



His to Want

Heart of the Wolf Trilogy

SABLE GREY

A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

His to Want

ISBN #978-0-85715-123-0

©Copyright Sable Grey 2010

Cover Art by Natalie Winters ©Copyright April 2010

Edited by Michele Paulin

Total-E-Bound Publishing

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher, Total-E-Bound Publishing.

Applications should be addressed in the first instance, in writing, to Total-E-Bound Publishing. Unauthorised or restricted acts in relation to this publication may result in civil proceedings and/or criminal prosecution.

The author and illustrator have asserted their respective rights under the Copyright Designs and Patents Acts 1988 (as amended) to be identified as the author of this book and illustrator of the artwork.

Published in 2010 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Heart of the Wolf

HIS TO WANT

Sable Grey

Dedication

Deanna Lee

My friend, my business partner, as well as my partner in crime. I wouldn't want to be a two headed dragon with anyone else.

Chapter One

Clasping her gloved hands in front of her, Cadence Hurst sat pensively waiting in the corridor of the Ashton House. Two storeys of stone and brick, the manor was impressive and reflected the wealth the Ashtons of London were known for. The floors shone, scrubbed clean, and there was the faint scent of lye soap in the air. The only light was the sunrays that filtered through the large windows at the ends of the corridor. No tapestries. No rugs. Impressive, but rather boring, she decided.

"Lord Ashton will receive you." The servant woman returned and offered a small smile from within her ruddy face of wrinkles.

Cadence stood, leaving her bag by the bench and stepped into the room. Her gaze swept past the floor to ceiling bookcase that covered one wall to the un-ignorable man who sat behind a massive desk. As he stood, her throat closed. Tall, broad shouldered but leanly built, Victor Ashton's presence was as immense as his home. Sharp features beneath thick dark hair and an intense gaze nearly rooted her.

"If I'd expected your visit, I would have greeted you myself." Long legs carried him around the corner of his desk.

She forced herself to move forward, steeling against the fear that shook through every vein. "Would you, Lord Ashton? I find that shocking, given it was your hand that struck my husband to his death nearly seven months ago."

He halted, his gaze narrowing. "You are mistaken, Lady..."

"There is no mistake." She retrieved the parchment and held it out. "It was one of your ships, the *Maiden Rowley*, that attacked. I have my husband's first mate's account of the incident."

His step quickened, closing the distance between them, long fingers reaching out to snatch the parchment from her hand. His lids lowered, and he read the account silently while Cadence watched his expression for any indication of guilt.

"I assure you that this *is* a mistake, madam." He spoke without looking up. "My brother would not wage an unwarranted attack on any ship. I shall send for him at once so we may clear up this...misunderstanding."

"How long will it take for him to arrive?"

"Three months at most." He turned and dropped the parchment to his desk.

"And I am to do nothing for three months? My husband is dead, Lord Ashton. I am left burdened and..." Her words faltered when he half turned, his gaze narrowed and filled with suspicion.

"Exactly *what* is the reason for your unannounced visit today, Lady Hurst?"

Cadence wet her lips. "Widow Hurst, sir, and I mean to allow you the chance to rectify the situation."

He faced her fully. "By rectify, you mean you wish me to give you money. I am not an ill-educated man nor am I lacking in the sense God gave most men. I can see you are here to dip into my pocket. And just how much is your husband worth to you, Lady Hurst." The dryness of his tone made her wince.

"Now that my husband is deceased I am left with his debts and no money to pay them. His family refuses to take responsibility."

"How much?" he repeated.

She took a breath. "I am here to secure employment that will allow me to pay off his debts myself."

"Get out. Have the constable come and charge me for any crimes you believe I've committed." He returned to his desk, settling in the chair.

"I beg you to reconsider, sir." She rushed forward to stand across from him. "I learn quickly, and this place is big enough that you would not even know I was here."

When he leant forward, attention dropping to his work, Cadence's mind raced. She had very little to barter with. Her husband had left her with nothing but the debt.

"I have knowledge of bookkeeping. I know the process of ordering merchandise and of—"

"I said get out."

Cadence frowned and looked at her hands before returning her gaze to his face. "I can be accommodating."

His gaze slowly rose. "I beg your pardon, madam?"

"I bore my husband's preferences dutifully. I would bear yours in the same manner." She looked down at her hands again. He was silent, but she couldn't look at him. Shame filled her. She was bartering herself like a whore. While it was only whispered of, it was no secret Victor Ashton kept many lovers and that his tastes included deviant practises. It was the only thing she had to use, and she would do so desperately.

"You meant to come here and blackmail me."

"I did, sir. I am desperate. If I do not pay off his debts, my husband's brothers are cruel and would expect reimbursement in one form or another." She drew a shaky breath.

"Then why not go to *them* with your proposal?"

"I would rather one devil than three," she answered simply.

"I do not like being threatened."

"And I do not like the idea of being mistreated by my husband's family." Cadence lifted her gaze. "I offer you all I have to give to prevent either from happening."

"Perhaps I am as cruel as your husband's family."

"Perhaps. But if I can pay my husband's debts, it shall only be temporary." She lifted her chin. "I've but one condition."

He leant back in his chair, crossing his arms and arched a brow. "And that is?"

"That any evidence left upon my body be done so where it is easily concealed."

For several long moments, he continued to stare at her in silence. "You *are* desperate."

"I am," Cadence admitted.

"It's poor business practice to negotiate desperately."

Cadence laughed coldly. "If you'd not killed my husband I would not be so desperate."

"I did not kill your husband."

"I do not care for your lies. I only care for freeing myself his debts and his family." Cadence waited.

"I will consider your proposal. You may stay here tonight while I make my decision. Have Hannah show you to a room."

He looked down at the parchment on his desk as she turned on shaky legs and headed from the room. At least, he was not sending her away as he'd initially intended, she told herself as she stepped back into the corridor where the servant woman awaited. One look at

the woman's face and Cadence knew the servant woman had been eavesdropping. She didn't care. They could think what they wished of her as long as she wasn't sent back to the Hurst household to suffer.

* * * *

Victor halted outside the door of the room that had been given to Cadence Hurst. It was late, well past midnight, yet candlelight glowed from beneath the door. What a strange woman the widow of Josiah Hurst had proven to be.

He had lied to her. It was indeed his ship that had attacked Hurst on the water, under his direct instructions to do so. For months, he'd tolerated the small thefts of his merchandise from his competitor, but when Hurst had attacked his brother and one of his ships, he'd had enough.

Now this woman, Hurst's widow, came to him and tried to blackmail him into doing as she wished as well. But Cadence was far more convincing than her deceased husband had been. Hurst had known nothing of the trading business. By instinct, this woman had offered whatever she'd heard rumoured he wanted.

After she'd left his study, he'd sent someone to find out how much Hurst's debts were and to pay them off. Had she only named the price he would have obliged. But while he had some honour, he was a greedy and selfish bastard, too. She'd offered to oblige his sexual appetites, and damn, but he wanted her to. He set the candle he carried on the table in the corridor then faced her room.

Her scent permeated through the door and found him. It twisted like beckoning fingers through the smells of the tallow candles and the night to tempt him. He'd smelled her fear earlier and her relief. Her feminine scent had been strong, heightened by her adrenalin, and had promised something sweeter if he accepted her proposal.

It was why he was a better businessman than Hurst or other of his merchant competitors. He was a werewolf and naturally had been born with better instincts about people than most. It gave him strength in his career and weakness in his private affairs—a weakness for beautiful women, for women who smelled feminine and responded strongly to him. Women like Cadence Hurst.

Lifting his hand, he rapped softly on the door. When the smooth wood opened moments later, revealing the woman he'd spent most of the evening thinking about, Victor's mouth dried. Earlier, she'd been buttoned up to her chin in clothes, her hair pulled back into a tight knot. Now, she wore a shift that he could very nearly see through and her auburn hair hung over her shoulders in long dark waves.

"You've come to a decision?"

If he hadn't, she'd just sealed the deal for herself by wearing that damnable shift. "I've come to counteroffer so that I do not feel I've taken complete advantage of you." But at that moment, he felt like tossing what little honour he had out the second-storey window and ravishing the woman.

"I will pay off your debts completely. In return, you will remain here for seven days." He saw her breathe out as if she'd been waiting for the worst. "During that week period, you will be as obliging and obedient as you said you could be. At the end of seven days, you will leave here with your husband's debts paid, and we will drop the accusations of murder."

Her tongue slid along her bottom lip, leaving a trail of moisture in its wake. "That sounds reasonable."

"Then we have an arrangement we both agree upon?"

"Yes." She lifted her hand to her chest as tears formed in her eyes. "Thank you."

"Do not begin weeping with gratitude just yet." He grasped the door frame with one hand and leaned against the wooden structure. "Now we must discuss my particular tastes."

Her hand dropped, and she clasped both together in front of her, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. He almost smiled at the pensive expression on her face. Many rumours circulated about him. He was an unwed son of the Ashton family. That made him a prime target for curious busy bodies.

"Whatever you mean to reveal to me will be kept in confidence," she assured him when he didn't speak right away. "I'd like to keep my reputation intact as well and would not speak of what goes on here."

Victor almost smiled at that. He didn't give a wit what anyone thought of him. She could invite the whole of London to watch what they did, and he wouldn't care as long as he got what he wanted. But the sentiment was well intended.

"I will never come to you in your room." He glanced down at her shift, thinking he was already tempted to break that rule. "I will never ask you to come to mine. Instead, when I have need of you, I will send for you to come to my study. There, I shall do nothing you don't want me to. If something is not to your liking, you must merely say so and it will end."

"I told you that I am prepared to bear your —"

"And I am telling you that I have never forced a woman to do anything against her will, and I will not start doing so now. I find no pleasure in the prospect." That wasn't entirely true. The prospect of grabbing her and doing as he wished at this moment made his cock harden. But she would like it, he thought. He'd make sure of that.

"That is very noble of you."

He shook his head. "I am not noble. If I were noble, I wouldn't be standing here thinking of ways to fuck you." He could tell his blunt words shocked and embarrassed her for her cheeks flamed to life and her gaze dropped to the floor. "While I may not be noble, I am also not the sadist that might have been whispered of me."

"Of course," she murmured.

"When you come to my study, you will wear no underclothes." He smiled as her cheeks grew redder, and she didn't look up at him. "I don't like things in the way of what I want."

"I understand," she whispered. "Is there anything else, Lord Ashton?"

"Yes. Two more things. Call me Victor. And don't wear that shift again unless you want me to forget what I said and come to your room." She looked up as he reached forward to touch the sheer material that hung loosely at her waist.

"It's what I sleep in."

His fingers curled in the gown and fisted, pulling the material tight against her body. "Don't tell me that. I want to hear that you will not wear it anymore."

