



Captured

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Anna J. Evans

Dedication

To my readers. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter One

Lillian held her breath as she turned the key, willing the door not to creak on its hinges and alert the household staff still working the lower levels of the four-story brownstone. Her father and older brother were attending the morning service near Harvard and would be gone for hours if they went to lunch after church. She finally had time to take the first steps toward her utter ruination, and she would be damned if something as ridiculous as a squeaky door would stand in her way.

But all was quiet as she stepped down into the room that had once belonged to her younger sister Sarah. It still made her heart ache a bit to see the tiny bed in its place by the wall, the toys in their positions, covered in dust. Over a decade had passed since they put four-year-old Sarah and, soon after, her beloved mother in the ground during the winter of 1886, but Lillian still felt the sorrow living in the room. The emotion was not for the dead; Lillian had come to peace with their passing long ago. Her sadness was for her father, a man who had never recovered from the loss of his youngest child and the woman he loved more than anything else in the world.

“And now you would wound him again, perhaps as mortally as he was wounded the first time,” Lillian whispered to herself as she closed and locked the door behind her, smothering a cough as the dust invaded her nostrils.

Her gaze traveled to the camera, already mounted on its tripod in the corner, and she willed herself to be overwhelmed with guilt, to stop this scandalous plan before she could take it a single step further. She waited, breathed deeply and watched the motes float through the bright morning sun, but nothing stirred in her heart or mind. There was no guilt, no shame, only that same breathless anticipation that had tormented her the entire week, making her unable to finish her meals, or stitch a single straight line on her embroidery.

“You are a wicked girl,” she whispered into the quiet air, a smile on her face as the sun brightened even more, as if the very universe approved of her contrary nature.

No, you are not a girl, but a wicked woman. A woman long past due for a taste of the abandon you crave.

The idea made Lillian giddy, and she slipped out of her house shoes without a second thought. The journey of a thousand miles began with one step, after all, and it would be better if the sound of her wooden heels weren’t heard tromping about. She was supposed to be taken to her bed with a stomach illness, and had asked her father to give her maid the message that she wouldn’t want breakfast or dressing help this morning. Margaret was notoriously overly solicitous, however, and Lillian knew she would be upstairs in a flash if she heard the slightest movement. She wouldn’t want Lillian to suffer a round of the heaves alone. The woman had been a mother to her since her own mother had passed when she was thirteen and took her position as such very seriously.

And what will Margaret think when the scandal hits? Will she despair that she taught you so very little? That she failed to bring you up to take your rightful place in Society?

Lillian pushed the thoughts away as she double checked the distance between the dark blue sheet she had laid on the ground and the camera. Carefully, she made a few small adjustments to the focus. She couldn’t think of Margaret or her father or her brother or she would never complete this plan. She must think only of her freedom, of the right to pursue a life beyond the advantageous marriage her father insisted she make within the year. She was already nearly twenty-three, practically an old maid, and he would wait no longer for her to make a match of her own choosing. Time was running out.

He said he was worried what would become of her if he were to take ill and die and she be left alone in the world, but Lillian knew the truth. Her dear father was far more concerned what would happen to himself and her brother, Curtis, not to mention the family banking business, if Lillian were allowed to remain a single woman. The longer she was unmarried, the more time she had to possibly make another “mistake”. Her father had moved heaven and earth to tame the winds of scandal the first two times, but they all

knew that such a miracle could never be wrought a third. In any event, he cared far too greatly for their place in Bostonian society to risk such a repeat offense.

The first time she'd landed herself in trouble, she'd been lucky enough to escape her father's rage. Fair or not, the young man involved had borne the brunt of it. Still, she'd thought her life couldn't become any more unbearable after that night. Losing the pleasure of *his* company, the comfort of the dreams they'd spun together, had been devastating, made her feel as if she'd lost her only friend in the world.

She'd been allowed more freedom than she realized, however, for her next indiscretion revealed how very narrow her world could become if her father so willed it.

She'd been watched like a wayward infant since the day two years past when her father discovered her on the beach near their estate in Martha's Vineyard, wearing nothing but her undergarments while swimming in the ocean with two boys from another high-ranking Boston family. Nothing happened between Lillian and the boys beyond some innocent kisses, but from her father's outrage you would have thought she'd been engaged in the sex act with both of them at the instant he found her.

Engaged in the sex act. Good Lord, even thinking the words made things low in her body twist and a desperate ache take up between her legs. How she wanted something to fill her there, something hard and hot and masculine, something other than her own small, soft fingers.

She'd learned to give herself pleasure when she was barely fifteen with the aid of some naughty books she'd spirited away from the locked drawer in her father's desk. The pictures of half-naked women, the stories of innocents being ravished, had made her long to be ravished herself, and led to nearly eight years of increasingly bold experimentation with her own body.

But she was tired of making herself splinter apart, tired of muffling her moans into her pillow. She wanted a man to take her, a man who set her aflame the way those books did, the way her fantasies did. The way Arnold Halewater, the fifty-something man her father had chosen as her betrothed, never would. The idea of losing her practically ancient maidenhead to Arnold was enough to turn her stomach, and provided excellent

motivation for her theatrics with her father that very morning as she feigned a vile intestinal ailment.

She would not let her long awaited first encounter be with such a fat, pasty-looking, self-important old poop.

“No, I most certainly will not.” She turned to look at herself in the small mirror on the wall as she shrugged off her thick cotton robe, letting it fall to the floor at her feet.

The sight of her own nude body took her breath away and immediately sent blood rushing to her cunny where she knew the petals there would start to plump, to grow slick and ready for physical love. Who knew the sight of her own form would be so incredibly arousing? She’d never had the chance to simply look at herself, her bare skin totally exposed, for more than a few stolen glances. She had been aided in dressing and undressing since she was a child, encouraged to struggle in and out of her wrappings as quickly as possible to avoid taking a chill even in the midst of the warmest summer days.

But now...now she could take her time...and maybe even imagine what a man, one man in particular, might think as he took her in.

Her hand trembling slightly, despite the warmth of the unusually fair spring morning, Lillian stroked the column of her throat, feeling the erotic pulse of her blood beneath the thin skin. She was pale still, as fashion demanded, but she knew her pallor would not last long once it was warm enough to take her bicycle out in the park for her regular morning ride. Her dark, nearly black hair spilled down around her shoulders, falling forward to cover her breasts. As she moved her hand slowly down her body, Lillian tossed the hair back, exposing her full, heavy mounds and dark rose nipples to the hungry eyes of her own reflection.

Her nipples were already puckered into tight buds that tingled and stung, aching for attention. Lillian let her fingers glide lightly over the tight tips. Air rushed from her parted lips as the cool skin of her hands met the hot, needy flesh of her breasts. It felt so sinfully beautiful to roll her nipples between her fingers and thumb, to feel the tightness in her belly burn into a fierce knot of pure heat, pure desire. She gradually increased her pressure, her breath came faster, and the reflection in the mirror threw back her head.

When she brought her face back up, her cheeks were pink, her lips parted and her eyes glassy, as if she'd had one too many after-dinner sherries in the parlor, lingering over a game of chess with Curtis. She looked wanton, abandoned and more blatantly sensual than any of the posed pictures in the erotic novellas she'd managed to hoard under her mattress during the past several years.

Lillian suddenly knew that this was the woman she had to capture, this was the image that would drive the man of her dreams straight into her bed and between her thighs. A quick comparison of the mirror and the sheet revealed the light in the room to be fairly even. The metering would still hold true. She had a gift for guessing the exposure she would need for any given photograph, could almost do so without the special meter she had purchased at the photographer's convention in New York last fall. A glance from the camera to the sheet and camera to the mirror revealed them also to be of nearly the same distance. It was close enough for the focus to be sharp if she were simply to turn the tripod in the direction she now faced.

She'd spent hours devising a way to activate the shutter on her camera without standing behind the lens, creating a trip switch with an old bicycle pump and a length of rubber tubing and cleverly hiding the device under a pillow on the sheet. But now, she threw that preparation to the wind. A good photographer had to seize the moment, work with the subject as it chose to behave in its natural setting, even if that subject was oneself.

In seconds, Lillian had the camera positioned next to her, part of the tripod visible in the mirror, but the main focus on her own nude form. Unfortunately, her blissful, sensual expression had disappeared in the few moments she devoted to being the artist and not the subject, but she knew she could recapture the feeling easily enough. She just had to breathe, to relax, to concentrate on the lustful feelings that were always so close to the surface, and had been for more years than she could count.

She moved her hands back to her breasts, cupping their heaviness, massaging the erotically charged skin as she imagined *he* would someday very soon. With her eyes closed, she could almost convince herself that her small hands were large, lightly

calloused ones, and that the fingers she brushed across her nipples were dry and made rough from hours spent soaking prints in the chemical baths needed to develop photos. That roughness made them scratch delightfully against her sensitive skin, made her moan and her quim throb with an even more insistent need.

She could almost hear him moan in response, knew that he was losing control as he pinched her nipples almost painfully. He wanted her, this instant, but they'd both been waiting for this moment for too long to rush. No, he would take her slowly, wait until she wept with need for him, until the puss between her thighs wept as well, before he pulled down his trousers and revealed his long, hard—

Lillian reached over with one hand and hit the button to take the picture, eyes still closed. Quickly she advanced the film, opening her eyes only a split second before depressing the switch again. The look of surprise mingled with lust on her face excited her. The idea of the photograph she had just created excited her, and the idea that *he* would be the first person, probably the only person, to ever see that photograph excited her even more.

Unable to keep herself from it any longer, she dropped her fingers down between her legs, parting the soft black curls that shielded her sex and finding the hard nub that only revealed itself when she was so aroused. It was now jutting proudly from her nether lips, as if it strained toward her eager fingers, aching for her to touch it, rub it, let her fingertips fly back and forth across it until the walls melted around her.

But she did not satisfy the needy little piece of her body, merely teased it for a moment, imagining again that it was his thick fingers that taunted her before slipping lower. He wanted to see if she was as excited as her eyes, her breath, her tightened nipples told him she was. He groaned again as he felt the liquid evidence of her need even before he reached her cunny. She was so aroused that her slickness trailed down her thighs, pooled between her legs like a warm pot of honey heated for afternoon tea.

"I've never seen a virgin so ready," he muttered against her lips, his large hand cradling one cheek of her buttocks, pulling her closer to the fingers that now parted her

folds. As one digit slid easily, swiftly inside, she cried out, pressing her breasts into the warmth of his chest.

The shutter clicked again, a soft whirring sound that beat against her skin, taking her to an even higher pinnacle of lust.

“I may have never had a man, but I know the ways of pleasure. So be sure that you please me, sir, or I shall have to look elsewhere for another lover,” she teased against the spicy skin of his neck, letting her tongue trace the line of his throat, taste the salty musk of the man who had obsessed her imagination for longer than he could possibly know.

“Is that so?” He laughed and nibbled her ear, thrusting another finger into her even as he let a third knuckle rub against her nub, quickly bringing her close to release.

The shutter snapped closed, capturing just how close she was, just how much she ached for him, for the pleasure he would give her.

“It is so, do not doubt me. I am a lady of my word.”

“I believe you, Lillian, but there is no need for your threats. You’re about to find your pleasure on my hand. Right now.” His voice was thick with need, as well as a smug, masculine authority that usually made her hackles rise. But now, all she could do was arch on her tiptoes and deepen their kisses, twist her fingers in his hair and hang on for dear life as the rhythm of his fingers grew faster and faster.

Her quim tightened in a fierce rush of pleasure, and fresh wetness flowed over her fingers. Her lips flew open in a cry of surrender and her knees nearly buckled, but Lillian managed to reach out and push the button on the camera. In fact, it was almost as if the effort it took to take her pleasure and observe it, document it at the same time, only made the release that much more exquisite.

“That was...I can’t even explain how perfect.” She clung to him, tears at the edge of her eyes, her breath still coming in swift pants against his neck.

“I am not done with you yet, my sweet. Don’t give me such compliments until we have accomplished what we set out to do here this night.” He was still incredibly tense, the hard length of his arousal against her hip reminding her that only one of them had achieved the bliss of release.

“What would you have me do? How would you spill your seed? In my hand? In my mouth? Or in my body?” She asked the questions with deliberate casualness, breathless to see how shocked he would be by her knowledge of the various ways of pleasing a man. She was curious to see if he would call her on her bluff, and how she would manage to bring about his climax with skills that had been practiced only in her incredibly vivid imagination.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, however, it seemed she wasn’t to be given an answer at all. With a dark look in his eyes, he simply ripped open the close of his breeches and freed his manhood, roughly spreading her legs and pushing the hot length inside her.

Lillian’s imagination did its best to hold on to the image of him taking her, to struggle to believe that her fingers thrusting wickedly, forcefully between her legs were actually a thick shaft of male need. It was difficult at first, but slowly, as her body began to climb once again toward the pinnacle of pleasure, she could almost feel the hot skin that covered his hardness, hear him making sounds in the back of his throat as he thrust into her with wild abandon.

“Join me, Lillian, join me now,” she imagined him pleading against her neck. And she did, sweet heavens, she did.

“Alexander, yes!” She called out his name, that sweet, forbidden name, into his mouth as he began to lose himself in her body.

The camera took one last photo, one last still frame of a woman in the throes of abandon. And then it was silent, all its frames exposed, all of her secrets contained within one deceptively small, simple black box.

Chapter Two

*I know it isn't proper, but don't send me away.
You don't know how long I've waited to see if this—
this sweet fantasy, might someday develop between us.*

The roll of Kodak film had appeared in his mailbox that very morning, wrapped with the strange, simple note. Heaven help him, but Alexander Darian hadn't been able to resist doing exactly as it asked. He'd always been lured in all too easily by the strange and unusual, a fact that kept him on the fringes of polite society despite his noble lineage or how his wealth and reputation as a portrait photographer had grown throughout the years.

Curiosity aside, however, he should have sent the damn thing away. The Kodak Company was making a mint off their signature film. It was an inspired bit of business to encourage photo enthusiasts to mail their rolls back to the plant where they were created for developing, keeping the entire process in-house. Still, their profit had not affected his own.

Alexander's clients would not trust their photographs to any but his hands. Most purchased the rolls he manufactured in order to ensure he would process their film personally. Not that he actively sought such work anymore. The fees for portrait sittings supported him well. The creation of film and the process of developing was more of a passion for him, something he did for love, not money.

He'd never bothered with a Kodak roll, hadn't had the urge to touch film that he wasn't familiar with from the moment it had been born. He should have stuck to his principles, should have packaged up the roll to head off with the afternoon post. Then he wouldn't be standing in the half-light of the studio behind his office tonight, staring at the lustful eyes and sinfully beautiful body of the one woman who had nearly ruined him

completely. And he certainly wouldn't be wondering how he was going to resist a second plunge into the waters of scandal with his Lillian.

Even looking at the negatives, with their otherworldly inversions of light and color, he had suspected her identity. She was taller, more full of figure, but those long raven curls, and haunting blue eyes were still the same. But who would have dreamed that those sweet cupid lips would be so completely captivating as they parted in pleasure, or that she would dare to explore herself so boldly, let alone capture the act on film? Even knowing Lillian's nature as it had been eight years ago, he was shocked—and painfully aroused—by what he saw.

He'd never prided himself on being a gentleman, and didn't even attempt to resist the urge to print the photographs on his best paper.

But as her image swam into eight-inch by ten-inch focus in the first chemical bath, Alexander felt unexpectedly torn by the emotions that swelled in his heart. Memories of Lillian as a younger girl, dressed in her brother's clothes, tailing him and Curtis as they looked for trouble on some of the less seemly streets in Boston saddened him beyond belief. He and Curtis had been inseparable until the misunderstanding that ended their friendship forever. Though Lillian's role in that misunderstanding was far from innocent, he had never blamed the girl.

