



Charlotte's Brides:

Danielle

By

Sable Grey

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Danielle

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Chapter One

Danielle sat pensively in a cushioned chair waiting in the home office of the Driscoll House, a two-story brick building in the center of Boston's well-to-do district. Charlotte Oberman had informed her that the man who'd sent for her, Alistair Driscoll, was a successful attorney, widowed for six years, father to three. The house, though dreary and in need of a thorough cleaning, was impressive. The woman who'd shown her to the office was not.

As the door behind her opened, Danielle stood, quickly smoothing down the pressed skirts of her dress, and turned. The man who entered was not the widower she'd pictured in her mind. He was tall, lean but fit, his dark hair long but pulled back neatly with a thong. He was the image of upper-class society, complete with tailored suit and shined leather shoes.

"You are Miss Whitmore?"

She held out her hand and met him halfway across the room. "Danielle Whitmore. I was sent by Charlotte Oberman."

His dark gaze swept over her in quick scrutiny before he took her hand, his long fingers folding briefly over hers. "I want to start by telling you that I've no need for a wife."

Danielle frowned as he released her hand and headed around his desk. "Then I admit I am confused as to why you would contact the Oberman Bride Placement business."

"It is my children. They need a mother." He indicated the chair

across from his desk and waited for her to sit before easing into his own chair. "I am seeking a marriage that will provide my children with a woman to look after and raise them as if they were her own."

Danielle had spent enough time on the streets before Charlotte had taken her in to know how to read people quickly. This one was all business. She released a little breath. That made things much easier for her.

"I shall require, aside from my living expenses and the household allowance, an additional monthly allowance for which I would like to set up an account. In return I am willing to take care of the affairs of your household and raise your children. The woman who showed me in is your maid?"

His eyes narrowed but he inclined his head.

"And you have a cook, a driver, and someone to look after your horses?" She watched him incline his head again. "I shall need to know their salaries and a list of their duties, some of which I will most likely want to take on myself."

"And the additional allowance?"

"I refuse to remain here a year or so with a strange man, one of whom I do not know what damage he might be capable, and be forced to leave with nothing to start over with," she stated plainly.

"I see."

"I can and am willing to be, if I am needed, useful in other areas as well. During the years I've been with Charlotte Oberman, I've found that I am very good with numbers and have had some experience with accounting and bookkeeping. I was even paid a small salary by Ms. Oberman for my work for her business and do not come to you empty handed or of weak mind."

She knew she'd taken the right approach by the way he was staring at her. At first his gaze had looked her over like she was but a woman, perhaps plain and not thin enough; now he was looking at her as if she were a potential business partner.

"Anything else?"

She withdrew the document that Charlotte had sent her off with

from her bag. "You only need to hand me a written and signed agreement about the monthly allowance and then sign these papers that state I am your wife. I will mail it to Ms. Oberman, and she will file it as a binding marriage contract." She set the document on his desk.

"You are not what I expected, Miss Whitmore." He finally leaned back in his chair and regarded her evenly.

"I'm practical and value a stable home. If this is unsatisfactory or does not please you, you may consider sending for a different woman." She held her breath and waited, hoping she'd not pushed the business attitude too far.

"I am satisfied with your proposal. How much do you wish for your monthly salary?" He pulled out a piece of paper and dipped his quill; then his brown gaze lifted as he waited for her response.

"Whatever you feel is decent and fair shall suffice." She decided to offer a bit of submissiveness to ease any worries that she might try to bully or cheat him. He lowered his gaze, and she watched his hand move across the page as he wrote out the agreement and signed it. Then he signed the documents but did not hand them back to her, only her allowance agreement.

"I will file this myself and send Ms. Oberman a letter stating I have done so," he told her, and she almost smiled. It was a businessman's trick to let the other businessman know he wasn't completely in charge of their arrangement.

"As you wish." She stood and reached for her solitary piece of luggage. "Will I be sharing your room or be given one of my own?"

"Your own. It has already been prepared for you."

"You are most generous. Thank you." She turned and left the office without looking back. The graying maid stood outside the door, her eyes narrowed as Danielle stepped from the office.

"I suppose you believe you accomplished something just now," the woman drawled.

"What am I to call you?"

"Claire Burns."

"Ms. Burns, please show me to my room, and then I shall wish to

meet the children." Danielle ignored the woman's accusing eyes and after a moment followed her upstairs and to her bedroom.

Alistir sat at his desk listening to them ascend the stairs. He wasn't certain about the woman he'd been sent, but over the next week, she proved she could meet the needs he'd spoken to Oberman about.

Danielle was competent, rational, and logical. She put the house in order, and his home had never been so clean. She established and kept a disciplined routine, one that kept her busy and proved effective with his children.

Each morning she met with the household staff, at which time she delivered the day's menu and a shopping list along with the exact amount needed to make any necessary purchases. The driver would be told if and when he might be needed by her during the day, the boy who cared for the horses given instructions on when to have the horses ready. Then she and Claire would collect the laundry for Claire to wash.

Midmorning to midday, she dedicated herself to the children, who took to her rather quickly. She gave them lessons, fed them their meal, and then put them down for their naps. An hour later, she would wake them and take them for an outing. When they returned, she allowed them time to play in the garden while she checked in with the cook to make certain that everything for the evening meal was in order. After the evening meal, she read to the children and then retired them for the evening. She would then dismiss the staff and take time to prepare for the following day.

He had to admit, it was a productive schedule. The only break in her calm, businesslike attitude was when she was with the children. He'd seen a different woman then, warm and patient, more than willing to answer any of their endless questions and quick to laugh at their jests.

She was perfect.

Well not quite perfect, he amended for the hundredth time since she'd arrived as he poured himself a drink in the late hours of the evening. Perfect would have been the woman he'd loved. But the arrangement was adequate.

"Mr. Driscoll?" As if summoned by his thoughts, he turned and

found Danielle in the doorway of his office. She had readied to retire, her long dark hair hung loose around her shoulders, quite a contrast from the tight knot she fashioned it in every day. His gaze dropped momentarily to the plain white cotton gown she wore.

"What is it, Danielle?" He lifted his drink to his lips as she stepped into the room.

"I wished to speak with you about the children before I retired, if you have a few minutes?"

"Of course." He waited, watching her pull the door closed behind her before facing him.

"They are all three very bright, and I fear I do not make use of their eagerness to learn. I haven't the education to offer the knowledge they crave. I spend most of my nights in your library looking up information to give them the next day, but when they have questions, I sometimes do not know the answers. I fear I am failing them in this." She frowned slightly, her large green eyes thoughtful. "I wish to ask permission to hire a tutor."

"They are quite young for a tutor, aren't they? Gabriel is only six and the twins but eight." He watched her cross her arms as she walked towards him.

"Yes, but they learn so quickly and have so many questions, it would seem a waste to deprive them of the learning they obviously want." She halted in front of him. "I only ask that you consider it. Of course I shall respect whatever decision you make on the matter."

"I will consider it as you suggest," he agreed.

"Thank you, sir." She started to turn but hesitated.

"Is there anything else?" For the first time since she'd arrived, she suddenly looked a little nervous. Had she done something she needed to confess?

"Yes." She finally faced him fully again, taking a deep breath. "It's a difficult subject."

"Speak plainly and to the point." He set his drink aside.

"It is our arrangement."

He didn't mean to groan. "You want more money."

The quick grin that flitted across her lips was rare. "No, sir. I've

more than I need." Her eyes glittered, laughing at him. "You needn't worry of me emptying your pockets in such a way."

"What then? Anything else could not be so difficult." He folded his arms over his chest as she allowed hers to drop so she could clasp her hands together in front of her.

"It had not occurred to me to before, but I feel I shall not be doing my duty if I did not breach the subject. While you've established you've no need for a wife, it does not dismiss the fact that you work long hours each day and that you may indeed have need of some kind of...release." Pink crept into her cheeks, another rarity of femininity.

He stared at her as she glanced around, seeming to be searching for anywhere to look but at him. It was delicately put, but the surprise of the subject caught him off guard. When he said nothing, her hand drifted up to the collar of her gown to finger the small band of white lace.

Alistir could not deny he was amused with her reaction to speaking of sex. Anything else and she was as intimidating as any business acquaintance he had met. Suddenly she'd been reduced to blushing and trembling.

He'd be lying if he said he'd not considered rapping on her door in the middle of the night...on more than one occasion that week. He did long for a woman's body at times, and she was just one door away—and his wife, after all.

"I am not opposed to an arrangement between us," she offered when he didn't speak. "I do understand that you would not offer anything more than physical satisfaction."

As if she'd read his thoughts. That was the very thing that had kept him from coming to her already. He had no desire for an emotional attachment. But he'd underestimated her logical approach to a situation. She thought as a man did, worked through problems and found solutions.

He turned and moved to refill his glass, taking several long swallows after he did. It was a tempting deal. They could keep it separate, away from everything else. That made it easier to keep emotions out of the way.

"I realize I am not the kind of woman you desire. Claire has already

informed me that I am too plain and not thin enough for your liking, that you prefer blonde hair over brunette." She spoke quickly. "I should understand if you do not want any kind of arrangement with me but thought it my duty to suggest..."

"Plain?" He faced her. She was anything but plain. Milky white skin, contrasting dark hair, and those luminous green eyes fringed in long dark lashes were intoxicating. When he moved toward her, she didn't back away.

"What would Claire know of what I look for in a woman?" He snorted and saw the faint trace of a small smile in the corners of her mouth. "I, like most men, enjoy any woman who can satisfy me."

"I understand." She nodded and then brushed back her hair when it fell forward.

He tipped his glass and took several swallows, watching her over the rim. Hell, it was already done. She'd offered him an arrangement that suited him.

"I assume you are no virgin." He watched her turn her gaze lower, and she shook her head. "How much experience do you have?"

Her eyes glittered slightly when she looked at him. "Very little, but it is enough that I do understand the gist of what takes place."

"You laugh at me, but I have particular tastes and am attempting to determine if you would be opposed to them."

"Tastes?" She shook her head. "Forgive me, but I don't..."

"A woman bent over the back of that chair, skirts lifted and the feel of my palm against flesh." He watched the pink creep back into her cheeks as her gaze darted to the chair he'd indicated.

"I've heard of men with such tastes." Her attention dragged back to him. "When I was at the Oberman building, one of the other women told me of it. She said that sometimes a man would use his hands, and sometimes other things...like paddles or rulers."

Alistir watched her lick her lips. "That kind of talk will get you into trouble," he warned, smiling when her eyes widened. "Don't look so terrified. I am not going to leap over there and beat you senseless."

She blinked and laughed abruptly. "Of course not. I did not mean

to suggest that you would do such a thing."

"And I've not frightened you?"

"You'll find that very little frightens me, Mr. Driscoll."

He admired her for that. "Take some time to consider what you would like. While I do like to dominate, force is not my nature." He drank from his glass. "I am, however, greedy and insatiable, and if you come to me once, I shall use you as I wish."

"Use me?" She bristled.

