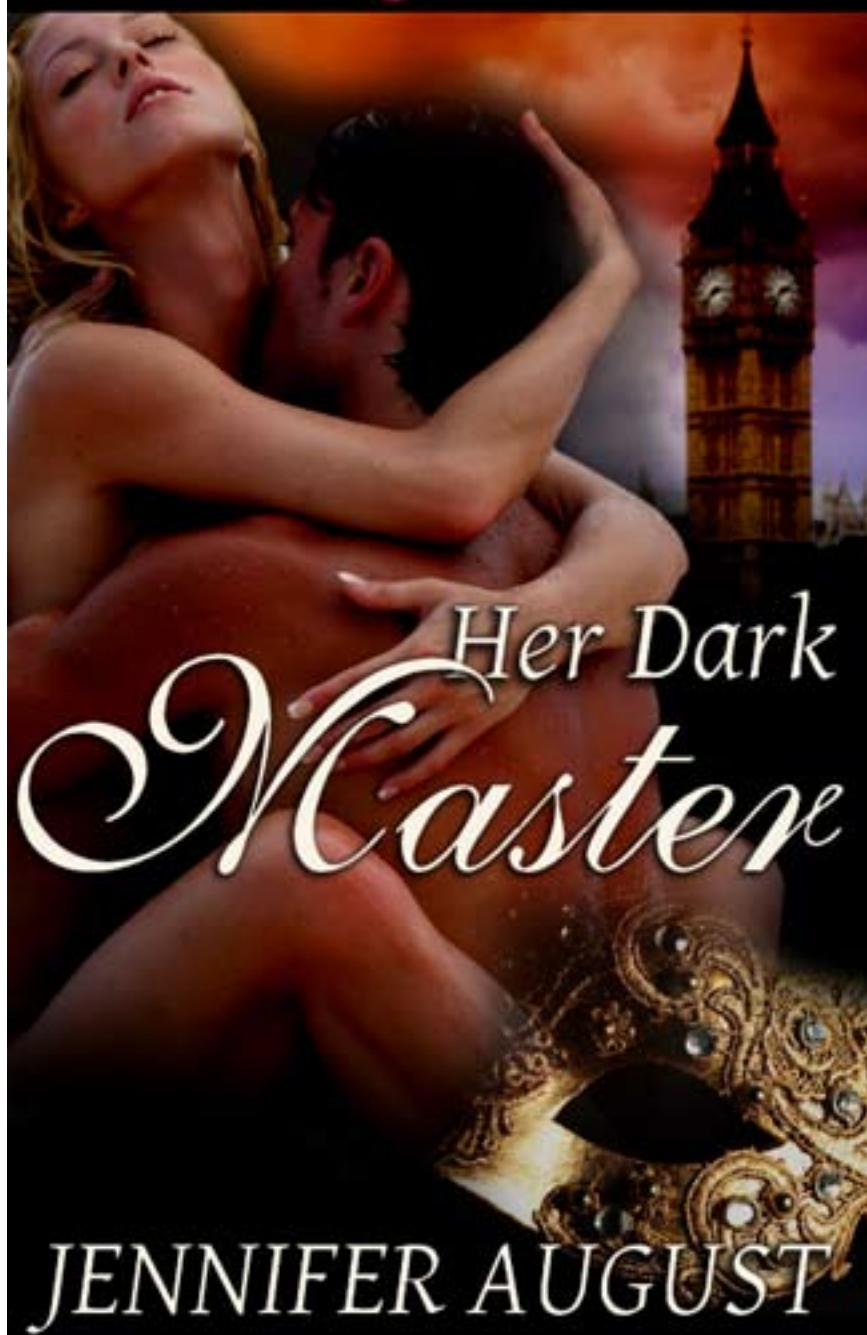


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Her Dark Master

* * *

by Jennifer August

To My Reader:

I've always loved heroines who aren't what they seem and heroes who exude power without trying. Tori's secrets and daring threaten everything she holds dear and only Matthew can rescue her. But will he give her his heart, as well?

Her Dark Master: Chapter 1

Victoria Rose Ashford sat primly in the front salon, watching through lowered lashes as her mother gushed over the visiting Colonel Jameson. Though the man cut a debonair figure, the gray at his temples coupled with the wide, blunt mustache reminded her more of a grandfather than a pleasing suitor.

No, he was most unsuitable, regardless of her mother's desires. Warnings, more like, though Tori also dismissed those as idle threats. Refusing proposals was not uncommon when a girl was still in her first few seasons. Why, her best friend Laurel Edison had turned down two herself.

"Miss Ashford, perhaps you would favor me with a turn at the pianoforte?"

Stifling a sigh, she seated herself at the instrument, taking as much time as she dared to arrange her skirts, the music, the cushion beneath her.

Bringing her fingers to the keys, she deftly coaxed a tune from the pianoforte. Not her favorite activity, by far, but at least it precluded conversation with the Colonel. She cared little for his battlefield exploits or his stern command of the Indian people under his jurisdiction. He was much too rigid for her tastes.

Polite applause followed the last strains of music and she stood, giving a light curtsy.

"You play splendidly, Miss Ashford."

"Thank you, Colonel." The platitude sounded forced and insincere to her ear, but he seemed to take no note of it.

Instead, he studied her intently. Was it her overactive imagination or did his gaze linger at her breasts? Surely he would not commit such a breach of etiquette.

"Do you have any other talents, Miss Ashford? Singing? Poetry?"

Tori cleared her throat and smiled at him. "No, I am afraid the pianoforte is my only real talent."

His mustache quivered alarmingly and his lips curled back. "I

doubt that, my dear. It is my finding that young women such as you are remarkably talented in many areas. Once they receive proper instruction.”

She blinked, positive she misheard. Misunderstood. Her secret writings must be affecting her more than she first believed if she was finding hidden meaning in the most innocent of comments.

“You are absolutely correct, Colonel,” her mother said, moving to stand beside him. “Victoria has always been a quick study.”

“Indeed?” the Colonel murmured, his shuttered gaze stalking her.

Tori shivered.

Her mother slipped her arm through his elbow. “Would you like another cup of tea, Colonel?”

Finally pulling his eyes away, he shook his head. “No thank you, Lady Ashford. I must be off. I trust I will find you both at the Harrington ball?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And you, my dear, will you consent to allowing me a spot on your dance card?”

Tori slanted a discreetly pleading look at her mother, to no avail. Swallowing hard, she nodded. “As you wish.”

His mustache quivered again and she caught the huff of air as he exhaled.

“Very good. Very good, indeed.” The Colonel’s eyes glinted. “Lady Ashford, if you run into our mutual friend Mr. Wolffe, would you be so good as to pass along my greetings?”

Tori glanced quizzically over at her mother’s in-drawn breath, surprised to see two small lines bracketing her mouth. “I am quite certain I shall not see him again, Colonel.”

“But just in case, please keep my words in mind.” With a bow and a final intense stare, he was gone.

Tori did not wait for the door to close behind him before dashing up the stairs, skirts high in hand.

“Victoria,” her mother said sharply, stopping her at the top of the staircase.

She looked back. "Yes?"

"Come sit with me, please."

Tori slowly walked back down the stairs, studying her mother. Behind her green eyes lurked a shadow. Of late, she'd grown more assertive in her desire to see Tori wed. The friction between them over the subject reared frequently, but Tori knew deep down her mother only wished her happiness.

She sat on the sofa and hoped this wasn't going to be yet another lecture on the necessity of a good marriage. She already knew that. She also knew Corwin would be the absolute finest match she could make. *If* she could make it.

Given his indifference to her, Tori feared a liaison between them would be impossible. However, she was not quite ready to give in. She still had time. She joined her brother Ryder and Matthew once a month for shooting lessons. She lived for those days when she managed to make Matthew forget she was more than a child and less than his friend's sister. A pity they didn't occur more often.

"I have given you plenty of opportunity to secure your own future, have I not?"

Heart tightening, she stiffened. "What do you mean?"

A frown marred her mother's brow. She rubbed her fingers to her temple and then shrugged. "You cannot have Corwin, Tori. You must leave that childhood dream behind and accept your future as a woman. A woman of status, married to a man with the wealth and means to care for you gloriously for the remainder of your years."

The words ripped at her. She ducked her head, refusing to allow any tears to fall. "I harbor no lost hope on Corwin, Mother, but neither do I wish for comfort over love."

"With security comes love. The Colonel can offer you that."

She stared at her dame, completely aghast. "You cannot be serious!"

Had the countess's eyes shimmered before she looked away? "There is nothing objectionable about him."

"Of course there is. He's old and stiff and...." She gulped, trying to find some other tangible quality that would make her mother

dismiss him as a possible suitor. “And he looks at me in an unseemly way!”

Lady Ashford’s gaze swung back, resting on her with such intensity that Tori felt the need to confess her sins, both old and new. Remarkably she managed to hold her tongue and her poise.

“He is a man, Victoria, and you are both beautiful and charming. Looking at you is a natural instinct.” A wan smile lifted her lips. “And he is not so old, really. Hardly much more than I.”

This was too much. Tori leapt to her feet. “No, Mother, this is madness. Why? What is going on that you wish me to wed someone like him?”

A very visible tremor wracked the countess, and her skin paled to an even whiter hue than usual before she regained control. “Family is most precious, Victoria. And you are already one and twenty. If you do not wed this season, then you may never do so. You will be a spinster. Alone, no children, no husband. Is that what you wish?”

Bitterness welled in her. No, a solitary life was most definitely not what she wanted. But neither did she wish a staid, boring life with a man older than her late father. She wanted Matthew Corwin.

Before she could make another comment, her mother rose and hugged her close. “I only want you happy and safe, my dear. Please remember that, no matter what.” She patted Tori’s cheek. “Now, go upstairs and get some rest. You look wan.”

Tori turned away, making for the sanctity of her room. She twisted the key in the lock and leaned against the door, pondering both her mother’s odd comments and the Colonel’s visit. Something about the man caused warning bells to ring, but she could not quite decipher why. He’d behaved the perfect gentleman. But his pointed looks and even more pointed comments did not sit well.

With a sigh, she pushed away from the door and rummaged in her wardrobe, digging beneath a mountain of hatboxes for her leather satchel.

True, she had a ball to attend later this evening, but she owed her editor a new installment. What started as a lark had become a

profitable, intoxicating adventure. Three years earlier, she had discovered her brother's secret stash of *Opals*—an underground paper of salacious adventures and sex—during a game of Blind Man's Bluff. Time and again, she'd crept into his room while he was out and pilfered the papers, reading without truly understanding them. Laurel, of course, had been no help either. It had taken some time, covert eavesdropping and a good bit of bribing the parlor maids for Tori to make sense of it all. Once she had, her newfound knowledge did more than thrill and titillate her. It roused her into a new awareness of everything and everyone around her. Including Matthew.

Most especially Matthew.

She began to notice how he moved and the way his eyes and hands spoke deeper than his words. Wondered and pictured how his body would entice and entangle with hers amid silken sheets and soft feather down. Soon, the stories of *The Opal* became almost ordinary. Though they still had the power to arouse, she found herself wanting more. Her imagination yielded hotter, more explicit visions of her and Matthew.

At last, fantasy fueled by frustration drove her to pen her own lascivious tale. Then another and another until one night, in a very tipsy whispered conversation with Laurel, she determined she would publish these stories. Despite the heady port, her friend had been aghast and rightfully so. The suggestion was ludicrous, even if Tori had known *how* one went about getting published.

Still, the heady temptation was too much for Tori's daring nature. First, she pinned down exactly when *The Opal* was delivered and how. That had been ridiculously easy. Finding the messenger boy and convincing him to carry an anonymous letter to the publisher had been more difficult—not to mention expensive. She'd had to coerce the little ragamuffin with nearly all her pin money.

Three years later, she and the messenger were both amassing a tidy sum from the writings. She paid him well for his silence even though he didn't know what her missives contained. Even her publisher had no idea of her identity.

In one dizzying swoop, she'd gone from innocent miss to published sex author, a career that, if discovered, would assure her ruin. No man, not even the Colonel—and definitely not Matthew—would wed her should the truth be known. And, despite her protests to her mother, she did still pine for Matthew.

Tori pulled her thoughts away from both the Colonel and Matthew, settling herself down to write.

It was a pity, though, that her heroines received more pleasure than she'd ever known. Likely ever would.

Innocent in real pleasures she might be, but her fictional characters and those of her fellow authors in *The Opal Chronicles* tutored her well. She'd gained insight she'd wager no other unmarried miss of the Ton possessed. With that knowledge came a sort of instinct that told her Matthew Corwin would be a man to reckon with in the bedroom. If only.... She sighed heavily, fearing such an arrangement would never occur between them. But still, he provided much needed inspiration and fantasy.

Pulling the leather folder open, she dug out her nib and parchment, re-reading the last bit she'd written.

Ewan's hand slid higher up her thigh, trembling over the silky flesh. He could smell her excitement. The honey already dripped from her cunny, wetting her thin linen chemise.

"My lord, it's frightfully hot in here. Why do you not disrobe?"

Ewan glowered at the upstairs maid. "I told you to stay silent. You'll have to pay for that."

The maid giggled before remembering her role and assuming a pouting demeanor. "Pay, my lord?"

"Aye, wench." He slapped the inside of her thigh, and his cock tightened at her squeal. He traced the faint mark his palm left behind. "On your knees."

Her tits swayed deliciously as she complied, giving him a saucy wink over her shoulder. Her arse tilted at an enticing angle.

Ewan shifted behind her, running his fingertips along the backs of her legs up to her round, fleshy bottom. He pressed his palms flat against her. "Not quite warm enough, wench." He drew his hands

back and brought one down hard. Fast. Again and again until her delightful bum turned a rosy, splotchy hue of deepest red.

She screeched and flailed on the bed with each stroke of his hand, her tears muffled by the pillows.

Tori shifted uncomfortably on the chair as she read. Her hand clenched at her lap, rubbing with slight pressure her own sensitive mound.

This was the sort of passion she wanted. The sort of sexual heat that only a strong man could offer. A masterful man.

A man like Matthew Corwin.

Tori glanced at the gilded mantle clock and sucked in a sharp breath. She was literally running out of time. If she wished to receive her weekly payment, she must turn her manuscript over to the runner in less than an hour.

“Blast it.” She bent once more over the parchment. Her mind fast and naughty, she scribbled out a satisfying scene for Ewan and his maid, dabbling out the final words just as the clock rang the quarter hour.

“Hurry, hurry.” She blew over the last page to dry the ink, bundled the pages in a discreet package, donned her cloak and crept from the room.

Fortunately, the runner always showed up on time in the same spot, an alleyway not more than two blocks from her house. That made getting in and out unnoticed much easier.

Delivery complete and the latest round of pound notes in hand, Tori snuck home as quietly as she’d left. When she reached her room, she let out her held breath, calmed her racing heart and stashed the money.

“Miss Victoria, are you awake?”

Glory’s soft voice muffled its way through the thick oak door. Tori smoothed her hair and unlocked the door for the upstairs maid.

“Yes, Glory, what is it?”

“Miss Edison would like a word.”

Tori brightened. “Send her up, please.”

The maid left and moments later Laurel Edison took her place.

“Laurel, whatever is the matter? You’re white as snow and twice as cold. Come by the fire.”

Laurel’s body shook beneath her hands as Tori drew her further into the room.

“Shut the door,” Laurel pleaded, fear thick in her voice. “Lock it. Oh, Tori, we’re in deep trouble.”

Her own sense of dread rising, Tori complied. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone knows.”

Tori gasped. “Impossible.”

“No, it’s true.” Laurel dug in her pocket for a mangled bit of vellum. She held it out to Tori with a shaking hand.

Miss Ashford,

I know your secret. Unless you deliver to me fifty pounds, your mother will also discover the truth. Arrive at 9:00 tomorrow, southwest corner of Hyde Park, past the duck pond. Look for the tree wrapped with a green ribbon. I chose it to match your eyes.

~Fondest regards.

Bile rose in Tori’s throat. She would be utterly ruined. More than ruined.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” Tori muttered at the threat slashed across the page. She raised stricken eyes to her friend. “When did this come? How did you get it?”

Tears spilled from Laurel’s eyes. “A boy at market asked me if I was Miss Edison, friend of Miss Ashford. When I answered yes, he gave me this note and ran. Didn’t even wait for a coin.” Laurel dragged in an audible, ragged gust of air. “Tori, what are we going to do? We’ll be ruined.”

Fear, dark and enveloping, more terrifying than anything she’d ever known, choked Tori. She licked lips dry from fear. “Maybe he does not speak of *The Opal*.” She flicked a nail along the edge of the blackmail note. “It could be anything he speaks of, Laurel, don’t you think?”

Her friend stared at her as though she’d sprouted four arms and a third eye. “And what else have you done that would warrant a blackmail note, Victoria?” she ended on a near screech, pressing

the back of her hand to her lips.

“Good point.” For a brief moment Tori wondered if her messenger could have been responsible, but quickly abandoned that notion. He earned a handsome sum for his assistance. Though fifty pounds was a huge sum of money to someone in his position. No. No, she refused to believe it was he.

Someone else knew.

Sick at both stomach and heart, she wadded the paper and stuffed it into her skirt pocket. “I suppose, then, there’s naught to be done but pay him.”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 2

“Whoa, easy, boy,” Matthew murmured when Orion tried to shift away from his questing fingers. A pebble had caught beneath the horse’s shoe, disrupting their early morning ride. The rising sun beat down through the trees and warmed Matthew’s neck, and he tossed his morning coat atop the saddle.

Moments later, with the rock removed, he led Orion through the dewy grass. No sense putting any more weight on the horse’s bruised flesh.

They came upon a deep curve in the pathway littered with dense trees on either side. From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of blue. He scanned the area, but nothing moved. Still his senses vibrated with warning. Something, or someone, was out there, skulking through Hyde Park.

Guided by instinct honed in his years of service to the War Office, Matthew softly commanded the horse to stay. He shrugged back into his black morning jacket and slipped into the woods. His quarry’s tracks were easy enough to follow—scattered leaves in a straight line, crushed grass, and displaced branches led him right ahead.

He caught the swish of dark blue fabric darting through the trees. With long, silent strides, he made up the distance between them and then passed his prey under the cover of the forest. Crouched behind the wide trunk of an ancient tree, Matthew caught the faint wheeze of breath, the hurried skip of shoes upon dried leaves. He waited until the last possible moment and then leaped straight into the person’s oncoming path.

However, he’d miscalculated slightly and they collided, falling to the ground in a tangled heap of curses.

Oh, hell, a *soft* heap.

“Get off me, you oaf!”

Astonished, Matthew stared down into the snapping green eyes of Lady Victoria Ashford.

“Matthew!” Her pink mouth gaped briefly in surprise. “What

are you doing? Are you following me?"

"Of course not. I was out for a ride." He still lay atop her with his hands cupping her shoulders. Her cloak had come slightly askew, revealing the creaminess of her skin. He rubbed his thumb over the exposed flesh, feeling her tremble just a bit beneath him and catching her barely audible gasp. She was soft, touchable, and delectable. Everything that somehow he knew she would be. With a start of surprise, he realized he wanted more. Wanted to trail his fingers from her shoulders to her breasts and fill his palms with her. His cock stiffened.

His rational mind ordered him instantly up and away from her, but her full lush breasts pressed so temptingly to his chest. His hips nestled intimately between her legs.

How had he never noticed how long they were?

"Please, Matthew, get off."

God, but he wanted to. It would take no more than the simple pop of his button, a long, slow slide of her skirt and he could seat himself—

"Damn it." He rolled off her and to his feet in one lithe movement before reaching a hand to her. "What the hell are you doing out here this time of day? Where is your maid?"

Tori swatted at bits of leaves and brambles clinging to her gown and waved toward the north end of the park. "She's just beyond there," she bit out, though her voice wobbled. "Where's your horse?"

He snapped his head back to her, control firmly in place. "Answer the question."

She edged away, hand patting her skirt, green eyes darting behind him. "I did. She's over there. Now, if you'll excuse me, I should be off."

Suspicion clouded him and he grabbed hold of her arm, preventing flight. "What are you doing here, Victoria? Meeting a lover, perhaps?" The thought burned him. "A morning assignation?"

Her cheeks flushed and her eyes widened. "How dare you!"

Matthew yanked her to him. She clutched at his shoulders for

support, again flattening her breasts into his chest.

“Answer me, damn you.”

“No, of course not.” She tried to pull away.

The friction only roused him more. In that moment he didn’t give a damn who might round the corner of their secluded spot and find them. His only thought to savor and taste her mouth. Sliding his arm around her waist, he splayed his fingers over the swell of her buttocks.

Tori arched, her fingers spasming around his shoulders. She licked her lips. “Oh, my. Matthew?”

“Then why?” he whispered, bending his head.

He had to taste her. Just once. She would be sweet. Innocent.

“I just—I don’t know. What are you doing?”

“I’m going to kiss you.”

“Finally.” She threaded her fingers into his hair and lifted her face to meet him halfway.

Matthew brushed a gentle kiss over her mouth, savoring her gasp, her tremors. Sweet, pure.

Widening his stance, he slipped his other hand beneath her tumbled hair, stroking the back of her neck. His thumb urged her chin up.

He deepened the pressure. Her mouth was soft like her breasts, filled with the sweet taste of her morning chocolate. He was so damn hard he could take her standing up.

She moaned and tugged at his hair. “Matthew,” she murmured, “More, please.”

The sound of his name on her lips brought him back to reality with an unpleasant thump. Jerking away, he took three steps back. What was he thinking? This was Victoria.

“You never explained why you were out here.”

She blinked several times, her head tipped to the side to study him as if he were a prized insect on a pin. A pink flush stained her cheeks once more, but she did not drop her gaze.

“You kissed me.”

Forcing himself to show absolutely no emotion, he cocked a

brow. "I've kissed a lot of women."

What could have been a flinch crossed her face, but with a set jaw and stubbornness in her eyes, she stepped forward and poked him in the chest. "I am not a lot of women. *Why* did you kiss me?"

Hell, if he knew that he wouldn't have done it. "Opportunity. And it's high past time you were kissed."

"Opportunity, is it?" Her nostrils flared. "And who is to say that was my first kiss?"

"Trust me. I can tell."

Her luscious mouth fell open and her face flushed deeply. A pang hit him and he shrugged irritably. He had to get her off this subject. The tint of her ire brought a sparkle to her eyes that was damn near enchanting, but more detrimental to his control was the way her agitated breaths caused her chest to rise and fall. "Now, for the last time, what are you doing out here? I suggest you answer," he snapped, more than eager to be away. "I'm damn near out of patience with you."

"Oh, you bloody, ridiculous man!" Her fists balled and he thought she might try to hit him, but instead, she jerked her chin toward the path. "I'm out for a walk. Now if you'll excuse me, I must go—somewhere."

And she moved past him with long, confident strides that both annoyed and amused him. He caught up with her in seconds but refrained from touching her again. Odd things happened when he did that.

"May I ask where we are going?"

She did not look at him but merely continued her march. "*We* are not going anywhere. *I* am going here. *You* may leave."

Matthew chuckled. Even before he inherited his brother's title, no one had dared dismiss him. And quite so snidely, too.

"Victoria," he began, but she cut him off.

"You're right. It meant nothing, Matthew. Do not give it another thought. I certainly won't."

God would surely strike her down for such a whopping lie, but Tori could not stand to see the pity she knew would be in his eyes.

He could tell she'd never been kissed. How mortifying. Had she truly done it so badly?

"Go away," she hissed, desperate for him to be gone. Not only was he an appalling distraction, but she had to find the correct location. Why had dealing with a blackmailer always sounded so breathlessly exciting in her novels? It was anything but.

Where was it? Blast Matthew and his untimely interference. The tumble and subsequent kiss had robbed her of her directional abilities. Faint voices from the park trickled through the trees behind her. She started forward in the opposite direction, her throat constricted. Would the blackmailer still be there?

"You look mighty determined," Matthew noted from beside her.

She stopped, quelling him with a glare. At least she tried to. Unfortunately, it had no effect on him. She was torn between reliving every second, every sensation of his kiss—good Lord, it was unbelievable that he'd done such a thing!—and dealing with the more immediate threat.

"Do you think," she began quite softly, "that you could be so good as to leave me be? I've a very important errand and you are not allowed."

Allowed? Lud, but she sounded like a schoolroom twit.

"Sorry," though he sounded anything but. "I cannot in good conscience allow you to wander the darkened woods of Hyde Park without some sort of protection."

Guiltily she clutched her reticule tighter. God knew what would happen if he discovered that she carried her pistol. Just in case.

Tori swallowed hard. "Who is to protect me from you? You know what would happen should we be discovered alone." He blanched and she smirked at her tiny bit of revenge, ignoring the pain of truth. Even though he'd kissed her, Matthew obviously did not wish anything more. Most definitely not marriage. "I'm perfectly safe. Please, *go*."

"Call your maid, then. Better yet, return home. Surely this *errand* is not worth your reputation."

Heavens, if he only knew.

Biting her lip, she closed her eyes. "Do you have the time?"

"Quarter past nine, if you can believe it. I thought you didn't rise before ten?"

After nine! Oh no, she was very late. This could not be good.

She sprinted ahead, searching each copse of trees for the tell-tale green ribbon tied around the base of a trunk. Her heart sank when she spied it at last. Glancing about, she didn't see anyone loitering nearby. Had he gone, then? Given up on the exchange? She didn't think so as the oddest sensation swept over her. For once, the prickle at the back of her neck had nothing to do with Matthew.

He was here. Watching.

The flutter of a small square envelope caught her eye. Swooping down, she picked it up, shoving it into her pocket near the packet of money, and worked at freeing the ribbon.

"What did you find?"

She gritted her teeth, turned around and dangled the fabric at him.

"That's it?" he asked in disbelief. "All that fuss and bother for a bit of fluff?"

"Yes," she insisted, hand hovering over her pocket.

"Try again. What is on the note you picked up?"

She gasped and backed away a couple of steps. "Nothing."

With a quick, blurred movement, Matthew reached into her dress pocket. She batted at his hand and they grappled briefly, and then froze at the sound of fabric tearing. Looking down, Tori saw the rip at her shoulder and her bare skin peeking through. She gasped and glanced at Matthew, whose eyes flickered with awareness.

"Miss Ashford, where are you?" Glory hissed from behind them, leaves rustling beneath her oncoming steps. "Someone is coming!"

One hand clutching at her shoulder, Tori spun around even as Matthew sprang backward. Oh, no! But he was gone. Disappeared.

"What the deuce?"

"Miss Ashford," Glory hissed again, the fear loud in her voice.

“Here, Glory.” She hurried forward to turn the maid away from where they’d stood. She had no idea where Matthew was, but she didn’t want to chance his being seen.

“What happened to your dress?” the maid asked.

“I fell.” Tori’s gaze flicked left and right as they walked. The unease still surrounded her. It was only when they reached the safety of the now-populated path that she realized with horror she’d failed to leave the money.

Tori swallowed hard. She could not go back now. Perhaps he would give her another chance. She tapped her pocket, breathing a sigh of relief at the crackle of paper. At least she still had the note.

After arriving safely home, they slid past Ryder’s study and into her bedroom.

“Glory, this is our secret, right?”

The girl looked at her with wary eyes. “Are you truly all right?”

“Nothing happened, I swear.”

With obvious reluctance, the maid slowly nodded. “Right, then, we need to get you out of this dress.”

The change was quickly made and Glory gathered up the torn dress. “I’ll fix the seam.”

“No, no.” Tori tugged it away. The note was still in the pocket. “I’ll do it, Glory. It was my fault.”

A confused smile touched the maid’s lips but she relinquished the gown. “Yes, my lady.”

Once she’d left, Tori locked the door. So much had happened in one hour. The most astonishing of all was Matthew. She pressed her fingers to her mouth in wonderment.

Matthew Corwin had kissed her. He’d touched and held her and his eyes gleamed with passion. Despite his churlish comment, she knew he’d felt something, too. He must have.

“Incredible, truly amazing.” With a light laugh, she drifted across her room and sank into the small chair at her escritoire. Would he do it again? She wanted him to.

Even better, Matthew’s kiss had proven to her, no matter what her mother said, that no other man would do for her husband.

Since she could not write for *The Opal* any longer, she would employ all her creative devices into enticing Matthew into marriage. One kiss would lead to another and another and then definitely into the depths of passion she both read and wrote about.

It was a brilliant plan. She would begin this very night at the Harrington ball.

The hall clock chimed the ten o'clock hour, snapping her from her reverie. Laurel would be arriving any moment for her report, one Tori didn't have to give. Not of the blackmailer, certainly, and she could not tell Laurel about Matthew. His kiss was a precious secret she very much wanted to keep to herself.

Secrets.

She remembered the note left behind. Tugging it free from her pocket, she stared at her initials scrawled along the top edge. The dark, black ink chilled her. She set the envelope on her desk, stood up and paced, sending occasional suspicious glances at the note.

She really did not want to open it. How unlike her. Still, no matter how she chastised herself, the note remained untouched. She would wait for Laurel and they would read it together.

