

ANN LETHBRIDGE



THE RAKE'S
INTIMATE ENCOUNTER

Wydore!

The Rake's Intimate Encounter

Ann Lethbridge



HARLEQUIN®

TORONTO • NEW YORK ■ LONDON
AMSTERDAM ■ PARIS ■ SYDNEY ■ HAMBURG
STOCKHOLM • ATHENS • TOKYO ■ MILAN • MADRID
PRAGUE • WARSAW ■ BUDAPEST • AUCKLAND

Author Note

Margaret and Tony knew exactly what they wanted when they met, and it certainly wasn't each other. Thank goodness for Lady Falstow! I do hope you enjoyed a peek at the beginning of Tony and Margaret's romance and our brief meeting with the Evernden brothers who will appear in my April Harlequin Historical, *The Rake's Inherited Courtesan*. All of my characters become close friends, so I am pleased to be able to invite you to sit down, have a cup of coffee, tea or juice, and get to know them.

I love to hear from readers, so please visit me at my website: www.annlethbridge.com where you can find all my latest news and where you can reach me directly.

I dedicate this book to my husband, who is my
inspiration

Chapter One

London, 1815

Brunettes, blondes and even a redhead displayed their mouthwatering attributes while they handled the cards at the green baize-covered tables with the dexterity of Captain Sharps. Tony Darby sauntered ahead of the Evernden brothers into what had once been a ballroom. At each table, fashionable gentlemen leered at their scantily clad banker, or stared at their cards.

Piquet. Whist. Vingt-et-un. Women. All the usual pastimes. Tony sighed as ennui swept through him and then turned to his companions. "This is why you dragged me all the way to Hampstead, Stanford? A gambling hell in a brothel?"

"Indeed," the fair haired and usually cheerful Christopher Evernden said with a grimace. "You've got a lot to answer for, Garth."

On the other side of Tony, Christopher's brother, Lord Stanford, grinned, his dark eyes unrepentant. "Lady Falstow will have your head if she hears the word 'brothel' in her establishment. The women here are looking for amusement, not money."

"Good Lord," Christopher said. "Is that Lady—"

"No names," Garth murmured. "In this club, discretion is the watchword. One wrong word and we will never darken these hallowed portals again. Look at them. It's a banquet of female desires."

Following the direction of Christopher's stunned gaze, Tony recognized one of London's foremost hostesses, known for her sumptuous dinners and witty conversation. Tonight, the blonde wore a carnivorous expression and a gown diaphanous enough to shame a courtesan.

She caught his glance. Her gaze ran down his length, obvious and assessing. Clearly liking what she saw, she beckoned.

Tony stifled the urge to flee and pretended he hadn't noticed.

Christopher groaned. "I have no interest in playing stud for some bored hausfrau. You promised piquet in interesting surroundings."

"Can it get more interesting than this?" Garth asked. "Look at them. They'll rip your clothes off, they're so desperate."

"The next time I go to White's I don't want to shake some fellow's hand knowing I tugged his wife," Tony said, speaking from an experience that still gave him nightmares.

"Nor me," Christopher said.

"You do the ladies no favors," Garth said. "They are here because their husbands don't give a damn whether they are happy or not." Strangely enough, the

usually insouciant Garth sounded rather grim. "And besides, many of them are lonely widows."

"I don't have the ready to set up an indigent widow with a host of hungry mouths to feed," Tony said. Tomorrow morning he had an appointment to view a property, which, if he decided to purchase, would empty his pockets.

"I thought you came into some money," Christopher said.

"Gone." He wasn't going to let the cat out of the bag and let them ridicule his decision to give up a life of idleness. Not until he made a success of it. "If you want gambling and a prime article on each arm, I know a great little hell in the Seven Dials—no limit on play and no commitment."

"Such gratitude," Garth muttered. "I invite you to London's most exclusive club and you prefer Haymarket ware. Do as you please. I have someone waiting upstairs, and I never disappoint a lady."

"Who the hell are you tangled up with now?" Christopher said with a frown. "You'll find yourself on Primrose Hill with a bullet lodged somewhere in your person."

"Nor do I bandy about a lady's name." Garth stalked off down the hall, the slight stagger an indication of the quantity of brandy he'd consumed on the drive over.

Tony smothered a yawn. Garth's legendary exploits among the ton's females had palled long ago. "Let's leave."

Christopher expelled an impatient breath. "I'll wait for him. He'll no doubt be too foxed by the end of the night to get home in one piece. Join me in a game of whist?" He gestured to a nearby table with three men and a pile of tokens waiting for a winner. "At least it presents a challenge."

"I pity the woman who holds the bank at your table," Tony said.

Christopher laughed. "It's a game of chance. I simply count better than most."

The blonde holding the bank had a lovely face and hard calculating eyes. The kind of woman Tony had found appealing when he first made his bows. "You know, I think I'll wander about for a bit."

"See if anyone strikes your fancy?" Christopher said, his eyes twinkling.

"See if they have any food. I haven't eaten for hours."

Christopher raised a brow. "*Bon appétit.*" He headed for his chosen victim and Tony spared a second's worth of pity on those about to lose their money to his friend's mathematical acumen.

He strolled down the hall and peered into a library lined with books and occupied by a couple sprawled on a couch. The next open door revealed a drawing room. No food there either. A young dandy, perhaps no more than twenty, knelt at the feet of a gorgeous creature in a red gown cut low across a magnificent bosom. The severe smoothed-back style of her dark-brown hair emphasized her prominent cheekbones and,

along with her almond-shaped eyes, gave her face an exotic look. The boy seemed to be sobbing, while the striking brunette patted his shoulder.

Tony started to back away, but she raised her head and their gazes met. She rolled her eyes heavenward with rueful smile of full lips and a glimmer of laughter in her dark eyes. An instant of connection, yet he was sure he'd never met her before. One thing he knew for certain, her melting brown eyes contained a cry for help. He bowed. "May I be of assistance?"

The boy raised his head. "She won't have me."

"I didn't mean you, you puppy," Tony said. "Madam, may I remove this watering pot?"

The young man sat up then, and fumbled in his pocket.

The woman handed him a scrap of lace. "Use this, Radcliffe. A man with puffy eyes and a red nose is rarely taken with any degree of seriousness."

"A red nose?" The boy sprung from the couch and ran to the mirror between the two tall windows overlooking the square. "'Pon rep. You are right." He dabbed at the offending aristocratic proboscis.

The blatant sensuality of the woman's smile, as she watched the lad, held Tony captive. No wonder she had the youth on his knees at her feet. And her breasts? Well, they were magnificent. Glorious mounds of pale, soft flesh. He didn't need another glance for confirmation. Didn't care to look, because her smile intimated she'd discovered life's greatest jest and

hinted that if the right person found the key, she might share the joke. He wanted that key.

"Vanity," she said, with a mock shake of her head at the lad. "It does wonders for a broken heart. I recommend cold water at once."

Radcliffe spun around. "Cold water, madam? Will it not make it worse?"

