

Experience

Book 13 of *The Rakehell Regency Romance Series*

Sorcha MacMurrough

On the eve of his wedding, Lawrence Howard's simple mistake regarding an address propels him straight into the arms of Juliet Lyons Dane, an unworldly young girl just up from the country for her first London Season.

Lawrence is convinced he is spending his last night as a bachelor with the capital's newest sensational Bird of Paradise. But his final fling brings with it the most shocking consequences.

Resentful of having been so compromised, and convinced he's been betrayed by her brother Matthew, a former business associate, Lawrence is determined to make Juliet suffer. He is certain that somehow she is part of a nefarious plot to ruin him and his family. That beneath her act of innocence lies an experienced woman of the world out to get whatever she wants.

But the more Lawrence learns of Juliet, the more he recognizes his mistake. Suddenly he sees that innocent or experienced, Juliet is the perfect woman for him. Can Lawrence make his wife fall in love with him before it's too late?

"Tell me what you're thinking right now," Lawrence demanded.

"Thinking? Now?" Juliet gasped, her eyes already glazing over with passion as he moved under her and the coach vibrated over the ruts and fissures in the road.

"Tell me."

"That I've never known how such pleasure could exist. Oh my."

"Look at me. No, don't close your eyes, look at me."

She obeyed, fearful of the consequences, that he would pinch or twist the way some men had at *soirees* or assembly balls. Or worse still, that he would stop the compelling rhythm within her.

"Tell me what it feels like."

"Like my soul is being torn from me."

His eyes narrowed. "A woman like you doesn't have a soul. Try again."

"Like we're blending and fusing into a single entity. I can feel your heart beating with mine," she panted.

"You haven't got a heart. Try again."

"Like I want to take all of you inside me and never let go. Yet even as I do, you possess me utterly."

He gave her a long slow caress at those words. "Yes, indeed I do. Then I'm just going to have to keep reminding you of that fact, aren't I? You're nothing and no one without me. Give up any notion of your family helping you, or you having been anything other than what you are now, what I choose to make you. Or not, as the case were. You're Juliet Howard now. Forget you ever heard the name Dane."

"But I was never-

At her unwitting words which appeared to be of protest, he rose with her on his lap and flattened her onto the opposite seat. His body was never still upon, within her. "Tell me who you are."

"Juliet Howard."

"What are you?"

"Your wife."

"What else?"

Mindless though she was with need, she was not going to say what he wanted her to. She was *not*.

Juliet looked straight into his silvery eyes, and clamped her hands down on his buttocks, cupping the tight orbs as she arched up against him. "Whatever you think you want me to be, darling."

Reviews:

"Lawrence and Juliet are a stunning couple we follow eagerly through every page of this sizzling romance novel. Lawrence the

dark, brooding hero, is enthralling, even if shocking at times. Juliet is a revelation, as she moves from girlhood to womanhood through the love of a tormented but essentially good man who needs to confront his past if he is ever to have a happy relationship with the woman of his dreams.

"This is another fascinating romp through Regency England. Reading Ms. MacMurrough's novels are always a pleasure because they have it all: wonderful characters, fantastic settings, and plenty of sensuality and suspense. We really believe in this couple as they meet, overcome their obstacles and enemies, and transform through the power of love.

"The historical details are always endlessly intriguing, and the secondary characters create a wonderful world we can step into effortlessly. She excels at capturing the true delight of falling in love, with all its pitfalls, difficulties and dangers which her unique couples always rise above." Evelyn Trimborn

"*Experience* has the hallmarks of a MacMurrough novel, suspenseful, full of dastardly villains and a marvelous hero and heroine who fight for each other tooth and nail. And all the things we have come to expect from a Rakehell novel: the wonderful secondary characters who support Lawrence and Juliet in their quest for love, and the heady sensuality of a couple whose passion and love are greater even than all their enemies put together." Jacqui Jerome

"Another fascinating book. The heroines keep getting more and more remarkable, the villains more and more sneaky and nasty. I adore the hero--a fallen angel if ever there was one. What I love about her books is how she is able to focus on the hero and heroine falling in love, (not try to set up a bunch of dull sequels!) and let's us travel the path to the happily ever after with them. Yet she still manages to give us quite a few surprises. Enjoy!" Annabelle Stevens

"Yet another Rakehell returns to the fold. This time it's the

fabulously ambitious tea trader Lawrence Howard, all set to be married to the foul Matilda, last seen in *Ravished*. He has believed all of her hideous lies. So when he ends up with innocent Juliet, he thinks he has been duped, and is determined to make her and her entire family regret ever forcing him into the match.

"Matthew pushed forward the marriage to protect his sister, and to save his former friend from a fate worse than death in marrying the foul Matilda. But neither man can protect Juliet from the enemies swarming around them if Lawrence cannot trust her. Haunted by his past, he must come to terms with the deaths of his parents and brother if he is ever to achieve happiness with his innocent young wife. Another tempestuous and sensual, not to say erotic, novel by this remarkable author." Carolyn Stone

Also by the author

The Rakehell Regency Series

The Mad Mistress

The Missed Match

The Miss Matched

The Matchless Miss

The Scarred Heart

Guardian of the Heart

The Mistaken Miss

The Model Master

The Model Mistress

Innocence

Innocence Afire

Ravished

Coming Soon:

The Model Husband

Ruthless

Madness

Beguiled

Experience

**Volume Thirteen of
*The Rakehell Regency Series***

Sorcha MacMurrough

HerStory Books

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Cast of Characters: *Experience*
A Rakehell Regency Romance Novel

Lawrence Howard, former Rakehell, tea trader just home from India

Robert Nash, Lawrence's factor in the tea trade

Stuart Howard, Lawrence's eldest nephew

Andrew Howard, Lawrence's youngest nephew

Matthew Dane, a Rakehell, Juliet's brother, former business associate of Lawrence's

Althea Dane, his wife

(For their story, see *Ravished*)

Juliet Lyons Dane, Matthew's sister

Miranda Lyons Dane, Matthew's youngest sister

Lady Pemberton, their aunt, prominent London Society hostess

Matilda Barnet, Matthew Dane's former mistress, Lawrence's fiancée, Nash's cousin

Philip Marshall, a Rakehell, works with Alistair Grant, barrister

Jasmine Marshall, his wife, friends with Isolde

(for their story, see *The Mistaken Miss*)

Dr. Blake Sanderson, a Rakehell, a doctor in London and Somerset

Arabella Neville Sanderson, his wife
(for their story, see ***Guardian of the Heart***)

Michael Avenel, a Rakehell, Randall's eldest brother
Bryony Avenel, his wife
(for their story, see ***The Model Master***)

Martin Jerome, Blake's cousin, an honorary Rakehell
Eswara Paignton Jerome, his wife, a healer from India who works with Blake
(for their story, see ***The Model Mistress***)

Ash Paignton, Eswara's son
Ellen Paignton, his wife
(for their story, see ***The Model Husband***)

Randall Avenel, a Rakehell, Earl of Hazelmere
Isolde Avenel, his wife
(for their story, see ***Innocence***)

Clifford Stone, a Rakehell, owner of Stone Court
Vanessa Stone, nee Hawkesworth, his wife, a great scholar
(for their story, see ***The Mad Mistress***)

The Duke of Ellesmere, Thomas Eltham, a Rakehell, lives at Eltham Castle
The Duchess of Ellesmere, Charlotte Eltham, nee Castlemaine, his wife
(for their story, see ***The Missed Match***)

Jonathan Deveril, a Rakehell, vicar of Brimley and Eltham

Pamela Deveril, *nee Ashton*, his wife

(for their story, see ***The Miss Matched***)

Sarah Deveril Davenport, Jonathan's youngest sister

Alexander Davenport, her husband, a Rakehell

(for their story, see ***The Matchless Miss***)

Alistair Grant, a Rakehell and barrister in London

(for his story, see ***Ruthless***)

Experience is a mere whiff or rumble, produced by enormously complex and ill-deciphered causes of experience; and in the other direction, experience is a mere peephole through which glimpses come down to us of eternal things.

George Santayana. Letter, May 1933, to the Marchesa Iris Origo. *The Letters of George Santayana*, ed. Daniel Cory (1955).

Experience ... is a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and co-ordinating. Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.

Aldous Huxley. *Texts and Pretexts*, Introduction (1932).

Experience cannot be transferred. We may give wise advice, but we cannot give wisdom to follow it.

H., contributor, *American Ladies Magazine*, pp. 230-3 (May 1828).

Prologue

Juliet came slowly awake, her lips parting in a sigh of pure joy as Lawrence teased them open. Surely this had to be a dream....

But no, he was real, solid, and buried deeply within her most secret core, and moving until her face flamed with desire.

"Good morning, my sweet. I was hoping you'd wake."

"Lawrence, what are you--"

"I can't resist a repeat of last night. You're so magnificent, I can't help it. I want all of you, so much. I want to stay here forever and never let you go. But go I must."

She nearly wept with frustration and opened her mouth to plead with him to stay. He pulled out of her pulsating softness, but apologised tenderly. "I'll be back with you in a moment, I promise, love. I need to taste you everywhere."

His mouth glided over her breasts so delightfully that by the time he had kissed his way down to her thighs she felt no shame or fear.

She was so delicious, honey-sweet. He inserted one finger inside her incredible tightness and curled it upwards, until she was shuddering against him once more.

"Too much?" he laughed.

"Oh yes, or not enough. Please, I want all of you."

"What, tongue and fingers aren't enough? You greedy little girl. I ought to punish you for that."

"Oh, please, it's too good," she panted as his fingers and tongue continued to move slowly and rhythmically.

"But you asked for more. So have more."

He gently opened her further and inserted a second large finger, causing her hips to buck upwards desperately. He held her still with one hand on her breast, and she rose on the wave of passion and began to float downwards.

Or would have if he had not begun to stroke her even more intently, now nibbling the roseate whirl with his teeth.

"More, love?"

"Oh, yes, please, all of you. I'm on fire."

As Lawrence glided up her body, his fingers and now thumb delighting her, he could see she was not exaggerating. Her elegant cheekbones and lush lips were flooded with colour, and he kissed her blisteringly and pressed into the luxurious cradle of her body once more.

She climaxed in an instant, taking him with her before he even had a chance to glide fully within. Just inside her entrance to paradise his pleasure was wrung from him in great shuddering bursts.

Here was truly a feast of the senses. He had travelled the world over and never met any woman as exciting or voluptuous as Juliet.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful. Your breasts. Manna from the gods." He leaned forward to lave each nipple, nibbling and suckling her tenderly until the throb in her womb grew too great to be ignored. "Your sweet moisture, like nectar. Your skin, sheer ambrosia."

Juliet gasped and called out his name, and he chuckled against her breast as she clutched his soft hair and climaxed.

He gave her a smile of triumph. "Remarkable. No one has ever responded to me like that before. Let's see what else I can do to you to make you zenith."

"All you have to do is look at me," she admitted, panting.

"Hmm, now that I would like to see. But touching you is so thrilling, I just can't seem to stop. Oh, my, what are you doing to me?"

"The same as you're doing to me?" she gasped as his huge length began to fill her once more.

"Listen, Juliet," he said, kissing her tenderly on the cheek and lips. "I really want to stay with you all morning, every morning, but I need

to leave for a couple of hours to take care of some unpleasant duties. Then I promise you I'll come back and we'll talk."

"Talk?" she said, her eyes already glazing over again with desire.

He grinned. "Aye, talk. And any other kind of intercourse you'd like. I need to know where I stand with you. We need to discuss our future. I can't just leave this at one night."

"Future?" she echoed. "What kind of future?"

He blushed like a schoolboy, and looked around the rich yet modestly appointed chamber decorated in gold and green. It wasn't quite what he expected of her....

"I don't know, Juliet. I mean, I've been engaged twice in my life, but it was never, well, it was never romantic. This time I want to do it right."

"*This* time? You mean *me*?" she gasped.

"Yes, yes, I think I do," he admitted, dreading her laughter.

Instead her eyes filled with tears. "Engaged?"

He nodded, and gathered her even more tightly to him. "Yes, and married too, if you'll have me. If you can see your way clear to turning your whole life upside down for a man like me. I'm not very good with women--"

Juliet laughed then, and he stiffened for a moment. "I think you underestimate your remarkable talents quite considerably, Lawrence. 'Very good' doesn't even come close."

Her words made him surge so powerfully, he was sure he would swoon. "Speaking of coming close--"

They revelled in their banquet of sensual delicacies, driving each other ever onward. As soon as one would quieten, the other would soar, until soon, their desires meshed and they peaked together so long and hard he was sure his heart had stopped.

He had never climaxed simultaneously with any woman before. It felt so perfect, the most moving of the many he had had with this marvel of a young woman.

He devoured her with kisses, trying to draw her right into him, just as she did with him in the incredibly tender embrace they alone could share.

Lawrence was so absorbed in making love to the wonderful girl he had been sent to meet, that he had scarcely a shred of sanity left when the door swung open, and gruff tones of masculine outrage assaulted his ears.

"Juliet! My God! Juliet! What on earth?"

Lawrence rose on one elbow and twisted to face the intruder. He blinked at the man in the bright sunshine, which seemed to glow like a limelight on his dramatic entrance.

All the joy of a moment before slipped away, leaving only the hard, brutal, nasty past ten years of his life.

He stared, and stared. For there, gaping at him, his face as black as a thundercloud, was his old enemy Matthew Dane.

"Lawrence Howard. You bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing to *my sister*!"

12 hours previously

Chapter One

Alone at last. Juliet practically skipped down the stairs. A whole evening to herself to catch up on her reading.

Oh, not that she was not enjoying herself in London, but the balls, parties, *fetes*, *soirees* and visits she had been dragged to ever since she and her sister Miranda had arrived from sleepy Lyme Regis last week was enough to wear anyone out. Let alone a shy, quiet bluestocking who needed to do her accounts and catch up on her studies, as well as take care of her correspondence and finish one of the many essays she had due within the next fortnight.

To her surprise, there was a knock at the door. It had to be a late-comer who was supposed to have gone on with the Rakehells to their special supper.

She smiled at the *sobriquet*. Her brother's friends were certainly outlandish in their pursuit of justice, and some had been men about Town, but most of them were now happily married by all accounts, and well-respected.

She heard a deep voice at the door ask for Matthew and the lady of the house.

The butler started to turn the man away, but despite her longing for solitude, Juliet decided to intervene.

"It's all right, Carstairs, I'll speak with him," she said, catching sight of the huge man who towered in the doorway. He was a remarkable-looking chap, as large as her own huge brother, with piercing silver grey eyes which bored into her as he bowed.

"I'm afraid Matthew pressed on with the others to the club."

He frowned. "Ah well, it is no matter, really. It was you I came to

see."

"Me?" she said with some surprise, clutching her book to her bosom.

He caught sight of the title. Plutarch's *Lives*.

"Yes, just so. I'm told you're a great student of the classics, history," he said, enjoying the witty banter, her pretence of innocence.

She blinked, and smiled prettily. "How very kind of you to say so. I did not know my reputation had spread so far and wide."

He nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed, I've scarce been able to hear about anything else at the club."

Juliet felt her cheeks heat. "Matthew does have a tendency to exaggerate. Please, forgive me, but might I ask your name?"

"Lawrence, Lawrence Howard."

She gave a smile of recognition, for the Rakehells had just been discussing him. Something about his huge potential in danger of going to waste, his fine mind and ability to debate eloquently when they had all been at Eton together. And his forthcoming engagement to the most unsuitable Matilda, her brother's former mistress, which they all prayed he would break off in time.

"Of course, Mr. Howard. Forgive me. And I'm Juliet, as you must know." She offered her hand.

He just stared at it for a moment as though he had never shaken hands before. Well, he had lived in India for many years, according to her brother, she reasoned. Mayhap they did things differently there? All thought of her studies flew out of her head at the thrilling prospect of talking with him about his travels abroad.

At last he took her hand, and she felt the blood fly to her face the moment he touched her. The most sublime warmth filled her from top to toe, setting her atingle.

"So nice to meet you," she murmured, unable to take her eyes off his arresting silver ones. Especially since he was staring at her as though he had lost all power of speech.

She disengaged her hand as gently as possible considering she just wanted to yank it away from the stunning contact.

She covered up her embarrassment by saying, "Matthew has

such a wide circle of acquaintance in London and insists on introducing me round. It gets my head into quite a spin."

When he continued to remain silently staring, she wondered if he were on a more serious errand. *Perhaps he had found out about Matilda, and was upset, distressed, having second thoughts about his marriage? It certainly would be a waste...*

So despite the impropriety relative to London manners, she took pity on the handsome silver-eyed man, and said, "If you really don't wish to follow on to the club with them, would you care to come into the parlor?"

"I would indeed," he said with a wolfish smile, barely able to tear his eyes away from the alluring little nymph.

Raven black hair, delicate brows, patrician nose, finely sculpted lips the colour of ripe raspberries and just as juicy, she was exquisite. His friends had praised her to the skies, but looking at her, he was sure all he had been told could scarcely do her justice.

Though plainly garbed in a loose wrapper gown of turkey red, it set off her dark looks to perfection. He stared at her eyes, which most men would have taken for blue. But he could see the unusual light in them, and observed, "Like violets in May. Extraordinary."

"Oh, my eyes," she said, blushing. "Kind of you to notice."

It was hard to imagine anyone *not* noticing. Her swan-like neck, shoulders, bosom, her supple waist and nicely curved hips, long, *long* legs, her tidy feet and hands, she was sublime.

He had all to do not to seize her to him and bury his lips in her glossy hair, piled up into a woven crown of coils but so vibrant and full-bodied that it was already attempting to break free of the confining pins which held the elegant style in place. There was no padding there to disguise thinning hair. It was a lush as the rest of her magnificent beauty.

Lawrence breathed in now, detecting roses, honey, and a bit of spice. From the moment he had touched her hand, he had been lost. But her delicious fragrance was nearly his undoing.

He would have reached for her then, but she was already stepping out of the foyer and down the corridor, leaving the servant standing gaping after them. Lawrence blinked, nodded, and hurried

after his vision of perfection.

She led the way into the less formal of her brother's two drawing rooms, an intimate chamber in gold and cream with burgundy accents.

"Would you care for some refreshment? Coffee or tea?"

He grinned. "Coffee never passes my lips."

Her fine eyebrows rose heavenward. "Oh?"

"I'm a tea trader. So tea it always is, and always shall be."

"Ah, yes, of course, Matthew had mentioned that. I'm sorry."

"Pray don't apologise. Kind of you to remember me at all," he said, with a burning stab of jealousy for all of her other male callers which was as unreasonable as it was acute.

She rang for Carstairs, and told him he and the servants could all go off to bed as soon as they pleased. Once again, the servant's brows shot upwards, but he said nothing, merely vanished as silently as he had come.

Juliet smiled. "I too like tea, though I will partake of mocha if there is nothing else. People tell me tea is the more healthful of the two. Coffee is said to keep one up nights. Of course, that can be no bad thing when there are so many pleasures to be had at all hours here in the *Ton*."

He shivered at the word 'pleasure', which put into his head at once the thought of spending a whole night with this divine creature. Lawrence's mouth went dry with longing as he watched her place the book she had been holding on the table almost caressingly, in a manner which he was sure was designed to call attention to her lovely hands.

They were white and slender, but with a hint of underlying strength. The hardness of her fingertips when he had taken her hand had set his flesh aquiver. Obviously played the harp. The thought of the wonderful things she could do with his instrument was almost more than he could bear.

In any event, time was pressing on. In less than sixteen hours he was going to put his head in the noose, and become a married man at last. He would pass an hour here as Matthew Sampson had

arranged, then head home.

With such a tight timetable, he needed to move things along with the lovely young woman. The direct approach was the only one he wished to use now; if he didn't bed her soon he was going to explode.

"But no pleasure of the Town could compare to an hour alone in your company."

She blinked at his boldness. "My. How flattering. I was warned you had a glib tongue."

"Only upon certain subjects."

Her long lashes arched upwards delicately, making her incredible eyes look even more enormous. "Really? I had heard you were a most eloquent man."

He was usually most vocal about his fantasies and requests from his female companions. But looking at this breathtaking young woman, he felt completely tongue-tied.

Such an immense lassitude flooded him that he did not even want to try to assume the dominant role. Let the little Cytherean take him wherever she would. He was certain it would be heaven.

"My eloquence fails me when you look at me with your magnificent eyes. Were I not so dazzled, I could perhaps make a feeble attempt to do your pulchritude justice. Your beauty is most certainly something to wax lyrical over," Lawrence managed to rumble out at last, when she had begun to wonder why he was staring at her so, as though he had taken leave of his senses.

"You flatter me, sir."

"Do you give my lips leave to attempt to praise your inestimable beauty?"

Juliet laughed throatily, never dreaming he was doing anything other than teasing his friend's baby sister.

The tea tray arrived just then, and she poured.

For once Lawrence did not try to teach someone the proper way to brew tea, or even very much care or taste what he imbibed.

"Very well, sir, I give you leave to try to sketch my person with your talented tongue. I have the feeling this will be most diverting."

He shivered at the *double entente*, calling to mind as it did all sorts of delights he had never dared try. "Your hair is like a shining nimbus, a halo to frame your angelic face. Your fine high brow is as an open book, in which men may read of your noble and intelligent character."

She laughed shortly. "Please, sir, you make me sound like Socrates or Plato."

"Plato indeed, for I am sure you can discourse as elegantly upon the nature of love."

"Surely a busy man such as yourself has not come here to have a *Symposium* with me?" she said with a warm smile, picking up on his allusion to one of the great philosopher's most famous works.

"Why not? You have a ready wit and tongue," he said, dropping his gaze to the level of her breasts. "And it would appear you love a good debate."

"Ah, but with a great deal of social intercourse, there can be only one winner."

He grinned in delight. "Not so, if we agree to compromise. Whilst I adore winning as much as the next man, I'm willing to concede the advantage to a worthy opponent."

She smiled at his ready witticisms. "That sounds like the best possible solution. Then we would both win. Or both lose."

"I promise you, Juliet, the loss will be as painless as possible."

She laughed in delight. "Oh my, they *were* right. You do have a most glib tongue."

He gave her his most seductive smile, licking his lips. "I'm delighted you're getting to experience it first-hand."

"Like all legends, I had feared it greatly exaggerated."

His breath was now a sensual puff in her dainty ear. "So too with you, my dear. But I find your reputation as a remarkable companion is all I could have wished for, and more."

She shivered at his nearness. Really, she ought not to allow him to sit so close, but where was the harm?

Juliet soon found out as she lifted her eyes to admire his god-like magnificence.

Finding him staring so intently at her, she dropped her long lashes shyly. As they lay up on her creamy petal-soft cheeks he found himself lifting his hand to her face to stroke the silky little fringes. She gasped at the intimacy of the caress. Worse was to come as his mouth captured hers possessively.

She pulled away with a gasp. "What do you think you're--"

He had rarely kissed any of his paid companions, but her lush rosebud mouth and the suggestiveness of the conversation had driven him to it. "It is a mere dueling of tongues, Madam. Just not with words."

His first taste had been so delectable, Lawrence was eager for more. He brought up his other hand to cup the small of her back, scooping her tightly to him as he leaned into her ripe curves.

Her hand came up to press against his chest in protest. But the sudden onslaught had breached her defenses, and she was startled to discover how pleasurable his kiss was.

Juliet had been subjected to various attempts upon her person and virtue ever since she had developed a bosom. This was the first time she had ever viewed such contact with anything other than mild distaste.

Now as his tongue twined with her own, she tasted champagne, a hint of vanilla, and citrus. She inhaled his marvelous lightly musky and very masculine fragrance.

For his part Lawrence tasted honey, roses and an indescribably sweet taste and fragrance all of her very own. He was even more overawed by the light womanly scent wafting off her, the scent of arousal, more divine than the most expensive Parisian perfume.

She was wonderfully feminine, a most tempting handful. Sweet, yet sultry. He sighed inwardly with contentment, losing himself in the kiss so completely that he was scarcely conscious of the movement of his hands.

Juliet stiffened for a brief second more, before flinging her arms around his neck and pressing tightly against him, granting him even more access to her ripe charms.

Her body was the most curvaceous and supple he had ever touched. His flesh leapt to attention almost painfully. The thought of

her bareness underneath her gown set off all sorts of erotic images he could not help but act upon. His kiss deepened, and his fingers stroked over her breasts, peaking her nipples until they almost begged for his mouth upon them.

She gave a shiver of delight, and he groaned lightly.

"I'll warm you, love," he reassured her, running his hands over her in a rubbing motion that stimulated her circulation in more ways than one.

Her hands, which had been balled into fists, relaxed at last, and came to rest on his face. She stroked his chin and jaw, then one slid behind his neck, deepening the kiss into a soul-stirring joining of tongues which urged him on to their ultimate union.

"Juliet, my goodness, you are so lovely. "

"So are you, Lawrence."

Lawrence was not sure she could even see him, for her eyes looked glazed over, but for the moment he did not care. The wild sweetness of the contact was driving him ever onward, and he had a vision of her completely bared to his admiring gaze.

He thought Matilda would be lovely, but this woman was perfection from head to toe. Long arms, gorgeous shoulders, ample breasts and hips, she possessed the ideal figure, without any corsets to strap her into shape, he marveled, tracing his hands over her from ribs to bottom, and feeling nothing there except ripe womanly curves and the lightest of underthings.

Her long limbs entwined with his were almost enough to have him rushing for a watercloset to assuage some of his more primitive needs. He might still have to do it yet if she kept kissing him like that, he thought desperately.

For Juliet was touching him as though trying to memorize every inch of his flesh. And there were a good few fascinating inches of him, which she was about to reach for when he pulled away and sat up.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked almost desperately.

"It's suddenly become very hot in here," she murmured.

"Perhaps we would do better to go to a bedchamber where we

could take our ease more readily?" he said, nibbling her throat.

She nodded, her mouth suddenly dry. She was unsure what to say, for no one had ever suggested such a bold thing before. But the prospect of being alone with him was no longer frightening, rather a craving which simply had to be satiated.

He scooped her up into his arms, driving the air from her lungs. "Which way, love?"

She pointed. As he progressed out into the hall and up the stairs, his lips began to tease hers open. He darted his tongue in and out, and nibbled on her lower lip. He licked her upper one in a sensuous feast which left her clinging to him breathlessly.

He headed down the hall as per her indications. Soon they were in the chamber she had been allocated, gold and white with bronze and forest green accents. It had turned chill, and he moved toward the small blaze instinctively. He stood her in front of the hearth. Stooping, he removed the fire screen and gave the embers a vigorous poke.

He straightened and reached for her. "The fire will get going soon."

"I think it's already started," she said with a tiny giggle.

For his manhood was boring into the tender flesh of her stomach with all too obvious need. He rubbed against her, warming their bodies, before moving down to kiss her breasts through the muslin of her gown. This time his mouth travelled down to her navel. He probed her tender belly with his tongue, and brought one hand up to stroke her flank.

"It most certainly has, Juliet. But there's plenty of kindling here to keep it blazing."

She caressed his head and the nape of his neck, and was eager for more flesh to be bared to her touch.

His busy fingers were already tumbling her thick luxuriant fall of raven hair down over her shoulders, running his fingers through it to loosen the coils so that it flowed freely over her curvaceous back and across her breasts.

She held her breath as he combed his hands upwards to massage her scalp, before tumbling her tresses down over her

shoulders and bosom once more. One hand on her waist arced her back to press her hips more tightly to his. Her nimble fingers began to undo his silk waistcoat, nearly tearing it asunder in her need-driven haste.

His bold kiss was an unmistakable act of possession. Lawrence ran his tongue sinuously along her own, before testing fully the honeyed sweetness of the inside of her mouth. He cupped her chin for a moment, then glided his hand back into her thick tresses to deepen the kiss still further.

She was curious enough to let the tip of her own tongue peep into his mouth for a second. He moaned and clasped her neck and the base of her skull with one huge hand, trapping her against his body.

Yet Juliet felt no fear. Rather, as she bared his chest, it was as if they fit perfectly together, head to toe. He was so enormous and perfect, like the statue of David. Yet he was scorchingly hot with life and passion.

She had expected a man's face to be hard and bristly like a hedgehog, but all was silken softness. The column of his throat as she bared it was warm and soft too. Nothing marble-like or spiked here.

Lawrence growled in the back of his throat as she slowly undid his clothing with one hand, her other moving up to stroke his own incredibly long lashes. He sucked one finger into his mouth, before breathing in her ear, "Are you getting warm enough, love?"

"Like there's a wildfire searing through me."

She was not the only one on fire. As she eagerly touched him with increasing boldness, she set sparks rocketing through him and straight to his loins. He had hoped to leave within an hour; now he was terrified that all night would never be enough with this incredible woman.

What on earth was happening to him? He was to be married at St. Mary's at eleven. But it was as if he had stepped into an inferno. The sensations blazing up within him were almost more than he could bear.

Bare.... He began to unfasten his waistcoat completely, then the shirt buttons at his chest and waist, until she had full access to him

and could press her kisses in a line from his cravat downwards...

Chapter Two

Down and down she went, until she reached his navel. Now he halted her, for if she suckled him he was sure he would not last two seconds. And that would never do.

For making love with this woman for the first time was surely a moment worth savouring. But his desperate urgency was making it more and more difficult to stand, or even breathe.

Her explorations with her lithe fingers were driving him ever onwards. Lawrence was almost tempted to ask her to take pity on him and let him spill just to end the torment.

But her hands were doing the most delightful things to his buttocks and chest, and the last thing he wanted to do was disgrace himself in front of her.

Now she was raking his throat with her short nails; the contact sent a jolt through him like an electric current. He walked forward until the backs of her knees hit the edge of the mattress.

He sat Juliet down gently, then joined her as she kissed down his neck and pushed his jacket and then his waistcoat off his shoulders.

Seeing her awed response as his shirt parted, the desirous expression which crossed her features, Lawrence kissed her full on the mouth, mingling tongues once more while he began to undo her gown. It had a simple enough pair of side fastenings at the waist, but he half-expected a murmur of protest as the garment was taken from her.

But Juliet made no demur, only kissed him back even more ardently as his hands lightly stroked the tops of her now bare

shoulders, his thumbs dipping down to the full curves of her breasts.

He slipped one strap of her chemise off her creamy shoulder, and licked and nuzzled her the exposed flesh until he moved downwards to fasten his lips on one rosy nipple.

Scorching heat flooded them both. For a moment he felt the blood surge through him. He wanted to end the sweet torment and simply take her then and there.

But the red-hot agony became a gentle warmth radiating outwards as she cradled his head against her breasts. It provoked sensations within him such as he had never experienced before, for all he had enjoyed the most remarkable professional women.

There was a delightful sweetness about the young woman, a light fragrance of rose petals which clung to her, innocent yet heady. Lawrence dipped his nose into her fragrant cleavage for a second before baring her other breast to nip and tease it.

Her hands were suddenly all over him once more, face, hair, neck, shoulders, which were straining through the linen shirt.

She tried to tug it off his rippling muscles, but he stayed her hands, pressing them back to his chest to prolong the final moment. The last thing he wanted to do was rush. No woman had ever touched him as heatedly as this; it was as addictive as a drug.

Over his massive chest, down his hard abdomen, and then back up over his shirt, her fingers soothed and massaged, as she revelled in the warmth of his body, the contrast of textures, soft, solid, silky, lightly downed, velvet, steel. Before Lawrence could stop Juliet a second time, she yanked his shirt all the way off, stroked down his long hard back, and kissed him even harder.

She ran one hand through his hair, and he had never felt so at peace. Or so powerfully aroused. His broad expanse of chest was explored thoroughly. She even rubbed his nipples with the balls of her thumbs, peaking them as her own had done.

One part of her mind was screaming at her that this was sheer madness, the other whispering for her to see all he had to offer. She should have been nervous, but she felt so calm, so certain, that even when he moved to slide her chemise down to her ankles, she made no protest.

Now clad in nothing more than a pair of lacy drawers, and her stockings and garters, she looked like an alluring woman of the world. The need to bare her thus-far perfect charms propelled him onwards. Never had he seen such breasts, hair, skin. His hands roved everywhere, almost searching for some flaw, some imperfection.

Yet there was nothing but the velvet of her skin, sweet as nectar as he began to kiss her thoroughly while he untied the tapes of her drawers. He gentled his hands up and down the silk of her stockings, warming her legs too, marveling at the shapely knees, calves and ankles.

She was a goddess, there was no denying it. Every man who had told him about her had said the same thing. Now he truly believed. She was divine, and about to become his in every way.

He moved her hands from his back and chest and put them at the waist of his trousers, giving her the hint before pulling the coverlet down to expose the crisp white sheets, smelling of starch and roses.

Juliet took the suggestion, and in the split second after she had innocently rubbed her hand against his shaft, he was pressing her backwards on the bed. He stroked up one stockinged leg, enjoying the glide of the silk, before tugging at the garter ribbon.

He moved to cradle both legs in his lap, sliding one stocking down with feather-light strokes before removing it and both her dainty black satin pumps. Her other stocking soon followed, every touch of his hand and the silk a dazzling flame.

She gasped and licked her lips, causing him to press his mouth to hers for another devastating kiss. Her little pink tongue darted maddeningly in and out in imitation of his own caress, enough to drive him nearly to distraction.

Even now Lawrence wondered at what it was about the woman which was driving him wild. She had done nothing artful, not even made any lewd suggestions or whispered naughty things to him. She was not acting either coy or predatory, trying to drive the passion between them. Not once had she ever even mentioned money, or how she only had a set amount of time before her next client.

And the way Juliet was touching and kissing him was like nothing he had ever encountered. It was a complete concentration upon him, as if he were the most important man in the world. Wonderful, perfect,

a deity in his own right, worthy to complete her in every way.

Never had he felt the awe which emanated from Juliet as she gave herself up to the thrilling sensations his every kiss and touch filled her with. His head swam. Lawrence knew he could take her now, in an instant, hot and hard.

But she was small, delicate, and though she was a professional, he did try to make sure he wasn't completely selfish. He knew most of them never felt any pleasure in what they did, but that did not mean to say he should bludgeon her to bits with his blunt instrument the way so many men did.

That though filled him with revulsion, and he kissed her harder, caressing her breasts and gliding one hand up between the legs still relaxed in his lap. From calf to knee it travelled between, alternating legs as it made its slow, inexorable progress toward that most secret haven of her body.

Lawrence raised his head to look at her, and kissed her once again. Her lashes did not flutter down to conceal her gaze this time. Again he had the uneasy sensation that there was something about all of this that he was missing. The way her kisses, her whole body fit with his, the way her voice was like music to his ears, her rosy fragrance a balm to his soul. The magic of her hands on his sizzling flesh. The way her hair shimmered in the light from the candles burning in the room.

Now he could feel her hand upon his thigh. He moved it upwards to cup him, preparing her for his own hand an instant later. She stiffened slightly, but only opened her mouth and legs further to give him all that he sought. He still waited for some coy rejoinder, some show of reluctance, but the woman was utterly without shame. Without shame, and full of desire, he discovered as he felt her warm dampness dew his fingers.

He began suckling her lush breasts like a starving man devouring his first meal in months, though he had been sexually active enough since he had come home to London from India when he had had the chance.

Business be damned for the moment. His only mission now was to stroking her inner folds gently, spreading her budding moisture so that when he joined with her at last she would not be split in two by

what he had discovered was his vast size.

But she seemed to have no qualms, for her hands were urging him to remove the last of his clothing as if she had no hesitation in making love to him. Yet there was nothing tawdry about it; it seemed as blissfully innocent as Adam and Eve discovering their own bodies for the first time.

He could not recall the last time he had been completely naked with a woman. Some of his transactions recently were so hurried he simply undid the falls of his breeches, clapped on his armour, finished in five minutes, then headed back to his warehouse at the docks once more.

But now Lawrence raised her legs from his own and flung off the last of his clothes in gleeful abandon. The feeling was most liberating, joyous even. Though he knew he ought to retrieve his evening jacket to get his protectors, he could see that she was a good, clean woman, just as everyone had said. Where was the harm in indulging himself fully just once?

Juliet kept waiting for herself to call a halt to the remarkable but terrifying things Lawrence was doing to her. But the voice of moral conscience and self-reproach was utterly silent. She who tended to analyse everything could not summon up one word of argument against this man bedding her, despite knowing all too well the enormity of what was about to happen. What she was about to become. Yet even as she heard the words in her head, *wanton*, *whore*, *woman*, she watched him disrobing fully.

More torrid heat now flooded through her languid limbs. No matter what her good Christian upbringing told her, her body screamed a different conclusion: *this was a man worth risking everything for*.

His lean, raw power was almost terrifying. But oddly she did not fear him. She sensed underneath it a tentative quality, an uncertainty, a doubt and anger that she could not put her finger on.

Juliet could still stop this madness, run into the safe haven of the bathroom and wait for him to leave. But as Lawrence stepped back to the bed, cupped her head in his hands and looked at her for a long moment, before lowering his lips to give her the sweetest kiss, she responded ardently and rose onto her knees to stretch against his huge frame.

Fully pressed together from head to knee, bare flesh to bare flesh, there was no mistaking what was to happen next. The joining she had heard whispered about. Had seen pictures of in a book in the library which had been on a high shelf but had had an intriguing title.

She knew enough about her own body to wonder how such a thing would be possible, for she was most slender, and he most formidable.

He was a man of the world, she a sheltered blustocking. *What on earth was she thinking?*

But rationality had little to do with it as the steady pressure of his hardness against her belly, and his hands cupping, kneading her bottom, drove her to kiss him even harder, touch Lawrence everywhere.

Juliet found herself imitating his strokes, down over the rugged slope of his back, to his gently rounded smooth buttocks, perfection themselves, until he sucked in his breath and rolled her over into the bed.

Lawrence laid down with her beside him, and there was no longer any hesitation or resistance in her mind or body. She simply had to make love to this dark Adonis. With no fear of consequences, no thought of the punishment God or man would inflict upon her if anyone ever knew...

The blood sang in her veins as Juliet let her fears slip away and they kissed torridly, mouths wide open, wet and sensuous. His hand slipped up to caress her gently once more. He murmured words of endearment against her fevered flesh. She was scorchingly hot, and heated up even further as he inserted one finger into her tightness.

He had learned from experience that women came in all different shapes and sizes. With some he had not been able to manage more than the smallest portion of his huge size. With this woman he not only wanted to manage, he needed to please her the way she was thrilling him.

He laid her flat on her back and spread her legs, devouring her leg from knee to hip with nibbling kisses as he put it over one shoulder, and then grasped the other leg. "You are so beautiful."

If this was his last night of freedom, he was going to enjoy every

minute of it. And that meant trying things he had never ever even considered doing before.

She let out a token protest at his questing tongue and he withdrew it for a brief time. Now as he propped her other leg upon his shoulder she had no chance to escape from the erotic onslaught. He licked, nipped and nuzzled, before inserting his tongue deeply within her, tasting her like a fine wine. Her smell and taste were all powerful aphrodisiacs.

In fact, being with a complete stranger and doing things with her that he would never have dared even mention to a wife, let alone tried upon her, was the most thrilling experience of his life.

He knew he ought to feel shame, regret, self-reproach for his infidelity, both mental and physical, to the woman he was about to marry tomorrow. But the truth was he could not have stopped himself even if he wanted to. The more he tasted of Juliet, the more he wanted, *needed* her.

Her burgeoning desire was evident from her increasing dampness. He replaced his questing tongue with his thumb, which he inserted to explore her. Some women complained that he was too much to manage, but as he tested her with his large index finger as well, he felt her daintiness, but also her ability to withstand him.

That was the word his some women had used. For not all of them took pleasure in the act, especially not the professional women he had consorted with to keep his personal life uncluttered by emotion or feminine interference. Lawrence would have said 'accept' him.

Juliet would have agreed with him if she had been capable of rational thought. But ever since he had teased her with his thumb she had been lost. Here were none of the agonizing squeezes and violent wrenchings of her arms and legs as had been her past experiences. All was tenderness, delicacy, and both a sureness of a touch and a tentative exploration, an unspoken question to which only she had the answer. It was yes. She wanted him.

Juliet decided she ought to make a bit more of a move to convince him, and ran her fingers through his hair, before tugging him up to kiss her full on the mouth. She shared her own taste and scent with him, and found the intimacy most thrilling.

His heart hammering in his chest, thrumming in time with her own,

only added to the sensation. He might be a complete stranger, but she belonged with him. Never had she felt so wonderful, so alive, as if she were floating. He moved his fingers and pressed into her yielding flesh, and she soared.

Juliet knew she still had time, could still get away. But the prospect of certain ruin was as dust in the wind. The swirling sensations below her waist were budding and spreading outward, leaving all of her limbs beyond her control.

Lawrence was like an expert rider of *haute école*, guiding her through all the movements of the elegant *dressage* of love, his hands on the reins of her desire, leading her this way and that. The more he touched her, the more she wanted to vaunt her beauteous charms in this magical display, surrender to his mastery utterly.

On her back, knees bent, legs wide, she presented a most alluring picture, one Lawrence could not resist. He moved up the bed and cradled her head in his broad hand. He positioned himself to touch her secret place with his huge tip. He rubbed up and down, up and down, until she clutched at him urgently.

"You are so very lovely. But tiny too. This might be difficult for you at first," he whispered against her lips.

She would have told him she was not afraid, but his mouth upon hers stilled the words. Even now he was already pressing into her, his hardness going on and on further and further in. He smothered her cry in his mouth as she curved her hips up to meet the stroke.

He began to withdraw, suddenly unsure, surprised and awed by what he felt inside her. He, who thought he had experienced it all. She was so hot and tight and lovely, he was not going to be able to last more than another stroke. He could spill his seed on her stomach and return for more, he decided, trying to pull away.

But her body and his evidently had other ideas, for her nails dug into his buttocks as she tried to adjust herself to the formidable pressure which had burst through her delicate tissue and now throbbed within. It was painful, true, but she was certain there was more, all the pleasure she had read about. Lifting her hips up off the bed, she managed to get him to slide in even further. And further.

Lawrence gasped and shuddered, and gasped again as she moved once more to accept his tempestuous stroke. He was

enormous, there was no doubt about it. But the steady pressure forward made it easier for her to take every glorious inch of him.

By the time he was a third of the way in, Juliet could sense a new dampness deep inside which made his vast maleness slide in the rest of the way more easily. She could feel a slow lapping tendril of pleasure unfurl within, and her body opened to him as she curved her hips up into his.

A desperate pant was wrung from her as her eyes flew open. "Lawrence!"

He raised his head to look at her. He had just finished, had been stunned by the sensations, the sheer pleasure, even though he had scarcely lasted five seconds. Her gasp of delight and the tightening of her inner muscles hardened him anew, and he was utterly lost.

If he didn't know better, he would have said they were made for one another. For they were certainly the most perfect fit together. He could feel his rigidity press all the way inside her in the most thrilling manner.

"Take all of me," he begged, now oh so needy himself as her gasps of delight became outright groans, her body shuddering against his in a tell-tale rhythm which propelled him onwards towards both of their peaks.

"Lawrence, please!" She had no idea what she was begging for, but it was very close.

Her face flushed with passion, making her blush like a rose. Her nipples begged for his attention. Her body cradled him and begged for release. With a throaty laugh of triumph he gave and gave. He who had always remained aloof, done nothing but remain in control, drive a hard bargain ever since all had been taken from him, threw all caution to the winds.

He gave himself in a way he had never thought possible, his mouth covering hers to stifle both their ardent and increasingly loud and uncontrollable moans.

Lawrence moved slightly to look at her, and saw once again her marvelous eyes open to look at him in surprise, wonder and joy. Again, he had encountered many a pair of eyes looking at him after the deed had been done, but none had ever looked at him like *that*.

Or if they ever had, he had not noticed. Or if they ever had, one or the other of them had left and never seen each other again.

Not even his fiancée had ever looked at him in such a sultry manner, though of course, she had led him a merry dance, advancing and retreating with a skill Napoleon himself would have envied.

His *coup de grace* would take place tomorrow when Matilda and he were married. But truly, he could never imagine from the few heated kisses and mild liberties she had allowed him to take as the wedding date had approached, that his future wife could ever compare with this girl.

He felt a mild pang at his infidelity, exacerbated by the fact that he was already wondering when he would next be in London so he could visit the incredible Juliet again.

But no. He had vowed he would try to be faithful. Certainly within the first year or so of marriage.

Matilda was in fact what he had always imagined to be his feminine ideal: blond, with ivory skin and the greenest eyes, like the most spectacular emeralds. Cold and hard...

He pushed the disloyal thought to one side. As the woman under him kissed him as though she worshipped the very taste of him, he stroked her lids until they opened. Saw their deep violet colour, warm and soft, as velvety as a caress as they shone up at him. Such a contrast... Day and night, but this dark-haired beauty was the more radiant of the two.

He lifted his lips to kiss her brow, and she sighed. "Thank you. Thank you so much. It was wonderful, a true gift. I had no idea...."

They stared at each other for several moments, as if frozen in time. He had gone rigid again at her words, and she could feel the change in him in an instant.

This had never happened to him before. The women he had been with rarely climaxed, still less rarely ever thanked him for his 'gift'. Lawrence had also never completed himself twice inside a woman with no protection, let alone desired any of them a third time. But his shock was nothing compared with the way he felt when she uttered her next sentence.

"Can you teach me what delights you?"

Her innocent inquiry quite unmanned him. With a murmured, "Yes, most certainly. It's all of you, love," he settled her down in the bed once more, gentling her tousled raven hair, before clasping her buttocks with both hands and moving against her powerfully again until her whole body burst into flames.

This time Lawrence found himself actually holding back his unexpectedly raging passions, watching her in awed fascination, the better to enjoy her wild, uninhibited response. Her head thrown back, she cried out low and lustily, fitting her body even more tightly to his as wave after wave of pleasure flooded through her.

Great, heaving shudders tore through Lawrence until Juliet's answering sob and desperate raking of his back and buttocks with her tiny kitten nails quickly told him she was with him every step of the way.

Kiss for kiss and stroke for stroke they gave, and received the most wondrous rapture. Lawrence's own pleasure was as nothing compared to what he could do for the lovely girl whom Fate had chanced for him to meet.

He completed himself inside her without a thought of pulling out before it was too late. His almost primitive need drove him on to possess her, feel her softness surround and clench him. He burst forth in a paroxysm of passion and spilled his essence deeply inside her.

"Juliet, my love," he sobbed into her shoulder, as she took him yet higher. A rainbow exploded in his head, and for the first time in his life, he knew absolute peace.

"Lawrence!" Juliet gasped, stroking his face and back, tears of joy filling her eyes as he drove into her with a final thrust which rendered her incapable of a single coherent thought.

She arched off the bed, surging into his arms, her breasts pressed against his chest so tightly, arms and legs clutching so hard it was as if she would pull him right into her completely and make them one forever.

Which in a sense they were now, Lawrence reflected as he blinked and roused himself to kiss her lingeringly on the mouth. Now that he had known such radiant joy, how was he ever to let her go? Settle for a loveless, commercially based marriage to a hard,

calculating widow, and render tawdry and difficult any chance he might ever have of seeing this vibrant, lovely young woman again?

She began to come down to earth at last and held him tenderly against her breast. "I'm sorry, I got completely lost in the feelings."

He laughed long and loud. "No need to apologise. I know exactly how you feel. You're so beautiful, Juliet. That can be my only excuse. I'm lost with just one touch, one...."

A movement of his hips was enough to complete his sentence. More than enough to send her eyes rolling back in her head as urgent desire roiled through her once again.

Her tiny sob of caught breath was enough to set him off. Feeling his pulsing hot hardness burgeoning within her once again, her violet eyes flew open. "Oh, no, surely we can't--"

"Don't tell me there's anyone else for you tonight. Or any other night to come. You're mine, Juliet. You can feel it too. We fit perfectly, like, like Romeo and Juliet."

"The world's greatest lovers."

"Right now, my darling, I feel like putting them to shame."

He wove his fingers through her long raven tresses, cupping her head to receive his kiss. It left her in no doubt of what he was about to do again, for as his tongue slowly penetrated her mouth, he filled her below with one deep inexorable thrust.

Only this time, instead of rhythmically moving against her sparking flesh, he pressed into her more deeply, the large head within swelling, touching her womb with a sultry throb. She didn't know where her body began and his ended as they became one.

One with a stranger, she thought with horrified alarm. But her momentary panic evaporated in the face of the bliss he was conferring upon her, truly a present from the gods.

Juliet didn't want to flee from him; she wanted to rush headlong into his arms, toward the delights only Lawrence could thrill her with. She tried to move her hips as she had done before, but he untwined one hand from her hair to cup her bottom and hold her steady.

He lifted his lips long enough to whisper, "Easy, love. We have all the time in the world. There's no hurry. Don't move. Just let me love

you.”

She drew in a thready breath and placed her palms on his buttocks, forcing her fingers to uncurl and stroke him, hold him to her. “I can’t stop moving. It feels so wonderful.”

“Gently, sweet,” he whispered again.

But it was already too late. Her internal caress was rippling so strongly, he pulled his hips more tightly to hers. Her inner muscles milked him of his essence though he struggled to remain with her. The impassioned kiss he gave her arched her back even further, driving him so deeply into her tautly-poised body that they both felt the earth spin away into the void.

Never had there been a woman like her for Lawrence, and he knew there never could be again. As he poured into her, his throbbing kiss was a silent plea for love, for help, though he wasn't even sure what he was begging for.

Juliet had never imagined anything like this could ever happen to her. She had never thought anything like this could exist. But then she had never imagined a man like Lawrence could ever exist, or if he did, that she would ever meet him, become his lover.

She had no idea what devil was driving Lawrence onwards like a man possessed. All her brother had said about him was true, and more. To all outward appearances he was a calm, sophisticated, witty, intelligent man of the world. Polished despite all his years in India.

Yet when she had looked into his silvery eyes just before they climaxed, she had seen something frightening. A grim darkness within. Directed at her? She was not so sure. And she did not want to run the risk of finding out.

At the same time, to leave him in the dark now that she had seen the truth was unthinkable. Only within her could he find the peace he sought, or if not peace then an absence of pain, anger and regret. Regret for the past? For the future, when he was supposed to be marrying so vary badly?

Is *that* why he had come to visit tonight? He had realised he'd made a capital error? Had seen her, heard of her, and been as fascinated with her as she had been with him? Decided to become

her lover in order to sabotage the match? Or to have one last hurrah before he put his head in the noose?

Or still more strangely, and incredibly, had been about to settle for a loveless match, and had instead ended up rewarded with the gift of love at first sight?

She cradled him against her and whispered, "It's all right, Lawrence, I'm here. I'm yours. Take all of me. Let me give you oblivion, even if it's only for one night," she offered generously, though the thought of letting him leave to go marry the foul Matilda, or indeed any other woman, filled her with jealousy.

Lawrence collapsed against her with relief and gratitude, as if all his struggles were completely at an end. Every nerve in his body seemed to coil and writhe with passion as she touched him, *loved* him.

Their souls and bodies blending and merging in the dance as old as time, they finished together blissfully. They lay for a time sated and spent in the warm circle of each other's embrace.

At last Lawrence managed to ease his heavy weight off her. He grasped her convulsively and clung to her, pulling her tightly to his side so that she could scarcely breathe. He too was still panting heavily from what they had just shared, and his words came out ragged and hoarse.

"I can't believe any of this. I never imagined-- I know all of this is a muddle. But whatever mistakes I've made, I couldn't bear to see you suffer because of me. I lost all control. I'm sorry. I couldn't even try to avoid completing myself within you. Not once, several times. Even now you could be with child if you haven't taken precautions. And the truth is, I don't honestly care.

"I'm not a good man, Juliet. I've been a rake, and have known more women than you can even imagine," he found himself confessing. "But nothing, *nothing* I have ever felt or experienced has prepared me for you. It's a sign."

She struggled to sit up. "Of what?"

"That it's not too late for me. I still have some hours of freedom left before tomorrow. Then I shall have to decide."

Her jet brows drew down. "Decide? I don't understand," she said,

wondering again if this had something to do with her brother's former lover. She tried to tell herself not to be silly, but her heart gave a little lift of pride. Was he saying he cared for her, not Matilda, after all?

Lawrence kissed her, trying to silence her questions and her fears. Suddenly he seemed the most wretchedly low creature on the face of the earth.

How could he just use women and cast them aside like an old handkerchief? He had been avoiding anyone other than professional women the whole of his life to ensure that things would only be temporary.

Now, on the eve of his marriage, he had found a woman he wanted to spend hours with, nay, even a lifetime with. Yet she was London's most sought-after Paphian, and he was supposed to be marrying Matilda, a respectable widow, in a few hours.

He might not have hurt the women the way some men did, enjoying brutality, bondage and all sorts of degrading games he had heard them actually boast about. But still he felt shame. This woman wasn't just a convenient, she was a human being.

And one he wanted to know everything about. He had thought he was protecting himself from any unnecessary entanglements, involvement of emotions; he had actually only been hurting himself. For he had deprived himself of warmth and affection such as this woman was bestowing upon him with every kiss, every caress of her remarkable hands. She seemed to kiss and touch him everywhere as if endlessly fascinated.

Perhaps he was a fool for thinking he could be different from any of her legion of clients. Perhaps this was the secret of her success as a whore? The fact that she could make you feel as if she *loved* you?

He damned himself for a fool. She was a prostitute, for Heaven's sake. Anyone could plunk down his cash, and she would spread her legs for him. Even now the next man had most likely arrived. He heard the clock strike, and felt a surge of fury rise within him. His hour was over.

"Can I stay?" he rasped. "Can I stay all night? God, I need you so. Please, let me stay."

His agonised tone, even more than the words, quelled any protest

Juliet might have made to the contrary.

"Yes, Lawrence, you can stay with me," she agreed, wondering even as she did so how she could ever succeed in getting away with such behaviour in her brother's house.

Yet practical be damned, she wanted him. *Needed* him. And he needed her. "But surely you must be tired--"

He soothed her hair back from her face, planting feather-light kisses on her eyelids and cheeks. "I don't want to waste a second of our magical time with anything so mundane as sleep. Not when there's so much more to share."

She could already feel herself soaring as he put one huge hand upon her breast to trace her nipple lightly until it peaked into his hand. "Mmm, so much more. Let me discover everything about you, please."

His mouth met hers in a kiss which tore through her like a whirlwind. Her limbs melted, and desire pooled in the pit of her belly, white hot and scorching through her veins.

She reached for Lawrence then, eager again for that which filled her with such delight, bold enough at last to reach out and touch him most intimately all over, just as he had fondled her.

Their caresses mirrored each other's as they lay back upon the pillows and he kept in tandem with her hands. He stroked her inner thighs, allowing his own legs to spread so that she could stroke the tender soft flesh, a startling contrast to the huge hardness jutting into the tender curve of her hip and belly, fiercely possessive in its intent. It awed her with its power and beauty. His entire body was made for admiration and worship, she thought as she reverently touched his face, neck and chest as well.

He lifted his lips for a brief second. "I love it when you touch me like that," he murmured as she stroked down his abdomen to his thighs.

"I'm not hurting you?"

"You could never hurt me, dearest Juliet. You've made me feel loved for the first time in my life. Laugh at me if you like, but it's true."

She smiled. "I would never laugh at you. In truth, I feel the same."

She kissed him tenderly, so movingly that it took all of his willpower not to roll her on her back and pound into her until they saw stars once more. But he held back as best he could. Prostitutes didn't often get pleasure from the act, if at all, so he was sure her sense of wonderment was due to the fact that she really was enjoying him.

Let her fulfill her own needs, he decided. He wanted her to love him forever as the only man who could complete her. Foreign though the idea was, he wanted to share his entire life, every particle of his being, with this awe-inspiring woman.

Matilda was a mere *bagatelle*. A business arrangement which his factor Nash had led him to, and which Lawrence had given into in an absurd moment of folly which he would take pains to rectify as soon as he managed to drag himself from this beauty's side.

Of course, he could take the easy way out, just not turn up at the altar at St. Mary's in the morning.

But no, that wouldn't be quite fair, now would it?

On the other hand, to tear himself from Juliet's arms was a thought almost too painful to contemplate.

She shifted in the bed, and he knew a moment's panic. But no, she was not leaving. She lifted her mouth, but she placed her hands on his chest to steady herself, and began to explore him once more.

She let her palms travel down his broad expanse of chest, his rippling abdomen, his lean hips, his massive thighs which proclaimed him a magnificent horseman. That thought gave way to one more daring, and she wondered....

"Yes. Please, take me now," he whispered.

Her eyes swivelled away from his surging loins a brief second, looking for a clue. Thus far, she had managed with no real knowledge or even rational thought, just the instinct of her body against his.

Now she considered his pleasure as an intellectual challenge. There were an infinite number of permutations that she could see; she looked forward eagerly to learning about each. She moved onto her knees, and resting her hands upon his chest once more, swung one leg over his hips.

His hands moved to hold her and his erection surged upwards,

giving her the final piece of the puzzle. She marvelled at the soft delicacy of the tip of it, before spreading herself over him, and giving a little push. Fiery red and gold sparks crackled all around them, and Lawrence let out his breath explosively.

“God in Heaven, Juliet!”

She was convinced she would be split in two as she rammed her hips down, just as his powerful answering thrust bolted upwards. She would have fallen onto his chest in a faint if he had not clasped her waist in his huge hands and pushed her back, angling her body so that his shaft rubbed the most delicious spot at the top of her mound. His hands and her legs setting the rhythm, she rode him hard, his body underneath hers never still as the outpouring of his passion went on and on.

She could hear her own impassioned cries, the blood throbbing in her ears, her shouting his name. Just when she thought it was all over, he moved one hand down to caress the tiny sweet bud at the top of her thighs, and she began all over again.

“No, Lawrence, we can’t!” she said in a panic, her eyes flying open as her passion ran away with her.

“Take what you need, Juliet. I’m all yours. Anything you want you have only to ask and I shall gift it to you. Money, jewels, gowns, anything you like, if only it will make you happy.”

She shook her head. “What more could I possibly want than this bliss to share with you?”

She clutched him fiercely, leveraging herself up and down with her hands, setting a breakneck pace he did not even try to check.

He watched in fascinated awe as the blush of love which had flooded her body now grew deeper. The sheen of perspiration which dewed her skin made her glow like a glorious goddess. Her internal shudderings grew more and more savage. He could feel his own climax only a second away.

He watched her struggle to let herself go, to surrender utterly to the madness inside. He held on desperately to his last shred of coherence. Her body was begging for release, vibrating from head to toe, squeezing him unmercifully with powerful inner muscles in her already incredible tightness.

Still his delight roared through him, and still she propelled them both onwards. He wondered at her ability to hold back from the ultimate bliss, for her entire body was rippling under his hands, her nipples and delicate peak so engorged that one brush of them was enough to arch her back almost painfully against his now bent thighs. He had heard women often faked their delight, but there was no possible way to counterfeit this unbridled response.

He watched her in awed fascination until he was sure she would strain all of her abdominal muscles if she kept contracting like that for much longer. He rolled with her to the edge of the bed until only her hips and legs were under him. With the back of her head resting on the carpet and one hand on her waist, he drove into her, massaging her breast until the ripples deep within her convulsed relentlessly in an endless roll like the surging sea.

Juliet clung to him tautly, her whole body opening to him as his hand upon her bottom pressed her up into his own huge frame, the better to receive his driving need. All the other climaxes they had experienced together were as nothing in the face of this onslaught of desire. They exploded as one, the orgasm rushing through them both until they could scarcely breathe.

At last they both quietened, and Lawrence pulled her up into the bed once more and put his arms around her tightly. He drew the covers up over her and smoothed her hair back from her flushed face. "Sleep now, love. I'll see you later."

Juliet did the only thing she longed to. She gave him a tender kiss, and fell into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter Three

Awakening some hours later, Lawrence could not remember the last time he felt so happy, so at peace, or so certain about anything in his life. The raven black hair tumbled all over his torso told him where he was in an instant. He felt a momentary jolt as he recalled the blond beauty eagerly anticipating their nuptials this morning.

But he had been having second and even third thoughts about Matilda for a long time now. Well, ever since they had got engaged six weeks ago, if he were being completely honest.

He would probably not have even gone that far had not his loyal assistant Nash spelled out for him all the advantages of the match with the same precision as he presented his balance sheet at the end of each month.

Lawrence had never thought to feel anything even remotely resembling love; he had not even been sure it existed. Had thought men who succumbed to it deluded fools.

Well, that was not strictly true. He had thought he loved his childhood sweetheart. But when she had rejected him when he had lost his money, and promptly married his elder brother, he had felt kicked and betrayed, but not heartbroken.

Of course, the heart coped with its wounds in different ways. Even he had to admit to himself now with the benefit of hindsight that he had quashed his anger and despair with months of hard work and study. Not to mention mortification of the flesh on board the ship taking him to the Far East to join his uncle, who had told him he was willing to adopt him as his heir after his own two sons had been killed in the overseas service.

He had found plenty of willing and talented whores when he had first arrived in Calcutta, and had told himself he had made a lucky escape from matrimony.

Now with this delicate young blossom nestled so tightly against him, he wondered how he could have ever found satisfying the quick fumblings and explosive climaxes over in seconds.

The sun streamed in, and he stroked her riotous ebony waves, tickling her cheek as he kissed her. The morning was said to be a marvelous time for making love. His manhood tenting the sheet was more than eager to find out for itself.

He drew the sheet and coverlet up over his shoulders, blocking out the sunlight, and moved between her thighs in the most alluring manner.

Juliet came slowly awake, her lips parting in a sigh of pure joy as Lawrence teased them open. Surely this had to be a dream.... But no, he was real, solid, and buried deeply within her most secret core.

"Good morning, my sweet. I was hoping you'd wake."

"Lawrence, what are you--"

"I can't resist a repeat of last night. You're so magnificent, I can't help it. I want all of you so much. I want to stay here forever and never let you go. But go I must."

She nearly wept with frustration and opened her mouth to plead with him to stay. He pulled out of her pulsating softness, but he apologised tenderly.

"I'll be back with you in a moment, I promise, love. I need to taste you everywhere."

His mouth glided over her breasts so delightfully that by the time he had kissed his way down to her thighs she felt as if it were the most normal thing in the world to share with her beloved.