Needing a distraction, she returned to the desk, edged the note beneath a pile of correspondence and pulled out a fresh piece of paper. She would craft a Plan of Seduction. One to win his hand in marriage. It was perfect. She would cater to his every need and taste. She wrote the words with bold strokes, underlined them, and then added his name with a flourish. Tori nibbled on the end of her quill and thought over the many stories from *The Opal*. What would he like?

Matthew was a highly sexual man. Though it seemed she'd always known this instinctively, years of watching him had fortified that knowledge. More than once she'd caught him with a widow in the gardens of some party, though he'd never seen her. Heavens, that would have been awkward. She never had been very good at concealing her emotions, and she was positive he would have noticed both her fury and jealousy—two things she knew he despised.

But even his philandering couldn't quell her curiosity or her

need for him.

Once, she'd even followed him to a brothel. Not that one would ever know the upscale apartment house in the middle of Grosvenor Square was anything but the house of a well-off widow. It was only by chance—oh, very well, by her adeptness at eavesdropping—that she even discovered its existence. During a low-voiced conversation with her brother, she heard him making his plans and had made some of her own.

It had been terrifying and exhilarating. Dressed as a lad, her face scrubbed with coal dust and her hair shoved beneath a tweed cap, she'd darted behind him in the shadows until he walked up the stairs and disappeared inside.

Frustrated by her lack of a view, Tori skirted the building to the rear doors. Unfortunately, they'd been locked, but a page boy opened one and stepped down the alley, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Her heart pounded so loudly, she was certain she'd be caught. The sweat pooled between her bound breasts. Nerves shook her entire body, but she was dying to see the inside of the house.

Just a peek. Before she had time to change her mind, she slipped inside, ducking quickly through the busy kitchen.

No one paid her any mind. Through a long hallway Tori followed muffled sounds until footsteps alerted her to someone's approach. She yanked open a narrow door, peered into the nearly black interior, and then darted inside the empty room.

The footsteps passed, but just as she was about to leave the sounds of moaning caught her attention. The small room held only a stool and a square of velvet draped over two walls. Ever curious, Tori lifted one of the panels revealing a hole no bigger than a strawberry. The tempo of the moans increased and she pressed her eye to the hole.

A bed was situated right in her line of sight. On it were a man and woman, both naked. The woman straddled the man, whose thin, pale hands wrapped around her lithe hips, guiding her up and down.

Her back arched and her breasts swayed. Tori pressed even closer, hoping for a glimpse of what the woman was riding, but their movements were so fast it was impossible.

Suddenly the man slammed hard and groaned, holding the woman tightly to his groin. A heaving shudder wracked the woman and her head dropped to his shoulder. She shook her lower body, eliciting an appreciative murmur from the man beneath her.

“Another one, luv?”

His hands delved into the furrow of her bottom, but his response was too low for Tori to hear. She pulled away and dropped the curtain, her entire body humming. So that was what it was really all about.

She couldn’t wait to get home to write about it, after caring for her own arousal, of course. Watching the actual act of penetration had done something to her that demanded release.

She’d slipped out of the brothel and was shimmying up to her room in no time.

Laurel had been scandalized. And perhaps a wee bit jealous.

Tori grinned again at the memory. That had been one of her best-selling serials in *The Opal*. Voyeurism was very popular. To this day she could well understand why.

“I wonder if Matthew likes to watch.” The notion did not set well with her. Watching meant more than one woman, and she was not about to allow that.

She scratched out several other ideas on her Plan of Seduction until Laurel showed up, breathless and late.

“Sorry,” she murmured, dropping her bonnet on the bed. “I couldn’t get away. How did it go?”

Tori carefully arranged her Plan out of sight and pulled free the note card.

“Not well, I’m afraid.”

She related the Matthew incident, omitting the kiss but showing Laurel the envelope.

“What does it say?” Laurel’s voice was laced with enough dread to make any actress proud.

“I don’t know. I haven’t opened it.”

They stared at each other over the parchment, identical expressions of worry on their faces.

“Well, go on, then. Do it,” Laurel prompted.

Tori nodded, slit it open and pulled out the card.

Miss Ashford,

A whore’s secret does not remain secret for long. The price of my silence is now 100 pounds. Return tomorrow at 9:00 sharp.

Come alone. Your maid may again wait at the edge of the path.

~Fondest regards.

“Laurel, Laurel!” Her friend had fallen into a near-faint. Tori pinched her arm to rouse her. Laurel always had been a bit missish. “You must quit this idiocy. I have figured out the meaning of the notes.”

Her friend frowned, rubbing her arm. “It’s not hard, Tori. He wants money or he’ll ruin you.”

“No, no, that is not it. Well, that *is* it, but I don’t think he’s talking about *The Opal*.” She paced again, something that never seemed to help her to think, but always to speak logically. “He specifically mentions the word *whore*. Don’t you see, he knows nothing about my writings, but must know about my trip to Lizzeth’s!”

Laurel’s mouth gaped before snapping shut with an audible click. “That is not any better, Victoria! You’ll still be ruined if it gets out.”

True. Drat.

“Yes, but at least now I can pay him off, but I won’t have to quit *The Opal*.”

“Good God, don’t tell me you are going write yet? Have you not had enough of a scare for one lifetime?” Laurel jumped up, pacing right alongside her. “This is madness. *You* are mad, completely devoid of all sensibilities. Pay him. Quit writing. Do not visit any more of those places. Marry a nice, boring earl or viscount and live the rest of your days in security.”

It was quite a speech coming from her often timid friend.

“Truly? Stop writing?”

“Yes,” Laurel dragged the word out in such obvious disgust that Tori could not help but laugh.

“All right, all right. You win. Tomorrow morning, I shall return to the park and leave the money, and then we will be done with this.”

“Promise?”

Tori bit her lip, looked away for a moment then shrugged.

“Trust me, I do not wish to live in a convent nor be shipped to the Americas.”

Laurel appeared both satisfied and immensely relieved. “Thank you.” She threw her arms around Tori and hugged her tight.

For her part, Tori had not *actually* promised her friend anything other than the fact she would despise the consequences of discovery. Truly, it was a small difference.

Besides, it would appear she had no need of *The Opal* any longer. She had a Plan.

Her Dark Master: Chapter 3

“All right, my lord, now that you have me out here on the balcony, what is your plan?”

Matthew chuckled, running his finger over the exposed skin of his companion’s neck. Goosebumps rose and she could not conceal her excitement. “What do you want me to do, Mrs. Banford?”

The pretty blonde widow shuddered delicately and edged closer, pushing her cleavage upward until her tits nearly fell out of her dress.

“Whatever you wish to do, my lord.” Mrs. Banford’s lashes swept down in provocative, feigned shyness. “I am yours to command.”

Unexpectedly he heard the words uttered in Tori’s voice. It was her perfect handfuls of breasts against his chest, and her startling green eyes acquiescing to him. The imagery made his cock jerk. Matthew refocused on the *available* widow before him.

“Are you now?” he asked huskily.

“Mm-hmm.”

He lowered his head, his fingers tangling in her hair and nudging her head backward. She was ripe for the taking, but was she truly willing to play the game? He tugged harder.

“Ow! Corwin, have a care! My maid spent hours on this style.” She jerked away with a huff.

A light, quickly smothered laugh floated to him. Matthew cut a dark look at the doors leading from the balcony to the well-lit ballroom. He didn’t see her, but he knew Tori was about somewhere. Little minx. Would she always plague him now?

“I believe it is time for us to return, Mrs. Banford.”

The widow gaped at him, still fiddling with her damn hair. He squelched a burst of irritation and held his arm to her.

“But I thought we were going to....” She waved her hands. “Aren’t we?”

“No.” Offering no further explanation, he took her elbow and propelled her inside, his keen gaze still sweeping the balcony’s

shadows, but he did not see Tori.

Matthew deposited Mrs. Banford at the refreshment table and left to find Tori. She stood just behind her mother's chair, a flush staining her cheeks, her chest rising just a bit faster than was usual. Nerves? Or the result of her hasty return?

"Lord Corwin." Lady Ashford inclined her head. "How good to see you. Surprising, one might say."

"I could not disappoint Miss Ashford, my lady. I believe this dance is mine?"

The countess started. "I was unaware, my lord. It is a waltz, you know."

He saw Tori look down at the dangling card, her mouth moving as she silently read the names. "Oh, but—"

"With your permission?" But he didn't wait. He merely took Tori's arm and led her away to the ballroom floor. He slid one arm about her waist and lightly clasped her gloved fingers. "What were you doing on the balcony?" He kept his voice low. A scandal involving Tori was the last thing he needed.

Her eyes met his and she raised her chin slightly. "What were *you* doing out there?"

"Do you really wish to know?"

Her spine stiffened beneath his fingers, and green fire snapped in her eyes. "I am no fool, Matthew. I know exactly what you were about with that woman."

He paused as they waltzed past another couple. Expertly, he guided her through the crowded dance floor to the furthest edge.

"Is that why you were there?" He drew her a bit closer, inhaling her light scent. Flowery and subtle. She felt warm and vibrant. "Did you want to watch?"

The sharp talons of her fingertips dug into his shoulder even as her gaze shuttered. "Watch what, my lord? You make yet another conquest? No, thank you."

Matthew studied her downcast lashes. Neither shy nor demure, there was another reason she hid her eyes. A different sort of awareness seemed to thrum below her surface, just under his palm.

Impossible. She could not have any sensual awareness. It was his own unsatisfied desires, his own visions of Tori naked and obedient, which threatened his carefully honed control.

For his own sanity, he must put an end to whatever ideas their kiss had stirred within her. And himself. She was strictly off limits.

A good set-down to repel her and he would have no more worries on that front. But before he could speak, she asked him the most incredulous question.

“Do *you* like to watch?”

Her eyes met his again, still burning and intense.

“What the devil?” Matthew spun her too quickly for the tempo of the music, placing his back to the crowd who watched them.

“What the—what kind of question is that?”

“You asked me.” She pertly tossed her head.

“That’s different. I know what I’m talking about. You’d better not have a damn idea.”

“Why? Because I’d never been kissed before you? That may be true and I may need practice, but I do have some understanding of what goes on between men and women. I am twenty-one, you know. And we have quite, uh, active maids who don’t always keep their conversations to themselves.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he bit out, steering her outside to the balcony. Thankfully it was empty, though he knew it would not remain so for long. He caught her by the shoulders and gave her a light shake. “You don’t need any sort of practice, kissing or otherwise.”

She smoothed the lapels of his jacket, licking her bottom lip when she looked up at him. No shade of doubt shone in her mesmerizing green eyes.

“Are you saying you like the way I kiss?”

Her low voice wrapped around him like a sultry hand. It did things to his body she really should not be able to do. This was Victoria.

Son of a bitch.

“Listen, whatever ideas you have about me, forget them. There

is nothing for you here.”

She stepped closer, nestling against him, an innocent siren bent on his undoing. Damned if it wasn’t working, too. His cock rose, buoyed by his excellent view of her breasts. Matthew really wanted to taste her again, to suckle away the sheen left by her tongue.

“Matthew, it doesn’t feel like there’s nothing there.”

To his great astonishment, she gently pressed her hips forward. Her eyes widened and a pink blush darkened her cheeks, but she didn’t move back.

Shocked to his toes, he gritted his teeth and sought the right words. Any words.

“In fact, I’d say there’s quite *a lot* there,” Tori whispered.

Matthew pushed her away. “The overheard whispers of maids don’t mean a thing, Victoria. Your behavior is unacceptable.”

He saw the hurt and mortification strip away her flirtatious demeanor and damned near apologized. He didn’t like causing her pain, but he knew it was for the best. He had to end this now. “Since you know so much, Miss Ashford, undoubtedly you will understand when I tell you that I require a woman of more sophisticated tastes and abilities.”

The moonlight broke from a cloud to bathe her white face and make it appear even more stark. “I see.” She drew herself up, affecting an air of dispassion.

“I’m glad that you do,” he said.

“Oh, yes.” She graced him with a frosty smile. “I see that you are arrogant beyond all comprehension, Corwin. Or perhaps my mild flirtation meant a bit too much to you. I did but practice upon you.”

He inclined his head, allowing her words. What harm was there in saving her pride? “Practice.”

“Oh yes. I mean, you are older—quite a bit older than me—and very much a rake. Who better than to learn a few tricks from? I have my eye on a few different gentlemen this Season who would make excellent husbands. And though the Colonel does surpass you in age, my mother assures me he is quite interested in a match.

Perhaps I shall indulge him.” She turned and strode to the ballroom doors. Fingers on the handle, she looked back at him. “Thank you for the lessons. I’m positive they’ll be put to good use.”

Tori’s parting shot burned his temper completely away. He’d had enough. He had done his damn duty tonight. Striding around the wide veranda, he searched for another entrance, intent on leaving with all possible haste.

Instead, he was waylaid by first one marriage-minded mama, then another. In between, he caught glimpses of Tori laughing and flirting her way through a bevy of attentive young bucks. His anger burned and simmered. Twenty minutes later, he finally escaped into a side corridor he knew led to Lord Harrington’s study. Opening the door, he caught the faint murmur of voices and a startled feminine gasp, but the light was too low for him to make anyone out.

“My apologies,” he growled in their vicinity, starting to pull the door closed. Damn, but he could have used a brace of brandy and respite from the bloodhounds in the ballroom.

“Corwin, come in!”

It was Ashford’s voice. Relieved, Matthew pushed back inside and closed the door with an emphatic click. An echoing *snick* came from the door on the opposite side of the room. An oil lamp burned low on a side table. The room brightened as Ashford turned up the wick. He was alone.

Matthew gave his friend a wry grin. “Sorry for interrupting. Nothing you can’t resume later, I assume?”

“There will be other opportunities.” Ryder shrugged, scrutinizing him intently. “What are you about?”

“Biding my time before I take my leave. Several determined mothers have the exits blocked so well, a man can hardly move without them taking note.”

Ryder chuckled. “Will you go to the club when you leave here?”

Since the incident with Tori on the balcony, he’d been on edge. He needed to relieve the sexual energy burning in him. “No,” he stated firmly. “I’m going to Lizzeth’s. She sent round a note the other day about a new girl she thought would suit me.”

Ashford's gaze flicked to the door next to him for an instant. "I see."

"Care to join me?" They'd often journeyed to the whorehouse together, though they'd never shared women. Matthew did not share.

"No, I think not. I've an early morning meeting with Lord Rich-ter about a horse he's keen to sell."

Matthew checked his pocket watch. A quarter past midnight. The Harrington ball revelers, including Tori and her adoring peacocks, would be well occupied for another few hours. By the time they fell into their beds, he'd have taken his unique brand of pleasure several times over.

And still would thirst for more. Damn the minx and her new-found abilities to arouse him.

Tori pulled her burning ear away from the door separating her from the two men in the study.

He was going back to the whorehouse.

Powerful hurt clouded her mind. She didn't want him to bed anyone else. It wasn't in the Plan.

Slipping out of the adjoining room, she scurried back into the ballroom with ideas whirling feverishly. How could her Plan of Seduction work if he wasn't around to be seduced?

A waiter passed by with a tray of champagne. Taking two, she downed them in quick succession. Ironically, the drinks seemed to strengthen both her resolve and her options. Of course, it was simple. Brilliant, even. She'd pulled it off once before, so why not again?

She found her mother and made her excuses, pleading a headache. Though she was loath to leave, the countess finally acquiesced and within minutes they were rattling home in their carriage.

"Did Ryder speak with you about the Colonel?"

Their dance had been stilted and tedious. Tori rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"And you will accept his suit?"

“Of course not,” she spouted, straightening in her seat, clutching the edge rail with a strong grip. “He’s old and repulsive. I’ll not marry him, no matter what Father promised you.”

Her mother’s sharp in-drawn breath held annoyance. “You’ll do as you are bid, Victoria. This is not a matter of inconsequence.”

The carriage bumped and bounced over the cobblestones. “Is it so difficult to understand that I wish to marry for love?” Tori finally said. “Like you and Father?”

“Such matches are rare, dear heart.” Her mother leaned forward, clutching at Tori’s hands, a look of almost-panic on her face. “Please, love, if nothing else, then humor him for a bit. Perhaps another, better offer shall come this Season, but until then...?”

The uncertainty on her mother’s face tore at her heart. But with her new Plan for winning Matthew’s heart and hand in marriage, she could afford a few days to pacify the Colonel. She cautiously nodded. “All right.”

A sigh of relief bounced in the carriage. “Excellent. You’ll not regret this, Victoria.”

“I shall be right as rain in the morning, Mother, I promise,” Tori said as they reached the house. Handing her wrap to the maid, she practically bolted up the stairs.

“All right, but do not forget the Colonel is calling on you at eleven.”

Tori skidded to a halt on the landing, peering over the railing at her mother. “You didn’t! I only just said I’d consider his suit!”

“He is well-connected and wealthy. A good match.”

The champagne buzzed in her ears, whispering insidious notions to her. Tori batted them away. “I’ll go, Mother,” she said. “But nothing more. You must not set your mind that I will marry him.”

The countess rubbed at her temples, her eyes shadowed and hidden. “What’s done cannot be undone. Get some rest, Victoria. We’ll discuss this more tomorrow.”

Tori nibbled at her lip before nodding and practically sprinting up the stairs. She had only a few moments to put the next phase of

her Plan into action. It might cost her dearly, but she saw no other way.

She would take the money intended for the morrow's payoff and switch places with the new whore at Lizzeth's. A mask and a disguised voice, and Matthew would not know it was she awaiting him in bed.

It was a daring, nay ridiculous scheme, but intuition told her this might very well be her best—her only—chance at securing Matthew's affections. Especially with her mother bent on this hideous match with the Colonel.

The idea of his touch, his hands, and his kiss repelled her more than she could express. God forbid she would have to suffer that. And if she did by some unfortunate stroke of fate, at least she would have this night to always remember true passion.

As Glory unlaced her dress, she went through the Plan once again, seeking problems finding many gaping holes. Ones she would deal with as they arose. The important thing was getting to the whorehouse before Matthew did.

Everything would sort itself out, she was confident. With a little help, and some planning, it always did.

"Good evening, my lord. It is a pleasure to see you again. It has been much too long."

Matthew turned as Lizzeth, the petite madame, swept inside. He bowed over her hand. "I apologize, but I admit your letter has piqued my interest."

She chuckled warmly. "I thought it might. When she arrived, my first thought was of you."

Matthew's body immediately took interest. "How experienced is she?" While some of the other girls took his tastes in stride, they didn't always get the same satisfaction he did, and though that wasn't a necessity, it made the act more enjoyable. More rewarding.

"She's had a few, but not so many she'll lay there flat while you finish. She's a quiet little miss, almost timid, but she's a right true

girl.”

“Good. Send for her.”

Lizzeth hesitated. “Listen, my lord, you know how my girls are, always fighting over you. I’m in no mood for that tonight. I’ll line them up in the Captain’s room and you pick. She’ll be the last to your right.”

Matthew chuckled, nodding. “All right, Lizzeth, go get them ready.”

“Good. I’ll come for you shortly.”

He spent the next fifteen minutes anticipating what the night held, mingled with flashes of unwanted memories featuring a small, dark-haired urchin he’d watched grow into a beautiful woman.

The door opened and Lizzeth beckoned him forward. She caught his arm as he passed, a puzzled frown on her face. “She’s taken to wearing a mask tonight, my lord. Said she’d feel more *obedient*.”

The mere word teased his cock and he grinned with wolfish glee. “Perfect.” Settling a well-filled purse in Lizzeth’s hand, Matthew stepped through the door, picked up the riding crop Lizzeth provided, and approached the four girls who awaited him.

They presented an erotic display for his hungry eyes. Dressed only in thin chemises, the women were bent over a low table, arses up, heads down and legs slightly spread. Right away he recognized two of them, both of whom he’d enjoyed in the past. Letting his excitement rise, Matthew refrained from looking at the last girl, gaze roaming over the third – a blonde he didn’t remember having. She looked over her shoulder at him and winked, her rouged mouth thin and wide. And vastly talented at coaxing an orgasm. Oh yes, now he recognized that face and mouth. A good time, but not the one tonight.

However, he had a role to play. Forcing a scowl to his face, he moved closer and smacked her smartly on the ass. “Eyes forward, wench.”

The girls giggled and wiggled, each trying to entice him to

choose her. All save the fourth one. She remained mostly still, though her hips swayed lightly and her shoulders shook with a fine, nearly invisible tremor. Her head was low to the table and she had what appeared to be a white-knuckled grip on it.

He smelled her submissiveness and it shot straight to his cock.

Unable to resist her allure any further, Matthew eyed her with lustful curiosity. Long, curly black hair, shoved haphazardly into some sort of queue and wound with a green ribbon, spilled down her slender back. Matthew drew a deep breath, blinked away the image of Tori, and stroked himself to ease some of the pressure building in his breeches. Long, lean legs peeked out from the ruffled edges of her white, almost pristine chemise, and her derriere appeared firm and lush.

He wondered if it had ever been taken.

Moving along the line of girls, he slapped the crop against his palm, the small sound of leather on flesh causing more jumps, giggles and groans. He enjoyed this part of it almost as much as he enjoyed taking them. Anticipation of the unknown, wondering how far he'd go, how much the taste of the crop on bare flesh would sting.

Randomly, he reached out and fondled them, slid his hand over a well rounded bottom, pinched a fleshy thigh, nipped at an available shoulder until at last, he could take no more and stood directly behind his choice for the night. Wedging a foot between her legs, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Wider."

She jerked and moaned, a near-violent tremble rushing through her. "Sir?" she asked, confusion in her voice.

With one hand forcing the small of her back nearer to the table, he pushed at her foot. "Open your legs wider."

The room became breathless, the scuff of her bare feet almost inaudible as she moved.

One of the other girls groaned. "Oh, no fair, 'e's takin' the new'un."

The other two chimed in with a chorus of disappointment, which Matthew quickly quelled, tossing each girl a coin. "Go on,

now. Rest up or find another gent to entertain you. There'll be other times."

The women giggled, pressed friendly hands to his back and bum, whispered good luck to the young vixen still trembling beneath his palm, and left the room.

When the door shut, Matthew withdrew slowly, watching his companion as she lay against the table. The tremors that pulsed through her gave him pause until he noticed the dampness between her legs. The thin white linen of her chemise turned nearly transparent, wetted by the juices of her arousal where he had pressed the fabric against her flesh.

He smiled.

"Don't move." He strode to the door and locked it. Pausing only long enough to draw a deep breath, Matthew returned to her, admiring her shapely buttocks and legs.

Truly the lines of a well-bred filly. One he intended to ride hard.

He stepped between her thighs, nestling the length of his clothed, distended cock in the cleft of her arse. Leaning down, he used the weight of his body to press her further into the table, flattening her, knowing the pressure on her breasts must border on erotic pain, just enough to stimulate her. It appeared to work. She moaned and wiggled slightly. Her head shifted to the right and she nearly looked back at him. He pulled a fistful of silky black hair, careful not to dislodge the ribbon holding her mask, and lowered his mouth to her ear. A hint of lavender filled his senses, a tantalizing hint of innocence and seduction.

"Lizzeth tells me you're accustomed to this sort of play. That you enjoy it. Is that true?"

"I—" She swallowed so hard he heard it. "Yes."

He inhaled sharply, his cock twitching with her response. "How much can you take?"

Another tremor, another deep breath. "I don't know," she said so softly, he had to strain to catch her words. "No man has ever really pushed me."

Matthew contemplated her statement with a sense of erotic ela-

tion. She issued a challenge he could not refuse.

Pulling her back further with his grip on her hair, Matthew tapped her flank with the crop. "You will take the whip?"

"Aye," the word came quickly, accompanied by a roll of her hips.

"You will obey me, no matter what I ask of you." Not a question this time.

"Yes, sir."

Matthew very nearly growled with pleasure.

"I do have one request, sir."

"Speak."

"You may use me in any fashion, and I will obey your every command, but please, do not remove my mask."

He gave a sharp tug at her hair, eliciting a pained groan. "Who is the master here?"

"You are, but please, grant me, on your honor as a gentleman, this one request."

Matthew removed himself from her, eyeing the beauty spread so submissively before him. Her body was his to do with as he pleased, and knowing she was so sexually charged by his dominance made it all the sweeter. Never had he had a partner equal his passion for this particular amusement. Giving her this safety would not detract from the night's pleasure and might only enhance it.

"Very well, but you will pay a price for daring to ask such a thing." He tapped the crop against the inside of her thigh and was pleased when she automatically spread her legs further, her muscles strained and taut. "I will not permanently harm you, but you will leave my bed this night marked."

Her soft moan made him want to plunge into her full force.

"Yes, sir, I understand."

"Your penance for asking will be five strikes with the crop. My agreement will cost you ten more." He bent the flexible leather whip in his hands, debating where to let it fall first. "No need to count them this time."

After first running a tender caress over her sleek cheeks, he

yanked the hem of the linen chemise upward so it pulled taut against her clitoris and the tight furrow of her arse. She barely had time to gasp before he brought the crop down on the now totally bare flesh, leaving a bright red stripe.

She yelped, hands reaching back to cover herself.

Quickly, Matthew pinned them down. "I can see I shall have to restrain you."

"Oh, no, sir, please."

"Five more," he rasped, wondering how he would last through the punishment before taking her. He was so hard he hurt.

Yanking his cravat from his neck, Matthew wound the material around her wrists, preventing her from interfering further. "We begin again." He brought the crop down quickly, enflamed by the sound of leather on her tender flesh and the arousing sight of her striped skin.

Tori cringed and moaned with each strike, though the core of her body threatened to overheat and explode. Never before had she felt such pressure, such need, between her legs. The urge to orgasm was so strong that she could barely control it. She could hardly believe she was here, in a whorehouse, allowing Matthew to treat her with less than anything resembling decency.

Or that she was so aroused by it that she could spend over and over again.

All the bawdy words and terms she'd written rushed into her head. She wanted to spout them to him, to beg him to make her come, but knew to do so would incite refusal and more punishment.

Every midnight fantasy she'd entertained, every naughty, lascivious thought she'd had was coming true. Only so much more terrifying and exciting than she'd ever imagined.

The crop lashed down on her tender arse again and she groaned, grinding her hips to the table in an attempt at some sort of respite. The sting was addictive.

"Ah, ah, ah," he cautioned, his low, familiar baritone close to her ear. "None of that, my pretty little whore. You'll not spend unless I

allow it, understand?"

Whore. This time the word tantalized her, sending an even greater ache to throb between her legs.

Matthew's strong body pressed firmly against hers. His hand swept in long, slow motions over her burning flesh as he soothed away the sting of the crop. She inhaled his scent, a mix of brandy and male, coupled with the scent of arousal. Both hers and his.

It intoxicated her more than even the whip.

Roughly, her head was jerked back. "I asked you a question."

"Mmm-hmm," she barely managed. Her entire world had shifted, making it difficult to concentrate. His presence, the pain-tinged pleasure coursing through her, and the impending act they would share pushed all coherence from her head.

She'd dared much more than she ever dreamed she would, but desperation drove her to it. Now, no matter the consequence, she was determined to share the ultimate act with the one man she did love. She would give him her virginity, however unknowingly he took it.

Matthew pulled her upright and around. Reluctantly, Tori left the hard surface of the table, not fully ready to face him, despite the anonymity of the mask.

With her hands still bound by his cravat behind her, Tori felt even more exposed to his gaze. Like a physical touch, his dark blue eyes skimmed her body, from her hardened nipples all the way down the length of her bare legs, not missing an inch in between. She squirmed, leaning forward, anxious for his hands again. To feel him caress her with desire.

"You please me, little one."

The words thrilled her. "I do?" she whispered, surprised and pleased at the same time.

"Yes." He tossed the crop to the table then reached out, slipping his fingers beneath the collar of her linen chemise. Slowly he skimmed her skin, drawing heat everywhere he touched. She watched his fingertips draw ever nearer to her breasts.

Oh, God.

“Beautiful skin for a whore,” he murmured, then frowned slightly, his fingers stilling as he gripped the chemise. “Fine linen, too.”

Was he about to uncover her secret? Tori thrust her breasts upward and scrambled for a way to throw him off track. He would absolutely kill her if he discovered her identity. Suddenly, a passage from one of her most recent underground papers sprang into her head and she knew it was the perfect thing. Licking her lips, she lowered her eyes. “I had a very generous lover before he turned me out, sir. He took good care of me.”

“Why did he cast you aside? Catch you with another man, hm?”

Tori shook her head wildly, not meeting his gaze. “No, of course not! I could never betray anyone.”

Matthew remained silent, studying her for a moment before nodding. “His loss, little dove. I shall replace it for you.”

His meaning was clear in the next moment as his strong hands ripped the material away, leaving her completely nude.

Tori gasped and instinctively tried to cover herself, but her bound hands prevented it.

Then she noted the hungry, lustful look on Matthew’s face and relaxed, feeling the power of her own body. He controlled her, but she could sway his actions. “Do you like, guv’nor?” She tried to interject the same light tone she’d heard the other girls use.

