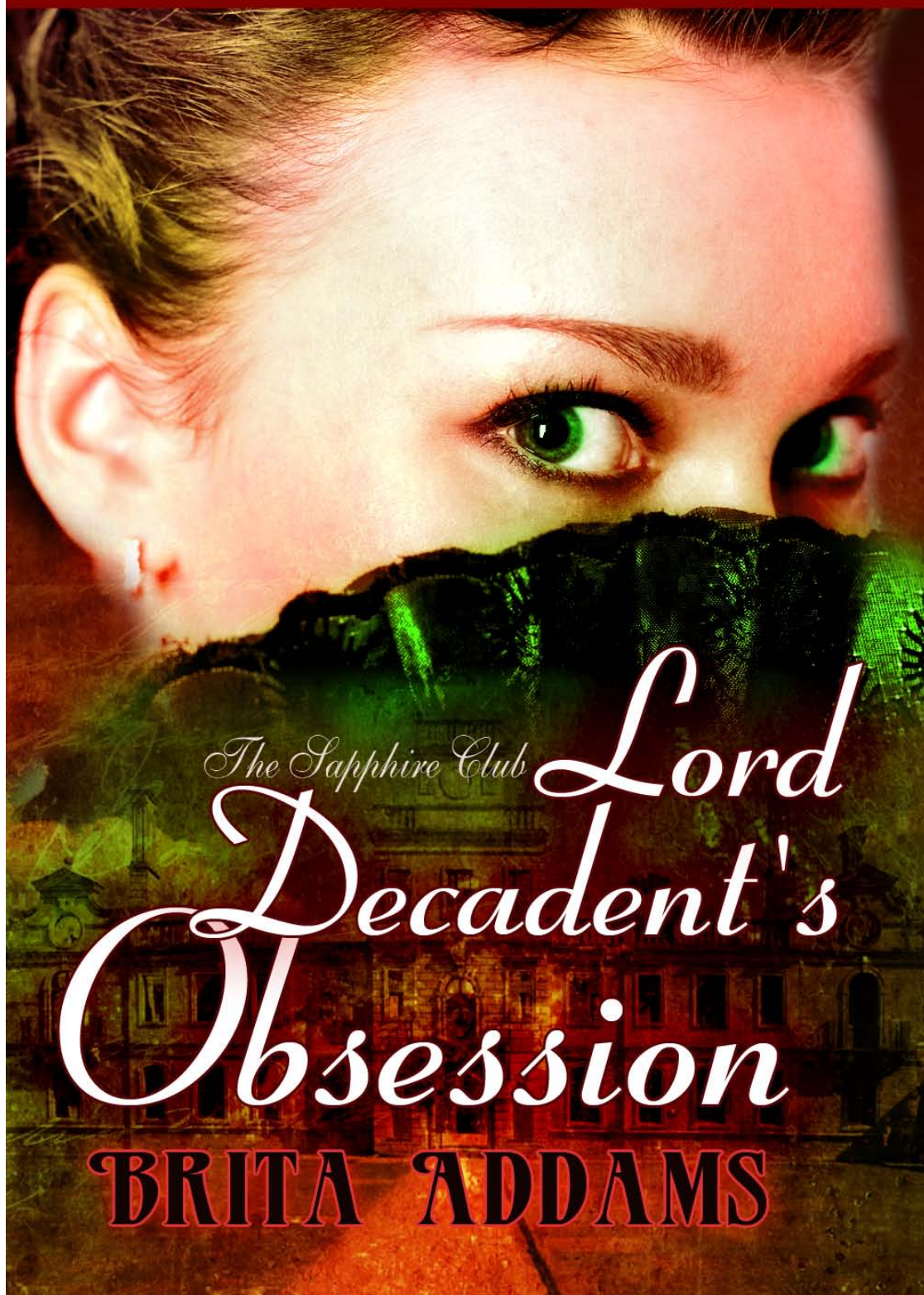


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Lord Decadent's Obsession

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Book Blurb

Since losing his wife, a woman who shared his sexual proclivities, Prentice Hyde has wandered lost, until Desiree Huntington appears at The Sapphire Club, wishing to engage his services in just the activities he most enjoys. At her seductive request, he paddles her lovely derriere, then takes her to his bed, showing her passion that she has never before experienced.

However, Desiree has a secret. Ten years before, the wicked Prentice Hyde took her virginity, her being one in a long line of faceless young women who were charmed by the handsome and persuasive Marquis of Wycroft. That single act destroyed her life, forcing her into a marriage with a man three times her age. Now, Desiree is bent on revenge.

Will she be able to make the decadent marquis fall in love with her without engaging her own heart? Can she forfeit the sexual awakening he has aroused in her? Will he be able to convince her he has changed and now his fondest desire is for her to join him in Lord Decadent's Obsession?

Dedication

To Clint, Kim, Mike, Sebastian, Chris, Patsy, Victoria and Lindsay. Your unflagging

support means everything to me. Love you all. To Keta Diablo, my mentor and friend. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your books inspire me and your encouragement can only make me a better author.

Chapter One

London, England

1817

Prentice Hyde glared moodily at the flames. If a stranger were to see him standing there, one would never imagine he was the Marquess of Wycroft. His tawny hair was mussed, a casualty of too many lonely, desolate hours. His cravat was unbound, and falling freely down his chest; the billowy sleeves of his ivory lawn shirt were rolled up to his elbows. He was brooding as he took another sip of his smoky scotch. Brooding, and waiting . . . and he *hated* waiting. His impatience would not bode well for his guest, he feared. Just thinking about what he was there to do made his cock stir, then stand at full attention, his fawn breeches becoming less comfortable.

A knock sounded.

"Finally," he shouted toward the door. "Get your ass in here, now."

The door creaked open, and a woman walked in, her beige cashmere cloak covering her from head to toe. She stepped over the threshold and shut the door. "I'm sorry for my tardiness, my lord."

"Remove your clothes."

Prentice made a slow turn toward the woman, taking in her appearance for the first time. She was rather short, but then most everyone was when compared to his six foot three inches. Her hair, almost as blonde as his, was unbound, wavy, and thick. The candlelight showed it to be golden, but she could have been bald for all he cared. It wasn't her hair he was interested in.

"Remove your clothes," he repeated, his tone stern.

She struggled to remove her dress, a silly pink confection that floated to the floor with a silky swish. She hadn't worn stays, which left her standing before him in a diaphanous chemise, silk stockings and her soft, kid slippers. Obviously, she'd dampened the chemise, for it clung to her every curve. Prentice's mouth watered, and he wondered if she'd done it for his benefit.

"Show me your breasts."

He was reaching beyond his purpose in meeting this young woman, but she deserved to be uncomfortable. She'd kept him waiting.

The woman untied the ribbons at each shoulder and slid the fabric down over her breasts, revealing puckered nipples. Prentice took a step toward her, slow and easy. He stopped six feet from her, and sat in the middle of the large, blue and gold-striped Hepplewhite sofa.

"Touch them."

As she did, his cock begged for surcease.

"Yes, squeeze them until they hurt."

She released a little squeak, but her head lolled back, showing him she enjoyed what she was doing.

"What is your name?"

"Susan, my lord."

"Why have you come here, Susan?"

"To have my bottom spanked, sir. My betrothed insisted I know what a real spanking feels like before we are married. He says I will have many. It wouldn't be proper for him to do this before we are married, so he brought me here."

"So you wish to be spanked, dear Susan."

"Yes, my lord. I wish to please my betrothed when he is my husband."

She blushed. Prentice did so love the color pink or crimson on a woman's cheeks.

He raised his arm and beckoned her with his fingers. "Drop your chemise, and come here."

Susan did as he bid.

"I'm going to spank you with my hand, Susan."

"Yes, my lord."

"Lie across my lap. Now are you comfortable?"

"Yes, sir."

Prentice smiled as he surveyed the luscious ass lying ever so close to his tortured cock. "Your husband will want your bottom to be reddened all the time, I suspect. Your cheeks are much too pale, my dear." He smacked her right cheek, eliciting a surprised, "Eek," from her.

"Did you feel that?"

"Yes, sir," she said, her voice strangled.

Prentice rubbed a rough hand over his work then struck her left cheek with equal force. She sniffled but made no other sound. "Were you ever spanked as a child, Susan?"

"Yes, all the time."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No, sir, it was my father who spanked me, sir."

"Well, let's see if we can't show you how enjoyable a spanking can be."

The young woman simply nodded.

He gave her several more quick smacks, followed by a harsh hand rub, and then a few more swats for good measure. She "Eeked" and "Ouched," but held fast, gripping his pant leg with both hands. Prentice used his hand to open her thighs, exposing her private parts. He dipped into her folds, and she rewarded him with a wiggle.

"Has any other man ever touched you thusly?"

"No, sir."

Prentice chuckled. "Not even that fiancé of yours?"

"No, sir, not until we are married."

"Mr. Hundley . . . a timid fellow, is he?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"With your permission, Susan, I am going to show you something. When you are married you must show this to your husband, and never let him take his pleasure

without giving you yours. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You see, dear, if sex is done properly, it is with an equal measure of pain and pleasure. Your ass will tingle and burn, making it impossible to forget that you are a sexual being. Now, let me show you the pleasure. His deft hand found her clitoris, and he began to circle the already erect nubbin. "You little minx, you are enjoying this spanking, aren't you?"

He'd already worked her into a state of ecstasy. She rubbed her soaking wet folds against his hand, and moaned as only a woman on the verge of reaching her pleasure would.

"Yes, dear, let go," he encouraged.

She did just that, making it difficult for him to continue. She writhed and squirmed, shouting unintelligibly. His cock throbbed; no doubt he could fuck a Seven Dials whore and be satisfied.

Little Susan seemed to have become a woman right before his eyes. "Are you a virgin?"

She hesitated, making him wary.

"Are you?" His patience grew thin.

"Yes, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty. I just had my birthday at Christmas."

"I believe you have now experienced a spanking at the hands of a man other than your father. I wish you happy in your marriage." He smacked her hard on both cheeks, and she yelped. "Get up now, and get dressed. We are finished here."

He helped her to her feet, walked to the mantel, and took up his glass of scotch.

She dressed, eliciting his help with the buttons.

"I suggest you be on your way. I'll have Hampton get you a hackney."

"I have my own, sir, but thank you."

She picked up her cloak and raced from the room.

Prentice sipped his scotch as he paced the room. His cock was raging. He'd fucked his way through the *ton* without any special regard to marital or virginal status. No apologies whatsoever, he'd broken in many young women when they'd become a bit too blatant in their flirting. Always with their consent, of course; they were amply rewarded with pleasure beyond anything they would get when they married their old, wealthy nobles. He'd even instructed them on how to feign losing their virginity on their wedding nights. He was nothing if not obliging, a true servant to womankind.

Alone, now, and unsatisfied, he needed relief. Though he could have found someone with whom he could enjoy a quick fuck, he wasn't so inclined. Being alone suited his mood. He resumed his seat on the sofa, opened the fall of his breeches, and released his cock. "*No willing quim for us tonight, old boy.*" Prentice took himself in hand, his head back against the sofa, a handkerchief in his free hand. This was about relief, not pleasure. Three minutes later, he finished. Nice and quick, just as he'd anticipated.

After cleaning himself up, he went in search of his friend, Lucien Damrill, owner of the Sapphire Club. He preferred getting foxed to wallowing in the loneliness that had infiltrated his life of late.

* * * * *

Desiree had sat breathless as she'd watched the Marquess of Wycroft spank the young woman's arse. Her body was still weak with envy as she thought of how he'd applied his hand to young Susan's ever reddening cheeks.

"My God, I have never seen anything so exquisite in all my life," she'd whispered to Serenity Damrill, wife of the owner of the Sapphire Club. She heard the door to room close. She looked into the room once again, and noted the absence of the gentleman who had left her in her current state.

She was still riveted to her chair, awestruck at the sights she had witnessed.

"Yes, he is quite skilled, though I can't speak from personal experience."

"Mrs. Damrill, what must I do to engage the marquess in such activity?"

"I believe you simply must ask, Mrs. Huntington. The marquess is a particular friend of mine, and I will be happy to make the introduction, if you'd like."

"I would very much like the introduction; now, if you don't mind."

Serenity Damrill chuckled. "I understand your haste. Come, I will make the introduction, then you may settle the details with Lord Wycroft."

"I understand, Mrs. Damrill. Might I have a few moments to compose myself?"

"Please, call me Serenity. Everyone else does, and of course you may."

The ladies chatted innocuously for several minutes. When Desiree felt more sure of herself, she nodded as Serenity led her from the small viewing closet that had afforded her such a delicious view of the equally delicious marquess.

Serenity knocked on the double doors of the library and opened them.

Her husband rose from his chair, smiling as his wife entered. "Dear, it is nice to see you. I thought I had misplaced you until Hampton informed me you had a guest."

"Yes, darling, this is Mrs. Desiree Huntington. She is interested in becoming a member of the club."

Lucien greeted Desiree with commensurate friendliness, welcoming her to the rarified environs of his club. "May I introduce you to Prentice Hyde?"

Prentice had been standing next to the desk, and appeared to have a wholly disinterested mien. "It is very nice to meet you, Mrs. Huntington."

Desiree noted that he seemed rather bored.

"Mrs. Huntington wishes a private conversation with you, Prentice, and possibly a tour of the club, if you wouldn't mind." Serenity winked at Desiree.

"We will leave you two alone to have your discussion while I consult with my wife. It has been an age, and I believe we have some unfinished business, do we not, my dear?" Lucian cast his wife a look that spoke volumes.

Desiree smiled inwardly at the heat the two generated.

"I believe we do," Serenity said, laying a hand on her husband's arm.

They left the room, leaving Desiree alone with Prentice, to fend for herself.

"Well, since our hosts have left us to our own devices, what is it you are interested in seeing, Mrs. Huntington?" Prentice addressed Desiree the moment the door closed behind Lucien and Serenity.

"I am entirely in your hands, my lord."

Prentice raised an eyebrow. "Do you know who I am?"

"Everyone knows who you are."

He watched her green-eyed gaze rake over his body, spending an inordinate amount of time at his crotch. His damned cock danced with excitement.

"Is there something in *particular* you wish to see, Mrs. Huntington?"

"I want more than you gave to dear, sweet Susan."

Prentice's eyes widened, his mouth fell open. "You were watching?"

"Yes. I am not a woman who hems and haws, sir. I wish to experience all the naughty things there are to experience here at the Sapphire Club. I will submit myself to you, if you will consent to take me on. I understand that arrangements can be made if members wish such exclusivity."

"Well, certainly, arrangements can be made. Now, I would be happy to accommodate you, but are you sure you know what the club is about?"

"I do. Do we have an agreement, my lord? I am anxious to start."

Prentice walked toward her, and with his arm extended toward the door, he said, "Come with me. It should never be said that I have kept a lady waiting."

Desiree smiled, and allowed him to guide her from the room. There was a flurry of activity in the entrance hall, given the late hour – a lot of laughter, and blatant sexual groping. She could hear moans, groans, grunts, and not a few howls as they passed many closed doors.

As they walked, she spoke. "I have always felt I was born at the wrong time. If I hadn't had brothers, I would have believed all of the malarkey that I was taught at Mrs. Petrie's School for Young Ladies. She and her staff of dried-up old crones taught us there was no more to life than embroidery, and learning to play the pianoforte."

Prentice escorted her into a room on the first floor. He watched her take in her

surroundings, and smiled inwardly when her attention came to rest on a rosewood chaise covered in rich, crimson satin. The arms were of different heights, and were thickly padded. "It's a Biedermeier," he told her. "The Damrill's have pieces like this shipped in from the Continent. It is excellent for spanking, and other interesting pursuits."

Desiree squeezed the curved arm. "Yes, I can imagine myself draped over it."

Prentice laughed. "I have met many women, but only rarely have I had the pleasure of knowing someone so candid."

Prentice stood with his hands behind his back. He couldn't take his eyes from her, finding her as physically attractive as she was stimulating. Her well-made, blue satin dress hugged the luscious curves of her body, the tops of her breasts spilling over the lace embellishments. She was a vision.

"Now tell me. What is it you wish to have happen here, Mrs. Huntington?"

"I wish to submit to you. I wish to be mastered."

Prentice arched his eyebrows. "Mastered, you say?"

"Yes, sir, mastered. I wish to be under your total control, at your whim. I will be your . . ."

"My what?"

She raised an eyebrow of her own. "Whatever you wish me to be."

Chapter Two

"Are you aware, madam, what that could entail?" Prentice asked, injecting a note of seriousness in his voice.

"I have a fair idea, but I am sure that you can enlighten me. I am not missish."

"No, I suspect you're not, Mrs. Huntington. However, I am a man of rather wicked tastes. A simple fuck is not in my nature, not since I came out of short coats. The motto here at the club is, 'Blister their arse, and fuck 'em insensible'. I adhere to that religiously."

"I have told you, sir, I wish to submit to you completely. I understand all must be consensual here. Is that not so?"

"It is a rule."

"Then I have nothing to fear."

"Spankings hurt."

"I am prepared. I have wanted this for a very long time, sir."

"Did your husband spank you?"

"No, he did not, much to his discredit."

Prentice laughed again. He liked her, much too much, if the truth was known. She was refreshing. His cock liked her too, traitorous creature.

"Well, you should know I spank only on the bare. There are certain rules that must be adhered to, and we will rub along nicely. I am not easy to anger, but I have a refined sense of ennui.

"As your *master*, I will be demanding. You must be available to me whenever I wish. If you receive a missive asking you to join me, you must return with the messenger without fail. I will never do anything to which you have not specifically agreed. I also must have *carte blanche*."

"I agree."

The fire in the grate was burning low, making the room rather chill. Prentice stoked it and added another log. "I wish to test you."

"Test me, sir?"

"I wish to see how you take a spanking. Bend over the side of the bed."

Prentice watched her face for traces of reticence. She stepped forward and did as he asked without as much as a blink. She raised her skirts and placed her hands above her head. He walked up beside her, making sure to brush her legs with his. He skimmed his hands over her bottom and down to the backs of her thighs. He paid particular attention to the tender skin of her inner thighs, and allowed the side of his hand to graze her cleft. *Ah, lovely. Already wet.*

"Spankings will always be conducted in the nude. You are to wear no

undergarments when you expect me or I summon you. I wish you to be clean-shaven, as I abhor this." He gently tugged her pubic hair.

He pulled the ribbon that held her frilly white drawers, letting them slide gracefully over her bottom and float down to her ankles. Then he rubbed his hands over her white buttocks once again. "As long as we are in association, your bottom will never look like this, my dear; I shall see to it." He gave her a smack with the palm of his hand, not holding back in force.

She expelled a breath. "Oh!"

"Did that hurt?"

"No."

He gave her another, amazed when she reacted by situating herself so her bottom rose even higher. "I like your pluck," he commented, before he went to work.

She moaned and squeaked, but took his punishment. After twenty strokes, he stopped, having assured himself she would be a worthy partner in the particular games he so enjoyed. It had been some time since he had found such a person to fill that empty space.

He drew her undergarment up and helped her to a standing position. She was not even out of breath nor did she have even a trace of a tear in her eye. "I believe we shall do well together, Mrs. Huntington."

"Desiree, please call me Desiree."

"Oh, Desire in French, is it not?"

"Yes, my mother was part French. I am named for my grandmother."

"It is an apt name."

"Am I to assume you have some of that particular emotion toward me, *Master*?"

"Well, I would have you note that my cock is like steel, and not only because I have spanked you."

"What shall we do about that?" She riffled her hand over the fall of his breeches.

"You could bend over that bed once again, and I could fuck you insensible."

Prentice's eyes grew dark. His smile disappeared. Prentice narrowed his gaze

and frowned. He'd like to bury himself deeply within her, and he had no patience for seduction this night.

To his surprise, and her credit, she followed his instructions. She raised her skirts then released the offending drawers from around her waist.

"Oh, yes, and you've a nice color to your ass. I am pleased."

"Yes, I am rather enjoying the sting and burn. Now I would enjoy something else."

He towered over her as he came up behind her and spread her legs wide with his own. He teased her, finding her clitoris, taking it between two fingers. She was wet. He was nearly salivating with need. With little ceremony, he entered her with a grunt. "Yes, that's what I like, a wet and ready quim."

He pumped her as his hand found her anus. He toyed with the opening, getting no argument from her. He used her own moisture to lubricate his finger and entered her. She groaned and balked; he stilled.

"All right." He inched his way in, feeling her muscles expand and contract around his finger, stopping and starting him.

He couldn't hold back much longer. The orgasm was building much too soon, but he couldn't force himself to stop. With no regard for her pleasure, he pulled from her at the last moment and finished with his hand. He felt an immediate sense of loss; his hand had never been a substitute for the moist depths of a woman.

She groaned in what sounded to him like disappointment but he dismissed her with a swat on the bottom. "Your time will come, but not tonight."

"That is not quite what I had in mind, sir."

"The next time we meet, I will see to your pleasure as well as punish you for your impertinence."

She straightened and smiled. "So there will be a next time?"

"Oh, yes, you have much potential. Come now, I will see you home."

"I have a hackney."

"Are you arguing with me?"

"No, sir."

"Good. I shall see you home."

Fifteen minutes later, as the carriage made the long journey from St. John's Wood to her Doughty Street home, Prentice was afforded the opportunity to examine the lady who had so precipitously fallen into his life. He observed her without her knowledge as the carriage lamp illuminated her face, a combination of fine bone structure and flawless, alabaster skin. Her nose was Patrician, her expressive eyes just large enough to portray surprise or pleasure, preferably in equal measure. Her mouth was a luscious creation, with a bottom lip just plump enough to nibble on or suck into one's mouth. The natural curve at her mouth's corners betrayed a propensity to smile often. He'd like to be responsible for some of her smiles, and would be envious should anyone else do the honors.

She was a beautiful woman, indeed. She had a bawdy nature, but to his way of thinking, all women should. He had no patience for a missish female, and they were the only kind that pursued him, more often than not with marriage on their minds.

The pretentiousness of society had prolonged his search for another mate, though, heaven knows, it was disagreeably uppermost in his mind. A marquess must secure the title and fortune with an heir. The very thought sent shudders through his body.

His wife, should there ever be one, would have to live life on this terms. He wouldn't give up his sexual proclivities for anyone. She would either be his partner or she wouldn't be his marchioness. He'd had it *all* once, and there would be no compromise. If there wasn't another Abigail for him, so be it. His cousin's footmen would look wonderful in blue and gold livery.

"This really wasn't necessary, my lord. I am quite capable of seeing myself home."

Prentice was torn from his melancholic reverie. "I realize that, my dear, but I am nothing if not a gentleman."

"I would hope not too much of a gentleman."

He smiled, storing away her comment. "So you said your husband didn't spank you?"

"No, he did not. He was not the man I wished to marry, and I would prefer not to speak of him."

Prentice nodded his acknowledgement. "I am sorry if I have opened old wounds."

Giving him a weak smile, she said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all."

"How long have you spanked women?"

Prentice laughed. "You make it sound as though I search the countryside for fresh asses to blister."

"I apologize. I simply meant that —"

He put up his hand to ward off her apology. "I understand. I have been a devotee for many years. I've spent a considerable amount of time on the Continent, and was taught much by some very talented people."

Silence once again surrounded them but for the clopping of hooves on the cobbles, and the occasional command from the coachman. The carriage creaked its way through the streets as the moonlight flickered through the windows. Prentice couldn't bring himself to speak, though he had much to say.

He had been retrospective of late; the anniversary of his wife's death loomed near. He experienced the same melancholy every year. His usual jovial humor was reduced to morose thoughts, and though his sexual urges never abated, he took little pleasure in satisfying them.

The carriage stopped outside number forty-two Doughty Street. The coachman opened the door, and Prentice got out. Desiree followed with his help.

"Would you care for a brandy, my lord? I have some fine French."

"Yes, I believe I would," he said without thinking. He loathed being alone, and rather enjoyed the lady's company.

Desiree let them into her home, the servants obviously having long ago found

their beds. Someone had left a taper lit, which provided scant but sufficient light. Prentice followed Desiree to her drawing room, a small but adequate place, filled to teeming with furniture that belonged to the last century. A scone was lit in this room, as was a nice fire in the grate, which warmed the room cozily.

Prentice walked around, looking at the porcelain figurines. "This is a nice room. It seems to be a pleasant place to spend some idle hours."

"Thank you. This is my favorite room in the house."

"How long have you been in London?"

"Many years now, but in this house only the last five."

"Is that when your husband died?"

"Yes, it is."

Prentice turned to apologize, and was struck once again by her inordinate beauty. His heart wrenched.

"Desiree, I . . ."

"What is it? You suddenly look so terribly sad."

Her compassion gripped him. He crossed the space between them, and before he could think, he kissed her. He covered her mouth with a desperation that frightened him. As her lips parted and her arms came around his neck, he became lost in the moment. His tongue delved inside to explore.

He wrapped his arms around her slim body, absorbing her warmth, her strength. He didn't allow himself this type of closeness. Having a woman's body pressed so close to his own, was a luxury he rarely indulged in. Fucking was one thing; this kind of intimacy was something else entirely.

She gave back, kissing him with abandon, with purpose.

"I want you," he whispered. "Where is your bed?"

"This way." She led him up the stairs, down a long hallway, and to her bedchamber. It too was warmed by a cheery fire in the grate.

They were barely through the door before Prentice was working the buttons on the back of Desiree's dress. He wanted to tear the thing off of her but realized

forbearance was the more appropriate route.

"God I hate buttons, especially tiny ones," he grumbled.

She giggled like a young debutante.

Finally, he pushed her dress down over her shoulders; it fell into a fluffy heap about her ankles. Her stays soon joined the dress, leaving her standing before him in her chemise, looking lovelier than a woman had a right.

He couldn't resist the temptation to pluck the silver pins from her hair. He wanted to see if her tawny tresses felt as silky as they looked. It took but a moment to discover the softness, and become intoxicated by the glorious smell of gardenias. He raked his hands through her locks, allowing himself to become lost in the moment.

"I wish to see you, Desiree."

"You have but to ask, sir."

"I am not your master now. I am simply a man who wants you under him."

She slipped the chemise over her head. Prentice filled his hands with her breasts then covered each nipple in turn with his mouth. She seemed to melt in his embrace. He suckled them, hungrily drawing the nipple into the moist heat of his mouth, laving them with his tongue.

"Delicious."

She reached up to unbutton his coat. He shrugged out of it, allowing the expensive garment to join her dress in a puddle on the floor.

"I wish to see you as well."

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Perching her bottom on the edge of the mattress, he towered over her, shielding her from the lapping shadows of the fire. Her face was close enough to

She reached for the buttons of his breeches, her tongue licking her bottom lip. When Desiree's hand brushed his cock through the linen, he closed his eyes, the sensation almost overwhelming. For a moment, he replayed another night in his head, another woman. He forced himself to open his eyes, to bring himself back to the present. *She's gone, old man. Abigail's gone.*

Impatience replaced sorrow as he helped her with the remaining three buttons. He then allowed her to slide the breeches and small clothes over his narrow hips, savoring the feel of her hands skimming over his skin.