She had lost her mother and her baby sister less than a year before and entered her fourteenth year largely parentless. Her father hadn't seemed to notice, or care, that she disappeared after the family's formal dinner every night. Curtis had been nearing his nineteenth year, old enough to make his own mistakes, but not Lillian. She should have had someone looking out for her. On some level, Alexander had realized that and tried to be the protective big brother her own brother had no interest in becoming. Of course, compassion had transformed into more complex feelings, feelings that had lost him a friend, a sponsor, and nearly derailed a very promising young career.

"You should package these up straight away, send them back to her and forget the film was ever developed," Alexander said aloud, even as he transferred Lillian, with her

hand cupping her full, luscious breast, into the second bath and moved a new print into the first.

Should. Never a word he'd had much success with. He *should* have stuck to photographing wealthy members of Society and their children, not indulged his passion for documenting the plight of those on the fringes of that society. Pictures of prostitutes, circus performers, orphaned children and the ancestors of freed slaves might have earned him artistic praise on the Continent, but at home, the work kept him from being fully accepted into Boston's upper crust.

He *should* have abandoned that work and made an advantageous marriage, helping remove the stain from his family name. Hell, when he came right down to it, he *should* have let Lillian be arrested that night so long ago. Most importantly, he should *never* be considering making contact with that family after eight long years in which William Thomas had done everything in his power to hinder Alexander's success. Even with a noble bloodline, Alex had been hard-pressed those first few years.

Now, of course, half the wealthy young women of Boston would be thrilled to marry him, for the chance at being a duchess if nothing else. If his cousin Frederick, the Duke of Chester, were to fall over dead before he produced a son, the title would fall to Alexander. It was a fate he prayed to be delivered from every night, having about as much interest in English aristocracy as he did courting marriageable young twits.

"Sweet God." Alexander sucked in a breath as the second image revealed itself and all rational thought fled.

A sharp, brutal desire shot through his body, stiffening his member. He was suddenly consumed by the desire to possess a woman—this woman—with the savage thrusting of his body into hers. If he could have pulled Lillian from the photograph into his darkroom, he would have. He would have pressed her to the floor, claimed her parted lips with his and spread those milky white thighs, ramming his cock into the sweet place between.

Never in his entire, rather colorful, experience had he seen such a blatantly sensual, sexual image. He wouldn't have believed such pure, abandoned pleasure possible for a woman, especially a supposed innocent. But there she was, Lillian, with her hand

between her legs and her entire body caught in the throes of release. Though the picture was black and white, he could almost see the flush that stained her cheeks and breasts. He could practically hear her cry of passion, smell the hot scent of her arousal in the air, feel the aftershocks that swept through her straining flesh.

The photograph was stunning. No matter that most would consider it nothing more than a scandalous item of titillation, fit only for the erotic rags, Alexander knew the response he was having to the image was more than that of an aroused male. The artist within him was aroused as well, excited by her bravery, her abandon, the sheer nerve it took to expose herself so completely and capture the moment in all its dark beauty.

To capture it for him, and him alone.

The realization made him groan aloud into the empty room as he continued to shift the developing photographs from bath to bath. For him. She had done this for him. She was a member of the social elite, from a bank-owning family as old as Boston itself. She couldn't mean for these images to be shown to the world or sold to the highest bidder at some London print house specializing in pornographic literature. They had been made for one purpose only, to arouse him, to let him know that she wanted him to...

To what?

The note had said something about fulfilling a fantasy, developing a fantasy between them. It didn't take much of a leap of logic to determine it was a sexual fantasy, and Alexander's blood heated to a ridiculous level as he imagined Lillian in his home, his studio, his darkroom, in a million different positions, his cock entering her, filling her, taking her to the same brink of passion she'd experienced with her own hand and beyond. He would gladly fuck her until every fantasy in her obviously fertile and erotically charged mind was satisfied, but was that all she desired?

"Don't be a fool, Alex."

Lord, he was talking to himself more than usual tonight. A sure sign of madness, a madness born in his cock and aching balls that was obviously affecting his right mind. She couldn't want marriage, her father would never allow it even if she did, and Alexander was certainly of no mind to take a wife in the near future. So what did she

want, his Lillian? She was a shrewd thing, had been even at the tender age of fourteen. She was clever, willful and determined to have what she wanted from life.

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, that now included him. Was it simply because of those nights so long ago, nights when they'd become unlikely friends and been foolish enough to dream of more? Could it possibly be because of that one kiss and the naive promises they'd made on the eve of her fifteenth birthday? She'd still been not much more than a pretty child to him, no matter what evil her father had accused him of perpetrating upon his only living daughter, so surely that couldn't be...

Damn, the look in her eyes in some of the pictures practically pleaded for satisfaction. Was that all that she wanted? A man—him in particular—to satisfy her body? He'd never taken a virgin, assuming she still was one. Even if she weren't, they'd still be asking for trouble if they engaged in an affair. If they were discovered, if she were to, God forbid, become pregnant with his child, she would be ruined forever. He didn't yearn to enter the married state himself, but did he really want to ruin Lillian's chances of making a suitable match?

The night wore on with no clear answer becoming apparent.

What did become abundantly clear, however, were eight stunningly erotic photographs of a woman claiming her satisfaction and offering an invitation he simply could not refuse. It no longer mattered that a part of him whispered to use caution. The thought of seeing Lillian in the flesh was fast becoming an obsession.

He ached to join her in each image, for it to be his large hands that cupped her full breasts and teased her dark nipples into twin buds. He wanted it to be his fingers that delved into her cleft, spreading her juices up to her nub, gliding over the bundle of nerves there until she began to find her release. Then, and only then, would he spread her gently from behind and slide his cock inside her pulsing heat. He would thrust into her again and again until she met his eyes in the mirror, until they both watched their reflections straining toward pleasure and struggled to keep their eyes from squeezing closed as they came, together, in complete sexual harmony.

“Get it together, man.” He took a deep breath, and a shaky laugh erupted from his chest.

There was no doubt about it. He must have her, and soon. He was already tempted to unbutton his trousers and free his cock right there in the darkroom, to find release in his own hand as he imagined how Lillian would taste, smell, how her soft fingers would feel wrapped around his straining shaft.

As Alexander hung the last of the prints to dry and stood back from his work, only one question still plagued his mind—how to answer her? Not that he’d ever been a man to stand on propriety, but the rules of etiquette simply didn’t address how to behave when a would-be lover gifted you with a nude self-portrait. Should he gift her with something in return? For some reason, he didn’t think that a self-portrait of him and his now painfully swollen cock would be quite as sensual as what Lillian had presented to him.

“And what, pray, is so funny?” The voice of his apprentice, Kenneth, interrupted his laughter, making him spin toward the door to the darkroom.

“Haven’t I told you to knock?”

“I did, but you were laughing so damn loudly that I didn’t think you heard,” the younger man said, coming deeper into the room. “Not that I see anything funny in here. Dear God! Who is that woman? She looks like—”

“Get out of here, Kenneth. If you come into the darkroom again while I’m working, I’ll terminate your apprenticeship.” Alexander turned the gaping teenager around forcibly and urged him back toward the door, angrier than he could express that he’d had to share the images of Lillian, even for a second, with another set of male eyes.

“But sir, you said you wanted me to come in this evening, that the small prints of the Dammond children needed to be done by this coming—”

“I don’t care what I said. Take the rest of the week off. I won’t need you in until next Saturday at the earliest.”

“You’re taking a whole week off? But sir, what about the—”

“I didn’t say *I* was taking the week off, I said *you* were. Good-bye, Kenneth,” he said, shoving the boy out the door.

“But sir!”

“I said, good-bye.” Alexander closed the door in the boy’s sputtering face, realizing as he did so that he’d just told a lie. He *was* going to take the week off, an entire week in which he would devote himself completely to the seduction of Lillian Thomas.

Not that she seemed to need much seducing, but that didn’t matter. Seduction was part of the pleasure for both parties. She’d seduced him with her body, her bravery and, to some extent, her talent. He’d never dreamed that she would take his lessons in photography all those years ago to heart, but she obviously had. The pictures had been technically flawless as well as more than aesthetically pleasing.

Now he would seduce her with the same, and in the meantime indulge his own muse. He’d spent so much time photographing the outcasts of Society that he’d completely neglected to take a look at his own world. He’d taken portraits of the social elite, but what of the face a woman like Lillian would show only to a friend, a lover? Surely the private life of a woman of privilege would be a fascinating subject to document.

As he’d developed each picture, he’d noticed that the mirror in which Lillian had captured her reflection was child-sized, cutting her off at the knees. It had been a child’s bedroom—one long neglected if the dust in the air were anything to judge by—where she’d gone to take her illicit photographs. Why? Had the choice to juxtapose her very adult body with a child’s room been deliberate, or had that been the only place where she could go to escape discovery?

Alexander, if he’d wished to photograph himself in the nude, had an abundance of places where he could find both time and opportunity. He owned his own home, directed his household staff and could make sure he was afforded privacy there any time he wished. His office and studio were also his own and he was free to close them for private use.

What would it be like to be in Lillian’s place, however? What if he were an unmarried woman given only as much freedom as her father would allow? Surely Lillian had even less control over her life than a married woman of her age, since he doubted

William would trust her with the running of the household as some older men did their spinster daughters.

Spinster. What an odd way to describe this woman. How could such a beautiful, obviously sexual creature, have remained unmarried for so long? More importantly, why did he know for a fact that she was still free? Why had he so carefully kept up with Lillian Thomas' state of wedded or unwedded bliss? And why had it been so easy for him to recognize her image even in the negatives, before he began the printing process?

Could it be that his mind, maybe even his heart, had retained an interest in the girl that wasn't entirely casual, or brotherly?

I think you've established that the "brotherly" feelings have been thrown out with the bathwater. Whatever other feelings you may have don't matter. She was never a "prospect" for you, never will be, no matter how the pair of you occupy yourselves in the bedroom.

Ah, the voice of reason. A frustrating thing, but all too often correct in its dictates.

No matter, he wasn't in the marriage market. But thank God his Aunt Tessa wasn't as convinced of that as the rest of Boston. She would surely know where he could arrange an "accidental" meeting with the lady in question. Lillian still attended social functions, despite the fact that she was too old to be actively courted by the wife-hunting young men of greater Massachusetts. That, of course, would only make his life that much easier.

Soon he would have Lillian alone, in his arms, and be well on his way to satisfying all of her fantasies...and a few of his own.

Chapter Three

Her cousin Marjorie was talking...again. When wasn't the younger woman talking? For the fifth time, Lillian cursed herself for not arranging her beach blanket and chair in a different location. But how could she have known she would be affected so deeply? That—for once in her life—she would actually crave the torturous business of sitting in ladylike silence while the boys frolicked near the waves?

“Don't you think so, Lillian?”

“Hmmm?”

“I asked if you thought so, too?”

“Well...it sounds reasonable enough,” she mumbled, her lips oddly stiff as she struggled to make the words. It was as if her body was turning to stone, immobilized by the entirely foreign pleasure of feeling *his* eyes, *his* attention focused so completely upon her.

“Oh, cousin, you are positively comedic. Reasonable, indeed.” Then Marjorie was off again, speaking so quickly Lillian would have had a hard time understanding her even if she had been paying attention.

She knew she *should* be, should at least attempt to make polite conversation before she ended up saying something to alert Marjorie to her lack of engagement in her cousin's tales of newly married bliss. Lillian didn't want to hurt her feelings. She was a dear thing, though not much of a conversationalist. But then, what newly married nineteen-year-old was? At least Marjorie had a sense of humor, a quality that seemed to be amputated from many a female's personality the moment a ring slid upon her third finger.

God protect her from such a fate. Lillian had been thrilled to avoid marriage for the past several seasons, and would gladly remain contentedly unwed if her father would allow it.

He will allow it. Soon he will have no choice.

The thought was followed by another shiver of awareness that rippled down her spine and pooled in what the novel she'd read last night called her "passion pit". Passion pit, indeed. As if that particular pit had ever experienced much beyond passionate imaginings. But all of that was about to change. The promise of a passionate future was in every dark, smoldering glance that *he* darted in her direction.

Simply seeing him for the first time in years had been enough to take her breath away. Zander was more stunning than ever. His shoulders had widened and he'd put on weight since his nineteenth year, but he was still lean and taller than every man in attendance, filling out his blue suit in a way that made her eager to see what lay beneath. His dark brown hair was a bit longer than fashion demanded and he wore no hat—a fact that clearly scandalized most of the people in attendance—but she couldn't care less. He was gorgeous, sensual and all male...and soon to be all hers.

He wanted her, he really, truly did! The knowledge was dizzying, filling her with a feminine power that was completely foreign and fantastically delicious. She could hardly believe the first stage of her scheme had been such a rousing success, but there was no mistaking the hunger in Alexander's eyes. He wanted her, the way a man wanted a woman, despite the fact that his lips twitched with good humor the one time she dared meet his gaze. His mouth might laugh, but she sensed he was finding this situation anything but humorous. He craved her body in his bed, her intuition was not wrong on that account.

Now, she simply had to make sure that the rest of the business went as planned. She mustn't make the mistake of letting her conquest be too easy for him. Alexander had always been a man whose passions were aroused by a challenge. What could be more challenging, more erotically frustrating, than assuming you were to have free access to a woman's charms and then finding that to be the furthest thing from the truth?

It would torture him, she was sure of it, drive him to such a pinnacle of desire that he would all too willingly draw out their affair. Too bad she hadn't bargained on how

torturous it would be for herself. She wanted him now, this moment, and waiting was going to be a nasty bit of business, indeed.

“...absolutely starved, of course. But really, that isn’t a proper way for an unmarried girl to behave at a social function.”

“You’re completely correct,” Lillian said, mimicking the outrage in her cousin’s voice.

“I knew you would agree, but you wouldn’t believe...”

Another conversational faux pas avoided. With a sigh, Lillian shifted her legs beneath her skirt, grateful that the spring afternoon was still too cool for ladies to wear their bathing costumes. For once, she was glad that she had her full skirts to hide beneath, to conceal the restless shifting of her thighs as she sought to ease the pressure that pulsed and throbbed within her sex.

She wanted him, as badly as he wanted her, and probably more. For surely the stories were true. Zander had always been a passionate man and the tales of his relentless seduction of his upper crust lady clients hadn’t surprised her in the least. Surely he had bedded a woman not too long ago. *He* wasn’t the one with years and years of frustrated desire simmering beneath his skin, making his flesh burn with the need to be pressed against another’s.

“...with Mr. Darian. It’s simply ridiculous, absurd really.”

“What? I’m sorry, darling, the sea gulls’ blasted yapping made me miss that last bit,” Lillian said, the sound of *his* name finally capturing her interest in Marjorie’s prattling.

“You shouldn’t say blasted, Lil. It’s not very fitting, even for an old spinster such as yourself,” Marjorie said with a smile. Lillian had joined Marjorie in mocking her own spinsterhood many a time. But today, for some reason, the word stung. Ridiculous really, when she’d just been thinking how happy she was not to be married. It was not a state of being she coveted and even marriage to someone like Zander would likely be a misery in the end.

Marriage to Zander. Good God, she mustn’t even let her mind process the thought. Her father would never allow it, the man himself would have no interest in her as his

betrothed, and she herself would suffer in the end. A domineering man might be what she craved in the bedroom, but not in her life outside of it.

“Very well, I’ll endeavor not to offend your ears further, but you must tell me the news of Mr. Darian. He and Curtis were such good friends many years ago, he has remained an object of curiosity.” There, that was a good reason for her interest. She had to provide some excuse or Marjorie would grow suspicious. Lillian was never interested in her cousin’s usual gossip.

“There’s no news to tell. My dear Phillip wanted us to have our portrait made with him next month. May is such a lovely month at the Vineyard and our beach house has this fantastic little garden. Do you remember Lillian, the one with the arbor all covered in—”

“Yes, of course. A lovely garden. But you said Phillip ‘wanted’. Did Mr. Darian refuse his request?”