She was still so delicious, honey sweet with a new slight metallic taste he wondered at for a moment. He inserted one finger inside her incredible tightness and curled it upwards, until she was shuddering against him once more.

"Too much?" he laughed.

"Oh yes, or not enough. Please, I want all of you."

"What, tongue and fingers aren't enough? You lusty little lady. I ought to punish you for that."

"Oh, please, it's too good," she panted as his fingers and tongue continued to move slowly and rhythmically.

"But you asked for more. So have more." He gently opened her further and inserted a second large finger, causing her hips to buck upwards desperately. He held her still with one hand on her breast, and she rode the wave of passion and began to float down.

Or would have if he had not begun to stroke her even more intently, now nibbling the roseate whirl with his teeth.

"More, love?"

"Oh, yes, please, all of you. Oh, I'm on fire."

She flipped the covers off her face. As he glided up her body, his fingers and now thumb delighting her core and mound, he could see she was not exaggerating. Her elegant cheekbones and lush lips were flooded with colour. He kissed her blisteringly and pressed into the luxurious cradle of her body once more.

She climaxed in an instant, taking him with her before he even had a chance to glide all the way in. The powerful ring of muscles just inside her entrance to paradise clamped down on his pulsing head, wringing his pleasure from him in great shuddering bursts.

He had heard women in the Far East could do this, but he had never met one. But then, he had travelled the world over and never met any woman as exciting or voluptuous as Juliet.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful. Your breasts. Manna from the gods." He leaned forward to lave each nipple, nibbling and suckling her tenderly until the throb in her womb grew too great to be ignored. "Your sweet moisture, like nectar. Your skin, sheer ambrosia."

Juliet gasped and called out his name, and he chuckled against her breast as she clutched his soft hair and climaxed.

He gave her a smile of triumph. "Remarkable. No one has ever responded to me like that before. Let's see what else I can do to you to make you zenith."

"All you have to do is look at me," she admitted, panting.

"Hmm, now that I would like to see. But touching you is so thrilling, I just can't seem to stop. Oh my, what are you doing to me?"

"The same as you're doing to me?" she gasped as his huge length began to fill her once more.

"Listen, Juliet," he said, kissing her tenderly on the cheek and lips. "I really want to stay with you all morning, every morning, but I need to leave for a couple of hours to take care of some unpleasant duties. Then I promise you I'll come back and we'll talk."

"Talk?" she said, her eyes already glazing over again with desire.

"Aye, talk. And any other kind of intercourse you'd like. I need to know where I stand with you. We need to discuss our future. I can't just leave this at one night."

"Future?" she echoed. "What kind of future?"

He blushed like a schoolboy. "I don't know. I mean, I've been engaged twice in my life, but it was never, well, it was never romantic. This time I want to do it right."

"This time? You mean *me*?" she gasped.

"Yes, yes, I think I do," he admitted, dreading her laughter.

Instead her eyes filled with tears. "Engaged?"

He nodded. "Yes, and married too, if you'll have me. If you can see your way clear to turning your whole life upside down for a man like me. I'm not very good with women--"

She laughed then, and he stiffened for a moment.

"I think you underestimate your remarkable talents quite considerably, Lawrence, my dear. Very good doesn't even come close."

Her words made his surge so powerfully he was sure he would swoon. "Speaking of coming close--"

They revelled in their banquet of sensual delicacies, driving each other ever onward. As soon as one would quieten, the other would soar, until soon, their desires meshed and they peaked together so long and hard he was sure his heart had stopped.

He devoured her with kisses, trying to draw her right into him, just as she did with his body in the incredibly tender embrace they alone could share.

Lawrence was so absorbed in making love to the wonderful woman he had been sent to meet that he had scarcely a shred of sanity left when the door swung open, and gruff tones of masculine outrage assaulted his ears.

"Juliet! My God! Juliet! What on earth?"

Lawrence rose on one elbow and twisted to face the intruder. He blinked at the man in the bright sunshine, which seemed to glow like a spotlight on his dramatic entrance.

All the joy of a moment before slipped away, leaving only the hard, brutal, nasty past ten years of his life.

He stared, and stared.

For there, gaping at him, his face as black as a thundercloud, was his old enemy Matthew Dane.

"Lawrence Howard. You bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing to *my sister!*"

Chapter Four

Lawrence was not sure if the choking sound came from his throat or hers.

"Matthew! I can explain!" Juliet shrieked.

"There's nothing to explain! I can see it all. You loathsome swine. Unhand her at once!"

Lawrence felt a lurch of shock and fear. His mind screamed in agony. *No, it couldn't be!*

"Is this how low you would stoop to get revenge upon me? To defile my own sister! Juliet, how long has this been going on under my nose! You bastard, you're going to pay for this!"

He grabbed Lawrence up from the bed by his hair and the scruff of his neck.

Juliet screamed, "Matthew, no!"

Fortunately their friends Philip Marshall and Blake Sanderson came tearing in, Michael Avenel not far behind to see what the commotion was.

"Jesus, Matthew, get a hold of yourself," Philip said, putting his huge frame between the two large and livid men.

Lawrence glared at the newly arrived trio. "Well, well, the Rakehells all together again," he sneered. "Thick as bloody thieves as always." He stopped and stared. "Michael Avenel, of all people. I had heard you were dead. Never thought to see you again anywhere other than Hell, more's the pity."

Michael's ice blue eyes flicked over the huge naked man coolly. "Welcome back, Lawrence. I'd like to say India has improved your manners and sense, but ravishing Matthew's sister for revenge is

pretty low even for *you* to stoop."

"I'm not the one stooping low, allowing my own sister to prostitute herself!" he flung back.

Juliet and Matthew both gasped.

Juliet clutched the sheet she had hastily covered herself with to her bosom and slumped to the foot of the bed in shock.

"*Prostitute!*" Matthew bellowed. "You have the gall to say that to me when the evidence of your ravishment is all too plain to see in the broad light of day?"

He pointed at the center of the bed, at the blood-flecked sheets lit by the sunshine from the unshuttered windows. White-faced, he swayed.

Blake caught him before he hit the floor, and handed him to Michael. "Get him down to the study and give him some brandy, now. I'll check Juliet. You, Philip, stay here. Help Mr. Howard get dressed. Then we're all going to have a nice little chat and see how this dire situation can be remedied."

"Remedied?" Lawrence growled, oblivious to what Matthew had been pointing at because he never dared take his eyes from his enemies, not while he was stark naked.

"I'll pay the tart and go. That's how things are done in every brothel. What the hell is there to discuss?"

Juliet was now weeping silently into her sheet, unconscious of the fact that only her bosom was covered. All three men could plainly see the bloodied sheets, her reddened thighs.

At their prolonged silence and stares, Lawrence at last looked down at himself, completely nonplussed. *No, surely not.* It was a harlot's trick, or her monthly courses. There was no possible way the most talked about Ladybird in London could be a *virgin!*

Philip could see him gaping, and his mind racing.

"Blake, can you please hand me Lawrence's clothes? We shall leave you alone to examine Juliet."

A petite blond woman clad in a riding habit now came into the room, head down as she tugged on her gloves. "My, little Juliet, you're lying in bed late for once. We're all waiting for you to come out

to the stables as we arranged, and here you are-- God in Heaven!" she exclaimed, staring at the naked man in her sister-in-law's room.

She covered her dusky blue eyes for a brief second, then peeped through her fingers at the awesome sight. He was huge in every sense of the word, muscles rippling as he bristled with fury, and still rampantly aroused despite their tryst having been interrupted.

Althea's mind raced. *Where on earth had Juliet met him? And how had the timid bluestocking had the nerve to be thus with him right here under her brother's roof?*

Philip made the introductions with some aplomb. "Matthew's wife Althea. Lawrence Howard, former Rakehell and now tea planter, newly back from India."

"Wha- Who, how?"

Philip smiled slightly. "That, my dear, is what we're trying to ascertain. You'd better go to Matthew in the study. I'm afraid he saw the, er, damage done and he fainted."

She took one look at the bloodied sheets and tore out of the room as if the hounds of hell were after her, leaving Lawrence feeling as though he had entered Bedlam.

Just what the hell was going on here? And why did he have an increasing conviction that he was in trouble no matter what he said?

And the even worse sensation that he had just lost everything that had ever mattered to him in his life?

The sight of Juliet's slender shoulders quaking as she wept was more than he could stand.

Wept? Or was she laughing in triumph that her little ruse had worked?

He could see her damp cheeks, heard Blake trying to soothe her, but this only made him more livid. Lividly jealous. Three men charging into her bedroom-- He had been right all along, for all she was pretending to virtue.

Philip held out his hand to him mildly. "Come, into the bathroom with me. Let's get you cleaned up and dressed."

He went into the well-appointed white and gold tiled bathroom and ran the water in the tub, putting in some citrus oil and then gathering

some towels. "Go on, get in, have a soak."

He rifled in the cabinet under the basin, and found some shave cream and a straight razor, which he stropped carefully as his former friend soaked.

"Well, I must say, I had heard you were in London on some great new business enterprise and cutting a swathe through the Town trollops, but I never imagined in a million years you were going to turn up *here*. How could you? I mean, apart from the fact that you're supposed to be getting married soon and Matilda will have your guts."

Philip sat on the counter, his body in front of the door in case Lawrence should try to make a dash for it. He looked at ease, but Lawrence remembered him of old. He never started a fight, but he always finished one, and never lost. It would not be wise to take Philip on, even if he were feeling spry, which he most certainly was not. He felt as though he had been knocked flat on his back and had the stuffing kicked out of him.

"Come now, you look like a sophisticate. What is there to understand? I'm supposed to be getting married today. It was my last hurrah. My stag night. Matthew Sampson was supposed to have organised everything for me. The mystery lady who is said to be the most sought-after courtesan in London."

Philip's brows shot up but he remained silent.

"He gave me the address, was supposed to meet me here. I left the club, a bit squiffy admittedly, but not completely flummoxed, and headed to the docks for a moment to check on things. So I knew I was running a bit late. I got here, was told by Juliet that I had missed Matthew, but she was glad to receive me. We talked, and everything else just followed on from there."

"Matthew *Sampson* gave you the address, you say?" Philip asked quietly, a couple of awful suspicions starting to gnaw at him.

"Yes, of course. As I said, Matt Sampson came on ahead to arrange for everything. I was just supposed to come for an hour, then go home to get ready for my wedding, finish packing for our honeymoon, and get to St. Mary's for half-ten for the eleven o'clock ceremony."

"What address did Sampson give you?"

"What?" he asked impatiently, slapping the washing flannel against his back.

"Tell me the address," Philip repeated patiently.

"Why, 17 Tavistock Crescent, of course."

Philip's mouth dropped open, and he put his hand to his forehead and groaned.

"What? What is it? What did I say?"

"But my dear chap, don't you see, this isn't Tavistock Crescent. It's Tavistock *Square*. Lawrence, you came to the wrong house."

Chapter Five

"But my dear chap, don't you see, this isn't Tavistock Crescent. It's Tavistock *Square*. Lawrence, you came to the wrong house," Philip said with a sigh and shake of his head.

Lawrence gaped, completely winded. "No, it can't be. It's not possible."

Philip sighed. "It all makes sense. You came to the house and asked for Matthew, didn't you."

He shifted uneasily in the tub. "Yes, but—"

"You were referring to Matthew Sampson. But Juliet must have assumed that you were a friend of her brother Matthew, and made you welcome. She must have thought you got your times mixed up, that you were going to the Rakehell club dinner with us. It's why we're here in the house together, all of us. Dinner last night, and riding this morning with Juliet and Althea. Althea has been working at Blake's clinic, and Juliet's sister Miranda is staying with her aunt at the moment, which is how Juliet came to be alone last evening.

"I am sure you remember their aunt, the redoubtable Lady Pemberton. She is most certainly going to rake you over the coals if she ever finds out. My dear chap, seducing Juliet is the equivalent of social suicide. Lady Pemberton will ruin you! What the hell could you have been thinking?"

Lawrence scowled. "I don't take kindly to threats. I've come back from India to make myself the king of tea in this country. No one and nothing is going to stop me! Not Matthew Dane, not Lady Pemberton nor the Rakehells, do you hear me?" he said furiously, finishing in the bathtub with a few hasty swipes and snatching up a towel to dry himself.

Philip sighed. "I'm not threatening you, merely stating facts. You seduced an innocent eighteen year old with excellent family connections. What do you *think* is going to happen to you?"

"Innocent?" Lawrence snorted in derision. "That girl would put Nell Gwynn to shame! And the fact that all four of you are in this house together shows this is a house of ill repute. You've tried to trick me in some way. I'm not even back in London two months and I meet up with you all, all friends, commiserating over a supposed virgin sister of Matthew's? I never even knew Matthew had any sister."

"Two sisters, Juliet and Miranda in fact, but that is by the by. You can search every single room in this house, talk to the servants if you don't believe me. This is no brothel. I give you my word."

"Forgive me if I say your word isn't worth much if you're consorting with Matthew Dane."

Philip shook his head. "Please, we're going to have to go out there and face Matthew as soon as you're dressed. I would just as soon not see him re-decorate one of the London parks with your brains."

Lawrence scowled.

"As a gentleman he has no choice in the matter. He will fight and most likely kill you, no matter if you choose swords or pistols. He shall have to duel you for the honour of his sister unless you can stop challenging him and come to some sort of logical accommodation."

"What, marry that trollop, you mean? No! Out of the question. I would rather be dead!" he barked, so furious he could scarcely recall having asked her to become engaged to him.

"You don't mean that!"

Lawrence's mouth was a thin line of obstinacy. "Matthew has had his own way for far too long. He thought to ruin me once before. He's never going to get the chance again. What is Juliet supposed to be, a spy or something, to relay whispered bed secrets about my business to you all?"

Philip held up his hand in protest. "Lawrence, you're being absurd. Why will you not believe me? You made a mistake! Be man enough to admit it. I'll go around with you myself right now to 17 Tavistock Crescent and prove it to you. No one here has tried to trick or trap you. I know Blake and I are friends with Matthew and Michael. But do you really think any of us would be party to the ruining of an innocent girl like Juliet?"

Lawrence shook his head. "I don't believe you. It's all lie. If she was a virgin, I'm the Queen of the May."

Philip rolled his eyes in exasperation as Lawrence tried to shave himself, his hands shaking so badly he nearly cut his own throat.

"But Lawrence, you saw her for yourself with your own eyes. Felt it, surely. Unless of course you've never have bedded one before, in which case you can be forgiven for thinking it might be a monthly.

"But that can easily be discerned in the next couple of days, if her linens remain unmarked. I'm telling you, Juliet is as pure as the driven snow. You and Matthew are going to have to discuss what to do about her future and yours."

"What future? I'm supposed to be marrying Matilda at eleven!"

Philip looked at him appraisingly for a moment, as if making up his mind. At last he said, "Forgive me, old chap, but you're not married yet. You've just ruined a genteel girl. Did you even use protectors?"

He sighed. "No, damn it, no I didn't."

"Superb. So now we not only have to worry about disease but--"

Lawrence scowled blackly. "I've always been careful! Disease will be no cause for concern. I give you my word as a gentleman."

Philip waved the remark away dismissively. "I might be inclined to believe you, but Matthew will not. Well, we shall just have to have Blake keep an eye out--"

Lawrence's ire bubbled over. "I swear, I've never lost control like this before. I'm not in the habit of leaving a string of bastards in my wake either."

Philip stilled. "But you do admit to the possibility?"

He nodded curtly. "Yes, yes, I do."

"Well, I think you can see where your duty lies."

Lawrence's eyes flew wide. "Impossible! What the hell do I tell Matilda?"

Philip shrugged as if the matter were of little consequence. He knew Matilda of old--she had been Matthew's mistress long enough, and had put him through hell on earth. Matthew was well rid of her, and Lawrence would be too.

How he had been so deceived by Matilda in the first place as to have got engaged, he had no idea. She must have been practically spreading her legs for him on the dock as he came into port....

Philip watched Lawrence continue to try to shave, but after him nicking himself a third time, he sighed. "Here, let me. I promise not to slit your throat. And if I don't do it, you will."

Lawrence relinquished the razor with a harrumph, and sat on the counter now, while Philip stood and shaved him with smooth strokes.

"I know Matilda would be, er, disappointed, but really, the worst thing that happens is you pay a fine for breach of promise. You can jolly well afford it, can't you? If all I hear about tea traders is true, you must be minting it. And if you're strapped for any reason, I'll gladly give you the money. Anything to stop Juliet from being ruined."

"You would do that for a girl you hardly know?" he said suspiciously.

"Now wait a minute! I'm happily married to a lovely wife, Jasmine, and support a clinic for fallen women here in London. I help any person on the game who comes to me. I'm hardly going to turn my back on my friend's innocent sister after she's been seduced by a scoundrel," he said, throwing a towel into his face for him to wipe off the rest of the shaving soap.

Lawrence glared at him.

"Well, not scoundrel, but certainly a very misguided and angry man."

"And Blake and Michael? What are they to her?" Lawrence said nastily.

Philip managed to remain calm in the face of his furious suppositions. "They're both married as well, if that's what you're asking me. Happily so, to most excellent wives. If you will forgive my saying, none of us ever expected to get married. Our wives burst into our lives one day, Blake's in a carriage accident and Michael's in a huge storm, and mine because I never knew the woman I had been toying with had a twin until I bedded her. And wed her, and have never had a moment's regret since, except about the selfish life I led swiving like a sailor until I married her."

Lawrence heard this with a jolt, for it had been exactly the way

he'd been feeling when he'd been with Juliet. As if he wanted to reform his life and--

Philip saw his bleak expression, and decided to force Lawrence's hand. "Time is pressing on. If you're to go explain to Matilda that the wedding is off, you need to do it soon."

"And why would I do that?" Lawrence snapped.

"Because you know the consequences if you don't. And because I suspect you don't really want to marry Matilda, now do you."

Lawrence lapsed into silence. At length he said, "She'll tear me to pieces."

"I don't think so," Philip said, thinking rapidly. *If Matthew were to go with Lawrence... Or Matthew went himself. Otherwise they would never be rid of the odious woman.*

"Matthew and Blake can take care of your problem, if you'll come around to Tavistock Crescent with me to prove we've not tricked you."

Lawrence finished mopping his face free of shaving soap and glared at his former friend. "Even if it was an honest mistake, how can I ever trust any of you!"

"The past is over, forgotten! Let it go!"

"I can't! I lost everything--"

"Apparently you didn't!"

Lawrence stared at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you!" Philip said impatiently, sweeping his hand up and down to indicate the fine evening clothes Lawrence was now putting on.

"You never had to sleep in the corridors of the Marshalsea, or sell your body to randy women who wanted to ride you with spurs on. Never had to face ten years of penal servitude in the Antipodes. Fight ever day of your life for food, water, safety, your virtue, such as I had left after all that."

Lawrence's eyes widened at his friend's admission of his former life.

Philip continued, "Juliet is an innocent girl! I was a prostitute and labeled a criminal, though I did nothing wrong apart from sell that

which was mine to save my family from debtor's prison. And being so naive that I fell in with the wrong crowd.

"You think you have cause to be aggrieved against Juliet? Matthew? My wife's father tried to ruin me, yet I forgave her! I knew she had had no part in what he had tried to do to me and my family. Why can you not see that even if Matthew did cheat you, which he didn't, Juliet knows *nothing* of this. She couldn't possibly. She was a small child, and--"

"She still spread her legs for me! Who wants to marry a whore?"

Philip's sucked-in breath told Lawrence he had gone too far. His tone was low, but made his outrage all the more powerful. "I'm sick of this double standard, the rake who looks down at sexually independent women. She's young, healthy, and passionate. What's wrong with that? She's heard about you from us, only good things, and you must have, well, sparked each other off. She is *not* a harlot, and this is *not* a bordello. I give you my word. As I've told you, we need to go to Tavistock Crescent to clear this up.

"And I was a whore, yet my wife married me. Loves me. You don't have to know me after today, but I would like to try to help you and Juliet put of this hellish muddle."

Lawrence was genuinely mortified at what he had said. He had always liked Philip, admired him. "Philip, I didn't mean--"

He heaved a sigh and shook his head. "The trouble is you don't know what you mean, Lawrence. You still haven't got over that explosive temper of yours, your impetuosity and unwillingness to back down even when you know you've made a mistake. And your suspicious nature is worse than ever.

"But time is pressing onwards. I need to speak to Matthew for a minute, and then you need to come with me around the corner to Tavistock Crescent."

Lawrence raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, then resumed his dressing. "I don't suppose I have much choice, do I?"

"No, I don't think you do," Philip said quietly. "You really don't want to fight me on this."

"All right. You go see Matthew. I'm going to poke my nose into every room in this house and question every servant."

"Just be careful how you phrase the questions, so they don't think you're an utter madman."

Lawrence rolled his eyes drolly. "Very funny."

Philip shook his head and sighed. "Hardly. There's nothing amusing about this at all, Lawrence. I pity you. And Juliet. But I'll do my best to make sure all of this turns out well. "

Philip opened the door to the bathroom a crack, and peered out.

Juliet, clad only in a chemise, jumped and cowered behind her sister-in-law. Her eyes were reddened, her cheeks still damp.

Lawrence had never seen a more moving sight in his life. He would have reached for her if his own fury had not stayed his hand.

He forced himself to tear his gaze away from her, and marched out of the room with the air of a man being led to the scaffold.

"Oh God, he *hates* me now. Thinks I'm a prostitute! What on earth?" Juliet gasped as soon as he had gone.

"Some men think that after they've had a woman. They don't ever stop to consider that they're the cause of their fall," Althea said mildly.

"But those horrible things he said, and his fury with Matthew. They looked as though they were fit to kill each other."

Althea shrugged one shoulder. "Old family history. I don't know all the details myself. But you need to face the facts, pet. He has compromised you, and could have left you pregnant. You need to think about whether or not you really want to marry him, because Matthew is going to have to press for that."

"*Marry* him? But Lawrence *hates* me now."

"He's very angry, but you're a gorgeous and loving woman. How could he hate your beauty and decency?"

Juliet sniffed, seeking some crumbs of comfort from this desperate situation. "He actually did talk about getting engaged, being married, before everything erupted into chaos."

"There you are then." Althea nodded with satisfaction.

Juliet looked up a bit more brightly. "He said he had to go take care of a few unpleasant duties. That when he came back we would talk about our future together. But Matthew came in to look about

going riding, and, well, you know--"

Althea sighed, and sat down at the foot of the bed. She patted the mattress, and Juliet joined her. "I may as well tell you, Lawrence was supposed to be marrying Matilda this morning."

"This morning? And yet he slept with me last night? Then he is as debauched as she is!" Juliet gasped in horror. "I could never marry a man like *that*!"

"To be fair, I don't think he's really that bad. She pounced on him as soon as he came back from India, monopolised him, offered herself as the perfect wife to help him advance his business, by all accounts. It was more of a marriage of commercial interests than a romance, according to the latest *on-dit*, though how he could have been so fooled by her I have no idea. Why, just last week--"

She nodded. "I know. I've heard all about it. But surely he couldn't have been so deceived in Matilda?"

"I think he was," Althea said pensively. "So you would be saving him from a fate worse than death if you were to marry him. With all of your skills and intelligence, he would have commercial success beyond his wildest dreams. But even better than that, he would have a wife who cared about him, whom he could love."

"Love?" Juliet shook her head. "He hates the sight of me. You saw the way he looked at me just now."

"Like he wanted to sweep you into his arms and kiss your tears away."

"Like he wanted to throttle me with his bare hands for ruining his life," Juliet maintained.

Althea sighed. "To be fair, he's said to be a complicated and somewhat difficult chap. So the truth is somewhere in between the two, I should think. The thing is, can you bear to save him from himself and Matilda? Stand being married to him?"

"If it were only the bedroom part, I would marry him in an instant without a second's regret or doubt."

Althea grinned. "That good, eh?"

"Incredible. I had no idea--"

"But you're saying you know there's a lot more to marriage than

that. And there most certainly is." She patted her sister-in-law on the shoulder. "But Lawrence was a Rakehell, good family and background, second son, unfortunate parents, and there was a scandal about his brother and his wife.

"Your aunt Lady Pemberton is going to scream like a banshee when she finds out about this, one way or the other. It's by no means going to be easy, but it could be worse, and we'll all do what we can to help. So I think you're going to have to accept the fact that the two of you must marry if you want to save yourselves from social disaster."

"I don't care for myself. I can go back to Dorset and live as quietly and obscurely as I did before you and my brother were kind enough to try to rescue a poor little country mouse. But I would hate to think of Aunt ruining the poor man for something that was at least half my fault. I could have stopped him. I didn't. I've made my bed, as they saying goes.

"And besides, there's one part of me that really enjoys triumphing over Matilda, snatching away her prize right out from under her nose. She's a virago and trull. She would make him miserable. I can help Lawrence, I'm sure I can."

Juliet lifted her chin proudly, her resolve growing more firm by the moment. "If he can get to know me and find it in his heart to forgive me for whatever he thinks I've done wrong, then I think we can have a good future together, even an exciting and happy one."

Althea searched her face, looking for any sign of fear or hesitation. She saw none. In fact, she had never seen her sister-in-law so glowing. At length, she nodded.

"Very good, Juliet. We're all in agreement about what needs to be done for the best, and I agree with you. Marrying Lawrence could well be the making of him, though with typical male pride he'll most likely never admit it. But he is certainly most taken with you."

The blond woman rose from the bed. "So I shall ring for the maid. Choose your best gown, have a bath and do your hair. I'll give you something to wash with which is said to help ward off pregnancy. Our Rakehell friend Jonathan Deveril the vicar is in Town for the blessing of the new addition to the clinic tomorrow. I'll send round to him, tell him to bring the flowers and a special license."

"But Lawrence hasn't agreed--"

"If he values his hide he will."

"Oh please, Matthew can't kill him--" Juliet begged.

Althea patted her hand and soothed, "He won't, I promise. But Matthew isn't stupid. He won't let you be ruined. And whatever happened between them all those years ago, I'm sure there was some misunderstanding. Matthew wouldn't want to see his old friend fed to a wolf like Matilda any more than you would. It'll be all right, really."

Juliet nodded and dried her eyes. "All right." She slipped off the mattress and padded towards her wardrobe to do as her sister-in-law had suggested and find a fine gown to be married in.

Married. To Lawrence Howard. The thought made her heart dance despite her trepidation.

"Very well. I'll get ready and wait for you here."

Chapter Six

Lawrence prowled from room to room. Every single one in the townhouse was exactly the same. Silent. He could see signs of habitation in some of the bedrooms, but all of the toilet articles were masculine, and the few scanty clothes in the wardrobes and drawers and valises suggested a temporary sojourn, not permanent residence.

Only in the room next to Juliet's and the large master suite were there any signs of female inhabitants, and the clothes and underthings were so unobjectionable, plain even, that he felt sordid even looking at them.

Those in the master suite were alongside many masculine personal items of clothing, and there was a much more noticeable number of garments and other more personal items such as books and jewels than in any of the other chambers.

Philip came in and pointed at one stage. "This is my room," he said, indicating the plain room in burgundy with blue accents. "I would invite you to search my pockets and so on, but time is pressing, as you know."

"Well, what is my sentence to be? Duel or marriage? Both equally deadly in the long run, I'm sure," Lawrence drawled.

His companion spread his hands wide. "It's entirely up to you. Matthew has agreed to act on your behalf with Matilda to explain this unfortunate *contretemps*. You have only to say."

Lawrence scowled. "Damn it, this is bloody blackmail. I won't stand--"

Philip looked at him steadily. "You can walk out at any time. Michael shall act as his second. I hope you'll understand if Blake and I refuse to stand up with you, though Blake is willing to be the doctor

in the proceedings if the two of you can't sort this out in a more civilised manner."

"And what does J--" He paused.

Philip raised his brows in inquiry.

"What does the lady say about all of this?" The insulting emphasis on the word 'lady' was unmistakable.

"What do you think she would say? That she doesn't want you killed for something which is half her fault. She's a lovely woman, educated and accomplished. You could do a damned sight worse. In fact, I think Juliet will be the making of you."

"The ruin of me, you mean, just as you all planned," Lawrence accused angrily.

Philip swept his hand around the room and raised it to the heavens. "Look at this house! Do you really think it's a bordello?"

"One of the more high-class ones."

Philip seized his arm.

"What are you--" he exclaimed as his old friend started to drag him out the door.

"Taking you to Tavistock Crescent, of course."

Philip nodded at Matthew in the foyer as they departed.

As soon as they were gone, Matthew fetched his cloak, off to see Matilda. "Michael, can you come with me for moral support? And bring pen and paper, please. I shall fetch all the cash in the safe and be with you presently."

They met in the foyer again a few moments later.

"Darling, I'll be back soon!" he called up to his wife, and headed off on his errand with both a heavy heart, and a swing in his step. Matilda would not be easy, but the delight at her having lost such a prize conquest was just too delicious for words. Now if only he could understand how Lawrence had ever managed to seduce his sister....

Both calls took very little time.

Matthew went to Matilda, and said his piece with Blake standing

by.

She blanched, took the money, fuming all the while, and signed the paper he thrust in front of her. Then they headed back to the Square to wait for Jonathan to arrive to perform the ceremony.

After some reluctance on the part of the doorkeeper at 17 Tavistock Crescent to open the portal, a buxom woman with the most impossible shade of red hair came to speak with them.

She stared and stared. When she at last found her tongue she exclaimed, "Bless my soul, if it isn't Philip Harris."

"That never was my real name, Bessie, any more than yours was Cleopatra in your heyday. But I'm short on time and need some answers. Matthew Sampson."

"Oh aye?"

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"Last night. Set up an appointment with me top girl last night for a friend, a last hurrah before his wedding this morning."

"I see." He gave Lawrence a meaning look.

Lawrence scowled back but remained silent.

"So what happened, Bessie?"

"Nothing. He was a no show. Maybe the lad got cold feet. Either that or he ended up jiggling giblets with someone from the club. Matthew waited for a time, then ended up having the rest of the hour to himself.

"Must say it's pretty bad form, though. Every man in London would kill for an hour with her. Normally I only rents her out for fifteen minutes at a time. Keeps them all panting to come back night after night. Her dance card is well and truly filled."

Lawrence stared around him at the dark garish decor and could heard the susurrations of sensual sounds in the background, murmurs, laughs, pants, and the occasional giggle or gasp.

"Can we see her now?"

"No can do, not even for pay. She's tied up until noon and I would have a riot on my hands if I told any one of the bucks they had to wait."

"Bessie, for old time's sake. Just one minute of her time, I swear."

"No, no, it's all right. If I could just have a look around?" Lawrence asked.

"Surely, sir. Not seen you around here before. Must be just back from overseas with that tawny weathered look of yours. There are other women you can see besides Belinda, you know. Just go on through and see what strikes your fancy."

Around the room in twos, threes and even fours were a bevy of beauties in various states of *deshabille*, but rather than looking sultry, they seemed bored and tired, hollow-eyed. Some men still lingered, no doubt to see the beauteous Belinda.

Lawrence hadn't seen so much pink naked flesh since he had viewed the pigsty on the deck of the ship which had brought him home from Calcutta. Not a single one of the women held a candle to Juliet, he had to admit. They all looked so hard, world-weary, and none of their figures could compare.

But the women caught his eye only fleetingly. Lawrence gaped at the full-sized painting of the Dionysian orgy which took up the entire length and height of the drawing room, and was notable for its anatomical detail and the enthusiasm depicted.

Even Philip blanched at the sight. "I say, Bessie, that's enough to put me off my dinner."

"You always was too squeamish and kind-hearted for your own good. Never did like the trade, though God knows you excelled at it."

"More like the women who pursued me did. But I paid my dues in Australia, and am happily married to a wonderful wife and have superb children."

"And does she know about--"

Philip nodded. "She does, and she loves me all the same."

Bessie heaved a sentimental sigh. "I'm glad you were one of the lucky ones, Philip, really I am. Gives us all hope. Those of us who want to leave, of course. Some of us enjoy it. Not many, though. Can't recall the last time I had a good tail-tickle with someone who knew what he was doing."

She shrugged. "But I have a good life apart from that. Town bucks

pay for this place, and me and me brother keep order. We get good takings and none of the gals need to stand out in the street in all weathers. It's a good life." She sounded as if she were trying to convince herself.

Philip shook his head pityingly. "Bessie, you're too old for this carry on. Violent young men, police raids, disease. I'm a lawyer now, and support the clinic at Bethnal Green. We get people started on different lives. Men and women." He fished in his pockets. "It isn't much, but go see Dr. Herriot, and he'll fix you up."

Bessie smiled wanly. "Can't teach an old bitch new tricks, but thank you for the offer."

"I don't believe that. Here, take the money. And if you don't keep it for yourself, or ever go see Dr. Herriot, promise me if you get any tender young things here, you'll help save them."

"Are you really so very rich then, Philip?" she said in awe.

"Yes, I am. Australia was the making of me. Well, it and my wife."

"Married her for her money, did ye?" Bessie said with a world weary air.

Philip shook his head and said proudly, "No, she hadn't a penny. I married for love. Maybe you can too."

Lawrence had observed the whole exchange, and decided he had witnessed enough. Whatever had been going on, Tavistock Crescent was most certainly a brothel. It wasn't possible for everyone to be in on such an elaborate hoax. And it would be easy enough to verify what the Madam had said with Matthew Sampson. And all that Philip had said about himself and the Rakehells.

"Seen enough?" Philip asked, his tone gentle.

Lawrence nodded wordlessly. He was still fuming, but more at himself than anyone else, for he felt like a fool.

But then, just because Juliet didn't work in a boarding school didn't mean she was virtuous. In fact, if she kept company with Philip and the Avenel brothers, he was sure she had to be fallen. It wasn't a question of who, but how many.

At the same time, though, as he cast a last lingering look at the women, trying to find anything to compare with Juliet's beauty, he told

himself he almost didn't care.

But there was still Matilda to deal with, which Lawrence pointed out as he and Philip headed back around the corner.

"Matthew and Michael have gone to see her. I will notarise the paper they bring back and there will be an end to it."

"Paper?"

"Stating that there was a last minute change of plans and you both agreed to part amicably rather than risk an eternity of marital woe."

"But I never—" Lawrence began to bluster. "How dare they! Who the hell do they think--"

"The brother of the girl you ruined, and his loyal friend. As am I, and acting as their solicitor."

"Very convenient," Lawrence sneered.

Philip shrugged, rounded the corner, and pressed on. "It would have been more convenient if Alistair Grant were here, but there isn't time. Matthew will buy Matilda off. She won't be the loser by it, believe me."

"Hah! The scandal, the indignity.... And what sort of sum could he possibly offer her that she would accept? She won't do it, I'm telling you. She would gain far more as my wife than anything Matthew could offer."

Philip remained willfully silent. The less Lawrence knew about Matthew and Matilda's past affair, the better.

When Philip continued to say nothing, he raged, "I think you're all insane. And I'm never going to forgive or forget this. Think you that everyone's problems will be solved if I simply wed the wench? A woman I detest?"

"Once she's married to me, I can do as I like with her. Beat her every day, take her children away from her. She will have no property, no legal rights or redress. If she's as innocent as you say, why would you marry her to a man like me, who spends the little spare time he isn't working trawling brothels and drinking and gambling at the club?"

Philip gave him another long assessing look, then shrugged and

strode on. "Many a reformed rake has been made by the love of a good woman. Or even a couple of naughty ones.

"Besides, I know you, Lawrence. You're angry and you bluster, a lot more than you used to, if I may say so. Must be an effect of the colonial service. You used to be quite eloquent in the debating society. But you're not a violent man. And your family tragedy--"

"Don't you dare say another word!" Lawrence barked.

"I won't on that subject, except to say that if you harm a hair on her head, you'll have all of polite society's censure. And then where will your business be?"

Lawrence fumed at the threat, and countered with one of his own. "I can keep her locked in the house so that no one will clap eyes on her from one end of the year to the next."

"You can," Philip agreed evenly. "But realise also that if you ever want your commercial enterprise to succeed here, you could use wealthy patrons and investors like myself. You could also do a great deal worse than have the support of Lady Pemberton, as well as a Duke and an Earl."

"Ah yes, Thomas Eltham and Michael Avenel."

"Thomas and Michael's younger brother Randall, actually."

Lawrence looked surprised at this piece of news, but was not going to allow himself to be distracted. "Thomas is a decent sort. What do you think he will say when he finds out you've blackmailed me into marrying a strumpet?"

Philip paused at the front door of Matthew's mansion and fixed him with a hard stare. "The Duke of Ellesmere will be pleased to receive your wife and you. He will understand that the impetuosity of youth caused the two of you to fall in love and marry with undue haste. No one needs know any different unless you want to make certain that you, Juliet, and any children you might be blessed with will never be able to hold up their heads in polite company."

Lawrence scowled but shrugged. "All right. You have every argument rehearsed to a tee. As I said, my debating skills are sadly rusted. I'll marry the chit. Where is she?"

"Now you're not going to--"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not going to hit her or shout at her. I just need to speak with her for a moment."

"Very well. Go into the drawing room and wait. I'll talk to Althea and if she thinks it prudent, that Juliet is up to it, we will send for her."

Juliet came a few moments later, approaching the man she had made love to so passionately only a short time before as timidly as a sparrow.

The sight of her anguished expression was enough to make him swallow the nasty accusations that had been forming on his lips. "I just need to know one thing," he rasped. "If you really wish to marry me."

"I've agreed to it," she said in an even tone which conveyed not a particle of emotion, though inwardly her heart was soaring at the prospect.

He stared at her, trying to get some clue as to her feelings. "If you refuse, then all of this confusion and anger will be over. I can get my fiancée to take me back, and--"

"Matilda?" she asked softly.

"Yes, just so," he said in surprise.

She sighed. He had no idea. She had to save him. And drat it all, she *wanted* him.

"I'm sorry. I think the marriage between us should take place."

His silver-grey eyes narrowed coldly. "And what if I told you that by marrying me you give up everything from your old life? Friends, family, everything? That I want nothing from Matthew or your family, and you shall be kept as little better than a servant to await my pleasure?"

"And I use the word pleasure loosely, for I vow you shall never get a moment of it as my wife. Never an ounce of kindness or consideration. If I marry you, I will own you, body and soul. So knowing all this, are you still prepared to marry me?"

She thought again of the dreadful tales she had heard about Matilda. Lawrence was a big strong man, but there was an underlying brittleness and vulnerability about him which spoke volumes, even if she had yet to discern its source. Here was a man who feared love,

emotional engagement, and yes, even happiness, joy. *Because it would be taken away, always taken away...*

She heard the words, and knew as he looked at her that the last thing on his mind was his loss of Matilda as a bride. She reached out her hand tentatively, and took his. "I understand, Lawrence. I will marry you, and take the consequences."

"You're mad!" he exclaimed in exasperation, flinging her hand away, though he immediately regretted the loss of contact. He began to pace up and down in front of the hearth like a caged panther.

"You will get no money, not be permitted to use your discretion in any way. And if our night results in a child, I shall not have him raised by a whore!"

She lifted her chin to look him straight in the eyes. "No, no, you shan't, but by the mother who will love him."

"And how could you love the child of such a fiend as the man forced to wed you, and who thus hates you?" he demanded, though even as he said the words, he was already reaching for her hand.

She said softly, "The child is not responsible for the sins of the parents."

His face fell, and once again he felt a dark presence in the back of his mind, trying to force itself up into his conscious waking thoughts.

"No," he hissed, stepping away from her as though he had been burnt. "He would not be. But if I catch you sinning, it will be instant divorce, do you hear me? Step out of line once, and I shall make sure you envy the lowliest beggar or hussy in Covent Garden."

Juliet could see his anger was more bluster and swagger than genuine emotion. Whatever she had said innocently enough had shaken him to his very core.

He grabbed her arm, not roughly, but with a coiled strength which made her shiver at the power which resided in his huge frame. "Come, let's get this farce over with."

"I shall just go up--"

"Now."

"Yes, Mr. Howard."

"Don't start that with me. The cool, polite retreat into formality. My

name is Lawrence. When I permit you to speak, you will use my given name. Mr. Howard was my father, or my elder brother or uncle, now deceased. I am your husband, Lawrence, or darling, said with the appropriate degree of tenderness and reverence in front of the world.

"Since you're such a remarkable actress, I'm sure you'll play the role of a good wife to perfection. And play it you will, for everyone else except me. I know what you are, but whenever we are in London, we'll need to keep up appearances.

"Do not think to ask for help, or shame me in front of any of your friends and acquaintances. For all anyone in the *Ton* shall ever know, we met, fell in love, and wed. I will not have us tying our garters in public, do you hear me? It would ruin me before I ever got my business plans under way. I've made too many sacrifices to let it all go now for one quiddle of my cod."

She could not resist teasing him despite his fury. "More than one, I seem to recall."

Her words were as powerful as a caress on his most private parts. He growled, "Don't remind me."

"Why not? It was wonderful. I can scarcely stop thinking about it. Why be ashamed of the joy we gave one another?"

Why indeed.

"None of your whore's tricks, now. Behave!"

Juliet stared up at him. "I wasn't aware it was a trick to be truthful."

"Then I shall be truthful. I shall not have you back in my bed. I've told you, you'll get no pleasure from me," he said impetuously, damning himself for a fool even as he did so.

For the alluring curve of her bosom, and the smell of her light fragrance made his head swim. He had all to do not to tear from her the elegant pale blue gown which draped over her luscious hips and thighs so artfully as to both conceal and reveal.

"Or if I do futter you, it will be only if there is no one else about, or as something only slightly better than using my own hand."

He ignored her looks of confusion and shock and dragged her to the library, where Matthew handed him the paper Matilda had signed.

"My, you really do know how to get what you want," Lawrence commented acerbically. "But make no mistake, Juliet will never learn anything about my business, or have access to my personal papers or my finances. So any attempts you might make to ruin me will be pointless."

Matthew said calmly, "I have no intention of ruining you. My sister would only get dragged down with you. She most certainly deserves a better life than she's had up until now. If you liked her enough to seduce her, then you can be a man and do your duty, pay for what you did by giving her your name and treating her well. But be warned. I will not stand by if I find out you have physically mistreated her in any way."

Lawrence stiffened. "I am no wife beater."

"But nor does your family--"

"Enough!" he seethed. "I have said I will marry the wench. That shall have to suffice."

Juliet stood with her head hung low, and almost declared she had changed her mind.

But the thought of Matilda made her shiver. Lawrence was angry now, but not a bad man. Not a degenerate...

He couldn't be. Not the man she had so suddenly begun to admire, possibly even love....

Chapter Seven

Lawrence did not even express any surprise at another of the Rakehells arriving a short time later to preside at the ceremony. Ever since he had stepped into this house he had felt as though his whole life had been turned upside down.

"My dear chap, welcome back," the handsome vicar said, offering his hand warmly.

"Well, well, Jonathan Deveril. It's been a long time. Let's just leave the pleasantries for the moment and get on with it."

He blinked and nodded. "Whatever you wish. This is your big day."

Jonathan started the ceremony with his words of welcome and opening remarks. The order of service went like clockwork, though neither Lawrence nor Juliet could manage to sing the hymns, so choked up with a welter of emotions were they.

She listened to the words of 'My song is love unknown' with a sense of complete unreality. She who had never dreamt of uniting her life with another's was now marrying a virtual stranger who thought her a trollop, in order to save him from a real one.

My song is love unknown,
my Savior's love to me,
love to the loveless shown
that they might lovely be....

Michael and Philip did credit to their friends by reciting their passages perfectly, without a single glance at the Bible set upon the desk. Jonathan selected the standard Genesis 2:15 to 24, but gave Lawrence a pointed message to Lawrence with I Corinthians 13:1 to

13: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Philip chose Proverbs 31:10 to 31 in order to send his old friend another message. "A wife of noble character, who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the

days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.' Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate."

Michael chose to give his old business colleague a further message with Colossians 3:12 to 17: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Juliet did not start to panic until Jonathan said, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honourable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

"First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name."

Juliet felt a shudder of fear and delight as she heard him intone

these words. Lawrence evidently must have felt her trembling, for he gripped her hand more tightly, though he did not look at her.

“Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.

“Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.”

Both of them held their breaths as they waited for what seemed an eternity. Juliet was not sure quite what she had feared—perhaps Matilda turning up to make a scene? Her formidable aunt descending like a fury? Lawrence arguing?

But blissfully, there was nothing. She risked a peep up at Lawrence and saw that he seemed perfectly calm. Why wasn’t he railing at his fate?

When the silence continued unabated, Jonathan continued with the ceremony. “I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God’s Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful.”

Juliet felt herself quaking. This was her final chance. She could say no here and now, and that would be the end of it. She would be free, and would never have to see Lawrence again.

That thought filled her with dread, and she wondered in a panic why this was so. *Was she losing her mind? She hardly knew the man, and he was livid with her.*

She closed her eyes, and swayed slightly, so that Lawrence caught her by both elbows to steady her.

“I’m, I’m sorry, it’s just...” She opened her eyes and looked up at him and whatever she had been about to say flew out of her head in

the face of his earnest expression.

He hates you for turning his whole life upside down, came her last desperate thought. *Hate, or something else?*

Yet when she closed her eyes, all she could see was Lawrence, laughing, smiling, chatting with her as he had last night.

"I'm sorry, it's just so warm in here. I was feeling a bit faint. I'm better now. Pray continue."

Lawrence's shoulders visibly relaxed, and he took her hand once more in both of his own. "If you're sure you're fine?"

"I'm fine. I promise."

"Very well, then." He nodded to Jonathan to move on to the next part of the ceremony, the exchange of vows.

"Lawrence, wilt thou have this woman Juliet to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Lawrence said in a clear, unwavering tone, "I will."

Still she waited for something to go wrong, but all was peaceful and calm.

"Juliet, wilt thou have this man Lawrence to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

She took a deep breath, and answered, "I will."

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

Matthew stepped forward. "I do give her." He kissed his sister and then stepped back.

With their right hands joined, Lawrence recited, "I, Lawrence, take thee Juliet, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth." He released her hand, and she then took his and squeezed it gently.

“I, Juliet, take thee, Lawrence, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.”

Philip now stepped forward to hand Lawrence the ring.

The ring he should have used to marry Matilda, she thought with a sinking heart.

Lawrence placed it upon the Bible, and Jonathan said a blessing over it before handing it back to the groom.

Lawrence took it firmly in his right hand, and held her left in his own. He said clearly, “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

He passed it briefly over each finger, starting with the thumb, as he intoned, “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” At that word, he had reached her fourth finger, and pushed the ring all the way down into place.

Then they both knelt in front of Jonathan as he said, “Let us pray. Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life: Send thy blessing upon these thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in thy Name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, whereof this Ring given and received is a token and pledge, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” they all echoed.

He took their right hands and placed them together. “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

Juliet and Lawrence gazed into each other’s eyes, hardly able to believe the enormity of it all. She could feel her eyes filling with tears, and Lawrence’s expression was most certainly stormy.

Why was she crying? She could have said no. But the truth was, she was actually feeling joyful, unlikely though that seemed given all that had happened.

But she did not have much time to analyse her feelings, for the

sensual smells of the roses in her bouquet were almost overwhelming, and Jonathan was pressing on with the ceremony.

“For as much as Lawrence and Juliet have consented to be joined together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a Ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen.

He then led them all in the Lord’s Prayer, and the responses, and moved on to the blessings.

“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, bless these thy servants, and sow the seed of eternal life in their hearts; that whatsoever in thy holy Word they shall profitably learn, they may in deed fulfil the same. Look, O Lord, mercifully upon them from heaven, and bless them. And as thou didst send thy blessing upon Abraham and Sarah, to their great comfort, so vouchsafe to send thy blessing upon these thy servants; that they obeying thy Will, and alway being in safety under thy protection, may abide in thy love unto their lives’ end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” Lawrence said fervently, earning himself a warm look from Juliet.

“God, who by thy mighty power hast made all things of nothing; who also (after other things set in order) didst appoint, that out of man (created after thine own image and similitude) woman should take her beginning; and, knitting them together, didst teach that it should never be lawful to put asunder those whom thou by Matrimony hadst made one: O God, who hast consecrated the state of Matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church: Look mercifully upon these thy servants, that both this man may love his wife, according to thy Word, (as Christ did love his spouse the Church, who gave himself for it, loving and cherishing it even as his own

flesh,) and also that this woman may be loving and amiable, faithful and obedient to her husband; and in all quietness, sobriety, and peace, be a follower of holy and godly matrons. O Lord, bless them both, and grant them to inherit thy everlasting kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Amen,” she said with enthusiasm, and smiled up timidly at the man who she would shortly be calling husband for the rest of her life.

“Almighty God, who at the beginning did create our first parents, Adam and Eve, and did sanctify and join them together in marriage; Pour upon you the riches of his grace, sanctify and bless you, that ye may please him both in body and soul, and live together in holy love unto your lives’ end. Amen.

“All ye that are married, or that intend to take the holy estate of Matrimony upon you, hear what the holy Scripture doth say as touching the duty of husbands towards their wives, and wives towards their husbands.

“Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, the fifth Chapter, doth give this commandment to all married men; Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water, by the Word; that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy, and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself: for no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife; and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife, even as himself.”

They stared at each other as if across a chasm, and Lawrence bowed to Juliet politely. Juliet. His *wife*.

Jonathan, who had performed the ceremony with the greatest solemnity, now grinned from ear to ear and said, “Oh, go on, she’s all yours now, Lawrence. You can kiss her.”

He did not need to be told twice. His mouth swooped down to

claim hers possessively, leaving them both breathless. His eyes narrowed, and he looked almost livid.

Their amused audience began to laugh or clap, and then Jonathan said, "Phew, I'm glad that's over with! Another Rakehell married."

This earned him the laugh he had hoped for from everyone except Lawrence.

"I'm not a Rakehell any longer. And while I thank you all for coming and helping me to this most remarkable wife, we shall be leaving now."

"Leaving?" Matthew echoed in confusion. "But what about the wedding breakfast?"

"I want nothing from any of you," Lawrence insisted. "Juliet is mine now, and I shall do as I like with my wife. She is coming with me in what she stands up in, no more. I shall make provision for my wife as I see fit. I have no wish to be beholdened to any of you for anything."

"Now hold on a moment--" Matthew began to protest.

"You should have thought of protecting her before you prostituted her, Mr. Dane. It's too late now. She's my property, as assuredly as if she were a horse I bought at auction. You will not visit, interfere, or try to contact her. I have no need to speak to your solicitors, for I would not take a penny of any marriage settlement you offered if I were starving in the streets. And now, I bid you all good day, and goodbye."

He took Juliet's hand and began to head for the front door of the house.

Althea protested, "But you can't just take her like that! Her cloak, some decent shoes--"

She ran to Juliet's room to speak to her maid, who obeyed her mistress and grabbed any garments near to hand, a pair of boots and her cloak and bonnet.

Philip did his best to stall Lawrence at the front door. The maid scurried out the door to the boot of the coach which had just drawn up from the rear stables, and stuffed the small bundle in.

Juliet nodded her thanks as her husband heaved her up into the coach. Oh, it was just too shaming. She was being treated like a criminal, and had no idea why.

Chapter Eight

A short carriage ride took them to Lawrence's lodgings, where Juliet could see his valises and *portmanteaux* standing at the ready, waiting for the last items to be added.

"Sit," he commanded, indicating a chair. "I'll be ready shortly."

He went through each drawer methodically to make sure he was leaving nothing behind.

"My factor Nash has gone down to Bristol to see about some new tea shipments coming in there. I was supposed to be going on honeymoon for a fortnight, but given the circumstances, I think the less time we spend in each other's company, the better, don't you?"

She simply nodded.

He glared at her. "Though there are some aspects of the honeymoon I imagine a woman like you would be unhappy to forgo."

She shrugged.

"Oh, don't be such a bloody hypocrite. You were gagging for it last night."

She blushed but gazed at him steadily.

"All right. We have time. I'll indulge you. Strip."

Her eyes widened. She shook her head.

His tone was chillingly quiet. "As your husband, I can tear that gown right off your body in an instant and no one will gainsay me. But I'll be reasonable. You have one minute to take it off."

She hesitated for thirty seconds, and then removed it.

"And the rest. All of it."

When she made no move, he said, "You have one minute."

She sent him a look as hard as a slap and then took off every last garment and stood at attention.

He closed his cases and put them outside the door, then sidled

over to her, stroking her shoulders and the back of her neck. He moved around to the front of her, his lips a mere inch from her own. She tried to still her rapidly beating heart, but the warmth emanating from him was enough to melt her. His breath fluttered over her cheek, and despite herself her hand came up to caress his broad chest.

He almost groaned as a ragged bolt of desire shot through him. "Quite the little courtesan, with your alluring caresses last night, weren't you?" he accused, trying to steady his reeling world.

She shook her head. "I don't really see how what we shared last night can be accomplished without it."

"I assure you, there are ways," he said, his eyes dark.

"Intercourse without touching?" she laughed incredulously.

"If that's a request for me to tie you or hold you down, think again. You'd enjoy it far too much, I can tell." He stared at her for a time. "Of course, there are other ways."

Lawrence dragged one huge hand down her breast, titillating her nipple abruptly. It crested in his hand, but instead of teasing it lingeringly to fullness, he impatiently moved on down to her thighs, spreading them with one knee before twirling his middle finger around her entrance to paradise and dipping it in.

"No, don't touch me!" he hissed when Juliet reached to put her arms around his waist.

He turned her and laid her on the bed face down, her bare bottom in the air in what she thought was a most shaming manner. For moment she was sure he was going to spank her, and she steeled herself for the first blow. She tried to push off the bed with her elbows, but he planted one hand in the small of her back.

"You might like it rough, but I don't fancy wasting my energy struggling. I'm not going to hurt you. This is just an illustrative lesson. Spread your arms and legs. Go on, spread them."

Lawrence lightly stroked his hands along her arms until they were straight out away from her sides, while with his knees he spread her legs wider. He tested her readiness once more, then unbreeched himself, pressing his huge length inside her. She gasped at the new angle which seemed to massage every secret place within her dedicated to the delights of Venus.

"Oh, Lawrence--"

"Not one word. Not one sound, or I'll punish you. No caresses, nothing. You will lie there and take it, for that is what wives are fated to do. As often as I like, any position I like, as hard as I like, as fast as I wish. Or as slow." He punctuated his words with matching movements of his hips.

As she lay there, Juliet could feel two contrary urges within her. One longed to give in to his mastery. The truth was that every touch, no matter how simple, flooded her with a passion so acute she felt as though she were being swept out to sea.

The other urge told her sexual relations weren't something to be done to her, but something to be shared, actively participated in as she had done last night. That even as Lawrence thought he was teaching her some sort of lesson, shaming or controlling her, she could turn the tables on him.

She knew Matthew and his wife were a most romantic couple. That their passion was heady, compelling, sultry. Althea had told her there were no rules to marriage, just whatever worked, felt good. Juliet decided Lawrence's rules be damned.

Juliet felt her body respond to him, go on fire everywhere. Even flat on her stomach she could still move. He had said no touching or sound, but he hadn't said anything about moving. She clamped her muscles and raised her hips, bringing him even more deeply into her. The friction against him and the rough fabric of the tapestry coverlet thrilled her in the most unexpected ways.

She heard his surprised gasp, and she swung her hips down and up even harder. Her muscles spasmed of their own accord. She could feel the flush of passion creeping down her thighs and up to her breasts. Perspiration trickled under her arms, in her palms, and even on the soles of her feet as her desire built and built.

Lawrence was stunned. Almost against his will he placed his hands on her buttocks and stroked and massaged their blooming fullness. He pulled her hips even more closely to his and the short, fast, abrupt movements now became long, slow and purposeful.

In fact, he almost cursed himself for his impatience, for his orbs had gathered tightly in preparation for his pinnacle. The last thing he wanted was for it to finish.

Lawrence recalled a trick his friend had told him about in India, and grasping himself below the base, he pulled down on his primed jewels. He instantly felt relief, but a few more strokes had him churning even more fiercely.

He tried a second time, tugging even harder. Again the sensation dissipated, but only for a moment. For now he was not only stroking his entire length into her, but she was circling with her hips somehow as he withdrew slightly. Her muscles clasp against his bulging tip were fit to drive him insane.

He tried to hold her bottom still, but decided the other rhythm she had forced was even more exciting. The fit of their bodies was so perfect it was as if they had been designed especially for each other.

He pressed forward ever more delightedly, deepening the contact, and still she surrounded him in the incomparable embrace of her most secret place. The *yonj*, the sacred space, the Indians called it.

For Lawrence, this was most certainly a glimpse of heaven. He had gone from an unbeliever regarding the gift of love to most a most enthusiastic convert. Nothing could compare with what he shared with Juliet, however angry he might be with her brother and his friends.

He pulled himself down one more time, but his need to complete himself within her only seemed to become more urgent. As was the need to kiss her.

He slid his hand up to tenderly cup her breast, while his other stroked her bottom lightly with the tips of his fingers and nails, making her shiver and contract.

He was about to turn her over when her own internal rippling set off a chain reaction so explosive he gasped. She bit the coverlet under her to stop her cries. His own echoed hollowly in the room.

Damnation, she couldn't possibly have been unmoved by that, could she? But then it had been his own fault for ordering her not to make a sound.

"God, Juliet, tell me--" he groaned.

But the moment had passed and she did not dare say a word, even had she understood what he meant. What was there to tell? In any case, to have opened her mouth at that stage would have been

to scream like a siren. The torrid heat had set her bubbling into an oblivion so acute that she feared for her sanity. Surely this had to be some sort of madness, this aching need inside of her, which roiled through her even as he filled her to the brim with the most incredible bliss.

He collapsed on top of Juliet for a moment, then rolled off and cursed, wondering why he didn't feel any more in control of his new wife or his raging passions than he had before.

He stormed into the corner and splashed in the basin for a moment. She was still prone. He was sorely tempted to go back to her and kiss her senseless, get her to pant his name as she had done last night. To feel her touch him. To see her violet eyes look at him as if he were the only man in the world she had ever bedded, ever wanted to bed.

Frustration roughened his voice. "You can get up. That's all for now. You're not getting any more."

Juliet rose slowly as if in a trance and looked at him. He felt his fury and desire rampage through him once more. Her remarkable eyes were dark with passion, their expression unreadable. She was gorgeous, breathtakingly so, and not the least bit cowed. But nor could he tell what she was thinking.

"Get dressed. We're leaving."

She remained silent, but did as he instructed. He was about to offer her the basin, when an odd sense of perverseness crept through him. "Just your cloak. Gather everything else into a bundle. If I have nothing better to do with my time I might have a tiddle or two."

At her look of mild puzzlement he said, "We're going to Somerset."

Her heart sank. Three or four days in a coach naked with a man who hated her. Things couldn't really get much worse. But she told herself to be patient. He was still angry, but bound to come around sooner or later when he saw they meant him no harm and everything had been a bizarre quirk of fate. A mistake.

Or not, for she had agreed to wed him to save him from Matilda and himself, and was determined to make the best of her marriage. Sooner or later he would get to know her, see her worth as a person,

and then...

Juliet gathered the last of her things and waited for Lawrence, distancing herself from the stress of the past twenty-four hours by thinking practically all the while of her next volume in her series. She had not intended to work on the much-awaited next book of her history of England for the month she was supposed to have spent with her brother in London, but it might be the only thing which kept her sane.

Lawrence might be her husband now, but no man owned her. If he never came round to caring for her, she couldn't be much worse off than she had been before. So long as he didn't beat her, her modest circumstances as a inconvenient wife wouldn't trouble her in the least.

She had never imagined she would marry a man for his fortune. Her own expectations had been modest enough before her brother had tried to help she and her sister out of their relative obscurity.

As her aunt had pointed out, being raised humbly in the country was no bad thing if it kept fortune hunters at bay. Her prospects were better than they had been now that her father was dead and her aunt and Matthew free to use their discretion, but still not that tempting for most men of the *Ton*.

However, Lawrence had insisted he wanted nothing from her family. Well, at least he could not reproach her for not being wealthy enough, whatever else he might hate her for. The huge chip on his shoulder about being a self-made man was a puzzle, but as a second son he must have felt his lack of resources keenly. If his elder brother had been less bright or deserving, it would have been all the more reason for him to feel angry or resentful.

"Coming?" he asked curtly.

"I wasn't aware I was being given a choice."

"No, you're right, you're not."

The fact that they hadn't eaten all day seemed to have escaped his notice. She bit her lip and told herself that she might as well practice endurance. It was the only way to get through her marriage. So many women had to put up with far worse than she. She just had to pray he came to his senses soon.

It was certainly brisk enough in his carriage with only her cloak, and no rugs or footwarmer. He evidently believed in a spartan existence. She put her bundle upon her lap under her cloak, but it wasn't long before he sidled over to her on the seat to tug down her hair, and from her hair his hand travelled to her breasts.

His attentions weren't harsh. In fact they were quite delightful, but impersonal, as if he were sampling a slave before buying. She disappeared mentally into her own world of books, reciting some of her favourite poems inwardly as he plucked the bundle from her lap and demanded she open her legs.

"What? No protest, no glib retort?"

She shook her head. Then she realised there were other reasons for his touch. His pristine white handkerchief rasped over her tender flesh, cleaning his essence from her, but also investigating. Not a trace of blood appeared.

He scowled and stuffed it back into his pocket, and with a last caress of her breast returned to his side of the seat.

"So Randall Avenel is the Earl of Hazelmere now?"

She nodded.

"Who would have ever imagined the fifth son as earl. But Michael is alive. Why isn't he earl?"

She remained silent.

"Is it because you don't know, or fear my wrath that you remain silent?"

She still waited for him to grant her permission to speak.

He sighed. "Oh, very well, if you must make me say it, please tell me. Speak."

"Randall inherited last year at the death of his fourth brother and his father. It was assumed Michael had been killed at Toulouse in 1814. Once they were reunited, Randall wanted to give up the earldom, but Michael insisted it should remain Randall's. That he had no interest in living such an arduous public life after his injuries, and now that he is such a devoted family man. Randall has made quite an impact in the House."

"I don't follow politics. But I'm sure he has quite an effect on

people. He hurts every one he meets. Such a pleasant facade, to disguise the wolf underneath. Wasn't there a scandal about his father and the fall of a prestigious new investment bank?"

