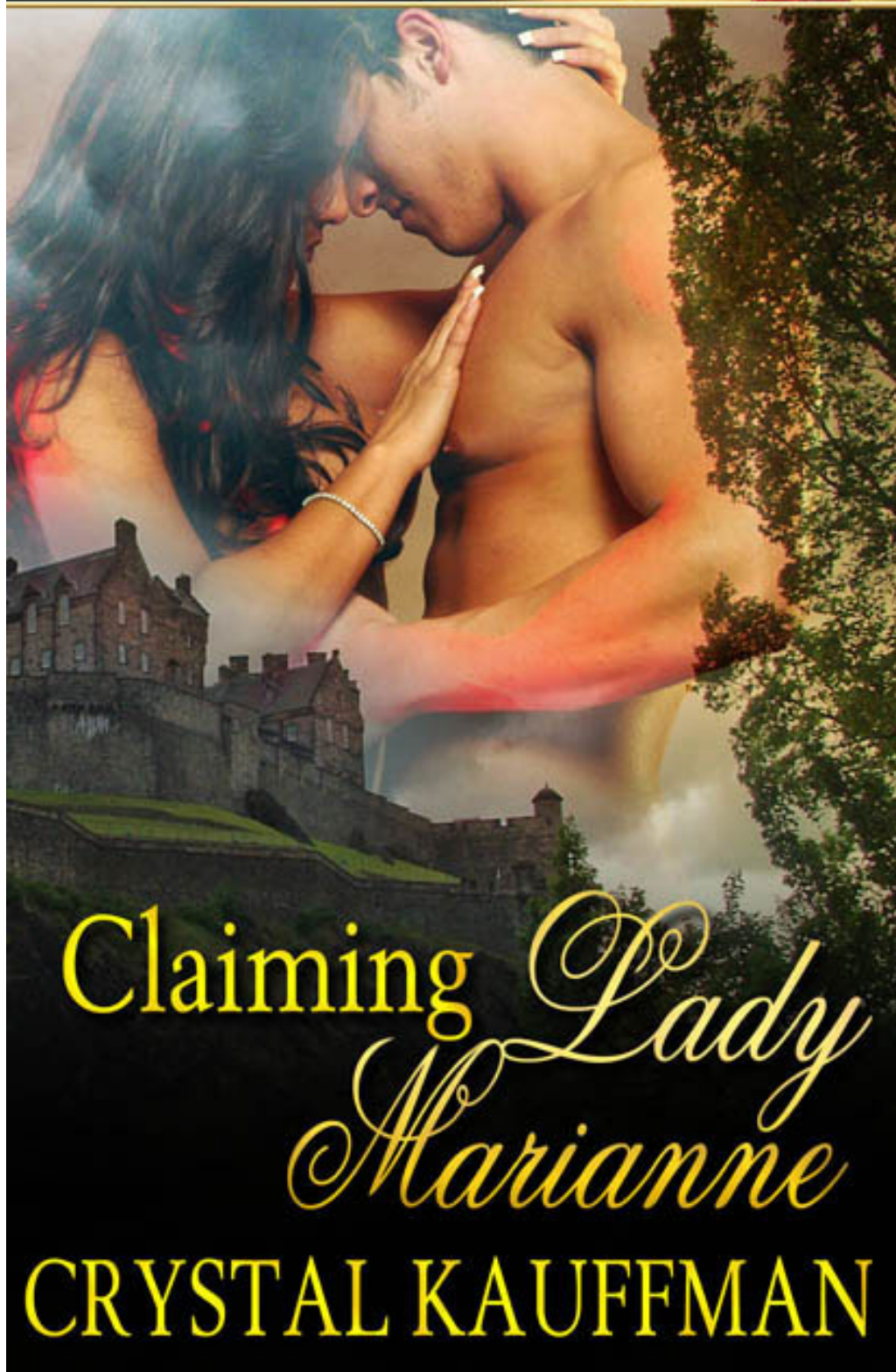


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



## Claiming Lady Marianne

Crystal Kauffman

After Marianne is caught *en compromise* with another woman, her husband, the vicious Viscount Cobham, is enraged. He remands Marianne to the care of her beastly grandfather with orders that she take a lover—a *male* lover. She is to get herself with child by the time he returns from his travels in six months. He will have his heir, one way or another. Marianne's grandfather charges his stable master with the task, and Marianne is bound to her bed every third night to await the burly man.

Michael Ainsworth is no stud horse, and Baron Thurlow's task is too ghastly to consider. But Michael longs for a glimpse of the pretty girl who used to cling to the paddock fence to watch the horses. When he finds her terrified and unwilling, his honor demands he protect her—despite the heartbreaking knowledge the viscountess can never love a lowly servant.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Claiming Lady Marianne

ISBN 9781419928031

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Edited by Grace Bradley

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication April 2010

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# *CLAIMING LADY MARIANNE*

Crystal Kauffman

## **Chapter One**

Lady Cobham felt the carriage slow, then veer sharply to the left. She glanced at her husband. This could only be the long drive leading to Brookmoor, the home of her grandfather, Baron Thurlow.

"My Lord." As she addressed her husband, the cowardly fear she heard in her own voice made her cringe.

"You will not be traveling to Italy with me, Marianne." Viscount Cobham examined the stitching on his glove as he spoke to her for the first time in three days. "I'm remanding you to the care of your grandfather. He'll know how to deal with you."

Her heart thundered against her ribs. With the small measure of relief came a different weight of new fear.

Free of one tyrant, into the hands of another.

Viscount Cobham lifted his gaze. His eyes narrowed with hatred. "You are truly your grandfather's offspring. I should have known you would prove defective."

She gasped, though his hateful words came as no surprise. "Edward, please."

"I can hardly bear to look at you. Your depravities have brought humiliation upon my family name."

Depravities? This she could not bear. What she and Louisa shared was beautiful. "I love her!"

He lunged across the rocking carriage so fast she didn't have time to lift a hand in defense. The strike of his closed fist made stars explode in her eyes.

"Do not speak of it again!" he roared, eyes ablaze. Spittle flew from his lip. He slid back into the plush leather seat and smoothed his fine woolen traveling coat, visibly forcing his façade of control back into place.

Marianne cupped her throbbing cheek. Pleading to his sense of compassion was a wasted effort. He'd always been vain and self-centered, expecting her to obey him while he remained a virtual stranger. He seemed more interested in earning affection from his prized hunting dogs.

Besides, her relationship with Lady Louisa was a private passion she wished to protect and cherish, not have stained by his wicked condemnation.

"Take a lover," he said idly, once again more concerned with his fine leather glove. His gaze flicked up to hers, piercing. "A male lover."

Therein lay the truth. That she had not taken his seed to root in three years was more of an offense than her search for love elsewhere, with, God forbid, a woman.

The carriage climbed the rise to Brookmoor's grand entry and came to a smooth stop at the stairs.

"Get yourself with child by the time I return." His sneering gaze slipped over her with disgust. "I will have my heir."

He slid from the carriage, leaving Marianne to be assisted by the footman. He marched up the steps in his long-legged stride, making her skip to keep up. Inside, he accepted Greta's assistance with his coat and hat while giving Marianne his back.

"The Baron awaits you in the drawing room, Your Lordship."

"I shall see my own way." He tossed a disgusted look down his nose. "Marianne, wait here."

She sat in the narrow waiting chair like a common messenger. Greta looked at her with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. Marianne knew the maid sensed the impending trouble and would side with her employer on whatever punishment was decreed. Perhaps she'd already heard the gossip. Rumors often spread faster among the working class than the peerage. Marianne had been caught in a wicked compromise sure to set London tongues afire, common and privileged alike.

Greta gave a sniff, then turned and disappeared down the hall.

The large clock in the entry tick-tocked its repetitive song for an hour and fifteen minutes. Fear gave way to boredom, then irritation. Marianne rose, hovering on the verge of returning to her old rooms, be they prepared or not.

There had been a time in her life when she was more courageous than this, with the notion to stand up to criticism.

*But two years under the cruel guardianship of a humorless husband has done a lot to destroy it,* Marianne thought ruefully.

The beatings, Lord Cobham's strikes usually placed carefully so the bruises would not show, had also done their part to destroy her confidence.

Defeated, she resumed her seat.

"I have just the man in mind," she heard her grandfather say. The doors to the drawing room flew open. Greta appeared from thin air.

"Fine, fine. I leave the matter to your discretion." Lord Cobham allowed the maid to help him into his coat. "I will see you in six months, Baron."

No wonder he'd struck her face. She was to remain here, a prisoner, hidden from any who might see.

Without another word or even a glance in her direction, he strode from the house.

Her grandfather smirked from his infirmary chair. "Got yourself in a pickle, haven't you, girl? I can't say I didn't expect it." His eyes gleamed wickedly, as though the situation excited him. "Greta, take her ladyship to her old rooms. She's to stay there until I call for her."

He grinned. All at once, that nearly forgotten leer was fresh and raw in her mind. Marianne shivered but stared back at him without words or emotion. Somewhere, so long ago it was also nearly forgotten, she had made a promise to herself they wouldn't break her.

Yet despite her vow, they'd already done a halfway thorough job of it. She cursed her cowardice. With a sigh, she turned and preceded Greta on the stairs.

Two days passed in which she sat alone in her rooms, always locked there by Greta. The first day her meals were delivered by a timid young maid who never announced her name. On the second day Greta, or a brusque, masculine maid she had never seen before, brought her trays. Marianne saw it for what it was—the removal of temptation presented by the sweet young flower. Foolish old codger. Her grandfather believed her relationship with Louisa was nothing more than sexual perversion, satisfied by any warm body.

That was a man's way of thinking.

Her affair with Louisa was so much more than that. The dear woman had been her very best friend long before their relationship turned intimate. And yet, Louisa was so much more than a lover. She had been a source of encouragement to Marianne, and truly listened to her. Louisa had spent countless hours reassuring her worries, chasing away the fears. Marianne would not have survived a single month of her miserable marriage if it hadn't been for Louisa.

Not a knock, but a rattle of the key in the lock announced a visitor after her evening tray had been removed. Her grandfather rolled his squeaking chair into the room, followed by one of the men needed to carry him up the stairs. Next came Greta, and the burly maid whose name she'd learned was Radostina.

Marianne squeezed the lapels of her robe together at her throat. She glanced over the lot, as uneasy under Radostina's disapproving gaze as she was in the presence of this man and her grandfather while in a state of undress.

"Grandfather," she said, but her gaze remained pinned on the large man.

She'd glimpsed him at the stables when she lived at Brookmoor, though she'd never known his name. He stood out as the tallest, strongest man she'd ever seen. In her years away, first at finishing school and then Viscount Cobham's Tally Ho, he seemed to have blossomed from an awkward youth into proud manhood. Dark hair, slightly too long at the brow, swept over one eye. His were soft eyes, though, he the only member of this macabre group who didn't glare at her like she was filth.

Greta moved into the room to straighten her vanity and Radostina headed the other direction to turn down the bed.

"For the sake of your reputation, your presence here will remain a secret," the baron began loftily. "As far as anyone who is anyone knows, you are in Italy with your husband."

There was a devious gleam in his eyes she didn't like. At least she felt herself lucky he hadn't taken a switch to her, or bade this brute of a man to do so.

"You'll remain in your room. Greta or Radostina will deliver your meals."

A prisoner? In her own room? She straightened her back. They would not make her feel guilty for loving Louisa.

"Michael will visit you every third night."

She frowned, confused. Why on earth...

Hissing rose in her ears and her face became unbearably hot. Surely he did not mean...

"W-What?" She shot a look at Radostina, still rustling by the bed. What in Hades was the surly woman doing?

"You'll be bound and put upon by him until not only are you seeded with child, but cured of your depravities."

The entire world stopped moving. "You cannot be serious." Her voice was so far away the words seemed to have been spoken by someone else.

"I am as serious as death, child! This is no laughing matter you've gotten yourself into."

"I have done nothing wrong!" she shouted back.

"You were found in bed with a woman, both of you naked." He flipped a hand. "While I could not possibly care less what you do, your husband is mightily offended. I took great pains to arrange that marriage. You should have been thankful for your step

up in society. Instead you throw it all away! Consider it a blessing he's willing to give you this chance to redeem yourself."

"This *chance*?" she echoed, stunned. Beside the old baron, the stable master, Michael, shifted from one foot to the other. The tips of his ears were bright pink, and he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Give Lord Cobham his heir. I don't suppose he'll care what you do if he gets a son. But for the time being, he's entrusted me to put a cure on you, and by God I'm going to do it."

