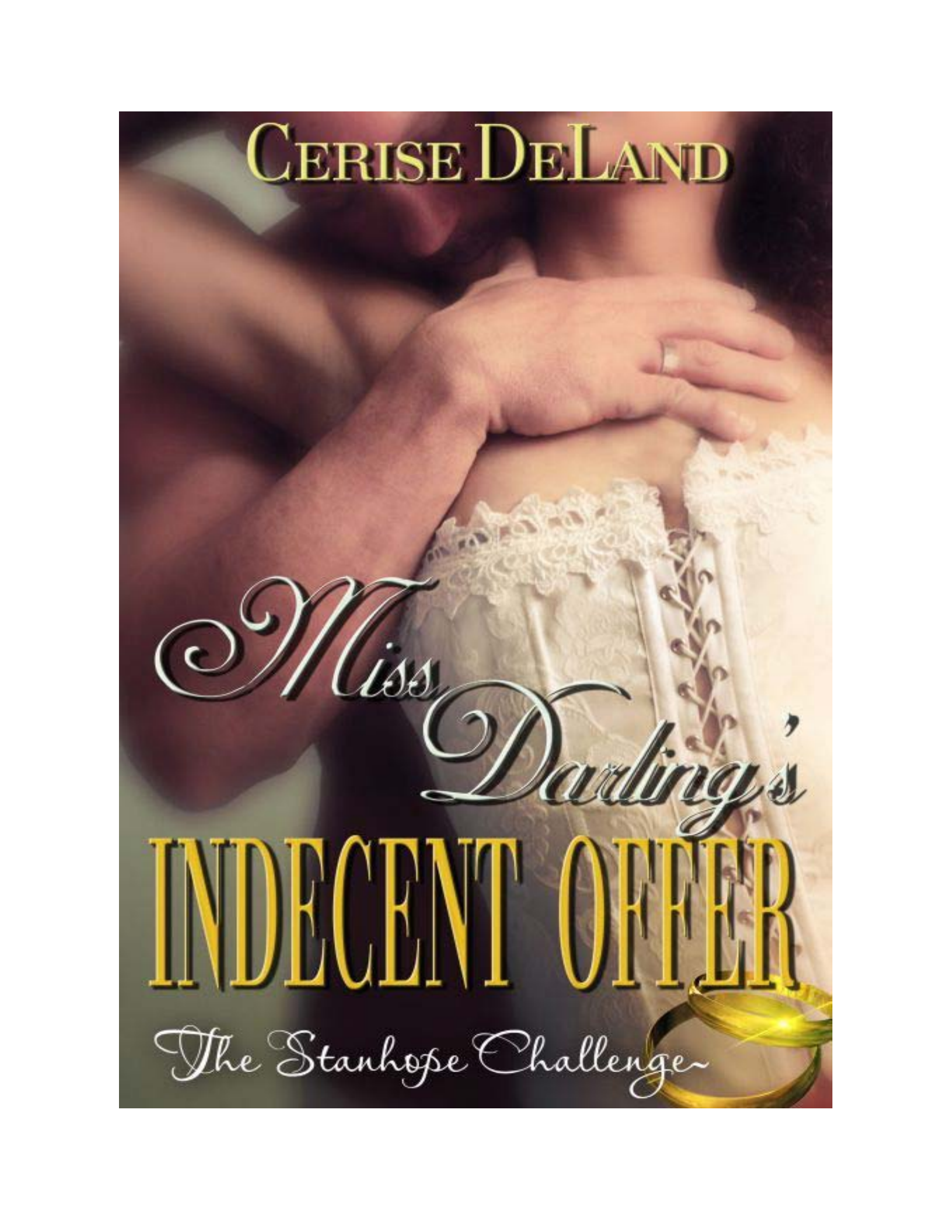




CERISE DELAND

Miss Darling's
INDECENT OFFER

The Stanhope Challenge

Miss Darling's Indecent Offer

A Stanhope Challenge Story

By Cerise DeLand

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*For my husband, Steve, who exemplifies
the best of gentlemen everywhere.*

Chapter One

March, 1810. London, England

Emma Darling had no delusions about the precarious nature of her indecent offer to Jack Stanhope. He had an inglorious reputation as a rake and would be no coy boy falling over himself to accept her proposal. In fact, the damn man was likely to throw her out of his carriage and into the rain like so much rubbish.

She sniffed, pulled herself up to her own imperious reputation as a blue stocking and put some iron in her spine. "You will smile. You will not simper. You will entice the man, Emma. With logic."

"Miss Darling?" Her coachman rapped on the bottom of his seat and she jumped.

"Yes, yes?"

"The gentleman you wanted?"

"Arrogant Jack?" Yes, he definitely was the only man Emma wanted. But she answered her servant here in the dark alley across from the entrance to White's. She peered through her window and wiped fog from its expanse. "You think that man is he?"

"Aye, Miss, blue covered brougham with the Stanhope crest. Must be 'im."

Must be.

"Thank you, Harris." She lifted her hood and draped it over her hastily set mop of hair. Rain or no, now is the time, Emma. She waited a heartbeat as her servant climbed down from his box and opened the door for her, then let down the steps for her to alight. She gave him her hand and a smile. Watery thing that it was, the expression was one he did not return, for he feared for

his position should her stepfather learn of her escape tonight. "Please do not worry, Harris. I promise I will speak on your behalf."

"I know, Miss. But I fret for your safety. The Viscount Durham is a bad sort." He handed her out into the pouring rain.

"Not completely so," she called to him and scampered across the cobbles. Deuced bad luck that the heavens opened at that hideous moment. She squealed and picked up her pace through the torrent of rain. But she managed, blast it! Catching her balance time and again, she fought for clear vision as she slipped on one stone and then slid across another. She heard Jack Stanhope shouting to his own coachman as she lifted her arm to beckon him.

"My lord!" Don't leave, Jack! "My lord!"

The coachman slammed the conveyance door. She scurried along. Then sensed the driver climbed up into his box. Knew he would be picking up the reins and panicked that if she did not do something rash, all her plans would be lost!

She swerved, stepped in front of the coach, and summarily fell into a puddle.

"Ohhhhhh, damn!" she beat the cobbles with one fist, wild at her clumsiness.

The coachman yelled. The horses neighed. She pushed herself up, hands wrist deep in pools of rain, her pelisse soaked. Hands hoisted her from the cobbles, right under her arm pits. "Get her up, Rawley."

"Good God, milord! She's a fright!"

"Up, up, here you go," a booming bass voice encompassed her and she was snatched up in strong arms like a sack of potatoes and shoved, like so much dross, into a coach. To the floor, in fact, of a coach. Jack's? Please, God.

She pushed upwards, glanced about. Those iron-like hands grabbed her once more under the arms and unceremoniously dragged her up and over the squabs. Fingers picked at her hood, undid her ties and threw back the wool to lift her chin.

"Christ, you are soaked! What in hell are you doing out on a night like this?"

She stared at him.

Jack Stanhope, no other. Eyes like lightning. Hair like midnight. Jaw like iron.

Collect yourself. "I had to come out." Of course you did, you ninny. He's not so handsome he can rattle you.

He frowned at her, pushed her curls back from her cheeks, and hauled her up higher. By the light of the interior lamp, she saw him better now. Close as a lover. And the power of her first hard look at the Pride of the Stanhopes made her admire the family traits all the more.

He was a luscious specimen of manhood, dark and imposing. The broadest of shoulders. The squarest of chins. The dimple there, dead center. She'd glimpsed him twice before at his racing box in Harton. She'd been drawn to his brash demeanor, his open laugh and booming voice. She'd felt his magnetism. A daring rake of tall, devilishly strong proportions, Jack Stanhope was not so much handsome as overwhelming. Not so much refined as damned perfect. For her. Her needs.

"What in God's good name is a lady doing out at this hour of the night? And falling in front of my carriage, no less?" His striking eyes were wide, though she could smell the liquor on his breath. His fingers dug into her upper arms. "Answer me!"

"I need to talk to you."

"The devil, you say. Who are you?" He lifted her higher, nearer, his silver-blue eyes searing her face as he scanned her features with a furious hunger.

"Emma Darling."

"Darling..." He caught her torso against him in reflex. Her breasts crushed to his broad chest as he sank his fingers into her newly cropped cap of Grecian curls and pulled her head back to see her by the carriage lamp. "What the hell? Joan Darling's girl?"

"Yes, Frank's and Joan's." Did he know her mother?

"You're shivering. Wet as a cat. Sit over here." He pushed her back into the squabs, both hands to her shoulders in a move that was mostly a shove. "Take off that cloak." He worked at a fastening to her wrap. "You'll die of cold. Your mother will have me for breakfast."

"No!" Emma wrapped her hand around his arm and noted that he was so large she could only succeed at plucking at the thick wool of his overcoat. "No, she won't. Can't."

"What?" He shook his head, loosening the fog from the spirits he'd imbibed, she supposed. Then he tried to undo the fastening of her wrap. "This damn thing is too wet. Can't get it open." His hands fumbled. "Why can't she help you?"

"She's ill. In the country." Dying from her husband's cruelty and neglect.

"Since when?"

"November, December."

He scowled now. "That's why I have not seen her about town."

"Listen to me, Jack."

If her hands on his hadn't brought him up short, the use of his given name by a stranger did. He paused. "You have my attention. What is it you want, Miss Darling?"

"I need your help."

"At three in the morning? A very inclement morning?" His black brows wiggled in mirth and surprise.

In the lamplight, his features mellowed with amusement. His brows were long and arched, his eyes, larger than she had heard, his mouth, a wide slash but full and supple. Generous. Oh, God. Please let him be as generous as his lips.

"This was the best time to find you. You would never have seen me at home."

"You did not invite me," he told her, his words a bit slurred, an impish grin gracing his mouth. "I accept all invitations from beautiful women."

"So I understand, but—" I am not beautiful. "You would not have come."

"You're certain, eh? Why not?"

"You do not really know me."

His starry eyes narrowed, running from her lips to her eyes to her hair tumbling now into her eyes and about her cheeks. "I daresay I should."

"Yes, you should." She leaned forward now, comforted by his humor and the warmth of him to take her in his carriage and have such care of her. But she knew she must look a fright, coming out as she did so quickly, taking the chance she could find him. "You will. If you accept my offer."

"An offer? Pardon me, Miss Darling. It's late and my manners are as short as my penchant for games." Bursting into a hearty chuckle, he fell back to the plush leather upholstery. Sobering, he ran a hand over his face. He knit his brows and surveyed her state of cold, wet dishabille. "I must take you home. Isn't it Park Lane? Opposite the street from my Aunt Amaryllis Stanhope?"

She folded her arms, the rain seeping through her cloak to her thin cotton gown and making her shiver. "I will not return there."

"Why ever not?"

"He is there."

Jack scowled. "Who?"

"Daniel." She murmured the name of the man who meant to ruin her life, keep her in rags and deny her her due.

"Pinrose?"

"The same."

"Your stepfather."

"Precisely." Her teeth began to clatter. She clenched her jaw. Wrapped her arms more tightly about her. "He is a tyrant. I have come to you to escape him."

Jack scowled, then picked up the plaid woolen blanket on the seat next to her and tucked it around her body and under her chin, frowning at her words and searching her face. "Christ, you're cold as ice. How long have you been out in this?"

"Since ten or so," she told him truthfully.

"Good God. Must be a damned good reason to chill yourself to the quick."

She shot forward and grabbed the lapels of his coat. "Jack, please help me. I have waited for you because I need you. Only you can help me."

"I am honored, Miss Darling, but—"

"Emma."

"Emma, my dear young woman, I have no idea what you wish. I barely know who you are! Let alone what I might do to assist—"

"Marry me."

He stilled. "Did you say...?"

"Marry me."

Emotions floated across his features. Hilarity. Disbelief. Curiosity. Incredulity. Compassion.

"You think I am a mad woman, I know. I know." She tightened her grip on his lapels. "Hear me out. I am twenty-four. Unwed. On the shelf. But once I was lovely and wanted. My stepfather saw to it that any suitor was deterred. One was chased away, another bought off. The first one loved me, I believe." She pushed back all tendencies to tears. "Now Daniel has arranged a new marriage to a man I loathe. I refused. Daniel locked me away. Only tonight have I had the opportunity to escape him. My maid helped. My coachman, too. They helped me because I told them I would come to you. They said if anyone could save me, it was you. Please, my lord, you must help me."

Her voice drifted away on a wave of her own despair. Jack flinched. Women in full cry of emotion were creatures he knew not how to handle. Women in mourning. Women in terror. Women in love. All tried his soul. Only women in bed appealed to his sense and his senses. This

Emma Darling appealed to something else in him. Sympathy. A unique emotion for a man of the ton. A man of means and family, never caught by a passing whim or caring concern, save for his siblings. How could he possibly care for this red-haired siren in threadbare cotton and wool? Only because Pinrose abuses her? Perhaps. Whatever the source of his compassion, her story filled him with alarm.

Fool.

“What is the problem only I might solve at this hour of the morning?”

“Marry me. Quickly. I must have your protection.”

“Mine? Is that so?” Why mine? Did Pinrose send you? The blackguard would stoop to anything! Four years ago, he’d robbed Jack’s best friend of a fortune cheating at cards. Months later, the poor man had subsequently hung himself in his rooms by the docks. Jack knew Pinrose would do anything to put his hands on money which never seemed to be his own. And Jack had said so often. For the accusation, Pinrose had blustered that he’d call Jack out, but had never had the guts to bare a sword against one so expert. The man had the spine of a jellyfish, picking on others less cunning than he. Would Pinrose use his stepdaughter to try to cast a scandal upon his name? Of course, he would.

“No one else will do. Your accusations that he caused the death of William DeForest make you my stepfather’s enemy, bar none. And you are right. My stepfather is a cad of the first order. No one else has declared it as loudly or as often as you. ”

Intriguing. Yet hardly a reason to marry. “Well, Miss Darling, let me point out a few facts to you. Even if I were so charmed as to consider wedded bliss to an utter stranger a possibility, I could not find a man of the cloth to join us at this hour in a driving rainstorm. Nor could I proceed without a license.”

“We’ll go to Gretna Green.”

“The border? For a quick march around an anvil?”

“An anvil?”

“Anyone, most likely the village smithy, says a few words to the couple over his anvil!”

“Not a vicar?”

He looked pained. “Never. A quick wedding in Gretna requires more trust than reverence for God.”

“Well, I’d like a minister,” she affirmed, then quick as a sprite, dug into her coat pocket and hoisted a small golden money pouch. She jingled it before him. “Silver. For you. Enough to pay our way to a vicar and back to your home in Durham.”

He let loose with a laugh. “My dear, the silver coins are a fine entreaty but money cannot buy you a husband.”

“I wager you it can.” She opened his palm and dropped her bag into it. “If you help me, there’s more, much more than that for you.”

He weighed it. Heavy. Impressive. But he did not need this. Or want it. And certainly he did not want her trouble. He always had enough of his own. Sometimes more than others. Like now. “No. I do not intend to marry. For silver or gold.”

“Never?” She fluttered those damn long, red lashes of hers, totally flummoxed by his answer.

He used his stock answer for her. It always worked with dewy-eyed maidens. “The family curse precludes any happiness in a union. I see my two brothers have so far skirted it, but tomorrow comes and brings untold miseries.”

“A curse! What import is that when people have real problems?”

“How true!” He chuckled. What the hell was he doing talking about the Stanhope challenge to a strange young creature with shabby clothes and the most angelic face he’d ever seen? Device, perhaps it was, to escape the real reasons for not marrying, but the family’s affliction had worked its magic to delay conjugal horrors in his life. “You’d know the thing was real if you had been told the tales I’ve heard. No lasting union comes to any in the Stanhope clan. Especially if they care for each other.”

She scooted forward, her incomparable large, grey eyes caressing his in fevered glee. “Then have no fear, my lord. On those two counts, you can certainly marry me.”

“How so?” Jack had enjoyed proposals from two other ladies during his youth and their reasons always did fascinate him, especially when they informed him that they would enthrall him. “Are you a fortune teller?” With all those horrible clothes, wild, bright hair and innocent doe’s eyes?

“You see, you and I will never care for each other.”

That struck him to the quick. He crossed one knee over the other in a nonchalance he feigned. “I see. And the second reason?”

“I do not want you forever and ever.”

Her decision that she would never care for him was a small prick to his pride. He'd never had a woman discount him. His station as a peer of the realm and his wealth meant too many fluttered about him in a marital heat. But this woman's rejection felt like a slap. He sought to cover his dejection with wry savoir faire. "Now that's a new wrinkle! Do tell me why."

"I want you to marry me and take me away to your home in Durham. For only three months."

"Three—?"

"Months. Enough time to satisfy my father's will to gain my inheritance. Enough to convince my stepfather that we are committed."

"To Bedlam, I daresay," he murmured.

"Don't say that or think it! To be imprisoned this way since my birthday last in December has been hideous enough. But if you married me and claimed me for your wife for three months, this would do to satisfy my father's will. Then, his solicitor, Jared Draycomb would free me of Daniel's power. Three months with you would prove I am healthy of body and mind."

Jack grumbled. "Are you saying Pinrose accuses you of—?"

"Infirmities of mind. Yes. But three months with you and the ton would conclude you would never harbor a crazy woman in your midst. Then I would be able to go to Mr. Draycomb to proceed with the distribution of the Darling estate. Draycomb and Sons would have to give me my inheritance, even though I am wed to you and not Benjamin Trayne."

Like a damn snake, that man's name brought a portent of evil slithering up Jack's back. To have Daniel Pinrose acting against this sylph-like creature was one awful thing. But for Trayne to be pitted against her, too, was infinitely worse. A cheat at cards and a cad who had ruined more than one good woman by his roguish seduction. "Pinrose keeps your inheritance from you and wants you to marry Trayne as well?"

"He does." She bit her lower lip and looked into her lap. "For my refusal, he locked me in my rooms on my last birthday."

Jack muttered about vengeance on the cur. "Why then?" he asked, though he could guess the cause.

"Since I turned twenty-four and therefore, came of age to inherit."

Jack lifted her chin with two fingers. Her skin was sallow, her eyes rimmed red from crying. Her perfect skin—save for the sprinkle of freckles on her upturned nose—needed the glory of the sun to enliven it. Her large eyes—almond-shaped and dulcet grey as a porcelain

doll's—needed to clear and smile again. Her lush lips needed once more to curve upwards in a smile. Jack felt the urge to help her feel joy once more. "And Daniel insists you marry?"

