

*Miniature
Rose*

Scarlet Rose

*Improper
Nights*

LESLIE DICKEN

Improper Nights
by Leslie Dicken

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Rae Monet*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

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Dedication

To Trish, who encouraged me to write something new and then tossed out a plot idea for me to run with.

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Reviews

THE LADY'S BARGAIN

Two Lips—4/5: THE LADY'S BARGAIN by Leslie Dicken is a fun and romantic read with a little humor thrown in to balance it out. Ms. Dicken manages to pack a lot into so few pages but keeps the historical feel of the time alive and intact. A good, quick read when you want to treat yourself and don't have "novel" time.

Fallen Angel Reviews—5 Angels: Mrs. Dicken has done an excellent job creating The Lady's Bargain. This quick story is a pleasurable read and fans of historical romance should definitely give Mrs. Dicken a chance.

Coffee Time Romance: Ms. Dicken has written a very sweet love story. The attraction between Christine and William builds very quickly. When they come together, the union is explosive. This book shows that sometimes the ultimate bargain is made to save something we believe in. But in the end, both sides sometimes win when the bargain is sealed.

Return to Rivercross

Leslie Dicken brings the characters of Return to Rivercross to life. You really feel the tension between them: Amelia's pain and suspicion and James holding himself in check when all he wants is Amelia to see his genuine love for her. Even in

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a short story, Dicken entwines the landscape into this tension as if it were a third character. I enjoyed this story very much.

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Chapter One

Lenora Blakely stared at the paper in her hand. It was true. All that Lord Cavanaugh said was true. With her father gone, the debts not repaid, she was forced to marry the earl. A man more than twice her age.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. It all made sense now. Why her father kept her home from the London Seasons after her first one. Why he forced an annulment the day after she'd run off to Gretna Green to wed William.

A shuffle of papers drew her attention. Lord Cavanaugh stood from behind his desk. His dark eyes measured her. "I know about the wedding and annulment. It matters not to me."

So she could not dissuade him with her unpleasant past. And yet, what other alternative was there to pay off her father's debt? Why would the earl pay for the land when it was owed to him? All he needed to do was marry his debtor's daughter and her property became her husband's.

Lenora bit her lip. Her one and only love affair was crushed before it truly began. And now she was forced to live the rest of her life with a man she barely knew.

"I'll give you a week," he said, taking the paper her father had signed from her hands. "Gather your belongings, choose a wedding dress if you like. Then this home will be yours as well."

She glanced at the tall bookcases, all adorned with leather-bound books. Saybrooke manor was large, fully

staffed, intricate and ornate. While her own home was nothing paltry, her father's debts had taken away much of the grandeur.

Still, Lenora never wanted to marry the wealthiest member of the ton. She just wanted to feel loved. Cherished. Not a payment. Not a brood mare. Yet, she would submit to her duty.

"I shall make myself ready for next week, my lord."

He smiled. "It will be a grand party."

She nodded. Lord Cavanaugh wasn't an unpleasant looking man. He wasn't obscene or grotesque in any sense. His graying temples and slight roundness were common indicators of a man in the second part of his life. But she, at twenty, was less than half his age.

Lenora left the study to find a crowd gathering at the front door. A visitor had arrived, one they knew well obviously as attentions were solely focused on this man.

Young, perhaps in his late twenties, the visitor stood taller than his welcomers. His square jaw and strong nose were perfect matches to the intense pair of vibrant blue eyes turning toward her.

"My nephew," Lord Cavanaugh whispered at her side. "His visit was planned months ago, but now it appears he will be here to share in our vows."

Lenora lifted her chin but found she could not reply. The stranger's gaze had not left hers. She was trapped under his predatory spell as when a hunter ensnared its prey. Her pulse drew to a brisk rhythm, dampening her palms, weakening her knees.

"Come." Lord Cavanaugh tugged at her elbow, and she stepped forward like a dog on a lead. She hoped to be directed out the door and into her carriage, but instead, she was led to the stranger. "May I present Miss Blakely?"

She stepped forward, but his predatory gaze would not let go. Lenora gasped. Her clothes felt instantly too tight, even suffocating. Her mouth watered, forcing her lips to part. A hum throbbed deep in her core.

"Miss Blakely, this is Lord Blackford, my nephew."

A large hand captured hers and lifted it to his mouth. Full, sensual lips brushed her outer wrist, sending shivers racing to her toes. But instead of quitting the gesture after the proper amount of time, his silky tongue slid discreetly across her skin. Her eyelids drifted partially closed, as if that tongue swept across her aching nipples.

With a whimper, Lenora pulled her hand away.

Like a haughty rake, his lip curled. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Blakely. Will you be staying long?"

Lord Cavanaugh guided her to the front door. "After next week, she will be here permanently. She is to be my bride."

Lenora glanced over her shoulder for a sign of regret or surprise on Lord Blackford's face but saw nothing except a wider smile. "Until next week then."

He turned and led the crowd through the long hallway.

* * * *

Her house felt emptier than ever. After her father's death, Lenora had been forced to let much of the staff go. Only a few remained, but they would be gone once she became Lady

Cavanaugh. She wasn't quite sure of her future husband's plans for the house, but the lands were fertile and produced enough to pay for the owed debts.

Unable to sleep, she left her room and wandered down the staircase. Lenora crept through the darkened hallways, as familiar to her as the trees outside her window.

She had only a handful of days left until she would be sharing another man's bed. Only once had she slept with a man. Her wedding night with William. Looking back, she could see how clearly they weren't matched. It wasn't just that William had no title before his name, despite being a member of the gentry. No, it was more in how they didn't fit.

William had feared her father's wrath and suggested the elopement. He claimed to love her but gave up without even the slightest fight when faced with the annulment. In a matter of weeks, he'd disappeared, and Lenora was back in her home as if she'd never left it at all.

But she was no longer a virgin.

She slipped out the rear door onto the patio. Moonlight lit the stones beneath her feet, guiding her to her favorite spot. A nearby fountain provided the soothing sound she needed to relax and settle her mind.

Stretching across the bench, Lenora listened to the call of the insects and stared at the heavens above. Stars winked and twinkled down at her, mocking her with their beauty and mystery. While she was nothing but a pawn, an object to be used and maneuvered as men saw fit.

The clopping of hooves brought her upright. No one should be out at this hour unless there was an emergency.

"So you knew I would be arriving."

Her breath caught. That voice. Could it be Lord Blackford? Here? This late?

Lenora quickly stood, folded her arms over her chest, though it did little to hide her nightgown from this stranger. She peered into the darkness. "What are you doing here on my land?"

A soft chuckle, and then she heard him dismount. "I was visiting several tenants and was asked to stay for supper." He stepped from the trees onto the patio. She gasped at the casualness of his open collar, his windblown hair. He appeared much different than when she had first met him yesterday, dressed so properly. This man before her was far more dangerous.

"On my way home, I had a whim to explore what would be my uncle's lands."

"Well, they aren't yet. So I am asking you to leave."

Lord Blackford made no move to depart. Instead, he stepped forward with the intent of a panther. She was his prey, too stunned to escape.

"Why do you marry him?"

A gasp escaped her throat at the direct question. She barely knew this man, yet she was alone with him and standing in her night clothes, and he spoke as if they were old friends. "That is none of your concern."

His long legs brought him ever closer. "Your father promised you to him to pay off debts."

Lenora lifted her chin, forced herself to hold her ground. "If you knew, why did you ask?"

His eyebrow lifted. "I knew nothing. I merely guessed. What other reason could there be?"

