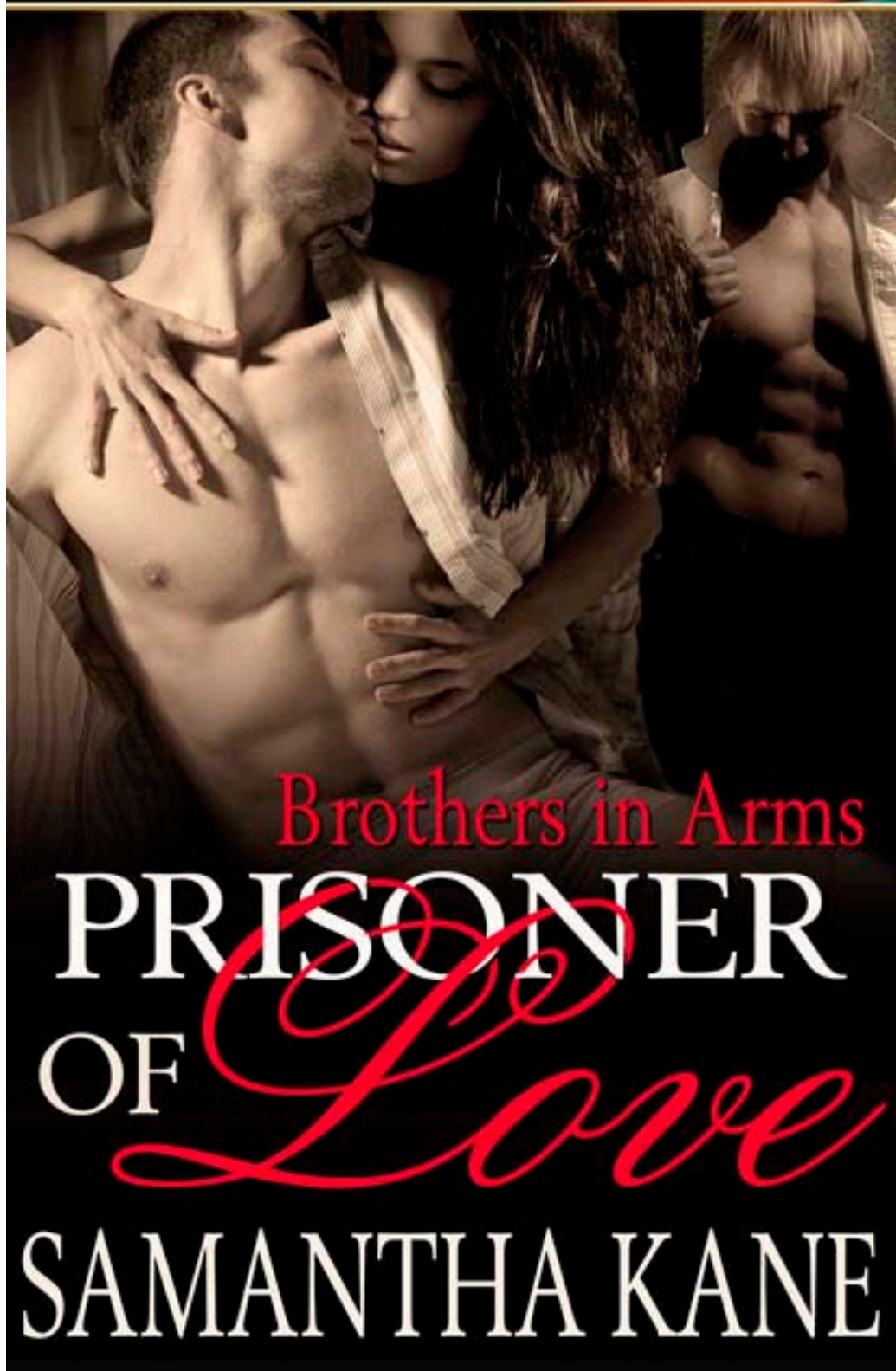


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Brothers in Arms

PRISONER
OF *Love*

SAMANTHA KANE

Prisoner of Love

Samantha Kane

Brothers in Arms, Book Eight

Veronica Thomas has been in love with two men since she was seventeen. One introduced her to passion. The other has shown her how to satisfy it. Now that she's older, she still wants them both. Wolf Tarrant was more than willing to share Very with his best friend and lover, Lord Michael Kensington. But two years ago, Michael ran from the unconventional relationship growing between the three of them.

When Michael returns from America, things have changed drastically for all of them. Rushing headlong into a scorching, passionate reunion may be a bad idea. Michael's secrets have the power to keep them apart forever, but Very and Wolf have secrets of their own. Held prisoner by their fears, the three struggle to overcome lies and mistrust to find the freedom to love one another as they have always desired.

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Prisoner of Love

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PRISONER OF LOVE

Samantha Kane

Dedication

This book is a thank-you to all the loyal readers of Brothers in Arms. You have all been so patient waiting for Very's book!

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my editor, Raelene Gorlinsky, for her support of Brothers in Arms. Since *The Courage to Love* she has encouraged me and been one of my biggest fans. Thanks also and every day to my critique partner (and partner in crime), Julie Gupton, who kept me, and Very, on the right path. And to loyal reader Shannon Wiseman for her help in naming one of the newest Brothers in Arms, Sir Barnabas James. Thanks, Shannon!

As always, my husband was patient and supportive while I immersed myself in Regency England. Thanks for not complaining too much when you got home from work and I'd forgotten again to take something out of the freezer for dinner.

Author's Note on History

I incorporated several historical events in this story. The first is the Peterloo Massacre. At a peaceful rally in support of universal male suffrage (votes for all men, *not women*) at St. Peter's Field in Manchester, England, in August of 1819 troops were called in by the local magistrate and demonstrators were killed by stampeding horses and the bayonets of the militia. The government's role at Peterloo was soundly condemned by the press and resulted in a government crackdown on the reform movement. The early universal suffrage movement would later lead to the women's suffrage movement in England. Most of the research on Peterloo is out of print now. But you can find information in a general history of Great Britain such as *British History 1815-1906* by Norman McCord.

I briefly mention a very important English legal decision, *R v Knowles, ex parte Somersett* (1772), otherwise known as Somersett's Case, or the Mansfield Decision. Somersett was a slave brought to England by his American owner. While in England he escaped, but was captured and imprisoned on a boat bound for Jamaica. Application was made to the Court of King's Bench for a *writ of habeas corpus* by several anti-slavery activists acting as Somersett's godparents. It was granted, and Somersett was given a court date to prove his imprisonment was illegal. The decision by the magistrate, Lord Mansfield, declared that no slave could be forcibly removed from England. In effect, Somersett's Case declared a slave free the minute he set foot on English soil. For more on Somersett's Case, see *Though The Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery* by Steven M. Wise.

The slave revolt on a plantation near New Orleans in January 1820 is a true event. I could only find several references to it and to the consequences of the revolt, but not the name of the plantation.

And last but not least, I incorporated several places and people in 19th century Louisiana in Michael's journeys in America. Auguste Chouteau was a French fur-trading mogul in Louisiana. His family founded the cities of St. Louis and Kansas City. You can read about the Chouteau family in *Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty That Ruled America's Frontier* by Shirley Christian. I confess I haven't read her book. You see, I wrote my Master's thesis in American History on the Chouteau family.

The White House was indeed burned down during the War of 1812, as every elementary school child knows. The small anecdote where Michael sits down to tea with President James Monroe at the newly rebuilt White House was a figment of my imagination. But White House protocol in the early 19th century was infamously lax, so it is entirely possible such a thing could have happened.

Any errors or factual misrepresentations of these historical events or people are my responsibility, and not a reflection of these excellent resources.

Chapter One

Veronica dragged her hand through the water as she glided around the lake in a small punt. The water was as still as a looking glass. She glanced behind and saw the ripples from her hand and the ones from the boat's passage merge behind them.

She allowed herself the luxury of watching the man propelling their punt around the lake with a long pole. Wolf was quite handsome. Dark blond hair that gleamed with red sparks in the sun, ice-blue eyes and a lean, aesthetically pleasing face, interesting rather than too pretty. He was her wolf, a predator who desperately wanted to devour her.

"What are you smiling about?" Wolf asked. He sounded amused. She liked that, liked that he was amused by her rather than exasperated. Everyone else seemed to lean toward exasperation. She wasn't that bad, was she?

"You need to scold your tailor," Very told him. "Your coat is too small in the shoulders." The material stretched and wrinkled with each smooth pull on the pole. He was tall and lean, with the body of a fencer or a dance master. But he was definitely more muscular than he'd been a few months ago.

Wolf raised a brow at her. "So now you are going to cost me the price of a new wardrobe?"

"Me?" Very asked in astonishment. "What have I to do with the size of your coats?"

"You've had me out on this bloody lake at least three times a week all summer. You do realize that it is *work* punting you all over on a regular basis? The size of my shoulders is in direct correlation to the amount of work."

"Huh," said Very, pretending confusion. "Are you trying to confuse me with your science, Mr. Tarrant?"

"I am trying to tell you, Miss Thomas, that when next we spend time together I should like to do it on dry land."

Wolf's response was said in such a dry, long-suffering tone that Very had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing. She looked over at the shore at the small group of people lounging in the shade waiting for them. Her Aunt Kate sat on a bench with Anthony Richards. Tony was her aunt and uncle's lover, and had lived with them since their marriage three years ago when Very was sixteen. He was as much an uncle to her as her aunt's husband, Lord Jason Randall.

Jason leaned against a tree not far from her Aunt Kate and Tony, his sharp eye never leaving the punt. Her uncle was more vigilant than any real father could ever be. He seemed to think that Wolf had nothing else on his mind but dragging Very off and

dispensing with her maidenhood. Which, when she thought about it, and she often did, seemed like a very good idea indeed.

"You're smiling again," Wolf noted.

Very pointed to the shore, and Kate waved. "That is why I insist on you taking me out on the lake, Wolf darling. Without our watery expeditions we would never have a moment alone."

"You call this alone?" Wolf asked. "When we are on display for all to see in the middle of a lake, in the middle of Hyde Park? Perhaps I need to explain the meaning of alone to you."

Very gave him what she hoped was a seductive look. "Oh, I wish you would. With illustrated examples."

Wolf closed his eyes with a pained expression. "You enjoy tormenting me, don't you?" When he opened his eyes his expression was intense and left no doubt that he would like to forgo the illustrations and use a more personal demonstration technique. "You know every night I lie in my bed imagining doing all manner of wicked things to you when I finally manage to get you alone."

"Like what?" Very challenged him. "I can imagine far more wicked things than you can, I'll wager."

This was what she loved about their time on the lake. In front of the entire world she and Wolf tormented one another with their deliciously naughty, forbidden fantasies, and no one was the wiser. She loved it. Loved that she drove him mad with desire. But she hated that she could do nothing more. Because she loved him and she desperately wanted to be with him. Jason, Aunt Kate and Tony were too smart for her, however. She'd admitted defeat. There was simply no way for her and Wolf to sneak off and enjoy one another. She was a veritable prisoner.

"Last night I imagined taking you roughly, Very. You drove me to distraction the other day, brushing up against me, dropping your reticule four...no, five times and bending over to retrieve it, waving that shapely bottom of yours in my direction. So last night in my dreams I gave you what you so richly deserved. A good, hard spanking."

Very laughed. "Not hard enough, if I know you. You're so afraid of breaking me, Wolf. I won't break, you know. You can spank me harder."

Wolf tilted his head to the side and observed her with a little grin that made her heart skip a beat. "Funny, that was what you said in my dream. 'Spank me harder, Wolf.'"

"Really?" Very asked casually, though her heart was tripping all over the place now. He'd never told her this fantasy before. "And did you?"

Wolf nodded. "Yes, I did. I spanked you until you cried out, spread across my lap, that marvelous soft, plump bottom reaching for the flat of my hand. Your skin was bright pink, fiery to the touch, and you were so wet, Very. Every part of you was begging for it."

Very was breathing heavily. "I don't beg."

"You'll beg for me when the time comes," Wolf promised quietly. "And you'll love every second of it."

Very looked at Wolf's erection pressing against the tight front of his trousers and then let her eyes travel up his trim figure until his heated gaze caught and held hers.

"I don't doubt it," she whispered. "I would beg if you'd give me what I want."

"What do you want, Very?" he asked, his voice so low she only knew what he said because they'd played this game so many times before.

"I want you, Wolf," she told him. It was what she always told him. And she meant it. Every time. She wanted him in every way, not just physically. She wanted to be with him forever. He smiled in triumph and she nearly swooned, not that she'd tell him that. God, she loved when he looked at her like that, like she was treasure to be pirated away and plundered.

"Just me?" he asked.

Very bit her lip. Then she slowly shook her head. It was hardly possible, but Wolf's look grew more heated, enough to singe her toes as if she were dipping them in the fires of hell. Which a great many people would tell her was exactly what she was doing. And she didn't give a fig what they thought. She loved the burn of the forbidden, to do what she was told she couldn't, shouldn't. She'd do what she wanted, and she'd do it with Wolf. And with Kensington.

"I want to be with you and Kensington," she whispered. "I want you both in my bed."

The memory of the last time the three of them were together came roaring back, as it did every time she and Wolf spoke of Lord Michael Kensington. It was over a year ago, the day her friend Sophie had married Ian Witherspoon, and Very had learned of the abuse Sophie had suffered as a child. She'd inadvertently upset Sophie, teasing her about the wedding night, not knowing that Sophie was terrified of being intimate with her new husband. Very had set off a chain of events with her teasing comments that had resulted in Sophie running from her wedding breakfast in tears, Ian chasing after her. Very had felt guilty, and so, so angry. Angry at the world for what Sophie had suffered, and angry at herself for ruining Sophie's wedding day.

Michael had found her in her Uncle Jason's library that evening, ripping up a pillow in her anger and frustration. And he'd made it better. He had a knack for doing that, for soothing Very's fiery temper and impulsiveness. But this time, it wasn't words that had soothed her, though she remembered every word he'd said.

* * * * *

Two Years Earlier

Very stood in the library and looked out the window into the back garden. The room behind her was lit only by the small fire on the far wall. She could make out the

little Greek folly in the far corner of the garden, a dark shape in the moonlight. She loved to sit out there on warm days and read, or chat with companions. Had Sophie ever been able to do that, to relax with friends? She'd seemed so awkward at it and Very had attributed it to her hideous father. But apparently there'd been more, as Very had suspected. She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and found her hand was shaking. God, she was so full of anger. She'd wanted to scream at Aunt Kate for not telling her, and then she wanted to hunt down Sophie's father and cut his prick off. Aunt Kate said Sophie had denied he was the one, but who else? Most of all Very wanted to cut out her own tongue. How could she have teased Sophie that way? God, how could Sophie stand her? She couldn't stand herself.

She spun suddenly and grabbed a pillow from the chair near the window. She beat it against the chair arm with all her might, holding back a scream of rage until it came out as a growl. She raised the pillow and tore at it and beat it against the chair again until it finally came apart and feathers flew around her head. She stopped then, panting with her exertions, frustrated that there was still anger inside her in spite of her violence.

"Well, I'm glad that I'm not the pillow," Kensington's voice drawled from behind her.

She turned to glare at him. "Shut up. I'm not pleasant company tonight. I don't have the patience to put up with your supposed wit."

Kensington sighed and walked over to her warily. He reached up and tenderly plucked a feather out of her hair. "I know I'm going to regret this, but what's the matter, little Amazon?"

Very stared at him in disbelief. "What's wrong? What's wrong? I just found out a dear new friend was raped as a child, I ruined her wedding day and you ask me what's wrong?"

Tentatively Kensington stepped closer and wrapped his arms loosely around her. Suddenly he was all that held her together. She clutched him desperately and he responded by wrapping her tighter in his embrace. God, how she had missed this! He'd hardly touched her in almost a year, not since that unforgettable first time they met, when he'd dragged her into an alley and given her her first woman's pleasure. She buried her nose in his neck and breathed deeply of his beloved scent. Spicy and exotic and all male, it made her blood thicken and heat.

"Very," he said, and she thrilled to hear the roughness of desire in his voice. He took several deep breaths and spoke again, his tone almost normal. "You did not ruin Sophie's wedding day. You can hardly blame yourself for her rape. In a sad way it's only natural that those memories surface the day she married. She's expected to share Ian's bed tonight. I can only imagine what fears she has about it."

Very turned her head to rest it on his shoulder. "Exactly, and I exacerbated the whole thing with my teasing. She was fine until I joked about being too drunk to enjoy

her wedding night. If only Aunt Kate had confided in me sooner! I would never have said that."

Kensington ran his hand down her back in what was supposed to be a soothing motion. Instead it set every nerve aflame. Her sex actually throbbed with desire for him as his hand settled on the rise of her bottom. She couldn't control the small, unsteady gasp that broke from her. Kensington froze and then tried to pull away.

"No! Kensington, please." Very knew she was begging, but her pride was nowhere to be seen. She needed him tonight. Needed him to show her again what love felt like, to help wipe out the image of Sophie being raped that was trapped in her head.

"Very, I can't." His voice was harsh and he put his hands on her shoulders and tried to shove her back.

"You can, you can," she told him, pressing closer, wrapping her arms around his neck in a death grip. She placed kisses along his jaw and bit his chin gently, eliciting a moan from him. "You see, you want me. You can't deny it, I can hear how much. I can feel how hard you are for me." She rotated her hips, feeling that hard length rubbing against her stomach. She placed an openmouthed kiss against his neck and sucked the skin lightly and suddenly his hands were grabbing her roughly and grinding her in to him. She laughed triumphantly and Kensington groaned.

"Goddamn it, Very. I promised myself I would leave you alone. You're so young, so innocent. Tell me to stop, tell me to leave you alone." He was kissing her wildly, his lips on hers for one moment and then running over her face and neck. He licked a path upward from her shoulder to the soft spot behind her ear and then bit her earlobe. Very shivered with unconcealed lust at the sting.

"Don't stop, don't ever stop, Kensington. I want to feel it again, that wild drop off a cliff that made my heart race and my breath catch. Show me what it means to love a man. Make me forget just for a while about what happened to Sophie. Show me how it feels when you want it, when you desire a man and he makes you his."

Kensington groaned aloud at her words and dragged her to the floor. "You make me throw all my principles to the wind, Very. I have no resistance to you, no way to fight when you tell me how much you want me. You are the ruin of me." He fell on top of her and Very had never felt such a delicious weight. She wrapped one hand around his head and pulled him to her for a kiss as her leg encircled his waist and yanked his erection down to her aching, damp mound. Though separated by layers of fabric, the contact was exquisite and she cried out into his mouth. He ground himself against her and she bit his lip sharply. The copper tang of blood made her pull back.

"Oh God, Kensington, I'm sorry. I'm just mad, as if I have some kind of brain fever. All I can think of is you and how wonderful you feel. You're so hard and heavy and mine. I want to taste you, to eat you up. Is this normal, this raging hunger for you?" Her voice was breathless and eager and she smiled to hear herself that way. It was glorious, everything about this was glorious.

Kensington was licking the blood from his lip as he tugged wildly at Very's bodice. "I don't know and I don't care. Just knowing you're dying for me is driving me mad. You've infected me with your fever." She heard her bodice rip and then she felt the cool air on her overheated breasts. "Yes," Kensington hissed. He dove into her breasts like a starving man, licking and sucking and biting and Very writhed beneath him. He rammed an arm under her back and yanked her chest high as he suckled one nipple ruthlessly, and Very thrust her hips into him, his cock rubbing against her in such a way that she felt the shudders of arousal through her whole body.

Reality became disjointed, as if time and place had no meaning for them. The heat and roughness of his touch, the feel of supple muscles flexing above her, the wet, smooth glide of his tongue on her skin seemed to be so natural, as if Very's whole life had led to this coupling.

"Touch me, Kensington, like you did before." She was like a woman possessed, wrapping her arms and legs around him and kissing him as if she might swallow him whole.

"Michael," he told her roughly, peeling himself away from her. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her. "Call me Michael. I want to hear my name on your lips when I'm loving you, Very. Say it."

"Michael," she pleaded, and the intimacy of his given name made her heart beat faster and her breathing grow ragged. "Michael, love me, please. I need you so much." His blond hair had turned to molten gold in the fire's light, his eyes dark and fathomless in the shadows. She shuddered at the fleeting fear that gripped her at his inscrutable expression. For one endless moment they were frozen there, she laid before him like an offering, he towering over her, her conqueror. The dramatic nature of the image as it formed in Very's mind broke the spell. "Michael," she whispered, arching into him, and Michael's hands came to her waist, gripping her almost painfully as he held her to him.

"I'm not strong, Very, not where you're concerned. I haven't trusted myself to be alone with you these last months. I've tried to leave you, but I'm weak, so weak. I keep crawling back, for this." He leaned down and kissed her hard and possessively. When he pulled away, Very gasped and thrust her hips at him. He reached out and touched a fingertip gently to the curve of her breast. "I crave this like an opium eater craves the drug, Very. I need you." She rose to her elbows to see his face as he stared at her. Those eyes closed in distress as he pulled his finger away, balling his hand into a fist. "Tell me to stop, Very."

"Never," she whispered. "I will never tell you to stop."

When the library door opened, the crack of light from the hallway split the floor like an arrow that ended at Michael's feet. Very gasped as Michael quickly tried to shield her from the intruder.

The door closed quietly with a click. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?" Wolf's voice was a low purr of surprised delight, and Very released the breath she was holding.

