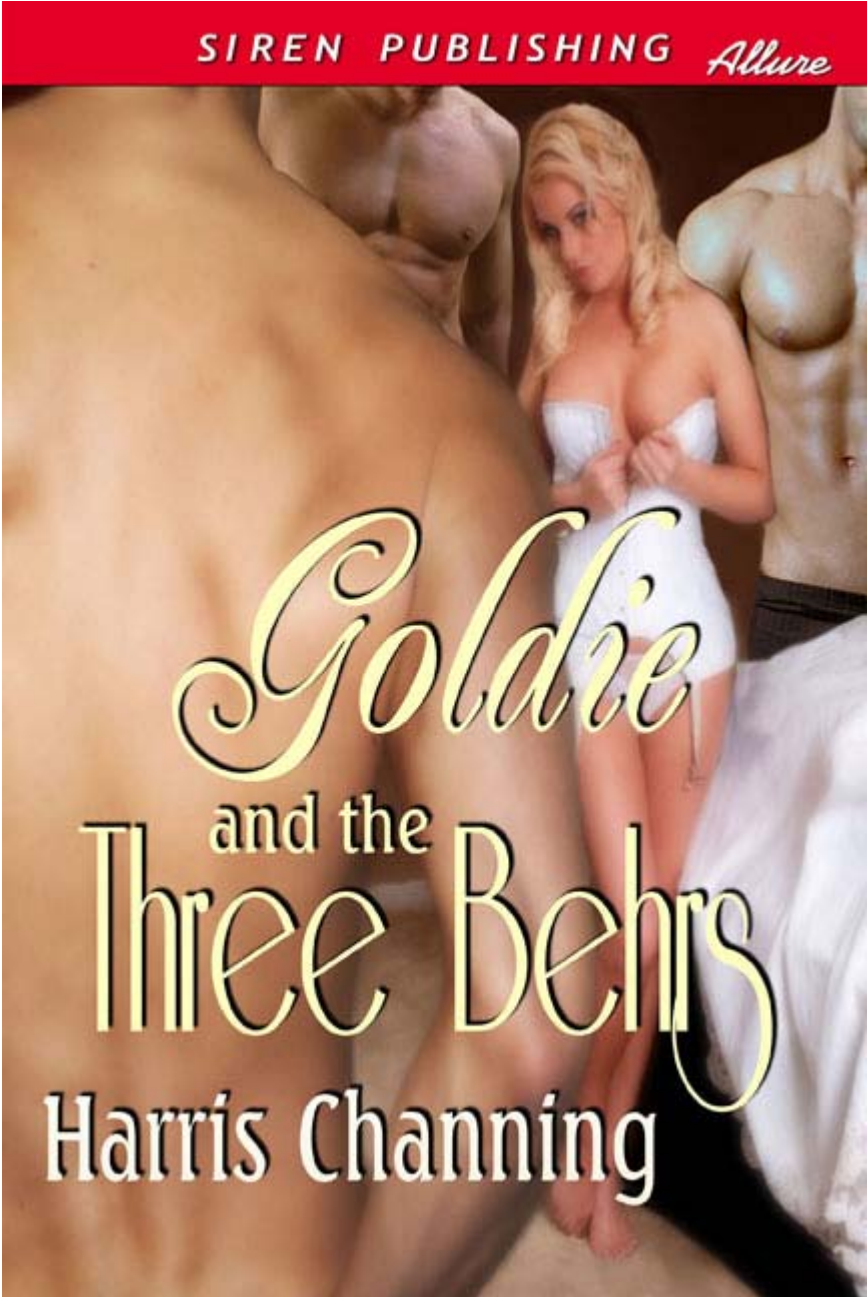


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*Goldie*  
and the  
*Three Behrs*  
Harris Channing

# **GOLDIE AND THE THREE BEHRS**

**Harris Channing**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.  
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# **DEDICATION**

For my family. Thanks for understanding my obsessive need to be in front of a computer!

# **GOLDIE AND THE THREE BEHRS**

**HARRIS CHANNING**  
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## **Chapter 1**

*England, May 1819*  
*Once upon a time...*

“Whatcha say, love?” Joseph asked, his cock pressing so hard against his breeches he wondered if any of the fellows in the pub could see it. Damn but he needed relief.

“I don’t know, sir.” The buxom wench smiled. She was a comely girl with red hair and breasts that could feed triplets. His mouth watered.

Taking her hand, he dragged her down the narrow, darkened hall. With hardly anyone in the tavern, he could have his way with her six different times before the drunkards even finished their pints.

She giggled, but thankfully, no words of protest popped from those full, painted lips. Pressing her against the wall, he pushed up her tattered skirts, praying for no bloomers.

“My lord,” she mumbled, and he grinned. It was his lucky day. No bloomers, just warm, smooth legs. With an eagerness that belied his experience, he ran his finger over the hair that covered her cunt before plunging it deep inside her. She was dripping wet and ready to receive him. He licked his lips.

“You want me? It’s going to cost you,” she mumbled as she ground her hips against his hand.

He buried his face in her neck, devouring the delicate skin like the animal he felt himself becoming. “What’s your price?” he growled.

Her breath caught in her throat. “A gown. I want a new gown.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” He freed his fingers, and, reaching around, grabbed tight to her buttocks and squeezed. His fingers dug into the soft flesh with such ferocity that she whimpered

“I’m worth it. But to find out, you must give me your word.”

She boldly stroked his cock, and he shuddered. “Aye. We have a deal.”

“Good. Now show me what you have to offer me, my lord.” She unfastened his breeches and held the length of him in her hand. He closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her cool fingers against his steaming shaft.

“Really, Joseph?”

The sound of his brother’s voice washed over him like ice water. With a groan, his erection softened, and his temper hardened. Edmund, the dandy, stood three feet from him, his face a mask of priggish disgust.

“What do you want?” Joseph asked, pushing his prick back into his breeches. “Why didn’t you just turn and walk the other way?”

“Because, you’re further sullyng the Behr name...not to mention the fact that we’re new to this bucolic little town. Must you soil everything?”

The barmaid rushed toward the pub, her eyes downcast. Edmund’s superiority rankled Joseph more than his eldest brother’s devotion to duty and honor. He pointed toward the wench. “Soil that? That was soiled a long time ago. I was just adding my seed to the mix.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “If you play your cards right, she may just let you fuck her, too.”



“Cards? You’re fucking her for cards? I highly doubt that. How much of that yearly allowance did the creature want for her goodies?” Edmund retorted.

“You need to grow up and stop judging me for giving in to my urges. I know you give in to yours.”

Edmund’s jaw tightened. “William is on the village green. He wants you to come immediately. He knew you were up to no good.”

Joseph smirked. “Yes, well, all of us can’t be like William, now can we? All strength and righteousness. To hell with him.” He stalked toward Edmund, poking him in the chest so hard that the slighter man stumbled back. “And to hell to you, you sniveling little prig.”

\* \* \* \*

“Do you see that one?” William said, pointing toward the maiden with the brightest golden hair Joseph had ever seen. The sight of the woman laughing amongst a half dozen other young ladies of the village and his manhood hardened. He immediately pictured all of them naked, frolicking not in the bright spring sunshine but in the silver moonlight. Oh, it would be carnal heaven, he mused.

As the blonde woman danced around the Maypole, he determined that he’d bed her the first chance he got and any chance he got.

“Aye,” Joseph replied breathlessly, leaning his back against the base of an oak at the edge of the green.

“She’s got the face of an angel,” William replied, joining Joseph on the ground. “I wouldn’t mind waking up with those blue eyes smiling at me every morn for the rest of my life.”

The familiar pang of jealousy sprouted full grown in Joseph’s gut. To be sure, if William wanted the fair-haired damsel, he’d have her. William got everything he wanted and more.

“Not so fast. Who is her father?”

William’s mouth dipped into a frown. “Sir Herbert Locksley.”

“Ah, the daughter of a lowly baronet. Not for the likes of you, Marquess, soon to be Duke of Worthington.”

William scowled. “I know. But a man can dream of beauty even though his reality is one of horses dressed in silk.”

Joseph grinned. “I, on the other hand, being the youngest, have no need to marry brood mares of good breeding. I can marry whomever I want, and Father wouldn’t give two figs.”

“So, you see the golden girl, and you decide that she is the one for you? What if she has the voice of a harridan?”

Joseph glanced her way and ran his fingers through his hair. Her yellow curls were simply the crowning glory. Every bit he could see of her was glorious in form. Small waist, ample bosoms, and if the pale pink dress covered thick ankles and heavy thighs, so be it. Parting them, he was sure he’d still find heaven. “I’ll wrap her mouth in gauze.”

William chuckled. “Not a bad plan, but the lady might protest.”

“Then I’ll spank what I’m certain is a glorious arse.”

“You’re a hard-hearted man.” William was again looking at the woman, his gray eyes filled with admiration. “That girl is someone to be cherished.”

“Then I’ll do that, too,” Joseph said, standing. “I think I’ve found my wife.”

William leaned back against the tree. “Best make sure it’s all right with her.”

Joseph smiled down at his brother. “How could she possibly say no to all of this?”

William lifted a skeptical brow. “How indeed?”

\* \* \* \*

“Come into the shade,” Lottie said breathlessly and tugged on Goldie’s arm, her freckled face alive with an excited blush.

“I rather like the sun. And others are about to dance. Don’t you want to watch?” Goldie replied, her attention focused on the Maypole. They had done a fine job of their weave, the colorful ribbons vivid against the pale blue sky.

“No,” she grumbled, pulling Goldie beneath the branches of a small tree. “Now look who finds shade under the massive oak.”

Goldie’s gaze came to rest on a pair of finely dressed gentlemen.

“That’s Lord Joseph Behr and his brother, William. William is the Marquess of Blackwood,” Lottie informed. “My sister met their maid at the haberdashers on Monday while picking up Father’s new hat. It’s a fine hat. He thinks he’ll put a feather in it.”

“Get back to the boys...your father’s hat? He can eat it,” Mary grumbled as she struggled to find a place beneath the tree.

Lottie glared at Mary for a moment before a new wave of excitement illuminated her face. “She said Lord Blackwood is the one to latch on to as he’s the eldest and gets most everything. They’re here, visiting their latest acquisition. They bought the Dunbar Estate. Can you imagine?”

Goldie continued to peruse the newcomers, hoping the gentlemen didn’t realize they were the topic of such lusty conversation.

“I think Blackwood is so handsome,” Mary gushed, sliding her hand around Goldie’s other arm. “Just look at that dark hair.”

“I don’t know,” Lottie said, biting her lower lip. “I rather fancy Joseph. Look at his eyes. They’re true blue, and being the younger, he is far more likely to settle on one of us.”

But Goldie’s gaze continued to rest upon the eldest brother. William was by far the more pleasing. Bigger, stronger, with finer features, and the most beautiful set of lips she’d ever seen a man possess. Lips that had her licking her own in want of a kiss.

Suddenly, his gaze met hers. A sly smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and he gave a small nod in greeting.

Heat shot to Goldie’s face. She jerked her attention away, feigning interest in the new set of dancers who graced the field. Yet the

hammering of her heart drowned out the rhythmic pounding of the musician's drums. Dear Lord, he *had* seen her. He must think her a silly half-wit.

But what did it matter what he thought? What mattered is what her mother would say if she knew her daughter longed to kiss a man so far above her station. She'd no doubt berate her and tell her to keep her eyes on her own kind. Despite her being a woman and him being a man, that was where the compatibility ended. She could see her mother shaking her head, hear her scolding words. *No, no Goldie. He's much too rich for your blood. His family would never agree.*

"Yes, well, I doubt either one will stroll our way and fall madly in love with any one of us."

"Goldie, you're so beautiful and kind," Mary whispered. "I've no doubt that if you were to be introduced to them, both William and Joseph would ask your father for your hand."

Goldie chuckled. "Silly girl."

"There's a third, too, you know. The Lord Edmund Behr," Lottie remarked. "The maid says he's an odd duck."

"Odd duck? Probably dafter than a brush," Mary whispered.

"How could you possibly know that?" Goldie asked, but her question hung in the air, answered only by Lottie's squeal.

"My word. Look who's coming this way!"

Goldie slid a glance in the direction of the oak, her stomach plummeting. Joseph walked toward them, his intense gaze set directly on her. Again, the heat of a blush inched its way on to her cheeks. Yes, his eyes were blue, but the trueness of them escaped her. He seemed sneaky, like a fox in a henhouse. And with the clucking of her friends, she had no doubt that either one of them would willingly dangle from his sharp teeth at the slightest invitation.

He removed his hat and offered them a curt bow, a strand of reddish-brown hair falling across his forehead. "Ladies."

"My lord," Lottie replied breathlessly.

The threesome dipped their knees in curtsies. Mary's portly form crashed into Goldie and very nearly toppled her over, much like a domino on a rickety table. Off balance, she stumbled back.

As Joseph reached out to catch her, his hand grazed the tip of her breast, the sensation of his touch sending an unexpected chill coursing through her body. Her breath caught in her throat, and for a brief moment, everyone but him disappeared.

"Goldie! I'm sorry. Are you all right?" Mary whispered, bringing her from her eerie trance.

"Yes, I'm well," she replied, attempting to pull free of his grip. He held fast, his hand warm and strong.

"What of you?" Joseph asked, his gaze shifting to Mary. "Are you all right, my dear?"

Mary's round face turned a deep shade of crimson. "Yes, my lord. Thank you."

"Very good." He nodded toward Goldie. "I do beg your pardon. I just didn't wish to see you fall and soil your lovely gown."

"Of course." She refused to meet his gaze, instead looking down at the soft folds of her pink linen gown.

"What's your name?" he persisted, dropping his hand yet taking a step closer, so close she could smell the sweet scent of his cologne. She looked up. He stood a full head above her, and with the nearness of him, she could see the dark stubble on his chin, feel the warmth of his body. She stepped back, anxious to be away. He was too forward. And the way he looked at her...

"Her name is Goldie Locksley," Lottie blurted out.

Oh, when they were alone, she was going to get a good smack.

His eyes took on a sparkle as they came to rest on her. "Goldie? What a wonderful name, and so appropriate."

"My real name is Georgina," she admitted, trying to keep eye contact but finding it increasingly difficult.

“No, no. I prefer Goldie,” he said, his voice taking on a softer, more personal tone, as if they were long-lost friends. “It is truly an apt name for someone blessed with angel’s hair.”

“You are too kind,” she said, stepping back farther still, her lungs suddenly tight. He made her dreadfully uncomfortable. “These are my friends, Mary and Lottie.”

He offered each a passing glance. “Pleasure.” But as soon as the word had past his lips, he turned his attention to her, his gaze bold as he ogled her form. Oh, but he was a nasty fellow. Definitely a bear in search of honey. “Is your father here, by chance?”

“Sir Locksley?” Mary chimed in. “He just left for the public house. He said he needed to wet his whistle.”

Yes, Mary was going to get a good smack, too.

“Thank you. I hope to see you again very soon, Goldie Locksley.”

She offered a stiff nod and wondered why the statement filled her with anxiety.

“Good day, ladies.”

The threesome turned to watch him leave, and despite her misgivings about the man, Goldie had to admit he cut a fine form in his long coat and top hat. Yet she couldn’t help but think he was a wolf dressed in wool.

\* \* \* \*

“Damn it,” Joseph muttered under his breath. It had taken all his strength not to grab hold of the girl and ravage her on the spot. Dear God what would it be like to deflower her beneath the Maypole? Ah, what a fantasy. He imagined her pale legs parting, of wrapping her hands in ribbon as he slid his hard prick into her moist folds.

