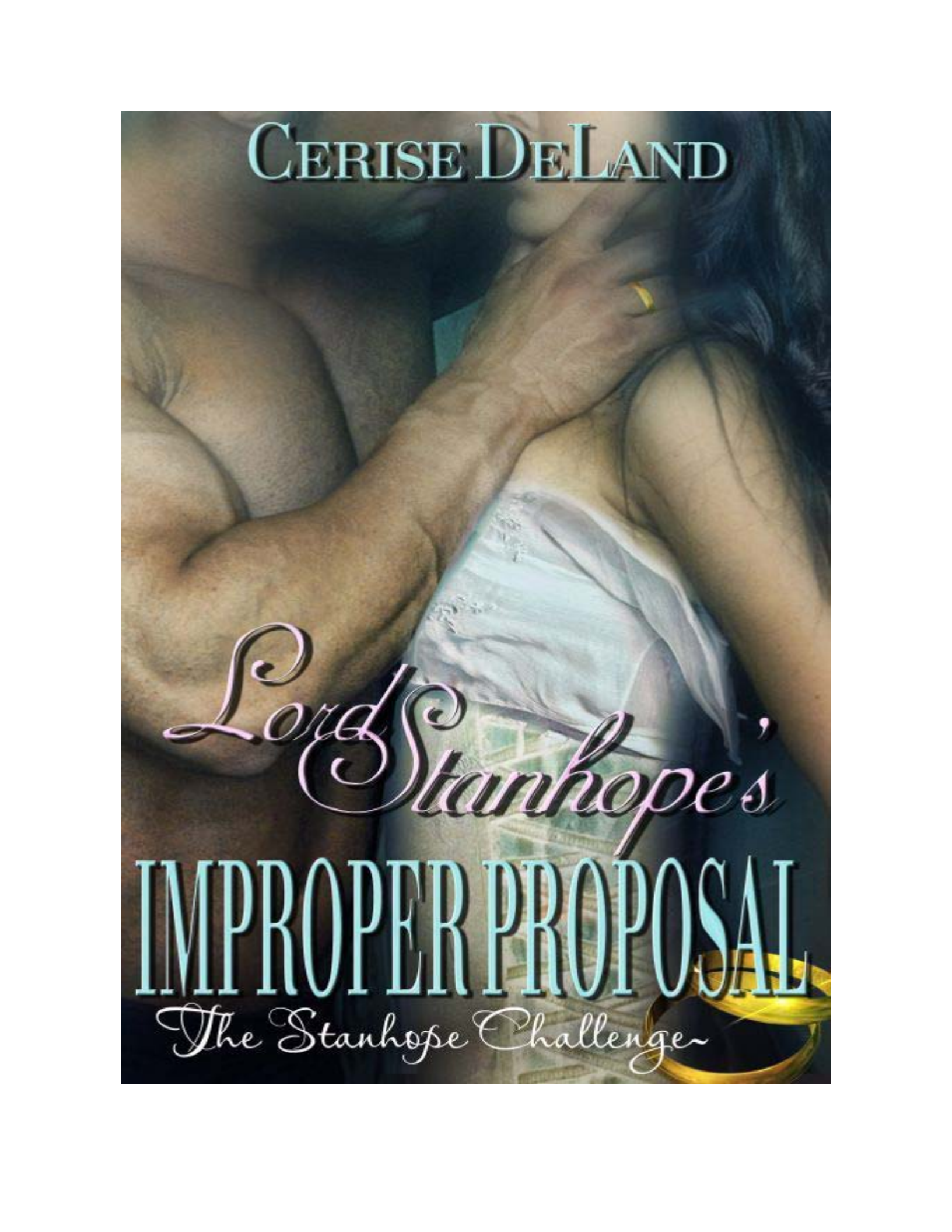




CERISE DELAND

Lord Stanhope's
IMPROPER PROPOSAL
The Stanhope Challenge

*Lord Stanhope's
Improper Proposal*

A Stanhope Challenge Story

By Cerise DeLand

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Lord Stanhope's Improper Proposal

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

Great thanks to a wonderful editor, Michele Paulin.

Catching all those pesky problems is a challenge you more than meet!

Chapter One

London, January 1809

It is a truth, universally accepted, that a politician in want of the premiership must also be in want of a wife.

Felice knew that was her new husband's justification for marrying her so quickly.

"A reason as good as my own," she told herself as she combed her hair back from her face and fluffed the ruffled bodice of her wedding dress. She pursed her lips, wondering how Adam really kissed a woman. How he kissed his mistresses. He had merely brushed her own mouth with his after the ceremony minutes ago. She'd always thought her lips worth more than a peck—and she was determined that this second husband of hers would do more than ignore her.

"I'll insure that he does," she resolved, with a check of her figure in the cheval mirror in the retiring room of her new brother-in-law's mansion on Grosvenor Square. "After all, the fictitious Miss Proper has charms that Adam does not know about." Nor should he!

That secret could ruin her marriage. "And I intend to keep both!"

So go to your wedding breakfast and be done with this mooning! You accepted his proposal! Now reap the rewards! London Society is open to you—the excitement of their lives, their intrigues ready fodder for your pen. For your romances and your poems.

She frowned at herself.

Be honest, Fee. You want more than inspiration for your stories. More than a means to repay that nefarious man your first husband's debt. You want Adam Stanhope gracing your own bed, not just his look alike walking on the pages of your newest romance. You want him inside your body. Making you wet and warm. And kissing your—

A quick knock at the door had her whirling.

"Dear Felice," cooed her husband's Great Aunt Amaryllis from behind the portal. "Do come out now. We are quite eager to applaud you and Adam. The guests, too, are clamoring for the receiving line!"

Most likely, the men want more wine while they make wagers on how soon Adam will bed me. And the women? They want to assess how a country mouse like me managed to snare the renowned, rich and eloquent Adam Stanhope. Third son of the earl. Widower. Father. Some day soon, the head of his party, if the papers and broadsheets are to be believed. And thereafter certainly, Prime Minister.

"Adam Stanhope," she murmured to herself. *"A great catch, Fee. If you can intrigue him."*
And there was the rub.

Adam, now thirty, was notorious for outlandish behavior. When he'd turned seventeen, he'd run away from home and sailed to Hong Kong to work with his cousin in his Far Eastern trading company. Four years later, he'd come home to finish his education at Cambridge, marry the beauty of the Season and run for Parliament. He'd won twice now. But since his wife had died in childbirth, Adam had made a name for himself as a rake. He was just like his brothers in that regard. Still, he was the only one who had married and challenged the Stanhope family curse. For it was a legend that no matter whom a Stanhope married, no matter that person's quality of character or breeding or good intentions, once wedded, a Stanhope lived in hell.

"I will be happy." Felice repeated the phrase that had become her motto ever since Adam had appeared in Kent last month and proposed. "I'll dispense with this hideous man plaguing me at once. Then I will devote myself to ensuring Adam is happy. I will be a social asset to him. And a good mother to his son."

What more could a man ask for?

* * * *

"A politician has to have a wife! Who the devil put that ridiculous rule about, Reggie?" Adam Stanhope asked his friend as he paced in his brother Jack's drawing room at eleven in the morning. He threw back another shot of Jack's fine brandy and coughed. "Oh, lord, that burns all the way down. Whose idea was it to stay out all night, eh?" He scrubbed his hand over his face, acknowledging his predicament had less to do with excess alcohol than with Fee Wentworth. Correction, Stanhope. "Dammit, you'd think a respectable widower with an heir earned the right to be free!"

“No help for it, old man,” Reggie responded and drained his glass of spirits. “Damn good stuff, if I say so myself! But see here, Adam, you admitted you need her. We’ve been through this entire argument before. You’ve got a bit of a reputation, courtesy of that Miss Proper ramblings and—”

The far door burst open. Adam’s oldest brother, Jack, appeared in all his dark imperious hauteur. He took one look at both men and slipped inside to shut the world out. “Now, Adam. Reggie. What the hell are you doing in here drinking?”

Adam cocked a long black brow at the man who expected to be obeyed in all things. “Drowning my sorrows.”

“Too late for that!” Jack’s mouth twitched in a grin. “Get the hell out here and let’s toast the good health of the bride and groom.”

“Come, come, Jack, you know what this means for me.”

Jack’s black brows arched high. “Oh, I do. One look at your bride and I have a very good idea that—”

Adam scowled at his brother. “She’s lovely.” Damned gorgeous, in fact. And mine, god help me now. “But I have ruined her.”

Jack startled. “You’ve had her? Already?”

“No, no. That’s not what I mean.”

Jack strode over to remove the snifter glass from Adam’s fingertips. “I know what you mean. And this does not help.”

“I’ve known her since she was ten, Jack!” Adam thrust out a hand, roiled by what he had just done to this sweet, shy woman.

“And? She was a charming child then. Now you have—”

“Wrecked her life! That’s what I’ve done!”

Jack narrowed his eyes on his brother. “How late did you stay at White’s last night?”

When Adam said “Ba!” and shook his head, Jack peered at Reggie. “How late?”

The man winced and brushed imaginary crumbs from his cravat. “Five. Six. Not certain. We were winning at dice, you see, and couldn’t leave.”

Jack stared at the ceiling. “I hope to god it was profitable.”

Adam grinned. “Five thousand in my pockets I hadn’t had before!”

The far door opened again. An auburn-haired man stuck his head in and grimaced. “What the hell is the delay here?”

Jack beckoned him. "Wes, Adam is having a rather belated moment of introspection. Do come in and help me talk sense into our youngest brother."

Wes took a step inside and shut the door behind him. In his cavalryman's dress blues, he leaned back against the door. "What's the matter, Adam? Nerves?"

Adam rolled his shoulders. "Every man's entitled. You told me so yourself."

"That," Wes chuckled as he limped over to the chair beside Adam and fell into it, "is before a man goes into battle!"

"Well, I am!"

Wes gave him the quelling glance his men termed *The Demand*. "You are married."

"I know I thought it a good idea. Despite the nightmare I lived through with Sarah." The mere mention of his first wife sent a wave of revulsion through him. "Everyone thought it a good idea. My colleagues. The Prime Minister. But you both, most of all, know this won't work."

Wes pursed his lips. "I've seen your new lady wife, and I say give it a go. If you admit defeat before you start, you're doomed."

"This is not a cavalry charge," Adam murmured.

Wes shrugged. "Perhaps it should be."

"Wes, have a little pity," Adam pleaded, his head splitting from too much whiskey and too little sleep.

"No pity for you," Wes shot back. "Felice lives up to her name in temperament as far as I can tell. And her figure, Adam, has certainly become more alluring than when I last saw her in Great Aunt Amaryllis' garden."

"She was ten!"

"Was she, now? Hmm. No wonder she was flat-chested."

"Now see here," Adam admonished his older brother. "Her figure is—"

"Superb and yours to explore." Wes wiggled his brows suggestively, then looked at Jack. "We met her when we first summered at Aunt's house. What year was it Father foisted us off on the poor old gel?"

Adam groaned. "It doesn't matter!"

I liked her then. Enjoyed her wit and intelligence every time we met. Now I've gone and hurt her irrevocably.

Jack shook his head. "Don't argue with him, Wes. He's got a snoot full from an all-night gambling rout at White's. It only encourages him to debate you. And neither of us can ever

outtalk him." He gave his brother, the Colonel and Man of Action, a wide-eyed look of despair. "The curse is upon him."

"Oh, hell," Wes mourned. "Not that again."

Adam frowned at both of his brothers. "That again? I don't seem to recall that either of you is yet married. Why not?"

"Not our time," Jack told him.

"No woman I like enough," Wes added. "You, Jack?"

"None I cannot live without," Jack said with pointed disdain for the subject. "Come on, Adam, let's do our drinking out there with all the others."

"They all wonder, you know," Adam offered, his gaze on the door.

"What?" Reggie asked when the two Stanhope brothers didn't respond to him.

All three Stanhopes considered Reggie Mortenson with bleak expressions.

Adam answered for them all. "They wonder when Felice will leave me. As we speak, they are out there taking wagers on the number of months she remains."

"The Stanhope women don't all leave," Jack reminded Adam.

The three brothers winced and looked at anything but each other. Adam knew each man thought of his own mother and how each had died in succession. And even though Jack's mother passed away after a riding accident, Wes's died of consumption and Adam's of childbed fever, the ton declared each woman had suffered first and foremost from a broken heart.

"He says he loved each one," Jack reminded them of the phrase their father repeated to them often.

Adam shut his eyes. "He declares he loved Clarice's mother, too!" Their charming half-sister Clarice had been Stanhope's by-blow, conveniently born between Jack and Wes.

"Aye," Wes acknowledged with a smirk. "In his prime, the man was a walking satyr."

Jack inclined his head toward Wes. "Astonishing, isn't it, that he managed his estates as well as he did, hopping from bed to bed like a right royal degenerate." He flourished a hand. "Yet, he cared for each woman he bedded."

Adam growled. "How can you believe him?" He had never known their father to be honest with anyone, least of all his three legitimate sons. "You were four," Adam reminded Jack, then faced Wes. "And you were two when I was born and my mother took a childbed fever. How can you know that he tells the truth?"

Jack rolled a shoulder. "Perhaps on this one issue..."

Adam shook his head, hands fisted on his hips. "I long to see the day each of you faces a woman whom you do not wish to kill with the family curse." He straightened his cravat and ran two hands through his hair. "Open the damn door, Wesley, I'm ready to claim my bride and ruin both our lives."

Chapter Two

Felice had tried conversation with him.

Adam sat silent in the coach to Dover, gazing out at the graying landscape and brooding. But now, here at the inn, she was determined to brave his mood and make the consummation of this marriage a joyous night. A good beginning to a stunning match and domestic bliss. A counterpoint to the scandalous series in the Tell-Tale by Miss Proper.

She pushed that errant thought aside quickly, skimmed her hands down her negligee and ran the brush through her long waves once more. Beneath the Italian chiffon, she felt her nipples bead. Her heart raced and her cunny swelled.

This night will be better than those with Wallace.

Her first husband had known nothing of subtleties. Not in art or music, books or cards. And certainly not in the finer points of making love.

But Adam Stanhope does.

Rumor said he did. Living in the Orient, he was reputed to have learned the exotic sexual practices of the Chinese. His mistresses put it about that he was agile and demanding. Her friends in the Risque Society applauded her daring marital catch and told her Adam's exotic physical practices could make a woman howl in fulfillment. Certainly, too, he must have benefited from his two brothers' tales of their legendary prowess with women. Jack's preference was for titled ladies whose husbands did not serve them well. Wesley's reputed taste was for a certain tea merchant's daughter. Felice thirsted to taste such delights herself.

"Felice?" Adam called through the door. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Hurry.

She turned. The sight of him made her mouth water.