"Over and over." He shrugged. "Eventually I would come to feel that you belonged to me to do with as I wished. Each time I dropped money into your account, I would think of it as payment for your submission."

"I see." She crossed her arms. "You would have me become your prostitute. I suppose that is the nature of our marriage already, isn't it, though I'd not quite thought of it that way until this moment."

Alistair stared at her as she turned and walked to the door. He hadn't meant to imply that he would make her his whore. He winced. Or perhaps that was exactly what he'd meant.

"Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Driscoll. Goodnight." Then she slipped from the room.

Chapter Two

Claire stood outside the front door as Danielle helped the children from the carriage. She could see that the woman wanted to speak with her, so she instructed the children to go inside and wait for her.

"Mr. Driscoll's brother and sister-in-law arrived while you were gone." Claire told her as soon as the children were inside. "He shall want your marriage to appear a traditional one, so I took the liberty of moving your belongings into his room and preparing your room for their stay."

Danielle realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled slowly. "That was good thinking. Thank you."

"I shall tend to the children this evening." Claire hesitated as she reached for the door. "He values what his brother thinks of him. It will be important to convince them that he married for love rather than convenience."

"I understand and appreciate the extra work you've done to ensure Mr. Driscoll is not disappointed." Danielle followed the woman inside.

"They're in his study."

Danielle took a deep breath as she removed her bonnet. Claire took it from her, remaining while Danielle brushed back her hair and smoothed down her dress. She could hear the children in the study as she moved toward the door.

"Danielle?" Alistair called, and she swept forward into the room.

"Yes, yes. Forgive me for my lateness. We were having so much fun in the park that time escaped me. I pray you aren't terribly upset with me,

Alistir." She leaned up and kissed his cheek, surprised when his spicy scent caused the muscles in her stomach to tighten.

His arm snaked around her waist and he rested his hand on her back. "Come and meet my brother, Charles, and his wife Eva." He indicated the gentleman standing near his desk, an older, heavier version of him. "Charles, this is my wife, Danielle."

Danielle swept forward and offered a light embrace to each of them. "Alistir has spoken of you often. It is a pleasure to finally place faces with your names." Danielle sent them her best smile, and it was returned instantly by Eva.

"Odd, for we've only just learned of you today." Charles' eyes narrowed. "You can imagine our surprise."

"Yes, I imagine you are indeed surprised. Our engagement wasn't as lengthy as we'd originally planned." She smiled up at Alistir to find him watching her.

"Then you are expecting?" Charles pressed.

"Charles," Eva whispered softly as if to remind him of his manners.

"We are not." It was Alistir who answered and then added, "Not for lack of trying." His words brought heat to her cheeks, but she continued to smile.

"I'm a mess, Alistir. Allow me to freshen my appearance for your family?" She looked up at him.

"Yes, but give me a few moments to speak with you first about the tutor we discussed." He looked at Claire still in the doorway, "Take the children, Claire, and have the cook informed we've guests so that he may make the appropriate changes for our meal."

"I've already done so, sir." Claire waved to the children. "Come along." They filed out, and Alistir guided Danielle to follow them. As Claire swept the children upstairs, Alistir pulled Danielle farther down the hallway away from the study.

"They arrived unexpectedly," he spoke quietly. "Go to my room. I had Claire purchase an outfit for you. Your attire is appropriate for an outing, but I did not know if you'd anything to wear for entertaining."

"That was very considerate of you." Danielle nodded. "And the

tutor?"

He stared at her for a moment. "I've acquired one as you suggested. He is to arrive tomorrow."

She smiled. "Thank you. Now let me go change before they come looking for us."

"We'll be waiting in the salon."

She turned and hurried upstairs. She found her belongings easily, and the dress. Yellow silk. It was a beautiful dress, far more beautiful than anything she'd ever owned before. She quickly dressed and fashioned her hair as she'd seen Charlotte Oberman fashion hers, in a loose bun atop her head, then hurried to rejoin her husband in the sitting room. He met her at the foot of the stairs, however.

Alistir's gaze dropped to the silk skirts of her dress, then drifted up to the low-cut bodice. "You look...appropriate."

She smoothed down the skirts, liking the feel of the fine material against her palms. "Quickly, now, is there anything I should know before I go back in there?"

"We met at a party two months ago. You liked the way I danced and allowed me to call on you." He leaned closer and breathed in. "Are you wearing perfume?" Hot chills unexpectedly raced down her spine.

"There was some left on the bureau in your room," she supplied.

"Claire's quick thinking." He nodded, then leaned away. "We were engaged in the spring. We married a month ago."

"I liked your dancing. What did you like about me?"

"The way you looked when you walked away." He sent a lopsided grin when she looked up at him. "My brother knows me well enough that he'd have called it a lie if I'd said anything else."

She felt her cheeks warm. "Of course."

"You reacted quickly. I appreciate that." He shifted slightly. "What my brother thinks of me means a lot. The pretended affection will please him."

She glanced at the door as she heard steps from the other side draw near. "We are just wed. Affection would be expected."

His gaze slanted at the door, then returned to her. "Indeed." He

leaned forward as the door opened, and Danielle's breath caught when his lips captured hers and his hands slid around her to bring her flush against him.

A million sensations washed over her, and without thinking she lifted her hands to his shoulders. As his lips held hers, his strong hands pressing into her back, she lost herself for a moment and moaned against his kiss. He stilled. But only for a moment. In the next, his arms tightened and his tongue thrust between her lips.

Sweet mother of God, he tasted like Heaven. That spicy scent filled her nose, and the heat of his body made her tremble. Her hands slid across his shoulders to curl at the nape of his neck. She couldn't help it and moaned again, moving her body boldly against his.

Alistir released her lips and pulled away, but she grasped the collar of his shirt and brought him back to her, wanting more. "My brother is standing just over there." He laughed against her lips and brought his hands to her shoulders, guiding her back from him.

Her gaze darted to Charles Driscoll, who in turn mumbled something and pointed at the door before darting back behind it. She looked back up at Alistir. Oh God. She'd all but thrown herself at him. Instantly, she released his shirt and stepped back.

"There should be no doubt in his mind now," she whispered as she reached up and smoothed back her hair.

"None," he murmured in agreement.

"Shall we join them now? I will feign embarrassment and you and he can exchange chuckles and winks, and laugh at my expense, as it is with men." She slipped her hand beneath his arm, hoping he'd not felt it still shaking.

He inclined his head and led her to the sitting room where Charles refused to look at her, seeming more embarrassed than she should have been. Eva's small smile told her that his husband had relayed what he'd seen.

She began speaking quickly, hoping she sounded embarrassed enough. "I hope beef is to your liking. I try to plan meals that will make up for Alistir's skipping so many. He works such long hours that he

hardly takes time for his appetite."

"That's not entirely true, love." Alistir grinned when she looked up at him, and Eva laughed from across the room.

"You would wither to nothingness were it not for me." Danielle feigned ignorance at what he'd meant. "Eva, would you join me in the gardens? I've convinced Alistir to hire a gardener, and I do like to spend time there before the end of the day." Eva nodded and hurried to join her, leaving Alistir and Charles alone.

Charles spoke once the door was closed. "She's pretty and she seems to enjoy you."

"I wouldn't marry one who didn't." Alistir walked across the room and retrieved two glasses. Charles said nothing as he prepared them both drinks and accepted the one held out for him.

Alistir took a long drink, trying to drown the fire Danielle had ignited. He'd not expected her response and had only meant to put on a show for his brother. But when she'd made that small noise against his mouth, he'd kissed her deeper and she'd received the affection passionately. Her fever had been surprising. Hell, when she'd grabbed him, he'd been tempted to pick her up and haul her upstairs.

"You are hot for her," his brother accused, and he looked up to find Charles watching him closely.

"As is to be expected when man and woman are first wed." Alistir took another drink. "I recall that you and Eva could barely keep your hands away from one another long enough to make it through the ceremony."

"She's nothing like Mary."

Alistir winced at the mention of his first wife. "No, she is not."

"Odd that you would choose a woman so very different than the first."

Alistir shrugged. "I have enjoyed many kinds of women since Mary's death, brother. This one I wanted to keep." He moved toward the door. "Let us join them in the gardens. Danielle begged for that gardener, and the money I spend on him should be appreciated."

Charles followed him through the house. "You are running from

me.”

Alistir glanced back at him as he reached for the door that led to the garden. “I am not running, brother.” He opened the door and stepped into the fading sunlight. His gaze instantly found his sister-in-law and Danielle, seated on a bench, their backs to the house. Their voices carried, and he halted when he heard their words.

“What is he like?” Eva leaned closer.

Alistir glanced at Charles when he stepped to his side, his gaze narrowing as he too listened to the women. When Alistir started to step forward, Charles put his hand on his shoulder. He wanted to hear what Danielle would say.

“He is considerate.” Danielle spoke delicately, but Alistir knew Eva would not be satisfied. While she was a gentle woman, she was also determined.

“You know what I mean,” Eva prompted. “I’ve often been curious of him. He can be so reserved at times, and then at others he seems as teasing as my Charles. It’s quite natural to wonder if a man is of the same character intimately.”

Danielle didn’t answer for a moment, and Alistir was about to call out to them when she answered.

“He has particular tastes.”

Alistir grunted. Clever woman. He slanted a glance at his brother.

“Tastes?” Eva asked.

“I find they match my own desires to have him dominate me.”

“That’s deliciously wicked,” Eva encouraged. “Charles is much the same. I admit I like his large hands. He only needs to touch my arm and I am undone.”

“I...I find I am very much affected by Alistir’s voice.” Danielle waved a hand. “Not when we are discussing tutors and the running of the house, of course. But when he leans in close and speaks of the things he wishes to do, his voice changes. Just two nights ago, when I’d come to him to ask about hiring a tutor for the children, our conversation became more intimate and he...” She stopped, seeming embarrassed to have said what she had.

Alistir's body hardened. It was a show, and she was quick thinking enough to realize that his family might know him well enough to know what he liked in women. But he wondered if there was any truth to her revelation.

He cleared his throat when his brother looked at him and despite Charles' hand, he pushed forward, causing the two women to lean away from one another and turn to welcome them with smiles as if their conversation had been no more than a discussion of the flowering plants around them.

"Alistir, your garden has never looked so lovely," Eva complimented as they stood from the bench. "Danielle told me that she had to practically beg you to hire the gardener, but it was a sound decision. It's truly lovely."

"Yes, quite out of character for you to indulge in such frivolity," Charles added.

"I have a weakness for begging women." Alistir slid an arm around Danielle's waist, smiling down at her, then leaned toward her, quieting his voice slightly. "I believe you use it to your advantage."

It was but a slight change in her, and he'd have not even noticed had he not been looking for it. A quick hitch in her breath. And her body tensed slightly beneath his hand. She'd not lied to Eva. She *was* affected by him.

"I am in no position to take advantage of you." Danielle didn't look at him.

He leaned closer. "Would you like to be?"

Her lips parted with a feigned gasp, and her head jerked around so she could stare at him. "Alistir!" But pink crept into her cheeks and that bodice tightened around her breasts.