She laughed, a throaty chuckle with a pulse-quickenning effect. *Had he lost his mind?*

"Not at all," she said. "Take the word of someone who has cried many tears." She turned her amazingly liquid eyes on Tony. "Don't you agree, sir?"

Tony smothered a smile as the young man paled. "Without a doubt. As one who has been the cause of many tears."

The woman laughed outright. More heat to his blood. Good God, he'd never met a woman who so instantly aroused his interest. *Aroused* An unfortunate word, with hardening results.

"Countess, you will forgive me if I go in search of cold water?" Radcliffe asked, returning to stand in front of her, much like a lad before a governess. "I will return. Then you will listen to me."

"Try some ice," Tony said. "I suggest you use it elsewhere on your anatomy. Cool your ardor. Can't you see you are bothering the countess?"

"Am I, Countess?" Radcliffe asked with a boyish smile. Tony wanted to punch him in the mouth.

The woman smiled. "Darling boy, I am old enough to be your mother. Now run along and find a nice young girl of your own age."

Radcliffe pouted. "You are not old enough to be my mother. She is ancient. And girls my age are dull."

The boy needed a lesson in manners. Tony took a half step into the room. "The lady is being polite to protect your manly pride. I, on the other hand, have no such scruples. If you don't leave now, you might find your nose a deeper shade of scarlet."

The countess's handkerchief held to his nose, Radcliff scuttled from the room.

The countess sighed. "I made a mistake in letting him speak to me alone. I had intended to let him down gently and instead, seemed to have raised his hopes. The dashing of them was hard, I think."

"I apologize for my countryman, Countess."

"Oh *la*, sir. No need for that. I'm as English as plum pudding, born and raised."

Not plum pudding. Perhaps baked apple with cinnamon or a succulent lemon curd, or a rich honey cake. He pulled back from the images and smiled. "I did wonder, given your lack of accent. I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. Anthony Darby, at your service." He bowed and as he rose, raised a brow in question. "Countess...?"

She inclined her head and held out her hand. "My deceased husband was a Russian count. I am recently returned to England. I was beginning to think I would require the help of a servant to release me from the

poor boy's clutches. Thank you for your timely intervention.”

A widow and thus available. Something feral and hungry sharpened its claws in Tony's gut even as he noticed she had not supplied her name. Damnation, he was mad, because instead of bidding her farewell, he took her hand and pressed his lips to the filmy lace covering her fingers.

The view of creamy breasts rising from plush red velvet, and the shadows in their valley sucked the breath from his chest. Even so, he inhaled the subtle fragrance of lavender. "The pleasure is all mine." He was surprised at the low growl in his voice

She tilted her head, a flicker of amber in warm brown eyes. Interest. Perhaps even challenge. Definitely not fear.

She withdrew her fingers slowly, lingeringly.

He regretted the loss. "I was looking for something to eat. May I escort you to the dining room?" He blasted well hoped food was laid out somewhere, because he needed something to counteract his light-headedness.

"Why not?" she said, rising.

Only then, did the full glory of her figure reveal itself. Full bosomed, tall for a woman—almost his height in fact—and with long, elegant limbs, she embodied each and every aspect of female charm he preferred.

Perhaps he wasn't in such a hurry to depart, after all. Dash it. Hadn't he said less than five minutes ago

that he didn't want any commitments? He held out his arm.

Margaret put her hand on the sleeve of the man holding out his arm with Clan, felt muscle and sinew beneath the dark blue superfine coat as they walked. An athletic man, as lithe and sleek as a racehorse. Quite beautiful, in fact. Unlike the bear-like Russians to whom she'd become accustomed, this man oozed finesse. And he was tall. Lovely and tall.

She studied his profile. Handsome in that narrow-faced, rather vulnerable English way, he'd looked too young at first glance. On closer inspection, the cynical mouth and the world-weary silver-gray eyes marked him as older. Around her age, or a little older, some thirty summers, she guessed. He glanced at her, caught her staring. The flicker of heat in the depths of his steely gaze had the same effect as too many glasses of champagne on her blood. A dizzy sort of breathlessness.

"I don't suppose you know where we might find supper?" he asked with a heart-stopping smile, his deep voice hinting at seduction. The dark, wicked places in her body responded with a delicious thrill. This man positively created havoc on her senses.

"Aah," she said, indicating the direction. "This is your first visit to Lady Falstow's infamous establishment."

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "But not yours?"

"No indeed." In a rash moment of utter abandon, she bit back the information that her only previous visit was for afternoon tea. After all, such an admission would weaken the armor of scarlet gown and carefully constructed air of confidence. After five minutes alone with young Radcliffe, she'd decided her wild flight of fancy to experience a little danger, to savor some of the joys she'd missed these past many years, wasn't really her cup of tea. Now she was wondering if perhaps this man could change her mind. It was a long time since her heart had fluttered, and right now it beat within her chest like a caged wild bird. A heady and youthful sensation she'd almost forgotten.

"This must be it," Darby said, ushering her into a room at the back of the house. A table set with epergnes and covered dishes lined the wall opposite the door. Artfully scattered small round tables allowed for groups of guests to talk, while equally tasteful screens permitted an element of privacy for those who wished it.

Margaret tensed at the sight of an inebriated noble plying his female companion with champagne. Couples and groups also occupied some of the other tables. An army of burly footmen hovered throughout the cream and gold painted room ready to intercede, as her ladyship had promised, should matters get out of

hand. Margaret wasn't ready for this. She wished they'd remained in the drawing room's seclusion.

Their hostess, a gargantuan figure in a gown of gold tissue, and shimmering with diamonds, circulated among her guests, her plump face beaming, her be-ringed hands gesturing volubly. She surged towards them in a tidal wave of hastily moved chairs. "There you are," she cried. "I heard you'd gone off with young Radcliffe. I was about to send Peter—" she gestured vaguely at one of her minions "—to see if you were all right."

A rush of warmth filled Margaret. It had been a long time since anyone cared about her comfort. "Thank you. As you can see, I am quite rescued already."

Lady Falstow turned her gaze on Margaret's escort. "Darby, isn't it?"

He bowed. "Good evening, my lady. I regret I did not see you when I first arrived."

"Came with the Everdens, did you not? The youngest brother is going to ruin me."

"I hope not, my lady." Darby grimaced as his gaze swept the room. "You have a full house tonight?"

Apparently, he also did not relish the crowd.

"Looking for a quieter spot, are you?" Lady Falstow tapped Darby on the shoulder. "Tell the fellow at the buffet what you would like, and run along to the conservatory where it is quiet."

A perceptive woman, Lady Falstow. Margaret lowered her lashes, fearing her eagerness to flee the

room might show. As Darby headed for the food, she pulled her hostess aside. "What do you know of him?" she asked in low tones.

"A younger son, I think. His friend Stanford's a bit of a rake. Not sure I know much about Darby." She frowned.

"Married?" For some odd reason, Margaret held her breath.

The older woman shrugged. "I don't believe so. I'd have warned you off right away, if that were the case."

Margaret winced. She needed more than a guess and Darby was headed their way with a bottle of champagne tucked under his arm and two flutes held in one large hand.