A nervous laugh escaped her lips. "I have another shift." She started to turn but looked back when he didn't release her gown. "I can show it to you, and if you approve, I will throw this one out." He forced himself to release her and watched her walk to the chair where she'd left her bag. When she bent to sift through the contents, his gaze dropped to her ass. She found the garment quickly enough and when she held it up, his throat closed. It was sleeveless and made of a blue silken material. White lace bordered the low sweep of the neckline. It was more torturous than the one she wore now.

"I could put it on if you need me to."

No, Victor. "Yes."

She walked forward and started to close the door, but he thrust his foot forward, and her gaze darted to his face when the door hit the toe of his boot. For a long moment, she just stood there staring at him. Then she took a deep breath and nodded. Walking to the bed, she dropped the second sleeping shift and, in one movement, pulled the one she wore over her head.

Victor's gaze roamed her body. Her skin was the colour of roses and cream, her nipples pink petals, and the soft curls at the apex of her thighs were as dark as the hair on her head. He stifled the groan that threatened his throat as he appraised her body silently. She had a mole on the underside of her arm and a small scar on the opposite shoulder. No other marks flawed her perfect skin. She pulled the second shift over her head. It wouldn't matter now if it were made of wool and covered her from head to toe.

"I bought this one once when my husband wasn't aware. He would have balked at how much I spent, but I wanted something pretty. Do you approve?" She looked at him and, though he'd not entered her room, instinctively took a step back.

"Then that's the one I want you to wear," he said thickly. "Unlike your unsavoury husband, I approve of finer things."

She smiled, seeming pleased with his approval. "He truly had no taste at all."

"That's not entirely true," Victor argued. Cadence Hurst was certainly testimony that her husband had some taste. She seemed to understand what he meant and looked away.

"Then our arrangement begins tonight?" Her voice was small and filled with nervousness.

"How do you feel about that?" His gaze drifted down the shift. It wasn't as loose as the other, slipping around her curves smoothly. The pearls of her nipples pressed against the sheer material, making him want to reach out for her again.

"I'm not sure. You look a bit frightening." She moved closer.

Not too frightening, he thought, or she wouldn't come near him.

"Do I?" He waited until she stopped in front of him, resting one hand on the door as if ready to swing it closed on him.

"I have heard that you like to abuse women."

He groaned and shook his head. "Dismiss whatever you've heard."

"I shall try." She nodded, but he knew that it would be difficult for her if she did not know what to expect from him.

"Shall I demonstrate?" He arched a brow. "So you may decide if it's what you want or not?"

She regarded him evenly for several moments before inclining her head. He glanced up and down the corridor to find no one stirred and took a step backwards. He waved for her to come away from the safety of her room, smiling when she hesitated.

"I will not bite." Then he laughed. "Hard."

She finally advanced and stood before him. Gently, he took her shoulders and guided her three steps to the left. Turning her so that her back faced him, he bent forward and breathed deeply of the scent of her hair before speaking into her ear.

"Lean forward and rest your hands on the wall."

Those hands shook, but she obeyed.

"Now spread your feet apart just a bit," he instructed, and again, she did so without question.

Slowly, he lifted the back hem of her shift, sliding it up her long, shapely legs and over her ass. Her whole body shook. She was most likely scared out of her mind. There was no guessing what rumours she'd heard of him. There were so many that even he couldn't pick out a handful of those rumours that were even close to the truth.

"If you wish me to leave you now, I will."

"I will bear whatever you inflict," she answered.

He frowned. He didn't want her to *bear* it. He wanted her to *enjoy* it. When he slid his palm over the crescents of her ass, she inhaled loudly. He moved his hand in a slow circular motion, closing his eyes as he enjoyed the feel of her smooth skin. When his fingers left her, she moaned a soft protest, and he smiled before allowing his hand to swing forward and his palm to clap against one ass cheek. Her body stiffened, but she didn't call for him to stop. Thank the heavens.

This time, he dipped his hand between her thighs and grazed her soft folds. "Wider."

She obliged by widening her stance, allowing him access to what he wanted. He raised his hand again, this time allowing his fingers to snap against her cunt. Her voice was a startled cry, and he instantly moved away from her.

“If that is something you don’t find appealing, then we can renegotiate our arrangement.” He saw the surprise when she straightened and looked back at him. “Think on it tonight, and tomorrow when I send for you, you may give me your decision.”

Chapter Two

Day One

"Hannah, do you know much of Lord Ashton's...ways? How long have you worked for him?" Cadence smoothed down her dress and faced the servant woman who collected her linens. It was the same woman who'd shown her to Lord Ashton's study and to her room the night before.

"Oh my. I've been here atop seven years, at least." The woman's cheeks rose with her easy smile. "I keep out of his affairs most of the time. He has strange ways, but they're easy to become accustomed to."

Cadence nodded and glanced down at her dress. She hadn't much. Josiah had never allowed her more than a few dresses. She'd taken to sneaking about to purchase the few things she kept hidden.

"He likes the linens washed every day," Hannah continued, and Cadence looked back at her. "It's odd, but he has a heightened sense of smell. So we do the wash and scrub the floors every day. He likes it quiet at night. He's more active in the evenings, rises later in the day than most." She shrugged.

"How is he with women?"

Hannah laughed as she walked to the window and opened it. "How is he not?" The woman glanced over her shoulder with a small grin. "I'm sure you'll find out soon enough, dear. Go along now. One thing Lord Ashton doesn't like is someone to keep him waiting."

Cadence nodded and left Hannah to shake out the curtains. She quickly made her way downstairs to his study. When Hannah had informed her that she was sent for, she was ashamed at the heat that bloomed in her body.

She lifted her knuckles, but he called for her to enter before she could knock. She hadn't expected the sensations that had come with his *demonstration* the night before. Nor had she expected the anticipation of what he would want to do with her. Now nervousness and excitement coiled inside her as she pushed open the door and stepped into the room. She'd

never enjoyed sex before, but she'd liked the forbidden pleasure she'd discovered the night before when his fingers had touched the most intimate part of her.

"Close and lock the door behind you." He was seated behind his desk, bent over a ledger.

He didn't look up, even after she locked the door and faced him again.

"Come closer."

Heat filled every limb, and her breath quickened as she neared.

"You've made a decision."

"I have." She licked her lips. "I shall stay here for seven days, and you will pay off my husband's debts."

He reached for his quill and dipped it in the inkwell. The seconds seemed like hours. While she waited, her gaze darted to the massive bookshelf. She'd never seen so many books. Her husband had few books, and those he had, he'd kept locked in his study where she'd been forbidden to go.

"Are you wearing underclothes?"

Cadence's attention swung back to Victor. "You instructed me not to, and so I have complied."

"Were you satisfied with the room you were given?" He dipped the quill again.

"Yes, it's very nice."

"Were you provided anything you needed?"

Cadence clasped her hands together. "I need very little."

He finally set aside his quill and raised his eyes. "If there is anything you should need, do not hesitate. Your stay here should be comfortable."

She smiled. "Thank you, Lord Ashton. That is very kind —"

"Victor," he corrected.

"Yes, of course. Victor." She forced herself to release her hands as his gaze slid down and back up the length of her.

"I like your hair down as it was last evening."

Cadence hesitated, but when he continued to look at her, she reached up and pulled the combs from her hair and loosened the knot she'd fashioned until her hair fell around her

shoulders. When he lifted a hand and waved her to move closer, she closed the distance between them, stepping around his desk.

"Night Phlox," he murmured and stood, indicating to a bottle of wine. "Stay here and help yourself to the wine if you wish." He stepped around her and exited the room. She looked at the wine and at the books again. Curiously, she walked closer to read some of the titles. Some were about shipbuilding. Some were legal books. And she found some that were of a more risqué nature.

Glancing momentarily at the door, she curiously opened one of the books. Her cheeks flamed at the erotic poetry she found within, and she clapped the book closed quickly. She thrust the tome back into its place just as the door reopened.

"Set it there." Victor led the way for several others. One man carried a large bathing tub and placed it where he'd indicated. The other servants filled the tub quickly with steaming water and filed out one by one without even looking in her direction. Once they were gone and he'd locked the door behind them, his gaze slanted in her direction.

"Snooping through my books?"

"You have so many."

"Find anything interesting?" He arched a brow, and her face flamed.

"I didn't read enough to decide." She laughed. "I was curious, and what little I did see, I deserved I imagine." She glanced at the tub. "You wish me to bathe?"

"I do." He retrieved a vial from his pocket and removed the top. She moved closer as he lifted it to his nose and breathed in deeply before emptying the contents into the water. He reached for the basket one of the servants had left and retrieved a large wooden paddle.

Cadence took a step back, and he looked up at her before his lips parted with an unexpected smile. "Don't look so terrified. It's not for you." He dipped the paddle into the tub and stirred slowly. "It is to mix the fragrance in the water. Have you never had a scented bath?"

"Of course." She was embarrassed by her mistake and forced herself to move closer. The scent drifted up to her nose. It smelled of a mix of honey and almonds and something sweet.

"What is that?"

"It's Night Phlox and one of my personal favourites but not the scent for every woman." He set the paddle aside then walked back to his desk and settled behind it, reaching for his quill. "But your natural scent is a nice match."

"You are going to stay here while I bathe?" Cadence closed her eyes when he didn't look up. *Stop it, she chided herself. You know why you are here. Just do as he likes. It could be worse. It's just a bath.*

"Are you praying for rescue?"

She laughed abruptly and opened her eyes to find him watching her. "Considering my situation, I doubt any prayers I might have would be received even if I were."

He tilted his head and studied her for a moment before looking back down at his ledger. "Well, finish your prayers quickly. You don't want the water to cool."

Cadence reached up and began working the buttons of her dress. She undressed quickly, afraid that if she paused she might run for the door. Each time she looked at him, he seemed engrossed in his work, quill in hand. She wasn't certain how she felt about that.

Once she was completely naked, she stepped into the tub and sank down into the hot water. The tube was made in smooth lines, and she settled into the form easily. Within minutes, she found herself relaxing. She closed her eyes and breathed in the honey scent of the water, allowing herself to enjoy the sweet heat around her.

She didn't know how long she lay like that and wasn't completely certain when Victor had moved from around his desk. She was suddenly aware of him however. Her heartbeat accelerated, but she didn't open her eyes, deciding it might be easier if she didn't look at his intense gaze.

Strong hands gently urged her to lean forward and back again after her hair was lifted. Long fingers began to work through her hair, massaging her scalp. He was washing her hair. She smiled and began to relax again. Perhaps he was not the deviant she'd heard of in the rumours. Perhaps he was a gentle man who enjoyed pampering women. She shouldn't mind a week of that.

She tilted back her head when he poured water over her hair to rinse out the soap he'd applied. "Thank you." She felt him lean closer, and his knuckles grazed her waist as he dipped his hand into the water. Opening her eyes, she saw that he held a cloth. Watching his

fingers move up to her shoulders, she sighed when he squeezed and the water ran over her skin.

"I believe you are trying to lull me into a stupor so that I might not protest whatever devious plans you have for me today." She tilted her head when he laughed and saw the flash of his white teeth. He was very handsome when he smiled.