"He and Trayne have an agreement to split the proceeds of the estate. I overheard them talk of it in our own parlor. When I confronted Daniel, he locked me away. I must have what is due me, Jack. I need it."

He had just enough glow left from his liberal consumption of brandy tonight that he could smile at her intensity. "What would a lovely young lady do with the thousands reputed to be left to you, my dear Miss Darling?"

Her mouth lifted with some rapturous thought and he nearly lost all his teeth gaping at the serenity which overcame her. He tipped his head to catch the ethereal glow she exuded. "I want to build an orphanage in Dover, and I need the money for beds and linens and books and food. Two staff, I think would do for a start. If at first I take in only the neediest children in Dover, I would have ten, maybe eleven orphans—"

"Whoa! Whoa!" Jack put up a hand. "You want your money to open an orphanage?"

She captured his gaze with raw intention of her desire. "It is a useful thing. A helpful thing to educate and clothe those for whom no one cares. Don't you think?"

"Oh, I do. But why you?"

"Why not me?"

He pursed his lips. "You have me there." Suddenly, he had to know the other side of this offer. "Have you made this proposition to other men?"

"No!" Her grey eyes locked on his in dismay. "You are the only man who can help me."

Jack could have been complimented. But his reputation had never been one which invited damsels in distress to run to him. In fact, the other direction was their wont. "And the reason for that is?"

"It is said by gossips that no man bests you. At cards or dice. Or women."

"And your mother?" He chose to react to Emma's train with logic rather than any pride in a back-handed compliment. He had met Joan Darling years ago. She was a vain woman, frail of body and flighty of mind. Intent on social engagements and fripperies, she was a social magpie whose discourse he had always avoided. Still, he knew not what sort of mother she was and offending her daughter as she shivered here before him was not a kind venture. "What does she say?"

"She cannot say anything. She is ill. At home in the country. Since Christmas, her health has declined. I fear she will not survive till this summer." Emma cupped her hand to her mouth. She fought back tears. "Marry me, Jack. You are my finest hope. And when I have my inheritance settled on me, for your help I will give you half."

"Half!" Half of forty thousand pounds and two estates fit for a king. "Tempting."

She beamed at him.

"Temptation to help you, my dear, comes not from this offer of money." That he did not need. The lure came from the way she looked and the way she beseeched him. Dire. Sad. Desperate. Yes, her state roiled him. For he knew Pinrose from his financial schemes and from his losses at the gaming tables. A conniving little frog. And Jack knew Trayne from Eton. A pompous peacock. Forever in debt.

"Name your price, then."

Jack narrowed his gaze on her. The temptation to take her offer rose up from that same well spring of emotion, so rare in Jack's thinking, that he had to look at her once more and imagine what she had been before Pinrose had sequestered her and abused her. She had been lively, fun-loving, a woman well-spoken with an education and a wit to form a plan to save herself. Jack bit back outrage she had been so poorly treated. Flooded with empathy that she had been deprived of what was rightly hers, he felt a fierce protection of her, tall and elegant and lovely as she most certainly was. For before Pinrose had imprisoned her, this delicate creature had been a jewel of femininity. Ivory skin. Sun-kissed hair. Peony pink cheeks. Cherry lips.

Jack Stanhope sat, stunned at himself. For a man who had never thought twice about a woman's birthrights, he craved a restitution of this woman's. "I will help you."

"Wonderful!" She leaned over and hugged the stuffing out of him. "And you will do it tonight?"

"Tonight it is."

She swayed with joy. Then she caught herself up to sneeze.

Jack fished a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it over.

She blew her nose. "And you will promise me one more thing, please?"

Murder seemed to not be on her menu, but a man never knew what a woman would want. "Let me hear it."

"That after we are wed, you will have me."

"Have you?"

“Yes, you know...” She gestured about with the handkerchief.

He searched her face, bright now with growing embarrassment. “Do I?”

“You must take me to bed.”

“Why must I?”

“Debauch me. Teach me! Everything!”

Never in his thirty-five years had he ever heard a lady say the word “debauch”. He told himself not to laugh and instead cleared his throat. She would be lovely and a sensuous temptation, he knew, once she recovered her health and vigor. His usual desire for a woman, once sparked, held for months. Would he be ready to let this one go from his bed after one encounter? “You wish to know the ways of the bedchamber?” When she nodded, he had to ask, “Why is that?”

She tore her gaze away, then straightened her spine as she faced him. “I want to know if what my mother says is true that love between a man and woman can be enchanting. But more than that, I want to be ruined for any other man.”

The force of her declaration set him back to the plush comfort of the squabs. He stared at her.

“The ton has it that to be taken to bed by Viscount Durham ruins any woman for another man.”

His rake’s reputation suddenly took on a new perspective. A sinister aspect became a monster that would have him help this charming young woman only to ruin her. Was he such a man to do such a task? He was appalled that this is what he had become.

“And there is the other fact,” she intruded on his reverie, “that if you take me to bed, Trayne will never want your castoffs.”

Chapter Two

Jack froze. If earlier he'd thought himself nigh unto foxed with the outlandish nature of her offer, he groped now for a suitable response to this preposterous request. Is this what others thought of him? A man so unprincipled that a woman might approach him to save her by taking her virginity? He'd never heard of such a thing!

He grimaced at the mental image of his character. Swiping a hand through his hair, he turned away from her and glared out the window.

"My lord?" Rawley, his coachman, called down from his perch. The poor man must be soaked by now.

"Yes, Rawley! Drive home!" Jack called up through the din.

Jack heard the flick of the reins on his drays. Then he felt the jerk of the carriage as Rawley did as he was bid.

Emma reached over to clasp Jack's hand, her eyes wide with what she assumed was her quick success. He had other ideas on that score.

"Is there not another man whom you wish to approach?"

"None. You are the perfect man."

Jack snorted. "I doubt that, Miss Darling. No other woman has ever proposed to me."

She became still as a mouse. "You cannot be serious."

He surveyed the shock in her gray gaze. "Deadly so."

"But you are sought after. Desired. Titled. Rich. Achingly handsome."

Achingly? "I thank you for the compliments. But my assets have not brought me anyone like you."

"For myself, I am grateful they have not," she said, looking regretful. Then she sneezed once more. "Few other men have a reputation," she commented as she blew her nose, "which could so decidedly ruin a woman's."

That, too, bit. Avoiding her gaze, he unbuttoned his coat, removed it and peeled her sopping wet cloak from her shoulders.

"I have insulted you," she murmured with contrition. "I do apologize."

"No need." He pulled his heavy wool coat snugly about her shivering frame, the sight of her dampened dress clinging to her solid little breasts making him feel all the more guilty for who and what he was. "Truth will be told."

They sat in silence for a long minute while Emma fiddled with his handkerchief and he considered nothing except his jaded past.

"I do not expect you to care for me these three months. You may leave me alone. I am quite capable of entertaining myself so if I could but take up residence in one of your houses and—"

Even now she wanted little of him. So extraordinary for a woman to do so. Usually a woman forward enough to invite you to their bed wanted your name, your title, your purse and if they wanted to share your bed, well then, that came with a propriety that bored the living daylights out of him. "But you would need a divorce."

"Yes. I doubt one may be granted an annulment these days if the marriage is consummated. And it must be for Trayne to renounce me. He is proud and even Daniel could not force him to take a woman to wife who had been..."

"Debauched?" Jack provided the word she acknowledged with a slow nod.

He crossed his arms. He was to be a debaucher. Hunh. And divorced! He had never thought of himself as that, either. What an extraordinary evening. A proposal of marriage. An indecent offer to wed and bed a woman whom he had never met. Plus the knowledge that, if he accepted this bizarre bargain, he would be married, divorced and well paid for it all within three months' time. He turned his face toward her. Lovely, she was, though she did not wear her success here with any hauteur. She had a humility to her demeanor that intrigued him for its novelty. That it also astonished him was unique. So much so that he admitted to himself he wanted to please her and pet her. That desire doubled as he discerned that her recent circumstances had worn her down to skin and bones, coupled with desperation that had brought her to him and to this pass. Marrying him could not only change her life immeasurably, but change her attitude, her health and her financial position.

But what would marrying her do to him?

Make him more of a rogue in the eyes of the ton?

He ran a finger over the seam of his lips. Did it matter if that were so?

He had no woman he wished to take to wife. He had, at the moment, no lover, either. No plans for the next three months. Not if one counted an invitation to Adam's and Felice's supper parties once a month. Or his annual business meeting with his father in late March in the family seat in the Cotswolds. Surely, White's and gambling did not figure prominently in any intelligent man's engagement book. However, the compassion, the sympathy he felt for her, coupled with his extreme dislike of her stepfather and Trayne, propelled him to accept this final stipulation from her. At his fine ripe age of thirty-five, he had no other pressing objections to such an insane proposition as marrying for three months. This indeed meant he was rather louche, didn't it? Without purpose, plight or grand passion, he had no reason to deny her what she wished. Him. His name and his protection. For three months.

What harm could that cause, when the damage done to her was a thousand-fold more brutal than any divorce might bring her?

He would live. Once the ton heard the true tale as they would, years from now, he might even be redeemed. He scoffed at the very notion. Redemption had never been a need of his. It was not now, either. If he did this, it was to help her, not raise up his own reputation in the eyes of others.

She watched him like a bird of prey, sharp-eyed and wily as a starving child seeking succor.

Rawley pulled up to Jack's front door. The coach rolled to a stop while the horses stamped and snorted. The rain drummed a fierce tattoo on the roof.

Jack took Emma's hand. "Come. We must get you out of those clothes."

She bristled. "We must not—not until we're married."

He shook his head. Yes, his reputation certainly was an outrage if the woman who had just proposed marriage to him might think him plotting to take her to him before the ceremony. "Miss Darling. I wish to have my housekeeper find you dry clothes, not remove yours from you."

He felt the tension drain from her body. "Thank you. I am grateful."

"Thank me in three months' time."

* * * *

However in the world Emma would survive this hideous journey, she could not fathom. She shifted, her derriere flattened from the interminable, bumpy ride. The trip north in the hired traveling coach Jack had hired was long, cold and silent. Worse, he had changed his attitude

toward her, his humor gone. Instead, he sat brooding all the way from Grosvenor Square to Northampton. That was only the first days' travel. The second was no better, with nary a word from him to ease their way. Though she tried to bring him out in conversation, her perpetual sneezing and coughing made polite discussions impossible. That night at an inn in Southwell, Jack had insisted she have her own room with fires built high by the innkeeper to ward off the chill of light snowfall.

She picked up a pillow from the seat opposite now and punched it, then rearranged it behind her back, which had never been so sore. Nor her throat. Nor her heart. Why ever was she the one so afflicted with a greedy stepfather and a grasping suitor? What had she ever done to deserve such? As if that were not enough trouble, she now contended with a man who had agreed to wed her, bed her and divorce her.

Jack certainly seemed no more civil about their agreement than that night she proposed. In fact, he seemed less so. Dark brows knit tightly together like a gargoyle, he considered the landscape out their coach window with an appalling dedication. Emma had had more discourse with her cat than with this mute man.

"I say, Jack, if you are angry with me, let me hear it! I cannot bear any more of your torrid silence!" And then, rasping as she was from her outburst and her infernal sore throat, she caught a hand to her mouth and nose and sneezed. Loudly.

"Good God, woman," he muttered, sounding frustrated as he swept her skirts aside and sat next to her. "Come here and let me rub your back for you. It's what my nurse would do for me or Wes when we took a chill. Would that we could escape this damn sleet."

She undulated with his ministrations. His hands were huge, warm and strong across her aching muscles. Facing out the window away from him, she could now pout as she had long wished to do and would not allow him to see her so. "Thank you, this is wonderful."

"I fear the cough will go deeper in your chest. Not a good thing, Emma."

"I know. Perhaps with rest and a few good brandies, I can recover."

"Like brandy, do you?"

She smiled to herself. His hands felt like enormous machines, turning her body to mush. "Do you?"

"The best. What else do you like?"

"Roast beef."

He hooted.

"Potatoes," she told him, her mouth watering at the very idea of warm slivers baked in cream and cheese.

"Parsnips, I bet."

"Ba! Who does?" She hacked with a wild cough. "Goose and pudding."

"Together?" he chortled.

"At Christmas dinner, yes. And you?"

"I'd rather that roast beef."

"And the pudding? Delicious plum pudding, dark with currants and cherries, sugar and a strong whiskey bath!" She knew she was crooning, dreaming about the rich treat.

"My girl," he said with a laugh as he settled her back into his arms and relaxed them both against the spare leather upholstery of the coach, "with all your talk of spirits, I would take you for a lush."

"Hmm." She nestled to his solid chest, warmer and more comfortable now in his embrace than she'd been in this coach or his presence to date. "I like wine, too."

She could feel him nod as he took her hand and raised it to appraise it.

"Beer?"

"When the weather's hot."

"Ale?" He massaged her fingers.

"Never."

"Ah. Good taste." He put her hand to his thigh and covered it with his own.

She shifted again, liking the feel of his muscles beneath her palm.

"Uncomfortable?"

She was tired, exhausted with her sneezing and hacking, but leaning against his chest had inspired sleep in her. "The bouncing of this coach will make me black and blue."

"I see. I do understand. Perhaps then you'd like to rest more against my chest." He put his back to the side of the coach and put an arm around her.

"I'll not crush you?"

"I would not have offered if that were so," he told her with stern eyes.

She rose from her position and then reversed to lay against him. Now reclining in his arms, she felt herself bolstered in a more substantial way.

"Is this comfortable for you?" she persisted, trying hard to make her voice cheery while her nearness to him made her body warm and vaguely tingly.

"Very." He put her head back against his shoulder. "We should make Yorkshire tonight. You need to rest."

But she couldn't. She felt every small movement of his body. The rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. The breadth of his right shoulder as she leaned against it. The power of his arms as he held her to him. Long and corded, quick to grab her when the coach hit a stone or a rut in the road.

"I'm afraid I cannot sleep," she confessed on a sigh and made to rise.

"No. Rest. The sneezing and coughing I do not like. I'll not have it said I killed you before I married you."

That set her to laughing and coughing. "Oh, Jack! No one would believe that!"

He lifted one long brow at her. "You are an innocent, aren't you? Of this escapade, I think the ton will have a merry dance for months. Then when you divorce me, it will revive once more. And on until you open your home for ragamuffins. Once more society will chew me over for abducting you." He examined her now from lips to eyes to hair and back again. "They will never forgive me."

"I will always praise you."

He chuckled her under her chin. "Darling Emma, your word won't count. The ton will label you a ruined woman who will say anything to make her way in the world."

"Jack, I promise you. For what service you do me here, I will daily proclaim your honor."

He smiled, sad and mellow. "If you are to have your way, I will dishonor you."

She tipped her head, aware of his word play. "You have your way with me as I have asked and we both shall be content."

"Do you think so? Tell me. The first man you cared for, what happened to him?"

"He died in Spain with Wellesley."

"I see. Hideous place. My brother Wes was horribly wounded at Talavera last year. He survives well though. Did your young man not wish to marry you before he left?"

"He did." Emma pressed her lips together and glanced at her hand held by his. "I regret I did not run away with him. Daniel forbade the match. It was the first indication of how conniving my stepfather could be."

"And Trayne? Has he said that he will accept only a virgin?"

She rolled a shoulder and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "He asked me in front of Daniel if I was still untouched."

"Bastard."

"I told him the truth. I see now I should not have."

Jack brushed her strawberry ringlets back from her cheek and pressed her closer. "No matter now."

"So you will have me?" Her pulse leapt at the joy and she glanced up at him. "Teach me?"

Jack considered her lips, full and smooth. "Have you, yes. Teach you, why? You have no plans to take another, do you?"

"No!" She was outraged that he would think her so forward. "Not at all. But I have heard our maids tittering in the downstairs parlor about their..."

"Affairs? Encounters?"

"Yes, quite right. And they seem to think it all great fun." She knew she was running on at the mouth about all this but she had to know. "Is it? Great fun?"

"It can be. It should be."

"Will ours be?"

He examined her soft grey eyes for a small eternity. "I will ensure it will be."

"Oh, thank you. I am delighted. If I cannot marry, I want to experience this for once in my life." With you and no other. For one night, if no more. "I can be content and have all I require."

"Really?" He picked up an errant wisp of her hair and twirled it about his finger. His gaze met hers and locked. "Do you not require love in your life?"

"I will have it from children who give love freely. Unendingly."

For some odd reason, he blinked. He turned his face quickly toward the window.

He was...undone?

"What did I say to upset you?"

He snorted. "You are damnably persistent."

"Yes. A trait Daniel wishes to disabuse me of. I will not change. I would not have survived if I succumbed to all who—"

"Dear Emma," he said as he turned to consider her face, "keep your determination, but do not use it against me."

"Tell me how I unnerved you," she insisted.

He smiled but the expression never traveled to his eyes. "A small thing. Your reference to how children love. Well and without censure. So should we all, eh?"

“Yes, Jack. So should we all.” And I am now bound to see why you believe it possible for children and acceptable for your brothers and sister, but not for yourself.

Chapter Three

Jack sat in the gentlemen's waiting room of the newest Durham dress shop, tapping his hat against his knee. The place was a tiny establishment run by a woman who claimed to be a French comtesse before fear of Madame Guillotine had sent her scampering to English shores and the town of Durham.

Why the hell did women's clothes require forever to sew?

He sighed and stood. They had to get over to the vicar, who was a peevish man, punctual to the second. Curse him. Why couldn't I have a cleric in my patronage who is late as hell, like the one near Wes's and Lacy's hunting lodge?

Jack took to pacing the store, the bolts of fabric appealing to his senses.

"Monsieur Le Vicomte!" Madame Duhamel swept from her dressing room in a cloud of gray silk and too much rose perfume. "Your lady will emerge in a moment. She is very lovely. Cuts a good figure, as you say here."

Jack chuckled. A good figure for your services, too, I imagine. "I am eager to see her. What keeps her?" She had no case of nerves when we arrived but was bubbling at the very idea of her marriage.

"She is eager to please you, Monsieur."