For a man who spent most of his days indoors, he retained the muscular physique of a man who indulged in horses and fencing. His midnight hair was thick and curly, perhaps more so than her own. His thick eyelashes fringed lightning-bright blue eyes that sparked and sent shocks of delight down to her core. She smiled, suppressing a grin that their children, if they were fortunate enough to have any at her late age, would definitely be black-haired devils. His sultry gaze fell down her body and gave her pause.

“You look lovely.”

She smiled more broadly.

“The ivory and lace do you justice,” he told her, securing the sash of his dressing gown and turning toward the window. Hands behind his back, he looked out over the Channel waters and flexed his shoulders.

She went to stand behind him. His cologne wafted over her senses. The sage and anise aroused her need to have him take her in his arms.

“Thank you for the lovely nosegay. And my wedding ring,” she said and paused to feel the circle of tiny diamonds around her finger, “is more stunning than I thought.” She was tempted to say, *I don't need diamonds*, but stopped herself. His Great Aunt Amaryllis had cautioned her not to be self-deprecating to him. “Adam hates that in anyone, especially a woman,” the lady had warned.

“Adam, I know we have not had much time to become reacquainted, what with Parliament in session, but I am eager to begin. Our friendship was a solid one when we were young and—”

“Listen to me, Felice.” He whirled on her, his large, electric-blue eyes caressing her lips, her throat and falling to her cleavage and her pointed nipples. He inhaled and focused on her mouth. “I want you to know how grateful I am that you agreed to marry me.”

“Gratitude is wonderful, but there must be more.” More that you feel for me or you would not have asked. She reached out to touch her hand to his.

“How true.” He rubbed her fingers for a moment then jerked away. “But with us, this arrangement we have is different.”

“Yes, we were friends long before this. Trusted each other with our secrets. Read each others' little stories. Knew what the other wanted from life.”

He stared at her. “We were children, Fee. We acted like ragamuffins and tore up the countryside with our antics.”

She chuckled. "Some marriages are based on less. Ours will be founded in more." She extended her hand to cup his cheek.

He clasped her fingers. "Don't, Fee. Please. This is hard enough."

Her spine stiffened. He didn't want her? She was comely. She knew it. Squire Forester had asked for her hand last year. Months before, Sir Harold Spencer had offered. She might be thirty and a widow, but she was not ugly. Her body was svelte, her breasts perhaps too large. And aye, her hair was black as hell and not the pale froth so popular. Her skin was flawless. Most of all, she had a mind she used to write epic poems, though indeed she earned a pittance for her labors. Her invention of Miss Proper was a new ploy and her forthcoming series loosely alluding to him, a ruse—a terrible necessity to satisfy her debts. Still, she had married him, welcomed this offer because she wanted him. Not his money. Not his name. Not his position. No, she had always adored him. And never had thought to have the chance to live with him. So when the offer came, she'd grabbed it. "Whatever are you talking about, Adam?"

"You know I respect you, Fee."

"Do I?"

"Of course, you do. I like your spirit, your conversation. I even like your poetry."

I doubt you'll like my prose. She arched a brow. "Romantic nonsense, you called it when I first began."

"You are much better at it now than at twelve, and it has made you a penny or two."

"Writing is a poorly paid profession. My father paid his published authors the same as I earn today for each copy of my works." She tried for levity, but the fact that she had made more in an advance on a political scandal sheet series about him made her cold with worry. She shivered, so far from the fire and, too, so far from the warmth she had expected of him on their wedding trip. She backed toward the flames of the fireplace.

"Christ! Felice, don't stand there." His gaze flowed down her form and stuck on the juncture of her thighs.

She looked down her body. Silhouetted by the dancing red conflagration behind her, her body seemed almost bare of the transparent silk.

"Out with this, Adam. What are you telling me?"

"I married you for convenience."

She swallowed back wild disappointment. She could have sworn that a tiny part of him had wanted her in his bed.

"I knew some of your motivation was your desire for political advancement."

There. She'd been bold to say it and let him know she had heard the rumors.

He set his jaw. His eyes dimmed. "But I regret it."

"Don't." She tried for magnanimity. "I am pleased to help you."

"Pleased? No!" He looked as if he were in pain. "Hear me out. I am proud you are my wife, but I doubt you'll ever be pleased you belong to me."

"Why ever not?"

"Because, we Stanhopes have miserable marriages."

"Ah, the curse," she said matter-of-factly. "A fable of immense proportions."

"No fable, madam!"

"It is. Used by men and women to justify their own failures to make a marriage a congenial union."

"Come now, Fee. You and I are not one of your romantic heroines and heroes in your epic poems."

"Thank god. I intend we mortals do as we must to make a good marriage of what once was a solid friendship."

He raked his hair. "No, Fee. That cannot be."

"Why not?"

"This marriage will make us miserable."

"Silliness."

"It's not silly, my girl. For over a century, no Stanhope has had a happy marriage. The Stanhope wives have died of broken hearts. The men have turned bitter, some dying in their cups, others going mad. I do not wish that for you or me."

"Yet you took me anyway."

"I did. I thought when I saw you at the Brimwells' country house last month that we might escape the Curse. I saw a lovely woman of wit and wisdom. I saw someone who could be my companion and my hostess, my partner. I also saw someone who would make a compassionate mother for my boy. Georgie is two and needs petting and coddling by a woman who can discipline him and love him."

She sank her fingers into the rough velvet of Adam's dressing robe and leaned into his warm hard body. "I want to be all those things for you."

He gave a pained laugh then clutched her closer. "Don't make this harder for me."

Both brows arched as her hips met his and pressed. His cock was high and hard. Impressively so. "Darling Adam, I doubt it can get any harder."

At her double entendre, he laughed ruefully and hugged her. "I should not touch you."

"I will touch you then." She slid his robe from his shoulders

"Fee, don't."

"I want you, too. Don't you see? I have for years and years."

He smoothed her hair from her cheeks. "You are charming. You remind me of a garden." He took her lips in a sweet kiss. "Fragrant and filled with every imaginable delicacy. Ready to be plucked."

She swayed fully against him, his declarations more than she had dared hope for.

One of his hands traced her throat, one breast and the curve of her waist. "I took one look at your dusky beauty last month in Kent and was enchanted. Who could imagine little Felice could be so utterly fascinating?"

She undulated in his caress. Her eyes fell closed. He was saying everything, doing everything a loving groom should.

His hand intruded between her legs. "You are petal soft and hot."

The sound of how ready she was for him filled the room. "Wet, too," she offered.

"Like dew," he growled then bent to scoop her up into his arms and stride two steps to lay her on the bed. He loomed above her, pulling down the negligee to cup her breast and rub his lips across her skin. "And your nipples are like spun sugar." He made her arch as he sucked her into his mouth, then rucked up her hem to slide his two fingers inside her cunny. "You flow so sweetly here. How did I know you would?" he asked like a man in a trance.

Thrilled at his enchanting words, she moaned and spread her legs wide in invitation.

"No, no. I can't!" He rose to his knees and stared at her as if seeing her anew. "We will not do this."

"But—"

"No!" He bounded from the bed. "I loved you as a child. I want you to be happy. You must not care for me, nor I you. The best way to ensure that is for us never to share a bed."

"You do not wish to consummate this marriage?"

"Better this way to keep my door and my mind locked against you."

She reeled with sorrow and propped herself up on her elbows. "Not every couple who goes to bed learns to love the other." She knew that firsthand.

"Love becomes tangled with other emotions. All of them are too wild to tame."

"Adam, this curse is just so much folderol. There is no proof."

"My mother died of it. So too did Wes' and Jack's. My father's three marriages all were failures. My first was a living hell. There is no joy in loving Stanhopes."

"What if I don't love you?" She didn't, did she? "What if I just want to be bedded by you?" He blinked, appearing utterly astonished and sad, too. "The same! It matters not!"

"It remains I am still your wife."

"But in name only, Fee." He picked up his robe and strode for the door. "In name only."

* * * *

The next morning, he rose from the bed he'd never slept in and told the innkeeper to take a hot bowl of porridge and a pot of tea up to his wife's room. Then he bid the man to send a runner to the ferryman with the message that they would not sail to Jersey for their honeymoon. Adam told the man to go to the livery, too, and hire two carriages to take him and his wife back to London. Felice could ride in her own carriage. Adam would not presume to burden her with his presence after he had abandoned her last night.

Coward.

Aye, he was. He liked his life. Wanted Felice. But if he never became a cabinet minister, could he affect change? Could he help write laws to change child labor? And repeal taxation? Could he improve the welfare of men in the Army? He doubted he could accomplish any of it.

So he took the stairs up to her room like an old man burdened with infirmities of body.

When he opened the door and saw the bed made, her trunk and valise gone, he knew he had truly become an older man filled the insecurities of his poor judgments.

She was gone.

He tried to hold back the agony of his despair. He had hurt her. Sweet, shy Fee. And thus had he taken the first step toward their destruction.

She had taken the second step. She had fled him.

And so the curse was now really upon them both.

Chapter Three

The stationers' bill came first. Well, that Adam could understand. Felice was a celebrated author of epic poetry. He had never asked her how much paper she used, but by Jove from the size of this bill, she must scribble all day on the very best parchment! Without quarrel, he summarily paid the man.

Two weeks later, came the book shops' invoices. Two of them. For more than twenty pounds each. How quickly did the new Mrs. Stanhope read? Adam tapped his fingers on his desk and idly wondered, too, what she read. No matter. Not his affair. He paid the owners the sums in full.

A month later, came a bill from a milliner. The amount was small. Adam wondered what she'd ordered. A hat to wear to tea? A feathery thing for a dinner party?

And where the hell was she living anyway? Not at her own small cottage in Kent. For certain, he knew that. He had charged Reggie to check when his friend went down last week to visit his uncle in Canterbury. The place was boarded up tight as a drum.

No one hinted where Felice might be. He did not inquire of anyone else. Too risky. He'd appear desperate. Was he? No, no, absolutely not! But from the invoices, he had to conclude she was in London. Somewhere. With her cousin, Lady Dunwitty? Or her friends, the Baron Jasper Elgin and his wife, Annabelle? Respectable people even though his cousin, the hideous Drayton Howell, had begun that horrible scandal sheet, the Tell-Tale.

But a fortnight later, Adam sat in his library and glared at the newest bill. He read the address of the dressmaker and concluded that wherever the hell Felice had taken refuge, she evidently needed quite a few new clothes. A whole damn closet full. He cursed roundly. What in the world was she thinking? Would she brave society by herself?

He did not know. But he worried.

He paid the dressmaker but demanded from the proprietor a complete listing of every item Mrs. Stanhope had purchased. Two days later, he sat scanning the Frenchwoman's descriptions of them. Incensed at Fee's audacity, he shot up from his desk and strode to the window overlooking Berkeley Square. She had purchased day dresses, riding clothes, walking ensembles and four ball gowns. Four! Where the hell was she going?

Without him?

The whispers began three weeks later. The second Mrs. Stanhope had taken the waters at Bath. She called on her elderly uncle and aunt alone. She took tea with the reverend who had once served in her parish in Kent and now lived in a retirement home in Lambeth. The Tell-Tale reported that a certain Mrs. S. had dined on the fourth with that literary sponsor, the Earl of Hargrave and his wife. If this was his Mrs. S., Adam wondered what she discussed. If she spoke of him. Thought of him. Hated him.

Soon after came two more pieces of rough news.

The first came in the form of a second installment of a short story by a self-styled political observer. This pseudonymous Miss Proper published her fiction in the Tell-Tale and in this episode, the main character, a certain member of Parliament named Alfonse Starhope had forsaken his wife on the pretext of a family curse. His lady wife, said the hideous tale, considered divorcing her husband. Desertion was her justification.

If this story were true, Adam supposed he could not blame her. But still, bad form to put it about in a scandal sheet.

"I'd confront her," he told his brother, Jack, one morning as they rode home together from a late night card game at White's. "But I cannot find her!"

"I heard last night at the gaming tables that Wingate and his wife give a ball in two weeks. Your wife has accepted the invitation. Go yourself, and have it out with her."

"I will." He scowled. "I must know what the hell she's up to."

Jack chuckled. "She's doing exactly what you'd expect. She's making a life for herself without you."

"She certainly is. Inspiring this simpleton Proper to make a mockery of me."

As Jack's coachman drew the horses to a stop in front of Adam's townhouse, he gazed at Adam with pained mirth. "Sending you the bills, too."

Adam drew his frockcoat about him and grabbed his top hat. "I cannot let her continue."

"Why not? Actually, Fee has not done anything scandalous."

“Not yet.” He climbed out of the carriage and faced his brother. “I married her to create the impression of stability and peace. Instead, she appears to be preparing herself to navigate society alone and on my money, as well.”

“What will you do about it then? Stop paying her bills?” Jack pursed his lips, rueful. “You’ve set that precedent. And she does not appear to need an allowance. Her earnings from her book of poems suffice.”

“I’ll find a way.” Adam checked the expression of his oldest brother. “I made my bed.” And it’s cold. Empty. “I’d rather lie in it with her under my own roof than have her gallivanting about alone.”

“She’s not known to be biddable. And you’re not known to be flexible.”

“But I am a good negotiator. I will use all my skills and do the thing that is most politic.”

“What might that be?” Jack snorted. “Haul her home in chains?”

“Seduce her.”

* * * *

Adam loathed balls. They were lavish things meant to force a man to chat and dance with any brainless chit or matronly drone he could not avoid.

For two hours now, he had grown weary of holding up the walls. If Felice were indeed here, it would not do for him to take the floor with anyone but her. But damnation, if he could find her in this throng.

Grumbling, he shot his cuffs and headed for the punch bowl. Dinner had not yet been called, and his stomach was growling. He should have eaten something as his man had suggested, but he’d been too eager to get here and look for his wife.

“Where the hell are you?” he muttered to himself, wondering if Clarence Wingate and his wife were mistaken about Felice’s acceptance of their invitation. He took a draught of his wine and frowned. What if Felice had taken ill? A headache? The vapors? Ba! Not Felice. Too ferociously healthy. He sipped more of his wine and recalled the way she’d looked at him that night in the inn. Her golden eyes had swum with desire as he put his hands on her delectable body and tasted her nipples. Her plush lips had parted in need as he stroked her cunt. The memory of how silken her skin was inside her swollen labia had him tossing back the rest of his wine.

Stifling a groan, he backed up against a column, and his gaze drifted. He lifted his chin to acknowledge his Great Aunt Amaryllis across the room. She spoke with some tall, lush thing in

diaphanous red. The woman, her back to him, had hair of purest black that curled at her nape. She wore it short, the fashion in France now the rage in London among the truly daring. This elegant creature also wore the Empire style, which he wagered, would cup magnificent breasts to tempting advantage. He had the roguish impulse to circle round the two women to see if he might enjoy other comely views of her figure. But she was animated in her conversation. Responding to his aunt, she turned to their other companion, Adam's vociferous opponent on matters of funding the army in the Peninsula, Drayton Howell.