He was so close she could smell the mingling of horse and exotic cologne. "My uncle is over fifty and without a wife. I'm certain you do not go to him expecting love."

Despite her predicament, she snorted. "Love? What would a man such as yourself know of it?"

Lord Blackford circled her. Again, she was the stunned antelope and he the panther, searching the perfect location for his bite. "I know that a beautiful young woman such as yourself would not marry a man such as my uncle without a desperate reason."

He stopped behind her, his sigh whispering atop her hair. Her legs felt as if they would not bear her weight, her breasts ached.

Lenora forced herself to breathe normally, but it was impossible. "Why-why do you care? Do you not want us to wed?"

The space between his hard chest and her sensitive back couldn't have been more than a few inches. "Actually, I want the old man to marry."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons, Miss Blakely. Or shall I call you Lenora?"

She stiffened. "How do you know my name?"

"I know a lot about you."

He brushed a strand of hair from her shoulder. She should push him away and run in the house or scream for a servant to come to her aid. Instead, she stood motionless, her body

reacting to every breath he took, every impulse of his hands. His fingers lingered on her skin.

Warmth raced through her veins. Her nipples tightened. "Why ... why are you really here?"

He bent low. "I knew from the moment I saw you."

"Knew what?"

His arms enclosed her waist, pulling her against his chest. Thick fingers spread like a fan upon her stomach. The firmness of his arousal against her lower back demanded attention.

Her heart slammed madly in her breast as she waited. Short gasps of anticipation escaped her lips. He was torturing her. Holding her tight, teasing her body with his and yet not admitting the reason for his actions.

"Yes," he murmured. "Just like that."

She closed her eyes against the need to feel his fingers trail down her arms, his palms cup her breasts. Her breath caught with desperate expectation. Even his very words drove her to distraction. Any moment now she'd turn and press herself into his arms. "What did you know when you first saw me?"

His hands slid down over her hips. She could feel their heat through the thin fabric of her nightgown. Her skin burned, mouth watered. "I need you to marry him."

He wasn't listening to her, only continuing to torment every fiber of her being. She shared one night with William, but nothing he'd done had brought about these reactions. Even once the pain of his first thrust was gone, she only wished he'd hurry to end his rutting.

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But now her blood was on fire. The juncture of her thighs dampened, her legs separated. There were only seven days to find bliss before her nights would once again include only rutting. Instead of running from Lord Blackford, she wanted to encourage him to stay. Why not feel pleasure while the chance stood before—or behind—her?

Lenora turned to face him. His hands automatically slid across her bottom, and his erection pressed into her stomach. She looked up at him, seeing the desire burning in eyes. Even this darkness could not shadow his need.

Nor hers.

She lifted her chin, invited him to kiss her.

Lord Blackford exhaled slowly. "You are to be his bride."

"But I am not yet."

A pained expression crossed his face, then he stepped back. The air around her suddenly felt cold, and chills sprouted on her skin.

She watched his tall figure cross the stone patio, but she couldn't let him escape so easily. "What did you know from the first moment you saw me?"

He lowered his head for a brief moment. "That you had to be mine."

And then he was gone.

* * * *

Black rode through the darkened fields, feeling every bit of his nickname. What started out as an amusing diversion had suddenly become an urgent need.

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He shifted on the saddle, but it was no use. This erection would last him a long while. If he weren't so angry at himself, he'd make a brief stop and rid himself of it.

From the moment he saw Lenora, he wanted her. But when he learned she was to wed his uncle, everything changed.

How easy it was to tell himself to forget her haunting green eyes, her luscious body and succulent mouth. But he couldn't stay away, couldn't stop thinking about her.

He'd fooled himself into believing that provoking Lenora would be a frivolous way to spend his time. Maybe she would soften a bit, based on her reaction to him at his uncle's manor.

Damn, he didn't expect her to turn and offer her lips. Oh, and what tantalizing lips they were. It took everything he possessed not to capture them, suckle them, make them his.

Black pushed the stallion faster. He needed a cold dump of water over his head.

Truth be told, it was in his best interest to have his uncle marry Lenora. The man promised once he had a bride, he'd move further south. Lord Cavanaugh's first wife had been a demanding woman, difficult to please. She always wanted more, better. Despite her having died several years ago, his uncle still worried a new bride would not be satisfied with a smaller home in the warmer south. No, Lord Cavanaugh insisted on marrying while he still lived at the manor, and once married to Lenora, he would finally depart for the other house.

Then, and only then, could Black claim Saybrooke. His uncle gifted the house and lands to him when his own son left the country for the States.

But why Lenora? Her passion would be wasted. The old man fell asleep immediately after his brandy and snored until dawn. Lenora would be every bit alone in that marriage as she was today in her big house.

He slowed as the imposing shape of Saybrooke Manor came into view. From the distance, Black spotted a rider galloping towards the stables. Whoever it was had come from the direction of Lenora's manor. Had he been followed?

No. Certainly not. He'd done nothing to cause suspicion.

Venturing to see the tenants had been a wise move on his part, to know them and earn their trust. But seeing Miss Blakely had been a huge mistake.

Black entered the stables and saw a horse being brushed down. It must have been the one he'd seen racing ahead before. Perhaps the groom could tell him who had been riding it.

Just as he stepped forward to ask, he was interrupted by the sound of someone approaching.

"Blackford, it is late for a ride."

Heated blood, which had pooled at his groin, chilled then shot through his veins at his uncle's voice. Black turned to face him. "I thought it a nice day to pay a visit to some of the tenants."

Lord Cavanaugh's expression was unreadable. "Readying yourself for my gift now that my marriage is imminent?"

Black nodded. "It seems the late hour must have escaped me."

"Indeed." His uncle glanced at the stallion, then into the distant darkness.

I need you to marry him. Black had spoken those words to Lenora. And he meant them. The London townhouse was gone, lost to his father's miserable gambling debts. There was nothing for Black to offer a future bride and family, save Saybrooke Manor. And his damn uncle wouldn't leave it until he'd wed.

He must stay away from Lenora, despite how badly he wanted to make the chestnut-haired beauty his.

"Good night, then," he said to his uncle, not able to look him in the face again.

"Yes. Good night." Did the old man's voice sound troubled, or was it his imagination?

Black had seven days to avoid her.

He could manage. He must.

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Chapter Two

Lenora tossed and turned on her bed. She was worse by tenfold than when she left her room earlier. Before, she was pitying her situation, but now her body was alive and overly restless.

Never had she felt this way. Clumsy kisses from William had given her a little excitement but nothing that ever lasted. Nothing that caused her breasts to swell, her insides to ache.

This humming in her veins wouldn't die, no matter how much water she splashed on her face or how deep she buried her face under the pillow.

Instinctively, Lenora thrust her hips. The aching spot between her legs rubbed against a bunched area of blankets. Sparkles shot down her legs, making her gasp. She did it again and was again rewarded with a wave of pleasure. Another thrust, another wave. Her thighs dampened.

She flipped onto her back and pushed the blankets aside. Eyes closed, Lenora imagined Lord Blackford's thick fingers sliding across her stomach and then down her hips. She pretended her fingers were his, that they found that throbbing spot between her legs. His fingers that massaged her nipple.

He was so terribly handsome, so well proportioned and strong. What it must be like to lie beneath him, to have him thrust his arousal inside her. His flesh, long and thick like his fingers, would fill up this ache deep within.

