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THE DEBUTANTE'S
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ELYSE MADY



The Debutante's Dilemma

By Elyse Mady

One woman in search of passion

Miss Cecilia Hastings has achieved what every young lady hopes for during her first London season...in duplicate! She's caught the eye of not one but two of England's most eligible bachelors. Both Jeremy Battersley, Earl of Henley, and Richard Huxley, Duke of Wexford, are handsome, wealthy and kind, the epitome of proper gentlemen. But Cecilia doesn't want proper, she wants passion. So she issues a challenge to her suitors: a kiss, so that she may choose between them.

Two men in love with the same woman

Friends since childhood, and compatriots on the battlefields of Spain, Jeremy and Richard have found that falling for the same woman has set them at odds and risks destroying their friendship forever. But a surprising invitation to a late-night garden tryst soon sets them on a course that neither of them could have anticipated. And these gentlemen quickly discover that love can take many forms...

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Dedication

For Jay

Who, despite the fact that if given the choice between being boiled alive in hot oil or reading a romance novel would undoubtedly ask, "How hot?", always knew I could do it.

Chapter One

London, 1814

Miss Cecilia Hastings was the luckiest girl who had ever lived to draw breath.

This was the near-universal assessment of the five hundred guests who found themselves crushed into Lady Stanhope's lavish ballroom like so many potted fish on this early June evening.

That the young lady was well-favoured, with a tall, even figure, a smooth throat and milk-white skin, striking grey eyes and dark chestnut hair, there was no doubt. Just eighteen, Miss Hastings was everywhere lauded for her calm manners and her unerring ability to navigate London's treacherous social shoals while appearing neither missish nor imperious. She danced divinely. She both sang and played the pianoforte. She could read Italian and spoke French beautifully. She befriended those wealthy and modest, with equal disregard for their particular standings. Her sartorial sense was unmatched and her dresser had been offered no less than a half-dozen bribes if she would but reveal the secrets to her mistress's beauty regime.

But there was no doubt that Miss Hastings's most particular and celebrated feature had been her ability—in this, her first London Season—to attract not one, but two, of the most eligible bachelors in England as suitors to her hand.

Single, handsome, titled heirs, educated at Cambridge, related to some of the oldest families in the country, and possessors of estates that would make the most hardened steward weep for joy. Each with a splendid house in town, their family seats—in Kent and Sussex, respectively—marvels of country grandeur and, crowning joy of crowning joy, each able to avail himself of a clear £30,000 a year.

In a word, that which every young woman—and her mama—aspired to with a fierce and competitive single-mindedness during the whole course of the Season from January to June, Miss Hastings had achieved in duplicate without seeming to discompose a single hair on her perfectly coiffed head.

Of course, there were some of her immediate peers, girls who had not met with such unmatched reception, who thought this excess smacked of matrimonial gluttony and behind her back took a savage delight in criticizing her faults, real or imagined. But to her face, they were all smiles and compliments, begging, in their most gracious voices, to have Miss Hastings share her secrets for winding her turban *à la turque* or to solicit a recommendation for the name of her mantua maker.

The knowledge that both gentlemen had made handsome presentations to Miss Hastings's gratified father in advance of their declarations to the lady herself was in such widespread circulation that any repetition of the fact elicited the merest murmur of acknowledgement by its weary listeners, so shop-worn had that particular social nugget become in the retelling. Now, as the Season wound its way to another overstuffed and over-heated conclusion, the single most pressing question in the minds of nearly everyone who had made an appearance in the

Stanhopes' crowded ballroom on this warm summer night was which of the two gentlemen Miss Hastings would ultimately accept.

To be fair, one or two of the guests were more interested in what they would enjoy during Lady Stanhope's lavish cold supper, but on the whole, the question of whether Lord Jeremy Battersley, sixth Earl of Henley or His Grace Richard Huxley, fourteenth Duke of Wexford, would be so distinguished by the young lady in question as to be granted the honour of toasting the new bride was without doubt the most engrossing conundrum of the entire Season.

For once, even the ton's most inveterate gossip-mongers could find nothing for which to rebuke Miss Hastings and could not conceive of her being less than ecstatic at her unparalleled social coup, *aux anges* as it were, at achieving the ultimate maidenly triumvirate: a marriage of the highest order, where both parties were socially elevated, dazzlingly rich and enviably well-favoured.

It was simply a matter of choosing between the two men.

What the lady herself thought of the particulars of her situation were, of course, mere speculation, and who her ultimate choice would be was still a matter of fervent wagering in gentlemen's clubs across the city.

Unbeknownst to the curious onlookers, as the music began and she stepped onto the dance floor in the company of her latest partner, Miss Cecilia Hastings was wondering exactly the same thing herself.

Because Cecilia Hastings, the nonpareil of the season of '14, was harbouring a secret in her very fine breast.

A very deep, very dark, very unladylike secret.

It was not merely that she would never countenance marriage for material considerations as so many did, their vows a matter of combining or replenishing family fortunes. Titles, be they ever so old or august, and ceremony held no sway either, for she had always preferred to take the measure of a person's worth through his actions and not those of his ancestors. And while she enjoyed going about in society, Cecilia truly preferred the company of friends and loving family, meeting in intimate gatherings, to the giddy social whirl of the Capital.

No, she harboured no cravings for the usual mundane or *quotidien* aspirations.

What she wanted, what she craved, was something much more insidious. Beneath her flawless curls and fetching gown lay the heart of an unannounced hedonist, who knew herself to be standing at the crossroads of a very momentous decision.

Cecilia was resolved that when she entered into any such union, both parties must be animated by mutually ardent feelings and not marched down the aisle, as so many of her acquaintances seemed to be, accompanied by those dour handmaidens, duty and lukewarm regard.

In short, she wanted to marry for passion.

The duke and the earl were both good men. Handsome. Wealthy. Kind. This much was never in doubt. What were in doubt were their true feelings for her, and Cecilia's for them.

So little time remained for her to discover the truth and the task seemed impossibly large. Cecilia Hastings knew what she wanted from life.

She simply had no idea how to go about securing it.

Chapter Two

If unrequited lust were a terminal disease, Richard Huxley's friends and relations would have been well advised to put by a goodly supply of black-edged handkerchiefs, such was the severity of his affliction.

Of course, as he bowed low over Cecilia's hand to collect her for their waltz, only the most observant would be able to discern this reality for, to all outward appearances, his Grace was his usual self, unaltered and urbane.

In reality, from the first moment he laid eyes upon her, Cecilia Hastings had infected him to his core with the most overwhelming sensations of love and desire. He was—and continued to be—utterly bewitched, such was her power over him. She moved with an unconscious sensual grace that made gazing upon her a deeply arousing experience, and yet she seemed wholly unaware of her effect on the men who congregated around her in flattering hordes. She never flirted or simpered as so many chits seemed wont to do. She treated each admirer with a calm equanimity that could reward or rebuke folly and sense in just measure.

Cecilia was innocent and untried but still her body hinted at unplumbed depths, and so lusty, sweat-drenched imaginings warred with his own good sense. Now, after nearly six months of unflinching restraint, Richard was at a breaking point. He wanted her. Every breath, every smile, sent a volley of need crashing through him and he

knew how little it would take to send him careening off into madness. She was a gently-born girl, with a reputation of the highest order and he could not dishonour her. Not without shattering his own inviolable moral. And that, no matter the utter temptation she presented, he simply could not do.

"Miss Hastings," he said evenly as he held out his hand, "I believe we are engaged for this dance, are we not?"

"Indeed, Your Grace," his partner said with a gracious smile, laying her gloved hand into his. "I am at your disposal."

And Richard, a veteran of more than a dozen cavalry charges across dusty Iberian plains, whose *sang-froid* under fire was the stuff of Army legend, felt almost light-headed with desire, electric need surging through him at her simple touch.

"Mrs. Hastings. Miss Semple." Nodding mechanically, he offered his observances to her party and led Cecilia onto the dance floor. It was a crush of the first order, the opening strains of the music barely discernible above the hubbub of the chattering crowds as he carefully and reverently gathered her into his arms in anticipation of the dance. She was tall and fit into his arms as though by design. Richard could gaze into her lovely face without effort and so bewitching was the view, beheld from mere inches apart, that the music had begun in earnest before he could rouse himself from his absorption. From the look of bemusement on his partner's face, he knew she had noted his distraction but hoped she had not discerned the reason behind it. She made gentle but perceptive comments about the size of the gathering, the warmth of the evening and

the richness of the decorations and he forced himself to respond in kind.

As they circled the room during their second revolution, carefully navigating between the twirling couples surrounding them on all sides, Cecilia smiled a little and said, "While I have no doubt of our hostess's abilities, I must confess that such crowded affairs hold little appeal for me."

"Indeed?" he said, his surprise at her unexpected avowal counteracting his ingrained reserve. He was grateful for her well-mannered attempts to recapture his distracted spirits and tried to respond to her observation in the same light-hearted tone. "I thought such routs and parties were the object of every young lady enjoying the delights of their first season."

She laughed then, her soft pink lips stretching to reveal her small, white teeth. "Your Grace is funning me and disparaging the sensible character of many young ladies who are only lately introduced to the delights of the Capital."

"A little," he admitted, relishing her buoyant parry. "But I will admit to surprise in hearing you speak so. Can I take your words to mean you have not enjoyed yourself this Season?"

"I have enjoyed myself immensely. The variety, the diversions have all exceeded my expectations. Or my powers of description," she added. "All I meant was that once the novelty has receded a little, I do not think I should like to spend all of my evenings thus. I am equally content, I confess, to spend a quiet evening at home, to the most celebrated party of the season."

"This is your vision of felicity, then?" Richard said, her simple answer striking a deep chord within him. An

image arose of just such an evening shared between them. He in a loose-fitting banyan, she in comfortable undress, her hair loose and soft. Firelight. The soft glow of candles, reflecting off the soft linens of a wide, welcoming bed. So lost was he in his domestic fantasies, he spoke without thought when he clarified, "When you are married, I mean."

Her hand jerked a little in his at his unguarded statement. Not once, in all the time he had been courting her, had Richard spoken to her thus, or mentioned matrimony in any but the most general terms. For the past six months, he'd resolutely controlled his impulses, as he always had, preferring to bide his time rather than leave himself vulnerable to a rash declaration. But once again, Cecilia had penetrated his carefully wrought intentions and circumvented years of breeding and manners, in such a way that he could not bring himself to regret his question. Her wide eyes, reflecting an inner turmoil so at odds with her polished exterior, met his and his breath caught in his throat. The intimacy of the dance left no doubt about whose marriage he spoke. This was not a simple observation, this was a sally of a very different sort and, if her rapid breathing and heightened colour were to be believed, Miss Hastings knew it too.

Such were his physical clamourings that it was difficult to focus on the words, his eyes captured instead by the delicate movements of her kissable lips and small, delicate tongue as they formed her speech.

"Yes," she said, a little breathlessly, "I do wish for... Rather, I had always hoped... I am not sure if..."

"I understand," he replied simply. Richard wished they were not in the ballroom, that they could be alone so he could express to her, in some small measure, his feelings

for her. He could not, of course, let loose with everything, so great, so deep were his emotions. He would run roughshod over her, scare her even, if he released unchecked the full measure of his desire. Richard would have to show her gradually, if, please God, she accepted his hand. He would teach her, slowly, of his passionate regard, of the delights that lay between man and wife and in time, he hoped she would come to understand a little of the depths of his love for her.

But for this timeless, suspended moment, sweeping past the multitude of flowers, bowers and Doric columns with which their hostess had recreated the allures of a pastoral Greek paradise, Richard simply held her, relishing the feel of her pulse as it beat a rapid and intoxicating rhythm against his shoulder. He paid no heed to the breathless heat of the room, its stifling atmosphere unbroken by even a hint of a cooling breeze. Instead, he breathed in the subtle scent of hartshorn and something else that was simply her unique smell. The crowds, the watching eyes, all was a blur. He could see naught but Cecilia's beautiful face. The lively, vibrant music from the orchestra filled the room, and he was moved to circle the room at an ever more daring pace.

He drank in the sight of the glorious woman in his arms, imagining a moment when he could hold her even more intimately, and nearly stumbled, his practiced feet tripping awkwardly through the familiar figures, when her dark eyes met his unexpectedly and he saw a flash of awareness cross her face.

"Your Grace," Cecilia said breathlessly, a faint wash of colour sweeping over her cheeks at his prurient attentions. Her thick lashes shielded her eyes from his gaze but her fine hand trembled in his grasp. The ballroom could have

been empty at that moment because, for just for an instant, as his strong arms cradled her, his satin breeches brushing daringly against the soft, sheer folds of her gown, he could nearly swear that the passion rushing through his body was flaring in hers too.

She wasn't afraid of him. Richard knew without a doubt that it was not dislike or disgust that caused her to colour so. It was something more elemental, and the emotions he had kept on such tight rein roared for release. His control slipping by degrees, in the grip of an erotic need more intense than anything he had ever experienced, he let himself imagine Cecilia, craving him as much as he craved her.

