



The
Triple Countess
series

A
Betting Chance

LYNNE CONNOLLY

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In this game of hearts, winner takes all.

The Triple Countess, Book 4

Sapphira Vardon needs five thousand pounds to avoid a cruel marriage and a grim future, and there's only one path for her. Don a mask and an assumed name, and risk everything to win at the gaming tables. First, though, she has to get through the door. Luckily she knows just whose name to drop.

Corin, Lord Elston, is curious to find out who used his name to gain entrance to Mother Brown's whorehouse and gaming hell. The enigmatic woman who calls herself Lydia isn't the sort of female usually found here. Behind her mask and heavy makeup, she's obviously a respectable woman—who plays a devilish hand of cards.

Sapphira is desperate to keep her identity a secret, but Lord Elston's devastating kisses and touches demand complete surrender. And once he learns the truth, there's more at stake than guineas. Corin finds himself falling hard for a woman who's poised to run. A woman who's about to learn that he only plays to win...

Warning: Hot action on the gaming table and in the bedroom might make you go looking for a time machine.

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A Betting Chance

Lynne Connolly

Dedication

To Sasha. Thanks for helping to make this book one to be proud of.

Chapter One

Spring, 1756

If this outfit didn't put off her would-be suitor, nothing would. Sapphira sighed and smoothed the dull brown gown she'd decided to wear. Even the sigh didn't disturb the linen fichu smothering her breasts. She'd taken care to leave only a small strip of skin showing at her neck.

She'd scraped her hair back into a knot at the top of her head and covered it with a linen cap, plain except for the narrow band of bone lace around the edge. Looking like this, she'd pass for a Puritan.

She shrugged, trying to loosen the tension permeating every muscle, but the movement only made her wince. Her father's latest application of the rod had missed its target a little, and she had a mark at the top of her shoulders. Hence the heavy fichu. She knew better than to display the marks of her shame.

Maybe she should feel glad of her father's skill in administering whippings, as it meant she was unlikely to take a scar. Punishment was one thing, but he knew better than to degrade the merchandise. Which was, in this case, her.

The soreness of last night had ameliorated to a dull throb, only exacerbated when she moved too precipitately, but her trepidation at actually putting her plan into motion sent her mind elsewhere.

Her father had administered the blows on Wednesday after she flatly refused to accept George Barber as her future husband. Today was Monday, and the punishment had done her no good. Her father was still set on the match and she was just as set against it, although she had the sense to appear agreeable.

Perhaps George Barber would turn out better than his looks promised. After all, a good husband didn't have to be good looking. Just kind, or fun-loving or...or at least more amenable than her harassed father. Her refusal to marry the man she'd only met briefly once and seen across a room and a street a time or two had resulted in a storm of fury. Nobody disobeyed her father. Nobody. She should have known better, but her protest had been involuntary. Before she'd properly thought, she'd blurted, "I cannot allow you to decide the rest of my life for me! I'm not a puppet, to be pushed into places I have no wish to be. Please, Father, reconsider. Or give me a little time."

Of course he had not. Instead, he'd put her on a bread and water diet, confined her to her room and given her a sound whipping, albeit with tears in his eyes.

Now she had to go through with the farce, see if she could get anything worthwhile from this terrible proposal. She turned to leave the room, only to see her father standing in the doorway. At once she lowered her gaze.

“I’m pleased you’ve seen reason, daughter,” he said. “It pains me to punish you. I was not looking forward to you forcing me to do it again.”

“I know.” She did know. His punishments were severe and precise, because they hurt him too. But he considered it his duty, and if Thomas Vardon had a virtue, it was that he never shirked his duty. Or that was what he told her, and he’d kept to the dictum all his life. That meant her father had also shown her great kindness and consideration where other fathers might have dismissed her concerns without compunction. Maybe because he was older than most fathers of children her age. Maybe because her mother had died when she was five years old, leaving her with no relatives, apart from the great-aunt he hardly spoke to these days, although he still allowed Sapphira to go for her Thursday lessons on Cavendish Street. Great-Aunt Josephina taught Sapphira how to behave like a lady, and if her father had but known it, how to gamble like one too. So perhaps it was just as well that communication between her two living relatives remained cursory.

She left her room hoping for the best and followed her father downstairs to the drawing room, her feet clattering on the bare boards of the staircase. The silence inside the house was punctuated by sounds from the busy street outside, a reminder of life going on right outside the door. She’d spent all her life in London and hardly noticed the commotion normally. A brief visit to the country as a child had left Sapphira aching to return to her home, where costers and flower sellers shouted their wares, chairmen swore at everyone and pickpockets jostled the quality in the streets in the hopes of snatching a fat purse or even the wig off a gentleman’s head. And always the rattle of wheels over the cobblestones and the clop of hooves.

She preceded her father into the parlor. The scent of the potpourri she kept there hit her nostrils, and she took a moment to inhale the citrusy, spicy aroma. It always steadied her. She kept lavender in her bedroom for calming, but after spending the night in the room she couldn’t smell it anymore. She associated roses with her room at her great-aunt’s house, together with the lighter colors and the elegance of the fashionable furniture Lady Carr owned.

But she liked this house, filled with the furniture her family had owned for generations, together with a few new pieces. Theoretically, it would belong to Sapphira when her father died. Theoretically she’d have his fortune and his business, but in reality her husband would get it all.

Which meant the gangly young man standing in the room next to the older couple.

Her heart plummeted to her sensible plain buckled shoes. Facing them, she knew she couldn’t do it, she couldn’t marry into this family. The Barber family, and their habits, were well known in the City. So pious they went to church three times on Sundays and held lengthy prayer sessions twice a day on weekdays. They were so soberly dressed colors hardly held a place in their lives, apart from dull browns and mournful purples. She should have worn yellow. That might have proved more effective in putting them off the idea of a match. Think, she had to think. Opposition didn’t work, so she had to come up with a plan.

Sapphira sank into a neat curtsey. “Father, Mr. and Mrs. Barber, Mr. Barber, I welcome you to this house.”

“Thank you.” Mr. Barber the elder spoke first, then her father spoke from behind her.

“I’m glad to see my dutiful daughter returned to me and more delighted to present you, Sapphira, to your future husband, George.”

Horror swept through her when she heard the threat made real. George Barber stared at her, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing when he swallowed. For all his unprepossessing appearance, it wasn’t George, but the idea of being sold off as a business deal, that made her recoil.

Perhaps she’d been too hasty. Perhaps listening to Great-Aunt Josephina’s tales of love with the right man had made her believe unrealistic stories. This was the eighteenth century, not some nebulous time out of mind. She could make something of this. She had to.

Her father had brought her up to understand business, and she’d proved an adept pupil. But if this family had any say in the matter, she’d be stuck in their house in Hampstead, praying and giving birth. They had so many children it gave her a headache to try to think of all their names. Still, if George had any gumption at all, she could make something of the alliance. If not her marriage, then what it brought, children and a larger business to deal with.

She fought not to let any of her horror show in her face or any other part of her body. She kept her hands relaxed and maintained a solemn but dutiful expression, set her mouth in a pleasant curve. “I’m honored, Father, that you took the time to search so diligently for me.”

Her father’s eyes narrowed. He was no fool and he must know she wouldn’t turn her opinions around so quickly. Unless he believed the beating worked completely. Let him think what he liked.

“May I offer you tea, madam?”

Mrs. Barber regarded her with an intent expression in her protuberant dark eyes. “We will not take tea, thank you. It is an extravagance we only indulge in once a day.”

Sapphira bowed her head and stepped away from the teapot, although she would dearly have liked a cup. The scent of the brew made her mouth water after her restricted diet.

Mrs. Barber wasn’t done. “Your father assures us you have always been a dutiful and obedient child. We will expect you to continue in the same way.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I will proscribe your day, and you will share a room with my son after your marriage. He will instruct you in your duties and you will obey him without question.”

“I have learned to help in the business, ma’am. I understand double entry bookkeeping and I help with the stock-keeping when my father requires it.”

Mr. Barber sniffed. “We will not expect you to take part in anything like that. Business is a man’s purview. Yours is to bear children and obey your husband. As well as his parents.”

Sapphira listened in horror.

Mr. Barber was a mercer, one of the most important merchants in the City, and he'd recently invested in shipping in order to transport his cloth more economically. Her father's cloth business would go very well with the Barbers' and perhaps form the beginning of an empire. She was there as a future breeding animal and a conveyor of wealth. Nothing more, it seemed. It wasn't as bad as she'd imagined. It was worse.

Her father beamed. "Mr. and Mrs. Barber will accompany me to the parlor to discuss the details of the settlement. We will leave you for twenty minutes to get to know your fiancé better."

She wanted to scream "No!" but if she'd done that likely they'd think her mad, which would give them an excuse to keep a closer watch on her. And that she couldn't have. Her only chance of freeing herself from this increasingly dismaying fate lay in appealing to Great-Aunt Josephina and she couldn't risk her father banning her weekly visit, as he had on Thursday last.

So she bowed her head and acquiesced. Nobody realized how hard her heart was thumping, how her fingers shook, because she kept them firmly clasped together. She stood completely still while her father and the two older Barbers left the room. They left the door open, thank goodness, so privacy was limited.

It meant someone was listening, probably Mary the maid, since Mrs. Cousins, their cook, would be in the kitchen preparing dinner. For once, Sapphira felt glad of the eavesdropper.

She raised her eyes to see her suitor licking his lips in a most insalubrious manner. He appeared to have quite a thick tongue which, she realized with a flush of embarrassment, could be useful in certain situations. The books her great-aunt kept in her private collection made her far more aware than she should have been of the pleasures of the flesh. But she couldn't imagine sharing them with George. Or rather, she didn't want to. The idea of baring even an inch more flesh than she was revealing right at this moment set her hair on end.

George stared at her in what she considered unhealthy fascination. His eyes, slightly protuberant like those of his namesake the King and his mother, had a glassy tone she couldn't like, but perhaps it was the light in here. She determined to try to make the best of things.

So she smiled and took a shaky step toward him. Before she realized it, he'd jerked her into his arms and slammed his mouth down on hers. She had opened her mouth when she made her move, intending to say something welcoming, but she'd had no chance. He squeezed her uncomfortably and shoved his tongue into her mouth with a force that took her breath away.

Waves of bad breath hit her like a rock and made her head spin. She reached out to try to push him away and found his upper arms, but he wouldn't move. Always the mercer's daughter, she recognized that he wore good English cloth, smooth and fine, but it was the only smooth or fine thing about him. When she tried to repel his tongue by pushing at it with hers, he took it as encouragement. He pushed in farther,

bringing one hand up to push aside her fichu to her breasts. Thank goodness for sturdy stays because his hands glided over her body, trying to find a way in and thankfully failed.

Unbelievable. Sapphira could understand his lack of finesse, given his unfortunate parentage, but not his lack of consideration. His parents would surely have told him that she was young and untried and he should treat her with respect.

Oh God, the gag reflex rose in her throat. The stink of his breath, together with his tongue greedily exploring her mouth, made it almost inevitable, and she concentrated on forcing down the bile that rose fierily from her stomach.

She shoved him away, and he remained where she'd pushed him, two steps away, staring at her. His chest heaved as he pulled a series of deep breaths into his narrow body. She shouldn't compare his physique to her nebulous dream man, but she did. The kisses she imagined when she lay in her bed at nights were so different, accomplished, careful and needy. And her imaginary lover's chest provided a broad support for her breasts, not a bony wall to squash them against.

"I'm sorry." George spread his hands in apology. "You're very pretty, you know." As if that constituted adequate reason. It did not.

"Thank you," she managed, but specifically for the apology. "My father has told me little about you. I know you're one and twenty. Don't you think I'm too old for you?"

"There's only a couple of years between us."

"Four. Four years." Hopeless to try that tack, but she had to try. Perhaps she could persuade him to call it off.

"And I have to do as my parents tell me." Then again, perhaps that was a forlorn hope.

"Why?"

He stared at her as if she were mad. "It's God's will."

"Not in my Bible. It says 'honor' in my copy, not 'obey'."

His mouth tightened, and she realized she had a bigot on her hands. Either that, or someone who wouldn't think for himself, too lazy or too stupid or both. A wistful melancholy filled her when she recalled her dreams of a man who would take her in his arms and woo her with love. If George had shown her any of the gallantry she dreamed of, she'd be the happiest woman in London. These days she knew better than to expect a complete dream man, but a little consideration, a little respect, a little self-respect would have done, would have given her something to build on. But her father wanted her to marry this man. This nothing.

Impossible. "Your parents are God-fearing folk, as are we, sir, but I've heard stories about your parents I'm convinced cannot be true."

He shrugged. "We go to church once a day, and we begin the days with prayers. Three times on Sundays."

“We have morning prayers.” A useful time, after which she instructed the maid on her duties, checked her father’s routine with him and arranged her day. Her father might also make announcements about his business, since his employees usually attended prayers. “When do you go into the City to attend to business?”

He frowned. “That is none of our concern. My mother says we are to concentrate on creating the next generation. A dy-dy—”

“Dynasty,” she prompted, almost automatically.

“Yes, dynasty. If you say so.”

Not too bright, then.

George licked his lips. “And you’ll be mine. They promised me that I’d have you to myself, every night, as long as I serviced you well.” A gleam appeared in the depths of his eyes. Oh God.

She had a sudden premonition of her lot in fifty years, if she lived that long. A tight-lipped woman, surrounded by children, maybe grandchildren, not in a loving household, but in one devoted to duty.

Insupportable. Much of life consisted of duty, to one’s parents, to honor, but all of it? Looking at George, she knew she’d never find it with this man, or with his family. She couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t. She had to find a way.

George kept his distance, but continued to talk to her about what they’d be expected to do. Excessive but thoughtless devotion, duty for its own sake, complete obedience and the suppression of any happiness, any joy.

Why had her father agreed to this? Despair and rage filled her in equal measure. Until recently he’d been stern but fair, listening to her and giving her due consideration in household and business affairs. He’d changed recently, the whippings only the worst of what was fast becoming insupportable to Sapphira.

Rather than this marriage she’d join the girls upstairs at Mother Brown’s, the notorious whorehouse and gaming house at the corner of Covent Garden. She visited the market twice a week in the early mornings, but the house was shuttered up at that time of day. Still, everyone knew it and what happened within its redbrick walls. She’d listened to the mutters, the salacious gossip. Mother Brown specialized in fantasy, making her clients’ dreams come true, and high-stakes gaming. Sapphira heard rumors that Mother Brown had made a fortune out of it, but she treated her girls well, because she claimed that happy girls worked better. So that wasn’t rhetoric. If she had to go there, she’d do it.

She let none of her defiance show. If she had, she’d have been watched, her visits to Great-Aunt Josephina stopped and her daily comings and goings curtailed. House arrest, in effect.

The prospect frightened her, and she wasn’t easily frightened. But only an idiot wouldn’t have felt fear. This family was completely intractable.

After today, the banns would go up. She had four weeks to escape from this nightmare. A paltry four weeks.

Chapter Two

Another season, another ball. Corin sometimes hankered for something different, and then castigated himself for being a selfish idiot. Rich and privileged, he should be thankful. But still, something inside him itched for a change. He hadn't the faintest idea what that could be, but he had a feeling he'd know as soon as he saw it.

His mother sailed toward him, moving effortlessly through the throng of the fashionable world, bestowing a nod here, a smile there. Corin waited, admiring her progress. Although well into her fifties, Virginia, the Countess of Taversall, dominated any room she entered with her grace and beauty. The white hair powder currently in vogue for formal occasions flattered the older woman, and Virginia, a beauty in her youth, was beautiful still. Even when she frowned at her son as she approached him. Corin knew why.

Virginia spread her fan and spoke behind it while fluttering it against the heat of the hundreds of candles that set the elegant room ablaze with light. "I thought you were in Gloucestershire. What are you doing here?"

Corin smiled. "Camberwell cancelled. He's in love so he wants to stay in London instead and play the courtship game."

Virginia laughed. "So Camberwell's bachelor party is indefinitely postponed?"

He shrugged. "It seems that way." Maybe that was the reason for his ennui. Yes, it had to be that.

"You should think of settling down, my son. Every year another of your friends marries. You don't want to be the only bachelor left at your age, do you?"

Corin grimaced at the reminder, his mood worse, if that were possible. He'd heard the sentiment too often recently. "We're not all as stiff and proper as Daniel." Not entirely a fair comment, as his older brother from his mother's first marriage hadn't had the advantage of two living parents who loved him. Daniel might be stuffy on occasion, but Corin loved him dearly.

With two boys still in the nursery and no daughters to marry off, Daniel tended to avoid the fashionable squeezes that marked the height of the London season. Tonight, however, he sat on one of the sofas set against the wall. Corin could see his boredom from clear across the room. Dancers passed between them, gliding over the floor under the two huge chandeliers that glittered with shards of light, the quartet doing their best to destroy a delicate minuet by a newly fashionable composer. Damned if he could remember the name. Everyone wore costly fabrics and fortunes in jewels. Boredom felt like a sin in such exalted company. Nevertheless, Corin refused to deny his restlessness.

Daniel, too polite to display it blatantly, nevertheless displayed his ennui to anyone who knew him by his rigid carriage and carefully disposed hands, which lay in a graceful position on each leg. Otherwise he'd start to drum his fingers. He always did that when bored, or thinking. Corin lifted his half-full wineglass in an ironic toast, and Daniel lifted his in response, his face deliberately blank.

Lady Taversall deployed her fan, flicking it in a graceful, practiced gesture. "At least Daniel is doing his duty. In a few years he'll be back in the ballrooms with his boys to look for a bride. I have a strong feeling that you will still be looking." She closed her fan with a satisfactory snap and poked him in the chest with it.

Corin rewarded her with a heavy sigh. "I promise, Mama, I'll find someone I can at least tolerate and I'll do it before I'm thirty. That's more than three years away. In any case, you have William."

"That is the least of my concerns. Your father thinks in those terms, but I'm afraid dynastic considerations come a little lower than the happiness of my children."

Corin drew a breath and showed his mother a face of mock horror, which he knew she'd enjoy. "Why, Lady Taversall, never allow anyone to hear you say that! Good Lord, this country is built on the backs of its great estates, whatever would anyone say if they heard you?"

She chuckled. "Wicked boy, you'll make me laugh, and then I'll crack this wonderful maquillage my maid applied so carefully."

He glanced at her flawless complexion. "If I'm not mistaken, Mama, you've already washed it off and applied a dusting of powder and a little rouge instead."

Lady Taversall gave a light laugh. "There, you see, you made me smile after all. Yes, I don't like to hurt the poor girl's feelings, but I fear I'll have to find some way of disposing of her services. Perhaps Olivia is ready for a full-time first-class lady's maid."

"If I know you, you've already planned it." Nobody told Virginia Taversall how to behave, what to wear or what to do with her life. Even her husband. Corin had seen her at work and he never wanted to gainsay the Triple Countess. Ever.

"I managed to poach a very good French maid from—well, never mind." But Virginia's casual glance across the ballroom floor told him very well who. Interesting times. The lady in question would not take the loss of her maid with any kind of equanimity. Corin looked forward to the civilized catfight that would undoubtedly ensue, with the ladies, both leaders of fashion and important influences in society, the best of friends. At least in public.

"Why do you come?" his mother asked just as the four-piece orchestra began to play a lively country dance. Several people took to the floor, but Corin made no move to find a partner. "I know you hate these affairs. You've called them very unflattering things before. So why come at all?"

Cattle markets. Oh yes, he'd called them that and more. Making sure nobody stood close enough to overhear them, Corin lowered his voice and told his mother the truth. "After Easter, the marriage market

goes into full swing. Young girls make their debut in society and husband-hungry mamas go into hunting mode. Every time an eligible bachelor crosses their field, the cry of ‘View halloo!’ goes up and they come baying after the poor idiot. Easter’s only a couple of weeks away now.”

Virginia’s low chuckle told him she understood. “So you go to the hunters instead of putting yourself in their sights.”

“I endure a few evenings like this every season, and they don’t pursue me with quite so much vigor. They assume I’m available when they want me, so they pursue more elusive prey. The challenge of the chase, you see. That means I earn myself some uninterrupted amusements of my own. They think I’m tame.”

“Whereas you stalk among them, a tiger using patience and observation rather than all-out attack.”

He swung around to give her his full attention, arching his brows. “A tiger, Mama? Your son, your tame cat?”

“My son, I’ve observed you at close quarters for twenty-six years now. A cat, maybe, but a domestic animal—I doubt it. One day a woman will tame you with love, but you won’t roll over for anyone else.”

He shrugged. He couldn’t imagine giving anyone dominion over him. Corin liked his life, he liked his freedom, and he didn’t relish such an exclusive relationship. A marriage should be based on reason and convenience. Love didn’t form any part of that.

“Virginia, your fate is upon you.”

Lady Taversall smiled and leaned back slightly. Not enough to embrace in public, but enough to tell her husband she heard him. “You mean I have to endure you all through the next minuet? My dear, how will I ever bear it?”

Lord Taversall chuckled low in his throat, a habit his son had inherited. The sound told those who knew them best they were amused, but their faces demonstrated nothing. “As you’ve borne it for the past twenty-eight years, love.”

Corin tried to pretend the affectionate word meant nothing to him, but deep down, in a part of him that always told the truth, he didn’t believe it. His parents loved each other. Virginia had found the love of her life on her third attempt, and his father had never loved anyone else.

Virginia made a little gesture with her fan. “Your brother wishes to speak with you. Go and see what he wants before he bursts.”

Corin doubted Daniel would do that, and if it brought an image of his dignified brother waving and calling across a dance floor, he kept the thought to himself. He walked around the edge of the dance floor to his brother, taking pleasure from the graceful movements of most of the dancers currently engaged in a minuet. Daniel smiled and got to his feet to greet his brother.

They started on a walk around the large room. Fast enough to deter people from joining them, so they could have a conversation in relative privacy, if they kept their voices down.

“You seem quite lovelorn when you look at Alethea,” Daniel remarked.

A particular friend of his brother Daniel and his wife, Alethea Cavendish had left her parents to visit her grandmother and to enter society. Corin enjoyed her company and saw rather more of her than he did most young ladies. Perhaps she was the answer, the wife he was looking for. He didn’t want love, he wanted a capable partner, and Alethea was far more than a pretty face. But Alethea was currently dancing with a man she smiled and dimpled at.

Perhaps Alethea did have an attachment, which would make her ineligible for what he was considering. Corin never poached on another man’s claim, if that claim proved serious. Deep in thought, Corin watched the newcomer and Alethea on the dance floor and couldn’t help thinking that they made a handsome couple. “Who is that the lady is dancing with?”

Daniel glanced at the couple and grunted. “Lord Welby, a neighbour of Alethea’s in Leicestershire. They’ve known each other a long time and Welby has begun to court her, I think.” Welby was of moderate height and dark hair peeped out from under his wig. Although undoubtedly a provincial, he showed charm. If Alethea fancied herself in love with him, Corin wouldn’t stand in her way, but he didn’t like the way Welby stared at her with open avidity. Not the way a gentleman should appear.

Daniel sighed. “Mama is turning her matchmaking attention on to you now. With all these young ladies vying to attract your attention, are you not falling desperately in love with even one of them?”

Corin made a disparaging sound. “No. I thank heaven that curse hasn’t reached me yet. It may never do so. I can only hope.”

Daniel grinned. “I’m perfectly aware you’d like to tease me into telling you yet again how much I love my wife, but I think I can refrain from doing so. We’ve been over that ground before.”

Corin huffed a laugh. “I have to look for my amusements where I can.”

“I suggest you look for them at Mother Brown’s.”

Totally astonished, Corin forgot his society manners and spun around to confront his brother, the skirts of his coat hitting his legs with a decided thwack. Not that he noticed overmuch, just mentally cursed the weight of silver braid. “You’re going there? Are you mad?”

Daniel held up one hand to placate his brother, and they began to walk again. Just in time. Corin saw two of society’s most formidable matrons approaching them, daughters in tow. If they knew what they were discussing, they might think again. No, they wouldn’t. Harassed husbands formed a large part of the bawd’s clientele. But Daniel wasn’t harassed. “No, bawdy houses aren’t part of my life and never have been. But Stevenage over there has just come from the house, and he heard your name.”

Corin grunted. “I’m known there. Brown runs straight tables, and unlike you, I’m unattached.”

“So much that you’re vouching for a lady playing the tables tonight?”

“What?” Corin’s mouth dropped open before he remembered his manners and closed it again. “I’ve never vouched for anyone there in my life, much less a woman. She’s playing the tables, not the bedrooms?”

Daniel shrugged, the shoulders of his elegant coat following his movement precisely. “That’s what Stevenage says. He’s putting it about that you’re a dark horse, that you have this lady in keeping, and I have to say he has me believing it. Have you been keeping a secret from us?”

“Ha!” He wished it were true, but nothing so exciting had happened to him in a long time. “I haven’t shared a bed, a wall or any other damned thing for months now. I’ve outgrown the bawdy houses and nothing else has taken my fancy. I bought my new house so I could have more privacy, but I haven’t needed it. Yet.” He rubbed his chin, thinking. “I’d better find out who’s using my name in case the woman cheats.”

“You mean you don’t?” Daniel had reason to know that Corin did cheat, when the occasion demanded it.

“Not when there’s money on the table. For those of us who are known for manipulating cards, it’s even more important that everything we do on the card table is straight down the line.”

Finally he had something to do tonight more interesting than dancing with debutantes.

Raucous laughter greeted Corin as he approached the door of his favorite gaming house an hour after he’d left the ball.

Covent Garden was filled, as usual, with half of polite society. The male half. The ladies present were less ladies and more—there were more polite terms, but basically, most were whores. If truth were told, some of them were far better company than the women he hobnobbed with in the ballrooms and at court. They had to be. The more expensive of the ladies of the night, the ones who preferred to be referred to as courtesans, didn’t just earn their living on their backs, or on all fours or however their patrons preferred to conduct sexual congress, they had to be good company too.

Torchères flamed outside the tall redbrick house on the corner, their bright flames illuminating the best whorehouse and gaming house in London. At least it was according to its owner and the guidebooks. Corin took a deep breath, the scent of wood smoke and tar strong in his nostrils.

He always found Mother Brown’s a welcoming place, the tables as honest as the ones in White’s. He should know. As a child he’d learned any card tricks he could find and invented a few of his own, learning as much as any cardsharp. Not that he used the tricks with money on the table. Ever.

Once, he’d lost ten thousand in one night. Lord, the dust his father had kicked up about that one, but on the other hand, it proved he played honestly. His father had disciplined him when he discovered his son’s predilection for card tricks. “You’ll never get clear of the suspicion, if it becomes known.”

To his father's fury, Corin had made sure it did get known, and he made sure he never, ever cheated. That way, nobody could accuse him of hiding his skill. And since he rarely played deep, at least not after that memorable loss, and his luck was barely average, nobody objected to sitting down at table with him.

Although he primarily came to this house for entertainment and the excellent tables Mrs. Brown kept, he wasn't a monk and he'd indulged his carnal appetites a time or two. He preferred the honesty offered here to the emotional games many society women played when he allowed them to draw him into a liaison. He wanted a woman, so he offered her a straightforward financial transaction. But even that had palled recently. Tonight he expected something different. He had to investigate the mysterious woman using his name. He might find some amusement in it too. He could only hope.

The flashman standing outside the front door grinned, his black and gold teeth gleaming in the light reflected by the flambeaux. Smiling at the large man, Corin allowed him to open the door. He stepped inside to the large, well-lit hallway and a house that was familiar in layout to his own, except for the treatment the owner had given it.

He loved the way Mother Brown turned fashionable excess into vulgar display. A chandelier with too many lavish crystal drops, a hallway painted just too vivid a shade of green, matched with overgilded furniture, and she turned expensive good taste into expensive vulgarity. It appealed to Corin's sense of the absurd. But while he enjoyed the display, tonight he set his mind to another matter.

He forced his usual jovial response to the bully's greetings, but his mind wasn't on it. He wanted to see this woman who had the temerity to use his name. A woman playing cards. She'd better be good.

He smiled broadly at Mother Brown, who was definitely a sight worth seeing. Not afraid to display her enormous *assets*, the lady of the house wore her stays cinched so tight Corin wondered how she managed to breathe. Every time she laughed or spoke her breasts quivered with a life of their own, threatening to spill out of her low-cut purple and lime-green brocade gown. Her breasts provided a soft base for a glittering array of jewels in far more profusion than anyone ever saw in society. Corin rather liked the blatant array of wealth. It was honest.

He swept her a low bow. "Madame."

She waved her fan at him. Like the other parts of her that didn't quiver, it glittered. "You're welcome here, my lord. But I have two guests upstairs who used your name to gain entrance. I would appreciate it if you could vouch for Lord Welby and the young lady."

Two guests? Welby? He certainly hadn't given the man permission to use his name. He'd never been introduced to him. No doubt Alethea had mentioned him, since Lady Taversall sometimes acted as Alethea's chaperone when Alethea's grandmother was too tired to do so. Now he wished he hadn't stopped at his own house to change out of the irritating silver braided coat before he came here. He might have arrived before Welby and made his position clear. What was wrong with people, why couldn't they choose someone else? "A lady? Someone I've...met here in the past?" That sounded promising.

“I have no idea, my lord. The lady is in disguise.” He couldn’t read anything in Mother Brown’s heavily painted face, but he’d bet his last guinea she knew the identity of the mysterious woman. “You must see her to ensure her continuance in this establishment.”

While he appreciated her mouthful of syllables, Mother Brown’s words perturbed him. “I never saw Welby before tonight, so I fear I can’t vouch for him one way or the other.” He couldn’t do much else but acknowledge that, but he wouldn’t allow anyone to use his name indiscriminately. “I would like to see the woman before I speak for her. It could be that I know her.”

Madame flicked open her fan in a practiced gesture that eerily reminded Corin of his taller, more elegant and undoubtedly slimmer mother. Maybe they’d all attended the same school. The thought amused him, of a school dedicated to the art of the fan and nothing else, full of little girls learning earnestly how to flirt. “If she behaves, I’ll allow her in again. But she used your name, my lord, and I’ll hold you responsible for her conduct tonight.” He adored the way she pronounced her “h”s, as though she’d forget them if she didn’t sound them properly. Mrs. Brown was a Londoner, and proud of it, at least she always claimed so, and since her house had been here longer than any other, she certainly had the evidence to support it. But born and bred, as she often claimed, he didn’t think so.

Corin nodded. “I accept your strictures. Lead on, dear lady.” He used far more formality than with the ladies of the ton. Laying it on thick amused the lady.

After bending over Mrs. Brown’s hand and bestowing an extravagant kiss on her jewel-bedecked fingers, Corin let her lead the way up the broad stairs to the main gaming room.

In an ordinary residence, this would be the main drawing room, but Mrs. Brown had no need of such a place, so it had become the gaming room. Next door was the dining room, where, from the sounds emanating through the door as he passed it, was well into its evening entertainment. Giggles mixed with soft groans told their story only too well, and the clink of cutlery was noticeable by its absence. They’d passed the cutlery stage hours ago.

The gaming room gave the appearance of more sedate activity, but that didn’t say a great deal. Some of the house’s females not involved in other activities helped here by sitting on the laps of the players in various states of undress. Just the right side of respectability, because serious gamblers came here and too much distraction was bad for custom.

Corin nodded to a couple of male acquaintances as he stood in the doorway and surveyed the scene before him. The room contained a set of tables, varying from the smallest, meant for two players involved in piquet or some other two-hander, to four-person tables. A larger table in the center of the room could take six comfortably, eight at a squeeze. Dishes scooped out of the wood at the borders of each table sported gold coins, promissory notes and pieces of jewelry. The murmur of light conversation interspersed with female giggles and the occasional sigh.

Usually Corin found this a place of relaxation, fun and games that he couldn't find in a coffee house or a gentleman's club. But not tonight. The woman seated at the large, circular center table was the reason. Corin took a moment to study her. An eccentric, at least considering the clothes she wore. She looked as if she'd left her horse in the mews and come straight up to play cards. Her dark green riding habit and powdered man-style wig only needed a riding crop and cocked hat to complete the outfit. He wondered if she wore boots under her skirts, and he allowed his mind to run riot for a minute. Would she ride as well if her mount were a man rather than a horse? His libido stirred at the mental image. He'd enjoy this encounter, even if it didn't end in the bedroom. Things were looking up.

She held her cards confidently, and her face bore a calm expression, but Corin suspected she only pretended to ignore the activity around her. Some of the couples toying with each other were going a little further than they usually did in this room; the next room, nominally the dining room, was the place for that.

The woman sat conspicuously alone. Out of the presence of ladies, gentlemen preferred to spread out, prop their feet up on the table or sit with their elbows out, possibly touching their neighbor. But nobody did that around this female. Pressure beat through the air like a drum calling men to arms.

Corin heeded the call. His hand went to his throat, and he loosened his cravat in a gesture that signified release and relative freedom. Nobody here would pressure him into offering for their daughter, nobody would insist on his perfect behavior.

Despite the presence of the female, he gave a sigh of contentment when he sank into one of the generously upholstered salon chairs gathered around the center table. "May I join you, gentlemen and ma'am?" he asked with a soft smile. He glanced back at where Mother Brown stood in the doorway and nodded, but raised a brow. She gave the smallest of smiles and left him to his business. He wouldn't vouch for the woman yet, he'd wait and assess her, but he'd enjoy doing it. However, while she remained here tonight, she'd be under his jurisdiction.

"Thought you were out of town, Elston," Stratton drawled.

Her head jerked up and their eyes met in a connection that struck sparks. He couldn't see the color of her eyes, even though Mother Brown never stinted on candles. She wore a black half-mask over the upper part of her face, her eyes glittering behind the eyeholes, but he saw her shock and he realized that she hadn't expected to see him here tonight. He was fairly sure he didn't know her. She evoked an unfamiliar reaction in him. Not the arousal, but a strange sense that they'd fit well, that he should, whatever the outcome, pursue the acquaintance. Glancing at her sent tingles through his body.

Her skin appeared flawless, no blemish marring the smooth white ceruse she'd plastered over it. And she'd covered her well-shaped lips with a lurid red tint. Perhaps she'd imagined that wearing a riding habit would preserve her modesty. It did anything but. The coat clung lovingly to luscious curves, the high neckline only emphasizing the sweet slope of her breasts. Corin felt his fingers curling to shape, sensing the soft flesh against his skin.

He forced himself to observation, away from imagining undoing the buttons one by one, revealing first the crisp white linen of her shirt, then her stays and shift, loosening the ties to reveal delicious breasts and nipples. His mouth watered.

To his satisfaction, she met his hungry gaze. Her eyes widened and she looked away. Not an ice maiden after all, then.

He didn't take his gaze away from her while he answered Stratton. "Turned out my host preferred to remain in town pursuing his quarry."

Stratton chuckled. "I'd heard as much. They're running a book on the outcome at White's."

Lace foamed at her neck, merging with the immaculate white linen of her shirt. She'd tucked the lace at her wrists back under her coat cuffs, as card players frequently did.

Assessing her as objectively as he could manage, Corin thought her outfit was modestly styled for a fashionable woman. Corin would say she was of the gentry, but the style was the latest fashion, not often found in the country, and she bore an air of confidence as if in her own milieu.

He would find out. She intrigued him. More than that, he wanted her. Since she was here and not at a fashionable ball, where the play could be as deep as any gaming house, it meant she didn't have the ingress there, or she didn't want people to know she gambled.

The gentlemen at the table were behaving with more decorum than usual, unlike their compatriots at the other tables, and if Corin was any judge, they resented it. The least they could expect was that, at the end of a long evening doing their duty, they could find a little respite somewhere a fashionable woman would never dream of going.

One man had the temerity to remove his coat, the evening being on the warm side and the candles heating the room even more. The others remained in their heavy evening coats, in deference to the lady, but Corin guessed they disliked the necessity. He decided to join the majority, at least for the time being.

The Marquis of Stratton leaned back in his chair, examined his hand of cards and made a tsk of disgust before he threw them facedown on to the table. "Consider yourself fresh meat, Elston. Perhaps my luck will change now you're here." He glanced at the woman. "And as for our charming guest, she is fast outstaying her welcome. The luck seems to be with her tonight."

Indeed, several neatly stacked piles of guineas adorned the lady's place, supplemented by several more in the dish.

Corin raised a brow. "Do we have the honor of knowing who is skinning us?"

The lady didn't crack a smile, but she did speak. "Call me Violetta."

Her husky tones sent a spike of arousal through Corin, and he decided he wanted to hear her name on her delectable lips, but the name she gave didn't please him. "I would rather not. Violetta is the name of my esteemed sister-in-law. May we compromise with Lucia?"

Chapter Three

Sapphira inclined her head. "As you wish, sir."

Only her years of training enabled her to conceal her first shock of hearing Lord Stratton greet him, then the added surprise of meeting his direct gaze. Those eyes would haunt her dreams. It was as if she'd met someone she'd known for years, familiarity almost making her drop her cards and flee the room, like he'd stripped her naked. She didn't need that, not now, not at this stage of her plans.

It had taken every bit of courage she possessed to come here, to bluff her way inside and put her money down. Mrs. Brown had only allowed her in after she'd murmured her real name in the lady's ear. Her first attempt had been met with a scornful laugh and a "Try again, dearie. She rents one of my upstairs rooms and you ain't her," so she had, in desperation, given her real name. So stupid, she couldn't understand why she'd done it, but the woman had smiled and patted her hand. Now this.

First she worried that he'd expose her. She'd used Lord Elston's name at the door on a gamble, having read that he'd be away from town for the three weeks she needed. But when she'd seen him, taken in that powerful figure, those fascinating eyes, her concerns temporarily went out of her head, replaced by a sensation she couldn't define. Heat, need, desire. But for what, she didn't want to imagine. Daren't imagine.

From his seat across from Lord Elston, Welby gave him a broad grin. "The game's loo, my lord. Three card and unlimited."

"Of course."

Reminded of her original aim, Sapphira returned her attention to her cards. Or tried to. Stratton's cool voice did help to bring Sapphira back to earth, and she glanced at the other players, trying to ground herself. Lord Strang, in all his glittering brilliance, and the Marquis of Stratton, in devilish splendor, had proved cordial opponents, but after a while she found she could ignore their undoubtedly impressive presences and concentrate on her cards. Lord Levenshill's more comfortable presence helped her relax, but she had the feeling he would behave far differently if crossed.