His smile was answer enough. He cupped one breast, lifting and testing the weight in his palm. She jerked in response.

“Interesting,” he murmured, eyes locking with hers. When his thumb and forefinger encircled her hard nipple, Tori’s lips parted, taken by the gentle touch.

“Are you sensitive here?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” As he increased the pressure, squeezing her nipple hard, the sensual, tender feeling escalated into pinpricks of pleasurable discomfort.

She gasped for air and control, remembering his admonition not to spend. “Yes, yes, oh, please.”

“Yes, what?” He tugged her nipple away from her body with a

steady force that took the weight of her breast with it.

Nearly unbearable desire battled unfamiliar pain and uncertainty. No man had ever touched her so.

“Sir,” she cried. “Yes, sir.”

“Tsk, tsk, you keep forgetting. I shall have to remedy that.” Tiping his head, he regarded her steadily as he took command of her left breast and repeated the same movement. Her back arched and tears formed at the corner of her eyes even as the pleasure intensified. She knew she would not last much longer, damn the consequences.

“Please, what?”

Tori licked her lips, breathing harshly through her mouth. “Oh.” She inhaled sharply as he adjusted his grip. “Please, sir, may I come?”

“No, I think not yet, little dove.”

Matthew let her breast fall and she nearly collapsed onto the table. He turned her around and removed the binding from her wrist. Gratefully, Tori rubbed the reddened flesh, wincing slightly as the blood rushed back to her hands.

“Come here,” he ordered, striding across the room to a large wingback chair.

Quickly she scurried forward. “Yes, sir?” Tori had to suppress a shiver just saying the words evoked. In her books she’d seen such things, had always gotten excited by reading them, and now to be saying them to him was enough to send her body past its limits. Her mind past its sanity.

“Undress me.”

She froze but her eyes flew to his face, taking in the tautness of his lips and the hunger in his gaze. Suddenly realizing just how far he was going to take this, how far she would let him, Tori shivered with both fear and sexual excitement. There would be no barriers between them other than her mask.

His hand swept out and caught her unprotected left buttock with a resounding crack. Squealing, she jumped, rubbed at the sting, and glared at him. It took only seconds to recognize her error. Drop-

ping both gaze and hands, she lowered her head.

“Please, sir, forgive me.”

No sound, no movement came from Matthew. Tori, loathe to look up again, kept her head dutifully bent and tried to calm her racing heart. Her mind flashed with every salacious passage of her underground reading and every evocative recitation of books that involved the joining of a man and woman. Jolts coursed through her as she imagined Matthew without clothing.

His hand descended heavily on the crown of her head, urging her down to her knees. “Release my cock,” he commanded.

The mere words enflamed her but Tori managed, barely, to maintain control. Hands shaking, she fumbled with the hidden fastening of his breeches, finally pulling the fabric apart enough to tug his white shirt out. He peeled it from his broad shoulders and tossed it aside. From her vantage point, Tori caught sight of his hard, rippled stomach and chest. His clothing had hidden so much from her eyes over the years. He was perfect to look at. Masculine, strong, and far better than any fantasy she’d conjured.

The hair scattered over his body and tapered between his nipples down the center of his torso and into the waistband of his breeches. Suddenly, she wanted very much to follow that trail. She tugged on his pants, her palms lingering over the solid flesh of his muscular thighs, until the breeches puddled at his feet. He quickly kicked them away.

Now he was completely naked.

Tori remained frozen in her submissive position, staring for the first time at a man’s totally aroused member. It looked much different than in her imagination. And no illustration from *The Opal* did it justice, either.

Long, dark and textured with veins, curly hair and an unmistakable scent of sex, it was the most beautifully intriguing thing she’d ever seen.

“God,” she muttered involuntarily.

He laughed, his hands tangling in her hair. “Though you’ve not earned it, little dove, taste me.”

As he forced her face closer to his crotch, Tori became aware of the heat emanating from him. Swirling, musky heat that enveloped her body and invaded her nostrils. She inhaled deeply, taking in his masculine aroma. Involuntarily, she licked her lips, eliciting a chuckle from him.

“Eager, aren’t you? I like that.” One final thrust at the back of her head and her lips met the head of his cock.

Tori’s gasp of surprise allowed the velvety tip to penetrate her mouth, gliding effortlessly over her lips to lie heavily on her tongue. The hint of salt was not unpleasant, but different. Holding her teeth open, she closed her eyes and tried to remember the ways her not-so-innocent literary adventuresses acted in this position. Tentatively, she compressed her lips around the thick shaft while lifting and trailing her tongue over the head.

He made a small noise and his fingers tightened in her hair.

“Deeper, dove. Show me you know how to suck a cock.”

He pistoned further than she was prepared for, his length intruding past her teeth and into her throat. She nearly gagged and tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Come on, take it. Suck me.”

Tori swallowed hard around his hot shaft and he groaned. With a start, she realized he liked that. And that she could breathe. Tightening her throat again produced the same reaction from him. Scooting into a more comfortable position on her knees, Tori edged closer, running her palms up his muscular, hair-dusted legs. Digging her fingernails into the tight flesh, she pulled him to her, delighted when her nose nuzzled the crisp hair above his cock.

“Christ,” he muttered. “You are well-taught.”

Tori eased backward, maintaining the hard suction and lubricating him with the spittle clinging to her tongue. Just as she reached the tip, her fingers encircled his base and she flicked in and out of the small hole before sliding down him again.

“Yes, just like that,” he hissed, hands alternately fisting and relaxing in her hair.

Tori looked up, finding his head thrown back and his Adam’s

apple working hard in his throat. His entire body was tense as though he were on the verge of coming.

If her mouth hadn't been so full, she would have smiled. He might be the master, but for the moment, she was the one in control. She wholeheartedly redoubled her efforts, determined to taste his cream whether he was ready to let it loose or not.

Despite the erotic high he rode, Matthew sensed the change in her from submissive maid to arrogant temptress. Immediately, he pulled his still hard cock from between her full lips and stepped backward with a frown on his face.

Matthew couldn't believe how good the dark-haired nymphet was at sucking him. She'd had him near to the brink more than once and it took all his willpower to not spurt down her talented throat.

"I wasn't done," she pouted, her gaze glittering sensually. Neither blue nor green, her eyes were an ever-changing mix of the two. The surrounding black lace of her mask shaded them and made their color all the less visible.

He itched to remove her mask, but a gentleman's word was his honor, and despite having all the power, he would tamp his curiosity for this night. Next time she would not hide her face from him.

"Get up."

Some of the smugness left her face and she rose, her heavy breasts swaying.

"You've more than a hint of impertinence in you, dove. I must rectify that."

"Sir?" Her voice now contained a note of caution, exactly what he wanted.

"Spread your legs. Hands behind your head."

Her hesitation lingered between them and ended only when he raised a brow and tipped his head. She complied though she continued to hold his gaze. Oh, yes, she was a delightful playmate. The right mix of submission and defiance made the game all the more erotic.

Matthew walked around her, inspecting her much as he would a

horse at Tattersall's. "Fine lines you have, dove." He ran his hand over buttocks and down the back of her thigh, enjoying the quiver of her muscles beneath his palm.

"Wider," he ordered.

She complied, shuffling her feet apart on the carpet until the muscles of her inner thighs became taut.

Matthew slid his hand back up her leg, over the curve of her sweet bottom and through the cleft. She gasped and leaned forward when his finger hesitated around the small, tight hole hidden there.

"Sir?" she questioned, voice high-pitched and definitely panic-stricken.

"Don't worry, dove. That will come eventually. But for now...."

He walked around to her front. Her lips parted, her eyes hazy, her pulse beat a fevered pitch against her ivory skin. Matthew held her gaze as he encircled her small throat before turning his hand over and letting the backs of his fingers trail slowly down her chest, hovering at the plumpness of her breasts. He flicked at one and she inhaled. He smiled.

He continued over her ribs and down the slight swell of her belly.

She blinked rapidly, her mouth opening and closing, and he silently applauded her acting ability. She very nearly had him convinced she was a trembling maid, touched by a man for the first time.

She was a true artist.

He dipped down, lazily dragging his fingertips through her curly black pubic hair. He spread his hand in a vee and pressed against her moist lips.

"Ah, what do we have here? Wet, are you?"

She didn't respond. Her rosy mouth parted in anticipation.

Matthew closed his fingers to bring her pussy lips together tightly, feeling her erect clit beneath the slippery skin.

She moaned softly, not an ordinary moan of pleasure. Her thighs quivered responsively.

He released her and tugged on a tuft of hair, eliciting a small

squeak of protest. "What is the rule?"

Her face held confusion, need and aggravation. "Please, sir."

"What is the rule?" he bit out, pulling harder.

She yelped and her arms flew down to cover herself.

Matthew captured her wrists with his other hand and held them away. "Must I tie you again? I think so."

"No, please, sir, really, I won't do it again."

"Too late, little dove. You disobeyed me."

Her protests died when he turned her to the table once more, pushing her face-down onto its wooden length. Settling himself between her legs, he splayed them until she groaned, and then he added an extra couple of inches. With her ripped chemise, he bound her dainty ankles to the equally sleek legs of the table. He left her just enough slack to shuffle, but not escape. Her wrists he bound again with his cravat, behind her waist so her head and shoulders were thrust upward.

"Now then, little dove, what is the rule?"

No hesitation this time. "I must not spend until you allow it."

He nodded his approval and stroked his hands down her trembling back, over the curve of her buttocks and between her legs.

He found her wet, as he knew he would. She truly did enjoy it as much as he. Her obedience was fueled by her desires, and he would ensure that she was well rewarded.

But not just yet.

Matthew drew his forefinger through her dripping lips to spread her juices over her stretched flesh. She shook at each movement, thrusting her hips as much as she could.

Her aroma was driving him mad. Sliding his finger into her wet hole, he stilled when she yelped and stiffened with what he nearly thought to be genuine fear. No, not possible, she was acting again. He wiggled his finger inside her, withdrew it, and then plunged it back in. Her bottom swayed but some of the tension left her shoulders and a soft mewling escaped her mouth.

Matthew added a second finger and marveled at the feel of her. She clenched, damn near tight as a virgin but slick as a temptress.

A high-pitched squeak escaped her and he pumped slow and long. Looking down, he marveled again at the satin texture and white sheen of her skin. His cock jumped with anticipation.

He leaned over her, nuzzling her ear as his fingers continued to fuck her. "For a whore, you're tight as a miser's purse."

She inhaled sharply and fresh evidence of her passion coated his questing hand.

"Do not spend, dove."

"I shan't, sir," she replied breathily.

"Do you feel how wet you are? How hot and grasping you are upon my fingers? How do you taste?"

She didn't respond, but small tremors continually shook her.

"Look at me." He withdrew his fingers. Glistening and heavy with her scent, he slid his tongue along fingertip as she watched. Her audible gasp thrilled him.

"Ever taste yourself?"

A small negative shake of her head was her only answer.

Matthew raised a brow and touched her lips with a juice-smearing finger. "It is high past time you did so. Open up."

Her eyes snapped at him in mulish disobedience and he frowned. "One last chance. Taste yourself or there will be no spending for you this night. I can, and will, torment you without release for your actions."

The threat worked. Tori squeezed her lids shut and opened her lips. His finger slipped inside. She found herself pleasantly surprised at the taste. Sweet, yet a little salty. Much like him.

"Not so bad, is it? Maybe another time we'll have one of the other girls join us." He removed his finger.

"No!" she spit out, not caring whether he punished her or not. How dare he even suggest such a thing.

But rather than anger him, her swift denial seemed to amuse him. "We shall see. For now, I have plenty to handle with you."

He slipped his hand over her back, and her breath hitched. Strong and determined, his fingers blazed a path down her spine and between the cleft of her bottom, hovering once more at the

tight hole her cheeks covered. Involuntarily, she flinched.

Rubbing softly, he nipped her shoulder with his teeth, his lips close to her ear. "Has any man taken you here?"

"No, sir."

His swift inhalation and the jerk of his hard cock against her thigh told her the confession aroused him greatly. "Please, no, sir, not there."

His finger traveled back to her dripping pussy, gathering the juices she knew still flowed from her. Tori relaxed slightly, relieved he was once more focused there. But then his now wet finger moved backward and pushed against the tight ring that refused him entrance.

Tori jerked away, but her bindings held tightly. "No," she whispered, mind and body whirling with conflicting needs. She could not allow this invasion, but the only way to stop it was to reveal her identity. "Please do not."

Matthew's voice, low and dark, echoed in her ear. "Relax, little dove, just a bit of play this time. I will have your cunt this night, but next time...." He pushed a bit harder and she groaned as the tip of his finger slipped past the tight ring, filling her almost unbearably.

"Breathe," he commanded, moving his hand back and forth. His other hand dropped between her lower lips to find her clitoris. In moments the dual stimulation had her at the edge of orgasm.

Her lower body throbbed and hurt as if gasping for air unsuccessfully. His fingers drew the pain deeper, turning it into a mindless pleasure that took over her senses and set her free. She was on the verge of spending when his voice filtered through her haze of need.

"You will not come."

The words jerked her back to the flat table, his insistent, intrusive hands, and the tingles spanning her from tits to toes. She groaned and swallowed, trying desperately to push away the need to climax, but it fought back.

"Please, sir," she begged, tipping her head to look back at him.

“Please, I must, let me.”

His hand dropped from her bottom to join the one at her cunt. He delved two fingers inside her, while tormenting her clit. “Oh God,” she moaned, knowing now it was useless to resist. He was pushing her over the edge intentionally.

Passion overcame reason and she keened wildly, pushing back at him, fucking herself on his fingers, loving the stretch, the invasion, the pounding need.

He slowed his rhythm as she came until his thumb alone stroked at her clitoris.

Oh, no. She had broken his command. More trouble was in store for her this night.

She couldn’t wait to experience it.

Slowly, Matthew withdrew from the limp, heaving, glorious body of the whore still bound to the table. It took every ounce of control, plus some he didn’t know he had, not to impale her wide open cunt with his very hard cock.

At last he’d found a willing, knowing playmate who took his punishments and his domination with exactly the right mix of obedience and defiance. Ripe, wanton and eager, this girl would serve him well again and again. He needed to pace himself before taking her.

If he could restrain himself. Moodily, Matthew spun away, leaving her still moaning, twitching and tied, and headed for the well-stocked bar. Pouring a draught of brandy, he studied the raven-haired harlot and contemplated his next move. The liquor would undoubtedly keep any orgasm of his at bay. The notion of taking her now, while she remained stunned and utterly helpless, appealed greatly.

A familiar, demanding twitch from his crotch echoed the sentiment. Matthew slugged back the last of the bitter brandy and set the glass aside. He walked behind her and grabbed a fistful of her hair, tugging her upward.

She shrieked, obviously still in a state of orgasmic euphoria.

“I told you not to come, didn’t I? You’ll pay for that, but for

now—”

Without further warning or ado, Matthew fitted the head of his cock to her slick lower lips and sank in.

The whore became almost unnaturally still and for a moment Matthew sobered, fearing he may have gone too far, too quickly. But a shake of her head, the hitch of her breath, and a soft, nearly imperceptible moan compelled him on.

Yanking harder on her hair, he muttered low, filthy words to her. Each verbal assault tightened her muscles around him. Her body, intent on resisting him, clenched and pushed back as if trying to force him back out.

This one knew the game as well, if not better, than he. After all, her ingénue act of innocence was dead on, belied only by the skill of her whore's body.

A very tight body. Concentrating now on winning this battle, Matthew shoved his hips forward into her, ripping a squealing gasp from her throat. Another push, another half-protesting squeak.

Then suddenly, like the lighting of a sulfur torch, he broke her. His stiff cock surged ahead into her dripping pussy and settled deep within her core.

She groaned again. Her back bowed between the grip of his hand in her hair and the invading cock riding her lower body. The pain was immense, sucking both her breath and her senses until all she could see was a pinpoint of light behind her tightly squeezed eyes. Tori whimpered as the throbbing, deep-seated invader moved backward, drawing her pain out with it. Relaxing minutely, she gulped, desperate to regain control before he slid inside again. Back again, slowly, the joining of their bodies eased by the copious amounts of desire he'd wrenched from her.

Matthew pulled on her hair and she arched backward, shifting her hips out of necessity. She emitted another mewl of surprise as he slipped further inside. She no longer hurt. The tenderness of her flesh, coupled with the heat of his thrusting cock, highlighted the pinpricks of desire coursing through her once more. When his hand dropped from her hair and found her clitoris, she was completely

lost.

Her entire being focused on the ascending spiral of the approaching orgasm he was skillfully coaxing from her. "Please." The word slipped from her mouth, almost of its own volition.

He chuckled and landed a light slap to her flank as he thrust harder.

"Please what?"

The uncontrollable clenching of her pussy told them both how much his words, and his actions, affected her. Another slap.

"Please what?"

"God, please, I, may I, oh..." The words trailed away as he left off her clitoris, grabbed both of her lower lips and ground himself inside as far as he could go. She'd never experienced anything like it. Again, thrown off her axis, she concentrated only on the incredibly wonderful feelings he'd stoked. "Yes, please, yes, like that."

He stopped all motion, held so deep inside her that she could feel every pulse of his heartbeat in the rigid length of his hard cock. "Do not come until I give you permission."

She groaned, but nodded, needing both the release and the permission now more than ever.

He pulled back, then pistoned his hips back and forth, titillating every nerve in her body. Each thrust stretched her lips and thighs just a bit further. Tori clenched her fists, fighting back the building orgasm until at last she feared she would burst without it.

"Please, sir, oh, please, I beg you to let me come."

She squeezed her inner muscles in a frantic attempt to get him to spend so that she could as well.

Matthew released her nether lips and grabbed her bottom, slamming hard and deep within her. "Curse your talented pussy, minx."

The heat, the pace of his thrusts, the words took her over the edge and she came endlessly. The word *please* still tumbled pell-mell from her lips.

He groaned and lodged himself against the cleft of her ass. She felt each spurt of his release. It set off another round of orgasm for her until she lay on the tabletop, a quivering mass of unbridled

nerve endings.

Matthew pulled out of the girl's tight, talented body and, on shaking legs, grabbed a nearby towel to wipe himself clean. With dazed eyes he watched her trembling form. If her compelling mouth wrapped around him to clean their combined juices, he would be spurting again like a schoolboy. And he had far better plans for the vixen this night than to waste another load so soon.

With a raspy laugh, he blindly tossed the towel aside, unbound her and helped her up. He caught an almost-familiar fragrance of lavender and roses, but before he could place it, he noticed her mask was slightly askew. It revealed the high, sweet curve of a cheekbone and just the outer edge of one eye. Quickly, her hands flew up to adjust the headdress. If not for his gentlemanly bond, he would rip the damn thing from her and feast upon the loveliness he somehow knew he'd find beneath it.

Instead, he chucked her under the chin like a chit, and then turned to the bar. "A brandy before we begin again?"

"Again?" she squeaked.

Matthew turned, half-smiling. "Of course, little dove. I've paid for the entire night and I intend to use your delicious, obedient body every way I want."

Tori licked her lips as panic assailed her. One or two hours out of the house she could manage, but all night? She would be doomed to a cloister, never mind the wholly repugnant thought of marriage to the elderly colonel. She paused, thinking hard. A convent would be the far more appealing life.

"I'd love a brandy, sir."

Her Dark Master: Chapter 4

Tori crept up the back alley toward her house on trembling legs. Her eyes were gritty from lack of sleep, and her body felt sore, aware and vibrantly alive.

Though she hated sneaking away from Matthew as he slept, she couldn't risk exposing her identity. She didn't regret a single moment of their illicit night, which had only served to further her determination to wed him. A marriage without Matthew would be one doomed to no passion, no desire, and no love.

She would not settle for that.

The sun peeked over the trees and the city stirred as it woke. She must find her bed, and soon, if she wished to avoid discovery.

She swung the door open noiselessly. A few short steps and she mounted the staircase, passing no one. Praying her luck would hold, Tori slipped into her room and quietly closed the door behind her, turning the key with shaking fingers.

She'd done it, by God. Unbelievable. The entire night—from the party to the encounter on the balcony to the erotic sex she'd shared with Matthew. All done without being caught. Laurel would never believe her.

Tori struggled from her dress, ruing the ruined chemise. Crumpling the fabric into a ball, she shoved it into the depths of the wardrobe to dispose of later.

At her naked appearance in the looking glass, she gasped, running fingers over the light welts left by his crop. Her thighs and bottom bore the brunt of the strokes—thankfully areas no one save herself would see. The stripes would heal and disappear, leaving her only with the memories of their making.

Tori slipped on her nightdress and flopped onto her bed with a groan. Three hours would not be nearly enough rest, but it would have to suffice.

Once the matter of the blackmailer was over and done with, she would redouble her efforts to seduce Matthew into marriage.

“What the hell do you mean, she paid you to switch places?” Annoyance rippled over Matthew. All he’d wanted was to spirit the chit away and set her up as his mistress. Instead, he found her vanished.

“I swear, my lord, I don’t know who she was,” the dark-haired whore in front of him wailed. Matthew bit back an oath and turned on the madam.

“What about you?”

Lizzeth shrugged. “Could have been a girl from another house, I suppose.”

“No, ma’am,” the other girl said with a snuffle. She caught her lip between her teeth and scooted backward. “I knew she was gentry right off.” She dared throw him a reproachful glance. “She talked good. And she had gold coin.”

Matthew stiffened, fists curled at his side. “Ridiculous.”

Marie shook her head and Lizzeth patted her hand. “Tell us what you do know.”

“She came in just after he did, right before we went in to line up. Stepped out of the closet, nearly scared me to death. She grabbed my arm and asked if I was to serve him.”

Surprised, Matthew stared at her. “She asked for me by name?”

“Aye, my lord. Over and over. She sure fretted about it, and then shoved the gold at me.” Marie gave an apologetic look to the madam. “I gave her my place and hid upstairs.”

Matthew heard the madam dismiss the girl and then close the door. Seconds later she thrust a snifter of brandy in his hand.

He drank it down and savored the burn.

He’d been duped.

“What will you do, my lord?”

Matthew knew she was worried about the damage this could do to her business. He slammed the glass down and headed for the door. “Don’t worry, Lizzeth. I don’t hold you responsible.” A vision of the faux Cyprian flushed with pleasure and filled with his cock flashed in his head and his body responded immediately. Curse her. “I’m going to find her. And make her pay.”

Half an hour later, Matthew brushed past Stires and made for the study in his townhouse. Fury fueled his every step.

To learn the woman he'd so sensuously tortured was a member of his own class, a woman who paid to take the place of a whore, infuriated him.

Just one more reason his mistrust in women was so well-placed.

He would find the deceitful bitch. He would find her and make her rue what she'd dared.

"Food," he snapped at the hovering butler. "Have water heated for a bath and lay out some new clothes."

"Yes, sir."

Matthew stood rigid in front of his desk, staring with unseeing eyes at the crumpled half-mask he held. The only reminder she'd left behind. "I've several stops to make, so ready the carriage."

Stires nodded and drew the doors closed, only to open them a moment later. "Sir, if I may be so bold. Are you well?"

Well? Hell no, he was not well. He'd found the woman of his dreams in a brothel only to find he'd been played the fool.

Again.

Sick to his stomach at the implications and the possibilities, Matthew drummed his fingers on the leather-topped mahogany desk.

"I will be fine, Stires."

The deep silence told him his longtime butler didn't believe him, with good reason.

"Very good, my lord," Stires said stiffly and retired from the room.

Matthew shrugged from his coat and flung it to the divan, but this relieved only a minimal bit of his pent-up fury.

He reached for the brandy decanter then put it back. He would need all of his faculties sharp and alert. Settling at his desk, he scratched out some notes about what he remembered about her. Which was damn near everything, right down to the small mole on the right side of her hip just above the bone.

Long dark hair. Slight frame. Her eyes were various shades of

blue-green, depending on the light and her level of excitement. When she came, they'd turned the most incredible shade of jade.

Despite his anger, his cock stirred. She'd been his every desire, fulfilled his requests, and taken his cock and his whip with equal fervor.

Ripping his wandering mind away from the memories, he stared down at his list and cursed aloud.

Half the women of the Ton fit her description.

Bloody hell, why had he allowed her to keep the mask on? Feeling even more the idiot, he realized the covering was her way of ensuring her identity remained hidden. She played upon his honor by demanding his word as a gentleman to keep her mask intact.

How many whores would even think of such a thing?

Stires reappeared with his breakfast. "Your bath shall be ready soon, my lord."

Matthew nodded, waving him away.

There'd been something about the way she spoke, the way her mouth moved.

Christ, he couldn't concentrate on that because all he saw were her lips wrapped around him.

Stires returned. "Lord Ashford, my lord. Will you see him?"

"Course he will, man. Have you lost your senses?" Ryder strode into the room and gave the butler an odd look before passing it on to Matthew. "What the deuce is bedeviling you?"

Matthew spooned eggs into his mouth and avoided an answer. Knowing his friend's insatiable curiosity, Ryder would gladly take up the hunt with him. But Matthew found he wanted that pleasure all to himself.

Anger mixed with fascination in equal parts. Anticipation. No, he alone would hunt his lady in whore's clothing.

"Long night." He waved a hand to a chair. "Sit down. Breakfast?"

"No," Ryder replied. "I just stopped by to invite you to Thursday night dinner."

Matthew cocked a brow. "A dinner invitation that warrants a

personal visit? And four days in advance? What's the occasion?" Then it hit him and the eggs soured in his stomach. "Tori's engagement dinner?"

Ryder's jaw clenched. "If my mother had her way it would be. But no, not quite yet."

Son of a bitch. Matthew dragged in a lungful of air and contemplated his friend. Maybe he should reconsider that brandy. "I take it you do not agree with the prospective nuptials?"

"I have no reason to dispute them."

"But?"

Ryder shrugged. "He's older than Mother. A stodgy fool like the Colonel will break Tori's spirit. It is not the life I would have for her. She needs someone younger, someone who will love her."

Matthew snorted. "Love is a ridiculously overrated commodity, Ashford. It does not exist."

"You thought it did once."

"And I was a fool proven wrong many times over." Gripping his fork tightly, he fought for calm. He didn't like the idea of Tori marrying the aging army man any more than Ryder, but it was her choice. "She'll be fine, that one. Lands on her feet all the time. 'Sides, she can always shoot him if he mistreats her."

Ryder's scowl remained for a moment longer then he sighed with a rueful grin. "Suppose I ought to gift her with a new lady's gun just in case there's a wedding."

Matthew nodded. "Excellent idea."

"Right then. So, you will come to the dinner?"

He didn't want to go. He wanted to hunt for the woman haunting him, body and mind. But he could not desert Ashford or Tori. "I'll be there."

"You are very quiet, Miss Ashford."

The Colonel's voice held a note of censure he obviously did not mean to disguise.

Tori turned to face him, gripping the reins tighter. "You sound disapproving."

“Merely confused. You are usually such a vivacious, effusive woman. Always smiling or laughing. You’ve done neither the entire morning.”

Tori blinked at his accurate assessment. She’d been deeply contemplative – one might say worried – since her blackmailer failed to show two hours earlier. No note, no ribbon, no meeting. She was most definitely on edge. “Odd that you would know something like that, Colonel, when I have only just made your acquaintance.”

He shrugged. “I have had my eye on you for some time, Miss Ashford.”

A chill skittered over her. “Oh?”

He laughed, mustache wiggling vigorously. “Calm yourself, my dear. You are a very beautiful woman, and I have been drawn to you at the various gatherings we’ve both attended. It was not until recently that I shored up the nerve to approach you.”

Tori relaxed, comforted by the laughter in his gaze. Feeling the fool for seeing shadows where none existed, she straightened in the saddle and mustered a smile. “No apologies required, Colonel.”

He edged his mount closer. “I, ah, I had hoped you would be receptive to my suit.”

Good humor fled in a wink. Her newfound knowledge precluded any sort of sham marriage, especially one to such an old man. Holding fast to her hope of being only with Matthew, she cleared her throat. “Colonel, I am flattered, of course, but...”

She trailed off, noting the darkness gathering in his eyes and the anger straining his face. The man shifted moods faster than anyone of her acquaintance. Not that she needed it, but the observation was another notch against him.

“But?” he prompted, his voice harsh.

“But,” she plowed on, “I do not believe we will suit. You will be much better off with someone a bit—” Tori struggled for the right word, discarding *older* out of hand. She did not wish to injure his pride any more than necessary. “Someone more experienced than I.”

The Colonel reached out and grabbed her horse’s halter, forcing

them both to a stop. Tori froze, her eyes wide and her heart racing. Surely he would not dare anything improper here. Already she caught a few interested glances tossed their way by other riders in the park.

Oh, dear. Maybe she should have said older after all.

“What I require, Miss Ashford, is your obedience in this matter. You will gain the necessary experience. I will see to that.”

That bore the stamp of a threat. Tori swallowed hard. “We should return. My mother will worry over me.”