Lady Falstow leaned closer. "Take my advice. If you want to enjoy him to the full, don't play the innocent." She held out a sliver of metal. "This opens the door to the room I showed you. It is up to you whether you use it." The heavily ringed hand caught Margaret's as she reached for the key. "Courage, lass. If you change your mind, ring the bell. You will find one in every room. A footman will arrive in an instant. I promise, you will be fine. Not one of my ladies has ever complained about their treatment in this house."

Swallowing, Margaret tucked the silver key into her reticule before Darby reached her side.

'Now,' he said with a smile sweet enough to make the older lady flutter her eyelashes. "Where is this conservatory?"

Lady Falstow fanned her face as if suddenly hot, sapphires, diamonds and rubies winking and glittering. "At the back of the house. Run along. The food will follow in a moment or two."

They wandered in the direction indicated, and Darby opened an etched-glass panelled door.

Margaret gasped. A glass cathedral met her gaze. The domed structure ran the length of the side of the house. Air, warm and moist and redolent with fragrance, filled her lungs. Orange trees, lemons and limes too, lined the walks among splashes of red, yellow and blue blossoms.

"Look at this," Darby said, indicating a long stem crowned with waxy petals of the palest cream and leopard-like spots. "An orchid. Did you ever see anything so delicate?"

"Beautiful," she whispered.

"Like you," he murmured.

She glanced up to see hunger in his eyes, naked and raw. A surge of heat rushed up from her breasts to her face. *Blushing like a schoolgirl, dash it.* And the color no doubt clearly visible in the light of the torchères strategically placed along the walkway. "*La*, sir, a compliment indeed."

He tilted his head as if puzzled by her coquettish tone. Did he see through her defenses to the rapid beat of her heart? He smiled and waved his bottle. "Let us find somewhere to sit. We can open this and talk."

Further on, they did indeed find a loveseat fashioned from bamboo and wicker, and cushioned with chintz, and set in an arbor of vines.

"How lovely," she said.

"A perfect setting," he replied and led her to the seat. While she settled her skirts, he eased the cork free with a gentle pop. Vapor issued from the neck of the bottle. He filled the glasses, not spilling a drop.

"You do that with great expertise," she said.

"Had lots of practice." He glanced upwards. "I didn't dare shoot the thing though that lot." He grinned with nothing of the cynic about his mouth. Her heart tumbled slowly and pleurably.

She raised her gaze to the gleaming arch of glass. "Oh, gracious. No indeed."

Their voices mingled in laughter swiftly absorbed by the verdant greenery. A companionable sound. Her stomach clenched. A painful longing within the joy of discovery of a kindred spirit. What would it have been like to marry a man with the ability to laugh? She forced the thought aside. Regret had no place in this evening. Lady Falstow had advised her to live for the moment. After all, she'd paid her full dues as a dutiful wife.

Darby handed her a glass of wine. Their fingers brushed. Little shimmers of something hot ran up her arm. A shiver of anticipation ran across her skin.

The quick uplift of the corners of his lips said he, too, felt the spark. "To your beautiful eyes."

"To your lovely mouth," she replied and drank deeply, the champagne cool and tart on her tongue, the bubbles misting her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

"My lovely mouth?" He raised a brow and leaned back against the cushion, his eyelids lowering a fraction as if to hide the heat in his gaze. Not possible. She was veritably scorched.

"I like the way it smiles." Oh, lord, one mouthful of wine and she sounded foxed, when in reality it was he who made her feel giddy. Or perhaps it was the perfume of so many flowers? "You must think me a fool, Mr. Darby."

"Please, call me Tony. And no, I find you...delightful. Uniquely charming."

Her heart beat a little faster. Her skin tingled. This was how it began, the dance of intimacy. Words and looks and sighs. Only she wasn't sure she remembered the steps. Still, she would not sit like the proverbial wallflower and let the music pass over her head.

"Tony." She shook her head. "I think I prefer Anthony. And I am Margaret."

He took her free hand in his large warm one. His gaze dropped to her mouth. "Margaret. It suits you."

"Plain and proper is what my father said." She smiled, remembering her beloved father's face.

"I see nothing plain and proper about you, Margaret." His gaze drifted lower, and once more, betraying heat rose up her neck and blazed in her cheeks. "You cast a hothouse of exotic flowers into the

shade." He leaned closer and breathed in slowly. "You smell wonderful."

Carried by his soft outward sigh, the words brushed her collarbone. Her heart picked up speed, a breath caught in her throat, her lips parted. Things were moving far too fast with this man. She knew nothing about him. Yes, she would indeed live for the moment, but only if the moment was right. She sipped at her champagne, using the glass as a shield. A poor one, to be sure, but a symbolic gesture any gentleman would recognize.

He leaned back with a smile, his hand along the back of the sofa, a hairbreadth from her shoulder. "So, you are recently returned from Russia. How did you find it?"

"Cold." She laughed, because she really did not mean the weather. "My husband spent most of his time at court, but in the summer we traveled to his estate. The country is vast and very different from here."

"In a good way, I presume?"

How did one express five years of homesickness without whining? "I learned a great deal about the land and its people, but I am glad to return to England."

Another question lurked in his eyes. She could see him trying to decide whether he should ask it or not. She asked, "What do you want to know?"

He smiled. "Am I really that obvious? I was wondering if you left ties back in Russia. If you will return there?"

"A politic way of wondering if I have children, perhaps? And no. I have no ties and no intention of returning. My husband had more than one heir from a previous marriage. His position at court required a hostess. I learned Russian. I can organize a banquet for a thousand people or a tête à tête for two." Why was she telling him all this? He would think she was looking for another wifely position, when nothing could be further from the truth. "My husband left me a comfortable independence, and I now seek my own amusement."

"Was it really that bad?" he murmured.

The gentleness in his voice cut through her carefully constructed defenses, not something she wanted on a night such as this. "You mistake me. It was not bad at all. The Russian court glitters beyond anything imaginable. The czar is all powerful."

"And many of the people are serfs." He pursed his lips. "I don't see how it can last. Look at France."

The man was talking to her as if she had a brain. She shook her head. "You are right. I do not see it lasting either. And nor did my husband. He advised following England's lead. Alas, I do not see anyone taking up his standard. Certainly not his heir."

"I'm so sorry."

"I beg your pardon?"

"For your recent bereavement. It was tactless of me to remind you."

"Ah, once again you mistake the matter. Konrad died more than a year ago. I mourned his passing, but

he was not a young man, he lived a full life, and I fulfilled my duty."

He withdrew his hand from the sofa's back and for a moment she thought she might have given him a disgust of her callousness, but he lifted her hand from her lap. He gently turned it over and bared her wrist of glove with his forefinger, then leaned down to brush the pulse point with his lips. Tingles ran across her shoulders and lifted the hairs at the base of neck. "Now it is your turn for life," he said softly.

Footsteps rang on the flagstones. She snatched her hand back. They jumped apart like guilty children. She laughed.

He grinned ruefully. "Dash it. The food."

