



CERISE DELAND

Lady
Featherstone's
FERVENT AFFAIR
The Stanhope Challenge

*Lady Featherstone's
Fervent Affair*

A Stanhope Challenge Story

By Cerise DeLand

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Chapter One

September, 1809 Lancashire, England

Wes galloped in the rain, the night thick and the air moist. He slumped over the saddle, his horse lathered and laboring. He dug his spurs into the hide of the animal. Mad to get his men up to the French line, Wes yelled at them. His voice cracked, hoarse. His throat raw. The din clamored around him. Like a vise.

The damned French came on like banshees from hell.

Why at night?

The dead of it.

Why in the rain?

He circled his troops. Blinking. Disbelieving. His men lay like broken toy soldiers, littering the earth. Ghouls, dark and bony, they lay strewn about, their blackened arms upstretched to him, grasping, calling for help, survival. Others cried out to him as they lost their seats and tumbled to the hard dark earth. Their horses whinnied and shrieked, rising up and pawing the sky. Men fell, hacked to pieces before they hit the ground. His lieutenant, mouth open, yelled at Wes to go back. *Go back.*

He would not. Could not. He wheeled about. *How to ensure my rear line turns to meet the French assault?*

But still the enemy came on. Gold and silver epaulettes shone in the rain. French shakos fluttered over their skeletal faces.

They whacked at Wes' youngest recruits. Not men. But boys. Just boys. One cried in the mud. His horse was wild eyed and thrashing, hooves beating a retreat where there was none. The sounds of the clashing steel, the agonies of men, the gunpowder clogging the air with smoke so thick, so dry men coughed and hacked, choked and drowned on it.

Then at once, a jolt to his own horse. His animal trembled, buckling, bowing down into the mud like a child at prayer. His mount, which he'd trained himself, had bought himself in Lisbon from the peasants' auction. His mount screamed, throwing Wes into the mud.

The foul grit sank between his teeth and down his throat. He clawed at it. A searing pain crossed his eyes. Burning, he tried to push up, push out, lift his head from the muck of earth and stones, ashes and blood.

He turned his head, spit out a mouthful, called for his servant. *Where are you? Charles?*

No one came.

He couldn't see. He pushed the mud from his eyes and screamed. *Get me out of here! Up!*

In a flash of lightning, it hit him. He was wounded. *Cut? Where?*

He lifted his head. Around him, two of his men lay, crawling toward him in the mire.

Am I crawling?

Back to the line, man. Back to the line...

And he stopped.

This scene was as it always had been. The woman in black would stride toward him now.

He cursed.

A fearful hag, she was. Petite, skin and bones, in her voluminous rags of death, she came to peer down at him, wrench his head up by a handful of hair. Then she'd kick him in the ribs and in the left arm to make him howl like a beast. She sneered at his pain, laughing at his writhing.

"Take him," she would order in her devil's voice. "Take him to die!"

"No! No!" he would yell as her rat-like minions scurried round him, rolling him to his back, while he screamed in the torment as they took his body up, up, up, his left arm hanging useless as the pain careened through his body and tore his mind to shreds.

"Let me be!" he would yell to no avail. "Let me die!"

Wes bolted upright.

His heartbeat pounded a tattoo.

Perspiration dripped down his temples.

"Oh, Christ!" he muttered, wiping his brow. He glanced around, felt his arm in the sling. *Safe. Yes, safely on the armrest.* "The nightmare."

“Sir?” his sergeant and servant, Charles, stared into his eyes, the man’s hands on Wes’ shoulders. “Tis the dream again, sir. Are you recovered?”

“Yes,” Wes grumbled, hating how his voice quavered. “Yes, yes! Brandy.”

“Here, sir. A hefty draught.”

Wes grabbed the glass as if it were ambrosia then gulped it down.

He coughed, the damn strong stuff burning all the way down his gullet but inspiring strong affirmation that he was indeed alive.

He sank backward in his old wingchair, the one he had inhabited now for nigh onto thirty days. Ever since they had brought him home from the Peninsula in a hospital bay, he’d sat in a goddamn chair. At Jack’s house in Grosvenor Square. At Adam’s in Berkeley Square. Here. Like an old man. A cripple.

He cursed. He’d left both brothers’ homes, knowing, seeing and seething at their understanding—aye, their pity—for his infirmity. Riled, he had come north to this old hunting lodge and sat in this chair.

His sergeant had come with him. Charles Brighton was a loyal sort. From childhood, Charles had been a servant at their father’s Stanhope estate in the Cotswolds. Charles had been Wes’ body servant since Wes was five, and he had followed Wes into the Hussars. Promoted by Wes four years ago, the older man probably had never thought he would need to play nursemaid to the illustrious cavalryman, Wesley Stanhope. More like, Charles would have thought to care for his horse and his kit until Wes pensioned him off at sixty.

Instead of any such banality, Wes found himself here, in this drafty old place his father had given him on his twentieth birthday. He sat here day after day in this big ugly chair, recovering from a broken left arm, a broken left ankle and the loss of his left eye. A scar long and ragged as sin ran across his left cheek.

No thanks to a French corsair and the muck of the Spanish plain outside Talavera, Wesley Hamill Curruthers Stanhope had fallen in battle during a charge of his own cavalry brigade. Days later, in a medic tent, his commander had informed him that his maneuver had won the day for the British, but Wes rued the praise. What good was a man fallen in the pursuit of his duty? What joy in that? What recompense were words of praise when his body was broken and ripped? He could only ponder his own mortality, which now he expected would have a sad and lonely ending.

A man without his profession. Without his faculties. Without an income, save what he got as a handout from his roué of a sire. Without hope of the comfort of a woman.

He growled in frustration at the memory of desire. The memory of how he'd made love to a woman. The recollection of how virile he'd once been, fucking as he wished. When. Whom. Never loving. Until two months before he'd left for Portugal, Spain and the terror of Talavera. Then had found a sprite of a woman. Never before had that been his type. But once he'd seen her, talked with her, been amused and enchanted by her, he'd known he was fully caught. Captured. Enraptured. Only that one time in his life had he thought he might brave the family curse on all loving marriages and find more than the temporary slaking of his desires.

But Lady Lacy Featherstone would never want a weak and broken man. His gut wrenched at the memory of her in all her angelic glory. She was a beauty, an accomplished horsewoman, an heiress freshly debuted last Season with family connections and willful as sin. If he had ever considered himself a proper match for the lady, now he was less than suitable. He was a cripple. Deformed. An oddity for any drawing room, let alone a bedroom.

Lacy. He shut his eye now, recalling how she had looked the night he'd met her for the very first time at his brother Adam's house party in April. In jade green bombazine, she had followed him into the library after the supper.

"You are ignoring me, Wes," she had accused him as she'd shut the door behind her.

He'd chuckled ruefully. His need to stop eating her up with his eyes was a monstrous thing so gigantic, he'd had to retreat here. Alone. If only just to get his cock down. "Evidently not entirely."

She'd drifted forward to face him, her startling robin's egg blue eyes searching his. "I want a kiss."

He'd raised a brow and chuckled. "We have only just met. Two hours ago."

She'd glided forward, her pale moonbeam hair a sweet accent to her flawless skin and the perfect roses of her cheeks. "Minutes, hours. What do they matter when you know in your soul what is to be?"

He'd adored her audacity to counter him but had had to show some resilience. "Ha! And what is that, Lady Featherstone?"

She'd tossed him a smile. "We are to be one. Forever."

"You are so certain."

“Doubt me? Kiss me and see.”

He could not take his eyes off her as she'd come to stand an inch from him. His fingers had itched to draw her close, feel her delicate curves pressed to his rock hard body. “You are all of what? Eighteen?”

“Nineteen,” she'd whispered and risen on her toes to press her lush lips to the corner of his mouth. “I have debuted. Of age. Open to a proposal.”

He'd hooted. But his hands had gone around her small waist. “We are not suited.”

She'd slid her lips to rest on his. “You are a cavalryman. I am a horsewoman. We are strong, independent and know what we want.”

He'd pressed his palm to her back, and against his chest, he felt the warmth of her breasts. “You need a man of wealth and position. I have neither.”

“I have a large dowry, and you have position. You are a colonel in the King's Hussars.”

“We are at war, my sweet.”

“Ah. I see.” She'd kissed him once, quickly, the fragrance of her perfume fogging his brain. “You fear you will come back an invalid.”

“Or not at all,” he'd corrected her, giving her a small shake.

She'd nestled closer to him. Her breasts, large and supple, had bored into his chest. Her thighs, strong and insistent, had pressed against his. “Darling, I care not how I have you.” Her voice, soft as a cat's purr, had enveloped him. “I want you.” She'd run her fingers through the curls at his nape.

He'd snatched her hand away. “That is wrong.”

She'd placed his palm over one breast. “Kiss me and tell me then.”

How could he refuse?

She was courageous and wise and had foresight. Yet he had left his own wits somewhere in the drawing room. From the moment he had watched her greeting his sister-in-law, he had wished she were his.

There in the library, she'd stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips over his.

“Darling Wes.” She'd taken his hand from her breast and pushed it down to press against her mound. Beneath her gown, she was hot. “I need you. As you do me.” She demonstrated by pushing his fingers hard against her dress. He could detect her slit and the plush lips of her cunt. “Feel how I need you.” She had gathered up her skirts and he could not resist helping her.

“Oh, god,” he’d groaned, his fingers wet and deep within her, sluicing her slick folds. “You are a jewel.” He’d stroked, listening to her succulent desire, feeling her heat and his own outrageous lust to get inside her. “But we will not do this.”

In the next two months, every time he’d seen her at house parties or balls, he had kissed her, caressed her and had been sorely tempted to take her wherever they stood. But reason had prevailed. He had never been so bold. Instead, he had gone to her father to ask for her hand. The man had readily accepted.

“Against common sense,” Wes mourned now, ran a hand through his hair and directed his gaze out the casement window at the never-ending rain. September in Lancashire. Supposed to be warm. Sunny. Now cold and dark as sin.

He struggled up from his chair, grabbed his cane and plodded in his slippers to the window. Would he ever be warm again? Anywhere?

The sound of carriage wheels made Wes tip his head in the direction of the drive.

No one visited. He had made it plain to Charles that the man was to spread that word in the village. Wes desired no visitors. No well-wishers. No expressions of gratitude for the so-called hero of Talavera.

Still, Wes heard the carriage wheels grind to a stop.

Shouting above the downpour of the rain made Wes turn to listen.

Then came the knock on the front door.

Charles emerged from the dining room where he’d been laying out luncheon.

“Who might this be?” Wes asked of the man who would not have invited anyone. He never disobeyed Wes.

“I have no idea, sir,” Charles replied as he stepped toward the foyer and the carved wooden door. “I will inquire.”

Wes nodded, putting pressure on his cane as he hobbled back toward his chair.

“Good afternoon,” Charles greeted the visitor. “Do come in. May I say who is calling?” he asked in a tone of voice so caring that Wes, out of his own immense curiosity, became focused on the portal and the figure standing there.

Wes stiffened. His mouth opened. His one good eye squinted in disbelief.

“Yes, you may say. Charles, isn’t it?” asked the vision in the bright navy blue pelisse and pink straw bonnet. The vision stepped inside, handed Charles her umbrella and pulled at her

gloves, finger by finger, as she gazed about, her large robin's egg blue eyes landing on Wes. Her face severe, unsmiling, she told Charles, "You may say Lady Lacy Featherstone calls upon Colonel Stanhope."

"I'm afraid, Miss Featherstone, that Colonel Stanhope is indisposed."

Her incomparable blue gaze danced down Wes's form. "He looks quite fit to me, Charles."

How can I? Looking like a gargoyle. Feeling weak as a puppy. He stepped back into the shadows of the great room.

Lacy took a step forward.

Charles blocked her.

She glared at the servant. "Charles, let us understand each other from the start. I am here. I have arrived here after an extremely discomfiting journey by coach from Kent. Do you know how far that is, Charles?"

"Yes, Lady Featherstone, I certainly do. The Colonel and I traveled here from London, and we did so with the Colonel in dire pain. I tell you that you may not see him."

Will be repulsed to see me. Wes forced himself to stand his ground.

"But, Charles, I do see him. I see him now. I see him plainly. And I will speak with him."

"My lady, you may not enter."

"Wes!" she called to him, bracing herself on two dainty feet. "I will not leave."

"Lacy, I do not wish to see you."

"I do not care what you wish."

"It is not proper that you are here. And unescorted, as far as I can tell."

She folded her hands before her, prim as he had never known her to be. "I do not care for escorts or proprieties."

"You must!" *Was she mad?*

"You heard me," she said as she surveyed the wooden beams of the ceiling and the black and white of the foyer floor tiles.

God, she was lovely. Like spun sugar, fragile and scrumptious. Meant for him. Once. Long ago.

"I came alone. My father thinks I am with my aunt Mary in Dorset."

If Wes were in his right mind or of sound body, he might have laughed. As it was, he scowled at her. "Go home, Lacy."

"I refuse."

What a piece she was. Once his. Once his match. "You will ruin your reputation," Wes insisted.

"Of what value, Colonel Stanhope, is reputation?"

"Everything!"

Lacy continued to glide toward him. Her gorgeous eyes riveted on his one good one, hers fixed with determination. "I suppose yours has saved your happiness for you?"

Wes choked on fury. *How did one so young, so fair, know such a truth?*

She strolled further into the room. "I came to help you and nurse you, Wes."

Wes huffed, the sight of her heaving breasts in the fitted jacket making him remember the night he'd viewed them in a garden at someone's ball. He'd put his rough hand inside her gown, the sight of her nipples inciting him to taste the gossamer, pink areolas. He ground his teeth. "I have a nurse. I have Charles."

"He does not love you," she remarked.

Charles startled. "Sir? I...I do not—"

Wes raised a hand to his man and both brows at Lacy. "I venture to say he does. In his way."

"He does not love you as I do." She stepped forward, her gown swishing against the carpet. "Or love you as I can."

"He is enough for me."

"Is he?" She looked Charles up and down.

"Go home, Lacy," Wes instructed with more sadness than he'd planned. "You and I have no future."

"Not true, Wesley Stanhope!" She stood toe to toe with him now. Her incomparable robin's egg blue eyes boring into his one. "Give over, Colonel. You have lost this battle. I am here to marry you."

Chapter Two

“Charles?” Lacy faced Wes’s butler. “Do leave us.”

Wes nodded at his man. When he had departed the room, Wes focused his one good eye on her. “Your obstinance won’t help you, Lacy. I will not relent.”

“Plan to live up to your moniker, do you?” she asked blithely as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

“The cripple of Talavera?” he bit off, turned and walked toward his chair.

When he was seated, she looked at him with ferocious resolve. All the better to hide the tears she wished to shed over his deplorable physical state. *Darling, how hurt you are.* “I meant the term the *ton* dubs you. ‘Difficult’.”

He brandished a hand as he fell backward into his huge over-stuffed chair. “Yes. See him now. The Difficult Colonel. The Scourge of Talavera. So difficult he cannot even rid himself of a pesky chit with silly ideas in her head.”

I will not be insulted. Or deterred. Sniffing, Lacy removed her bonnet. With it came a few of her hairpins and the fall of her platinum hair about her shoulders. *Wonderful.* She had planned its cascade, just like that. Wes loved her hair. Among other attributes. She planned to use every one of them in her assault on the famous colonel whom she had loved at first sight.

“Lacy,” he sounded so weary. “You must not stay.”

Smiling to herself, she strode to the large table on which a few books lay spread open and put down her hat. Then she began to unbutton her coat. “You cannot make me go, Wes.”

He ran a hand through his auburn hair. “Do not remove any more clothing, Lacy!”