He shook his head in an attempt to remove her visage from his mind and to keep from climaxing in his breeches. There would be time to relieve himself after he planted the matrimonial seed in Miss Locksley’s father’s head.

Turning the corner toward the public house, he hoped he was lucky enough to keep his jacket closed to hide his throbbing cock.

“Blast,” he muttered, spying the barmaid leaving the tavern, her red hair flashing copper in the midday sun. She was the receptacle in which he planned to empty himself. At the sight of her ample breasts pressing against the bodice of her tattered brown gown, he realized the baronet would have to wait, for his pleasure would not.

Coming up on the petite woman, he slipped his arm possessively around her waist. “Where are you off to?”

She giggled and squirmed in his embrace. “My lord, you certainly are familiar with a lady.”

He pressed his lips to her ear. “Where are you going, and would you mind some company?”

“I’m going home to get me a bit of lunch.”

“What are you having?”

“Just a chunk of bread and some soup.” She pulled away and eyed him suspiciously. “You want to finish what we started, your lordship?”

“Yes, dear,” he answered in all honesty. “I do so want to fuck you.”

She brought her lower lip between her teeth, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “My price has gone up.”

His cock demanded he pay her price. “Fine. What do you want?” he mumbled.

Reaching for his hand, she led him down the narrow alley between the pub and an abandoned shop. She glanced over her shoulder. “I want that new gown and some of them kid gloves.”

He chuckled. “All right. How about a pink gown?”

“Blue.”

“You can have whatever color you want,” he said as they left the alley and headed toward a small, whitewashed shack.

Stepping up on the rickety porch, she stopped. “And I want you to carry me over the threshold as if we were a proper couple.”

“Well, we’re not a proper couple, are we?”

“No.” She giggled. “We’re very improper. Now pick me up and take me to my bed.”

He chuckled and scooped her easily into his arms. Using the toe of his boot, he pushed open the door and walked the three steps to the narrow bed. Depositing her on the straw mattress, he shut the door, tossed his hat onto the floor, and removed his coat and tie.

“Get those clothes off,” he muttered, coming to his knees before her. “I want to see everything my gown is going to cover.”

She quirked a brow and smiled as she shimmied out of her clothing and undergarments. His cock grew harder with each item that puddled on the floor before him. He took in a deep breath as he ogled her nude form. She was shorter and heavier than Goldie, yet she would do.

“Lie down,” he commanded, twisting the fabric of his tie in his hands.

She obeyed, her copper curls fanning out on the white pillow. Straddling her, he took her hands and bound them to the bed post.

“What are you doing?” she asked, squirming beneath him, the feel of her motion arousing him all that much more.

“Just a little game.”

“Please,” she panted. “I don’t like it.”

“You will,” he said, freeing his lower half from the confines of his pants. “You’ll feel more without your hands to distract you.”

“Oh my,” she muttered, staring at his rod. “I’ll bleed like a virgin.”

Lying atop her, he smiled and buried his face in the bend of her neck, images of Goldie’s smiling eyes coming to mind.

“Spread your legs,” he muttered, pulling his shirt over his head.

“Why you paying for this?” she asked, her breathing coming in gasps. “You’re beautiful.”

“No complications,” he returned.



He lowered his mouth to hers to keep her from talking. The coarse sound of her voice voided the fantasy of fucking the golden maiden.

She moaned as he probed her mouth with his tongue. She obviously liked the ale served at the pub for she tasted and smelled of it. Yet, it didn't bother him. No, it intoxicated.

He ran his hand down the length of her body and imagined the soft feel of Goldie beneath his touch. Her sweet, virginal body would be his to soil. His heart was set. He would have her.

Unable to contain his desire, he slammed his cock deep into the barmaid, the picture of Goldie's surprised expression urging him deeper.

The woman let out a moan, and he removed his kiss.

"Sir, please. I wasn't ready. Are you made of steel?"

"Shh," he mumbled. "Don't talk."

He kept his eyes closed, wondering if Goldie would be as slick as the woman he now occupied. He'd make sure she was. He'd have her begging for him.

Gyrating his hips, he filled her with his full length. "Steel," he grumbled and started to pulse within her with such force, he lifted her off the bed.

"Oh," she cried out.

At her urging, he continued to pound her flesh. She wrapped her legs around his waist and bucked beneath him.

"That's good there, my lord," she shrieked. "Right there, put it right there."

She moaned so loudly that he found himself smiling. He was either giving it to her the way she liked, or she was a damned good actress. Either way, he was near release.

Clenching his jaw, he slammed into her a final time, the pressure of seed spilling from his body so great that he, too, moaned. "Sweet Goldie."

"No, sir. My name is Naomi."

## Chapter 2

“I’m not ready to marry, Father,” Goldie moaned, plopping down on the edge of the burgundy settee. “I’m barely of age. I’m happy here with you and Mother.” She glanced around, her favorite room. The parlor had always been so cozy and comfy and full of precious memories. “Can’t this courting business wait six months?”

She met her father’s stern gaze with a stubborn one of her own. But despite how strongly she felt, short of running away and living the life of a street urchin, she knew it was futile. For if Father wanted her wed to Joseph Behr, Goldie would wed Joseph Behr. Her small dowry and low standing in society made the match with the youngest son of a duke very tempting.

Father lifted a brow and ran his hand along the smooth, dark wood of the fireplace mantle. “This is your chance to help your family. Besides, your mother and I aren’t getting any younger and would like to see you settled before we join the Lord in the great beyond.”

Oh, how she hated his flair for the dramatic. If his parents hadn’t insisted he marry her mother, she was certain he would be on a stage somewhere pretending to be someone else, rather than pretending to be a husband and father.

“Don’t be silly,” she chided. “You’re as fit as a fiddle.”

“That may be so, but I’d like to be fit enough to hold my first grandchild in my arms.”

“But Father...”

“No buts, child. The duke and I have corresponded. The conditions for your marriage are very favorable. You will have your own home, and Joseph is worth a thousand pounds a year.”

“But I’ve only met him once. He makes me uncomfortable.”

Herbert Locksley shrugged his heavy shoulder. “For a thousand pounds a year, I’m certain you can make your own happiness.”

Tears stung Goldie’s eyes. “I will be the dutiful daughter you desire,” she said, all the while trying to figure a way out of the mess.

Herbert walked by and rested his hand on her shoulder. “’Twill be a good life for you, daughter. Of that I am sure.”

With a snuffle, Goldie stood and walked toward the window. The forest beyond her childhood home called to her, promising clean air and a temporary reprieve from thoughts of Joseph Behr.

She grabbed up her jacket and marched toward the front door. “Where are you going, child?”

“For a breath of air.”

“Don’t be long. Joseph will be here to sup this night. I don’t want you falling asleep in your soup.”

Goldie shot him a glare. “As if one could ever sleep amidst your terrible slurping.”

Herbert laughed, a laugh full of glee. But Goldie suspected it had less to do with her remark and more to do with the thought of one thousand pounds a year.

\* \* \* \*

“Do I look the dashing gentleman?” Joseph asked, his eyes twinkling as he walked down the staircase and toward his brother.

“Well, you would,” William replied from the entryway, “if you could erase that smirk.”

“I can’t,” Joseph said. “For tonight I dine with the most glorious angel in England, or possibly, the entire world.”

“Ah, yes, your immanent engagement. The girl’s father is on board, but is the girl?”

Joseph brushed aside William’s concern with a flick of his wrist. “Not formally, but she will be mine. I plan on sealing the deal with a

kiss this very night.” Joseph grinned. “I imagine she tastes like heaven, don’t you suppose?”

Fire burned in William’s gut. His brother was a cad. Everyone knew it. Everyone accepted it. And now, that fool Herbert Locksley was not only going to agree to a marriage, but was going to insist upon it.

“And our father? Has he accepted your marrying the daughter of an inconsequential gentleman with very little land and a large amount of debt? For I have sent word of my misgivings. I think perhaps you should hold off on anything official until I hear back.”

Joseph stopped near the door, gazing into the gilt-framed mirror and smoothing back his hair. “Father and Sir Locksley agreed upon terms via messenger.”

“Did you hear what I said?” William demanded. “Hold off. Just dine with the lady. You cannot know—”

“I know she’ll be mine,” Joseph shouted, turning to face his brother. “Stop meddling. You want her for yourself. You can’t have her. Besides, Father wants me to settle down and marry. At this point, it could be a scullery maid. Goldie will garner respect and envy.”

William crossed his arms and paced the floor. Damn his father. The bloody bastard would give anything to gain respectability for his most foolish, youngest son. The boy most like him and least like their dear mother. He’d be far wiser to concern himself with the virginal Edmund and leave Joseph to his ghastly habits. Habits that a delicate marigold would no doubt be unable to handle.

Images of her laughing, the sun glinting gold off her glorious curls, entered into his fevered mind. Skin so creamy white, lips so rosy, no doubt she felt *and* tasted of heaven. His wolfish brother would devour her in one gulp.

“I see my choice in bride has already made me the envy of someone, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m going for a ride,” William grumbled, pushing past his brother. “Reconsider ruining her life.”

Joseph straightened his coat. “My mind is made up. Best for you to accept it and be ready to join me in a celebratory toast this evening. I plan on getting quite foxed. William’s jaw tightened. He tore open the front door. “Why should tonight be different from any other Saturday night?”

\* \* \* \*

Even the forest’s beauty did little to ease the knot that had taken the place of Goldie’s stomach. How was she supposed to do this?

Tears blurred her vision, and she stumbled. Maybe the life of a street urchin would be preferable to marrying a virtual stranger. “A handsome stranger who seems quite taken with you,” she reasoned aloud. “It could be worse. I could be marrying Rudyard, the pig farmer.”

Lowering herself on the trunk of a downed tree, she buried her face in her hands. Maybe things wouldn’t be so horrible once she had a good cry. Joseph was a decent match, better than she ever expected, and yet her heart ached for something more. Was it wrong to want to be loved and to be in love?

At the furious sound of beating hooves, Goldie looked up from her perch. The devil himself seemed to be riding toward her on the back of a black steed. Jumping to her feet, she determined to get out of the demon’s way before he trampled her to death.

With her sudden movement, the animal veered from its path, heading straight for her. She closed her eyes and waited for the pain that was sure to follow any sort of impact. God knew this was not the way out she wanted, and marriage to Joseph was definitely starting to look better.

But the physical impact never came. With her eyes still closed, she felt the hot breath of the beast against her heated skin and smelled the sweet scent of hay. Lifting her lashes, she came face to face with the devil’s spawn and felt herself foolish. The creature bore the softest

brown eyes. He blew out an impatient breath and nudged her with his muzzle.

“Sorry,” the rider said from atop the massive steed. “I didn’t expect to see anyone along this trail.”

With the setting sun to the man’s back, she was unable to make out any features, but the silhouette of his form was fine and youthful and strong. The voice was so deep and rich that a delighted chill raced across her body. “It is a lonely trail, to be sure.”

“Then why choose it, angel?”

She took a step back and shielded her eyes with a cupped hand, hoping to learn the man’s identity. “Do I know you?”

“I beg your pardon,” he said, the leather of his saddle protesting his dismount. Removing his cap, he bowed his dark head, and stepped into the light.

William Behr stood before her, beautiful William Behr. Just the sight of him set butterflies loose and had her mouth watering for that kiss. That kiss she had dreamt of since seeing him for the first time.

“I am William, Joseph’s brother.”

She dipped her knee and lowered her head as fresh tears stung her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, offering her a crisp linen handkerchief.

“Sir, you needn’t concern yourself with the affairs of a silly maiden’s heart.” She took the hanky and dabbed her eyes, feeling suddenly foolish.

“So, your mind is not set upon marrying my brother?” Was that a lightening of his tone? Looking at him now, with the small bits of light piercing the canopy of leaves, the man took her breath. He was aglow in fading golden rays. Why couldn’t someone like him ask after her?

“My mind? No.” She shook her head. “My father’s most definitely.”

William exhaled, the whisper of his breath tickling her skin and bringing her eyes to his. “Then don’t marry him.” His gaze caressed her face. “Don’t have anything to do with him.”

Surprise had her lower jaw agape. “Why?”

William raked his fingers through his hair, hair that shone blue in the sunlight. “You’ll have to trust his brother.”

Her curiosity piqued, she narrowed her gaze. “How can I trust a brother who won’t tell me all?” Annoyed, she handed him back the handkerchief.

For a long moment, they stared at each other, a need in her arising that she couldn’t explain. A jolt of excitement stemmed from her abdomen and shot through her entire being.

“You’re going to have to.” He pulled his hand from his glove and, reaching out, touched her cheek.

She didn’t respond, far too aroused by the warmth that radiated from his fingertips. She was enthralled, enchanted. Reflected in his gray eyes, she saw a smoldering heat.

“What are you doing?”

He cupped the side of her face. “I don’t know.” He stepped close.

Her heart beat so hard, her legs grew so weak, she felt as though she could tumble into him. Yet she needed to move back. Why was it her body refused to be moved?

“Don’t you feel it? It’s remarkable, really.” As if pulled by some unknown force, he leaned in. “So powerful.” She tilted her chin, waiting for his lips to touch hers, needing them more than wanting.

“Yes, but isn’t it wrong?”

“It’s not. It can’t be.” With that said, he set his mouth atop hers, his lips every bit as amazing as she imagined...but more. They were just the right combination of hard and soft, the pressure perfectly suited to her desire—forceful enough to show her the passion that simmered within him, yet gentle enough to bring her closer. She was a moth and he a flickering flame.

Her hands on his chest, she relished the feel of his heart beating beneath her fingertips. Inhaling, she savored the woodsy, masculine scent of him. She grew moist at the idea of him taking her fully, right there on the woodland path.

He pulled her to him, his hands tracing the line of her spine, his fingertips kneading the flesh.

When he pulled away, she feared he would stop his passionate assault. She was afraid her kiss was too inadequate to please an obviously experienced man. But what she saw in his eyes bespoke a wantonness that had her heart thundering in her chest.

“I want you desperately,” he mumbled, his breathing ragged.

Joy flared, heating her blood to a near boil. Would this beautiful man be the answer to her prayers? “You do?”

“And if my life were mine, there would *be* a marriage. But it would be between you and me and not you and Joseph.”

She swallowed hard, the butterflies resurfacing, their wings soft against her stomach. “Are you saying you wish to marry me?”

His jaw clenched. “Yes. But my name is forever entwined with another, no matter what my heart wants. My duty as a husband belongs to her. My wedding date is but a year away.”

Her heart plummeted. “I see.”

“No, I don’t believe you do.” He took a step back and blew out a harsh breath. “I have means, Goldie. Although my name will not be yours, I can take care of you.”

Her lower lip trembled. “As what?” she asked, but she realized the answer even as the question poured from her lips. “As your mistress?”

He looked away, the shame in his countenance almost as tangible as the pain that shot through her heart. “Yes.”

Her lower jaw trembled as tears poured forth from her eyes. “I’m not a whore.”

“No,” he said, reaching for her, but she sidestepped his advances. “Not a whore.”



“Well, you can’t love me. We’ve shared but a moment in time and a kiss...yet you offer me money to lie in your bed.”

He started toward her, his gaze pleading. “A bed fit for you. My brother cannot offer you that.”

“Perhaps not,” she replied, lifting her chin in hopes to recapture a bit of the pride that had surrendered itself to his kiss. “But he offers me security, a decent name, and a future free of ridicule.”