She nodded. "But it was proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that his cousin who was the next heir to the estate after Randall was responsible. And also for murdering Randall's fiancée. I can understand you envying Randall the title, but he's suffered a great deal."

Lawrence said angrily, "So why didn't you marry this paragon?"

"I've never met him. And he's already married anyway."

He frowned. "Never met?"

"As for Michael, he too has suffered. He was badly wounded, crippled at Toulouse. His wife helped him to walk again. Now the two brothers live together with their mother and are building an extension to their house so that both families can live there. Michael is a devoted family man, with three boys and a girl. Randall and Isolde have eleven children, with another on the way.

"Eleven!" Lawrence exclaimed in shock, doing some quick mental arithmetic. "Surely not--"

"They've only been married a short time. They have three natural and eight adopted, though they don't differentiate in the least."

"What does Michael do now? Landowner?"

"Michael and Bryony are compiling a multi-lingual dictionary of five European languages all in one."

He stared in surprise. "Hm, that's a huge undertaking."

"It is, but it will be a great work of scholarship when it's finished."

He looked at her inscrutably once more, and an uneasy prickle at the back of her neck caused her to lapse back into silence.

"So they all live in London?" he asked after a time.

"No, not really. They have townhouses for the Season, some of them, but otherwise they all live in Somerset."

"Somerset? The hell you say!"

She cringed away from his shout of outrage.

He muttered to himself, "Well, Somerset is a big enough county. Whereabouts?" he asked her.

"All around Brimley."

"Damn and blast it to hell! The memory of their betrayal has haunted me for years, and now you tell me they're going to be living practically on my *doorstep*?"

"Did you not think to enquire about the neighbours before you bought your new home?" she asked quietly.

He scowled. "My factor and my bride-to-be made the decision."

Matilda. Well, that made sense. She had not quite given up on Matthew and the Rakehells then to add to her series of conquests.

Juliet sighed. "Forgive me, but I understood you had come home because your elder brother had died and you had inherited. Where did he live?"

His face closed up. "Taking that property would have been out of the question," he said brusquely. "Nash and Matilda said they found a spacious and elegant property near Millcote village, easy travelling distance from Bristol for my work, and not far off the main road back to London."

"You've bought Blake's old house by the sound of things."

He scowled even more fiercely. "The Devil I did! I was told the name was Jerome."

She nodded. "Yes, Blake Sanderson is their heir now, so he uses the name sometimes out of courtesy to them. He and his wife Arabella built a lovely new house and rest home on the Jerome estate. You would know Martin Jerome, their cousin, I believe."

He nodded, and looked slightly less displeased. "Yes, I do. He's a good man."

"He too has suffered. He was nearly killed by the highwaymen who murdered his first wife. He's married to Blake's assistant Eswara now."

His brows shot up. "Eswara? That's an Indian name," he said with interest.

"Yes, she's half Indian, half English, the widow of a soldier when they met. She has one grown son, Ashoka, also studying to be a

doctor with Blake."

"Regular army or East India Company?"

"Regular, I believe, but I only know what my brother has told me."

"Well, you're going to know soon enough if they're to be our neighbours. Damn."

She said softly, "I know you feel you have cause to be angry with Matthew, but surely the rest of your old school friends can't be that bad."

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Pardon? I'm sorry, but-"

"You've no doubt swived all of them at one point or another!"

Her eyes spit fire.

"Or even all at the same time!" he accused nastily.

Her back went ramrod stiff. "You're disgusting!" she hissed, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

He was immediately back in the seat beside her, his hands driving her breasts to surging eager peaks with only one purposeful touch. "You didn't say I was disgusting last night or this morning when I was tugging you! And even if I am, which of us is worse? Me for doing this to you, or you for enjoying it?"

"I was referring to your nasty, suspicious mind. There's nothing wrong with two decently married people doing this," she said with as much dignity as she could muster considering her body was completely betraying her once more.

"Aye, decently married. I'm just supposed to believe that Jonathan Deveril of all people is a vicar? With his background and penchant for the ladies?" he sneered.

"He's happily married to Pamela, and Vicar of Brimley and Eltham."

He paused his fingers' torrid caresses. "Bloody hell! If you're lying to me and those marriage lines are fake, I'll see you in Newgate!"

She met his furious gaze with cool aplomb. "If you thought it was all trumpery, a fraud, it's a wonder you didn't say so at the time! Or that you would have taken me from London."

His fingers slid over and into her for a tantalisingly brief moment before pulling abruptly away, leaving her gasping on the shores of her vast sea of desire.

"And have Matthew duel me? No thank you. That's what all of you wanted, wasn't it?"

"For what reason?" she cried, the frustration in her mind and body causing her to throw all caution to the winds. "What could any of us hope to gain?"

He flung himself away from her with a violent gesture.

She put her hands up as if to ward off a blow.

The sight of his wife cowering from him set off a crawling feeling of dismay within which made him shudder from head to toe.

When he was able to catch his breath he said, "I don't know what reason, but give me time. Believe me, I shall find out. Then they'll all pay. In the meantime, I'll just have to take out my revenge upon you."

The words chilled her and she gathered her spread cloak around her and shivered. Again the movement reminded him of something long forgotten. *Something, or someone?*

He shook his head to clear it. That wasn't important now. He needed to keep all his wits about him now that he had this viper in his bosom. *If only she weren't so damned lovely....*

Chapter Nine

The silence lengthened in the coach until Juliet was sure she would scream. Finally she could tolerate it no longer and declared, "Surely you can't mean to glare at me or, or grope me for the entire coach journey. So since I'm a simple country girl with little conversation which could possibly interest a man of the world like yourself, why don't you tell me all about your work? Or, if that's too personal," she said quickly, catching his look of derision, "tell me about the history of tea. I adore history."

He looked out the window stonily for a time, but her remarkable violet eyes continued to rest upon him expectantly, until at last he gave in. Where was the harm in telling her about it? With any luck she would fall asleep and leave him to his brooding thoughts. The only trouble was, she was even more beautiful and alluring when she was asleep. He shoved that lewd thought to one side and began.

"The Chinese are said to have discovered tea in 2737 BC. They have a famous legend of an Emperor, Shen Nung. He was about to drink some boiling water, when a few leaves from an overhanging tree blew into the pan. The inquisitive Emperor decided to taste this unlikely looking brew, and discovered that it was both delicious and refreshing.

"But was another four thousand years before the brewing method that we use today was developed. During the Ming Dynasty from about 1368 to 1644, the Chinese began steeping the tea leaves in boiled water. With a few adaptations, the traditional Chinese lidded wine-ewer became a perfect teapot."

"What does the word mean?"

"It's a Chinese word for the plant. 'Tea' and all its worldwide variations in spelling and pronunciation 'tey', 'tay', 'te', 'thé', 'thee' come from a single source. 'Te' pronounced 'tay', means 'tea' in the Chinese Amoy dialect. The Mandarin word for tea, 'cha', has also

spawned a few derivatives around the world such as 'cha', 'chai', and 'char'."

"That's right, here in England, the poorer classes talk about 'a cup of char'. But I shall try to pronounce the word correctly as you do from now on."

"Anyway, it refers to the glossy, green leaves of *Camellia sinensis*."

"I see. But, forgive me, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No, go ahead if you don't understand something," he said with some attempt at civility.

"I was just going to say, but I thought that you had come from India."

"Yes. An Indian legend attributes the discovery of tea to Bodhidharma. He was understandably tired after a seven-year period of sleepless religious contemplation. In desperation he chewed on some leaves from a nearby tree, and was immediately revived.

"But you're right. Tea is normally grown in China. It's only through efforts of pioneers like my uncle that India is going to become one of the world's greatest producers of tea some day. And I will have been right there at the bottom of the pyramid, or the acorn, so to speak."

He was so happy talking about his greatest love that he forgot himself in the thrill of the moment. His silvery eyes shone, and Juliet was sure she had never seen a more handsome man in her life.

"I see. Tea certainly has grown in popularity since it was originally brought from China."

"It's an acquired taste, particularly amongst women, as compared with coffee."

"I like both, but I have to admit, there isn't anything quite like a really good cup of tea."

He gave a small tight smile. "So glad to hear you say that."

"No, I mean it. I love Lapsang Souchong, and the Gunpowder Green that I had at my aunt's house was first-rate."

"I'd like to think my tea is even better. We were cultivating the plants brought over from China in the Darjeeling district, but I had

heard about some interesting sturdy trees growing in Assam. The Indians had tea and never even knew it. Now I've broken the Chinese monopoly," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Not bad for the man your brother looked down upon, underestimated."

"Please, I know nothing of this. You keep saying things that make no sense to me."

Lawrence gave her a mocking smile. "You're a fine actress, my dear. You certainly missed your calling on the London stage. You would have been legendary for your skill on the boards as well as in bed. But then a good protector, a good husband is worth far more than a few quick fumbles in the tiring room."

Juliet remained silent, for she knew that trying to defend herself only made Lawrence more and more angry and resentful, and she didn't wish to incur his wrath any further. It was grossly unfair, but he seemed to be convinced of what he was saying. She hoped time would prove him wrong about her. For the moment it was enough that he was even speaking to her.

"How did we come to drink so much tea here in Britain?"

"Tea reached Europe in the early seventeenth century. Despite exaggerated claims for its medicinal properties, Europeans preferred the flavour of coffee. It was only amongst a few aristocratic cliques that tea became popular. Early seventeenth-century Dutch and Portuguese traders were the first to introduce Chinese tea to Europe. The Portuguese shipped it from the Chinese coastal port of Macao. The Dutch brought it to Europe via the Spice Islands, also known as Java and Sumatra.

"The strange brew that came in amongst the cargoes of silks and spices was not an instant success. Europeans tasted it, but preferred the flavour of coffee. The suspicious English waited until 1652 before they even began to trade in tea. Crates washed up during shipwrecks confused people. In Cornwall they used the leaves to dye their clothes brown."

"Oh my. I didn't know it was so late as that. Did any one else recognise its potential?"

"Actually, the Russians were early devotees of tea. Their tea arrived overland from China by camel train. As the passion for tea increased in Russia, the lines of camels that snaked across Asia

lengthened. By the end of the eighteenth century, several thousand camels in trains of two to three hundred at a time were crossing the Chinese border carrying tea, amongst other luxury goods."

"Gosh, how exotic. It must have been remarkable. And all the spices and silks and carpets and so on?" she said excitedly.

He could not help smiling at her eager expression. "Yes, just so."

"Have you seen a caravan yourself?"

"I have, actually. I've been to China and Russia."

"Only imagine," she said with a wistful smile and sigh. "And I've scarcely even seen anything of England, let alone London."

He shot her another one of his dagger-like looks, and she lapsed back in her seat and cast down her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I've interrupted you again. Pray continue. Tea came to England. Tay," she said, correcting her own pronunciation.

Damning her inwardly for the most charming little *coquette* he had ever had the misfortune to encounter, he continued, "The first record of tea being advertised in Britain occurs in 1658, which advertised tea for sale at a coffee house called *The Sultaness' Head*. Thomas Garway, a merchant with an eye for a deal, advertised tea at his London coffee house, *Garraways* later that same year.

"Garway's advertisements painted a rosy picture of the new drink. There was hardly an ailment that this miracle leaf couldn't cure, such as helping headaches, giddiness, bad dreams, colds, dropsy, and scurvy.

"Tea-drinking came under royal patronage in 1662 when Charles II married Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese princess and avid tea-drinker. Catherine began taking tea at Court in delicate, translucent Chinese bowls and pots and the courtiers soon followed suit. Tea was already expensive, but now it was fashionable too. Suddenly tea had style and exclusivity. In the eyes of the image-conscious aristocracy, it was irresistible."

"I'm surprised it isn't more popular, then."

"Ah, but you would have to understand economics to grasp that. Well, more than the simple economics of the household and your fleshly trade."

Her head snapped back as though he had physically slapped her. She could hardly have felt much worse if he had. Though she had to thank her lucky stars that thus far he had not, she knew all too well from her friends and acquaintances how completely at the mercy of a husband a wife was. But even a slap or two might not have been as bad as the incessant digs at her in even the simplest conversations.

Perhaps if she just ignored him he would grow tired of it. She had met enough bullies at the small school she had attended as a girl to know that most of them went away if they didn't get a rise out of you. On the other hand, some would never leave one alone unless one stood up to them.

"Economics?" she asked through tight lips. "You mean like our problems with free trade?"

He looked surprised. "Yes, just so. Free trade in tea during the second half of the seventeenth century was stifled at home and on the high seas. Opposition, mainly from brewers, persuaded the British Government to impose huge duties on tea."

"And the East India Company had a monopoly on Far Eastern trade?"

His brows rose further. "Indeed. Thus it put the profits of tea importation into the hands of a single organisation. Therefore they could set whatever rate they liked, so it became such a high-priced commodity that most could not afford it, and thus it did not spread in the same manner that coffee had."

"What a shame. From a public health standpoint it would be most beneficial. It does most definitely revive the spirits, even if it doesn't do all the grand things that Mr. Garway claimed. But in terms of practicality, most water from public sources is unfit to drink. For those who want to avoid disease, the choice is either a delightful cup of boiled water, or beer that is strong enough to kill the poisons in water such as cholera. So it's no wonder the brewers protested. Coffee would still have been too pricey for the average person."

"It wasn't just the brewers crusading against tea," Lawrence said, warming to his theme. "The Church denounced tea as a sinful drink, and doctors claimed it was bad for the health, not good."

She nodded. "So they all formed a powerful lobby, and they had influence in Parliament. Tea was new, foreign, and had the potential

to damage beer sales, so eventually they convinced Parliament to impose a punitive tax on it."

"That's right. The tea duty doubled the price of the already expensive tea and set it way beyond the reach of ordinary people. If you look at the rate tables, they were selling Gunpowder Green Tea at about fifty to sixty quid an ounce."

"No wonder everyone wanted to be in the tea trade, and work for the East India Company. It was like a license to print money."

"That's right," he said with a nod, "though of course you had to be in the right seat in the Company. Being one of their army wasn't so superb. You had to put up with some pretty harsh conditions. But things improved a lot by the end of the last century."

"The East India Company was founded by Queen Elizabeth, right? Toward the end of her reign."

He gave her another one of his long assessing looks. "That's right. 1600."

"So why was the East India Company so successful compared with the Portuguese or Dutch, who were also in India?"

Lawrence shrugged. "Aggressiveness, organisation. A good army. But above all, ships. The best trading fleet in the world. In 1609, the Company began shipbuilding at its own yards on the lower Thames at Deptford. The shipyards turned out the finest merchant sailing ships in the world.

"And of course, everyone wanted to work for them. The rewards of sailing in East India Company vessels were potentially huge. The lure of wealth attracted the best officers, who were supported by a crew of volunteers. They would get a share of the profits if the cargo got to its destination safely, and that was a small fortune for men like them. All the cargoes were rich and valuable, but as tea began to grow in popularity, people like my uncle saw there was real money to be made."

Juliet settled herself more comfortably in her seat, tucking her legs under her in a graceful manner which inflamed him all over again. He was tempted to demand that she spread her legs for him once more, but the truth was he was enjoying the conversation.

Even though it was evident she had studied him and the tea trade

thoroughly, the better to try to hook him in, she was a good listener. And even if she did try to use the information against him in some way, it would be difficult, immured as she would be in the house in Somerset with no one permitted to call, and no correspondence allowed without his express permission.

He tried to keep his eyes off her charming bare toes peeping out from the hem of her cloak as he answered her next question.

"So if tea was so expensive for the reasons we've already discussed, how did it start becoming popular?"

"The coffee house culture of the early eighteenth century combined business with pleasure and tea drinking. Although women enjoyed tea at home, they would not dare set foot in a coffee house if they valued their reputations. They were gossipy, bawdy places, hugely popular, but with stiff competition between the owners. They were always trying to find new novelties to lure in more customers."

"I've heard that once there were as many as two thousand five hundred squeezed into a two or three-mile radius of central London."

"Yes, that's about right," he said, nodding. "Some were interested in the beverage side of things, whilst others offered unique products. For example, Mr. Lloyd would display a list of ships that were due to sail, along with their cargoes. This encouraged the underwriters to meet in Mr. Lloyd's coffee house in order to arrange the ships' insurance. And of course, Lloyds of London the insurers is still in existence today."

"How fascinating. I didn't know that. You must write all these dates down for me. I usually take notes on everything I learn of interest with a little lead pencil and small notebooks I make up for myself, but -"

She caught herself in time before she said anything further about her poor state now that he had taken her from London with nothing more than what her little maid had managed to hand into the carriage when he wasn't looking before they had left.

"I can write them down if you like, if I have time, but I can't think a light-skirt like you will have much use for the information. It doesn't exactly dazzle most people."

"I have no intention of dazzling anyone, as you well know. You

and I are married now. I know the folly of infidelity only too well. Not even infidelity, in some cases but something so simple as a criminal conversation."

She sniffed and crossed her arms over her chest, and willed herself not to cry in front of this hard-hearted man. He would only think her trying to wheedle him with her tears, and she might end up in worse case if he thought her more weak and feeble than he already did.

Damnation. She had had such high hopes for London. She would have been far better off to have stayed at Lyme in obscurity, contented herself with being an old maid, rather than be bound to a man who hated her.

Lawrence could sense Juliet's withdrawal from him in an instant. He hated not being able to grasp her thoughts. Not being able to reach her when she retreated from him into her own private world once more. He also hated himself for wanting to control her like a puppet. He had never cared what his other mistresses did or who they saw when they were not with them. They were professionals, or high-class Incognitas with a stable of admirers. He had never been the jealous type. If the women had moved on, he had shrugged and wished them well.

Now his longing to possess this girl completely led him to sit by her side and grasp her ankles, pulling her legs straight onto his lap and spreading them. She resisted the urge to snatch them away and press them closed again. The more she struggled against him the more Lawrence was determined to master her. In any case, did she really want to struggle? They were married. He had the right. Any court in the land would support him over her in this regard.

But he had said she would never have any pleasure in the marriage. So what did he think he was doing to her now? Every time he touched her, her flesh went on fire. She was just learning to control the sensation, try to keep the thrilling feelings at bay, to not make a sound. But the blush of her skin, the budding moisture, gave her away every time.

"Tell me what you're thinking? Do you believe that you can escape me through adultery? I shall ensure that all the servants have as little to do with you as possible. I am master in our house. They shall not take any orders that do not come expressly from me. So if

you see a chance to escape by swiving the servants, think again. Unless of course I order you to, and would like to watch. I'm sure it wouldn't have been the first time."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "I'm thinking how appallingly you must have been treated by some woman in the past to think so ill of every woman now."

"Not every woman. But certainly you."

"Then why did you marry me? It seems pointless to-"

"I didn't fancy getting my brains blown out or having to flee the country just when everything was starting to fall into place for me. Not to mention the fact that I still have to do something about my brother's two sons."

"You have nephews?"

"Yes. They're at boarding school at the moment. But I need to try to provide some sort of home for them as their guardian at some point. Once I'm more settled. But that is not for you to worry about."

"I like children."

Lawrence gave her a withering look of scorn. "I'm not interested in your perversions. You'll stay away from them. I shall undertake their upbringing and education, their training for the tea trade."

"And what of any children we may have together?" she questioned softly.

"I pray God that it has not happened yet, and will be taking every precaution to make sure it does not."

His hands gave the lie to his words, for he was by now caressing her most intimately.

Juliet's head lolled back into the corner as she tried to contain the miraculous excitement building within her. Thus far he had not shown any caution. And did not appear to wish to now as he grasped her left leg and bent it, freed himself from his trousers, and pulled her onto him.

"Tell me what you're thinking right now," he demanded.

"Now?" she gasped, already glazing over with passion as he moved under her and the coach vibrated over the ruts and fissures in the road.

"Tell me."

"That I've never known how such pleasure could exist. Oh my." They had hit a deep pothole and he surged into her. She felt forward onto his neck, but he pushed her upright with his palms on her breasts.

"Look at me. No, don't close your eyes, look at me."

She obeyed, fearful of the consequences, that he would pinch or twist the way some men had at *soirees* or assembly balls. Or worse still, that he would stop the compelling rhythm within her.

"Tell me what it feels like."

"Like my soul is being torn from me."

His eyes narrowed. "A woman like you doesn't have a soul. Try again."

"Like we're blending and fusing into a single entity. I can feel your heart beating with mine," she panted.

"You haven't got a heart. Try again."

"Like I want to take all of you inside me and never let go. Yet even as I do, you possess me utterly."

He gave her a long slow thrust at those words. "Yes, indeed I do. Then I'm just going to have to keep reminding you of that fact, aren't I? You're nothing and no one without me. Give up any notion of your family helping you, or you having been anything other than what you are now, what I choose to make you. Or not, as the case were. You're Juliet Howard now. Forget you ever heard the name Dane."

"But I was never-"

At her unwitting words which appeared to be of protest, he rose with her on his lap and flattened her onto the opposite seat. His body was never still upon, within her. "Tell me who you are."

"Juliet Howard."

"What are you?"

"Your wife."

"What else?"

He could feel his climax building as he awaited her answer, and

pressed into her until she saw stars. But mindless though she was with need, she was not going to say what he wanted her to. She was *not*.

She looked straight into his eyes, and clamped her hands down on his buttocks, cupping the tight orbs as she arched up against him. "Whatever you think you want me to be."

He opened his mouth to protest. But one last surge within her as she pulled tightly had him losing all control. He glided out and back into her with one final long stroke which he didn't even try to halt. All five of his senses collided and exploded in an instant as his mouth covered hers and silenced her uncontrollable cry of passion.

The kiss set off another series of explosions for them both. As his hips ground against hers, his angle of penetration massaged her outwardly until she could only yank his shirt upwards out of the waistband of his trousers in an effort to touch some of his glorious bare flesh.

She nearly sobbed in relief as she ran her hands up his back and then left one at his shoulder, while the other worked its way down to the small of his back, and began to insinuate itself into his drawers.

Then she was cupping his warm smooth curves. An arousal so powerful yet so peaceful washed over her that she opened to him even further, all tension at an end. They did nothing but fight and quarrel when they talked, but *this*, this sumptuous feast of the senses, was how it was meant to be between them.

Feast was the correct word, for as they both soared to a second pinnacle and descended, he began to kiss her all over as though ravenous. Her face, neck, throat and breasts were laved and nibbled, and finally he suckled each rosy nipple in turn. He rasped his chin over them, sending shivers of delight right down to her toes.

Juliet's hands were never still on his warm flesh, until she impatiently brought them around to the front and started to unfasten his shirt. A jolt of the carriage sent the lower half of her body sliding off the seat, but he caught her to him more tightly. She moved so that she was back in his lap with her knees astride him. She slid up and down with slow, intent purpose, kissing him wherever she bared his chest. She teased his male nipples to attention, and desperate to touch all of him, moved her hand behind herself to cup him.

Lawrence had fully intended to stop her, remind her who was in control, but her feather-light yet purposeful touch and heated kisses were enough to set him reeling back nervelessly against the squabs of the seat as she drove them both on to even higher peaks of delight.

His heady cries filled the coach, and Juliet was sure she was going to collapse and sleep for hours. If he let her.

But Lawrence wasn't finished yet. Delighted though he was, he still wanted more.

"Oh, Juliet, you're driving me wild."

She kissed him, but he pulled his mouth from hers and whispered it in a long wet caress over to her ear. "Turn around."

She looked at him uncertainly.

Lawrence gave a slow, lazy grin, and reassured her, "It'll be all right. I promise. Just turn around. I'll help you."

He untied her cloak and flung it on the opposite seat, then helped steady her as Juliet raised herself off the seat by her knees and stood with her back to him. She gasped as he ran his hands down her possessively, covering the whole length of her back and down to her bottom. "So lovely. So very elegant. Come here, sweetheart. Sit on me, and I'll guide it in."

She kept herself steady with the aid of his hand on her waist. She soon felt herself gliding onto the huge length of him once more. The depth of the penetration and the different angle set her on fire in an instant. But even worse was to come. Or *better*. For one hand came up to caress both of her breasts, while his other disappeared into her silky nest of curls.

"Just sit back against my chest, let the coach take us where we want to go."

His hands were certainly driving her forward fast and furiously. She reached to his sides and tugged as hard as she could on his trousers, dragging them far enough down for her to caress all of the most tender flesh between his thighs.

"Oh, no, please, just let us both go-" He gasped and pulled her head sideways for a ravishing kiss. She brought her hand up to his cheek and they soared and soared, and finally wafted back down to

earth.

Lawrence bent his knees and moved sideways, tucking himself into the space between the seat and its back, and pulled her close. He reached out one long arm to grasp her cloak, and threw it over her. Tucking it around her still quivering naked body, he threw the rest over himself, and fell asleep in an instant. Juliet snuggled backwards into his huge frame, and gave herself up to slumber with a contented sigh.

Chapter Ten

Lawrence awoke some hours later as the last rays of the sun were disappearing below the horizon. For a moment he tried to recall where he was. The small movement of Juliet against his madly aroused flesh, and the jolting of the carriage, told him in an instant. He blinked and shook his head slightly. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept so well.

The sight of her bare neck, so tender and exposed, moved him to kiss it. Her nipples crested and her lips parted in a sigh. He raised himself up on his elbow, and saw she was still asleep. He had never seen such an arresting sight. In repose she was even more glorious, so fresh and innocent-looking, like a dew-dappled morning glory. Her long lashes swept down over her lightly blushed cheekbones. Her face was unlined, and for once she looked as though she were without a care in the world.

The sight of her gorgeous mouth was just too tempting. He scooped her knees around and over his legs so that she was sideways in his lap. Lawrence took one tentative slow thrust and kissed her softly. As his kiss deepened, she came awake slightly, and for a moment wondered what on earth was happening.

Then she guessed, and relaxed. His hands, still so foreign to her in many ways, were familiar, both soothing and arousing. The question now was, did he want her awake or asleep?

But as the kiss deepened Juliet had no choice but to kiss him back. She raised her hand to his face and curved her other arm around his shoulder as the carriage continued to rock them like a huge cradle.

Now his lovemaking was so delicate and tender she felt herself floating on a cloud of euphoria as she climaxed. His hand slipped down to the delicate nub between her legs and she realised he was going to continue pleasuring her.

She took a deep breath and allowed the sensations to wash over

her. What was the point in struggling against him when he was so determined to have his own way?

But Juliet could have her own way as well, for her legs locked around his and one hand upon his thigh gave her purchase and control. She sped up their rhythm until they both gasped their passion into each other's mouths, and lay panting, his head against her breast as he listened to the tumultuous beating of her heart, which echoed his own.

She stroked his hair back from his face and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you. For everything."

He stiffened, unused to the tenderness, uneasy, on edge. She wasn't supposed to be thanking him, enjoying herself. He jerked his head up and flung his legs over the bench, standing up so abruptly he had to catch her by the arm as she nearly tumbled to the coach floor.

His hard hand grabbing her caused her to hiss with pain. He pulled her to him to comfort her for a moment, her breasts pressing against his chest making him want her all over again. He nudged her backwards into the seat and flung her cloak over her ripe body with a furious gesture.

"God, what a hot little whore it is to be sure."

She stared at him incredulously. "You're blaming *me* for all, well, all this?" she asked with a wave of her hand.

"There's no one else to blame. Not that blame is a very good word. It's your job, after all."

She gazed at him levelly, barely managing to keep her tears at bay. "Aren't you going to feel the biggest fool and blackguard in the world when you find out that you've made a mistake about all this?"

"I already do. What man is happy in the knowledge that he's married a woman that half the Town has had."

She threw up her hands in exasperation. "I give up. Fine. Whatever you say, oh lord and master. I'm the most low, vicious, conniving whore that's ever strode the streets of the city. I've swived swathes through the bucks of the *Ton* and ridden them like Derby winners. I have more tricks for parting you from your money than you've had hot dinners, and the only reason I haven't died of the clap is because I have every cock scrutinised at the door before it enters."

His stomach lurched into his mouth and for a brief second he was sure he was going to toss his guts onto the floor. He swallowed hard, chasing back the bitter bile.

"Ah, at last we understand each other."

"Only too well," she said with a long look at him which one of pity and something more. No, not dismay. Triumph. Determination. And the lift of her chin told her that she was anything but submissive, for all her previous words.

It gave him pause. Lawrence hated being so uncertain of himself. He was used to being buffeted by the winds of fortune and change. But this woman was a hurricane blowing through his life, sweeping away all rational thought.

He hurled himself into the corner of his seat and glared out the window at the darkness beyond. He wondered how she always managed to make him feel so awful about his life. He had been so happy until....

Had he?

Lawrence quashed that thought immediately, and lit the lamp over his head. He fetched his valise, and immersed himself in his papers. Though he was damned if he understood a word he read.

Juliet was relieved to have been forgotten about for the time being. She could avoid the piercing scrutiny of his gaze and not have to worry about his hands making her mindless with need. She needed to be rational about this. She was an intellectual woman, after all.

The trouble was that Lawrence was not a rational man. He was convinced she was a fallen woman and little better than a criminal. He couldn't bring himself to trust her, and she couldn't seem to change his mind. Anything she said or did was twisted in such a way as to seem proof of guilt.

So perhaps the solution was to do nothing. The harder she fought, the more she had coals heaped on her head. The more she tried to take control of the fierce passion between them, the more she was held in contempt.

Juliet was not accustomed to being passive, but in this case she had little choice. She knew she was intelligent, well-connected. That she would find a way out of this predicament one way or the other

given time. But it shocked her to think how many women really did have husbands who were far worse, and who were far less able to defend themselves.

He had hurt her arm before by accident, and stung her pride, but he had not taken a fist to her. He shouted and screamed, but it was because he seemed to have no other way of expressing his emotions.

When he had awakened her, he had been tender, and he had said things to her on occasion which were warm and appreciative. She had no idea what devil was sitting on his shoulder driving him to such excesses, but she recalled a conversation she had had once with a friend who had married an especially violent man.

It was true that some men did thrive on violence. She had seen and heard enough about it first-hand helping nurse the sick in her district. But her friend had said her husband didn't know any better because his own parents had constantly been at odds with each other. Once her husband had seen that she was gentle and kind and didn't want to fight all the time, they had settled down.

She knew some women could be violent too. She thought with a shudder of Matthew's former mistress Matilda. He had told her the story about their first night together and the riding crop. Not that he had ever allowed her to... or used it himself. But it showed how excessive she could be. Was Lawrence that way as well? Was that why he had wanted to marry her? Had they shared those proclivities and he now expected her to give in too?

She was determined not to give in. If he raised his hand to her once she would walk back to London in naught but her cloak if need be, and get her friends to hide her. Or go to one of the Rakehells for help. Matthew would not be far away once he returned to the country, and his friend Randall would conceal her in the meantime, she was sure.

On the other hand, if she was going to separate from her husband's bed and board, she was going to have to do something to earn her own living. She couldn't possibly live on charity forever. She could just go back down to Dorset, but she was fearful of the Lyonses getting into the line of fire. They were most excellent people, but getting on in years now. Not to mention her poor little sister. The last thing she wanted was Lawrence storming into their snug country

cottage in a towering rage.

At least there was her writing. Between her work as an essayist and her histories Juliet could support herself, she was sure. But she needed books, papers, a library.... A decent place to live.

Well, if Lawrence was just going to abandon her in the country, she would have plenty of opportunity for that. He evidently didn't think much of her domestic skills. Indeed, he seemed utterly indifferent to worldly comforts. He rarely ate, didn't seem to care about heat or clothes or a good bed. Joyless. That was what he was. Utterly joyless.

But why? In fact, he almost reproached himself for pleasure. He had enjoyed himself with her, she was sure of it. Yet the more they shared, the more he seemed to reprove her and punish himself. Take on more work than before, she thought as he ploughed through his papers with a determined air.

Her new husband was a puzzle, but not one she was going to be able to solve at once. She had to be patient. She had been warned by her family that one day she might meet a man who was her match. He was not intellectually, certainly, but rather in terms of force of personality. And thus far she had been bested every time.

But then, Juliet had allowed herself to be bested. She had to pick her battles. She couldn't go toe to toe with him on every last thing. In truth, she didn't want to. She wanted the magic back of that first wonderful night they had been together when he had been witty, charming, and they had had such fun. Had experienced such pleasure, untinged by regret or anger.

To Juliet's relief, they arrived at the inn where they were to stop the night. He strode out of the carriage without a backward glance, and she heard him order two rooms.

"I'll have a bath, good fire and hot meal sent up to mine, please. Can you call us at six in the morning?"

"Very good, sir. And the lady?"

He shrugged. "That's no lady, that's a stray bitch in heat I found in the road."

The landlord, to his credit, blushed and looked shamefaced. "But you want a room for her?"

"Yes, I just said so."

"Yes, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"No, I've told you what I need."

He stormed up the stairs after the maid who said she would show him the way, leaving the landlord looking at the woebegone girl with the most enormous eyes he had ever seen.

"Have you any luggage, miss?"

"Just a small bundle, thank you. My husband's things are in the coach, though. I'll just get my own luggage and you can give me a tiny room."

"He's not said anything about food or owt."

"I haven't any money. And I don't think I could manage a bite in any case."

"I'll fetch you some bread and cheese and a ewer of hot water. It's the best I can do. I'm sorry."

"It's more than I have a right to expect."

"Has he, well, abducted you, forced you to elope or something? I can send for the authorities," he whispered.

"No, nothing like that. He is well and truly married to me. I agreed to it. My family was there."

His pitying look spoke volumes.

She ran to get the bundle from the boot of the carriage and her clothes, and followed him up to the tiny room he had given her at the back of the inn.

Once there she availed herself of the hot water and dressed herself in both chemises, all of her petticoats, her wrapper and a clean pair of drawers. She put on both pairs of stockings over her freezing feet and got into bed. She knew she was going to be in trouble if he decided to seek her out later that night, but with no fire in the room and no hot food, there was little else she could do to stay warm. The landlord did however bring her a warming pan and a pair of hot water bottles. When her husband was finished eating she was given the cold remains of the meal on a tray.

"It isn't much, but better than nothing. I can bring up the scrapings

of the pot if there is anything left after all the other guests have dined."

"No, you've already been more than kind, have put yourself out for me more than I have the right to expect. Thank you."

"Just leave the tray there. Someone will fetch it later."

"Thank you. But now that you've brought the bottles and pan I might as well get in and just go to bed."

"Yes, Miss. Good night, Miss."

She got into the bed with a heavy heart, and prayed for a good night's sleep and a better day tomorrow.

Chapter Eleven

It seemed as if Juliet had only been asleep for a second when she was being shaken awake. "Come, Miss, your husband be just about ready to leave," the landlord whispered.

"Pardon? What time is it? He said to knock us up at six!"

"He changed his mind, woke us all at five for hot water and breakfast. He didn't say nowt about you, and now he's striding into the coach."

"Drat. Can you hold him off for five minutes while I use the chamberpot and take off my clothes?"

"Take *off*?" he echoed in confusion.

But she was already stripping away her wrapper and stockings. He left a hot roll on her table and told her he would stall for time with Lawrence's luggage.

She bundled her clothes into two piles, one to take with her in the coach, the rest to conceal in the boot, and managed to slip out the back door of the inn and around to the rear. She put the larger of the two bundles in, before moving around to the side of the coach, where her husband was gruffly thanking the landlord and settling up the bill.

He frowned at the change he was being given. It seemed a most inexpensive inn to him for accommodation and all the extras for two people.

She scrambled into the coach like a skittish hare and cowered into the corner, clutching her clothes under her cloak. She tried to swallow the last of the roll she had jammed in her cheek without him looking.

Silence reigned as they got underway. She hardly dared look at him, but as the sun rose she could see he looked unkempt, as if he hadn't slept. In fact, he appeared a damned sight worse than she did, she decided, having caught sight of herself in a small pierglass on the way downstairs. And looked dreadful despite the fact that he had had every comfort at his disposal, a hot meal, a fire.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, thank you."

"Did you have all you needed last night?"

She thought the question deliberately cruel and sarcastic so she nodded. "Yes, thank you. I have no intention of being a burden to you if I can help it."

The sooner she started earning money the better. But that was going to take some thought and planning. She wished she could do fancy needlework like her sister.

Since it was too dark for him to resume working on his papers, she suggested, "If you've a mind, I'd still like to hear about the history of tea."

"Do you recall where I left off?" he asked, his tone surly.

"We had got to the point where the coffee houses were thriving in London but were no place for women because they were too bawdy, and places where men congregated to do important business."

"Ah yes, just so." He gave her a long look, shrugged, and took up the thread of the story. "Tea drinking for people with social pretensions became an occasion of great ceremony. It was so expensive, the precious tea leaves were kept in a locked caddy, for which there was only ever one key. Once or twice a week, the lady of the house would unlock the caddy to serve tea as a family treat, or to impress an important guest. The word comes from Cantonese, 'catty,' by the way.

"The fine porcelain in which the tea was served emphasised the family's wealth, while adding to the sense of ceremony. It was an opportunity for a refined woman to show off her pale skin and delicate bone structure against the translucent purity of the Chinese porcelain. The porcelain too was very expensive, having had to be transported half way around the world without being smashed. The people of the Orient have all sorts of elaborate tea rituals. We've started to develop our own with afternoon tea.

"In any event, since the fashionable women could not possibly go into the coffee houses to buy the tea themselves, they had to send a footman. Inevitably they began to demand better service, and so the better establishments bloomed, whilst others went out of business.

The more successful owners bought up the adjoining properties or opened chains of establishments as a result. The better coffee houses became exclusive clubs. The rest were home to the rough and unsavoury elements of city life.

"But some canny men diversified, and converted the raucous atmosphere of the coffeehouse to a place ladies would like to be seen. Social life in the first half of the eighteenth century became more sophisticated as coffee houses gave way to tea gardens. The tea gardens came in like a vision of paradise: tree-lined avenues, lantern-lit walks, music, dancing, fireworks, and good food accompanied by a fine cup of tea.

"Tea gardens weren't just fun, they were a social melting pot. Within these exotic landscapes, royalty and the masses could promenade together. The most famous and long lasting of the eighteenth-century tea gardens are the Vauxhall Gardens. On warm summer evenings, the music of Handel could be heard among the pavilions, arcades, and supper rooms. Vauxhall's rival, Ranelagh Gardens has a boating canal, a so-called Chinese pavilion, and a central, domed rotunda. In 1765, the nine-year-old Mozart actually performed there."

"Imagine. I've not been to either place myself. They sound like fun."

He ignored what seemed to be a hint to take her some time. "So England's thirst for tea in the eighteenth-century was growing steadily and there were fortunes to be made, but it could be a bloodthirsty and cutthroat business."

"Because of the taxes, cost and competition?"

He nodded. "Untold lives have been lost to the tea trade, including my two cousins in the Far East, which was how my uncle came to send for me to become his heir. People think of tea as a thing of gentility, but the trade is just as rugged as the men on the south coast moonraking.

"Exorbitant tea duties led to smuggling. High costs encouraged adulteration. And of course, there are the dangers of sailing with the cargoes half way around the world, with monsoons, typhoons, and all sorts of other hazards. Trying to break the monopoly in China also meant inviting a great deal of trouble into my home."

"Oh dear. I had no idea it was so dangerous, Lawrence."

He nodded. "Over the years we've lost men to illness, shipwreck, being press-ganged into the Royal Navy. And of course there are captains who might prove untrustworthy, sell the cargo in another port and report it lost or pirated.

"So we would let the captains engage in so-called private trade. Instead of just a flat wage, we would give them other goods which they could buy and sell on their own behalf. The goods had to be non-perishable because they were stowed in the lower parts of the ship, below the level where it was safe to store tea.

"So most officers extracted maximum value from their private trade allowance by importing fine Chinese porcelain because it was so expensive, in such high demand, and would resist sea water. But the smuggling was so lucrative it could never be stamped out. I know my men, but I'm sure we've lost quite a few tea chests this way."

"Really? How do they do it so easily?" she asked, fascinated by all he was telling her.

He shrugged. "Good organisation. The same as with wine or any other goods coming into England the government has put a high duty on. Landing a boatload of tea on some deserted shoreline is an easy way to make a quick profit. So easy that whole communities became involved in the trade, especially in Holland and Portugal.

"From here it is a quick trip to the Bay of Biscay or across the North Sea, and a small fortune can be made, enough to share around everyone involved. And there would be even more profit once the product was diluted. You think you know tea, but I'd say most of what you've had has been adulterated in one way or another. Perhaps even a few times depending on how many sets of hands it's passed through."

"Adulterated?" she asked curiously, settling in her seat more snugly. "How?"

"Canny tea merchants exploit customers' ignorance by diluting the product with either inferior teas, or with something altogether less palatable, twigs and dried leaves being the most obvious. But I've even heard of powdered sheep droppings being used. Richard Twining, one of the most famous tea traders here in England, published an entire book on the subject in about 1780. In it he

claimed there was a certain village near London almost entirely devoted to the production of material for adulterating tea, and that they produced twenty tonnes of the stuff each year. But just think of the rewards. That's why I pre-package all of my tea, which is sealed with a special wax seal. All the packages are counted. And need to match the tallies. I don't want an adulterated product with my name on it."

"I see. That's very wise of you."

He nodded. "Wise, and principled. I've not had an easy life, but I've never cheated anyone to get a better one."

"I'm sure not," she said quietly, knowing he was thinking of her brother as he spoke.

He looked so angry she wondered if she should continue the conversation, but anything was better than his glowering silence.

"So tell me more about your ships. Do they just trade with England, or other places? And what is it like to travel so far, for so many months at sea?"

"It's about a two-year round trip to China and back. The weather, hunger and scurvy and other horrid diseases caused by indifferent food and water are unpredictable foes. Even more dangerous than the weather is the nefariousness of man. I know my ships can always put in to St. Helena, a British-run colony, but anyone who's ever travelled the high seas can tell you Madagascar is nothing more than a lawless haven for pirates."

"Really? Have you lost any ships to them?"

"Not me. My uncle when he was in charge. My cousin's ship was lost that way. My ships are well-supplied with decent food and water, my men are well armed, and they all travel in convoy for safety."

"So all of your organisation and astuteness has paid off. That's how you've come to be so successful."

"That and the fact that the East India Company is a lot more loose than it used to be, so their officials can be bought off to look the other way, and the fact that the government, for reasons known only to themselves, have not imposed any duty on Indian tea. In any case they lost their monopoly on Indian trade in 1813, so I've been free to do as I like ever since."

"Oh my! You must be vastly wealthy, then."

"I'm working on it," he said with a small smile.

"I would say you've already succeeded. But you don't seem to have had a very easy time of it. Between outwitting the Chinese and setting up your own plantations and harvesting the Assam tea, I think you called it, you must work eighteen or twenty hours a day."

"More at times. But I do have Nash to help. He takes just as much of an active interest as I do."

"And do you let him have some to trade himself?"

He nodded. "A bit. But it's Howard tea, and I want to advance the family's name. If we could get royal patronage it would make me even more prominent than Twinings."

She gave her honest opinion then, despite her nervousness around this stranger who had so suddenly become her husband. "You sound as though you're going about it in the right way. Being honest and scrupulous and offering a high-quality product. Now all you would need would be an appropriate parlour for people to sample all of your different teas, a place both men and women could be pleased to visit. And you could make up little sample bags of muslin or some such other fabric, with a little drawstring, for your salespeople to take around."

"Hmm." He pondered her suggestions for a moment in silence, staring out at the landscape as it flew by. "But I'm a long way away from setting up the tea rooms yet, let alone having a large sale force at my disposal."

"Well, there are many people who I am sure would like to try your tea, who might not otherwise take the trouble to call. You know, habits become ingrained and so on. You can get them to try the tea by passing it through the doors in the better neighbourhoods and making sure each little bag has a card attached which gives the name of the shop.

"You can get some handy women interested in extra money to make them up for you. You can certainly take out some inexpensive advertisements in the *Times*, but tasting is believing. As with wine," she added, wondering if he might think better of her and her suggestions if he knew of her own commercial experience.

He frowned at her now. "I'm sure. Though decent women in our society don't usually know all about wine. But then, you're not exactly decent, are you? I'm sure you've had enough men sample your wares."

"Back to the scurrilous insults again?" she said wearily. "And what is wrong with knowing about wine any more than about tea? I should like to think I'm intelligent enough to learn about both."

"Why bother?" he said dismissively. "You're nothing more than a possession, an ornament in my household now. I have no use for you as anything other than that."

She stared at him levelly. "I find that hard to believe. Most men want a wife who can share their burdens with them in some way."

He glared at her, his silvery eyes cold and forbidding. "I would be nursing a viper in my bosom. You'd betray me as you did every other man who has ever had the misfortune to like or trust you."

She blinked, getting more and more clues as to his innermost feelings and reasons for them. "Betray? But if I'm a harlot, it's surely a simple monetary transaction. A commercial relationship only. There are no feelings involved, no commitment."

"As for the word *like*, I wonder at you using it when you would appear to have nothing but contempt for me. Indeed, you view me as little better than an African slave bought off an auction block. Even they are allowed to wear a dress. Shall I shred my petticoat and fashion a halter for my neck so you can tie me up at the next hitching post?"

"So you enjoy bondage, do you?" he said gruffly, both disgusted and excited.

She could guess vaguely what he meant. "No, I don't. How can I enjoy any of the cruelties you inflict upon me? Thus far they have been only mental, but they are often the unkindest of all. If you want to beat me, just have done with it so I need not keep fearing it."

"Beat you?" he gasped. "No-" He stared at her, and saw she was in earnest. He scowled, and suppressed a shudder.

Juliet sat calmly gazing at him, and once again Lawrence felt as though she had bested him in some indefinable way. Now it was he who felt as though he had been beaten.

Just what on earth was wrong with him? Ever since he had met her his world seemed to have spun out of control.

He banged on the back of the coach with his fist, startling her. "Stop at the next inn for some dinner," he called up to the driver.

She sat huddled in the seat until he said gruffly, "Pray put your clothes on. It is a grey day and that cloak does not cover you sufficiently."

"Thank you."

Heedless of modesty at this point, she obeyed with alacrity. He averted his gaze, at least for a time. He had missed her lush body in the bed beside him last night, and was feeling decidedly needy as he watched her dress. He would have thought their afternoon in the coach would have sated him, but he had been up half the night and more than once had lifted the latch to find her.

But he had not ascertained where she was in the inn, and was not about to wake the place by searching for his wife. In the end he had got about an hour's sleep, awakened in a fierce temper, and roused the whole household for breakfast so he could find his wife at last.

Now as they pulled in Lawrence thought about breaking their journey there for the night, simply bedding down with her until he could sleep at last, and pressing on to Somerset in the morning.

But he told himself he had to get back to business in both Bristol and London, trying to forget that he should have been on honeymoon with Matilda by now. The word *honeymoon* conjured up all sorts of erotic possibilities which he did not dare think about. Not if he was going to continue on that day.

He looked at Juliet as she remained where she was in the coach.

"Are you not hungry, Madam?" he asked with a frown.

"I wasn't sure I was invited to come."

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm."

"Nor do I appreciate yours."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Come or stay there as you please."

"Can you have something sent out to me?" she asked softly.

He turned back toward her impatiently. "Why put them to the

trouble? Why not just come in?"

"Because I look so bedraggled, I wouldn't want to shame you. I am after all only a bitch in heat you found by the side of the road."

The words he had used the night before hit him hard. Furious with himself and her, Lawrence strode away and left her sitting alone in the freezing coach.

She waited for a time for some food to arrive, but when none was forthcoming, she wiped away a few self-pitying tears, and slipped out to avail herself of the shrubbery.

He returned a short time later with the driver and resumed his seat, and the coach rolled on. She did not dare ask him what had happened, and the smell of brandy was so strong upon him she quailed. Men were often even more bad-tempered and violent when drunk.

Lawrence had lost his appetite at her words, and the brandy he had ordered for himself had been most vile. So vile in fact that he had dropped the glass after the first taste, sloshing it all over his coat.

When the landlord had insisted he would pour him another Lawrence had waved him away, and mopped his lapels as best he could with his pocket handkerchief.

After a trip to the chamberpot he had dragged the driver away from his beer and beef, and insisted they were leaving.

Juliet had no idea how she was going to endure the hell of having to share the confined space with him once more. Though freezing and half-starved, at least him taking a dinner break would have offered her a brief respite to consider her options. To be away from his arctic gaze.

But the motions of the coach soon rocked her to sleep despite all of her best efforts to stay awake. She started as she felt his arms go around her.

She tried to pull away.

His deep voice rasped in her ear, "Easy. I'm not going to futter you. Just go back to sleep."

He slid over and wedged himself in the corner, and pulled her over to his side. She was stiff and unyielding against him at first, but

as she heard his deep, even breathing, and knew he was slumbering, she relaxed and dropped off to sleep once more.

Chapter Twelve

When Lawrence opened his eyes a couple of hours later, the coach was slowing. He craned his neck to look out the window, and saw a goodly inn in the distance.

He decided if they were going to sleep, they might as well do it in a half-decent bed. Juliet looked just about done in, her porcelain skin almost transparent as he gazed down at her. He had never seen a more lovely sight in his life.

Of course, it was her stock and trade to look beautiful, but he was sure she was asleep. Even his hands upon her in a more and more suggestive manner did not awaken her. She shivered but was still.

"Juliet? Juliet?"

Still there was no sign of her waking. He was about to shake her roughly when he decided what was the point. It would be like kicking a kitten. She couldn't help what she had become any more than he could. They had been molded by circumstances and fate. Both of them had ended up hard people of the world.

He wondered what she dreamed about. Pretty dresses, more male conquests? Or something more simple? A decent home, family? What fantasies had led her to be part of the *demi monde* when she had been born to the *haut monde*? And how could her brother have prostituted such a delicate little flower just further his own ambitions? For surely she must have been the most adorable and trusting little girl once upon a time. Or had she always been sly and cunning, a natural little flirt?

He had no idea, and didn't want to find out. All he wanted now was a bed, hot meal and a few hours of mindless oblivion between her thighs. Since he was stuck with her, he might as well enjoy her.

He shook her awake, and half-carried, half-dragged her out of the

coach.

"Wha- What is it?" she gasped, her eyes flying wide with alarm.

"We're stopping here for dinner and the night." He let go of her so abruptly, she almost fell. He reached out one hand to steady her.

"Thank you. All right."

The driver and she both looked at each other in surprise but followed him as he strode into the inn. "A room. Bring the luggage and the dinner in an hour. And a bath in two."

As soon as they were behind closed doors in their plainly furnished, long, low-beamed chamber, he yanked at the ties of her cloak and began to remove her clothing with an intentness which indicated his desires all too plainly.

"Lawrence, what on earth-"

Her hands came up to shield herself, but he brushed them aside impatiently and continued to unbutton the front of her frock and then her chemise.

"Lawrence, please. What are you-"

He simply laughed, a harsh sound which grated on her every nerve. "You really do play the innocent so well. But I'm in the mood for a few other games."

"Please, stop a moment," she begged, taking a step away from his questing hands. "At least let me take off my own clothes and use the chamberpot. And I haven't had a bath since we left London. Nor more than a bite to eat."

He paused at that. "What do you mean?"

She stiffened and said quietly, "You know full well what I mean."

"I wouldn't be asking if I did!" he barked.

"This is yet another game of yours, isn't it?" she hissed, managing to break free of his grasp. She scurried behind the screen in the corner.

"I'm not playing any game! I haven't time."

"Then why are we here?" she asked.

"Because I thought it would be more comfortable sleeping in a

bed than the coach seat. And we need to eat."

"I see."

She hurriedly tended to her needs, then quickly poured some warm water from the pitcher into the ewer. She washed her hands and face, grateful for the warm water. But she could hardly relax and refresh herself as she longed to. She hated the fact that he was just on the other side of the screen seething and could overhear everything she was doing.

See it too if he came close enough. She had put up with a lot of shaming in the past two days, but performing her bodily functions in front of him really was the last straw.

As he continued to pace on the other side of the screen, she nearly lost her normally placid temper. She stepped out from behind the screen to face him, and began to yank off all her garments.

"I've had no food or fire since the day we married, and no bath to soothe my aching limbs after being jarred up and down for days on the road. So if you want to bed a corpse, I shall just lie down now. With any luck I shall expire shortly and you shall have all you've ever wished.

"In fact, if I snuff it quickly you can hurry back to London. You might just get Matilda to forgive you, and your honeymoon plans can continue apace."

"Now you're being melodramatic," he growled.

"Am I? Just do me a favour when you're finished with me? Leave them enough coins so I don't have to be buried in Potter's Field?"

He glared at her. "God, wench, you would try the patience of a saint."

"Which we all know you most certainly are not," she said with a shake of her head.

"Nor are you!" he fired back.

"But I wouldn't treat a stray bitch the way you have me! So which one of us is worse?"

His words coming back to him like a slap were enough to make him relent in his anger.

Lawrence took a deep breath and tried again. "Please tell me one

thing, truthfully, without flying off the handle?"

"Yes, if I can," she agreed warily.

"Why have you not eaten? Are you sick? I mean, surely it can't be a baby-"

"No, I'm not sick," she sighed, shaking her head. She moved over to perch on the arm rest of one of the low wooden chairs by the table. "As for a baby it's far too early to tell, as you well know. The reason I haven't eaten, nor had even the most basic human comforts, Lawrence, is that you haven't bothered to make any provision for me.

"You ordered what you wanted last night at the inn, and made no mention of me. I was the stray cur, remember? You had breakfast this morning, then had me dragged out of bed while you waited to leave. I barely had enough time to take my ease, let alone breakfast. I had no dinner. You left me sitting in the carriage and had nothing sent out. So when do you think I could have eaten? Or bathed, or had a warm fire?"

He stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign tongue. But she was right. He had neglected her most shamefully. And she had taken the punishing treatment because he had told her she could expect no better.

He turned on his heel and marched to the door, and shouted so loudly the rafters shook. She dived behind the screen and peeped out.

A manservant appeared and bowed nervously, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "Food and bath now. Bring whatever you have, it makes no difference. My wife is hungry. I'll come downstairs to dine."

He slammed out of the room, leaving her alone at last. Hardly believing her luck, she scurried over to the door and locked it. She availed herself of the chamberpot more completely, got rid of the slops into the bucket, and washed her hands again.

A maid coming with the food tray a short time later took the slops away and left her with more hot water. She huddled in her cloak by the fire as she waited for the servants to fill the tub.

A mountain of food appeared a short time later, roast beef with dripping and potatoes, bread, cheese, chicken, ham. She ate her fill,

but also had the foresight to wrap some of the food in a cloth.

Her new husband was being nice to her at present, but that was not to say it was going to last. And knowing him, he might have some even more inventive cruelties in mind.

Juliet was certain he did later that evening, when bathed, and replete with food, she put on her chemise and slipped between the newly warmed covers, complete with hotwater bottles as well. She sighed, and finally began to relax.

There had still been no sign of him since their arrival, and she supposed he had secured a chamber for himself and would not be seeing her again until morning. Well, at least she would have all the food she had placed in her reticule for breakfast if Lawrence decided to make another precipitate dash for the road.

She stretched out on the bed, exhausted, and was just about to drift off to sleep when she heard the latch lift. Her husband was in his dressing gown, and slipped in beside her in the bed despite her alarmed expression and stiff posture.

"I just wanted to say, well, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she whispered.

"About you being neglected. I'm not used to having a wife to cater for. I just go where I want, do what I want, with no reference to anyone else."

She shrugged. "I can't expect you to change your whole life for me."

"Not all at once, no. But enough to realise that a lady likes her privacy, and even a fallen woman needs to eat. Might not fall if she didn't."

She moved away from him at once. "Please, don't start on me again."

"I didn't mean to. Slave then, even a slave needs to eat."

She looked daggers at him. "Somehow you always manage to come up with just the right thing to say to make it hurt even more."

"Then let's just not talk at all. Lie down."

"Sit, stay, roll over, beg. Back to the bitch, now are we?" she sighed.

His gaze devoured her beauty. "Aye," he said, hating himself for his desperate need to control her. "Let's just see about the in heat part."

Lawrence kissed her blisteringly, shocking her to the core. Wildfire flooded through her as his lips seemed to suck her very soul from her body, and with it any defiance she might have flung back in his face.

Before she even realised it, her hands had parted his dressing gown and were stroking down his supple steely muscles. The taste and smell of him fresh out of the bath was almost more than she could bear.

She dragged her mouth away from his. He was about to grasp her head to renew the contact when her mouth began to work its way down the strong column of his throat. From there it roved over his chest, down his abdomen, and from there even lower. The glory of him naked in bed beside her as he had been that first fateful night set her senses soaring.

His hand stroked her ears and cheek and shoulders, and only when she came to the very seat of his desire did he stop her with a shake of his head, raising her and rolling her onto her back.

The prospect of being in her mouth was just too exciting to bear, and he would never expect his wife to do it, much as it thrilled him.

She spread her legs to welcome him, but she was so tight with need she was not sure he was going to be able to manage. She half-expected the stroke to be instantaneous.

But his huge hands gentled over her stomach, until with agonising slowness one nestled between her thighs. Heat flooded through her as he brushed her lightly, touching her most intimately as he spread her dew and began to lightly caress her pearl of pleasure.

One mouth on her breast was enough to make her almost beg for him to take her, but as if sensing her impatience he whispered against her skin, "We have all night. All night for nothing but this dance between us. Just let it happen."

He began to kiss downwards. Juliet tried not to cover herself in shame or tense up. He was being more than kind to her.

She half-feared Lawrence changing into the cold and hostile version of himself. But she knew at some point, with her legs spread wide as though a sacrifice on an altar, she simply had to trust him not to hurt her. He hadn't the first night, when he had thought her a tart. Well, he still thought she was one. Only the anger and resentment had been added to their relationship.

But surely he couldn't be furious forever. And damn her for a fool, but she *wanted* him. She had never experienced anything other than dismay or revulsion at a man's touch before.

Now Lawrence's hands upon her were like an extension of herself, all of her deep-seated yearnings and desires being laid bare as he gently opened her like the petals of a flower.

Juliet bloomed under him that night as he made love to her over and over again, bringing her to peak after peak of shuddering delight. After her first three pinnacles she waited for him to tell her what a trollop she was. After her sixth, she waited for him to bark orders on which position to get into. When she lost count after a dozen, she had the uneasy feeling he was trying to prove his masculinity in the face of all the other lovers he imagined she had had.

As the hours passed and still he drove on, she was sure Lawrence was trying to torment her, deliberately deprive her of sleep. They would quieten for a time, and change positions, from him to her on top, or him along her back with her on her front or side, to him on his back with her curled tightly against him.

But no sooner would she start to slumber than he would begin to touch or kiss her all over again, never leaving her untouched. Was this relentless display of prowess just trying to prove his ascendancy over her?

Juliet thought of the way a hawk was trained in medieval and Renaissance times, continually kept awake, manipulated and petted until it at last it gave in to its master.

Just when she was drifting off to sleep his hands or lips would move over her still quivering flesh, and she would be soaring once more. He probed her body deeply with his hands as if longing to uncover every single one of her deepest needs and desires. She sensed he was testing her in some unfathomable way, and was equally fearful of asking for more, or saying she had had enough.

But then, as her foster-parents had taught her, sometimes it wasn't always what one said, but *how* one said it that counted.

Near dawn, she stroked back the hair from his brow and kissed him tenderly. Then she raised her lips.

"Lawrence, my dear, you're a wonderful lover, and I wish this night could never end. Thank you. It's all exquisite. But if you need to get back to work in a couple of days, you should get some sleep."

He paused for a moment. "You're not too sore?"

"No, you've been so gentle. It's like heaven."

"One more time then?" he said uncertainly.

"Mm, that would be wonderful, thank you. How would you like me?"

"Just like this. Oh, lovely."

"Mm. Lovely," she agreed wholeheartedly.

She stroked her hands down his back and indulged her passion for his buttocks and groin, slipping one hand one way and one the other to cup him. He caught her wrist and she started.

"Just brush me lightly, like that. If this is our last time I want to prolong it."

"It doesn't have to be our last time. Not if you want to stay in bed in the morning and leave late tomorrow," she whispered, stroking him with the most feathery touches.

He looked around the rather bare room, and shifted a bit in the lumpy bed. "You might be right, though. The accommodations of an inn leave a lot to be desired."

She smiled up at him. "I don't care. At least you don't leave anything to be desired."

He actually grinned then, taking her breath away at the sight of his masculine beauty.

"God, Lawrence, you're magnificent," she breathed.

She stretched under him luxuriously, trying to touch every inch of him, then arched her back, her zenith suddenly upon her, tearing through her even more fiercely than any she had experienced before. She couldn't even try to hold back her moan of passion.

He wanted to believe her words, wanted her to desire him and him alone. Wanted her to forget any other man she had ever known. Wanted her to forgive him for his callous indifference the past two days. The vindictiveness which had caused him to say those unconscionable things to and about her. He couldn't bring himself to apologise, but he could bring her to joy. And himself along with her.

Her eyes flew wide as he moved more intently within her, and they both exploded. And it was not only the shock of the thrilling sensations. He had not used any protection, not once. Yet he had sworn...

She smiled to herself happily as he rolled himself on his back once more. He was about to gather her to him tightly when she resisted, and murmured, "Breakfast."

"Mm, I suppose," he said sleepily, closing his eyes.

Now it was his turn to have them fly open as she knelt astride him and took him up to the hilt.

"I just adore sausage."

He laughed aloud then, and flopped back onto the mattress. He let her do almost anything to his awesome body. She found him completely fascinating, and desire scorched through her as she worshipped him with her hands and lips, though he kept her from his most delicate flesh.

She wondered at his reluctance, when he was so interested in doing the same to her. But she was more than able to delight him with her hands and the angle of her body as she rode him like the wind. Her explorations and discoveries soon triggered another towering culmination, and to her relief he finally slept.

Juliet was still throbbing with desire, but with any luck he would agree to stay another night at the comfortable establishment, and there might be a chance for yet more pleasure.

Chapter Thirteen

There were more than enough chances for pleasure when Lawrence and Juliet awakened lazily a number of hours later. His erection was fiercely hot, forming an impressive mound under the covers that she could not fail to ignore.

She pointed, and disappeared behind the screen. He made a show of yawning loudly and moving about in the bed to cover her embarrassment.