"Wolf," she whispered. Without thinking she reached out for him, and he came as if pulled by invisible strings. When he reached her side he dropped heavily to his knees.

Wolf Tarrant was not a large man. He was tall and lean, with the whipcord muscles of a fencer and the elegance to match. His face resembled his namesake with its sharp angles, long nose and square jaw. In the firelight his thick, wild dark blond hair took on the hues of the fire itself, red, gold, orange and black. He was always so composed, so self-contained, and yet Very suspected that there was a great deal of fire inside him, beneath the façade. She longed to see him burn for her. She had never thought much of Wolf in sexual terms. She had accepted that he came with Kensington. But here, now, she realized with relief and excitement, she wanted him. She wanted to touch him and be touched by him and the happiness this brought her made her giddy. She brushed his strong cheekbone with the pads of her fingers as her thumb caressed his lower lip. "Wolf," she said again, her new sexual awareness of him as an individual clear in her voice and her touch.

Wolf closed his eyes and dipped his head into her caress. "Very," he said, his voice breaking, "Very." He bent down to kiss her and she rose from the floor to meet him halfway. The kiss was a tender exploration, a first kiss in every way. It ignored the fact that she was spread out on the floor half naked, caught in the throes of passion with another man. In that kiss it was only Very and Wolf and the wonder of their discovery of one another. He passed his arms gently around her until he was supporting her, until she was wrapped tightly against his chest, their hearts beating together. Her arms were around his neck, one hand on his shoulder the other buried in his untamed hair.

Wolf's tongue slipped into her mouth so gently that Very whimpered at the sweet sensation. He was so different from Michael, who devoured her like a starving man. Wolf savored and gentled her until she could take no more tenderness. She broke the kiss with a sob. "Please, please," she begged, her body once again on fire. Her nipples were so sharp they ached for a soothing touch, and she could feel the heat of her sex as it was bathed in her cream. She clutched at Wolf's arm, dragging it from around her and he was forced to lower her to the floor. She took his hand in hers and guided it to her breast, pressing it against the aching point there. "Yes," she cried out, her back arching. "Michael," she whispered, wanting him to share this feeling. Wolf was kneading her breast as he nuzzled her neck.

"No." The word was harsh and anguished. Wolf froze against her, and Very looked past his shoulder at Michael. He was still kneeling between her legs, but somehow he seemed apart, separate from her in a way he hadn't before. He was very carefully not touching her. He was looking at Wolf with dawning horror, at his hand on Very's breast, his face pressed to her neck. Very didn't know what to do. She was aching and burning and she was finding it hard to think of anything but the ecstasy that was just out of reach.

"Please, Michael," she begged, arching into Wolf's hand, which had resumed its pleasurable caresses. She moaned as Wolf sucked gently on her neck. "Oh God, please."

"I...I can't," he whispered brokenly, and Very watched him through a fog as he crawled backward away from her and Wolf. "What have I done?" His question didn't seem to be directed at her so Very didn't answer.

Wolf shuddered as Very pressed his hand harder against her breast. He lay down beside her, his warmth a delectable pressure against her side. "Michael," he said, his voice rough, and he kissed the delicate skin above Very's collarbone. "Don't, don't ruin it, Michael," and his voice broke. He cleared his throat. "Don't run away from this."

"I can't," Michael said again. "What are we doing, Wolf? She's a child." He turned his head away and covered his eyes as if he couldn't bear to look at them. "I can't do this to her."

"I am not a child," Very told him, and Wolf pulled back to look at her. She gazed into his face and saw none of the guilt that seemed to beleaguer Michael when he touched her. Wolf looked at her like a woman, a desirable woman. His gaze was possessive and arrogant and proud, and Very wanted to purr and roll all over him until she was covered in his scent. "I want this," she whispered, and hardly recognized the sinful voice as her own. "I want to touch and be touched, I want to come and I want a man to come for me." She looked at Michael. "I want to be a woman and not a child. I want to be wanted by a man without seeing guilt and shame in his face afterward."

"I can't, Very," Michael said brokenly, "I can't."

"I can," Wolf said firmly in her ear.

Very turned back to Wolf and with slow deliberation pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. She released all her desire into that kiss, tried to tell him all she wanted and needed with her lips and tongue and teeth, and he heard her and understood. He moved closer to her and slid one arm under her until her neck rested on it. He ran one hand down her stomach to rest between her legs. Very groaned and thrust against him.

"What do you want?" Wolf asked against her mouth. "Do you know?"

"I want you inside me," Very demanded wantonly. "I want you to take me over the edge, Wolf. Will you take me?"

"Oh, Very," he said wickedly, "I will take you any way you want." He pressed his lips to hers again and his tongue danced in her mouth deliciously. Very became breathless and had to break the kiss. She was panting but there was no embarrassment at her arousal. What she felt with Wolf was elemental, as if she had been stripped down to the bare essentials and there was only breathing and wanting and the touch of his flesh on hers, the beat of his heart against hers.

He backed away from the kiss slowly. "You are so wonderful, Very. Do you know how precious you are to me?" he whispered and then he kissed her again tenderly.

"Wolf, oh God, Wolf," she said, suddenly on the verge of tears. She'd never bothered to really see him before, accepting his presence as necessary if she were to have Michael with her. How long had he felt this way about her? Had she hurt him with her indifference? She was such a blind fool. Today had been eye-opening for her in so many ways. She was dizzy with the emotional highs and lows.

"How could you?" Michael's voice whipped out of the dark. "What are you doing to her, making her?"

Wolf sighed and rested his forehead against Very's temple. She ran her hand softly through his hair.

"I want to give my woman pleasure, Michael. I am not the kind of man who will tease her and leave her wanting out of some misplaced sense of offended moral righteousness." Wolf's voice was as angry as Michael's.

"No matter what she says, she is still a child, Wolf. She doesn't understand what you'll demand of her." Michael's voice was filled with accusation.

"I will force her to do nothing." Wolf angrily pushed to his feet, the mood clearly ruined. "But I will not deny her what she wants either." He reached down and pulled Very to her feet. She was still a bit unsteady and clung to him. "And do not attempt to place the blame on me. I have never forced anything on you, either."

"Stop talking about me as if I'm not here," she said, annoyed. She pointed at Michael. "And stop talking about me as if I'm an idiot. I know very well what I'm getting myself into."

"Do you?" Michael asked bitterly. "Do you really know what Wolf and I are to each other?"

Very busied herself with straightening her clothing. There was a slight tear in the fabric of her bodice that she was afraid couldn't be fixed. She sighed. She hadn't exactly wanted to have this conversation tonight, but she was not one to run from a challenge. "Of course. You're lovers. Look, I said it and didn't run shrieking into the night." She didn't even try to keep the sarcasm from her voice. Wolf chuckled beside her and she smiled up at him.

"And do you understand what that means?" Michael wouldn't let the subject drop. "Have you considered that?"

Very shifted uncomfortably. Oh, she had considered it all right. Just about every night in her lonely bed she thought about exactly what that meant. "It means that you will both come to my bed, at the same time." She was rather proud of how steady she sounded.

Michael snorted. "Yes. But it also means that we fuck each other, Very. It means that when Wolf looks at me the way he looked at you tonight – and yes, he does look at me like that – I can't pull my pants down and bend over fast enough. That cock that is even now hard for you, Very," Michael pointed crudely at Wolf's erection, "is buried in my arse at every opportunity, and I'm not above returning the favor just as often. Is that what you want?"

"Stop it, Michael," Wolf ground out.

Very felt herself blanch at his crudity. She'd had a vague idea about how men made love to one another, but thanks to Michael her education on the subject was now complete. She straightened her shoulders. "No, it's all right, Wolf." She looked at Michael. "If that is what you want, then yes, I want it too."

Michael growled in frustration and pulled at his hair as he spun away from her. "What must I do to save you from yourself, Very? You throw yourself into trouble at every turn, and I am the catalyst! This..." he made a motion between the three of them, "this is unnatural, do you understand? Whether your aunt enjoys the same relationship or not, it is not natural nor is it accepted." He paced away. "You are young and you have the chance to live a normal life." He shook his head. "But not with me. Not with us." He walked quickly to the door.

Wolf took two steps toward him. "Don't, Michael. Don't run again."

Michael stopped but didn't turn around. "Goodbye, Wolf. Goodbye, Very. I—" He broke off and opened the door. "Goodbye." He left, pulling the door closed behind him.

* * * * *

In spite of Wolf's pleas, Michael had run. That night haunted Very. She had pushed him too far. If she had only held her tongue, if she had seen how conflicted he was about the relationship that was developing between the three of them, they could have taken it slowly. But Very hadn't been satisfied with slow. She'd wanted to jump head first into the tempest of their desire for one another and damn the consequences.

She was still staring into Wolf's eyes as the memory tumbled through her brain once again. He was the one good thing to have come from her impatience. That night had been the start of their love affair. Because it was love, had been love from that moment on, and it only grew stronger each day. Beyond stolen kisses they had hardly touched one another since that night, but the yearning was a constant thing between them.

Wolf sighed and looked away, breaking the intensity of the moment. "We haven't heard from him in months, Very." He looked back to her, his eyes filled with resigned despair. "He's in America. That's very far from us and from the few intimate moments we shared. It's easy to forget with time and distance." He gave a particularly vicious push to the pole that rocked the boat slightly. "He ran away from us, from the idea of the three of us together." He sighed. "I don't know if Michael will ever come back."

Very concentrated on dipping her hand back in the water and watching the ripples again. "He'll come back. I know he will."

"And if he doesn't?" Wolf asked quietly.

Very blinked rapidly to clear the unwanted tears away before she finally looked back at Wolf. *He had to come back*, she thought. But what she said was, "Then we shall have each other, won't we? And you and I shall do all the wicked, wonderful things we've talked about."

Wolf's smile was bittersweet. "If Jason and Tony ever let us alone. How long do you think, until they believe I love you and I'm not just chasing after you because I'm pining away for Michael?"

Very had no answer to that. Her uncles refused to see that she and Wolf loved one another, not just because of their mutual feelings for Michael but because of shared interests and complementary temperaments. She'd argued until her throat was sore. But their answer had been to throw her on the marriage market, hoping some other man would catch her eye.

Wolf sighed at her silence. "How goes the courting?" he finally asked.

This was an extremely sore subject with Very. She crossed her arms, irritated with Wolf for bringing it up. Her uncles and their matchmaking ways were driving her mad. "Jason has brought home another stray from the Army. Some captain or such who upon a half an hour's acquaintance declared undying love for me." She snorted. "Love of Jason's money, no doubt." She threw her hands up in agitation. "Honestly, why can they not see it? They parade eligible men before me as if I was Wellington reviewing the troops, and I am the only one who can clearly see that they have no interest in me. They see a pretty girl who would make a tolerable wife, particularly since she brings a sizable income." She growled ferociously and Wolf laughed.

"My brown hair is like the fecund earth in spring," she quoted sarcastically. At Wolf's incredulous look she nodded. "Oh, yes, I've actually heard that one. And my blue eyes gleam like, well, take your pick. Stars, the sun, the moon, a candle flame, sunlight off a sharp blade." She rolled her eyes. "My figure is comparable to Aphrodite's—"

"Hold up," Wolf immediately interrupted. "Who said that last one?"

Very snorted. "Don't worry. Jason saw him out of the house in a hurry." She motioned over her shoulder with her thumb. "Arse end first." She put her elbow on her knee and rested her chin on her fist, not caring how unladylike she looked. "I wanted to kick the silly man in the shins yesterday when he said that after we were married he'd have to curtail my 'reformist tendencies'. And this is supposed to make me fall at his feet?"

Wolf looked at her askance. "What cause were you espousing yesterday?"

Very huffed in annoyance. "Don't you start." She pointed at him. "If I can't have you I have to do something to take my mind off my frustration. Working for a worthy cause may not engender the same excitement you do, but it keeps me occupied so I don't go stark, raving mad."

Wolf laughed, and Very sniffed primly. "Universal suffrage is no laughing matter."

Wolf's demeanor changed in the blink of an eye. "You are not going to Manchester," he declared flatly. His tone said quite clearly he would not argue about it. Very, as usual, ignored his warning.

"I must go to Manchester! I have been in contact with Mrs. Fildes, the leader of the Manchester ladies' reform group you know, for months now. The situation in Lancashire, indeed the entire nation, is dire! So many out of work, and no representation, Wolf! They haven't the right to vote. No recourse to address their suffering. None. The injustice of it stings in a nation of enlightened men." Very was so

outraged over the whole thing she could barely put words together to express herself. "And the Corn Laws, driving the price of food higher and higher with half the population starving already as it is! How can you not support their cause? Englishmen who have fought and died for King and country deserve the right to vote, Wolf, whether they are landowners or not. That is why they march. Why I must march."

He looked at her askance. "Surely you don't march in support of the vote for women?"

Very shook her head. "Of course not. That would be foolish to even think about. They will never allow it. This march is only about the vote for men."

"I do not have the right to vote," Wolf observed. "Shouldn't I be given the courtesy of deciding for myself if I am outraged about it?"

"That is exactly why I wholeheartedly support the cause of universal suffrage, Wolf," she said earnestly. "So many of the men I love and admire cannot vote. You for one, Tony for another. You fought for your country Wolf, many men did, men who now have no say at all in the laws of this nation. Where is the justice in that? To fight to uphold a government that ignores and mistreats you?"

"All right, all right. Yes, I support the idea, Very. But that doesn't mean that I think the woman I love should hie off to Northern England and march in some mad protestation which is more than likely to land her in a great deal of trouble. Can you not support my right to vote from London?" He cocked his head. "And hasn't this march already occurred? Was it not scheduled for several days past, on the second of August?"

"It has been rescheduled. The local magistrates are making things far more difficult than they ought to. It's simply a meeting, Wolf. Mr. Henry Hunt will be there to speak to the people." She clasped her hands together in excitement. "It will be so wonderful. History in the making. Surely with an orator like Henry Hunt on our side we shall triumph."

"A seditious meeting in which the organizers plan to illegally try to elect their own representative to Parliament, Very. A dangerous meeting to be at. Tempers are high on both sides. That is no place for a young woman."

"Oh, you are so...so difficult!" Very burst out. "It is exactly the place for young women. Won't the presence of women cool tempers? Men will not threaten violence to one another when there are women present. All the ladies in Manchester will be marching."

Wolf's look was disbelieving. "You don't know men very well, my darling. Not only will they threaten it, they will act upon it, women be damned."

"I am not a child, Wolf. I need this. I need to do...something." She couldn't put into words how powerless she felt about her life, about Michael's absence and her inability to be with Wolf the way she wanted. Before he could argue, Very said, "I am going," slowly and quite clearly, so there could be no misunderstanding.

"You are not." Wolf actually sounded irritated, which was so unusual it brought Very up short for a moment.

"Captain Macintosh thinks the march in Manchester is the greatest thing to happen in England since King John signed the Magna Carta," she told him with a great deal of satisfaction.

"Captain Macintosh is a fool. And who the hell is Captain Macintosh?" Wolf asked, this time his anger unmistakable.

They had arrived back at the dock. Very stood up and clambered out of the punt on her own. "He is one of the suitors that Jason brought by the house for me."

Wolf nearly fell out of the boat as it rocked riotously under Very's awkward scramble. "He sounds like a trained monkey," Wolf bit out.

"Macintosh is a fine fellow with a distinguished history of army service," Jason barked. Very whirled around to see him standing behind her, his arms crossed as he glared at Wolf.

"Even worse," Wolf mumbled. Jason's cheeks turned red with anger. Wolf smirked at him. "Captain Macintosh thinks it's a capital idea for Very to go to Manchester. History in the making. Isn't that so, Very?"

"Yes," Very said and then inwardly winced. She knew better. She knew Wolf had an ulterior motive or he never would have said a word about any of the nincompoops that Jason brought round for her. *Goodbye, Captain Macintosh*, she thought, and goodbye Manchester.

"Then we'll go to Manchester," Jason declared.

"What?" Very practically yelled. She looked around to make sure she'd heard him correctly. Kate had gone pale, and Tony was shaking his head in disgust.

"Oh Lord, Very," Kate said. Jason was sputtering.

"You can't take it back," Very rushed to tell him. "You said it. Everyone heard." She ran off the dock and grabbed Kate's hand, dragging her off the bench and toward the carriage. "Come on!" Very called out. "We have to get ready! We've only days to get there."

"Well, Jason, congratulations," she heard Wolf say, his voice shaking with anger. She ran harder, not sure if she was running from Wolf or toward Manchester. And not sure if it was the right direction at all.

* * * * *

"How marvelous this is!" Very reached out and grabbed Captain Macintosh's arm. "Everyone—men, women and children—marching for suffrage, for a voice!" She pointed out the window of the inn. "This is their voice, isn't it? They will be heard today! History will record August sixteenth, the year of our Lord 1819, as a turning point in England."

"Since everyone else is here," Jason said glumly from behind her, "I fail to see why we had to come. Sane people do not willingly place themselves in the middle of a storm."

Very wrinkled her nose at him. "Oh, pooh. Honestly, Jason, there are five of you here." She gestured around the small private parlor at the array of gentlemen finishing their breakfast. In addition to Jason and Tony, who sat together on one side of the table, their friend Daniel Steinberg calmly sipped his tea in a chair by the door. Simon Gantry, another old friend of her uncles from the war, stood at her side placing her between him and Captain Macintosh. "I daresay nothing can befall me in Manchester. Not even a stiff breeze."

Simon looked up at the clear blue sky. "No, no breeze my dear. And hot as Hades. It's a perfect day for a riot."

Daniel snorted into his teacup. "Oh, how amusing, Mr. Gantry," Very said sarcastically. "No one asked you to come."

Simon turned to her with an expression of horrified dismay. "As if I would have said no!" He saluted Jason with a smile and a nod. "And actually, Jason did ask me to come. I am frequently invited to all the best affairs, you know."

"There will be no riot today, sir," Captain Macintosh said earnestly. "The commoners have been drilling to ensure that the proceedings are peaceful. There will be no weapons, and no violence."

"My dear boy," Simon told him sadly, "there is always a riot. One simply cannot gather this many people in one place without inciting feverish tempers."

"I must disagree, sir," Captain Macintosh said staunchly. "I have been following the events leading up to today's meeting, and I believe the people's behavior will be above reproach."

Very truly liked him, which was a bit of a shock. She'd used him abominably to come here and he surely must know it, but he didn't appear to mind. And he seemed to enjoy talking to her about a wide variety of subjects. Perhaps her income upon her marriage was an attraction for him, how could it not be? But Very could see settling into a sedate married life with him. He was kind, generous, intelligent and not unattractive. Tall, with a shock of auburn hair, he reminded her of Mr. Jefferson in America, based on descriptions and the fact that he quoted Mr. Jefferson endlessly. There was only one problem with him. Well, two actually.

He wasn't Wolf.

And he wasn't Kensington.

Just then Very noticed a group of women dressed all in white, their arms linked, walking down the center of Kennedy Street in front of the inn. "There are the ladies!" she exclaimed.

"They might as well be wearing targets on their backs," Simon observed, watching the women march by.

Very ignored him and turned to grab her reticule and shawl. She was dressed in white, as well, and anxious to join the friends she had only corresponded with but never met. "Oh, do hurry, Jason! I shall miss them." She rushed over to the door.

"Stop right there, Veronica," Jason ordered her. "When Tony and I are done with our meal, we will walk to St. Peter's Field. There is still plenty of time before Mr. Hunt is to speak to the assembly."

Very couldn't disguise her dismay. "But Jason! I have come all this way to march with my friends. Please, please hurry."

"I can take Miss Thomas, sir," Captain Macintosh offered. Very could have kissed him. She beamed at him from across the room and he blushed. "It would be no trouble, and I shall protect her from any harm until you can join us."

Jason was already shaking his head. "We did not come all this way to send Very off with you, Macintosh, but thank you."

"I shall go with them, Jason," Daniel said. He stood up. "I've finished my tea, and I grow bored with sitting here."

"And I," Simon said. "I want to see this irreproachable rabble Macintosh champions." He looked pointedly at the plate of sausages in front of Jason. "And we all know how long it takes you to eat, Jason. You have a hollow leg."

Tony laughed. "Oh, let them go Jason. We have been here for two days, and other than rumors, have yet to see any sign of mischief. We can join them shortly. Shall we meet you in front of the church, on Peters Street? The field is only a short walk from there."

"No, Tony, please, at St. Peter's Field. The entrance right there on Peters Street. Please?" Very begged.

"I don't know," Tony said.

"Tony, Jason," Daniel said reasonably. "Don't you believe that I can protect Very as well as you?"

Very saw the two men hesitate to answer. She didn't know much about Daniel's war service, but she'd heard rumors that he'd been a very dangerous officer and had killed many men. Very found it hard to believe that the slight, very dapper Daniel could hurt a fly, but Tony's and Jason's reaction to his simple question made her wonder.

"Very well," Jason said irritably. He wagged a finger at Very. "But be warned, miss. None of your trouble. It sprouts around you like weeds in a field."

"As long as it doesn't sprout in St. Peter's Field," Simon muttered as he followed her out the door. She turned and stuck her tongue out at him, which only made him laugh, of course.

Chapter Two

Wolf watched Very emerge from the inn, her hand on Macintosh's arm, Daniel and Simon behind them. He was hidden in the shadows of an awning, half concealed by some stairs, but he could tell it took Daniel all of two or three seconds to spot him. He smiled at Wolf and made a small gesture, indicating Wolf should follow them. Wolf huffed in annoyance. Of course he was going to follow them. What the hell did Daniel think he was doing here if not to follow Very around?