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She arched her back, rubbed her nub harder. Her muscles stung with the tautness, but she couldn't give up. Not when relief was so close. Just a bit longer and she'd find release. Lord, she must.

Lenora flicked her swollen spot, increasing the tension. But she needed more. Something else. Something to fill the throbbing void.

She slid her fingers inside and burst. Tiny explosions blasted out in every direction as waves of pleasure shook each and every muscle.

Finally. Relief from Lord Blackford's torment.

But the question remained, did she avoid him to keep from suffering, or did she seek him out and indulge her deepest desires?

* * * *

The day was warm, with the sun burning through the cloud cover. Lenora had visited some of the tenants to let them know of the upcoming changes. Although she'd still be here, Lord Cavanaugh would be their landlord.

But the visits took longer than she expected, and after calling on only two families, she headed her favorite mare back home. She still had much to prepare for moving to another household.

Her mare sniffed out a nearby stream, and Lenora let her wander over for a drink. The cooler air slipped over her skin the moment they were in the shade.

But she was not alone.

Lord Blackford sat on his horse a few yards away. He was so handsome, so charming, so dangerous. Her mare whinnied, greeting his stallion.

Blackford's head snapped up and his gaze pierced through to her core. Lenora gasped at the stark need so obvious in his eyes. The parting of his lips ushered a wave of heat through her blood. He licked his lips, and moisture dripped between her legs.

She nudged her horse down the stream toward him, suddenly confident and determined to experience passion and bliss while she still had the chance.

"You should stay away from me," he said the moment she was beside him.

"Why?"

She stared at his lips. Lord, they were so soft, so sensual. If they could make her mouth tingle, what magnificent things could they do to the rest of her?

"Because you are to marry my uncle."

"And?"

He drew in a deep, shaking breath. "And I want you."

Desire encouraged a boldness she couldn't explain. At this point, her hunger was in control of her action. Lenora reached across and placed her hand on his thigh. The muscle tensed beneath her fingers. "I thought about you after you left last night."

His eyes closed. "No. Don't tell me."

"You brought my body alive and left me wanting." Her fingers pressed into the fabric, then slid ever so slowly upward. "I've never had that feeling before."

"Lenora..."

She continued on, watching the rise of cloth at the apex of his legs. Her pulse quickened, her breasts ached. "I was in my bed, unable to sleep. My body burned, hurt for release."

"Don't."

"I imagined your hands on me, moving down my hips. I used my fingers to—"

Lord Blackford captured her face in his hands and pulled it to his. His lips closed over hers with a searing heat. Lenora opened her mouth, inviting his passion. His silky tongue circled hers, then drew it into his mouth. They stroked, caressed, entangled.

Her nipples puckered and yearned for his touch. But his hands were buried in her hair, now fallen from her sun bonnet.

That didn't stop her from touching him. She slid her palms up the inside of his thighs until she found the rigid flesh beneath his breeches.

He moaned and wrenched his lips from hers. "Lenora, you must ... you must stop."

She felt flushed and warm and yet so very alive. "I need you, Lord Blackford—"

"Black, please." He hissed as her fingertip trailed from the base of his long erection to the tip.

Lenora grinned. His aroused body betrayed his resisting words. "I need you to show me passion, to allow me to experience ecstasy. You are my last chance."

"He is my uncle. My father's brother ... Lord, you must stop."

Until he moved away from her, she wouldn't stop. He tortured her last night, she would equally torture him. "I don't want to rely on my own hands to bring me pleasure."

"Lenora!" His lips parted, nostrils flared. Heavy eyelids covered much of his blue eyes. Ruddiness marked his cheeks. Intuition told her to grip him tighter.

She yearned to push him to the brink of control. "Please. I'm not too ashamed to beg."

Black looked down to watch her fingers stroke him. His breathing grew more rapid, his eyes more glazed. She increased the tempo.

He groaned, his shoulders shook. Then he thrust her hand away. He stared at her, a raw hunger in his gaze. "This is a mistake."

Every part of Lenora's body was on fire, her thighs sticky with her juices, her nub swollen. She swallowed, fought the arousal scorching her blood.

Ordinarily she'd be hurt at such a rejection. Instead, a sudden confidence drew her upright. She lifted her chin and turned her horse toward home. Without looking back, she said, "I will be out on my patio again tonight."

* * * *

Black watched Lenora ride off, using every bit of willpower to remain in his spot, to not chase her and yank her back to the seclusion of the trees. He clenched his teeth so hard he expected them to crack.

When she was out of sight, he flipped open the top few buttons of his breeches. Still on his horse, he slid his hand

under the material. He gripped his cock, squeezed and stroked. His palm felt nothing like hers. Even through the fabric, her gentle softness was unmistakable. Her touch was light yet insistent. Curious yet determined. She weakened him.

Her tale of self-exploration was enough to arouse him, but then the taste of her lips sent him over the edge. And when she touched him...

Bloody hell!

Black closed his eyes, remembering Lenora's shape last night through her thin nightgown. He could see the outline of her generous breasts, the shape of her hips. He'd pressed his erection against her luscious ass, wanting nothing more than to grind himself to release.

Release!

Tingles raced to his toes, his nipples, finally exploding inside his brain. He cried out as relief spurted from his swollen flesh.

At last, he stilled and waited for his heartbeat and breathing to slow.

I will be out on my patio again tonight.

Why would she taunt him this way? What if his uncle discovered them together?

It could mean rescinding the gift settlement, which would leave Black with no home of his own. Were Lenora's tempting lips and passionate body worth the risk of his only chance of a secure future?

He climbed down from the horse and washed his hands in the cool stream.

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It wasn't like he hadn't had women before. Many of them. He could find a willing maid or a harlot in town. He could find relief elsewhere.

Lenora was forbidden. Yes, it was settled then. He'd go into town tonight and rid himself of this nagging itch. This painful yearning.

He would find someone who wouldn't bring about the demise of his dreams.

* * * *

Black tried everything he could think of to talk himself out of going to Lenora. He reached the next town before he gave in to the truth. No other woman would bring him the relief she could. No matter how much he might drink, how many diversions he could find, how enticing the maids might be, none would stop him from thinking of Lenora.

Thoughts of the afternoon had him painfully erect already. If he went to her tonight, there would be no turning back.

By the time he'd reached the border of her lands, he'd talked himself into the next few nights of pleasure.

What harm would come to them if no one found out? She sought pleasure before she wed a much older man. He wanted to alleviate this aching need. After a few days, their lust would slack. Lenora would marry his uncle, and they would soon move away.

Eventually, he would find himself a wife, and Lenora would be nothing but a few fond memories.

He moved silently through the rear lawn of her manor. There she was, just as she said. She lay upon the bench,

staring up to the heavens. The night was warm, with only the occasional appearance of the moon. Long shadows and darkness blinded him to the shape of her body beneath the gown.

But he knew. He remembered.

Black dismounted and walked toward her. His footsteps did not stir her, but he knew she was awake. And waiting.

His cock throbbed as he stood over her. Her white gown glowed as if it were the moon itself. He dropped to his knees. Closer now, he could make out the circles of her nipples, the triangle of hair.

"Touch me." Her voice whispered to him in the night, soft and pleading.

Obliging her request, he skimmed his hand down her throat and over her breasts, across her stomach and past her thighs. She whimpered. He ached.

Up again, his palm glided, but this time beneath the fabric. The length of her smooth, supple legs launched his thoughts down a wild path, one where her ankles hooked around his waist and her knees squeezed his ribs. He swallowed, hard.

Her breath quickened as his hand pressed over her mound.