Adam was about save the ladies from this odious man when he spied his aunt beckoning him with small, surreptitious gestures. He strode over, gave the ladies a small bow and froze.

"Good evening, Adam," his aunt bid him as Howell briefly acknowledged Adam. "How are you, dearest?" She offered her wrinkled cheek for him to kiss. "Adam?"

He could not move. This, this apparition in delectable cherry was his wife?

"Kiss her, dearest. Both cheeks," his aunt instructed him, scarcely above a whisper. "There. That's a darling man. How are you?"

"How am I?" I'm apoplectic! "I hardly know what to say! My heavens, Fee, you were lovely before, but now..."

Her lush mouth slowly widened in a smile of welcome. Her golden gaze danced over his features. "I am honored, Adam. I believe you know Lord Howell."

Adam bid the man good evening, wondering why this lout was chatting with his wife and his aunt. He wanted this creature nowhere near Felice.

"Have not seen your wife in a while, eh, Stanhope?" the man asked with immense satisfaction.

"She took the waters at Bath," Adam bit off, trying for a nonchalance he did not feel.

Damn this man.

"She came with me, Lord Howell," Aunt Amaryllis announced with her righteous brand of hauteur.

Adam tried not to gape at this revelation. Fee has taken refuge with my aunt?

"Did she?" Howell asked, intrigued.

Felice's smile for Howell was strained. "Forgive us, my lord, but—"

"Miss Proper should report that in her stories," he ventured.

"I think not, Lord Howell. Excuse us, will you?" She cut the man and faced Adam and his aunt. "You look distressed, Adam. I assure you that—"

He took her arm. "What the hell are you doing talking to him?"

"Adam," cautioned his Aunt, "not so loud, my boy."

Felice frowned. "Howell approached us," she shot back in a whisper.

"How do you know him?" he persisted.

"He bought my father's office ten years ago."

"Where he now publishes that rag?"

"The Tell-Tale. Yes. He bought out my father, printers, typeset racks, staff and all. Oh, my. Smile, Adam," his wife demanded in a stern tone. "Sir Henry Ulmsly approaches."

"Sir Hen—" His brain hardly worked. What the deuce was she rambling on about? "Ah. Good evening, Sir Henry." Adam bowed in deference to the man who was second in seniority in his political party. "How wonderful to see you out."

"Thank you, Stanhope. Ladies," the older gentleman greeted Amaryllis and Felice. "Nice party, say what? The orchestra is fine, too. Tried it yet, Stanhope?" The man glared at him, the stare though his monocle emphasizing his suggestion Adam take Fee out to go down the dance.

Did the man read Miss Proper and question Adam's fidelity?

"No, sir." I've only just found my errant wife.

"Should show her off and stay away from Howell. I must say, Mrs. Stanhope, you are looking lovely. Charming gown, don't you think, Stanhope?"

Adam gritted his teeth, but managed to sound polite. "Stunning."

"Thank you, Sir Henry," his wife replied to the compliment with radiant joy. "I chose it especially for this evening."

Did you now? Adam was going to extract her from this assembly and show her just what he had chosen for this evening. A good spanking. A chance to lock her up and throw away the key, that's what!

"Well done, Mrs. Stanhope." The old man made a gesture to dismiss himself. "I want your opinion on the funding for the Spanish Campaign. Your husband," Ulmsly addressed Felice with a solicitous voice, "is becoming the foremost expert on the Army's preparedness."

"Indeed, Sir Henry," she replied to Adam's surprise. "His calculations on regularity of transport of foodstuffs and ammunition are ones you should take heed of."

Ulmsly laughed. "Know them, do you?"

She nodded. "My business is to understand my husband's positions."

"I think you are right, madam! And so we shall heed them, too. See you next Wednesday, Adam. Mrs. Stanhope. Pray, excuse me. Wonderful to talk with you."

He was no sooner gone than Adam stared into Felice's golden eyes and demanded an explanation. "How do you know about my views of supply?"

She lifted one elegant, creamy and nearly bare shoulder. "I read the papers."

He was gratified she cared about such things. "Come with me to the garden."

"And if I do not wish to come?"

"I shall throw you over my shoulder and carry you there."

"You would not dare!"

He made a move to pick her up, and she yelped.

"I'm coming," she told him between tight lips. "Take my arm."

Chapter Four

Her perfume swirled around him. Lilacs? Lilies? Who the hell knew? Whatever it was, he inhaled it and understood his sanity had not survived the assault. As they had traversed the terrace and navigated the maze of boxwoods, his temper rose.

With the moonlight brilliant and the breeze bustling through the evergreens, he drew Felice through the lanes of the complex maze and found a stone bench.

"Please sit down, Fee." He was going to try to be more than civil. After all, he had rehearsed this so many times, he knew the speech by heart. But the way Fee looked, the way she had changed her appearance unnerved him. Her hair made him wonder about the texture as her curls ruffled in the wind. Her smile made him question if he had truly tasted those lips on their wedding day. Her gown made him ponder what it would be like to take it off her, measure those marvelous breasts in his hands and suck her nipples again. And if he once more did that, would not he want to insert his very hard and heavy cock inside that wet warm chat of hers?

"I am fortunate to have found you," he declared, "and only by chance. You have done a good job of sequestering yourself. Why the hell have you been with my aunt Amaryllis?"

She lifted a shoulder. "She invited me."

"How? When?"

"The day after I returned from Dover," she said in a voice he could barely hear. "A friend of hers saw me engage a room in a small lodging house in Jermyn Street and told her. She came to call on me and insisted I be her guest."

"I am grateful to her," he declared. "She kept you safe and secure."

"And was discreet about it, too."

"Damnably so! I could not find you!"

"You looked?" she asked, her luminous eyes wide and quite stunned.

"Of course, I did. I worried."

"Sweet of you. But there was no need. Aunt was kind."

"For that, too, I owe her great thanks. Did she inspire you to buy the new wardrobe?"

"To change my hair, as well. Do you like it?"

"I do," he admitted. "I suppose she also told you to send me your bills?"

She threw him a merry smile. "That she did."

"I do not begrudge you paper or books or even a new wardrobe. You are my wife. But to come out in public now, with Miss Proper mocking me—"

She bristled and turned her face up to his. "I will not be a prisoner of your decisions or your curse. You pushed me aside, Adam."

"I did it for your own happiness."

"And your own freedom." She lifted her chin, valor suffusing her expression even though tears swam in her eyes.

"Fee! You think I have mistresses?" He was shocked she thought that of him.

"Don't you?"

"No! I've not had one since last winter. I gave her up long before I saw you again at the Billings'. The cursed Miss Proper should write that instead of the drivel she pens!"

Fee blew a gust of air up to ruffle her bangs. "Ending an arrangement with another woman is too bland a story to sell papers," she grumbled then rolled a shoulder. "It's cold out here. Say what you want and be done."

He removed his coat and whirled it around her shoulders. But he could not seem to let her go and by the lapels, drew her against him. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, Fee."

"Felice," she corrected him, but when he shook his head, she affirmed, "My name is Felice."

"Very well." He swallowed, closed his eyes. "I do not wish to hurt you...Felice."

Her bosom heaved. Her scent rose up to his nostrils and made him tremble with want and shame. The look in her eyes castigated him for his behavior. "Darling, I don't mind paying your bills. Hell, I'll buy a hundred gowns. If they are all as gorgeous as this one, I won't pinch a penny."

She snorted. "Now you are being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not." With one hand, he combed her hair back from her cheeks. Her curls twined about his fingers like strands of Sian silk. Her voluptuous lips pursed, tormenting him. Did

he suddenly want the one woman he should not have? Who could not make him happy? "This is madness."

"What is?" She searched his gaze. "To live apart?"

"No. Yes!" Her lips were distracting him, befuddling his logic. And he did have logic for this, didn't he?

"Adam, it should be clear to you now that I have more pride than to accept a marriage in name only."

"I made a mistake." He hauled her closer, and the lightning shock of her body against his brought back memories of their embrace in the inn in Dover. "I am so sorry and I wish I could undo all this. But the curse is working and—"

"Ever the curse." She pushed him away. "I will hear no more of it. Foolishness like that is for idiots."

He grabbed her, pressing her nearer. The warmth of her, the way her curves fit his so snugly made him suppress a moan. "Tell me you are happy as you are."

She stuck her nose in the air even as fresh tears landed on her lower lashes. But she glared at him. "Tell me you are happy as you are!"

"Hell, no!" he roared. "I worry about you. Where you are? How you are? I scoured the town for you. Bath, too. Then I find you here, out in the world, looking ravishing and too damn appealing." He wanted to have her, be inside her. Her body set his so aflame. "Holding you does horrible things to me."

She tried to step backwards. "So don't."

He wouldn't let her go.

"If the curse is working," she said on a wisp of sound, "why are you compelled to embrace me?"

He sent his fingers through her short hair. "Part of the curse is an unavoidable urgency to take the other."

"To bed?" she asked, bewildered but thrilled at the same time.

"Yes, yes," he replied, her mouth too close. "Conflicting but true."

She wrapped her arms around his waist. Her breasts brushed his chest. "What happens if the couple fights the urge?"

His lips descended to hers. Damn, they were plush as eiderdown.

"Adam?" she asked between meetings of their lips. "What happens if you..."

He took her mouth, held her head securely as he ravished her completely, lips and tongue and teeth. God, she felt divine.

"Oh. That's what happens," she sighed, her eyes shining in the moonlight. "Stunning. May we do that again?"

He growled and draped her backward over his arm. "Christ, yes," he murmured as he sampled her willing mouth once more. "This, too." He sent kisses down her chin, to her throat and at the center of her cleavage. "You smell of roses." His fingers found a nipple beneath the delicate fabric of her gown. "Your breasts look like dark, rich flowers." His mouth found her areola and sucked it into his mouth. "Did you know?"

She cried out. "Never."

"And this." He braced himself against the bench with one leg while he gathered up her skirts with the other. "I have to feel how you want me here."

He found her nether hair, light and frothy, traced her seam and drove one long finger up into her sopping wet channel. He cursed, kissed her on the lips and knew the utter lunacy he'd sampled in the inn in Dover.

"Yes, have me and damn the curse!" She wiggled up against him, clutching his lapels.

The night, the music from the ballroom and her perfume blended into a craving he did not understand. He set her to the bench, undid his flies, bent and lifted her hem to expose her legs. Pretty, pink, beribboned garters held up her stockings. Lovely the way they framed her taut thighs. Stunning that she wore no drawers and did not blanch as he stared at the dark feathering of her pussy. He bent and put his mouth to her chat, his tongue intruding for a sample of her heavy musk.

She bucked and he soothed her.

"There, there, you shall have more." And so shall I. He reached inside his breeches, his cock springing free of the confines. He stroked it once. She shuddered. Smiling, he could not resist another taste of her cream. He spread her labia wide and in the moonlight, saw how her body glistened in want. Growling, he sent his tongue inside her channel.

She mewled and begged for more.

He gave it, his strong tongue laving her thick juices as his fingers sought her tender button. Opened wide for him, she trembled. "Adam, please."

"I know, my darling," he crooned and bent to suck her swollen bud into his mouth. As she ground her teeth, he rose to watch her face transformed by ecstasy. "You like my mouth on you. And I?" He bent to kiss her nub again. "I love to eat you. You are so giving."

"Oh!" She grabbed his shoulders. "What is this inside me? A coiling, a storm."

"You have not felt this before?"

"Never."

Joy overwhelmed him. "This is the energy, the drive to take me inside you." He sucked on her tiny bud once, twice, three times until to his delight and shock, she broke apart in an orgasm that had her keening. If he could make her come like that with only his mouth, what would she do naked in his bed with his cock buried deep inside her?

She pressed a hand to her stomach. "Oh, this is wonderful! Umm. Heavenly!"

He sent two fingers up inside her slick channel.

"Fee," he moaned, his head dropped to her lower abdomen. From here, he could inhale again the aroma of her desire for him, and in gratitude, he stroked her molten core. "You flow like summer rain. I need to be inside you. Now." He never rushed a partner, but this sudden urgency was startling and demanding.

"Adam," she beseeched him as her fingers reached between her legs and searched for his shaft. "There. Oh, my, it is large, isn't it? Come put that inside me."

He rose up on his knees then up to his feet. He brushed back her skirts, hooked her legs up over his forearms and positioned his cock at the entrance to her beautiful cunt. This position he adored was one he'd learned quite young. Meant for a woman who gave her body to her lover with endless cream flowing over her lips and coating her thighs. He had the tip of his penis just at the opening to her dark entrance and conversation drifted their way.

He froze.

"Adam, Adam." Fee was begging him in a whisper. "Don't stop. I—"

"Quiet, darling."

Voices became louder. And headed their way.

He flipped her skirts down. "Fee, someone is coming."

"No!" she moaned and rather loudly, too.

He winced, the denial of paradise with her a torment in his groin. "We will continue—"

"Promise?" She sat up with his help, looking at him dazed.

"Absolutely!"

She blinked, her attention suddenly on his very straight, very ready and very unhappy cock. "My," she exclaimed and licked her lower lip. "That is lovely."

"You are making me daft," he muttered, reassembled his flies and tried to get her to stand.

When she did, her gaze was clear and riveted on him. "Take me home with you."

Pulling her against him, he floated in a haze of sexual need. When he had planned to seduce her, he had expected she to be the only one enchanted. "Yes, by god."

"No one will know," she offered like a conspirator. "Not anyone. Not even The curse."

Chuckling, he kissed her mouth.

"So that's how I taste?" she murmured, eyes closed, her tongue tracing her lips. "How do you taste?"

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. What a treasure she was. "Want to learn?"

"I do! Yes, yes. Why not?"

"No one will know," he said, though he didn't have the mindfulness at the moment to understand why he said that.

"No one will care," she replied, as she nestled against him, and he led her from the maze.

He smiled, too damn pleased with himself and his desire to feast on her. He knew he courted disaster to take her home, to his bed and another orgasm. But hell, he knew now that whatever she had felt as he'd eaten her luscious pussy and stroked her core, he had to have a piece of her the way a man should. The way a husband should. The way he was entitled. Damn the curse! Its chaos was working, but at the moment, he did not care. If they were meant to suffer more than they had already, it was sheer torment to be without her now.

They rounded the side of the house, found one of Wingate's footmen and told him to find Adam's coach. Within minutes, Adam's servant pulled up the brougham. Once the door was closed, Felice came willingly to his arms.

"Kiss me again," she pleaded, her elegant fingers splaying up into the curls at the back of his head. "I've wondered what your flavor was. Licorice? Molasses?" She put her mouth to his and enjoyed his texture then let her tongue plunge inside.

"Felice," he murmured as he fondled one peaking nipple through her gown, "you undo my resolve to be courteous and slow. I believe you are a witch."