She looked lovely, dressed all in white. Seeing her on another man's arm while she looked that way was galling.

The streets were quite crowded. It was a perfect late summer day, sunny and warm. There was almost a gay air about Manchester today, as if they were going to attend a street fair rather than a political rally. Everyone wore their Sunday best. Yet Wolf couldn't shake the feeling that trouble was waiting around the corner. Perhaps it was just because he wasn't at Very's side to protect her. He didn't like that one bit, and he had every intention of giving both Jason and Tony an earful when they returned to London. Up until now he'd put up with their attempts to prevent his courtship of Very. His patience was wearing thin.

After a few minutes Daniel and Simon fell farther behind Very and the captain until they reached Wolf's side.

"Fancy meeting you here," Simon said convivially. He twirled his walking stick and whistled a little tune as he marched behind the contingent of white-clad ladies.

"I had the urge to visit Manchester," Wolf said nonchalantly. "I've heard such glowing tales of the city."

"Don't be an idiot," Daniel said drily. "We fully expected you to follow us, Jason and Tony included. Jason wondered where you were this morning, although not in front of Very." He looked at Wolf out of the corner of his eye. "Why didn't you insist on coming with us?"

Wolf sighed. "I don't know. Very seemed eager to come with Macintosh." He shook his head. "No, that's not it. I'm just tired of being the whipping boy." He laughed. "Good God, I'm so full of self-pity I'm near to bursting with it."

"I really believe that Very has strong feelings for you," Daniel assured him.

Wolf was astonished that Daniel thought he questioned Very's feelings. "I know she does. Very loves me. But she also loves Kate and Jason and Tony. For understandable reasons they hesitate to encourage a match between us. Very hopes that by her constancy of affection for me she will win their approval. I cannot argue with her. I would also rather start our life together with their blessing. But she is still young."

"Too young to make a decision?" Simon asked. He tipped his hat to a young matron holding a toddler, who smiled coquettishly at him.

"No, I meant she is still young enough that we do not have to rush to the altar. There is time to do it right." Wolf strained to keep his eye on Very. The crowd was growing thicker, jostling him.

"Why do you think Jason and Tony, especially, hesitate to approve a match between you?" Daniel asked. He scanned the crowd continuously, and his calm demeanor helped Wolf remain calm when he could no longer see Very through the throng.

"I suppose because of Kensington. They know he and I were close, and that Very had feelings for him first. They believe our attachment for one another stems from our affection for Michael more than love of one another." He paused. "And of course because of what I did in the war."

"What we did in the war," Daniel said firmly. "We worked together. And they have no problem with me."

"Well, that's not entirely true, old man," Simon said. "They very much object to what you did, and the fact that you might be doing it again. Gentlemen frown upon spying and assassin work, don't you know. I wager that if you suddenly developed a romantic attachment to Very, they would object to you."

"Since the chances of my developing romantic feelings for Very are about the same as you settling down with a pious widow, I don't really think that's relevant," Daniel replied with acerbity. "And it certainly doesn't help me convince Wolf that it is time to stop dancing around and get to the point with Very. Whether or not Kensington returns is not the issue. The issue is that an unmarried Very wreaking havoc among London's eligible bachelors has given me a perpetual headache. I am tired of playing nursemaid and companion to her and I want Wolf to marry her and get her off my hands."

Wolf barked out a laugh. "I'd almost believe that if I didn't know how much you enjoy playing nursemaid to all of your acquaintances. But, yes, I agree with you. I want to marry her and get her off your hands, too."

That made Simon stop flirting and turn to him with his mouth agape. "You do?"

"Should I be offended on Very's behalf?" Wolf asked.

Simon shook his head. "No, I didn't mean it that way. I adore Very." He held up his hands defensively. "Like a little sister or a distant cousin. It's just, well, Kensington. I mean, we all assumed she'd marry him." He winced. "Perhaps that didn't come out right."

Wolf shrugged. "I assumed it once, too. But he's been gone too long. I can't wait until he decides to come back, his tail between his legs as always. I want Very now. When he returns, we'll still be here." He saw Daniel and Simon exchange a glance. "We're not going to rush into it. As I said, we have time. But I am going to be a bit more forceful with Jason and Tony about the seriousness of my intentions."

Daniel clapped him on the back. "That's it, my boy. Show no mercy."

Simon stopped suddenly and cocked his head. "Do you hear that?"

Wolf had been on too many missions with Simon during the war not to stop and immediately look about for danger. They were nearly to St. Peter's Field. "What? What do you hear?" Simon's second sense was legendary. His cold chills and shivers of premonition had saved all of their lives more than once.

Simon spun around, and the people walking behind him grumbled as they had to side step to avoid him. Daniel and Wolf immediately followed suit and scanned the streets around them. Simon suddenly pointed. "There! Damn it! I was afraid there'd be trouble, but not so soon." He grabbed Wolf's arm and shoved him backward. "Go! Fetch Very now and take her back to the inn!"

It was then the thunder of hooves could be heard. Wolf had a quick view of the shadow of cavalry coming down a side lane toward Peters Street. People screamed as the horses burst out of the lane into the crowd. One woman tried to run across the street carrying a child and was struck by a passing horse. The child flew from her arms and fell under the hooves of the charging horse brigade. None of the men stopped or even slowed down, but continued charging down the street, sabers drawn. In the blink of an eye both Simon and Daniel had plunged into the crowd, herding men and women out of the way of the horsemen.

"Christ," Wolf whispered. He spun around and dove into the now screaming, panicked crowd. He was heading for St. Peter's Field while most of the crowd had turned and were fleeing toward him. Where the hell was Very?

Very was so shocked at what was happening she didn't protest at all when Captain Macintosh grabbed her hand and began dragging her off the field. Men on horses were coming from every direction. They had their swords drawn, and were slashing at the unarmed crowd. When she saw a man run through with a sword as he tried to protect a woman in white Very screamed.

"What is going on?" she cried out to Macintosh. Just a moment ago Henry Hunt and the other speakers had ascended the steps up to the makeshift platform in the field. There had been no warning before the soldiers came, no rioting or violence. "Why are they attacking the crowd?"

"I don't know!" he yelled back. He was looking around frantically, dragging her around people who had fallen beneath the crush of the crowd trying to escape.

A woman screamed and Very looked back to see a white dress stained with crimson as a figure crumpled to the ground. "My God, Simon was right! They are targeting the ladies!" Very yelled. Macintosh didn't answer, just ran faster. Very lost her shawl and reticule as they tried to navigate off the field.

Her hair had fallen down around her shoulders and Very was suddenly brought up short as someone grabbed her hair and yanked her to a stop. "You!" a voice barked.

In a panic Very tried to tug her hair free, too frightened to turn and see whom it was. Macintosh turned and with an angry shout let go of her hand and dove for

whoever was behind her. Very was knocked to the ground when her hair was suddenly released. She rolled over and saw Macintosh wrestling with a soldier.

"For shame!" Very heard a man cry out. She looked to her left and there was an officer on his horse, shielding some people and admonishing his own men. "For shame, gentlemen! The people cannot get away!"

A brick landed on the ground next to Very and she covered her head. Soon a barrage of rocks and stones were raining down all around them. She was hit on the back and arms, and she tried to curl into a ball to avoid the heavy blows, terrified another soldier would appear and slash her with his saber. She heard Macintosh cry out, and peeked out from under her arm.

He was down! The soldier he'd been fighting with had been dragged away by a small crowd. Very crawled over to Macintosh. He was holding his side, half sprawled on the ground. "Macintosh!" she yelled to be heard over the crowd. She reached him and grabbed his shoulder. The eyes he turned to her were glassy and she realized he was bleeding profusely from his chest.

"Got...me," he whispered. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth as he collapsed in Very's arms.

"Oh my God," she cried out, looking frantically around. She couldn't think. This wasn't supposed to be happening! "Wolf!" she screamed, though she knew there was some reason she shouldn't be calling his name. But it was all she could think. "Wolf!" she screamed louder, closing her eyes to the chaos around her. Someone stumbled and fell over her, and she curled her body around Macintosh, trying to protect him. "Wolf!" she screamed again, though she knew it was futile.

"Very!"

The faint cry came from the crowd behind her. Wolf! It sounded like Wolf.

"Here! Here I am!" she yelled as loudly as she could. "I'm here! Help me!"

Very wrapped her arms around Macintosh as best she could and was alarmed to not feel him breathing. Frantically she felt for a heartbeat, but her hand slipped in the blood covering his torso. Then she felt it, a wide gash in his chest. A saber wound. She tore a piece of her dress off and crammed it on the bloody hole.

"Macintosh!" she yelled. "Can you hear me? Help is coming." She was startled by the sob that broke free from her clogged throat. Was she crying?

"Very!" Wolf fell to his knees beside her. "Are you hurt?" He was running his hands up and down her arms, around her rib cage. "Where?"

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. "It's Macintosh. He's been sabered, Wolf! You must help him. You must."

Wolf turned his attention to Macintosh immediately. "Where?"

"His chest, on the left," Very told him, her voice irritatingly shaky. Around them the noise and violence was abating as most of the crowd had escaped the field.

Wolf leaned down and put his ear to Macintosh's mouth. After a moment he looked up at Very and she knew before he even said it.

"He'd dead, Very."

Very shook her head in denial. "No, he can't be. He simply can't! He was protecting me, Wolf. This wasn't supposed to happen. He said it wouldn't happen."

Simon came running up to them, out of breath and disheveled, his hat and coat and walking stick missing. "Let's go!" he urged them. "They'll be rounding up stragglers soon, and you're likely to find yourselves in jail if we don't move along. Daniel is waiting for us at the edge of the field."

"It's Macintosh. He's dead," Wolf told him. He sounded so calm.

"Bloody hell," Simon yelled out. Very turned her startled gaze to him. Simon never yelled. He was holding his hair in bunches in his fists and cursing while he paced. He stopped and took a deep breath. "I'll carry him. You get Very. We have to go. Now!"

Wolf gently pulled Very's arms away from Macintosh. She hadn't even realized she was still holding him. "Come on, let's go, darling. Simon will take care of Macintosh. Can you walk?"

Very nodded, unable to speak. She was crying. Very never cried. She sobbed and when she stood her knees gave out.

Wolf swept her up in his arms. "I've got you, darling," he whispered.

It was the last thing Very heard. When she saw Simon throw Macintosh's limp body over his shoulder there was a rushing sound in her ears, and she suddenly couldn't breathe. The world narrowed down to a pinprick and then went black.

Very woke up disoriented. For a second or two she wondered what on earth had happened to that gold damask chair by the window in her room, and who had put up those hideous curtains? Then she remembered she was in Manchester. When she remembered Captain Macintosh and the march, she sat up quickly in the bed with a gasp. The sudden movement made her lightheaded and she wobbled. Before she could right herself, strong arms surrounded her and the bed dipped as someone sat down beside her.

"Very, my dear. Are you all right?" Tony asked quietly.

He was as dear to her as an uncle, a solid, steady, loving presence in her life for the last few years. He had brought safety and security into her life when he and Jason claimed her Aunt Kate as their wife and lover. But he was not the person she needed right then.

"I want to see Wolf. I need him."

She was surprised at how rough her voice was. Had she screamed and cried so much, then? There was a great deal she didn't remember, although she suspected that would change. Her head began to pound and she pressed her finger firmly against the center of her forehead, fighting the headache.

"You should rest," Tony said gently. "There will be time to see people later."

"Not 'people'," she answered sharply. "Wolf. I want to see Wolf. Would you get him, please?"

"Very," Tony said, his voice soft but firm. She cut him off.

"No more, Tony." She pushed away from him and looked him in the eye. "I'm done doing this your way." Tony looked like he was going to say something else. She held up a hand to stop him. "Just...don't. Could you please just do as I ask and fetch Wolf for me? I'm too tired and frightened and headachy to succumb to lust right now. I just want to talk to him." Tony looked skeptical. "Please?" she pleaded.

Tony sighed, but he stood up. "All right." He hesitated a moment, then sighed again. "It isn't that I don't like Tarrant, Very. I do." He ran his hand around the back of his neck in a frustrated gesture. "We just want what's best for you, that's all."

"I think I should be the judge of that." She tried to be firm, but she'd started to shake and her teeth were chattering. "Can we please talk about this later?" She was alarmed at how high her voice was getting. "I just need Wolf."

Tony started to reach for her, and to both her shock and his she jerked away, frightened. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's only..." She didn't know how to finish that sentence. She looked at Tony helplessly. "Wolf."

"Very."

She turned and he was there, in the doorway. Very had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep the choked sound she made from escaping. In an instant he was there beside her, sitting where Tony had been, and she was in his arms. With a sigh she held him close and closed her eyes.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. At least, not anything other than Wolf.

"You're always there when I need you," she whispered into his neckcloth. He smelled of the outdoors and damp linen. She didn't care. He was so warm. She began shaking again.

Without a word Wolf slid fully onto the bed. Resting his back against the headboard he turned Very so she was in his lap. He pulled the covers over her and she became acutely aware that she wore nothing more than a nightgown. When they were settled to his satisfaction he stroked her arm soothingly and said, "Yes."

Very couldn't help laughing a little. "So succinct. 'Yes'," she quoted in a deep voice. "No recriminations? No lectures?"

"No."

"I love you," Very confessed, then she felt foolish. It was hardly the time to throw that at him. "And I'm impossible," she rushed to add. "I know it."

Wolf didn't answer for a long while, just continued to run his fingers up and down her arm. She rested her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. Before long his fingers had moved to stroke her hair. Her head hurt.

"Tell me about Macintosh," he asked quietly when she was almost asleep.

Her hands instinctively clutched his jacket as a memory rushed into her mind. "Someone grabbed my hair. It was the soldier. Macintosh pulled him away from me. They fought." She had trouble catching her breath. "I fell and then someone was throwing bricks and rocks and I hid my head." She stopped. Suddenly she could feel the bruises and scrapes from the rocks that had hit her. She ached from her head to her toes.

After a few silent minutes, Wolf asked, "How was he wounded?"

Very shook her head wildly, biting her lip.

"Tell me," Wolf said. "We have to tell his family, you know. There could be trouble over it all, Very. I need to know."

She took a deep breath. "I don't know. I heard him cry out and when I looked up the soldier was being dragged away from him. I rushed over and he said...he said..." she swallowed several times, but the tears wouldn't go away. "He said, 'Got me,' and then he collapsed into my arms." She wiped her cheeks and ran her hand under her nose. She was as snotty as a babe.

Wolf's handkerchief was shoved into her hand. "Take this."

She sat up and wiped her face, but the tears were falling faster. "I..." She hiccupped. "I didn't realize he'd been sabered, not at first. Only when I tried to feel for a heartbeat...and there was so much blood my hand slipped...and I tore my dress but it wouldn't stop..."

Wolf gathered Very to his chest again and his tenderness destroyed her restraint. She cried her eyes out all over his jacket, hating every minute of her weakness. But when the storm passed she felt infinitely better, which made no sense whatsoever but seemed appropriate in a world gone mad.

"I suppose we should marry soon," was Wolf's calm response to her complete breakdown. "My name will offer you some protection should there be inquiries into today's fatal affair. I am not without connections."

Very's immediate reaction was joy that they would finally marry. But it was quickly followed by despair. "You would regret it sooner rather than later," she told him despondently. "I am difficult." She shook her head. "No, don't deny it."

Wolf chuckled and she felt his amusement against her cheek where it rested on his chest. "I wasn't going to," he said. "You are reckless, and willful, and spoiled."

Very pushed away from him and sat up with a frown. "Well, I wouldn't go that far," she muttered, crossing her arms.

Wolf dragged her back into his arms. "Very," he said quietly, "those are the things I love most about you." Very looked at him in surprise. He nodded. "Yes, it's true." He kissed her hair and hugged her tightly. "You are so very much alive, my darling," he whispered. "You live every moment with such emotion, such absolute, greedy abandon. I'm not like that, Very. I'm staid and distrustful. When I met you I was

disillusioned with life, and expected betrayal at every turn." He paused and sniffed, and Very tried to break away from his hold, but he held her fast. He laid his cheek against the side of her head. "You taught me how to live again." His voice broke and Very pressed closer, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I almost lost you today," he whispered. "I never wanted violence or hatred or any of this to touch you. I wanted you to believe you owned the world. I wanted to wrap you in cotton and bring the best of the world to you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you."

"But you were," Very cried out. She managed to pull back enough to cup Wolf's cheek in her palm. She slid her thumb through the tears she found there. "You saved me, Wolf. If you hadn't come..." She shuddered. "I don't want to think about that. When I was scared out of my mind all I could think of was you. I screamed your name though I didn't know you were there. Some part of me knew that I could count on you. You are my rock, Wolf. My hero, my foundation." He closed his eyes and turning his face, kissed her palm. "When all the world was going mad, I knew you would be the calm at the center of the storm. You are my center, darling."

"You never saw me," he said quietly, looking away toward the window. "You had eyes only for Michael." He turned back and pinned her with his gaze. "You never saw me until that night in the library, the night Michael left."

She cupped his face in both hands and held his gaze. "Now you are all I see."

"And Michael?" he asked.

Very shook her head. "Isn't here to be seen." He started to say something else, but Very pressed her fingers to his lips. "Shh. We'll talk about Michael later." She let out a little laugh. "I expect we shall talk about him endlessly. But not right now."

Wolf moved his head and freed his mouth. "And when he returns?"

"If he returns?" Very amended. She shrugged. "Then he shall find me a married woman, and I shall make him pay dearly for his transgressions."

Wolf grinned weakly. "What will I be doing?"

"Helping your wife torture him, of course," she answered.

Wolf laughed. "Of course." He leaned in to kiss her and she held her breath, but he stopped, so close she could feel the warmth of his mouth on her lips. "We shall be married as soon as we return to London," he told her.

"As soon as possible," she agreed in a breathy whisper.

"Thank God," a voice drawled from the doorway. Very and Wolf both jerked in surprise and looked at the doorway. Tony was leaning against the doorframe with a smile on his face. Jason stood behind him scowling. "I'm dreadfully tired of trying to keep you apart while you both decided whether or not you were going to do it properly," Tony said. "You two have worn us ragged the last year. I was about to order a minister and damn whether you two were ready or not."

Very laughed incredulously. "Oh, we're going to do it, all right. Go and order the minister and leave us alone."

Tony curtailed any response Jason might have made by pulling the door closed with a little salute. "As soon as we get to London," Jason called through the closed door.

Very barely heard him as Wolf's lips finally met hers. The kiss was far too gentle, and far too short. But oh, so delicious. She wanted more but she could see from the look on Wolf's face she wasn't going to get it.

"Now isn't the time," he whispered, kissing her forehead. "But after we're married? Well, then you'll get everything you've ever asked for. Then it will be my turn to spoil you."

Very shivered in anticipation.

* * * * *

"You shall regret being shackled to me," Very whispered to Wolf as the Reverend Mr. Stephen Matthews went on in pious tones about the glory of marriage. Wolf wasn't sure, but he thought it might be the same speech he gave at his friends Sophie and Ian's wedding.

It seemed to Wolf as if the nightmare of Manchester and St. Peter's Field was a distant dream, though it was only two weeks past. Thank God the authorities had questioned them only once and then dismissed them as unimportant.

"I believe the phrase is, 'You will rue the day,'" he whispered back.

Someone cleared his throat in a censorious manner. Wolf was relatively sure it was Jason, and accordingly ignored him. They stood in front of family and friends in the Randall drawing room. Wolf's family was not in attendance. They probably didn't even know about the marriage yet. His father was in the diplomatic corps and was somewhere in Europe. Wolf was quite sure they would be very relieved when they received his letter. They had been worried about him for far too long.

"You will rue the day," Very whispered. "Mark my words."

"I believe they were my words," he couldn't resist pointing out.

"Am I interrupting?" Stephen asked politely.

"Not at all," Very said, completely unflustered. "Do carry on."

Before Stephen could get back to his speech, Wolf told him, "Shackle us. Now."

"Repeat after me," Stephen told Very. "I, Veronica Marie Thomas, take thee, Wolfgang Marchand Tarrant, to be my wedded husband."

"I take you," Very said to Wolf. He laughed.

"I take you, too," he said.

"But I took you first," she countered.

"We shall see about that," Wolf murmured.

Stephen sighed. "Very well. You're married. Sign the papers."

"Well, that was decidedly unromantic," Wolf heard Simon complain. "We waited long enough. They couldn't have done it up proper for us?"

Wolf watched Very from across the room. The wedding luncheon seemed endless. Good God, how much could his friends eat? And the inane chatter was driving him mad. Couldn't they see he wanted to bed his new wife? Was there some unspoken agreement among them to make him wait as long as possible? As if the last three years of interminable, unsatisfied lust weren't enough. But he'd been told he couldn't leave with Very for their new townhouse until the guests left. Silly custom, if you asked him.

She was so bloody gorgeous he was hard pressed not to throw open the door and shout to passersby on the street that she was his, and he was going to finally, at last, fuck her until neither of them could walk straight.

She caught his eye and grinned. Then she deliberately dropped something on the ground and bent down in an extremely unladylike way to pick it up. Her gown was decadent. A light, cream-colored watered silk that clung to her curves indecently. Demure in cut, with not nearly enough of her delectable flesh on display, but wicked as it swirled around her, shaping a curvaceous hip and a plump buttock one moment, and then the long line of her leg the next. Wolf was mesmerized by it. The way it shaped the generous cheeks of her bottom as she bent over was nearly giving him an apoplexy. She had the audacity to look back at him, her arse taunting him from twenty feet away, and wink at him. God, she was glorious.