The Colonel shook his head. “She knows I will take care of you.”

More panic assailed her and Tori drew herself up. “Colonel Jameson, I feel a touch of stomachache coming on and unless you would care for me to retch over your polished boots, I suggest you take me home. Now.”

The war of wills continued in silence for another tense moment. Tori really did think she might lose her breakfast on him, but finally he nodded, the anger seeping from his features.

The man was more mercurial than the London weather.

“Of course, my dear, I apologize. Let us return and I will call on you tomorrow to discuss our future.”

He turned the horses and headed back through Hyde Park while Tori reeled at his high-handed assumption. But she remained silent, not willing to rouse his temper once more.

Colonel Jameson frightened her. Not many men had that ability, especially since her brother and Matthew had schooled her quite adeptly in the use of pistols.

When at last they reached the townhouse, she dismounted quickly.

“Good day, Colonel.” Sketching out the briefest of curtsies, she gathered her skirts and darted inside. To her dismay, he followed her.

“Miss Ashford, a moment, please.”

Slowly she faced him. “Yes?”

His blue eyes traveled the length of her body and he tapped his

riding crop along his leg. Unlike the night before when Matthew wielded the same instrument with lascivious delight, the Colonel's handling of it made her uneasy. His gruff voice was unyielding when he addressed her. "When we are wed, you will be more docile."

His audacity astounded her. To bloody hell with his feelings, she would not stand for such remarks. "Then it is a good thing we are not to be married, Colonel. I trust you will understand when I tell you I do not wish to see you again."

He chuckled, the crop moving faster. "And I hope *you* understand when I tell you the decision is no longer yours to make. I have struck a bargain with your mother, Miss Ashford. Tell her I extend my regards to our mutual friend Mr. Wolffe." The Colonel leaned forward, the look in his eyes chilling and hard. "I look forward to relieving you of your arrogance along with your innocence. Good day."

Turning sharply on his boot heel, he sauntered out the door, leaving Tori speechless, infuriated and more frightened than ever. What the deuce was going on? What bargain?

It was quite a feat, but she finally managed to gain control of herself. She thanked providence no firearm was readily available. She set off in search of her mother and found her seated comfortably on a settee, a sewing basket at her side, her head bent over her stitching.

"Mother," Tori said sharply, "why is the Colonel so positive I'm going to marry him?"

Her mother jumped and exclaimed, lifting her finger to her mouth. "Victoria, mind your tongue."

Tori's stomach did lurch, but she remained outwardly calm. "Why?"

Lady Ashford sighed and put the sewing away, patting the chaise. "Come sit and cease your hysterics."

Sinking down, she eyed her mother warily. "He has a high opinion of himself, and he speaks out of turn."

"As do most of the young bucks in town." Her mother rubbed

the top of her hand, and for the first time Tori noticed the dark blue veins so prominent. Her mother was always so forceful it never occurred to Tori she could be growing old.

“Would it truly be so horrible, being married to him? Your future would be secure. Your children will never want.”

“But *I* would, Mama. I would.”

“You promised me you would give him a chance.”

Tori debated sharing the shocking statement about her innocence he’d made. Instead, she picked at the feather adorning her riding hat. “Aye, that is true enough.”

“Would it be too much to ask for some enthusiasm? He is not a leper, you know.” Lady Ashford sighed, shaking her head. “Trust me, Victoria. I would do you no harm.”

“I know that, Mama.”

Her mother gave her a wan smile, though her mouth was tight. “Good. Go upstairs, dear, and rest a bit. I have arranged a party for Thursday night. Just family and few close friends. Laurel, of course.”

Tori gave a sigh of her own. Wonderful, one more quandary from which to extricate herself. She rose and started from the room, stopping only when she reached the doorway, a sudden question on her lips. “Mother?”

“Yes?”

“Who is Mr. Wolffe?”

The countess whitened visibly and swayed, catching the back of the chaise with one hand, the other flying to her mouth. “What?” she whispered, eyes wide. “What did you say?”

Tori blinked several times, unease tingling down her spine. Something was very amiss. “Mr. Wolffe. The Colonel mentioned him.”

“Oh, dear God.” Lady Ashford crossed the room rapidly. “What did he say about him?” her mother asked, though oddly no hint of her anxiety now remained.

“I, uh, nothing, really,” Tori stammered. “Just to pass along his greetings.”

“You’re certain that’s all?”

“Yes.” What on earth was going on? Tori felt bewildered, completely off-kilter. Corwin, the blackmailer, the Colonel, her mother’s odd behavior. It was all very nearly too much to take in. “I believe I’ll just go upstairs now.” She backed away from her mother. “A rest, you see.”

Tori fled to her room, aware of her mother’s sharp gaze. She must sort all this out quickly before any more unforeseen drama occurred.

But really, who was this mysterious Mr. Wolffe? Perhaps her brother would know. And while she was questioning him, she would make it a point to apprise him of her distaste for the Colonel’s suit.

She’d just gained the landing upstairs when Glory caught up with her.

“These have just arrived for you, Miss Ashford.” The maid gave over two crisply pressed parchments.

Tori took them, pleased her hand did not shake and betray her onset of nerves. One bore a close resemblance to the previous blackmail note. The other she recognized as a message from the editor of *The Opal*. “When did these arrive?”

“Boy brought them ‘round back just now, Miss,” Glory replied. “Together?”

“Aye.”

“Thank you.” Tori nodded and turned away, flipping the envelopes over and noting with great relief the seals were intact. She debated sending for Laurel, thought better of it and retreated to her room. The time for pussyfooting was long past.

After securing the lock, she carried the notes to her writing desk and held her breath, mouthed her prayers, and broke the wax on the blackmail note.

Miss Ashford,

My apologies for missing you this morning. I was unavoidably detained. I will contact you again soon. Be waiting.

~Fondest regards.

“Regards, my left foot.” Tori read and re-read the note, seeking any clue to the writer’s identity. She found none, of course.

Her head ached from trying to make sense where none could be found. She re-folded the paper and stuffed it into a cranny of her desk.

Picking up the other message, she found a coded note from her editor requesting a certain type of story, one featuring beautiful young women at the mercy of an alluring, dangerous man. Her newfound knowledge would certainly assist her with the writing.

And the sum the editor offered was quite enough to refill her coffers after meeting the one hundred pound demand from her blackmailer. Eventually.

She sighed, her head still pounding. Perhaps she could take her earnings and flee to the continent for a time. Greece or Rome, even. But that would mean leaving Matthew.

“This is getting me nowhere.” She rubbed her temple. After digging for clean paper, she tried to accommodate her editor’s request. Odd thing was, every scene and every bit of dialogue she wrote seemed too vague. She was not delving deeply enough into the reality of the experience of submitting to a masterful man.

Nodding, she scribbled a few of the more exotic memories of her night with Matthew, adding more and more detail until she had to stop and relieve herself of the pent-up need.

Her pussy yearned terribly, her secret lips swollen and throbbing with a deep ache. The thrum of her rapid heartbeat stoked her craving. After doffing her riding habit and chemise, Tori stretched out on her bed, clad only in her silk stockings. She spread her legs and slid her fingertips along the upper edges of her thigh.

Around and down the outside of her pussy, she teased herself. Her other palm skimmed along her belly before catching the soft mound of her left breast and tweaking the hard nipple between forefinger and thumb. She moaned at the tightness, the tingle of pleasurable pain.

Nothing as great as the sweet torture inflicted by Matthew, but enough to push her higher to orgasm.

Tori spread her slick lips wide and arched her hips. Her breath hitched as the air hit her sensitive clit. She rubbed her thumb over the swollen flesh, slipping one long finger inside herself, marveling at the wetness and the way she grasped and tightened.

Was this how Matthew felt when his cock slid into her? Had the muscles of her cunt gripped him with this much heat and demand?

She stroked the finger in and out, moving her other hand down to continue toying with her clit, mimicking his movements. She wished he were with her to hold her and whisper to her with low words of need.

Tori moaned. Her head thrashed as the pulsating grew stronger and harsher. Matthew beside her. Inside her. Stoking her. Only he could bring this out in her, only he could quench the fire.

Closer she drew, gasping for breath now, her eyes tightly clenched, her legs stiff.

“Matthew.” She pictured him as he’d been at the last. Poised above her, his muscled arms strained with his weight as he slid slow and deep into her body, each movement controlled and timed for the ultimate response. He’d held her eyes so intently, she almost feared he knew.

Instead his hips plunged, his face contorted, and he yelled as his cock throbbed inside her.

She was his forever. There would never be another man for her.

Matthew. His name, coupled with the magic of her own questing fingers, threw her over the edge and she orgasmed. A long, delicious spasm wracked her body while her empty soul cried for him.

Matthew downed his third glass of champagne and scanned the crush of people. He skipped over those women who could not be his submissive miss, past the blondes, those with blue eyes, and the tall girls who stood with awkward hope near overbearing chaperones.

No, none of them could have engineered and carried out a plan of such daring as his mystery woman. Though she’d been eager to obey, he’d detected a core of strength inside her. He doubted she

would bend quite so easily outside the bedroom.

Of course, his observations now did him little good. He could not find her and his odd rash of appearances at nearly every ball, fête and recital in town had caused a stir of excitement through the Marrying Mamas. He found himself under intense scrutiny and it irritated him almost as much as being played the fool.

Almost.

A passing waiter offered another glass, but Matthew refused it, noting the time was much later than he anticipated. He must put aside his hunt for the moment and make for the Ashford town-house.

He climbed into his carriage and slumped against the seat. Stretching out his legs and rubbing his brow, he pondered once more the possible identity of his prey.

No debutante seeking a husband would dare such an act, no matter her bravado. The decision to eliminate those young things pleased him as he could not stomach the thought of having been made the fool by a young, virginal chit out for a lark.

That left the bevy of widows who enjoyed allowances from their late husband's estates and freedom from society in regards to their liaisons. He decided he should also include the dallying married couples of his acquaintance. Boredom oft drove a woman to desperate deeds.

But who among his female peers would commit such an audacious act? And why him?

That question plagued him constantly. He knew he'd been chosen specifically. The whore at Lizzeth's confirmed that much. Requested him by name and description. But why?

A woman who sought his attention, but lacked the nerve to approach him directly?

A still-married woman seeking a bit of excitement outside her own marriage bed?

Both were plausible, but damned if he knew which was true.

For one horrifying moment, he'd even wondered if the mystery woman was his ex-fiancée. Now that was a truth he could not have

borne.

The carriage rumbled to a swaying stop and the door popped open. Climbing down, Matthew tugged his sleeves, straightened his cravat and headed up the walk to pound the brass knocker.

“Corwin, ‘bout damn time,” Ryder grumbled as they met in the hall. “Mother and Victoria have been going ‘round and ‘round about serving dinner or waiting for you.”

Matthew clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Then let us proceed to the table, lest your mother decides we should have our eyes blackened for further delaying her meal.”

The company of ten gathered in the drawing room stood at their entrance and exchanged greetings. Lady Ashford spared Matthew a sharp glare before leading everyone to the dining room.

He found himself seated next to the grand dame herself, and Tori was placed between Ryder and the Colonel at the opposite end of the table. The other guests filled the remaining seats, alternating male to female according to precedence.

Matthew chafed at finding himself seated too far away from Tori to achieve any sort of discreet conversation.

He could not believe she seriously entertained the notion of marriage with the ex-Army man. He stared down the table with harsh scrutiny at the Colonel. As if sensing his regard, the Colonel turned and met his stare, mustache bristling, brow raised.

Pointedly, Matthew swung his gaze to Tori and then back to the Colonel to let his opinion clearly be known. The older man stiffened, neck and ears reddening, hand balling into a fist.

“Corwin, start a fight at my table and you will find yourself on the first ship to the Americas,” Lady Ashford’s soft, yet unyielding voice sounded in his ear.

He nodded shortly. “I would dream of no such act, Lady Ashford. It is a night meant for merry-making, is it not? One meant to secure Victoria’s future?”

Lady Ashford’s lips twitched, reminding him oddly of the Colonel’s mustache. “That is not your concern, Corwin. Behave in a fashion worthy of your station.”

She shifted in her chair to speak to someone else, and Matthew found himself gripping his fork with great force.

Not his concern.

But she was. Had been for quite some time. Hell, Tori wormed her way into his fantasies more often than he found comfortable, but the pleasurable outcome always outweighed the slight guilt.

He cast a look down the table at her as she chatted with her friend Laurel. Tori wore her dark hair swept up, coiled and curled to set off the elegant length of her neck and strong line of her jaw. She wore a deep green gown which matched her eyes.

Her mouth pursed with delight at something Laurel said. Matthew blinked and focused on her lips, full and red. He could still remember exactly how she'd tasted.

Tori sipped her drink. Her tongue slipped out to catch a stray drop of champagne, and Matthew nearly groaned aloud.

A woman like her could very nearly change his mind about marriage. But it was not for him. One near-marriage to a member of the lying sex was plenty for him. No, he'd take his pleasures as he had been—by assignation, gold coin and chance.

Tori laughed, a deep throaty sound that pulled his eyes back to her. She leaned to one side and he lost her behind the towering centerpiece of white roses and baby's breath.

When she sat straight again, she was shaking her head and merriment gleamed from her eyes. He smiled in response. She looked like nothing so much as a mischievous imp. A swathe of curls escaped one of the pins and fell forward to cover her cheek.

Matthew froze, staring at her half-hidden features.

Impossible.

The air in the room suddenly seemed thick and harsh, and he was unable to breathe. Lightheaded, dizzy and disbelieving, Matthew continued to examine her.

With every passing moment the truth became more evident. The hair, the skin, the eyes, her delightfully talented mouth.

He groaned.

"Are you all right, Corwin?" Ashford spoke from the head of the

table.

With effort, Matthew pulled his gaze away from Tori. "I'm fine," he gritted out, the lie coming easily. His rational side argued he was mistaken. Tori could never have engaged in the wanton activities he'd shared with the mystery woman.

She was but a girl and had no knowledge of anything remotely sexual, much less the adventurous romp he'd enjoyed with his anonymous bed partner.

And my God, she would have been a virgin!

"Lord Corwin, are you unwell, sir?"

Tori's soft voice intruded on his private argument.

Sir: His cock stiffened at the sweet sound and he knew for certain then. The treacherous bitch he hunted was none other than Victoria Rose Ashford.

Slowly, he raised his head, meeting her concerned look head on. A muscle ticked in his jaw from the effort he engaged to remain civil.

He'd always known she would betray him somehow. But never, in even his twisted mind, could he have envisioned this.

The table grew silent and he felt the weight of everyone's attention.

Tori's eyes widened and a rosy hue crested her cheeks. She bit her lip and his hand fisted in reaction.

With measured, precise calm, he placed his napkin on the table, stood and bowed to Lady Ashford. "Please forgive my unseemly exit, but I am suddenly feeling quite ill."

He heard Ryder's muffled snort as his mother glanced quickly at the food.

"Rest assured, my lady, it is not anything to do with your fine feast. I incurred this affliction a few nights ago."

Tori gasped. He turned to look at her again, having managed to shroud his fury for the moment.

Lifting his glass, he quirked a brow at her. "I find it best I retire to my own house so as not to *condemn* any of you to this illness." He caught Tori's wince at his deliberate verbal jab. She knew he'd

unmasked her. Her obvious guilt further provoked his anger. “Before I depart however, I would like to make a toast. To Miss Ashford. May you have a lifetime of happiness, devoid of deception and betrayal.”

Everyone save he and Tori sipped to the odd toast, murmuring low words of assent. He noted the tears forming in her eyes and saw her half-rise from the chair.

“Thank you for your *kind* words, my lord. Please, allow me to walk you to the door?”

The Colonel harrumphed and she spared not a glance for him. Didn’t give a damn what anyone else in the room—brother or prospective intended—thought of it, Matthew supposed. A reluctant spark of admiration popped into his very irrational thoughts.

“No.” Matthew waved her back down. “Least of all you.” He paused, knowing she sensed his anger. “It would not do for you to become ill.”

“Quite right, Corwin.” Lady Ashford smiled.

He bowed to the room at large, turned and left, pace quickening with every step he took toward the door. Away from her.

Slamming into his carriage, he threw himself against the cushioned bench, seething. His pride demanded action, the retaliation he’d so carefully crafted.

But not now. Now, he only wanted to return to the sanctuary of his home and come to terms with the truth.

Tori had betrayed him.

Her Dark Master: Chapter 5

With back-alley skills learned at university, Matthew climbed a well-placed tree outside Tori's window, eased the sash up and dropped inside. The soft whisper of her breath sounded from his left and he turned his head toward her bed. He exhaled softly as the rising posters distinguished themselves from the night.

Perfect.

He rose, closed the window and doffed his hat and jacket. Silently he set his bag of carefully selected implements on the floor. He crossed the room, felt for the door handle, and turned the key before pocketing it.

He had trapped his lady-whore. And tonight, she would pay for her betrayal.

Matthew struck a flint and lit the lamp on her writing desk. The golden glow spread across the papers on the surface and he paused, catching sight of a familiar bit of parchment just peeking out from a nook. Good God. How had a lady come to learn of such a scandalous journal, let alone to possess a copy of it?

More lies, more deception, more proof she was not the innocent he thought. He crumpled the latest edition of *The Opal Chronicles* in his fist. This discovery fueled his displeasure even more. How could she have done this to him?

She stirred behind him. Matthew tossed the paper down and crossed to her bedside on quick, silent feet.

He inhaled sharply, fighting the urge to wake her with a kiss that started out tenderly and heated quickly into a passion that he knew she matched. She slept on her back. Her dark hair spread out in a silken wave, tempting him to wrap his hands in it as he'd done three nights earlier. She'd liked that, and had begged for more.

Matthew gave himself a mental shake but still gazed over her slumbering form. When his dark eyes returned to her sweet, pointed face, he found it marred by a frown.

Good. Her guilt-ridden mind gave her no ease.

Now he would mete out his own justice. Drawing a length of

black silk from his pocket, he leaned down and settled his hand over her mouth.

Immediately her eyes popped open and she fought him. Matthew grunted, impressed by her strength. Her slight frame belied hidden abilities.

“Cease your struggles,” he hissed, pressing his face closer. It was a mistake. Her scent, a combination of lavender and feminine musk, invaded his senses. Her lips were soft beneath his palm. Dismayed, he remembered all of it from the night they’d spent together.

Why hadn’t he known her then?

“Be still, Victoria.”

She finally ceased, eyes widening as she appeared to recognize him at last. Her body softened though he still read fear in her green eyes.

The rage that had spurred him from the moment of discovery suddenly evaporated, leaving only a dark need to exact revenge.

Her sensual torture was about to begin.

Tori’s lips moved and he shook his head. “Not a word from you this night unless I command it.”

He lifted his hand.

She opened her mouth.

“No.” He dangled the silk in front of her. “Unless you wish to be gagged as well as restrained?”

She shook her head and remained silent. Her tongue slid along her lips, and his breath hitched as more memories and new ideas peppered him. He would put that tongue to good use tonight.

Pulling the bedclothes from her, he swept his gaze over her form. The heavy nightdress did nothing to hide the pebbling of her nipples or the womanly curve of her hips.

“Matthew,” she breathed, arms reaching up for him.

“Ah, ah, ah.” He straddled her hips. The scrap of black silk floated between them in warning. He tugged her arms up and outward, securing each to a bedpost. She tensed but remained silent.

With a light touch, he pulled his fingertips down her bound

wrists and arms, absorbing the exquisite touch of her tender flesh beneath her gown. Supple and firm. He wanted to run his mouth along every inch of her and taste her once more.

His cock stiffened into her and she groaned. Her eyes half-closed as her hips rose under him.

Hiding his smile, he slid off her, palming her thighs through the gown and easing her legs apart. He looped the silken bindings around each ankle and tied them off at the remaining bedposts.

Her gown stretched taut and molded every part of her body to his hungry eyes. But this visual feast was not quite enough.

“I’ve a special night in store for you, you deceitful little trollop.”

“Not fair,” she gasped, lifting her head.

“Tsk, ts. I warned you about silence. A pity you could not obey. You did it so well while playing my whore.”

“This is ridicul-*mph*.”

He cut off her words with a black silk gag. The fabric darkened further with her vain attempts to push it away with her tongue. Finally, she was well and truly silenced.

“Fair, my lying dove? Was it fair of you to pretend to be something you are not? And to what purpose, I wonder? What sort of manipulation did you have in mind? Blackmail? Marriage? Did you think because you were a virgin, I would wed you?”

God knew it was the honorable thing to do. But he despised being manipulated and Tori had proved that she was a woman who made her own decisions. If she chose to give him her virginity, then so be it.

Her head thrashed and she twisted in her silken bonds with her fingers clenching wildly.

He watched her for a moment then rolled his shoulders, again shoving aside his own sense of guilt. Damn, he could not allow himself to sympathize. His ex-fiancée had taught him well the dangers of sympathy and trust.

Tori mumbled around the gag and he looked down at her, temptingly subdued. “It matters not, little dove. Tonight you will discover the dangers of meddling in affairs that do not concern you.”

He picked up his bag and set it between her outstretched legs. "You realize, of course, you must be punished for your infraction." Matthew opened the bag and pulled out a knife, holding it up to the lamplight.

She whimpered.

He frowned. "Come now, Victoria, you know me better than that. Or at least, you know me as much as I thought I knew you. I would never harm you... permanently." He stroked the blade, tapping it with his finger. "It is merely to rid you of that bothersome gown. Good luck explaining this to your lady's maid."

Her nostrils flared and anger stoked emerald fire in the depths of her eyes. He laughed softly. Raw emotion at last. Nothing planned, nothing calculated.

He moved between her legs, kneeling at the edge of the bed. "Remain very, very still," he advised, grabbing hold of the hem of her nightdress and slicing upward until she lay bare before him.

She wore no undergarments, nothing to hide the thatch of dark hair above her pussy or the swell of her breasts. Already her lower lips glistened and her nipples strained upward.

God, he didn't know if he would survive this retribution.

Above all, she must not sense any weakness from him. Matthew tamped his feelings, shunting the unexpected tenderness and thoughts of forgiveness to the furthest part of his brain. She must pay for her betrayal.

"Now, we begin." Emptying the bag, he placed several metal boxes, a long feather and a specially sculpted bit of ivory on the night table. Taking his place between her legs again, Matthew removed the lid from one of the small round tins. The pungent aroma of mixed herbs wafted on the night air. He dipped his finger in the paste and leaned forward, gently pulling apart the moist lips of her pussy.

The sweet smell of her arousal mingled with the lavender scent she wore. He inhaled deeply. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, Matthew firmed the tip of his tongue and flicked it rapidly over her swollen clitoris.

Tori bucked beneath him, a low moan escaping the gag. Her hips rotated and the muscles of her thighs clenched in useless spasms as she tried to close her legs.

Settling between her widely spread thighs, he blew on her clit, dabbing the unguent onto the ruby-red nerve endings.

He waited, his fingers tripping up and down the sides of her pussy, causing shiver after shiver to wrack her. She smelled of sex and yearning, which shot straight to his cock, making him harder if that was possible. He shifted on the bed to conceal his desire.

“Did you know,” he said conversationally, “that sultans of old kept their women in constant states of arousal?”

Her hips danced, slowly at first but then gaining momentum as the paste he applied began its work in earnest. The warming lotion would send her body higher and higher, but without relief. Spreading her lips wider, he blew across her clit, slapping her outstretched thighs when her shriek grew loud, even with the gag.

“You begin to see, do you not? You are helpless against the powers of the paste. I have applied just a tiny bit because you were already so wet.” That was the bloody truth. He’d never had a woman so ready to receive him. To his chagrin, Matthew fought his slipping control.

He swallowed hard, reminding himself of her betrayal.

“Mpphw.”

Despite the thin gag, he could make out his name on her lips.

“Not one more sound until I give you permission, Victoria.”

Her eyes flashed angrily just before she closed them and nodded.

“Good. There is but one more command you must obey.”

Her lashes fluttered up and she met his gaze, one brow quirked in obvious question.

“You may not come without permission.”

Permission he did not intend to grant.

Sweeping his thumbs back down to her soaking nether lips, Matthew lowered his mouth, hiding his grin.

She bucked and grunted, displeasure obvious in her tone.

Good.

Flattening his tongue, Matthew fitted it to her crevice and wiggled the tip into her slick hole. Her sweetness exploded over him and he was unable to contain his own moan. Honey sweet and twice as inviting, her musky taste was addictive. Matthew redoubled his efforts, tickling her clit, pulling her juices into his mouth with pleasure and ease.

She jerked and gasped with such ferocity that he raised his eyes and lifted his mouth away, eyeing her questioningly.

“Like that, do you? Which part, little liar? The potion?” He blew along her straining clit and her lashes dropped, but she shook her head.

“No? As I recall, you quite enjoyed the feel of my tongue last time.” Suiting words to action, he lapped again at her wide-open cunny, finding her twice as delicious as before. He lifted a brow. “Does that please you, then?”

She nodded slightly before thrashing her head wildly side to side.

Matthew frowned. “Out with it, Tori. What do you want?”

Unfair of him, he knew, since she could not speak past the gag, but it was all part of his fun.

She moaned and her widened eyes looked from him to her pussy and back to him.

Understanding dawned and he started, unwillingly impressed by her natural sensuality. And her unabashed mute request. Curse her. How was it possible this creature raised in innocence seemed to be his match in both sexual appetite and inclination? Why her? She was nothing more to him than an orifice, a vessel to be used for his satisfaction.

Nothing more.

There could never be anything more. Even if—when?—his honor compelled him to offer for her, they would not share a bed again. She was too dangerous.

Back to his task, Matthew stroked her clit with his tongue, sweeping the openness of her lower lips until she rocked and

swayed. He fitted his mouth over her clitoris, tapping the sensitive nub with his tongue, swiping the last bit of the cinnamon-tinged paste along it. Holding her wide-eyed gaze with his eyes, he drew a deep breath and began to hum. Slowly, but with deep, vibrant sound. She groaned around the gag and her breathing grew more ragged, her legs and hips stiffening beneath his hands.

She was on the edge. Matthew intensified the humming, focusing all his attention on her clit and keeping a careful watch on her face.

When her eyes glazed and her mouth clenched tightly over the gag, he withdrew.

Her head dropped back and she grunted in obvious dismay.

Matthew drew to a kneeling position and tipped his head. "Look at me," he commanded.

Her lashes were shut tight and did not budge. Much as she'd done a few nights earlier, she was pushing him.

She would not win.

Rolling from the bed, he stalked to her side and gripped her turgid nipples, squeezing with just enough pressure to force her eyes open.

"Do you begin to understand, Victoria? Do you see how this night will proceed?"

He let go of her nipples and she released her held breath. He picked up the feather and swept it over the mounds of her breasts, along her sides, up her arms. She twisted and mewled, promising him retribution with the spitting fury of her eyes.

He stroked the feathered quill again and again over her left nipple. She shrugged and flattened, trying to move away, but he followed, tormenting her to an ultra-sensitive state. Her responsiveness was hypnotic. He switched to her other nipple and repeated the process.

Her teeth bit at the cloth and suddenly he wanted more. Wanted to hear her begging for the release.

He set the feather aside and leaned close to her ear. "If you scream, I will be out the window and gone before anyone can ar-

rive to assist you. All they would find is you. Naked. Aroused. And tied down. Much more difficult to explain than a torn nightdress, don't you think?"

She growled at him, fingers clawing the air.

Matthew smiled. "I'm glad we understand each other."

He slipped the binding free of her mouth, his palm hovering over her lips. Despite his warning, he wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't chance it. Besides, he was nowhere near ready to leave. Not to mention he would never humiliate her like that, despite his deep anger. But she didn't need to know that.

The night hour was still early. They had plenty of time left for retribution.

"You son of a bitch," she hissed quietly. Tears swam in her green eyes and she swallowed hard. "Why are you doing this, Matthew?"

He dropped the cloth to the floor. "I could ask you the same question, you little Delilah. Imagine my surprise when I discover the whore I bought turned out to be you. How could *you*? You betrayed me. You were a virgin."

Tori buried her eyes in her outstretched arm, unable to look at him. The pain and surprise in his voice were real.

She could not believe he'd gone to these lengths for revenge. The coldness in his face frightened her far more than anything he could physically do to her. It was the emptiness now in his eyes, the haunted tenor to his voice that ravaged her. He deserved an explanation, one she never dreamed she'd have to make. She had to make him understand she didn't give him her virginity for any reason other than her love for him.

Tori gathered her nerve to tell him the true reasons, but before she could speak, another sensation assaulted her.

Matthew had moved between her legs once more and something cold and hard slid against her. She lifted her head to try to see what he was doing, but could not.

"At Lizzeth's, when you played the whore, I took liberties with your body that I shall enjoy once more. Pity you shall not."

She winced at his use of the word “whore” but knew his derision was no less than she deserved. Then she heard the rest of his sentence.

“What do you mean, I will not?”