She threw her head back for a full-throated laugh. "Comes with curses."

He chuckled with her. "We're ruining your dress."

"You'll buy me another."

"I will give you anything you want," he whispered as she caressed his thigh.

"Anything?"

Shocked to laughter, he nodded. "Tell me what you wish."

A light flashed in her eyes. "An education in the art of love."

The coach rolled to a stop. The horses stomped and snorted.

Stunned, Adam stared at her. She was his wife. His very charming, giving wife. She seemed sensual, too. But he had been duped once before. His instinct here however said she spoke the truth.

The coachman knocked on the door. "Sir?"

"Thank you, Brown," Adam called to his coachman, but to Fee, he warned, "Be aware that my gift to you will be a generous one to myself, as well. It is most improper to take advantage of a woman."

"I am not just any woman. I am your wife, and I wish a mutual pleasure for us, Adam."

She could not have spoken more persuasive words. He grasped her hand and kissed it. Then two of them straightened their clothes quickly. Once repaired, he rapped on the door for Brown to open it. He descended and held out his hand for Felice. "You may brush down the horses and retire for the evening, Brown."

The man flashed him an astonished look.

Adam, for all his lust and haste to get Fee into his bed, understood his man's sudden reluctance to proceed. "This is Mrs. Stanhope, Brown. She will be spending the evening."

His servant checked Fee's expression. She summoned the ability to smile politely at the man and acknowledge him suitably as the lady of the household should, despite the rather odd circumstances of their introduction. Turning with a regal demeanor, she gathered up her skirts and preceded Adam to his front door.

He grinned at her social graces.

In the morning, I shall worry about what we have done. But for now, Adam flung open the door to his townhouse, whisked Fee up in his arms and told the butler to go to bed. The placid servant nodded and shut the door as Adam bounded up the stairs to his bedroom.

Yes, damn the curse, for one night. He'd take a bit of bliss for himself and make more for his wife, as well, as he educated her in the finer arts of making love.

Chapter Five

Felice hung on to Adam with feral hunger. She'd meant to be his good and obedient wife, in bed and out. She'd imagined he might care for her, like her as a bed partner beyond the pleasantries of their friendship. But this wildness in him thrilled her.

As he let her slide down his torso while he opened his bedroom door, she leaned against him and went eagerly with him as he led her inside. But she came to a halt, surveying his sanctuary. A Stanhope bedroom. A legendary den of private pleasures. The master suite of a Stanhope was reputed to be the one place on earth a woman could indulge in the most mindless intimacies she could imagine. If some women rued the day they entered one and fell in love with a Stanhope, far too many regaled others with the tales of decadence. True, those women had been paramours. Not wives of Stanhopes. Never wives.

Adam cupped her face. "Felice, do you now have second thoughts?"

Tearing her gaze from the red velvet canopy and counterpane over the massive bed, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "No. Not I. I thought about my decision to marry you long and hard. I am committed to you and making a happy marriage."

He swept one arm around her waist and grinning against her mouth said, "I am delighted, too, you are willing to brave a man many call wild."

"Mr. Wild, I've heard of you. A talented politician. But brash, eager and tormenting to women. Just like your brothers."

"My brothers, Arrogant and Difficult?"

She chuckled. "What's in a name? I know they have other redeeming qualities, just as you do."

He walked backwards, leading her further into the room rich in ruby velvets and damask, punctuated by gold appointments. "Contrary to what you may have heard or read, no other woman has ever been here. Not in this room and not in my bed."

"But your first wife?"

His eyes darkened, his lashes dusting his rigid cheekbones. His voice was a rasp. "She was never here."

Felice was filled with such joy at knowing her uniqueness to him that she was momentarily speechless.

He stared at her. "I want you to know that in the morning, if you wish to go, I will not forbid you."

His largesse tore at her. Was he that magnanimous to take a woman to bed and let her decide if she would leave...or return to him? Wonderful for a woman's independence, but what if that woman was his wife? And she wanted to remain?

Felice shook off the dismay of tomorrow's choice. Instead, she put her hands to his chest, the fine wool of his waistcoat smooth and scintillating to her senses. "I will tell you my decision then."

His eyes narrowed on her mouth, and he stepped against her, his hand at her nape supporting her as he leaned over and kissed her with ravishing intent. At that moment, she gave up all caution, worry and dismay. She was here where she had longed to be. And he?

He was taking her mouth, treasuring it, exploring it, absorbing it into his entire being. She let him and met him with her own desires. Her arms clutched him closer and her heart beat faster. Her lips, her breasts, her belly, her loins turned to flame.

He broke away with a gasp.

"Allow me," he told her as he spun her around and with nimble flicks unbuttoned her bodice. She could tell his fingers faltered. Shaking herself in anticipation, she stepped out of her slippers. No sooner did she discard her earbobs, then he had her spun about again, her red sarcenet gown slithering over her curves to the floor. With a few deft strokes, she had the two hooks of her chemise undone, the thing gaping open. With an indrawn breath, he slid his warm hands beneath the thin fabric as he pushed it from her shoulders and over her breasts. He discarded her petticoat next.

She dared not move a hair on her head.

Silently, he stood there for a very long moment as he surveyed the naked display she afforded him. Clad only in her thigh-high ivory stockings held up by garters, she knew she displayed every charm and every flaw she possessed.

"My darling wife," he said on a broken voice, "you are quite the loveliest creature I have ever seen."

"Please, Adam, never tease me."

"Tease you?" he got out. "I promise never to do that." His eyes gleamed. "At least not with words."

She grinned at him. "And how will you do it otherwise?"

"You are the tease! Come to me!" He caught her up in his arms again and strode with her to a huge winged chair where he laid her across his lap. "I shall show you."

"I fear," she ventured when she sat there before him quite naked and he fully clothed, "you have me at a disadvantage." She flicked his cravat then put her fingers to the buttons of his waistcoat. "I cannot sit here nearly naked while you are still trussed up like a Christmas goose."

He settled his arms on the rests of the chair and sat back. "Have at me, then."

Emboldened, she got to her feet, but he must have thought she was about to leave, for he seized her wrist. She merely intended to straddle his legs. An impulsive decision, she knew, that might offend his sensibilities and induce him to throw her out. Or bind her closer.

Even as she gathered her courage and sat down on his thighs facing him, she inhaled and knew the fragrance of her desire for him rose to his nostrils. They flared wide. His eyes fell closed. "You are a temptress."

"I'm glad you think so," she crooned as she went to work on his cravat, vest and shirt to tug them off and drop them to the floor. His chest was marvelously furred with black down. She ran her fingers through the softness.

He caught her hands and warned her with a look.

"You have touched me twice now," she explained with a raw courage she summoned from somewhere deep inside, "and I have not had the pleasure of reciprocating."

"You are bold."

"You wish me prudish?" she dared him.

"Never. Your eagerness is refreshing and requires me to summon the greatest discipline. I will teach you the fullest pleasures, if you will allow me my way."

"Totally."

He brought her palm to his mouth and buried his lips there. "Such trust, I will honor."

At his declaration, she flexed her derriere. Her juices inside her gushed, and she wondered if she would embarrass herself flowing with too much need of him.

"Did your first husband give you any lessons in love?" he asked her as he flicked his tongue to the center of her palm.

"Wallace was kind," she admitted, not quite knowing what to add that would be polite and yet informative. Her knowledge of sexual congress was limited to the fast couplings she'd had with her husband and the more appealing writings of her fellow female writers in the Risque Society at home in Kent.

"Kind?" Adam asked on a thread of sound. "Spread your fingers, darling. There. Elegant," he crooned, as he inserted the tip of his tongue in the hollow between each finger.

She undulated in his lap and pressed her lips together in a moan.

He smiled but kept at his task, picking up her other hand and licking each space between her fingers there. "I shall be kind, too."

She purred, a pure guttural sound of delight.

His brilliant eyes sparkled at her as she put one of her hands to his shoulder and the other to the muscle over one of his dark nipples.

"I will be slow, too. Was Wallace slow?"

"No. Quick, clumsy and very boring."

"Is that so?" Adam asked with measured intensity and took to lazily examining her cleavage and both breasts. "You seem very excited."

"I am," she confessed on a wee sound. "You make me so."

His smile was sensual, dark and destructive to every maidenly instinct she'd yet retained. "I want to make you as wild as I am."

She shifted on his thighs. "I want to be."

"Do you?" he asked lightly as if he knew the answer. His hand cupped one breast. She felt her body swell with want.

"You have beautiful heavy breasts."

She swallowed.

"I like the way they tip up toward me."

She gulped.

He grinned, and a dimple appeared in the corner of his mouth. "Did Wallace fondle them?"

"No."

"He should have."

She nodded. "I agree."

He arched mischievous brows. "They deserve devotion." One of his thumbs brushed across a nipple. It beaded. Her pussy pulsed. "They should be treasured." He pinched her. "So that they harden, like this." He cupped her other breast and gave it the same homage. "They should be aroused so that they swell and bud. Like this." He tweaked one and brushed the other then bent and took one in his mouth.

Felice bowed up into his embrace as he sucked on her and made her moan with abandon.

"Gossamer."

"You like them, then," she got out. "Oh, I was so afraid."

"Of what?" he asked on a whisper as he took the nipple in his mouth and ran his tongue around the areola.

"That they would be too big. Not the fashion to be too well endowed, you know."

"I don't give a damn about the fashion," he growled and caught her nipple between his teeth then played with it with his talented tormenting tongue. "I only want to make you moan for me. Will you, darling? Moan?"

"I have already!" she blurted as he pushed her breasts together and bit one then the other.

He pulled back so quickly, she cried out. But on his dark handsome face was a fierce expression. "Undo my flies."

Her hands shook, but she worked diligently at his buttons. Beneath the fabric, she saw the breadth of his penis. Large and proud, his cock peered out at her as she pushed aside his trousers and his small clothes. Tall, rigid and red, his shaft wept for her.

She grinned down at it. His cock was a beautiful piece. She slid her fingers over the tip, and he grunted.

"Did I hurt you?" She jumped back.

"No. Only made me want you more. Do it again."

She did.

He made an animal sound in the back of his throat.

"Again?" she asked, eager as a child.

He groaned. "All you like."

She cupped his heavy balls still encased in his breeches and ran her thumb over his weeping slit. "This is wonderful that you allow me this."

He cleared his throat and laughed. "I permit you to do anything you wish."

"Really?" She could not have asked for a greater favor.

"Truly." He arched both dark brows. "What would you like to do with me?"

She continued to caress his cock but bent to lick one of his nipples. "This," she said and felt a moan vibrate in his chest. "And this," she told him as she sucked on the other nipple.

"What a nymph you are!"

A nymph for a satyr. "You won't hate me?" she asked, panicked that he might reject her for her advances.

He yanked her closer, her tender nipples boring into his rocklike chest. "Hate you?" he barked. "You come to me with this giving body and this open mind, and you think I will refuse you?"

Trepidation niggled at her resolve. "Women are not supposed to be so forward."

"In England, yes. But in other lands?" he told her as he splayed the fingers of both hands up into the crown of her head and drew her near to speak on her lips. "In other lands, a wife is expected to be an equal partner in her husband's bed. She can learn about pleasures and revel in them. So, too, can she ask for them."

"I want to do those things. I want to be a wife like that."

"Do you, my darling?" He gazed straight into her eyes.

"I am not a woman who simpers and demurs."

"Then you are one of a kind." He wound one of her curls around a finger. "And if you wish to give pleasure as well, then..."

"To you? I do."

He studied her a moment, and if he measured her veracity, she welcomed it. For what she told him was true. With no other could she have embarked on such an intimate journey. No other did she know so well. So comfortably.

"Well then, you shall have what you wish. No coddling. Only lessons in love." He shifted beneath her, his heavy balls and long penis filling her hands. "Stand up, my sweet."

She slid off his lap and stood before him, her breasts aching for his mouth, her pussy dripping cream along her thighs. Her toes wiggled in her stockings, digging into the carpet in expectation.

“To love another’s body, you must first learn to love your own, Felice. Touch your breasts for me.”

She tilted her head, not sure she had heard him.

His turbulent gaze seized hers. “Do it.”

She lifted her breasts, thumbed her nipples and bit her lower lip as a shot of satisfaction rammed through her loins.

“Circle your nipples. There, feel how they swell and point. Tell me in your own words, darling, what you think of that?”

She caught a breath. “I like it. Love the feel of them puckering. Tingling. I need the sensation. Need more of it.”

“Pinch yourself.”

She did and bucked.

“Very nice. Again, my sweet.”

She did and moaned. Her eyes drifted shut.

“Superb. Now stroke your ribs. Yes. And your hips. Strong hips.”

“Not too wide?” she asked, eager for more approval, lost in her own caresses.

“No. Hips are for a man to hold. Yours are lush, meant to have a man’s kiss here.” He bent and placed his lips at the hollow of her hip near her thatch of hair. He gripped her, his fingers sinking into her buttocks. “You smell divine, too.” He kissed her once again. “Now thread your fingers through your pretty pussy hair, my darling. Yes, like that. Splendid.”

“Adam?” She pressed her thighs together, her cunny slick with her juices now and pulsing over and over. “Is this wrong to enjoy?”

“Not at all, my dearest. You prepare yourself for my touch, my kiss, my cock inside your luscious body. Now, be a good wife and spread your legs apart. That’s good. You want me, sweet. Say it.”

“I want you. I flow with need for you.” She was opening her lower lips, delving along the smooth skin, silky with creamy fluid and so sensitive to her own touch. She could not find any satisfaction suddenly, and she massaged the nubby spot he’d caressed in the garden. She could not stroke it quickly enough. “What is this?”

"A bundle of nerves meant to heighten your pleasure. There, you see? You buck and thrash so artlessly. Do it again."

She complied and thrilled to her own touch. "This is torment."

"Because you are aroused now, prepared and eager to be filled by me."

Her eyes shot open, and she saw him, his cock in one hand caressing the tip which gave off drops of fluid. "Send two fingers deep inside yourself."

She gaped at him.

He smiled with gentle reassurance. "Do it, darling. You will be pleased. Have you not been by what I have taught you thus far?"

She sent two fingers deep into her core and found no words to define the sensations that raged through her.

"What do you feel?"

"Wet. Swollen. Wanton!"

He chuckled. "Now stop."

She froze. Then she watched him stand and step out of his shoes, breeches and hose. Naked now as she, he wrapped one arm around her waist and sent one hand traveling over a breast, a nipple, her belly button to her slit to caress the nub of nerves. She had had the pleasure of his fingers inside her before. This time, she absorbed even wilder pleasure from his caresses.

"I feel that demand building once more," she said on a tremulous voice. "What is that?"

"Your urge to our ecstasy," he told her as he insinuated his hand deeper into her cunny. "You come so easily, darling." He stroked one special place along her inner walls, and she tilted up her hips into his hand. "Your husband never pleased you to completion, did he?"