The added danger from the unlimited amount one could win or lose made the game interesting. Doubly interesting for her. Three-card loo meant more reliance on sheer luck, a faster game and consequently more radical changes of fortune and deep play. She had to keep her nerve in this game, where participants played deep as a matter of course. She could do that if she forgot she was gambling for money. Hour after hour playing high-stakes games with her great-aunt for buttons or pins, learning tricks and

techniques, had given her nerves of steel and a familiarity with the game her father would have beaten her for having, but Elston's presence turned her into a nervous wreck.

Now she didn't know if Elston would deny knowing her. He could do that at any moment and get her barred from this house forever. And this was her last chance to avoid wasting the rest of her life bearing children to a man she could never respect, living in the country, away from the City she loved. Rather than remain as the Barbers' prisoner, she'd do this.

She glanced around the table to avoid staring at the man opposite her. The four gentlemen had given themselves a brief introduction, and she'd heard of them, but her father had dealings with the highest of the land, so mere titles didn't awe her.

She hadn't met Welby, who told her he was "up from the country." She doubted the man would have very deep pockets. His clothes were flashy, but poorly made, and although he had the appearance of a gentleman, a closer look showed her one more accustomed to dealing with the gentry. Difficult to define, but a certain deference to the other men at the table, and a lack of knowledge of the most recent political issues. If he tried to keep up with the others, the man was a fool. And vulnerable. Play could be very deep at Mother Brown's and nobody played to lose.

Elston dug into his pocket and dropped a handful of sovereigns into the little depression by his place. He watched them finish the hand, which didn't take long. Sapphira won and scooped the money and notes to her place, trying not to grab. Every gold coin brought her nearer to the plan she'd concocted with her great-aunt.

Elston shoved a few coins into the centre of the baize-covered expanse and picked up the cards Welby dealt to him. He glanced at them, then at the upturned top card. Spades were trumps. She prepared to test his mettle.

"I thought you vouched for the lady, Elston. Do you not, then, know her?" Stratton watched them carefully from beneath dark, frowning brows and Sapphira held her breath.

Elston met her eyes and smiled. "I've met her a time or two," he said easily. Just as she decided she could let out her breath, he added, "Perhaps. In this guise she's not as easy to recognize. I may need to request further enlightenment."

Stratton nodded. She'd played well and fair so far, hadn't disturbed the gentlemen's conversation or their play, except to win her share of hands. So they'd give her a chance. She got that message loud and clear.

A few hands later, her cup held a little less gold, but Welby's held just four coins. Stratton was even and Levenshill and Strang showed about level, while Elston had won.

She licked her dry lips and glanced up to catch him watching. A flash of hunger arced between them, and she looked away but felt his gaze on her. Suddenly short of breath, she couldn't take a draught of much-needed air. If she breathed deep, they would see it. Her jacket fit very well.

Ten guineas lay on the table and her gaze flicked on to them, then off again. Knowing how much facial expression meant to hardened card players, she relaxed her muscles, but she knew without looking that he'd noticed her momentary tension. She touched her tongue to her lips and withdrew it, reminded of the evil-tasting lip paint she'd used in an attempt at disguise. He saw it. He missed nothing. Already, Elston had become *he* to her. The man, the only one who mattered sitting around this table.

Welby's luck changed. Elston passively played a few more hands and the pile in his cup decreased while Welby's increased. Sapphira steadily won her pile of guineas but at a more modest rate than before Elston's arrival. Once she'd regained some of her sangfroid, she could concentrate again and it showed in her game. As long as she didn't look at him or meet that perceptive gaze, she could cope.

Welby dealt the cards, and Sapphira fanned them in her hand and idly ran her fingers down the edge of the last card. Although she didn't stop, she felt something. *Hell and damnation!*

From her isolated position she saw Elston glance at Levenshill, who raised a brow. Then he glanced at her. She didn't move, but she met his eyes for a tense moment. Someone was marking the cards. Welby, to be precise, and it was a clumsy effort. Sapphira didn't exactly make a habit of gambling in public, and for her to notice spoke of Welby's ineptness. Marking with the tip of a fingernail wasn't very subtle, and people who played regularly would be bound to notice. Nausea roiled in Sapphira's stomach. The evening had gone well until Elston arrived. The man brought trouble with him.

Corin heaved a sigh. Mother Brown prided herself on her straight tables, and one of her methods of ensuring it was to broadcast the identity of any cheat far and wide. There would be no hope of this not reaching the ears of the fashionable world, sooner rather than later, if they exposed Welby now. Although he'd refuse to vouch for the cad, La Brown wasn't above holding Corin responsible for any discovery of cheating, and society being the gossip-loving engine it was, the story would be all around London by morning. If he didn't scotch it now.

Marking the cards in such an obvious, amateurish way would get Welby found out sooner rather than later. At least his companions tonight—all but the lady—were seasoned men of fashion who knew Corin. They'd be unlikely to spread the story, if he requested it of them. So he had to keep this matter between everyone at this table, and that meant a private conversation with the lady calling herself Lucia. At least he'd get some amusement out of tonight, which so far had been not far short of disaster.

Lord Strang got to his feet and tossed down his cards. "I have an appointment early in the morning. Yes, I know, it's a dreadful bore, but men of business don't keep the same hours we do." He exchanged a glance with Corin, and he didn't need the words to know that Strang was leaving the matter to him.

Levenshill chuckled. "Henpecked, that's what you are, Strang. That wife of yours wants her garden finished, doesn't she?"

"Is the new house working out?" Corin asked. His brother Orlando owned some of the finest land in London, and Strang's new house stood on some of it.

Strang gave him a smile. "Very well, thank you. Far enough away from my mother to give us far more privacy than we had in the family mansion." Strang's strained relationship with his parents was no secret. He'd rejected the highborn ladies thrown his way in favor of a country nobody. His mother had never forgiven him.

Strang sighed dramatically. "We're one of the last families in London to have a London mansion, and I can't for the life of me persuade my parents to take the path of least resistance and pull the draughty old place down. A mausoleum, that house. And yes, you guessed it. The new house is perfect for us, but my lady insists on remodeling the garden. I am at her service."

Lord Welby snorted. "No woman of mine will ever tell me what to do." Not only a cheat, but a boor, then.

Lord Strang turned a freezing glare on to him. "Indeed, sir. You must do as you think best, naturally." He turned and left, his gorgeous evening coat glittering under the candles, as volatile as his temper. Corin had no doubt Strang would deliver the cut direct if Welby approached him after tonight. Strang's chill could be felt a full minute after he'd left the room, but it did nothing to cool Corin's desire for the mystery woman seated opposite.

Lord Levenshill chuckled. "Strang adores his wife although he's far from henpecked. Took him a long time to settle down, but he's never strayed since."

Corin grunted in agreement. "Nor likely to. Neither would I if my wife looked like Lady Strang and had half her intelligence." He gathered up the cards and tossed them aside, reaching for a fresh pack. They splayed across one end of the table in colorful disarray.

As he broke the seal and shuffled, his gaze met Lucia's once more. She looked aside hastily. So not as cool as she wanted to appear. Satisfaction and anticipation of a private interview with the lady heated him. "I have a fancy to see you without your paint, madam. Do you think there's any chance of that?"

She snorted, a most unladylike sound, but one that made him smile. "Not unless you strip me naked on the table."

Fascinated, he watched a rosy blush course over her face and as much of her body as he could see, which, with the high-necked jacket of her riding habit, was regrettably little. He shot her a hot look that simmered with promise. "I might bet on it, if you weren't such a good player."

"You don't have enough money for me to use that as a stake."

Elston burst into laughter and caught her in the act of suppressing a smile. Enchanting.

Welby reached out and grabbed a passing tart, hauling her toward him by gripping her skirts. After one startled look at him, she smiled and sat in his lap, twining her arms around his neck and eyeing Elston slyly. He turned his shoulder. Only one woman held his interest tonight.

“Are we still playing, gentlemen?” she prompted. Corin suppressed a smile. It appeared it was her turn to be icy, although now he’d had a glimpse of the woman beneath the mask, she didn’t fool him.

During the next few hands Welby’s consumption of wine increased. He had the whore’s tits out of her bodice and tweaked her nipples as he played his cards, but he paid little attention to her other than that.

Corin had no doubt Welby was using the doxy to distract his unexpectedly worthy female opponent. Lucia didn’t let her gaze stray in that direction, and he saw a telltale tightening of her jaw when she needed to. She disliked it, but she would cope. Maybe she wasn’t used to displays of this kind, which meant she was, as he suspected, respectable. The knowledge increased his curiosity. And his desire.

Welby trumped Corin’s king of spades with a heart. “Your luck has changed, sir.”

Corin gave a short nod. “Shall we double the stakes? I would like to try to turn the tables.” By now they were playing much deeper. He hoped the lady could stand the increased stakes, but he wanted this awkward business over.

Lord Levenshill pushed back his chair. “Not for me. I’ll bid you good night, gentlemen.”

Lord Stratton got up too. “I have an appointment with a lady not too far from here.” He beckoned and a handsome brunette crossed the room to him, her deportment as smooth as any society lady. But a society lady wouldn’t have allowed Lord Stratton to slip his arm around her waist and kiss her mouth in such a familiar manner. He gave Lord Welby a smiling glance, nodded to Lucia and moved away.

Lord Levenshill walked toward the exit, passing Corin on the way. As he did, he pressed his shoulder and leaned down for a brief private word. “I’ll play with the lady again, but be sure Welby doesn’t come my way in this house.”

Tight-lipped, Corin nodded. “I’ll see to it.”

Elston gathered the pack before tossing it aside carelessly and reaching for another, ridding them of yet another crudely marked set of cards. “Just the three of us, then. Shall we play five-card loo? It might make the game more interesting.” And give him a chance to change the game if he had to. If Welby cheated, he’d have no choice but to bring his more underhand skills into play. Condemning him publicly would be to condemn himself, and to bring calumny to Alethea too. They were neighbors and that was all society needed to make a link. She’d danced with him earlier that evening, with society watching, he recalled, his heart sinking.

Lucia agreed, as did Welby, who fondled his whore and stared at the green baize surface before him. “Yes. I have to say I’ve found this evening very instructive so far.”

“You don’t come to London often?” Corin shuffled through the new pack.

“No, on the whole I prefer the country. But I had a purpose in visiting London at this time. I find myself in need of a wife.”

Damn. For Alethea’s sake he’d have to take an interest in Welby. Outwardly he only raised a brow and got to his feet to remove his heavy coat. His waistcoat flashed with sparkling brilliants and the

elaborate embroidery gleamed in the candlelight. He'd gone home to change his evening coat, which irritated him with its weight of silver braid, but he'd retained the waistcoat he'd worn at the ball.

He threw the coat over the empty chair beside him. "In need? A strange choice of words, sir."

Welby shrugged and tweaked the whore's nipples hard enough to make her squeal.

Corin's dislike of the man grew and solidified into certainty. Even whores had feelings. Welby gave him a complacent smile. "I'm not getting any younger and I need an heir. That kind of need." All the time he tormented the whore, taking no more consideration of the woman in his lap than he would a piece of fluff on his coat.

"Does that explain your interest in the lady earlier tonight?" He wouldn't name Alethea in this place.

"Indeed. She's a pretty piece and a considerable heiress." Welby cupped the whore's breast and lifted it as if he were going to suck on it, then he lowered it again.

Corin curled his lip. "Put her down, Welby. It's not working. Our charming companion isn't in the least concerned by your distraction."

Welby glanced across the table and grimaced. "You're right."

Lucia showed nothing. Not distaste, not dislike, not fear. Corin admired her sangfroid. The lady had quality.

"Don't mind me." Lucia infused her words with a London accent, but she laid it on too strong and he didn't believe it for a minute, except it demonstrated her familiarity with the way the ordinary Londoner spoke.

Corin gave her a quizzical glance and returned to shuffling the cards. Still, his admiration of her grew. Young, and if he had her character right, respectable, her stoicism spoke of more than the desperation that must have driven her to this place. He'd watched her long enough to know that although she could play cards, and do it well, she didn't have the experience of these houses. She'd appeared from nowhere, seemingly, but nobody did that. He'd find out.

Welby glanced at Lucia. She tapped her cards on the table, sighed and then threw in her hand. A player had to win at least one trick to win a fifth of the pool, which wasn't much, since they'd started again, or put in the stake as a forfeit. If she played, she might lose all and have to match the pool for her stake in the next hand. No limits made this a dangerous game. He wondered how far Welby would go. If it weren't for the lady, he'd test him. Since she'd thrown in her hand, now was his chance.

Welby leaned past the whore, ignoring her voluble protests, and pushed a substantial number of gold coins to the centre of the table to add to the pool. Wordlessly, Elston matched them and added a few more. Welby met his additions.

Corin smiled at Lucia and she smiled back, a natural, pretty smile such as was rarely seen in this house and one he found totally enchanting. His immediate ambition became to see her do that again, without the mask to conceal her expression.

The whore Welby held was now all but naked to the waist, her chemise gaping open, framing rather than hiding her breasts, and his free hand roamed busily under her skirt. God knew what the cards he handled would pick up. The rich scent of a whore in heat wafted across the table and nausea momentarily swamped Corin. Although Mother Brown insisted her whores were clean, the reminder of their profession seemed wrong with Lucia sharing the experience. Corin tossed a card onto the table.

Corin won substantially with that hand, but not in a manner he wished to pursue. The money felt dirty. He'd donate it to the Coram's Foundling Hospital if he retained it. It was the only chance he had, as Lucia didn't throw in her hand again.

Welby shifted the girl onto one knee as they continued to play and Elston steadily made gains on him. Lucia played her hands well but remained mostly silent, apart from necessary communication.

Welby continued to lose.

At the end of the next hand when Lucia raked her share of the pool to add to her other stacks, she glanced away from Corin's congratulatory smile, but turned to address Welby instead. "Your luck's not so good, sir."

"I can handle it." To prove it, he pinched one of the harlot's nipples so hard the female gave a small whimper of pain.

Two thousand in the pool, give or take a few guineas. That meant far less to Corin than it did to the other two people on the table, he guessed.

They played. Lucia won. She dealt another hand.

In a last-ditch attempt to put Lucia off her game, Welby leaned forward, took one of the doxy's nipples into his mouth and bit. Lucia visibly winced and Corin didn't blame her.

"I prefer my women under my control," Welby purred. "Don't you think women should know their place, sir?" He glanced at Lucia from under dark lashes. She stared back at him expressionlessly.

Corin hesitated, a card in his hand. "I wouldn't say that to some of the mothers in society, sir." Fury seethed through him, the last thing he needed now. He had to keep a clear head in order to rout Welby.

The bastard was getting to him. Corin had planned to fleece him before he left, and to do it honestly, but the whole situation roused him to fury, making him sink to this man's level.

"Underneath me or on top for that matter." Although she was no lightweight, Welby hauled his whore up to straddle his lap.

"I've had enough." Corin got to his feet and addressed Lucia. "I trust you know that not everyone is so—"

Welby scowled. "Listen, she decided to come into a male enclave, so she has to learn to endure our ways."

Lucia shrugged. "Sir, I don't really care. It's not as if I've never seen a naked female body before."

It was Corin's deal so he decided to speed up on his plan and raise the stakes. He retook his seat and gave Lucia a feral smile. "Madam, we will strip him bare."

Chapter Four

He meant it. Sapphira watched him and knew that every firm line, every seemingly easy display, demonstrated Lord Elston's determination to thrash the other man.

She hated that the harlot Welby toyed with displayed her body so brazenly, with every semblance of enjoyment but with a cold, dead expression in her eyes. This house was considered relatively mild, so God only knew what the others were like. She had no inclination to find out. Everything was going so wrong with her plan.

She sat between a man she found so repellent she wouldn't have shared a word with him and one she felt an attraction to that passed anything she'd felt for anyone before. Her groin felt hot and uncomfortably wet, and when she met his eyes, she found it hard to look away. Harder each time. She didn't know if she was misreading the hungry look in his eyes, but she couldn't maintain her coolness much longer.

The respectable gentlemen's clubs wouldn't have her, and she had no invitation to the salons and balls where deep play could sometimes take place. She had to come here to find the high-stakes game that she needed. She would have to take whatever that meant.

Three thousand lay on the table, so she shoved another pile over to join them with a fatalistic sense of doom. Lord Welby obligingly offered up his own oblation. The pool grew alarmingly fast. If he upped the stake, she'd have to wave goodbye to the coins already in the pool. Fighting the tension turning her insides to water grew increasingly difficult, but if she could just hold on, she'd have much of what she needed to escape her fate.

She glanced at Lord Elston. His lips curved in the very ghost of a smile, one that touched her deep inside. She couldn't think about that, she had to suppress it. She couldn't afford softer feelings, not now, maybe not ever.

Her deal. The damned man, Welby, was challenging her, leering at her as she handled the cards. She gave him a bland smile and dealt.

Welby lost. In between fondling his woman and snarling at Elston, he forgot to concentrate on his hand. He didn't win a trick. Which meant he had to match the money in the pool. The next hand saved his hide, but only just. He scowled at the one trick he'd managed to win.

Welby shoved the woman off his lap and snarled under his breath. "Dammit, it's the whore's fault. Get away from me, doxy, go and find somebody else to fuck."

The heavy scent of lily of the valley and the warning in Elston's hooded eyes told Sapphira that Mrs. Brown stood close behind her. Tension took her stomach and bile rose to her throat. Would Elston decide he wouldn't vouch for her after all? Was this her one and only chance at making the money she needed?

"Daisy." Mother Brown hardly raised her voice, but the whore grabbed her clothes and scrambled away. The low murmur of conversation in the room quietened as everyone sat back to watch the entertainment.

Elston glanced up from his cards as if only just seeing her. "Welcome, dear lady."

Mother Brown grunted. "Lord Welby, please take note that in this room a little light flirtation is perfectly acceptable but no more than that. It distracts from the game and my regular clients object to it."

Welby frowned.

"Better listen to what she says, old man," Elston drawled. "She wields power over the shadier side of society, just as the Duchess of Queensberry rules the other side."

Welby glanced at him, and then gave Mother Brown a terse nod. "I beg your pardon," he said, as if he were a schoolboy having an apology dragged out of him.

"Humph. You asked that I put Daisy aside for you. Can I assume you still wish for her company somewhere more appropriate?"

Welby sighed. "I'm disinclined to the sport now. Please excuse me." Showing more manners than he had so far, Welby got to his feet and collected his money, much depleted now. He executed a sketchy bow before he left the room.

Triumph roared through Sapphira. She'd seen Welby off and she remained at the table. He'd threatened to take everything she had, but she could breathe more freely now. She had her stake back, if little more besides.

There was the small matter of five thousand pounds left in the pool. Guineas, not pounds, she corrected herself. Gentlemen dealt in guineas. With that as her stake, she could easily make herself a new life.

"We can hardly play loo with just the two of us," Elston commented. "But the evening is young, ma'am." Sapphira didn't consider one in the morning young. She'd have to be up in five hours. Hardly worth going to bed at all. "Do you take the pool, ma'am, and we will meet on another night. Would that suit you?"

Mother Brown, still present behind her, cleared her throat. "That money is for gambling, my lord."

"It is left to the lady and myself. If I choose to concede the game, then the money is hers."

Sapphira caught her breath. Would he do it? Could it be that easy? No, he was teasing her. Nobody did that. Except the stupidly rich, and by all accounts the Taversalls were stupidly rich. Hope crept into her heart, buoyed her spirits. "How do you know I'll come back?"

"I can see it in your eyes."

She was surprised he could see anything beyond the mask she wore, which grew increasingly hot. But although she wasn't a gentleman and couldn't give her word as such, she would come back. She nodded. "Very well."

"You're a fool," said Mother Brown, and moved on, her skirts rustling up a storm. Sapphira wasn't sure who was the greater fool—her for not taking the money and running or Elston for trusting a stranger.

As if reading her thoughts, Elston met her eyes. Was it wrong to yearn for a pair of sparkling hazel eyes, to feel his gaze on her as if he touched her most intimate flesh? Then she was damned. Her body tingled from her awareness of him, even when he wasn't looking at her.

Elston picked up his glass and took a sip of the ruby liquid. Sapphira had left hers untouched, remembering Great-Aunt Josephina's warning to leave the stuff alone. You never knew what people might drop in a glass of wine. Elston didn't seem in the least concerned about that. "You have a way of getting this safely home?"

She was surprised he asked, and then not so surprised. He did seem the concerned type. The combination of gold and promissory notes would amount to a substantial weight.

"Someone is waiting for me downstairs."

"Your lover?" He arched a brow, but she saw a tiny amount of uncertainty in his gaze, one that warmed her. She wouldn't do anything about it, but to have a gentleman interested in her made her feel more worthwhile, and hot all the way through. "No. I don't have a lover. I'm a rarity in this house. A v—"

Before she could finish the word he moved to her side of the table, then put one finger over her lips. His touch tingled, made her want to lick him, the urge so unexpected it shocked her into silence.

"Hush, madam. I don't think that word has been heard in truth in this house for many a year. It might collapse around our ears in complete shock." He removed the finger. He'd hardly touched her.

The reality of the contact hit her with the force of a bullet. The quiver that went through her spoke of recognition, of want, of something wild she didn't have a name for. Startled, her gaze flew to his face, to see the same stunned expression reflected there.

Maybe it was her shock. Maybe he felt nothing. "I have a proposal for you, madam," he said. He sounded calm enough.

Mother Brown's cool voice sounded quiet above the pounding of her heart. "Should I ask for the betting book?" Sapphira had no idea how the woman managed to be in the right place at the right time.

"No need. This is between us. I trust you to keep your word." Elston glanced up to address the madam. "Is there somewhere I may talk to this lady in private?"

Her eyes widened behind her mask and her throat tightened with tension. Deep inside she wanted it, wanted private conversation, or whatever else he offered, but she couldn't afford to let her guard down. If he or any of his compatriots discovered her identity and told her father, the game would be up and any hope of escape foiled. She couldn't bear that.

She could almost hear the cogs turning in the madam's mind. Privacy meant sexual congress in this house, and when she'd come into this place tonight the woman had warned her that the only activity tolerated from her was gambling. Now she made her decision. "As long as it's only talk. You can use the room Lord Welby has bespoken. He paid for an hour. But I won't have any private transactions in this establishment. We're not a lodging house."

"Understood."

He shrugged on his coat before taking her elbow, and even through the cloth of her jacket and her shirt his touch burned. "Wait—" She turned back to the table.

"Mother Brown will have the money packed away for you," he said.

She wished she hadn't seen the madam's smile. Although the lady had most of her teeth, the smile held no friendliness. "Indeed I will. In a drawstring purse."

"A rather large one," Elston said.

"I'll bank it for you," the lady suggested. "I can give you a note for the whole that you may take to the bank whenever you please." Then that predator's smile again. "No extra charge, this time at least."

She glanced at Elston and he nodded agreement, signifying that she could do that without risk. She'd guessed as much. In her earlier short, terse conversation, Mrs. Brown had explained the rules of the house in no uncertain terms. Mother Brown was a woman of her word, not because she had moral scruples, but because it was better for business.

"Except for a thousand guineas. I want that in cash."

"I'll have that ready for you."

"Give it to my escort." She ignored Elston's arched brow. "His name is Frankie, and he's waiting for me in the hall."

She grimaced. "Aye, I know 'im. A good hunk of man, that one."

Her cheeks burning, she explained, for more his lordship's benefit, "He's my footman."

Elston leaned forward to speak quietly to Mother Brown, but she heard what he said. "If Welby returns here, it's on his own cognizance. This lady, however, I will continue to vouch for, if she requires it."

The madam nodded and moved away.

Sapphira shivered. She felt as if she'd lost her willpower. What he wanted she would give, and give it gladly. But she followed Lord Elston upstairs to a small room at the back of the house. He held the door open for her and accompanied her in. The soft click sounded like a padlock closing.

Most of the space was taken up by a modest four-poster, old-fashioned in style but sturdy. Much like her own at home. The drapes were linen and clean. She guessed they were linen because it was easier to launder than velvet or brocade, not because Mother Brown was skimping. A small dresser held a bowl of clean water and a couple of clean towels, with a half-used cake of soap. So mundane. So *suggestive*.

Elston glanced around the room and grimaced. He gestured to the bed. "There seems nowhere else to sit."

She saw the sense in that and mounted the stool that was supposed to help her into the bed, not on to it, but she used it as a footstool and sat on the clean covers that nevertheless still smelled of something musky. He sat next to her, not needing the footstool to touch his feet to the floor.

The intimacy of their positions, so close, made her shiver.

He frowned, concerned. "Are you cold?"

"No. It's quite warm tonight."

"So it is," he agreed. "Spring is definitely in the air. Now, are we about to discuss the weather like ladies in a salon, or do you want to know why I wished for seclusion?"

Sapphira suspected she already knew. But she couldn't allow that, for any number of reasons, primarily because Mother Brown wouldn't let her back into the house. Despite the reasons, despite knowing that, forbidden images of herself in Elston's arms, caressing and kissing, tormented her mind. Made her yearn to make them a reality.

He glanced around. "You have to know there must be spy holes and listening posts all around this room. So keep your voice low, if you please." He leaned forward and before she could shrink back to maintain the distance between them, he caught her arm. "We need to stay close to maintain any kind of privacy."

His proximity made her heart pound, the heat rise to her breasts and her cheeks. Her breath shortened, and she tried to pull in deep breaths to calm down. After all, she'd just seen a man fondling a woman in public and remained stone cold. This man was fully dressed. What was wrong with her?

"Madam, we both know what Welby was about tonight. He marked the cards."

"Yes." She knew but it sounded worse when he spoke it aloud, however softly. She glanced up into his eyes. Light brown, the shade known as hazel, but this close she could see flecks of green and gold. Fascinating eyes. Beautiful eyes. "Just twice, I think."

"Indeed." Elston frowned. "I'm inclined to believe he did it from panic." He growled low in his throat, a rumble that did nothing for her sangfroid. "He intends to court a young woman, a protégée of my mother's. His reputation is so far unsullied."

"I understood that much."

"I don't like him, but if he proves a good husband for Alethea, and she wants him, I can't interfere. His behavior tonight is probably because he'd been drinking heavily, and the pleasures of town may have tempted him a little too much. My dislike isn't enough to condemn him. Those two incidents with the cards aren't enough. But I will continue to watch him."

She hardly knew Lord Elston, but she trusted him, and she was a fool for doing so. She'd come up here with him and if she wasn't down in reasonable time they'd have Frankie hammering on the door.

“Thank you for confiding in me.” She turned to get down from the bed and leave, but he pulled her back, his hand on her arm. She shivered at the intent expression in his eyes.

“Promise me you won’t talk to anyone about Welby’s behavior tonight. Trust me, if this behavior proves typical, I’ll deal with it.”

“I promise.” She understood. Lord Welby had connections with a friend of Lord Elston’s, and he wanted her silence while he investigated the matter. She could do that.

His lips relaxed into a smile. “Thank you. I want to talk about you now.”

“M-me?” Dread filled her, and her heart threatened to pound its way out of her chest. Did he know? Had he recognized her? How could he have done? She would mean nothing to him, even if she told him her name. Which she had no intention of doing.

“You intrigue me, lady of mystery. You were perturbed when Welby used Daisy, but you didn’t let it distract you from your game. Therefore you’re either highly expert and practiced at visiting houses of ill repute, or you’re desperate. And I don’t think you’ve been in a place like this before.”

“What would I be desperate about?” She forced coolness into her voice. He was getting too close. This man was dangerous.

“How should I know?” His eyes narrowed. “But I’d like to. That accent you use, it’s too close to the real thing for you not to be unacquainted with London.” He studied her closely. Too closely for her liking. “I wish you’d trust me with your secret. I might be able to help.”

“I don’t know you.” Not in any recognized meaning of the word. The connection she felt to him had to be her imagination. He couldn’t feel it, not this wild needing.

“I think we should get to know each other better. I want you to trust me.” He touched her chin, his forefinger stroking her skin. She wanted to purr like a cat, but instead she moved back. Before she could retreat out of his reach he tilted her chin up so she had to meet his direct gaze. His eyes bored into her soul. “There’s something about you—I don’t know.” He bit his lip. It was the first time she’d seen any vulnerability about him and she found it meltingly seductive.

She couldn’t risk weakening. She put her guard back up and kept it firmly in place, reminding herself that he was a stranger, that she didn’t know him. “I told you, I can’t do that. I’m here to play cards, no more.”

“I love a challenge,” he murmured, and lowered his head.

The first touch of his lips against hers paralyzed her. Recognition—of what she still didn’t know—shot between them and she opened her mouth to protest, but he used it to his advantage and licked her lips before he slid his tongue into her mouth.

Now shock held her rigid. Nobody had ever kissed her like this. She hadn’t imagined it possible. She’d seen the caricatures in the shops with their sometimes explicit content, watched a man fondling a

whore, seen mercenary transactions take place in the street—she'd thought herself reasonably au fait with sexual matters, for a virgin.

She'd been wrong. She knew that watching and experiencing were two different things but had never known it could be so devastatingly different. The intimacy floored her, and she could do nothing other than reach out for something to steady herself.

The memory of that other kiss—that disgusting, slobbering kiss George Barber had forced on her—returned in full measure. This didn't compare, couldn't. She wanted to press closer to Elston, not jerk away, put as much distance between them as she could. Nothing like that. If anything had told her that she couldn't go ahead with marriage to George Barber, this did.

Corin cupped the back of her head as her hand made contact with his velvet-clad arm. She clutched it, praying for control as he took his time exploring her mouth, caressing her with soft strokes that made her heat up right down to the forbidden area between her thighs. He held her safe, didn't move his hands or try to unfasten her clothing. One arm curved around her waist, the other over her wig. She wanted his hands under it, in her hair, cupping her head intimately. One of the strings of her mask loosened.

She jerked back, her hand going to her only protection against discovery. "No, don't!" Her voice was breathless, whispery, but at least it still worked. As did her common sense.

"I want to see you." He sounded as out of breath as she did.

"No, you can't." She reached up and retied the one string he'd managed to undo. Luckily the other one still held firm. He'd dislodged her wig, and she pulled it back into place, but he must have seen that she was a brunette.

"Why not? Will I know you?"

Having regained her composure, enough to confront him anyway, she shook her head. "It's highly doubtful. But you might see me somewhere else."

"And you've lost that accent. I knew you'd assumed it, but there's still a tinge left. Are you a Londoner?"

Born and bred. "I've visited London a lot," she said, hoping desperately to put him off the scent. She had to get out of here before he guessed more. Before he had her out of her clothes and spread out on the bed for his pleasure. How could she have been so stupid?

But she had to pass him to get to the door, and he caught her skirts. "A challenge, sweet Lucia. Just between us."

"Why?"

"Because of the danger. Because you want a bit of excitement in your life." If only he knew she'd have more excitement than she'd ever wanted soon. But she appreciated that he didn't threaten her. He could have her barred from this house with very little trouble, but he hadn't done it.

She turned around, willing at least to listen, but keeping some distance between them, as much as this small room would allow. He sat there in his splendid clothes looking every inch a prince. A wicked prince. He released his clutch on her skirt, and she resisted the urge to put her hand where his had just been, to touch the residual warmth. “Well?”

“Let me get to know you better. You intrigue me. Can you meet me, talk to me, with your mask and maquillage off? Can you look me in the face without your protection?”

“No.” She couldn’t do it. With no mask or makeup he’d see every expression on her face, and he’d know she was his for the taking, however hard she fought against it.

He leaned back, smiling. “A challenge, then. A bet, just between us, with no money at stake. If I recognize you and challenge you in public without your disguise, you promise to meet me at a place of my choice.”

“Why?”

He smiled. “I want you, sweet Lucia. I want to see your face while I’m making love to you.”

Before she could repress it an image flashed into her mind. Him, naked, admiring her naked body, kissing it, touching it. Oh she wanted it so much, but she couldn’t. Mustn’t. She held back her shock. Barely. “And what’s in it for me?”

His rich laugh filled the small space with joy. “I hope to give you pleasure as I’m taking it.”

She pulled out of his grasp, put her hand on the door latch. “I can’t.” Then she was gone, hurrying toward her servant, Frankie, as fast as she could without colliding with anyone or losing her foothold.

Chapter Five

Looking smart and fashionable in dark green, her head adorned with a cocked hat decorated with a large green feather, Alethea Cavendish appeared at her most charming. Corin was driving her through Hyde Park in his tilbury, and consequently she garnered the best kind of attention. He shot a grin at her. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Very much, thank you.” She gave him a shadowy smile in return, but he knew her well enough to see through her posture of quiet dignity to the childlike glee rioting through her. “You chose the right hour with the right people. They will all wonder what we’re doing here together.”

He nodded to an acquaintance, but didn’t stop. “It’s not the first time I’ve driven you in the park.”

“Yes, but this time you’ve driven just too fast to allow people to stop us, and you’ve engaged me in conversation the whole way.”

“I wonder if they realize it’s my way of depressing pretension and keeping the vile Welby away from you.”

She gave a peal of laughter. That would help his reputation. “Welby isn’t that bad. He was a good playmate when we were children. Really, Corin, you worry too much.”

His mouth settled into a grim line. “People change.”

“Yes they do. You know your parents are hoping we’ll make a match of it?”

“I’m fully aware of it. But neither of us want that, do we?”

Although he saw Lady Norris waving to them, Alethea ignored her in favor of turning her head to meet Corin’s gaze. He prayed she’d say no. He knew now what he wanted, and despite Alethea’s pretty, clever self he recognized the lack of something. No spark.

He had a dark-haired vixen with glittering eyes to blame for that. However much he tried to put her out of his mind, the lady in the dark green riding habit and black mask haunted his thoughts, and had done ever since that kiss. He’d stolen it out of a sense of mischief, but as soon as his lips had touched hers and his arms encircled her he’d wanted more. Mischief fled, replaced by raw desire.

As a result of Corin’s seemingly increased interest in her, Alethea was currently basking in the attention of several gentlemen. Her fortune was modest, but her demeanor charming. She’d do well, if she kept her head. And kept away from Lord Welby.

Alethea didn’t reply to his question. Instead, she nodded and smiled to Lady Norton, who smiled back and then glanced at Corin and raised a brow. He didn’t stop. “They’re already pairing us up, damn them.”

She fixed him with a blinding smile. "But your heart isn't in it. Something's happened, hasn't it? More than you wanting to keep me away from Welby, that is?"

He shrugged before taking a corner with deceptive ease. His pair of bays pranced, skittish today. "No. Not really. Or yes. Dammit, Alethea, I don't know. I met somebody, but I haven't even seen her face." He snapped his mouth shut. "I can't say more, truly. Forgive me. It might be a stupid notion."

She dropped her gaze to where she had folded her gloved hands demurely in her lap. "If you meet the love of your life, you must go with her."

"I would like—" he began, but his voice seemed obstructed somehow, and he cleared his throat. "Never mind. I don't trust that Welby and I don't like him."

"Why not?"

He didn't want to answer that question because he had no definite answer, just a feeling and two clumsy attempts at cheating at cards. He couldn't hold Welby's treatment of the whore against him, because many men behaved the same way at Mother Brown's and Welby had been considerably drunk at the time. Normally, he'd have dismissed the man as a boor, but Lucia's presence had driven him to anger and a strangely protective mood he didn't want to examine too closely.

Alethea shivered and looked away.

Corin disliked her sudden change in mood. "Is there something wrong?"

"N-no. Just remembering a few things best forgotten."

"Like what?"

It wasn't like him to pursue something she obviously felt uncomfortable discussing. She turned her head and met his eyes. "You know my background, why I live with my grandmother rather than my parents."

"Some of it." He swung the horses around, directing them to the exit. "I want to know more details, Alethea. I know you weren't happy with your parents and I know you were glad when Daniel and Miranda found your grandmother for you, but I wasn't involved in the other matters so I want to know. If I'm nothing else I'm your friend, but I'd like to act from a position of knowledge, not blind ignorance and intuition."

"Yes," she said, staring at her hands in her lap. "You should know."

Silence fell until they left the park. Acutely aware of the attendant sitting behind them, they said nothing. Corin had recently employed the youth as his tiger, and he was disinclined to give him any pieces of juicy gossip before he was sure of his discretion. So far he'd revealed nothing not known in society, but he didn't want his suspicions about Welby spreading too far before he decided what to do about the man.

When he took her for a drive, Corin usually saw Alethea to her grandmother's door before he took his precious bays around to the mews himself, but today he flung the reins to his tiger with the brief instruction to "See to them."

He accompanied Alethea up the steps into the house and handed his hat and gloves to the waiting footman. She turned away to let the man help her off with her short cloak, and bent her head to unpin her hat, shoving the pin back before she gave it to the servant. Without a word she followed him into the bookroom where nobody would disturb them.

Corin closed the door and crossed the room to her. They stood a foot apart and stared as if they'd never seen each other before. "So tell me about your life with your parents," Corin said. His mouth tightened. "All of it."

Alethea clasped her hands in front of her, so tight the knuckles turned white. Corin hated seeing her like that. She was usually so happy, so confident, that this was a side of her he'd have preferred not to know about. When she forced a smile he wished she hadn't. "I'm sorry. I spoiled our drive today by thinking of my father. For the most part I can forget, but sometimes something reminds me. Today the sight of a beggar swinging his fist into the stomach of a small child reminded me. They were under the trees in the park and nobody took any notice except for me."

Corin caught his breath. It was worse than he'd imagined. He knew Alethea was unhappy with her parents, that she'd suffered some kind of abuse, but many children did, and she showed none of the cowed attitude of a child long hurt by its parents. She hid it too well. He kept silent and let her speak.

"My father was—is—a brute. My mother is completely under his control. When she had me, she contracted childbed fever, and that made her sterile." When he raised his brows in surprise, she smiled. "You didn't know?" She lost the smile when he shook his head. "My father blamed my mother and he tried to—he hurt her, forced her to work like a slave, tried to bring about her death. My father tried to kill my mother by working her and depriving her of comforts."

"And you too?" His frown told her what he thought of that.

"Not precisely. He treated me reasonably well for a while, until it became obvious that my mother wouldn't have any more children and then he realized I was his only child. He wouldn't leave his estate to me—he didn't believe that women should hold power of their own—but I might marry and have children." She paused and looked away. "Lord Welby—the present Lord Welby's father that is—was one of my father's drinking cronies. And worse." She paused and bit her lip. "I used to play with the son, the Welby you know, but he became too rough in his play and frightened me. When I saw him last week for the first time, when he came to pay his respects to my grandmother, I thought he'd changed. He was so pleasant. But I still can't like him. It's unkind of me, but I can't forget. I've tried to like him, because of our childhood, but privately I can't do it."