She has. She does. "She will do it better if she appears promptly," he said, directing his words toward the dressing room.

"I'm coming, Jack!" Emma called to him from the curtained rooms in the back.

He was eager to have done with this ceremony. There was so much to do in London for Emma, yet caring for her clothes and comfort was necessary. Caring for her reputation had become even more important to him. To that end, before he'd hired a travelling coach four days ago in London, he'd penned a note to his younger brother Adam that he was leaving for his Durham estate for a week or more. He did not reveal the reason, lest Adam storm over to

Grosvenor Square in shock at the news of his pending marriage. Then, too, he'd rejected Emma's suggestion of Gretna Green in favour of the more legitimate ceremony by his vicar's hand. Jack needed to marry Emma as quickly as possible, as lawful as possible, then return to London to right other wrongs against this charming woman. That he also contemplated the consummation of his marriage to her with a yearning he'd not known for any woman made him testy.

How to please a virgin, old man?

Absurd quandary for a man who has bedded— let's be honest—too many women.

Absurd quandary for a man who has never wished to marry any woman, but now cannot wait to claim this one.

He spun and touched another roll of cloth. "Tell me about this velvet, Madame." His fingers sank into the deep pile of forest green velvet and imagined it against the swell of Emma's breasts. If they were as pert and full as they seemed beneath that awful muslin she had worn to waylay him, then she was a rare find, indeed.

"Silk from Lucca, Monsieur. You like it?" Her French accent tore his attention from his future wife's assets and made him wince at the destruction of his native tongue.

"I do. We will also need a chamber robe for the Viscountess."

"But of course! I have a wonderful length of mink that would look superb at the bodice." She ran her fingertips down her own to illustrate.

"No," he shot back, thinking of the purity of his future wife's complexion. "I want the contrast of the green against her skin."

"I see," the woman demurred as he moved toward a table of sheer chiffrons. "And shall Madame have a gown for her boudoir?"

"Of course." She could not sleep for months in the nude. Could she? "This one." He pointed to the pale pink. "And this." The ivory.

"The style, Monsieur?"

He caught her eye and her meaning. Lascivious in her query, she covered her innuendo with a deft smile as he replied, "She is my bride. Yes. You may say so in the village. So do give her the newest style, Madame Duhamel. And send along with the other items, a long night rail of brushed cotton, too."

The woman bowed her head. "Of course. May I suggest three more items?"

He nodded, his eyes on her gaunt eagle's face.

“Slippers to match the robe. Kid walking shoes to match her new coat. And an evening gown,” she suggested as she lifted a long bolt of embossed sapphire satin, “the color on your family crest. For dinner parties. A low décolleté, don’t you think?”

Jack could already see Emma in the regal blue. How she would walk, how she would dance in the sinuous fabric. Knew as well which necklace to give her to accent the gown and her firm, young breasts. “Done!”

“Jack? You are buying me more?”

He turned. My God. His gaze ran down her form. In plum georgette, Emma Darling appealed to every sense he had. For the eye, the classic Greek elegance of a strawberry blonde with flawless creamy skin, her face framed by the en Coeur neckline. For the nose, the fragrance of jasmine. For the hands, the tautness of her shoulders, the point of her breasts, the curve of her hips, all to be adored with reverent touch.

“You are lovely, darling Emma.” He made a motion for her to whirl about. “Let me see how I shall be beggared. Delightful. And the new cloak for the lady, Madame Duhamel?”

“Finished tomorrow, my lord. We will sew all night, I promise you. I will deliver it myself to Durham Manor. For today, I give her my own cloak to borrow. The chill demands she have good wool.”

“Indeed. I am grateful for your foresight,” he praised the woman but could not take his gaze from his bride-to-be.

Emma ran her palms over the fabric of her dress, smiling like a child at her birthday party and beaming with more good health than the past few days.

The fact that she had stopping sneezing and wheezing, despite a red nose, pleased him. But the fact that he was eager as hell to have this ceremony displeased him. A confirmed bachelor, he marveled that he harbored a growing desire for her. Usually lust hit him quickly and hard. Here, though he knew her for only four days, he felt inspired moment to moment by her lack of artifice and lured by her resilience. Her effervescence. He’d not known women without wiles. He marveled at her forthrightness. And her courage.

For the first time in his life, he felt refreshed to match her in those qualities. Noble, even, to try. He patted the ring in his frockcoat pocket. By God, you will proceed to this wedding, man.

“Come, Emma. We must be off.”

Emma glided forward and took his offered hand. “The rest of my wardrobe?” She asked of Madame.

"In three days' time. We will work night and day."

Emma grinned at the dressmaker. "Wonderful. Thank you very much."

When they were in his barouche with his Durham Manor coachman at the reigns, Jack pulled her close as was now he now wont to do as they travelled. Emma nestled against him like a delicate bird, then stretched up to kiss his cheek. "You are generous, Jack. I did not expect it."

"Necessity, Emma. We cannot have you naked for three months." Though that's not a bad idea.

She squeezed his hand, then glanced out the window. "Does it hurt?"

"What?"

She tipped her head this way and that. "To be bedded?"

Her thoughts travelled to the bedroom as well? How intriguing. Gratifying, too. He caught her chin and led her to look up at him. "By some, I am sure. You will feel nothing but pleasure, I do hope."

"How is that accomplished?"

He chuckled, a pang of desire growing in his cock. "Inquisitive chit. Never fear. I will show you!"

She grinned. "I am eager for it."

Bless me, if that's true. "Outlandish woman. You try me."

"How so?"

"You are forward."

"And in the bedroom? Does a lady not ask her husband for affection?"

"Never having been married, I cannot say."

"But you have had mistresses. Has none ever asked you to kiss her...or...do other things?"

Some have been very forward. Asked for attentions I had no desire to bestow. He glanced away, wondering now here in Emma's presence why he had ever been attracted to any of his paramours. All had been lovely. None had been as interesting as this woman next to him. Was that because none had ever survived a test of will like this one? "Of course."

"Why should a wife be different?" she persisted.

"Wives are generally not lovers," he told her.

"Sad. Is there some rule prohibiting that?"

I fervently hope not! He shook his head and laughed at himself. "None I know of. Merely convention and the need to marry for anything but love."

"Ah." She thought a long minute. "So have you ever been in love?"

"No."

The curtness and finality of his reply had her lifting her brows at him in question. "How can that be for a man of your age?"

"My dear, I am not in my dotage." He was miffed by her assumption and frowned.

"Still..." Her eyebrows danced in merriment. "Most men are married by your age. Especially those of your rank. They want a wife and an heir and a spare."

"I have no need to get any. I have two younger brothers, both married. Adam has two sons, and Wes's wife will bear a child in the summer."

"You have avoided marriage," she concluded with finality to her tone.

"It is easy to avoid the dice tables if one is objective about the real prospects."

"I see," she said, crossing her arms and frowning in consideration of that statement. "You credit the family curse with this reluctance, I imagine?"

He nodded. Always a good excuse when one is not amused. "It helps."

She sighed. "I am glad then I will not be considered a true wife."

A shroud of sadness fell over him. Why should that insult his pride? Why should that inspire a desire to be a true husband? He scowled.

"You are angry with me," she offered minutes later as intrusion to the pall of silence. "I am most grateful for what you are doing for me. The elopement. The marriage. The gowns. Jack, please look at me."

Her warm appeal, so earnest in her apology, made him appraise her lovely face.

"I am sorry," she repeated. "I will be quiet as a mouse and agreeable as a parson."

"Will you?" he asked, partly to be contrary and partly to prod her. "What if I like you as you are?"

"Well, I—"

"Assertive and charming."

She tipped her head in question. "Thank you for the compliment."

"You are welcome. Now do me one favor."

Relief drifted down her delicate features and her gaze reveled in his. "Anything."

"Show me how grateful you are." Where the deuce did that idea come from?

"I...am...not certain what you mean."

“What do you think a man means when he says that to the woman who is about to become his wife?”

Her doe's eyes widened in understanding as they examined his features. “Perhaps he means this,” she whispered as she braced herself against his chest, lifted her face and put her soft lips to his.

Her touch was light, brief.

He moved not one muscle.

She withdrew. Only an inch.

Her gaze found his and lingered.

His own focused on her mouth.

“Or this.” She strained toward him once more, this time placing her lips on his in a harder, longer caress.

He gripped her arms, brought her closer, held her to him like a drowning man clinging to a raft.

“That,” she murmured as she lifted her warm lips from his, “could be gratitude.” Her gaze locked on his. “Or this might be,” she got out as her lips met his again and this time, covered his in a hunger that astonished him.

He gathered her up against him, crushing her torso to his. She tasted of need and haste, hot desire fresh on her lips.

He scooped her up to sit across his lap. This way, he could plunge his fingers into her hair, plunder her supple mouth and feel the glory of those pointed breasts against his chest.

“This isn't gratitude, Jack.” She broke away, her eyes wide with shock and delight. She came back for more of his mouth, slanting her lips across his one way and the other, inciting him onward.

He growled, plunging his tongue inside the warmth of her mouth. Christ, she was soft and pliant. He leaned over her, a palm to her breast. Her nipple grew firm and full, blossoming beneath the new gown. He kissed her chin, her throat and worked his way down her bodice to the tip of her pointed areola, hard as a diamond under her gown. There, he sucked her into his mouth, felt her gasp and press closer in offering to him.

“Milord!” His coachman's voice permeated Jack's euphoria. “Milord, we're 'ere. The vicar is coming out to greet the carriage, sir!”

"Ouff!" Emma exclaimed as Jack picked her up by the waist and plunked her onto the seat, then pulled Madame Duhamel's cloak across the wet spot on her bodice.

"Come, my dear." He yanked at his own great coat to cover his raging erection in his infernally snug breeches. Then he smiled at her. "We are about to be married."

"And you will kiss me again," she declared on a thread of sound, a dazed expression in her eyes.

Oh, he was going to do more than kiss her. "Yes, darling Emma. When you are mine." I am going to feast on you.

* * * *

The young vicar was a tiny rabbit of a man. Shorter than she by four or more inches with long ears, huge eyes and a nervous tick to his pointed nose that interrupted the flow of the service so that Emma wanted to giggle like a girl.

But, ahem, she straightened herself up time and again while she watched Jack do the same. He took to tugging at her hand to keep her in line, as the two of them each recited their vows.

As the vicar approached the end of the ceremony, Emma felt herself nearly swoon with delight. To be married was one thing. To be married and out of Daniel's clutches was much more. But suddenly to find herself amused and enthralled by the man she had chosen, the most unlikely man, a rake of the first order, was astonishingly good luck. Jack Stanhope. She must pinch herself when she had the chance. But then, she had other ideas in store for what to do after this horrendously long ritual was complete. In Jack's bedroom in Durham Manor, she would revel in what she thought never possible for her. And to do it in the arms of a man whom she had met only days ago, but whom she enjoyed and yes, even trusted, she filled with expectation.

"The ring, milord?" the little rabbit asked Jack. "Have you one?"

"Of course I do!"

She opened her mouth to ask Jack how he had acquired such a thing, but snapped it shut to keep the vicar guessing about the length of their relationship. The little man had drilled them with questions when Jack and she appeared at his parsonage door. Though Jack had sent word round that they were coming this afternoon to wed, the vicar, Jack told her, had sent a note back asking for the license. Jack had told the man that he would acquire one when next he was in London, but for now, this ceremony would be done, duly witnessed by him and recorded in the parsonage records.

"Jack!" She was agog at the sight of the jewelry he produced from his pocket. A gold band encrusted with tiny emeralds and rubies, the ring was a sizable bauble sure to cover her entire knuckle. "This is lovely."

"From the family collection, dear Emma. This was my mother's wedding ring and now, it is appropriate that it becomes yours. I am told by my father that my mother loved the ring for its inscription, a phrase from the thirteen-hundreds. 'You and No Other.'" Jack held her hand out and slid the ring upon her finger.

It was much too big.

"No matter," he told her, "I will have it sized down. Wear it for today."

Tears came to her eyes at the sentiment and Jack's thoughtfulness. "I am grateful."

He laughed and caught her up against his chest. "Again?"

She nodded quickly.

He glanced at the vicar. "Are we done?"

"Yes, my lord. You are now man and wife. Kiss her, kiss her, if you must."

"I must." Jack's face went still, his handsome mouth pursed in concentration, his gaze in hers. Then he buried the fingers of one hand in her short hair and held her as he swooped down and claimed her mouth, her breath, her very being.

He broke away, astonishment in his gaze.

She was certain his look matched her own.

He removed her arms from around his neck and tugged her toward the door of the tiny chapel with both hands.

"Thank you, Vicar Boyle. I send to you tomorrow the fees for the new pews."

"You paid him to marry us quickly?" she asked, choking on mirth as Jack led her outside and into their carriage.

"One always gives a gratuity to the minister, darling Emma," he told her as he helped her up into the conveyance.

She stared at him, marveling anew at his words. "I am no longer Emma Darling."

When the coachman closed the door upon them, Jack hugged her close. "No. You are Emma Stanhope."

And am I your darling? Might I be? For just one magical night?

He lifted her chin and examined her eyes as if he could divine her thoughts. "You shall be my darling, if you still wish it. Do you, Emma?"

Chapter Four

She held tightly to his hand all the way home to Durham Manor. A short ride of ten minutes, the journey seemed to take ten years. But snuggled against Jack's chest, Emma listened to his heart beat and the pace resounded with her own yearning. To make love to him, to be loved by him for just one night seemed so impossible days ago that she had feared to make this last request in her offer. But he had agreed and now he seemed as eager as she.

Do not delude yourself, Emma. Men love rarely. That was her mother's warning.

Emma fought back the dour words, so daunting to her fortitude. But you do not wish for love from him. Only the deflowering.

She squirmed in her seat. Be honest, Emma, don't you want more?

"You are sad. Why?" Jack lifted her chin. "If you have second thoughts on this, I can—"

"No!" She tried in vain to smile at him. "I was thinking of people who have nothing to do with us."

Jack's silver eyes seemed to look straight through her. "Who?"

"My mother."

"She has to do with you. So tell me."

"She has a jaded view of men. Thinks none worthy of her. Thinks few can honor a woman's affections."

"Do you believe her?"

Emma examined his earnest features, so intent on her. "I always thought her a little...extreme."

"Parents often appear that way."

"They do. After a while, it becomes imperative to rid yourself of their notions."

He hooted. "How true. I'll tell you about my father sometime. His notions are notoriously odd."

"I have heard."

"Really? I wonder that they did not deter you from approaching me," he said with distaste for the subject.

"They were, I am ashamed to say, the very reasons that I did," she admitted, felt her cheeks flush with color and turned her face toward the coachman who pulled open the door and let down the steps. "I think of you differently now."

He cupped her face with one hand and led her to look at him. "Do you, darling? How encouraging," he whispered as he bent and kissed her slowly, his mouth blessing hers time and time again and creating a craving for more. "Come," he said breathlessly as the barouche rolled to a stop and he broke away. Quickly, he stepped out, offered his hand and led her up the broad stone steps. The servants had assembled in the foyer in a line. She had met a few last night when they arrived late. Now, here all of them stood.

"They are here to congratulate you and to receive the new mistress of the house," Jack affirmed her suspicion as to their purpose here.

She clutched his arm, tingling at his nearness and his endearments, honored that he had told them they were marrying this morning. "You arranged this, Jack. How wonderful." She accepted each of the staff's good wishes. The housekeeper who curtsied to her. The head butler who bowed. The cook who dipped low. The maid who had waited on her last night in her bedchamber after they had arrived at Durham Manor. Followed by two more maids and a footman. "I thank each of you for this," she told them wondering how they would feel when they learned in a few months' time she was not to be their mistress forever.

"Simmons," Jack bid his butler, "bring the Viscountess and me two brandies in the drawing room. And we will take a cold luncheon in an hour or so in the dining room."

Emma shivered with anticipation. Her gaze on her husband, she began to undress him in her mind's eye. His silver grey frock coat, his high starched cravat, his spotless shirt. My God, Emma. Are you so eager for him? She fought with her better nature to finally look upon the horsey-faced butler.

"Of course, my lord." The servant inclined his head as two of the maids shot each other sideways glances.

Emma wanted to jump out of her skin with excitement. "I've never had so much brandy in my life," she confessed to Jack as he looped her arm in his and led her toward the drawing room.

"Good for the constitution."

"Good for the body in this clime!" She tried for levity to mask her nerves.

He opened the double doors to the drawing room.

"Oh, this is beautiful," she twirled about gazing at the splendor of the ivory walls, the red velvet upholstery and the sapphire Oriental rug. Last night, she had seen little of the house because they had arrived so late. Built in the grand Palladian style, the white stone manse was a huge two-story monolith approached by a circular drive and surrounded by gardens and stables. The inside was luxuriously appointed in Turkish rugs and French tapestries, Italian silk settees and Chinoiserie draperies at every window. "The statuary?" she asked about the Carrara marble nudes dotting the perimeter.

"From my father's Grand Tour." Jack strolled toward a portrait on the far wall. The man there resembled Jack so much that were it not for the powdered wig and lace jabot, Emma might have thought it a study of her new husband. "He brings home beauty whenever he finds it."

"You say that with sarcasm." She walked toward the painting to note the silver eyes, the midnight hair, the killing handsomeness of Jack's sire. "Because he has had so many wives?"

"Because he had so many lovers. In quick succession."

Children, too, from what she'd heard. On both sides of the blanket. But not wishing to pry too much, she demurred and nodded. "I see."

"The ton, I know, declares it is a centuries old family trait," Jack said with some wry amusement.

Though Emma wished not to think more of it, she could not help what was whispered about Jack himself. They say you carry on the tradition with a new mistress each season.

A knock at the door had Jack calling to his butler who entered with the brandies.

"You may leave us," Jack told him after he set the tray on a deal table.

"Your luncheon is also ready, my lord. Laid out as you require."

"Thank you, Simmons. You may tell the staff not to disturb us for the remainder of the day. You may leave us now."

The man nodded and retreated, a resounding click to the two doors as he closed them.

Jack pressed a snifter into her hands. "To you, Emma. Your happiness."

"And to yours." Not to ours. Not to the future. Only mine. How fitting for the limits of my offer to you. So be it. She took a draught, threw it back and found herself choking on the sentiment.

"Hold on!" Jack laughed as he took her glass and patted her back.