She shook her head. "No, never this wondrous feeling. Oh! Adam!"

He went to his knees. "Open your thighs, my sweet. I want to lick you."

"No! I can't!" Was he mad? Was she for doing it?

"Good. Let me roll you open, darling." And then he put his mouth to her private places and tasted her with a dancing tongue.

She clutched his shoulders. "Adam, I cannot stand."

"Mmm, of course you can, sweet. Christ, you are drenched in cream." He licked her again, rolled her open more widely, and the cool air of the room hit her slick flesh.

"Adam?"

"Yes, darling?" he got the words out between titillating kisses to her cunny.

"I...I love this."

She could have sworn she could feel him smile against her skin.

"I know you do, pet." He sent two fingers inside her cunt and stroked her. "You would not be so wet or swollen, so soft or supple if you did not want me badly."

"I need more," she demanded.

"You need my cock. Inside here." He massaged her inner walls. "Tell me that."

"I want you. Buried deep within me," she said to the rhythm of his caresses. "Now!"

He pushed her to the chair he had vacated, spread her out, her cunt open to him, her thighs out wide and lifted her knees to drape over the armrests.

Beyond reason, she marveled at her wanton position as he said, "Watch me eat you," and bent to put his handsome mouth to her pink glistening cunt. "Watch me lick your lovely clitoris," he put his lips to her nub of nerves. She yelped, but he settled her with two hands to her inner thighs. "Watch me suck your pretty lips."

One hand to the chair cushion, she writhed. "If you don't fuck me soon, I shall die."

At her use of the four letter word no woman uttered, she gasped. He lifted his face to stare at her.

She was done now. He'd hate her. Reject her. Leave her in this maddening state, howling with sexual deprivation.

"My darling wife, you astonish me with your vocabulary."

"I know I am impetuous and—"

"And delightful!" He chuckled and rose up on his knees. "See how your pretty pussy cries for me inside you." He took one finger to scoop her cream from her cunny and raise it to show her, then sucked it from his finger. "I want you now, Felice." His face went rigid in stark need as he took his cock in one hand and put it to the entrance to her core. "You are frank. And lusty."

He sank inside her with a slow drive. He stretched her channel wide, his shaft hot, satin iron. She threw her head back and let out a cry of fulfillment.

When she looked down, he had his eyes squeezed shut, his teeth gritted. The ecstasy she saw on his face as he opened his eyes and began to move in her, astonished her. He seemed transported, focused only on some ferocious quest and driven to a rampaging release. He moved like liquid fire inside her tense and yearning channel.

Her cunny swelled. She sought to hold him inside her.

“Darling,” he objected, “you are so swollen, so tight, I cannot move. Let loose, my pet, or we will have no ending that...there. There!” He grunted. “My god! There. You are talented at this, do you know?”

“No!” She swallowed loudly. “Don’t stop. You won’t, will you?” She could not help herself from watching how his long red cock disappeared inside her cunt and came out, shining with her juices then drove inside once more. “Never stop.”

He laughed through his exertions.

She chuckled, too, but caught herself short, as he pumped inside her.

“Never,” he said, “made love to a woman who was laughing.”

A wave of ferocious need rolled over her. “Laughter be damned, Adam Stanhope! I want to scream.”

He grabbed both her wrists and held them to the cushion. “Allow me then to help you.” He drove into her then with such a thunderous rhythm she felt the full length of his rod claiming her to the hilt and heard her juices sluicing over him. It ripped through her as wave after wave of the most glorious pressure built and pounded through her loins. She broke apart in the deluge, vibrating in the storm.

He rammed her in repeated thrusts, head thrown back, transported in a fury of his own making. He cried out, as he released his own essences into her.

At last. She drifted in euphoria. She was his wife. In deed as well as word.

She melted backward against the chair. One hand sought his arm as she stroked him in languid repletion.

He withdrew his body from hers in a slow glide that had her moaning in protest.

He gathered her into his arms. “I know, my darling. My body fits so well in yours.”

She licked her lower lip. “Again?” was all she could manage to think of.

He snorted. “Again, yes, we will. You have the penchant for multiple orgasms, my pretty.” He planted a kiss at her temple. “And I will fuck you until you tell me no.”

She pressed her thighs together to suppress her desire for another bout with his cock inside her. “You will not disappoint me?”

“Eager woman,” he took her mouth in a savage kiss. “I will not disappoint you. Or myself.”

Chapter Six

She was a succulent piece.

He lay awake beside her for hours, enjoying the sight of her voluptuous body in the abandon of sleep. Her large, perfect nipples, her firm breasts. Her rounded stomach. Her thatch of pubic hair. Thick and dark as the hair on her head, her pussy was a beautiful cat. He could not stop himself from stroking her there as she slept. Still swollen from their romps, her cunt gripped his fingers and made him hard and hungry for her.

Luscious creature that she was, she'd purred in response even as he'd brought to bed water and soap to bathe her. So moved by his cleansing, she'd let him caress her until she rode his hand and begged him to possess her once again with his cock. He'd had not the will to refuse her but had taken his shaft in hand and watched it sink inside her hot walls until he swore she was replete and he milked dry.

How many times had he taken her last night?

He stared at her. Her arms flung out in repose, her expressive lips parted, her large golden eyes closed, she was an erotic sight for only him. His heart bounded with pride. How often had he taken her to the ecstasy she'd asked for and deserved? He grinned and brushed his fingertips over her navel to the top of her seam. Should he make her come again? She came with such abandon. Every time he touched her. Never had that happened to him here in England. Not even with the woman he had once thought he adored.

Sarah crossed his mind like a ghost. Her specter matched the woman who, alive, had transformed to a lying, manipulative unfaithful creature within a few months of their marriage.

He climbed out of bed and made for the balcony. Pale dawn lined the sky. The translucent yellow reminded him of Sarah's hair, and in contrast, the deep blue recalled her eyes.

At once, the horror of their marriage came rushing back to him like the hideous nightmare it had been.

Sarah Ramsey had been the fairest debutante of her Season. Petite, quick and coy, she had interested any young buck who had a mind to marry. Why Adam had found her attractive after his many years in China, he could not say for certain. Perhaps, he was simply ready to marry. She had been lovely. Celebrated. The picture of youth and health. He had known her briefly when she was but a child. Then he had left for Hong Kong and his tenure with his cousin in the export company. But Adam had never delved too deeply beneath the surface of this charming doll who danced at the assemblies and commented with some intelligence over politics and books.

Beneath that façade, Sarah had been childish and vain. Worse, she'd craved attention. Yet even he, for all his knowledge of yin-yang intimacies of sexual congress, could not bring her to orgasm. That had been a harbinger of her other petty traits. She'd been too stiff, too interested in her dignity and what she'd thought were society's demands that a wife seem elusive, unresponsive. He could never have predicted that she would need other men's attentions. Or that she would go so far as to commit adultery. And thus, she destroyed for years, his own belief in the goodness of women and his own belief that the famous Stanhope Curse was a fiction. Would that he had sought out Felice and wed her instead when he'd returned from Hong Kong. Perhaps he would never have had cause to believe so firmly in the curse again.

Yet, for his career and for his son, he had sought out Felice with the plan to solve his problems with a simple solution of marrying his childhood friend. But one look at her, one conversation with the charming widow, and he'd found he laughed at her wit. On instinct, he'd wanted to offer her marriage. Yet, he had discussed it with Jack and Ulmsly. A few other party leaders as well, all of whom thought marriage good for his public persona.

Two weeks later, he had ridden down to her cottage, knocked on her door and within minutes, he'd offered marriage with no thought of the curse until the day of his wedding. He had gotten cold feet and, as if abstinence could cure his family problem, he had deluded himself into believing the union could be in name only. But he had forgotten that he was a man who liked women. Educated, witty, lovely women. Out of bed. And definitely in it.

"And now what have you done?"

He felt two arms wind around his waist and warmth of his wife's body against his back. "I'll tell you what you've done, Mr. Wild." She pressed a tender kiss to his shoulder. "You have made love to me so often that I am ravenous."

He chuckled and turned in her embrace. "Hungry, eh?"

Christ, she was stunning in the soft morning light. Tousled and sleepy-eyed, she smiled up at him.

"What would you like? Eggs? Bacon?"

"A bath."

"A wonderful idea." He nuzzled her ear and sent his lips down her throat. "You smell divine."

"I smell like us!"

"Precisely." He arched her up to take a nipple between his teeth. "Like musk."

She panted in delight as she let him have his fill of both nipples. "And sex."

"And mine."

"Oh, yes," she sighed, "very much yours." She pushed away and walked backwards toward their bedroom.

He stalked her. "My tub is big enough for two."

She arched a brow. "I need food before I make love to you again."

"I shall feed you as you wash me."

"Demanding creature."

"I have not yet begun to show you just how demanding I can be."

"Nor have I," she tossed back, her chin up in the air.

He laughed, waving a finger to indicate his robe that she'd donned. "Remove that, madam. You hide what feeds my hunger. And I refuse to wait to teach you more."

She shrugged, and the garment flowed to the floor.

His balls twitched. His cock filled in praise.

"Do you never tire?" she marveled at his erection, her eyes alight with interest.

He strode to her. "Not of you."

She licked her lower lip as he backed her to the wall. "What can you be thinking? To do it standing up?"

"You will like this," he promised and braced her upright as he lifted one thigh over his hip. "This position is called Bamboos by the Altar." He tilted her hips so that he could claim her tight pussy. "What say you about it?"

"Ahh. Um. Do the bamboo stalks move?"

He showed her what his cock could do for her need of him. "Mine does."

"Deliciously so," she affirmed.

He rolled his hips to stroke one sensitive spot in her cunt. "My stalk is the Yang. It reaches and caresses your grotto."

"And does so well, too."

He slowed and let her feel the power of one slow invasion high inside her. "Then I can show you this," he crooned and slid out of her with a pop.

"No!" She beat his shoulder as he snagged her arm and led her toward the bed.

"Oh, yes, another position for your education." He stopped. "Bend over. Your hands to the floor."

She stared at him. Her desire and anticipation warred and defeated modesty.

He grinned at the sight of her shapely ass pointed up in the air toward him. Knowing that to touch her little hole would be too quick, too stunning to her sensibilities, he pushed down the temptation. Instead, he spread his hands on her derriere and fondled the fullness of her cheeks.

"You are lovely here, my darling."

"Touch me, damn you."

"Like this?" he asked as he reached down to spread her labia wide and send his cock along her seam.

"Yes!" she ground out.

"And this?" He nudged at her clitoris with the tip of his penis.

"Yes!"

"But this..." he told her as he sank his jade stalk deeply into her warm fountain, "this is what you need. Say it."

She was moving with him, whimpering in delight. "I do. I do."

"So do I," he said between gritted teeth.

"What is this called?"

He smiled at her inquisitive nature. "Donkeys of Spring."

"I should be mortified," she grumbled.

"Instead, you are edified," he whispered as he sank inside her over and over again. "I feel how thrilled you are, Fee. God, has there ever been a woman to compare to you?"

She pushed backwards. "There better not be."

He hooted in joy as he increased his tempo. "Jealous type, are you?"

"A harridan," she retorted.

"I will remember," he assured her as he pumped into her with ferocity.

She squeezed her muscles together, and once more, he knew she was so tight, so ready that her orgasm was near.

He pulled out.

She groaned. "You devil!"

He laughed. "All the better to make you rejoice, my love." He urged her up and around. "Lie back on the bed. Just here at the edge." He ran his hands down her taut thighs to her knees and grabbed her feet. "Put these in the air."

"I am definitely beyond the pale here," she murmured, her gaze rolling to the ceiling in mock criticism of her fully exposed position.

"I adore this view of you. The flower petals of your sex are so swollen and pink. You drip with nectar, inviting my honey bee to pierce you. Like this."

She let out a whoosh of air as he entered her, seated himself fully and held.

"Quite a sting," she managed.

He held her ankles as he began to pump her. "Quite a luscious flower."

"Adam." She caught her breath and between clenched teeth, managed to say, "Dearest, now. Would. Be. Good."

She pulsed all around him, squeezing his cock to the point where his discipline flew away and he came in a long hot stream that had him growling.

Caught in his own euphoria as he felt his own joy wash over him, he realized he still held her feet in the air. If he had adored the look on her face as she slept, if he had admired her beauty as she met him in ecstasy before, the expression on her face now was unmatched. Every contour, every line of her visage was relaxed in a rapture that rocked his reason and tripled his pride. He had thought never to find a woman here in England who could match him for sensual awareness. Yet, here, in this childhood friend, a woman whom he had married for convenience, was the most eager, stunning partner he had ever imagined.

He lowered her legs, caressed her thighs, her pussy and her breasts then lifted her by the arms onto the fullness of the bed. He lay down beside her and cradled her to him. He pushed her soft curls from her cheeks. Her brilliant eyes opened, and she considered him with languid ease. He would dare to call her look one that cherished him.

"Thank you," he told her. "That was the finest experience of my life. Each time, I do enjoy you," he whispered as he placed a kiss to each eye, "thoroughly."

“And I, you,” she whispered as she brushed her fingertips over his lips. “Is it always like that?”

“With you, I think it will be.”

“Does that mean you want me to stay?” she asked, searching his gaze.

“Will you? Please?”

“What of the curse?”

“Whether you stay or not, the curse may well fall down upon us.”

“What could happen? You could hate me for being a wanton woman?”

“Or you could reject me for being such a lecherous husband.”

Her lips toyed with a grin. “I will take both.”

“As will I,” he told her sincerely. “Dare I conclude that each of us sees more potential here than what we find in this bed?”

She met his gaze frankly. “I thought there was hope for that all along. I would not have married you otherwise, Adam.”

“I’ll brave the curse, if you will.”

She threw her arms around his shoulders. “I need that bath and breakfast.”

He felt the brush of her breasts against his torso. “Perhaps once more before we bathe?”

Chapter Seven

But making love in a tub and being hand fed by one's husband does not make for a meal that compensates totally for hours of exuberant love making.

Driven by hunger, Felice braved the dining room, dressed in her ball gown. Adam had just pulled out her chair for her when his butler appeared to inform him he had a caller. Though it was unusual to have a visitor before eleven, this gentleman, declared the butler, requested a few minutes of Adam's time and awaited his host in the sitting room. When Adam asked the identity of the man, the butler told him Lord Ulmsly.

"I shan't be long," Adam told her as he bent and brushed a kiss to her lips. "I'd tell you to wait for me, but the fact that Ulmsly is here at this abominable hour is truly astonishing. Enjoy yourself, darling, and I promise to return as soon as possible."

"Hurry," she told him. "We must talk about how I am to leave here without letting half of London know I spent the night. We don't want any more rumors about us."

"Right you are."