“No, not at all. Phillip had planned to ask Mr. Darian to come to the Vineyard for a week and take photographs of the entire Drake family during their annual retreat from the city, but I told him he simply couldn’t. I knew that Uncle William would be furious if even a former Thomas sought the services of that rascal.”

“He’s hardly a rascal,” Lillian said, disappointed that the news of Zander was really no news at all.

“Well, he must have done something horrid for your father to hate him so. What was it, Lillian? Did he and Curtis have a terrible fight? Did Mr. Darian steal from the family during that time your father sponsored his work? Word was he had no inheritance after his parents passed away, despite their noble roots. I’ve asked before, but no one in the family seems to know, but you must, you—”

“I know nothing. He was simply a member of our household one day and gone the next. Quite mysterious really,” Lillian lied through her even white teeth. “I can’t say I ever saw him quarrel with my brother, though they were a rakish pair. Of course, with Curtis now working with father at the bank, you would never believe that he was such a rascalion in his youth.”

“Indeed! He’s been practically stuffy with me the last two times he’s come to dinner. Phillip says it’s because he’s preparing to court Miss Elizabeth McBiddens, but I simply can’t believe that. Nothing against Miss McBiddens, but really—”

“Pardon me, Marjorie darling, but the clams are nearly ready and I wondered if you wanted me to fetch you a plate.” Phillip’s voice was as soft and even as always, but his sudden presence at the edge of their blanket still made Lillian jump. She was a bundle of nerves today, a state she didn’t see improving until she made contact with Zander. She had never expected to see him so soon, as his appearances at social functions were few and far between, but she couldn’t waste this opportunity to take her plan to the next level.

“Darling, you are the sweetest,” Marjorie said, reaching up to squeeze one of her husband’s hands in her own, her smile brighter than the sun reflecting off the white sand. Her love for her short, square husband was obvious in every word she spoke of him and in every interaction between them. For just a moment, Lillian wondered what it would be like to be in the midst of such a lifetime love affair. “Will you get a plate for my sweet cousin as well, I think she—”

“No, please don’t bother, Mr. Drake. I feel the need for a bit of exercise before eating. I’ll take a walk and then fetch my own plate.” Lillian smiled as she rose to her feet and fetched her parasol. Margaret had insisted she bring the thing, determined as always to keep Lillian pale as long as possible. “Wouldn’t want you to get a reputation for catering to too many women at once.”

“It is no trouble, Miss Thomas. I’ll gladly bring a plate for you as well,” Phillip said, not making eye contact with her as he spoke. The man was positively timid, a drastic foil to his gay, chatty wife.

“Yes, stay Lillian. I was so enjoying catching up with you. And you know I’ve been dying to talk to you about the Ladies’ Arts Society Luncheon. It’s my first time hosting an event and I would feel so much better if I had your ear before I started making the final arrangements,” Marjorie pleaded.

“Cousin, what do I know of that sort of thing? I’ve never—”

“But you’ve been part of the Arts Society for years. At least you know what’s been served in the past. I’ll simply die if I have Cook make quail and that was on the menu last season.”

“Very well.” Lillian sighed, insanely distracted as she watched Zander’s dark hair disappear over a dune. He was walking toward the lighthouse, but if he got too much of a head start she’d never catch up. “I’ll call on you next week and we can talk quail and pheasant until your mind is put thoroughly at ease. Good day, Phillip.”

Lillian broke away from the couple before Marjorie could speak another word. A bit rude of her, perhaps, but her cousin should be used to her odd ways by this point in their acquaintance. Lillian was the peculiar spinster of the family, a role she would have a long time to perfect if this afternoon went as planned. Now, if she could just manage to make contact with Alexander without making it seem she was chasing him along the seashore like some desperate wanton...



Alexander had been certain she would follow. Her gaze had been on him all afternoon. As soon as she thought he wasn’t looking, he’d felt it, the heat in her deep blue eyes enough to keep him in a permanently half-cocked state. He’d made sure she saw him leave and had walked slowly enough that even if she’d decided to crawl across the sand on all fours she should have reached him by now.

Crawling across the sand on all fours. Now there was an image that did nothing to ease the ache in his loins.

The last two days had been the longest of his life. Never had he been so desperate for a social event as this damned clambake. His aunt had assured him that Lillian and several of her relatives were on the guest list, and even gone out of her way to ascertain that the lady in question was planning to attend. His poor Aunt Tessa was so thrilled to see him interested in a woman, *any* woman, that she hadn’t batted an eyelash when the name Thomas entered the conversation. She knew of his rift with William, but Tessa was the sort who believed true love could conquer all.

True lust is more like it.

Lust—that was the only word for what he was feeling. He was consumed with lust for Lillian, and every minute without his hands on her body, his cock between her thighs was an eternity of torture. He could tell she felt the same, could see the wild desire in every soft curve of her body as she'd fidgeted upon her blanket.

So why hadn't she followed him? Why in God's name wasn't she already here, by his side, letting him take her hand in his and lead her behind the lighthouse where they could get more intimately acquainted?

"Damn and blast it," he grumbled through gritted teeth.

Could he have been wrong? Could he have somehow mistaken the look in her eyes?

"Even if you did, there was no mistaking the intent of the photographs." He spoke the words aloud and immediately felt foolish. This was why he needed to attend parties, regardless of his quest to corner Lillian in some private space where they could have their way with each other. He spent far too much time in his own company. The solitary life was starting to make him strange, unfit for the company of his peers.

As if you care for their company, or they for yours.

With a sigh of frustration, Alexander headed back toward where the picnic tables had been arranged for the first clambake of the season. Miss Cara Barrow's mother and father were hosting the party. They'd both been dear to his parents when they were still living and he owed it to them to be at least a bit sociable. Maybe he'd take a few pictures of the event and send them to them free of charge, as thanks for—

"Damn it all!" The frustrated female voice sounded from his left. He turned to see *her*, his Lillian, squatting between two dunes, behind a camera mounted on a tripod.

"Lillian, good day." Dear God, was that the best thing he could think to say? There she was, cheeks flushed, hands on her hips, looking at him like some naughty schoolboy, while thoughts of her nude body and small white hands between her legs filled his mind, and all he could think to say was "good day"?

"Zander Darian, it is not a good day. You've just completely ruined my last chance at what I'm sure would have been quite a photograph." She brushed her hair out of her

eyes with a casual wave of her hand and smiled at him as if there were nothing between them but an old fondness. “But no matter, I can attempt to capture the waves at a later date. How have you been? It’s been so long since we’ve had the chance to speak as friends.”

“I’m well, quite well. And yourself? You look...quite well.”

Damn you, man! The photographs! She just mentioned taking a photograph, an excellent lead into something clever and seductive about the ones she sent you. What’s wrong with your head?

“Oh, I am well. As well as can be expected in my unfortunate state.” She smiled and winked at him then. A small wink, but a wink nonetheless. What in God’s name was she meaning? Her state? The state of a lustful young woman yearning for sexual fulfillment? Or something else altogether?

Damn him, but her friendly, casual demeanor was not at all what he expected and he wasn’t sure what to think, to say.

“I’m to be officially betrothed soon, you know,” she added, sparing him further speculation.

“Is that so? And who is the lucky man?” And why did he suddenly want to wring his neck until death? Whoever he was, Alexander knew he would rather see him dead than allowed to bed Lillian—*his* Lillian—freely for the rest of his life.

“A friend of my father’s, but I fear he will not be so lucky.”

“Dearest Lillian, any man who won the pleasure of your company would be a lucky man indeed.”

There you go, man. You’ve got her blushing, it’s only a matter of time now. Keep your wits about you, show that you’ve earned that rakish reputation of yours.

“Oh please, Zander, let’s not play those types of games. There’s no need for double entendre between friends. Arnold Halewater will not be a lucky man because I simply refuse to be married off to him. Even if I did obey father’s wishes, I’m sure I would make the old dear absolutely miserable with my wild ways and far from biddable nature.”

“I haven’t heard of any scandal attached to your name, Lillian. Surely your ways can’t be so very wild.”

“Zander, I think we both know how wild I am.” She walked slowly closer, the look of a confident siren mingling with the humor on her face. “Did you like them?”

“Like what?” Alexander struggled to appear as detached as she seemed, though she stood close enough for him to feel the gentle puff of her breath against his lips, the heat of her body warming the front of his own.

“The photographs, of course. I knew you were the only one I could trust to develop them for me, the only one I could trust to help me win my freedom.” She brought her hand to his in a simple little caress that made his body ache. “Will you help me, Zander? Will you, once more, be my partner in crime?”

“You want me to develop pictures for you?” Surely that couldn’t be all?

“Yes, and photograph me in the nude, as well. If that’s agreeable to you. I don’t have much money to pay you, but I’d hoped—”

“You want me to photograph you in the nude? Surely you realize the scandal—”

“No one will ever know! I have a friend in Paris who will sell them for me and wire the money to my account. Once I’ve sold a few dozen, she assures me that I’ll have enough money to strike out on my own.” She took a deep breath and uncertainty crossed her features for the first time. “Please, Zander, I can’t bear to marry that man. I desperately need your help. You’re the only one I can trust.”

“Are you sure about that, Lillian?” There was anger in his tone as he wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her tightly to him. Whether it was anger at her for leading him to believe she wanted more than his professional services, or anger at himself for being so profoundly disappointed, he couldn’t say.

“Zander, what are you—”

“Surely you didn’t believe you could send such images to a man, any man, and not have him expect certain things?” Alexander let his hand smooth up the side of her waist, firm against the bones of her corset until he reached her breast. There he paused, just beneath, and watched her eyes grow wide and her breath come faster.

“Please, I...”

“If you mean to make your way in the world alone, Lillian, you have several lessons you need to learn.” He cupped her breast in his hand and captured her nipple through the thin fabric, squeezing until she cried out. Then he dropped his mouth to hers, swallowing the sound. Her lips were warm, despite the cool ocean breeze, and the softest thing he’d touched in ages.

But soon mere lips were not enough. Alexander swept his tongue across the seam of her mouth and gained his first intimate taste of Lillian Thomas. Behind the hint of lemonade and the salt of the sea air was a darker flavor, an exotic spice that was pure woman, pure passion. She melted into him, meeting his tongue with her own, running her hands down his back, and he knew in that instant that they would be magic together. The intensity of her response, the innocent fervor of her every touch betrayed that she wanted so much more than his photographic skill.

Lillian wanted him in her bed, buried inside of her sweet cunny. He would simply have to enlighten her to the fact.

“But I will make sure that you learn them.” He released her as suddenly as he had taken her into his arms, flicking a casual finger across her hardened nipple before turning and walking away. “Be at my studio tonight. Your lessons begin at nine o’clock sharp.”

He didn’t wait for a reply or turn to see the look on her face. She would be there. He’d bet his career on it. Hell, he *was* betting his career. If word got out that he’d seduced one of Boston’s innocent daughters and taken pictures of her in the nude, he would be ruined. An affair here or there with a married matron was one thing, the ruination of an unmarried miss quite another. His time as a portraitist to the wealthy would be over.

Too bad he didn’t have the sense to give a damn, and that his aching body would settle for no less than the complete sating of his lust upon Lillian Thomas. He would help her, but he would also have her, of that there was no doubt. Nothing came without a price, as Lillian would learn in lesson number one, beginning tonight.

Chapter Four

“Let the sheet slide off your other shoulder, expose the other breast now.” Alexander’s voice was muffled by the camera he stood behind, but Lillian had no trouble hearing his directive. She did, however, have a great deal of trouble resisting the urge to tell the bastard exactly what he could do with his overbearing attitude.

“Of course.” Her voice was remarkably calm, considering the mix of rage and maddening desire that thrummed through her body as she obeyed his command.

“Not so much. Try to *tease*, not simply bare yourself.” Alexander sighed, but snapped a picture all the same. “We’re looking to seduce the viewer, Lillian, not merely give him a refresher course on the female anatomy.”

She wanted to kill him. No, on second thought, she wanted to lay him naked on a hill of fire ants, let them sting his flesh for hours, and *then* kill him. Instead she forced a seductive smile.

“*He* might also be a *she*, Zander. We women do enjoy erotic photographs, as well.” Lillian shifted slightly on the settee and tried to think sensual thoughts rather than homicidal ones. She rearranged the sheet until only the barest hint of each nipple was showing and her long braid hung down over one shoulder, nearly covering the aureole of her left breast.

“Better.” He said the words begrudgingly and turned to rearrange several of the dozen electric lamps. Amazingly they hadn’t blown a fuse as yet, but it was only a matter of time. Zander had a specially made light as large as a street lamp running, as well as the smaller lamps. They were surely only minutes from an overload.

Then they would be sitting in darkness together, alone in the business district after all the other shopkeepers had run home. There would be no one to hear the man scream when she pounced upon him like a wild animal and—

And what?

She'd brought this on herself by pretending she wanted something other than her true desire. How could she fault Zander for giving her exactly what she'd asked for? Deception was most assuredly a sin that cut both ways.

"Focus Lillian. If you want to have a sufficient portfolio to send to Paris by the end of the month, you can't drift away each time I stop to rearrange the lights."

Or maybe she *could* fault him, the bastard. He'd kissed her on the beach, touched her intimately and given the clear impression that they would be doing more tonight than merely playing photographer and subject. Damn it, the man had even mentioned something about "lessons", bringing to mind all those deliciously naughty tales of schoolgirls turned over their tutor's knee.

She'd moved heaven and earth to sneak out of the house and down to his studio tonight, not to mention spent a good chunk of pocket money bribing the scullery maid. He would do more than take her picture tonight. Her plan to make the man wait had been out the window hours ago. She *would* lose her virginity tonight, and Zander would be the man to permanently rid her of the last of her innocence.

"I'm sorry, Zander," Lillian said, an idea sparking in her fertile imagination. "Perhaps I'm having trouble because I don't know what I *should* be thinking about."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I've never been with a man in that way. How would I know how to go about seducing him with my eyes, or anything else for that matter?" Lillian arranged her face in her most innocent expression, even as one hand idly fingered the edge of the sheet near her tightened nipple.

Feeling his eyes on her, knowing she was nude for the first time in front of a man—this man—had kept her in a state of dizzying arousal for hours. It was likely near midnight, and her muscles ached from posing for him, but her wicked lust only grew more vicious. She desperately needed relief, and was determined that he would be the one to give it to her.

"I think you're doing a fairly good job." A smile quirked at the edge of his lips, but his eyes were dark and humorless as he snapped another picture.

“I am? Are you speaking as a man, or as a photographer?” Lillian held his gaze, nearly losing the ability to draw breath as those brown eyes seemed to stare straight through her, past the boundaries of her skin to the secrets of her very soul.

“Very well, Lillian.” His voice was frighteningly soft as he fetched the lens cap for his camera and slipped it into place. “I was going to wait until I felt we’d taken at least a dozen appropriate photographs, but if you are so eager to advance to the payment portion of the evening, I’m willing to oblige.”

“Payment?” What in the world was he up to? Surely he didn’t mean to blackmail her for money? The Zander she had known would never do such a thing, and this older, harder version of that boy had no need for money from the look of his home and studio. Perhaps he’d merely forgotten that she couldn’t afford to pay him. “But I told you Zander, I don’t have—”

“Lesson number one. Nothing in the world is given freely, Lillian. This is something you must learn before you strike out alone. There are many out there who would lure you in with promises of friendship, only to pull out a marker later and demand all that you own. Never sign anything, never take a loan of money or service without consulting a lawyer or trusted advisor first.” As he walked toward her, he slowly slipped off his coat and then moved his fingers to the buttons on the vest beneath.

“We didn’t sign anything, Zander, and I’m not a complete fool when it comes to the workings of the world.” Lillian watched him toss his vest to the floor and continue working the buttons on his white dress shirt. Dear Lord, he was removing his clothes! This was what she had wanted, what she had prayed for—so why was she suddenly so terribly frightened?