Corin understood that. He had no need to tell Alethea any more about Welby. "You can avoid him without too much trouble, if you wish. It might be better if—"

She turned to him, an eager smile on her face. Oh no, he didn't mean that. Oh Lord, he'd just stepped in here with her all alone. If the servants told her grandmother, she might wonder.

He took a deep breath. "Alethea, you know I like you very much—"

"But you don't love me." Her promptness astonished him. He'd thought, coxcomb that he was, that this would be difficult.

"Yes, that's the thing. Until last week I'd have said that was enough. A matching of interests, a mutual liking—" He broke off, appalled at what he was saying. That had always been his ambition, always been his preference for a life partner. By his previous definition, Alethea was a perfect match. And he'd be in the perfect position to protect her from her brute of a father.

She glanced up at him, amusement in her gaze now. "So you *are* looking for love? The examples set you by your siblings have had an effect?"

It must be that. It couldn't be anything else. Nothing whatever to do with bewitching dark blue eyes and a face he hadn't even seen properly. All that one-touch, one-heart business that La Contadina was singing about in the Theatre Royal every night. All nonsense, better left on the stage. Except that he saw it every day with his parents and siblings.

So he shrugged. "Maybe it has."

"We don't have that spark." Her mood was lifting again because she gave him a saucy smile. "We could keep each other in reserve. You know, in case the loves of our lives don't come along after all."

That forced a laugh out of him. "That sounds good. Especially considering what I'm about to propose."

"Which is?" Tension entered her voice. Perhaps he shouldn't have used the word propose, but it was too late now.

He plunged in. "I've instigated certain enquiries into Welby. I know my father asked questions when Welby came to London, because of his connection with you, and he came up with a satisfactory report. It might be that Welby's just wounded, hurt, as you are, by his past. Your father was a brute, so it doesn't take much to imagine that Welby's father was one too. I don't know yet but I want to know more about him, more than the cursory check my father had done. I don't want him compromising you or getting you involved."

She sat, hands neatly folded on her lap and watched him. "Go on."

"I want it to appear that we're interested in each other. Enough to give me the right to protect you and drive away anyone from getting too close, not enough to bind us together. Just until I get a response about Welby or I see for myself. He's pushing you, Alethea, and if you're not careful you'll find yourself compromised, whether you want it or not. Several times a season a couple draw close and then draw away again. But I don't want you hurt. I don't want you to think my interest in you is something it's not."

"So you're sure. Is it your mystery lady?"

"No!" He bit his lip. Jesus, he should learn to keep his impulsive reactions in check. And it was true. He wasn't sure of anything anymore. A few hours spent in the company of someone mysterious, a stolen

kiss, they didn't make anything like a lifetime's commitment. Or a headlong plunge into love. It took more than that. Didn't it?

All he knew was that he couldn't wait until Thursday.

Chapter Six

Sapphira sat opposite Lord Elston, watching him carefully. She sat at the big table again, and it was considerably more full than the week before. Word had got around. Now the glittering favorite children of the aristocracy lined the table, eager to view the new phenomenon of the mystery lady. She knew several gentlemen's clubs had books on her identity, and she ensured her mask was not only tied on but pinned firmly to her wig. Not that most of them would recognize her if she appeared without her mask, but she didn't want to take any chances. Or spoil their fun.

Now they watched her speculatively. Not that she cared, much, because she could only come here for another week, maybe one more if she pushed her luck. The Monday after that was her wedding day. Preparations were already afoot. They terrified her.

Tonight she'd already won a thousand, and the stakes would only get higher. She'd play until she had nothing left, or until she won five thousand pounds clear. She could then pay her great-aunt back and continue with her plans. Not even Great-Aunt Josephina knew the details. She'd insisted, then her aunt couldn't tell Father, however much he pressured her. "And he won't do much of that," the redoubtable old lady had declared. "I'll have him thrown out."

Frankie, currently waiting for her downstairs, was proof of that. Aunt Josephina employed two more like him, and they were devoted to her, mainly because of the extravagant wage she paid them. Sapphira needn't worry about her father trying for revenge. Her aunt was more than a match for him. But she couldn't ask Aunt Josephina to protect her from her father's plans for her and shelter her when she defied him. It wouldn't be fair on anyone, and the tensions would prove unbearable. Besides, although she didn't like to think of it, Aunt Josephina was nearly eighty, and when she died her house and her fortune would return to her husband's family. That would leave Sapphira with nothing and nobody. She might have to turn prostitute in earnest.

She picked up the new hand that someone had dealt her and glanced at her cards. Good enough to play. She'd regained a small stake from the pool with the last hand and it now stood at a thousand guineas. That was, until Lord Elston, sitting across the table from her, doubled it. He was pushing her. Her hand was mediocre, one court card, a couple of high cards and two low cards she'd be lucky to get rid of without punishment, but what the hell, she'd take the chance.

Probably not a good idea, she reflected a few moments later as she watched Elston raking in the pool, including most of her money. After this, she'd never play loo again. This stake, this chance was all she had, but she knew better than to hope her luck changed.

It did, though. At the beginning of the next hand she found herself two thousand to the good. Perhaps tiredness or stress had made her too nervous, but she wasn't winning as fast as she needed to. If she won another thousand she'd still be short of her goal, with only two more chances to change it. Two more Thursdays.

So she got to her feet, remembering the accent she'd adopted. "I'm goin' to say good night, gentlemen." A chorus of disappointed moans echoed around the table. Elston glanced up at her and their eyes met for a fraught moment out of time. She'd relived their kiss countless times over the last week, more after comparing it to the appalling experience with George Barber, hoping to expunge the memory of both from her mind for vastly different reasons.

After that one experience with George she'd taken care not to be alone with him on their following two meetings, but he'd still taken the opportunity to slobber over her hand.

The expression in Elston's eyes changed to concern. She hardly knew him and yet she recognized the change in his mood. A frown creased his brow and his mouth settled in a hard, firm line. She sent him a smile, forced, but she didn't want him to follow her. She hoped she looked reassuring and in control.

As she left the house and turned onto James Street, Frankie fell into step behind her. They would have to take a detour to avoid Seven Dials, one of the notoriously thief-infested parts of the City, but she welcomed the brisk walk. It gave her time to think. Frankie wasn't a big talker, and she was glad of it.

With a rush and a snap of heels against the pavement, she heard someone come alongside her. She knew better than to look until she sensed him, that expensive fabric and citrus scent she already associated with Lord Elston. Then he was abruptly jerked away. "Hey!"

She turned to see him in Frankie's grasp. Elston grinned at her, that disarming smile melting her heart. "Tell him to let me go. I'd like to walk with you a pace."

If she didn't let him, he'd follow, she knew it. So she agreed. "But not all the way. Frankie, walk ahead of us if you please."

Frankie grunted and set off. She followed, Elston by her side.

"Sweet lady, won't you remove your mask?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. Masks are still fashionable, sir, so I won't seem too out of place."

"Except for the riding habit." He glanced down at her near-pristine outfit. She'd only worn it a couple of times, when she was learning to ride. It seemed a good choice for a disguise.

Lord Elston matched her brisk pace. "You are creating a sensation. The old bawd is delighted."

She already knew that from the way the door lay open to her as soon as she approached it, and by the state of the cardroom. It had been heaving, with gentlemen waiting their turn at the central table. She cared nothing for that, except that it brought fresh game to the table.

Elston leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Aren't you afraid someone will recognize you?"

"No." Damn, she should have prevaricated. That firm negative gave him too many clues. She assumed her accent again. "I don't move in them circles."

"No, but you don't belong with the working people, either. Give me some credit for intelligence, my dear Lucia."

That name on his lips sounded wonderful. She wished she could always be Lucia, but in two weeks Lucia would cease to exist. The riding habit would molder at the bottom of her great-aunt's closet, and she'd throw the mask in the fire. Much as she longed to keep it, because it would be a souvenir of the few hours when she'd been happy.

Concentrating on the game, stealing the occasional glance at him, she could live completely in the present. Now she had to think about the future and go on worrying. On her own, always on her own.

Even here, walking along the streets toward her aunt's house, she felt happy. She didn't mind the lengthy walk—finding a chair at this time of night would most likely lead to trouble and she'd be robbed, despite Frankie.

Tonight she'd forgotten to take her gloves. That wouldn't impress Aunt Josephina. She could picture exactly where she'd left them—on the little table by her bed.

But she felt his hand when it brushed against hers, and felt it again when it returned to twine their fingers together. She should pull away, she really should, but she didn't. They passed several couples in advanced poses of debauchery, giggles and groans punctuating their walk. Sapphira chose not to look after her first shocked glance. The tables had been relatively sedate tonight, no doubt because Mother Brown knew a good thing when she saw it and didn't want to put her off. And Welby hadn't come.

Corin pulled her closer until their palms touched, and she recalled the palmer's scene from Romeo and Juliet. *Palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss*. But it didn't feel like it. It was another intimacy, a step closer to something. She just didn't know what. Or didn't want to think about it. What she wanted couldn't happen. Could it? For the first time she let her mind dwell on the possibility of taking Elston as her lover. Would she dare? No, of course not. She couldn't think of it.

"You didn't do very well tonight," he said.

"Well enough. I recouped."

"You want to do more than that, don't you?"

She shrugged. "Why else would I be there?"

"To snag a wealthy lover? It's what they're saying at the clubs. There's already several entries in the books about you. Who and when."

“Do any of them have you down as *who*?” She tried to sound nonchalant, but the thought sent the heat rushing to her most intimate place.

He chuckled. “A few. They’re expecting me to resolve the books when the time comes, since I claimed to know you. But I’ve been circumspect since last week. I haven’t referred to you once and I haven’t shown indifference either. Either would be suspicious, don’t you agree?”

She tried to tug her hand free, not too violently or Frankie would notice.

“Hush, sweetheart. I’ve thought about you a lot. I just haven’t told anyone and I promise I won’t. I want to know more about you, I want to see more of you.” His voice took on a desperate edge.

It was too dark in this street to see his face clearly, even if she’d looked, but she daren’t right now. Even wearing her mask she might give too much away.

His words mirrored her feelings exactly. But she couldn’t think of it, couldn’t afford to. She had to leave nothing behind. But oh, she wanted to.

Why this man? Why now? And could she even think about...?

She could, she really could. Her fingers tightened around his, and he turned his head to give her a questioning glance. She didn’t look away fast enough and he saw it. She knew because his eyes widened and he sucked in a breath. “Oh yes,” he murmured softly. “Yes. I feel the same way.”

She came to a halt. “We’ll have to say good night here, sir.”

He smiled. “Why not let me walk with you the whole way?”

“I’m incognito,” she reminded him.

Frankie cleared his throat. “Time to go, Miss S—”

Elston gave her a mischievous glance. “Sophia?”

She shook her head, then nodded, just to confuse him a little. “Lucia. I like the way you say it.”

Blushing, she glanced away, but he caught her chin with his free hand and urged her to face him again. Their gazes clashed and met. “May I see your face?”

“No.” She couldn’t risk it. All she knew about Lord Elston were the small facts she’d gained from the newspapers and gossip sheets, and those she had to buy on the street and discard before she reached her home. Precious little knowledge. The son of a wealthy peer of the realm, single, man about town but not a notorious rake. She trusted him, somewhere deep in her heart, but she couldn’t trust her traitorous body that told her to let him take her where he wanted, do to her what he wanted, just once, just this once.

She pulled away, though it hurt to leave the warmth of his presence. Elston grabbed her hand again to support it with his fingers as he bent over it with a flourishing bow. His lips barely touched her knuckles, but the fleeting contact made her shiver. She couldn’t do this much longer. She just couldn’t. Two more Thursdays, that was all.

He turned and walked away, the heavy skirts of his green brocade evening coat flapping in the sudden breeze that kicked up. She automatically pressed her hands on her skirts to prevent the same occurrence and

watched him go. When he reached the end of the street he turned and waved. She lifted her hand in farewell before she realized she was doing it.

~ * ~

Sapphira tried to live her life normally, but every day she asked her father if she really had to marry George Barber, and every day he said yes. The coming merger would enrich both parties considerably and they would form Barber and Vardon. It would be one of the biggest companies in the City. She didn't care, she told herself, but she was too much the daughter of the City of London to lie about that for long.

If they'd allow her to take a more active part in the venture, she could bear the plans for her future. Even marriage to the odious George. He visited her twice a week now, and every time she disliked him a bit more.

She'd suffered one wet peck, which he tried to make into something else before her father entered the room and cleared his throat. That kiss made him think that his daughter was accepting the situation, which made matters easier at home.

But on Tuesday she cracked. She knocked on her father's office door at the close of the afternoon's activities. Her father was just back from the coffee house, and he had his debt-book, the small notebook he carried everywhere with him. They did most of their business out of these books, and in the past Sapphira had helped transfer her father's precious notes to more formal bookkeeping. He looked up, smiling. "Word is all over the City about the coming merger. Mark my words, daughter, this is a great thing for us."

For him, at any rate. Not for her. She folded her hands over her apron. "Can it be done without the marriage?"

He glanced up. "Indeed not. The house of Barber and the house of Vardon need an heir, or at least a contract to seal the merger. That contract is your marriage. The Barbers insist on it."

Her heart ached. "I fear I can't do it, Father. I can't like the man you want me to marry."

Her father's thick brows lowered over his eyes, dropping them into shadow. She hated that look, but she had to try to make him understand. Before the Barbers had appeared on the scene, he'd preferred to discuss matters with her, resolve arguments by discussion rather than take to the switch. But this must be her last attempt. "He is a weak vessel, Father. He is not intelligent, he has no will of his own. And his breath is bad."

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his stomach. His plain waistcoat was beginning to strain. Too many good dinners, but he was still a strong, healthy man. "You will have to influence him. Sometimes the weaker vessels can be easier to control. You could do that."

Relief flooded through her. He'd decided on discussion. "Not with his parents. They want me to be an obedient wife, one who stays at home and hardly ever ventures forth. Someone with no mind of her own. I can't do that, Father. Please don't make me." So many women in the City led their own lives on their own

terms. Wives proved important support and partners for their husbands. Sisters and daughters, too, and not a few heiresses who contrived to retain control over their fortunes. With those examples, surely her father could see reason.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "The business contracts are signed. If I go back on them now, my word will mean nothing in the City. Strengthen your resolve, Sapphira. If that is what your husband wants, then that is what you must do."

She begged, she pleaded, but the result was that an hour later she lay face first on her bed, sobbing. He'd given her six careful stripes. They missed the nearly healed set he'd given her on her first refusal, and weren't as hard, but that was, he told her, because they would need time to heal by her wedding day. As he placed the switch down by her side, he told her to contemplate it. "You will marry George Barber and you will appear happy. What you make of it after that is up to you. You will be what they need you to be, Sapphira."

When she turned her head she saw the glimmer of a tear in his eye. He'd always said he hated punishing her, but he'd never shirked from his duty. How she wished he would.

It stung. He'd made her take off her stays and beat her through her shift, so she'd need to change that. It would be streaked with blood. And she'd wash it herself, to make it her own shameful secret. Nobody would see it. She'd have to rely on her Thursday games and go through with her plan although she ached to think of what it would do to her father. She hoped they'd blame her for the defection and continue the business deal with her father.

Her back was well enough that Wednesday for her to take her usual early morning walk down to Covent Garden to buy fruit and vegetables for the house. Their cook wasn't getting any younger, and Sapphira enjoyed the walk, even with a sore back.

She took Mary, their live-in maid, to help carry the produce. Covent Garden by day appeared vastly different to the place at nighttime and she preferred it this way. The raucous shouts came from people calling their wares, which by day were fruit, vegetables and flowers. The streets around the central market hall were thronged with vehicles, stalls and vendors, the coffee houses were opening for business, sending the distinctive scent of the fresh brew over their immediate surroundings. Sapphira headed for her customary providers inside the market hall.

The days were growing lighter, and at six o'clock the sun shone down on them, adding sparkles to the wet cobbles under her patterned feet and glinting off the windows in the high buildings of the piazza. A chilly sun, but she liked the spring. Summer tended to be too sultry and the produce rotted too early, leaving an unpleasant smell lingering in the air, and the crowded streets became too uncomfortable. But this time of year a refreshing chill remained, and she welcomed the lighter mornings.

She conducted her transactions with a mixture of friendly banter and hard bargaining. She'd miss these trips. Perhaps they'd have a market in Coventry. She'd carefully selected her destination and although

it wasn't far from London, it was a large and prosperous town, and she knew she'd have a better chance of melting away there than she would in the country.

She'd take the money and run away, start a new life as a respectable widow somewhere new. Regret and sorrow filled her, but she would learn to live again, become someone else. She'd already bought false papers with an account of her military husband's death. They'd cost her a pretty penny, but they'd furnish the proof she needed when she bought a house or dealt with a lawyer.

She walked past Mother Brown's, carefully avoiding staring at the house, as did most respectable females, even the poorest hawkers. Strange how the people who lived on the streets considered themselves better than the whores there, who earned the kind of money they could only dream of.

Double standards lay everywhere, as she knew to her cost. Although she only played cards, and did it in a high-necked, modestly cut riding habit, she would be condemned if anyone ever found out how she raised the funds for her precipitate escape.

She glanced down at her basket and then Mary's, and tsked in irritation. "We've forgotten the oranges."

"I'll go and get them," Mary said, and scurried off. Sapphira glanced down at the cobbles and decided against resting her basket on them while Mary got the oranges. It was heavy, but the cobbles were decorated with cabbage-leaves and other greenery, slippery from the early morning shower, and with heaven knew what underneath. Better to carry it. So she folded her arms, shifted the basket to lie over both of them and set her mind to planning meals for the next few days.

Until she heard a low voice from just behind her. "Good morning, Lucia."

It wasn't until she whirled around to face him that Corin knew for sure that he'd met his mysterious lady, the one who disturbed his dreams and made his days so much more interesting. A deep sense of satisfaction filled him and he smiled at her. "It's good to finally see you without your mask."

He drank in her appearance, took it deep within him and knew he'd never forget this moment. She was such a beauty too. A perfect oval face, large, dark blue eyes, currently wide with shock, and a rosebud mouth. He'd tasted that mouth, but the whole face had a harmonious and enchanting appearance, one he'd never tire of looking at. She'd scraped her dark hair back into a severe knot currently covered by a wide bergère straw hat, unadorned with furbelows. She wore a practical wool gown which, to his experienced eye, was of the first quality.

Finally he could place her for sure. Lucia was a Cit. That was why she'd been so sure she wouldn't be recognized. Cits and the aristocracy moved in different circles, except for business. Not all of his kind became involved in business to any great degree, but his brother was heavily involved in the building industry and his father had rebuilt his fortune using his shipping line as one of his assets. He felt sure their paths would have overlapped sooner or later, glad it had come sooner.

The sight of her sent a jolt of heat to his groin. Their journey had to end in bed. If he didn't have her, he'd regret it to the end of his days. And since she was respectable, he had to think about it seriously. He wouldn't deny his desire for her, so deep it amounted to a physical need. It went farther than that. The startled, almost scared look she'd given him gave him an urge to protect her, not to allow anyone to cause that expression again. He'd never been a possessive man, but by God he felt it now. She was his. All he had to do was make her see it.

So he had to try not to disconcert her or send her away, running scared, never to enter the portals of Mother Brown's house, currently behind them, again. He kept his distance, a pace away from her. "I thought it was you."

"Who?" She kept a guard on her expression, once her shocked reaction came back under her control. He liked that. It showed quality deeper than what could be gained by mere birth.

"Lucia, you can't fool me. I've watched you closely for two nights now, as a card player should. Every movement of your hands, your shoulders, the way you tilt your head. I know every bit of it. You can't hide from me." He spread his hands in a gesture of pacification. "I won't tell anyone, I swear it. You wish to remain incognito, and in that place it's obvious why you want to do so. I won't betray you." He flashed a grin. "I win our challenge, don't I?"

She stared at him, taking in his plain costume, down to his black shoes with their silver buckles and back again. "Were you in disguise as well?"

He chuckled. "You've only ever seen me in evening dress, haven't you? No, I'm going into the country with friends to see a mill. A fight."

"I know what a mill is." He smiled at the distaste in her eyes. A bare-knuckle fight didn't attract most women, although many of her sex currently slumbering at Mother Brown's would be present. Not for the fight, though. For the custom. They'd never tempted him like she did. Nobody had.

Something primitive deep inside him called to her, and he saw an answer in the way she held her body, unfolded her arms.

Automatically he reached for her basket, but she pulled it back. "It's fine. I carry this weight and more several times a week."

Another deception. He'd nip that one in the bud. "Are you going to try to tell me that you're a servant? Your gown might be plain, but it's too fine for that." He glanced at her hands, but she wore sturdy leather gloves. So far he'd assumed she was a daughter, but what if she were a wife?

"You're married?" Horror pulsed through him. She couldn't belong to someone else. Again, his instinctive reaction surprised him. Marriages were largely a business, an arrangement to suit the families of the parties concerned. The participants made heirs, then took their own paths. It was the general way of things, so there'd be no reason for him to be dismayed to hear she was married. Except that she'd never be wholly his, never commit to him.

He wanted that?

She saw his glance at her gloved hands and bit her lip. He could see what she was thinking. At the table her mask and her carefully controlled demeanor made it harder for him to read her movements, but here, she was less guarded, and relief swept through him. He was almost sure she wasn't married. She'd have jumped at the opportunity to tell him, if that were the case. But if she lied to him, he'd let her.

She didn't. "No, I'm not married. But I'm betrothed."

That was almost as bad. If she'd signed the marriage contract, that would make her as good as married. "Formally?"

She shook her head. "Not yet." She worried at her lip and he wanted to stop her, soothe her with soft licks and strokes of his lips and tongue. "I won't come back to Mother Brown's."

Her decision shocked him. "Why not? You haven't yet achieved what you wanted to, have you?" If she didn't reappear, he'd go hunting for her. And he'd find her. Nothing else would do.

"No. But I can't, not now. Not now you've seen me."

Something important was happening here, surely she could see that too? "You must come back. Please. I won't tell a soul. You need to come back, don't you? You haven't made the money you need. I swear, Lucia, I won't tell anyone." He came as close as he'd ever come to begging. He'd get down on his knees if it made a difference, not caring who saw him or what they thought.

"You don't know anything about me." She frowned, her delicate brows reflecting her doubt.

"No, I don't. London is the largest city in the world, with perhaps a million people living in it. We don't move in the same circles, I know that much, but that's all. I can't possibly hope to find you, can I?" But he *would* find her. "Please come back. You need to." He needed her to. That connection, the way he heated up every time he felt her. His cock had reacted when she'd turned, confirming his surety, but it was more than that, far more. Nobody aroused him like that, nobody turned him into a lustful boy like she did.

Next week he'd employ someone to follow his lady and her attendant, if he could persuade her to return. If he tried to do it, her bully would spot him in a second. He would search for her. He would find her. "If you don't appear at the house tomorrow, I'll look for you. That's a promise, sweet Lucia. If you come, I'll respect your wishes to remain incognito." He wanted her to tell him of her own free will, but he'd find her, no matter what.

She shifted the basket resting on her arms. It had made twisted marks on her smooth flesh, marks he never wanted to see there again. "I—"

"Miss Sapphira—"

Her name. He had her name! Triumph surged through him and he wanted to crow aloud. It took all his self-control to pretend that he hadn't heard. She turned to face the woman, someone older, also carrying a basket laden with fresh produce. With her face, her position in life and her name, he'd discover her identity. Or he'd regret it for the rest of his life. He could ask his father. Lord Taversall had a brilliant business mind

and knew many of the most prominent businessmen in the City. Sapphira was an unusual name. He'd unearth her now, although he'd respect his promise to her if he saw her tomorrow night at the gaming table in the hope that she'd tell him herself.

He found her confusion adorable. She blushed a charming pink and spoke quickly, drowning out whatever else the woman was about to say. This woman had the appearance and the demeanor of a servant. She glared at Corin, then at her mistress. Her reputation would remain intact, conversing with a man in a public place, but Cits guarded their daughters well.

He gave her his best smile. In these clothes he might pass for a City man, but if she were well connected, the maid would probably know most dignitaries by sight or by reputation. Engravings of them hung in the print shops and their conspicuous presence infected London at the height of the season. He couldn't risk taking on a false identity. "Good morning. I was just asking if I could carry your mistress's basket for her."

"You know this man, ma'am?" So no repetition of her name. No matter. He had it now. Maybe he'd have more soon.

"He's done business with my father." Lucia—Sapphira swallowed. He didn't like the way her demeanor changed with the advent of the maid. She seemed more uncertain, less like the lady he'd been talking to until a moment ago. Something was wrong here. He would do her no favors by insisting on making her acquaintance, accompanying her back to her home, or making a scene. But he *would* see her again.

Sapphira turned a bright smile on to her maid. "Mary, do we have enough ginger, do you think? My father likes it in his apple pies." Just a moment to calm her churning stomach and tumbling thoughts. He did that to her, every time, and she had to force her mind into its usual order, instead of the turmoil he caused.

Mary shot him a suspicious glance, but she went off once more.

The expression in his eyes warmed her, not even trying to hide his concern for her. "I'll tell Mary you're John Farmer. My father does business with him, but he never visits the house."

She just couldn't see him go. She should, she really should, but if she didn't visit Mother Brown's again, this could be the last time she'd ever see him. She drank in his appearance, from his well-polished leather shoes with their silver buckles, to his face, already dangerously dear. He'd recently shaved, she could see a small nick near the angle where his jaw met his throat. She wanted to kiss it, touch that fresh, sweet skin with her tongue. Find out what he tasted like first thing in the morning.

He took her elbow as a man pushing a cart on wheels trundled toward them, and she almost jerked away from the tingle that shot up her arm. She moved back with him, and she wasn't sure how, but he'd

pushed her into an alcove between two houses and he had her in his arms. Despite the heavy basket between them, he leaned forward and stole a kiss in the instant while the cart covered them from view.

“Oh!” Their second kiss, taken while the noise and bustle of a market went on all around them. It felt just as good as the first, even though it had been swifter, over too soon. She wanted to touch her lips where he’d been, but the basket prevented it.

He slipped his under the basket handle. “Let me carry this for you. Please.”

She released the basket, unable to resist him anymore. “I can’t— We can’t—”

“I know,” he said gently. With his free hand, he stroked her cheek. He stood too close to her and held the basket to one side, in front of her, so anyone coming from the market hall would find it difficult to assess just how near to her he was. “You’re a respectable woman, I can see that. But can I help wanting you, needing you?”

The look of raw hunger in his eyes shocked her. “How can you? How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, but I do. No, I’m not a rake, I don’t make a habit of seducing unprotected women. You can trust me, I swear it,” he said.

She already knew that. Just knew it without him telling her. Up close she could see the way his eyes changed with the light, the golden glints catching the gleams from the sun.

“But I want you and I can’t stop thinking about you. I want to spend more time with you. Even if we only talk, I want to see you again. Will you return to Mother Brown’s? Will you?” His lips tightened as he waited for her answer. “I know you’re in trouble, that you’re worried about something. Otherwise why would someone like you go to such desperate measures?” He saw too much. But still she met his avid gaze, unable to look away. If a clash of vision could cause sparks, they’d be in the middle of an inferno right now. She couldn’t deny that attraction, couldn’t turn him away.

“I can’t tell you. Not here.” She glanced around nervously. There must be a queue at the shop where they usually bought their spices or Mary would be back by now. Standing to one side of the raucous throng she felt isolated, as if only she and the man before her existed. She took a deep breath, tried to steady her thrumming pulse.

“But you will? Please, I want to help you.”

“You can’t.” But even though she said it, hope dawned deep within her. Maybe it would be possible. Maybe she could find some happiness with him before she left. Sitting, talking, kissing—it sounded like heaven compared to what she’d have to endure if she didn’t succeed in her task.

If she didn’t make the money she needed to enable her to disappear, she wouldn’t ask him to help. The Barbers were powerful people, their tentacles reaching right into the highest in society, their network of business deals threading through the most dominant members of the aristocracy. His father engaged in business. Helping her could damage his family, as well as her own.

But a little happiness. Maybe she could have that. She swallowed her nervousness down. "I'll be there."

Wheels rumbled on the cobbles and she glanced around to see another cart laden with fruit. They stood on the far side of it. This one didn't trundle straight past. Two thumps indicated the props dropping down. Perhaps the carter intended to set up here. The strong scent of fresh produce, oranges, apples and pears, reached her nostrils, wreathing through her senses. Until Elston kissed her again.

She gave everything up to him. For that short space of time only they existed, only they mattered. He didn't take her into his arms, he couldn't with that heavy basket dangling from one hand, but he cupped her shoulder to draw her closer.

She went. Felt the soft wool of his coat against her hands, accepted his kiss, let him open her mouth with a practiced flick of his tongue.

Joyous warmth spread through her. She wanted nothing else but this. Heat sizzled as his tongue caressed hers and he tasted her lips, stroked her mouth, sent her body into shuddering need. All with one kiss.

When he drew away, his breath came harsh against hers, as if he'd run clear across the piazza. "Can you deny this?" he demanded fiercely, his voice so quiet and intense.

She shook her head and lifted her hand to touch her lips, hardly able to understand what he'd given her with that one kiss.

"Then come to the house on Thursday. Say you'll come." Urgency infused his voice and his eyes stared into hers, desperately willing her to say yes.

"Miss Sapphira!"

She cleared her throat. "Here!"

The maid tsked as she joined them. "Those filthy costers, they'll barge in anywhere. I have the ginger, ma'am. We can go now." She shot Elston a dirty look.

Still shaken from the encounter, Sapphira nearly laughed. Instead, she reached out to take the basket from him, carefully avoiding his hand. Another touch might upset her right now. He let it go, still watching her intently.

They walked away, Mary glancing behind her, probably to ensure he wasn't following them.

He watched until they reached the corner and turned out of his sight.

Chapter Seven

Never had she been more nervous, not even on that first, fraught evening at Mother Brown's. Elston had seen her, he knew her. Only his reassurance that he wouldn't tell anyone drove her back. That, and desperation twice over. She needed the money. She'd worked out how much she must have to blend into a society with the unremarkable ease she required, and she didn't have enough. She could run, but after she'd paid her stake back to her great-aunt, she'd have a thousand pounds. Not enough to establish herself as a respectable widow and have enough to invest for an income.

And she was desperate to see Elston again. Honesty compelled her to admit that, at least to herself because she wouldn't admit it to him. Two more Thursdays, but if she did well tonight she wouldn't come back. Couldn't. She'd be far away by then.

Mother Brown almost smiled when she saw her. "You've brought the gamin' right up," she informed her on her way up the stairs. "You're welcome 'ere for as long as that lasts. And I think I'll spread the word in society, get some of my gentlemen to say the room is available to ladies of a certain caliber. As long as they have the stake."

Sapphira appreciated the woman using her familiar voice rather than the society tones she used with the customers. She understood the need for concealment, giving them what they expected. She'd heard the men laugh at her, for her overcareful accent and elaborate vocabulary, and realized that Mother Brown was too shrewd not to know it too. She let them laugh and took their money. Sapphira had the strong feeling that neither persona revealed the real person. "Your gentlemen won't like it."

The bawd chuckled, but since she was walking behind Sapphira, she couldn't see the expression on the madam's face. "Oh yes they will. Keepin' the whores out of the gaming room will be popular in some circles. And they'd like a place they can play deep, some of 'em."

"What's in it for you?" It seemed a reasonable question. Apart from having the whores to help with the celebrations for the big wins and consolation for losses.

"The 'ouse always wins. I'll set up a vingt-et-un table as well as the central table. That'll do nicely."

"Well I'm glad what I do is 'elpin' somebody." Sometimes she found it hard to maintain the strong accent she'd adopted. She didn't fool herself, she knew Mother Brown would have realized that her lady gambler wasn't exactly off the streets, but the men in the cardroom seemed content enough.

Elston hadn't arrived yet, but the important business of the evening had to come first. Perhaps she'd concentrate better without his distracting presence. She took her seat at the table and emptied her purse of

guineas into the shallow dish impressed in the woodwork. One or two of the gentlemen nodded to her. Two of the others nudged each other and smiled. Marks. She could use them.

So it proved. She doubled her stake in the first half-hour, but remembering how she'd lost concentration the week before, she remained cautious. As cautious as she could with such high-stakes betting.

She had two thousand guineas profit now. Free and clear. She'd wanted five thousand, but three would be sufficient to pay off her great-aunt and put some away for her plans. Perhaps she'd been greedy to want five.

Her cards for the next game were exceptionally good. Glancing around the table, she saw no one she recognized as a cheat, not at first. Lord Strang, with a dark-haired man she didn't recognize, Lord Stratton and two others. So this was just luck. She could only hope her evening continued in the same way. The man sitting next to Lord Strang gave her a smile. Dark-haired, with a wicked glint in his brown eyes, he said, "Lucia, I believe. I'm Lord Thwaite, Strang's cousin. Call me Freddy. Everybody does." He didn't look like a Freddy to her.

They all played straight and they all treated her with politeness.

Until Welby arrived and smirked at her as he took his place at the table. God help her, she'd almost forgotten the cully.

After his first hand she knew he was cheating. Too many good cards went down and Welby had the winners for all but two. Luckily he'd given her one of them, so she could continue playing and she won some of her stake back.

The air around her crackled with tension and she didn't need to turn her head to know why. A hand brushed her shoulder and then Elston sat in the place next to her, miraculously abandoned by its occupant during the last hand. She turned her head and nodded, keeping her mouth straight, not allowing the smile she wanted to release to show even a trace of itself.

"Good evening, gentlemen, my lady." He emptied his purse into the dish with an expensive tinkle. "The game is loo again? Welby, how pleasant to see you." His voice said anything but that. It depended what the listener wanted to believe, the words or the sound.

At least it wasn't Welby's turn to deal. Strang dealt, and to her relief Sapphira found she held a slightly better-than-average hand. So it was a shame she lost five hundred. Gloomily, she translated the guineas to pounds. Five hundred and twenty-five pounds. Damn.

Conversation slowly stilled over the next few hands as the pool of money at the center of the table grew into a glistening heap of guineas and notes.

If she won this, she could go home sure of her funding. She'd already put away the thousand Great-Aunt Josephina had staked her and she could see the money on the table, taste it. She'd need a box to carry

it away. Maybe Mother Brown would lend her one of her bullies to help Frankie on their way back to Cavendish Street or give her another promissory note.

Three minutes later, no more, she looked at the wreck of her hopes as Welby raked in the guineas. He could win fairly, it seemed. He didn't need his cheating ways.

She still had five hundred left. She pushed three hundred into the pool without hesitation. As if by accident her hand brushed Elston's as she drew it back, but she knew it was no accident. Chills shot up her arm and she shivered.

"No," she heard him say, very quietly. But that was all.

She won the next hand and recouped a thousand, her three hundred plus seven hundred more. She began to breathe more easily. Then it was Welby's deal again. He dealt her a fine hand off the bottom of the pack.

Was this man an idiot? Did he think he could do this without others noticing? He wasn't even too good at base dealing. She saw him do it once, a movement partly obscured when the man next to him reached for his wineglass, but she still saw it. She had to play it and if she won, and if someone else noticed, it would look like collusion.

If she threw in her hand, he'd know she knew. Nobody threw away a hand as good as the one she held.

She lost. Down to her last three hundred. Not enough to do anything useful with, so she had no choice, she had to play. Sweat broke out across her back, and she shifted her shoulders, trying to ease the burn when her marks stung. She had hoped to win at least one hand to retain her stake.

What hurt the most was that Welby had cheated. He'd won her money by cheating. Now the guineas lay before him. He stacked some of them, but it wouldn't have been polite to put them away. They tumbled in golden disarray, spilling over to the place next to him. He drew out a jeweled pocket watch and made a play of consulting it. He was planning to leave now and take his winnings with him. Before he could move, cards lay in front of him, dealt by the dark gentleman, Lord Thwaite, the creases by his mouth pronounced and his dark eyes glittering. Now Welby was honor bound to play.

They played another hand. She lost. Everything except the original stake, and she wouldn't risk that. Welby won.

Sapphira felt cold, then hot, then numb. Nothing at all. Her mind raced, coming up with solutions to her dilemma. Refusing to marry George wouldn't work. She could do it, but her father would disown her. She even toyed with the idea of working upstairs. The girls here earned a good amount of money. But she couldn't bring herself to cross the invisible divide, from respectable to disreputable. She might find herself servicing some of the men she'd met as her father's business colleagues. That would ruin him and everyone who worked for him. No, she couldn't risk that.

All the time she felt the silent presence of Lord Elston next to her, the one good thing that had happened to her in the recent past. She wouldn't ask him to help her. That would drag him into her messy, ugly affairs and she didn't want that. She wanted to leave one thing behind she could remember with pleasure.

She had to chance coming next week. She had two hundred guineas at home. Rather than risk Aunt Josephina's money, she'd use that first. All she had in the world.

After suffering through another week of visits from the spineless George, she knew the truth of the saying "I'd rather die than marry you." She could train him, but it would take years, and she'd never have the support of her parents-in-law or her father. Decades of battles and fighting. She wanted more than that. She wanted a life. She wanted Lord Elston.

Forcing an easy smile, she got to her feet. "I have to say good night, gentlemen."

"Follow the money!" one of the players cackled, and got a glare from the others for his pains.

"I'll say good night too," Elston said.

"Follow the lady," Strang murmured.

Sapphira pretended not to notice, put her chin up and walked out of the room, concentrating on not stumbling, not falling, not giving in. This was only a setback. Hard to believe that a few hours earlier she was a winner with what seemed like a fortune now.

Downstairs, she found Frankie waiting for her in the hall. She didn't look back. She didn't need to. Elston's presence cast a tingling awareness over her whole body, making it even harder for her to retain her sangfroid.

Madam stood in the center of the main hall. Glorious in cerise with diamonds, she shook her head mournfully as Sapphira came up to her. "Don't despair, lovey. Come back again. Does it have to be Thursdays?"

"Yes." She couldn't sneak out of her father's house. If her father discovered her deception, he would wield his cane with a vengeance. And he would discover it. Her bedroom lay next to his and every floorboard creaked. She couldn't get to her bed without him knowing.

Mother Brown sighed heavily, putting her bosom in imminent danger of escaping from the tight lacing that pushed it up so far it almost touched her chin. "A pity. I'm setting up my own Lucia, but you're the original. Gotta give you that." She met Sapphira's gaze directly, her own eyes fish-cold. "I'll give you good money if you carry this on upstairs. The betting coves would love it."

"No." But she hadn't spoken. He had.