As he turned on his heel, she tucked into a generous helping of coddled eggs, toast with marmalade, bacon and a Scottish banger. Stuffed, she poured herself a third cup of tea then rose to look out the window. Wondering why Ulmsly might have come calling on Adam, she realized with a start that this was Friday morning. And on each Friday, the Tell-Tale was published.

She closed her eyes and counted backwards. Yes. The story that featured a man similar to Adam had appeared today in its fourth installment.

She winced. In this one, her Lord S. took a mistress again, after living for weeks alone without his new wife. This was untrue of Adam of course, believing as she did his statement that he'd broken off his arrangement with his paramour. But her tormentor had demanded she give Lord S. loose morals. Clearly, Felice needed to end this story. End the series. Fulfill the hideous

terms of her agreement with Adam's foe. Seven installments. All meant to ruin him politically. She'd only agreed because she had needed the money to pay off her mortgage on the cottage in Kent, a debt that Wallace had incurred at dice. But weeks later, married to Adam, she had not needed her little house any longer. She had offered it for sale. How could she have known things could turn so quickly in her favor?

Not in your favor if you don't stop these stories!

She could not have predicted this reunion and definitely not this bliss with Adam. She must not ruin it. But how to end the series without causing more trouble? Howell promised to print a story about her indebtedness and claim they were her gambling debts. Not Wallace's. The honorable member for Parliament from Bayton, Mr. Stanhope, was trying so hard to be reputable that he would not welcome any intimation that his new wife was a gambler. That was a piece of fiction through and through.

She clutched her stomach. What if Ulmsly knows that I am Miss Proper? If he tells Adam, I am doomed.

The breakfast room door creaked open.

She spun.

The butler, a cool man of imperial bearing, did not look at her ball gown, thank god, but at some place beyond her left ear. "May I have Cook prepare more bacon and toast for you, Ma'am?"

"No, thank you. Excuse me, what is your name?"

"Roberts, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Roberts. I am quite pleased with breakfast. Do give my compliments to the cook."

He took the opportunity to look into her eyes. Whatever he saw, he did not register in his expression. "Will that be all, Ma'am?"

She was returning, wasn't she? As Adam's wife. With full privileges and duties here to run this household. "Yes, Roberts. Good morning," she bid him, authority in her tone.

As he left, Adam returned. His face was somber, the lines around his mouth etched with some concern.

"Did you finish?" he asked her, his gloom dissolving as he came to put his arm around her and hug her close. "Sorry, darling. Couldn't be helped. Ulmsly demands his prerogatives."

"I'm certain."

"Come sit with me and talk while I finish my breakfast." He took her hand and led her to her chair. A light came to his dark eyes. "Did you replenish your energy?"

"I think I did," she said, believing it to be true. "Enormous amounts of it, too."

He took a bit of toast into his mouth. "Mmm. Chi."

"What?"

"Energy you need. What anyone needs. The Mandarin word for it is chi. One must have tons of it to enjoy good sex."

Her cheeks flamed.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "After all we've done, you blush so red you match your gown?"

"Pray, good man. Give a woman an opportunity to become accustomed to such conversation," she justified herself with a gay taunt.

He used his napkin, pushed back his chair then reached over and pulled her to his lap. "Don't be shy."

She flicked a button on his waist coat. "I'm not. It is just the light of day, you realize. And we are in the breakfast room."

His fingers etched swirls on her thighs. "Anywhere you are is where I wish to have you."

She met the challenge in his gaze. "Here?"

With one arm, he swept the breakfast dishes toward the center of the long table. "Here."

He told her to rise and sit on the table.

She hooted. "You cannot mean to do it now?"

He raised her chin. "Anytime. Do you doubt we can do it at this angle?"

She threw back her head to laugh. "I do not doubt you can do it backwards!"

"Mmm." He nodded. "That I will show you this evening." He helped her slide back on the polished wood.

"You are a satyr."

At that, he paused for a moment, definitely unhappy with the pronouncement. But then he leaned forward to thumb her nipples and reach inside her bodice to bring forth one breast then the other.

She looked down at herself. A total wanton. Scandalous Miss Proper.

She scarcely had time to berate herself than his seeking hands were gathering up her hem and lifting it above her thighs.

"I want to see you prepare yourself for me. As I taught you last night."

Her hands played and pinched her nipples. They sank over the wrinkled froth of her gown and down to the pouf of her pussy. Her pussy. Adam's term for her nether hair and now her own. She combed her fingers through it. Stroked it. Tugged it. The friction made her moan in need and cry out for him.

"More," he told her in a guttural sound. He opened the placket of his breeches, grasping his rigid cock and caressing it, thumbing moisture from his hard red tip. "Show me that you are eager for me, pet."

"I am," she cried, as she parted her pussy lips. "See how hot and wet I am." She sent a fingertip down one slick lip.

"A flowing fountain." He smiled wickedly. "See how well we fit together here." He inserted his shaft inside her, halted then pulled out.

She objected.

"I know, my sweet. But anticipation is so good for you."

"You will drive me to Bedlam."

He kissed her like a madman. "I intend to go with you." He entered her again and held. Then set up a rhythm that had him enter, hold and retreat. Enter, hold. Retreat. Enter, hold. Retreat. "This is Two Seagulls Soaring."

Two lovers fucking. "I see that," she said with difficulty as he continued, seemingly disciplined as a monk, save for the perspiration on his brow.

"Then we will go to my aunt's," he said on a *hold*, "and return to move your belongings into the bedroom suite adjacent to mine."

"No," she objected on *retreat*.

"Fear not," he told her on *enter*. "You sleep with me."

"Not separately," she demanded on *hold*.

"Never," he said on *retreat*. "I have more to teach you."

Her incredulous gaze danced over his features. "You know more positions?"

"A multitude," he exaggerated with wide-eyed lechery.

She giggled. "I am yours. But you must go faster."

"I cannot," he confessed on a stunning *enter*.

"You'd better," she threatened. "Or I'm...um...what do you call it...rejoicing without you!"

“Well, then, if you must do it now?” He rocked her in a faster tempo that shifted the table and made them both laugh.

“I believe I really, really...must!”

Afterward, they pondered what the servants must think of the master of the house who had just brought his new wife home more than five months past their wedding and had claimed her in the dining room for more than an hour. What’s more, they had set the china clattering and the table legs groaning to their uproarious shouts and ribald laughter at eleven in the morning.

Chapter Eight

Each day, Felice discovered new satisfactions to being Adam's wife.

His servants accepted her as their mistress without incident or comment.

His Aunt Amaryllis was the first to call on Felice a week after she'd moved into his townhouse. Days later, the grand old lady brought two of her best friends, dowagers of the first water whose acceptance was needed for any woman in society to make a place for herself.

Other scions of the town soon followed. Lady Ulmsly, featherbrained but forthright, presented her card. Clarice, Adam's half-sister, came praising two new male staff secured for her by her late husband. Two of Clarice's friends, fashionable women who admired Felice's short hair and au courant style, arrived to coo over Felice's newly married state.

Adam brought his son, Georgie, down from the family estate in Gloucester. The little boy was a tow-haired giggling child of two who, nonetheless, did not run to Felice's arms immediately. She did not balk at that. She read fairytales to him at night, played blocks with him in the nursery and, thus, gave him time to discover that she was as devoted to him as she was to his enthralling father.

Her days with Adam were a blur of political discussions, luncheons for him and his colleagues and social obligations that often took him out without her. Increasingly disturbed by the Tell-Tale assertions of his infidelity to her and to his party, Adam complained how his colleagues now questioned his motives and his objectives. His speeches to the floor were met with catcalls and demands he sit and be quiet. Not all came from the opposition.

"Shall we host a dinner party?" she asked him one morning at breakfast. "We will invite your colleagues."

Adam remained reluctant. "The conversation might turn to taking me to Tyburn Hill to hang me."

“What better way to cool their heads than to show that you are not averse to private discussions,” she persuaded him.

Seeking a remedy for his ills, Felice castigated herself for Adam’s troubles. Miss Proper continued to tear his reputation to shreds. This was not because Felice wrote such hideous thing, but because whatever she presented to Howell, he edited to make more damning. He would even do it in front of her. Torturing her, he would greet her in the office that had once been her father’s. Howell would read her words—and change the type as it was set, transforming Adam into a lecherous, debased gambler and womanizer. Then he would criticize his politics in scurrilous asides.

Felice objected to Howell actions vociferously but had no power to make the kindly old typesetter remove the defamatory words. Though the man who had once been her father’s right arm gazed at her sympathetically, Bill Bundy would not argue with his current employer. “A man has to eat, don’t he, sweet Fee?”

Determined to save what she could of Adam’s reputation, she had gone to the Fleet Street offices yesterday in high dudgeon. Bundy looked on as she faced Howell. “Only two more. Then we are done.”

She had vowed she would forever after cut him cold. Ruin him somehow as he was ruining Adam. Never would she forgive him for how he had abused her and her husband. Taking the premise of a private loan and making a wife betray her husband. For what? To ruin a man’s political ambitions? To win a political point or two?

But at the root of this problem was her own disloyalty to Adam. And she had not the courage to reveal it. From their wedding day, he had emphasized truth in their relationship—and she had violated it. Though she had discounted the Stanhope family curse as a hoax, she had only contributed to the possibility that her own happy marriage was headed for disaster.

* * * *

“Shall I help you with that?” she asked Adam the night of their party. “You are all thumbs with this cravat.”

“Style!” he complained and let her fiddle with the damned thing. “Do you have a new gown for this evening?”

“I do,” she said. “I wanted to feel very special for my first dinner party as the wife of the MP from Bayton.”

As she was still in her chemise and stockings, he felt no compunctions about drawing her close. "You are special to me. More so each day."

She threw him a grin. "The feeling is mutual."

"Georgie comes 'round, too."

She nodded, gratified the boy had begun to accept her. "He is a sweet child, easy to love. We will do well together, darling. You wait and see."

"Wes liked you. Said so before he returned to Spain. And Jack tells me he admires you immensely. Always did."

"Ha! Really? Lift your chin. There. So, 'Difficult' can accept me as a Stanhope wife," she joked about his oldest brother. "Extraordinary!"

"He especially likes your figure!" Adam ogled her décolleté. "If only he could see you now!"

"You both are scandalous men to discuss my form."

"I like your voluptuous curves!" Adam swept her close and took a fast hard kiss. "Hurry with this tie, madam, or I fear our guests will find us unforgivably late!"

"A tempting idea." She winked at him. "For later! Let's get your coat."

As she presented it for him, he turned his back and brooded about the dinner conversation. "No discussion tonight of salt and flour supplies for the troops in the Peninsula. Help me steer them from that, will you?"

"Of course. What seems to be the issue?"

"On the floor yesterday, Howell accused me of miscalculating what we need."

"Too little?"

"Too soon," he told her.

"Do any of our guests tonight feel the same?"

"I am not certain yet. I want to listen and learn." Adam pulled at his coat cuffs and brushed away a speck of lint, frowning over the increasing virulence of his opponents.

Felice grew solemn. "You would think that a man with a merchant fleet and a spice company here in London would be supporting a ready and adequate supply of foodstuffs for our army in Spain."

"True. But I would swear Howell has some ulterior motive."

"Do you think he built this scandal sheet to promote his own views?" she posited.

"The Tell-Tale? Perhaps. Sometimes, I think he uses it to just to make others suffer."

"So do you think he is truly evil? Those who work against others for no reason but to take their pleasure are very few and far between, Adam."

Adam examined her, confused by her words since she was usually so supportive of anything he said, particularly about Howell. "You defend him?"

"No, surely not! I wish I knew what drives him."

"That makes two of us." He took her arm and walked her toward her own dressing room. "Show me this new gown so I will have eyes for my dinner guests instead of you alone."

She leaned against him as they entered the room next to his bedroom. "You are too complimentary." She went toward the dress form and her new dinner gown delivered only this afternoon by Madame Fouchay. Grass-green silk over a slip of buttercup yellow, the design with the high Empire waist was the one Adam most enjoyed seeing on her.

"Lovely," he declared.

Her golden gaze fell over him in admiration. He bristled with delight for what she gave him in bed and elsewhere in his life. With his son, his house, his very heart. Was he coming to love her? So dangerous a proposition. Family curse or not.

"You are more than generous with me, Adam. A wardrobe, my own spending money. The run of the house. And care of Georgie. I am honored."

"And I am more than pleased. More than I ever thought to be." He chuckled her chin. "Come, don this gown. I shall like it on you. Best of all, I will enjoy removing it after all our guests have gone."

* * * *

The party of sixteen consisted of Adam's closest personal friends in Parliament. Felice looked down the table and took pride in how her guests relished the selections for the evening. Adam's cook has risen to the occasion with grand flair, bringing in for the entrée a roast of beef succulent and done to point. Cook's dessert of flan and strawberries finished off the five course meal as Adam suggested the men retire to his library for brandy and conversation. Fee took the ladies to her parlor for tea and a draught of sherry.

Lady Ulmsly was most appreciative of Felice's menu.

"I assure you, my lady," Felice demurred, "Cook's talent predated my arrival here. I merely ordered the menu for this evening."

"Nonetheless," offered Lady Wingate, "a sound beginning as a new bride."

"Thank you, Lady Wingate. My husband and I are extremely happy." I could not have dreamed of more nor imagined more for one of my heroines.

"You don't say?" asked Mrs. Nance, a brash older woman, who was married to the MP for York. "Wonderful. The curse is not working?"

Lady Wingate raised both brows. "Mrs. Nance, this is hardly a question for our Felice."

"Of course, it is! No wonder there was a curse, at least in Adam's case. Poor man was so distressed married to that little Sarah. She was a peacock. Not a thought in her head for Adam. Would never have hosted such a dinner party. Wouldn't know how. Wouldn't care to help him."

"I'll say," Mrs. Smithfield, the wife of the member from Dover, chimed in. "You have done your duty this evening, Felice, bringing us together. Lord Howell, as I understand from my Henry, learned of this dinner and fumed with envy."

Howell envious? Delicious. "His paper is so critical of my husband, I am beside myself with worry," Felice declared.

"Shall we put it about then that the famous family curse," continued prying Mrs. Nance, with a busy flutter of her fan, "is not working?"

"I have not seen sign of it since I moved in," Felice told her with a grin. And why not? This was her only way, perhaps her only opportunity, to reveal some part of the truth and counter the effects of Howell's and Miss Proper' lies. "Initially, Adam and I were concerned about the curse. But we agreed to work on our marriage to make it a solid union."

"And love?" asked Mrs. Nance.

"Oh, well," Felice demurred. Were the nights in his arms, the joys in their bed proof they could get on well together? Were not the hours enjoying each others' company out of bed in the parlor and the dining room, good evidence, too? So what if those moments of laughter soon had them making love on the settee or the library table or...

Felice cleared her throat, noting her cheeks burned with her ribald musings. "All good marriages are made on earth, don't you agree?"