At that moment, hard and half-mad with desire, Richard wanted nothing more than to grab Cecilia's hand in his and hurry with her through the wide French doors, into the seductive darkness of the gardens and make love to her then and there. Measured and rational be damned. He shook, his need was so overwhelming, his gloved hands clenching compulsively. He gazed down at her softly curving cheek, alight with a self-conscious flush. Cecilia's eyes met his own gaze once more and this time, she did not drop her eyes. Instead, they stared at each other, sparks flying between them like flint sparks on tinder. Her lips parted, her tongue darting out to moisten the soft flesh he dreamt of plundering, and his cock hardened to painful rigidity.

Impaled by her bright, querying eyes, he couldn't breathe or think or rationalize and for the first time in his life, Richard Huxley came as close as he had ever done to throwing caution, duty and honour to the wind, so overwhelming were the images burning his brain.

Pressing against her smooth, lithe body and tracing its silhouette with his hands, while he discovered the soft secrets of her flesh. Trailing his tongue along the enchanting crevasses of her ample breasts before he freed her taut, tight nipples and suckled them, wet them, drew them into his mouth and—

“Take care, sir!”

A startled exclamation drew Richard’s attention back to his surroundings, and such were the tight quarters on the floor that this time not even he could prevent a jostling collision with another unwitting couple. In the aftermath, the ladies’ fans and trains had to be disentangled and apologies exchanged. He was grateful for the distraction though as it gave him a chance to recollect his wits and reorder his britches.

He shifted discretely, hoping to ease the awkward strain of his now-engorged cock against the too-tight confines of his satin britches while he offered a fervent prayer upwards that his rapidly burgeoning lapse had escaped notice of the room generally and Miss Hastings’s particularly. *Clearly*, he thought wryly to himself, carefully restoring a more becoming distance between both their bodies, *there is less difference between fourteen and twenty-nine than was generally supposed when it came to the business of awkward erections.*

Despite his vaunted good intentions, he was still relieved when the music came to its flourishing end and he was able to escort his partner back to her party. Richard’s control over his baser instincts was strained to such a degree that as much as he craved Cecilia’s nearness, the inability to act on those instincts was almost too much to bear. He needed a moment—a long moment—alone to collect himself.

As they wove through the chatting party-goers, such was the crush that it was inevitable their path took them within arms-breadth of Jeremy Battersley, Lord Henley, leaning with seeming carelessness against a flower-draped column. His eyes though, fixed with steady intent on Miss Hastings, belied his repose. They glittered with dark purpose, and the tense set of his shoulders spoke to his deep upset. The men knew each other too well to dissemble or hide their thoughts and Richard knew that his momentary lapse had been unquestionably observed by his rival.

Cecilia, though, did not seem aware of the potent undercurrents swirling between them or, if she was, was far too well-mannered to make mention of it in company. She paused to acknowledge her other suitor as good breeding demanded, and when she did, Henley's face lightened, his tightly held lips relaxing into a charming smile.

"Miss Hastings," Henley said, his blue eyes fixed on her beautiful face. "You are in very fine looks tonight. Your parents are well?"

"Thank you, sir," Cecilia responded politely, her hand still resting on Richard's sleeve as etiquette demanded. "My parents are in very good health." She smiled at him then and as he stooped to bow once more. Henley's eyes flared with an emotion Richard had no difficulty identifying—it was one he'd endured every day since the Season began.

They both loved the same woman.

And they were both powerless in the face of their desires.

Conscious of the rampant speculation their small party was garnering, Richard was still ashamed of the

impatience he felt at his friend's interruption, so eager was he to reclaim Miss Hastings as his own, if only for a few more moments. His tone therefore was abrupt, nearly curt, as he spoke his acknowledgements. "Henley."

Their eyes met and his greeting hung between them, the silence stretching past civility, into out-and-out rudeness before Henley wheeled sharply, presenting his well-tailored back to his former fellow officer and stalking off.

The cut direct.

Cecilia gasped and for a moment, Richard was so stunned he couldn't summon a single thought. He'd been cut by his oldest friend. The room erupted into paroxysms of fervent conjecture but he could barely summon the will to care, so intense was the pain radiating from his chest.

As proof of the chasm between them, no sign could be clearer.

Mechanically, his feet carried him towards the chairs where Cecilia's party was situated. He spoke the necessary pleasantries, even teased Mrs. Hastings's elderly companion a little, bringing a pleased flush to the spinster's thin cheeks, but his mind was in turmoil, reliving again and again his friend's unmistakable declaration.

For almost twenty years, through their days at Eton, then Cambridge and on to Wellington's Peninsular campaigns, they had been as close—*no, by God, closer*—than brothers. Their bond had been indissoluble and irrevocable. Each would have trusted the other with his life. Indeed, on the hard-scrabble battlefields of Spain, they often had. They'd shared everything from schoolboy pranks to, on one memorable and wine-soaked occasion, a particularly adventurous opera dancer.

Now their years of closeness were under mortal threat.

Because unlike in years past, when they both would have found humour in the ridiculous ceremonies that composed the London Season, circling the room together, avoiding matchmaking mamas and their dough-faced daughters and flirting with married women of a certain age, before escaping to a comfortable dinner at their club, now they were fighting for the woman they loved.

And while they tried their best to ignore it, an inescapable pall had been cast over their meetings these past few months. The closeness, the near-clairvoyant ability to know what the other was thinking, had dissipated under the strain of their mutual romantic interest. Like the fine springs of a watch wound too tight, their bond had come askance in the face of one inescapable truth.

Cecilia could not marry them both. And the friendship that had lasted the best part of two decades seemed very unlikely to survive her decision, whatever it ultimately was.

Chapter Three

It was past 2 a.m. before Cecilia finally found herself home. Bidding her mother and father a good night on the stairs, she longed for nothing more than the soft comforts of her deep featherbed. Her thin dancing slippers had long since begun to pinch her toes, her eyes to ache from the unrelenting glare of the enormous chandeliers that had overhung the ballroom and if she'd been obliged to accept one more insipid compliment from a quizzing, foppish dandy, she was quite certain she would have screamed.

Or even worse, laughed out loud at their unrelenting stupidity.

But she never did either of these disgraceful things, no matter how appealing they might seem, because then Mama would be embarrassed and Papa disappointed. And as the only child of much-loved parents, ones who had provided her with nothing but affection from her earliest days, she could not dream of disappointing them in such a fashion. They had done their utmost to ensure Cecilia's presentation was everything grand and enjoyable. Her duty, surely, was to repay their kind regard by securing the approbation of society through her retiring behaviour and by marrying well.

It was expected of her.

Indeed, their sense of hopeful, interested expectation seemed, at times, more onerous than the melodramatic demands of a wicked *pater familias* intent on restoring the family's fortune through an insidious marriage. The

Hastings fortune was fine. More than fine, in fact. It was ample, even lavish, due in no small part to her father's meticulous stewardship and, as the sole heiress, she stood to inherit the family wealth in its entirety.

Cecilia's parents wished a fine match for her because they wanted her happiness and believed with all their hearts that this was the path she must travel to achieve it. They themselves had travelled the same path, their parents as solicitous for their children's rational and well-settled establishment as hers were now for her own. And there was no doubt that Mr. Frederick Hastings, principal of Dominion Trading and Export and the former Honourable Miss Catherine Spenser, late of Hedlow Hall, had spent nearly twenty-six years in comfortable, personable partnership, admired by all for their universal kindness, steady mutual regard and continued prosperity. That, as far as Cecilia knew, the partnership had never once been disturbed by unbecoming physical desires, by lust or dangerous carnal appetites, should be admired, rather than abhorred. That she had her doubts spoke, she most fervently believed, towards her own shortcomings, rather than those of her estimable parents.

But now, as she sat alone in her room Cecilia found herself remembering her unexpected encounter with Lord Wexford during their second dance. The hot, lingering look in his eyes as he'd peered down at her, his strong arms so tight, so unexpectedly forceful, as he spun her in dizzying turn after dizzying turn. He'd spoken of marriage. He'd never done that before and even now, hours later, she found herself strangely breathless. The stunning—and unexpected—fire in his eyes. The startling sensation of matching warmth that had seemed to curl from her inner depths, scorching her body with its

discomfiting heat. What had he intended to say, before they had been interrupted? Had he finally intended to propose? Or had he...had he wanted to kiss her? Take that mesmerizing heat and intensify it by bringing their lips together and—

A soft knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Hoping the dim candlelight would hide the flush colouring her cheeks, she bid her late-night caller to enter.

It was Georgiana, her cousin and closest confidante. Newly married and now living some distance from the capital, Cecilia missed their regular interactions and had been overjoyed at the letter announcing the couple's plans to visit London for the month of June. Georgiana's husband had taken possession of a very fine town home, newly built and situated in a fashionable quarter, for the duration but such was the niece's affection for her uncle and aunt that the couple spent nearly as much time in Portman Square as they did their own comfortable accommodations. The cousins had spent the past fortnight savouring the delights of the city and renewing the acquaintances Georgiana made when she'd had her own come-out the year before. Now, her pretty face was a welcome distraction from Cecilia's unsettling thoughts and she called her into the room quickly.

"Cousin," she said, patting the counterpane in invitation. "Will you sit with me a little while? I have missed our talks since Edward persuaded you to defect from our family circle in favour of his."

Settling beside her, Georgiana laughed at Cecilia's teasing sally and tucked her stockinged feet beneath the folds of her pale silk gown. "As have I, Cissy," she concurred. "For while Edward is all things agreeable and

you are a fastidious correspondent, for true exchanges, nothing can surpass a late night confidence."

"A true exchange? In confidence? My word, this sounds a serious affair," Cecilia observed. "What have you to tell me that cannot be trusted to the King's post?" A wonderful suspicion occurred to her and she blurted, "Oh, Georgie! Are you and dear Edward expecting a happy event? Am I to be an aunt?"

Georgiana blushed, plaiting the counterpane in obvious mortification, and she shook her head fiercely. "No. It is not of myself I refer to. It is of you I hoped we would speak," she said soberly. "I do not think you are happy, Cecilia, and I am hoping you will tell me why."

The question was so unexpected Cecilia could only hope the dim light hid the betraying flush of colour that rapidly stained her cheeks. "I am sure I do not know what you mean. I have been enjoying myself immensely these past months." Flouncing from the bed, she stalked to the dressing table and busied herself unnecessarily aligning the cosmetic pots her lady's maid had left in perfect order. "I have met ever so many pleasant people and attended many very enjoyable outings. This Season has been everything my parents and I could have hoped for."

Georgiana was sitting up now and her usually animated face was uncharacteristically solemn. "I am not talking about last week's outing to Don Saltero's coffee house, nor of your excellent parents' expectations. I want to know why you are so unhappy. And help you, if I can."

"I am certain this is not a matter you can help me resolve, and so I would not burden you with my paltry concerns."

Georgiana came to stand beside her, their reflections silvery and indistinct in the dressing table mirror. She

took Cecilia's hand in hers and pressed it intimately. "Cecilia Caroline Elizabeth Hastings, we have been the closest of friends our whole lives. To whom did you confess when you were determined to marry Stevens, the under butler, when you were thirteen?"

"You, dearest."

"And I never betrayed your confidence, did I?"

"Never," said Cecilia, giggling a little at the remembrance of that forgotten girlhood passion. Stevens had been tall and very well-muscled, with dark, curling hair and bright blue eyes that always twinkled above his livery. The epitome of masculine beauty, he had been the object of Cecilia's girlhood fancy until he'd run off with a very pretty, very pregnant second parlour maid and put paid to her fancies in a resolute fashion.

Georgiana, though, was not dissuaded by childhood memories. Instead she persisted, her gaze penetrating. "Then do you imagine I would betray a confidence now? Will you not unburden yourself to me and let me share your troubles? I would ease your mind, if I can, and offer remedy and solace. You have but to tell me."

Despite the small fire burning low in the nearby fireplace, Cecilia's fingers were cold, and not even Georgiana's steady press could relieve the chill, emanating as it did, so deep inside her.

All of her fears and doubts rushed to the fore. Everyone seemed so pleased by her suitors and their marked attentions. She knew both men had called on her father and presented papers from their men of business, detailing their offers for her hand, her jointure and settlement offers. Any day, Cecilia would be asked by each man in turn if she would do them the honour of

giving her hand in marriage. And she had no idea how she would answer.

She had only a vague idea of what was involved in the act of marriage but she did not think, if Georgiana was to be believed, that it would be burdensome. Not if she loved the man she was married to. Indeed, Georgiana's happiness seemed to imply that marriage could be a deeply fulfilling enterprise for man *and* wife.

But Cecilia could not settle in herself the answer to her most unsettling question.

