

ELLORA'S CAVE EXOTIKA



JUNIPER BELL  
*My Three*  
LORDS

## **My Three Lords**

*Juniper Bell*

*How is one innocent country girl to choose between a Duke, a Marquis and an Earl? Must she?*

When Miss Alicia Silverwood marries the Earl of Dorchester, he whisks her off to *Notre Plaisir*, a country manor where erotic surprises await in the company of three powerful lords.

The young Earl needs a wife and heir. The cynical Marquis de Beaumont needs a playmate. And the commanding Duke of Warrington needs a reason to live. As for the new Lady Dorchester, she's about to discover the true nature of her own sensual needs. On top of that, she's falling in love.

It might take a miracle for Lady Alicia and her three lords to come to an arrangement that makes them all happy. Or perhaps all that's required is a little scandalous rule-breaking.

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My Three Lords

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# *MY THREE LORDS*

Juniper Bell

## **Prologue**

When I look back on the first days of my marriage, I wonder if any of those strange and wonderful events would have occurred had it not been for the goatherd. If not for that obliging boy, I would never have caught the Marquis' eye. He and my husband would never have concocted their plan, and the Duke would never have —

But my story runs away from me. Indeed, it's not my story alone. I share it with my three lords. Although I was not present at the plan's initiation, as White's is barred to females, I have always been incurably curious. For certain portions of this tale, I have therefore used my own knowledge of the protagonists along with bits of acquired information and a shamefully active imagination to give our story its full flowering. Or, shall we say, its deflowering...

## **Chapter One**

*White's Club, London, 1811*

The three friends met, as they so often did, in the comfortably male haven of their favorite club, where the clink of glasses and the rattle of the dice box made a soothing counterpoint to the harsh wind clattering at the windowpanes.

"Nasty night," said the Marquis de Beaumont, in a tone of weary distaste. He was the eldest, and enjoyed a most unsavory reputation, reflected in the cynical glint of his dark eyes.

"What do you expect? London in March. I told you we ought to be hunting. Keeps the chill off." The young Earl of Dorchester bounced a leg up and down, as was his habit. His thighs, straining against his buckskins, betrayed a man of action who would prefer to race a four-in-hand or engage in fisticuffs rather than sit confined inside a club room, no matter how masculine its décor.

"My dear boy, we are hunting. You do recall the purpose of this visit to London, do you not?"

The Earl's face fell at the reminder.

The third of the trio, the Duke of Warrington, signaled the waiter for another bottle of brandy. "Dorch may know it, but I require some clarification. I recall mention of a girl, a relative of yours, and your rather unconventional plans for her future. But then I also recall a fair amount of claret."

The Duke smiled at his companions, but neither was fooled. Warrington not only outranked both of them, but he possessed a natural air of authority that meant his opinion was eagerly sought and never ignored. The Duke was not to be trifled with, a state of affairs that often rankled the Marquis, no matter that the two were playmates and third cousins on the distaff side.

"You will not throw a wrench into my plans, I trust," he said now, eyes glittering at the Duke.

"Your plans?" Dorchester protested. "We are discussing *my* marriage, are we not?"

"Indeed we are," said the Marquis. "Your marriage, and my ardent desire to see that you live your life in happy, connubial bliss."

The Duke stretched his long legs toward the flickering fire in the great marble fireplace. "And there, as they say, is the rub. I must wonder as to the source of this ardent desire. You yourself are hardly an example to be emulated, at least in the area of connubial contentment."

"*Au contraire*," said the Marquis, irritated. "I'm a famous rake and my lovely wife is a famous whore. We are perfectly suited. Dorch, however, is of a different nature. He requires a different sort of mate."

"I know very well what I require," said Dorchester, leaping to his feet. His friends, accustomed to his inability to stay still for more than a few moments at a time, watched with affectionate amusement. "If I'm to be leg-shackled, I require an innocent girl who will adore me and look upon me as her lord and master, which is what I shall be. She must be sweet to the eyes, restful to the ears, and —"

"Delicious to the mouth and other interested organs," finished the Marquis.

"Precise—" Dorchester aimed a scowl at his older relative. "I wouldn't have phrased it in such a way."

"No indeed, which is precisely why you need my help in this matter. Not only have I located the perfect bride for you, one who matches your description in every particular, but I have offered myself as the instrument of your future happiness."

A smile played across the Duke's firm mouth. "I am filled with anticipation as to the specifics of this proposal."

"Very well, then. Let us stipulate that our young friend Dorch, virile though he is, has no interest in the finer arts of pleasuring a woman."

"She's not a woman, she's my bride," said the Earl with a fine bluster. "Her purpose is to carry on my lineage."

"You make my point for me, my boy. You require an obedient, well-trained wife who will fulfill your various needs. She will be far more willing and able to play her part in the drama if she, too, finds some pleasure in the arrangement. I take it you find no quarrel with that, Warrington?"

"No," said the Duke dryly. "Though I've sworn never to fall victim to the tender sex, my encounters with them are generally enhanced by a sense of mutual enjoyment." The Duke had a certain reputation of his own, that of the elusive heartbreaker. His refusal to fall in love and, more importantly, to marry, had sent more than one matron into an unseemly rage in the privacy of her boudoir. The Duke seemed content with his current heir, who happened to be the man pounding his fist into the leather armchair next to him—his distant cousin, the Earl of Dorchester.

"Must you attack that piece of furniture so ruthlessly?" he asked his heir.

The Earl flung himself back into a seated position. "I don't enjoy hearing my intimate life discussed in so cold-blooded a manner."

"Cold-blooded," the Marquis scoffed. "Precisely the opposite. I intend to help mold your bride into the most warm-hearted, warm-blooded, passionate, satisfactory creature you can imagine."

"And what will you yourself gain from the experience?" the Duke inquired.

"I will gain the happiness of a friend. The successful disposition of a young relative, whose parent has come to me for guidance in finding a suitable husband."

"And?" prompted the Duke.

"You know me too well."

"To know you is to love you, and more importantly, to be wary."

"If you insist on knowing all, this particular girl has always intrigued me."



"Oh?" The Duke exchanged a look of surprise with the Earl, as not much managed to intrigue the Marquis. "Is she a beauty, then?"

"She's pretty enough, but no great beauty who will find sport in tormenting helpless lovers. No, Miss Alicia Silverwood possesses something else. Something I cannot describe, and which I have never been able to categorize and thus dismiss. Ever since our first meeting, under circumstances that shall remain private, she has lodged in my mind's eye. Since I cannot marry her myself, or bed her out of wedlock without causing an irretrievable rupture with that branch of my family, I can never have her."

"Unless Dorch goes along with your absurd proposal." Warrington stood up, his lean length dwarfing the other two men, and signaled for the porter. "I do believe we've heard enough, Dorch. Come along."

But the Earl of Dorchester, for once, stayed in his chair and leaned forward, elbows on knees, to scrutinize the Marquis. "Warm-hearted and passionate, you say?"

"I do indeed."

"You can form this girl into a wife who will suit me?"

"I have very few talents, but I pride myself on my intimate knowledge of the feminine...soul."

"Don't listen to him, Dorch. He has only his own interests in mind." The Duke allowed the porter to help him into his greatcoat.

"But he already revealed his own interests. If they align with my own, what matter?"

"Yes, Warrington, what matter? The boy needs an acceptable bride, and I can provide one, along with a special service that will lead to a long and happy life. Why, I'm willing to place a handsome wager on the outcome. Shall we say, my new curricule?" To cement the agreement, the Marquis opened his porcelain snuff box and offered it to his friends.

The Earl's face lit up, but the Duke declined the snuff along with the wager. "I must state my strong objections to this entire endeavor. But you're of an age to make your own destiny, Dorch. I won't stop you. And now, I must away."

Heavy silence followed as the Duke took his hat and walking stick from the porter. The Duke's friends knew where he was headed, but the dread topic was best left untouched. All discussion of his condition was strictly forbidden among the three.

Finally the Marquis raised one dark eyebrow and drawled, "I take it you have no desire for an invitation to the deflowering?"

The Duke turned on his heel and stalked out of White's, a discreet sea of servants bowing as he passed.

The Marquis laughed and beckoned to the nearest waiter. A minute later, pen in hand, he scrawled a note that would be delivered to Warrington House the next day.

*"Notre Plaisir, in the merry month of May. As the proverb has it, the more the merrier."*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Chadwick House, London, May 1811*

I confess to an embarrassing trembling in my hands when my sponsor, Lady Chadwick, presented me with the Earl of Dorchester's proposal. I do not like to quiver and swoon the way some girls do. But I had only met the Earl a time or two, always in the company of others. I could not recall a single conversation conducted on personal terms. He had never even appeared on my dance card.

"Are you certain? He wishes to marry *me*?" Try as I might, I could not keep the astonishment from my voice. I was no heiress, nor celebrated for any particular claim to beauty or scintillating wit. I was a simple girl from the country, recently freed from the confinement of the schoolroom. I had attended a sum total of four balls and two routs, as well as one musicale at the home of the Marquise de Beaumont, who, quite frankly, provoked a sense of alarm in me.

I did not care for the way her eyes swept me up and down, searching implacably for flaws and no doubt finding many. As I have mentioned, I was no beauty, with my chief virtues being a clear complexion, a pleasing bosom, and thickly curling hair the brown-gold color of wheat in autumn. I was light on my feet on the dance floor and pleasant enough in conversation, but I saw no reason for the Marquise to look upon me as a stray farm cat intruding into her domain.

I wondered whether she knew about my first, unforgettable meeting with her husband. But the Marquis had vowed never to betray my secret, and say what one might about that notorious rakehell, I knew him to be a man of his word.

“Does the Earl say why he wishes to marry me?”

“Why?” Lady Chadwick’s double chins shook like jelly. “My dear Alicia, you do ask the most inappropriate questions. Why should he not desire to marry you? You are under my protection.”

“Please forgive me,” I murmured, delivering a little bob of a curtsy. My upbringing had not prepared me for such sensitivities. I was continually saying things I should not and skating near the thin edge of disgrace. Lady Chadwick had saved me from disaster many times in the few short weeks I’d been in London.

“I will send our acceptance immediately,” she said, reprovingly.

“But—”

“Immediately,” she repeated firmly. “The Earl of Dorchester is precisely the sort of husband your dear father wishes for you. He’s wealthy enough, he’s young, and you must admit he’s handsome.”

I brought up an image of bright blue eyes, ruddy cheeks and a body that was always jittering and jobbering. Girls of delicate upbringing are not supposed to be picturing male bodies, but as I mentioned before, I was raised in the country, along with my six brothers. I do believe it is impossible for a girl with six brothers to be unaware of certain realities related to the male gender. I had, eventually and after the

aforementioned embarrassing episode involving the Marquis, learned to keep such knowledge a more closely held secret.

"I suppose he's handsome enough." *A bit like a roast mutton with legs.* Fortunately, I managed to keep that thought to myself.

"Handsome enough? Why, girl, I am ashamed to call myself your sponsor. The Earl of Dorchester is quite sought after. You will be the envy of all the other girls, not to mention their mothers. Don't you know he's the Duke of Warrington's close friend and heir?"

She spoke the name of the Duke in the same hushed voice she used for members of the royal family and all other arbiters of the *haut ton*. He was rumored to possess a devastating charisma fatal to *ingénues* such as myself, or so I'd been told at my first rout.

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I'd been enjoying the refreshment of a lemonade after a particularly vigorous quadrille. Another young debutante told me in an excited voice that the Duke of Warrington would be attending later that night.

"I do hope I shan't faint," I said, intending it as an amusing sally.

"Oh, certainly I shall fall into an instant swoon," she answered. "He's said to be the most fatally attractive man in the whole of England, and the most eligible bachelor too. Young ladies frequently faint at the mere sight of him."

I giggled at her absurd exaggeration. But she blinked at me with such sincerity that I decided the birdwit deserved to be teased. "Then I hope I never set eyes on him," I declared.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've never fainted in my life, and I have no intention of doing so on account of a Duke, and if he's indeed so deadly a presence, I will beg him to stay very far away from me. If he approaches, I shall be forced to toss my lemonade in his face to defend myself from his fatal charm."

"Miss Silverwood!" At that moment, I feared she truly would faint. She swayed and I grasped her elbow to keep her upright. Immediately her chaperone came to her side and shot me a terrifying glare.

After she'd been whisked away, an amused voice spoke behind me. "What on earth did you say to the poor girl?"

I turned, surprised, to see a gentleman emerge from behind a pillar. Had we been introduced? Could I have forgotten such a thing? He was a tall man, quite well-favored, strong and straight, with shadowed green eyes. His hair, clipped short in the Brutus style, was the color of roasted chestnuts. Although he was far from old, an air of seriousness clung to him, as though he bore some deep burden.

"Nothing of interest, and certainly of no significance to you." I was not, of a matter of daily habit, quite so impertinent. But the closeness of the ballroom, the perfumed air and the night's tedious conversation were grating to my nerves.

He seemed undisturbed by my pertness. "And why not?"

"Because you are very rude to eavesdrop, and quite incompetent as well."

"Is that so?"

This conversation, at the very least, was far from tedious. "Quite. If you listen to other people's conversations, you should do it properly and not oblige them to repeat themselves."

He gave a solemn nod. I noticed his eyes did not dart around in search of someone more important. "I shall have to improve my eavesdropping, it seems."

"Or eschew the practice. Although I do concede, at times it is the only way to learn anything of interest."

"Quite right. And at this moment, I find myself extremely interested in what a fresh-faced young girl such as you could possibly have said to Miss Chastity Morehouse that would cause her to be borne away from you as if you had the plague. I believe I heard a reference to the Duke of Warrington?"

On closer inspection, his green eyes contained chips of golden bronze and had a quite mesmerizing effect. I barely knew how I answered, only that the words seemed to spill from my lips of their own volition. "Yes indeed. I said nothing improper, merely that I hoped I should never meet him. I'm sure he would not mind at all, as there are any number of other young ladies that should be delighted to. I venture to guess all of them, as a matter of fact."

He scanned the crowded ballroom and gave a sigh. "I do believe you're right. And I wonder that you should be the sole exception."

"They say he is so diabolically attractive that he sends innocent girls into a swoon. Fainting," I told him, "has never appealed to me. My brothers swore they would disown me if I ever fainted. And if the Duke truly has the power to make girls lose control of their senses through his sheer beauty, though in truth my natural skepticism finds it unlikely, it seems far wiser and more practical to keep a safe distance."

"I take your point. However..." I was never to hear his riposte, because at that moment someone caught his eye and his expression once again became grave. "I thank you for the refreshing conversation. If you ever do meet the Duke, I hope you will manage to cling to consciousness despite his fearsome charm. Good night to you." He gave a very proper bow and disappeared into the crush. The lovely ballroom seemed suddenly lackluster in his absence.

What an extremely improper conversation, I thought with a delighted shiver, since I was now sure we hadn't been introduced according to protocol. I was fortunate that Lady Chadwick had been knee-deep in *on dits* and had failed to notice my shocking behavior.

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I recalled myself to the present moment, in which my put-upon chaperone was still speaking. "The Earl is comfortable enough on his own, and should the Duke, the good Lord forbid, succumb to an untimely end, he will be one of the wealthiest men in

England. I shall send your acceptance this very moment. I will tell the Earl to pay us a call tomorrow."

I did not waste my breath with an argument. It was a good match, and my Papa would be most happy with it. I could very well have ended up the bride of some ancient, liver-spotted count, several of whom had hovered near me at times. It was a pity the Earl wasn't more...intriguing. More like that mysterious man who had engaged me in conversation for such a brief moment, but who had never entirely left my mind.

The Earl of Dorchester seemed a bit too much like my brothers to engage my interest. I felt I already knew everything there was to know about the Earl. Horses, brawls, hunting, horses, occasional gambling, horses and hunting. What else did I desire? I couldn't say. I could only feel its lack.

Never mind that kind of thinking. For a girl in my situation, tedium was a small price to pay. I would accept the Earl's proposal and be happy.

## **Chapter Two**

It certainly qualified as a whirlwind courtship. In quick order, the banns were read, our wedding vows exchanged, and the Earl of Dorchester and I found ourselves rattling across the countryside in a fine traveling carriage drawn by a magnificent pair of chestnuts. Behind us followed a baggage coach and a groom on horseback leading my new husband's black thoroughbred alongside.

My husband spoke of all three horses with great enthusiasm during the entire journey from London to Surrey. We were to spend our first few nights as a married couple in a friend's country house. My new husband refused to disclose the identity of our benefactor.

When I expressed my surprise, a wave of red crept up his face. "I'm your husband," he snapped. "You ought to trust me to manage our affairs."

I was loath to start married life with a quarrel, so I murmured simply, "Why, of course I do, my lord."

He relented enough to explain, "An old friend of mine, a mentor of sorts, someone I've known since I was a baby, offered us the use of it."

"How very kind."

"My own manor is quite far, in Suffolk."

"Suffolk has many appealing features, or so I have been told."

"Yes. The trout fishing is quite good, and the hunting is unmatched anywhere in England."

"You must find it very much to your liking."

By the impatient way he nodded, I knew he had already tired of our conversation, and indeed, why should he not have? It was tedious in the extreme to be discussing



such trivialities during what might be considered a momentous occasion, our first extended conversation as a married couple.

“Do you prefer the country or the city?”

His question surprised me, as I thought he already knew I’d barely spent any time in London at all. But then, we knew very little about each other.

“I vastly prefer the country. I find the London air to be filthy and very likely to clog the lungs, and as for the social whirl, it is utterly exhausting. I would prefer to milk cows in the dairy rather than fix a smile to my face whilst I dance with every young man who is commanded to do so by his mother.”

Dorchester’s mouth dropped at this speech of mine. And no wonder, as it was the most I had ever uttered in his presence, and certainly the most candid.

“Although the parks are lovely,” I stammered, in retreat from my own frankness.

Dorchester laughed, a hearty sound that bounced around the carriage. “There’s something we can agree to, then. I detest the time I spend in Town. Now that I’m in the parson’s mousetrap, I no longer must drag myself to Almack’s like a trained monkey.”

We smiled at each other, delighted to have found some common ground.

The carriage ran over a bump in the road, causing my husband to lurch sideways until he was nearly on top of me.

I clutched at him until the carriage had righted itself. But even when it had, he did not immediately return to his previous position. Instead, he held me close and gazed into my eyes. The unfamiliar feeling of physical closeness to a man who was not a brother created a pleasant sense of anticipation. I found myself hoping he would kiss me on the lips. I had always wondered what that would be like.

But he did not. Instead he did a thing that nearly snatched the breath from my body. He put his hand on my bosom. His hand was hot, even through the thick wool of my traveling pelisse. It created a sensation that I have to admit was not unpleasant. But in that moment, I was too surprised to do more than gape at him.

Quickly he pulled it away, then sat back on his seat as if nothing untoward had occurred. And perhaps it had not. I was, after all, his wife. And I was aware that he was entitled to do whatever he pleased with my body. But to the best of my limited knowledge, such intimacies were meant to be performed in the privacy of a bedchamber.

Married life, I supposed, had many surprises to come. I curled back into the seat, listened to the clip-clop of the horses' hooves and tried to determine the nature of the feeling my husband's hand had ignited in my flesh. For it was true that the breast that had borne the weight of his hand felt strangely different from the one that had not.

From the safety of my nest in the corner, I eyed my new husband, whose leg was now jumping impatiently while he watched the pretty countryside pass by. He certainly was a well-muscled man. His thighs and calves looked as if they might burst right out of his clothing. All his movements were quick and impulsive. I wondered how many teacups he'd broken in his mother's drawing room as a child. His most notable feature was the vibrant summer blue of his eyes. He reminded me of my brother Harry, who loved climbing trees and dropping frogs down my back.

I wondered if I could love him. To my understanding, wives were not required to love their husbands in the romantic sense, although they were expected to obey them and bear their children and share their beds when requested. I suspected that I wouldn't mind sharing the Earl's bed. But could I love him the way I'd always wished I would love a husband?

I eyed him dubiously. In my secret fantasies, my love would be a man who saw into my soul, who commanded my heart, someone strong and masterly. But my new husband was so boy-like, I could not imagine feeling more than a sort of sisterly affection for him. Once again, my mind strayed to the green-eyed man at the ball. Why did I remember every word we had spoken, while I had to force myself to pay attention to my husband's description of his last hunt?

My unruly thoughts kept me company during the rest of our short journey. The coach pulled up outside a charming stone manse with a chimney on each end, already puffing smoke in a most welcoming manner. Pink roses tumbled over each other in a tangle of artful disarray, a style that I much preferred to the more well-tended gardens one saw in London. The windows sparkled, and a grove of horse chestnuts in full bloom created a lovely sense of privacy. Whoever owned this house had exquisite taste.

A team of footmen jumped to attention to deal with the horses and assist us with our baggage. I had brought only two trunks with me, which had surprised Lord Dorchester, since ladies generally travel with many more. I did not tell him that what was in those trunks represented the sum total of my worldly possessions.

My husband led me up to the open door of the house, where the butler awaited us. He bowed before us and murmured, “Welcome to *Notre Plaisir*,” but at the time I could not decipher the name. A bustling housekeeper took charge of me and herded me up the curving staircase to a darling chamber that she informed me was to be mine. I felt sure I’d arrived in heaven. I saw a large four-poster bed with emerald velvet bed hangings and a matching counterpane. Bowls of roses filled the room with a delicious scent. The large casement windows were open to the warm May breeze, and a riot of singing birds recalled the chattering crowds at a London ball. The housekeeper introduced me to the girl who was to be my abigail, since I had no maid of my own. Her name was Annie and she bobbed a shy curtsy at me.

When the housekeeper had gone, Annie helped me remove my pelisse. “Would ye like ta rest a while, my lady?” she asked in a pretty country accent.

When you’re a gently bred young lady, people are constantly asking you if you want to rest. In point of fact, I did not want to rest. I wanted to explore this delightful spot, to race down the sloping hillside to see if there was a creek nearby, to bury my nose in the wild roses and hunt for other favorites—harebells and wild pansies and daisies. Raised in the country, I was accustomed to running free and digging in the dirt, not resting in the middle of a beautiful day.

But I was a married lady now, so I sighed and told the girl, "Yes, I thank you. I will take my rest now. Please wake me when supper draws near."

"Of course, my lady." She helped me remove my dusty traveling dress, loosened my stays, then withdrew. After one more longing glance at the sparkling world outside my window, I lay down on the bed. Perhaps my husband would come to me. I was quite intrigued by the marital mysteries soon to unfold. To my surprise, the fatigue of the last few weeks took hold and I fell asleep, my last thought being the memory of the Earl's hand on my bosom.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Notre Plaisir, that afternoon*

"I trust your journey was a pleasant one?" In the stables, the Marquis watched, amused, as Dorchester brushed the mane of one of his chestnuts. A stable hand's work, performed by an Earl.