She arched a brow. "You said you were hungry, Anthony."

"I'm starving," he said. The low growl in his voice did not speak of bread and meat. Her inner muscles tightened pleasurably. She shivered.

The footman coughed loudly, then appeared round the corner carrying on high a silver tray loaded with several small plates. He dragged a small table from concealment behind the trellis and set the tray in front of them. He unfolded the napkins, placed one on each of their laps. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Anthony eyed the tray. "Thank you, no." The footman withdrew.

He had selected nothing but the best. Oysters nestled in ice, caviar in a silver bowl, mouthwatering

frosted grapes, light temptations designed to sharpen the senses. A hedonistic feast.

Anthony picked up an oyster and held it to Margaret's lips. Tipping her head back, she swallowed the delicate flesh, salty and sweet and tangy with lemon. She licked her lips.

He leant forward and tasted the corner of her mouth with a delicate lap of his tongue. "Delicious."

A flutter pulsed between her thighs. Wicked man. "Me or the fish?"

"Both, of course."

She smiled and heaped a tiny water biscuit with a mound of blue-black beads. The finest caviar, all the way from the Black Sea. She knew, because she had ordered it, sent packed in ice. When she raised her gaze from her hands, she found his gaze fixed on her face, intent, hungry and hot.

"Open," she murmured, the thrumming in her veins growing stronger, more demanding.

He did, and his grin was that of a wolf about to be fed a small tender morsel. She popped the tiny cracker in his mouth and watched him chew, experiencing the delightful burst of salty flavor in her mind as his eyes closed in pleasure.

He picked up his wine glass and held it to her lips, watching as she sipped and swallowed, his chest rising and falling with each deep breath.

How did he breathe so evenly, the wretch, when her heart raced out of control? She reached for her glass, determined not to be beaten. The glass shook only a

little as she brought it to his mouth. His eyelashes flicked up as the rim touched his bottom lip, his gray eyes, glinting with more than laughter, met her gaze. Her hand trembled. He grasped her wrist, held her hand steady and drank deep. She felt so weak, he might have been draining her blood.

He took the glass from her slackened grip and placed it on the table. Fine trembles ran through her body, running deep beneath the surface, an ache in her center, a yearning in her heart. The heart she could do nothing about. The rest? Well, time would tell. She managed a smile.

He returned his attention to the platters, his hand hovering above the dainty offerings, looking for the choicest piece. For her. She felt like some medieval lady, with her knight searching his trencher for the most tender cut of meat. He settled on a crescent of pastry. It hovered at her lips, and unable to resist the gentle urging in his expression, she opened her mouth.

Dear God. It tasted wonderful. What was in it, she could not tell. Something savory rather than sweet: spiced meat perhaps. The pleasure was all about him, his look of satisfaction, the slight curl to his lips, the scorch of his eyes. He selected again and again, little bursts of heaven filling her mouth, until she put up a hand in defeat.

He dabbed at her mouth with his napkin. "Crumbs," he said. He refilled their glasses. They chinked them together and drank an unspoken toast

that was all about what would happen next. Her pulse beat faster.

"Eat something," she said, her voice husky.

He leaned forward, tilted her chin with the tip of his finger, and pressed his lips to hers, a gentle brush, a butterfly wing of a kiss, a sweet touch of his tongue. Sweet sensations tingled in her breasts, tightened her stomach.

She put a hand on his collar for support and deepened the kiss, swept his champagne-flavored mouth with her tongue. Delicious.

His hand, warm, steady, strong, came up to her ribs. His thumb brushed the underside of her breast, a tantalizing touch, a sensual promise. A cry of surrender lodged in her throat.

Too fast. Too soon. She felt thrilled, and wicked and completely out of her depth. Today had simply been a testing of the waters. To meet a man she liked so quickly seemed beyond the realm of possibility. Dare she trust the desires of her body, when it knew so little?

He must have felt her slight resistance, for he pulled slowly away, his lids at half-mast, his breathing faster than before, she noticed with a surge of heat.

"There are chambers upstairs where we could ensure our privacy," he murmured. "Should you wish?"

He stood and brought her to her feet.

Chapter Two

Her gaze searched his face, looking for something. Tony experienced the most anxiety he'd known in his life. The urge to sweep her up in his arms, to kiss her senseless, to drive out all resistance, pounded in his blood like hammer blows. If she turned him down now, he might well end up weeping at her feet like young Radcliffe. Or putting her over his shoulder and carrying her upstairs.

His groin pulsed approval at the latter vision.

The deuce he would. An English gentleman accepted a no at face value. While it might not suit his baser nature, he wasn't about to force the issue. He'd have to find another way to seduce her into his bed. Or perhaps she was one of those women who preferred teasing over a relationship. Or she wanted a *carte blanche*. He drew back, tensing, as if he sensed the headman's axe about to fall.

"Anthony," she said, her voice hesitant.

He straightened his shoulders, smiled.

"Are you married?" she asked softly.

An unexpected question. He raised a brow. "No."

"Betrothed, perhaps?"

"Not as yet."

"The prospect of a betrothal soon, though," she said nodding.

"Why don't you come out and say what is on your mind?" The growl was back. Damn, but he felt as if he'd fallen afoul of the inquisition.

She waved a hand, her cheeks flushing a shade of pale rose. "I have no wish to engage in anything harmful to another woman. If you have prospects, I prefer to acknowledge our very pleasant conversation and leave it there." The words seemed to come out of her mouth in a rush, the pink on her high cheekbones turned a deeper red.

He ached for her obvious embarrassment and adored her principles. He took the fluttering hand in his. "I have no obligations, I swear it."

She gazed into his eyes for a very long moment. She nodded, as if coming to a decision. "I accept your word." She smiled then, openly. "I apologize. I will not blame you if you have changed your mind." Her gaze lowered to their clasped hands.

"Badly burned, were you?"

She shook her head. "It is over and done, not worth repeating."

"I suppose, since we are laying our cards on the table I should ask about your expectations, from this evening."

"None at all."

He experienced a sensation of dismay, followed by shock. He forced a smile. "Nor hopes for the future?"

"Most definitely not."

She was either a very good liar, or he hadn't made much of an impression. Or was it something else?

Why be disappointed when her answers were exactly what he'd hoped? Good grief, an hour ago, he'd wanted to leave.

Now, he wanted to dive into the warmth of her brown eyes, to kiss her eyelids, feel their lashes against his cheek. He couldn't resist. He pulled her close, dipped his head and claimed her lovely full mouth. She melted against him, warm and willing and curvaceous and soft. Pliant. Deceivingly yielding for a woman with a backbone of iron. He tasted her mouth, while his hands explored the sloping shoulders, the wonderfully straight back and the swell of her hips. She arched against his erection and he stifled a groan of pleasure.

Lifting his head, he gazed into her face. "Will you come upstairs with me?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I would like that very much. There are stairs just beyond the door where we entered."

Ah yes. An organizing woman. She'd forewarned him. "Perfect. Then let us go." He held out his arm.