“Quiet.” A sharp slap to her inner thigh pulled a hiss from her. Though she was certain he’d taken all necessary precautions to avoid detection—Matthew was nothing if not meticulous in his planning—she did not wish to alert anyone in the household. Marriage to the Colonel would be the least of her worries were she discovered in this predicament.

She’d known Matthew long enough to understand he meant what he said. He would have no qualms about leaving her trussed up and alone.

Not a risk she was willing to take.

“Pay attention, Victoria.” He wiggled the rock-like thing at the entrance of her pussy. “This object comes from the eastern harems where one man cannot satisfy all his wives at one time. But as no other may have her, a substitute was created.” Slowly the object pushed inside of her, long, cold and heavy.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “Matthew, what—”

Another slap, this one closer to her clit. Pleasure swarmed her and made it difficult to concentrate. “I warned you about talking.”

The object retreated then returned. Over and over, he repeated the slow movements. Incredibly, her insides quivered and pulled, thickening and throbbing as though Matthew’s own cock delved into her. She struggled for breath and focused on the growing need.

“Please, I need to....” She whimpered, biting her lip. “Please, sir, may I?”

“May you what?” Matthew slid beside her on the bed and draped his trouser-clad leg over her bare one, pulling her thighs apart even more. His hand sped up, forcing the thing in and out at a rate that matched her fluttering pulse. “Tell me what you want,” he whispered low at her ear then pulled back, meeting her gaze. “Tell me.”

Without the mask and the anonymity it afforded her, shyness

overtook her. She could not say such things to him, not with his coolly appraising eyes probing hers.

“No,” she murmured, looking away.

His strong fingers caught her chin, forcing her eyes back to his. The pulsing between her legs slowed down and she whimpered again.

“Oh please, sir, please.”

“Say it.” His voice brooked no refusal and he pressed the object very deep inside her, holding it motionless a moment before wiggling it up and down.

The motion pushed her higher. It was as though he’d found a secret spot that drove her every need.

“Say it.” More rocking, more pulsing.

Tori was locked by the intensity of both his gaze and the sensations destroying her rationale. “Please, sir, may I come?”

The air around them, smelling richly of her arousal, stilled. Then he grinned a dark sort of smile that sent tremors of foreboding through her.

“No.”

“Oh,” she moaned low. “You are an evil, vile, hateful man.”

The makeshift cock resumed its slow, infuriating and unsatisfying pace. “And you are a lying, self-destructive schemer. That makes us even.”

Tori tried to focus only on the sensations roiling through her, but his words kept intruding.

“Had you known it was me, would you have continued?” she finally gritted out, seeking his face in the shadows, an odd hope kindling within her heart.

Matthew’s eyes burned and snapped. His cock was hard against her thigh. He could not hide the fact he was affected by this intimacy. Abruptly, his hand stopped. “Don’t move.”

He pulled away, leaving the now-warmed fake cock lying heavily in her needy pussy. Its presence did nothing more than remind her of what she could not have.

Shifting her pelvis, Tori concentrated hard on clenching her

inner muscles. If he would not give it to her, she would take the pleasure herself.

She felt him watching her and it thrilled her even more. A litany of short, sharp breaths escaped her as the orgasm rose in her.

“Yes,” she hissed. “So close, oh.” Faster, harder, she clamped her muscles, each spasm, and each release like small sparks of fire in her belly. The euphoria was nearly upon her when he pulled the object out.

“No, damn you, no.”

Breathing heavily, she fought her bonds with renewed vigor. She would tear the fabric and use her own hands to bring about the climax she so desperately needed.

“Stop moving, Victoria.”

She ignored him, pulling until the skin of her wrists chafed unbearably. His hands covered the small wounds and he pressed close.

“Stop it,” he muttered in her ear. “Do not harm yourself.”

“Then let me come, damn you. This is not fair.” Her voice broke on the last word, fading into a near-sob.

Matthew’s own labored breathing sounded ragged and she sensed the struggle within him. His eyes were no longer cold shards, but lit with a desire she felt to her core. He was softening.

“Matthew, please,” she begged, moving against him. “You want me. I can feel it.”

“Aye, you damn minx, I do want you. Something like this, I cannot hide.” He ground his hips to hers, proving beyond any hint of doubt he desired her.

“Then take me. Like you did before. Make me feel it, Matthew, please.”

His head dropped to her shoulder and his lips brushed against her. “I cannot.”

“Why?”

“God, Tori, what am I even doing here?”

“Please, Matthew. Listen to me. Now, like then, I am yours to command. But you must allow me to come. This denial is not fair.”

Instantly she knew she'd said the wrong thing. His head lifted and she saw his eyes had regained their chilly appearance. His jaw pulsed.

"Fair?" he repeated softly. "And was it fair of you, the one woman I believed would never deceive me, to use me as you did?"

"I only wanted you to love me."

Matthew froze, heart lurching. *Love*. It took him a long moment to recover himself. "Love is the ultimate betrayal. I understand all too well, madame. With the impending doom of marriage upon you, it was a lark you sought. And me you found. Me, you requested."

She inhaled sharply. "You know about that?"

"Aye." Matthew withdrew, loosening the knots at her wrists. "The other whore told me the whole tale. What I fail to understand is how you even knew Lizzeth's existed, much less how you got there. Or that I would be there."

Thinking to sway him back to tenderness, especially now that he was busy releasing her ankles, Tori sat up, reaching out to him. "Matthew, if you would but listen?"

He shrugged away from her touch and stood. "No matter. What is done is done. Roll over."

"What?"

"Roll over, Victoria. It is time for your final punishment."

She licked her lips, searching his face. "You don't intend to use the crop? The noise...."

He laughed, though to her the sound held little humor. "Worried about the noise and not the experience. My God, how you have had us all fooled. Especially me. But no more. Your true colors are revealed and I have been proven right. Again. Now turn over."

Tori considered refusing. Perhaps the time had come to end his cruel game. But desperation drove her to try once more. Maybe if she proved her willingness to submit to him, he would forgive her. Maybe more.

She rolled onto her stomach.

"Spread your legs."

Much as she had on the first night when he used that command on her, she moistened. Despite the turmoil he roused, he easily ruled her body. She was his whether he accepted the fact or not.

Tori spread her legs, lifting her arms upward without prompting. He retied her bonds then removed himself from the bed. Before she could question him, he returned. The chilled imprint of a round tin settled in the dip of her lower back.

She heard the lid being twisted off, then the slick touch of his fingers sliding down the cleft of her arse. He circled the small pink hole, pushing gently.

“Matthew?” She tensed with shock and a hint of fear.

“That night I touched you here. I promised the next time I would take you there.”

He pushed his finger further into her rosebud, eliciting a groan and utter stillness. She looked so vulnerable lying before him, the faint marks of his crop still visible. Matthew swallowed hard.

She had betrayed him.

“No, you cannot.” Her voice trembled, but her hips slowly pumped up and down.

True to the nature of all women, she lied once more with her mouth, but spoke truth with her body.

“Yes,” he murmured into her hair. “And you will take it. Every inch of my cock will sink into you.”

“Oh, Matthew.” The longing and pleading returned full-force. She was a true slut.

The realization should have disgusted him. Instead, it tempered his anger and gave rise to tenderness. “I will be careful, Tori, and I promise it will not hurt. All right?”

Even if his pride demanded he move forward with no concern for her feelings, an unnamed part of him forbid such cruelty. He watched her face carefully, seeking any sign of fear or repulsion. Despite their current circumstances, Matthew knew he could not—would not force this upon her. His own weakness astounded him.

When she turned her sparkling green eyes upward, he found only desire.

“Yes, sir.”

The words were his undoing. Every shred of anger melted under the heat of her total submission. His need for revenge vanished as if it had never existed. Now, in this moment, there was only his beautiful submissive and the gift of herself. Matthew quickly removed his clothing, no longer willing to subject her to the indignity he'd planned.

Matthew leaned down to press soft, gentle kisses to her buttocks, nipping now and again at her firm flesh.

She mumbled and fidgeted, swinging her body to and fro as much as she could. He reached up and grabbed a pillow, sliding it under her belly.

“Matthew, please touch me.”

He complied, tilting her hips upward and spreading her body even more. In the candlelight, her lips were deep ruby red and glistened with juices of desire but not completion. He slid his stiffened tongue up and down her slit, stopping every other stroke to tease her taut clit.

Her sighs of encouragement thrilled him and shot straight to his cock. He swiped along the soft roundness of her buttocks, and then inward, paying special attention to the forbidden area he intended to gently ravage. Her moans increased as did her arousal, proved by the juices flowing freely from her.

“More?” he asked.

“Yes, please, more.”

Matthew reapplied the lotion that would both numb her tiny arsehole and ease his entry into her. The heat from their bodies would melt the paste, further enhancing the experience.

Rising to his knees behind her, Matthew dipped his cock into her well-drenched pussy. They both gasped as he sank inside. Christ, she was hot and tight. It almost blew his control.

Tori moaned and wiggled her backside, her inner muscles contracting. Unable to resist, he stroked in and out a few times, nearly losing himself in her slick depths and muffled sighs.

Matthew wet his fingers in her juices before pressing one

against her smaller hole. She groaned again as his finger slid inside.

He glanced down. "My God, Tori, do you know how erotic you look?" He dropped a kiss on her shoulder. "Both of your holes are filled with me, do you feel it?" He rotated his finger, pumped his cock slowly.

Her head nestled in the crook of her bound hands, and she nodded her head. "Yes, sir," she panted.

Matthew nipped at her neck. "Do you like it?"

"Yes." Her body waggled against his. "But...." Her voice trailed off.

"But what?"

"It's not enough."

The softly whispered words thrilled him and he pushed back into both holes. Tori gasped and bucked beneath him. The air was filled with the low sounds of her encouragement.

Her pussy was wet and hot, eagerly sucking his cock down.

But that wasn't the pleasure he needed tonight.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled out, fully lubricated. Easing open her buttocks, he fitted the head of his cock to her rosebud. "Relax," he whispered, stroking her neck.

"I trust you, Matthew," was her only response.

He fisted his shaft and bore down with slow, even pressure. Beneath him, she whimpered his name and he stilled. "Tori?"

"Don't stop, sir, please. I want this."

The tight ring of her sphincter gripped his head as he pushed further inward. A sudden release, and he slid easily forward, sinking nearly half his cock into her tight channel.

Tori's back arched and she emitted a low-voiced, passion-laden gasp.

"My God," he breathed, fighting for breath. Tori felt so good, so right clamped around him. Never before had he felt such perfection. He groaned as his cock throbbed in response to her tight sheath.

Tori stared at him over her shoulder. Need hazed her eyes and

her lips were deep red as though she'd been biting them.

Matthew hesitated, ready to stop at her slightest word.

"Yes," she hissed, instead. "Yes, damn you."

Her words sent him reeling. He'd never had a lover so responsive. She was a rare jewel.

"More, sir, please. I need more."

Matthew heeded her pleading request and inched his hips forward until his pelvic bone met the soft flesh of her buttocks.

They both groaned.

He remained still for a long moment, and then pulled back only to sink in once more with slow determination.

Tori jerked and wiggled her arse at him, begging him with her body.

He acceded to her unspoken demands and repeated the slow, deliberate motions until sweat beaded his brow.

He could not hold out much longer. His hands gripped her hips, leaving dark marks of ownership. Again and again he tormented them both, filling her ass and withdrawing. Slick, wet heat, tighter than anything he'd ever felt, a million nerve endings all on the edge of lust. He couldn't get enough.

"Please, sir, please," Tori pleaded.

Gritting his teeth and tightening his grip, he sank as far into her as he could. Flattening himself along her sweat-glistened back, he moved her hair aside and nipped at her ear.

"Please, what?"

"Please, sir, may I come?"

Knowing she was that close, hearing her beg for permission with only his cock in her arse, sent him over the edge. He withdrew until only the tip remained in her. Fingers tight at her hips, he inhaled deeply. "Come for me, Tori, come now," he growled, slamming into her tightness one last time, spewing jets of his seed deep into her most secret place. Her low howl of completion quickly followed.

Utterly spent, Matthew fell atop her quivering form, his softening cock slipping from her still-grasping body.

He remained atop her for several long, replenishing moments. He enjoyed the feel of her beneath him, the occasional shiver that wracked her flesh, and the soft sounds of contented approval she made. At last, he knew he could stay no longer and, sucking deep breaths into his lungs, he stood and stripped her bonds away.

He lifted her wrist, smoothed his fingers over her pinkened skin, and touched it with a soothing kiss.

“Matthew, that was incredible.” Her fingers curled over his, a tremor making her voice quiver.

He looked up, meeting her melting, almost shy, gaze.

That was when it hit him.

“Oh God, what have I done?”

The shyness catapulted into confusion and she sat up. “My lord?”

With speed borne from the need to depart with haste, he dressed and then gathered his utensils, tossing them to the bag, loathe now to touch them. These instruments he’d devised for her torture, for revenge, now served to illustrate what a true cad he was.

From the bed, Tori watched him with quiet grace. No screaming recriminations, no demands for marriage. He swallowed rising self-loathing.

In less than two minutes, he shrugged into his coat and tossed the key to the door to her.

She caught it with a frown. “Matthew?”

Her soft tone, worried and drained, pierced his furiously moving thoughts. She knelt in the center of the bed, the coverlet clutched between her glorious breasts, the pink of one nipple just peeking out from the fabric.

He looked away, cursing himself for noticing even that. “I must go.”

“Go?” she repeated incredulously, her spirit stirring.

Shoving the window sash upward, he settled a leg outside and took one final look at her, drinking in her tousled, sensual beauty. He wanted to tell her he’d marry her and ease her mind, even though she did not seem overly beset about it. But his own doubts

and wildly fluctuating emotions held his tongue in check.

Could he truly marry her without ever having her again? Take her to his bed without risking his heart? She tempted him more than any woman ever had.

That worried him more than he cared to admit, even to himself. He stared coolly at her. “There is still the matter of your betrayal, Victoria, but that is a discussion for another night.”

Before she could respond, he slipped out the window and disappeared into the night.

Her Dark Master: Chapter 6

“Victoria? Victoria, wake up.”

The snappish tone of her mother’s voice pulled Tori from a deep sleep. She groaned and burrowed her head under the pillow.

“G’way.”

“I most certainly will not go away, young lady, and you will not spend another moment in this bed. Now, up, up.”

The pillow was yanked away unceremoniously, and her bed covers were stripped away. Glad she’d replaced the torn nightgown, Tori reached for the blankets. “I don’t feel well, Mother.” Not precisely the truth, though her lower body did ache deliciously.

“Colonel Jameson will be here in less than an hour. Victoria, you must make yourself presentable.”

“Mm-hmm.” Hang the Colonel. She would not worry about him anymore. Even the prospect of sitting and conversing with him did not dampen her mood. She felt sated and, in a surprising way, much more secure in her chosen path after the long night with Matthew. Nothing would take that away, not even Matthew himself.

After all, despite his anger and protests, he had searched her out for another night of forbidden intimacy. Did that make her irresistible? She stifled a satisfied giggle under her mother’s stern eye.

She would not marry the Colonel, nor after today would she suffer his presence and subtle threats. This foolishness with him ended today. She would see to that.

Ha, put that in your pipe and smoke it, you old codger.

“Victoria!”

Oh, bloody hell, had she spoken out loud?

Tori rolled over, relieved that her body seemed more adjusted than earlier. Her mother stood beside the bed, holding a strip of black satin left behind by Matthew in his haste to leave. Victoria’s eyes widened before she slammed them shut and gulped.

Remain calm. Look guilty, you are guilty. Act innocent and she will not press the issue. “Yes, Mother?”

“Get out of bed. Have you heard nothing I’ve said? It is too late

for a proper bath.” She frowned and toyed absently with the scrap of silk. “If Glory had not told me you were still sleeping, I fear what would have happened. What sort of impression is that to give the Colonel?”

Tori rolled her eyes, but gingerly slid from the bed. *Put down the gag, Mother.* “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. I promise.”

The words sounded delicious on her tongue and the promise of them even sweeter. Tori understood their truth the moment she spoke. She didn’t know how, but everything would be fine. Or it would be, as soon as she managed to liberate the precious bit of black silk from her mother’s hand without causing any suspicion.

Something in her tone must have pleased her mother because the frown turned into a smile of satisfaction. “Excellent. It is for the best, my dear. I know you will understand once you marry. Times are difficult without securing the proper future. I shall ring for the maid to help you bathe and dress.”

Not knowing what sort of evidence her recent night of passion might have left behind, Tori shook her head. “It will be faster if I bathe myself.”

Drop the scarf, Mother, please!

Her mother finally let the silk flutter to the surface of Tori’s writing desk. “All right, but do not dawdle.”

As soon as the door shut behind her, Tori crossed to the desk and picked up the satin, holding it to her cheek, eyelids drifting shut. Just the touch of the silk next to her skin roused her desire.

Would it always be this way for her with him? Could he command her to such heights without even his physical presence? Tori giggled and wrapped the strip around her wrist, holding it taut.

Yes, he could and always would. The scintillating idea warmed more than just her heart. Pity she had no time to deal with the effects of a good memory. She must prepare herself to deal with what should soon be a bad memory. The Colonel.

“I hope Matthew doesn’t show up while Jameson is here. He might get the wrong idea.”

She laughed again, almost giddy with confidence in her future.

Nothing could go wrong for her today. Matthew might have tried to resist her, but he had failed. He had come to her for revenge, but instead had found something much more precious.

Not that he knew it.

No matter. He'd been slow to realize he wanted her, but now he could not deny it. He might be slow to love her, but love her, he would. She just knew it.

It took her less than half an hour to wash and dress, her body growing less sore with each movement. Only sitting at certain angles seemed to aggravate her delightfully abused bottom.

Good Lord, even after having written and read about the act, the actuality proved to be much more exhilarating. Intoxicating. She wanted to do it again.

Moments later, squirming on the horsehair seat in the drawing room, she tried to banish such thoughts until after the Colonel departed. A quick glance at the mantle clock told her he'd been closeted with her mother and brother for nearly a quarter of an hour. Were they haggling over her bride price?

Not that it was necessary, but they didn't know that. She only hoped they would not agree to terms before Matthew could realize he belonged with her. Not just for a stolen night, but for always.

"Ah, Miss Ashford, so glad to find you smiling and in good spirits this fine day."

Colonel Jameson appeared in the doorway, flanked behind by her family. Ryder glowered and her mother looked peaked. A knot twisted Tori's stomach and she rose, the smile fading.

"Is everything well?"

"Aye, my dear, could not be better. Unless we were already wed, that is." He chuckled, his mustache dancing above his lips.

Tori pulled her gaze away from the spectacle of his whiskers and looked at Ryder. A deep scowl covered his face. Her apprehension grew.

"Victoria, we need to talk. Come into my study." Ryder reached a hand out to her, but the Colonel intercepted her before she could reach him.

“That is not necessary, my lord, as we’ve agreed to all the pertinent details.”

Oh, no.

Ryder pointedly dislodged the man’s hand from her arm, and she stepped back. “She is my sister, Colonel. Until she is no longer in my house, she has my protection.”

Her gaze bouncing between the two bristling men, Tori swallowed hard. Ryder was a very dangerous man when crossed, and as much as she wanted him to toss the Colonel out on his ear, she felt the need to soothe the tension. Besides, even if the Colonel’s offer had been accepted, it was too soon to explain to her brother about Matthew. What could she tell him? Nothing. It had to come from Matthew himself, and Matthew wasn’t here.

“It’s all right, Ryder. I’ll be fine.”

They shared a look of sibling understanding. He didn’t like it, but he finally accepted it. With a grunt, he swung away toward the door. “I’m going out.”

Lady Ashford’s shoulders dropped and her head lifted. Her obvious relief caused another wrench of discomfort in Tori. What exactly had been said in that meeting?

Damn, she hated being a pawn.

“Victoria, I have some exciting news,” her mother started, only to fall silent at the wave of the Colonel’s hand.

“Please, madame, allow me the pleasure?”

Lady Ashford’s hesitant acquiescence further fueled Tori’s unease.

“The pleasure of what?” she demanded, not giving a whit if she sounded churlish.

The Colonel eyed her silently, his mustache twitching every once in a while. Refusing to be intimidated, Tori matched his stare, going so far as to raise her eyebrow. The mustache bristled more, and Jameson snapped his gaze to her mother.

“Lady Ashford, I will take Miss Ashford out for a carriage ride.”

Tori clenched the folds of her gown and widened her eyes at her mother in a mute plea. It was one thing to have to tolerate a draw-

ing room visit. But a carriage ride, alone with the Colonel, would be intolerable.

Oddly, her mother refused to meet her eyes. “Of course, Colonel.”

Oh, why had she rejected her brother’s protection? “But—”

“I will see you upon your return, dear,” her mother said. “We will have much to discuss, I am sure.”

Tori scrambled, trying to figure out what the deuce to do. She couldn’t be absent from the house if Matthew visited. She needed to talk to him before things with the Colonel went too far.

“Honestly, Colonel, I appreciate the gesture, but I am feeling a bit off this morning. I had thought to retire to my room and rest for a while. Perhaps another time?” It would never happen, but *he* didn’t need to know that just yet. Anything to be rid of the odious man and his blustering ego.

“No, Miss Ashford, that will not do. Now, collect your parasol so that we may be off.” Short, to the point, and quite obviously expectant of her immediate obedience.

The unease now blew into full alarm. “What is going on here? I demand you tell me. It is quite obviously my future you plan to discuss. Tell me now.”

Lady Ashford made a small noise that sounded like a cross between a groan and a sigh. Tori flicked a glance at her mother, but found only a pale face and anxious, pleading eyes.

“What has been done?”

The Colonel turned to her mother and sketched a brief bow. “Do not worry, Lady Ashford, I expected this reaction. Believe me, when we return, she will be much more receptive. Come, Miss Ashford.”

Wrapping his hand tightly around her upper arm, the Colonel quite nearly dragged her from the salon. Tori was horrified, especially that her mother would allow such a thing to happen.

She felt as if her family had abandoned her. They had given their blessings to the Colonel’s offer, an offer they knew she would have rejected. She didn’t want to believe it of either of them, not

truly. Well, she was not going to meekly submit to any of their machinations. She would, by God, get herself out of this mess.

Yanking her arm away, she smoothed the crushed material of her sleeve and lifted her nose. “No force is necessary, Colonel. A ride in the park would be lovely.”

His bushy gray brow rose but he nodded. “I knew you would come ‘round, my dear. You do seem prone to these bursts of emotion, quickly followed by your impeccable logic. Your maid can ride behind us.”

The door shut behind them and she climbed into the waiting carriage, her heart thudding madly like a horse before a race. Whatever happened in Ryder’s study, she must find a way to make it *un-happen*.

Save for the clattering of the wheels over the road, the ride to the park was silent. She would wait for him to make the opening gambit. Great care must be taken, of that she was quite certain.

Apparently, only she could save herself from marriage to this man. She certainly had an ace up her sleeve, though confiding her lack of innocence to him was her very last option.

But if it came to that, she most definitely would.

“Tell me, Miss Ashford, what interests you?”

Ah, nice, innocuous conversation to begin. She could do that. “I am quite adept at firearms. I prefer not to hunt, though. Seems dreadfully unfair to the fox.”

He chuckled. “Your tender heart is but one of your many delights, Miss Ashford. Where did you learn to shoot?”

Tori hesitated. “A friend taught me.”

“Corwin?”

Slowly she turned to look at him, surprised he would make the connection. “Yes.”

“Heard much about him. Good man. Good eye.”

Tori said nothing, wondering where he was going with this.

“Bit of a rake, though. After his bungled engagement, swore he’d never marry. For any reason.” The Colonel studied her hard. “But you knew that, of course. Him being a *close* family friend and

all.”

That was before me, she wanted to shout and remove that smug smirk from his face. Instead she shrugged. “Corwin is more than just a roué, Colonel, but he keeps his interests very near to his chest. But you are correct that he is a family friend. In some way or another, he has looked out for me and has even been a sort of protector, if you will.” There, let him ponder that for a bit. While she would not claim Matthew directly just yet, she could infer a long-held, unbreakable connection.

“Hm. Miss Ashford.” He shifted in his seat to look at her, an abashed expression on his face. “I do hope you will forgive my boldness, but I would only like to say that I, too, can be a protector. My men looked up to me, and I ensured their safety every day I commanded them. I could quite easily do the same for you. You would always be safe with me.”

“Safe from what, Colonel?”

“From what or from who meant you harm or disrespect. I may not hold a title, but arrogant as it sounds, I do hold an enormous amount of sway within Society. Rest assured, my dear, that in the unlikely event should anything ever arise that could mar you, I would gladly, unendingly, shield and protect you.”

Ha! She did not need his protection.

To be honest, though, she did wonder for an instant what he would do to her blackmailer. Mulling over his audacious comments, Tori fidgeted on the seat as they made their second circle of the park. Enormous sway from a man she’d never even heard of much less encountered in three Seasons? Doubtful. And his offer of protection, though quite odd, was not required. What was required, however, was an answer. As happened so often before, impatience got the best of her.

“What happened in the study?” She heard the snap creeping in her voice.

No reply, but his hand began a rhythmic slap-slap-slap lightly against his thigh.

“Colonel?”

“Ask me politely, as a gently bred lady should do.”

Mind games seemed to be a favorite of his. “Fine. Will you please tell me what happened in the study?”

“Not quite perfect, but certainly acceptable. You are trainable, which is one of the first things I noticed about you.” He smiled warmly and his mustache lifted high onto his cheekbones. “Among many of your fine attributes, of course.”

“The study?”

He laughed. “And persistent, too. All right then, my dear, since it appears you will continue to bedevil me until I tell you.” He stroked his mustache over and over. “You are much like your brother in both your tenacity and your pugnacious nature. He proved a bit more troublesome than I thought—again much like you. But, with your mother’s help and persuasion, he finally agreed. Albeit with some reluctance.”

From the moment he mentioned Ryder, an icy vein of desperation slid through her. She did not wish it to be true, but there could be no other explanation.

“Agreed to what?” she asked softly.

“Our marriage, my dear. Your brother not only granted his permission for us to wed, but also agreed to special license. Next week, if I can procure it.”

“What?” she shrieked. “I do not believe it. Ryder would never allow such a thing.”

The Colonel’s countenance grew dark and furious. “You will act appropriately, Miss Ashford. You will be my wife and when that happens, you will learn your place. No matter what it takes.”

“I’ll not marry you, Colonel. This farce has gone on too long. Take me home. Immediately.”

“I understand you’ve had a shock, my dear —”

“I am not and will never be your dear, Colonel. I will not marry you.”

He lunged forward, clutching her shoulders and shoving his face close to hers. “You will. And you will obey me. Do not force me to do something you will regret, Victoria.”

Struggling to break free, Tori kicked at him, but the folds of her gown made the blows ineffectual. "Release me," she demanded, true fear shaking her. "Colonel, you are hurting me."

His breath came in short sharp gasps, and his eyes remained wild and intense. But slowly he seemed to regain control of himself. Sitting back, he let go of her arms and smoothed his fingers over his mustache.

He exhaled slowly. "Regrettable that you forced me into such a display, Victoria, but I trust you understand this is not a silly little game you may play or not as your whim dictates. We will wed next week." He tapped the top of the carriage with his knuckles, staring out the side window. "I will refrain from visiting you until then, so as to avoid any undue speculation. I would not go to this marriage with any scandal over you."

Shocked into silence by both his actions and his words, Tori rubbed her sore upper arms.

"You will find me to be a caring and giving man, Victoria. You will not be unhappy."

"How do you know what I will find? You don't know me at all."

He looked at her, a hooded gaze that held menace and promise. "I know you far better than you are aware. Here we are."

The coach stopped in front of her house and Tori scrambled out the door without waiting for either man to assist her. She ran into the house, past the butler and Glory. Tears now streamed down her face. Bursting into Ryder's study, she cursed when she found it empty.

"Where's Lord Ashford?" she demanded of the maid.

"He has not returned, my lady. Are you all right?"

Tori drew a deep breath and swiped angrily at the tears. Damned if she would let that monster affect her this way. Neither he nor any blackmailer would get the best of her. She was made of much sterner stuff.

Not only that, but she had Matthew on her side. He would know what to do. She didn't believe for an instant the Colonel's slander about Matthew's vow to remain a bachelor forever. And even if it

were true, he would not scruple to come to her assistance. Dashing off a quick note, she sealed it with wax and straightened up. Hesitating, she tapped the folded paper against her palm. Matthew was still furious with her. It would be a mistake to push him. A mistake to make him feel ensnared. She turned back to Ryder's desk for a moment before rushing back to the maid who hovered in the doorway.

"Glory, I am going out."

"What should I tell your mother?"

Tori battled the temptation to tell her to go straight to Hades, along with the Colonel. Why her mother chose this man for her, she did not comprehend. What did the older man say that convinced both Ryder and her mother to agree to such a ridiculous thing?

"Tell her I went out."

"Lord Ashford, my lord."