"Pleasant enough."

"And my little Alicia?"

"Pretty. She's a quiet one."

"*Restful to the ears*, I believe was your request."

"Yes, not one of those irritating chatterboxes. Though I hope she's not overly quiet." The Earl frowned and stubbed his boot into the straw on the floor of the stables.

"Meaning?"

"I didn't mention this in our previous discussion, but I require a certain liveliness between the sheets. I don't want to feel as if I'm in a museum or a subscription library where you can't make a peep."

"My dear boy, you stun me."

The Earl looked up at the mocking face of the Marquis, which was now drawn into lines of exaggerated astonishment.

"Have you actually entered the doors of a library? Why, this is shocking news indeed."

"Oh, balderdash. You know what I'm talking about."

"I do, and I don't mean to make sport of you on your wedding night. Let me assure you that your concerns are unfounded. Have you never heard the phrase 'still waters run deep'?"

"Maybe I have, I pay no attention to such things," said the Earl with an impatient shrug.

"Alicia Silverwood, excuse me, the Countess of Dorchester, may be quiet, but she runs deep. Deep and passionate. You need have no fears on that count."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Little Alicia and I had a memorable encounter one day when she was no more than twelve or thirteen."

The Earl dropped his mane comb on the stable floor. "You didn't," he said in horror.

"No, no, I'm not nearly as perverse as you think," answered the Marquis with irritation. "Alicia was doing some exploring of her own, and I simply happened upon her. I can say no more."

"But she is untouched, is she not? You haven't married me off to an impure—"

"Dorch, not another word." The Marquis held up a hand to stop his friend. "Your wife is a virgin, I have no doubt about that. Whether or not you deserve her is another matter. I will leave you to your horse. You show far more understanding of your hunters than you do of women."

"I *am* a master horseman."

"And I am a master cocksman. Tonight, you will hold your tongue until Alicia is begging for you and you have no doubt that you have acquired a woman of great passion and, as you say, liveliness."

The Earl picked up the comb and, grumbling, set back to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I awoke, the house felt different. I lay for a moment collecting my thoughts. Darkness had fallen, and the sky outside my window was the deep blue of sapphires, fading into black. The air had become quite still. The murmur of crickets arose from the woods.

But that wasn't the source of the strangeness. After a moment, I realized what I'd sensed. Someone was in my room.

"Annie?" I bolted up to a sitting position. "Is it time for supper? Have I missed the entire evening?"

In the corner, where I vaguely remembered a settee positioned to look out the window, a figure rose from the shadows.

"No, indeed," said the figure, revealing itself to be a man.

"Lord Dorchester?" I said it tentatively, knowing even as I spoke that the man was not my husband. I recognized that voice, though I was still too sleep-addled to bring the name to mind.

"No," he said, coming closer. He bent to light a candle from the fire, and with a shock I saw the dark eyes and weatherworn face I'd known since I was a child.

"Beaumont?" The night had slipped into a realm of absurdity that made me wonder if perhaps I still dreamed.

The Marquis gave a mocking bow. "*Ma petite* Alicia."

"I'm married now," I said nonsensically.

"Yes, I know. You're married to my young friend the Earl of Dorchester."

"Your friend..."

Realizing I was in utter dishabille, I wrapped the coverlet around me. It seemed inconsequential under his burning gaze, as if his eyes alone could shrivel the lace into smoke. "Please explain why you are in my bedchamber."

"Please explain why *you* are in *my* bedchamber."

"*Your...*" A piece of the puzzle fell into place. "This is your house?"

"Indeed. *Notre Plaisir*. Perhaps you've heard me speak of it over the years. My haven, my hideaway from the rigors of Town life. You look lovely in this bed, *ma chérie*, just as I anticipated. Now I suggest you give up this missish behavior and exit from those coverlets so I can get a better look at you."

"But, I'm not, Dorchester is..." I spluttered. This made no sense. Dorchester was my husband, and yet here was the Marquis behaving as if he had the rights to me.

"Dorch is your husband. He is well aware that I am in this room at this moment, and he knows precisely what I intend to do. That is to say, not precisely, as he possesses very little imagination, poor boy. Perhaps you've noticed this fact?"

I had, but I didn't see how it concerned the Marquis. "What does any of this have to do with the fact that you're here with me, when it should be my husband?"

The Marquis lit another candle with the one he was holding and placed it in a wall sconce. He did the same with several more, so the room filled with flickering candlelight. It added to the feeling of being in a dream. He closed the window so the air from outside wouldn't disturb the candles. The murmur of crickets and other night noises subsided, so we were alone in this silent bedchamber, the Marquis and I.

When he was done, he turned to me. "Do you remember that brief but memorable moment in the barn at Silverwood Manor?"

My face burned. How could I ever forget such a mortifying event?

"You displaying your delicious young bosom to that ragamuffin."

"He was a goatherd," I said hotly.

"So you told me. And a mute. You explained that you'd chosen him so he wouldn't betray your secret."

"I was curious! I merely wanted to see for myself—" I bit down on my lip. The Marquis already knew what I'd wanted, since he'd interrogated me relentlessly at the time.

He prowled toward me like a lynx stalking the chicken coop. "I've never forgotten the sight of you, with your dress all undone. You were on the verge of letting him put his hand to your nipple, were you not?"

"No," I answered hotly, because such a thing would be unthinkable for a young lady. The whole adventure was unthinkable, but a fever of insatiable curiosity had taken hold of me, and I had proceeded with my bacon-brained idea without further thought.

"You can't hide the truth from me, Alicia. I know you too well."

"I think you should leave now." I clutched the counterpane around me to add an additional layer of protection, as his slow approach had brought him to the foot of the bed.

"I can't do that. The Earl of Dorchester is relying on me."

"He...he knows you're—"

"Of course he knows. I'm here at his request. He'll be here a bit later."

My thoughts were a perfect whirl of confusion. My distraction allowed the Marquis to tear the counterpane from my grasp. In the next instant he strode to the side of the bed, picked me up under the arms and placed my feet on the floor.

"You're a dissipated, dissolute disgrace to your name," I hissed at him. My fiery words seemed only to urge him on. He put his hands to the front of my petticoat and ripped the delicate cotton away from my body. Now I had only my loosened stays and chemise to keep me from nakedness. I batted furiously at his hands. "Does my husband know you're treating me in this manner?"



"Your husband wants a warm, willing wife. He would not be happy to see you behaving like a harridan."

"If he were here, I wouldn't be." I spat the words at him.

"He isn't here because he has sent me in his stead. Your duty is clear, *chérie*."

My duty was anything but clear. Yes, I was supposed to obey my husband. But wasn't my husband supposed to initiate me into wedded life?

"I know you, Alicia. I know you down to the bottom of your soul. You're just as curious now as you were then. You want to know what's in store in your married life."

I whirled away from him. "Only from my husband. Not you."

Iron arms gripped me from behind and flipped me onto the bed. I felt the weight of him against my back. I struggled to free myself, to no avail. The Marquis let me exhaust myself with my flailing until I lay still. Then he lowered his voice to a gentle murmur in my ear.

"You know me to be a man of my word. I make you two promises, Alicia. The first is that I shall not take your maidenhead. Only one man may do so, and that is your husband. The second is that tonight you will experience more pleasure than you've ever imagined, thanks to me. If the Earl were here tonight, you'd receive no gentle caresses, no stroking such as I intend to give you. Your nipples would be left untouched, save for a rough tweak or two. Whereas I intend to savor their sweetness and watch them stand to attention like pink sentinels of your desire."

Pinned as if I were a helpless butterfly, I lost myself in the soothing cadence of his speech. I became aware of the heat and strength of his body, and an unfamiliar tingling in my belly.

"You may think you prefer the Earl, but you'd regret it deeply. Your deflowering would be painful rather than pleasurable. Harsh rather than sweet. Such an event in a young girl's life should bring tears of joy along with the tears of pain. That is what I offer, and the Earl, cognizant of your best interests as well as his own, has allowed me to provide this service. Do you understand?"

I nodded, and when he didn't respond, whispered, "Yes."

"Then come. Rise now."

The weight lifted off me and he helped me to my feet. When I stood facing him, I saw a look such as I'd never seen on his jaded face before. He looked almost tender. Slowly, gently, he traced the skin along the edge of my loosened stays. I felt a prickling in the tips of my breasts. When I looked down at myself, my nipples were just as he said, pink and standing up under the layers of undergarments. He hooked his finger in the busk between my breasts. My breath caught.

"I won't proceed further unless I have your full consent. Despite my reputation, I am not in the habit of forcing my attentions on unwilling girls. I must know that you accept what I'm offering you, fully and completely."

His black gaze seared into me, as if he could see all the hidden corners of my soul. And perhaps he could, because God help me, I wanted the things he'd promised, and more. I wanted to lie down on the bed and roll myself in the bedclothes, or strip off my chemise and run outside under the stars. I didn't fully understand what was happening to me. My body felt heavy and yet light at the same time.

"I do," I whispered. "I accept."

His eyes glittered in the candlelight. I felt dizzy. For a moment, I was back in the barn at home, caught with a goatherd's hand hovering over my breast. I'd looked up in alarm at the sound of soft laughter. The sight of the Marquis' delighted, mocking smile had turned me to stone.

There had been another feeling as well, a charge in the air that had made my skin prickle.

I felt it again as his eyes deliberately consumed my body, top to toe. Under my eyelashes, I performed an inspection of my own. The Marquis was not a bad-looking man, slender of build, perhaps a head taller than myself. As always, he was dressed in the height of fashion, with an embroidered cream waistcoat and a splendid coat of dark blue superfine that fit him to perfection. He always appeared to be mocking the world

around him, but over the years I had on occasion seen him perform small kindnesses that surprised me.

“There has always been a special feeling between us, has there not?” As he spoke, he deftly removed my stays until I stood in nothing more than my chemise. I shivered at his nearness. Not for the first time, I thought what a powerful man he was, not in physique but in presence...a powerful man inclined to darkness.

He picked up a candle and slowly walked around me, shining its light on my body. The warmth from the candle paled in comparison to the penetrating weight of his gaze. I fixed my eyes on the pretty dressing table on the far side of the room. I counted five silver-backed brushes and considered attempting to count the individual bristles to distract myself from the strange feelings stealing over me.

A gentle touch on my posterior made me start. His hand cupped my bottom and warmth flooded my being. How could such a simple touch create such an uproar within me? With a firm hand and wandering fingers, he stroked my flesh. I felt the back of my chemise inch up my legs. The feel of his fingertips roaming across the backs of my thighs was so exquisite, I closed my eyes so the pleasure would continue.

“Ah no, my dear, you are not allowed to close your eyes. I want you to fully comprehend that it is I, the dreaded Marquis de Beaumont, who is bringing you this enjoyment. Whose hands are now stroking your tender buttocks?”

Tendrils of fire seemed to spread across my bottom as he quickened his touch. “Yours,” I gasped.

“And who intends to remove this interfering chemise from your body?”

My throat became suddenly parched. If he removed my chemise, I would be naked before the most notorious rake in England. “You,” I whispered. “But, please...”

“Yes?” His fingers danced up the curve of my spine and my belly seemed to quiver in response. Cool air caressed my back as he drew up the chemise. “Ah, so lovely. I’ve waited a very long time for this moment.”

I clutched the front of it to my chest. My head was such a confusing swarm of thoughts, I didn't know what I wanted to say. *Please continue. Stop this instant.* The two opposite impulses battled in my mind. "Why me?" I managed. "Why a long time?"

"Why you?" My question did not make him pause in his intrusions on my body. Every inch of exposed skin drew a caress or a pat from his relentless, curious, knowing hands. Every touch sent a cascade of shivers across my flesh. "I'm sure you don't remember, but you first caught my eye as a girl dashing after your brothers. You ran directly into me, like a Spanish bull into a cape. I have been accustomed to find myself a figure of fright for young girls. But you seemed to have no fear of me. I plucked you off the ground and held you high. You looked back at me with those frank eyes of yours, whose color I find no words for, somewhere in the mysterious realm between gray and blue, and you said, quite simply, "You were directly in my path. You will please to put me down now." And so I did, and watched, bemused, as you raced away to join your brothers. At that moment I knew you were an unusual girl."

By this time he was in front of me, loosing my hands from their grip on my chemise. I looked up at him and found myself surprised by a hint of softness in his usually sharp eyes.

"This chemise," he told me softly, "can hide nothing from me. I know your soul, *ma chérie*, perhaps better than you do yourself. You desire things you cannot name. You sense it in the springtime air, the moonlight over a stream, the scent of lilacs in the sunshine. The world promises you something just beyond your senses, something you cannot grasp, simply because you don't yet know how. I will show you how, my dear, if you will tell me one thing."

As if compelled by some mysterious force, my fists relaxed their hold on my garment and fell to my side. I stood, a willing victim, waiting for the Marquis to make my unwanted clothing disappear. To my utter disappointment, he stepped back.

"Oh no, sweet. You will be an eager participant in our adventure, or I will have none of it. Now answer me a question, please." His suddenly brisk tone made me raise

my head in surprise. "I have told you how I perceived you at first meeting. Now I require the same of you. Did you find an ogre in your path that day, or perhaps at our next encounter, if that one is lost to your memory? Am I a figure from your nightmares, a dark and satanic man to be feared, or do you allow the possibility of a more—"

"Shhh." From somewhere, I found the boldness to rise on to my toes and put a hand over his mouth. "I do not think you an ogre. Never have I thought so."

His eyes, over the top of my hand, looked painfully relieved by my answer. I took my hand away, and he grasped it tightly. "No ogre?"

"Not at all. Do you not remember the time you comforted me when my brothers refused to take me with them to fish for trout?"

"You were fifteen at the time, and had to stay at home and complete your watercolor."

"Yes. No one seemed to be the least bit sympathetic, save you, despite the way you teased me out of my suffering. But did you never wonder why I unburdened myself to you?"

"No," he answered, his brow furrowing in surprise. "I was simply overjoyed that you did."

"You had gained my trust by never betraying my secret."

A spark lit deep in his eyes. "Ah, the goatherd."

"Yes. For days, weeks, I lived in dread of what punishment I might receive. I never imagined that you would keep my secret for me. To this day, I don't understand why you did."

"Do you not?" The spark grew to a devilish grin. He tilted my chin up with one hand, while the other busied itself feeling my bosom through my chemise. "Because some day I knew we would find ourselves here, you and I, and your trust would come to full flower. Now I intend to rid you of your clothing. Do you consent?"

The play of his hand on my bosom was unbearably exciting. My breath seemed to retreat into my throat. Gazing into his eyes, where the promise of unknown pleasures lurked, I nodded.

"That will do for now. Later, I intend to extract a more pronounced expression of your desire."

My skin shivered with longing and my ears became tired of so many words. A rebellious impulse drove me to attempt to take command of the proceedings. "Do it, please," I ordered him. "I grow weary of talk."

Delighted laughter accompanied the Marquis' enthusiastic removal of my chemise. "There's my girl," he breathed when I was naked. "Just as I thought, willful, forthright and utterly innocent." He stroked his hand across my belly. "So fresh and tender. Your skin is like that of a fawn. Your breasts are delightful, and these little pebbles are crying out for my attention, aren't they?"

Oh, they were, yes they were, as I discovered when he placed his warm hands on my breasts, the nipples caught between two fingers. A frenzied joy lanced through me and brought a fluttering to my lower parts. A moan escaped my lips.

"Ah, just as I suspected," he murmured. "Such sensitive little morsels deserve all the attention I can spare from the rest of your delectable body. But there's simply so much to discover."

He lowered his head to my bosom and to my utter shock put his tongue to my nipple. All I could do was gasp, then hold his head close to me so that I should not fall into a swoon from the pleasure. Wet warmth surrounded me. With tongue and teeth he nipped at my nipples until I bit back a scream.

At times, late at night under the bedcovers, I had felt my own bosom and other private parts, but the sensation was entirely different when produced by a man's firm, commanding mouth.

A feeling of weakness stole through my limbs. I lost track of where his hands were and what they were doing, other than to comprehend that I no longer had any will to protest.

In fact, my body seemed to have become complicit in the Marquis' explorations. My legs parted of their own will as his hand neared that most secret of all places. But despite my manifest desire, he merely brushed his hand over the soft hair on my mound.

"Only when you're ready, *chérie*," he murmured into my bosom. "Entirely, indubitably ready. Annie? You may enter."

## **Chapter Three**

I wrenched myself from the Marquis' arms. To my shock, the abigail came into the room carrying a bowl of liquid and a washcloth. She closed the door behind her and stood with her eyes cast downward.

I glared my outrage at the Marquis. "Now, now, my girl, no need for such a look. Annie is here merely to prepare you. You're accustomed to lady's maids bathing you. This is merely a variation on that theme. She will ply you with soothing oils and scents to enhance your experience. This is a technique I discovered during my travels in the Orient. When I returned, I trained Annie and have found her to be greatly proficient in the art. Now come stand in the center of the room here."

He led me to the spot he indicated, then lifted both of my hands into the air with one of his own.

"Beautiful, is she not, Annie?"

"Aye, my lord. Most beautiful." I detected a smile in her voice that was oddly reassuring. She came close, dipped her hands in the liquid, and brought them to the outer edge of my hips. I shivered at the unfamiliar touch. The scent of rose, lavender, and something spicy emanated from the oil. Her hands gently traveled up my torso until they approached my bosom. I caught my breath, wanting and fearing her touch on my nipples, but it did not come. Perhaps they were too erect, I wondered, embarrassed at my own cravings. Was it natural for a girl's nipples to stand so firmly from their chest?

The Marquis' deep voice intruded into my thoughts. "I want you to become accustomed to hands on your body, hands that do not belong to your husband. There are many ways to attain pleasure, and I find it absurd to limit oneself to the marital



relation only. Dorch is in full agreement with me, or at least he shall be. Tell me how this feels to you."

My head fell back as Annie rubbed the oil into the space between my breasts, along my neck, and on the plump outer curve of my bosom. "Lovely," I breathed. Oh how I wished she would touch my nipples, but she seemed determined to avoid them. She knelt down to rub oil into my ankles, then stroked her hands up the inner part of my thighs. My legs quivered and I would have fallen to the floor if the Marquis hadn't held me upright.

"Leave her cunny to me," he told Annie. She nodded, and I didn't have to inquire what the word meant. Growing up as I had, in the country, I'd overheard several references to that part of the female anatomy. I'd once taken a hand mirror and attempted to peek at my own. My curiosity has always been one of my biggest flaws.

Annie disappeared behind me and worked the oil into my flanks. And suddenly I felt a strong, more masculine touch on my front. With one hand, the Marquis kept my arms raised above me, with the other he took a firm grasp of one nipple. I cried out at the sharp stab of excitement. He put his fingers to his mouth to wet them, then pulled at my nipple until helpless whimpers flew from my mouth. Then he transferred his attentions to my other nipple, until both were plump and gleaming, nearly twice their habitual size.

"Oh, please," I gasped, not sure what I was begging for. "Please, more, more."

But just then I jumped a bit, because Annie's hands had found their way to the crease in my buttocks. She rubbed from the top of the crevice all the way to the edge of my most private parts. I'm embarrassed to say I tilted my hips to allow her more freedom in her ministrations. I did the same with my chest, thrusting my nipples forward into the Marquis' grasp.

In that moment, I knew I would do anything to make these intoxicating caresses continue. The pretty room around me disappeared into a haze of delight. My two

determined pleasers were both behind me, a fact that relieved me greatly and allowed me to imagine this was all a lovely dream.

After all, it couldn't possibly be true.

"Would you allow me to touch between your legs?" the Marquis asked, breathing hot into my ear. He let loose my hands so they were no longer over my head, then brought them down to be gathered behind my back by Annie. He himself moved to my side.

My response was a sharp "oh" of surprise. He appeared to accept it as assent, for soon my thighs felt a tickle and a forceful hand pushed them apart. And then a most wonderful feeling ensued, a melting pleasure such as I had never imagined. All the world became consumed by the mounting fire provoked by the Marquis' hand. His fingers pushed aside my flesh to press the tiny spot where all my urges appeared to concentrate. I had discovered this little nub during my own explorations, but I did not know its name, and certainly it had never produced the sensations elicited by the Marquis de Beaumont's devilish hand.

I squirmed under his caresses, only to find my movements restricted by the presence of the abigail behind me. My skin flushed and became especially sensitive to the touch. I felt the rough linen of her dress press against my back. Her sweet breath came quickly on the back of my neck. I knew I should be embarrassed by her presence, but I was not. The knowledge that she was watching my urgent writhing brought me to a new peak of excitement. I leaned back against her soft body.

"Oh, *ma petite*, you are even more sweet than I dared to hope. Open your legs for me, yes, precisely like that, oh, tell me how that feels to you." The Marquis' hot murmurs added to my fever.

"It's...oh, I have no words for it." Was it proper for anything to feel so divine? Worry cast a shadow over my pleasure, until I remembered his promise not to steal my maidenhead. After all, this was what my husband desired. My hesitation disappeared, and I widened my legs to allow his hand deeper into my most private area. As I did so,

I became aware of an unusual wetness. I feared he would notice and become disgusted, but instead, he appeared delighted at his discovery.

"A most enticing juiciness," he told me. "Nothing so sweet as a maiden's first dew. This, my dear," he said, fingering the little nub, "is your clitoris. It is the source of your pleasure, though some men of science are not yet convinced of this. They have not had the experience that I have been fortunate enough to acquire. Whenever a man, or a woman, should such a circumstance arise, rubs it and strokes it, gently at first, but then increasing the speed and roughness of the caress, you will find yourself taken over by pleasurable sensations. Many gentlemen do not have the patience to locate the clitoris, or to stroke it properly."

"But..." I gasped as he pinched it between his fingers and rolled it so my knees buckled beneath me. "My husband..."

"You and I will enlighten him." The Marquis sounded amused at the prospect. "I will not allow my little Alicia to do without such joys."

Gratitude filled me. Could any family friend be more gracious and generous than the Marquis de Beaumont? My dark guardian would save me from a dull life devoid of the sensations now rioting through me.

"I thank you greatly," I said in a pant. "But what..."

"Yes, my dear?" He deepened his caress of my clitoris—such a pretty word—and plumped my breasts with his other hand. Oh, he was a devil, that man, snatching the words from my mouth before I could even form them.

I struggled to speak my worried thought. "What...happens next?"