They strolled along the walkway amid the leafy plants. He matched his pace to hers, needing very little adjustment, he noted with satisfaction. A branch drooped over the walkway, covered in red blossom, an hibiscus. She paused to inhale its fragrance.

"Very little perfume," she said, with a disappointed little grimace, her nose and cheek generously dusted with yellow.

"But lots of pollen." He took his handkerchief from his pocket. "I know you gave yours to that young puppy, so please allow me." Grasping her jaw, he flicked the yellow grains away. She wrinkled her nose, and he leaned forward and kissed the delectable tip. His body quickened. A mad vision leapt into his mind of her naked flesh covered from head to heel in pollen and him, feather in hand, dusting her off. It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest it. God save him. He hadn't had those kinds of visions since his green youth. Nor had his body roused so hard and so fast.

"This way," he said, making a break for the door before his imagination took him beyond the point of no return.

Nearby, a narrow set of stairs did indeed wind its way up. A servants' staircase, he guessed.

"One floor up," she said, her voice husky. She rummaged in her reticule. "I have the key." She pressed the cool shiny metal against his palm.

How many other men had she led up these stairs, panting those little breaths, her bosom rising and falling in a tantalizing rhythm of feminine music? He didn't want to know. He didn't want to think about it. He'd never cared before, so why this sudden feeling of possession?

He put his arm around her waist, nuzzled her neck below her ear, gorged on the scent of lavender and needy woman. "Lead the way, Countess."

They climbed the stairs like sweethearts, her head against his shoulder, his arm about her waist pulling

her tight against his side. Each time she stepped up, she afforded him a glimpse of a well-turned ankle and curve of calf. Slender and shapely. What more could a man ask? Passion? She had that too. The heat of her body burned through his clothes at hip and thigh and forearm. He fought to control his breathing as his blood grew heavy and thick.

He swung open the door and watched in appreciation the sway of her hips as she sauntered in.

Lady Falstow might be an abbess of sorts, but she did not run anything so common as a bawdy house. The suite—for it opened into a sitting room, and beyond lay a chamber he felt sure must be a bedroom—had pale cream walls and a sofa covered in green and white damask. A low table at one end of the daybed held a bottle of champagne in ice and two glasses.

He closed the door with a soft click and she spun around, her slanted eyes wide, like a cat deciding whether to hide or play.

"Would you like some more champagne?" he asked.

"Yes" One corner of her mouth twisted ruefully. "Thank you." She sat down on the sofa while he drew the cork and poured two glasses. He sat beside her. "To us," he said raising his glass.

"To us," she whispered.

"A delightful room," he said.

"Indeed." She took a long sip of her drink and set the glass down. She was nervous. Not quite the

sophisticate he'd presumed. That pleased him, strangely enough.

"Give me your hands," he said.

Her eyes widened.

"Please."

She held them out. They shook just a little. He took them in his. "I promise I will do nothing without your approval."

Her gaze rose swiftly. "I did not think you would." Her voice sounded breathless, but her expression remained calm, her eyes dancing again.

"I'm glad." He turned her hands over, placed them on his knee. Three tiny pearl buttons marched up the inside of her wrists. Starting with her left hand, he slipped the tiny beads through the loops one at a time. He pulled the fabric aside, revealing a tracery of faint blue veins in her creamy skin. He brushed it reverently with his thumb.

She drew in a breath.

The soft sound sent a shiver down his spine. Her skin there was sensitive. There would be many more places on her body equally responsive. He looked forward to discovering them all. He brought her wrist to his lips, tasted the fragrant flesh with his tongue. She brushed his cheek with her fingertips, the lace rough against his skin.

He drew off the glove and laid it beside her glass on the table, still maintaining hold of her hand. It trembled lightly. It reminded him of a swallow he'd removed from the cold grate in his bedroom as a boy.

Soft, warm, fragile and terribly vulnerable. He replaced it on his knee and went to work on her right hand.

She smiled. "You are good at buttons."

"Mmm," he said, tasting her other wrist. "Lots of practice."

She giggled. "It tickles when you talk."

He finished denuding her hand and handed her the glass. "Sip."

With a raised brow she did and he took a deep swallow of the bubbling wine from his own glass. Tart and crisp, it cleansed his mouth. He drew her to her feet and captured her mouth, tasting cool champagne and warm woman. She tangled her tongue with his with a tiny cry of encouragement in the back of her throat.

Ah, yes.

He cupped her buttocks, pressing his hips to her belly, his thigh against the apex of hers, felt her hips answering pressure against his erection.

It felt good. Very good.

His palm wandered the span of her lovely back, the straight spine, the velvet of her gown soft against his hand. And another row of tiny buttons. Far too many buttons. He cradled her nape bowing her back until he held her weight in his palms.

Desire mounted as she leaned back, trusting he would not let her fall. He warmed in a way that had nothing to do with the heat at his groin, or the lust

urging him to strip her naked. It registered in the corner of his mind still capable of rational thought.

The exploration of her wonderful welcoming mouth, the weight of her supple body in his arms, had him on fire. The raging beast of lust wanted to rip her clothes away, to throw her to the floor, hair wild about her shoulders, spread her legs and drive into her heat. Blood pounded in his ears. His heart thundered.

He brought her upright, cupped her face in his hands and gazed into her liquid brown eyes. Amber flame sparked in their depths. She smiled and lowered her lashes. The sweetness in her expression touched his heart. In that moment, she seemed more child than woman. Almost innocent.

"Lovely," he murmured. "May I see your hair down?"

She reached up.

"Let me," he said, filled with a kind of madness that required he serve her. He walked around her with measured steps, the urge for haste beating in his veins, only iron will chaining it fast. The knot at her nape presented an interesting challenge. As did the myriad buttons down her back. With a gentle probe, he located a pin in the luxuriant coil. Tortoiseshell, he saw as he pulled it free. Its companions amid the glossy tresses were more forthcoming. In a rainstorm of pins, copper fire bursting forth wherever candlelight touched, a mass of soft wavy skeins fell to her creamy shoulders, slid halfway down her back and over her breasts.

The strands ran through his fingers, silken ribbons scented with lavender. Rich, and glorious. She glanced over her shoulder, a teasing half-smile on her lips. "Do you approve?"

"Oh, yes, my sweet." He spun her around and swept her up, her wonderful hair trailing over his arms.

Her face alight, her eyes dancing, she laughed. The throaty sound went straight to his groin. In a fever of impatience, he kissed her forehead, her nose, her lips in quick succession. He swept her up and carried her through to the next chamber.

Covered in gold brocade, draped with filmy hangings, an enormous bed dominated a room lit by wall sconces and a blazing fire. A rug of white fur lay in front of the hearth, a chaise-longue occupied the bay window embrasure. Tony had eyes only for the bed.

He set her on her feet. "May I help you with your gown?"

The rough edge to his voice sent pleasurable little quivers racing around in Margaret's belly. Her throat dried. No going back. She'd wanted this. He was lovely. Perfect in fact. Handsome. Gentle, and obviously experienced in seduction. In less than an hour, he had her body humming with tension, strung tight with desire and longing.