William’s mouth tightened into a bitter line. “We shall see about that, won’t we?”

“Indeed we will. The sooner the better.”

“Take care,” he said through gritted teeth.

“I need no advice from you,” she said, her glare every bit as formidable as the one he now bestowed upon her. “Good day to you, sir.”

“Good *luck* to you, my lady.”

\* \* \* \*

“Yes? Did you say yes?” Joseph moved closer to her on the settee, his muscular thigh brushing against her leg. His angular face was alight with what could only be delight.

“Tell me, sweet. Tell me again that you will be my wife.”

His exuberance was catching, and although she longed for her answer to be spoken to another, she felt for the first time that perhaps she could love Joseph. Not today, but maybe tomorrow. She smiled and glanced around at her parents’ home. Soon she would have her own, and perhaps as a wife, she’d have more luck doing things she longed to than she had as a daughter. “I said yes. I am pleased to be your bride.”

Joseph sprang to his feet and lifted her into his arms. “I want to kiss you now. Is that all right?”

She wet her lips and smiled. “I think it’s customary.”

Without further discussion, Joseph pressed his mouth to hers. His lips, though not as full and comfortable as his brothers, did manage to bring a fan of pleasant warmth centered from her core. Where the want of William had been fast and furious, Joseph's kiss offered a small spiral of desire that, if nurtured, would fulfill her.

He pulled away. "Tell me, dearest one. When do you want to marry?"

"I don't know. In a year? Two?"

His smile faded to a frown. "Truly? You want to wait that long?"

She nodded. "It takes time to plan a wedding, and it gives us time to learn more about one another. I've yet to meet your father..."

"Why not a small affair?" he said, pushing back a lock of hair that rested against her cheek. "Frankly, Goldie, I'd like to wed as soon as possible."

"But—"

"Why wait? It is what we both want." His brows furrowed with obvious concern. "Isn't it? Or are you putting it off because you are unsure?"

From the open doorway, her father bustled in. God only knew how long he stood there, eavesdropping. Anger rankled her, and she bit her tongue, hard. "Of course she is sure. When do you want the wedding, sir?"

"Saturday."

"One week?" Goldie could hardly believe her ears. Surely he hadn't meant to change her life so drastically, so quickly. She felt as though the world around her had shifted. Her future had become a massive boulder tumbling down a steep hillside. It was both frightening and out of control.

"All right," Herbert said, offering Joseph an outstretched hand.

The pair shook on the deal as if Goldie were a horse to be bought and sold. Her stomach roiled, and tears slid from her eyes. Only this time, there was no one present to offer her a handkerchief.

Sitting on the settee, she buried her face in her hands. Neither man seemed to notice, both only too happy to congratulate the other.

### Chapter 3

Goldie lay in her bed and stared up at the heavy oaken canopy. Her bed, Joseph's bed, the innkeeper's bed, whoever it belonged to, it pressed hard and unyielding beneath her. Even the pillows seemed leaden. Still she lay there, her focus fixated on the tapestry that adorned the bed's ornate frame.

The days leading up to the wedding had flown by in a blur of fittings, flowers, and tears. Not hers, but the tears of her mother. Deep-seated sorrow stole her tears and left behind bitter fury.

"I so wanted a big wedding," her mother had sobbed. Yes, well, she would have liked that, too, but the wedding day had not been her mother's nor hers. It belonged to Joseph and her blasted father. The rapidity of the wedding, the sneaky feel of it, and no doubt most everyone in the village would be counting to nine. That was once they found out about the secret nuptials. But why did they need to be kept secret? Why couldn't she at least been allowed to have Lottie and Mary stand beside her? And why hadn't William or the other brother been in attendance?

But what did she care? The deed was done, and now the only thing standing between her and being a proper wife was the consummation.

*Consummation.* Even the word made her cringe. What did she know about pleasures of the flesh? She knew the basics of lovemaking. That the act would hurt the first time and that it was a wife's duty to please her husband. But why couldn't it be more? Why couldn't it actually be a pleasure for her?

She rolled onto her side and waited for Joseph's arrival. He had deposited her in their room at the small inn on the outskirts of town and rushed off. Not, she realized, an illustrious start to a life together.

And God but she wanted to get this part over with and get on with the business of being the mistress of their home, a home she longed to lay eyes on.

At the sound of the door opening, Goldie sat up, dangling her feet off the edge of the bed. "Joseph?"

"Aye, love, it's me. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No," she admitted, her mouth suddenly dry, her hands trembling with nerves. "I was waiting for you."

"Glad to hear it. I had a bit of business to tend to, and I was needed back in town. Your father needed to speak with me. He is as excited about our nuptials as I."

She watched as Joseph crossed the room and began to undress. He started with his snowy-white necktie. He was a beautiful man, and bedecked as her groom, she grudgingly admitted that she felt a sense of pride standing at his side.

"Yes, he is rather happy to be rid of me," Goldie lamented.

Joseph chuckled. "Don't think that, dear. Think of it as he's glad to be gaining a son, or perhaps a son's purse?" The joviality left his tone and a seriousness took over. "Regardless of his motives, I'm glad to have you as my bride."

He unbuttoned the top button on his shirt and lifted his hand. "Come here, my sweet. Help me get ready for bed."

On quaking legs, Goldie made her way to her husband. Adrenaline coursed through her limbs and had her wondering if perhaps she should have insisted on a longer engagement. An engagement ought to include country walks, dinners together, more time to get to know what to expect from the man one would be married to for the rest of one's life. Damn her father and his greed.

Now, standing before him, she awaited some sort of instruction.

“Give me your hand,” he whispered, and she obeyed, setting her trembling fingers into the warm fold of his grip. “Why are you shaking?” he asked, brushing a kiss across her knuckles.

“I’m worried that I’ll do something wrong. That it’s going to hurt. That I won’t please you.”

He lowered his face level with hers, his blue-eyed stare soft with pleasure. Inhaling deeply, she relaxed a little. Maybe Lottie had been right. His glorious orbs seemed true blue. Didn’t they?

“You won’t do anything wrong,” he said. “I’ll take extra care, and you do please me, Goldie. So much.”

He pressed his mouth to hers, and she allowed herself to take pleasure from his kiss. She allowed herself to overlook the hardness of his lips and allowed the warmth of her desire to flow freely as he slipped his tongue between her lips.

She opened her mouth wider, her tongue shyly sliding across his. Never had she been kissed so fully. Not even William had ventured so far.

Leaning against her husband, she forced back the thought of his brother. After all, Joseph was the man who respected her enough to give *her* his name. It was he who respected any children that the union would bring enough to give *them* his name. He was where she belonged, and, by God, she would make her marriage work. With renewed determination, she grabbed hold of his shirt.

He pulled free and stared down into her face, his eyes alive with surprise. “You take me aback, Goldie.”

“How so?” she whispered, unbuttoning the next button in line.

“A bold virgin you are.”

“Curious,” she said, coming to her tiptoes. “Kiss me like that again, Joseph.”

“You liked that?”

She nodded. “I felt it all the way to my toes.”

At her urging, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed, setting her down upon the unyielding mattress. Lying atop her,

he did as she asked, but this time the kiss was hard and demanding. The need coming from him so strong she couldn't help but respond.

Weaving her fingers through his hair, she was glad to know the man possessed one bit of softness. His curls were as sleek and smooth and pleasant as a newborn kittens.

Again, he pressed his tongue between her teeth, and again she greedily accepted the intrusion. A pleased moan escaped her throat. The man could kiss, thank goodness.

He removed his mouth from hers, and using that clever tongue, traced a steamy line down the length of her throat. Her flesh reacted to his attention. Every bit of her bloomed with heated curiosity. What part of her body would he grace next with his touch? Flares of desire and raw need exploded on the uncharted territory that was her body.

"Joseph." She whispered his name.

"Aye, love." With nimble fingers, he quickly unbuttoned her gown, and, pushing open the fabric, he rose to his knees. "Dear God, I have married Venus."

She smiled up at him, his face animated in the light cast from the many lamps that glowed about the room. "Is that a good thing?"

"Damn it, woman, I'll be the envy of every man in London."

"London?" she asked.

"Yes." He wrapped his long, hot fingers around her breast, swirling the nipple with the rough pad of his thumb until the crimson mound peaked. Taking the aroused bead into his mouth, he sucked the delicate skin as gentle ripples cascaded through to her core. Moisture flooded from her body, trickling from her womanhood and puddling on the bed beneath her.

"Dear lord," she muttered, lifting her pelvis and grinding her hips against his abdomen. "I want more," she groaned. "More, Joseph."

"Oh," he chuckled, "I did hit the marital jackpot."

She smiled up at him, and he kissed her, the pressure searing the deepest recesses of her body. Pulling his shirt apart, she longed to run

her hands across the muscles of his chest. Oh, how she needed to curl her fingers in the warmth of his skin.

He shrugged free of his shirt, and she pulled his steamy body to hers, her breasts pressed against his chest. Her eager hands traveled down the length of his back, solid muscle meeting her touch.

“Tell me you want me, Goldie. Tell me,” Joseph whispered against her lips.

“I do want you.”

Taking hold of her hand, he set her fingers atop his cock. It felt rigid and massive beneath the confines of his breeches. “Do you see what you do to me?” He hissed. “Since seeing you that first day, I have longed to plunge myself deep inside your beautiful box.”

Her breathing became labored as fear of the unknown and curiosity battled to take control. But no, it was too late to stop now, and the truth was, curiosity had won the moment he took her hand.

She slowly slid her fingers down the length of his shaft. The groan that followed was deep and full of yearning as it echoed through the room. He sprang from the bed and unfastened his pants, kicking them to the floor. His features were wild with his passion. He stood before her, fully naked and fully aroused, his slender body glorious in the flickering light. “My darling, I will try to take it easy,” he vowed. “But I have never wanted a woman so much. Never.”

She lifted her hand to him. “Do take care,” she said. “But do come back to bed.”

Fascinated, she watched the muscles of his chest flex as he crawled across the mattress toward her like a stealthy panther on the prowl. Her desire for him spiraled to near manic levels.

He pushed her legs apart, and with fervent fingers, he stroked the hair that covered her sex. Slipping his index finger along her slit, he slowly warmed her clitoris. The pleasure of his touch sent her closer to an edge she never knew existed before this night.

She bit her lower lip. “What are you doing?”

“Pleasing my wife,” he said.



Small gasps popped from her lips as, slowly, his fingers grew closer to her sheath. She squirmed beneath him, wanting him to take her, near frantic for him to press himself inside her.

He pushed her legs farther apart and rolled fully atop her. “Are you ready?” he asked. Sweat beaded on his brow, and his breathing had become labored.

“Yes,” she panted. “Yes, I’m ready.”

Slowly, he pressed his cock between the lips of her cunt. She braced herself, knowing that this was where the discomfort would happen. Despite his methodical pushing and controlled entry, pain shattered through the warm glow of his lovemaking. Tears burned her eyes, and she cried out. He stopped and brushed a kiss atop her forehead.

“Are you all right?” he asked, the girth of his manhood filling her up and stretching her beyond comfort.

“It hurts.”

“I know,” he whispered. “You’re so very snug.” He slowly began to move, rocking gingerly back and forth, the heat of his motion easing her ache. Warmth seemed to rush to the area, and with each thrust, pleasure overtook pain.

“Oh,” she whispered. “That’s better.”

He smiled down on her, his eyes taking on a faraway look. “It’s wonderful.” Increasing his pace, she closed her eyes and focused on the spot that twinged with each insertion. It quivered and quaked, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

“Joseph,” she cried out, lifting her hips to meet his rhythmic pounding.

“Oh, God,” he called out, slamming harder and harder into her.

She tilted her pelvis, and he hammered at the spot that promised a release she found she desperately needed and never knew existed. “Yes, there,” she whimpered, and with a renewed power, he ended her yearning and sent ripples of delight cascading across her body. Her moans echoed through the still night air.

His pleased moans quickly joined hers, his breathing ragged, every muscle in his body taut. “Dear, Goldie,” he cried out, his face contorted into a pained mask, his lower lip tight between his teeth. He groaned, and, with a shudder, she felt the release of his seed deep within her.

A contented smile crossed his lips, and he lowered his head to her bosom. “Magnificent,” he muttered and eased himself from her body. Rolling off her and onto his back, she moved closer, her head on his shoulder.

He wrapped his arm around her, holding her sweat-soaked body close to his. “Is it like that every time?” she asked breathlessly.

“God, I hope so.”

\* \* \* \*

Goldie reached over and touched him. The night shrouded him in a dark cloak. His body was warm, and her skin chilled. The spring air that drifted in from the open window rested upon her like dew on morning grass.

“Joseph, I’m cold,” she whispered, moving closer, the feel of her husband against her a pleasure she hadn’t expected. In fact, everything about Joseph was a surprise.

He rolled over and faced her, his breath hot against her skin. “You want me to warm you up?” he asked, the seductive tone of his voice igniting desire into the lowest point of her body.

“Please?” She smiled, and he rolled atop her.

“With pleasure.” He pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss so powerful her pussy burst with moisture. Rising on his elbows, he brushed his lips across her forehead. “But first, I want to share something with you.”

“What is it?” she asked, her body protesting his departure.

He lit a candle and, going to his valise, returned with a black silk scarf and a velvet rope. Turning to face her, his expression took her

breath away. The need in him was so strong that her body reacted without a single touch.

He returned to the bed. His hard cock rested against his belly. The large head shone purple, and she flushed, readying herself for what was to come.

“What are those for?”

“A special treat,” he said, straddling her waist with his long, sinewy legs. “It will intensify our lovemaking.”

She bit her lower lip and, despite the twinge of anxiety that warmed her veins, curiosity once again got the better of her. “I don’t see how. But you’re the master, and I, simply a novice.”

He snorted. “You’re wonderful.” Taking her by the wrists, he secured her to the headboard.

“Is this necessary?” She didn’t like feeling trapped.

“It’s all part of the game,” he whispered in her ear, his steamy breath sending currents of desire rushing to her sex. Gone was the apprehension, in its stead the need to be fulfilled. He gently tied the scarf around her head, covering her eyes. With the world around her dark, she waited for what was next. Would he kiss her? Plunge his cock deep within her cunt? Fondle her breasts?

She waited. “Joseph?”

“Aye, love, I’m here.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, the cool air from the window sending a chill across her naked body.

“Admiring my wife,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

She yearned to feel his touch, to touch him in return.

“Joseph,” she mumbled. “I feel out of sorts.”

“Shh,” he whispered. “Just feel.”

As if he sensed her need, she felt the mattress shift, felt the warmth of his body. His mouth hovered above hers. She knew by the hot breath that fanned across her face. She parted her lips to taste him, to welcome him. Finally, he kissed her, and the intensity of the kiss

had her squirming beneath him. Her fingers itched to entwine in his silky curls.

He moaned when she slid her legs apart to receive him. He pulled his lips free from hers. "Don't stop, Joseph."

"I have no intention of stopping," he said, cupping her breasts, his thumbs circling her nipples until they tightened. Again she squirmed, and yet he continued his pursuit of pleasure. This time he took a nipple into his mouth, tantalizing the aroused peak, flicking it with his tongue. The ecstasy was so intense, she twisted in her bonds, and he chuckled.

"Am I driving you mad?" he asked, his delight audible in his wicked tone.

"Yes. Do hurry."

"No," he said and traced a scorching line with his tongue down past her navel, stopping as he reached the top of her pussy.