"That is quite wonderful," she got out with a cough as she eyed the crystal decanter. "I'd like another."

"You would, eh?" Jack frowned. "For courage?"

"I am not foxed, if that's your worry. But courage is not a bad reason." She put out her empty glass to him. "You know me well."

"I daresay," he said as he took up the decanter and splashed out more brandy for her, "not well enough to do as we are about to do."

A flash of excitement dashed up her spine. She took another sip, more slowly this time, and pondered his words. "How well have you known the women you have taken to bed?"

"Ah, well, a gentleman does not tell."

"I don't want names." Though if I knew, I'd hunt them down and scratch their eyes out. "I want details." She took another sip, feeling quite deliciously warm now, head to toe.

He looked her over and arched a long black brow. "Attraction is not based on knowledge."

No. "But instead on what?"

"An allure." He took a long drink of his own spirits and swirled the remainder in the glass. "A connection of the mind that feeds on an appreciation of the other's figure and speech."

"Camaraderie."

He emptied his glass and filled it up again. "True. Like ours."

"We have a friendship?" She downed her own glass and raised it for a refill.

He dribbled some in. "We do."

"You're being stingy."

"And you'll be drunk!"

"Pour, my lord." When he did, she asked, "And so you mean to say you find me alluring?"

"I do." He shot her a look filled with mirth. "As you do me."

"I am astonished at that, you realize." My God, what was she telling him? She needed to entice him not repel him. She needed to be in his arms and his bed and quickly, too, before her courage failed.

"I am certain you are no more surprised than I am that we get on so well."

"Will we get on well after this?" she asked, her voice quivering with desire to be out of the dashed sweltering drawing room and into his bedroom. And his bed.

"I will ensure it," he whispered. He put his glass down and beckoned her with one hand. "Give me this," he said as she stood before him and he removed her snifter from her fingers. "These are the rules."

"Rules? I don't—"

"Darling Emma, I know you do not obey anyone's rules save your own. But these are necessary to your happiness afterward. Hear me out." He cupped her elbows and drew her flush to his body. Had she ever noticed that he was a head taller than she? That his eyes were deep pewter with desire? That his voice was so deliciously low and sent waves of delight to her bones and her breasts and her belly? "We will climb the stairs to my suite and I will kiss you. Here." He touched her cheek. "And here." He thumbed her lower lip. "And here." He traced the line of her throat to her shoulder. "At each kiss, you will tell me if I may proceed." He stroked the hollow of her throat, then let his eyes drift suggestively lower and back to hers. "Or not."

"I like to kiss you." She confessed, bold with the brandy.

"I thought so." He smiled consolingly. "But there is more to love than kisses."

Of course there was. And it was high time she stopped being a ninny and learned about it. She put her hand in his and said, "May we please cease all this talk and go before I melt here at your feet in a puddle?"

He leaned back and chuckled. Before she knew what had happened, he had upended her world, caught her up in his arms and headed for the door. In minutes, he had them up the curving staircase, down the hall and into the dark mahogany shadows of his suite. With a shoulder to the door, he closed it and set her to her feet. His hands went to her shoulders.

And hers went to his.

"Stop," she warned with the brightest of intents.

He looked like the house had fallen on him. His disappointment was so ripe it rendered Emma even more in his thrall. "You've changed your mind? Well, hell. I might have known you would not want—"

"But I do," she affirmed and beamed at him. "I must be the one to lead or I will never have the patience to bear you going slowly, you see, and so I—"

He cursed roundly. "Then hurry! My patience is thin. Very thin." He spread his arms out like a scarecrow. "Undress me?"

"Not a bad idea," she replied. "But not just yet."

His arms flapped to his sides. "What would you like me to do to seduce you then?"

“Follow.”

“Follow?”

She winked at him. “My lead.”

“Tormentor. Get to it, will you?” He stretched his arms wide once more, his fingers wagging in urgency.

His good humor for her madness tickled her. So with more determination than she'd felt in years, she knew now what she must do. She reached up to circle her arms around his very sturdy shoulders and beseeched him in a whisper. “Do kiss me again as you did after we were wed.”

His pewter eyes deepened to shades of darkest metal. “I must embrace you to do that. Are you certain this is what you wish?”

“I do,” she murmured, already placing her lips against his moist ones. “I very much do.”

What he did, how he enfolded her with such care and such fierce restraint was an act she told herself to never forget. But the meeting of his lips on hers, the matching of his desire to her own had her gasping for air as he took her mouth, broke away and then came back for more. He possessed her with arms so strong, she cried out in triumph and greater need. All a jumble, her emotions had her hugging him closer to her and wishing for more.

Everything.

“Can we sit?” she asked him, breathless.

In a thrice, he had her up in his arms, just as he had carried her before, and took three steps to a massive settee. He sat against the far arm and drew her over his body. Against her thigh, she felt his cock. She moaned into his seeking mouth. How huge was he? She was no cloistered nun, had seen animals mate and knew the way men and women joined.

“Shall I kiss you more?” he asked with a husk to his bass voice, pushing her disheveled hair back from her brow and cheeks.

“Yes, do.” She worked at his cravat.

“And shall I help you with that?” he asked when she fumbled and plucked to no avail.

“I’m a failure as a forward woman,” she offered in pique.

One corner of his mouth tipped up in a laugh. “You are perfect as a forward woman.”

“Folderol. You’re coddling me.” She pouted.

He arched a brow, slithered off his cravat and shook his head. “Not in the least. May I take my coat off?”

She pressed her lips together. "Do."

"And my waist coat?"

She wrinkled her nose at him and stuck out her tongue.

He captured her, cradling the back of her head in his large palm. "I have better uses for your tongue, my darling." He sat up, and in one swirl, had her under him on the couch. "Let me show you with mine."

The kiss stole her mind. Sweeping inside, he took her with a breathless impatience. Plundering her, he defined the scope of her mouth and plunged into the recesses of her consciousness. He pulled back. His dark eyes startled and searching.

She knew he asked for permission or guidance. She knew only that she needed more of the same. "Jack," she whispered as she cupped his jaw and drew him forward. "Jack, again." The sweetness of his kiss undid all her senses. "Again," she begged when he pulled away once more.

"Emma." His lips were on her cheek, her lower lip, her shoulder. All as he had promised.

She pushed him away. His midnight hair was mussed, his eyes clouded, his shirt gaping open to reveal the contours of his naked chest. And on his face was the question, shall we go on?

"Yes, let me up."

He pulled her to her feet. "Emma?"

She presented her back. "Undo me."

He groaned, muttering something about ties and seamstresses as his fingers worked at the fastenings and his lips took a journey down her spine, pressing kisses to her flesh. "God, you are lovely." He twirled her around. "Take it off." His eyes sought hers. "Take it off, Emma."

She had wanted to lead. She was. He required it. She tried to smile but the need to be rid of the gown was her most urgent goal. She crossed her arms and tore at the bodice to tug the gown to her waist.

His eyes narrowed. His breathing quickened. His nostrils flared. "Step out." He retreated. "I want to watch you." He lifted a finger to point to her chemise. "The rest."

She swallowed hard. Mad to have him now, she pulled at the tiny ribbon threaded through her thin cotton bodice, knowing beneath, save for her thigh-high stockings, she wore not a stitch. "Are brides always...?"

"Naked?" he asked. His gaze went from hers to her fingers. "They should be."

"Right you are," she agreed on a surge of daring and lust, then pulled the last of the ribbon through her garment. The thing fell and she was free, the cool air caressing her breasts and making

her nipples pucker—and her nether regions pulse in need of whatever her husband would provide.

How long she stood there looking over his shoulder at the wainscoting she could not measure. But from the corner of her eye, she could tell he toured her body like a man intent on making notes. Making maps. Making journeys she knew not of.

“If you don’t say something soon, I shall leave,” she threatened him.

“You are gloriously made, my darling Emma.”

She gulped back some of her fear he would reject her. “Truly?” she prodded and he affirmed her beauty once more. “My breasts are not too small?”

“Each will fill the palm of my hand.”

She ventured a glance at him then. His eyes, dark slate and heavy with lust, drifted to hers and back down her body. “And my hips are not too thin?”

“Svelte as a siren, darling.”

She cleared her throat. “And my legs are not ugly?”

“Straight near your thighs, curvy little knees, long calves. And delicately boned feet.”

“I am acceptable?”

“More than, sweetheart. Any man would prize you.”

“Oh, Jack,” she cried, her voice breaking in nerves, “no need to say that if you don’t think it. I have no need for compliments. Really. If you will just please stop looking at me like that.”

“May I hold you?” he asked, a reverence in his tone she’d not yet heard there.

“Oh, yes. And kiss me, too. I want to be kissed. Make me warm like you did in the coach.”

He opened his arms. “You need to be near me, then.”

Stepping over her wedding dress and chemise, she took a step toward him. “You need no clothes, either.”

“Shall I discard them?”

In a flood of reason, her mind declared he must be naked to make love to her. “I want to.” She stood ever so near again, her fingers to his shirt, his buttons, his flies, his small clothes while he stepped out of his boots.

As his breeches fell and his undergarments with them, she looked down at his body. Her daydreams of how a man’s cock might look were astonishingly inadequate. He was huge, red and standing tall. A long, thick, rigid piece of flesh she found enticingly handsome.

He took both her hands in his. “Have you never seen a man before?”

She shook her head, mesmerized by the sight of his assets.

"Never known what a male animal looks like?"

"Oh, yes!" She told him forthrightly. "Horses and dogs. Cattle, too. But none are as lovely as you."

He snorted. "Darling, a man's accoutrements are never called lovely."

"But you are," she felt quite taken with the length of him. And the girth. She reached out a hand.

As she snatched it back, he caught her. "Want to touch me?"

Her eyes, she knew, must be large as melons, as she nodded and said, "I do."

"Then, here."

"Oh, my." His skin was soft as down. She stroked his length. "But hard as iron."

He clamped her hand. "Darling, you must go slowly."

"Really?" She stared at his cock in amazement. "Does it not like to be caressed?"

"Most definitely." He inhaled deeply. "But you see if you...ah...stroke me too long or hard, then I wish to proceed too quickly."

"Mating is not a moment's passion?"

He looked appalled. "It should never be only a moment's. But hours."

"Hours?" she could barely say the word.

"Who told you less?" he said with sad amusement as he led her to stroke his shaft in languid ease.

She lifted a shoulder. "My mother. And the maids I overheard said it took minutes." She examined how she seemed to make his cock grow larger, redder. And a drop of fluid now appeared on his tip. "They never said anything about how beautiful you are."

He winced. "Emma. Stop that." He put a hand to the one of hers that caressed him. "May I touch you now?"

"Hmm. No. If you do, I shall have to stop stroking you." She tossed him a saucy look. "I rather like this, Jack."

"I'd rather like spanking you, Emma."

"You wouldn't!" She paused.

"Never spar with me. Let me touch you. It is not fair to let you have your pleasure whilst I have nothing of you to sate me."

“Mmm. Perhaps you are right. But then, I wonder.” She grinned and squeezed his long, hot rod. “Will this go away?”

He rolled his eyes. “I am quite certain that is not going away.”

“If you’re sure?”

He gave her a beady eyed look that made her chortle.

He stepped against her. His gaze in hers. His long arms reaching for her and pulling her into the vise of his embrace. Skin to skin, they each inhaled as their bodies met.

“Emma, darling, you feel like heaven,” he told her as he cupped her face and brushed his lips on hers.

“Take me to bed, Jack.”

“My fondest wish,” he whispered as he bent to gather her up and fulfill the last stipulation in their agreement.

Chapter Five

By God, he had promised her a gentle introduction to the art of love. As he strode toward his master bed, he vowed to do it. But in the intervening hours since he'd first agreed to her indecent offer to have her, he'd learned so much about her that he felt changed. Transformed, even noble that he might provide such a service for a woman so abused.

His journey to the bed was only three strides, but each was filled with his newest conflict. He wanted her. Naked. He had her so. But to take her as she was—a virgin, willing as the devil—bound him to a finer pledge to himself. He would be gentle. Kind. The finest teacher.

Yet as he laid her to the counterpane and pulsed at the sight of her lithe grace against the sapphire brocade, he prayed he could summon enough restraint. She was not like any of his former mistresses. She was no married lady of the ton, eager for romping. She had no concept of what a good fucking might include, yet he yearned to take this luscious body of hers and ravish her like the rake he was. Like the rake he had been?

He loomed over her, on his forearms, one of his knees intruding between her legs as they dangled over the edge of the mattress. He swooped down and ran his nose along her cheek and swanlike throat. Would he ever get enough of such innocence? Christ, that anyone would think it possible for Arrogant Jack to be so conquered!

"You smell wonderful," she told him, one hand drifting down his ribs.

"Many creatures know their mates by the aroma of the other," he told her as he caressed the fullness of one breast and had her arching into his hand. "Each marks the other."

She sighed as his fingers found her nipple. "Will you mark me?"

"Aye, darling." He shifted lower. "Beginning here." He sucked her nipple into his mouth and she bucked. He pulled away. "You like this."

"I do." She clutched his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin.

He smiled to himself and held her breast so that her hard little nipple pointed at him. He drew on it softly, tugging at her willing flesh. Her areola pebbled.

"The other one?" she beseeched him.

He grinned and moved to her other appealing breast. This one he laved as she whimpered and wiggled. Then he nipped her, sucking her high and hard to come away with a pop. "More marking?"

"Yes, yes." She stared at him, wide-eyed and mouth open.

He sank further down her body to her ribcage and her belly. "You are well made here, too, darling Emma. Taut waist. Flat belly." He swept his hand over her silky skin, then followed his caress with his tongue. He felt her insides quiver and blessed the years he'd spent in other women's beds so that he might now bring this sweet woman ecstasy.

He lifted her fully onto the bed and her thighs fell open. He snuggled between them. His cock fit along her seam and she flinched.

"I feel very warm, Jack."

"As you should." He pinched one of her nipples and smiled, then kissed her other pert breast. "And do you feel wet?"

Her thighs tried to close but only clamped against his hips. "I do."

"And full?"

"Empty!"

He chuckled at her. Even in the act of making love, she amused him. "I will soon fill you, sweet Emma."

"How soon?"

"Impatient, are you?"

She hummed in frustration. "You know I am, you beast!"

"This beast has more to teach you and more to savor before I come inside you."

"Like what?" she demanded, petulant as he had never before seen her.

"Ah." He swept his hand down to her mons and toyed with her moist curls. "How's that?"

She froze, then blushed bright pink.

He traced her seam. "And that?"

She bit her lips and moaned.

"Or this," he sank a finger deep inside her scorching little chat and she rose right up into his arms.

"That," she whispered as she sought to get closer yet to him, "that is divine."

With his lips to her belly, he declared, "I have never felt so welcomed, darling."

Her legs spread wider, her pussy pushed against his hand.

Smitten, he sank another finger inside her raging channel and then another. His cock pulsed with urgency and his balls tightened in violent need. But not yet, man. She needs more.

He slid lower, the fragrance of her cunt so sweet with musk he feared he'd swoon like an untried lad. With two hands to her labia, he nuzzled her pubic bone with his nose, then spread her swollen lips wide. She groaned, protesting then praising him and thrashing her head. Whether she moved in modesty or need, he could not tell. Whatever her sentiment, he knew how to replace it with lust. He put his mouth to her slick flesh and licked her with the dexterity of a man who adored the taste of a woman.

"Oh, my God! Jack!"

He had all he could do to hold her down and let him have his fill. She was salty and creamy, hot as a summer day and so ready to be fucked he had to eat her more to keep from plunging into her. "Shhh, my darling," he soothed her between lavish swipes of his tongue along her plump little pussy. "Let me," he crooned as he found her pretty nub and nibbled on her. "Christ, let me have more. Have all. Have you mad for me."

"I am!" she yelled again and again as he marveled that he had said those things aloud. He growled in a passion for her that had him so raging hard he dripped cum on the bed.

"Hold still or I cannot love you as I should," he told her. As she quieted, he parted her curly pussy hair once more and sank to the feast he had promised himself. She was flowing with love juices, translucent white fluid running over the crest of her lovely lips and onto the curve of her thighs. She smelled deliciously decadent, wanting him, feeding him with her essences and her passion. He licked her delicately, tracing the edge of one labia, up to her bulging clitoris and down the other swollen side. Pushing his cock into the bedding for some relief, he knew he'd better teach her what a roaring climax could be before he took her hymen and gave her pain, no matter his careful preparations of her sweet, hot cunt. Pushing her labia together, he offered himself the tasty treat of her clit, which he titillated with the tip of his tongue. Then he laved the nubbin with a slow rasp. Finally, he pinched her tiny mound until she moaned that she wanted more. In compensation, he sucked on her until she quivered beneath his lips. Plunging two fingers inside her, he massaged her wet walls as she pounded around his fingers, and he prayed for sanity to fuck her now, slowly, as she deserved.

She rocked in his arms, gasping. Soon as her pulses ceased though, he was on his knees, spreading her lovely thighs wide, admiring the deep red of her pussy coated by her glistening cream.

“Come now, again, sweetheart, with me inside you,” he crooned as he sank so slowly into her and felt the barrier he knew awaited him. “We’ll do away with this, my Emma,” he whispered and pushed forward. In one fervent stroke, he sank further into her lush cavern and held.

She did not squeal, nor whimper, nor cry out, but wrapped her long arms around his chest and pressed her warm lips to his mouth. “Darling Jack, oh do give me more.”

He nearly shouted in quick relief, but the urge to truly claim her consumed him like a storm. Sliding deeper, he caught her to him, took her lips in a mad kiss, and moved so slowly he marveled he had the willpower. “How’s this, my pet?” He sank deeper.

“Thick.”

“You’ll make me insufferable with pride.”

“Wonderful,” she told him, her eyelids fluttering in ecstasy he could see in every line of her lovely face.

“And this?” He lodged now fully inside her sopping wet pussy.

She undulated in her joy. “Sublime.” She hooked an arm around his neck. “Now make me pound again as you did with your tongue and your fingers.”

“Christ, how lucky can I be?” At her invitation, he ravished her mouth. He tested her charming cunt’s resilience. Then, feeling how wet and wild she was, he hauled her legs up over his forearms, her succulent red labia devouring his cock, and he took her. Took her hard. Took her fast. And slow. And damn grindingly delicately until he knew her walls quivered and he gave her every bit of his hungry cock, every ounce of his seed and every iota of his devoted lust.