"You're mad!" She started towards him, intending to drop at his knee and beg for mercy. Greta caught one arm and Radostina appeared at her other faster than Marianne believed the brawny woman capable of moving. They clutched her viciously, digging their fingers into the soft underside of her upper arm so precisely it seemed they had conspired their brutality ahead of time.

Marianne screamed at the pain and reared back. Her knees gave out but her captors hauled her back onto her feet, Greta giving her a shake.

"Grandfather! Don't do this!"

"Fear not, child. Medicine is always unpleasant but you'll thank me when you've been cured of your depravity."

"My depravity!" she screamed at him. "You set about having me raped and you call me depraved? You're insane, and this is criminal. I'll report you!"

Greta and Radostina dragged her to the bed. Marianne's screams peaked as fear swirled around her like a choking fog.

"You'll tell no one, if you know what's good for you." He shook the cane he always clutched in his gnarled hand. "Scream all you want. The house is empty."

## **Chapter Two**

Radostina shoved her down on the mattress and Greta appeared on the far side before she could right herself. They dragged her hands above her head. She heard a whirr and snap of leather. A tight cuff secured around one wrist, then the other. *Merciless God, Radostina had secured binds to the bedposts.*

"No! Please, don't do this to me!"

The unsympathetic women grabbed her ankles and wrenched her legs wide. Marianne cried out as a muscle strained in her inner thigh.

"Please, Greta, Radostina, you cannot condone this. You must help me!"

"The staff has been given strict instructions," her grandfather said eerily. Marianne lifted her head and saw him staring at her with a dark hunger in eyes whose pupils had gone wide, as though in the control of some wicked drug. They were now lifeless, almost content to witness her misery. The rheumy orbs shifted their focus to Greta. "She's not to be let out of this room."

He laid his cane over his lap and turned his chair, stopping when he found Michael. "You know what to do."

He wheeled himself out of the room. Radostina followed, but Greta walked to the sewing table. She returned with scissors and grasped the hem of Marianne's nightgown. A snip and a tear opened the garment to the neckline. Cool air rushed over her naked flesh. Greta pulled each side of the ruined garment wide.

Marianne thrashed, mortified by her nakedness in front of this stranger. He stared down at her, his eyes raking over every inch in thorough examination. She fought against the binds even while she knew it was futile.

The door clicking shut seized her attention. They were alone.

"I beg of you, if you have one shred of decency, leave me be!"

He slipped his suspenders off his shoulders and worked the laces on his mason's shirt. She squeezed her eyes shut, spilling hot tears across her temples. Just as quickly she opened them again, too fearful not to look.

He removed his shirt and tossed it over her vanity seat. His fingers moved to the laces on his breeches. His chest gleamed, bulged with muscle, completely bare of hair. His hands were enormous, but nimble on the ties. She saw him shift each leg, toeing off his boots by the heels. He hooked his thumbs into the waist of his breeches and shoved them over his hips.

"Oh, God!"

Her throat burned from her sobs and new tears stung her eyes. She rasped out another plea, even as she knew it would fall on deaf ears.

His clothes cast off, he stood tall. A wail of agony welled from deep in her belly. His skin was whiter below the line of his breeches, having worked in the sun without his shirt. His hips were narrow beneath the spread of his shoulders, but still impossibly wide. He was a liberal statue of a man, and his penis was *enormous*. It jutted from a curly crop of black hair like a massive pine seeking the sky.

She was no virgin, she had endured Lord Cobham's increasingly frequent and ever more violent needs as the months dragged by without giving him his heir.

But Michael was frightening in his virility. His arousal was virulent, the shaft thick and throbbing, the head shiny, swollen tight and purple in obvious fervor. She couldn't bear to look at it, but neither could she drag her eyes away. This was a punishment and the pain intended struck fear in her heart.

His eyes, though, held passionate regret. He strode toward the bed slowly, almost reluctantly, not with the eagerness of a man excited to indulge in this immoral act.

Marianne choked out a sob, no longer able to form the words to beg for mercy. He loomed above her, a monster bent on her destruction. He leaned in, grabbing for the tossed aside sheet before he knelt on the corner of the bed.

"Please, no! Oh God, Louisa. Louisa!"

He laid himself down gently, beside her at first before he shifted over her prone body and fell neatly between her bound-wide legs. A causal toss of his wrist brought the sheet fluttering over them.

He was heavy, his skin cool against her raging hot flesh, those muscular thighs pressing hers wider to allow him between.

Her fear was irrational, she'd been put upon viciously by Lord Cobham so many times before, yet the unholy wickedness of rape sent her spinning toward insanity, so terrified she was blinded by it. She no longer screamed, but sobbed incoherent pleas, choking on her own tears.

A beefy hand clamped over her mouth. His whisper came softly, lips placed just at her ear. "Shhh."

The gentleness of that utterance brought her crashing back down to reality and some of the fear gave way to pure, absolute rage. How dare they – all three of them! If there was one thing she succeeded in doing before she died, it would be vengeance –

"He is watching through the squint."

The rage tripled. At once she recognized the eeriness in her grandfather's eyes as dark lust. In that instant her lifetime of unpleasant suspicions was confirmed – the subtle glances, the accidental touches, the too-familiar affections. All her uneasiness was suddenly founded in reason.

"I am going to thrust on you," Michael said. "And you scream."

The colossal shaft of his manhood brushed the length of her sex and drove downward with a jerking thrust of his hips. She felt the hard cap push against the lower curve of her buttock. Marianne cried out, more from shock than his order to.

He thrust his hips again twice, three times, before she truly understood she had not been violated. She continued to whimper and cry, still controlled by raw terror.

His movements were awkward, as though he tried not to touch her body even as he strove to make his act convincing. His skin grew tacky with sweat and his breathing came hot at her ear. Several minutes into it, he grunted. Though his act upon her was a lie, his groans were true. Warm liquid spurted against her thigh with surprising force.

His body went still, his breathing now labored. His shoulders trembled, though she suspected it was from the ferocity of his climax, not the effort of holding himself prone above her. His forehead pressed to her cheek. Marianne squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face away.

"I'm sorry."

"Get off me."

"I'm sorry," he said again. He drew away slowly, dropping the sheet back over her. Marianne opened her eyes to find him standing over her, staring down with a tragic expression. He glanced at the rug, then turned to collect his clothing. For agonizingly long moments, there was no sound but the rustle of fabric.

Once dressed, he approached the bed again. Marianne closed her eyes and turned her face. He freed her ankles first, then the wrist of the side on which he stood.

She rolled onto her side, sobbing quietly, and worked the other strap free herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael wrenched the knob and found the door unlocked. The maid Greta stood in the hall, waiting with the key. Behind her, Baron Thurlow rolled up in his wretched infirmary chair, grinning evilly.

Greta pushed the door closed and slotted the key. It rattled as she locked the viscountess inside, a scraping sound grating shrilly that he recognized as a broken pin in the mechanism. She then turned and strode away without a word or even a glance, as if such depraved activities were the norm in this house.

"Fine job, just fine," the baron said, his voice low with sultry appreciation.

Michael swallowed back sore regret. He felt sick to his stomach. He turned and strode down the hall, not caring if his dusty boots left tracks in the baron's blood red carpeting.

"It shall get easier, my boy," the baron called after him. "Don't you worry!"

How had he never noticed the maniacal edge in the old man's voice?

He stalked from the house without truly seeing, stomping out a furious gait until a maple branch whipped him across the face, bringing him back down to earth.

When the baron had first called upon him, he thought the man's proposal outrageous, but the extra two pounds added to his monthly salary was too tempting to ignore. Still, after a night of contemplation, he'd decided to refuse.

Had the quarry been anyone other than Lady Marianne, Michael would have in an instant. While his job was to care for the stallions and see to a prosperous foaling, he had his pride. He was no stud horse himself.

Yet still the next day he presented to Baron Thurlow, wanting to see Lady Marianne for the first time since she'd left so many years ago. Wanting to know if she was as pretty as he remembered, or if his imagination had chiseled her into the goddess who haunted his dreams.

Wanting, and hoping with all his might, to find her willing.

The moment he saw her he knew his endless fantasies had not tricked him. She was exactly as he remembered, the loveliest creature in all of England. Delicate, fragile, with waves of chestnut hair flowing past her shoulders and the ripest lips any woman had the right to possess. He'd been as entranced by her immeasurable beauty as he was the fear shooting off her like sparks from a blacksmith's anvil.

She was not willing.

Michael knew at once he had to protect her. From her degenerate grandfather, from her undeserving husband, from the uncaring maids who would assist in her destruction.

He didn't yet know how to save her, yet he knew he could trick the baron for months. Her husband was not to return from Italy for half a year. Michael had time to formulate a better scheme.

At least he tried to convince himself he could. He was desperate. Somehow the fates or the stars or God himself had given him this incredible opportunity to save Marianne from the rape of another. To cherish her as she deserved to be cherished.

Only now did he realize the risk he took. Dismissal would be a generous punishment, one he would not be afforded. The baron was a corrupt old cad. Michael would most likely find himself drawn and quartered, and then his mother would have no one to care for her. A blind woman cast out of the only home she ever knew would not survive a day.

Instead of returning home, he walked to the paddock and whistled to Skylark. The old mare ambled over, heavy belly swinging. She was too old to be bred again, but the baron had insisted. She'd already produced two champion racers, and Baron Thurlow wanted another trophy winner.

"Hello, sweet. I forgot to bring you an apple." He stroked her velvety muzzle. "Will you forgive me?"

She nickered softly, a sound from deep in her belly that took great effort in her state. She would.

He smiled. "You're an angel. Soon, I'll be sleeping in the barn to keep a close watch on you. Your foal will come any day now. A colt, I'm guessing. It'll be a champion, with your good heart."

Unbidden, his thoughts strayed. He imagined Marianne with a swollen belly, heavy with his child. A warm flush tingled across his flesh and rolled to his cock, which was already hard and straining uncomfortably erect again.

He would never violate her. He couldn't bear the shame in his heart, and he would never hurt a woman that way. His mother had raised him to be proud, principled, and above all, respectful of his own honor.

But the fantasy was too incredible to ignore. There were no words to describe how magnificent it would feel to know she carried his child.

The moon crossed the sky and the night air became colder. Skylark moved away to nibble at a few shoots of grass she discovered in the paddock. On leaden feet, Michael finished the journey home. He eased through the door to their tiny cottage as quietly as he could, but it was not quiet enough to hide him from the sensitive ears of a blind woman.

"Michael?"

His mother's voice rang with concern. She shuffled into the dark room.

"Here, Ma."

"Where have you been?" She stopped, staring at him, knowing, but not seeing. Another flush rolled across his skin.

"Just out at the paddock."

"You're later than usual." Now her voice was heavy with concern. "Are you in trouble?"

"No, Ma."

"Don't lie to me, Michael." She shuffled closer and maneuvered herself easily into her chair at the table. "I can smell the perfume on you. I know that scent. It's expensive."

He caught her meaning. The scent was worn only by women he had no business cavorting with.

Michael dropped into the chair in his usual spot, kitty-corner to her at their rough wooden table. Not only couldn't he lie to her, he had no desire to. Michael took a deep breath and let the whole story out in a rush.

After her initial gasp, her features settled and she listened to him with that calm, intelligent assessment his mother had always possessed. Once he finished, he felt better for confessing, but no better about the situation.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I agreed before I thought it through. I never should have risked what we have here. I was a fool."

She reached with a thin, bony hand and he grasped it in both of his. "Don't you apologize, Michael. I'm so much prouder of you for what you're doing for poor Marianne. She was the sweetest child." His mother frowned. "I always knew that old codger was evil. I never told you the things I found in his laundry, but now I don't need to. You found out what kind of man he is on your own."

"I just want to protect her. She's so beautiful, Ma. Grown up so pretty you'd hardly believe it."

His mother squeezed his hands with surprising strength. "Don't you get your heart broken, my son. Marianne belongs to another man. You only get to play this ruse for six months."

Another odd burst of heat blossomed in his chest. These were six months he wouldn't give up for the world.

### **Chapter Three**

"How is my granddaughter doing today?" Baron Thurlow watched her ladle his soup with a critical eye.

"She will not speak, milord," Radostina relayed obediently. She squeezed the handle in silent anger until her knuckles turned white. "She does not look at me."