She came out from behind the screen blushing prettily, and he patted the bed and stroked her gently when she got back in. From there he rolled over to kiss her, then worked his way down to her breasts, giving them his full, undivided attention.

He had to go slowly, Lawrence told himself, enjoy every moment, the freedom of her body. He would feed his pleasure from hers. His own needs were simple compared to that of Juliet. He wanted her to ride the crest of the wave of her passion in as many ways and for as long as she needed to. It was easy now that he knew what genuine pleasure was. Nothing had ever prepared him for the delights he had discovered within her time and time again.

When she had quietened, he moved his mouth down still lower. This drew a protest from her at last. "No, really, you can't, not after-"

"No secrets between us. No barriers or boundaries. You're mine now. You're so beautiful, Juliet, I can't help myself. I want all of you. I need you to trust me. Please?"

She fell back onto the pillow with a little nod. He spread her legs wider, feasting on the sight of her. Never had he seen a more lovely woman. He just had to experience all of her, over and over again. See if there was a flaw in her absolute physical perfection.

In the sunlight filtering in through the mullioned window, he examined her almost as carefully as a doctor, and she was sure once

again he was checking for any sign of a monthly.

In reality he was enthralled with her lush pink perfection. He had known enough women in his day, but never one such as this. He was sure he could spend a lifetime in this bed and never grow tired of her charms.

He knew he had no reason to trust her, but why make it complicated? She was a woman, he was a man. And here was more delight than he had ever imagined, right in the palm of his hands. She had done him a favour--the prospect of lying here with Matilda filled him with a cold dread.

He pushed that thought to one side and teased her to another cresting peak with his hands, until her limbs were leaden with his loving. He wanted her so languid that she would not feel anything other than pleasure, no shame or embarrassment.

As he dipped his tongue to lick her tight little nub of flesh, flicking it back and forth lightly, she grasped the bedcovers, knotting them into her fists. His tongue slid lower, until he penetrated her and began to taste of her as though sipping fine wine. The rasp of his lightly-bearded chin sent her into oblivion, and when he brought up one hand to stroke her distended bud, she gasped and grasped his hair almost painfully.

His other hand on her breast, with his forearm and elbow increasing the pressure on her belly, not only enhanced the experience, but held her still, for she rocked and panted in the throes of the most sharp-edged desire, which slashed through her and left her begging for more.

Lawrence was more than willing to give her more, over and over. When at last she stilled for a moment, he replaced his tongue with two large hard fingers, and moved up between her legs to plant a sultry wet kiss on her mouth.

"Now you know what you taste like. As sweet as honey, like roses. And there's some of me too. Would you like more?" he whispered enticingly.

"Yes, please, more," she said in awed tones, completely in his thrall, no shame or fear or anything other than the powerful throbbing he elicited from within.

He kissed her deeply again, and she panted and writhed in the grip of another outburst of passion.

When she had quieted again, Lawrence turned her on her side, and began to lick and nuzzle down her back, until she panted in great heaving sobs. His hand moved around to her front and rubbed her into even more of a frenzy.

When he reached one buttock to plant a playful nip upon it, she began to soar out of control once again, pleading for him to move inside of her, until he flipped her over on her back and she pulled him into her arms desperately. Her legs wrapped around his waist, driving him into her with a passionate abandon that soon had him begging himself.

"It's all right, Juliet. I'm here with you. You can have all of me. Just take your time!"

Her devouring kisses soon ended any notions that he could control what was happening between them. She wrung the orgasm from him with her sinuous body as surely as if she had taken him in her hand and squeezed. They soared together, all muscles straining and quivering until they tumbled though the sky.

At length they both quieted. With one last tender head to toe caress, Lawrence kissed her hard and heaved himself out of the bed. He rang the bell, and threw a sheet over her lovely bare form to spare her any indignity when the servant came in.

He grinned with pride. Never had any woman looked so well-loved. It made him throb all over again just looking at her on his pillows, her dark hair spread, her legs wide, her breasts peaked, her feminine core glistening wetly with his ardour.... *His seed.*

Oddly, he didn't care. In fact, the thought of her being with child made him feel so aroused he had all to do not to get back into the bed and dive into her secret cove, trying to delve into the mystery of her.

She gathered the chemise he had discarded some time in the middle of the night.

Desire roughened his voice. "I never want any clothes on you in bed. In fact, every night, I expect to find you in bed naked and waiting for me at any time."

"Yes, Lawrence," she said. "May I wash now?"

"Yes, of course." She was about to climb from the bed when he stopped her with one huge hand on her stomach. He took a handkerchief and tested her again.

She met his gaze head on. "My monthlies won't be for another two weeks or so. I'm as regular as a clock."

He scowled and said nothing, simply gathered his dressing gown and left.

Lawrence returned a short time later with a towel and some shaving things. Once they had bathed, he took Juliet back to bed. She was astonished at the change in him. Gone was the tenderness and play of the night before, the long languid kisses. Flat on her stomach once more, or on her hands and knees or hanging over the edge of the bed, he took her from behind until she thought she would scream if she didn't get a kiss. He was like a man driven. He did not even dare admit to himself what was goading him onwards.

If he didn't leave her pregnant now, he never would.... She was his. He was never ever going to lose her.

At last Juliet twisted under his huge body and planted her hand on the back of his neck. She pulled his head down and almost devoured his lips. Their climax was simultaneous and crushingly powerful. He groaned and sobbed into her, longing to hear her match his cries. But there was nothing but silence. The abyss came up to seize him. The darkness within him had claimed his soul once more.

Chapter Fourteen

At the end of another two torrid nights on the road, they at last arrived in Millcote.

Juliet had never been more relieved in her life. She hoped that settling into their new home might calm Lawrence's moodiness and tendency to excess, for he was so intent upon making love to her that she was almost getting sore. She had ventured to hint at the problem, and he had changed his style, now facing her and pressing into her so deeply she was sure the top of her head would explode.

But still he brought her to pinnacle after pinnacle of ecstatic culmination, night after night, and day after day in the coach. Yet still she was sure they hadn't even scratched the surface of their passion. For this was a bodily need, pure and simple for him, or so she believed. Just think what their unions could be like if he *loved* her?

Lawrence didn't know what on earth was wrong with him. Every time he touched Juliet he just couldn't seem to get enough of her. He wanted to kick himself for almost rubbing herself and him raw, and tried to be more tender.

But once he was inside her he nearly went wild. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to not take her in his arms and kiss her senseless. Even her simple kisses overwhelmed him. The touch of her hands caught him in a silken web of sensuality he never wanted to escape from.

Now that they were at Millcote, reality would intrude. Nash would be there, and his factory in Bristol, servants...

He felt like saying the hell with it all, going down to a charming beauty spot like Lyme, or even staying at a fine inn in Bath and indulging in all the pleasures the fine town had to offer.

But he was here now, and was curious to see the house. He would also have to send back any of Matilda's things she had already

had sent down. He tried to recall what she looked like, and in doing so kissed Juliet almost in relief.

"What was that for?" she asked softly.

"You're mine. I can kiss you any time you like," he said gruffly.

"I only wish I could--"

"Er, here comes Nash."

Nash was a tall thin man with sharp green eyes and a shock of startling auburn hair. Like Lawrence, he looked weathered by the Indian climate, and had the air of someone far too busy for social pleasantries.

Indeed, he felt anything but gracious as he espied a dark-haired woman in the coach with his employer. Matilda's new maid? And what were they doing here? He had not expected them for a fortnight. He nearly panicked as he realised he had left out some most incriminating materials...

"Well, Nash, it would appear you've chosen a very fine house," he remarked, staring at the red-brick mansion in awe. He had never imagined he would ever own anything so fine in his life, yet here he was.

"What are you doing here, sir? You and Matilda are supposed to be enjoying your wedding trip."

"Ah, just so. There's been a change of plans."

"What, you're not married?" Nash said, restraining his emotions as best he could. *Damnation, had he found out about Matilda after all?*

"I *am* married, to this charming young lady. Mrs. Juliet Howard, may I present Robert Nash, known to all as just plain Nash."

Nash stared, and sensed a strain between the couple which he could not quite put his finger on. He shook hands abruptly because he knew it would look most particular if he did not, and suppressed all the thousand screaming questions in his brain as he said, "If you'll forgive me, sir, I shall just summon all the servants to allow them to welcome you home."

Damn again. He had got up a most disreputable group of minions who would have suited Matilda down to the ground--a few lusty men

and women to indulge her when Lawrence was away, and even himself if he was there, though tea was king. The last thing he had ever imagined was hiring for a household to be run by a tiny genteel slip of a thing who looked as though she would puff away with the first breath of wind.

Lawrence stepped ahead of her, and she had the sensation she had been completely forgotten as he stepped into the spacious hallway and began to survey them like a general in command of his troops.

The men were all huge, strapping specimens. He felt a creep of unease as one of them stared at his wife with open admiration in a most lewd manner. He was practically licking his lips.

She was almost oblivious to the attention, feeling so cold she had all to do to keep her teeth from chattering. Still, she felt a dreadful creep of unease, and certainly had not like Nash one bit.

He stared at all the servants again, saw them all looking his wife up and down. Jealousy made Lawrence's words harsh. "I am the master here. Mr. Lawrence Howard. Failing my presence, Nash is in charge. You will obey our commands and ours alone. My wife is delicate and is to be left alone. No callers, or correspondence. She is not to be troubled with household matters. You will refer all questions regarding expenses and supplies and so forth to myself or Nash.

"You, girl," he said, pointing to a tiny little maid whom Nash was sure one of the men had been ill using since she had been out of nappies, "shall attend my wife and act as her personal maid. I do not need a valet myself, but I would be grateful if someone could help my wife unpack our things."

The insolent-looking man he had first noted stepped forward eagerly, but Lawrence fixed him with a glare and indicated a smallish looking younger man. "You can carry, he can unpack."

He turned to his factor. "Nash, I want to see you in the library."

"Er, there's no fire in there. The drawing room?"

"Aye, it'll do."

As soon as the door was shut behind them, Lawrence made it clear he didn't like having a dozen male servants in the house. "We haven't got so much heavy work that we need that many," he pointed

out with some truth.

"No, you're right. I had intended some to stay here, some for the London house when you find a suitable place," he lied.

"No, I don't think so. They are far too rustic. You can find them a place at the factory if you like, but otherwise we'll keep six and turn the rest off, starting with that insolent pup who cheeked my wife."

"Cheeked?" Nash asked in genuine confusion.

"Just do it. I'm not to be questioned in my own house," Lawrence growled.

Nash stared at him. "Yes, sir, I mean, no, sir. But might I ask how it came about that you went away to London to take one woman to wife, and came back with another?"

"I met her, we desired each other instantly, we wed."

"But who is she? Who are her people?" Nash pressed.

Lawrence waved away his factor's questions with an abrupt gesture with his hand. "It's not important. Just keep in mind that she's my wife, and as fluff-brained as the rest of the gender. We will not discuss business in front of her, and she is not to be involved in the running of the household. That includes when the boys come."

"The boys?" Nash sounded horrified.

"Yes, of course. My nephews Stuart and Andrew."

"But they're at school. Surely--" he started to protest, all of his best laid plans shattering like glass.

"They do have holidays, you know, and even one coming up for Easter fairly soon. I have every intention of doing my duty, even if I'm not exactly adept with children. But I daresay practice will make perfect. Or at least improved."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir. I shall dismiss the servants now and have the nursery cleaned."

"Have all of this place cleaned," Lawrence said, running a finger along the mantelpiece. "It looks as though it hasn't been touched for months."

"The property has been empty for some time," Nash lied. "The servants have not yet had a chance to--"

"I'm well aware of the fact that these are English men and women, and they have their own minds and democratic attitudes. I would not expect them to be so docile as our Indian servants. Nor can we treat them as such," he said with a pointed look, for he was certain his factor had resorted to corporal punishment on occasion back at the tea plantation. "But I do expect an orderly home."

"Quite. But if I may ask, now that you're here, do you intend to have a honeymoon? For if you do not, there is a long list of properties for both your new townhouse and the proposed tea rooms for you to view in London. And for tea rooms in Bristol."

"I've only just got back from London," he said with mild exasperation, though he could not have said why.

"True, sir, but I would not like to presume, and it's a very big decision. I can certainly take care of matters in Bristol, unless of course you wish to, and--"

He sighed. "No, no, London will be fine. I'll go in the morning."

He toyed with the idea of asking Juliet if she would be willing to accompany him. He vetoed that idea outright when he went to find his wife and saw her white skin had become so transparent, with purple smudges under her eyes, that he had the feeling he was viewing a ghost.

He looked around the charming pink and white room, noticed the dirt and grime. "Have them shake down this room before you start using it." He opened the adjoining door, and admired the bathroom, before going through a second set of doors to the master bedroom. "This room is much more clean and tidy. The decor is a bit heavy, burgundy and blue, but at least it's decent."

"But it's the bedroom for the master of the house."

"My bedroom, yes," he said impatiently.

"I would not like to presume. And there will be times you do not wish to sleep with me."

Lawrence was damned if he could think of one, but he nodded curtly. "Well, just so. You must be tired. I shall order a bath and some food. If you could see to it that my bags are unpacked and repacked."

"Repacked?" she echoed in confusion, her heart sinking.

"Yes, I'm returning to London in the morning."

"I see," she said quietly, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I doubt very much you would want to come. Another four days on the road after all the discomfort you've experienced..."

"If I were to have a day or two to rest.... But I would not wish to delay you."

"No, just so, you need to rest." He fanned his thumb along her delicate cheekbone. "Bath and bed for you. I shall see you when I return."

He resisted the temptation to kiss her senseless, and cast his eye around the chamber once more, liking it well enough, but wishing somehow it were more grand. Or that she had decided to use the master bedroom as he had suggested....

He gave the orders to the servants, and strode from the room.

Nash was just finishing sweeping up the last of the tell-tale evidence when Lawrence burst into the library. "Show me that list of properties, and a map."

Juliet had hoped she would see Lawrence before he left for London, but she had no visit in the middle of the night, though she longed to feel his huge frame sag the mattress beside her before pulling her close.

At dawn Lawrence had risen and crept into her room, and pulled back the sheet to feast his eyes on his wife, naked and in peaceful repose. He longed to kiss her awake, but knew she had to be exhausted after the excesses he had subjected her to ever since they'd met. And if he got into the bed beside her, he was damned if he would be able to get out of it for a week. He too was tired, and her softness was so tempting...

He kissed her lips and she smiled and sighed. Her body stretched languidly. He moved down to her thighs and kissed her with considerable ardour. She whimpered in delight and reached for him, but he evaded her. With one last lingering lick he closed his eyes, inhaled her sweet feminine perfume, and dragged himself away.

He felt completely wicked for wanting her so, his every sense

filled with her. His fingers itched to feel her satin skin, her silky sex, her elegant curves. The blood pounded and surged in his veins.

He told himself to stop being so foolish. He was going back to London, nine square miles of iniquity if he so chose. There would be numerous other women, and he could go see Matilda, explain....

Go see the incredible Belinda he had heard so much about...

He would see Matthew Sampson, ascertain what had really happened that fateful night. Continue on as he had before that little Dane minx had turned his life upside down.

He finished packing his valise, and with a last long look at the adjoining door, he shook his head and left.

As soon as he was gone, Nash headed for Bristol with all of the cargo he had hoped to store in the house unnoticed. Now that Juliet was living there, it simply wasn't safe. He needed a new base of operations, and decided to clean out one of the rickety old buildings on the side of the wharf.

He took the six most licentious male servants with him, including the one Lawrence had objected to, and told them he would be happy to use their various talents until things got more settled.

He got them started cleaning out the two-storey building for his own use, and told them to look over some of the other disused sheds for their accommodations. He toyed with the youngest of the men for a time, but was really not in the mood. Not when all his plans had come so badly unstuck.

He had already written to Matilda asking for her version of the events, and hoped in the meantime that she would have had the sense to write to him to apprise him of the disaster.

A letter came from her the following day. The news could not have been worse. Matthew Dane's *sister*. Hell and damnation. The last thing he wanted was for them to meet up after all these years! Let alone marry into each other's families.

How on earth could such a disaster have happened? The letter said also that Matthew had paid her off handsomely in order to avoid a breach of promise suit, and Matilda was quite happy to say that several of her other lovers were in a position to offer marriage.

Nash wrote back and told her to fleece them for all they were worth, but in no circumstances to marry. This was a temporary setback only. He would have to behave circumspectly for a time, in the event that Lawrence had become suspicious of him.

But Juliet looked as though she would hold as much interest for a man of the world like Lawrence as a china doll. She seemed a little fairy with as much air in her head as a pint of beer. She would be a minor inconvenience to be got rid of when the time came.

In the meantime, he would watch and wait, and take his opportunities and pleasure as they came.

Juliet tried to settle into her new home, but the servants were a most bizarre lot, seldom in evidence, at least not in the downstairs portion of the house, though she could certainly hear enough banging, rattling and groaning up in the attics.

She guessed that they had taken her husband's orders to clean the house from top to bottom literally, and could only hope they would get to her chamber eventually.

On the whole she was rather relieved. She didn't like the way they looked at her, especially the men. She would not have had anything to do with them had it not been for the fact that after two days of study in the library she realised that none of her orders were being followed.

She was confused, until at last the answer came to her. Of course. Lawrence had said to obey he and Nash, and Nash was not there. A query as to his whereabouts gave her the information that he had gone to Bristol.

Food, hot water, firewood, all had to be secured with her own two hands. She was not too upset by this, since she was accustomed to doing a great deal for herself. But going into the kitchen soon became a battle of wills with the old harridan of a cook, who insisted at every morsel was carefully husbanded as she had only a limited budget and had not been told to make provision for an extra mouth to feed, even though they had turned off six servants, and the mouth in question was as small as a sparrow's.

As for the bathroom, it became a never-ending source of torment

to her, for much as she longed for a hot bath and brought in coal and wood for herself, she could not master getting the modern boiler lit and the water heated. It made the most alarming noises, and she was convinced the house would blow to pieces.

As for company, she saw no one, the few people who called being turned away by the cook in no uncertain terms before she could say a word. She peered through the window at the three dark-haired people, and the woman turned and fixed golden eyes on her. She gave a nod, and turned. By the time Juliet figured out how to open the window to call to them, they were gone.

Still, she got a great deal of work done, for here no one expected anything of her. She made the most of the daylight hours to work in the window seat in the natural light. Even securing candles was becoming harder and harder. She rescued stumps wherever she could and secreted them in her drawer. She did not venture out beyond the garden; it was too cold, her garments not suitable. There was such a struggle over firewood, she only allowed herself a small fire in the hearth in the library. She knew it was only a matter of time before she was going to have to chop it herself. She hugged the meager glow by sitting on the hearth rug as she wrote essay after essay on ways to help the deserving poor.

She laughed at the phrase. She could speak from personal experience now. For surely she was little better than a beggar, with her two gowns, two pairs of stockings and so on. She could wash one while she wore one, but as the weeks passed they became more and more dingy, and her stockings more hole than knit. And she had not even the most basic supplies to repair them.

Still Lawrence did not return, and she found herself almost wishing he would. Anything had to be better than this limbo of silence.

She was a warm, affectionate woman for all her intellect, and missed social interaction, even if her new husband was so gruff and insulting. He could be so tender too. His more rampant lovemaking had a single-minded intensity about it which made her feel like the most special woman in the world, for all she knew he was trying to show her he was master in his own home.

She shuddered to think what he was doing in London. Had he already been unfaithful to her? Worse still, gone back to Matilda? Was going to maintain her as his mistress?

The thought of him sharing his body with another, his wonderful kisses and touches, the amazing possessive things he did with his mouth, was almost more than she could bear. Many a sorrowful tear dampened her pillow at night as Juliet lay tossing and turning, naked under the covers and longing for his heavy heat on top of her, inside her.

Lawrence contemplated taking Matilda as a mistress for all of about two seconds. But when he saw a pair of well-cut coat tails vanishing behind a curtain, he *knew*.

Her green eyes were as smooth as polished jade as she greeted him warmly, but her body language betrayed her. She was like a cat on hot tar. He immediately superimposed an image of Juliet over her appearance. His new wife was far more poised, elegant, gracious. Naturally voluptuous.

Matilda tried to lure him by dragging her bodice down with one hand at her waist whilst the other took his in a lingering grip.

He said a few words of apology over the confusion. "I wish you no ill will. I do hope you'll find someone who will make you happy, keep you in the manner which you deserve. It would never have worked between us. I'm married to my tea."

"Hardly. Juliet Dane, by all accounts. Not that I blame you. Younger woman, the chance to beget children. But surely we can still be friends--" She fluttered her lashes.

"Really, no. I would be compromising you most shamefully, and you were the one who insisted we never consummate our relationship prior to the nuptials. If I was not willing to compromise you before when I was single, I'm most certainly not going to do it now that I'm a married man. Good day."

He departed as quickly as he had come, before she could protest, and felt inexpressibly relieved it was all over.

But that was not to say he was well and truly rendering himself a eunuch. He worked all day at the factory with a new shipment, and paused only long enough to change into evening garb before heading to the club.

But not a single one of the house wenches titillated him in the

least, for all their scanty clothing and Herculean efforts to attract his attention.

A week after his return to London, Matthew Sampson met up with him at the club. "My dear Lawrence, I thought you had vanished from the face of the earth!" the tall blond young Adonis exclaimed. "I waited and waited, and then had Belinda myself. Extraordinary. An hour of pure heaven. My dear chap, you have no idea what you missed."

Lawrence smiled dryly. He knew what he was missing now, and she was raven-haired and buxom, with lips like ripe raspberries.

"Come to the Crescent now. I know she's always busy, but you must be tired of being leg-shackled by now. I mean, I know Matilda has a certain reputation, but I'm telling you--"

"Reputation?" Lawrence said softly.

Matthew shook his head hastily. "Never mind. All water under the bridge. She's your wife now and--"

"She's not. I changed my mind about--"

"Oh, my dear fellow. I can't think why I hadn't heard. Tubby Barnet met up with me at the Crescent and had a badger-baiting out in the country all lined up and--"

"So it's just as well I didn't count on you as my groomsman, then, isn't it?" Lawrence asked coldly.

The young fop let out a braying laugh. "Oh, egad, yes, quite. After Belinda, well, it all just flew right out of my head. But you can see for yourself. Come to meet her, on me."

Despite himself, he was curious, and feeling so agitated he was sure he would pop if his linen drawers rubbed him the wrong way one more time.

"All right, lead me to your paragon."

He was revolted once again by the shocking decor of the bordello, but even more disgusted with the patrons, who in most cases did not even bother to avail themselves of private rooms or beds.

They were coupling all over the large drawing room in every position and state of undress imaginable. He wondered if there was

such a word as tripling or even quadrupling as he watched masses of limbs writhing on the floor, couch or table.

He was as fond of female flesh as anyone, but he had never visited a knocking shop such as this, and never wanted to again.

He had thought himself worldly, but some of the young bucks of the *ton* were doing things to the poor young girls he could never even imagine thinking of, let alone wishing to.

"Come on, this way. Stop staring. Anyone would think you'd never done that before," Matthew said with a laugh.

Lawrence looked daggers at him. "I never even knew it was possible."

Matthew threw his head back. "Lud, you're priceless. What a sense of humour."

He led him to a white and gilt door and knocked three times in a particular rhythm. "My special signal, don't you know." He gave a broad wink.

"Come in," he heard a high-pitched voice call.

Lawrence saw a mass of ruby and white flesh jiggling over a tiny man like an escaped *blancmange*.

"Almost finished." One meaty hand strangled the man's wattles above and the other below. The poor man collapsed and grabbed his clothes, scurrying from the room on trembling legs which were so twig-like they could scarcely hold his weight, for all he was so tiny.

"Lawrence, Belinda, Belinda, Lawrence, the man I was tell you about who was supposed to have come for his buck's night."

The buxom red-head with hips as broad as a sofa reclined on the pillow and looked him over so lewdly he felt as though he had been ravished, defiled.

She nodded and spread her legs wide, exposing her shaven sex in a manner which made Lawrence's skin crawl.

"That's all right. He can come now. In fact, with a man like him I'll probably be able to come too. Special rate for you, luvvie. In fact, hung the way you are, I'd almost do it for free."

Matthew was genuinely hurt. "You always make me pay."

"You still don't know what you're doing. An hour with a man of the world like Lawrence would be worth a hundred rogerings from chaps like you."

Lawrence diffused the situation quickly. "She's just trying to wind you up, goad you on, Matthew. Don't let me interfere. You two can go at it. I'll even pay." He flung a handful of notes on the floor. "It's the least I can do after you were so kind."

"Very generous of you, old sport. Would you like to stay and watch?"

"Er, no thanks. I've seen enough for one night."

"You think that other thing was bad, wait until you see--"

"Good night, Matthew. And goodbye."

He got out into the street as fast as he could and hailed a cab, hugging himself all the way back to his hotel.

Alone in his room at last, he shuddered and washed his hands and face, and ordered a bath, much to the surprise of the night staff, who thought he looked decidedly ill and brought up some brandy to revive him as well.

Work hard, play hard, that had always been his motto. Now he was appalled that he had wasted as much time as he had since he had arrived in London on carnal pursuits and men like Matthew Sampson.

He forced himself to breathe evenly, deeply. A vision of Juliet as she had smiled up at him timidly the day they had married made him long for her so acutely he slipped his hand under the water.

But one touch told him it was not the same. There was nothing wrong with it, but he had spent months alone on board ship, months alone on his tea plantation. Why was he alone now when he could be with his wife?

But she was Matthew Dane's sister. A spy. An experienced woman of the world.

She might well be, but compared to the trull he had watched tonight, Juliet was as pure as the driven snow.

He pulled himself out of the tub and dressed, and began to pack his things. He would make a decision about the tea rooms tomorrow,

have the survey done and sign the papers. Go to the labour exchange and try to find suitable people for his enterprise. And shake the dust of the city and go home to Juliet as soon as he was done.

Home.

Chapter Fifteen

Three weeks to the day after he had left, Lawrence went up the stairs straight from the coach as the clock struck midnight. He slipped into his wife's room silently. Just as he had done the last time he had visited her, he pulled back the sheet to feast his eyes on his wife, naked and in peaceful repose.

But instead of her pink and ivory perfection, he saw swathes of cloth, and she clutched the sheet and coverlet and whimpered, trying to tug them back up over her shivering frame. The weather had turned fiercely cold again, and Juliet was bunched up in a tight ball, her hands in fists under her chin.

His fantasy thwarted so unexpectedly, Lawrence could feel his petulance rise to the fore despite himself.

"I thought I told you I expected to find you in bed naked and waiting for me at any time," he said gruffly, sitting on the edge of the bed in a way that could only be described as menacing.

Her eyes flew open at once. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, her voice shaking with cold and fear. "It's just--"

"And even worse than disobeying me is talking back!" His voice rose several decibels.

Juliet cowered under the covers even further. "I don't mean to defy you," she said between chattering teeth, "but I'm so cold."

Still in his great coat, he had not noticed how chill the room was. Now he looked around with some perturbation. "Why is there no fire in the grate?"

"The servants won't do as I ask. You told them you were the master, that they should obey only you, not give any consideration to me." A sudden violent sneeze flew out of her before she could stop it to emphasise the pitifulness of her plight.

"What? It's still winter. Do you mean to say--"

"I can always go to the kitchen if--"

He flung the covers back, and she waited in confused terror for his hands to rend her clothes. But he was simply staring. "You haven't even any hot water bottles!"

She cringed away from him, still trying to shake herself from slumber. "Please don't shout so. My head is aching and I--"

He raised his candle and saw her wan expression, hollow cheeks and shocking pallor.

She had been working too hard on her book and essays, and of course hardly had anything to eat. She had also missed him dreadfully for all his mercurial manner, and thus scarcely been able to sleep. The bitter cold also made it hard to get comfortable in the huge, lonely bed.

Lawrence had never seen such a bright, sunny girl so radically altered. He took one of her freezing hands in his own, noting the pitifully thin fingers. Now his voice was deathly quiet. "And did their refusal to perform any duties for you also include serving meals?"

She nodded. "I eat with them in the kitchen if there happens to be anything left. If there isn't I can usually cadge some boiling water and coddle myself an egg if Cook doesn't chase me and there is one. In truth though I've not had much appetite."

His hand snaked out to snatch her wrist, and before Juliet even knew what had happened she was being lifted to her feet. She hunched tightly, preparing for a blow. As she shivered against Lawrence in trepidation he held her close to his chest, wrapping his coat around them both. With his other hand he yanked the bell pull so hard that it practically tore out of the ceiling.

Then he swung her up into his arms and began to descend the stairs. By the time he had got down to the kitchen there was still no sign of a single servant, and his fury was reaching astronomical portions.

Lawrence sat Juliet in a chair by the fire and began to strip off his greatcoat and jacket. Her eyes widened. He had said he could take her at any time, anywhere. But surely he was not going to fuddle her in front of all the servants?

She trembled as he gripped her wrist, and a cry of protest bubbled

to her lips. But he stopped stripping off at his jacket and threw it around her shoulders, placing her one arm and then the other into the huge sleeves before tucking the coat all around her body.

"Stay here, and stay warm." He brushed her hair out of her eyes, and to her astonishment stroked her cheek gently for a moment. "I'll be back soon."

He stormed up the stairs. Juliet could hear his voice echoing through the attic as he roused all the servants out of their beds.

Or each other's.

Juliet gasped as two naked serving girls and four of the menservants were driven down into the kitchen by her outraged husband.

"The six of you will be dismissed without references or wages first thing in the morning. In the meantime you're going to wait on my wife hand and foot. No fire, no food? I'm master here, and she mistress, but you are mere servants and there's a distinct difference in our positions.

"You've treated her worse than an orphan! I expected food and a fire this instant for her room, a warming pan, hot waterbottles, and a clean habitation. They haven't even been taking care of the chamber or the night soil, have they?"

She blushed. "No," she admitted. "I've been tending to everything myself such as I've been able."

He looked at the remaining serving girl and the cook, the kitchen boy and the gardener. "The rest of you will help find some decent replacements for this sorry pack of swivers and you'll do everything my wife asks you the instant she asks you to do it, or you'll be out on your ears as well. Is that clear?"

Most of the servants now began to scurry about to follow his orders. One of the buxom serving maids dared to approach boldly. "Are you sure you want to dismiss me, guv?" she said with a warm smile.

His cold grey eyes flicked over her body almost insultingly. "There's nothing of yours that I'm even remotely interested in. That you should have the gall to proposition me in front of my genteel wife means you can leave now. Bates, please ensure that she leaves this

house in five minutes with only that which she is entitled to take with her."

"It's the ladylike wives that drive red-blooded blokes like you to me," the woman said with an arrogant toss of her tangled hair. "You know why I was here. Don't bother to pretend otherwise."

With a withering glance at Juliet she sidled off, looking far too smug and self-satisfied considering she had just got the sack.

But as Juliet had learned in London, a woman who was not too particular about her virtue could go far in the world. Just look at Matilda.

Lawrence now came over to poke the fire until it began to glow, then fed in more coal. "Any better?" he asked softly.

"Yes, thank you, sir."

His black brows drew together. "You know my name. I would have you use it."

"Yes, Mr. Howard."

He stared at her, trying to detect any sarcasm, but found none. "No, I meant by my given name."

"I see. Lawrence," she said timidly.

He wondered what it was about the way she said his name that made it sound like a caress. He looked into her violet eyes now, and she stared back into his own silvery ones, now as grey as a storm-tossed sea. Then she touched his shoulder lightly. "I'm glad you're home. It's good to see you."

He was pleased for all his insistence on submissiveness and respect that she was not cringing away. He was also glad that after the dreadful experience being mistreated in her own home for so many weeks she was not completely despondent and dejected.

"We'll have you warmed up and fed in no time. Some wine?"

"No, thank you," she said with a grimace, thinking how raw her stomach felt.

But then that was another reason for her thinness. Even if she had been getting fed regularly, her stomach had been so unsettled that she probably would have lost most of it anyway.

She sighed as she realised she really ought to tell him what she suspected. But it was not something he was going to be glad to hear at this point. It was only going to make him even more resentful of the way her had been tied down and trapped.

Well, he seemed so uninterested in her now that he had had her a few times that he probably wouldn't even notice. Especially if he insisted on making love to her face down and never touched her as he had said she could expect.

On the other hand he would be furious not being told. Juliet sighed again. She was certainly never going to win no matter what she did.

But she was not going to think about that now. It was early days yet anyway. A lot could happen in the meantime. Most women did not count themselves safe until the first three months had passed. Why get him upset over something that would in all likelihood amount to nothing?

For the moment at least Lawrence was home after so many weeks, and being solicitous of her. Not looking at her as if she were some unpleasant species of insect. *Just keep him calm...*

Cook came bustling up now with the remains of a roast, which she began to heat in its own juices. She also began to warm some soup.

"Shall you be eating in the dining room, sir?" she asked stiffly.

"No, my wife is cold. We shall remain here by the fire."

Juliet sneezed again.

He offered her his handkerchief.

"Thank you."

"Perhaps we should get the doctor out."

"No, I wouldn't want to put you to any more trouble," she said quickly.

"But if you're ill--"

"No, really, I'm fine," she insisted, worried that the doctor might already be able to discern whether or not a baby were on the way and would tell him.

"All right. But if you're not feeling better tomorrow I'm sending for

him."

She nodded and huddled down in his jacket.

Lawrence sighed. "I'm sorry things have been so terrible here. I'm afraid I trusted these servants far too much and assumed that they would continue to perform well even with myself and Nash away. I'm guessing he's been in Bristol?"

She nodded. "As soon as you left."

"I shall ask him to find someone suitable to train up that should be able to take his place when we are neither of us here. I promise you will not be left alone and defenseless again."

"Not so helpless if I had been give the keys or at least some pin money," she said softly.

His brow knit again fiercely. "No keys, you say?"

"Cook refused to give them to me. Said I was a flighty young miss, and a jade, that I wouldn't know one end of a carpet beater from the other."

"It isn't her place--"

"She's angry because I did actually try to give her some hints as to how she could improve her receipts but--"

Cook chose to put her tuppence in. "I dare say all sorts of fancy rich foods a hoity-toity miss like her is used to, which are indigestible." She gave a disapproving sniff.

Lawrence glared at her. "That may be true, but it couldn't be very much worse than the awful things you served the last time I was here."

Cook glared at Juliet as if noting down yet another black mark against her which she would pay for.

Lawrence caught the look and decided he was not going to tolerate her rudeness.

"Tomorrow we shall go to the labour exchange in Bath and find an entirely new cook and a housekeeper."

"If you please, I don't need a housekeeper. I know I'm young, but I really would like to try to make a decent home for you myself."

He nodded, pleased with Juliet's answer. "It would be good to let

you take responsibility for a time. Teach you what you need to know."

She stared at him, wondering at what point she could correct some of his assumptions about her. He evidently assumed that just because she was Matthew's sister that she had been raised in the lap of luxury.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. It had only been her brother's marriage which had altered her and her sister's circumstances and prospects, and only for about a week.

It was more than kind of Matthew and his wife to have taken an interest considering the cloud which had hung over her and her sister since even before they had been born.

But to tell Lawrence all she had suffered was unthinkable. She did have some pride left in spite of being at such a low ebb. The last thing she wanted was for him to be kind to her because he felt sorry for her.

At that thought she removed the great coat. What was the point in feeling melancholy? Plenty of people were far worse off than she was.

He looked surprised. "Where are you going?"

"I should be helping."

"No, Juliet, you'll stay right there and let the servants earn the money I pay them. And you're barefoot. Have you no stockings?"

She nodded. "But I've nothing to mend them with. For heaven's sake, I had no key. What did you want me to do, beg for alms in Millcote?"

He scowled blackly, and for a moment she was afraid she had pushed him too far. She scurried away from the chair, flinching as she did so as if to ward off a blow.

He gaped at her in astonishment and growled, "Come back here and sit."

She scurried back like a mouse and sat, gathering her legs up under her nightrail like a small child. Damned if she didn't look terrified of him. He reached for her. She shrugged out of his jacket and tried to hand it back.

"Thank you. But I shouldn't have presumed."

"No presumption. You're still frozen. Put it back on."

She hurriedly complied.

He fact that Juliet obeyed him with such alacrity showed just how scared she was of him. Damnation, he had really succeeded in making her think him an ogre.

He had been furious at all of his plans for the future coming unstuck. But if she had been part of some sort of plot to dupe him or fleece him, she certainly wasn't going about it very well. Unless it was all part of a scheme to get him to feel sorry for her, the better to get even more out of him...

But no, Juliet really did look wan and ill, and the house was indeed in the most desperate case. She had had no way of knowing he was coming. She'd been sound asleep when he had gone into her bedroom.

He thought with shame of how he had pulled the covers down hoping to feast on the sight of her naked and had terrified her by losing his temper. Just what was it about her that had him so tense and on edge? He wasn't usually so short-fused.

He sighed. He knew why. Every time he laid eyes on her he wanted to bury himself in her right up to the hilt. Yet he knew she deserved better than that--all women did. He had never had problems with his fleshly desires before. And she was his wife, however much she had been an unexpected one.

He thought about Matilda. For a moment he tried to remember what she looked like. It was only with great difficulty that he pushed the omnipresent image in his head of Juliet to one side and recollected Matilda's feline grace and beauty.

She had been like a large predator, hunting him, yet eluding him when he had decided he didn't want to be the prey but had become the hunter himself. She had said she was determined to maintain her virtue, not become the stereotypical lusty widow. However, the few snippets of gossip he had picked up about Matilda in London had told a different tale. Nothing specific, merely hints that he had missed something.

Regarding Juliet, he had not been able to find out anything about her at all, though he had asked around enough while he had been

stuck there taking care of all the business he had suddenly started to find too tedious for words. She had been so sparkling and vivacious the night they had first met he found it hard to believe that she had not made an impact on the *Ton*. Her beauty was so luminous she must have turned half the heads in London.

Yet there had been no gossip about her at all that he could discern. In fact, most of the men he had spoken to all knew Matthew Dane, but none of them knew anything about two lovely sisters. He had not met Miranda, but if she was anything like Juliet, well, he was sure the two of them would have been the talk of the Town.

Yet now his gorgeous young wife was in a completely plain nightdress and wrapper without a trace of lace, just her own embroidery by the look of it. She had said she was not very good at fancywork. Nor did she play the harp and pianoforte very well if anything she had told him was to be believed. Of course, with her family and connections, she didn't need to do anything to attract a husband. The fact that she was so very lovely was just the icing on an already sumptuous cake.

Or would have been for any other man but him. He wanted nothing from her family. Well, nothing except her, he had to admit when he saw her eyelashes flutter down sleepily. He had dragged her out of a sound slumber. It was late and he had been traveling for days. He had wanted nothing more than to curl up beside her and smell her wonderful honeysuckle and rose fragrance. Now they were committed to eating supper at this ungodly hour and waiting until her room was shaken down completely. The scantily clad servants moved back and forth with hot water bottles, warming pans, fresh sheets and towels, and heaps of firewood.

He wanted to kick himself for having been so impetuous. He really had to get a tighter rein on his emotions, relax a bit more. Well, as soon as they ate he was going to do just that.

"I want a bath as well," he said suddenly. "Will you please light the boiler for me?" he said to one of the men.

"Yes, sir."

"By the time we eat the water will be hot."

She looked at him wide-eyed, and then lapsed back with a sigh.

"Oh no, let me guess," he grumbled. "You've not been allowed to have bath either?"

"They wouldn't light the fires for me and I was afraid of blowing up the boiler."

"Then you shall have the water first."

"Oh, no, I--"

"You need a bath," he said simply.

He put a bowl of hot soup into her hands and handed her a chunk of bread. The roast beef wasn't long in coming, and he made her drink some milk.

No sooner had Juliet proclaimed herself full than he scooped her up, brought her to the bathroom, and removed all of her garments. She blushed, but saw little point in trying to shield herself. Especially when he shucked off his own clothes without any hesitation, and told her to get into the bath first whilst he shaved.

She laved and scrubbed herself until her skin tingled, peeping every so often at his bare magnificence and feeling inexplicably relieved that he was home, for all that he had stormed, raged, and turned the house upside down in the middle of the night.

Her spirits lifted considerably. It felt so good to be really clean. She started as he took the flannel from her fingers and began to scrub her back, and sighed.

"You can do the same for me in a moment if you don't mind. And as much as I would love to show you how much fun we can have soaping each other from head to toe in this tub, we're both tired and I need you."

She looked at his straining manhood, fully erect against his abdomen and darkened with desire, and thrilled at his words. She finished with her wash and scrambled out of the tub.

As she dried herself she had to admit that if she was being completely truthful, she didn't want to wait a moment longer than necessary for that which she had viewed.

Juliet scrubbed his back and shoulders, and he completed his ablutions with a few more scrapes of the flannel, and then ducked down to wash his hair quickly. She admired his finely sculpted body

as he stood and the water ran down his abdomen and thighs in sensual rivulets. For a moment she wondered what it would be like to let her tongue flow over all of him like...

He draped a towel lightly around her, one around his own loins and took her hand gently. He led Juliet up to her room once more.

"Out," he ordered the remaining servants. He dropped his towel as soon as they were gone. She waited for him to grab her, fearful and excited.

He caught her look of trepidation. "Lie down, Juliet, and get warm. I'll be with you in a moment."

He sorted their clothes into two piles efficiently and draped those that were not going into the wash over the back of a chair so they would not get too crumpled. Then he lit several candles and placed them near the bed.

"Show me all of you," he ordered.

She removed the towel.

"Spread your legs. Go on, wider."

She turned her head away from his burning gaze but complied. His fingers reached up to force her to look at him. "You're lovely. There's no need to feel ashamed. I like looking at you. Still better to touch. Delicious to taste."

"Oh, Lawrence, no, you can't enjoy--"

"I think you know how much I really do," he said softly.

She blushed at the memory he had evoked.

"Just relax."

She let her legs fall where they would and readied herself for his first touch or lick. Instead of between her thighs, his hands came up onto her breasts and she gasped as her nipples leapt into his palms. Now he bent his head and his tongue glided down her most tender flesh. He inhaled deeply and groaned, "Mmm, so succulent."

She wondered if this was part of a new campaign he was waging to humiliate her. At the same time, she wasn't going to complain, for he was a most remarkably thrilling lover when he took the time to touch her. Caress her as if he cared that she enjoyed herself. Though enjoyed was such a weak word to describe the sensations he filled

her with as his tongue and fingers began to explore her with a deft assuredness of touch that had her soaring.

Her lips parted, swallowing a little sob of pure bliss. The sight of her looking so moist and inviting notched up his desire to an even higher pitch. He rubbed her swelling bud of sensuality and she bit back a groan.

"Tell me what you want," he urged hoarsely.

She remained willfully silent, determined not to beg abjectly when she knew he knew full well what her hips were desperately questing for.

"Ask and it shall be yours, I promise."

She shook her head, causing her hair to tumble out of its confining ribbon and spread on the pillow in a dark fluffy cloud.

"All you need to do is ask. I give you permission to speak."

Juliet could stand it no more. "Please, all of you inside me, your body on top of mine, please," she gasped, writhing and twisting under his hands and lips as she sought her urgent release.

Still he teased her with his tongue, circling her entrance, and occasionally peeping it in the tiniest fraction, causing her to clutch at his head and pull his head even closer to her. He felt his hardness grow almost painful in its incessant need for fulfillment. He kept tasting her, smelling her sweet fragrance, and it was the most exquisite torture for them both.

He just couldn't turn away, almost afraid to end the wildfire between them. He knew only too well how delightful it was to kiss her. It was how all their troubles had started in the first place.

But if he did that his control would be tattered to shreds, and he was not willing to accede control to her or allow himself to make love to her with the unbridled passion which was simmering just under the surface. Demanding he enter her with one blistering thrust until they both screamed...

Lawrence rolled her over on her front and sought to keep control by depriving himself of the thrill of her arms around him, her drugging kisses. But he wanted to feel her. He pulled her onto her side, and began to stroke her front and mound while he set up a blistering pace with his hips.

She exploded against him quaking and sobbing, and he was right behind her, at last slowing to a more leisured pace, but never holding still inside her as he sought another climax for them both.

He flipped her onto her front again and rose to his knees, grasping her legs on either side of his body as he held them like a wheelbarrow's handles.

Juliet rested her head on her arms and wondered at the new angle of penetration, the slow sure thrusting nearly driving her mad. Her palms itched to touch his magnificent body. She adjusted her weight on one arm and brought up her forefinger and thumb to circle him, holding tightly as he pressed inwards. Her other three fingers brushed his satiny pouch, and a burst of breath was wrenched from him as he pounded into her.

He gasped but said nothing, and she bit back her cries until he finally collapsed on top of her.

Juliet waited for him to roll off her body, but his head beside her on the pillow, his chin resting on her shoulder, was still. She turned her head enough to kiss him on the cheek, and then she too slept in utter peace.

Chapter Sixteen

She awakened to Lawrence's slow, thrusting movements and kisses all over the nape of her neck as the sunlight filtered in through the shutters. She moved her hips to meet him, and he turned them on their sides and made love to her so exquisitely she felt as though she would weep. She bit back her sobs of desire as he took her ever higher.

Just when she thought she couldn't possibly climax again, he drove her yet higher again. But the one thing she longed for eluded her. She could touch his arms with her hands, but his mouth was much too far away, and at last she had no energy left to struggle, and gave up.

He was about to turn her over and let her cradle him against her wonderful softness, and kiss her now that he felt he had at last taken the edge off his blazing hunger for her, but a tap at the door and his name being called had him out of bed in an instant.

"What is it, Nash?"

"I heard you were back. I wanted to know how you had got on."

The dismissed servants had run to Bristol to complain to Nash, and he had returned to Millcote at once to stave off disaster. All his plans were coming undone because of that chit of a girl...

"I got back late," Lawrence said gruffly. "What time is it?"

Nash glimpsed the jet hair and ivory flesh in the bed and tried to tamp down his fury. "It's nearly ten. I've called a meeting for one, and arranged to take you around the new tea rooms, to see what you think."

Lawrence cast one longing look at the rumpled bed, sighed, and nodded. "Order us some breakfast and have it sent up to my wife on a tray. I'll be down for a wash in a minute. And get the boiler lit."

Juliet murmured sleepily as he returned to the bed and rolled her over. He kissed her abdomen and stroked her curls, noting how thin

she was. He felt a brute for ever having subjected her to his relentless desires last night, knowing as he did what she had had to put up with these past three weeks since he had gone.

He licked both nipples lightly, and with a quick taste of her, as delightful to him as always, he pulled the covers up to her neck and left.

Nash, ever resourceful, had come up with a whole new ploy to keep Lawrence out of the way whilst he consolidated his position and put the second phase of his plan into motion.

"Liverpool, Chester, York and Hull? But we've scarcely got organised in London and Bristol!" Lawrence exclaimed.

"Think about it. You have the ships. They're fine ports up in the north. Bring the tea straight in and--"

"But we have no local contacts, no base of operations," he outlined, ticking all the needful items off on his fingers.

Nash shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Easily done with the right people to help, good connections. Lots of willing local investors who want to see their towns prosper. And we can't look down our nose at the north. There's traditional landed gentry, sheep, money to be made. They'll want to share the same social pretensions as the more fashionable cities in the south, and there will be less competition, since there are not so many coffee houses. Plus, York and Chester are fine towns. People visit them all the time to see the historical sights. We would not only get locals but all the visitors if we had decent tea rooms."

Lawrence pointed out, "It will mean delaying the tea rooms here."

"That's all right. We can set up shop at the front of the warehouse in the meantime."

"It will mean weeks on the road. Are you sure you want to--"

Nash shook his head at once. "Not me, sir. *You*. I would never presume to make such vast decisions on your behalf."

Lawrence could not resist saying sarcastically, "I don't see why not. After all, you chose my house and hired those hopeless servants."

Nash's green eyes glittered but he forced himself to remain silent.

"I need to stop in Bath and find some replacements as soon as possible."

"I'm sorry they didn't work out."

"They might have if you'd been here. Just where *have* you been?"

"In Bristol, working, of course," he said smoothly. "The *Canton* and *Macao* both came in ahead of schedule."

"Good and bad. I'm delighted they arrived safely and made such good time despite the season, but I don't want a glut of tea on the market." He sighed. "All right. Have you got a kit of samples to take up with me if I go?"

"Of course, sir."

Nash got out the rather cumbersome-looking cases he had had prepared. Lawrence thought once again of Juliet's suggestion about the little sample tea bags as he checked through the caddies and tea service.

"I've made the appointments for you starting Friday up in Liverpool."

Lawrence's brows shot up. "But that means I'll have to leave tonight, or first thing in the morning," he said, hoping his tone did not betray his frustration.

"Yes, sir. But if you have anything else important to do I can always--"

"No, it's all right. You've worked very hard to make all this come about. And as long as I'm up there I suppose I should look in on the boys, see what the school is like. Bring them home for Easter if I can manage to persuade the headmaster to let them have a holiday."

"Very good, sir," Nash said, restraining a smile of triumph.

"In that case I shall take these with me now, have the meeting, and I shall leave in the morning."

He headed back to Millcote as soon as he could, and apologised to his wife at once. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to get to the labour exchange, but I need to leave tomorrow."

"Back to London?"

"No, I'm heading--"

She looked at him expectantly, but the warning bells inside his head forced him to be silent.

She shrugged slightly and returned to her chores, trying to ascertain what had happened to all of the housekeeping money and making a list of what they needed. There was only the bare minimum of everything. Though she did not mind for herself with only two of each item, she had the feeling her husband enjoyed fresh sheets and towels on a regular basis, and he certainly liked his shirts crisp.

He looked at the list and frowned. "I'm not made of money, you know," he complained, for he had already parted with a considerable sum to set up the house in the first place, and had no idea that most of it had been squandered. Since he did not look in the linen closet or cupboards, he thought Juliet was being spoiled and extravagant as per her background as Matthew's sister.

"I'm sorry. Never mind, then," she sighed.

"It's just that the business is--" He caught himself again.

"I said it's fine. I'll go fetch you some supper."

"Why?"

"I assumed you were hungry," she said patiently.

"No, I meant why are you fetching it?"

"You sacked almost all the servants, including Cook."

"What about the little serving maid? Can she--"

"She got dragged away kicking and screaming by one of the men we dismissed. All of twelve, she was. It's disgusting."

"Egad." Lawrence looked genuinely shocked. "I had no idea. What the hell did Nash think he was playing at?"

Juliet wasn't sure, but she could never in a million years voice her suspicions as to his veracity. She would simply have to keep an eye on him. There was something about the way he had looked at her that made her blood run cold.

"All right, if we're to have any food and one decent night in this wretched house at all, we might as well get ourselves organised. Food, hot water, firewood. I'll take care of our chamber upstairs. You

bring the food, get the remaining servants to bring up the warming pan and bottles. It's setting in for a fair frost. And have the boy sort my laundry and pack my fresh shirts."

"Oh, but--"

She wasn't sure how fresh they were, and certainly not starched or ironed. The rest which he had brought home were still hanging in the back part of the kitchen designated as the laundry room, dripping dry along with her own single change of clothes.

Well, at least he had more than two shirts, and there would be servants in the inns to tend to them for a few coins. If she had no staff and no money, and no ability to buy more of anything, what else was she supposed to do?

"I'll see to it, Lawrence," she said quietly.

The silence between them grew uncomfortable, and she fled.

Juliet was sad to know her husband was leaving again, but surely he would at least leave her some money to manage with whilst he was gone. When he came back she could have a real home for him.

Yet she was reluctant to ask him for anything, especially when he began to fondle her most boldly. She didn't want him to associate her lovemaking with money in any way.

All rational thought flew out of her head as soon as he began to remove his own clothes in front of the fire in their room. He had her sit in the armchair and hang her legs over each side.

"No, no hands," he commanded, feeling so desirous of her he had all to do not to pounce.

"Lawrence, please," she almost wept.

"You're my wife, and will do as I say, as I desire. There's no use complaining now. You wanted me well enough that first night."

"Yes, but Lawrence, I need--"

He put one finger on her lips. "You know the rules. Not a sound. Not one word."

He was not intentionally being cruel; it was a bedroom game and his attempt to control his raging lust. For Juliet, it was almost torture

not to touch and kiss him after so many weeks.

She forced back the hot salt tears of frustration as he raised her arms and draped them over the back of the chair, hooking them there by her inner arms so that they dangled down from the elbows. Starting with her peaked right breast, he licked his way down to her knees, tasting her everywhere except her centre of desire until she thought she would go mad with yearning. Only his tongue and lips touched her, and she had an impetuous urge to shove him back by his shoulders and impale herself upon him.

But just as she began to move her arms to do precisely that, he thrust his tongue deeply inside her, kissing her as eagerly as if it were her mouth. She felt shame and a firestorm of need as she climaxed against him, her flood of desire feeling almost torrential and her body with no other release since she was forced to remain silent.

Juliet expected him to berate or mock her, but he merely chuckled, wiped his chin and slicked his hand over himself before gliding into her.

"Nice of you to be so warmly and wetly appreciative, my dear. You're so delectable. I have no doubt if I could package your special essence I would make a fortune. And not just there. The lovely delicacy of your cleavage, that wonderful smell behind your ears, the nape of your neck. Even your underarms. More lovely than any perfume."

He began to inhale deeply in each of the places he mentioned, though he never touched her except for the incredible slow, deep rhythmic thrusts between her spread legs.

"I've never seen anything like you. I keep trying to find a flaw. I wish I could. Then maybe I wouldn't want nothing but this, over and over."

She closed her eyes against the rising tide of her own passion. Her lips parted, and she licked them. The sight was too much for Lawrence, who hoist her out of the chair and pushed upwards hard as her feet slid down toward the floor.

She gasped, the first real sound of passion he had heard her utter since their wonderful initial night. He staggered over to the bed and made love to her like a man demented, leaving no inch of her flesh untouched by his tongue, lips, teeth, hands and pulsing manhood.

Juliet was astonished by his ardour, but matched him kiss for kiss, stroke for stroke, though pinned as she was under him much of the time she couldn't explore him with any of the freedom she wished for. She gritted her teeth to remain silent, which only drove him on even more urgently.

Finally even Lawrence had to give up, and admit defeat. He might well feel her quivering and shuddering, but if he couldn't please her now, get her to scream and pant his name, he was never going to.

Juliet collapsed into an exhausted stupor. She had never guessed that such pleasure could exist, and she was boneless with delight, her every sense more alive than it had ever been, sizzling within her.

Curled tightly against Lawrence's huge frame, a sensual somnolence came to her at last. Their breaths mingled as they laced their fingers in each other's hair, and both slept.

Chapter Seventeen

Lawrence cursed the entire avian kingdom the next morning as he awakened to the sound of birdsong. He opened one bleary eye. Then he cursed Nash for ever having promised him at Liverpool without consulting him.

His good mood was restored briefly as he opened his other eye and saw his wife's ruby lips only a hair's breadth from his own. He kissed her warmly, teasing with teeth and tongue. She glided on top of him as she had done that first magical morning, surrounding him, filling his senses. He felt as though they were in a world without time as she loved and treasured him deep with her lush softness. They both panted and gasped each other's names as she drove them both to a climax that was magnificent in its brilliance.

When he next awoke the sun was high in the sky. He started. He was sure the sensual encounter had been a dream, except that she was still lying on his chest as peacefully as a lamb. He gentled her hair back from her face and planted a kiss on her brow. Damn if he wasn't going to have to drive the team head over neck to get to Liverpool in time, but it would be worth it for one more taste of her luscious charms. For goodness knows when he would next see her.

His anger at himself for going, for not wanting to go, and for missing the little minx so much when he was separated from her, made him more lusty than the occasion warranted. Not that Juliet complained, but she had rather like the gentler Lawrence who had let her have free rein in the early hours of the morning when they had cradled each other so tenderly and every featherlight touch had set off a new explosion of delight leading up to the final cataclysmic one.

When they were both panting and spent, he blustered out of the bed and cupped her rump in a manner which would have earned him a sharp slap and a good setting down if he had been anyone other than her husband.

"Damn, but I'm running late. Bath, and then I must go."

She stiffened but simply nodded.

He sensed his crass error at once, but he didn't know what else to say to make things right between them. He hurriedly bathed and dressed whilst she stuffed his now-dry but untended shirts into his valise and put together some food for his trip in a little basket with a bottle of hot tea.

"Thank you," he said when she handed the items to him, oddly touched by her thoughtfulness.

"Safe trip."

"I'll see you at the end of the month."

Her heart dropped like a stone. *Another whole month....* She would go mad.

Juliet nodded again, hoping to keep her expression neutral, when all she wanted was to beg him not to leave.

He reached for her for a quick smacking kiss, and then he was gone, leaving her staring after him out the front door wondering why she felt the entire sun had been eclipsed.

It was only long after he was gone that she realised she never had got to ask him about the housekeeping money.

Lawrence was kept in a continual buzz once he got to Liverpool. The other three cities in the crammed itinerary Nash had given him were no different. It was the middle of April before he could even think about going home, and by then he was so desperate for his wife he thought he would scream if he didn't immerse himself in cold baths twice a day.

It would have been easy enough to find a willing companion; Nash had seen to that. His introductions to the best houses in each city had included some very fine worldly women indeed. Ones more than willing to extend a warm welcome to the traveller in every sense of the word.

Nash had hoped even if Matilda stood no chance with him now, as she had informed him after her last meeting with Lawrence, there might be some other beauty to keep him occupied in the north while Nash gradually set himself up for life in the south.

But Lawrence never even looked at them, leading to all sorts of rumours about his preferences. He had to be either a eunuch or a bum chum to pass up all they had to offer. His explanation that he was a happily married man they laughed off as being just too absurd for words.

At last he made his way to the small boarding school outside York which his nephews, eight and seven respectively, had been relegated to after his parents had both died. He cursed his own stupidity for not having written in advance to the headmaster to ask how they were and whether he could take them home for Easter.

He cursed his stupidity yet again when he acknowledged that in all the weeks he had been away he could have at least written Juliet one note telling her he was all right, and asking how she was.

He penned a quick letter telling her he was fine, would be home soon, and expected all in readiness when he and the children got there.

"Kill the fatted calf," he wrote with a final flourish, and then added as an afterthought, "From your husband."

No, nothing lover-like about the note, he thought with pride, not wishing her to guess for a moment how much she had wrapped him around her little finger, even though he had done everything he could to maintain the upper hand in their marriage.

Lawrence was shocked and appalled to find the school was little better than a stables. His nephews had been beaten repeatedly for minor misdemeanours by the headmaster's wife. The boys spent more time waiting upon them in their well-appointed home and working in the fields and garden like common labourers than at their studies. Stuart and Andrew showed recent signs of having been locked in the coal hole or in the ice house to 'teach them some manners.'

Their scant two meals a day were comprised of gruel and the most coarse bread. Every single child he clapped eyes on was emaciated, red-eyed, and utterly defeated. Many of them were also infested with vermin of every description.

After meeting with the boys, he roared into the headmaster's palatial study. "I'm appalled. This is what you consider to be a decent education for the sons of gentlemen?"

"Boys will be boys. They have to have the wickedness forced out of them with mortification of the flesh."

Lawrence stared at the corpulent man and his wife. "The only people I see here in dire need of mortification of the flesh are the two of you, you pompous old windbags. You're lucky I don't take a horsewhip to you.

"As it is I'm sending for the authorities and writing personally to every parent to come take their child from this, this chamber of horrors!"

Lawrence was as good as word, removing the boys and their belongings to a good hotel in York and finding school places for those boys whose parents could not move them, or had no one other than indifferent guardians to see to their welfare.

It was the last thing he needed in addition to all his tea duties, taking on the boys as well, but what else could he do? He had never seen such cruelty even in India, and this was supposed to be prosperous England.

The days flew by, with Lawrence scarcely able to rest, so busy was he by day and evening, so longing for his wife was he at night.

Finally, on a cold, blustery April day Lawrence at last began to hurry home, desperate to get back to Juliet for the Easter holidays.

For Juliet, time had hung heavy on her hands until the dark-haired woman she had seen through the window of the library tapped on it one day.

"I'm Eswara Jerome. I had hoped you might come see us by now, but--"

Juliet had disgraced herself by bursting into tears.

"Come now, climb through the window and come home to tea with me."

"I can't. If my husband finds out..."

"Is he likely to come home?"

"No, he's away and--"

"Come. It'll be fine. You'll see." She extended her hand, and Juliet

took it in relief.

Over hot tea and sandwiches that tasted like heaven, she confided her circumstances, including her pregnancy.

"I think I've got to know your brother Matthew well, my dear, as well as anyone can really know a person. I'm sure he didn't cheat Lawrence. Why do you not tell your husband the truth, stand up to him. If he's never hit you--"

Juliet shrugged. "He can be so cold and cruel in other ways, there seems little point."

Eswara looked at her fondly. "Bullies pick on easy victims. You need to develop confidence. In bed and out."

She shook her head. "Bed has never been the problem. It's explosive. He's like a man demented. One touch and I go wild. But the rest of my life... No food, servants, money."

"I can--"

She blushed with shame. "No, I couldn't."

"A message to Matthew, then?" her friend suggested, her eyes full of concern.

Juliet shook her head. "It would only make it worse if Lawrence ever found out. Or if Matthew tried to intervene. No, I married my husband even knowing what his conditions were. I must muddle through until he admits he was wrong and changes his mind."

"Pride is cold comfort when you're all alone," Eswara warned. "And you need to think about the baby."

"I'm well, really. And I have my work, and the garden. If you would mail all of my chapters and essays for me, I could get paid for them soon."

"Hm, there I can help you. And will give you some petty cash as an advance on them. You will take a couple of pounds now and pay me back when the money arrives. And perhaps also allow me to help you with some clothes?" she asked with a fond smile.

"No, really. I need to do this by myself in my own way. Or with Lawrence if he will ever come home and be a real husband instead of just a businessman."

"And a father?"

Juliet shrugged one shoulder. "I don't think he will be happy with the news. But he can't be any worse than my own father was, discarding myself and my sister like unwanted rubbish."

"He thought he had his reasons."

Juliet crossed her arms in front of her. "He was cruel all the same. I never want any child of mine to have to go through that," she said firmly. "At least my baby will have a loving mother even if Lawrence does prove a disappointment in that regard. In any event, I must go--"

"You will come back tomorrow and I shall examine you. Not eating or sleeping isn't good. I know you don't wish charity for yourself, but will you at least accept my assistance for the sake of the baby?"