She let her coat drift from her shoulders and slung it over a nearby chair. Today, she’d donned the blue serge gown that matched her eyes. These were one of her assets with him, and she was no fool when it came to men’s attentiveness to her. Especially Wesley Stanhope’s. From the moment she’d seen him at his brother Adam’s house last April, Lacy had known the dashing colonel instantly, completely. Understood him, too. She had proven it that first night they met

when she found him in his brother's library and kissed him. Now, it remained for her to prove it to him. And sadly, military man that he was, he was too bull headed to see that she knew what was best for him. *Me, of course.*

She walked toward him.

Finally, she stood fore-square before him. He was so huge and she so much shorter that facing him while he sat, she was only a head taller. The height was one she would employ. She gazed down at him, her resolve to be resolute with him dwindling as she took in how sallow his skin, how bleary his eye and how lax his bad arm. "I will not leave you, darling."

"Lacy." He winced. Whether from physical pain or mental torture, she could not decide. "No good can come of this. I cannot marry you. Will not."

She put her hands on her hips. "Why not?" *Say it! Once! Then we will be done with this fantasy of denial!*

"Look at me!" He swept out a hand.

"I am, my love."

His eye squeezed shut. "I am ugly."

"Handsome."

"Blinded!"

"In one eye."

"My left arm is broken."

"*Was* broken."

He huffed. "My left leg is twisted and painful to walk on."

"We can correct that with—"

He shot up from his chair to tower over her. "No. We. *Cannot!*" He teetered on his feet.

She caught him with two hands to his upper arms. "I must."

"You are mad, woman, to think you can—"

So she leaned up on tiptoes and kissed him. His mouth, so firm and strong, held for a split second, then melted to hers. She wrapped her arms around his and held him, steady and fierce, as she caressed his mouth with her desire for him.

"Lacy," he murmured as he broke away and stared down into her eyes. "Lacy, you must not do this."

She brushed her lips on his. "What will you do, Colonel Stanhope?" She leaned up and spread tiny kisses along his lower lip and to the corner where his dimple marked his left cheek—near the endearing scar. "Have Charles throw me out?"

"I will have him take you to town. Get you a room in the inn. Arrange to put you on tomorrow's coach back to London."

"The roads are closed," she told him with immense satisfaction. "The rain is horrible. I had to pay the coachman double just to bring me here from town." She nuzzled her nose along the corded column of his throat and placed her mouth to the hollow there where his pulse beat frantically. "And I daresay, you have no coach here. I cannot ride a horse to town in this rain. So you see I am here on your doorstep, darling. Give over." And then she kissed him sweetly.

He steadied himself, braced his legs wide and wrapped her close. This near, her stomach fit into the hollow of his loins. Her eyes drifted shut.

He lifted her chin with two fingers. "Christ, you are so lovely. So determined. Some smart man must have danced attendance on you while I was in Spain." He combed her hair back from her cheeks and let his fingers descend through the length of her curls, down to her waist. "I am no man for you."

She nestled closer and felt the proof that his statement was definitely false. "I've come to prove you are just that."

With one arm, he clutched her so fiercely that he nearly lifted her off her feet. His mouth on hers, he groaned. "What once was a good match is now an impossibility."

"You are still my Wes. Still wise and witty, young and—"

He shook her. "Ancient with the stench of death about me! The men I killed. The men who fought with me and died. My horse! Gutted by cannon fire. Me! A wreck of a man."

"But alive," she argued so rationally, she might have been in Inns of Court.

"Ba!" He set her to her feet and pivoted from her to lumber toward the casement window then open it. Chill autumn air breezed in with the smell of wood fires and burnished foliage.

"You will listen to me and do as I say."

"I am not one of your men, Wes." She had come armed with her logic. "I am the woman you love. The one you proposed to before you left for Spain. I am your match. Your equal. Now and in all things. I mean for you to be my husband."

"You are meant for a man who can do his husbandly duty."

“To bed me? Darling, I just felt evidence that you are capable of that!”

He turned, a snarl curling his upper lip. “Fuck you? Aye, I could. Now. Here. But not well.”

His coarse word thrilled her, but she knew he used it to repel her. She smiled because he couldn’t. “How do you know until you try?”

He shook his head. “I could have you where we stand, I daresay. For some mad reason, I seem to want that with you.” He raked his hair. “But I mean more than possessing you, Lacy. I mean providing for you. Crippled as I now am, I earn less income. I have no means to support you, dear girl. I am pensioned. A pitiful sum it is, too. Furthermore, I am never to return to service.”

“You do not know that. You—”

“Look. At. Me.” He glared at her with his one good eye. “How can I lead my men now? I could not see half of them!” He touched his patch. “I will never again wield a sword!” He raised his left arm only as high as his shoulder. “Be reasonable!”

“So you won’t return to the King’s Hussars. So you have only a pension. I have money. A dowry. You would have accepted it before. You can take it now.”

“No!” He banged his cane down into the carpet. “How can I hold my head up if you provide our income?”

“Oh, *damn*, Wesley. How many men live off the incomes of their wealthier wives? Hundreds! Money knows no gender.”

“My manhood does.”

She couldn’t help but grin at him. “Yes, your manhood knew my gender a few minutes ago, and the recognition had nothing to do with my money!”

“You are stubborn as hell!”

She preened. “Precisely. A perfect match for you, Difficult.”

“Lacy. I will not marry you. Ever. Accept it.”

She lifted her chin at him. “And I will not leave you. Ever. Accept it.”

“If you stay, dear girl, the rumors will kill you. No man will ever have you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You will.”

“Everyone will conclude you live in sin with me.”

“I conclude that if you will not make me your wife, I will make you my lover.”

His eyes danced down her form. "Lacy, my god. Do not do this. I am not worthy of you. Not now. Perhaps, I never was."

"Absurd! You were always and still are worthy of me."

"If I was before, there was still the Stanhope family curse."

"Rubbish. I hear your brother Adam and his new wife now claim the curse does not exist."

"Perhaps for them this is true. But now, for you and me?" He glared at her and her heart broke with the sorrow she saw beneath his gruff façade. "The curse would destroy both of us. There is too much against us."

"You love me," she insisted and knew her petulance was not the way to argue with him here. She had to sound impervious to his ranting and remain unaffected by his words.

"There you see! The first characteristic of the curse. The partners profess to care for each other."

She inhaled, catching up her own courage in the process. "I care nothing for your family history. I know you love me. I love you. And we shall be together! Now. Here. Always."

He snorted. "We cannot. You must go."

How to wheedle my way in here and stay? She held her arms akimbo. "How will you dispose of me? The weather conspires to defeat you."

His face crumbled.

What had she said? She scrambled for a lifeline. She could not be defeated now. "I am here until the rain stops and the roads are open."

He shook his head and walked away. His shoulders sagged.

She advanced. "While I am here, you must let me help you. For all we were to each other, you owe me that."

"Perhaps. But do not delude yourself. I am not well, Lacy. Besides," he ground out, "What can you do in a few hours?"

Pray god, it is more than that. "I'll show you! Give me the running of your house."

"What?" He chuckled. "Darling, I think you have gone daft."

She strode toward him, ran her hands up over the massive chest and corded muscles that had made her mouth water months ago. Now, she felt how he had lost strength from disuse and malaise. She would make him what he had been. In body. Mind. And heart.

“Yes, my love.” She reached up and sweetly kissed him once upon his stern mouth. “I am mad for you, Wes. Tell Charles I am in charge.”

“He won’t take kindly to that.”

“I know.” She could have predicted that the butler would take umbrage at her command. But she’d also seen something else in the servant’s eyes. Something she could use. Desire. And if she had to, she would persuade Charles to her own ends. Anything, everything, to make Wes whole again. And hers. “But he will agree, won’t he, for a few hours, as you say? And I need his help. Tell him that whatever I want I must have.”

“And when the rains stop, you will leave.” It was not a question but a demand.

She smiled a tiny concession. For now. “I will go.”

“Charles?” Wes called for his man.

This time, Lacy paid more attention to the tall, well-proportioned blond who walked into the great room of the old lodge. Wes’ long time companion and servant on the battlefield was perhaps five or more years older than his master. With broad shoulders and a lean torso, Charles had a certain likeness to Wes about the eyes and mouth that made Lacy wonder if Charles were a by-blow of Wes’ father. That man, the Earl of Stanhope, was renowned for his many wives, mistresses and conquests of servant girls. If Charles was a Stanhope by blood, that would bind him to his master in ways that might be advantageous to Lacy. If his heritage made Charles more amenable to helping her save Wes, then so be it. She would avail herself of whatever familial devotion Charles possessed.

“Lady Featherstone refuses to leave,” Wes told him.

Charles, who had been drying a glass with a towel, paused to consider Lacy. “We can put her in the bedroom upstairs in the back.”

“Is it near the Colonel’s bedroom, Charles?” she asked, cool as lemonade in June.

“No, my lady.”

“I wish to be placed in a bedroom adjoining his.”

Wes arched a dark auburn brow. “Lacy, that is not proper.”

“My very presence is not proper, Wes. And you have agreed that I have the run of the house.” She glanced at Charles. “Do you sleep with the Colonel?”

Charles blinked. “Sometimes, when he has the nightmares, I stay, yes.”

“Where?”

“Where, my lady?”

She nodded, looking impervious to his shock.

“In the trundle, under the—”

She waved a hand and smiled like the mistress of the house. “There will be no more need for you to trouble yourself.”

“That,” Charles said with finality, *“is my duty.”*

“Now, it is mine.”

Wes looked as if he had just swallowed an elephant. Shock and surprise warred with laughter as he told his man, “Charles, you must do as the lady requires.”

“Thank you, Wes.” She beamed at him then turned a consoling gaze on Charles that she knew usually had men hanging on her every word. “I appreciate your help, Charles. My purpose is to ensure that the Colonel has every comfort and every delight available to him to recover fully.”

Charles took in her lips, her eyes, her hair. If he had listened in on Wes’ and her conversation from the other room, he knew that they had kissed. Her lips were swollen with their kisses. Her eyes were bright with the promise of sensual delights to come. Her hair was down, a pale blonde cloud of curls upon her shoulders and draping the tips of her breasts. She was ripe for an affair.

Charles’ blue eyes sparked with his intuitive knowledge of it.

Her breasts blossomed with it.

At once, she concluded she had been so right to come here. To challenge Wes. To make him kiss her and caress her. Make him see reason and passion. She would make him so happy, so excited, so healthy again, that he would take her to his arms and his bed. He would make love to her. But he was stubborn, and this would take time and ingenuity. So if she had to cajole Wes in ways that might be a bit unusual for a lady of society, she would.

Charles would comply.

And Wes would hurry to marry her.

Chapter Three

That night, she rose from the supper table as Wes finished his meal, rubbed his eye patch and his one good eye. She had ordered the fires built higher in the old lodge, and the temperature in this nook of the great hall was cozy. Wes needed the warmth to kill the chill in his bones and muscles. That plus hearty food would help her on her mission to restore him to his former self.

She smiled at him. "Wait here, Wes. I will help you to your room. I wish to speak with Charles and will return in a minute."

She picked up Wes' plate and wine glass. Charles swept to one side to let her pass, his role as butler usurped by her.

She hastened off to the kitchen, thinking Charles a decent cook but lacking an imagination with which to embellish the meat and potatoes. Cabbage didn't help his repertoire, either. When he appeared in the kitchen, his hands full of her plate and glass, she told him she would help him cook tomorrow night's meal.

"I did not know ladies could cook," he told her, part challenge, part question.

"I can," she informed him with aplomb. "When I was a child, I loved our cook. She was a kindly woman, full of stories as she baked cookies and pies and dressed foul. I learned much as I sat there, watching and asking her questions. She died last year, and I miss her still. But I remember her each time I enter a kitchen."

Charles' expression went lax. Clearly stunned by her familiarity, he frowned. "I ordered a pig from the butcher last week. It should come in the morning."

Trying to change the subject and keep your authority? "Wonderful. But I want fresh fish for tomorrow night's meal. Do buy three nice trout. Or a large salmon. I want fresh rosemary and thyme, too, for a stuffing."

"Yes, m'lady." He turned away and caught up a bucket to get fresh water from the well in back of the smokehouse.

“I’m going upstairs, Charles, to read to the Colonel. There will be no need for you to assist us tonight.” *Or any night hereafter.*

A tick worked in the corner of Charles’ right eye. If Lacy had doubted Charles was of Stanhope blood, she did not now. *Good-looking devil. But not my devil.* She grinned at him and bid him sleep well.

Finding the dining room deserted, she grew miffed that Wes had managed the stairs alone. Without her. *So. You mean to escape me. Not so, my love.*

Catching up a book from the reading table, she made her way up the broad wooden staircase and adjourned to her bedroom. She shut her hall door with a resounding thud, intending to give notice to Wes she was here. *Ever here.* Not going anywhere.

With haste, she hustled to step from her gown and undo her chemise. The stays were such a bother, and she muttered in her consternation. When she was naked, she rubbed her hands over her breasts and down her ribs to her waist and the smooth curve of her hips. Her eyes closed as she caressed her nipples, one by one then pinched her soft areolas in glee.

You are about to have Wesley Stanhope.

She sighed. Delighted with herself. Her courage. She leaned over to view herself in the damn tiny mirror on the dresser. So much for the furnishings in old hunting lodges where women were never expected to stay for long! She grinned that she was here and ready for her own assault. Then she brushed her hair to a high sheen and finally reached for her Chinese silk robe of peach and ivory. This last was the jewel of the carefully selected wardrobe she’d brought with her, all chosen to entice Wes. To make him see reason.

She swirled, grabbed the book and made for the connecting door. Then she flung it open.

He sat on the edge of his large feather bed. The high fire Charles had built in the hearth blazed, accenting Wes’ auburn hair with flames of red and gold. Struggling to remove his shirt, he shot his head around when she suddenly appeared at his side. “Hell, Lacy. Stop this. Go get Charles.”

“No,” she told him sternly as she put a knee to the mattress, laid down the book and reached for the buttons on his shirt.

He clamped a hand over hers. “I will not allow this.”

She gave him a slow smile. “Throw me out.”

He screwed up his face and lifted his hand. Considering the ceiling, he said, “Hurry.”

She was quick as she cared to be. Which was to say, not very. One button was stuck. Her knuckles grazed his chest.

He smelled of the woods and the fire in the great room. She recalled how he had smelled so very much like...well, *Wes*, when she'd arrived and had held him and kissed him. How many nights had she lain awake at home in Grosvenor Square and recalled how she adored his natural musk and prayed for his safety in Spain? When she had the buttons undone, she brushed the fabric from his broad shoulders and he shivered. He turned his face away, and she knew he had chosen this side so that she could not see the fullness of his expression. But his taut mouth told her he was tense. Attracted. Fighting her.

She leaned over, inhaling his scent, and put her lips to his sternum.

He sucked in air.

Swift as a bird, she shifted and caught one of his nipples to suck it and lave it.

"Christ, Lacy." He pulled back.

She followed. Raining tiny kisses on his chest, she could feel how her robe gaped, her skin gliding over his furry chest, her own nipples peaking in urgency.

He shook. Leaning on his one good arm, he could only object with a shout. "Stop this!"

Her answer was to lean closer, grab the nape of his neck and give him a voluptuous kiss on the mouth.

This time, he groaned.

"I've thought of doing this," she whispered, her lips on his cheek, "since you said goodbye to me in the garden at the Rolands' ball, my love." There in late May, amid the aromas of fresh spring flowers, he had kissed her to distraction, affirming marriage as soon as he returned from the Peninsula. "I have wanted your power and charm every moment since I first saw you. And you, my darling, have wanted me." She inched up onto the bed beside him, letting the robe slip from her shoulders and puddle at her hips. "I have dreamed of you. This. Us."

"I have not dreamed of you," he told her, his face harsh, his lips hard.

"You lie," she said and traced the column of his throat with the tip of her nose.

"Leave me."

"I can't. I adore you. Don't you see?" She leaned back. Without looking down, she could tell her breasts beaded for him. Toward him.