"Bah." He waved his hand in that simple gesture that had a thousand meanings. Impatience. Disrespect. Irritation. Disinterest. Dismissal. Today, it meant Marianne's complaints were trivial, unimportant.

Radostina hated him a little bit more with every insulting toss of that gnarled, age-spotted hand.

"Does she eat? Eh?" He eyed her, his mouth turned down in a permanent scowl.

"She eats, milord."

"Good, good. When she gets with child she'll need her strength."

She blew an even breath from her nostrils. "Yes, milord." Too late, she realized he caught the tone she thought she'd masked.

"Eh? You've a complaint, maid?"

A plea for Marianne, a small request he show his granddaughter even a sliver of mercy, hovered on the tip of her tongue. "No, milord."

"She ought to be grateful. Three years gone without fruit, people have started to talk. She'll be cured and have the viscount's heir. She ought to be grateful, I tell you."

Greta forced a stiff smile. "Yes, milord."

"Deliver the luncheon in her chamber as you would. Inform her she's to dress for dinner. I've changed my mind. No reason she can't have her meals in the dining room.

And starting tomorrow you'll take her on a brisk walk every morning. Fresh air will do her a world of good."

\* \* \* \* \*

Marianne paced her chamber in growing anxiety. She'd had two nights and two days to consider the stable master's motives, but could arrive at no clear reason he would defy her grandfather and merely pretend to...to mount her. The idea, even unspoken, lodged in her throat. *To stud me. To rape me.* At least acknowledge it for what it was, she demanded of herself.

Outside her balcony doors, the setting sun dappled thick clouds with blotches of color. He would come to her soon. It was the third night.

She sat at her desk and hastily scribbled out a note.

*"Dearest Louisa, I am not in Italy, but rather I am a prisoner at Brookmoor, as Lord Cobham has remanded me to my grandfather's care. My punishment is vile, but I shan't trouble you with it as I am certain you face your own tribulations since our discovery en compromise. I only wish you to know that I remain in England, and despite the efforts of others, I love you ever so."*

She sanded the paper and folded it into an envelope. The key rattled in the lock, making her heart leap. She hurried to the bed and tucked the letter into the mattress covering, no time to wax a seal. She stood and smoothed her robe as the door swung open.

Greta and Radostina entered ahead of Michael. His worried gaze dropped on her like a weight of lead, then quickly slid away.

"Come now, m'lady." Greta started for her, and Marianne realized she was backing away. "Best to stop fighting it."

The woman grabbed her wrist and wrenched her toward the bed.

"You wretched beast," Marianne hissed at her. Tears sprang to her eyes as the terror returned, only now it was mixed with a strange flurry of hope and supplication. Her gaze shot to Michael. He was every bit as gigantic and foreboding as she remembered.

Would he continue his ruse? Or would he indulge in what he had merely been afraid to seize the first night?

Greta was rough as she shoved Marianne onto the bed and jerked her arm up to receive the leather strap. She snapped the buckle tight. Radostina mimicked the act on the other side of the bed.

All four limbs were restrained. A surge of panic welled inside Marianne like a tight fist and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. Still, she could not stop herself from writhing against the straps. The more solid they felt, the higher her panic climbed.

Radostina cut open her shift on the seam where it had been repaired, then the two maids left. In echoing silence, Michael disrobed. Like the first night, his penis stood tall, as thick as a German sausage. He stood over her, staring down with a look of fierce longing. His eyes caressed her, lingering at the apex of her widespread thighs.

Would he take her tonight? She prepared herself. He was, after all, just a man. It would serve Edward right if she still didn't bear.

Michael descended, bringing along scents she hadn't noticed that first terrifying night, but now remembered. Leather. Hay. Fresh air. Above it all, the raw, primal scent of a man who worked with his back.

Instead of recoiling from the odor of sweat, she reveled in it. How she hated the sour oils and lotions Edward wore.

Michael arranged himself over her, hovering inches above her nakedness. Her heart kicked against the walls of her chest. Again, he pulled on the edge of the bed linen and it fluttered over them. His colossal body covered her and he lowered his head beside hers.

The fear vanished. She felt...protected.

Ridiculous. She was as much at risk as ever.

She turned her face, touching silky soft hair with her nose. What an improvement over Edward's slicked hair, greasy with its bitter-smelling pomade.

"Please." Her voice failed, and her whisper was so soft she worried he hadn't heard.

"Marianne."

Her eyes drifted shut.

"Michael."

"Do you remember me?" His returned whisper was light at her ear. Grandfather could not possibly hear. The old man was so deaf he couldn't hear most of what was said immediately in front of him.

"I do."

"I remember you, too. The pretty girl who stood at the rail to watch the horses."

He remembered her better than she did him. She had only been fifteen the summer she spent most of her days clinging to the paddock fence, watching the men work the gleaming stallions. Her tutors had punished her, but the beautiful horses had been too fascinating to resist.

Michael was moving on top of her. "Scream now." He thrust.

She managed a strangled cry. The thick, hot length of him pushed against her thigh. Yet, again, he did not violate her.

Intense relief washed over her like a cool rain. Without the terror, her pussy was open and moist. His hard length pressed down, sliding across her slick cleft. His hips rolled, driving his monstrous erection up and down, fucking her mattress.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on him, the way his body touched hers, the incredible size of him and his even more incredible restraint. He was huge and heavy, but held his powerful body so carefully above her she felt no discomfort at all. She only felt the breadth of his hips touching her, resting atop her pelvis, pushing her thighs wide. Marianne realized she did not feel the expected pain to her breasts, remembering the way Edward crushed down on her without heed.

Michael gasped and his skin grew dewy where he touched her. His hot seed came in a torrent against the cleft of her buttocks. Again, the force of the streams surprised her. Was this what Edward's had been like inside her?

Somehow, she doubted that. Edward was a thin dandy, willowy and soft. Michael was a virile mountain of a man with the prowess of a lion. His muscled arms on either side of her head shielded her from the too-bright glow of her hearth and her grandfather's damnable prying eyes.

He grew still, but didn't rise. "I'm sorry." Another moment passed, and Marianne realized he was nuzzling her hair.

She turned her head again, pressing close. "Why do you not?"

Marianne felt him stiffen, then begin to draw away. "I *cannot*." His whisper was shrill.

"Michael," she returned in an urgent whisper, stopping him. "Please."

He fell still.

"Deliver a letter to Lady Louisa Almdale. I've tucked it under the mattress. Please. Please, Michael." Her fear that he would refuse her was what finally brought on the tears. "Please."

He gave no answer, only shifted and rose. A bolt of agony struck her heart, but she had prepared for the chance he would betray her to her grandfather. She chose the risk.

With his back to her, he dragged on his breeches. She watched the muscles in his back flex and bulge. The curve of his arse was so muscular it almost seemed squared, not round.

He returned to the edge of the bed and bent to pull on his boots. She closed her eyes, willing him to retrieve the letter.

When she felt him dig under the mattress, she nearly wailed with relief. Her eyes flew open, but Michael didn't look at her again.

The paper crinkled, sliding inside his boot she supposed, then his weight left the edge of her bed. As the first night, he unbound her ankles and the cuff at her wrist. Without another word, he left.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Michael."

He paused, his hand still on the knob. Behind him, the old man's squeaking chair rolled up the hall. Michael's heart raced. The old trout couldn't possibly have heard. But was there more than one squint? Had he seen everything from across the room? The envelope seemed to burn him inside his boot.

"It is as I suspected."

He swallowed a noisy gulp.

"She won't come round any time soon," the old man muttered. "She's got it in her fool head she's in love with that lowborn trollop, as unnatural as it is."

Michael glanced over his shoulder. The baron's gaze held suspicious knowing.

"You must speak nicely to her. Flattery and praise, my boy. Have you never wooed a woman?"

Michael clenched his jaw. "I have not."

"Eh!" The baron waved a hand in the air. "It'll come to you."

Michael turned and stared down at the old baron. The man was a shriveled shell of a person.

"It is not a race. You cannot simply mount her like an animal. You must deliver a kiss or two, a fondle here and there. Women need to be coddled if they are to be wooed. Gentleness is what will cure Marianne."

"I... Yes, I see." Michael swallowed. He would explain the baron's demands to Marianne. She would understand it was not his choice. But Lord forgive him, the idea of touching and kissing her was pure magic.

"Ah, I know she's not your choice. Maybe you fancy that pretty young slut from the kitchens? The one with the red hair and the..." He made a cupping gesture in front of his chest, pantomiming large breasts, then flipped a gnarled hand at Michael. "Eh, you'll get over it. Shall I make it three pounds added? That should be enough to make a bony girl more tempting."

Marianne, bony? That nasty whore from the kitchens more appealing? The old man was blind as well as deaf. And dumb, apparently. Marianne's breasts were perfect, elegantly rounded and slightly upturned, of flawless, milky-white skin and budding, rosy nipples...

"It shall be enough." He started to leave, but stopped. "I no longer wish her bound." Michael's pulse raced with his daring. "She'll not evade me," he quickly added.

The baron snickered. "Fine, fine."

"And the maids need not remove her clothing. From now on, I shall do it myself."

Baron Thurlow's grin turned oily. The old man probably expected this would provide a better show. "As you wish, my boy. As you wish."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Michael's first night in her bed, Marianne had been afraid to search the room for squints. Her fears had been nightmarish, she'd half expected to find a rheumy eye staring back at her through the hole.

But now, feeling confidence inspired by her macabre alliance with Michael, she spent the next three days searching her room for the peepholes. She had to do something while waiting anxiously for a reply from Louisa, or she would go mad.

The squints could only be in the walls separating the two adjacent suites, and possibly in the ceiling, though the latter was doubtful. From wherever he'd been watching, Grandfather had wheeled his chair out to meet Michael in the hallway both nights. She'd heard their muffled conversations through the door.

She found the first easily enough—a tiny oval-shaped eyehole cut through a petal in the flower pattern on the wallpaper, above the wainscoting to the left of her bed. A second concealed under the edge of the painting to the right. From both, the watcher would have an unobstructed view of the profile of her bed.

How long had these been here? She thought back, embarrassed, to the last year she'd spent at Brookmoor. Before leaving for finishing school, she'd received her menses and her breasts had begun to bud. She ground her teeth in anger. Should she have a daughter instead of a son, she would protect her like a mother bear.

Marianne nearly stopped searching after finding the second squint, but caution, and having nothing better to do, made her keep searching.

She almost didn't find the third, but by accident she saw a glow of light behind the wooden headboard. The setting sun passed through the identical balcony doors of the adjacent suite and landed on its far wall, just as it did in her room.

From the vantage point of this tiny squint, the spy would have more difficulty seeing the activities upon her bed through the small openings in the carved detailing of her headboard, but the glimpses he could see would be vividly close, and privileged.

She shuddered. A pillow propped up against the headboard would be a quick remedy, but she worried about what Lord Thurlow might have been able to hear had he spied this close to the bed.

She supposed she would have been punished by now if he had discovered her letter to Louisa.

The opposite wall revealed a single squint, purposeful to her dressing table.

Beastly, perverted old cad. She made a mental note always to be robed at her vanity and never to be undressed outside the privacy of her dressing screen, where she'd found no squints.

Except of course, when Michael visited.

The rage brought by this outrageous situation still coursed through her veins like liquid fire, but she could not deny the small thrill at the prospect of seeing the stable master again. Her anger wasn't directed at him, only her grandfather and Edward.

Michael, her conspirator in arms, was her savior.

Like clockwork, Greta escorted him to her room one hour after the evening meal, which she now consumed in the dining room whilst listening to her grandfather smack his food about his wrinkled mouth. But tonight, Greta merely closed the bedroom door behind him, leaving them alone.

"Good evening, Michael," she said evenly, despite her curiosity. What was different tonight?

Michael blushed and tipped his head. "Good evening, Lady Marianne."

He seemed to search for words, then straightened his back and stared down at her. "You'll no longer be bound during my visits. It is...unnecessary. Lord Thurlow understands there is naught you can do to resist me."

Her heart leapt. At once she saw the logic he'd used to convince her grandfather to forego the restraints. He'd probably promised him a better show, ensured Marianne would be helpless even so. Smart man. But she was confused—was she to fight him in order to provide the old man some grotesque thrill?

"And it is I who shall undress you from this night on. It is a small reward for my efforts toward your rehabilitation."

"Is it now?" she replied, biting back her anger.