Even so, the little pinprick of fear poking around in her mind warned of terrible consequences. A fallen woman. Easy virtue. Wanton. Words of

disparagement. All true, to some extent, if she followed this path. And if she didn't? If she called a halt right at this moment and returned to her lonely sensible existence, would she regret it forever?

She had weathered many storms in her life, ridden out the fierce gales of shattered hopes and dreams in absolute calm as good breeding demanded. Here, no duty, no expectations lay in wait to mould her decisions. Only free will. Hers.

His face hovered above her, waiting for her answer, his gray eyes smoky, mobile lips full and sensual from their kisses. A man with a powerful need to conquer, for all that he held it under control.

And if she let him conquer her body, would he also conquer her heart? Could she come out of the adventure unscathed? Incredulous, she let go her breath at the painful squeeze in her chest. Clearly it was too late. He'd already touched her soul. If she weren't careful, he'd leave scars.

But she would not let him think her a pawn to be played at will.

"First you, my dear Anthony." She reached for his cravat.

"It will be faster if I do it," he said, breathing just a little hard.

"And deprive me of the pleasure? I think not."

"Hell," he breathed.

"Don't worry. I know what I am about." After all, her elderly husband had occasionally required her attentions. Konrad had been a considerate husband,

always kindly, but other women had hinted at things that led her to believe she might have missed something in the marriage bed. In seeking to learn the truth, she was taking a risk. The thrill surging in her veins made her think it might be worthwhile.

She flipped the ends of his cravat free. The knot proved resistant to her efforts, but he stood patient, his chin elevated, the flickering of a muscle in his jaw the only sign of tension. That and the heat rolling off his body and dashing against her breasts like waves breaking on shore. The knot gave. She unwound the crisp length of muslin free and let it fall to her feet.

Wicked. She swallowed, trying to ease the dryness in her mouth, wondering if she had the courage. Her heart seemed to beat louder in the quiet room. Could he hear it? Sense her nervousness?

She inhaled a quick breath and fumbled with his coat's five gold buttons. He helped her pull the garment over his shoulders and down his arms. It landed on top of the cravat. Next the pearl gray waistcoat. It slipped off easily and she flung it aside. Her breathing became very shallow and rapid. Her hands were shaking worse with each passing moment. If she didn't get this done quickly, she'd be running for the door.

The shirt disappeared into the waistband of his biscuit-colored pantaloons. She tugged it free and undid the buttons at his throat, revealing golden flesh and a sprinkling of light brown hair. She laid a hand flat on his flesh, feeling warmth and a strong steady

heartbeat. Her insides quickened. "Bend down," she said.

He laughingly groaned, but did as she bid and she hauled the soft fabric over his head and off. The treasure she had uncovered held her gaze. Delicious arcs of muscle and chords of sinew sculpted his firm flesh. Beautiful. His pectoral flexed as if to prove his strength. His Adam's apple rose and fell with a swallow. She wasn't the only one feeling the stress.

Unable to resist the glorious sight, she ran her hands over the warm flesh of his shoulders and biceps, trailed her fingers through the crisp curls on his deep chest, outlined the ridges of muscle beneath his ribs.

Lovely curves and defined shadows. Hard flesh and supple muscle. Not an ounce of extra flesh or any blurring of the definition of shoulders, waist or hip. Perfect male beauty.

He sucked in a breath.

A thrill tightened her center, deep between her thighs. She rode the sensation as it rippled outward, loosening her limbs, making her breasts feel full and sensitive.

His hand went to the buttons of his falls and she took in narrow hips and lean flanks, gloating at the evidence of his arousal. With a quick flip, she brushed his fingers away. "I'll do it."

"Sweetheart, you are lulling me," he murmured, his voice a hot murmur.

"I know." Her voiced rasped.

He cupped her chin and pressed a swift kiss to her forehead. "Hurry up."

Truth to tell, she thought she might die soon herself, if she didn't get him onto that bed. But she would not rush. She'd never have the courage to do this again, and never with anyone else.

The buttons of his falls slid free with little effort, thank heaven. Reveling in the tensing muscles of his stomach at the intrusion of her fingers between fabric and skin, she worked on the fastening at his waistband. The button pinged onto the floor. "Oh dear."

"Not a significant problem." He sounded as if he might be laughing and indeed when she glanced up his eyes were dancing beneath half lowered lids.

She peeled the tight fabric over his hips, down long muscular thighs to his knees.

His erection sprang free, larger than she'd expected, hard and proud, curving up to his navel.

She knelt to remove his shoes, her cheek brushing his arousal.

"Hades," he said. "Woman. Enough." He toed his shoes off and stripped off his pantaloons and stockings in seconds.

She sat back on her heels and looked up at him. She'd seen statues in museums that didn't hold a candle to this man.

A sound rumbled up from his throat, a frustrated growl.

She laughed. In a flash he had lifted her to her feet.

“No more teasing. You've had your fun. Now it is my turn. Be prepared to suffer the torments of heaven.”

Slowly she turned her back to him. She bowed her head and let her hair fall forward, a curtain to hide her heated cheeks. "If you please."

He traced the line of her dress across her spine, a gentle abrasion of her skin, then briefly pressed his lips to her nape. She shuddered, whether in terror or delight she wasn't sure. Nimble fingers released the buttons down her back. A quick jerk and the bow holding the lace for her stays unraveled. Strong practiced fingers pulled them free of their eyelets. Despite the warmth in the room, her back tingled with the touch of cool air as he pushed the gown off her shoulders and down her arms.

She swallowed. Turned to face him. For she had never been accused of cowardice. His gaze lowered to her breasts, covered only by her chemise, a gauzy muslin shift edged in fine lace. The wonder and awe in his face brought a smile to her lips. "I see you are not disappointed."

He glanced up then, and grinned. "No indeed. *J'adore.*" He dropped to one knee, pulling the gown over her hips, untying her petticoat. His movements, though quick and strong, were not quite as controlled as before. "I am at your feet."

"Literally." She laughed. She had never felt so beautiful in her life, or so alive. She ran her fingers

through his hair, shorter than fashionable, but shining. Light brown with hints of gold.

"Step out, please, madam." For all of his politeness, his service as her maid, there was no mistaking the words for anything but a command. A request to make haste.

She stepped over the pile of crumpled red fabric pooled at her feet, and he whisked it away, tossing it across the room.

"Sit," he said, still on one knee and gesturing at the bed.

With raised eyebrows, she complied.

One foot at a time, he removed her slippers with an economy of movement that had her heart pounding in her chest. He shot them after the dress. He ran a hand up her calf, caressing, shaping, then brought her to her feet wearing naught but her chemise and stockings and her emerald choker. "Gorgeous."

He cupped her bottom in one large hand, the other went around her shoulders, and he scooped her up and deposited her on the bed as if she weighed no more than a kitten.

She felt kittenish, flirty, lighthearted and terribly wanton. He nuzzled her throat, licked her ear, making her whimper approval. He straightened, gazing down at her with hot quicksilver eyes.

Her nipples hardened and her breasts ached for his lips and tongue.