His gaze fell there, and he blinked, his face drawn and sad. "I do see. As I saw the night we met. You are so lovely, darling. The Incomparable of The Season. Go home, Lacy." He pleaded with her now, even as he looked on her nakedness and treasured her with his adoration. "You can have so much more than me."

She leaned on one arm now, as comfortable in her nudity as she told herself she must be here to persuade him to her ends. "I have seen all those pretty boys who masquerade as men. You think I want any of them?" She arched a wicked brow at him. "Why would I?"

"There must be one among them whom you like?"

She lifted a shoulder. One breast wiggled. She grinned as he swallowed hard against the sight of her movements. "Perhaps."

"Who?" he demanded.

"Jealous?" *In spite of yourself? Oh, wonderful!* "Trenton Sullivan."

Wes ground his teeth. "A peacock."

"True."

"Why would you like him then?" he bit off, miffed.

Enjoying Wes' anger, she shot back, "He fancies me. He told me so. Would give me a closet full of gowns and his mama's diamonds."

"Bastard," Wes breathed. "What would you want with—"

"Diamonds?" She ran her fingers across her throat—low across her throat. "To persuade him to kiss me here? To show off to perfection what he might have?"

Wes cursed.

A frisson of excitement trilled up her spine. *Now we have progress.* "But you once told me I need no jewels." She skewered him with a look. "Were you talking idly?"

He made a study of her areolas. "No."

She inhaled and arched with the exertion. Wes watched like a hawk over prey. "Good. I did not think you lied to me then."

He reached out a hand, ready to cup her fullness but snatching away at the last moment. "Lacy. Lacy. I have never been false to you. You are quite exquisite." His voice was so low, she could barely hear him.

"I believed you," she got out. "That's why Trenton is no match for me."

Wes licked his lips, his gaze adoring her nipples. "No match is right."

She flowed forward, taking his hand, allowing her breast to rest in his palm. His flesh, once callused from years handling a sword and reins, were now smoother, his skin like a hard brazen breeze of summer.

“Oh, Wes, this is so good, my love.” Her arms went round his shoulders. Her skin slid along his chest, his strength still enough to make her moan and need him.

Against her cheek, his lips were torrid. “Lacy, darling. From the time I first saw you, talked with you, I knew you were willful. Demanding.”

“And you are just the man to be my match,” she told him and turned so that her mouth spoke on his.

“But now, no longer, Lacy.” He pushed her away, drew up the robe to cover her breasts and glared at her. “Get out of here.”

Hungering for him as she was, she struggled to raise her chin and appear unfazed by his rejection. “I came to read to you.”

“Like a child? No. Go to bed,” he ordered her and met her gaze with the one so many called his look. The Demand. “Leave me in peace.”

She knew there would be none for her tonight. She prayed god he found some. But judging from the peak in his trousers, she knew he would find no relief from wanting her unless he serviced himself. She stood, caught up her robe and marched to their connecting door then faced him. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He worked his jaw. “Know this. Come in here if you must. I have not the power to stop you. But I’ll not have you in here to tend to my private needs. I’ll have Charles. Only him. Stay as you must until the waters recede; I care not. We will be polite. We will talk and smile and pretend we are civil to each other.” He rose, hoisting himself up with his one good arm wrapped around the bedpost. His lightning gray eyes pierced hers with his determination. “And when the rains end, you will leave. As much a virgin as the moment you arrived.”

* * * *

She took the staircase down to the main floor, knowing what she must now do. She wasn’t pleased at the prospect, either. She was scared, knowing she tampered with loyalties and relationships so complex. She gave herself over to the strong resolve of which she knew herself capable.

A youngest child, the only daughter, the only surviving offspring of two parents who had never loved each other, Lacy understood the value of love in a family. She'd seen the devastation of its lack and the erosion of trust and civility when indifference ruled. When she had witnessed the binding effects of marital love, those delights had been nuggets to savor. She'd stored away the tidbits to treasure in her child's mind. Love was better. Love was rare. But loved ones could die, leaving nothing to the survivors, save the hollowness of daily existence.

She would not live her life without Wes. She didn't have to. He had survived Talavera—and she would see to it that he recuperated and thrived. With her. Where he belonged.

She was halfway to the kitchen when Charles pushed open the swinging dining room doors. Ever fastidious, he had a towel in one hand, a dish in the other.

"My lady?" He frowned. "What's wrong?" His gaze shot to the grand stairs then back to her. "Is the Colonel well?"

"Yes, very. He is nigh unto too well."

"I do not understand."

Charles shook his head, and she was certain he did that to keep his eyes in his head and not on her wrapper, gaping open to expose much of her breasts.

"How can he be too well?"

She strode to him and laid a hand on his wrist. "Please put these things down, and come talk to me."

He did not move a muscle. "No. Why?"

"I need your help, Charles."

He got a pained look on his face. "I doubt that."

His impertinence had her arching her brows at him. "Well, I do. So there. Now, stop pretending you are not attempting to preserve your power over Colonel Stanhope."

"Preserve my power?"

"Yes." She took the plate and towel from his fingers and placed them on the table. Then she summoned forth the determined girl, the coquette, the firebrand who knew how to cajole, how to tease and how to flirt. She put her hands on his waist. He smelled of soap and cedar. She looked up at him and praised her lucky stars that if she had to do this to gain Wes and save him from himself then she could do it with someone who cared for Wes. "I want you to help me raise the Colonel from his doldrums."

Charles stiffened and tried to step backward. "I would like to find a way, but fear there is none. The Colonel is stubborn."

"Hmm," she considered and stepped forward. Her wrapper, a thin covering over her breasts, now pressed against the plain white cotton of Charles' shirt. "Difficult. I agree. And there is only one way to ensure he faces the world once more." She shifted, her nipples rubbing against the silk and boring into his shirt.

Charles retreated a step. "How is that?"

She advanced. "To make him feel."

Charles inhaled. "Feel?"

"Alive," she whispered. "As alive as you and I are now." She shifted once more, her nipples suddenly as hard as stones.

He swallowed. "What do you mean to do?"

"Make him feel desire." She grasped Charles' shirt and rose on her toes. Against his lips, she said, "Make him feel need." She brushed her mouth on Charles' firm one. "For me."

Charles turned his head, but his eyes were languid, nearly closed. "And so you want me to help you?"

"Yes," she said against the strong column of his throat and pretended it was Wes'. "I want you to help me make him jealous."

He turned his face down to hers, his blue eyes rabid with dismay and desire. "How would I do that, my lady?"

"You will touch me," she told him, "here." She pressed his hands to her waist. "And here." She took a palm and put it to her throat where her pulse beat. "And here." She pressed his hand to her cheek. "And then you will kiss me."

"I doubt that," he argued but didn't sound as though he needed persuasion as much as instruction.

"Yes." She put two fingers to his lips, so like Wes'. Then she pressed her fingertips to her shoulder. "Kiss me here." Her cheek. "Here." The hollow of her throat. "And here. Will you? Please?"

He stared at her, his breathing thick.

“You know, Charles, he cannot continue as he is. He is too vital, too young, too talented an officer to simply give up on life. And love.” She pleaded with him, her heart in her words. “Say you will help me.”

“It is a tall order, my lady.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t normally make advances to women above my station. And never to any woman whom the Colonel wished to entertain.”

She bristled a bit at the mere idea that Wes had once had other women. “But he never asked any of those women to marry him, did he?”

“No, my lady.”

“And did you like any of them yourself, Charles?”

“No, my lady. Never.”

She smiled at him. “We have an agreement then.” She took his hand and placed it around her waist so that she was pressed fully against him. “For now. For this purpose. You will come to my aid.”

“How?” He looked uneasy but eager. “How will I know you wish my advances?”

“I will gaze at you with purpose. You will know.”

He stared.

“I could brush against you. And you could respond.” *Like a stallion to a mare.* “You will know, Charles. Women are not strangers to your bed, I imagine?”

He nodded. “Very well. I will do as you wish. But for no more than what you define.”

Eager to establish the boundaries and thrilled with her victory, she stepped away and secured the wrapper around her waist. “I love the Colonel.”

“I know you do, my lady. And he loves you.”

She whispered, “Thank you, Charles. I could not accomplish this without you.”

She left, her head high, her attempt at an illusion of propriety and ladylike behavior elusive as sleep later became.

And as the hours passed while she lay awake in her bed, she pondered many puzzles. Surely, she was not attracted to Charles as mightily as Wes.

Why would she even think to approach Charles with such a gambit? She had never imagined such an idea before coming here and confronting such a problem.

Why would Charles agree and rather readily, too? This was an extraordinary offer she had made to him. If Charles was not used to sharing Wes’ conquests—or taking Wes’ leavings,

then what made him agree? Could it be possible he found her not just attractive but irresistible? She concluded he had.

But the one question that had her pacing the floor back and forth, back and forth, was the one to which she had no answer. Would Wes respond to this ploy before she had to allow Charles more liberties than she had planned?

Only time would tell.

Chapter Four

Wes heard Lacy coming down the central stairs the next morning as the hall clock struck ten. She hummed a bawdy tune that had Wes wondering where the hell she'd learned it. Charles, too, startled at the sound, raising his head from his task of dusting the sideboard and glancing sideways at Wes.

"Good morning," she bid Wes gaily as she crossed the great room to his chair to sink her fingers up into his hair and kiss his lips lavishly. "How did you sleep?"

"Very well." But silently, Wes cursed. He'd thought of her all night. In the next room. In the damn wrapper. With those two full breasts brushing against the silk. Her nipples outlined by the diaphanous stuff. His cock shockingly hard. Harder than he thought it could be ever again. Hard as he was now.

She gazed into his eyes, her own twinkling. "The rain is an utter downpour."

Wes could have laughed at how the weather conspired with her plan, but he merely nodded.

"You've had your breakfast, I imagine?" She glanced over her shoulder at Charles and smiled at him. "What did you prepare, Charles?"

"Biscuits. Eggs."

"Might you have any left?" She straightened and walked toward Charles then squeezed his hand. "I am so hungry."

Wes set his teeth. The way she touched Charles' hand, she appeared to be starved for more than breakfast.

"Do come, Charles," Lacy beckoned his man with a sweet appeal in her voice. "You must show me."

Wes narrowed his gaze on his houseguest and his man. Lacy needed no lead. She always had her own head. So what was this sudden dance?

And why could Charles not take his eyes from her?

His man put down his dusting cloth, took a look at Wes and turned like a marionette to follow Lacy's swaying hips.

Wes drummed his fingers on the armrest then rose like a shot. He got his damn footing but couldn't seem to get to the kitchen soon enough.

The two of them stood there, as if frozen in time. Lacy's delicate hand was on Charles'. Her lips parted as she gazed into Charles' eyes.

Wes let the kitchen door swing back and forth. *Thwump. Thwump.*

The two of them turned their heads. Neither of them seemed disturbed, concerned.

I am! "When you finish, Lacy, come out. I wish to speak with you."

"Certainly, Wes. Charles is just asking me how I like my eggs. Aren't you," she crooned and stared up at the man with too much admiration, "Charles?"

Wes grumbled to himself.

Minutes later, she deigned to appear at his side. Still licking her lips from her repast, little she-devil that she was, she came to stand before him. "Marvelous cook, Charles is. How did he learn?"

Wes arched a brow at her. "He learned on the fields of Portugal. Never knew how to cook a crumb until I demanded it. So do not regale me with your praise of his talents." *You are trying to incite me.*

"My, my." She tossed her long, pale locks over her shoulder, caught back in a pink ribbon today. "Let me give you a pillow to support your arm." She strode to the settee and picked up a small, old thing then came back and lifted his arm. "We must really build up your strength here, darling."

"I am fine as I am."

"I dare say, not." She arranged his arm and hand just so, draping his fingers over the curve of the pillow and smoothing them down. "I know a remedy," she called and spun toward the kitchen again. "I'll see if Charles has any idea where I might acquire the ingredients."

"Lacy!" he called in vain.

She'd gone back to Charles. For what? Comfort? Another breakfast?

Wes snorted. With his good hand, he picked at his trousers. Then he brooded. Remembering her mouth beneath his. Her breasts against his chest. He had always told himself

she would be his equal in bed, her sweet juicy little cunt grasping his cock like a vise and holding him.

Hell. What idiocy to want her.

And what the hell was she doing? With Charles, too.

He fisted both hands. He could not kill his own sergeant. A man had been with him as his servant since he'd been in knee britches.

Wes rose and went to the window, yanked the casement open and inhaled the smell of torrential rain and autumn. There she was, hurrying toward the smokehouse and the stables, Charles close behind her.

What now?

He might take a switch to Charles.

Oh, bloody hell. He couldn't do that. Not to a man who was most likely his half-brother. The man was so loyal, so devoted that he had forsaken his own amorous interest in Wes' Aunt Amaryllis' housemaid to go to war with Wes time and again.

Damn. How ungrateful can I be?

Ungrateful enough to want Charles to keep his hands to himself.

Wes cursed, lumbered to the hall closet and peered around in the dark for his coat on a hook. *Where the hell had Charles put it?*

Ah. He grabbed the tweed and picked his way toward the kitchen, out the back door, down the stone path and into the smokehouse. He flung open the door. They weren't here. He rubbed his jaw and whirled for the wooden building along the same path. The stables.

Raindrops dripping down his temples, he stood inside the stables. Turning, he heard his horses stomping. In the shadows, he heard the murmurings of his man and the woman who should have been his own.

He rounded a stall, and there they stood, Charles lowering his face to hers, his own eyes closed, his lips almost touching her throat.

"Hello! What is your business out here?" Wes glared from one to the other.

They broke apart like guilty thieves.

Lacy brushed her palms over her skirts. "Charles was showing me your horses."

Wes took two steps forward to peer down at her. "Why? You know good horseflesh when you see it. You helped your father raise his bloodlines. And what is your excuse, Charles?"

“Sir! I was merely following her request to—”

“Yes, yes.” Wes waved a hand at Charles. “Leave us.”

Charles departed with a long, last glance at Lacy.

When the sound of Charles’ footsteps died away, Wes asked, “You like him?”

She demurred with a shrug. “Charles resembles you.”

“Is that why you like him?” He stepped right up to her and took her forearm. The mere feel of her tiny bones under his hand made his cock stiffen and his balls twitch.

“Yes.”

Wes examined her. *Witch.*

“And no.” She pulled out of Wes’ grasp and made her way to his newest acquisition, a mare he intended to mate to his new stallion. *Might as well breed them if I can’t ride them.* “I like Charles for himself. He is quite knowledgeable about you.”

“You need know nothing about me.”

“But I do.” She approached the mare. “I need to know what happened to you in Talavera. Why you do not wish to be with people.” Lacy patted the mane of the mare that seemed to nod that she was happy to be noticed. “Why you do not wish to be with me.”

“It was war, Lacy.”

“You think I cannot understand that.”

“Why should you?”

“Because I love you!” she bellowed. The horse whinnied. She spun to face the animal. “Sorry,” she said to the beast in the kindest tone, but to Wes she was argumentative. “Other men come home to their loved ones. Why not you?”

“Because I am not whole!”

“Or do not wish to be?”

He spun and almost fell over with the propulsion. “I will not argue with you.”

“Nor I with you.”

He had to walk away. Save himself from the ripe temptation to shut her up with a kiss.

“Do not leave me, Wes.” She said it in such a way that she clearly referred to much more than what he did at this moment.

He stopped in his tracks. Her tone gutted him.

Her arms surrounded him. Caught him back to her body. “I love you, Wes.”

“That feeling is best left to the libraries and ballrooms where we met once in peacetime.”

“Is love only for those rooms? Those times?” She strode around to face him then stood up on her toes and kissed him, lavishly, endlessly.

His lips ached with the beauty of it. His cock throbbed with the need to demonstrate his devotion to her.