"You should grow accustomed to that quickly. The Driscoll men are nothing more than scoundrels with heavy purses. They shall endeavor to embarrass you at any opportunity," Eva offered.

"I'm beginning to learn that as truth, I think," Danielle agreed, turning her attention to the colors bleeding through the sky as the sun began its descent. "If he were not so charming at times I might rethink my

marriage.”

“You do not know him at all if you believe he would give up anything he has already claimed as his.” Charles glanced at Alistir before letting his gaze drop to Danielle. “Certainly you already know how possessive he can be. It is why I am so surprised to find him married, and to such a gentle woman. You don’t seem to me someone who wished to be...”

“Used.”

Alistir stared down at Danielle. He didn’t think she’d actually meant to say the word. The fact that she was recalling their conversation about sex made his fingers tighten on her waist.

“I was going to say possessed.” Charles’ gaze narrowed.

“No, I believe ‘use’ was Alistir’s word when he was warning me of his nature.” Danielle tried to step from his side, but he held her there.

“Did I, love? I don’t recall that.” His gaze met hers and her lips parted. “Refresh my memory. How did I say I would use you?” He felt her body tremble slightly. Damn. He was a fool for not having gone to her room already. Had he known he’d not offended her, he most certainly would have.

“Over and over again.” Her gaze didn’t move from him even when his brother cleared his throat. It was as if she’d forgotten they were even there. And then she blinked and looked away quickly.

“Claire will dine with the children tonight so we might have our meal without their distraction. Shall we adjourn to the dining salon?” Alistir suggested, and his brother inclined his head. They made their way to the door, but Alistir’s hand tightened around Danielle’s waist.

“The two of you go ahead and we’ll meet you there in a few moments.” He didn’t look at Danielle when her head snapped up. Charles and Eva quickly stepped through the door, but when his brother didn’t pull it closed behind him, he knew that he’d remained to eavesdrop.

“You are angry that I repeated what you’d said to me in private. It was thoughtless, and I realize I shouldn’t have...”

“You expect me to punish you?” He arched a brow as she stepped from his side to face him.

Danielle straightened, her chin lifting slightly. "I most certainly do not. I only thought you meant to reprimand me for speaking without thinking."

"Perhaps I should." Alistir leaned forward, and she took a step backwards so that her back hit the stone wall next to the door. "Give you a lesson in stilling that little tongue of yours."

"You would do no such thing. I only meant to..."

He glanced at the door, then met her gaze. Realization that they were not alone passed over her expression.

"And now you tell me what I would or would not do?" Alistir could see her breath quickening as he leaned closer. "Let me tell you exactly what I would do, love. I *would* drag you back to that bench and cut this damnable dress off of you."

He placed his hands on the wall on either side of her head, enjoying her reaction to him. "I *would*...what was the word...ah yes...*use* your body over and over until I was completely sated."

"You lie." Her voice was little more than a breathy whisper. "You told me you were insatiable."

Alistir saw the door close out of the corner of his eye. His brother would leave them alone for now. His gaze dropped to the top of her breasts.

"I have not come to you, but I am reconsidering the dynamics of our arrangement." His gaze lifted to her face. "Your reaction to me is intoxicating."

Her eyes widened. "Your brother..."

"Has given us a moment alone," he finished, then chuckled when she stared at him. "Looking at me as if I am some kind of predator again."

"My reaction to you is merely for show. Is it not what you wish of me?" Her gaze dropped to his lips momentarily. She pushed past his arm as if to go inside, but he snaked that arm around her waist and pulled her to him, her back flush against his chest.

"What are you doing?"

"Deny you enjoyed the kiss we shared and I shall not attempt to do so again," he murmured close to her ear. "You protect yourself with logic."

It is admirable. Hell, I liked you for it from the moment I met you. But I can see that you desire me, Danielle."

"I am flesh and blood if that's what you mean. You cannot expect to kiss me and for me not to take advantage and enjoy the exchange." But her voice shook, betraying her.

"Is that what you were doing, Danielle? Using me?" he asked, turning her so he could look down at her face. She seemed uncertain of how to answer. "Then use me now." He lowered his lips to brush against hers. They parted for him instantly. Soft breath. His tongue slipped past her teeth to taste her wet warmth. He didn't kiss her like before; instead he savored her, coaxing her to lead, to pull that fire she'd given him before. It didn't take long for it to flare to life, and he groaned when she turned, grasped his shoulders, and moved her body against his.

He chuckled when she gave him a push and they stepped back against the brick wall next to the door. "You realize that those living next door only need to look out their windows to see us."

"I don't care if the entire city of Boston decides to watch. Kiss me, Alistir." Her lips feathered against his jaw and she pressed her hip against his cock. He closed his eyes as her lips moved over the planes of his face. He fought for control, but it was a losing battle.

"Please."

He turned his head and captured her mouth, kissing her deeply as her hands worked the buttons of his vest and then his shirt. Her fingers touched his chest, nails scratching his skin as she slid her hands around him, as if trying to touch as much of him as possible.

"Tell me again," she whispered. "Tell me what you want to do to me, how you would punish me."

His body jerked against hers. Her hands sought behind him and a moment later, his hair fell free on either side of his face. She curled her fingers in it and thrust her hip against him.

Glancing on either side of them, he found none of the neighbors plastered to any window, so he snaked his hand down to her ass and tilted his head forward until his lips brushed her ear. "I want you across my lap, your bum surrounded by the lace and material of this dress. I

want the feel of your skin beneath my hand, to feel you jump when I..." He stopped when she whimpered. If he continued he would fuck her against the wall. She seemed to realize the same and stepped away from him.

He stared at her glistening lips, the flush in her cheeks. The tops of her breasts strained against the bodice of her dress. She took a deep breath, then another, her hands moving quickly to straighten her skirts and smooth back her hair.

"Tonight," he promised and she nodded, squaring her shoulders and stepping toward the door. *Tonight.*

Chapter Three

Danielle looked up from her book when the bedroom door finally opened. It was close to midnight, and she'd been waiting for him to join her for hours. Now her heart pounded. Had he changed his mind?

"I did not know if you wanted me to wait for you or not," she blurted but stopped when he lifted a finger to his lips.

"They'll hear every sound." He pointed to the wall that separated the rooms. "Come here." He removed his vest and tossed it to the side. Her heart thumped as she watched him unbutton his shirt.

"Your hair," she whispered.

He unbuttoned the last button of his shirt and then lifted his hands to free his hair. Like black silk it fell forward, the ends reaching just below his shoulders. She enjoyed the way his eyes darkened and swept greedily over her as he bent down and removed his shoes. She'd never had a man look at her like this before. He wanted her. She liked him wanting her, desiring her.

"Come here," he repeated. He looked like a wild animal about to strike, and it made her body flush with hot chills. Rather than moving toward him, she took a step backward around the chair. His dark brown eyes glittered, and he matched her movement by taking a long stride forward.

"Don't make me chase you down," he warned. That thought sent another thrill through her. Would he come after her if she ran? She took another step backward, and when he moved forward and circled around

the chair, she darted toward the door.

She closed the door soundly and raced toward the stair, glancing back when he threw the door open. Her heart thumped. He looked wild as he met her gaze. She started down the stairs as he stalked forward, but his arm wrapped around her waist midway down. He brought her back against him, so that his cock pressed into the swell of her ass.

"What game are you playing?" He spoke against her ear and she closed her eyes, enjoying the low vibration of his words. His hand slid up her stomach and covered her breast, squeezing firmly.

"I've been with a man before," she admitted. "I was alone in the world and hungry. I am not a virgin."

"If you were I would hate myself for what I'm going to do to you." He licked at the lobe of her ear. "Do you know what that is?"

"You mean to punish me," she whispered and felt his cock press harder against her.

"I mean to possess you, Danielle," he corrected, and she rolled her head back against his shoulder.

"It's not fair." She turned her face into his neck, breathing him in deeply. "That you should make me feel this way, and yet you remain so controlled." He released her when she turned to look up at him.

"If I did not control myself, I would have fucked you in front of my brother today." His gaze darted over her head momentarily, then returned to her face. "My office. They will not hear us there."

"Your office," she repeated, backing down the stairs, watching him stalk after her. "That is our arrangement then? Only in your office."

"Yes."

She reached the bottom of the stairs. "That will keep it separate. And we will not speak of it the rest of the time. It won't exist until we're alone together at night."

"Shall I give you a written agreement?" When she laughed, he reached out and grasped her wrist, jerking her around the banister toward the door of his office. He pulled her roughly inside and kicked the door closed behind them.

Her back hit the wood of the door behind her and he leaned

forward, resting his hands on either side of her head. "Unbutton your dress."

Danielle swallowed and lifted her fingers to work the buttons. She watched his gaze lower, following every movement of her hands. His nose flared slightly and the planes of his cheeks flushed. She recalled the first time she'd seen him, and how he'd looked since—reserved, unemotional. Now he was neither of those.

"Enough," he commanded, so she let her hands fall to her sides. Straightening, he reached forward and roughly unlaced her corset. It was an older style, lacing up the front. Tonight, she was thankful she'd not purchased one that clasped in the back. He didn't unlace it completely, just loosened it enough to slide it down and expose her breasts.

She stared at the top of his dark head as he leaned forward and licked at her nipple, then the other. His hot tongue made her tremble. She'd been with but one man before. It had been pleasant but nothing like this.

"It feels sinful," she moaned, and he lifted his head.

"We are married, Danielle. We can do whatever we want." He took a step backward, his gaze moving over her. "What do you want?"

She glanced around the room, her attention falling to the small chair in the corner with the low back. Her heart thumped. She'd never dreamed of being so brazen. She didn't look back as she moved forward and pulled the chair out from the wall. Turning it, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. If she didn't like it, he would stop. She could tell. It was her reaction to him that excited him, just as his reaction to her bloomed heat throughout her body.

Reaching back, she lifted her skirts to her hips, baring her ass, then leaned forward over the back of the chair and slipped her fingers down to the arms. She waited, holding her breath.

"My God." His quick steps followed as he neared. The sudden warmth of his palm caused her to start, and then she laughed nervously at herself. His hand made a slow circle over the crescents of her ass, then again.

He moved around to her side. "You must tell me if I hurt you. It is

not my intention to truly hurt you."

"I will." She gasped when he suddenly slapped his palm against her skin. She'd not expected the sensation that found her. She'd imagined his hand, his voice, but not her own body's reaction. Dark excitement coiled in her sex, pulled tight.

His hand ran a circle, then rose and fell. Again. She heard his heavy breath deepen, but held her own, waiting for the next swat. This time, his circle dipped lower, between her thighs, and grazed her sex. He froze.

"You are wet." His fingers pressed against her and she moaned, the pressure intensifying the sensations already pulsing there. "You like this."

She laughed shakily. "I wouldn't remain bowed up like this for only your benefit." She licked her lips, wishing she could see his face but not daring to move. "I've been curious about it since you spoke of it to me."

"You daydreamed of me doing this to you, then?" He began moving his hand in a small circle against her. She wiggled against him, indicating she wanted more of it.