Did she love them? And did they love her? Could she be a wife to either of them, when she did not believe either man—not withstanding Lord Wexford's unusual behaviour towards her early this evening—to be moved by more than fondness, good manners and a belief in the properness of her prospects as a mother and hostess? Could she share the intimacy of the marriage bed with a man who felt no more than respect and admiration for her person? Cecilia shuddered at such a dismal prospect. She could not keep her fears to herself anymore. She doubted Georgiana could provide any solution to the terrible muddle, but the urge to unburden herself of her secrets was too insistent to deny.

“You wish to know what has made me so unhappy? Truly?”

“I do.”

“Then let me put this question to you. Do you think it a rational course to marry a man that does not feel passion for his wife?”

Georgiana looked perplexed. “I am sure I do not understand. Of course Lords Wexford and Henley feel passion for you. They have been courting you month after month.”

“Of course they have courted me. They have attended to my every whim, danced every dance, said everything that is right and proper and pleasing. But you must believe me sincere when I say that I am convinced, in my heart, that mere admiration and liking are the extent of their attachments.”

“No! It is not possible,” Georgiana demurred. “Surely, when they have kissed you, when they have held you in their arms, when they have touched your face and hands, they must have revealed something of their feelings for you. They are men of the world, after all.”

“Neither Lord Henley nor Lord Wexford has ever kissed me. Not even once. Nor have they, to the best of my knowledge, ever even attempted to administer such a gesture.”

Georgiana straightened, disbelief evident in her eyes, her amorous suppositions totally displaced.

“What! Never?”

“Never.”

“But surely, even if they have not yet kissed you, they’ve taken liberties?” Georgiana paused and Cecilia knew her cousin was wracking her brains for suitable examples of unbecoming warmth. “Held you too close during a waltz, brushing your legs with his own? Or let his ungloved hand touch yours when descending a carriage, whilst claiming it for an accident?”

Cecilia shook her head, dejected.

“Kissed your palm with an open mouth, while he peers speakingly into your eyes?”

“Not even once.”

“Pressed your hand too fervently when paying you his addresses during an afternoon visit?” her cousin queried, her tone increasingly vexed.

"No."

"At the very least, paid you a compliment on the appearance of your person in overly warm terms?" she said, grasping at straws.

"Both Lords Wexford and Henley have conducted themselves as perfect gentlemen during their courtships. Not once have they ever betrayed the least questionable behaviour," Cecilia admitted morosely, her vexations and frustrations overcoming her usual reticence. She snorted. "They have both, I regret to inform you, been pattern cards for all that is proper in a suitor. Sir Charles Grandison himself would approve of their attentions, I think, for I assure you it has been consistently, unrelentingly, maddeningly *correct*!"

"Oh, Cecilia, my poor darling! Now I understand. Why didn't you say anything?" Georgiana commiserated feelingly, her tone well suited for the delivery of condolences on the death of a most beloved relation.

"And what would you have me say, Georgie? And to whom should I have said it? That while I may have secured the attentions of two of the most eligible and handsome bachelors in the whole of the British Empire, I cannot seem to secure their physical affections, too? That I am so unwomanly, so unspeakably forward, that I cannot be content without passion? That I want to know *pleasure* with my husband, as well as respect and kindness? When I know that there are a thousand girls who would trade places with me in heartbeat, just for the chance to be their wife, who am I to ask for such unseemly things?"

"It is not unseemly!" Her eyes darkening with intense feeling, Georgiana lowered her voice to an unaccustomed, ferocious whisper. She dropped to her knees and clasped Cecilia's tightly clenched hands between her own. "It is a

most precious, blessed thing to share yourself, and share your pleasure, with the man you love. You must not think yourself wicked or unwomanly for wanting such things! I would never have married Edward if I had not known, in my heart, that I could share such sensations with him. When we are together—together carnally, I mean—there are moments of such joy that it is as if we are one person. The feelings such moments arouse are more precious than anything. If you do not believe you can feel a similar passion for either man, I beg you, as one who only wants your every happiness, not to accept their offers, no matter what other inducements they might offer! Marriage is a lifelong proposition. Please, do not let me have the grief of seeing my dearest friend in all the world make an unhappy choice.”

Their eyes filled with tears, the two cousins embraced and, for a long moment, the only sounds were of Cecilia’s weeping.

Finally, she raised her face and tried to repair the damage to her tear-soaked visage.

“So, what do you propose I do, Georgie? For I can hardly march up to Lord Henley at the next picnic and ask him very nicely if he would mind making love to me, so that I may know if he will satisfy me once we are married. Or do you suppose His Grace would be more amenable to such a request?”

Georgiana’s face was distressed at Cecilia’s bitter query. She bit her lip, and then finally shook her head. “I do not know, dearest. I wish with all my heart I could advise you, direct you towards a path that would assure your happiness but I cannot. Only you can do that.”

“I know, Georgie.” Cecilia sighed. “I know that all too well. And so here I sit, undecided and unsure.”

The small ormolu clock on the mantle chimed the half hour and Georgiana stood reluctantly. "I should go. Edward will be waiting for me." At the door, her cousin paused. "Whatever you decide, Cissy, I will support you in it."

"Thank you," Cecilia said. "That is true friendship."

Georgiana slipped from the room and, morosely, Cecilia climbed into bed, blowing out the candles before she slipped beneath the covers. The darkness was relieved only by the faint glow of the embers in the hearth, the occasional pop and hiss of the fading coals the only sound.

Once more the image of Lord Wexford's face rose before her and all too easily, she could remember the heady feelings she had experienced in his strong arms. She had told Georgiana an untruth earlier. She claimed neither man had ever indicated an intention of kissing her but Cecilia knew, despite never having shared the experience with anyone, that Wexford *had* wanted to kiss her earlier tonight. She'd read it in his eyes.

What would have happened tonight if they hadn't been hemmed in by the gawking guests?

What if they had been alone?

Her eyes drifted shut and she raised her hands to her lips, tracing their outline. In her mind's eye, a man's figure took shape. Initially, he bore a resemblance to Wexford but as she filled in the details, he seemed to take on a life of his own, until he could claim little similarity to anyone she had ever met.

He was tall and well-formed, with a character both impulsive and daring. She let her hands roam across her face, imagining the touch of his capable fingers against her skin, opening her mouth to lick her parched lips and

relishing the feel of her tongue against the dry skin. She felt a moment of unease as her dream deepened, for she realized suddenly that her dark stranger was a strange amalgam of both her suitors. He resembled Richard in face and colouring but his lean, easy movements and piercing blue eyes were drawn solely from Jeremy.

But she did not let her realization dissuade her long. Unlike either man, she knew instinctively that her fantasy lover was passionate and seductive. Not for him the stifling platitudes of convention. She could see him, waiting for her in a garden, the shrubbery illuminated with gently bobbing lanterns. He would be bold and unafraid of expressing his emotions. Cecilia imagined hurrying from the ballroom, dashing across the soft lawns, heedless of her thin slippers or her trailing silk gown, knowing that such a man was waiting for her, craving her kisses, her touch, as much as she craved his.

She saw herself running through the night and reaching him, panting and giddy. In her imaginings, the man she dreamt of did not hesitate but strode towards her and gathered her in his arms, pressing their bodies together so closely that every plane and valley could be felt one by the other. And when she thought of him kissing her, she gasped aloud in the solitude of her bedroom, but so intense were her dreams that even the intrusion of reality could not draw her from this place.

The kiss she imagined him bestowing was heated, ardent and unrestrained. She kissed him back fully, anchoring her hands in his thick hair and worshipping him with her mouth, as he worshipped her.

Her restless hands strayed across her bosom and beneath the fine linen of her night rail. Her breasts felt full, and between her legs a pulsing ache had begun that

both frightened and thrilled her. Cecilia had to bite back a soft moan, so moving were her imaginary wonderings.

Was this sensation what Georgiana had meant? Had she been referring to these winnowing paroxysms of need racking her body, when she spoke of the pleasures that existed between man and wife?

But then a bitter thought intruded, and such was its potency that her wanton imaginings suddenly ceased and she found herself alone in her bed, her sheets in disarray, her breathing hard.

What was the point of such imaginings when they had no chance of ever becoming reality? She was a sad creature indeed, reduced to creating a fantastical lover in a desperate bid to escape a truth she did not want to acknowledge but could not ignore.

Cecilia must answer her suitors' demands in the very near future. If only she could tell them what she feared, explain to them what she sought. They were men of the world, as Georgiana had so aptly termed them. Perhaps they would understand if she were to put the matter before them. If only there were some guidance in the exhaustive comportment manuals her mother had been so insistent she study.

Advice to a Young Lady Upon the Writing of a Letter of Seduction.

But of course, there was no such letter, no such advice, and so she was left, alone and sleepless, to turn the problem over and over in her mind. She pounded her feather pillow with a frustrated fist and then stopped as an improbable plan unfurled before her eyes.

Advice to a young lady upon the writing of a letter of seduction, indeed.

Sitting bolt upright, Cecilia laughed out loud. Flinging back the sheets, she hurried from the bed towards her writing table. She fumbled a little with the flint, struggling to light the candle. When it was lit, she paused. Could she truly be considering this rash course of action?

Unbidden, the answer rose before her.

Do I or do I not want to know if passion is possible with these men before I accept one or the other's offer of marriage?

Her mind's voice answered her silent query with a stern rebuke.

Yes, I do.

And if that was the case, she must be willing to risk herself, if only a little, to find out the answer. Otherwise she must resign herself to a life of passionless comfort. Indulged, admired and utterly unfulfilled both within the bedroom and without.

Indulged, admired and utterly unfulfilled.

The phrase rolled from her lips once more like a funeral benediction and her resolve firmed.

If passion were truly discouraged between couples, then why illuminate the dark walkways that criss-crossed Vauxhall and Marylebone? Why hang lanterns and set candles in secluded garden bowers? The dancing, the finery, the flirtations. They were all designed to encourage intimacy. She had to know if passion was possible betwixt her suitors and herself, so that she would be able to respond to their offers of marriage accordingly.

Her plan was outrageous and yet, in her secret heart, Cecilia had to admit its appeal. Was it possible? Could she do it? She thought again of Lord Wexford, of his dark, close-cropped hair, his firm lips and clever face. What would it feel like to truly kiss such a man, to run her

hands across the smooth cloth of his jacket? To feel the firm resistance of his body as she pressed herself against him and stroked his mouth with her own in more than her own furtive imaginings?

And Lord Henley. Equally handsome, his tall figure muscled and athletic, like a statue from antiquity. His hair pale and longer than Wexford's but with a hint of unruly curl in its golden locks, his smile hinting at an impish, playful side. She had seen his strength, his dexterity and control, when they had ridden together along the Row. What would it be like to loosen his cravat and spread wide the collar of his fine linen shirt? To press her mouth against the fast-beating pulse of his neck? To run her hands through his glorious blond hair as he responded in kind. An indolent warmth begin to steal through her limbs once more before she shook herself, determined to set such distractions aside while she considered the problem from all sides.

If Cecilia were to be discovered, her reputation would be undone. She would be without recourse or redemption. And her parents? What would they say if they ever discovered their only daughter behaving in such a fashion? Yet somehow even the notion of disappointing her doting mother and father could not dissuade her.

It could be done with no scandal, no discovery. Two letters, quietly and discretely delivered. Biting her lip tightly, she mulled over the details carefully. Not to their homes, of course. Her father's livery would be known there at once. Their club, though. If she were to send the notes to their club, it would simply be one note to arrive amongst many and would not occasion the least comment. After tonight's imbroglio, the two men were clearly no longer on speaking terms. The risk of her unmasking must

surely be diminished by the distance between them, for whether or not either man choose to take up her invitation, they would certainly never reveal her plan's existence to the other.

Her pen poised above a small sheet of cold-pressed paper, Cecilia hesitated one last time, silently composing the words she must write. Was this the right course? Could she go through with it?

Yes, she would take her future in her hands.

Cecilia would write them both, send them a letter of invitation. She would learn the truth of their feelings, no matter the consequences.

Her future happiness depended upon it.

Chapter Four

He shouldn't have left.

Not like that.

As he sat in the darkness of his swaying carriage, Jeremy Battersley swore and slammed his clenched fist against the deep leather squabs. The look on Wexford's face when he'd cut him tonight ate at him and yet, despite his disgust, he knew there'd been no other course.

Not when he was being eaten alive by such molten, spewing jealousy.

Jeremy was still man enough to be ashamed of such low feelings, even if he could not control their aim. But it gave him little comfort, for he knew their days of friendship were numbered and it grieved him deeply.

He was not a man who spoke easily of his feelings and never had been. His father's early death, shortly before he arrived at Eton, had left him wary and distrustful of laying open his affections, still mourning as he'd been the passing of a well-loved parent. Jeremy learned too quickly that many of the boys were merely interested in currying the favour of a newly appointed peer and cared not at all for the boy behind the weighty titles, the friendship they'd offered contingent on self-interest or vanity. But Wexford had been different.

