

Elayne S. Venton

Stranded at an inn near Gretna Green, Miss Cassandra Briggs is without funds, without a chaperone, without her virtue. To add to her humiliation, her *faux pas* is discovered by the ruggedly handsome rogue, Mr. Philip Masterson.

Philip has been Cassie's friend for years. What he really wants is to tie her to his bed. The time has come to claim the woman. Now ruined, Cassandra is willing to settle for a courtesan's life and Philip is willing to take her as his mistress. In each other's arms, however, neither is ready to settle for anything less than love.

But love is inconstant...and a woman will protect her heart at all costs.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Constant in Love

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Electronic book publication May 2010

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CONSTANT IN LOVE

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Dedication

To Mr. Thomas J. Cullen III, my high school English teacher, who selected me to read my poetry at the "Evening of the Arts". That honor, along with his encouragement, gave me confidence not only in my writing, but in myself, for which I am eternally grateful.

Chapter One England, near the Scottish border, 1808

"He is gone?" Cassandra Briggs glanced around the gathering room where passengers awaited the next stagecoach, searching for her beloved, her gaze coming back to rest on the balding innkeeper. "That cannot be." She gathered the shawl collar of her pelisse in her fists, warding off a bone-deep chill that had nothing to do with the damp draft leaking through the cracked windowpane behind her.

George William Browley, third son of the Viscount Lontour, had vowed to marry her in Gretna Green. When he'd mentioned elopement, she hadn't agreed lightly. She'd spent hours analyzing every detail, going over every possibility of failure, evaluating the consequences. It was more than an adventure; it was her life. In the end, excitement won over and they'd left that very night.

One more half day of horrendous coach travel and they'd cross the Scotland border. Why would he abandon her now?

A man far into his cups stood on a chair by the hearth, raised his tankard and began to chant:

"Let not Woman e'er complain Of inconstancy in love Let not Woman e'er complain Fickle Man is apt to rove."

When he paused to take a long draught Cassandra mentally blocked him out. She was not in the mood for a lesson in love through the words of the brooding poet, Robert Burns.

"George must be speaking with the coachman," she insisted to the innkeeper, glancing out the window into the courtyard. "Making certain there is an inside seat available for me."

Stableboys and servants scurried around the newly arrived stagecoach, unhitching

the horses, guiding disembarking passengers over muddy ruts filled with water from last night's rainstorm, unloading baggage in the boot and answering questions. George was nowhere in sight. She turned back to the innkeeper in confusion, recalling how her fiancé told her to take her time washing and dressing while he directed the preparations for the next leg of their journey. "We agreed to meet here, in the common room, at the sound of the coach horn."

Something urgent must have drawn him away. He wouldn't leave her without a word. Would he?

The first brush of panic coursed through her veins. A few hours ago, George had been romping in bed with her, whispering passionate words, marveling at her lush, responsive body. His scent still filled her nostrils, the memory of their joining continued to dampen her sex and her backside yet tingled where he'd playfully swatted her when he hopped out of bed to dress. Warmth spread across her chest as she recalled rolling onto her back and he'd told her not to move so he could admire the way she lay sprawled in languid satisfaction. As alluring as a high-paid courtesan, he'd said. She'd taken no offense. In truth, she'd felt like a wicked wanton lying naked and open to his smug, possessive gaze, and she'd relished it.

I will carry that vision with me for the rest of my days, Cassandra.

Had he murmured those words as a final farewell? Unfathomable. She swallowed in distress. "Wherever he may be, he shall be back shortly."

The innkeeper looked at her as if she had the intelligence of a stump. "I saw him m'self, riding through the inn yard on one of my fastest horses. A test ride, he told the hostler, in preparation of the auction tomorrow." The man let out a deep *harrumph*. "Haven't seen my horse since. Rotten thief. When I find the bugger, he'll hang."

No. That didn't sound like George at all. Yes, he had a penchant for good horseflesh, but he'd never steal a man's horse. He was an honorable gentleman.

"Look abroad thro' Nature's range," the drunk advised the room at large but his bleary eyes settled on Cassandra.

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"Nature's mighty Law is change, Ladies, would it not seem strange Man should then a monster prove!"

Cassandra glared at the drunk poet. George was not a monster. He hadn't roved anywhere. "There must have been an accident," she said in his defense. Even an excellent horseman such as George could be thrown by a spooked horse. "Has anyone searched for him?" Her voice cracked with worry.

"The coachman says he passed a rider galloping toward Dumfries as if hellhounds were on his heels. I'll send word to the authorities to keep an eye out for 'im."

The news stunned her. Had George changed his mind about her?

She stepped blindly toward the door. There had to be a rational explanation. An urgent message from home, or something valuable lost on the road between this coach stop and the last. Some reason he'd leave her –

The tavern keeper grabbed her arm, halting her progress. "You owe me for the morning tea and biscuits," the balding man groused.

"Hm?" The tavern master's words barely registered. Her brows dipped in dismay. Had George tired of her so quickly? She'd seen no sign of it, but what did she know of men and their fancies? Perhaps she'd disappointed him in bed. Perhaps he only enjoyed virgins, and once he...

No. That awkward experience had occurred weeks ago when her father first left home to visit his ailing sister. George loved her. She'd been sure of it. He'd said so more than once.

Determined to find her missing fiancé, she pulled away from the man bruising her elbow and yanked open the door.

The innkeeper blocked her passage with his stout body and leaned toward her with an arched brow and expectant glare. "If you can't pay, you can work off the debt," he said, scrutinizing her from head to toe. "Won't take long, I suspect." The lusty gleam in his eye left no doubt what type of work he had in mind.

She leaned back from his yeasty breath and raised her chin in defiance. If she were

forced to sell her charms to pay her debts, she'd choose her benefactor, not submit like a common whore to any random traveler who stopped at the tavern. Fortunately, such drastic measures were not necessary. "I can pay, sir." She'd tucked a few pounds in her reticule along with...

Heart in her throat, she ripped the cords open. There was one other thing that George may have wanted besides her virtue. She blew out a long sigh of relief at the sight of the small velvet pouch within. Her mother's legacy. Cassandra's dowry. She ran her fingertips over the soft pouch, envisioning the diamond and emerald brooch inside, a gift from a wealthy noblewoman whom her mother had saved from drowning when their rowboat tipped over. She traced the circular shape of the jeweled pin with its dangling teardrops of precious stones...and paused. The contours didn't feel right.

Her heart pounded. She turned her back to the waiting innkeeper, worked open the pouch drawstrings and peered inside at the contents. A broken shell and rough pebbles tumbled around in the dim light.

Dear Lord! Indignation burned her cheeks as she rummaged through the rest of her purse. Handkerchief, pencil, calling card case... Where was her purse for tips? *He'd robbed her, taking everything of value.*

The blood drained from her face, leaving her lightheaded, then rushed back into her cheeks with burning fury. How had she misjudged George so badly? Driven by anger, she pushed past the hovering innkeeper. Browley would not get away with this! She'd track him down, on foot if necessary, steal her jewels back if she had to. Her stride lengthened. *Damn him!*

"Hey, there!" The innkeeper stomped after her.

Cassandra couldn't deal with the proprietor now. The man she'd loved had used her, leaving her with no money, no pride, no prospects. If she wasn't so astounded, she'd be crying her heart out. Lifting her skirts above her ankles, she dashed through the stable gates, determined to find answers, straight into the path of two riders.

A big black mount pranced directly in front of her, shaking its huge head. She

shrieked and jerked backward, wavering on her feet. The innkeeper grasped her cloak from behind. "Not so fast, missy!" His tight hold pulled the strings at her neck taut, choking her. At her squawk of protest, he released his hold on her pelisse and pulled both arms behind her instead.

"Unhand her, sir!" the rider commanded, his voice sharp and familiar.

Cassandra looked up at the mounted man's thunderous scowl. *Oh no.* What was Philip Masterson doing here? Had her father sent him after her? Beneath the brim of his country hat, his black brows dipped low and his dark eyes narrowed dangerously at the portly man standing behind her.

Chapter Two

Heat poured into her cheeks. To bear one's foolishness alone was appalling enough, but to have a childhood friend witness her downfall, one who'd she'd flirted with over the years but had shunned after a single kiss, was horrifying. She dropped her gaze and stared at his horse's knobby knees.

"You know this miss, sir?" The tavern keeper eased his hold. A heartbeat later, he completely let go. Whether he'd done so because of Philip's glare or the second rider boxing them in from behind, she couldn't say.

"I do." Philip steadied his restless mount. "What is transpiring here?"

"She run off without paying for her meal, that's whot."

Cassandra scrubbed the mud off the toe of her half boot in the clump of weeds at her feet. Embarrassment prevented her from telling Philip how her lover had run off with her money and her precious dowry.

"Has your purse been stolen, miss?"