“No, we did not, but the degree to which you’ve compromised yourself is as good as a promise written in blood. I could demand anything of you Lillian, and you would be bound to give it to me. I hold your reputation and the means for your liberation in my hands.” The shirt was unbuttoned now, giving her a breathtaking view of the hard, masculine flesh beneath. The ripples of his muscles made something within her ache to

trace them with her tongue, even as another part of her cried out that she must flee this place now and never return.

“You wouldn’t harm me. You’re...my friend.”

He squatted down in front of the settee, only inches from where she lay, sheet now clutched tightly around her, concealing as much of her body as possible. Lillian was shocked to find her throat tight. In all of her imaginings, she’d never thought she’d be near tears when it came time for Zander to touch her.

“I was your friend, you haven’t seen me for years and your father has done his best to ruin me.” His eyes were soft, but his words firm as he began to play with the end of the sheet near her feet.

“But he hasn’t succeeded, and that was none of my doing. You know I tried to defend you to my father, Zander. I tried to convince him that it was all my idea, and—”

“Shh.” He placed a gentle finger to her lips to silence her and then let that finger trace across the sensitive skin. “I know, Lil, and I wish you no harm. You were an innocent, still are. I’m only attempting to teach you the cynicism you’ll need if you really hope to make a successful life for yourself without a father or husband’s protection.”

If he only knew that it was cynicism that had brought her to him, and that all she wanted was for him to carry through on his threat to destroy her reputation. But she couldn’t tell him that or he’d never follow through with this affair, and she wanted him to follow through. Wanted it more than the air she breathed, no matter that deceiving Alexander left a foul taste in her mouth.

“Oh Zander, thank you,” she said, feigning great relief. “For a moment I—”

“Don’t thank me yet, sweet. I still intend to have my payment.” He smiled and leaned forward to press a quick kiss to her cheek, then stayed near to whisper in her ear. “Take off the sheet, and show me that treasure between your legs.”

“Wh-what?” She’d imagined a scenario like this at least a hundred times, but now that it was actually happening, Lillian found herself seized by complete panic.

“You heard what I said, Lillian. Don’t make me ask twice.” Then he bit her ear, a little nibble at her lobe that wrung a sound from her throat that wasn’t the slightest bit fearful.

Before she could lose the bravery inspired by the bolt of longing shooting from her ear straight between her legs, Lillian parted the sheet and let it fall behind her onto the cushion. Zander helped her ease the fabric down then settled his hands gently on the swells of her buttocks. Lillian’s cheeks flamed when he pressed a kiss to her neck then pulled back to look her in the eye.

“For the next half hour, you are mine to do with as I please.” His hands smoothed around each side of her body, down her trembling thighs, to hook softly behind her knees. The contact made her shiver, her heart race, and a rush of heat flow from her cunny. “Now show me what is mine.”

Lillian hesitated, staring into his eyes, lips parted, breathing so quickly that she felt lightheaded. Surely he couldn’t really mean for her to show him...that. Men never looked at *that*, did they? In all her reading, she’d only once come across a story of a man who liked to kiss women in that scandalous place. She’d assumed the character, and the author, had simply been perversions. No average man would want to—

“Now, Lillian.” He tugged at the backs of her knees, spreading her thighs wide. Lillian sucked in a breath and braced herself with her hands behind her hips, shaking all over as Zander sat back on his heels and dropped his gaze.

“Please, Zander, I—”

“You’re shaking.”

“I know, I—”

Zander lifted eyes filled with fire and something sweeter to hers. “I will never hurt you, never do anything that doesn’t bring you pleasure. Do you understand?” Lillian nodded and felt her shivers subside as he petted her thighs with slow, soft strokes of his rough hands. He held her gaze until he seemed assured of that understanding, then dropped his eyes back between her legs. “God, Lillian. You are beautiful.”

One hand smoothed up her thigh, and his thumb came perilously close to touching her where she so desperately ached—and feared—to be touched. Slick heat rushed from her quim and her hard little nub strained away from the petals of her sex. God, she felt she would die if he didn't touch her and die if he did. Shame and excitement, anger and yearning, flooded through her until she closed her eyes against the rush of emotion. She couldn't watch him watching her for another moment or she would run mad.

“Open your eyes, Lillian,” he ordered, his voice soft and his breath hot against her thigh. He had his face *that* close to her most intimate place, *inches* away. What if he was truly planning to taste her, to kiss her there? What if he found the taste of her arousal repulsive? What if she was so shamed by the contact that she—God forbid—started to weep like an infant? What if—

“Very well then, you may leave them closed if you wish, if you swear to obey the next order I give you without delay.”

“I swear it.” Lillian gave the vow without hesitation, anything to keep from opening her eyes, from having to come to terms with the sight of her wanton position and Zander's dark head between her legs.

He mumbled something against her skin that she couldn't quite catch, then set about kissing her. One soft kiss just at her knee, then another, farther up, then another, closer and closer until she was sure he would touch her sex. Her muscles tightened even as the lips of her cunny plumped, that wicked part of her all too ready to feel those talented lips, that firm tongue, on its heated flesh.

But at the last moment, he backed away, torturing her other thigh with kisses, little nibbles of his teeth, sweeps of his tongue, until she trembled. This time, however, fear had nothing to do with it.

“Please.” She breathed the word and let her legs spread even wider. Damn her reservations, she suddenly felt as if she would die if he *didn't* touch her there, if he refused to kiss and nibble and lick where her desperate body needed it the most.

“Please, what?” he asked, biting down hard enough on the thigh between his teeth to make her moan. Biting had never entered her fantasies, but she liked it, was beginning to crave the feeling of his teeth raking across her skin.

“Please kiss me.”

“With pleasure.” Seconds later she felt his warm breath on her lips. She moved forward, closing the distance between them with her eyes still closed, claiming his lips, opening for his tongue. She slanted her mouth, giving them both deeper access, and mated her tongue with his. He tasted of coffee and honey, a trace of pipe smoke, and something all Alexander. The taste of him was achingly familiar, as familiar as the feel of her own hands on her desperate skin, as familiar as the four walls of the room she had slept in since the day she was born.

“Not my lips, Zander. Kiss me...between my legs. Please, I want to feel your mouth on me,” she mumbled against his hot, wet lips. Lillian knew she was speaking boldly, but didn’t anticipate that her words would make Zander pull away from their kiss with a strangled sound. “What? What’s wrong?” Her eyes flew open to see Zander staring at her, shock and lust mingling on his features.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said, pressing another quick, heated kiss to her lips. “Everything is perfectly right.”

With a wicked grin he brought a hand between her legs and flicked a single finger up and across her dripping opening. Lillian gasped as if in pain, but it did not hurt. Dear Lord it didn’t hurt, but it burned, made her burn for more of his touch, his kisses, anything and everything that he would ever want to do to her.

“But remember, you still owe me obedience. You swore it, and I will expect you to obey the next order I give you, sweet Lil.” In that moment he sounded like the boy she had known. But then he brought his finger up to his mouth and licked her slickness away and the man came roaring back as he closed his eyes in obvious appreciation.

They came back together with desperation, she clawing his shirt from his shoulders as his hands roamed over her bare skin. His lips left hers to trail down her neck. She arched into his kiss and the hands that cupped her breasts. His thumbs brushed across her

nipples again and again, sending bolts of pure electricity pulsing down to her aching nub. Lillian felt set aflame, as if she would begin to glow, brighter than the lights surrounding them.

“Blast it, Zander, please. Oh God, please,” she begged as he kissed her shoulder then moved his lips to her breast. She cried out as he took her inside his mouth, sucking her deep inside that wet heat and bringing her to a previously unimagined pinnacle of lust.

Her sex wept freely down her legs, her hands fisted in his thick, silky hair, and her hips bucked shamelessly against the palm that he pressed to her mound. When he finally slid two fingers inside her, she moaned and arched her back, taking him deep inside her eager body. All thoughts of fear and shame had vanished, replaced by the overwhelming need to feel Zander’s bare skin against her own, his lips on hers as he pushed something thicker than fingers into her dripping cleft.

But it seemed Zander hadn’t forgotten her earlier request.

“Sweet Lil, you’re so wet, so damned wet.” He pulled his fingers from between her legs and swiftly replaced them with his mouth.

Lillian gasped as Zander’s tongue speared through her slick folds, tracing every inch of heated flesh until her channel ached to be filled. And then, he filled her. Damn, but he filled her, thrusting his tongue deep inside, in and out, in and out, until things low in her body tightened and Lillian knew she was only seconds away from shattering on his mouth. She squirmed wildly beneath him, her body seeking a little more, just a little—

“Zander!” She screamed his name as he suddenly moved his tongue to her nub, circling with gentle pressure while fingers once again took up the rhythm inside of her.

“Come for me, sweet. Come, Lillian.” He groaned the order against her sex, then opened his mouth and took her nub inside, pulling and suckling until she had no choice but to obey.

She arched off the cushions, into his mouth as her body contracted violently around the fingers still working inside her. Never in eight years, in all the time that she’d been secretly finding ways to pleasure herself, had she ever come apart like this. Her nipples

ached, every nerve screamed out, raw with pleasure, and those few inches between her legs had become the center of her world.

“There’s no other like you.” He muttered the words against her slick skin, lapping away her moisture with gentle strokes of his tongue.

No, she was wrong. It wasn’t her pulsing sex that had become the center of the world, but the man who worked so fiercely to pleasure her. Zander. He was everything she’d longed for and more, a better lover than she could have dreamed up in a million years of girlish fantasies.

“Lil, my Lil.”

Her heart twisted. Hearing him call her by that long-ago nickname did something to her, made this both more bitter and more sweet. Sweet because she knew now that his feelings for her weren’t nearly as cool as he would have had her believe. Bitter because neither of them could ever let their feelings make them fools.

There was no future for them, even if she became daft enough to wish for one.

“Zander, I—”

“Wonderful first session, Lillian. I’ll see you day after tomorrow. Come in the morning, near ten.” He pressed a quick kiss to her lips that tasted of her own salty musk, then turned and walked to the door.

Lillian watched him go, torn between begging him to come back and telling him to go straight to hell. In the end she just let him go, but made a silent promise to herself. The next time they met, she wouldn’t be the one left sitting, staring at his undeniably nice-looking bottom as he walked away.

Chapter Five

Alexander's studio had once been a carriage house in the 1830s. During the renovation, he'd had it fit with all the modern plumbing conveniences, including a large bathtub made of dark wood imported from England. The expense was extravagant, but paid for itself within a few years. Alexander lived at his studio as much as his home five miles away and appreciated a wash after ten to twelve hours spent processing film and prints.

But he'd never been more grateful to run a bath than he was today, knowing that soon the creamy skin of his Lil would flush pink as she stepped into the hot water.

Lillian... She'd shattered him with her openness, her passion. He'd been so close to pressing her back against the cushions and sliding inside her. He'd been dying to feel the slick heat between her legs gripping his cock, to possess that lovely little cunny that tasted like a piece of heaven and threatened to make his world a living hell.

Hell because he'd known after that night he never wanted to share her. He wanted to make her his own, just as they'd dreamed about so long ago. He'd been lost the second she spread her legs and looked down at him with blue eyes filled with equal parts fear and desire. And trust, mustn't forget trust. She trusted him to help her, to be her friend and co-conspirator, to aid her cause, not ruin her name.

She *would* be ruined if he gave in to the all-consuming desire to fuck her until they both forgot the reasons why they shouldn't. Just as ruined as she would be if he actually allowed her to sell the photographs they'd taken. Paris was not nearly so distant a place as she assumed. Someday, those photographs would come back to haunt her and she'd be shunned by Society. Her father would cut her off and she'd end up working as a seamstress in a sweatshop or worse.

He couldn't allow that fate to befall Lillian anymore than he could take her as his wife. He would continue this charade for a few more sessions, then threaten to expose her

if she didn't obey her father's wishes. Even more than he desired her body, he wanted Lil safe and cared for. Halewater could provide her with the kind of life to which she was accustomed. The only thing he could offer her were the snubs of family and friends, in exchange for a lover already married to his work. She deserved better.

"Alexander? Are you here?" Blast, just the sound of her voice made him hard. It truly would be a hellish few weeks if his kinder nature insisted on doing the right thing. "There you are. What are you doing?"

She leaned against the doorframe, staring down at him with a bemused smile. The puffed sleeves on her light blue dress somehow didn't look nearly as ridiculous as they did on other women, but Lillian had a gift for making anything she wore look fashionable. Even her brother's britches. Damn, shouldn't have let his mind go there, to the way that tan fabric had strained across her—

"Zander?"

"I'm running a bath," he stated brusquely, wincing at how irritated he sounded. He couldn't let her get to him. Anger, passion...they were far too closely related. He needed to keep his cool.

As if that were likely with another round of erotic photos on the agenda, God help him.

"I see that, but why? We aren't staying indoors today," she said, whipping a parasol from behind her back and tapping it on the tile in front of her. "I have something different in mind, something I think you will like very much."

"It doesn't matter what I like, but what the consumer likes. Bathing photos are all the rage. You'll be sure to sell them without a problem." He turned his attention back to the water, casually pouring a bit of bubble bath into the warm stream as if he couldn't care less whether she was about to disrobe.

"Alexander, I would think you of all people would realize the benefits of going *against* the rage. Sooner or later the public will tire of nude women performing their toilette and want something new and fresh and— What are you laughing at?"

He should have known his Lil wouldn't be satisfied with the portfolio of an average erotic model.

"Nothing. So, what do you have in mind? I saw some very interesting pictures of *two* women bathing the other day. I could arrange for a friend to join us. I believe the ladies were kissing, caressing each other's—"

"Zander!" The shock on her face made him laugh even harder. "You are wicked."

"But isn't that why you sought me out in the first place?" Their eyes met and held, the erotic charge in the air stiffening his already turgid member. "Don't worry, Lil, I don't want to share you. Not even with a member of your own sex."

His foolish words hung in the air for a moment before she took a deep breath and dropped her gaze to the floor. Alexander's resolve strengthened. She didn't want him to lay any sort of claim. He was merely the means to an end, an end he would never allow her to achieve. He had to put a stop to this charade, the sooner the better.

"Lillian, I—"

"Meet me at your house within the hour. Give your servants the day off, and make sure we are completely alone."

"We are completely alone here already."

"I want to make use of your garden—"

Lillian, nude among the flowers...

"I think something outdoors would be lovely."

...legs spread, with a tulip pressed to her cunny...

"I haven't seen many erotic portraits executed with natural lighting and I—"

No one around to see or hear when he pulls it away and pushes his cock deep—

"Lillian, I don't think that's a wise idea. I do have neighbors on either side." Alexander shifted on his stool near the bath, crossing his ankle over his knee, hoping to conceal his raging erection.

"Nonsense, the wall is high, I had my driver take the carriage by your house yesterday and saw for myself. No one will see us. We'll be completely safe from discovery." She smiled and stepped closer, adjusting the rumpled collar of his coat with a

familiarity that caused a strange aching sensation to take up in his chest. “Haven’t you always secretly wanted to be nude under the warm sun?”

“Pardon?”

“I thought I’d be the one to teach the lesson today. The theme will be the importance of learning to work well with others, to lead, but also to follow.” She finished with his collar and set to work smoothing his shirt. He captured her hand in his, shaken by how good, how *right*, it felt to have her fuss over his appearance.

“Lillian—”

“Don’t be afraid, Zander. I promise to be a gentle teacher.” She bent and pressed the softest of kisses against his lips, then pulled her hand away. “See you soon.”

She was gone before he could think of a response, or give in to the urge to toss her into the bathwater fully clothed, and leap in after her.

“Probably for the best. It would be difficult to explain a drenched dress on such a fair day.” His voice echoed strangely through the washroom, which felt sadly empty without Lillian.

He had to follow her to his house and be done with this farce. He wouldn’t last a few more sessions without losing what was left of his common sense, not to mention his fast-waning self-control. And certainly not to mention his heart, that organ he hadn’t been sure he possessed, but which now thumped unsteadily in his chest, aching for the girl he’d lost and the woman he could never have.