"It seems to me," he said, his grin wicked. "You are overdressed."

The words, the roughness in his voice, drew her insides tight as if a chord between them had shortened or twisted. A jolt of pleasure made her gasp.

He laughed. "God, you are so responsive."

"Anthony," she said. "Lay with me."

He shook his head. "Stocking first, madam." A warm hand caressed the sole of her foot. A knuckle massaged the arch. A strong thumb rubbed the ball of her foot.

"Mmm. Now you are the tease," she said.

"This is serious business," he said, dropping to his knees beside the bed. All she could see was his shoulders, his nape, the glint of gold among toffee-colored waves as his hands shaped her ankles, squeezing and rubbing her calves before straying up behind the backs of her knees. A finger eased beneath her garter.

He leaned forward, breathed on her thigh, warm and moist and blazing sensation. More sensation than she ever imagined. Her insides melted, grew hot, quivered.

He tugged at a garter with his teeth. It came undone. Slowly he slipped off her stocking. Then the other garter.

"Lovely," he said. "Beautiful legs. A feast for the eyes."

"Please," she said, wanting him skin on skin, inside her.

"Soon," he murmured. "My sweetly veiled. Patience." He pressed his palm against the inside of her thigh.

She swallowed, feeling the blush rush to her face, yet relaxed at the gentle pressure, let her thighs fall open.

He stroked her inner thighs, up and down, gentle sweeping caresses of both hands now, each pass reaching higher, closer. Her woman's flesh tingled, expecting his touch, wanting the weight of his hand. She reached down and caught his wrist, place his hand at the juncture of her legs.

He drew in a soft hiss of breath. "You are bold. Demanding." Pressing down with heel of his hand, he increased the pleasure.

Her stomach rolled slowly. This man knew how to please a woman. She purred her approval.

The touch disappeared. She lifted her head, frowning, and he grinned as he climbed up on the bed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good," she murmured.

He kissed her then, sweetly, a light brush of mouth on mouth. A whisper. She nipped his bottom lip and he thrust his tongue into her mouth. She sucked it. He groaned. The sound arrowing sweetly to her core. He took control of the kiss, tangling his tongue with hers, ravishing her mouth, plundering with his tongue until she felt dizzy.

He broke away and in one swift and ruthless move, pulled her shift up her body. She lifted her arms and

head, and he pulled up and free with one hand, while capturing her wrists with the other.

"No escape for you now." He gazed into her face, his eyes dark like the smoke from an open fire. Mysterious, promising heat, and yet waiting for permission.

Had he sensed it then, her cowardice? If she told him no, he would stop. For a little while longer, she had the control. But this was the point of no return; his eyes said so.

Whatever happened tonight, she would never see him again. Couldn't. It would be too difficult to hide her feelings. Feelings one should not have for a casual lover. And if she would never see him again, she might as well have something worth remembering. She smiled.

He captured her mouth, while his free hand went to her breast, teasing the nipple, rolling it, squeezing hard enough to cause sensual pain. She gasped into his mouth.

He broke away, trailed little kisses down her jaw, her throat, licked at the small hollow at her shoulder, blazed a path to the rise of her breast. Sensations swirled through her blood, leaving her languid, yet tight as a bowstring. She stroked his back, his arms, his wonderful shoulders. Warm and wet, his mouth took her breast. His tongue played with her nipple, licking, flicking, swirling.

He suckled.

Her insides clenched so hard, she almost tipped into bliss. Not quite. So close. "Sweet heaven," she gasped, pressing up with her hips, reminding him of her other need.

First one nipple then the other, he kissed and suckled and tormented, until she thought she might go mad.

She bit his shoulder and he groaned and chuckled softly. "Are you ready for me?"

She managed a nod.

"Let me see." He reached between them, caressed her woman's flesh, eased a finger inside then another, gentle probing. So good. Not nearly enough. She arched her back.

"Ah, sweetheart," he said. "You feel wonderful. Hot and wet and ready." He nudged her legs apart with his knee, and guided himself to her entrance. She felt the head of him, bathing in her moisture, tracing her cleft, touching that special place that seemed to make her crazy with lust. Her mind darkened, focused only on that one small place, every fiber of her being centered on the tension.

He thrust forward. Hard. Huge. To the hilt.

He withdrew. Pleasurable friction.

She lifted her legs, clenched around his waist and hung on for dear life.

He thrust into her deep and hard, again and again the tempo increasing with each thrust. The sound of damp flesh coming together. Murmurs of pleasure and cries increasing desire.

Nothing else in the world. Desire spiraling higher. Hot flesh. Soft moist sounds. Kisses.

Tony thought he would unravel at any moment. Her inner muscles clenched around him, drawing him deeper with each penetration, until he hung on to control by a thread. Dark-honey eyes drew him into their depths as her body held him fast. She clung to his shoulders, his hips, meeting each thrust with a gasp in the back of her throat that made his balls clench. Passion filled her face. Her body accommodated his like a sweet sensual glove. He was in heaven.

She lifted her head and nibbled his ear. The tickle went straight to his groin. He thought he might go right over the top. Not without her. She deserved everything he had to give and so much more.

Three hours, he'd been hard. Since the moment they'd met. If she didn't find her release soon, the back of his head might explode.

He brought his hand between them. Felt for that hard little nub of clitoris, watched her face until her eyes widened, then rubbed hard fast little circles, found the rhythm and watched her melt into abandonment with such a feeling of tenderness it almost stopped him cold.

Closing his eyes against the emotion, he drove into her body, hard and fast, seeking release and the best of deaths. She stroked him, nuzzled his neck, welcomed him into her heat, and then she shattered, her internal pulses of pleasure kissing his shaft. He broke through

into white light and mind-numbing bliss, falling into wonderful warmth.

Somehow he managed not to collapse. He remembered to breathe. His heart pounding, he hung over her, saw her arms fall away from his shoulders, her eyes glaze, her lips curve in satisfaction.

He felt like a hero.

God help him.

He eased out of her and rolled on his side, pulling her close, holding her as if he could keep her there for all time. He stroked her shoulder, kissed her ear, felt her tiny shiver. His groin gave a happy little pulse. Once wasn't enough. He had the feeling that no matter how many times he made love to this woman it would never be enough. Something inside him ached at the thought of never seeing her again. And the thought of another man touching her wasn't to be born. Had she truly driven him mad?

It hit him like a horseshoe to the temple. This was what he'd been seeking all along. Bricks and mortar were only a fraction of the permanence he sought. Without a heart at its center, a house would mean nothing. He'd never believed in hearts as anything but a pump for blood, but the ache in his chest was all about her. He knew instinctively, illogically, that without her, the land would mean as little as the rest of his life.

Dear God. If he wasn't badly mistaken, he loved her.

"May I call on you?" he murmured into her wonderful mass of lavender-scented hair.

She turned her head, her brow furrowed, her eyes regretful. "I don't think so."

The pain of her rejection hurt worse than a fall from a horse at full gallop, worse than the bite of a well-honed rapier. Rather, it seemed to explode in his chest like a barrel of gunpowder.