"Now what are you doing?" She gasped, the sensation sending fresh moisture to her already sopping womanhood.

"Teaching you the pleasures of sex. I already told you, and maybe one day you'll see fit to take me into your mouth." Using his fingers, he spread her folds open and buried what could only be his face into her, his tongue now focused upon her clit. Rolling his tongue in small circles, he had her close to an orgasm within seconds. All her attention seemed focused on what he would do next, where he would touch, how he would please her.

Her moans echoed through the room as he sucked gently on the nub. "You like?" he asked, slipping his finger deep inside her sheath. "You want me?"

"I do," she cried out, bucking beneath the rhythm of his finger sliding in and out of her body.

"Tell me you want me to fuck you," he said, his mouth warm against her ear. "Tell me, and you will have me."

"I want you. You know I do."

“Yes,” he said, pushing her legs apart and settling his cock at the entrance of her sex. “You want it right here, don’t you?” He asked the question but didn’t wait for a response. Instead, he slammed hard into her.

Her breath caught in her throat as pain mingled with pleasure. “You’re too hard.”

He ignored her and continued to press in and out of her until the pain disappeared, and once again, the warmth from his prick spread through her like wildfire. He quickly brought her to heights she had never expected, and, on a wave of ecstasy, she felt her muscles tighten around his cock and release in a flood of pure rapture.

\* \* \* \*

Sun filtered in through the small gap in the heavy draperies, the miserable light falling on Goldie’s tired face. Her sleep had never been so deep before, her relaxation so complete. But it was morning now, the morning of her first full day as Lady Joseph Behr. Rolling over, she reached for him, only to find the bed empty and the sheets cold to the touch.

“Joseph?” she called, hoping to hear the deep tones of his voice from the small parlor that adjoined their bedroom. Her only answer was the ticktock of a mantle clock. Her heart plummeted, and she fought back disappointed tears. Wasn’t last night worthy of more than a morning of desertion?

Setting her feet on the cold, oaken floor, she wondered how long she would be left on her own. And would he mind if she were to get dressed and go visit her friends? Was it all right to tell everyone of their good fortune?

She stood and looked back at the crimson stain upon the sheet and felt the dull ache from last night’s passionate onslaught. Just the memory of his thick cock and she blushed. Yes, married life was going to be interesting. If only he wasn’t so damned hard when he

first entered. Biting her lower lip, she likened it to sitting upon a railway spike.

Going to her trunk, she gathered up a walking gown, dressed, and began to groom. She would go into town and see her friends, have a bite to eat, and maybe head home to see her parents. Yes, she would tell her father how happy she was and how grateful for his insistence she marry Joseph. A sudden thumping made her jump. Goldie rested her hand on her racing heart, realizing it was merely a visitor.

“Woman, open this door. I’ve misplaced my keys.”

“Dear Lord,” she whispered. Surely the man who pounded at her door had made a mistake. Joseph wouldn’t be so indiscreet. It was merely a confused stranger.

“Goldie!”

“Joseph?” she replied nervously from her seat at the dressing table. Inwardly, she cringed, praying the fellow would apologize and move on, yet knowing in her soul he would not.

“Yes, wife. I lost my key.” God but he sounded odd. His words were slurred and sloppy.

She scrambled to her feet, anxious to get him inside before more people noticed his terrible state. Yet the anger that boiled in her gut longed to shove him back onto the streets with the other drunks and feral pigs.

“Where have you been?” she asked, pulling open the door. But she needn’t have asked the question. By his rumpled clothes, his wild hair, and his glassy-eyed stare, she knew her first instincts had been true. Damn him for overindulging at the public house.

“Just celebrating our nuptials,” he grinned, “and I realized that I needed to see you again.” He pushed through the door, flopped onto the bed, and fumbled with the opening of his trousers. “I have a cock with your name on it. Why not give us a bit of a ride?”

She clenched her jaw. Was he really going to humiliate her and ruin the warmth of the memory they created last night? “I don’t think I’ll take you up on that particular invitation.”

“Oh, come now, love.” He freed his prick and ran his hand up and down the hardened shaft. “You’re not going to let a little whiskey keep you from another chance at becoming the mother to my son.”

The very idea of lying down with him made her want to retch. Oh, dear God, what had she done? The dream lover of the night before had vanished. Was this the true man she married? Why was he doing this to her? She set her hand to her stomach.

“If you were to impregnate me at this particular moment, I fear the babe would be born drunk.” She grabbed up her shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders. “I’m going to breakfast and to visit my friends. When I come back, I hope you’re sober.”

He scrambled to his feet. “You’re still my wife, and if I want a fuck, you’ll give it to me.”

Fingers of fear traveled up her spine, and yet, she stood her ground, refusing to give in to his intoxicated threat. “I’ll give what I want, when I want.”

He sprang at her in a display of coordination she did not expect from the inebriated monster. “You’ll take what I give,” he mumbled, pinning her body against the wall, his hard-on pressing against her hip.

“Joseph, don’t. Last night—”

“Was incredible,” he whispered, his lips hovering above hers. “And I want more.” Leaning in closer, he traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue, the smell of whiskey strong on his breath.

She trembled and cursed herself, for her body reacted to the nearness of him despite the fact she was bitterly angry and a little frightened. “Forget more,” he said. “I want all of you.”

“Joseph, when you’re sober.”

“Now,” he said in a heated whisper. “I want you now.” Pressing his lips to hers, she felt all the fight leave her. Since awakening, her body longed to be satisfied. She found his commands arousing, and she yearned to feel the sexual power he possessed. Damn her body. She longed to have him quench the fire that roared deep within her.

She kissed him back, her fingers curling in the fabric of his shirt. The smell of cigar mingled with the scent of his cologne. Damn her lack of will. Damn her body.

He smiled against her kiss. "That's a good lass. Let your husband fuck you."

"Yes," she moaned, presenting him with her neck. His stubbled chin scratched the delicate flesh, sending an erotic mix of pleasure and pain shooting into her womb. What was happening to her? A hapless virgin one day and a wanton woman the next.

"You smell so good," he mumbled against the rounded tops of her breasts. Greedily, he pushed up her skirts and slipped his fingers between the lips of her pussy, rubbing quickly back and forth before driving his middle finger deep inside her. Her breath caught, and her body shuddered as he swirled the digit around. "You like that, do you?" he asked, pressing hard against her clitoris while he continued his inward assault.

She closed her eyes and focused her full attention on the sweet motion of his hand. Wetting her lips, she bore down on his finger, wanting to force him farther in. She didn't understand what it was about him that demanded she take his rapturous abuse.

Without warning, he pulled his touch free and, in one swift motion, slammed his prick inside her, nearly lifting her feet off the floor. The full force of his cock filled her, and again she was lost in the sensation of him. Nothing in the world mattered more than this moment.

"Joseph," she cried.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his breath hot against her ear.

"No."

He continued to slam into her, pounding away, each thrust forcing her closer to the orgasm she longed for. Over and over he slid in and out, the throbbing head of his cock tantalizing her.



Forcing her leg around his waist, he kneaded the flesh of her backside, his fingers digging in, the pleasure increased by the intensity of his grasp. He pulled his hand back, the heavy slap of his palm against her buttocks echoing through the room.

“Oh, dear,” she called out, her lips and limbs tingling from gasping for breath. “You hit me.”

“Love tap,” he grumbled. The sting excited her, the power of him. He was all man. Her man. The master of her very flesh.

“Do it again,” she shouted, grinding against him, and again he stung her with a salacious slap. “Joseph,” she cried as her desire washed through her, ending in a tidal wave of release.

“Goddamn it, Goldie,” he moaned. “I’m coming.” He threw his head back and stopped pulsing. Instead, his body twitched, and a deep groan slipped past his stern lips.

“Are you all right?” she asked, waiting for him to withdraw, waiting for him to do, to say something. Instead, he stood before her and stared at her with a warmth that touched her soul.

“I’m bewitched.” Sweat poured from his forehead, his chest, every inch of him, glistening in the morning light. “You’re in my blood, and I’ve a fever for you.” He took a step back, and running both hands through his hair, he leaned forward.

“That’s a good thing, right?” she asked, trying to smooth her skirts, but they were hopelessly wrinkled. “I’m your wife. I should be in your blood, as you are in mine.”

“No,” he shouted, his face growing pale. “No, it’s not a good thing. Go home to your parents.”

“I don’t want to,” she said, reaching out to touch him, but he dodged her hand. “Please, I don’t understand.”

His lips curled into a snarl. “Just get out.”

Tears filled her eyes and tumbled over her cheeks in hot, salty streams. “You want me to leave? For good?”

He lowered himself on the bed, his gaze hitting the floor. “I don’t know. I need time to think.”

“I see.” But she didn’t see. She didn’t understand, but she longed for the earth to open wide and swallow her whole.

## Chapter 4

“What do you mean, he threw you out?” Herbert boomed, his round face crimson with rage. “What did you do?”

Goldie bit back her tears and sat on the edge of the settee. “I didn’t do anything...”

“Nothing? You did nothing? You did allow him to...to...”

“Herbert,” her mother chimed in, her mouth wide with her horror. “That’s not our business.”

“Christ, woman, if she didn’t allow him access to her bed, you can’t blame the man for giving her the boot.”

Her mother wrapped her arms around her daughter. “Damn you, Herbert. This is all your fault. You forced her into this, laying guilt upon her gentle feet. You acted as if we were at death’s door. Your melodrama has cost our girl dearly.”

Goldie buried her face in the crook of her mother’s neck, finding comfort in the familiar scent of roses. “There there, child,” Mother cooed. “Twill all be all right. You’ll see.”

Herbert paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, his hands behind his back. “I need to know, girl, if he chooses to annul the marriage, were you intimate? I mean, he’ll pay a high price for your virginity.”

“Stop it, Father, please,” Goldie cried out. “What does it matter? I’m ruined if he doesn’t take me back. Who would want a discarded woman?”

“It matters,” her mother coaxed. “It matters.”

Goldie sprang to her feet, heated anger and humiliation spiraling up on a rush of blood toward her head. Her heart raced with the effort,

and her head grew light. “Well, of course we were intimate. Not once but three times.” She glared at her father. “He’s very good at it, too. Do you want to know all the details? Do you?”

Herbert stared at his child, his thick lips dipping into a frown. “Of course not.” He reached up over the mantle and pulled down his musket. “And, by God, he’ll do what’s right by you.”

Her mother stood and rushed forward. “Dearest, no, you mustn’t.”

“Damn it, Aggie, I must. This is my fault. I did pressure her, and I’ll fix it one way or another.”

“Father, it will be all right. I know that Joseph will come to his senses.” Goldie tugged on the musket. “You can’t do this. He and I are married. He can’t back out of that. Can he?”

Herbert’s graying brows joined in confusion. “I don’t know, but you’re my girl, and you’re not dirt beneath his feet. I’ll not have him treating you as if you are.”

Tears clouded Goldie’s vision as she looked at her father. It was the first time since all this started that he acted as if he cared. “Just give it a little time, all right? Please. I can’t stand the idea of you getting hurt.”

“I’m sorry, child,” Herbert said, brushing a kiss across her cheek. “I have to do this. Your honor is at stake.”

Aggie held tight to her daughter. “Oh, dear Lord, child. What are we going to do?”

Contemplating an answer, Goldie returned the embrace. What could they do? They were at the mercy of a serpent. The realization had her hating Joseph with every fiber of her being.

She pulled free and led her mother to the settee, where they both sat. The silence in the parlor had Goldie’s ears aching. And then she thought of him. The Marquess.

“I have an idea,” Goldie said. “You stay here, Mother. I’ll be back soon.”

“What are you going to do?” Mother called after her in a panicked tone.

“Just wait here for Father,” she said as she hurried from the house.

Rushing down the hall, she reached the front door. Should she saddle a horse or run? After all, the Dunbar Estate was less than a mile away.

\* \* \* \*

William burst through the front door, the only thing on his mind the leather sofa, a newspaper, and a warm fire. Hunting was supposed to be relaxing but not this day. The dogs had gone crazy, the fox nowhere to be seen, and Edmund’s constant complaining had thoroughly ruined the experience and his mood. Oh, who was he kidding? Those were all normal parts of hunting. What plagued him most was his longing for Goldie.

“Where are you going, Will?” Edmund called after him, his boots tapping against the cream-colored marble floor. “I thought perhaps we could have a game of chess. Instead of a pretty little fox, you could hunt down my queen.”

“No, Edmund,” William called out, his voice echoing against the walls of the cavernous entryway. “I’m into a more solitary endeavor at the moment. Maybe after supper we can play a game of cards? I’m not much on chess, you know that.” And it was true. Despite being quite adept at the game, William didn’t feel the need to master it. Edmund, on the other hand, could play from sunup to sundown.

“Will, I don’t care for cards.”

“Sorry, old chap.”

Entering his study, William glanced over his shoulder at his blond-haired brother. “Why not ask Lewis to play? He’d no doubt love a moment away from the kitchen staff.”

Edmund pursed his lips. “Lewis is an oaf.”

With his hand resting on the door, William shrugged his shoulders. “Aye, but he’s an oaf willing to play chess.”

He began to close the door, to erase his brother from view. A massive headache was setting in, he could feel it. Blast the headaches. Blast the stress. Blast his family. All of them drove him to distraction.

And that fool, Herbert Locksley, had a nice wife and daughter, a lovely little house. Yet he strove for more. Didn't he realize how attractive a simple life was? That's all he ever wanted, and yet he was bogged down by the responsibility of acquiring more and more through any means possible. And that included wedding Lady Louisa Carnton. Just the thought of her shot a throbbing pain to his head. The woman's voice wore on him like a cat in heat.

Rubbing his temples, he flopped onto the sofa and straightened his legs. The soft pillow at his back, the sweet popping of the fire in the fireplace, and he closed his eyes. Ah, just a moment to gather his wits before starting to read. Yes. The afternoon belonged to him, and no one was going to disturb him. No one.

"My lord?" There was a gentle rapping on the study door.

"Goddamn it." He barely stifled a shout. "What is it, Lewis?"

The oaf stuck his head through the crack in the door. "Uh, sir, there's a young lady here claiming to be your sister-in-law. She says she's married to Lord Joseph."

The groan that escaped his lips was only the external manifestation of his dread, for his stomach plummeted and the lump that seated itself in his throat promised suffocation. What had the sneaky bastard done now? He should have wondered when he didn't come home last night. "She doesn't happen to have the most glorious mane of golden curls, does she?"

"Aye, she does."

"Jesus Christ."

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

William rose to his feet. There went his afternoon dedicated to catching up with the news and some sleep. Resting his hand on the chocolate marble of the fireplace mantle, he watched the door and waited for the fallen angel to enter.

“Show her in.”

And there she was, every bit as pretty as that day on the trail, where she yielded to his kiss. Damn his brother. Damn him to hell.

Dressed in pale blue, the satin of her gown complemented the soft blue of her eyes. She dipped her knee, and he nodded in return. “Miss Locksley, ’tis a pleasure to see you. How may I be of assistance?”

Her porcelain cheeks flushed a charming shade of pink. “I am married to your brother.”

“Against my father’s wishes? Just Monday, Joseph was told there would be no wedding. I see he didn’t pass the news on to you.”

Her hand flew to her mouth, the color draining from her cheeks. Damnation, was she going to faint? He came to her side, and taking her arm to steady her, he led her to the sofa. “Sit. Lewis, bring me a glass of port,” he demanded.

There was no reply.

“Damn it, man, I know you’re eavesdropping. Bring me the blasted port.”