She sighed and nodded. "All right. Only for the baby, mind."

Eswara provided a lifeline in the dark days that followed, making Juliet eat, giving her aids to sleep, and bestowing upon her little gifts such as herb cuttings and seeds.

Her son Ash was a marvelous companion, bright and witty, and her husband Martin solid and all Juliet wished her own husband could be, tender, devoted and an admirably attentive father to all his children.

Juliet learned a great deal from the whole family, most especially from Eswara, about her own body and what would be taking place in seven months, and about her own pleasure not being sinful. She was as knowledgeable as any doctor she had ever met, but then Dr. Blake Sanderson would not just have anyone working for him as an assistant. He was a most exacting professional, so she knew she was in good hands with her new-found friend.

Ash taught her a bit of what he called martial arts. She knew it was from an unspoken assumption that her husband hit her.

"Really, he has never once raised his hand. Nor has he ever even hurt me, except by accident once when I nearly fell. He doesn't hurt me that way. He just gets angry and says things--"

"All the same. This will give you confidence and assurance," Ash said.

"No, really, I can't, um, touch you. I'm sorry."

She stopped her visits for a couple of days after her embarrassing meeting with Ash, but Eswara came in the window on the third day with all sorts of exotic foods for her to try.

"We're going to London for Holi, our Indian spring festival. These are the special dishes we make for the occasion. I'll miss you, but we'll see you as soon as we get back."

"Thank you. I'll miss you all too," Juliet said sincerely. "And if you do happen to run into Matthew, tell him I'm fine, not to worry."

"You want me to *lie* to him?" Eswara said softly.

"It's not a lie. I'll be fine. I'm better off than most women. Everything will be all right, you'll see."

Juliet's optimism was sadly misplaced. She threw herself into her work, but the larder was getting more and more empty. With no money and Eswara no longer there to help with food and other small comforts, things were getting bleak and nearly desperate.

Lawrence had promised he would be home by the end of the month, but as March turned to April and there was still no sign of him, nor any payment for her books and essays, which she had requested to be mailed to Eswara's address and called for every day, but to no avail, Juliet began to scour the garden and woods for anything she could find to eat.

She found some pistols, set some snares, and was able to bring in some food for herself and the two remaining servants, who also did what they could for the poor abandoned young wife.

Lawrence's idea of killing the fatted calf would have been a fine one but for the fact that Juliet had not much to offer except what they had gleaned from Millcote forest. And when days passed and there was still no sign of him coming home, she felt furious that he had discounted her so totally from his life. One single note in all these weeks....

She tried not to think about how a lusty man like her husband was spending his spare time. It made her ill to even contemplate him in the arms of another woman.

She gave the house the best spring-cleaning she could considering they were down to the last of their soap, and made up all the beds yet again. She prepared the nursery for the boys as best she could, and waited. Surely he had to be home by Easter.

They arrived on the Wednesday before the holiday, and Juliet had never been so relieved to see anyone in her life. She would have thrown herself into his arms and kissed her husband for all she was worth if he hadn't looked so grim and forbidding.

Lawrence frowned. He had never seen his wife looking so ill. Surely the new servants had not misused her as well. Did she have no more backbone than that? Or was she simply lazy and shiftless?

He was appalled to see that she had made no effort for the boys' homecoming, no cakes or biscuits, nothing but the plainest fare, and that she was also wearing the same gown he had last seen her in when they had arrived in Somerset so many weeks before.

He did not approve of womanly vanity, but thought his homecoming rated a bit of primping if she cared at all about him.

Truth to tell, he had taken special pains with his own clothes, though he had been more than a little irritated when he had first opened his valise on the road his first morning away and discovered his shirts unfinished. Was she so spoiled that even the basic housewifely skills were beyond her? Or did she think she was above them?

This thought led him to insist he speak with her in the drawing room. She told Sam the garden boy to take the lads up to the nursery, and followed him.

"I would like to know why there is nothing special in the house for Easter," he said without preamble.

"I ran out of money," she said simply. "Not that there was--"

"I can accept you being a whore, but I will not have a wife who is a spendthrift and slattern!"

She gritted her teeth, willing herself to remain silent. But when he demanded, "Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" she let fly.

"I know I have to be the world's most undesirable wife, but you

don't have to keep rubbing my nose in it. I never expected to marry, never had a hope of it. Never even dreamt of it.

"Until I met you, I was convinced I was going to end up an old maid. Perhaps it would have been better to not have wed at all than to constantly have my unworthiness thrown back in my face. I'm very grateful to you for making me your wife, Lawrence, truly I am. I know the sacrifices you made, and how you did it to avoid scandal for both our sakes. But if you hate me so much you really ought to have said no to my brother.

"After all, what kind of coward are you that you would have just allowed Matthew to bully you into marrying me if you really loved another? Or if you really despised me and hated my family that much?"

"Hate you? Love another—"

"I know I'm the last woman in the world that any man would ever want to marry, but please refrain from telling me so every minute we're together, the rare time we are together, and we shall get along just fine."

Lawrence was completely confused. "An old maid? You?" he gasped, shaking his head. She was easily the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

"And I'll thank you to keep the fine to swive but not to wive remarks to yourself as well."

She stormed out into the garden and began to resume her digging, which she had left off when she had heard he was home. More fool her for having hoped he might be glad to see her as much as she had been looking forward to seeing him, she thought with a sniff as she rammed the blade with all her might into the hard-packed earth.

Juliet tried to tell herself to be fair, that Lawrence had had a lot on his plate with the boys, but still it was just too bad of him. It also hurt that he had said he did not want her to have anything to do with the children for fear of her contaminating them.

She didn't want to feel sorry for herself, but it would be awfully nice to have someone around to help alleviate the loneliness. She was never bored with her work, and her secret visits from Eswara

when she had been home, but she needed human contact like everyone else.

As she continued laboring, her tumultuous emotions gave way to logical practicalities once more as she tried to work through her marital problems rationally.

Perhaps she could win his heart by trying to be more of an asset to his business? She did not know much about tea, but how hard could it be to learn? She was a smart woman, and surely it could not be much different from learning how to trade wine.

She sighed and began to wonder if she couldn't perhaps use the information he had given her already about tea, jot down a little history. Lawrence might be able to use it as a novelty booklet to market his teas, and also just for anyone interested in such a thing. If she spent at least half of her time thinking about the wretched man anyway, this might help take her mind off his fascinating mind and body and the incredible things he did with it.

Juliet decided as soon as she had a quiet moment she would start noting down what she recalled, and continue learning as she went along. He certainly seemed most knowledgeable about the subject, but she was fairly certain he was not the literary type. He was intelligent enough and certainly greatly eloquent when he wanted to be, but in terms of writing, she was not so sure. He most likely just didn't have the patience.

But then he would never believe she had written it, or think she was only trying to curry favour with him by flaunting her pretensions to being a bluestocking. Some men hated a *bas bleu* even more than a light-skirt.

Lawrence came up behind her as she continued working amongst the rows in the vegetable garden. He cleared his throat and said to her back, "I don't know why you were so upset before, but really, I did not intend to be so severe upon you. Is this part of the game, to make me as unhappy as possible in my own home?"

She whirled around to face him. "For pity's sake, Lawrence, there is no game! Or if there is, it's the one you've been playing all along. To make me wretched, humiliate me. Whore one minute, dowdy undesirable useless frump the next!"

He shook his head. "I really don't understand any of this. What

you said before, especially. Why on earth would you ever class yourself as an old maid?"

"Well, look at me!" She spread her hands wide. "What do I have to offer a man? Apart from the obvious, which anyone of a hundred million other women could, and probably a lot better, if your sexual exploits are to be believed."

Lawrence's eyes widened. "Now wait a minute. I never said--"

"You didn't have to. You've no doubt been raking all over--"

"Oh for the love of the Lord, I've been working for weeks! And if I did rake in London, it was only because I had just traveled nine months on the high seas with only my hand for company! You can hardly blame me! I'm not the type of man who usually resorts to self-gratification. Nor did I constantly roger everything in sight in India. I know the consequences of having illegitimate children, especially between English men and Indian women. The children end up neither one thing nor another.

"I'm not racist, but there are plenty of other people in the world who are. They make so-called half-castes' lives very difficult. You can ask Ash Paignton and Eswara Jerome if you don't believe me."

"Eswara?"

"Yes, Nash saw you speaking to her one day through the window, and thought to mention it to me."

"Nash has been here perhaps twice since you left. I suppose I'm to be chastised for speaking to her as well?"

"No, not at all. Why would you think that?" he asked in confusion.

"You said I wasn't to have anything to do with any of the Rakehells."

"Well, perhaps I was too harsh," he conceded. "Besides, she is a wife, not an actual Rakehell, so it's all right. She's also a medical lady, is she not?"

Juliet nodded. "She is, she is indeed."

He hesitated to ask the question, and she offered no information. She was still looking at him like a kicked puppy.

Lawrence sighed, and shoved his hands into his pockets disconsolately. "I seem to be doing nothing but apologising to you all

the time these days, Juliet. The truth is I really don't understand what's happening between us. All I know is that now that my nephews are here, I don't want this house to become a battleground in front of them.

"Things were very hard for them before they left for school, apparently. They were put there for their own well-being and left there when their parents died. It's been terrible for them to be orphaned thus, and treated so abominably."

"Why, what happened?" she gasped.

He took his hands out of his pockets and began to pace up and down, recounting all he had witnessed when he had gone to call unexpectedly.'

"Oh my, the poor children!" she sighed, near tears.

"Your sentiments do you credit, my dear. I would appreciate you doing what you can to put them at ease."

"You told me not to go near them because I would contaminate them with my er, *perversions*, I believe is the correct word."

He heaved a huge sigh. *Yes, damn it, he had said that to her, hadn't he.* "You, well, you mustn't take everything I say as Scriptural truth."

She stared at him and shook her head, trying to fight back the tears. "I'm sorry, Lawrence, but you say all these cruel and nasty things to me, and then you expect me to forget about them? How can I?"

"Are you saying you don't want to help with the boys?" he accused.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "I'm saying I'm more than happy to try to become a mother to them if that's what they need and that is your intention."

"I would be grateful." He bowed and left her.

Grateful. Such a cold little word. But it was better than nothing.

She went indoors and tested her other frock to see if it was dry yet, but it was still soaking. She now had dirt on this one.

Well, with any luck he wouldn't notice, and he would be off again on business soon. She doubted he even noticed anything about her.

If he had, he wouldn't have abandoned her for weeks on end in an empty house without a penny to her name.

Lawrence paced up and down in the study, wondering at how altered Juliet was since the last time he had seen her. Oh, she looked as though she were eating, and she had made no mention of any sign of a baby.

But she was wearing the same gown as had had seen the last time he was there, and it was bemired with dirt. Yet he knew for a fact that she was most fastidious about washing herself. Well, some people did not hold with changing their clothes very often.

He could see her not having had any offers if she always looked so frumpy. Not that he cared--she would be divine in a burlap sack. But it brought to mind some unpleasant memories which he really did not want to contemplate...

He stewed in his study while she tried to put together something a bit nicer for the boys. She was almost tempted to see if Eswara were home yet. She could at least beg some flour, eggs, sugar and jam for a roly-poly and worry about how to pay her back later.

Her stiff-necked pride stopped her once more. She was not going to grovel, and she was not going to pretend all was well when it wasn't. Lawrence might not give a tinker's damn about her, but wife or no wife, she had the right to eat and have soap with which to wash and clean her clothes.

Juliet did not escape her husband's notice for the simple reason that he insisted she dine with them that evening. She tried to excuse herself, saying she could help put away all of the rest of the children's things.

However, he demanded they eat as a family. She did the best she could to sponge off her frock, but weeks and weeks of incessant wear of the one or the other had taken their toll.

He looked at her in surprise when she came into the room, and began to fear in earnest that she was in some melancholic state when she did not look at him, and replied to all of his remarks in monosyllables. With the boys she was far more forthcoming, asking them about their likes and dislikes and conversing with them on a

level appropriate to their age.

As he watched her, Lawrence realised that never once since they had met had he ever seen her in an evening gown. He wondered why she had not made the effort tonight. It seemed rather rude to the boys, to them all considering they had all dressed in evening garb.

Or was she trying to make them feel more at home? His old family residence, which had become his brother's establishment, had not been so fine as this. Not so far as he could remember, anyway. He tried not to think of the gloomy old medieval pile any more than was strictly necessary.

During the meal Juliet offered to read the boy some stories before bedtime. "What kind do you like?"

"Anything to do with history."

"Really?" she said with a warm smile. "I think I can find a few tales to tell you."

He seethed with no small degree of resentment as they chatted. She had charmed them both, he could tell.

When the simple meal of rabbit stew with potatoes was over, the boys proposed going up to their room to look over their books, and he noted he was not included in the invitation.

She looked up. "I don't suppose you wish to come. I'm sure you must be very busy."

"Not too busy to spend time with my family," he said curtly.

Once upstairs, Stuart asked, "Would you please read us this one, about Robin Hood? He's my favourite."

"An excellent choice."

Lawrence noted she had a wonderful speaking voice, and was able to adjust her tone according to the age, gender and character in the story. The boys were so enthralled they begged her to read another story, and another. She caught Lawrence's eye.

"No, lads, it really is time to settle down for the night. Plenty of time for more stories in the morning, and some proper study of literature and classics. There are excellent stories in Latin and Greek to be had as well, as I shall show you."

Lawrence thought resentfully of what an actress she was. Her

performance reading had been wonderful. She was now trying to pretend that she could teach them better than the tutor he had hired for them to come at the end of the week.

She tucked the boys in and left one candle burning up high.

"I'll look in on you in a little while. Sam is in the next room if you want anything or get scared. Good night, lads."

"Good night, Uncle Lawrence and Aunt Juliet," they both chorused.

She strode out of the room and headed for her own chamber.

"I want a word with you, Madam."

She stiffened, steeling herself for yet another attack. "In the bedroom, or the library?"

"The library," he said in clipped tones, for he was sure that any proximity to a bed would be his undoing.

She went down the stairs, entered the room, marched over to the desk and stood at attention in front of it like a soldier.

"First of all, I want to know what you think you're doing telling them you will provide them with lessons."

"Forgive me, I thought I could help with their education. I know you intend them for the tea trade, but the truth is they will be looked down upon if they do not have the classics, and I assume you would want them to have the best opportun--"

He flung a copy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* down on the top of the desk. "Translate it by sight, if you please."

"Gaul is divided into three parts," she began without hesitation. She closed the book and continued, "One of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in ours Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws. The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae.

"Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest, because they are furthest from the civilization and refinement of our Province, and merchants least frequently resort to them, and import those things which tend to effeminate the mind; and they are the nearest to the

Germans, who dwell beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually waging war; for which reason the Helvetii also surpass the rest of the Gauls in valor, as they contend with the Germans in almost daily battles, when they either repel them from their own territories, or themselves wage war on their frontiers."

He took down another book, which as chance would have it was Plato's *Symposium*, in Greek. He opened to the middle of the book. "Start there."

"Thus numerous are the witnesses who acknowledge Love to be the eldest of the gods. And not only is he the eldest, he is also the source of the greatest benefits to us. For I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life than a virtuous lover or to the lover than a beloved youth. For the principle which ought to be the guide of men who would nobly live at principle, I say, neither kindred, nor honour, nor wealth, nor any other motive is able to implant so well as love. Of what am I speaking? Of the sense of honour and dishonour, without which neither states nor individuals ever do any good or great work. And I say that a lover who is detected in doing any dishonourable act, or submitting through cowardice when any dishonour is done to him by another, will be more pained at being detected by his beloved than at being seen by his father, or by his companions, or by any one else. The beloved too, when he is found in any disgraceful situation, has the same feeling about his lover."

She looked up from the book, directly into his eyes. "Shall I go on?"

"Where on earth did you learn?"

"I had an excellent tutor."

He scowled. "I'll bet you did. A young Adonis just down from Oxford or Cambridge who said he would teach you about love and ruined you."

"A matron lady and her brother, both elderly, who have since passed away, and were kind enough to say I was their brightest pupil."

"Well, if the tutor doesn't work out, I might ask you to step into the breach," he said grudgingly. "But now I wish to know why you are garbed in so ill a manner. It was rude to the boys and myself. I shall

expect you in evening dress when we dine as a family from now on."

Juliet's shoulders slumped for a moment. This really was too much. To her horror she could feel the tears streaming down her cheeks, though she had sworn to herself she would never cry in front of him.

One would have thought he would be happy to have an educated wife who could teach the boys. Instead of praising her fluent Latin and Greek, he was relegating her to the level of a fluff brain interested only in fashion.

The worst of it was he knew full well she had nothing... For he had allowed her to take nothing, and had given her nothing. And what did she mean to him?

The answer was all too evident.

Nothing...

The walls closing in around her, she fled out the door and into the garden once more, and began to cry as though her heart would break. She would see Eswara in the morning and borrow the coach fare to get to home to her little cottage in Dorset. She would walk if she had to. Enough was enough. No food, warmth, money, clothes, a baby on the way who would end up suffering from her deprivations if she didn't have some relief soon ...

"Juliet, where are you!" she heard him call. "It's pitch dark. You're going to hurt yourself."

She hugged the walls of the garden shed and tried to cower out of sight, but a stray light from the lantern he had brought outside lit on the blue of her gown. She tried to cry silently, but a sniff betrayed her whereabouts.

"Come, lass, whatever's amiss, it will do no good to sit here on the cold ground."

She continued to cry, and he raised his brows in surprise. He reached out and touched her cheek, and saw it was indeed wet.

"Are you ill?"

"Aye, sick of being made sport of," she wept. "Sick of being a failure, a disappointment. Sick of your hatred, which provokes such cruelty."

"Cruelty? I don't understand. All I asked you to do was put on a nice gown. Most women adore-"

She took a deep breath, thinking of all the poor women in the world who had one ragged frock and an uncertain future. It was foolish to weep for what she couldn't have when she ought to feel fortunate for what she did own.

She gulped hard. "I suppose you're right. I'm not that badly off compared to a lot of women. I should be grateful for the little I do have. It is apparently more than I deserve. I'm sorry to have cried over something so foolish," she said in a monotone as she swiped at her tears with her sleeve.

"I don't understand why you're so upset."

"Now you're mocking me again."

"No, I'm asking you why you're crying," he said as patiently as he could considering how utterly at a loss he was to deal with her. Her tears were like a dagger through his heart.

"You aren't the least bit pleased I'm educated, but you want me in a nice frock."

"I *am* pleased. Just surprised. But as to the gown-"

"If all a man ever wants is a dressed-up doll, you wonder why women are flighty, and whores?"

"Now I never said-"

"It's what it sounded like," she fired back.

"I would of course expect your gown to be modest. That one is perfectly fine, but rather dirty."

Juliet lost all patience then. "Well, since you're so fond of controlling me, why don't we have a look at my wardrobe, eh? You can select what you would like me to wear tomorrow evening."

She marched into the house through the kitchen door stiff-backed, grabbed the nearly dry gown off the line, rammed it onto a hanger, and continued up the stairs to her room, with her husband trailing along behind in confusion.

Once there she flung open the empty wardrobe and hung it, then took off the gown she was wearing and hung it while he watched her in confusion.

"Please tell me which you prefer."

"I don't understand. Where are-" But he already knew the answer just by looking at the expression on her face.

He slammed the wardrobe door shut and stormed out. *Damn it. What kind of a fool was he? And what the hell was wrong with him...*

She undressed, put her garments away, and slipped naked between the sheets, but started as he came back into the room and began to open all the drawers in the dresser. Apart from the top one, containing two ragged pairs of stockings, a couple of gray swathes of linen he didn't bother to examine further, and the dingy petticoat, chemise, and drawers she had just doffed, all were empty.

"Damn it, Juliet, why didn't you say anything?"

"To whom? You weren't here. And I did mean what I said, about being better off than other women."

Lawrence sighed. "And about your educational achievements as well, I'll warrant. I've shamed you dreadfully again, punished you, without even realising how badly. I'm sorry. Please, don't cry."

She snuffled and wiped her eyes with the corner of the sheet. "I'd rather you be indifferent to me than falsely nice."

"Damn it, Juliet, this isn't how I expected..." He flapped one arm helplessly and began to pace in front of the cold, empty hearth. The sight of it on top of what he had just seen in the drawer cut him to the quick.

"Expected what?" she asked softly, when he remained silent for some time.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Expected married life to be. So, so fraught with pitfalls, and you so dependent upon me for everything."

"You said you wanted nothing from my family. It was only because the maid ran and placed a bundle in the coach when you weren't looking that I even have as much as you've seen."

He shook his head. "I am sorry, truly." He stroked her cheek lightly.

"I could almost believe you, except that this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that you've been cruel and heartless. You berate

me for being a whore. I try to show you I'm not one, yet you expect me to dress, I don't know, alluringly. I don't know how! Your world isn't mine! I don't know what you want. If all the dreadful things you've said to me are true, I have no wish to know your world. That someone could try to harm those two innocent boys, for example."

"I could almost believe you, except that I've known your brother for years-

"I'm *not* Matthew. I wasn't even brought up with him!"

But he wasn't listening, he was gazing at her violet eyes. She could see his intent as he gazed at her and reached for her bare shoulder. "No, Lawrence, please, can you not hear me out-

But his lips were already on hers, and when he lifted them a long time later he was already half-undressed and she had no idea what she had been about to say next.

She also had no idea how he could manage to get around her with one simple kiss or touch of his hand, but the contact was like fire and ice.

"I don't want to fight. I just want to curl up inside you, beside you, and sleep for a month," he admitted in a tone so low as to be scarcely audible.

She relaxed against him with a sigh, relief and longing flooding through her in equal measure. "Then we won't fight. Not in here, not tonight, anyway."

He rose from the bed to remove the last of his clothing, while she slid over to make room for him on that side.

"Lie down flat, on your back, and close your eyes, your arms under the covers."

Her heart sank. *Damn*. He was back to giving orders again. And just when he had said he didn't want to fight. She obeyed him though, for the desire sizzling in her veins was enough to get her to agree to anything.

She tried to stay calm. He didn't seem angry. And what was the thing that Eswara had taught her about rubbing his muscles? It had felt so good on her hands....

He slid the sheet down off of her so slowly, it was a sensual

caress all of its own. It crept down over her suddenly peaked nipples, to her tender belly, over her fluffy curls, down all the way to her feet.

"And everywhere that sheet touched, my hands are going to touch, and then my mouth."

Her breath caught in her throat as he stroked her shoulders, and began.

Chapter Eighteen

Juliet opened one bleary eye as Sam clattered into her room and began to do the fireplace for the master. She tried to sit up, but her hips were firmly pinned to the bed, with Lawrence laying half on top of her, his head buried in the apex of her thighs. She tried to cover her bare breasts, but took some comfort from the fact that the sheet was covering his nudity at least.

She stroked his hair tenderly. He had not exaggerated about trying to climb right into her, nor about the sheet. He was so needy and driven in bed, it made her wonder what sort of hellishly lonely life he must have led until he met her.

But no, she was flattering herself. This was the man who had been engaged to Matilda. The man who had had more professionals in his bed than she'd had gowns in her entire life. To expect him to be faithful would be the height of folly. No, he had to be some sort of uncontrollable degenerate who couldn't exist without assuaging his overwhelming sexual appetite at least six times a night.

She had seen Lawrence so seldom, she was not going to complain, for she had most certainly missed him. But he would be leaving again tomorrow or the next day at the latest. Then she would have nothing except the torrid memories to sustain her until the next time he came home.

As soon as the serving lad was gone, his tongue flickered out and down in a languid caress that had her thighs parting of their own accord.

"Has anyone ever told you how breathtaking you are down here? Pink perfection. I could look at you all day, stroke you all the time." His fingers moved now to accompany his words.

"Is this a new way to shame me?" she asked bitterly.

His head shot up. "No, no! Not at all. Come here, see for

yourself."

"What?" she exclaimed in shock.

He swept her up into his arms and brought her over to the wardrobe. The empty mirror filled with their reflection as he sat her in front of it and pointed. He spread her legs wide. "Look at yourself."

"Oh, no," she said, blushing.

"No, really, you're lovely. Like the most gorgeous rose. And you go from a fresh tea rose pink, to almost deep red when you get really excited. And do you see your lovely petals and little bud? They --"

He continued whispering to her, and from describing he went on to touching, and from touching, seating her on him and making love to her while they both watched.

His running commentary on how beautiful and alluring she was, the tempestuous heat, made the moment a feast of the senses that left them completely, explosively satiated. She was sure this was just another way of hurting her, and waited for something nasty to leave his lips.

But in the end he simply scooped her off the floor and carried her to the tub, brought Juliet her cleanest gown and some underthings, and told her to get ready to go to Bath.

"You want me to go with you?" she asked in surprise.

He gave her a long lingering kiss. "I have some errands to run, and I simply cannot do them without you."

"I don't have to come. I have a list of all the things I think the boys are going to need. They grow so quickly. I mean, I can mend Stuart's clothes and pass them down to Andrew but it will take a bit of time and--"

He kissed her again.

"Move forward and I'll scrub your back. In fact, moved forward and I'll come in with you."

"Will we fit?"

He grinned lustily. "Never had any trouble before."

"Oh, Lawrence, that's not what I meant—"

"But I do."

He got in and lifted her by the waist.

"Oh. Oh!"

It was some time before they were ready to leave for Bath.

Lawrence took her hand to lead her downstairs.

Juliet hesitated a moment. She whispered shyly, "We really ought to at least try to clean up the bathroom and change our sheets."

He patted one stray curl into place in a gesture that could almost be described as affectionate. "I'm not ashamed of what we shared, and you shouldn't be either. After all, as you pointed out, we are indeed married."

"Aren't there certain injunctions against leading each other into sin?"

He grinned. "I think there might be, but I'm willing to risk it if you are."

"Risk what, exactly?" she asked as he led her down the stairs.

"Hell for a taste of paradise here on earth."

"I'd like to have it in both places," she said with a warm smile.

His eyes glowed. "You can have it anywhere you like, my pet."

She couldn't help but giggle. "I think I have already, judging from what the bedroom looks like."

Lawrence gave an impish grin which took her breath away. "I think I can manage to find quite a few more places in the house we haven't tried."

He helped her into the carriage most solicitously.

"But the boys-"

"I know. I would never do anything to upset them. But what we do in the privacy of our own chambers is no one's concern except ours. So you're not to feel guilty or go scurrying if the servants see you."

She giggled. "I rather hoped they wouldn't see *you*."

"I promise to be a bit more discreet, or better still, just put a latch on that door."

"All right. Latch it is."

Lawrence grinned. "My, we're a greedy little girl, aren't we?"

"I know I have no right to be. I'm very grateful for what I do have. I just wish-" She bit her lip to silence herself.

"What do you wish?" Lawrence asked gently, stroking her shoulder.

"That what we shared was more special. To you I mean."

"Special?" he said with a frown.

"Er, exclusive. Unique," she said, blushing. "I ought to have known from the outset that I could never hold your interest for more than a night or two, but-"

"I talk too much, and you listen far too well," he grumbled, lapsing back into the carriage seat.

She put her chin in her hand and gazed out the window pensively, until she felt him toying with one of her jet curls.

"It *is* special. I haven't been--" He drew a deep breath. "The truth is I've been alone since I left this house, and every night since we left London that I haven't been with you. I can't promise it will always be like that, but I find such delight in being with you that I can't be bothered to try to seek another. And I wouldn't waste my money paying, not after what you've so generously bestowed upon me."

Juliet looked at him with a new sense of hope. "Do you suppose well, I could touch you some time after all? Affectionately, not just in bed. I mean, you did say-"

He took her hand and kissed it, then kept it in his own. "If my every word is going to come back to haunt me, I'm going to take a vow of silence."

"Yes, about that too. Am I still supposed to-"

His eyes widened. "No, definitely not! Is that why-- Oh damn. Come here."

He kissed her thoroughly, and began to tease her under her skirts. "Tell me," he urged.

"Tell you what?" she asked in confusion.

"Go on, tell me."

Her breath was soon coming in huge shuddering pants.

"Now let it all out, and tell me."

"Oh, Lawrence, Lawrence!"

He laughed in delight and pressed on, thrilling her beyond measure.

"Oh, Lawrence, that was wonderful," she said in awe, her breath coming in low sobs.

"You can be silent if we're playing little games, but otherwise, I want you to scream."

"But you don't, most of the time."

"I was only being quiet because you were."

She reached for him to caress him, but he shook his head.
"Almost to Bath. Save that thought for later, though."

They pulled up in front of a fine dressmaker's and he helped her down and said, "I've surveyed all the shops in Bath for fabrics for the tea rooms I wish to open eventually. This was the best one. Anything you can't find here isn't worth buying. You'll need at least a dozen new gowns."

Her mouth dropped open in shock. She tugged her hand away from his as he tried to lead her into the shop. "No, really. I don't want you to take the trouble. You told me I was a spendthrift--"

"You have only two gowns in your wardrobe."

"I haven't done anything to deserve--"

"It isn't a case of deserving. You're my wife."

"A wife you don't want," she pointed out. "Someone who has brought nothing but shame and anger."

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. "That's not strictly true."

"But you know you're lumbered with me. You've reminded me often enough. I've brought nothing to you, so I deserve nothing. If you were to let me be a helpmeet to you--"

"Well, what do you think you've been worth since the first night we slept together?"

She clutched her waist and gasped, making a low sound

reminiscent of an animal in pain. She fled from him blindly then, running right out into the street. Right into the path of a carriage flying down the Bristol to London road.

"Juliet, look out!" Lawrence shouted, his heart hammering in his chest.

He snatched her out of the way with an inch to spare and rolled to safety, covering them both in mire.

"Let me go! You're a monster!" she gasped, dragging in a breath.

Then she was up and running again along the road, darting back to the opposite side of the street, weaving in and out of the traffic and doubling back in an effort to lose him.

She didn't know what she was going to do with no money and her gown covered in filth, but anything had to be better than spending time with a moody and mercurial man who could be so tender one minute and so viciously accusing and insulting the next.

She almost wished he would hit her--it might almost be preferable to the constant carping and humiliation. She almost wished the carriage had struck her and ended her misery there and then. *And just when they had been getting along so well...*

The shop next to the dressmaker's was empty, the door ajar for the removal men going to and fro. Juliet sprang in and ran behind the door, sinking onto her knees as she held her shoulders and cried.

She could feel her knee and ankle swelling, and did not even bother to try to clean her frock with her handkerchief. She just crouched in the corner and wept hopelessly.

She heard the scrape of booted feet coming and going in and out of the front door, but did not even bother to look up at the workmen as they carried on.

Finally one of them ventured to ask, "You all right, Miss?"

"I um, fell. I'll be all right."

"That your husband lookin' ye?"

"Yes, but don't tell-"

"You're hurt, Miss, and that gown is all torn."

"No, please don't make a fuss. I'll be all right."

The kind-looking older man shook his head and went out with the small table he was carrying.

Lawrence came back up the street, and the workman pointed silently.

He saw his wife cowering in the corner holding her leg, tears streaming down her face, her hands all bloodied, and her gown a complete loss.

He felt deeply troubled by what had almost happened. He had upset her so much she had nearly been killed. But what to do about it?

"Juliet, I never meant-"

She turned her face away and shook her head.

Damn. "Let's be strictly practical about this," he said gruffly, moved beyond measure by her tears, but sensing that touching her would only make things worse.

"You've come up with a good idea for my tea marketing, you're looking after the household, and helping with the boys. A good housekeeper and tutor would get about fifty pounds a year each, and someone working for me in my company as a clerk would get about the same. So you can have an initial allowance of one-fifty, and any special purchases like good gowns, which can be work clothes for our business engagements in the day and evenings with clients and potential investors can be additional. Though if you will permit me, I would like to buy you a couple of special things as wedding gifts."

"Why would you want to give me a gift?" she asked suspiciously, with a ragged sniff.

"It's customary. A bride can give her husband one as well."

He face fell. "I'm not so thoroughly acquainted with your likes and dislikes that I would even know what to buy. Even if I had any money."

"I've already had my gift, and it can't be bought in a shop." He stroked her damp cheek and kissed her. "More than one gift, I seem to recall. Ever since that first night. Given freely, with nothing held back. So come, please do not deny me the further delights of your company any longer."

She shook her head. "But I have my things back in Dorset. If you would allow me to send for them, I wouldn't have to buy a thing."

He frowned at the mention of Dorset, and waved her suggestion away. "You can send for whatever you like, my dear. But a married woman has a certain freedom of dress in terms of colour and style. Whilst I would not like you to bare your bosom to anyone other than me, I rather fancy looking for a regal purple frock to match your eyes."

She smiled up at him tremulously. "I'm surprised you even noticed them. Most people say they're blue."

"I can't stop noticing them. They're said to be the windows of the soul. Yours most certainly are, and a mirror such as the one at the front of your wardrobe," he said with a sultry smile, "reflecting both of our innermost desires."

She smiled again a little more happily. "All right, I shall indulge you in the purple gown if you'll deduct the cost of your clothing from my stipend. After all, you ruined them trying to save me."

He shook his head, not even liking to think how much they had cost for fear of her believing he was either boasting or reproaching her. "Nothing a bit of soap and water won't cure, and I can pass them on to one of the servants if they don't wash well. Please don't fret."

She looked down at herself in chagrin. "But we can't go into the shops looking like this."

"Never fear, I shall explain everything. Now come, dry your eyes, and let me refasten your hair ribbon."

She stood still as he untangled it and then untied it and combed his fingers through her scalp. The contact was electrifying, and soon his feet were planted firmly between her own, his lean hard frame pressing her into the timber and plaster wall.

The sound of a throat clearing brought them to their senses with a jolt.

The older man grinned. "Sorry to interrupt you two love birds, but unless you want to put on a show for the whole of Bath, I suggest you adjust your clothes and take her home."

"Sorry, we didn't mean to delay your work."

"No hurry moving out. Last tenant did a flit. Just glad to see such a nice young couple has patched up their quarrel. Saw you run out in front of that carriage, and thought you was a goner, lass."

She took a step forward and realised her leg was. She grimaced and would have fallen if Lawrence hadn't caught her elbow.

"Come, dear, we need to get you to sit down so we can have a proper look at that leg. I'll just take you next door, and get them to fetch a doctor and some decent clothes for me and you."

Her husband was as good as his word. In no time at all, she had been cleaned up, and had donned a ready-made new frock, white with purple sprigs. The doctor cleaned out her abrasions while Lawrence went behind the curtains to change into the clothes he had had purchased off the peg. They were quite a good fit despite his large size, and he sent his card around to the tailor to tell him he would call to be measured at a more convenient time.

"You can go now," Juliet offered. "I'll stay here and-"

"Nonsense. This was to be your shopping trip. So you can have my undivided attention. You sit there, Juliet, and we shall bring you whatever you would like to see."

He started with two dozen of every undergarment conceivable, and some elegant nightrails. "You can wear them when I'm not home. They're beautiful, but your pearlescent skin is even more so," he murmured in her ear, causing her to blush as red as a peony.

He rifled through all of the purple fabrics, intent upon matching her eyes. "This is it. Perfect. Now, what to match it with. Silver or gold lace. Or black. No, I think the simpler, the better. Just draped like this, with a little white satin panel here." He indicated her bosom and she coloured to the roots of her hair.

Mrs. Parkins enthused over the idea, but suggested silver tissue, and showed him a pattern with a draped bodice and long train which Lawrence pronounced just the thing.

Juliet was stunned at her husband's generosity and interest in every last detail. "Oh my, I shall look awfully fine."

"You shall indeed. A gown just made for you. And now, with this purple *voile*, it can be an overgown for something in, hmm, hyacinth."

He selected some elegant gold braided twist as a trim, and

enthusiastically moved on to a third gown of deep purple with a square neckline and narrow gold bands across the bosom and around the dropped waist.

Those three bespoke gowns would take several days, so he selected a rich jade green, a deep blue, and a bronze coloured evening gown off the rails, and pronounced them excellent fits.

"Really, these are plenty. I shall write home for my other things. They will be glad to send them."

"Day gowns, if you please," Lawrence said, ignoring his wife's every protest. "We will look at ready to wear first, and then something with a few less ruffles and pleats. My wife is slender and elegant and does not need to walk around like a ruched and beribboned popinjay."

Juliet sat back, completely at a loss. She had never seen a man so altered. She kept waiting for Lawrence to turn on her, disgrace her in front of the kindly woman or the other patrons in the shop.

But he was the model companion, entertaining without being brash or offensive, and polite without being flirtatious to the women who all stared at him with undisguised admiration, if not downright lust.

Juliet also protested at how much he was spending because she knew her figure was going to be changing soon, and she was going to need new things for herself and the baby once it arrived.

But Lawrence plowed on, determined to make up for his neglect, and in truth, dressing his wife, the better to undress her when they were alone.

Juliet almost started to enjoy this new, animated Lawrence until she spotted a tall dark-haired man walk up to the window with his two female companions, then point and start to move toward the entrance.

Oh no, surely the Avenels weren't going to...

But they *were*. Bryony and Isolde entered the shop, with Randall not too far behind his sister-in-law and wife.

They introduced themselves cordially to Lawrence first, admired the gowns, and asked Juliet how she was.

Randall bowed to Lawrence and offered his hand, which he declined to take. However, Randall had suspected he would not, and so glossed over the refusal by pivoting to offer it to Juliet instead. "So pleased to see you again. And many congratulations on your marriage. Are you well?"

"I am, thank you. I just sprained my ankle just outside the shop, silly me, but-"

"We wondered if your wife might be allowed to join us for tea at Sally Lunn's when you're finished here," Isolde made so bold as to ask Lawrence.

"Oh, no really, I couldn't-- My ankle, I can't walk and-"

"Nonsense, my dear. I shall gladly bring you in the carriage and fetch you in half an hour," Lawrence offered, and was delighted to see his wife's face light up.

Lawrence was surprised at the offer which had sprung to his lips, but he had to admit he was impressed with the two women, quietly, not modishly dressed, and lovely, but without any flashiness. Of course as attractive as they were, his own wife put them in the shade, he felt.

"If you have no pressing business, you're certainly welcome to join us, Mr. Howard," Bryony said cordially.

"No, it's quite all right. I need to go to the tailor myself anyway, so I'm grateful for the chance for my wife to take her ease and some refreshment."

"I can take her around to the tea shop in my carriage if you'd like to go now, Lawrence," Randall offered.

"That's quite all right," he said stiffly, thinking the years had really left their mark on his old friend, who looked incredibly mature and sophisticated.

"I shall wait here until all the ladies are finished, and we can all go together. They can leave their parcels in my carriage. They will be ready for you at Sally Lunn's at, say, four?"

The two women, one auburn-haired, one dark, both nodded.

Randall kissed his red-haired wife warmly and departed, leaving Bryony to scurry to the door to perform a similar office for her own

spouse Michael, Randall's brother, who had spotted Lawrence in the window and declined to enter the shop for fear of causing a scene.

Lawrence watched their easy camaraderie with a twinge of envy. Well, there was nothing stopping him with Juliet was, there? Nothing except his own stiff-necked pride.

The two women then swarmed like locusts on the shirting fabric and worsted wools, complaining all the while about how fast children grew.

Isolde patted her belly happily. "If this is twins I shall have a baker's dozen. I had triplets the first time," she explained to the confused-looking couple.

"Congratulations," they both said with some surprise and not a little envy.

"Ah, the magic of love. Nothing like it."

"No, indeed," Bryony said with a warm smile, and a long look at Juliet's stomach which she could not fail to interpret.

Juliet felt herself flush hot and cold. Did Lawrence suspect? She was not going to worry about it now, not when things were going so well, and Lawrence had promised her for tea.

"I said, my dear, are you sure you don't need anything else from here?"

"Not at all, thank you." She put her hand up to his cheek and kissed him.

"What, what is it?" he asked, seeing her odd expression.

"Nothing except a mild twinge in my leg, and a recollection of my list here in my reticule of all the things your nephews need. Perhaps Isolde and Bryony would be so kind as to proffer their advice?"

"Only too pleased," Isolde replied.

The time flew by, and soon their purchases were complete. Lawrence lifted Juliet and brought her to the carriage. It was a short trip around the Baths to the bakery. He deposited her in a chair at the tea house and told her he would be back at four. He kissed her warmly on the lips and strode off, leaving both women smiling at her.

"Looks like another of the Rakehells happily married," Isolde said with a laugh.

"Oh, no, I mean, well, yes for me but he, um--"

"You're lovely. What man wouldn't adore you?"

To her chagrin, Juliet suddenly realised that he had not given her any money. Was it just another little dig at her, or--

Suddenly Lawrence reappeared and took her hand, kissing it. "I'm sorry I forgot. Enjoy yourself, and find something nice to bring back home for the boys?" he whispered.

"Yes, darling, I shall. Thank you." She palmed the coins he pressed into her hand, and with a last kiss on her lips he left once more.

Juliet listened carefully to the two women as they chatted about their families and life in Somerset, and she had to admit she had never had such a pleasant afternoon with two such intelligent and lively women. There was no spite or vindictiveness, no awkward personal questions or interest in gossip.

She was almost sorry to see four o'clock arrive, and the men return for them, though she was more than glad to see the handsome face of her husband. She had got gingerbreadmen for the boys, and had bought him some little fruits. She offered them to him when he got into the coach.

He looked surprised. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"I wasn't sure what you liked, so I guessed marzipan."

"An excellent guess. I adore it. Though I love lemon curd and good old fashioned English scones with lots of butter and jam. And crumpets. Speaking of which--"

Her eyes widened as he knelt at her feet. Sliding her drawers down as he drew his head up underneath her dress, he began to feast upon her until she panted out his name.

"I must say, I don't know why I never did this with any other woman before. I supposed your fragrance is just so delicious, and you're so clean and fresh, not riddled with disease."

"You may never have done it, but you certainly know how. It's wonderful," she admitted, her eyes glowing. "May I?"

He shook his head. "You don't have to. A lot of women don't like it."

"Well, I won't know until I try. You always stop me."

Watching him enjoy himself so much, hearing his groan of pleasure, gave her a heady consciousness of her own power. She explored the uniquely different areas of his maleness, asking him what he liked, making sure she didn't hurt him.

"I'm not that delicate. So long as you don't punch or kick the pouch below."

She watched in awe as it become tight and smooth, and he said, "That's when you know I'm happy. Oh, yes, right there. Oh, and there."

"There?"

"Mmm."

"What about there?"

"Oh Lord-" He pulled her head away and rammed her hand on the end and squeezed in order to catch him.

When he finally finished, he mopped her with a handkerchief. "My goodness, I haven't done that since I was about ten. The ideal male fantasy. And the only thing better is--" He mimed.

"I could have--"

"Not this time. Really."

"I want to make you happy. Really."

"You do," he said sincerely. "I love your touch. Your mouth. Your lovely skin. You're so beautiful. I look at you and the whole world falls away."

"Please, you don't need to--"

He smiled as a new thought struck him. "And you will be even more lovely in one of your new gowns. I shall order a special meal and we'll have presents and games and stories before bedtime."

She had almost forgot all about the boys with the excitement of the day. And about the meal. Her face fell.

"Er, Lawrence," she said sheepishly.

"Yes?"

"I don't mean to ask for money. But the truth is the reason your homecoming has been such a poor one is I've not had any. The cook stole whatever was in the kitty, and even before that, there wasn't much. We've had no food apart from what's in the garden and what the three of us have found in the woods."

"The three of you?"

"Sam and Bill."

He frowned. "Where are the other servants?"

"How could I hire anyone with no money, and no means of transport to get to the labour exchange in Bath?"

"Damn!"

"And that's not all. I asked you for more sheets and towels and so on. That's because there's only two of everything in the whole house."

"What, did those wastrels steal the rest?"

She shook her "No, there's been nothing from the moment we arrived at the house. I suspect your fiancée must have not got around to-- Or used the money for something else. I wasn't trying to wring more concessions from you the day I made that list before you went away, Lawrence. I was asking you for the basics needed to get by."

His brows knit in consternation. "I gave the money to Nash to tend to. Are you trying to tell me you've had *nothing* all this time?" he demanded.

She blushed and nodded, but said quickly, "Eswara was really kind to me, had me over to tea. Offered to make me a loan, or contact Matthew to tell him in I was in dire straits. But I, well, I have more pride than that."

"And could you not have written to me?"

She shrugged. "You left me with no idea of where you were, and no money for the postage."

He made a choking sound that made her cringe and draw back.

She shook her head quickly. "But let's not argue now, please, Lawrence. Rather, could we try to remedy the situation together, if

not for me, then for the sake of the boys. The plain truth is, Husband, that we have no servants, and nothing in the larder."

She heard him grind his teeth. "Not for long," he rasped.

He turned his pocket inside out and pressed all the money into her palms.

"Lawrence, what are you—"

"Driver, head back to Bath!"

"Yes, sir."

Lawrence turned to her and kissed her hard. "I'm sorry. I've been a fool."

"So long as you don't think I'm a slattern and spendthrift," she said quietly, her eyes never leaving his face.

"God, how you must hate me," he said, shaking his head with regret.

She snuggled close against him. "Only when you shout. But one kiss and I'll forgive you anything."

"You can have a hundred." He bent his head.

It was more like two hundred by the time they got back to town.

Once there though he was all business, and held her upright as she hobbled doing her errands.

It was late when they got back and the boys were famished. Lawrence whipped together some eggs quickly, seeing as they were hungry and his wife exhausted.

Since it was then time for the boys to head off to bed, he took them straight up as soon as they had finished eating. Together they got them into their night shirts. No sooner was that done than they demanded a story. They looked to Juliet, but she shook her head.

"It's Lawrence's turn tonight."

"Me?"

"Of course."

"What would I tell them?"

"About India, of course."

"Like what?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"You were once famous for your eloquence. Tell us about the places you've lived," she suggested.

"All right." He thought for a moment, then began, "Darjeeling is in the foothills of the Himalayas, at an altitude of about six thousand feet. It stands on a long, narrow mountain ridge of the Sikkim Himalayas. The name Darjeeling originates from the Tibetan words *dorje ling*, which means Place of the Thunderbolt. According to legend, the hill was struck by a thunderbolt and a monk founded a monastery there."

"Are the mountains very beautiful?" Stuart asked.

"Oh my, yes. You can't imagine anything so fine, and they're covered with snow all year round. There is a road up to a place called Tiger Hill, which runs up a steep gradient through colourful forests of trees and beautiful ferns. From this hill you can get a view of almost three hundred and sixty degrees of the Himalayan panorama.

"We used to go up when we had finished the harvest, leaving in the middle of the night to make the journey to be there for the dawn. We would sit there with our breakfast and watch the night turn lighter, first tingeing with a dull red, then changing to brilliant orange and finally bright gold as the sun rose over the Kanchenjunga range.

"Kanchenjunga?" Juliet said, doing her best to imitate his pronunciation.

"The Kanchenjunga, at over twenty-five thousand feet so far as we can tell, is one of the world's highest peaks. The Range derives its name from the Tibetan word, Khang-Chen-Dzod-Nga, meaning Five Treasures in the Snow, a reference to the five snow-capped peaks of this towering mountain range. The five peaks are called South Peak, Central Peak, Main Peak, Yalung Kang and Kumbachen."

"What sort of flora and fauna do they have there?" Juliet asked.

"It's like paradise. There are lively springs sparkling down the mountain walls. Monkeys, wildcats, leopards and jackals can be seen all over. There are forests of fir, pine and birch, orchids, with thousands of varieties of flowering plants and hundreds of types of ferns."

"I'd love a monkey," Andrew said, his eyes shining.

"So would a lot of other people. I used to see all sorts of poor animals being bought and sold in the Chowrasta, which means crossroads. It's an open-air market where you can buy all sorts of items. I used to deal in fabrics on the side as well, you see, hence my interest in muslins and so on," he said with a warm look at Juliet.

In truth she had wondered how he knew such a lot about women's clothing, and had burned with jealousy.

"But the Hindus don't believe in exploiting animals in any way, and that would including taking away their freedom by keeping them as pets."

She raised her brows in surprise. "What, not even eating them?"

"For the strict sects, no, not even eating them."

"You said springs?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, waterfalls even, from all the snow melting. The stunningly beautiful waterfalls originate from a small stream, the Kalijhora, and cascade down a sheer drop of about a hundred feet, with the water rushes through deep ravines to the valley below."

"What was the weather like? I mean, everyone complains that India is so hot and dry and full of disease," Stuart pointed out.

"Some parts are, but the weather in Darjeeling is really very much like here in England. The best times to see it are mid-March to May, which is the flower season, when they have the spring festival of Holi, and mid-September to November, which is the festive season. The winters could be very hard."

"Is that why you left?" his wife inquired.

He nodded. "For the most part. It was lovely there, but I wanted even more rapidly growing tea, so for that I moved to Assam."

"Can you tell us about it too, if you're not too tired?" she asked softly.

"No, I'm not tired, but you might find it dull."

"No, not at all," she said sincerely.

"Well, boys, what do you think?"

"I think I want to hear it, but I also want more gingerbread."

"Very well then, we shall all have our heart's desire. Gingerbread all around, and more stories. And if you like monkeys, just wait until I tell you about the magic monkeys of the monastery."

The boys giggled, but Lawrence kept a straight face.

"Oh, tell us now," Stuart begged.

"Gingerbread and milk first."

She rose from the bed but he shook his head. "I'll get it. You stay here with your foot up."

He returned with a tray and served everyone, handing her a hot cup of tea which smelt like heaven.

"You're very good at this," she said with a smile.

"What?"

"With the boys. Being entertaining."

He shrugged. "Not much occasion for it where I've been. Perhaps I've been saving it up for all these years."

"I can see why you used to win every debate."

"But not every argument. Not with you. And I wouldn't want to either."

"So, you were going to tell us about Assam. What does the name mean?"

"It is not clear, actually," Lawrence said. "It may be derived from the Sanskrit term 'Asom' that means unparalleled, or one with no equal. The term 'Asom' in Sanskrit also means undulating or uneven, which is apt because the countryside is very rugged. In addition, the Ahoms ruled Assam for six hundred years till the early part of this century. The words 'Ahom' and 'Asom' are pronounced similarly, and hence the Ahoms may also have given Assam its names.

"Assam is generally composed of plains and river valleys. It can be divided into three main geographical regions: the Brahmaputra Valley in the north; the Barak Plain in the south; and the Mikir and Cachar Hills that divide the two regions.

"The northern part of Assam is wholly occupied by the elongated valley of the mighty river Brahmaputra. Most of the people live in this valley. The Brahmaputra valley is bounded by the foothills of the

Himalayas to the north and another lower range of hills and mountains to the south. In the center part of Assam, to the south of the hills is the Barak Valley. But the Brahmaputra Valley is the dominant physical feature of Assam, and that's where I lived. The Brahmaputra enters Assam near Sadiya at the extreme northeast corner of the province and runs westward for nearly over four hundred miles before turning south. The river valley, rarely more than fifty miles wide, is studded with numerous low, isolated hills and ridges that abruptly rise from the plain. The valley is surrounded on all sides by mountains, except for the west. It's intersected by many streams and rivulets that flow from the neighboring hills to empty into the Brahmaputra. It's glorious, very lush and fertile, and as I said, we discovered tea naturally occurring there."

"It sounds so beautiful, Lawrence."

"He nodded. "It is."

"It's a wonder not everyone goes there to grow tea."

"Well, there are a few problems. Earthquakes are a common phenomenon in Assam. The average temperature is moderate, about eighty degrees in the hottest month of August, and sixty degrees in the coldest, January. In this season, the climate of the valley is marked by heavy fogs and a little rain. Assam does not have the normal Indian hot, dry season either. Some rain occurs from March onwards, but the real force of the monsoon winds is faced from June onward. Rainfall in Assam ranks among the highest in the world, apparently. Largely occurring during the months from June to September, it often caused destructive summer floods throughout the area." He shook his head. "Not something I will ever forget."

"Tell us about the animals," Andrew said excitedly.

Lawrence gave him a warm smile. "Assam too has some incredible forests, full of wonderful things like the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, elephants, tigers, deer and wild pigs. The most important forest products are timber and bamboo, firewood and lac, which is the source of shellac. There are about seventy species of timber. In Assam I also became involved in timber and the furniture industry, so-called Japanned tables, that sort of thing, from the shellac."

"You've certainly tried a lot of different things," Juliet remarked,

growing more impressed with the man she had married with his every word.

He nodded. "I have. There's a lot of money to be made in India, but by the right people."

She looked at him carefully. "What do you mean by the right ones?"

"People who will appreciate the country's beauty, don't want to despoil it all, take without giving back. I grow tea, it's true, but I make sure my workers are treated well. I buy and sell furniture, but I give the craftsman a realistic wage."

"I'm glad to hear it. Eswara has told me something of the ills of her country. I'm glad you don't exploit people."

He stroked her cheek tenderly. "I'm sorry if I've--"

"Tell us about the monkeys," Andrew said excitedly.

He shook his head. "It's far too late and your mother is done in. Tomorrow, I promise. Or the next night, since it will be her turn to tell the stories tomorrow evening."

"Will you be here in two nights' time?" she asked softly, though she hated sounding so jealous and insecure.

"Wild horses couldn't drag me from your side now." He kissed her hand and helped her rise.

They tucked the boys in and then he carried her down to his own room, where he had had Sam make up a roaring blaze.

He laid her on the bed gently and began to remove the pins from her hair. "I shall be your maid tonight, my dear. Nothing but pleasure, anything you like."

"Anything?"

"Unless I think it's going to hurt you."

"No, but it might hurt you. You hate not being in control," she observed perceptively.

"We'll see. I can try to be less bossy for one night."

"Then fetch me that hand cream we bought before, please?"

He handed her the bottle and she told him to remove his clothes.

"What about yours?"

"Sush. Not a sound. I give the orders tonight. Lie on your front."

Juliet revelled in her sense of power as he did so. She began to massage him all over, and was looking forward to discovering first-hand the things that Eswara had told her would please a man.

Pleased was a mild description as Lawrence writhed and twisted as her slick hand slipped over his bottom and thighs. "Good God, who taught you--"

"Eswara thought you might stay home a few more nights if I learned massage."

"Remind me to thank Eswara. But you don't have to bribe me to keep me home. I've, well, I've missed you."

"You don't have to say--"

"It's true. There's been no one else, Juliet. Nothing except cold baths twice a day to quell my passion. I can't get enough of you when I'm home. You hug, kiss, or touch me and I go wild. I'm afraid I might hurt you."

"Is that why you--"

"Yes. It's why I'm telling you now. As soon as I turn over I'm going to grab you, I just know it."

"Unless I grab you first."

"What?"

"It's my night. I can do whatever I like, you said. So spread your arms out to the sides and don't touch me until I tell you."

He did as she asked, and roared out his passion as she took him in her mouth and finished him there.

"Oh, Juliet, you have no idea. Now I'm even more hot and rampaging than I was before."

"Funny. So am I." She glided onto his re-hardening flesh and held his arms down. "Ah, no touching, remember. No kissing either. Not until I say."

She set a pacy rhythm which was easy to follow. He took off like a comet across the heavens within a minute.

"Easy, love. We have all night," she said with a smile. "Or at least that's what I think you said to me once."

"Kiss me?"

"Kiss me." She moved upwards slightly so that they were still joined, but her breasts were level with his mouth. He feasted on them for a time, and then asked if he could touch.

"Yes."

He brought his hands up reverently, touching the side and underside of each.

"That's what Eswara said about Indian lovemaking. The tantra, she called it. Getting to really know something, not just grabbing and consuming."

"I'll try to be more patient, I really will," he vowed, his eyes blazing with barely suppressed emotion.

"I'm not complaining. It's been wonderful. You're very bossy, though. It's frustrating to have no will of my own, no chance to well, participate, touch and kiss you the way I long to."

"But the consequences--"

"You fear your strength. But apart from shouting and being selfish you're not a violent man. Why do you think you'll hurt me?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it, think about it."

"Perhaps you'll tell me one day?"

He nodded wordlessly. "Please kiss me."

She lowered her mouth onto his and he surged into her so strongly she gasped in surprise. His engorged head filled her, and she spasmed around it. One stroke left her mindless with need. A second sent her over the edge. A third had her clasping his head as she rubbed her crested nipples against his massive chest, every part of her body touching his in an erotic massage all of its own. The hand cream set them to gliding against one another. He spent himself inside her explosively, and found himself laughing with joy as he collapsed at last.

She frowned with puzzlement and hurt.

He held her tightly and was at last able to speak. "God, that was

wonderful. And I have some ideas on how to make it even better."

"Lawrence, what--"

He went into his wardrobe and came back a short time later with some four by four swatches of fabric.

"Left over from my piecework days. Ah, here's a nice piece of silk I can think of some excellent uses for. Not to mention this lovely soft bit of fur."

He rubbed them over her bare flesh slowly.

"Oh, Lawrence, oh!"

Chapter Nineteen

Lawrence methodically worked his way through his fabric samples for the next week. If Juliet was sorry he had taken control of her special evening she never said one word of complaint. For there were times when he was so driven she couldn't rein him in, and didn't really want to. It seemed odd to her that such a powerful business man should be in such dire need of acceptance and affirmation, but now that he was not constantly sniping at her, she was more than willing to give it.

It was all too easy. He was wonderful with the children, and gracious to their guests, the Jeromes and their son Ash and his new bride Ellen.

"We were recently at the Holi festival with the Avenels," Martin told his old friend. "The ladies said what a wonderful time you all had in Bath."

"Er, yes, we did."

"What is Holi, exactly?" Juliet ventured to ask the dark haired man, not much older than his step son, but who had a tragic air about him which told her he had seen much of the world and suffered greatly before he had finally met his wife Eswara and found happiness at last.

Martin deferred to Lawrence. "You must know all about it from living in India for so many years."

Lawrence explained the festival of colors to his wife briefly.

"I'd love to visit India itself," Martin said with a sigh. "You must tell me what it was like living there from the English perspective."

"It wasn't always easy, but it was incredible. I'd love to take Juliet some time. Though, with so many months at sea in both directions..."

She smiled up at her husband. "Oh, I don't know, I think we could

find ample things to help us pass the time most pleasantly."

He grinned at her, and would have kissed her senseless had they not been in company.

"Anyway, you must come to London with us next year for Holi," Martin offered. "Or any other occasion you like."

"Perhaps," Lawrence said coolly.

"It's so good to celebrate spring at last. A time of new beginnings," Eswara said with a smile. "And I'll bet you met on the second of February."

Lawrence thought for a moment. "Yes, yes we did. But what--"

"Bryony would tell you it's the Celtic fertility festival of Imbolc, which means 'in the belly'."

Lawrence nodded and shrugged.

Juliet stared at her friend pointedly, then gave a slight shake of her head.

"More tea, anyone," Ash offered. "And then I get to tell everyone about my wedding." He beamed at his new blond wife in a way which filled Juliet with not a little envy.

Eswara's brows had shot up at Juliet's silent warning, and to the younger woman's relief, she had let Ash take center stage.

But as soon as the two of them were alone, Eswara whispered, "You need to tell him some time, Juliet. I can scarcely credit the fact that he hasn't figured it out already."

She shrugged. "many men are ignorant of such things. Besides, it's best to err on the side of caution. Remember my mother's history. Let's just get past the first three months, shall we?"

"All right. But I'm telling you, you need to be honest with him. It's because of your mother's past history that I say that."

"But things are going so well at the moment, I really don't want things to change," Juliet confessed with a sigh.

"They might get better," Eswara suggested.

She shook her head slowly. "I wish I could think that, but I don't."

"You need to trust each other."

Juliet shrugged. "I'd like to. But he doesn't trust me."

"He doesn't trust love."

"Of course I love him--"

Eswara smiled. "I meant his love for you."

Juliet wagged her head quickly from side to side, and rose from the window seat where they had gone for their *tete a tete*. "Oh, no, he doesn't--"

"I'll be you anything you like that he does. You'll see. It won't be easy, but he does."

The Duke of Ellesmere and his wife also called, and Clifford Stone and his family. Jonathan came to visit as well to encourage them to join the rest of the parish on Sundays now that Lawrence was home and the boys were living with them.

Lawrence agreed to do so and apologised for missing Easter. "I've been so busy with the tea trade and settling into this house and getting to know my nephews, it all slipped my mind."

"No matter. Come any time. You're always welcome," Jonathan reassured him.

Lawrence smiled back. He was almost starting to feel as though it were true. And as hard as he tried to be suspicious of the Rakehells, he could find nothing objectionable about their conversation, manners, or way they treated Juliet and the boys, as if they had known them all their lives.

Perhaps it was not so terrible being a family man with a good set of acquaintance after all.... Or the husband of the most beautiful woman in all of Somerset, he reflected, as his wife smiled across at him as though he had just given her the greatest gift by agreeing to take them to church.

Nash was less than pleased to discover Lawrence had been home for over a week and never once attended to business. He was clever enough at defrauding Lawrence behind his back, but he needed him to sign papers and do all the running which would made his trading deals so successful that the pickings would be ripe.

He came to the house and in a subtle way reprimanded Juliet for

keeping Lawrence from important duties.

She stared at him for a moment after he had spoken to her in the drawing room, where she had been tidying away the boys' toys now that they had gone up for their naps.

It might well be true, but it wasn't his employee's place to say so and she told him as much.

"Don't make an enemy of me," he warned. "I can send you scuttling back to whatever whorehouse you came from with your tail between your legs. Or my tail between your legs."

Juliet gasped and clamped her hand to her mouth.

"What's going on here?" Lawrence asked, entering the room just then.

"Just getting better acquainted with your charming wife," Nash drawled.

The way he said the last two words made it sound like an insult.

Lawrence frowned and looked from one to the other. "Well come along, don't dawdle. If you really need me in Bristol, let's go." He gave his wife a warm kiss and promised her he would see her later.

Juliet sat down in front of the fire, stunned. How had Nash dared be so rude? Here was an enemy indeed. And a friend to Matilda, if he had defrauded Lawrence in order to even take the housekeeping money, she guessed, thinking back over his attitude from the moment he had seen her in the carriage.

An uneasy prickle at the base of her spine sent her running to Eswara.

"The baby is fine," she reassured her after a brief examination. "Don't get yourself into such a state."