"You two are shameful," Simon observed next to him. "A disgrace to well-bred English brides and grooms across the nation."

"And we haven't even had the wedding night yet," Wolf calmly replied. "Imagine the national outcry tomorrow morning."

"How is she?" Daniel asked. He'd been rather quiet today. In Wolf's experience, that never boded well.

"She's fine," Wolf replied. When Daniel made no response, Wolf looked over to see the other man watching him knowingly. "All right," he said with a sigh. "The truth is she's having nightmares. Jason and Tony and Kate are worried sick over her. She's been...distracted after the dreams."

"What does she say?" Simon asked.

"She says it's all normal, considering what she went through. She tries not to dwell on it."

"You must give her time," Daniel said. "She's been very sheltered, you know." Before Wolf or Simon could speak, Daniel went on. "Yes, I know. Keeping company with a group such as this is hardly what most would consider sheltered." He gestured around the room to the various threesomes there, including Jason, Kate and Tony; Sophie and Ian Witherspoon and their lover, Derek Knightly; and Philip and Maggie Neville and their lover, Jonathan Overton. "But we have sheltered her from violence,

from the harsh realities of life. She has been cosseted and treated like a princess by all of us. Perhaps we did her a disservice."

"You forget what her life was like when Jason and Tony found her and Kate," Wolf said roughly. "Kensington prevented her from paying the greengrocer's bill with her virginity, for Christ's sake. She knows the world is not a nice place. She didn't need St. Peter's Field to teach her that."

"Of course not," Daniel said sharply. "But she hadn't seen that before, Wolf. She hadn't had a man die in her arms before."

"She will again tonight," Simon interjected smoothly. "Or I miss my guess."

"That, sir," Wolf said coolly, "is my wife you are speaking of. Kindly do so in a respectful manner or I will be forced to violence."

"Simon," Daniel chastised. "That was hardly appropriate."

"Oh, get off it, you two," Simon said testily. "If you can't tease a groom on his wedding day, when can you, I ask? And discussing Very's obvious charms is a sight better than arguing over whether or not she's as mad as a hatter now that she's seen violent death firsthand. We all survived, didn't we? That's more than I can say for that little lad trampled in the charge. You should be thanking God Very didn't see that."

Wolf took a deep breath and forced his mind to go blank. He would not relive the memory of watching the horses trample that small boy. Not on his wedding day. "You're right, Simon," he agreed. "I am thankful. And you are also right about Very's charms. All of which are mine to enjoy at my leisure for the next fifty or so years. Starting," he checked his pocket watch, "as soon as you all get the hell out of here."

Chapter Three

Very turned this way and that, checking her dress in the mirror. She'd debated about changing it before they left, but Wolf seemed quite enamored of it. Truth be told, she did look rather marvelous in it if she did say so herself.

Behind her, her Aunt Kate and Kitty Markham, her aunt's best friend, fussed over Very's trunk of clothing. They'd come upstairs with her to freshen up before she and Wolf left for their new home. She spun around. "Oh, Aunt Kate! I just can't believe how wonderful everything is! I'm so anxious to move into our new townhouse." On impulse she ran over and hugged Kate. "I'm so happy," she whispered.

"Are you?" Kate asked. She sounded worried.

Very pulled back and gave her a reassuring grin. "Yes, I really am."

Kate let her go and smoothed her hands down the front of her dress nervously. She was a tall, thin woman with hair so blonde it was almost white. She looked like a beautiful Nordic princess, or so Very had thought from the first moment her late Uncle Harry had brought her home. "I know I'm not your real mother, Veronica," she said with a little hesitation, "but I want you to know I'm here for you if you need me."

"Kate!" Very cried out. She grabbed her aunt's hands. "You are the mother of my heart." She pulled her in and hugged her again. "You took me in when my parents died and you became my mother in every way. I shall be forever grateful to you."

Kate sniffed and self-consciously broke free of Very's arms to search for a handkerchief. Very pulled hers out and handed it to Kate. Kate shook it at her. "Don't think I didn't see you dropping this all over the drawing room so you could preen for your groom." Kate blew her nose.

Kitty laughed. "I lost five pence to Knightly over it. I really thought she'd stop after the third drop. But he said she'd go five."

Very blushed. "Wolf does like it when I do that."

"Oh lord," Sophie sighed from her seat in front of the window. Upon the news that Very and Wolf were to be married Sophie had won one hundred pounds from Derek. But the truth was she'd been ecstatic at their impending nuptials, and when the two were alone she'd cried tears of joy with Very. Sophie was flipping through the pages of a book of poetry Very had left on the table there weeks ago. She hadn't picked it up since they'd come back from Manchester. She'd spent very little time in her room, actually. She'd spent every spare minute getting ready for the wedding, and she hadn't been sleeping well. She was so anxious to leave. She longed for her new house with Wolf with a zealous fervor that surprised her. She'd always been happy here with Kate

and the uncles. But it all seemed so strange now, as if she was a different person from the girl who used to sulk and daydream here.

"Don't indulge him, Very," Sophie advised. "The next thing you know he'll be dropping the handkerchief and demanding that you pick it up for his amusement."

"Sophia Witherspoon!" Kitty exclaimed. "Does Derek do that?"

Sophie wrinkled her nose. "Ian does it to Derek. But don't tell them I told you."

"Stop," Kate said sternly. She wrung her hands, and Very suddenly realized Kate was quite nervous.

"What's going on, Aunt Kate?" she asked suspiciously.

Sophie grinned at her from the window and wiggled her eyebrows.

"I should have spoken with you before now, of course," Aunt Kate said, "but the time never seemed right." She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "Do you have any questions? About the wedding night."

"Oh, good God," Very said, "you had me worried for a moment there." She waved a hand dismissively. "Kitty told me all about it years ago."

"What?" Aunt Kate asked in shock. She turned on Kitty. "What did you tell her?"

Kitty shrugged. "What I wish someone had told me before I bedded my first man."

Kate put a hand to her brow dramatically and reached behind her with the other hand, searching for the edge of the bed. When she found it she lowered herself down to sit there. "I feel a swoon coming on."

"And it isn't as if Sophie and I haven't discussed her marital relations in detail," Very added, just to shock her aunt. Kate did not disappoint. She turned a glare on Sophie.

Sophie held up both hands and looked entirely too innocent. Very knew she'd left innocent behind a long time ago. "Now, Kate," Sophie said nervously, "Kitty is right. There's no reason to keep a woman in the dark until her wedding day. Not that Very was ever in the dark." The last was said in a murmur as Sophie turned her head away, but Very heard her clearly.

"It isn't that I wanted to keep her in the dark," Kate defended herself. "It's just that...she was so young...and I...I didn't want to influence her."

Very snorted. "Yes, I can see how speaking to me about coitus would have been more influential than the fact that you married two men. At the same time. Sheltered and innocent, that's me." She blinked her eyes rapidly, feigning innocent wonder.

Kate glared at her. "It is entirely different. Kitty, tell her." She gestured at her best friend.

"Now, you see," Kitty said, her hands on her hips. "That is exactly why I told her what goes where and how to make it feel good when she was younger."

"It is going to feel amazing," Very sighed dreamily. "Utterly amazing."

Sophie leaned forward in her chair with a huge smile. "Utterly."

Kitty nodded. "Completely."

Kate fell back on the bed. "Totally, completely, utterly amazing," she agreed, throwing her arms out in abandon.

At that, all four women burst into laughter.

After a few more minutes of laughter and last-minute packing, Kitty and Sophie kissed Very on the cheek and wished her luck, leaving her and Kate alone.

"Very, come here," Kate asked quietly. She patted the bed beside her. Very sat down next to her and Kate took her hand. "How do you feel about Kensington's absence today?"

And there it was. "No one has mentioned his name today. Not once." She stood abruptly and walked over to the window. She pulled the curtain aside and saw the carriage parked in the street, waiting for her and Wolf. She broke out in goose bumps, both excited about leaving and dreading it in a strange way. She'd felt that way for the past two weeks. She'd had to force herself to leave the house, and she'd been a complete ninny the whole time she was away. She turned back to Kate. "I'm not going to lie. I wish he'd been here. He should have been here."

Kate looked troubled. "You still love him, then? What about Wolf?"

Very checked her hair in the mirror. "Our feelings for Michael haven't changed, Aunt Kate." She turned back to the older woman. "We are both still very much in love with him. And when he returns, after a sufficient period of suffering, we shall tell him so. But it made no sense to wait for him apart, when we could be waiting together. There was no reason to remain apart. I love Wolf. I can think of nothing," she paused, "nothing," she repeated for emphasis, "that I want more right now. I will never regret marrying him. I love him, Aunt Kate. Truly."

Kate got up and took Very in her arms. Very went willingly, seeking her warmth and the security she'd always found in her aunt's embrace. "I know you do, darling. And that's what scares me to death."

Very tightened her hold on her aunt. "Oh, Kate. Wolf loves me," she whispered. "He does. He treats me so well, and I know I matter to him. More than anything, I think. And he'll never leave, Aunt Kate. He'll never leave me." She pulled back, placing her hands on her aunt's shoulders and then she looked the older woman in the eye. "You must stop worrying about me. I will be fine. Better than fine." Kate managed a weak smile at Very's words. They were words that had become a promise of sorts between them, back when things had seemed so dark and then Jason and Tony had come and brought the sun with them.

Kate sighed. "And if Kensington doesn't return?"

"He'll come back," Very said, knowing in her heart that it was true. Believing it with all her might.

Kate stood and kissed her cheek. "Come on. We've kept your groom waiting long enough. If he's anything like your uncles, he'll be up here looking for you soon."

Very laughed. "Yes, he is and he will." She tugged on her aunt's hand. "Come on. I can't wait another second."

She pretended not to notice that her aunt still looked troubled.

"Are you all right?" Wolf was concerned. They'd only been in the carriage for a few minutes, yet Very seemed uncomfortable. No, more than that. Sick, really. As if the motion of the carriage was making her ill.

Very's lips thinned and she shook her head. Wolf had been keeping a bit of a distance between them, not sure getting close to Very at this point was a good idea. He really did not want their first time together to be a rushed encounter in a carriage immediately following their wedding, which was a distinct possibility if he so much as touched her. But he crossed over to sit beside her, taking her hand in his. Immediately her posture relaxed and she took a deep breath. Her hand clutched at his, as if she were terrified.

"What is it, darling?" Wolf asked gently, not sure how to tread with Very in this mood. She was never ill, and rarely frightened. "You mustn't fear tonight, dearest," he tried to reassure her. "We don't even need to..." He was at a loss for a word, a euphemism, anything. For months they'd been tormenting each other with wicked talk, using explicit language. Now he was suddenly self-conscious and couldn't bring himself to use the same words.

Very turned incredulous eyes to him. "Not fuck?" she said in horrified tones. "After all this time? Wolf Tarrant, you had better take me to bed as soon as we get home, or I fear for your safety."

Wolf laughed, both amused and relieved. Here was his Very. He wasn't sure what had upset her, but other than the pale cast of her face, she appeared to be back to normal. "Thank God. If I had to put off fucking you for one more day, I feared for my sanity."

Very suddenly threw herself into his arms. Wolf dragged her onto his lap, and then reached over to pull the shades down on both carriage windows. As his arms closed around her he noted she seemed thinner. She'd lost weight in the previous weeks. He buried his face in the fragrant, soft curve of her neck. He didn't know how he was going to be able to let her out of his sight now that she was his. Those few minutes in Manchester, when he'd seen the carnage all around, heard the screams, and not known whether or not she still lived had been the longest, most terrifying minutes of his life. Nothing he had ever experienced, not even during the war, had filled him with terror like the thought of Very's life cut short by a brutal saber, or a stampeding crowd.

He cupped the back of her head, knocking her bonnet askew. He didn't care. He wanted to feel the silk of her hair on his fingers, the pulse of her heart there, in the delicate hollow behind her ear. His lips found her cheek and he breathed in her scent as he relearned the taste of her.

"Wolf," she murmured, tipping her head back, inviting his lips to wander down her cheek to nip at her jaw. There was a noise outside and she tensed. "Will we be home soon?" she asked in querulous voice.

Wolf knew there was something not quite right about that voice, but his brain was fogged at the feel of her in his arms like this, the knowledge they didn't have to stop if they didn't want to. "Yes," he told her, dragging her lips to his. "And not a moment too soon."

Very's kiss had no hesitation in it, no fear. Wolf must have imagined it in her voice. She leaped into the kiss with abandon, opening her mouth and inviting him into her heat at the same time she thrust her delicate tongue into his mouth as if she owned it. And she did. They both knew it.

Very broke the kiss. "Touch me," she demanded breathlessly. She grabbed his arms and dragged them from around her, then cupped his hands over her breasts. They both moaned. "Oh, God," Very said, "I had no idea." She laughed a little wildly. "It feels...different. Knowing that we don't have to stop. That we won't stop. That no one can stop us." She leaned into his caress, and began kissing his jaw. Her lips found the same spot behind his ear that had so fascinated him on her. He shivered and his grip on her breasts tightened. Very moaned loudly, and Wolf grinned. She was no delicate flower. She wanted to know she was being made love to, wanted it rough and real. He'd known that. From the moment he met her, he'd known she wouldn't want it gentle and neat. It was one reason he desired her more than any other woman he'd ever known.

The carriage began to slow and Wolf felt the movement as it pulled over to the right. There was a shout from the driver and an answering call and he knew they'd reached their new home. He slid his hands around and rubbed them gently up and down Very's back. "Darling, we're home. Set yourself to rights, and we'll continue this as soon as possible."

Very looked at him with sleepy eyes, her pupils large black pools rimmed by bright blue. He was going to drown in those eyes later. He reached up and straightened her bonnet. "You'd best get off my lap before they open the door. They may know what we've been doing, but we don't have to actually show them."

Very laughed. She looked at the door as the carriage came to a stop and bit her lip, a little nervously he thought. But she slid over to sit on the seat next to him, and smoothed her skirts. "As soon as we can escape upstairs," she told him. "I mean it. No long greetings for the staff, or playing lord of the manor with instructions and other nonsense. I shall feign a swoon if you dare try to prolong it. I want you upstairs with me, making love to me within the half hour."

Wolf raised a brow at her imperious tone. "Oh, do you?" he asked coolly. "I shall fuck you well and good, Mrs. Tarrant, when it pleases me to do so. And you will wait on my bidding like a good wife should." He tried to keep a straight face, but he was laughing with Very by the time he got to the end of his sentence.

"Oh, that was a good one," Very said, wiping her eyes. "'Like a good wife should'," she imitated, setting them both off again into laughter.

When the footman opened the door they were sitting properly on the seat, but their laughter had the young man gaping. As soon as they were down the carriage steps Very clung to his arm as if her life depended on it. A glance in her direction showed him her face was pale again, her mouth flat and determined. "Very?" he inquired quietly, placing his hand over hers on his arm. He didn't want to draw attention to her distress.

"I'm fine," she said slowly. He saw her jaw flex as she gritted her teeth briefly. "Can we go inside, please?"

"Of course," Wolf said, suddenly aware he'd been standing there on the sidewalk with her, staring. He led her up the short flight of steps to the imposing black door of the townhouse. It had a large, ornate knocker and brass lanterns framed the lintel. It hardly looked like the sort of house he or Very would live in. Too serious by far. He grinned foolishly. Yes, he and Very were good together. Not too serious, not grim. Not like he used to be, before Very. The first thing he'd do was change that door. "Red, do you think?" he asked.

Very started next to him as the door was opened suddenly. "What?" she asked tightly.

Wolf realized he'd spoken aloud as if Very had been privy to his thoughts. "The door. I think we should paint it."

"Red?" Very asked. She practically ran inside the house. "Whatever you think," she answered vaguely, dragging him after her.

"Good afternoon, madam," said Jenkins. "Sir."

"Jenkins?" Wolf was surprised to see Jason's butler at his door. "What are you doing here?"

Very grinned, all signs of distress gone as she spun around to hug the butler. "Jenkins! You came!"

The butler cleared his throat and Very stepped back, straightening her back and settling her features into a more subdued expression that befitted the wife of a gentleman. Wolf was tempted to laugh again. "Yes, madam. Lady Randall and I agreed that it would be best if I were employed here to help you as you set up your new household."

Very's smile fell. "You're not staying?"

"Of course he is," Wolf answered for him. If it made Very happy to have him here, he stayed.

"We shall see," Jenkins said, not looking at Wolf as he took Very's reticule and bonnet.

"Does Randall know we've stolen you?" Wolf asked conversationally as the footman came to take his hat and gloves.

"Yes, sir," Jenkins answered. "Lord Randall was...persuaded to let Lady Randall handle staffing matters."

Wolf laughed as he looked over at Very, who was standing there with her hands held together innocently in front of her as she looked everywhere but at Wolf. "I'll wager he was."

"Shall we serve supper in the dining room this evening?" Jenkins asked. "Or would you prefer to dine tête à tête in your sitting room, madam?"

Very blinked at him in astonishment for a moment. "Oh, goodness. I can do that, can't I?" she asked with a huge grin. "Yes, Jenkins, that would be delightful. In the sitting room, if you please. Something light. With champagne. Can we have champagne?" she asked Wolf with a little frown.

Wolf walked over and tucked her hand into his arm again. He liked it there. "You may have barrels of it, my dear, if it pleases you."

Very hugged his arm to her. "A barrel of champagne then, Jenkins, please."

"If we have no barrels in the cellar, madam," the butler said with a straight face, "I shall bring a bottle." Wolf looked at him over his shoulder. The butler sighed. "Two bottles?" he amended. Wolf smiled.

Very was in the middle of a conundrum. If she didn't get Wolf upstairs and unclothed within the next ten minutes she was going to melt into a puddle of deranged want right there in the foyer. On the other hand, Jenkins was standing there looking at them expectantly. He was like a kindly grandfather sort of butler, and she adored him. She simply could not make herself embarrass him by running upstairs with her groom the minute they arrived home. It was...unseemly. He'd be terribly disappointed in her. He'd tried so hard the last few years to turn her into a lady. He'd failed miserably, of course, but she didn't like to rub his nose in it.

She looked at Wolf. He was watching her as if she was his dinner and he was starving. Which made her equally as hungry for him. And yet they stood here talking about supper. Someday she might laugh about this. Right now she wanted to cry. She was suddenly tired and cranky, and to her shock actually felt tears gather in her eyes.

Jenkins sighed. "You really must rest, Mrs. Tarrant." He politely gestured her and Wolf ahead of him, toward the stairs. "This has been a trying day, after an equally trying month. You should rest. All afternoon."

"Thank you, Jenkins," Wolf said as he calmly led Very up the first few stairs. "Mrs. Tarrant is tired. We shall ring for supper when we're ready."

"Of course, sir," Jenkins said with a small bow in their direction. "You shall not be disturbed." He turned and disappeared into the back of the house with a serene expression.

Very was stunned. "Did he just order us upstairs and into bed together?"

Wolf smiled wickedly. "I knew I liked him."

Very smiled back. "Race you," she said quietly. Wolf was completely unprepared when she hiked up her skirt and broke for the top of the steps. She laughed as he called her name from below. By the time they'd raced to the second floor, he had overtaken her. A startled maid fell back against the wall as they raced past her. Wolf turned into the master bedroom first, Very only a few steps behind. He spun around to face her, his grin victorious, as she raced in. She barely lost a step as she slammed the door behind her and ran into his arms. He wasn't prepared for her and stumbled back a few steps as he caught her against his chest.

"Mrs. Tarrant," he said breathlessly as he regained his footing and lifted her up onto her toes with his arms wrapped around her waist. "Fancy meeting you here."

He kissed her roughly and Very wrapped her arms about his neck and held on. They fit together perfectly. They were practically the same height. When she was on her toes like this, their mouths were even. He tasted so delicious, like the cider they had drunk at the luncheon. His mouth was startlingly hot and slick, and Very moaned in appreciation. He left her mouth to trail kisses down her cheek and then along her jaw.

"Fancy it," Very gasped.

Wolf laughed, his mouth pressed to the pulse pounding in her neck. She shivered as his breath caressed her skin. He rubbed her body against his, and she could feel his hard member against her stomach. She wrapped her leg around his, nearly falling as her skirt got in the way. "Damn," she muttered, trying to kick free of it.

She jostled Wolf with her kicking, and he stopped kissing her neck. "Would you care to know what I'm thinking?" he asked, the calm question belied by his breathlessness.

"That these clothes are completely unnecessary, and in fact are the bane of my existence?" Very queried.

Wolf's burst of laughter quickly settled into a gentle chuckle. He tucked a strand of hair that had fallen from its pin back behind her ear. Very was amazed that he seemed to have no trouble at all holding her up with one arm. "No. I was thinking that it hardly seems real, to have you here with me right now."

Very felt decidedly unromantic at that moment because that was most definitely not what she was thinking. She was thinking supremely earthy thoughts, such as how his bare skin would feel pressed against hers in the heat of passion. She grew suspicious as she noted that he was deliberately trying to put space between them, as his breathing grew more ragged by the second. His cock was most definitely thinking the same thoughts she was, hard and long against her stomach. "Wolf, darling, what are you doing?" She tried not to sound too impatient.

A slight blush flushed his cheeks. "I don't want to rush our first time," he admitted. "I'm trying to make it good for you."