She spun around and glanced up at the gent on the bay mare. Lord have mercy, he was a striking man. Unlike Philip's casual brown wool jacket and buckskin kneebreeches, this fellow rider wore a jacket of fine green wool over a cream striped waistcoat with a frothy spill of white linen at his throat. Tan pantaloons clung to muscled thighs and his high boots somehow gleamed through a fine layer of dust. His moderately tall hat sat on a head of dark blond curls and he regarded her with understanding blue eyes.

"Yes, sir." Bless him for not thinking the worst of her.

"Here now," Philip said, drawing her attention back to him. He tossed a gold coin at the wide-eyed proprietor, who caught it easily. "I will cover her expense, sir. In addition, my friend and I will need a room, meal and ale and care for our horses. Have you something to offer us?"

"Of course, sir!" The innkeeper bowed to the two men and hustled back to the inn.

"Where is your chaperone?"

Cassandra finally met Philip's gaze. The heat of embarrassment and something more, something warm and familiar and...comforting, spread outward to the very tips of her fingers. Philip might chastise her but he'd protect her too. He always did.

At her silence, Philip cocked a brow at her, and she had to look away. The obvious answer hung between them, unvoiced. Admitting the truth, even when he must suspect it, proved too difficult.

Philip dismounted, splattering mud from beneath his boots, and approached her, holding his reins loosely in one gloved hand. "Cassie." He said her childhood nickname so softly it didn't carry further than her ears. "You cannot be here alone. Where is your...companion?"

A lump formed in her throat. "He is missing."

The narrow-eyed look he shot over her head to the rider mounted behind her gave her goose bumps.

A part of her still refused to believe George's duplicity. "There must be an explanation for his disappearance," she exclaimed. "He pledged his devotion to me."

"Of course he did," Philip said soothingly. "You're a lovely young woman." He glanced around. "On your way to Gretna Green were you?"

"He said he loved me," she said, twisting her purse cord in her hands.

Something in her explanation must not have set well with him because his expression darkened. "And you thought you loved him?"

Heat gathered in her chest and rose up her neck into her cheeks. Had she been such a fool? She clenched the purse strings in her fist and stared at him. "I am afraid I may have been unwise in my choice of..."

"Company?"

"Fiancé," she insisted, although her status held less appeal now that she knew George had stolen from her.

His features hardened and he stepped closer, giving his horse some slack in the lead. He clasped her gloved hand with his free hand. "Have you committed a *faux pas*?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"How rude of you to ask, Philip." The flame in her cheeks burned hotter.

He didn't blink. "I need to know."

Why she admitted her faults to him, she couldn't say, but she'd always shared her secrets with him. Somehow he'd always made her feel better or fixed her problem. She could count on Philip not to say anything to anyone else. So she nodded, confirming a woman's worst sin.

For weeks, she'd met George whenever she could, mostly at country fêtes where untitled sons of the nobility and an estate manager's daughter could mix without raising an eyebrow. It had been at a neighbor's picnic...Philip's family outing, come to think of it, where George had first stolen a kiss and had somehow managed to bare her breasts before she'd balked at his actions. It hadn't taken him long after that to convince her to raise her skirts for him. How rash she'd been!

Philip took a long hard look from the tips of her muddy boots up the wool pelisse covering her traveling dress and finally to her face. She could see the questions hovering in his eyes, the censure on the tip of his tongue.

"Thank you for coming to my aid and paying my debt," she blurted in an attempt to avoid a public setdown. She looked up at his riding companion and nodded to him, including him in her thanks.

The rider regarded Philip with an impatient arched brow.

Philip grunted at his friend. He turned sideways and raised his arm toward the rider. "Miss Cassandra Briggs, may I present my associate, Sir Edmund Anstead, Esquire."

"Sir Edmund," she said with a quick curtsy.

"Miss Briggs." He swept his hat off his golden hair and bowed low over the side of his horse. "Charmed to meet you."

She dipped her head in greeting. Perhaps under different circumstances, she might reciprocate the feeling. At the moment, anger blurred the fringes of her vision and embarrassment stung her cheeks.

The hostler hurried from the stables, took Philip's reins from his hand and waited for Sir Edmund to dismount before he led the horses away.

A brief silence ensued while Cassandra weighed her options. Returning home in shame topped her list of undesirable options. She tilted her head at Philip, suspicion rising to the forefront of her thoughts. It couldn't possibly be coincidence that he'd happened upon her here. "What are you doing near the Scottish borderlands? Last I heard you were headed in the opposite direction to the shores of Brighton, quite a distance from Scotland."

He glanced up at his riding companion. "Come breakfast with us, and we will tell you of our adventure."

"I cannot." Her voice wobbled. "I must find George."

He took her arm and deftly turned her back toward the inn. "I fear he abandoned you, dear. 'Tis a grim state of affairs for a woman once a man gets what he wants."

Tears pooled in her eyes. "He wanted my money!" She leaned into Philip's side, taking comfort in his friendship, and he gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Such familiarity in a public place should've upset her, but anyone could see she was distraught.

"But that is not all he took," he whispered.

Her cheeks burned with heat. Philip was wrong in his thinking. She'd *given* her virginity to George. Without hesitation. Lustily. It had been a horrible mistake, but she could not blame George on that account. His other offenses however... She'd never

forgive him for those. She looked up at Philip with her heart in her throat. "He stole my mother's necklace too. My dowry."

"The swine," Philip's friend spat.

Cassandra blinked and looked over at Sir Edmund, unaware he'd taken to her other side. The security of being flanked by two handsome young men made her feel better. "To be sure," she agreed.

"I shall send a message to Bow Street," the young lawyer said. "Name this lowly person and he shall be apprehended immediately."

His offer surprised and pleased her. "He is Viscount Lontour's youngest son, but London is not the place to seek him. The innkeeper thinks he travels the north road to Dumfries."

Another look passed between the two men.

Sir Edmund inhaled deeply. "Ah, George Browley, that ne'er-do-well. Among other things, he owes me a gambling debt." The hard glint in his eyes did not bode well for her fiancé. He blinked, hiding his rage, and looked past her to Philip, his lips drawn in a fine line. "I believe he stole something from you too, Philip."

Philip's embrace tightened around Cassie's shoulders. "Yes, and I intend to get it back."

Chapter Three

They'd arrived back at the inn door. Cassandra barely recalled moving her feet to get there. As soon as they stepped inside the dark interior, the stage horn blew and the last passengers hurried out the door. It looked as though Scotland was not in her future. The loss didn't bother her as much as she thought it would.

The irritating bard had fallen asleep in his chair and most of the patrons had dispersed. Even so, they moved farther into the inn. With a possessive touch on her back, Philip guided her through the main dining room to a parlor set with a few round gaming tables. "We shall enjoy more privacy here."

Sir Edmund held her chair while Philip motioned to the servant girl who blushed and bobbed a curtsy to them. She laid their room key on the table. "Yer meals will be ready in a trice, sir."

Philip took the seat opposite his riding companion with Cassandra settled between them. The strength of their protection surrounded her, filling her with satisfaction. The serving girl had regarded her with a bit of hostility, and when she thought about it, the other women who brushed by them on their way out the door also cast her a glance of curiosity tinged with envy. Two handsome men had rescued her, albeit temporarily. What woman would not covet that?

"Set your worries aside, Cassie. We will take care of you and your misguided...fiancé."

"All in one sweep," Edmund muttered.

"I am mortified and grateful but—I don't know what to do now." She peeped from beneath her lashes at Philip, hoping he'd have a palatable recommendation. As a child, he was always getting into scrapes of one sort or another and he excelled at worming his way out of them.

Philip slid his fingertips over Cassandra's gloved hand. "For now, you must rely on my protection."

Cassandra was not a stupid woman. She knew the avenues open to a woman in her position were few. This far from home, she could pretend the two men were her brothers but it would be only a matter of time before one of them bumped into someone they knew. There'd be no stopping the gossips then.

"If I reach home before my father returns from visiting his sister, no one need know what occurred here." She sat back in her chair as the serving girl slipped pewter platters onto their table, chagrined that the girl had heard her confession.

"I shall escort you home," Philip promised.

"If either of you gents needs anything else, my name is Lizzie."

Sir Edmund flipped her a coin, which the girl caught deftly and tucked into her bodice. Whether the coin was a tip for serving them or for something later, Cassandra would never know. The servant curtsied, gave Cassandra a smug smile and skipped away.

A flare of resentment tightened Cassie's jaw.

"Edmund and I attended a boxing match."

"What?" Cassandra pinned her attention onto Philip. No longer a boy, a strong, broad-shouldered, roughly cast gentleman looked back at her with more than friendship gleaming in his eyes. A flutter in her chest took her by surprise, more so when the feeling dipped low into her belly.

"I promised to tell you about our adventure in Brighton," he said with a warm smile. "Boxing has become quite a big draw there."

She nodded, leaning toward him, anxious to hear his story. She'd heard about the fights that men of all classes participated in and bet heavily on. The idea of men stripped of their shirts, flexing their muscles, their skin gleaming with sweat, locked in a power struggle, increased her pulse. "Did you participate?" she asked in a hushed

voice, imagining Philip shirtless with his fists clenched before him.