"Next?" The superfine cloth of his coat pressed against my bosom. God forgive me, I rubbed my nipples against it. It aroused in me a virtual flood of desire. I knew there was more to this act between a man and a woman, and I wanted to know everything about it.

As swiftly as I could, I composed myself. "I've heard talk of a man's rod penetrating within the body and causing dreadful pain. You mentioned such a possibility yourself."

"You are not to distress yourself about that. Do you not wish to know where our present experiment is leading us?" His finger dipped inside me, drawing a squeak from my astonished lips.

"Your finger is within my body!" I told him.

"My finger is in your cunt. *Ta chatte*. Your prick-skinner. Fancy bit. Goatmilker. Itching Jenny. Tickle-Toby." With each odd word, he waggled his finger. "Only such a delightful haven would have so many different names."

"But...is that the usual procedure?"

"Do you dislike it?"

I pondered the question. In truth, I preferred the fondling of my clitoris, but the finger inside me was not unpleasant. Perhaps it required... "A second finger might add to my enjoyment," I proposed.

The Marquis let out a crack of laughter that made Annie jump. I myself seemed to have no bones left to perform such a dramatic act as jumping. I merely smiled at him with a lazy fondness.

"You find me amusing?"

"Amusing, yes, as well as a revelation. Your brothers taught you to eschew absurd airs of missishness, did they not?"

"They could not abide airs of any kind. But to be frank, I do not wish to discuss my brothers at this time."

"To be frank. You are ever frank, are you not? You are a truth-teller, so rare in our times. Perhaps that is the particular fascination of Alicia Silverwood. Incandescent frankness and a tender freshness impossible to resist. And yet I shall resist. My fingers

are better put to use on your delicious clitoris. I cannot risk stealing with a finger what is your husband's by right."

He withdrew his finger and spoke to the abigail. "Annie, leave us now. Thank you for your services."

Annie left the bedchamber with a humble bob and curtsy.

"Why did you send her away?" I asked.

"She has served her purpose. Now I would like to be alone with my delectable little morsel." He placed his hands on my hips and moved us in lockstep back toward the bed. When I felt it bump against my thighs, he gently bent me over and laid me on the coverlet. I was reminded of how I'd clung to it when he had first appeared. It seemed years ago. Spread naked beneath him, I looked up at my Marquis. He still wore every stitch of his clothing.

"Open your legs," he told me.

Instead, I lifted one leg and placed my foot on his thigh. "Why do you not remove your clothing?"

"I do not wish to," he said brusquely. "Open your legs," he said again.

Instead, I raised my other leg to rest on his thigh. I gave him a saucy smile, delighted with my disobedience. But I did not expect the consequences of my rebellion. Quick as a wink, he snatched my legs up over his shoulders so my most private parts were directly under his nose. A gasp of purest shock escaped my open mouth. And then he did something even more astounding. He lowered his head and kissed my private parts. I struggled, but his hands held tight to my thighs. With my body suspended thus in the air, he prodded his tongue against my clitoris.

I shrieked.

He lifted his head and frowned down at me. "Do you wish me to stop?"

"No!" I shrieked again.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Do that, what you did just now." I could barely believe such a thing had occurred. I itched with impatience to feel it again.

"This?" He bent his head to me again. I groaned my assent as he set to work with tongue and lips and even, I fear, teeth. The wetness I had noticed earlier now became a virtual flood, my juices combining with those from the Marquis' mouth. But once again, I had no sense of shame, as I would have expected. My head thrashed from one side to the other as waves of starlight surged across my vision. Something was occurring within me, a certain kind of building and gathering and urging and needing. *I need, I need*, I wanted to tell him, but all that came from my mouth was a helpless whimper. And in truth, I didn't know what I needed.

Fortunately, the Marquis did. As the glorious sensations mounted, my trust in him became absolute. If my life depended on attaining the mystery I sensed ahead, then my life was in his hands. In his mouth. In his clever lips and diabolical tongue. I gave myself over to him, body and soul. The candlelit chamber, the dark glass of the windows, the velvet hangings on each side of the bed, all faded to nothing. All I saw was the dark head of the Marquis burrowed between my legs, the white knuckles of his hands as they anchored my thighs to his shoulders. All I smelled was the scent of the Marquis' eau de cologne, mingled with salt perspiration and an unfamiliar aroma that I suspected came from me. All I felt was the rough scrape of his chin on my flesh, his hair tickling my skin and, above all else, the sharp, searing pleasure of his tongue on my cunt.

And then, all my senses became reduced to one. The thunderclouds of pleasure building inside me cracked open, lightning through the darkness. The physical world shattered and I was transported into a realm of light and joy, where I spun among the stars and shimmered with the moon. In this precious realm no time existed, or perhaps I had lost the mental faculties that would permit me to mark time. Beautiful images flowed through my mind.

In the midst of them, to my eternal surprise, smiled the green eyes of the stranger from the rout.

I would have stayed there forever, had the Marquis not had one more surprise in store for me. He lifted his head, aimed an enigmatic smile in my direction, then spoke over his shoulder. "You may take her now," he said to the empty chamber.

My confused senses could not decipher this simple statement. I could not comprehend the appearance of another man in the room I had assumed to be empty. I only vaguely recalled the sound of the door opening and closing again while I was in my altered state. I could not make sense of the features of this other man, his over-bright blue eyes and fever-flushed cheeks, his impatient stride to the bed.

"You took your sweet time, damn your eyes," said the other man. "Another minute and I'd be useless."

"Patience has never been your strong suit, my dear boy." The Marquis graciously removed my legs from his shoulders and, with one last caress, let them drop back onto the bed.

I finally put a name to the eager face. "Dorchester?"

"Who else would it be?" My husband hurriedly unbuttoned his breeches.

"Why are you...?" My question didn't bear finishing. This was his wedding night. That's why he was here.

For a frantic moment I wondered if it was proper to join with two men in one night. But whom could I ask? Lady Chadwick was not present and would no doubt fall into a faint if posed such a question, or any of my other questions. Was it wrong to be naked before two men? Was it wrong to experience such ecstasy at the hands of a man I was not married to? In this sea of unknowns I clung to one thought. A wife does as her husband wishes.

"Would you like me to withdraw?" the Marquis asked.

"Do what you will," Dorch growled. Roughly he parted my legs, which were still weak and limp. "I hope you're ready, wife."

And then I saw the rod of which I'd heard tell. I'd glimpsed my brothers' members on occasion, such as when they'd stripped for swimming in the creek, but never one engorged in this manner. It stood erect from his body, thick as a baton, purple as a tulip. But such flowery comparisons did not do justice to its forceful nature. This was a weapon of war, it seemed, because with no preamble, he plunged it inside me. Pain shafted through me and my body arched.

"No, no, dear boy," protested the Marquis. "Delicately, gently the first time."

"Stubble it, Beaumont. Your work is done. You got her hot, now I intend to have my fill." He stroked again and strangely, the initial pain faded as if it were a summer fog. Something quite different took its place. The quivers from my trip to that other realm had never entirely subsided, and now they clutched at my insides with renewed vigor. Each of the Earl's fierce thrusts created a rumbling within me. Another storm built and I thrust my hips to meet my husband's need. That other world beckoned me again with its sweet intoxication.

I knew enough by now to be even more grateful to the Marquis for the initiation he had granted me. But I must admit the memory of the older man quickly faded. Instead, the young, vigorous image of my husband took his place. My body responded to his virility. I embraced his sturdy flesh within my own. I gloried in the bright blue eyes narrowed to pinpricks of lust. He had a different smell from the Marquis, fresher, more vital. I caught the scent of leather and horse sweat, as if he'd recently jumped from the back of his thoroughbred and bounded up the stairs to mount me.

And ride me he did. My husband was a lusty, strong man and I rejoiced in his desire for me. He rutted inside me, his powerful rod searching out every corner of my womb. The cloth of his breeches crushed against the back of my thighs. He gripped my hips to grind me against him. Once again I lost all consciousness of my surroundings.



An insistent sound reached my ears, a mewling such as that of a kitten. It came from my own mouth.

And then the wave broke, just as it had before, but deeper within me. My body clenched around that wonderful shaft and I arched to the heavens. Ah, such bliss it was to find myself transported yet again to that sweet land where I floated free and unfettered. From beneath, in that other world I'd left, I heard my husband give a shout of triumph as he released a fountain of hot liquid into me. I felt him lie across my body. I felt him rub his cheek into my belly and heard him whisper, though I could not make out the words.

Like a blossom falling from a tree, I gently returned to the bedchamber where the two lords awaited me. I lay still, reflecting on the strange series of events that had occurred in the past few hours. In the dark shadows beyond the bed, I saw the Marquis lounging against the frame of the window.

My husband lifted himself to his elbows. His blue eyes had a clear look to them, as if a fever had lifted. "My darling sweetheart," he said. I blinked my surprise. I had not thought he cared much for me. But apparently our intimate encounter had inspired new affection. I searched my own heart and found a certain tenderness that had not existed that morning.

"My dear husband," I murmured back.

"Are you in pain?"

"Nothing to speak of. Perhaps some slight tenderness." My cheeks warmed. Now that the storm of desire had passed, embarrassment took hold. "May we be alone now?" I whispered to him.

Dorchester lifted his head and spoke over his shoulder. "Beaumont, my bride and I require some moments of privacy. I bid you good night. We will join you at breakfast."

The figure at the window stood very still, then gave a slight bow and ambled across the room. I felt pity for him in his lonely state. Were he and his wife unhappy with each other? The Marquise was a diamond of the first water, as exquisite as a swan floating on

a lake, but I had detected cruelty under the feminine façade. The Marquis was nearly her opposite, hard at first glance, tender in his heart.

Thoughts of the Marquis' marriage disappeared as my husband ran his hand across my waist. "You're far prettier without all those pieces of froth you ladies wear."

"You do not like my clothing?" In another man, such a comment might offend, but Dorchester had a boyishness about him that made it impossible to be outraged.

"I like it fine, as far as it goes. Do you like to ride?"

"I like it fine, as far as it goes."

After too long a pause, he chuckled. "You possess a quick wit."

"Do I?" This came as a surprise to me, although I suspected Dorchester was not the best judge of wit in a woman.

"You aren't a bluestocking, are you?"

"Good heavens, no, I barely know how to read and will have to rely on my housekeeper to keep all the accounts."

After another overly long pause, he surprised me with a tickle on my ribs that made me roll over and giggle. "You're not supposed to tease your husband."

"Are you so certain I'm teasing?" Through my giggles, I batted his hands away, but he was too strong for me. He pinned my hands above my head and tickled until tears streamed down my cheeks, just as my brothers had used to do. For a moment I was back at home, in our favorite meadow where my brothers had built a tree fort, and they were tickling me because I had uncovered their theft of several loaves of bread from the kitchen. The memory replaced the strange newness of my marriage with familiarity.

"Stop, I beg of you," I pleaded, when I thought I could bear no more.

He stopped immediately. My brothers would have continued until I'd promised to perform some dread chore for them. At that moment, I knew I would have no trouble getting my way with my husband. He lay on his side next to me and touched my breast.

"Such bouncy muffins you have. Will you sit above me so I can look at them?"

"Yes, but you must remove your clothing first. I must see what my husband looks like."

Eagerly, he bounded from the bed and tore off his clothing. His body was fine and muscular, his skin white. Even naked he looked ready to leap onto a horse or throw himself into a cold stream. Suspended between his legs I saw the curled husk of the mighty shaft that had entered me. I scooted forward on my knees to examine it more closely. It resembled a sleeping mouse, its color a dusky purple at the tip, and a rosy brown where it disappeared into a cushion of wiry hairs.

One of my passions as a child was observation of nature, and it was as such that I analyzed my husband's manly parts. But he seemed not to understand my interest.

"Why do you stare so?" He blocked my view with both of his hands.

"I'm curious."

"You're an odd girl, I find."

I was silent. This was not the first time I had been called odd. But I remembered the kind things the Marquis had said to me, that I was a "truth-teller" and possessed "incandescent frankness and tender freshness". Would my husband see those aspects of my nature as oddities?

"I suppose some find me odd," I answered. "But I do not."

He shrugged as if the entire discussion suddenly bored him. "It matters not. I find you pretty and you do not pester me with annoyances. Most girls chatter on so that I can barely bring myself to listen to them."

I did not know how to answer that. I grew up with boys, not girls.

"I believe we will do very well together." He flung himself back onto the bed. "Now come sit atop me so I can ogle your bosom." With one mighty heave, he rolled me over onto his body. I straddled my legs around him and sat up. He put his hands to my breasts and squeezed enthusiastically. I cannot say that it felt bad, nor good. Unlike the Marquis, he had no sensibility in his touch. And yet it seemed I was always greedy

for fingers on my nipples, no matter how fumbling and unskilled. Warmth rose within me. I half closed my eyes and used the memory of the Marquis' finesse to enhance Dorchester's hapless efforts.

He bounced my breasts around for a while, then declared himself ready for sleep, and within moments he snored at my side.

I had only been married a day, and already I felt I knew everything necessary about my husband. Dorch was youthful, impulsive, spirited, restless and supremely lacking in interest in anything beyond his ken, including the delicate feelings of his wife.

What, I wondered, was the nature of his friendship with the Marquis? Why had the revered Duke of Warrington made him his heir? Surely he must possess other worthy qualities of which I was not yet aware.

Indeed, one of them was quite clear. He was sufficiently aware of his own failings to allow another man to all but deflower his bride. I shuddered to think what the experience would have been like without the intercession of the Marquis. I would be forever grateful to both men.

But could I continue happily on with only Dorchester in my bed? Would the urgings of my body be content with such a simple lover? And why had the eyes of the stranger at the rout appeared to me during that moment of bliss? As my husband snuggled and snored next to me, I worried that perhaps the Marquis had awakened desires that were best left undisturbed. Had my dark lord granted me a curse rather than a boon?

## **Chapter Four**

The crack of a billiards cue against a ball shattered the heavy quiet. Balls tumbled into pockets like mice running from a hungry cat.

The Earl of Dorchester found the Marquis de Beaumont hunched over the green baize-covered table. A fire crackled companionably in the hearth and the pleasant scent of a cheroot perfumed the billiards room.

The Marquis straightened up and set his billiards cue on the floor as if it were a wizard's staff. "There you are, my boy. I trust I find you well?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And your bride?"

"Sleeping like an angel." A soft smile spread across his face. "And you need not ask for your thanks. I am in your debt. I believe no man has ever had such a satisfactory wedding night. I napped for a short while, then woke up and took my wife again, much to her expressed delight, rested once more, then had another go. Her eagerness for the act seems fathomless."

With hooded eyes, the Marquis chalked his cue tip. "I promised you a warm and willing wife."

"That you did. I have never known you to welch on a promise. I already said I'm in your debt."

"Interesting," murmured the Marquis. He racked the balls. "And how do you intend to repay this debt?"

The Earl screwed his face into a frown. "Would one of my new fillies do the job?"

"I'm afraid not. First stroke?"

The Earl absently took the cue. "Perhaps the name of my tailor?"

"Non-starter, my boy. My tailor would laugh yours off Bond Street if he ever set foot there."

The Earl lined up his shot. "Then I don't know how to please you, my lord. You must name your price."

"The answer is as plain as the nose on your face. I want little Lady Alicia."

A sharp "thwack" split the room as the Earl misjudged the path of the cue and nearly tore a rip into the fabric of the table. "Why?"

The Marquis ran his hand over the green baize. "My dear boy, no emotion is worth damaging my billiards table."

"Sorry. Now tell me what you want with my wife."

"Well, if you must know, for many years now I've lost the, shall we say, *joie de vivre* I possessed before my own leg-shackling."

Dorchester's open face grew dark, as it did whenever the Marquise was mentioned.

"I find our little Countess ignites a spark I've been sorely lacking."

The Earl fingered the billiards cue, then shook his head firmly. "She's my wife."

"So? Did I not touch every part of her body earlier this evening? Did I not bring her to such a state of arousal that you were able to march in with no preparation for the deed?"

"Yes, that is true, but now she's been properly broken in. Your work is done. You may exit," he flourished the cue, "stage right."

"You delude yourself, my boy. If you approach your wife in your usual blunt manner, you will get a very different result, especially now that I have introduced her to the more subtle joys of lovemaking."

"To damnation with subtle. A strong cock, that's all she needs."

The Marquis thrust out his arm for the cue, which the Earl shoved into his grasp. "Are you so certain?"

"I will stake my happiness on it. You should have seen her the second time I had her. Her eyes nearly rolled up inside her head."

"I believe Lady Alicia needs more than your simple-minded fucking. She needs a lover who can divine her deepest desires, who can vary his lovemaking in an unpredictable manner. You, *mon ami*, are a one-note song. I have many tricks up my sleeve." As if to prove it, he dropped four balls with a single stroke.

"I'd stake a strong prick against a sleeve of tricks any day of the week." The Earl claimed the cue.

"Then we have a wager?"

The Earl nodded eagerly, gambling being one of his favorite vices. "But what stakes? A wager is no entertainment at all without stakes."

"So true, my boy, so true. And yet, it might be considered unseemly to wager material objects on the emotions of a woman, though it's happened many a time at White's, no doubt."

"True." The Earl stroked his hand along the cue with a puzzled frown. "But what could we wager that has no material value?"

"Hmmm..." The Marquis appeared to ponder. "I've got it. If you and your strong prick can convince your wife she has no need of the finer arts of lovemaking, I promise to leave you newlyweds alone from now on."

The Earl gave him an uneasy, bright blue glance. "Alone? With my wife?"

"A terrifying prospect, no doubt," said the Marquis dryly.

"Well, and what if she feels the other way, that a strong prick, in some circumstances, is assisted or benefited, shall we say, by other kinds of activity?"

"Ah, then we agree to do whatever makes her most happy and satisfied. It's difficult to argue with that, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, I should think you're right." The Earl bent over the table to take his shot, then straightened up in dismay. "But there's a hitch. I intend to get my wife with child. *My* child. A boy. I already have his first pony selected for him."

The Marquis chuckled. "You need have no fears on that count, my boy. I will promise not to penetrate your wife in that manner. In my hands, she will achieve full satisfaction, prick or no."

The Earl delivered the cue along with a skeptical glance. "You'll be able to restrain yourself from that sweet cunt?"

"I will enjoy that sweet cunt, and all other parts, with any and all parts of my body save for my shaft. I will leave that task to you."

"Very generous of you," grumbled the Earl. "We'd better keep this part of our arrangement from Warrington. I don't believe he would grant his approval."

"Must His Grace be apprised of your every move?"

"Of course not, but I find his opinion valuable. He can unearth hidden motives I would never have suspected." The Earl watched the Marquis sink the last ball so the billiards table was clear. "In fact, I wish he were here at this moment to detect your true motivations."

The Marquis gave a light laugh as he replaced the cue in the rack mounted on the wall. "As you said earlier, it's no doubt best Warrington is not here and has no knowledge of our activities, those completed and those planned. He has, as they say, no dog in this hunt." He wandered to the fireplace mantel, where his cheroot smoldered in a crystal dish.

"True enough," said the Earl, but still his face betrayed a youthful worry that he'd been outmaneuvered. The Marquis drew on his cigar. Through a wreath of smoke, he granted the younger man a guileless smile.

\* \* \* \* \*



When I awoke, I was naked in bed, alone but for the cheerful chirping of birds outside the window. Soft sheets the color of pearls embraced me in a lovely cocoon. I stretched luxuriously, noticing pleasant new aches such as one experiences after the first hunt of the season. I leaned my head to the side and saw that someone had opened the casement to allow the fresh air and sunshine inside. Someone had also cleared the chamber of all my discarded clothing and had laid out a fresh, white-dotted muslin morning gown for me.

Was it Annie? As the question entered my mind, memories from the previous night flooded my thoughts. Annie had seen me enter that state of divine arousal at the hands of the Marquis. She'd had her hands on my body while I trembled with delight. What would she think of me now? I scolded myself for my concern. She was only a servant doing her master's bidding.

As was I, in a manner of speaking. I was the wife of the Earl of Dorchester, and I had done as he bade me.

I rose from the bed and, naked and barefoot, stepped to the casement. The sun was high in the sky, nearing its midday height. Merry sunshine smiled down on the profusion of roses, which seemed to sparkle back at their generous benefactor. I shared their mood. The world seemed a glorious place.

A rough barking drew my attention to the lawn that sloped down toward a grove of ash trees. A gun dog, an Irish Setter from the looks of him, raced across the grass in pursuit of a stick. He jumped on it, snarling and snapping, then dashed back to deliver the stick to his owner. I saw the vigorous figure of my husband bend down to tussle the stick away from the beast's jaws. Again he tossed it, laughing, and again the dog leaped after it. A boy and a dog. How suited they were to each other, I thought. Simple creatures enjoying a simple game.

But would simple games satisfy me? The question made me turn in dismay from the window and my restless thoughts to take up the muslin laid out for me.

I slipped into my chemise, then rang the bell to summon assistance with the rest of my toilette. Annie appeared so quickly, I thought perhaps she'd been waiting outside my door.

"Good morning, Annie."

"Good morning, my lady." Her matter-of-fact manner immediately eased my mind. No doubt many stranger things had occurred at the lair of the Marquis de Beaumont. She helped me into my stays. Her quick, efficient touch gave me comfort.

"You aren't married, are you, Annie?"

"No, my lady. My sweetheart and I plan to marry as soon as he has saved enough to lease a small cottage."

"How lovely. Does he work for the Marquis?"

"Aye, he works in the stables. He's always had a way with horses, even as a child." With my stays secured, she settled my petticoat over my head.

"You were childhood sweethearts then?" I asked through the fine cotton covering my face.

"Aye, my lady. All our lives."

When my head emerged from my petticoat, a frown shadowed my face. "You must love him very much."

She shrugged and straightened my petticoat so it hung properly. "I suppose so. I do na think on it much. Dickon is Dickon. One day we will be married."

"And you will be a good wife."

"Oh sure. As are ye, my lady."

My head snapped around to meet her kind blue eyes. She was such a country girl with her freckles and ginger hair. No shadows on her open face. She already knew my secrets. I could trust her.

"Do you think so, really?"

"I do, mum."

"But surely a good wife would...that is, would not—"

"A good wife does what her husband asks," said Annie firmly. She held out the white muslin so I could step into it. Then she moved behind me to fasten my dress. I saw it had an unusually low neckline, and it pushed my breasts together so they sat plump in the dotted muslin. The girl reappeared in front of me and reached out her hands to smooth the worry lines from my forehead. "My dear mother always taught me that true joy is to be found in the submission of a wife to her husband."

"As did my mother."