Matthew froze momentarily. Had Victoria squealed? He wouldn't blame Ryder if he called him out right now. Hang the law and the seconds.

Ryder brushed past Stires, storming into the study. Slamming himself into the leather chair facing the desk, he raked a hand through his hair.

Matthew braced himself for his best friend's fury.

"Tori is going to marry the Colonel."

Reeling, Matthew reached out hands splaying on the sturdy desktop. "What?"

Ryder nodded. "He and Mother cornered me this morning. There is something not right with this whole situation, but I'm damned if I can deduce it."

Matthew stood and poured two brandies, struggling with Ryder's stark announcement and his own relief that his friend didn't know what he'd done. Gulping down the brandy, he refilled his glass, still uncertain of what to do. Tori's sudden engagement only complicated matters. He needed time to think, to plan. He

swallowed hard. “So the chit is getting married,” he murmured tonelessly. “‘Bout time, don’t you think? She’s been left to run wild for long enough. Three seasons, Ashford. One more and she ran the risk of spinsterhood.”

He didn’t want to think about Tori, not about her lies, her betrayal, her body. And most especially about her upcoming wedding. Let her marry the bastard. She meant nothing to him.

Liar.

“Devil take it, Corwin. Pull your head out of your arse and help me.”

“With what?”

“I must find some means to disqualify the Colonel.”

“What for? And if you’re so keen on your *darling* little sister not marrying him, just refuse his suit.”

“I did, actually. Refuse him. But Mother has some sort of bee in her bonnet about the whole affair and insisted upon the engagement. Very nearly went into hysterics about the whole thing.”

That caught his attention. Matthew lowered his glass. “Your mother?” Finally, his brain snapped into line and he really looked at Ryder, who avoided his gaze. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing,” Ryder grunted without conviction. “For years she’s been content to let Tori do as she pleased, until suddenly this Jameison turns up and I find my little sister betrothed to him.”

“Fortune hunter?”

“Doesn’t seem so.” Ryder frowned, swirling the brandy in his glass. “The man appears well enough off. Mother’s insistence is the only reason I agreed to the whole affair. Figured it would give us time to come up with something to use against him.”

“Count me out, old boy. What your sister decides to do with her life is none of my concern.” The lie was heavy on his lips.

Ryder rounded on him. “Tori decided nothing. I’m asking you to make it your concern, Corwin. I need your resources.”

Eyeing his friend warily, Matthew stood. “What resources?”

“Come on, man, I’ve no time for this. I know you have sources of information that the rest of our world is not privy to—holdovers

from the war. You must ask them what they know of the Colonel.”

“What if she wants to marry him?” Damn, just speaking those words tore at him. Matthew gritted his teeth and glared at Ryder. “Don’t assume she’s unwilling, Ashford. You may not know your sister as well as you believe.”

Ryder sprang up, slamming his hands on the desk. “What the hell are you implying?”

“Not a thing. I say again what she wants to do is up to her. No one can control her.” Oh, but that statement was so untrue. Matthew remembered all too well that he could control her with ease. With passion.

“What is going on between you two?” Ryder snapped. “First the dinner party, now this. You’ve been acting beyond your usual boorishness with her. Why?”

“She means nothing to me, besides being the bratty sister of an old friend.”

Ryder contemplated him, and then slung back the brandy. “No,” he muttered, shaking his head. “There’s something more. Blast it, why does everyone have to be so secretive. What has she done to you?”

Matthew chuckled mirthlessly. He lifted his glass. “She is a woman, Ashford, is there anything more that needs to be said?”

Ryder’s eyes widened. “Good God, you’re in love with her.”

The pronouncement hung in the air between them. While his friend gaped at him, Matthew struggled to maintain a calm façade. Love? Impossible. Desire, passion, lust. That was all he felt for Victoria Ashford. “Have you taken complete leave of your senses, man? She is a troublesome little chit.”

“Careful, Corwin, the truth is in your protest. When did this happen? *How* did this happen? This is the most damnable thing.”

He gritted his teeth. “Listen closely, Ashford, I am not in love with your deceitful sister.”

“Deceitful?” Ryder shook his head. “She is not Cecily. Tori could not lie to save her life.”

Matthew remained silent, unwilling to refute the words though

he knew them to be false. She may not have lied with ease or even for gain, but she'd done it nonetheless. And so much more.

"Christ, this is completely beyond all comprehension." Ryder stalked away, returned and gave him a disgusted look. "What I am about to tell you must never be repeated, Matthew. To do so would cause irreparable harm to my family. Needless harm."

The hair on Matthew's neck rose and he shifted in his chair. "Of course, you have my word."

"I would trust no one else with this." Ryder gave him a hard look. "Or with my sister." He blew out a sharp, stream of air. "I am not my father's only son."

Matthew's mouth slacked. "What?"

The muscle in Ryder's jaw ticked and his throat worked. "Just after my parents married, my father had an affair. Lincoln Wolffe was the product of that union."

Stunned, Matthew rose. "When was he born?"

"The records show the day after me."

"But you have your doubts?"

Ryder nodded, striding past the desk to look out onto the garden. "Aye. He came to see me, you know. At Eton. We were thirteen."

Matthew remembered that year, and several more, to be ones filled with fun, entitlement and the discovery of women. "Why didn't you tell me?"

His friend's shoulders remained stiff. "I swore my silence to my father."

"What did this Wolffe want when he visited you?"

"Just to see me," he said flatly, turning around at last. "Said he was happier being the son of impoverished country gentleman than the high-falutin second son of an earl."

"You believed him?"

"At the time I did. But now I'm not so sure." Ryder smiled faintly. "He seemed to be a good man, Matthew. If I'm right about that, he doesn't deserve or need to be thus exposed to the world. And if I'm wrong—well, of course, a bastard cannot inherit the

title, but the scandal would be devastating.”

With a nod, Matthew picked up his quill and began jotting notes. “What causes you to doubt Wolffe now?”

“The Colonel,” Ryder said succinctly. “I learned this morning that he mentioned giving his regards to Mr. Wolffe. Jameson must be using him as leverage against Mother, and that’s what convinced her to agree to the marriage.”

Matthew winced. For half a second he’d managed to forget about the quandary with Tori. He’d delayed conceding to himself he would marry her, but this sudden engagement changed everything. He could not allow another man to have her. His honor would not allow it.

He’d been the one to take her innocence, however unknowingly. He could not send her to another man’s bed in such a state. Yes, he would offer for her, but out of duty and honor. Not love.

And he must do whatever he could to protect her—and her family—from the disaster now looming. Once this dilemma was solved, he would deal with Tori.

“Have you discussed this with your mother?”

“No, she doesn’t know I am aware of Wolffe’s existence. I intend to keep it that way. I’ll not have her any more upset than necessary.”

“Commendable as that notion is, it may be unavoidable. Where does Wolffe live?”

Ryder eyed him warily? “Why?”

“If I’m to get your ass out of this mess, then I need all the facts. That includes any information I can dig up on him. I’d like a look at his birth certificate, too. What has made you unsure of his date of birth?”

Tension radiated from his friend and he cracked his knuckles, looking away. “I can think of no other reason the Colonel would be able to use him against us. Mother would be devastated to learn of his existence at any time, but so soon after her marriage? Think of the gossip that even now would torment her. Her life since Father’s death has been the social scene. To have her name bandied about

would likely destroy her.”

What a disaster. There was more at stake here than his own sense of honor over taking Tori’s virginity. More than freeing her from her engagement to the Colonel. His friends were facing a familial crisis that was as crucial to them as his brother’s death had been to him. Should Lady Ashford remove herself from society, she would likely take Tori with her. And that, he could not allow.

The only thing to do, it seemed, was rid themselves of the Colonel. “I will agree to look into the matter of Jameson for you. And Wolffe?”

“I’ll take care of him,” Ryder said flatly. “When this is done, I’ll pay him a visit. It’s long overdue.”

Of course. Ryder never doubted his own honor, never failed to do the right thing.

Matthew looked down at the paper, seeing Tori’s face as he’d left her early this morning.

She’d been so passionate, so giving. In fact, she gave to him everything dear to her, including her heart, without asking for anything. She’d never requested he marry her, never demanded he do his duty or protect her honor.

Good God. He’d been as wrong about her as a man could be.

“Do not worry, Ryder, I will fix this. All of it.”

He rang for Stires.

“Yes, sir?”

Scribbling out a message, Matthew sealed it in an envelope and handed it over. “See to it that Wiggs receives this immediately. Discretion at the highest, Stires.”

The man bowed, taking the envelope. “Always, sir.”

After he left, Ryder raked a hand through his hair, frown still firmly in place. “Thank you, Matthew. I know Victoria thanks you as well.”

An immediate vision of Tori on her knees thanking him with her superb oral skills rose and Matthew shifted in his chair. How was it possible the chit was a virgin? But he knew she was. Or had been, of that he was certain. Her lively spirit, always so apparent when

they were together informally, shone through beautifully when she'd posed as the courtesan. She'd been the perfect balance of vixen and virgin.

Until he'd taken her.

Shaking his head, he rose. "Wiggs will contact me soon. I'll let you know what he finds."

Once his friend was gone, Matthew paced the study, contemplating his newfound situation.

How could he have not known she was everything he'd ever searched for, everything he'd ever fantasized about? A tease, a joy, irrepressibly funny, and smart as a whip. A caring nature for those less fortunate, a ferocious protectress of her family and friends. His intimate knowledge of her bedroom manner melded with what he knew of her everyday life, and he realized that if such existed, she could quite possibly be the most perfect woman he'd ever known.

Of course, he had to marry her. Their marriage would not be a quiet, docile one, and that suited him just fine. He rather supposed he ought to ask her brother's permission. Matthew scowled, imagining the gleeful, knowing look on Ryder's face when he presented his case.

He sensed a lifetime of unending taunting and I-told-you-so's from that quarter.

Oh, well, he supposed there were worse things.

There was a discreet knock at the study door just before it opened. "A note has arrived for you, my lord."

Matthew frowned. "Wiggs already?"

Stires coughed. "No, sir. Left by a young woman. Seemed in quite a state, if I may say so."

His brows shot up even as he took the note. "Thank you, Stires."
"Certainly."

Tearing open the vellum, he smoothed out the parchment, scanning the words.

Tori, asking him to meet her.

He crumpled the note and tossed it into the fire. *Oh no, little dove, on my terms, not yours.*

“Sir?”

He jumped not realizing the butler had remained. “Yes?”

“She asked me to give you this one, should you destroy the other.”

Matthew shook his head and suppressed a laugh. Impertinent little chit. He took the second message.

Matthew, quit being obstinate. I need you. Urgently. I may be in danger. No, I'm not over-reacting. I cannot speak of it here. Please come to the bookstore.

“Bloody damn hell, what’s she done now?”

Slapping the paper onto his desk, he spun on his heel and shouldered past Stires. “Should Lord Ashford return before I do, keep him here. Ply him with brandy, but do not allow him to leave.”

“Of course, sir. And may I say where you will be?”

Matthew pulled on his riding coat and headed for the door. “Tell him I’m rescuing his sister. Again.”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 7

“Miss Ashford,” Matthew said as he came up behind her.

Tori whirled, relief quite evident in her pale face. He could see that had it not been for the busy pedestrian promenade, she would have flung herself into his arms.

“Lord Corwin.” She curtsied, gaze darting left and right. “I am grateful you could come. Did it take just the one note or both?”

“Both,” he replied. “Where the devil is your maid?”

She had the decency to blush. “I’m afraid I am alone at the moment.”

“Good God, do you truly wish to ruin yourself?”

An unspoken *again* hovered between them. She looked away. “Maybe it would be the best thing to do.” Tori’s head tipped and her brows knitted. With a small inhalation, she nodded slowly. “Gracious, my lord, it is a brilliant suggestion.”

“Forget it, Miss Ashford. Go inside, last row of shelves to the left. There’s a door leading to a small chamber. I will knock twice. Pause, then twice more. Only then, will you open the door.” He resisted the urge to curse, furious once more with her.

Except this time, his anger was directed at her blatant disregard for her reputation. Again. Shunting aside the mocking voice that asked when *he* became such a paragon, he glared at her. “Go. Now.”

Looking quite put out, Tori finally huffed and entered the bookstore. Matthew strolled away, ducking into the tobacconist’s shop three doors up. After perusing the aromatic wares, he made his selection and arranged delivery to his townhouse.

All the while knowing she would be more than irked with him for making her wait. There was no other way to do it. Following her in would arouse as much gossip as her walking down the avenue alone may already have done.

At last he made his way back to the bookstore and slipped toward the back room. Rapping on the door, he looked behind him to ensure no one watched, and then turned to knock again, finding

instead a hopping mad, bewitching, green-eyed imp.

Reaching out, she grabbed his coat lapel and yanked him forward. Caught off guard, he stumbled inside, arms automatically curling around her in an attempt to stabilize himself.

She laughed softly. "I thought you'd never ask." Clinging to his shoulders, she pressed a passionate kiss to his lips.

Tori tasted as gloriously as he'd fought so hard against remembering. She was rich and luxurious, like a hot brandy spiced for winter.

With a groan, he deepened the kiss, gently parting her lips with his tongue, seeking the further sweetness of her mouth. She permeated every part of his being, and he quite enjoyed it.

Matthew broke the kiss only because the need for breath intruded. Settling his forehead to hers, he closed his eyes and tried to regain his composure.

Odd that such a tiny little thing could so easily destroy both his senses and his stability. Quite a hold she had on him, but he was not prepared to admit that aloud. The little chit had plenty of ammunition to use against him, and a large part of it pressed urgently against his breeches, seeking the welcoming cradle of her thighs.

"You are well?" His hand crept to her backside. "No ill-effects from last night?"

"I am marvelous, sir, thank you. Do you know," she said in a voice of wonder, "that was our first real kiss? Besides Hyde Park, I mean. That doesn't count because you were vexed with me."

He blinked and moved backward. "Have you suddenly lost your ability to count, Tori? There have been many more than one."

She gave a low laugh, pressing tightly to him. "No, no, I meant it was a real kiss. Just you and I, no games, no blindfolds, nothing but true passion and desire between us."

Games.

Settling his hands to her shoulders, he pushed her gently away, spearing her with an intense frown. "Speaking of games, do you care to explain why you bribed a whore to take her place in my bed? And for that matter, how?"

He had every right to ask the question, but the sheer bluntness made her wince.

“Funny how everything seems to come back to the Colonel, isn’t it?”

“What the devil has this to do with the Colonel?” Matthew moved across the small storeroom and settled an elbow along a shelf, one brow lifted as he waited for her to continue.

“Blast it Matthew, don’t look at me like that. I was desperate.”

“Is that what you call it?”

He sounded bored, but she saw the muscle pulsing in his jaw and the anger building in his shoulders.

“No, no, no, you’re getting it all wrong.”

“Enlighten me.”

“I’m trying,” she snapped with exasperation, “but you keep interrupting me.”

He gave her a sharp half-bow. “My apologies. I’ll not speak until you’re done, shall I?”

“Good, see that you don’t.” Tori paced the small room, watching the dust her skirts kicked up, trying to find the right words. The ones that would replace his rage with understanding.

“Apparently, when Father died, he made Mother a most unusual promise and had Ryder swear to see it done.” She peeked at Matthew and found him watching intently. His regard made her shiver and threaten to veer off course. “Father promised that *she* could pick my husband for me. And only she. No need for Ryder to approve the match, unless she wanted him to.”

“Why do you think he would he do that?”

“I don’t know, honestly. But I was only nine at the time. For the first two Seasons, Mother allowed me to make my own decisions and I rejected several suitors.” She paused, definitely not ready to reveal he was the reason why she turned them all down. Somehow, she didn’t think he’d appreciate the sentiment.

Another whirl and small cloud of dust. She clasped her hands behind her back and rocked on her heels. “Then, this year, she began muttering about husbands and weddings and unattain—uh,

unattached men. She told me this was the year for my wedding.” Tori looked up at him, a grimace on her face. “Even if she had to plan it for me.”

“Evidently she meant it.”

“Aye. But I did not think her serious about the Colonel. Not until *he* told me the pact was well-made and unbreakable. We are to wed by special license next week.” Tori could not stifle her shudder of distaste.

Matthew finally pushed away from the shelving, stalking toward her. He tipped her chin up, his finger as strong and commanding as ever. “Get to the whorehouse, little dove.”

The nickname caused a tingle between her thighs, and Tori groaned, surreptitiously squeezing them together.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he reprimanded her. “Talk now, and if you’re explanation is satisfactory, then we will see what sort of reward you get. However,” he leaned close, his voice dropping to a low growl, “disappoint me and there shall be consequences.”

She shivered, not sure which she preferred. Apparently he saw her dilemma, because he reached up and tweaked her nipple through her day dress, then stepped back with a wicked chuckle. “Continue.”

“Right,” she squeaked out and then cleared her throat. “The night we danced, I happened to overhear you and Ryder discussing your plans. I was not very happy about it and, well, it was quite a rash decision, I admit, but not truly out of character. Don’t you agree? I am a bit impetuous.”

“Exceedingly,” he said.

Pausing only to offer a small glare, she continued, “And headstrong. God knows you’ve told me that often enough over the last fifteen years.”

“Why did you do it?” The command in his voice made her unable to do anything but answer.

“I was furious that you would be with another woman. Especially a, a, lightskirt.”

“A whore.”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

Tori tightened her mouth and shook her head. “You are supposed to be quiet until I’m finished.”

His low chuckle sent shivers straight to her clit. “Come now, little dove, who do you think is really the master here?”

She licked her lips, but looked away, suddenly shy. No blind-folds, she’d said. Truly just the two of them. It made being submissive to him as her true self seem much more intimate. More powerful.

“Tori? Who?”

“You are the master, sir,” she finally whispered. “Damn you.”

He stroked her neck and his thumb traced her bottom lip. “I am damned, little dove. Never doubt it. Finish your story. You must return before your absence is noted.”

“I told Glory I was indisposed and asked not to be disturbed. They’ll leave me alone for a while longer.”

“Clever girl,” he said with a slight smile. “But I always knew that.”

Her eyes widened. “You did?”

“Finish,” he responded.

Somewhat disappointed that he wouldn’t answer, she nodded, amending the facts only slightly. “All right. I feared what might happen with the Colonel, so I made the reckless decision that I would not go into my marriage bed without ever having known any sort of passion. Any kind of tenderness.”

“And you expected to find that at a whorehouse? Are you mad?”

She glared at him and shook her head. “Of course not, you dolt. I knew where you were. Gold has the power to open many doors and mouths. Once I made my way inside, finding you was easy as rubbing two coins together.”

“How did you know I would choose you?” He seemed morbidly fascinated by what could have happened.

She preferred not to think about it, but couldn’t repress a shudder of post-apprehension. “I didn’t think that far ahead. I just

knew.”

“Crazy, ridiculous, idiotic, little chit. My God, think of what could have happened to you!” He spun away and returned to the shelf, keeping his back to her. Tension stiffened his shoulders and his fingers slapped against this thigh.

He was very angry. With good reason. “But that’s all in the past, Matthew.”

He spun around. “You *knew*?” he spat. “What in the blazes could you have possibly known? You were a virgin, an innocent. Did you even think of the position you put me in? You know nothing of what happens between a man and woman in the bedroom, much less the games indulged in by those who frequent a whorehouse such as Lizzeth’s.”

Stung by his criticism, she lifted her chin. “I’ve read *The Opal Chronicles*, Matthew. I knew very well what I was getting into.”

He snorted. “Unbelievable. This gets more fantastical by the moment. Stories in an illicit paper do not offer a realistic view of sex.” Shoving his fingers through his hair, he exhaled sharply and glared at her for the hundredth time of the conversation. “Is that your entire explanation? That you worried about not finding passion with the Colonel rutting between your legs?”

Tori gasped. “How dare you talk to me that way? I didn’t do it on a lark, you great oaf! I did it because I’m in love with you.” Infuriated, she reached out to strike him, but he caught her wrists in a tight grip.

“You love me?”

Tori looked over his shoulder, mute and belligerent.

He gave her a little shake, unable to reconcile the wildcat in his arms with the submissive miss of his fantasies. Both had the power to raise his ardor equally. “Answer me.”

“Why else would I do it, Matthew? Despite what you seem to think, I am not a whore. I did it out of love. I could not go to another man without ever knowing your touch.”

Sane thought flew away. Matthew crushed her to him, capturing her mouth in a demanding, exhilarating kiss. Feverishly, he worked

at the stays of her gown, stripping her bodice down, then her chemise until her beautiful, high breasts were exposed to him.

Thrusting his hips into hers, he walked her backward until her bottom nudged the wall. With one hand, he lifted her arms over her head, still firmly clasped at the wrist.

“Keep them there,” he ordered, letting go only when she nodded, wide-eyed and flushed. Her tongue swiped along her bottom lip and he groaned.

Matthew caught each of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, tweaking them with light pressure that grew stronger as her need rose visibly. Her hips swayed and thrust towards him, but her hands stayed in place.

He continued to pinch and caress her for a few moments more before pulling up her skirts until her pussy became visible to his hungry gaze. “You’re wet already, aren’t you, little dove? If I put my finger inside your tightness, you’ll coat it with your sweet juices.”

With her eyes squeezed shut, she nodded sharply.

“God,” he muttered before putting words into action.

They both gasped low when his finger slid into her cunny. Tori’s back arched and thrust her tits out further when he added a second finger.

“You feel incredible, little dove. So slick and inviting. Shall I put my cock inside you? Do you want that?”

Again she nodded.

He chuckled. “Not quite that easy. Tell me what you want.”

Her eyes flew open. “What?”

“Tell me. Give me the words. As you, Victoria. No games. No bindings or blindfolds. Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

Her cheeks brightened even more as embarrassment battled need. “Please, don’t make me.”

Matthew withdrew his fingers then slowly plunged them in, widening them just a bit. Her whole body responded and her arms dropped momentarily before she flattened them high against the wall again.

Aye, she was well and truly his. The knowledge stunned and excited him beyond all measure. With quick movements, he unbuttoned his breeches. His cock, hard and eager, sprung upward and he laid the hot length along her thigh.

“Oh God, yes,” she breathed.

“Tell me.”

She sucked in deep, sharp breaths then met his gaze square on. “Please, sir, put your cock in me and fuck—oh!”

As soon as she uttered the word sir, he was lost. Matthew pulled his fingers out and fitted the head of his cock to her tight hole. He sank in, effectively cutting off her ability to speak. Her hands dropped to his shoulder, but he didn’t reprimand her.

That added one more punishment to her tally, but it was a punishment he would claim at his leisure.

“Fast, sir, please. Fast and hard.”

Matthew groaned and slammed into her, her back thudding against the wall with each thrust. She took everything he gave and offered just as much heat and passion in return. Her pussy clenched around him, demanding satisfaction as well.

Tori’s breath sped up, coming in little hitching gasps. When she ground her clit against him and stayed there, he knew she was close to coming. Her fingertips dug into his shoulders.

“Ask,” he panted out. “Ask me for it.”

“Please. Sir. May. I. Come.” Each word was ground out as she struggled to obey.

“Aye, come for me, little dove.”

And she did, clutching with need around his cock. The strength of her orgasm triggered his own. Matthew slammed into her one last time, sending his seed deep inside her body with powerful jets.

He held her up for a few moments while they both regained their breath and composure. Finally, he slid from her and tucked his now limp cock inside his clothing, then straightened her gown.

She gave him a weak chuckle. “Will it always be this way?”

Matthew smoothed her hair from her face and kissed her tenderly, accepting the fact he was well and truly caught by this innocent

vixen. He would not let her go.

“If it is, I’ll die an early death.”

She smacked his arm and laughed. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Come along, Tori. We’ve got much to resolve. Any further secrets you care to divulge?”

Tori’s fingers stumbled over her bodice, the movement so small he would have given it no heed but for the odd flush now mounting her cheeks.

“Victoria?”

“I should get home.”

“You should tell me what has you so stirred now.” His gaze dropped to her stomach. “You’re not breeding are you?”

She rolled her eyes. “It is a bit early to know that. But would it truly be such a horrid thought? I rather adore the idea of giving you a son.”

A son. Matthew’s breath caught and he struggled against a smile. He, too, found the idea enchanting. “We’ll discuss that later, little one. For now, tell me quickly what other tidbits ramble in that head of yours. I’ve no desire to discover them on our wedding day. Or before.”

Her fingers twisted one over the other, the pace increasing until she finally tossed her hands up. “Fine then, Lord Inquisitor, I shall tell you. But know it is no harm, no foul. Naught shall be discovered, I promise. I hope.”

Matthew’s jaw clenched. He did not like where this was going. “Victoria.”

Sighing mightily, she peeked up at him. “I must confess I do a bit more than read *The Opal*, sir. I write for it as well.”

“Good God,” was all he could mutter.

“I’ll have you know, I’m quite good.” She folded her arms over her chest, lower lip jutting out in a pout that should have looked ridiculous, but instead had him wanting to soothe her injured feelings.

He rubbed her arms and pressed a small kiss to the crown of her head to hide his exasperated sigh. “Of course you are, Tori. But

how in the hell did you get involved—no, later. For now, no more writing or anything out of the norm until we are wed. Agreed?”

“I can’t.” She pulled back, worry clear on her face. “I’ve a deadline tomorrow I must meet.”

“Out of the question.”

“No, really, it will be perfect. I’ll send him one final piece to finish my contract.”

“You have a contract?” he repeated, utterly stupefied. Had he hallucinated the whole episode? Must have. It was the only logical explanation, really.

“Under what name do you write?” he asked in horrified fascination.

“Master D,” she said in a small voice. “I chose to write behind a man’s name for obvious enough reasons. However, I will write this final installment and then put down my quill for good, if you wish.”

He knew the name and had enjoyed the stories. Thoroughly. Matthew raked his hand through his hair. “Let us not be hasty.” He drew his finger along her collarbone down to the tip of her quivering breast. “You shall write them only for me.”

“For you? But...”

“Yes.” He smiled. “Like a sensual Arabian Nights. For my pleasure and at my command.”

She nodded, eyes gleaming. “I like the sound of that. Oh, yes.” She clapped her hands. “I have a wonderful idea already. I could... *mph.*”

Matthew pressed his palm over her lips and raised his eyes heavenward in search of divine guidance. “One thing at a time, Tori. We must depart.”

After he determined they were both presentable, they slipped undetected from the storeroom. He halted her behind the bookcases with a light hand on her arm. How responsive she was.

“Return home as quickly as you can. I’ll come by tonight and make my offer to your brother.”

Instantly tears shone in her eyes. “You will? You’ll marry me?”

Matthew nodded. “I will not dishonor either of us by allowing

you to marry anyone else. It is a good match.”

While it wasn’t a passionate declaration of love, Tori heard the sentiment behind the words. With a low squeal, she flung her arms around him and kissed him. “I love you, Matthew.”

He pushed her away with a gentle reprimand. “Wait until the time is right, Miss Ashford. Propriety, remember? Now, go. I’ll see you tonight.”

Beaming with pleasure, she curtsied and then whirled, practically skipping down the aisles. Matthew’s low voice reached her just as she neared the end of the shelves.

“Propriety.”

She slowed her steps and turned the corner, looking back one last time for a glimpse of his face.

“Here, now, watch it!”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry.” Tori whipped her attention to the huge, bald man in front of her. A load of books sprawled over the floor, his green felt hat slightly crushed beneath them.

“Quite alright, Miss Ashford, thank you.” He seemed to flush and mumble, but kept darting looks at her as he gathered up the books and hat. When at last he had them all, he nodded his gleaming head. “See there? Right as rain.”

“Yes,” she said with a smile before skirting around him. “Enjoy your reading.”

“Oh I will, miss, thank you.”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 8

1,000 pounds or the Earl of Corwin dies.

A carriage will be waiting for you in the alley at precisely four o'clock. Do not be late.

Tori dropped the vellum envelope back to the bed, staring at her name drafted in the now horrifyingly familiar script.

"Oh, no," she whispered in sudden panic, "I forgot to tell Matthew about the blackmailer!"

She eyed the mantle clock. Within the quarter hour, it would chime four.

Matthew. Hands shaking, tears welling, Tori dropped to the edge of the bed, the note curling in her fingers. Oh God, please, nothing could happen to him. Who would dare such a thing? Why?

Rocking back and forth on the bed, she whimpered softly. The blackmailer could not have really threatened him. It was beyond any comprehension. It was despicable. He could not die. She refused to let it happen.

The situation must be dealt with.

Sucking in a deep breath, Tori crumpled the repulsive note and tossed it over her shoulder. Fear burned into fury. She stomped back to the wardrobe and pulled out the gun pouch. "Dare to threaten the man I love, will you?"

The very small, discreet, yet lethal lady's handgun Ryder presented her last Christmas was exactly what she needed.

She slid the gun from its pouch, loaded it and stuffed it into her reticule. Then she added several more lead bullets to be safe.

Tori yanked on the bell pull and paced the room until Glory's light knock. Unlocking the door, she mustered a smile for the girl. "I am feeling much better now. In fact, I believe a walk will do me a bit of good. And solitude."