"I suppose I did, though it is not in my nature to daydream. But I did wonder...oh, wait..." she protested when he removed his hand.

A moment later his palm slapped against her ass, this time leaving a slight sting. "You wondered if you would like it."

She drew a ragged breath. "Yes. The thought held some appeal to me, surprisingly." His hand snapped again, and she caught her lip between her teeth as she gripped the arms of the chair. "I didn't think it would be like this."

"And what is this?" he asked. She could tell he was aroused by the way his voice had thickened, deepened.

"I don't know...wicked." She moaned when his palm cracked against her again.

"That control you said I had?" He moved around behind her, and she heard the rustle of clothes.

"Yes?"

"It's gone." She gasped when she felt him nudge against her and a split second later he invaded her, filled her to the quick. She cried out,

welcoming the intrusion, rocking back into him by instinct.

His hand slapped against her ass and the muscles of her sex clenched. He groaned deeply before easing back and then rocking into her again. As he began to move into her, his thrusts rough, her whole body bloomed with heat. Pressure built, an unfamiliar feeling, creating a tension within her that was nearly unbearable. Her legs trembled as the chair scooted forward, threatening to slip out from under them.

"Wait, I can't...I feel as if I will..." Her thoughts scattered as her body demanded more when he slowed. Long fingers slipped beneath her, lifted her from the chair and then guided her to her knees on the floor. Much better. Then those strong hands gripped her hips and he mounted her as a dog would a bitch and began to ride her, filling her so deeply that it was almost painful.

"Alistir, it's too much." She whimpered as his body slapped into hers. He bent over her, arms folding beneath her waist, breath hot against her neck. Closing her eyes, she let go and whimpered when he pushed deep and again. Her arms betrayed her and she lowered to her elbow, his folded arms lowering to her abdomen, lifting her with each violent thrust.

And then one arm loosened, his hand slipped down between her thighs to pluck at her sensitive flesh. That tickle of pleasure broke her, and the tension that had coiled tight inside began to unwind. Her voice lifted as pleasure exploded from within, filling her entire body. Her body moved by its own will, bucking back against him, her head thrashing from side to side. She had no control as dark, hot pleasure raked through her.

"Mother of God, Danielle." His deep voice vibrated through the haze that followed the frenzy of sensation and he drove into her, deep, and stilled as his cock convulsed for several seconds.

Silence found her. Not silence. Both of them were breathing heavily but other than that, it was quiet. Slowly, he pulled from within her and she fell forward onto her stomach, her body completely relaxed. He remained on all fours above her, dragging deep, heavy breaths into his lungs.

"Roll over, woman, and let me see that I've not damaged you."

Danielle didn't want to move but rolled over, pushing her arms

above her and stretching her legs out. Her muscles warmed and relaxed and she smiled up at him. Damn. She wished he'd ridden her like this. He looked good enough to eat, his temples glistening as his hair fell forward around his face.

She hummed as she stretched again. "I was afraid this kind of arrangement might be a mistake. It was not."

His lips curled. "I've been working on a case for some time, and it's been awhile. I'm normally not so rushed, but you look none the worse for wear. I don't believe moving to the office helped in keeping what we were doing discreet, however. I imagine half the households on this street heard you."

She giggled despite the heat in her face. "We could tell them I was ill, that the beef didn't sit well in my stomach."

His laughter was deep as he stood and then collapsed in a chair. "Someone ill doesn't usually scream my name and demand I don't stop."

She rolled back to her stomach as the heat flamed in her face. "I didn't realize I'd said such a thing."

"You have a lovely ass." His foot touched her back when she started to rise so she could cover her lower half. "No, stay there. I want to look at you."

"Your tastes are odd, Alistir Driscoll." She relaxed, tucking her arms beneath her head and turning her face so she could look at him. Her gaze drifted down to his open shirt and then to his cock. It was thick, but not overly so, and much longer than the man she'd been with before. Nestled into a thicket of dark, curly hair, even spent, it wasn't unimpressive. He was beautiful.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth that settled in her limbs. She shouldn't mind this new arrangement. They could keep it separate. He would not worry about her developing unnecessary feelings, and she wouldn't worry about having to deny the needs of her body anymore. It was perfect.

Chapter Four

Alistir sat at the head of the table, goblet of wine in hand, only half listening to what his brother and other guests were saying. Eva had insisted on a dinner party and when Danielle had mentioned she would require an appropriate dress, Eva jumped at the chance to go shopping with her.

The dress she wore was a cream-colored bodice that pushed the tops of her breasts into full view with velvet skirts that were the very shade of green of her eyes. Eva had fashioned her dark hair atop her head, showing off the length of her neck. She was breathtaking.

"Forgive my brother. He seems easily distracted these days." Charles' words brought his attention to the left, where several of his male guests chuckled. Danielle looked his way then frowned when her gaze dropped to his plate. She leaned toward him.

"You've eaten nothing. You need sustenance if you mean to continue to work such long hours. Have you no appetite?" It was not part of her show for the guests. She meant what she said.

His gaze dropped to the bodice and he didn't bother lowering his voice. "My appetite has not diminished. Eva made certain of that."

The men laughed again while the women tried to hide their smiles. Danielle's gaze widened, and she straightened in her chair quickly. Her hand lifted to fidget with the lace along the shoulder of the dress.

"I'm only being truthful," he spoke quietly once the conversations started up around the table again.

"You are being wicked and trying to embarrass me," she argued without looking at him. "We do have an agreement."

"Have you any proof of such an agreement? A written contract, perhaps?" He grinned when her head snapped around.

"Don't you dare pull your attorney tactics with me, Alistir Driscoll!" She forgot to lower her voice and the conversation quieted again as she pointed her fork at him. "Or I will expose every wicked secret you have."

Alistir laughed. Now over her embarrassment, she was attempting to turn the tables on him.

"You should know that I do not respond well to blackmail." His grin widened when she lifted her chin and sniffed as if disinterested.

"I don't give a wit about what you respond well to."

"Don't you?" His voice dropped slightly and her gaze slanted at him. Though he could see she tried not to smile, she failed miserably.

"Only when it suits me." Her smile twisted slightly when Eva offered a soft giggle.

"And when is that, Danielle?" he pushed.

She looked at him directly, obviously refusing to be embarrassed further or intimidated by him. "You know very well when."

He glanced at the others then back at her. "We'll discuss it later."

"Perhaps." She reached for her wine and took a sip. "I assured the children that despite our guests, I would still read to them before they slept."

"They've taken to you quickly." Eva nodded, looking at the women at the table. "They are all three quite fond of her."

"It was no easy task winning them over, I will admit." Danielle smiled. "Gabriel accepted me right away, and Agatha came around quickly. But Abigail..." She shook her head.

"She adores you," Eva argued.

"My first night here, she put a frog in my soup, sewed my gown to my linens in my sleep, and demanded that I leave her father alone," Danielle revealed, and the women laughed.

Alistir stared at her. "Is that true?"

She nodded. "It is. I did not tell you because she had every right to

be upset. It passed in the first week." She chuckled. "Agatha and Gabriel did welcome me as their father's new wife easily, however. It was Claire who gave me the most fits."

Eva laughed. "I imagine she did not like the thought of another woman running *her* household."

Alistir reached forward and touched Danielle's hand affectionately. "Dani here laid claim to this house on the first day. Claire had no choice but to accept."

Charles raised a finger, wagging it in the air. "Then it is money you are after."

Alistir stiffened as he looked at his brother, but Charles' gaze was, as were those of the other guests, locked on Danielle.

"Is it so difficult to believe that a woman should want me for me and not my money?" Alistir glanced at Danielle, who'd laid her fork to the side.

"Four months ago when I visited, there was no woman in your life to move into your home." Charles crossed his arms. "Now here this one is, and I cannot help but to suspect she may be trying to take advantage of you, brother. You barely even had an engagement."

Before Alistir could respond, Danielle withdrew her hand from beneath his and lifted her chin. "It doesn't take anyone with sense to know what they want quickly."

"And what is it you want exactly? It is obvious that you enjoy one another, but sex is not enough to get him to marry a chit. I wonder if you've not trapped him somehow." Charles arched a brow.

"Enough badgering my wife, brother. You are ruining the appetite that Eva worked so hard to work up for me." Alistir attempted to lighten the conversation, but Danielle would not back down.

"When I met Alistir, it is true I thought him handsome and accomplished. But it would take more than a handsome face and few coins to make me wish to marry someone. I married him because he asked and offered me a family, a stable home, and a solid relationship that I need not doubt." She stood and Alistir rose as well, stepping around the table to her side. "The fact that I enjoy having sex with the man I marry

does not make those feelings less valid. Furthermore, Charles Driscoll, I certainly wouldn't have to become with child to get a man to marry me. I am intelligent and learn quickly. I am not a weakling and do not break when others mean to intimidate. I am as strong willed as any man and whatever I do, with or without my husband, I do well. Alistir and I are compatible and had the good sense to see that. We needed no long engagement to test it. And quite frankly, neither of us give a wit if you approve or not."

She'd forgotten her show for the guests. She'd instead grown claws and attacked his brother in the same manner she'd been attacked. She refused to be intimidated, even rose from her seat to look down at the man across the table. It was a businessman's trick, and it reminded him of her first meeting with him.

"You forgot beautiful," Alistir murmured from her side.

Those flashing green eyes turned his way. "What?"

"Beautiful. You said you were intelligent, no weakling, strong willed, but you forgot beautiful...I shall have to invite my brother to evoke that temper often. It is almost as effective as that dress." His gaze lowered momentarily to her bosom. "Almost."

"Do not flatter me in an attempt to silence me," she snapped.

"I wouldn't dream of silencing you." And it was the truth. She was angry, eyes glittering, face flushed, and Alistir had to admit that he found her breathtaking like this. He started to lean forward but then remembered those still sitting at the table.

"I have always had a weakness for outspoken women." He laughed, looking at his brother. "This one comes with a suit of armor and a sword."

"Well, I think she's delightful, Alistir. As she says, the two of you are a good match," Eva agreed. "We are happy for you."

"Thrilled," Charles agreed flatly.

"If you all are finished with dinner, seeing as my brother has done his best to ruin it, shall we retire to my study while Danielle tends to my children?" Alistir watched the guests rise, and Eva led them from the dining room while Charles remained behind.

"You will never do that again," Alistir directed the words tightly at his brother. "I am not a boy and I need no one to pound my wife with questions, insinuating she has ensnared me somehow. I make my wealth seeing through the lies people weave and cannot be so easily duped by a pretty face."

"You cannot expect me not to be concerned about you, brother..."

"I expect you to show me respect, the same you would expect from me if I were a guest in your home. I expect you to know me well enough to know that I would not be lured into marriage by sex. And I expect you to treat my wife as you would have me treat yours." Alistir glanced at Danielle momentarily to find her staring at him, all anger gone from her eyes. "Danielle has proven a good mother for my children. She has run this household with a firm hand. And until Eva decided she wanted this dinner, Danielle has never asked me for a solitary additional coin. She only did so today to please you and your wife. She does not deserve to be treated as you have treated her."