A tall lanky boy, his dark hair always askew and his nose generally buried in a book of Latin prose, he'd never tried to insinuate himself into Jeremy's good graces. Of course, two minutes leafing through Debrett's peerage

would show Dick Huxley had no need to toad eat, standing as he did to inherit titles and wealth that rivalled, if not exceeded his own. Steady, ferociously clever and loyal, these were all words that described his best friend and they were attributes that had not changed in the intervening years. Somehow the mournful little boy and the abstracted young scholar had become friends and friends they had stayed.

Until now.

It wasn't surprising really, the complication they now found themselves in, when you looked at the situation with a dispassionate eye. Their taste in women had always been remarkably similar. They both admired clever, handsome women, who carried themselves with grace and could express themselves with wit and intelligence. Sensuous women who, through looks and presence, proclaimed their interest in love and bed play and physical sensation.

Cecilia Hastings offered all of these things and more, though her potential for lovemaking was entirely unconscious and untried. In fact, that made her even more deadly, for the possibility of being the man to unleash that latent desire had been enough to keep him rock-hard for weeks on end.

He remembered Wexford's expression when he'd first told him about Cecilia. They'd been playing billiards in Jeremy's fine home in Grosvenor Square, as they had done a thousand times before. On a normal night, they were well-matched but his mind still fixed on the haunting beauty he spied that morning at court, he played abysmally, his shots careening across the table with all the effectiveness of a blunderbuss against a French cavalry charge.

"Are you quite well?" his friend had asked, as another ball missed its mark so widely that it hadn't even threatened the pocket towards which he'd been nominally aiming.

"I think I am in love," Jeremy said, the words startling him even as he knew them to be true.

His stunning admission had elicited nothing more than a raised eyebrow from Wexford and hadn't disrupted his ability to make his shot in the slightest, either.

"Indeed?" he said, moving round the low table to size up his next approach. Wexford paused, considering the lay of the balls on the hot-pressed felt, and chalked his tip. "And what do you love most about this lady? Her tragedy? Her comedy? Or perhaps it is her ability to sing light opera?" He leaned over the table as he spoke and carefully stroked his shot in preparation.

"Her feathers. Her white ostrich feathers."

Balls had scattered and skipped across the table when Wexford's cue plowed into the felt at Jeremy's steady statement. Because without another word being spoken, they knew, as anyone who spent any time amongst the Ton must know, what that simple avowal meant.

Debutantes alone wore white ostrich feathers, the ridiculous headdresses topping off an elaborate ceremonial costume of a high-waisted white saque and hoops that was *de rigueur* for any young woman of good family making her courtesies in front of the elderly Queen Charlotte and her plump, spendthrift son, the Prince Regent. It was a ritual marked by pomp and circumstance, one of the annual ceremonies that signalled the opening of the London Season. And no man with conscience or breeding could pursue such a girl with anything other than marriage as his goal. Because if he did and was exposed,

he ran the very real risk of being ostracised from all polite society for his galling lapse. By acknowledging his interest in a feather-wearing young lady, Jeremy was perforce declaring his intentions honourable and his ultimate goal marriage.

“Is she of good family? Of good ton?” His friend had asked cautiously, knowing Jeremy’s propensity for amorous impulsiveness. He had sounded for all the world like an over-protective mama and Jeremy had stifled an urge to laugh at his tone. But Richard hadn’t even waited for acknowledgement before running his hands through his short cropped hair and sighing. “Of course she is. Only way she’d set foot at court otherwise. You mean to offer for her, then?”

Jeremy remembered the feeling of the smooth ball rolling beneath his fingertips as he’d considered his friend’s question carefully. It had seemed impossible—it was impossible—that he should be weighing just such a course. A fortnight ago, they’d been in the fields hunting, bemoaning the upcoming Season and making sport of the poor souls so careless of their liberty as to allow themselves to be caught. Now he was contemplating—no, not contemplating, *relishing*—the prospect of matrimony to a girl he’d only just met and to whom he hadn’t spoken above twenty words.

Jeremy had not been able to rationalize it. It still seemed too extraordinary for words but he’d known then, as he knew now, that what he felt when he first laid eyes on Cecilia’s dark head, making its graceful progress through the waiting throng of debutantes, was real. A charge, a spark unlike any he had ever felt before, surged through him at the sight and since that moment, his heart had not been his own.

"In the fullness of time? Yes, I am," he'd said and Wexford's eyes had darkened at the avowal but he hadn't challenged Jeremy further. They knew each other too well to needlessly speak of the changes such an offer would invariably bring to their own close relationship. "And if it comes to pass, as I very much hope it will, that the lady in question accepts my suit, will you stand up with me?"

"You know I will," his friend had said, catching his hand in his and pressing it firmly between his own. "I wish you joy, Jeremy. May she endeavour to be worthy of you and make you happy as you deserve."

The irony of course was that he, the man who would not speak of love, had spoken of it so precipitously, while neglecting one cardinal, one elementary element in his recital. Jeremy had been so wrapped up in the sensations of love, marvelling at her beauty and allure, that he utterly neglected to tell his best friend the most pertinent detail of the entire matter: the name of his paragon. This lapse would have merely been fodder for subsequent amusement, had not he been engaged to escort his mother to the theatre two days subsequent, whilst Wexford attended a musical soirée at a well-connected matron's home the same night.

A musical soirée attended by none other than a Mrs. Hastings and her newly-presented daughter.

When Wexford announced his own thunderclap, it had been Jeremy's turn to offer his felicitations and for a few short hours, in the comfort of their handsomely appointed club, they'd both marvelled at the tremendous coincidences of life. Two determinedly single bachelors falling so precipitously and so willing into the parson's mousetrap in such a short span. Happily ignorant, they lauded their respective ladies' beauties and charm. They

had laughed heartily and congratulated each other with aged scotch, each sunk in the delights of anticipation that accompanied such a headlong rush into love.

Until the truth had come out, as it always will, and the damned tangled mess they were ensnared in had been exposed in all its knotted glory.

Much like his guts were knotted with need now.

Jeremy hadn't been with a woman in damn near six months and the strain was telling on him badly. Perhaps that was why he'd instructed his driver to take him back to his town home by way of Covent Garden. As the carriage turned onto Russell Street and drove towards the wide square, he realized it would be but the work of a moment to stop and descend to one of the countless nunneries that riddled the district. The theatres had long since let out but the roadway was far from empty, as ladies of the night strolled indolently in front of the taverns, eager to offer solace to their next randy customer.

Though hardly a monk, Jeremy rarely made use of women like these, for he disliked the baldly mercenary quality of the whole transaction. On occasion, on the continent, he'd spent a few days of sojourn with a woman no better than she should be. And in London, he'd kept mistresses over the years, clever and beautiful Cyprians who welcomed his patronage but knew well the parameters of their interaction and expected nothing of deeper import but companionship and intimate relations.

He'd been between understandings when he met Cecilia and had had no interest in anyone but her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Tonight though, Jeremy craved a human touch, a way of escaping, if only momentarily, the scalding emotions that were churning in his gut. He wanted the oblivion of a fast, furious fuck.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to contemplate the desolate landscape that must greet him, now that he had severed his friendship with Wexford so irrevocably.

As the carriage made its way slowly through the mews, he considered his options without much enthusiasm. Mrs. Campbell's, at No. 18, always offered quality girls, or he could try his luck with Mrs. Crosby on George Street—she was known to have a particular fondness for the men, former and present, of the King's army. But before he could instruct his driver to one or the other of these addresses, his eye was caught by a flash of dark russet hair, curling in seductive tendrils down a well-shaped back. His cock surged, and his brain seized on the image to the exclusion of all else.

Cecilia.

She turned and even as he acknowledged the futility of his fantasy, Jeremy saw a figure boasting abundant breasts, plump and full above the insufficient confines of her stays, while her ass swayed indolently as she sashayed the brief distance along the cobbled verge of the street. She was shorter than Cecilia, her figure less regular and her gait less graceful but the uncanny resemblance was enough to have him pounding hard against the carriage roof.

When the conveyance came to an abrupt halt, he opened the door. The moll watched his invitation nonchalantly before approaching the waiting carriage with studied indifference. She clambered inside, revealing a very fine pair of ankles in red clocked stockings, and sank with an enticing smile into the seat opposite. Jeremy closed the door and felt the carriage rumble to a start again. He neither knew nor cared where Greggs was headed. All he knew was the desire surging through his

veins and the possibility of assuaging his need, however temporarily, made him reckless.

In the dim light of the carriage lantern, he could see that the prostitute did not truly resemble Cecilia in the face. Her eyes were wider set and her teeth, when she attempted a seductive smile, far from the neat, white set of which Miss Hastings was possessed. But her hair was, to his eye, an identical shade of deep chestnut brown and in her air and in her manner there were enough similarities to see his cock hardening rapidly beneath the layers of his formal britches.

“Evening, guv’nor,” she said, taking in his rising interest with knowing eyes. “Five shillings for a sucking, seven for a fuck. Ten for anything else you might like to bugger,” she said frankly, stroking her work-worn hands across the powdered expanse of her near-bare bosom.

Wordlessly, he nodded his agreement to her terms and she sank to her knees on the carriage floor, her experienced fingers working swiftly to release the buttons of his straining breeches. His cock sprang out, hard and jutting, into her waiting hands. She cooed appreciatively, and his mouth twitched at this piece of professional flattery, but before he could develop the ironic thought further, the whore’s mouth closed over his engorged shaft and he gasped at the welcome sensation. She began to suckle it, squeezing and working his shaft with a practiced rhythm. She pleased him slowly at first, tasting and licking every inch of his length, then more and more deeply.

Jeremy gasped again and her mouth tightened further, drawing and sucking harder against his rigid member while her nimble hands stroked the vulnerable sac hanging below. He plunged his fingers into her hair and

gloried in the image of his hands buried deep amongst the ruddy strands. How many times had he imagined this scene, seen it in his mind's eye? A hundred? A thousand? He'd lost count, so frequent and vivid had his sexual fantasies of Cecilia become. His balls trembled and tightened and he knew he was close but he didn't want to come in her mouth. It was a mere step from finding relief at his own hand. He needed to be inside her, needed to feel her wet channel close around him, to achieve any real respite.

The lightskirt paused, her wide red mouth poised over his now-glistening cock, and he hauled her into his arms. He didn't try and kiss her mouth. He knew from past experiences that such intimacies were not encouraged by the whores who congregated in the district, but he still let his lips range across her exposed throat and bosom. She ground against his thigh, her intimate wetness damping the fine silk. She unwound his stock and cravat then wrenched open his finely embroidered waistcoat. His fingers sought out the buttons that held her dress. Undone, her gown slid down her arms to reveal a well-darned shift and stays that elevated, rather than contained, her abundant breasts.

He flicked a finger against her rigid nipple, stroking the brown tip through the threadbare linen, before his hand transgressed the barrier and pulled the breast free of the stiff, confining stays. The weighty globe filled his palm and Jeremy relished the weight. He set free its twin and she leaned back, enticing him with her body. He suckled and nipped as she writhed against his leg, her moist curls brushing and taunting his straining cock. Her gown was completely disordered, her legs bare above her crimson stockings and ribbon garters.

He was hard, rock hard, and he could feel how close he was to losing his control. Half a year was too damn long to go without. He thrust a finger between her legs, and felt her distended clit, wet with need. Jeremy circled it, teasing, while her hand reached between his legs to his turgid member and mimicked his gestures. Together, they stroked and rubbed, taking the lead in turns, sending their passions spiralling higher and higher. He slipped one and then two fingers between her private lips and she shuddered, mounting his hand and taking it deep, whilst his thumb pressed against her most sensitive point.

Her cries of pleasure galvanized him into action and he lifted her up and deposited her on the bench opposite. She lay back, her knees spread wide against the broad leather seat, her pussy gleaming and wet, fully exposed by her rucked-up gown, her full breasts hard tipped and brazenly displayed. As he watched, her fingers travelled between her legs and she began to play again with her swollen nub, circling it and stroking it with knowing, shameless fingers just as he had done moments before.

Watching her play with herself hardened him even further. As her fingers slipped inside her moist channel, Jeremy pushed his britches down, his thick shaft stiff and protruding and drew his shirt above his waist.

"Turn around," he said shortly. He wanted this release. But if he was to maintain the fantasy, he did not want to see this stranger's face as he did so. She turned, thrusting her ass into the air, as she bent against the broad seat. He could not stand—the carriage box was too confining for that—so he sank to his knees behind her and rubbed his cock slowly along the seam of her gleaming white cheeks, spreading her moisture along her ass with his jutting tip.

Jeremy waited, his arousal tight to the point of pain, poised between her moist lips, her little mewls of needy pleasure telling him that, working girl or not, she was on the verge of orgasm. He steadied himself, bracing his arms against the narrow walls of the carriage, as his cock surged. He took a deep breath and smelt...

Rosewater. And gin. And desperation.

Not violets. Not the scent of fresh linen. Not the light fragrance that was so uniquely Cecilia's and which he would know blindfolded.

The whore's hips undulated and quivered, and he could make out her shadowed cleft, weeping with need for him, offering him release. Her soft wide ass filled his hands. Jeremy knew he could take her and she would come, and he would achieve the solace he so desperately sought. His cock throbbed. So too did his head.