He regarded her with amusement sparkling in his eyes. "Not this time. I have dabbled on occasion though."

She grinned at his roguish nature and then turned to catch Sir Edmund's eye, noting that instead of eating, he sat back regarding her. His open admiration made her feel a trifle self-conscious.

"And you sir? Have you sparred with an opponent?"

"I stay clear. I am afraid a black eye and raw knuckles might startle my clients."

"Ha!" Philip exclaimed. "He is afraid of marking his pretty face."

"I can understand his concern," she said, admiring Sir Edmund's classical features with more of an artist's eye than the awe of an attracted female. "You are a handsome devil, if I may be so bold, sir." When he chuckled, she turned to Philip and noted the scar that sliced through his left eyebrow as well as the slight bend to his nose. He was far less striking than Sir Edmund and yet it was Philip who made her blood sing, her breasts tingle, made her feel safe and wanted. "On the other hand, some imperfections convey strength and masculinity – attractive qualities as well."

Laughter rumbled from Philip's throat. "You are a charmer, love." He hesitated with his fork slightly raised toward his mouth. Leaning close to her ear, he said, "I believe you will succeed in whatever endeavor you choose from this point forward."

"I am left with few choices," she said quietly.

Philip looked pensive, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Although he denied being a gossipmonger, Sir Edmund redirected the topic, bringing her up to date on the latest social events in London. His recounting of society's matches, mismatches and flagrant liaisons made her feel less of a hussy and more connected to the normal state of English life. Her situation, evidently, was a common occurrence.

"Thank you, Sir Edmund, for making me feel at ease," she said, smiling boldly at

him.

"It has been my pleasure."

"I wish we had met under different circumstances," she said, dropping her gaze.

He saluted her with his tankard of ale. "To fate, my dear. To fate."

She raised her teacup in acknowledgment, but it tasted bitter.

Philip boldly squeezed her gloved hand. The simple action put a lump in Cassandra's throat. She felt like crawling into his lap, snuggling into his warmth and crying into his neck. The life of a soiled woman was not the future she had imagined for herself. How could she untangle this mess she'd fallen into?

With a shaky sigh, she rubbed her forehead.

"Are you feeling ill?" Philip asked, concern evident in his voice.

She shook her head then reversed her decision and nodded.

"Let me assist you to the settee." The legs of the Windsor chair scraped over the wood floor when Philip pushed away from the table. He gently grasped her elbow and raised her to her feet. "You will be more comfortable there." As they crossed the wide plank floor, his arm slipped from her elbow to her waist, where she presumed it would be easier to catch her should she faint.

Or perhaps he simply liked to hold her thusly.

Rather than steady her, the nearness of his hard body made her pulse trip faster, her knees weak. He smelled of mud and horseflesh and man, a strong biting scent that might put off other more delicate women. For her, it conjured images of him sitting tall in the saddle, holding her snugly across his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck, while his horse cantered across a dew-kissed open field.

Dear Lord. That was no daydream. Her step faltered and Philip squeezed her tighter. She clung to his hand at her side. It had been a long time since she recalled that ride. Her first kiss. She'd been so young, naïve of the way between men and women, confused by her feelings, and fearful of getting pregnant from the kiss itself. After all, that's what her mother told her *— heed my word child, kisses will get you with child.* Her mother had twelve children, so Cassandra thought she spoke from experience. By the time she was old enough to know better, Philip had moved on to other women. Not that it mattered. Her mother protected her from lustful men until the day she died.

Now look at her. Ruined as her mother predicted and Philip making her belly flutter once again.

Oddly, she was more concerned about Philip's impression of her than the reaction of family and friends. For some inexplicable reason, she'd never wanted to let him down. She'd thought marrying a man of George's station would make Philip proud of her accomplishment. In retrospect, marrying a rake like George would've made Philip angrier than he was now. In fact, Philip appeared more relieved that he'd stopped her marriage in time than angry about what she'd done.

She sighed in pleasure when Philip sat down next to her and held her hand. No one occupied this little alcove off the card room and she was thankful for the privacy.

"You should know – " Philip began.

With a tiny frown tugging at her brows, she put a finger to his lips. "Allow me a moment of peace." She had to think.

The odds of returning home before her father, without a whisper of controversy, were slim. She'd destroyed her reputation. Few titled gentlemen would have considered marrying her before her madcap journey with George. Now none would have her. Men of no rank would consider widows before tainting their good family names with a ruined bride. Even Philip, good friend as he was, could not bail her out this time. His budding investment office relied heavily on the fortunes of the nobility and his character must be beyond reproach. She must prepare for the worst.

The worst for a woman in her situation gave her a chill across her shoulders. She'd throw herself into the filthy Thames before she sank to the level of a streetwalker. If she had to sell her favors to survive, there were better ways to do it. A career in the right part of town offered a chance to live in relative ease. Demi-reps received new clothes

and jewelry, rides in fancy carriages, invitations to parties. Things she'd enjoyed infrequently living in the country with her reputation intact.

Thanks to George, she wouldn't face that kind of future unprepared. Cad though he turned out to be, he'd taught her to enjoy sex, and based on his responses, she excelled at pleasing him too. She couldn't quite understand the censorious attitudes of other women toward such a delightful activity. Not every man would satisfy her as George had, but rather than wallow in her misfortune, she embraced the opportunity to make a name for herself. Mayhap one day, if she were lucky, she'd find a man among the lot who truly loved her.

Or at least someone as kind and sympathetic as Philip and his friend. Someone she could love.

She peeked around the corner, the room empty but for Sir Edmund who ate his meal with gusto, paying them no mind. Still, she lowered her voice to address Philip. When she started to talk, her voice wavered.

Philip gave her a reassuring smile and ran his finger over the back of her gloved hand. Even with her skin protected, his touch drew a shivery response from deep inside her. Perhaps it was because it reminded her of George's sensual touch, or her body still hummed from having a man thrust between her legs. Either way, the yearning she felt for Philip was real, however misguided it might be.

Perhaps she would make an excellent demi-rep after all.

"My brothers have brought home tales of *nunneries* near St. James Place where wealthy men venture to meet virgins."

Philip's eyes widened, but he kept silent.

"They say the ladies there are very fine." She leaned forward and added in a conspiratorial whisper, "And 'tis doubtful they are virgins."

Philip's lips twitched in suppressed amusement and although he raised his brows in astonishment, he failed miserably in his attempt to look ignorant of the matter.

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She pulled on the fingertip of her glove, confident Philip had frequented the socalled nunneries for a tumble more than once. If she worked there, would he request a dalliance with her? The thought made her warm. "If I cannot save my reputation, I shall inquire about a position like that in town."

"There are alternatives," Philip suggested.

"Indeed? I have no desire to serve a spoiled lady or her children, nor do I wish to become an unappreciated housemaid. Work in the new factories sounds frightful." She shot a sharp gaze at him. "I would rather bend over in a fancy bordello than bend over a textile loom for endless hours."

Philip shook his head, a grin lifting his lips. His gaze dropped to her bosom for a long moment before he raised it back to her face. Slowly, he reached out and brushed a finger across her cheek. "There is no need to pursue either, I assure you."

Her brows lifted high. Was he making her an offer as his mistress? She hadn't considered that, but the idea sounded rather splendid. Could he afford her? Would his having a mistress be acceptable to his clients? Lord knew the majority of them kept mistresses.

Perhaps she was getting ahead of herself. She inhaled deeply. He hadn't made an offer...

Philip leaned close, his warm breath caressing her cheek. His hand drifted down and settled gently on her shoulder where his thumb absently rubbed her neck. "For weeks, I have been extremely jealous of your dalliance with George Browley and now the vision of your buttocks wiggling at me, well, it is disconcerting."

She gasped. "You knew about George and me?" How was that possible? "We met in secret. We told no one."

Philip ignored the question, held her gaze and leaned closer still, his lips a hairsbreadth from hers.

Warmth spread across her chest. "Tell me, Philip."

"George is a braggart." At her sharp intake of breath, Philip added, "He is also a liar. One never knows what to believe." His lips brushed the side of her mouth. "So I followed you here."

"Why?" The whispered word made their lips touch for a fraction of a second.

His hand slipped up the back of her neck into her hair. His eyes narrowed. "Because he cannot have you." He pulled her into a hard kiss.

For a second, she stiffened, her mind grappling with another of George's betrayals, but then something shifted inside her. When Philip swept his lips over her mouth, her entire body melted as though she were made of wax and he were a hot flame. When his tongue pressed for entry, her eyelids fluttered closed. She parted her lips and gave him access to tease her tongue.

There was comfort in his kiss and something more. Something good.

Blindly, she reached out to embrace him. He dragged her sideways onto his lap, wrapped his arms around her at the same time she looped her arms around his neck. Oh yes, this felt so familiar and exciting. He deepened the kiss. His erection pressed against the thin muslin of her dress at her hip.