"Then ye need have no worries. Do exactly as your husband asks and ye will be happy as a lark." She gave me a cheerful smile.

"And the Marquis?"

She laughed. "Let that be between your husband and the Marquis."

"You're most wise, are you not, Annie?"

"I do na know that, my lady. I'm a simple maidservant." She tweaked the skirt of my gown so all the wrinkles shook out. "Should I do your hair now?"

I nodded my assent and went to the dressing table. As she ran a silver-backed brush through my hair, I pondered her words.

As a woman, my purpose in life was not in question. I was born to marry and give birth to children. As a gentleman's daughter, I was meant to marry another of my class and continue our shared bloodline. My aim was to be a good wife. My mother, before she died, had instructed me strictly in the requirements of being a good wife. Even though I was but eight years of age, I had diligently repeated her directions many times. The desires of a wife are subservient to those of her husband. A wife smooths the way of a husband, keeps his household running, bears his children, brings him ease and comfort, and submits to him in every particular.

Although that fate never sounded at all appealing, it was certainly superior to the alternative, which would be to remain a childless ape leader for the rest of my days. I

myself would not have minded such a fate, but I couldn't bear to disappoint my father. It was for his sake I'd traveled to London to submit myself to the dizzying whirl of a London season.

Now I was married and thus far I had done everything my husband desired. I'd been a perfect wife and my conscience could be clear.

*Do as your husband asks.* But what if he asked that I spend the remainder of my days as his bed partner, and his alone?

Despite my worries, I went downstairs to break my fast with a hearty appetite. As I passed through the halls of *Notre Plaisir*, I admired the sparkling clarity of the windows, the graceful sweep of the staircase, and the lovely trompe l'oeil wallpaper. I knew that *notre plaisir* meant "our pleasure", a name that seemed imbued with naughty meaning after last night. The pleasure referred to apparently applied to all senses. The light fragrance of freshly cut roses and daisies floated through the house. Everywhere one looked, a pretty knickknack or graceful bit of drapery caught one's eye. The only sound competing with the birdsong was the industrious sound of pots and pans emanating from the kitchen.

My stomach joined in the noisemaking with a clamorous growl. I remembered that I had never eaten my supper last night, having been surprised by the appearance of the Marquis. Other needs, apparently, had taken precedence. I followed the scent of fresh baked bread to a pleasant, sun-drenched room, where silver chafing dishes sat upon a sideboard. The sunny room afforded a delightful view of the rose gardens.

Ravenous, I poured myself a cup of chocolate and helped myself to muffins, toast, fresh churned butter and plum jam. I do not believe I have ever been so happy as the moment I brought my plate to my table and sat down to fill my stomach. But I had only eaten a few bites when footsteps behind me interrupted my feasting.

"Hungry this morning, *ma chérie*?" The Marquis' teasing voice sent a shiver up my spine.

"She's eating you out of house and home," said the Earl with a laugh.

The two men strode into the room, apparently in the best of moods, the Earl's arm slung over the Marquis' shoulder. The Marquis was impeccably dressed, as always, a spotless cravat frothing at his neck. My husband looked more disheveled, as was his wont. They brought with them a whiff of outdoor air and a vibrant sense of adventure.

"Good morning, my dear husband. Good morning, my lord," I greeted them, after quickly swallowing a mouthful of toast and jam.

"You look lovely this morning. Nocturnal activity agrees with you," said the Marquis genially.

I managed a smile, though I wanted to kick him in the shins. Must he deliberately embarrass me? The Earl, on the other hand, seemed to find that sally vastly entertaining. The force of his laughter nearly knocked him off his feet.

"Do sit down," I told him with a frown, "before you knock my breakfast onto the floor."

"'Twould indeed be a disaster." Gravely, the Marquis pulled out a chair for my husband, who collapsed into it, legs askew. "Our dear Countess must regain her strength."

I eyed him suspiciously. He had some new plot up his sleeve, I felt sure. "You are so very cheerful this morning. Has Bonaparte finally surrendered? May you return to your homeland?"

"Is that what you wish?"

I made a little face at him, marveling as I did so on what comfortable, intimate terms I now felt with the Marquis.

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you. *L'Empereur* is still rampaging across Europe, and I am still as much an exile as ever. Quite a relief, really, when you consider that as an *émigré*, I am free to moan and complain and devote myself to my own pursuits with no regrets."

I raised an eyebrow. "Regrets? Are you quite sure you're capable of the emotion?"

He looked thoughtful. "I do not know. I find I am capable of quite a few emotions I thought out of reach." His pointed look confused me, as I knew not to what he referred, save that it involved me in some mysterious way.

"Enough of your nonsense, Beaumont. Now, you said you would talk to your stable master about a mount for my bride, eh?" He waggled his eyebrows in a way that was clearly meant to be insinuating, but wound up comical instead.

"I depart at your command, *mon ami*. Enjoy your breakfast." Before he left the room, the Marquis bent down to whisper in my ear. "And may you enjoy the remainder of your day."

I shivered as his lips brushed against my ear. The tone in his voice evoked naughty images. Under my muslin gown, my nipples hardened. I wondered if the two men would notice.

If the Marquis did, he gave no sign, merely leaving the room with an elegant saunter. The Earl stared at my bosom. Silence fell as I begged my unruly nipples to lay flat. But the more I thought about them, the more I felt them brush against my clothing like determined little chicks pecking their way out of their shells. I tried to eat another mouthful of buttered muffin, but my appetite had vanished. My throat closed with hunger of another kind. I met my husband's eyes and saw the same lust there.

"Take down your dress," he said in a thick voice. "That top part, so I can see your bosom."

Slowly, fingers shaking, I drew down the edge of my bodice to expose my breasts. As the air stirred them, a deep quiver fluttered in my belly. "What if...the servants..." I breathed, covering my nipples with my hands.

"Stuff the servants. Take your hands away."

I snatched my hands away from my bosom and lowered my head. If a servant saw me, I'd have to pretend, oh, I didn't know. I'd have to cling to the wish that we would never see anyone at *Notre Plaisir* again. But the Earl, sensing my distress, jumped up from the table and put a chair against the door. I breathed a sigh of relief, then glanced

at the windows that looked out over the garden. Should anyone chance to walk among the flowers, they would catch sight of much more than roses.

"You have the most delicious nipples," said the Earl, coming to my side. "They make me...you make me...mad with desire." He reached one hand inside my bodice to bounce my breasts and rub his thumb across one nipple. My head fell backward, heavy with the rush of heat his fondling aroused. "You are such a darling," he breathed. "I need your mouth on my prick. Undo my breeches, wife."

*True joy comes when a wife does what her husband asks*, I reminded myself as I turned toward him. Perhaps it was true, as this new position allowed both of his hands access to my breasts. As he delved into my bodice to capture my breasts, I fumbled with the unfamiliar buttons of his breeches. Alas, the time I spent with my brothers did not extend to the removal of their inexpressibles. The slowness of my fingers made my husband impatient, and he squeezed my nipples between his fingers until a sharp jolt quivered directly into my lower parts.

"Oooh," I moaned, my fingers going limp.

"You like that?" he asked, tweaking me harder.

I wasn't certain that I did, as the sensation danced the delicate edge between pleasure and pain. A sense of weakness flooded my limbs, accompanied by the knowledge that like it or no, my nipples were his to do with as he pleased. I didn't answer, instead hurrying to undo his buttons and free the lunging manhood inside.

"Lick it," he ordered. The notion undid me. Never had I heard tell of such a thing. But then my scientific curiosity came to life. What would it taste like? What would happen to it if I took it into my mouth?

I cautiously extended my tongue and put it to the tip of my husband's member. Soft velvet greeted me. Surprised, I licked farther and savored the salt taste of him. The organ came alive under my tongue with twitches and leaps like a puppy seeking my attention. I was reminded of how my husband had played with the gun dog on the lawn. His manhood was like a playful puppy, one that had not yet learned to control its

own strength. It surged into the cavern of my mouth as though seeking a path down my throat.

"Gentle," I mumbled, a bit frightened by his vigorous movements. He groaned and pulled his member away. He gripped on to my head in order to control his movements better. My poor impatient husband was making every effort to restrain himself, but it simply wasn't in his nature.

"Never mind," he said in a rough, blunt tone. "Bend over the table instead. I thought to spare your soreness, but find I am unable."

Bend over the table? I looked at the table in utter bewilderment. Did he expect me to...

Apparently he did, as he hauled me to my feet and bent me over at the waist so my upper half was pinned to the table. I felt a rush of air as my gown was thrown up over my head. For this I was deeply grateful, since my face was hidden from view. If a gardener happened to wander past the windows, at least he would not be able to identify the girl with her posterior exposed in such a blatant way.

I closed my eyes and told myself this was part of being a good wife. Good wives did not protest when their husbands kicked apart their legs and drove into them from behind. Good wives did not mind when their breasts were crushed against fine linen tablecloths, their nipples roughened by the fabric. Good wives did not object when... And then, to my surprise, I didn't object at all, for a deep throb of heat sparked inside me.

My husband's strokes worked me against the table so my clitoris, too, felt the friction of the tablecloth. It drove me into a sort of frenzy and I waggled my hips to further the contact. That motion seemed to drive my husband mad. Stronger and more forceful came his thrusts. Each one pushed me further into my state of heated passion. I even writhed my bosom against the tablecloth to satisfy the craving of my nipples.



"Oh, oh," grunted my husband, until abruptly, he thrust deep and then held still, agonizingly still, as my womb filled with heat. Then he pulled himself away with a pat on my naked buttocks.

"Now that's the proper way to break the fast, is it not?" I envied the satisfaction in his voice, for I had received no such release. My body throbbed against the table. "You'd best cover yourself, wife, one never knows who might walk past those windows."

He pulled my skirt down to hide my nakedness, then went to the side table to help himself to toast and jam. I sat up and hurriedly restored my bodice to its proper state.

"Ah, nothing like a mouthful after a morning's ramble." He bit into his toast with strong white teeth. "Or a mouthful after a mouthful." A lecherous wink accompanied that sally.

I felt mutinous. My husband had lit a fire within me and still it burned. And he, it seemed, had no intention of dousing it. I didn't know if I should bring this to his attention. Perhaps he knew and did not consider it important. What were my wifely rights in such a situation? I opened my mouth to pose the question, but just then the figure of a young gardener appeared outside the window. For one disturbing moment I longed to run outside, fling up my skirts and let the man take me in the garden. What was happening to me?

"In the nick of time, eh?" My husband winked and I quickly agreed. I saw no need for him to know my shameless thoughts. The Marquis would understand, I had no doubt, but not the Earl.

"Perhaps we should confine our intimacies to the bedchamber in future," I suggested.

"That sounds a bit tedious to me." Dorchester shoved another bit of toast in his mouth. "I say we test out all areas of the grounds. Care to meet me in the kitchen later?"

I saw by the twinkle in his bright blue eyes that he teased. My husband was a boy at heart. The need burning within subsided enough that I was able to return his smile. "You like to make mischief, I see."

"Young troublemaker, that's what Warrington calls me. The Duke of Warrington, don't you know. He's constantly after me to behave more as the heir to a Dukedom than a rumbustious schoolboy."

"And do you not listen to him?" I located my breakfast plate, which had traveled halfway across the table during our activities.

"I listen. Sometimes I obey. But I keep telling him I'm still young. I suppose he's forgotten what it's like to be young."

"Is he an elderly man?"

Dorch guffawed. "Not hardly. He's only ten years older than I. But he assumed the responsibilities of a Duke at a criminally young age. Didn't get to sow his wild oats. A shame, really. A nonesuch like him should have had a high old time. Instead he was always closeted with his steward and man of affairs."

"I've heard tell he refuses to marry."

"Yes." For the first time since I'd known him, my boisterous husband looked downcast. I wondered at the source of his sadness. "That's why he made me his heir. A position I never sought. If he were to find out...that is to say, if he were to marry and beget an heir, you needn't worry. We'll still be well provided for."

"Eight thousand a year, I'm told."

At his startled look, I blushed. Was it improper to discuss such details with one's husband?

"You are a frank one, aren't you? That's the way the Marquis described you. I see he hit the mark."

At the mention of the Marquis, my blush deepened. But the Earl seemed oblivious to my discomfort.

"I wonder where the old rascal is off to? He gave orders for a picnic, but I'd rather go on another long gallop. Will you join me?"

"I should like nothing better, but I'm afraid, well, how shall I put it, that I find myself indisposed." I gave him a significant glance, but he seemed not to catch my meaning. I would have to resort to frankness. "A certain tenderness will prevent me from mounting a horse today."

"Oh! Well, that's to be expected, I suppose." He set down his plate with a clatter. Did he make any movements without a deal of noise and commotion? "You don't mind if I go, do you? I become surly if I don't get a nice long gallop in every day."

"Then go, by all means."

"You don't object if I leave you alone?"

"I'll still be your wife when you return, I imagine." I smiled saucily at him.

He shook his head in a bemused kind of way. "You're a wife like no other. I should have known the Marquis would choose someone unusual."

"The Marquis? I don't take your meaning."

"The Marquis de Beaumont," he repeated impatiently.

Suddenly a deep suspicion entered my mind. "Is this his doing, our marriage?"

"Yes, naturally. He thought we would suit. I'm no good at courting and wooing. I find all the balls and such an utter waste of time. Beaumont informed me he knew the perfect girl to satisfy my requirements."

"Requirements," I answered faintly.

"Don't worry your head. I'm quite pleased with the Marquis' choice."

"But—"

"And don't pester. That was one of the requirements."

"I see." But I didn't see. Why had the Marquis selected me as his friend's bride? Was it simply to bring me into his clutches so he could seduce me under Dorchester's

very nose? Anger simmered to a boil and I barely managed a smile for my husband as he dashed off to the stables.

The Marquis had made sure I was married to a man who cared more for his horses than he ever would for his wife. Why?

I rose from the table and reordered my garments. When I looked presentable again, I went in search of the nefarious Marquis. He was about to receive a full dose of my much-lauded “frankness”.

## Chapter Five

I found the Marquis in the kitchen herb garden conferring with the housekeeper. In one arm he held a large wicker basket. His dark face sported a cheerful expression, which I have to say looked alien to his cynical nature.

"May I speak with you, my lord?" I asked him with as much politeness as I could muster.

"My dear Countess, what a delightful sight for sore eyes. You may speak with me to your heart's content. May I suggest you join me for a picnic on this lovely May day?"

The Marquis didn't seem to know he was in my black books. "A picnic? You're suggesting a *picnic*?" I answered, my voice rising.

The housekeeper made haste to depart, with a bob of the head and a bustling of skirts. The Marquis smoothly stepped to my elbow. "Do you intend to embarrass me in front of my household staff?"

"Fine time to worry about that," I responded. My pointed reminder of the role of Annie in my initiation elicited a rueful chuckle from the Marquis.

"Your point is well-taken. My staff is here to serve me and they are, due to my particular needs, extremely protective of my privacy. The last thing you or I need to concern ourselves with is the staff."

"Well, and I do not. I concern myself with another matter." I skipped to catch up with the Marquis, who was now hurrying me down the winding pathways of the kitchen garden. The scent of sun-warmed rosemary and thyme rose beneath our feet. Sensual and soothing, the fragrance distracted me from my anger. When we reached the edge of the garden, the Marquis took my hand and led me down the sloping lawn. I caught sight of an inviting body of water sparkling through the horse chestnuts.

"And you shall unburden yourself of your concerns in due time."

"But I care not for a picnic. I just now finished my breakfast."

"Indeed, I'm surprised you had any breakfast at all, given the Earl's appetites."

"I did not eat quite as much as I wished," I admitted. My few bites of jam and muffin had not satisfied my hunger, which gnawed again at my belly.

"I anticipated as much, and so I arranged for this little expedition." His gay smile told me to cease my worrying. It didn't work.

"You will answer my questions, will you not?"

"Of course, my dear. Now please take a moment to appreciate the lovely weather. Do look at the glorious sunshine and breathe in the pure air. So different from that nasty London fog, don't you agree?"

"You are trying to distract me from my purpose." Stubbornly, I clung to my bruised feelings as we made our way down to the water. I followed the Marquis through a wooded copse into a sheltered meadow at the edge of a small lake. Truly, never had I seen such a delightful spot. But even though my senses rejoiced in the beauty around me, when I am angry, I resemble a dog with a bone.

I stood with arms folded across my chest as the Marquis spread a lacy white cloth onto the grass. In the middle went the wicker basket, from which wonderful aromas escaped. Roast mutton, biscuits and strawberries. My belly emitted a growl.

But my hunger would have to wait.

"Please tell me why you convinced the Earl of Dorchester to offer for me."

"He did not need extensive convincing. He liked you quite well already."

I stamped my foot. "That is not a proper answer."

He sighed. "When will I ever learn that the usual tricks and flatteries do not work with my little Alicia?"

"Your little Alicia? Have you forgotten once again that I'm married, and to the man you selected for me?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten. How could I?"

"How *could* you? My question precisely! How could you? Am I no more than a puppet in your puppet show, or a pawn in your chess game?"

"Not at all."

"You manipulate people to do as you wish—"

"That's true."

"Without giving them the slightest hint as to your true motives."

"Now that's unjust. I did give you a hint."

"What?" He'd disrupted my speech and I found myself off balance.

"It all began with the goatherd."

"The goatherd!" I threw up my hands. "Can you not erase him from your memory?"

"No, because that was the moment I knew I had to have you. But I was already married. I couldn't offer for you. And over the subsequent years I grew increasingly attached to your dear father. I knew I could never dishonor him by taking your maidenhead. So there seemed to be only one solution to my dilemma."

I shook my head to clear it from his honeyed, reasonable tone. "What dilemma?"

"You're being dense, *chérie*. How else was I to enjoy you, when you would inevitably be married off to someone else? You might marry a Scottish lord who would spirit you off to the north. Or you might be continually with child for the following twenty years. In short, I would have no control over the situation."

I gazed down at the Marquis, who stretched lazily on his elbow on the lace-edged cloth. A bee buzzed near his head, but he calmly flicked it away.

"You considered my future to be a situation you must control?"

"A situation I desired to control," he corrected. "If I could manage it. When I knew my young cousin wanted to marry, all the pieces of the puzzle fit neatly into place. Dorch has always been inclined to follow my lead on important matters. He looks up to me as a valued friend and mentor."

"So you can manipulate him at will."

"Such a dismal way to phrase it. I do believe he's delighted with the way I've arranged things. As you should be as well."

"I should?"

"Would you be content with Dorch as your one and only lover, forevermore?"

I turned away from him so he wouldn't see how his words hit home. "I would have been, if you hadn't..."

"If I hadn't shown you another way."

"Yes," I answered, my voice choking. "And I curse you for it."

The Marquis leapt to his feet and was at my side in an instant.

"But I had to, my darling girl. Could I allow my Alicia, the girl who fearlessly flouted all convention by making an assignation in the stables with a goatherd in order to satisfy her curiosity, to spend her nights in the arms of a sensual dullard?" He put his hands on my shoulders to turn me, but I tore myself away.

"If you had let matters alone, perhaps I would have found someone entirely different to marry."

"And therein lay my dilemma." He narrowed his eyes at me. I had never looked into the Marquis' eyes so deeply, and I noticed how black they were, like thick tar. They were quite beautiful and powerful. But if a man's eyes are windows to his soul, I wondered what manner of blackness lay within the Marquis' spirit.

"Darling Alicia. Why do you worry so? Everything will work itself out just as it should." He lifted one hand and pushed back a strand of my hair. "If the love of one man is good, why should not the love of two be better?"

"Love?" I whispered, searching his face for the look I imagined would accompany such a declaration. "Do you love me?"

Under my seeking gaze, his expression darkened. "I chose the wrong word. Let's not speak of love."



My curiosity was piqued, though I admit to being relieved that the Marquis was not in love with me, for I felt sure I could never return such a feeling. "Why not? Is such a thing beyond your experience?"

"Not at all. Love and I are not strangers. Indeed, I'm her favorite victim. Love treats me much as a harsh teacher treats a naughty schoolboy."

He wandered back to the picnic cloth and knelt to sample a strawberry. His air of studied nonchalance didn't fool me. This subject pained the Marquis.

"Do you refer to your wife?"

"Alas, no." He flicked the hull of the strawberry into the grass. I thought he'd reached the end of his confessions, but to my surprise, he continued. "At one time I thought I loved my wife. Her many betrayals put an end to that pleasant illusion. During the dark and tumultuous aftermath, the dreaded light of truth dawned. I love another, one whom I've loved for most of my life."

"But that's—" I wanted to say "wonderful", but his grim look stopped me.

"Sadly, it's a hopeless case."

"I'm very sorry." And indeed I was. I disliked seeing the Marquis in pain. I restrained myself from asking about the object of his doomed affection.

The Marquis stretched himself out on the cloth once again and beckoned to me. "But for you, my darling, while it may not be 'love', there has always been a stirring in my heart. I enjoy the sensation, and should be loath to relinquish it. You have a vibrant life about you, like that of a butterfly trapped in the net of a girl's body. I find it quite fascinating. I want to be close to you so I can experience the fluttering of those inner wings."

I didn't understand his talk of butterflies and wings. I had begun our conversation quite angry with him, but once again he was confounding me with honeyed words. I didn't want to hear any more.

I turned from him and paced to the edge of the sparkling lake. In times of trouble, I often used to sit by the stream at Silverwood Manor. The flowing of the water helped to order my thoughts. Perhaps that would be the case here as well. Was it improper to do such a thing in the Marquis' presence? The worry seemed absurd after our previous intimacies.

At the water's edge, I removed my slippers and stockings, held up my gown and waded into the chilly water. As a girl, I had on occasion stripped down to my chemise in order to swim in our stream. My brothers had made sure I was a strong swimmer and had no fear of the water. Crisp and cool, it lapped against my feet. The soft mud wormed between my toes. The midday sun cast its rays down on me in a shower of gold. The day was alight with joy. I stepped deeper into the water.

And then came a loud shouting from the lawn. I saw, to my amazement, the Marquis hurrying after me.

"Have you lost your wits, child? You wear no proper bathing costume. The water will soak your skirts and bring you down to the lake bottom."

Although I spluttered in protest, kicking at the water, he lifted me in his arms and hauled me out of the lake.

"Have I upset you so greatly, that you must make an attempt on your own life?"

"I was only up to my ankles!" Water dripped onto his breeches. I was no doubt ruining an extremely expensive garment. His tailor would be quite infuriated with me.

He dumped me onto the picnic blanket as if I were a sack of grain. "What am I to do with you now?" He scowled at me. The fright of my venture into the water seemed to have made him come alive. He no longer looked troubled. In fact, he looked quite vigorous.