Elston pushed past her to confront the bawd, but he did it in the way he must know would work best. "The lady's not for sale."

Madam heaved another sigh and Elston moved back a little, almost against Sapphira so her front would touch his back. At the thought, waves of heat pulsed through her, though whether embarrassment or

desire she refused to speculate. "Another one gone. Oh well, you can fake, though it seems a shame. I like to offer the real thing in this establishment."

Frankie tried to block Elston's access to her, but he failed when Elston took her arm and ushered her down the steps. They didn't speak until they'd turned the corner on to James Street.

"I want you to come home with me," he said.

She turned her head and stared at him, astounded and not a little offended. "For money?" Not him. She wouldn't wreck the daydreams she'd carefully constructed, the ones that would keep her in optimism when she needed all her courage. Desperate? She'd passed that half an hour ago. But not him.

"Not for money. I want to talk to you. About someone at the table tonight."

Welby. Relief swept through her. "Can we talk while we walk?"

"No. I want this conversation in private. Send your bully home."

"No. I need him."

"You don't." He leaned close and murmured in her ear. "Sapphira Vardon, you can't hide from me." Hot breath caressed her before she got his meaning.

Shock jolted her into action. To Frankie's absolute open-jawed astonishment she said, "Go. This gentleman will take me home. I don't have any money to keep safe tonight. I won't be long, I promise."

At the same time she wondered why the hell she should do this, and then she recognized that innate sense of honesty at her core that told her the truth. She wanted him. She didn't want to give her virginity to a stranger, or to George Barber, she wanted to give it to this man. Not for money, not for any other reason than to have one unforgettable experience. She didn't even care that he knew her, though she didn't know how. Her family and his didn't exactly run in the same circles.

So despite Frankie's protests, at the end of James Street, she sent him home and remained with Lord Elston.

"How did you find out my name?"

"There aren't many women in London called Sapphira. Once I knew your first name and realized your station in life, it was easy. I asked my father. He's in business. No, I didn't betray how I knew you, just mentioned our meeting in Covent Garden and said I'd been taken by your beauty. And I'm sorry. I know I promised that I wouldn't, but I needed to know. You're in trouble and I want to help. How can I do that if I don't know who you are?"

A man with a doxy on each arm shoved past them. Elston moved closer to her until they faced each other in the now relatively quiet street. "You know I want you."

She met his gaze fearlessly. "Yes. I want you too."

"But I really want to talk to you."

"If you're quick."

He let out a short bark of laughter, as if he were reluctant to release it. “You have it all, don’t you? Beauty, brains and honesty.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” She turned and walked away. He caught up with her and took her by the shoulders, turning her around. “You’re going the wrong way, bella. My house is this way, close to Grosvenor Square. You know it?”

“Of course I do.” No point in hiding anymore. He knew everything. He could tell her father, but she wouldn’t deceive herself into saying that was the reason she would sleep with him. She wanted him. She would have done it if he’d called her Lucia throughout.

“Before we go won’t you take off that mask? I’ve seen you now. You have nothing to hide from me.”

She swallowed back her nervousness and lifted her hands to the strings. It felt like she was taking off more than a mask when she finally let her hands fall, her mask now held in one of them. She’d left off the maquillage tonight in favor of rice powder and red lip paint.

He gazed at her, his eyes stroking her skin, and smiled. “Lovely. You are purely lovely.”

When he took her hand, she let him. An indiscreet action even between married couples during the day, at night it was positively risqué and gave her a thrill, almost as much as what she wanted to happen next.

If she ended up with child, she could cope. If she married George she’d feign virginity on her wedding night. But she wasn’t marrying him. Wouldn’t even think of it from now on. If she established herself as a widow in another place, her pregnancy could help with her new identity. And she’d have the memories of tonight to sustain her. She could live on those for a long time.

As they walked into the more fashionable part of London, the cobbled streets gave way to smooth pavement, and the houses had flambeaux outside almost every one, lighting the street. The odor improved too, something, as a Londoner, Sapphira was hardly aware of until it wasn’t there anymore.

And the tension stretched between them. They didn’t speak much, and she reveled in that too. It gave her a chance to memorize this walk, the way he held her hand, the fresh scent of him, sandalwood and something spicy, the way his coat rustled when he moved.

From time to time he glanced at her as if he didn’t believe she was still there, and smiled, a mixture of reassurance and a promise of what was to come. Once she licked her lips which had suddenly gone dry, and he gave a groan, so soft she hardly heard it even in these relatively quiet streets and squares. Occasionally someone passed them, but not as frequently as in the City, and sometimes they heard a cough and a snore from the boxes that housed the charleys, the night watchmen. So much for nocturnal vigilance.

He stopped outside a house in one of the new streets close to Grosvenor Square and reached into his coat pocket for the key. He led her up the steps to the shiny black front door. No torches flamed outside this house. It seemed almost deserted.

Gentlemen kept far more servants than the people they liked to call Cits. At home, Sapphira and her father employed a maid, a cook and a footman who didn't live in. A nob could employ twenty servants. The houses were bigger, but it was as much appearance as necessity. So she'd have to brace herself to face them.

When he opened the front door, she smelled fresh paint and furniture polish. No valet or footman came forward to greet his master with a lighted candle. No hallboy slept at the back to guard the house at night.

Elston smiled at her, his expression intimate, and she knew before he told her that they were alone. "I've only just bought this house. I thought it was time I moved out of my mother's house, especially since my youngest sister is preparing for her society debut. So it's not complete yet and I don't have live-in servants."

"How many sisters do you have?" Her research hadn't told her that much.

He grimaced, but ended with a smile. "Three at home. One half sister, married. The youngest is Olivia and she's sixteen. I've suffered through Mary and Perdita's society debuts, and I have no intention of being at hand for the third."

Gently he closed the door behind them. It cut off the outside world with a finality she wanted more than she could remember wanting anything else. She stood still, not knowing what to do now, feeling helpless. The empty hall stood waiting, moonlight gleaming through the fanlight over the door on to the pristine black and white tiles on the floor. She stared at them, wondering what came next.

What came next was Corin touching her waist from behind and drawing her against the heat of his body. She melted. She'd never felt anyone so close, even though several layers of clothing lay between them. His breath heated her ear. "Come upstairs. It's only partly furnished, but I do have a bed."

"Yes." She could hardly articulate, but she managed that much. He released her and came around to take her hand and lead her up the wide staircase into a bedroom on the second floor.

Another door closed. She wanted this, so much.

A rustling, and she knew he'd discarded his heavy evening coat. Dark green tonight, she recalled in an effort to still her mind and her panic. For however much she wanted this, she was entering unknown territory. What happened next was up to him.

He came around to face her, the brilliants on his cream waistcoat glittering in the moonlight. "This is the main bedroom in the house. It seems fitting that we should use it."

She glanced toward the bed. A four-poster, but in the modern light style, the posts mere slender carved rods of mahogany, the drapery light silk, green, lined in white.

The bed was made up with a cover that matched the hangings, which was folded back to reveal crisp white sheets. "I bought the sheets earlier this week," he told her. "Made the bed myself earlier today."

"You were that sure?" She wasn't sure she liked that he took her for granted.

“No, but I hoped. And it would give me some solitude if I wanted to sleep alone. I’ve needed to think things over recently. Come and sit down.”

He helped her up the steps to sit on the coverlet and took his place beside her. “We left Mother Brown’s early. We have time. But I want to talk to you, as well.”

She didn’t want that. Not now. “Later,” she said, and pressed her mouth to his.

Although she’d only kissed him twice before, she knew the shape and the texture of his mouth, which opened immediately under the pressure of hers. His arms went around her and hers around him. His warmth surrounded her, seduced her all on its own, made her believe nothing could go wrong while she was in his arms. She heard a thump behind her on the bed as her hat and wig fell on the sheets.

By then he had his tongue in her mouth, but oh, the difference in his touch to that of her despised suitor. He didn’t fill her or gag her, but explored gently, each sweep a little deeper, but not too deep, never too much. He tasted of the wine he’d drunk that evening and himself, spicy and alluring. He touched her teeth, her tongue, stroked the roof of her mouth in a gesture that sent thrills of sensation through her, spreading over her body, heightening her awareness. And her yearning. But he didn’t rush her. Almost she wished he’d throw up her skirts and do the deed, so she could get that first time over with.

He drew back and traced the outline of her lips with his tongue before he returned for another brief foray. When he withdrew she stared at him wonderingly. His smile warmed her heart. “Are you sure you want to do this? I won’t do anything you don’t want me to. Just say it, sweetheart.”

“Yes. I’m completely sure. I want you to take my virginity. No one else.”

He drew a quick breath. “Your honesty humbles me. I shouldn’t do this. I know who you are, where you come from and you’re no doxy. Losing your virginity means as much to you as it would to one of my sisters. But I want you more than I can say, Sapphira.” Her name on his lips sounded different, like a blessing.

“Please. I want it to be you.”

“I can’t tell you the honor you do me by trusting me to do this.”

“I always hated my name before you said it.”

He lifted his hand to cup her cheek. “Why? I think it’s lovely. Where does it come from?”

“It’s in the Bible.” She glanced up. “My name is all I have left of my mother because it was her name too. She died when I was small.”

“It suits you. Matches your eyes. Deep sapphire. Eyes to drown in.” He leaned forward to kiss her again, but this time he made it soft, almost reverent.

“What do I call you? My lord?”

He chuckled. “Not if you want to live. My name’s Corin.”

“Corin.”

He closed his eyes for an instant, as if savoring something sweet. "It sounds better than I imagined. I've dreamed of you using my name since I first met you. Now I have a new ambition. I want to hear you scream my name."

Hot blood rushed to her face and her breasts, but he wouldn't let her look away when she tried to. He held her chin firmly and brought his lips close to hers again. But he didn't kiss her. "If I do, what's my reward?"

"I-I don't know." She was in unexplored territory now.

"I have it already." He smiled and touched his lips to hers before urging them open and tasting her once more, sweetly, but moving into passion. He tugged her into his arms and held her close, then he released her enough to reach the buttons of her riding habit. It fastened down the front, and he deftly undid every button. All twelve of them. She counted in her mind, waited breathlessly for each one. He released her mouth to touch his lips to her jaw, the sensitive skin just under it, and down her neck. Thrills coursed through her every time his lips touched her skin. He had her cravat off almost before she noticed him loosening it, and he could kiss and suck gently at the point at the base of her neck, and she melted for him.

The area between her legs was growing moist, and she became vaguely worried. What if her courses had begun early? She hadn't known this to happen before, but the dampness was accompanied by an increase in tension and her skin seemed far more sensitive than ever. She sighed and murmured his name.

"That sounds good," he whispered between kisses. He had her shirt now, had unfastened the necktie and was working on her cuffs. It didn't take him long. She watched him as she raised her arms so he could pull the garment over her head, leaving her in her shift, stays and skirts. She should feel ashamed, but she didn't. Only glad because it bared more of her to his touch.

He sat back. "So lovely," he said and lifted his gaze to hers. She reached up and pulled out the pins that fastened her hair, shaking her head when it came down.

His smile was her reward. He pushed his hand into her hair, drawing her back for another kiss.

She spread her hands over his back, broad and strong. He wanted her as she wanted him, his eagerness evident in every kiss, each avid glance at her. That made her happy. And he kissed like an angel. Or a demon, she wasn't sure which.

She wanted to touch him as he was touching her. Already he'd loosened the fastening on her skirt and was sliding it off her hips, so she took a moment to stand on the steps to let the garment fall away, together with the petticoat underneath. But when she sat again she slid her fingers over his waistcoat and undid the first button. It glittered under her fascinated gaze. She'd wager those were real diamonds.

Not that she cared right now, not more than the passing thought before she felt the heat of his skin tantalizingly close to her fingers. She wanted that skin under her hands, more than diamonds, more than anything else in the world.

She continued on her task until she'd undone all the buttons, and only then did she realize he'd stilled and the hungry caresses over her shoulders stopped. She paused and looked up at his face. His eyes gleamed in the dim light cast by the moonlight through the open curtains at the window, the only light they had. "I'm wondering if we're doing the right thing," he said. "You're encouraging me to treat you like a harlot. I want you, more than I've ever wanted a woman in my life, but this is new country for me. I watched you undo my waistcoat and you brought it home to me just what I'm doing here. You don't do this often, if ever. It's so new to you. I shouldn't let you do this."

"Don't stop," she whispered. "Please. I only have this night."

He shrugged the waistcoat off his body, not bothering to look where it landed. "What do you mean? What's happening tomorrow?"

"Nothing. But something is happening soon."

"Your betrothal?"

She lifted her hand to cover his, savoring his touch. "It's not something I welcome. I can't bear the thought of not making love with you. My virginity is just that—mine, and I choose to give it to you. I don't belong to anyone now, and my betrothal isn't formalized. For the next few days I'm my own woman, in charge of my own behavior."

She wanted to smooth away the crease that appeared between his brows. "I won't be your excuse, either for breaking off your betrothal or your lack of virginity on your wedding night."

"I don't want you to be. You won't be, I swear it."

He stared at her for a moment longer, helpless passion in his gaze. "God help me, I can't resist you anymore," and he leaned forward to take her mouth.

All tenderness disappeared in this savage possession. He tilted his head and devoured her, dragged her close, until with a growl he pushed her away again and groped for the laces of her stays.

She stopped him and reached for the hidden row of hooks and eyes at the front of the garment, the device that enabled her to dress without a maid to tighten her laces every morning. He brushed her hands away and did it himself, efficiently disposing of the garment until she was left in her lawn shift, her body glowing through the thin material.

"There should be nothing between us." He pulled the shift up and over her head. He disposed of her stockings equally ruthlessly, undoing her plain garters and dragging the practical wool garments down her legs. She wanted them to be silk, but he didn't seem to notice. He was too intent on getting her naked.

Which she now was. He stepped down, never taking his avid gaze away from her. He swept her body, once swiftly, taking her measure, then in a more leisurely way, taking in the parts that fascinated him. Sapphira pressed her thighs together, in case he saw how embarrassingly damp that part of her was growing. Her nipples tightened under his gaze and tension invaded every part of her.

Corin stripped quickly and efficiently, dropping his clothes to the floor until only his underwear remained. His hands busy at the drawstring, he stopped and glanced up at her. “No time for maidenly modesty anymore.” With a hint of a smile, he stripped away the last garment. Before she had time to properly take in what she was seeing he was back on the bed, pushing her down on to the pristine white sheets.

She gasped as his mouth came down on hers, and when his chest hit her nipples she cried out into his mouth. Heavenly warmth, divine touches. No maid helped her with her daily washes, her baths or her dressing. Only Corin had ever held her this close, and it was all she’d dreamed and more. Corin and Sapphira touched from head to toe, and she couldn’t imagine anything more blissful than this.

His erection jutted into her stomach, making an impression she wanted to stay there forever, like a key in wax. If she could, she’d take a cast and keep it close to remind her of this. Not that she was likely to forget any of it.

He dropped feather-light kisses down her neck and then further. He continued down to her breasts and licked around her nipple before he took it into his mouth, each touch sending thrills through her whole body. She cried out, her back arching of its own volition in an effort to get as close as she could. She flung out her hands to grasp something in this extreme of bliss and found his shoulders, hard and muscular. So good.

He treated the other breast to the same lavish kisses and touched the one he’d just abandoned, stroking from her chest to her nipple, cupping it in his hand and pulling, tugging. Sparks of sensation flowed down from the tips to the rest of her, transmitting tingles of warmth through her. And still she wanted more.

Returning to her mouth, he smiled down at her before kissing her in the way he’d taught her to enjoy, full penetration with his tongue. His hands explored her skin. When he drew away this time, he murmured to her, “Touch me. Please. I want your hands on me. Learn me.”

It was all the invitation she needed. She spread her hand over his chest, watched as he drew in a sharp breath and lifted up so she could smooth further down. He was muscular, more than he appeared to be when he was dressed, and now the muscles flexed under her hands as he lifted up on to his elbows. He gazed down at her. “You are lovely, Sapphira. So beautiful. And I want you so much.”

He caught her mouth again like a man addicted, who couldn’t get enough of the substance he needed. Kiss followed greedy kiss, and his hands roved freely over her body until he reached the juncture of her thighs.

She kept them clenched, but he eased one finger into the small space between. “Open your legs, sweetheart. Let me prepare you.”

Her eyes opened wide. “P-prepare me?”

“The first time it can hurt a little. I don’t want to cause you pain. Nothing but pleasure for you, if I can help it.”

She knew about pain. "I don't mind." But she opened her legs for him.

He slipped his hand between them and groaned. "You're already wet, sweetheart. That's good. It gets your body ready to accept mine. Do you like this?" His finger slid along the inner part of her, the crease that led to the opening she'd only ever touched to clean before now. It felt strange, but at the same time it felt right. She was supposed to get wet, he'd just told her. Natural, normal. And so good.

She gasped and her body tensed.

"That's good. Let me look after you now. Trust me."

She did trust him. Completely. Opening her legs wider and bending her knees helped him to touch her more, caress her with an intent she wasn't sure about, only that he increased her sensitivity with every touch. Then he nudged a part of her that she hadn't really noticed before. A small knot of flesh at the place where her opening began, only now it seemed full of sensation. She was hardly able to bear his touch there.

"This is the clitoris, the pearl of pleasure, the heart of a woman's enjoyment," he said. "Another time I'll kiss it, suck it into my mouth and show you what it can do for you. Now we'll let it help us, ease you further, open you more for me. Touch me, Sapphira. Touch my cock."

The word sent a frisson of excitement through her. She'd heard the word on the streets and knew what it meant, but so far she'd never heard a gentleman use it. She obeyed him, felt the hot, hard rod covered by unbelievably soft skin.

Eager to explore more, she let her fingers follow the ridge under the slick head and felt the drop of liquid seeping from the small opening at the top. More liquid to ease their way, she guessed. She smoothed it over the head, ventured further to stroke the long shaft under it, encouraged by his soft sighs and murmurs of encouragement.

While she was exploring him, he was returning the compliment. He slid his fingers through her wet crease, pausing to pinch her clitoris, caress it and down again until he slipped one finger just inside her.

Nothing had prepared her for the sensation of having someone's body inside her own, in however small a way, because he only introduced the tip of his finger and then stopped. "You're so tight, sweetheart." He eased farther in, taking his time, rewarding her with soft kisses on her face and neck. "That's the way."

She watched him, watched the way the moonlight played on his face, turning the harsh lines into softer, more playful curves. Perhaps that wasn't just the moonlight. His expression seemed less guarded somehow, more open. She loved it.

He added another finger. She hadn't felt any discomfort, he'd gone so slowly, but he'd moved until she couldn't touch him anymore. Then he withdrew his hand, giving her clitoris a tweak in passing that made her gasp and catch her lip between her teeth. He lifted up and over her so he lay between her legs, his cock touching her crease.

As he bent to kiss her again, he slid down farther and farther until he'd breached her opening. It didn't hurt. He tensed as he eased in, pushing steadily. Her opening closed around him tightly, then something gave way and he surged in.

He didn't stop until his body was fully embedded in hers. She stared up into his eyes, the gold streaks gleaming now as he watched her with a slight frown between his brows. She lifted one hand to smooth it away. "What's wrong?"

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Not one bit."

The frown disappeared and she cupped her hand around one side of his face. He turned his head and caught her finger in his mouth for a teasing nip before he released it with a soft kiss.

Then he moved, lifted until he nearly left her before pushing in again. He touched a spot inside her, caressed it with his movement, and it sent a jolt through her, so she jerked up, toward him.

"That's it." He slid his hands off her to press down on the bed on either side of her. "Lift your legs, sweetheart, wrap them around me. Trust me now."

How could she do anything else? "Completely."

He smiled. "Brave words, my lady," and he thrust in and drew out of her again, increasing the feeling, sending shots of sensation through her with every advance, centering on him. He watched her as he withdrew and drove, set up a rhythm that had her lifting up to meet him in what was almost a dance. She raised her legs as he'd asked and rested her heels on his lower back, just above his buttocks. As he drove into her she gasped, held herself open for him, moaned. "I don't think I can bear any more."

"Yes you can. You can, Sapphira. Sapphira."

She'd never hear her name again without remembering this moment, when her lover used her name like the sweetest of caresses, the most intimate endearment.

She forgot to think, could only concentrate on the sensations he brought to her, opened gateways she hadn't known before, created a world in which only he and she existed, only they mattered. She cried out and felt the feelings grow, centering herself for an explosion of mind, spirit and body until she felt her whole body pulse around him where he drove into her.

He cried out wordlessly and dragged his body out of hers, to return and press against her. His erection lay hard on her stomach, and she felt him throb, once, twice, three times as he called her name and wet heat spurted between them.

Sapphira wasn't sure when she'd lost her breath, but she realized the panting wasn't only coming from Corin. He lifted up on his elbows and smiled down at her. "I knew your voice screaming my name would make me happier than anything else."

She caught her breath. "Why, why did you withdraw?"

He touched his lips to the tip of her nose, then her mouth. "Because, my angel, that is the time when I'm most potent and you're most receptive. It's not a guarantee, but it should help."

She understood. That was when he would make her pregnant and he hadn't a mind to do that. Why would he? She was another conquest in what was probably a reasonably long line, not his first and he wouldn't want a messy connection with her. She was in his bed, she was with him and he only had eyes for her now, but she wasn't a fool and she knew what this meant. Even if it meant so much more to her. She had come to his bed knowing it, and she still didn't regret it for a moment. She had to keep reminding herself so she didn't take it too seriously, so she didn't fall in love with him, although she feared it was too late for that.

She curled into him, but he pulled away. "Wait here," he murmured as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and slid to the floor. He left the room and returned in a brief moment with a small basin of water, two wet washcloths and a towel. He cleaned them both, making it an act of caressing gentleness that could have seduced her all over again. When he'd done, he glanced at the cloth he'd used between her legs. "Very little blood," he said, with satisfaction. "Did I hurt you at all?"

She shook her head, entranced by the caring she saw in his eyes and the way he touched her, almost with reverence. "No. You were wonderful."

"I wouldn't go that far." But he looked pleased. He dropped the cloths on the side of the basin and the towel on the end of the bed before he slid in beside her again and gathered her into his arms.

He caught a patch of raw skin with his arm and she winced. Before she realized what he was doing, he'd rolled her on to her stomach.

She knew what he was staring at. A moment of fraught tension later he demanded, in a hard, determined voice, so different to the gentle, sweet tones of a moment before, "Who did this to you?"

Chapter Eight

Caught. She'd temporarily forgotten about the marks, the ones still fresh, scabbed over in a few spots where the lash had bitten too deeply, and the ones that had nearly healed from the time before.

Shaming tears sprang to her eyes. The last thing she'd wanted to do tonight was weep, except with joy, but boneless with pleasure, she'd forgotten her sore spots until he'd come into contact with one just now. She wanted to curl in to him, enjoy his warmth while she could, but now that he'd seen the marks, everything changed.

Her tears flowed until she didn't seem to be able to stop them. Corin turned her gently into his arms, let her cry and said nothing, only held her. Nobody had ever done that for her before, offered her the solace of silence and demanded nothing of her. She'd never let anyone see her private misery, always pretended that she didn't care, that she was strong enough to cope with anything life threw at her.

Here, enclosed in Corin's arms, feeling oddly secure, Sapphira released everything, and her defenses dissolved in a long, hot flood of despair.

She found it hard to believe that anyone had any free will of their own. As far as she was concerned, every person tried to use other people. Only the strongest survived. When she lay in her bed at nights on her own, when she allowed herself to think, she feared she was one of the weakest. Furious and unable to change anything, until she'd decided to take her fate into her own hands.

In that moment Sapphira didn't know how she could bear to separate from Corin, not so soon after finding him.

"I'm nobody's property!" She buried her head against his chest, temporarily unable to face ugly reality. Corin smelled of soap and something vaguely citrus, so wholly unlike her betrothed's bad breath and camphor smell. There was no fear here for her, no repulsion. Quite the opposite. She wanted to stay here, held and safe.

An illusion. Everything except her survival had to count as that. She must prepare herself for conflict, even attack. The only safety she had was here, in this room, in Corin's arms. Outside, she could trust no one.

Desperately, she fought for control and eventually found it. When the last of her tears had gone, she lifted her head, blinking, and forced a smile. "I'm sorry," she managed. "I'm just a watering pot. Please forgive me."

Was that anger she saw in his eyes? She couldn't imagine why he would be angry with her, but she knew enough of men to realize their actions weren't exactly predictable or even logical at times. So she waited to discover which of them it was. "I've ruined it, haven't I?"

He made a sound of exasperation, something like, "Tcha!" and lifted one hand away from her back to touch her cheek, his voice gentling when he spoke. "You've ruined nothing. You just gave me one of the most joyous experiences of my life, one I'll never forget and nothing will change that. Will you tell me who has distressed you so and why you have those marks? The full story, please, don't leave anything out." The last he delivered in a stern tone, one he hadn't used with her before.

She forced a watery smile. "Just a moment's weakness," she ventured, but she wasn't sure how long that excuse would hold, and she was right. He frowned down at her. When she tried to pull away, his hand firmed on an unmarked part of her back. Not enough to hurt, but enough to keep her there, unless she put a little more effort into leaving him. She hadn't the strength to do that. He felt too good for her to leave him just yet.

"I don't believe that for a moment." His gaze remained steady on her face. "You're too self-controlled for that. Something has distressed you beyond bearing."

She couldn't escape from this. Perhaps half the truth would satisfy him. To her dismay, she felt her bottom lip tremble. It was no good. A vision of her betrothed came to mind. "I'm not a good person." She deliberately kept her voice low, so it would not tremble any more than necessary. "I gave to you what I should have kept for my husband. But my father wants me to marry a man I cannot bear." Without realizing what she was about to say, she blurted out the truth. "He's unpleasant in his person, but I could put up with that, I could perhaps teach him better habits, but there is worse. He's weak, does everything his parents say. They're so devout they're hardly ever out of church and the rest of the time they drive businessmen into the ground. I've been asking around, and they give half measures, or try to finance one venture by taking from another. Nothing illegal, just sharp, too sharp, too ruthless." She gulped back her tears. "They want my total obedience. I'll hardly ever leave the house after our marriage and I'll become a breeding machine. I can't do it. But my father is set on the match. It means expansion of his business and I have no right to deny that to him."

"He did this to you?" His hand gently traced one of the ridges on her back, not one of the fresh ones, but one her father had inflicted a few weeks ago.

"He did. Fathers beat their children, you know."

His mouth firmed into a hard line and the dangerous glint in his eye promised trouble. "Mine only did it once and I have to admit I deserved it. And he took care not to break the skin or cause me unnecessary damage. Your father has given you lasting hurt."

Shockingly, a hot tear forced its way out of one eye. She'd thought she was all cried out. No chance of concealing it so she let it trickle down.

More shockingly, he bent his head and caught it in his mouth before he delivered a gentle kiss to her. His lips touched her cheek lower down, then the corner of her mouth before he drew back. "You must not think of doing it. You must be strong in your refusal."

She tried to make him understand. "It means too much to him, to us as a family and to the people who work for us. He has beaten me in the past, but rarely and not as badly as this." She sighed. "You worked out that my father is a Cit. Influence and family connections mean as much to us as they do to you."

"Do you have no one to protect you?"

She shook her head, her hair catching in the hair on his chest. "I have a great-aunt, but she can't protect me. She's frail, and although comfortably circumstanced, on her death the house she lives in and her portion returns to her husband's family. She's done her best. I stay with her every Thursday, which is how I can come to the gaming house."

He frowned. "You're over age."

"You think I should set up my own establishment, like some eccentric spinster? They won't allow it, but actually, that was the basis of my plan. That's what I needed the money for."

"Tell me."

She'd gone too far not to tell him. "I wanted five thousand pounds to buy a house and an annuity. Three thousand would have done it. I'll travel to a provincial town. Coventry, I thought would do very well. I'd buy a house there and call myself a widow. Widows have more freedom, and if, by any chance, I should be pregnant, I could explain that away too." She glanced down, her face heating as she remembered why she'd thought out that part of her plan. In case she slept with Corin. "My husband was a military man, killed abroad. People might suspect, but they wouldn't accuse unless they knew for sure. I have papers tucked away at my aunt's house. And I could hide better in a town than isolated in the country. I'll have to change my plans a little unless I win next Thursday, that's all."

"You can come to live here."

She shook her head, feeling his warmth against her cheek, but her heart leapt at his proposal. For all that, it was impossible. "I can't. It would disgrace my family and bring my father's reputation into doubt. It's not just him, it's our employees and all the people he does business with. His word is paramount in any business transaction. If my father knows where I am, he'll come for me." Though the thought of living here with him, for however short a period, filled her with a joy that frightened her with its intensity.

"I'll make sure you're guarded."

She gave him a sad smile. "You live in the rarefied air of the upper echelons of society. I don't. I have no personal fortune, no influential relatives. The Barbers will cancel the business deal and nobody will trust our company anymore. If he can't control his daughter, they'll say, how can we expect him to handle our investment? No, I can't depend on anyone else. I have to find my own way through the mess and stand on my own feet."

"I rather fancied myself as knight errant," he said, regret coloring his voice in minor tones.

Sapphira liked the idea of him being a knight errant, but it wouldn't work.

"Why do you have to do this so quickly?" he asked.

She snuggled closer, trying to remember everything, bearing her up for the times to come. "Because the marriage is set for a week on Saturday. After that it will be too late."

Corin listened to her words with mounting horror and disgust. Seeing those marks on her back had sent his whole body cold. That anyone could do such a thing to Sapphira filled him with appalled revulsion.

The man who inflicted those horrible lashes wasn't inflicting dispassionate punishment. Whoever did that either enjoyed it or didn't know when to stop, because he'd cut into the skin. The man might have done it in a rage, a thought that filled Corin with cold horror, because rage, the most destructive of emotions, could lead to total lack of control. Fear could do it too. He could kill her in either of those states. If Vardon hurt her again, he was a dead man. Corin would make sure of it.

His father had beaten him once, for releasing a cat in the stables and causing havoc to the staff and the horses. He'd delivered the beating carefully, and Corin had never done anything so foolish again. While he knew his father had hated administering the punishment, he had done it because the prank could have resulted in serious injury to the horses or the grooms.

He needed Sapphira in his arms, holding her safe. The strength of his reaction shook him to the depths of his being. He would have wanted to protect anyone, but not like this, not to the extent he felt it now. He needed to shelter her from any more hurt, to care for her himself, and he knew no one could do it as well as he could, because—

He broke his train of thought. No, that wasn't true. He hardly knew her, so how could he love her? Except that he felt he knew her exceedingly well. Inside and out. The thought made his cock rise again, but he ignored his reaction to her luscious body. Now was most definitely not the time.

He was on the horns of a dilemma. Should he encourage her to go forward with the marriage? Could he trust what she said, or might she be exaggerating about the family and her prospective groom? He didn't know this Barber family but it didn't sound promising. He had just over a week to sort out this damned mess. One thing he was sure of—this would not be their last time together. If for no other reason than he couldn't bear never seeing her again.

He tightened his hold on her before he registered her wince and loosened his grip. "Let me see the marks again. I want to make sure they're clean and healing properly."

She didn't want to but with some gentle urging he had her on her stomach and he could look closer. He reached for the tinderbox on the nightstand and lit the branch of candles there.

The light revealed the marks of a set of fine lines, where she'd been beaten before. They were healing cleanly and he was glad to see it. The newer lines were deeper, cutting into the skin with scabs pulling at

the edges. He didn't like that. So he got out of bed again and brought the basin closer, resting it on the table next to the candles. He could have used a proper washstand right now. He should really get on with furnishing this place, especially now he had a reason to do it.

He wrung the cloth out in the water and dabbed it on the wounds. Slowly and carefully, but he still felt her flinch occasionally, although she didn't make a sound. She needed distraction and he needed to know more. "Talk to me, sweetheart. Tell me about your life."

She laughed. "It's very boring, really. My mother died when I was young, and so I've looked after the household for years. My father ensured I knew the business, but he never meant me to run it. Most girls of my sort do that, help their fathers or husbands by some bookkeeping or business arrangements. I don't have any particular friends, because the ones I had married and moved away. We write a lot. Emma has married a sea captain and lives in Liverpool and Joyous married a merchant from Scotland. I miss them, but I know I should have married years ago. I could have chosen my own husband in that case, as long as he was acceptable to my father. I'm a creature of habit. I go to the market three times a week, supervise the household and attend the occasional City dinner or ball. I've only been out of London three times, but I was glad to get home. I'm used to the City, to the noise and the bustle. I don't think I'm a country girl."

"We'll have to find out, won't we?"

He shouldn't have said that because she whirled around, nearly taking the cloth out of his hand. "What do you mean by that?"

He sighed. "I don't want you leaving the City on your own. I want to help you."

"Why?" Her face cleared. "Oh."

He smiled at her worldly wise expression. He'd taken her innocence, but in other ways she'd lost it some time ago. He'd loved her ignorance of the intimacies between a man and a woman. He longed to show her more, introduce her to so many delights until she knew as much as he did. He'd never been a rake, but he'd had his share of affairs, enough to know true quality when he saw it and felt it under his hands. "More than that, Sapphira. Much more. Promise you won't do anything without getting in touch with me. Let me help you."

She shook her head. Her dark curls clung to the pillow as if they didn't want to leave. He knew how they felt. "This was supposed to be my one evening of freedom, something to remind me of you."

"I want more than that."

"It's impossible."

No it wasn't, but he didn't want to spend their few precious hours in argument. "At least let me be your friend. Let me help. You'll need someone. You have no idea how lonely you can feel on your own." And because he couldn't help himself, he bent and kissed her. At once, she drew him in. He doubted she knew what she was doing, but she did it all the same, held him in the palm of her small hand. He loved it, wanted to give her more, and still more, drink from her well until he was completely sated.

Already he doubted the point of satiation would ever come.

She responded eagerly, with an innocence that broke his heart and excited the other part of him, the one that responded to her deep, wanton promise. One day she'd become aware of her power, and that would give her the confidence she lacked now. He wanted to bring that bud to flower, to give her the strength to reveal her full beauty.

Her kiss set him aglow with a longing he could hardly bear to deny, but he must, for her sake. He'd taken her barely half an hour ago and she couldn't be comfortable. But she had other ideas. When she turned over and touched his cock, he groaned into her mouth and pulled away. Feeling her sweet hands leaving him was pure torture but he moved out of reach.

"No," she said. "Come back. This is my only night. I want you again. Please."

"I'll make you sore."

"I'll recover. It's a good feeling, it will remind me of what we did here and now. Corin, I want this experience free of anything else. No obligations, no promises."

He smiled. "I should be saying that," and because he couldn't help it, he reached for her breast. Her soft skin, tipped with the stiff, pointed nipple, delicate pink giving way to a rosy blush, tempted him beyond his powers to resist. He took it into his mouth, caressing it, all the ridges and peaks, memorizing it. Perhaps he could bring her pleasure in another way.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes, seeing his own desire reflected there. "I can't make love to you in every way I want to, not in one night, but I give you the promise you asked for. Tonight is ours, with no promises, no obligations."

She answered his smile with one of her own and he bent to his task, licking around the nipple he'd just kissed. He loved her breasts, firm, high and full, responding to his touch with a sensitivity he'd never seen before. With every caress he grew increasingly certain that she was meant to be his. He'd do his best to make it so.

He cupped her other breast, loving the texture and the way it fit so well into his hand. He kissed, stroked, listened to her sighs and little moans. She was relaxing more with him, learning to sink into the experience and enjoy.

Venturing farther down her body, he dipped his tongue into her navel and rimmed it, before he released her breast and brought his hand down to open her sweet center. Her aroma wafted up to him, the scent of an aroused woman, potent and enervating.

At his first, gentle kiss she flinched as if he'd hurt her, but when he did it again, she murmured something and let her legs fall open as he urged them apart. He took a moment to look at her, see her desire, wanting him, the woman he'd just made and wanted more of. Her clitoris swelled under his gaze, the pretty outer lips flushed with her arousal. He watched the dew form, his mouth watering, and surged forward to lick, to suck, to take.

She cried out, called his name with a confused, “What are you doing?” that made him want to show her more than they had time for tonight. This had to be enough. He pushed his tongue deep into her and tasted her, sweet with a hint of tart apple, addictive, luscious.

He took her clitoris into his mouth and sucked, ate at her until she squirmed to get away, but he wouldn't let her, planting his hands on her hips to hold her down. He felt her arousal grow as her wetness increased, and he lapped it up, letting her hear the sound and knowing from her responsive moans that she was enjoying his ministrations. He might have shocked her at the outset, but she entered the experience with gusto, pushing up her hips so he could reach the heart of her, opening her legs and letting them fall wide.

And then she stiffened, gave a strangled cry and screamed his name as she fell.

He rested his forehead against her stomach, his finger inside her, feeling her contract hard around him until he couldn't bear any more waiting. He'd promised himself he wouldn't, but he couldn't stand not to, so he lifted up and lay over her and when she opened her eyes, he was inside her, smiling down at her.

He found her blush delightful, arousing, and he plunged deep. “Sapphira!” Her hands on his shoulders, spread wide, urged him on. He forgot gentleness, forgot consideration, but drove into her with a sense of coming home. He gloried in the way she pushed her body up to meet his thrusts. He watched her, knowing for sure that life didn't get much better than this.

His climax overtook him with the power of a tidal wave. He barely withdrew in time and afterwards he had only enough energy to roll to one side, although he wouldn't let her leave him, but held her close as if he'd never let her go.

Chapter Nine

Sapphira said goodbye to Corin at the end of the street where her great-aunt lived. She'd had to reason with him to persuade him to let her go at all. Dawn was breaking, the thin light filtering over the fine redbrick houses, warming them into welcome.

A similar glow suffused her body as she prepared to slip down the backstairs at her aunt's house. The maid might be up, but she had her excuses ready. She'd fallen asleep after the last time they'd made love and woken in a panic, but cradled in his arms, he'd soothed her. He'd admitted he didn't want to let her go, had watched over her for what was left of the night. She hadn't slept that well in weeks and although she'd had barely four hours' slumber, the uninterrupted rest had left her feeling much better able to cope with the shoals that lay ahead. With fortune on her side, in two weeks she'd be on the other side of her escape, planning her future.

She still needed the money, but next week she'd be ready and sharp at the table. Three thousand would be more than enough. She could invest in something with a better return for her money than an annuity and build up her stock that way. It would work. Because, despite Corin's offer, she was still determined to set her own future, not depend on anyone to get the life she wanted. Or almost the life she wanted, because after last night, she knew what she really desired. And that was unattainable. Perhaps, when she'd settled in her town of choice, she'd send him her address and ask him to visit. But she wouldn't depend on him for anything. She'd see him in *her* house.