"Some say a bath is a prelude to sin." He slanted a glance at her face. "Perhaps you should try praying again for strength and clear mind so you cannot be lured into any devious traps." His smile dipped into an easy grin when she laughed.

"You knew the bath would relax me."

"Of course."

"Then you do mean to sin."

"You don't have to fear my sin just yet." He lifted her arm and ran the cloth along the underside. It sent shivers over her skin.

"Should I be afraid of you?"

"If I were someone who meant to harm you, I would lie and say you should not, however, if I am not, I would say the same." He met her gaze. "But if you must hear the words, you shouldn't fear me, Cadence."

"For some reason I am more frightened than before."

She closed her eyes when the cloth dipped over her breast. He made small circles over her nipple then around and beneath. No man had touched her so gently.

He moved to the other and did the same. Then down her stomach, and she stiffened when he dipped between her thighs. The material slipped over her sex and though she didn't mean to, she sucked in her breath. For a moment, his hand stilled then repeated the movement, this time applying more pressure. She opened her eyes, but he moved away from her sex and to her legs, his expression revealing nothing of her reaction to him.

"Lean forward, and I shall wash your back." He instructed once he'd washed her legs and feet.

She did so, and he gently slipped her hair over her shoulder. Everywhere he touched now seemed to burn. It took him only moments to finish, and he guided her back against the tub again.

She watched him dry his hands and unroll the sleeves of his shirt. He returned to his desk.

Curious. She remained a few more moments then rose from the water, using the linens left for her to dry herself. Her skin was softened from the oil, and the aroma of the bath now filled the room. Once she was dressed, he spoke again.

"I'll have someone clear this away. I'll send for you again later."

* * * *

Victor pulled the window closed. It had taken hours to air out the scent Cadence's bath had left in his study. He poured himself a glass of wine and took a long drink. She had relaxed much more quickly than he'd thought she would. She was no innocent, he knew. She'd been married. But he could see she was uncertain. Not so uncertain however that she hadn't responded instantly to his touch, he reminded himself.

He'd only meant for her to take the bath herself. But he'd been unable to resist when she'd lain there, a little smile curling in her bow-shaped lips. And he'd been aware of her attraction to him when she'd looked up at him. Even if he hadn't smelled it on her, felt the heat radiating off her body, he could have merely looked and seen it in her eyes.

He heard her footsteps coming down the stairs. She wore no shoes, her feet bare. The door behind him opened and the almond-sweet scent found him again. And beneath it—Cadence.

"Lock the door." He didn't look back at her and listened to the lock click into place. "Undress."

Silence. Then she began removing her clothes. He took another swallow of his wine and faced her once she grew silent again. He smiled. Her hair was down.

"Come here." He waved her to a small chair but touched her arm when she moved to sit. "No, I want you to bend over the back."

A small, pink tongue slipped along her bottom lip. She took a breath then moved to do as he'd told her. It was awkward. She was unfamiliar he could tell.

"Grasp the arms of the chair with your hands." She did. "Now keep silent. This house is quiet at night. Any sound can be heard throughout." It was an exaggeration. She probably

knew it, but she nodded. In truth, only a few of the servants actually lived in the house. Most had their own homes to return to when their work at Ashton was finished.

"Like before," he told her and ran his hand over her ass. He clapped his palm against her ivory skin, and she started but didn't try to rise. Again. He slid his hand down between her legs and caressed her cunt. She was soft, warm and her anticipation radiated out from her tensed body in potent waves.

His hand rose and when his palm swung downward, she jumped on contact, a soft whimper sounding in her throat.

"You only need to say so, and it ends." He waited, but she offered no protest. He raised his hand again, and this time, when his fingers met her cunt, a groan pushed past her throat. The sound of his palm meeting her flesh a third time was followed instantly by a soft cry.

He stepped around the chair and reached forward to lift her face upward so he could see her expression. Her eyes were dark, and she shook, aroused by their exchanged. Satisfied, he released her and moved again behind her.

"Wider."

He watched her widen her stance. She was completely exposed to him. Her cunt glistened in the dim light of the candles, and he could smell her arousal. The crescents of her ass were perfectly rounded, and when he ran his hand over that soft skin, he saw the goose bumps form on the small of her back.

He clapped his palm against her cunt then again when she cried out. The evidence of her warmed body glistened on his fingers when he rubbed at her soft folds. He raised his hand and delivered a firm but controlled strike. The moment his fingers snapped against her cunt, her cries became words.

"Dear God, please."

"Please what, my dear Cadence?"

"I cannot bear it any longer."

"You are in pain?"

"No, Sir."

"Victor," he corrected and raised his palm again. A final swat then he allowed her peace.

"We are finished for today."

For a moment, she didn't move, and he would have grinned had she not straightened and faced him. Instead, he turned and walked to his bookcase. He heard the rustle of her shift as she pulled it on behind him, and after finding the title he sought, he faced her and held the tome out for her to accept.

"Read it before you come to me tomorrow."

Her small pink tongue slid out to wet her bottom lip, and he didn't release the book to her until her gaze lifted and met his. He could see the dark there behind her eyes, desire so thick he considered grabbing her and burying his cock inside of her. When she gave the book a tug, he loosened his fingers and watched her hesitate, a small frown pulling at her brow.

"Did I displease you, Sir?"

"Victor," he said again and waited for her to ask again using his given name.

"Victor," she amended. "Did I do something wrong? I admit that this type of exchange is new to me, but I tried to do as you instructed and —"

"Go to your room, Cadence. Return to me, here, tomorrow for our midday meal. Wear your hair down as it is tonight." He turned, silently dismissing her, and after a moment, he grinned as he listened to her stomp from his study.

Chapter Three

Day Two

Victor finally set aside his quill after nearly an hour of silence and reached for her without looking up from the ledger. He pulled her closer, his hand slipping beneath her skirts and his long fingers cupped her cunt. She gasped but stood still at his side as he continued to look over the numbers in his ledger. He'd called for her after her evening meal and waved her to stand beside him until he reached for her. Just his closeness had excited her and she was grateful when he'd finally touched her.

"You said you were familiar with bookkeeping?" he asked as if his hand was not beneath her clothes and his thumb had not begun stroking her flesh. She stared at him. It was some kind of game, she realised. He expected her to play along. Slowly, she bent forward and looked at his ledger.

"I know of some." She sucked in her breath when his thumb pressed firmly and began moving in small circles.

"Admittedly, I have made a mistake somewhere in my calculations but cannot locate the error. Perhaps, you would be willing to look. Your eyes are younger than mine, and you may be able to spot the discrepancy more easily than I." He slid the ledger towards her and leant back.

She focused on the rows of numbers, despite the heat that coiled up from his hand. Her fingers shook as she dragged them down the page. She felt him watching her. Perhaps he waited for her to ruin his game by giving some indication of the sensations rushing her body. He'd probably purposely made an error just to give her something to look for.

Forcing her attention away from the throbbing beneath his thumb, she was grateful to find the error quickly. "Here, sir. I believe you meant this to be a one rather than a seven." She pointed the error out with a shaking hand. He leant forward.

"Indeed, you are correct." He reached for his quill and corrected the number with a steady hand.

Cadence's breath became deeper as his thumb continued its agonising torture, but she stood there as if she did not notice the building tension. Her gaze darted to his face as he pushed the ledger back, but there was no indication in his expression that he was aware of what he was doing to her.

"Perhaps I was wrong not to consider your initial proposal. An employee who is knowledgeable enough to help with my work is not completely unappealing." He looked up at her and tilted his head. "Would you care to sit while we talk?"

She would have laughed if his expression hadn't been so serious. She nodded and stared as he pushed back from the desk. His hand fell from beneath her skirts, and she took a shaky breath. It was over. But she suddenly knew it was not when she realised he wished her to sit across his lap. Taking a breath, she moved forward. She'd promised to be obliging and so she would. As she slid onto his lap, heat flared over every inch of her. His cock pushed rigidly against her bum. It was the only indication that he'd reacted at all to her.

He pulled her back against the arm of his chair then reached around her with his right hand to pull the ledger forward. His left hand slipped back under her skirts to push her thighs apart so he could continue stroking her.

"My brother is bringing more for trade from the Netherlands. It shall be a good shipment this time." He flipped a few pages and tapped the list of goods of his order. Cadence pretended to look, but when he slipped a finger inside of her, she moaned softly.

"Did your husband ever work with such a large shipment?" he asked casually, his finger rocking in and out of her while he continued to stroke her clitoris with his thumb.

"No." The word squeaked out. "He was always jealous of how much more you could afford to buy for trade."

"Was he?"

"Y-yes." Her body trembled.

"He told you so?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes as her breath gasped between her lips.

"Perhaps if he'd not been such a very poor businessman, he could have afforded the same items for trade," Victor suggested. "Do you agree?"

She rolled her head back then to the side against his shoulder as tension heated her body and caused her to moan. "Whatever you say, Lord Ashton."

"Victor," he corrected.

She only hummed in response. The scent of him found her, and before she could stop herself, she pressed her lips to his neck. His hot skin felt good against her lips. She breathed the scent of lime soap deeply.

"My husband approached his business in the same manner he approached his women—with as little effort as possible," she murmured against his skin. Another finger joined the first inside of her, and she arched against his hand.

"It is the mistake many men in this business make." His fingers dove deep.

"Stupid men," she rasped.

"There are other ways than force to get what you want."

"Yes." She could barely think. Her fingers curled in his clothes, knotted as she felt her body shake, promising release.

"I can have anything I want by just..."

"Anything," she repeated. "Please."

His hand stilled, and her eyes flew open as a moan of protest pushed past her lips. "Anything, Victor. You can have anything you want." She straightened and stared at him. His eyes were dark, the only sign on his face that he was affected at all by what he'd been doing moments before.

"...by just asking."

"Sometimes, you need not ask. Sometimes, it's okay to take what you want." She wanted to reach down and push his hand back into her.

"Yes." He put his hands to her waist and lifted her from his lap. "I appreciate your understanding of the business. You can go now. Return after dinner."

He was dismissing her! She stared at him as he reached for his quill. She wanted to climb back onto his lap, to plead for him to take her. Instead, she turned on her heel and marched angrily from the room.

Chapter Four

Day Three

Cadence worked the spade around the rosebushes angrily. She'd not gone to him at dinner the day before as he'd bid her to. She'd not gone to him earlier that morning when he'd sent for her, either. Instead, she'd had the gardener give her work outside away from him. Victor Ashton would have to come to her since he meant only to tease and torment.

"I do not like to be ignored."

She started with surprise and found the very man of her thoughts sitting on the bench only a few feet away. She'd not even heard his approach. He crossed his arms.

"You assured me you could be obliging. That is what our agreement was based on." He looked at the sprouts of lavender that grew near the bench as he continued, "I could find any woman to neglect me, one who would do so for free."

Cadence almost laughed though she couldn't be certain if he was jesting or serious.