She circled her arms around his neck. “I think such passion is for all the times of our lives.” She put her lips to his throat, one hand to his chest where the heat of her palm burned his chest. “All the places where we can be happy.” Her hips pressed against his and his cock, damn willful thing, sprang up higher, hard as iron. Suddenly, her hand was there, undoing his flies and reaching inside to caress him. “There is the proof we can be.”

She stepped backward, and he felt her loss like a wave of gall flowing over him. She worked at the ribbons beneath her bodice, freeing her dress and just as quickly, pulling it over her head. She was—*my god*—naked.

He stood so still he could have sworn he was felled by a falling tree.

Her skin, so perfect on her face, was a flawless expanse of porcelain. Her shoulders, trim. Her arms, long and lithesome. Her breasts, dear heaven, plump, up-turned handfuls, her nipples pink as June’s roses. Her waist was small, but oh, she could and would bear beautiful babies. With those hips, she could carry children, but she would first hold a man in thrall. Her nether hair was a frothy platinum bush to match the glory of the curls on her head. And the plush wealth of her pussy made him lick his lips, wanting to taste and feel the plump lips of her *chat*.

Her gaze in his, she pulled at his trousers and sent them down his thighs. Her two hot little hands cupped his shaft then squeezed gently. Leading him backward, she lay down on a low haystack. If he’d had his right mind, he would have laughed, but she was leading him by his cock and damn his soul if he could say no. Or think straight.

She widened her trim thighs. And tipped up her hips. Her pussy was an irresistible invitation. Her blonde hair framed her thick, pouting lips. Her labia glistening with her desire for him. Her seam, long and red. Her tiny little asshole, a rose, too. His. All his. To have and to hold and damn, if he wasn’t going to feast on her, here and now. Vows or not.

He raked his hair. He knew he was mad. She was clever. He was needy. And she had driven him here, knowing full well he would lay her down and take her, letting no man—not even his half brother—intercede and put their affection to any unreasoned test.

“Lacy.” He bent over her, one knee to the side of her hip, his one good eye scanning her flushed face and her gorgeous sultry body. “You must not do this. The hay will torment you.”

She stroked his rod, long and evenly. “You torment me.”

“I will not make love to you for the first time in my barn with your ass in the prickly hay!”

She beamed at him, triumphant, testy. “If we leave here, I do not trust that you’ll fuck me at all!” As he gasped at her ribald words, she got a handful of his two balls and massaged him.

“You must have me here. Now. I will not stop, and I will not move.”

He swallowed hard, summoning some self-control. “Lacy, you cannot imagine what you ask for.”

“I don’t want to imagine,” she crooned and kissed his mouth, his dimple, his throat. She rubbed her thumb over the slit of his cockhead, and he bucked.

“Very well,” he growled and glanced down at her sweet little *chat*. He’d have her and in his own way, too. “Don’t. Feel.” He pushed her knees wide, her pussy now spread open, her slit parting and allowing him the first glimpse of her need. “Spread your legs wider. Wider! I need to see! That’s right. Christ, you are beautiful.” He gathered a handful of her pussy hair and combed it. Then he traced a finger down her seam. He could smell her. How musky, how florid. He inserted a determined finger to her cunt and sank right in. She was so wet, so sodden, he groaned and stroked her sopping channel. Then he lifted his fingertip to his mouth. She tasted of sunshine and lust.

She watched him, mouth open, fascinated.

He winked at her and nearly wept with joy at the sweet, thick flavor of her cream. Bracing himself on the damn hay, he nestled himself down and parted her plump labia even wider. “Your lips are beautiful rose petals, my love. I want to learn each curve.” He traced a fingertip over the edge of one lip. “And taste all of you.” His tongue defined the delicate fold of another. Blowing air on her hot pussy, he thumbed open the apex of her labia and found her swollen little nub to pinch it and make her moan. “This is a sweet bud I must have in my mouth.” With parted lips, he surrounded her clitoris, tongued her to a keen then sucked her high and hard into his mouth.

Somewhere in his head, he heard her scream. Spurred on by her whimpers, he laved her juicy flesh.

She thrashed on the hay and called his name. He sucked her wildly into his mouth, shot two strong fingers up her cunt and felt the power of her delight. Her walls pounded against him, and he rejoiced that she was so giving and he such a cad to take her, have her this way without benefit of vows.

She rose up, her fingers plucking at his shoulders.

He gathered her close and crushed her nearer. *God what a fool you are, Stanhope. No will power at all where she's concerned. Never had any.*

He brushed her hair from her forehead. "You liked that." He smiled sadly at her.

She beamed back at him. "I never knew."

"From what I hear, few women do."

"I want more." She wended her hand down to cup his very large and sensitive cock. "I want you inside me. Now, Wes."

Craven, unprincipled, Wes knew he had lost his reason, but the drive to have her was a ripe and insidious thing he could not deny. Could not hold back.

He parted her thick, slick lips with his cock and slid inside her. Until there was a barrier. *As I knew there would be.*

He dropped his forehead to her shoulder. This is what came of wanting a willful woman without regard to logic or consequence.

He drove inside her carefully. She was swollen, tight and small, so small he thought he'd give her his seed and end it right then. *Jesus.*

He twisted up inside her. Her juicy walls gave, caressing him. He could go no further but savored heaven, paralyzed by her sweet cunt.

She gave a little sound.

He looked down at her. "Lacy, I am sorry, darling."

She shook her head and, with two hands to his face, said, "I do not break."

"Strong and wise. But in the act of love, I know best how this must be done." He slid out of her.

"No! Don't stop. Don't!"

"I won't leave you." *How can I now?* He kissed her, her fragrance on his lips and filling the air around them, drowning him even further in a sensual haze. "I need to make you happy."

"You have," she protested as he reached for her gown and handed it to her.

“Not like I will now. Upstairs in my bed.”

Chapter Five

They passed Charles in the kitchen, Lacy giving the servant a smile of gratitude. He had done well by her and, thank the good lord, done it so quickly that she need not seduce him any longer.

Wes walked beside her, his step—she could have sworn—faster, lighter.

But the distance from stable to his bedroom seemed half a world away for all Lacy's need to have him inside her once more. *Safe, with me. Always, with me.*

She walked ahead of him up the stairs, brushing away the drops of rain from her face and bosom. She opened his door and proceeded to the center of the room. He shut the door with a soft thud.

She spun, facing him, aware now she had what she had come for. His attention. His care. His love? Ah. That she had always had, lust though it might have been the night they'd met. Their love would always contain lust, though this morning she would mix it with commitment, and like a good batter, add understanding later.

She watched him sink against the door. His rugged face was flushed, his scar vivid, his golden red hair mussed from their encounter. His lightning gray eye danced down her body. He was a sore sight. A man in love.

"Shall I pretend to be the demure girl now?"

"Do as you wish, pet."

He pushed away from the door to advance slowly on her. For the first time, she noticed he had walked inside without the cane.

"You have so far and look where you have me."

That made her grin. She crisscrossed her hands to lift her gown but then thought better of the plan. She strolled forward, the coquette coming out to play with the man she adored. He halted at her advance, his feet planted firmly.

With a finger trailing down his chest, she leaned up and widened her eyes at him. “I’d rather see you.”

He snorted. “I am not as lovely.”

“To me you are,” she whispered and ran the tip of her nose down his throat.

“I am not as graceful, either.” He grasped her by the waist.

She smiled, wickedness in her wink. “You did not plan to seduce me, either, this morning when you dressed. So I am certain, you are encumbered with all sorts of clothes you now do not need.” She stepped backward and crossed her arms, the better to keep her hands to herself. “Go on, Colonel. I await your pleasure.”

“Damn right, you do.” He fiddled with his shirt ties, undid the buttons on his flies and stepped from his shoes. With a few flicks of his fingers, he cast off his shirt and let his trousers drop, then his small clothes.

She bit her lip.

He stepped from the heap of his clothes, and she was breathless with the glory that was Colonel Wesley Stanhope of His Majesty’s Hussars.

True, he bore the scars of his career in the cavalry. A slash across his taut ribs. A nasty gash, now healed, on his massive left thigh. The wounds of Talavera shone more brightly though, more starkly, and she caught back a gasp. He would not want her pity. Not now. Never here.

His left arm hung at an odd angle, witness to how it had been broken and not appropriately healed. His left ankle was larger than the right, but both corded legs looked healthy, normal. Of course, there was the scar that could not diminish but only enhanced his square jaw, his dimple and make him more debonair than the night she’d decided he was destined to be hers. And as for the eye patch, evidence of the loss of his left eye to a saber’s cut? Ah. That she could not heal, but she had made him see how she loved him—and she could and would make him see so much more.

“What do you think?” he asked, his left eye muscle twitching beneath the patch, showing his nerves and his tremulous distaste for her examination of his wounded body.

“Shall I tell you?” she whispered and walked forward to press her torso to his and enfold him. “Darling.” She splayed her fingers atop the breadth of his chest. He was so big, his muscles so pronounced, her fingers did not meet. She sent her hands down his huge arms. He was power

and might. Sleek and sturdy. She twisted her hands down to run them over his ribs, and as she sank her fingers to his groin into his nether hair, she barely made a sound as she said, “You are stunning. A male creature who makes me want and need.”

He hauled her against him, one hand driving up into her hair, sending her ribbon to the floor. “I wish to hell I were that creature who loved you the first night we met.”

“Would you have made love to me then?” she asked, enthralled by the way he kissed his way down her throat.

“Aye. If you’d been mine then, I would have taken you in Adam’s library.”

“Ah,” she said, “and here I thought you were such a gentleman.”

“I tried but failed with you, Lady Featherstone.” He lifted her face and focused on her lips. “Now that I’ve had a taste of you, I think I’ll have you wherever I want, whenever I want.”

“Oh, good!” She gave him a peck on the lips. “Will you please do me a favor?”

“Mmm. What?”

“Hurry.”

He laughed then, throwing back his head then crushed her to him to take her lips in a fierce assault. “You have to ask for mercy, my lady, because I intend to have every morsel of you in my hands.” He kissed her then, all lips and tongue and teeth. “And in my mouth.”

She shivered and pulled out of his arms. Knowing his infirmities and his balance were off, she gave in to her own impatience and reached down to gather up her gown to once more fling it off.

“In the bright light of day, my darling Lacy,” Wes said as he took one step toward her then another, “you shine like fine ivory silk.”

She grabbed his hand and led him beside her to the bed then spun to face him. “I hope to god you do not treat me like I’m silk.”

He smoothed her hair back from her face and cupped her chin with one strong hand. “I shall treat you like my lover.”

“Precisely what I am!” She fell back on the mattress, up on her elbows to beckon him with wagging fingers. “Come up here and show me.”

But he hovered over her hips, his arms shaking with exertion. Or was it tense delight?

Then, with two hands to her knees, he spread her legs and looked his fill. “You have the loveliest *chat*.”

She vibrated at the compliment. "So you have said. Will you have more of me?" she asked, her voice tremulous with expectation. "That way?"

His lightning gray eye sparked with sensual need. "You crave more of that?"

"I do." She undulated. "I do. I never knew men loved women like that."

"Pleasure comes in many forms."

"I've seen only one. Like animals mate."

He hooted. "Like a stallion takes a mare."

"Yes," she whispered. "Take me that way, will you?"

He advanced on her, hovering over her, like the warrior he was. Fierce, bold, massive, and so amused. The dimple in his left cheek twitched. "I'll have you in so many ways, your head will spin."

She pressed her breasts together in glee. "I'm ready. Let's get to it!"

"A harpy!" he chuckled, but his expression died to a serious note. "I fear to hurt you though. You are, my darling, very small here." His fingers slid to her seam and glided up inside her.

"Too small?" She panicked. "Do you not like me?"

"Sweetheart, shh." He soothed her with tiny strokes inside her body. "I adore you. You are just precisely the right size for me."

She relaxed and took his cock in her one fist. "And you, my darling, are very well hung."

He snorted. "The better to please you, you demanding piece."

She opened her legs so wide that his hips sank between them. Against her core, she felt the hard rod of his manhood. "Put that inside me. No more delays."

He insinuated one arm behind her hips and lifted her then sent his cock up inside her to the hilt. She hung suspended in the euphoria of what she had needed for months and months. Wesley Stanhope, deep inside her mind and heart, now going deep inside her body.

But he halted. Caught his breath. "We must breach this."

She knew he meant her virginal wall. Arms to the mattress, she braced herself. "Do it."

He snorted and brushed his lips on hers. "Courageous Lacy."

"Eager Lacy. Dying Lacy." She cuffed him. "Wes?" she pleaded.

"Shh. One stroke and then you will enjoy this. I will ensure it."

He plunged forward, and she felt only his move to claim her.

“There,” he said.

She grinned. “Easy. So easy.”

He kissed her quickly. Then he began moving like a sleepwalker, slow and steady, his mouth against her ear, breathing words of passion. Words she had needed from him. Some she’d never heard but needed to. From him. “Sweet Lacy, god, you feel divine. Lacy, small and tender. You have the juiciest cunt. The thickest cream... Christ. How you take all of me... You are a prize. Mine to fuck.”

The sensation of his cock claiming her made her frantic, blissful. Her cunt throbbed and pulsed. She wanted to cry out how she needed him to stroke her, take her, do her harder, faster. She bit her lip, dug her nails into his back and just let loose with a scream of wild delight.

He anchored himself to her, his hips pumping into her with swift force. “That’s right, love. Go. Cry! God, you are so good.”

He shouted and then he stopped.

His mouth to her throat, he fell over her body then rolled to the side. He outlined her mouth with a fingertip then cupped one breast and thumbed a nipple. “Did I hurt you?”

She examined him. He was all concern for her, soft and sweet, the caring lover. His face was relaxed, his mouth moist and swollen from their kisses. His dimple roguishly showed in his handsome square face. His scar along his left cheek seemed redder with his exertion. And for the first time, she could see how the field surgeon had sewn down the lid where once his left eye had been.

Her Wes. He was dear and kind, hurt but a hero to his men, to his commander and country. But to her, he was her man to love. And how he had once been hurt was in savagery, man’s inhumanity to man. What he had done now with her, was in another cause. A gentler, nobler one.

She pressed a palm to his left cheek and covered his scar, “No, Wes. You have made love to me.”

“I want to ensure you love the act. Love what we do together. I could not bear it if you turned on me now that we are one.”

“What makes you think I would?”

“The scope of human emotion is wide.”

“I doubt you could ever hurt me.” She asserted this with firm knowledge.

He pushed up and left the bed. He scowled as he rose, suddenly realizing he had lost his patch, and he snatched it up off the bed.

Lacy did not move. She would not call attention to its loss. Or his. This was not the time or place. And the issue they had just opened was a terrible topic that she knew better than to probe. Not now. Later.

He went to the sideboard and donned the patch once more then poured fresh water from a pitcher into a large porcelain bowl. Taking up toweling and a bit of soap, he rinsed his hands then brought the cloth toward her. "Open your legs, Lacy."

This time she did so slowly. And while passion sparked in his one good eye, his desire died to sweet concern as he put the cool towel to her hot, moist cunt and washed her carefully, lavishly. When he was done, he leaned over to kiss her mouth. But hands to her ankles, he spread her thighs again and, once more, bent to take her with his strong, demanding mouth.

He ran the tip of his tongue down her seam. Plumped her lips and shot two large fingers up inside her. She whimpered with the fullness. Then he rolled her cunt open, found her nub and ran the edge of his teeth over her taut little bud.

She cried out and put a hand to her cunt but he tore it away. "Nothing between us."

He parted her more fully then, placed his torrid mouth over her and feasted on her slick, demanding flesh.

She keened, plucking at his shoulders when she suddenly felt the ferocious need to buck and scream and went out of her mind with a gale force tearing through her loins.

He caught her to him. "Roll over."

At first, she couldn't understand but scrambled to do it.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, draping his body over hers, both on their knees.

"As you want," he gruffed and sent his cock up along her slit from behind. "Like your precious horses."

Then he found her cunt, driving inside with a long spearing thrust that had her gasping for air.