She couldn't quite grasp the fact that this was Philip, her long-time friend. He'd never paid her a bit of attention after that first kiss. No, that wasn't true. She'd chosen to ignore any spark of interest he'd shown. She'd thought she wanted someone more refined, someone higher in the aristocracy, like George.

George had proven to be a disappointment, and this, this felt so much more...sincere. As if Philip had been waiting a lifetime for one more kiss.

The hand not cradling her head eased beneath the edge of her heavy cape, over her ribs, his forefinger brushing against the underside of her breast.

Yes, touch me. She cautiously arched her back, lifting her bosom high. Her tongue scraped over his teeth when she rubbed her bodice against the rough nap of his wool jacket. Fire burned in her belly.

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Slowly, his hand inched upward over the proffered globe until a finger met the tiny point. Her breath faltered as he rubbed it and the peak tightened along with the muscles low in her belly.

A moment later, his hand covered her breast, his fingers kneading, his palm teasing the nipple.

Her knees locked together. What a weak woman she was! His kisses drugged her, making her want to draw up her skirts and straddle him, undo the buttons on his breeches and mount him – in a public room no less – just as her mother warned.

With a groan, Philip broke the kiss and turned his head to speak into her ear. "Let me make love to you, Cassie."

With her eyes still closed, she nodded. Perhaps she should have hesitated, shown some modesty, but she'd never been coy with Philip. She wasn't going to start now.

He pressed the room key into her palm.

She closed her fist around it, wondering if she'd lost her mind and not truly caring. On unsteady legs, she preceded him out of the alcove. Without a single glance at Sir Edmund, she walked through the private card room to the front of the inn.

The poet was back on his makeshift pedestal, recanting Burns' words as she passed him by to go up the staircase.

"Mark the winds, and mark the skies, Ocean's web, and ocean's flow, Sun and moon but set to rise, Round and round the seasons go. Why then ask of silly Man To oppose great Nature's plan?"

Didn't the man know any poems but *The Inconstancy of Love*? Cassandra tried to ignore him, but the final stanza cast a chill across her shoulders.

"We'll be constant while we can – You can be no more, you know."

It hadn't been so many hours ago that she'd taken George inside her. She cast that thought from her mind. She needed to purge George. Needed to feel loved, wanted.

And she wanted Philip. Her pace quickened up the steps.

Chapter Four

Philip's erection strained against his pants when he stood up. The blasted urge to touch Cassie in the most intimate places hadn't abated since she'd calmly admitted to her *faux pas*. Too much a gentleman to ask for more details, he imagined George Browley fucking her with her legs thrown high in the air.

He wanted to kill the bastard.

Adjusting himself with a quick tug at the center of his breeches, he walked out of the alcove a full minute after Cassandra. He strolled over to his friend and leaned a hand on the back of the adjacent chair.

Edmund glanced up from his meal and took a second, longer look at Philip's face. "Well, why are you smiling like a fool?"

"I am afraid you will be unable to collect on your debt from Browley. Miss Briggs is mine now."

"Indeed? Where is she?"

"Waiting for me in the room, so stay away."

Edmund frowned. "The chap should not have bet a romp with his fiancée at any rate. Not well done, I dare say. However, if she has offered herself to you of her own free will..."

"Of course she has," Philip said, incensed at the slash to his honor.

"Then I shall concede to you." He raised a brow in challenge. "For now. Did you tell her about her inheritance?"

Philip shifted his jaw back and forth. "No. I am leaving that up to you. You're the one who spilled that tidbit to Browley, of all people, setting him after her like a hound on the scent of a rabbit. You can beg her forgiveness."

"But not until you've secured your place at her side, I take it."

"The money has nothing to do with it – her – us."

Edmund shrugged. "We shall see."

A knot lodged in Philip's throat. There was no hiding the fact from Edmund that he needed money, but he intended to earn it through wise investments, not marry it. In fact, he intended to keep Cassie as his mistress just to prove that he didn't want her newfound wealth. A niggle of uncertainty skittered up the back of his neck. Would she be happy with that arrangement? Would he?

Holy hell, he'd loved her forever. It was Cassie's mother's fault he'd buried his feelings. The woman kept a tight rein and close eye on her daughters, determined none of them lose their hearts — or their virtue — to a boy with no prospects. Such was life, but he'd thought he'd overcome that obstacle. For years he settled for a close friendship with Cassie while he worked to build a name for himself. To no avail. Even after her mother's death, she'd spurned any flirtation from him, setting her sights on men from titled families such as George Browley.

Well, he had his pride. A marriage proposal was unthinkable. Despite her bad experience with Browley, why would she change her strategy now? His heart clenched at the possibility of her laughing at him and turning him down. He'd end the sexual relationship before he took that chance.

Edmund watched him closely while he drank his draught. He set down the empty tankard with a thud. "When you tire of her, toss her my way. I would like to sample her sweets."

Philip's fist curled around the chair rung. "Go to hell." He stomped off to make love to the only woman he ever truly wanted.

* * * * *

The second Philip walked in the door, any hesitation Cassandra felt disappeared. Her heartbeat skipped when he gave her a secret, sexy smile and turned the key in the lock behind him.

The intensity of his gaze made her belly flutter. He took a step forward and halted, turning his head toward the sound of the shouting bard below.

Cassandra cringed. Why didn't they kick the fool out? Even upstairs, behind closed doors, she could hear the man.

"Why then ask of silly Man To oppose great Nature's plan? We'll be constant while we can – "

"Ignore him," Philip said, walking up to her and interlocking her fingers in his.

"I am trying," she said, her knees shaking beneath her skirt. She'd taken off her pelisse and now she craved the warmth and protection of the heavy cloth.

Why was she so nervous? It was Philip here with her.

Exactly. It was Philip. What if she disappointed him as she'd disappointed George?

Oh Lord, she must dispel this lack of confidence. If she'd disappointed George, it hadn't been in bed.

The pleasure in Philip's eyes calmed her. When his soft lips brushed across hers, the chill that swept down her spine had nothing to do with fear. She unclasped one hand so she could run her fingers through his fashionably tussled hair while she gently nibbled and sucked on his lips.

A small groan from deep in his throat rumbled against her mouth. His free hand found the curve of her buttocks, shocking her when he pulled her hips toward him and pressed his hard erection against the thin layers of fabric covering her belly.

Knowing that he wanted her as much as she wanted him set her body aflame. She rolled her hips, sinuously sliding her abdomen across his hard shaft, reveling in the size and breadth of him. Unlike George, she wouldn't receive Philip easily. The thought made her whole body flush with heat.

The delicate threads of friendship frayed in the scorching blaze between them. Philip plunged his tongue into her mouth, kissing her hungrily. His hands shoved

through her hair, twisting the pins loose from the coiled curls at the back of her head. Half her tresses tumbled down. She shook her head. Pins pinged on the wood floor. Philip yanked at her hair until it all fell over her shoulders and then he tangled his fingers in the long tresses.

It didn't surprise her that he reacted so passionately. She'd avoided his hungry gazes for years until she thought any desire he felt for her had dissipated. She'd been wrong.

He backed her up against the footboard of the bed and his hands fell to her shoulders. His blunt fingertips grazed over her skin as he dragged her puffed sleeves down her arms to her elbows. The bodice of her gown sagged down to the ribbon tied beneath her breasts. Oddly, the warmth of his hands on her arms made her shiver as much as the cool air hitting her bare breasts. Her nipples puckered under his intense scrutiny.

"Beautiful," he whispered, raising his gaze to her eyes.

Intent on the ring of green in his brown eyes, she jumped when his cool hand closed over her breast. Her lips parted on a soft gasp. A gush of wet heat soaked her core.

He kissed her again. Harder. Invading her mouth. His hand massaged her breast with a desperate intensity.

Cassandra pressed her body into his, wanting to mesh every inch of their flesh. Clothes interfered. With a grunt of frustration, she pushed at his shoulders, breaking the deep kiss. "Wait."

His frown lasted but a second. She shrugged out of her sleeves, liking the way Philip's eyes darkened at her bouncing breasts as she wriggled free of her bodice.

Before she could do more, Philip gripped her arms, holding her still while he admired the pale white mounds before him. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth and he looked up at her with fire in his eyes.

A wave of heat and ice ran through her body at the same time, making her shiver.

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"Let me warm you," he said, his voice deep and raspy. His fingers dug into her arms and he tilted her backward until her back arched and her breasts rose up for his pleasure.

His tongue shot out and licked his lips and then he dropped forward for his first taste. His rough cheeks settled between her breasts and he turned his lips to kiss one and then the other. He settled on the right one, as if it tasted best, and nibbled his way toward the tight nub pointing high at the opposite wall.

She watched the top of his head and caught glimpses of his tongue flicking out to tease the nipple. Jolts of current raced from his mouth through her breast and down to her mons. When his mouth closed over the bud and he drew on it, she gripped his elbows, holding tight so she wouldn't lose her balance. Her hips jutted forward searching for contact and found it in the hard muscle of his thigh. She rubbed against him, aching for more, while Philip massaged her breast and tortured her nipple until it burned.