"If I am paying for a woman's attention, I expect to receive it." He reached over and plucked a stem of lavender and brought it to his nose. "If I were not overly intelligent, I would think you mean for me to discipline you for your disobedience." He smiled as he breathed in the lavender.

"Then I am thankful you are not a stupid man."

"Are you wearing undergarments?"

She wet her lips. "I thought it would be easier to go without them than to worry of taking them on and off when I don't know when you'll send for me."

"Clever." He tossed the stem aside. "Remove your clothes."

Her gaze snapped to his face. "Here? But anyone from your household could see us if they merely glance out a window!"

"Perhaps next time, you will not think I am to come to you and will come when I command you to do so." He stretched out his legs lazily. "Remove your clothes, and do not make me say it again."

Glancing at the house, she frowned. Now, he would humiliate her as well as punish her. She closed her eyes and began removing her clothes. If she did not fight him, it would be over quickly, or at least, she hoped.

"Come here."

At his command, she stepped forward, her eyes on the ground.

"You will receive discipline each time you disobey me."

"Of course." She nodded that she understood then gasped when he pulled her down across his lap so that her stomach rested on his thighs. Without any warning, his hand clapped against her bare ass, and she started.

"I don't like it when someone breaks agreement with me, Cadence." His voice was soft, too soft, before his hand clapped against her skin again. The sting it left burned her flesh and warmed her insides. This was his discipline? The very thing she'd secretly longed for again? His shifted her and pushed her thighs apart. When his hand slapped against her again, this time it was against her cunt.

"You are the one that offered obedience. You said you would be obliging." His fingers left a sting that made her entire body shake with forbidden pleasure. Again. Again. "You must learn to do what you are told." His palm clapped against her, and a whimper curled up from her throat. "Tonight you will learn that everything in this world, including your disobedience, comes with a price." He released her and guided her to her feet. "Go to my study. Wait there."

Her legs shook as she started to turn and reach for her clothes.

"Leave them."

Her eyes widened. He wanted her to walk through the house naked! She opened her mouth to argue, but when he raised a challenging brow, she turned, face burning with embarrassment and hurried inside. She was grateful no one saw her, and she managed to slip into the study undetected by any of the others in the house. He joined her several minutes later.

Her gaze dropped to the silk scarves he carried, and her stomach knotted with uneasiness. "I apologise for my disobedience. It was foolish and —"

"Come here," he interrupted but cocked his head when she glanced at the door. "Of course, you can leave if you wish. It is your choice."

Cadence took a breath and stepped forward.

"Hands behind your back," he ordered, and she closed her eyes as she obeyed. He tied her wrists together with one of the scarves. She gasped when another dipped over her head to cover her eyes.

"You will not let me see you when you beat me?"

"I do not beat women," he murmured next to her ear. "Now bend forward and spread your legs." She did as she was told, surprised when soft velvet rubbed against her stomach. She instantly remembered the small velvet covered stool she'd seen in the study the day before. She'd thought it peculiar since it'd stood as high as her abdomen and did not match the rest of the furniture. Now, she understood as she settled onto it why it was there.

"Wider."

She parted her thighs so she was certain she was fully exposed to him. When his palm slapped against her pussy, she cried out with surprise and heat coiled through her.

"No, my dear. Not a sound. You don't make a sound until I command it," he whispered in her ear. "Do you understand?"

"Yes."

His palm left a sting, and her throat closed over the moan that threatened. This was not discipline. This was more torture. Torture that made her want to leap upon him. He continued until her pussy throbbed with painful need, and she had to struggle to keep silent.

Something hard and smooth slid into her, phallic shaped but not of a man. It pushed deep, and she groaned without meaning to. Victor left the object there, and a moment later, another smaller tool was placed against her ass. It pushed into her, and she gasped at the unfamiliar intrusion.

"You will obey me now?" His deep voice vibrated down at her.

"Yes."

His palm slapped against her clit and she made a noise as her muscles clenched around the foreign objects inside of her.

"I said silence, Cadence. Do not disobey me when you've been *bearing* your discipline so well," he purred and slapped against her sex again. She clamped her teeth together and fought the urge to cry out. His palm left a glorious sting. Then another. And a third time. She shook from her attempts to keep silent.

“Good. Now rise up and let me move the stool. Then roll over on your back.”

She obeyed, heart thumping with excitement. Her arms ached slightly when her weight pressed onto her tied limbs. What would he do next?

“Open your mouth, and you needn’t be silent any longer.”

When she did, hot flesh pressed then pushed between her lips. Her breath caught. His cock was in her mouth!

He guided himself deeper then withdrew. Into her mouth again, and an odd pleasure rippled through her. A moment later, his palm cracked against her clit, and she moaned against him.

She heard his breath hitch above her as he pushed into her mouth deeper. His palm cracked again, this time a bit harder, and when her sound muffled against him, his breath hissed through his teeth. She instinctively tightened her lips around him, and he stilled momentarily.

“Suck.” The word was a guttural half growl. She applied suction then cried out against him when his palm left a throbbing sting on her clit. She sucked again, pulling him farther into her mouth and was rewarded with another sting from his fingers. Arching her back, she tried to take more of him, wanting him to continue his assault against her. Her body felt full, the strike vibrating through her pussy so that when she clenched around the objects inside her, the sensation intensified. She wanted more.

Victor’s cock slipped between her lips, in and out several times while she sucked at him greedily before his palm connected again.

“Harder,” she whispered when he pulled from her mouth and allowed her a moment to catch her breath.

He pushed between her lips again. The crown of his cock bumped the back of her throat moments before he began slapping her pussy repeatedly. She bucked at the intensity of the sting and pleasure then cried out against him when the fingers of his free hand wrapped around one of her nipples and pinched.

“Sweet Mother of God,” he murmured and removed his cock from her mouth.

She waited and heard the telltale friction of skin against skin next to her. He was touching himself. That thought sent a wild flurry of need through her. She wished she could see him, watch him find his release.

The sound stopped moments after a deep groan vibrated from his throat. She waited. Was it over? Would he touch her again? After a moment, she felt the objects being removed from within her. It was a strange feeling when they were gone. Firm fingers guided her up onto her knees, and the scarves were untied and removed. When she looked at him, he was fully dressed.

"That's all?"

His gaze slanted at her as he rose and moved towards his desk. "Enough discipline for tonight. Go to bed. And tomorrow you will come to me after breakfast." He held up a finger. "Do not disobey and make me come to find you, or I will do what I just did in front of the entire household."

She felt like weeping. The ache in her body was too much. This was worse than what was whispered of him, crueller than her husband's beatings. Standing on shaking legs, she massaged her sore shoulders.

"Is this how it will always be?"

"Until you learn to do what I say." He looked at her. "Goodnight."

She turned quickly so he wouldn't see her tears of frustration and left the room.

* * * *

There was a soft rap on the study door, and a moment later, to Victor's surprise, Cadence Hurst appeared. He'd not sent for her, and it was late. He pushed his ledger aside and waited for her to step into the room.

"You've already paid off my husband's debts."

He grimaced. Of course, she would still tend to her affairs.

"That was my part of the agreement."

"What if I'd gone against my word and left here?"

"There are risks in any business agreement. It wasn't a large enough amount that I would have been damaged by it." He watched her walk forward and around his desk. The blue gown shimmered around her.

"Do you never stop working?"

"If I do not work, I make no money. If I make no money, I cannot pay off a lady's debts."

"You are a curious man, you know?"

His lips lifted slightly. "Am I?"

"I cannot sleep tonight because of it."

Her revelation pleased him. Maybe that meant she was no longer afraid of him. That she desired him rather than feared him.

"Today, all that you did was new to me."

"Yes."

"I thought you meant to beat me."

"I know."

"It was nothing like what I'd heard of you before I came here." She looked down at her hands. "It was said you are a deviant who abuses women. I thought they meant you beat upon a woman. Your cruelty is far worse."

"You are free to leave whenever you like." His gaze dropped to the curves the gown accented. "Though I do not believe I've been cruel at all."

"My husband never made my body warm with desire. It was easier to wish him to find his release and leave since there was not disappointment."

"Why have you come to me tonight when I've not sent for you?"

"I wish something else from you, and you said before that sometimes a person only need to ask for what they want."

Victor waited. "I believe it was *you* who said that. I merely agreed."

She licked her lips. "I'd like to feel you inside of me."

Victor's mouth went completely dry. He'd thought to take it slow, to give her time to get used to him, his tastes, before he fornicated with her. That way she wouldn't be afraid. He'd obviously been mistaken.

"I'm not so complicated myself. And while I've only been with my husband before, I am not naïve. I think I might enjoy you."

"You did not enjoy your husband?"

"Good Lord, no." She laughed. "It was like having a grunting pig in the bed. He never thought of how I felt or if I found pleasure. With you, I know it would be different."

"How do you know I wouldn't be as selfish as he?"

"I learn quickly." Cadence leant forward to speak softly next to his ear. "You paid those debts without knowing if I would stay or not. That shows me you are not nearly as hard as you would have had me believe these past days. I think I understand what you want from me though I'm not overly pleased with it. You like to play games."

"Clever woman." He turned to look up at her. "Perhaps I shall reward you for being so clever."

"A kiss perhaps?"

He blinked. "A kiss? That is all you want?"

"I am a woman. Of course, that is not *all* I want. I told you before that I wished to feel you inside of me." She smiled. "I think you mean to torture me so if I am to receive a reward, I want it to be something I can enjoy. And I have not been kissed in a very long time."

For a moment, he just sat there looking up at her. He should have kissed her that first night. It was such a small thing. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Reaching forward, he cupped her face and bent his head. Soft lips parted in anticipation moments before he pressed his mouth to hers. When his tongue slipped between her lips, she leaned into him and lifted her hands to his shoulders.

She tasted agonisingly sweet, and it fuelled his hunger. His hands slid down from her face, around her and pulled her flush against him. Her fingers lifted to his chest and curled in his clothes. A soft moan vibrated from her against his mouth.

"Thank you," she spoke when he finally released her lips.

"Don't thank me yet." He slid his hand around her waist then up to squeeze her breast. "I like to spank. I like to bind. That is the extent of my deviancy. I'm not a monster though I am amused by the rumours. I meant for you to discover the truth yourself."

"It was cruel to make me want you then send me away," she whispered.

He chuckled. "Yet you still remain. Perhaps you like my *cruelty*?" He released her and held up his hand. "I'll not hear that you feel obligated to stay. You think I killed your husband. If anything you think I owe you something."

Her bottom lip caught momentarily between her teeth. "Perhaps I do like what you do, but I don't like to be left with my body aching so I could weep."

"Yes, you do." He grunted. "You like it enough to come to me tonight wearing this damnable gown. You like it enough that you remain, knowing I will send you away unsatisfied again tonight." He smiled when her cheeks flushed.

"I don't understand your game. I know there must be something at the end. It would be sadistic if there were not, and you have already said you are no sadist." She nodded. "So I will take part in your torturous game."

"That pleases me." He released her breast, ran his finger over the tip then took a step back. "Pull up the hem of your shift."