Her warm breath upon him was nearly his undoing. "Touch me." Even *he* sensed the raw need in his voice.

He waited for the first contact—that precious feeling he'd always adored. Her warm hand reverently closed around his steel hard cock, while her eyes studied his face. She was practiced, he could tell. He did so hate to break them in, to teach them the many ways to please him, especially when he was anxious to sink into them and forget. He wished for a schooled touch from someone who might have a few surprises of her own.

She slid her hand down, touching all the most sensitive spots. Then up again, her thumb riding the engorged blue vein.

"Oh, shit," he hissed through his teeth.

"Do you like that, my lord?"

"You know I do, vixen." His hold on composure grew tenuous.

As she slid her hand down once again, she flicked her tongue over the bulbous head, lapping the secretion her ministrations produced. She opened her mouth, covering the head, surrounding his cock in wet, velvety warmth. Inch by delicious inch, she took him in.

Chapter Three

Desiree awoke to Lord Wycroft's soft snores. The sun was not yet up. She'd have to wake him soon, before the servants began to stir.

She rolled to her side, lifting herself up on one elbow. He hadn't changed in the last ten years. He was still the most handsome man she had ever seen. His tawny hair was beginning to streak with silver, but the look certainly became him.

If she wasn't careful, she would become lost in those topaz eyes again, a fate

she'd not allow.

She'd sensed a deep sadness about him the night before, but he was still the same horse's arse he'd always been. She laughed to herself. *He's so self-confident; he must think himself invincible.* A man of eight and thirty should be more careful, and she would make him realize it.

She flopped back onto her pillow, pondering how the last ten years had come to define who she was. She'd been like all the other girls in Mrs. Petrie's School for Young Ladies. She'd learned to embroider – a pursuit destined for extinction – and play the pianoforte and violin, and all the proper manners any young girl should know. Later, she had come out, curtsied before the Queen, danced with all the eligible young men and old widowers, all of whom were looking for a wife, and if she were truthful with herself, she'd have to admit she'd been happy with her life.

But then, an arrogant, cocksure nobleman, who, it turned out, meant none of his flattery, had turned her entire world upside down. He'd infiltrated the ranks of the searching, and pursued his course of conquering. She'd been one of many who had fallen into his trap of long eyelashes, silver tongue (oh, that tongue!), and heavenly hands.

Desiree shuddered at her immaturity. *How could I have believed all his lies?* She'd asked herself that same question every day for the last ten years. That mistake had cost her everything she held dear. He'd taken her virginity, which she gave without so much as a whimper, then abandoned her to her fate, while he went on and married Abigail Featherstone. *I was good enough to fuck but not to marry.*

Instead, her parents rushed her into a marriage with Ebenezer Huntington, a wealthy merchant treble her age. His gray side-whiskers alone turned her stomach, but add to that his paunch, and his yellowed, tobacco-stained teeth, and he was a thoroughly disgusting man.

The family of the young man who'd originally wanted to marry her insisted upon knowing the status of her maidenhead before committing to a betrothal. Upon a physician's discovery that the valuable shield was no longer intact, her humiliated

parents palmed her off on Mr. Huntington, who didn't have a care for the condition of said maidenhead. He was quite content to have a young, beautiful wife to sweat over in his bed. The sounds of his grunting and groaning had solidified her anger toward Prentice Hyde, the almighty Marquess of Wycroft.

In the beginning, in her more rational moments, she'd taken the lion's share of the blame. However, as time passed, and her misery increased, it had become easier to shuttle all the blame to him, citing *her* youth, and inexperience.

She'd fallen for his honeyed words, and their one quick coupling in an alcove had changed her life forever. He'd pay for that. She would lure him in, and when she had him as enamored as she'd been, she'd walk away.

She'd planned this for years. She'd heard how he was a devotee of some of the more perverse sexual practices, something she had become interested in, as well. After her husband died, and she'd gone back out into society, she'd attended a ball, where she'd overheard several rather foxed gentlemen describe some of the activities that went on at the Sapphire Club. Their descriptions had dampened her quim, and excited her senses.

She relished the idea that a man could turn her into a quivering mass of need as he spanked her bottom. She'd always been a naughty girl but had hidden it well beneath linen and silk.

Yes, she would enjoy Prentice Hyde. She'd submit to his whims and wants because it suited her purpose to do so. If last night was any standard by which to judge, she'd look forward to what was to come. She'd learn all she could, and when the time was right, she'd turn it on him and pray that he'd suffer after she took her leave.

Revenge was sweet, or so she'd read somewhere, but in the meantime . . .

* * * * *

Prentice sat behind the expansive mahogany desk in his library, trying to concentrate on the sheaf of papers his man-of-business had foisted upon him earlier

that morning. Crop yields and petitioning tenants were something he usually left for Upton to handle, but somehow the business always ended back in his lap.

"Give them whatever it is they want," Prentice said, impatient with being forced to see to matters that held no particular interest for him. It wasn't that he was a neglectful landowner. He simply knew how to delegate so he could pursue far more important matters. Right now, he had a matter of a carnal nature to tend to, and Upton was in the way.

"The cottages need new thatch before the cold sets in and —"

"I said, give them what they need. See to it, Upton." With that, Prentice stood and made for the door.

"As you wish, my lord."

Though it was early afternoon, the Sapphire Club hummed with activity. Prentice enjoyed the atmosphere of the place. It was a large, rambling, three-story estate in St. John's Wood. Lucien Damrill had purchased it and established a sex club, which occupied the first two floors. Lucien and his wife, Serenity, resided on the third floor.

Prentice and Lucien had been friends for years, and it was Prentice who had helped exonerate Serenity of murder a few years before. The friendship deepened after that, making Prentice feel as though he was almost a partner in club.

His boots tapped loudly as he walked across the tiled entrance hall toward the library. Lucien could usually be found there at this time of day, though he would be setting out soon for his afternoon spanking appointment with his wife.

The door stood ajar, and before Prentice entered, he peered into the room. Lucien stood beside the Biedermeier chaise, his wife bent over the arm, getting her daily spanking.

Lucien's perversities required a mate such as Serenity, who had adapted to, nay, *surpassed* her husband's expectations. She enjoyed her spankings, begged for them as a rule, and Lucien could deliver one with skill.

"Come in, Prentice," Lucien called. "Don't be loitering about in the hall."

Prentice sauntered in, making for the fine French brandy Lucien always stocked.

"Good afternoon, Serenity, I see you are enjoying yourself, as usual."

Serenity was rather breathless, but she smiled as Lucien delivered another stroke with Serenity's favorite leather strap.

Prentice sat down out of the way, savoring the sound of the strap as it hit bare skin. He envied Lucien, for Prentice once had such a partner and would forever feel that loss acutely.

Lucien helped Serenity stand, and she straightened her skirts. They had been pulled up to her waist, and as usual she wore no drawers.

Lucien kissed Serenity with shameless passion, rubbing her inflamed bottom as he did so.

"I love the sting," she whispered, though Prentice heard.

"Are the beads in place?"

"Yes, of course they are, just waiting for you to remove them."

"All in good time, my darling."

"Sorry, Prentice, we weren't trying to ignore you. How did you make out with Mrs. Huntington the other evening?"

"So far, so good. She seems willing enough." He kept his demeanor casual, belying the hopefulness he felt.

"Have you put her through her paces, old man?"

"Not yet. That's why I'm here. I've sent a footman with a message. She should return with him soon. Is Marjorie about?"

Serenity nodded, and went to the bell pull. Within a minute, Marjorie, Serenity's personal maid, appeared at the door.

"Yes, Mrs. Damrill."

"Lord Wycroft wishes to speak with you. Darling, will you join me, please?"

"Lucky dog," Prentice called out as the Damrills left the room.

"Yes, my lord, how may I be of service?"

"I am expecting Mrs. Huntington, Marjorie, and I wish to have you take care of her."

"Yes, sir. Do you wish for the usual preparations?"

"Exactly, my dear, the usual, then take her to the Queen's suite. Array everything as usual. I will make my choices when the time comes."

"Yes, sir, I will have everything to your liking."

"You always do, dear. I don't know how you handle so many responsibilities. You are amazing."

Marjorie blushed prettily, curtsied, and left the room.

* * * * *

Upon her arrival, Desiree was escorted to a retiring room, whereupon, a maid greeted her warmly.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Huntington. My name is Marjorie. His lordship has asked me to assist you."

"Assist me?"

"If you will allow me, I will tend to your preparations, after which you will meet with Lord Wycroft."

Desiree nodded, and Marjorie began to unbutton Desiree's dark blue muslin gown.

"Step out, please," she said, then went about hanging the gown on a hook affixed to the wall.

"I must ask you to remove the rest of your clothes and go to the bed for me."

Desiree frowned. She hadn't expected to be delayed by a maid and asked to strip naked in front of her. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, with not a little perturbation in her voice.

"Lord Wycroft asked that I perform the usual preparations before you meet with him, ma'am. Would you rather I not proceed?"

"He told you to do this?"

"Yes, Mrs. Huntington, he did."

"I see. Very well, then." Apparently, Wycroft considered this all part of her submission.

When she was naked, she went to the bed.

"If you will scoot to the edge of the bed, Mrs. Huntington, and raise your feet up to rest on the edge, I will shave you."

Desiree remembered the little tug on her pubic hair that had accompanied Prentice's admonition.

"That's it. Now spread your legs wide for me, and I will be done here in a few minutes."

Desiree watched as the little maid, not much younger than she, wielded the straight razor with an enviable expertise.

When they finished, Desiree climbed into the tub that had been prepared for her. The bath was scented with lavender oil. She luxuriated while Marjorie was out of the room. When the maid returned, she ushered Desiree from the warm water and bundled her into a nightgown and wrapper.

"I am to escort you to where Lord Wycroft will join you. Please come with me."

Desiree followed the young maid down a long passageway. The walls were covered with framed depictions of people engaged in various sexual acts. There were no hunting scenes – no, nothing so benign. Paintings of men spanking women had found their place upon these walls. Sexually explicit sculptures adorned pier tables set against these same walls, lending to the atmosphere of pure, unadulterated debauchery.

The decor was all quite stimulating. She'd never seen anything like what she was seeing on this, her first real foray into the world of the Sapphire Club. She reminded herself that this was for her, because she *wished* to immerse herself in this carnal world. Later, and she would know precisely when 'later' was, she would pull the rug out from under lofty Lord Wycroft. Until then, however, she would enjoy the decadence she so craved but had never had the freedom to enjoy.

Marjorie opened the door to a room nearly at the end of the passageway, curtsied, and left Desiree to enter alone. Two glass and ormolu sconces lit the room. The

shadows danced about the ceiling as she walked by, stirring the air. There was a massive bed, dark wood, ornately carved, and dressed in a fine, red silk counterpane. The four posters were swathed in red silk as well, opulently draped, flowing to soft pools at the floor.

An elegant, Ionic-scrolled day bed, upholstered in red velvet, stood against one wall. Desiree ran her hand over the plush fabric and imagined herself draped over the higher of the two pillowed arms. Her cunny clenched and moistened. She wondered if her master would fuck her from behind as she bent over the arm.

There was a short table with a gilded top beside the day bed, upon which lay four implements—a well-worn leather strap, a riding crop, a wooden paddle and a cane, all neatly placed side by side, exuding promise for a very interesting afternoon.

Chapter Four

Prentice had waited in the offices of the Sapphire Club, drinking brandy and trading barbs with Lucien and Lady Amelie Foxworth. The lady shared the men's interest in the perverse. Since her husband's death, she'd been a private client of Lucien's, sans the requisite fucking that always followed the thrashing she received every Thursday.

A knock interrupted a particular bawdy story her ladyship was telling. Lucien caught his breath from his laughter, and yelled, "Yes."

Marjorie poked her head around the door. "Lord Wycroft, the lady is in the Queen's Room."

"Thank you," Prentice said. He swallowed the last of the brandy, and stood.

"What does she want?" Lucien asked.

Prentice walked to the fireplace, realizing he'd never bothered to ask the lady precisely that question. "Dunno. Claims she wishes to submit. I'll see what stamina she has. Later, I'll show her some of the rougher games, and see what her limits are."

"Good man. Well, Amelie, I believe your arse is in need of some color, is it not?"

"It needs a good fucking, as well."

"Haynes is waiting, as always. Come, the room is prepared."

Left alone, Prentice gathered his wits and prepared for his first session with Mrs. Huntington. His hands longed to spank her, much more than they should.

He removed his coat, leaving it draped over the sofa arm. As he walked to the Queen's room, he rolled his billowing shirt sleeves up to his elbows. His long legs made short work of the distance, the red carpet muffling the sounds of his steps.

Upon opening the door, he saw her rubbing her hand over a paddle. She started, as though she'd been caught doing something wrong. He quietly made his way to her over the Turkish carpet that covered the polished wooden floor. A clock ticked. The fire crackled, much as the electricity between them.

He removed the wooden implement from her hand and brushed his fingers over the dark, glossy wood; the handle carved to resemble a woman's torso. He raked his hooded gaze over her hands then lifted his head to meet her eyes. He'd taken on the persona of master.

"Am I to infer you have chosen the paddle to begin with?"

"It is rather interesting, is it not? I've never seen a paddle with holes in it before."

"Yes, it is a thing of beauty. Air passing through the holes allow for a greater *sting*."

She licked her bottom lip. "It is beautiful."

"There are rules to which you will adhere. I don't ever want to walk into a room and find you handling my tools."

She looked nervous, which was his intention. "When I send for you, it will always be as it was today. You will meet with Marjorie, who will ready you as I have instructed. You have no authority to countermand me, and, if you do, Marjorie will report it, much as she did your hesitation today. When I enter the room, you will be naked and prepared to obey. Is that understood?"

Desiree's heart raced as Prentice's dark, velvety voice surrounded her with

unease. He was calm, almost too much so, but, at the same time, threatening. Was he angry? She couldn't tell.

"I understand, sir. I am sorry."

"As I recall, you have been rather impertinent, an offense I rather enjoy punishing."

"So you said at our last meeting."

"You will come to crave these meetings, Mrs. Huntington; however, they will always be at my behest, not yours."

His deep baritone was even, with just a hint of inflection. As he set down the rules of their association, she found herself lulled into his web. The implied seduction in his voice held promise and yet had an air of something truly fearful. The threat gave the experience an enticing edge.

"You are still dressed, which has earned you an extra little punishment." He gave her a wry smile.

To her disgust, her hands shook as she untied the satin bow that held the wrapper closed. He towered over her, his arms crossed over his chest, his legs apart. He looked like a torturously handsome pirate, and his topaz eyes bored through her as she revealed more and more of her body.

She sensed his impatience, and quickly allowed the nightrail to drop to the floor.

He began a slow walk around her. "By your actions, you have given me permission to do this, have you not?"

He touched her breast, squeezing the nipple hard, but she didn't permit herself to flinch. "Yes, I have."

"Very good. I will seduce your body with the pain of the spanking just as I will seduce your mind until you cannot live without the lash. Sexual congress will never again be complete for you without the pain."

She knew what he said was true. She was wet simply with his words. She prayed she could do what needed to be done. Her body wanted all he offered.

"Tell me what you want from our meetings, Desiree, and be mindful that I want

to hear *exactly* what you want." He continued to circle her, touching her at will.

"I want to feel the paddle."

"Where, here?" He swatted her leg.

"No."

"All right, then, here?"

She felt the sting on her arm. "No, sir, I want to feel the paddle on my bottom."

"Don't dissemble with me, Mrs. Huntington. I am incapable of deciphering feminine euphemisms."

"I want you to spank my arse."

"Now, we are getting somewhere."

She realized she didn't feel at all self-conscious.

Prentice knelt behind her and touched her buttocks. Desiree closed her eyes and savored the attention.

"I will warm you up with my hand. Bend over the bed."

Though he didn't strike her with any force, the sound of his hand on her skin reverberated throughout the room. He alternated cheeks, being sure to cover her seat, and the tender underside of each mound.

"You know, I have always had a fascination with the feminine ass. Since ladies spend an inordinate amount of time swaying it back and forth, trying to garner a gentleman's attention, it seems rather fitting that we should spend some time exploring that ass."

Desiree's gut seized. What could he mean?

He rubbed over his handiwork, playing with the crease between her cheeks. She flinched, earning her a sharp swat with his hand.

"Implicit permission or am I wrong?"

"No sir, you are not wrong."

"Spread your legs wide for me, and keep them spread."

Desiree did as he bid. Excitement and fear, in equal measure, suffused her body. She felt the paddle being dragged across her arse, followed by light taps upon her

tender skin. Without warning, he let fly with the first strike. She'd been unable to clench her cheeks, in order to harden them against the assault. She breathed a soft sigh. The first blow hadn't hurt nearly as much as she'd thought. The second, however, delivered to the underside of the left buttock, forced a loud breath from her lungs.

She absorbed the stinging swats as they were laid over the previous strikes, and the feeling was glorious. An all-encompassing glow, radiating from her stomach, touching all parts of her, replaced the pain.

The throbbing of her sexual arousal became unbearable. Between each spank, Prentice stopped and rubbed her arse, his hand dipping into her drenched folds. Just as she'd move to get closer, he'd move away and strike again.

She hated herself for enjoying his attentions, but wanted more.

"You took that quite well."

His praise brought a rush of warmth.

He took her elbow and helped her up, but instead of pulling her into an embrace, he walked away.

"You may dress now." His voice held a note of strange detachment, with nary a trace of the velvety softness it held earlier.

"That's all?"

He chuckled. "Do you mean you want me to continue wailing on your ass until you can't walk?"

"No, but I thought there'd be more."

"Well there isn't."

Desiree struggled with confusion and arousal beyond comprehension. Dazed, she turned away.

Just as she was about to walk out the door, Prentice called after her. "Don't alleviate the tension you feel. If you do, I will know."

* * * * *

He waited a few minutes just to be sure she was gone before he let himself out of the room. His prick was like stone, and though he knew he could have slaked his need, he hadn't felt inclined. He rather liked the idea of her begging for his cock . . . and she would.

He could join in any of the sexual games that were going on at the club, and he set out to find just the person to help him with his need.

The club was not a brothel, although Lucien saw to it there were high-priced whores on the premises to care for those gentlemen who came alone. Lucien had reasoned that if he didn't, the men would go elsewhere to find what they needed. This way, there was no reason to leave the club. The gaming rooms did a brisk business, while the ladies draped themselves over any and all available laps, teasing and enticing until the poor fellows had pricks ready to crumble they were so hard.

Prentice found his quarry in the large drawing room just off the entrance hall. She wore a gown made of the sheerest ivory silk and was plunking away at the pianoforte when Prentice walked in with an erection that could kill.

"Fortune, darling."

"Well, if it isn't the marquess. Been spanking a new arse, I hear. Pretty young thing. Saw her leavin' a few minutes ago, nursing a real red one, I suppose."

"You busy?" He walked up behind her and she swiveled around to face him.

The woman's gaze lowered to his crotch. "Oh, I see you need some help, poor man." She brushed her hand across his trousers. "What'll it be, my lord? Hands, mouth or, ah"

"Or ah." He grabbed her hand and led her back to the room where he'd spanked Desiree.

Once there, Fortune removed her gown, then undressed Prentice. He wanted to fuck with abandon, and Fortune had always been a willing partner.

She bent over the footboard and spread her legs wide. He retrieved a bottle of oil from the bedside table drawer, lubricated his prick and her anus, and entered her with little warning.

He pumped her, releasing his pent-up frustration with loud grunts. His pace increased, she moaned, and then it was over. He'd spent himself inside her with violent thrusts, as he'd done more times than he could remember. Fortune had been the constant in his life since his wife died, although not for more than a good fuck several times a week. Grief didn't prevent a man from satisfying his needs.

"My God, woman, you have a tight ass."

"So you say every time you stretch it, my lord."

"Cheeky wench." He swatted her rear-end hard, evoking a giggle.

She stood, and reached for her discarded gown. "I'd let you spank me if it would help. I haven't had a good thrashin' in days."

"I just gave a good one, and it didn't help, but I appreciate the offer."

"It's gettin' to be that time, isn't it?"

"Yes, tomorrow. Thanks, love, time to go." He tossed her a coin and watched as she sashayed out the door, exaggerating the wag of her tail.

He could be himself with her. He'd been known as 'Lord Decadent' for so long, and he wasn't about to make apologies for his sexual proclivities now. He enjoyed bringing a woman to sexual fulfillment through pain and pleasure. Fortune understood this, just as Abigail had.

Chapter Five

Desiree wasn't sure if her expectations had been fulfilled or if she was left wanting. Certainly, his lordship had left her frustrated and mad as a wet peahen, but when she thought about the spanking he had doled out, she couldn't have been more pleased.

His final words to her — "*Don't alleviate the tension*" — were ludicrous. She was wound tighter than a ten-day clock, and saw no relief in sight. Heaven only knew when he would deign to summon her again.

She stomped around her bedchamber. After her husband died, she'd moved here

and had the entire house redone, making it a feminine bastion, complete with chintz coverings for the furniture and fresh flowers every day. She'd grown quite comfortable living alone, but for a few servants. They'd come with the house, and since everyone got on well, she'd never seen a reason to turn them out.

Desiree had never had any particular friends, given that her ruination and subsequent marriage had alienated her from all decent society. She hadn't cared, until this moment, when she really needed to rant and have someone confirm to her what a horse's arse Prentice Hyde was. Getting second opinions was always the best course.

"To hell with him." Her determination to defy Lord Wycroft's edict burned hot inside her. She'd become quite adept at personal satisfaction, and if there was ever a time when she needed those skills, it was now.

She undressed and took her favorite toy from her bedside table. A couple of years ago, she'd been friendly with a Frenchman who'd referred her to the maker of exquisitely carved wooden phalluses. She'd never been sorry for the acquaintance or the advice, for she had been able to please herself as often as she liked, and Prentice Hyde be damned, tonight was one of those nights.

* * * * *

Days passed before Prentice sobered up enough to even spell his name. After he'd left the Sapphire Club, he'd gone to his St. James Square home and barred anyone from entering his bedchamber. There, with a supply of brandy, scotch, and Irish whiskey, he'd gotten putrid drunk and stayed that way for seventy-two hours.

His yearly mourning time had started out as usual, with him walking around the room, playing over and over again the scene during which, having just given birth, his Abigail bled to death before the doctor could help her. The baby lived but a few hours before he too died, all in this room.

As the brandy had dulled his senses, but not his memories, he'd begun to curse himself for getting his young wife with child in the first place. *God damn my mother for*

her constant nagging about filling the nursery. He'd screamed it until he was hoarse, but he was angrier at himself than he could ever have been at his mother. He was the one foolish enough to believe her and her incessant harping on his obligation to produce children. Though he'd never held his mother in particularly high esteem, that relationship had fallen even deeper into the abyss since the deaths of his wife and child.

Abigail had been perfect for him. She wanted to participate in the activities at the club and was curious about spanking and its erotic qualities. He'd been attracted to her from the moment he'd spied her at the Hargraves' Ball. The courtship lasted but a few weeks, and they were married by special license in the drawing room downstairs. Though their private conversations had taken a sexual turn early on, they had never so much as kissed before the wedding, at her insistence.

The day of the wedding had been torturous, as all he could think of was stripping her bare and fucking her until neither of them could stand up. She'd pranced around, acting the role of marchioness, until he could take no more. He'd shooed everyone out just before dinnertime. As Byrd, his hawkish butler, shut the door behind the last guest, Prentice carried Abigail up the stairs, barely making it into the bedchamber before ripping the dress from her body. He'd taken her, that first time, right on the floor.

He'd never been so aroused in his life. By the time they finally made it to the bed, she'd been deflowered and ravished several times. Sometime that night, or during the following erotic and blissful days, his seed had taken hold, and the countdown to her death began. Now, two years later, he still couldn't face this day without the reinforcement of liquor-induced oblivion.

Since his home was a bachelor's establishment, where he rarely, if ever, received guests, Byrd also filled the post of valet.

On the fourth morning, Byrd, a man who greatly resembled a hawk, let himself into Prentice's bedchamber with his own key. Byrd had strict orders, and understood Prentice wished to wallow no more than three days and nights, subsisting on nothing more than liquor. Behind Byrd were two footmen carrying the hip bath. It would be

full, and steaming by the time the butler/valet stripped Prentice out of his rank clothes.

It took a full complement of Cook's food, and Byrd's ministrations, but by noon, Prentice Hyde was once again sober, and dressed as the Marquess of Wycroft should be. He certainly smelled like a man of means rather than a Cheapside tavern, and he didn't look nearly as haggard as he had with three days growth of beard and no food in him for nearly as many days. Looking in the pier glass over the mantel in the library, he felt rather satisfied with himself, as though he had accomplished the transformation on his own.

"Upton's been around, I see," he commented to Byrd and nodded toward a neat stack of papers and periodicals sitting on the desk.

"Yes, of course, my lord, every morning."

"Show me what I need to sign; I need to be somewhere."

Byrd raised an eyebrow that conveyed his obvious disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that, you scrawny parrot. Just show me what Upton thinks is urgent, and I'll be gone."

A quarter hour later, the Marquess of Wycroft was headed toward St. John's Wood, whatever Byrd gave him to clear his head having worked miracles.

Thoughts of Mrs. Huntington seeped into his brain. He'd left her in quite a state, and worse, he hadn't cared that he'd done so, though he had a reputation of being considerate of a lady's needs. He chuckled at the admonition he'd given her as she left him, and he suspected she had satisfied herself as soon as was physically possible.

His impression of her was favorable, though she seemed to have an edge he wished to soften. He had seen something akin to heartache written on her face, and he'd not pay for someone else's transgression. He recognized it plainly, for he carried the same type of pain—that of loss—and the hurt that naturally follows. She'd come to him, her mind being submissive, and that was what she would be.

Hampton received him, taking his hat and walking stick. Prentice was at home here, the only place he felt as such. He was an unabashed sexual being, a true creature of the flesh, needing the release more than the closeness. He'd never allow his heart to

engage again – not ever.

He strode toward the library, where he'd surely find Lucien at this time of day. The list of private clients had grown, thanks to his and Lucien's business acumen. And in the years since Serenity had been back by Lucien's side, the membership had increased as well. Serenity had become a no-nonsense woman, who'd learned firsthand how to master the implements needed to provide the clients with the punishment they desired.

"There you are." Lucien looked annoyed.

"What, can't a man grieve in private without you becoming discomfited by it?"

"Staying foxed for three days is not grieving. Prentice, old man, facing it and moving on would be more to your benefit."

"Duly noted, now what has happened in my absence?"

Lucien smiled in a way Prentice didn't trust. "You've been much sought after, my old friend."