At the shuffling of the oaf’s feet, he seated himself beside her. The sweet scent of lavender swirled around him and set his blood on fire.

“He said he had his father’s support,” she replied, her glorious breasts rising and falling as she took in rapid breaths. “His Grace and my father discussed terms via messenger.”

“I can assure you, my father said no. Not something Joseph is used to.”

Her lower lip trembled and great tears hung on the edge of her lashes. “Well, Reverend Watkins from London came and performed the ceremony just yesterday.”

“Watkins?” Rage began a rapid climb. “Was he a bony old fellow, with a bald head, narrow nose, and moles, lots and lots of moles?”

She sniffled and nodded, the tears flowing freely.

“Dear Miss Locksley, he is not a reverend. He is a debt collector.”

“Oh, my God.” She buried her face in her hands. “I am ruined. I am a ruined woman.”

He hesitated a moment before setting his hand upon her shoulder. Oh, but to be able to ease her pain. How he would gladly take his brother’s place as her groom if only he weren’t already committed. “We’ll make this right, I swear to you.”

“And just how can you do that?”

He jumped to his feet. “I can start by fetching Joseph and making him answer for his misdeeds.”

She wiped her eyes. “My father has gone to town to do just that. And he’s brought his musket with him.”

“Edmund!” William shouted as he rushed toward the front door. Out in the hall, he nearly knocked his fair-haired brother into the next county. “There’s a young lady in the study. Tend to her.”

The younger man’s face blanched. “Young lady? Tend to her how?”

“I don’t know,” William replied brusquely. “Play chess with her.”



## Chapter 5

“I’m sorry, my lord. I don’t know how to play chess.” She walked past him, the soft sway of her skirts garnering his full attention. Fascinated by the pale blue silk, he continued to stare.

He didn’t know for certain what the problem with the maiden was, but he was certain it had something to do with Joseph. When women came crying to William, it was almost always due to Joseph’s whims and appetites. The bastard usually had Father’s attention. William got everything else. It left little for him. Thank God for books and chess and Julian.

“And,” she said, his attention coming to rest on her face, dipping to her mouth. It moved with such grace, the fullness of her lips almost tantalized. His gaze followed the gentle upturn of her nose before he focused on her wide, gloriously blue eyes. My, but she was lovely. She would fit nicely on Joseph’s list of conquests. “I feel I should be in town with my h—” She stopped before the dark marble of the fireplace, the soft orange glow of the flames flickering against her smooth alabaster skin. “With your brother and my father.”

Patting the seat next to him, he longed to get her closer, to smell her perfume, to feel the warmth of her. Was it wrong to want to examine her features with the eye of an artist? For despite being a woman, she would make a lovely portrait.

“Miss Locksley, why not come here, and I will show you how to play chess. It is a wonderful game.”

“My lord, I don’t know how I can concentrate. My mind, it is so full of worry.”

Edmund stood and offered her a smile. “I find if I focus upon something other than what plagues me, I come back at the problem refreshed and am better able to find the answer I seek.”

“Mine is more than a problem. It is a horrendous wrong done to me and mine. A wrong that cannot be righted.”

Again his gaze dipped to her lips. The pink rosebud was aquiver with emotion. His heart ached to ease her sorrow. He knew only too well how she felt. Used. Lonely. Sad.

“I’m certain that whatever the wrong is, William will see it righted. Of my two brothers, he is by far the most respectful of the fairer sex. He will not let you down.”

The tears she had so valiantly fought to hold back flooded over her cheeks.

“I pray you’re right. For if you’re not, I am a ruined woman.”

Edmund took two more steps forward and anxiously reached out and touched her hand. “I am right, Miss Locksley. And if I’m wrong about William’s success, I will do my utmost to see your reputation spared.”

She sniffled. “Thank you.”

“Now,” he said, heading back to the sofa, “I think we need a distraction. How about that game of chess?”

The tiniest of smiles touched her lips. “All right, but you’ll have to teach me. Chess is not something I know much about.”

“You’ll like it. Where else do you get to be the master of your own people?”

\* \* \* \*

“Lewis!” Damn, where was the man?

William stormed through the front door, Herbert Locksley close on his heels, huffing and puffing, his large face moist and red. “You say you’re going to fix this, and yet that—that monster brother of

yours is gone. I don't see how you can fix anything if you can't find him and force him to marry her."

"Sir Locksley, honestly, I'm doing the best I can. I'm going to send word to my father. Maybe he has heard from Joseph. What more do you want?"

"I want resolution. I want revenge. I want the creature jailed for—for fraud," he shouted, his voice echoing against the marble floor. "Surely, sir, you understand that time is of the essence."

William rubbed his temples, the headache that had lurked behind his eyes all day had arrived full force. His stomach roiled, and the sound of Locksley's voice grated on his nerves. "Of course I understand, and you will have resolution. I promise. One way or another, Miss Locksley will not appear tarnished."

"Her virginity is gone," Herbert shouted. "You can't get that back."

"Lewis!" William shouted again. This time the old man shuffled into the entryway from the direction of the study. Goldie and Edmund followed close behind. Her large blue eyes stared at him, hopeful and expectant. What the hell was he supposed to do? Damn Joseph. Damn his black soul.

"What have you learned, Will?" Edmund asked, his brow lifting with the question.

William scrubbed his face with his hands, not wanting to look at Goldie anymore, not until after he delivered the ungodly news. "That Joseph has left town, and no one knows where he's gone."

A sob popped from her lips. "Dear, dear me."

Edmund touched Goldie's hand, and William's gut tightened. Damn his eyes. He couldn't keep them off her. Not even for a second. He so longed to offer her comfort, to touch her hand as his brother did. Envy gripped him hard, and he needed to get away. Turning on his heel, he faced his butler. "Lewis, have my horse saddled. I'm going to consult with my father."

"I'm coming with you," Herbert bellowed.

“That’s not necessary, Sir Locksley. I can assure you I have Miss Locksley’s best interests at heart.” His gaze fell upon her, and his heart clenched, for the expression on her face was so unsure, so distrustful. Why did it bother him? She had a right to believe all Behr’s were reprehensible. “I apologize, Miss Locksley,” he said, his collar suddenly too starched. “We will make amends, one way or another.”

Her lower lip trembled, and tears shimmered in her bright blue eyes. “How am I supposed to believe you?”

He smiled wistfully. “Because, I give you my word.”

\* \* \* \*

Edmund watched his brother stride from the house, his long legs and broad shoulders filling him with the familiar sense of inadequacy. William was everything he wasn’t, tall, strapping, handsome. The only place he excelled was in intellect, but that didn’t get him far. Not with a pompous ass for a father. Mother was his only hope, and when she died, he simply sat back and allowed his father and brothers to control his destiny. And why not? He had not a clue as to what he should do. He was the son of a duke. Wasn’t that enough?

He turned his attention to Goldie. She was a pretty little doll. One he would love to dress and pamper.

“I think I shall go home. I need to sleep. I am ever so tired.” She did appear rather peaked, below her eyes dark from exhaustion.

“I think you should stay here,” Edmund said and straightened his spine, hoping to make himself appear larger, stronger, and more...masculine.

“My lord, I appreciate your kind invitation.”

“It’s not an invitation,” he interrupted. “You’ll be safer under my protection until your father returns. God only knows what Joseph has in mind.”

She set her slender fingers to her breast. “I think he got what he wanted. I don’t suppose I’m of any interest to him any longer.”

Edmund lifted a brow. “Miss Locksley, my eyes are quite functional. You’re a flower with a sweetness that needs protection. Allow me to do this small deed, to prove to you that all members of my family are not selfish monsters who trample such beauty beneath their feet.”

A small crease formed between her eyes, and she frowned. “Thank you, my lord. Unfortunately, I cannot accept your offer. My reputation is teetering toward darkness. What talk will befall me if I stay here, alone with you?”

He stifled a laugh. She was safer with him than she realized, and yet he saw the wisdom in her words. “We shall send for your mother immediately. Will that suffice?”

Her smile warmed him. “Yes, my lord.”

\* \* \* \*

“Two entire weeks and we’ve yet to hear from any of those men. Even your father has neglected to keep us informed. It’s a bad omen.” Her mother’s expression took on an almost sinister quality as she faced the flickering fire in the study.

“I know very well how long it has been,” Goldie replied, struggling to stand. Of the three chairs in the room, the one she had vacated was far too soft. The cushions threatened to swallow her in their feathery confines.

“Then how is it you manage to maintain such a calm demeanor?” her mother asked, smoothing the mahogany armrest of her seat.

“Calm? You think I’m calm? I feel if I let myself imagine what could happen to me next, I’ll go mad.” Honestly, had her mother always been so naïve? She bit her lower lip and walked toward the window, the beauty of the sunset beyond the panes of glass lost to her.

Bitter anger and disappointment pooled in her gut. Her naivety had died alongside the drying blood of her virginity.

“Well, we can take comfort in the fact that the eldest has seen fit to personally champion your cause.”

She spun around. “My cause?”

“Yes, the redemption of your reputation. I’m certain that you will be married to Joseph before all this is over.”

“Married to Joseph?” Tears threatened to choke her. “I realize it is my only way out, but how could you imagine I relish the idea of being forcibly married to that man?”

“What?”

The shrill tone in her mother’s voice had her turning to face her. Her heart hammered in her chest at the sight before her. Her mother’s face flushed a deep crimson, her blue eyes bulging.

“Why would I want to marry that cad?” she asked, hoping to calm the woman. God knew she didn’t wish to cause her any further stress.

“B—because it’s the only way to salvage your reputation,” she sputtered, her lower jaw trembling as if she were chilled by an unseen blast of winter air. “And what if, God forbid, you’re with child? You’d have a bastard running around carrying the Locksley name? I think not!”

“Stop it, Mother,” Goldie pleaded. That was an avenue she need not explore.

At the gentle rap on the door, Goldie smoothed the fabric of her gown and pulled in a deep breath. What would befall her next?

“Miss Locksley?”

“Yes, Edmund. Do come in.”

Her mother stared at Edmund, her complexion taking on a green, sickly shade. He stepped through the door, a book tucked under his arm.

“Lord Edmund,” Goldie said, dipping her knee.

He nodded, his eyes soft as they fell upon her. “I have had word from Lord William.” His mouth pinched into a tight line, and Goldie

knew the message contained bad news. Her heart ached, and she pressed a hand to her abdomen.

“It would seem that Joseph has left England for the continent. He offers his deepest apologies to you and your family and hopes that when he returns, he will be able to call on you.”

Goldie’s mother gasped, her hand gripping tight to Goldie’s arm. “What did you say?”

Shock had her head swimming. Was she so foul to him that he had to leave the country? She fought to keep back her tears.

“He’s fleeing my father’s wrath, to be sure.”

“What will I do now?” Goldie asked, pulling free of her mother’s grip. “What?” But the question hung cold and still and unanswered in the suddenly too hot room.

“We’ll figure something out, my dear. I promise.” Edmund’s reassurances lacked conviction. With her mother’s ghastly white countenance, suddenly the room was not only too hot but far too small.

“I have to get out of here.” She rushed past Edmund, the need for fresh air and the soothing scent of the forest far too strong to fight. Normalcy, she needed normalcy.

On shaky legs, she fled from the house, determined to put any and every bit of distance she could between her and anything remotely related to the Behr family.

## Chapter 6

Why was it that when Joseph did wrong, he felt the guilt?

William urged Etalon forward, but by the way the usually high-stepping beast dragged his feet, it was obvious the past weeks had worn him down. And who could blame him?

He and the stallion had searched all of Joseph's haunts both inside and outside of London. But to no avail. It was only when his father's investigators confirmed that Joseph had boarded a ship to France had he accepted how truly reprehensible his brother was.

Gaming, lecherousness, and love of the whiskey were no longer just sport for Joseph. He had stepped over the line. He had taken a sweet, beautiful girl and tarnished her beyond repair.

Goldie. What a gem. Could such a diamond ever truly be that tarnished? The thought of getting to her and helping her in any way he could revived his tired soul. He wanted to offer her comfort. To hold her hand as Edmund had. If he could give her more, he would. Something about her touched him in a part he never knew he had. She warmed him with her smile, and her pain had him aching. Her shame had him raging.

Perhaps it was God's will that he hadn't found the leech. For if he had, the meeting may have very well ended in pistols at dawn.

Dismounting, he led Etalon down a narrow path toward the stream that separated the Dunbar and Locksley properties. Etalon lowered his ebony muzzle into the clear waters, drinking deeply.

The serenity of the forest did little to quell the upset that plagued William's thoughts. What was he going to do to fix this mess? If only he could marry her, he would. But that didn't answer the question that



haunted him most. Why was he so attached to the woman? Why did he long to be with her no matter what the cost?

Tying Etalon to a small tree, he fell to his knees. Cupping his hands, he splashed water against his skin, hoping the cool liquid would stop the fever that Goldie had infected him with.

At the sound of a snapping twig, he sprang to his feet, his hand coming to rest on the butt of his pistol. "Who's there?" he called out. His only answer was the call of a distant peacock.

Through narrowed eyes, he scanned the darkened path. Dusk had set in, making him an easy target for bandits and crooks. But he welcomed them. Perhaps a little physical adventure would end his suffering.

Etalon lifted his head and snorted, the animal's alarm raising the hackles on William's neck. A shadow flickered past the periphery of his vision, and he pulled the pistol from its holster, pointing it at the direction of the phantom. "I demand you make yourself known, or I cannot promise my bullet will not do you grave harm."

And there she was, stepping out from behind a small thicket, an angel in blue, her golden hair free of combs and ribbons, her cheeks pink from the fresh air, her large eyes reflecting fear and rimmed in red from crying.

"Miss Locksley."

"My lord." She curtsied, and he smiled. Just the sight of her and he calmed.

"No need for such formality, sweet," he replied, holstering his weapon. "And I would be honored if you called me by my given name."

The smallest of smiles touched her precious lips. "Considering all you know about me, I suppose you should call me Goldie."

They stared at one another for a long moment, heat coursing through his body at her proximity. "Goldie," he said her name, savoring the taste of the word on his tongue.

“Have you any new news on Joseph?” A small crease formed between her eyes as if the thought of his brother caused her pain. He longed to reach out and touch her face, to smooth away the visible proof of her discomfort.

“Nothing since we learned he left England. You were apprised of that, were you not?”

Her lower lip trembled, and tears slipped from her eyes. “Yes. But only an hour ago. I wanted to believe that your rapid return would offer me some sort of hope. But I can see by your countenance that no such hope exists.” She looked heavenward. “There is nothing but gossip and ruination in my future.”

He watched in pitied awe as she swayed from side to side. His heart clambered in his chest, and he rushed toward her, sweeping her teetering form into his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Warmth. Sweet, soothing warmth. The smell of porridge. Home. She was home in her bed. The fire stoked, the breakfast on. All was as it should be, and the nightmare of Joseph Behr was gone. Just a dream.

“Mother?” she called.

“Sorry, sweet, your mother isn’t here.”

Reality settled over her like a sheet of ice. It was William’s voice calling to her from the kitchen. God, why did she have to wake up? Why couldn’t she just lie here until all this passed? For her dreams were the only reprieve from the nightmare of her reality. “I’ve made you something warm to eat,” William said as he carried a tray of food toward her. “I’m not much of a chef, but my nurse used to have me doctor her oatmeal. Said I wasn’t only Lord Blackwood, but Lord Porridge as well.”

Goldie sat up. With her head swimming, she reached for her sheet, holding it firmly to her breast. “I’m not hungry, my lord.”