She reached down and scooped up the material. When he said nothing, she lifted it higher until she was exposed. Still he said nothing, so she widened her stance.

"Good." He reached down and slid his fingers against her, surprised to find her already moistened. Slipping one inside her, he smiled when she closed her eyes and moaned. A second finger joined the first, and he began pushing in and out of her. She was responsive. It made it much easier for him to determine how hot she was for him.

He watched her breath quicken as she parted her lips. Her face flushed, and she swayed forward against his hand. Her fingers fisted in the material she held. Then she very nearly did him in. She whispered his name. He stilled. He wanted her pleasure. But damn if he would give anyone the opportunity to say he took it from her. He removed his hand, and her eyes flew open.

"Why? Why do you stop? I can see that you want me. I can see it."

"Go to bed now." He turned and returned to his desk.

"No."

He laughed. "No?" He looked up when she moved forward. He didn't want to hope. He wouldn't allow himself to think that she'd reached the point that she would change the rules. That would be too much to hope for.

"I want release."

"Then go find it."

"I want you to..."

"I asked you what you wanted, Cadence. You asked for a kiss. I gave you that." He pushed his chair out from the desk and crossed his arms looking at her.

She licked her lips. "You want me to...touch myself...in front of you?"

His cock jerked. Yes, he did. Then he wanted to climb on top of her and bury himself inside of her. *Not yet, Victor. Not yet.* She still compared him to her bastard husband. He wouldn't be another grunting pig atop her. When the week was through, it would be him that she compared others to.

"Do as you like, Cadence."

She frowned and finally released the hem of her gown. She opened her mouth then closed it and turned to stomp from the room. He growled in frustration. He wouldn't be able to concentrate on work at all now.

Chapter Five

Day Four

Cadence stood just inside the door of the stables, watching Victor as he brushed down a horse. It surprised her that he would leave his study and partake in work he had two men hired to do. She'd been curious at first but then when he'd removed his shirt and started pitching straw into the stalls, she found she couldn't leave. His body was hard...not like that of a man who did not know physical labour. His muscles moved beneath his skin as if he were very accustomed to what he was doing.

Now, she wanted to touch him, to run her hands over his skin, to feel every ridge beneath her fingers. Forcing herself to step back, she glanced towards the manor, but no one watched her. No, she was the one slipping around spying. He behaved as if he didn't want her, but she was not so stupid to believe it. Perhaps he was waiting for her to start playing his game, too.

Turning, she hurried back inside the manor and up to her room. She had but one dress that was revealing. She'd bought it for a dinner party her husband had thrown to impress his business associates. They'd responded to the low bodice, and Josiah had beaten her after the guests had left. She'd never worn it again.

She found the green satin dress quickly. No undergarments. That was his rule. But only when he sent for her, she corrected herself then smiled as she pulled out the undergarments she'd purchased with the dress. Still, at the last moment, she decided not to don them. She released her hair from its tight knot then fashioned a looser one, bringing a few strands down around her face. As she glanced in the looking glass, she hoped she was not just embarrassing herself.

Back downstairs and out to the stables, she found him still working. He looked up when she stepped inside. His gaze slipped down her, but she pretended not to notice.

"I thought you were gone today," she lied. "I was going to sneak out here and go for a ride. What are you doing? I didn't think you were the type to work like this."

"And what type do you think I am?" He reached for his shirt, but she stepped forward and touched his hand, stopping him.

"It occurs to me that I've never seen you unclothed, and since you've most definitely seen me, it's only fair I get a peek." She waited then breathed out when he cocked his head but withdrew his hand.

"And what is your assessment?"

"I am not disappointed." She saw his little grin. "Perhaps I should reward you for that?"

He laughed abruptly. His eyes glittered, and she decided she quite liked this lighter side of him.

"Trying to turn the tables now?"

"I'm only trying to follow your rules." She stepped closer, and when he didn't move, she reached out and touched her hand to his stomach. His skin was hot beneath her fingers, smooth and hard. "Though I think you might request a bit more than a kiss as a reward. You *are* very greedy."

He laughed again, but this time, it sounded different, thicker.

She forced herself to let her hand drop from his body as she tilted her head and looked up at the rafters as if she were contemplating. "What kind of reward?" Then she snapped her fingers. "I've got it."

He arched a brow when she looked at him. He was amused with her. Well, that was better than laughing her out of the stables. Her gaze dropped to his trousers to find the hard bulge of his cock. Amused and aroused. Good.

"You said you like to spank and have demonstrated it to be true on more than one occasion." She saw his eyes darken and smiled. "One swat should be reward enough for a bared torso." She turned with pounding heart and prayed she'd done the right thing. She grasped the first wooden rung of the railed door of an empty stall and stepped onto the bottom. Sliding her feet apart, she leant forward slightly.

The sound he made drove hot shivers down her spine. Half growl. Half moan. Deep. She didn't look back and waited. The seconds were nearly as unbearable as the ache he always left her with. He'd been right the night before. A part of her liked the way he made

her feel. She'd never felt it before with her husband. It made her feel alive—and the frustration would ebb away after awhile.

Finally, the back of her dress lifted. She'd not donned bloomers. Only her stockings. She hoped she'd not made a mistake. His hand slid against her ass then dipped down against her pussy. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his fingers on her. When his hand left her, she clenched her teeth together and waited for the swat. When it came, it took everything she was made of not to moan.

"And another for your deception." His voice was guttural.

"Deception?" Her own was not much different, thick with heat.

"Had you thought I was gone for the day and meant to go riding, I believe you would have worn your undergarments."

"Perhaps I like not wearing them." She didn't move, waiting. This time the sting exploded across her cunt, and she couldn't stifle the moan in her throat.

"You mean to deceive me still," he said moments before his hand landed again. This time a cry pushed past her lips. His hands circled her waist, and a moment later, he lifted her to the ground and spun her around. The step he took pushed her back against the door, but then he stopped.

He looked wild. Dark eyes glittering, nose flaring with every breath. His hands left her and grasped the top rung of the door on either side of her head. Then he closed his eyes and took a breath. Why was he fighting so much? She wanted him to do what she could see he fought against doing.

"I have a confession to make," she said after a moment, and the laugh that escaped his lips was tortured. "I know nothing of riding horses. I haven't ridden since I was a little girl, and then I only rode if my father was with me."

He groaned deeply and tilted his head forward against hers. A dark thrill shot through her, and suddenly, she understood. This is what he was after. He liked the desire he evoked.

"When I came into the stables, it was not the first time I'd seen you with no shirt. I watched you work for about an hour before I decided I wanted to touch you." She smiled when his head slid down to her shoulder, and she saw the cords in his arms tighten. "I did not mean to reward you at all. In complete truth, I wanted to punish you for sending me

away last night." Her smile widened when he chuckled against her shoulder. "But it is obvious that I play your game very poorly."

She slipped from beneath his head and walked towards the stable door.

"Cadence."

She stopped and took a breath before glancing back. "Yes, Victor?"

"You are changing the rules."

She failed poorly at not smiling. "Yes, I am."

Quickly, she left him. Her body ached, but she finally understood why he enjoyed her torture. It made her feel heady knowing he ached now for her. He would be miserable and look forward to the next time he saw her. He would wonder what she would do next. She wondered that herself.

That night, he sent for her, and she went to the study. She closed the door then looked at him. He was bent over his ledger again. He really was handsome, she decided.

He spoke without looking up at her. "I believe I've made another mistake."

"Yes, you have." She walked quickly forward before she could change her mind about what she would do. He looked up when she reached down and grasped his shoulders, turned him in the chair and straddled his legs, knees against his thighs.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm taking what I want, Victor Ashton. And there's not a damned thing you can do about it." She kissed him hard, heart pounding. For a moment, he made no move then his hands slid up her back. When he kissed her back, it was full of passion and his arms tightened around her. She almost wept with relief when he lifted his hips and pressed his cock up against her.

While he responded with equal heat, he didn't take over. He allowed her to lead, she realised. The same thrill that had filled her earlier did so again. Leaning back, she reached forward, her gaze locked with his, and jerked open his shirt open, sending buttons popping in different directions. His gaze darkened, but he remained as he was, waiting for her to do as she wished. Most likely taking count of how much he would punish her for later, but she didn't care. She wanted him.

Rising from his lap, she pulled at his shirt, thankful when he rose, too. She pulled him away from the desk then back to her lips. Arms around his neck, she rubbed her hip against his cock. When he chuckled, she jerked his shirt down over his arms.

"Slow down, Cadence..."

"No." She shook her head and pushed him towards the settee. He sat, grinning up at her.

"No?"

"No." She returned to his lap, lifted her gown and ground unabashedly into him. "I'm afraid, if I do, you will try to send me away again." She slid her hands over his chest as she rubbed herself against his cock, feeling it harden and press out beneath her.

"Once you do this, Cadence, I caution you that you'll have nothing to hold over me. I will take from you again and again and again before you leave here," he warned, but he reached beneath her and freed himself from his trousers.

"I do hope you aren't lying." She sheathed him inside of her in one movement, stilling when he filled her completely. His head rolled back, eyes closed as he groaned deeply. Leaning forward, she kissed his jaw.

"For God's sake, move, Cadence."

Slowly, she smiled. No, now was the time to slow down. She had him right where she wanted him, and she planned on getting him back for every torturous thing he'd done to her.

"You mean like this?" She rose slowly up his length then down again.

"Yes," he hissed, but when she didn't move, his head snapped up so he could stare at her.

"Again?"

Lines creased around his mouth, and he grinned. "I do believe you are more cruel than that which is whispered of me." He wrinkled his nose. "Yes, again."

Cadence obliged but only once, despite the fire that raged inside of her own body.

"Again."

"Perhaps that's all I mean to give you tonight. Perhaps I only —"

"You won't make it to the door if you get up," he threatened, and she fought and lost against the fight not to smile.

"But you said you would never force a woman." She rose and lowered again. Once more then stopped.

"I didn't know it then, but I lied." His hands clamped around her hips, but to her surprise he didn't urge her to move.

"You lied? Oh my. That's not good at all, Victor. We can't have that. I think you should be reprimanded for that."

"Not unless you wish me to fall in love with you," he murmured.

Her heart fluttered. When she looked in his eyes, he didn't blink, meeting her gaze directly. Slowly, she leant forward and kissed his shoulder.

"There is no way I should allow your deception to go unpunished. Not when you have worked so hard to make sure I don't do the same." Parting her lips, she nipped his skin.

His reaction was savage. Air sucked between his teeth, and his hips lifted, pushing himself deep. The sensation caused tension to tighten in her stomach.

"You are very naughty. Now, you change *my* rules," she said when he lowered back to the settee. She bit again, this time a bit more firmly.

"By God, if you do not stop, Cadence, I swear I will..."

She rose and pushed him into her as she leant back. "What exactly will you do, Victor? Deny me?" She rocked atop him, and his fingers dug into her hips. "I think you cannot make up your mind. First, I must slow down, and now, you mean for me to hurry. I cannot please a man who is so uncertain of everything."