"I'm sorry, it's just—"

The unusual golden eye missed nothing. "Tell me what's really bothering you."

Juliet confided in her friend at once as to what had just happened in the drawing room.

To her relief, Eswara agreed with her assessment that something strange was going on. "I know the servants were most peculiar. They

hardly did a stroke of work that I could see. I thin you're right, there is more to him than meets the eye. Confide in your brother. Perhaps he'll be able to find out--"

She shook her head. "No, I couldn't. Besides, Nash has been with Lawrence for years. He trusts him. It isn't my place to interfere in the business."

"Still, I would keep an eye on him. Your intuition that he's a threat must be based on something."

She nodded. "Thanks, I will."

"And do me a favour? Take the martial arts lessons from Ash?"

"No, I couldn't."

"Me or Martin then?"

"No, really," Juliet protested. "Whatever would Lawrence think if he found out I had been brawling with a man."

"Not brawling. Learning to be independent."

Juliet looked around the exotically appointed sitting room and sighed. "I think he believes I'm independent enough without snapping men's arms and legs off."

"So you still haven't told him who you really are?"

She shrugged. "I'm Juliet Howard, his wife."

Eswara shook her head. "He's going to find out. Then what will he say. He'll be furious in direct proportion to how much of a fool he feels when he does."

She sighed, and nodded. "If he asks me about my past life, I'll tell him. Otherwise, he doesn't seem to care. All he's interested in is the future."

"But we're the sum of all our parts. Especially him. He can never move forward if he doesn't look back."

Juliet grinned. "Now that's just one of your cryptic Hindu sayings which sound very spooky and mysterious."

Eswara shook her head. "You've sensed it. He's refused to talk about it. But he and the boys are never going to be healed if you don't discuss it."

"I can't force him to--"

The older woman nodded. "I know. Just be there for Lawrence. Tell him you love him. It's a big risk, but--"

Juliet nodded. "I know. But I risk more if I don't tell him."

"Tell him everything," Eswara urged. "Secrets in a marriage are never healthy, even if you think you're protecting the other person."

"I will tell him about the baby, and about me."

"When?"

"Soon." She gave her friend a reassuring smile. "I promise."

A couple of days later Lawrence came upon his wife in the study. She quickly put her history manuscript under the tea story she had been jotting down when she got some spare time whilst the boys were at their lessons.

He gave her a warm hug and kiss. "I was thinking about your tea bag idea."

"Yes?" she said carefully.

"Well, it would have to have enough tea in it to make a whole pot, and would have to have enough room for the contents to infuse, about triple the size of the quantity, four times for luck."

"What shape?" she asked promptly.

He considered this for a time. "I don't think it matters. Whatever would be easiest for the women to make."

"Square or rectangular, you would have to sew four sides, triangular three, round, you need to go right the way around. We talked about a little drawstring and putting your tag on them."

"With instructions for use?"

"Yes. You can dictate and I'll note it down."

He did not hesitate, and she did not take umbrage at the use of her as a secretary. She was just glad to be of help, and that he had taken her idea seriously.

"Always use good quality tea. Always use freshly drawn cold water. If using leaf tea, put in one heaped teaspoon per person, plus

one for the pot. When the water is at boiling point, pour onto the tea and leave to infuse for five to six minutes or to taste. Stir and pour. Add milk first or last depending on taste. China and green teas, which are light and delicate, do not generally take milk well, and flavored teas are better without milk."

"All very good, but the problem is the tag would have to be huge," she pointed out.

"So we can print up a bigger card, with the bag attached."

"If you have the money for it."

"That's fine."

"So the tag on the bag itself will have the name of the shop address, and type of tea?"

"Type?"

"You are trading in both Darjeeling and Assam, are you not?"

He felt a surge of pride at his wife's intelligence, and the interest she had taken in what he had told her. "I had thought only the Darjeeling, but you might be right. To get people to try the Assam would be most beneficial. It's much more full-bodied."

"If it were popular with people who found China tea too insipid, just think of the market potential."

"Most people might not even notice the difference."

"They would if they tried yours, liked it, and you were the only person with a steady supply."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "It could be a bit risky. I might damage my Darjeeling business on a chimera."

"Or you might develop a taste that no other tea shop has, and one that would catch the royal family's attention," she argued astutely.

He nodded at length. "You could be right." His silvery-gray eyes shone proudly as he looked at his intelligent wife.

"You have nothing to lose by trying. These are all free samples, after all. Keep track of your streets. Hand out Darjeeling in one, and Assam in the other, and when customers come in, and perhaps might wish to place a regular monthly order for say, a special discount, see which street they come from," she suggested.

"And for a third street, hand out a sample of each, and see which is most requested. Once you know your customer, you can offer them other type of tea, make them feel special, exclusive, discerning."

He smiled at her, filled with enthusiasm for the experiment. "You know, you could be right about that. Do you think you can locate a reasonable printer in Bristol to make up the various cards and tags?"

"Yes, I can if you like. And find the muslin and string to use for the tea bags. Whatever we use will have to stand up to boiling water and in some cases a bit of mashing."

"Excellent thoughts. I shall send for the carriage." He absent-mindedly kissed her on the cheek, and strode out of the room, calling for his coat and her cloak.

She smiled with delight. He had listened to her. Liked her idea. Was willing to let her try it. She wondered what he would say if she suggested the little property she had seen in Cheap Street right next to the milliner's as being the ideal spot for a tea house? And if they were really canny, they might even persuade the owner Mrs. Parkins to knock a door through so her ladies could refresh themselves during a long period of trying things on, for example, a new bride planning her *trousseau*, a lady with new gowns for the season. Or they could go in to wait whilst their parcels were being wrapped. If it had an ambiance of gentility and exclusivity, people would be flocking.

Sally Lunn's was the nearest competition, but the draw there was the baked goods. Tea and sandwiches and a more refined bill of fare as well as the convenience and the uniqueness of the tea would be Lawrence's selling points.

She ventured to suggest this as they sat in the coach together, and he listened patiently. "I'm not sure I want to commit to yet another-"

"But here are so many wealthy people in Bath. And the invalids. We could also market the tea as a restorative. The shop would be literally around the corner from the Baths. We might never find so fine a site again. Not to mention the fact that it might not be so big a risk as you think. Mrs. Parkins would probably be delighted at the opportunity to offer something new to her clientele. She might be willing to split the cost of the refurbishment of the property with you.

And what would you really need? Water, a good fire, and some fine porcelain-"

"I can get that all that easily," he said, nodding. "What about the decor?"

"We could make it like a drawing room at home. With some books and ladies journals. A *salon du the*. Or more exotic, with some fine silks, and an oriental feel, like the Pavilion in Brighton? Eswara Jerome might let us have some of her silks at a really good price, or again, we can barter with Mrs. Parkins?"

He said nothing for so long she was convinced he would veto the idea, until he banged on the roof of the carriage.

"Bentley, I've changed my mind. We need to stop in Bath first. Cheap Street."

He looked at her and gave one of his small tight half-smiles. "Of course, if the property is as desirable as it seemed that day we saw it, it may already be let, but there's no harm in looking and asking."

It was not only not let, but available at once at a reasonable monthly rate. Though small, it had a fine picture window overlooking the street where the fashionable women could see and be seen.

"And would you have any objection to knocking a door in through the property next door if the proprietress were amenable, and giving us first option if she should ever decide to terminate her lease?" Juliet asked the estate agent.

Lawrence gave her a long look, but said nothing.

"I don't see why not, if you were willing to take possession immediately, and let me have three months' rent in advance."

"We are," Lawrence said firmly.

Juliet's heart surged with joy. What a thrilling prospect to be sure. Now if only Mrs. Parkins would agree to their plans.

He took the papers that the estate agent offered him and they parted with a gentleman's agreement to consider the property his effective upon the payment of the rent.

Then they went to see Mrs. Parkins, who was not averse to the idea, but said she would have to think about it. They discussed the price of her fabrics and some thoughts on the decorations, and a

steady supply of muslin and twisted cotton cord.

"And some girls who can ply the needle to make little sachets for tea samples?"

"I would be only too pleased to help. Nothing fancy?"

"No, just cutting out and sturdy moderately neat stitches. Any young lady who wishes to earn some extra money can do it."

"I can spread the word, certainly. Many of the women have daughters who would be only too happy for the pocket money."

"Good then. We'll supply all the materials and set a price per dozen bags?"

"That would be fine. And they can call in here to collect them if you like."

"I wouldn't want to put you to too much trouble. But we'll see how it goes if we knock the door through by all means."

"Very good. A pleasure doing business with you both."

The two women shook hands. Only when Juliet left the shop did she realise that she had taken over the proceedings completely. She steeled herself for a tongue-lashing from her husband.

To her surprise he said, "Well done. That last part means you've convinced her. She will think about it for a couple of days, get used to the idea, and get used to having us around. Now all you'll have to do is hire some decent waitstaff and people to keep the place spotless."

"And draw up menus and set the prices and get furniture, remember?" she reminded him, checking each item off on her slender fingers as they headed back to their waiting carriage.

"Furniture and crockery will be easy. The *Samsara* will be coming in with porcelain and Japanned furniture. We can go see Eswara when we get back, and Jonathan. He will have poor people he knows from the parishes who need work making the bags and filling them. Well done, Juliet. I'm very proud of you."

She beamed at him as if he'd give her a million pounds.

Nash was livid when he heard that Juliet was becoming involved in the business, and did everything he could to discourage Lawrence

without saying anything outright. "But Boss, with the boys--"

"She's very capable."

"But a woman, flighty--"

"I've not found her to be so."

"You didn't see her when you were gone."

"Why, what are you accusing her of?" Lawrence asked with a scowl.

"Nothing, nothing," he said, though he allowed his gaze to slide away as if he were concealing something.

Lawrence shook his head. "Don't tell me nothing. What are you saying?"

"Just that she was inseparable from that young black buck Ash Paignton."

"When?" Lawrence asked coolly.

"March," he said vaguely.

"When?"

"The end of March. Saw them together several times."

"And tell me, did you happen to stay at our house for tea?"

"Er, yes, waited for her for ages. Cook was most entertaining. She makes fine meals."

"Why are you lying to me?" Lawrence demanded.

"What?" Nash gasped, trying to look wounded.

"I'm asking you why you're lying to me about my wife, damn it! It's a simple enough question," Lawrence barked.

"What on earth would make you think I was--"

"Never mind. I'm going to let the matter drop because I can see what your game is. You don't like her being involved in something which is not her provenance. But she's my wife, and this is *my* company. I hire and fire, and don't you forget it. You may have been with me for many years, Nash, but that can change in a minute if I find out you've been playing fast and loose behind my back!"

"What has she been saying to you? I never--"

Lawrence fixed a cold eye upon his factor. "She didn't say anything. *You* just did. Might I suggest you go up North for a couple of weeks to oversee the new warehouses being set up and--"

"But you're suppose to be going," the red-haired man protested angrily. Then he clamped his mouth shut, as his boss gave him a look which told him he had clearly overstepped his bound.

"I have a family now, Nash. You don't. *You* can go."

"I never thought I'd see the day when--"

"When what?"

"When *what*?" he repeated when Nash stood glaring at him, grinding his teeth.

"When you'd be led around by the cock by a little whore like that," he burst out, no longer able to contain his wrath that all his plans had go so badly awry thanks to that little bitch Juliet. How on earth had she managed in so short a time to turn upside down his whole plot that he had been putting into effect for months?

Lawrence's eye narrowed dangerously. "All women are whores to you, aren't they?"

"Yes! Some are just a bit more honest about it than others," he fired back.

"You don't need to be a woman to be a whore. Plenty of men sell themselves for money as well." He gave his employee a withering look, then took a deep breath, forcibly restraining his temper as he was teaching himself to do around Juliet. "

"Look, I don't want to fight with you, Nash. But I am master here, not you. I work far too hard for it to be otherwise. And your judgement about the house and budget there has been less than it ought to be. Your remark about my wife even less so, and completely uncalled for as well.

"Therefore, I would suggest you leave first thing in the morning, and don't come back for a few weeks until I've had time to simmer down, and you are prepared to mind your manners and remember exactly what your station is in life."

Lawrence stamped out of the small office, leaving Nash shocked and in utter turmoil. *Lawrence was starting to suspect...*

And that little bitch had pointed the finger at him. Well, two could play at that game. Like Iago to Othello, he could whisper poison in his Lawrence's easily enough given the chance.

But that would have to wait. He had to go to Liverpool now. He needed someone to look after his interests whilst he was away. It was time to tell Matilda to drop her diddling with all her *beaux* in London and move on with the next phase of his plan.

Juliet took to the tea trade like a duck to water. There was much to learn, but her husband was more patient than she could ever have imagined. Their tea house was complete in record time thanks to her hard work and some help from Eswara. The Avenel wives also assisted, and were delighted to proffer advice and spread the word about the grand opening and the Howard teas, and even to help take around samples.

"We've done the whole of the Royal Crescent, samples of both, and North Street, Assam on the north side and Darjeeling on the south."

"Thank you, Isolde, but you really shouldn't be walking so much."

"Nonsense, it's good for the baby. Besides, my dear, I don't see *you* slowing down."

"Sush, not so loud."

Isolde gaped. "What, you still haven't told Lawrence? He must be the most obtuse man alive."

"Not obtuse, just, well, not familiar with ladies in the most strictly intimate sense."

"Blind too, for you're fairly glowing."

Ash came in with his wife Ellen not long after. They both partook of some refreshment, and expressed their opinion on her final choice of menu.

"Keep it simple but exclusive. Nothing too exotic, though my mother makes a chicken in creamed coconut which is simply divine. The secret is matching the tea to the food. So, for example, with Assam, a cucumber or tomato sandwich, or a lemon tart. With Darjeeling, cream cheese or egg and cress sandwich, and creamy

desserts. With your former favourite, Lapsang Souchong, chicken or smoked salmon sandwiches, or walnut cake. And with the tea with bergamot, fine pate or a ham and mustard sandwich, and most definitely creme brulee."

"Thank you both. You've been a big help."

"We'll be there for the opening, but in the meantime, let us both wish you luck." They each gave her a warm hug and kiss, and nodded to Lawrence, who had just come in the door and witnessed the exchange.

He tried to tell himself there had been nothing in Nash's lie that he had seen Juliet and Ash together, especially since was sure he had been up in London for Holi, and was newly married to a lovely wife. Still, he felt himself bristle with jealousy as soon as he saw them.

"What is it?" Juliet asked with a worried frown, seeing one of *those* looks on his face again.

"No, it's nothing," he denied with a shake of his head, trying to snap out of his dark reverie. "I just wanted to see how you were coming along."

She smiled happily. "Everyone who has come to put in their tuppence worth has helped me narrow down the menu. The cards will be written out neatly, and the supplies all laid in. The adverts are already being put out, and the samples have all been sent round. Now all we have to do is wait."

"It will be fine, I'm sure," he said stiffly, still seething over the kiss on the cheek she had permitted the handsome young doctor.

Juliet's elegant dark brows knit. "Lawrence, if you don't think I'm up to the task of--"

He hastened to reassure her, "No, of course not. You've been amazing. Your friends too. It's just a big undertaking and you looked a bit, well, flushed."

She put one hand to the small of her back. "*Our* friends. As for your other remark, well, true, but it's nothing a good massage wouldn't cure."

That was precisely the worst thing she could have said given Lawrence's suspicions of Ash. He took her hand roughly and led her to the waiting coach.

"Are you going to tell me what's flown up your nose now, or am I just supposed to guess?" she asked wearily as soon as they were seated inside. She might have known things were going too well between them.

"Nothing. I just don't like other men pawing you, that's all."

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "Pawing? Where did that word come from? And do you mean *Ash*?"

"Yes."

"But he's a married man!"

Lawrence snorted derisively. "I can name you at least a dozen for whom that consideration would never even enter their mind."

She gasped as though she had been dealt a blow, and hugged her arms around her waist. "Are you including yourself in that group?"

"Yes," he said nastily, though he took no satisfaction from her wounded look after all.

Her hand flew to her stomach and she tried not to be ill. Juliet compressed her lips tightly. She was not going to fight and argue with him. And she was damned if she was going to let her spoil her opening in only two days' time.

Her next words surprised them both. "Tell me about the different kinds of tea again. Green, Black and Oolong. And about tea grades. I need to know what I'm talking about on Monday."

"Juliet--"

"The tea, please. It is after all more important to you than anything. And so it should be. You've given up so much for it. Including a large portion of your humanity."

"Juliet--"

"The tea!" she gritted out. "Or I'm going to get out of this coach and walk home."

She moved toward the door, and he saw from her violet eyes he really had pushed her too far.

He sighed. "Very well, the tea."

She settled back in her seat with her arms crossed, not so much as touching him with even the hem of her skirt.

He longed to reach for her and wipe her expression of seeming indifference off her face, but he knew his own anger well enough by now to decide he just couldn't trust himself to touch her in this frame of mind.

So he took a deep breath and started. "Much is dependent upon leaf size and processing methods. In India we use Flower Pekoe, tiny shoots and unopened buds. In China their tea grade is Orange Pekoe, when the youngest opened leaves are picked. It's called that because of the orange hue of the leaves. With Souchong, older, coarser leaves closer to the trunk of the shrub are picked.

"Another factor in the picking of young leaves is call a 'flush.' This is the sprouting of new buds and leaves on a plant. These fresh young leaves and buds are then picked. A tea plant may flush more than three times within a single growing season. In Darjeeling we might have had two flushes a year, perhaps three in a mild one. In Assam, we get flushes all year round, so we get a far greater yield."

"Tell me the steps for processing the tea leaves after they've been picked."

"But I've told you and the boys this."

"Remind me again," she requested, her nerves finally steadying. "I'll see if I can recollect it all."

"All right. First comes the withering, when the tea leaves are spread on racks or troughs to reduce their moisture content. Then the rolling, so that their structure breaks down to release their natural juices. This begins the fermentation process."

"For teas which are fermented. Not all of them are," Juliet interjected.

"That's right. In any event, fermentation takes place when the tea is spread on trays in a cool, humid atmosphere to let the air get at the leaves. It changes the chemical structure of the leaf, and allows the tea's characteristic flavor to emerge. The longer a tea is allowed to ferment, the stronger flavor it will have and the darker it will become."

"Then comes the firing," Juliet said, trusting her voice to keep steady at last. "The leaves are dried and the fermentation process is halted. In this stage, the leaves move through hot ovens to stabilize the leaves and lock in the flavor."

"Finally there is the grading, when the longer leaves, commonly called orange pekoes, are used for loose teas. The left-over fannings and dust from the process are used for filler and for the very poor."

He nodded, please with her intelligence and memory. "Very good. So now you can tell me the difference between Green, Black, and Oolong teas."

"Green teas are pan-fired in a wok to remove the substance which would otherwise cause the leaves to ferment. They also become soft, pliable, and easier to work with. The leaves are rolled on heated trays to break down its structure, and bring out the flavor juices. After this is done, the leaves are dried or 'fired' until they are truly seared, and then the tea is ready for packing and export. For centuries the only tea drunk was green."

"Very good. Now tell me about Oolong," he requested.

She obliged readily. "Oolong, which in Chinese means 'black dragon,' is relatively new compared to green and black teas. Oolong teas are only partially fermented, which results in a tea that is stronger in flavor than green teas, but softer, lighter, and more subtle than black teas. The leaves are processed in the same manner as black teas, but they are not allowed to ferment as long.

"Very good," he praised sincerely. "So tell me about black teas."

"They are not pan-fired in a wok, but withered like the Oolong. They're placed in a room for about a day, and then the leaves are soft enough to be rolled, by hand, into little balls. It goes through all the processes you described, but the firing is the key. During the firing the leaves turn dark brown, not black, and lose most of their moisture. If the firing is not done correctly, and the leaves are too dark, the resulting cup of tea will taste weak."

"Excellent. I think you know all you need to know."

She shook her head. "There are some things I would really rather not know."

Lawrence sighed. "I'm sorry I said what I did before. Look, I can't promise to be faithful to you for the rest of my life. I would be a liar if I did. Any honest man would tell you the same thing. All I know is I'm going to try my damndest to succeed. I'm not a good man by any means. But I do wish to at least try to take my marriage vows

seriously."

"Anything else I need to know? About the tea I mean," Juliet said coolly.

"I don't think so. Is there anything I need to know?" he said with a pointed look.

She gazed at him levelly. "Nothing. Nothing at all. We're both fine. Don't go looking for trouble where none exists."

"I shall try."

"Then so shall I."

Chapter Twenty

Juliet wanted to believe Lawrence had been faithful to her during their marriage, but Matilda turning up seemingly by special invitation at her grand opening, and local flirt Georgina Jerome practically throwing herself at her husband, was more than enough to ruin what should have been a happy day.

"Don't pay either of those blondes any mind. They'll try to quiddle anyone's cod," Ash said with a dismissive wave of his hand, putting his arm around his wife.

Ellen nodded. "It's true. My own sister tried to poach my husband right out from under my nose."

"But I was chaste before I wed, and shall remain so," Ash said firmly.

Juliet sighed pensively. "Lawrence told me the other day that he couldn't promise to be faithful to me for the rest of our lives," she confided in a low tone. "That he would be a liar if he did. That any honest man would tell me the same thing. Yet you tell me with such certainty--"

The handsome young doctor nodded. "I can be sure because it's an active choice. I make it every day. Mind over the body, or fleshly desires. I love my wife too much to ever pollute what we share. To dissipate my energies which should be focused only upon making her happy. And I care too much for my fellow human beings to treat them as though they're only on this earth to be used as my entertainment."

"There's also your work, just as Lawrence is always so busy. How do you balance it all? I feel like I hardly know him."

"You're doing the right thing here," he said, indicating the bustle of the tea room. "What better way to understand something than engage with it."

Ellen nodded sympathetically. "That's why I study with Ash. This work is so important to him, I would be missing out on a great deal

otherwise."

"Still, might it not seem a bit, er, unladylike to many?"

Ash grinned. "Not much worse than what you've already done, your two successful careers."

"Sush, he might hear you."

Ash looked at her closely for a moment. "I don't think I have to tell you of all people about the ill effects of secrets upon a marriage."

Juliet shook her head. "No, it's just that there never seems to be enough time or the right moment to confide in him."

"Make the time," Ellen urged. "He's certainly most taken with you. I know he can be a bit rough around the edges, but I'm sure he loves you."

Juliet gave a shaky laugh. "I only wish I could be so sure."

"I know many of men's spheres are closed to women as of yet, but things are changing. Lawrence might prove more understanding than you're giving him credit for," Ash said.

He took Ellen's hand. "I love my wife and want to see her happy. But I also have to be happy myself in order to be able to do that. Part of loving someone is loving oneself. You don't need to be a martyr, Juliet.

"I'm not, Ash," she protested sincerely. "Most of the time, my marriage has been wonderful."

"You mean when you're with Lawrence," Ellen said with a knowing wink. "Well, it's a start. But you need to cultivate that which makes you happy too, not just live your life for your husband and children. Though as Ash just said, you're making a good start here, and we wish you much success." The dazzling blonde kissed Juliet on the cheek.

"I'm glad you both approve. I think it will be the making of Lawrence, and my marriage too. But I'm not just doing it for my husband. I want that meaningful life as well that Ash just mentioned.

"I just wish, well, I wish Lawrence shared your principles on chastity in wedlock," she sighed, pleating the skirt of her new green gown with nervous fingers.

"In this case, it's clear what the right thing to do is, and I assure

you, it is no hardship. If it were ever to become one for either of us, I would like to think that we have a close enough marriage to be able to discuss it and weather any small storms which may arise. If we don't make a drama out of things, it will be no more than a tempest in a teacup.

"At other times, principles can be as prickly as a thornbush. But it's all part of who I am, and Ellen understands that."

"Or at least I'm beginning to. It has got us into a couple of scrapes, though," Ellen confided.

"Oh, really?" Juliet asked, looking from one to the other.

"The Duke thinks I'm fluttering his wife," he whispered in her ear.

Juliet's eyes flew wide.

Lawrence could not help catching his wife's look.

"Oh, no, Ash, surely not," she whispered when she could find her tongue again.

He nodded solemnly. "No, of course not. He misunderstood something and is, well, upset. Jealousy kills."

"I shall of course defend you if asked," Juliet said stoutly, not in the least doubting Ash's innocence. He might be rather outlandish compared to many in the district, but one thing was for certain, he was not a womanizer or hypocrite.

He shrugged one shoulder as though the matter were not in the least important, though the enmity of the Duke could mean almost certain ruin for the up and coming young doctor's career. "Thank you, dear friend, but I fear it will do little good."

Juliet stared at him. "But you just told me your principles--"

"Ah, but some men don't understand them. Perhaps it is because so few live up to them."

She gulped her cup of Assam tea nervously, then shook her head. "I don't understand, Ash. You're not a rattle or rake. What on earth would make Thomas think--"

"I can't break a confidence. But I think if you told him your story again, it might clear things up for him?"

She frowned up at him. "*My* story?"

"About you and your sister, how you lost your parents."

She clapped her hand to her mouth.

Ash took her other hand before she turned away. He squeezed it gently. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings on this of all days, when you're supposed to be basking in the glow of your success. But Thomas needs to hear it, and soon, before he says or does something he will truly regret. Promise me."

"All right. I promise."

"Thank you." He kissed her cheek.

Ellen hugged her warmly, and they moved away, leaving Juliet staring after them pensively.

"Has he been upsetting you?" Lawrence demanded angrily as soon as the other couple was out of earshot.

She blinked up at him, still dazed by all Ash had said. "No, not at all. He just reminded me of something a bit disturbing, that's all."

"What, pray?" her husband demanded.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. We can talk about it later. Right now, we have customers and guests."

She gathered her wits about her, adjusted her deep purple shawl and gown, and plastered a smile on her face, though her day felt well and truly clouded over, especially when she looked across the room at Thomas Eltham, and saw the Duke glaring at Ash from his corner wherever the young man went.

When she caught Thomas a third time, she steeled herself and said to Lawrence, "Can you please go speak to Clifford and Jonathan to thank them for coming? I need to talk to the Duke privately."

"The Duke?" Lawrence asked, sounding completely shocked at the very notion. "But why?"

"He needs my help, apparently."

"*Your* help?" Lawrence asked, staring down at his wife as though she has sprouted three heads.

She fixed him with her violet eyes. "You needn't sound so surprised. If you didn't continually dismiss me as a trollop all the time, you might see that I had a grasp of some things beyond your ken."

"If you didn't always act like a trollop, maybe I wouldn't," he shot back before he even realized he had opened his mouth.

She closed her eyes and swayed for a moment. "Get out of my way."

"You are *not* going over there," Lawrence insisted, trying to block her way, his jealousy soaring out of control once more.

Juliet might have considered obeying, if only in order to avoid causing a scene at their grand opening. But she could see across the room that the handsome couple were now exchanging heated words. Charlotte fled into the opposite corner a moment later, looking near tears.

That decided Juliet in an instant. She took a deep, steadying breath and declared in a low tone, "Short of knocking me unconscious or carrying me out of this shop over your shoulder, you can't stop me, Lawrence. You're welcome to come with me to hear what I have to say, but say it I shall."

She swept passed him, head held high, and went over to offer the Duke her hand as if they were old friends.

Lawrence stared at her in impotent fury, but he could do little other than greet newcomers with a fixed smile on his face while he watched her every move.

It was bad enough her flirting with Ash. Now she was working her wiles on the Duke of Ellesmere?

Thomas's expression went from polite interest to wariness to alarm. His head shot up and he looked at his wife with a mixture of shock, horror, and joy. His cup and saucer clattered to the floor unheeded.

The small crash turned all eyes towards that corner of the room, but the Rakehell Duke didn't care. Thomas hugged Juliet, and then ran over to his wife. He kissed her hard, picked her up despite her embarrassed protests, and left the shop, all eyes gazing after them with amusement or shock.

The tea room opening was now assured to be a success—no one in Bath would be able to talk about anything else for days.

Juliet stooped to clean up the shards, and gave a small smile. The broken porcelain was a tiny price to pay for helping bring the

estranged couple back together. If only her own marriage could be managed so simply.

Once Juliet had helped the Elthams mend their marriage, she avoided her glowering husband to make sure everyone felt welcome and had all they desired. All her guests and patrons seemed to be having a wonderful time.

Everyone except her and her husband.

Lawrence was in a fine temper by the time they closed for the day, but refrained from shouting all the way home in the coach.

Juliet kept waiting for him to tear into her. This new, restrained Lawrence was almost more terrifying than the blustering one.

As soon as they got home, the boys ran over to hug her, her and asked if things had gone well.

"Very well, indeed," she said, embracing each of them warmly in turn, before handing them some cake which she had saved for them.

"Thank you," they chorused in delight.

"If you'll excuse me, I just have to do my accounts," she said calmly, making her way to the library. "Do you want to come help me count, lads?"

"Yes, indeed. I want to know just how much Ash and Thomas are paying to frig you!" Lawrence bellowed.

Young Andrew went wild then, throwing himself at Juliet's knees and screaming. She could barely make out the words he shrieked.

Stuart's tears and equally violent response sent her tumbling to the floor. She held her stomach and tried to comfort them both at the same time, completely at a loss as to what could have set them off.

When Lawrence moved to help them up, Stuart shouted, "Don't touch her!"

Andrew's words at last became clear. "Don't hit her! Don't hit her!"

Lawrence and Juliet stared at each other, appalled.

Then she *knew*.

She swallowed back her horror, and took a deep breath. "It's all

right," she said in her most reassuring tone. "Lawrence would never hit me. I'm fine. Just because we argue sometimes doesn't mean we don't love each other. That he's going to hurt me."

"Please don't leave us," Andrew wept.

She stroked the sobbing boy's hair, close to tears herself. "No, pet, no, I'm not going to leave. We're a family. Nothing bad is going to happen, I promise.

"Now come, Lawrence will tell you the monkey story again, and we'll have our cake and some milk." She rose from the floor unsteadily, her husband gripping her elbow to aid her.

She looked into his turbulent silver eyes pointedly. "Lawrence, darling, will you please get the milk?"

He nodded wordlessly, shocked to the core by what the boys had unwittingly revealed, and ran to the kitchen.

He steadied himself with both hands on the large table in the center of the room, breathing deeply until he felt he could face his family once more. The darkness which always felt as though it were lurking in the corners of his mind had now begun to show itself, and he was as horrified as his wife.

It certainly explained a lot though. Things he had never wanted to remember now teemed in his brain. *No*.

He grabbed the milk jug and some glasses and small cups for the boys, and stalked back out as though the hounds of hell were after him.

By the time he returned he saw that she had got them settled on the sofa, one on either side of her. His heart shrivelled in his chest when he saw all three of them huddled in a forlorn heap looking at him so suspiciously. He put the tray down on the table, poured a drink for each, then and pulled up a chair to sit across from them.

He took a drink from his own cup, hardly able to trust his voice as he repeated their favourite story. His tone came out reassuringly normal as he began, "The first Monkey tea allegedly came from Mount Ying-T'ang near Wenchow in Chekiang Province. It's a lonely place haunted by wild beasts. But in the hidden valleys there were numerous monasteries with monks or tenants engaged in farming and fruit growing.

"According to the legend, a very young novice from the Heavenly Wisdom Monastery was looking after some pear trees covered with ripening fruit. Suddenly a large tribe of monkeys came swarming from the forest and set about gobbling up all the pears. By the time a few monks came running over in response to the little novice's cries for help, the trees had been stripped bare.

"They returned to the monastery with heads held low, expecting a severe scolding from the abbot. Instead, the old man said resignedly, 'Heaven commands us to show compassion to all living creatures, and so does the teaching of the Buddha. Things come and go. Moreover, monkeys, like all sentient beings, have a spiritual nature. They have taken our pears. Well, so be it.'

"From then on, those holy men allowed the mischievous little monkeys to come and go freely. The wild monkeys gradually lost their fear of the men, and came to regard the monks as friends.

"The winter that year was unusually cold. Heavy falls of snow lay upon trees and mountains, and hundreds of unfortunate beasts starved to death.

"After weeks of bitter weather, a horde of ravenous monkeys invaded the monastery grounds and, in an agitated state, ran about half-pleading, half menacing, as though to say, 'Please give us food, or else we shall just have to break in and take it.'

"So the abbot ordered that bags of food be taken out and distributed to the monkeys, whereupon the animals, responding with loud cries, seized the bags and ran back into the forest.

"With the arrival of spring came the time for harvesting all the tea leaves. While this arduous labor was being performed, hundreds of monkeys came swarming down from the peaks. Only this time, instead of looking for food, they were dragging along the old burlap bags they had been given, which now bulged with freshly picked young tea leaves.

"The tea, having been picked in places inaccessible to the monks, was found to be of unrivaled quality. Because of this, fine tea from China is often known as Monkey tea."

By the time Lawrence reached the end of the story, the two overwrought boys had fallen asleep.

"You need to rest too," he whispered to his wife, who looked so bone-weary it made his heart ache. "I'll get supper."

"Hand me my work basket as long as I'm sitting here," Juliet whispered back.

He shook his head. "Bugger the work basket. Just rest."

He went behind the sofa and stroked her neck, then kissed her on the brow.

When supper was ready, Lawrence called them in to the dining room, but the meal was a remarkably silent affair. Soon the children asked shyly to be excused, and went up to bed and lay down without a murmur or request for a story.

Juliet hugged and kissed them both, and they allowed Lawrence to stroke their hair. He felt as though he had kicked a pair of kittens, and almost couldn't contain his longing to be alone with Juliet and make it up to her.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway and closed the boys' door behind her, he said, "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouted at you and scared the boys. I mustn't let that happen again." He sighed. "I can't promise to curb my tongue all the time, my dear, but I never want them to be frightened or insecure."

She nodded. "Thank you. I understand. Neither do I. I really don't know what set them off, but I shall try to be vigilant. If we have any personal matters to discuss, we should make sure we do it when they're safely in bed."

"Quite," he said with a wink.

Juliet sighed, and looked away from his intense gaze. She began to walk down the corridor to her own chamber. "But what you have accused me of is inexcusable, so if you will forgive me, it's been a long day. I think I would like to retire to my room alone."

His face fell. They hadn't spent one night apart since he had returned from his trip to the north. "But I've said I'm sorry."

She turned to face him. "And you think that's just going to wipe the slate clean?"

Lawrence stared at her silently.

Juliet stepped up to him and took his face in both her palms. "I know this has been hard for you. Please believe me when I say I love you, Lawrence. Yes, love you, in spite of everything," she said in response to his startled look.

"But I can't go on like this any more. It's evident you don't love me. I doubt you ever will. Because you don't even know who I am. To you I'm Juliet Howard, the inconvenient whore and wife you've been leg-shackled to."

"Now that's not—"

"Isn't it?" she challenged. "Things are fine between us for a little while, then it all pops right back up again. And how could it not? After all these weeks, you still don't know me."

"In the normal way of things we would have courted, learned all the essentials. Now you're too busy with work and our new family. Not that I blame you for that. I do blame you for hardening your heart against me. Or maybe it isn't possible for us to be happy. Perhaps you really just don't know what love is. How to bestow it. Or maybe you think it's what you do between my thighs all night, every night."

He blushed at that.

She shook her head. "I don't know. All I can say is, I'm giving up, Lawrence. I love you, but I'm not going to beg and plead for you to see me, understand me, love me. I can't try any harder than I already have to knock down all the brick walls around your heart. The rest is up to you, my love."

She kissed him gently on the cheek and retired to her room, closing the door behind her.

Lawrence stared at the closed oaken portal and sighed. Then he dragged himself to his room and threw himself onto the bed, and cursed himself for a bloody fool. *Juliet loved him.... Loved him.*

But she was right. What did love really mean? He recalled his former fiancée, the boys' mother. Laughing, vivacious.

Remembered his own mother...

No. God, no.

Chapter Twenty-one

Lawrence sat bolt upright in the bed, and mopped his sweating brow with his sleeve. Now that the blessed veil of forgetfulness had been torn away from him by the boys, he felt as though he were living in a nightmare.

His normally peaceful slumbers had been unsettled all night by memories he thought he had wiped from his mind by sheer force of will. Now they bubbled up like a noisome cesspool, disturbing his rest, ruining his appetite.

But he was *not* his brother or father. And Juliet was his wife, and had said she loved him. He clung onto that thought for succour as he shaved and dressed with trembling hands. It would all be fine. He wasn't upset, he told himself, it was just a summer ague. He'd be better soon.

All the while his inner self mocked at him. *You know what happened. You're as bad as they ever were. Worse.*

He ran out of his room to look for his wife, and discovered it was so late in the morning already that she had headed to the tea shop in Bath without him. Feeling dreadfully shamed and reluctant to face her after his outburst yesterday, he wandered out into the woods and soaked up the late morning sunshine for a moment.

Juliet was right. He had been in a dark place for a very long time. And might never leave it if he didn't do something to haul himself out into the light.

He came upon a charming little clearing behind the house, isolated in the woods, with a fine old oak tree and a carpet of flowers. The place was secret, shadowy, yet dappled in sunlight. Just the kind of place a romantic husband might take his wife for a bit of privacy.

He looked at the tree and stroked the trunk, then climbed up it using its old knots as footholds. He sat in the branches and looked down at his house in the distance.

His house. His choice. Heaven or hell. He had hurt Juliet badly through his evil minded suspicions and bitter accusations against her and her whole family.

Suddenly Lawrence realised he didn't care about her past, only her future. Her future with *him*. He never wanted to spend another night without her by his side. Not if he had the power to stop it.

And he most certainly didn't want to run the risk of anyone else in their lives taking her from him. He wasn't a bad man, for all he had discovered about himself yesterday. He was *not* his father and brother, he reminded himself again with a shiver. There had to be a rational way to look at this.

He turned over the often painful evens of what should have been the triumphant opening of the tea room. He could see now that even when he was successful, he always felt as though he wasn't good enough. It was this underlying insecurity which made him feel at such a loss around Juliet. She was clearly smart, as well as beautiful. A whore? She was a goddess in every way.

Or the most consummate actress known to man, he reflected. But thinking over her patience, her clear love for the boys, all she gifted him with, he could find no flaw in her.

Perhaps that was the trouble, he acknowledged with a sigh, shifting on the tree branch to swing his legs disconsolately, like a sad young schoolboy. She was so remarkable, she took his breath away, and left him feeling out of control, in her power utterly.

Yet he couldn't afford to be vulnerable. Not when there was so much riding on his business, for him and his whole family. And he couldn't afford to really love someone, because in his experience, to love them was to lose them.

He felt his guts churn again, and dropped down out of the tree to sit on the ground, leaning his back up against the broad trunk and hugging his arms around himself, feeling chilled to the bone.

Business, now that was what he excelled at. So what had gone wrong yesterday, right in the middle of what everyone in the tea room had described as a great success? He turned over his feelings like the pages of his account book, and at last came to a few conclusions which helped lift his spirits at last.

He was proud of his wife, but he had been insecure seeing her talking to the two huge dark-haired men yesterday, Ash, then Thomas. Well, might she not have been equally insecure seeing Matilda and Georgina Jerome drape themselves all over him as though they were lovers?

He had observed Martin and the other Rakehells enough to know they were very attentive and devoted to their wives. He had not mocked them for it, but actually envied them. There was no reason he couldn't do the same. Couldn't woo his wife. He looked around at the lush, bucolic locale. Perhaps this glade, this tree, might be just the place to start.

Ever the man of action rather than sentiment, Lawrence rose from the ground with a renewed sense of purpose. He headed for the stables and searched for some tools. Later he would go into Bath and find just the right things to give her, little gifts, the makings of a special picnic. He had never given her anything except her wedding ring, which had been intended for another woman, of all things, he recalled with a shamed pang, and a few paltry gowns.

Juliet had given herself over and over, to everyone who met her, from the boys when they cut their knees, to her friend Eswara when they sewed or worked in the garden together.

She gave to him, night after night, day after day, with never a word of complaint. And not just as his lover. She had turned their cold, empty house into a warm, loving home he not only looked forward to coming back to, but didn't wish to leave in the first place.

She had suffered terrible neglect from the moment they had wed, and yet had blossomed like a morning glory greeting the rays of the sun. It was about time he bathed her in warmth and sunshine, instead of chilly, dark disapproval.

He hefted a large plank of wood and a saw, and began.

Juliet's opening was a resounding success, but it was eclipsed slightly by a new brand of tea appearing on the streets of Bath and Bristol in a black tin with gold lettering labelled 'Han's Finest China Tea.'

It was being sold well below the prices Lawrence was offering, and he had to admit that for people who didn't know any better, it wasn't too bad.

When Lawrence came into the shop one afternoon at the end of the week, she made him taste the pack she had bought.

"Hmm. A lot of fannings and dust, and some really low grade tea, green tea in fact, mixed in. A half-decent cup, but not as good as mine," Lawrence said after a time. "Most definitely Assam and Darjeeling though as their base. Strange."

"Yes, isn't it," she agreed readily, hoping he would come to the same conclusion herself, that somehow his factor was up to no good. "Especially about the Assam. I mean, surely you must know every grower in the region. And Han's is a Chinese name, so what would they be doing selling *Indian* tea?"

He shrugged. "Well, you know, it would have a certain mysterious Eastern cachet. China tea is still seen as more expensive and exclusive, so people are getting a moderately good tea at a bargain price."

Her brow creased with a frown. "Still, it seems an awfully strange coincidence."

"No matter, darling. As I said, it's not as good as mine, and in any case, now that this tea room is so successful, we can barely keep our tins on the shelf," he said, indicating the bare planks with a wave of his hand. "I can't wait for my next ships to arrive."

"Let's hope it's soon. I'm delighted we're doing so well, but we need a steady supply."

"Never fear. As I said, Assam grows throughout the year. But we don't want to glut the market either."

She nodded, and now moved to speak to Mrs. Parkins, who had come around for some refreshment and was most impressed with the quality of women sipping tea and partaking of the delicacies Juliet's new cook had prepared with guidance from Eswara.

"I think I would like to knock that door through. If we could have the workmen in one Sunday?" Mrs. Parkins said, her gray curls bobbing excitedly.

"I think we can manage, yes. Thank you." Juliet smiled.

"I adore the menu."

"It's come out rather well, hasn't it. Please, stay and--"

"Oh, no, I couldn't," the older woman protested, but she was already licking her lips.

Juliet couldn't blame her. The wonderful aromas often made her hungry as well.

Randall and Isolde came in then, and Mrs. Parkins was thrilled to be introduced to the Earl of Hazelmere.

All thoughts of food now forgotten, she went scurrying off to tell everyone the news of whom she had just met, and was glad she had made the decision at last to throw her lot in with the feisty young Juliet and her dashing husband.

"I say, many congratulations. You're packing them in," Randall said, looking around and beaming his approval.

"I know. Wonderful, isn't it?" She smiled back at the handsome young Earl clad from head to toe in black save for a charcoal gray waistcoat.

Really, they might all be called Rakehells, Lawrence noted, but they dressed as soberly as parsons apart from the sumptuousness of some of the fabrics. He had no reason to feel inferior, he reminded himself, nor jealous.

"And how did the tea sample campaign go?" Isolde asked.

"Wonderful. They've all been coming in in droves," Juliet told her, smiling from ear to ear. "Thank you and Bryony so much for your help. The Assam is definitely winning out. People love the full body. But they are buying the Darjeeling too for fine company. So both have been successful."

Randall nodded. "So I see. The shelves look as though they've been hit by locusts."

Isolde beamed. "Good, I'm so glad."

"Thank you. You and Bryony. Come sit down and have something *gratis*, both of you," she offered, as a table emptied.

They thanked her and settled into their seats to read the menu, while everyone else in the tea room tried not to stare at the Earl in their midst.

Despite his internal reasoning, Lawrence was scowling. As soon as he had his wife alone, he declared, "Do you have to tell everyone all our business?"

"This is *my* business too, or had you forgotten?" Juliet said in clipped tones. "And she helped."

"Yes, and *he* helped ruin me."

"Don't be absurd," she fired back. "That's not true, and you know it. Randall would have been little more than a child when you left for India. Besides, you're *not* ruined. Look around you at all you have. Unless you think so little of all this that it counts for nothing with you." She waved her hand around the room, and then placed it flat in the middle of her chest.

"All the more reason to be wary. Because now I have so much more to lose," he hissed.

"That's *not* going to happen--"

"Why not?"

"Because they're *friends*. Friends don't stab each other in the back. Do you really think the two Avenel wives have nothing better to do with their time than help their husbands plot against you? And it was Bryony who showed me the Han's tea. She was the one who warned us."

"The better to put us off the scent!" he accused in a bitter tone. "They could all be responsible for—"

Juliet shook her head pityingly. The timing was too perfect to be a coincidence. She was to open her tea shop, Matilda showed up in the neighbourhood, and a new cheap tea started to flood the market to undercut her in Bath and Bristol. But not London?

"Is the Han's tea in London?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he replied, surprised by the question, but thinking it a good one. "I can find out."

"I'll pack for you as soon as we get home."

Lawrence shook his head. "Oh no, I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you tomorrow."

"Pardon?"

"You're looking worn out and I'm taking you home, and you're taking the weekend off," he said, cuffing her elbow possessively and already starting to lead her toward the door.

She started to dig her heels in. "But--"

He continued to tow her by the arm across the room towards the cloak pegs. "You've achieved a huge success thus far. But I will not have you overdoing things. I'm delighted it's all gone so well. However, we're not exactly fighting to keep the wolves from the door."

"No, but to build a future for the boys and our children. I'm glad to do it."

"Fetch your cloak and bonnet. You're coming home now."

She bristled. "Back to ordering me around again? Just trying to coerce me into bed?"

She had not gone into his room since the night they had quarrelled in front of the boys.

He sighed and shook his head. "No, I don't want to coerce or bully you, but surely you must see I want..."

She stepped away from him to speak to a woman trying to catch her attention, and he grew more and more angry.

"I liked it better when I had you all to myself," he grumbled when they were at last alone again.

"Aye, continually naked like a *houri* at your beck and call. But you're the one who chose not to have a honeymoon, went back to London, went up North. You chose to leave me for weeks on my own with only one note in all that time to tell me you were alive or dead."

"But that was business! I didn't want--"

"And *this* is business," she hissed. "So please stop shouting in front of all our patrons."

They all looked away politely, but she could see they were all dying to know what the striking couple were arguing about.

He shook his head. "You are not evading me that easily. You're my wife and--"

She heaved a resigned sigh, knowing this was one battle she was not going to win. She reached around behind her back, took off her

apron, and went over to the serving counter to tuck it away. She said good night to Sally the chief server. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yes, Miss. Don't worry, it will be fine."

She grabbed her cloak and reticule from the small staff cloakroom, and sat silently all the way home, despite his best efforts to make small talk.

Lawrence realised with an inward groan that he had done it again. He had pulled on his wife's strings as if she were some sort of puppet who did nothing but dance to his will.

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper again, didn't I," he admitted with a sigh.

She stared at him stonily. "Worse than that, you shamed me in front of our patrons, and have treated me with the utmost disrespect. No matter what I say, you disregard it. I'm not allowed to use my own discretion about when I'm tired, when I work, when I sleep, if you choose to let me sleep. I'm not a child, or a possession. I'm a grown woman with my own thoughts, feelings and desires."

"Not if they're for another man!" he rasped.

They had by now drawn up in their own drive. She stepped out of the coach without even waiting for his assistance. The horse took several steps forward, but she caught herself before she fell off the step and shook his hands off her when he tried to help steady her.

"I'm fine! I'm not one of the boys who has to be protected to the point of suffocation. This jealousy and obsessiveness of yours is going to be the death of us both if you don't stop it!"

He went white and slammed the coach door behind him so furiously the whole vehicle juddered.

He was more angry than she had ever seen him and the worst of it was, she had no idea why. Her eyes widened at the glint she saw in them. Grabbing her skirts, she fled to her room and slammed it behind her so hard the noise echoed throughout the house.

Trembling and panting on the threshold of his home, Lawrence looked down at his hands, and realised they were bunched into fists. He counted to ten and willed them to relax, so that they gradually unfolded for him to press them together.

No wonder she had run from him. She must have felt sure he had gone beyond the pale.

He took a deep breath to steady himself. He had to go more slowly. Stop flying off the handle all the time. He squeezed his fingers together. When had he ever just held his wife's hand? Kissed her appreciatively without it being a prelude to something more?

He had supper alone, for the boys had seen the whole altercation from the hall entrance, and were terrified of him once again. Juliet was still locked in her room, the tray he had brought for her left untouched and all his attempts to speak to her through the door met with nothing but stony silence.

He spent another long, lonely night trying to tell himself she loved him. She had said so herself.

He left her to her own devices in the morning, going about her chores as always, though with a wary manner around him that reproached him more than mere words ever could.

At last he could bear it no more. When she moved to go into the library he said, "I rather hoped you might take the rest of the day off to spend some time with a very lonely husband."

"I could try," she said quietly, wary at what new scene was going to erupt next.

He held out his hand. "I have a little surprise for you."

She looked at him so mistrustfully his heart lurched in his chest and he wanted to kick himself.

"Come, it's all right. It's just outside. We can go for a walk. It's a lovely day, so warm you don't even need a cloak."

"The boys--"

"Now have a house full of well-trained servants thanks to you and the Bath labour exchange. I've told them to keep an eye on them this afternoon. So please come."

He took her hand gently, lacing their fingers, and stepped out the front door. He walked around the house on the small path which led into Millcote Forest.

In a short time they came to a lovely little clearing. The sunlight shone down in small rainbows, and many-coloured butterflies sported

themselves along the lush carpet of flowers.

Juliet smiled despite herself. "It's beautiful. Like an enchanted glade. Oh, and look at the swing. The boys will love this."

"And they can of course share it with us. But it's actually for you."

"Me?" she said in surprise.

"Yes, I built it for you. And here. There's even little basket of delicacies left for us by the faeries," he said, leading her a bit further into the arbour to show her a wicker hamper and some spread blankets. "So come, try the swing. I'll push you first."

"Really, this is awfully good of you," she said, her misgivings still clear from her expression.

"Nothing but the best for you, my dear. It's the least I can do considering how much joy you've brought into my life."

She couldn't tell if he were mocking her or not. His tone and demeanour seemed sincere, but the words were so unlike him.

They had by this time stepped into the cool shadowy glade, and his silvery eyes were dark and unfathomable as he gazed down at her. She stared up at him, uncertain what to think, or do.

"Food or swing first?" he asked softly, his breath whispering over her temples.

"What would you like?"

"Ah, no, this afternoon is for your delectation, so all shall be as *you* wish."

She made so bold as to say, "Well, if that were true, you might have consulted with me about this." She indicated the grove with a sweep of her hand.

He stiffened. "If you don't wish to be here--"

"No, it's not that. Really, it's been most kind of you to think of me, but this surprise seems, well, excessive, I suppose. I don't deserve--"

"You do. Everyone deserves to be spoiled and pampered sometimes. I'm only sorry I never thought of it before. Not very good at this marriage thing," he said with an apologetic smile and shrug.

"Now that's not true. You've done marvelously well considering. In fact, it's I that should be pampering you," she said, a soft light

gleaming in her eyes as she thought of the delicious taste of his skin.

He felt himself actually blush under her heated gaze. "Well, some other time, then. My surprise is here now, and we wouldn't want to let the champagne get too warm."

"Champagne?" she said with evident delight. "Oh, no, indeed."

She sat on the blanket with her legs curled under her, and watched as he deftly uncorked the bottle and filled two glasses.

"To every day being a new beginning."

They clinked glasses and drank. Then he looped his forearm around hers, "Let's try it this way, shall we?"

The bubbles tickled her nose and she giggled. A delightfully heady sensation coursed through her veins as she met the warm gaze of her husband. If only he could be like this all the time, happy and tender instead of cold, angry and aloof.

"I would like to try."

She realised with a huge wash of mortification which clouded her features that she had actually spoken her thoughts aloud.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," she gasped, panicking.

Her glass fell from her trembling hand. It fell against the edge of the hamper and broke. She felt close to tears and would have run from the bower had not his huge hand stayed her gently.

He stroked her arm and said quietly, "I'm not angry. I don't blame you. I blame myself. I've been a selfish ass, and I'm truly sorry. I've never behaved so badly in my life to anyone. The fact that you're my wife only makes my churlishness that much more reprehensible. Please come and sit down."

"But I've broken my champagne flute. I've ruined everything," Juliet said, suddenly near tears.

He cupped her cheek, stroking her peachy skin with his thumb. "It can be even more fun for lovers to share a glass. You haven't ruined anything. I know you have reason to fear me, be nervous, but honestly, I mean you no harm. I just want you to relax and let the joy wash over you."

"You're not angry with me?" she asked timidly.

He hugged her to him as carefully as if she were a newborn. "No, love, I'm not angry with you. I don't think I ever was."

"No, but you've shouted and been so vile and--"

She coloured to the roots of her hair once more and stepped out of the warm circle of his embrace.

"Damn it, Juliet--"

She flinched at the harsh words. He grew even more frustrated with himself, thus rendering his tone still more gruff. "Can't you see--"

Her eyes widened further for a moment before she shrank into herself, cringing one shoulder away from him as though to ward off a blow.

That one small gesture decided things for him in an instant. He wasn't very good with words. Never had been. But for the sake of his marriage he simply had to try.

He stepped back from her so she wouldn't feel so cornered. "Look, Juliet, I'm sorry if I raised my voice. The truth is I'm not a man for fine speeches or sentiments. I just sort of bluster and expect everyone to run and do my bidding. And so many years abroad had made me somewhat less than polished in my manners. A general avoidance of the female sex except for amatory purposes has rendered me even more unfit for civilised company. But I swear to you, Juliet, I really am trying."

She turned to face him. "Trying to what?"

"Trying to tell you I'm sorry. Please, can we sit?"

She gave him a short nod and returned to the blanket, this time sitting cross-legged as she had as a girl. Her pose offered a tantalising peep of her calves and lacy petticoats.

"I know I was furious. I blamed you for what happened, the circumstances that led to our marriage. I mean, you were charming, and I thought it was all worldly banter. We were having a wonderful time together until Matthew walked in. I really did think I had been duped. I mean, your brother and I--"

"I know, he was the last person on earth you would ever wish to deal with. You said so at the time."

"Yes, I did. I had hoped you wouldn't remember."

"I could hardly forget any of the things you said to me that day," she said with a wry grimace.

He sighed and reached carefully for her hand. To his relief, she didn't jerk it away. "I dare say. As I've said, my only excuse is that I was convinced that you were all plotting or scheming against me. It seemed too pat, with no such thing as coincidence. And I'm not always very good at admitting I've made a mistake. Even when I went to the other address Philip had indicated, and found, well--"

"The woman you were really seeking that night," she supplied helpfully.

He blushed. "Yes, just so. Even then, I blamed you in other ways. I can see now though that everyone was right. I couldn't have asked for a better wife and helpmeet. I'm truly sorry that my feeling of loss of control, of entrapment, has led me to take things out on you."

"And the ladybird? Was she as good as everyone said?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He shook his head.

Juliet's heart sank until she heard his next words.

"I don't know, my dear. I didn't stay. I met her, got the whole story from Matthew Sampson and her. Just as Philip had surmised, I got the wrong address."

"Was she very beautiful?"

He shook his head. "She didn't attract me in the least. And even if she is the talk of the Town, I doubt that anything she had to offer could possibly have been as wondrous as what you gifted me with that first night. You yielded up the most precious treasure of your body, but even more than that, your heart and soul."

"And you gave me a gift in return, Lawrence. You asked me to marry you, before Matthew barged in, remember? No one had ever done that. I never dreamed--"

"I'm amazed I ever got to see you in the townhouse."

Her brows raised. "Oh, why?"

"I would have thought the swains would be lined up three deep all around the block for one glimpse of your pulchritude."

Juliet giggled. "Oh, now I know you're mocking me."

He kissed her hard enough to part her lips with his tongue.
"Never, I promise. Now come, drink up and have a strawberry or two. I shall feed them to you. And look, I even have some dipping sauces for them."

"Mmm, chocolate. You thought of everything."

"I tried."

They sipped the wine and shared it, their tongues fizzing with the heady brew as they kissed and nibbled the food and each other's lips.

Lawrence knew the pressure was building within him, and wanted her to enjoy the swing before he spread her on the blankets and devoured her own special strawberry with a liberal coating of chocolate sauce.

At his wicked grin, she asked, "What? Have I done ought amiss?"

"Not yet, but I have the feeling you're going to be decidedly naughty later on."

"Not now?" she asked, fluttering her lashes.

"Not yet," he said with a grin. "Now you're going to try your swing. Come, love."

She settled onto the wooden seat and clung to the ropes. He came around behind and began to push.

His warm hands touched her waist, back, buttocks, the sides of her breasts. The thrill was enhanced by the unpredictability of it all, for as she swung, she could never be sure where his hands were going to land next. It was wild and free, but after a time Juliet could discern a pattern, with the contact growing more and more intimate, and increasingly lingering.

His hands began to stroke, not just push, and his fingers crept around to the sides of her bosom. She ceased pumping her legs and the swing slowed, and eventually rocked to a halt as her entire body was caressed from shoulders to hips.

"You must be tired," she said with a breathlessness only partly born of exertion. "Why don't you sit and I can push you."

"Better still, you can sit on my lap." He looked at her so warmly she could feel her cheeks tinge with colour, but she did not hesitate.

He settled on the seat, and she put her slender back to his broad

chest, her legs between his. He set the swing in motion once more and clasped her around the waist so she would not slide off. He could feel his arousal pressing into her bottom. In a fit of daring she took his hand, lightly running her fingers over the back of it for a moment until she finally placed it on one curvaceous breast.

Lawrence was thrilled and delighted. For though he was trying to mend fences with her, it was more than he'd hoped for. He took full advantage of her willingness to make love with him outdoors in broad daylight. He alternated hands to massage her legs or breasts as the other prevented her from slipping onto the grass.

Her skirt began to ride up her calves, and she planted her feet on the ground and stopped the swing. She cast a smoldering look at Lawrence over her shoulder. The dark fire in her violet eyes heated him even further, but he simply watched and waited. She had her shoes and stockings off in a trice, and after that it was a simple enough matter to remove her drawers, leaving her in only her simple pale lavender muslin gown.

She then caressed his waist, before lightly fanning her fingers downwards over his thighs to his knees. There was no mistaking his desire, which bulged through his black broadcloth trousers in a most demanding manner. She hoped he wasn't going to try to take control of what was happening between them as he always did in bed. He had said it would be her special day.

She brought her hands slowly back up to the waistband of his trousers. "May I?"

"Yes, most certainly."

She opened the fastenings of his breeches and stroked him delicately with her palm, causing him to shudder with unalloyed delight. Her touch was exquisite, and he reached for her to pull her into his lap.

But she shook her head and knelt for moment. "I don't think he's quite ready yet."

She suckled him all the way into her mouth for a moment, before moving her lips and tongue up to the satiny tip. She soon had him glistening nicely, and her own pleasure had already flooded through her, enough for her to be certain that their joining would be a smooth glide of delight.

"Mmm, it's too good. Please come here," he begged, opening his arms.

But instead of sitting facing him, she put her back to him once more, joining with him with a smooth ripple which brought him deeply inside. Then they set the swing in motion again, both gripping the silk ropes, with her leaning all the way back into his chest as she as nestled against him. "Oh my."

A few more movements back and forth were enough to appreciate the effects of gravity and the compelling rhythm, and she put down her feet to slow and stop them once more. Under his ardent gaze, she threw all caution to the winds and removed her gown and chemise with a couple of naturally seductive movements which left him dry-mouthed with desire.

Now as naked as a wood nymph, Juliet climbed into his lap facing him and they began to swing once more. She savoured his neck and began to tug at his clothes until his shirt was fully parted.

She licked his nipples, beaded with the perspiration which trickled down his neck. She rubbed her breasts against the crisp starched linen of his shirt. He moved his legs in a sultry tempo which caressed her bare bottom as he continued to keep them in motion.

The swing soared skywards, raising her *derriere* in the air, but the forces gravity were already plunging her down onto his full length. As he swung backwards, they were pulled apart, only to be brought together again cataclysmically as she rose in the air once more. She gasped and groaned as the pressure built within.

Just when he couldn't go any deeper, and she felt sure she was about to be split in two, her whole world exploding into crystalline fragments, the pendulant swing arced the other way, pulling them apart once more with the most delicious gliding motion.

The angle was exquisite, making all of her feel well and truly massaged, from her entrance to paradise right to the tip of the roseate swirl which she could feel springing to attention almost as avidly as Lawrence's own flesh.

"Oh, Juliet, I'm not going to be able to hang on," he gasped.

Even as the words left his lips and puffed into her shell-like ear, they were flying upwards again, literally as well as figuratively. The

arc was now even higher, bringing him even deeper. She could feel her inner muscles clenching to try to hold him in that one sweet spot forever, but already he was being drawn away from her.

Desperate with need she released her frantic hold around his neck, clung on to the ropes, and leaned back. The subtle shift in position caused even more friction between them. With a wild cry she threw her head back and gave voice to the complete bliss he filled her with.

Lawrence was thrilled with her unbridled response and stuck his legs straight out, angling himself even more acutely and taking them that much higher on the next upswing.

He nearly dropped Juliet as her climax notched up to a new frenzy, wringing his delight from him. He locked his elbows around the ropes and clung onto his wife like a shipwreck survivor, for truly he felt as if he had been swept up in a maelstrom of pure rapture. Only Juliet anchored him to this world as they kissed deeply, the swing bringing them back down to earth at last.

"That was, well, incredible," she panted feverishly, smothering his face with warm wet kisses.

"It most certainly was. And will be again if you just give me a minute."

She looked up at him with passion-glazed eyes, and moved to leave him.

His heart hammering in his chest, he exclaimed, "Where are you--"

He hung onto her possessively, one hand on her hip, the other on her breast as he stayed her. "Where are you going? Unless you really hated it?" he asked, feeling a cold finger of dread ice his spine.

"No, it's not that, it's just--"

"Tell me! Are you hurt? Was it too much?"

"No it's not that, it's just, well--" She sighed.

"What is it, Juliet? If it's a matter of your safety and well-being, then you must tell me."

She had wondered about the activity harming the baby, but in truth she was more concerned with--

"I suppose I just wanted to know who else you'd built a swing for," she said tonelessly.