Very blew out an exasperated breath. "Oh, for heaven's sake. We've waited months, Wolf. Years. Slow is unnecessary. I want fast. I want rough, mad, passionate love. I want you to take me like a savage." With each word his jaw clenched a little harder and

his arms tightened around her. "Now. Let's try that again. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? That these clothes are unnecessary. So on and so forth."

Wolf fought a grin for a moment and then feigned a thoughtful look for a second. "Close enough," he agreed, setting her on her feet. "Off with them." He got a wicked gleam in his eye. "Didn't you once declare clothes were essential to your existence?"

"That was when I couldn't take my clothes off for you," Very told him flatly. "So don't let it trouble you."

Very reached behind her back to undo the ties on her dress and couldn't reach them. Her eyes widened in dismay. "This is why Kitty asked if I was sure I wanted this dress! Oh, drat! Why didn't she say something?" She spun in a useless circle, trying in vain to reach the ties.

Wolf stopped her before she made herself dizzy. "You really need to overcome your shyness," he teased. "I certainly hope I won't have to work this hard to persuade you out of your clothes in future." She felt the ties loosen under Wolf's deft fingers.

"Very amusing, Mr. Tarrant." Very put her hands on her hips. "For that so-witty remark the clothes stay on next time."

"That will not be a problem, so don't let it trouble you," Wolf whispered behind her, and kissed her exposed nape. "I can work around clothes."

Very turned to him, holding her dress up with a hand pressed to her breastbone. "You too," she said, gesturing with the other hand at Wolf's jacket. He began to unbutton it, taking an aggravatingly long time to slip two buttons free. Very grew impatient and shrugged the dress off her shoulders. It fell to her waist, and Wolf took a step back to look her up and down, his hands frozen with the next button half undone. She was encouraged by the heated look in his eyes as they met hers, and pushed the dress over her hips so it fell to the floor.

"Good God," Wolf whispered. "Is that what you normally wear under your clothes? If so, it's probably a good thing I didn't know it." His fingers were fumbling with the buttons on his coat, until at last they were free. He tore the coat off, turning it inside out, and, uncaring of its welfare, tossed it to the floor.

Very smoothed her hands down the front of the diaphanous chemise she wore. It had a very low neckline, barely covering her nipples, and as she tugged it down she could feel the material clinging to those hard points, held on by sheer arousal alone. The flush on Wolf's cheeks darkened and his breathing became more erratic as his gaze followed her hands down. She slid her palms around to glide down over her hips onto her thighs, pulling the chemise tighter against her front. She knew the material was so thin you could see the dark triangle of curls between her legs clearly.

"This is perhaps a little more revealing than my normal attire," she admitted in a husky voice. Wolf's devouring look had her pulse pounding everywhere his eyes touched—her breasts, her throat, her sex. She was thankful Kitty had steered her true in this garment at least.

"Can Kitty make you another?" Wolf finally asked. His voice sounded as if it were being forced out of his throat.

Very nodded. Kitty owned a dress shop. "Yes, she can make as many as I ask for."

"Good." With that one word Wolf stepped closer at the same time his hands grabbed the neckline of her chemise. Very gasped as he tore the garment right down the center. He challenged her with a smoldering look. "Is that passionate enough?"

Wolf's arm snaked around her waist under the torn material and dragged her against him. The bare skin of her breasts and stomach against the soft material of his shirt and trousers was so erotic Very felt her sex clench tightly and a thrill of pleasure go through her. She closed her eyes and shuddered in Wolf's embrace. When she slid her hands up the front of his thin muslin shirt she received great pleasure from the feel of his muscles rippling under her caress. He adjusted her against him, so that his cock was pressed to her mons, and Very's arms went around his neck and she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt as she spread her legs and thrust her hips into his.

"Wrap your leg around me," Wolf ordered her. She didn't protest his high-handed manner. They were both thinking the same thoughts now and she had no desire to lead them off the path they were on. Instead she did as she was told. Wolf grabbed her thigh and pulled it higher so her leg was wrapped around his hip. It tipped Very off balance, but Wolf's grip on her was so strong she didn't fear falling. He surprised a gasp out of her when he picked her up with one arm and took two steps forward. Then he rested his booted foot on the low wooden bed support, so that Very's raised leg was supported by his, her other foot on the ground. The new position steadied them both, and they dove into another scorching kiss.

It was so different from their past kisses and caresses. Then their encounters had been rushed and furtive, leaving her unsatisfied. There was no sting of expected disappointment tingeing her arousal now, only anticipation. And the anticipation was a sweet ache, a desperate ache. She shuddered as her sex brushed against Wolf's hard thigh. She wanted to feel more of him.

Frantically she reached for his cravat, yanking on it until it came loose. Wolf made a sound that could have been arousal, approval, or perhaps she had just choked him. She really didn't care since the wretched piece of cloth was off now. Her hands delved into the open neck of his shirt. Wolf finally broke their kiss with a gasp, and Very sucked air into her lungs, not realizing until that moment how badly she needed to breathe. She'd been clinging to that kiss like it alone could sustain her.

She rained kisses on Wolf's chest. It was hard, muscular and the heat of his skin made her lips tingle. He had hair on his chest, a heavy dusting of light hair in the center and she rubbed her nose and cheek in it. So soft. She let her hands slide under the material of his shirt and Wolf jumped when her palms encountered his small, hard nipples. She rested her forehead on the triangle of bare chest revealed by his shirt as she rubbed her hands in circles over his nipples. Wolf groaned. He reached between them and yanked the tails of his shirt from his trousers.

"Very, pull away." He gently pushed against her shoulders. "I want to take it off."

Very jerked back. "Yes. Off." She reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up at the same time Wolf reached behind his back to pull it off over his head. They both laughed as their efforts worked against one another.

"Me," Wolf said.

"You," Very agreed and dropped her hands to run them over his stomach as Wolf jerked his shirt off over his head and threw it away.

Very could only stare. He was like one of the Greek statues in the British Museum. She ran her hands over the soft skin of his torso. Her thumbs met in the thin line of hair that arched down his stomach to the top of his trousers. She followed the path, her hands splayed across his midriff. She felt his muscles quiver, heard him suck in a sharp breath. He wasn't as muscular as some of the statues. He was sleek, though, as sleek as he'd looked in his jacket. But his muscles still bulged, from his chest, his shoulders, his arms, in a pleasing way, a way that said here is a strong, fit man, just made for love. Without thinking Very leaned forward and kissed his chest and Wolf's hand cupped the back of her head.

"Here," he said, guiding her mouth to his nipple. "Kiss me there." His voice was a rough whisper, and Very knew it was lust giving him that desperate growl. With a hunger that surprised her she kissed the berry of his nipple, then licked it. "Yes," he hissed, his hand tightening in her hair. She circled the nipple with the tip of her tongue, toying with it, sucking on it, and Wolf growled. She loved that sound from him. He had done that on their boat rides on the lake when she said something particularly wicked, when their arousing conversations had gone too far.

Wolf pulled her face up to his and kissed her again. She'd thought they'd been aroused to a fever pitch before, but this was better, more. His mouth was open, hot and wet and devouring. His arms around her waist pulled her tight to him and Very nearly cried at the kiss of his bare chest to hers. She rubbed against him like a cat, and again she felt her sex clench in need. She was close to ecstasy just from this, from finally giving herself—her body, her soul—to Wolf, so close to doing everything they had promised and dreamed and spoken of.

She felt the silken glide of Wolf's hand along the crease between her raised leg and hip, and she pumped her hips closer, seeking his touch. He didn't deny her. His hand reached between her legs and covered her mound. She gave a muffled cry against Wolf's hungry mouth.

He was panting roughly as he pressed a hard kiss to her cheekbone. "So wet," he growled. "So hot." His fingers were running along her sex, seeking her crevices, spreading her moisture.

"Wolf, please," she begged. Her hips thrust, wanting more.

"I told you you'd beg," he said, his voice filled with male satisfaction. Any other time Very would have taken offense, but not here. Not now. He was right.

"I told you I would." She could hear her submission in her voice. Hear how much she wanted him, that she'd do anything for him. And it felt right and good.

"Again," he demanded in a harsh whisper against her ear. She shivered and he gently bit her earlobe.

"Wolf, please," she begged again. "Please." She thought she might cry if he didn't do something.

His finger slid inside her channel firmly, until his palm rested against the sensitive spot at the top of her slit.

"Wolf." It was a tremulous cry of surrender. Wolf enjoyed her reaction, she could tell. She didn't try to hide how good it felt, she didn't try to be worldly or blasé. She filled his name with her wonder, her longing, her love. She gave it all to him, and trusted him to fulfill his promises.

"Yes," he answered her, as if there had been any question. "God, Very, you feel even better than I imagined during all those lonely nights in my solitary bed. Wetter." His finger slid out and then back in. Very moaned. "Hotter." His wicked voice was hot and moist against her ear. Again he moved his finger in and out, his palm jamming into her little bundle of nerves. She cried out in pleasure. "Tighter." Out and in again. "Mine."

The feeling was exquisite. Torture. Ecstasy. To have Wolf inside her, even in such a small way. She felt every bit of that finger fucking her. She felt all those things he'd said—wet, hot, tight. The pleasure was indescribable. Her hips moved, wanting it, wanting to be fucked. "So good," she cried out in a trembling voice as his finger withdrew and then claimed her again.

"Fuck me, Very," he whispered, just as he had all those times on the lake, when she couldn't, when it was just fantasy. "Fuck me like you've been wanting to."

"Yes, yes, yes," she moaned, doing just as he'd asked, fucking his finger as she clung to his shoulders and his voice in her ear.

"I want you to come, Very," he told her. "I want to feel this little cunt come on my hand, and then I'm going to fuck you properly. I'm going to finally claim what's mine."

"Oh God." She loved when he talked to her like that. So lewd and rough, like he had the right to talk to her like that because he knew she wanted the same things. He'd said those things to her before and left her aching afterward, so much so that her own hands and fingers weren't enough to satisfy her. "I want you to fuck me. I want it." The last was said in a high cry as her climax hit, hard and wild. Wolf ground his palm against her mound as he rubbed his finger inside her and hit a spot that made her shriek at the sharp sting of pleasure. Wolf covered her mouth with his own, his hand on her nape twisting her head at a sharp angle to accommodate his kiss. It was a claiming, too, a statement of ownership as he swallowed her cries and held on to her sex.

When her climax abated, Wolf slowly removed his finger and petted her between her legs. She liked it, liked feeling how wet he made her, and how he clearly enjoyed the feel of her.

"How do you feel?" he asked. He sounded impatient, which made Very smile.

"I feel fine."

"No bruises anymore? No aches?"

She realized he was talking about her injuries from Manchester. She broke away with a shiver, stumbling a little as she pulled her leg from his waist, suddenly feeling cold and clammy. "No. I'm fine." He didn't believe her. She could see it in his face.

"Turn around." He didn't wait for her to obey him. He grabbed her arm and spun her around, pulling off one sleeve of her torn chemise to expose her back. He ran his hand down her spine as if he were a doctor.

"Stop it," she said, jerking away and turning to glare at him.

He was unfastening his trousers. "Good," he told her. "I didn't want to hurt you. I'm going to try to be gentle, but by God, Very, I've waited a long time for this and I don't know if I can."

His words washed away her anger and uneasiness. "Don't be. I told you I don't want gentle. I want to be fucked just like that, like you've waited too long for me and can't wait another second."

Wolf shoved his pants down to his hips and Very greedily took in her first look at his cock. It was wonderful. The tip looked plump and soft, and the drop of moisture crowning it made her mouth water. It was a deep pink, the same color as his nipples. The shaft looked firm, hard enough to satisfy her with a good fuck. She imagined his cock was the perfect size to fill her up, to make her moan and cry out in pleasure as it fucked her like his finger had. She wanted that to happen, wanted to be driven beyond speech or care as he slid in and out of her roughly. She wanted that cock more in that moment than anything she had ever desired in her life. She ached for it, actually felt her channel tighten and throb in anticipation of it.

"Christ," Wolf whispered. Her gaze flew up to meet his. His desire was blatant, not just in his rearing cock, but in his hard nipples and flushed cheeks and glittering eyes. "I've never seen a woman want it as much as you do right now."

Very backed up slowly, until her knees hit the mattress. Wolf followed her step for step, just as slowly, hunting her. His nostrils flared, as if he could smell her arousal. Without taking her eyes off him Very climbed on the bed backward. She didn't take her torn chemise off. Something told her that the ragged garment hanging from one shoulder was part of what he wanted right then. She still wore her stockings and shoes. She left those on, too. She lay down carefully, and raised her arms to rest them on the bed above her head, thrusting her breasts out, inviting him to enjoy her. "I do want it," she whispered, watching him and waiting.

"Spread your legs and raise your knees," Wolf ordered. "Keep your arms just like that." His voice was so hard and rough. Very loved it. Loved being told what to do. Loved giving in to him the way he wanted. Anything, she'd do anything for him, with him. She spread her legs and then slid her feet along the bedcover until her knees were

high. She was completely exposed. Her sex clenched and she arched her back in pleasure.

Wolf crawled on the bed. He paused between her legs and shoved his pants further down his thighs. He hadn't wasted time taking the rest of his clothes off, either. He was going to fuck her with his boots on. For some reason that thrilled her. He leaned over her, carefully placing a fist on either side of her shoulders. Then he rubbed his cock against the hot center of her and she moaned, grinding against his length. "Inside," she begged.

"You know it's going to hurt," he growled.

"Only a little," Very panted. "Only at first. They told me."

"Tell me." Another order. "Tell me if it's too much."

She nodded. Before her head had stopped moving he pushed inside. He hadn't lied. He wasn't gentle and it did hurt. But the pain was inconsequential compared to the absolute joy she felt at finally being with him this way. Belonging to him this way. She was stretched around his hard length, and she fought not to struggle against his possession. It was all consuming, this act of love, this taking. And it was a taking. He took her emptiness and filled it, took away her loneliness and fear and, before long, even the pain of his entry, until all she felt was him. Everywhere, all around her, inside her – him.

A small sound escaped and he froze. It was odd. He hadn't been moving anymore, had pushed his whole length in and then stopped, as if to give her time to adjust. But when she made that small noise, he went still, his muscles locked in place, so different from his relaxed stillness of a moment before. "Very?" he said, and it sounded as if he forced it out through gritted teeth.

In answer she moved her arms, reaching down and cupping his backside, pulling him in deeper. They both moaned. "It just felt so good. You feel so right."

At her words he lowered his torso until her breasts were pressed to his chest and he kissed her. His kiss was rough again, a little wild. It was clear the kiss wasn't for her. It was for him, because he needed the taste of her on his tongue, and so she gave it to him. She wrapped her arms around his lower back and opened her mouth and just held on, letting him take her where he wanted to go. He didn't stop kissing her as he began to move. His first two thrusts were slow and gentle, testing. She met his movements with her hips, widened her thighs so he could get closer, deeper, and wrapped her legs around his. It was enough to convince him. He began to push into her, hitting her mound just right, sending waves of pleasure through her with each jolt. She was tender, but the pain only intensified the pleasure.

"Yes," she groaned. "Fuck me, Wolf. Oh God, finally." She clutched at his back, dug her nails in and fucked him back.

"Dammit," he growled, "that feels too good. I can't last." He started to slow down and Very scratched his back.

"Don't you dare." She could hardly talk she was panting so heavily. She wanted to feel his release inside her right now. The hot, wet heat of it filling her. She cried out at the thought.

Her cry had him moving again, slamming into her. The climax took her by surprise. It wasn't as intense as the first, but it was there and she pressed into him, holding onto it. Wolf buried his hands in her hair, pulling it unconsciously, and his mouth latched onto her neck as he shuddered above her. And then she felt it. Felt his impossibly hard cock jerk inside her, felt the warmth that sparked another bolt of pleasure that made her clench down on his shaft. It was a circle, his pleasure intensifying her own, her pleasure driving his higher.

When it was over, when he slumped on top of her and she released his back with a groan, he rolled over, and held her close against his chest. Her torn chemise dug into her shoulder. "Ow." She didn't have the energy to do anything about it. She yawned. She was suddenly so tired she could hardly keep her eyes open. She mewled a complaint when Wolf slid out from under her.

"Let me get these things off," Wolf said quietly. He pulled the chemise out from under her and slid it down her arm. Then she felt him pull off her shoes. She didn't even open her eyes. Once he'd tucked a blanket around her, she gave up the fight and let sleep take her.

Wolf woke with a start. Very lay next to him, thrashing and kicking at the blankets. He put a hand on her arm and she screamed, sitting bolt upright in bed, nearly knocking heads with him.

"Very!" he called out. He grabbed her arm and shook her. She was cold, her skin covered in goose bumps and perspiration. She yanked her arm from his grasp and rolled off the bed, falling onto all fours. He scrambled after her, terrified she'd hurt herself. At the sight of him jumping off the bed, Very scuttled away backward on her hands and feet, like a crab, shaking her head.

"No!" she said. Her back hit the wall and she huddled there, one hand outstretched as if to ward him off.

Wolf froze. He took a moment to take a deep breath and calm down. She was fine. It was just a nightmare, and his chasing after her in the dark wasn't helping. He turned to the small bedside table and lit the candle there. Then he squatted down beside the bed, so that his face was on a level with hers. "Very? Very, it's me, Wolf."

"Wolf," she said. There was nothing there for a moment, no understanding or feeling. Then she blinked and it was as if she woke up, though he'd seen her eyes open. "Wolf," she said again, her voice tiny and frightened. He rushed to her side when she held her open arms out to him.

"Mr. Tarrant?" There was a pounding on the door. "Is Mrs. Tarrant all right?" It was Jenkins.

"Don't let him come in," Very pleaded with a bruising grip on his arm. "Don't let him see me like this."

"She's fine, Jenkins," Wolf called out. "She simply stumbled in the dark."

"Shall I bring your supper?" he asked through the door.

Very nodded. "Yes," Wolf answered. "But give us a few minutes."

"Of course, sir." They stared at one another as his footsteps faded.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Very let go of him and looked at her hands, then she began to rub them together, as if washing them. But her motions grew rougher and her distress grew. Finally Wolf grabbed her hands. "What are you doing?"

"I've got blood on them," she said.

In horror Wolf yanked her hands closer to the light, turning them over to examine them. They were fine. There was nothing there. His heart was near to pounding out of his chest. She tried to pull her hands free. "There's nothing there, Very," he said slowly. "You're perfectly fine."

"I killed him." Her voice was small and dead.

Wolf couldn't stop from dragging her into his arms. She made no response, simply laid her head on his chest while he held her. "No, you didn't. You must believe me. It's just a nightmare. It will pass. You'll see."

He sat on the floor with his back to the wall and held her like a child, petting her hair and her back. "We shall go see Kate tomorrow. Would you like that?"

At that Very's arms flew around his shoulders and she clutched him. "Not tomorrow. I don't want to go." She was shaking. "We can stay here together for a few days." She sniffed and let him go, and then wiped her cheeks with her palms and gave him a watery smile. "You're right. I'm fine." She cupped his cheek briefly and then stood up and began picking their clothes up off the floor as if nothing had happened. Wolf felt his stomach lurch. "Besides," she went on, "I invited everyone for tea on Thursday. They shall want to see how we get on, won't they?" She smiled too brightly. "We don't have to leave before then. We'll see them Thursday. They'll come to us." She turned to him, clutching the clothes to her chest. "Yes?"

After a moment's hesitation Wolf agreed. "Yes." Instinct told him it was the wrong answer, but he crushed his reservations and gave Very what she wanted.

Chapter Four

Seven months later, April 1820

"We are going shopping tomorrow afternoon. Very, would you care to come?"

At Kate's words the entire room froze. All their friends were there, just as they had been every Thursday afternoon for the last seven months. Thursday tea at Very's, they all joked. But there was nothing funny about it at all. Not to Wolf.

He schooled his features into a pleasant if disinterested mask so that when Very looked at him anxiously she wouldn't see the wretched fear and anger that clenched his gut at Kate's seemingly innocent question. It wasn't innocent, of course. Everyone knew it was quite deliberate, as it was every Thursday. Perhaps even Very knew.

He wasn't sure. They'd never discussed it.

She glanced at him and then she abruptly turned away, rattling her cup in its dish nervously. "I don't believe so, Aunt Kate. Not tomorrow. Perhaps next week?"

The same answer she had given every Thursday since Kate started asking. Wolf had lost track of how many months ago that had been.

An awkward silence met her refusal. Very placed her cup on the table with an audible thud. She looked at Wolf and indicated the door with a slight twist of her head.

Wolf obediently stepped forward. "My dear, do excuse us. But I'm sure the gentlemen would like to join me in my study for a time."

It wasn't out of the ordinary. Every so often they did just that. When Wolf was in need of something stronger than tea.

Very beamed at him. "Of course, darling! You go right ahead." She smiled and held out a hand to Sophie, who obligingly took it. "I'm sure the ladies have a great deal of gossip and whatnot to share with me."

Wolf bowed slightly to the ladies and the gentlemen filed out of the room with murmured excuses. They all seemed as eager to get out of the drawing room as Wolf felt. So many undercurrents at work here. Too many. He was drowning in them.

When they reached his study he didn't bother to hold the door. He walked right over to a table in the corner and poured himself a whiskey. He was going to need it. He turned and there was a line behind him of men waiting for a glass of their own. He waved a hand at the assembled bottles. "Gentlemen, serve yourselves."

He perused his friends as they poured their drinks. So many paired off. He was past the jealousy now. A few months back he hadn't been able to even look at any of his old friends who had found happiness together with a wife shared by both men. That had been his dream for himself and Very and Michael. His friends were here a great deal now, someone stopping by every day to keep Very company and check up on them.