Alexander burst through the elegant door of his Beacon Hill mansion and slammed it closed behind him, gratified by the fact that no butler was there to attend to his coat. He’d dismissed the servants not quite an hour ago and then gone for a walk around the Common, determined to work out the perfect words to convince Lillian to forget her foolish plan. She had to be made to see reason, and it seemed he was the only one who could save her from herself.

“Lillian, I simply must—”

Every reasonable word of the speech he'd carefully composed abandoned him as he opened the back door and stared out into his small, walled garden.

Lillian was already there and already completely nude, lying on a blanket in the shade of the small clutch of cherry trees at the far end of the flowerbeds. Her skin was as white as the profusion of blossoms that bloomed above her head, her long black hair unbound and strewn out on the grass behind her. She'd set up a camera a few feet away but didn't seem to be posing at the moment. Instead, her face was buried in the pillow of her arms, her thin shoulders shaking.

"Lillian?" He crossed to her, feeling his feet sink into the damp earth below him. This spring had been unseasonably warm, but the ground itself was wet and cold. She must be half frozen if she'd been lying there for long on nothing but that thin quilt. He took off his coat and knelt beside her. "Here, cover yourself, you must—"

"Don't touch me." She raised a tear-stained face and pushed him away.

"Dear Lord woman, it's a coat, not a serpent."

"No, you are the serpent. I've been waiting here for hours. I thought you weren't going to come." Tears welled in her eyes again and her lower lip trembled.

"It hasn't been hours. A half hour at most."

"It felt like hours," she sniffed, running a shaking hand across her nose.

"Here, take my handkerchief. Your nose is damp." He fumbled the scrap of linen and pressed it into her hand.

"You aren't supposed to mention such things, Zander," she said, nevertheless using his handkerchief on the body part in question. "I understand that you consider yourself above societal convention, but some things are simply a matter of good manners. It isn't good manners to keep a woman waiting for hours—"

"A half hour! I swear it, Lil, it couldn't have been more than—"

"Even a half hour is too much! Or to mention her weepy nose."

"What should I have done? Let the blasted thing run all over your lovely face?" He cursed as something he'd said made her weep even harder.

"You could have simply offered the handkerchief. You could have—"

“I could have turned you away on the beach last weekend as well. It’s what the ‘well-mannered’ would have done. If you want manners, you should go ahead and marry Halewater.” There, he’d said it, gotten the point of his message across, if not so elegantly as he’d hoped.

“I don’t want Halewater. I want you. I’ve always wanted you, don’t you see that?” Tears ran freely down her face now and Zander felt a strange stinging at the back of his eyes as he looked into hers.

Lillian drew a deep sobbing breath. “I thought that this— I thought I could pretend— Blast it, but I can’t.”

“Please, Lil, take my coat. Let’s go in and have some tea and—”

“No, let me speak! I adore you, have adored you since I was a girl. You’re all I’ve ever thought about. Since the day you left, every time I’ve brought myself pleasure, every time I’ve imagined a man’s hands touching me the way you touched me two nights past, it’s been you in my thoughts, in my heart. Don’t you understand? Don’t you feel—”

Dizzy from her words, he silenced her with a kiss that put them both off balance. They tumbled across the quilt, a tangle of desperate hands and lips. Her tongue demanded entry to his mouth this time and he gave it willingly, eagerly, anything to keep his mind off her words, and the feelings they brought surging to the surface. Memories of the girl she’d been, of that kiss, of that night that had meant so much more to him than he’d ever allowed himself to admit, flooded his mind.

What if he had gone back? What if he’d tried to take her away, despite her father’s threats? Could they have spent these last eight years as lovers? Maybe more?

“You were practically a child, Lil.” He murmured the words against her lips as he helped her with the buttons of his shirt.

“I was old enough to know I loved you, that you were the most treasured person in my life.” She gave up on the buttons and moved to the close of his pants. At this rate he’d be naked in moments, ready to do all those things with Lillian that he’d sworn he wouldn’t.

“I had no money, no home, nothing to offer you. You were only fifteen—”

“I’m not fifteen now.” She pushed his shirt off his shoulders and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts against his bare chest. The connection of skin on skin took his breath away. “Make love to me, Zander. Do not make me wait another second.”

Every good intention he’d ever had was swept away by the look in her eyes. Hunger, a need so strong it threatened to eat her alive. How could he deny her? Especially when that same hunger had haunted him since the day those self-portraits arrived on his doorstep, bringing back the ghosts of dreams he’d thought long laid to rest.

With an abandoned groan he claimed her lips again, meeting the desperate sweep of her tongue with his own. His hands found her breasts, pinching her nipples harder than he’d intended then pinching them again when she moaned into his mouth and spread her legs. She hooked her ankles behind his hips, pulling his still trouser-covered cock against her quim, grinding against his length. Her breath came in small, swift pants as he kissed her neck, her rhythm growing faster, as if she would find her own satisfaction against him before he’d even removed his clothes.

“Not yet, Lil, wait for me.” He pulled away from her and swiftly disposed of shoes and pants, then sat back on his heels, his cock straining against the front of his body.

“Zander, please. Come inside me.” Her legs still lay on either side of him, the slick, swollen petals of her sex bared with a shamelessness that made him ache to do exactly as she commanded.

“I will, but you must do something for me first.” He hooked his hands behind her knees and pulled her closer, taking the arms she reached toward him and pulling her to sit in his lap.

“Oh!” She cried out as her legs spread and her nub pressed against his shaft. Her arms looped easily around his neck, fingers tangling in his hair, nails scraping against his skin in a way that made him groan.

“I want you to come for me, Lil. I want your cunny wet, dripping when I push inside you.” He kissed the flushed skin at her throat, then down to her breasts, where her nipples

were already drawn into tight buds, begging to be kissed. He pulled one rosy tip into his mouth, sucking and swirling, nipping at the eager flesh and then laving away the sting.

“Zander!” She writhed against his cock, now trapped between his belly and her molten core, bucking against him until his shaft was coated with her juices, slick and pulsating with the need to be inside her.

“Come for me. I want to see you come apart in my arms.” He sucked the nipple in his mouth harder and pulled her hips closer, meeting her grinding circles with his own. She cried out, fingers digging into the skin at the back of his neck until he felt blood, warm and wet stinging in the grooves she made.

He pulled away from her breast to watch her come, head thrown back, black hair tumbling down to her ass, breasts shamelessly arched toward his face. A strangled sound escaped his throat as he continued to buck against her, struggling to stave off his own release. He hadn’t waited this long to come on her belly. He would come inside her, buried to the hilt in his Lil, his sweet girl, the only woman who had ever made him lose control, lose his mind, his heart.

“Yes, God yes.” She cried out as he lifted her, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance. He reached between them, gently spreading the petals of her sex, working just the head of his thickness into her channel. Immediately she tried to impale herself upon him.

“Wait, Lil. Wait.” Sweat broke out on his lip as he dug his fingers into her hips and held her still. “Take it slowly. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Zander, please. I don’t care if it hurts. I want your cock inside me, I want to be filled with you, every inch.” She wiggled and pushed her hips down, taking just a bit more of him into the liquid velvet of her cunny. “Fuck me, Zander. Fuck me now.”

He surged inside her with a roar, pulling her hips down, lifting his own, until he tunneled as deeply as he could, until the tip of his cock rested at the end of her channel and his sac nestled in the hollow of her ass. She stiffened in his arms for a moment, sucking in a breath, then pressed her mouth to his, licking, biting, the urgency he also felt communicated in the restless squirming of her hips as he lay buried inside of her.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, pushing her back onto the quilt, keeping them joined as he moved above her.

“A little, but I liked it. I like everything you do to me.” She kissed him again and again, tears mingling with laughter as her nails trailed along his back, down to grip the muscle of his ass. “I already want more. I want to come with you inside me.”

“I wouldn’t settle for anything less.” He kissed her softly, once, twice, trailing his tongue along her swollen lips, as he slowly began to move, in and out of her tight sheath. Then he moved his mouth to her breast, suckling, licking, kissing, until her passage grew slicker, until her muscles relaxed and he could push deeper, harder, faster into her welcoming body.

“Zander, God, you feel so good,” she mumbled against his mouth, her hips beginning to meet his thrusts with her own. He could feel her juices coating him, running down the base of his cock to cover his balls, already tight and aching with the need to shoot inside of her. He could smell the heady scent of her desire mixing with the flowers around them, quickly driving him to the edge of reason, until he pounded into her with wild abandon.

She cried out beneath him, her body tensing, straining toward a second release, and Alexander reached down to thumb her nub. He shifted his angle so that he could circle her with a firm pressure while his cock pistoned in and out, watching his engorged organ disappear into her cunny and emerge slick and shining with her desire.

“I’m going to—oh!” Her back arched as she came, her face twisted with ecstasy, his once innocent Lillian a dark beauty who marked his soul.

He cried out seconds later, gasping for breath as his cock twitched inside her clutching sheath. Her orgasm milked every last drop of seed from his body, drawing out his own release until he was dizzy, adrift on an ocean of pleasure and peace, unlike anything he’d ever known.

“Lillian, God, what have you done to me?” He collapsed on top of her, kissing her lips, smoothing his hands through her hair.

“I have forced you to ravage my harbor of love with your masterpiece of nature until we were both quite deliciously spent.” She laughed, a glorious sound that made her tighten around where he still lay deep inside of her.

“And where did you hear such nonsense?” He joined her laughter, feathering kisses over her flushed cheeks.

“I read it. My father has quite a large collection, but I never thought. Nothing ever...” She let her words trail off and brought a hand to his face, the look in her eyes telling him everything left unsaid.

“Come inside with me. Let’s get something to eat, some tea, and—”

“Don’t run away from me, Zander,” she said, wrapping her legs around him when he tried to pull away. “I don’t think I could bear it again.”

“I’m not running away, Lil.” He ran his fingers through her hair, looking everywhere but at the piercing blue eyes that searched his face. He wasn’t physically running, but in his heart...

A part of him was already composing the talk he would give her over tea, how he would explain to her that there was no future for this affair. He wasn’t good for Lil. He hadn’t been eight years ago, and despite his increased wealth, he wasn’t now. She deserved better, she deserved a man who would devote himself to her. He could never be that man, even if he wished to be.

“Very well, let’s go have tea.” She let him pull away this time and moved to gather her clothes. “And talk. I believe we’re long overdue for a good talk.”

“Talk?” His throat grew tight once more, and something in his stomach soured.

“Yes, talk, Zander. You didn’t suppose you’d get something for nothing, did you?” She paused and tilted her head to the side, no doubt taking in his shocked expression. “Remember Zander, nothing in this great, grand world is for free. Never sign anything, or commit any lascivious act, without first consulting a lawyer or trusted friend. Hell, the degree to which you’ve compromised yourself is as good as a signature written in blood.”

She turned and walked away, her dress and undergarments clutched in one arm, the round globes of her ass swaying temptingly as she made her way to the door and

disappeared inside. Alexander didn't know whether to laugh or curse his own stupidity. In the end, he did a bit of both, laughing and cussing, as he struggled into his clothes, determined to be dressed before he went in to meet his match.

Chapter Six

Just tell him the truth, the whole truth. You've already made a fool of yourself, admitted far more than even you intended, just—

“Lillian?”

“Good heavens!” She yelped and jumped half a foot in the air, her squeal of surprise mingling with the squeal of the teapot steaming furiously on the stove.

“I believe the water’s hot.” Only Alexander’s head showed in the doorway leading out of the kitchen, as if he was afraid to enter the feminine domain.

But Lillian knew better. He’d arranged the tea service with ease, swiftly piling cakes and scones on a plate and preparing the china pot with a mesh ball filled with a blend he’d imported from England. No, it wasn’t the kitchen he feared, but the woman in it. Ever since she’d mentioned a “talk”, he’d been positively skittish.

“Sorry, I was thinking,” she said, using a thick towel to pull the black pot from the stove. “Apparently I can’t think and make tea at the same time. Really, it’s quite ridiculous, my cousin insists women are superior when it comes to juggling various—”

She turned to pour the tea to find the doorway empty. He’d fled. Again.

He doesn’t want to talk to you, not about making tea and not about the past. He probably doesn’t want to talk at all. Ever. He’s only interested in an affair, not—

“Which is exactly what I wanted.” Lillian set the hot water back on the stove and plunked the lid of the china teapot down with more force than necessary.

All she’d wanted was to lose her virginity, and engage in an affair scandalous enough to make her completely unmarriageable. She’d achieved the first goal and the second wouldn’t be difficult either. If she kept disappearing from the meetings for her various Lady’s Societies, skipping out early on lunch dates and frequenting Alexander’s home and business, it wouldn’t be long before the sharp tongues of the gossips would begin to wag.

Then Halewater will call off the betrothal, and I'll be free. At least until Daddy can arrange to buy another husband.

The thought made Lillian squeeze her eyes shut and bite her bottom lip. She couldn't let her mind be clouded by doubt. Her father *did* love her. It had taken him months to decide that Halewater would be a good match. He wouldn't settle for just any husband, and no one that he deemed worthy would settle for a woman with a scarlet reputation. She would be safe. She had to believe that or all of this—the scandal, the pain of getting so close to Zander and knowing he would never truly be hers—would be for nothing.

She picked up the tea tray and headed up the stairs to Zander's drawing room, no longer certain that talking was necessary at all. What would a rehashing of the past accomplish? It would only open old wounds and taint the passion they'd found. She should simply enjoy her time with him as a partner in delight and forget that she'd ever loved him, or that it would be so easy to love him again.

"Wait, stop right there." Alexander spoke from the opposite side of the room. She turned to face him and the shutter on the tripod beside him snapped closed.

"Do you want me to go back out and come in without the dress? Is serving tea in the nude the latest thing in erotic photography?" She tried to make her tone light, but failed miserably. She sounded as tense and confused as she felt.

"No, I thought I'd take some conventional portraits if you don't mind. Something acceptable for polite society," he said with a grin as he snapped another photo.

"Hardly. I still have my hair down, and I didn't bother putting on my corset, in case you hadn't noticed." Lillian set the tray down on the small table near the fireplace, trying to ignore how self-conscious she suddenly felt. He'd photographed her in the nude, why did this sudden urge to document their tea seem so much more intimate?

"Oh, I noticed." The heat in his voice made her lift her eyes. He met her gaze and that familiar erotic charge filled the air. She was about to speak when he took another photo.

"Zander, stop it."

"Why? You look lovely. I like you like this."

His words made the tightness in her chest nearly unbearable. He liked her like this? Serving tea with her hair down in his home? She couldn't imagine a more domestic scene, yet he seemed to have no interest in the domestic life. He'd never even been betrothed, a fact that made Bostonian mothers with marriageable daughters positively livid.

Once Lillian had been foolish enough to believe that he was holding off on marriage in order to ask for her hand. But that dream faded after her debut came and went without so much as a letter from the boy she'd been in love with since she was fourteen.

"Never mind. I'll stop. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't mean to upset me? Upset me?" Anger filled her words, the anger she hadn't let herself acknowledge, but had been building inside of her since the day Zander disappeared from her life. "How did you think I'd feel? You never even wrote me a note to say good-bye."

"That is what you wish to talk about? Childish fancies?"

"They weren't childish, the way we felt for each other was real— It was— But then you left, like a thief in the night while I waited, hoping that— For years I—"

"Lillian, there are things you don't know. You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly. I followed you and Curtis in my boy's clothes, you took me out of the gambling hall to the street. You kissed me and gave me a birthday gift and said you hoped some day you would be able to give me more." She babbled the words, feeling like a fool but unable to stop herself, just as she hadn't been able to stop the confessions pouring from her mouth when he'd discovered her crying in the garden.