By the time he set away from her right breast and moved to the left, she was humping his leg in an extremely unladylike fashion, her buttocks clenching, her cunny growing wetter and wetter until cream leaked to the edges of her nether lips

"Philip!" she cried as she smoothed her dress hem up to her knee.

He leaned back to watch her, his face flushed, and drove his hand beneath her hem straight between the open slit in her drawers. With a wicked grin, his fingers traced the soft and sensitive curves of her mons until she gasped with pleasure.

"Philip," she rasped, "please."

George had been an enjoyable rutting beast, but he'd never taken the time to satisfy her in other ways. She wanted that. Needed it. Philip needed to know.

"George-"

Philip's entire body stiffened. He withdrew his fingers in a cold rush.

"No!" she exclaimed, shaking her head, clutching his arms so he wouldn't pull

away. "George never touched me like this. I wanted you to know." She begged him with her eyes. "Do not stop." She bit her lip. "Please, Philip, make me forget him."

Determination hardened his features. He kissed her brutally. Briefly. Then he glared at her through narrowed eyes. "Do not ever speak his name again."

"Very well," she whispered, her throat too tight to speak any louder.

She almost expired on the spot when Philip thrust two fingers into her moist center – deep and violently. Her inner muscles contracted around him, coating him with the proof of her desire. The long sigh she released made his grimace soften.

He nuzzled his nose into her hair and wrapped one strong arm around her back while he drove his fingers in and out of her.

She clung to him, realizing she'd almost ruined the moment. The firm pressure of his erection grinding against her hip provided some solace, but the near loss of Philip's embrace made her chest constrict. She cared more deeply than she thought.

Nothing in her past experiences compared to the desperate need she felt now as her lover stroked her. His thumb slipped, bumping against the sensitive bud at the apex of her mons. She sucked in a deep breath at the pleasure darting deep into her belly. Then he deliberately skimmed his rough thumb pad over it, making her jump and squeak in surprise. She clamped down on his diving fingers, soaking him with her juices.

Driven by her response, he pushed his fingers deep and rubbed her weak spot with his thumb until her legs shook and she could barely breathe past the throbbing pulse in her throat.

"Ph...Ph..." Her body was so tense she couldn't even say his name.

"Release, darling."

She blew out a series of clipped breaths as the climax rushed through her. "Oh!" The muscles in her buttocks trembled as she pushed and squeezed and squeezed until the rippling shocks faded away.

Oh...my...God

"Cassie," he murmured against the damp hair at her temple. "My darling, Cassie."

Her heartbeat thundered in her chest. If Philip hadn't been holding her, she would've crumbled to the floor. Slowly, he eased his fingers free. Her hem slithered down over her legs and he immediately scooped it up along with the hem of her shift, all the way up over her head and tossed the wad of thin fabrics onto the bed's bolster pillow. She plopped down on the edge of the mattress, unable to stand a minute longer, wearing nothing but her stockings and ankle boots, having neither the energy nor the desire to cover herself.

The smile he gave her drew one from her in return.

It seemed as though she was glowing from the inside out. "I never knew..."

He pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "Before we part, I will touch every inch of you, taste you, hump you until you can no longer move."

She licked her dry lips. How spoiled she'd be for any other man!

Watching her intently, Philip stepped back and removed his coat, waistcoat, neckcloth and boots, coming back to her in his breeches, white stockings darned at the heel, and loosely tucked white shirt. "Let me assist you," he said, dropping to one knee before her.

He removed her boots and rolled one stocking off her foot, the light brush of his fingers tickling her sole, making her toes curl. A smile tilted his lips as he set the stocking aside. "Sensitive, my sweet?"

"Yes."

"Hmm." He tugged at the garter on her other leg. When the silk stocking sagged down, he brushed his fingertips behind her knee.

She twitched, nearly kicking him in the groin.

Letting loose a chuckle, he grabbed her swinging ankle. "None of that now," he admonished with a smile, quickly removing her stocking and draping it over his shoulder. Before she realized what he was about, he used her garter to tie her ankle to the bed leg.

Surprised, she laughed. "Do not tickle me and I will not kick you."

"I am making certain you do not run away from me."

She took a long hard look at him. "I have been doing that for a long time, have I not?"

"Yes," he said somberly. "Now I have you exactly as I imagined."

The longer he looked at her nakedness, the warmer she felt. Her belly quivered with desire. She squirmed in unease, tightening her inner muscles to hold back her seeping juices. Her breasts ached for his touch once more, her nipples tight with want. Yet, he didn't move, despite the fact his cock pressed hard against his breeches.

"Philip," she begged breathlessly, wanting him more with each passing second. His unsteady breath on her belly drove her to distraction. "Touch me again. Now."

The barest touch of warm lips brushed her inner thigh and her knees nearly buckled. She needed no gentle prodding to spread her legs wider.

Nerves jumped when he bent his head and blew hot breath on her damp curls. Desire sharpened, stealing her breath. She dragged her nails across his scalp.

Her hips jerked when his fingers slipped between her legs and opened her mons. Her pulse quickened as he traced every fold while he kissed the tender flesh of her belly. He probed deeper into her ripe center, testing the depth, withdrawing and sinking again, drawing a prolonged moan from deep in her throat.

Cream smeared his fingers, making each slide sound juicy and wet. Her body pulled tight around his stroking fingers. She clamped his head against her.

He jerked away and stood suddenly, kissing her while he arched her backward until she lay flat on the bed, her buttocks teetering on the edge. Then he stood back, looking at her lying with her legs spread, her ankle tied to the bottom of the bedpost. Air whooshed into the wet void between her legs. Uncomfortable, she started to wiggle backward on the mattress.

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"Stop."

She froze. Frustration rose but she didn't let it show. He'd left her empty, throbbing with desire, sharp and unfulfilled.

The sting was soothed somewhat when Philip moved into the notch between her legs and braced an arm on either side of her. "You are all mine, Cassandra Briggs. Do not forget it." He skimmed his lips across her breast and sucked one rosy peak into his hot mouth.

Aching need twisted into the tips of her nipples.

She rubbed his shoulders through his loose-fitting shirt, caressed the taut muscles beneath his sleeves, inhaled his earthy scent. It wasn't enough. She grabbed his shirt and yanked it up to his chest. Philip released her long enough to pull the shirt over his head and throw it onto a nearby footstool.

Cassandra's jaw dropped at his perfectly sculpted chest and flat stomach. She didn't have nearly enough time to admire him before he dipped his head down again to take the other nipple in his mouth. He was not gentle, yet the roughness sent waves of arousal through her belly to her core. Pleasure pulsated there, making her wetter, yearning for fulfillment.

A groan vibrated in Philip's throat.

Her lungs worked harder to keep up with her rapid heartbeat. Her buttocks clenched and she pushed up off the bed, seeking satisfaction.

Philip pulled away so fast, she blinked at him in confusion. "What is the ma...?"

His eyes burned with passion. His fingers flew over the buttons on his drop-front until one corner fell open and his engorged cock with its dark pink head popped out.

"Suck me, Cassandra," he said savagely, shoving his pants down to the buttons just below his knees. When she started to rise, he pushed her back, crawling up onto the bed and moving to her side.

She turned her head and opened her mouth obediently. The drop of liquid on the

tip tasted salty on her tongue. She slid her wet mouth past the bulbous head, down as far as she could, and back to the tip, all the while thinking about his cock sinking into her slick cunt. Faster, then slower, twisting her head, and sliding her tongue all around him as George had taught her.

"Bloody hell," he rasped, tweaking her nipple.

She jerked against her ankle bond and worked harder to bring him closer to orgasm. She wanted him in her, fucking her. Now. She scraped her teeth up his length and then sucked on the head.

This time, he jumped. His breathing hitched. With his left hand braced near her head, he leaned down so he could slip a finger between her damp nether lips. After a quick slide up and down, he found her swollen nub and swept his finger over it.

Her lips tightened around him so she wouldn't bite him. Her back arched.

"Want more, love?"

She nodded.

He obliged by rubbing back and forth, slowly adding pressure until she twitched with yearning, on the verge of orgasm.

Please. I want to climax. Make me soar, Philip.

Reacting to her mournful moan, he slipped his finger down and plunged two thick digits inside her.

Relief collided with a jolt of pleasure. In gratitude, she slid her lips over his cock, pushing the head toward the back of her throat.

Elation warmed her when he groaned in delight.

Mutual satisfaction drove her on. While she pleasured him with her mouth, he stroked his fingers in and out of her slick cunny and rubbed her throbbing bud. She squirmed and twisted, frustrated by her bound leg, lost in the burning sensation pulsing through her veins.

"Yes," he sighed long and low. "That is good. Right there. So – good." He sucked in

a deep breath and jerked free of her mouth.

Before she gathered her wits, he slid down to stand between her legs and lunged into her. Deep. Snug. Stealing her breath.