Bent up and back, she felt his huge penis filling her, rubbing her, stroking her with such force, she groaned.

"You like this?" he asked, hoarse.

"Yes," she ground out as he impaled her time and again in brusque rapture. "Oh, yes."

He put his lips to her back, his one arm around her hip to play with her wet cunt. She undulated against him, as he rammed her over and over with his huge, plunging cock. Then once more, she felt her pussy walls grasp him, ride him, vibrate against him, and she knew she was a perfect mate for this man.

This was what she had dreamed of long ago, when she was a child and she'd watched her mares and stallions mate. This was what she had seen, the male's long penis, nearly to the ground, so huge, so dark. Sinking inside the mare. Taking her. Making her bare her teeth as he mounted her where she stood.

"That," Wes said when he rolled her over, breathless, frantic and grabbed her chin to kiss her. "That is what you shall have each time we mate. Each time we love, you will come. Come like a crazy woman."

"Yes!" She tried to wrap her arms around him, but he evaded her. Instead, he pulled from her reach and turned toward the headboard. Situating himself against a few of his pillows, he sat down, his cock up and weeping for her.

"Come here." He patted his lap. "Put your lovely legs over mine and let me fuck you this way."

She scrambled up to drape her limbs over his. Eager to touch him, she cupped his rod and cradled his balls in her hands.

He caressed her breasts. "I do not mean to neglect your lovely nipples." He bent forward to lave one with tender care while he thumbed the other. Then he nipped her and captured the other in his mouth. "You are a treasure. Made for me."

With one hand, she caught herself from falling backward.

"And you for me." She sent her hand down between them to recapture his penis and nestle his tip near her entrance, the memory of his size a sizzling temptation. She strained to get closer. "Please now, Wes."

He slid inside her, easily, slowly and with such ease, that they each looked at the other, stunned and pleased.

Her eyes fell closed. The sensation of him, the fullness of him in this position, was not what she had felt before. He was more.

He pushed up inside her, anchoring her to him, the sound of her liquid want, sweet and succulently seductive.

Then he began a rhythm of slow and steady possession that had her rocking with him. Biting her lip, she tried to watch, but the view was difficult, the sensation too wild. She gave herself up to the torrent. This, this was what she had wanted from him.

“Wes!” she called out to him as a flood of excitement rushed over her once more.

He held her fast and hard, flowing into her with an increasingly forceful pace that had her rising to the ecstasy she’d known just minutes ago.

He rose from the bed, pulled her hips toward him, putting her legs in the air and holding her ankles. And then he fucked her. Good and long and hard and oh so sweetly that when she could not stand the heat or the pressure, she broke apart in a thousand tiny pieces, yelled how she adored him and went limp. He pounded into her, a few more joyous thrusts, his teeth bared as he growled and grunted then, bracing himself inside her, gave her his seed.

She drifted to a boneless rest as he crawled up beside her, clasped her to his side and said, “Lacy. Now, god help us both, you are mine. For good or bad.”

She smiled at him, happy beyond her dreams. “In sickness and in health.”

And they held each other for a timeless afternoon as the fire in the grate blazed higher and the rainstorm outside raged.

Chapter Six

Wes worried what to do about their wedding. When to get the minister. How to do so without causing a stir among the villagers. Or rumors flying back to London, Lacy's father, or his own brother, Adam, an MP with sensitivity to scandal.

But the rain was a torrent. Day after night. The lawns sodden. The air thick. The wind brisk and brittle. If the roads had been impossible the day Lacy had arrived, they had disappeared now. His front drive was submerged. His stone paths to the smokehouse and stables, all pools of water.

He had no thoughts now of sending her home. Not without him. The thought of her leaving his seclusion without his name sickened him.

But urgency was paramount. They had coupled frequently, wildly. He had taken her often, and she had rejoiced in it. She must sometime very soon tell her father of her marriage. Wes would have it no other way. He liked Lord Featherstone immensely. A sharp-witted man, but kind and loving to his only surviving child, Lord Girard Featherstone occasionally sported an unnatural anger. And a steady hand with a pistol.

Wes knew he could explain himself to Lord Feather, as many called the man, by telling him he loved his daughter. He had since that first night at Adam's when she had pursued him and had shown her true colors. Her determination. Her resolve. His kind of woman. Out of bed. And in it? Well. Had he not found her irresistible for the past two days he'd loved her here in his bed? He had not let her leave, could not bear to part with her.

He'd ordered Charles to bring up a hip bath twice a day then watched her bathe, taking the sponge and soap himself when the need to put his hands on her was more than reason allowed. He'd picked her up from the copper tub by the armpits, surprised at his own strength, and put her down on his bed, sopping wet, then spread her pretty pussy lips and laved her until she'd groaned for him to put his cock inside her.

Of course, he now must marry her. Not really a hardship on him, their union was certainly a foregone conclusion. A man could not take a titled lady to bed—a virgin and the daughter of a man he respected—and not offer her his name and house and board. Even if the man did not love the young thing, he had to do his duty.

But Wes did love this headstrong creature. And he did want her. Though, Christ knew, he might live to regret it, and he knew she would.

When he would not go out in public, when he would remain here for all his days on this earth, when he chose to read and write and raise his horses, how would she take all that? A woman like Lady Lacy Featherstone would perhaps take umbrage. At first. Then she'd take herself to town. Take a lover. Take more.

Wes swallowed hard on that prospect. She was his jewel, his darling. Could he stand to see her walk away from him now that he had tasted her sweet little cunny and ripped open her hymen? Worse rakes existed in the *ton*. Wes knew. He had caroused with the best and worst of them. So had his older brother Jack. Only Adam, their youngest brother, had taken a wife at a young age and kept his respectability intact until his first wife cuckolded him and forced him to a mistress' arms. But Adam, relieved of his first wife by a deathly illness, was now wed once more and needed no comforts from a kept woman. He had a darling of a wife.

As I will.

Wes rose from his bed the third morning of Lacy's intrusion to his life and peered down at her beauty. Even asleep she was a siren. All sinuous grace, relaxed and totally disarming in her dishabille. Her pale hair tangled on his pillows. Her long arms flung this way and that. Her lips, dear heaven, her wide plush lips open in an invitation to kiss them, unawake and unaware of how he could not control his urge to taste her, take her.

He brushed his mouth on hers. "Wake up, I want you again." He kissed his way down her naked torso, nipped at her soft, pink nipples. "Your breasts are eager to make love," he murmured and wended his way to her navel then found the part of her he had to possess, it seemed, hourly. "And your pussy wants me to pet her."

She made mewling sounds that told him she sparked to his advances. "What will you do for me if I let you have her?"

"Lick her."

"Suck her?"

“Bite her.”

“Ah.” She cuffed him on the shoulder as she rolled over. “Have me this way you insatiable man.” She raised her ass in the air.

He bent and smacked her taut little cheek.

“Ouch.” She burrowed into the sheets. “You are a terrible man. So demanding.” She wiggled her buttocks at him. “So tormenting.”

He rose to his knees and reached around to slid his hand over her stomach and sink it in her bush. She was wet with him from last night’s fucking, but she also gave off fresh cream that meant his fingers sank inside her cunt easily. He found her clitoris to pinch her and encircle the tiny nub. His penis slid along her seam from the back, and he knew the way they fit together was perfect. He found her vaginal core and sank inside in one swift drive.

She hissed.

He pulled out and rammed inside more deeply.

She gasped in delight. “What a way to say good morning.”

He chuckled and bit her shoulder. “You drive me to it.” He caught her hair back to nip her neck.

“Do I? How do I do that, pray tell?”

“Merely breathe, my beauty. And you have me in your hand.”

“I daresay at the moment, I do not.” She moaned as he sank inside her to the hilt and ground himself against her. “Though I look forward to having you there.”

“Chit. You are not supposed to know what to do with a man’s cock in your fist.”

“Mmm. Then you must teach me.” She braced herself in the wealth of the bedclothes and pushed her ass back toward him. “Fuck me, now, damn it, Wes. And later, I’ll take you in my hand.”

He hastened to do her bidding.

“Or can I have you in my mouth?”

* * * *

The morning of the fifth day, Lacy stretched out her arms as she awakened to find Wes had left her alone. Not his normal practice to leave her early, he usually fucked her at least once before rising from their bed.

She smiled and ran her palms over her breasts. Her nipples beaded, used to his touch, his lips and his tongue on her there. *And here, too*, she thought as she stroked her stomach and spread her pussy wide. Aching to have him inside, she inserted her fingers into her wet core and arched, sighing. She found her little bud that he loved to pinch and nip, circling it herself and feeling her temperature rise with interest in the artfulness of Wes' love play.

She had chosen well, this man who was thirteen years older than she. A man with a renowned career in the cavalry. A man with a reputation among women. Women not of his station. Not of hers. He'd told her the other day the reasons for that.

"The family curse is one we Stanhopes learn about at an early age. We are told to beware of love. But lust? Ah. Well. Lust and mistresses are permitted. Witness my father. He's had as many women as he can line up to share his bed. Most of those whom he claims to have loved, he did marry. Jack's mother, mine, Adam's. Clarice's mother, too, he loved, but could not wed. She was already married to an ancient man, and Father did the man the service of providing him with his own heir, which he gladly accepted though a female."

"And so you have had affairs?" Lacy had persisted.

"With the wars, I thought I might not survive. Or become..." He'd winced. "Maimed. A monster."

"You are no monster but a strong and daring man, my love." She had risen from the bed then to wrap her arms around his waist and lay her head against his chest. "And you certainly are no cripple. I will show you."

"I can barely make love to you without shaking."

"A sign of you having lolled about here! No indication of your true potential." She'd kissed his throat. "Once the sun comes out, we will build your strength. Go for long walks. Put you on that marvelous beast of a horse in the stable. And you will ride."

"No, I will not."

"Of course, you will." She had rubbed her breasts against him. "You would not let me ride alone, now would you?"

He had vowed he would not allow her out of his sight for year. "Perhaps not even out of this bed for another five!"

She grinned at the memory of his joke. It represented the return of his natural humor, a quality lacking from his demeanor the first few days she'd been here. The next quality she

wished to help him reclaim was his confidence in himself, and she pondered how to ensure its return.

His revelation that he had never gone into the village since his arrival here weeks ago and that he had sent Charles on every errand worried her. Her charming, clever colonel would not, could not hide away from the world. She would not allow that. He had too much to offer to his country, his men and to her to wither away in this old pile of stones.

She rose from the bed and pulled on her silk wrapper then paced the floor.

If Wesley would not go to the world, she would have to bring it to him. Wouldn't she?

How best to accomplish that?

* * * *

"I suspect the sun got jealous of the clouds and ordered them to exile," Lacy gaily told Wes five days hence when they had enjoyed brilliant weather for four days running.

Wes had sent a message to the vicar as soon as the clouds parted, and he awaited the cleric's presence here tomorrow as Wes had instructed. "About time, too. Now all we need is the roads to emerge from the muck." *And I will make Lacy a married woman.*

Serving luncheon, Charles placed before Lacy a bowl of the stew Lacy had prepared herself early that morning. "The road from here to town is dry. The riverbanks have receded, too. The coach to London is running again."

Wes raised his gaze to Lacy but asked of his man, "When did it resume?"

"John Topper said day before yesterday."

Lacy bit her lower lip and considered her dinner. "When you went to buy the ale today, did he give you any news of the post?"

"Mail went out three days ago. John expects our delivery here restored tomorrow."

Charles glanced sideways at Lacy.

Wes smarted at the look. *What was that?* His man was not still making advances on Lacy, was he? Would Charles dare to touch Lacy now? Now that he knew she slept in Wes' bed? Now that he knew what Wes planned for tomorrow? Still, the incident shook him. *Good thing you have made arrangements with the vicar or you would be fit for bedlam with your worry over her reputation.*

"Thank you, Charles," he instructed in his commander's voice. "We are well served. You may leave us."

“Yes, Colonel.”

After a minute of silence, Lacy put down her fork and inhaled deeply. “You must know he is not being bold with me.”

Wes met her glance. “I have only one eye, but I know what I see. He gave you a look.”

“It was...” She waved a hand.

Wes threw down his napkin. “Do not demean yourself by telling me—”

“If you will let me finish, Wes, I will tell you that he is concerned for me. That is what it was. Concern.”

“He is not making himself a nuisance?” Wes’ blood pounded with the very idea.

“No.” She put a hand over his. “Darling, stop. He is your loyal man. Always has been. He was helping me make you jealous, and now that you and I are one, he is done with paying me attention. Besides Charles has confided in me that he cares deeply for a maid in the service of your Aunt Amaryllis Stanhope.”

Wes felt mollicoddled and grumbled. “It’s true. Patsy O’Shea is a parlor maid in my aunt’s house in Park Lane. She served briefly in my father’s house, but Aunt Amaryllis took her a few years ago when she needed new staff.”

“So there you have it!” Lacy lifted both shoulders, a smile wreathing her face. “You should let them marry, you know. Suggest it, in fact.”

Wes frowned at her once more. “I doubt my Aunt Amaryllis needs a sergeant who—”

He shut his mouth with a snap. And smiled. “I see your line of thought.”

“Wonderful.” She beamed at him.

“You think we need a maid?” He took Lacy’s hand in his own.

“I believe we will,” she said with an air of expectation to her tone. “You are not sending me away—”

“No. Never.” He picked up her hand and put his lips to her palm.

“And though the sun is shining, darling, I certainly am not inclined to pack my bag and go.”

“As if you ever intended to leave,” he said with rueful joy.

“There you have it! So you see, if I am staying and we are, shall we say, living together, then don’t you think we should—”

“Get married. I do. I definitely do, Lady Featherstone.”

She got the most sublime expression on her face. "Please say that again."

He pulled her from her seat and put his chair around to take her upon his lap. There, with her warm, giving body in his possession, he brushed a tendril of her silken hair from her cheek and smiled at her. "I have not much to give you, darling. In fact, I fear for what I, and therefore we, might become. I am a proud man and broken."

She put a finger across his lips and shook her head.

He took her hand away. "Listen to me, sweetheart. I love you. And I find that shocking at my age, for I have never loved another woman. To care for one so young and innocent astounds me. I thought I was such a man of the world." He smiled sadly. "But I have my limits, like other men. This war and these injuries shake my confidence in me."

She would have objected again, but he stopped her.

"Let me speak, Lacy. I can take you to bed, and I can love you until we are both mad with it. God knows, you have a taste for me that I am gratified to see."

"And feel."

He nodded. "And feel. But there were sights on the fields that stay with me. Sights I had seen before but never affected me so sorely. The military is how I have made my way, but I do not relish it or war. In fact, I wish to end it. End it all as quickly as possible. And yet to accomplish that objective, I must face the world again, and I hope you will bear with me to do it. I promise little but my love and devotion to you and any children we may be fortunate to have. But I cannot promise to be the man you met at my brother's house, nor danced with at the assemblies. That man is not here. Still, he asks if you will marry him. I love you, Lacy. Will you," he asked with measured tone, "marry me?"

"I will. As you were, I loved you, Wes. As you are, I love you. And as you will become, I will love you, too, my darling." She kissed him quickly, deeply and wound her arms around his neck.

Outside, a clattering of horses' hooves sounded on the drive.

Wes cocked his head, wondering who this could be. The vicar had no carriage and was not to come until tomorrow. But Wes sighed and focused once more on the woman in his arms. He cupped her chin and admired her face. "I hope you are never sorry, Lacy, that you agreed to this."

Shouts met Wes' ears. He inclined an ear toward the front hall.

Lacy did, too.

Footsteps tromped up the porch. Someone rapped their knuckles on the door.

Charles appeared, his gaze going to Wes and Lacy.

“Open it, Charles,” Wes charged him, and the servant flung it wide to ask who was calling.

But the man on the other side of the door waited on no such niceties but stepped into the foyer, flinging his top hat aside and scowling at Wes.