"I see." Charles spoke quietly and looked at Danielle. "Well done, Danielle. You've got him right where you want him to do whatever it is you have planned to do." Charles turned on his heel and marched from the room. Alistir started after him, but Danielle placed a hand on his arm.

"He only means to protect you," she said softly.

"If he were not my brother..."

"He does so because he *is* your brother. He does so because he loves you." Danielle bowed her head. "I shouldn't have spoken to him in anger myself. It was not my place."

"If I felt it was not, I would have stopped you." Alistir put an arm around her shoulders. "I said I have no need for a wife, but I am not cruel. If you had thrown your fork at him, he would have deserved it."

"I did not say he didn't deserve it."

Alistir chuckled and gave her shoulders a squeeze before glancing down at her bodice. "That dress is...quite revealing. He may have thought you meant to suffocate me in my sleep..."

She turned to slap playfully at him, and impulsively he kissed her. He stilled, realizing what he'd done, but her lips parted. His hands

grasped her waist and he kissed her hard, tongue thrusting into her mouth, tasting her. Her mouth set him on fire when she responded and her hands slid over his shoulders to pull at him. When she moaned into his mouth, his cock hardened.

"The children are waiting." Claire's voice sliced the air like a sword.

He growled, tearing his lips from Danielle's. "They can wait." He glared across the room at Claire.

"No...I promised them," Danielle whispered but didn't release him. He looked down at her, at her glistening lips, swollen from his assault. Her body trembled in his arms. She released him abruptly and he allowed her to step back from his embrace. He didn't move as he watched her walk unsteadily around the table to join Claire.

Danielle looked back and offered a little smile. "Thank you for what you said about me." She turned and quickly moved through the door.

Claire said nothing until they reached the top of the stairs. "He looked ready to devour you."

"He didn't eat much of his meal." Danielle glanced back at the woman to find her eyes narrowed. "It's the dress." The woman's gaze dropped to the outfit momentarily.

"You looked ready to devour him. He isn't wearing a dress." Claire put her hands on her hips, her expression unchanging even when Danielle laughed.

"I was not expecting him to kiss me like that. I forgot myself." Danielle started for the children's room.

"Will you forget yourself after everyone leaves and he comes looking for you to finish what was begun?" Claire asked. When Danielle looked back, she was surprised to see a hint of a smile on those thin lips. "He *will* come looking for you."

Danielle stared at her. She'd expected the woman to scowl at her, to accuse her as Alistir's brother had. She didn't expect that little smile to widen a bit.

"And if he does?" Danielle waited.

Claire snorted. "If you don't know what will happen, then you are a naïve little twit." She turned and headed back down the stairs.

Danielle watched her until she'd disappeared, not knowing exactly what to make of the woman's odd behavior. She pushed it from her mind and stepped into the children's room. An hour later, after the children were asleep, she made her way back downstairs, smiling at a few of the guests who mingled outside of the study talking. She decided quickly that she would not join them, truthfully not wanting to face Charles again.

Instead she made her way back to the kitchen where she found Joseph, the cook, washing the dishes. "Here, allow me to help you." She started forward, but he shook his head and waved his hand so he could continue his work.

"The meal was wonderful. The guests enjoyed every bite," Danielle said after a moment and saw the little smile her compliment brought. He was a big man but quiet. She noticed he didn't say much unless she asked him a question directly.

"Some think I mean to take advantage of Mr. Driscoll." She waited, but he didn't look up. "I can't imagine anyone taking advantage of him." She sat down at the small table in the kitchen.

"Do you see any wrong with wanting a stable home?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, missus."

"Me either. It's a practical solution for many people." She rested her elbows on the table. "And I've grown very fond of the children. They are fond of me as well." Joseph nodded in response. She sat there in silence, looking out the window at the night until the door of the kitchen flew open.

When Alistir entered and his gaze settled on her, she stood. "The guests are gone. They finally departed when they realized you would not be joining them."

Danielle winced. "I know I should have, but I just didn't feel I had the energy."

His gaze narrowed. "Are you ill?"

"No, no, I just mean I'm not well suited to play hostess to that many people." She offered an apologetic smile. "Your brother and his wife

have retired?"

"They have." He stalked forward, and she realized suddenly his hair was unbound and his vest unbuttoned. She recalled Claire's words. He'd been looking for her. Heat coiled in her stomach as his gaze raked over her.

"Joseph allowed me to come here for quiet, though I fear I might have chattered so much that he wished to drown me." She took a step backward, noticing that Joseph had turned and was watching them. "He wouldn't allow me to help him with his work..."

"I should hope not, after paying so much for that dress." He stopped directly in front of her.

Her lips twisted. "*I* didn't pay for it, sir. You did."

"Then I suppose it is debt you should repay." He placed his fingertips atop the table's surface.

"Don't be absurd. I haven't enough to pay you back for this dress! If it were left to me I would have chosen one much simpler. One that didn't..." She stopped when he leaned his hip against the edge of the table, his gaze locked with hers.

"I don't want your money, Danielle."

Her stomach clenched. "*What do* you want?"

He didn't look away from her. "You are dismissed, Joseph. Leave us."

Danielle's heart pounded as Joseph, without a word, left them there alone. She waited, breath held, for Alistir to speak. Instead he retrieved one of Joseph's large wooden spoons from its peg on the wall. Danielle's eyes widened when he slanted a glance in her direction.

Tapping the flat side of the spoon surface against his palm, he walked back to the table. Her breath hitched as she recalled the feel of his hand when he'd slapped his fingers against her cunt. Would he do the same with the spoon he held? Each time it tapped against his palm, her heartbeat quickened.

"I thought we were only going to do this in your study. That was our agreement." Her hands trembled, so she clasped them together.

"That was before you left me there to entertain all those people

without you." His quiet baritone voice sent hot shivers down her spine. "Before you made me search this entire house for you."

"I did not *make* you do anything." She looked at the spoon when it slapped against his palm. "You mean to punish me now? For something I didn't truly do? You wouldn't..."

"I warned you once about telling me what I would or wouldn't do," he purred as he stepped around her. "I would do anything I please in my own home." His breath rushed against the left side of her neck, and she swayed back into him.

"Eva said the dress would drive you wild," Danielle whispered.

"It would drive me even wilder if it were discarded in the corner." His hand snaked around her waist to her stomach, where his fingers splayed and pulled her flush against him. Her skin burned beneath the material of the bodice. The fit had been perfect, but it suddenly felt too small.

"I don't know how it is you don't have more wives, Alistir. To make a woman feel like this..."

"You would marry for sex?" That breath caressed her ear and she closed her eyes.

"For this I would have married and not asked for an allowance."

His chuckle was deep, vibrating against her skin when he bowed his head and pressed his lips to her neck. "I think you would renegotiate upon the morning."

"Perhaps." She sucked in her breath when his tongue touched her skin.

"You enjoy the anticipation, the torment," he murmured.

Danielle shook her head. "It is not the torment I crave. Well, not completely. It's you. I never had a man evoke such heat, so much desire. I feel as if I am shaking from it."

"Bend forward, across the table." He spoke next to her ear. "Spread your legs for me."

Her hands shook as she ran them across the surface of the table and bent over the edge. She slid her feet apart and waited. The back of her skirts lifted, then her shift, and the cool air of the kitchen washed over her

bare skin. His palm felt warm and circled the crescents of her ass, then dipped against her cunt.

She moaned when his fingers left her and a moment later his palm clapped the left side of her ass, then the right. When the smooth wooden face of the spoon ran across her thigh, her breath deepened. Excitement burned through her veins and when that wooden surface snapped against her cunt, the sting made her shake. Again and she cried out.

"Do you want me to stop?" He didn't even sound like himself.

"For the love of God, no," she rasped.

The third pop made her knees weaken. For a moment there was nothing. Hot breath whispered against her cunt and sent its heat rushing through her entire body. When his tongue flicked against her throbbing clit, she could take no more. She straightened and turned to face him. His cheeks were flushed, his lids heavy, nose flaring with each breath. Her gaze dropped and found his cock pressing out against his clothes.

"More?" He arched a brow when she looked back at his face.

She closed the distance between them, shoving her hands into his hair to jerk him forward. When she kissed him, she thrust her tongue against his and he groaned. The spoon clattered as it hit the floor, and a moment later his hands grasped her hips. He hauled her backward and lifted her to the table, crawling atop it with her. He jerked the bodice lower so her breasts spilled out and leaned forward, opening his mouth wide for one pink tip. He sucked fiercely, causing her to arch upward while his free hand pushed up her skirts. Long fingers delved into her.

Desperately, she pushed his vest over his shoulders then pulled at his shirt until he released her, leaned back and tugged the garment over his head. The dark hair of his chest tickled her nipples when he leaned forward again, and he slid a hand beneath her to lift her up as he dropped his lips to her throat.

Danielle grasped his shoulders and held on to him while it seemed the world spun around her. "Please, Alistir, please. I ache." His head lifted and those brown eyes darkened. Releasing her back to the table, he shoved her skirts up to her waist. He freed himself from his trousers and settled between her thighs.

She lifted her hips and reached for his shoulders. He pushed and then thrust his full length into her, groaning as he stilled momentarily. She felt full and hot, trembling with need. She pulled at his shoulders until he was close enough, then leaned up to kiss him. He didn't let her kiss him as she'd done before, rather claimed her mouth as he rocked back and then thrust into her again, causing her to cry out against his mouth. And then he slowed, torturing her with lazy strokes. He released her mouth and leaned forward to speak right next to her ear, his hair sliding forward across her face.

"Give, Danielle." His voice brought on a new wave of arousal, and she jerked up to meet his movements in response. "I want to feel your body tighten around me, to pull at me." His fingers slid between them to pluck at her hardened nipples.

"Please, I can't stand it," Danielle whispered. It felt like madness threatening her whole body. He had to know that his voice only intensified the sensations trembling through her.

His lips brushed against her ear. "Give me what is mine." His thrusts quickened, became more deliberate, as if he knew he was bringing her closer and closer to rapture. "Do it for me, love." She arched as pleasure exploded and engulfed her entirely. Her whole body shook, and she felt control leave her completely. His breath hissed through his teeth as her nails raked down his back. It was too much. She thrashed beneath him, unable to still her body, aware that she was screaming his name but unable to stop herself. He rode her until the last wave of pleasure subsided and then pulled from within her. His hands pushed her knees apart, and he lowered to lick at her clit.

"Alistir, no, it's too much." Every nerve in her body felt as if it were alive, and that slight movement of his tongue brought her hips jerking upward.

"It's never too much." His lips closed over her sensitive nub and he sucked fiercely. Her entire body bucked, and she grasped the edges of the table on either side until he released her from his demanding mouth.

She fought to catch her breath as he settled again between her thighs. He kissed her lips softly and she felt him still hard against her.

"I won't be gentle now," he whispered and then pushed back into her. He rode her hard, arms taut on the table on either side of her. He'd given her pleasure first, and now he was mad with his own need. She lifted her hips, helping him.