He strode closer, making her breath catch. He circled her with the eye of an eagle spying a mouse. Once behind her, he reached around to grasp the lapels of her robe and gently pulled them off her shoulders.

"Fear not, Lady Marianne," he leaned close to whisper. "My only concern is for your comfort."

She closed her eyes and willed her heart to resume its normal pace. Did he bring a letter from Louisa? She could endure any “medicine”, if only he did.

He pulled her robe down her arms and tossed it aside. Her arms hung at her sides, fingertips tingling.

“Your hair smells like flowers,” he said, and then softly, “Lord Thurlow instructs me to woo you with flattery and gentleness.”

“And ever dutiful, you obey.”

“I thought it would be nicer for us both.”

She flinched when he touched her arms. She would not allow herself to be wooed. *I will not be broken like some unruly horse!*

“I’m grateful I’ll not have to repair my nightdress again.” A slight nastiness edged her tone.

He continued his traverse until he faced her. “Perhaps you prefer to remove it yourself.” He turned her vanity seat around and sat. The delicate chair looked fragile beneath his burly frame. She expected it to crumple under him. He smiled at her with a mischievous, thoroughly adorable grin.

Tit for tat, was it? She almost preferred he remove it for her. She could achieve a level of detachment if she weren’t required to act. Marianne grasped the top button at the neckline, aware her would-be lover enjoyed the show as much as her lecherous grandfather. Her heart kicked up its frantic pace.

Michael sat still and silent, only his eyes moving to follow the flimsy garment as it slid down her body, catching for a moment on her breasts, then again on the flare of her hips, before pooling at her feet.

The vanity seat squeaked as he pushed to his feet. Eyes locked with hers, he slipped out of his suspenders and untied the laces at his neckline. He dragged his shirt over his head, mussing his hair.

Marianne allowed herself a visual exploration in return. The ridges in his chest and stomach were uniformly cut. The perfectly mirrored weave of muscle and sinew bunched and danced as he unbuttoned his breeches and bent to push them over his hips.

The sight of that magnificent staff of manhood—and she felt no shame in acknowledging its magnificence—made her breath catch. It soared skyward from its thick patch of hair.

A tingle rushed over the surface of her skin as she imagined what that gargantuan staff would feel like plunging in and out of her. No, she suddenly realized, Edward's streams of ejaculate inside her were surely nothing compared to this man's, for Edward's organ was shorter and much narrower, and did not stand as tall when erect. It curved to one side, like a sick plant.

Michael toed himself out of his boots and shoved them off with the rumple of his breeches. Marianne glimpsed a point of paper, the corner of an envelope, in his boot. Louisa's lavender stationary! Her gaze shot to his and a thrill touched her heart.

The frantic breaths in her lungs turned to a choked sob.

"If you accept me, there will be less pain," he said in a strong voice.

Marianne nodded. "I don't like the binds." Her voice hitched.

He took her wrist and led her toward the bed. A moment's panic made her plant her feet, but he pulled her along effortlessly. Her skin burned under the imagined gaze of her beastly grandfather. Michael lifted the sheet and guided her toward the bed. Marianne sprawled, pretending to collapse under his force.

Michael crawled in beside her and gathered her close, once again tossing the linen over them both. His skin came against hers with shocking intensity. Propped on one elbow, he looked down at her like an adoring lover. His other hand caressed her arm.

"Obey me, Marianne, and you'll see it can be nice for both of us," he said with authority. He bent close to nuzzle her and his voice fell to a whisper. "The nights we're not together, I dream of you."

Her heart froze. Was this true? He was obvious about the words spoken loudly for her grandfather's benefit, and those meant only for her. That had definitely been a whisper for her alone.

He had feelings for her? Of course he did. She almost felt foolish for not realizing it. Why else would he go to such extremes to help her? His protection was one thing, but Michael had *spared* her. She had mistakenly believed he didn't understand she would not be spared. One way or another, Edward would see to it she got with child. Or died trying.

Nausea swam through her stomach. If Michael failed, what would come next?

He arranged himself gently, making a great show of his gentleness in preparation to mount her. Without realizing her own actions, she found her hands on the rounded curve of his shoulders. His skin was warm, already slightly dewy from the warmth of their contact, and his wonderful earthy scent filled her nostrils. His skin was soft, but the muscles harder than she'd expected.

"Open for me, Marianne."

She became aware of his broad thighs pushing hers wide and her first reaction was to stiffen.

Michael seized her wrists and wrenched them above her head. She squeaked in surprise. His hips bucked against her, and instinctively she cried out. His hot shaft drove between her buttocks like a spear, the incredible length of him sliding across the moist folds of her sex.

She whimpered under the force. His pelvis slammed against her, the root of him rubbing her clitoris. He pounded with his hips, hotly abrading her cheeks with his driving penis.

He was stimulating himself on her flesh.

The pressure against her sensitive nub started waves of ticklish warmth that surged in time with each thrust. Before consciously aware, she rolled her hips to meet the contact, seeking to enhance the first tiny shocks of climax.

She'd never experienced her womanly pleasure with Edward, instead, it was Louisa who'd given Marianne her first orgasm, Louisa who'd taught her how to strive for it, and intensify it. Louisa who'd shown her how beautiful climax could be.

The waves started as hints at ticklish pleasure. She pushed against his pelvis, rubbing herself against him.

Michael's breath came in steamy grunts against her neck. He erupted a torrent of hot seed, leaving a sticky pool under her backside, and the act was over too soon. He trembled, spent, his still-thick shaft lodged lengthwise in the valley of her ass.

Marianne was clinging to him, her legs high and tightly squeezing his hips. She was disappointed, though she truly hadn't expected her womanly pleasure from him. The almost-climax had been an unexpected surprise.

He shuddered over a long breath. "I'm sorry —"

"Louisa writes?"

"Yes."

She fell limp with relief, all anger and humiliation forgotten as hope bloomed in her chest.

Michael took that as his signal to rise. He carefully arranged the sheet over her, then sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his fingers over his face and through his hair.

She wished she could tell him not to worry, that she understood why he did what he did, but he was too far away for her to whisper it. She would not sit up and deliver an endearment, for she would never give her grandfather the satisfaction.

She lay on her side, watching as he dressed himself. He truly was exquisite. Unwittingly, this masculine creature had nearly brought her to climax.

He picked up her fallen robe and arranged it neatly on the vanity chair. That was when she saw it; an undetectable sleight of hand she never would have noticed had she not been looking eagerly for the letter. He slipped the small envelope inside the folds before laying the garment across the padded seat.

Her eyes drifted shut on a prayer of thanks.

Once fully dressed, he turned back to her. "You see that to give your consent makes the act more pleasurable."

"Yes, Michael." She ground her teeth over the obedient response. She saw his tactic. If her grandfather did not believe he was succeeding with her, someone else would be brought in.

That could not happen. Lord only knew the tortures her grandfather might think up that her husband would only cheer on.

And she could not bear the idea of any other man than Michael even gazing upon her naked body.

Michael bade her farewell, and left. Moments later she heard the key twist in the lock, but she dared not retrieve the letter. She would wait until the mid of night, until certain her grandfather believed she had fallen asleep and was long gone from his peeping holes.

## **Chapter Four**

*Dearest Marianne,*

*My heart is lighter knowing you are still in England and not burdened by the brutal hand of your loutish husband. I wish there was a way to free you from his cruelty, but alas, I am powerless to help you. I will fondly remember the specialness of our time together, and you will always be in my heart.*

*Henceforth my life takes a new direction. I am going to have a baby. Theodore has forgiven my transgressions, and I repay his mercy with my unwavering loyalty. You remain my dearest friend, Marianne, but our relationship must remain just that.*

*Yours truly, Louisa.*

Hot tears burned Marianne's eyes, making the second reading nearly impossible. It hardly mattered. The point of the message had been stunningly clear on the first painful reading. Louisa had abandoned her.

Marianne cried through the night and all morning. She looked miserable, but did her best to make herself presentable by lunch.

"I had a visitor," she told her grandfather smugly over the soup course.

He narrowed a beady, suspicious eye, probably expecting she'd reported him to the constable.

She smiled wickedly. "My menses."

"Ah!" He flipped his hand and dug back into his soup. "You needn't discuss such ghastly topics over lunch. Bah!"

She smiled at her plate, content in his discomfort.

The second day her tears had dried, but a darker misery had dug in deep. She considered throwing herself from her balcony, but when she opened the doors, the fresh scent of spring promised her a better future waited just over the horizon. Besides, her death would serve nothing but to free Edward from an unpleasant nuisance, and she wouldn't provide him the convenience.

At the evening meal the next day, she announced to her grandfather she would not entertain Michael for another three days, and the old man didn't argue. She suspected his disinterest was more from bad news he'd received from his solicitor regarding one of his investments, but she didn't pry. She cared nothing of his wretched existence.

By the arrival of her next scheduled visit with Michael, she had resigned herself to her aloneness. There was nothing but Michael now, and her loathsome grandfather.

Though she still loved Louisa and wanted only the best for her friend, Marianne could not deny a small amount of jealousy.

Would breeding bring Edward's forgiveness? She doubted it. Louisa's husband was an affable man who had always been fun-loving and kind. It had been he and his father together who had accidentally caught her with Louisa in their bedchamber, and Theodore had actually grinned, his eyes lighting up with interest, before he sobered over the magnitude of the situation. Had Theo's father not also seen, her affair with Louisa might have remained a secret. Perhaps even morphed into a ménage à trios.

But if she were to take Michael's seed, would her husband abandon his violence toward her?

She snorted at her reflection in the vanity mirror. He would during her pregnancy, at the very least. Lord Cobham would never risk injuring his precious heir, secret bastard or not.

Not for the first time, she wondered if Michael would fit inside her. What it would feel like to accept that immense flood of ejaculate? How much more passionate would his moans be if he were truly possessing her?

How wonderful would it feel to have his child growing in her?

A warm rush of something unidentifiable heated her skin and swirled into her stomach, a surge of excitement and magic she'd never experienced at the thought of carrying Edward's child. Michael was a handsome man with bright eyes and clear skin, and if she imagined hard enough, she could picture him as a child. The lines in his cheeks now must have been dimples when he was a sprite.

Precisely on time, the key slotted in the lock and the door eased open. She remained at her vanity, brushing her hair.

A rose passed under her nose. Snowy white, with flawless petals and a delicate fragrance. She smiled and took the offered stem. Brought it closer and closed her eyes to breathe it in.

"Its beauty pales beside your own," Michael said, leaning close as he eased behind her. One hand slid over her shoulder in a gentle caress.

She put the flower in her water pitcher and went back to her hair. Michael sat on the corner of the bed and watched her silently. Then she realized he'd whispered the compliment. It had not been for her grandfather's benefit.

She met Michael's eyes in the mirror. His were sultry and adoring. His cheeks turned pink.

How was this affecting him? Obviously he had a fancy for her. It hardly mattered that she was young and pretty, he'd seen her naked. For a simple stable boy, that had to be incredible.

She set down her brush and went to him. Marianne made a mental promise to remember his feelings, to think of how this charade was affecting him. It was selfish to pity herself and not consider Michael. He'd done so much for her, it was the least she owed him.

She stood before him and touched his face. He closed his eyes and turned to nuzzle her palm. He was smoothly shaven and his hair was glossy and feather-soft. She noticed small details for the first time—his shirt, though of rough, inexpensive material, was white and crisp. Though he smelled wonderfully of alfalfa and horses, his hands

were clean and his nails neatly trimmed. Even in her finest habit, she came from the stables feeling gritty and badly in need of a bath. Michael had obviously taken great care before coming to her.

He caught her hand. She turned hers to grasp his fingers and urge him to his feet.

“Do you wish to undress me?” Her whispered question came in a rush before she could reconsider the boldness of it.

He touched her cheek. His fingers caressed lightly before moving under her hair to her nape. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “I do.”

He touched the shoulders of her loosely belted robe with only his thumbs. A slight pressure dragged it off. He let it fall to the floor. He worked the laces of her gown next. She felt his fingers trembling.

She glanced around him. Both squints were blocked from her view by his large frame. That meant her grandfather could not see her. She reached for Michael’s shirt laces. The fabric was coarse and her fingers grew hot with the frankness of her act.

“May I?”

He drew a deep breath and nodded. Clearly her boldness was as shocking to him as it was to her. She loosened the laces then tugged the hem from his breeches. He reached behind his back and yanked the shirt over his head by the collar.