Lenora moaned, wriggled. Her mouth opened as she licked her lips. Black leaned forward and seized her tongue. She arched her back, reached for him. Her arm slipped around his shoulders, drawing him close. He kissed her desperately, mimicking their rapture from the afternoon. She returned his strokes measure for measure, soft sighs escaping her throat.

His knees hurt from the stone, but he didn't move anything save his fingers, which slid to her breasts, cupping them wholly.

He pulled back and glanced down at her. An encouraging smile played upon her lips.

Black raised her gown and lowered his lips to her nipples. He flicked one then the other with his tongue until both stood erect and swollen. His cock leapt, hungry for attention. He leaned forward slightly to rub it against the bench's edge.

Lenora lifted her hips. He denied her request, forcing her to wait. To suffer for his touch where she ached the most. Instead, he focused on her breasts, massaging and nipping at them. He alternated between the two, giving each a fair share of his attentions.

"More," she breathed.

He chuckled and lapped at her eager points again, but that wasn't what she had in mind. She moved her hand down her stomach and over her golden curls.

Fascinated, Black watched her pleasure herself. His pulse jumped as she fondled her mound, pressing and sliding her fingers around. He'd seen a whore do this once, but it held only minor amusement for him. This—Lenora—was beyond his wildest fantasies.

He could hear her juices as she pushed her fingers between her folds. She let out a small whimper and drove them in deeper. Then she added another finger.

It was quickly becoming more than he could bear. Already he was practically humping the wooden seat.

Black closed his hand over hers, joining in her ecstasy. Her back arched again, her hips lunged upward. He thrust their fingers faster, driving them in together, reaching far inside the slick heat. His mouth found her nipple again while his hand worked her wetness.

She moaned, wriggling and turning her head from side to side. Her tension rose, muscles tightened. He flicked her sensitive nub with his thumb, and she shattered.

Crying out, she pumped her hips, clenching around their joining hands. "Yes," she murmured as ecstasy faded. "Thank you."

Black didn't respond. He was close but hadn't gone over yet. The denied relief pained him, and he was tired of using his own hand. "Lenora..."

She understood immediately and rolled to her side, stretching for him. A few flips of the buttons and his cock was free. He stared, breath halted, as her fingers enclosed about him. Hell, there was nothing like a woman's slender, gentle pressure.

Her hand quickened, and Black forced his eyes to remain open, watching as she worked him, sliding up and down, squeezing. His scrotum tightened, a buzz flared through his bloodstream. Her finger circled around then across the head. Sparks shot to his toes. Yes, just like that, just a few moments more. It wouldn't take long—

The hot wave pulsed from his spine then swelled with astonishing speed. With a roar, Black watched his cock empty its seed onto her hand until it left him spent.

Lenora grinned up at him. "Stay?"

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Black didn't answer, couldn't. Shock rolled through him at how easily he could lose control if he allowed her to touch him again. Hell, he'd never intended to take her completely, but the passion was more intense than he expected.

He looked around for something to help clean her up.

Soft laughter filled the night. "Don't bother. Look." She wiped her hand on her gown. "It's gone."

Her carefree nature and spirited character only tortured him more. Black rebuttoned his britches. He had to go now.

Tomorrow he would better prepare himself for her touch. He would not lose control so easily. "I'll return on the morrow."

The corner of her lips curled into the knowing grin of a woman who finally realized her power in the ways of men. "You know where to find me."

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Chapter Three

The next night when Black arrived, Lenora led him inside. Dressed only in her nightgown, she took hold of his hand, and they silently walked through the darkened halls and up the stairs. Most of the servants were asleep, and if they weren't, she cared not. All of these servants would be let go, their services not needed at Lord Cavanaugh's manor.

Once inside her bedroom, Black shut the door and yanked her tightly to him. He plundered her mouth, desire raw and wild on his tongue. His scent flooded her senses, spiking awareness through her bloodstream.

She arched against his hard chest. A rigid arousal jabbed her stomach.

Lenora nipped at his lips, remembering the feel his solid flesh under her fingertips. He was velvety soft and yet unbending, like stone. She wanted to touch him again.

He shuddered and broke the kiss. "Lie on the bed."

She obeyed and sprawled across her four poster bed. Black pulled off his coat and shirt.

Despite the gray shadows of the room, Lenora gasped at the magnificence before her. She'd never seen a man so powerful, so well chiseled. William was handsome, but he was nothing like this man.

Shadows of light danced along the muscled ridges of Black's chest and abdomen. His skin glistened where the moonlight touched him, as if it, too, were in awe of his

grandeur. Her fingers itched to caress him, to glide along the hard angles.

Her breathing grew more shallow as he stepped toward her, his walk purposeful and sensual. With a deliberate slowness, he unfastened the row of buttons at her neck. Each flick of his wrist drew a whimper. Instead of lifting the shift over her head, he slipped it off her shoulders. He left on her stockings.

"So lovely," he murmured. A fingertip traced her budding nipple, then all the way down her thigh.

Lenora wanted to close her eyes, but she was too fascinated by his touch, by his admiration of her body. She couldn't remember ever feeling so worshipped, so adored.

Black leaned over her and kissed her lips again. Their tongues battled. She wanted to pull him onto her, but he had other things in mind.

His lips left her mouth and sought her neck, tracing damp trails down her throat then to each breast. He lingered there, enticing both nipples to hardened peaks.

Heat rushed through her veins, sparkles danced at her nerve endings. She felt both alive and drowsy. Wetness engulfed her navel, causing not the ticklish giggle she expected but an erotic flare of desire.

He sank to his knees at the end of the bed and pulled her forward until her legs were over his shoulders.

Lenora rose on her elbows, curious. He clearly had a plan in mind, and yet she wasn't sure—

His tongue slid up her inner thigh to her mound. He did the same on the other leg then pressed his mouth to her aching

dampness. Large, hot hands gripped her hips. She could watch no more.

She moaned.

His tongue thrust inside her folds, tapping her swollen nub next sinking deep inside again. She squirmed, but he held her firm. He feasted on her body like a man starved of food—licking, lapping, suckling, kissing.

That exquisite tightness built deep inside, begging for release. Lenora bucked her hips, and he pushed his tongue in deeper. She wriggled, wanting, needing something more, something harder.

A strong flick of her nub and she screamed. Her back arched, hips trembled. Scorching heat exploded from deep in her center, spiraled out to her nipples and sizzled at her toes. Yet, Black did not retreat from his position until her last quiver receded.

"That-that was ... amazing."

He laughed. "I assume you've never had that done to you before."

"No. Nothing even close."

Now she must return the favor. Lenora sat up and lowered her legs from his shoulders. "Stand up."

"Lenora..."

His plea may have said one thing, but his actions said something else. He stood motionless as she unbuttoned his breeches and slid them to the floor.

His erection sprang free, large and demanding. She wasn't intimidated but aroused. She enclosed one hand over his

staff, eliciting a hiss from above. Just as he feasted on her flesh, she would do the same.

Leaning forward, Lenora smelled a musky and masculine scent, stirring her body to a quick recovery. But first she would taste every part of him. She kissed his length, from the base beside her hand all the way up to the very tip, where a drop of liquid moistened her lips.

Black drew in a ragged breath but otherwise didn't move. She felt him watching her as her tongue traced circles over his silky firmness. The vein underneath throbbed and pulsed.

Enough of the appetizer, time for the main course. She drew back and glanced up. Shadows carved deep chasms in Black's cheek, but she could still see the blazing heat in his eyes. His lips parted, making his breathing loud and labored.