I became aware of a tingling in my loins. The fire lit by my husband had never entirely disappeared. My watery adventure had not doused it, in fact, quite the opposite. My entire body felt alive and eager. I leaned back on my elbows and shook my hair back.

The Marquis' eyes narrowed to black slits. "Are you attempting to seduce me?"

"Why should I have to?" I answered, tilting my head to the side. "You went to such great effort to secure my presence at your estate. And to what purpose, I ask? So that you might lecture me about an innocent, harmless little dip in the lake?" I drew one leg up so my chemise was revealed.

"You minx." He dropped to his knees next to me on the cloth. "You *are* trying to seduce me. And why should I be surprised? I expect no less from my daring, curious girl. But still, I cannot have you dashing off willy-nilly. I'm afraid you've earned yourself a lashing. Now turn over."

A lashing! Girls did not receive lashings. Those were reserved for wayward schoolboys. I'd seen my brothers receive the lash on occasion, and indeed they squealed like piglets, albeit briefly. Out of panic, I resisted, but the strength of his slender frame was surprising.

"If you fight me, your lashing will be far worse," he warned.

I trembled as I turned over, urged by his forceful hands.

Facedown on the blanket, I closed my eyes and braced myself for the sting of a lash. Instead, a silky touch wandered up my leg. I squirmed as my undergarments were pushed up over my buttocks. What was that mysterious object with which he stroked me? A feather, perhaps, or a brush? I gave up trying to guess and simply enjoyed the way it swirled across my skin. The backs of my thighs were the object of much of his attention. I was astonished at what chills and shivers were brought to life in such an innocent area.

My eyes closed halfway, until the grass and wildflowers of the meadow blurred into a pleasant backdrop. The hum of bees echoed the hum of pleasure in my throat. Slowly, the soft stroking spiraled toward the center of my desire. Firm hands spread my legs apart. The brush, or so I had decided it must be, painted a lovely trail down the cleft of my buttocks. Excitement filled me. I pushed my groin against the cloth, but

when that didn't satisfy my need, I arched my back instead and thrust my buttocks into the air.

"Shhh," whispered the Marquis. "Gentle, gentle. All in good time. Do you like my lashings?"

"Yes." I sighed restlessly. "But you don't understand," I told him. "The Earl left me —"

"I can well imagine. Don't think about Dorch. Think about the feel of my instrument against your skin, against your tight little hole."

He drew the brush across my bottom hole and I felt my flesh tighten. "You don't mean to...what do you intend —"

"Shhh. I intend nothing but what will bring you pleasure. This area is the seat of much pleasure, but only if used properly. This is simply an introduction. So many enjoyments to introduce to you. Do you find this pleasant?" The brush swirled against the hair covering my mound. It teased, it tantalized.

"No, I do not," I told him frankly. "That is, I find it enjoyable but I fear that you will give me no relief."

He laughed softly. "That is not my way. But you should know how to relieve yourself should that prove necessary."

"Relieve myself?"

"Have you not done so, in the secrecy of your own bedchamber?"

Fortunately he could not see my face, which I crushed against the lacy picnic cloth. The green of the grass and the white of the fabric blurred together. "I've...played with myself," I admitted.

"Show me."

"No!"

"Show me, or I will leave you high and dry." To emphasize his point, he dabbed the brush back and forth across my clitoris with quick motions that brought me to a near-frenzy.

"Stop, please, I beg you."

"Then show me how you pleasure yourself. Put your hand against your mound."

I did so, and the heat of my own flesh astonished me.

"What would you do next?"

"I...I do not know."

"Don't act like a little miss who doesn't know her own mind. Show me."

Stung, I rubbed my hand against my own sex. A stab of lightning shuddered through me.

"That's it," said the Marquis. I felt his hand push down on my buttocks, adding more pressure to my own efforts. And then, shockingly, he spanked his hand across my flesh. Another deep sensation shook me to the core. My hand faltered in its motion.

"Don't you dare stop," said the Marquis, with another quick spank. "Do you know why I'm spanking you? Don't stop. Keep caressing yourself. Why am I spanking you?"

"I...I don't know," I whimpered as I rubbed my hand against my cunt. But when his strokes came, my arousal soared. When they stopped, it flagged. Gratefully, I felt his hand descend again. My skin was aflame, a heat that matched the conflagration within.

"You dare to question my wisdom in arranging this marriage for you." Spank. "You dare to scamper away from me and give me a fright by wading into the water." Spank. "You dare to wonder whether or not my presence in your life is beneficial."

"No," I cried. "That is not so."

"You want me then?" Spank.

"Yes!" My limbs trembled with my need.

"How do you want me?" Spank.

"I want you..." Desperately, urgently, I wanted him. "Inside. If you please."

"Ah, my dear." He lifted my buttocks higher into the air so he could replace my fumbling hand with his own firm grip. He inserted one thumb into me, not enough to satisfy my craving. But I forgot that emptiness when his other fingers clamped around my clitoris. Speared thus on his hand, I was like a child's doll in his grip. And still the other hand continued its spanking. Each stroke of his hand was accompanied by the most delicious fondling of my mound. His thumb probed deep into me, wresting a cry from my lips. I panted and writhed like a mad thing in his grasp.

"Oh, please, I beg of you..." I whimpered.

"What do you beg?" Another spank sent tremors through my being.

"Don't stop, don't stop, I beg you, don't stop..." I chanted the words as if they were a magic spell. The Marquis did not stop. He shook my cunt in his fist as though I were a mouse caught in a lion's paw. He spanked and shook and rubbed and probed until the bright light broke over my vision and I broke free of my earthly bounds.

I let out a shriek of ecstasy that must have frightened away the birds. But it made no matter to me. The outside world ceased to exist during those few blissful moments. I soared above, just as before, in that promised land on high. A fleeting glimpse of green eyes greeted me once again, then just as quickly disappeared. Clouds flitted by, lit by a setting sun. Singing angels seemed to accompany me in my journey.

And they held me in a bed of feathers as I drifted back to earth.

I opened my eyes to the sight of an ant crawling up a blade of grass, seemingly undisturbed by my commotion. Beyond it, blue sky peeked from between horse chestnuts. The world re-formed itself. The Marquis gently lowered my trembling body into a reclining position, far more discreet than my previous display.

"You are truly a treasure, my dear," he said, stroking my posterior. He drew my petticoat down to cover me.

I rolled over onto my side and gazed up at him with heavy eyes. My body felt delightfully languorous. Sleep beckoned to me, but first, I had a question for the lord who had so pleased me. Admittedly, it had best been asked earlier.

"Did my husband give his permission?"

"Your husband and I have arranged everything. You have no need to worry."

I sighed, and nestled my head against his leg. "Lovely." I felt filled with affection for the Marquis. "Do you not desire satisfaction?"

"You have given me great satisfaction," he answered.

"But not..." I gestured to his breeches, where I detected no sign of a lump.

"I made a promise. I always honor my promises."

A promise. It must have been a promise to the Earl, and I could well imagine what it was. Dorchester would want to be sure our offspring were, in point of fact, his.

"I see. But surely, there is another way?" I remembered how I had taken my husband's member into my mouth. "Perhaps with my lips and tongue?"

The Marquis laughed and stroked my hair. "Always forthright, are you not? I thank you for your kind offer, but I must decline."

"Why?" I sat up in surprise, all thought of sleep banished. Perhaps he wouldn't enjoy it? This seemed astonishing. For a traitorous moment I thought longingly of my husband's thick, bullish manhood. If the Earl were here, he would have no qualms about bringing out his shaft. My belly quivered at the memory. But perhaps the Earl would not like my mouth to be on another man's member? My current situation was so confounding as not to bear close questioning. The Marquis interrupted these thoughts. "My sad case of unrequited love has left me with some quirks."

I gaped at him in fascination. "What sort of quirks?"

"The only way I can achieve the ultimate satisfaction is through an entirely different entrance." He broke off.

"Different entrance? Why, whatever do you mean?" My curiosity, as always my fatal flaw, burned.

"I cannot show you as yet. All in good time, I promise you."

I knew a very good method for extracting information from stubborn males. I pounced on top of the Marquis. "You must show me, or I shall tickle you until you lose your breath." I found a particularly sensitive spot under his armpit. Despite all his efforts to maintain his dignity, laughter bubbled from his lips. "You yourself said I was insatiably curious and that it was an admirable quality."

"A foolish statement indeed." He grabbed at my hands, but I was an expert at tickling men who were bigger than me, having done so countless times as a child. Before long he was lost in helpless spasms of laughter, as if he were a boy again. It had probably been many a year since anyone had tickled him.

"Show me, show me, show me," I chanted, showing no mercy.

"Show him what?" An irritated voice interrupted our play. "My dear Beaumont, I humbly suggest you tell this hoyden what it is she wants to know, else I toss you both in the lake."

In that moment, before looking to see who spoke, I became aware of two things. First, the stranger's resonant voice struck a chord within my mind. Second, the Marquis, at the sound of it, developed the lump in his breeches that had eluded him earlier.

"Upon closer examination, I see the wench has already been into the lake," the man continued. The distaste in his voice made me cringe. I withdrew myself from the Marquis' grasp and sat up to face my accuser.

A pair of green eyes gazed on me with scorn. I recognized him immediately. He was a tall man, tall and straight and strong and handsome, with hair the brown of roasted chestnuts, eyes the green of the meadow around me. Those very eyes had appeared to me during my moments of ecstasy. "You," I said.

But he did not appear to recognize me. The frown on his face deepened. It seemed the product not only of this present irritation, but of many preceding burdens. He had a commanding presence, even more so than the Marquis. The Marquis was like a snake that bore constant watching. This man was more like a king. And now this king was gazing at me from on high with deepest disapproval.



I leapt to my feet. "How dare you intrude on our privacy without so much as a by your leave!"

He looked taken aback, but only for a moment. "Who the devil are you? Beaumont, explain, if you please."

The Marquis rose lazily to his feet. I wondered if the lump was still visible, and made a mental note to pursue that interesting matter further. "My dear Warrington, I owe you no explanation. This is my home. You are welcome, of course, as you always are. But I need explain nothing."

*Warrington?* This was the famous Duke of Warrington? Mortification overcame me. I swayed as dizziness took hold. Was this what an impending faint felt like? Faint I would not, no matter the circumstances. Not after I'd declared such a thing impossible to this very green-eyed man.

The Duke seemed not to notice my struggle to retain my wits. He focused his disapproval on the Marquis. "I beg your pardon. I merely came to offer my best wishes to my friend, and to make sure that the bridal journey was proceeding smoothly, but I see that you sent the newlyweds on their way and stayed behind to...cavort."

"Not at all. This, my dear Warrington, is Lady Alicia Dorchester, a relative of mine and our young Earl's new Countess. My dear, this is the Duke of Warrington. He too is a cousin of some kind."

Head high, I performed the most perfect curtsy I could manage given that I stood barefoot on a cloth and the hem of my gown was wet.

The Duke inclined his head into an equally proper bow, but not before I witnessed a strange expression cross his face. Perhaps it's more accurate to say a rapid series of expressions appeared and disappeared too quickly to be deciphered. "My lady. I offer you my best wishes for your future happiness."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

By the time he straightened up, his handsome features held no expression other than weariness. "Where is the bridegroom in question?"

"He took Galahad for a gallop," answered the Marquis. "He requested that I entertain his bride."

"I see."

Those two simple words produced in me a sudden desire to plunge into the lake, or perhaps into a hole in the ground that would magically appear for my convenience.

"The Marquis de Beaumont, an old friend of my family, was counseling me on the demands of the married state." That didn't sound like an improvement. "That is, he was advising me on how best to conduct myself now that I am a Countess—" I snapped shut my mouth, realizing there was nothing I could say that would ameliorate the situation. I scrambled for a way to explain my wet gown. "I must tend to my appearance after that unfortunate slip on the lakeshore."

"A slip, eh?" The Duke now looked more amused than affronted. "I'm relieved to hear it was nothing more. I feared perhaps you fell into a faint."

*A faint.* My eyes flew to meet his, and I saw by their gold-glinting amusement that he had, at long last, recognized me. Or perhaps he'd recognized me from the start.

The Marquis must have been astonished to see me tongue-tied, certainly not my usual state. "Perhaps, my dear, you should retire before the sun becomes too much for one of your delicate constitution."

I refused to respond to his teasing. The Marquis knew very well I was anything but delicate. "I believe I shall do so. I bid you both good day." Executing a dignified bow, I directed my steps toward the house. All I desired was to reach my bedchamber and close the door behind me so no one, not the Earl, the Marquis, or even Annie, could disturb my thoughts.

But the closed door did nothing to keep out the disturbance created by the Duke of Warrington. For the next few hours, my thoughts were composed of one thing only, the reliving of each moment of my encounters with the Duke in merciless detail.

## **Chapter Six**

The Duke, mounted on a sleek bay gelding, and the Marquis, on a white mare whose color seemed meant as an ironic comment on the state of his soul, trotted into the woods in search of the Earl.

"What news?" the Marquis asked in an uncharacteristically subdued voice.

The Duke shook his head. "Not yet. I will not repeat myself."

They rode in silence through the dappled light cast by fluttering birches and mighty oaks.

The Marquis adopted a lighter tone. "Is the new Countess not everything I suggested?"

"You never mentioned that I'd find her in your lap, dripping with water."

"You must admit her tousled condition interfered in no way with her appeal. The way she stood her ground under your withering gaze was truly endearing."

The Duke shrugged. "If you must know, I found her overly wanton and lacking in proper comportment."

"Don't be such a prig."

"A prig? If I were truly a prig, I would have turned tail and run for the hills. And yet I stayed and attempted to converse with a girl who you, it was clear, had just finished tumbling."

The Marquis slanted a sly glance at the Duke. "Jealous, perhaps?"

The Duke frowned. "I have not often been accused of such an emotion."

"Which perhaps accounts for your unaccountable behavior. Why, you treated that poor girl as if she were one step below a maidservant."

"Did I? I did not mean to." A ground squirrel ran across their path and made his horse shy. With a soft chucking, he calmed the bay.

"She was merely in the midst of tickling me. This is a favor she routinely granted her brothers. I was honored to share in the experience."

"She does seem to bring out another aspect of your character," admitted the Duke. "I do not believe I have ever seen, or imagined, that you would be the object of a good tickling."

"At the hands of a master, no less." The Marquis chuckled. "If I were you, I should work to make amends so that you might enjoy her ministrations."

"Dare I ask how the main event, which I assume preceded the tickling, unfolded?"

"Clearly you dare to ask. You are the Duke. The Duke dares anything. But the Marquis will only disclose such details as do not encroach on my dear young friends' privacy. Dorch and his Countess are entitled to commence their marital adventure accompanied only by those who have their best interests in mind."

The Duke threw back his head and laughed so long and hard the gelding's ears pricked in alarm. "And that would be you, I presume?"

"As both Dorch and Lady Alicia would attest." The Marquis gave a thin smile. "An otherwise painful occasion was rendered quite delightful thanks to my intervention."

"You're chivalry itself." More laughter shook the Duke's lean body.

"A philanthropist, you might say."

The two men emerged from the woods and looked out over an expanse of pastures dotted with grazing cows. In a fenced-in field, a bull snorted and feinted. The Marquis smiled. "Remember when Dorch climbed into the bull pen and flaunted his red jacket at the beast?"

"Of course I remember. He would have died had I not staunched his wound with my cravat."

"I told you not to waste such a work of art on Dorch's scratch."

They laughed again, letting the peace of their surroundings ease the tension of the unspoken news. As the silence stretched into an unusual length, the Marquis gave the Duke a sharp, assessing glance. But the Duke was merely lost in a brown study, not one of those dread episodes that plagued him and alarmed his friends.

"Fear not," said the Duke softly. "It happens more often at night." A figure racing across the fields, man and horse melded into one being, caught his attention. "There's our young buck. I must say I feel a kind of fatherly pride in the boy."

"Indeed," agreed the Marquis, still watching the Duke closely for signs of trouble. "The raising of young Dorch is my sole good deed to date, and I am relying on it to get me past the Pearly Gates."

The Duke waved a commanding arm in the air, and Dorchester guided his horse in their direction. "Are you not concerned that your current endeavor might undo all the good you have previously done?"

"Not one whit. If *le bon Dieu* has any care for the feminine spirit, he will applaud my actions. Our Dorch is many things, but a lover with skill and finesse he is not, and never will be."

"And are you so certain," the Duke asked with raised eyebrow, "that your kind of finesse is what a woman wants, no matter the situation?"

The Marquis started. "Have you spoken to Dorch, then?"

"I haven't yet seen him. What's afoot, you devious devil? I know that look. Come now, out with it. I'll learn it one way or the other, since Dorch is incapable of keeping a secret."

The Marquis acknowledged defeat with a wince. "A small wager, that is all. Dorch and I agreed to put our different styles of lovemaking to the test. A young buck against a jaded old rake. Perfectly harmless."

"Beaumont, you should be ashamed."

The Marquis looked in all directions, as though searching for a stray rabbit to chase.

Just then, the Earl's great black thoroughbred pulled to a snorting halt beside them. Dorch radiated energetic good health, his face bright with exertion, his sand-colored hair ruffled by the wind. "Of course he should be ashamed. What of? This time, that is?"

"Please to explain this wager you have agreed to," said the Duke sternly.

The Earl's open face turned sulky. He reached down to pat the foam-flecked side of his horse. "I'm of age. And I'm a married man now. I don't believe I owe you an explanation."

"And yet I am requesting one." The Duke's green eyes seemed to have a sway over his heir that stern words did not.

"Very well. We agreed that if I could not convince my wife that a strong cock is all she needs, she might have a choice in the matter."

"A choice?"

"Yes. If the Marquis wins our bet, Alicia will be allowed to choose whichever arrangement makes her the most happy."

The word "happy" clearly took the Duke aback. "I see."

"Are you opposed to granting ladies a choice?" The Marquis' silky tone belied the triumph in his eyes.

"Not as such, no."

"I thought not." The Earl and the Marquis exchanged a smug glance. But both were surprised when the dark cloud on the Duke's brow was lifted by sudden laughter.

"I am sorry to say you're both in the wrong. And sadly, that leaves the young lady in a hopeless position in which no choice will make her truly happy." He nudged his horse around in the direction of the great house.

"How do you mean?" The Marquis nudged his white mount after his friend.

The Earl followed behind. "Yes, what are you talking about?"

"Only one element will truly bring happiness to a woman, in bed or out. Dorch, do you love your little bride?"

"She's lovely. She said she likes to ride, though I have yet to see her on horseback. She's...comfortable."

"Comfortable?"

"Yes. If I had a little sister, I would want her to be like Alicia. I'm quite happy with her, really."

"But do you love her?"

Dorch shrugged. "Perhaps in time. It's not essential in a marriage. Very few of my friends are in love with their wives. That's what bits of muslin are for."

The Duke hid a smile. "And Beaumont? I ask the same question of you. Do you love Alicia?"

"I've known her since she was a baby, and I've always had the greatest respect for her, even a fascination with her. She's like no other female of my acquaintance. Candid, sprightly, always truthful, of a frank and curious bent of mind, and in possession of the most delicious form. She promises to be a highly enjoyable partner in every way."

"But do you love her?"

"As much as I'm able at the present moment."

The Duke brushed aside that cryptic answer along with the low-hanging branch of a beech tree. "And thus my point is proved."

"Precisely what is your point?" The Marquis fended off the same branch when it came springing back.

"A woman needs to love and be loved if she is to truly be satisfied."

"Nonsense," said the Marquis.

"Balderdash," said the Earl. The stubborn branch swung at the Earl in his turn. He batted it back, only to have it slap him doubly hard.

“Ah, my friends, my heart weeps for you. As it does for our young Lady Dorchester. How is she ever to experience true joy and love when she is married to *you* and seduced by *you*?” The Duke turned to gesture at each of his cousins in turn. Both men glared at him. “I’d say she lost this wager well before it was ever laid.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner that evening was, I daresay, one of the most excruciating events of my life thus far. Married to one man at the table, intimate with another and...unsettled by the third.

I knew not how else to describe my response to the Duke. He unsettled me. I’m not accustomed to worrying overmuch about others’ opinions of me. My brothers and I grew up quite carefree, and I without the attention of a mother after the age of eight. My father had so very many things to occupy his mind that as long as I did nothing that would bring outright shame to our family, he was content to let me be. And then again, our family was such an insignificant one in the larger scheme of things. I had no grand ladies watching my every movement. I grew up in happy ignorance, oblivious to the greater world.

But now I found I cared deeply what the Duke’s opinion of me must be. And I feared it was indeed dreadful. Not only had I been unforgivably pert at our first, highly improper meeting, but at our second one I’d been...oh, it was mortifying to recall how I’d behaved. The realization that a matter of mere minutes had saved me from being caught in a disgraceful position was humiliation indeed. I found my face frequently flushing as the meal progressed.

We sat around the long table set with gleaming silver candelabra and a magnificent centerpiece of a crystal swan. The Marquis sat at the head of the table, the Duke at the other end, and the Earl and I on each side. The length of the table gave me the impression that oceans of space separated me from the two lords on the ends. The Earl, on the other hand, seemed to be just a hand’s breadth away. Every time I looked up I



caught his bright glance and knew he looked ahead to further marital intimacy that night.

The prospect unnerved me. It was my wifely duty, and I had experienced pleasure in his arms, but everything seemed different now that the Duke had arrived. I fretted over whether he knew what had transpired between the Marquis and me. I felt sure I had done no wrong, as I had followed my husband's bidding. And yet I felt sure the Duke would judge me harshly for it. His posture was so erect, his aspect so severe, as though his heart was burdened by a thousand worries. One of them, surely, must concern his heir's new bride.

The servants were, for the first time, much in evidence as they laid the table with an array of dishes, veal and lamb and other meats in the center of the table and various custards and vegetables to the side. I forced myself to swallow bits of roast quail amid the tense silence.

Finally, the Duke spoke. "Did you enjoy your ride today, my dear Dorchester?"

"Of course I did. Why do you bother with a silly question such as that?"

I smiled in delight. At times I adored the Earl for his honesty and impatience with custom.

"My dear boy," began the Marquis in a disapproving tone, but the Duke waved him off.

"It's no matter, Beaumont. We're all family now, are we not? No need to stand on ceremony."

"That's right," crowed the Earl. "Three cousins and one wife."

His sally sent a disturbance through the room. I did not dare look up, but I didn't need to in order to feel the heightened tension in the wake of his remark.

"Three cousins and one wife," came the Marquis' silky tones. "What a beautiful thought. Family is indeed important. Though we are but distant cousins."