With one arm scooped beneath her back, he drew her up toward his chest. His mouth captured her lips in a sweet but demanding kiss, and all seemed right. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and her free leg around his waist, and gloried in his slow and easy rhythm.

Her new lover broke the kiss, leaned back a little and grinned at her.

She couldn't help smiling back. She leaned forward and nipped his chin, unable to stop touching him for a second.

Philip pumped into her more forcefully, his hot gaze burning into hers. Each thrust bore a seal of his possession.

Cassandra threw her head back and let her body take over, drawing him in with constricting inner muscles, her hips chasing him on every withdrawal. Her silky cream coated him. The burning pressure inside her belly grew hotter. Tighter.

"Love me-" He nibbled on her extended neck, tightened his embrace, his strokes becoming as fast and erratic as his breath.

Her heart seemed to be beating in her neck. Her body quivered on the cusp of elation. She drew a sharp breath and dug her nails into his back.

He plunged hard, grinding as far as he could go, filling her completely. Then he jerked back and plunged again. And again.

"Oh. Oh!" She thrust her hips forward and smashed her full breasts against the crinkly hair on his chest.

His hands shifted down and gripped her butt cheeks, drawing her tight against him as he shoved into her over and over. His breath panted past her ear. His pulse beat visibly in the chords of his neck.

A slight shift and some part of his hard body scraped over her markedly sensitive

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swollen center.

Her world exploded. Eyes squeezed tight, she reveled in the passion whipping through her belly and vibrating through her core.

A deep, unrestrained grunt expelled from Philip's mouth and he buried his cock deep within her throbbing body. Warmth filled her and fulfilled her. His body shook in the aftermath and he held her close, damp heat sealing their bodies together.

And then she was falling to the floor...pulled down actually...twisting awkwardly and landing sideways in Philip's lap to accommodate her bound ankle. He pushed her wild hair away from her face and looked at her. Just looked. Into her soul.

She wanted to tell him that she loved him, but that was silly, wasn't it? They'd made love, but that didn't make them *in love*. George had been proof of that. So she simply cupped Philip's jaw in her hand and gave him a soft yet brief kiss, too out of breath for more than that. "You are brilliant, sir."

He emitted a self-depreciative laugh.

"Truly," she insisted, running her thumb over his parted lips.

His expression sobered and he planted a series of quick kisses on her lips. She pecked back at him, making it a game of loud, smacking kisses.

Something warm and wonderful was evolving between them, something more mysterious and deeper than her relationship with George. She wanted to protect her heart, fearful of men of inconstant affection now, but when it came to Philip, she couldn't imagine her friend deceiving her.

They both started giggling at the same time and finished with one last, long and loud smooch.

His eyes danced as he regarded her and then slowly softened. "Marry me."

Chapter Five

Cassandra's eyebrows shot up and her eyes must've looked as if they might pop out of her head. Philip instantly looked chagrined. She could tell he wanted to take his proposal back. The idea was as foolish as her wanting to say, "I love you."

What of his business? His reputation? Still, she wasn't going to release him from his offer. It was a matter of survival.

"Yes."

Now he looked as surprised as she had a moment before. Fear wrapped around her heart. Her mind formed the words to beg him, but pride wouldn't let her voice them.

His brows drew down in a frown and she knew she'd answered too quickly.

"Why?" he asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Why?"

"Why do you want to marry me, Cassie?"

Oh my. "The same reason you want to marry me." *There. That is a safe answer.*

He tilted his head at her. "Which is?"

Love? She swallowed. "Do you not know why you want to marry me?"

He pushed her off his lap onto the pine floor and grabbed his shirt off the footstool behind him. "Do not play games with me, Cassie." He stood up with his breeches stretched between his ankles, fixed his inside-out shirtsleeves and yanked the large shirt over his head. The hem fell below his softening penis.

"You asked," she said with a hint of anger. "I answered. I wish to be your wife."

"To protect your reputation?" He was yanking his breeches up now.

"No, because...because..." She couldn't say it, couldn't lay her heart bare so soon. She crossed her arms over her nakedness. "Because I might carry your child." He spun on her, his face flushed. "Or George's?"

"Not George's," she spat. "He never..." She looked away. "Not George's."

"Fine." He grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet. "We will go to Gretna Green. Now. Get dressed."

He turned his back and stormed out the door, slamming it behind him.

Cassandra lurched forward to go after him but her blasted ankle was tied to the bedpost.

By the time she untied the knot in her garter ribbon, threw on her wrinkled shift and dress and jammed her bare feet into her boots, someone was knocking on the door.

There was no hiding what she'd been about. Her hair frizzed out in a tangled mess around her shoulders. The bedding was rumpled. The room smelled like lust. She rushed to the door, holding it closed so no one would see her thus.

"Who is it?" she said through the doorframe.

"Sir Edmund. Are you all right?"

She tilted her head against the panel in the door and let out a shaky sigh. "Yes. Where is Philip?"

"He is in the stable yard. He told me to fetch my belongings and to gather you up while I was at it. What has happened?" He turned the doorknob. She pushed back when he tried to open the door. "Let me in." He sounded a bit angry.

"I am not decent."

The pressure on the door disappeared. "Make haste then."

She quickly scooped up her stockings and shoved them into her reticule, then twisted her hair into a bun at the back of her neck. The hairpins scattered on the floor were soon tucked back into her hair. Her wrinkled dress was beyond redemption, so she threw her pelisse over her shoulders and latched the frog closures from the neck to her waist. "Come in."

Sir Edmund's gaze swept the room before it landed on her. "What happened here?"

He held up a broad hand and turned his head aside. "Not physically. That is all too apparent." He picked up a garter tie she'd missed and handed it to her. "Why is Philip stomping about like a child?"

"We are to be married."

The lord's mouth dropped open and quickly closed again. "I beg your pardon?"

"On the spur of the moment, he asked for my hand. I accepted. Now he is bound."

"Are there terms?"

"Ah, the lawyer emerges, I see." A cynical smile tugged at her lips. "No terms were discussed. My dowry has been stolen. I come with nothing. He has made a poor bargain I am afraid, and already he regrets it."

Sir Edmund shook his head and mumbled something beneath his breath. He picked up his satchel, which had never been unpacked and opened the door. "Shall we?"

The strains of the relentless poet's scratchy voice drifted up to the portal.

"Let not Woman e'er complain Of inconstancy in love Let not Woman e'er complain Fickle Man is apt to rove; Look abroad thro' Nature's range, Nature's mighty Law is change, Ladies, would it not seem strange Man should then a monster prove!"

Cassandra gritted her teeth. She had not believed George was a fickle monster and yet he proved so. Philip would not let her down in the same way. Her instincts told her so.

"I love him." She couldn't tell Philip but she needed to tell someone. His friend looked at her with pity, she thought with a stab of despair. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I will try to make him happy."

Sir Edmund winced. "Oh you have made him happy. Do not doubt it."

* * * * *

Riding sideways on horseback with her legs thrown over Philip's thigh was not as enchanting as she remembered. The edge of the saddle dug into her rump. The horse's gait jarred her back. Although his arms bracketed her while he held the reins, Philip did not hold her. They did not speak.

The damp overcast afternoon suited her mood. Still, a little more of Philip's body warmth would've been appreciated.

Sir Edmund cast unreadable glances at Philip for most of the journey to the Scottish border. At the stage rest where they watered the horses, took care of necessities, purchased a loaf of bread and hard cheese and caught up on the local news, the two men looked as if they had sharp words for each other but neither said anything of importance. When they reached the sign post pointing to Gretna Green, Sir Edmund reined in his horse.

"I shall take my leave of you in town, Philip, and go on to Dumfries in search of Mr. Browley. He has quite a head start. Night will soon fall. I should take advantage of the daylight."

Philip nodded, but Cassandra noticed he didn't look his friend in the eye.

"Before I go..." The lawyer cleared his throat. Philip took unusual interest in the leather strap in his gloved hand.

Sir Edmund tapped his riding whip against his leg. "Miss Briggs," he began. Philip shifted in his saddle.

A twinge of warning straightened her spine. "Yes, sir?"

"As your legal representative, I must inform you –"

"Legal representative?" Since when? A knot clenched in her gut. Did she need representation?

"Um, yes, miss. Your father has hired my firm..."

Oh this was not going to be good news.

"To settle his sister's estate."

Cassandra gasped. "Aunt Elizabeth died? When?" The blood drained from her head, leaving her lightheaded. "Oh my poor father. They were so close. I should be there for him..." She searched the side of Philip's face. "My father did send you after me."

When he didn't answer, Sir Edmund explained. "Your father does not know about Mr. Browley's nefarious intentions. He thinks you have been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped!" She struck her fist against her chest. Her heartbeat pounded beneath her clenched fingers.

"Yes, for ransom."

Her head started to spin. She must have wavered in the saddle because Philip's arms were suddenly supporting her. She turned on him in anger. "Why did you not tell me sooner?"