Something to look forward to. As was next Thursday, when she hoped they'd be together again. One more night. She'd said one night but she wanted more and she couldn't resist him.

"Miss Sapphira!" Frankie, wringing his great hands together, stopped her at the top of the area steps. "Go in the front way—your father is here!"

Her blood ran cold and she breathed deep to stop herself from fainting. It was six o'clock, far too early—no it wasn't. Swiftly, she explained what she had in mind, how she could get away with arriving so early—or so late. She had reason to bless her choice of costume now.

She walked up to the front door and rapped smartly on the knocker.

Her aunt's footman answered the door and she stepped inside, followed by her aunt's faithful manservant. She heard her father's voice immediately. He could make himself heard clear across the floor of 'Change with that pitch. He must have been on the lookout for her. "Sapphira! Upstairs, miss, now!"

She heaved a sigh and ran upstairs into the pretty parlor that caught the sun in the mornings. Her aunt was huddled in a chair, not yet dressed for the day, clad in a lace-trimmed silk wrapper with warm woolen shawls wrapped around her shoulders and over her lap. Her lady's maid stood behind her, her face grim.

Her father stood in the center of the room, arms akimbo, glowering at her. She noticed, almost dispassionately, that his wig was slightly awry. He must have pulled at it, something he only did in a passion. "Do you care to explain what took you out of the house so early?"

Her aunt sent her an appalled stare and Sapphira prayed she'd not told him something that would conflict with the lie she'd hastily prepared. "I went for my riding lesson, Father. Don't you remember, Aunt Josephina, the instructor said he wanted to see me early this week?"

Relief flooded over her aunt's face and Sapphira knew she'd said the right thing. She dropped her father a brief curtsey. "I'm sorry, sir, but there was no time to inform you. My riding instructor cancelled my lesson yesterday, and promised to give it to me if I could be there early. The lesson is paid for, and I didn't want to waste your money." The last was probably overegging the pudding, but her father didn't seem to mind. His face softened the tiniest amount. "I left a note for Aunt Josephina in the kitchen when I left and I took Frankie with me."

"He's a good boy, my Frankie." Her aunt's voice wavered. "No harm will come to Sapphira when he's with her."

"Hm." And with that one sound Sapphira knew she'd avoided a whipping. If he discovered where she'd really been, he'd have beaten her to within an inch of her life. Her father never shirked his duty. "I found it disconcerting when I discovered you absent, Sapphira. I would appreciate the note when it is located."

He'd get it. It would have fallen to the floor and overlooked, she was sure of it. She'd make it a certainty. She forced a pleasant smile to her face. "Have you come to take me home, Father?"

"Eventually. I have come to discuss a proposition with your aunt. Since it concerns you, you may stay and listen."

"Yes, Father." At his gesture she crossed the room and took a seat on the gilt-framed spindly sofa that stood next to the large, comfortable chair her aunt habitually used. One wrinkled hand emerged from the nest of shawls to pat her on the hand. A silent gesture of reassurance. She'd done well. But only just. Without a little quick thinking and a felicitous costume, she would have been in deep trouble.

So she composed herself, hands neatly folded in her lap, and waited for her father's next detonation. She felt warm, happy and replete and not much could sway her today.

Mr. Vardon flicked up the skirt of his fine wool coat and sat on the sofa opposite his daughter. He gave her a hard smile. "I thought it might be preferable if you were married from this address, if Aunt Josephina is agreeable."

The lady brightened. Her frailty made it impossible for her to leave the house often, or to take part in many activities, but by bringing the wedding to her, Mr. Vardon was showing her a kindness. Also, it could not be denied that this address was superior to their residence in Spitalfields, a perfectly respectable house but not of the first stare. It would give Sapphira's father a slight advantage, one he needed over the superior Barbers if he were to achieve the best he could from their business deal.

A shame the wedding wouldn't take place. Not that Sapphira could be sorry.

They made the appropriate remarks and then Lady Carr decided to accompany her great-niece upstairs when she went up to change for the journey home and the rest of the day. She waited until they were out of earshot of her father, which took some time as the old lady didn't move easily. In the pretty bedroom Sapphira used here, she firmly closed the door against her solicitous maid.

"This will mean you can get away more cleanly, dear," Aunt Josephina said. "I will ask for your presence the night before the wedding. If you can find a night coach, you'll be long gone by the time your father misses you."

A pang of guilt assaulted Sapphira. "He will be so angry and upset."

"All the more reason for you to be far away when he discovers your deception," her aunt said. "It will teach him a lesson." She paused. "Sapphira dear, I didn't tell you, but I do not think you will have to stay away forever. Once the danger is past, I think Thomas will forgive you."

Sapphira shook her head. "No. He won't. He'll cast me off."

"Dear, you're his only relative apart from me, and he can hardly depend on me to provide him with an heir. He loves you, in his way, and he wants the best for you. He thinks the Barbers are the best. He'll want you back. Find a way to write to him when you're gone. That is all I ask."

"I'll try." How she could do that she had no idea. She would trust no courier, and sending by the regular post meant he could discover where the missive had come from with a few careful enquiries. Perhaps, one day, she'd find a way. But she could risk no path leading back to her.

"Write to me, dear," her aunt said. "Include a note for your father, just to tell him you're safe. I will destroy the letter you send to me, I swear it."

That might be possible. But could she trust her aunt not to tell him? The question must have shown in her eyes because her perspicacious aunt spotted it. "I won't give him the note. I'll send it by the mail. Give him a goose to chase."

At least Aunt Josephina had made her smile.

After returning to his own house to sleep most of the morning away, Corin strode into his parents' London residence to the usual confusion and noise. While his mother ran the house beautifully, it was rarely quiet because of all the visitors and the bustle created by his sister Georgiana's imminent presentation. Also by sixteen-year-old Olivia's jealousy. She'd have to wait a whole year for her society

debut and she wasn't happy about that. She'd tried every tactic—that a double debut would be cheaper, that she was taller, more developed than Georgiana. That was the key to his mother's determination to give Georgie her own year. At nineteen, Georgiana was small, sweet and delicate. The more robust Olivia would outshine her. Georgiana's debut had been delayed by a mild attack of smallpox the year before which had left her unmarked, but weak. Lady Taversall was consequently determined to give her daughter the principal role for at least one season.

Corin was in full agreement, so when his youngest sister flung herself into his arms in a storm of weeping, he held her patiently and set her aside when her tears subsided. "Come, Olivia, you know you're a fortunate person. You have to learn to step aside graciously."

Olivia pouted. In a year or two she'd sweep into her first ballroom and break any number of hearts, but Corin thought she had better learn to behave with more decorum or the hearts would swiftly mend. As the baby of the family, Olivia had been overindulged, but Lady Taversall was currently applying her own formidable tactics to taming her daughter.

"Is Papa in?" he asked.

"Yes. Nobody else is, though. They've gone shopping."

Ah. Thus the temper. Corin guessed Olivia had failed their mother in some way, and he knew for certain Olivia had some task to perform. "So what should you be doing? Sewing?"

"Writing out the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians and giving my opinion on it."

Corin grinned. He remembered that one. Their parents were religious, but not unthinkingly so. They encouraged free discussion as long as it was well informed and not blasphemous. He'd shocked his father once by declaring that he considered St. Paul to be an ass. He'd learned not to say it, but sometimes he still thought so. Experience had taught him when to speak his mind and when to stay silent. He patted her on the shoulder in the direction of the stairs. "If you finish it quickly, I'll wager Mama will take you on the next visit to Bond Street."

Olivia grumped at him but he could see her mood lifting. "I'll go and do it now."

A clever girl, his littlest sister. She'd lead someone a merry dance one day. He was glad he would only be a bystander.

He knew where he'd find his father at this time of day—in the bookroom at the back of the hall. He knocked before he went in, and was pleased to see his father at his desk.

All his life he remembered his father and this old, scarred desk. Lord Taversall did all his London work here—his Parliamentary speeches, his contracts, his legal affairs and the mass of work connected with the Earldom that Corin would inherit one day. Not yet. He was fully prepared to take on the task, but he loved his father too dearly to wish him gone.

Now he greeted his parent with a smile and a brief bow. His father looked over the top of his gold-rimmed spectacles. “Good morning, Elston. Pray take a seat and let me know what trouble you’re in today.”

Corin didn’t smile as he usually did these days. It was true, when he’d first hit London at the age of eighteen, he’d done it running, with the inevitable result. Heavy debts, a woman screeching breach of promise and a severe beating from an assault by a gang of thieves had been the result. His mother had wept, his father had roared at him and sent him back into the country. Corin hadn’t made the same mistakes again. He liked to think he learned quickly.

But he was in trouble now. ‘Struth was he in trouble. He hadn’t really understood just how deeply he was enmeshed until he realized he was about to tell his father a half-truth. He never lied to his parents—it wasn’t worth the trouble he found himself in when they discovered the truth, which they inevitably did. This time he wasn’t sure of his own mind or what he wanted, except for tackling the immediate dilemma.

“Papa, how would I find out discreetly about a man in the City? A man of substance?”

His father put his pen in the standish and leaned back in his chair. The old wood creaked under his weight. Lord Taversall wasn’t overburdened with avoirdupois, but he was a tall man, and well built. His hawkish features took on a sharp look. Corin would have to be careful. “Why?”

“Because I suspect the man of wrongdoing.”

“Is he the Vardon you had me look into for you? The father of the woman called Sapphira?”

Corin inwardly groaned. His father was too astute. “No, it’s someone I have concerns about in a business matter.”

“I won’t ask you how you came across this person. Not yet. But if you become involved in the business of the City, you’ll be stirring a small pot that has huge influence in global affairs. This would be no youthful prank.”

“It isn’t one, I swear. I can’t tell you the whole, I have someone’s confidence to respect, but I do need to know about the Barbers. I’ve heard they’re deeply religious and equally deeply engaged in sharp practice.”

His father regarded him steadily without talking and eventually said, “Yes, if it’s the Barbers of Barber and Company, I know them.” He drew a breath and let it out in a deep sigh. “Before I tell you about them, answer me one question. How serious are you about this woman?”

Later that day Corin walked into the St. James coffee house, feeling better about the decisions he’d made. He still couldn’t see his way to a conclusion, but he’d determined his immediate path. Now he had another problem to cope with, one that he’d failed to share with Sapphira. Somehow they’d been sidetracked. The thought of just how they managed that brought a glow to his heart.

“A penny for them?” He turned to see Lord Strang, a slight smile adorning his mobile lips. As usual, Strang wore all the accoutrements of fashion from the exquisitely powdered and curled wig to the tips of his red-heeled shoes adorned with glittering buckles that Corin had no doubt were diamonds. Strang was of slight build, but his agile strength had fooled many a mark. As had his fashionable demeanor. People who didn’t know him were likely to dismiss Strang as a fashionable fribble. People who knew him better never made that mistake.

Today Strang was resplendent in harebell blue, an excellent match for his eyes. Corin grinned. People always noticed what Lord Strang wore, his extravagance in dress a mask for the more secretive man within. Most people who met him were too busy wondering about his clothes or the cost to wonder about the man and the razor-edged mind inside them. “Secret thoughts. For now. Not even you can discover them.”

Strang’s smile turned beatific. “I’ll wager I could if I put my mind to it.”

Corin knew better than to engage Strang’s interest, so he shrugged. “It wouldn’t be worth your while, believe me. I came here to discuss something far more interesting.”

“Afternoon Richard, Elston.” The man who approached them was tall, strong and as dark as a gypsy, but for all that he was the ethereal Richard Strang’s cousin, Lord Thwaite. Corin had approached them because they were both present at Mother Brown’s the previous evening and had both noticed what he did. And because Strang and Thwaite had learned cardsharpping from an expert on a recent visit to Venice. His earlier notes to their respective lodgings had brought acquiescence and a meeting place.

Corin had learned his tricks the hard way, by practice and observation, but the three men had something in common. When there was money on the table they never used tricks. Unlike Lord Welby.

He led the way to a quiet corner and they ordered wine. When the attentive waiter had left them, Corin began the conversation. They sat in the window embrasure where they could be seen but not overheard. This was the only table in the window space, and they could see anyone approaching them long before they arrived.

“So what do we do about Welby’s cheating?” he said. “The man is newly arrived in London and is a neighbor of the father of a friend of mine.”

“Alethea Cavendish,” Strang said softly.

Corin knew better than to reveal his dismay that he had guessed her name. Besides, he could trust this man with his secrets. “Indeed. He is courting Alethea, and she is a particular acquaintance of my brother and sister-in-law, the Rosingtons. I don’t think he’s as flush as he makes himself out to be.”

“I know he’s not.” Strang leaned back in his chair, twirling his glass of wine. The faceted glass reflected the spring sunshine outside, casting bright drops on to the highly polished table. The scent of the furniture polish combined with lavender oil reminded Corin sharply of the scent of his woman. The aroma had perfumed their encounter last night.

Hell and damnation, could he never scent lavender without having an erection from now on?

"After the first time we met Welby at Brown's, I had some enquiries made." Strang seemed to know everybody's business although Corin had no idea how he did it. He never divulged his sources. "Welby, it appears, is in possession of a modest estate, mortgaged to the hilt, and a number of pressing debts. He has come to London to find pigeons to pluck. So far, he has been moderately successful. He is undoubtedly after money."

"Alethea stands to gain a considerable fortune from her grandmother in the fullness of time. So he will be courting her for that purpose."

"Indeed."

Thwaite grunted and Strang gave him an indulgent smile. "You have something to say, Freddy?"

"Only that we need that kind of man like we need warts. Can we do anything?"

"Oh yes," purred Corin. "Next week at Mother Brown's."

Strang appeared pained. "Does it have to be there?"

Corin saw a way to get some of his own back. A very little. "I thought you were a happily married man, Strang. What would your wife think if she knew where you were spending your nights?"

The beatific smile returned. Corin didn't trust that smile one bit. "I was hard put to stop her coming along. My lovely wife is up to every rig and she doesn't let a foolish thing like convention stop her." He took a tiny sip of his wine and grimaced before he put the glass down on the table. "Like many things, that wine promises much but fails to deliver. I thought you were taken by that female at the table, the mysterious Lucia. The lady is gaining a considerable reputation. It could be that Welby is more interested in her than he is in loo."

Corin shook his head, though he wanted to wring Strang's neck. His reaction to Strang's mild teasing surprised him somewhat, though he failed to show any of that outwardly. "He wants the money. The lady only interests him the same way she interests every other red-blooded male in society."

Freddy Thwaite tossed back his glass of wine. "I fear you're right, Richard. That wine is not what I'm used to here. The lady is lovely, her mask doesn't disguise that. So could it be, Elston, that you are more than mildly interested in her?"

Corin knew that to deny it would only encourage the two men to tease him further. He already suspected they knew more than they were saying. "It's possible. As you say, she's a lovely piece. But it's Welby I want stopped."

"And the lady? Is she to be stopped too? An accomplice, maybe?"

"She's not involved." He didn't miss the glance that the cousins exchanged, and he realized he'd answered too sharply. With these two that was as good as a declaration of intent. He sighed. "Yes, I know her identity and no, I won't tell you."

A smile curled the edges of Strang's mouth, as if Corin had just confirmed a suspicion he had. But he nodded. "Then I won't enquire. I'll take your word."

Corin blessed him with an answering smile. "Thank you. As for Welby, if we do this we all end up with the money we started with. Apart from Welby and me. I'll win what he loses. Let him target his evil on me." He'd welcome it. How dare the villain try to seduce Alethea? The girl was almost a member of the family.

Strang gave a sharp nod. "Fair enough. If Rose can spare me for the evening, that is. We work as a team, but I don't want her in that house. It might give her ideas." He bared his teeth in an expression more feral than his usual suave exterior, but that only meant he trusted them to see some of the ruthlessness he could display. Welby would see it in due course, but that was one of the reasons Corin had chosen Strang and Thwaite to discuss the matter with. Clever men, and Strang's languid, fashionable exterior led others to underestimate him, as they were meant to. His wife's reserved manner also hid a very perspicacious woman, one Elston would have been interested in had he discovered her before Strang did, but after Strang had set eyes on his Rose, and her on him, nobody else was in the running.

Like his Sapphira.

After a few errands, Corin strolled back to his mother's house, tolerably satisfied with his day. Time to dress for dinner. He'd left an hour, since they were to go on to a ball afterward. Doing the pretty, he called it. He might even see his brother Orlando there, and his sister Perdita. Although Daniel, Orlando and Perdita were strictly his half-siblings, he never thought of them in that way. He'd even shared the schoolroom with Orlando and Perdita for a while, until Orlando had insisted on making his own way in the world.

As usual, his mother had provided several pretty debutantes for him to flirt with, and hopefully to court, but he feared that now she was chasing a lost cause. Not that he'd tell her quite yet, but he couldn't put it off much longer. His father would tell her if he didn't. He was disappointed not to see Alethea, as she'd proved quite useful in heading off the ambitions of the more determined young ladies, but he'd see her later.

At the Duchess of Queensberry's, Alethea proved to be a vision in pink. Her grandmother had pleaded illness, so she was here under the chaperonage of Lady Taversall, but as Alethea confided in him, "Boredom, not illness, is grandmère's complaint. She said she couldn't bear more vacuous conversation from people who didn't know Italian opera from the good English kind. I think someone upset her last week, and she's still sulking."

She shook the triple ruffle on her sleeve, covertly admiring the fine Brussels lace, and then looked up to catch Corin grinning at her. "What? My dear, for most of my life I had nothing but old clothes and cheap silk to wear. Is it a problem that I appreciate what I have now?"

"Not at all. Particularly since you were admiring the lace and not yourself."

She gurgled with laughter. "You know it's considered vulgar to openly laugh in public."

“Only by those who wear full maquillage,” Corin said. “And they’re merely jealous.”

She smiled this time. “And by those with rotting teeth and bad breath.”

That made him shudder, and only reminded him of what Sapphira had said about her odious fiancé. His sunny mood left him at the reminder. He would save her from that, at least. One way or another. So he offered Alethea his arm and took her on to the highly polished floor for the next dance.

At the end of what was supposed to be a stately country-dance, he took Alethea away to the sound of muffled laughter. Alethea was trying not to giggle. Whoever had polished the floor that day had done it in an overzealous frame of mind and the dance had ended in a shambles of sliding and skidding. The Duchess was furious, and the sight of her storming away to locate her steward sent the rest of the room into gales of laughter. Mr. Walpole, whose waspish comments peppered society’s doings, wasn’t present tonight, but he would doubtless hear of it before the end of the evening. They could look forward to another rendition of accounts, and Corin hoped it would be in a form that allowed for gossip. Too many of Mr. Walpole’s accounts were confided to private letters, though he usually ensured he repeated the note to as many people as was necessary to make his comments public. But the dance had lightened Corin’s spirits again, and ever optimistic, he led Alethea away to what he hoped was a well-provisioned supper table.

A very good one, certainly, he decided as he led her to a small table for two by the windows. A well-heaped plate and a good glass of wine was a definite advantage. So was the table, in a place where no one could overhear them, and he had a notion that Alethea was about to add to his bank of knowledge.

“So you have seen Lord Welby recently?”

She picked up an oyster patty and surveyed it critically, which meant she didn’t have to look at him. “Last Friday I let him drive me in the Park. He declared his love for me, said it was of long standing. I can’t say I noticed before now, but I responded with the appropriate maidenly shyness.”

Corin chuckled. He knew Alethea’s maidenly shyness only extended to the technical. Due to her appalling upbringing, she had seen and heard far more than a maiden of her age and birth. “You never cease to amaze me, Miss Cavendish.”

She tapped his knuckles with her fan. “He has given me some extravagant gifts of late, of such blatant vulgarity that you would not believe it. Grandmère advised me to send all but the most innocuous back, so I did. Yesterday he sent me a note. I haven’t shown anyone else yet.”

“Why? What does it say?”

She frowned and leaned back. “You sound awfully intense. Do you care that much about me?”

He took a deep breath, preparing to answer as honestly as he could, and she laughed. “I told you. Intense. Don’t worry, I’m only teasing you. I don’t intend to do anything foolish. Welby is an attractive man, and he’s done his best to charm me, but he lives close to my father. Anyone who comes under his influence is suspect, at least as far as I’m concerned. And when I received this note, that confirmed

everything for me. He said he was passionately in love with me, couldn't wait to marry me and wanted me to run away with him." Another laugh.

Corin's blood ran cold. If Alethea had been as gullible as the man imagined, Welby could have ruined her life. Alethea gave him a tight smile. "I haven't yet replied. I have the details, but I'm not going. Should I say I am?"

"When and where?" Corin glanced down at his filled plate, but he'd lost his appetite. Thinking of that man and the havoc he'd caused without thought to anyone but himself devastated his soul.

"He wanted me to go to Scotland with him. You know the inn in the City where the coaches leave for Glasgow? That one. I can't remember the name, but he wrote it down for me. Wasn't that kind of him?" She picked up another patty and contemplated it. "He said we would be married forthwith. He would protect me from my father, from everyone. His love was enough, he said. What really worried me was when he asked me not to tell anyone, least of all my grandmother. He suggested that the old lady might be too frail. So delicate, don't you think?"

Fury surged through him.

"Corin, in time he would have suggested a miracle medicine for Grandmère, if she proved difficult. Something with a touch of something extra in it. I read about that, do you remember the Mary Blandy case? I wouldn't put it past him. He's so persuasive, he has excellent address, such wonderful attention. But I've come to the conclusion that he's a snake."

Sapphira had a relatively sheltered upbringing, but she'd had the same misgivings about Welby right from the start. He knew better than to tell that to Alethea. Sapphira was his secret and she would stay that way until he decided what to do.

Who was he trying to fool? He already knew what he wanted to do. Alethea was watching him, her eyes narrowed, and he knew he'd prevaricated for too long. "I want to talk to you, Alethea. I think I need your help."

She smiled and flicked her fan open. "La, sir, you confuse me!"

He chuckled. "No I don't. Admit it."

"As if I would do anything so foolish as to admit anything to you. We ladies are supposed to keep the gentlemen guessing."

He snapped his fingers. "We're friends, Alethea, you and I. It doesn't matter what sex we are, does it?"

Relaxing from her pose of fashionable flirtation, Alethea lowered her fan and let her smile grow natural. "No, it doesn't. I've wondered why the spark doesn't exist between us, but it's something we'll have to ponder. It would have been so convenient."

“Yes, it would.” He suffered a moment’s regret that he felt nothing but friendship for the pretty girl with the lively manner and intelligent comments. If Sapphira had never bewitched him, he and Alethea would have made a good match of it. “We can’t stay here all evening.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Has your would-be lover arranged a time and place for your elopement?”

She giggled. “Yes. He fixed all the details.”

“Don’t give any more gifts back to him. Keep them boxed and I’ll return them for you. In good time.”

She shrugged. “That’s easy enough. As long as you do return them.”

“Yes, I promise. They’ll buy his ticket back to Leicestershire, no doubt. I’ll have him met, but not by you, and sent home with a flea in his ear. All done discreetly, just a little muscle to help him along. I’m currently involved with arranging his future.”

“Tell me.” Not a request, but a demand. He outlined what he’d planned with Strang and Thwaite, and she laughed and commented that it served the devil right.

She traced the sticks on her fan with one finger, as if she didn’t want to look at him and was creating a diversion. “And there’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Yes, there is. How do you fancy marrying someone else instead?”

She looked up and her amazed gaze clashed with his calculating one. “You aren’t serious! I never took you for a matchmaker, Corin.”

“Just this once. Listen.” And he leaned closer and murmured to her while society looked on and speculated.

Chapter Ten

The adventure she'd entered into with such hopes was fast turning into a nightmare. Sapphira felt no qualms as she stood outside Mother Brown's waiting to enter, no excitement. Only trepidation and terror. She'd hardly eaten anything all day, and as for the lessons Great-Aunt Josephina had taught her, the lady might as well have talked to a brick wall. She had to win the money tonight, she *had* to.

She'd already left a message for her redoubtable aunt. Her belongings resided at her aunt's house, ready for her to leave on her bride trip, one she sincerely hoped and prayed wouldn't take place.

But her heart lifted when she remembered that Corin would be here tonight, and he might want to take her home with him again. She regretted nothing of the previous week's activities, except losing her concentration enough to drop so much money. She wouldn't do that this week.

The door opened wide, letting a stream of heated light out to greet her, and she stepped forward. Mother Brown stood in the hall, this evening dressed in puce and scarlet, her jewels flashy diamonds and emeralds. Everything clashed as, Sapphira knew by now, it was meant to.

Instead of nodding to her and walking past, she approached the madam, who raised a plucked and penciled brow. "You wished to speak to me?" the woman asked her.

Like a parody of a monarch. Sapphira moved closer, breathing in the scent of camphor and oranges that wreathed the madam. "Tonight will be my last night. Feel free to replace me if it brings business to the house. I'm leaving."

To her surprise, the woman patted her arm in what felt like a sympathetic manner. "Good luck with whatever you've got planned. Single women in a man's world—it's never easy, dearie, but you have the courage to do it."

Sapphira drew back. "I thought of taking advantage of your offer, but I think I'll leave it to someone else to carry on."

The woman nodded, setting her jowls quivering. "Don't you worry, that little nugget of an idea is staying with me."

"Is there somewhere safe I can leave this?" She indicated her portmanteau.

"Leave it in the passage outside my office. Nobody goes through that door without my permission. You can pick it up later."

She nodded her thanks and walked to the back of the hall, where she'd been once before, and after depositing her bag she went upstairs.

Frankie moved to his place on an uncomfortable hard chair without having to be asked. The bizarre had become normal so quickly Sapphira could hardly credit it. Wanting to keep her plans secret until the last possible moment, she'd told him her bag held a few necessities for the night and although he'd protested, she'd ignored them and made him carry the bag to the house.

She went upstairs, found her customary seat vacant and took it. The whores here tonight were of the demure kind, bosoms quivering above low necklines threatening to break free, exchanging kisses but no more with their customers. The large central table was bare of everything except cards and money, and around it sat gentlemen. Definitely gentlemen, dressed for the evening in exquisite satins, brocades and velvets. Even if they'd been sitting naked they would have been marked out as gentlemen from their posture, their smoothly manicured hands, but most of all from their air of supreme self-confidence. But she knew that to be a mask, much as her more material one.

Surprisingly it would be a wrench to part with her mask. It was a nondescript black mask, much as some women wore in the street to protect their complexions or at a public masquerade. She could keep it and nobody would think much about it, but knowing what memories it held, the piece of stiffened silk had the power to break her heart.

She glanced around the table and nodded to the men seated there. Lord Welby, God rot him. The exquisite in the powdered wig and the astounding scarlet velvet coat she remembered as Lord Strang. The gentleman with him, Lord Thwaite, gave her a smile. And Corin sat, watching her with warmth in his eyes. She gave him a tentative smile and he nodded shortly. His mouth was straight, the creases between his nose and mouth deeper than usual. Something was bothering him and she didn't think it was her. He'd had her, and he could move on from that. She doubted she ever would. Much as she longed to think more of her connection with Corin, she didn't dare.

Welby threw down a card. "They're saying, Strang, that your wife has lost her hold on you."

His lordship glanced up from contemplating his cards and sent Welby a tight smile. "Hell will be a cold place before that happens. Her hold on me is equivalent to mine on her and entirely voluntary. So before you think of sending a toothsome whore my way, remember that it will be a waste of your money."

"Likewise," said Freddy, tossing his cards back into the pile. "I prefer to make my own choices, and while Mother Brown keeps one of the best houses in town, the girls here are a step down from La Outringer."

"Do you still have her in keeping?" Corin asked. He put down a card.

Freddy shot him a grin, a genuine one that Sapphira recognized as devastating to the fairer sex. He could bring them to him just using that smile, but the devilish looks didn't hurt, either. "No. Damnably expensive to have her exclusive attentions, except I discovered they weren't as exclusive as I'd hoped. She had to go." He sighed. "You can't get an honest whore these days." His attention went to Sapphira. "Beg pardon, ma'am."

“Not at all. I’m neither an honest whore nor a lady, so speak freely around me.”

Freddy exchanged a glance with his cousin. The difference in them fascinated Sapphira, one so angelically fair-skinned and blue-eyed, and she’d wager he hid blond hair under that wig, and the other dark and devilish. But in this case she wasn’t at all sure which was the angel and which the devil. Or maybe they were devils both. Angels she doubted.

“I think we’ll behave as if you’re a lady,” Strang suggested, making his play. “Humor us.”

She inclined her head and began to think better of him. While they finished the hand, she emptied her purse into the dish. Not so much tonight. She had her great-aunt’s stake, but she feared she might have to take it with her, after all. Aunt Josephina had told her it was her portion, to do with as she wished. She wouldn’t wager it. It was the minimum she needed for her escape and she’d have to demote the wealth of her mythical soldier husband. It would have to do. Unless she had the same luck tonight as she’d had on her first. Plus a little help. Her cardsharper skills were better than anyone knew. Long hours spent in her room with the same three books to read and a pack of cards someone had left behind and forgotten led her to play and practice.

She would do anything to win, but after three hands she realized she was out of her league. She had won back her stake every time, but no more, and Welby’s pile of guineas grew steadily but not spectacularly. His irritating air of complacency increased as the evening wore on and her demeanor became more strained.

Just after midnight the tide began to turn. By then Sapphira had worked out that everybody at the table was cheating. There wasn’t a straight dealer there. They blocked anyone else’s attempts to sit down with them. Something was afoot, a regular conspiracy. Welby’s deals were clumsy and somehow everyone managed at least one trick each, which meant they didn’t have to double the pool. Strang’s were clever, enough to encourage optimism, not enough to be obvious. And then Freddy dealt her a hand that was so outrageously good she wondered if she dared play it. Of course she did, and won seven hundred pounds, doubling her stake.

After that the stakes rose and rose and she realized this must be the final play. Welby didn’t seem to notice. His smiles grew oilier as the evening progressed, especially the ones he directed at her. “I understand Madam is considering hawking her virginity,” he announced. Strang’s eyelids flickered and he subjected Welby to a glacial stare but said nothing.

Corin, on the other hand, didn’t refrain. “The lady has the right to courteous treatment.” Relatively mild words spoken in a tone that didn’t brook a refusal.

“I heard it myself. And it seems I’ll have a little to spare after tonight. How much would your ladyship charge for the privilege of allowing a man into your sweet cunny?”

Corin’s low growl sounded almost animal. “Outside. Now. Collect your sword on the way.”

Not exactly the most elegant demand for a duel, but it would serve. And was the last thing she needed. Or wanted. Before she could protest, while she was still numbed by the crudity, Strang spoke in a tone that drenched the table in freezing cold. “Really, Welby, one would imagine you had never been in the presence of gentlemen before. For all we know this lady is a duchess, and while I grant you that not every duchess is a lady, they all deserve courtesy.”

Welby shot him a startled glance. The metaphorical cold water had done its work, it seemed. He put down his brandy glass, the click echoing over the suddenly silent room.

He shot Sapphira a glance. “Forgive me, madam. It appears I was wrongly informed.” She gave him a curt nod, lowering her head to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. “But if it happened that I was not, I would be interested.”

She let the last remark pass, and so did the gentlemen.

But it wasn’t Welby’s final barbed comment. Half an hour later she’d turned into a nervous wreck, every offended sense of outrage roused. From Catholics to Jacobites, from African slaves to bankers, everyone, according to Lord Welby, was poxed or cheats and thieves or all three. Corin’s growls increased, but he moderated the volume as play passed from dealer to dealer. They let Welby beat them on his deal, but nobody put much in the pool and everyone scrambled a trick out of the hands, so he was never a big winner. When Strang, Freddy or Corin dealt, he lost. When she dealt, she dealt fair, knowing when she’d met her match and knowing who the mark was.

She should go soon. She’d had her fill of this and she wouldn’t win any more than the seven hundred she’d managed already. When she stood and shook her skirts out with the intention of taking her leave from the table, Corin shot her a glance of warning, and then appeal. His appeal won and she retook her seat.

And then, on the last hand, they destroyed him. So confident with his hand, Welby pushed nearly all his guineas back into the pool and they had to match him or drop out. Sapphira dropped out and this seemed to be what the other three men were waiting for.

As a maid replaced the candles that had started to gutter, Sapphira set her mind to her next move and the change she’d determined for her life. Perhaps she’d meet someone. As a widow, she could decide her own future, and she could find contentment, if not love. She was very much afraid it was too late for that.

She watched as three masters of their craft took Welby for every penny he’d won and then went for his stake. The pattern grew obvious for anyone who knew what they were doing, but Welby did not. Although the table could hold more, nobody ventured to join them and Sapphira wondered if more people than these knew about this night. Not Mother Brown, she was sure. She’d ban all of them if she knew, or discovered it, and she was in a position to let the word drop in certain circles. Strang, Freddy and Corin were playing a dangerous game, and Sapphira realized there was more at stake than the three thousand guineas on the table.

Make that ten. She blinked, but with the banknotes and the piles of gold, it must be close to ten thousand guineas. The coins winked at her, sharing their secret and warning her not to say a word. Her own play had failed, but Welby was about to crash in spectacular fashion.

Conversation ceased and one or two people came over to see how the hand played out.

Badly for Welby. He watched incredulously as the gentlemen trumped his cards, and then he produced his last card, the ace of spades. Corin humiliated him by producing the two of hearts, but since hearts were trumps, he won the trick.

With a roar, Welby rose to his feet. Freddy grabbed the table to stop Welby from tipping it over as he clearly intended. Instead, Welby lunged across the polished surface and grabbed Corin by his blue velvet coat, hauling him up to face him nose to nose. "You cheated!"

Unlike Welby, Corin remained calm. "A serious accusation, sir."

Glasses tumbled, spilling their contents over the baize surface as the gentlemen sprang to their feet. Strang gripped Welby's shoulder and dragged him back, while Freddy did the same service for Corin, although he didn't need it as much. But when Corin began to say "Name your—" Freddy interrupted him.

"Don't even think it."

He was in no danger, Sapphira was sure. Those two gentlemen would stop him from getting into a duel. So she quietly got to her feet, scooped up her winnings and stepped back.

Time to go.

Corin regained his equilibrium quickly and the brawl ceased almost as soon as it had started. The room filled with large, plainly dressed, battle-scarred men, the flashmen who took care of the rough work, as Madam was wont to put it. Only four came in, but they filled the available space and then some. They stood back after a cool assessment of the situation—Welby, securely held by Richard Strang, and himself, standing back with Freddy, only mildly irritated, at least on the surface.

Underneath he seethed. He wanted to kill the bastard for what he'd tried to do to Alethea, and his insinuations to Sapphira all evening. He'd not put her off her game, but he had upset her. He shook off Freddy's restraining arm with a brief, "I don't need that. I might hate the bastard, but I'm not completely stupid."

"I know, old man. But rather him than you."

Compounding a rigged card game with a duel would have put him out of society for a long time, perhaps forever. His parents would have been deeply grieved. So were mistakes that lasted a lifetime sometimes made—in a moment's impetuous action. He recognized this moment as a pivotal one in a life of decisions yet to come. Each decision led to a fork in the road, and this time he'd chosen the right turning.

Only just.

Welby still struggled; only the white knuckles on Strang's hand showed how firm a grip he had on the man. The house bullies stayed back, but kept their bodies between Welby and the door. Corin wouldn't have suspected that an elegant gentleman like Strang would have such strength, but he had, and he remained calm throughout, holding the man without inflicting unnecessary damage. Now he spoke and his voice still held the ice-cold water in its tones. "Your winnings should be enough to buy you a ticket back to your home, Welby. I would take it—tonight. Your behavior in this house and elsewhere has been noticed by some who would not take your transgressions as lightly as we have done."

Corin bared his teeth. "Do not attempt to contact any of my family, or anyone close to me." He already had someone waiting outside, ready to escort Welby to the coach that would take him home.

"You have Alethea under guard?" Welby still had some fight in him. "Is she allowed to make her own decisions?"

"It is her decision and she decided that she doesn't want you." Corin felt sick. While glad he'd put an end to Welby's pretensions, he wanted out of here. He wanted Sapphira. He scooped up the money, but hesitated when he reached the winnings. They'd put all of Welby's money his way. Then he gathered that up too, despite the faint moan he heard from Welby's direction, and put it in his other pocket. "I'm sure I can find a worthy cause." He wouldn't give the money to anyone else, wouldn't keep it longer than necessary. It even felt dirty. He wondered how cheats coped with their perfidy. Maybe they had no conscience at all, but he had one and he wouldn't lower his standards.

If Sapphira needed money, he'd give it to her, but it wouldn't come from Welby. But she wouldn't need it. He would see to that.

He glanced up once he'd weighed down his pockets. His valet would probably resign when he saw how badly the pockets of the evening coat had sagged out of shape, but there was still a lot of coin left on the table. A bully approached with a leather bag and at Corin's nod, began to load the extra money into it.

Freddy put his hand on Corin's shoulder. "Go. We'll handle the rest."

Welby sighed, a heavy, theatrical sound. "Very well. I'll leave." Whether that was the result of the words Strang had been murmuring in his ear or his own weariness, Corin couldn't tell, but he felt a profound relief that the problem was over. He had enough without Welby adding to it.

He nodded, but didn't reply. There was no need. He left the silent room and walked past the dining room. The double doors were closed, but sounds of revelry penetrated through it. At least someone was having a good time. Now he had to find Sapphira and take her home. He had some explaining to do.

Downstairs, Frankie looked up from where he still sat on the hard chair. He got to his feet.

"I will escort your mistress tonight, Frankie. With her consent."

"Sir. I was just waiting for you both to come down. I'm ready when you are."

Frowning, he turned to one of the house bullies. "Could you find Miss Lucia for us, please?"

The man nodded to the back of the hall. "She went down the backstairs. It should bring 'er out near Madam's office."

They walked through, accompanied by the bully. Behind the small door lay an office, neat and precise. But no Sapphira.

Corin didn't pause. Collecting the house staff like a sheepdog rounding his flock, he stormed through the offices at the back of the house, until he came hard up against the heavily perfumed, glittering personage of the owner.

"I've banned cullies for less," she said, her low voice needing no volume to deliver its full, menacing promise. "You tell me what you're up to, an' I might just see my way to overlookin' this." Corin noted the lack of polished address, the over-perfect way she usually spoke with her customers.

She'd only overlook his conduct because he'd brought custom to the gaming room. "I'm looking for Lucia. She left the room during the argument. I assumed she'd come down here."