Wolf was grateful. He'd hated himself for the jealousy. Now he just felt...empty. Nothing.

"We were summarily dismissed," Jason observed. "Care to tell us why?" He settled comfortably on the sofa by the door as he awaited Wolf's answer. Wolf had an odd moment where he saw images of Jason flash through his mind. Times when Jason had occupied that same spot over the last seven months, different clothes, different days, but the same olive green sofa, the same position—one leg casually crossed over the other, one arm along the back as he sipped his drink.

"Very is pregnant," he said. He'd been going to dance around it, lead up to it gently for Ian and Derek's sake. But something harsh inside him made him say it just so. He was tired of delaying his own joy for the comfort of others. What should have been one of the happiest times of his life was tinged with bitterness. The sour taste of it made him take a mouthful of whiskey to wash it away.

Derek spun around to face him. "What?" His face had washed out to a gray pallor. He was a big man, strong and muscular, yet those three simple words brought him low. He put his drink down and started for the door.

Wolf intercepted him. "No."

Derek pulled his arm out of Wolf's grasp. "What do you mean, 'no'? Sophie—" He broke off and looked away for a moment. His jaw flexed in anger. "Sophie will need me."

Ian walked up and stopped by Derek's side. He discreetly took hold of Derek's forearm between them. He was fair to Derek's dark, calm to Derek's storms. "No, Wolf is right. Very needs to tell her, and she doesn't need us there to complicate it." He sighed, and then turned and walked over to the nearest chair, wearily sitting down. "Our presence would only make matters worse. Sophie feels guilty enough about her failure to conceive without our worry compounding it." He started to take a drink but stopped with his glass halfway to his mouth. Almost as an afterthought he tipped his glass in Wolf's direction. "Congratulations."

Wolf nodded once in acknowledgment.

"Yes," Derek said. He was trying so hard not to be sullen or angry. That was always a struggle for him, and today the battle must have been doubly difficult. "Congratulations."

Wolf looked over at Tony. The older man was watching him closely. "What does Dr. Peters say? Will there be problems?" he asked, the strain in his voice evident. He adored Very as if she were his own daughter.

Wolf laughed mirthlessly. "Problems? No. Actually, the fact that she never leaves this house is probably the best thing she could do to protect herself and the baby from harm." He leaned back against his desk, half sitting, and set his glass down beside him. "She is quite healthy, Tony, at least physically."

"There is nothing wrong with her," Jason growled. He stood up and faced Tony, who was on the other side of the room. "She is simply frightened by what happened in Manchester. We should never have let her go."

"It has been seven months, Jason," Tony replied in clipped tones. "This is beyond normal fright. No healthy, sane person refuses to leave her house for seven months."

"She is not deranged." Daniel finally spoke from his position standing against the wall near the table holding the whiskey. Simon was holding up the wall next to him. Simon refused to look at anyone in the room, instead staring into the amber depths of his tumbler.

"Her reaction is extreme, of course, but not dissimilar to some I saw in the war," Daniel continued. "Traumatic events affect different people in different ways."

Wolf had heard it all before. He looked out the window. The sky had grown dark, and the first cold drops of an early spring rain were tapping at the glass.

"She left the house several months ago," Jason replied curtly.

Wolf couldn't contain his burst of disbelieving laughter. "I do not call what occurred leaving the house."

Wolf could feel Jason's accusing glare between his shoulder blades. "You handled it wrong."

"I handled it the way we agreed upon," Wolf said through clenched teeth. "I did what we all thought best. And might I point out that I was the only one here handling it, and the aftermath."

"You didn't want us here," Jason fired back. "You foolishly thought you could do it alone."

"If you had all been here to see her abject humiliation and misery, it would have been worse for her." Wolf grabbed his drink and stalked over to stare morosely out the window. *Let it rain*, he thought. *Let the heavens pour down their sorrows. They would not be going out in it.*

"It made her physically ill, Jason, when Wolf tried to force her out of doors. She cast up her accounts on the sidewalk and fainted dead away. She wouldn't see us for two weeks after. Do you really want her to go through that again?" Tony argued.

"Christ, Wolf," Derek said. His voice was full of the apology he hadn't been able to say earlier.

Wolf wanted to hit him. Instead he just stared at the rain, as if it would tell him something. Anything.

"Can she care for the child?" Daniel asked.

That made Wolf turn around at last. "What do you mean?"

Daniel shrugged. "Is she deficient in either the capacity to love it, nurture it, or physically care for it?"

"You bloody bastard," Wolf said in shock. "She is no different than she was before! Of course she can care for it. She wants this baby so much it's frightening. If something

were to happen..." He didn't finish the thought. He didn't have to. "Do you think I would have—" He broke off at Jason's thunderous expression. "Had relations," he continued cautiously, "with her if she were deficient in such a manner?"

"No." Daniel sipped his drink. "I just wanted to make sure you, and everyone else here, knew that."

Daniel's statement seemed to ease the tension in the room. Wolf realized the truth of his own words—Very was the same in almost every way. Even the nightmares had stopped. The last one was months ago. The only manifestation of any lasting consequences from Manchester was her inability to leave the house. And she was unable, it wasn't a choice on her part, he didn't think. Something in her mind prevented it. And that is what made it impossible for him to help her. Her fears were locked inside, and he did not have the key.

He looked down at the thin layer of whiskey barely covering the bottom of his glass. He couldn't stop himself from wondering if Michael would have known how to help. He had always known how to handle Very when she let her emotions get the best of her. Wolf only knew how to love her. At the thought he raised the glass and tossed the last of the fiery liquid down his throat.

"Is it raining again?" Simon asked conversationally.

"Yes," Wolf replied automatically, resuming his vigil at the window. "It seems to rain constantly these days."

"Sophie, dearest, do you hate me?" Very asked quietly. She had dreaded giving her friend the news as much as she had rejoiced at finally being able to tell everyone. Sophie had sat next to her on the small sofa in frozen, shocked silence while the other ladies congratulated her.

Sophie startled at Very's question, as if woken from a trance. "Hate you?" Her genuine horror at the question soothed Very's frayed nerves. She threw her arms around Very and hugged her tight. "I could never hate you! You are the best friend I have ever had. I'm truly so...very, very excited for you," she said with a laugh. It was a little joke between them, about how many times Sophie had been forced to pause in conversations and say, 'very...no, not you dear.'" Everything to Sophie was very—very exciting, very pleasing, very funny, very sad.

The joke made Very laugh, and then for some inexplicable reason, cry. She and Sophie pulled away from the hug, both sniffing.

"You will be a wonderful mother, Very," Sophie said, delicately blowing her nose. "Just wonderful."

"So would you," Very said, her voice choked with sadness. "If only—"

"Nonsense," Sophie said gently. She put her hand over Very's and patted it soothingly. "This isn't about me, is it? It's about you, and how happy you have made us all with your news."

"Sophie," Very ventured after she'd gotten her tears under control, "I do wish things were different. I know how much you want a baby."

"And I shall have one, won't I?" Sophie said with a forced smile. "Yours. And I shall spoil it mightily."

"It's not the same." Very clutched her hand. "You deserve a baby of your own to love."

"If God wanted me to have a baby, I suppose I'd have one," Sophie mused, rubbing Very's knuckles with her thumb. "You mustn't fret over it, Very."

"God had nothing to do with it," Very said bitterly.

Sophie's smile was just as bitter. "No, I suppose not. My dear brother —"

"May he rot in hell," Very interjected under her breath.

"Yes, well, one can hope," Sophie agreed fervently. "There's some scarring," Sophie told her quietly, placing her hand over her stomach, "inside. Or so Dr. Peters speculates." She shook her head. "No matter." With a determined, and distancing, smile, she changed the subject. "Have you a name yet?"

Very let her turn the conversation since it was clear she was uncomfortable talking about her failure to become pregnant. It was a sore spot for poor Sophie, like a bruise that wouldn't heal. "No, we haven't thought much about names yet. It's still too soon." She held her arms out at her sides and looked down at her still flat stomach. Only when she was nude was the slight bump there noticeable. "You can't even tell I'm carrying yet."

"What about..." Sophie trailed off. She looked away and Very's stomach lurched. *Don't say it, she silently pleaded. Don't bring it up. Not today.* Sophie took a deep breath and looked directly in her eyes and Very braced herself. "Darling," Sophie began, taking Very's hand again, "Peterloo was months ago."

"Don't call it that," Very said harshly, pulling her hand away. She hated that god-awful name the papers had given to the massacre at St. Peter's Field. It made a mockery of Waterloo, and the war that had branded Wolf and their friends so deeply. She took a steadying breath. "Please."

"All right," Sophie said. "All right." She paused a moment, but she would not be deterred. "For the baby, don't you think you ought to get over this...this...reluctance to leave the house?"

"Sophie —" Kate gasped. Very held up a hand to stop her protest.

"No, Aunt Kate. She's right. But there's no hurry, is there?" She smiled at them all. Didn't they all feel better at her smiles? That smile had kept the questions at bay up until now. "We've months before the babe is due. There is plenty of time for that." She glanced out the French doors at the teeming rain. "After this interminable rain stops. Honestly, I'm beginning to think we shall have to build an ark if we are to escape it."

"Yes, yes, of course," Sophie eagerly agreed. "After the rain. Surely it will let up soon. We've all been kept indoors, haven't we?"

The other ladies concurred in murmurs while Very watched the rain outside her windows.

Chapter Five

Later that evening Very went in search of Wolf. He'd been awfully quiet after everyone left, so preoccupied at dinner that he'd barely spoken. When he got like that she knew where she'd find him—in the room he'd turned into a gymnasium of sorts, set up for his fencing exercises. He always went there when he was frustrated or needed to think. He'd been there a great deal in the past few months. That was her fault, of course.

True to her nature, when he sought solace there she couldn't leave him alone. She'd had to invade his private sanctum. She had no illusions about herself. She didn't want him to have a place that didn't include her. And she'd so desperately wanted something they could share in those frightening early months of their marriage.

She opened the door cautiously, her trepidation due more to uncertainty about his mood than worry that he might accidentally injure her. He was on the other side of the room, viciously stabbing a dummy in a parody of an attack exercise. His épée was bent nearly in half with each lunge and stab.

"You are going to ruin that weapon if you aren't careful," she observed mildly, closing the door behind her.

He jerked around to face her, surprise evident on his face. "I didn't hear you come in." He was breathing heavily, and his shirtless shoulders and chest glistened with sweat in the candlelight. He looked lean and dangerous and she wanted to run away from him almost as much as she wanted to run to him. He stepped over to a nearby chair, picked up a towel lying there and wiped his face and neck. When he started to wipe his chest, Very stopped him.

"No. Leave it. I like how you look, sweaty and hard and dangerous."

He laughed. "'Mad, bad and dangerous to know?' That would be Byron, love." He grinned at her. "You've always been attracted to the rough side."

Yes, she had. He had her there. First Kensington and then him. Both of them dangerous in their own way. She wandered closer to him, glancing out the window as she went. She made a face. "It's still raining."

"Is everything all right?" Wolf asked as he threw the towel back onto the chair with a nonchalant, backhanded toss. It was such a manly gesture, so physical and careless. Very envied him that freedom.

"Yes," she said, keeping her voice light. "Just bored."

His grin turned devilish. "Feel like a bout?"

Very grinned back. "Oh, yes. That would be splendid." She untied the sash on her robe and let it slide down her arms. She wore nothing under it but a light chemise. She tossed her robe on the chair with Wolf's shirt and kicked off her slippers.

"Yes, splendid," Wolf said appreciatively as he eyed her from head to toe. She warmed under his regard. As she chose a sword from the collection on the wall, Wolf sighed contentedly behind her. "I know you wore that in order to distract me during our match, and yet I find I can't be upset about it."

Very chose her favorite foil, and walked to the center of the room, the bare wood of the floor cool against her feet. She grabbed the skirt of her chemise in one hand, holding it up against her hip, exposing her leg from ankle to thigh. "Whatever gives me an advantage, since you are the more experienced swordsman."

Wolf exchanged his épée for the lighter foil. He wouldn't let her use the heavier weapons, not yet, and the truth was she liked the foil. She liked the way it felt in her hand, as if it were an extension of her arm, light and fast and deadly. She wanted to be deadly. When she walked out the door, and she would one day, to face the world again, she wanted to be ready for it. She wanted to be the wolf in sheep's clothing.

She swung her foil dramatically before gesturing Wolf closer with the blunted tip. His answering smile was a challenge. Already she could see his cares melting away, just as hers were. Here they both forgot everything but the heat of battle, the passionate competition that required more strategy than brute strength. Here they were equal, or would be once her skills matched his.

Wolf took his stance across from her and saluted her with his foil. "You, my dear, are no swordsman at all. But you are very much a woman, which makes you a formidable foe."

Very laughed and hiked her skirt higher. At the flash of bare leg, Wolf frowned slightly. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to put on the jacket and breeches I bought you for fencing?"

"I trust you not to hurt me." She circled him, and then presented her blade. "And I will endeavor to keep you whole, as well."

"We shall keep it light, then," Wolf warned. "Just a few simple exercises. Nothing dangerous."

Very pouted. "I like dangerous."

Suddenly Wolf was on the attack, driving her back with a swift series of blows. His final lunge in the attack missed her. "*Passé*," she taunted. Her riposte was rapid and drove him to retreat.

"Very nice," he said approvingly. "But separate your actions more. You're still having difficulty doing it all in one lunge."

"Didn't I tell you the same thing last night?" Very teased.

Wolf looked at her blankly for a moment. Then understanding dawned and he laughed. "You have no shame, Mrs. Tarrant." He wiggled his brows. "And I would never deprive myself of lunges, I assure you." Once again he took his position and saluted her with his blade. Very faced him on guard.

"Were you to lunge excessively, Mr. Tarrant, I would take exception. But excess is measured by how much one can take, and the measure of a man even more so. Excess shall be your measure, then, and that measure that will come between us." Very thought herself quite clever, at her play on the word measure, which in fencing meant the distance between fencers.

"You've been reading too much Shakespeare again," Wolf sighed. He immediately went on the attack, and again she barely parried his thrusts, driven back in retreat to the wall. She shrieked in mock outrage.

"I shall take you, measure for measure," she growled.

Wolf groaned. "I should like to run the Bard through. Haven't we any other books in the house?"

Very laughed and swished her skirt and when Wolf's attention was caught by a flash of her bare sex she attacked. And so the conversation went, back and forth, teasing as much as fencing, until they were both sweaty and breathing heavily.

They circled one another, each looking for an invitation and a chance to get a touch to end the match. Wolf feinted and caught Very with a *passata-sotto*. The muscle in his upper arm gleamed in the candlelight, twisted like a thick, taut rope under his skin as he leaned one hand on the floor and lunged low, touching the blunted tip of his blade to her left breast. She barely felt it, his touch was so careful.

"*Touché*," she said, her voice soft. She was panting with exertion and had to take a breath between syllables.

"*Touché*," Wolf agreed. He was grinning in triumph. "But you made me work for it." He rose slowly, not removing his tip from her breast. He ran it lightly around her nipple and she shivered as it puckered with a sharp pull. He flicked his tip against it lightly and Very let her head fall back for a second as she took a deep breath. When she looked back at him his arm was at his side, his weapon held loosely in his hand. Her gaze travelled to his crotch and she saw he was hard. She knew he would be. He always was when they ended a match.

"Why, Mr. Tarrant, does fighting with your wife excite you?"

"Beyond measure, Mrs. Tarrant," was his sly reply.

Very laughed, delighted that he'd joined her word play. But she had play of another kind on her mind now. "The same forfeit?"

Wolf's pale blue eyes gleamed as he nodded slowly. "Yes, I think that's fair."

"I'm sure you do," she murmured as she took his foil and carried it with hers over to the wall and placed them in their holders. She turned slowly and leaned back against the wall beside the row of blades hanging there, her hands behind her back, palms flat against the cool wallpaper. Her breathing had returned to normal, but as she watched Wolf walk across the room, his pace slow and steady, light on his feet like a sleek cat ready to pounce, she found herself having trouble taking a deep breath again.

He stopped in front of her and they just stared at one another for a moment. His gaze was intent, as if he were trying to see right into her mind through her eyes. Whatever he saw there must have reassured him, for he deliberately placed first one fist and then the other on the wall to either side of her head, leaning in toward her. He stopped a scant few inches before their lips would have met. Very knew that was not the kiss he sought.

She slid down the wall, her descent slow, drawing out the moment for both of them. She kept her hands on the wall for balance, spreading her fingers. The feel of the rough silk wallpaper beneath her palms was as much part of the sensual treat of the moment as was the feel of her hair catching in the paper, the slight pull of strands coming loose from their pins as she went down, down, down, until she let her knees finally rest on the floor. Wolf simply leaned on the wall, surrounding her, caging her, saying and doing nothing, just watching her with that intent gaze pinning her to the wall and making her blood pound between her legs. She pulled her skirt out from under her knees, and spread them, so that her face was level with his crotch. Then she sat back and took the time to enjoy the view.

Wolf's trousers rode low on his hips. Even through the loose fit she could see his hard cock. He wasn't a big man, but she thought his cock was big. It felt that way to her. It was thick and heavy when he was aroused, a vein pulsing along its side. She teased herself with the thought of it, the memory of holding it, tasting it, fucking it. She grew wet and overheated and had to fight the urge to actually move her hips, thrust against the memory of it.

"Are you going to somehow wish them open?" Wolf asked, amusement and lust vying for control of his voice. "Or do you think you should just use the buttons, like everyone else?"

Very looked damned erotic kneeling there at his feet. She was so exotic looking with her large, wide-set eyes and full, sensual lips. There was something about the shape of her face that reminded him of a lioness, a certain flatness to her nose and cheeks and forehead that was leonine. Her knees were splayed, her skirts hiked up, so that he could see the shadow of her sex. He felt his cock jerk at the sight of her spread and waiting for him, had seen the tiny little jerk of her hips she couldn't control because she wanted to be fucked so badly.

But first she had to pay her forfeit. Which, by the hungry look in her eyes, he didn't think would be onerous to her. She reached up and undid the buttons on his pants, working far slower than he liked, but he let her play her little game. He stopped her when she went to reach into his trousers and pull his cock out. She really needn't bother. It was hard and rearing up onto his hip. He took his cock in his hand, ran his fist up and down slowly, pulling the skin taut, rubbing his thumb over the damp slit in the end. Very moaned, and he felt the gloating quirk of his lips that he couldn't control. "Are you ready?" Very nodded. "You don't have to," he said, making it her choice.

Another game they played. He liked to hear her ask for it. Liked knowing she wanted it as much as he did.

"I want to." Her voice held that particular note that made the hair on his nape rise in anticipation. A hungry, sultry note, a little submissive, and yet aggressive too, as if she'd let him do whatever he wanted to her, but she'd kill him if he didn't do it immediately. She continued to stare at his cock, treated to the sight of it getting harder under his own ministrations, the rod growing redder, darker, with each beat of his pounding heart. "Please."

The last was a plaintive whisper he couldn't ignore. He pointed the tip toward her mouth and she rose onto her knees, opening wide until she engulfed the head and closed her lips around it.

Wolf groaned at the hot, wet feel of her mouth. Her hands slid up his thighs as her mouth moved down, until she held his whole cock in her mouth, until he could feel the back of her throat. She'd made it a game, practicing for months until she could do it. She moved her mouth on him, sucking and swallowing but not releasing one inch from her embrace. Wolf had to concentrate not to come right then and there. This was his favorite thing, other than fucking her. To have her service him like this.

With trembling hands he began to pull the pins from her hair. He liked it down when she did this, when he fucked her. She loved when he petted her hair, when he grabbed a fistful of the dark, gleaming tresses as he came. When he'd removed the last pin, he gently massaged her head and combed his fingers through her hair. She moaned around his cock in appreciation and he grabbed that fistful, afraid he was going to come, wanting it, but desperate to fuck her, too. He rode the moment, clamping down on his climax ruthlessly.

When he could breathe again he opened his fist and palmed the back of her head, moving her on his cock, fucking her mouth. Her hands slid around his hips and pushed his trousers down, the cool air on his backside making him shiver. She palmed his buttocks, kneading them, sliding a finger along the sensitive spot at the top of his crease. As she massaged his backside it created an erotic rub in his crease at the same time she was sucking and licking his cock. He gritted his teeth and blew out a breath, squeezing the cheeks of his arse together to lessen the sensation. She had learned too well over the past few months what he liked. He used her hair to pull her off his cock.

She was panting as she licked her lips. "Don't you want me to finish?" she asked coyly, tipping her head to the side as she rubbed that finger further down his crease, so close to giving him that dark pleasure they both loved.

But not tonight. Tonight he needed desperately to lose himself in her. To fuck her and love her, to feel her surround him. "I want to fuck you," he rasped. Thank God Very didn't require finesse at this point. He lost it with her, every time. He became a rutting beast, the savage she'd begged for the first time they were together.

"Yes," she said with deep sigh. "Yes."

It was all Wolf needed. He fell to his knees and pulled her over to straddle his lap. She was as eager as he and grabbed his cock, then lowered herself down on him. The feel of her wet cunt gliding down his over-sensitized cock was pure heaven. He shuddered and immediately started thrusting. She was nearly knocked off his lap and grabbed his shoulders at the same time he grabbed her hips. They fucked one another hard, the way they both liked it. Rough and fast and deep. Wolf could hear how wet she was, the sucking sound her cunt made when he pulled out and she tried desperately to keep him there.