She grinned, opened her mouth and swallowed him. From the moment he was fully in her mouth, she moved quickly. Constantly licking, sucking, stroking him with her tongue and lips.

His fingers dug into her hair, but she didn't break her rhythm. She tickled the tip then pulled him back in to taste it all.

Soon, she wasn't the one directing the action. He jerked his hips, driving his flesh in and out of her mouth. Wetness dripped down her thighs, her nipples pinched with need.

"Oh God, Lenora." He thrust into her willing lips again and again until he tried to pull back, but she didn't let him go. He'd taken all of her when she reached the pinnacle. She would do the same.

Black threw his head back and shouted her name again. Hot, salty liquid sprayed on her tongue and down her throat. Lenora continued to suckle and twirl her tongue around his flesh until all movement stopped. She hadn't expected to feel so aroused, so taut with need. But hearing his pleasure, given by her, was better than any fabled aphrodisiac.

Once the last of the drops fell, he stumbled back. "You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to."

He stood near the window, his powerful body suddenly deflated and withdrawn. How and why had his mood shifted? What bothered him so intensely?

She patted the bed, hoping to entice him from his altered disposition, to prevent him leaving again. "I'm ready for more."

Black managed a smile. "You passionate minx. I believe I'm finished for the night."

Her heart lurched. When would he stay with her? Fill her completely?

He buttoned his breeches. "Tomorrow then?"

Lenora stood, reached for her clothes. "I'll show you the way out."

She could show him the same emotionless detachment he gave her. This was only about pleasure, after all, not about intimacy. It was her own fault for allowing her heart to yearn for more.

He shook his head, already at the door. "No need. 'Till the morrow." And he was gone.

* * * *

Black stood at the top of the staircase, his stomach knotting. Below him, Lenora walked with Lord Cavanaugh from room to room.

Why hadn't she told him she would be here today? He'd have gone out for several hours so that he wouldn't see her. So that he wouldn't crave touching her. So that his heated gaze wouldn't give them away.

Instead, he watched as a servant approached his uncle and pulled him aside. Lenora stood patiently in her proper dress, her hands folded and chin set. She looked nothing like the wanton woman he'd left in her bedchamber.

The one whose cream he devoured. The one who engulfed his cock and then swallowed his release. He hardened at the memory. In fact, he'd been hard almost non-stop since leaving her last night.

And now she was here.

"Ah, Black," his uncle called up to him. "I have some urgent business to attend. Would you mind showing Miss Blakely the gardens she so wishes to see?"

Black could not think of an excuse quickly enough, even when Lenora's soft gaze found him. He sighed and started down the steps.

His uncle clapped him on the shoulder. "Thank you. I'm sure I can entrust her into your care."

Black fought off a cough. If only the old man knew how little he could actually trust his nephew around her. But as his uncle turned and headed in the other direction, there was nothing to do but lead Lenora to the rear yard.

She said nothing as they walked, didn't even look at him. Yet, her intoxicating scent, the creamy skin at her throat and the rounded swell of her breasts aroused him to a fevered pitch. By the time they'd reached the far edge of the walled garden where a vine-covered gazebo offered a respite, he knew his control was far lost.

The moment Lenora stepped into the shaded structure, Black pushed her up against a low wall. He said nothing, she had no reply. The contact of their mouths was enough.

He plundered her lips, drew forth her silky tongue. He suckled it, teased it, consumed it. Lord, she tasted heavenly.

Her hands swept from his waist to his ass, pulling him against her. He moaned at the insistent touch of her fingers, the urgency of her movements.

His lips lowered to her neck to press heated kisses on her skin. Then his tongue slid downward, pushing aside the fabric until he licked the insides of her breasts.

In his passionate haze, he realized his breeches were undone and pushed low. He wasn't sure if Lenora had done it or he had. Hell, he hadn't planned on this being the manner in which their first coupling occurred. But she was already bunching up her petticoats and skirts, opening her legs.

Black leaned back and stared her directly in the eyes. He had to be sure this was what she wanted. Her gaze reflected a steamy heat, an open invitation.

It was all he needed. He held nothing back as he lifted her leg and slammed his throbbing cock into her tight wetness. Heaven.

Lenora threw her head back, her lips parted, eyes half closed. Her neck gleamed in the sun-dappled light, enticing and magnificent.

Over and over, he pounded into her, desire from the last few days gaining power like a train on a steep hill. He wouldn't last much longer.

The wood splintered from the battering, but neither of them stopped. Black couldn't stop now if his uncle stood right beside him.

He buried his face into her neck, enclosed his arms around her waist. A blazing tingle shot down his legs and into his toes.

She whimpered and tightened her embrace and fiery channel. "Yes, oh, Black, yes."

Her insistent hands yanked at him, pulling him in deeper, while her tongue encircled his ear. She nibbled at it, pulled on it with her teeth.

Desperation echoed in all of her actions and multiplied his own desire.

Lenora's cry and drenching wetness sent him over the edge. Black thrust himself deep, again and again, until he moaned against her neck and emptied everything he had inside her.

When he could feel his legs again, Black pulled out and stepped aside. He quickly buttoned himself, trying to appear as he did before. Before they found ecstasy.

Lenora did the same, but she didn't move as rapidly. Her movements were slow, careful, not at all hurried. Did she

wish to be caught? The thought both terrified and intrigued him.

Still, he felt like a scoundrel for molesting her outside like a randy schoolboy. "I apologize—"

"Don't." Her voice was soft but not wounded. Still, she would not look at him. "You didn't hunger for it any more than I."

He helped her tuck some of her hair back up in the pins. "Do you still want me to—"

"Yes. Tonight. And every night until I no longer live in that house."

With a final smoothing of her skirt, Lenora turned and walked out of the gazebo, following the path around to the other side of the garden.

Black trailed after her, pleased at her bravery and impressed with her determination. But mostly he wished the next four days would never end.

* * * *

Shadows danced across her room, keeping time with the flickering flames in the fireplace. Lenora waited for Black just as she had the past several nights. Even though tomorrow would be the last night before she wed Lord Cavanaugh, somehow today felt different. As if it were the end.

She tried to push the feelings away, the ones that told her how much she wanted Black to sleep all night with her. The ones that made her smile throughout the day when she thought of him.

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Lenora had asked him to bring her ecstasy, to give her the memory of a week of bliss. How is it that he managed to invade her heart as well?

A soft knock sounded at her door. He entered without pause, his gaze searching the room for her. Instead of standing in the center of the room where he could immediately ravish her, Lenora lay on her bed. Waiting.

He crossed the room without a sound. They rarely spoke during their times together, as if their voices would disrupt the secret. Lenora had wondered if she feared knowing him. For if she learned more about the man Black was, she'd yearn for more than just his touch.

He began to undress.

"Stop." Her voice broke the silence.

His hand stilled.

"Slip off your boots and lie with me."

She heard his breath catch, but he obeyed. Soon he was lying alongside her, his head upon her pillow.

"I want more."

Black cleared his throat. "More?"

"Tonight I want more than fast pleasure. I want ... I want you to cherish me. Slowly."

He tensed beside her. Was he truly only using her for immediate gratification? Was there nothing more to their trysts than lust?

Her throat tightened. "Do you not—"

Black rolled over onto her and covered her mouth with his. But instead of the usual frenzied kiss, his tongue slid across

the seam of her lips. He nibbled, ever so slowly, on the bottom one, gently teasing her mouth open.