"Really? Whose ass needs thrashing, and why, pray, is there no one available to do so?"

"It would seem Mrs. Huntington has attempted to run you to ground. That scarecrow you call a butler informed her any number of times that you were not at home, so she has all but taken up residence here waiting for you to magically appear."

"I don't recall summoning her."

"She apparently doesn't understand how the 'I am your Lord and Master' thing works."

Prentice felt a dangerous degree of ire rise within. "When was she last here?"

"She's here now, visiting with Serenity. I fear we will have to let a room to her if you don't set her straight soon."

He'd not been pursued in this fashion since he first inherited at the age of twenty. He'd always set the restrictions on his associations with clients, and the rules therein. The first rule was that he set the rules. Once he took on a client, they agreed to abide by that dictate. Mrs. Huntington had agreed and had summarily broken that agreement.

"Where is she?"

"In Serenity's drawing room."

Prentice turned and walked out of the room, his lips pursed. His stride was long and determined. He found Marjorie and gave her instructions, which the maid set out at once to perform. Then he made his way to his usual room. This unexpected session set his fingers to itching. He'd not planned to summon the lady for several days yet. However, once this session was over, there would be no doubt as to who was in charge.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Huntington, excuse me, but I am to prepare you for Lord Wycroft, and you must hurry."

Desiree looked at Serenity, her heart pounding. She hadn't expected to see Lord Wycroft, though she'd been spending an inordinate amount of time at the club in the hopes that she would. However, she'd been disappointed for several days.

"You'd best go. He is every bit as impatient as my husband, and that might not bode well."

Desiree bid Serenity good day, and followed Marjorie to the room in which they had prepared her a few days before. Though no bath was involved, she was stripped naked and shaved. When they finished, Marjorie led Desiree to the same room where she had met Prentice for their first session.

Upon entering, she removed the nightrail. She looked around the room, not at all sure she was alone.

"Hello," she said, but received no answer.

She assumed, since he had summoned her, that he would make his appearance any moment, but time passed, and still no Lord Wycroft. Candles were lit; the red draperies were closed. She went to the window and peered through a separation in the heavy velvet curtain. She gazed down at the garden below, a lovely, expansive retreat, filled with scrubs, trees, and several babbling fountains.

Spanking implements had been laid out on the top of the bedside table, the sight of which caused her quim to clench with anticipation of what was to come. She touched her nipple, soon tugging, the sensation exciting her. All she could think of was a cock, *his* cock, large and hard. It had been days, and she wasn't used to such deprivation.

Suddenly, she detected movement in the shadows. "Hello," she said.

Nothing.

She had no idea what she should do. "Please say something."

"Please, don't let me stop you. Continue with what you were doing."

Prentice's deep, velvety voice washed over her. Damn his eyes, he could seduce the frilly drawers off an old spinster. She hated how she reacted to him. Touching her breast again, she relaxed, thinking of the many times she'd done this in the privacy of her own chamber.

If her plan was to work, she'd not only have to seduce his body but his mind as well. Having never been self-conscious, she decided he had afforded her an unexpected opportunity to advance her scheme.

As she pinched her nipple with one hand, she used her other to seductively explore her torso, then going lower, touching her mons.

"You will notice I am freshly shaven." She delved deeper, playing with her moist folds.

A groan came from the shadows, the only indication he was still there.

Desiree walked to the bed and climbed up. She propped herself up against the pillows, which faced the darkened corner. Raising her knees, she spread her legs wide and began to pleasure herself. She knew of no man who could withstand the sight.

Although tempted to get lost in self-pleasure, she never forgot his presence. Every move, every caress of her hand, every soft sigh, was for him. As her eyes drifted shut, she circled her clitoris, dipped inside the warm folds. Her goal wasn't to simply come. She wished to entice, tease, prolong the pleasure. Knowing he was watching heightened each stroke, each spark. When the fire began to build, she moved ever so slightly away, before she returned to begin building again.

She continued, until the tension built with so much heat, so much raw desire, there was nothing to do but let it build. She worked her quim with great speed. She inhaled sharply, with a hiss. She rolled her head side to side. And finally, she *did* forget his presence and lost herself in the feeling.

Suddenly, her hand was drawn away. Desiree opened her eyes wide in surprise. He stood over her, holding her moist hand.

"What did I tell you?"

Chapter Six

Prentice's cock ached, and he wanted nothing better than to drive into the waiting cunny before him. However, this was all a game. He'd seen it when he slipped from the viewing room into the darkened chamber. If he fell for her ploy, his authority over her would be lost.

"Answer me, madam. Did I not tell you to wait?"

She was having trouble recovering normal breathing. She panted and blew out what sounded like an exasperated sigh. "Yes, you did."

"Well then, are you in the habit of disobeying?"

"I've never obeyed anyone in my life."

Prentice laughed heartily. "If we are to have the association *you* requested, you *will* obey me or we will part company."

She jerked up to a sitting position. "No, please. You can't mean that."

"I mean every word. If you are willing to submit to me, you must do so completely. If not, we'll part company. The choice is yours."

He couldn't read her face, but he saw her gaze dart from his face to the empty space behind him.

"I do wish to submit, but you must teach me how. I've been independent for a very long time. I am sorry, sir. I am so sorry."

The relationship he had in mind for them had nothing to do with master and

slave. Even he wasn't that jaded. He wouldn't humiliate her in public, though he wasn't beyond giving orders at inopportune times. No, he simply wished for her complete acquiescence.

"I am looking for someone who will bare their ass for me when I demand it and take a spanking as I see fit. Your pleasure shall come *only* when I permit it and at no other time, nothing more, nothing less. Is that clear?"

"Yes." Her answer was firm, her voice steady.

"Fucking comes when I say. Satisfaction – yours, at least – comes only when I deem it necessary. You will learn to control your urges. Above all, you will never try to seduce me unless you are absolutely sure seduction is what I desire of you and are certain of my positive response. Otherwise, you will pay a penalty, as you will today."

"Pardon me, sir, but you look like you responded positively." She rubbed her hand over the front of his breeches, over his painful erection.

He swatted her hand away and stalked to the door. He flung it wide and shouted, "Get out and don't come back!" He deliberately avoided her gaze.

"But, my lord – "

"Don't argue. There is nothing for it. Get out. You are not serious, and I have no patience for your nonsense."

She climbed off the bed, grabbed her nightrail and wrapper, and did as she was told. He slammed the door behind her for emphasis.

Damn the wench. She was fighting for control, and he couldn't have that. He was used to setting down the rules and wouldn't have a headstrong woman turning his head and upsetting the way of things.

The bitch had heated his blood, causing his current suffering. He should have put a stop to her actions as soon as he saw what she was doing but he'd decided to see how far she would go. He'd had three choices after she'd begun to pleasure herself. He could have joined her, pleased himself, or stopped her at a most inopportune moment. He'd chosen that last, as disrupting her pleasure seemed to be the most effective thing to do. It would either chase her away or he would have a humble,

biddable woman, willing to do anything to garner his slightest attention.

He'd done this too long to question the effectiveness of his methods. She'd be back, bare ass, in need of his ministrations.

* * * * *

To describe Desiree as livid would be like calling the grass green. She raced down the hallway as though the hounds of hell were nipping at her arse. Only when she burst into the empty room did she realize she hadn't even stopped to cover herself.

"How dare he?" She ranted, pacing the floor. Her heart was beating so fast she could hear it. Her plan had just gone up in smoke, and worse, he had the upper hand. *Oh, he is good! He knows exactly what I will do, and I'll do it, there is no doubt.*

She'd never been good at groveling, but she knew she must. When? It galled her to think he expected her to do just that. If she did so right away, he would be ever so smug, and if she waited, he could well reject her out of hand.

She dressed with alacrity. A nice slice of humble pie was in order, and she would choke down every morsel.

* * * * *

The next morning, bright and early, Lord Wycroft received a missive from Desiree.

"I wish to make amends for my behavior. Please advise as to the best way to do so." The note was short and to the point, something he greatly appreciated.

He determined he would send no answer, at least not immediately. He went about his business, pleasing Upton with unusual attentiveness. He was particularly chipper, having had Fortune attend him, several times, after his manufactured rant. By the time he'd placed his head on the pillow, he'd been rather pleased with himself.

It hadn't always been to his benefit to be so cocksure, but he knew when a

woman wanted what he had to give more than she valued her pride. By withdrawing, he had insured her compliance in future.

He remained at home throughout the day, reading and tending to several squabbles that had festered amongst the staff. He'd turned out two footmen who had deemed it their duty to harass an upstairs maid, and read copious amounts of Greek history, a particular favorite. As afternoon slipped into evening, he began to feel restless.

After scribbling a short note and sending a trusted footman to deliver it, he made his way to his chamber to freshen himself. He planned a rare evening at home but one he would enjoy.

Three quarters of an hour later, he received word that his guest had arrived. He never received ladies at his home, but the added intrigue and impropriety were deserved in this instance.

Though it had been some time since he'd plied his favorite activity within the confines of his home, he was well prepared. He made his way to a room, which had a fire crackling in the grate and a single candle casting a flickering shadow. He'd instructed a footman to escort the lady to the room in fifteen minutes time.

This night, he would put her through her paces, as Lucien was wont to say. She would either walk away satisfied that their agreement was intact or she would simply walk away. This was her final chance to come up to scratch.

Despite the merrily dancing fire, the room was gloomy, helping Prentice to assume the role he played so well.

A knock sounded at the door, and he answered with a firm, "Enter."

Prentice stood beside the fireplace, one elbow cocked against the mantel, and one leg bent over the other knee, balanced on the toe of his boot. He was his usual languid self, at least on the inside. Outside, he'd assumed the role he'd play this night.

"Good Evening," Desiree said.

Prentice nodded.

"You asked me to come here?"

Prentice casually pushed away from the mantel and walked to a pier table that held a cut-glass decanter filled with brandy. He poured a healthy amount in a snifter. The glass had the club's signature stem, resembling a nude woman. Deliberately fingering the bosom of the frosted figure, he looked at Desiree but said nothing.

She fidgeted, and he was pleased. She was uncomfortable, just the way he wished her to be.

"You sent me a missive. Why?"

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior, sir. It will not happen again."

"I would hope not, unless, of course, I want it to."

"Of course."

The air grew thick as Prentice continued to play with her. He liked eroding her composure. He imagined her heart racing, knees shaking. She was worrying her hands, dancing from one foot to the other. He thought he detected a tremble in her voice. She wanted this. She'd proved her intentions by returning with his messenger. All she'd had to do was refuse, and this arrangement would be null and void. She wanted whatever he wished to dole out and somewhere in him, he was happy for that.

He walked closer to her. She stood just inside the room, not having moved but for the trembling, which grew even more pronounced as he neared. When he reached her, he moved his arm around her waist. As he brushed her gown, she started and sucked in a breath. With a flick of his wrist, he locked the door, the sound of the click filling the room. The noise made a statement louder than words.

"Tell me precisely what you want, because I have become confused by your actions."

Desiree licked her bottom lip, an action that had never failed to arouse him. "I wish to submit my body and will to you, sir. I wish to learn to do that. I want to please you, in whatever way I can."

"Really? I suppose your attempt to seduce me was an effort to please me."

"Yes, it was."

"Seduction pleases me, but not initiated by anyone but myself, is that

understood?"

"Yes, sir, I am sorry, sir."

Prentice circled her, a technique he'd learned from Lucien. The action never failed to disarm the other person. He skimmed his fingers over her exposed arms, breathed in her fresh, clean scent. He liked the tension he sensed in her, evidenced by the stiffness in her shoulders, by her quick, shallow breaths. He could almost smell her fear.

"I am not sure you are sorry, Mrs. Huntington. You didn't act sorry."

Now standing before her, he noticed a glistening around her eyes. He smiled to himself. Submission was never easy, even if one desired to do it. Some found it distasteful to put themselves completely in someone else's hands, and then, there were those who needed to give themselves over only to discover how truly strong they were. Serenity Damrill had been in the latter category, and he had come to admire her. He feared Desiree was in both but saw great potential in her strength, once she learned to use that strength to her advantage. Being as headstrong as she was, he would have to break her of her impulsiveness and show her of what she was truly capable.

* * * * *

Desiree sniffled, using her gloved hand to wipe an errant tear. "I am sorry, sir." She tried to sound as sincere as she felt. He had shamed her, and the remorse she felt was profound. He had to be convinced of her sincerity, her willingness, or all would be for naught.

"We will start over, Mrs. Huntington, but only with the understanding that I am in charge."

"Yes, I would like that," she said, and meant every word. In the darkest hours since their last meeting, she'd realized she wished to be spanked by Prentice Hyde more than she wanted anything, including the revenge she was so desperate to exact. Oh, she would have that too. Inasmuch as he thought he was in control, she knew it was she

who held the winning cards. He'd give her nothing she didn't want, and she would take all he gave, including his heart. In the end, she'd destroy him, and he would be more than willing to help her do it.

Prentice began to dislodge the tiny buttons at the back of Desiree's dress. She stood still, but her stomach tensed and her heart began beating a rapid tattoo. He brushed over the skin he'd bared, sending sparks down her spine. She closed her eyes. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck, ragged and warm. He seemed as affected by the moment as she was.

Neither spoke a word until her dress fell from her shoulders. With a low rumble, he began to tell her what he expected to do to her.

"I will punish you for your impertinence, leaving you with a reminder of who is your *master*."

She shivered at his words, her quim pulsing, her arse anxious for the first lash. He unlaced and removed her stays, then he cupped her bottom through the gossamer-thin white chemise. Soon it, too, was gone, baring her but for her stockings and shoes.

"Bend over the high arm of the chaise. I want that ass high." Though masterful, his voice still held a note of kindness.

She found herself walking on legs of jelly. She reached the red velvet chaise and admired the beauty of it. She draped herself over the padded arm while Prentice chose two implements with which to administer her spanking. He showed her the paddle she had liked so well, and then the leather strap.

"Have you ever been spanked with a strap before, Mrs. Huntington?"

"When I was a child."

"Fine, I will warm your bottom with my hand, then use the strap, and finish with the paddle. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Please."

"Very well, spread your legs wide for me."

Desiree did as he instructed. He stepped to her side, securing one arm over her waist. He rubbed her bare bottom with the other hand before he spanked one cheek

with a flick of his wrist. She lost her footing.

"Stay on your feet." His voice was stern.

Ten swats with his hand, five administered to each cheek, gave her bottom a rosy glow. She'd come to love the sound of his hand slapping her bare bottom, and he was making sure this spanking really stung. It'd burn later and be difficult to sit.

He retrieved the strap, slapping it against his leg. Desiree quivered with anticipation.

Prentice's fingers dipped into her folds. "You are wet, Mrs. Huntington."

Of course she was wet. She wanted this as much as she wanted his sexual attention.

The strap struck. *Oh, God . . . that's going to leave a mark.* She expelled a breath she hadn't realized she'd held. She absorbed the sting and anticipated the next strike. When it didn't come soon enough, she said, "More."

She knew to expect her five swats with the strap and five with the paddle. The paddle hurt, especially on top of what she'd already taken, but she loved every sensation. Each hit made her eyes water, her throat dry from sucking in gulps of air. There was a point where her body switched from feeling the pain to anticipating the pleasure. Her mind drifted to thoughts of storing this experience for safekeeping. She'd lock it away in that blissful place, deep within, because one day, the memory of this would be all she'd have.

She was jarred back to the present, when he stopped. It had ended all too soon.

When he finished, he again dipped into her folds. She thrust back against his touch. "Please, sir."

"What do you want, Mrs. Huntington?"

"I want you."

"You want me to do what."

"I want you inside me."

Chapter Seven

The woman bent over before him was attractive, and she could take a spanking, though he'd held back during this session. She was willing, as well, a decided plus in her favor. Fucking her wasn't a chore, though it held no particular fascination for him either. A quim was a quim, eager or not.

As he began to undulate within her, his mind drifted to another woman, as it so often did. Desiree's soft, responsive moans began to sound like Abigail's. She'd love it when he took her like this. His admitted ass-obsession had fueled her wantonness, making their lovemaking wild and more satisfying than any in his vast experience. Abigail had loved being spanked and taken anally. She'd encouraged his obsession, reveled in it. Prentice closed his eyes and allowed his mind to take him to another time, inside another woman. He forgot himself. He grabbed Desiree's reddened cheeks, squeezing hard as his thrusts became stronger. As a low rumble at first, her name rose in his throat. "Abby." He said the word over and over again, until, without thought as to the sensibilities of the woman he was fucking, he pumped his body against hers, shouting, "Abby! Abby!"

He finished with a crescendo, his dead wife's name echoing in the room. Breathless and spent, Prentice remained still, with his eyes closed. He knew. Yes, he knew where he was, but he wanted the pretense to remain a moment longer, before reality once again crushed the world he had inhabited for those few moments.

Desiree stirred beneath him. He opened his eyes and sadness enveloped him as he saw the blond hair of his current partner. Abigail's hair had been brown, kept shining with his nightly brushings.

He pulled away from Desiree and began buttoning the fall of his trousers.

"What's wrong?"

Prentice knew he was acting like an ass, and chose not to correct his behavior. He turned his back, separating himself from her.

"Leave."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Get out!"

Desiree retrieved her clothing, dressed hastily and left the room. Prentice secured the lock, then stood with his back to the door for long minutes, tears streaking his face.

After Abigail's death, he'd barely allowed a heartbeat between mourning and fucking someone new. He was a carnal person. Abstinence was simply not an option. Tonight had been different. Desiree was different and that difference frightened him. But sexual games, and mutual satiation was the extent to which he was willing to go, and she gave no indication that she felt any differently about their arrangement than he did.

He'd rarely been overcome with emotion while with a woman, but tonight had unmanned him. In that moment, he made his decision. He would end his arrangement with Mrs. Huntington.

* * * * *

Desiree's thoughts raced as she made her way to the carriage. As the sound of horse's hooves rhythmically hit the packed dirt road, she ruminated about what had just happened. Prentice Hyde was an enigma. He'd insisted she leave, which she'd done without discussion. Now, she wished she had spoken to him because there was something quite wrong. Who was Abby?

He'd not acted as she remembered — carefree and careless. He'd had such appeal with his quick smile, and his sparkling topaz eyes always twinkled with some mischief or other. Now, those eyes were almost dead but for the infrequent moment when she could tell he was enjoying himself.

She suddenly had a sense of foreboding wash over her. A stab of conscience — something she didn't want to feel — warning of the devastation that could become her *own* life if she pursued the course she was on. She wanted to take from him, not give; yet, she felt badly for the pain he was so obviously feeling.

Her bottom smarted as the carriage hit a hole in the road, reminding her of the

time she had just spent with the handsome marquess. Women all over London clamored to garner his attention, but she had simply walked in and offered her buttocks up to his paddle. She chuckled as she envisioned a conversation that might occur between Prentice and one of the simpering lovelies who'd set her sights on the *Marquess of Wycroft*.

"It is very nice to meet you, Miss Vapid. I understand this is your first season."

"Oh, yes, Lord Wycroft, it certainly is, and I intend to snare you in the parson's noose before the last ball."

"Do you now? Well, my dear, there are certain criteria by which I will choose a wife."

"Well, I am sure I could fill all your needs, my lord."

"Let me see if that is so, fair lady."

"I've no fear, sir. I have been raised to expect and appreciate a man's needs."

"Come with me, then, so we might continue this conversation with a degree of privacy."

He would lead her to an unused room in the ball-giver's home, one no doubt supplied with a sofa. They would settle comfortably, and only then would Prentice Hyde become the real man, and drop the façade the world usually saw.

"I want you to lie across my lap, my dear, with your skirts raised, please."

"Oh, sir, I am afraid I cannot do that. I am a proper young lady."

"I realize that, darling, but if we are to be married, I must know, in advance, if you can fulfill the requirements I have in a wife."

"What could they be that I must lie across you lap with my skirts raised?"

"Why, I am going to give your ass a spanking, dear, and will do so often throughout our marriage. Then, I will fuck you insensible, in any fashion I wish. Your compliance is required, not merely suggested. Now, lie down, dear, and let me see how deeply you wish to pursue this relationship."

Desiree laughed nervously, imagining the young woman running screaming from the room, from the madman who wished to possess not only her body but her will. If only he'd shown his true self all those years ago. If only she'd run away from him. If only

Lord Wycroft was jaded in his tastes and would settle for nothing less than what Desiree herself had already given him. She would give him more, should he ask, but she questioned now whether she would ever hear from him again. Something had upset him. Had she inadvertently done something wrong? If that were the case, she felt confident she would never hear from him again, as he'd already given her a second chance.

The carriage slowed in front of her Doughty Street home. When the bewigged, liveried driver opened the door, she felt a sense of loss. Almost certainly, her plans for revenge had been thwarted, but for this moment, something else held more importance. Lord Wycroft was in pain, and there was no one who understood that better than Desiree herself.

* * * * *

Prentice awoke in a frightful disposition. He needed to grasp the reality of his life and not continue to mourn for a woman whom he had loved and lost. Therein lies the rub, he thought as he tried to accept the painful truth. He'd never allowed himself to love before Abigail. When he finally did, he'd left himself vulnerable to the pain that all too often accompanies the glory of finding the person one is sure was made just for them. Such was the case with Abigail.

He'd thought himself the luckiest of men when he'd plied his suit and she'd accepted him. Abigail had begged him to spank her on their wedding night, though he had thought to delay in favor of a softer, more romantic initiation into the marriage bed. Taking her maidenhead, he had thought, was enough pain for one night, but Abigail wouldn't hear of anything else. After that, she pled with him almost nightly to paddle or strap her, followed by a mating that nearly tore the house down.

It had not surprised him when she got with child within two months of their wedding. He had wanted to cease the spankings when they became sure, but she'd insisted. He'd always been careful, and never forceful, and she had inevitably rewarded

him with sex that he was sometimes sure he could still feel upon his skin.

Prentice shook his head, hoping to release the cobwebs and the ghosts. Lucien had told him any number of times to let Abigail rest in peace. "*Tormenting yourself will only serve to destroy you, old boy. Remember her with fondness, and move on.*" Prentice had always known his friend had the right of it, but somehow he couldn't allow his wife to leave his mind.

Last night, he had come close, but when he closed his eyes, he remembered a night, long ago, when he and Abigail were in the exact position he'd found himself in with Desiree. Her sweet moan when he entered her that night had stiffened his cock beyond anything he had ever experienced. The way she moved back toward him, accepting his length and girth, wanting more and more, until he spent himself with a fury.

Desiree gave and gave, and he took and took, selfishly, under the guise of mastering her. She had to want more, surely sexual gratification being the least of it, but he was incapable of giving beyond what he already had. He could spank her and take her time and again, but he would always leave her unsatisfied, because his heart was elsewhere.

In the past, whenever he had taken on a private client, the act had been nothing if not mechanical. He'd thrash them the way they wished, usually with a leather strap or even a flogger, and then they'd offer their ass or quim for his use. He'd grown accustomed to that being their role.

Somehow, things were different with Mrs. Desiree Huntington. She wasn't as jaded as his past clients, yet there was an edge to her. She was independent, knowing exactly what she wanted, and he suspected it was more than he was giving.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his feet touching the cold wooden floor. He heard Byrd in the dressing room, trying to be quiet, yet making a terrible muddle of it. "Come out, you. You must do something with this." Prentice used his hands to indicate just how disheveled his was, even though Byrd couldn't see him from the other room.

"A bath has been prepared, my lord."

Byrd scurried about, pulling clothes from the clothespress, laying them out for his master. Prentice shuffled into the dressing room, divested himself of his nightshirt and sank into the steaming water.

"I'm getting too old, Byrd."

"Yes, my lord."

Prentice sank deeper into the limited space of the tub, his knees bent. The steaming water seemed to leech into his bones and his tense muscles, relaxing him at once. He rested his head on the rolled metal edge, his eyes closed. Once again, he allowed his mind to drift back to Abigail, and the many times he had served as her maid, bathing her, then combing out her silky chestnut hair. They'd make love for hours afterward, kissing each other's bodies, touching every possible inch. He'd taught her how to take him into her warm, wet mouth, and she'd learned to perform fellatio like a well-seasoned whore. She could indeed perform magic with her tongue.

This was a dangerous path he was allowing himself to travel. His mental stability was slipping; he could feel it, making him fit for only his own company.

As a germ of an idea became a plan, he saw his next course of action.

"Byrd!"

The valet came running into the room as though his hair were on fire. "Yes, my lord," he said, pressing his hand to his chest.

"Have my things packed immediately. I am going to the country."

"The country, my lord?"

"Yes, you know that vast wasteland outside the city? The country. I will leave forthwith. Do not tell my mother or sister where I am, under penalty of death."

"Yes, my lord. How long will you be gone?"

"As long as it takes." Cryptic, yes, but truthful.

Prentice drew his long frame upright, rivulets of water streaming over his body. Byrd handed him a hefty Turkish towel. He stepped out, dripping water onto the tiled floor, and proceeded to complete the drying process.

Within an hour, Byrd had Prentice dressed in traveling clothes, his trunk packed

and on its way to the carriage, which waited at the door.

Much had been accomplished by a great many people in order to fulfill Lord Wycroft's whim to pass an indeterminate amount of time at Wycroft Park in Cambridge.

As he boarded the well-sprung black carriage, complete with the Wycroft crest, he gave one more instruction to Byrd. "Inform Mr. Damrill of my departure, and swear him to secrecy. Tell him, *no one* is to know of my whereabouts. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Under penalty of death, Byrd."

Chapter Eight

It had been nearly a week since Lord Wycroft's mysterious behavior, and Desiree's hasty retreat from his home. She'd not heard a word from him, which only served to convince her that the arrangement she had so carefully thought through, was over.

She'd gone to the Sapphire Club in the hopes that Serenity Damrill could enlighten her as to what to do next, only to come away even more confused. When she found that Lord Wycroft had left London, and no one seemed to know where he'd gone, she was more than convinced that her suspicion was sadly true. Her plan for revenge had been aborted. She'd lived with it for so long, she felt bereft and cheated.

More than that though, Desiree's mind seemed to constantly drift to thoughts of what she was missing, of the spankings she had begun to look forward to, and the potential of great sexual satisfaction.

She had analyzed the last evening they spent together, and found nothing to warrant the resulting anger he exhibited. She knew he hadn't found out about her plan, because she had told no one of her intentions. Serenity had not been of any help, and neither had Wycroft's odd looking butler. If a hawk, and had parrot had a child, the man would be that off-spring.

Desiree knew the butler was lying but short of beating the scrawny creature with her umbrella, she knew extracting information from him would be impossible. Bribing a maid or footman might do the trick, but upon careful contemplation, she decided she had no wish to cause problems for innocents.

She felt rather dejected when she returned to the Sapphire Club several days after her last visit, seeking out Serenity's advice. Over tea, they discussed what was occupying Desiree's every waking hour.