"Come into me, Alistir," she coaxed, hoping her words had the same effect on him as his had on her. "Take what is yours." It sounded like a half growl, half moan and he straightened, grasping her hips to lift them to his relentless assault.

"Mine," he gritted from between his teeth, his gaze locked with hers.

"Yours," she repeated, and he threw his head back and shouted as he released into her, his hips thrusting as if unable to stop. Then he fell forward, his hands releasing her to slap against the table's surface again, holding his weight off of her.

"Mother of God," he spoke between labored breaths. Danielle reached up and pushed his hair back from his face, held it back as he stared down at her. He stayed like that for several minutes then pulled from within her. Danielle pushed herself up once he'd slid from the table to stand next to it, adjusting his trousers.

She pushed her skirts down and adjusted her bodice so that her breasts were again concealed behind the silken material. "My hair no doubt is a mess." He looked up at her, then her hair, and grinned.

"I like it better down anyway."

She reached up and removed the pins so that what was left atop her head tumbled down around her shoulders. "As I do yours." Her gaze rose to his chest. She'd not seen him shirtless before. "May I touch you?"

He stepped toward her as she scooted forward so that her legs dangled over the edge of the table. When she reached out, he parted her knees with gentle hands and stepped between them.

"You are beautiful," she whispered as she ran her hands over his chest and stomach. "Perfect."

"I shouldn't have taken you here like I did. On a table."

She looked up and found him frowning. "I don't think I minded." His frown disappeared, and a moment later a grin slanted across his lips.

"No, I imagine you didn't." He tilted his head. "There is just one thing though."

"Really? What thing is that?"

"This dress." His fingers played along the lace, knuckles grazing her collarbone.

"What about it?"

"You are still wearing it." He smiled when she laughed. "I meant to get you out of it." She laughed again, and he lifted his hand to run his palm across her cheek. When he leaned forward, his lips brushed gently over hers. He kissed her slowly, tenderly, until she was breathless.

"That's nice."

"I *can* be gentle," he spoke when he leaned away. "It's just difficult to do when you start grabbing me and begging me to climb on top of you."

"I did not beg," she defended and then laughed at the look he gave her. "Well, maybe I did a little. I recall you saying something about your liking a begging woman."

He chuckled and leaned forward to lick at her bottom lip, but Danielle's attention was drawn to the sound of footsteps. "Someone's coming."

"I don't care." He lifted his hand to her breast and squeezed gently, and for a moment, she didn't either. His mouth teased at hers, coaxed her lips to part so he could kiss her again, this time deeply.

The door opened and he still didn't release her. However, when the gasp sounded, he pulled away. Danielle felt heat in her cheeks at the look on Eva's face. It grew hotter when the woman's gaze darted to the table and then back to Alistir as he stepped from between Danielle's knees. He bent down and retrieved his shirt and vest, then lifted Danielle from the table to set her on her feet.

"I...I'm sorry...I didn't know anyone was in here...I was hungry..." Eva found her voice and stammered over her words.

"We were just about to retire for the night." Alistir reached back and took Danielle's hand. Eva hurried out of the way so Alistir could lead Danielle from the kitchen.

“Don’t use the spoon,” Danielle whispered as she passed and followed Alistir’s laughter from the room.

Chapter Five

"She's here." Alistir stood when he heard the women return with the children, and called out from the study. "Danielle, come and bring the children." The children rushed forward and into the room, then bounded across it to embrace their guest. Danielle halted however at the doorway, her face going pale. As Eva smiled and swept past Danielle to greet him as well, Alistir followed Danielle when she stepped backwards into the hall.

"Why is he here?"

Alistir stared at her. "I invited him."

"Why?"

He laughed. "He's only been my best friend since we were boys."

"Oh God, Alistir," she whispered, and her hand shook when she lifted it to her mouth. "I told you I was with a man before...that I was no virgin. He'd approached me on the street. I wasn't a prostitute, but he propositioned me with enough money that it could keep me off of the streets."

Alistir stared at her, a knot tightening in his gut. "You took money for sex?"

"I would have been out on the streets. It only lasted a couple of weeks before I met Charlotte Oberman." She looked for the first time since he'd met her like she might start weeping.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Your friend was the man."

Alistir glanced back at the door and then took a step toward her,

lowering his voice. "Kiefer?" He couldn't explain the intense emotion that forced its way through him.

"Keifer McDowell. He's a lawyer like you. His mother lives in Cornwall," Danielle supplied, and when he didn't say anything, she continued. "He has a scar on the inside of his thigh. He got it when he was a boy..."

"When I pushed him out of a tree," Alistir finished. "Hell. He will know that you were not at any party where I could have met you." Alistir steeled himself against his irrational emotions.

"He would not. He never knew where or how I lived. He'd approached me on the street and made the offer. I wouldn't have even considered doing it had he not. Most never guessed my financial situation. I don't even know if he truly thought I was a prostitute. He didn't treat me as if I was, and we always met in a room he acquired for us."

"Enough. We'll talk about this later. I have to introduce you as my wife and hope that Keifer can keep his mouth shut in front of my brother." He glanced down at her and slid a hand along her back. "Chin up, love."

She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders, taking a deep breath. It wouldn't be easy for her, he knew, and he wished he could save her from her shame. Another part of him, a darker part, hoped she was so shamed she felt ill.

He pushed open the door and led her inside. "Kiefer, this is my wife, Danielle. Danielle, my longtime friend, Keifer McDowell." He saw the recognition sweep over Kiefer's face, and Alistir's chest tightened. It wasn't jealousy. Hell, he'd been with half the women in Boston himself. It was something worse. Possessiveness. Sliding his hand from her back around to her waist, he pulled her to his side.

"It is a pleasure, Mr. McDowell," Danielle greeted.

"Kiefer will be staying here, and Charles and Eva have decided to extend their stay because of his visit. Claire's had the sitting room made adequate for him to use as his room here," Alistir told her, noting Kiefer's gaze darting back to Danielle as well before he turned his attention to the children.

"They are growing up so quickly, Al." He tousled Gabriel's hair.

"And this one looks just like you."

"Eva and I took them to a café today," Danielle spoke. "I felt certain there would be no food left in the place for anyone else. One would have thought we never feed them."

"Dani let me have cake too," Gabriel piped. "And we sang songs with Aunt Eva. And we saw a man that Aunt Eva said was walking sin."

Alistir looked down at Danielle when she turned her head, attempting not to laugh. "And what did Dani think of him?" Her gaze darted up to meet his.

"She thought his nose was too big," Gabriel answered.

"You would not use the children to spy on me."

He breathed out a breath. "There you go again, telling me what I would or would not do. I believe I've warned you of doing that, wife."

Her cheeks flushed and she looked away. "They've had a full day and should take their naps." He nodded and allowed his arm to slip from around her. They instantly went to her, and she bent down to scoop Gabriel up and let the girls follow her from the room.

"Walking sin?" Charles spoke once the children were gone. "Have we not enough sin in our household that you must prowl about Boston seeking more?"

"Charles!" Eva whispered and shook her head. "I won't stay here and allow you to pry. Instead I'll help Danielle with the children. It is good to see you, Kiefer. And Alistir, any more houseguests, you and Danielle may run out of rooms."

Alistir grinned at her slight jab at catching them in the kitchen the night before. She swept past him and through the door, calling out for Danielle.

"She's very pretty, Al," Kiefer said, and Alistir moved quickly to pour himself a drink. He didn't want to hear how pretty Kiefer thought his wife was.

"But then you always did have a weakness for the pretty ones." Kiefer accepted the drink Alistir held out for him, but Charles shook his head. "Is she good with the children?"

"They adore her." Alistir lifted his drink to his lips and took several

long swallows.

"Not as much as my brother does, apparently," Charles added. "He can barely keep his hands away from her."

Alistir didn't miss that momentary flicker of emotion on Kiefer's face. "No more than she can resist placing hers on me."

"She sounds perfect." Kiefer's smile didn't reach his eyes.

"No, she sounds like a wailing banshee," Charles argued, and Alistir slanted his gaze at his brother.

"Jealous?"

Charles shrugged. "I would be if I didn't suspect..."

"She's not after my wealth," Alistir interrupted. "And I'll thank you for not starting that argument once again. She's the least expensive woman I've ever met. And if you aren't completely, you well should be jealous, brother. And so would have been your wife had she been but a few minutes earlier when she walked in on us."

Charles' face broke with a grin. "Marriage has made you cocky."

"You said you met her at a party?" Kiefer asked.

"Yes. We danced and I was seduced by her when she walked away," Alistir said, and his brother laughed. "So I followed her."

"Like a mongrel on the scent." Charles shook his head and then cleared his throat, nodding toward the door as it opened. Danielle appeared.

"The children are down for their naps, and Claire will tend to them when they wake. Have you need of anything from the market? I thought to go with Joseph and lend him a hand in planning the meal for this evening."

"Nothing comes to mind." He held a hand out, and she hesitated before stepping into the study. "Do you need money for a new dress for this evening, or do you mean to torture me with that green velvet again?"

"You needn't buy anything new. I do have my own wardrobe..."

"Yes, I've seen it. It's pitiful." Alistir retrieved a purse from his desk and held it out for her. "Something with a little less material around the bottom than the green one."

"It is ridiculous to expect me to buy a dress for every dinner we

have." She put her hands on her hips. "And my own clothes are appropriate. You did not behave as if I were dressed so pitifully before, or even as if you cared of such things. Now you would have me shoved into something with enough lace I could strangle myself with it."

"Is that what I would do?" Alistir reached forward and grasped her hand, placing the purse in her palm and closing her fingers around it. "Buy a damned dress."

"I should buy the ugliest thing I can find," she snapped and started to pull away, but his hand closed over hers so that she looked back at him.

"No kiss before you leave?"

Her gaze darted to Kiefer, then slid to Charles before resting on Alistir. She stepped forward and pressed her lips to his cheek. He winced. He knew she was uncomfortable. He released her hand and watched her turn and leave the room.

"She seems a little too tame for you," Kiefer spoke once she was gone.

"Perhaps I've grown tame myself after so many years of living alone." He retrieved his drink and took a swallow. "I find she suits me."

"Why would you push money at her when she declined buying a new dress?" Charles asked.

"Because I like looking at her, Charles," Alistir snapped. "Why does your wife wear sleeping shifts that a man can very nearly see through? Because that's what you want her to wear. I very nearly ravished mine last night because I liked how she looked dressed as she was."

Charles seemed unaffected by Alistir's outburst. "I'd have mine wear nothing at all if the truth be known."

Kiefer chuckled. "Tell me that and I may try to steal her from you to keep for myself."

"You've been threatening that for years, and you see she is rooted right where she is." Charles grinned.

"Only because I fear if you lost her you wouldn't find another to put up with you," Kiefer jabbed, and Charles laughed.

"That may be true, though now with my brother out of the hunt, I may have a fighting chance."

Kiefer nodded. "Al was always the ladies' first pick."

"Could charm the underpants off of a nun," Charles agreed. "And most likely has more than once."