There was just one problem and it was one that saw his ardour cooling with remarkable haste.

As much as the lightskirt resembled Cecilia, this wasn't really her. It was a poor facsimile, sought out impulsively in worry and melancholy and unmet need. Fucking this hapless creature whilst imagining her someone else would not satisfy him. Not really. And if it wasn't the real thing, he didn't think he wanted it after all.

His arousal sank further, his cock softening in retreat.

"Stop," he said, recovering himself enough to sit against the facing bench. Jeremy tugged at her gown. Petticoats and muslin tumbled over her bare haunches, covering her nakedness. He began to restore the buttons on his own fly, his haste to escape from her company making him awkward.

Her elbows akimbo, she twisted against the leather squabs and looked round in red-faced surprise. "What've I

done not to please you? Didn't you like it?" she asked in perplexity. A sudden suspicion crossed her mind and her jaw tightened mulishly. "You'll still have to pay for what I've done, even if you don't fuck me. You won't save none for stopping short, ye know."

"I fully intend to pay you," he reassured her. "I have simply changed my mind." She gawked at him, uncomprehending, until she saw his cock, resting against his tight blond hair and her head nodded knowingly.

"Oh! *Changed* your mind, did you?" she said with sympathetic briskness, like a nurse with a recalcitrant charge, making to sink to her knees once more. "Had it changed for you, more like. Well, it happens to the best of us, if'n you don't mind me saying. Just give the wee Lordship and me a few minutes to talk, and I don't doubt you'll be feeling more yourself in no time." She pursed her wide lips in invitation. His hand on her shoulder was gentle but implacable.

Her shrewd eyes, far older than her still youthful appearance, sized him up and a ghost of a smile crossed her face. "She's a lucky one, your lady love. Not's many who'd forgo their own pleasure just for the right of it, and that's the way of it. I'll be wishing you well, for all I didn't get to enjoy a fuck with you meself. It's rare I get to enjoy a gentleman like you, who knows his whys from his wherefores, if you catch my meaning."

Jeremy laughed despite himself at her assessment of his scruples and signalled his driver with a gesture of his hand against the box. The carriage rolled to a stop in the shadow of Wren's great cathedral. He withdrew his purse and counted out far too many coins but he didn't feel this girl should suffer for his attack of conscience. Her eyes widened at his generosity but she didn't comment as he

set the money into her outstretched palm. It disappeared into her rapidly reassembled gown, stashed God alone knew where. She clambered quickly from the carriage onto the uneven cobblestones.

"Will you be all right?" he asked, looking down at her from the open door.

The impulse to inquire after her well-being surprised them both, if the look on her face was any indication, but she smiled again and bobbed a fillipping curtsy.

"Aye, sir. Thank you, sir." The wink she threw him told him she was grateful for more than just his financial largess. She was gone in a flash, slipping away from the carriage and into the narrow streets that criss-crossed the ward. Jeremy was left alone to survey the dark and lonely street from the confines of his luxurious conveyance.

He had a choice to make. He loved Cecilia and wanted to take her to wife, but he was equally attached to his friend. Once he delivered his proposal, the outcome for former lay with solely with Miss Hastings. The decision to retain the latter however, lay with him. If he wished to continue his friendship with Wexford, he knew that the first gesture of reconciliation must come from him. And while he could anticipate the pain he would suffer all too easily if Cecilia did indeed prefer Wexford's suit over his own, Jeremy did not believe he could survive the loss of both his best friend and the woman he loved simultaneously. The loss of one would be agony enough, the loss of both, unimaginable.

The course before him was clear, therefore, and he would act on it without delay.

"Home, Greggs," he said finally, reaching up to pound one last time against the carriage ceiling with a decisive fist. "Take me home without delay."

Chapter Five

Richard sought the refuge of the library as soon as he arrived at his club. He'd spent the day following the Stanhope's ball immured in his study, trying and failing to lose himself in the paperwork that all estate management seemed to entail. He'd made little headway, the numbers dancing before his eyes in meaningless capers, such was the continued turmoil of his thoughts. *Jeremy. Cecilia. Jeremy. Cecilia.* Round and round, the names had circled through his weary brain until he'd been desperate to escape his own troubled company, if only for a few hours.

Certainly the carnal restraints he'd been labouring under had put him under considerable strain. His normal appetites, which he had always taken great and regular pleasure in fulfilling, had been thwarted out of a desire to woo his intended bride honestly and forthrightly. Even as he tried to turn his mind to the correspondence his man of business had forwarded on, his unsatisfied desires needled him, upbraiding him for the precipitous *congé* he'd delivered his previous paramour at the beginning of the season.

But his aching cock aside, Richard knew he'd made the right choice. He would die before he would dishonour the woman he loved. Not for him, the stifling sham of a society marriage, with a few brief interludes of reluctant matrimonial acquiescence, followed in quick succession by an heir, a spare and then an ever-changing parade of

lovers and bucks, traipsing in tawdry succession down the hall to the master's and mistress's far distant suites.

Perhaps he was naïve, but whenever he allowed himself the luxury of imagining married life, he had always seen it as a lasting and permanent accord, deeply satisfying for both parties, physically and emotionally. His own parents had enjoyed just such a relationship, and only the death of his father two years prior had seen it brought to its justly mourned end. With an example such as theirs to emulate, he felt unequal to settling for mere fondness or tepid liking.

Richard found no answers to the questions plaguing him in the well-ordered columns of his account books, and finally he'd slammed them shut and admitted defeat. He'd told his butler not to lay supper for him at home and ordered his driver here instead. He ignored the quizzing glances and near-audible whispers that followed his progress through the club, an exclusive establishment which had boasted a Wexford as a member since shortly before the Great Fire one hundred and fifty years before. Richard knew that the breach between himself and Henley would be the topic of the latest *on dit* and that the betting book, typically filled with wagers concerning currie races, the outcome of romantic campaigns against enterprising Cyprians and the turn of cards and dice, would be filled instead with avaricious gambles on the outcome of their mutual pursuit to the exclusion of all else.

So while he nodded to a select few acquaintances, he'd ignored all the invitations that had greeted his arrival and made his way to the large, book-lined room alone. But he hadn't had a chance to even stretch out his smoothly buffed Hessians in front of the comfortable fire before he

was interrupted by a fellow club member. The Right Honourable Octavius Howland-Smythe was a fop of the highest order, whose interests extended no further than ensuring the pristine state of his linens and gambling away his quarterly income in as short a time as possible. He was without question the last person on earth Richard wanted to speak with in his present black mood. Sadly, the feeling wasn't mutual.

"Ah, Wexford! Just the fellow I was hoping to see."

Richard hoped that shaking out the journal in his hands would provide the man with the broad hint that he was not looking for company or conversation. That it wasn't broad enough was clear when Howland-Smythe sank down into the free chair beside him. He leaned closer and Richard could smell the port on his breath.

"I want you to know I've backed you to win over Miss Hastings," he said confidently, oblivious to the insult such a confidence conveyed. "The book's got Henley running at two to one odds over you, but my money's on the title. Gels always have their eye on the title and a duchess will always take precedence over a countess." He tapped one long finger against his nose, and his head bobbed sagely. "And after Henley gave you the cut direct last night, I dare say he knows it too."

"That is one theory, I suppose," Richard said, neither confirming nor denying the attribution levelled against his friend, his eyes fixed firmly on the narrow columns of print before him. It wasn't Howland-Smythe's fault he was a confirmed idiot. The blame fell squarely on his parents' shoulders, who should have taken one look at their lacklustre offspring and drowned him shortly after birth. The mood he was in, Richard was more than happy to correct their oversight.

But his heart still twisted at the unwitting reminder of the breach and he tried to dissuade the young man of his gross misapprehensions as evenly and noncommittally as he was able. "But I would not put too much stock in such notions, either. Popular reports thrive best when there is little or nothing of substance to support them, I've found."

"Of course," his tormentor agreed obsequiously. "And you must not believe I merely sought you out to remind you of this unpleasantness. Indeed if it had not been a matter of business, I would have left you in your solitary contemplations, utterly unmolested." Howland-Smythe leaned forward and, lowering his voice to what he must have supposed to be a discrete and reassuring level, continued, "I am considering laying out another sizeable wager in your favour. If you could confirm, privately and *complètement entre nous*, of course, whether the breach between you both is permanent, I would be eternally in your debt. How's thirty percent of the winnings sound, eh?"

A heavy red haze began to descend over Richard's eyes. The falling out between Henley and himself was raw enough without these thoughtless, preening, sap skulls picking over it like so much carrion.

"Thirty, you say?" His voice was dangerously low, but the foolish young man, lulled into a greedy complacency by the chance to make some ready blunt, seemed unaware of the danger he was in.

"Quite so!" he chimed, favouring Richard with yet another blast of sour port. "Mere confirmation that the rumour of the breach between you both is—"

"Utterly untrue and a complete fabrication," offered a deep voice dryly. Howland-Smythe started at the interruption and they both looked up to see Henley

standing before them. He cast a scornful glance at the upstart, then ignored him completely.

"I am sorry if I kept you waiting, Wexford. Unavoidably detained."

More moved than he could give voice to, given their eavesdropper, Richard shrugged as if the matter was of no great import. "Not at all. I'm sure my companion will not mind relinquishing his chair in your favour."

It wasn't a request.

Howland-Smythe hurriedly stood and bowed awkwardly. "My lords," he squeaked, before scurrying away to disseminate the gossip he had so unexpectedly learned. Richard had no doubt that the odds would be recalculated posthaste and he was vengefully hopeful that many of the bettors would lose the better part of their quarterly incomes as a result.

Henley sank down into the now empty leather chair and contemplated the cheerfully burning hearth. After a long moment, he spoke. "I must beg your pardon for my behaviour towards you last night. It was utterly and without question—"

"Forgotten."

Henley turned towards him, gratitude in his blue eyes, and then swallowed hard, as though something was lodged in his throat. "You are too gracious."

"You are my friend and I assure you that there are few enough of those around for me to discard them at the first signs of rough waters." Richard stood and crossed to a nearby sideboard to collect a bottle of well-aged scotch. Pouring two glasses, he returned to their chairs in front of the fireplace and handed his friend one of the cut-glass tumblers. They saluted each other and took a sip. The warm relief Richard felt spreading through his chest had

little to do with the fine malt in his glass and everything to do with man he was sharing it with. They were reconciled and he felt awash in gratitude at the resumption of their friendship. He did not know if he could have survived without such a significant part of his life.

“Your Grace.”

At the interruption, they both turned, glasses in hand. The major-domo was standing behind them, a small note set out on a tiny silver salver.

“This note was delivered earlier today. I did not recognize the livery of the servant who carried it but I assured him I would hand it to Your Grace personally the next time you were resident at the club.”

Setting down his drink on the table next to his chair, Richard took the envelope from the servant, his curiosity piqued. After the retainer's removal, he turned the message between his fingers thoughtfully. The paper was smooth and of good quality, but the seal was a simple, nondescript oval, without a family crest or monogram to give any hint of the sender's identity. The writing, though, revealed more. Elegant, the loops and whorls of his name beautifully formed. It was unmistakably a lady's graceful hand. As he stared down at the note, a memory burst upon him: a short note of regret received from Miss Hastings several weeks before, sent when a spring cold prevented her from joining him on a planned outing.

The hand was identical.

For a moment, Richard was so stunned at the ideas ricocheting through his addled brain, he was rendered mute.

Cecilia Hastings was writing to him.

His heart began to pound, his racing mind considering and discarding wild notions of the note's contents in rapid

succession. Did she mean to accept him? Even before he offered? Or God forbid, refuse even to allow him to speak? Such was his hope that he felt almost unequal to the task of breaking the seal and reading her words.

“Open it.” The hoarse voice startled him out of his abstraction. He looked at his friend and there was no mistaking the exquisite pain in Henley’s eyes, riveted on the elegant *communiqué*. He too had made the logical deduction as to its anonymous sender and the agony in his eyes as he traced the looping moniker was unmistakeable. “Open it, Richard, so I may be the first to wish you joy.”

“We are not engaged,” he protested. “I have spoken to her father but I have not yet spoken of my feelings to Miss Hastings in person. You must not assume...”

Henley shook his head ferociously. “She has written to you. Only a woman who considers herself thus committed would write. To dare such a course otherwise would be to invite ruin.”

Richard nodded reluctantly. He knew Henley to be correct in his assessment but before he could open the letter Bentley reappeared. “My lord?” he queried once more.

“Yes?” Richard replied, trying to swallow down his displeasure at the unwelcome interruption. “Was there something else you needed?”

“No, sir,” the servant corrected, nodding at Henley instead. “I meant my Lord Henley.” In his hand was a second note, laid carefully on the same tray with which he had delivered the first. “I would have brought it with Lord Wexford’s but I had not realized you were joining him this evening.” His carefully blank face conveyed none of the knowledge he must possess, for no one in London was more aware of the happenings in polite society than the

army of servants who tended to it, and a breach of such magnitude would have been news indeed. At the moment though, Wexford was simply grateful for the man's sober discretion.