"I have tried to find him, but no one will tell me where he's gone."

"I can only tell you that he left word that his whereabouts were to be kept secret."

Sensing she wasn't going to make a co-conspirator of Serenity Damrill, Desiree came to the point about her second reason for calling.

"You know of my arrangement with Lord Wycroft?"

"Yes, of course." Serenity smiled. "Your arrangement is much like mine was with my husband when I first returned. Is there a problem?"

"The problem is, nothing is happening, at least right now."

"And you want to be spanked, is that what this is about?"

Desiree blushed tellingly. "He has such a way of making it sting, and feel so wonderful all at the same time. It truly heightens the sexual experience afterward. What will I do if he refuses to see me ever again?"

"Well, I can take care of the spankings for you, if you wish. I have several clients, and I haven't received a complaint yet. We can always find you a sexual partner, Desiree, if that is what you wish."

After several moments of thought, Desiree said, "I appreciate your offer, and at some future date I may consider it, but for now I believe I will wait for Lord Wycroft to return, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

The ladies finished their tea, after which Serenity escorted Desiree to the door. As they passed the library, Desiree heard male voices.

"He is in Cambridge, at Wycroft Park. His missive says he will be there 'til the

end of the month."

The other voice was too low for her to hear, but she had all the information she needed. Serenity looked at her with admonishment in her eyes. "Don't go to him, Desiree. He will be angry."

"I understand." Her quim pulsed with excitement as did her bottom. With her mind reeling, she set out, Serenity trailing behind, chattering about "hell to pay" and "heads will roll."

"No one told me, Serenity. The information was not meant for my ears. It was overheard."

"Please, do not do this. It will not turn out well for you or your derriere."

Desiree lightly touched Serenity's cheek. "My dear, that is what I am counting on."

* * * * *

Almost a fortnight in the country was having a cathartic effect upon him. He hadn't imbibed spirits of any kind, not liking the wasted days following the *in his cups* nights. He had come to the country for the purpose of clearing his head, sorting through thoughts and feelings, the need long overdue. He'd come to say goodbye.

Abigail was buried here, and before he could make his way back to London, he had to manage to put his marriage behind him. When she died, he'd buried her in the family plot on the estate. Then he'd left for London had never visited her grave, which also contained the body of their child. Even during this visit, he'd not yet worked up the courage to do so.

The long days had entailed hell to leather rides on Pegasus, his long-neglected steed. Black as coal, and of fine bloodlines, the Arabian was his proudest acquisition, but of little use in London. The grooms took care of him at the Park, helping to justify Prentice's long absences.

Prentice also spent an inordinate amount of time reading in his well-stocked

library, and ate good country cooking, provided by Mrs. Polton, one of his tenant's wives. Davies served as the butler and valet, as Byrd didn't travel well, and thought the fresh air in Cambridge would surely kill him after so many years in London.

The house ran well with a skeleton staff, making the stay all the better given that there weren't so many servants running about. Though the place was sprawling, he used few rooms, the others closed off and untended.

He'd spent the last few days, when not riding or reading, thinking of how to go about putting a period to his life with Abigail. He was ashamed at his behavior toward Mrs. Huntington on his last night in London, and would have to make amends upon his return. Since his departure, he'd realized what the problem was, and how to once again claim his life.

It was the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do, other than burying Abigail and their child in the first place, but he was a shell of the man he'd been before their deaths. Mourning for her and their child had destroyed the ready smile and light-heartedness for which he was known.

As sexual a person as he was, he had been merely going through the motions, reaching climax without gratification. The only thing that distracted him from his grief was when he was administering a spanking. The all consuming thrill, the sound of leather on bare ass, the mewling sounds or the howls as the lashes struck, were all a part what made him who he was. People needed water and air to survive, but Prentice Hyde need that and so much more, for without a willing spanking partner, he'd just as soon join Abigail in the cold, dark ground.

He'd never become so lost in the act that he forgot what he was about, and injured the other person. However, he'd begun to feel anger and deep-seated loss during his last session with Mrs. Huntington, and instead of spanking his way through it, he'd fucked her with no concern for her pleasure then further acted the rotter by demanding she leave without explanation.

When he had looked at her, bent over the daybed, he'd pictured Abigail, and from there he been lost. It was then he knew he'd have to exorcise the past if he was

ever to have a future.

Since his arrival at the Park, he'd begun to feel healthier, more able to handle the ultimate task. He'd cried rivers of tears. With every bout, he'd felt cleansed a bit more. Oh, he would never forget his wife, but what he wanted to be able to do was to remember her with fondness, and not with all-consuming grief. He wanted to one day find someone else to love, and not compare, always finding his new partner lacking in one respect or another. He wanted to be able to give himself permission to go on and live.

Prentice set a date for the final task at hand. He'd not cried for several days, and was anxious to return to his life in London. He must make amends, and accept that his erratic behavior may have well caused Mrs. Huntington to seek other means of satisfying her needs. However, he would apologize, and attempt to make up for his rudeness, and self-absorption.

His visit to Abigail's grave would be on the morrow he determined. He would go early in the morning, and by mid-day, he would be on his way back to London.

* * * * *

Desiree's journey involved an overnight stop at an inn, though the trip could have been accomplished in one long day, had it not been for a broken axle and weather that wasn't fit for man or beast.

The Buck and Doe Inn was comfortable, if not luxurious, with sufficient food and an adequate bed. Desiree had entered the establishment, sans maid and drenched to the bone. What a miserable turn of events! After the axle broke, nearly toppling the carriage, and injuring the coachman, she'd had to ride astride, in the rain, the mile back to the inn.

With the nerves she was experiencing at the thought of presenting herself at Wycroft Park, the last thing she needed was difficulty with her transportation.

A hot bath and a good night's sleep would go a long way toward steeling her for

the day ahead. The innkeeper assured her that Wycroft Park was only ten miles away, and he'd informed her that arrangements were being made to have a suitable carriage waiting for her in the early afternoon of the next day.

She'd gone over and over what she would say to Lord Wycroft. However, none of her planned explanations sounded as convincing as they had in London. She felt almost foolish, traipsing over the countryside after a man she positively loathed, just so he could spank her arse and give her a rogering she'd never forget. But then again, she wanted what she wanted. She'd never felt so alive as when Lord Wycroft was inside her, driving himself deeper, the linen of his trousers abrading her duly spanked bottom.

That last night they'd had together had been one of the most satisfying, and yet disappointing nights of her life. Despite Lord Wycroft's admonitions, she had employed her wooden phallus and had enjoyed all the pleasure she had been denied. The thought of how decadent it was to even own such a thing made her quim weep.

There were times, during these past ten years, when she had silently thanked Prentice Hyde for taking her maidenhead, for he had introduced her to a world of the flesh she had come to appreciate. However, the result of that one decision had ruined her life, for society placed great value on a woman's virtue. She'd adopted the stance that a man should be happy to get someone with experience, lest he have to teach her all the fine points, but she somehow couldn't envision such freedom for women. Men wanted to marry a virgin, yet worked diligently to see how many they could deflower before the parson's noose tightened around their necks.

In her cozy room at the inn, she plotted the next day. She almost wished he'd be angry with her for her impertinence. She decided the approach she would take should advance her original purpose in this venture. No man could resist a woman who flattered his sense of self. She'd not seduce his body but the things she would do to his mind would leave him wanting more.

* * * * *

Prentice rose with the sun, dressed as though going to his club and broke his fast. He was prepared to do what he must. It was time.

The day was brisk, and a cool wind blew through his hair as he walked the short distance to the Wycroft graveyard. He took sure steps, his boots eating up the ground. The neat, granite stones marked the graves of his father, grandparents, and their parents. Aunts and uncles were buried there as well, the site holding nearly thirty family member's remains in all. He walked to the far side of the fenced-in plot to a stone that looked dissimilar to the rest.

As his last act on Abigail's behalf, he'd had the granite cut to resemble a heart. A sentimental gesture, to be sure, but beneath the hard slab lay his family – the wife he had loved so completely, and a child of his flesh, whom he'd never gotten the chance to know.

He rubbed his gloved fingers over the smooth top of the stone, reminding himself of his mission. He squatted in front of it, tracing his fingers over Abigail's name. He remained there for long minutes, the words he'd rehearsed so many times eluding him. Finally, he sucked in a deep breath, and began to speak.

"You are gone, my darling, and now *I* must let you go." He swallowed hard, his eyes stinging with as yet unshed tears. "I loved you more than I knew I was capable, and you gave me all a man could want. I wish for your eternal peace. Take care of our child, and please know I will always love you. I must go on and seek my way. I must let you go."

He bent his head and kissed the stone, again brushing his fingers over her name. A soft, warm breeze washed over him; he chose to accept that as a sign of Abigail's understanding. Stooping there, he cried, pouring tears of relief and loss over the tiny plot of ground that now housed what was once most important in this life. How could it all be reduced to so little? The fact remained that it was. He removed a monogrammed handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and wiped his eyes and face.

"Thank you, dear Abby, thank you."

He stood and breathed in the fresh Cambridge air. He felt cleansed, free. He'd

unshackled himself from his past, glorious as it had been. He had no idea what the future held, but he was ready for it. With a lighter heart, he made his way back to the manor house. He had hours of travel ahead of him and a life to begin living.

Chapter Nine

After his return to his home, Prentice spent much of the morning in his library, sorting through some books he wished to take back to London with him and finishing up estate business. He'd enjoyed having contact with his tenants and learning more about the management of the large estate. He wondered how he could have allowed himself to become so complacent, leaving it all in the hands of Mr. Upton. But then again, he knew he would continue to do so.

A light scratching on the door alerted him to Davies' presence.

"Yes, what is it?" He continued to read a letter before signing it.

"My lord, you have a caller."

"A caller? Is it one of the tenants?"

"I don't believe so, my lord, but she won't give her name."

"She?" Now his curiosity was peaked.

"Yes, sir. Shall I send her in?"

"Yes, do, Davies. I will be leaving within the hour. Is everything prepared?"

"Yes, my lord. Mrs. Polton has packed a basket of your favorites."

"Fine, please, send in our mystery lady."

Desiree's knees were shaking as the very proper English butler led her across the black-and-white-tiled entrance hall, down a passageway, and stopped in front of a large door. She'd heard the clicking of the pendulum on a large grandfather clock and the tapping of her own heels on the marble tile, but otherwise, the house was as quiet as a mausoleum.

The butler scratched at the door, and it was then she heard the familiar voice of

Prentice Hyde.

"Yes, Davies, come in."

Davies opened the door, and with an outstretched arm, ushered Desiree into the expansive, darkly paneled room. The library was bright. The draperies at the five bowed windows were open, allowing the early afternoon sun to pour into the room. A strong smell of leather assailed her, prompting her to gaze upon the great many shelves that lined the walls. She longed for time to explore the titles, but doubted she would be afforded such a gift.

The butler had closed the door, leaving Desiree standing a goodly distance from the desk where she saw Lord Wycroft, head down, writing furiously. The delay in her discovery was welcome, but short-lived. She watched as he replaced his quill in the gold holder on his desk, sanded the paper upon which he'd been writing, and then raised his head.

With his golden brown eyes fixed on hers, he sprang from the chair and was around the desk before she had the opportunity to blink.

"What are you doing here? Who told you where I was?"

He spat out the questions at lightning speed, making it difficult for her ascertain whether he was angry or just surprised.

"I came to see you, and no one told me you were here." She tried to keep her voice level, though she was trembling unbearably.

"No one but Lu . . . son of a bitch!"

"He did not tell me, my lord. I overheard him talking to someone at the Sapphire Club. Serenity was mortified and begged me not to pursue you, but I had to see you. If you will grant me a few minutes, I will be on my way."

"Overheard, huh? I suppose you were at the club to wheedle information out of Serenity. I threatened everyone under pain of death."

"I know. Your butler, Byrd, lied rather unconvincingly when I inquired as to your whereabouts."

"I'll have to give the man a raise. He does try ever so hard."

Desiree smiled but knew the conviviality had ended. The slight smile he'd shown was gone, replaced by a furrowed brow and pursed lips.

"What is it that was so important you had to come all the way to Cambridge?"

Without being asked, Desiree sat on a leather chair near the fireplace. She saw Prentice's eyes widen in surprise, but soon took the chair's twin opposite hers.

"Sir, I wish to apologize for whatever it was I did to cause your anger with me that last night in London. I wasn't aware I had behaved in any manner other than as you instructed. Given your precipitous demand that I leave, I fear I have done something offensive, and for that, I apologize."

Prentice had crossed his legs, one over the other, his fingers laced over his flat stomach. He looked so beautiful in this town clothes. She immediately hated herself for that thought. He looked every bit the lord of the manor, and her body was even now reacting to him in a way that could prove unwise, especially if he chucked her out for yet another demonstration of how forward she could be.

"You did nothing, Mrs. Huntington, to cause my behavior. It is I who owe you an apology, and it would have been delivered personally upon my return to London, had you not been . . . well, no matter. You are here, and what am I to do with you? My intent was to leave within the hour."

"You are leaving? Oh, I *have* made a muddle of this." She rose, nervous anew.

"Please, sit," he said, graciously extending his hand in invitation. "You have had a long journey and must be exhausted. Might I arrange for a meal for you?"

She had eaten precious little for her morning meal, afraid to put too much in her already jittery stomach. "Yes, a bit of food would not be unwelcome. Thank you."

"Davies!"

The butler appeared instantly. "Yes, my lord?" "Have Mrs. Polton prepare a light repast. We will dine in here."

"Very good, my lord."

After the butler once again closed the door, Prentice turned to her, his eyes partially shielded by his long eyelashes. "Am I to infer by your presence that you wish

to continue our arrangement?"

She was relieved that he had initiated the conversation. "Yes, my lord, I do. I had feared I had inadvertently committed some offense."

"Nothing like that, I assure you. I swear I had every intention of calling on you upon my return to apologize for my aberrant behavior. I can't explain how appalled I have been at my own lack of consideration for your feelings."

The door opened, and Davies and a footman entered, carrying several trays. Davies went about seeing to it that a table was set for the diners as the footman set out plates of cold meats, bread, and cheese, as well as a bowl of fruit, cut into small pieces, and sparkling glasses of fresh lemonade.

"Very good, Davies, my compliments to Mrs. Polton."

The butler nodded and led the way out of the room. After the servants had closed the library door, Desiree picked up their earlier conversation.

"My lord, I do hope my appearance here has not upset you."

"I hope it is not presumptuous of me to assume you know what you might expect after we dine."

Desiree smiled. "Not in the least, my lord. I could hope for nothing better."

* * * * *

"My plans have changed. Please have a room prepared for Mrs. Huntington, Davies, and send Pagett in, will you?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I will have one of the servants get you settled, and then I will come to you. Are you sure you wish to resume our arrangement?"

"More than I can tell you, my lord."

A pretty little woman hurried into the room, straightening her plain gray dress. She served in the kitchen, but since servants were at a premium, she would be now serving in another capacity.

"Yes, my lord," she said in a voice little more than a whisper.

"Pagett, you will be Mrs. Huntington's maid during her stay. While her room is being prepared, you may use my chamber. I believe you remember what my requirements are, do you not, Mrs. Huntington?"

Desiree nodded and smiled.

"Good. Go along now, and I will see you in half an hour's time."

When the women left the room, Prentice expelled a loud breath of air. This was exactly what he needed to complete the excision. At one time, this house rang with Abigail's moans of pain and ecstasy. The servants must have grown accustomed to the sounds they heard, for it was often that Abigail was draped over the bed or the wonderful Biedermeier chaise in the master's chamber, as he spanked her and then made love to her for hours on end.

He swallowed hard as he remembered his resolve. Today was the day he had said goodbye to his past. An afternoon sequestered with Mrs. Huntington was just what he needed to focus on the future.

* * * * *

Pagett had helped Desiree out of her morning gown and stays, leaving her wearing her ivory silk chemise. When she was able to manage on her own, she dismissed the girl, needing a few minutes to herself before the afternoon with his lordship began.

She walked around the chamber and realized how excited she was to be there. Putting her anger toward Lord Wycroft aside, she was determined to selfishly take all he offered this day. Despite her ultimate goal, she'd realized through her weeks of deprivation that she had a need, and no one else could satisfy that need as he did. He was skilled, and when the time came, she knew she would miss her sessions with him. But, she told herself, make no mistake . . . that time *will* come.

The elegant room was quite large, and breathtakingly appointed. Gilt and dark

wood bedposts supported an elaborate tester, from which fell heavy swags of red velvet with long fringes. The tester's ornately carved head and frieze depicted what she assumed was the Wycroft crest. The red watered-silk on the walls matched the canopy and counterpane. The décor included splashes of red damask on chairs and settees. A mammoth fireplace filled one wall, with its white marble mantel, upon which sat dozens of miniatures. Upon the walls hung large, gilt-framed paintings of tranquil landscape and animal scenes, intermingled with an occasional portrait of a stern man or woman. She realized she'd half-expected the decadent erotic paintings found at the club, but instead, this room could have belonged to his lordship's mother.

Situated directly in front of the fireplace, in the middle of the room, sat a Biedermeier chaise, identical to those found at The Sapphire Club. Its well-padded, rolled arms and highly glossed fruitwood frame beckoned her to assume the position and await Lord Wycroft's expert hand. Her bottom quivered at the expectation.

The door opened and closed with a barely discernable click. She turned toward the sound. When she fully faced him, she stripped off her chemise, leaving her standing completely nude.

"So you recognize that piece?"

"Yes, I most certainly do."

"Good," he said approvingly. "I believe we will make considerable use of it."

Desiree smiled, her stomach feeling as though a village of butterflies had taken up residence.

"It has been some time, and I feel as though I have neglected you. Do you feel neglected, Mrs. Huntington?"

"Yes, I must say I do."

Prentice walked to a chest that stood along the wall. He opened the drawer, and removed several items. His back was to her, so Desiree couldn't see what he had taken from the drawer, but she knew she would enjoy whatever it was.

"I have not used these specific items in quite some time, but I fancy it won't take long to become accustomed to them again."

He turned, and she saw the implements he held in his hands: a paddle and leather strap.

"You've not been spanked in some time. I can promise you I will not be so neglectful in future."

"There should be a penalty for that neglect, should there not?"

"I can't imagine to what you refer, madam." His tone was light, and it warmed her to hear it.

He sat on the side of the bed and patted his thighs. "Come."

Despite herself, she couldn't help but prance anxiously to his lap. When she was comfortably situated across his thighs, he rubbed her bottom. "Oh, my, your beautiful derriere has lost all its lovely color." He struck her, leaving behind a slight heat. Between each strike, he rubbed his mark. She closed her eyes, the better to concentrate on the ecstasy of the attention he was giving her. She emitted soft, approving moans. She adored this moment, and looked forward to all that would follow.

After a few more swats, he helped her to her feet. "I've selected a strap for you; would you like that?"

"Oh, yes, please." She craved the feel of Prentice's strap. He seemed different, and she wanted him. She'd chastise herself later, but for now, she wanted Prentice in every way possible.

Chapter Ten

"Go to the chaise," Prentice said, his voice almost a whisper. As he watched her cross the room, her swaying hips showing off her bottom's tantalizing color, a wave of nostalgia washed over him. This was the room in which he'd first made love to his wife, had first spanked her and held her through the long night when she gave birth to their child. Sadly, Abigail had died in this room, plunging him into an abyss.

Somehow, it was appropriate to have Mrs. Huntington here, to replace the past with the living, breathing present. As he watched Desiree kneel on the seat of the chaise

and stretch out over the rolled arm, he felt another warm breeze, as though someone had opened a window, allowing in that first bit of spring. He again accepted the sign as Abigail telling him to move forward.

He took up the strap, a well-worn piece of leather he had been subjected to by his father and his tutor when but a boy. A smile cut across his face as he remembered himself howling like a wounded animal when his rear end received the blows for one infraction of the rules or another. In reality, he had enjoyed every moment and often contrived ways to be sentenced to such punishment.

Even Abigail hadn't known that tidbit of information. Only Lucien knew, and had secretly applied the leather on occasion, when Prentice felt the need for it.

Prentice flicked the strap against his thigh as he walked toward the chaise. Desiree had arranged herself comfortably, her bottom high, her legs spread wide. Normally, he preferred his client's feet firmly planted on the floor, but this had interesting possibilities for after the strapping.

"How badly do you want this, Mrs. Huntington?"

"Desiree, please call me Desiree."

"Very well, Desiree, how badly do you want this?"

"Very badly, my lord."

Prentice teased her, dragging the strap over her flushed cheeks, which bore several handprints from his earlier efforts. She wagged her bottom ever so slightly. Prentice drew back and struck.

"Whoo." She bent her head forward and inhaled deeply.

Prentice held back, allowing her to absorb the blow. He'd not hit her hard; the idea wasn't to hurt her, just to make it sting. However, coming so soon after his hand spanking, the sting would be intense.

"Not what you expected?"

"Just what I wanted."

With several more, Desiree and Prentice seemed to get into a rhythm. He applied the strikes, each one a bit harsher than the last, and she regulated her breathing so to

exhale when the blow struck. Prentice knew she couldn't take many, so he made sure she felt the ones he administered. When he heard her snuffle, he stopped.

His admiration for her was immense. She hadn't moved but to raise her bottom higher to meet the strap.

He rubbed her bottom, admiring his work. He brought her hand to rest on one cheek so she could feel the heat. Her smile nearly unmanned him. Thoughts of a dangerous nature streamed through his head, ones he could ill afford.

Prentice's cock was aching, and he made no effort to hide the bulge that threatened the buttons' strength on his breeches. He crudely rubbed along his length, as her tongue licked her bottom lip. He stood before her, barely giving her room to seat herself on the chaise. With their eyes locked, she reached to release the straining buttons. Prentice's eyes closed when she first touched his skin.

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband, and with painful, agonizing care, she pulled the breeches over his hips. She gave him a mischievous smile as she licked the fluid from the head of his cock. He smiled back weakly, not sure if he could withstand much more while standing.

He put his hand under her chin and said, "Let's get comfortable."

He shucked out of his breeches and scooped her into his arms for the short trip to the bed. He set her on her feet, and settled against the pillows as she took a position between his widely spread legs.

She brushed her delicate hands along the insides of his thighs, moving toward the juncture where legs met torso. The skin was so sensitized, making him aware of every nuance. Avoiding her ultimate goal, she brought her hands below his buttocks.

With a barely discernible flick of her wrist, she encouraged him to lift up so she could knead his buttocks. Her touch was wonderful, firm yet somewhat tentative. So often, he was the attentive one. Only on rare occasions was he fortunate enough to find a partner who enjoyed exploring the male body.

He allowed an approving sound to escape his lips, as she slid her fingers down the crease between his cheeks.

"Do you like that?" she asked

He remained silent, not trusting her enough to share such secrets.

She abandoned his backside, licking and teasing, which drove Prentice to the brink of madness before she enveloped his length, one agonizing inch at a time. She knew the most sensitive places, the clever girl, concentrating on them with flicks, licks, and sucks.

He put one hand in her hair, taking a fistful of the blond silk. As her rhythm became more schooled, he clutched and released. He felt the orgasm begin to build, heat settling in the small of his back. He tensed and held his breath, afraid to miss even the slightest sensation. He moved in an effort to seek the heat of her mouth, holding her head firmly in place. She rolled his ballocks as they tightened, squeezing just the way he needed. Without shame, he released his seed into her mouth. She gagged but he was too far gone to release her. He felt her licking his spent cock and she continued to lave him until he could stand no more.

He pulled her close, kissing her, praising her without words for the pleasure she had given him. He held her for several minutes, recouping his abilities, then, with a practiced movement, he rolled her onto her back and plunged into her, his cock again hard as stone.

He placed his hands on each side of her face, and with slow, deep strokes, he fucked her, as he focused his eyes on hers. He insisted she not close them, for he wanted to see her as she reached her peak, and all moments in between. The brilliant emerald combined with sunlight, giving the verdant depths a sparkle, the twinkle of a sexually aroused woman about to realize that paradise was but a stroke away.

"Come for me," he whispered in her ear. "Come loudly." He punctuated each word with a controlled thrust.

Her hot breath left her body in pants. She smelled of musk, undoubtedly his favorite fragrance. She dug her fingernails into his back and brought her legs around his thighs. The slight pain was like a whip to a horse. As she pulled him closer with her legs, he thrust with all the power he could muster. His loud grunts were unabashed as

he struggled fiercely for the closeness he required.

Her moans became soft keening sounds, then unintelligible words as her body tightened around him, her legs trapping him closer. Her attempts to thrash underneath him were futile, as they were skin to heated skin from chest to genitals. His hips pumped against her, sharp, staccato thrusts, each accompanied by a grunt for emphasis. She came with blinding intensity, her body arched in the perfect position to fully feel the rampaging force of his hips as they slammed into her.

"Oh, God," he said, as his body gave way to bone-wracking shudders, that went on for several long moments before his arms apparently could no longer hold his weight.

Desiree struggled for breath beneath Prentice, but still she clung to him, enraptured by his skills, much to her dismay. She had never envisioned such passion, such unadulterated pleasure. For all of Prentice Hyde's deficiencies, giving pleasure was not one of them.

She'd be sore for a week, but the discomfort would be worth it to have had this experience. He was sucking in great amounts of air, trying to catch his breath. She finally had to push at his shoulders to get him to move so she could do the same.

"So sorry," he panted, as he situated himself to her side, one leg draped over both of hers.

Neither spoke for several minutes. Desiree thought he'd fallen asleep, noting his breathing was even, and his eyes were closed. She was rather enjoying his warm breath on her skin, when he propped himself up on one arm and looked down at her.

His smile was toothy; his eyes sparkled. "Will you stay here with me for a few days?"

"Do you wish me to stay as your guest or paramour?"

"As my paramour, of course. I would like to take you to the lake, and the forest, and"

"And what will we do in all of those places?"

"I will spank you in each one, and then we will make love with abandon. Will you stay?"

She was treading on dangerous ground, for her heart was already beginning to betray her. However, she couldn't keep herself from agreeing. "I would like that above all things. It sounds marvelous."

Upon her return to London she would spend weeks castigating herself for this decision, but for now she wished to enjoy every moment.

"Wonderful. That's settled. Now, I wish to ask some questions, and I expect truthful answers. Understood?" His voice was playful, enticing her to play along with him.

"Understood, sir. Ask away."

"Why do you like to be spanked?"

"Well, I suppose the intimacy of it, for one thing. I have always been enticed by erotic drawings"

"Erotic drawings? Where would you have seen such things?"

"My father had a collection, which he thought he kept well-hidden. I spent many hours viewing the drawings. They not only depicted spankings but also every possible sexual position. Since that time, I've always, somewhere inside me, wished to have that myself."

"Was your husband as, shall we say *adventuresome*, as you are?"