"I do, indeed." Lady Wingate gazed around the room. "We work on ours, don't we, ladies? Even though our men are too much driven by the winds of politics."

"And the winds of war," Lady Ulmsly added with a grumble. "Do forgive me," she nodded to the ladies, "but I wish that man Howell would decide if he is on our side or not."

Felice startled at the public accusation.

So did Mrs. Smithfield. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well!" Lady Ulmsly drew herself up into her full importance. "The man accuses us of not being efficient in our pursuit of Bonaparte. Imagine! Yet, he is the one who delays signing contracts with the Army. We know he can make more money from his import and exports if he holds out his supplies to the last."

"He will grow rich off the war?" asked Felice.

Mrs. Smithfield was stuck speechless.

"My husband tells me this is so," stated Lady Ulmsly.

"Is that not a conflict of interest?" asked Lady Wingate.

"Terrible," grumbled Lady Ulmsly.

"Shameful," asserted Mrs. Smithfield.

Treasonous, concluded Felice.

"Aye. If you ask me," grumbled Lady Wingate, "he should be shot."

He should, at the very least, be exposed. If there was proof. Was there?

Adam might know.

But when the men came in, the topics never turned to politics, the war or Howell. It was as if the men had sworn off the subject entirely. Try though Felice might to steer them that way, she failed. The guests left less than an hour later, leaving Felice to broach the matter with Adam as they undressed.

"Lady Wingate cast a few aspersions on the intentions of Drayton Howell tonight," she told Adam as she stepped out of her slippers.

He tried to undo his cravat. "Howell! The bane of my existence."

She went toward him. "Let me untie that or you'll have yourself in knots. What do you think of his criticisms of your army supply policies?"

"Here in our bedroom, I'll say he's an ass. Out in public, I try to stay to the facts of the matter. We have a fair idea of road conditions in Portugal into Spain and they are terrible. Fit for mules. Yet transport is vital to keeping an army moving. Especially food. While most armies live off the land they invade, confiscation never makes for good relations with the people. Howell puts on a show for the public, showing how financially prudent he is. But in reality, he may have another reason."

"There," she said as she removed his cravat. "Do you have any suspicions that he may delay the government's decision based on his own interests?"

Adam frowned at her. "My god, you ladies did peck at Howell's bones."

"We did. Is it justified?"

"Smithfield has suspicions but will not declare." Adam turned her about and, in moment, had her bodice undone, the gown drifting to the carpet. Then he spun her into his arms. His eyes clouded with worries. "Come to bed, and forget about Drayton Howell."

"He should never be in our bedroom," she asserted but fought the man's image as she went into her husband's arms.

Adam wrapped her close, stripping away the last of her undergarments. "I want you naked. Do you hear me? Never wear these again."

His ferocity disturbed her. So did his actions as he grasped her wrists, pinned her to the bed and consumed her with kisses everywhere. Her body gushed in delight, welcoming him, wanting him in a rush of fervent need. He was desperate, and he made her so as well.

"You have nothing to hide from me, Felice," he told her after he had possessed her and made her quake with satisfaction. "And nothing to fear."

Suffused as she was with the physical exhaustion that his love making always produced, she noted the words, but did not question their meaning or their cause until hours later.

* * * *

The next morning, his words plagued her such that she chose to remain in bed instead of going down to breakfast with Adam. Neither of them had slept well—he up and pacing the floor most of the night; she tossing and turning, asking what ate at him and receiving no answer.

Meanwhile, the need to rid herself of Howell raged like a disease in her mind. But what to do? Publish an exposé in the rival broadsheet? Then was she not as wicked as Howell?

She ate no breakfast but paced in her sitting room, watching the rain outside match her mood. She went upstairs to play with Georgie and came down just as the post arrived at eleven. As she opened her only letter and gazed at its contents, she jumped to her feet. This was her royalty statement from the publisher of her epic poetry and romances. Money! She earned more money on her work in the past few months than she ever had. She paced back and forth, the paper crackling in her clenched hand. A wild possibility brewing in her brain.

Could there be one way to save her reputation? One way to save her marriage? She had the idea, but did she have the savvy to pull it off?

What would she lose to try?

Not her honor. That was already gone. And she would lose her marriage in any case, wouldn't she? That would die the instant Adam learned she was Miss Proper.

But if she did not try to ameliorate the damage done to Adam and the Spanish war effort, she would forever be ashamed of her cowardice. She would fully deserve to be rejected by Adam and shunned by society. No one would ever receive her again. And she would not blame them.

There remained only one thing to do.

Within the hour, she presented herself at the East End office of the publisher who printed her epic poetry and romances.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Tolbert,” she greeted the jolly old clerk who had worked here since he was a boy of twelve. Tolbert was the assistant to Edward Collins, owner of Collins Publishing. She knew Tolbert better than Collins and had fewer compunctions about asking a favor.

“How are you, dear Mrs. Wentworth?! Oh, no, no!” The bent, graying man ambled around his huge desk overflowing with papers of all sizes, weights and colors. He shook her hand. “It is Mrs. Stanhope now, I forget. Forgive me. Wonderful to see you!”

“Thank you.” For a few minutes more, they reacquainted themselves having not seen each other since just before Felice had married Adam in January. Tolbert resumed his chair, and she took one opposite. She glanced about the busy office then toward the back room, where through the glass, she could see the two typesetters and the busy presses. “I received my recent statement in this morning’s mail.”

“Wonderful. Shall I get your earnings for you?”

“Yes, please. I am thrilled sales are up! Mr. Collins must be delighted, too.”

“He is! We both are delighted with your new success. Now that you are in Society, you create a stir and people demand to read your work.”

“Curiosity motivates readers.” Would that they were inspired to read my work only for my talent.

“True.” He folded his fingers over his corpulent stomach, his bushy brows knit together. “How are you? You look well enough, but the rumors of you and your husband are not favorable.” A considerate man, Tolbert had the ability to get to the heart of a matter. “We heard he turned you out. And now there is this Tell-Tale series.”

She flinched and considered her gloves. “Those are pure fiction. I came to speak of another matter.”

The man waited.

“You have talked for the past year about the enormous volume of work you have. Your sales grow. The number of volumes produced increased by—” She waved a hand.

“Ten percent last year! Three, the year before.”

“Yes. And I hear Mr. Collins takes on more authors,” she added. “My friend Ann Carruthers in Kent wrote to tell me last week that he has offered to publish her novel.”

“Well done it is, too, I will say. Yes, we do take on more novels. Business is good.”

“Wouldn’t you say then that you and Mr. Collins need an additional typesetter?”

Chapter Nine

Adam narrowed his eyes, disbelieving what he saw. Yet, it was Felice. Her clothes. Her hair. Her hat. He leaned toward the windows of his carriage, the rain coming down in sheets and fogging up the view from his carriage. But there was no mistaking the woman, her figure, her quick stride, her furtiveness. No mistaking the building she entered, the office door that opened to her. The man who admitted her to his presence.

She might well have worn a sign: *Mrs. Adam Stanhope. Here to see Drayton Howell. Member of Parliament. Opponent of Mr. Adam Stanhope's policies. Publisher of the Tell-Tale.*

My god. He had not believed her capable of such betrayal.

Across from him at his dinner table last night, she had been the perfect hostess. An intriguing conversationalist. An informed observer of the political scene. A wit commenting on the popularity of certain novels, art and ladies' fashion.

In his home, she had ordered his life with grace. Smoothly assuming control of his staff and their duties, she had added a measure of efficiency to the daily routines. She had reorganized the maids' duties, settled a longstanding dispute between the butler and his coachman and even charmed Georgie's nursemaid into relinquishing some power to her. This, she asserted, was best for the boy in the name of love.

Love. Adam scoffed at the word. The concept. The element that made a Stanhope marriage a shambles.

Had he loved Felice?

He might have. Certainly, he had been headed toward that, fearful as he was of that state of bliss. Love, that one emotion which could truly ruin what they had built together these past weeks.

Love. He cast the concept aside. Better to speak of lust.

Lust had been the emotion that built their marriage.

Aye. In his bed these past months, she had been the perfect mate. Eager for his kisses. More than ready to return them. Willing to explore new heights of sexuality.

And he had succumbed to the euphoria she created. Allowed himself to enjoy her succulent body. Her lovely mouth. Her lush breasts. Her creamy pussy.

He drove a hand through his hair.

What kind of fool falls for that?

Certainly, from the age of seventeen, he had enjoyed women's bodies! He knew how to prepare a woman with compliments and kisses. Knew how to tempt a woman with the touch of his fingers, the caress of his tongue. Knew how to urge a woman to open her thighs and let him pleasure her clitoris and inner walls. Understood that a woman wanted—needed—more than one orgasm.

Like Felice did.

So what was wrong with him that for a second time, he had married a woman who would destroy him?

Was he too kind? Too naïve? Too eager to have a companion in this world?

Or was he just too damn stupid to realize that no matter whom he married, he would fail?

He was, after all was said and done, a Stanhope.

And the curse was unavoidable. Indomitable.

And what was he to do now?

He stared at her as she sat talking with Howell, her lovely face drawn tight in severe lines, her right hand pointing to a sheaf of papers on Howell's desk.

Divorce her.

Banish her.

Send her back to her cottage in Kent.

Friendless.

He winced at this vision of her. He recoiled at the vision of himself without her. He would be so alone. And his son, who adored his new mama, would miss her sorely, too.

Dear god, Fee. What have you done to us all?

And why?

* * * *

At the end of Adam's revelations, Jack insisted the two of them call on their Aunt.

"She's the only one who has any perspective on the curse," Jack declared as the two of them climbed into Adam's coach for the ride to the elderly lady's house in Park Lane. "Even Father claims she is the only one who has any objectivity on the matter."

"What can our maiden aunt know of the curse?"

"She told me once she did not marry the one man she adored for fear of it."

"Well, then another relative affected by this damn thing. Besides, if Father sought his sister out on this, it didn't cure his problems."

"True. But it is worth a shot. Particularly because you look like hell, old man."

"You would, too, if this were you."

"Yes, well. Rest easy, it never will be." Jack crossed his arms and scowled out at the downpour.

"If you do not marry and have no heirs, all goes to Wes. He says he will renounce it."

"Well, there you go! And if you won't take it, Georgie, poor tyke, shall inherit!"

"I do not wish this hell on him."

"If you will not take it for yourself or him then all Stanhope fortune goes to the Crown."

Adam cursed roundly. "It was the Crown that ruined our family in the first place! Charles was a heartless leech to seduce the Stanhope wife. I will not see the Crown benefit once more from Stanhopes' distress."

"What do you plan to do to stop it?" Jack replied as if Adam had holes in his head.

"Divorcing your wife will not end it but only make it worse! Especially, my dear brother, because you love her."

Adam opened his mouth to object, but the look on his oldest brother's face stopped him.

There were no lies between them. Ever.

Had never been as children. Never as adults.

The brothers had agreed to this as young boys. Adam would not break the promise now.

Nor would he lie to himself.

He did love Felice.

And if there was a way to live happily with her, he needed to find it. Save his marriage. His family. His heart. His hope. And yes, if possible, his political future.

* * * *

"Adam, dearest," crooned his Aunt Amaryllis as she poured tea for Jack and him in her drawing room, "you have taken up this gauntlet rather late."

Jack cocked a brow at Adam as he strode to take the cup and saucer from his Aunt.

"How so?" Adam asked and refused the tea in favor of standing before her fireplace.

"You have not noticed her circumstances before now," his aunt shot back.

"What do you mean, Aunt?"

"You married her quickly." She settled back on her settee and met his gaze fore square.

"Did you inquire of her circumstances when you proposed?"

"No. If you mean her finances, that would have been forward."

"But kind, don't you think?"

"She is a published author, Aunt. I assumed she made a comfortable living."

"You also assumed you could sweep her up, marry her and create a life for her in one snap of your fingers."

"I did." He paced. "I did. What's wrong with that?"

"Ba! The folly of men in love."

Adam halted at that last word. "Aunt, please let us dispense with the critique of how I proposed. I did it quickly, I admit. I did it without much thought except to acquire a wife whom I enjoyed and had since childhood. Someone who would be a complement to me."

"To your political ambitions."

"Yes! Some marry for less."

"Most should marry for more."

Adam sighed. "Agreed. But that is not the world we live in."

"She cares for you."

Adam locked his gaze on his aunt's. "I knew it from the start. I thought it useful to a marriage."

"But you did not consider what she needed to be happy, other than your name or your income."

Adam waited. His aunt had more to tell, and he knew not how to induce her to reveal it.

"She was in debt."

Adam frowned. "She told you this?"

"I persuaded her to it. Bullied her actually when one of my friends discovered her renting a room after you rejected her in Dover. I asked why she was lodging in such a place. She told me she had little."

"Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"Because she had made...shall we call them, arrangements? Arrangements to pay the debt before you went down a second time to propose."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"I did not ask. She did not say. I suspect they are not ones she wishes to discuss."

"But why make them at all?" asked Adam bewildered. "She is not profligate with money. And if she had asked me, I might have been able to pay them for her."

"They were her husband's gambling debts. She would not have you responsible for them."

"But what of her own income from her novels and poems?"

"Ah, those payments from fiction? Come only twice a year. They were not sizable enough to pay the bills. She told me she would have to find work."

"Work?" Adam was appalled as much at the very idea of his wife employed, as the idea that he never knew, never suspected, she needed to. "Doing what?"

"Typesetting."

Jack spit his tea across the room.

Adam scrubbed a hand over his face. "How in hell...?"

Amaryllis sipped her tea nonchalantly. "Remember that her father owned the publishing company that Howell bought. Felice knew how to set hot type from the age of four."

"Has she been setting type for Howell?" Adam demanded. "Is this what you are trying to tell me? That she is or was employed by him, and she set the words that have ruined my career?"

"I am telling you that she took money from Howell, yes. And though she did not set the type, she did write those stories for the Tell-Tale."

Adam reeled with rage and despair. "My god. Can she hate me that much?"

"On the contrary, she loves you to distraction."

Jack, who was still using his handkerchief to brush off his waistcoat, snorted. "Superb! No wonder the curse is operating at full throttle."

"Absurd!" Amaryllis shot back. "The curse operates only if you let it. Only if you fail to see that marriage is not set in stone from inception but a movable feast for rational men and women who know how to compromise...and forgive."

“What am I forgiving here, Aunt?” Adam probed. “Other than myself for short-sightedness?”

“I think you must first ask that question of Drayton Howell. And then you must ask it of your wife.”

“If I see Howell, I will not talk. I will strangle him.”

“Well, then, dearest,” his aunt smiled serenely as she handed him a piece of parchment with a name scrolled upon it, “I think you need to call upon this gentleman before Howell or Felice.”

Adam took one look at the name on his aunt’s stationery and balked. “Crammer? The leader of the opposition?”