His face fell.

She said hastily, "Never mind! I have no right to ask."

Juliet was already attempting to stand. He grasped her waist and held her on top of him, his flesh tumescing within her once more. "No one! Ever! Please, Juliet, don't do this to yourself or us. It wasn't--"

She tried to will away the tears which beaded her long jet lashes. There was no need to cry. It had been so wonderful. But her joy was short-lived in the face of her jealousy. She knew she sounded like the shrew she swore she would never turn into.

But her body was raging with fierce need, and with the change within her, new life, new emotions. Everything seemed to bubble and fizz on the surface like the vintage champagne they'd drunk. It stirred her deeply, peaked her breasts, set her hips surging against his, her legs spreading even wider of their own accord.

He sensed the need vibrating through her, and was both awed and humbled. "I swear. The swing was just supposed to be fun. I never even thought-- I never built anyone a swing before! I overheard you talking to the children about how much you enjoyed having one when you were their age, and I wanted to surprise you. It's the last place I ever imagined making love to anyone.

"Except that the first time was so wonderful, now you've got me thinking about it all over again. Well, doing more than thinking," he admitted, for the fierce pulsing within her and drag of her hips was enough to set him moving with Juliet all over again.

His feet left the ground, and with her legs spread so wide, his penetration on her upswings became even deeper. Four more movements back and forth had her whole body primed for release, tautened with rampant need like a bowstring.

He twanged her tension ever higher as he rubbed her rosy nipples and delicate bud on the down swing, so that by the time they began the upward motion she was already half-mindless with need.

"Lawrence!" she gasped. She could feel herself tumbling into eternity.

His own climb was only one breathy sigh away, but he waited a

moment until he was sure she was coherent enough to hang onto him. Then he put his feet down for the briefest moment, pushing off hard, the better to set the swing rocking even higher.

"Hold onto me, love. Don't let me fall."

She was moved by his request, for it showed a deeper level of trust than she ever could have hoped for.

"I've got us both, Lawrence. We'll be fine. Take what you need, all of me."

She pumped once with her legs to keep the swing soaring, and a raw moan of passion echoed in her mouth as he kissed her like a demon. He shuddered so hard that for a moment she was sure he was going to thrust them right off the seat.

The swing rocked back down to earth, and at last he stumbled off of it and onto the blankets with his tiny burden. His hands still cupped around her buttocks, he lay hard and heavy on top of her, but she relaxed into him and waited for his breathing to calm.

"That was easily the most superlative experience of my life. But I'm willing to do anything to try to top it."

"What could possibly top that?" she said breathily.

He withdrew himself carefully from her body and tossed his clothes in every direction as he stripped naked.

Then with a sultry grin he reached for the bowl of chocolate. "You tell me, love. If anything you like here tops it, you can have it for the rest of your life."

She reached for the bowl, dabbled her fingers in it, and smeared it over his satiny head. "Let's just see if we can find something special for you too. And I do so adore chocolate."

Chapter Twenty-three

The next month passed by in a whirl of happiness, as Lawrence and Juliet made time for each other during the day, and their lovemaking took on a whole new intensity and intimacy at night. His tenderness grew as his anger and suspicion diminished. If neither of them could quite believe their luck, nor could they bring themselves to spoil it with doubts, pushing them firmly to one side.

That was until Ash and his wife Ellen came by and he commented on how well her pregnancy suited her, and that she looked blooming.

Lawrence overheard the remark as he entered the drawing room, and froze. He said nothing while the Paigntons were there, but as soon as they had gone he demanded, "When were you going to tell me?"

Juliet didn't even try to pretend she didn't know what her husband was talking about. "When I was sure that everything was all right. Plus you're always so domineering, I was going to tell you when I was sure that things weren't going to change between us yet again. This past month has been so wonderful and--"

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did it happen?"

"My guess is just about the very first time."

"Unless of course you already were! I only ever saw you bleed the once!"

Juliet said patiently, "Are you angry with me because I didn't tell you, or because you're so obtuse you didn't guess?"

"Or because you've fobbed me off with someone else's bastard!" he carped.

She sat hastily on the sofa again before she fell down, gripping the armrest with white-knuckled fingers. "Please, don't shout. The

boys--"

"I want to know. Whose is it? Who was it?"

"There's been no one but you! Never anyone but you, I swear."

"Then how did that young buck know you were pregnant before I did!" he demanded.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Because he's a doctor and his mother examines me! She's known for months. They all have."

"Surely. First-hand experience of what a--"

"Stop it!" she shouted tearfully. "You're finally going to say or to something so unforgivable that I really never will be able to trust you again."

"What about you? Going around with that--"

She shook her head. "He's a nice young man, decent, who loves his wife. He was chaste before he married, and is faithful now!"

Lawrence's eyes bulged. "And just how would you know that? You tried him on?"

Juliet shook her head, the tears beginning to fall in earnest. "No, no! We were talking about what you had said to me the other day. When you told me you would probably be unfaithful at some point. I saw you with Georgina and Matilda, Lawrence. They were all over you and you were doing nothing to dissuade them."

"I didn't want to cause a scene—"

"You did anyway when you got all testy about me speaking to Thomas."

"That was different?"

"How? I was upset, I admit it. Jealous. You'd certainly given me enough cause, with your attitude toward your former fiancée and your callous remarks about your intended lack of fidelity one day.

"Ash didn't agree with your sentiments at all, however. He said it the case of adultery, it was clearly wrong for all parties concerned, and therefore not even to be contemplated. That it was a case of mind over body. That a man could stay pure if he worked at it hard enough."

"And was in command of Indian philosophy. But I'm weak, and

I've never lied to you. Can you say the same?" he challenged.

"Yes! I *am* weak. But only where you're concerned. I love you, Lawrence, though God help me, sometimes I wish I didn't! I've never lied. I'm not lying now. The baby is yours and will be born some time in November. I'm well enough, though I've not gained much weight. I'll begin to show even more soon, so we may have to be careful--"

"I can't believe this," he said, scowling.

"With all we shared when we were first married, and you not taking any precautions, why would you doubt it?"

"All the weeks I was away--"

"I was alone. Ask Sam and the gardener! Or are you saying that Eswara runs a brothel now?"

"I've heard the rumours about Ash and Ellen being sexually immoderate. Everyone in the district has--"

"I don't know about Ellen, but the rumour about Ash was a mistake. Thomas thought--"

"I can't believe you would have such inappropriate conversations with a virtual stranger!" he gasped, pacing up and down on the hearth rug.

"He asked for my help."

"I'll bet! Which you generously gave," he sneered.

"No, no, it's not like that!" She began to weep hopelessly, sobbing as if her heart would break.

He relented long enough to give her a handkerchief.

"Please, can you take me upstairs?" she gasped. "I don't think I can manage--" She clutched her belly, and all the colour had drained from her face.

Lawrence immediately lifted her and shouted for the servants to run for Eswara and Dr. Sanderson.

Juliet was able to catch her breath once he got her to her bed, but her head was swimming, and she couldn't stop crying.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

"This should have been the happiest time of our life, and you've

destroyed it." Her eyes closed and she turned her head away on the pillow, and let the tears fall unheeded.

Lawrence was sure then that he had lost her. He felt as grief-stricken as if she had died in his arms, as if he had killed her...

And if he didn't lose her now, he would. He couldn't help it. Every time they got close, he drove her way. Upset her, hurt her. He couldn't blame her if she turned to another. *He would kill himself if she did....*

Blake came in within a quarter of an hour, and reassured her that she and the baby were fine. She was just overtired.

"You need to go carefully, both of you. No more late nights and long days on your feet at the tea shop. I would recommend a nap every day, and real sleep at night, not the two of you billing and cooing. She'll be fine in a few days, with rest, and I shall look forward to dancing with you at our ball in a fortnight's time."

Juliet blushed faintly despite her pallor. "Oh um, we hadn't thought to--"

"We'll be there," her husband said firmly. "I can't keep trying to avoid all the Rakehells forever."

"Including Matthew?" the dark-haired doctor asked softly.

Lawrence met his eye without flinching. "Especially Matthew."

Blake closed his medical case. "In that case, you can both get your rest. Don't worry, I'll see myself out. I do know the way, after all. Love what you've done with the house, by the way, Juliet. I always loved living here, but now it's a real family home. Take care."

Once the doctor was gone, Lawrence hardly dared look at his wife as she lay on the bed. The dark shadows in his mind brought him back to the horrible times he longed to forget. Did not wish to remember. *Ever.*

"Can the boys come in for a visit?" she asked softly.

"Blake said to rest."

"I'd like to see them. And you can tell their favourite story and for a little while I can pretend that we're a happy family and that you love me."

"For I do love you, Lawrence. I don't know what you think you've done to not deserve to be happy and cared for, but it's blighting all our lives. I'll go away if you think it will make things easier. As I said, I never expected to be a wife--"

He sighed, running his fingers through his ebony hair. "I don't know what I want. What to believe."

"An honest enough answer, I suppose," Juliet said wearily. "But if you really know me so little after all these months of marriage, that you think I could possibly have given myself to another--"

Lawrence sighed. "I don't understand why you didn't tell me about the baby."

"Because I want you making love to me in bed every night, on the swing, wherever. I don't want to be some brood mare with no thoughts and feelings of my own. Desires."

Then she gave a bitter laugh. "But to admit to that brands me a whore in your eyes as well. Anyone else would be glad to have such a devoted and loving wife. You use my love for you as a stick to beat me with."

He winced at the simile. "I'll just go get the boys now."

He took one last look at the shadowy room and the still figure of his wife draped in the sheet, and fled.

Chapter Twenty-four

Nash had seethed the whole time Lawrence had sent him away. Every day brought new reports from Matilda of how things were progressing with their new enterprise. But each day Juliet was more and more ensconced in the business, with her own workers now accounting to her. It was only a matter of time before that fool Lawrence had her inspecting the cargoes...

Normally he would not have cared less, but it appeared there was a great deal more to the little chit than met the eye. He had dug deeply into her background, trying to find something to use against her. Instead he had been shocked to discover she was one of the top wine traders on the south coast, far too canny for his comfort.

But he also knew Lawrence's Achilles' heel. He had been furiously jealous when his brother had wed his former fiancée. How much more livid would he be when he found out his wife had betrayed him.

Alas, though, she behaved very circumspectly, unlike most of the women Nash knew. The worst she could be accused of was speaking to that black bugger Ash Paignton, but he was married now and so busy with his doctor's duties around the district with his wife in tow that he would never be able to make any accusation stick.

But that was not to say he couldn't plant the seeds of doubt. With that in mind, Matilda encouraged all of her male suitors to go with her to the tea house toward the end of each day, when they knew she would be fetched home in her carriage.

As a result, Lawrence saw his wife with a different man nearly every evening, as the unsuspecting young woman naively tried to explain to them what they claimed they wished to know about tea.

By the time Blake's ball came around, Lawrence was in a jealous frenzy at the prospect of other men now having the excuse to touch his wife under the guise of dancing with her.

His insecurity was made ten times worse by the fact that all of the Rakehells and their wives welcomed her with open arms. He had never felt himself as good as any of them, and burned to think his wife fit into their intimate little circle far better than he did. She was witty, entertaining, and much sought after, though she danced but little.

Blake's lovely wife Arabella introduced her around to everyone whilst Lawrence hugged a pillar and stared morosely. Philip and Blake tried to draw him out, and even encouraged him to take a turn on the floor with some of the women who were lined up three deep for an introduction to the spectacular-looking Juliet, resplendent in the violet gown with silver tissue Lawrence had had made specially to match her lustrous eyes.

Juliet was so stunning that even the flirtatious Matilda, trying her utmost to rekindle what had once been between them, did not get more than a passing glance as he watched his wife's dark head while she made her way around the room. She declined to dance repeatedly, Lawrence was relieved to note, but one passing word spoken with Ash, and he felt his face suffuse with colour.

He stiffened even more, however, when Matthew came into the ballroom with his lovely blonde young wife Althea, and they greeted each other warmly. Still, there seemed a certain strain between the brother and sister, a formality about them that he found odd, until he decided it was all a show for his benefit so that he would not suspect....

"I wouldn't be at all surprised to discover that Matthew was behind the Han's tea brand undercutting you," Nash said. "Both of them are as false as the day is long. And his wife Althea is a fallen woman by all accounts that he rescued from a brothel and tried to set up to be respectable. I'm sorry to have to tell you all this," Nash said, as if hesitating to impart bad news for fear of upsetting his employer, "but well, you deserve to know the truth about the family you've married into.

"It's not your fault, of course, sir. You were fresh off the boat from India. How could you possibly know. But you can see what she's like, can't you, sir. I've seen her holding hands with Ash Paignton. That cock and bull story about the servants mismanaging the household affairs and thieving is just to put you off the scent. She's been living it

up. Spent hundreds of pounds at a wine merchant's. I rather wondered how she seemed to know so much about it."

Lawrence's brows knit. "Wine? She did mention it to me once, but I've never seen--"

"It's bad enough being a whore. But there's nothing worse than a closet toper. Well, it could be worse, I suppose. We know all about the evils of the opium trade. They say Ash and his mother are spice traders. Spice and what else, I want to know."

Nash had chosen his words carefully. He was sure this was the one thing Lawrence would never, *ever* forgive. Prostrate with grief over the death of his sons, his uncle, old Simon Howard, had taken to using laudanum to help him sleep. The man had died a pitiful opium addict who had attempted to wean himself from the drug, and ended up overdosing by accident.

Lawrence watched her narrowly for a time. At length he concluded, "I don't think it's possible. She would be more addled. So would they all. They are all medical people as well. They know the dangers better than anyone. No, I refuse to believe that Martin's stepson and wife are addicts."

"Still, Juliet is part of that loose set, and therefore not a fit companion for the boys. As for the child, I'll lay you any odds she was breeding before you ever even met. It's unfortunate, but you had no way of knowing Matthew Dane was still intent on destroying you. However, there's no need to be dragged down any more. She'll destroy herself, and then you'll be free of her."

"Free?" Lawrence echoed numbly, scarcely able to recall what his life had been like without Juliet in it.

"All you need is a tiny bit of evidence and a witness, and you can have a divorce, with no one pointing the finger at you. You can marry Matilda, or any other lady of your choosing. If you want a lady, of course," he said with a smirk, ever the skillful deceiver.

"That Georgina Jerome is quite a handful, but at least she's honest about it," he said almost casually. *And would never be clever enough to pose a threat to his budding empire. Even Matilda was getting too close for comfort, and he had never liked his cousin very much anyway.*

Lawrence scowled blackly. "I'll never marry again. Too much trouble. Too little reward," he grumbled, calling himself a liar all the while. "But I might take you up on the suggestion to give the Jerome lass a tumble if I'm feeling suicidal and want to die of the pox."

He stormed into the refreshment room and tossed back several glasses of wine. As he was drinking the fourth, a florid-looking young man with a receding hairline came in and while he waited to be served, introduced himself.

"Tobias Parke."

"Lawrence Howard."

"Oh, I say. Howard? The tea trader?"

He nodded. "That's right."

"Oh, you must just tell me all about India. People tell me it would be the making of me. But the Company isn't what it used to be, and--"

"No, indeed. But there are plenty of opportunities for someone canny with the energy and ambition to succeed," he said gruffly.

His wife entered a short time later with auburn-haired Isolde Avenel and Philip Marshall and his lovely blond wife Jasmine. Lawrence thought resentfully how striking they all looked together. Happy too. As if they belonged in the sumptuous mansion, while he felt nothing more than an outsider looking in.

"A quick drink, and then it's my dance, Juliet," Philip said.

They all nodded to Lawrence, observing their every move with the utmost attention, looking for any sign of aught amiss. They had a spoonful of lemon ice only, with nothing alcoholic, and their conversation was about a proposed new orphanage and public sanitation works in the area which Blake was hoping to start a subscription for.

The trio finished their refreshments and were about to depart when Juliet turned and stepped close to her husband once more.

She took his hand and stretched up on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, heedless of who was watching. "Thank you for bringing me, darling. And letting me speak to Matthew. You're very kind."

He nodded abruptly, but when he said no more, she stroked his cheek with her gloved hand. The cool of the satin both chilled and

inflamed him. But before he could say a word, she gave him a last warm if shy smile, took Philip's arm, and departed.

Lawrence watched the sway of her hips as she left. She was wearing the violent gown he had bought for her, and looked like a regal goddess. He had to admit he had never seen her look more lovely. But then she looked content, happy even, and he had to admit, her lovely figure was now more voluptuous than ever with the babe she was carrying rounding her gently in all her feminine places.

"I say, what a wife. You're an awfully lucky chap." Parke licked his lips lewdly.

Lawrence should have punched him in his drooling mouth, but his resentment at his wife's social success had reached a fever pitch.

"Do you think so?" he asked coldly.

"Of course. Don't you? I mean, she's beautiful, witty, elegant, and anyone can see she absolutely adores you. Not a light bone in her body."

"I'll bet you ten guineas you're wrong," Lawrence growled.

Parke was a man of the world, but no one had ever proposed such a thing before. "Pardon me? You want to bet me that your wife *will* be unfaithful?"

"Try her yourself. That way we'll know for sure."

Even the loose Parke balked, wondering what game the huge grim man was playing at. "No chance. I say, you're all sheets to the wind or something, my dear fellow." He backed away from him.

"You'll be sorry you ever said something so absurd, and blame me."

"No blame. It will be her fault entirely."

"I don't--" Then he gasped, his eyes widening. "No, surely not. You're married to that, that goddess of perfection, and you want a *divorce*?"

"She is bound to disappoint me sooner or later. I know what she is, have known ever since we married, though she pretends to be different. Claims she loves me, despite everything." He shook his head. "All women are faithless and not to be trusted. I can't even be sure the brat she's carrying is mine. So you'd be doing me a great favour if--"

Parke shook his head. He had tried on plenty of women in his day, but the ethereal beauty in the violet and silver gown was just too much even for him.

As Parke left the refreshment room, a hand shot out from the shadows, grabbing him menacingly by the lapels.

"Maybe Mr. Howard didn't make himself clear." Nash waved a wad of crisp new banknotes in front of his nose. "This ought to take care of any trouble you'll have to go to. Only just to be on the safe side, don't just converse with her. And she may look like an angel, but I happen to know she likes it rough. The rougher the better. Put on a good show for all the witnesses I'll manage to get."

"You can't be serious," Parke gasped.

"Come now, Parke, I've heard all about you from Matilda. I know you're *up* to the task."

He gaped. "Surely-"

"Even hotter."

Parke shook his head. "I never would have guessed from her looks. Well, it just goes to show you, still waters run deep."

Nash shoved him away down the corridor. "Off you go for a gallop, and don't forget to lather her hard."

Parke grew more and more excited as he watched Juliet in the crowd. He could feel his arousal mounting, and wondered what sort of man Lawrence was. Would he be up for a few three or foursomes? Who was the new woman he had lined up for his bed next? Surely not Matilda? She was incredible from what he had sampled before, and her friends, well.... But none of them were as handsome and strapping as Lawrence Howard. Oh, it would be too delicious. He was certainly a most virile specimen.

His assistant Nash wasn't bad either, Parke reflected happily as he scurried down the hall on his nefarious errand. They might know all sorts of other interesting women. This evening was turning out a great deal better than he could have ever hoped.

"Pray come with me to the conservatory for a breath of fresh air, Madam," he said to Juliet as she came off the dance floor with Philip Marshall. "I did so want to ask you about your opinion of Richard III's reign."

"Oh, er, yes of course, if we can sit for a time," she said, holding her belly.

Philip interpreted the gesture, and against his better judgment decided to leave her with Parke to go find Blake or Eswara. How much trouble could the little bugger be in two minutes?

But incited by all Nash had told him, they were no sooner in the conservatory than Parke was on top of Juliet, pressing her down onto the bench as she struggled and tried to scream.

"No, let me go! What on earth! Let me go! Stop, no, please, the baby, no, please!"

"I know all about you. Know you like it rough. Pity about the gown, but you've got me so excited I just have to get at your gorgeous tits."

Lawrence had entered at the far side of the conservatory, the blood pounding in his ears. He was deaf to his wife's cries of pain and terror as he heard his father's words echo in his head: *Damn it, I'm going to kill you.*

He came forward now. "No, stop. I didn't mean--"

He could feel the familiar terror freeze his limbs. Now, as he had so many years before, he bargained with God that he would do anything, be better, reform his life, if only the woman he loved wouldn't be taken from him.

Lawrence watched in wide-eyed horror as his wife's bodice of silver tissue and violet silk shredded like wet paper with the force of his attack. Parke knocked her from the bench onto the floor and began to haul her skirts up.

"No, no!" she screamed.

He took another step forward until he felt a hand on his shoulder. He heard the words as if from a great distance. "I saw the whole thing, sir. More than just a criminal conversation by the looks of things. I'll tell your solicitors to proceed with the divorce at once."

"For God's sake, help me stop him!" Lawrence exploded, frozen in place by a swirl of images each more terrifying than the next.

"Stop him, sir? But you wanted-- And she evidently wants it too, in more ways than one."

Juliet's cries for help had gone unheeded in the music-filled

ballroom beyond, but Parke found them grating enough to slap her hard, drawing blood.

"Shut up, you bitch. You want half the ballroom to watch us swive? Or are you trying to invite a few others? I hear you like that too."

"Oh, God, help me, please, someone. He's going to hurt the baby, please help me!" she struggled with all her might, while all the while Lawrence stood paralyzed, reliving the terrible night so long ago...

Philip and Blake tore in a moment later and flung Parke off her at last, before he could do his worst.

Eswara knelt down to take her hand and pull her skirts down over her stockinged legs, while Blake examined in her bloodied lip and other injuries and draped his jacket over her bare torso.

Philip was in a towering rage. He lifted a large rake left behind by one of the gardeners.

"And how would you like me to stick this up you, eh, Parke?"

"Oh, God, no, no, help me, please, someone!"

Parke's cries became more high-pitched and desperate as Philip flattened him face down on the marble bench and began to tear his trousers off.

"Those are exactly the words Juliet said to you when you tried to force yourself on her, you bloody swine. And you're not even pregnant. It was bad enough when you tried to seduce young Amy Brandt last month. But this goes beyond belief!"

"He told me to do it!" Parke shrieked.

"Who did!"

"Lawrence Howard, of course."

"You bloody liar! I ought to--"

Parke squealed in terror as the stout-handled gardening tool began to draw ever closer.

"He did, I swear it! He told me to have it off with her so he could get a divorce! I swear!"

An involuntary movement from Lawrence caught Blake's eye, and he and Eswara stared at Lawrence.

"Let him go, Philip," Blake said quietly.

"Let him go? The lying little rapist-"

"Let him go."

"But Malcolm Branson-"

Blake shook his head. "The authorities are not going to hear about this, because Juliet's predicament is going to be bad enough even with a simple criminal conversation. Let the bastard go."

Philip threw down the rake and dragged Parke up by the scruff of his neck. "At least let me escort him from the property."

"Be my guest. Only don't draw blood. And hurry back. Juliet's going to need your professional services too."

Philip vanished out of the French windows, Parke howling all the way.

His examination at an end, Blake lifted her into his arms. "Not that you care, Lawrence, but Eswara says she's bleeding. There will be nothing I can do for the baby at this stage. I might be lucky if I can even save your wife if he's hurt her badly. It's far too early for your child to be born. You'll be hearing from her solicitor Philip in the morning. Now get the hell out of my house."

"But I didn't mean-" Lawrence started numbly.

Blake shook his head. "You've destroyed any relationship you've ever had with your suspicion and mistrust, Lawrence. With the Rakehells, and now with your wife. Divorce will be the best thing for both of you. If Juliet lives, that is."

He began to head out the French doors.

"Where are you taking her?" Lawrence shouted.

Eswara glared at him. "I know I would suit your purpose to have her paraded half-naked in another man's arms right through an entire ballroom full of people, but surely you've got what you want now. You can spare your wife that indignity at least."

Lawrence could hardly breathe. "I never meant-"

"Blake is right. You don't deserve her. And you have only yourself to blame."

Lawrence could hear his wife weeping as she vanished from his

sight.

"Please, the baby. Please save the baby. Lawrence's son. I don't want to live, but you must help him. Please save him."

"It's too early, Juliet. It's not possible, " Blake replied quietly.
"Come now, please, pull yourself together. It will do you no good to get so upset. I'm taking you upstairs to a nice quiet room, and we'll see what we can do for you and the child."

"Lawrence," she wept. "I don't understand. Lawrence. Where is he?"

"He's not coming, Juliet. He has business."

"I don't understand," she sobbed. "I thought he cared for me. How could he-"

"It doesn't matter now," Eswara soothed.

"But I want him, I want to see him."

Blake had by now come around to the main hall and ascended the stairs rapidly, Eswara close behind.

"Please, my husband where is he?"

"He's probably already left."

"I'm dying, aren't I?" Juliet gasped. "God, the shooting pains, they're awful."

"One side or both?" Blake asked.

"Just one. The right side."

"Did you get twisted or something?" he asked.

"Yes, when I fell off the bench."

"Onto your belly, or back?"

"Onto my back. But he was on top of me and-" She began to weep even harder.

"It's all right."

"I never encouraged him. I never even talked about anything other than history! Why did he-" She made a choking sound. Then she asked for her husband again.

Eswara looked at Blake and then nodded. "I'll go."

She went through the drawing room directly, heedless of the dancers as she pushed through to the conservatory once more.

Lawrence was still standing as dumb as a stone for all Nash was trying to encourage him to leave.

"You got what you wanted. It's all over now. She'll never be unfaithful to you again, and you can start afresh. Matilda will forgive you, I'm sure, once she understands how badly you were duped by Dane's whore of a sister."

"Don't speak to me about her," Lawrence rasped furiously. "You haven't the right-

"But we need to make plans. Matilda is in the crowd. Go tell her-

Lawrence roused himself enough to shoot his factor a furious look. "You're so eager to see her wed, you bloody marry her!"

"What?" Nash gaped. He laughed uneasily. "Anyone can see she loves you."

"No, she doesn't. She's not capable of that emotion. The damnable thing is, that was what Parke said about Juliet, and I was too stupid to listen to him. Anyone can see she loves me except *me*. My God, I've been such a fool," he rasped. "I don't know what demon possessed me. I never expected him to go so far with her. I never imagined he could be such a fiend."

"You're the fiend," Eswara said angrily, stepping forward now. "Wanting to divorce a poor girl like that whose only crime has been to be Matthew's sister, and then to put that degenerate onto her. She'd have died of syphilis for sure!"

"I never thought he'd actually-" Lawrence started to protest, though he knew how absurd and pathetic he sounded even to his own ears.

"I may not be a Christian, but what about your marriage vows? I hope you burn in hell for what you've done here this evening."

"We're not interested in your opinion, you lousy nigger!" Nash shouted, balling his fists.

Eswara looked at him with utter contempt. "I may be Indian, but I'm a better Christian than you are! You never lifted a finger to help her either. In fact, you were holding Lawrence back from coming to

her rescue! The pair of you ought to be locked up in Bedlam!"

"Please, you've got to believe me, I never thought--" Lawrence choked, and clasped his hand to his chest. The tears streaming down his face unheeded spoke volumes, enough for Eswara to relent.

"She wants to see you. God knows why, but she does. To say goodbye, I suppose."

Lawrence went white. "Is she--?"

Without waiting to hear the answer he began to vomit, in great shuddering spasm so violent that he sprayed Nash, who backed away in disgust.

"Get hold of yourself, Lawrence. Are you drunk?"

"God, Juliet," he wept.

Nash shook his head. "Pull yourself together, you fool. It's only a woman. You've seen her at last for the slut she is. Forget about her and--"

Eswara growled like a panther. "Get out, now."

"Don't you give me orders!"

"Philip Marshall is coming back. That's his step on the gravel. I'd leave now if I were you."

Nash didn't need to be told twice. He fled through the ballroom as Philip surged into the conservatory and slammed Lawrence up against a marble column so violently it trembled.

"Eswara, hand me that tool, will you?"

"No, Philip, this has gone far enough!" Eswara shouted.

"It has indeed. Poor Juliet is well rid of you." He let go of his cravat, and would have spat at Lawrence had they been outdoors.

Philip threw himself on the bench and glared at his former school friend, who hung his head and vomited again. The explosion came more weakly this time, but was so prolonged he felt sure he was going to be turned inside out.

Eswara finally took pity on him and decided to intervene. She grabbed and pressed the back of his hand hard with both of her own, and for a time he wondered what she was doing, until she explained, "It's part of my Indian medicine. You must have seen it in Darjeeling

and Assam. Just take a deep breath and relax, and the nausea will subside."

"It will *never* subside. When I think what almost happened," he gasped and hiccupped.

"Then *why*? Why divorce her?" she asked gently.

"No reason. A hundred reasons."

"But she loves you! She's carrying your child."

"Does she? Is she? How can I be sure?"

Philip and Eswara looked at him, and shook their heads.

Eswara shook her head. "Perhaps being sure doesn't matter now. The fact is that she's been hurt, and could be dying if Blake can't do something to stop her pain and bleeding."

"I can't go to her. She'll hate me--"

"Damn it, I don't care how upset you are, how jealous," Philip hissed. "Your wife could die! Many a stronger woman has been carried off by less. So whatever differences you have between you, I want you to put them aside this minute and come up to see her. Do whatever you have to, *lie* if you must, but I expect you to tell her that you love her and you're sorry. That you'd be lost without her."

He heaved a huge sigh. "I only wish it were a bloody lie! Then I wouldn't feel like I killed her!"

Philip shook his head in exasperation. "You've been a complete and utter fool, then. You've let your anger and resentment for Matthew blind you to all that's good and decent in the world. But as sure as I'm standing here, Matthew never cheated you. You need to find out who did. *After* you help save your wife."

"All right. I'll try," he said raggedly. "If you're sure she wants to see me." He cuffed at his tears and tried to adjust his toilette, but only ended up looking more dishevelled than before.

"She's been calling for you. I'm sure," Eswara said, taking his arm.

Philip offered his handkerchief to help clean up the worst of the spatters on his dark evening coat. After a quick trip to the cloakroom to splash his face and rinse his mouth, Lawrence found himself upstairs on the landing outside the door to her chamber.

As soon as she saw him she held out her hand. "Oh God, Lawrence, the baby. Please don't let me lose the baby."

Her violet eyes looked at him so beseechingly, with such love and trust, he wanted to slit his own throat for all the hurt he had caused her. He knelt by the bed and took her hand in both his own.

"I won't, dearest. We're going to do everything we can to help you. But you need to trust us."

She stroked his thick hair back from his brow. "I trust you with my life. I've always loved you, Lawrence, even when you were so cruel to me.

"I don't understand. Why did he do this? I've never even spoken to him about history above once or twice. What kind of monster would attack me like that in a decent home such as this with half the County in the next room?"

Lawrence began to wonder himself. A madman, surely. Flirtation, a kiss even, was one thing, rape quite another. "I don't know why, love. But he's never going to hurt you again as long as he lives. Do you understand?"

"Oh please, darling, don't do anything foolish. I couldn't bear it if you got into trouble because of me. After all, it isn't as if you've ever loved me. I'll go away and--"

He gripped the glass of wine that had been put by her bedside to fortify her, and drained it in one gulp. Then he clinked down the glass and looked Juliet straight in the eye. "I've always loved you, Juliet, always," he confessed at last. "Damn my stupid pride all to hell. It's been pretty cold comfort all the lonely hours I've been without you by my side. The truth is I loved you from the moment I clapped eyes on you. I just didn't know it was love. I thought I was immune to that emotion until you touched my cheek. Looked at me with your incredible violet eyes. As the hours went passed, I knew I could never go through with marrying someone like Matilda. How could I condemn myself to a life of tepid respect when I could live a life of torrid passion?

"Yet even as I worshipped your voluptuous body, I admired your mind. Your wit, intelligence. I only kicked at the spikes because it was Matthew of all people trying to dictate to me."

She sniffled and sobbed then, huge tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'm dying, aren't I?" she wept.

"No, no!" he shouted, his voice hoarse with anguish. "Don't say that!"

"It's all right, you can tell me the truth."

Blake gave them both a reassuring smile.

"No, no! You're not going to die, my dear. Why would you even think that?"

She looked up at her husband. "Because you're being so nice to me," she snuffled.

"Was I always so cruel to you?" he asked, feeling his gorge rising once more. And to think he had promised to love and honour Juliet before God, and had brought her to this.

"No, I didn't mean that exactly, only, you wanted a divorce. Wanted to prove me a whore, that I had led him on," she guessed. "So you can have what you want. I won't fight it. Only let me keep our baby. You don't need to lie to me about the rest."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm not going to let you go, Juliet, not now, not ever. I'm so sorry. I can't even begin to tell you all the feelings that made me do what I did. What I've done these past few weeks. I was angry, shocked when you told me we were having a child. I was so jealous of Ash I couldn't see straight.

"Then there were all the men the tea shop dancing attendance upon you for the past fortnight, and all the men tonight dancing with you, and well, God forgive me, I was so blind with jealousy that I didn't stop to think what I was almost throwing away. I'll understand it if you never want to see me again, but I need to beg your forgiveness."

"I do forgive you. But you're right. This marriage has to end. You've never loved me, and--"

"I've *a*lways loved you," he vowed again, "even when I thought you betrayed me."

She shook her head and said gently, "There's no point in lying any more. I know you loved Matilda. If we divorce--"

He shook his head, and kissed her hand. "If we divorce my life

won't be worth living. I've never loved anyone but you, Juliet. Certainly not Matilda, who could never hold a candle to your beauty, elegance and wit."

"You're lying to me, aren't you?" she sobbed. "I mean, what you said about Matilda can't possibly be true."

He stooped to kiss her hand. "Why would I lie? You're saying you'll accept the divorce. I'm turning you down categorically. If I loved her, why would I do that? She means nothing to me. My feelings for her were tepid at best. It was more of a practical business arrangement than a romance. With you I have so much pleasure I can't believe I could ever have taken a second look at Matilda."

She shook her head. "Now I know you're lying. I must be dying after all." She sniffed. "How much time do I have left?" she asked Blake.

"You're not dying, not for a long time, if I can help it. Lawrence, say something to her!" Blake hissed.

"I don't know what else to say!" he said with increasing agitation as his wife wept as though her heart would break.

He stroked her hair back from her brow and asked softly, "Why are you so sure I'm lying, sweetheart?"

Her tears continued to stream down her face. "You said your feelings for Matilda were tepid."

"They were!"

"But she's one of the most sultry courtesans in the whole of London. How could I ever compare--"

He stared at her, convinced she had taken leave of her senses. "What are you saying? *Matilda*?"

"Just that she was Matthew's mistress for over two years. Led him quite a dance. And not just him, several others well at the same time. You can ask Philip and Blake. She tried it on with them when Matthew and his wife had just got married. She was trying to organise three- and foursomes with the bucks in the area."

Lawrence stammered, "N-n-n-no, it's not possible. You're lying!"

Blake nodded. "Juliet's trying to tell you the whole truth about your marriage, old chap. I think you'd better listen."

"She can't be--"

"Every word she just said is true," Blake confirmed. "I'm sorry to have to say it, but you *were* nearly duped on your wedding day. Though not by Juliet."

Lawrence's mouth worked up and down like a landed trout's for a moment. When he finally regained the power of speech, he stammered, "But she-- And we never-- Matilda told me--"

Philip poked his head around the door, and shook his head. "It's all true, Lawrence, every word. But perhaps you can discuss the more intimate details with your wife later, when you're not so upset."

"No," he said, scowling furiously, "for there's nothing to discuss. I swear to you by all I hold sacred, Matilda and I never went to bed together. *Never*. She told me she'd been chaste since her husband had died and that we should wait until our marriage. She groped me a bit, but that was all, the better to lead me on. I was busy setting up everything in London and Bristol, and didn't really have time or care. I thought her solid, respectable, unexciting. I was willing to wait.

"I was anticipating life being so dull with her that when the other Matthew, Matthew Sampson, suggested I have a go at the most fabulous Incognita in the *Ton*, I decided why not have a last fling before I settled down to a stolid life of domestic respectability. Except I got the address wrong, and came to your house instead. The rest you know. I blamed you, thought it was a trick."

She nodded. "I never deceived you, darling, but nor could I tell you the whole truth. The fact is, well, even leaving aside my fascination and desire for you, I did have an ulterior motive for agreeing to marry you. Not for your wealth, but in order to save you from Matilda. Because I wanted you, and well, I could see you needed me."

"I do need you, I can admit it now." He kissed her hand tenderly.

"I could see it. You were so glowing and full of hope until my brother came in, and just seeing him dragged you right back to the cold, dark past you thought you had left behind when you went to India to make your fortune.

"But he and his friends never bore you an ounce of ill will. I had heard all about you and your circumstances from the Rakehells. They

said so many good things about you, that I was delighted to meet you, and hence, well, where we ended up.

"The more time I spent with you that night, the more it seemed to confirm everything that they had told me, darling, and that we were made for each other. For that glimpse of what it was like to find true love with a man I could admire, respect, and esteem, well, I was willing to risk my all and give my all for it. And not because of what I hoped to get from you, Lawrence, but for what I hoped to bestow. The love of a good woman, not a selfish and self-serving one like Matilda."

"You did it for me?" he whispered.

She nodded. "Aye, to save you, even if it meant putting myself in peril. No, not because I was frightened of you, though I suppose I should have thought more about the pox. But you're a worldly man, and sensible above all, so I trusted in you having always been cautious.

"I'm not so naïve that I don't know what happened to fallen women in this society, but I'm not friendless and alone. I didn't have to go through with the wedding, you know. But I did it to stop you marrying Matilda. Ask Althea if you don't believe me."

"Oh I do, sweetheart, that's just the trouble. I believe you, and yet it's all so incredible."

"I could very easily have refused to marry you that day, brazened it out until we saw whether or not there was a child on the way, and then decided what to do."

"I know. I could have as well. Or just walked out."

"But you didn't walk away."

"No, and thank God not, since there is indeed a child. *Our* child."

She stroked his cheek. "You believe me after all, then?"

He nodded emphatically. "Our son or daughter will be loved and treasured, I promise. I'm so very grateful for, and humbled by your capacity to love. I want to learn that from you. It's the greatest blessing you've ever given me, even more than, well, you know. I saw the sheets. You were pure as the driven snow until you let me into your bed, into your heart. I'm your only love at the moment, and I have no intention of sharing you with anyone except our family and

friends. And only in the platonic sense." He kissed her warmly.

When he raised his lips, he asked, "I know you're a loving woman, but how on earth could you ever have brought yourself to marry me after all I said and did that fateful morning. I was so hateful and hurtful to you."

She shrugged one shoulder and gave him a weak smile. "Even beyond my own predicament, Althea reminded me to consider how much was at stake for both of us. I knew all about Matilda from Matthew. So I didn't really have to think twice. I knew it was virtually a matter of life and death. And I was pretty sure I loved you. And that you cared for me. You asked me to marry you before Matthew ever barged in, remember?"

He nodded. "I do. You see, I was thinking clearly after all, even though I was so dazzled. All I knew was I had found a treasure so precious, I simply couldn't let it go."

"Matilda would have led you a merry dance and divorced you for infidelity. You can count yourself lucky you didn't end up with a dose of the pox."

"I know it now." He sighed.

"You don't look convinced," she said softly.

He got off the floor where he had been kneeling, and leaned down to embrace her. Then he perched carefully on the edge of the bed, making sure he didn't lean on any part of her. "I am sure. It's just, well, I can't believe how cruel I've been to you. I've been furious with myself for this entire mull. After all, I don't normally ring the front door bell of a respectable home, mistake it for a brothel, and roger the first woman I meet. I've made so many mistakes, I can't see how you can even stand to look at me."

"Darling, please, it doesn't matter now." She reached out to stroke his shoulder. "I love you. I've been telling you all along. I don't know how long it will take to convince you. Maybe a lifetime. But then my life is yours to share. Or not, if you really wish to be rid of me."

"No, not at all," he said firmly, shaking his head. "It would be like ripping the heart from my body. But it does matter, what I've done. Look what I've brought you to. All because you were kind enough to try to save me. Because you're tender-hearted and cared what

became of me.

"And now I've destroyed you. I'm never going to get back that adorably pert young woman who sparkled like the brightest star in the firmament in a gown fit for a goddess. I've torn it all to shreds." He fingered the remnant of her gown sleeve, then put his head down on her shoulder and began to weep.

She was startled, but stroked his hair tenderly. "I don't know. I'm told being a wife and mother, with an adoring husband and baby, is a pretty joyous time in a woman's life. Some parts of our life may be over, but there's still a great deal more to share."

"I can't be so selfish. I don't want to hurt you any more than I have already."

"If you can honestly say you believe in my fidelity, that this baby is yours--"

He gulped back his tears, reminding her of a small child. "I do believe it. I was so jealous. Not just of you talking to other men, but the way, well, the way you fit in with the Rakehells and all of their friends down here so effortlessly, as if you were always a part of them," he admitted with a rare flash of complete candour. "I was a fool. That damned chip on my shoulder again."

She stroked his cheek, pitying him with all her heart. How had such an intelligent and compelling man come to this? "If you can honestly say you believe in my fidelity, that this baby is yours, then I want us to stay married, to try again. But I want you and I to woo each other properly. Take the time to really get to know each other, without any arguments, and without, well, the dazzling passion we share."

Blake, who had been sorting through his medicine bag on the far side of the well-appointed blue and mahogany chamber, scowled at them both.

"That's exactly right. Absolutely no dazzling passion until I say so. You need to rest, Juliet, which means you're going to be in this bed and bored for weeks. You get a kiss on the cheek if you're lucky, Lawrence, do you hear me?"

He nodded. "Yes, anything. If only you'll agree to remain my wife."

Philip said quickly, "I know he's an old school friend of mine,

Juliet, but as your solicitor I'm advising you to think carefully before you commit yourself to anything."

She shook her head. "I don't need to think, Philip. I'm already committed to him. We're married. 'Let no man put asunder, remember?' That includes you, Lawrence."

"I don't want a divorce. I know I'm terrible at sharing my thoughts. Please, just believe me when say I love you and I'll do anything for your forgiveness."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"That includes trying to get along with all of the Rakehells, including my brother?" she asked softly.

He gave an abrupt nod. "I will try. Give me a bit more time, and we'll see."

"Thank you. I love you."

"I love you. God forgive me for being so blind. But I'm going to find out the truth. All of it, as soon as you're well. No more being haunted by the past."

He kissed her and began to cry softly again against her silken fall of hair. She wiped away his tears with her slender fingers, which he now kissed.

"It's all right, Juliet. Everything is going to be all right. I swear it."

He looked up at Blake hopefully.

Blake nodded. "There was just some staining. It's stopped now. She twisted her back but she and baby are fine. I'm going to prop up the bed up just to be sure, and we'll need to check her every hour.

"Luckily, she's one strong girl. Of course, she's had some good country breeding. None of the missish putting on of Town airs and too tight corsets for you or your sister, eh?"

"No, indeed," Juliet said with a slight smile. "London was more than enough for me the few days I got to stay there. Most unhealthy. Nothing could compare to Somerset, except back home in Dorset."

"Aye, it's lovely here."

Lawrence stared. How was it that Blake knew more about his own

wife than he did? And what was this about Dorset? Matthew had been brought up in Surrey and Berkshire.

Blake said quietly, "I'm going to have a trundle bed made up for you here, that is if you want to stay with her."

"I'm staying," Lawrence said firmly.

"I'll just get some wooden blocks for the bed. Call if she starts to feel any more pain."

Lawrence blanched at the mention of the wooden blocks, and felt as though he would be ill all over again.

Eswara said, "Don't worry."

"I can't help it."

"She's in good hands."

"I only wish she had been in better ones up to this point."

Eswara stared at him assessingly for a moment. Then she replied, "The gods have seen fit to give you more than your fair share of luck and chances. Don't waste this one, will you, Lawrence. "

"I'll try," he promised, cuffing the tears from his cheeks. Eswara had given him the clue he needed to go on. He sat up more fully and took his wife's hand.

"Tell me about Dorset," he asked quietly.

"What, you mean the place, or my life?" she asked in surprise.

"Both."

She described the house she had lived in, and her sister Miranda. For the first time ever, he truly listened to her uncritically, not sifting through every word looking for falsehoods or a reason to mistrust her. To try to detect conspiracy where there was none.

Blake returned a short time later with some night things. "Arabella gave me these and said use whatever you like. Eswara can help get you settled. Let's just leave them for a little while, eh, Lawrence?"

"Oh, er, yes. Call me when you're done, sweetheart."

"I will, and thank you for staying with me."

He shook his head. "It's I who should be thanking you for that."

Philip went out first and held the door for Lawrence. "I'll just head

back downstairs to speak with my wife for a moment. I'll be right back." His low tone and sharp look at Lawrence made it sound like more of a threat than a promise.

"Thank you, Philip. Really. You saved my wife when I couldn't. I'll always be grateful."

"Thank your wife, not me. If I had my way, I would leave you to rot. But she loves you. I will have to respect her wishes, and not start divorce proceedings. But you owe me a favor, Lawrence, and I have every intention of collecting."

Lawrence stiffened.

"Learn how to love your wife. I guarantee, once you really get to know her, you won't be disappointed." With that he vanished down the elegant staircase.

Lawrence stood staring after him for a time. Then he looked down the hall at his companion. "Blake, this going to sound like an odd question, but can you please tell me everything you know about my wife?"

Blake shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. There was a family scandal. Matthew's mother died. His father cast off she and her sister Miranda, not quite identical twins. They were fostered out to a couple called Lyons, and lived with that name. Matthew met them perhaps a half dozen times over the years."

"So that's why no one knew Matthew Dane had any sisters? And why she wasn't the toast of the *Ton* even though she's so gorgeous."

Blake nodded. "Now that he's settled and respectably married, Matthew thought he and his wife could do something for them. Give them a London season and perhaps a settlement so they could marry well. They're both as green as grass. They were only up in Town for a week or so when you met Juliet, and were hardly seen except by we Rakehells and a few shopkeepers. Althea was working on getting them kitted out with a few less countryfied fashions, and Lady Pemberton was getting ready to present them at court. But then you met Juliet, and well—" He spread his hands wide.

"My God, and all this time, I've been accusing her of—"

Blake shook his head. "And worse. Of trying to destroy you as well, when anyone can see she is a loving woman incapable of guile."

"What else do you know about her?" Lawrence asked, eagerness replacing the last twinge of jealousy which plagued him.

He flapped one arm at his side. "Not much that can help you with the answers you really seek. I know she loves roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and told my wife something about adoring swings."

Lawrence blushed, but for the first time in a long time he almost felt like smiling.

"Lady Pemberton could tell you more. Or her guardians the Lyonses down in Dorset. That's all Matthew ever told me of her past history, and I doubt he's withholding anything. You can ask Philip, Thomas or Randall if that helps. If you're willing to talk to any of them, that is," he added with a grimace.

Lawrence nodded. "I will. I gave Philip my word, and I have to start somewhere."

"Start with Juliet, when she's feeling better. You need to learn how to talk to your own wife. Or should I say, actually listen to her."

Lawrence couldn't wait for her to get well, however, so he did indeed speak to the Rakehells about his wife, for they all came to call the next day to see how Juliet was.

Lawrence was astonished at how everyone went out of their way to be so kind.

At the end of Philip's visit with his wife Jasmine, he pulled Philip to one side in a small reception room, and expressed his gratitude for all he had done for her, that day, and the night she had been attacked.

Philip shrugged. "You've been in a very dark place, Lawrence. We do want to help. The Rakehells look after their own."

"So what do you know about my wife?"

His account did not differ in any way from the others he had received already.

Philip paced up and down in front of the hearth in the small half paneled room with pale blue flock wallpaper and walnut furnishings. "Listen. I don't know what happened with that business venture all those years ago, for I was in a bad way myself and left school as

soon as I had finished my studies," Philip said.

"But I can honestly say that greed has never been one of the Rakehells' failings. A certain eagerness for the ladies before they married, yes, but if you're thinking they cheated you for that reason, I still say you'd be wrong. You can tell me to mind my own business, but this has gone on for far too long. I think you need to find the whole truth. Go see Lady Pemberton in London, and talk to Matthew."

Lawrence scowled and sat back on the sofa with a stubborn look on his face. "I'll see Lady Pemberton, but I'm not--"

"I heard you promised your wife that if she got better that you would try to get on with her family and friends."

He sighed. "I'll start with Lady Pemberton."

"All right. Just don't leave it too long."

"But I can't go now, not when Juliet needs me."

"No, but in a few days. And she can come to stay with us while you're away," Philip offered, "unless of course Blake insists on her staying here for medical reasons."

"You're all being very good about--"

Philip waved away his thanks. "You've been acting like a madman. When you're willing to steady yourself down and confide in someone rationally, we'll all be the better for it, especially your poor wife."

Lawrence broke down then and told Philip about the state of his marriage ever since he had wed, his neglect, his mental cruelty. He wiped away his bitter tears at the end with Philip's handkerchief.

His friend looked grim. "I am not going to berate you more than you've already done to yourself. I can see you've suffered through your misunderstandings, your suspicion and jealousy, and that all this has all been hellish for you. It has to stop, Lawrence, surely you can see that."

"I don't know what to—"

"You do," Philip maintained, before moving over to pour two glasses of sherry from the decanter on sideboard. "You were raised a decent Christian, and you're married to the best of women. I don't know Juliet intimately the way you do, it's true, so mayhap she does

have some character traits you find it difficult to reconcile to."

Lawrence shook his head. "That's just the trouble. She's perfect. Even when I was so furious with her, thinking her fallen, or a traitor, I couldn't stop wanting her."

Philip smiled wryly. "And hated her all the more for it, I dare say."

Lawrence didn't even bother to deny it.

"Well, I can talk about the Juliet I've come to know and respect ever since Matthew introduced her to me and my wife. I can't understand how you could be so wrong about a sweet, loving young woman as to treat her the way you have.

"Even if she were a fallen woman and a schemer, and all the other vile things you believed, did that make her any less of a human being?

"I was a prostitute, for Heaven's sake. Are you going to send me out of the house and forbid your wife to have anything to do with me?"

"No, no, of course not," Lawrence said sincerely.

"Would I deserve cruelty, neglect and brutality just because I was trying to earn a living the only way I could to help support my entire family?"

"No! I thought Matthew was setting out to ruin me somehow!"

"Ruin you?" Philip snorted, all patience at an end at last. "You bloody fool. He *saved* you."

Lawrence stared. "Saved me? I don't see how."

Philip sighed, and sat across from Lawrence with a sigh. He handed him the sherry glass, and began, "Michael told me all about it. He and Matthew were there the day the letter came to your little office from your uncle, asking you to be his heir, and travel to India. The opportunity that saved you from ruin. Though it invited you to come out there, that was all."

"All?"

"There was no money for your fare to India."

Lawrence shook his head. "Of course there was. I had nothing left after our partnership went bad. The money in the letter was the only thing that paid for my passage."

Philip shook his head. "There was cash, it's true, but it never came from your uncle. It came from Matthew's own pocket. And added up to damned sight more than any dividends that you might have had from the investments you all made."

"I don't understand. After the way I treated him, why on earth would he ever—Unless you mean he felt guilty, and was giving it back."

Philip shook his head. "No, never guilty. The fact of the matter is, when the money went missing, Matthew knew he hadn't done it, so naturally began to look around for whoever did. In the end, he thought *you* were guilty of cleaning out the account yourself. He was livid at the accusations you had leveled at him, and angry with himself for having trusted you. But he gave you the money anyway. He hoped you'd make something of yourself with it far away from England and the shadow of your brother. And the woman who was being unfaithful to you right under your nose."

Lawrence gaped, but knew all Philip was saying was true.

"As for Juliet, well, when she learned that you were set to marry Matilda, she saved you as well. She didn't want you to end up a laughingstock and in that foul woman's clutches. If you had married Matilda, you would have been seen as the biggest gull alive, and she would have brought you nothing but scandal and ruin. You don't have to take my word for it. I'll give you a list of names you can take with you to London. Just make sure you have plenty of money for horse shoes, and a few new pairs for yourself."

He shook his head and sighed. "I can't believe any of this. Damn it all to hell. Juliet told me one day I would find out the truth about her and feel like an idiot. But I've hurt her so much, the marriage should be over."

Philip reached over to clap him on the shoulder. "Except that she loves you, old chap. Despite everything, Juliet sees the good in you. You offered her the chance for divorce and she was willing to take it to make you happy. Because even more than her own happiness, she wants yours. She loves you. In spite of everything. Doesn't that tell you something?"

Lawrence downed his sherry in one gulp. "That the woman is a saint and I don't deserve her."

"I thought you were coming to terms with each other? That you loved her?" Philip asked softly.

"I do," he insisted.

"Even though you thought her a harlot?"

"Yes, even then."

"So how much more do you love her now that you know she is innocent and chaste?"

Lawrence shrugged. "I don't think I can love her any more than I already do, but I'm willing to give it my all."

Philip nodded, satisfied. "Good man. But don't be surprised if you do love her more with each passing day. Your heart being open to her at last will make all things possible. And just wait until your baby is born."

He heaved a ragged sigh. "*If* it's ever born. The poor thing has been through hell."

"You're going to have a fine healthy son in the fall. You mark my words. And you're going to spend the rest of your life thanking all the gods in the heavens for the gift of their bounty. You thought Matthew took everything from you. If it hadn't been for him, where would you be now?"

Lawrence shook his head. "I have no idea. I certainly wouldn't have all I do now."

"And if Matthew hadn't agreed to let you marry Juliet?"

He sighed. "I would be miserable right now married to his cast off mistress, and would never have known the joy that Juliet has brought into my life."

"A joy all the more precious, I should think, because you have the bliss of her love when you've really never deserved it."

Lawrence clinked his glass down on the table and rose to go see his wife. "Believe me, I can't get out of my mind just how unworthy of her I really am. It's part of the reason I've been acting like a madman, as you put it. But I swear to you, I am going to make it up to her. To you all. If Juliet still loves me after all, this I shall worship her like a saint or goddess. For she would surely be one to continue to love a bastard like me."

"Not a bastard. Just a very haunted and angry man."

At the end of a week Juliet declared herself hale and hearty, with her back feeling very much better. Blake insisted she should stay to be kept an eye on by he and his wife. She got out of bed and was able to sit and read to the boys and chat to her husband.

He basked in the opportunity to wait on her hand and foot, but the questions which teemed in his mind refuse to rest.

"I need to go to London for a few days, though, darling," Lawrence said quietly at one point. "I hate to leave you, but--"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "One last separate journey. You're going where I can't follow."

"You know why?"

Juliet nodded. "I do. But I'll be waiting for you when you get back. Then you can tell me everything."

"I love you, Juliet."

"I know you think you do at the moment. Only time will tell. Go on, seek your truth, and come back home to me a whole man."

Lawrence's first port of call in the capital was not his warehouse, but Lady Pemberton's.

She was rather surprised to see him, but made him feel welcome. The handsome older woman gestured him to a chair, and did not bother to beat around the bush.

"I've heard about your wedding to Juliet from my nephew Matthew. Why have you come here, Lawrence?"

He tried not to be humbled by the magnificence of the blue and gold drawing room she had received him in. "I know this is going to sound like an odd question, but I need you to tell me what you know about my wife."

"Ah."

Something in the tone of that single syllable made him start and stare at her expectantly.

"I was wondering when you were going to come looking for the truth. It's taken you long enough. How is she?"

"Not well. I've been a fool," he said bluntly.

Lady Pemberton gasped. "What do you mean, not well?"

"She nearly miscarried. Blake Sanderson says she's better, she says she is as well, but I'm afraid I've been harsh with her and have much to regret. I thought she was one thing. It turns out she's another."

"And are you disappointed?"

"No! Not at all," he said sincerely. "Maybe that's just the trouble. She's everything I could have hoped for in a wife, if I ever dared hope so high. I want us to be happy. *Her* to be happy. I'm just not sure if she can be with me. I've been like a madman with her, loving one minute, shouting and furiously jealous the next. She's a loving woman, but I don't know if she can ever find it in her heart to forgive me."

"Do you love her?"

He shrugged hopelessly. "I think so. I'm fairly sure I do. But I don't know."

The silver-haired woman glared at him from her piercing blue eyes. "You're going to have to do a damned sight better than that!"

"But how do you know? How can one ever *know*? What *is* love?" he asked, his emotions surging so powerfully they threatened to choke him.

Lady Pemberton sighed. So that was it. "It's no one single thing. It's a million things, little and great. The life you build together with each other. The nights of joy and the sharing, tenderness, even when intimacy isn't possible. Holding hands, putting your arms around each other, being affectionate and devoted, aware of the other person. Desiring to please her instead of only yourself."

"And being faithful. How can I be sure?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders and shook her head. "No one can ever be completely sure, but great intimacy usually ensures that neither partner ever has the chance or desire to stray."

"Matthew's parents had all that and more, until Matthew's father

destroyed his marriage by refusing to trust Matthew's mother. I can tell you for certain, she was never unfaithful."

Lawrence blinked in confusion. "Matthew's parents? I thought we were speaking of my marriage."

Lady Pemberton sighed. He had been a self-centered man for a long time, but perhaps he was ready to hear the whole truth now. Hear it, and listen, and understand.

"Matthew's mother adored him, wanted a whole house full of children. Alas, it was not to be. Years passed with him as the only one. Not even a false pregnancy or miscarriage. Then one day, just after Matthew went off to boarding school for the first time with all you Rakehells, she suspected she was pregnant. Was overjoyed, but fearful she might have made a mistake, or that she might do something to provoke a miscarriage, and lose the chance of such a huge blessing.

"She withheld herself in the marital bed because of that. She didn't tell her husband because she was afraid he would make a huge fuss, be upset, treat her like an invalid. She was also afraid of disappointing him if it turned out that she was wrong, or that she lost the child.

"She never lost interest in him as a husband, never came to London to see a lover. She came up to see a specialist. She was staying with me, and told me all about her bright hopes of another son. She adored Matthew so. Worshipped him. Raised him like a demigod, which is why he was always a bit spoilt and arrogant. But he's always had a good heart, and tried not to hurt people if he could help it."

Lawrence stared at her in confusion. "I still don't understand--"

"Patience. Forgive me if I occasionally seem to digress. After her visit to the specialist, who assured her that all was well, Matthew's mother went out the following day to buy Matthew's father a gift. She wanted to buy him something special to make up to him for what she felt was her marital neglect. To tell him what the doctor said, and explain everything. To share the wonderful news, and celebrate"

She sighed for a moment. "Alas, fate intervened, in the most harmless way. Whilst out, she ran into an old school friend, and agreed to take tea with her. Her friend met up by chance with a male

acquaintance, who offered them a ride home in his carriage when they were finished with all their shopping. The friend went across the street to buy one last-minute item, and left them alone, never dreaming that any harm could come of it.

"Only that one innocent act led to the most dire consequences. Matthew's father had followed his wife up to Town hoping to surprise her. He saw she and the harmless chap together admiring the gift Matthew's mother had bought for Matthew's father, a lovely new fob watch.

"I'm ashamed to admit that my brother misread the whole thing completely. Jealousy caused him to do the unthinkable with the woman in his life he adored more than life itself. He banished her from the house, forbade her to ever see Matthew again, and filed for divorce. He named the gentleman as having had a criminal conversation with her."

Lawrence felt ill as he heard the latter part of the tale. And to think he had come so close to losing his own wife because of his blind jealousy and the rage it provoked. "Don't stop now, please, Lady Pemberton. I need to know. What happened next?"

"As you can imagine, it was the scandal of the year. Yet oddly, no one took my brother's part. His wife had been so completely above reproach, not even the gossip hungry *Ton* could find fault with her. Everyone tried to reason with him, me above all. Matthew's mother was as close to me as any sister could ever have been. But his father insisted that even if she had been blameless in London, she had been up to no good for months at home. He refused to believe the child was his. She died in childbed, with the twin girls who arrived farmed out to a decent family down on the south coast, down in Dorset.

"I begged and pleaded, but they were not permitted to be anywhere near Matthew. I can honestly say, having seen the girls, that they could not have looked more like their father if they had been stamped at the same mint.

"I wanted to raise them myself, but Matthew's father forbade me to interfere. I'm sorry to tell you that my husband, God rest him, insisted I stay out of it. Those twin girls were Juliet and her sister Miranda."

He opened his mouth to ask another question, but she halted him with one raised hand.

"But before I tell you about them, let me finish the story of my sister-in-law and brother. After Matthew's mother died, Matthew's father was never the same. He became a religious fanatic who saw depravity everywhere. He told Matthew, his only son, whom he had once loved, that he was full of base desires. That probably goaded him into committing even more rakish excesses. I understand young people only too well, their spirit of rebellion.

"But what was even worse than his father's fanaticism was his coldness. His wife's supposed infidelity made him second-guess himself, see treachery everywhere even when none existed. He even started to doubt that Matthew was his, though they were as alike as two peas in a pod."

She fixed him one more with her rapier-like gaze. "You can see now what jealousy, mistrust and suspicion can do to even the happiest of marriages. He should have trusted her. They were so happy. Why could he not believe it was true love?"

"Perhaps he felt he didn't deserve it?" Lawrence said softly.

"And what would ever give you the idea that *you* didn't?" she demanded astutely.

He sighed, poised on the brink of a momentous confession, something he had dared not admit even to himself before. He pressed his palms together as though in the confessional, and took a deep, steadying breath before revealing, "I wanted to be a good, virtuous man. But after what happened here in England, being a second son, and then losing my business and my fiancée because of the actions of the very people I should have been able to trust the most, well, I started to tell myself that the ends justified the means.

"Once I left for India, all my hopes dashed, to encounter my debauched opium addict of an uncle, I'm afraid to admit that I didn't dare trust, didn't dare love. I just became a law unto myself. I was determined that no one would ever touch my heart, or see me vulnerable. I swore to myself as I sailed from these shores that no one would ever be able to take advantage of me again."

Lady Pemberton urged softly, "Go on, let it all out."

He ran one hand through his ebony hair and admitted, "My success, such as it's been, has been fuelled by nothing but hatred. I hated Matthew for seeming to deprive me of my hopes by stealing from me, and hated the Rakehells, who I thought were my friends, for taking his side against me.