The mere mention of her husband threatened to rile her. There would have been no husband, at least not *that* one, if it hadn't been for the man next to her. With deliberation, she quelled the anger, not allowing bad memories to ruin this delightful day.

"No," she told him, "he was not."

He moved on to another topic. "Were you spanked as a child?"

"Of course, often, and I rather looked forward to them. What of you, my lord? Why your interest in such perversities?"

"I spent many years in India. At first, I took a casual interest in the Kama Sutra,

then a more intense interest as I came to understand the meaning of the teachings."

"Were there women who allowed you to practice what you'd learned?"

"Never a lack of them, my dear," he said, and slid his hand between her legs. He dipped two fingers inside her. "I've always been somewhat amazed at the number of people, not just women, who enjoy spanking, to varying degrees. Some, such as yourself, enjoy it as a means of sexual arousal — while others need crave the paddle or lash as a part of discipline. The various nuances always fascinate me."

She found herself reveling in the glorious sensations he was again producing. The heat was simmering inside her, lust and need clouding her ability to think. If he continued on this path, conversation would be difficult.

"So men enjoy being spanked as well?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Oh, yes. When we get back to London, I must take you on a tour of the club. You'll be amazed at what you might see."

The next question seemed obvious, but her curiosity tugged at her tongue until she asked it. "Have you ever been spanked as part of sexual play?"

She watched his face, wishing to see every flicker and blink. There were none. Instead, he kissed her until she forgot she'd even asked the question.

He made love to her again, this time with less intensity and passion. When he was finished, her body felt well-used. Her bottom had a pleasant sting, reminding her of his attentions. When he pulled the bedcovers over her, she closed her eyes. Before long, sleep took her.

* * * * *

It had been hours since Prentice slipped out of his bed and made his way to the library, where he had imbibed more scotch than he had intended. He'd not had anything to drink since his arrival at the Park, but a bit of spirits seemed appropriate, after what he'd done. He'd committed a thoughtless act, that of failure to consider the

consequences of spilling his seed inside his partner. He never again wanted to be responsible for a woman perishing in child birth and yet *that* rational thought had completely escaped his mind, which was once again controlled by his cock.

Prentice knew the price that should be exacted, but he also knew it was one he was unwilling to pay. There would be no marriage in his future, under any circumstances. He'd not considered himself an honorable man since Abigail died.

He'd pray his seed had not taken and use French Letters from now on, as much as he hated the infernal things. He wasn't ready to give up romping with Mrs. Huntington, but he could certainly be more mindful of the precautions he should take.

As he sat sprawled in his chair, drinking his scotch, he started planning their activities for the next day. It would test her, no doubt, but he intended to see just how much she trusted him. The result would indeed be interesting.

Chapter Eleven

The pony cart was ready, packed with all they'd need. Prentice stood tapping an impatient foot on the marble when Desiree entered the entrance hall the next morning. Sometime in the night, Prentice had informed her they were going on a picnic, something she had not done since she was a child.

She had chosen a simple muslin dress, and forewent the stays, reasoning that Prentice had seen all there was to see, and they would encounter no one else during their adventure.

"Come, come," he said anxiously, his hand waving her toward the door.

"I'm coming, sir." She increased her pace, laughing as she did. She was looking forward to seeing his estate and spending a few hours out of doors.

Prentice handed her into the seat then bounded up himself. He took up the reins. The small chestnut mare stomped her feet and whickered, anxious to take her exercise. Prentice turned down the drive and onto a path that would lead them across the fields.

Along the way, he pointed out the tenant's cottages in the distance and the sheep

in the fields beyond. A gentle breeze swayed the tall grass and lifted Desiree's hair, which she had pulled back in a simple style, with hair combs on the sides.

Prentice seemed rather chatty, mentioning several times how lovely the day was, how intense the sun's warmth, and how much he appreciated the vast expanse of property that belonged to him. Desiree watched as the sun shone on his hair, revealing golden highlights. His smile was infectious as was his enthusiasm.

They passed low stone walls that looked ancient in their disrepair. Ivy grew wide over the length of them, and most were covered with thick patches of moss. She heard a loud buzzing to her left and discovered a nest of bees in an oak tree.

Birds chirping and the smell of newly mown grass made her recall her youth, when she ran freely for hours over the country estate her father owned in Kent. It had been a happy time, one that had not been repeated since her forced marriage to Ebenezer Huntington.

The pony cart was heading for the forest, a place so in contrast to the wide open space she presently enjoyed. Soon, Prentice steered them through trees and down a well-worn, rutted path, which led them back out into the sunshine again. There, before her, stood a magnificent sight, breathtaking in its beauty.

A crystalline blue pond glistened in the sunlight, its surface sparkling like diamonds, and large enough to accommodate a hundred swimmers. The water rippled only slightly in the breeze. A red brick folly rose up a short distance away, the metal roof sparking in the sun, beckoning her to explore.

Prentice stopped the cart beside the majestic structure. Too anxious to examine the beautiful building, Desiree didn't wait for his assistance in alighting.

"My father had it built when he married my mother. It was a gift to her, which she never fully appreciated."

"She didn't like it?"

"She didn't like my father." He chuckled.

"Oh, I see." Another piece of information she hadn't known about him and his family.

"My lord, this is positively beautiful." It looked like a cottage, unlike any folly she'd ever seen. There were turrets on either side of the main structure, which had two large doors, each with twelve panes of wavy glass.

Prentice unlocked the door and gave a push. The door opened on squeaking, unwilling hinges. It opened into a large room, partitioned into a kitchen and parlor. She twirled around on the marble floor, thinking a lovelier sight she'd never seen. It was furnished with comfortable, over-stuffed chairs, settees, dark wood tables and a small table and chairs set in the area that looked to be the kitchen.

"I had Mrs. Polton and some of the staff come here very early and set it to rights. They left us food and fresh linens, enough for a couple of days. Would you like to stay here with me?"

"Oh, my yes." She could live in this place forever.

Prentice smiled at her answer. "Good. Come, let me show you around."

They went outside, where she discovered that the folly sat near a shallow grotto. The setting stole her breath. They were on a hill, something she hadn't noticed as they negotiated their way through the woods. The rise overlooked rich, verdant fields, which spanned as far as she could see.

Before she could conceive of doing anything different, she turned to Prentice and hugged him, bubbling over with excitement. He hugged her back, twirling her around and around. No doubt, she'd never forget this moment. When he finally set her down, he kissed her deeply, his tongue delving into her mouth with hunger and need.

Desiree had never imagined a man with such passion. His mind seemed to rarely leave the realm of the flesh. Before she knew it, her dress was falling to the ground. The sun bathed her in golden warmth; her skin was quick to heat.

"I want you naked," he said, shucking out of his coat. He danced on one foot and then the other as he removed his boots.

"Here? Now?"

"Yes, here and now."

She removed her chemise and stood nude before him, basking in the sun's

warmth. It was glorious.

He laid her down in the soft grass, the sensation alone as sensual a feeling as any she'd ever experienced. She saw hunger in his eyes, but then the man was forever ravenous. His hands were everywhere at once, firing her blood and filling her senses.

She waited as he took the pains to sheath himself with a French letter, and with little warning, he came over her and entered, hilding himself with one deep thrust. He rode her hard, taking his satisfaction with enthusiasm. She soon came, shouting her delight to the heavens. He roared as he pounded into her, his face strained, eyes closed. She'd come to realize how demonstrative he was, and she rather enjoyed it.

Temporarily sated, Prentice rolled off Desiree and onto his back, placing his arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun. He lay partially naked beside her, and realized he didn't want to be anywhere else, at least not at this moment.

Up on one elbow a moment later, he looked down at her, his body providing shade for her eyes. "Have you never made love outside before?"

"Never!"

"Want to do it again?"

She looked down at his cock and was amazed to see it at full attention.

"Are you ever *not* ready for sex?"

"Not to my recollection. Get used to it, my dear; I am a man who is steeped in the pleasures of the flesh. Let me know if that isn't to your liking, but I see no reason to change now."

Her eyes widened and he only realized what he had said, or rather how he had said it, when the shock registered in her eyes. He hadn't meant to make it sound as though he intended anything permanent by this forest foray, but even to his own ears, it sounded as though he'd meant more.

"As far as our agreement goes, my lord, I am quite content with your abilities."

Prentice breathed a sigh of relief. *She didn't hear it the way I did. Good.*

They rested for a while few moments in companionable silence, enjoying a

perfect day spent in a perfect setting.

"I feel like a swim. What about you?" Prentice finally spoke. She agreed the water would feel good, and accompanied him as he made his way to the pond. He dragged her into the water. They romped, splashing each other, him dunking her and her fighting to do the same to him.

They laughed like children, carefree and genuine. Prentice was enjoying her company. She seemed willing to participate in any venture he suggested, which pleased him, because he had some thoughts as to how he could take their sexual games to new heights.

They were in the water for nearly an hour before he took her by the hand and led her to the grassy shore. He was aroused, which was becoming a way of life for him, especially around Desiree. His hands itched for the feel of her flesh. He pulled her to him and held her tightly with one hand, leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I am going to spank you right here, right now." His other hand came down on her wet bottom.

"Oh," she exclaimed in surprise.

"Hold perfectly still while I redden you up."

She snaked her arms around his waist, rested her head on his chest and allowed him to do what he must. His hand on her felt wonderful. The position lent itself to an intimacy she wished she didn't want, but couldn't reject. His erection throbbed against her belly. Her bottom stung like fire by the time he was finished, as he had given her no quarter, but she felt bereft when he stopped. Then, he turned her and bent her over. Holding her around the waist, he entered her from behind. It was breathless, painful, and glorious, all at once. Over before it started, leaving her sated, but her heart still intact.

"The Decadent Lord; that *is* what they call you, is it not?"

"So I have heard," he said as they walked back to the folly, both naked and blissfully content.

"I can see why."

"I don't believe you have much evidence as to the full extent of my decadence, but I say you will, before we leave here."

"I indeed look forward to what you might have in store, my lord."

"I believe it is time you called me Prentice, considering our intimate arrangement. I've always thought 'my lord' referred my father at any rate." He spoke without thinking, but found he had no regret. She smiled a kissable smile, her eyes sparkling. "Prentice it is," she said with enthusiasm. "Prentice it is."

"Are you hungry?"

"Just a bit."

"Well, let us have a light meal, and then I might have a surprise or two for you."

As they ate the cold meat pies, washing them down with wine and finishing with fresh fruit, Prentice asked prying questions. He knew he might upset her, but he wished to know something more about the lady, who, at least for the moment, was occupying so much of his time.

"My father died shortly after I married. My mother died just a few years ago. I have a brother, but he lives in Virginia; we haven't seen each other in seven years. I have assorted aunts and uncles, but no one close."

"You must have been lonely these last years, living."

"I am wealthy and not terribly concerned what society thinks or feels. From the little I have seen at the club, there is much going on that *society* professes a distaste for but participates in quite enthusiastically."

Prentice laughed. "It is true. We have lords and ladies involved in every manner of lascivious behavior, but outside the club they act as though they have never seen a naked body in their lives. It's laughable."

"Your staff must be made up of remarkable people," she said, changing the subject.

"They are paid well to look the other way. I have employed the same people for years. They know me and know I will always look out for them. They also know I will

crush them if I find they've gossiped."

"Remind me never to cross you."

"I know where your vulnerable parts are, my dear."

"Yes, I suppose you do."

Her expression revealed what he thought to be an inexplicable sadness, but he wasn't inclined to explore the reason.

They were still naked, a condition he informed her would be expected during their stay at the folly. "No one will come anywhere near here, and I want you available without fripperies."

"Fine, sir, if that is what you wish." She bowed her head in reverence.

He lit a fire and set down blankets and pillows on the floor. He filled their wine glasses and led her to the pallet he'd created. There, as they watched the flames, he described, in brilliant detail, exactly what the next few days would entail.

"I expect you will learn more about yourself than you have ever imagined."

"What of you, Prentice? What will I learn of you?"

It took no thought at all to say, "Nothing," and mean it. He was always guarded, except with Lucien, who knew all his secrets and would protect them with his life.

"Oh, but there must be something I will discover."

"You will have enough to cope with when your endurance is tested. You needn't bother worrying about my dull life."

She began to cough at that statement. "Admittedly, I don't know you well, but from all I have observed, your life is anything but dull."

"I have been fortunate to be able to live life on my own terms, but short of meeting pleasant women such as yourself, I live a rather mundane existence."

"We must see if we can't remedy that, sir," she said, as she rolled toward him and took his blazing erection into her mouth.

"Ah, that, my dear, is a good start."

Chapter Twelve

Prentice's mind went blank. Desiree sucked him as though his cock were a stick of peppermint candy. My God, where did she learn to do this? His body convulsed as she brought him to the brink, and then backed away, prolonging the delicious torment.

He could have sworn he heard her chuckle when he'd anticipated his release, only to have her clever tongue move to a less sensitive spot. The tension built and abated until he was sure he'd go mad with want.

His hands held her head in place, his fingers gripping her hair. He wasn't sure he could keep from pulling, and his mind was too consumed to care.

"Now, please." He could stand no more, greedy bastard that he was. He thrust his hips up, jamming his cock fully into her throat. He heard a chocking sound but her head, tongue and lips never stopped moving. The sensations were unearthly. He was in cock-eating heaven, a place from which he never wished to return.

He threw his head back as he exploded into her mouth, feeling her swallow frantically.

"Oh, fuck."

He wasn't in control of his jerky movements as the aftershocks kept coming, and his hips kept thrusting. His cock throbbed inside her warm, moist mouth as the last vestiges of his seed were being pumped down her throat. He felt a vibration.

"Mmm."

Weakly, he lowered his head, and a most beautiful sight met his eyes. Desiree was laving his nearly limp cock, not letting a drop of his seed escape her tongue. His heart thrummed, and fear seized his body. The kind of fear one has when the unknown stares you in the face and threatens your *way* of life, but not your life itself. The fear that your life is about to change, and the balance you have so carefully established is about to be upset.

He gently pulled her to his chest, setting his fear aside, albeit temporarily. He kissed her, tasting himself on her lips. The aroma of sex filled the air, an aphrodisiac to the lusty beast his body hosted.

"Very well done, my dear. Well done, indeed."

"I am so happy you enjoyed it." Her eyes twinkled, seducing his mind completely.

He held her for several minutes, mediating a battle between reason and want.

He closed his eyes and fell into a familiar train of thought. He'd long ago accepted something about himself that, from the outside, few people but those who knew him well would ever guess. Prentice Hyde's thoughts trended toward the perverted. Nothing or no one would ever change that about him, for he was quite content – no, downright happy – fulfilling his wicked fantasies, all the while wishing to again share them with someone who was equally wicked.

He'd not apologized to anyone for getting a raging cockstand as he spanked a lady's ass. The turn of a pretty ankle hadn't done it for him since he was thirteen.

Abigail had understood him without question, had participated and enjoyed, not just allowed him to do as was his wont. She was a jewel in his life, one he knew he hadn't deserved.

Now, another woman had come into his life, his equal in many ways, able to take the pain of his spankings, and later, beg for more. As he held her, he questioned whether she could withstand the whole of what he had in store. There were things he'd not done to her, urges he'd purposely quelled, lest she run for the hills screaming for his commission to Bedlam.

Over the next couple of days, he would do them all and maybe more. His actions would either end their arrangement for good or bind them together in a way he was unsure he even wanted. He dared not think he could ever find a partner like Abigail, but he must test Mrs. Huntington.

She lay in his arms, eyes closed, lazily dancing her fingers threw the hair on his chest.

Brushing errant tendrils from her face, he said, "Sleep now. You, my lady, have a very busy day ahead of you."

He rose from the comfortable pallet then reached down for her hand. She was as

light as a waif, yet built for pleasure. Her breasts jiggled just enough to entice his tongue to taste them. Her tiny waist begged his hands to encircle it. Her luscious ass invited any number of acts that would wait for another day.

"Before we sleep, would you finish what you started, sir? You've left me in quite a state."

"Imagine how needy you will be in the morning." He gave her an impish smile.

She pouted prettily but conceded, following him to the bedchamber. The room was as he remembered, not quite the well-appointed bedchamber in a London townhouse, but quaint, rustic. He'd always loved the white birch paneled walls, remembering the one thing his mother liked about the place was the open, airy feel during the daytime hours. The very few times his mother had come here, she'd stood at the single window, threw it open, allowing a cool, clean breeze to billow the pale blue muslin curtains. He realized the bed was the same, not as wide as the one he and Desiree shared at the club, but adequate.

"This is lovely," Desiree said, as she sniffed the air. "Mmm, lavender."

"It's the sheets, if memory serves." Changing the subject, he called her attention to a particular point of fascination for him. "Look at the ceiling."

Desiree looked up.

"I remember watching the builders cut those logs and assemble them as a dome. I was quite enamored of their ability to create something so simple, yet beautiful. This folly has always been one of my favorite places in the world."

He pointed out the amenities, scant as they were. There was a carved wooden screen, which created a privy. The washstand stood on the other side of the room. "In the morning, I will heat water for you," he said, giving her a playful wink.

She'd barely laid her head upon the pillow before he heard the soft, even breathing that indicated her lapse into slumber. He knew it wouldn't be that easy for him. He'd come to the country to say goodbye. Could he possibly be contemplating opening a new chapter in his life so soon? The possibility frightened him but the thought of losing the sexually adventuresome Desiree brought to mind, with vivid

emphasis, the desolate years ahead, taking pleasure where it came, and leaving him with an empty heart.

He turned to her, propped up on one elbow. As he looked at her peaceful face, innocent in repose, he imagined endless nights like this, with her in his bed, a true partner. A chuckle rose in his throat at the thought of being married to some missish little debutante and what their wedding night might be like.

"Well, now, my lady, would you mind baring your creamy ass, as I am inclined to spank you until you can't stand up and then fuck you blind."

"Why, husband," she might say, "I have never heard of such things."

"You have now, so get to it."

He then envisioned seeing her wagging ass as she headed out the door and back to Mama, who had failed to inform her preciousness that men are indeed perverse creatures, who'd sometimes demand more than some women are willing to give.

Marriage loomed in his future, as his mother had so informed him any number of times, but he had resisted until he met Desiree. Though he wasn't sure he could love her, he was certain he could enjoy her.

Intoxicating dreams lured him into his rest, dreams of red cheeks and satisfied cocks.

* * * * *

Sunshine flooded the room, drawing Desiree from her slumber. Clean air assailed her senses, as did chirping birds and the smell of bacon. Lightly patting the bedcovers next to her, she found she was alone in the room, but there was a clamor going on in the house.

She heard several curses as something metal hit the floor with a terrible, resounding clang.

She gingerly hopped out of bed, threw on her dress, and opened the door, just as Prentice let fly words she had never heard, in a tongue she thought was foreign.

He was hopping around the kitchen on one foot, wearing nothing but a scowl.

"What are you doing?"

"I am trying to make breakfast, but I fear I am out of my depth."

"First rule of the kitchen, one does not fix bacon in the nude. It could prove injurious to certain valuable parts of one's anatomy."

He looked at her with his eyes slanted to the side. "You couldn't have told me that a half hour ago? Really?" The question seemed like an afterthought and sounded as though he should have thought of that himself.

"You haven't made a complete mess of it, but you must dress for safety. I fear you will have to make use of your, ah, valuable bits, and we wouldn't want them burned and out of commission, now would we?"

"I suppose I should have asked Mrs. Polton how to do this but it seemed rather straightforward. I hadn't counted on the food protesting."

Desiree laughed at his foolishness and sent him off, out of range of the battling bacon.

Soon, she had a simple country breakfast prepared, complete with coffee, eggs, toast, and the errant meat. He came to the table dressed in breeches, boots and a white lawn shirt, worn untucked. They ate like starved adventurers, as they discussed his utter failure as a cook.

"Where did you ever learn to cook, Desiree? I assumed you had servants to see to such mundane pursuits."

"I enjoy such things, though I confess I haven't done much of it in recent years. I do believe I can handle our meals here though, as someone must protect you from yourself."

He laughed with unburdened enthusiasm. She admired a man who recognized his own failings. She was forced to stem the tide of unwanted thoughts at that moment, for she wanted nothing to spoil this bucolic respite.

As she cleared the dishes away, Prentice rose. "I have plans for you today."

"I assumed you would."

"Would you care to go for a walk?"

Her heart leapt. "Yes, absolutely."

"Take off the dress."

She raised an eyebrow but complied without protest. "Are you sure no one will see us out here."

"I'm absolutely sure, for as far as you can see, this is my property. The tenants stay where they belong, and no one comes near here unless I request it. We are alone, which, by the end of the day, you will consider either a blessing or a curse."

He had alluded to any manner of activities for the day, which had only served to peak her interest. "I look forward to whatever it is you have planned."

"I do hope so."

He led her out the door, and onto a path behind the folly. It was such a lovely day, the sun warming the ground as well as her body. If one must run around naked, this day was the perfect time to do so.

They walked for several minutes, finally coming upon a sun-dappled spot under a copse of trees. Nature's sounds surrounded them, birds chirping, small animals rustling in the underbrush and the occasional cawing of a predator bird as it captured its prey.

Prentice walked to a tree stump and picked up a bag, alerting her that he must have come here as she slept. "What is that?"

He held a knife, which gleamed in the sun. "I want you to take this, cut a switch, and bring it back to me."

"A switch?"

"I believe you heard me."

He'd taken on the persona of master. "Yes, sir." Her quim wept at the thought of the sting a switch would produce. She'd had her legs switched as a child by a governess, who was possessed of scant patience for a dreamy-eyed girl such as herself. A new thrill came over her as she scampered off into the woods. She cut and tested several against her legs until she found the one that produced the proper feeling.

When she returned to the copse, Prentice stood with his legs apart, his arms across his chest. There was nary a smile on his face, which struck a humorous chord with Desiree. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. After all, they each had a role to play.

She handed the knife back to him, and he dropped it into the bag. Then she brought forward the flexible, thin twig, which he tested by bending it several times, and swishing it through the air.

"Oh, this will do quite nicely. You are in for a treat. Now, I wish for you to go over there, and face that tree." He pointed to the other side of the clearing, and she did as he bid, her body trembling with anticipation.

He arranged her with her legs back, hands against the trunk.

"Poke your bottom out. Yes, that's it." He struck her, with the tip just kissing her cheek. She flinched but soon realized there was no reason. He repeated this many times, never really landing the harsh, swishing sting she'd expected.

He walked to her, placing his hand on her buttocks. "Nice little red kisses. How does it feel?"

"I expected more."

"Oh, my dear, never fear. You shall have more; just not with this." He tossed the green switch away and then got very close to her ear.

Chapter Thirteen

"You seem to enjoy pain."

"Yes, I do."

"That's very good, very good indeed, because I enjoy inflicting it, but only in a most pleasurable manner, of course. Do you enjoy new sexual experiences?"

"Yes."

He detected hesitancy. "Is it really yes or aren't you sure?"

"It is really yes. I gave you carte blanche when we met."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I do, completely."

"Good girl. I would never do you harm. I only seek your pleasure."

"And your own."

He swatted her bottom. "Cheeky girl."

"Yes, I believe I am."

His voice was deep, velvety, seductive. He was snaring her in his sexual trap, and she wanted just that. She wanted his wicked games. He thrilled her with his awareness of her needs. She wanted a spanking, and at this point it didn't matter what he used. Should I beg, she wondered, her body still in the same position against the tree.

As if he had read her thoughts, he said, "Tell me what you want me to do to you, Desiree. Later on, I will not ask, but right now I want to give you what you need the most."

His face was so close to her own, his warm breath washing over her, seducing her. She swallowed hard, the need in her about to control her every action. "I want you to strap me, hard. Don't stop until I tell you to."

"You are sure?"

"My God, yes."

Prentice brought his hand down to cup her quim. "You are so wet."

Desiree closed her eyes, praying he had brought the strap in his bag. As he snapped it against his leg, she let out a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you hadn't brought it."

"I suspected we might have need of it."

"That I do. Please sir, now."

"As you wish, my dear."

As was his habit, he struck her lightly the first two or three times. They stung, barely, but readied her for what was to come. She dug her bare feet into the ground, reaffirming her position. Then she closed her eyes. With every stroke, she felt her quim

clench. Her breathing escalated, but she took deep, cleansing breaths, then expelled them upon impact. She became lost in the sound of the leather impacting her bare skin. Even the slight whooshing as the strap went through the air excited her, bringing her to new heights of awareness and satisfaction.

Her head lolled forward between her outstretched arms. The only sounds she made were moans of approval.

Prentice became concerned. Desiree had asked that the spanking end only upon her request; however, he had struck her the requisite number of times, and she appeared to be in thrall. He feared if he continued he would break her skin.

He stopped. She remained still. He walked to her and gently touched her face.

"Are you all right?" He whispered.

"Yes, I am, but why did you stop?"

"It was too much."

"I never said it was too much."

"I will harm you should we proceed, and I don't wish to do that."

She nodded slightly though she seemed immersed in her thoughts.

He picked her up, holding her close as he walked back to the folly. He would put a soothing balm on her deeply reddened bottom and allow her to rest.

A surge of guilt coursed through him. He hadn't liked her request that she be the one to determine when she'd had enough. Having done this for so many years, he knew how much a woman could stand before it became too much, before she went into herself, much as Desiree had done. Harm should never come to one who submits to sexual games. He feared in his willingness to please her, he had allowed his judgment to become clouded.

He reasoned that she had gone beyond the pain; he could have beaten her bloody without her realizing it was happening. He'd be more careful, and use his common sense with her. She had a tremendous pain threshold, something he admired and yet also feared.

As he laid her on the bed, she came into herself. "Why did you bring me back here?"

"You must rest, Desiree. You aren't thinking clearly, or you would have stopped me."

"I didn't want you to stop."

She sounded like a petulant child. From now on, he would use his own judgment, for clearly, when it came to spankings, she had none.

"Your ass is nearly blistered. If I'd continued, you would be bleeding."

That caught her attention. She touched her bottom. "Oh, my, it is on fire."

"That's what I have been trying to tell you."

He reached for some ointment, rolled her over, and liberally applied the soothing unguent.

"That feels nice."

Of a sudden, it struck him that she was as ass-obsessed as he was. That was the only answer.

"Can I talk to you seriously, Desiree?"

"Of course."

"Had you ever been spanked before you came to me?"

"Only as a child."

"What made you decide you wanted to be?"

"I've explained this already. Since seeing my father's erotic drawings, I've been thrilled by the idea of someone lifting my skirts, baring my bottom and spanking me. The pain increases the pleasure. I don't know; it's difficult to explain."

He laughed aloud, feeling oddly liberated. She was no run-of-the-mill woman who sought punishment. She craved the pain and pleasure as he did. Did he dare speak as frankly to her about his deep-set desires? No. He dismissed the thought. That perversity would remain between him and Lucien.

"I understand. Not everyone experiences sexual arousal the same way. That is why the Sapphire Club exists. You can always be yourself with me, Desiree. I wish to

please you."