“William,” he said, placing the tray on her lap. “And I’ll not let you leave this bed until you’ve eaten at least a few bites of my concoction.” His silver-eyed gaze rested on her, warmth and compassion alive in his expression.

She took the spoon and ladled a small bite of porridge to her lips. It smelled wonderful, of fresh cream and cinnamon. It tasted even better. Her mouth watered. “This is very good,” she managed. “Thank you.”

He lowered himself on the edge of the bed, her mattress dipping beneath his weight. “Eat more. Please.”

She ate three more bites, finding it difficult to swallow past the lump in her throat. Yet, having him with her helped. Having his kindness focused solely upon her momentarily eased the memory of the evil done to her by his brother. “Is that enough?” she asked, placing the spoon beside the half-empty bowl.

He took up the tray and set it on the floor, his body still beside hers on the bed. The nearness of him, the warmth of him, reminding her that she was still a woman. A woman who had tasted the pleasure of lovemaking. A woman who, despite knowing the damage it could cause, longed to feel the quake of an orgasm as it enthralled every cell in her body.

“Goldie, I’m so very sorry for the misery my brother has inflicted upon you.”

“It’s not your fault my...William.”

“Not fully, no,” he admitted, sorrow changing the tone of his voice. “But I knew he coveted you. And if not for my misgivings about the adequacy of the match, my father would have acquiesced, and you would be his bride.”

“So you don’t believe me good enough to marry your brother?” she asked, pushing at the covers and trying to get away from him. Good enough to be *his* mistress but not good enough to be *his brother’s* wife. “How dare you feign compassion for me when you think me unworthy of the Behr name.”

He grabbed at her with both hands, the strength of his embrace hindering her flight. “No. God, no,” he shouted. She struggled against him, his body crashing atop hers as he pinned her to the bed. “Be still. Allow me to finish.” He stared down at her, his eyes alive with passion. “Don’t you see? If anything, you’re too good for him. I didn’t want him to hurt you. I was trying to protect you.” He eased his grip. “He has damaged and deserted you. I know what he is capable of. I failed you, and I’m sorry.”

He remained atop her, the feel of his body against hers beyond pleasant. Her contours were a perfect fit against his muscular frame. “I don’t hold you responsible,” she said, her words coming out on a rush of air.

“I thank you.” He lowered his face closer to hers. “But I do.”

He pressed his lips to hers, and despite the knowledge that the kiss was wrong, she allowed him the advantage. For beyond the circumstances, the feel of him felt right. Just right.

She yielded to his kiss, the flames Joseph had ignited dwarfed in comparison to the passionate fire that William set deep within her. Her thighs parted, his narrow hips resting between her legs. The moan that rumbled from his throat touched her in ways she never knew existed. Yes, she wanted him and he her. There would be no guilt or sorrow as she offered him her body. Joseph was gone. He deserved no consideration. If William didn’t mind that she was a ruined woman, why should she punish herself further? William was true and honest. Joseph was nothing but a liar and a cad. If he were to return to her on bended knee, she would refuse him.

He pushed himself up so that his face hovered above hers. His dark curls framed glorious features. The fierceness of his hunger kicked her already racing heart up a notch. “I want you, Goldie. To possess you. To make you mine.”

“I know,” she mumbled. “If only it could be.” She gently slid her hand down the long, thick shaft of his cock, her touch lingering at the

swollen tip. Even there, the elder brother held the advantage over the younger.

He pulled in a sharp breath and stared at her from beneath hooded lids. "But it is wrong to take advantage. I cannot marry you, no matter how much I wish to."

His admission touched her soul. "You would if you could?"

"Yes," he hissed. "Without delay."

A long moment passed, her need for release rising with each breath she took. "If there is no more for me than this, so be it. I will take my pleasure where I can."

He nibbled the delicate flesh of her neck, the gesture sending chills across her skin. "You turn me into a thoughtless man," he mumbled. "I have never longed for a woman as I do you. I can think of nothing but your beauty, your tender heart, your golden locks."

"William, don't make this more than it can be. Don't taunt me with pretty words."

"I have to have you," he mumbled. "But you must promise to allow me to take care of you. To see to your needs. To be your husband in every way save one. Promise me that we'll be together every chance we get."

"Yes," she whispered. "I promise."

He kissed her gingerly. "You have made me the happiest of men."

Curling her arms around his neck, she opened her mouth to receive him. The taste of his kiss was bittersweet as she yielded to his requests, requests that would mark her as a whore, a wanton woman. But oh, to be wanted by William Behr. It would all be worth it, for he truly wanted and adored her.

He slid his hand down the length of her body, the strength in his touch demanding her attention. Each finger of his hand, each swirl of his tongue, and she knew what tenderness felt like. She basked in the power that true emotion wielded.

She arched her body against his, longing to be sated. He moaned against her mouth, his want demonstrated in the pressure of his kiss

and the nimbleness of his fingers as they unfastened the strings of her bodice.

He freed her breasts from silk and lace. "Goldie, you're magnificent."

"Suck them, William. Make them yours."

"Dear God, woman, I want all of you to be mine." As instructed, he buried his face in the mounds of rising and falling flesh. Each nipple peaked with his attention, with each suck, each gentle nibble. He mastered them, making them fit for no one but him.

"Hurry, William," she urged, forcing his shirt open and reveling in the beauty of his muscles. Large, bulging, powerful, animalistic.

"No," he said, claiming her lips once again. "I will savor every moment, Goldie. I want to close my eyes and be able to envision every inch of you."

She giggled and squirmed beneath him. "I don't know if you can wait that long," she said in a husky tone that dripped with hunger. She quickly unfastened his breeches, pushing them past his round, smooth, and utterly perfect backside, freeing his cock.

"Not if you do that," he whispered, pushing up at her skirts. "You drive me to distraction."

"Good. Then do as I wish. Show me all you have to offer."

He smiled down at her. "Woman, you are meant to be mine. Don't you ever forget that."

"No, William," she replied, coming up on her elbow and setting her mouth close to his. "You don't forget."

"How could I?" He forced her back on the mattress and kissed her with such conviction that she knew he spoke the truth. Knew he would see her cared for. Oh, he was the one. She knew it that moment on the village green, saw it in his eyes then, felt it in his touch now.

Running his hand up her thigh, his fingers caressed the hair that covered her sex. Heated moisture poured from deep within her as he fondled the sensitive nub that crowned her pussy.

“You’re ready for me,” he mumbled against her ear, the warmth of his breath sending flames of desire that scorched her flesh.

“Yes. I have been.”

He opened the folds of her sex, plunging his finger deep inside. She gasped at the welcomed intrusion and reveled in the control of his touch.

“You like that?” he asked, moving rhythmically in and out of her body, his thumb pressing hard against the nub.

Her nipples hardened as she felt herself nearing the ultimate pleasure. “Yes, William. Oh, yes.”

His lower lip tucked between his teeth, he closed his eyes. She writhed beneath his touch, his fingers pounding against her pleasure spot with such accuracy, she felt she couldn’t breathe. There wasn’t enough air in the entire world. “There?” he asked, his breathing, too, was labored.

She didn’t answer him, just cried out, the world around her sparkling with the most amazing bits of light. Her lips tingled, blood whooshed past her ears, and the muscles of her sheath contracted, sending her spiraling toward a pleasure she had never known before.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the magical tide to cease and when, finally it did, she looked upon her lover. “You don’t wish to take me?”

He smiled down upon her, beads of sweat trickled from his forehead, his eyes alive with his passion. “Yes, I do.”

She stroked his cheek, longing for more of him. “Then what are you waiting for?”

He kissed her gently. “For the exact right time.”

## Chapter 7

William aided Goldie up the front porch steps to the estate. “You take care while I’m away.” He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing each knuckle and inhaling deeply the sweet scent of her perfume. She smelled fresh and clean like vanilla and clover.

“While you’re away?” she asked, tilting her head and looking up at him with such tenderness his heart warmed. When he said he could wake up each morning and look into those blue eyes, he meant it. Of course, he didn’t realize how much at the time.

“Yes, I’ve got matters to settle.”

“Oh. Will you be gone long?” He could practically feel her disappointment. Should he tell her what his secret mission was about or surprise her when he returned?

“I will be gone as short a time as possible.”

She nodded, her lower lip trembling. “Do take care,” she whispered, her hand coming to rest upon her bosom.

“I will, my darling. We have a lot to look forward to, you know.”

It took all the strength he could muster to turn and walk away. His strength wavered as he glanced over his shoulder. She watched him, her eyes shimmering with tears, and he longed to stay. But more than that, he longed for the freedom to tell the entire world she belonged to him. And he would make that declaration just as soon as possible.

He increased his pace and ducked into the cold shadows of the barn. The smell of hay and horses had his mind buzzing with what was to come next. The long, cold ride to Northumberland and Lady Carnton.



Moving down the wide aisle, he looked for the stable man. “Julian, where are you?” he shouted, several of the horses snorting in startled reply.

“Here, sir.” Julian panted from the far end of the barn, his youthful body a silhouette against the open backdoor. “I was just fetching some fresh straw for Etalon’s bedding.”

“Fine, fine,” William grumbled. “I need you to saddle up Red Robert.”

“But, sir,” Julian said, brushing the straw from his breeches. “You’re only just back, and you know how Lord Joseph is about anyone riding his horse.”

Just the mention of his brother’s name had him curling his fists at his sides. “I don’t give a damn about what Joseph likes or doesn’t. And your place, Julian, is not to question me. Do as I say.”

“Aye, sir.” Julian nodded. “But Red is in a dark mood.”

“And now,” William chided. “I am, too.”

At the sound of shuffling feet, William’s gaze slid across the aisle to find Edmund stepping from Julian’s quarters. His gut tightened as his gaze shifted back and forth between his brother and his stable man.

“What are you doing here? Are you teaching Julian chess?” he asked, his words dripping with sarcasm.

“As a matter of fact, I was teaching the queen how to king me.” Edmund chuckled and offered Julian a pleasant smile. “Get the horse ready for my brother, won’t you, Jay? He seems quite rushed.”

“Yes, my lord,” Julian responded and hurried toward Red’s stall.

Now alone, Edmund came closer to William. “Big brother,” he said in a hushed tone. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

William let his rancor ease. Everyone was entitled to a bit of pleasure. But Edmund needed to be more careful.

“I’m going to Northumberland to call off my engagement to Lady Carnton.”

Edmund’s mouth dropped open. “Father will see you maimed!”

“I’m not worried about that. I’m worried about Miss Locksley.”

“Ahh.” Edmund grinned and nodded. “The fair-haired girl. In your blood, too, is she?”

William cocked a brow. “You, Edmund, find her attractive?”

“Of course. I am not blind. She is quite ravishing. Very pliable, too.” He smirked. “She plays chess with me, you know. Not many people will, and she is an adept pupil. Almost beat me once...almost.”

“Do I need to be jealous?” William asked, and although he said the words in jest, he still needed to know the answer.

“The Marquess of Blackwood jealous of his dandy brother? I think not.” Edmund patted his arm. “You have always been good to me. I hold that dear.”

“Thank you, Edmund. You’re a good man.” An uneasy silence followed the manly declaration of affection.

“Do you think Father will ever share that sentiment?” Edmund finally asked.

William chuckled. “He’s never shared that sentiment with either of us. Joseph, the bloody fool, is his pride and joy.”

“Well, after his fiasco with Miss Locksley and your upcoming fiasco for what I assume is Miss Locksley, maybe I’ll have a chance to be the favored son?”

“Stranger things have happened,” William replied, and, resting his foot on the lowest board of Etalon’s stall, he peered in at the animal. “Tell me, Edmund, can I trust you’ll watch out for her while I’m away?”

“Of course,” Edmund said, his voice touched with warmth. “I want you to be happy, William. And I want her to be happy, too. I can’t think of a finer sister.”

\* \* \* \*

Oh how Edmund loathed this type of meeting. Being summoned like a servant never ceased to bother him. Still, the man was his father and a duke. He should be able to muster a small bit of respect.

Filling a glass with whiskey, he took a seat in his soft, comfy chair and stared warily up at his father. He wondered when the fellow would begin his tirade. Not once in his life had they carried on a true conversation. Father spoke, Edmund pretended to listen. While he waited, he began to take notes. First thing he noted was the man's weight increase. He had gone from fat to incredibly fat.

Second, there was no hint of youth left in his sagging face, and why his hair remained black had him wondering if a bit of dye hadn't been used to keep the gray hairs at bay. Regardless, he looked like an old man hanging on to the memory of youth by a single strand, of hair.

But the duke *was* intimidating. His stare still had Edmund's gut wrenching just it had when he was a small boy. And he had been a small, awkward boy that longed for a father's acceptance. Of course, now he knew better. His father would never accept that his son was a Nancy. He tried not to care.

"Sir Locksley and I have been all over the town squelching rumors about Miss Locksley and Joseph," the duke finally said and rubbed his bulbous nose. Edmund winced. One could fit a large grape in those nostrils.

"I believe we have made inroads toward killing the talk. Most were easy to convince, since everyone who knows her had difficulty accepting the gossip as truth."

"Well, that's good."

"The innkeeper and his wife have been well paid to deny the tryst, and in time, all this will be yesterday's news."

"I see," Edmund replied, taking up his glass of whiskey. God, he needed a drink to swallow the nonsense his father was feeding him. "What will you tell her future husband when he takes her to bed and finds she's not a virgin?"

He met his father's gaze. The man's face was tinged in red with anger. "That is where you come in."

"Me?" Edmund asked, downing the whiskey, the liquid burning his throat. He stifled a cough. He didn't like the direction this was taking.

"Yes, you."

"How do I figure in this masterpiece?"

"You will marry her."

A dry chuckle popped from Edmund's lips. "You're not serious."

"Yes." The duke paced before the fireplace, his round stomach bouncing up and down with each step. The man needed a corset.

"I think not. That is Joseph's place."

"Aye, he'd like that. That's what he wants." The duke pulled a letter from the breast pocket of his crimson coat and tossed it to his son.

Edmund caught the paper and, setting his glass on the floor, pulled it from its sheath. He quickly scanned the contents.

"Well?" the duke asked.

"Well, he's ruined her, and he wants to make reparations. Why stop him?" But he loathed the idea. William wanted her, William should have her. Dutiful William deserved a bit of happiness.

"Because he did this to defy me. To back me into a corner. To force me to give in to his whim."

"Goldie is hardly a whim for any man."

"So, you like her?"

Edmund folded the paper and set it upon the floor beside his glass. "Of course I like her. She's a delicate flower with a kind heart and good soul."

"Then you won't have a problem marrying her."

"Why are you involving me in this?"

The duke blew out a frustrated breath and rolled his eyes heavenward. "Because you and I both know you find no interest in women. But at least this way you'll have the appearance of propriety."

The virgin bride question will be nullified, and Joseph does not get his way.”

Edmund crossed his legs and plucked at a loose string on the knee of his breeches. Damn, he liked these pants, and they were all but ruined now. “Is there any way I can talk you out of this?”

“Absolutely not. You will marry her, or you will find yourself disinherited and living on the streets.”

“Fine,” Edmund conceded. “But I want a presentable wedding.”

“What?” the duke asked with a disbelieving chuckle. “I thought a nice, quiet ceremony...”

“Oh, that won’t have tongues wagging.”

The duke seemed to ponder the fly in the ointment for a long moment. “I see your point, but the engagement cannot be too long, either. For if Miss Locksley is with child, the tongues will simply wag later rather than sooner.”