“Good God!” Lacy shot from Wes’ lap.

“Lacy Featherstone!” The tall, silver haired man framed in the doorway shouted at her. “What in hell are you doing here?”

“Papa!” she said, hands clenched together, gathering her wits, Wes thought, as she rushed toward Lord Feather.

“My lord.” Wes stood and lumbered toward the foyer and his newest visitor. “Please, do come in!”

“Demmed right, I will! Only far enough to get my gel!” He shot out a hand to Lacy’s forearm.

“No!” she cried and dug in her heels. “Papa! Stop! You must listen!”

“I’ll not listen. I see what’s going on here. You on his lap like a hussy. Him, him!” Lord Feather advanced, brandishing a hand at Wes. “You asked for her hand. I gave it! And then what did you do but got her here and ruined her good name! Hero of Talavera! Ba!” He tugged at Lacy. “More like Cad of Talavera!”

“Father!”

“My lord.” Wes had reached the hall and stood nearly toe to toe with the man who tried to take his daughter home. “Please, sir.”

“*I came to him, Papa!*”

“I care not who came where or when. Only what happens now!” Feather roared down at her.

“Papa! Stop this!” Lacy stomped her foot.

Wes might have laughed in other circumstances. As it was, he could only inject with some semblance of reason, “Lord Featherstone, please, sir. Lacy and I are to be wed.”

“Is that so?” Feather challenged him, his face florid with rage.

“We are. I would have wed her days ago, but the roads have been flooded, sir. The vicar could not come. He has no coach. His cottage was surrounded by the waters, said my man when he returned. I had Charles offer the cleric one of my horses.”

Lacy observed Wes with measured interest. “You have?”

Wes nodded at her, her face alight with love for him.

“Likely story!” Feather shot back. “Get in the coach, Lacy.”

“Sir,” Wes advanced another step on the man who would, please god, soon become his father-in-law, “Lacy and I *will* wed.”

“When might that be?” the man picked at him.

“Yes, Wes,” Lacy turned up a sparkling robin’s egg blue gaze to him. “When might that be?”

“Tomorrow.” Wes announced. “Charles went out to arrange it with the vicar yesterday.”

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, her countenance angelic.

“Tomorrow,” Wes confirmed and smiled down at his bride as she came to his side, rose to tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth. “At eleven. Here.”

Chapter Seven

The vicar was late.

Lacy paced her own bedroom, smoothing her pale blue gown to her hips and praying the man would come. The rains had returned, and she feared that he was marooned inside his little vicarage near the creek toward town. She, having come so far herself to brave her father's wrath and Wes' to have him marry her, wanted no more delays. "So much more to accomplish," she murmured as a knock came at her door.

"Ready, my poppet?" her father called to her.

"Oh, yes," she said and flung the door wide. "Come in, do."

Her father, a dapper man of fifty-five, stepped inside and closed the door. He towered over her, his face kindly and concerned as he kissed her cheek. "You look lovely. Though I would have preferred to see you wed in London in a proper ceremony."

"This is proper. Wes would not have come to me. You see that, don't you?"

"How changed he is? I see he is not as jovial. War does that to a man, you must realize."

She nodded. "I do. He has nightmares. During the day, too, he will relive moments which he refuses to share with me."

"Perhaps he is wise not to burden you."

"I love him. What happens to him is no burden to me. I want him well and happy, doing what he was trained to do."

"You mean return to his men?" Her father blinked, astonished. "Well, I would say the wounds, aside from the loss of his eye, are not severe. The arm will heal with use. The ankle, too, I daresay. Broke one when I was his age, and it came to rights."

"His spirits are what I wish to improve."

Her father lifted her chin and peered into her eyes. "You are a willful woman, my dear child. You may have to do no more than wait for him to come around. You are a tonic for him, I would think."

“Thank you. I agree. But I have a few plans to improve his attitude quickly.”

“If he loves you, and I believe he does, then it will do him well just to marry you. Love makes all the difference in your life.”

She tipped her head to consider the sire she had always adored. Her parents had made no secret of the fact that neither loved the other. “I wish you had had that opportunity.”

He fidgeted, reaching for his pocket watch and staring at the time. “I did once. I am not proud to say I let it pass me by.”

Surprised by that revelation, she waited for the explanation.

“We let circumstances part us. I was a fool to let her go.”

“What was the reason? Money? Position?”

He frowned. “Fear.”

“Of?”

He drew himself up and shook his head. “A family curse.”

How many families could claim such a disaster? “A family curse? No! Not...this family? The Stanhopes?”

“The same. We must go down now.”

“But I want to know more!” She was being led along by her father’s persuasive hand.

“You shall. Some day. When I have the courage to tell you what an idiot I was to believe that love could not cure a curse.”

“I believe it can,” she told him at the top of the stairs.

He grinned down at her. “I know you do, poppet. I am proud you have acted to prove to Wesley that love is more powerful than anything else.”

“I have more to accomplish on that score, I’m afraid.”

“You do. But you are a determined woman.”

She smiled weakly. “I am.”

“The better to stand your ground with a Stanhope.”

We shall see very soon just how well I can do that.

* * * *

For a man who was used to leading cavalry charges, Wes was shocked he had a case of nerves before his wedding.

Of course, the vicar was late. In the eight years since he'd been appointed, the man had never made a service, a baptism or a funeral on time. A wedding was no small difference to a man like that.

Wes fumed and paced the great hall before the fire. *Bad enough we are to wed up here in the country, far from the friends and relatives whom Lacy should have had applauding this marriage.* He sighed. His two brothers would not be pleased at Wes' haste. Jack, the oldest, insisted on performing the familial functions that their father had never taken up. Though Jack himself remained unmarried, he did aim for sibling solidarity. So, too, did Adam their youngest brother. Now married for the second time to a woman who was a vast improvement in temperament from his first wife, Adam took a keen interest in his two older brothers, inviting them often to dinner and receptions in Berkeley Square.

Now, the family would add Lacy Stanhope to their circle.

Wes prayed he could be worthy of her. Yes, he knew that when he'd proposed to her she had a sizable dowry coming to her on her marriage. He had not refused it then. He would not now. With only his pension as income and this house to live in, he would have to take the money to make Lacy's life bearable. Perhaps, over time, if he got his mare to breed, he would be able to earn enough to keep them in some semblance of comfort.

He strode to the window. The rain was coming down again and making his ankle ache. His once broken arm, too. He rubbed his shoulder. If he was prudent with his money, he might make a decent living from the mess of his life. *And if Lacy leaves me because I cannot give her what she needs?* He squeezed his eye shut. So be it. *I have saved her reputation for her. That, above all, is the best thing I can do for her to ensure she lives well. With me. Or without me.*

Charles appeared from the kitchen, a tray of glasses in his hands. He had been laying out a cold luncheon for all of them to have after the ceremony. The hams, sausages and cheeses, plus the whiskey, would make the afternoon warmer and more convivial than the weather, certainly. "Sir, I put a soup on. The damp is chilling."

"Good idea, Charles."

Wes squinted at the apparition coming up the drive. "Whose carriage did the vicar say he would borrow?"

"A barouche from the farrier, sir."

"Odd. Looks like the four in hand from the inn."

Charles put down his tray on the table and strode to the front door. As he opened it, Wes heard chatter among those in the coach.

“Is this the vicar?” Lacy asked as she descended the staircase with her father at her side.

Wes turned to look at her. With her pale hair caught up in delicate curls atop her head, she wore an empire gown of blue, a shade lighter than her eyes. The angelic vision she presented humbled Wes. Made him proud to claim her, though he knew their marital road ahead was not smooth or happy. “We are not certain.”

Charles walked out to the porch and to Wes’ surprise addressed the figure climbing down from the conveyance.

“My lady? Welcome, if we had known you were coming...” His voice drifted off in the din of the rain, as he offered his hand up to the woman then to another. Behind them was another figure in the coach.

“Who are these people?” Lord Featherstone asked Wes, a measure of alarm and irritation in his tone.

“I have no idea, my lord,” Wes told him as he made for the foyer. He had invited no one. Never did. So who this was— “Good god! It’s my aunt.”

“Amaryllis?” asked Lacy.

“*Amaryllis?*” echoed her father.

“Yes,” Wes shot forward to bring his aunt in from the rain. “I have only one aunt.” He went for the lady and offered his arm. “Aunt, do come inside, my dear. It is hideous out here.” He brought her in and took her wrapper. Looking her over, he grinned at the woman who never failed to amuse him. Her height so near to his own, her auburn hair so like his, her face so similar to his fascinated him. Rather like looking at the family heritage to see yourself so much reflected in another person’s form and demeanor. She grinned at him, liking the resemblance, he was certain, herself.

Amaryllis stomped and brushed off the raindrops. “I hope you have some spirits, Wesley. I am cold as hell and so is my maid.” She turned, surrendering her coat to Charles who kept glancing back at the maid.

Wes had to chuckle. “Charles, do leave the coats for later. Pour our new guests a straight draught, will you? Yes, man. I mean Patsy, too.”

Wes examined the servant girl standing just inside the entrance. With her carrot-topped hair and ivory skin, Wes could see how Charles found the Irish lass attractive. Here's hoping she had a personality as sunny as her looks, and if she did, Charles would be the luckier. Wes pursed his lips. *But then I should suggest he marry her, shouldn't I? Let him free to do so.*

The manly figure standing behind Patsy cleared his throat to announce his presence to the group so taken with Patsy and Amaryllis.

"My god, man!" Wes blinked, not believing what he saw. *Whom* he saw. One of his junior officers dressed in the royal blue field coat of the King's Hussars, his shako under his arm in respect for his senior officer, his colonel. "Captain Hawritch? What are you doing here? Come in. Do come in!" Wes shook the man's hand and led him inside the foyer. "Close the door, Charles. Captain, where have you come from? Surely not London!"

"Indeed, I have, sir. Straight from Whitehall." The younger man surveyed the group and bowed as was proper for his station. "Your servant," he said to all.

Wes could not understand the bounty that had befallen him. Especially on his wedding day. He'd make the best of it, having Charles bring out more food and wine. Then too, he'd somehow find a way to make up this infernal embarrassment to Lacy. But as he turned to look at her, she gazed with unbridled interest at Hawritch. And Wes frowned.

Meanwhile, hang it all, he had to attend to his guests. "Please, all of you do come into the great hall where the fire is high and hot. We'll warm you up with whiskey, too, if that is your wish." He looked at his aunt with a grin.

Her gaze was fastened on Lord Feather, though why that was Wes had no earthly idea.

Feather, for his part, appeared to be apoplectic. Mouth open, eyes wide, he gaped at Amaryllis.

What the hell was going on here?

Wes turned to Lacy who beamed at Hawritch. And Charles, poor besotted man, admired Patsy, who hung back, demure and silent as all parlor maids were taught to be.

When all were neatly settled in various chairs before the fire, their whiskies in hand, Wes introduced each to the other. He noted that Lacy and her father Feather sat close together. Amaryllis took a chair near Wes'. Hawritch to her left. Patsy stood, as was her proper place, while Charles ran around, refilling Hawritch's and Feather's glasses.

Wes attempted polite conversation because no one else seemed capable of giving it a go. “I’m thrilled to have you here, each of you.” *But why are you each here, uninvited?*

His aunt sniffed, directing her gaze pointedly at Wes. “We were delayed. I would have been here sooner, but the flooding on the roads is quite appalling.”

Hawritch agreed. “I have been on the road from London since yesterday morning. My orders were to arrive as soon as possible.”

“I see,” said Wes, his interest piqued. “And who gave you those orders, Captain?”

“Whitehall.”

Wes nodded. *Army headquarters in London.* “Who in Whitehall?”

“Dickson, sir. Lieutenant General Dickson.”

My commanding officer in Spain, now general staff in Whitehall. “Why would he send you to me? He certainly knows the extent of my injuries and my need for solitude.”

“Sir,” Hawritch said as he examined those in the room, “I was told to discuss my purpose only with you.”

“Very well,” Wes understood the need for secrecy in wartime. “And do you also have orders?”

Lacy shifted in her chair.

“I do, Colonel. But I was told to deliver my papers to your hand only. And to discuss them with no one.”

“I see,” Wes wondered what the hell to do. As soon as he took the orders in hand, he might very well be bound to carry them out. He shut his eyes and rubbed a hand across his forehead. He didn’t need one of his raging headaches now. Suddenly, he realized he had suffered but two since Lacy had thrown herself back into his life.

“Why are you here?”

Everyone in the room went dead silent and turned to the person who’d blurted this.

“*Why?*” Lord Feather demanded of Amaryllis.

“Girard,” Wes’ aunt addressed Lacy’s father by his first name in an astonishing tone of intimacy, “I am here for you.”

“What? That’s insanity!” Feather retorted.

“Of course, it is,” she replied, cool as cucumber in July. “But nonetheless, I am here.”

“Well?” Feather demanded, his cheeks red with an outrage only he understood. “Tell us why.”

Amaryllis did not deign to look at him but put her nose in the air. “I see you are about to make a great mistake. The second great mistake of your life.”

Feather shot a glance at Wes. “Do you have any idea what she’s talking about?”

Wes folded his arms. He knew when best to sit on the sidelines and watch opponents have at each other. “None whatsoever, my lord.”

Charles hoisted the whiskey flask. “Another, my lord?”

“No!” Feather retorted.

“I will, though!” Amaryllis raised her glass.

“You cannot drink more than one!” Feather objected.

Everyone’s eyes bulged with interest.

She preened. “In the intervening years since I so unceremoniously took more than one punch and passed out into your arms, my lord Feather, I have learned how to drink.” She extended her glass so that Charles might pour. “Fill it up, man. There. Thank you.”

“You are impossible!” Feather jumped up from his chair. “Like you always were.”

She threw the whiskey back and got to her feet. The two of them stood toe to toe in the middle of Wes’ great hall. Whatever this was, as a reunion or a rematch, it was damn good.

“I’ll have you know that I am my own woman. Independent. And I do as I wish.”

“Well, you shouldn’t!”

“Pardon me?” She put her hands on her hips. “As if you know how to live your life!”

“I do! Have done! And done quite well without you,” he roared back.

“Financially, yes,” his aunt sputtered. “But what of Louise?”

Uh oh. Wes knew Feather’s long dead wife was not a topic anyone discussed with Feather without coming away with a bruise or two.

“What about her?” Feather baited Amaryllis.

“You married her when you knew you should not have. She was miserable.”

“That made two of us! Lord knows, I tried to make it better. So did she! We were unsuited.”

“And now, you will seek to separate these two fine young people who are so well suited to each other?” she taunted, pointing at Wes and Lacy.

Feather blinked. "What? What the hell do you mean?"

"Aren't you here to separate them?"

"No, I—well, yes, I was, but listen to me, Amy."

Amy? Wes felt pained with laughter. A pet name for his aunt, usually the imperious but rational one in the family? Lord knew his father had never fulfilled that role. He was too busy seducing anything in skirts to bother with common sense. All that was left to his father's sister. *Amy.*

His aunt dug a crumpled sheet of paper from her dress pocket. "This!"

"What in god's name is that?" Feather reached to pluck it from Amaryllis's fingers.

She pulled back. "A letter, Feather."

"Hell, Amy, I see that. Where'd it come from? What's it say?"

"It's from Charles."

A gasp rose up from the assembly.

"*Charles?*" Wes shouted. "You wrote this? What the devil is going on here?" he scowled at his servant who stood, flask in two hands like a penitent, grimacing at Wes.

"I was concerned you would throw Lady Featherstone out."

Wes rose from his chair.

Lacy grinned, thoroughly enjoying this.

Her father gasped and whirled on Wes. "*You were going to throw her out?*"

"Well, of course, I was!" Wes retorted to those who focused on him now. "She showed up unannounced in the rain, with no servants and said she had lied to you to give herself cover."