In minutes her nails were digging into his shoulders. "Are you going to come for me?" he asked, his voice a rough slash cutting through the ragged sound of their breathing and the slap of flesh on flesh.

"Yes," she cried out. "Wait for me. Don't come until I do."

He'd wait. She had the delightful habit of coming twice, at least. Once when he stimulated her to climax, and again when he came inside her. She loved the feel of his release inside her, loved the wet, hot feeling of it. She told him so as she was coming, every time, because she knew he loved to hear it.

She was riding him hard, slamming down on him, her face red, her lips parted, her eyes closed. Then he felt the first flutter of her release that in moment became a gripping, rippling tide pulling him in and holding him deep as she moaned and her nails cut into him. The pain kept him from immediately following her into climax. Instead he pulsed his hips hard, short little jerks that pushed his cock against a spot that made her keen with pleasure. God, he loved fucking her.

When she was done she was weak, panting. "Do it. Fuck me more and come inside me."

She was demanding, and he grabbed her hair and pulled her head back as he slid out and slammed home. "Like that?" he asked roughly. "Do you want me to fuck you like that?"

"Yes," she hissed, giving as good as she got. She was shaking in his arms and he knew it was good for her tonight. She was a bundle of sensation, her hips flying and fucking and he cried out as he began to come, the first jet of his release almost painful in its intensity. Then the pleasure washed over him and he could only cling to her and shudder and jerk as she cried out.

"Oh yes," she said, giving him what he wanted. "Wolf!" The last was a strangled cry as she gripped him in orgasm again.

When it was over they clung to one another, panting and sweaty and stinking of sex, and Wolf felt a peace come over him that he hadn't felt all day. This was theirs. This was what was important. Very's head on his shoulder, her arms and legs wrapped around him, his cock still nestled in her warm, wet curls.

After several minutes Very's silence became unbearable. She rarely spoke after they made love, just curled up and went to sleep next to him. But he was tired of the silence. He felt no resistance to his embrace from her, felt no indication that she didn't share his

feelings of contentment after they made love. So he finally asked what he'd been wondering for months. "What are you thinking?"

Wolf's voice broke into her reverie. She nuzzled his neck, tasted the salty tang of his sweat and smiled. "Can't you tell?"

Wolf didn't answer right away, and there was something about his silence that made her look up. He was frowning slightly. "No," he answered finally. "I used to be able to tell, or so I thought. But not anymore."

His answer startled her, and frightened her a little, too. "What do you mean?"

Wolf sighed and resettled the both of them, untangling their legs so he could lean his back against the wall. He pulled Very over so she sat between his knees facing him, her bottom on the floor, her legs draped over his spread thighs. The position was incredibly close to how they'd been moments before. He laced their hands together. "You used to wear your emotions on your sleeve for all the world to see. You used to loudly proclaim them, for all that, to anyone who would listen. Now," he shook his head. "You are an enigma. I see your emotions in your eyes but you are silent about them. You smile and say all the right things, of course. But I don't know what you are really thinking."

"Oh Wolf," she whispered. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. His embrace was even tighter, a tad desperate and so needful that her fear was washed away. "It's true, I used to wear my emotions like a new gown, showing them off for all. I was a child." He started to protest and she shushed him. "No, it's true, for all my proclamations to the contrary. I was a child who didn't understand real emotion, so each little emotion became a Shakespearean tragedy." He chuckled at her comment, as she had wanted, needed him to. She pulled back slightly to look in his eyes, keeping her arms loosely around his neck. "But now I understand what real emotion is. I understand fear and love in a way I didn't just a few months ago. And those kinds of emotions you don't show the world. Those are meant to be shared with only a few."

"Very," he whispered, resting his forehead on hers. She rubbed against the caress like a kitten.

"We haven't talked about it," she whispered, the fear a very real thing. Clogging her throat.

"We don't have to," he rushed to tell her.

Very went on as if she hadn't heard him. "Sophie said today that with the baby's imminent arrival I needed to get over my 'reluctance to leave the house'." Very laughed, but it was a hollow sound, echoing in the room. "She doesn't understand. No one does." She looked at him then, at the pain and compassion in his eyes. "No one but you."

He shook his head slowly, sadly. "No, I don't. I want to, but I don't." And she could see how the admission tore him apart. Yet another regret to add to her list when it came to all the ways she had hurt Wolf.

She stroked his cheek with her palm, and cupped his jaw. "That makes your support over the last few months even more precious to me."

Wolf's lips thinned, deep brackets forming beside his mouth. He pulled her hands down and held them in his, squeezing them almost painfully. "I have not supported you. Not like I should. I should never have tried to force the issue last December. It was the wrong thing to do."

Very shrugged, although her stomach knotted as she remembered her uncontrollable and violent reaction. She hadn't been able to stop herself from getting ill, had felt as if she couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't speak or cry out for help. Helpless, she'd been utterly helpless. For weeks afterward she was sure she was going mad. She had been so frightened, and Wolf had held her through it all, loved her and brought her back from the brink. "If it had worked, we would say it was the right thing to do." She choked down the memories. "I don't know what to do, either, which is the most frightening thing of all."

Wolf pulled her down so her head rested on his chest. She closed her eyes and breathed his scent in deeply, placed her hand on his chest next to her cheek and concentrated on the beat of his heart. *This is love, she thought, the feeling that every moment with him makes my life richer and gives me strength.*

"I know why he ran," she said eventually, when her eyes had grown sleepy and the rain had become a welcome blanket of sound in the stillness of the room, closing their confessions inside.

"What?" Wolf said quietly, brushing her hair back over her shoulder.

"Michael. I know why he ran." The muscle in Wolf's arm directly in front of stiffened, but it was the only sign of his agitation.

"Why?"

"Because he understood love. He knew what it would mean if he were to love like this, perhaps he already did. It's terribly frightening, isn't it?" She smoothed a hand over his chest, soothing him. He relaxed beneath her. "I can't blame him anymore. But it hurts knowing that he hasn't had the chance to know what we know now." She looked up at Wolf, her cheek still on his chest, and he was looking down at her, a question in his expression. "That while love is perhaps the greatest fear, it is also the greatest joy, the thing that holds you up when you cannot walk alone."

"I love you so damned much it hurts," Wolf said solemnly.

"Which more or less proves my point," Very said with a wry smile. Wolf laughed. "He didn't respond to our letter telling him we'd married."

That wiped the smile from his face. "No. He did not."

A part of Very relaxed at the truth she heard in his words. That part, just a small one mind you, had wondered if he'd kept Michael's answer to himself. "Then we must try something else." She bit her lip for a moment, hoping Wolf wouldn't be angry. "I asked Daniel to help us find someone, an investigator of sorts, or perhaps just an old protégé who could help us find him. I'm worried."

Wolf's arms tightened in a brief hug as he looked out the window. Very followed his gaze, but all that she could see was their reflection staring back at her. "Yes, so am I," he admitted at last. He pulled her back to face him with a hand on her cheek. "But we will find him, Very. Because I believe you are right, Michael did understand love. And the love that drove him away will bring him back."

Chapter Six

She was there at the window again. My God, she looked beautiful. As he watched she pressed her palm to the glass, as if she was locked inside and desperate to get out. But he knew that wasn't true. She hadn't cared to leave the house all week. He knew, of course, because he'd been standing in the bloody rain every night for days, watching for a glimpse of her or Wolf. Hungry for the sight of them.

He was three times a fool. He should just go and knock on their door. He could tonight. The past few days he'd been too busy trying to sort things out. Important things that had to be done before he could take care of this. Because he knew this would not be quick, or easy. He hoped not, anyway. Hoped he hadn't read more into their letter than they had meant. Perhaps it really had been what it had seemed on the surface—a letter to a friend, an acquaintance, announcing their marriage. But he'd read between the lines and at the time he'd seen the same desperate longing he felt, the raw ache of separation that was his fault.

He hadn't been surprised by their marriage. He should have been, he supposed. But he'd recognized their feelings for what they were that long ago night in the library, the first time Very and Wolf had kissed. The last time he'd seen them. They were falling in love. And when he left, well, there'd been nothing to stop their fall. He'd spent almost two years wondering if that was why he left. Because he thought they'd be better off together than with him.

He gripped the posy of flowers he held in his hand. He'd bought the same one, a bundle of pale winter flowers, from the same woman on the same corner near Covent Garden every afternoon for the last five days. And he'd thrown them in the gutter come sunrise when he hadn't worked up the nerve to see them. To tell them he'd come back. To beg them to forgive him.

Suddenly Wolf was there in the window beside her. He put his hands on her shoulders and nuzzled her neck and Very smiled and said something that had them both laughing. Michael took a step forward in protest when Wolf pulled her from the window and out of view.

As they disappeared from sight a very real ache in his chest robbed his breath. He rubbed at it for endless minutes, but he knew it was useless. It was an ache he'd carried since the day he'd sailed from England's shores. And possibly the broken rib from that trouble he'd had in New Orleans. But he was feeling sorry for himself, so he convinced himself it was the broken heart. He looked at the flowers again, and against his will, against his better judgment, his feet moved, first one step then another, and before long he stood at the bottom of their steps. Just a few feet separating him from warmth, from shelter, from them.

He took the first step. Would they welcome him? Hell, would they recognize him? The next step was shaky. What if they didn't? Well, at least he'd tried. At least he'd be able to see them. He took the next two steps quicker than the first two, it was as if he could feel them pulling him. He couldn't have stopped now for any reason. He was running up the remaining few steps. And then he was standing there, staring at that bright red door, out of breath and terrified. He'd known their house right away. Knew it by that door. He reached for the knocker and his hand was shaking. He pressed it against the cold, wet wooden door. It seemed alive to him, beating in time with his own heart. He gripped the flowers tighter and he knocked.

"Did you hear that?" Very asked Wolf. She was sitting at her dressing table, brushing her hair. She was ready for bed, wearing nothing but a nightdress and her robe. She looked at the reflection of Wolf in the mirror, on the other side of the room in a chair pulling off his boots. He didn't use his valet very often at night, or she her maid. They liked the intimacy of getting ready for bed alone, just the two of them, like an old married couple. She smiled at him as he looked up at her in the mirror.

"Hear what?"

There it was again. Harder. There was an urgency in it that gripped Very for some reason. Knocking on their door. She stood and her brush fell from her hand.

"Very?" Wolf sat holding his boot, staring at her in concern.

"Tell me you hear it. The knocking." God, she wasn't imagining it, was she? This wasn't some foolish terror that only lived in her head? It came again, and this time she heard the door open, heard voices. Heard *a* voice. She spun to the bedroom door and ripped it open, not answering Wolf's call, not putting on slippers or tying the sash of her robe.

Her heart was pounding as she ran. *Please let it be real*, she silently begged, *please, please, please*.

She heard Wolf calling her name but she couldn't stop, she had to know, to see. The voices below were silent now. God, had she imagined it? She flew down the steps, down the hallway, until she reached the balustrade that overlooked the entryway, gripping it in both hands, staring down at the doorway in hope.

He looked up at her. His hair was longer, his face thinner. But it was him. "Michael," she said, his name catching on a sob. His name broke the strange stillness that had held him in its grip as he stood there, frozen, staring at her. He started for the bottom of the stairs with slow, halting steps, never taking his eyes from her. He was coming to her. She turned then and stumbled to the stairs, desperate to hold him, not sure if this was a dream. She needed to touch him to assure herself he was real. She had to hold on to the rail as she went down. She couldn't see the stairs. She was crying, and that wasn't how she'd wanted him to see her. But she couldn't stop.

"Very," he said, and his voice was little more than a ragged croak, as if he were crying, too, and he was running, she could see that, knew it.

They met on the stairway, and Very fell into his arms. He caught her, held her so tightly she couldn't breathe. She didn't care, would never breathe again if it would keep him here. She felt the damp of his clothes, registered that he was soaking wet. She just wrapped her arms tighter around his shoulders, her fingers scrabbling for purchase in the wet cloth of the coat on his back.

"Very, Very," he kept saying over and over, his voice full of wonder and pain and shock and joy. She couldn't even speak past the tears. He began to slide down, his arms still wrapped around her, until he was kneeling on the step below her, his cheek pressed against her stomach, arms around her waist, his eyes closed. He was crying, great racking sobs that shook him.

She couldn't break his hold to pull him up or to slide down with him, so she held on. She ran her hand over his head, his wet hair slick and cool on her hand. She cupped the back of his head and pressed his cheek closer to her. Somehow it seemed right, to have him pressed there, right over the baby.

In a few minutes he'd calmed down, was just rubbing his face against her, hugging her. "Come," she whispered. "Come up. You must see Wolf."

He looked up at her then. He was a beautiful mess, his eyes red, his cheeks wet. She wiped them with her hands. "Wolf." That was all he said, but she could hear what he left unspoken, the longing.

"I'm here." Wolf's voice came quietly from above them, on the landing. Michael broke away from her, and it was all she could do not to grab him and pull him back. But he lurched to his feet and took the stairs up to Wolf. When he reached him they simply stood there staring at one another, the air around them charged. Finally Michael took the one step that brought him up against Wolf and he lowered his head until his forehead rested on Wolf's shoulder. That was all. Just that touch. Wolf's hands were hanging limp at his side, but at Michael's gesture he placed them on his shoulders. After another minute, Wolf ran his hands up into Michael's hair, gripped his head firmly and pressed his cheek to Michael's temple. His eyes were closed, as if he were trying to hold everything inside.

Very hadn't moved. She gave them this time, just as Wolf had given her the time she needed with Michael. The men's greeting was so subdued, so full of unspoken emotions that it broke her heart. And then Wolf opened his eyes so he was looking directly at her. He wanted her now, wanted her with them, and so she went to them.

Without words she and Wolf each grabbed one of Michael's arms and pulled him down the hall, up the stairs—the same path they had just taken. But their urgency now was of different kind. Very had to kiss him, taste him, have him. She'd waited so very long. Words would come later, right now she—no, they—needed to put their claim on Michael. Mark him so he would never leave them again.

Michael didn't resist at all. He looked as if he was in a trance, his eyes darting from Very to Wolf and back again, letting them lead him wherever they wanted. When they reached the bedroom Wolf dragged him in while Very pushed him from behind, and

then she slammed the door shut and placed her back against it, as if preventing his escape. She was breathing so heavily one might think she'd just run all the way from Mayfair. She just couldn't believe he was here. Right here. In their bedroom. Not half a world away, but here.

"Are those for me?" she asked, pointing to a sad, bedraggled posy of faded flowers in his hand.

He held them up and looked at them in surprise, as if he'd never seen them before. "Ah, yes," he finally answered and then he was smiling so hard his gorgeous blue eyes shining as his cheeks crinkled and his dimples popped out. Very smiled back and they stayed like that, him holding out the flowers, her just standing there like an idiot.

"You're wet." Wolf seemed calm, but Very heard the tremor in his voice. "Let's get this off." He reached for the collar of Michael's jacket.

"It's still buttoned," Michael said, looking around for somewhere to put the flowers.

Very laughed. "Here." She took them from him, careful not to touch his hand. If she did, if she touched his skin, she'd be lost. She wasn't going to rush this. Well, not much anyway. She took the few steps necessary to reach the washbasin and threw the posy in the pitcher of water there. Then she turned and hurried back to her two men. Wolf was peeling Michael's coat down his arms.

He'd lost weight, but not muscle. "Good God, what have you been doing?" Wolf asked as he ran his hand down Michael's arm, a slow, appreciative caress of his biceps through his wet shirt that made Michael shiver.

"Nothing. Everything. Not now." Michael's answer was nearly incoherent. He raised shaking fingers to his shirt and tried to pull the tails from his trousers.

Very pushed his hands away. "Me," she said eagerly. He dropped his hands and she tore the shirt out and yanked it over his head. He stumbled at the force of it. She laughed self-consciously. "Sorry."

He grinned back at her and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "It's all right."

He looked so boyishly charming, so much like her Michael that she got a lump in her throat. She reached up and ran her fingers through the wayward lock that kept falling over his face. "It's so long." Long enough to cover his face past his nose, and halfway down his neck in back. She pushed the wet strip of hair behind his ear.

"No one to cut it properly," he whispered. "And no one to care if I did or not."

She put her hands on his chest then. Ran them over the muscles there, the rough mat of hair covering it. Then she let her hands slip around him and hugged his naked torso to her as she kissed him right over his heart. "I like it long."

"Very." Her stomach clenched at everything she wanted to hear in her name from his lips, everything she imagined she heard.

"I want you." She said it even though it must be obvious. But he'd been gone so long. He hadn't seen her since she was a girl, too young for what they had both wanted to do. Now she had done all those things and more with Wolf, with her husband. She

took a deep breath of his scent, and blinked back tears. "Did you get our letter?" she asked without looking up at him, staring intently at his dark brown nipple. The small bud in the center was hard. The dark circle surrounding it was covered in goose bumps. She held him tighter, trying to warm him up. Then she blew out a hot breath across his nipple and a shudder racked his whole body as he buried a hand in her hair.

"Yes," he croaked. He cleared his throat. "I got it."

Very rubbed her nose against the stiff peak of his nipple. He groaned, and she glanced up out of the corner of her eye and saw Wolf's hands on Michael's shoulders, kneading them. Wolf was shorter than Michael. She couldn't see his face. Michael shivered again and sucked in a breath and Very wondered what Wolf was doing that she couldn't see. "Why did it take you so long to come home? Why didn't you respond?" She wanted to take the questions back as soon as she asked them. She didn't want answers right now. She just wanted Michael. Answers were for later. "Never mind." She started to kiss that tempting nipple, but Michael pulled her hair gently so she had no choice but to look up at him.

"It took a while for your letter to find me. And then...complications arose when I tried to get home. You must believe that I came back to England as soon as I could."

He seemed so sincere and she desperately wanted to believe him. She hated that she didn't trust him right now. That was why she hadn't wanted to ask questions. She just shook her head. Michael started to say something but Wolf's hand glided up from his shoulder to cup Michael's jaw and turn his head to the side. Wolf stepped out from behind him and kissed him. No words, no warning, no permission asked or granted. He just kissed him.

Very knew they had been lovers. Michael had admitted it right before he stormed off the last time, had drawn a very vivid picture of what exactly that meant. A picture Wolf had embellished for her over the last year with excruciating detail. She and Wolf had fantasized about this moment together, and Very knew that Wolf wanted Michael as much as she did, that he had missed his lover tremendously. Yet she was unprepared for the sight of them kissing like the lovers they had been, and would be again. It was...mesmerizing. Erotic. Thrilling. For a moment she forgot her own desires and concentrated on theirs, and it made the anticipation that much more exciting.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It may have begun that way for a split second, but it only took a moment for both men to fall into the kiss with abandon. They devoured one another, mouths open, tongues tasting, breaths mingling. Wolf gripped the side of Michael's head and held him in place. Very could see how tight his grip was by the white knuckles on his hand. Michael's hand tightened on her head in response, pulled her to his chest until his heart was pounding right under her cheek. She stepped closer, inserted a leg between his at the same time he shoved his leg between hers and pulled her hips to his with his free hand. He was hard, and where Very had been aroused before she now felt feverish with want, wet and aching. Michael thrust that hard cock against her as he groaned into Wolf's mouth and Very couldn't wait another second.

She reached down with both hands and fumbled at the buttons on Michael's pants, tearing at them roughly. She shoved her hands inside and started to push them down.

Michael grabbed her wrists and stopped her. He tore his mouth away from Wolf's with a gasp. "Very, don't," he rasped. "Talk. We need to talk first."

Very shook head. "No. Talk later. Love now." Michael looked like he wanted to argue, but he was also clearly ready to make love. Very put her fingers against his lips. She'd meant to quiet him, but the softness of his lips, the damp left behind from his kiss with Wolf made her change direction. "Kiss me," she whispered, "kiss me like that." He knew what she meant, knew she wanted what he'd given Wolf. He shook her hand off. She feared he was going to say no and demand that they talk. Instead he leaned down and gave her the kiss she craved.

It was gentle, what his kiss with Wolf had started to be but wasn't. Michael sipped from her lips, tasted her as if she were a delicacy. Very let him because it was perfect. He was perfect. She'd been afraid of this, she realized. Afraid he would taste different, or act differently, that it wouldn't be the same—they wouldn't be the same. And it wasn't. But not in the way she had imagined. He was afraid of hurting her. She understood that now, as she hadn't two years ago. She broke the kiss, pulling away slowly, so that their wet lips clung for a moment before separating. "You used to kiss me with the same passion you just gave to Wolf. You don't have to be afraid, Michael. You won't hurt me, not with this." She looked into his eyes and the tenderness and joy she saw mixed with trepidation erased all her fears. She put the truth on her face, in her eyes. "I'm not a child anymore. I'm a woman, and I know what this means, and what I want. Trust me, please."

He fought against his reservations, and she gave him time to adjust to who she was now. "Very," he said, obviously searching for words. He shook his head, unable to voice his thoughts. He looked away for a moment and his lips thinned as he clenched his jaw. "I'm sorry," he finally said. He looked down at her. "Can you forgive me?"

"For leaving? Yes."

He shook his head again, the action a harsh jerk. "No. For forcing you to grow up too fast."