“Still, I want a lovely ceremony. I want flowers and...”

“Do you want a new gown, too?” the duke asked snidely.

Edmund smiled. “Is that an option? If it is, I want silk.”

\* \* \* \*

Goldie tried to hold back the tears, but they seemed to fall of their own accord. How had she come to this point? Not one brother had broken her heart. Two had. Why had William left so abruptly? Why? Did she displease him so much that he could just walk away?

“Don’t cry, dear. Your father will fix this. You will see.” Yet despite her words of comfort, Mother sat beside her on the settee, twisting her hands in obvious worry.

“I don’t see how,” she replied. But her sorrow and her mother’s were different. For she no longer cared what Joseph did or didn’t do. Her fresh anguish lay at William’s feet.

Mother didn't meet her gaze, didn't offer to wipe away her tears. She just sat there, wringing those pitiable hands and staring into the dying embers of the dark, marbled fireplace.

At the tap on the door, Mother stood and glanced over her shoulder, her jaw trembling. "Daughter, what horror will we face next?"

Goldie lowered her chin and stared down at the red and black pattern of the Oriental rug, unable to offer her mother the answer she so wished she possessed.

"Mrs. Locksley?"

The voice of the butler rang strong though the closed study door.

"Yes?" she replied, trepidation obvious in her wavering tone.

"The duke and your husband have arrived and wish to speak with you and Miss Locksley. They are in the duke's office."

"Come along, Goldie," her mother said, offering her hand.

As if on her way to the gallows, Goldie rose from her perch on the edge of the settee and took hold of her mother for support. With her chin still lowered, she fought back the blinding tears and followed her mother out into the large hall that would take them to her certain doom.

With a deep breath, Goldie forced the last of her tears to fall, clearing her vision. Lifting her gaze, her focus came to rest upon not only the massive butler with the shock of white hair and the wrinkled brow, but Edmund. His face was alive with excitement.

Mother turned toward the young lord and dipped her knee. "Lord Behr."

"Mrs. Locksley, you're looking rather peaked. Can Lewis offer you a bit of sherry?"

"No thank you, my lord," she said, the shake of her head sending the small silver curls that framed her face into a frenzy of bounces.

"Mrs. Locksley, I insist." He pointed toward the room that they had recently vacated. "Lewis, take the lady back to the study for a small drink. You're meeting my father for the first time." He directed

a kindly smile toward her mother. “Best to steel your nerves for the encounter.”

“Oh, well...” Mother mumbled but allowed herself to be led away.

Once the pair was safely ensconced in the study, Edmund pulled Goldie into the entryway, his expression one of mischief.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her mood rising along with her suspicions, for surely the news must be good if he grinned like a cat with a mouth full of feathers.

“Telling you to accept my father’s proposal.” He offered her his handkerchief, and she accepted, wiping her eyes.

“What proposal? Oh, God, Joseph isn’t in town, is he? I don’t want to marry him.”

He grinned, those clear blue eyes sparkling, humor alive on his lips. “You are to marry me.”

Shock had her head reeling, and now she, too, needed some sherry. “I beg your pardon?”

“Father wishes for you and I to wed.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat, her hand coming to rest upon her breast. “And you’ve agreed to this?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Yes. But the question is, will you?”

“I’m very fond of you, Edmund...”

If possible, his smile grew wider. “I’m very fond of you, too, and that is why you must accept this proposal and insist on a fine wedding.”

“Edmund...”

He placed the tip of his index finger over her lips. “It is necessary to buy time until William gets back from Dumbarton.”

She felt the nervous coil in her stomach relax at the mention of William’s name. “Dumbarton?”

“Yes, he’s gone to tell his fiancée that he is marrying someone else.”

Again the tears flowed, but they were not tears of sorrow. “Me?”

“Yes, you, silly. And if we insist upon a large wedding, when you finally meet your groom at the altar, it will be William and not me.”

“You would do that for me?”

“For you and for William.”

She leaned in and kissed his cheek, her joy overwhelming her. “Thank you.”

“’Tis not done yet,” he murmured in her ear. “Now put that gloomy face back on and play the game.”

“How will I ever be able to thank you?”

He chuckled. “Name your first son Edmund and teach him to play chess.”



## Chapter 8

Joseph looked over his shoulder. Was he being followed? Seeing no one behind him in the narrow alley, he rushed past the public house and toward Naomi's ramshackle home.

"Damn you, Father, for driving me to this." Yet, he bitterly acknowledged his own action or, rather, inaction was to blame. If only he'd just defied his father and married her. But how could he know that she would touch him so deeply? He wasn't prepared for the addiction of true and honest feelings. He wasn't about to call it love, but he did yearn for the golden witch.

He spied Naomi sitting on her front porch, her skirt hiked up to her knees, her pale legs a stark white against the dimness of dusk. He raised his hand in greeting and jogged toward her.

"Why, my lord, I didn't expect to see you again." She looked him up and down. "I took you for the sort to fuck a girl and not pay for the privilege."

Joseph frowned and pulled a pouch from his pocket, the coins jingling as he tossed it to her. "There's enough there for two gowns, the gloves you wanted, and a bonnet."

She shifted the pouch from one hand to the other as if gauging the amount without counting. With a coy smile, she stood, the skirt of her tatty green gown unfolding to its full length. The hem was so worn that the barmaid couldn't possibly have enough thread to mend it.

"So, Naomi was good enough that you had to come back for more?"

His gut tightened when she stepped down from the porch and gazed up at him. Rising on her tiptoes, she placed her lips atop his,

her kiss deep and full of her desire—her desire for more money, no doubt.

Still, she had offered him release before, and they had gotten on quite well. So, why was it his prick didn't respond to her curvaceous and willing body? But without thought, he knew the answer.

Goldie.

He had tasted the world's finest champagne. And looking at Naomi, with her greasy hair, lack-luster eyes, and thin-lipped smile, he realized he would never be able to stomach swill again.

He shoved her back, and she stumbled. "What'd you do that for?" she protested, her voice echoing against the empty street.

"I don't want you," he spat. "I need a place to stay, and I need you to keep your loose lips closed tight."

"Why not stay at the estate?" she asked, crossing her arms over her large bosom. "I reckon you're here for the wedding."

"Shut up," he grumbled. The idea of Edmund marrying his Goldie had the bile rising in your throat. "So, do we have a deal?"

She lifted an auburn brow. "Well, my lord, we might, but it's going to cost you a bit more than I have in my hands."

\* \* \* \*

Goldie lay back in the tub, the warm water a comfort to her tired body. With the small engagement party behind her, she determined to relax, even if it was only for the length of time it took the water to cool.

Yet despite the warm, dozy feeling the bath allowed her body, her mind was alive with the memory of the party. The blur of so many faces, so many questions, so much chitchat. How the guilt of being a liar poked at her conscience with every story she and Edmund told.

"Stop it," she mumbled to herself. There would be time to worry about the consequences later. Right now, she needed to relax. The

wedding was in three days, and if William didn't get back soon, the consequence would be marriage to Edmund.

She chuckled at the idea. Edmund was more of a friend than a lover. No hint of attraction, no chemistry beyond their mutual love of poetry and fashion. Still, marriage to Edmund was far more desirable than returning to Joseph's bed. For although his rough sexual practices had her body betraying her, she knew what lovemaking could be when both parties gave all they had to satisfy the other. Sex became magical when a man touched a woman with true emotion and desire.

She closed her eyes, the lids burning with her fatigue. Sleep had evaded her since she agreed to the marriage. Worry kept her awake. What if William didn't come back? What if Joseph did?

At the squeak of the dressing room door, her heart beat madly against her ribs. Who would be so bold as to enter the room where she bathed? Who? Only one man came to mind. Joseph.

"Goldie?"

Joy rapidly replaced fear. William's voice echoed through the room, and without thought of modesty, she rose from the tub and opened her arms.

"You made it back."

He wasted but a moment to ogle her with hungry eyes before rushing to her side and wrapping her in his arms.

"You take my breath away," he murmured against her ear.

Oh my, he felt good, smelled good, and when he crushed his lips to hers, tasted good. He slipped his tongue between her teeth, and she savored the feel as he dipped and swirled her into a world without fear or sorrow or worry.

Pulling away, she recognized the yearning in his expression, the gaze so intense her own desire flared in the deepest recesses of her abdomen. "Let's go get married, Goldie. Now."

She buried her face in his neck. "No, not yet," she whispered. "Take me to bed. Make love to me, William. I have missed you so."

He let out groan that reverberated against her very soul. It was filled with forceful need. “You make me forget myself, woman. I know better than to tempt fate, and yet I cannot resist.” He scooped her into his arms and carried her into her chamber.

The small room glowed with warmth from the fireplace and candles. The bedding seemed cold against her wet, naked flesh. She watched in raptured awe as he undressed.

His broad chest shimmered warm in the flickering light, his muscles flexing as he unfastened his trousers. Freeing his cock, he ran his hand along the hardened shaft.

“Come to me,” she whispered, her mouth watering at the sight before her. He was perfection incarnate. The most beautiful man she had ever seen. If only he had been her first.

With a wicked grin, he obeyed, his breath catching in his throat as she fondled his prick. Without hesitation, she took him into her mouth. She gingerly sucked the head of his swollen cock and was rewarded with his pleased moan. Moving back and forth, she took as much of his length into her mouth as she could, the warm, musky scent and flavor of him urging her to continue his pleasure. For hadn't he put her first at the cottage? Hadn't he put her first, before his brothers, his father, his fiancée?

She stopped. What was she doing to him? Had his feelings for her destroyed him just as Joseph's desire for her had very nearly destroyed her? Dear God, no. She couldn't be responsible. Tears slid from her eyes.

“Oh, William,” she cried out. “I can't let you marry me.”

He fell to his knees before her, his mouth agape, his dark brow raised in question. “*Let* me marry you? It's my pleasure to marry you.”

“But I'm stealing you from your family. I've ruined all your plans.” She stroked his cheek with her hand. His skin was feverishly warm. “I don't want to be something you regret.”

“Where would you get the notion that you’re ruining anything?” he asked, his tone compassionate, his eyes so full of emotion that they touched her heart. “I am saddled by my father’s ridiculous expectations. Burdened and disappointed by Joseph. Edmund is the only true brother I have. He has championed our affection, Goldie.”

“But your inheritance. Will your father not disinherit you?”

“I would work in the fields as long as I got to wake up to those blue eyes every morn.”

Her tears spilled down her cheeks, and he caught them in the palms of his hands. “But, William, you aren’t meant for that sort of life.”

“I said I *would* work in fields.” The smile that touched his mouth had her forgetting her obligation to push him away. She traced the outline of his lips with her fingertip. “I’m a damned good businessman in my own right. I have enough money to take care of you and anyone else who joins our family.”

“Our family?”

“Yes, sweet. I want to share everything with you. My life is in your hands. I knew it the first moment our gazes met on May Day. Joseph’s intentions drove me to the brink. I don’t want to live my life without you.”

“How do you know I’m worth it?”

“My heart knows. My soul.” He brought her hands to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “Please, marry me.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he lay her down atop the bed, his warm flesh pressed to her hers, their bodies two halves of a whole. He made her feel safe and loved.

“William, how can I say no?”

“Then don’t.” He kissed her again, the action so full of promise, there was no denying him anything. Not her body, not her heart. Her future was his. She would do anything he asked, gladly.

Her hands traveled down the smooth contours of his back. The muscles rippled beneath her touch. He was perfect for her, and she understood what he meant, for her life now lay in his hands.

Moisture flooded from her cunt, and she parted her legs, eager to finally give herself to him. “I love you, William,” she mumbled against his lips, and he smiled down upon her.

“I love you.” He buried his face in her neck, the stubble for want of a razor scratchy against the tender skin. The wondrous heat from his breath raised a delightful chill across her aroused body.

Rising on his elbow, he stared down at her, the fierce passion in his expression taking her breath away. He was a starving animal and she, his willing prey.

He moved deliberately lower, his hands cupping her naked breasts, his thumbs swirling the nipples until they peaked. She stifled a plea, and he drew a nipple deep into his mouth, devouring the sensitive bead and sending currents of need coursing through every cell she possessed. No part of her was left unexplored by his fingers and tongue. She writhed beneath him as he erased Joseph from her flesh.

Feral moans echoed through the deepest recesses of her core, his mouth seemingly setting her on fire with each swirl, each stroke. He spread her legs apart and, looking up at her, buried his face within the moist folds of her pussy. He nibbled her sensitive nub with such precision her orgasm had her bucking beneath him as she called out his name. Still he didn't stop. He dipped the tip of his tongue into her sheath, his fingers kneading the flesh of her buttocks. She spread her legs ever wider.

“Take me, William. Hurry. I want you.”

He chuckled and crawled up the length of her body, his gaze never wavering from hers. “Take me into your mouth again.”

She bit her lower lip, and once he lay with his head on her pillow, she turned her back to him and straddled his chest.

“You’ve a beautiful backside,” he mumbled, taking her ass in his hands as she bent forward and took cock into her mouth. As she pleased him, his finger probed her sex. He pressed the long digits in and out as she ran her tongue over the plum-sized head of his prick. His moans of pleasure urged her on.

She felt him shift, the tight muscles of his abdomen flex. His mouth once again tasted her, his tongue replacing his hands. More moisture seeped from her. If he didn’t take her soon, she would implode.

She took him fully into her mouth and moved her head back and forth, sucking as hard as she could, eager to please him as he pleased her.

“Stop,” he panted, “or I’m going to come, and I’m not quite ready to do that.”

She obeyed and turned to face him, her legs still straddling him as she gazed down at her lover. With his hands on her waist, he lifted her up and slid her down, down atop his thick cock. She gasped at the perfection of the fit, the ease with which her body accepted him. No pain, no discomfort. Nothing but sheer delight.

Her body began to twitch, and she closed her eyes, concentrating on the delightful pressure that filled her. His hands still on her waist, he guided her in a slow up-and-down motion, a motion that had the walls of her sheath quivering with pent-up ardor. Setting her feet flat on the bed, she bounced up and down atop his prick, each swift movement marching her toward the release she knew would come if she just kept her rhythm, kept on demanding pleasure. More of him. She wanted more. Needed everything.

Small sobs popped from her lips as she crashed into him. His moans joined hers, and the grip of his fingers grew tighter.

In one sudden and swift motion, he rolled her onto her back, his breaths coming in harsh gasps. “Goldie, you drive me mad.”

With her knees resting at his waist, he forced his length deeply into her sex, his mouth pressed to hers as he commanded everything

she had. She complied, raising her hips to meet his powerful thrusts. Delicious thrusts had her groaning and grasping at his buttocks. Her lips tingled, her body flexed as her pussy grew tighter.

She floated higher and higher, gasping for breath, wanting him to hurry but never wanting him to stop. “William,” she cried out as she was swept up in a current of passion. Her cunt sent her over an unseen edge and tumbling toward ecstasy. Over and over her muscles contracted until the world turned only for them.

He growled fiercely as he fucked her, his body shook his face glorious with satisfaction. With a final thrust, he emptied himself inside her.

Their gazes locked, and his precious expression had tears welling up in her eyes.

“Let’s go get married.”

“Yes, let’s do that.” She smiled through her tears.

He brushed a kiss across her lips. “Get dressed and pack a small bag.” Grabbing up his trousers, he quickly slid them on. “I’ll see to it that Julian has the phaeton ready. Meet me at the stable?”

She nodded. “I can hardly wait.”