"I've even hated Juliet, despite the fact that I'm so drawn to her I can scarcely be in the room without wanting to embrace her. I believed she was just part of another plot to ruin me. I've treated her badly not because of anything she's ever done, but because of my anger, suspicious nature and jealousy."

"But you don't hate her or Matthew now?" his regal companion demanded.

He shook his head. "I feel like such a fool. Philip tells me that Matthew never stole from me. That the money was missing and they thought I had taken it myself. Matthew felt sorry for me, wanted me to have a chance to put my gifts to use. He paid for everything when I went to India. It seems he was actually the making of me, not the ruination. Without the fare for the ship passage, I would never have gone to India, and never have all that I have now. And I doubt I would ever have had so much had I remained here in England."

She nodded. "It doesn't surprise me in the least. Because Matthew lost his family, family means everything to him. He didn't want the same thing to happen to you. In fact, you gained a new future through his help and that of your uncle, despite the fact that he was a debauched opium addict.

Lawrence nodded and sighed.

"So, it appears that Matthew never cheated you."

"No, never."

Her sharp blue eyes bored into him. "Then you must know who did."

He sighed. "It's just so hard—"

"I know. But it's the truth and you need to face it."

"If not Matthew, or Michael, or Philip, then who—"

She tutted impatiently. "Lawrence, for pity's sake, stop running from the truth. They're all dead. They can't hurt you any more."

"I can't—" he said, pressing his hands together as though trying to keep the lid down on Pandora's box.

"Then I'll say it, if you can't bring yourself to face the ghosts of the past. Your own brother did it. He tried to destroy you out of envy and jealousy. He wanted your fiancée for himself, and took her and all you had worked so hard to achieve. He pretended to be you and withdrew all the money. All you Rakehells who had invested in the scheme you were heading pointed the finger at each other. But since you had the most to lose, it didn't take them long to decide you were the most innocent."

Lawrence sat numbly, reliving the pain of the moment as clearly as if it were yesterday.

"Your brother didn't just want to ruin you financially, Lawrence. He could have ruined you personally forever if all the Rakehells had turned against you, and the scandal had given you the reputation of a thief. You might have even ended up in prison. Then what prospects would you have had?"

Lawrence shook his head. "I can't believe my own brother hated me that much."

"You had much to envy, lad, then, and now. You're intelligent, hard-working, you were far more able than he was the eldest son, and your father seemed to favor you for all you weren't his heir. Your fiancée came from a good family, and stood to inherit a fair sum as an only child. Many have killed for far less reason. Let alone deliberately ruined."

Lawrence shuddered at her words, and pressed his hand to his brow as though he had a headache.

Lady Pemberton rose now and poured him a glass of brandy from one of the cut-glass decanters that stood on a sideboard nearby. She pressed it into his numb fingers, and waited while he drank it down. Then she poured him a second one, and resumed her seat.

"Matthew suspected you for a time, but he also knew the two of them were having an affair. He said you nearly caught them one time in the library when you went looking for an atlas?"

"My God, yes, I remember!" he gasped. "Matthew came to stay with us. He was there looking really flustered, and couldn't get me out

of the room quickly enough. I was sure then that he had been going through my papers."

"If you will pardon the crudity, it wasn't he rifling through drawers, but your brother."

"So they were both plotting against me all along?" he said, shaking his head incredulously.

"It would appear so, Son."

"And then they married as soon as I was out of the picture and they could afford to."

"And then died not too long ago, and left you their two sons to look after. Look, Lawrence, what they did was wrong, terrible, but it didn't work out so badly for you, did it? I mean, you're a prominent tea trader now, back in England now and so prosperous, your whole future is set fair. You've made far more in India than you ever would have done toying at stock brokerage. You never really enjoyed it or had the talent for it, and the rewards are paltry compared to what can be made in the India trade."

He nodded. "It's true. And I loved India. Love tea. But I also love England. And admit, I fell in love with the idea of coming back here to show everyone who had doubted me, accused me, what an incredibly successful self-made man I was. Hah." He shook his head and grimaced. "What a fool I've been."

"Not so much of a fool that you can't see your mistakes, and want to rectify them before it's too late."

He nodded eagerly. "I do. That's why I've come. I need help. I need to know everything."

"Then let's talk about Juliet herself. Since her father disowned her, she's been raised a quiet, respectable girl all these years, but she's not traditional. You've got a *bas bleu* of the first order there. Have you heard of J. A. Lyons?"

Lawrence's eyes lit up, and he nodded enthusiastically, before taking a sip of the brandy. "Who hasn't? His histories of England are the finest scholarship to date, and sheer entertainment. I can't wait to get the next volume on the reign of Elizabeth."

"You're going to have to wait. She got married recently, and I believe is *enceinte*."

"Lyons is a *woman*?"

"Not just any woman. Your wife."

He stared. "But that's not possible. She's so young."

"She also has an excellent head for business. She has supplemented their modest income with wine trading on the Continent. Juliet is one of the top wine merchants on the south coast. She kept the business going even during all the years we were at war with France, and her but a mere slip of a thing."

He groaned. "And there I was trying to educate her..." He blushed with mortification. "I'm such an ass. And I told her she wasn't permitted to take anything with her from her old life because I wanted to prove I was so much better than she was. Now I find she was raised as a pauper."

"Not quite, but close enough. Any little gifts I gave them she reinvested for herself and her sister. She's lived life more quietly than a church mouse in some respects, but she's not too naïve or unsophisticated, for all she was raised in Lyme Regis rather than London.

"Once Matthew was happily married, a true family man at last, he decided he had to do something to help the family, raise the girls' prospects. He's no longer a rake, so their reputations wouldn't be tarnished by the association. Juliet and her sister were only just recently arrived in London when you met and married.

"Quite frankly, I don't know how you could possibly have mistaken a virtuous young woman for a harlot, but if you will pardon me being so blunt, I believe you saw what you wanted to see. That you believe most women are harlots, and therefore not to be trusted, and not to be respected."

He glared but remained silent.

"You also seem to be easily deceived by women, for all you are a hard-headed business man. Your first fiancée? Then Matilda? I would be hard put to meet a worse woman than that one. She made Matthew's life hell as his mistress for nigh on two years until he broke free. I don't know what your other liaisons were like--"

"Safe and predictable. The physical only. Bad women I could never come to care about," he confessed with a wave of his hand.

She nodded. "I thought so. It seems to me that you have no idea how to share your life with anyone. You're so domineering because you've done nothing but bark orders at coolies for ten years. But a wife is not a slave, and even a slave is a human being, after all."

He drained his glass, clinked it down on the small side table next to him, and sat with his head in his hands for a time. After a short while he asked, "Will you give me the directions for the house in Lyme Regis?"

"Have you not found everything you need to know yet?"

"Not quite. Where is her sister Miranda?"

"She's gone back down to Dorset for the moment."

"Then I need to take her to see Juliet, and I must also bring the rest of my wife's things to our new home."

Lady Pemberton fixed him with a hard stare. "If you have no intention of making Juliet happy, you should just let her go now. It will save all of you a great deal of heartache in the long term."

Lawrence shook his head vehemently. "I can't, Lady Pemberton. She's my wife, and what I have, I hold. I've already lost so much in my life, I couldn't bear to lose her," he rasped, feeling near tears.

"I'd like to be noble and walk away, so she won't have to look at the man who was either indifferent to her or so mentally cruel day after day.

"But when I thought she had been unfaithful, I wanted to kill myself. When I thought we were to be divorced, a part of me was so grief-stricken I didn't think I could even draw my next breath. And when she nearly lost the baby, I knew I couldn't live without her. That I had *a/ways* loved her, from the moment we met. I hate all the things I did and said, but I was so sure Matthew and Juliet had tricked me." He sighed.

"One other thing you might want to consider."

"Mm?" he said distractedly.

"Well, two things, really."

"What are they, Lady Pemberton?"

"Ask yourself two questions. How did Matilda latch on to you so quickly when you arrived back in England? And who would have

known all about your investments with the Rakehells, enough to help your brother steal from you?"

He frowned. "Surely it doesn't matter about either now. Juliet saved me to rescue me from that harlot Matilda, and my brother is dead. These questions are both ancient history compared with mending fences with Juliet."

She looked at him sharply. "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer."

Lawrence shook his head and sighed, then stared moodily into the fire. "I thought I knew who my enemies were."

Lady Pemberton rose and said stiffly, "The Rakehells have never done you any harm. You can trust in that above all else."

"I'll try. But now I must go see my wife's foster-parents." He rose and collected his outergarments from the chair on which he had placed them.

"Be careful. And give Juliet my love."

"I shall. And thank you." He offered her his hand, which she took without hesitation. "I've been a fool, but I swear I'll do anything to make it up to her."

"Just start doing it. One day at a time. And night," she added with a wink.

"The nights have never been a problem." He grinned. "Except me spending far too many of them on my own."

"Glad to hear it. That girl has dash and spirit, for all you've tried to saunter all over her like the cock of the walk."

"I know. What a waste of time. She smiles at me, and she can wrap me around her little finger in an instant."

"She may be called Lyons, but she is a Dane through and through. Go on, off you go, and be happy. And I expect an invitation to come to stay as soon as she's feeling better."

"You're welcome any time," he said sincerely. "She's staying with Blake at the moment, but we have a goodly house, and I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you."

"In that case, I shall head down there first thing in the morning."

"I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Very good, then."

He stuck out his hand once more, this time more awkwardly. "Thank you for everything. Really. You've been more kind than I deserve after everything I've done."

She took his hand in both her own. "You're welcome. Just make sure I don't ever have call to take you to task for neglecting your wife ever again. Else you will suffer for it, and not just personally. I will be happy to offer my patronage of your teas once you and my niece are a bit more, er, settled, shall we say. But just remember, that patronage can be revoked at any time if I see you lapsing back to your old ways."

By rights Lawrence should have been furious at her near-blackmail, and told her what she could do with her patronage. Instead, he gave an airy wave. "Believe me, you won't. There won't be enough hours in the day to worship Juliet and make it all up to her. Business be damned. She's my wife, and carrying my child. I'm going to try to be the best husband she could ever want, and if I fail, well, then, my dear Madame, by all means do your worst, for I shall most certainly deserve it."

"That's the spirit, lad," she said, giving his cheek a pat. "*That's* true love."

Lawrence flashed a grin. "I know it now. I've had the best teacher. My lovely wife."

She went to the desk to write out the address he had requested.

He thanked her and bowed.

"*Au revoir* for now, son. And be careful."

"You said that before," he noted, his brows knitting.

Lady Pemberton fixed him with a hard stare. "Let's just say I know Matilda of old. A mischief-maker if ever there was one. Never underestimate her."

He nodded. "She's in Somerset the last I heard."

"Then all the more reason why you should finish your business and head home to Juliet with all possible haste."

He didn't even pause to shrug on his coat. He turned and ran

down the stairs and into his waiting carriage without even looking back.

Chapter Twenty-five

After Lawrence left Lady Pemberton's, his mind teeming with all he had learned about the past, he had his driver push hard for Lyme Regis, and arrived early in the morning on the third day.

The Lyonses were already up and about, and he introduced himself to the older couple. They were immediately all smiles. They peered out the door and around, and then looked back up at him in consternation.

"But where's Juliet?"

"She couldn't come. She's expecting a baby and needs to rest."

"Oh my! A baby? Already? How wonderful. Come in, lad, come in," the jovial older man with silver hair said.

"I wanted you all to come stay, and to bring a few of her favourite things with me to make our house more of a home. I mean, she's done wonders with the place and my nephews, but she has so little. She never complains, never buys anything for herself."

"You got the more sensible sister," Miranda said with a warm smile. "I'm the extravagant one."

Lawrence blinked for a moment. They were not identical twins, but she was similar enough to his wife give even him pause. It was the posture, the tilt of the head.

But as he shook her hand, there was none of the spark he felt every time he and his wife touched. Her eyes were blue, not the rare violet he loved so well, and her hair a dark glossy chestnut brown, not jet black like his beloved's. She was also more slender, with a longer neck and much more workmanlike hands, roughened with manual tasks.

"I was just heading out into the garden, but I'll come up to her room with you and pick out some things she will like."

"And some of her favourite gowns and such. I know she said she'd sent for all her things, but I don't believe it. So little arrived."

"I did pack most of them. It's her books she will really be missing."

He hated himself for the way he had been so scathing about her reading.

"No need to look so sad. She'll be fine. Call it twin's intuition. I know she's been really happy and really unhappy. But she's strong."

"She has to be to put up with me."

She led the way up the narrow stairs to a rather plain room with a single narrow four-poster bed. Everything in the room was white, or oak. It was as simple and elegant as his wife, and he immediately felt at home.

She watched him look around, but there wasn't much to see, and his huge presence in the small chamber was almost overwhelming. "Why not go downstairs, freshen up, take tea, and have a little rest. We'll pack and be ready to leave in an hour."

"If you don't mind, I'd just as soon stay here, and you can tell me about growing up here, and why you're packing these mementoes."

So Miranda regaled him with tales of their childhood and he lay on the bed, redolent of his wife's alluring scent.

He felt as though he had been traveling for years. In a sense he had, but in this tiny bright sunny bedroom painted white with the tiniest hyacinth accents which reminded him of her eyes, he was sure he had come home. He looked around the snug cottage, and determined then to redo every room in their house. Juliet could have whatever she liked.

The white room reminded him of another chamber in another eon....

He saw it now as clearly as if it were happening at that moment: his father fighting with his mother. Only this time....

You mustn't ever tell. Never tell.

And Lawrence, terrified of losing his father too, had remained silent.

Except that murder would out, and his father's legacy, if not financial, had most certainly been a most lasting one.

"Oh God, Juliet, I'm so sorry," he wept.

"I'm not Juliet, I'm Miranda. I think you were having a nightmare, Lawrence."

He sat up in the bed with a start. His wife's sister was poised to go out the door with a valise.

"No, you're right. I know you're not her," he gasped, shaking his head in a vain attempt to clear it of the horrible visions which teemed within. "I was just thinking of her, that's all. No, you really aren't very much alike, now are you."

She shook her head. "She's the clever one. Me the sociable one, and a moderately good homemaker, more by chance than by choice."

"My mother was like you."

"Thank you, I think."

"Yes, sweet and gentle, like Juliet."

"Juliet?" She laughed merrily. "You *must* be in love! Ma! Pa? Lawrence says Juliet's sweet and gentle."

There was a guffaw from below.

He was perplexed.

Her foster-father came up now, and explained, "She could give the roughest French sailors a run for their money when it came to the trading, and swear and drink with the best of them in several languages. Smart as a whip, our girl. Perhaps not as ladylike as what you're accustomed to, but what's the point of having a high-stepper when a good workhorse will get you where you're going as well."

"Pa, Juliet would be mortified to be compared with a horse!"

"But you know what I mean. No use in airs and graces, now is there? Juliet has a good head on her shoulders, with the right man to bring her out of herself." The older man beamed with pride.

"Which I evidently am not," he said with a sigh.

"Oh, I don't know. She loves you, so I suppose you have to be."

"What makes you say that?"

"To continue the horse motif, wild horses couldn't get her to do anything she didn't want to do."

Lawrence stared down at her. "What about fear?"

"Fear?" Miranda laughed. "I've never seen her afraid. Turned a bull in a field once before it trammelled me to death."

His head swam. She'd feared him, shrunk away from his anger. He really was his father's son. He thanked God he had never hit her, but the prospect of a child coming soon terrified him. What if he hit the infant the way he and his brother...

Now he longed to see Juliet with every fibre of his being. He recalled Lady Pemberton's warning as well about not leaving Juliet on her own for too long. "Are we ready to leave?"

"Aye, just about. Missus is just packing a few things and then we'll close up the house."

"Do you mind if we press on until late tonight? I was up in London and have already been away longer than I ought," he asked, tugging at his suddenly too-tight collar.

"Not at all. We can sleep in the carriage."

Within half an hour they were all under way. One part of Lawrence was delighted to be making the acquaintance of such a lovely family. The other part of him couldn't wait to see his wife, hold her in his arms as though he would never let her go.

The old couple sensed it, for as they neared Jerome Manor, her foster-mother said, "You go on up and see Juliet yourself first. We'll get settled in our rooms, get the dust off, and come along by and by."

"Thank you."

"Nothing like young love."

There was nothing like it indeed, for one look at his wife's sparkling eyes as she heard him step into the room, and he was one his knees by the side of the bed. "Forgive me?"

"Always. Come up here and let me look at you, kiss you."

"Oh, no, I'm filthy and I don't want to hurt--"

"I'm fine. Really. Come here. You have no idea how much I missed you."

"Oh, I think I do," he said with a sheepish grin as his erection

strained against the fabric of his trousers.

She scooted to the edge of the bed and unbreeched him, caressing his huge length between her breasts, her hand massaging his satiny tip.

"Oh, Juliet, no!"

"It's fine, love, just relax."

Within seconds it was over, and he groaned, "Worse than any schoolboy."

"I don't mind. Blake says we need to be careful for a little while longer. I don't want you to suffer and be tempted to stray."

He kissed her several times, on her eyelids, cheeks and mouth. "Stray? Never. What would be the point? You're perfection itself. My goddess. Why waste time with a pale copy when I can have all that is most divine in this world," he said tenderly as he sat beside her and cleaned her with his handkerchief.

"Your goddess?" she said softly, thinking of Eswara's words about how to view herself as a woman. Her own inner power.

"Always. I just wish I could be your hero. But I've been so awful to you. I've never been so ashamed in my life," Lawrence said, his tone so bleak she stroked his hair and hugged him to her tightly.

"I did try to tell you," she said softly.

"I know. I know. My only wonder is how you resisted the temptation to rip me to pieces with your tongue."

She shrugged. "You were confused. Angry. I was just waiting for you to come to your senses."

"My God, love, you waited long enough," he said with a rueful laugh.

"But now the past is over, and we have a bright, shining future."

"I'm not so sure about the past," he admitted. "There are some loose ends to tie up, and I don't want to lose all of it. There are some things worth keeping, remembering. Like that first marvelous night with you, and our first day in the swing."

They both smiled warmly at the sultry memories.

"But first I need to tell you--"

She sat up and fluffed the pillows, and patted the bed for him to join her.

He climbed in, put one arm around her shoulders, and took her hand. "The truth is, Juliet, well, I didn't understand love and passion, not really, until I met you. I've been so in awe of your beauty, your intelligence, I suppose I just couldn't believe my luck. Couldn't trust it to last. My parents--"

She waited patiently for him to tell her his dark inner truth at last.

Lawrence took a deep breath. "My parents started out happy. But my father became more and more jealous. There were dreadful scenes, him shouting, she pleading. From words it went to blows. From blows, to the final inevitable tragic ending." He shuddered.

"She asked for a divorce, tried to separate from him. He would always ask her to come back, convince her that *this* time, things were going to be different. They'd be fine for a while, but the voices would start to raise again. Then there would come that horrible thudding sound."

"Thudding sound?" she whispered, already knowing the answer to her question.

He nodded once abruptly. "My brother was older than me, was always selfish, didn't care. But my mother was good, kind, affectionate. She didn't deserve the brutality. I tried to defend her. It was like David going up against Goliath. He hit me so hard once I can still remember the blow. I was laid up for weeks afterwards, and they thought I might never hear again.

"My hearing did come back, but I never played music so well after that, though everyone was kind enough to try to pretend. I was hopeless at sports at school because I was so badly out of balance. It toughens you up, being seen as a weakling. You either become one or, well, overcompensate for your deficiencies by becoming aggressive."

He cradled her against him as he confessed, "I fought and bullied my way to the top of the class, the school, taking on all comers I knew I could beat one way or the other. I met my match in the Rakehells, and when I couldn't beat them, I tried to join them. I wanted to be a better man, really. Then, when I thought they had stolen from me, well, all bets were off. I saw them as hypocrites, and

their actions as proof that I had been correct all along, that might really did make right. I know now that I was wrong."

"You poor boy, what you must have suffered in such a house," she soothed, massaging his back and shoulders until he felt less tense. After a time she asked, "But your mother? What happened to her?"

His next four words were devastating, and the last thing Juliet ever expected to hear. "My father murdered her."

"Oh, Lawrence, I'm so sorry." She caressed his shoulder and face and held him close.

He felt as though he were suffocating but forced himself to go on. "It was a bad fight. I was home from school for Christmas. They had been to a ball. She had talked to a man. More than talked. She was trying to get a divorce. Anything had to be better than what she'd tolerated for so many years. He punched her once, savagely. She flew down the stairs. Her neck snapped.

"He told me to never tell anyone he had been there, and left for the north. Everyone assumed it had been an accident after he had left her to go away on business. By the time he came back, she had been buried. He'd left the arrangements to me and my brother. He couldn't even face what he had done. And I never told the authorities because it was bad enough losing one parent, let alone two."

"And your brother?" she asked, unable to believe the enormity of what Lawrence must have suffered. What he had held inside for so many years.

Lawrence's voice was scarcely audible. "He murdered his wife and killed himself."

Her eyes flew wide. "No!"

He nodded solemnly. "I can only guess what the boys have witnessed over the years. I had an inkling when they became upset that time I shouted. I should have guessed. Having seen nothing but violence, and being a violent man himself, it seems logical--" He heaved a huge sigh. "Which is why, my darling Juliet, I would like to offer you a chance to divorce me. Knowing what I am, can you really bear to run the risk of--"

She squeezed his hand hard and leaned into his huge frame.

"Divorce isn't going to solve the problem, Lawrence. It would only make you more bitter, lonely and angry."

"If I had known all this about myself before, made the connections before we wed, I would never have done something so cruel as to marry you," Lawrence said, drawing away from her slightly, tempted almost beyond endurance by her softness.

"Our marriage seems to have brought my whole horrid past rushing back to me. It's bad enough a man like me having wife. A child on the way makes things even worse."

She stared at him. "A man like you? Lawrence—"

"I know you love me, darling, but you have to face the facts. You know what I did that night Parke attacked you. But there's worse, darling, far worse. What if I ever hit you or the baby? Sometimes my anger gets so, well, boiling, I don't know what to do."

"You've never hit me," she insisted. "You shout sometimes, but you've never hurt me personally, not even when you thought I had betrayed you. Not even when I was completely naked and at your mercy. The only way to combat hate is with love."

"But that's just it. My father and brother would have said they loved their wives!"

She shook her head. "That wasn't love. It wasn't sharing, tenderness, trust. It was some sort of unhealthy obsession, a need to control. Perhaps even a need to hurt so they could feel like big men, as you said.

"But love is kind, devoted and nurturing. Even when the boys have been at their worst you've never lost your temper."

"They're children," he said, as if the thought had never occurred to him to be angry with them. "And I have to admit, seeing the way they had been treated at school, I vowed then and there that nothing they did could possibly ever warrant a whipping."

She smiled up at him. "I'm glad. I agree. I was never hit as a child. I have no intention of doing it to any of our children." She opened her arms to try to get him to come back to bed, but he continued to pace up and down alongside the bed like a caged panther.

"Oh, Lawrence, I'm so sorry you've been carrying this around

inside you, all these memories for so many years."

He ran the fingers of one hand through his thick black hair. "But that's just it. I never thought about it until, well, we married. Then you reminded me of my mother. Not in terms of appearance, but your gentle manner. I had, um, I suppose you'd call them sudden recollections. Visions."

"What kind of visions," she whispered.

He admitted, "Of my dead mother. Of me killing you."

"Oh, no, Lawrence, no—"

He nodded. "I saw you lying in bed draped in a sheet when Blake came after we had quarrelled, and I was terrified. You looked so like Mother in her shroud, I couldn't breathe. So I was trying to, well, drive you away I suppose, before I hurt you. Except that by some miracle you still keep forgiving me."

"I do it because I love you." She reached over to kiss his hand. "So long as you know you have no reason whatsoever to be jealous of Ash. Thomas accused he and Charlotte of having an affair. Charlotte was having a difficult pregnancy. Thomas thought she had lost interest in him because of Ash. I have no idea what gave him the notion, and didn't understand the reasons for it at the time, but Ash asked me if I would tell Thomas the story of my parents. Once I did, he understood his own fears were groundless."

"I'm glad you were able to help them. And Ash and Ellen too."

"And us as well, I hope. You're not the only one with a tormented family background, darling. My father may never have hit my mother, but he destroyed her just as surely as your father did yours."

"God, we are a right bloody pair, aren't we," he sighed, perching on the edge of the bed beside his wife.

Juliet kissed him gently. "We don't have to be. I meant every word I said, Lawrence. I do love you. If we've managed to be happy even with all your fears and insecurities, just think how happy we can be if you just let them all go."

"I'd like to believe that, my love, but it's such a huge risk."

"Loving someone is all about risk. And it's too late. I can't stop loving you," she confessed. "Believe me, Lawrence, I've tried."

He held her close, listening to the beating of her heart as it kept time with his own. "I'm so sorry. You're the most wonderful woman a man could ever have as a wife. You complete me, make me whole. If I had married Matilda, my life would have been hell. I'm sure I would have strangled her with my bare hands as soon as I found out what she was."

"I don't think so. You would have just become more bitter and debauched."

He shook his head. "Don't remind me. A visit to that brothel was enough to put me off wenching for the rest of my life."

"Oh? What happened?" she asked, both worried and curious.

"Never mind," he said with a long shiver. "The important thing is I wasn't the least bit tempted by any of the women there, or indeed, have ever been tempted by any other woman who has crossed my path since I met the love of my life, who happens to have the most rare pair of violet eyes."

"Oh Lawrence, thank you."

He cupped her cheek and planted a brief kiss on her lips. "But in that brothel, I did realise that you were a person, not just a receptacle for my lusts. And that that would be true even if you had been the biggest harlot in Christendom. And it had never been all lust anyway. I do remember asking you to marry me that morning before Matthew came barging in."

"Ah, yes, Matthew," she said, sitting up further, steeling herself for a quarrel.

To her surprise, his tone was truly repentant. "Yes, Matthew. He didn't cheat me. My own brother did. He knew if I had no money, my fiancée would give me up. I think she did care about me in her own fashion, but she was far too interested in worldly wealth and success. He was also trying to destroy my reputation, he envied me so.

"I thought it was all Matthew's fault. And that the Rakehells were all in on it. Ironically, the one man I should have been able to trust above all was the one who cheated me. Because of my brother, I thought for a time that I had lost everything. So everything I did after that was motivated by a need to get even. To show everyone that I was down, but not out of the game. I drove myself twenty hours a day

when I got to India. After I got off the ship and had a few weeks of madness, I didn't even touch a woman from one end of the year to the next. Only when I went to town would I raise the roof for one night. I'm not as bad as you think."

She stroked the hair back from his brow tenderly. "I never thought you were bad, darling, just misguided and wounded. But it was like you were only half a person. Just work. No pleasure, or when you did get it, you reproached yourself for it. Were angry with me."

He nodded. "It's true. I could lose myself in you so completely that the tea made no difference. And I hated myself for treating you like an object."

"No, not really. You always tried to please me, even when you said you were never going to. Even when I couldn't hug or kiss you."

Lawrence sighed. "Believe it or not I was actually trying to protect you. You touch or kiss me and it's like fireworks going off. I just suffuse and convulse with desire, and all I want to do is bury myself inside you up to the hilt and stay there forever. God, how raw and crude."

She smiled slightly. "It sounds like an interesting challenge. But I think we might have to get out of bed some time. But you *are* within me forever, Lawrence. Now that I've known the joy of your passion, nothing else could ever compare. I feel you within me always, and not just because of the baby."

She took his hand and placed it on her abdomen. "I feel you in my head and heart too, in my spirit. You've been so grim, but I've seen your potential for happiness. That day with the swing. You laughed and loved, and for a time you didn't fear yourself, or me. We can get that back. And try to keep it, nurture the joy of love every day."

"You do. All the hundred little thoughtful things you do for me and the boys."

She smiled up at him mischievously. "We may not be able to use the swing for amatory games for the moment, but there's something so special about just having you all to myself to touch and treasure even for an hour--"

"Two hours, every day," Lawrence said firmly. "No work, boys, or

writing your histories, Mr. J. A. Lyons."

She smiled at his proud expression. "So I've gone from bawd to bluestocking, have I?"

"Except that you never were a whore."

Juliet gave her husband a long sideways glance full of mirth. "I don't know, darling. You certainly manage to make me feel quite wanton. Especially when you look at me like *that*."

"You mean like this," he said with a grin, staring at her like a starving man presented with a feast.

"Oh, my yessss—"

"I've missed you so much."

"And I've missed you. Come, take your clothes off and get in this bed."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't—"

"There are lots of different ways of making love. You've just seen one. I have a mind to try a few more."

"Dare I ask where--"

"Eswara has been teaching me all about the tantra. I have a *lingam* massage for you--"

He knew the Sanskrit word and blushed to the roots of his hair. "Good Lord," he gasped. "What was she thinking telling you about--"

"That we have to be careful for a time, but we adore each other. So let's worship each other in any way we can. And she can teach you about the *yoni* massage if you--"

"If?" He grinned. "Damned right I want to learn, if it will make you happy."

He had by now divested himself of all his clothes. She immediately began to massage him all over.

"I rather like you silent and submissive," she said with a giggle.

"I rather like you bold and in control. Oh, Juliet, oh!"

"And there's plenty more where that came from."

He rolled over and buried his face between her thighs. "I know. And you can have as much as you like."

"I like, very much. Mm, just there. And there. Oh, that is wonderful, thank you."

"You said that to me our first night. I should have listened to you then. Did I hurt you very much? I mean, for your first time," he asked worriedly, lifting his head to look at her.

She smiled gently. "You've always been a magnificent lover. You were very caring, and I adore your eagerness and inventiveness. And some of the games have been quite thrilling."

"I don't want any games. Being with you is so powerful, I can, well--"

"What, what is it?" she asked in surprise, looking at his sudden fit of trembling.

"I can be right inside you and still burn for more."

"Oh, Lawrence, I feel exactly the same," she admitted with a shaky laugh, caressing his finely chiseled jaw.

"You do?" he said in relief. "God, I thought I was some sort of monster or degenerate."

"No, not at all. It's love. And wanting trust and intimacy. Needing to communicate, be honest with one another. You were said to be an eloquent chap, and I can see your tongue is most certainly skilled, but you've never told me what you want or need. We've just gone by instinct."

"We've not done too badly, though, have we?"

"It's been frustrating though, not touching or kissing."

"I'm sorry. It's been frustrating never knowing if I pleased you or not. When you were so silent."

"You can't tell from my body?"

"Some women pretend."

She laughed. "Then come here. I'm going to give you a few lessons about what pleases me. But you'd better not fancy any sleep tonight. And only if you show me a few of the things that please you."

Lawrence travelled up her body in a long, languid caress. "I'm looking at it. It's all of you."

He kissed her again with his full need and passion, without any

restraint, and felt himself soar. Her arms reached out to clasp him, and in his heart and soul he knew she had him safely now, and would never let him fall into the abyss again.

Chapter Twenty-six

After their magical night at Blake's, Lawrence took his now well wife home with her family to a completely different house and life from the one he had subjected them all to.

With the demons of the past laid to rest, everything fell into place, his work, friendships and family ties. His new in-laws were a joy to be with, and all the Rakehells, including Matthew, were made welcome and found time for.

He set regular hours for himself in Bristol four times a week, with the other three days set aside for domestic affairs. He and Juliet shopped, paid calls, spent time with the boys, and allowed themselves half a day every Wednesday for their own special picnics in the glade.

One day Ash and his wife came past, and without a trace of embarrassment admitted they could see the swing from their window.

"My step-father Martin was nearly killed in this very spot, you know. Hung from that self-same tree and left for dead. The rope broke rather than his neck."

"Oh my," Juliet said, looking around her in alarm.

"Nay, there are no ghosts here any longer. You've both been happy here. You've brought life and joy back to this place. I hope you don't mind if Ellen and I use it some time. That swing rather looks like fun." Ash winked.

Lawrence and Juliet, totally naked and cowering under a blanket together, nodded.

"Please, use it any time from now until after our baby is safely born. It's an experience that I can highly recommend. With the right partner, of course," Lawrence said, with a fond kiss for his wife.

Ash hugged his wife, the placement of his hands leaving none of

them in any doubt as to his thoughts. "I couldn't agree more. If you find the perfect love, hang on to it with both hands. Sorry to interrupt. Carry on." He flashed a cheeky grin and they left.

Juliet giggled. Lawrence shook his head. "Now, where was I?"

She rolled on her back and spread her legs wide. "I don't recall. Why don't you start all over again with that wonderful thing you do right there with your tongue and it'll come to me."

"It's certainly going to come to me if you keep doing *that*."

Juliet laughed happily, and let the sensations wash over them both.

Lawrence's seeming dereliction of duty allowed Nash the chance to further his own business interests at his employer's expense. But he was still not happy. He needed Lawrence, needed his aggression and drive.

And he hated to admit it, but Lawrence knew far more about tea. He had an instinct for it and people. Nash could siphon off funds and tea, but he would never have the power Lawrence had, unless he could get the entire empire for himself.

Juliet's pregnancy set him into a state of indecision. Should he move now, or bide his time? The longer she got her claws into him, the less likely it would be that Matilda had any chance of winning him back. Lawrence would be upset at the death of his wife, but he would throw himself into his work even more enthusiastically, and have Matilda to console him.

One thing was for certain. Nash didn't want any heir to be born. With that in mind he began to arrange for some 'accidents.'

He became a more frequent visitor to the house, though it galled Lawrence to have him there on the three days he was supposed not to be working. Inevitably Nash wanted to discuss business, and all he wanted to do was be with his wife and family quietly.

Juliet began to dread his brooding presence, for he seemed to suck all happiness from the house, and the minor little accidents of a busy household became major disasters.

One of the maids tumbling down the stairs on a patch of wood oil

left at the top landing ended up in a broken leg. Juliet, following on behind, got a slightly twisted ankle. She shuddered to think what would have happened if she had gone down head-first as well in her pregnant state.

A huge branch falling during a particularly windy day as Juliet worked in the garden narrowly missed her.

A few days later, one of the heavy bookshelves in the library tore away from its wooden anchors, demolishing the six-drawer desk underneath.

Juliet, now nearly eight months pregnant, quailed in fear as she looked at the remains of the once mighty walnut piece, which had been crushed flat and was now fit only for kindling. It took them days to clean up the chaos of papers, ink, splinters and glass shards, but every moment she spent doing so gave her time to ponder over the seeming accident.

If she and Lawrence had not reconciled, she might almost have thought he was trying to kill her. But the love shining in his eyes was enough to tell her that her suspicions had to lie elsewhere, with the one man who had never made any attempt to hide the fact that he disliked her.

After one especially trying visit, Juliet dared to say, "Lawrence, I really don't want Nash coming to the house any more. He was rude to my sister, and the last time he was here she was so ill that she took to her bed for two days."

Lawrence looked up from his papers in surprise. "Oh, surely not--"

But Nash had mistaken the dark-haired sisters, and doctored her untended cup of tea in the drawing room with a violent abortifacient. Since Miranda was not pregnant, it had not done her any lasting harm, but Juliet was now getting the uneasy feeling that Lawrence had indeed been nursing a viper in his bosom. Only it had been a male.

She began to visit Lawrence in Bristol, taking a more active interest in the business, looking around the warehouse, travelling home from work with him. Nash had to become more cautious yet again. It damaged his Han's business to not be able to have the freedom to come and go as he pleased.

He tried to persuade Lawrence to go up north again, the better to plot and scheme, and get rid of Juliet once and for all.

But Lawrence had said adamantly, "Nothing could possibly persuade me to leave Juliet when she's within weeks of giving birth, and she certainly can't travel. If it's so important, you go."

One day when Juliet was at the warehouse, she caught sight of their former house servant who had looked at her so lewdly that first day she'd arrived in Millcote.

"Lawrence, look! What's he doing here?"

"Who?"

"That man." She pointed.

Lawrence caught a brief glimpse of him before he vanished behind the tea chests. "I'm not sure. He looks familiar but--"

"He's the man you sacked for being so rude when we first came to Somerset."

"So he is. I suppose Nash felt he might be useful."

"Get rid of him," Juliet demanded.

"What?"

"Get rid of him!" Juliet insisted, trying to remain calm in the face of her fears. "Find out who's working in this factory and sack any of the men who were at the house when I first arrived."

"Would you recognise them?"

"Yes, I think so. You?"

"Yes."

Nash was livid as the six men most loyal to him were turned off. He grew even more desperate now. He needed to keep his Han's quota up, and would have to work all night every night by himself until the end of the month if he wanted to keep his lucrative sideline in adulterated Howard tea ticking over. His fall-back plan was to sneak the men into the wharf at night.

But Juliet convinced her husband to institute extra security measures. Lawrence personally began to oversee a great deal more

at the docks. He had sensed his wife's growing uneasiness over Nash, and he had to admit he was beginning to share it himself. After all, he had known both he and his brother, and he had been the one to introduce him to Matilda when they had 'run into each other' at a tea house.

Juliet had been his first priority when he'd got home from London and Dorset, but he had not forgotten what Lady Pemberton had said to him. He couldn't prove pilferage, but he was increasingly of the opinion that something odd was definitely going on.

"Look at this. A one can be made into a seven, for example. Or the ink scraped off in the ledger. Look these numbers. They've certainly been changed," Juliet said to him one evening in his counting room as she chanced to look at one of the accounting books a clerk had been working on.

As a result, Lawrence and Juliet began to keep the books themselves from that day forward. They also started to count every single container of tea as the chests came off the ships.

Nash grew wild. How the hell was he ever going to manage now...

But he had not got away with wholesale speculation all those years for nothing. It might be more difficult, but it could be done. He had the means and the tools.

But he needed Matilda's help, even though she was a liability, becoming more and more licentious as the word spread about her peccadillos, and she had no more big burly serving men to service her at the warehouse every night.

One cold October evening Juliet came to fetch Lawrence from work. They were supposed to be attending a harvest ball at Thomas Eltham's town house in Bath. Charlotte had recently been safely delivered of an adorable baby girl, and that too was a cause for celebration. Juliet was very much looking forward to seeing her and all her friends.

Ted the nightwatchman told her, "Mr. Howard was just here a moment ago. Working late tonight. He might be checking the last of the cargo for the ship that's heading back tomorrow. Or he could be in Nash's office, just the other side of the canal. They'll be going over

the bill of lading and getting ready for the mid-month inventory."

"Thank you, Ted. I'll just take a stroll down and see if I find him. If you see him, tell him--"

"I will, Miss."

Juliet usually spent most of her time in the warehouse and its offices. Since the night was crisp and dry, she decided to enjoy her little adventure and look around a bit more. She generally avoided Nash, so had never been in his offices. She knew he had taken one of the two-storey houses. He worked in the bottom part and lived rent free in the top one.

Juliet looked around curiously in the deepening twilight and saw a light off to her right. That must be the correct house, she decided. She strode alongside the murky canal and peered into the partly open door.

Nash stood with a number of different containers covering the desk in front of him. She recognised the usual Howard tea cannisters and royal purple sealing wax. But some of the tins had been opened, and he was pouring half the contents into some empty ones by the sound of it. Then he added what looked to be twigs, fannings and dust, and a couple of other vile-looking things she could only guess at. When each tin was filled he re-sealed it.

Even more interesting was the second batch of tins he opened, for they were divided into quarters into smaller black boxes and adulterated at a ratio of what she guessed to be one part tea to three or four parts rubbish. She caught the name emblazoned on the side of the tin. Han's. Nash... The Oriental sounding name would fool the consumers. It had all been a fraud for goodness only knew how long. Ever since Lawrence had thought him a friend? Ever since he had lost everything and gone to India?

Damn the wretch. Nash was nothing more than a hypocritical fraud.

But even more shocking was the sound of footsteps coming down from above. Surely her husband could not be a party to such appalling dishonesty!

But no, the tread was lighter, the steps softer. A shapely blonde with cat-green eyes wearing nothing but a black leather corset

entered, carrying a horse's bridle and a riding crop.

"Come upstairs. I've been waiting ages," she whined. "You said you'd let me ride first."

"In a minute. I have to finish up now before the inventory tomorrow. The stupid bugger thinks he's so careful, that his tea is so pure. If only he knew."

They both chuckled.

"Aye, he thought I was pure," Matilda laughed. "Should have fattered him to string him along after all."

"You *are* pure, cousin. Pure lust, pure temptation. It will be a shame to have to share you with him. But once we get that bitch Juliet out of the way you'll need to pick up where you two left off before she spoiled things."

"When will we kill--"

"He watches her so closely these days it's hard to say. It will have to be soon. We can't run the risk of having the baby pop."

Juliet gasped in horror, alerting the two of them to her presence. Before she could flee Nash flung open the door and grabbed her by the arm.

"How long have you been standing there!" he demanded.

"Not long!"

"How long?" he hissed.

"I looked in, saw a naked woman and gasped," she lied desperately. "I didn't mean to startle anyone."

"Lawrence warned me when you two first married that you were a prime actress. Come Matilda, help me--"

"Let me go!" She shoved him hard, broke free, and ran. "Help, Lawrence, Lawrence!" she shouted as she charged back down the dock as fast as her distended belly allowed her. *If she could just get back to the gate....*

She heard Nash coming after her inexorably. "Lawrence! Lawrence!"

Suddenly she felt herself go flying. She landed in the canal with a splash. The noisome oily cold water bubbled up into her nose and

mouth. She choked and flailed wretchedly for a moment while she tried to rise to the surface.

For a blissful second she was able to take a deep breath. Then a rough hand rammed her head back down below the surface. Nash had laced his hard fingers in her soaking hair, trapping her.

She reached up and clawed frantically at the hand and wrist. For a moment she despaired, until she forced herself to be calm. She had taken Eswara up on her offer to learn about her own power after she had been attacked by Parke. All that her friend and Ash had taught her came to the fore now as she used Nash's force in his arm against him to yank him into the water.

Juliet surfaced in an instant, kicking madly against her heavy velvet evening gown and many layers of petticoats which were soaking through and threatening to drag her under. There was a ladder not far away which she paddled over to. Just as she began to ascend she felt Nash grabbing her from behind.

"Lawrence! Lawrence!"

"Juliet! Where are you?" her husband bellowed, coming down the gangplank of the ship berthed some distance away and peering into the darkness.

"I'm down here! Help me please!"

"Down where?" came the anguished cry.

"In the canal!" she answered, clinging to the ladder with all her might as her assailant tried to drag her under. "Help me quickly! It's Nash! He's trying to kill me. I saw him adulterating all the tea, re-packing it as yours and the Han's brand we've seen popping up all over. And Matilda is in his office almost naked. They're lovers, and they've wanted to steal your company all along!"

She was never so relieved in her life to have her husband's hands upon her as he tugged her from Nash's limpet-like grasp and stood her on the docks.

"It was *you* who incited Parke. And set up those so-called accidents to harm or kill my wife. You bastard!"

"Please, I can explain, only get me out of here! I can't swim!"

"You were going to kill me. You and Matilda. And then what,

marry each other?"

"Don't be silly! What the hell would I want with a whore like that? She's only a means to an end. She isn't even that good in bed. You got the better bargain, you bastard. But then you always did roll in shite and come up smelling of roses. Me and your brother fleeced you all those years ago, and what happens. Your uncle adopts you, damn your hide! I set you up to marry the biggest whore in London, and you get this innocent barely out of breechclouts!" Nash snarled.

"Whore, am I!" Matilda shrieked, kicking him in the head as he tried to ascend the ladder.

She was clothed now in a low-cut gown with voluminous skirts. She hoisted them higher as she poised for another kick. Only this time the partly conscious Nash grabbed her ankle and heaved her into the canal.

Lawrence and Juliet watched in horror as the couple struggled. Before Lawrence could even attempt to intervene, they had vanished under the murky water.

"Run, get Ted at the gate," Juliet gasped. "Quickly."

Part of Lawrence wanted to just leave them to their watery grave, but he knew his wife would never forgive him. Would he be any better than Nash or Matilda if he stooped to killing to get what he wanted?

He waited and waited, but there was no sign of them. Ted came tearing up shortly afterwards, with a couple of the other factory watchmen in tow, but after half an hour there was still nothing.

"We'll look for the bodies to surface just to be sure, but I'd say they were goners," Ted said with a shake of his head.

Juliet had insisted on remaining with her husband. Despite her wet clothes he had not minded. Gripping her by the waist, he swore he was never going to let her out of his sight again.

"Come, dearest. We need to get you out of those things." He brought her into the office and found Matilda's cloak. "Not ideal, but better than nothing until I can get you a gown," he said, stripping off her soaking clothes with alacrity.

"Just like me travelling with you when we were first married," she said between chattering teeth. "Only in this case it will be a short journey. We'll be back home soon."

"Oh no, I'm going to take you to an inn to rest."

"No, darling, really, I'm fine. I want to be in our own home, our own bed. And I swear I'm not going to let you leave it for a week."

He threw his arms around her and held her tightly. He had never felt so inexpressibly weary in his life. He had trusted Nash, and been betrayed day after day, year in and year out.

And his loving wife.... She had tried to save him, and nearly paid the price. He should have listened to her hints that all was not right with Nash.

Now he had to make some momentous decisions to deal with this new crisis. "Ted!" he called.

"Yes, sir?"

"Inventory tomorrow is cancelled. Close the factory. See that the ship gets away tomorrow, and then I'm giving everyone a fortnight's paid holiday until I decide what to do."

"Decide what to do, sir?" he said, puzzled. "Why, everyone adores your tea. If you close, you're going to have a run on the place."

"All right, a week's holiday, and I want all the tea in the factory sold at half price."

"Half price? All of it? But--"

He nodded. "You heard me. Half price. Spread the word to the others. I have a new shipment due any day now, and we shall just have to make sure that the new batches are unloaded and packaged as quickly as possible."

"Aye, sir, I'll do my best, sir, pass on your instructions, and look for a replacement for Nash, shall I?"

Lawrence shook his head and sighed. "No need. I think I've already found one. That is, if she'll agree to do it." He gave his wife a significant look.

Her brows flew upwards in surprise. "Me? But--"

"I've been so wrong about so many things, and will have to spend the rest of my life begging for your forgiveness. But I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

"But the baby, and the boys--"

He bent down to kiss her, all the love in his heart welling up with that single gesture. When he lifted his lips at last, he said, "You can do anything if you set your mind to it. Everything you touch thrives. And I was hoping well, that we could persuade your parents and sister to come live with us, make us a real family. And I would promise to work decent hours. And give you time to write your histories, I swear. Anything you want if it will make you happy."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

Juliet took his hand warmly in her own. "Give me time to think about it, all right?"

He kissed her hand tenderly. "Certainly. Come, my love, let's go home."

Lawrence was most tender in the carriage ride on the way back, and let the floodgates of his emotions pour forth all the bitterness and sorrow of the past few years. However terrible it had been, none of it mattered compared with nearly losing his wife.

"I don't even care about the tea any more. Not when I nearly lost you because of it," he said, cuffing his tears away.

"But you didn't lose me. I'm still here, and they're dead. And you're not *going* to lose me either."

"I'm amazed I haven't already, between being so unkind to you, driving you away, and that bastard Nash trying to kill you. All those accidents... The bastard. I hope to God he is dead, else I shall bloody well kill him."

"You're not going to lose me," she reiterated. "I love you, I always have. I married you to save you from Matilda, and because I wanted you. On the whole, I've had few causes to repine. And Nash is dead. He couldn't swim. He can't hurt any of us ever again. I love you, and we're going to be happy."

"Now I know you're going to leave me, just feel sorry for me. I was beastly--"

She kissed him then, and the soaring sensation he always felt swept through him.

"We mustn't--the baby!" he gasped.

They were nearly home, so she smiled. "Not here, but in bed. If you can wait that long."

"You waited for me, Juliet. I'll wait forever if I can just once hear you say you love and forgive me. I'll work every day to--"

"I love you, Lawrence, and forgive you. On one condition. That you will invite all the Rakehells here tomorrow and tell them you were wrong, that you want to mend fences. That Nash cheated you, not them."

"I will do it, gladly. And anything else you want."

"I think a swing tomorrow as well wouldn't go amiss."

He shuddered with desire and nearly missed his step as he got out of the coach and reached for her. "But the baby, the, well, depth."

"We'll manage just fine. And there's always the blanket if the worst comes to the worst."

"Hah, there is no worst being married to you, my love."

He carried her up to their bedroom and laid her on the bed tenderly. He tugged off the cloak and threw it into the fire. "If I never hear that woman's name mentioned again it will be too soon."

"The same for me, dear. And I never want to have to have her as a shadow between us either."

"I never loved her," he said, his eyes blazing. "The only woman I have ever loved or will ever love is you."

"Come and show me, then, and don't stop until I tell you to."

He flashed her a broad smile. "In that case, we'll never leave the bed."

He lay down on his side to face her and stroked down her body from cheek to wrist, from cheek to breast to waist. "You're the most arousing sight I could ever imagine."

"Even better than the view of the Himalayas from Tiger Hill?"

"Even better, though it comes a close second."

"And you. I love you so much I just have to look in your silver eyes and I melt. But I rather fancy you naked too. If you don't mind

disrobing, I'd like to feast my eyes on you. In fact, a full feast might not be such a bad idea." She nibbled his earlobe and he purred.

"Only if you're not too tired. You've been through quite an ordeal, love."

He began to remove his clothing and she kissed over his body as it was bared. "The only ordeal was thinking Nash might get away with harming you, and I would never get to tell you how much I loved you and have you really, truly believe it."

Lawrence cupped her cheek and gazed at her. His tone had never been more serious in his life as he said, "You already have. You do it every day with just one look or touch, or something you do for me or the boys. I'm the one who's been remiss. I love you, Juliet, my darling wife. You are the sun, moon and stars to me. Even if I lost every ship, factory and tea leaf, even the roof over our heads, I would count myself blessed if I still had the gift of your love."

"Then you shall be blessed for as long as God chooses to spare us both," she promised, rewarding him with a glowing smile.

"And it will still never be enough time to tell you how much I love and worship you."

"Eswara says the Hindus believe in reincarnation. I'd like to think we'll meet again. That we're destined for an eternity together. Even that wouldn't be enough to worship you."

She had by now reached his abdomen. He sighed and melted. "Oh, you are a most perfect wife. Every man's fantasy."

She lifted her lips at last. "And you're perfect for me."

"I hope so. I'm going to try to be. Starting now." He laid her on her back and drew her knees over his shoulders.

"Mm, almost perfect."

"Almost?" he growled, nipping her satiny mound playfully.

"You inside me is perfection."

"In that case, I shall aspire to perfection always."

"Mmm, yes, please."

Epilogue

Nash and Matilda's bodies were found in the canal the next day, and the new shipload of tea arrived from India the day after. There was a run on the Howard tea at half price, especially since the Han's tea vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Lawrence only hoped that some new ships would come in soon to help meet the demand for the Assam which Juliet had predicted all those months ago would be a huge success.

Even if they did not, he was already more wealthy than he had ever imagined. He recalled Philip Marshall's words the morning he had wed, that Juliet would be the making of him. Never a truer word had been spoken.

Lawrence kept his promise and called all the Rakehells together, apologised, and asked for their forgiveness. There wasn't a dry eye in the room as Lawrence and Matthew hugged and slapped each other on the back.

Lawrence said, "I understand it all now. You didn't want me to hate my own brother. So you let me think all this time that you were to blame."

"Family means everything to you. I can see that from how happy you've made my sister."

"I've done and said a lot of things I'm not proud of. The way I treated her--"

She came up to hug them both, one on either side. "It doesn't matter now. What's important is we're all friends, and so shall our children be. A new generation of Rakehells to carry on the honourable traditions of the original. No more mistrust and suspicion."

"That sounds like an excellent toast, wife. Let's get out the champagne and really celebrate."

Lawrence and Juliet went back to Bristol at the end of the week to try to assess the damage Nash had caused. Philip looked over all that they found in Nash's quarters, and surveyed Nash's wealth and holdings. He had been enriching himself at Lawrence's expense from the moment he had gone to India as his secretary, and had accumulated quite a fortune in his own right.

Yet strangely, he had scarcely spent any of it. The sum would have been more than enough to set him up independently as a gentleman of means and leisure for the rest of his life. It had been the hunt, the treachery he had been addicted to.

"What do we do with all of it now?" Lawrence wondered aloud.

"Well, his cousin Matilda was the heir," Geoffrey Branson the magistrate explained. "She's dead too. So unless there are any other relatives we still haven't managed to locate, I would say you're morally entitled to the money, since it was just about all stolen from you."

"What do you think we should do with it?" he asked Juliet.

She shrugged. "Give it all to charity. Blake's clinic, a fever hospital, whatever. I don't care."

"Ash's fever hospital?" Philip suggested. "He's still looking for subscriptions. And his argument with Thomas didn't help him much in the district, for all they've patched up the quarrel now."

Lawrence nodded. "That's as good a plan as any. He's a worthy young man, with his heart in the right place. It would be a pity for him to go back to India just because of the quarrel, and because he feels a burning need for social justice. We need it here in England too."

"There's enough money here for Blake's orphanage as well," Philip pointed out. "Or for the clinic in London."

"Do whatever you like, Philip, you and the Rakehells. I trust you. And I have all I could ever want right here." He embraced his wife.

"I can't tell you how good it is to hear you say that."

"And I have so much to thank you for, Philip. You've been our guardian angel. I don't know what Juliet and I would have ever done without you. Ever since you came into her room at the townhouse you've been patient and kind, tried to sort out this whole muddle. You rescued her from that bastard Parke, and finally got me to see

reason. You encouraged me to have the courage to discover the truth at last, about my past, and my future. You've been a true friend, and I can't ever begin to thank you enough." He offered his hand, which Philip shook warmly.

"Don't mention it. Just do us a favour. Look after that wife of yours. The baby is on its way, and she mustn't overdo things."

Philip's prediction came true sooner than either of them imagined. They headed home and made the most tempestuous love yet.

Juliet drifted off to sleep exhausted, and woke early the next morning on All Hallow's Eve with a dragging sensation in her lower abdomen which told her it was time.

She did not make a fuss and wake her husband--she had been told by Eswara it could take hours. She was a bit alarmed that it was only barely nine months so far as she could guess, but Blake and Eswara had told her at the end of their last examination that the baby had dropped into position, and she was all ready to give birth at any time.

A piercing pain shooting right through her caused her to gasp.

Lawrence reached for her sleepily. "Are you starting without me, darling?" he chuckled tenderly. "All you have to do is ask."

"Lawrence, the baby!"

He sat bolt upright and looked at her white face.

"Oh God, Juliet! What do I do?"

"Shout for the servants, get the doctor!"

Lawrence shouted, but there was no one. "Bloody hell. It's their day off for the All Hallow's holiday. They'll all be at church. And your family were all going too, and then heading on to the house party at Randall's. I'll go--"

"No, I need you to stay. You can't leave me--"

"But Blake says childbirth take hours," he said, torn between remaining, and running for help. He yanked on his breeches and was about to leave the room when he saw the sheet change colour, darkening fiercely.

"God, it's coming!" Juliet gasped.

"Oh, Lord, Juliet, please, what do I do?" Lawrence asked, more terrified than he had ever been in his life.

"Stay with me!" she begged, stretching out her hand to him as he dithered in the doorway, shaking with terror at the thought of losing her.

"Oh, God, I didn't know what to do, my love. Stay, or go for help. I couldn't bear it if--"

"Nothing is going to happen," Juliet gritted out. "You're here with me. We love each other. We're going to be fine. All three of us. I promise."

He ran to her side of the bed now. "I do love you so, Juliet. Words fail me. I'm so sorry--"

"Oh God, just hold on to me, Lawrence," she pleaded, wringing his hand like a sponge. "Don't let me go."

"No. Just like the swing. I've got you, love," he vowed, kissing her hand and hanging on for dear life as another contraction rippled through his wife and she writhed helplessly on the bed.

"Hello! Hello!" he heard suddenly from below.

"Oh, thank God! It's Philip!" she gasped, as another pain tore through her.

"Up here! Come help us, please! Juliet's in labour!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Lawrence!" his wife screamed. "It's coming!"

He pulled the sheet back, heedless of his wife's nudity in front of their arriving friends, and caught the baby just as it slid out gracefully.

"A boy, it's a boy!" he said joyously to his wife, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

Eswara came bustling in the bedroom door first. "You're doing just fine. We need to cut the cord and free it from the mother. Just hold on. Philip, can you find some towels or sheeting?"

Philip ran to locate a linen cupboard.

Lawrence stood frozen, staring at the baby as though he would never let it go. It opened unusual silvery eyes and gurgled at him,

then hiccupped and smiled. Then it let out a little mewling cry and smacked its lips hungrily.

There could be no doubt in anyone's mind who the baby took after--he was the spitting image of his father. It was like looking in a mirror which rendered everything in miniature.

Eswara tidied the mother and baby, and then it was all over.

"My goodness. I never heard of any birth that was so easy or fast. You're truly blessed by the gods," Eswara said with a broad smile and shake of her head when Juliet recounted what had happened.

Juliet smiled up at her husband warmly. "I know it, and will thank them every day for all they've gifted me with."

"What do you want to name him?" Lawrence asked, coming over to his wife's side to nestle the child against her bosom. She pulled down the shoulder of her nightgown, and the newborn immediately latched on to one nipple and began to suck heartily, causing her to gasp and start in surprise and pleasure.

"Lucky little chap," Lawrence murmured in her ear, causing her to blush.

"I think you know what we should name him."

Lawrence rose from the bed and placed his hand lightly on the baby's head. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "I give you Matthew Philip Howard."

Philip looked surprised and delighted. "Oh, I say. Thank you."

The two men shook hands and embraced.

"Not at all," Lawrence said, waving away his friend's choked-up gratitude. "If you hadn't come when you did--"

"Yes, Philip, why did you come with Eswara?"

He shrugged. "Intuition. Always had it. Gets me out of the worst scrapes sometimes."

"In this case, it got us out of one. I'm very grateful. If Eswara hadn't been here--"

"I did nothing except offer a little bit of practical support. You did it all, Lawrence, for your wife and son. You were very brave."

He said modestly, "I did nothing. I just caught him. My wife did all

the work."

"You did half the work, anyway, creating him," Juliet said with a warm smile, "for which I am extremely grateful. Not to mention pleased."

Eswara caught the warmth sparking between them, and nodded to Philip. "We're going to go downstairs to hunt up some breakfast. Philip dragged me out of bed so abruptly he scarcely let me dress. Call if you need anything, or you feel any pain."

"None at all," Juliet said, beaming. "I couldn't be happier."

They both waved and headed downstairs.

"A miracle," Lawrence breathed, meeting her beloved violet gaze over the dark head of their beautiful son.

"Yes it was. Like our love."

He took her hand and kissed it. "In case I've never said it, dearest, meeting and loving you has been the most superb experience of my life."

Juliet smiled. "I think you might have mentioned it once or twice."

"So long as you believe it," he said, his silver-grey eyes glowing so fervently that she had no doubt in her mind any longer.

"I do. Experience has taught me that miracles really do happen. And once I'm back on my feet, we'll have the factory to run together, better than before. Everyone will marvel at how you came back from the brink of ruin as a young man, to be the most successful tea trader in the world. And the boys will train with us both, so we shall be one big happy family at work and at home. Emphasis on the word *happy*. They can make their own choices when they're old enough. For now, we can just educate them as young gentlemen, along with this young chap here, and allow them the freedom to find their heart's desire."

"The way I've found mine," he said, kissing her lips, and then the top of his son's head.

"Above all, we won't let money or ambition get in the way of what is truly important, our love for each other."

Lawrence got into the bed carefully beside his wife and new son. "Thank you."

"Thank you, darling. For everything. And thank the gods you went

to the wrong address that fateful night. For look what it's brought us. Our beautiful sons, all three of them, and a lifetime of joy."

Experience had taught Lawrence the true meaning of his next words, and he said them now with no doubt or hesitation, and without a shadow of despair from the past. "I love you, Juliet. Forever."

Juliet's violet eyes glowed as she drew him to the breast opposite her son. She cradled his head against her just as tenderly, her joy complete, and so much more than she could ever have hoped for. "I love you, my darling Lawrence. Always."

Author's Note

This novel came about as a result of my wanting to explore the darker side of married life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus far all of my heroines managed to secure happy marriages for themselves with decent men, but their paths have been littered with villains whom they have barely managed to escape.

Lawrence is not exactly a villain, but a hero in serious need of redemption. All of my Rakehells have been tortured by the past in some way, but never barbaric or cruel themselves.

I also have to admit I loved researching the history of tea whilst I was writing this novel. I had simply assumed that Indian tea would have been traded in the Regency period, but it turns out I put Lawrence right at the exciting commercial beginning of what has now become the trade with the largest tea-producing area in the world.

Lawrence is ambitious, has a chip on his shoulder, and is angry with himself and the whole world. He takes his aggression, fury and frustration out on his wife, whom he has every reason to think has betrayed him on a number of different levels. He is not physically cruel like his father and brother, but he controls her as so many men try to do women, by attempting to control her sexuality.

As we have discovered in this century, children who grow up in abusive households frequently become abusers themselves. Add to this Lawrence's insecurity, resentment of Juliet's brother Matthew, and conviction that he has been duped, and the stage is set for a tumultuous marriage.

Husbands would in fact have resorted to similar or even worse stratagems in order to rid themselves of unwanted wives than I write about here (see the novel *Maria* by Wollstonecraft, for example).

Of course, these women ought to have been thankful they were not killed outright, especially in an age where sudden death was all

too common, and often not viewed as being in the least suspicious, and where a wife really was little better than a horse to some husbands. And sometimes treated as worth even *less*.

Once Lawrence realises his fears and stops pushing his wife away, the stage is set for him to admit his love, and trust in it. No longer insecure, they can be equal, and he can be the loving husband he has always had the potential, but never the courage, to be.

Again, apologies if I have come to close to the knuckle in this novel, but as I have pointed out before, the Regency period was one great savagism as well as civility.

In my next two novels, another old Rakehell friend will be rescued from a fate worse than death, and another young lady will descend into hell to win the love of a good man. There are also still a few more deserving Rakehells we need to give that wonderful happily ever after ending to, and I am sure we'll be seeing the vivacious Miranda again soon.

As always I'm delighted to hear from my fans. And many thanks to everyone for making this series possible! It's been quite an *Experience!*

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