Her nails raked his arms, her legs hugged his hips, her pussy pulsed around his spurting and aching cock, milking him, absorbing him into her as if he never existed but for her.

He fell forward, his head to her breast bone. His breathing rapid, his hands still cupping her shapely thighs, he kissed her ribcage. He rested, coming back to a conscious world he barely knew. This was his wife. His darling. His Emma. A Stanhope. A woman he adored here in bed and out of it. A treasure he had never thought to even imagine.

He looked up at her. “You are well?”

She was smiling at him, her hand lifting to stroke his cheek, his jaw, his chest.

“More than,” she told him in a husky tone that made his cock twitch to take her again.

He made to pull away.

"Don't go!" She caught his arm. "Not yet. I..."

Thrilled at her entreaty, he moved forward inside her and she squeezed him with her vaginal walls. "You should rest, and if you hold me here like this and caress me as you do, I will remain much longer."

Her eyes flashed like lightning. "Stay then." She hugged his cock once more. "I like you here."

He chuckled and went down to his forearms to capture her lips. "You take well to making love, madam."

"Because I have a good lover."

"He is your husband," Jack affirmed, aware that in the statement he staked a further claim on her affections.

"And as his wife, do I not have the power to ask him to make love to me again?"

"He might not leave." For hours.

"The day is young." She flung back her arms to the sheets, her tempting breasts up in invitation, as she glanced toward the window where fresh rain sluiced the panes. "The weather is bad for riding...out of doors." She arched both beautiful brows. "What could we do to pass our wedding day, hmmm?"

He ran his gaze over her naked body. Flushed and sinuous, she was spread before him, his body still deep inside, grew ravenous. What man, what mate could refuse this offer? "You are a terror."

"And you approve," she proclaimed in charming appeal. "Love me again, Jack."

He pushed forward, his cock like iron once more, her cunt stretching to give him the wet welcome he craved.

"God, you are a sweet piece." He rocked into her, his tempo swift, his need hard. With his seed spent in her the first time, this second fucking came upon him with more rigid heat, more need to kiss her lips and pluck her nipples, more challenge to make her come again in dreamy pace with him. As he plunged inside her, she opened more easily than the first time. Now she flowered, used to his touch, ready for his love. She touched his nipples, squeezed his ass, ground her pussy against his cock and cried out in fulfillment as the two of them reached another torrid peak of need and quaked together, then drifted down to silent and languid peace.

He pulled his cock from her wet pussy and wrapped her in his arms. She sighed as he kissed her cheek. "You must rest."

She clutched at him, her eyes open and alarmed. "You won't leave?"

"I doubt I am capable," he told her the truth. Physically and perhaps otherwise, he was captured.

So, as she snuggled closer to him, her lips pressed in a tender kiss upon his skin, he combed her long sun-kissed hair from her face and marveled at this woman who was becoming his most excellent lover.

He had not foreseen that. Like so much else in this liaison with her, he was without predictability. But not without focus, thank God. He had not planned to want her. Only help her. But now, if he also needed her, what was that but a huge conundrum for him?

He hated Pinrose. Loathed Trayne. Knew the minute she spoke their names, even had she not been so charismatic and dear, that he would help her in any way he could.

Some of that was set in motion by his note to Adam the night he left London with Emma. Pinrose's investments in a shipping company now at question by the Admiralty and Whitehall for war profiteering. Trayne's quest to buy an estate in Dorset now challenged by a mysterious counter-offer.

Jack cradled his wife closer, his insistent cock slid along her cleft, all too readily interested in her warm and giving body. He would have her again. Why not? She wanted him. She was his in sight of God and man. And he desired her as irrationally as he had never wanted another woman.

But where would that leave him and his raging emotions for her three months hence? He might be a bag of bones by then, loving her as often as he knew himself capable. But he could not leave her now. Not after this one love-making. Not when he needed to indulge himself in her entrancing body once more. His own dilemma of how to live without her was a problem for the future. He would live for now. For her. And yes, dammit, for their mutual satisfaction.

* * * *

She awoke and he slept beside her, his huge body lax in repose. She wished to touch him, caress him, make certain he was real and hers. But when she moved, she felt the ache between her thighs and knew this afternoon with him had been no daydream, but a ravishing reality.

She caught back a chuckle and with a fingertip, pushed the sheets farther down his body. His waist was slim compared to the contours of his chest and massive arms. His hips were trim. His nether hair as raven as the shining locks on his head. And his cock. Hmmm. That most

intriguing part of him was a long, thick rod whose dimensions interested her, even slack as it was. Could she touch him?

She snatched back her hand. No. She had held him in her hand in his sitting room and he had filled her palm. Warm and soft. Hard and red. Hers, now. Well, for a while anyway. Three months.

She glanced away, sorrowful that she would one day lose him and this wondrous friendship they had begun. Lose his loving, too.

She slid to the side of the bed and picked up a knitted throw upon a huge chair. Curling it around her shoulders, she stood and felt a gush of fluid coat her thighs. She sat right back down. The bed bounced.

Jack's hand went round her wrist. "Don't go."

"I think...I must, Jack. Is there a chamber pot?"

"A stooled chair in the bath chamber," he told her, but held her back. "What's amiss? You are not hurt?"

"I think I must be bleeding," she said on a high note of dismay. Her mother was so full of stories of pain and blood after her first night wed. With Jack, Emma had forgotten all of that in the flush of desire. "I'm all wet and..."

He rose up at once on his knees and took her in his arms. "Let me see."

"No!"

"You cannot be modest now, my pet!" He smiled with consolation. "Don't fret. Let me tend you. You are my wife, remember? To love and obey?"

Would that that were true beyond this chamber and this day.

He scanned her features. "I would not have you think your health is lost here, not after the joy we've had this afternoon. If you are injured, I must know. Lie back and open your legs, darling."

"I am mortified," she muttered as she felt his gaze and his breath upon the skin of her upper legs.

"Don't be, pretty wife. You are well. You only give off those juices you created and the seed I gave you when we loved each other. Look at me," he commanded with a tender tone and caught her chin. "There is a pink tinge to your emissions, and that was the last of your maidenhead, darling. To be expected. But in fact, yours was an easy barrier to break."

"Oh, that's not good, is it?"

"For me, it was," he proclaimed with twinkling eyes. "And for you, it was a blessing. Some virgins have a bit of a tough go, I am told. Not fun for man or woman, that."

"You've never had a virgin?"

"Before you? No. Never."

"Why not?"

He scrambled up beside her and planted a kiss on her forehead. "Because initiating virgins to the art of love is what a husband does. I have never been a husband before today and did not wish to be one."

"Why not?" She dearly wished to know the answer to this question. Suspecting it had to do with his father and their relationship, she would bide her time to get this information.

He snorted. "Well, had you asked me last week or last month I would have responded that I had no reason to want to be one. No woman who needed me for more than a dalliance. No woman I wanted for more than that. And courtesy of my father, an upbringing which showed me that what passed for love between a man and woman was beguiling and temporary."

"I see." She took that as its face value and wished for more. Perhaps not today, but tomorrow and soon.

"Suppose I order the maids to prepare a bath, eh? Should have thought of that before, but I didn't. Sorry, darling."

She knew that in this diversion he attempted to avoid discussing the subject further. "A bath would be welcome."

He kissed her and rolled away, then headed for his armoire where he took down a floor length black velvet robe and tied the sash about his waist. "Hungry? You should be after what we did. Heaven knows I am. I'll have some supper sent up. Should have done that, too. But I am not thinking."

Hoisting herself up on her elbows, she smiled at him. "Neither am I."

"I am too taken with you to be rational." From afar, he gazed at her naked body, then raked both hands through his hair. "Nothing for that now. What's done is done. Cover up but do not dress. I like you naked. But the maids will be up with the hot water soon enough."

Desperate to keep him or at least have him back soon, she urged, "You will return soon?"

He made for the hall door and called to her as he put his hand to the knob. "You may count the minutes."

Chapter Six

Was he totally daft?

What the hell was he doing making love to this innocent?

Well, now not so innocent, old man. You should have asked yourself that question hours ago. But as it is, you have had one hell of a marvelous time initiating her to the joys of sex. And if once was not enough, then one night was not either. Could he walk away after three more months of nightly ecstasy with her?

Cursing aloud, he took the stairs down to the first floor and padded on bare feet toward the back of the house and the butler's pantry. There, he saw his servant Simmons seated, polishing glassware. What's more, the man's usually pinched face sported a happy countenance as he whistled a merry tune about a lad and his lass. Simmons never whistled. Never smiled. Never spoke of love. Or women.

"Simmons?"

Startled, the butler shot to his feet. "Milord! Is ought amiss?"

"No, Simmons. We are well. I want two trays sent upstairs from that cold supper I ordered. Does Cook have roast beef and potatoes on the sideboard as I requested last night?"

"She does, milord."

"Excellent. Put lots of it on one plate. And my lady needs hot water sent up to my bath chamber. In fact, have the footman haul in the tub from the bedroom across the hall and draw two baths in my suite while we're at it."

"Yes, sir. At once."

Jack headed for his library, then turned back with a nagging question. "And Simmons?"

"Yes, milord?"

Jack frowned in playful challenge to this usually stoic man. "Have you taken to becoming a whistler since I've been in London these past four months?"

The butler's large eyes popped wider. "No, sir."

"Why today then?"

"Well, sir, it is your wedding day, isn't it. And we were celebrating along with you and your new wife."

"I see." Jack scratched his head as he considered that answer. "Not a bad idea."

"No, sir." Simmons grasped his hands together like a minister about to deliver his favorite Sunday sermon.

Jack suppressed a grin and ventured, "Is my getting married such cause for celebration among the staff?"

Simmons beamed. "Yes, sir."

"Oh? And the reason for that is what?"

The once unflappable butler flexed his shoulders. "Ah. Well, my lord. Many of us never thought you would take a wife."

Jack feigned a grimace. "And now that I have?"

"I won the bet." The man looked like he'd won at the races.

Jack put both hands on his hips and leaned forward to examine the man who never seemed to have enough red blood in his veins to be passionate, let alone gamble. "Which was?"

"That if you did bring a woman home to us, she would be a good girl, I said. The others thought differently, my lord."

Jack blinked. Dear God. His staff had opinions of him. Some of them dastardly, it seemed. "How much money did you win, Simmons?" How big was the fear I was unredeemable?

"Forty pounds. Sterling, that is, my lord."

"Forty—?!" Was he blubbing like a fool? "Handsome." Outrageous!

"Yes, my lord."

Jack shoved his hands in the pockets of his robe and rocked on his heels. "And you can readily see the Viscountess is a good girl, as you put it?"

"Oh, yes indeed, my lord."

So could I. From the moment I looked at her. Soaking wet. Pleading with me. Lovely and lonely.

"She is quiet and graceful, my lord."

"That she is."

"And very pretty, too, sir. My compliments on securing her hand in marriage."

More than her hand. Her luscious giving body. Jack cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Totally her doing, Simmons. Wish I could lay claim to having begun the relationship."

"My lord?"

Jack examined the man's confusion at his revelation. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Simmons. Enjoy your winnings, man. What will you do with it, I wonder?"

The butler blew his chest up like a prize boxer strutting the ropes. "I do have an ambition, my lord."

"Do you? How interesting that I would never have known. Well, this certainly is a day for new developments of all types. Out with it, Simmons. What is your ambition?"

Simmons cleared his throat, once and then again. "I would like your permission to marry Cook."

Blow me over. Jack grinned. "Is that so? For how long have you wished this, Simmons?"

"Five years, my lord."

For a man who had wed a woman he wanted within five days of meeting her, as many years to wait to possess the one a man wanted seemed extraordinary to Jack. "Then you must do so. Immediately."

The servant's face split in a grin. "Thank you, my lord. I am delighted, my lord."

"Better put down your glassware, man, and go propose, don't you think?"

Shock fell over the butler's features. "I have your permission?"

"You do. We must get the vicar to give you a time. We'll have the wedding here and the Viscountess and I shall be your witnesses." Emma would like that tremendously. "Shall I go tell her?"

"Yes, do, my lord. Two days from now?"

"See if Cook agrees first, then yes, two days. We will have a party!"

Simmons stared at him. "But my lord, we have never had a party here."

"High time, then, eh, man?" Jack encouraged. "Go propose, Simmons. Weddings and love should have priority."

Jack himself began to whistle the same ditty Simmons had done. As he found his own way toward his library, his correspondence and his accounting books, he wondered if they all didn't need a good dose of whistling to sound out the new music in the house.

* * * *

Emma felt Jack's lips brush hers as she lay in the warm bath.

"Darling Emma," he breathed against her cheek, "I must have you in this tub each day if you are to look like this." His large hands cupped her chin as he devoured her mouth in a sultry claim.

Her eyes drifted open as her arms wound around him. "You were gone so long that I missed you." She pulled him close for another kiss. "I fear your bathwater is cold now. Where were you?" She knew she sounded demanding. What was happening to her that she was changing into this clinging creature yearning for her husband's touch?

"Letters to write. To your lawyers to tell them of our marriage and ask they keep it secret until I arrive in London to meet them. Other matters. Debts to collect. Trayne's and Pinrose's to me."

"They owe you money?"

"And soon, they will owe more. Trust me on this." He touched her lower lip with his thumb. "I came as quickly as I could."

She tugged at the front of his robe as he leaned over her. "Take this off. Get in. My water was wonderfully hot and you will love the soak after all our days in that hideous, bumpy carriage."

He shrugged out of the garment. "Satisfied?"

She pressed kisses to the corded column of his throat down to his chest. "No, but I am having a tremendous amount of fun!"

He yanked backward and splashed water in her face. "Tease."

He rose up on his feet before her and the astonishing perspective of his sculpted form made her gasp. "My dearest man," she enthused as she cupped one hand around his knee and slid it up his massive thigh, "it is you who teases me. With this," she whispered as her fingers closed around the girth of his cock and her lips placed a kiss to his groin.

He jumped at the softness of her caress. "'Tis not my intent, madam, to tease you with this."

"No?" She challenged as she stroked him, root to tip, and he grew wider and harder and longer in her hand. "I think you have invented a new temptation for me, my lord."

He hauled her up by the armpits, the bathwater cascading to the tub and floor. A hand catching up her sopping wet hair, he crushed her to him and kissed her like a madman. "Two can be tempted, madam."

"I don't want to be tempted, Jack," she told him on a sigh. "I want to be satisfied."

"As before?"

"Definitely."

He glanced toward his bedroom. "I doubt I will make it to the bed."

"Why not here?" She could not resist the taunt.

He growled and tugged her toward his own tub. Climbing in, he sank and led her to join him. "What if we fuck here, um? Would that please you?"

"If you, milord, are fucking me," she teased him with that gloriously audacious word, "yes. You think there is room?" she marveled, laughing.

"You are so nimble, yes." He pulled her toward him, and put his mouth to her belly to kiss her navel. "Get in here, my lovely. There. Now come closer and wrap your legs around my hips. "

Her eyes went wide as her thoughts and her gaze led to his cock and what she might do here with him in such a confined space.

"You can wash me, wife." He took her hand and dropped a small toweling into her palm.

"Everywhere?"

"Of course." He leaned back, closed his eyes and put his arms to the rims. He opened one eye to observe her. "I am your husband and you may have all of me. As I have had all of you."

"And was I...?"

"What?" he asked as she began to soap his chest.

"Worth having?"

He covered her hand with his. "Do not doubt it."

Her eyes grew moist. "For such a kind man to think that I am worthy of him is—"

"Emma. Darling. I am a man of the town. Not accomplished at anything, really, except running this estate and a few investments. You compliment me too much to think that you must be worthy of me, when I strive to be worthy of you."

She glanced away, modesty and joy triumphant in her heart. "You do like me."

"Look at me. I like so many things about you. Shall I tell you, darling?"

She nodded, appreciating the way he settled his legs beneath her, brushed his hands down her arms to draw her close, then stroked the crown of her wet head. "You have the most amiable constitution. Funny. Wise and honest, too. Then there are your looks, madam. The sunny hair, the alluring grey eyes and intoxicating skin. Your stunning oval face. The fullness of your lower lip and the rich bow in your upper. You like my descriptions? I can feel you smile against my skin."

He stroked her back and her buttocks, hugging her nearer. "I like your body too, my darling. A delicious meal."

"Oh, you are being romantic now!" she scoffed, fearful of succumbing too much to his spell.

"And honest." He traced her calves and thighs. "Shapely legs like carrots." She snorted as he lifted an arm in the air. "Long limbs like celery stalks." She laughed as he weighed a breast in his palm. "Firm apples here, topped by ripe strawberries." She whimpered as he skimmed her ribs. "Strength of character here." Her navel. "An orange." Her nether hair. "Hmm. And what is this? A coconut?"

She pinched his forearm and snickered.

"And this," he whispered as he slid two fingers up inside her channel and she squirmed to get closer, "this, my wife, is a succulent passion fruit."

"You are a sinful man," she said as she laughed against his lips.

"I hope for you I am a better man," he told her as he shifted and she felt his cock probe at the entrance to her body.

"The best man," she affirmed and pushed forward. "The only man."

"Only yours," he told her as he pistoned inside her, and she wished his statement could be true forever.

She strained upward, grinding down to get him deeper inside her. He kissed her breast, pinched her nipple, then sucked it into his mouth, bit her and pulled.

She gasped, arching up and needing more. "This is no good!" she ground out. "This tub is not big enough for your satisfaction and I daresay at this angle it will do nothing for mine!"

He sputtered in glee. "Stand up then!" he ordered, and she rose in a whoosh of water.

He did the same and stepped out, then grabbed her and backed her to the wall. "I'll have you climax here," he growled and hooked her leg up around his hip to plunge into her. She felt her swollen body part and give, allowing him inside her with slick ease.

She cried out in languorous delight. She lolled her head against the wall, her eyes half-lidded with desire, one hand winding round his neck so that she could get her footing. "Please, oh please."

"Fuck you," he muttered in his mindlessness.

She heard him. Liked the phrase. The idea. The need to have him that way. Raw and needy. Fast.

"Fuck me, do," she murmured and held him like iron manacles, then bit his shoulder as he pounded inside her with a fury she'd not known from him.