He laughed, and it was a deep sound that vibrated through her. "I know what you want."

"Do you?" She rocked again, and he groaned.

"I shall give it to you." He suddenly pulled her forward so his face was, but an inch from hers. "Please, Cadence. I cannot stand it. I want you."

Her lips parted. She'd not known that's what he'd wanted before. It was so simple...and satisfying. She moved, jerking her hips so that he was thrust into her at a steady rhythm.

His gaze never left hers, held her as they were while she rocked atop him. It only intensified the ache in her to have him looking in her eyes this way. Her body trembled as

she neared release, and his arms slid around her while he lifted his hips now to meet her thrusts.

“Victor...I...”

“Yes, Cadence,” he whispered and nodded. She found her orgasm immediately, pleasure rising inside of her until it seemed to spill out around her. As she peaked, she writhed, unable to help the spasms that shook her. He held her and continued the rhythm she’d started, so she rode him through every wave of intense heat, until she drifted down and her body stilled.

Cadence stared at him. His jaw was clenched. His whole body tensed. He’d not found his own pleasure, she realised. He’d let her have his role in their game and was abiding his own rules. She was torn between wanting him to suffer as she had and relieving him.

“Make up your mind quickly because, if you remain, there will be no time for me to stop again,” he said when she just sat there.

“It seems cruel to leave you.”

His hands guided her off of him and to her feet. His cock was slick with her juices, and she almost climbed back atop him.

“I’ll live. Miserably but you deserve yours.” His voice was ragged. “Go to your room. That’s the only place you can be that will be safe.”

“Safe?” She laughed at that, but when he looked up, his dark eyes glittered. Yes, safe. He was close to leaping on her. Her heart accelerated with new adrenalin. He was allowing her to understand the game, giving her a chance to see what he desired himself.

“I suppose I am a bit weary and should retire.” She moved backwards towards the door. Every muscle was locked, like an animal, a wild thing, about to strike. She turned and opened the door, glancing back one time to find him still watching her. Then she slipped out and closed the door.

She expected him to call out for her, but he didn’t. He didn’t come to her room. He didn’t send for her the next day. Instead, he left by carriage and did not return until the morning after. Now, as the darkness thickened outside and with just one day left in the week before their arrangement was over, she stood outside his study. She was angry. She’d hoped her display in the stables would make him want her more.

Without knocking, she stepped into the room.

He stood across the room, a parchment in one hand and a drink in the other. He looked weary and distraught. Her anger lessened. Perhaps he'd not meant to punish her at all. Perhaps, it had indeed been business that had kept him away that day. Josiah had been in the same business and sometimes had unexpected affairs that had to be attended to immediately.

He looked back at her, and his eyes looked saddened. Oh God. She knew that look. Some deal had gone bad. He was suffering a loss. She'd been a silly ninny to assume he just meant to punish her.

"I'm glad you're home." She closed the door behind her. "I've decided I quite rather you torturing me silly than your being gone."

"Have you?"

"Your game keeps me from becoming bored." She sent him her best smile, with hopes of lightening his mood. "I didn't know what to do with myself. I think you mean for me to wish for you when you are not here."

"And what will you do when the week is over then?" He sounded defeated. She watched him lift his glass and take several long swallows.

"Perhaps, I'll find some poor fellow to torture as you've done me?"

It was weary, but it was a smile. "A stable boy, perhaps?"

She grinned but shook her head as she closed the distance between them. "No. I doubt a stable boy would know what to do with himself or me if I behaved with him as I did you." She touched his arm as he took another deep drink. He was trying to drown away whatever bothered him.

"Something is wrong. You've had a business deal fall through," she spoke softly, hoping he wouldn't be angry that she'd poked her nose into his affairs.

"Yes." He met her gaze. "I don't like not getting my way."

"I doubt it happens often." She took the drink from his hand. "Come and don't think of it for awhile. If you dwell on it now while it is raw, it will fester. Take your mind off of it and return later with a clear mind." To her surprise, he followed when she tugged his hand. He sat when she halted in front of the settee.

"While I undress, I'll tell you how I spent my day." She began working the clasps of her dress.

"I thought you'd pined for my return?" He reached forward and retrieved the glass again and brought it to his lips, but his gaze lowered to follow her fingers.

"I fear by doing so I've indentured myself to you an extra day." She slipped the dress down when it loosened, and the rim of the glass dropped slightly. "I lied to the shopkeeper and told him I was your cousin, and that you'd instructed me to charge the items to your account. I threatened to have you come there and close your account if he didn't allow me to buy it on your credit. He wasn't pleased with my choice, but apparently, he more feared your lack of business than my tastes in underclothes."

It was brazen, an item meant for a prostitute no doubt. She'd meant to punish him by wearing it, but now, she hoped to ease his disappointment with business. She'd never worn a corset so binding or so revealing. And it was red, stretched tight across her stomach and beneath her breasts, pushing them up so that they appeared ready to burst out from the garment. The stockings were red, too, with silk red ribbons attached to the corset to hold them in place.

"I know you said no underclothes and that you liked finer things, but I thought this might please you none the less." She let her dress pool at her feet and held out her arms. "Was it a mistake?"

"Mother of God, Cadence." He slid forward to the edge of the settee and reached out to run a finger down her waist. "I imagine the shopkeeper knew you were not my cousin." He laughed then and stood.

"You seemed amused with the rumours that circulated about you so I doubt you will suffer much from any tales he whispers." She bit her lip. "Please tell me I did not make a mistake. I've never bought such a thing before and —"

His finger pressed to her lips. His gaze was tender, and it surprised her.

"Had I known what kind of woman you were, I would never have made this arrangement with you." He let his finger slide down to her chin.

"It *was* a mistake then."

"There is no mistake. I could *eat* you at this moment." He laughed and set the drink and parchment to the side. "When you first came to me, you were so...well not what you've turned out to be. That woman wouldn't have come to the stables to tempt me. She certainly wouldn't purchase a garment meant to drive me wild."

Cadence breathed out and smiled. "I don't feel I'm very different than I was. Your game is new to me, but—"

"No, you haven't changed. I just saw you differently. I've learned that my assumptions about you were off." His hand flattened on her waist. "You've spine and a will of your own, even when you make an arrangement that might have made others feel powerless."

"You allowed me a choice to leave," she pointed out, wondering why he was assessing her personality when she wanted him to be as wild as he said she drove him. "It was expensive. I suspected you might want to punish me for the purchase."

"Clever woman. I am tempted, seeing you like this, to punish you for the rest of your life. You play this game well," he murmured.

Cadence's heart fluttered. Did he just say the rest of her life? What did that mean?

"But you aren't mine to do so with." His hand fell away from her.

She saw his deflated expression and licked her lips, deciding to take the chance. "I could be, perhaps."

His gaze darted back up to her face.

"I quite like you, Victor, now that I've gotten to know you."

"You said I was cruel and expected me to beat you," he said dryly.

"I didn't realise why you played such a one-sided game. I understood in the stables. You want to be desired, to see someone wanting for you and have control over what you give to them. I admit I was surprised, but as I said, I am not stupid and I learn quickly." Cadence reached for his hand and brought it back to the corset. "I don't mind your little game now that I understand."

A tortured look crossed his face, and he thrust the parchment forward. "Your husband is not dead. He survived the attack on his ship."

In one instant, Cadence's world collapsed. What did he say? She reached out numbly and stared at the words. It was her husband's handwriting.

"McKenzie said he had perished," she whispered.

"I went today to confirm the truth. I saw him with my own eyes." He nodded to the letter. "He lives."

"Oh God."

"The letter arrived this morning by courier." He walked past her and refilled his drink. She watched him drink heavily as realisation sank in her stomach. Josiah was alive and knew she was here.

He'd probably discovered his debts were paid. It would take no real education to surmise their arrangement.

When she said nothing, he looked back at her. "The letter says he will arrive tomorrow to retrieve you."

"I feel ill." Cadence touched her stomach and turned to sink down onto the cushions of the settee. Her entire body shook. He was alive. He knew. And he was coming for her. She'd not wept a tear when she'd received his first mate's letter. She'd been ashamed of the relief she'd felt instead of sorrow. And now...and now...

Her gaze darted up to Victor. He claimed very little honour, but she could see now that he had more than most. Another man would have kept the information from her until the arrangement was over. But he'd proven again and again that he was not the kind of man that would do so.

"The game is over," she murmured.

His gaze met hers, but he didn't answer. Finishing off the drink, he set the glass to the desk and retreated behind it.

Chapter Six

Day Seven

Seven days. It was just seven days. Victor ran a hand through his hair as he gazed out the window of his study. He'd been with plenty of women before. But none of them had been Cadence Hurst. He might not have liked her as much if she hadn't made him laugh so easily. If she hadn't teased him in the stables. And if she hadn't left him, hard and shaking with need.

Yesterday, she'd only made it worse. That outfit. He knew she'd probably meant to torture him with it, but as soon as she realised something was wrong, she'd switched her plans and tried to ease whatever disappointment he might have felt from work. That's what made her different than other women.

He wished he could have seen her bullying the shopkeeper to get it. He smiled. Josiah Hurst didn't deserve a woman like her. Hell, Victor thought, he probably didn't either, but he wanted her. And today, she would be taken away. She would return to her bastard of a husband – a husband she hadn't seemed overly upset in losing in the first place.

He'd not revealed the rest of what he'd discovered to Cadence, of why her husband hadn't returned home immediately. Hurst had gone after Victor's brother, Michael, and in retaliation of their attack, Hurst left Michael without an arm and bleeding to death in the ocean. It had only taken just a little physical influence to make the first mate of Hurst's ship to start talking. McKenzie had informed him, however, that they'd received word that Michael lived.

At last, as it drew upon the evening, a carriage came into view. Victor remained where he was as it stopped in front of his home and Hurst climbed out. He loathed the very sight of the bastard. He turned from the window and walked to his desk. Sitting down, he stared at the door until it opened.

"Josiah Hurst is here to see you, sir." Hannah hesitated, then stepped forward and surprised him by closing the door. "I keep to my own, sir. I don't add to the gossip of your

affairs, business or personal, but I cannot keep silent today." She held up her thin hands as if to ward off anything he might say. He had nothing to say. She'd been exactly as she described and it shocked him now that she would meddle.

"You were happier than I've ever seen you, sir, this last seven days, if you don't mind my saying so." She hesitated then turned and retreated from the study. "He'll receive you now."

Josiah stepped through the door, and Victor stood, indicating one of the chairs he'd arranged on the other side of his desk. The man sat but said nothing. Moments later, the door flew open, and Cadence burst in as if she were afraid of what might be happening.

"Just in time." Victor indicated the other chair. "Please come in and sit."

Her gaze dropped to Josiah when he turned. "I didn't know. I was told you had perished, and I didn't know what else to do."

Josiah faced forward. "We'll discuss it later."

Cadence swallowed loudly and moved forward. Victor noted the way she moved. She was cowering. She'd never done so with him. Even when she'd not known what he would do to her.