"And I meant that," he said, his voice tight, controlled. "But I—"

"Then the police discovered us kissing and that I was a girl and said they were going to arrest me for 'attiring myself in men's trousers'. But you told them who I was and convinced them to deliver us to my father's house instead. You kept me from being put in jail, I don't understand how that led to your expulsion from our home."

"It didn't. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"So it's true what my father said? You decided to leave of your own free will?"

“Hardly! Your father assumed we’d done more than exchange a few innocent kisses, Lil. He thought I’d already ruined you, snuck into your chambers every night since I’d been a guest in his home. Curtis thought the same.”

“But that wasn’t true! I tried to tell them. If you’d told them as well—”

“I did tell them, Lil. They didn’t believe me, or they didn’t care, one or the other. They wanted better for you than a penniless boy who might someday—through some act of God—be an equally penniless duke.”

“It doesn’t matter what they wanted, you knew what *I* wanted. We could have found a way to be together. If you really cared for me as I cared for you.”

“Lillian, don’t push this matter.” There was a warning in his voice, a warning she ignored.

“No, Zander. It is time for us to—”

“It is time to put this matter aside. The past belongs in the past.”

“No it does not, not when it’s still shadowing our present.” She took a deep breath, unable to keep from asking the question that had burned in her mind since the day he’d kissed her on the beach. “Tell me true, Zander, would you want me now if we had no past? If my father—”

“Damn your father!” His volume made her flinch, but she didn’t back down.

“Zander, you can’t blame my father for all of this. You had free will, you could have—”

“Your father threatened to have me arrested, Lillian, for a crime punishable by twenty years of hard labor.” Alexander ran a frustrated hand through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut as if he wished he could force the words he’d just spoken to evaporate into the ether.

“What?” Lillian sat on the couch behind her—hard. Surely he couldn’t be telling the truth.

But why would he lie? Zander had never lied to her, ever. Wasn’t that part of the reason she’d felt so guilty for deceiving him?

“The first citation we received that night was for homosexual display with intent to commit unnatural acts. Do you know what that means?” he asked, softly.

“Of course I do, I mean— But that’s ridiculous. Once they discovered I was a female—”

“Once they discovered you were female, they wrote another citation, but the officer didn’t dispose of the first. By the time the policemen left your house that night they were already in your father’s pocket. He swore to me he would have me charged with committing unnatural acts with another man if I dared to speak to you again.”

Lillian stared into his troubled face, her mind racing. He was telling the truth. Dear God, he was telling the truth. Her own father had stooped to that level, threatening a man who was not much more than a boy, dependant on him as a sponsor, with no one to turn to for help but an aging aunt with no prospects of her own.

“Even if the charges were dropped, if I wasn’t prosecuted, the scandal would have ruined me. Can you imagine any of the wealthy people of Boston wanting their portrait taken by a deviant?” He sat on the sofa across from her, a bitter smile on his face.

“I’m so sorry, Zander. I can’t tell you—”

“You don’t have to be sorry, Lil. It wasn’t any of your doing.” He reached out and took her hand, twining his fingers through hers in an intimate caress that made her insides quiver. “Besides, you’re right. I could have made contact with you eventually, but by that time years had passed and I’d convinced myself...”

“That what we felt wasn’t real. That it was nothing but a childish fantasy.” Lillian finished the thought and squeezed his hand.

How could she fault him? She’d done the same. Even when she’d first seen him on the beach, she’d convinced herself that lust was all she felt for Alexander Darian. She’d been certain that she bore no scars from years past, that those nights spent lying awake in her bed aching for him had merely been the product of adolescent fancy, nothing more.

“Twenty years of hard labor for kissing another man? It’s hard to believe,” she said finally, simply to break the tense silence that had settled between them.

“Believe it.” He smiled and lifted her hand to his mouth for a kiss. “We could actually be prosecuted for our activities two nights past. Kisses on cunnies are also unnatural acts so I’m told.”

“Truly?” she asked, trying to ignore the way her sex throbbed simply from hearing him speak the word “cunny”. She was hopeless where this man was concerned. Completely hopeless.

“Truly.” His mouth left her hand, kissing up to her wrist, nibbling at the sensitive skin.

“That’s...so strange.” She should leave here immediately, head for home and confront her father with what she’d learned. Instead she found herself wanting to stay, to draw out this afternoon as long as possible, fearing it might be the only they’d ever have. “And what of kisses to pricks? Are they unnatural as well?”

He sucked in a breath, hot against her skin. “Most unnatural.” He pushed the table between them aside with one foot and pulled her into his lap. “There are also other things we should be sure to avoid.” His hands pushed up her skirt, playing along her bare thighs. She hadn’t bothered with her stockings either.

No corset, no stockings... It was plain that she had intended on having more than tea this afternoon, whether the decision had been a conscious one or not.

“Like what?” Lillian tried not to squirm as his hands feathered up and down her legs, petting her until her quim grew decidedly damp.

“You should never take the leather phallic in my bedroom in hand and play with yourself in front of me. You shouldn’t push it into this sweet puss while I watch you rub your little nub with your fingers.” His fingers trailed lightly over the legs of her drawers to where the fabric slit open near her sex, drawing a moan from her lips despite her flaming cheeks.

Reading about these things was one thing, hearing them from Zander’s own mouth, imagining the scene he described, was quite another.

“You should never let me press you onto your belly and lift your hips, or mount you from behind.”

His hand moved to the opening in her drawers, one blunt finger testing the molten liquid pooling between her legs. Lillian closed her eyes and spread her thighs, willing herself not to be ashamed at the excitement his words brought her, or the bliss tightening her womb from that single touch.

“You should never allow me to spread your cream back to your second hole, or penetrate it with my fingers.”

Good Lord, surely he couldn’t mean—

“Or lick it with my tongue.”

“Zander!” Her eyes flew open as she tried to snap her legs closed, fearful that he might try to make good on that wicked threat.

“I wondered how far you’d let me go.” He laughed, a deep, rich, genuine laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the sides.

“You were poking fun at me?” She smiled and narrowed her eyes.

“Never, Lil. I was just playing with you a bit.” His finger plunged deeper, making her squirm against his hand, wanting more than one thick finger to fill her.

“I understand.” She shoved his hand away from her and turned on his lap, sliding down between his legs to sit before him on the floor. “Now I’ll play with you a bit. Surely, that is only fair?”

“Entirely fair.” He watched with dark eyes as she worked the front of his trousers. His cock, hard and thick, sprang free seconds later, its mushroom head swollen, pointing toward her, practically begging to be kissed.

He groaned as she pressed gentle lips to the soft skin covering his hardness, trembling hands coming to cup her face as she let her tongue flick out over his burning flesh. Lillian sighed and licked him again, surprised by how wonderful she found the taste. His desire, her desire, both mingled on his skin from their earlier coupling, making her sex clench between her legs.

“Will you take me in your mouth, Lil?” he asked, running fingers through her hair, pushing her tangled locks away from her face.

She rolled her eyes up to meet his, wanting to watch him as she gave her wordless answer. She knew the passion on his face—the wonder mixing with lust as she parted her lips and took his shaft into her mouth—was not a thing she would ever forget.

“Lillian.” He said her name, but his eyes said so much more.

As she suckled him, pulling him as deep as she could before running her lips back to his tip, she imagined she read the same longing in his eyes that filled her heart. Just for a moment, she wanted to believe that this afternoon was a beginning, not the end of a childish dream.

Again and again she took him into her mouth, just a little deeper each time. Eventually she found a rhythm that coaxed the hint of salty essence from his cock and a moan from his lips. She increased the power of her suction, drunk on the intimate taste of him, aching to feel him shoot his seed into her mouth. She wanted to swallow every last bit of him down, to hold some small piece of him inside of her.

“Stop, Lil, you have to stop.”

She ignored him, instead moving faster, her jaw aching.

“Stop, blast it.” He fisted his hand in her hair and pulled, wrenching her away from his cock with a gasp.

“You didn’t like it?” Shame washed through her, even as her sex gushed more hot cream, responding to the feel of his hand clenching powerfully at the base of her neck, immobilizing her, forcing her to tilt her face up to his.

“I loved it, but I love being inside you even more.” He pushed her back onto the carpet, his mouth bruising as he kissed her, but it was a sweet pain that only built her fever.

In seconds, his hands were flinging up her skirts and spreading her wide. He shoved his pants to his knees and gripped the base of his cock, preparing to enter her when she wiggled out from beneath him and rolled onto her stomach. She lifted her hips as he’d described and peeked over her shoulder to see how he would respond.

“God, Lil, I love you.” His voice was thick with need, and the eyes that met hers glassy with what looked like unshed tears.

Before she could wonder why he felt like crying or fully grasp the meaning of the words he had spoken, he was filling her, thrusting into her from behind with a force that made her knees scoot across the carpet. His strong fingers dug into the flesh of her hips, pulling her back to him, forcing his cock deeper than ever before. Then he began to take her, not gently, but with a raw hunger that thrilled her even more than his tenderness in the garden.

Soon every rational thought left her mind as she arched her back to meet his thrusts, her breath coming in desperate pants, overcome by the new way he filled her. His cock felt even larger from this angle, stretching her almost to the point of pain, hitting a spot deep inside her that sent shockwaves through her entire body. Every nerve ending sang with pleasure and her cunny grew hotter, wetter.

“Zander!” She screamed his name as her sex clamped down around him with a fierceness that was frightening. For a moment she was terrified that her entire body would fly apart, that she might embarrass herself, but then the pleasure coursing through her became too great. She ceased to care about anything but the way he made her feel, the bliss that blurred her vision and made her lips tingle with a wondrous numbness.

“God, yes Lil.” He came with a cry. She felt the hot stream of his release as he spent himself within her, his cock pulsing softly. He pressed her to the ground and lay on top of her, his weight as comforting as the hands he stroked over her body and the kisses he pressed to her neck.

As her soul came back into her buzzing flesh, Lillian became aware of the tears flowing down her cheeks and swiped at them with the back of her hand. She didn’t want Zander to see her tears, didn’t want to explain how every intimacy they shared affected her heart as deeply as her body. She’d been a fool to think she could drink her fill of easy passion with a light heart. She wasn’t like the merry lasses in the stories she read. She was a woman who ached for love, companionship, understanding, as much as she yearned for sensual fulfillment.

“Did you mean what you said, Zander?” she asked softly, not wanting to do anything to ruin this moment but knowing she had to know the answer.

He paused a moment, took a deep breath, but didn't pull away or pretend he didn't know exactly what she spoke of. "Yes, I did. I've always loved you, Lil."

Her next breath came out as a sob and it was all she could do to keep from bursting into fresh tears when he sweetly shushed her and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"I will probably love you for the rest of my life, but what does that change?" He pulled his softening cock from her body and rolled onto his side. She turned over to look at his face, not bothering to straighten her skirts.

"What do you mean? It changes everything, doesn't it?" She pulled in a breath and forced her tone to be even.

"I could never be the husband you'd want Lillian. I'm married to my work, spend hours in the darkroom and at my studio. You'd be alone—"

"I'd come with you. I love photography, Zander, you know I do. I could help you, be your assistant." She smiled, trying to ignore the way his eyebrows pinched together.

"And what of your father, your family? Could you bear to have those once dear to you snub you for the rest of your life? To never sit on a blanket with Marjorie, or play chess with Curtis, or be invited home for Christmas dinner?"

"They would not be so cruel, Zander, I—"

"What if you're wrong, what if they are? Would you grow to resent me for stealing your family away from you?"

"Never. We could be each other's family then, Zander. I know it."

"What if we have children, Lillian? What then? Would you want them to live on the fringes of polite society, the product of two parents whose peers find them too unseemly to invite to dinner parties?"

"Our children would be happy in our home if we were happy," Lillian said firmly, though she could see that the matter was already decided in his mind. Whether he believed his own arguments, or perhaps some other secret concern assailed his mind, she would probably never know.

"Lillian, I—"

“No, please, don’t. I understand.” She stood stiffly and shook her skirts, grateful that she had left her corset and stockings near the back door. She would get them, fetch her camera from the garden, and leave. Then she would try to forget she’d ever been foolish enough to be swept away by her own machinations.

“Do you? Do you truly understand?” He stood beside her, hitching up his pants even as he captured her elbow in his hand. “I’m trying to do what’s best for you Lillian.”

“Please, Zander. Make the decisions you must, but don’t attempt to tell me you make them for *my* good. You choose your own good, as you always have.”

“Perhaps I have, but I had no one else to look after my future. If I hadn’t preserved myself, no one else would have.” His tone was hard, and the look in his eye truly angry.

“Yes, that was an excellent excuse eight years ago, Zander. Today, sadly, it hardly rings true.” She pulled her elbow from his grasp and raced toward the back door.

“I won’t allow you to sell those pictures to Paris, Lillian. That *is* for your own good, and I won’t be swayed!” He yelled at her retreating back, not even bothering to pursue her.

She stopped at the door, spinning to face him. “I never intended on selling them anyway, you fool. It was merely a ruse to get you to see me, to spend time with me and hopefully ruin my name sufficiently to avoid an unwanted marriage.” She spat the words at him, the tears in her eyes doing nothing to blur the shock she saw written on his face. “I have learned my lessons in cynicism, Alexander. I learned the first when my mother and sister died and it seemed my father wished I had died as well. I learned the second when you promised me your heart and abandoned me to a cold, companionless existence.”

“Damn it, Lillian, I—”

“I learned the third today when I offered my heart, my body, my love and my life to you and you couldn’t force them back into my hands quickly enough.” She paused, looking at him, at the slight hint of shame on his face as he clutched his pants closed. His silence spoke volumes and made her stomach threaten to relieve itself of its contents on

his highly polished floor. “Good bye, Alexander. May you continue to take excellent care of yourself.”

Lillian stumbled down the steps and out into the garden, grabbing her camera and hiding her underclothes under the blanket she scooped from the ground. Her hair still cascaded around her shoulders, but with any luck she’d make it out the garden gate and to the corner where she’d told her coachman to wait without detection. She could arrange her hair in a simple bun on the way home, sneak in through the servants’ quarters, and be appropriately dressed for dinner in less than an hour.

No one would be the wiser. No one would know how close she’d come to realizing her most secret desire, or to ruining her chances to leave her father’s home. She’d marry Halewater and start anew, away from the men who had lied to her and the home that held as much misery as joy for her these past eight years.

Lillian paused at the gate and turned to look at the back door. It was tightly shut, and no brown eyes looked out at her from the windows onto the garden. He was letting her go, giving her up without a fight. Once again.

“Good bye, Zander.” She whispered the familiar nickname to herself one last time, a hollow feeling settling within her chest as she realized she had never spoken truer words. It was time to bid good-bye, to the man, and to the girlish fantasies she’d clung to for far too long.

Chapter Seven

Three weeks later

“There, that’s lovely. A few more twists on this side and we’ll be finished.” Marjorie gathered hairpins from the vanity and wrestled the last of Lillian’s hair into submission. “You don’t know how much I’ve enjoyed this, Lillian. It’s been ages since I’ve had the chance to play this way. My Phillip insisted on hiring a girl *simply* to do my hair. I already have Katie to help me dress and I tried to tell him that I enjoyed— Lillian? Are you are all right, sweet cousin?”

Lillian met Marjorie’s eyes in the mirror and did her best to banish the stricken expression she saw reflected on her own face. This was supposed to be a night for celebration. She had to pull herself together and quit mooning about as if she were headed for the gallows.

“I’m fine, just a bit of nerves.”

“No need to be nervous, darling. The particulars of the betrothal have already been arranged. All that is left to do is celebrate!”

“Of course, you’re right.” Lillian swallowed hard against the bile that rose in her throat. The particulars of the betrothal had *indeed* been arranged, far before even she had been made aware. She’d been promised to Arnold since her twentieth birthday, apparently, a fact her father had disclosed two weeks past when she made weak noises about postponing the official announcement.