She’d never actually looked at his bare chest so closely. The vivid view revealed tiny details that entranced her. Goosebumps pebbled the rosy flesh circling his flat nipples. A small mole perched on the curve of his left pectoral.

Michael scooped her into his arms, making Marianne squeak in surprise. He whirled around as though she were weightless and settled her on the bed. He tossed the sheet over her, protecting her from prying eyes.

She propped her head on her elbow to watch him remove the rest of his clothes. His engorged manhood proved he was as eager as he’d ever been. It curved upward like a

pine growing from the side of a cliff that was determined to seek the sun nonetheless. She stared, wondering again what it would feel like pushing into her, filling her.

Strangely, there was no fear. She knew it wouldn't hurt, because Michael wouldn't allow it to. A hot wave of need coiled low in her belly.

Lord Cobham had been rough, careless, punishing. There had been pain, but nothing she couldn't survive. She'd merely come away with an aversion to the act, a belief that it was always unpleasant.

Now she realized each man was unique. Louisa had described the act as delicious, that being filled made her feel complete, where in retrospect she'd been missing something vital. Marianne hadn't ever shared the desire, in fact, thought her friend odd. But now, strangely, she felt the desire to be possessed by that magnificent organ.

And what if she were to carry his child? How utterly divine! Better his than Lord Cobham's miserable seed. Better Michael's than any man's.

He slipped into bed beside her and drew the sheet over them. The sensation of his flesh against hers had become a welcome familiarity. Her blood raced and her heart beat a fast staccato, but Marianne realized the fear had turned to something much more sublime.

"I've missed you." His hand slid over her arm and he nuzzled her hair. "The days between us are endless."

She experienced a twinge of embarrassment. He was in love with her. And while utterly preposterous, she could not deny it was nice to be courted with flattery and adoration, no matter how unconventional.

She found herself cuddling close. The tip of her nose touched his throat. He smelled exquisite. The skin was rough, thrillingly masculine. "I haven't thanked you properly."

His hand trailed to her jaw and cupped. "It is not I who should be thanked, but every man condemned who would not do the same to help you."

"You had the courage to defy my grandfather. Not many are brave enough to do that."

His body was pressed close, every part of him, including the rock-solid column between his legs, rubbing against her.

"He is but a frail old dog who still retains his bark."

She giggled. He was at that.

"Have you another letter?" he whispered against her ear.

His question dampened the warm arousal befuddling her. She eased onto her back and shook her head. "There won't be. Louisa has...ended our intimacy."

Marianne felt him ease away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Ours was an impossible affair."

She felt the stillness of him. Perhaps he realized theirs was, as well. It saddened her to be the one to break his heart.

She turned her head and looked into his eyes. His returned gaze was searching, his dark eyes now a deep amber she found oddly soothing.

"Kiss me," she beckoned.

A flicker of uncertainty passed through them. He lifted his head and moved toward her slowly, as if waiting for her to change her mind.

His lips touched hers softly at first. He tasted wonderful. Yes, each man is definitely an individual, she realized happily. Marianne leaned into him, pressing her lips more firmly against his. His kiss was reverent, cherishing. When she opened her mouth and swept inside, she felt his surprise in his reaction.

He had never kissed a woman before. She found his innocence enchanting. He was eager, and the boldness excited him. He moved closer, pushing his erection hard against her thigh.

*I want it inside me, she thought. I want to feel him.*

She wanted to be claimed by him. She wanted to be branded.

Warm pleasure followed the path of his hand onto her breast. She arched her back in response.

Michael froze. He pulled back, looking into her eyes with alarm. His worried gaze shot to his hand. She looked too. Had she not been so aroused, she would have laughed.

When she looked up, she found his alarmed gaze piercing hers.

She smiled devilishly. "Kiss me."

Did she mean...? Michael's heart hammered against his ribs. Her pebbled nipple pressed into the center of his palm. Kiss her here?

Marianne closed her eyes and arched her back. She tilted her head back and sighed her pleasure.

Yes, she did.

Still, to be sure, to give her the chance to stop him, he placed his lips first to the velvet skin of her throat. Her light, flowery scent teased his nostrils. A sound of satisfaction slipped out of her and wrapped around him like a warm cotton sheet fresh out of the sun.

Her body rose and fell like a wave, arching and rolling beneath him. Each delicious inch he explored was more enticing than the last. His mouth slid over her collarbone and into the little U-shaped divot between. He changed direction only fleetingly, still unable to believe she wanted him to suckle her.

She shifted, removing all doubt, and her happy moans increased as he trailed a path of kisses onto the smooth mound of her breast. His lips closed over the ripe berry.

"Oh."

He flicked with his tongue, tasting it. She was more delicious than the lightest confection. He wanted this moment to go on forever.

Marianne stroked his shoulders, rolling her hips against him. She squirmed beneath his mouth, giving a soft cry when he razed gently with his teeth and sighing when he pressed his lips around her stiff peak to soothe the sting.

Her legs had parted, and a shift of her hips brought the warm, damp kiss of her pussy against his belly. She was aroused. He felt a surge of pride. She might prefer the touch of a woman, but his gentleness had convinced her a man could be good too.

He bestowed the same care to the other nipple, earning pleased coos and moans. Every sound she made was a personal triumph.

*If I had forever with you, you would know only pleasure.*

Her fingernails dug into his back, telling him she liked when he licked a circle around the swollen areola. Imagine that. She liked to be licked.

“Oh Michael,” she said on a sigh. “Kiss me everywhere.”

*Everywhere.* If only he did have forever with her, she would know what everywhere truly meant.

He kissed a path down her smooth stomach and poked his tongue into her bellybutton, earning a squeal of delight. The pressure of her hands on his shoulders urging him on, and the rise of her body, told him he was on the correct route.

He rose to his hands and knees to continue the traverse. He placed a kiss directly atop her mound. She wound her fingers into his hair.

He speared his tongue between the folds of her womanhood, parting them. Her hips bucked in response. He parted her, revealing the pearly flesh hidden there. Her clitoris was swollen and her pussy wept sweet cream.

Michael indulged in a private smile. He'd been embarrassed nearly to death when the two grizzled old stable hands had talked about the intimacies they'd shared with their wives, but now he was grateful for their candid talk. Once those two old codgers, both of them now long in their graves, had learned how shy he was, they'd

purposefully but playfully tortured him with vivid descriptions. He'd never tasted a woman, bestowing the ultimate kiss, but he felt confident now.

"Gentleness," old Vinnie had told him.

"Until she begs for it harder," Husker had cut in.

This much, Michael already knew. Gentleness worked better with all creatures than brute force.

He laved his tongue in a circle, tasting all of her. He'd heard a woman described as a peach, and now he knew why. The slick moisture of her desire tasted slightly like the fruit.

He now knelt below her, each hand placed on the velvet skin of inner thighs, but Marianne had lifted and parted her legs with no urging from him.

He sucked her budding nub into his mouth. She cried out and yanked on his hair. Michael formed a rhythm, stroking with his tongue and sucking the sensitive pearl of flesh.

"Oh, Michael. Oh, yes."

She thrashed on the bed when he changed to suck-suck-suck, bucking against his mouth. She released his hair to grab fistfuls of the bed linen. He could hear her trying to muffle her cries.

"Oh, oh God." Her body arched, then sagged to the mattress. "Oh."

He was near to bursting himself. He lunged forward, covering her with his body.

"Michael –"

He settled as carefully as he could, the heat already racing through him. He gushed against her thigh, groaning out the pleasure that came entirely from bestowing hers. He hadn't even had a chance to fake taking her.

She cupped his face and urged him toward her mouth. Her kiss was sweet, and he would swear, a bit amused. He was embarrassed.

"Marianne."

She smiled against his lips. "Michael."

Now he was truly embarrassed. "Was it nice?" He risked the question cautiously.

"It was very nice."

He relaxed. So he hadn't made a fool of himself. "I'm glad."

"And I thought it was I who owed the proper thank you."

He nuzzled her hair, breathing in her flowery scent. She was a breath of heaven. "It is my honor to serve you."

She caressed light circles across his back. Her nails raked, tracing exquisite lines, before she smoothed with her palms again.

"Mmm. Scratch."

"You like to have your back scratched?"

"I guess I do." And even more, he liked talking to her. She obviously felt no embarrassment for what just transpired, so he forced himself to abandon it, too.

"Roll onto your side," she told him.

He eased off and turned. She shifted behind him. A moment later, her hand was tracing magnificent circles across his flesh.

"You have such broad muscles." Her voice was relaxed. If she found such pleasure in the kiss, he would give it every time. *Gladly.*

"You must work very hard."

"No harder than any man, I suppose." His own voice was light. This was the second greatest pleasure, lying spent in a soft bed beside a warm woman. He could only guess the first greatest having spent himself inside her. He could live without that, for this.

"Not every man is so strong." Her hand flattened to caress his upper arm. "So large."

He knew he was larger than most men, and therefore he knew he must take greater care with a delicate beauty like Marianne.

"You can stay the night, you know." He heard the caution in her voice. Almost as if she were afraid to offer it, but needed to question herself, as well. "No one will forbid you."

"I would like that very much, Marianne." He reached to cover her hand where it slid lazily up and down his arm. "But my mother would worry. She's blind, and I need to return to her."

"Ah. I see." She lay back. "Does she know about...?"

He rolled over and pressed close. Marianne was a soft miracle. "I couldn't lie to her. She's glad I'm protecting you."

"You're a good son."

He closed his eyes and concentrated on every point they touched. "I'll tell her next time I might not return before morning. If you offer again, I'll stay."

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd stayed longer than usual, waiting until Marianne was asleep. It was nice to see her at rest. He hoped, at the very least, she no longer spent her days living in misery. He prayed she knew there was nothing to fear from him.

The old man was sitting in the hall when Michael eased quietly from the room. None of the maids were about.

"You've done a fine job so far. She's coming around." Baron Thurlow wheeled forward. "Tell me, what does she whisper?"

"She begs me not to hurt her," he lied before thinking it through.

The baron snickered. "I suppose when you're hung like a Shetland pony, there's got to be some pain for the chit."

Michael swallowed as he grasped the baron's meaning. He hadn't considered that he might be larger *down there* than other men as well. After all, he'd never seen another man's tools.

"And what do you say in return?" the baron prompted nastily.

"There is naught I can do." Guilt swam in his gut.

"Ah! Good. Tell her it can't be helped. She'll get used to it, m'boy. Looks like she's already learning. Does she speak of that hussy woman?"

Michael shook his head. *Vile old man.*

"Ah, yes. Hmm." He worked his gums. "You're enjoying yourself, I hope."

"A warm body is a warm body," Michael returned with a shrug. *Play the old monger's game.* Even so, the words stuck in his chest like a rusty knife.

Baron Thurlow chuckled. "Fine, fine. You're doing a fine job. From now on, though..." his eyes narrowed with a wicked gleam, "toss off those coverings. I can't see a damn thing. My eyesight isn't what it used to be."

The baron turned his chair and wheeled away, leaving Michael gaping like a freshly caught fish.

"See you on Wednesday, m'boy."

## **Chapter Five**

Marianne paced the room, lost in thought. What had she been looking for? Oh yes, her scissors. She turned again, saw them atop the bureau.

She retrieved them, but stood by the balcony doors, looking at the starry sky. Her mind played over the magnificent delights she'd experienced last night and again her skin heated. She'd been a hairsbreadth from begging Michael to fuck her. The only reason she hadn't was she couldn't grasp the right word. She'd been halfway between "take me" and "fuck me" when he'd spurted against her thigh. His ejaculation had sent a new and unique thrill through her.

*That hot liquid could have been inside me.*

She turned and headed toward her vanity, then remembered the thread from her table.

Could she truly do it? His lips upon hers had been delicious, his kiss fresh and real. No brandy on him, or tobacco. None of the foul opium that turned Edward into such a beast.

A tap-click-click pulled her thoughts back. Something hit her window and bounced on the stone balcony.

Tap-click-click. This time she saw the pebble thrown against the glass.

She stepped onto the balcony. Michael stood below, white shirt gleaming in the moonlight. Their divine kiss had just been last night, he wasn't due back for two days.

He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Must...speak...you."

She glanced at the next window. The room was dark, but that didn't mean Grandfather wasn't lying in wait. Otherwise his suite was on the other side of the wing and his balcony around the corner.