"As you've most likely discovered, I've paid off your debts, Hurst." Victor stepped around the desk and half sat, half leaned on the corner in front of Hurst. "I believe that shall make up for the fact that my brother attacked your ship." His gaze darted to Cadence when she gasped.

A smug look crossed her face.

"I *knew* you were lying." She crossed her arms.

"Yes, well, you are a clever woman, aren't you?" He faced Josiah again, pleased with the anger he saw boiling behind the man's eyes. "That leaves us with something else that must be resolved."

"The fact that you've been fucking my wife?"

"I thought you were dead, Josiah. What else was I to think?" Cadence said but when Josiah looked at her she sank back against the chair.

"You keep silent. There is no defence for what you've done. Rather than behaving a mourning widow, my wife beds another man? I'll deal with your part in this later."

Victor clenched his hand but remained as he was until Hurst faced forward again.

"How much is your wife worth to you, Hurst?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "How much are you offering?"

"Name her worth."

"Well, I've not been here this week to see what you got out of her," Hurst snapped. "Or if she'll be swollen over the next month or so with your offspring."

"A woman doesn't normally show for a good three months," Victor corrected. "But you need not worry of that. Nothing transpired that would make her so."

Hurst stared at him. "Nothing? You did nothing with her?" The man suddenly laughed. "I always knew your brother was the danger in your family, but I thought you might be at least a man. Well, perhaps, you don't owe me as much as I thought."

Victor narrowed his gaze. "One would think you would be happy that your wife had not been defiled. Your disappointment seems more in loss of coin." He glanced at Cadence, but she didn't seem shocked in the least. "It matters not. I did not say I did nothing. I said I did nothing that would leave her with child." He smiled when Hurst's humour left. Standing, Victor walked to the small table near the window and filled a glass with port.

"So I ask again, Hurst. How much are you willing to receive for your wife?"

"Don't turn your back to me, you rotten bastard," Hurst warned, and Victor glanced over his shoulder momentarily.

"Forgive me, Hurst. Would you care for a drink?"

"I don't want a drink, Ashton. I want what I'm owed."

"What you're owed," Victor repeated and lifted the glass to his lips for a quick swallow, then looked at Cadence. "Let's ask your wife. How much should he receive, Cadence? What are you worth?"

She looked as if she didn't want to speak. But when her gaze tore away from Hurst to meet his, she smiled and her chin lifted.

"More than you've got I'm certain."

Victor grinned. "Clever."

"All that you've got," her husband corrected.

"All?"

"At least, all that's invested in the business."

Victor nodded. "That would cripple me. It would be like losing...a limb." When Victor looked at Hurst, he saw realisation then fear. *Yes, you stupid bastard. You should be afraid.*

"Now, wait a minute..." Hurst began as he stood, but Victor strode forward and was before him in seconds.

"Wait? Did you wait to see if my brother would live or die when you amputated his arm? Did you?" Victor stepped backwards and leaned against his desk again, bringing his drink to his lips. Cadence stared at her husband, horror on her face.

"Did you when you had my ship attacked?"

"Ah, but I was doing your family a favour, wasn't I? And I believe we've already settled up that situation." Victor nodded at Cadence. "There is still the business of your wife."

"Give him nothing, Victor." Cadence's voice was cold.

"I said keep silent."

"Give him nothing at all." She stood, her hands shaking. "Perhaps a room in which he can sleep tonight. That is all."

"A room? We are leaving in a few moments, girl—"

"I will not be leaving until tomorrow since my arrangement with Lord Ashton has not yet been filled. I will leave the two of you to the business you mean to conduct but I will not go against my agreement with him regardless of what you decide. I'm staying another night," her gaze darted to Victor, "for whatever he wishes of me, when he wishes it."

"What talk is this? Get to the carriage, and I mean now, girl, or you'll be sorry."

Victor stiffened when Hurst faced Cadence. If the bastard struck her, he would carve out Hurst's heart with the glass he drank from. As if answering his thoughts, the very glass he thought of shattered in his fingers.

"Damnation." He hadn't realised he'd been gripping the glass so tightly. Tossing the fragments in his hand aside, he swiped at his clothes. "Hannah!"

The woman appeared instantly and hurried forward. "I suggested thicker glassware, sir."

"Yes, yes. I was clumsy." He swiped at his clothes again.

"Ashton, enough of these games. Make me an offer and let us be done with our business today," Hurst said.

"One ship, filled to the bow with merchandise." Victor accepted the cloth Hannah held to him and used it to brush the pieces that had stuck into his palm. His blood stained the crisp white linen quickly.

"You jest."

"I do not jest when it comes to business." Victor looked up. "Do you feel your wife is worth that much?"

"It is acceptable."

"Josiah Hurst! You would sell me off for a boat?" Cadence's voice lifted.

Hurst ignored her. "I'll expect our agreement in writing before I leave."

"Of course." Victor stepped around Hannah and his desk, and wrote the agreement on a piece of parchment then handed it to the man. "I must tell you however, Cadence did not lie. She is worth much more than that."

"Then I should have asked for double."

"You would have gotten any price you named." Victor glanced at Cadence. "I *would* have given you everything I had for her."

Her gaze darted to him and softened.

"You lie."

Victor shrugged. "His greed blinded him. So now you'll never know."

"Don't speak to her. Don't even look at her again," Hurst ground out.

"I'm afraid your dealings are closed and I still have another day with him," Cadence told her husband. She looked to Victor. "Will you give him a room here tonight?"

Victor inclined his head. "Only because you request it."

"Thank you. When do you want me to return?" Her eyes flashed angrily. She was using him to get back at her husband. He would allow her that. The bastard deserved whatever she did to him.

"I'll send for you when it's time."

"Now wait a minute —"

"The moment you accepted that ship, my dealings here no longer concerned you. Victor is paying for seven days and he will get seven days," Cadence snapped before facing Victor again. "Your hand is bleeding."

"A minor irritation. It will not affect our...arrangement," he replied and slanted a glance down at Hannah when she chuckled.

"He could cut off your arm, sir, and I doubt it would hinder you," Hannah said. She rose, the pieces of broken glass cupped in her apron. "I'll ready a room for Lord Hurst." She moved quickly from the room, and Victor grinned as she closed the door behind her.

"Then I'll retire to my room and await your command." Cadence started to turn then pointed a finger at Hurst. "And you. You may want to consider moving into your new ship because you will have to wonder every night after this if it is the one when I will smother you in your sleep."

She stormed to the door and jerked it open.

"Cadence, have Hannah return with a length of linen to wrap my hand." He waited until she started to step from the room. "And Cadence?"

"Yes, Victor?" She didn't look back.

"Wear the corset tonight."

"As you wish." She stepped aside and left as Hannah returned.

"Who in hell do you think you are?" Hurst gritted. "You can't just do whatever you please—"

"Oh but I can. This *is* my house." Victor shook his head when Hannah started to step forward. She retreated then stepped farther away, seeming to have an inkling of what was about to happen. "There is just one thing left for me even up."

"And what's that?"

Victor set the bloodied cloth to the side. "You are a very poor business man. Your assessment of me and my standing in my family was completely wrong. You see, my brother takes his command from me. He attacked your ship under my direct orders."

"Because you could not do it yourself."

Victor moved lightning fast, and in moments, had Hurst's arm twisted behind him. "That's your mistake." He held the man's upper arm in place and jerked his wrist backwards. His elbow snapped easily. "I do whatever I damn well please."

Hurst howled and Victor loosened his hold just long enough to reposition his arm across Hurst's forearm, pressing it into his back before jerking his hand again, snapping the wrist.

"You left my brother without an arm. Now yours is ruined." He wrapped his fingers around one of Hurst's fingers and broke it easily. "Do you realise your mistake now?"

Hurst howled again then spoke between ragged breaths. "Yes."

"Then get the hell out of here. I have your wife to fuck." Victor thrust the man away from him. "Wait in the corridor, and Hannah will take you to your room and have you tended to." The man stumbled through the door. Hannah hurried forward and closed the door behind Hurst before facing Victor.

"Shall I make certain his arm becomes infected?"

"Yes."

"It won't heal properly?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir." Hannah turned and left the room.

It was nearly midnight when she returned. "He is suffering but not so much that he didn't go to Cadence's room."

Victor's throat closed. "Did she let him in?"

"Yes."

"You may retire for the night."

Victor watched the door close. His heart pounded. He'd settled himself that she would leave with Hurst the next day. But he'd not considered she would welcome Hurst into her arms again so soon. Not in Victor's home.

"Not in my home," Victor said aloud as he headed for the door. His heart pounded with what he could only label as pure jealousy. It wasn't rational, and he didn't care. Up the stairs, he took them two at a time, darting past Hannah midway. He never even slowed, throwing Cadence's door open.

Then he stopped short.

Cadence dragged the brush through her hair and smiled. Behind him, Hannah chuckled as she passed, and realisation kicked him in the stomach.

"You are a conniving little wench." He accused then spoke over his shoulder. "And you are no better." Hannah chuckled again.

"You did not send for me."

"I thought it was a ruse to punish your husband." He took a step backwards so that he stood in the doorway rather than in her room. His gaze dropped when she slipped her foot from beneath her, and her robe fell open, revealing the corset.

"What kind of punishment is a ruse?" She dragged the bristles through her hair. "How much would you have given him? How much am I worth?"

"More than I have."

She smiled and glanced up at him. "Flattering. Now the truth."

"Whatever he asked for and still I'd think him an idiot for not asking for more." He leaned inside the doorway. "I broke his arm."

Cadence stared at him. "For your brother?"

"Yes." He nodded.

"Well done."

He arched a brow. She'd not even batted an eyelash at his revelation. Perhaps, Hannah had already revealed what he'd done, and she was over her shock.

"I was tempted to offer him two ships to let you stay here another week." He grinned when she gasped then ducked when she swiped one of her shoes and hurled it at him.

"I may not be much, but I am worth more than a ship or two."

"They're fine ships."

She laughed as she set her brush aside and stood. The robe fell open completely. His gaze washed over her hungrily.

"You're not mine to want."

"Tonight I am. We could imagine he wasn't here, that he'd been killed. You could say you didn't do it, and I could be content with allowing you torture me all night with your little game." She slid her hands along the doorframe then up until her finger bumped his. "I do owe you another day."

"You owe me nothing, Cadence."

"Perhaps you owe me?"

"Perhaps." He dropped his hand to her waist and touched a rib of the corset. Lower and his fingers curled around one of the ribbons. He pulled and the bow she'd fashioned slid loose.

"I owe you some truth, at least. About me."

"You will share a secret now?" She laughed lightly.

"I'm...not always as I appear to be." The words seemed forced as he toyed with the ribbons at her thighs. "And when you bit at me the other night, I was very tempted to show you my true nature. You made me want you for myself."

"And what is your true nature?"

His gaze lifted and met hers. "I am a wolf." He continued when she said nothing, "All three of my brothers are the same."