"You were pleasing me this morning, before you stopped. I am at loose ends right now."

"Are you now? Well, I can assist you in tying them, if you'd like."

"I had no doubt you could, sir. This might be a good time to shuck out of those clothes."

* * * * *

To Desiree's delight, they spent the afternoon in bed, fucking like rabbits. Despite what Prentice Hyde thought, he'd be strapping her again, just the way he did this morning. The spanking had produced the greatest orgasms she'd ever known, and she wasn't about to forfeit that reward in exchange for his misguided conscience. She thought it odd that he even had a conscience.

The heat, stinging and aching, emanating from her bottom, was delicious.

Despite her hurt at his abandonment of her ten years before, she felt remarkably at home with him. Who else could she share her sexual peculiarities with? They understood each other, and on the face of it, that made her happy. However, it undermined her purpose, leaving her with a dilemma.

A huge part of her wanted this arrangement to go on indefinitely, but she wouldn't allow that to happen. She'd get her fill and leave him, without as much as a glance back. These glorious days would have to last her a lifetime. She'd marry some nice gentleman and forget about Lord Wycroft, but not now. He was beside her on the bed, his eyes closed, though she knew he wasn't sleeping. With any luck, she could convince him to stay a few days longer before returning to the real world, for when they did, he would, once again, become a part of her past.

* * * * *

Prentice had something he wished to do, and he was almost sure Desiree would love it. Despite what had already transpired between them, he'd kept this to himself, for fear of frightening her.

They'd had a simple dinner, provided in the basket Mrs. Polton had sent to the folly early that morning. Prentice had kept Desiree naked as he'd promised to do, taking her to the lake to bathe and frolic, then taking his pleasure in her sun-warmed body. Of course, he'd seen to her pleasure as well. By the look of her, she was well-satisfied. She'd not stopped smiling. She was cow-eyed, and she touched him a lot. He'd put it all in perspective at another time. To have these stolen days to themselves was a rare gift, leaving no time for recriminations or second guesses.

Desiree washed the dishes while he slipped into the bedchamber to light a candle or two and stoke the fire. The evenings and nights had begun to get a bit chill. When he returned to the parlor, he took the opportunity to study her. She stood at the table, back to him, doing the menial work of cleaning up after a meal.

Her bottom had lost little of its redness, and he cringed when he observed the clearly delineated marks made by the strap. *Damn, and blast.* Guilt seared through him. He'd prided himself on never leaving marks, now he had.

He admired her pluck, though. She had an innate ability to go after what she wanted. She endured his punishment, because it ultimately gave her pleasure. He wasn't so jaded that he couldn't understand that. He found himself wanting to give her more enjoyment, more pleasure, and if pain was a part of that, so be it.

She bent over to place the dishes on a shelf. It was then Prentice knew he must have her. Her bottom was perfectly heart-shaped. It invited his attentions.

"Come," he said, startling her. He sat and patted his lap.

She went to him, placing her bare bottom on his thigh. Absently, he rubbed her, wanting more, while holding off the urge to take it.

"You have beautiful breasts, do you know that?"

"It isn't something I've ever thought about, really."

"Quite alright, I'll do that for you." He then sucked a nipple into his mouth,

pulling until she squealed with excitement.

They kissed, something they were not terribly accustomed to doing. Prentice felt a closeness to her this night, and before the sun rose in the morning, he prayed the barrier he'd spent so long building around his heart would have been breached.

With their lips still engaged, he rose from the chair, and carried her to their chamber. When he placed her on the bed, she protested the release of his lips.

"Desiree, I wish to show you something else, something that could be quite pleasurable for you but painful as well."

"You have my rapt attention."

He busily arranged two pillows in the middle of the bed. "Settle yourself upon the pillows, with your bottom in the air."

She did as he asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I feel it is best to show you. You may stop me at any time, just like with anything else we do. Do you promise me you will if you feel the need?"

"Yes, I promise." Desiree's body thrummed. She suspected what he had in mind and prayed she was correct.

Prentice knelt between her spread legs and applied oil to her anus with a cold finger. She thought it odd that the sensation should be so pleasurable.

"Try to relax."

She nearly came apart with anticipation. Heretofore, she'd only had her French phallus with which to experiment, and she had done so as often as possible.

Prentice slipped a finger into her, and though it was delicious, the feeling was nowhere near what she wanted.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, but I want more."

"More it is." He removed his finger and replaced it with two.

The feeling was so vastly different, stretching, resistance. She felt full, but still wanted more. She willed herself to relax into the burn. Prentice moved his fingers inside her, stretching the tight muscles, creating a slow arousal. She was afraid the

ecstasy of it would send her into an orgasm. She didn't want this heavenly experience to end.

"Do you like this?"

"Oh, yes." She pushed back against his hand. "I want more."

"Are you sure, sweeting?"

"More, please." She focused on the burn and the ultimate pleasure. "I want you."

She felt the bed move and heard the rustle of fabric, making her think he was removing his clothes. She didn't move a muscle, fearful he would interpret any movement as discomfort on her part. For years, she had dreamed of being taken this way, but never had the courage to seek it out. Now, it was being given as a gift. She was in rapture.

The bed dipped under his weight. Again, she felt his cool hands as he applied oil to her anus and his cock. He knelt behind her, spreading her legs wide with his own.

With as mellow a voice as she had ever heard him use, he said, "Relax now. I will try not to hurt you."

"I want you." The tears of a realized desire flowed freely, streaking her cheeks and seeping into the counterpane.

She could feel him at her entrance, teasing the tight opening. Her heart pounded, her breath self-restricted. Her fingers, once splayed, now were fisted, the bed linens bunched in her palms. The anticipation of what was to come had a powerful command over her.

When he slipped the head of his cock just inside, it burned like fire, stretching her beyond her perceived capacity, but soon, as her muscles relaxed, it began to feel better than anything she'd ever experienced. More intense, all consuming.

He stopped his progression, which allowed her to absorb the pain.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Desiree nodded, afraid to speak lest he sense her tears. She sucked deep breaths in, then blew them out completely.

Deeming him too careful, she began to push back, gently at first, then with more

zeal as her muscles relaxed, accepting the substantial invasion. She rocked on her knees, taking him in, inch by precious inch, until she felt wiry hair abrading her tortured bottom. She'd taken him in fully. She was in the boughs.

Chapter Fourteen

"Are you all right?" he asked again, once he was fully surrounded by her.

"I have never been more so."

Her voice was sweetness itself. Her anal muscles were pulsing, kneading his cock, causing him to exert more control than he thought he possessed. He concentrated on the constricting warmth as he waited for her muscles to relax. It was a sweet agony, and he wanted desperately to move, but would only do so by her leave. Then he felt a slight rocking, accompanied by sensual moans, punctuated with several phrases that all seemed to end in, "Fuck me."

His own little naughty minx. "You like this." A statement, not a question.

"I love this, more please. Harder. Make me feel you inside me."

He leaned forward and kissed her back. He placed his elbows on the pillows, and enveloped her in his embrace as he began a gentle glide out then in again, his schooled hips establishing a rhythm as old as time.

"More, Prentice. I need more."

With a force he hadn't wanted to employ, he gave a sharp jerk of his hips and halted himself. He stilled to listen for her reaction.

She grunted. She moaned. And then gasped out, "Let me feel more."

He did, his thrusts accompanied by grunts of his own. Sweat streamed down his face, on his chest and back, the exertion heating his body as much as his lust.

Her back glistened with her own efforts; her moans became mewling, then keening. He thrust his hips as though it were her quim he was fucking. God, she felt so good. The velvety softness of this forbidden place was so tight, yet seemed made for his cock. Her heat seared him as she accepted his rhythm, working with him to bring them

both to the place they so desperately wished to be. She whispered his name, over and over again, spurring him on.

He dropped a hand to her clitoris, taking it between two fingers and rubbing until he felt her body tighten, his cock the beneficiary of the climax she was experiencing. Her legs scissored, only kept open by his own; her back arched, and he had to shift his position to stay with her.

He wanted her to feel him fucking her as she exploded in her release. He slammed into her, pulled almost free and thrust hard again.

"Prentice, oh, my God!"

He had no idea if he'd hurt her and couldn't stop to find out. He exploded, his seed pouring into her as his body demanded surcease. He strained, feeling the blood throbbing against his forehead. He hammered against her ass, seeking more, deeper, tighter. As the last pulses left him, he expelled a resonating groan. It had been a climax he'd remember.

Shaken, exhausted and sated, he dragged her off the pillows and rolled with her so they lay on their sides. He was still embedded deeply within her, his cock still partially hard. He didn't want to separate from her, somehow believing this would be proven a dream. In a sense, it was a dream, but so much more. She'd accepted, as well as encouraged the act, reveling in it and in him.

When sanity and breath returned, he asked, "Are you well, sweetheart?"

"Quite." Her voice was shaky, her eyes closed.

"Look at me." He demanded her attention.

When she didn't obey at once, he uncoupled and turned her over to face him. She was in tears, and from the wet mark on the counterpane, he surmised she'd been crying for some time.

"What is it? Have I injured you?"

A sob tore from her throat. "I am not hurt. It is just that you have fulfilled a dream for me, one I never foresaw coming true."

"What dream?" His mind searched through all they had done. Incredulity

forbade him presuming she meant what he had just so powerfully experienced.

"There are things you don't know about me, Prentice, that I've never told anyone."

"What things? You must tell me. Trust me."

She sniffled, hiccupped a bit, the tears flowing abated. "I do trust you, else I would have never come here with you."

He waited and allowed her to catch her breath.

"I came to you because I wanted to be spanked. Now you have given me something I had never dared imagine."

Prentice managed to hold himself together, when all he wanted to do was assure her that it was she who had given him the greater gift. "You've thought about . . . ?"

She nodded and raised her hand to touch his face. "For some time now, but as for spanking, well, I've wanted to be spanked since I was a girl, I looked forward to it, sometimes provoking my father's temper. I received some fairly satisfying thrashings, without anyone ever realizing I was enjoying them. It's been far more difficult since I've been grown. How does one tell their old, staid husband, 'Darling, won't you take your riding crop and whip me with it, please'?" She affected a voice that made him laugh uncontrollably. She then became caught up in the humor, and together, they rolled about the bed until they were exhausted.

"That is priceless, my dear. I must say, I always wondered what motivates someone to come to the club and seek out the things they do. Serenity and I have spoken several times about her motivations, which always seemed rather straight forward. She'd had a lover who'd introduced her to the pleasures and pain of spanking. She found she not only enjoyed it but needed it."

"I understand that. I have come to need it as well."

"But the sex, Desiree, how could you know about such things?"

"Remember my father's drawings?"

"Ah, yes. Quite an education for a young girl, eh?"

"I suppose, but until now, I had no way to imagine how wonderfully satisfying

such an act could be." Her sweet smile, flushed face and watery eyes melted the rough edges he so proudly displayed.

Though reluctant to leave her, even to walk to the washstand, he did just that, cleaning himself then obtaining a clean cloth, wetting it and bringing it back to her. He gently washed her bottom, careful not to touch her inflamed anus. With a careless gesture, he tossed the wet cloth in the direction of the washstand and climbed back onto the bed.

He hugged her, trying not to squeeze her too tightly. Before he knew it, he was hard as stone and at her entrance, pushing himself into her. She brought her legs about his waist. As they looked into each other's eyes, he made love to her, deeply, deliberately, sensuously. There was no frenzied movements, no desperate need to reach the pinnacle, just slow, punctuated thrusts, driving home the importance of this single act. For him, it was a declaration, a confession. In a short time, after he worked out the details, he was intent on making Desiree Huntington his own. For him, she was becoming his home.

* * * * *

Despite Desiree's pleas, Prentice needed to return to London with alacrity. By this time, his mother would be frantic, if not ready to call out the Runners. He knew Byrd would sooner be castrated than divulge his whereabouts, but it was time to let the man off the proverbial hook.

They reluctantly left the folly, returned to the manor house, from where they would depart by early afternoon.

Desiree moped, even pouted, but to no avail. Prentice remained resolute, and she could do naught but comply with his wishes.

* * * * *

It was in the wee hours of the morning when the carriage pulled onto Doughty Street. For Desiree, too much of the real world came crashing back at once. Gripped by despair and dread, she foresaw her life changing yet again, plunging her into the abyss that was her future. She hated to leave Prentice but knew that if she didn't do it now, she never would.

She had many wonderful memories to comfort her on those nights when she had only her phallus for company. She would always picture his face and imagine the next decadent thing he had planned for her. However, she had every indication that his feelings for her were engaged and now was the time to strike. He mustn't ever have the opportunity to hurt her so profoundly again. It was time to forge ahead with her plan, and if she suffered a momentary loss, so be it.

Just before they'd left the manor house, she'd asked him to spank her. He, of course, had no idea it was for the last time, but had complied when she'd asked him to make it memorable. He'd not employed the strap but instead used his hand, which he said was appropriately intimate. She'd silently cried for hours as she thought the same thing.

When the carriage stopped in front of her house, Prentice jumped out and lifted her down. He walked her to the door as the coachman brought her bags, turning them over to Ferguson, her sleepy butler.

They stood outside, as she was reluctant to invite him into her home, lest she beg him to stay. He kissed her hand, asked her to come to the club on the morrow, then left. They had made love several times in the carriage during the long journey from Cambridge and kissed until her lips were raw. Those memories would be enough to hold her through the long years ahead. They would have to be.

She stood outside until his carriage turned onto Oxford Street, and drove out of sight. She whipped through the front door and made a mad dash up the stairs, directly to her bedchamber. The room was cold and dark, which suited her abysmal disposition. She wanted nothing more than to lie across her bed, where she could alternately cry and ruminate on the idyll she'd spent with the Marquess of Wycroft. He was in love

with her, something she knew as surely as she knew her own name. Now, it was time to break his heart, as hers had been broken so many years before, and if she was honest, was breaking now.

* * * * *

Lucien and Prentice were enjoying a late breakfast when Hampton scratched at the door and entered. "A missive for Lord Wycroft," he announced, as he presented the silver salver. Prentice took the ivory foolscap, nodded to Hampton, and cracked the wax seal. He drew his eyes to the signature and saw it was signed by Desiree. His heartbeat increased significantly.

Dear Lord Wycroft,

I wish to thank you for the wonderful days we spent together and all you have taught me. However, upon reflection, I have come to understand our disparate consequences. To continue as we have is impossible, and I must ask that you not attempt to contact me again. I will not be available to you, as our arrangement is at an end.

I pray you will respect my wishes, but have taken steps to secure my privacy. You will not be admitted should you call, and any missives will be returned unread.

I thank you sincerely for all you have taught me about myself, and about you.

Respectfully,

Mrs. Desiree Huntington

With hands shaking, Prentice read the words several times before they began to mean anything to him. The feeling of desolation and hopelessness quickly replaced the happiness he'd felt just moments before.

He jumped up, the chair skittering across the floor. He began to pace. Through the haze that infiltrated his mind, he heard, "Prentice, old man, are you quite well?" It was Lucien.

"No." He handed the paper to his friend.

After a moment, Lucien sighed. "I don't know what to say."

"I believe she has said it all."

"You aren't going to leave it at this, are you?"

"Apparently you *didn't* read it. She doesn't wish to hear from me. I certainly will not force myself upon someone who wishes otherwise."

"What could have happened? From everything you have said, the situation couldn't have been better."

"So I thought."

Conflicting emotions battled for prominence as Prentice relived the last few days. There was nothing. Even when he'd bid her farewell, he'd sensed only sadness, a reluctance to part.

Fear's tentacles were grabbing at the sanity he had begun to make of his life. He had no idea where to go from here. He'd begun making plans, which had included marriage. Lord, he was meeting with his mother later in the day to float the idea of his marrying an untitled woman. That was enough to set him back in itself.

"I've no clarity of mind. Everything is a jumble."

He looked at Lucien, his friend of many years, the only man who knew all the secrets, and still loved him. Lucien's black brows arched, reading plainly what Prentice wanted.

"Come, my friend. We will see if some sense can be made of this."

At times such as these, when Prentice became unable to sort his thoughts, he relied upon Lucien, not an easy thing to do for a man used to control. However, he'd learned early in his life that one's thoughts could be temporarily refocused through pain, a lesson learned at the hand of his tutor many years before.

Mr. Wexler had been an angry man, who felt strict discipline was as much a part of a boy's education as were mathematics and Greek literature. Regular canings and birchings became part of the curriculum, encouraged and often witnessed by his parents, much to Prentice's shame and humiliation.

The one thing the whippings had done for him was enable him to sort through the unnecessary thoughts and direct his attention to what was most important. By the

time he'd had this epiphany, he'd begun to crave the pain, a secret he'd kept closely hidden, but for discussing it with Lucien. His friend had a taste for the same.

The men went to the third floor where Lucien and Serenity lived. There was a hidden passage, located in the library on the first floor, which led directly to the residence. It ensured their privacy, as Lucien had had the stairways to the top floor blocked off, lest club members begin to travel about the house and accidentally stumble upon places they shouldn't go.

Lucien had a room outfitted with all that was needed. He used this room for his afternoon spanking appointments with his wife.

As Lucien prepared the strap, Prentice disrobed. They'd done this many times since Abigail died, and he would never have been able to live through the grief without it.

Prentice situated himself on the spanking bench, lying down on his stomach, arms above his head. He wanted to feel nothing but the pain. It certainly couldn't feel worse than his broken heart did.

"Lay it on, Lucien."

"As you wish."

Lucien was a master, with years of practice. He'd blistered arses of men and women with equal aplomb. Prentice was continually amazed at how many in the *ton* offered up their privileged rumps for punishment.

The first strike was light, earning a grumble from Prentice. The next—and all subsequent blows—rocketed pain through Prentice's body. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes closed as slap after slap struck his buttocks. When Lucien stopped, Prentice insisted on more, until he had endured forty lashes.

"Enough?" Lucien asked, to which Prentice simply nodded. "I shall leave you alone then."

After Lucien left the room, Prentice lay still for long minutes. He finally allowed the tears to flow, but not from the pain in his hind quarters. No, there was a profound emptiness in his chest. Desiree's missive had dug a deep hole there. She'd snatched his

hope for the future from him, the cruelest of all gestures. However, clarity had come to him; he knew what he must now do. He would have Desiree, for at this moment, he wanted nothing more.

Chapter Fifteen

Desiree hadn't eaten in days. She'd not even felt the urge. She'd locked herself in her bedchamber, kept the draperies closed and cried until no more tears would flow. The misery she felt was beyond her bearing.

She'd gotten her revenge, though it didn't feel as sweet as she'd expected. She felt like she'd slashed her own wrists and was dying a slow, painful death. She'd had no idea that her revenge would affect her in such a profound way. She'd pictured herself laughing at his pain, when instead, she found herself mired in her own.

He hadn't said the words, but she knew Prentice Hyde was in love with her. Without confirmation of it, she knew she'd hurt him, as he had hurt her years before. However, she had *never* expected to fall in love with *him*. To her shock and dismay, she'd realized on the morning they'd left the folly, that indeed she had.

Prentice filled a need in her even she never realized she had. He'd immersed her in his erotic world, one of sexual satiation, and a recognition of her body's wants and needs. He'd given, making her want to give back in treble.

She'd felt his warmth toward her at the folly. Consciously, she knew he had changed in his feelings toward her. However, in the end, her need for revenge trumped the joy he had given her. While at the folly, she was willing to forego what he had done to her, how he had ruined her life. It is petty revenge, she'd told herself. He's a different man now. Yet, when she awoke the first morning back in her house, she'd momentarily felt differently. Now, she had no idea why, and regretted writing the quickly dashed off missive. She lamented having sent it. *I would have been better to have used it as a catharsis, then chucked it into the grate.*

Nonetheless, it was over now. He'd never wish to see her again, even if she

prostrated herself at his feet. Prentice was not the type of man to forgive.

She'd not heard from him since she'd sent the note. She kept telling herself that was what she wanted, but then anger rose anew at the thought that he hadn't attempted to kick her door in and carry her off to a glorious future. She'd even pictured the scene where he *did* kick the door in, stormed the stairs, stripped her naked and spanked her raw for acting so foolishly.

Her bottom tingled, remembering the glorious spankings he so adeptly administered, and how there would never be another. She'd almost convinced herself she could live on the memories but now she knew she'd deluded herself in the worst possible way. He'd ruined her again, this time for anyone else.

She stared at the floral canopy above her head and imagined Prentice in this room. He'd lain on the pillow that was now clutched in her arms. He'd taken her under these bed linens, touching her body and her soul. The memories were too vivid, too sweet, the loss too agonizing. She didn't think she could bear it, yet she knew not what to do.

Pride would keep her from retracting what she'd done, even if he'd accept an apology. She could always offer up her bottom to his strap, but he could as well laugh at her as apply it. A man can tolerate just so much foolishness.

Oh, if she could just turn back time. If only life could be as simple as it was at the folly. She'd been happy there, and he was too. She began to laugh at the thought of him trying to cook bacon in the nude. Then, she cried at the thought of all he had done to her, the unmitigated joy he had shown her. How her body responded to his slightest touch, as it now did in the remembering.

She reached into the drawer in the bedside table and retrieved a familiar object. She threw the covers to the side, drew her nightgown to her waist and raised her knees. Her fingers danced over her moist folds until they found the most sensitive spot. Short of a spanking, this was all she knew to do to make her feel alive again. With fingers pressing and circling over her clitoris, she plunged her phallus deep within and began simulating the act she so wished Prentice were committing upon her body at that

moment.

Her orgasm came, but it left her bereft. Again, she dissolved into tears, feeling empty and alone. Revenge was a bitter bed partner, but it was hers, for she had chosen the course, and there was no turning back now.

* * * * *

Several days later, Prentice took the brandy his mother's butler offered as he waited for the Grande Dame to make her appearance. He needed the fortification of the burning amber liquid to see him through this meeting, for he would run up against opposition from the start.

Thirty minutes after his arrival, the dowager Marchioness of Wycroft, Dorothea to her closest friends, entered the parlor of her home in Grosvenor Square. She entered in a flurry of swishing satin, a toothy smile upon her face, which totally belied the woman's usual miserable disposition.

On her best days, she was cranky; on the worst, she was to be avoided. Prentice couldn't tell quite yet what he was facing but the brandy helped.

"Good afternoon, my darling son. Please do sit down, and tell me all you have been up to."

"I'd prefer to stand, Mother, but please, you sit."

She did so, spending an inordinate amount of time straightening her skirts. She perched primly upon the edge of the chair, lest her aristocratic torso touch the back. She folded her hands in her lap and looked up at him with an enigmatic smile.

"I haven't much time, dear. I am expected for tea at the home of Duchess Hackberry, but I am ever so happy to see you."

"Thank you, Mother, as I am you."

"Do you have anything specific of which you wish to speak, or is this simply a social call."

"I wish to inform you of my impending marriage."

The dowager marchioness clapped her hands, and Prentice could envision what was going on inside her empty head.

"Oh, my darling, I knew the duke's daughter would accept your suit. She isn't the loveliest thing I've ever seen, but she comes from a fine family — "

"Mother, please. There is no duke's daughter. My soon-to-be wife is Mrs. Desiree Huntington. I am sure you don't know her."

His mother raised her haughty nose, and her smile disappeared. "No, I most certainly do not. Who is the person? Please, don't tell me you are marrying your mistress. Good lord, Wycroft, one doesn't marry one's mistress."

"She is not my mistress. She is the person I love." His temper never failed to shorten in his mother's presence. She was a most provoking woman.

"Who are her people? Is she a widow or something else?"

"Mother, have a care. I have no idea about her *people*. She is a widow of several years." His tone was curt, but it didn't deter his mother from further interrogation.

"She must be after your money, and you are too blinded by lust to see it. Oh, dear lord, you are the Marquess of Wycroft. You are meant to marry well and fill the nursery with children with noble blood from both their parents running through their veins. I forbid it, Wycroft, I say, I forbid it."

She'd extracted a fan from her sleeve and began to pump it rapidly before her face, the lace of her cap lifting and falling with the breeze. He had neither time nor patience for melodrama, an affectation his mother employed as often as those around her allowed. He rarely did.

"I came here to inform you, madam, not seek your permission. I trust you will be civil when I bring her 'round."

"I shall be dead, yes indeed, I shall be dead. You will be the death of me. Thank the good lord your father isn't here to witness this. You would kill him as well."

"It has been a pleasure as always, Mother." Prentice strode out of the room, his mother still blustering about death and such. He'd gotten no more or less than he'd expected, but then he never did.

He settled somewhat uncomfortably on the seat of his carriage, more determined than ever to win his lady. He directed the coachman to Doughty Street. This had gone on long enough. He would simply inform her that she had no choice. Since he was her master, she'd have to obey. Whatever her problem with the match, he could easily dispel her worries. She'd mentioned their "disparate consequences" in her missive as the reason for ending their arrangement. That was nonsense, no matter what society or his mother might say.

He gingerly walked to the door at number forty-two and rapped the brass knocker with resolve. The door opened to reveal a tall, haughty gentleman, who wore a pristine white wig and no smile.

"Yes."

"I am the Marquess of Wycroft, and I have come to pay a call on Mrs. Huntington." He handed the butler his card. The man took it with his white-gloved fingers, glancing down at it over his straight, perfectly shaped nose. His eyes came up to meet Prentice's as he began to shake his head.

"Madam is not receiving." He handed Prentice's card back to him.

"She will receive me, my good man."

"No, she left special instructions with regard to you, my lord. She is especially *not* receiving you."

Prentice wanted to throttle the man who seemed to have dominion over this house as well as over him, albeit temporarily. Instead, he attempted to appeal to the man's sense of loyalty to his mistress, through a totally fabricated story.

"I have been told Mrs. Huntington has been ill, and I wish to express my sincere concern."

"I have no idea where you would have heard such a thing, my lord. The servants here are quite loyal. They never would have spread the Mrs.' business around like that."

Prentice smiled. "They might not have, my good man, but you just did. Now, if you please." Prentice attempted to push his way into the foyer.

The butler's haughtiness suddenly disappeared. "Please, sir, she will be angry as

a wet hen if she knows you are here."

"I can handle her anger, ah, what is your name?"

"Ferguson, sir."

"Yes, Ferguson, just tell me where I might find her, and I won't say a word about who told me of her illness."

"She's not ill, sir. She's frightfully sad, though. She won't eat, and we're all worried for her health."

"She hasn't eaten, you say? Since when?"

"It has been several days, my lord."

Prentice felt his body heat in anger. He ran toward the stairs, muttering about incompetence and good help. He made his way to Desiree's bedchamber. Once in front of the door, he attempted some semblance of calm. Surely Ferguson had exaggerated the length of time Desiree had been without food.

He knocked, but received no answer. He tried the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. He then began to shout, foregoing any calm he'd attempted to foster. "Desiree, open this door."

He listened carefully. Nothing.