She motioned for him. Michael stalked to the wall and took hold of the trellis. She cupped her hands over her mouth to smother a mouthful of worry. Her balcony was so high when she looked over the railing to the ground her head swam. But Michael scaled the wall and hopped onto the balcony with ease.

"Michael, what is it?"

"I must speak with you." He gripped her arms. His obvious panic made her fear leap to life. "Your grandfather..."

"What? What!"

He dragged her inside. Once in her bedroom, he released her and stalked across the floor, shoving a hand through his hair.

"Michael, you're scaring me. What has the old fool done?"

Michael sat on her tiny vanity seat. She ran to him and grabbed his outstretched hands.

"You must tell him you've been cured," he pleaded with raw agony in his voice. "Tell him you are with child."

"Why?" He wasn't making sense. She bent toward him, cupping his face.

"He has ordered me...he demands I remove the bedcovers. I can no longer *pretend*."

She stood upright. Was that all? Thank goodness it wasn't something truly awful. For a moment, her thoughts had reeled toward horrific possibilities.

"Then you must do as he says." A bolt of heat shot down the very center of her, borne halfway of fear, halfway of excitement.

Michael went still. His brow crinkled and his deep eyes held utter misery. He seized her hands again and brought her knuckles to his lips. He placed a fast kiss upon them. "I cannot."

"Why?"

"I could *never* —"

"Michael, you must." She knelt before him. Marianne could not help but smile at his distress. Poor, chivalrous Michael. "Michael, you've been so good to me. I know you will continue to be."

He swallowed, shaking his head.

"Do you not want me...*truly*?"

"I want you more than anything. But I cannot...not merely for his benefit. You are more precious to me than that."

How to make him understand? She touched his cheek again. He grabbed her hand and held it firmly there.

"My husband is a brutal man." She swallowed. It was hard to confess, even if it wasn't her fault. "In all ways."

Michael fell perfectly still, then his brow furrowed. "Marianne."

"You have been so kind and gentle to me, I know you would never hurt me the way he does."

"Ah Marianne, I couldn't bear it. It breaks my heart to hear you are treated so cruelly."

She smiled again, warmed from head to toe by his obvious love. "That's because you are special. In our short time together, I have come to admire you immensely. There is no other man I would rather have possess me than you."

The agony left his eyes for a type of surprise. "But I—" His gaze slipped past her to the wall, where she knew he was looking for the squints. "Not merely for a wicked old man's satisfaction."

"Then we shall have to have our first time together now, when we know we are alone."

She rose and leaned in to work the laces of his shirt. He was silent, watching her with awe. When she loosened it, he helped her drag it over his head.

She smiled as she reached for his breeches. He sucked in a breath.

"You are a wonderful man, Michael. I consider myself lucky that you were the one chosen. You are strong and good, and I feel safe with you." She said these things as she worked him out of his breeches, unable to do so without covering her actions with words. Was she really going to take him? Oh yes.

Every ounce of fear was gone. She felt only the anxious need to touch him in the ultimate way.

*It will be good, I know it. And I am anxious to know what good feels like.*

She peeled open the flap of his breeches. The dark patch of hair was revealed. She leaned close and pressed her lips to his. He responded with fervor, almost like an excited little boy. Kissing her wildly, he moved his hips and lifted himself off the chair to help her work him out of his breeches. His mighty cock sprang out as though glad to be freed from the restricting wool.

She broke their kiss to gaze down at it. She grasped him and Michael sucked in his breath. He pressed his forehead to hers, eyes closed. "Marianne."

"Oh Michael, you are magnificent." His cock looked even larger in her small hand. It was hot, and the skin was soft velvet over cut stone.

She stood back only to toss off her robe and gown. He gaped at her nakedness, still obviously filled with disbelief. She eased back, dragging his breeches down his thighs. He lifted himself to help. She grabbed one heel and then the next, yanking off his boots, and dragged his breeches away in a tangle with his hose.

He started to rise but she placed her hands on his shoulders, stilling him. She straddled him over the chair and lowered her body toward the spear of flesh throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

"Here?"

*Yes. Here. Not in the bed where my grandfather bade me raped.* "If you please. For our first time."

He touched her hips and slid his hands featherlightly into the arch of her waist.

"My first time."

She stopped. "Ever?"

His skin turned a shade pinker. "Ever."

She drew him to her chest and kissed his temple. "Oh, Michael. I am honored."

She swirled her hips, placing a wet kiss to the swollen crown of his cock. He drew a long breath through flared nostrils. She took his mouth, kissing him with open lips and a stab of her tongue, then nipped his upper lip.

Marianne sat down. The engorged head pushed through her opening, stretching her with a glorious pressure. He was big, but the fact he wasn't stabbing ruthlessly into her body prevented any pain. He breached her resistance and sank into her, his magnificent thickness traveling deep, stretching her wide.

Her thighs trembled as she seated him inside herself. This was the point Edward brought her the most pain, his initial invading thrust like a punch of his fist. But Michael remained as still as a statue, letting her control his traverse into her body.

The sensation was incredible, more intensely superb than she had believed possible. With the physical pleasure came an intense emotional wonder. *He is inside me. We are joined.* It was magnificent.

She rose, dragging her cunt halfway up the length of his pole, then sat, sinking him to the root. She was slick with excitement and coated him thoroughly.

Glorious delight exploded through her feminine walls and unfurled into her body. As great as the physical sensation was the emotional awareness of divine ecstasy. There was no pain! And now she understood Louisa, the thick mass filling her to absolute capacity was exquisite.

How wonderful that they had waited until the time was right and this could be enjoyed as it should. She marveled at the specialness of the man loving her, saying a private thanks that he was so good to her. To whatever perfect force of destiny had brought him to her.

"Oh Marianne," he said on a breath. "I'm inside you."

"You are," she returned happily. "Isn't it fantastic?"

"It is better than fantastic. It is magic."

She nuzzled him, seeking his mouth but her kiss hovering, teasing, flicking and darting. He responded in kind, like she, as exhilarated by the notion as much as the act. Her pleasure was immense. *I do not despise men. Only Edward.*

Michael rose suddenly, lunging off the chair with her wrapped around his hips. The motion shoved his immense cock deep.

"Oh!" He reached the ceiling of her cunt, touching her in a place Edward never had. Yet still there was no pain, no regret. Only heavenly bliss.

He walked to the bed with her straddled around his hips. One knee rested on the bed and he descended, holding her with an arm locked around her ass and the other bracing against the bed. He hovered like this for a long moment before settling her down as light as a cloud.

The astronomical restraint of this big, strong man was amazing. He held himself over her carefully, arriving on top and entwined with ultimate gentleness.

Marianne sighed, lost in paradise. She circled his shoulders with her arms and rotated her hips to bring him farther into herself. With her soft mattress at her back and his chiseled body on top, she was cocooned in safety and warmth. It felt different, too, than when he faked his act upon her. This was real, and it was wonderful. She took him onto herself and into herself with intense permanence and wholeness.

He rolled his hips, beginning a languid thrusting in and out. Deliciously, beautifully, in and out. Each pull of withdrawal a tug of sheer magnificence, each push back inside a stroke of exquisite pressure. Heat built inside her until she felt as though her pussy was in flames. She threw her legs wider, rotating her hips to meet each delicious plunge. She gripped his ass and dug her fingers into his firm cheeks.

He gasped, and the dewy moist sheen on his skin revealed his nearing climax. She increased her movement to urge him on, desperate to milk his seed from him. Excitement sang in her bloodstream. She knew the force of his ejaculate, and was about to take it into her womb.

With the knowledge came a potent awareness. *He could plant his seed in me this very moment... Oh yes. Please, let it be Michael, only Michael.*

The next sound was a groan and Michael's hips became jerky.

"Marianne, I'm...I'm going to—"

"Yes. Oh yes." She bucked beneath him, chanting it over and over as her own climax burst like an explosion. She squeezed her eyes shut, forgetting everything for the rapture consuming her. She had never reached such heights of pleasure before.

It took long moments for her world to stop spinning. Dimly she realized Michael had finished and lay still, though still thick and deep inside her. Her entire body trembled and her pussy clenched with the aftershocks of what had been a stunning orgasm.

The stroke of Michael's thumb across her cheek brought her eyes open and focused.

"Great heavens."

"Have I hurt you?" His voice carried an ounce of worry.

"Not even a bit. You are incredible." Emotion tumbled over her like a sudden storm. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him as tears welled and spilled. "Thank you, Michael. Thank you. So much."

He drew back, concerned. "Why are you crying?"

"Because of you," she said, but she dragged him back to her kiss, showing him they were good tears. "Because you were so good to me."

"I could be nothing else, Marianne." He returned her kisses softly, soothing her. "I love you."

## Chapter Six

When Michael returned, he brought a single, perfect pear. She smiled at the simple gift and regarded it as the most special thing she'd ever received.

Second to his love. A small part of her envied the woman he would someday marry. The woman he chose would be lucky indeed. But the time to commiserate was later, when Marianne was back with her wretched husband and Michael was gone from her life to this unseen, unknown blessed woman.

She rose from her vanity and faced him. A thrill of energy vibrated inside her, low but permanent.

He slipped his thumbs under her robe at the tops of her shoulders while he leaned in close to sprinkle her with featherlight kisses.

"I wish not to indulge your vile grandfather." He whispered each word with the sensuous lull of seduction between his soft, slow kisses. "I planned to fake the act, but now that I am here, I cannot resist you."

He cupped her cheeks and she gripped his wrists. "I do not wish you to resist me."

The kiss he placed on her lips lingered like a prayer of thanks.

"He matters not," she went on. "All that matters is you." She kissed him back. "And me."

He dragged her robe away. Beneath it, she was naked. Michael slipped his hands around her back and scooped her close. "Us."

"Us." Marianne stood back as he stripped out of his clothes. This time, Michael was urgent. She dipped her head and hid her smile. His urgency was quite flattering, as was the towering erection betraying that urgency. *That's for me.* Heavens, the man was enormous. She had taken that inside her? By God, yes she had.

She stepped close and grasped it in her hand. He closed his eyes and sucked in a sharp breath. Suddenly, the need to taste him was powerful. She dropped to her knees in front of him and took him in both hands. A strangled sound escaped him.

"Compared to you, my husband isn't half a man."

One night when Edward was dazed on Opium and couldn't get an erection, he'd gripped a fistful of her hair and forced her to her knees. When she fought him, he'd yanked her hair until she'd taken him in her mouth. It was a horrific experience, and thankfully he'd lost interest and shoved her away before it had gone on too long.

Marianne had never imagined she would want to do that again, yet here she was, anxious to taste Michael and love him with her mouth. The musky scent of him enticed her and thrilled her. She laved the swollen crown of his cock with her tongue then drew him into her mouth. He was warm and solid and more beautiful than she could have imagined. *This is the part of him that touches me deep inside*, she thought, happy to be so intimately acquainted with this incredible organ.

At once she knew tonight she needed him to take her from Edward. She looked up, but before she could speak Michael scooped her into his arms and spun toward the bed. With one hand he tossed away the coverings, then knelt and carefully laid her down.

He hovered over her, pecking tiny, urgent kisses everywhere. She yanked the pillow from beneath her head and shoved it backward against the headboard in a move she had practiced, blocking the squint. She then rolled away from Michael, turning over onto her stomach. He followed, covering her, warm and heavy against her back.

"Take me from him," she whispered over her shoulder. "Of late, the only way he would have me was from behind, like animals do. He was rough, his intent to punish me."

"Ah Marianne, can he not see how valuable you are?"

"I want you to be rougher."

Michael froze.

"I want you to tear my flesh with your magnificent cock. Brand me. Make me yours."

Marianne leaned upright. Michael circled her with his arms, holding her tight against him. Her pebbled nipples teased his forearms. He would not hurt her. He could not.

"No."

"Yes! I want to be yours, Michael." She turned her head to whisper over her shoulder. "Please. Take me from him."

Strangely, he understood her need, and he shared it. He would give anything for Marianne to be his. Only he wished he could make it so by wrapping his hands around the viscount's neck and throttling the man.

"Please. He tore my maidenhead for the first time. I want to feel as if you are taking it again. Claim me as your own."

"Are you sure, Marianne?"

She gripped his arms where they crossed her chest. "Absolutely. He is already so insignificant compared to you." She pulled his grip loose and bent forward, readying herself. "Make him so in all ways." She looked so small and vulnerable, her delicate body prone before him, something inside him snapped.

Mine.