She had hoped for a bit more time to pull herself together, to put aside the terrible sadness that had plagued her since the day she left Alexander’s garden. But it seemed Arnold would wait no longer to take her to wife. The betrothal would be announced tonight during a dinner hosted by her father, and they would wed at the end of the summer at Arnold’s estate in the mountains of upstate New York.

“I’m so happy for you, Lillian. I know I teased you about being a spinster in good fun, but I’m so glad to see you marry. I hated to think of you spending your life alone with no husband, no children.”

“Yes, of course.” Lillian tried to smile again, but obviously failed to convince Marjorie all was well.

“Darling, listen.” Marjorie lowered her voice conspiratorially, despite the fact that they were alone in Lillian’s dressing room and not likely to be overheard. “Just between us—because we’re cousins and you have no mother to do this—well, I’ll tell you, the wedding night is not nearly so horrid as many would have you believe! There’s only the slightest bit of pain, and the closeness is actually very nice. I’ve come to look forward to the nights Phillip visits my room, and I know you will do the same with Arnold.”

Lillian closed her eyes against the visual inspired by Marjorie’s words. Arnold’s fleshy white body working over hers, shoving his cock between her legs with as much enthusiasm as he shoveled food into his mouth.

Stop it Lillian, or you truly will be ill!

“Thank you, Marjorie.” Lillian squeezed one of Marjorie’s hands gently in her own, knowing her sweet cousin had only the kindest intentions. “Thank you so much for coming early. Having you here means so much to me.”

“Oh, cousin.” Marjorie’s eyes grew misty and she bent to press a quick kiss to Lillian’s cheek. “You are such a dear. I will miss you so much if Mr. Halewater does indeed choose to move to New York full time.”

“I fear he may. Arnold has retired from the active business life and his interests manage themselves. But I’m sure he will allow me to come back for visits as often as I choose.” Lillian forced a smile onto her face, and eagerly changed the subject. “Enough about me, I’m dying to know if the gossip I’ve heard is true.”

“Gossip? You hate gossip, Lillian. I can’t imagine what you might have heard that would interest you in the slightest.” Marjorie grinned and let one hand stray to her slightly rounded belly, giving herself away.

“Oh, Marjorie! Congratulations! I’m so happy for you and Phillip.”

She leapt from her chair to give her giggling cousin a hug, and soon they were both laughing so loudly they missed Margaret's knock.

"Miss Lillian? May I come in?" Her maid's voice sounded from the crack in the door.

"Of course, Maggie. You must see the miracle Cousin Marjorie worked upon my hair."

"Oh, Miss Lillian, you look pretty as a picture, you do." Margaret's eyes were immediately wet with tears, a common occurrence since the date had been set for Lillian to leave the Thomas home. Margaret would be staying on here, by Arnold's orders. He had his own staff at his homes and didn't wish to employ more servants.

"Now, don't cry, Margaret, or I will start to cry and ruin my face."

"Ruin your face indeed! You've ruined it already by painting yourself up like some—"

"What's this, Maggie? A present for Lillian?" Marjorie dashed over to take the rectangular package from the maid's arms before Maggie could get deep into her usual lecture on the evils of rouge.

"It is, but a strange one. It was delivered to the servants' entrance with no calling card attached. Real nice paper, though, so I thought I'd bring it up to you."

"Thank you, Maggie," Lillian said, her throat growing tight as she took the package from Marjorie and softly touched the card affixed to the top. It read simply, "For Lil", but those two words were enough for her to know exactly who had sent the gift.

"Open it, Lillian! I'm dying to see your first engagement present! I'd hoped I would be the first, but no matter. I told Phillip I should have brought the basket upstairs with me when I arrived. But he was so eager to go see that new billiard table Curtis ordered for the—"

"Go fetch it now, cousin. I'd love to open your gift in private before the rest of the guests arrive," Lillian said, jumping at the chance to get her Marjorie out of the room. She didn't want anyone to see her open Zander's present. She wasn't sure she'd be able to hold herself together, and it wouldn't do to fall to pieces in front of her cousin.

“Maggie, would you get us some tea? And maybe sneak a bit of something else in the pot to soothe our nerves?”

“You’re a naughty girl, Miss Lillian, always have been a handful.” Maggie frowned, but Lillian could tell by the slight twist of her mouth as she headed downstairs that she would oblige her.

She smiled as the women left the room, but could barely keep her hands off the package while she waited for them to tromp down the stairs. As soon as she heard their footsteps fade, she ripped at the paper. The box beneath was an unstained wooden container with a hinged lid. It resembled a large jewelry box, but wasn’t nearly ornate enough to be intended to hold precious heirlooms.

No time for guessing games, Lillian, hurry and open it!

Lillian fumbled with the clasp, opening the box to reveal a small handwritten note atop a stack of white paper.

I know this isn’t proper, on the eve of your betrothal, but don’t send me away.

Please forgive me for being a fool and a coward,

A man too daft to see his fantasy was a reality, nearly within his grasp.

Her hands shook as she pulled the papers from the box, realizing now that they were photographic prints, turned face down. As she turned the first over to meet the light, she gasped, nearly dropping the lot of them on the floor.

“Dear God.” She blushed as she took in the scene Zander had arranged. His nude form, with camera beside him, was reflected in a large mirror, the ornate frame of which was barely visible through the photographs pasted around it.

Dozens of photographs, all of them of Lillian herself, circled Zander’s image. The self-portraits she had taken, the nudes from their first night together, the pictures he had taken while she was serving tea—all of them were there. As she shuffled through the eight prints he’d enclosed in the box, the message of his work became abundantly clear.

In the first photo, Zander’s cock hung limply between his well-muscled legs, as he stared at his own reflection, obviously displeased by what he saw. In the following photos, his gaze shifted, directed toward her own image in the prints surrounding the

mirror. Slowly, the Zander in the photographs became aroused, and finally found completion in his own hand, all while staring at her image as if it were the only thing in the world that could possibly give him pleasure.

Lillian's body responded violently to the sight of him, and her cunny came alive for the first time in weeks.

But what does this mean? What would he have me do? The betrothal will be announced to Father's friends tonight and in the paper tomorrow morning. It's too late, there's nothing—

Lillian's desperate thoughts were interrupted by footsteps on the stairs. Hurriedly, she ran to her bed and shoved the pictures of Zander under her mattress, dashing back to sit at her vanity seconds before Marjorie appeared at the door.

"Here we go, cousin, I hope you— Oh! You opened it without me!" Marjorie stuck out her bottom lip prettily, as Lillian had seen her do so many times with Phillip when she didn't get her way.

"I couldn't help myself, darling, but it seems I shouldn't have bothered. The box was empty." Lillian hoped Marjorie would accept her falsehood. If she didn't, Lillian had the horrible feeling she would break into tears and reveal all to her cousin. Her heart raced as her mind frantically sought a way to put a stop to the night's festivities. It would be so nice to confide in someone, to have a coconspirator!

"That's strange," Marjorie said, crossing the room to examine the box for herself. "What sort of person would send an empty box?"

"I don't know, it's very disturbing." With a sigh, Lillian pressed the box into Marjorie's hands and leapt to her feet. So much for gaining a confidante.

In seconds she was at the window that overlooked the garden, frantically searching for some sign of Alexander, some clue as to what he would have her do. This was so like him, to begin something and assume she would know how to continue it. He should have at least given her a clue, some sort of—

"Wait, Lillian, there is something in the box! See, right there in the corner. It looks to be...a ring." Marjorie held it up for Lillian's inspection, a puzzled expression on her face.

Lillian's pulse pounded unhealthily in her ears as she took the ring from Marjorie's fingers. A round green stone, surrounded on either side by round diamonds, set in gold. It was the very ring Zander had described to her that night so long ago, the ring his mother and grandmother had worn. The ring he would have her wear when she became his betrothed.

"I have to stop this dinner." Lillian slipped the ring onto her third finger with determination. Halewater hadn't bothered to give her a ring as yet. She had supposed he might finally get around to it tonight. Now he wouldn't have the chance.

"Lillian! You have to be joking! Lillian, where are you going?" Marjorie's frantic voice followed her down the stairs.

"Don't worry Marjorie, I'll contact you soon."

"Lillian, please! You must tell me what's happening."

Lillian didn't answer, only picked up her skirts and dashed to the front door. Thankfully, most of the staff was either in the kitchen or the formal dining room preparing for the guests that would descend within the hour. Curtis, Phillip and her father were in the men's parlor with the new billiard table, and Dover, the usual doorman, was no doubt in there as well, serving cigars and port. There was no one around to observe as she flung herself out onto the front steps and down to the walk.

She panted as she raced down the street, wishing that her blasted corset hadn't been laced quite so tightly. She needed to make it to the center of Louisburg Square quickly, before her cousin could alert the house that she was gone. Years ago, that had been where she, Zander and Curtis agreed to meet if they were separated during their adventures. She could only hope that's where Zander intended for her to go.

If not, she might as well sell those photos of herself to Paris. Her father would never forgive her for embarrassing him like this. Running away from her own betrothal dinner would surely be the most scandalous thing she'd ever done.

"As yet," she whispered aloud. If Zander was truly there waiting for her in Louisburg Square...well, then her life was about to get more scandalous than ever.

She ran a little faster, praying for disgrace harder than she had prayed for anything in her life.



Zander paced the grass beside the bench for the fiftieth time, cursing himself for contacting Lillian as he had. Damned romantic, artistic nonsense! He should have simply rung the doorbell and demanded to speak with her, or intercepted her after the Ladies Arts Society Luncheon at her cousin's house last week.

But she'd been laughing as she ascended her coach, hardly the picture of a woman tormented by melancholy. Unlike he himself, who had spent the past three weeks with perpetual circles under his eyes, unable to sleep for the dreams of Lillian that haunted him. He had made the most dreadful mistake of his life, letting her walk out of his home that day. A mistake second only to letting her father frighten him away in the first place.

"Or maybe second only to sending that damned box. Blast it, man—"

"Talking to yourself? I assumed you'd put that habit behind you, now that you are such a success." She was a bit out of breath, but there was no mistaking that voice.

"No, sadly, I'm as ill-mannered as..." He turned to face her, the words dying on his lips as he took her in. Lillian was lovelier than ever, her light rose gown picking up the pink in her cheeks, her eyes flashing blue fire in the fading light.

"As ill-mannered as?" she asked, her voice a soft whisper.

"As I ever was." He took a step toward her and stopped, suddenly more nervous than he could remember being in his life. "Lillian I'm sorry— I mean, I was a fool, a— Damn it, I—"

"Just tell me one thing Zander." She held up her left hand, wiggling the finger where his mother's ring already sat prettily, as if it had been made for her alone. "Is this where you intended this ring to be placed?"

"God, yes." His throat tightened impossibly further as she closed the space between them, until he could feel her breath on his lips as he had that day on the beach.

"And will I be accompanying you home tonight?"

“Lillian, I hardly think it would be proper—”

“I’ve run away from my own betrothal dinner, Zander. I doubt I will be welcome at my father’s home.” She flipped a stray curl from her face and gave him a passionate look that he hoped to see again and again in the years to come. “I don’t give a damn about propriety, I—”

“I’ve booked two seats for us on the evening train to New York. We can get married in the city, tomorrow morning if we can manage it. We can honeymoon there as well, if you like. I don’t give a damn where we are as long as you’re my wife, as long as I get to feel you—”

She leapt into his arms with a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, pulling his lips down to hers. Zander groaned as that warm velvet pressed against him, and her sweet tongue speared into his mouth. He’d come so close to losing this woman, the only person in the world who had ever touched him so deeply, made him want to be the man he saw reflected in her eyes. The knowledge made him shudder and grip her tighter, until her breasts smashed against his chest.

“Thank you, Lil, for giving me another chance, for coming here tonight.”

“You certainly left it to the last minute,” she murmured against his lips, even as she ran her hand down between them, over his rapidly swelling cock. “Next time, make sure you send the reconciliatory self-portraits *before* my father messengers my betrothal announcement to the *Globe*.”

“There won’t be a next time. You’re marrying me tomorrow, the *Globe* be damned. That’s final. And in the future, all reconciliatory self-portraits will be delivered to you personally. You’ll find them on your bed—”

“*Our* bed. I won’t stand for separate bedrooms.”

“Very well, you’ll find them on *our* bed seconds before I come to you, on my hands and knees, begging forgiveness for whatever stupid thing I’ve done.” Alexander let his hands wander to her bottom, squeezing her through her dress. They were hidden from the street by a stand of trees, but even if they weren’t, he didn’t know if he’d be able to keep his hands off his soon-to-be wife.

“Will you be naked as well?” She laughed then gasped into his mouth as he moved one hand to her breast and dipped his fingers beneath her bodice, capturing her nipple.

“In the portraits or when I come begging for forgiveness?”

“Both would be nice, I do so like to look at you naked.” She kissed him again, raking her teeth over his bottom lip, making his cock twitch painfully in his trousers. “But you won’t do stupid things too often will you Zander?”

“I’ll try not to, Lil, but you know by now that I’m a foolish man. I can’t believe I ever risked losing you to that flabby pink son of a horse’s—”

“Please, don’t speak of it. I’ve just recovered my stomach from an hour ago when I was imagining my wedding night.”

He pulled away from their kiss, searching her face. “I love you desperately. You know that don’t you?”

“I do.” She smiled, and his heart ached at the beauty of it.

“I will do everything in my power to show you that, every day. And when I fail, it won’t be because I don’t love you. I’ll try to be deserving of you, to—”

“Shh.” She quieted him with two fingers pressed against his lips. “Alexander Darian, you *are* deserving, you always have been, no matter what my father, my brother or anyone else might think. You are a good man, a brilliant friend and a lover more clever and passionate and tender than I could have—”

“Stop, Lil. You have to stop or I’m going to do something hideously ungentlemanly like weep or take you on that bench.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Her hand ventured back down to his cock and squeezed.

“Don’t tempt me, Lil. I’m a wicked man, you’ve said it yourself. I have no manners, good or otherwise.” He sent her a warning with his eyes, a warning she ignored as she pushed him back to sit on the bench and stood before him.

“I believe, in the past, that I may have put entirely too high a value on manners.” She slowly began to bunch the front of her skirt in her hands, and his heart skipped a beat in his chest. “It’s a cool evening. There aren’t many people out walking the square.”

“Lillian.” Her skirts were hitched up to her waist now, revealing those delicate white drawers that he knew were slit wide open between her legs.

“Zander.” She mocked his firm tone and gave his erection a pointed glance. “You’d better take that out quickly if we are to have our fun before we are caught.”

“You mean for us to commit an unnatural act, don’t you?” He freed his cock and pulled her to straddle him on the bench, stifling a groan as her damp little cunny slid onto him with astounding ease. They were made for each other. How could he ever have doubted it?

“Is it unnatural if I’m on top?” she asked, her eyelids drooping and her lips parting as she began to ride him, up and down, sheathing him in the sweet, slick heat of her body.

“It certainly feels unnaturally good.” He gripped her hips and met her thrusts with his own, leaning forward to nibble and tease her breasts through her clothes.

“Oh, more, please more,” she begged, arching toward his mouth.

Without a second thought, he dipped his hands into her bodice, coaxing her breasts out into the cool evening air. The sight of her nipples, now so readily available to him though she remained fully clothed, was easily the most erotic thing he’d ever seen. He set to work attending to the rosy tips, licking and suckling the heated flesh until her breath came in desperate little pants and her hips squirmed frantically closer to his own.

“Will you come for me Lillian? Out here in the square for all of polite society to hear?”

“Zander!” She called his name as her quim contracted around his cock, the evidence of her passion coating his aching member.

He followed her a second later, muffling his cry against the soft skin of her breasts, clutching her close as he spent himself inside the welcome heat of his love. She hugged him tightly, feathering kisses over the top of his head, laughing as she struggled to catch her breath.

“You must let me up, or I fear I will faint. Maggie laced me far too tightly to fit into this blasted dress.” He helped her detangle herself to sit next to him on the bench. Once

she'd smoothed her skirts, and adjusted her bodice, only her kiss-swollen lips gave any clue as to what they'd just done.