"And you thought I'd hidden 'er away?"

Now she said it, yes he did. He said nothing, but met her glare for glare. "Where is she?"

The madam regained her poise. She flicked the heavy ruffles at her elbows and he moved back. "How should I know? She came down the backstairs, collected her portmanteau and left."

Icy fingers slid down his spine. "Portmanteau? What portmanteau?"

"She brought it with her tonight and asked me to stow it away while she played upstairs." Mother Brown's eye closed in a sly wink. "I'd have thought you knew all about that."

Corin turned his head to glare at Frankie. "And you didn't think it was worth mentioning to me?"

The big man shrugged. "I thought you knew about it."

"One of the maids saw her leaving," Mrs. Brown said.

"Why didn't she stop her?" Corin demanded. Someone should have told him, someone should have stopped her. Where had she gone?

"None of our business. She's a grown woman, she does as she pleases."

Corin thought Mother Brown enjoyed delivering that particular homily. Right now he didn't give a damn if she got pleasure from it or not. All he wanted was Sapphira, safe and in his arms. He would do anything for that. "At this time of night? It's past one in the morning, how could you let her leave in a district like this?"

Mother Brown merely folded her arms and watched him. Her action pushed her bosom up to terrifying proportions. She could suffocate a man with those things.

"Do you have any idea where she went?"

The harridan shrugged. In this small hallway, lit by stinking oil lamps and painted a dull brown, she seemed like a perverted bird of paradise, stuck in the wrong place. But she belonged here just as much as

she belonged in the lavishly decorated extravagant house beyond. “She probably wants to make her own life. Out of the reach of any man.”

That was it. Corin spun around and pushed at Frankie’s huge form. “Get out of here! She’s gone from this house.”

The house was perking up. Gentlemen were arriving from balls and other entertainments, bent on entertainments of their own. A few greeted him and he forced polite smiles and bows.

Frankie stumbled out the front door, nearly tumbling down the steps, but regained his footing and waited for Corin in the street.

This was one of Covent Gardens’ busier nights. Men and women milled around the square and the piazza, where, in a few hours, carts would arrive from the market gardens surrounding the capital to unload their fresh produce. That was where Sapphira belonged, not here, in the dangerous demimonde where she was so unsuited. He loved her courage, adored her independence, but wanted to be the man she chose to take care of her, to entrust herself to. More than his own life, he feared for hers now, in this teeming mass of humanity. Alone, anyone could take her, use her. Kill her.

No. That would not happen and he wouldn’t think of it. She knew London well, she might avoid the worst of the city, although to the north lay one of the worst areas, a place respectable beings rarely entered. She wouldn’t venture into Seven Dials.

Now he turned to Frankie. “Where do you think she’s gone? You know her plans?”

“No, sir. I knew she wanted some money of her own before she got married. I knew my lady couldn’t give it to her.” His face twisted, but he remained silent.

“Come on, man, out with it!”

“I know the man her father wants her to marry is a sniveling coward.”

“She won’t be marrying Barber,” Corin said, relieved to find an ally. He’d suspected that Frankie might have been working with her, against him, distracting him so he wouldn’t find her. “She could be in danger.”

Frankie’s heavy brows beetled over his deep-set eyes. “I know that. We need to find ’er.” He’d been around the gentry long enough to approximate a facsimile of polite speech, but he occasionally lapsed into the vernacular. Corin liked that, wished the man trusted him enough to behave more normally around him. Corin also liked that Frankie knew not to “my lord” him to death. Only the socially pretentious or the inept did that.

Frankie met his eyes with a direct gaze of his own. “She took her portmanteau an’ she ’ad all the money, including the stake my lady gave her. Likely she’ll want to pay that back. I know her, and she won’t want to keep it, although my lady said to let her keep it.” He scratched his head, shoving his wig aside to reach underneath. Sparse brown hair poked out at the edges when he readjusted his headgear and stuck his hat on top of the whole. “There was a change in plan. She was to stay at her ladyship’s until

Saturday, when she'd leave for her wedding. She's likely decided to try to make a clean getaway. Her ladyship wouldn't preach to her father, not unless she thought she couldn't do anything else. And if she does that, and her father finds her, he'll lock her up until Saturday. Then we'll never get to 'er."

Corin's mouth settled into a grim line. He wouldn't allow that. What his father had told him about the Barber family earlier that day made him determined that Sapphira could never marry into them. Given a little more time he would have done it properly, made it right, but Vardon hadn't given them a chance by setting the wedding so early.

First they had to find her. He recalled the plans she'd confided to him while they lay in bed last Thursday. It seemed so long ago now and at the remembrance his cock came to attention and his libido roared into life. Never had a woman affected him so completely. He wanted it again, now, he wanted more, he wanted to drive them both mindless with desire.

"Where do the coaches leave for Coventry?"

Frankie paused, his stare turning speculative. "She could get a ticket right enough and be away by five. Some coaches leave at three."

"Once we discover which one she's on, I'll have my phaeton put to and go after her. She won't get far, but we have to discover which one. Hopefully we'll get there before she leaves."

"This way, sir. Are you fit for walkin'? This time of night it'll be quicker."

"As far as I have to," Corin said grimly. Frankie was right. By the time he'd roused the stables, got horses put to his carriage, she could be away. "Do you think we should separate?"

Frankie thought for a moment. "It might be a good idea. The inns are spread about a bit."

"Let's go."

Chapter Eleven

There was little chance of getting any sleep, even though she'd picked a corner by the fire at the Belle Sauvage. Her ticket purchased, all Sapphira had to do was wait until the coach was ready to leave. She had an inside seat, near the window, so although it might be draughty, at least she'd have a corner to prop her weary body against. The journey to Bristol would take two days, so it was as well she had enough cash for an overnight stay. Then she'd have to find a respectable hotel before she went house-hunting. All so complicated. Her original plan had been to buy the house and the ticket well before she left, but that had proved impossible.

She'd cope. She'd have to. One thousand, seven hundred pounds, most of it stitched into her clothing, would have to do.

"Miss?"

She looked up as the innkeeper's wife stood before her, holding a bowl of something steaming and fragrant. "The coachman says if you're all here, he'll set off a bit early. No point waiting. But there're still two passengers not here yet. So you might like this before you go. You won't get more than meals on the run. This'll be sixpence."

She paid up and received the bowl of stew together with a hunk of bread and a dish of tea. Enough to sustain the stoutest heart. Balancing the stew on her knee, she began to eat. She was sure the food was excellent, especially when she saw the way the others in the room were shoveling it up. She tasted nothing, could see nothing, hear nothing except that room in Mother Brown's gaming house, and the destruction of her last hopes. And her last sight of the man she loved.

Unfortunate that they had to choose tonight to give Welby his lesson. All she prayed now was that he wasn't leaving on the same coach she'd chosen. If he was going back to Leicestershire, he wouldn't be a fellow traveler.

Rather than that, she'd change her seat and go somewhere else. After all, what did it matter where she went?

A commotion near the door drew her attention and she glanced up. Someone entered the room, a man and a woman, respectably dressed but no one she knew. They could be the last passengers. It had rained a couple of hours ago, the weather turning to spring showers, so the roads might be slippery. She should be safer inside the coach, but right now she just didn't care. She was forcing herself to carry on, to behave as if

she'd never met Corin, as if she was merely escaping a marriage she couldn't abide. Nothing else. If she kept telling herself that, one day she'd believe it.

Maybe. She'd pray for that day. But she couldn't go to him, couldn't run to someone else and expect him to shoulder her burden. Perhaps one day in the future she'd come back, perhaps she'd meet him again, but she knew better than to assume he wouldn't be married. He had his duty, and there were many young women only too eager to help him assume that part of his obligations.

She checked her watch, a plain but quality instrument, a hunter with a chased edge to the cover. It had been a gift from her father on her eighteenth birthday. She sprang the catch that opened it, then closed it and opened it again. The watch had such a sweet action, she often did that just for the pleasure of operating it. If it had been engraved, she would have had to leave it behind, but it was plain enough so she took the risk of keeping it.

Three o'clock. The coach was due to leave at five, but if everyone on the manifest had arrived, they could well be away earlier. Leaving her life in the dust. Or the rain, because she glanced outside and saw it coming down once more.

She couldn't eat any more. She laid the bowl on the table by her side and finished the tea, a good strong brew. Only now did the stress of the evening begin to hit her in a great wave of weariness. She leaned her head back against the hard wall behind her and closed her eyes.

"Sapphira?"

At first she thought the sound was in her mind, the result of wishful thinking. Half awake, half dreaming, she could allow herself a moment's indulgence. He spoke her name, just like when she'd drifted into sleep in his arms.

"Sapphira?"

A little louder now, and someone touched her knee. Startled, she jerked back and her eyes sprang open. She blinked, then blinked again, clearing her vision.

He was still there. Kneeling in front of her, the skirts of his blue coat trailing on the straw-strewn, none-too-clean floor, his eyes shaded with anxiety, darkened with sleeplessness.

"No!" Her voice came a little softer than she'd wanted. She slid along the bench on which she sat, trying to get away, but he placed his hands on the worn wood on either side of her, caging her. "When I'm safe I'll send word, I promise." She'd intended to do that, send a message to him and ensure he wouldn't discover where it came from.

"Not good enough," he said. "Come and talk. I've hired a room so we can be private."

If she went to a private room with him, it would be doubly hard. "No."

He glanced around at the decidedly fuller room. Every occupant of it was staring at her except one gentleman wrapped up in a greatcoat and muffler, snoring gently in the opposite corner to the one where

she sat. "If you don't come with me, I'll claim you're my errant wife, running away to her lover and I've come to get you back."

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me."

Looking at his firm mouth, the determined line of his chin, she had no doubt that he would do that. And dressed as he was, and dressed as she was, she knew who they'd believe.

While she couldn't give in gracefully, at least she could get to her feet and walk out of that room with her head held high. She followed him up the broad, worn staircase outside the main room up to a small chamber. The boards creaked under her feet, reminding her of her home. This place had the same smell, a mixture of baking meat, furniture polish and camphor.

He closed the door behind them, the old-fashioned latch rattling in its hook, and reached for her. She didn't struggle. What would be the point when that was exactly where she wanted to be?

"I thought I'd miss you." He gave a weary laugh. "Then I'd have to have the horses put to and drive after you. It might have taken me weeks to find you. Never scare me like that again."

"Corin, you have to let me go. You don't owe me anything. I have to do this."

"No, no you don't. I won't let you. Sapphira, I can't let you out of my life, not when I've just found you. Don't ask me to."

She listened with a dull ear. He wanted everything, everything he couldn't have. "I can't, Corin."

He gazed at her, touched his lips to her temple, her nose and then her mouth, each touch feather-soft but filled with yearning; the same yearning she felt right down to her soul. "Please, Sapphira, let me make love to you. Just one more time, let me love you."

With a moan, she gave in. She might still catch her coach. She had to. With that in mind she fumbled for her watch and twisted the knurled knob at the top. After an hour the alarm would chime. They had until then. "Yes. I want that, Corin." One more time.

Her setting the watch hadn't escaped him, but although he frowned, he said nothing about it. Instead, he took her hand and led her to the bed, a matter of two steps, then turned, released her hand, lowered his arms and let his coat drop. He caught it and tossed it in the direction of the one chair in the room where it landed with a heavy thump and a jingle. He'd brought his winnings with him, then. She still wouldn't take them if he offered.

She could see his skin, its color glowing through the full sleeves of his fine worn shirt. Her mouth watered when she remembered its taste.

He cupped her face, his eyes grave, showing none of the humor she'd come to associate with him. She felt his breath on her skin, watched his lips coming closer. Then they touched hers and as had happened before, the world ceased to exist. She uncurled her hand and heard a soft thump as her watch hit the floor, cushioned by her skirts.

With her hand now unencumbered, she lifted it to touch him, to feel his heat, but it wasn't enough. And they didn't have time. Aware of her watch ticking away the minutes, she reached for his waistcoat and began to undo the buttons, her hands fumbling on the embroidered silk.

He pulled away after a brief but intense kiss and did the same service for her. Buttons and hooks were undone or torn off as fast as their fingers could perform the office. When her skirt hit the floor with a decided thump, he took the time to stare at it. She brought his attention back to her. "My money. I sewed most of it in there."

He laughed. "I see." He made no other comment, but turned back to her and stared at her before he said one word. "Off."

He dragged his shirt over his head as she unhooked her stays and bent to undo her garters. She wanted total nakedness. So, it seemed, did he. He grasped her shift and pulled it up while she was still straightening, then, pausing only to drag her last remaining garment over her head, tugged her into his arms.

The touch of her skin against his came as partial relief from the tension building up in her since she first set eyes on him that evening. She'd wanted him close to her, not intent on someone else. Now she had it, and he was all hers.

She raised her head for his kiss and it scorched a path through her body, opening her to him. Spurts of delight chased the fire when he touched her lips with his tongue, then her mouth, before taking it with a thoroughness that made her melt. He followed it with a succession of kisses, each one bringing her a little more under his spell until he stopped and lifted her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a feather.

He drew back the covers and laid her against the pillows, straightening up for a moment to gaze at her. Totally naked, she felt no shame. Not before this man. She wanted only to bring him pleasure and to give herself memories.

When she opened her legs a little, he smiled and took his time watching her. "Do you remember what I said I'd do to you another time?"

"Yes." Though some of the things she'd imagined were exaggerations or lovers' talk.

"This is another time." He climbed on to the bed next to her and reached for her. When she would have rolled over to face him, he kept her lying flat with gentle pressure from his left hand on her hip. "No. Stay like that. You look so lovely. Like Venus or a nymph fresh from the sea."

The compliment made her blush, but she liked it. So did he. "Look at that," he said softly, tracing his finger down from her chin, down her throat to her breasts. "You blush all over. How beautiful you are, sweetheart."

"No. But I'm glad you like me."

"Oh, more than that. Can't you see?"

She could, but she hadn't mentioned it. His cock stood straight and hard, reddened with the lust he felt for her, taut and glistening. As she watched, a drop of clear liquid oozed from the small opening at the tip. It fascinated her. She licked her lips and moved forward, intent on tasting.

Laughing, he put his hands on her shoulders and urged her back down. "Me first," he murmured. "Let me love you. I need to do it. I was so afraid when you disappeared..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for you to worry. You must know I know London very well. I can avoid problem areas and even make myself invisible if I need to."

His concern touched her. Used to walking through the City on her own at most times of the day and night, she hadn't considered that he might worry. Foolish of her really. She should have left a note. Even if tears had blinded her as she'd exited Mother Brown's house for the last time.

Now she did as he bid her. He ran his hands down her sides from her breasts to her knees, smoothing her curves, making her feel cherished, sending her nerves into a riot of sensation. He slid up her body again and paused at her breasts before he leaned over her and took one nipple into his mouth. He curled his tongue around it, tickled the tip until she whimpered for him to suck, but instead he moved on to the other breast and gave it the same treatment. She lay on that bed and clutched the sheets, coarser than the ones they had made love on before, but clean. He touched his lips to her stomach, her navel, and kissed down the imaginary line between that and her privates. Without any urging, she opened her legs for him, lifting her knees a little to allow him access, her body begging him to touch her there.

Instead, he leaned up and looked. When she began to close her legs, he smiled and shook his head. Propped up by the pillows, she watched him, the way his expression softened when he looked at her. She loved his spectacular body, so unselfconsciously displayed. He had a sprinkling of dark hair on his chest, and a line that led from his navel down. His hair, dark and cropped short under the fashionable wig he sometimes wore, added to the vision of pure masculinity before her. She loved his broad shoulders, the way his large body made her feel small and protected. An illusion, she knew, since she needed more than strength to protect her, but for now she let herself slide into the dream. "Corin?"

"Yes, sweetheart?" His voice was low and quiet, and sent delicious shivers right through her.

"Touch me. Please."

He reached out one finger, and then paused, hovering over her. "Any particular place?"

"My—my clitoris. I liked it when you did that." She'd never said that word out loud before.

He smiled, showed his approval. "I liked it too." He traced the very outside, around her outer lips, returning to the front, a hairsbreadth from her clitoris. "Did you know that it stands erect when you're aroused, like my cock?"

She had no idea, but it fascinated her. She sat up a little and looked, and he moved his finger out of the way so she could see. The pink tip sat proud of her pubic hair, just as he'd said, erect and glistening

with her juices. She wanted him to touch it again, grind his body over her as he had before, make those exciting thrills course through her body.

“There are many names for this part of a woman’s body,” he said, “some poetic, some earthy, some ridiculous. Comparing it to a shell, for example, because of the color. The truth is, nothing compares to it. Nothing. It is what it is, the seat of a woman’s desire, beautiful on its own terms.”

Without warning, he swooped down and touched his tongue to her clitoris. She nearly came off the bed with the strong reaction her body had, but he held her safe, held her down so he could feast.

And feast he did.

His long, lavish kisses made her head swim, but her body knew what to do, as if it had been born with the knowledge. She pressed against his mouth, drawing back when she realized how wanton that must be, only to have him push his hands underneath her bottom and raise her like an offering to his hungry mouth.

He tongued, licked and tasted every bit of that most intimate part of her body until she was fighting the need to squirm, because that would have taken her out of his reach. She gasped his name, then reached out and found firm flesh. His shoulders. She hung on and gave herself up to him.

When he sucked her clitoris, gently at first, she thought she wouldn’t be able to bear it, but unthought, images came to her mind. Naughty images, of him taking her like this in front of a baying audience.

Where that image came from she had no idea. Unless it was the caricature she’d seen in a shop window last week of a duchess bowing to the King, fully dressed at front, half bare behind and open to the gawping courtiers standing behind her, a comment on the lady’s known allegiance to the Jacobite cause. Now all Sapphira could think of was the naked part, and the exposure.

The shameful thought made her senses skyrocket and she cried out, her body jackknifing in convulsions she couldn’t control, but so wonderful she never wanted them to stop.

He pressed his forehead to her stomach and she could hear his heavy breathing, but in a moment he’d lifted himself and smiled down at her. “You look wonderful. Ready?” His voice rumbled through her. She nodded wordlessly.

He sank on to her welcoming body and she arched up to meet him. His cock met her crease, sliding between, sinking down and deeper. He met slight resistance when he entered her body, despite the wetness she’d created and he’d helped with, but a couple of pushes and her body accepted him. He didn’t stop until his sac rested against her bottom.

They stared at each other, eyes open all the time, and she fancied she saw all the way to his soul. She opened her heart and let him see all she felt, the things she wasn’t sure of yet, and what she knew.

He withdrew and thrust, touching a place deep inside her. He invaded her and she welcomed it, then he smiled, such a sweet, open smile she knew not many people had seen it. “How do you feel?”

“Fine. Wonderful.” She wiggled under him, heard his gasp and knew she could drive him to the edge of madness, as he had just done to her. “I don’t know how I’ll live without this.” What made her say that

she wasn't sure, unless it was that she felt that only the truth would be right now. Lies would be like swearing in church, deeply wrong.

"You won't." Before she could ask him what he meant, he withdrew again and thrust several times in quick succession, and he took her with him again, to the joy that was unique to them.

She hooked her legs around his waist before he asked her to, and clutched his shoulders, but she never closed her eyes. The sound of their lovemaking made music in her head, the slap of flesh against flesh, the wet sounds of her body, her gasps, his groans all made an unforgettable symphony. She wanted everything, tried to commit it to memory so she wouldn't forget a moment of it. His pupils widened to encompass much of the hazel iris, his mouth half opened, and he stared at her, watched her as avidly as she watched him. She loved the way his muscles flexed and bunched as he thrust, the ones in his upper arms tightened when he lifted and took his weight on his hands. The angle this gave him made her gasp and moan when he plunged into her again, cry out, "Don't stop, oh don't stop!" an exclamation that made him give a breathless, gasping laugh of triumph.

"Never. I swear, never." He quickened his thrusts, slowed to a deliberate in and out then sped up again. The different rhythms tripped her over the edge, made her cry his name over and over as her body pulsed around his, her muscles squeezing and releasing him.

"Sweet Sapphira, have mercy!" He pitched forward, catching his weight on his elbows, and she felt him gush hotly inside her once before he dragged his cock out of her and pressed it between them. Jets of his essence spurted between them.

They lay together, panting, regaining breath and a sense of time and place.

His smile took her breath away. "Wait here."

As if she were about to leap out of bed and race off, she thought. He left the bed and returned in a few seconds with his handkerchief, purloined from his coat pocket, with which he cleaned them both. The fine material felt soft, caressed her skin, but not as much as he did after he'd done and drew her into his arms.

Urgency swept over her. "What's the time? I should be getting up. I'll miss the coach."

"I want to make that a certainty." He turned her face to his, preventing her from leaning over to find her pocket watch, and he gave her a long, luscious kiss. "You set your watch to tell you. Until then you're mine. And if I can persuade you to listen to me, longer."

"I'll listen." She already knew what he'd say, that he wanted her to stay. "If I stay here, I have to marry George Barber."

"No!" He took her face in his hands and tilted her chin so she had to look at him. The light in this room was dim, but she could see his eyes and the anguish in them. She couldn't bear that she brought that to him. "You won't have to marry him, I swear it."

Tears misted her eyes. "You can't stop it."

“Yes I can. Listen, sweetheart.” His fingers stroked her cheeks, wiping away her tears. He paused to kiss them away before he continued. “Geoffrey Barber, your would-be father-in-law, is a cheat and a thief. My father has discovered so much about him that he’s about to bring his empire down on his head. He needs one more piece of information for the proof he needs. One more.”

She couldn’t believe it. “But Mr. Barber is an upstanding citizen, one of the leaders of the Guild of Mercers. How can he be a cheat?”

“He wouldn’t be the first charlatan in that office.” Corin eased his hold until he held her face gently in his palms, his touch warm and soothing. Beneath the covers his legs tangled with hers. “He invested badly and now he’s suffering for it. He needs your father more than your father needs him.”

“Then-then I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t you let me go? If that’s the case, why don’t you go to my father and tell him?” It sounded too good to be true.

He kissed her again. “Because he would reject your marriage to Barber and refuse to sign the marriage contract. And that’s what we need, a copy of the contract.”

She frowned. “Why? Why can’t you ask my father for a copy?”

He smoothed the frown away with a gentle kiss, his lips lingering on her skin. “Because he doesn’t have one. Barber promised to deliver one on Saturday, the morning of your wedding. My father went to visit your father in a business capacity. They both have merchant ships, so he declared an interest in sharing a cargo. Your father said he would have more ships at his disposal after Saturday. You are to sign the contract then, aren’t you?”

She nodded.

“I swear, you won’t marry him.” Was that what he wanted?

“You’d sabotage my escape in order to get hold of a piece of paper?” She jerked back, intending to get out of bed and dress. She didn’t want to listen to any more.

But he reached out and pulled her back, wouldn’t let her go when she balled her fists and hit his chest. “Oof! No, please listen. That’s the last thing I want to do. Sapphira, come away with me. Let me take care of you.”

Totally astounded, she stopped, her fists resting on his chest. His smile broke her heart. “Let me do this. Listen to the plan I’ve drawn up with my father and a friend, and then you can choose.”

“We don’t know each other.”

“You blindsided me, sweetheart.” He touched his lips to hers in a sweet kiss. “But I won’t make you do something you’d detest. The choice must be yours, to trust me or to take that coach at five. Let me explain.”

Chapter Twelve

It seemed a long time since Sapphira had last given her father the polite curtsy of a good morning. He glanced up and then let his gaze linger on her. "Very good, daughter. You are reconciled to your marriage now?"

"Perfectly, Father. Does the gown suit?" She wore a brand-new blue gown that had arrived just that morning from a new dressmaker. The front opened over a petticoat of a darker blue. Attractive, but practical, as her father had required. Her snow-white fichu covered her bosom almost to the neck, and she had but a single ruffle of lace at her elbows, but it was good lace. She'd tied on a prettier cap than usual to cover her neatly coiffed hair, fastened in a tidy knot on the back of her head with no curls or ringlets to spoil the neat effect. But powdered, in the name of respectability and formality.

This wedding day was all she'd ever dreamed of, and if her groom was handsome, considerate or even absent for most of the year, she could have lived with it. But her husband-to-be was none of these things so she was about to do something that would result in her complete ruin.

Even her previous plan hadn't been this foolish, and for what must be at least the twentieth time since she had agreed to it, she wondered why. Only for the same answer to come to her. Because Corin needed her help and because she couldn't bear to leave him.

But not just that. Barber threatened to ruin her father's business and a number of others with his foolish actions. He'd speculated with money he didn't have, and speculated on that, too, hoping to rob Peter to pay Paul before the creditors came after him. His desperation had led him to claim a ship, one that Lord Taversall owned, and if they could discover proof of further speculation, especially with that ship, they had him. The marriage contract contained such a deal. It was to be the basis of the partnership that her father agreed with Barber.

She wondered if his son knew this. Confronting her father without absolute proof would be foolish. He wouldn't believe her over his man of law and Barber's reputation in the City, especially since he knew how she felt about George Barber.

This was her only chance, but if the careful plotting went awry, she'd have to sign that contract and that made her as good as married. Afterward, the ceremony was more or less a formality. No escape, not for her, whether Barber was discovered in his perfidy or not.

So now she bobbed a curtsy and left the room to her father's smiles.

As she passed her great-aunt's room, she heard the lady's quavering voice asking her if she could spare a moment. Only a moment, but she knew what Aunt Josephina wanted.

Her great-aunt was seated in a comfortable chair before the fire and she smiled as Sapphira came in. "I just wanted to give you a little present."

"You've already given me so much, Aunt. I don't need any more."

"You need something pretty to wear on your wedding day."

She glanced at the door, but she hadn't heard anyone. Just in case, she lowered her voice. "There won't be a wedding today, Aunt Josephina, you know that."

Her great-aunt waved a finger from side to side to admonish her, a smile on her thin lips. "Now, you don't know that, dear."

"I'm going to cross the divide, Aunt Josephina, live in sin." She lowered her voice even more for the last one. Corin had asked her to go away with him and she'd said yes.

"Tut, child, you won't do that." Lady Carr reached for a box at her side. "My husband gave me these on my wedding day. Promise me you'll wear them for me. If not on your wedding day, then another day. Enjoy them."

She opened the case to reveal a string of perfectly matched pearls. Sapphira was no jeweler, but she knew quality when she saw it and for all their simplicity the pearls screamed it. She touched one of the glowing spheres. "Are you sure, ma'am?"

"Oh yes. I kept them for you. Simon knows it isn't part of his inheritance." Simon, her nephew, was presently away in Canada pursuing the family interests. Sapphira had always liked Simon. She was glad he wasn't here today to see what he would undoubtedly regard as her disgrace.

She still wasn't sure, but she consoled herself with the thought that she would still be able to go through with her plan if she needed to. Her aunt wouldn't take her stake back, which meant she still had the one thousand, seven hundred pounds. That would buy a house and an annuity. But first she'd have a little more time with Corin. After Thursday night she couldn't walk away from him.

She crossed the room, her skirts sweeping the polished floor. Her aunt had a fine Oriental carpet under her feet, but the rest of the room was floored in good English oak. Unusual for Sapphira to wear a floor-length skirt during the day, though. Usually she wore shorter ones that cleared the floor. A London resident couldn't afford to drag her skirts in the mud. After today she would take the skirt up. No she wouldn't. After today her world would change.

The thrill of having a lover to touch her, stroke her, love her would replace the daily routine. She'd have to make a new routine, and at first it would probably include a lot of time in bed.

Her heart rose to her throat, choking her as she closed her aunt's door carefully behind her and reached into her pocket for her watch. The pocket was large enough for the pearl box, and she put it away now. She wouldn't wear it today. Flicking open the watch case, she saw it was barely half past eight. Her

marriage was set for ten. The carriage was due at a quarter to ten to take her and her father the short distance to the church. Before that, at nine, Barber was bringing the contract. Her greatest fear was that he'd arrive early and insist on her signing.

The front doorbell clanged for attention and Frankie strode across the neat black and white tiling to the front door. Sapphira could hardly breathe when she saw Barber and his son, both dressed in sober finery. She stepped back so they wouldn't see her peering over the balcony, glad her skirts were wool and linen, not rustling silk. Not that she didn't have silk skirts, just that she remembered the noise they made and didn't wear them.

The men crossed to the office where her father waited for them. Now they'd go through the contract. Her father had already detailed it with his man of business, so all he would do was make sure this was the same as the one he agreed on. However much he trusted someone, he would never fail to do that. Which gave her a few moments' grace.

When she entered her bedroom she closed the door and sagged against it in relief. A figure stood there, presumably having come up the backstairs and through the jib door. A figure in a gown exactly the same as the one she wore. "Alethea Cavendish, I presume?"

The pretty woman dimpled and stepped forward, holding out her hand. "Pleased to meet you. Isn't this fun?"

"Not quite the name I'd give it," Sapphira said.

Alethea took in Sapphira's appearance in one comprehensive glance and nodded with satisfaction. She stepped in front of the modest mirror set above the dressing-table. "Come and stand next to me."

Sapphira did. Alethea had a fairy figure, not at all like Sapphira's own fuller one, but she could remedy that. She opened a drawer and grabbed a spare fichu, handing it to the girl, and went to find a pair of pattens. The extra height would make Alethea an inch or two taller, nearer Sapphira's height.

Alethea ripped off her own fichu and stuffed the other one down the front of her gown, using it to plump up her breasts, then she arranged the first one over the top. "There."

"We won't fool my father."

"I can try. You say the study is dark?"

"Yes, but you'll have to speak."

"Not necessarily. I have a plan. It should give you a little more time."

Alethea didn't show any sign of feeling the same agony that Sapphira did. But she might be hiding apprehension well.

"What plan?"

"I'm going to say that I've cast up my accounts and I'll go downstairs with a handkerchief over my mouth. That will cover the part of me that isn't covered by the veil. Clever idea about the veil, by the way."

"That was my Aunt Josephina."

Alethea dimpled. "What a wonderful woman. Thanks for the pattens, I'll put them on in a minute." She regarded Sapphira once more. "My lace is too fine. We don't have time to change it, so I'll just hope that nobody notices. You'd better be going."

Before Sapphira could move, she received a hug from the other woman. "Good luck. Corin is a wonderful man. He'll take care of you."

Mildly surprised by the affection, Sapphira turned and opened the jib door, the small panel that gave her access to the servants' quarters. "Thank you so much."

"Don't thank me yet. I'll delay leaving this room as long as I can, then I'll see if they'll accept the puking excuse. Do you have everything?"

No, not her father's regard, or the objects she'd grown up with, except for a miniature of her mother that she had tucked in her pocket. Or the lists and household account books she'd kept for so long, and her daily routine. She'd miss them, there was no sense pretending she would not, but presumably Corin intended to set her up somewhere so she could have that again.

But she nodded to Alethea and left her to cope with what was to come.

She walked as quietly as she could along the narrow passage that went behind all the bedrooms. Older houses didn't have these, but most modern ones had something similar. It was as well her great-uncle had decided to buy his wife this fine new house on their marriage.

Frankie was waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase, and he held a grey cloak which he tossed around her shoulders. He helped her pull up the hood and conceal her face before he took her through the kitchen. The other two servants, busy preparing the wedding feast, hardly looked up. They'd been at it since five this morning, and they must be exhausted.

Outside the back door they had to climb the steps to ground level. The area stank of vegetable matter. Her aunt never came down here, and it was obvious from the state of the place. Sapphira would never allow any house she controlled to get in such a state and she resolved to see to the matter next week. That was before she caught herself up. Of course, she wouldn't be coming back here. Perhaps ever. She'd seen the last of her great-aunt this morning.

Sadness gripped her, more than at the loss of everything she'd known thus far in her life, more than losing her father's regard, although in the past she'd been very proud of that.

A little farther along the street a closed carriage waited, dark, uncrested, but with the clean lines and the polish of a private vehicle. Frankie nodded toward it.

She turned to him. "Thank you so much."

With a jerk of his head he indicated the carriage. "Urry up. I'm to say I thought you were the dressmaker, come to make some final adjustments. Get along with you."

She quirked a smile and did as he bid her.

As soon as she reached the carriage, a footman hurried around to let the steps down for her and opened the door. When she took the first step, a hand extended out of the carriage to help her up. She climbed up, straight into Corin's arms.

They folded around her as the footman collapsed the steps and closed the door with a slam that made her jump.

Then they were off, the coachman springing the matched pair that had stamped in their traces.

Sapphira looked into the face of the man she loved most on earth. She had given up everything for him, her reputation, her respectability, her life. Everything she'd known before. And now she was in his arms, she couldn't regret it.

He gave her a kiss, gentle, almost reverent. "Good morning, sweeting. From now on we'll start the days together."

Unless his wife wanted him, she supposed. She wasn't foolish enough to imagine that Corin would remain unmarried. She'd tortured herself with the probability and knew that when that day came she'd bow out of his life. But she couldn't deny herself the few precious years they might have together. Not for a life of spurious respectability in a new place where nobody knew her. "I've brought nothing to you."

"You've brought your precious self. That's all I want, although my father might have other ideas."

She frowned. What would his father have to do with that? How could Corin tell him about his mistress? Did the upper classes live that differently? She didn't think so; she'd met lords and ladies before and she knew they held many of the same percepts that she and her kind did.

They had this time. "Do you have a house nearby?"

"You know I do." He curved his arm around her in a protective gesture she adored but a twinge of alarm disturbed her.

"You can't want to take me to your London house? My father will find us in no time!"

"I don't care if he does." A spark of apprehension marred his expression. "You are of age, aren't you, sweetheart? Your bearing, your gravity, and your beauty all spoke of it."

She gave a short laugh. "Of course I am. I'm twenty-five. Didn't I tell you?"

He kissed her. "We didn't have much time to discuss age. I'm twenty-six. I think that makes us just about perfect."

She thought so too. She paid no more attention to where the carriage was going, content to relax into his kisses. But she knew they couldn't stay in the London house for long. She wouldn't shame her father that way. Even if she didn't go back to him, he and his colleagues would know she was there, living with her love out of wedlock. It would damage his reputation, and so his business. She would make Corin understand. If he didn't want to leave London, she would have to. Maybe to Kensington, or Hampstead, somewhere not quite so far away.

The carriage passed through fashionable London, elegant squares with private gardens at their centers, wide streets lined with classically designed houses. But the native Londoner still found his way here too. Street urchins darted between better-dressed people, hawkers yelled their wares, or sang them out, delivery vehicles jostled with the more stylish ones, giving no quarter for access to the street. An Englishman never cowered. She'd miss all that, and the feeling of being somewhere that mattered, a place she knew down to her bones. A pang hit her until she looked at the man who held her in his arms. What she was feeling was nothing like a strong liking. She loved him.

The carriage drew up smoothly outside a small church, one of the new ones built after the Great Fire, its white stone exterior already soot-blackened. Its steeple stretched up toward the sky, blue this morning with scattered fluffy clouds. She assumed they'd stopped to allow a vehicle to pass, but when the footman opened the door and let down the steps, she stared at Corin in bewilderment. "This isn't your house."

"No it isn't. We go there afterwards."

"After what?"

"After we marry."

Chapter Thirteen

Sapphira's mouth dropped open. She hadn't heard right. Closing her mouth with a snap, she watched Corin as he reached inside his russet-colored coat and drew out a piece of paper. He frowned when he saw her astonishment. "What? You didn't think I meant—oh Lord, you did!" With an irritated gesture he waved away the footman standing outside the carriage. Letting the paper fall into his lap, he took both her hands.

"I never meant for that. I didn't mention it on Thursday because I needed to get a special license to marry without banns, and I wasn't sure it would come through in time. And I assumed you realized. I'm completely stupid not to tell you. Oh my dear, what must you have thought!"

"I-I didn't think it was possible anymore. The new law means three weeks' notice before a wedding. You asked me to come away with you. You asked me to trust you and I did. I do."

He touched the paper. "Look at it. Read it."

Reluctantly she picked up the sheet and scanned it. "So this means...?"

"It's for couples who need to marry in a hurry, or who can't get the banns in time. You have to go to Doctor's Commons to get it, and the couple has to be named on the form. We're supposed to swear that both parties are willing, so I did that too. I wasn't sure it would be done in time, but my father pulled strings and it came through yesterday."

"I didn't know about it. I've never needed to know."

"Any other objections?"

Heat rushed to her face. "What else? You're an aristocrat, I'm a Cit!"

"And you never heard of them marrying before? Sweetheart, you're a respectable woman. I couldn't do that to you. Marrying you is the best way to keep you safe, to stop any attempt from your father to get you back and marry you to George Barber."

"And you don't mind?"

"Mind? I meet someone lovely, funny, witty, someone who I know I'll never tire of making love to, a real companion? How could I mind that?" He paused and bit his lip before he slid down to the floor of the carriage to go on one knee in front of her. "And it occurs to me that I've done all this the wrong way. Sapphira Vardon, would you do me the honor of giving me your hand in marriage?"

So simply, he reduced her to tears. She took the hand he extended to her and let several salty drops fall. He would do this for her, to save her from the danger of her masquerade, from the machinations of the Barbers. She loved him so much. "Oh yes, yes, if you're sure."

“Perfectly sure. Come, my sweet, they’re waiting for us.”

She might be dressed for a wedding in the City, but she doubted she’d pass muster at a society event. She plucked at her gown. “I can’t—”

“Yes you can. My parents and my family are here, that’s all. It’s a private affair, and we’ll put it in the papers as such when we advertise it later in the week.”

“And I don’t bring anything to you.” A wife who brought nothing to her marriage was at a severe disadvantage. She’d have nothing to provide for her daughters’ portions, no power play to bring to her new family. The equivalent of a poor relation.

“You have a dowry of one thousand, seven hundred pounds,” he reminded her, his lips twitching slightly but not actually smiling. “The important thing today is to save you from any danger.”

“Is it legal? I mean, the banns for my marriage to George Barber have been put up for the last three weeks.”

He did smile then and got up, to back down the steps and hold his hand out to help her out. “Completely legal. The special license makes it so. It supersedes the banns. If we didn’t get it in time I would have taken you to my parents’ house, where you could have gained shelter, but this is the safest way.” He drew her closer to him, heedless of the busy street and the footman letting up the steps of the carriage behind them. “And the way I wanted most. To see you every day and not to care for you as I want to—torture.”

He kissed her hand but didn’t release it, instead drawing her forward.

Before they walked into the church, she said, “Wait, just a moment,” and drew out the jewelry box from her pocket. She opened it and pulled out the pearls. Corin fastened them for her, his hands cool at the back of her neck while she slipped the now-empty box back into her pocket.