Exchanging looks of mutual consternation, Henley lifted the note from the salver. In all respects it was identical, save for the fact that it was his name written across it the linen parchment, not Richard's. Without further discussion, they opened their notes and read them wordlessly.

My Lord, the notes ran, Please forgive me writing you thus. While I greatly fear the charge of presumption, I am well aware that having spoken to my father all is arranged for you to make me an offer of a most gracious and lifelong nature in the coming days. Before we speak thus however, I would meet with you privately to discuss a matter of such import that it could materially affect the happiness of both parties, should its resolution not be concluded prior to any discussion of the former. I would beg both your indulgence and your discretion therefore in asking for the pleasure of your company tonight at 11 o'clock, in the green-house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Edward Cooper, which you will find situated at some remove behind the main house.

I remain your humble and obedient servant, C.H.

For a moment, each man sat in disbelieving silence. Richard fingered the smooth wax, as though the irregular blotch could reveal more of its mysterious origins. Henley threw back the remains of his drink with a single, uncharacteristic toss of his hand.

"This is surely a joke or caprice?" he said, setting his tumbler down hard on the table. "Some sort of perverse

lure, meant to discredit us both, and draw Miss Hastings into disrepute?”

“Possibly,” Richard responded thoughtfully, as they exchanged their respective notes. “But if it is such a plan, why then deliver the notes with such careful discretion? Everything about the affair speaks of it being sincere.”

“But she has written to both of us!” Henley protested. “Such a breach of propriety, from someone who is a bastion of virtue and modesty! I can scarce make sense of it. It seems such an extraordinary thing.”

“Extraordinary, indeed. Yet I would surmise that if this note is from the young lady in question, the matter she wishes to discuss must be of the utmost importance for her to risk communicating with us in such an unorthodox manner,” Richard said logically, glancing at a nearby clock. “I intend to keep this meeting and learn what it is. Will you join me, or send your regrets?”

For a long moment they contemplated each other, each weighing the risks and rewards in their own minds. Standing, Henley slipped the note in his pocket, and nodded.

“I will have Bentley call us a hack. If we are to make the meeting in good time, we will need to leave directly.”

Chapter Six

The gravel crunched softly beneath Cecilia's smooth leather soles. It had been the work of moments to inform her doting parents of her intentions to attend an evening party with her cousin tonight, another for Georgiana to extend a kindly invitation to spend the night, followed shortly before their departure by a spasm of the head so seemingly severe that Edward himself had suggested she retire. Her carefully laid plan was set in motion. As she crept from the house, she heard the hall clock chime the hour. She had not been detected or challenged and now she made her way unimpeded down the narrow walk.

The well-tended gardens behind the Coopers' town home were cloaked in darkness, deserted. The heady perfume of roses in bloom filled the still night air. The glancing glint of the moon off the smooth glass of the nearby conservatory startled her for a moment. Dark clouds scudded across the sky as Cecilia made her way towards her destination. Set well away from the main gardens, the greenhouse lay before her, dark and unmoving, its wide glass windows murky and impenetrable.

With trepidation, she pushed open the heavy door. It was unlocked, as Georgiana had foretold. The air inside was warm and redolent with the scent of moist earth and foliage. As she moved deeper into the green world, soft leaves caught at the hem of her sarcenet cloak, snaring and impeding her progress. It was too hot for the

disguising cloak in the warm heat and Cecilia made deft work of the silk ribbons at her throat, loosening them and letting the cloak slip away.

“Miss Hastings?”

At the greeting, she turned and watched as Lord Henley stepped from the shadows.

“You came,” she said, relief and apprehension colouring her voice in equal measures. “You received my note then?”

Henley nodded but before he could answer, Wexford stepped from the shadows to stand beside his friend, and at his appearance not even her years of training could prevent her mouth from gaping open in surprise.

“We both did,” Henley clarified and Cecilia could only stand in mute disbelief as her eyes travelled rapidly between them. She could not make out their expressions or discern their thoughts, for their faces were hidden by the flickering shadows cast by their well-shielded lantern.

Last night, in her room, in the secret covering of the night, her plan had seemed bold and daring yet considered in the most rational terms it was madcap in the extreme. She had hardly dared think it possible that *either* man would feel strongly enough to accede to her unorthodox request. That they both should, simultaneously, was almost too much for her mind to accept, despite the indisputable evidence before her. Cecilia could feel the fear begin to erode her hard-won certainty as she struggled with how to deliver her opening salvo.

“Miss Hastings?” Henley prompted again and took a step nearer.

She didn’t respond to his prompt immediately, her mind still in turmoil over their simultaneous appearance. Shocked, she didn’t consider her words before she spoke.

"I had understood from last night that you were not...that you were no longer on speaking terms." She blushed but she simply couldn't understand how the two men had come to be standing before her at the same time. What perverse twist of fate had brought them here together, twin witnesses to her wanton proposition?

Henley and Wexford both stiffened at her impolitic reminder of their public falling out but the latter's voice was steady when he responded. "We have resolved our differences."

"And the notes?" Cecilia stammered. "I had not intended for you to be cognizant of the mutual invitations."

Henley smiled a little. "That much we had concluded for ourselves, Miss Hastings. But in spite of what London society might have hoped, we were indeed together at our club this evening. It would take more than one misunderstanding to end a friendship as long-standing as ours."

Of course. Upon witnessing their *contretemps* at Mrs. Stanhope's ball, she had felt safe in sending her anonymous notes to the two men at their club simultaneously. But obviously, as she should have anticipated if she had been thinking clearly, they had reconciled almost at once, and in that generous act, thrown all of her rash plans into disarray.

Yet even as she felt a blush flooding her cheeks at being so mortifyingly revealed, Cecilia couldn't help but remember her dream from the night before. The disturbing and pulse-racing imaginings her sleeping mind had conjured so fully and in such detail. Had perhaps she hoped for such an occurrence? Surely not! But if not, why did she feel such anticipation?

Before she could parse her emotions further, Wexford interrupted her thoughts. "Now, Miss Hastings," he said, his voice deep and imposing, "You asked us to come here tonight. Perhaps if you could tell us why?"

"C-Cecilia, Your Grace," she said awkwardly, her mouth dry, her tongue tripping over the words, as she tried to collect herself. "I would that you would both call me Cecilia."

"Indeed," he said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her request, his dark eyes controlled and penetrating. "And is that why you have called us here? To invite us to use your Christian name? Could not you have issued such an invitation at a more conventional time and location? I believe we were scheduled to meet at Lady Hammersmith's boating excursion tomorrow, were we not?"

She looked at them both as they stood before her, their superfine coats setting off their broad shoulders, their tan and buff breeches so well cut as to show off every play of their muscles. Physically, they were so dissimilar. Wexford, dark and lean, with a clear, assessing gaze. Henley, broader, his hair golden, his eyes a bright cerulean blue. But regardless of their superficial differences, they were both achingly beautiful, their strength and virility signalled by their every movement.

Summoning her courage, she willed herself to speak, the words flowing from her with dearly purchased calm. "No, my lords, I have called you here in this unorthodox manner to discuss the offers of marriage you have both seen fit to present my father."

"It is usually the man's prerogative to propose is it not, Miss Hastings?" Wexford's tone was still dry but Cecilia would not be deterred.

“Please believe that I am aware of the honour such offers carry and I know that in most cases, it is indeed the prerogative of the suitor to present proof of his intentions. Do not believe I am wilfully abrogating that duty! But you must understand that before I can answer you with a truthful response to that question which I know you both plan to ask, I must beg the most serious and most secretive of favours from you both,” she pleaded. “Indeed, you must believe me when I say that unless I deemed it *absolutely* essential to my future happiness as well as your own, I would not ask it.”

“You may ask what you will, Miss Hastings. We are at your service,” Henley said formally, bowing slightly at the waist, his voice for once utterly lacking its usual amused and flippant tones.

Her heart quailed but despite her fears, Cecilia stepped closer to them both, her hands clenched in an unconscious manifestation of her internal distress. “My Lord, Your Grace, before I can give you any answer to the question you both wish to put before me, I must ask that you take liberties with me first.”

Total and utter silence met her outburst. Neither man moved and Cecilia was overcome by the certainty that she had managed, with her impulsive gesture, to give them both an implacable disgust of her person. She was twice a fool! Thrice a fool! When would she ever learn to curb her tongue and...

They are disgusted with me. They cannot bear to look at me! Cecilia thought wildly, her mind furiously pondering an immediate escape from her mortifying predicament.

But before she could chastise herself further, Henley broke the silence, his voice oddly strained when he spoke.

“Miss Hastings...Cecilia...you do not know what you are asking,” he said and Wexford agreed.

“I do!” she cried, suddenly vexed beyond bearing. “I want you to kiss me! Here, in this garden. Tonight, without delay. I know young ladies are not supposed to feel interest or curiosity over the married state—at the intimacies that pass between a husband and a wife—but I cannot, I *will not*, marry without passion and affection. And so I ask you again, kiss me. If you feel nothing more for me than respect or admiration, I would that you leave, but if you feel the slightest degree of desire for me, I would know it now by your kisses.”

Henley and Wexford exchanged an inscrutable look that Cecilia could not decipher.

“Miss Hastings,” Wexford said, echoing his friend’s words, “you do not know what you ask.”

“Do you want to kiss me?” she asked, blinking rapidly against the sharp flurry of tears that threatened her composure when her outburst was met with total quiet. Neither man moved and Cecilia looked down at her fine leather boots in mortification. “Your silence, gentlemen, is answer enough. Pray forgive me for my gross imposition on your kindness. I would, of course, beg your silence on this regrettable matter and I will inform my father that you are both withdrawing your offers without prejudice. Please accept my best wishes for your continued health and happiness.”

She whirled away, nearly blinded by her hot, angry tears. She stumbled, catching her toe in the uneven gravel. She would have fallen had not the duke caught her arm and steadied her.

“Miss Hastings.” His tone was so gentle she was forced to lift her eyes up to see his face. “Cecilia,” he

said, lifting his hand towards her tear-stained cheeks. For a moment, it seemed as if he would refrain from the gesture, but then she felt the soft touch of his long fingers against her face and she nearly shuddered, so heady was the subtle stroke against her skin. "Do not hurry away. You must believe me sincere when I say that kissing you would not be, in any imaginable form, an imposition or a hardship."

She blinked and met his eyes once more. There was a heat in his eyes Cecilia had never seen before, a longing so ardent and sincere, she felt an answering pull deep inside her own body. It was like the moment they had shared at the Stanhopes' ball but this time they were not amidst crowds of curious onlookers. They were, all three of them, alone, with no one watching them or judging. What they said or did therefore was for no one's consideration but their own and the possibilities such privacy afforded them made Cecilia's head whirl.

The soft pads of Wexford's fingertips brushed against her damp lashes, drawing away her tears, and a thick lassitude descended on her limbs. Her head tilted on her neck, turning away for a moment, from the intensity in his eyes, and she found her gaze tangled with that of Henley.

His breathing sounded short, audible even in the stillness of the hothouse, but his fine blue eyes were blazing as he watched them both, and his lean face was taut, as though he were struggling for precarious control, a sight that made Cecilia desperate to break through his reserve, though she knew not how to achieve it. He stepped closer, so that she was now standing between both men, their tall, angular bodies making her all too aware of her own petite size and feminine softness.

"I have never been kissed before," she admitted. "I will have to rely on your expertise, to show me just how it is done."

Far from discomposing either man, her confession seemed to please them, as Georgiana had foretold. The men's lips quirked, not a full smile, but something in the twist of their lips told her they were trying very hard to contain some sort of secret mirth. Why that should be, she was not entirely clear, but at the sight of their full, tilting mouths, a little of the tension she had felt pressing in upon her dissipated.

"Rest assured, we will take care to instruct you fully," Henley promised, his deep voice redolent with carnal possibilities. His strong hand slid around her waist and began to draw her back towards him in inextricable increments. His touch was intimate but so gentle she could feel no alarm at their startling proximity.

"Of course, I am aware of the basics," Cecilia hastened to clarify. "My cousin has apprised me of them. Of lips meeting. Of—of...tongues...touching." She blushed, vexed at her stammer. She sounded the veriest ninnyhammer, as unlike her calm and placid self as possible. It was their nearness, she vowed, that was affecting her thus. The heat, the subtle scent of their baywater colognes, mixing with the evocative scents of their secret retreat, it was all proving too much for her, the bombardment of her senses was overwhelming.

"It is less a matter of delivery than it is destination," Wexford purred into her ear, his voice low and oddly beguiling as he slid one strong hand gently along her jaw. At the same time, she felt Henley's touch on the small of her back. She started but he did not withdraw. Instead he drew small, calming circles against her body, his warmth

evident even through the folds of her gown. His hand trailed up, over its simple lacings, towards the exposed skin of her nape. His finger brushed away the soft curls of her hair and she wanted to melt, so electric was the sensation.