*She is mine, because she wants to be. And I will give her what she wants, for I need her to be mine in this way, too.*

Marianne wrapped her hands around the carved wooden posts in the headboard. She glanced over her shoulder as he guided his cock through her slick cleft. He took his time, thoroughly coating himself in her cream.

He grasped her hips. "I love you, Marianne." He rammed himself deep. She jerked under the force, but only a small sound escaped her. She was tight and hot, squeezing him in a velvet clasp. He felt her push back from the headboard, meeting his pressure.

"More, Michael." Her voice was resolute.

He eased back and thrust again, guarding himself. He felt his cock touch the end of her channel and find resistance.

"More."

She was wetter than he'd ever found her, and her cream slicked the way for him to ride in and out of her at his will. He eased back and slammed deep again, his thighs slapping against hers. When she didn't recoil, he increased his power. She pushed her hips back to meet each thrust until he was pounding into her with enough force to make both their bodies quiver under each impact.

His skin flushed with heat and tension coiled in his balls. With a grunt of warning, he erupted in great torrents, spurting deep inside her. He could feel the heat radiating from her pussy and judging from the shrill cries she released, Marianne found pleasure as well.

Aftershocks rocked his entire body as he curled himself over and pressed his chest to her back. "Are you hurt?" he whispered between panted breaths. He cupped her dangling breasts, enjoying the way her nipples pressed into his palm.

"Not nearly enough." He could hear her smile in her returned whisper.

"I'm sorry. I'm not capable of hurting you." He gently extracted himself from her body and Marianne collapsed on the mattress. She twisted around and he settled with her, collecting her against his chest.

"I should have realized." She cuddled close, fondling his pectoral muscle with curious fingers. "I like you too much. Even when you're strong and forceful, I like it." She kissed his chin and he responded with a kiss to the top of her head.

Her delighted words incited a storm of tingles across his flesh, but inside he hurt. He'd told her he loved her and it was true, he literally ached with it. It didn't matter that she didn't love him back. She felt safe with him and she liked when he touched her. That was the most important thing. If only he could give her that forever.

"Ah, Marianne. What are we going to do?"

Her only response was to sigh and lay her head against his chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael's next gift was a hard-shelled warty gourd. Marianne laughed when she saw it. The top had been sliced off, its edges sanded smooth and replaced as a lid fastened with a leather string. When she peered inside, she gasped.

Louisa's purple stationary.

She set it down with tingling fingers and looked up at him, her eyes misting with tears. Michael took her by the hand and led her to the bed.

He gently removed her robe, kissing her so tenderly she ached with joy. How odd that in this macabre prison, she had found such deep caring. Michael cared. And Louisa cared enough to write again. Inside her chest hope blossomed like a rose unfurling in the warmth of the sun. Could it be Louisa had not forsaken her? For the first time in weeks, she no longer felt completely alone in the world.

"Did you read it?" she whispered between kisses. He guided her down to the bed and teased the sensitive inside of her thigh with a fingertip.

"I cannot read," he said against her neck.

"Oh, Michael." His words brought the tears on in a rush. She locked her arms around his neck and urged him to roll on top of her.

He slid inside her so slowly and gently she felt only the tingly hints of fantastic pleasure to come. He rocked slowly, gliding in and out of her pussy in a languid caress that made stars dance behind her eyes. This gentle man, so strong and capable, so

pleased with the simple things in life, not even knowing how to read. If only her own life were so simple and calm.

Waves of warm magic rose until she felt drowned by them, succumbing to the pleasure until there was nothing else but their two bodies locked in the throes of love.

Her climax came like a summer rainstorm—intense, shrill, replenishing. She'd known ever since the night she'd asked him to take her roughly that he was incapable of hurting her simply because he was not Edward.

And because she had found this delight with Michael, the loss of Louisa as her lover was no longer so catastrophic. Michael had given her back her confidence and her belief in herself. Not only did she no longer feel so alone, she no longer felt so afraid of *being* alone.

Marianne rose to relieve herself in the chamber pot, then sneaked the letter back into bed. She unfolded it in the narrow space between their two bodies and read by the dim candlelight.

*My dearest Marianne,*

*I fear my reply was penned in haste, and I apologize for its tone. I have read your letter again and again, and I realize you might be in terrible danger. You were so elusive about your situation, yet I thought only of myself. I am an unworthy friend. Even more, I was a fool to think I could force myself to stop loving you. You own a part of my heart that will forever be yours, and I could not remove you from it any more than I could stop it from beating. I have told Theodore of my feelings, for likewise if I had not, ours would be a marriage based on lies. He faults me not for it, and he agrees with me that something must be done to help you. It would seem he holds Lord Cobham in the same regard as do I. I pen this letter to you on Monday the eighth, and if I have not received proof by the fifteenth that you are safe, we will then rescue you by force.*

*I can only pray that you can forgive me, and will allow me to do so.*

*Yours in love, Louisa*

Marianne brought the letter to her chest and laughed even as she cried. "Oh, Michael. She still loves me." She breathed in the light scent of Louisa's perfume and a thousand delightful memories fluttered through her mind.

Michael had gone very silent. When she looked up into his eyes, he forced a sad smile. "I'm glad," he said wistfully.

The sweetness of his jealousy touched her heart. She cupped his cheek. "My dear Michael. I love you just as much, if not more."

He eased back, a look of pure awe on his face.

"Truly?"

She had never said she loved him. It was long overdue.

"I do," she assured him. "I thought you knew."

He merely shook his head, eyes squeezed shut.

"Well I do." She pecked a kiss to his lips. "I love you."

He laughed and dragged her closer. It felt good to tell him so. She had never said the same to Edward. It would have been a lie.

"And I love Louisa," she said, thinking of Louisa's confession to her husband. Likewise, Marianne thought it was important that Michael know the truth, and either accept it, or... She could not bear to think he would not. She looked at him anxiously, biting her lower lip.

"I would never expect you to stop," he said.

"Oh, Michael. Thank you." She read Louisa's letter to him. "You must deliver a response before Monday. I will tell her what my grandfather conspired to do, but that I am well, protected and cared for by the most heroic man in the world."

Marianne leapt from the bed and sat at her vanity, still naked, convinced her grandfather now expected Michael to stay late and had long gone off to his own exploits. "I think it important that others know what has happened here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Michael's next gift was a single peppermint. "It isn't for you," he said with a sly gleam. He waited for her in the main entry, adorned in carriage master's livery.

She accepted the peppermint and followed him outside. The surrey waited at the bottom of Brookmoor's grand steps, hitched to an old, swaybacked nag.

Marianne had been looking forward to this jaunt for days. She loved getting out of the dusty old house, but her daily walks with Radostina were dreary events overridden by the stocky maid's constant complaints about never ending aches and pains.

"This is Icarus." Michael led her to the horse. "He was a champion in his day. Your grandfather wanted him put down when he became too old to race, but I convinced him to let me pasture the beast."

Such was her miserly grandfather's way. "There is only one beast at Brookmoor," she said idly, holding her palm flat to offer the peppermint to the horse. Large nostrils sniffed their way to the treat and his velvety lips plucked it from her hand. She chuckled as Icarus's bristly whiskers tickled her even through her glove.

"I think it is important to reward those who have devoted their lives to our service," Michael returned in a low voice.

Marianne suspected he spoke not only of the horse, but of his own mother, who had been cruelly cast aside when no longer useful. Grandfather truly was a beast, for it was the years using lye soap that had made Michael's mother blind, her life toiled away in Lord Thurlow's service only to be forgotten when crippled by her very loyalty.

She stepped to the surrey and Michael handed her in. He rode in the driver's seat until they were out of sight of the house on the long track circling the property. Once concealed in the tree-shaded road, he knotted the reins and hopped into the carriage with her. She sighed and snuggled close as the old horse plodded on.

They stopped beside an ancient oak and spread out a blanket beneath its limbs to enjoy the afternoon. The day was warm, muggy with the moisture of a cloudy sky hinting at a summer storm.

The months had passed in a blink of hazy happiness unlike Marianne had ever known. It seemed only yesterday the mornings were crisp with springtime frost. June loomed on the horizon like the grim end to all.

She eased close and trailed tiny circles in the opening at his neck. He grasped her fingers and brought them to his lips to kiss her knuckles. A surge of anguish swept through her so powerfully she nearly cried out. She could not bear a future without Michael in it.

She urged him onto his back and straddled him. He watched her in silence, content to let her have her way. She slid backward and worked the laces on his breeches, then dragged them over his hips. Other than lifting himself, and a few helpful nudges downward, he let her command him.

Marianne crawled forward on her knees to position herself above him. His expression didn't change when she touched the steel column of his manhood with her pussy. He did not seem surprised to discover she was bare beneath her skirts, and she was pleased by his obvious confidence in her desire for him.

His eyes drifted shut as she moved, guiding herself into position and working him to readiness. She shifted her hips, angling him to spear toward the center of her body. With sudden pressure downward, she sheathed him with herself. She drew him to the hilt and lay down across his chest. Marianne kissed his chin, then lay her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her back.

They moved in unison, though hardly at all, loving slowly and endlessly. Her body was sore, her breasts tender, for it seemed all they did was enjoy each other. And yet it still wasn't enough. She would spend the rest of her life with him inside her if she could.

Their movements slowed as the heat grew between them. He curled his body beneath her, lifting his hips to push deeper into her core. She ground her clitoris against him, clutching his shirt into knots as the pleasure consumed her like a flash of fire.

They lay still for long moments afterward, lulled by the melancholy song of a whippoorwill. She made no move to dismount him, and he made no move to leave her.

Finally, she could keep her sad news to herself no longer. "Word arrived this morning," she said on a whisper. "Edward returns in two weeks."

## **Chapter Seven**

Marianne was sure her grandfather continued to watch when Michael visited, but for the last three months he'd seemed preoccupied during the day, as though he'd lost interest in her otherwise. She suspected it was because of a bosomy scullery maid.

Her door was no longer kept locked, and one night when Marianne peeked out before sneaking to the kitchen, she'd heard the chit giggling as she made a late-night departure, tucking her cap back into place. Upstairs, there were no servant's halls. With only four maids and the kitchen staff long asleep, it hardly mattered anyhow. Her grandfather's lecherous tendencies were no secret to her, though she hadn't known the maid was such a trollop she could be lured by a shilling. Surely that was the only appeal held by that withered old man.

Marianne retrieved the last of her stationary to pen a final letter to Louisa. After Edward's return, these fallen-lax restrictions were sure to end. It might be the last letter she could send for a long time.

And of course Michael wouldn't be there to deliver it. Marianne drew a deep breath to force away the pain spiking in her middle. Their separation was too painful to consider.

She turned the paper over and found it was the sheet she had used to scribble out her calendar when she'd first arrived. Marianne frowned. Had it truly been four months since her last menses?

Excitement fluttered across her skin until her scalp prickled. She lifted her eyes to the mirror, but saw only Michael, his virile nakedness, his body atop hers. His randy smile, his soft brown eyes.

Her breasts had been so sore lately, and yesterday morning she'd thought the oatmeal tasted foul. That had been the reason she'd felt ill after eating it, hadn't it?

Or...could it be she was pregnant?

She rose and slipped off her robe to look at herself in the mirror. Her breasts were engorged, the nipples darker than usual and more sensitive than ever before. She turned sideways. Was she imagining the slight swell to her belly?

Marianne grinned until she smiled so wide she looked silly, and then she laughed out loud. Her kind, sweet stable master had done what Edward could not.

She carried his child.

She both loved him for it, and pitied him for it. The joy in her heart warred with a sadness so deep she died a little inside. She was grateful beyond words it was Michael whose babe she carried, yet she ached with the tragedy he would never get to be a father to his own child. It almost seemed a curse that this child would be Edward's undeserved legacy, sure to suffer under the man's greedy attitude and inability to love anyone but himself just as Marianne did. Would the child grow up as surly and selfish? That would be the true crime.

The day passed in surges of emotion—happiness, sadness, joy, regret, anxiety, relief.

When Michael finally entered her room that night, she could hardly wait for the door to shut behind him to throw herself into his arms.

He allowed her a brief hug, then gently pried her away. He must have thought her high emotions were because they had only this, and one more secret night left before her husband's return.

"Shh, Marianne, don't cry." He wiped a tear away with a thumb. "Don't spoil our last days with sadness."

She laughed through the tears. "Michael, you've done it. I'm pregnant."

He froze in silence. Astonishment, then shock, then worry passed over his face. He swallowed. Finally he released her to stalk away.