Even with their tongues connected, he held his passion in check. She felt his restraint. While her blood burned, he kept his desire in control.

He kissed her leisurely, taking each moment to fully investigate her mouth, her eyes, her ears. His kisses were light, yet sensual. They were planted with the utmost care and intention.

A lump collected in her throat.

Little by little, Black kissed his way down her body. He unbuttoned her nightgown and pressed his lips to each spot of bare skin. Her arms, her hands, her shoulders. He moved across her breasts, setting them on fire, but did not linger.

His mouth caressed her stomach, her waist, then he gently rolled her over. With soft strokes, his tongue moved up her spine and onto her neck.

Lenora couldn't move. Didn't want to move. Liquid passion sped through her veins, but she didn't want to stop this glorious feeling. She'd never felt so treasured in all her life.

Black pulled her gown over her head and out of the way. She was completely bare to him while he was still fully clothed. It made her feel wanton. Yet, she wanted to remove his clothing, explore his body as he did hers. After he finished caressing and kissing her legs.

When he rolled her back over, Lenora sat up. She reached for his buttons and undid them one by one. Slowly, his shirt came off, exposing his muscled torso and smooth stomach.

She brought her lips over his chest, flicked his nipples with her tongue. He sucked in a deep breath, clenched his hands into fists.

She unbuttoned his breeches and pushed them away, exposing his arousal. Her mouth watered. "Lie down."

Black did as she requested, and Lenora pulled off his breeches so that he too was naked.

She began at his ankles and kissed her way up his strong legs. Her tongue shot out and traced circles as she reached his thighs, causing him to grip the blankets. Instead of engulfing his hardened flesh in her mouth when she reached it, she climbed atop him and sank down until they were fully united.

Lord, he filled her so completely. Every measure of his silky hardness stretched and extended the length of her inner walls. The consistent pressure rippled sensual pleasure.

Black hissed but then wrapped his large hands around her waist and watched her every move as she rode up and down, rocking her pelvis. That feral male grin transformed to a desperate lip bite. His grip on her hips tightened, and he began to control her movement, edging her toward that undeniable release.

Her nipples hardened, her toes curled. She shifted her legs back and leaned forward so that she was lying flat. The slick warmth of his body enveloped her in a soothing cocoon. When he wrapped his arms around her, she couldn't withhold her weeping.

Slowly, she writhed atop him, not wanting to leave his hold. She couldn't imagine anything more perfect—the

satisfying thickness of his flesh inside her and the sheltering tenderness of his embrace.

His lips found her neck, then her cheek. He nudged her face until their mouths connected. She feared he could taste her tears, but she could not resist his kisses. Their tongues danced a slow rhythm, sensual and hypnotizing. She could do this all night.

However, Black's breathing signified he wouldn't last much longer. Hot hands skimmed her back and over her bottom. He moved her up and down, increasing their tempo.

His head dropped back as the intensity surged. Soon the slow lovemaking was replaced by an urgent need. Over and over, he plunged her up and down his erection.

Then he squeezed her cheeks and thrust his hips one last time. He clenched his eyes shut, growled her name and shuddered again and again.

Tightening her hold on his still partially erect flesh, she slammed herself down until fireworks exploded in her brain and tingles raced to every nerve.

She dropped her head on his chest and listened to the rapid beating of his heart as Black put an arm around her.

He'd shown he cherished her. Proved he could give her more than quick release to her frustrated desires. But now what?

There was one more day for them to enjoy. And yet her lungs were tight, her eyes damp. She couldn't bear to think past this moment.

Lenora lifted her head to glance at him. He was breathing evenly. Asleep.

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She smiled. Tonight, Black would stay until dawn.

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Chapter Four

Black's eyes opened as the first licks of sunlight streamed through the trees and into the room. Lenora stirred beside him, her gold hair fanned across the pillow. Her arm was thrown over her eyes, lifting her gorgeous breasts high. Her nipples glowed rosy in the morning light, the tips pointed and succulent.

His mouth watered.

The erection he woke with now throbbed with heightened need.

Black leaned over and swirled his tongue over one of the peaks. She tasted heavenly.

Lenora moaned but didn't otherwise move.

An energizing buzz zipped through his veins, and Black rolled onto his stomach. The soft sheets rubbed his aching cock, bringing him close to a quick release. He buried his face between her breasts, no longer restricting himself to a gentle awakening. Her giggle only urged him onward.

Within seconds, he was nipping at her skin, suckling her nipples, licking every part of her his tongue could reach.

Rampant urges shook his control.

Lenora's fingers trailed down his arms, across his back. When she brushed across his ass, Black growled with pleasure.

A slight turn of his hips and his desperate cock jerked for her touch. Immediately her thin fingers stroked his length.

Hell, he wanted to sink his cock into her mouth, between her legs, and yet he couldn't move.

Raging. Wild. Desire pumped through his bloodstream. Expanding heat swelled and mushroomed. She needn't do more than rub his skin with her fingernails.

He couldn't stop the eruption.

"Lenora!" His whole body shook as scalding fluid shot onto the sheet.

Black dropped back on the bed, catching his breath.

She ran her fingers down his stomach. "I like waking up that way."

He grinned. He did too. Lord knew her stroke on his cock in the morning felt tremendously better than his own. "I must go before the sun rises too high."

Lenora nuzzled her head upon his chest. "Must you?"

More than ever. Her tenderness only dug further into his pain and guilt.

Black wrenched himself from her warmth, swallowed against his tight throat and pulled on his clothes.

Lenora said nothing else, nor did she move from the bed. Her lack of hysterics or any physical demonstration both pleased and pained him. Did she yearn for him? Feel the tearing at her gut the way he did?

Black forced away the temptation to kiss her good-bye and instead nodded to her from across the room. Her smile did not offer any view to her emotions. A lift of his chin and he exited heaven.

Once back at the manor, he immediately ordered a bath. Not that he minded the scent of sex on him, but he didn't want others to notice.

The memories of their time together left him with more than an aching erection. A keening sadness lurked deep inside him, a dreaded notion of the beginning of the end. The wedding was tomorrow.

Black tried to shake it off. He washed himself clean, dressed and ate. But the restlessness wouldn't go away. He tried a walk in the garden, but that only brought thoughts of their lust in the gazebo.

He rode his stallion for a while, but the sight of the stream brought visions of her request and the aching yearning she had left him with.

Damn. Would everything here remind him of Lenora? Once she married his uncle and moved away, would he never be able to stop thinking of her? Could another woman ever erase his memories of this week?

I want you to cherish me. Slowly.

He'd hesitated. Froze. Fear that she felt something more had gripped him in a panic. When she'd questioned him further, the pain in her words moved him to prove something to her. But what? That he felt something more for her than passion?

Did he?

Black slowed his stallion. Far off in the distance sat Lenora's home. His heart pitched.

He did, damn it. He did feel something more. And it scared him to death. But he had to tell her. She had to know the time spent with her was not strictly about pleasure.

When he reached the house, the servant informed him that Miss Blakely was unavailable. Black knew she was home. He couldn't leave. He had to tell her while he had the courage.

He went around the servant and up the stairs, following the voices to the end of the hall. Black didn't knock, couldn't hesitate again. He pushed the door open.

Lenora stood at the far end of the room, the light from the windows spilling upon her. With hair the color of a halo and bathed in a heavenly glow, she looked like an angel dressed in white.

"Bl—Lord Blackford!"

Only then did he realize she was in a wedding gown. Several people darted around her, nipping and tucking fabric.