"I tried," he said quietly. "I am sorry. I was...distracted."

"Oooh." She punched his arm. "I must go home immediately."

"Your father is staying at your aunt's house for a time. Most of your brothers are there too, protecting your inheritance."

"What inheritance?"

"A large house," Philip told her. "A few remarkable racehorses. Track winners."

"Your maiden aunt was a frugal woman, I am told," Sir Edmund said calmly. "She lived well below her means and died a wealthy woman. She left most of that wealth to you."

"Me? Why?"

"The will was written when you were born, the first female after five males. Her only niece. Am I correct?"

"At the time, but I have three younger sisters now."

He shrugged. "Nonetheless, the will was never updated. You are well-set, my dear."

Cassandra's jaw dropped in disbelief, and then her world start tilting. Her vision narrowed. Her throat constricted. "Browley knew?" she rasped.

Sir Edmund cringed. "I am afraid I let the news slip during a card game, before your aunt's passing."

"As soon as we heard he was courting you, we kept a close eye on you," Philip said, taking her hand.

She stared at their entwined gloves, black and white. A fine rain began to fall, splotching the leather. Coldness settled on her shoulders and spread to her fingers.

Philip lifted the fur-trimmed hood on her pelisse and covered her head.

"We saw you taking a turn with him at the Townsend's fête," Sir Edmund said, unmindful of the rain dancing off his hat brim. "You looked so happy. I thought we might have overreacted, so I told Philip to bow out and invited him to go to Brighton with me."

"I warned Browley off," Philip said with a biting edge to his voice. "He laughed in my face. He said I was resentful because you loved him and not me, and I knew he was right, so I left with Edmund."

The hurt in his eyes soothed her taut nerves a little. He blinked his wet lashes and she wasn't sure if it was because of the rain or something less manly.

"I should never have left."

"Something changed your mind about him," she said with certainty.

"We received word that your aunt passed away."

"He is a reckless gambler," Sir Edmund stated at the same time.

She heard Philip's back teeth gnash together and he flashed a warning look at Sir Edmund who shrugged unapologetically.

"Greed makes men foolish," Philip said. "Next thing we know, you were eloping. An honorable man would have no need to do so."

The Gretna Green sign pulled her attention. Philip was no better than George. He'd

just said so himself. He wanted her money too, not her, and she had fallen into his trap. She'd given him her most prized possession, not her body, not the promise of a dowry she didn't even know she had, but her heart. That weak organ suddenly seemed to cleave in two. She pulled her hand free from Philip's grasp.

"Take me home." She could barely speak the words.

The warmth of his arm at her back dropped away. "I had no intention of taking advantage – "

"But you did."

"I did not want your money. I only wanted..."

She waited, but he didn't finish. "What?" Her tone hardened. "What did you want, Philip? Revenge on George? The ability to boast about bedding me too?" His grim expression contained a hint of guilt. Her voice rose above the intensifying rain. "Certainly not marriage, that was obvious."

"You left me no choice!"

Hot anger surged through her blood. "Take. Me. Home!"

The horse pranced beneath them. "Damnation, Cassie." He tightened his hold on the reins to still his nervous mount. "I was willing... I never thought you would agree to marry me. In the past, whenever I wandered too close emotionally, you pushed me away." His gaze searched her face. "Like now," he added with a bite in his tone.

"I am not..." She turned her face away to gather her composure. Tears brimmed in her eyes. He'd never really wanted her. It was a game to him, to see how far he could go with his seductive teasing, to see if she'd break and throw herself into his arms. Well, she finally did and now he felt trapped just as much as she did. "I release you," she said without looking at him.

"What?"

She turned toward him, lifted her chin and glared at him. "I release you from your insincere betrothal. You do not want me. You cannot have my money. All you have is

the ability to ruin me. Well, give it a go, sir. I will survive without you."

"For the love of god!" He grabbed her sleeves in a steely hold. "You are the most obtuse woman I have ever met!"

She mentally threw daggers at him. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth.

"Don't want you?" he shouted at her. "I love you! I have always loved you. All these years, I was willing to take whatever crumbs you tossed my way. When I found you here, soiled and talking of *nunneries*, I could not bear it. Of all your dismal options, a marriage of convenience between us apparently never crossed your mind." He tipped his wide-brimmed country hat to the side and stared up at the sky. His lips thinned. The chords in his neck flexed.

What could she say? A marriage of convenience? No. Not with Philip, not with any man. She required a marriage with love or no marriage at all.

Rainwater streamed onto his shoulder but he didn't seem to notice. His cheerless gaze cut back to her face. "I would have been happy if you considered being my mistress. I thought that would prove I was not interested in your newfound wealth. But that was not what I really wanted. Yes, I offered for you without thinking. I spoke from the heart." His grip on her arms eased and he took a deep breath. "I could not believe you accepted. Did not trust my hearing. It was too good to be true, and you proved it when you told me you wanted to marry me in case you were breeding." He let his arms drop away. "How do you think that made me feel, Cassie?" His whole body sagged in the saddle. "I only wanted you to love me," he whispered, as though speaking to himself.

His heartfelt speech left her flabbergasted. She was still absorbing everything he said when the skies opened up and rain thundered down, drenching them in seconds. Without a word, the two men kicked their horses into a fast trot toward town.

* * * * *

Water pooled around her soaked shoes as Cassandra stood shivering in the inn

entrance hall. Clutching her pelisse close for warmth did no good. The dampness seeped through the wool lining into her dress.

"A room with a hearth," Philip demanded of the innkeeper, slapping a pile of coins on the hall table. His lips quivered with cold too.

A few moments later, the three of them were led to the second floor where the servant quickly lit a fire in the grate. They huddled around the meager flames like street urchins.

"That wet cloak is worthless," Philip said, peeling it from her shoulders and hanging it on a hook mortared into the stone fireplace surround.

Cassandra clasped her arms over her chest, not only for warmth but for modesty since her damp dress clung to her skin. From beneath her lashes, she saw Sir Edmund take a long look and then glance away. Philip pulled the coverlet off the bed and wrapped it around her.

"Thank you," she mumbled.

He removed his jacket and hung it over her water-logged pelisse. Two hats sat on the hearth, steam drifting up from the wet wool, the damp smell mixing with the sweet scent of the burning wood. An awkward silence fell among them as they stood gazing into the flames, their bare hands extended for warmth.

Sir Edmund shivered in his soggy clothes. He looked from his friend to Cassie and back again. "Damn," he grumbled, snatching his hat off the brick hearth. "I will dry off by the tavern fire," he said as he strode toward the door. "I shall see you back in London after I have collared that scum, Browley."

Out of politeness and genuine concern for his health, Cassandra turned to call him back, even though she would have preferred the privacy with Philip. Sir Edmund was already gone. A wave of uncertainty tangled her tongue when she gazed at Philip. He looked back, trying to hide his emotions behind a stiff expression while he scrutinized her face. She could see hope in his eyes, carefully shadowed by gravity, mock indifference and resolve.

Could she trust his declaration of love? Was it a ruse to gain her new wealth? Once she married him, everything she owned would belong to him.

Becoming his mistress would not be a bad thing. She could maintain a degree of freedom and enjoy his company, but it would eliminate her chances for any kind of marriage, with him or anyone else.

The safest choice – the least risk to her wounded heart – would be to walk away.

A sharp pain jabbed at her heart.

No, love wouldn't let her give him up. He'd never given up on her.

She inched a little closer to him. Her fingers reached out and brushed his, skin to skin. The light touch was surprisingly enticing.

He clasped her hand and gave it a little squeeze. A sad smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "I am sorry about your aunt. I am sorry I did not tell you sooner." He inhaled deeply. "Your father is postponing the funeral until you return. He said he can only handle one tragedy at a time. There is nothing he can do for his sister now. You are his main concern."

"You should have sent word as soon as you found me."

His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "I did. Four days ago."

"Four days ago?" she asked incredulously.

"That is when we first sighted you and Browley. Unfortunately, he saw us too and gave us the slip."

A chill shook her shoulders. "The night of the fire at the inn stable. George had been tense all evening." She gazed into the hearth's flames, remembering. "He took a walk alone after dinner. I panicked when the fire bell rang and he wasn't with me." A different kind of panic hit her now. The brevity of the mistake she almost made by marrying George made her knees quake. She gripped Philip's hand tighter. "Rather than stay and help douse the flames, he dragged me away to 'safety'. A tradesman gave us a lift in his wagon to another inn off the main road."

"Edmund lost his favorite steed in that fire."

"Oh God." No wonder he wanted to find George. A man prized his horse above all else.

"After the fire, there were no mounts for hire for miles around. Edmund told me to go on without him, but I could not abandon him. I felt certain we would find you again." Holding her hand tight, Philip linked her arm through his. "I knew I must." He drew her closer to his side. "The entire county was looking for George by then. It was only a matter of time before someone nabbed the coward. I sent a message to your father to that effect." Philip stared into the flames, his jaw set. "He knows I will fight to the death to keep you safe."