"Distant or not, you're my family." Only the Earl seemed oblivious to the change in mood. "My dear, you probably don't know this, but Beaumont and Warrington raised me after the death of my parents."

This seemed a safe topic, so I convinced myself to lift my eyes. Immediately I saw the Marquis still enjoying a devilish chuckle, and as for the Duke...my heart quivered at the way the candlelight made his eyes glow. What thoughts made him so generally grave that his rare smiles were like sunshine in the woods?

"Do tell me more," I said to the Earl, hoping to focus my thoughts on their proper object, my husband.

"They both died from an infectious fever when I was but twelve. Most of my family assumed I was doomed and refused to allow me in their homes, for fear their own children would be affected. But Warrington was outraged by their coldness and whisked me off to France, where the Marquis kindly allowed us the use of his home until I was healed."

"I, of course, turned tail for England," put in the Marquis.

"Not so. You were there from time to time, I remember it well, and you were always very kind."

"Those are but the ravings of your fevered brain. Most of my good offices on your behalf were performed later, once I was sure you would survive and were worth my efforts."

The Earl looked wounded, but the Duke shook his head with a smile. "Don't try to convince him of his saintliness, it would be far too big of a shock to his system. He's a confirmed villain in the eyes of the world, and would far rather inhabit that role than that of Good Samaritan."

"Although I do have my moments," the Marquis murmured, slanting his black eyes at me.

I felt the flush make its way up my face again. Curse the man for his endless cleverness in finding ways to embarrass me. *And pleasure me*, my treacherous body reminded me.

I was determined to drag the conversation back to safer ground. "I think you were fortunate in your guardians. Having six brothers of my own and no mother after the age of eight, I know how entertaining the male gender can be." With that, I turned as red as the roses in the garden. I heard choked laughter from the Marquis' end of the table and a smothered snort from the Duke. How had such an innocent statement gone so awry?

If fainting had been in my nature, it would have been a convenient moment for one to occur.

"Present company excepted," I added faintly. Even my attempts at rectification were doomed, as I now felt that I had been unforgivably rude. "I do not mean to imply that my dinner companions are not entertaining, for nothing could be further from the truth."

Fortunately for me, I ran out of breath to form my sentences, as every word seemed to make matters worse. My face, I felt sure, was purest crimson by now.

Even the Earl seemed to realize something was amiss. He gazed back and forth around the table with a puzzled frown. "I don't know why that should be a controversial statement. Males are certainly more entertaining than females. Talk of fripperies and toile and the latest *on dits* is so deadly dull, I don't see how you ladies abide it."

"Present company excepted, I suppose?" The Marquis hid his smirk behind his wineglass.

"Of course, of course," said the Earl hurriedly. "Why, Alicia barely even seems like a female, for the most part. That is..."

It was his turn to go red in the face, and I sympathized with him so deeply I couldn't bring myself to feel the outrage that was naturally due me. He stammered an apology.

"It's quite all right," I told him. "I take no offense."

"See? Barely a female at all!" The Earl sounded triumphant as he speared an asparagus frond on his fork.

The Duke, shoulders quaking, put down his knife and fork. "Beaumont, I have to hand it to you. I believe these two may be a perfect match after all."

For some reason, I didn't like the sound of that.

Two footmen entered the room bearing a silver salver and tongs. While one removed the veal, the other replaced it with a magnificent poached fish. When they were finished, the Marquis gave them a gracious gesture and they backed out of the room with a bow.

I was sorry to see the last of them. Their presence had provided a brief moment of respite from the pitfalls and perils of our conversation. I now feared the Duke knew exactly what had occurred between the rest of us. The three, apparently, kept few secrets from each other.

The Marquis served a healthy portion of fish to each of us.

"This trout is exquisite," said the Duke.

"My chef is lately fled from France. I snapped him up as soon as he made his way to these shores. Not that I'm one to profit from the misfortune of others, but there are occasional benefits to the current conflict."

"It won't last forever, you know," said the Duke.

"And when it ends, no doubt I shall adapt. I am prepared to weather all possible outcomes."

"I would expect nothing less."

Under the table, I felt the jittering movements of my husband's leg bouncing up and down in his impatience. Dorchester apparently wasn't of a political bent of mind. Nor was I, but the subject was far less shattering to my nerves than our previous topics. "Are you on the side of the English then, my lord?"

"I am on the side of the angels, my lady."

The Duke snorted. The Earl chuckled. I smiled, happy simply to have peace in the family.

The family. My husband and his two strangely compelling cousins were my new "family". Two of the men were intimately known to me. I wondered about the third. What would it be like to have the Duke in my bed? I peeked up at him under my lashes. To my utter shock, he was gazing at me. A mystified frown creased his wide forehead. He looked as though I were a difficult problem he needed to solve. The bronzed green of his eyes was alive with speculation, bemusement, and maybe, just maybe, a hint of desire.

I looked down at my fish and shivered. What sort of sensual adventure awaited me that night?

\* \* \* \* \*

But only the Earl came to me. My husband took me with a vigor that was becoming familiar. He wrapped my legs around his waist and told me to cling tight to him. I lifted my hips up and pressed myself against him. At first I was fearful that with so little preparation, his assaults might be painful. But the encounter with the Marquis earlier that day had left me with a need gnawing at my belly. All of my dark lord's caressing and taunting and fondling and spanking had lacked one thing, the deep plunge of a manly rod. His thumb, even though wickedly clever, could not take the place of a proudly aroused member.

After a brief initial moment of tenderness, my body welcomed my husband's manhood with a throb of joy. He rammed into me so I felt his soft sac brush against my

thighs. Sparks radiated from my center out to the tips of my fingers and even my toes. How deeply satisfying it was to feel his flesh so far within me. I closed my eyes and savored the roughness of my husband's urges, matched, so unexpectedly, by my own. A song of bliss rose higher and higher, as that sweet land beyond the horizon beckoned.

And then he paused in his thrusts. "Tell me how this feels." His demand nearly made my mouth fall open.

"Most wonderful," I assured him. "Please to continue."

"But do you like it more than that other stuff?" He thrust deep.

I gasped. "Other stuff?"

"The fancy stuff. The frills and furbelows, so to speak."

Why was he suddenly so talkative at such a sensitive moment? The haven I sought receded from me. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean. What do frills have to do with marital relations?"

"My point precisely." He brightened and ground his hips against mine. But our brief discussion had cast a pall over the moment. I felt twinges and soreness that I hadn't felt just minutes earlier. I became aware of the details of the bedchamber. Annie, or some other servant, had replaced the bouquet of pink roses on the dressing table with a new display. One of the petals had dropped onto the surface. For the first time I noticed a lovely watercolor hung on the wall in a gilt picture frame. The scene depicted was oddly familiar. Soon I realized it was the enchanting island in the center of the lake.

Entrancing as the painting was, I did not care to be admiring art during a time when I should have been transported in the arms of my husband.

I pulled out of his grasp and clasped my arms around my knees. "Why must you disrupt our embraces with idle chatter?"

Dorchester gaped at me and sat back on his heels. His body gleamed white in the moonlight, save for where the sun had touched his neck. "Idle chatter? I was attempting to determine what pleases you most."

"What pleases me is to bring our intimacy to its proper conclusion."

"That is what I intended to do." His rod still looked willing, but an irritable mood gripped me.

"You should have kept on as you were rather than distracting me with useless talk." I flounced off the bed and flung open the casement. A gust of balmy air caressed my face.

"Return to the bed and we'll finish. I promise you'll be content."

"The time has passed." I pouted. "I'll return if I must, as it is your marital right. But you might consider a bit of preparation."

"Preparation?"

"Strokes, caresses, sweet words." I put my elbows on the windowsill and let the breeze refresh me.

"But..." he spluttered, "you said you wanted none of that."

"I never did so." I turned from the window to witness a mystifying look of disgruntlement cross his face. "What have I said to offend you? Do you wish me to return to the bed, or shall I continue to enjoy the night air?"

"There's no purpose to it now." Indeed, his manhood had shriveled into mousehood.

I left the window and returned to his side. "I do apologize, my lord. Would you like me to take it into my mouth?" I began to sink to my knees.

"No," came his gloomy answer. He stopped my movement and steered me toward the bed. We sat together, naked. "It was my own fault. I interrupted our lovemaking for a shameful reason."

"Shameful?" Astonishment made me stare. He rubbed his hand across his face as if to clear his mind.

"I must relieve my conscience and beg your forgiveness. The Marquis and I agreed to a competition. My vigorous prick against his sensual arts. When you seemed content

with my brutish thrusts, I thought I'd triumphed. But instead, it seems you do prefer a more skillful technique." My poor husband looked so crestfallen, it might have been adorable had I not been so enraged. The sheer force of my fury made my naked limbs quiver and my vision blur.

"A competition?"

"A wager, to be precise. Do you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? Never!" I scrambled off the bed. I could not continue to be in his presence one more moment for fear I should try to hurt him. "Remove yourself from my bedchamber."

"But—"

"Or I shall jump out the window."

I knew I would do just that if I must. I wanted no more of my husband. No more of the Marquis.

I turned my back to my husband and listened to him fumbling for his clothes. Sickened, I now knew my marriage was a disaster. I could not continue in such a situation. I would find my way back to my father and brothers, or perhaps join a nunnery. The one thing I would not do was stay here with the Earl and the Marquis. I would go somewhere with no more lords to toy with me.



## **Chapter Seven**

The gloomy-faced Earl stormed into the billiards room where the Duke and the Marquis were enjoying a bottle of port and a game of whist. The Marquis narrowed his eyes at his young cousin.

"Here to admit defeat, I presume?"

The Earl flung himself at the Marquis, who moved not a finger to avoid the attack. Instead, the Duke dropped his cards and stepped between his two cousins to take the brunt of it.

"Warrington! I didn't mean...are you hurt?" The Earl patted his cousin's broad shoulders.

"I'm not so fragile as of yet," he answered dryly. "Now why don't you sit down and discuss this in a civilized manner."

"Civilized! A bit late for that, ain't it?" Dorchester scowled in the Marquis' direction, but obeyed the command. He perched on the edge of an armchair and dropped his head into his hands. "She booted me from her bedchamber. We've driven her away."

"We?" the Marquis drawled. "The last I saw of her, she was happy as a kitten in cream. And as creamy as a —"

"Enough." The Duke stopped the Earl, who was already halfway out of his chair, apparently bent on murder. "You both deserve whatever that poor girl chooses to inflict on you. You should be ashamed. Both of you."

Both seemed inclined to argue the point, but the Duke continued implacably. "I refuse to be drawn into your quarrels. I came here for an entirely different purpose."

A pall fell over the room, the familiar ghost of the Duke's confounding malady.

"You saw the physician," said the Earl.

"Indeed."

The Earl leaned forward to grab a poker and jab at the fire. "Well? Don't torment us. Did this one agree with the others?"

The Duke took a bracing sip of port. "The doctors don't seem able to come to agreement on much of anything."

"What do they say, precisely?" The Marquis was deadly serious now.

"They say nothing precisely. They speak in vaguenesses and probabilities, mixing dire warnings with reassuring platitudes. After this last appointment, with the Scottish physician, I've made a decision."

\* \* \* \* \*

From the earliest time I can remember, I loved to steal from my bedchamber and venture into the darkness of the night. My oblivious family never knew and I never was caught, by servant or stranger. I wouldn't stay out-of-doors long. I would simply find a tree or a lovely spot of grass and lie back to enjoy the starry panorama above me. I would return spattered in dew, but with mind and soul much refreshed.

It had been quite some time since I'd had the luxury of such an adventure. In London, it would have been madness to step outside alone at night. At the very least, my reputation would be besmirched. At the worst, some physical harm might come to me. The wedding and the journey to *Notre Plaisir* had prevented me from indulging my craving for night air, but tonight the urge was impossible to deny.

After a sleepless hour, I rose from my bed, drew a shawl around my shoulders and stole out of the bedchamber. The household was silent. Everyone appeared to be asleep. I experienced one moment of fright when I passed by the billiards room and saw the remains of a fire still asmolder. But the room was empty, leading me to believe some or all of the three lords had stayed up quite late and had only recently withdrawn to their

chambers. Since the Earl had not returned to my side, no doubt he was asleep in his own private room.

A set of glass doors let onto a stone terrace. I chose this exit rather than the front entrance. Carefully, I eased the doors open, relieved to hear nary a squeak from the hinges. It was impressive how the Marquis kept everything in perfect condition. At Silverwood Manor, there was always something in need of repair, whether it be the gate to the chicken coop or crumbling mortar in the chimney.

The great black night greeted me with a sweet embrace of country air. The moon had just risen and provided a silvery light for my journey across the lawn. I picked up the hem of my nightdress and danced my way down toward the lake. For some reason, I seem to see better in the dark than most other people. Perhaps it's due to my nighttime roaming.

The damp grass felt delicious on my feet. From long experience, I'd learned it was best not to ruin a pair of slippers, which might bring unwanted attention to my clandestine forays. Bare feet were safer, and a few burrs or thorns nothing worth regarding.

I scampered as if I were a puppy dog released from its chain. At night, with no one watching, I felt free and joyful. I had no need to worry about my reputation or proper behavior, about a husband who wagered on my most intimate desires, or a blackguard who had ignited a flame that still tormented me.

I spread my arms and turned in a happy circle. A moonlit sky arched above, punctuated by bright scintillating points. Around me, the dark shapes of trees gathered and crickets murmured. I heard the lapping of water against the shore of the lake.

And another sound, a rhythmic splashing.

Was someone swimming in the lake at this hour? Perhaps an animal? My better judgment told me to hurry back to the manor. But my curiosity, as always, got the best of me. I headed for the shadows of the trees so I should not be spotted and tiptoed toward the lake.

It stretched before me like a spreading ink spot. The rising moon picked out glimmering ribbons on the surface. Not far from shore was a dark lump with two sticks protruding from either side. They moved in slow circles, up and down, so I soon realized I was looking at a small rowboat. A man sat at the oars, and from the arrogant tilt of his head I knew it was a nobleman, not one of the serving class, or a tenant come to poach. I speculated that one of the three lords was in that boat, since it would be extremely odd for a visitor to arrive and head directly to a rowboat on the lake. Squint as I might, I was unable to make out which one it might be.

And then, right before my eyes, the oddest thing occurred. The lord slumped over the oars.

Now perhaps the most sensible thing would have been to run back to the house and wake the household with a call for help. But I was so practiced in my surreptitiousness that I never considered that course of action. Instead, I tossed aside my shawl and waded into the water. I found it much colder than it had been earlier in the day. It closed around my ankles with a frigid grip. Softly, I called out to the unconscious man.

“Are you ill? Wake up! Hallo, hallo.” When I received no response from the boat, I waded in farther and raised my voice. “Ahoy the rowboat. Please talk to me, if you are able.”

When it became clear no response would be forthcoming, I plunged into the water up to my waist. I gasped from the shock of the cold, but at the same time it made my limbs tingle and filled me with vigor. I submerged myself further and swam toward the rowboat. My strokes were awkward, as I was unwilling to let my head go below the surface. Long tendrils of my hair flowed behind me. My nightdress clung to my legs, making the short swim far more arduous than it ought to have been.

The urgency of the situation grew as one of the oars slipped so it dangled precariously from the oarlock. I swam harder. I uttered a silent thanks to my brothers for their lessons in swimming.

I was nearly dead from exhaustion by the time I reached the little craft. Still the figure didn't move. I clung to the sides of the boat, too fatigued to do anything more. I had only enough presence of mind to push the oar back into its oarlock. When I recovered my breath, I gathered all my strength and pulled myself onboard. I dropped into the bottom like a sack of potatoes, and the sound finally stirred the unconscious man to life. He groaned.

I scrambled to my knees. "Sir, you appear to be ill. May I offer you some assistance?"

When he didn't answer, I took one limp hand in mine and murmured to him. "If only I had some smelling salts or a bottle of hartshorn, but I'm afraid I'm woefully unprepared as I am not a person who faints. The next time I ramble out of doors I shall be sure to carry some with me for the sole purpose of reviving any swooning noblemen I may encounter."

After a few moments of this, the man raised his head and looked me full in the eyes. I saw that it was the Duke of Warrington.

"You," he said. In the moonlight, his skin looked pale. Pain tightened his face.

Knowledge shafted through me, straight to the pit of my belly. The Duke, that strong, chestnut-haired, kingly man, was ill.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"'Tis nothing," he said brusquely. "I was merely taking a brief rest from the stroking of the oars."

"You're not telling me the truth."

"You needn't concern yourself."

And yet I found it did concern me. Very much. "If you're fine, then take the oars." I shoved them at him, only to watch him fumble.

I took the oars into my own hands. I'd never rowed a boat before, but surely it couldn't be very difficult. Immediately, the rowboat threatened to capsize.

"Give me the oars."

"No, you're too weak from your fainting spell."

"It was no fainting spell."

"Then what was it, pray tell?"

"I will beg you to stay out of my affairs."

"'Twould be much easier accomplished had you not fainted in front of me."

Squabbling in this manner, neither of us paid proper attention to our course. Amid the splashing and arguing, a new sound made itself known. The rowboat scraped against the rocky beach of the little island. We had run aground.

"Oh, dear," I sighed. "I supposed I had best return to the water and push the craft away from the shore."

"Ridiculous idea. We shall go ashore and warm ourselves. Look at you, you're shaking like a scared rabbit."

"I'm not scared." But my protest fell on deaf ears, as the Duke propelled me out of the rowboat onto the beach. He seemed to have regained some of his strength. Although he moved slowly, he tied the boat's rope to a rock then led me up the incline to a sheltered spot under a grove of birch trees.

Now that my exertions were behind me, I felt colder than ever. The wind prodded me with frigid fingers. I dropped to the ground and wrapped my arms around my knees to curl into the smallest possible ball. Even so, I shivered and shook. The Duke sat next to me. Something warm came around me. Gratefully, I realized it was his greatcoat. Outside that garment, his arms encircled me. He rubbed gently and held me until my shivers tapered off. His grasp was firm, his body a solid wall of heat. I clung to him as if he were an oak tree and I a climbing vine.

"Better?" His breath was warm against my hair.

"Warmer, I thank you. The lake wasn't nearly as cold earlier in the day. I didn't expect to become so chilled."

"What were you thinking, you mad girl?"

"I believed there was someone in the boat at death's door. Or at the very least in a dire state that required immediate assistance."

"I required no assistance."

"You're very stubborn, Your Grace."

Finally, he smiled. "I'm sorry to have frightened you. Obviously, I had no inkling anyone was nearby."

"It's lucky for you I was."

His chest rumbled with a laugh. I felt the vibrations through the several layers of clothing between us. "It occurs to me that as the wife of my heir, perhaps you were a tiny bit hopeful you might find me beyond help."

I tried to pull away from his embrace but he did not allow it. "That's a dreadful thing to say! I have no desire to be a duchess."

"Or perhaps you were on your way out to knock me overboard."

"How could you ever think such a—" In my outrage, I forgot my shivers. My shaking was now from fury. The Duke gave me an approving nod and I saw that was the intent of his teasing. My anger subsided. "The very idea is absurd."

"Especially for one who desired never to meet the fatally attractive Duke of Warrington."

My face heated. The Duke certainly had clever ways of returning the warmth to my being. "I did not desire it, but it seems to keep happening willy-nilly whether I wish it or not. However, may I point out that I have yet to succumb to a faint, which cannot be said for Your Grace?"

He chuckled reluctantly. "My powers are apparently waning. I do indeed thank you for your assistance. You're a most unusual creature. I wonder how many girls would swim to the rescue of a stranger in the middle of the night."

If that was a compliment, it had a funny ring to it. "Well. You're welcome."

In the quiet that followed, I heard the lapping of wavelets on the shale bank, the soft hoot of an owl somewhere on shore. The Duke's warmth seeped into me and a pleasant sense of well-being filled me. This peaceful feeling was interrupted by a new question.

"Now Lady Dorchester, I must ask what you were doing outside on such a night."

"Nothing," I answered evasively. "I only wished to breathe the fresh air and enjoy the lovely night."

"All alone? A new bride on the second night of her marriage? It strikes me that something might be amiss."

"Not at all. That is, my husband and I..."

"Yes?"

At his kind tone, all the hurt feelings flooded back. The dark night, the tiny island, so apart from the rest of the estate, the warmth flooding back into my veins, all combined to make me forget the value of discretion.

"My husband found fit to place an unseemly wager that is so improper and so thoroughly humiliating that I couldn't bear to remain in his presence." My wounded emotions poured out of me. "I beg you not to rise to his defense, for his behavior is inexcusable. He's an impulsive boy who doesn't think things through. And the Marquis is even worse. Neither of them cares how such a challenge would affect a woman's sensitive feelings. I thought I was doing the proper thing as a new wife, but now I find I cannot forgive him."

"Why should you? What he did is unforgivable."

"It is?" I gazed up at his stern face, so entrancing in the silvery light. I had not expected him to take my side against his own friends and cousins.

"Both of them behaved abominably, and you have every right to be furious with them."

"You...you know about the wager?"



"I do. And I've told them I think they're both a disgrace."

I shivered. The Duke mistook my reaction as a physical one to the wind, and wrapped his coat more tightly around me. "On their behalf, I apologize."

"You didn't do anything improper." Snuggled next to him, the unruly thought floated through my mind that I wished he had, or would. He smelled so lovely, a bit like oranges mixed with wet wool. The heat of his body seemed to send wisps of steam rising from my damp clothing.

"No, but I knew something along these lines would happen. I knew the Marquis was up to something, and I knew the Earl stood no chance of putting a stop to it. I'm sorry I delayed my arrival by a day."

"You have no cause for apology." But still, I was grateful for it. I cuddled against his strong chest as the drowsy heat stole through my body. He held me securely in his arms.

"Will you forgive your husband then?"

"I admit my first response was quite implacably unforgiving. Fortunately, no letter-opener or other sharp instrument was nearby. But now I've had time to reflect, my thoughts have taken a different course."

"How so?"

"I believe strongly in facing the truth. It's never good to lie to oneself."

"So very true." The Duke sounded quite struck by that statement. "What truth is it that you are determined to face?"

"A simple one. I've been thinking on it all night. I married the Earl before God and my father and Lady Chadwick, and I will not back out on a vow. This marriage is my life now."

"You're very honorable."

"Besides, unless I join a circus or some such, I should have to return home and that I cannot do. My brothers would laugh at me far too much to tolerate. I would have to

commit bodily harm to at least one of them, perhaps even extending to murder, and then I should end up in a ladies' prison doing my washing by hand. I do not care for that prospect."

I noticed a certain quaking in the warm body enfolding me. The Duke was laughing. I didn't see why he should be so amused.