"I have never and would not." Alistir sat in a chair. "I've never met one pretty enough to try."

"How easy did Danielle's come off?" Kiefer asked and Alistir looked down at his drink, trying to stifle the gnawing tension that made him want to strike his friend. "Poor chit probably hadn't a chance. A poem and something shiny that you compared to her eyes, perhaps?"

"I did not seduce her at all." Alistir stretched his legs forward.

"Come now. A woman like that?" Kiefer laughed.

"Like what?"

Kiefer shrugged. "I must concur with your brother on this, Al. She does seem like the type who would want something in return. She doesn't strike me as one who would just throw herself at a man."

Alistir gripped the arm of the chair with his free hand. "Rather you think her someone you might find on the street. A couple of coins and lure her back to a room?" He met Kiefer's gaze, saw the wince and realization of what Alistir was referring to.

"Well now, I wouldn't go so far as to describe her in that manner," Charles interjected.

"Nor would I." Alistir released the arm of the chair, forcing himself to calm. "The truth is that I told her what I wanted and she found it was what she wanted as well"

"And what's that?" Kiefer asked.

Alistir forced a laugh. "Just what do you think?"

"To dress her up and molest her on the dining room table?" Charles quipped.

"Exactly."

Three hours later, as he sat at the dining table, his brother's poke at him seemed a rational thought. The dress was all silk, cream and roses that dipped slightly off of her shoulders, the bodice fringed in white lace. It did not fit as tightly as the other had and covered more of her breasts, but still she looked enchanting. He liked her hair styled away from her

face and down her back.

His gaze dropped to her plate where she pushed her food around, and then he leaned toward her. "You are not eating."

"No need for concern," she whispered.

"I shall be concerned if you grow too thin. You have certain attributes that I would prefer remain as they are."

Her gaze darted up at him, and pink crept into her cheeks. "How can you say such things when"—her gaze swept the table, but Charles, Eva, and Kiefer were engaged in conversations about the new horses Kiefer was buying—"I have shamed and embarrassed you."

Alistir watched her look down at her plate. She looked as if she were suffocating in guilt. He reached out and took her hand, bringing her knuckles to his lips.

"You would not think such things if you knew what I was really thinking." He watched her gaze rise to meet his.

"And what are you really thinking?"

"How I'd like to crawl inside that dress with you." Alistir glanced up when Kiefer sputtered and reached for his wine. Eva's reddened cheeks told him they'd heard what he'd said.

"Alistir." Danielle's lashes lowered.

"It's a very pretty dress."

"A very pretty impractical dress," she amended.

"It pleases me."

She rolled her eyes. "I shouldn't give a wit if it pleases you or not."

"Shouldn't you? I care if you are pleased." He grinned when she kicked him under the table. "I go to great lengths to make certain that you are."

Her gaze darted to the others, who pretended they were distracted by one another. "Stop it, Alistir."

"Then eat, or I shall begin describing exactly what I might do to make certain you go to sleep tonight pleased with me." His gaze dropped to her lips when they parted. It wasn't the dress. It was her. Her reaction to him made him wild for her.

"You wouldn't do such a thing."

"Wouldn't I?" He set his napkin aside and stood, stepping around the table behind her. When he bent forward he heard her breath catch. His lips to her ear, speaking only in a whisper where only she could hear, he rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Make no mistake, Danielle, that if I choose not to do something it is to spare you the embarrassment I'm certain you would feel. If it were not for that alone, I would do whatever it was in my head to do to you with no regard for witnesses. And everyone at this table knows that as the truth of me."

He let his lips graze her ear. "Now about how I will please you tonight..."

"Please don't, Alistir," Danielle murmured. "I don't think I could stand it."

Eva came to Danielle's defense. "Alistir, you are as much of a brute as your brother. Sit down and let the woman eat her meal in peace."

"Would that please you, love?"

Danielle licked her lips and nodded. "Yes, please."

"It's a beautiful dress." Then he straightened and returned to his chair. "Now eat."

She jabbed the meat with her fork and shoved it into her mouth. She chewed angrily, refusing to look at him, and he grinned.

"And that's not seducing her?" Kiefer asked, causing them both to look up.

"Danielle, please tell this man that I did not seduce you into my bed," Alistir growled. "He seems obsessed about it."

"I just know you, Al, and your ways."

Danielle finished chewing and swallowed. "I should not like to discuss such intimacies with so many present."

"Do you want me to leave?" Alistir asked and saw the slight smile in the corner of her lips.

"You have about as much knowledge of seducing a woman as a cur dog in the street," Danielle growled, and Charles and Eva both laughed aloud.

"Would you like me to seduce you, Danielle? I'm quite certain that

I could change your mind about me." Alistir watched her slant her gaze at him.

She shook her head and finally looked at Kiefer. "He did not seduce me. If he had I might have had the sense to run away from him."

Eva laughed again. "He is a good man beneath all of that."

"She means beneath my clothes, otherwise she wouldn't be traipsing half naked around my home trying to sneak a peek at me." Alistir grinned when Eva gasped.

"You didn't miss anything of importance, my sweet," Charles added.

"Oh! Don't you start as well!" Eva slapped at her husband's shoulder.

"Eva and I did notice a gentleman at the market today." Danielle took another bite of meat and chewed slowly, not continuing until she'd swallowed. "He was very handsome and because he was well groomed, I asked him which of the two dresses I was looking at he preferred."

Alistir reached for his wine. "I should thank him for his choice."

"Indeed. He made me try them both on and walk around in front of him before he decided. I thought it very considerate of him to take so much time. He even felt of the materials to determine which was the finer of the two." She wasn't looking at him.

"You didn't find that awkward?"

"Only when he wasn't certain about the undergarments I'd chosen and thought they needed closer inspection."

Eva's hand covered her mouth as a gasp and then an abrupt laugh spilled from her lips. Alistir stared at Danielle, a grin pulling at his lips. She'd done it again, this time succeeding in turning the tables on him. When he glanced at the others, Kiefer laughed into his napkin while Charles just stared at Danielle.

"I found him quite helpful," Danielle added, and Eva turned her head. "Shall we take our drinks to the study?" She stood, but Alistir grasped her hand.

"The rest of you go. We'll meet you there in a few moments." The three filed out, leaving them alone. "Please sit, Danielle." She eased back

into her chair as he released her hand.

"You are angry with me for my jests..." she began, but he shook his head.

Alistir reached into his pocket to retrieve the letter he'd received early in the day. "This is the third letter I've been sent in two months, and I'd not told you before because I thought this business was settled. But as it is not, I feel you should know the details." He thrust it toward her.

He waited while she unfolded the letter and read over it quickly. "This is not true." It was not a question, and he breathed out heavily.

"No, it is not."

"Have you even met his daughter?" She set the letter to the table.

"Yes. We shared an exchange, but nothing that would make her with child." He looked up at her guiltily. "My particular tastes...."

"I see," she interrupted. "How old is she?"

"Eighteen."

"Have you spoken with her about her father's accusations?"

"I tried to when I received the first letter, but her father refused to let me speak to her," Alistir admitted. "So you see, Danielle, we both have things in our pasts to deal with. You have no reason to be embarrassed or feel that I would be embarrassed by yours with Keifer."

She stared at him. "I appreciate that." She looked down at her hands. "What will you do? He could try to ruin your reputation with this."

"I'm attempting to handle it discreetly." Alistir reached for his wine. "I will send a letter back to him in the morning."

"Do not. Wait until your brother takes his leave. Enjoy his visit and face this ugliness once he is gone." She stood as he rose. "If he receives your message before Charles leaves, it may prove an ugly scene that you would rather Charles not witness."

Alistir nodded in agreement. "Thank you for not doubting me." He glanced at the door. "We should join them before my brother accuses me of using this table as a bed." He started to move toward the door, but she touched his arm and stepped closer.

"It does not matter to you, but it matters to me that you know

that—while he was pleasant and never cruel—I never enjoyed Kiefer as I do you.” She was right. It shouldn’t matter to him, but her words eased the tension that had tightened in his chest.

He ran a hand around her waist, then slid his fingers down to her hip to give her a squeeze. “You are a very poor liar.”

Her eyes widened. “I am not lying! No one has ever made me feel as you do.”

“I do not doubt that, love, but still you are a liar. You aren’t wearing undergarments.” He grinned when she slapped at his shoulder.

“You had to grope at me to make certain? Otherwise you might have believed I allowed a stranger...”

“I can’t be sure. You’ve taken up with two of the men sleeping in my household tonight. I suppose I just wanted to be certain.”

“Oh, you!” She balled her fist and punched his shoulder, causing him to laugh. “At least the men I’ve lain with are of adult age.” Alistir swatted her ass as she darted past him to the door.

That evening, after everyone had retired and Alistir had looked in on his children, he returned to his study. When he opened the door, he stopped.

Danielle sat on the settee completely nude. Across the room, she’d discarded the dress. She stood slowly and let her hands fall to her sides. His body hardened as he stepped forward and pulled the door closed behind him.

* * * * *

“You never screamed my name so desperately.”

Danielle looked up from the vegetables she was chopping. With Alistir away from home that morning and Charles and Eva riding about town, she’d decided to make herself useful in the kitchen.

Her gaze darted to Joseph, but he didn’t even acknowledge Kiefer’s presence. “I’m certain I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, let us not pretend that you weren’t wailing like a banshee last night in Alistir’s study.” Kiefer laughed as he entered the kitchen and

swiped one of the carrots she was slicing. "I never remembered you being so vocal."

"What do you want, Kiefer?" She finally put the knife down and looked at him.

"I want to know why you left me in that hotel room waiting for you?" He leaned an elbow on the counter. "What changed? You were there the week before. The week before that. Suddenly, nothing."

"My situation changed." She glanced at Joseph, but he still didn't look up from preparing the meat for stew. "And do not make it seem as if we had some special relationship, Kiefer. We both knew what it was. You are just angry that I ended it before you did."

"I'm not angry. I'm jealous as hell." He leaned closer. "What does he do to make you scream like that?"

"I will not discuss my relationship with Alistir with you, and I will thank you not to bring it up again," she snapped and scooped up the carrots to drop them into the large cooking pot.

"Charles believes you're after his money."

She whirled to face him, swiping up the chopping knife and pointing it at him. "I am after no such thing!"

"No? You took mine."

He didn't move when she closed the distance between them. "My parents had passed away, you accusing bastard. I didn't know what else to do. *You* approached me."

"And I suppose I was the only one fucking inside that room a few minutes later." His gaze dropped to the knife where her fingers worked around the handle. "I'm surprised you would tell Alistir about us. Did he tell you that he's gotten another woman with child?"

"Get out of here before I cut out your heart." She turned her back, blood pounding through her. "You know those are false allegations."

"He's always had an appetite, you know."

"Do not tell me of my own husband's appetites. I'm fully aware of them. And we've been honest with one another about our pasts." She looked at Joseph when he finally lifted his gaze but didn't find it filled with judgment as she expected. He merely glanced between the two

before returning to his work.