At the same time, the stroke of Wexford's fingers across her temple and down her cheek, to the corner of her mouth only added to the sensations against her skin. It took all of her effort to recall herself to the conversation, so liquefying were their tender caresses. Cecilia struggled to find the words to respond to his curious claim.

"Destination?" she said thickly, shuddering when Henley began to massage the nape of her neck.

"Indeed," Henley concurred, sounding amused, as the pads of his fingers burrowing into her thick hair. "For while you are quite correct in supposing a kiss to be delivered by the lips, it is untrue that its only destination is likewise." He bent, lifting away her hair, and his smiling mouth descended in a soft arc to kiss her skin. It felt marvellous, his mouth moving against her neck. He trailed down her neck to the column of her spine, each subsequent kiss more potent than the last.

She whimpered when Henley licked her shoulder, so bewitching was his touch. As if that were the signal he had been waiting for, Wexford kissed her full on the mouth then, without further preamble, and when his strong, masculine lips touched hers, Cecilia could not help but rise up on her toes to increase the pressure. His slick tongue breached her mouth, exploring the warm recesses of that cavity with dizzying intent. Her first kiss felt nothing like she had imagined when she had considered the matter in the dark of night, alone beneath her thick counterpane.

Four arms held her close, stroking her thighs and torso. Her breasts felt heavy, tingling with sensation against the constriction of her gown. Why kisses against her mouth and neck should cause them to react so was a mystery, but the sensations darting through her body were so wonderful that Cecilia felt no compunction in deepening the kiss, in touching her own tongue against Wexford's, and writhing in concert against Henley's expert seduction. Each touch was hotter than the last, and in the silence of the greenhouse, she could hear the sound of their breathing, quick and laboured.

Her senses seemed preternaturally alert to every sound, every touch, every smell. The air was rich with myriad floral perfumes. It blended with the scent of their warm male bodies to create a potent, sensual elixir. As she trembled in their arms, she could feel two heavy, solid lengths, as mysterious as they were enticing, pressing simultaneously against the soft flesh of her belly and posterior.

These men desired her just as she desired them.

Their kisses grew ever more heated. As Wexford attended her mouth, Henley drew the pins from her hair and it tumbled down, her dark tresses cascading in riotous abandon. "Oh, you are beautiful, Cecilia!" he cried, his hands tangling with an almost painful intensity in her hair. She turned and met his mouth with her own swollen lips. He was taller than his friend and she had to angle her head a little more to reach his mouth. His well-shaped lips moved against hers in a different rhythm than Wexford's had, but when his tongue touched hers, comparison was irrelevant, her only thoughts those of pleasure. She wound her arms around his neck, relishing his need as he deepened the kiss even further.

A hint of breeze made her suddenly aware of a new sensation: the loosening of her dress. It was a simple affair, for Cecilia had been forced to dress herself to avoid arousing the suspicions of Georgiana's astute lady's maid. Now, Wexford's fingers brushed against her spine as he worked competently, leaning down to kiss the smooth column as it was revealed inch by inch. He freed the pretty cotton print and the dress dropped from her shoulders. It caught on her arms but was not delayed long. Careful hands carried it down, until it puddled at her feet and she stepped forth in naught but her underthings.

Even in the dim light, she knew they could make out the curves and dark shadows of her body beneath the sheer linen of her small clothes. Cecilia felt a momentary and disorienting burst of modesty and she tried to cross her arms across her bosom but a firm hand stopped their disguising arc.

"You are magnificent," Henley said, twining his fingers through hers. He brought her hand up and trailed his tongue across her open palm.

"The most sensual woman I have ever seen," Wexford agreed, sinking to his knees before her and planting an open-mouthed kiss against the soft curves of her stomach. Releasing her hand, Henley followed suit. Working in tandem, each man carefully removed one slim kid boot. Their hands stroked up over her calves, past her knees and under the wide hem of her shift. Cecilia shivered, but she wasn't cold. At her garters, their hands paused, momentarily stymied by the unseen knots. She looked down, at the dark and golden heads bowed before her. If anyone had asked her if she ever expected to have such powerful men prostrate before her, performing such menial tasks, she would have thought them touched. Yet

there was no doubting the proof of her senses. A giggle rose up in her throat, so intense were the feelings circulating through her blood, escaping before she could recollect herself.

Henley stood first. His chest, visible beneath the open neck of his linen shirt, glistened in the humid air. He drew his hand up her thigh, across her hip, before it curved around the aching fullness of her breast. The pink, rosebud nipple, already tight and needy, peaked even further and Cecilia, who had not thought it possible for the magnificent sensations she was experiencing to intensify even more, found she was very wrong indeed.

He squeezed and stroked the twin mounds while his tongue trailed low across the revealing expanses her shift laid bare. Even then, when his mouth closed over her nipple and sucked it inside the wet cavern of his mouth, she nearly fainted. She never experienced anything so intense as the pull of his mouth against her swollen flesh.

“Good God!” Cecilia cried, a sudden flood of moisture between her legs pulsing in concert with the draw of his mouth. “What are you doing to me?” The emotions Henley and Wexford stirred in her were so intense, they frightened her. Surely, the feelings she was experiencing under their hands was wrong. Unnatural, even. For nothing—not her mother’s stern warnings, not the whispered conversations overheard in snatches in the retiring room, not even Georgiana’s impulsive frankness, had taught her to expect lovemaking to feel thus. Her feelings were so intense and so primal, she could barely recognize herself in the wild-haired and wanton creature she saw reflected in their eyes.

She craved their touch. Cecilia had dreamt of this moment almost since she had come into womanhood, and

her body responded to their caresses with an instinctive sensuality. But now that the moment was before her, she hesitated to take the last, irreparable step. She had no fears for her safety. If she asked them to stop, she knew they would do so immediately. Rather she feared their touch for another reason altogether. For how could her life resume its placid, conventional course, if she let loose the dark and potent forces that were clamouring so insistently for release?

"It is too much! Too much," she said, even as her fingers threaded through his golden hair to draw Henley even closer. At her words, his mouth paused, a mere finger's breadth from her sensitised skin, and he straightened, resolute honour written in every line of his face.

At her feet, Wexford's hands reappeared from beneath her shift, her woven garter dangling between his long fingers. He knelt back upon his haunches and looked at his friend, their eyes meeting in silent communication before he turned his beautifully masculine face upwards to meet Cecilia's wide eyes, the expression of his features serious and composed.

As one they spoke, hoarse with the same need that was speeding through Cecilia's blood. She tried to stop her ears, to block out the siren call of their deep voices, bringing to life her most intimate fantasies. But even through her hands, pressed firmly against her ears, the words snaked inside her, chipping away at her last, paltry defenses.

"I want to see you naked," Henley whispered, his hand sliding smoothly across the small of her back before coming to cup her ass in a grasp that hauled her full against his body.

"I have dreamed of this moment every night since we met," Wexford said softly. "I want to make love with you, and kiss every inch of your skin with my lips and hands." He bent his head and licked up her legs, towards the apex of her thighs.

"I want to bury myself between your thighs and make you scream my name." Henley slipped behind her. His hips ground against her ass and she could feel the rigidity of his member between her legs, electrifying against her revealing wetness.

"I want you, Cecilia." Wexford's face came to rest against her soft mound. His hands spread the linen shield taut, soaking the fine material. He blew softly and she gasped, resisting the urge to thrust herself against his mouth.

"I want you so much," his friend agreed ardently. "But you must tell us—do you want us, too?"

That was the question, wasn't it?

She wanted them. She wanted them more than she ever thought possible. And clearly they wanted her. Their actions told her that and left no room for doubt. But this interlude had shown her that passion was not enough. In her innocence, Cecilia had conflated passion with love, its absence with stultifying fondness. The passion she had shared with these two men was wonderful, heady and dizzying. She could not doubt the proof of her senses and the fact that they both loved her. Their actions told her so. But if she was to go any further, she needed to answer once and for all the most elemental question.

Did she love them?

From deep inside her, the answer rose up.

Yes, came the answer without hesitation, *I love them both. Utterly and completely.* As she thought it, a sense of

rightness pervaded her, banishing convention and duty and fear.

Cecilia wanted passion in her marriage. In her life. But tonight, she learned it was not enough to merely dream of being carried away. She had to take chances too. So without allowing herself time to think anymore, she grasped the hem of her shift and pulled it over her head in one smooth movement.

She stood before them, naked and proud. From this moment on, she would meet her life head-on and so she let them gaze upon her to their fill. This time, she did not shirk or glance away. They could read her unmistakeable acquiescence in her bold gesture. Cecilia met their heated looks of anticipation with equal impatience. She cherished their stunned exclamations of admiration and then she began to laugh.

And perhaps her laughter was infectious because the two men soon joined in, their broad shoulders shaking with mirth at the wholly unexpected but utter rightness of their situation. It was an affirmation of sorts and with it, came clarity.

She finally knew the truth.

During their courtship these past six months, she had seen them in many lights: as brave and staunch heroes, as proper suitors for her hand, as well-mannered gentlemen who moved in society with ease and grace. Yet until this moment, alone with them, sharing their laughter and their joy, had she seen them as men.

Men who could laugh.

Men who could feel passion.

Men she could love. Very, very deeply.

Such certainly freed her and Cecilia was impatient for their caresses but the bare gravel dug into her feet and she shifted uncomfortably.

“Wait,” Wexford admonished, serious now as he swiftly spread her discarded cloak across the ground. “Lie here.” Strong hands laid her down and she watched as they removed their own clothes with admirable haste. Shirts, breeches, small clothes, stockings, all were shed and thrown away without regard for their destinations and she felt laughter of her own rise up again at the sight of Henley’s fine shirt draped over a juniper plant and a lone stocking of Wexford’s caught on the tines of a nearby garden rake.

Their male bodies looked strange to her in the soft lantern light. As they bent and flexed, the play of their muscles caught her eye. Wexford’s shoulder bore a deep and wicked looking scar, doubtless a memento of his years of service, while Henley’s body too bore clear signs of bravery and suffering. They were true men, not posing popinjays and she felt her blood heat in anticipation at the culmination of their tutorial. They were stunning as they stood before her, their foreign male lengths jutting hard before them from the apex of their thighs and she found herself desperate to explore their bodies for herself.

As one, they lay alongside her. Strong hands stroked her all over and Cecilia began to feel as if her very skin was on fire, burning hotter and hotter with each touch and each kiss. They touched her with loving care, with affection, with desire. There was no artifice or dissembling. They both gave the full measure of their passion and their frankness incinerated any last lingering inhibitions she might have been harbouring.

Cecilia had been wrong. The marriages these men desired were not mere creatures of convenience or politeness. The marriages they were hoping for were to be raw and earthy and reckless, and she knew that every day would bring a deepening of their mutual passion and regard.

She moaned, her eyes closed, as their mouths and lips drifted across her skin, arousing her, exciting her. Her hands clenched and she found she needed to anchor herself against their bodies, digging her fingers into their broad shoulders as they took her higher and higher. A lick across her shoulder, a deep suckling of her sensitive breasts, an arousing bite on the smooth skin of her inner thigh, followed by gentling kisses that carried away the sting and left only her mounting excitement. Against the darkness of her closed lids, Cecilia could not distinguish the bearer of individual gestures but it mattered not. Each caress excited her more and more, the destination, the object, of this interlude, as of yet unknown. But she could not fear it, not when her body was attuned to this riotous experience. She reclined against her make-shift bed of silk and revelled in their intimacies.

They loved her, these magnificent men, and together they would initiate her into the realities of carnal passion. She knew she should feel shame, to be so wantonly displayed, her naked flesh voluptuously devoured like a Sybarite's feast, but she could not. It was too intoxicating, her feelings too immediate, to allow any sense of shame or prudery to interject and she gave herself over to the sensations utterly.

Another kiss, this time brushing the soft hair over her mound, had her quivering with need. Before, Wexford had kissed her through the barrier of her shift. Now there was

nothing between her innermost body and the touch of his hands and mouth.

“Please,” she begged, her hands opening and closing in mindless supplication. Her hips spasmed upwards in anticipation of his touch but still it did not come. Cecilia opened her eyes to see Wexford, tensely naked, kneeling between her wide-spread legs. His body was covered in sweat and his skin glowed softly in the light of the now sputtering lantern. His member jutted out from the dark thatch of hair between his legs, long and thick, but he made no move to thrust it into her. “Please,” she said again. “Please, Richard.”

It was the first time she’d ever spoken his given name. He swore at her plea but he finally moved to stretch out before her. His dark eyes never left her face as his hands slipped beneath her legs, drawing them ever wider, while his hands trailed deliberately towards her weeping core.

Her head was resting on Henley’s strong chest, his powerful arms encircling her, and she reclined against his body as he dropped open-mouthed kisses across her throat and face. When Wexford’s fingers spread her nether-lips wide and slipped between them, she screamed, so intense was the sensation. But the sound did not betray them, for Henley was there, his drugging kisses swallowing the sounds of her excitement, even as his talented fingertips played against her breasts.