"Ye can't do that, my lady. Your mother would have a spasm."

"I'll be no more than an hour, Glory. Surely you can keep them away that long?" She squeezed the girl's shoulders. "Please?" she whispered, putting all the desperation she felt into her voice.

Tension whipped between them. "It'll mean my job, miss. I can't. I just can't."

The anguish in her voice was real, as was the danger. Should her mother somehow learn of the maid's deception, she would indeed cast Glory out without a reference. Chewing her bottom lip, Tori considered and discarded several ideas.

Damn and blast, she had no time for this. Matthew's life was in grave danger and she must put a stop to it.

Matthew.

"Listen to me, Glory. I cannot tell you how I know this, but I guarantee you that you will continue to have employment. I will see to it. You have my word."

The girl wavered. "I don't know."

"Please, it is very important. I would not ask this of you otherwise."

A shiver went through the girl, but she nodded. "An hour, miss, promise?"

"Aye," Tori whispered, batting away tears. "You've saved a life this day, Glory. Now, come help me dress. Something light and easy to move in."

Should something untoward happen, she wanted to be ready to dodge and duck. Not that she expected any such thing to occur. Blackmailers were notorious cowards, and when confronted with both rage and a pistol, they inevitably backed down.

At least, that was what she'd always read in her novels.

She would use the carriage ride to formulate a secondary plan should the blackmailer prove of sterner stuff. A cold knot of dread circled her heart, but she pushed it away. No time for cowardice here. Matthew's life was at stake.

But she truly hoped the blackmailer was the frail and fearful sort, the kind easily persuaded by a stern warning and gun metal.

"Right, then." Glory tied off the last lace. "I'll tidy up in here. On your way, miss, and quick as rain back in bed with you."

Tori nodded and sprinted down the hall, ducking into a small alcove as she caught the murmur of her mother's voice below. Af-

ter she passed and the soft click of a door sounded, Tori crept with more stealth down the stairs, past the curious gazes of the kitchen staff, and out the door.

A cold sweat built between her breasts as her heart hammered loud and hard. Her chest hurt from an overset of nerves. She really wasn't this brave, but she had little choice. She must resolve this. Now.

Picking up her skirts, Tori kept to the side of the house, staying in shadow as much as possible. Adventurous she may be, but foolish she was not. It would only take one set of prying eyes to prevent her from facing this scoundrel head-on.

Making the last corner, she saw the promised carriage. It bore a black banner over the door, hiding the crest, she supposed. Biting her lip, she stopped and seriously debated the wisdom of her actions.

Oh, why had she not told Matthew of it at the bookstore?

Because she'd been quite distracted both by Matthew's love-making and his proposal. Well, not really a proposal so much as a command.

But she didn't mind. And now that they were engaged, she would definitely tell him. He would know much better how to deal with something of this magnitude. What on earth had she been thinking?

Heaving a sigh, Tori turned back around, only to be stunned by a blow to the head. She blinked into the shadows, trying to see her attacker and struggling weakly.

The fist hovered above her head once more. "We've unfinished business, Miss Ashford."

"Calm yourself, Glory. No one is accusing you of anything."

Matthew's words were falling on deaf ears. The maid continued to sob and wail, her pale face turning an unfortunate shade of beet red.

"Glory," Matthew said softly, only to wince as her shrill weeping grew louder still. "Glory!" he snapped and the crying lessened

just a bit.

Ryder gave a disgusted sigh of defeat.

Matthew stood in front of the maid, looking down at her bowed head. "Stand up and face us."

She did.

"Excellent. Tell us exactly what happened when Miss Ashford arrived home." Matthew kept his tone clipped and terse with command.

Her lower lip trembled, but she nodded and recounted the events of the afternoon.

"You let her go out unattended?" Lady Ashford shrieked, outrage and fury mottling her face.

Glory shrunk away, her tears spouting once more.

"Quiet," Matthew roared. "Everyone, including you, Lady Ashford."

"She is *my* daughter, Corwin –"

"And my fiancée."

All heads swiveled to gape at him then. He waved his hand.

"With Lady Victoria's permission, I came to offer for her today."

He turned back to the maid. "Instead, it seems I shall have to chase her down."

"Irony at its finest," Ryder muttered *sotto voce*.

Matthew chose to ignore him. "Did she say where she was going or why?"

"No, sir, just that she'd be an hour. No more." The girl looked beseechingly first at him, then Ryder. "I swear it, my lords."

Matthew tapped his fingers to his thigh. "Did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Anything at all?"

Glory shook her head then stopped. "Well, aye, sir. When I went to her room it was tossed like a barroom after a brawl."

"Charming analogy," Lady Ashford muttered.

"Let me see it," Matthew demanded.

"Absolutely not," Lady Ashford gasped.

"Well, I cleaned it up, sir, so there'd be no trouble. But when she didn't come home...."

“Let’s take a look anyway.” Ryder headed for the stairs, leaving his mother sputtering behind him.

Matthew was not far behind him. For all his outlandish behavior and his intimate knowledge of Victoria, he found himself hesitating at the threshold of her private quarters. Invading them did not seem proper. At least, not this time. The last time he’d been in this room, he’d been blinded by fury, consumed by passion, and appalled by his actions.

This time, worry and fear for her safety clouded his mind.

He watched as Ryder rummaged through the wardrobe, leaning slightly to get a better view. When it became apparent he couldn’t see a bloody thing from his vantage point, he gave up and stepped inside the room.

Tori’s familiar lavender scent immediately surrounded him, and his stomach clenched. How could he have not known it was Tori behind the mask?

He would not allow any harm to befall her.

“What are you looking for?” he asked her brother.

“Her gun’s gone.” Ryder tossed a familiar-looking, torn nightgown to the floor and then turned. In one hand he held a leather satchel, an empty cloth pouch in the other. “At least she’s got some protection.”

“Oh, my God,” her mother whispered from the doorway, fanning herself vigorously. “Why would she take a gun?”

Matthew combed his fingers through his hair, searching for answers he didn’t have. He looked around, remembering how easy it had been to flip the rickety latch on her window. Maybe an intruder had come in that way?

But no, Glory had seen her leave. Whatever caused Tori’s armed flight had happened after she returned home and before she left again.

“Were you with Miss Ashford the entire time after she arrived home?”

“No, sir, she’d been back at least fifteen minutes before I came up.”

“What is this? Where had she been?” Lady Ashford demanded.

“With me.” Matthew turned his back on her glare of censure and looked around the room again. The writing desk. He strode to it, staring down at its litter of papers.

Letters to friends, invitations, doodled scraps of paper. Naught but the usual assortment one would expect to find on a desk.

“Damn,” he muttered viciously, swiping his hand across the top and sending all the pages to the floor.

Silence followed his display. He gritted his teeth, trying to contain his impotent rage.

Where was she? Who had her?

Because someone must have taken her. She would not leave him of her own accord.

“I will be downstairs, Ryder. I feel in need of a brandy.” Lady Ashford turned stiffly and left the room, her footsteps fading down the hall.

Matthew looked at his old friend. “What in the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know, damn it, but we must find out.”

“Aye.”

“Pardon, sir, but I wonder if this might help.”

Matthew turned, finding Glory holding out a crumpled bit of vellum. He took it and smoothed the paper out.

“Miss has received three of these in the last few days.”

With his gut twisting at the words written there, Matthew cursed low, long and vehemently. He gave the note to Ryder.

“Blackmail?” Ryder looked up from the note, clearly bewildered. “But why? What could she possibly have done? And why threaten you?”

Although Matthew could offer a few explanations, any of them would likely have him facing his future brother-in-law at dawn over pistols.

“I know why.”

All three turned at the quavering new voice. Laurel Edison occupied the recently vacated doorway. “I know, but I’ll only tell

Lord Corwin.”

Ryder brushed past him so fast that Matthew did not have time to reply. He watched, astounded, as his usually calm friend grabbed the young woman by the shoulders. Giving her a hard shake that set her bonnet tumbling to the floor, Ryder pushed his face close to hers.

“My sister’s life is in danger. You will tell *me* what you know. Now, Miss Edison. Do I make myself clear?”

Her panicked gaze flitted toward him, but Matthew forced himself to remain still and not intervene. He must allow Ryder the chance to ferret out the information they needed. For now. If Ryder didn’t get answers soon, though, Matthew would take matters into his own hands. “I’d answer him, if I were you.”

Ryder pulled her into the room and shut the door. Laurel’s eyes widened even further and she shrank against the wall with one hand pressed to her bosom.

“What are you about, sir? I’ll be ruined.”

“Glory’s here. Besides, you’ll be in worse straits if you don’t tell me what the hell is going on.”

Matthew was impressed with Ryder’s quiet ferocity. Maybe the man had been paying attention to him after all. His normal unfailing politeness towards all things unrelated and feminine seemed to have deserted him.

Laurel puffed up at the threat and tipped her chin. “I am as afraid for her safety as you are, my lord, but it is no reason to lose all civility.”

“Miss Edison, you are pushing my limits.”

Matthew’s eyebrows shot up. Something lay unresolved between these two, but at the moment, he could not afford their tiff to interfere with Tori’s predicament. He stepped forward and shouldered Ryder out of the way.

“She is in grave danger, Miss Edison. Tell us what you know.”

Eyes squeezing tight, Laurel rambled about discovering *The Opal*, the ensuing success of Tori’s stories, and the resultant black-mail notes. Matthew found himself incredulous, infuriated, proud,

and amused all at the same time. He had a feeling it was a mix of emotions soon to invade his life for good.

But first, he had to retrieve his naughty sub.

“Two notes, you say?”

“Yes.”

He turned to look again at the writing desk, now barren save a few papers that had escaped his fury. He knelt down and gathered them up. “She didn’t tell you about the latest one, then?”

Laurel shook her head. “Another, my lord?”

“Aye, threatening me.”

“Good lord,” Laurel gasped. “Though it does explain why she would accost him alone, sir. She would do anything to protect you.”

Matthew lowered his head, fighting back a dark shroud of shame. Had everyone but him known her true feelings?

Pushing to his feet, papers in hand, he flicked through them, seeing the words but not really reading them, trying to erase the horrid image of Tori hurt and alone. He shoved the blackmailer’s notes into his pocket and turned back to Laurel and Ryder.

“Where did you meet this messenger for *The Opal*?”

“At the end of the alley behind the kitchens, my lord.”

He exchanged a glance with Ryder. “We’ve a weasel to find.”

The messenger boy was easy enough to spot. He tried to run as soon as Laurel called out to him. Fortunately, Matthew had planned for this eventuality and watched in satisfaction as Ryder, hidden in the street, snagged the ragamuffin by the scruff.

“Lemme go.” The boy twisted and flailed to no avail.

“All in good time, lad,” Matthew murmured as they retreated back into the alley, away from the curious eyes of pedestrians.

Ryder released the messenger and set him against the brick wall, one hand on his shoulder to stay him.

“Ain’t this rich,” the boy sneered. “Gentry ‘ittin’ up ones what ain’t got nothin’.”

“All I want is information. Surely you trade in that?”

The young man’s eyes sharpened and he pushed at Ryder’s

hand. “‘ere now, why didn’t ye say so?”

“I’m saying it now. What do you know of Miss Victoria Ashford?”

The boy chuckled and gave him an almost pitying look that had Matthew biting back a smile. He had gumption, this one.

“Come now, m’lord, answers aren’t free, are they?”

“You little urchin,” Ryder muttered, reaching out again.

Matthew stayed his hand, pulling a bag of coins from his vest pocket. He jingled it. “The contents of this purse for the information I seek, provided I like it, of course.”

“‘alf if you don’t.”

He snorted, but nodded at the audacious beggar’s demand. “Tell me.”

“She writes for some paper, don’t know which one though. Don’t ‘ave use for ‘em meself.”

“Who pays her?”

“Mr. Thomas Bailey. ‘e’s got a fancy place couple streets over from ‘ere. Done, then?” The boy held out his hand.

“Not quite. Who’s been paying you to read the notes between Miss Ashford and Mr. Bailey?”

The beggar’s eyes widened and beneath the grime, his skin took on a pallor not unlike a corpse. He scuttled to the side, evading Ryder’s reach. “Don’t know.”

He licked his lips and his gaze darted between the coin-filled pouch in Matthew’s hand and the safety of the street just yards away. “I’ll take the coin and leave ye now.”

Matthew held out the bag, making the youngster come to him to retrieve it. With subtle steps he fell deeper into the alley, the boy following until they stopped suddenly.

“Tell me who.”

The boy stiffened, wiping his ragged sleeve across his nose, leaving behind a slightly cleaner swatch of skin. “Not afraid of ‘im.”

“Who?” Matthew bit out, patience fraying too thin.

Despite his bravado, the boy couldn’t hide a shiver or the quick,

longing look at the mouth of the alley.

“Don’t know.”

Ryder crowded the small space, an austere frown on his face. “I’m done with games, Matthew. He knows who has my sister. Let’s take him to the authorities. They’ll get him to talk.”

“‘ey now,” the lad yelped. “No need for that. I don’t know ‘is name, but I know what ‘e looks like. And the carriage he drives.”

“He drives? Not rides in?” Matthew quickly asked.

“No, ‘e’s a servant, that one.”

“Tell me what he looks like.”

“Hm.” He stared at Matthew and then looked Ryder up and down. “Right about as tall as ‘im, but uglier.”

“Thank you,” Ryder said dryly.

“Bald ‘ead. Sweats a lot. Wrinkles on ‘is forehead and ‘is neck ain’t there. Right funny lookin’, too. Always in a green suit.”

“What does he do when you give him the notes?”

“Writes ‘em down in a little black book, gives me a coin, tips ‘is ‘at and leaves.”

“Is that all?”

“Aye, sir, I swear it.” The boy’s voice, which until now had remained resolute and quick, suddenly quivered. “Can I go now?”

“Thank you for your help, lad. You’ve done well.” Matthew pressed the bag into the boy’s hand and watched him scamper to the street where he dipped into the crowd and disappeared. The boy had talent going to waste. He was sure of it, and when this mess with Tori was resolved, he’d see to it that the lad was set aright. Wiggs could always use another man with that sort of instinct.

“What now? We’ve no more information than when we started, and you are lighter in the purse.”

Matthew looked from Ryder to Laurel. “Let’s send Miss Edison and her maid home in a carriage and call on Wiggs. He should have some information for me by now. Maybe he’ll recognize this mysterious figure in green.”

“We’re wasting time, Corwin,” Ryder said a bit later as they walked toward a non-descript tan and white building set amidst a

row of ones nearly identical.

“Unavoidable. I like it even less than you.”

“He works from here?”

“You sound surprised.”

Ryder shrugged. “I expected it to look more nefarious.”

Matthew chuckled. “Wiggs deals in information, not crime.”

“Ah.”

The door opened before they could knock, and a slight young man clad in impeccable butler’s clothing waved them in. “Mr. Wiggs has been expecting you, my lord. This way.”

Heading through the whitewashed hallway, they were led into a large room crammed full of books, chairs, tables, and one massive desk. Behind it sat a thin little man with a wisp of a mustache, round spectacles perched on his head, and a suit coat that looked two sizes too big.

“Mr. Wiggs, you have what I asked for?”

“Yes, my lord, and it is most troubling. Your Colonel is not the most stable of men, nor is he the kindest. His tastes run to the foul rather than exotic.”

Matthew’s throat clenched and his mouth went dry. “Foul? What mean you?”

“From what I’ve been able to gather, he hurt two girls quite badly while in India. When a third was suspected to be his work, he was returned to England and decommissioned with full pension.”

“I don’t understand,” Ryder said. “What do you mean, hurt them?”

Matthew shook his head slightly, letting Wiggs know not to elaborate on the torture he suspected the Colonel inflicted. He did not need to worry over Ryder’s state of mind while concentrating on rescuing Tori.

“I’m afraid it’s not quite clear, sir. Only thing I can tell you for certain is that he returned to England under a cloud and retired to a quiet, crumbling family estate just north of London.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“No, my man lost him. Astounding as it may sound, I believe his valet—a hulking man in a hideous green suit—evaded my watcher. Despite his brutish appearance, the valet was smart enough to get the Colonel out of the way without alerting my man he’d been spotted.”

“Did you say a green suit?” Matthew leaned on the desk.

“Yes, my lord. Is it important?”

Hundreds of thoughts and emotions spun through Matthew and he struggled to contain them all, to find one clear moment of logic so he could concentrate.

The Colonel.

“Aye,” he bit out. “Give me the direction of that manor, Wiggs. That bastard has my fiancée.”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 9

It was the repetitive flick upon her thigh that woke Tori. Reaching down to brush the annoyance away, she gasped when her arms, trapped above her head, did not move. Opening her eyes, she stared up at the rusted manacles clamped around her wrists, the chain joined, pulling her arms up where the metal fastened to the wall. This was no featherbed she lay upon.

“Oh my God,” she breathed, memory rushing back.

The flick came down upon her leg again and she jerked her gaze down, taking in her near state of undress. Only her chemise remained, reaching nearly to the matching leg shackles around her ankles. The menacing leather crop attacked her leg in one neat swoop.

“Ah, awake at last. I must say I was becoming dreadfully bored with your fainting fit. Lasted a bit longer than I’d imagined it would. Always thought you were made of sterner stuff, but that no longer matters, does it?”

Tori stared wide-eyed at her captor. His long-winded, nearly cheerful speech sounded more than odd to her ears. As always, his mustache jumped and wiggled, but even more so with his glassy-eyed enthusiasm.

“Colonel,” she said carefully. “Where am I? Why am I bound?”

“Oho, you little temptress, as if you did not know.” He tapped the whip against his palm, grinning as the echo of leather on flesh died away. “Miss Ashford, we are at my humble estate. Soon to be our estate, of course.” He gestured around the dank, stone room. “And this is the spot where I shall re-educate you.”

Her fear eclipsed her surprise with one breath. “What do you mean?”

The Colonel slid his hand up and down the shaft of the crop as though stroking his own flesh. She shuddered in repulsion.

“Miss Ashford, as your fiancé, it is my duty to train you. So, from this moment, you may consider your training started. There are rules, of course, which you will be expected to obey. Punish-

ment will be severe.” He chuckled, a dark, maniacal sound that rolled her stomach. “Very severe and I *will* take great pleasure in administering it. You’ve been a naughty, naughty girl. I tried to warn you. I did. Tried to help you see reason. Almost had you that day in Hyde Park, but *he* showed up and you fell into his arms like the whore you are. Must be dealt with, mustn’t it?” Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth.

Tori could hardly breathe, let alone comprehend his vile words. She could see the madness in his eyes.

“Hyde Park? What do you know of that?”

“Fifty pounds—nay, one hundred. Such a paltry sum for your talents, don’t you think?”

Understanding dawned much too late. “You? You were behind the blackmail letters? I should have known. Only a coward uses blackmail to get what he wants.”

The Colonel slapped the crop along her upper thigh and she yelped, trying to roll away from the blows, but of course she could not.

“Watch your tongue,” he hissed before his face cleared and he tipped his head. “Your fair skin is going to look delicious striped in red, my dear. To answer your question, yes, it was I.”

“But why?”

His mustache twitched and a dark flush rose on his cheekbones. When he finally spoke, his voice was strained. “Strategy, my dear. With the threats to your reputation, you would gladly accept my offer of marriage. I never expected you to try to take care of it yourself, however.”

She sensed a deeper motive. “Why not continue to press the blackmail? Why kidnap me? Do you think to frighten me into wedding you, Colonel?” She twisted her hands back and forth.

“*Tsk, tsk*, do not bother. You’ll not escape those bonds until I release you.” He held up a rusted key.

Tori rolled her eyes and huffed out a disgusted breath before she could stop herself.

Instead of retribution, the Colonel merely chuckled. “One of the

many qualities I admire about you, Victoria, is your *joie de vivre*. Always willing to take on a challenge in your usual feisty way. But you will lose this one, I assure you.”

He paced the small stone chamber, walking back and forth along the bed and occasionally reaching out to thwack her with the crop. Each time she forced herself to remain still. She would not give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

He soon noticed. Putting his fists on his hips, he frowned down at her like a petulant toddler. “What is amiss, Victoria? I am quite aware of your desires. Here you are, bound and helpless, your skin caressed with my crop. And yet, no response. You lie there like a lump of fish eggs on toast.” His voice rose with each accusation and broke on the last word.

Shocked fear coursed through her. His words debased her darkest fantasies. This was not what she wanted. He was not Matthew. Tori swallowed hard and shook her head. “You are wrong, Colonel. I merely wrote about those things. The readers want that, not me.” God, let him believe her and end this madness.

Uncertainty chased across his features and then he narrowed his eyes. “No, I am right about you, just as I was right about those girls in India. But you are much heartier.”

He mumbled something else but she caught only a few words, none of which assailed her trepidation. *Whipped, too much, bloody.*

She wiggled her wrists and cursed the manacles’ strength. She would not escape unless he released her. Tori cleared her throat. “Colonel, how do you know these things? How did you know about *The Opal Chronicles*?”

Jameson shrugged. “My man has been watching you for quite some time. Once we’d established your habits, it was actually very simple to coax the information from the messenger boy.”

“You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

The Colonel glowered. “Of course not. I’m no monster!”

“Debatable,” she muttered.

Apparently he did not hear. He continued to outline the brilliance of his plan, detailing the careful surveillance, the coin paid

to gain access to the notes, the way he primed her mother to accept his suit.

“What exactly did you say to convince her you were suitable? Indeed, to the exclusion of all others?”

The crop tapped a little faster in his hand and he chuckled. “Let us say yours is not the only secret in your family.”

Tori jerked against the chains. “What do you mean?” Despair rose, but she pushed it away. She must be strong for herself, for Matthew, for their future. “What secret?”

“Couldn’t hurt to tell you now, I suppose. You’ve a second brother.”

Tori felt her eyes nearly pop from her head. He *was* insane. “Another brother?”

“Mm-hmm. Younger than the earl, but close enough in age that eyebrows would have been raised and tongues set to wagging.” The Colonel gave another low, mad chuckle. “Your mother knew about your father’s mistresses, but not about Mr. Wolffe. Took one look at his birth record and turned ghost white.”

Tori shook her head. “So what? First born or second, he’s still a bastard. Ryder’s title is secure.”

The Colonel’s mustache and brows twitched a rapid tattoo. “Your mother’s abhorrence of scandal played nicely into my hand, as did your impending spinsterhood. She wishes to see you settled comfortably, which I can provide. I merely pointed out that the whisper of a by-blow could diminish your prospects.”

“Ridiculous.” Her chest tightened because she knew better. Her mother would consider such a thing feasible. And would have few qualms about preventing it.

“Obviously not to your mother. She agreed to my suit, but said she wouldn’t force you to wed. Knowing what I did of your tastes, I was prepared to offer my own enticements.” He tossed her a frown. “Truth be told, I had no idea you were going to be so damnable stubborn about the whole affair, though.”

“Then you didn’t know as much about me as you thought. I’ll never marry you,” she spat.

The Colonel regarded her solemnly, the only sound the swish of his crop. "I do not wish you to be unhappy, Victoria. I assured your mother of my deep love and regard for you. You will be well taken care of. There is nothing for you to fear from our union. You will serve me and I will give you anything you desire."

Tori shuddered. "Damn your soul! You shall rot in hell." A sob choked her and she turned her head away from him, drawing deep breaths.

The Colonel did not respond, but she could feel him staring at her. Assessing her.

"Where are my clothes?" she finally asked.

"Look at me and I will tell you."

Exhaling sharply, she turned back to him. "Where?"

That odd, bright gleam was back in his eye. "I believe you've misunderstood the situation, my dear. You are not a prisoner, but rather a pupil. A young lady in need of instruction which only I can provide. Once you've successfully learned your place, we will emerge and be wed as is proper. The length of time we reside here is up to you. Learn quickly, leave quickly. Your absence will be noted, of course, but a few days, maybe a fortnight could easily be explained away. Especially with your mother corroborating any story I choose to spin."

His madness was well and truly complete. "What if I do not wish to learn?"

The Colonel blinked several times, brows furrowed as though trying to understand the meaning behind her simple question. "Impossible. No, you are the perfect one. I've known it for some time."

She fell quiet. She must get him to release her, but how? "What does this learning entail?"

He brightened. "How to serve me properly, of course. Attitude, language, availability, discipline."

Tori forced the disgust from her voice. "Will I always be chained? I must say, Colonel, I am frightfully uncomfortable."

"Would you like me to release you?"

Biting back the sharp, sarcastic retort that sprang to her lips,

Tori nodded instead.

“Ask me as a good girl should.”

What had once been a pleasurable game, a fantasy diversion to be enjoyed only with Matthew and her imagination, now took on an unpleasant taste. Saying such things to anyone but Matthew made her want to rebel. Her survival instinct, though, cautioned against such defiance.

“Please release me.”

“Sir,” he prompted.

Her chest tightened and her throat closed in protest, but Tori knew obedience now would ensure her safety later. Closing her eyes, she pictured Matthew in front of her. “Please release me, sir.”

His hand stroked her cheek, tangling just a bit in her hair, tugging lightly. “There now, that was not so difficult, was it?”

Tori mumbled an agreement. The chain above her head clinked and loosened as he unlocked the shackles. She breathed a sigh of relief, and when he moved to her ankles, she rubbed the raw flesh of her wrists. Blood poured back into her hands with tingling force. She twisted her shoulders to relieve the ache.

“Better, my dear?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He smiled in that mad-benevolent sort of way. “Your clothes are here.” He pointed to a low stool in the corner of the room. On the floor next to it lay a chamber pot. “I shall leave you to dress and to refresh yourself. My man Baxter is not here, so we are on our own for a late supper. I’ve brought a basket of meats and cheeses, a bit of bread, and a bottle of wine.”

Tori remained still on the bed, watching him as he talked, fascinated despite her better judgment. He spoke as though this situation were the most normal thing in the world.

“Come, come, up and dressed, my dear. I will return shortly to fetch you for supper. Do not tarry.”

With that he pulled her to her feet, bussed her lightly on the forehead, and unlocked the door with a jaunty whistle. At the door, he turned back to her. “You asked me why now?”

Tori stilled. "Yes."

The jovial look fled from his face. His mouth became pinched and fury rose in his eyes. "You ran to Corwin."

The Colonel stepped forward, crop fisted and half-raised. "He took your virginity," he snarled. "And for that, I will have his life."

Tori lurched forward, bile in her throat. "No!"

He smiled, all traces of rage gone. "Dress, Miss Ashford. When I return, you may try to convince me to spare him." He locked her back in, waved through the small barred window in the door, and walked away, his merry tune fading with each step.

Tori bent double and tried not to vomit. He was going to kill Matthew. "No, damn you," she muttered as anger rushed in. She shook herself from her stupor, ran to her clothes and found her reticule. Incredibly, both the gun and the bullets remained. Despite his weeks of surveillance, it seemed the Colonel had not learned that much about her.

She dressed with as much speed as possible, tucked the gun between her shaking palms, and waited on the bed for the Colonel's return. Over and over in her mind, she replayed the lessons spent at Matthew's country estate, the weeks of target shooting, and the steps to accuracy she'd honed over the years.

Aye, when the Colonel returned for her, she would be more than ready for him.

And when the door opened, she fired.

Horrific visions filled Matthew's mind as he raced toward Jameison's estate. Pushing his horse hard and fast, he muttered a litany of promises and prayers that she would be unharmed and undefiled by the raving madman who held her prisoner.

Beside him, Ryder's horse grunted with each gallop. Glancing sideways, he caught his friend's fury, more vicious than any other time he'd ever witnessed Ryder's anger. He was glad to be on the same side in this battle.

"How much further?" Ryder yelled over the pounding hooves.

"Couple of miles, I think."

Ryder nodded and Matthew leaned low over the saddle to urge his horse faster. The surrounding countryside was filled with bushes and trees, definitely an area not well-traveled. The dense forestry to his right bespoke privacy and seclusion. The perfect hideaway for a madman.

They rounded a bend.

“Damn!” Ryder pulled his horse sharply to the right.

“Son of a bitch,” Matthew echoed, hurling his horse as far to the left as he could, narrowly missing the coach parked sideways across the road.

“What the devil are you about, you fool?” Matthew shouted as he struggled to turn his mount around.

“Gun!” Ryder yelled.

Matthew heard the crack of a shot, followed by a thud.

He leaped from the back of his horse and ran to the road, where he found Ryder sprawled face-down. A huge brute in a green suit grinned malevolently from his perch atop the carriage.

Matthew had seen him before, in the bookstore when Tori had knocked him over. Matthew didn’t believe in coincidences. This was the Colonel’s man Baxter, the one who’d been following Tori. He clenched his fists.

Baxter waved the gun. “Care for a taste of the lead, my lord? I’ve been aching to gut you for quite some time.”

Matthew slowly crouched beside Ryder and was relieved to find him still breathing. But he needed a doctor.

“I am unarmed,” he said to the Colonel’s valet, holding up his arms to illustrate.