"Can you deny the truth of what I say?"

"Not at all," he gasped, pulling one hand away from our tight embrace to wipe his streaming eyes. "I merely marvel that a mere slip of a girl should be able to see things with such clarity."

"Female eyes work just as well as men's."

"Better, it seems. I knew you were a delightful girl the first time we spoke, at the Allworth's rout. I never dreamed we'd—" He broke off before he could finish that intriguing thought. He moved to bring his arm back to its previous, enchanting position, then hesitated. "Are you quite warm now?"

"No," I answered promptly. "My clothing is still damp, and when the wind finds its way to me, I become dreadfully chilled."

"Perhaps your clothing is, that is to say, it might be best if you—" Again he arrested his speech in a most frustrating manner. His unspoken words sent my pulse into a flutter. A new tension arose between us.

Something else seemed to rise between us too. My legs, curled together, rested on top of his thigh, meaning I was partially in his lap. And in that lap, a burgeoning spear of flesh poked against my leg. The Duke was becoming aroused. That fact made me giddy with an excitement I'd never felt before.

"Please...ignore that," he said in a strained voice. "An inevitable consequence of our current circumstances."

"I don't mind," I told him in a frank manner. "I find the male member quite entrancing."

He released a snort of laughter. "Do you indeed?"

"Yes." I pressed my leg against it and felt it surge.

"It seems to find you equally so."

Again, shivers swept through me. A silence fell over us and the outer world faded away. In that moment something remarkable took place. The world shifted so the Duke occupied my mind entirely and absolutely, as if no one else existed or had ever existed. Nothing else held any significance.

I breathed deeply of his presence, which was as intoxicating to me as wine. My skin came alive with awareness. There seemed to be something connecting us, communicating even when no words left our mouths.

All I knew, all I felt was each breath the Duke took, the rise of his chest, each tiny movement of his muscles. We were alone in a world of our own making, his arms around me, my legs curled on his. The shale beneath us could have been a cloud in heaven. The darkness of the night acted as a curtain shielding us from outsiders. For this moment, only two people existed in the world. One man, one woman.

I knew he desired me. He knew I desired him. And I sensed, with my new heart that knew only him, a deep, lonely longing in his soul, a grief that cried out for relief.

Without thought, I turned and pressed the length of my body against him. I felt him shudder with desire, and knew he was fighting the urge to embrace me. *Don't fight it*, I told him silently, using nothing but the slow press of my body to make my case. *You need me. I need you.* And I did need him, oh how I needed him. I needed the comfort of his strong arms, the warmth of his smile, the intensity in his shadowed eyes.

Silently, we battled. How could he withstand the craving that surged between us? How could he resist the call of my soul to his? He could not, and with a strangled groan he grabbed me to him and brought his head down to mine. As his lips seared mine, I felt my heart shatter into a million sparkles of light.

Neither the Earl nor the Marquis had ever kissed me.

Now the Duke kissed the breath from my body and the strength from my limbs. I clung to him and opened my lips to his ferocious explorations. His hands held my face as he delved his tongue deep into my mouth. My soul thrilled to his passionate fervor. I returned it with equal force. We tasted one another with lips and tongues and hands, greedily groping each other's bodies. The Duke seemed lost in a sort of madness as he plucked the clothing from my body.

"God forgive me, I need you. I need to see you and feel you." He groaned. "Every part of you."

My skin was so heated by his touch and my own inner fire that I didn't feel the wind that had bothered me earlier. I rose to my feet, flung off my chemise, and stood proudly before him.

"Oh, my sweet," he said, his eyes devouring me. "You're a goddess."

He reached up one hand to pull me back into his lap. His heat enveloped me. The textures of his clothing—stiff wool and fine linen—prickled against my exposed skin in the most exquisite way. I felt a tingling all over my body, but most especially in the tips of my breasts. They stood up with embarrassing eagerness. I became suddenly aware of my nakedness as compared to the Duke, and put my hands to my breasts to hide them.

But the Duke gently withdrew my hands. I turned my face away, not because I was ashamed of my nakedness, but because my body responded so readily to his gaze. All it took was the Duke's glance to settle on my bosom, and those nipples of mine leaped to attention like determined little soldiers. What would he think of me and my unmaidenly urges?

Then all such worries vanished. The Duke touched my nipple with one gentle finger. It was such a light touch, and yet with so much restraint behind it, as if he wanted to ravage me but was allowing himself only one simple touch. The sensation was so enchanting that my other nipple immediately felt the lack. Did he sense how my flesh cried out for him? Did his finger feel the same craving that my nipple felt? Perhaps, for in the next moment he reached for that breast too.

The Duke, that man of gentle iron, had his hands on my nipples. It defied belief.

And then came more delight. He moved my legs so I straddled his hips. I felt his hard length burn against my mound and it made me mad with lust. He ran his hands up and down my arms.

“Chilled?”

“No.” I clutched his hands and put them back on my breasts. I felt no chill, only heat and light. His touch was divine to me. His hands seemed to understand my skin and know what my flesh craved.

We spoke no more words. Perhaps we were afraid to break the spell.

I rocked against him and saw his head arch back. I knew he felt as I did, that such overwhelming desire was too much to bear, that it would make him burst. I ran my hands down his chest, unbuttoning his waistcoat, opening the white linen shirt he wore. Hard muscles lurked under smooth skin. A light dusting of hair tickled my fingers. I came across little nubs of nipples. I wanted to feel every crevice, every rise of muscle and every twitch of sensitive skin. I wanted to inhale this man, devour him and make him part of me.

His fingers played with my nipples. I moaned as a spasm shot through me. There was something I wanted to tell him, but my desire was so great I could not utter a coherent word. I lost myself in his eyes, dark pools like tunnels to his heart. We gazed at each other, soul to soul.

A shadow passed over him.

“We must not—” He tried to put me away from him, but I would have none of it.

I boldly reached inside his breeches and took his manhood into my greedy hands. It was a mighty thing, its girth so great my fist barely reached around it. In my grip, it grew to an even more substantial size. It nigh to scorched my hand, so hot was that spear of flesh. From the moment I touched it, all thoughts fled my mind save one. I wanted him inside my body.

All thoughts of proper behavior, of decorum, of my former self...all were gone. I was a woman craving a man, nothing more.

And I knew that man wanted me. As I stroked his flesh, I gazed into his feverish eyes and saw how he lusted, and how he fought that lust.

I inched myself forward so his member brushed against the tender inner part of my thighs. My belly clenched with anticipation. His body went rigid.

"You tempt me beyond bearing," he muttered under his breath. I felt fierce joy at those words, and a dizzying sense of power. Of course he couldn't resist me. Not when my hand danced up and down his shaft, testing its eager response. Not when I arched my back to brush my nipples against the muscular expanse of his chest. Not even his clothing could stand in my way.

His thickened shaft spilled from his opened breeches. I claim no knowledge of how they came to be unbuttoned. His cravat was long gone, his shirt loose, displaying his strong throat and powerful chest. It rose and fell with his rapid, almost hoarse breathing. In the moonlight, sweat glistened on his skin. His eyes bored into mine with an intensity that took away my breath. He looked half-crazed with desire and altogether magnificent.

His cock nudged the curls that guarded my cunt. I arched my hips in greeting, spreading my knees farther apart to entice a visit. I felt a magical rhythm undulate my body. It was as if a siren from the deep possessed me. As my thighs gripped his, my upper half moved in a sensual dance, my arms rising to gather my hair over my head. With a primal knowledge I didn't know I possessed, I wove a web of lustful invitation, of wicked bewitchment, of feverish enchantment. Could he resist? He tried, I saw how he tried. But in that moment, on that spot, neither one of us could withstand the need that drew us together.

In one strong, gloriously forceful motion, he flipped me over onto my back. I gasped in surprise as the rough wool of his coat scraped my bottom. He braced himself over me.

"You push me too far." He choked out the words before roughly pressing my legs apart with his knee.

I spread them even farther apart and arched my body to meet his.

And then came the moment that shattered my world. He drove into me, his massive cock claiming me to the utmost reaches of my body and soul.

"I—" Another powerful thrust and the truth broke in blinding waves. "I lo—"

But suddenly I had no breath, no words. I barely knew where I was. The depth of my madness frightened me, and I gripped the coat beneath me to anchor myself. But the next deep stroke of his cock chased away all fear.

He began a slow corkscrewing of his hips that made my body sing with frenzied joy. I moved and danced against him. This seemed to drive him mad. He stilled my hips in an iron grip that left me no choice but to ride the sweet rising wave. "I... I..."

Deep inside me he plunged, so deep and far. It was as if a dam had broken inside him and no longer could he hold himself back. He took me with desperate hunger, with a ferocious, endless need. No longer was he the restrained and commanding Duke. Together, we'd unleashed the savage within. And the siren in me urged him on. *More, more, more...*

Until the pleasure exploded inside and I wailed my ecstasy to the moon and the stars and the man who ruled me body and soul.

The blissful waves swept across me, sharp and deep and complete. This time, I didn't transport to another realm. Rather, I stayed where I was, joined with my Duke, as we whirled together into a magical union. I felt his body shudder with his release. I heard him give a harsh cry of joy. And I knew, with all my heart, that this was the only man I would ever truly love.

I loved the Duke. I had perhaps done so since our first meeting at the rout. He'd never entirely left my mind since then, even appearing to me during moments of ecstasy. I knew he must love me, too, else how should I feel so complete in his arms?

But he did not declare it. To the contrary, as soon as his throes of passion ended, a dark shadow descended on his face and he rolled onto his back.

"What I've done is wrong, very wrong. I deserve utter condemnation and scorn."

"No! I love you."

He shifted restlessly on our makeshift blanket. "That's impossible. I've sworn never to love."

"You cannot swear such a thing. I think I loved you from the first moment we spoke."

"You must stop immediately. It cannot be."

I hit him on the fleshy part of his upper arm, where I knew it wouldn't hurt.

"I can't and I won't. And I'm very stubborn. When I make up my mind about a thing, it never changes. I love you. I always will."

He shook my words away as if they were horseflies. "And your husband? My heir? What have I done to him?"

"Don't speak of him!" My anger had faded in the presence of much stronger emotions, the way a candle is outshone by the sun. But still, I did not want to think of him. "Dorchester is more of a brother to me, a very naughty brother indeed. I imagine he feels much the same toward me. Is that not the best one can hope for? Our marriage was an arranged one, after all." I shivered as a wisp of cool air whispered against my cheek. "Will you hold me closer, please, Your Grace?"

"Are you becoming chilled?" He hurried to bundle me up more warmly. I basked in his care and concern. "I find it impossible to deny you. And yet I must."

I buried my face in his chest. I knew what he referred to. This glorious communion could never happen again.

"We should row back to the house." But his tone held no conviction.

"No, no," I said quickly. "I'm sure I would become far too chilled out on the water. We're much warmer here, at least until the sun rises."



“And when the sun rises, what then?”

“Perhaps it won’t do so,” I said, desperately. “In the meantime, we can pretend we’re gypsies living in the open air, free as the wind, without a care in the world.”

“What a lovely thought.” And so for the next stretch of time we imagined ourselves to be carefree wanderers. In our imaginations, we made a bonfire and danced around it. We ate berries and hunted geese, which we roasted on a stick over our fire. We bathed in streams and slept under the stars. We gave ourselves a caravan of ragtag children.

It was that last addition that brought our play to an end. The Duke’s face sobered at the mention of children. “I should have been more cautious during our lovemaking. If you are with child, I will never forgive myself.”

“If that is what the Lord desires, that is what will be.” In my heart, I knew I would be delighted to bear his child. The complications of such a prospect were daunting, but so were the joys. “Don’t you love me a little?” I whispered.

“It cannot be.” His bleak tone told me our brief interlude of fantasy was over.

Shortly after that, the first hint of gray on the horizon augured the onset of day. Under normal circumstances, I adored watching the sunrise. But this time, it brought a dreadful tightening to my belly. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping it would be full dark when I opened them again. But the sun was relentless in its slow encroachment on my happiness.

“We must leave now,” said the Duke, and this time I did not argue. I rose silently to my feet, which, of all parts of my body, were the most numb from cold. He buttoned his greatcoat around me and led me to the rowboat. Together, we heaved it into the lake, then he swung me into it so my feet wouldn’t touch the water. He pushed off from shore and jumped into the boat. I watched every movement with greedy lust. He was graceful yet powerful, strong yet considerate. Everything he did made me love him more deeply.

He saw me devouring him with my eyes and gave me a chiding look. “Behave yourself, now.”

"I didn't do anything!"

"It's that look in your eyes, you must know what a fire it lights in me."

"Does it?" I asked innocently.

"You bring to life things within me that I thought I'd banished, things I've sworn never to—"

He snapped shut his mouth, as if determined to say no more. He set himself to rowing. I watched the oars dip in and out of the black water, making a silvery sound. I remembered how I'd first spotted him, unconscious and slumped.

"You never answered my question," I exclaimed. "What was wrong with you when I spotted you in the lake..." I trailed off. His eyes met mine with a deadly seriousness that turned my body to ice. "No." I whispered. I didn't even know what I was saying "no" to, only that it was something terrible.

"I'm—" he began.

"Don't say it. Don't say anything more. Nothing!" He tried to speak. "Not another word." For the first time in my life, I refused to hear the truth.

He looked away from me so I gazed on his profile and that beautiful mouth with its firm lines and tender curves. In side view, he was as magnificent as a warrior on a coin. Nothing could be wrong with this splendid man. It was impossible.

We said nothing more during the remainder of the trip across the lake. As soon as we'd dragged the rowboat to its resting spot under the trees, I ran alone toward *Notre Plaisir*. Grayness tinted everything, the trees and the grass, even the sky above. I remember almost nothing from that mad dash to my bedchamber. When I reached my bed, I tore off the Duke's coat and stuffed it under my bed. I dove under the counterpane, burrowed deep inside my nest of covers, and cried.

## Chapter Eight

Annie came to me a few hours later. At the sound of her entrance, I raised my throbbing head from my pillow to make certain none of the three lords had come into my bedchamber. I wanted none of them. At the sight of Annie, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good morning, my lady," she said. "Do ye care to break your fast this morning?"

"No, I thank you. I believe I will stay abed today."

"Are ye ill, then?"

"No. Yes. I know not what I am."

She came around to the side of the bed, her bright head a beacon of sunshine, and gasped at the sight of my tangled hair. "My lady! What have ye done?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Certainly it was nothing compared to the turmoil inside me.

"Your beautiful hair," she moaned. "Please may I brush it out, my lady? It won't take but a shake of a lamb's tail."

The quaint country phrase comforted me. "Very well. But I am not cheerful today and if I say anything untoward you must promise to forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Annie seemed astonished at the thought. It was not the role of a servant to forgive her mistress. But Annie and I, through our previous intimacy, had passed beyond such strictures, in my opinion.

I rose naked from the bed and let her drape a new nightdress over me. Her touch soothed me. She was such a kind little soul, like a hedge-sparrow hopping in from the fields. If the Marquis were a bird, he would be a black raven. The Earl, a kingfisher or perhaps a falcon, graced with a love of the hunt. And my Duke? The Duke would be an eagle, magnificent of heart and body.

I sat on the little gilt stool before the mirror and shook out my hair. A terrible mess, it was. I even felt bits of vegetation among its strands. Annie, who had no doubt seen much stranger things in the Marquis' employ, made no comment on its condition.

She took one thick lock in her hands and worked the brush through it. I watched her in the mirror.

"Ye seem downcast this morning, my lady."

"Yes, as I said, I'm not cheerful today. I detest being unhappy. Why be unhappy when there are so many delightful things to be enjoyed? That has always been my philosophy."

Dimples flashed in her freckled face. "I, too, believe it's best to look on the good of things and not dwell on the unpleasant."

"Such as the fact that you won't be able to marry for some time?"

"But we *will* be able to marry, some day. So why should I complain?" With the tangles smoothed from one shank of hair, she placed it carefully over my shoulder so it hung over my breast.

"Perhaps you're better off as you are, with no husband."

"My lady!"

I'd shocked her with my bitter tone. "You need not take my words seriously. Besides, my situation is not at all like yours. You're in love, are you not?"

"I suppose I am. Sometimes I can scarcely remember." She giggled. "If I had a fine lord like the Earl in my bed, I would not complain."

Her expression bright with mirth, she met my eyes in the mirror. I ought to have corrected her and told her such speech was improper. Instead, I giggled in response. "Perhaps my dilemma is too many lords in my bed."

This sally turned her giggle into a full-fledged fit. Oh, what a relief to be able to share my worries with a sympathetic female.

"The Earl is too simple in his methods, and the Marquis is too subtle. How am I to choose one over the other? Especially when..."

"When what, my lady?" Her pretty eyes were bright with curiosity.

"When there exists another, who is neither too simple nor too subtle, who inspires such passion in my heart and soul as I never knew existed."

"Oh my," she breathed.

"Yes, and I cannot have him. I am married to another, and I can never have my true love." I closed with a sob.

"Oh, that's simply too tragic." In her sympathy, Annie pulled the brush through my hair with an overabundance of enthusiasm that made me wince. "Oh sorry, my lady."

"Make it hurt, I don't mind. It's just how I feel inside."

Despite that childish statement, she gentled her strokes. "What a dreadful situation for ye, my lady. If it were only a question of the Earl and the Marquis, 'twould be easily solved. But with a third to consider, oh my poor lady, my heart bleeds for you."

"Thank you, Annie." But I had to return to her most interesting comment. "What do you mean, that the problem would be easily solved if it included only the two lords?"

"Well, begging your pardon, mum, I've been in the Marquis' employ for quite a time, so I've also come to know the Earl." She blushed a bit, so I knew not to pursue the precise details of such knowledge. "The Earl, fine man though he be, has not the temperament to attend to a lady's...needs. But he is a sweet-hearted fellow, and he would not wish for his wife to be unhappy. The cousins are so very loyal to one another, they are all branches of the same tree, so to speak, even though they're only distantly related. Your Earl looks on the Marquis almost as a father, or perhaps an uncle. He would not deny anything the Marquis desired, and he would not deny you either. Thick as thieves, those three are. Blood brothers, you might say. It's said if you do harm to one, you do it to all three, and so no one cares to do so."

At the mention of the Duke, tears came into my eyes again. Annie, focused on my hair, didn't notice. "The Duke seems very different from the Marquis."

"Oh yes, he's quite different. The Duke is a great man with many duties and burdens. He doesn't visit here in the way the Earl does. He's never married, no matter how many heiresses chase after him. I do know the other two fret about him. They think he worries overmuch and doesn't enjoy himself."

"We know what the Marquis means by that," I murmured.

"Aye." Annie giggled. "I do believe both the Earl and the Marquis would do anything to enliven the Duke. He's so serious and worried."

Clearly, she didn't know the Duke's secret. It must be very closely guarded, because the scope of Annie's knowledge was truly impressive. All the information she'd conveyed swirled inside my mind. The Earl...the Marquis...the Duke...me.

The room dimmed, and when I came to I was lying back in the chair with my nightdress opened. Annie waved smelling salts under my nose. I shrank from the unfamiliar, bitter smell. "Oh my lady, you're back." She pressed kisses onto my cheeks and neck. My skin shivered in response. "I feared I'd knocked ye dead with all my silly chatter. My dear, lovely lady, please do tell me you're all right!"

"I'm all right. Please, Annie, I'm fine. Don't fret so. I never faint."

And yet, I *had* fainted. It made no sense, nor did anything else that had happened to me since my marriage.

"As you say, my lady." She stopped kissing me, but kept hold of my arm. With gentle strokes, she felt my pulse. "May I say something to you in confidence?"

"I suppose so."

"When I stroke so, I see the blacks of your eyes grow big. And your cheeks turn flushed. You have a great appetite for sensual delights, I find. Do not be offended," she said quickly. "I, as well, have an appetite for such, and the Marquis has taught me not to be ashamed of it. It's a wonderful quality for a woman to possess. The fine ladies,

some of them, don't allow themselves this joy. Others overindulge and use it to do harm."

From the edge in her voice, I wondered if she referred to the Marquis' cold-eyed wife.

"But you, with your freshness and softness, your eagerness for sensuality, are most unique. In my time serving the Marquis, I have never encountered this combination."

Her delicious strokes made my eyes close halfway. I felt as if I were a cat being petted. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Only to say that perhaps ye should not worry. Perhaps there is a perfect answer that will make everyone happy, especially yourself."

I gazed into her kind eyes. Her caresses had lulled me into a dreamy state, one in which I could not bring myself to worry. "Everything will be lovely," I said in a sleepy voice.

"Most lovely." She smoothed the hair back from my forehead. "It serves no one to deny your true nature, my lady." After that, she helped me sit up and arranged my hair down my back. "Look at you, beautiful as an angel."

"You're the angel, I believe," I murmured. With a cheeky wink, she left the bedchamber.

I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair flowed down my back, golden as a sheaf of wheat in the sun. My lips were pink and softly parted. My eyes glowed with a sweet light, the light blue of a spring morning. The flush still sat upon my cheeks, and the neckline of the nightdress revealed a creamy curve of flesh. *It serves no one to deny your true nature.* I knew my heart. I loved the Duke. That truth was written in stone. I had accepted the prospect of a loveless marriage with Dorchester. But now that I'd fallen so entirely, thoroughly in love with the Duke, everything looked different. Everything looked impossible.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you attempting to murder your horse?" the Marquis yelled to the Duke, who was hurtling across the fields several lengths ahead of his companions during their morning ride.

The Duke didn't answer.

"Take care with that beast, Warrington. He's far too fine a piece of horseflesh to be pounded in such a way."

At the Earl's shouted warning, Warrington pulled on the reins. His gelding reared into the air, hooves clawing, then danced back down on all fours. "You dare to speak to me of how best to treat my horse, when you can't treat your own wife with the proper respect?"

"Whoa," said the Marquis, bringing his white mare to a snorting, foaming halt at his side. "Those are words a gentleman might take as an affront."

Indeed, the Earl's face had turned bright red. "I treat my wife with every respect."

"Does a wager demonstrate respect? Have you no thought, no sensitivity? Did either of you pause to wonder how such a bet would make her feel?"

The Marquis toyed with his riding crop. "And just how do her feelings concern you?"

The Duke tossed his proud head. "Why should they not? She's a sensitive, tender-hearted soul."

The Marquis perked up his ears as if he were a foxhound on the scent. "And how would you know this?"

"Yes, how?" the Earl echoed suspiciously.

"It matters not."

"The pieces of a puzzle begin to fall into place." The Marquis ticked off the points on his fingers. "The lateness of your rising this morning, the mysterious footprints causing alarm among my servants, a rowboat out of place. You had an adventure last night, my dear one."