"You look lovely in that blasted dress." He smiled and leaned over to press a quick kiss to the tops of her breasts. She pushed him away with a giggle and a gentle swat on his knee.

"Thank you. I'm glad you find it lovely, as it is now the only dress I have to my name."

"We'll get you an entire wardrobe made in New York, and you can order whatever you want when we return to Boston." He would gladly buy her the moon and a few stars as well, if he were able. Nothing was too good for his Lil, though he knew she had never been the sort to pursue fashion above her other interests. "I'm sure you'll want to redecorate the house, as well. It's terribly masculine and stuffy, been needing a woman's touch for years."

"The groom spending a fortune for his new bride. Quite a change from the large dowry Arnold Halewater was to receive." She turned her eyes downward, a blush heating her cheeks.

"I don't want your father's money, Lillian." He gently took her chin and turned her head toward him. "I don't need it, wouldn't take your dowry if he begged me to accept it."

"You're certain?" she asked with a grin. "You want an old maid with no dowry and no doubt, after this evening, a truly scandalous reputation?"

"All I want is you, scandal and all. In my home, in my life, in my bed, in—"

"And in your studio, as well?" she asked, as he helped her to her feet. "I meant what I said, Zander. I want to help you in your business as well as at home."

"I would be delighted. God knows, my apprentice Kenneth will be glad of some help by the time we return from New York. He has nearly two hundred prints due by the end of the month."

"Goodness! The poor boy."

“Misery wasn’t good for me, Lil, I couldn’t seem to get anything done.” He led her out to the opposite end of the square, where his carriage waited with his trunk and two tickets to New York on the nine o’clock train. “Aside from printing out pictures of you and some fairly horrid nude self portraits, of course.”

She joined his laughter, then turned to him with a gasp. “The portraits! Zander, I shoved them under my mattress, but they’re sure to be discovered.”

“Let them be discovered. Your father wouldn’t dare show them to anyone.”

“But won’t you be embarrassed? Assuming my father forgives us, of course, and consents to have us over for dinner now and then?”

“Surely you’re joking, Lil. This glorious masterpiece of nature is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, I’m quite proud of my splendid love rod, my glorious cock stand, my proud, pants pea—”

“Enough! No more reading for you, you silly goose.” She laughed until she was out of breath and he had to lift her bodily into the carriage. Then he climbed in beside her and they both laughed some more.

And when they were finished, his Lil scooted close to him and put her head on his shoulder all the way to the train station. Alexander knew then that he had made the best decision of his life when he took that roll of Kodak film and set about developing the future of his dreams.

About the Author

Anna J. Evans came back to her true love of writing fiction after a decade or so as a poorly paid actor and playwright. After working off-off-Broadway, in a few C-movie films in Hollywood, and then becoming a stay-at-home mom-writer to three children (ages three to thirteen), writing erotic adventures seems like tame work.

She's written contemporary, paranormal, historical and fantasy erotic romances and been awarded multiple Recommended Reads from review sites such as Fallen Angel Reviews, Two Lips Reviews and Joyfully Reviewed, but her favorite feedback always comes from fans.

Anna lives in Arkansas with her Air Force husband, her real-life romantic hero, and their three kids.

To learn more about Anna J. Evans, please visit <http://annajevans.com>. Send an email to anna_j_evans@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Anna_Evans_lolsexy/

*Tess Starling is willing to risk everything—and offer
anything—to avenge her father's death.*

Carnal Deceptions

© 2007 Scottie Barrett

Available now at Samhain Publishing

Upon leaving her father's gravesite, Tess spies creditors confiscating the finery of her first London Season. But her gowns will do little to satisfy her father's debts. Fleet Prison awaits her. Tess dons a homely disguise, cloaking herself in mourning weeds. She is determined to evade the authorities until she brings to justice the swindler who ruined her father. Resolute in her quest, she will transform anew, reinventing herself as a temptress to seduce the villain. She only wants for hands-on training, but the man who volunteers proves too much of a distraction. Everything about Tallon Hawkes, the Earl of Marcliffe, fascinates, including the battle scars marking his body. A motivated pupil, Tess yields eagerly to his sexual demands.

Long before he discovers the sensuous female beneath the layers of black crepe...long before he discovers the brilliant copper-colored tresses hidden by the ratty wig...long before he tastes the sweetness of her skin, Tallon Hawkes' heart has been hooked. Tallon plays along with Tess's scheme, but he is distrustful and jealous of her obsession with their shared enemy. Tallon is determined to bring her dangerous game to an end. But will his arrogant maneuver lose him any chance with Tess?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Carnal Deceptions*:

The next morning, Tess woke to find herself tangled in her blankets. She'd been dreaming of satin and silk and erotic couplings. The explicit pictures that Miss Midwinter had shown her were branded on her brain. A woman bound with ropes, lifting her bottom in offering as she waited for the man to plunge into her. A woman servicing three men at once. Miss Midwinter had added her own narrative, describing the sexual acts depicted so graphically Tess had been forced to open the window to the chill morning air to cool her cheeks. All her lessons lacked were practice. Her dreams had revealed a deep hunger for

that real experience. Unfortunately, in every dream Lord Marcliffe was the man she explored with her mouth and hands and body. She'd slid satin over the smooth skin of his chest until it snagged on the rough scars of his shoulder. More shockingly, she'd followed the trail of the fabric with her open mouth, her tongue tracing every ridge.

Frustrated, she threw her bedclothes aside. She stepped naked out of bed and bathed herself at the washstand. After patting herself dry, she opened the wardrobe and peered into a dark and empty hole. Not even her chemise hung there. She searched the floor, shook out the bedclothes, got on her knees to peer under the bed and found nothing, not a stitch. Even the flannel gown she'd thrown off in the night was gone. She wrapped herself in a blanket. Opening the door a crack, she called for help. No one answered. Her pleas seemed to echo off the walls.

Tess stepped into the hallway and raced down the stairs. There was a queer emptiness to the house. She shivered as her bare feet touched the cold tile floor of the entrance hall. With the heavy blanket dragging behind her, she entered the dining room. No weak tea or burnt toast awaited her. She pushed open the kitchen door expecting to see Mrs. Smith's smiling face, only to find another vacant room. Afraid now, she hurried up the stairs to Lady Stadwell's bedchamber. The door was ajar. She found the wardrobe empty as well as the bureau drawers.

She'd been deserted. She could not go into the yard naked, but she was certain what she would find there. No gardeners, no grooms, and the stable cleared of all horses.

Without question, she knew exactly who had executed this plan, who'd evacuated the house right under her nose. Trembling with fury, she returned to her chamber. Why not take advantage and luxuriate in bed for once? First she fluffed the pillow but then decided to give it a good pounding, until feathers burst from its seams. She settled back on the now flattened pillow, but finding rest in her agitated state proved impossible. With a scream of vexation, she kicked the covers to the floor then with a muttered oath stooped to retrieve the blanket. She had yet to explore Mrs. Smith's room. Determined to thwart the fiendish earl, Tess lit a candle and ascended the servants' stairs. The flame fluttered eerily in the narrow hallway. Muttering a plea for fortune to turn in her favor, she entered

the low-ceilinged room. The doors on the small wardrobe were agape, and the barren interior that greeted her seemed a purposeful taunt. Not even a blasted apron remained.

Sparked by another idea, she raced downstairs to see if the mudroom that adjoined the kitchen held at least a rain cloak. The hooks were empty. The bastard had been ruthlessly thorough. If he wanted rid of her so badly, why hadn't he left her some clothing? Clearly, he wished to see her completely humiliated.

She stomped through the empty house. In the parlor, she clutched at the faded damask drapery thinking to yank the curtains from the wall, but the curtain rod was too heavy and well-seated. She would have to take scissors to the fabric. It was an inspiration with little chance of success. Her skills as a seamstress were negligible. Besides, it would take her forever to create a garment. She glanced out the window at the stables. Though the house was somewhat isolated, certain angles of the yard could be spied from the road, and Tess did not have the courage to go outside mantled only in a blanket. When night fell, she'd fetch the ladder from the barn. She would explore the attic for moth-eaten garments. Surely there had to be remnants of other generations stored. Unable to occupy her mind with reading or anything remotely productive, she curled up on the settee to wait for dusk.

The sky was just starting to gray, the gloomy veil of night dropping, when the front door slammed. Tess flew off the settee and raced into the entrance hall, her bare feet skidding on the slick marble, to find the devil himself, with the two huge mastiffs at his heels. He gave her a placid smile as he pulled off his leather gloves. What was he up to? She didn't trust a hair on his black head.

"W-What is going on? Where is everyone?" she stammered, completely flustered by the idea of being alone with him.

"They left early, just before the sun. I had the cook accompany Lady Stadwell in the carriage so that people would think you'd left with her."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Why would you do that?" Her voice rose to a hysterical pitch and he immediately pressed his fingers to his temples.

Though he appeared stone cold sober, he was suffering the aftereffects of a week of imbibing. His skin was paler than usual and in stark contrast to his black hair. “Because people talk. And since we are just beginning this venture, I felt there was no need to stir up rumors.”

Tess pulled the wool blanket tighter, scratching her bare skin. She had never felt so vulnerable. She blinked up in confusion at the most intimidating man she’d ever known. She was at his mercy. Lady Stadwell had abandoned her.

“Is there some reason—” With effort, she squelched the urge to rain curses down on him “—why I have nothing to wear?” Her voice vibrated with fury.

He shrugged. “The dressmaker will have some of your wardrobe completed by the week’s end. In the meantime, you won’t need any clothing.”

“I suppose I’m to lock myself in my room naked until she arrives?”

“No, I expect you to stay in *my* room naked for the week.”

She couldn’t have understood him correctly. “Pardon?”

“If I’m to hire you for my aunt’s dubious scheme, I’d like to see just how capable you are.”

“Exactly what does that mean?”

“I intend to fuck you, Miss Calloway.”

Lord Marcliffe was studying her a little too carefully. She suspected he was expecting she’d lose her nerve. He casually combed back his windblown hair with his fingers. How on earth could someone be that handsome and that cruel? “I detest you!”

One woman, two men—the choice of a lifetime and the chance for a perfect future.

Perfecting Amanda

© 2007 Bonnie Dee

When Amanda McCormick heads west as to create a home of her own and begin a “perfect” marriage with a man she’s never met, gambler Spencer Teague intercepts her. Pretending to be her fiancé, he tricks her into surrendering her virginity.

Amanda hides the misguided affair and forges a relationship with her young husband, Travis. But her secret haunts her when she learns she’s pregnant. Meanwhile, Spencer is haunted by visions of a little girl who demands he find and help Amanda.

Their lives entwine as the three come together in an unexpected relationship that touches—and tortures—they all. Amanda questions whether perfection is attainable and if it’s possible to love two very different kinds of men.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Perfecting Amanda*:

Travis led her to the sofa and settled her there. He popped the cork on the champagne and poured two glasses then crossed to the windows and released one side of each drape to dim the room. The windows were open but let in little breeze, only dust. A ceiling fan turned slowly above them, but did little to cut the heat. “I’m sorry it’s so hot. It doesn’t make it very romantic.”

Amanda agreed. Perspiration beaded on her forehead, dampened her armpits and the length of her spine. She felt sweaty and not very beautiful with her hair straggling down from her coiffure.

Sitting down next to her on the sofa, he handed her a glass of champagne. He raised his glass and touched it to hers. “To our union.”

She sipped the ice-cold fizz much too fast. It tasted sweet yet dry and felt so cool going down her parched throat.

Travis set his glass aside, loosened his tie and removed his jacket and vest. He unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt.

She watched as if from a distance, feeling too disoriented to react. The only thought that formed in her mind was how handsome he looked in just his shirtsleeves. His shirt was so clean and white she wanted to reach out and touch it—touch the man beneath it and see what his hard muscles and warm body felt like. Her fingers ached to know, finally, what a man was really like.

Moving closer to her on the settee, Travis reached to cup her face in one hand and bent his head to kiss her lips.

She felt his warm breath on her mouth and then soft wetness. Her eyes drifted closed and her lips parted in a little gasp. It wasn't as if she'd never been kissed before, she reminded herself. Doug McCray had graduated from holding her hand to kissing her before he left for college and she never saw him again. But this felt completely different. The pressure of Travis's lips was more assertive and considerably less sloppy than Doug's inexperienced kisses.

Travis stroked his thumb along the side of her jaw and moved his mouth against hers. The wet tip of his tongue brushed her lips.

Amanda started and her eyes flew open. But, as he caressed and kissed her, slowly, seductively, possessively, her eyes fell shut again. She relaxed and allowed the pressure of his mouth to increase and his tongue to slide as smoothly as the brush of fingertips over her closed lips.

When he pulled away, she leaned toward his absent mouth. Her eyes opened once more and met his.

They were hooded, dark with desire. "You're so beautiful."

She half-smiled, embarrassed and thrilled at the compliment. On occasion Doug had said she looked pretty, but no one had ever called her beautiful. It wasn't a word she connected with her appearance, but Travis's intense gaze told her he was speaking the truth as he saw it.

He sat back, took another sip of champagne and pushed a hand through his dark brown hair, lifting it from his forehead. "It's unbearably hot in here."

She drank from her glass, too, then set it down and fanned her face with her hand. "Yes. It really is."

“Perhaps if...” He reached out and unbuttoned the neck of her blouse.

She batted his hand away, abruptly alert and shocked. “Mr. Baxter!”

He bowed his head. “I’m sorry for taking such liberty, but you’d be so much cooler in just your chemise.” He nodded at the silver basin that had held the champagne bottle. “And we have all that ice. It would cool your body.”

Her hand went to the front of her blouse, poised over her heart. She stared at the ice then at his ice-blue eyes that made her hotter instead of cooling her. Her heart beat between her legs as well as in her chest, pounding fast and erratic. “I suppose we *are* to be wed tomorrow. Maybe it would be all right...just because of the heat.” She unbuttoned the top button of her high-necked blouse. Then the second...and the third, her fingers trembling and her flesh going simultaneously hot and cold as she exposed it.

She was frightened, yes, but she also incredibly excited in a way she’d never felt before in her life. Taking off her blouse in front of her fiancé was more thrilling than the time she’d ridden Cousin Dale’s bicycle down the big hill near their house and nearly crashed at the bottom. She felt anything might happen now as she careened out of control and she couldn’t, or wouldn’t, do a thing to stop it.

Amanda’s gaze never left Travis’s face while his stayed riveted on her moving fingers and the increments of flesh revealed to him.

Blood rushed through her veins and roared in her ears. She couldn’t believe her audacity in disrobing for a stranger, prospective husband or not. And yet her hands kept moving until the entire row of buttons on the front of her blouse was unfastened. She grasped the open front of the blouse and the little lilac jacket and slid both down her shoulders and off her arms.

Travis gazed at the pale swell of cleavage rising above her corset then his eyes returned to her face. “It’s a wonder you don’t pass out wearing that thing. Turn around and I’ll loosen it for you so you can breathe. The idea of corsets is ludicrous, don’t you think?”

As if in a trance, she turned her back to him. In a moment she felt his hands working at the ribbons harnessing her into the corset. Her eyes closed and she breathed in, intimately aware of his proximity and the heat of his hands moving near her back. She

felt the ties loosen and her rib cage expanded as she drew a deeper breath. She caught a whiff of Travis's cologne underlain with his own male scent. Another wave of arousal swept through her at the basic masculine odor that awakened the femininity in her.

His hands moved around her sides, removing the corset from her body. "There. That's better. It's much too hot a day for propriety." Warm laughter percolated in his voice. His breath puffed against her bare shoulder as he spoke.

That was when she fully realized she was sitting in nothing but her thin chemise, her breasts unbound from the restraining corset. Her back was still to him. He hadn't seen her yet and she felt both dread and excitement at the prospect of turning around. He would be able to see the shape of her breasts and even her nipples through the sheer fabric.

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