"That she did!" affirmed Feather. "When my sister happened to write and ask after Lacy, I knew she was not with her and I went straight away to come here. I could not let my precious child ruin her reputation." He advanced on Wes. "If you were not of a mind to marry her, I had to see to it she could find another man."

"Yes," Wes conceded, "you did." He spun to face his servant. "But why would you write to Lady Stanhope, Charles?"

"He didn't," said Amaryllis.

"He wrote to me," Patsy claimed.

Wes hung his head. To laugh or scream, that was the question. But a better one was, "Why, Charles?"

“I feared if Lady Featherstone left, sir, your health would decline further. That she would...spend many days here for naught and two fine reputations would be lost.”

His man looked tortured. Wes understood at once that what Charles feared was Lacy’s ruin. Then too if this was a household of poor reputation, Charles could never ask Patsy to marry him or serve here with him. His sergeant would spend his life caring for a man who was increasingly bitter. “I understand, Charles. Thank you. You did no harm. You meant to help.” Wes faced his aunt. “And when you came you had no idea that Lord Featherstone was here?”

She looked sheepish. “None at all.”

”And this outburst is really an old quarrel between you and Lord Featherstone.”

His aunt, never coy, glanced away, suddenly sad. “It is.”

“An old heartache,” Feather added with distaste and resumed his seat.

“So then this is the lady,” Lacy said to him, “you should have married.”

He nodded.

Amaryllis sniffed again and resumed her seat. “Charles, give us another shot of that, will you?” She held up her glass.

“Jesus, Amy!” Feather was outraged. “No need to get blistered!”

“Will you stop me?”

“Yes, damn it!” Feather looked around and suddenly burst out laughing. So did the others, including Aunt Amaryllis. “I think I will! Later.”

His aunt began to chuckle. “A promise, Feather, I will hold you to. But why later?”

“We are about to have a wedding,” he told Amaryllis with mellow affection in his gaze, and she smiled back with such love it burned its way into Wes’ heart.

Exclamations of joy went round the room.

Wes rose, went to stand behind Lacy’s chair and put a hand to her slim shoulder. He grinned, wondering where the deuce the vicar was. “Our vicar is always late. One must come into the world and leave it on his schedule. But in the meantime, Captain, I am intrigued how you too are here at so propitious a time. Did Whitehall also receive a letter from Charles?” Wes meant it as a joke, but the reaction on Hawritch’s face told no tale of laughter. “What?” he demanded of the man who had served him so well and never flinched from bad news. “What nerve have I struck?”

Beneath Wes’ fingers, Lacy’s muscles tensed.

“General Dickson received a letter, sir.” Hawritch’s gaze went round the room and landed on Lacy. “From Lady Featherstone.”

To find himself out maneuvered by his beloved tempted Wes to anger. But he knew not the results of her intrusion, and to be fair to her, he had never known her to be without some noble purpose to her acts. Without a look at her, Wes walked around to face his subordinate. “Give me the letter, Captain. I will now see what Dickson has to say.”

Hawritch gave it up to him, and Wes tore open the wax seal and read, then re-read the orders. He was to report to Dickson in Whitehall with all due speed. There, he was to take up a position on general staff, consulting on the troop movements north through Spain toward France. If and when circumstances warranted and his health improved, he would go with Arthur Wellesley in pursuit of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Wes turned on his heel and faced Lacy. “Stand up.”

She bit her lip then rose from her chair.

“Come here.”

She lifted her chin and marched forward.

“Do you have any idea what is in this set of orders?”

She shrugged.

“What did you suggest to my commanding officer?”

“That he put you to work. In London in Whitehall. Until you are more fit. I said two or three months would do it.”

“You did, eh? Anything else?”

She nodded. “And afterward, once you are more fully recovered and if the war still rages, that you serve on General Wellesley’s staff in Spain.”

“Because?”

She lifted her chin higher, and her robin’s egg blue eyes challenged his. “You are a magnificent officer. A wise man. A talent who must not be wasted at such perilous times as these.”

Wes examined her. She was young and blindingly lovely. Headstrong and sometimes foolish. But she was brave and kind. Selfless in her love of him and he adored her.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and held her closer to kiss her hard and fast. “You will be a famous Stanhope wife.”

“Not as famous as my husband,” she assured him. “And only if that vicar learns how to read a clock!”

Epilogue

Wes lifted Lacy's hood against the March winds as he led the way into the front door of a Portsmouth inn near the docks. He'd arranged for a room for them for the next three days in this tiny, tidy place with good fires, good cooks and soft beds.

He waved to the innkeeper near the tavern bar as they passed toward the stairs then up to the top floor where they were alone in the largest room. He could barely keep his hands to himself she looked so lovely.

Once inside the room, he kicked the door shut and caught her up in his arms to swing her around. "I have missed you."

She wound her arms around his neck and worked at the clasp of his cloak. "Since I was with you last in February in London, I have been starved for you." She let him kiss her cheek while she worked at the buttons on his uniform.

"You don't feel starved," he complained. "You've gained weight!"

"It's damn cold in Lancashire in winter, sir! Besides a married woman can be fat and happy."

"Who told you that?" he objected playfully.

She chuckled. "You can lift me, you brute. Do not complain!"

"How are your father and Aunt Amaryllis?" he asked of the lovebirds who recently became betrothed.

"I think I am jealous," Lacy said, giggling. "They are so cute together. Like children who have a new game to play." She pushed his cloak and coat off his shoulders.

"Mmm. Happiness is a fresh sport. I understand it now." Wes held out his arms as she fiddled with his shirt.

"Delicious, isn't it?" She stretched up to kiss his jaw.

He grabbed her around the waist and held her head while he plundered her luscious mouth. "None to compare." He let her work on his flies. "Tell me about Jack and Adam and

Felice.” Lacy had stayed with them in London before she’d left to come to Portsmouth and bid him farewell for Spain. “Georgie, too,” he added Adam’s son by his first wife.

“All well.” Lacy flung off her own cloak. “And send you their love. Georgie sends gooey little kisses, too. Like this.” She put an imitation of a child’s kiss on his lips.

He licked his lips and rolled his eyes. “And how are my horses?”

“Well. I think Lucinda will breed this year. She may have conceived already. I cannot be sure yet. But I will write to let you know.”

“Do that.” His hands now more practiced at removing all her folderol, he managed to get her bodice open and spread the fabric wide. Then he placed his mouth atop the mound of one breast and breathed in her scent. “Christ, you are lovely. How did I think I could ever do without you?”

She wound her fingers in his hair. “That was a mystery, Colonel. I had to solve it.”

“You did, my love.” He took her lips then, long and lavishly, the sweet caverns of her mouth a new delight to him each time he tasted her. “I shall forever be grateful.”

She cupped his cock through his trousers. “Care to show your wife just how grateful you are?”

“What is your pleasure, madam?” he teased.

“That we not leave this room until you board the transport.”

“That,” he whispered with reverence as he let her clothes drift to the floor, “I can do.”

“That you not speak of Spain,” she told him, “only us, while you make love to me.”

“Done as well.”

“That you know I will think of you daily, hourly.”

“I have known it since the minute you barged your way in the front door of the lodge.”

He sent his lips down her throat, his hands cupping her breasts, his thumbs brushing her peaking nipples. “Everything you did was to show me I was not dead.”

She opened the button of his trousers and reached inside to take his cock in hand. “I have the proof.”

He rammed his thigh under one of hers and pushed her against the wall, his fingers finding her sopping wet cunt. Then he lifted her leg and the tip of his shaft found her opening. In one explosive jolt, he was inside her, stunning her, thrilling himself with her surrender.

“I think you are well recovered, my love.”

His forehead rested on her shoulder. He was shaking with laughter. “To fuck you against the wall?”

She moaned. “To hold me up with both arms and use your left leg, you are so healthy, darling. I am so proud of you.”

He laughed and slid rhythmically in and out of her. “Proud of me? I owe my renewed life to you.”

“And I to you,” she told him. “Oh, Wes, what would have happened if you had not wanted me again in Lancashire?” The anguish in her tone shocked him, but he knew what propelled her today was fear for his life.

This time, for this voyage, he had none. His nightmares were fewer. His daydreams gone. When his mind spun out away from his work, it wandered to her, her beauty and her courage. She had restored his confidence in events—in himself and his career. She had shown him that stubbornness had more to do with dedication to a goal, than submission to despair and helplessness.

“What you have taught me, Lacy, I will not forget.” He sank inside her, and she arched into him.

Against his mouth, she said, “And promise me you will come home to me.”

“Always.”

***Lady Ramsey's
Ribald Choices
By Cerise DeLand***

***A Stanhope Challenge series story
and
A Free Read***

The Dedication

*For charming men everywhere who know how to treat a lady well,
Especially my own Charming Man.*

At twenty-eight years of age, Lady Clarice Ramsey had the distinct privilege of possessing her two deceased husbands' fortunes, a house in Grosvenor Square, two in the country and a set of race horses who had stood stud to so many mares that she had begun to hire them out to service her neighbors' breeding programs.

Just before the demise of her second husband, she had broached a novel idea with the old roué. To her surprise, he agreed that for her excellent service to him and his appetites for her cunny and her breasts, she should secure some continued joy for herself after his passing. She did not want to breed. No, no. But she did wish to enjoy herself before she lost her lustrous blonde looks and healthy buxom body. Thus the old man had immediately set about interviewing and hiring staff who would aid her in her quest.

With one butler and his assistant, plus a male cook—whom she never met—but who also served as man-of-all-work, her masculine household's uniqueness was noted by the *ton*. Indeed, her household became a notorious topic and a bane to her slightly more conventional half-brothers, Adam, Wes and Jack Stanhope.

But she told herself she could not care overmuch. Her dear brothers were not exactly paragons of sexual virtue and in fact, lived up the demands of the males in the family that they be accomplished lovers. She, too, was a Stanhope, after all, and could flaunt convention as her ancestors had. True, too, she was also a by-blow of the eighth earl, Lord John, and thus not only on the other side of the blanket but entitled to act like it if she wished. And she did sincerely wish. Plus, like her brothers, she would never find happiness in love or marriage. She was a victim of the family curse that damned all love affairs within marital bounds. So why then should she not give herself what happiness she might take?

Thus tonight, after burying her husband in July and allowing herself two more months to train and be trained by her new staff, Clarice shivered in anticipation of her initiation into a new world of carnal delights. A world described to her by her butler and his assistant. A world she craved for the lonely days of her existence. For if love was not her destiny, if marriage an impossibility and a prison of its own making, if children not her goal, then pleasure would be.

Tonight was her first evening to sample her new lifestyle. She trembled deliciously as she rose from her bathtub, stepped over the porcelain rim to the floor and allowed her butler to wrap her naked body in a heated bath towel.

“Thank you, Robert,” she smiled at the man whom her husband had hired for her to embark on the search for her own ecstasies. She adored the man’s luscious swarthy looks, the breadth of his shoulders, the bulk of his arms and his experience as a colonel in the Iberian Campaign. A colleague of her brother Wes, Robert had acquired a leg wound that left him with a slight limp.

“Madam,” he said in homage with that baritone she felt stroke her spine in velvet tones. “You may want to use the French lavender perfume this evening.”

“Really?” She admired his sculpted mouth and allowed her praise to emanate from her eyes. “Where would you suggest I apply it tonight?” she asked. He always had novel ideas that titillated her senses—and creamed her *chat*.

“For the Baron DeVere, I would say the hollow of your breasts.” His voice rumbled as his umber gaze travelled from one areola to the other and sank to the deep valley between.

“And for Lord Landover?” she asked, recalling that Robert and Landover were childhood friends.

“The hollow between your buttocks.” Robert’s hell-dark gaze locked on hers.

“He likes a woman’s nether place, does he?” She pressed her thighs together as more of her private juices coated her labia and began to trickle down her thighs.

“Very much. He can show you the joys of it like no other man. You are prepared for this?” he asked, his muscular arms embracing her as he ran his hands down her backbone to cup her cheeks, define the cleft between them, and press inside her asshole with one long index finger.

“I am. See how my nipples pebble at the very thought.” She pushed her breasts together in anticipation, offering up the glorious globes to her butler and her fantasies. Her eyes closed.

“Let me feel your delight here,” Robert persisted on the topic of her preparation and now twisted his fingers high inside her tiny rosette.

“See how I respond,” she crooned, her head falling back on her shoulders, squeezing her buttocks and thrilling to the man’s touch. “Do I not excite you?” she persisted, suppressing once more the urge to voice what she knew to be true about her butler and his assistant’s identities.

Roger's breath blew warm against her shoulder as he caressed her upper arms and stepped away. "I have prepared your chamber. The oils, the brandy and cigars."

She shook once more in anticipation, her nipples rubbing the nub of the towel. "I am very eager to get on with this and learn. You have been most helpful with suggestions to entertain them at the same time." She felt her face flush in a betraying naivete she knew was a remnant of her sexual innocence.

"Come, let me arrange you on your chaise longue." He took her hand and led her into her boudoir. The red velvets and silks of her bedding had been a favorite of hers and she had added copiously to the room rich in tapestries and upholstery. Her newest acquisition—a magnificent black chaise longue—stood apart. Made to hold her and two men, the piece came from Italy, ordered by Robert last summer while she was still in proper mourning. He had suggested it and she had spent long empty days enjoying its comfort as the butler tutored her in how to excite herself with her fingers and later with a porcelain phallus of exquisite large size.

Tonight, she was to use the chaise for the first time with others—and she put a hand to her *mons*, quivering inside.

Robert led her to the black reclining beauty and helped her sit, then positioned her arms, just so, to frame her large breasts, her shapely long legs, one demurely crossing before her naked cunt, and her feet, those flawless dainties that she knew some men yearned to kiss.

Robert's gaze examined her intricately. "Is your cunt creaming in welcome yet?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "I long to open my hot pussy and let my guests lick and suck me to completion." One of her hands strayed to her mound, her index finger eager to delve inside. "I fear to dissipate my desire though. I want them to give me their best, their most inventive offerings."

A knock sounded on the door to the hall.

"Come in," Robert called so that the door opened and his assistant, Gerald, a strapping big Scotsman quickly entered. He too was black-haired with curls that touched his forehead and highlighted his ink-black eyes.

Gerald assessed Clarice in her pose and his wide-eyed gaze met hers, telling her he approved. "Lovely. The French lavender tonight?"

Clarice nodded.

"My favorite," he growled.

Robert surveyed Clarice as he asked Gerald, "Anything else you see we should ensure my lady has to aid her in her efforts?"

"Has she practiced today with the china phallus?" Gerald asked his eyes on her mouth.

"She has indeed," Robert reported. "I watched her. She is most accomplished. I am certain she will delight the Baron with her talents."

"And what say you of my lady's progress with the plugs?" Gerald lifted his chin to indicate her asshole.

"I have stretched myself to the largest one, Gerald," she told him with pride of accomplishment.

"I have inspected her nether hole, Gerald, and she is sufficiently accustomed to receive Landover's cock."

Clarice swooned, eagerness swelling her labia and coursing through her veins. "I need them now, both of them. Gerald, Robert, please," she beseeched them with her eyes now watering with ripe expectation.

Robert nodded, his handsome visage tight with strain. "You will not move nor touch your cunt until I bring them up to you?"

"No," she responded, fond of him to the point of wanting his approval, his friendship. "Do I not always do as you ask?" She batted her lashes at him prettily.

"Very well, Madame." Robert took one last assessment of her as she sat unmoving.

She was, after all, his creation. Tutored by him, she had progressed to this point where she was ready to have two men at once. Gerald had supervised, advised and offered new ways to stretch her greedy pussy and her bald ass.

"Let us leave her, Gerald. Think only of bliss," Roger instructed her, shooed his assistant out, grasped the handle, stared deep into her eyes, then shut the door.

She sighed back against her sumptuous cushions. Her throbbing labia swelled with need to be petted and kissed. Her little asshole twitched with the desire to be deflowered for the first time. Her mouth made a moue, as she yearned for it to encompass a huge cock and bring it to spurting fulfillment.