He filled her up with his cock and his passion until she moaned in delight, his strong thighs supporting her as he pounded into her over and over. She shook with the turbulence of it and rejoiced in the crazed pleasure. Was loving a man always this fierce?

He came with a growl that reverberated in her bones. She felt his hot seed burst inside her body and she sank her fingers into the satin of his hair. His hands gripped her thighs, hauled her up so that she was completely off the floor, her channel possessed by his shaft, her mind gone in the fury.

"Oh, Christ," he mourned, brushing her hair from her face as he let her to the floor. "I hurt you."

"No, no! Never!" She clawed at his upper arms. "I need you. More. More."

"Yes, here," He sank to his knees and pulled her to the floor. He spread her out on the deep sapphire carpet and his mouth covered her mound, his hands spread her wide as he settled between her legs. Her thighs fell open. "Let me bring you pleasure again."

She gasped as his hot tongue defined her cleft and she sought to rise to watch him. The sight of him licking her, petting her, thrusting a finger up inside her had her mewling. "Jack, this is madness."

"Aye, Emma, darling, every bit of you is made for mad, luscious fucking." He licked her labia. "This little bud here," he told her as he flicked at some tender part of her, "is a sweet meat I must have to suck." He demonstrated and she keened. "To nibble." He did it and she moaned. "To roll and pinch." He used his expert fingers on her and she cursed at him. "Fuck you, aye, darling, I will. Let me have this part of your hot little cunt, too." This time, he plunged one finger up inside her to massage her. Then another finger stretched her and made her rise off the floor. Yet another finger filled her to stroke her with such dexterity, she felt tears gather. "Come again, my wife," he

urged her, breathless as she as she felt her body once more open, swell and erupt in a shower of passion that made her scream down the house.

Jack drifted over her, warming her, kissing her cheek and burying his cock inside her still pulsing and wildly tender body. "You come so easily, pretty wife, I fear we must hope the servants are deaf."

She chuckled and wrapped her arms around him, moving her hips to revel in the length of his cock buried so deeply inside her. "I want to feel like that again and again. May I? With you?"

"I stand at the ready to bring you to ripe fulfillment at any moment. Say the word."

"Really? Oh, my. You are serious!" She tingled, her thighs hugging him closer.

"I will attempt to fulfill madam's every desire." He proclaimed with feigned humility, then drove inside her with a heathen's grin. "Where next would you like to climax?"

Chapter Seven

By three o'clock the next afternoon, when Madame Duhamel arrived, Jack could count the marvelous encounters he had enjoyed with his new wife...let's see. Three? Or was it four more ardent and fascinating couplings?

The dining room, he thought to himself as he bounded down the stairs to meet the dressmaker, had been a wild repast. At half past two in the morning he had rung for Simmons, told the butler to rouse Cook from their mutual bed and asked for sustenance. Then he had gone back to Emma and led her down the stairs to feed her from his fingers. Bits of roast beef. Pieces of baked potatoes. Sugared plums. He snorted. What were they compared to the way she licked his flesh and nipped him after each taste, her luscious lips swollen from his kisses, her naked body beneath his robe the most enticing of the offerings laid before him? He had her there, standing up against the linen fold walls. Then again, bent over a mahogany sideboard, her incomparable grey eyes wide with wickedness as she glanced over her shoulder at him. And upstairs, in their bed twice more, at the least. Insatiable was a word which took on new meanings for him. No woman had ever held him with her intellect and wit, as well as her body, like his new wife did.

He took the last few steps down to the drawing room more slowly. Not good to appear before the wise owl Duhamel with a rampant erection, old man.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le Vicomte." The woman dipped her head in deference. "A lovely day."

"Superb, Madame. Let me see what you have done." His gaze shot to the item draped over her arm, covered by a satin wrap.

She extracted the wool coat of dove gray, epaulette closures of black braid. "Madame la Vicomtesse will look divine in this."

"I agree." He took the coat in his hands, the merino soft as eiderdown. "A good choice for the wool."

"We will have all the rest tomorrow, Monsieur. The negligees, Madame's green robe for her boudoir, the evening gown, and two day dresses."

"Excellent, Madame Duhamel. I will include a bonus for your promptness."

"I am most grateful, Monsieur. My bill for services will not appear until you have all the garments you ordered for Madame and I know that you are happy."

"I am most grateful."

She lingered before him. Normally so self-assured, she pursed her lips. Perplexed?

"Is there a problem, Madame?"

"No, not at all. I simply wondered if you had seen this?" She took from her dress pocket a paper. A broadsheet, to be precise.

"No. I never read it," he told her, recognizing the heavy print as that of a paper from York which only reprinted items from a notorious publication out of London. "It is a rag, Madame."

"But it speaks of you, Monsieur, and your little wife." She strode forward and placed it in his hands. "You should see it, my lord."

An hour later, Jack made his way back to his wife. Tiptoeing inside, he considered this lovely creature who had darted into his life so haphazardly. His darling Emma. She sprawled across the linens, her arms up in the pose of a carefree spirit, her head turned to one side, her lips parted in exhaustion, her elegant legs open as if she welcomed him back inside her, even in her sleep. He smiled and laid the coat aside. Loathe to wake her, he strolled into his bath chamber. The remains of their baths last night were strewn about still. He had not allowed the maids or footman in here. Not yet.

But life intrudes, does it not?

He sat on the edge of one of the copper tubs and ran a hand through his hair. Once more, he affirmed the resolutions he had made downstairs in his library after reading the broadsheet. To destroy Pinrose and Trayne. Quickly. Financially. To make her life happy now.

According to the broadsheet, the word was out that Emma had gone missing from her home. Her stepfather had questioned his staff and learned where she'd gone. To whom and how. Pinrose had sacked his coachman and a maid for their collusion. He'd vowed to have satisfaction from Jack.

But Jack knew Pinrose well. Satisfaction, in his case, did not mean a duel. Pinrose could not wield a sword. The man never had any grace or style to impart to fencing, let alone work any talent with a pistol. The only way Pinrose had ever made a mark on anyone was by bullying them. And you shall never get Emma in your clutches to threaten her. Just wait and see, Danny. You shall not best me.

“Jack?” His wife’s sultry voice, thick with slumber, permeated his reverie.

“Yes, darling, coming!” He strode into the bedroom.

Naked, lithe and exquisite as a nymph, she stood, the sight of her halting him in his tracks and nearly sending him to his knees with lust. She bent over the coat, her tapered fingers caressing the cloth the way she caressed him, his skin, his cock.

“It’s absolutely beautiful, Jack.” Her gaze met his. “Will you help me put it on?”

He crossed his arms, assessing the living breathing temptation before him. “Why?” He arched a brow. “Are we going out?”

Her expression blossomed into a glorious smile. “Visiting neighbors? Introducing me to the village? The local doyennes? Why, darling,” she said with dulcet tones to the endearment that set his heart to flutter, “I do hope not!”

In two strides, he had her in his arms. One hand to her nape, one to her derriere, he crushed her to him for a kiss. “You shock me, Madam.”

With a saucy toss of her head, she drifted backward to their bed. He followed, the contrast of the dove gray wool against her milky flesh a sight his cock enjoyed tremendously. But when she opened the buttons of his breeches and reached inside to extract his shaft, he could readily say he was even more stunned and infinitely satisfied as she pushed him to the bed, then rose above him to ask, “Might I surprise you if I say, I do not care if we ever leave this room?”

Would that we could remain, my sweet. He touched her lower lip with a fingertip. “We’ll stay, Emma. How could I leave such an enticing invitation?”

She beamed at him as she replaced her hand with the moist sensation of her mouth over his cock and sucked him fully into her. As she drew up, she whispered, “Will you teach me more?”

He snorted while she trailed her tongue over his slit. “I daresay, sweetheart, on your own, you are creative.”

She kissed his tip, pulling away to let him watch her lick from her lower lip a few drops of his pre-cum. “I never want to bore you.”

He chuckled and sank his fingers in her curls. "No chance of that, my pet." I'd lock you up and throw away the key if I were a cave man. But then I'd be like Pinrose. I want you free. And wild. And mine. Because the only way to prove to you I am the best man for you is to prove I would never keep you against your will.

* * * *

The next afternoon when Madame Duhamel arrived, Emma protested from the sumptuous disarray of their bed and reached to bring him back to her side.

"You are pouting, darling," Jack chuckled, leaned over her nude body and swatted her derriere.

Admiring his impressive proportions of chest and thighs and cock, she looped an arm around his neck. "I am a bride. A cosseted bride and I can be petulant if I care to."

"Madame Duhamel has your clothes, Viscountess! Will you make her wait?"

"You get them. They'll fit. She took my measurements. Besides, I don't need them." She rubbed her thighs together, her channel gushing anew to have him deep inside her. "Do I?"

He watched her writhe in sinuous entreaty and his silver eyes darkened. She vibrated in triumph to lead his thoughts to ribald ideas. "Eventually."

"Jack," she crooned, "I am very tender."

His black brows shot high. His mouth curved and his tongue came out to lick his lips. "You are swollen."

"I am," she mouthed.

"And wet."

"That, too." She bowed up the better to let him see how her nipples beaded.

"The way a woman is supposed to feel after she's been loved so often, madam."

"I need you again. Now," she told him on a wisp of sound, her fingers skimming her stomach, delving into her curly hair and massaging her aching flesh. "I need you to touch me, pet me."

He swallowed, his gaze on her fingertips as he put one knee to the bed and flung another across her.

"Am I to be overruled in my own house?" he challenged, partly in mirth, one hand lightly caressing her breast, making her body quiver and gush with need.

"You like me in this bed," she told him with a certainty she knew in her bones to be true.

"I do." He bent to pull her nipple into his hot, moist mouth. "You intrigue me. Soft. Strong. Determined, but not prickly."

"Do you say you make love to me to discover more of my sterling character?"

"One way to view my needs." He winked at her, as he shifted to push her knees up to her chest and tease her with his shaft probing her core. "For now."

She shivered at the possibility he might want her for longer than today. He had done more than have her, more than initiate her and more than she'd asked. Now she was addicted to sex with him. Like good brandy, he intoxicated her. But when he would leave her to her own devices to wait out the three month interval she needed to satisfy the lawyers, she had no idea. And she needed one.

He paused, looming above her, dark and rich and beautiful. "You worry." He slid inside her, sending her arching into his arms, his cock deep and lush and so very full. "Tell me."

"I have not had enough of you," she confessed. "Not yet."

His eyes narrowed on her, his jaw flexed. Whatever his thoughts, she could not fathom. "I'm here," he rasped and sank inside her to the hilt to prove it. "Let me make you happy—"

"You make me shameless," she added, breathless as he.

He growled and rammed into her, then held. "Abandoned, I'd say, madam, is the newest element I admire in your charming character."

"Make me moreso," she pleaded, her mouth finding his, her hips grinding against his to get closer still.

"My fondest endeavor, darling Emma."

And accomplish that task he did so well, in fact, that before he left her arms to dress and descended the stairs to greet Duhamel, Emma had screamed out in another glorious orgasm.

* * * *

Jack returned to their bedroom, his arms laden with the goods the modiste had crafted so quickly. He heard Emma splashing in the tub as he kicked closed the door to their suite and hung the items in the armoire.

"Do not dally, Mrs. Stanhope. Presents await you," he called to her and took a chair in his sitting room. The oblong box filled up his inside frock coat pocket. He shifted, a smile on his lips, awaiting the sight of his wife.

She appeared at the door, her body wrapped in one towel, her head in another. Fresh and rosy, she smiled sweetly at him, looking exactly what she was—a woman well fucked.

His cock rose at the mere idea of having her again. Christ, you are a satyr, Stanhope.

But she is your wife. And oh, so willing, man.

He grinned. "Come closer, darling." He beckoned her, nodding toward the armoire.

She seemed to glide across the carpet, the towel over her body dropping as she moved, a silhouette of grace.

His cock lengthened in the ridiculously tight breeches. Perhaps Emma had the right idea not to dress. For days. Or months.

"What do you think, pet?"

He watched her hands touch the fabrics, smoothing the nap, defining the trim. Envy reared. I want your hands on me.

He blinked at the revelation.

Stanhope, you are far gone.

He smacked his lips and focused on what he was about here.

"Lovely," she enthused over the two negligees, one pink, one white. The forest green chamber robe of plush velvet had her making odd little sounds of delight. While the day dresses, a plum sarcenet and a sea-green corded muslin had her gasping. But the sapphire evening gown with a décolleté Jack knew would dip quite daringly low, had her spinning toward him.

"You are pleased?" he asked when it became clear Emma was speechless with delight.

"Exceedingly so, darling." She skimmed her fingers over the fabrics once more. She reached for the heavy brocade robe.

"No," he admonished her with finality. "The sapphire."

"But I need to don a chemise and—"

"No. I will have you in the gown, madam."

She stared at him a moment, her magnetic grey eyes narrowing. Did she catch a hint that he had other intent?

"Will you help me?"

"To remove it, yes." He nodded at the satin. "Let me see it."

Flinging the towel from her hair, she carefully took the fine blue gown into her hands and let the damn thing slide down over her naked body.

She turned and strolled toward him in her bare feet. As he suspected, without hair styling or rouge or powder, without flowers or even undergarments to complement her lush beauty, she was a gorgeous creature.

"The sapphire is the color on the family crest. You wear it well, darling. I knew you would."

"You chose this. It's divine, Jack." Her fingers stroked the fabric the way she petted his chest and his back and his cock. "I wish I could wear it somewhere for you to be proud of me."

"I am proud of you, Emma. And you will wear it, and everywhere you go, I will be thrilled to see you in it."

Her face fell. She turned away. "Do not promise me things you cannot give."

He caught her arm and brought her back to stand before him. The scent of her soap and dewiness of her body aroused his sense of smell. They had fucked so often, he had indeed marked her with his scent. He could still smell how fecund she was. How musky her cunt. How juicy her pussy. How often she creamed for him and let him lick her and suck her. How she loved him. He tugged her hand. "Look at me. I promise you that you will wear this soon and with me by your side, fending off the men who will approach you."

She shouted in laughter, though he could see tears dot her lashes. "You would kill any man who did."

"You are right, of course. But allow me to at least sound chivalrous, darling."

She sniffed. "You are sweet, Jack." Her fingers brushed the satin. "Still."

He pulled her down to sit on his lap, then thumbed away two tears from her gossamer cheeks. "I have a gift for you." He reached inside his coat and flipped open the jewelry box.

"Oh, my." She extended her index fingers to one of the dozens of sapphires. "The family jewels?"

He chuckled. "Among others. They are now yours. To go here." He tipped his head to kiss the center of her throat. "Allow me?"

"Yes, yes!" She swiveled to permit it to clasp it round her neck and then she petted the jewels as tenderly as she caressed his cock and his balls. "How do I look?"

His mouth watered. "Delicious."

She brushed her lips over his in a caress that had him panting. "You do mean to show me off. You are not being kind to say that we will appear in public? And me in this?"

"No, my precious." He sank his fingers into the wet curls at her nape and nuzzled her beneath her ear. If she was becoming shameless, he was becoming enslaved. "I want you with me." Anywhere. Everywhere I can get you.

"Where?" she asked, her voice a thread of sound as he sank a finger inside her bodice and caressed her blossoming nipple.

"London." Best to tell her the truth as he made her mindless in his arms. He had not planned it this way, but—

She jumped up. "You cannot be serious."

"But I am. We must go to London. You and I."

"That was not our plan." She kneaded her hands. "I can't go back. Not until I am free. That's three months, Jack, from the time we are married. Three months to tell the lawyers—"

"Stop this," he said as he rose and tried to take her in his arms.

She escaped him, backing her way toward the armoire.

He followed. "Emma. Listen to me. In two weeks time, we return to London."

"No." She dropped his hands. "I will not go."

He advanced on her. "You must."

"Why?" She put a hand to her stomach, looking ill, betrayed. She spun away from him. "I should have known this interlude must end," she chastised herself more than him.

He whirled her around, hands gripping her shoulders. "No, listen to me! You must return to challenge Pinrose and Trayne."

"I will not go, Jack! Daniel will take me, put me away." She waved him back with a wild gesture of despair. "I will not be locked up again. Ever."

"Darling, they will not take you away. I will not let them."

"They are mad. You, too, if you think them easily dissuaded!" She began to pace to and fro. "They do not know where I am and—"

"But they do know, Emma," he told her with sweet compassion and that made her cry out in alarm. "The whole of London knows. York and Durham, too. Madame Duhamel brought me a scandal sheet yesterday. I could not bear to tell you. I wanted you to be happy. Longer." Always.

"They know? So soon?"

"The gossips are merciless."

"Let me see it."

"It's downstairs in my library."

She drew herself up, deathly quiet in her determination. "Show me."

Minutes later, he handed her the paper, then watched her read the sheet and blanche.

He took it from her hands. "Emma, believe me. Nothing has changed. I have a plan in motion. You must let me pursue it."

"Describe it to me."

"It has to do with finances. Pinrose's."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "And Trayne?"

"I will dispose of him as well." Jack continued to tell her how he had bought up all of her stepfather's and Trayne's debts from other creditors making the men indebted to him alone. "I have accomplished it, save for three investments. The largest one may escape my grasp, and the other will take some doing."

"What are they?"

"The one I may not be capable of buying is a partnership that speculates on the discovery of gold ore out of Africa. The other, more within my reach, is to fund a new shipping company out of Plymouth. But I will move heaven and earth to buy those loans from the lenders. Trust me."

Her gaze, now not quite so desolate, met his. "I do. But I do not wish you to do this at the cost of bankrupting yourself."

"I won't." But I may come damn close if both projects fail. Jack enfolded her in his arms. Stroking her hair, he felt her curl into him. Never had he given succor to a woman. Never had he wanted to.

A rapping on the door came at a poor time. "Yes?"

"Milord," Simmons called to him. "A...ah...visitor, sir."

Emma raised her face. Jack kissed her briefly, sweetly. Then brushed her curls from her cheeks. "Go back upstairs. I'll be up in a few minutes to help you off with this gown."

She brightened over that. "Minutes? I hold you to it, milord."

"Come." He looped her arm through his, led her through the door and out into the foyer. But there, before them in the far end near the front door stood a man Jack had not seen here in Durham Manor for more than a decade.

"Wait here, darling."

"Who is this?"

"My father."