He drew in a long breath. He'd asked. She'd said no. She offered nothing beyond this one encounter, and he'd gladly accepted.

But it hadn't been an outright no, had it? He lifted his head and smiled into her lovely face. "I'm not easily put off."

Her eyes swam with tears, even though she smiled back. "Please. Don't say something we will both regret later."

Those tears gave him hope.

He nestled her into the crook of his shoulder. "Then we will talk about it later."

She sighed as if she hoped he would not, then closed her eyes.

He gazed down at the dark sweep of lashes, at the pale skin taut over exotic bones. He wanted to wake up to this vision every day. Nothing else would ever meet this need.

Somehow he'd persuade her to change her mind. He'd find her. They'd talk. Get to know each other. He'd make her see he wasn't a frippery fellow who

didn't know his own mind or his own heart. He would not let her go without a fight.

Margaret knew she'd slept, but not how long. The aftermath of bliss, the languor, the melting limbs had taken her by surprise.

She opened her eyes and stared at the canopy, felt his breath on her cheek, the weight of his thigh across hers. This was what she'd missed by being the dutiful daughter. How unfair.

Her heart ached. Not for the past, but for something larger, something as solid as a mountain, something as deep as a chasm. It was loss.

He'd asked her to see her again.

He should not have done that. For a moment, she'd almost said yes. Fool. Had years of obedience, rigid duty, self-control been for naught if this man could crumble her will to dust? For years, she'd submitted to the strictures of her life because Konrad had said that on his death she would never be dependent on anyone again. He'd kept his word. How could she consider giving up her freedom?

Except, somewhere deep inside, youthful hopes and dreams stirred into wakefulness, as if they had slept for a very long time. Painful with longing as they stretched and unfurled, they offered more than duty, they promised joy. If only she dared take the risk.

Beside her, Anthony shifted. "Awake?" he murmured, and traced her jaw with his finger.

She couldn't help her sigh of pleasure at his touch.
"Yes. It is time for me to leave."

"Will I find you here tomorrow?"

Her heart skipped a beat. She quelled its enthusiastic reply with a frown. "I will not return."

He gazed into her eyes, searched her face. "Did I offend in some way?"

She'd wounded him. The pain was there in the shadows clouding his eyes. She wanted to beg his forgiveness, but did not trust herself to speak of it, in case she cried. "Of course not."

He stroked her back. Her skin danced under his fingertips, begged for more. She almost groaned out loud. "It is better this way," she managed to say.

He was silent. Angry? She turned to look at him. His eyes were smiling. "I will find you, countess."

Her heart soared in the most ridiculous manner.

He slid out of bed and gathered up their clothing from the far corners of the room. Silently he helped her dress, lacing her stays, buttoning her gown, kneeling to help her into her stocking and shoes, even retrieving her pins from the floor in the other chamber. On the dressing table, she found a brush and while she fixed her hair, he dressed swiftly. As she finished, he came and stood at her shoulder.

Faces side by side, they stared at their reflections, hers dark, his fair. He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him.

His mouth brushed hers. Delicate, tender, no more than the brush of a butterfly wing.

A promise? Or a gentle farewell. Tears were hot at the backs of her eyes. She would never see him again. Must not, if she truly wanted her freedom. And yet it no longer held the bright allure of a distant star that she could see every day in her marriage. Right at this moment, the future looked bleak.

"Are you ready?" he murmured.

Was she? He gave her no chance to answer, for he opened the door and escorted her along the corridor to the staircase leading down to the entrance hall.

Two young men, one saturnine leaning against the wall, the other fair and looking at his watch, glanced up at their descent.

"Darby," the fair one said, his eyes opening wide as they reached the ground. "I thought you'd forgotten us." He sent a telling look to the dark gentleman, who had straightened. The Evernden brothers, no doubt. Anthony's friends.

Anthony signaled to a lackey to open the door. "May I drive you home?" he asked her softly.

"No need," she said, smiling, wishing she could kiss him goodbye. "My carriage is waiting."

"It would be," he said. A rueful twist to his lips, he bent closer, his breath tickling her ear. "You can't hide from me. I'll find you. You will be mine."

Her heart picked up speed, beating out longing and wild hope. Should she listen? She wanted to. Apparently madness had invaded her blood. She whisked out of the door, before her tongue could say anything incriminating.

"Who is that?" one of the young men asked.

"My future wife, though she doesn't yet know it," Anthony said, loudly enough for her to hear. "The love of my life."

Her breath caught in her throat, her stomach took a long slow roll of happiness. She stopped. A smile took control of her lips. Glancing back over her shoulder, she caught the full effect his cat-who-ate-the-cream grin and wanted to laugh. She raised a brow. "We haven't had our courtship yet."

He bowed with a flourish, then gazed into her eyes. "We will, my love."

My love. Her heart swelled, filled with a bubble of the purest joy. It grew so large, she thought it might carry her away like a hot air balloon. With steps as light as girl in the first blush of youth, she ran for her carriage. *The love of my life.* She savored the words, and foolish tears ran down her face.

Anthony would move mountains to find her. He'd said so with his eyes.

"Home, John," she called to the coachman, as the footman opened the carriage door.

Home to prepare a welcome.

Hungry for more Regency rakes? Read **THE RAKE'S INHERITED COURTESAN** by Ann Lethbridge, available April 2009 in print and ebook format from Harlequin Historical.

Enjoy more passion through the ages with the sensual Harlequin Historical **UNDONE** titles on sale now:

NOTORIOUS LORD, COMPROMISED MISS by Annie Burrows

THE UNMASKING OF LADY LOVELESS by Nicola Cornick

LIBERTINE LORD, PICKPOCKET MISS by Bronwyn Scott

THE VIKING'S FORBIDDEN LOVE-SLAVE by Michelle Willingham

SHIPWRECKED AND SEDUCED by Amanda McCabe

Craving something a little longer? Find more historical romantic adventure from Harlequin Historical at www.eHarlequin.com or your local bookstore.

Interested in writing for Harlequin Historical **UNDONE**? Send your submission to undone@harlequin.ca.

Ann Lethbridge has been reading Regency novels for as long as she can remember. She always imagined herself as Lizzie Bennet or one of Georgette Heyer's heroines, and would often recreate the stories in her head with different outcomes or scenes. When she sat down to write her own novel, it was no wonder that she returned to her first love: the Regency.

Ann grew up roaming England with her military father. Her family lived in many towns and villages across the country, from the Outer Hebrides to Hampshire. She spent many memorable family holidays in the West Country and in Dover, where her father was born. She now lives in Canada, with her husband, two beautiful daughters, and a Maltese terrier named Teaser, who spends his days on a chair beside the computer, making sure she doesn't slack off.

Ann visits Britain every year, to undertake research and also to visit family members who are very understanding about her need to poke around old buildings and visit every antiquity within a hundred miles.

ISBN: 978-1-4268-2923-9

The Rake's Intimate Encounter

Copyright © 2009 by Michele Ann Young

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

www.eHarlequin.com