I want you to cherish me.

Lord, yes, he cherished her. He treasured her. He didn't want to give her up. Not for his uncle. Not for the manor and lands.

But Lenora's marriage was one of convenience. She was doing her duty to pay off her father's debts.

He had no right to interfere.

"Lord Blackford?"

Black spun on his heel, raced down the stairs and out to his waiting horse. He had to leave. Not just this house, but his uncle's manor. He could not watch Lord Cavanaugh marry Lenora.

He'd leave. Tonight.

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* * * *

"You're leaving?"

Lord Cavanaugh stood at the front door as the footman and driver loaded Black's trunks.

"Yes." His chest felt tight, his stomach in a knot.

"What of the wedding and party tomorrow?"

"I—I'm sorry, I can't stay."

His uncle crossed his arms. "I promised you I would go live in the house in Dover once I married."

Black sighed. "I know. And perhaps I'll come back once you're gone."

"Does this have anything to do with Miss Blakely?"

It had everything to do with Miss Blakely. Guilt coupled with the pain inside Black's gut. He'd wronged his uncle, taken advantage of a lonely woman and given up on his dream. Was there anything more to lose?

Black started down the steps, then stopped and turned back. "Best wishes tomorrow. And please tell your new bride I am sorry I won't be there to see your vows."

He quickly scrambled inside the carriage before his uncle could press any further. Before his uncle could learn the truth.

* * * *

Lenora clenched the paper in her hand as the carriage bumped over a rut in the road. Lord Cavanaugh had sent an urgent request to see her.

Her stomach twisted, nerves flinched. It was probably something to do with the ceremony tomorrow. The one that would bind her to him forever.

Yet, her guilt led her to wonder if his request had something to do with Black.

Black.

Why had he shown up this morning? What had he wanted to say? Even more curious, why had he disappeared so quickly?

Lenora sucked in a deep breath as the carriage rolled to a stop. If nothing else, she prayed Black would not be standing above as he had several days ago. She couldn't tolerate him watching her, having his steamy eyes follow her every move.

The head butler led her to the study and quietly shut the door behind her.

Lord Cavanaugh stood with his back to her. His shoulders sagged, then he turned. "Lord Blackford is gone."

Lenora blinked. Gone? "Gone where?"

He pursed his lips. "He has left for good. Returned to London."

Returned to London? Black left? Without saying good-bye? She felt her throat close in, her lip tremble. Is that why he'd come to see her? To tell her he was leaving?

"Miss Blakely?" Lord Cavanaugh stepped closer. "Lenora? Why don't you sit down?"

She lowered herself to the deep-buttoned chair. Too late she realized her incriminating reactions.

"You care for him?"

It wasn't her intention at the start, but now she thought of him every moment of the day. "Yes."

"How much, Lenora?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. Guilt. Loneliness. Loss. She knew not which tore at her heart. Perhaps all three.

Lord Cavanaugh sighed. "Did you see him every night?"

Lenora bit her lip, nodded. She couldn't bear to look up at him. She had disgraced him. And with his own nephew. Shame like she'd never felt before crept up from her knotting gut to inflame her cheeks.

A hand lifted her chin. "Lenora, do you love him?"

Did she? What was love? Was it thinking of someone each moment of the day? Was it wishing he lay beside her each night? Was it yearning to be held by him? Was it a deep desire to carry his child?

Lenora squeezed her eyes shut, but the growing lump in her throat wouldn't leave. Her heart ached—for the shame she'd caused Lord Cavanaugh, for the loss of Black. Now she'd have no one. "I'm so sorry."

She heard him move to his desk and open a drawer. "I had to see for myself. And now I'm convinced."

The sound of scribbling met her ears before he walked to the door and whispered something to a servant. When the door shut again, he was on his knees before her. "Lenora."

She drew in a deep breath and forced her eyes open. "Yes, my lord?"

"Do not weep. Unless it is for happiness."

"Happiness? I don't understand." She tried to read his expression, discern the meaning in his softening eyes.

"I had planned on leaving this house and moving south for my health. This manor should have been Lord Blackford's long ago. I held onto it for selfish reasons."

Lenora blinked. She didn't quite grasp what he was telling her.

"I'm signing the title to put it in his name only. He will be the owner."

"So I will be moving south with you?"

Lord Cavanaugh rose to his feet and pulled her up along with him. "If you choose to come with me."

"Choose? But I thought—"

"You didn't read your father's promissory note carefully. It stated that you are to wed the owner of this manor, not me specifically."

Her breath caught as his meaning dawned. She had to wed the owner, which would be Black very soon.

"So you knew he came to me each night?"

Lord Cavanaugh nodded. "I suspected and then had a servant confirm. Honestly, I was relieved."

She strode to the window and pushed the heavy curtain aside. "Relieved? You didn't want to marry me?"

"I felt from the beginning that you and my nephew would make a good match. But I didn't want the marriage of convenience forced upon him. I wanted him to fall for you on his own. And he did."

Her chuckle did not lift her spirits. "If he felt something for me, why did he leave?"

"Because he knew nothing about your father's document or that I would leave the manor to him so soon. He left because he probably could not bear to see us wed."

Lenora's pulse trembled at her throat. Was it possible that she and Black could be together? How would she find him in London? "If he's gone, I won't—"

"I just sent a note with my fastest rider to retrieve him. Go. Wait in the garden. He'll be here sooner than you know."

Lenora blinked back tears, but this time they were from happiness. What seemed impossible only hours ago was suddenly a very real possibility.

Impulsively, she turned and kissed Lord Cavanaugh on the cheek. "You are a kind man."

He patted her shoulder. "Wait for him."

* * * *

Black stormed up the steps of Saybrooke Manor. The servants at Lenora's house told him she was here, and now he was ready to tear down walls to be with her.

At the front door, he came across his uncle first. "Where is she?"

"In the garden. She waits for you."

Why was the man smiling? Was he enjoying their misery?

Black was barely aware of his surroundings as he hurried through the manor to the rear patio. Long strides brought him into the garden, into the place he first found heaven inside her body. He didn't see her by the roses or the pond.

A movement, there in the gazebo.

Within seconds he was beside her. Black gathered her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers. She yielded to him, capturing his face in her hands.

He'd been a fool to leave. A fool to believe he could stop thinking about her.

Black broke the kiss, his breathing heavy but his heart light. "I'm sorry I left. I should have stayed and fought to have you."

"You can have me."

He nodded. "I'll do whatever it takes. Anything my uncle asks."

She looked at him quizzically. "Didn't you get the note?"

"Note?"

A finger traced down his cheek as her lips curled. "Your uncle will not fight you on this. He, in fact, knew about us all along."

Black drew up, straightening his spine. "Knew about us being together?"

"Yes. My father's debt note only indicated I marry the owner of this manor and lands, not Lord Cavanaugh himself. Black, your uncle plans on gifting the house to you now."

His heart hammered inside his ribcage, his mouth dried. He was getting the house and lands now? All that he wished for? And Lenora, too?

"So does this mean you aren't marrying my uncle?"

Her brilliant smile lit up the shadows. "No, I am not marrying Lord Cavanaugh. But I am set to wed the owner of this land, this house, this garden." Her arms spread wide as a

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mischievous gleam flashed in her eyes. "As well as the owner of this gazebo."

He grinned, felt his blood warm, his body stir. "I'm not the owner yet."

She pushed him back against a low wall. "But you will be, and that's good enough for me."

Black captured her lips again. But this time he would not let them go.