God's teeth, she loved him. Not like the giddy, secretive affection she'd felt around George. Lord, she hadn't known George at all. He'd been a horrible fraud, a monster indeed, most inconstant in love, whereas Philip had been the epitome of constancy.

The depth of her affection for Philip expanded threefold.

I love you too. Saying it out loud was still too scary for her. What if it was too late?

"You said..." She cleared her scratchy throat. "An honorable man would not need to elope."

He regarded her steadily. "I did."

"I think of you as an honorable man, Philip."

"I would like to believe so too," he said solemnly.

"Even if you, and the woman you love, celebrated the nuptials early..." She stopped to study him closely. He didn't flinch. That was a good omen. "There would be time to read the banns before her condition showed."

"Plenty of time." The flicker of hope in his eyes grew brighter.

"Early births are not uncommon."

"Precisely. Elopements are for the underaged and cowards."

"Perhaps then," she said, slipping her other hand into his warm palm, "you would

like to speak with my father?"

The flow of emotions through Philip's expression amazed her. Relief. Joy. A little disbelief? A grateful smile instantly changed into a teasing grin.

"To ease his mind that I am not interested in marrying you for your money or holding you for ransom?"

"Are you?"

He snorted. "The only thing held hostage is my heart."

She felt like crying. "I love you, Philip."

He breathed a shaky sigh and pulled her into a gentle embrace. "I love you too, Cassie. Ever so much." He kissed her eyelids, which soothed her eyes burning with unshed tears. He kissed her cheek. His fingers splayed into her damp hair and he kissed her mouth with tenderness and love. So much love.

It all happened slowly, losing her grip on the coverlet, her dress slinking to the floor, her shift whispering over her head, his big warm palms caressing her cool breasts. She barely noticed any of it while he gently nibbled on her lips and made love to her mouth.

She felt more than heard his soft exclamation when her cool hands tunneled beneath his shirt and explored the hard contours of his chest and belly. Her fingertips skimmed over the puckered nubs rising from the soft crinkly curls of hair on his chest and she understood the reason his fingers tightened in her hair. She had the same reaction when he rolled her pink peaks between his finger and thumb.

She wanted him in the bed. On top of her. Completely naked.

Her hands fumbled at the buttons on his breeches.

Without breaking his drugging kisses, he helped her, stripping quickly and efficiently as only a man can do. Clothes flew everywhere. His neckcloth landed on the hearth and caught fire. Engaged in removing his boot while standing on one foot, Philip simply kicked the flaming cloth into the burning coals.

And then he was unclothed. Standing before her like an Olympic god, his muscles rippling in the firelight, his thick erection rising from the dark nest of curls at his groin.

All she could do was smile.

He laughed at her, scooped her up behind the knees and walked over to the bed.

The sheets were cool where the blaze had warmed her backside.

Philip climbed up onto the mattress and straddled her on all fours. After a long, sensuous kiss on the lips, he dragged his tongue down the column of her neck. Goose bumps popped up all over her body. Her nipples tightened, rising for attention. While he caressed her breasts with his hands, his mouth laid siege on the pale globes with long strokes of his tongue punctuated by decadent draws on her flesh with his lips.

As he dragged his wet mouth down her body, her skin flushed with heat. Her belly quivered beneath his kisses. She spread her legs, inviting him in.

"You smell like rain," he said softly as he kissed around the hair clustered on her mons. He pushed her knees into the air and kissed the inside of her thigh. "And the damp earth in spring right before planting."

She knew exactly what he intended to plant in her wet, prepared soil.

She was wrong.

He spread her nether lips with his fingers and dipped his head between her legs. "What? No!" Mortified, she bent at the waist and reached for his hair. The shock of his tongue lapping at her open center thrust her backward as if he'd physically shoved her down. It felt too good to comprehend.

Her fists curled into the bedding as he licked and sucked and blew hot breath inside her. She made ridiculous mewling sounds she couldn't stop. Though he tried to lick her dry, her cream flowed heavily. When he probed her with two fingers, her hips jerked off the bed. She thought it couldn't get any better and then he closed his lips over that mysterious bud down there and sucked on it.

She came in a rush. Her body bucked. The orgasm rippled on and on. She moaned

and writhed beneath him and never wanted it to end.

She was dazed and breathing hard when he rose above her again, wiping the wetness on his mouth and chin away on his shoulder. Words escaped her, but she stared at him with awe and excitement and more desire than she thought she possessed.

A knowing, wicked little grin lit his face. He gave her a quick kiss and then guided his cock into her soaked cunny.

Her eyes fluttered shut at the intense pleasure of his hard shaft filling her. When he didn't move, she opened her eyes and regarded him, waiting, his willing slave.

"There is no turning back now," he said, even though it sounded as if he were giving her one last chance to change her mind.

Her inner muscles, seeming to have a mind of their own, gripped his cock, holding him tight inside her. She lifted her weak arms and cradled his face. "I have been a fool all these years." She raised her hips to take him deeper. A muscle in his neck jumped. "Blind to the best thing in my life." She drew back slowly, keeping a firm grip on his pulsing shaft, and quickly took him inside her again. "Make love to me, Philip. There will be no regrets."

He let out a whoosh of air. The pink tinge in his neck faded. And he loved her, pushing her knees toward her chest and stroked in and out of her body with increasing speed. The flame inside her burned hotter with each thrust.

A grunt slipped through his parted lips. Suddenly he dropped down to kiss her, nearly crushing her with his weight. His body was hot and sweaty, sliding over her skin in a teasing lure. The hair on his chest tickled her breasts. Her inner thigh muscles burned with the pressure of his driving pelvis spreading her wide, and yet it was a good burn. So good, she wrapped both legs around his waist and grunted with pleasure with every deep thrust into her core.

It wouldn't be long before her body spasmed in climax and she imagined he couldn't last much longer either, but his stamina surprised her. He plunged into her wet center over and over, driving her lust higher, coiling her body tighter.

The ropes beneath the mattress squeaked. The bed frame shimmied.

He shifted so he could slide his hand between them and pluck at her throbbing nipple.

"Oh God!" she cried, her body bowing, on the brink of something big.

Philip drove harder, faster, panting loudly as he claimed her body with his. His hold on her dusky peak clamped down hard and she nearly screamed at the pleasurepain.

Deep inside, a sharp spring broke free and glittering magic sprang forth, spinning through her like a cyclone. She clung to him as a cry of joy squeaked up her throat.

Philip stilled above her, his big cock pushed as deep as it could go, and then he grunted as his body jerked and he filled her with warm love.

Body and mind had both crashed by the time Philip dropped his head and pushed inside her one last time. Every muscle ached. Her nipples tingled, especially the one he'd grabbed so hard. She'd never felt so good.

A long groan rumbled from Philip's chest as he collapsed beside her. The weight of his arm draped over her ribs felt like two stone. His long, thick cock rested on her hip, still rigid and coated with her cream. His heavy leg crushed her leg into the mattress.

She let out a loud sigh of pleasure and clasped his hand.

"Indeed," he said, his hot breath coming fast.

Going back to her modest existence, waiting the appropriate time for a proper wedding, unable to snuggle with Philip like this would be torture. She didn't want to sneak around as she did with George; she wanted to shout her love to the world. But she was a realist. Society morals were strict, even for an estate manager's daughter.

"As much as I dislike it, we must return home as soon as possible. My aunt's funeral..."

"I know," he said, drawing her hand to his mouth and kissing her knuckles.

"We will send word to Father of our imminent return." She paused, blowing out a breath to steady her wildly beating heart. "It is a long journey," she said, mentally counting the number of nights they would have to put up at an inn, the number of nights she could lie in Philip's arms. "It may take us a week. Longer if the weather is uncooperative. We don't want to rush and risk illness or injury."

Philip chuckled. "Of course not. We shall take as long as you need, love."

"The thought of setting my feet on the cold floorboards makes me shudder." She snuggled into his heat. The hair on his chest tickled her nose. "I would much rather stay in this warm bed for the next week."

He laughed louder and squeezed her tight. "The weather is much too miserable to set out on this day."

She lifted her face to look into his eyes. The happiness in his expression warmed her more than the crackling fire in the hearth or the exertion of making love with him. She kissed his crooked nose. "Yes and it will be dark soon and colder as the night wears on."

His grin grew. "I think I know of a way to keep you warm."

"Indeed? I feel a chill already," she said with a teasing smile.

"Insatiable wench!" He rolled on top of her and kissed her madly.

About the Author

There used to be a time when Elayne would start reading a book in the afternoon and stay up until the wee hours to finish it. Now those hours are spent researching, writing, re-writing and occasionally making dinner. Multi-published, Elayne enjoys writing in several genres where the characters' passions hurl them together and love binds them throughout time.

Currently she lives in the rural south with her wonderful, industrious husband, two teenagers and a lovable golden retriever. In her spare time, she volunteers at the local historical society.

Elayne welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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