Then he stepped to her side, held out his arm and said, “Come. It’s our wedding day.”

They walked into the dark, cool realms of the church.

She blinked to accommodate the change in light and saw the vicar standing by the altar in his everyday white surplice and bob wig. Despite that, his welcoming smile gave her the courage to step forward.

Several other people, all dressed much more finely than her, stood waiting. She sank into a series of curtsies as Corin introduced them, overwhelmed by the titles and consequence, although he introduced them all by personal name first, then mentioned the titles almost as of little importance.

The older couple was the Earl and Countess of Taversall. Lady Taversall, tall, elegant and utterly terrifying to Sapphira, changed her attitude completely when she smiled. It was like sunshine breaking out on a dull day, an icon becoming a real human being. The others were Corin’s siblings, both full siblings and half siblings, apart from his sister Perdita, who was resting in the country after giving birth to her husband’s heir.

Nobody looked at Sapphira when that was mentioned. That was, in a way, as bad as everyone looking at her, because as the wife of the eldest son of the Earl of Taversall, she'd be expected to produce offspring. Although Corin had only made love to her once without withdrawing fully, she could be fulfilling that expectation right now. Time would tell.

She was still confused and bewildered by this sudden change in her fortunes, but when the service began she did as she was told, repeated what she should. She only realized, halfway through making her vows, that this was it. She would be bound to Corin for the rest of her life.

And she couldn't be sorry.

When Corin gave her a gentle kiss at the end of the ceremony, Sapphira heard a feminine gasp, though whether it was Lady Taversall, Lady Rosington or Lady Blyth she couldn't say. He gazed at her, smiled and offered the support of his arm to guide her to the vestry, where they signed the parish records and had the certificate witnessed by Lord Rosington and Lord Taversall.

They left the church to find carriages drawn up outside. Corin led her to one, and she noticed the coat of arms emblazoned on the side. Not the carriage they'd arrived in, then. He handed her in and waited for Lady Blyth to enter before he took his place by her side.

She glanced at the stunningly beautiful Lady Blyth and found herself held under a cool regard, so she lifted her chin and stared back. One thing she did know—she was as good as they were, despite their titles and their wealth.

Lady Blyth, the Violetta Corin had referred to on their first meeting, gave her a smile of such dazzling intensity she blinked. "It's so good to have someone to talk to. Perdita prefers the country these days and while I love Miranda, we don't always enjoy the same things. And Miranda doesn't have the chequered past that I can lay claim to. I hope you don't mind, but Corin told us where he met you. How absolutely thrilling!"

When she turned reproachful eyes on to her new husband, he merely put his hand over hers and squeezed it reassuringly. "Listen to Violetta. She'll tell you what I felt I didn't have the right to, and you'll understand the kind of family you've married into. Of course, if you require a separation after you've heard, I'll understand, but you're still not getting one." He raised her hand and touched his lips to the back of it, sending her body into a riot of sexual heat. Just one touch, one look and she was lost. It didn't seem fair, until she saw the same heat lurking in his eyes.

So she glanced down, giving herself a moment to regain her faculties, then turned her attention to Violetta.

Violetta repeated that dazzling smile. "If you held your own against Corin at the gaming table, then you did exceedingly well."

"Not only me," Corin said, "but on one memorable occasion, Strang and Thwaite."

Violetta's slim black brows went up. "I am deeply and suitably impressed. I could never play cards at more than a social level. However I do feel I can trump you on one score. You might have heard of the courtesan, La Perla?"

"Of course. She rules London. The rumor is that the original La Perla has moved on and nobody knows what happened to her daughter, La Perla Perfetta, except she went back to Italy."

Violetta laughed. "No she didn't. She married Lord Blyth."

Sapphira caught her breath. The thought of a courtesan, however exalted, marrying into the nobility defied explanation, but Violetta proceeded to tell her exactly how and why that happened. She could hardly believe it when the lady finished her story and she was astonished that Violetta would vouchsafe so much to her.

Then she understood. Violetta had faced so much to marry the man she loved and braved them all. She was sending Sapphira a message. This family, great though it was, was human. Approachable.

And she was Lady Elston now. No, that must be someone else. It didn't sound right.

The coach drew up outside a gracious mansion on one of London's greatest squares. This was where Lord and Lady Taversall lived when they were in London. As the footman came around to open the door and let down the steps, the mansion's glossy black front door opened to reveal a superior-looking servant, no doubt a butler or steward.

Now that was intimidating.

But following Violetta's example, she allowed the footman to hand her out of the carriage and took Corin's arm for the short trip up the stairs and through the front door.

Inside the tiles on the floor were marble, and above them hung a French crystal chandelier.

They went upstairs, to the formal rooms and into the drawing room, a beautiful place with an Aubusson carpet and spindly gilt-legged chairs upholstered with apple green silk. Sapphira walked in silence, feeling deeply out of place in her plain gown. Corin led her to a wide sofa and sat by her side. Nobody joined them, but they all found seats nearby.

Sapphira knew a family discussion when she saw it, and she had to accept she was part of this family now. They certainly did.

They chatted about inconsequential matters while maids brought in tea and small cakes. Sapphira refused the cakes, took the tea. Food would choke her. She glanced at the plain gold band Corin had placed on her finger. Her wedding ring.

Lady Taversall waved away the maid and sent her younger children upstairs. Corin's brother William was at university, but the three girls, all under twenty-one and over fifteen, sulked at the dismissal. "We'll hear from someone," Olivia said. Then she flashed Sapphira a mischievous smile.

The bell jangled. At least that sounded the same as the one she was used to. In a few moments the door opened once more to admit a triumphant Alethea. "I'm married!" she declared in ringing tones. "Only

I'm not. I confessed when they wanted me to sign the register. I said it was for a lark at first, and then they got seriously upset so I ran."

"Oh dear God!" exclaimed Lady Taversall. "I should never have allowed it. I knew you three were planning more than a civilized conversation with Mr. Vardon."

Corin laughed and reached for Sapphira's hand, but frowned when he realized she was trembling. Sapphira blinked. She had never been told that part. "Conversation? You think my father would have let me go after a conversation?"

"We thought it best to leave our parents a little in the dark," he said. "They couldn't have agreed to the plan. Alethea and I cooked it up between us, nobody else is to blame. But Sapphira is right, her father is a stubborn man and by the time we'd persuaded him of Barber's perfidy she would have been married to George."

Lady Taversall's mouth thinned. "Tell us the whole, Alethea."

Nothing loath, the lovely woman sat in a chair next to Lady Taversall's, with Daniel, Lord Rosington on her other side. Although Daniel appeared stern, Sapphira was certain she caught a suspicious twinkle in his eyes, and his wife was positively smiling. "It seems we are members of a family who prefer to set our own destinies. Life is anything but boring here."

Orlando crossed one leg over the other and glanced at his wife. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

Sapphira felt a smile, deep down. Despite her troubles, her concern at what she had done, her mood lifted. So far she'd been so confused that the only thing she was sure of was her love for Corin, and she'd let that guide her. Now it all began to sink in.

"It went better than I'd hoped," Alethea said, accepting the dish of tea Lady Rosington handed her. "We planned for me to create a slight diversion, but I saw how I could prolong it a while longer. I covered my face with a heavy veil over my bonnet and put a handkerchief to my lips as if I'd been weeping. I spoke in a whisper, told them I'd been so sick I'd hurt my throat. And when I saw the groom, I knew Sapphira had every right to weep. She was polite in her description of him. His tongue is too large for his mouth and his breath is foul."

"You should not judge people just by their appearance, dear," Lady Taversall reproved gently. She flicked open her fan and wafted it gently in the air to emphasize her point.

"It was worse. The way he looked at me I thought he'd rip the clothes off me where I stood. And his father called me 'girl' and 'you'. His father was a martinet, completely ruling his wife and son. And they wore awful clothes, not at all suitable for a wedding." She took a deep draught of the tea. "So when they ordered me to sign the contract, I signed it as 'Caroline, the Queen.' Well, the lady's been dead ten years or more, I didn't think she'd mind." Sapphira heard what sounded suspiciously like a snort of suppressed laughter from her husband. "So we set out for the church. I went through it all, and made my voice hoarse.

It wasn't until the vows that they noticed. That awful man, George Barber, just ripped the veil away. Then he reached for me. I don't think he cared that I wasn't the wife he was expecting. So I ran. I didn't think I could run in pattens, but I managed it. That estimable servant, Frankie, was waiting outside with a hackney cab. And here I am."

In the shocked silence came the voice of Orlando, Lord Blyth. "Oh, well played!"

Alethea got to her feet and took a bow, smiling broadly, before she sat down again. "It was a pleasure. Actually, when I saw the awful family Sapphira was to marry into, I would have done it anyway, with or without any investment scandal."

Her last remark made Lord Taversall's face, heretofore lit with amusement, settle into gravity again. "I fear that last is the only reason I can condone this behavior. We should have advised that Sapphira discuss the matter with her father and refer him to me."

Corin squeezed her hand. "By then she'd be married to the odious George, instead of me. And I wasn't about to condone that, Father. I have never incurred your displeasure before, but in this case I had to take the risk. I'd do it again."

Sapphira swallowed back the lump that had risen to her throat. "I don't know what to say."

"I do." Taversall addressed Alethea. "The marriage contract. Does Mr. Vardon have a copy now?"

Alethea nodded. "He locked it away before we left for the church."

"Good. Then I can show him what Barber meant to do. That, after all, is the reason for this."

"That and the way he treated Sapphira," Corin said quietly. "I would not have him do what he did to her."

His comment earned her a sharp glance from Lady Taversall. "Do you mean to explain that remark?"

"Please no." Sapphira couldn't bear anyone else knowing of the shameful marks her father had left on her.

Corin frowned, but listened to her plea and shook his head, tight-lipped. Her ladyship stared at her son and then leaned back in her chair, lifting her fan to wave it before her face in an elegant gesture. Her silk skirts rustled as she moved, the fine fabric moving slightly with her every breath. She wore white, with a small floral print in blues and greens. So pretty, so much like the gowns Sapphira secretly longed to own.

She wanted a distraction, anything to stop thinking about her father and the distress he must now be in. She had to explain. "What he did to me, it wasn't like him. He's a stern man, but he rarely laid a hand on me before." She said it softly, but she still heard Lady Taversall's softer gasp. "I think Barber had done something, put my father under an obligation."

"He wants your father's business. He needs it to shore up his own. But none of it matters now, because you're here, with me." Corin's voice soothed her and she forced herself to take a few deep breaths. "Any arrangement using your marriage to his son is invalid."

“You should thank God for that,” said his father. “I knew there was something amiss with part of my financial portfolio, but until Corin came to discuss Barber with me, I had no proof, nothing to trace. But once we began to concentrate on him, it unraveled very fast. And it all came down to the ship that never was.”

His face tightened. “Barber lost a ship at sea two years ago, it was the beginning of his troubles. But he claimed the ship put in at Newcastle in the north, and began his deception. Then he laid claim to a ship that I own that bears a similar name, but he never did it in writing. You know a City man’s word is his bond, so he didn’t need to before the contract.”

He glanced around at his grim-faced audience. “Perhaps he thought he could put matters right, but they only grew worse. In the last year the market has grown nervous. The peace with Austria is wavering and we’ve had a few bad harvests. Investors are doing what investors always do at times of uncertainty—they’ve been burying their money, putting it in their safe places, investing only in ventures that look safe, but have a lower return.”

He sighed. “Barber wasn’t prepared for that. He’d dipped badly in some riskier projects and they didn’t work out. A new cotton plantation in the Colonies, and a regular shipping route between India and London. Only the route failed, the plantation suffered and he was left badly damaged. At that point he should have cut his losses, taken what he had left and begun to build again, but in one last gamble he invested in the ship that was lost. Now he’s used the same vessel in the deal with Mr. Vardon, plus the one that I own. The first ship doesn’t exist anymore, and I can prove it. I have signed affidavits to show the ship was lost at sea with most of its hands, a tragedy, and one that wasn’t insured.” He huffed. “You can bet that the ship is insured now, and that Vardon planned to lose it on its next voyage.”

Rosington let out a low whistle. “‘Struth, the man must be desperate!”

“Vardon gambled his daughter’s happiness,” Corin said. “I won’t forgive him easily for that.” He shrugged. “The rest I’ll help with for my wife’s sake, but I won’t take part in any public humiliation.”

His father cast him a withering look. “You think that’s probable with his daughter part of the family? No, our aim is to extricate Vardon from the Barbers, reconcile him with Sapphira and prevent Barber from laying waste in the City. The man holds a number of influential positions. Next week I plan to visit Lloyds and a few other places to start a few rumors. The thing could be done without our active intervention.”

Sapphira could only hope so.

“If I may, I’ll talk to you later about that,” Corin said, getting to his feet. He held out his hand to help Sapphira up. She didn’t need it, but she took it anyway, to feel his skin against hers. “But I think we’ve done enough for today. I want to get my bride home.”

She gave him a questioning look, but he ignored it. “If Barber comes knocking, I’ll have him sent away. He’ll probably come here after that. I’m in no mind to let him or anyone else ruin my wedding day.”

Virginia's face softened into a smile and warmth filled her eyes. "You're perfectly right, my son. I was about to ask you to stay for dinner, though. Don't you think Sapphira deserves a good meal? And it's *en famille*."

Reluctantly Corin agreed to it because, as he said, he'd wager Sapphira hadn't eaten much that day. She hadn't eaten at all in fact, and although very soon she was faced with two courses of exquisitely cooked dishes, she didn't manage much more than a little chicken and a slice of apple tart. Olivia and Georgiana, two of Corin's siblings, came down for dinner, which meant that Sapphira had to endure the scrutiny and blatant curiosity of Corin's sisters. She didn't say much so she suspected she'd be castigated as somewhat gauche, but at the moment she didn't care. She didn't want to explain that she'd acted hostess for her father ever since she'd reached eighteen and knew perfectly well how to go on in company. She was still coming to terms with what had happened that day.

When they toasted the bride and groom, Corin caught her glancing around, looking for the happy couple. He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. Even that small gesture of affection embarrassed her. She'd never displayed her emotions in public, and at the moment she felt too raw, too open.

After dinner, Corin accompanied her to the drawing room, as if he couldn't leave her alone, although she half wished he would. For her it might be a love match, but she had no proof that he held anything other than liking and a desire to rescue a damsel in distress. She suspected Corin had an excess of gentil knight in his nature and while that made him an exciting and stimulating companion, it also made her nervous, because her future was firmly locked with his now. She hoped he wouldn't tilt at too many windmills.

Another short sojourn on the beautiful but uncomfortable satin sofa and Corin announced that they should really take their leave. Barber had not yet appeared, for which she could be thankful.

She wondered what she would find. The evening was beginning to draw in when they left the house and climbed into the same crested carriage in which they'd arrived. After it set off, Corin caught her hand in his. "You seem overawed. I wouldn't have thought you'd let anyone do that to you."

"It's all so fast." She met his concerned gaze frankly. "I need some time to let it all sink in. I thought you wanted me to be your mistress and I prepared for that, accepted it. That was after I'd already accepted that I wouldn't be travelling alone. Now I'm your wife? Truly? Why, Corin?"

He didn't answer at first, but took her hand to his mouth and delivered a soft kiss. "Because it's the only way I can protect you. The banns had gone up, so there was a declaration of intent and your father could demand your return, even though you're over age. I don't want you going back to him, ever." When she opened her mouth to protest, he touched his finger to her lips. "No. He hurt you. I want you completely out of his reach. If you decide you can't like me, or that you don't want this life, then we'll come to some arrangement. I'm hoping you'll like it. I'm sure you can do it."

She gave him a tentative smile. "Meeting the King, being your hostess?"

"All of it." He moved closer. "You can do it, you know you can."

She flushed and glanced down. "I've met the King already, at a City dinner. I've been my father's hostess for a while now. It's the change, all in one day."

"Overwhelmed. And you have a house to furnish."

She looked up at him, reminded of what she'd seen before. A half-empty house. She could do it, but with so many other things to get used to it would be difficult. Perhaps that was what she needed—to keep herself busy for a while.

But her gaze clashed with his and she was lost. Heedless of the area they were passing through, that it was daytime, that the carriage windows were open, she went into his arms for his kiss. And he seemed equally lost. He curved his hand around her face, cupping her cheek, and opened her mouth with a flick of his tongue as their lips met to plunge inside and conquer.

While sliding her hands under his coat in a desperate attempt to feel his warmth, her ring snagged on the fabric, reminding her once again of her new status. She pulled back, but he wouldn't allow it, curving his arm tightly around her waist, drawing her closer.

His lips left hers and he murmured, "Why do *you* think I married you?" before he returned to her mouth, taking her with a devastating thoroughness that ensured her compliance. She snuggled closer, longing for the time when they could find a bedroom and be alone together. His hands stroked her body, and even though she shouldn't be able to feel his touch beneath her gown, underwear and stays, it thrilled her to have his hands on her.

She barely registered when the carriage came to a halt, but when the door opened, she tried to jerk away. Corin took his time finishing the kiss, but by then Sapphira grew more acutely aware of the footman who must be watching them avidly.

When he finally released her, she saw the footman standing rigidly to attention by the open carriage door, the steps ready for them, and she flushed a fiery red. But Corin merely nodded, got down the steps and reached for her.

He wouldn't let her walk, but swung her into his arms and climbed the steps to the front door, which someone had opened for them, and straight across into the hall. He gazed down at her face, his regard amused but tender. "Bestall, I present your new mistress to you. We were married today."

But Bestall, whoever he was, didn't have much chance because by now she had her face buried in Corin's waistcoat. The scent of clean, aroused male didn't do a lot to restore her equilibrium, so she was glad he didn't stop, but carried her up the stairs.

However he climbed the next flight and this was the bedroom floor. "Corin, what will they think?" she managed to choke out.

“That we’re newly married and we want to get down to business,” he said, tossing her on to the bed. “And they’d be entirely right.” Only pausing to strip off his coat, he joined her.

She sat up to reach for him and saw a shadowy movement from the corner of her eye. Afraid someone else was in the room, she jerked her head around to see a mirror set above a dressing table, set with brushes and a few pots, together with a wig stand suitably adorned with a finely curled man’s wig.

He smiled at her silent query. “I ordered enough things to make the house habitable. We still have some bare rooms, but this room is ready. I sent to Thompson’s for servants too.” Touching her chin with two fingers, he guided her back to look at him. “That was more important. I want you safe. I want you happy. I’m giving you a budget and enough servants to keep you safe. You should outfit this house and yourself before the season proper starts.”

She swallowed. “You knew you wanted to marry me? You knew I’d say yes?”

“Let’s say I hoped. But I wanted you well protected anyway. Whatever happened was taking you away from your father and the”—he paused as if struggling for words and she realized he was choking back a curse—“the Barbers,” he finished. “If I couldn’t get the license in time I would have taken you to my mother. But don’t fool yourself, we were getting married anyway. From the moment I took your virginity I knew you were mine.” He lifted his hands to her bodice and she watched, transfixed, as he began to unhook her gown from her stomacher.

When he threw her fichu over his shoulder, heedless of where it landed, she protested. “Be careful. This is all I have to wear.” Her trousseau was at the Barbers’ house, her old clothes at her father’s. She had nothing else.

“I think you’ll find, my lady, a few items waiting in your clothespress. I have a lady’s maid ready to enter our service if you like her. I wasn’t presumptuous enough to speak on your behalf in that regard.” He grinned, a disarming expression she couldn’t resist, even if she wanted to. “You see, I’m not completely irredeemable.”

Not at all. But yes, she didn’t want to lose what she’d had, and what he was giving her. No compliant wife, she.

A fresh surge of confidence swept through her. She could do this, be the wife of a future earl instead of the wife of an important City man.

And there was something else she knew how to do. Unfasten a waistcoat.

Naked, they were a man and a woman who wanted each other. She could cope with that, if only just, because Corin’s naked body weakened any resolve she had.

They undressed each other in concentrated silence, their quickened breathing the only sound in the room until, with Corin down to his breeches and Sapphira in only her shift, they were surrounded by a welter of discarded clothing.

Corin flung back the covers, getting rid of a lot of clothes in the process, and helped her up on to the bed.

She hadn't realized that desire could be so mindless, could eliminate everything but the need to touch him, take him inside her body—but she'd never known anyone like Corin before. When he tugged his breeches and underwear down his legs, she tore off her shift and fell on him like a starving animal. He didn't laugh, he didn't push her away, instead he accepted her, gave back what she gave him.

This time she initiated the kiss, driving her tongue into his mouth, eager to learn him, to discover him for herself. He groaned, his hands roaming her body. Her breasts tingled, her nipples hardened against his chest, but she wouldn't give him control. Not that he asked for it. She kissed down his neck, slid her hands over his body and worked her way down to his nipples. His chest was almost smooth, only a light sprinkling of hair blurring the hard muscle he displayed every time he moved. And he tasted wonderful. A sense of power crept through her, a realization that control could be addictive.

"I want to know you in every way," she murmured to his delectable flesh as she kissed and tasted the firm block of muscle, the hard peaked nipple. He grasped her shoulders, then his hold softened and he traced her body with his palms, rousing her to further efforts.

In every way, she'd said. *Just do it, don't think.*

Kissing farther down, she reached his navel, a deep knot in his belly, with a line of dark hair her mouth watered to follow. She dared to spread her hands over his hips, work down farther to his rear and then up and around his thighs.

She had only one place to go and she didn't hesitate. This was the first time she'd seen his cock for long enough to examine it. The head was taut with shiny skin, so taut it appeared at stretching point, and as she watched a dewdrop of moisture gathered at the tip.

A voice whispered to her, so hoarse she could hardly recognize it as Corin's. "Kiss it."

Power. If she didn't kiss it, she'd kill him for sure. So she waited and watched the clear liquid swell, and traced her finger around the flange under the cap. He sucked in a breath and groaned. "Please."

She smiled and leaned forward, letting the tip of her tongue touch her lower lip so he could see it. Then she extended it and delicately traced a line around and up, toward the tiny opening.

Without warning, she opened her mouth and took the top of his cock deep inside.

He rewarded her by jerking up, forcing it farther in, although it seemed to be an unconsidered reaction. His hands tightened their hold on her shoulders, and then eased again when she pulled back.

She licked, sucked, felt the texture with her tongue. She loved the salty, musky taste, the scent of pure male wafting deliciously to her nostrils. Under his cock his sac tightened, and intrigued, she cupped it. Two egg-shaped, smooth objects moved under her hands, seemingly loose. He gasped, groaned. "Sweetheart, no more, or I won't be able to stop. I'll come. I want—I want to come inside you."

His words didn't flow. He gasped them out, forced them out, so unlike his usual dulcet tones. But she loved them. Loved him.

Reluctantly she released him, and gave the tip one last kiss before she lifted up to climb over his body and lean over him. His shaft pressed between them, impressing the flesh on her stomach. He grasped her thighs and pulled, so she opened her legs and set her knees on each side of his, raising her body clear of his. His cock sprang up, and he took hold of it in one capable hand, demonstrating that he was no stranger to his own body. It made her ashamed that she'd avoided touching her private parts for so long, except to clean them. She should have known better, not allowed her father's strictures on what was proper to rule her natural instincts.

"Lift up," he said now. "Take me inside you, Sapphira."

He said her name like the sweetest of endearments. Lulled and seduced by his words as much as by her own boldness, she did as he bade her, but before she took him, she rested her weight on one hand and used the other to touch herself. Her hand shook, but she traced her body, felt her clitoris press hard against her fingertip and the resulting jolt of sensation, slid it down to the opening that Corin had helped to widen.

She didn't watch herself, but him, seeing how her actions excited him, the golden lights in his eyes sparkling, his mouth a little open, his tongue flicking out to touch his lower lip before he lowered his gaze, blatantly watching her and taking pleasure from what she did. "Deep inside, darling. Feel it, feel where I'm going to go, where I'll thrust hard and make you come. You're going to ride me, Sapphira, like the roughest, most unruly steed you ever had. Do it."

She sank her finger deep inside her body until he had fully embedded it there. Soft, wet, hot. Nothing until the end of her finger nudged something hard, like the tip of her nose. Fascinating. Heat flushed up from where she touched, to her spine, her neck, her head and her attention snapped to where he waited for her. She withdrew her finger and used her hand to support her body as she lifted and took his waiting cock inside her. Just as he asked, and as she longed for.

Wanting to plunge deep, she braced her body to drop but he caught her hips in his hands and forced her to go slower. "Let's feel every inch of this. I want you, but I want to remember every moment of when I made love to you for the first time in our married lives. And when you made love to me."

"Yes."

So she went slow, pushed down until she'd taken all of him and then bent so she could kiss him, joined at their mouths and below. Their mouths worked, luscious and succulent, enjoying, exploring.

She lifted and sank down again. It felt good. Better than good. Her breasts brushed against his chest when she finished the kiss and drew away to lift up a little farther. He helped her until she was almost upright, as if she sat astride a mount.

She did. Not completely secure on a horse, she felt at home here, mounted on her husband, and she laughed in sheer joy. He smiled in response, urged her up and then down, until she'd found her tempo.

Then it was easy. She sensed the way her body responded to his, moved back to discover what a difference that made and gasped. Every time she moved his cock grazed a spot inside, the place he'd found before, and now she'd found it for herself.

For an instant she forgot him, forgot everything but that instrument of paradise deep inside her sending her soaring. Her head went back as she gasped for more air, aware of his hands on her hips, urging her, pushing her to work herself to the ultimate of heights.

When she exploded it felt like a fountain had suddenly come to life inside her, spraying every part of her parched body with light and heat. She called his name, twisted on him, but he held her safe while she pulsed around him.

He grabbed her, dragged her down to lie over him, and she felt him throb inside her. This time he didn't rip his cock away from her, but groaned, and then whispered her name like a benison as he gave her everything he had.

This time he could have made her pregnant. If not this time, the next time, or the next. And the notion excited her beyond bearing.

Chapter Fourteen

Sapphira could tell when Corin walked into a room, so she didn't turn around when she felt his presence but continued to study the drawing room through narrowed eyes. They opened wider when he slid his hands around her waist and pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think you taste wonderful."

She laughed. Corin could always make her laugh. "I meant the room. Will it pass muster?"

"More than," he said. He lifted his head, though he kept her banded to him, his warmth heating her back and rear. "I like it. Not too feminine, but very elegant. I'm always afraid of destroying one of my mother's chairs just by sitting in it. I like these better."

She'd chosen her favorite blue for the main color, with accents of white and darker blue, and had achieved something that was, while still elegant, a touch sturdier than Lady Taversall's drawing room. All her life she'd been used to good furniture, but in the built-to-last mold, rather than the currently fashionable one. Encouraged by her husband, she'd gone with her instincts and together they'd chosen furniture and drapery that they'd both liked. The drawing room, dining room and front parlor were in an acceptable state, but she still had to begin on some of the other rooms.

Working here, sometimes she recalled what it was like when the house was empty, just the two of them to inhabit the dark corners. She should prefer it like it is, but sometimes she thought wistfully of the time when he'd called her Lucia and she'd worn a mask. "My bedroom next, I think."

He growled deep in his throat. "Why not leave it until last? I love having you in my bed every night." He paused then continued in a lighter tone, "I never thought I'd say that. I always believed in a marriage as a partnership, someone to make babies with and to share the duties of my station when the time came. But with you, there's so much more."

He held her tightly so she couldn't turn around to see the expression on his face, but it was so close to a declaration of love that her heart swelled. She hadn't told him, except at night when he slept, but she wanted to. Soon. She knew now that she'd fallen in love with him almost at first sight. Her feelings had only strengthened with every encounter, and now she was in so deep there was no getting out.

"Are you busy now?" he asked.

"No."

"I think you might benefit from a nap before dinner." His hand crept up toward her breast and moved her fichu aside so he could touch her skin. She shivered. "I love it when you do that." He bent to kiss her neck and work up to her ear, where he took her earlobe between his teeth and nipped.

How could she resist? Why would she want to? But just as she turned around to kiss him, the doorbell jangled. Sapphira had left the drawing room door open so she heard the tone, if not the words, of the man below.

Now she shivered for a different reason. "Father. He's found me."

"Since the announcement went into the newspapers four days ago, he was bound to, sweetheart." He restored her fichu to its proper place, although she doubted her father would approve of such a gauzy object in place of the linen and fine wool ones she'd left behind. Nor the pale green silk gown her new maid had fitted to her just that morning. It had embroidered robings and a matching petticoat and, of course, panniers underneath. Very fine. But perhaps he would, since it represented good business for the mercers. Corin seemed to like it. He smoothed his hand down from her breast to her waist. "We'll receive him like a viscount and viscountess. I'm glad he came alone, he might see reason."

"You want to see him?"

"He's your father, sweetheart. We need to get this sorted out. But if he lays a finger on you, I swear I'll use my sword on him."

Her very own protector, but the thought of him hurting her father chilled her.

He crossed the room to pick up the little hand bell on the mantelpiece and its silvery tone filled the air. Almost immediately a maid entered and bobbed a curtsy. "Desire Bestall to show our visitor up, if you please. And send a footman to find my father to inform him that Mr. Vardon has arrived. Tell him to hurry. He'll most likely be in Lloyds' Coffee House on Lombard Street."

"Yes, sir." The maid bobbed another curtsy and hurried off.

The extent of his desire to protect Sapphira shocked Corin. When he'd thought of a wife in the imaginary way, he knew he would always wish to protect her, but never to tear a man's throat out for hurting her. With the rational part of his mind he could recognize that the beating Vardon had inflicted on his daughter was within his rights and not too vicious. No, he couldn't condone it, could never imagine doing that to his own flesh and blood. Especially to force them to an act that was against their will. One that would make them supremely unhappy.

But when Vardon entered the drawing-room, Corin had his society mask firmly in place. Inside he hoped his father would not be long. He watched Sapphira stand and give her father a sweet curtsy before retaking her seat and indicating the sofa opposite hers. Corin presented Vardon with a bow before he sat.

Vardon didn't take a seat, but stared down at his daughter, sorrow on his creased face. "You have caused great trouble, Sapphira. You must come home with me."

“No, Father. My place is with my husband.”

Vardon spared Corin a glance, then, his dark eyes hardening, looked away again as if he were of no notice. “The young woman who thought it amusing to ape you at the altar escaped before we could question her. It has taken us this long to trace you.”

Sapphira’s hands, currently folded neatly in her lap, twitched. It was the only sign she gave of her irritation, but Corin felt it in the air and yearned to take her in his arms. He wouldn’t let her go now.

“You are not married to this man, Sapphira. It cannot be legal.”

“On the contrary,” Corin said, “it is perfectly legal. We married by special license. The banns are only an intent to marry. I carried out my intent.”

“Nevertheless, the Barbers mean to sue for breach of promise and to prove the marriage invalid. Daughter, how could you shame us in such a way? We may be able to save the situation. George Barber is still willing to take you, although he will not trust you for a long time, if ever.”

“No!” Sapphira made her agitation more apparent by her sudden words, and now she twisted her hands together, no longer tranquil and at rest. “I won’t marry him.”

“She cannot. Our marriage is valid, sir.” Corin put his hand over hers, unable to bear not soothing her. “She is my wife and I don’t intend to let her go.” He felt a twinge of regret that he hadn’t been able to court her properly. “I’m sorry for the threatened lawsuit, but very soon Barber will be in no case to pursue it.”

Vardon shot him a frowning look and opened his mouth to speak again, but after a gentle knock at the door, the maid brought in tea and Corin sighed. Society rituals could be irksome sometimes, but he found it soothing to watch Sapphira make and dispense the brew, her agile fingers busy on something other than him, which was a pity. But at least they weren’t twisting in her lap, betraying her distress. He hated seeing his wife so upset.

She handed a dish of tea to the maid, who placed it in its deep saucer and took it to Mr. Vardon. Corin left his, too, but even if they didn’t touch them, at least it had used up a little more time. His father would be here soon. It must be twenty minutes to Lombard Street from here, but Lord Taversall would take a cab or a chair to arrive as fast as he could.

At least Vardon didn’t say anything while the maid remained in the room. He didn’t say anything at all apart from a brief word of thanks when he took the delicate Worcester china. Sapphira had chosen the most feminine of tea services, Corin recalled with a smile, delighted to indulge the frivolously feminine side that had seen little exercise in her life with her father. Now, seeing her father gingerly handle the rose-strewn white porcelain, it gave him a moment of amusement. He’d remember that sight, and it helped him to remain civilized, when all he wanted to do was strangle the man who had caused his Sapphira so much unhappiness.

At last the maid left, closing the door behind her with scarcely a click. Vardon continued where he’d left off. “I still have your clothes, and your fiancé still has your trousseau. We can rearrange the ceremony.”

"I'm growing tired of this." Corin leaned forward, one of Sapphira's hands still clasped in his. "Sapphira and I are married, sir. Legally and irrevocably. She is Viscountess Elston and in the fullness of time will become the Countess of Taversall. Nothing save my death can prevent that. I would prefer to discuss the marriage settlement with you in a civilized manner, but if that isn't possible, my family will endow her with what she needs."

He felt Sapphira's sorrow. He knew she wanted to bring something of her own to the marriage, but as far as he was concerned, she'd already brought a treasure beyond price. Her sweet self. He squeezed her hand and wouldn't release it when she tried to pull it away. "I intend her to remain my wife, whatever it takes."

"The Barbers believe that you are not legally married. The special license is a new device and could easily be overturned if the Pitts and Foxes of this world give way to the Butes."

He didn't care for Vardon's threats. "Then I will marry her again, in any way that will make the union legal. But the license is legal now and cannot be revoked. The Barbers' threats are unfortunate, but Sapphira is a member of my family now and she'll be protected as such. I will not have my wife distressed or threatened."

Vardon's mouth thinned into a straight line. "She's my daughter. I've come to take her home."

Stubborn man. "She *is* home."

Sapphira managed to drag her hand away. "And I have no say in this? Father, I have obeyed you and cared for you all my life. The one time I pleaded with you not to go ahead, you called me a foolish woman and chose to ignore my pleas. No, worse, you punished me for them. I had planned to run away, anything but marry into that family, I was so desperate. Lord Elston prevented me from doing that. You should be grateful to him because if I had, you would never have found me."

Vardon sat back, visibly shocked. "You could not."

"I could, and I did. My plans were well advanced by the time Corin found me."

Vardon's attention turned to Corin now. "How did you meet?"

Before she could mention Mother Brown's or implicate her great-aunt, Corin spoke. "I saw her early one morning at Covent Garden market. I was going out of town, so had risen early, and when I saw her, she captivated me. I had a lot of early mornings after that." True as far as it went. "I courted her, but she said she couldn't receive my addresses because you wouldn't approve, sir. I wouldn't give up and eventually she confessed that she hated the Barbers and was planning to leave London on her own. I couldn't allow that." He loved her little sound of protest. He'd make her pay for that later in the best possible way, maybe persuade her to do it some more, and louder. "I devised the scheme to allow her to escape Barber's clutches. The marriage contract, as you no doubt discovered, was invalid, as Sapphira didn't sign it, so only the banns remain as evidence of intent."

“And my business arrangement with Barber and company.” Vardon got to his feet and paced the room, returning to his chair but not sitting. “It’s clear I won’t get any help from you. If you, Sapphira, continue to live in sin with this man, I will disown you. You’ll be no daughter of mine.”

Corin caught his breath, astounded by the callousness of the man. He must know how much distress he would cause his daughter—and to no purpose. It would be one thing, and a business decision, to disown her from the business, but another to deny any association with her.

A breath of wind, a change in the air, told him someone had opened the front door, and he heard footsteps approaching a moment later. A soft knock announced what had to be his father.

Lord Taversall entered on the heels of the footman meant to announce him. One comprehensive glance at the room’s occupants told him the situation. He stepped forward, but not so far as to give Mr. Vardon clear access to the room’s exit. Vardon had no choice but to make his bow.

Corin and Sapphira stood, but his father waved them back down into their seats. Sapphira poured her father-in-law some tea, but left it on the side table for him when he grimaced and shook his head. “I’ve done nothing but drink coffee and tea all day, my dear.”

“I must assume that you are as appalled at this arrangement as I was,” Mr. Vardon said, taking his seat after Corin’s father had chosen his.

Taversall nodded. “At first, yes I was, but now I’ve had an opportunity to acquaint myself with Sapphira, I am forced to admit that my son could not have chosen a better woman to take for wife.”

“You accept their marriage, then?”

“It’s perfectly legal. I was there. Elston’s brothers acted as formal witnesses. Everything is aboveboard, I can assure you, sir.”

Vardon stared at him, then turned his attention to his daughter, and back to Taversall again. “I am threatened with breach of promise from the Barbers. You must know that Sapphira was affianced to George Barber.”

Taversall grimaced. “An unfortunate situation. My son saved you from a pack of trouble, Vardon. That family is not one you want to do business with.”

“Forgive me if I disagree with you, sir. The Barbers are an important influence in the City. The alliance would have served my business well.”

“I don’t think so. The Barbers have been a thorn in my side for a year or more, now.” Taversall reached into his pocket and drew out one of the battered notebooks he habitually carried when doing business. “I have proof of their perfidy. For now let me offer you times and dates. I can verify them all.”

He opened the book and handed it to Vardon, who arched a thick brow, but took it. Businessmen did not often share the contents of their debt-books, unless it was with the staff whose business it was to transcribe the journals into formal double-entry bookkeeping.

While Sapphira sipped her tea, Corin watched her closely. He understood she would be upset, but at the first sign of undue distress and he'd insist on taking her away. He would not have his wife put under threat or unnecessarily disturbed. He wanted her happy. The thought surprised him because it came with no qualifications. He didn't want her happy so she would accept him in her bed, he didn't want her happy so she could fulfill her duties better. He just wanted her happy.

Vardon's horrified voice broke the silence. "Is this true? You have proof?"

"For most of it, yes," Taversall said. "Some is speculation, extrapolated from the facts, but the basic facts are truth and I have incontrovertible proof." He turned his head to take in Corin and Sapphira. "And after this morning I have proof of something else." He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers, flexing them against each other. Corin recognized the signs. His father always did enjoy a receptive audience. This time Corin would give his lordship all the time and attention he wanted. "I didn't spend today and the previous two days simply visiting coffee houses," he said. "I've been to Newgate, the Fleet prison and a few other places just as unsavory. I have an acquaintance who knows his way around such places."

Corin's mouth hardened. Lord Strang, he'd wager. The man had a finger in many pies, and his advocacy for law reform gave him knowledge most people of his station did not possess. He prayed Strang hadn't told Taversall about the mysterious lady in Mother Brown's gaming house. Once Taversall had that nugget, plus the knowledge that his son had been spending more time there than ever before, it wouldn't take him long to add two and two. His father's arithmetical skills had never been lacking.