“Too bad for you.” The valet pointed his gun at him and cocked it. “I expected better of you.”

“Not man enough for a fair fight, are you?”

The bald man squinted at him for a moment, and the barrel of the gun wavered, pointing downward, but not long enough for Matthew to make a move.

Finally, the valet shrugged. “Fists, bullet, either one will kill you.” Tucking the gun into his pocket, he climbed down the side of

the coach with an agility belied by his size. He approached Matthew with gleeful menace in every step.

Stopping a few feet away, Baxter pointed at him. "Don't you want to ditch your fancy clothes, my lord? Don't want them bloodied up, do we?"

"Won't be a problem." Matthew whipped out his pistol and fired quickly. "I never said I was going to fight fair, either."

Fingers clutching the bleeding hole in his chest, the man fell to his knees. He looked up at Matthew with surprise clear on his face. "Bastard," he muttered and fell to the right.

Matthew relieved him of his gun and then turned his attention to Ashford, who lay motionless on the ground. "Ryder?" Matthew turned him over, wincing at the blood spreading across his coat.

Ryder's eyes opened. "Damnation, that hurts."

Breathing a relieved sigh, Matthew pulled back the coat lapel to examine the damage. "It's only a shoulder wound. You'll live."

"Only?" Ryder pushed himself to a sitting position with a deep groan.

"No time for sympathy, Ashford, I've got to find Tori before he harms her."

Ryder gasped again. Maybe the bullet did more damage than he'd thought. "What? Did it hit lower?"

Ryder shook his head and raised one arm. "Tori."

Matthew nodded. "Aye, you're right. I've got to get to her."

"Nay." Ryder nodded. "There."

Matthew began to worry the fall from the horse damaged his friend's brain. "Aye, she's at Jameson's estate. Will you be all right until I return?"

"I believe, my lord, my brother is trying to tell you I'm right here."

Matthew spun around. "Victoria."

She stood at the head of the coach with her hair tumbled down, her clothing haphazardly covering her body, and her slippers in shreds. She clasped a gun tightly in her right hand.

Not trusting what his own eyes told him, he sprang to his feet

and raced the short distance to her. “My God, love, are you all right? Are you hurt?” He touched her everywhere, stroking her hair and shoulders, caressing the curve of her back and up her arms, seeking injuries and grateful to find none.

“Matthew,” she said softly, leaning into him.

He wrapped her tightly in his arms, vowing never to let her from his sight again. Overwhelmed by emotion, he choked back a sob, pressing his face into her hair and inhaling her lavender essence.

“Tori.” His voice broke. Tears formed in his eyes. His heart thudded as though it would spring from his shaking body with the emotions building within him.

It was neither honor, nor duty, nor any sense of righting a wrong that compelled him to marry Tori. It was his own heart. The one that stopped beating the minute he’d learned of her abduction. The one that now threatened to burst from his chest as he held her.

In that instant, Matthew knew he loved her and that she could heal him. Had already started. His life had been one of half-truths, deceit and secrets. With Tori, he could be himself without worry. It was a gift beyond all comprehension, and she gave it willingly.

“God, Tori, I thought I’d lost you.” Unable to stop, his hands still roved her body. “Did he hurt you? Are you well?”

“I’m fine, my lord.” Her voice sounded oddly flat and distant. The gun fell to the ground as her hands turned soothing, stroking his hair and shoulders. He felt fine tremors running through her.

Alarm rang through him.

“What happened?” He winced at the ashen pallor of her skin and the wildness in her eyes. He was so intent on reassuring himself of her safety that he’d not given a thought to her mental state. “Tori,” he said soothingly. “Little one, where is the Colonel?”

Her mouth opened and closed, but only small gasps of air escaped.

“Breathe slowly. It’s all right,” he murmured. “You are safe now.”

Tori’s eyes fluttered shut and her nostrils flared with her panicked breathing. “Matthew, please don’t think ill of me. I did what I

had to do. I swear it. He left me no choice.” Her entire body shook with tiny spasms.

Matthew gripped her shoulders. “What happened?”

“God forgive me,” she sobbed. “I shot him.”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 10

“Where is she?” Lady Ashford’s screech could be heard all the way to Matthew’s study.

Tori, wrapped in a warm blanket, looked at her brother. “We are in agreement? You won’t back down?”

Ryder shook his head and stood to face the doorway. “We are in here, Mother.”

She burst into the room, her disheveled, nearly unkempt appearance quite a shock to Tori. “What is amiss, Mama? Are you unwell?”

“Victoria Rose.” Her mother drew her name out in long, imperious syllables. “Where have you been? You have quite a lot of explaining....” She trailed off, staring at Tori, the bit of wildness in her eyes slowly replaced by comprehension. “Oh, hang it all, are you hurt?”

Before Tori could recover from this stunning breach of etiquette, her mother swept her into an embrace. Being wrapped in her arms, a place Tori had not been since the schoolroom, broke the reserve she’d managed to hold in place since her kidnapping.

Quiet tears, followed by deep hiccups and near-wails, escaped her. Tori buried her face in the crook of her mother’s neck, finding unexpected solace.

“Oh, Mama,” she cried over and over.

Lady Ashford’s trembling hands brushed her back, head and neck, providing maternal comfort sorely needed.

At last the storm quieted and Tori regretfully pulled away, embarrassed by her lack of control.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she murmured.

“Hush, dear. There is nothing to apologize for. Not from you, at any rate.” Lady Ashford’s voice broke slightly.

“Why do you ladies not seat yourselves?” Matthew asked. “I will have Stires fetch tea and a light supper.”

Tori turned to him, smiling through still-damp eyelashes, and Matthew’s heart clenched. God, he never again wanted to see such

desolate hurt on her face. He bowed to them. "Please excuse me."

"Of course, my lord," Lady Ashford assented. "But we will speak when you return."

"I look forward to it."

After directing the staff, Matthew took advantage of the time to change clothes and gather himself. It was not every day a man found himself in love and the object of that emotion in danger.

He found little pleasure in lying to her, but her state of mind was more important than any deception. And so he had told her the Colonel had survived her gunshot but had taken his own life. The small white lie—indeed, she'd proven a crack shot—had only served to soothe her frayed nerves. He was content.

Tugging the sleeves of his jacket to crisp ends, he returned to the study where the primary participants in this odd series of events huddled on the settee and faced the low table. The three of them spoke in hushed, serious tones. Tori appeared relaxed though intent on her brother's words.

The conversation continued as he joined them, lifting a startled Tori from the couch and depositing her on his lap.

"Matthew," she reprimanded him, shooting a blush-filled look at her mother.

"Never mind," he replied. "She'll just have to get used to it."

"I will, will I?" Lady Ashford said in her more normal stately tones.

"Aye."

"And what sort of life can you provide for my daughter, Corwin? You are quite the rake. A roué is not what I ever intended for my daughter."

"Mother!" Tori protested.

"Hush," Lady Ashford murmured, though with none of her customary acidity. Maybe the incident had mellowed her. For Tori's sake, he hoped so.

"I promise I shall treat her as well as any queen has ever been treated. I shall see to it she wants for naught. I will fill her days with joy and her nights with love." He no longer spoke to her

mother or brother, but directly to Tori, his heart in every word.

Stroking her cheek, he leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her brow. “I will give you everything you ask for and so much more. Never shall a day pass that you will not know how deeply I love you.”

Tori remained quiet and still on his lap. She raised a trembling hand and swept it over his hair, leaning close to his ear, whispering her scandalous request so only his ears heard it.

“And will you punish me when I deserve it, my dark master?”

Her Dark Master: Chapter 11

“You have a very smug smile on your face, Lady Corwin,” Matthew commented. He stood behind her, watching as she brushed her long, ebony hair.

“Lady Corwin. I find the title quite remarkable, my lord.”

He took the brush from her hand and laid it on the table. “I find *you* quite remarkable.” Matthew slid the collar of her cotton night-dress aside, baring her shoulder. Watching her in the mirror, he leaned down and brushed his lips to her warm flesh.

Her eyelids fluttered as she lolled her head sideways. She cupped his face lightly to urge him to continue. With grateful greed, he suckled her golden skin, delighting in the shiver of her response. How he’d missed touching her.

In the rush of wedding preparations, they’d been unable to do more than snare an occasional secretive kiss and fondle. It had not been enough for either of them.

Matthew growled low in his throat and scooped her up from the chair to carry her to the bed. After tossing her lightly upon the downy covers, he planted his hands on his hips and playfully scowled at her.

“I’ve a hunger for you, wench.”

Flipping her hair from her eyes, Tori raised up on her elbows. She bent her knees so that her gown slid up to reveal her tawny thigh. “Is that so?”

“Aye.” He yanked his shirt from his pants, swiftly unbuttoning it and then letting it fall to the floor. His boots and stockings soon followed. Hesitating over the buttons of his breeches, he raised a brow. “And what do you want, Tori?”

The air filled with a thickness that left him uneasy. “Tori?”

His new wife bit her lip and looked away from him, staring instead at the fire as though she’d never seen such a thing.

“Victoria,” he said sharply.

She jumped then pushed herself to a sitting position. “My lord... Matthew, I would like to request a boon. A bridal gift.”

Tension knitted her delicate brows together and he caught the rapid rise and fall of her breathing beneath the voluminous night-dress. Whatever boon she wished to request had her on edge.

“Anything, Tori.”

A sharp inhalation, a quick peek up at him, then silence.

Matthew frowned at her. “You must tell me, else I cannot grant it.”

“It’s a bit embarrassing, my lord,” she said, her voice a mere whisper.

“Then we’ll not speak of it.” He was thoroughly confused now. Though eager to reacquaint them both with the joys of love-making, he would not rush her.

“Oh, but we must,” she blurted out, finally looking up at him.

“Victoria,” he gritted out.

“My lord.” She gained her feet and closed the distance between them. “My encounter left me a bit unsettled.”

Ah. “It’s to be expected, of course.”

“Nay,” she shook her head. “Let me speak.”

He raised a brow and nodded. “Pray do so. Quickly.”

“Hmph. I am trying to. Where was I?”

“Unsettled.”

“Right. Yes. Well, as to that, it’s not really the abduction nor the unfortunate result that has me so dismayed, but what occurred in between.”

Tori peeked up at her husband—la, how she loved that word—and drew a steadying breath. If she was ever to resolve this unexpected side effect of her ordeal, she must draw strength and tell him.

“When I was at his mercy, I found myself to be in a similar position as on *our* first night together.”

“Lord, woman, it was nothing alike.” He sounded horribly offended.

“No, of course not, and that is the problem, Matthew,” she rushed to assert. “I felt nothing save revulsion and true fear while he had me bound.”

Oh, please, work it out. Do not make me say it.

Apparently, some unspoken prayers were answered. Matthew's face cleared immediately. "And you wish to discover whether the joy of that bondage is gone forever?"

"Yes, sir," she said automatically, head lowering.

He tipped her face up. "You are sure, Tori? You wish to spend our first night together as man and wife submitting to me? In all ways?"

Unable to stop herself, Tori knelt in front of him, holding his hand and looking up at him. "I pledged my troth to you in front of God and the Ton this morning. Now, I would give you my obedience, if you would have it."

He raised her up and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her deeply. "You know, of course, that I am but putty in your hands and *you* truly command *me*? I will never do you harm or treat you as though you are not worthy. You know this, no matter what?"

"Aye, my lord."

The change came over him suddenly, altering him from concerned husband to arrogant master in one subtle shift of his expression. Tori's body reacted instantly. She grew wet with anticipation and her nipples strained toward his touch.

"Come here, little dove, and take my cock out from my pants. We shall see if marriage has deprived you of your excellent cock-sucking talents."

Tori eagerly reached for the soft linen of his breeches. She grasped his hard staff and pulled it out. Wetting her lips, she inhaled deeply his musky aroma. His hands fisted in her hair and moved her forward.

Tori opened her mouth wide and engulfed the head of his cock. She clamped her lips around it and pulled hard.

He could not squelch his appreciative groan. Matthew's fingers tightened to urge her onward.

Tori sucked as much of his length into her mouth as she could, stalling only when he filled her totally. She gagged when he pushed against the back of her head, forcing her to take more.

“You can do it, dove, relax your throat. A true little whore can deep-throat any man.”

The naughty words only inflamed her more, and she did as instructed, allowing the muscles in her throat to open wider. She grunted as he slid forward. A thin salty trickle escaped his cock head and coated her mouth.

They both groaned.

“Damn you, woman, you’re going to make me spend already. Do not do it. You will regret it.” His hand pulled again and his hips thrust forward.

Tori could not resist the challenge or the unspoken promise of punishment. Encircling the base of his shaft with her right hand, she continued to suck him deeply into her throat while cupping his tightening balls with her left. Little pinches and scrapes with her nails, coupled with the suction, drove him closer to the edge.

“My God, you are the best.” His words, grunted out in rhythm with his thrusting hips, thrilled her.

She boldly found the tight, puckered ring of his anus and pushed one finger gently inward. She was rewarded by his shout followed immediately by the salty splash of his seed as he came in her mouth. Tori continued to lightly rub with her finger, pulling every drop she could from him. She held her own need to orgasm back. Hers would come later.

When he’d at last been drained, his hands left her hair and she rocked back on her heels to grin up at him with arrogant delight.

“Enjoyed it, did you?”

His chest heaved and a flush coated his high cheekbones. “Aye, you minx. I believe I told you not to make me come, didn’t I?”

Thoroughly enjoying the game again, she attempted a regretful look, but knew she’d failed miserably. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He pulled her up by her underarms and tugged the nightgown over her head. Quickly, he spun her around and forced her to bend over the bed. “*Sorry* will not do. It’s a proper punishment I’ve in mind for you. Ten, I believe. Do not move.”

Her knees quivered in anticipation and her cunny fairly tingled

with delight. She spasmed just at the thought of what he was about to do to her.

What she wanted him to do.

Her hands fisted the bedsheets and she peered over her shoulder, seeking him out. He rummaged in a tall dresser and pulled out a crop.

Tori groaned and he whirled.

"I do not remember giving you permission to look. Another five, it shall cost you."

He moved behind her once more. "Spread your legs."

She complied, inching them apart and resting more weight on her elbows.

The crop tapped her naked bum. "Wider."

Tori spread her feet on the rug. She squeezed her eyes shut and eagerly awaited the first blow.

Instead, she felt him lay his body along hers and press her closer to the bed. His mouth nipped at her ear. "It's a lifetime of pleasure we've to look forward to, my love."

"Aye, my lord," she sighed, happier than she'd ever been in her life.

"You know I love you."

"Aye. I love you, too, sir." She wriggled her bottom.

His chuckle reverberated along her spine and his fingers slid along her cunt, delving into her wetness. "All right, my impatient little slut. I suspect you'll be sitting quite gingerly for the next few days."

Matthew slid the crop along the ridge of her spine and to the cleft of her arse. "Count them," he ordered.

He lifted the whip and slashed it down on her delicate skin.

She moaned and thrust her bottom up higher, looking at him over her shoulder. "One, sir. One of many, for years to come."

About the author:

Jennifer August traded comic books for romance novels at the age of 12 and never looked back. As an adult she discovered the sultry side of love and romance and poured it into her books. She would love to hear from you: JenniferAugust08@yahoo.com. Happy reading!

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Plus Ten Questions With Bethany Michaels!
And Bethany's Too-Hot-To-Cook Summer Pasta Salad!

The Merry Widow by Koko Brown

Victorian England is a man's world. And no one knows this better than Phillipa Jones who must fight society's conventions along with chauvinistic ship captains and a greedy yet undeniably handsome Viscount to keep her late husband's shipping business afloat.

Unfortunately, one moment of weakness and a case of mistaken identities will place her in a compromising position, which will see everything she's worked for come to ruins including her reputation.

Excerpt:

"I heard he's hung like a horse."

Phillipa Jones's violet eyes swung up from the stack of missives in front of her to settle disapprovingly on her office clerk. Despite celebrating her fourth year anniversary at the job this past summer, Lucy never ceased to amaze. Her brand of frankness was more suited to the docklands than a place of business. "Miss Pemberton, I'm sure that piece of information may be of interest to those within your own set, but—"

"Pardon me, ma'am," Lucy said with dignity, "but it's not just me set. It's the entire ton that knows it as well. Why, just last week, I read in the Evening Marlborough about him fuck—I mean having a dalliance with a certain Italian duchess at the opera."

Phillipa pursed her lips at the mention of the daily newspaper, which had become popular for its weekly gossip column, the "Ruffler of Victorian Feathers." As if she didn't have enough to worry about as a female business owner. She also had to worry about her recent decision being uncovered by the 'all knowing and all seeing'

Lady Cherbourg.

“O’ course, they ain’t mentioned his name for they never do, but everyone knows who the honorable Viscount of Equine is.”

“Viscount of Equine?” Phillipa’s lips twitched in bridled amusement.

“Yes, it’s a reference to his cock. Like I said, hung like a—” Lucy didn’t finish, but her brassy curls bounced around her face as she nodded in excitement.

Phillipa was not entirely unfamiliar with the male sex organ, but she couldn’t help the blush staining her cheeks. Proper ladies just didn’t speak so freely on such a subject, not even in intimate circles. Once again, she questioned her hiring of her young charge in order to her provide her with a better opportunity than the one she would have faced working on her back or eking out a pittance as a washwoman.

“Despite Lord Bellomont’s special attributes, Miss Pemberton, I will not see him,” Phillipa replied brusquely. “Furthermore, I know very well that this is his third visit, but I am not interested and will never be interested in anything he has to say. Harry and I built this shipping company from one small frigate to the five steam liners we have today all with the sweat off our backs. And I will not see it lain to waste regardless of the large purse he’s offering. Now please go back out there and tell his Lordship good day.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lucy turned to do her bidding but came back around, a queer look etched on her face. “Mrs. Jones, I almost forgot. Your coach is ‘ere. Oscar arrived right before the Viscount came calling.”

Phillipa looked up so suddenly her spectacles slipped down her nose. “My coach? What time is it?” she asked, reaching inside her jacket pocket.

“It’s a quarter past three, ma’am.”

Phillipa confirmed the time on the silver pocket watch Harry had given her thirteen years earlier, on her 25th birthday. Despite its age, it still told accurate time.

Hell’s bells! she groaned. She’d been so busy with making sure

the books would be closed by the end of the month she'd almost forgotten what was happening tonight.

"While you tidy up your loose ends, I'll get rid of 'is Lordship."

"Thank you, Lucy." Phillipa snapped the watch closed, the click resounded loudly in the quiet room. It was even more quiet now because she no longer shared it with Harry. Yet despite his passing and her subsequent taking over of the business, her routine had not changed. She always started work promptly at eight o'clock and she never left her offices before six o'clock. Her driver arriving three hours early was due to only one thing—this was the evening of her first visit from Madame Valant's stable of young gentlemen.

Rising from her desk, she walked over to the coat tree in the corner and removed the black bonnet hanging from the branch. As she tied the grosgrain ribbons under her chin, her fingers shook with nervous excitement.

Ironically, she'd read about the Madame and her notorious "stable of studs" in the Evening Malborough. The prime attraction was that the Madame, or at least her stable, made house calls, for Phillipa doubted that she would have had the nerve to visit the infamous Pall Mall and its stretch of gentleman's clubs.

Not really knowing what to expect, she had been surprised by the middle-aged woman who floated into her home a month ago. Petite of stature with pale blonde hair and strikingly beautiful, Madame was a ray of light in the dark room.

"For now, all you want is a companion?" Madame Valant regarded Phillipa closely over the rim of the delicate tea service.

Phillipa took a deep breath and replied, "Yes. Although Harry died over three years ago, I am not eager to enter into the confines of a conventional marriage. I just want the company of a man to brighten the halls of this home again, even if it's just for a few hours," she added quietly, unable to meet the other woman's gaze. Instead, she looked down at her dress and straightened her tartan skirt for the hundredth time across the mahogany sofa.

"I truly understand, ma chérie. When my benefactor died, I was surprised at how much I missed not only him, but his very male-

ness, and the security and protection that his mere presence provided. And perhaps one day you will feel comfortable enough with one of mes garçons that you might be willing to quench your baser needs.”

Phillipa opened her mouth to refute that prediction, but Madame Valant leaned over and placed a creamy, heavily bejeweled hand on her knee. “Tut, tut, chérie. You are a woman in your prime. And one that I assume was well loved and was used to the pleasures between a man and woman. If you were not, you would never have called me. Sooner or later, I hope you will indulge in my fine stock to satisfy all your womanly needs.”

And tonight might be that night, Phillipa mused as her coach ambled through the crowded streets of inner London. Over the course of a few short weeks—while the Madame searched for a suitable placement—her initial disquiet had turned into one of anticipation.

Like a connoisseur of fine wine, Madame Valant had supposedly chosen her bevy of male companions well. Not only were they rumored to be handsome, but well educated as well, many of them the bastard children of the nobility.

So even if her visits remained innocent in nature, such as sharing the occasional evening meal, playing backgammon or even discussing the evening papers, she had the option of tasting from the Madame’s stock if she was sorely tempted. And considering her heightened eagerness for her unconventional company, sooner might be now rather than later.

Secret Confessions Of Lady H by Bethany Michaels

When merry widow Lady Amelia Holbrook records her erotic exploits in her secret journal, she never dreams another soul will read the passion-filled pages. But when the journal goes missing and pieces start showing up in the scandal pages, she knows she has to track down the thief and discover his motive before her good name and that of her whole family are ruined. The only man she can trust to help her solve the mystery is her husband's cousin, Grayson Turner, but when an old friendship becomes more intimate, Amelia finds herself in danger of losing far more than her journal.

Excerpt:

He stepped closer and I smelled a curious mix of light male musk, clean linen and some exotic spice I couldn't name.

Before I could step away, he stroked my cheek, light as a whisper. The contact was a shock. I didn't stop him. Not at first. Not until his eyes turned smoky and his gaze focused on my parted lips.

Then I stumbled in my haste to rid myself of his unsettling touch. No man had dared caress me like that, not since Edward.

He grinned. "No need to be afraid. I was merely trying to collect my toll."

"I am not afraid. I am simply losing patience with a man who claims innocence in his misdeeds yet would force an introduction to someone who clearly does not find his acquaintance desirable."

"But I find your acquaintance very desirable." He cocked his head. "And I never claimed to be innocent."

He traced the edge of my jaw with one fingertip. "I don't think you really want to return to the ball. You haven't danced a single set all night."

It unnerved me that he had been watching me. And that his perception was so accurate.

"Tell, me how long has it been since Holbrook died?"

My breath caught. Although Edward's name ran through my

mind like a litany, no one had dared speak it aloud in my presence.

It was almost a relief.

This man didn't pity me. And he saw through my attempts to remain distant, shut off, even in the middle of a crowd. He saw the real me, the one I tried so hard to hide.

His fingers were warm and surprisingly gentle skimming across my cheekbone, my nose, across my eyebrows. This time I didn't back away.

He stepped closer until my breasts were pressed against his chest. "Do you miss the touch of a man, Lady Holbrook? The scent, the strength that lies in check just beneath his skin? Do you miss the way a man can look at a woman and she knows exactly what he wants of her?"

His voice was low, just above a whisper. It felt as if he was speaking inside my mind, reading my thoughts. His fingers trailed down the column of my throat and to the neckline of my gown.

"You are a sensual woman, Lady Holbrook. Any fool can see that. And if your husband was anywhere close to competent between the sheets, I'll wager you've spent many nights these last two years wishing for the return of pleasure."

Ten Questions With Bethany Michaels

1. Hi, Bethany! Please tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm a married, thirty-something mom of four small children. I work as a transportation planner at night, am home with the kids during the day, and squeeze in writing whenever I can. Reading and writing has always been a love, but I didn't get 'serious' about writing until about four years ago. I'm a born and bred Midwesterner, but recently moved to the Nashville, Tennessee area. Although I'll never be the Southern belle type, I do love it down here... except the crazy-hot summers. I like hot sweaty love scenes on the page, not getting hot and sweaty just stepping out to grab the newspaper off the front porch!

2. Do you remember the first romance you read?

I read 'teen' romances from the library quite a bit as an elementary aged kid, but the first adult romance I read was about an Egyptologist (also as an elementary-aged kid). I can't remember the title, but I loved it. After that, I started reading all the romance I could, um, borrow from my mom's shelves. Jude Deveraux's *A Knight in Shinning Armor* is the first romance I truly fell in love with and 20 years later, it is still one of my all-time favorites.

3. Who has influenced you most in your writing career?

I'd have to say my parents. My mom has always read romance. We have similar tastes and it's been so much fun over the years talking about books we love. My dad has always been really encouraging, too, even if he's not allowed to read what I'm writing right now! My extended family, in-laws and Indiana RWA chapter sisters have also been extremely supportive. A writer may sit at her keyboard alone hour after hour pounding out that latest book, but no successful writer ever really does it without a herd of people behind her.

4. What got you interested in Erotic Romance?

I started reading classic erotica in college and got really interested in the whole subject. Beyond the obvious reasons, I think sex is a really interesting topic. Something that seems like a simple biological function is actually very complicated socially, emotionally and intellectually. Then there was the fact that I just plain liked the ‘good parts’ in romance novels. In Erotic Romance, there are many more and varied ‘good parts’ but you still get the emotionally satisfying romance that makes all the good parts mean something.

5. What makes a man sexy? Lovable?

I really love a man who is strong enough to rely on (and who knows he can rely on you) but sensitive enough to know when you need a hug. Someone you can trust with any secret and who you can be yourself with, who loves the crazy bits you try so hard to hide from everyone else. Humor, intelligence and most of all, confidence are the sexiest attributes in a man (and a hero), I think.

6. What are the qualities that make for a great heroine?

My daughter is my ideal romance heroine. She’s also the wild thing who is giving me the gray hair. She’s smart, strong, confident and goes after what she wants relentlessly. But she’s also very loving and will help or care for anyone who needs it. She’s creative, stubborn, strong-willed and absolutely fearless. My little romance heroine is ‘precocious’ as a six-years old, but hopefully she’ll grow into her heroic qualities... before she redecorates her room with finger paints again, wrecks my car or burns down my kitchen.

7. What draws you to the historical time period you chose for this story?

Educating Eva, my novella in *Secrets 23*, was actually my first try at writing a historical. I think what I love about writing in the Regency period is that there is a lot I could do with the plot from arranged marriages, to the threat of social ruin that motivate a lot

of the character's actions. There were stricter social mores (at least on the surface) that made a lot of things "forbidden". And as we all know, the things that are forbidden are simply irresistible. I thought a Regency house party would provide unlimited opportunity for a lot of naughty goings-on. And it did—my house party in *Educating Eva* turned into a sort of an erotic fun house... anything could be around the next corner!

8. Are there common themes that show up in your stories? If so, what are they?

All of my stories, so far, explore the theme of what seems to be and what actually is—who a person seems to be on the outside, versus who they are on the inside. I love a good twist ending to a story that takes a reader's expectations and totally turns them upside down.

9. Any advice that you think would benefit new writers?

For a lot of us, simply finding the time to write is the biggest challenge. But nobody just HAS these imaginary piles of minutes lying around. If you want to write, or do anything else that's close to your heart, you have to MAKE the time. Once I decided writing was something that I needed to do, I learned to write anywhere and everywhere, whenever I had a few minutes. Sometimes it's at work between tasks. Sometimes it's at the park on a laptop or in the waiting room of my kids' dentist. And believe me, some of the hottest love scenes I've written have been typed out at the McDonald's Playland on my Alphasmart.

10. What are your plans for future books?

I just finished a Regency-set story for Red Sage, written in a serial format, about a 'merry widow' whose journal containing her erotic exploits has gone missing. She thinks one of her former lovers is the thief and must get the journal back before her secrets are splashed all over the scandal pages, ruining her and her family. Luckily her former husband's sexy cousin is available to assist. I also write light paranormal erotic romance and am currently

working on a story about a demon posing as a sexy and mysterious Las Vegas illusionist and a correspondence-course PI hired to discover all his wicked secrets.

Bethany's It's-Too-Hot-to-Cook Summer Pasta Salad

This recipe sounds a little wacky, but the sweet and tart flavors really blend together for a fabulous light summer meal, when just the thought of turning on the oven makes you sweat! Serve with ice-cold lemonade, or here in the South, a tall glass of your favorite sweet tea.

5 cups cubed cooked chicken
3 cups cooked rotini
1 ½ cups chopped celery
½ cup chopped green onions
1 cup drained pineapple tidbits
1 (11oz) can mandarin oranges, drained
2 kiwi fruit peeled and cut into chunks
1 cup mayonnaise
1/3 cup vegetable oil
2 tablespoons cider vinegar
2 tablespoons orange juice concentrate
1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon dry mustard
1 cup slivered almonds, toasted

In a large bowl, combine chicken, pasta, celery, onions, pineapple, oranges and kiwi. In a small bowl, mix the next six ingredients. Pour over chicken mixture. Toss to coat. Cover and chill for several hours. Toss with almonds just before serving.

Enjoy!



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