Chapter Eight

Drawn by surprise and curiosity, she followed Jack toward the front door.

"Sir," she heard him greet his father with a chill that matched the horrid weather. "To what do we owe your unannounced visit?"

The earl of Stanhope stood, cutting as giant a figure as his son amid the ivory walls and black marble tile of the foyer. He whirled toward Jack, then inclined his head toward her as he slapped his gloves against his thigh. "You should know quite well, my boy."

"I have never read your mind, Father." The men stood face to face. "Enlighten me."

Emma approached so near now, she saw the older gentleman clearly.

"Pinrose and Trayne are my calling card, Jack."

Emma froze, staring at the huge stranger in the heavy black travelling cape who glowered at her husband. My God. She would know this man anywhere. The shape of the face, the iron jaw, the brilliant silver eyes, the large muscular frame. The midnight hair etched with white strands. A handsome man. The sire of her husband. The portrait in the drawing room did him no justice at all. John Stanhope, eighth earl, roué of the first water, examined her as if she were on a block for sale. She stood her ground, her chin up, her back straight.

"I say, Jack," the older man declared with admiration as he appraised her, "if it is true that you have married this woman, I'd tell you that you have made the finest decision of your life." He shot his head around to glare at his offspring. "But you have gotten us all in a kettle of hot water, my boy. What the hell were you thinking?" His gaze drifted back to Emma.

She felt the man's appraisal as if his eyes delved into her soul.

"Has he seduced you, my dear, or did you work your wiles on him?"

Emma glared at him. "Neither."

"Really? I see you wear the wedding ring I gave his mother, so I am clearly late for the ceremony. Sad, that. I would have liked... Well, no matter. Will you not introduce me, Jack? You might give me that due."

Jack strode forward to wrap one arm around her waist and stand with her against the storm of his father's assault. "Allow me to introduce my wife, Father. Emma Stanhope. The earl."

John extended his hand to pick up hers and press a polite kiss to the back. "Honored to meet you, Mrs. Stanhope. Jack, congratulations, I commend you to wed her. She is a beauty. Fiery, too, I've heard from those I know in London. Bad, that. Brings down the curse, you know. Has he told you about the family curse, dear Emma?"

"He has," she affirmed at once.

"Did not deter you, did it?"

"No."

"But then you needed only temporary succor, didn't you, to rid yourself of Daniel Pinrose and his protégé, Trayne?"

"I wished it, yes," she admitted curtly, not knowing how much to reveal to the man whom Jack clearly did not revere.

Jack growled. "What business is this of yours, Father?"

"You are, dear boy." John glanced around the foyer. "Where the hell is Simmons? I need a brandy."

"And you need to tell me what the deuce you are doing here," Jack demanded, anger rife in his features. "You are never invited."

"Never welcome at all, so true. Did you know this, my dear new daughter-in-law?"

"I insist, Father," Jack intervened with adamance, "tell me why you are come."

"Simple, really." John worked at the buttons on his great coat. "I have come to help you, Jack."

Jack's brows rose a fraction. "Odd. You never have before!"

Emma could feel Jack's body tense as an animal ready for a match.

"Tut, tut. Jack. No way to treat your father. Don't you think, Emma?"

Jack stepped forward. "I do not want you here."

Emma considered the taut lines of Jack's face. What was there between father and son that should cause such enmity? She understood cruelty from Pinrose. She knew indifference from her mother. But this spoke of other causes.

"I understand that. But if you do not give me the opportunity to tell you why, you and your lovely Emma will be the losers."

Jack scowled. "Ten minutes." He stood aside and extended a hand toward the drawing room. "Then Simmons will call for the coachman to take you back to Stanhope Castle."

John strolled around his son and Emma into the drawing room, headed straight for the fireplace. There, he removed his coat, flung it on a chair and pressed his hands behind him. Facing them both, he leveled his fathomless pewter gaze on Jack.

"I have heard of this elopement from the broadsheets in London. Damned terrible way to learn your eldest and your heir has run off, but we reap the indifference we sow, eh, my boy? Yes, well. In the sheets, 'tis said, madam, that your coachman was sacked by your stepfather. A maid, too, it seems. Both repaired to the editor of a broadsheet who happily printed the story in a gossip sheet. Bad business to be so maligned."

Jack scoffed. "Spare us any rhapsodies, Father. You have often been the subject of such broadsheets."

"As you have yourself, dear man."

Jack inclined his head in sarcasm. "I learned from a master. Continue."

"I went round to your youngest brother in Berkeley Square to ask what he knew of your escape, Emma, and your intent to have Jack take you to Gretna Green. Adam knew little but that you, Jack, had gone north. Meanwhile, I was in a tizzy."

Jack barked in laughter. "Hard to imagine."

"I know, I know," the earl said with a theatrical sigh and wiggled a few fingers in the air as if throwing dice. "Figure of speech. Oblige me, will you. In any case, at that point, I began to hope, Jack, that you would make for here to hide lovely Emma away from those two scoundrels. Thus, I had my man pack a bag and here I am."

"To help me," Jack challenged him.

"Odd as it may seem, Jack, yes." He dug inside his frock coat pocket and extracted a long folded set of papers. "You need to ruin Pinrose. Here is your means."

Jack eyed the documents from afar as if they were snakes. "I have started my own means to ruin him. Trayne, as well."

Emma had watched this verbal match with growing distaste, but now she stepped forward and curled her arm into her husband's, proud of his action against both of her oppressors.

"Ah-hah!" The earl put a finger in the air. "But is it enough?"

"How could you care?" Jack was florid with rage.

"I do if you mean to ruin yourself and take the family fortune with you!"

Emma shot a glance at Jack. He'd told her he would remain solvent. Had he distorted the possibility?

"Money," Jack spit out.

"Money has made us all what we are."

"Not quite all, Father."

"For Christ sake, Jack, I know you resent the hell out of me for allowing nurses and governesses to raise all of you. I cannot change that. But I can regret it!"

Jack stared at his father as if mountains had crashed down on him.

John Stanhope cursed blatantly. "Time, I hope, will heal our breach. For now, I see you don't believe a word I say. Will we stand here all night arguing? Take the papers and read them!"

Jack snatched them from his father's hand. Instead of reading, he laid out his plans to his father. "I bought up Pinrose's debts. I plan to go to London and call them in."

"He has no inkling?" the earl mused.

"I made it a condition of the purchase, at a good interest rate I might add, that his former creditors not tell him I have the paper. They are all friends of mine, as luck would have it. I am in the process of buying up stock of a merchant company that Pinrose wishes to own outright." Jack examined Emma. "One reason he wants your inheritance, darling, is because he wishes to use your land rents to purchase an option to buy up the majority owners' stocks once the Army invades France and creates a greater market for merchant vessels."

"I thought the rents were what he wanted," she told him. "They are sizable."

"Clever plan, Jack." His father praised him. "But it is not enough to ruin Daniel."

"And why, Father, would you be at all interested in helping me or your newest daughter-in-law be free of that man?"

John cast a paternal eye on Emma and smiled like an old man proud of his family. "I wish to live differently. I want to be a part of you."

Jack's mouth dropped open.

The earl ignored his son to say to Emma, "I was a friend of your father. He was one of the finest gentlemen I have ever known. Kind. Honest. Honorable. He died too young." He turned to admire his son. "I wish to help you save his daughter, Jack. Her reputation. Her inheritance. Her future."

"I still do not understand," Jack muttered. "All our lives, you have ignored Adam, Wes, Clarice and me, as if we were so much baggage. Then you appear and announce you wish to live differently? Preposterous."

"I was wrong."

"You think you can buy your way back into my graces?"

"Money may be my means in this instance. I say one must use the resources one possesses. Don't you?"

"Of course. Especially if it is the only means you will part with."

The older man pursed his lips, rocked on his heels and cleared his throat. "I grow older, Jack. And contrary to what you and your siblings may think of my, shall we call it, lack of paternal regard, I do care for each of you. I hear and read of your triumphs. Adam's success in Parliament. Wes's on the fields of Spain. Yours in businesses you are too modest to discuss among your friends. I can see what you have done here to save Emma from this odious man and his little dog, Trayne. I also see every one of my children now married, with charming spouses, and children coming into the family. "

Jack looked like the house had fallen on him. "What makes you think you merit that?"

"Men change, Jack. Surely you know that. I wish to prove my intentions are honorable and true."

Emma saw Jack frown, then open the documents. "What are these?"

"The deeds to Pinrose's offices in Lombard Street and Emma's home in Park Lane."

Emma was stunned. "How do you have them?"

"They are mine, dear Emma," said her father in law. "I purchased them from their former owner, also a good friend of mine, a few days ago."

"They must have cost you a fortune," she marveled.

"I have money. I use it for good causes," he informed her with a smug smile.

Jack continued to read the papers, flipping pages. "Pinrose has no office and no home."

"Precisely."

Jack stared at his father and the way his features changed seemed like night had become day. "So now that you own these, he has no collateral to use as assurance for the purchase of the merchant company."

"Precisely."

"Does he know you own these?"

"No. And he won't until the directors meet to vote on partners for the company."

A beam of joy flashed across Jack's features. "Wonderful. I want to be at that meeting."

"So you shall, my boy. It occurs Friday. At noon."

"It's three days ride back to London," Emma pointed out.

"Just enough time for Jack and I to return to London if we leave at dawn. What do you say, Jack?"

The question of her husband's acceptance hung in the air for a long and perilous moment. As if emerging from a dream, Jack stepped to the bell pull, all the while contemplating his father.

When Simmons appeared, Jack's gaze did not waiver. "Simmons, have the housekeeper prepare the south bedroom. The earl stays the night with us. And bring us three glasses and the bottle of brandy."

* * * *

Four days later, Jack sat next to this father in the coach to London and pondered for a countless time his loneliness. To be apart from Emma left him with a hollow in his heart. Odd to be so enchanted with a woman whom he'd known mere days. Comforting to know she waited for him out of desire and not mere duty. Unnerving to know that she waited for him in hope that she might be free when he returned. Free to leave him. If she wished. Did she?

Jack shifted in the coach at the despair that idea engendered. He had long ago decided that he did not wish her to leave him. But how to keep to his promise to help her if he did not divorce her? Shaking his head, he willed himself to leave that worn out topic for another day. He turned to the other obsession that plagued him on this journey. His father.

If Jack had ever thought his father could be amiable, after almost four days in his company, Jack now wondered he had ever assumed otherwise. The older man was congenial to the point of giddy. As they left Durham Manor, his father became capable of small talk. But as the hours and days wore on, he learned that the man suffered from a sore heart that he had ignored his children. "I closeted myself each time I found a woman I cared for and soon lost to illness or childbirth. True, I would discover a new amour soon. Perhaps far too soon to suit the purviews of Society, but then, the heart does not obey rules. Does it?"

"How true," Jack had agreed and fit the words to his own situation.

His father's newly declared humility suited his new humanity, his largesse to aid Jack for Emma's benefit a boon Jack would not soon forget.

Friday, the two strode into the offices of Hampton and Roe in Threadneedle Street more comfortable with each other than they had ever been. Hampton and Rose were the factors in Plymouth who brokered the new merchant shipping line and Jack and his father agreed to present a united front. Here, they greeted the four original investors milling about in the central office with more than half a dozen other potential investors.

"Good afternoon, my lord." Todd Gibbons, a baron whom Jack knew from the card tables at White's, stepped forward to shake hands with his father. "Ralph Roe told me you have business with us. And you have brought your son with you!" The man's bushy white brows shot high. "Surprise to see you here, Durham." He leaned close to confide, "And with him, no less."

Jack smiled at the wealthy baron who had always used Jack's honorific, instead of his given name. "My father invited me, Gibby."

"Did he now? Smashing. Well, do come in. We have sherry on the sideboard, there. I think you know all the others, by sight if not formally. Let me know and I shall do my host's duty by you, Durham. We have a few more interested parties soon to arrive." He glanced at one of his colleagues. "We did say noon, did we not, Harry?"

"You did," John Stanhope proclaimed and took a seat at the long mahogany table.

Outside a chapel bell began to toll the hour.

Gibby waved them to the table. "Do let us start. Latecomers will have to catch up."

The twenty or so in attendance took their seats. Jack sat beside his father.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," began Ralph Roe, a roly-poly man Jack had met years ago when he made his first investment in clipper ships out of Boston. "Each of you has before you a copy of the proposal for this shipping line. We have listed the costs of purchasing two older clipper ships and refurbishing them. On the next page, the estimated outlays of capital to construct four new ships, one each year, out of Plymouth. The third page details the projected routes, the commodities traded, current prices and the profits for the first five years, based on today's prices."

"I have a question." Winston Dutton was a man whom Jack knew to be a wealthy landowner from Kent. "You are assuming that the shipping lines remain open for the next five years and that Bonaparte will be contained."

"Actually, Winston," Gibby piped up, "we are assuming that Boney is clobbered by our Wellesley on land and by our navy and that we have clear sailing in the sea and on land."

“Wellesley comes along,” Winston replied, “and the Royal Navy performs well without Nelson. Yet this impressing of sailors is a frightful problem with other countries, especially the American Colonies. The reason I balk at this is the precarious nature of the whole enterprise. I do not wish to spend thousands to build new ships only to see them sink to the bottom of the ocean.”

“I agree,” Jack said, then ran his index finger down the list of goods traded. “A large part of your profit is projected from the rum trade.”

“That we do, Durham,” Gibby answered.

“That triangular trade,” Jack’s father put in, “is a nasty business.”

“You object?” asked Hampton, one of the factors here.

His father’s brows arched in disdain. “Not to sugar or rum, but to the sale of human beings. I do.”

Jack scanned the faces of the others. “I do as well.”

Hampton scratched his bald head. “Any others here join the Stanhopes in that?”

Four others added their objections.

Gibby looked at Hampton and Roe. “Well, then. May I ask, are your objections to the commodities enough to totally dissuade you from investing?”

The four plus Jack and his father agreed and this had Hampton and Roe putting their heads together.

The door opened.

“Mister Pinrose,” Hampton and Roe shot up from their chairs to greet the hawkish looking grey haired man. “Do come sit down. We have begun but we can summarize for you.”

Pinrose stared at Jack, then glanced at John Stanhope. “Thank you. I apologize for my tardiness. I had an urgent matter requiring my attention.”

Because he had not removed his gaze from the two Stanhopes and perhaps too because all others knew Pinrose accused Jack of abducting his stepdaughter, every other man in the room seemed to turn to stone.

Jack would have laughed, but found the prospect of confronting his nemesis too thrilling to court frivolity. Besides, where was Trayne? Had not both blackguards agreed to attend this meeting? And why would Trayne suddenly not appear?

“Then do sit, Mr. Pinrose,” Hampton said with no warmth. “We shall continue.”

Jack bit back a smile. More than an hour later, the business venture had been debated to its finest point.

Hampton folded his fingers before him and glanced down the table. "We come then to the final issue. Are you willing to invest in this, and if so, please state your initial sum and when you will deposit it to our bank. We urge promptness in this matter as these prices from the shipwrights in Plymouth may increase without notice. We will begin with Lord Gibbons."

Within thirty minutes, all had spoken save Pinrose who, since he arrived last, was invited to speak last.

"I wish to invest twenty thousand July first."

Jack fought the urge to sneer. As he surmised, Pinrose would put up his share in three months' time. Not good enough, you thief.

Hampton thanked him. "Mr. Trayne was to have come with you. I wonder if I may inquire as to his sentiments in this matter?"

Pinrose stared into Jack's eyes. "He wishes to invest ten thousand."

Does he now?

"On July first, Mr. Pinrose?"

The hawk-nosed man opened his thin lips. "That is so, Mr. Hampton."

Jack's father rapped his fingers on the tabletop. "We cannot wait that long for such a meager sum."

"It is not meager," Pinrose retorted.

The earl said, "I'll give you another twenty right now, Hampton."

"To add to your forty?" Hampton asked, astonished.

"Quite so."

Jack grinned and knew the look was evil as he turned to Pinrose and said, "And I give you another twenty to add to my thirty, if we exclude Mr. Pinrose and Mr. Trayne from the corporation completely."

"My word," Hampton breathed.

"See here!" Pinrose jumped to his feet. "You cannot do that, Stanhope."

Jack glared back at him. "Of course I can. And did."

"You abduct my stepdaughter—"

"She came to me."

"She is not of her right mind."

"She is sane as my banker."

"If she married you, she is not in her senses."

Jack stood and even from ten paces away, he loomed, more than ten inches taller than the little man. "We married each other, Pinrose. I have the license in my pocket and the vicar's statement with it."

"They are frauds."

Jack's nostrils flared. "You are the fraud. The liar. The cheat. The thief. The tormenter of men. The brutalizer of women. To even think to lock a young woman in her rooms and demand she marry Benjamin Trayne so that the two of you can abscond with her inheritance."

The men in the room inhaled collectively, a mutual sign of outrage.

Pinrose turned to them, hands out, palms up. "I wish to join this venture."

Jack's father coughed. "Pray tell, man, if these gentlemen decide to take your offer, what will you use for collateral until the first of July?"

"Property."

"Which," John Stanhope asked, "property?"

"My offices in Lombard Street. A house in Park Lane."

"How interesting," John said with dispassion, then removed from his inner frock coat pocket long papers tied with blue deed ribbons round the packages. He flattened them and pushed them toward Hampton and Roe. "The deeds to your office in Lombard Street and the home of your charge, Emma Darling," he said slowly articulating his barbs, "now my daughter-in-law, Emma Stanhope?"

"How do you have them?" Pinrose croaked.

"I bought them, man."

"From—"

"Your creditors. Who else?"

Pinrose gazed at the others round the table. "I have other means."

"Do you?" asked Jack, and removed from his coat pocket other papers. "Gentlemen, please see here I have bought the loans Mr. Pinrose has made in the last six months. Intending to come into a bit of money to pay them all off, Pinrose?"

The little man reached down the table. "Let me see those!"

"Ah, ah, ah!" Jack pushed them toward Hampton and Roe.

“This is outrageous!” Pinrose picked up his top hat and gloves. “I will speak to my lawyers. I shall see you in hell. Both of you.” And with that, he stormed out.

The door bounced off its hinges as the investors muttered about the dastardly behavior of the man who had just left. No one regretted his departure.