A minute or more later, she heard footfalls on the stairs. She held her breath, mad to be ravished as she had always longed to be. Wild to take a man the way she'd imagined and then been told by Robert and Gerald that men would want her to love them.

The door opened and in walked two deliciously fit, broad shouldered, black-haired men. She smiled, knowing them each so well. One with wavy silken hair. One with curly. Both with masks.

She had not asked for that. Had not wanted it. In fact, she'd railed against the seeming anonymity. But Robert had told her that for the first time, it would add brio to their mutual discovery. Heighten their passions more quickly, more completely. As they became more adept to each other's preferences and foibles, as they discovered new joys on their journey, the masks would then come off.

She had agreed. Their faces, she mused, were not as vital to her excitement as their build, their coloring and their ingenuity in bed. After all, she knew their faces, their roguishly handsome faces. And she knew the rich enticing bravado of their voices.

The curly-haired fellow stepped forward to her side. He bowed and took her hand to kiss in the continental manner. "Lady Ramsey," he said with a slight Scottish pronunciation to it. "Clarice," he murmured as he put his lips to her hand and followed it with a lick of the tip of his tongue. "Lord Geoffrey Landover, at your service."

"Geoffrey," she rolled the name on her tongue and by its use, dispensed with needless formalities. "I have eagerly anticipated you coming here."

"And I as well, Clarice. May I introduce my cousin, the Baron DeVere?" Geoffrey turned, to extend a hand toward the other man.

This man strode forward with a hitch to his step, a remnant she knew of his days in the cavalry. He bent to kiss her cheek. "Clarice. Baron Roger DeVere."

"Roger," she settled herself back to her cushions and let her breasts sway to tempt him. "How wonderful to have you here."

"Clarice, t'will be my pleasure and Geoff's to have you here."

She laughed, loving the twinkle in Roger's dark eyes as he teased her. "Would you care for a brandy?"

"Allow me," Geoff said and moved to the sideboard, knowing precisely where she kept her spirits.

"Do not move a hair on your head," instructed Roger and smiled in broad appreciation of her pose. "You are a delicious piece. Don't you think, Geoff?"

“I do,” Geoff stated as he poured amber liquor into three small glasses. “I am eager to taste just how delicious, Clarice.”

“I have douched with French waters of rosemary.” She wiggled in her seat. “The better to have you enjoy yourself while I do the same.” She stared at his lavish mouth as one hand drifted to her folds and two fingers opened her seam. The room filled with the aroma of her warm cunt, rosemary and lavender.

“Ah-ah.” Roger put a hand to her mound, his long fingers warm and gentle. “You are not to move until we tell you. Oh, thank you, Geoff. Take your brandy, Clarice.”

She accepted it and took a sip. The warm liquid slid down her throat and she anticipated the warmth there which she’d soon give to Geoff. “Please come here, Geoffrey, as I am very hungry to see your attributes.”

He chuckled, downed his brandy and strolled over her, unbuttoning his frock coat, his shirt and his trousers as he came. By the time he stood before her, he had only to shrug out of them, removing his trousers last and revealing flawless, bare skin. And a gloriously long cock that stood high and hard and red in attention.

“Lovely,” she crooned and licked her lips at the sight of drops of cum on his tip. “Do come nearer and let me show you how delighted I am with your acquaintance.”

Geoff took two steps forward, his iron shaft just at the level of her mouth. She rejoiced that they were so well attuned. Robert had told her that this chaise was constructed in the very best dimensions for assignations and she now had proof he was so right.

She ran her hand along Geoff’s penis and admired its rock hard beauty. She let her hand drift to his root and cupped his balls, as Robert had told her the baron would like her to do. She encompassed the blue helmet of his cock and rubbed her thumb over the tip. “You cry for me, Geoff. I am honored.” Then she showed him how much she was as her lips sank over him and laved the hot shaft.

Geoff received her attentions, hands on his hips, breathing heavily. She glanced up. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back. She preened. And she licked him, first one side and then down the impressive length of the other. She felt her cunt flood with the lubrication to take all of his wealth inside her, and she whimpered. She kissed his tip and once more, covered him with her mouth. Oh, my god, he was so big, so round, she wondered if she might fail him and she worked him, harder and harder. But in her own foggy mind, she began to hear him moan. Then

she felt him plunge his fingers in her hair and hold her to him. That's when she sucked him more deeply down her throat and she felt him jerk, yell and give off the most generous deluge of cum into her willing mouth and down her elegant throat.

She swallowed. "Delicious," she told him, kissing his tip as she raised her face to him.

Geoff gave her a handkerchief.

"Thank you," she murmured politely, wiping her lips.

"The pleasure was mine, Clarice," he told her. "Now let me see your cunt."

Her gaze went to Roger who stood a foot away, his own gaze never moving from her mouth. "Would you like to see my channel as well?"

Roger inhaled deeply. "Yes. Spread your legs, Clarice."

Slowly and with a tender smile growing on her mouth, she bowed her legs, then spread them wide.

Geoff cleared his throat. "Your *chat* is bare!" He was obviously thrilled.

Clarice opened wider for his better view. "My butler gave me the idea to shave. He supervised. Not a nick to my flawless skin."

"Admirable man," Geoff said.

She settled her buttocks more deeply to the chaise and tilted up her *mons* for his examination. "Do you like the way my cunt gleams with my juices, Roger?"

"I do, Clarice." He wagged a finger at her. "Wider please. I like to see how your inner folds hang down from your mound. I will be happy to tug them open and investigate each little curve and crease."

She gulped at the scrumptious idea. "Will you do that now, Roger?" *Please.*

"No, I need to see how well you have learned how to take a man inside your pretty ass." He indicated she should roll over. "Let me see your bum, Clarice."

She turned to her elbows and rose up on her knees, tilting her waist down so that her ass stood up high in the air.

"Oh, Christ, cuz," groaned Geoff, "that is a lovely sight. Look at that rosy hole and below, those coated, glistening lips. She will be such a superb fuck."

She moaned. "Will you please come and put your fingers inside me, Roger?"

"Eager are you, my darling?" he asked in that loud strong voice that rippled through her.

“I am, I am. I have been such a good student, don’t you agree? For months and months, I have been waiting and wanting.” She turned her head. “Remove your clothes, my man. I need to see you in your glory.”

Geoff hooted. “She has become demanding, Roger. What will you do?”

“Why this, of course,” Roger answered, coming forward and spanking her on one ass cheek and eliciting a shriek of surprise and a roll her hips.

“More, Roger,” she begged.

“Like this, my pretty?” he asked and smacked her on the other cheek.

“Yes!” She groaned and offered up her buttocks again. “My pussy needs a spanking, too. Don’t you think she does? She’s such a bad girl. Make her behave, Roger,” she whimpered.

Roger bent and kissed her on her cunt, then took the flat of his hand and tapped her.

“Harder, darling,” she pleaded.

And he complied.

She quivered and let down more luscious juices. “I am creaming for you, Roger. Might you want me to be soaked when you invade my sweet cunt, hmm?”

He rapped her frilly folds again and she groaned.

But he was driven by now. She watched him from between her thighs as he grunted, then removed every stitch of his elegant evening attire. The body he revealed was a work of art. With saber wounds criss-crossed on his massive chest, arms like beams, lean hips that sprouted a beautiful red cock with a giant helm.

“My god,” she praised the man, “let me take that in my mouth and give it a proper welcome.”

He came and climbed up on the chaise behind her. She could hear him suck his fingers into his mouth and insert them, once, twice into her ass. She groaned, did not move her hips, but waited for the next claiming.

“Shall I replace my fingers with my cock, my lovely?” he growled.

“This instant,” she commanded.

And he obeyed.

She opened her mouth. The shock of his girth, the delight of his thrust had her *chat* howling in exultation. The electric possession of his cock in her ass made her blind with

excitement. "Take me," she had been taught by her butler to invite Roger thusly. "Fuck me there."

And so he did. A brilliant electric invasion of her ass by his huge iron rod. Over and over and over again, he rammed her and possessed her. She mewled for god knew how long and screamed with mad fulfilment.

His hands gripped her hips and rolled her to her back. Geoff was there immediately to lick her nipples. Bring them to wet points, soothe her, cool her down and let her cunt throb of its own accord in joy at the two men's ingenuity..

She sighed.

Roger rose and went to the wash stand, cleansed his hands and returned to kneel between her open thighs.

"Will you put your mouth on my pussy, now, please, Roger?" she nigh unto begged him.

"I will, my sweet." He slapped her thigh. "Open wider, pet."

She hastened to do so. "Am I wet enough?"

"We shall see," Roger said and spread one set of her folds with such delicacy she shivered. "What do you think, Geoff?"

"Rog, I must taste her to decide." Geoff bent as she groaned in eagerness and put his tongue to her clit. There, he titillated her with his talented tip.

She bucked.

"Hmm," Roger crooned, "she is too eager, isn't she?"

"Aye," Geoff concurred, "I want to lick her down but cannot do it if she jumps around."

"I won't move! Come back to me!"

"Ah, ah," Roger warned, a slap to her tender pussy. "No demands, my sweet. We are here to serve each other, not command. We have plans to eat your pussy for innumerable hours to come and cannot do it if you elude us with your body's untamed reactions."

She whimpered. "I know, I know." She reached down to spread her labia wide. "But I am so needy, I think I will come without either of you. And that would be such a waste, such a waste. Please do not desert me!" She felt tears come to her eyes.

"Eat her until she comes, Geoff. She deserves it, sweet puss. I shall observe." Roger drifted away and a part of Clarice seemed to go with him.

"Will you return?" she beseeched him.

“I will, my dear,” he said from somewhere far away as Geoff bent over her and pressed his luscious lips to her clitoris and sucked her high and hard into his mouth. She rode his passion with muted screams, her hands plucking at the deep black velvet upholstery. Her gaze darted over Geoff’s shoulders, to Roger’s dark scowl as his cousin explored all of her folds, fingered each crease, tugged on each delicate edge and reached up inside her with his long and tormenting tongue to bring down more cream and a mad shout of her thundering release.

Wiping his mouth with another of his handkerchiefs, Geoff kissed her hard hungry clit, her seam and the top of her mound, then stood. “She is everything we knew she would be, Roger. Sweet as a ripe peach, thick with want, a huge clitoris that demands a devoted tongue and rewards you with powerful convulsions in her fiery furnace. You will enjoy her. She is the rarest piece of cunt I have ever sucked.”

Roger said nothing for the longest minutes, but stared at her slit.

She examined him, her body ravenous for his. Her passions not abated by Geoff’s attentions but her wild cravings now at fever pitch.

“What would you like, Roger?” she asked finally. “That which you need, I will provide.”

“Will you, my darling?”

“I promise you whatever it is, I am yours.”

“Go get him, Geoff.”

Geoff left the room, leaving Roger and Clarice to stare at each other in silence.

She knew that to be too inquisitive might anger him. She had no need of that. She wanted him at her service. Geoff, too. Who was this other man Roger summoned?

Geoff opened the door and behind him strode a slightly taller man, hell dark, broad as heaven, but with silver edging in his hair.

“You have primed her?” this new arrival asked in a rasping bass voice.

“We have, your Grace,” Roger answered. “Clarice, this is our oldest cousin, the Duke of Mornay. He comes to us only to do your bidding. Tell us, Clarice, what is your fondest desire and it shall be done.”

She glanced at the overwhelming sexual appeal of his grace, the Duke of Mornay. She had heard of him, his wealth, his war escapades, his wounds, one to his left leg, one to his face, where, yes indeed, she saw a scar reach from his jaw to the corner of his left eye. Most of all,

she had heard of him as a man who sought a wife with a few rare attributes. She must be wealthy. She must be indisputably lovely. And she must be insatiable in bed.

Clarice now knew she was his mate. His best choice. Her finest chance to have a man in her bed, in her life. A man she did not have to love, but one who had friends and thrilled her to the core. She had only to prove it to him.

The duke strolled to her side. His gaze beneath the black mask roamed over her. “Lovely breasts. The nipples are huge, satin and rosy. I like to suck on hard ones. Will you enjoy that, my lovely?” He put out one hand to cup one breast and then pinched the nipple.

“I will.” She squirmed. “I do.”

“I see this is so. I like your legs. They are long, taut. Have you ever had a man put them over his shoulders as he fucked you?”

“No, but I welcome that, too. I am agile.”

The duke smiled. “I also understand you like to be fucked in the ass.”

“True, true. Geoff has been so kind as to give me a taste of that.”

“Roll over, my lovely. Let me see your pretty hole.”

She did as he asked, and he fingered her intricately there so that she undulated. “Very tight. Not torn. I hate that. You used the plugs to good advantage. My cock is very big, you see. And you have need of that. Geoff will, of course, continue to prepare you for me by using his wonderful tool in your ass, before I come to tend it. Is that acceptable to you, my sweet?”

She rolled back over, her palms running over her pebbling nipples and down to her sopping wet cunt. “Perfectly. What else might I do to please you, your grace?”

He leaned over, his fathomless eyes a devil’s invitation to endless nights of passion. “What is your biggest fantasy my pet? Tell me.”

“And if I do, what will I get for my reward?”

“Why, my name and titles. Me in your bed. Agreed?”

She nodded, thinking what else she might ask.

The duke noticed her contemplation. “What more could you want, Clarice?”

“By biggest fantasy, whenever I want, whenever I need it.”

“Of course. Tell me and it is yours,” the duke proclaimed.

She beckoned him closer to the foot of her bed. “I want you to fuck me now in my cunt.”

“That is—” the duke began.

She put up a hand. "Please allow me, your grace, to finish."

"Proceed."

"I want Geoff in my mouth at the same time Roger is in my ass and you are fucking me in my very lonely, very empty, very smooth and creamy cunt." She ran a hand over her plump pubic mound to tantalize him.

"My god!" the duke exclaimed and cursed.

Clarice despaired. Were all men territorial with their women? Was she never to find a man who claimed to give her all she required, but then removed the prize when it suited his fancy? She began to rise.

"No!" all three men shouted at once.

And she reclined to the chaise.

"Let me under you," said the duke and began to remove his clothes.

"Let me behind you," said Roger with a wide grin on his face.

"Let me open your pretty mouth," said Geoff, licking his lower lip.

And the four of them found ecstasy that afternoon which each vowed would continue for years and years to come.

And so it did. Till death did them part.

About the Author

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

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

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

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

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

***Wanton Venture* by Elaine Lowe**

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

The new Earl of Belforth, Raymond Talbury, has arrived from Spain to find his family destitute and his position as a bachelor precarious. He needs money, not romance. But when he meets his new employer, all he can think about is getting the fiery redhead in his bed, or anywhere else he can have her. There really is no way he can refuse her offer of a mutually satisfying undertaking.

They both harbor secrets, but their feelings for each other are plain. Will circumstances and a menacing relative drive them irrevocably apart, or will their wanton venture succeed beyond their wildest dreams?

***Chasing Temptation* by Regina Carlisle**

London's Haute Ton calls her Miss Temptation. But Elizabeth Grayson can't be bothered by society's diversions while seeking justice for her murdered sister. She is a woman on a dangerous mission. Now is not the time for mindless social engagements or courtships from men she has no intention of marrying. However, Christian Delaford is no ordinary man. He stirs her like no one she has ever met before. His eyes speak of sin and tangled sheets. Of decadent nights spent in his arms. Far too diverting for her peace of mind.

Christian Delaford, the Duke of Haverton, must be married by midnight of his birthday or forfeit his heritage to a distant relation. After years of living a hedonistic life in the Orient, the thought of binding himself forever to an insipid English Miss fairly curls his toes. London's current 'diamond of the first water', however, changes his mind. In Elizabeth, he finds a bold and daring woman who harbors a terrifying secret. He vows to chase Miss Temptation, to the ends of the earth if needs be, and save her from the forces that would tear them both apart.

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