Cecilia knew she would never forget the sensation, the first time a man’s tongue stroked her core. Her hips bucked but Wexford held her down, one tanned palm resting against her gently curving belly, just above the spot where it seemed all of her sensations were housed. He licked and fingered her inner lips, his mouth and lips nibbling on the self-same bud that Cecilia herself had on

occasion surreptitiously toyed with when she had lay in her virginal bed and imagined them both. But there was nothing secretive or hesitant about his kisses. He tongued her with broad, satisfying strokes and her body began to shake. Each moist pass made her want to scream. Each deepening thrust of his fingers to explode. With every lap of his tongue against her pink, wet lips, she was flung higher and higher and higher.

Cecilia exploded into a paroxysm of delight so intense that she thought for a moment her heart might actually explode from her chest. In the aftermath she could lay, quiet and spent, whilst the two men murmured loving reassurance. But as she recovered, she realized that her lassitude was not shared by either man. Not for them this blissful sense of well-being, for their shoulders were still tense, the misery of their carnal control writ large across their faces.

Pushing back her thick tangled hair from her face, she sat up. She could feel the press of the small stones shifting beneath her cape. Again her eyes were caught by the sight of Wexford's cock, curving in broad magnificence up towards his muscled stomach. His mouth still wet with her intimate juices, he watched as she leaned forward, her breasts swaying with each slow, tentative movement towards him, until she was creeping towards him on her hands and knees, her hips rolling seductively.

She jolted when she felt Henley's callused hand, stroking the soft swell of her buttock but she did not stop moving forward until she had drawn up in front of Wexford. She raised herself up, pressing their bodies together from knees to chest and blew a soft puff of air against his corded throat. He swallowed, licking his lips as though he was parched and she wondered, watching his

tongue snake out, if he could still taste her, as he licked his full, masculine lips. If she kissed him, would she taste herself, too?

Wicked curiosity overcame her reticence.

“I want to kiss you,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck even as from behind, Henley’s hands began to stroke along the narrow crevasse of her ass. She pushed back against his hand, just enough to show him how much she enjoyed his illicit explorations, but her eyes never wavered from Wexford. “From all I have been taught, it’s less a matter of technique than it is a matter of destination.”

A strangled chuckle escaped him at her bawdy repetition of their earlier words but the laughter died on his lips when she covered them with her own. This time, she took the lead, kissing him deeply before plunging her tongue into the soft recesses of his mouth. He returned her caress ardently and she could feel his cock swell even more, its length pressing into the soft flesh of her belly even as his arms stroked down the delicate path of her spine.

Henley was equally busy, his mouth and his fingers exploring the soft mounds of her derriere even as his fingers snaked round her hips to insinuate themselves between her legs. This time she knew what to expect, her body reacting rapturously to the sensual intrusion. She pushed against the welcome pressure, riding his fingers, drawing them deeper and deeper into her moist interior. His thumb played against her swollen bud and as she writhed against his hand, her tongue mimicked his rhythm inside his friend’s mouth.

They moved together, pussy and fingers, tongue and mouth, and she began to tremble. She knew herself to be

on the brink of another marvellous experience but this time she wanted to participate, and not be a mere vessel for their passions.

She broke the kiss with Wexford and began to lick down his torso. Meanwhile, Henley's mouth sucked hard on her ass, blowing and rubbing vigorously. She felt her abdomen clench in anticipation. She swirled her tongue around one flat nipple, and lapped at the well-defined muscles of Wexford's abdomen. Her hands came to rest on his broad legs as Henley's hand pressed against the small of her back, pushing her down until she was crouching on her hands and knees, her face even with Wexford's cock, her hair spread like a blanket of silk across his lower half while Henley continued to fondle and licked her rounded globes. She moaned, glorying in her dizzying erotic initiation.

This close, Wexford's maleness was exquisite yet foreign. A straining, rounded tip, the broad, veined shaft, the mysterious soft sac that was drawn so tight into his body. The tip of his cock glistened with liquid and the bounty before her was so overwhelming she could barely decide where to begin. Cecilia stroked him, watching as her slim white hand moved up and down his shaft, slowly at first, then with more and more assurance. She took the moisture and rubbed it round and round, lubricating her path with his own desires. He groaned, thrusting his cock into her hand with abandon.

Over and over, he said her name, a long, continuous stream of words that sounded half-prayer, half plea. His thrusts grew wilder, harder and she could feel his body begin to shake. Without warning, she took him in her mouth and his cry of pleasure was so loud that the heavy, glass panes shook.

He tasted like nothing she had expected, his salty muskiness was simultaneously strange but deliciously appealing. Her tongue traced the rigid shape, swirling around his tip before pushing back the soft enveloping hood of flesh. She tasted a burst of fresh salty liquid that told her without words how close he was to release.

As she drew Wexford ever deeper into her mouth, she felt Henley rise to his knees and this time, it was his cock, not his tongue and fingers, that began to rub between her legs and widespread cheeks. Her breath caught in her throat as the tip of Henley's cock pushed temptingly against her wet inner lips.

The feeling was so novel, so utterly right that Cecilia wanted to rear back, to impale herself on that taunting, desirable pressure, but when she tried to move, Wexford's hands, gentle but implacable, held her still and she was forced to endure Henley's titillating forays, her body humming and throbbing with unmet need. She wanted to beg him but she could not speak, for her mouth was still filled with Wexford's cock.

Henley paused once more but this time did not withdraw his cock from between her legs. His hands were anchored to her hips and she could feel him tremble. It seemed impossible to imagine that she should have such power over two such magnificent men but now, as she knelt between them both, she could only revel in their devastating sexual expertise. Thank the merciful heavens that she had dared to act as she had.

"I must have you, Cecilia," Henley said, his dark voice hoarse. "I will be gentle, I swear it, but there will be hurt. It is unavoidable."

She twisted at his words, looking back over her shoulder and smiled. "I would trust you with my life, Jeremy. I will trust you with my maidenhood too."

He thrust forward and she could feel her narrow channel stretching, expanding, to accommodate his prodigious girth. He pressed further and the discomfort grew. She wanted to plead with him to stop, to withdraw. Surely this could not be correct. Discomfort yes, but this fullness was bordering on the verge of pain. Her muscles clenched, and she felt her teeth pierce her lower lip. Her ardour was evaporating with each dearly purchased inch. It was all she could do not to withdraw but before she could speak the words, Wexford's hands began to knead her tensely gathered shoulders and stroke the long, tousled strands of her hair. It was a pleasurable distraction, to have him touching her thus. Her arousal began to increase once more and when Cecilia felt a searing pain, she knew that the deed was done.

Pain was receding now, and when Henley began to remove himself from her warm channel, she protested with a whimper of unmet need.

"Don't go!" she begged and he laughed even as his hands trembled with restraint.

"I promise. I'll never go. I'll be with you—love you—forever."

"Oh, God, yes!" The words were torn from her lips before she could help it and when he thrust again, there was no pain, only deep, drawing need. In front of her, Richard's cock stood up, his hands working the thick member. Through her half-closed eyes, she could see him watching Henley, each stroke of his hands keeping time with each stroke of his cock and she knew he was imagining himself in his friend's place.

“So beautiful,” Wexford said, growling low in his throat. “So...”

“So hungry,” she said and took his cock into her mouth once more. His hands plunged into her hair, anchoring her mouth to his engorged member. He thrust, his taut ass tightening with each sally and she could feel his body begin to tremble uncontrollably.

Her own body vibrated in sensual sympathy, and when Henley’s hand reached between her legs to pluck at her clit, her mouth closed in an involuntary paroxysm of delight. Wexford shouted out his release. At the sound of his friend’s delight, Henley’s own cock surged, pounding into her so deeply that she felt near to splitting. Passion, mindless, reckless, bottomless, swept over her as both men filled her with their warm, salty fluids. Her body clenched and spasmed, again and again, and this time Cecilia could not have contained her scream of fulfillment, even if she had tried.

She felt replete, a sense of lassitude so profound stealing over her that thought was almost too much for her. She did not know if she would ever have the strength to move ever again. Still boneless and drifting, strong arms gathered her up and laid her back against the soft silk. As the sweat began to cool on her passion-soaked body, she found herself cradled between the bodies of the two men she loved more than life itself.

One thick leg insinuated itself between her weak, trembling limbs, whilst comforting hands stroked across her still-sensitized skin, gentling her and brushing away the tangled, sweat-soaked bands of her hair.

“I love you,” Cecilia said into the darkness and her admission was rewarded by two deep, soul-wrenching

kisses, one after the other. "You are both everything I could ever want in my life's partner."

"And yet," Wexford began sadly, "You cannot marry us both. You must decide."

But before he could continue his lament or press her further, an idea, a shocking, tantalizing idea began to grow in her still-sated brain.

She rose onto her elbows to study them both. By now, the lantern's candle was a mere stub, so late had the hour grown. But by its feeble light, she gazed upon their faces and her certainty grew. They were both honourable, handsome, skilled. Cecilia knew she could no more rend the bonds of friendship between them as she could choose one over the other to share her life. Her solution would shock them, she was sure, but with every moment she considered it, her resolution grew. Her course was right, and it was one that would bring them all the greatest pleasure, she knew.

And when her plan was laid out before them, the two men knew their debutante had solved the seemingly impossible dilemma in the most satisfying manner possible.

So satisfying in fact that they put it into action twice more before dawn.

Epilogue

One Year Later

The former Miss Cecilia Hastings was the luckiest woman who had ever lived to draw breath.

As she went down the dance with her handsome husband of less than a year, there was amongst the watching spectators of the Little Season, not a single voice of dissent against this universal assessment. That she had secured to herself the unmistakable and unwavering regard of her handsome and wealthy spouse was so obvious to anyone with sense, or even functioning eyes, that it admitted no further comment. That she felt likewise, her frequent glances and affectionate gestures proved equally. Indeed, such was their constancy and general proximity that a newcomer to their exalted circle might be forgiven for assuming them the veriest newlyweds and not a well-settled married couple of a twelvemonth.

And if claiming her crown as one of the matrons of select society was not enough, and being hailed by all for her unmatched sense of dress still insufficient, less than ten months after their wedding she had delivered to the proud papa not one but *two* proofs of her affection. If one had not seen the notice, printed so handsomely in the Times, a person could be forgiven for not realizing her so recently risen from her confinement, so enviably slim and elegant was her figure.

Two hale, plump heirs who spent their days immured in the unending comfort which their wealthy and loving family could provide, and who were, as all who had been so distinguished as to admire them during one of their mother's exclusive and sought-after at-homes could attest, as sweet and adorable as any two babies could possibly be. Of course, a more dissimilar pair it was hard to imagine. One blond, with soft blue eyes and the sweetest pair of dimples, the other dark, with a thick shock of brown hair that made him look quite rakish despite his diminutive size. But both were, despite these superficial differences, without doubt the apples of their doting parents' eyes.

And as for their godfather! Well, it was hard to believe him the same person, so domestically reformed, so unremittingly cheerful had he become in the interim. At the urging of his friends, he had paid an extended visit during the first months of their marriage at the couple's new country seat, and had been seen to enjoy the greatest ease and felicity imaginable in their company. No low spirits or mourning for him.

It was even rumoured that his christening gift to his young godsons had cost in excess of five hundred pounds! *Five hundred*, mind you. And his patronage of a certain exclusive toy shop on Highgrove Street was so regular, so steady and so generous as to allow its proprietor to put serious consideration towards a sizeable expansion as soon as ever a suitable site might be secured.

His gracious acceptance of Miss Hastings's preference last year in favour of his intimate friend was acknowledged by all as the height of good breeding, for there could be no doubt of his honest attachment towards her at the time. As for his speech to the bride and groom

on the occasion of their marriage? What more could be said about it that had not already been said? So becomingly written, so universally complimentary to both members of the happy couple. Reputable sources even reported it to be in its third printing in a well-respected comportment manual as an example not to be bettered of a speech on the occasion of a dear friend's marriage to a well-admired lady.

Yes, the former Miss Hastings *was* the luckiest woman who had ever drawn breath, and well she knew it and gave thanks.

In triplicate, as the case may be.

About the Author

An enthusiastic and voracious reader from a young age of everything from obscure eighteenth-century novels to misplaced cereal boxes, Elyse has worked as a freelance writer for the past several years for many of the leading sewing and craft magazines in North America.

The Debutante's Dilemma is her first work of fiction. She is also working on a number of contemporary romance manuscripts as well as a full-length historical romance novel set in the 1780s.

In addition to her writing commitments, Elyse also teaches film and literature at a local college. In her free time she enjoys (well, *enjoys* might be too strong a word—perhaps *pursues with dogged determination* would be better) never ending renovations on the century cottage she shares with her intrepid husband and two boys in Hamilton, Ontario.

With her excellent writerly imagination, she one day dreams of topping the *New York Times* bestseller list and reclaiming her pre-kid body without the bother of either sit-ups or the denunciation of ice cream.



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