“And remember, we’re eloping. Be as silent as possible.”

Biting her lip, she suppressed a giggle. “Yes, I’m already surprised we didn’t wake up the whole house.”



## Chapter 9

Julian pressed his cock back into his pants, sweat pouring down his beautiful face, a face Edmund longed to look at in the bright light of day over tea and scones.

“You are a great fuck,” Edmund said, his back itchy from the straw of their makeshift bed.

Julian grinned. “As are you, sir.”

“I’ve told you,” Edmund said, sitting up and offering his lover his hand, “I am not Lord or Sir or anything when I’m with you. I’m simply Edmund.”

Julian slipped his hand into his and came to his knees, his sweet breath fanning against Edmund’s cheek. “Edmund, when are we going to leave England?”

Edmund ran his fingers through Julian’s soft brown curls. “As soon as William and Goldie are settled.”

Julian pressed his lips to Edmund’s, the kiss delicious and powerful. “Where will we go?” Julian asked, sliding his hand down his lover’s naked chest.

“Italy. We’ll just live in sunshine and happiness.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. I promise.”

Edmund lay back, his cock growing stiff at the idea of making love to Julian for the second time that night. Soon. They would be together soon and in a place where no one cared who they were or what they did.

Julian kissed him again, and a small moan escaped Edmund’s throat as desire scorched his loins.

“What was that?” Julian asked, sitting up and interrupting their lovemaking.

“Just a horse,” Edmund replied, grasping the waistband of Julian’s trousers.

“No, sir. I don’t think—” But his words were interrupted by the sickening sound of metal against bone.

Horror. Shock. Disbelief forced adrenaline though to Edmund’s core as Julian’s body slumped over. Reaching up, he touched the base of his lover’s skull. Hot, thick blood coursed from a deep head wound. His life force slipped though Edmund’s trembling fingers.

His gaze darted around the room, but there was nothing but bits of shadow and light. No form. No figure lurking in the corners.

He pushed Julian off and laid him gently in the straw. Leaning over him, he patted his cheeks, praying for a sign of life. His open eyes were glassy in the flickering lamplight. He set his face to his beloved’s chest. “Please. I love you. Please wake up.”

“Want to join your lover in hell?”

Edmund stilled, his heart racing as he lifted his gaze. Joseph stood above him, a pistol in his hand—a pistol pointed directly at his forehead. “Why did you kill him? He’s nothing to you.”

“It’s dark,” Joseph growled. “I would have thought you would be on top. Silly me, thinking you’d be a man in any situation. Now where is she?”

Edmund rose to his feet, his legs quaking, tears blurring his vision. “As if I’d tell you a bloody thing.”

“The witch belongs to me. You think you can steal her away? She’s mine. You have nothing to offer her, you fucking Mary boy.”

Edmund looked down at Julian and an ache so deep settled over his being that his own life ceased to matter. “Yes, I’ve already stolen her and made her mine. Over and over. She’s a mighty fine fuck, don’t you think? She turns this Mary boy into a man.”

“You’re a liar. Your soft prick and soft heart always get the better of you.”

Edmund sniffled and dried his eyes. “Not this time. I rode her hard, and I’ll ride her harder after she’s my wife. She’ll bear *my* children. She’ll call *me* husband, and it was all Father’s idea.”

Joseph’s expression shifted from rage to mania. “No, she’ll call *me* husband before this night is through.” He lifted the pistol and angled the butt toward him. There was a sharp, agonizing ache, and Edmund’s world turned black.

\* \* \* \*

With her bag packed, Goldie pulled her cape over her shoulders. Her new life awaited her in the stables. A new life she could hardly wait to start. The world was indeed a marvelous place.

Bending before the mirror, she checked her appearance one more time. She pressed a wayward curl back into position and smiled excitedly at her reflection. Her skin glowed fresh and pink, her eyes alive with happiness. A marvelous place, indeed.

Yet as she turned to leave, the joy and smile slipped from her like the outgoing tide. A heavy jolt of fear replaced glee. For in the doorway, Joseph stood, menacing, with pistol in hand.

“You startled me,” she said, her hand flying to her breast. He wore a mask of hate, his mouth twisted in an angry frown.

“You disappoint me,” he returned. “You fuck me. You fuck Edmund, and then you fuck William. You’re not at all the woman I pined for these past weeks.”

She took a step back, her escape hindered as she collided with the wall. “Leave me, Joseph. I’ll scream.”

He raised the pistol higher, his finger resting on the trigger. “Go ahead, but it will be the last noise you ever make.”

Her jaw bounced up and down as terror took control. “I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you, but you disappointed me. I thought we were married. I thought you cared for me. But you tossed me aside like garbage. What would you have me do?”

He narrowed his gaze. “So, you see to it that you secure your future by infatuating my brothers?”

“No. I mean... William and I... we...”

“Shut up!” He leaned against the door, closing her only exit. Without taking his eyes off her, he reached back and locked the door, slipping the key into his jacket pocket.

“Please, don’t do this, Joseph.”

“What of William? I saw him leave your room.”

She looked away, unable to face the loathing that met her gaze.

“Did you bed William?”

“What does it matter?” she shrieked.

He rushed her, his hard body colliding into her tender flesh as he pressed her firmly against the wall. “It matters.” Forcing his knee between her legs, he leaned into her, his nose in her hair.

She struggled against him, but at the cold feel of the gun barrel at her throat, she stilled. “Please,” she murmured. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“I can smell him all over you.”

“I love him, Joseph. I can’t help it. He wants to marry me.”

“Well, he can’t have you. You were mine first.” Jerking her from the wall, he tossed her atop the bed as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

“Joseph, I’m not a possession.”

He pressed his body atop hers. “Yes you are. You’re mine.”

She writhed beneath him. The stink of sweat and alcohol had her stomach roiling. “No. Let me go. You have to. You have no right.”

“I have every right. I loved you first.”

“Love? You loved me? Then why did you trick me?” she pleaded through sobs. “Show me there is some softness in your hard heart.”

“I’ll make you mine again. You’ll forget him.” He pushed her gown up, his hand rough as they parted her legs.

“No, it doesn’t work that way. I can never forget him. He is just right for me, don’t you understand?”

He covered her mouth with his, silencing her pleas.

\* \* \* \*

“Julian!” William shouted the man’s name, anxious to be on his way. After a taste of Goldie, he didn’t know how his brother could have left her. He raked his fingers through his hair. Life was going to be a pleasure from this moment forward.

He walked down the wide aisle of the stable. Glancing about, he noticed first the eerie silence. Something was indeed awry. The air seemed heavy, the horses huddling at the back of their stalls. Even Red, as bold and nasty as he was, had his nose tucked in the corner.

“Julian?” he called again, this time his voice laced with concern. He stilled, his ears aching for want of an answer. The only sound, the heavy breathing of frightened animals.

Dread settled on his chest like a boulder as he neared the large stall that served as Julian’s quarters. He knew. Deep in his gut he knew when he turned the corner something would be wrong.

The horror before him had his heart thumping against his breastbone. His brother, face battered, his naked body lay atop Julian’s. The back of the stableman’s head gushed blood.

“Dear God,” he mumbled. Falling to his knees, he removed his ascot and secured it tightly about the man’s head, hoping to stop the bleeding.

He turned his attention to his brother and tapped his cheeks. “Edmund. Brother. Please open your eyes. Who would do such a heinous thing?”

But before the question passed his lips, he knew. “Edmund. You must open your eyes. Tell me. Did Joseph do this?”

“Yes,” Julian mumbled, his lower lip trembling. “I heard them arguing. He wants the girl.”

“God damn him,” William bellowed, Etalon whinnying as if in answer to his master’s distress. He looked down at Julian. “I will send for help.”

Frantically, William scrambled to his feet and ran toward the house. What would he find in his angel’s room? Would she be stolen away, or would some new horror meet his frenzied gaze?

\* \* \* \*

With all her strength, Goldie pushed at him, shoved. Dear Lord, what was she supposed to do? He was bigger, stronger, so much more powerful. He was going to have his way, no matter how she struggled. No matter how hard she fought. And yet she couldn’t give in. Wouldn’t. This was her life. A life meant to be shared with William.

She stilled against his heavy arms and, instead, lay placid beneath him, her breathing coming in short, harsh gasps.

He smiled down on her, his face red, rivulets of perspiration flowing from his brow. “That’s a good girl.” Pressing his lips to hers, she allowed him to slip his tongue between her teeth and deepen his kiss. When he did, she clamped her jaw shut, biting as hard as she could.

He shrieked in pain and pulled back, streams of blood and saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth. “You bitch!” he shouted as she scrambled off the bed, narrowly missing a manic swing of his massive hand.

“Get out! Do you hear me? Leave me alone!”

He raised the pistol with one hand and wiped his mouth on the back of the other. “Put on your cloak. You’re coming with me.”

“No.” She shook her head vehemently. “I won’t.”

He pulled back the hammer, his eyes so filled with loathing that she knew without a doubt he would pull the trigger if she didn’t comply. “I said you’re coming with me.”

“Why? Why would you want someone who is in love with someone else?” she asked. But judging by the sneer on his lips, it was the wrong question. She shrank back and once again found herself pressed to the wall. Tears slid down her cheeks, her bruised body aching from the struggle.

“Why?” he answered. “Because that someone happens to be William.”

“You hate him that much?”

His jaw tightened and flexed, the veins in his neck bulging. “Not until you came along.”

“I don’t wish to be the cause of anyone’s misery, but—”

“Well, you are,” he interrupted. “You’re my misery.”

“Then just let me go. Forget about me.”

“It’s too late for that.” He sprang forward. She closed her eyes, the impact of his hard body against hers had her head reeling from crashing into the wall. Lifting her lashes, she fought the darkness that tinted the periphery of her vision, but she was suddenly very tired, her limbs too heavy to lift.

“William,” she mumbled as she slipped toward the floor.

\* \* \* \*

Lifting her up over his shoulder, Joseph rushed the door. He would have her yet. And then when *he* saw fit, William could replace him in her bed.

Rage boiled in his gut at the thought of his brother’s hands on the woman meant to be his. The woman he wanted since the moment William pointed her out to him. Damn William’s eyes for seeing her first. His brother got everything first. But not this time. He had taken Goldie’s virginity. They were bound by blood.

With one hand, he steadied her limp form as she dangled over his shoulder. He then set the gun on the bed and fished the key out of his pocket, his free hand shaking. Damn, he hoped William hadn’t

discovered his arrival. Damn Edmund, too. Of all the nights to be fucking his lover. But it was good to pummel the dandy bastard. He had wanted to do that for years.

Sticking the key in the lock, he wondered if he or the stable man lived. Turning the key, he realized he didn't give two figs. Neither Edmund nor Julian was worth worrying about. Besides, no one would miss Edmund. Not even the duke himself.

He opened the door, yet the sight before him had bile rising in his throat.

"Get out of my way."

William didn't flinch, didn't move. The stoic bastard always did know how to put him in his place with a single look. Goddamn him, he was so much like their priggish mother.

"What have you done?" William asked, reaching out to touch Goldie.

"I made her swoon," Joseph said, his voice a low growl. "Now get the hell out of my way."

"No," William replied, his mouth an angry line. "You put her down, and prepare your sorry ass for transport. You'll not get away with what you did to Edmund this night. And you definitely are not leaving Dunbar with her."

Joseph stepped back into the room and, without looking, reached for the bed in an attempt to grab the pistol. Why not kill William, too? That would make him first, last, and only in line for the title of Duke. But where was the blasted gun?

"Why must you take everything?" Joseph shouted. "Why? She was mine first."

"Aye, she was, you damned fool. Now put her down," William pulled a flintlock from the folds of his jacket, "or I'll see you buried instead of transported."

Finally, Joseph's hand met the smooth, polished wood of his own pistol. His odds were improving. He aimed the gun at William and



cocked the trigger. "Sorry, brother, I'm not the one who is going to be buried. Not just yet."

"Put her down. If you truly care for her, you won't want her harmed. You and I can take this outside and settle it like gentlemen," William said, his voice taking on a strange, calm tone.

Joseph chuckled. "I'm not a gentleman." He pulled the trigger, the explosion so loud it had his ears ringing.

A split second later, William's gun sparked.

"What did you do?" Joseph asked. The smell of gun powder stung his nose as a burning sensation took root in his upper thigh.

"I shot you just as you shot me." A small stream of blood trickled from William's cheek. "Now give me my bride before you bleed to death."

Joseph looked down, thick currents of blood spurted from an ugly wound in his leg. His mouth dropped open in horror, his heart beating with such ferocity he fought the urge to run.

"Help me, brother," he whined. "I feel dizzy."

William glared at him, the hate and sorrow that slid from his gaze almost as tangible as the pain that now throbbed from his wound.

"Put her down gently, and then I'll see to you."

## Epilogue

*May 1820*

Goldie opened her eyes, the bed beneath so perfect that she could have slept in it forever. She rolled over and set her hand on William's pillow, the linen cool to the touch.

A smile curled her lips as she pulled the pillow to her breast and inhaled the scent of her husband. Even the slightest hint of his scent and her mind raced with lusty thoughts.

"Good to see you awake, my lady."

He stood at the foot of their bed, gazing down at her. He was dressed, his hair neatly combed, the scar on his cheek from Joseph's bullet barely noticeable in the pale morning light.

She pouted. "Were you going to leave without kissing me goodbye?"

He came to her and leaned in. "I've stood here watching you sleep for the past ten minutes, knowing my day couldn't start until I kissed you."

He set his lips to hers, the passion between them igniting into a heady flame. She set her hands on the lapels of his coat and pulled him closer. He leaned into her until she lay back on the pillows, his body atop hers. Pulling away, he gazed into her eyes and groaned. "Woman, you're doing it again."

She giggled. "Good. Now are you in very much of a hurry?"

He nibbled her neck, and she greedily arched her body against him. She could never get her fill. Never.

"Father has asked Edmund and me to join him for breakfast," he murmured. His warm breath sent heated chills across her entire being.

“He has some papers for us to look over before he heads back to London. And, of course, Edmund is taking Julian to Italy next week. Hopefully, the warm weather will help the lad.”

Goldie’s stomach twisted. Would the damage Joseph caused ever truly be over? “I hope so. He certainly did fight to live after what Joseph did to him. It’s amazing he’s still with us.”

William sighed. “He’s determined to regain all his strength. And his recovery has most assuredly brought out the nursemaid in my brother. Despite my reservations, Julian’s presence in Edmund’s life gives him purpose and contentment.”

She ran her fingers through his dark hair, taking pleasure in freeing the curls he had only just tamed. “As for your father, do you suppose he will ever recover?”

“I don’t know,” William replied, his expression grim. “Joseph’s behavior and transport to Australia aged him immensely.” He settled on the bed next to her, and she snuggled close, her head on his chest. “The only joy he takes now is in the possibility of grandchildren.”

She nuzzled his neck, and he ran his hand down her back. The simple show of affection had her wanting to rip off his ascot with her teeth. “Well, you tell him that I’m supposing the first one will arrive in about seven month’s time. At least, that’s what the doctor and I figure.”

A joyous laugh popped from his lips, and once again he kissed her. “You make me the happiest of men.”

“Well, good. Because I love you with all my heart,” she murmured.

“I love you, too.” He reached over and ran his fingers through her curls. “And let’s hope the babe has your glorious goldilocks.”

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

An Army brat, Harris Channing traveled around the Southern United States and Europe as a child before settling in Tennessee as an adult. Married with two children, she enjoys her family, reading, writing, and gardening.



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