"Either you open this door, or I shall kick it in."

He heard her faint voice. "Go away."

"I will not, until you see me."

"Please, go away."

He rattled the door handle, and then on impulse, shoved his shoulder against the door. It popped open.

"Oh, my god." The scene before him was shocking.

* * * * *

She'd heard him distantly, calling to her. Her mind was hazy, her energy sapped. It wasn't until the door burst open that she became aware someone was really there. She

was weak, unable to lift her head from the pillow. Her mouth was dry, thirsty, but no water. Didn't want the servants around. Alone. She wished to be alone. She wanted to die.

She heard shouting, a demanding voice, male. It sounded like food, water, doctor. She was too weak to fend the noise off, but with her whole being she wished it would stop.

Then, someone was at her side, the mattress leaning under their weight. Hands on her head, pushing away the hair she'd been too weak to move herself. "Oh, my sweeting," a voice said, but it seemed as though she were in another world. Her eyes wouldn't stay open.

"What have you done to yourself?"

The man's voice again. She hadn't the strength to answer.

"Prentice?"

"Yes, dear, it's me."

"It's over. Go." The words sapped what little energy she could muster. She lapsed into an eerie kind of sleep. She was conscience but felt distant. She was aware but then not.

"I won't go, and nothing is over. I'm here to take care of you."

"No." She dug deep into her reserves. He must leave. She'd done what she must and wouldn't turn back.

Ferguson brought some broth which Prentice took from him, then ordered the man out of the room. "Shut the goddamned door, and no one come in here unless I tell them to, is that understood."

"Yes, my lord." The door closed quietly.

"Here, Desiree, you must take this broth."

"No." She turned her head stubbornly.

Gritting his teeth, Prentice emphasized each word. "Open. Your. Mouth."

Chapter Sixteen

Prentice held her while he force-fed the broth into her unwilling mouth. His warmth felt nice. In these moments of extreme weakness, it was welcome, too. Strength to fight him eluded her.

The doctor came and with a cursory examination, declared her malnourished. "She's starving herself."

"Is there any damage?"

"Not that I can tell. She is not in any pain but is as weak as a kitten. Upon talking to her staff, I learned she hasn't eaten in nearly a week."

Prentice's arms wrapped around her. When she was stronger, she would make him leave. If he persisted, she'd disappear. But not today. Today, she would revel in his attentions. All the better to send him away with a scathing rebuke when she was strong enough to deliver such a thing. He would forever remember her angry words, as she castigated him for being such a miserable libertine.

For now, though, she would allow him to hold her, just for a little while longer. While she slept, he could hold her, what harm would that do? Tomorrow, she would tell him that she meant every word she'd written. Tomorrow.

* * * * *

Prentice lay next to Desiree, having pulled her into his arms. Her head now rested on his chest, and she was sleeping. Even with the broth, she'd showed no signs of improvement, but he knew logically it would take time.

He traced over the fine lines of her jaw and nose, over her pale lips, remembering her smile on the day they went to the folly. She'd been filled with joy then. What had changed? What had brought her to this? To telling him she never wished to see him again? So many questions.

He'd sent Ferguson to his home, requesting the necessities he'd need for a stay. He was determined not to leave until he saw Desiree well and he had the answers he wanted. Byrd would dither and insist on moving in as well. Prentice wouldn't fight

him. The hawkish man was worth his weight in gold, even if he irritated the hell out of his master.

Prentice allowed his mind to drift to another time, another place, another woman. He'd lain like this with Abigail, sure that if he willed her to live, she would. They'd been like this when she'd looked up at him with dull eyes, whispered her love, and died peacefully in his arms. He'd held her for hours after, afraid it was true, afraid of what came next, after he relinquished her body to the grave.

What had come next was nothing like he'd imagined. No, it was far worse, and in many ways, still was. Only Desiree had shown him that life could again be bright. She was everything he could wished for and had never dreamed would come into his life twice. He, a man of the flesh, with the most decadent of sexual appetites, deserved to tread life's path alone, yet he'd been afforded two women who shared his proclivities, instead of deriding him for them.

He'd loved Abigail, and in many ways still did. She'd died giving him a child, a sacrifice worthy of sainthood in his mind. She'd given his life meaning, and before he'd understood what that was, she was gone, taking with her the best part of him.

He'd begun to see that man coming back again, with Desiree. The man he wished to be: caring, giving, loving. He'd felt the possibility of a future, something he'd thought had forsaken him. He'd fallen in love again, as surely as he had with Abigail, and he *wanted* to be in love. He wanted to spend his days and nights with Desiree at his side, her beautiful bottom under his strap, and then her body under his, as they pour their love into each other. She must see that them being together was the only way he would survive.

* * * * *

Three days passed before Desiree was strong enough to hold her eyes open for more than a few moments at a time. She'd had more broth than any human being should have to bear, but through it all, Prentice was there, pouring spoonful after

spoonful into her mouth. He'd held her throughout the days and nights, tending to her personal needs, not allowing anyone else into the room. He'd told her that her cheeks – that is, her facial cheeks – regained some of their color.

When she'd realized what the situation was, she was flattered and overcome with an emotion she was still too disoriented to understand. However, as her strength began to return, so did her resolve. She was ill because she'd forced herself to let him go, and too weak in mind and spirit to accept the decision. Now, he was restoring her to health, only to force her to do it all again.

He now slept beside her, facing away for the first time since his serendipitous arrival three, or was it four days before? Even from this angle, he was beautiful. The soft purr of his breathing brought back the precious memory of their all-too-brief time spent at the folly, when everything seemed possible. His blond hair was disheveled, his clothes wrinkled. He wore a white lawn shirt and brown breeches. His feet were bare, much as she wished the rest of his body was at that moment.

She must be getting better, because she felt her quim clench at the sight of his buttocks, molded so beautifully by his tight-fitting garment. Though the shirt would normally have covered such a delectable view, his restlessness in sleep had forced it above his waist. She could barely see his bronzed skin, just a small patch above the waistband. She longed to touch it, to see if it was as warm as it had been as they lay in the sun.

He stirred now, rolling onto his back. Her eyes went immediately to his crotch. Even as he slept, his cock bulged. She wondered if he was dreaming of their days and nights together in Cambridge. She longed to know if he dreamt of the glorious spankings he'd given her, the gift he'd conveyed by their administration. Her bottom tingled, wishing he would wake, attempt to convince her how wrong she'd been and drive the point home with his hand. She ached for him to thrust himself into her and fuck her until she came to her senses. How she wished he would take control of her foolish mind, making it impossible for her to give him up so easily.

But it hadn't been easy, not by far. Her ruination had shaped her life for ten

years, causing her to endure the humiliation of lying beneath her husband as he grunted and groaned his way to his climax, never once realizing her needs. His fetid breath in her face, his rank body odor and those damnable side whiskers, all were enough to cause her to cast up her accounts. He'd provided for her well financially and left her a wealthy widow, but it was the rest she couldn't forgive: his temper, his ignorance, his circumstance. She'd been the daughter of title and money, and was foisted off because she was no longer fit to occupy the bed of a nobleman. It was all Prentice Hyde's fault, something she would be loath to forget, lest he be in a position to hurt her yet again.

He stirred, reaching toward her. She scooted out of bed, and his hand landed on the spot where she had lain. She backed away from the bed, watching him, until his eyes slowly opened, confusion written on his face.

He came up on one elbow and looked at the bed. Then he looked at her. "What are you doing? You are supposed to be resting."

"I'm fine now."

He rubbed his sleepy eyes with his palms and dragged himself to a seated position. "How are you feeling? Stronger, I hope."

"I'm fine." Oh, how she wanted to run into his arms.

His legs fell over the side of the bed as he raked his fingers through his tawny hair. It looked as though he might have done that hundreds of times as his hair was hopelessly mussed.

"You should eat a bit of something. We could try some solid food today."

"We won't be trying anything today. I must ask you to leave."

His expression didn't change, making her unsure if he'd heard her. He rose, wincing slightly when his bones creaked, as they adjusted to the new position. He stretched, pulling his shirts up. He thrust his pelvis forward, giving her a wonderful view of the prominent bulge in his breeches. *The man is incorrigible.* Under different circumstances, she'd release him and ease the pain he must be feeling.

She watched as he went to the washstand and splashed cold water on his face

and hair. It served him right having to wash with cold water.

He tucked his shirt into the waistband of his breeches, then retrieved a comb from a nearby shelf and attempted to tame his unruly locks.

She wanted him gone, more so than ever, for she felt her resolve waning. Prentice Hyde filled a room. The walls fairly vibrated with his presence. She feared she'd never be able to sleep in this room again. He was everywhere, and the memory of it would prove too painful. He simply must go.

"Prentice, I am grateful to you for your care and concern, but as you can well see, I am on the road to recovery. Therefore, I must ask you to leave. I meant what I said."

"I am glad you are on the mend, though a bit scrawny. You seem to have recovered your mental acuity as well. I worried you had done yourself some permanent damage."

"I am fine, now, please." She extended her arm toward the door, which he summarily ignored.

"Not without an explanation." He sat in a chair and crossed his arms.

"I don't need to explain anything to you, sir. This is my home, and I do not wish to have you in it any longer. That is all the explanation I intend to give."

"So it is as I thought. You have no reason. Yes, as I suspected, you weren't . . . oh, hell, how shall I say this . . . woman enough to tell me to my face. You hide behind missives and illness, but can't tell a man the truth. I expected more of you, Desiree, I truly did. You're weak, like most women, but worse, you pretend to be strong. Not a flattering combination. I'd be well rid of you, if I chose to be so, which at the moment, I don't."

"You have no choice, sir. Insulting me will not change my mind. You must leave, and please do not return." She turned with the intention of leaving the room. She was dangerously close to giving in to her heart. Before she could reach the door, he grabbed her arm, swung her around and kissed her. His lips were so warm, conveyed so much need. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, demanding she answer. He held her head in his hands, not allowing her any movement that he didn't want.

The kiss went on and on as the ice around her heart began to melt. Then, he gave her an opportunity, and she took it. He'd loosened his hold, allowing her to extricate herself and get out the door before he realized what she was about. Weakly, she made her way down the stairs, from where she shouted, "Prentice, you must go, now."

Several minutes later, he appeared in the door of her bedchamber, fully dressed, sans his cravat. He sauntered down the stairs as though he were not being chucked out, tapping his walking stick on each stair. Desiree stood next to Ferguson, who seemed as incapable of determining what was unfolding before him as she.

Prentice had a smile on his face, one she knew meant mischief. She'd seen it too many times before not to recognize it. He walked to where she stood, dismissing Ferguson with a flick of his wrist.

"Don't you dare leave me alone with him!"

Prentice countermanded her, and Ferguson made for a less tension-filled part of the house. If Ferguson hadn't been faithfully in her employ for so many years, she'd have had the man drawn and quartered.

"You will not come into my home and order my servants about. Why, you won't be coming into my home at all."

"I, my dear, have been ordering your servants about for days, which is why you are standing where you are now and not being lowered into a dusty grave."

Good Lord, almighty, make this man leave now, before I rape him where his stands. No man has a right to be so appealing.

She raised her chin in determination. "You must go, and please don't ever return. I meant what I said."

"You did not mean what you said, but I will leave. Prepare for an all-out assault on the bastion around your heart, for I will have you — all of you." He actually had the nerve to pat her bottom before he opened the door and meandered out.

She closed the door behind him and slid down its length. She'd just allowed the most important person in her life walk away, and wouldn't permit herself to do anything to stop him.

Chapter Seventeen

Prentice found a hackney and made his way home. He spent much of the morning setting himself to rights, then made his way to the club. The Sapphire Club was the only place on earth he felt truly at home, other than anywhere Desiree Huntington might be.

While soaking in his bath, he'd devised what he thought was a brilliant plan, but he would have to enlist the help of his friends, Lucien and Serenity.

"Good to see, you," Lucien said, when Prentice appeared in the office.

"Nice to be seen." Prentice helped himself to a drink and sank into a cozy leather chair.

"Where have you been?"

"Nursing Desiree."

"Did she change her mind about things?"

"No, she chucked me into the street just this morning."

"Did she tell you why the change of heart?"

"She did not, but it doesn't matter. I will have her, and there isn't a thing she can do about it."

"The all powerful Marquess of Wycroft. Snap your mighty fingers and it shall be yours." Lucien waved his arms in his imitation of the benevolent and demanding God Wycroft.

"Nothing quite so dramatic. I have a plan, and I need your help – yours, and that of your lovely wife."

Lucien called Serenity in to listen as Prentice set down his plan. His friends agreed to help him in its implementation. Feeling quite satisfied with himself, he was ready to take on a client or two, lest he lose his touch.

"The club is overrun with those who wish for my hand," Lucien boasted. "I've had to involve Haynes a bit more. He's quite versatile it seems, somewhat of a

chameleon. He took on the Duke of Thornhill, at His Grace's behest."

"That is interesting, to say the least. I knew the duke was comfortable with men or women, but Haynes too?"

"I don't ask such things." Lucien had never judged anyone for anything, lest someone look too closely at his life.

"I must prepare."

"I hope this works for you, Prentice. If not, there is always Lady Foxworth."

"May the saints preserve me; I will leave her to you."

"Yes, I understand her imagination has now run toward pirates. In an hour's time I shall be Blackbeard, and she my Spanish slave."

"Well, I must say you have the coloring for it."

"The hair is getting grayer by the day, my good man." The men laughed, though Prentice was not exactly light of heart. If Serenity failed on the errand he had sent her on, he feared he'd have to take drastic measures.

* * * * *

"I couldn't have been more surprised when Ferguson told me you had come to call. I am so very glad to see you."

Serenity smiled, her icy blue eyes sparkling. "I couldn't stay away, Desiree. I've come to make you an offer, one which I sincerely hope you will accept."

"Please, tell me what you have in mind." Curiosity was a weakness, one of many.

"I wish to offer you my services."

"Your services?"

"Yes. Forgive me, but I am of the understanding that you have needs similar to my own. To be frank, I crave being spanked, and thankfully, my husband is a master at it. At any rate, I have learned his techniques and wish to offer you my services. We can conduct private sessions, and I can even provide you with sexual accommodation if you so chose. Many of our members are unencumbered men who would be happy to satisfy

such a beautiful woman."

"Serenity, I am honored, but I don't know if I could do such a thing. As an adult, I have never been spanked before, but for Prentice."

"Would you prefer I ask my husband? I am sure he would be more than happy to accept you as a private client."

"Oh, good lord, no. I simply wouldn't wish to impose upon *your* time."

"I am making the offer, dear, and wouldn't if I weren't capable of doing so. We are friends, and I know how difficult it would be for me if suddenly I had no way of fulfilling my needs."

Desiree wanted to leap at the chance, but didn't wish to appear quite so anxious. She poured tea, served small cakes, and thought about how wonderful it would be to at least have some part of her life as she wished.

"I must ask that Lord Wycroft not be made privy to this agreement. I am quite firm on that, but if that can be arranged, I gratefully accept your offer."

Serenity smiled and patted Desiree's hand. "I have time this afternoon if you would care to join me on the ride back. I was so hoping you would accept. We are having a tableau this evening. I would love to have you as my guest. There are so many interesting things to see. I've still not grown accustomed to what people will do to reach satisfaction."

Desiree nodded knowingly, thinking of all she had done, and would do again, if she'd only allow herself the freedom.

"Please give me a moment while I change my clothes. I must confess to excitement at what you have suggested."

Desiree raced to her bedchamber, quickly chose a rose muslin gown, and before she knew it she was again downstairs, ready to join Serenity for the drive to the Sapphire Club. She'd had no idea what she would do for sexual release after being spanked, so she brought along her trusty phallus. She couldn't face allowing another man to touch her, not after Prentice. She'd ask to be alone after the spanking and take care of it on her own.

The women chatted about innocuous things during the carriage ride, making it the most carefree time Desiree had spent since those days with Prentice at the folly. Though she still didn't feel quite herself, she was stronger. For a certainty, she couldn't keep herself locked away in her house. She'd move on with her life, and maybe one day she could even see Prentice without feeling such profound sadness.

After informing her husband of her return, Serenity led Desiree to a room on the second floor, chattering all the way. Desiree was excited, hoping that being spanked would help to clear her head. This room did not look like a bedchamber.

"It was designed to be a room for punishment only. I thought you'd be more comfortable here, considering."

"Yes, I think I might be, though I've never been spanked without"

"As I said, I can arrange it for you if you wish."

Desiree's eyes filled with tears. "No." She composed herself and then asked, "How do you wish to do this, Serenity?"

"I will leave it to you, dear. This is for you. What shall I use?"

"I believe I need the paddle." She'd never request the strap again. It reminded her too much of Prentice.

As Serenity prepared herself, Desiree walked around the room, avoiding the Biedermeier chaise. In the end, she chose to bend over the back of a chair, her arms braced in the seat. Though she would be spanked on the bare, she simply hiked her clothing up to her waist.

Serenity came to her and rubbed her hand across Desiree's pristine cheeks. "Your bottom shows no signs of ever having been spanked. It has been some time, hasn't it?"

"Too long."

"I believe I will warm you up a bit, before we begin."

Desiree nodded, almost wishing it were over. Serenity spanked one cheek then the other. Desiree didn't react. Her mind was elsewhere.

The first swat of the paddle dragged Desiree's attention back to the present. She wanted this desperately. With her legs spread wide, she accepted every swat; Serenity's

hand was as sure as Prentice's. Desiree absorbed each powerful strike, taking the pain and craving more.

As always, the last two or three swats were the hardest. Serenity warned her ahead of time by counting. Desiree braced for the impact and took it with a loud hiss. When the last connected with her abraded flesh, tears streaked down her cheeks. She remained in position and sobbed.

Serenity helped her to stand then folded her in her arms, where Desiree remained for long minutes, crying as though she'd never cried before.

"Do you wish to talk?"

"I love him, you know. I truly do."

"If that is the case, why did you send him away?"

"He told you?"

"We are his friends. Prentice is like a brother to Lucien, and I owe him my life. Yes, he told us, and he is devastated. He cares deeply for you as well, and he is confused by this turn of events."

"I can't turn back now. I will have to learn to live without him."

"And if he wants you?"

"To his peril."

"What makes you say such a thing?"

"May I speak to you in confidence?"

"Of course."

"Ten years ago, I made a terrible decision. I allowed myself to be seduced at a ball, and my virtue was taken. There was another young man who wished to marry me, but his family insisted upon knowing for a certainty that my maidenhead was intact, so they called a doctor in to examine me.

"I should have admitted to my indiscretion before things advanced to such a stage, but I was afraid. When the doctor announced that, indeed, I was not a virgin, the young man's parents forbid him to marry me. He wouldn't have done so anyway, and as a result, I became a pariah. My family found a wealthy widower, a merchant thrice

my age, and married me off to him. I was only eighteen years old, Serenity, married to a man of almost sixty years. It was horrible."

"I am sad for you, dear, but what does this have to do with Prentice?"

"Prentice Hyde was the man who took my virtue. It was he who flirted and cajoled, daring me to go off with him for a few stolen kisses. He made me feel beautiful. He said all the things a young girl wishes to hear. Before I knew what was happening, I was so caught up in his attentions, I would have allowed him any liberty."

"Oh my." Desiree watched as Serenity's eyes widened and her jaw dropped.
"Yes, oh my, indeed. Then, to make matters worse, the next time he saw me, he didn't even know who I was. He ruined me, Serenity, and he didn't even remember me."

Her tears flowed in earnest now, her humiliation complete. She'd never told the story to anyone else. She realized as she told it, she wasn't angry. Instead, she had a profound feeling of sadness.

The women were quiet for several more minutes before Desiree asked if she could have some time alone. "I need to compose myself."

"I will come for you in, say, an hour?"

"Please."

The door closed, and at last, Desiree was alone.

* * * * *

Prentice was in shock. He'd witnessed Desiree's spanking, gaining a cockstand that ached as never before.

Then he'd heard the conversation between the two women, condemning him as the worst kind of rogue. He'd deflowered so many young women, all willing participants in his flirtations, but he'd had no earthly idea that Desiree was one.

No wonder she feels as she does. He'd positioned himself in the viewing area adjacent to the room Desiree now occupied. He could see her, doubled over, crying for all she was worth. She began wailing, making him wish he could go to her but knowing

it would be the last thing she would want.

He watched her as she went through the torments of Hades, alternating between screaming and quietly sobbing. She was in pain, and he couldn't be the one to help her, for he was the one who'd caused her misery.

He watched, dumbstruck, for what seemed like hours, as she cried her heart out. Just as he determined he needed to go in and comfort her, she whimpered, then raised her head, dried her eyes and cried no more. He could almost feel her resolve returning; her admirable courage once again fully installed. She stood and walked around the room until she came to the Biedermeier chaise. She brushed her fingers over the red upholstery and longingly squeezed the rolled arm. He knew she was remembering how she'd draped herself over the arm of its twin, and he'd spanked her that way, after which they'd made love for hours. He remembered, and he ached to make this up to her.

She sat down in the center of the chaise with her dress up around her waist. His eyes were riveted on the sight that was unfolding before him. With her knees bent, legs spread wide, and her feet planted firmly, Desiree touched her womanly folds, circling her clitoris as he'd done so many times. From her reticule, she took a long, shiny black object and promptly inserted it into her vagina. Her moans became more intense as both hands worked to satisfy a need he was desperate to fill for her.

She'd rested her head against the back of the chaise, her mouth open, eyes closed. After some short pants, she came with abandon, shouting her release. Then, she was still, frozen in place by what looked to him like grief. She began to cry once more as though she possessed all the tears in the universe.

"I love you!" she shouted, her voice laced with bitterness. "Why?"

Chapter Eighteen

By the time Serenity returned to fetch her, Desiree had composed herself. Her eyes were gritty, she was exhausted, but she felt better. She shared a meal with Serenity,

then changed into a costume for the evening's entertainment.

The tableau was a monthly event at the club, held in the vast ballroom. Members were invited to create their own sexual scenarios, played out in a public setting.

"Now, you may participate if you chose – there are many eligible young men who would be more than willing to guide you – or you may simply watch."

By the time they entered what was known to members as "The Gates of Heaven and Hell," people in various costumes were milling about, carving out spots for themselves. The room was impressive not only for its size but for the sheer decadence of the décor. In the middle of the room stood a massive fountain, consisting of a tall, slim column upon which sat a large bowl. The column rose from a stone pool. Water was pumped over the sides of bowl and flowed into the pool, over the sumptuous bodies of three naked women, their arms raised over their heads as though holding the column in place.

Around the perimeter of the room, Corinthian columns draped with colorful silks partitioned the space into cozy rooms, each furnished with a bench, pillows, and whatever else the members requested.

The long walls were indented with deep niches, and had spectacular plasterwork around the ceiling and under the impressive white stone railing of the gallery that hung high over the room. Inside each niche was a naked man or woman, all of them posed in a sexually explicit manner.

More and more people flooded into the room, each dressed in costume, complete with masks. Serenity had loaned Desiree a half-mask of gold, with feathers sprouting from the top edge of it. Her costume was little more than yards of silk wrapped around her body.

The room was dimly lit with sconces and candelabras. Hampton, the club's butler, walked to the center of the room and rang a bell. All talking and movement stopped. "Ladies and Gentlemen, let the games begin."

The room erupted with excitement, which drew Desiree's attention, though it was scattered. She and Serenity walked slowly, greeting members. Desiree's gaze was

drawn to a room where a man was strapped to a bench, and a woman was spanking him soundly with a tawse. The man was screaming, " Harder, demme it," as the poor woman was trying to please him.

"That's Lord and Lady Argyll. He does like a good thrashing, and she resents having to do it before her own." They giggled and moved on.

"Mrs. Damrill," a woman called in a trill voice that caused Serenity to sigh. "How are you this evening, dear?"

"I am fine, Lady Foxworth, and yourself?"

"Getting my arse beaten nicely, though not as well as Luce."

"I'll leave you to it, my lady."

They heard a screech from the lady as they walked away.

"Serenity, does Prentice participate in these tableaux?"

"He has, yes."

Desiree didn't ask anything else about Prentice. Her heart ached at the mere thought of him involved with any of the members.

Serenity was called away, leaving Desiree to continue her tour alone. As she strolled through the room, she saw several spankings and a ménage with some very attractive women and an older gentleman. She couldn't help but stare as the women explored the gentleman's body. He lay back and allowed them to suck and probe at their leisure.

"Come join us, beauty."

Desiree looked as the older gentlemen waved his hand.

"No, thank you, my lord, you look well taken care of as it stands."

The man bellowed with laughter and then quickly sobered as one of the lovelies sank herself onto his cock. "Oh, yes, darling."

A footman approached and handed her a missive.

Desiree scanned the large, flowing script. *Meet me in the room on the second floor.*

Assuming the note was from Serenity, Desiree made for the staircase. The sexual activity surrounding her was intense, making it difficult to concentrate. The memories

of her time with Prentice were emphasized by everything she was seeing.

Desiree left the room, happy to have been called away from all she couldn't have. As she walked down the hallway, almost to the staircase, she felt a gloved hand clamp tightly over her mouth, while at the same time something silky was slipped over her eyes. Her heart began to race, as she attempted to shrug out of the attackers grasp. In her head she was screaming, "Let me go!" and "Someone help me," but it was all muffled behind the leather, which smelled old and of sweat. As she tried to strike the person with her hands, they were secured behind her back. She kicked her feet, screaming behind the hand and struggling mightily, but she could make no headway. She was being dragged, and soon heard a door open and felt the chill evening air. Desiree screamed, "Please, let me go!" or she thought she did. The hand was still firmly against her mouth. She tasted the leather as she again tried to plead for her release. The sound of feet scraping against a hard surface, she assumed stone, filled the otherwise quiet night. Their ascension down the stairs was rapid, as she felt two people, one holding each arm, lifting her, feet barely touching the steps. Before she knew it, she was lifted into a carriage and onto a hard seat. It took a moment for her to realize that her mouth was uncovered. "Help!" she shouted, but was distracted when she felt the coach tilt as someone jumped in behind her. She was nearly thrown off balance, her pleas lost in her attempt to right herself. She heard a loud knocking sound and the carriage immediately jolted forward, causing her to lurch. As the horses were given their heads, their speed threw her back against the seat.

She sat rather uncomfortably, tension and fear built inside her. The smell of stale tobacco teased her nose, as did that of sweat. Her heart continued to race, her mind reeling with all the implications of her abduction. "What do you want of me?"

"Just sit back, missy and no harm will come to you."

The voice was gruff and not one she recognized. Her imagination began to run wild. Was it someone who saw her during the tableau? She had not a soul in the world to worry about her, to search for her.

"Please tell me what this is all about." Desiree didn't try to disguise her distress.

"In due time, missy." She felt the carriage shift and the man plunk down beside her. He turned her body and began to do something behind her back. Immediately, she began to kick and wiggle.