"And does he know your appetites too?" Kiefer drawled. "Does he know that you if he licks right between your shoulder blades, you become undone?"

"How can you be so despicable?" Danielle felt like assaulting him, driving the blade into his gut and twisting it. "I meant nothing to you, Kiefer."

"Because you say your situation changed, and suddenly you are married to a successful man who happens to be my best friend. I'd hate to see you take his money and leave him waiting one night in his study. I also wouldn't want him to feel he couldn't take care of any responsibilities he has because you've trapped him for however long until you desert him." Kiefer slammed his hand atop the counter. "And you meant something just as you now mean something to him."

Joseph finally spoke as he dropped pieces of beef into the pot atop the vegetables. "Mr. Driscoll wanted to marry the lady. They are a good match. The babies love her, and she does well by them." He lifted his gaze as Claire entered the kitchen, then fell silent.

"Well, you sound like a great wife," Kiefer said sarcastically. "You know that's what every man looks for: a woman whom everyone in town has seen naked."

Danielle moved without thinking, and her palm cracked against Kiefer's cheek, leaving it reddened. "How dare you say these things to me? You've no right to pass judgment on me."

He reached out and grasped her arm, jerking her forward. "I have *every* right! I paid for you. You were *mine*."

"Mr. McDowell, if I were you, I would unhand Mrs. Driscoll. Joseph here has a ridiculous soft spot for her, and I believe he might break off the hand you've placed upon her," Claire warned from behind them.

"Are you fucking the cook too?"

Danielle slapped him again, as hard as she could, and he shoved her away from him. Tears stung her eyes and she fought to blink them away.

"You are using him just like you used me, Danielle. I won't stand

by and let you do that. You don't have any more feelings for him than you did for me that day you left me in that room alone."

"That's not true." Danielle hated herself when the tears began to fall. "I have never felt about a man the way I feel about Alistir." She turned her head and held her fist to her mouth to attempt to stifle her sobs.

"That's because he has more money than others." His words cut into her when she knew she shouldn't let them. He turned on his heel and strode from the kitchen. Danielle sank to her knees as she lost her fight against crying. She was barely aware of the fingers that slid around her shoulders until Claire spoke.

"I've known the man a long time. He's just jealous as men do become when it comes to women. There isn't any sense in sitting in the floor crying over it."

Danielle stood when Claire urged her to. "I was alone and hungry. I wasn't a prostitute, but he seemed so kind. And the money he gave me kept me out of the streets. I hated myself for it and as soon as I could, I got away from him. Charlotte took me in, she gave me a place to live where I was useful and..."

"It can be hard on a woman alone in the world." Claire's voice softened, causing Danielle to look up at her. "But you don't get anywhere if you don't pick yourself up and shake yourself clean."

"Why are you being so nice to me? You don't even like me." Danielle stared at the woman.

"Because Joseph looks like he's about to burst into tears himself, and what am I to do with two of you blubbering about?" Claire began straightening Danielle's skirts. "Besides, Mr. Driscoll has enough worries right now without fretting over his wife and Kiefer McDowell."

"What if Kiefer says something to Charles?" Danielle's stomach knotted.

"He won't. He may be jealous and stupid right now, but he loves Alistir and wouldn't do that to him," Claire assured her. "If you love him half as much as Kiefer does, this will pass."

"Love?" Danielle stared at the woman.

Claire slanted her gaze at Joseph momentarily. "Did I say love? I don't know what I must have been thinking."

But she had said love. And it felt as if Danielle had been kicked in the stomach. Did she love Alistir? Could someone fall in love with another person so quickly? She thought of his glittering brown eyes, his teasing smile, of how they laughed together. That knot in her stomach tightened. Dear God.

"While you stand there and realize the truth the rest of us can already see, why don't you get back to chopping those vegetables." Claire gave her a little push towards the counter. "I have linens to wash."

Danielle took up the knife and began working mechanically, then stopped. "I love Alistir Driscoll." As soon as the words were out, it felt as if something inside of her lifted. She *did* love him. Behind her Joseph just grunted in response.

Chapter Six

"My name is John Lyle. I want to speak with Alistir Driscoll."

Alistir's entire body stiffened and he rose from behind his desk. Thankfully, Charles and Kiefer hadn't returned from their ride. Eva was upstairs with the children. But the visit was unexpected.

"Thank you, Claire. Will you see that Joseph remembers to buy more flour today?" Danielle's voice caused him to halt just inside the doorway of his office. "Hello, Mr. Lyle. I'm afraid my husband is unavailable for meeting today."

"I think he'll want to see me, missus."

"Forgive me, sir, but I believe you are mistaken. And even if he did, you would not be welcome in my home to do so."

For a moment Lyle said nothing. "Then you know what he's done to my daughter."

"I know what you accuse him of," she amended. "And I understand you are looking for someone to blame. If I were you, sir, rather than wasting my time traipsing across Boston to avoid facing the truth of your daughter's nature, I might consider sitting down with her and discovering the truth."

"You don't mean to insinuate..." Lyle sputtered.

"Not insinuate, Mr. Lyle. I'm outright saying that while your daughter might have had some kind of physical interaction with my husband, he did not get her with child. And unless this is some unheard of case of Immaculate Conception, I would come to the conclusion that

she has a lover. I would expect a man at your age to understand this kind of reasoning."

"My daughter does not lie. She told me..."

"Yes, she does not lie. I'm certain that she does not lay with men either." She spoke with sarcasm so thick it could have smothered a man.

"Step aside, woman. He is gonna pay for what he's done. Do you understand that? You don't know..." The man raised his voice.

"I can know that, sir. My husband has great control when it comes to his appetites. He is not some fumbling youth who acts upon impulse. And I also know that if he had been responsible for her present condition, he would have married her rather than myself upon hearing the news. And I did learn of this situation only two days ago, but I did have our driver take me to your home yesterday morning so that I could speak with your daughter myself, at which time she admitted that it was not my husband at all but the young man who tends your horses that got her with child."

Alistir stepped forward to stare at the back of Danielle's head. She'd gone to the man's home?

"I also learned that you, sir, know the truth but because the boy has no money, dismissed him from your service, despite their affection for one another, and have targeted my husband because of his bankroll rather than his guilt." She stood with her spine straight. "Furthermore, I had another attorney present during both confessions so they are duly documented, and I will take immediate action if you even so much as think about trying to blackmail my husband again."

When Lyle said nothing, she leaned forward slightly. "Do *you* understand me, Mr. Lyle? Have I made myself clear to *you*?"

Alistir stared as the man turned and descended down the steps, slamming the iron gate closed as he left the property. She stepped back and closed the door, resting her hands on the wood to take several breaths. She'd been as intimidating as a man. But now he saw what strength it truly took for her to be so.

"Remind me never to cross you," Alistir said softly, causing her to gasp as she turned.

"I'd hoped you would not know he came here," she said after a moment.

"So you could handle the affair yourself?"

"Yes." She nodded. "You are not angry, are you? I asked Keifer to go with me yesterday. He was more than happy once I explained what I meant to do."

"And when were you going to tell me you'd done so?"

"After your brother had left. I didn't want you burdened with this during his visit." She chewed at her bottom lip when he neared.

"Perhaps I don't like the idea of you and Kiefer doing anything together without my knowing about it." He raised a brow. "Especially not after I learn that he might be jealous and want more from you than I'd like you to give him."

Her face paled. "Joseph told you of that?"

"You may give him his orders, but I employ him—have done so for the last ten years." He watched her lower her lashes. She'd gone out of her way to save him from public ruin. Most women would not have. Most would have wilted when Lyle knocked on the door. She'd stood like an oak, took control of the situation, and cut the man to the quick.

He closed the distance between them, reached forward, and grasped her shoulders, bringing her against him. Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers. For a moment she didn't respond and then released a slow breath.

"You made me think you were angry with me." She tried to shove him but he held her firmly.

"Perhaps I should reprimand you." He dragged his lips to her jaw. "Meddling women need to be shown that there are repercussions for what they meddle in."

"And I should take a poker to your head for your ruse," she threatened, causing him to laugh.

"Consider it later. Right now, I want to kiss you." He captured her lips and kissed her deeply, until she moaned softly against his mouth. He only meant to kiss her and then let her go, but when she leaned into him, he released her shoulders and slipped his arms around her. She started

when he kneaded his fingers into her ass and ground against her.

"I have to go to the children," she whispered.

"They have Eva and the tutor," he argued, lowering his lips to her throat.

"Alistir, we agreed...."

"At least have a little consideration for those of us who have work to do." Claire's clipped tone caused him to groan as he straightened and faced the woman standing directly behind them.

"I would, except the linens are stripped from my bed, Claire, and have not been returned yet. I believe that was your doing."

She snorted as she turned and headed toward the kitchen. "As I understand it, you aren't particular about having linens, or a bed for that matter." The door swung closed behind her.

Alistir laughed, and then did so again when he found Danielle's face flushed deeply. "Don't let her know she embarrasses you. She'll walk all over you with it if you do."

"I shall go reprimand her now." Danielle started to duck around him, but he boxed her in by placing his hands on the door behind her on either side of her head.

"Are you running away from me?"

"I do not run away."

He chuckled. "No, you don't do that. You stand up and fight, bite back. Lyle looked like you had slapped him across the face with his own hat."

"And you have work to do." She put her hands on his chest as if to push him away but stilled. "I can't have you growing lazy so that the children and I are forced to live in the streets."

He softened his voice, leaned closer. "Can a man not enjoy his wife's kiss in his own home?" He dropped one hand to her hip and brought her against him.

"You are too greedy of a man to desire only a kiss. I grant you a kiss and suddenly my dress is across the foyer and Claire is picking wood splinters out of my back."

He laughed aloud. "I'm going to kiss you, Danielle Driscoll, with or

without your consent.”

“I thought force was not your nature.”

“Neither is loving a woman who accuses me of becoming lazy and believes me too ignorant to handle my own affairs. Yet here I stand, patiently waiting for the first opportunity I get to leap upon her.” He watched her pull away from him and stalked forward, one step for each one she retreated. “Don’t make me chase you, love. You know how that will end.”

“I did not say you were ignorant.” She backed toward the door of the study.

“Don’t change the subject. I *will* have that mouth.” He closed the distance when she suddenly halted.

“You said ‘love.’”

His arm snaked around her and pulled her flush against him while the other hand opened the door behind her. He walked her backward and then kicked the door closed behind him.

“But when I came here you said...”

“Yes, well that’s before you grabbed me in the gardens and invited all of Boston to watch. I believe you demanded that I kiss you then.” He pulled her forward, working the clasps of her dress. “Or maybe it was that night on the table when you said you were mine. Or perhaps watching you sink your claws into John Lyle made me realize that I’d loved you from the moment you set foot in my office.”

He kissed her cheek. “What difference does it matter how we got here?” He jerked her dress down over her shoulders. “But now that we are, will you kiss me?”

“Anywhere you wish.”

Author Bio

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, three spoiled dogs, and three crazy cats. She spends her time researching her genealogy, designing cover art, watching movies, and reading.

<http://www.sablegrey.net>