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Also available

The Lady's Bargain

by

Leslie Dicken

Posing as a governess should have been a simple matter, but when Lady Christine Claybourne altered her name and appearance to match her new station, she hadn't counted on the childish whims of Miss Ellie Preston landing her stuck in a tree. Nor the roguishly handsome rescuer who sees through her disguise and happens to be the brother of the fiancé she's running from. Desperate to keep her identity a secret, she offers her body in return for a rake's silence.

As the second son, it seemed William Preston, Lord Kingston, could never please his father and had long ago given up trying. Instead, he rushed headfirst into a frivolous life and sought every opportunity to thwart his older brother. Bedding John's ravishing bride-to-be promised double the satisfaction, but even he was not so heartless a cad. Yet, how could he not accept the lady's bargain?

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Chapter One

Posing as a governess should have been a simple matter, but when Lady Christine Claybourne altered her name and appearance to match her new station, she hadn't counted on the childish whims of Miss Ellie Preston. Fingers clamped tightly to the rough bark of the tree she currently found herself stuck in, Christine closed her eyes and listened to the incessant pounding of her heart.

"I'll be back, Miss Archer," called the mischievous voice from below. "Don't go off!"

Humor from a ten year old was not what Christine needed right now. Especially since that ten year old was responsible for her present predicament.

She sucked in a deep, courageous breath and slit her eyes open, forcing herself to look at the ground below. It didn't seem that far as she was climbing, or maybe it was just the motivation to reach her pupil who claimed being stuck. When, in fact, Miss Ellie Preston could easily climb up and down this large, ancient oak.

"Help is here!" the girl yelled.

Her stomach already in knots, Christine slowly took a full glimpse of the figures at the bottom of the tree. Next to her rotten pupil was a man with a ladder. He leaned it against the trunk, and Christine's heart sank when the top rung came to a rest several feet short of her perch. The man said something to Ellie. She nodded and ran off while the man climbed not the ladder but the tree.

He scaled the oak without effort. His lean, muscular legs and powerful arms pushed off the trunk and branches with masculine ease, stirring a long forgotten tickle in her belly. His yellow curls caught the sunlight and shimmered with golden highlights. Christine assumed he was tall, certainly more than her, for he reached branches without any of the stretching she had to do.

Finally, just before reaching her, he stopped and looked up. Her breath caught at the hard angles of his face. Pale grey eyes, rimmed with dark lashes, rested above high cheekbones. A slight dimple in his chin softened a strong jaw.

"Good afternoon." A deep voice shimmered over the words, quickening her pulse. "You must be Ellie's new governess."

Dressed casually, this man might have been a gardener or someone from the village. But something in his demeanor, his speech, led her to believe he was of a much higher station. Someone who could prove most dangerous to her.

"How do you know that?"

He scratched his chin. "Well, let's see you are the fourth one in two years. And every one of them has left after she sent them up this tree."

Christine groaned. It wasn't bad enough that she was stuck way up in this tree, but that she had been as gullible as the others before her. Well, she wouldn't dare leave because of this trick.

The curl of his lips hinted at a devilish rake. "Mind if I join you?"

Before she could answer, he swung himself up on her branch and sat, causing it to bounce with his weight. Ice washed through her blood. Instinctively, she clutched his leg.

A large, warm hand settled over hers. Sparkles tingled up her arm. What was the matter with her? It had been years since a man affected her this way.

"It won't break. I promise you."

She swallowed both her fear and her wantonness and looked from their hands to his face. "Haven't you come to collect me?"

He nodded.

"Why ... why are you sitting here with me then?"

"Getting to know you." His eyes danced.

"My name is Miss Archer. I am the governess for Miss Ellen Preston, third daughter of the Earl of Remington." She sighed. "Now may we get down?"

He ignored her question. "Have you a first name, Miss Archer?"

Even a recluse like her knew the rules of society. He was either trying to be rude or he was flirting with her. "I have," she answered.

"Is that your name? I have? It sounds Scandinavian or maybe German."

She wanted to be annoyed at him, teasing her while she was frightened for her life. But his charming grin and sparkling eyes disarmed her. "Victoria," she said, forcing herself to say the name she'd taken six weeks ago.

"Our queen." Skepticism colored the words.

A tremor of concern flickered in her chest. "Yes. And my name. Victoria Archer. Are you satisfied? Now can we get down?"

"You don't look at all like Queen Victoria." His gaze took a slow sweep of her, dragging down her loose fitting bodice and back up again. "No. Victoria doesn't suit you."

Her body burned at his glances. Heat gathered between his legs. Oh Lord, she'd denied herself for too long. She sucked in her breath, but it only made her aware of his heady masculine scent.

"I-I believe you should be referring to me as Miss Archer. My Christian name is quite irrelevant."

Those gray eyes of his stared at her, then suddenly shifted away. He appeared to struggle with himself, debating whether or not to say something. But the smile returned to his face and he said, "I've always liked to break the rules."

Christine swallowed, somewhat unnerved by his admission. She wanted to ask who he was, what his name was, why he didn't introduce himself. But she couldn't find the right words.

A breeze gusted up the branches, rustling the leaves and lifting his hair. An urge bubbled inside her to brush her fingertips along the hard planes of his face, down the skin of his strong forearms. Something about him mesmerized her, captivated her. He could be her downfall if she wasn't careful.

"Why aren't we getting down?" she asked, changing the subject.

"See that ladder?" He pointed to it. "I need two men to come and hold it still."

Christine gripped the tree tightly. "How are we going to get from here to the ladder?"

"I'll carry you."

"Carry me?" Her heart resumed its frantic shuddering. But she now wondered if it were from being so close to him rather than fear. "How?"

He lifted one shoulder, his sly grin returning. "I'll throw you over my shoulder, of course."

"Shoulder?" she echoed. She licked her lips and glanced down at the grass. The distance made her gasp. It was so far to drop. And yet, being so close to his body, held securely in his power...

She'd been a recluse far too long.

Thick fingers tipped her chin toward him. A shiver spread through her breasts, making them ache. "Is it the height or the fall that frightens you?"

"Both," she answered. "What frightens you?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I have yet to find it."

"Nothing?" She tilted her head. "Thunderstorms? Darkness? Snakes?" He shook his head as she persisted. "Loneliness?"

His fingertip traced her jaw, and Christine's eyes closed on their own volition. "Are you frightened of being lonely, Miss Archer?" His words were a whisper. He leaned toward her so that she could hear his breathing, smell the mingling of sweat and cologne.

In an instant, a tingle raced through her and her breathing turned shallow. He was close. So close. She wanted him to kiss her. God, yes, please.

Fire blazed in her bloodstream, wetness dampened her legs. She wanted him. Perhaps it would be better if he were the gardener. She could assuage this ache without getting herself into trouble.

Suddenly, there was only emptiness as his hand moved away from her face. "Open your eyes, Miss Archer. I'm not going to kiss you."

The flush of embarrassment that swept through her quickly turned to anger. How dare he tease her this way? The rake! Her eyes flashed open, and she glared at his charming, smiling face.

"Not yet, anyway."

Her gaze sharpened on him. "What does that mean?"

Raising an eyebrow, he swung his legs. The branch danced with his movements. "I know who you are and it's not a governess named Victoria."

A gasp escaped her lips. A mistake. Now she could not deny it. "Who am I then?" she whispered.

With a wink, he slid closer. The heat from his body washed over her, teasing her. "Lady Claybourne, of course. The woman who was supposed to marry my brother."

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