She laughed. "A wolf? You look man enough for me."

"I transform, by will, when I have need of it. I can show you."

She grinned, obviously amused. "Please do."

He would not transform, but he would show her he spoke the truth. Slowly, he allowed heat to fill him, just enough that he knew she could see the change in his eyes. Her reaction was a step backwards, and those ribbons slid through his fingers.

"I told you before, you need not fear me."

"Your eyes..."

"Are those of the wolf," he finished. "I have not harmed you, Cadence. I am still the same man you know. I am also the other."

"How can this be?"

Victor looked down and shook his head. "My kind has always been. You can appreciate why we wouldn't expose ourselves. Men are dangerous when they are afraid."

"Why...why do you tell me this now?"

He couldn't look at her. "I didn't expect to want you as I do, Cadence. I didn't expect to feel..." He stopped, then began again. "Perhaps, I mean to give you a weapon against me because I did do as you first accused. It was my intention to have Josiah Hurst killed when I gave the order to attack his ship."

"I see."

"Now we are even."

For a long moment, there was silence.

"Would you like to come in?"

"Yes." He lifted his gaze to her face. "Forever."

Don't, Victor, he told himself as she stepped aside and waited for him to advance.

"You're not mine to want."

He made himself step backwards. Her gaze widened then clouded, but she nodded. Slowly, she closed the door. Turning, he started for the stairs then stopped. Tomorrow, she would leave. She would go back to Hurst's home. She would be angry, but eventually, she would fall into the routine of being his wife again. Tonight, she wanted Victor. She wanted him even after he'd told her his secret.

And he wanted her.

He returned to her door. Lifting his knuckles, he almost rapped. Then he heard her sobs. The emotion that hit him was unexpected. She wept because of him. Lowering his hand, he turned the handle and opened the door. He didn't look at her as he stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him.

"Victor?"

He looked up as she wiped the back of her hand against her cheek.

"If you were mine to want, I would marry you tomorrow."

Her eyes widened. "You are lying again."

He shook his head and laughed. "I'm as vulnerable right now as the day I was born. It is the truth. I knew it to be so the moment you climbed up on the stall door in the stables. You have spine, woman, and it is intoxicating. I very nearly kissed you today when you told Hurst you would come to me when I sent for you. You are as vicious as I am—if not more so."

"Then you are an easy man to win over."

"I am not." He removed his vest and began unbuttoning his shirt. "It's no secret that I have kept many lovers. With every one of them, I have never once hesitated when walking away." He removed his shirt, watching her gaze dip down over him as he tossed it to the side.

"What is different this time?"

"You. Most don't turn the tables on me. Most don't call me out when I'm caught in a lie. And most don't care if I'm distraught over business or not." He undressed quickly then stood before her naked. "I accept your game, Cadence, because by nature I am greedy and selfish. I shall imagine that you *are* mine to want tonight. And tomorrow until you leave with him, I shall continue to think of you as mine."

"You shall make me weep," she whispered.

"No. I shall make you scream with pleasure so loud that he shall never forget it was me who made his wife do so." He moved forward and grasped her, hauled her against him and kissed her savagely. His tongue thrust between her lips, and he tasted her sweetness as she clung to his arms. When he released her, her mouth glistened, and she gazed up at him with wide eyes.

"Not here."

"Oh you can't mean to continue your silly rules now!" She laughed, shaking her head.

"In my room. You are mine, and I will have you in my own bed." He turned and opened the door.

"Victor Ashton, you've no shame at all. You haven't a stitch on!" She spoke between laughs, and he gave her a pull into the corridor. Several doors down, he turned and grinned at her.

"You don't know me very well if you think I would care of such things."

"Shameless."

"Exactly." He opened the door and stepped backwards into the room, pulling her with him. Her gaze darted around, and he laughed at her curiosity.

"You do enjoy finer things," she finally said.

"Indeed," he admitted and pulled her to him, hitting the door closed behind her. "That's why you are here." He slipped the robe over her shoulders. "Although I enjoy you completely naked, I do believe I want you first wearing this on top of me." He ran his hands down the sides of her corset.

"First?"

He grinned. "You were right to be afraid of me when you first came here. I have an insatiable appetite."

"One wouldn't know it with as many times as you sent me away."

"However did you manage?" he asked sarcastically.

"I touched myself in my room until I found release."

His hand slid to her ass and squeezed. "You are not afraid of me now...now that you know..."

Her hand touched his lips, silencing him.

"I cannot think of it right now. It confuses me and makes me nervous. Right now, I only want to think of my belonging to you, of this one night we have together." She leant forward and kissed his shoulder then her lips parted and her teeth grazed his skin.

"Do that again, and I shall make you mine completely," he warned.

He felt her lips pull against him with a small smile before they parted again. Her teeth pressed, then harder. His thrust his cock against her hip, arms tightening around her. Hurst be damned, he would not allow her to leave him tomorrow. It was too late. He *did* want her for himself, and he would have her.

Roughly, he pushed her to his bed and crawled atop her. He settled between her thighs and stared down at her. Her gaze widened, and he knew his eyes were yellow again. It could not be helped. Tonight, he would not just fuck her. Tonight, he would make her his mate.

"I thought you said you wanted me on top." Her voice shook.

"I lied." He pressed his cock against her and thrust forward, filling her completely. "I want you too madly." He rocked backwards then forward again, enjoying the sound of her moan. His pace wasn't measured. Hunger claimed him, and he rode her, touching her deeply with every thrust. Her moans became cries, and he leant forward and pressed his teeth to her shoulder. Her breasts arched up against him, and her fingers wove into his hair. She held him to her as her voice lifted around his name. When she came, he bit her, binding him to her forever.

* * * *

Victor paced around his office. She was gone. She'd left before he'd awakened that morning, taking her bastard husband with her. He'd thought she would stay, assumed she wanted him as he wanted her.

"Sir, they couldn't have gotten far," Hannah suggested from the doorway.

"I bared myself to her enough last night. She has made her choice." Anger wove through the hurt in his chest. "She chose Josiah Hurst." The name hissed out between his teeth, and he cleared his desk with one angry swipe of his arm.

"I imagine she did not." Hannah ventured a step into the room. "She and I have become close over these past seven days. I like her, and she confided things to me."

Victor looked up at Hannah. "What things?"

"Things about you, sir, and how you've made her feel. She was quite besotted with you from the first day, I believe." Hannah crossed her arms.

His house servant's words forked hope into him, through his anger and into his heart. But why would Cadence leave him if she felt as he did? He didn't understand.

"Why would you allow her to leave with him? Have you no heart at all, sir? How could you, knowing what would happen?" Hannah's gaze was fixed on him.

"What in hell are you talking about?" Victor studied her pained expression.

"You don't know?"

"Know what? Open your mouth, woman, and tell me what it is I'm supposed to know."

Hannah's hands slid to her sides as she suddenly rushed forward. "He is cruel to her, sir. He beats her and misuses her. She spoke to me of it, of how she was grateful he was dead and of how she wished she'd been strong enough to kill him herself years ago."

Victor's stomach dropped. "Beats her?"

It suddenly made sense—her assumptions when she'd first arrived that he would harm her, the way she'd cowered from Hurst the day before.

"Now you know." Hannah tapped a foot. "What are you going to do about it?"

The pain of his canines pushing through his gums caused his voice to strain. "I'm going to get her."

"Hurry, sir."

He strode from the room, through the front door, ignoring the popping of his bones as he shifted. The pain seemed minute in comparison to the anger that pounded in his veins. By the time he reached the bottom step, he leapt forward in full transformation, a vicious growl tearing from his throat.

Hurst had a good three hours on him, but Victor caught up with the carriage in under thirty minutes. As he neared, he heard them arguing then the strike, followed immediately by Cadence's cry. Rage pounded through the wolf, and he leant forward, quickening his speed until he came along side the carriage.

Another strike and Victor leapt, tearing through the carriage door with fury. Cadence's face was reddened, and her arms were lifted to defend herself from the attack. Possessiveness rushed through Victor. Hurst had lifted his uninjured arm to deliver another

blow, but Victor sank his teeth in, causing the man to scream and the driver to react by bringing the carriage to a halt. Victor nearly ripped Hurst's arm completely off.

He jerked him from the carriage with his teeth, hearing the driver's shout as he climbed down from atop. Victor yanked Hurst around as the driver lifted the gun, felt Hurst's body jerk from the hit. He released him instantly and lunged forward, knocking the driver to the ground. The young man's head hit hard, and his body went limp. Victor remained atop him, growling, until he decided he wasn't dead, just knocked out.

When he turned, he found Cadence standing next to the carriage, staring at him. Her face was already bruising from Hurst's assault. He let the blood lust ease out of his veins, the heat ebbing away enough that he could transform back to man.

"You are a wolf." Her hand shook as it lifted to her mouth.

"As I told you. Why didn't you tell me your husband abused you? How could you keep something like that from me?" He stalked forward and expected her to retreat due to the look of shock on her face, but she did not.

"I was going to come back to you," she whispered.

"You shouldn't have left. You are mine." He grasped her shoulders and brought her forward, against him, slipping his arms around her. It felt right having her in his embrace. He shouldn't have allowed her to leave in the first place.

"You are a wolf."

He breathed out heavily. "Yes, but I would never harm you, Cadence. Never." A long silence echoed between them.

"I believe you. You had seven days to do so if it were your intention. It's just so... There isn't even a word." She lifted her face to look up at him. "You came for me."

"Because you are mine."

"Josiah is..."

"Bleeding to death if we don't get him tended to soon." Victor stepped backwards to kneel down next to Josiah. "I will not kill him, though my blood yearns for it. But he will give you a divorce, and you will become my wife."

"He will not."

Victor glanced back at her over his shoulder. "Oh yes, he will. I swear it to you. Because if he doesn't," Victor smiled down at Josiah who stared up at him like he was a monster, face

twisted in pain, "I'll hand him over to my brother, Michael, who isn't nearly as forgiving as I am."

Josiah's eyes widened.

"Oh yes, my brother lives. And he will sleep until he comes here and devours you." Victor lifted the man and settled him into the carriage then placed the unconscious driver next to him. He turned to face Cadence.

"I'm taking you back to Ashton. Hannah will know how to care for Josiah."

"You will drive the carriage?"

"Of course."

"But you are completely naked." Her gaze dropped down to his cock momentarily.

"We'll address that and how to get you the same once I have you back home."

Her gaze rose to his face. "Home."

"Yes."

"Because at long last, I am yours to want." Tears brimmed in her eyes, and he leant forward to kiss her lips tenderly.

"As I am yours."

About the Author

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, three very spoiled dog, and three crazy cats. She spends her time writing, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

With favourite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well in to her twenties that she realised that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

Email: sablegrey@gmail.com

Sable loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

Also by Sable Grey

Shadow Wolf

Total-E-Bound Publishing



www.total-e-bound.com

Take a look at our exciting range of literagasmic™
erotic romance titles and discover pure quality
at Total-E-Bound.