"Now stop that, ya little wildcat. I'm just untyin' your hands. You want to be more comfortable, don't ya?"

Seeing the merit in what he said, she rubbed her arms and wrists. She touched the blindfold, hooking her thumbs into the underside, but the man saw what she was trying to do.

"No, ma'am. Try it again and I'll tie your hands behind ya."

She acquiesced, feeling helpless. She took to heart what he said about not being hurt, reasoning that he could have hurt her already if he'd wanted to. With her hands free, she might have a better opportunity to escape, but if she caused trouble, she'd lose that precious bit of freedom. She made a calculated decision to behave, at least for now.

"Here, take a drink, as we won't be stopping. You have a long ride ahead. There's a pillow and blanket. Get some rest."

A cup was put into her hand. She drank without thinking about what she had been offered. Rest was definitely something she wouldn't be doing. Possibly, if she lulled her captor into believing she was sleeping, he might let his guard down.

Desiree felt for the bedding, and lay down. The seat was hard but padded. Her eyes became heavy and sleep was tempting. The continuous movement, the monotonous clapping of the horse's hooves, eventually lulled her into slumber.

* * * * *

Prentice was at the reins, rather pleased with himself. Everything had come together brilliantly. Now, all he had to deal with was her anger, and he had no doubt it would come in vast proportion. They were several hours out of London when he pulled into a coaching inn to change the horses. He went to the door just as his driver jumped out.

"She's out, my lord."

"You sure?"

"Oh, yeah, she snores."

Prentice laughed. With luck, she'd sleep for the rest of the journey to Cambridge. He changed places with his driver so he could rest as well. They would arrive mid-morning and he would have his work cut out for him when she discovered it was he who had kidnapped her.

This was a last resort, to be sure. If he'd thought he could reason with her, apologize for his roguish behavior, and convince her of the strength of his present day feelings, he would have done so. Instead, he needed to get her alone, away from her everyday life, back to where she'd been truly happy.

He decided rest was imperative, given the fight he'd have on his hands later on. He stretched out, his long legs filling the small space in the coach. He began to feel drowsy as the miles behind him disappeared in the dust, and his future loomed in the mist ahead. Never had he been so unsure of anything in his life.

* * * * *

What was that smell? Her head felt like it was filled with sawdust, and her mouth was as dry.

She slowly opened her eyes, looking straight up at a domed, rough-hewed ceiling. Moving her eyes side to side, reality began to seep into her sleep-sodden brain. This looked very familiar. But it couldn't be. She must be dreaming.

One doesn't dream smells, however, and that smell was wonderful. Bacon. She sat up and knew she wasn't dreaming. She was at the folly. But how?

The events of last night crept, one by one, back into her memory. She'd gotten a message from Serenity. No, it wasn't signed, she'd just assumed it was from her. A hand over her mouth, then someone put something over her eyes. A man gave her something to drink. That was all she could remember.

Her heart began to beat a rapid tattoo as her situation became clear. Prentice had kidnapped her! How dare he!

She jumped off the bed, an ill-advised idea, given the throbbing in her head. It took her a moment to orient herself, but then the delicious aroma of bacon cooking lured her out of the room.

As angry as she was, or should be, she couldn't help but laugh when she saw Prentice, his back to her, at the stove.

Noting he wore a shirt and breeches, she said with a note of levity in her voice, "Aren't you a bit overdressed?"

Looking over his shoulder, he answered, "I heard from a very reliable source that it was unhealthy to cook bacon in the nude. I must say, it is much more comfortable this way."

His electrifying smile sent frissons of anticipated pleasure through her.

However, she pushed the jocularity aside, allowing her anger to overtake her tongue. "What in hell am I doing here, Prentice Hyde?"

"I believe you are waiting for your breakfast, which shall be ready in a matter of minutes."

"You know quite well what I mean."

"Might we speak of this when our stomachs are full? I don't know about you, but I haven't eaten in ages."

"You kidnapped me."

"Yes, I most certainly did."

"Why?"

"After we eat."

Indeed, in a matter of minutes, he filled their plates with eggs, bacon, toast, and fruit, washed down by steaming hot coffee. The coffee left much to be desired, but the rest was amazingly good.

She was unabashed in her enthusiasm for the food, and ate like a starving beggar. As she wiped her mouth on a linen napkin, she looked at his handsome

countenance and wished she weren't so angry with him.

Then, another thought played with her mind. Was she really angry? Was this what she really wanted to happen? Before she allowed herself to absolve him of his latest sin, she asked, "Why am I here?"

There was that contagious smile again. "You are here, my dear, because I wish you to be."

"That is not an answer, and you know it. You kidnapped me. Stole me from the club, drugged me, and brought me here. Why?"

"I am sorry about the drugging part, truly I am, but I knew you wouldn't come willingly. You would have likely scratched poor John Coachman's eyes out given the chance, so I thought it best to see you slumber while we traveled."

"You are incorrigible."

"So you've said on occasion."

"I thought my missive was quite plain, Prentice. This changes nothing."

"Yes, it will. I know why you sent the letter."

"I sent it because I don't wish to continue our arrangement."

"Liar."

"Excuse me?"

"You are lying. There is another reason."

Her face flushed. "How could you know that?"

"I know."

"How? Tell me."

"You'll hate me all the more."

She looked at him with steel in her eyes. With clarity of mind, she knew exactly how. "Serenity told you?"

Trying to diffuse any culpability on Serenity's part, he said flippantly, "Not exactly."

"Then *how* exactly?"

"You told me."

"I told you?" Then it hit her with the force of a fist to the gut. "You were listening when I told Serenity."

He didn't acknowledge her reasoning but didn't deny it either. He simply looked down at the empty plate in front of him.

Then another wave of reality washed over her. "You were in the viewing room weren't you? You not only listened, but you saw everything."

His head still bowed, he raised his eyes to look at her through the partial shield of his long eyelashes.

She jumped up and began to pace. "Oh, my god!" Embarrassment enveloped her.

"You'll pace yourself to exhaustion, Desiree. Please, let me explain."

"How can you explain yourself out of this? You invaded my privacy, Prentice Hyde. Oh, my god! Was Serenity aware of this all along?"

"She's my friend and yours too. She wants only what you want, *your happiness*."

She'd never counted on Serenity betraying her. "She knew you were watching?"

With contrition, he nodded. "She did."

"She came to fetch me *not* out of her own concern but because you asked her to?"

"She *is* concerned for you, but I did ask her to convince you to come to the club. She offered her services on her own, suspecting you might have need of them."

"Who took me from the club? I know it wasn't you because he talked to me."

"Lucien put the scarf over your eyes and secured your hands. It was my coachman who put his hand over your mouth."

"His gloves smelled terrible. I'm sure they weren't clean."

"That *was* my number one priority." He chuckled, a most endearing sound, despite the fact she was angry enough to slap him.

"What did he give me in the coach?"

"Just a drop of laudanum."

"I must have some time alone, and you must make arrangements to get me back to London. I can't stay here like this."

"Like what? You were happy here, weren't you?"

"More than I want to think about, but that changes nothing."

"I won't let you leave. I've come this far as a criminal; I may as well hold you for ransom."

"Ransom?" She laughed heartily. "There is no one in this world who gives a damn if I live or die, Prentice Hyde."

"Yes, there is."

Chapter Nineteen

Desiree ran from the house. She didn't want to hear how Serenity cared about her well-being. Prentice certainly wasn't about to profess undying love for her. He only wished his sex partner would return to the fold. It was devastating to know that was the extent of what she meant to him.

She walked for hours, crying. She screamed to the heavens about the unfairness of her lot. She screamed until her voice cracked and her throat burned. She wanted Prentice. She knew that, with a surety she'd never before possessed. She loved the way he made her feel when they were in the throes of passion, but he also made her feel good, even when they did something as simple as eat a meal together.

Was it enough to want him, knowing he wanted her for only one thing? But didn't she want that one thing as well? She could forge a new arrangement with him, going into it knowing her true feelings. How could she get hurt that way? At least she would get out of the relationship what she wanted, which was his attentions. As pathetic as it was, she needed what he gave her.

She had enough money to make a life for herself once he tired of her. Maybe, she would tire first, leaving Lord Decadent to wander aimlessly without her, instead of the other way around. She'd take from him, just as she had before, but this time she'd wring him dry.

It was late afternoon by the time she found her way back to the folly. She saw puffs of smoke from the chimney at a distance. It looked like a fairy tale. The little house

in the wood, tiny animals scurrying about, flowers everywhere, a real happily-ever-after.

Resigned that it would only be a happy for now, she opened the door and walked in, prepared to live for today, and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Indeed, a fire crackled in the grate, but Prentice wasn't in the room. She wouldn't blame him if he'd left her for the manor house. She heated some water and took it into the bedchamber. When she got there, however, the sight before her took her breath away.

There were flowers everywhere, even petals sprinkled on the snow-white sheets. Their scent was intoxicating. The warmth from the fire made the room cozy, welcoming, homey. The blue curtains were open, the last vestiges of daylight weakly filtering in.

Prentice sat in an overstuffed chair, looking as though he were fresh from his bath. Dressed in his usual country attire of breeches, untucked shirt and boots, he was the picture of the casual country squire. A book lay open across his lap, making Desiree envious of said book.

"I've missed you," he said, his voice low and sultry.

"Have you?" Her voice sounded equally seductive.

"I'm sorry, Desiree."

"So am I." Determined to forge ahead with her new plan, she said, "I wish to start over."

"How do we start over, Desiree?"

"We agree to the same arrangement we had before. I wish to fully submit to you, Prentice, nothing more, nothing less."

"I see. You wish to have your little ass spanked, and then, I am to roger you insensible, and that is all you want."

Fighting the urge to scream from the rooftops that she wanted so much more, she simply nodded, lest he detect the lie on her tongue.

Prentice bit the inside of his cheek to keep from speaking the words he so desperately wished to say. He loved Desiree more than he thought possible. He'd heard her declaration of love for him, and it had torn through his black soul, making him understand how empty his life had become.

He'd also heard her tell Serenity about his deplorable behavior. If he were to be honest, the scene she described had been repeated innumerable times over the years. Most times, he'd not even asked the young women's names before he flattered them, turned their heads with implied promises he had no intention of keeping and then seduced them. Before the young women knew what was what, he'd invade their most private parts and steal their most precious gift. It was a pattern repeated more times than he could count.

Shame burned like fire, to think how he'd changed the course of this beautiful young lady's life without as much as a backward thought. He'd make it up to her, he vowed. He owed her a debt, and if she'd allow it, he'd spend his life repaying it.

Afraid to push her into something she didn't want, he waited for her to speak again. She poured the warmed water she was carrying in the basin, and began washing her face and hands. She was still wearing the costume from the night before. It was nothing more than lengths of silk draped over what he already knew was an enticing body.

He loved that she was comfortable with varying degrees of nakedness, for if he had his way, she would perpetually be in that state.

"I suppose we should talk, should we not?" he said.

"I suppose we should."

"I have not always acted in a fashion of which I could be proud, Desiree. As a young man, I prided myself in the numbers of flirty, vacuous young women I could take when they offered themselves so freely."

Quietly, she said, "I never offered anything."

"I confess, I must take your word and apologize for any presumption I may have labored under. However, I can say without equivocation, I did not rape you."

"No, I never meant to insinuate otherwise. I gave myself to you willingly. Only later did I realize what I had done, and how drastically my life was altered by that single decision."

"I am sorry." He'd never meant anything more in his life.

"You didn't even remember me, Prentice. How empty the experience must have been for you. It meant something to me. You were so handsome and charming. You flattered me, kissed me until I was breathless. I was only eighteen years old, in my first season. I wanted you to like me." Her voice cracked as a single tear streaked her perfectly structured face.

"I cannot defend myself. I was every bit the lout you have always thought me to be. I can only say I am not that man any longer."

"I've tried to tell myself that, honestly, I have. Do you know what I endured, having to marry an old man, because the man I wanted to marry expected, wanted, deserved a virgin?"

"I can't imagine. I am sure it was the worst kind of degradation."

"My name was ruined in society; my parents turned their backs on me. The man I married never loved me or I him. The memory of the pleasure you showed me that night made his rutting all the more unbearable. He drank and ignored me, then would wake me and treat me like a whore. It was terrible."

She was crying in earnest now. He hoped she could release the horror of her past and allow him to create a future for her that would make up for the despicable wrong he had perpetrated upon her.

"Come." He motioned to her with his hands.

She shuffled toward him. When she was within reach, he pulled her onto his lap, into his embrace.

He slid his hand up and down her back as she tucked her head into the crook of his chin. She sobbed, mumbled unintelligible words, and clung to him. He comforted her, trying to take away the pain she'd been living with for years. "I'll make it up to you, Desiree, I swear I will."

Her hand came to rest upon his upper chest. He kissed her forehead, then her nose, causing her to raise her gaze to meet his own. Very quickly, these innocent acts became a conflagration. Their mouths met with ferocity, tongues battling for supremacy. Hands refused to be stilled; there was too much to explore. She straddled his lap. With both hands on his face, she ravaged him as he gave her bottom a wicked smack.

She barely blinked, though her eyes lit and he knew she was feeling what he did.

"Oh, yes," she murmured into his mouth. She poked her bottom out. "More."

As they kissed, Prentice gave her swats, her approval thrumming in her throat. Suddenly, she shifted her position, sprawling herself across his lap.

"What do you want, my little one?"

"I want you to really spank me, Prentice. I crave it as surely as the air I breathe. Please."

His cock stirred. He'd missed her willingness, her total submission, her complete enjoyment. With a gentle hand, he lifted the volumes of silk that covered her. Beneath lay her heart-shaped bottom, reddened from Serenity's spanking. He rubbed, taking in the feel of her. He wanted to kiss her there, show her what true adoration was. He would, soon.

"Tell me again how you want me to spank you."

"I want your hand to strike me as though I was an errant child. Show me what it is like to be under your control."

He brought his hand down on her arse, not hard, for he couldn't bring himself to do so. He wanted to seduce her with this spanking. Entice her to new heights. He gave her sharp pats, making sure they stung without jolting her. But she wasn't satisfied, and indicated as much by her constant wiggles and squirms.

"Strike me, Prentice. Please, I wish to feel your power."

He did as she asked. Through her howls he recognized her need was being met. Her body relaxed as he continued, her head rested upon the arm of the chair. She absorbed the blows as she always had. She hissed and moaned but seemed to be in

heaven.

His cock was rampaging for a turn at satisfaction. She'd endured the usual twenty swats, and it seemed she could endure many more. "You've had enough," he said, as he rubbed her bottom.

"Never," she answered. His heart soared.

He pulled her into his arms, and his mouth came crashing down on hers. If there was a way for him to convey the entirety of his feelings through that kiss he would find it. He wanted her as his own.

He picked her up and took her to the bed. As he stood, she knelt on the bed and began to remove his shirt. Her hands touched every inch of his torso, nuzzling, nipping, kissing as she went.

He removed her costume, revealing the body for which he'd longed. He bent over and removed his boots, throwing them indiscriminately across the room. Her shaky hands released the buttons as though it were the first time she'd done so. The object of her quest was revealed as she rolled the tight-fitting garment over his hips. He completed the process, at last standing before her in all his masculine glory.

She adored him with her hands, teasing, sliding over his length, her eagerness a definite aphrodisiac. The moist warmth of her tongue was torturous, as she flicked over the head of his cock, bulbous, sensitive and enflamed. He groaned as he flexed his hips, seeking closer contact.

"Oh, my sweet darling," he sighed as her tongue teased the sensitive underside of the head.

Without warning, she fully sheathed his cock with her mouth. The sensation was unearthly, enticing him to a level of sensuality he'd not even experienced with Abigail.

He backed away, encouraging her to lie down. He crawled over her, his feral gaze raking over her aroused body. "My turn."

He attacked her mouth, his tongue seeking where his cock had so recently been. He pinched her nipple to even deeper arousal. He laved her breasts with his tongue, then slid his body lower. Teasing her ribs, he licked his way over her stomach, his chin

nuzzling the fuzz that was growing back over her mons.

"What's this?"

"I haven't seen Marjorie."

"You will or I'll do it myself." He licked her folds, giving her a start.

"I'd like to see you try." Her voice strained.

"Don't tempt me, seductress."

Her body arched, meeting his tongue. There was no more discussion.

He brought her to new heights of ecstasy. She clawed the counterpane, her body racked with pleasures she'd never known, not even with him. Her bottom stung under the pressure of his hands as he held her firmly to his mouth. He laved her clitoris until she was mad with pleasure. Every nerve in her body was on fire. He drove his tongue into her passage, slipped one finger into her anus. She was awash with sensations, overwhelmed with passion.

"I want you inside me." She gasped as the latest orgasm began to dissipate.

"Roll onto your belly, my love."

The endearment washed over her like a warm spring breeze. Oh, how she wanted it to be so. She did as he asked, and he helped to her knees. She supported her upper body with folded arms, her head resting on the counterpane.

"Oh, yes, I do so love your bottom," Prentice said, his hands brushing over the reddened skin. "Such a nice color."

"You must be sure to keep it this way, sir."

"Oh, that will be my pleasure."

"And mine."

He teased her folds with his cock. Her awareness was heightened as he inched his way into her. He went torturously slow, despite her best attempts at temptation.

"Not so fast, little one."

"Please, I need you."

"I need you too, but I wish us to take our time."

However, in the end, the passion overtook his best intentions.

"Harder," she moaned as he thrust into her.

He couldn't resist. As it always seemed to do, their lovemaking became frenzied, leaving them spent. Prentice gathered her into his arms, and they slept. Tomorrow would be a day of decisions.

Chapter Twenty

The sun poured into the room the next morning, its rays shining in Desiree's face. They'd not shut the draperies the night before, their passion having overtaken all other rational thought.

Prentice was lying on his stomach, his head turned away from her. The sheet was a stunning white against his bronzed skin. He was a well-built man, broad-shouldered, narrow nip at the waist, his bottom . . . Desiree gasped and jolted to a sitting position.

"Oh, my god," she said aloud, jarring Prentice from his slumber.

"What's wrong, love?" He'd turned his head and placed a quelling hand on her thigh.

Desiree's touched his bottom, careful not to hurt the angry red skin. He flinched then buried his head in the pillow.

"What is this, Prentice?"

He shook his head, still not looking at her. His fingers dug into her thigh. The muscles of his buttocks clenched as she waited for him to speak. It took a very long, uncomfortable time.

"We all have secrets, Desiree. Even the mighty Marquess of Wycroft."

"What secret?"

Silence ensued once again, leaving a pall over the room. It was several minutes before Prentice spoke again, his voice strained. "When I was a child, I was caned, strapped or paddled regularly, first by my father, then by my tutor, and finally, by the headmaster at Eton. After the first few times, I realized I rather enjoyed the experience.

It always enabled me to clear the cobwebs away, and focus on what was important or a task that needed to be done.

"I could always make better decisions afterward. After school, I was ashamed to admit to my need for it. When I met Lucien, we got quite foxed one night, and he began telling me of his need, which made it more comfortable to discuss my own."

"Did Abigail know?"

"No, she didn't. I never had it done while she was alive. As open-minded as she was, I couldn't face telling her. I wouldn't have told you either." His eyes finally met hers.

"Does Lucien do this for you?"

"I go to Lucien for what I call 'refocusing'. It's happened several times of late."

"When was the last time?"

"On the night of the tableau, I needed to be clear as to how I was going to get you back. I demanded Lucien thrash me until I told him to stop. Some of my better ideas come during a thrashing." His eyebrow arched, and she could see a smile threatened his mouth.

"But you feel it is fine that I should enjoy having my bottom paddled or strapped as often as possible?"

"You came to me not as a lover but as a client. I dare say there are many secrets about me you don't know."

"What am I now?"

He put his arms around her and dragged her down until she rested beside him. "You are my lover, my captive, and I do hope, soon, you will be my wife."

She wasn't surprised by his casual proposal. "Your wife, you say. Mmm, I will have to think about that. I do have a long line of gentlemen who wish to blister my arse and fuck me insensible, you know. You are not a rare commodity."

"I'd better be as rare as it gets, or I will be doing more than thrashing your lovely bottom. Speaking of which, let me see if you need some color." He rolled her over and gave her a couple of swats. "This will not do. We will take care of this at the grotto." His

eyes flickered with mischief and passion. "Come."

He rolled off the bed and took her with him. She reached for her dress, which he promptly took from her. "No, my dear, I prefer you as my naked woodland nymph, prancing about the forest in her natural state."

Desiree's heart beat wildly as the promise of the day unfolded. If only they could spend their lives in this place, surrounded by nature, and unencumbered by the responsibilities of his title. He seemed so at home here and less what the world expected him to be.

"When shall we marry?" he asked as they walked to their spot near the forest.

"I hope soon. I can think of nothing I'd like better than to be your wife." Her anger and insecurity had disappeared.

"I must tell you what you are opening yourself up for, before you discover you have made a terrible mistake. I have thought of little but your lovely derriere since the first time I bared it. I am obsessed with it and you. Our marriage will entail frequent spankings, some surprise ones, and some that will take place in some rather unique places."

"Do you promise?"

"Oh, yes."

"What about you? Would you ever consider allowing *me* to spank *you*?"

He dropped the bag he was carrying and took her in his arms. "I'd never considered such a turn of events, to be honest. Lucien has been the only person privy to that particular inclination."

"Well, would you? Allow me, that is."

"I suppose I would. I certainly trust you as much as I trust him."

"Would you allow me to do it now?"

Prentice smiled. "I suppose, but then it is my turn."

"Fair enough."

They arrived at the grotto. The cool air chilled her skin. She'd wondered what the rest of the world would think about her prancing through the forest in the nude. She

concluded she really didn't care.

"How shall we do this?" she asked.

She helped him to draw his buckskin breeches down to his knees and raise his shirt. There was a stone bench, which he draped with a blanket, and then he stretched out on his belly.

Her heart began to beat faster, the excitement beyond her imagination. She'd never thought to do this before, having been so focused on getting what *she* needed.

"What do you wish to be spanked with, my darling?"

"I think the paddle, which is exactly what I intend to use on you."

Desiree took up the paddle and began to play, slapping her hand with it, skimming it across his cheeks, even lengthwise over the crevice that separated his tight, well-formed bottom.

His body arched as she did it. She smiled to herself.

Her first smack seemed to surprise him, which was her intention. Her heart wasn't into hurting him, given that evidently Lucien had given him quite a thrashing just a short time before. However, he reacted to each blow as though he rode the verge of an orgasm. He groaned much as he did while inside her.

He held his hand up, signaling her to stop. He rose from his reclining position, his erection like granite.

"Bend over this bench, now," he said seductively, as he removed his boots and breeches."

"I don't get the benefit of lying down."

"Bend over the bench and get ready."

She did as he bid. Instead of the paddle, he used his hand, spanking with an upward motion, catching the tender underside of each buttock. He stopped to separate her cheeks, and using her own juices, slipped a finger into her anus, fucking her wildly, to her delight.

"Oh, my God, that is unbelievable."

He bent low to her ear. "Really? Well, then I believe you will love the surprise I

have for you," he whispered.

He put something firm and hard against her anus.

"What is that?"

"I do believe you are well acquainted." With a gentle but steady hand, he pushed the oiled shaft into her. She moaned and finally hissed through her teeth.

"That burns."

"The pain will subside." He stayed the forward progress and rubbed over her bottom until she told him to continue.

"Oh, my god, Prentice, it is delicious."

"Yes, it is."

Her head was swimming with sensations. He used the phallus to stretch her, while he used his other hand to concentrate on her clitoris. When she came, he encouraged her to be as loud she wished. "No one will hear you."

Shout she did, thinking the waves of pleasure would never end.

"Please, I want you inside me."

She pled for him to take her, and he filled her in a trice. Prentice's thrusts were slow, deliberate, as he punctuated each with a light smack of his hand. Soon, the frenzy overtook them, each of them striving for the pinnacle. When it came, they exploded in a cacophony of sounds. Moans and grunts, groans and sighs, all joyful and pleasure soaked. Prentice held her around the waist for a time before turning her and enclosing her body within his arms.

"I've never experienced such heights of pleasure."

His confession touched her. "Neither have I."

The day waned as their affection grew deeper. "I will always strive to be the man you deserve," he said, as they gathered their belongings for the walk back to the folly, Prentice asked once again, "Will you marry me?"

* * * * *

They held the ceremony in London, barely a month later. The large drawing room at the Sapphire Club, usually used as a meeting place, was transformed into a lovely, flower-filled 'grotto'. Only members of the club were invited, save Prentice's mother and sister, who'd declined the invitation when told where the wedding was to be held.

"Just as well." Prentice had snickered when the female members of his family informed the happy couple of their proposed absence, over dinner the night before.

"What is *that* to mean?" his haughty sister asked.

"Just as I said, Emmaline; I invited you only out of courtesy. Desiree and I will manage to forge ahead in the absence of your less than charming company."

"Why must you be so rude, Prentice?" His sister pouted.

Prentice stood, pulled his soon-to-be wife's chair out, and said, "You've not seen anything yet."

They walked out, leaving the two women to fume and fuss.

"They would only make our lives a misery, darling." He'd longed to do just this, for years, but hadn't, fearing having no semblance of family. Now, he had Desiree, and she was all he needed or wanted.

The happy couple spent many months traveling the Continent. Prentice wanted to take her to all of the places he had visited alone. In each city, they found a varied supply of interesting sexual implements. Bookstores supplied a rather extensive library of erotic etchings, some of which Desiree looked at with concern as to the feasibility of accomplishing the position depicted.

The couple found sculptures and paintings as well, determined to create a sexual sanctuary in their private quarters at Wycroft Park.

"I am obsessed," Prentice said one evening, after a particularly bawdy time worshipping Desiree's bottom, with both strap and cock.

"I can tell." She laughed, as she felt the burn of this latest foray. "I'm grateful to you as well, my darling. You've given me more than I ever expected to find when I first walked into the club."

He kissed her deeply and promised many inventive years of marriage.

"Do you also promise that I will always have Lord Decadent and not some stodgy old marquess?"

"I believe that is one promise I can most definitely keep." He reached beneath the satin sheet and found her bottom. "But you, my dear, must also promise that Lord Decadent can always have his obsession."

~The End~

About the Author

Brita Addams grew up in upstate New York but has lived in southern Louisiana for many years. She is an avid reader, particularly of biographies and anything historical. She loves to travel, which she and her husband do as often as they possibly can. From her earliest school days, writing was always a part of her life, though while raising their family, it just seemed to hum in the background. Now, with the encouragement of her hero – her husband – and her children, she has been fortunate in being able to create the stories she's always longed to write.

To learn more about Brita Addams and The Sapphire Club Series, visit <http://britaaddams.com/>

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If you liked Lord Decadent's Obsession, Book II in The Sapphire Club series, you might also enjoy the following book from Brita Addams and Noble Romance Publishing:

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