Taversall glanced at his son and Corin could see none of that in his gaze. "Unfortunately I also have proof that Barber had designs on you after the wedding. I'm sorry to bring this to you, but you have to know. Please accept this as the plain, unvarnished truth. After the wedding, Barber had planned to have you killed, Vardon. He had employed a number of ruffians, one of which was not all he seemed. He was, in fact, a spy in the employ of a resourceful young man." Strang for sure. "A day after your daughter married George Barber, you were to be attacked and killed in the street. Set upon by ruffians."

"Why would he do such a thing?" Vardon demanded.

"Your daughter is your sole heir, sir. Barber desperately needed what you brought to your partnership with him. All of it. And he didn't need an honest man becoming too interested in his business."

Sapphira closed her eyes, and Corin immediately turned all his attention to her. He removed the dish and saucer from her grasp and put it aside, returning to take her hands in his. He would have drawn her closer and held her, but her body had stiffened. When she opened her eyes he saw the same horror that must be reflected in his own eyes. "How desperate must he have been?" she said.

"Very." Vardon's voice held no doubt. "It fits. I would have discovered his deception before too long. When it was too late. I will need to see some confirmation."

“Of course. I suggest you accompany me to my house, where I’ll provide you with all the proof you’ll need.”

Corin would bet his last guinea that his father’s study and Vardon’s held strong similarities.

Taversall shook his head. “I’m sorry I had to bring this to you, but not sorry I discovered it. Now we have to work a way to bring the Barbers down without dragging the reputation of the City with it. We must persuade him to resign from his position in the Guild, and to retire with his nonexistent assets. Maybe he can plead ill health.”

That Barber would even consider hurting an innocent woman, much less his Sapphira, infuriated Corin. While his action in stealing her from the odious George Barber was something he’d never regret, it seemed he’d been altruistic without knowing it. Now they needed to move carefully, because if Barber was publicly exposed, it could wreck businesses associated with Barber’s. From what he’d heard of the man, he wouldn’t regret bringing other people down with him.

Corin got to his feet. “Come, my dear,” he said, and held his hand out to help Sapphira to her feet. “I don’t wish to prevent you knowing what you should, but I don’t want you distressed, either.”

This was the test. If Vardon allowed him to take his wife away, it was an indication that he accepted the marriage.

Vardon, trouble clouding his eyes, nodded absently. “Women are less resourceful than men. It is suitable for her to retire.”

The man didn’t know his daughter as well as he thought, because if anyone, man or woman, was resourceful, it was Sapphira.

Chapter Fifteen

After two weeks of marriage Sapphira still woke up with a sense of wonder when she found herself nestled in her husband's arms. The expression in those gold-flecked hazel eyes was soft, with something she had never seen before and didn't dare to give a name to.

He did it for her. "I love you, Sapphira."

Tears sprang to her eyes but she blinked them away. He deserved better. "I love you too. I've known for some time but I didn't want to burden you with it if you didn't feel the same way."

He touched his lips to hers in a kiss that was almost reverent. "I should have realized before. It's more than happiness, it's a deep sense of right. I dread to think what I would have done if I hadn't stepped into Mother Brown's that evening."

"I would be living in Coventry, and you'd be looking for a bride."

He shuddered and drew her closer, tangling his legs with hers. "It doesn't bear thinking about. You're mine, and I intend to keep you."

"I don't want to go anywhere, except with you." She laughed. "How foolish of us!"

He kissed her again, this time a little more lingering. "Why? There's no one here to hear us. This is our room, our bed, and we're completely alone together." He propped himself up on one elbow. "Which reminds me..."

"What?"

"You said you wanted to decorate your bedroom."

She frowned. "Yes. Do you have any objection?"

His fingers feathered over her breasts, making her nipples tighten in response. "Only if you promise to spend every single night with me. I don't care which bed, as long as we spend it together."

She relaxed, smiling as he moved his body over hers, already opening her legs to accommodate him. He came down over her, his chest just brushing her nipples, making what was sensitive lift to the edge of unbearable. His shaft nudged her entrance, frolicked there, urging her to grow wetter for him. She knew so much more now. Encouraged by her husband she'd explored, discovered new feelings, new sensations and she didn't think she was done yet. With Corin it would last a lifetime. His teasing had the desired result and she wriggled under him. "Corin, now. Please, now."

"Say it."

As he thrust his cock deep into her body, she said it.

“I love you, Corin.”

Later in the day, feeling warm and loved to the point of smugness, Sapphira stood in her new bedroom and stared, narrowing her eyes. Before her, balanced precariously on a stepladder, stood her hapless maid, three long swatches of fabric bunched in her hands.

“Which do you think?” she asked the woman.

“Ma’am, it’s not really my place...”

Sapphira had no patience with that kind of nonsense. “You’re my personal maid, Barton, you are supposed to give me advice as to the colors that suit me best and the best way to present myself. I’ll be holding levées in here, so it needs to be right. The blue, the green or the cream?”

“May I come down now?”

She wouldn’t get anything out of the woman until she allowed that, so she nodded.

Barton gingerly climbed down the ladder, the swatches firmly gripped in one hand. This room was completely bare, but the Chinese-style bed and the matching clothespress and dressing table would be arriving sometime soon. She’d vacate the room then, leave it to the men to put the bed together and arrange the furniture in the places she’d chosen. The floor already sported a soft Savonniere carpet, the pattern a variety of colors that would become any of the pieces her maid carried. She didn’t dare consider the price, and Corin had ordered her not to think of it. An investment, he’d said, then deflected her arguments in the way he was fast perfecting. Kisses and caresses tended to melt her resolve as nothing else did.

Barton crossed the room to her, purpose in her gaze. Sapphira remained still while the maid draped the fabric over her, then stood back and examined the result with detachment and concentration.

“The blue, I think, ma’am. Dark blue lined in ivory silk would make a handsome display.”

Sapphira agreed. While she’d liked the green she knew it was an indulgence. The pink flowers sprinkled over the surface, while pretty, weren’t as striking as the blossoms adorning the blue. It was just that the blue was far more expensive, and she was hoping to assuage her guilty conscience at spending so much money by making an economy somewhere. It would have to come from something else. Maybe plain walls instead of Chinese wallpaper. Yes, the blue was decorative enough on its own. “The blue, then,” she said. “Could you make a note, Barton?”

“Very well, ma’am.”

A commotion from the hall made Sapphira turn and head for the door. The unmistakable sound of workmen filtered up the stairwell and her excitement rose. She wouldn’t be human if she didn’t admit how much she enjoyed getting the new furnishings for her house. And after this morning a new glow filled her heart. He loved her. He said so.

Over the next twenty minutes the men brought in a succession of cedar boxes, smelling of sandalwood and freshly cut timber. She breathed deep and watched them unpack the panels of the bed. Fascinating.

Every bed she'd ever seen was already in place. She hadn't realized they came apart like this, but they would have to, otherwise they wouldn't be able to get them into the houses. They brought the dressing table, washstand and the other smaller pieces and set them in place.

The men glanced at her from time to time and she knew she shouldn't be there, but she wanted to watch, and it was her house, dammit, so she'd watch if she wanted to.

Half an hour later they had the bed set up. Without the drapery that would cover it later, it looked strange, but she could imagine the blue silk in place there. She could also imagine what would take place there when she was alone with her husband.

When the men had gone, she nodded to her maid. "Definitely the blue. I enjoyed that. Could you arrange for some tea to be served in the parlor, please? I'll be down directly."

Her maid bobbed a curtsey and left.

Sapphira turned a slow circle, taking in the room where she'd hold court in the mornings, and perhaps get up to different activity at night. She loved it, adored the smell of fresh wood, clean carpet. For the first time in her life she'd allow the frivolous side of her to come out, buy perfumes in delicate glass bottles, scented soap, all the accoutrements of femininity she'd considered a waste before. Before Corin, that was.

She turned again, ready to leave the room and go downstairs for her tea. But someone blocked her exit.

"How nice to see you again," said George Barber.

Chapter Sixteen

The hairs on the back of her neck rose. George was dressed in a rough brown coat, plain black breeches, a battered cocked hat. As a workman. He must have got in with the other men assembling her new bedroom for her. But apart from realizing how he'd entered the house unannounced, Sapphira didn't concern herself with further details, because what held her attention most of all was the gleaming pistol George held in one hand. His other hand rested in his pocket, probably on the butt of another weapon.

"I wish I could say the same." She didn't like the look in his eyes, half mad, half calculating, and she knew she had to keep him talking. Who had seen him come in? "How are you, George?"

"Better for seeing you." His voice was hoarser than she remembered, but the thin figure and the plain costume remained the same. "We're going home. To our new home. You won't be leaving the house again. Ever."

She shuddered. If she'd married him she didn't doubt that would be her fate. A housebound, downtrodden child bearer. "I have to wait until my—until Lord Elston arrives home."

"Why? That man enticed you, Sapphira, he drew you into sin. I'm willing to forgive you if you come with me now."

"I have to stay to tell him where I'm going." How could the man even consider he'd get away with this? "Otherwise he'll come after us."

"He won't find us. We had to move out of the house at Hampstead, did you hear? Father is taking us overseas, to the American Colonies, he says. We can start again. But I won't go without you. You're mine, Sapphira, the first thing anyone has ever given me to be my very own. You're lovely and I won't let you go." His voice had turned plaintive, and she saw pleading in his avid stare.

Her first reaction was horror when she realized he could do it. If he could get her to the docks, he could stow her away and then they'd be lost. Not that he'd get that far. He had to get her down two flights of stairs and out the door first. She backed up. "I have to get some clothes."

"We have your old ones. Your father packed them ready to send to you, but I took them first. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't love you, but that won't stop me doing my duty. I want you, Sapphira. You're mine. I never had anything before, and when you looked at me you saw a person, not a thing."

He'd been a victim too, then. His parents had starved him of love and in her he saw salvation.

"Let me get a cloak."

Reluctantly, he nodded. "It's not a warm day. I'll come with you."

She prayed they'd find someone in her dressing room, but it was a forlorn hope. At this time of day the servants would be engaged elsewhere.

From the mad look in his eyes, she knew that one false move and George would kill her.

"Is her ladyship in, Flatley?" Corin handed his hat and gloves to the footman.

"She is supervising the arrival of her bedroom furniture, sir, but she ordered tea served in the parlor, so we are expecting her down directly."

"Very good." With any luck they wouldn't receive any visitors and he could steal a kiss or two, maybe more. Now that he'd acknowledged his love for Sapphira it was as if a weight had been lifted away from his shoulders. He could come home early to see her, share more time with her, stop behaving as if this marriage was anything but a love match.

He went into the parlor, a cheerful room on the ground floor, its window opening on to the garden beyond. He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the vista, imagining a few clipped hedges here, a climbing rose there. He'd talk to Sapphira about it and by next spring they might have a cozy rose bower to take their tea in, and maybe indulge in a little *plein-air* dalliance.

Meantime, he had some news for her. His mother had arranged her presentation at court. Then their season would begin in earnest. He'd have to squire her to a few balls and such, until she had made her own friends and knew how to go on.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour, its tinkling sound sweet in the relative silence. Realizing it was at least ten minutes since he'd entered the room, he wondered what had become of her. Knowing his wife, she was probably in rapt adoration of her new furniture. She liked to behave rationally, but he hadn't missed her delight when her new gowns were delivered, and the extra furnishings for the house. She loved pretty things, something nobody had indulged her with before. It would be his joy to bring that to her. In fact, he had a trinket in his pocket he thought she'd like. He was just passing the shop and saw it, and immediately thought of her.

A sound from upstairs made him jerk his head to one side, and almost before he realized what he was doing he was outside the room.

A shot from inside the house.

He started up the stairs, shoving aside the footman already on his way up. Someone was screaming. Not his wife, he'd know her voice anywhere. One of the maids. His heart in his throat, Corin began to pray. *Not Sapphira, please God, not her!* When the footman put his hand on his shoulder, he wanted to fling him away, but the man was strong and Corin turned to face him. The man jerked his thumb in the direction of the study.

Good thinking. He kept a couple of loaded pistols there, for the use of the night-watchman and the hallboy. Corin forced his mind clear of the shock, into rationality, and leaped down the stairs. He knew

exactly where the pistols were kept and grabbed them both, thrusting one at Flatley. “Go up the backstairs. Get other weapons, just in case, and rouse the house.” There seemed no need for quiet, since the maid was still screaming.

He came upon her on the first floor, just outside the drawing-room. Sapphira’s lady’s maid. He grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a shake, not hard, but enough to make her meet his frantic gaze. “What happened?”

“I—I— There’s a man, my lord, a man, and he has her ladyship! I went upstairs to see if she wanted her tea brought up, and he was there, holding a pistol on her. He fired when he saw me.”

“Did he hurt her?” He couldn’t bring himself to ask the inevitable question, but his mind supplied the answers. He saw her, bleeding, a great wound torn in her body, staring up at him, already beyond help.

No, no! The maid shook her head. “I don’t know, sir.” Then she went off again in a series of screams that threatened to deafen him, and lifted a shaking hand.

He followed the direction of her finger, looking over his shoulder before he slowly stood and turned around.

Sapphira stood at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the bedrooms, wearing the gown he’d seen her in earlier that day, but with a cloak around her shoulders. Behind her stood a disheveled ruffian. His dress was respectable work clothes, but one pocket hung loose, and his wig had tilted askew under his cocked hat. Sapphira blinked hard and he knew she was blinking away tears. “I have to go with George now,” she said over the screams of the maid.

“Quiet, woman!” His sharp, snapped-out tones did something to bring the maid to her senses, and her screams declined into miserable whimpers. “Why do you have to go with George?” He needed time. George’s back was unprotected, one clear shot would do it.

Then George lifted a pistol. It gleamed evilly in the light from the open door behind them. He brought up the pistol to rest the barrel against Sapphira’s head. “This is why. I shouldn’t have to do this, but I need to reclaim my fiancée and there isn’t much time.”

“We’re going to the Colonies,” she told him.

For a bare instant Corin believed her matter-of-fact tones, and the future stretched before him, bleak and loveless. That would not happen. He would keep her if he had to tie her to the bed. “And do you intend to bring a bill of divorcement?”

“If necessary.” Her lips compressed and he knew she was fighting back tears. “George loves me, and he wants to claim me for his own.”

Pathetic little bastard. He’d kill him before he’d let George Barber steal his wife.

He felt a measure of relief when a flicker attracted his attention and he saw Flatley, armed with the twin to the pistol he held, silently step out behind them. He’d removed his livery coat, a bright royal blue that would undoubtedly attract Barber’s attention had he worn it. The white shirt and blue waistcoat was

bad enough, but shirtsleeves would also give the footman better control over his weapon. He held it as if he knew what to do, lifted it in a steady hand, and then paused as he realized what Corin already knew—Barber would shoot Sapphira, if only in a reflex action when he died. That was a good, well cared for pistol he held, and if he shot, he would kill her outright.

Corin breathed out and concentrated on the present, forcing his terror and fury out of his mind. Neither would help his aim and he needed that if he was to save her. One look at Barber and he knew he couldn't persuade the man to let Sapphira go. Reason had passed him by some time ago. One moment, one second of inaction, and he'd have him.

Barber jerked a nod at him. "Go down in front of me, and take that woman with you." He meant the maid. It would hamper Corin to hold her, but fortunately the maid, her face tearstained, got to her feet with the aid of a nearby chair and stood trembling before him, hysterics abated, so he wouldn't have to hold her up. She stepped in front of Corin, enabling him to bring his weapon up unseen, sheltered by her body. "Walk in front of me," he said. "Slowly."

The maid nodded and sniffed. When she took a step toward the stairs, Corin took one at the same time, keeping his pistol concealed. Barber stood completely still, watching them, and Corin saw his chance. "The Colonies can be hard, if you're not prepared for them." Anything to distract the man from his concentration on Sapphira.

"We're ready." Barber grinned at him. Seeing the state of his teeth, Corin would rather have remained ignorant of the interior of that mouth. "We have money."

"Sapphira is my wife."

"Not there she isn't. Papa says they don't accept the new marriage laws there. I'll marry her on board. She was promised to me. She's mine. I never had anything of my own before."

Just like a parcel. She was whoever she chose to give herself to, but Corin would have been lying if he didn't admit that he'd have fought for her. Just not like this. The maid took another step, which he closely shadowed. "I don't want to turn my back on you." He didn't look in the direction of the footman, ready, as Corin was, to take his shot. They'd only have one chance.

Barber moved and nudged Sapphira's head with the barrel of his flintlock. She blinked away a tear and when she turned, Corin saw her upper arm. Red with blood. He'd grazed her. He'd kill him for bringing a moment's distress to his wife. She winced when Barber grabbed her arm over the graze and moved a little, her distress making her reaction involuntary.

It was just what he needed. Corin brought up his weapon and fired.

The sound reverberated around the hall and Corin realized that Flatley must have fired at the same time. Good man. The footman leaped forward now, as Corin did. He pulled his wife into the shelter of his arms while Flatley took care of what was left of Barber.

Flatley had aimed for the man's shoulder. Corin had gone for his head and his shot had shattered the man's skull. He didn't want Sapphira to see the mess, so he swept her up into his arms and stepped over the body to take her upstairs and lay her on the bed. When he looked down on her face he saw she was unconscious.

Although he told himself there was little harm, the sight of the blood on her arm enraged and terrified him. Her maid, now past her shock, attended to her mistress, efficiently stripping her clothes away to expose the wound. While Corin held her, the maid cleaned and dressed the wound and then left Corin to hold her tightly and wait for her to awaken.

When Sapphira opened her eyes, she saw Corin gazing down at her.

She melted into him and then visions brought back to her just what had happened. George, the pistol, Corin, white-faced, fury blazing from every tense muscle. An explosion of sound and then blackness. Her last thought before she'd passed out was that she'd had too little time with the man she loved.

But it seemed not. When she stirred, pain shot up her arm and she groaned.

"Sweetheart, try not to move too much. He shot you."

"I remember." She watched him, afraid to look, afraid to shift her gaze from him in case she never saw that wondrous look in them again. "He was mad."

"Not mad, desperate. He was simpleminded, did as he was told, but he saw you and wanted you. He was yet another victim of his parents."

Anxiety shaded the warm love in his eyes, and she didn't want his concern to grow any worse. "How is he?"

His lips thinned. "Dead. I'm sorry, my love, but it was the only way you'd be safe. He would have killed you."

"I know that. But he had four loaded pistols with him. He used one to frighten me, another stuck in his belt and he had one in each pocket. He would have killed you, made me a widow."

He kissed her forehead. "I don't think he was that rational. He'd seen you snatched from him and he wanted you back."

She snuggled close, despite the twinge from her arm. "He shot my bed."

"We'll buy you another. But you won't see much of it for a while. I won't let you out of this one easily."

She wore her shift and nothing else, and she wanted him in the same condition, or more, so she lifted her aching arm to his waistcoat and undid the first button. Her fingers fumbled at first, but by the time she reached the second, she'd regained some control. He laid his hand over hers, his fingers warm and gentle. "What are you doing?"

"Will you get in with me?"

He chuckled. "I'm not sure that's wise. Barton will be in presently with some food for you."

"I don't want food. I want you."

"You're sore."

"Not where it counts." She tried to shake her hand free but he wouldn't let her.

"You rest. If you insist, I'll join you for a while. I want to hold you, love."

He crossed to the door and turned the key in the lock. Nobody would enter once they realized the newlyweds wanted to be alone.

He removed his clothes, turning it into a teasing display, just for her. To make her smile. She watched as his waistcoat dropped to the floor, and he bent to undo the buckles at his knee and then stood up again to unbutton the falls on his breeches. He took them off with his stockings after he'd kicked out of his shoes. The garments lay on the floor in a glittering heap, his buttons, buckles and shoe-buckles proclaiming his station in life. His body proclaimed everything else, everything that mattered to her. If Corin had been a merchant like her family, it might have been easier for them, but he wouldn't have been Corin, the man she adored. He would have been someone else. The privilege he accepted but never took for granted gave him an air of confidence without arrogance, the confidence that had first drawn her. Perhaps the person she was, the independence granted to a woman of her situation in life, had drawn him. She hoped so because she didn't intend to change that.

"You wanted a partner," she said.

"I did. I do. In and out of bed. The life we have to lead is already proscribed for us, but it doesn't have to go exactly to plan." Dressed only in his shirt now, he gazed at her and grasped the hem of the garment, which came to mid-thigh. As he revealed his magnificent body she was taken by its strength, the concealed power only she saw. As if he read her thoughts, he gazed at her. "You're all I want now, my love. All I'll ever want. From now on only you will know me like this, and only you will be in my heart."

"And our children." She loved the way his body moved when he crossed the room to the bed.

"In time, sweetheart. All in good time."

Sitting up, ignoring the shard of pain from her arm, Sapphira stripped off her night shift and tossed it aside. He climbed up on to the mattress in a single gliding move, unconsciously displaying his honed athleticism. But she'd love him when that body grew old, when it lost that fine shape, if it ever did. Whatever he was, he was Corin, the man who shared her heart and soul.

He took her into his arms and she knew complete bliss.

About the Author

Lynne Connolly has been in love with the Georgian age since the age of nine, when she did a project about coffee and tea at school. One look at the engraving of the Georgian coffee house, and she was a goner. It's the longest love affair of her life.

She stopped looking around old houses and visiting museums long enough to go to work, fall in love for a second time, marry and have a family, but they have to share her with her obsession, which they do with good grace and much humor.

To learn more about Lynne Connolly, please visit www.lynneconnolly.com. Send an email to lynneconnollyuk@yahoo.co.uk or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/lynneconnolly>. She can also be found at MySpace, Facebook and the Samhain Café.

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Richard and Rose

Hareton Hall

Scandal, murder and passion—an ordinary day for Richard and Rose.

Eyton

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Richard and Rose, Book 5

When Richard and Rose visit his family estate in Derbyshire to celebrate the christening of their firstborn, Rose comes face to face with some hard realities about the powerful Kerre family. The vast majority of them are far from delighted with Richard's choice of wife. Plus, they think a man who shares his bed with his wife *every* night must have something wrong with him.

Rose is driven half mad by Richard's overly careful love for her. Somewhere underneath that smooth, sophisticated surface lies the passionate, intense lover she longs for—and she takes steps to seduce that savage lover back into her bed.

Their joyous occasion is marred by the theft of a valuable necklace. Richard's family looks to him to solve the crime—but something isn't adding up. Evidence pointing to two trusted servants seems too convenient...and then they're murdered.

From the tangle of jealousies, secrets and desperate lies, Richard and Rose once again dance on the edge of danger to achieve justice—without dragging the family name into public scandal.

Warning: Sharp-shootin' Rose goes gunning for her man in this one. So steamy sex ahoy!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Eyton:

"I suppose I was naïve." He laughed. "You can read about it, and men do exchange knowledge about such things. Some even boast of their conquests."

"Did you?"

"I didn't need to. I merely made no secret of it." He smiled and touched my face with one finger, his breath catching in his throat when I firmed my grasp on him. "But that was before you. I took great care of you. I touched you, felt where I should go, what I should do, and I knew I must be gentle. Even then I hurt you."

I smiled back at him. "Not much. And what you've brought to me since makes up for it a hundredfold."

"Thank God the woman I fell in love with loves this as much as I do. Or do you? Is this all an act, to please me?"

He was teasing me, but I replied, "Do you think I'm that good an actress?" I let him go and swung myself on top of him, propping myself up on my elbows. I pushed my now-tangled hair back behind my ears. "I never expected this, but when we first met—no, the day after, when you were helpless and hurt—I

saw the man beneath all the affectations, the finery. I wanted you although I didn't know it was desire. My body seemed to recognise you first."

He smiled and shifted a little under me, sliding his now-hardened member between my thighs, touching my cleft but not going any further. "And there you were in that hopelessly outmoded but obviously new riding habit, standing next to your sister who was so lovely she could make the sun come out at night, and I knew I wanted you, knew I had found you at last. I was horrified."

That made me laugh. "Did you fight it?"

"Not for long. You wouldn't let me. If you hadn't been so openly responsive, the moment might have passed and I might now be married to Julia Cartwright."

Even the name made me shudder. "Don't let's talk about her now."

"No." He looked at me, his gaze sweeping over what I was revealing for him, his smile telling me he was enjoying the sight. "I don't want to bring either my error in judgment or her noxious husband into our bed anymore. Let them do as they please, so long as they leave us alone."

I could do nothing but concur with that. I bent my head to kiss him, feeling his hand still on my breast crushed between us. I sat up, and his hand followed me. His other hand held my waist, and he lifted his knees, giving me something to lean on. I sat up and looked at him, decided to tease. "I was told tonight about some of your exploits."

His look never left mine. "Which ones?"

"When you seduced two rivals in a week and spurned them both at a ball."

He smiled reminiscently. I had not expected that, especially in this situation. "They deserved it. They had started their own book on which one could get me first, so I obliged. After I put a substantial wager on the winner. But she was only a winner by an hour or two."

"Don't you miss it?" I looked down at his face. I found it difficult to connect those stories with this person I knew so well.

"No," he answered immediately. "It was pleasure engendered from a mixture of boredom and desperation. I didn't care. You made me care."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know. But there's nothing to miss. I have so much here I can't imagine ever wanting anything else. You shouldn't listen to them."

"I want to know what you were like before."

He shook his head, serious now. "No, no you don't. I spent twelve angry years trying to destroy myself. I'm not angry anymore, I have all I want, and it fell into my life before I went looking for it."

I smiled and watched him. He lowered his eyes to look at my body and back up to my face again, taking his time, his loving gaze lingering on me. I delighted in the pleasure he took in me. "It's like they're talking about a stranger. I don't know that man."

“If you had known him, you’d never have taken me seriously. You’d have watched, as others watched, without coming close.”

“I’d have run away. I didn’t like hurt or distress and you went looking for it.”

He frowned. “I wouldn’t have let you. I love you too much to let you go.” His face cleared as he looked up at me. He reached his hands up to hold my breasts. I moved into his hands and lifted, so he found his way back home. I sighed in contentment as I felt him fill me. Our immediate needs, the desperation was gone now. This was loving. “And now?”

“Now,” he replied, “I don’t care what anyone else does. I have you, and I mean to keep you. Whatever it takes, I’ll take care of you and love you. Remember what I told you. This is love, this is making love, and whatever anyone else says can make no difference to this.”

He began to move slowly, sensuously, and I responded, my movements an echo of his. I kept my eyes on his face and watched him until his hands slipped down to my waist and I leaned back against his knees, putting my hands behind his legs to pull myself onto him.

This always engendered some of the most intense feelings in me, and I cried out, hearing his murmur of “Yes, that’s it, oh, my love, yes,” from below me.

Is the enemy of her enemy a friend...or a beast?

Beauty Tempts the Beast

© 2009 Leslie Dicken

Lord Ashworth is scarred by a night of terror years ago that left his face in ruins and his life in shreds. He hides in Silverstone Manor, using rumors that paint him as a horrible, murdering monster to keep visitors at bay. Yet he can't shake the feeling that the rumors might be true. He tells himself it's better this way. If his memories ever resurface, at least he will be the only one hurt by them.

The woman on his doorstep, however, simply refuses to fear him. That's not only an oddity, it's a threat to his secret...and his heart.

Vivian Suttley has seen the face of evil more than once in her young life. She's on the run from the latest, a cruel man determined to force her to marry him. Whatever the whispers about the reclusive Ashworth, surely it's nothing compared to the bleak, violent future she leaves behind.

Ashworth saved her once before, and he's her last hope for refuge. Yet she wonders if she's truly safer at Silverstone—or if she has just made the biggest mistake of her life.

Warning: This book contains a lot of sexual tension and a several sexual scenes, have a fan ready!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Beauty Tempts the Beast:

Vivian had pulled a stool over and was sitting upon it, warming herself at the hearth. A firm muscle rounded her calf toward the small bump of her ankle. She had pulled her hair over her shoulder and was raking her fingers through the ends. A hint of her breasts peeked above the towel.

Ashworth swallowed.

He held the brush and dress out to her. "I'll wait for you in the hall." Where he could remain harmless.

"Stay."

Her soft plea halted him.

"I would find it much easier if you would brush my hair."

Ashworth clenched his jaw. A spring coiled in his gut, winding him tighter. Desire flushed through every cell of his body, but panic tempered the heat. "I could call for Mrs. Plimpton."

"She cannot be spared."

"Certainly there is a servant here who can attend you."

"Please, I know only you."

Did she realize what she asked? He was a man. A man who had shied away from a woman's touch for too long. What he would give to try again.

Ashworth took the brush from Vivian's hands as she stood, pretending to ignore the unease in her eyes. She turned to face the snapping fire and presented him with her silken shoulders.

He ran the brush lightly through her waist-length hair and forced himself to resist the urge to skim across her bottom. In fact, he had to resist touching her anywhere. But the hunger pounded within him like a violent storm, his pulsing flesh ached for release.

Over and over he slid the brush through her tresses, unable to stop, unable to speak.

"My lord?" Her voice was fragile, vulnerable. She spun quickly, suddenly landing within his arms. Her breasts pressed upon chest. The scent of her tempted his restraint.

She was seducing him. He wasn't a fool. But how could he not react? How could he not take the chance that he might find relief in her warmth? But he would not let her have control.

Ashworth dropped the brush and yanked her hard against him, making certain she understood his desire. Her eyes widened but she did not fight him. He would test how far she was willing to go.

Bypassing her pliant mouth, he grazed her ear with his lips. He licked the curve, inhaled the sweetness of feminine beauty. She tensed briefly, then melted against him.

His hands reached for the cloth wound around her. He wanted to cast it away, lower her to the floor and have his way with her. Why should he not?

Then her arms reached behind him and her palms flattened against his back. It took him a moment to realize that she was embracing him. Ashworth lifted his head and placed a kiss upon her wet hair.

Vivian did not linger. She slid her hands downward, where her fingers brushed the band of his breeches.

Reawakened, he swooped down and lifted her into his arms. Her dark eyes did not leave his. An unfamiliar ache burrowed into his chest. An ache urging him to hold her tight. He'd ignored it. He must.

His breath halted as his gaze traveled the length of her, from her sleek shoulders to her shadowed breasts, past the towel, then down to her well-formed legs.

But those curves which lay beneath the towel...?

He whispered her name then kissed her lightly upon the lips.

She reached for his neck, pulling him down to her.

Passion swelled.

Ashworth ravaged her mouth, suckled on her tongue. He kissed her neck, the hollow space at the base of her throat.

Sitting up, he pulled off his shirt then tossed it to the floor.

She was lovely. Unlike the sheltered white skin of the girls his mother usually sent from London, Vivian's was the color of warm tea.

He nudged her legs apart and settled his hips between them. A draft circled through the air and glided across his back. The candles dipped then brightened again, elongating the shadow between her breasts. He

lowered his lips to the valley, kissing her softness, skimming his tongue along the cleft of her delicious skin.

He wanted more. More.

Rain gusted against the rattling window.

A woman screamed.

Ashworth jerked his head up. He stared at Vivian's face. Her head lay upon his pillow, eyes closed, lips slightly parted and swollen from his kisses. Uncertain perhaps, but not terrified.

Resuming his quest, he tugged on her wrap. He must have it gone. But it stuck tight. "Vivian," he breathed. Her eyebrows creased but she arched her back. The towel came free.

Ashworth stared at her beauty, mesmerized. She was beautiful. Incredible. Perfect.

He enclosed his lips over an enchanting pink nipple and it sprang to life in his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the knot, as if he were rolling a small pebble.

Blood.

He recoiled, stared down at her skin. Had he bitten her? But no redness marred her skin. She was perfect. Every place he looked upon her, she was perfect.

Slashes. Screams. Blood.

He blinked, but this time the image did not vanish from Vivian's body. Everywhere, crimson fluid spurted from gaping wounds. He looked down to see his hands covered in it. A nauseating odor stung at his nostrils. Nearby, someone wailed.

Ashworth sprang up from the bed.

"My lord?"

He shook his head, but he still saw her covered in a red haze. Ice choked his veins. Cramps ravaged his gut. Bile burned in his throat.

Vivian sat up, covering herself. "What is it? What's happened?"

Ashworth back away, bumped into a chair. "Leave me."

"I don't understand."

"Go. Now." He spun away from her and braced himself against the window ledge. Rain thrashed at the panes. Lightning fractured the night.

"Have I done something to upset you?" She came close. Stood directly behind him. He could destroy her with a quick blow of his arm.

Warm fingers settled upon his bare shoulder. "Lord Ashworth?"

"LEAVE ME!"

At last she scurried to gather her things. Hurried footsteps faded and then the door slammed.

He panted, struggled for a normal breath. He'd prayed Vivian would be different, that her innocence and beauty would be enough to heal him. He had been mistaken. He would not be fool enough to challenge his destiny again.

The Monster was doomed to live alone.

Ashworth yanked on the rope for Pinkley.

Of all the juice joints he had to bust, this one had to be hers...

Jazz Baby

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In the world of illegal speakeasies, Kate Kirkland has her life running smoother than a Model T. Maybe moving the family bar into the basement wasn't the best choice for her alcoholic brother, but Kate's making them a living—until a local gangster tries to expand his territory. Right into her bar.

Luckily Micah Trent, her handsome and too-suave bootlegger, is ready and willing to offer her a helping hand. If Kate can bring herself to accept it. Since sharing one sensual dance to seal their deal, she can't ignore the delectably wicked way he makes her feel.

Micah is keeping secrets of his own. He's a Prohibition Agent, sworn to shut down the gin mills and distilleries that keep illegal booze flowing. Kate's speakeasy is next on his list—right after he uses her as bait to catch the gangster hunting her.

But even if Micah and Kate can maneuver their way through the gangsters' dangerous underworld, will their love survive the trial by fire?

Warning: This title contains steamy hot sex, big fancy guns that result in just a little bit of brains on the floor, and enough booze to float an armada.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Jazz Baby:

Down, boy. Kate Kirkland was a means to an end, that was it. Nothing more, nothing less. Johnny Vittorelli was in the process of setting himself up to be bootlegger to all of lower Manhattan. Thanks to a luckily timed bust of Saul, Micah and Jake would be sitting pretty before Vittorelli even got his operation going.

He could hardly believe he was back here, in New York again. He'd grown up here, in the seedy Bowery, and left as soon as he was able, unwilling to watch criminals and the corrupt leadership of Tammany Hall politicians drag it down even further. Only to have life and work drag him full circle to take down a criminal enterprise.

When it was all over, the Prohibition Bureau would wipe through every club involved in the sting.

Not quite the way a man thanked a woman for a lovely romp in bed, and that wasn't even touching on how he'd have to lie about himself every moment they were together. It'd be in his best interests to get his brain out of his pants. Pronto.

"It's a deal, Miss Kirkland," he finally replied.

"You got a bathroom in this joint?" Jake piped up for the first time since they'd sat down.

"Of course, Mr. Sterling. I'll show you where it is." She angled her body to get out of the booth, which left her facing him. "Mr. Trent, if you'd please let me out."

For a split second, he was tempted to force her to push him out. She'd already put him to the test, so it would only be fair. But he slid out of the way rapidly. He needed to keep in her good graces, not piss her off enough to send her shopping for a new bootlegger.

Once again, Kate let them through the small club, this time to a shadowed hallway at the opposite corner. Micah stayed to the rear of the procession, the better to watch her hips sway. Her dress was open nearly to the small of her back, black silk framing creamy, porcelain skin. The soft sweep of her spine curved in exactly at the bottom of the opening, hinting at what was further below.

That whole *keeping his mind out of his pants* idea wasn't going so well.

"There you go, Mr. Sterling. Second door on the right."

Jake nodded briefly and moved toward the indicated door. Kate turned to Micah and propped a hand on her hip.

"Were you going with him? Maybe he needs help to shake?"

"You are a spitfire, aren't you?" He leaned against the turquoise and silver wall.

"Most of us modern girls are."

"To answer your question, no. Jake's a big boy. He's been toilet trained for a good three years now."

"Then why did you feel obliged to follow?" Her tone was dry, but a smile quirked her cupid's-bow mouth. "I'd think you'd be enjoying your drink with Saul. Our business is finished for now."

"We didn't seal the deal." He'd followed to ensure Jake would have a private moment to snoop around, but it wouldn't serve to say so. In his line of work, the truth was seldom the best choice. He and Jake specialized in undercover work. In quickly, get the information, or make the bust and slide out again. No muss, no fuss. Already this was shaping up to be one of the longest operations they'd orchestrated. He couldn't afford to get side tracked by the sexy speakeasy owner.

"We agreed. That's enough for me."

"Not me." He caught her hand in his, loosely holding her fingertips. Every cell in his body popped to life, the same as when they'd shaken hands before. "Dance with me."

"Is dancing often a part of forming new business relations for you?"

"Nope."

"Then why make the exception for me?"

"It's rare I get to do business with such a beautiful woman." He tugged gently on her fingers, aiming her at the postage-stamped dance floor. She took a small step in that direction. Her mouth was saying all the right things, but she was weakening. "Dance with me."

"I have work to do. This isn't necessary."

"Of course not. That's why it'll be fun. Come on, it's a fast one. We'll swing around the floor a time or two and I'll let you get back to work."

With a short nod, she acquiesced. He lost no time in hauling her out to the floor. The instant they set foot on the parquet, the piano player segued into a slow, smoky number. He couldn't have planned it better if he'd slipped the man five bucks.

She considered backing out. He could see it in the rigidity of her shoulders and the brief frown that wrinkled her pale brow. Then she took a deep breath that lifted her small but perfectly formed breasts and raised her arms into waltz position. Micah scooped her into his arms and swept her out into the dance before she could have second thoughts.

And then he nearly lost track of the steps in a raging sweep of lust.

Bare skin. The hand on her back rested on bare skin. As smooth as silk, with sleek muscles moving beneath.

Sure, he'd seen her dress. Logically he'd known he'd be touching her skin if they danced. He just hadn't had a clue what effect it would have on him. Apparently that effect was to stop all semblance of mental processes.

She moved beautifully in his arms. If he even thought about a turn, she was right there with him. She avoided his gaze at first, until he spun them into a swooping series of turns, stopping only when her bright gaze lifted to his, a giddy smile curling her lips.

Involuntarily, his arms tightened, drawing her nearer. The beaded fringe around her skirt brushed his shins and their chests were one deep breath apart. The dance stretched on into the type of extended moment that approached eternity.



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