"Marianne, I..." He sat at the vanity seat and drove his fingers through his hair.

She knelt before him and took his hands.

"I thought I would be able to accept it." His gaze lifted to hers under a weight of regret. "I cannot."

Her heart kicked painfully against her chest. She couldn't bear to be without him, either.

"It isn't right. I can't leave you here. I can't leave my child here."

She hardly dared believe his words were true. "We could leave," she risked softly, almost afraid to let him hear if what she imagined he was saying wasn't true.

He shoved out of the chair and gripped her arms. "Can you live without this life, Marianne? Without your elegant gowns and your fine things? Without servants and maids?"

Excitement leapt to life inside her. "You are what I can't live without, Michael."

"Will you leave all this for me? Will you raise a laborer's son instead of a viscount's?"

She gripped him back. "Oh yes. A thousand times, yes."

His chest rose and fell on a breath, but otherwise he didn't move. For a moment, neither did she.

"I have a bit of money saved at Tally Ho, and jewels I can sell. We can go to France. Or America!"

"Get dressed."

She dragged her corset on over her shift. He laced her quickly. She finished dressing while he shoved the things on her vanity into a carpetbag.

They ran for the door.

Her grandfather sat at the door in his chair, lying in wait in the hall.

"Eep!" Marianne rocked backward into Michael, not even through the doorway.

He narrowed his eyes menacingly. "So you're breeding, eh? I'm only surprised it took this long. Should have known the problem lay with that dandy, limp-dick foxwop husband of yours."

She swallowed, searching for the right words to tell him to go to the devil, but once again he'd reduced her to a frightened, trembling child.

"I suppose now you think you're in love and going to run away together." His rheumy eyes skipped from her to Michael. "Frankly I expected it of you, you're just a big, dumb pachydermatous oaf. But I'm surprised at you, Marianne. Falling in love with a lowly servant."

"Don't call him that." She stepped into the hall and pointed a finger at him. "He's the most honorable man I've ever met. You should strive for one-tenth of his integrity."

He laughed, a rude snort of censure. "So you're running off, eh?" His tone teased, like he was entertaining the antics of a toddler. "Where do you propose to go?"

"You shouldn't concern yourself with me any longer."

His expression turned downright evil. "That may be Edward's heir you carry there, but it's also mine! Don't forget it's the future baron in your womb as well, daft girl! You are most definitely my concern."

"I'm not afraid of you anymore. You're just a shriveled-up old biter!"

Michael stepped around her, grabbed his infirmity chair, and wheeled him around.

"What do you think you're doing? Unhand me! You'll be hanged for this. How dare you lay a hand on your superior!"

Michael shoved him forward. His chair rolled nearly to the end of the hall before the thick carpet slowed the wheels. Michael seized her hand and urged her the other way.

"We'll go directly to Tally Ho," Marianne said as they hurried down the immense curved stairway. "My footman, Randolph, is loyal. He can be sent for your mother."

They ran across the polished marble floor, startling Radostina.

"Oh my heavens!" She placed a hand to her heart. "Is the house on fire?"

Michael wrenched open one of the grand double doors. They both stopped short, faced with Winston Beeves, Edward's solicitor, and Beeves' assistant Mortimer Howell.

Mr. Beeves' face lit up. For a moment, they all stared at each other in wonderment.

"Lady Marianne. What are you doing here?"

"I...I came home from Italy early," she blurted. "When I learned I was with child. I thought it would be best to spend my pregnancy here." The lie was a risk, but she had so little time to think.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you! What a stroke of good luck. It's a blessed miracle."

Her heart was hammering so hard she could hardly draw a breath.

"We had come to deliver terrible news to Baron Thurlow, we had, but now I see it's only half as bad. Thank the good Lord for that."

"Whu...why?" White spots passed before her eyes, turned silver, and then darkened to gray. Her stomach threatened to rise.

They would never escape.

"Marianne!"

She whirled around. Her grandfather stood on the top step, wobbling dangerously over the edge.

"You can't leave here!"

"Grandfather!" Despite the years of torment, the countless acts of misery he'd caused her, his immoral peeping and the unholy plague of rape he'd inflicted upon her, her first instinct was to protect him. "Go back!"

She lifted her hand, took a step in his direction, even as she saw him topple forward.

Marianne screamed.

"Good God!" Beeves bellowed.

Baron Thurlow tumbled down the steps like a bag of sticks. Michael ran for him, but he was too late to do more than meet the body as it rolled off the last step onto the stone floor. Winston hurried after Michael. They knelt by the old man's crumpled body, reaching, but both afraid to touch.

Greta appeared in time to catch Radostina as she fainted.

Marianne covered her face and turned away. She lifted her gaze to find Mr. Howell staring at her, eyes wide and face deathly pale. "I d-did not know he c-could walk!"

She could only shake her head. She hadn't either.

"What do we do?" Greta let Radostina slump to the floor. She paced one way and then turned and paced the other, pressing her knuckles against her teeth.

"Get a doctor," Mr. Howell exclaimed. "Oh my yes, someone go for the doctor."

"It's too late for him," Winston stood back. "His neck is broken."

Looking haunted, Michael slowly rose to his feet, eyes locked with hers.

"Not for him," Mr. Howell stated. "Lady Marianne. She's looking rather peaked..."

And that was when the black spots swirling before her eyes turned into a solid wall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Marianne. Marianne!" A woman's light and elegant voice called through the shadows. The sound was like music. But it wasn't real, just a beautiful memory.

Marianne blinked away the cobwebs.

"Oh thank heaven."

The voice *was* real.

"You had us quite worried."

"Louisa?" She blinked again, clearing her vision. Louisa had become a hundred times more beautiful in their six months apart. She smiled and leaned forward over a huge belly to kiss Marianne.

She became confused, not sure if the time apart had been merely a bad dream.

But then she thought of Michael. It hadn't been a bad dream at all.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, surprised by the weakness in her own voice. "I've missed you terribly."

Louisa squeezed her hand gently. "We shall never be apart again, darling."

"Is she awake?" a male voice called from the doorway. It was Theo, sounding like a long-lost friend.

Louisa tossed a fleeting glance over her shoulder. "She is fine."

"Thank the Father for that!" another voice boomed, and Marianne remembered Mr. Beeves.

Louisa smiled, but it was filled with sadness. "Marianne, there's been a terrible accident."

She struggled to sit up. "I remember. Grandfather —"

"No." Louisa urged her back into the pillows. She glanced down, biting her lip, and when she met Marianne's eyes again, hers were swimming with tears. "It's Edward. His ship sank in the crossing. He's drowned."

Marianne caught her breath. She let it out in a single, choking sob.

"That's why Beeves came here today."

Had she heard right? *Dear God, don't torture me with a mistake such as this.*

"He thought you were on the ship with Edward and had died as well. He'd come to notify your grandfather."

"Are you sure?" she breathed out, too afraid to dare hope she was truly, finally free.

Again Louisa nodded. "Thomas collected his body this morning," she said of Edward's brother. "Edward tried to pull a peasant boy from a jolly boat to assume his place. The boy's father struck him with an oar. Those in the boat saw him go under. His body washed ashore this morning."

The story did not surprise her. "A wretched death for a wretched man."

"Marianne, everyone believed you were lost at sea. Thomas expects to inherit Edward's title."

"He can have it. I don't care! All I want is to be free."

"And you are free. Free to go and do whatever you want." Louisa squeezed her hand. "Is it true, you're with child?"

Marianne nodded.

"Parliament may decide to award Edward's title to Thomas," Louisa explained gently. "But if your child is a boy he'll inherit the barony. Do you realize you could be carrying a baron!"

"Where is Michael?" She pushed upright, and this time Louisa let her sit up.

"You mean that giant of a man who's been pacing a path outside your balcony?" Louisa's eyes literally twinkled. She rose and went to the door.

"Scurry along, you three. Marianne is fine, but she needs her rest." Louisa closed out the curious faces of Mr. Beeves, Mr. Howell and Theodore. She then crossed the room, smiling slyly at Marianne. "And the kiss of her beloved, I would guess." She stepped onto the balcony and waved him up. Seconds later Michael vaulted over the railing and ran into the room. He dropped to his knees beside the bed and Marianne leaned into his arms.

"Is it true?" he asked in a choked voice, his face pressed into her hair.

Marianne settled back, blinking away tears so she could see him clearly. "We're free."

\* \* \* \* \*

*A Year Later*

The dark gray ball gown was an improvement over the black Marianne had worn for the past year, but still she longed for the pastel pinks and purples she liked so much better. Powder blue complemented her eyes beautifully, and reminded her of a

summer's day. The year of mourning for a husband she had despised seemed a continuation of the torture she had endured during her three-year marriage to Edward.

She lingered near the refreshment table, noting the perfection Louisa's man Wellingsly had achieved with the delicacies. Nearby, three nasties who didn't deserve them wagged their tongues loudly.

"I heard she didn't even fight for her husband's holdings."

"Why should she, with all she inherited from her grandfather?"

"It was an insult to the family."

"That grasper Thomas didn't care. He was glad to hoard it all."

"I'll wager his contribution to his nephew put a stitch in his side though."

The women erupted in wicked twitters.

Marianne's fingers tingled from the nervousness speeding through her bloodstream. She didn't care about the gossips, but tonight was a very special night.

Louisa floated over, as lovely and graceful as a ballerina in soft pink silk. The family pearls lay at her neck, complimenting her milky skin.

"Lady Marianne. You look lovely."

Marianne accepted the compliment politely. Softly she added, "I feel like a cloudy sky."

A server handed them each a glass of punch. "Your parties are always lovely," Marianne told Louisa. "But I can't wait for tonight to end."

Louisa laughed. The sound was like silver bells. "Don't worry, sweet. It will all be over soon."

"I'm so nervous." Marianne's cheeks had been pink most of the night. "If not for tonight...I would be up in the nursery with Jonathan and Eliza."

"And if not for tonight, I would be with you," Louisa agreed conspiratorially. "I do hope for a boy this time," she added, smoothing a hand lightly over her still-flat belly.

"And I for a girl."

Louisa's eyes lit up. "Marianne, are you keeping secrets from me?"

Marianne looked into her glass. "Does this punch taste sour to you?"

"To me, it does. But of course everything tastes off in the beginning."

"It does to me as well," Marianne told her. She smiled lightly. "Yet Lady Elizabeth said it was too sweet."

Louisa's smile broadened. "How divine!"

A flutter of excitement started anew. The gaggle of gossips turned their attention to the doorway.

"Who is that rakish gentleman?"

"He's from the colonies."

"I heard he made his fortune from breeding prized racehorses in America."

"I heard he made it in shipping."

Theo stood near the gallery doors with Lord Winston and Lord Bellingham, introducing them to a handsome newcomer.

"He certainly is strapping."

"I heard he is looking for a wife."

"Lady Simpson told Lady Jessica he missed the season because his mother was ill. He wouldn't travel without her."

"How very chivalrous."

Marianne's heart continued to race. She pretended nonchalance as Theo led the newcomer over.

He kissed his wife's cheek. "Darling."

"Theo, you didn't sneak off for a cigar, did you?" she scolded lightly.

"On the contrary, I've had the dubious task of escorting Mr. Ainsworth about. It seems *everyone* wants an introduction."

"I can well imagine," Marianne said huskily. She turned to the new arrival. He was exquisite in a black waistcoat and cream-colored breeches. His knee boots shined and a diamond pin winked in the center of his lace cravat. She offered her hand. "Do continue, Theo."

"Of course. Allow me to introduce Mr. Ainsworth from America. Mr. Ainsworth, the dowager Viscountess, Lady Cobham."

He took her hand and kissed the back of her glove. "A pleasure, m'lady."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Ainsworth."

He returned a lustful gaze, showing a row of straight white teeth behind a slightly mischievous smile. "Please, call me Michael."

## About the Author

Crystal Kauffman is an award-winning, multi-published author who is the luckiest woman alive—she has her very own real-life prince charming for a husband. Crystal loves all genres of fiction, as long as they have lots of steamy sex and lots of satisfying romance. She's been a closet erotica writer since...well, let's just say before it was legal for her to buy it. Then the greatest thing happened. Publishing houses catering specifically to erotica were born, bringing Crystal out of the closet. The formation of Romance Writers of America's *Passionate Ink* chapter, where she could mingle with other like-minded erotica writers, was proverbial icing on the cake.

Crystal welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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