Promising to see the man who would prefer to chop off his own arm rather than see Adam, who had criticized Crammer’s party so unmercifully for two years, Adam bid his aunt good day and climbed into his coach with his brother.

“Best you see this now,” Jack said as he shoved a broadsheet into Adam’s hand. “I just bought this and the Tell-Tale from the boy on the corner there.”

Adam opened the paper Jack handed him, his own party’s crier.

Then he read the headline, fell back into the squabs and cursed. “I cannot believe it.”

“But will you do it?” Jack asked.

“Resign?”

Jack stared at him, forlorn.

Adam was wide-eyed and ferocious with shock. “Ulmsly wants me to resign? Never!”

Chapter Ten

The hall clock chimed half past eight before Felice returned home. Adam had told his butler to notify him the moment she arrived, and she took her time climbing the stairs to their bedroom. Indeed, she took so long, Adam almost thought her to have fled the house instead of face him. He was wrong.

She opened the door and stood on the threshold for countless moments, her gaze locked on his as he sat ensconced in his wingchair waiting for her.

Her hair, always curly, was a riot what with the constant rain she'd braved all day. Her slippers were wet. The hem of her dress drenched, droplets fell to the carpet. Her face arrested him, however. Her complexion, usually so pink and lively, was lax and gray with regret.

Without saying a word, she closed the door. Then she turned, straightened her spine and looking quite resolute, walked straight for him. Her gaze absorbed him. His attire, his robe and trousers. His pose, relaxed but wary. And then she spied the copy of the Tell-Tale on his table, under his hand.

Her golden eyes lit with despair and remorse. "Oh, Adam, what are you doing reading that? You shouldn't. It will only make you feel worse."

"I thought it intriguing."

Tears formed on her lashes. She reached up to rip out the pins in her hat then circled the little, felt coronet round and round in her hands. "What does it matter what Howell prints on a day when Ulmsly asks you to resign?" she mourned, barely above a whisper. "I am so sorry, Adam."

He'd leave the regrets for later. For now, he cared more about her. "Where have you been?"

"Walking."

"In this weather? Where?"

She shook her head. "Along the Thames. Near Somerset House and Whitehall."

"All day?"

"Most of it. Yes, I—"

"I would have much preferred you be here with me on such a day as this."

She tipped her head. "Would you?" she asked, a bit in wonder. "You shouldn't." She stiffened her backbone once more and sniffed away her tears. Putting her hat on a nearby table, she came to stand before him and clasp her hands together as she declared, "I am responsible for your downfall. I am the one to blame for it all."

He owed it to her to hear her out, that he knew. So he nodded and let her have her say. "Tell me then."

"I have lied to you."

For a man who had told her he wanted honesty, this opening salvo took his breath away. But he said, "About what?"

"I am Miss Proper." She inclined her head toward the broadsheet. "I am the author of those columns. I took money from Drayton Howell, and in return, I was to write libelous pieces about you."

Her forthrightness assuaged much of his bitterness. He inhaled.

She seemed to sway backward as if she thought he meant to strike her for her admission. He was appalled that she would have been so mistreated by others. Or that she would think such punishment suitable to her error in judgment.

At once, he put on a face of reason and calm as he asked her, "When did you begin this?"

Confused at his reaction, she went on. "Weeks before we married. Drayton came to me when he heard the rumor that you would come down and propose to me. I, of course, knew nothing of your intentions. But when he came, he did so asserting that Wallace owed him money. From losses at dicing and cards."

"Did you ask for an accounting?"

"An accounting? No, no. I had no need. I knew Wallace's penchant for gambling. We pinched pennies because of his ridiculous addiction to it. Howell's statement seemed sound."

"And did you agree that the stories would be aimed at me, about me and mine?"

"No, of course not. I simply agreed to write a series for him that would rival the other broadsheets for their scandalous stories. I had no idea he meant to rake you over the coals. But nonetheless, it happened."

"How did he do it?"

"He told his typesetter to change the names of the characters. Once he started, he could continue to become bolder. And he did."

"And this typesetter of his agreed to this?"

"Oh, yes. What's a man to do when his family depends on his income to eat and pay the lodgings?" She shivered, rubbing her arms.

"You should stand before the fire. Change your clothes and get warm."

"No. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I am leaving, Adam. I have no excuses to give you for my behavior. I have no means to apologize other than my frail words. No way to ameliorate my sins against you."

"Why didn't you tell me about Howell?" he blurted, done with beating about the bush for an answer to this mystery. "Why not just tell me?"

"I saw no way out. I saw Howell milking me forever!"

"Could he do that?"

"Why not? He could say I was willing participant. That I was the gambler, not Wallace. He even threatened to say Wallace had a child by a prostitute in the Seven Dials. That I was with child, and that's why you married me so quickly. There was no end to what he would print in that rag of his!" She retreated backward to the fire. Shaking with fury and sorrow, she let in to the tears that racked her. "I wanted to show you that the curse was a myth, a fable, and all I did was show you how real it is!"

She whirled toward her dressing room.

He caught her before she made it to the door. "Don't cry."

She turned up a face so ravaged by sorrow, his heart fell to his toes.

He cupped her cheek and brushed a stream of tears away with his thumb.

"Adam, I have ruined you. I want to go."

"Fee," he declared, "come sit with me and talk."

"No! I can hardly bear to—"

"Look at me! I did not resign!"

Her lashes fluttered. She shook her head. "What? Why not?"

"Ulmsly retracted the request. Most unnecessary, he called it, in light of developments."

"I am confused. What developments?"

"Come sit with me and I will tell you." He took her hand and led her back to the chair he had left. Though she was reluctant to sit on his lap, he tugged her down. "There. Now. I went to see a few people today."

Her brow wrinkled. "I want to hear about Ulmsly."

"So you shall." He pushed a wisp of her hair from her eyes. "Have I told you lately how I adore your eyes? They are brilliant as pure gold, you know."

"Adam," she beseeched him as her lips quivered. "Do not praise me, please."

"But you are my wife," he affirmed.

"Not for long. You cannot want me now, not after today and this." She put a hand to the Tell-Tale, while the other swiped at a stream of tears on her cheek.

"And if I do?" he ran his hand up her throat to cup her nape.

"I'll say you're mad."

He put his mouth to the hollow behind her ear and whispered, "Such madness is proof of a man who adores his wife."

"You mustn't," she rasped, her eyes closing as he wrapped her closer and kissed her cheek and her luscious, trembling lips.

"But I do love you, Fee." He blessed her mouth with a light stroke of possession. "I think I have loved you for years, darling, and only just have come to my senses."

She struggled up from his grasp. "You cannot! The curse!" She waved her arms about. "Dear god, the curse has worked its will, and I have been its instrument!"

He sprang to his feet. She retreated, and he stalked her. "I would rather love you than not. Live with you than without you. To hell with the curse!"

"How can you say that?" she sobbed.

"Because I forgive you."

"Oh, you are mad."

"For you, yes. Don't you see," he said as he proceeded to follow her as she backed into her dressing room, "none of this was really your fault?"

She blinked. "I take responsibility."

"And for that, my darling, I am proud of you. But you must not take more than your due."

She stood now within the voluminous froth of her many gowns. Enfolded as she was in the colors of the rainbow, he had to grin at her.

"You are a rare jewel, Felice Stanhope. Stunning and inventive, wise and dear. I am a very fortunate man to be your husband."

"I think you are foxed. Or someone has hit you on the head."

"You do not know what is in that issue of the Tell-Tale, do you?"

She gritted her teeth. "I do. I certainly do. I saw Howell order his man to set the type."

"All of it?"

She rolled a shoulder. "What does it matter? All, some, none?"

"No matter. I know the answer to that question."

"You do?"

He took her hand. "Come with me, and I will show you."

"How do you know the answer?" she asked, skepticism written on her features as he led her back toward his bedroom.

When he sat her on the edge of their bed, he handed her the broadsheet. "Jack picked up this copy of the Tell-Tale on the street this afternoon soon after he and I left Aunt Amaryllis. She had a few revealing facts to tell me. All of which you might have told me. Should have. But I am to blame here. I scared you half to death, being so damned focused on warding off the curse. Christ. I asked you to be honest with me then acted like a child afraid of ghosts."

Felice stared at him.

"I know. Hard to imagine I am a man of reason, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Read your column."

Her eyes took in the words with growing surprise and increasing haste.

"The episodes here printed have been lies, fabrications..."

"...Outlined by Miss Proper, true. But edited by the publisher of this paper..."

"The malicious intent of the publisher to ruin the life and reputation of the Honorable Lord Adam Stanhope, M.P., is one I shall attest to here and in a court of law.

Affirmed this twentieth day of June, 1809. William Bundy, typesetter. Formerly of Howell Publishing."

She let the paper drop to her lap. "I cannot believe it." She skimmed the piece once more. "How did this happen?"

"That Howell allowed that to be printed?"

"Yes! My god, Adam, yes, how?" She gaped at him, her eyes dancing over his features with delight, alarm and curiosity.

"Your man Bill Bundy tells me he is very grateful to you for freeing him of the yoke of Drayton Howell."

"You spoke with Bill?"

"I did. Jack and I found him at work, cleaning his type and his presses right after we bought this. Howell had left for the evening after reading of Ulmsly's demand for my resignation. Bill told Jack and me how Howell abused your words, changed them, forced Bill to edit them and made Miss Proper into a waspish witch out to destroy me."

"And Bill composed this himself?"

"He did." Adam thrilled to the look of excitement on her face.

"Wrote it and typeset it to expose Howell in his own broadsheet?" she blurted. "I can hardly believe it."

"Bill Bundy is most grateful for you securing the job for him at Collins's. He starts tomorrow. He could not see you suffer any longer under Howell's yoke. Just as you could not see him suffer any longer with Howell."

"My heavens! I meant to cripple Howell, put him out of business if I could by taking Bill from him. I knew Bill yearned for his freedom from the blackguard. He could not bear what he was forced to print. By contrast, my father was such an honorable man."

"So is his daughter," Adam whispered and lifted her chin to kiss her lips.

"But Ulmsly urged you to resign! How did you refuse him?"

"I showed him this issue of the *Tell-Tale* and told him the story. I took Bill Bundy with me, too. Afterward, Ulmsly and I called upon Paul Crammer who told us of his proof that Howell was holding goods in his storehouses to drive up the price of goods for the Army in the Peninsula. With all that, there was no reason to ask me to resign. My reputation was restored. Or it will be, when Ulmsly himself addresses the Commons tomorrow and puts the doings on the record."

She recovered herself after few minutes. "I think this is an ending fit for a good novelist."

He drew her close. The urge to comfort her and keep her was a steady wave of desire in his blood. "I want our happy ending."

"You could want me?" she asked him, stunned.

"Want you always," he told her as he kissed his way down her throat.

"You could forgive me?"

"Forgive you this and more," he affirmed as he began to undo the buttons at her bodice. "Is that not what good marriages are made of?"

"And the curse?" she asked him as her gown dropped to the floor and Adam lifted her petticoats then drew them over her head.

"That old fable?" he asked her as he cupped her breasts and kissed each gossamer nipple. "What power can it have over commitment and true love?"

About the Author

Cerise DeLand believes great romances match feisty women with one—or more—men who cannot live without them. And Cerise knows men—all types of them from living in Italy, England, Japan, New York, Washington—and wild west Texas! She blends that intimate knowledge with a passion for European and Chinese art and travel to delightful lands she loves to write about.

An award-winning author, Cerise has also penned 18 print romances and mysteries (under another name), many of which have been selections of The Doubleday Book Club and The Mystery Guild. And what does this prolific author do when she's not writing? Ah. She is an excellent cook. To taste and prepare a few of her delicacies, do come to her blog, especially on Thursdays for her Afternoon Delights, elegant simple refreshments to serve after your rendezvous! <http://cerisedeland.blogspot.com>

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All three of these ladies' lives are changed forever when they come into contact with *The Duke's Mistress*, and learn that some liaisons, no matter how compromising, are perfect.

***Made for Mischief* by Regina Carlisle**

All she really wanted was one naughty night before returning to her life as a sheltered country spinster! Crawling beneath a bed in London's most notorious brothel was beyond the pale, even for known eccentric Arabella Spencer. Little did she imagine that lust, desire, and yes, love was just within her grasp.

When Grayson St. James, Lord Mercer, newly returned from fighting Napoleon, dragged a squirming, dusty bluestocking from beneath his bed, he was...well...aghast! She wanted adventure, did she? She wanted to learn about sex, did she? He was just the man to teach her.

As a vow of vengeance and a case of mistaken identity unite Grayson and Arabella in a common goal, the dour Lord Mercer finds himself laughing for the first time in longer than he can recall. But will an unknown threat bring them together or tear their world apart?

***Wanton Venture* by Elaine Lowe**

Helena Gracechurch is far too occupied by thoroughly unfeminine concerns to fall in love. She's got a business to run, a brother to protect, and a sinister cousin to avoid marrying. But her lusty thoughts about the man she's just hired to captain her flagship are quite vexing and she has to keep her mind focused if she expects her world to remain afloat.

The new Earl of Belforth, Raymond Talbury, has arrived from Spain to find his family destitute and his position as a bachelor precarious. He needs money, not romance. But when he meets his

new employer, all he can think about is getting the fiery redhead in his bed, or anywhere else he can have her. There really is no way he can refuse her offer of a mutually satisfying undertaking.

They both harbor secrets, but their feelings for each other are plain. Will circumstances and a menacing relative drive them irrevocably apart, or will their wanton venture succeed beyond their wildest dreams?

***Chasing Temptation* by Regina Carlisle**

London's Haute Ton calls her Miss Temptation. But Elizabeth Grayson can't be bothered by society's diversions while seeking justice for her murdered sister. She is a woman on a dangerous mission. Now is not the time for mindless social engagements or courtships from men she has no intention of marrying. However, Christian Delaford is no ordinary man. He stirs her like no one she has ever met before. His eyes speak of sin and tangled sheets. Of decadent nights spent in his arms. Far too diverting for her peace of mind.

Christian Delaford, the Duke of Haverton, must be married by midnight of his birthday or forfeit his heritage to a distant relation. After years of living a hedonistic life in the Orient, the thought of binding himself forever to an insipid English Miss fairly curls his toes. London's current 'diamond of the first water', however, changes his mind. In Elizabeth, he finds a bold and daring woman who harbors a terrifying secret. He vows to chase Miss Temptation, to the ends of the earth if needs be, and save her from the forces that would tear them both apart.

***Falling Fast* by Cerise DeLand**

When Shana Carpenter meets Kade Stapleton years after she ruined his bronc busting career, she wants to make amends to him by building his reputation as a rodeo manager. But her plans go haywire when she faces him and is stunned by her irresistible desire for him. Making love to him often every day, though, cannot erase her guilt. And when she realizes she loves him, she finds herself with a bigger problem. Can she ever forgive herself for what she did? Can he ever forgive her? And can he ever wholly love her?

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