"What adventure? Where? Where'd you go?" inquired the Earl, much like a dog with bone.

"My whereabouts are not relevant to this discussion." The Duke wore a look of thunder.

"Perhaps not, but I venture to guess your choice of companion is extremely relevant."

"Companion? Great balls of fire, does this concern my wife?" The Earl sliced his crop through the air, frightening his horse. "I demand an answer."

"Come now, Dorch." The Duke glanced over at the Marquis, who looked equally taken aback.

"An answer, or I'll see you for pistols at dawn!"

"Pistols at... Dorch, really, don't be absurd." The Marquis took hold of the great black's bridle, but Dorch pulled his thoroughbred away.

"I'm tired of you both telling me what to do and where to go and who to get married to. And then you both want to fuck her. I've had enough of it. Pistols at dawn."

The Earl dug his spurs into the horse's side and galloped at a crackling pace toward the open fields.

The Marquis flicked a speck of horse spittle from his coat. "He must learn to control his temper, that boy. Nobody duels anymore, after all, the law forbids it."

"No. He's right." The Duke's dark tone made the Marquis look up in surprise. The Duke frowned down at his riding gloves. "I've done wrong by the boy. I must answer for my crimes. It will be pistols at dawn, but..."

"But what?"

"Only one of us will be firing."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Marquis came to me in greater distress than seemed possible for such a jaded gentleman. I was wandering in the garden among the heavy-headed roses in a brown study of my own, attempting to find a path through my troubles.

"We must do something immediately, or all will be lost," he declared.

I wondered if perhaps he was rehearsing a role in a tableau. "Is your waistcoat ripped, my lord? Your cravat stained?"

"Is it?" He glanced in alarm at his cravat, but even my teasing could not distract him from his distress for long. "This is no matter for joking, I'm afraid. Your husband intends to put a period to my...to the Duke."

A horrible chill rooted me to the ground. "No. He cannot."

"So I told him, but he listens not to me. Oh, what have I done?" He wrung his hands, for all the world like a young girl enacting a Cheltenham tragedy. "But perhaps it's only what I deserve."

"You?"

"I truly never intended any harm. Especially to one who is blameless. One who is fine in every way, who is —"

Slowtop that I am, the truth finally dawned. "You love the Duke."

The Marquis turned as pink in the face as the peony rose he stood next to.

"But, but, I love him too."

The Marquis snapped the head off the rose and shredded its helpless petals. "Well, and what of it? Shall we fight a duel for his favors? We'd best do it soon, as by dawn tomorrow he will be no more. Dorch means business, and Warrington means to stand up with an empty pistol. He probably thinks it an easier death than the unknown fate he's decided to accept without struggle."

"Unknown fate?"

"He suffers from an unexplained illness of the heart, and informed us last night he's decided to seek no more medical attention."

At that moment, I experienced a fury like to tear *Notre Plaisir* into bits of brick and dust. As a female, my destiny was guided and influenced by men. I had so little sway over the events of my own life. But if this was how men directed their affairs, what would the world come to? I didn't know which lord was worse. The Marquis, who had set this catastrophe in motion, the Earl, who was bent on such an idiotish course, or the Duke, who would accept an early end without battling.

"Where are they?"

"Dorch is cleaning his pistols and Warrington is closeted in my library."

"Do not allow him to leave."

\* \* \* \* \*

How I got my ox-headed husband into that library, I'll never know. I believe I may have threatened to faint, and even faked a few tears. In truth, I was far too angry for tears. When we entered the peaceful, book-lined room, the Duke was hunched over an *escritoire* writing furiously on a piece of foolscap. He wore no waistcoat or cravat, only a linen shirt open at the throat, and he looked entirely delicious to my loving eyes. The Marquis hovered near him.

I marched to the desk and ripped the foolscap into shreds. "I won't have this. I won't, I won't. Do you all understand?"

"Darling," said the Earl, scampering behind me. "This is men's business."

"Men? Men?" I whirled on him, my outrage nearly choking me. "What sort of man wants to put an end to his lord and mentor, the cousin who has named him his heir, who raised him as a motherless child, who has shown him nothing but kindness and generosity?"

"And who spent the night with my wife, after she, that is, you, turned me out of her, I mean, your bedchamber!"

I put my hands on my hips like a veritable fishwife. "And so? Is that any different from our first night as a married couple?"

"Well, yes." I saw him search his brain for the source of the distinction. "I gave no permission to the Duke." He punched one fist into the other. "No one can deny my rights as a husband have been violated."

"No, indeed," said the Duke gravely as he rose to his feet. "I am guilty as charged and more than ready to accept the consequences."

"No. No." I cast around for another strategy, something that would mollify my husband's wounded pride. "Now that I see what has offended my dear husband, which I must admit was not immediately clear to me, the situation is easily solved without bloodshed or murder."

"How so?" The Marquis' black eyes gleamed with interest.

"My husband is my lord and master. Therefore, he must give his permission."

A flummoxed silence filled the quiet library. Outside, I heard the call of a cuckoo to its mate.

"Permission for what?" The Earl scratched his chin and shifted from one foot to another, no doubt longing to be back on his horse where all was simple.

"Permission for me and the Duke of Warrington to be together. I cannot lie to you, my dear husband. I love the Duke, and I'm fairly sure he loves me, although you will not hear him say so out of respect for you."

The Earl, all agog, swung his ruddy head from me to the Duke. "In love?"

"Yes." I clasped my hands together to stop their trembling. "Love it is. And shall be forevermore. So you see, you can't kill him in a duel, because then I should hate you forevermore, and we shan't be happy together at all."

He scratched his ear. "Warrington in love." He eyed his older cousin. "Is it true?"

The Duke evaded the question. "My boy, don't allow yourself to be swayed from your righteous indignation."

"Is it true?"

I held my breath. What if I had imagined he had feelings for me? I teetered on a dark, unknown precipice.

“Yes, it’s true.” At his anguished words, my world righted itself. “I didn’t intend such a thing, I promise. You know I’ve sworn not to succumb to such feelings. And yet I love her. When I’m in her presence, I feel young and hopeful. I believe there might be some joy and purpose to life.” He met my husband’s eyes with a level gaze. “I’ve done you wrong and must make amends. If my death is what you require, that you shall have.”

The Earl recoiled at such a blunt statement. He took a turn or two around the room. Little gilt chairs kept appearing in his path, only to be kicked aside, drawing frequent wincing from the Marquis. I tried to meet the Duke’s eyes, but he kept his gaze fixed on his perambulatory friend. Finally my husband threw up his hands.

“My thoughts lead nowhere. I have no desire to slay Warrington, but now I learn my wife loves another. Barely married, and she’s already bedded three men. What can be done?”

Phrased in such a way, my recent history certainly sounded quite disgraceful. Fortunately the Marquis stepped smoothly into the breach. “If I may, I believe the solution lies before our very noses. Dorchester, you and I had a wager. A shameful one, but I believe its terms still hold.” He turned to me. “Countess, you must tell us which style of lovemaking you prefer, a strong prick or artful caresses.”

Why must he bring up such a topic at this moment? My face became as red as the damask wall coverings.

The Duke stepped to my side. “Are you not ashamed to badger her so?”

“No. I am not. My Lady Alicia, you are always and ever truthful, ever since you were a lass. Answer the question. You have experienced the forceful thrustings of young Dorch, and the wicked delights offered by myself. Which do you prefer?”

I would have preferred to expire that very moment—or perhaps faint—but no matter how hard I wished, a faint refused to occur. “I cannot answer that question.”

"Come, come, don't be coy."

"I can't answer because —"

"She should not be obliged to." The Duke moved to shield me from my tormentor. He put one hand behind him and I grasped it gratefully. "Haven't you done enough?"

But the Marquis kept his black eyes fixed on me. "Trust me, Alicia. Answer the question."

I saw the urgent command in his eyes. I remembered how he'd kept my secret all those years. But still I could not answer. "I cannot because I don't prefer one or the other."

The Earl paused in his restless pacing. "You seemed to enjoy yourself with me."

"Yes, I did indeed. And with the Marquis. And the Duke, of course. I enjoy the act of lovemaking in all its forms. That is my true nature, I find. But it's impossible to choose one method over another."

There, the truth was out.

The three lords gazed on me in fascination. No doubt my confession ran counter to every rule of protocol.

"Then no one wins the wager," said the Earl.

"Not so," answered the Marquis quickly. "Lady Alicia, *ma chérie*, will you be content with Dorch's lusty member alone?"

I hesitated, unwilling to hurt my husband. But I cannot tell a lie. "No."

The Marquis turned to the Earl. "Do you not remember the terms? If she chose you, I promised to leave you two alone. If not, our little Countess can decide what arrangement will make her the most happy."

Of a sudden, their wager seemed not such a dreadful thing after all. Would I really be allowed to choose for myself what would make me most happy? This was an unbelievable turn of events, and yet it seemed to be the case, as all three lords looked on

me as though waiting for the oracle to speak. To give proper formality to the occasion, I stepped away from the Duke and stood in the center of their triad.

"I wish for very little, really," I told them. "Nothing beyond the pale. I wish the Duke to live happy for those days that are left to him. You're ill, aren't you, Your Grace? That's what you tried to tell me on the lake."

The Duke bowed his head. "There seems to exist no explanation for my ailment, and thus no cure."

"It causes you to faint?"

"On occasion. Those occasions becoming more frequent."

"And that's the reason you've never married."

"I will leave no widow behind. I will force no child to be fatherless." His tone of quiet resolve spoke of sleepless nights and painful decisions.

I swallowed hard so I could continue without giving in to my tears. "I wish our beloved Duke to be surrounded by his friends and by a woman who shall love him with all her heart until she dies."

I looked at the Earl. "I wish to be a devoted wife to my husband, to give him children who will carry on the Warrington line."

I gazed from one to the other, the Earl jiggling one leg, the Marquis' black eyes continually straying to the Duke, and the Duke, oh my Duke, watching me with his heart full in his eyes. "And finally, I wish to enjoy all the pleasures of life in the company of my three lords."

## **Chapter Nine**

*Warrington Manor, six months later*

And so it came to be that the three cousins took a wife. The world knew nothing of such an unusual arrangement. When the Countess of Dorchester became with child, it was assumed, naturally, that the Earl's seed had taken root. But Lady Alicia herself had no doubt that the child was the Duke's, and that a part of him would live on and eventually inherit his rightful estate. The Earl did his duty enthusiastically and frequently, but was burdened with no obligations beyond his ken. For more imaginative delights, the Marquis was always willing to oblige. When the Marquis came to visit, the Countess of Dorchester swam in a sea of sensual pleasure.

And, first and foremost, there was the Duke and the passion they shared as the days ticked away. The increase in sensual activity appeared to improve his condition. The fainting spells grew less frequent. It comforted the Duke greatly to know that his love would have two lords to look after her upon his passing. They did not speak of that inevitable day, but it shadowed their love and made it shine all the brighter, the way the setting sun makes every leaf sharp and clear.

One morning they lay cuddled together after a passionate night of lovemaking.

"My love, the Marquis arrives today," murmured the Duke. "It is his natal day, I do believe."

"Then we must celebrate." The Countess wriggled against the warm body of her Duke. "Shall we invite a house party?"

"At such short notice?"

"Very true. Well, no matter, we always enjoy ourselves most when it's just the four of us. But James..."

"Yes, darling?"



"I know the one gift that would make the Marquis the most happy."

The Duke grew quiet.

"Would it be so very uncomfortable?"

"Will you take part alongside me?"

"Naturally. It would be the three of us. It would mean so much to him. You know he's been in love with you for years." Alicia spoke softly so as not to unsettle him overmuch.

"No more than with you."

"To the contrary. When we're together, the only way he attains arousal is through mention of you, or through penetration of that rear orifice to which he claims exclusive rights."

"And you would not mind? Both of us, in your bed?"

Alicia ran a hand across her breasts. "Do you see how my nipples peak at the mere mention of it?"

"Oh my darling, how I do love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

That's how I talked him into it, as the Marquis, that master of manipulation, had instructed me. And when I found myself, later that night, sandwiched between the two men, the experience outmatched my anticipation. Both men knew my body intimately, but somehow being naked before both of them brought a fresh piquancy to the experience. My nipples puckered at the very feel of their eyes on my exposed form.

In most all things, the Duke was in charge. In this, the Marquis took the lead. His plan was to make me the center of attention, although I knew he awaited the moment when he could touch the Duke. He stretched me out on the featherbed and stroked his hand across my belly.

"Still flat, I find."

"It's still early, my lord." Only eight weeks earlier had I determined I was with child. But all three lords were eager for the new addition to our family.

He stood and removed his own clothing. After a moment's hesitation, the Duke did the same. I gazed with relish on their naked bodies. The Marquis' slenderness masked his wiry strength, while the Duke, in my eyes, was perfection itself. His member, even when soft, was of a stature and elegance that made the Marquis' eyes gleam.

Moving past the awkward moment, the Marquis turned his attention to me. He lifted my foot and nibbled on my big toe. He danced his fingers along my calf and into the tender hollow behind my knee. The devil knew very well which spots made me lose my composure. My hips came off the bed as I clutched at the coverlet. The Duke's eye flared with desire as he watched me twist under another man's touch.

"Hold her arms to the bed," the Marquis instructed the Duke. "She has a bad habit of squirming out of my grasp."

The Duke roused himself from his trance and came near my head to pin my arms. What the Marquis didn't tell the Duke was that such restraints made my fever run twice as hot. In the Duke's strong grip, I twisted shamelessly as the Marquis opened my legs and put his tongue to its devilish work on my quim. The Marquis had achieved a mastery of my body's responses over the past months, so after only a few moments I was begging for release.

"Foolish girl," scolded the Marquis. "I intend this to last awhile. Suck her nipples, Warrington."

The Duke leaned over me and put his mouth to one nipple. He gave it a long, luxurious stroking with his tongue. I knew how much he enjoyed the greater fullness of my breasts resulting from my expectant state. Each swirl of his tongue, each tug with his loving mouth told me so in the most delicious manner.

I closed my eyes and soared into a world of ecstasy. Two mouths sucked on me, from above and below, two tongues licked me into a frenzy, two strong men worshipped my body. It was beyond anything I could have imagined.

I wondered if my Duke was aroused by the sight of me as a feast for two men. I wanted to reach my hand back to feel his member, but he still had my arms immobilized. "Are you hot?" I whispered to him.

A strangled groan was his only answer. As if to get my attention, the Marquis tugged on my clitoris with a hint of teeth. "Oh!" I gasped as a spasm arched my back.

I fought to hold back my release, but it was no use. With my Duke's lips teasing my nipples, my cunt at the mercy of the Marquis' relentless licking, I lost myself in a torrent of sensation. My body bucked against the two men as I rode out my frenzied release.

When it was over, I knew it was just the beginning. The Marquis flipped me over so I knelt on hands and knees. I still panted and quivered. In this new position, I welcomed the breath of air against my heated flesh.

"Come," the Marquis told the Duke, who quickly disappeared from my view. The Marquis' cock took his place before my still hazy eyes. It was fully engorged. I knew his excitement was due to the sight of the Duke behind me. I felt the Duke's hands on my hips as he prepared to plunge his rod into my waiting entrance.

"Suck me, *ma petite*," said the Marquis, pulling my head to his prick.

As I took him into my mouth, I felt my Duke ease into me from behind. His member felt larger than usual. His first deep stroke pushed me against the Marquis, who immediately swelled within my mouth. My womb clutched at my beloved Duke's manhood, which seemed aroused to a hardness I had never felt. Again, I had one man at each end of me. Through my lusty fever I wondered if the Marquis would get the contact he craved with my Duke.

As their strokes increased in speed, the two men steadied me. The Marquis held my head still so I shouldn't be slammed into him. The Duke gripped my hips tight, the better to bury himself within me. My body rocked between the two. The Marquis' cock filled my mouth. I knew he must be gorging his eyes on the sight of the Duke fucking me from behind. I heard harsh breathing and grunts above and behind me. A yeasty

smell rose around us, different from the scent of me with the Duke, or me with the Marquis. This was the perfume of our blissful trio.

I knew from the Duke's rhythm that he was close to completion. His strokes became deeper and more urgent. Cries spilled from my lips as I worked the Marquis' organ. And then, just as I thought I could bear no more, the Duke wrenched himself out of me. The Marquis withdrew from my mouth. I turned over to crouch on the bed and watch what was about to occur.

The Duke stood naked and proud at the foot of the bed. His massive shaft stood out straight from his body. I heard the Marquis' breath catch at the sight. The Duke beckoned to the Marquis, who, eyes fiery points of black, moved to the foot of the bed and crouched down to take my Duke into his mouth. The Duke threw his head back as the Marquis worked his cock with great, greedy suckings.

The sight aroused me a hundredfold. But I wanted to participate, not sit idle. I scooted over behind the Marquis and wormed my hand between his thighs to take his prick into my hand. It jumped at my touch.

I stroked the Marquis while he sucked on the Duke's cock. The Duke's body was beautiful, tense as a bow, his hands on his hips, head thrown back. The Marquis was ravenous, insatiable. His hands roamed the Duke's sac and even probed the crevice of his buttocks. I could see the Duke resist at first, then give in to the pleasure. He spread his legs apart for the Marquis.

When he did that, the member in my hand gave a great twitch of excitement. I felt so tender for them both. Delight in their enjoyment made me smile. I adored watching their muscular bodies throb and sweat. I loved watching the Duke's eyes close halfway as he succumbed to the hard mouth on his prick. I loved seeing the Marquis come alive. How long had he dreamed of tasting the Duke's flesh, of filling his mouth with that stiffened member? I stroked the Marquis' cock the way I knew he liked. I felt hot liquid spill onto my hand. The Marquis gave a muffled roar of release, and then the Duke

jutted his hips forward. He pumped his seed into the Marquis' mouth and that eager lord swallowed every drop.

A time of near-slumber followed, as the three of us lay twined together on the bed. Their cocks were depleted, but I had nearly reached the peak earlier, on hands and knees, only to have my release snatched away. But I was so happy for my two lords that I determined not to mention it.

Our dear abigail Annie had left us a basin of water. The Marquis dipped a soft cloth into the refreshing rose-scented water and cleaned first himself, then the Duke's softening member and powerful thighs. The Duke, head pillowed on my thigh, legs akimbo, submitted to his ministrations quite readily.

"If I mistake not," the Marquis said, "our darling Alicia has been left hanging on the edge of a cliff."

"No, no," I demurred. But I cannot lie. "Yes," I admitted, "it's true."

"I will soon be recovered enough to breach your lovely backside. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes." This was an act I shared only with the Marquis, one that felt so forbidden I found it utterly entrancing.

"But wait," said the Duke. "My sweet darling, perhaps you'd like to be joined with me in the more usual manner. My cock is rapidly regaining its senses."

"Oh, yes, I'd like that very much."

"But which would you prefer?" The two lords spoke at once.

Why were they forever making me choose? "I cannot say."

My lords chuckled and with one mind set to work with hands and tongues to bring me to a sobbing, shrieking peak of desire. I lost track of where I was, and which direction I faced, so many times was I turned around and opened up for a mouth or a thumb or a delicious nibble. The hands and mouths seemed to multiply so I kissed one

pair of lips while another latched itself to my nipple and yet a third delved into my quim.

A third mouth? In my delirium it took me quite some time to understand that my husband had joined our happy party. Now three men caressed me and pressed their hard flesh into me. Everywhere I looked I saw naked skin, muscular limbs, and burgeoning cocks. I heard the slick slap of flesh on flesh, the harsh panting of lusty men and my own moans.

Soon the craving inside me grew so I thought I would die if I found no release. I was belly down on the bed. Someone, I knew not who, had thrust their thumb deep inside me and I worked myself against it, but it wasn't enough. Sobs of despair mingled with my tears of arousal. "Please, my lords, please..." I begged.

The Marquis turned me on my side. "I'll take her from behind. Someone else must claim her cunt."

The Earl stepped eagerly to the task. He lay facing me, his bright blue eyes gazing into mine. His first thrust was divine. How I did love my husband's lively cock. I kissed him tenderly on the lips. After all, it was thanks to him that we were able to enjoy such enchantments.

Then a hard pole probed my bottom hole. The Marquis used my own juices to moisten the rim of the hole. Oh, what exquisite pleasure as he eased his prick within me. Oh, what a wonder to feel two cocks fill me to bursting. And the third cock, where was it? I looked over my shoulder to see a shocking sight. The Duke was working his member into the Marquis' bottom hole. And the Marquis looked utterly transported.

I might have felt envious of my Duke's evident enjoyment of the Marquis' buttocks, since he refrained from taking me in that way. But every stroke he took pressed the Marquis' body against mine, and the Marquis' cock deeper into my bottom hole. I felt the rhythm of his thrusts and heard his message. He was fucking me *through* the Marquis. But soon I forgot to think about anything, as the two cocks embedded within me fought a duel with each other. Thrust, parry, *touché*. Joy, madness, need.

Fingers tugged my nipples. Another hand frigged my clitoris, and I recognized the Marquis' clever mastery. The Earl clutched my hips, then shifted to grab the Marquis' instead, the better to ram his prick into me. Hard male flesh corked me in both passages. My sight blurred. My breath came ragged. I longed for a cock to fill my mouth too, but all were busy elsewhere. Instead, my lips spilled sweet words and cries into the scented air. The three lords responded with grunts and urgings.

"Fuck me, James, fuck me," muttered the Marquis, whose dark face was clenched with ecstasy at being buggered so thoroughly.

"So tight, so tight," murmured the Duke.

"Oh yes, oh yes," cried the Earl, ever lacking in imagination.

"My sweet lords, how I love you!" The urgency in my voice was a signal for all three to increase their movements. They knew me, knew how I trembled and begged when my peak was near. After all, my body belonged to them. I was their playground, their meeting place, their sensual temple. As first the Earl, then the Marquis, and finally the Duke shouted their release, as fiery liquid streamed into me from both ends, my inner muscles tightened and release shook me like a lion's paw. Bliss spread throughout every part of my being. Rays of light transported me to that glowing realm, and I knew no greater happiness existed than to be as one with my three lords.

## About the Author

Juniper Bell is a multi-published author and avid fan of romance novels, the steamier the better. She lives with her sweetie in a cabin in Alaska with no running water and a spectacular view of glaciers. She wound up in the frozen north after leaving her career as a stressed-out Los Angeles TV writer. Luckily, her love for writing survived the move. When she's not writing, she's spending time with her family, traveling, shoveling snow and dreaming about the day she moves to Hawaii.

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

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