Over an hour later, their investment agreement signed, Jack and his father climbed into Jack’s brougham once more.

“A glorious afternoon, I would say. What think there, my boy?”

Jack scowled. “Where was Trayne?”

John waved a hand. “Matters not. He gave Pinrose his proxy and their scheme failed.”

“But why wouldn’t Trayne show?” The joy of their victory over Pinrose sharpened Jack’s alarm.

When the two men stepped inside Jack’s foyer and doffed their coats, his butler handed Jack a note. “For you, milord.”

“From whom?” Jack turned it over and over. Cheap parchment. No crest.

“A boy from the streets brought it, milord. Looked like someone might’ve hired him on the spur of the moment.”

Those words alone seared Jack’s mind. “What the hell?” he raged as he read the note once, then again.

The words were scribbled, the penmanship ugly. The words uglier.

“You have my debts, but you do not have Emma. We do.”

Chapter Nine

Two evenings later, Jack stumbled into his foyer in Durham, exhausted and half out of his mind with worry.

As Simmons pushed a whiskey into his hand and the groom took his weary horse away, Cook bustled to the kitchen to warm soup and bread for him. Jack fell into the hall chair and asked about Emma. “When did she disappear? Have you found anything of hers, here or—?”

“Milord, you know she’s gone?”

Jack rubbed his forehead, the pain in his head as big as the one in his heart. “I do. She’s been abducted.”

“Abducted! I told Cook she would not run away. I told her she was happy here.”

Jack drank a hefty draught of the strong whiskey. “When did she go missing?”

“Not certain, sir! I am beside myself with where she could have gone! Out she went to the village, each day after you and his lordship went to London. She would take a basket of breads and jellies from the kitchen, herbs, too, and out she would light, sir.”

“Why in hell would she...?” Jack began, then realized he knew her thinking. She was going down to the cottages of the tenants and taking them food and seeing to their needs. Just as she wished to help orphans, her hope to aid other disadvantaged had led her to this end.

“She’d go for hours. Come home at suppertime, sir. But then the third day, she didn’t come home. Do you know where she is?”

“I have a few possibilities.” Two places Trayne owned, one not far from here seemed more probable. “Tell one of the footmen to go fetch the sheriff in Durham. I need his help. Tell him to bring a few men with him, too. I’ll pay for their services.”

“That I will, milord. Come now, eat and we’ll get a bath sent up to your chamber.”

But whiskey and food did not take the hunger from Jack's heart. And hot water only brought back memories of sharing a bath with his wife.

By the time the sheriff and three villagers appeared in the front hall, Jack was ready to lead them on the thirty mile journey to Trayne's grandmother's cottage near the village of Stanley. Now, eight o'clock at night, the trip would take at least two hours, maybe more.

The sheriff, a kindly man whom Jack had known since a boy, was aghast at the tale of abduction of his wife. "I say, milord," Howard Rufus exclaimed, arms akimbo in Jack's drawing room, "we'll catch this bastard. Cut off his balls for you, sir."

Jack winced. "I may beat you to the honor, Rufus." And if he has hurt my Emma, if he has done more than that, I will murder him outright. "More whiskey, men, before we go?"

"No, milord," the three replied in turn.

The biggest of them, the Durham smithy, grinned with evil purpose. "Have more of that, good sir, and we'll not be riding straight."

"I tell you, Mark," Jack told the giant whose hands measured two of Jack's, "when we return with my wife, I'm giving all three of you the wealth of my cellars for the next year."

"Ah, milord, what your new wife was doing for us was bold enough to tell us who she is and what she be about," Mark Smith replied. "She's a lady, all right. Me wife told me so. We'll get this bastard who put his hands on her, and make him wish he never set foot in Durham."

"Here, here," Jack clinked glasses with each man and within minutes, they were out the door and on the road, the late March winds cutting through their coats like chilling knives.

* * * *

Emma sat in a corner of the rough stone cottage, her supper, an unsavory mutton stew rumbling in her stomach, her hands tied to a most uncomfortable reed chair. Benjamin Trayne had had the decency to allow her her privacy for delicate matters, removing the bands to her ankles with which he hobbled her. But for the past three days, Emma sat with her arms bound only loosely enough to eat and slept in her ropes as well. Greater still was her growing pain and agony over what her husband would do when he knew her gone. Over that, she argued with herself mightily.

Would he think I have left him?

How could he, Emma? Not after what you shared.

But he is not a man to trust women.

Why would he not trust you?

Why, indeed. What had she done for him, except offer him money he would not take? Promise him she would not bother him, but leave him once their vows were said?

Trayne offered no insight into his plans, either. He was under the illusion that she and Jack were not married. The fact that she had no wedding ring confirmed his conclusion.

"And you'd not have a license, either," he said, leaning over her that first evening he'd abducted her from the Durham forest road. "That old vicar in Durham is a surly cuss. He'd not move his carcass for anyone, especially a reprobate like Jack Stanhope." Trayne had laughed in her face, his foul breath forcing her to wince and turn away. She did not disabuse him of the fact that the Durham vicar was a young man now and whatever had happened to the older one he referenced, well, she was not about to lead him down that path of discovery, was she?

In fact, he thought Jack had not yet wed her, or worse, had no intention to ever do so. For indeed, her wedding ring sat atop the dressing table in Jack's bedroom.

She recoiled at the image of what Jack would do when he returned home to find her gone, the ring upon the table, she gone without explanation.

Oh, Jack. How well do you know me?

"What do you intend to do with me, Benjamin? I cannot continue to live like this. Trussed like a chicken, I grow weary and weak."

"Be quiet. You'll know soon enough what we plan. Daniel will come soon."

"Daniel conspired with you to do this to me?" She cursed.

"Fine thing for a lady to be taking the Lord's name in vain. Tut-tut." He wagged a finger at her.

"Go to hell."

He sneered and flexed his fingers in a menacing gesture. "I should shut you up."

"Touch me and you never will again."

"You'll not be so high and mighty if I take you here and now." His blue eyes narrowed as they danced over her body. He leaned over her once more, his weasel face and rodent's breath making her go still with hatred. "Did Stanhope have you?"

If she said yes, Trayne might recoil. Or not. She dared not chance it. Rather, an opportunity will come to escape him. It must. Realizing now she should not test his mettle, she bit her tongue and glared at him.

He came closer, his nose against her own. "You don't smell too grand any longer, pet. Quite a comeuppance, is it not, to be at a man's mercy?" He licked her earlobe.

She shivered and bit back a retort.

He grabbed her hair, pulled back her head and smashed his mouth on hers.

She bit his lips.

“You bitch!” He reared back, his lower lip bleeding. He staunched it, staring at his fingers.

Outside, an owl hooted. A dog barked.

Trayne stepped backward and picked up his musket against the far wall. “Don’t worry. I will return to teach you manners.”

The door slammed and she cried out in fear and frustration. What to do? What to do?

She had long ago noted where he kept the kitchen knife and she rose now in a half crouch to jump with the damn chair behind her toward the table where the big butcher knife lay. She got to the table and stared at it. How to get it in her hand? It was too far into the middle of the table for her hand to reach.

She stood, her legs aching with the effort, and stretched toward the center. She whimpered in agony. She stretched again, this time hooking her chin over the knife and pushing it toward her, splinters from the rough wood digging into her skin.

At the edge of the table, she grasped the handle. Success had her staring at the weapon in her hand.

Outside, the dog that had barked was now yapping wildly.

Oh God. Let that dog attack Trayne. Please.

She got the knife in her fingers and twirled it toward her. If she could just get the blade to the right angle, she might be able to saw the rope off her other wrist and...

The door flung open and banged against the hinges.

“What the hell are you doing?” Trayne screamed at her, but slammed the door behind him, working at hoisting a beam that would lock into the bar. But a force worked against him and Emma could not believe her eyes that it popped open.

Trayne backed up toward her, yelling, “Get away from me! Get out!” He lifted the gun and took aim.

Then he howled in pain as she sank the knife into his buttock. And removed it and struck again!

He jumped forward.

Right into the arms of her husband.

"Hello, darling!" Jack grinned at her as he passed Trayne from his arms to that of another burly creature. "Take this animal away, Sheriff." Jack came toward her, saw the bloody blade and knit his brows. "Taking up carving, are you, sweetheart?"

"Only rump roasts, Jack," she got out with a shot of humor that surprised her, considering the terror she felt draining out of her.

Grinning suddenly, Jack slowly extracted the knife from her stiff fingers and spread his arms around her to bury his lips in her hair. "Are you well? Did you hurt you? Let me see you." He brushed her hair from her face and examined her with a husband's practiced eye.

Tears of happiness dribbled down her cheeks. "No, no. He wanted to. Said he would." From the corner of her eye, she noted how three men tied up Benjamin Trayne the way he had done to her. "Oh, Jack! How did you find me?" She began to sob then.

He rocked her in his embrace. "A short story I will gladly tell you. Shall I recount it as we go home?"

Emma drank tea on the veranda outside her bedroom and watched the swallows dance in the trees. Spring came to the north of England now that early April had arrived. The air seemed fresh and gentle breezes wafted over her face as she took another sip.

She inhaled the fragrances of new grass and flower buds. Her body, thankfully, was stronger, recovering from the bondage and confinement that the ogre Benjamin Trayne has imposed upon her for nigh unto three days and four nights.

That nightmare had ended more than ten days ago and here, in her husband's home, she had recovered much of her physical strength. But her heart was sore.

Though Jack had been loving and solicitous, demanding that they not ride home that night but take a room in an inn close by and then hiring a coach the next day to drive her back to Durham Manor, she was now alone. Jack, seeing to her comfort with his staff constantly fluttering about her, had demanded she sleep in her own bedroom alone. Furthermore, he had ordered her to remain in bed for at least two full days. She had balked and complained of his orders, even secretly arising to stretch her limbs in joyous abandon and scurrying back to bed if he poked his head in her door. Then, just as he had surprised her when he burst through Trayne's cottage door in Stanley, he shocked her when he left her a note one morning.

"Gone to London, darling. Sorry, but I did not want to wake you before I left. And I must go soon. Eat well and stay in bed! Love, J."

For what she now wanted from him, this had been a miserly, miserable note to receive.

She had not remained in bed. Indeed out of pique, she had taken to long walks in the gardens. She no longer had Trayne to fear. The sheriff had seen to that man's incarceration for abducting her. Jack told her, too, that Trayne would come before a judge soon to hear his case. And as for her stepfather, Pinrose, whose note to Jack was as good as an admission of complicity in her abduction, that man would face criminal charges in London as well.

Emma told herself she ought to be satisfied with those events. Still, she wanted more. She wanted Jack.

And she worried, now that she had time and occasion, that her original offer to him was now inadequate to the totality of all she did desire from him.

And how to tell him, how to ask for more when he remained in London?

She had asked Simmons if he knew why his master had gone. "His lordship does not confide his personal issues with me, madam."

Emma contemplated her options. What was best to do now? With Jack away and only a little more than a month gone since she first waylaid him in front of White's, she had two more months' time before she could return to speak to her solicitors and fulfill the terms of her father's will. Gaining her inheritance and her freedom seemed like the best course of action, whether or not her marriage lasted beyond that period. It was, after all, what she had originally sought. Best to stick to her plan and accomplish what she could.

She rose now and putting her cup and saucer aside, knew she needed to exercise her mind as well as her body.

Pulling on the coat that Jack had ordered for her, she buttoned up the frog closures and descended the stairs and walked out the front door to the side garden. A maze of tall boxwoods, dotted with stone benches and a few sculptures, the walk was one she delighted in for its complexity. Not once in the past few days had she turned the same way or become bored. Often, she had a devil of a time finding her way out. The mental challenge now, she told herself, would steer away her mood.

But that was easier said than done. Finding a bench she had sat in a few days ago, she praised its comfort, but sighed in sadness. She was lonely. For her husband.

And what if, Emma, he never returns?

A hand over her mouth, she told herself that was foolish to believe. He cared for her, did he not? What man makes love to a woman the way he did and not care for her?

And how knowledgeable are you, Emma Stanhope, of men? And love?

She jumped to her feet, tears streaming down her face, and made for the house and her bedroom.

Within the hour, she had asked Simmons for a reticule. "Any," she demanded of him. "One of his lordship's, if you must. I want you to have the groom hitch the horse to the brougham." She took chemises and negligees from her dresser drawers, piling them up for her journey.

Simmons had objected. "His lordship will not approve, madam, that you are gone."

"His lordship," she replied with vigor, "is not here. And I will not be bound. Not deterred, do you hear me? Not by anyone!"

"Can I not entice you to stay, Emma?"

She spun toward the sound of the bass voice that asked that question so softly.

Jack.

He nodded to Simmons, who promptly hurried away and shut the door.

Jack's dark silver gaze took in the pile of her clothes, her body, her hair, her determined expression. With nary a word, he strolled toward her and raised his brows.

Emma lifted her chin.

"Where are you going?"

"Where have you been?" she countered.

"London." From his dust-covered breeches and green frock coat, it was clear he had returned home with all due speed and perhaps on horseback.

She dare not allow herself the hope that this implied he hurried home to her.

"Where are you going, Emma?" he asked again, his large body looming over her, his eyes shocked, his mouth stretched in grim lines.

"I...I thought I would visit my mother."

"I know she would like that."

She tipped her head. "You do? How?"

"I saw her three days ago. I went to Kent to talk to her. Introduce myself."

Emma surveyed his features. Why now, even as she planned to leave him, did his rugged masculinity appeal to her? Why did his demeanor enchant her? "Why?"

"To tell her what happened with her husband. She did not know. I thought she should."

Emma nodded. "Of course. She needed to know."

"She is relieved. In fact," Jack said as he dug a small envelope from his inner coat pocket, "she sends you this."

Emma took it from him and with shaking fingers, tore open the parchment. Tears immediately obscured her vision. "She says she is well," Emma finally managed to clear her eyes. "Better than she has been in months, because you have come and told her about Daniel's arrest." She caught back a sob and peered up at him. "I am grateful."

"I know, darling. You always are." He smiled but it took him an immense amount of effort. "Will you tell me why you are leaving me?"

"Because you were not here."

He stepped so close now, her body melted with desire for him. "I am now," he whispered. She stomped her foot, feeling foiled and petulant, angry and neglected. "You know what I mean!"

"Yes, I do," he said with his old compassion for her and took one of her hands. "Will you come sit with me and let me tell you what I have done?"

Biting her lip, she nodded and followed him to two lacy old Chippendale chairs by the window.

"I had to return to London to testify against Daniel. He is in gaol, not soon to be let out, not only because of this charge but also others brought by two men he defrauded. I also had to deposit monies in a company of which my father and I now hold the major shares. Pinrose was excluded from this venture by my father and me."

"For me."

"Yes." He acknowledged. "I am happy to say for you."

"Clearly your father did this not for me so much as to aid you."

"And to get into my good graces. Perhaps that of Wes and Adam. Clarice, too. He is trying his damndest to turn a leaf, change his life."

She squeezed Jack's hand.

He gave her a small smile. "While in London, I also paid a call on Jared Draycomb."

"My father's solicitor."

Jack nodded. "And the executor of his estate. I officially informed him of our marriage. Then I proved it by showing him the license and the certificate from our vicar here with his signature and the date of the wedding."

Emma sat straighter. "What did he say?"

“Congratulations.” Jack grinned as she did. “I also reminded him that as of the tenth of June, when you will be married to me officially for ninety days, you will be eligible to appear in his offices for the official dispensation of your father’s assets into your keeping.”

“Oh, Jack!” She felt her heart burst open with love and pride in him. “What did he say?”

Jack lifted a shoulder. “The only thing he could, my dear. He offered me his congratulations on our wedding and then invited you to come promptly at nine on the morning of the tenth of June to receive your due.”

She stayed quite still. “According to the current law, I cannot take those assets to my own keeping unless I am divorced or widowed.” Her statement, she knew, begged the question of what Jack would do about their marriage within those next months. Divorce her or —?

“Precisely,” he said and rose from his chair. His hands clasped behind him, he strode away from her. “Your orphanage is a fine project which awaits funding.”

Her body stilled. He would leave her. Divorce her. Oh, no, no. She had to save her own pride here and so she said, “You know how grateful I am for what you have done for me, Jack. No other man would have done more and I—”

“Emma.”

She had to look at him, but once more, she found that difficult with tears in her eyes.

“Emma, I am here prepared to make you an offer.”

She blinked. The last word surprised her and yes, even pleased her. Yet wary, she asked, “What kind of offer?”

“I told Draycomb I would remain married to you until June eleventh.”

“Oh, God.” She clamped a hand to her mouth to strike back a sob.

“On that morning at ten o’clock, you may decide if you wish our marriage at an end. If so, I will promptly leave the meeting with Draycomb and I will sign a statement declaring my intent to divorce you.”

Blinking back tears, she could scarcely fathom life without him.

“But I do earnestly hope you do not wish a divorce, Emma.” His voice fell to a harrowing softness. “I want you to stay with me, Emma, not just until the eleventh of June, but for the rest of our lives. And if you do, I lay no claim to your estate of lands or money. You establish and operate your orphanage as you see fit. Or any other enterprise you wish to open.”

She was not certain her ears worked well. She stared at him and to make her vision better, she swiped tears from her lashes. There was no mistaking what she saw.

He dug from his pocket her wedding ring and held it out to her. She had feared, among other things, that he had returned it to the family vaults when she could not find it after she'd returned from Stanley. "I want you to have this. I took it with me to London and had the jeweler cut it down for you. Will you take it, Emma? Be my wife? Not merely for three months but always?"

This was so much more than she had imagined from him.

"You want me?" she whispered.

"I think I did from the first few minutes in my carriage, Emma. For your daring, your fortitude, your generous nature."

"I can't believe it," she said in wonder. "What of the family curse?"

"To hell with it. Convenient excuses for men who do not wish to love completely."

She laughed.

"I love you, Emma, darling."

"I do believe, my lord," she told him with a cascading joy spreading throughout her body, "my name is Emma Stanhope."

He gave some ragged sound. "Will you keep it?"

She rose and strolled toward him. "Keep my name? The ring? And you?" She reached up on her toes and curled her fingers into the hair at his nape to speak on the lush firm contours of his lips. "I have never known a gentleman to equal you. I do accept your offer. I love you, Jack. You and no other, my darling man. Now will you please kiss me to seal the deal?"

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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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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