Very grabbed the back of his neck and squeezed in irritation. "Don't be an idiot. You didn't. My God, when I married Wolf I was still such a child." She took a deep breath. She didn't want to tread that ground tonight. She'd walked that path with Wolf last night, and that had been enough for a while, thank you. She closed her eyes, admitting to herself that she didn't want to see the disappointment in his eyes when he learned about...about her. She opened her eyes and at his upset look she squeezed his neck again and brought his forehead down to touch hers, her other hand over his heart. "You must trust me now, Michael. I'm not that child anymore. I am a woman full grown, and I want you. I want to take you to our bed and I want to show you how much I have missed you, and how much I still love you."

"Did you have to marry him?" Michael's question was abrupt and unhappy.

Wolf jerked away from where he'd been quietly observing them at Michael's side. He turned and walked a few feet away and stopped, his back to them with his hands on his hips. His back was ramrod straight, the muscles tight with anger. He turned to face Michael. "Is that what you think of me? You accused me of ruining her that night in the library because I dared to touch her. I dared to want her, when you were trying so damn hard to keep her pure and pristine for some white knight. But I was the bad man come to steal the princess's virtue. Is that what you think I did the minute you left?"

"No," Michael groaned. He stumbled back and sat on the end of the bed his head in his hands. "I'm ruining this, aren't I?" He looked at Wolf pleadingly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, I don't believe it. And that's not what I thought then." He took a deep breath. "I've had two very long years to think about why I left."

Very waited impatiently for him to go on, but he was silent. "That's it?" she exclaimed, throwing her arms out. "In two years you still haven't figured it out?" All right, perhaps she was still angry. She crossed her arms and glared at him. "This is why I didn't want to talk."

Michael hung his head. "We have to talk. If we make love first, you may not be happy later."

Fear gripped her chest and she lost her anger. She rushed up to him and fell to her knees in front of him, her hands on his thighs. "Then don't, don't talk. Never talk. I don't care why you left. I only care that you came back to us. Please, Michael."

"Very," he said, placing his hands over hers, and she knew he was going to try to soothe her, like a skittish mare. She was tired of being soothed.

"Don't." Her voice was hard and angry. "Don't treat me like that." She stood up, enjoying the fact the he had to look up at her now. "Do you think I haven't hated you in the last two years? Do you think there weren't times that I cursed your name and cried myself to sleep?" She spun around in a swirl of robe and stalked around the room. "I have been around in circles over you, Michael, and so has Wolf. That night when you stormed off, we had discovered something beautiful between us that you tried to stain with your accusations. But you couldn't, because it was too strong." She faced him, her hands on her hips. "Wolf has been my rock the last two years. My champion. He is the reason I have not curled up into a little ball and wasted away. I begged him to take me a hundred times, and every time he said no. At first, because he was waiting for you. Waiting for us." She gestured among the three of them. "He wanted to begin as we meant to go on, the three of us together. But your absence and your silence wore us down, Michael. And then..." She couldn't go on.

Wolf walked slowly over to her and wrapped his arms around her from behind so they both faced Michael. "And then we realized that while we both still loved you and hoped for your return, what we had was strong enough to keep us together and build a future without you," he finished for her.

Michael was crying. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and looked like a lonely little boy left out in the cold. "I hoped that was what you would do. When I left.

That's why I left." He dropped his head and stared at his lap. "Because I didn't think I was good for either of you. I wanted this," he weakly gestured just as Very had done, "and I thought that was wrong. I thought that by leaving I could give Very what she deserved, and I believed that that was you, Wolf."

"What?" Wolf was as astounded as she was.

Michael nodded. "And then, as soon as I was on that boat, I began to question my logic." He smiled lopsidedly. "I travelled a bit, alternating between cursing my stupid childish behavior and convincing myself I'd been right to leave, and then one thing led to another and I'd been gone almost a year. But I thought about you both every day and wondered where you were, and hoped you were together. When I realized how much time had passed...I also realized I was a fool. This," he gestured again and Very smiled, "is right. Isn't it? Still?" He sounded so hopeful.

Very started to go to him, but Wolf held her back. "I don't know. Is it?" he asked. "You are the one who ran away from the three of us together, Michael. Not Very. Not me. Right here, right now, we want you. Can you bring yourself to come to our bed or not?"

Michael laughed. "I thought that was obvious a few minutes ago. Yes, I can definitely bring myself to do that. Quite happily. But do you still want me? After how stupid and thoughtless I've been?"

Wolf let her go. "Yes," she told him. She grabbed a handkerchief from her dressing table and brought it to Michael. "Here." She turned to Wolf. "Get over here and help me take his boots off. One of you fucking me for the first time in his boots was enough. His are wet and dirty and I'm concerned about the linens."

Chapter Seven

Michael laughed as he wiped his face. "Good God. You really are married." Then her words registered. "Wolf fucked you with his boots on the first time?"

Wolf walked over and waved his hand to tell Michael to lift his foot. He did and Wolf tugged his boot off. "Yes. We are very married. And yes, on our wedding afternoon I couldn't even wait to shuck my boots before I buried myself inside her."

Very laughed and let her robe slide down her arms and onto the floor. She was practically naked. For all their kisses and caresses before he left, he had never seen her like this. She was right. She was every inch a woman. "My little Amazon," he whispered. "My God, you are beautiful." And she was, she was every man's dream come true. Tall, lithe, with full breasts and delicate pink nipples that he could see through the thin muslin of her gown. And her legs. They were endless. He had to close his eyes and swallow at the images in his head of all the ways he wanted those legs wrapped around him. He'd thought his memories had been exaggerated. Now he realized they hadn't done her justice.

"She's an Amazon in bed, too," Wolf said, his voice dark and seductive. "She likes it hard and a little rough. She can take what you have to give. She takes me like that, and it drives me mad."

"Good God," Michael said, falling back on his elbows to let Wolf pull off his other boot. The thought of Very and Wolf fucking hard and rough, Wolf with his boots still on, made his cock throb. He wanted to see it. He should have seen it. He should have been here. Would have been here sooner if he could have.

He'd been honest with them, up to a point. But he couldn't tell them everything. There was too much at stake. He hadn't lied when he told them he'd thought about them every day. And he hadn't lied when he said he wanted to be in their bed. He wanted it more than anything. He opened his eyes to see Very and Wolf watching him. The hunger in their gazes made his breath catch.

"Up," Very said. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up to stand. Then she put her palms on his hips and began to push his wet pants down. She paused with her fingertips just touching the curve of his arse. "Are you sure?" she asked. Her voice was low and sultry, the voice of a woman. He hadn't heard that in her voice before. It was...exciting. It aroused him to know that she was experienced now, that he didn't need to tread lightly.

"Yes." He grabbed her arms and yanked her to him. "Are you?"

She nodded, biting her lip, anticipation burning in her eyes. Michael looked over at Wolf. "You?" Wolf smiled. That particular smile he reserved for the bedroom. The one that said without words that he'd like to eat you up one lick at a time. "Then I'm

yours.” He shoved his pants down to his knees and fell back on the bed, pulling Very with him so she landed on top of him and she playfully shrieked, although not loud enough to bring the servants. “Do with me what you will,” Michael told them, and he meant it. He raised his head to capture Very’s mouth and she met him halfway. This time he didn’t hold back. He kissed her as he’d dreamed of kissing her, as he should have kissed her, when he’d wasted so much time trying not to kiss her. How he had wished to kiss her when he was stuck in America.

She tasted divine. Hot and wet and sweet, like mint. She knew how to kiss. Michael recognized Wolf in her kiss. They kissed alike. Did they fuck alike? The thought made him shiver. He wanted Very to ride him the way Wolf did, rough and hard. Suddenly he felt hands yanking his pants off and he raised his feet off the bed to assist. Even though he was naked, all he could feel was Very’s nightclothes. “Get naked,” he said in between kisses. “I want to feel you on me.”

Very moaned. She sat up, straddling his thighs, and Wolf was there behind her, helping her pull her gown off over her head. He did it slowly, his hands starting at her thighs and traveling up her hips to her ribs and then her breasts were visible, bare at last. She put her arms above her head and Wolf tugged the dress off. Very lowered her arms and rested her hands on Michael’s stomach as she shook her head to get her hair out of her eyes. He realized he was holding his breath watching her unveiling and he breathed deeply, putting his hands over hers, rubbing her palms on his feverish skin.

“I should look, touch, worship, I know I should. But dammit, I’ve waited what seems like forever to be inside you and I’m not thinking clearly at this moment,” he admitted. He slid her hands up his chest, forcing her to lie down on him. She stretched out, a living, breathing delicious blanket of lusty woman, and Michael sighed with a contentment he’d never known. Then she snuggled against him and her damp sex rubbed on his cock and he jerked his hips, seeking more.

Very settled her mouth on his neck and kissed him. He felt her tongue swipe against his pounding pulse and then she sucked, hard. He groaned and grabbed two handfuls of her luscious behind, grinding her down on him. He nearly came right then. Very broke her kiss and moaned his name. The bed dipped and Michael looked over with dazed eyes to see Wolf next to him. He was naked too, and it almost broke Michael. Wolf was thinner too, his shoulders thick with muscles that Michael didn’t remember. But he did remember the light dusting of dark blond chest hair, his pink nipples and sleek arms. It was every fantasy he’d had for two years—no, longer than that, he’d admitted as much to himself and to them—and the reality of it was almost more than his overloaded senses could bear. He’d come expecting recriminations and rejection and yet less than an hour after mustering the courage to finally knock on their door he was about to receive the one gift he thought he’d thrown away, the right to share a bed with these two people, the two people he loved most in the world.

“Are you going to lie there staring at me,” Wolf asked, the amusement in his voice underlain with something else, something infinitely tender and precious, “or are you going to finally fuck my wife?”

Very laughed above him, the damp heat of her breath bursting against his neck as she shook on top of him. He felt her laughter in every inch of his body that she touched. It was as intimate as sex. Had they laughed before? He couldn't remember. Not like this. It had always been so serious between them, an agony of emotion. Her buried his hands in Very's hair and kissed her neck, her jaw, her lips, even while she laughed. They were all older now, and wiser. Love didn't have to be an agony. Instead it could be a balm to all the other ills that beset you. It was shelter, and safety, and warmth, and, yes, laughter.

He became aware of her hand petting his hair, her other hand straining down the length of his arm. She wanted to hold his hand. He gave it to her, and she laced their fingers together tightly. "Yes," she said against his lips. "Are you finally going to fuck me?" He opened his eyes to see hers twinkling above him.

"No," he shook his head and then blanched at the uncertainty and fear that chased the laughter from her face. He cupped her cheek and ran his thumb over her full bottom lip. "I'm going to make love to you at last."

Very closed her eyes and kissed his thumb and Michael rolled over, toward Wolf, until Very lay under him, Wolf pressed against their sides. Very was an angel with a halo of dark hair against the white linens, his angel, and he leaned down and reverently kissed her breast. She made an encouraging sound with a little wiggle that arched her back slightly, offering him more, so he took it. He sucked lightly on the nipple, but he was hungry for her and sucked harder, deeper, wrapping his arm around her, under her back, pulling her up off the bed, taking and taking, sucking and tasting. She was salt and sweat and lavender with just a hint of cinnamon, and tasted like ambrosia to him.

It took him a few moments to finally hear Wolf's voice calling his name softly. Very's hands were wrapped around his head, holding him to her as she cried out and bucked underneath him. But she didn't want to dislodge him. She wanted him inside her. He knew it with an instinct he thought he'd lost, a connection he hadn't had with anyone else besides the two people in this room.

"Michael," Wolf said. He was running his hand down Michael's back from shoulder blades to the curve of his buttocks, his fingers barely brushing the crease there. Then he started over again. Michael bowed his back, seeking that touch at the same time he thrust his hips into Very's, crammed his cock into the warm, welcoming valley of her sex. She was hot and wet and wanted him. He let go of Very's breast and stared at the swollen, pink tip in wonder. He licked it once, twice, trying to soothe her and still taste her. The mewl of pleasure that escaped her was like a spark to a flame.

Wolf worked his hand in between Michael and Very and then he grasped Michael's cock in his fist, firmly, the way Michael liked to be held, stroked. "Wolf," he managed to cry out in a strangled voice, jerking into the grip.

"This, Michael, she wants this," Wolf told him, squeezing his hard length, sliding his hand down the shaft until he could rub a finger over the damp tip, spreading the proof of Michael's desire. Michael groaned and Wolf bit his shoulder, hard. Michael welcomed the pain, remembered all the times Wolf had done that in the past to keep

Michael from toppling over the edge too soon, when he knew there was more and he didn't want Michael to miss it.

"Yes," Michael gasped. He jerked in Wolf's hold again. "Take me there," he begged.

Very dragged his mouth to hers, preventing any more talk, and then Michael felt Wolf place his cock against Very's opening and he pushed inside, too desperate to have her to do it with any finesse. He was all aching need, fumbling and panting and ready to confess all, anything, do anything, just to never have to leave her. He pressed deeper, gasping in air as the hot, wet, tight walls of her passage clenched him and he felt the ripple of her excitement, felt how close she was, as close as he was. He wasn't sure of anything except the feel of her under him, surrounding him, Wolf caressing him and murmuring words Michael couldn't hear or understand but felt deep inside. He thrust wildly then, afraid to leave her, to pull out too far, but too gone in the pleasure to keep from moving. He had to move, had to show her what this felt like. He rammed into her roughly enough to rock the bed until it hit the wall, over and over.

Very sobbed once beneath him and he clenched every muscle in his body, forcing himself to stop, but she dug her nails into his back. "Don't stop," she whispered. "Please, please, Michael." It was soft and full of the painful intensity of this joining and it made him know he wasn't alone in this. She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck and Michael knew there was nothing on earth that could have pulled her away from him. He thought she might be climaxing, but he couldn't stop, couldn't pick her pleasure apart from his own.

"Very," he said, his voice shaky with emotion. He kissed her. Kissed her and kissed her until they were both breathless and he felt her tears on his cheeks. It felt too good. He couldn't last. "Very, I'm sorry –" He lost his voice as his sac grew tight and a sharp heat began in his tailbone and shot down to the root of his cock and then out, and he threw his head back and cried out in ecstasy as he filled Very at last.

He wasn't sure how long he lay on top of her. When his head stopped spinning he pushed up onto his elbows and ran a shaking hand over his face. "Am I still breathing?" He rolled off Very to lie on his back.

When he could open his eyes again, Very's chin was resting on her hand on his chest and she was staring at him with a dreamy smile. "That was wonderful. Can we do it again?"

Michael laughed weakly and rolled them both over, so that Very lay against Wolf and Michael was tucked up behind her. He tangled his leg with Very's among the sheets. Very began rubbing her foot on Michael's calf and petting Wolf's stomach. He watched as Wolf stretched in pleasure.

"I need a little time to recuperate, my love," Michael said. He leaned over and kissed Wolf's shoulder, gave it a little bite, and wrapped his arm over Very to settle his hand on Wolf's chest. Within moments he was asleep.

"Honestly, I don't know how you two do it," Wolf commented wryly. "A little love play and you're out like a pinched flame."

Very yawned and laid her cheek on his bare chest. "Mmm, it just makes my bones feel like molasses." She already sounded half asleep. She snuggled into Wolf's embrace with a contented sigh and just like that she was asleep, too.

He didn't sleep. He needed to, but he couldn't. He just lay there and watched Very and Michael sleep. In actuality he knew neither of them was going to leave during the night. But knowing it and believing it were two very separate things. He tried keeping them both under his hands. If he was touching them he'd feel them get up, wouldn't he? That was how he knew the moment Michael woke up. He'd only slept an hour or two, perhaps three. It was hard to tell lying there in the semidarkness how much time had passed. When Michael woke he tensed under Wolf's hand on his arm. He started to jerk the arm back, to hit something was the impression Wolf got. He wasn't sure why he thought that, but he did.

"Michael," he said. He kept his voice calm and even because he didn't want to wake Very or alarm Michael. It worked.

Michael relaxed back into the mattress with a relieved sigh. Then he rubbed his face. "What time is it?" he whispered. He kissed Very's shoulder, but she didn't respond in any way. She was too exhausted. There had simply been too much emotional upheaval in the last two days. Hell, the last seven or eight months.

"I don't know," Wolf answered. "The middle of the night, I think."

Very remained asleep, not moving even an eyelash as they talked over her. "Does she always sleep like that?" Michael asked.

"Mmm-hmm," Wolf answered. He was distracted by Very's hair, which he was brushing with his fingers, carefully working out each tangle. "Especially now."

"The look on your face," Michael whispered. "My God, you love her."

Wolf looked at him in shock. "Of course I do."

Michael shook his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that. It's just that when I left..." He let the thought trail off, but Wolf understood what he meant. He and Very had only just discovered one another as lovers when Michael ran. Michael was realizing that Wolf loved her in a way Michael didn't understand yet. It must be disconcerting to him. He had always been in the middle, the one who tied them all together. But that wasn't the case anymore. Wolf frowned. Would Michael accept that rather fundamental change in their relationship?

Michael was watching him comb through Very's hair. "I'd like to take care of her like that. And you too," Michael said softly. He reached over and brushed his palm over the top of Wolf's head. "You cut your hair so short. I like it."

Wolf looked up at him and smiled in relief. Michael didn't appear upset. "I like yours long. Don't cut it."

They both laughed. Wolf's arms were around Very and Michael picked up his hand where it rested on Very's back. He twined their fingers together and kissed Wolf's palm. "I missed you. So very much."

Wolf's hand closed into a fist and Michael let go. He resumed stroking Very's back. "I missed you, too."

Michael tilted his head. "Did you?"

Wolf realized he hadn't said too much tonight. He'd been so caught up in his own emotions, and Very's, that he hadn't noticed Michael couldn't tell what he was feeling. Michael had never been able to read him like that.

Wolf sighed and kissed Very's temple. He laid his head down and looked at Michael warily. "Yes, I did. More than you know. And I don't want to go through it again. Very can't. She can't go through it again. Especially now." Wolf watched Michael wince at his words. He didn't care. He'd resolved not to dance around Michael's feelings anymore.

"You said that before, 'especially now'. What do you mean?" Michael ran his hand down Very's side and she shivered in her sleep. He smiled.

"She's pregnant."

Michael snatched his hand back. "What? Why didn't you tell me?" His shock turned to horror. "My God, I was so rough! Did I hurt her? Is that why she's insensible?"

Wolf reluctantly smiled. "She's not insensible, not in the way you mean. She just fell asleep, which is common at this stage of the pregnancy. She's been dropping off at all hours of the day lately." He kissed her hair. She smelled like Michael. It was a jolt of awareness for him. She would probably smell like Michael all the time now. He had changed, but his smell was still the same. How was that possible? Wolf felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach by the wonderful smell of Michael and Very and sex mixed together. He could stay drunk on that smell.

Michael still looked shocked. "Very. Pregnant." A smile bloomed on his face. "Very, pregnant. With your baby, Wolf."

"Yes, I know," he said, amused in spite of himself.

Michael's hand was gentle as it slid between Wolf and Very and cupped her stomach. "I guess there is a little something here," he said with a thoughtful look.

Wolf tried not to laugh too loudly. "God, don't let Very hear you say that."

Michael grinned. "Apparently I've lost my ability to charm the ladies."

"Have you?" Wolf made the words merely an amusing reply rather than the searching question he was tempted to ask. He didn't want to know who Michael had been intimate with the two years he was away from them.

"Anyway, you're the one she's going to be angry with," Michael cautioned. "I have a feeling she wanted to be the one to tell me about the baby."

Wolf made a face. "You're right about that. But I have not lost my ability to charm Very. And now that you're home, I think it will be some time before she'll feel like being angry at anyone."

Michael lay down on his back so that Wolf could only see his profile. It was a clever maneuver, one Wolf had taught him. Reveal only so much, hide the rest. He could hardly have picked a better move to put Wolf on alert. But all he said was, "I am home, and I won't be leaving again, not if I can help it." He put an arm over his eyes. "I'm exhausted. I haven't slept properly in weeks and I can hardly put a coherent sentence together. Please, Wolf. Can we talk more tomorrow?" He rolled over and spooned Very, his arm around her, his hand on Wolf's side.

Wolf almost said no, determined not to protect Michael and the delicate balance of his feelings anymore. But he heard himself say, "Of course. Go to sleep," and he knew old habits were going to die hard.

Michael pulled Very toward him a little and leaned over and kissed her on the slight bump of her stomach.

"Oh," Very said sleepily, surprising them both. "He told you."

Michael settled behind her, his hand on her stomach possessively. That touch had Wolf closing his eyes against an overwhelming flood of emotion.

"He told me." Michael's sleepy voice drifted to him from behind Very. "Now go to sleep, both of you."

This time, amazingly, Wolf did.

Chapter Eight

"Wait! What are you doing?" Michael sat up in bed so quickly he felt a little lightheaded.

Very slammed the bedroom door and leaned against it, her hands holding the doorknob tightly. "I just put your clothes out in the hall. They need to be laundered."

Michael rubbed his hand over the top of his head, trying to wake himself up. He could tell the only thing he accomplished was making a further mess of his hair. "You didn't put them out in the hallway. You threw them out. And what am I supposed to wear?" He looked out the window. It was still raining, but it was clearly late morning from the grayish light filtering through the clouds and the sounds from the street.

"Nothing," Very told him. He slowly turned back to face her, and the look she wore made his groin tighten, a flash of intense pleasure that faded into anticipation. He leaned back on his hands and smiled at her. The smile she gave him in return was laden with desire. "Do you have somewhere else to be?"

He shook his head. "No. I told Father..." He shook his head again, not wanting to even think about what was waiting outside these doors for him. "No."

Very frowned. "You went to see your parents first?" She bit her lip. "Of course you did. I'm sorry." She smiled, a quick little perfunctory curve of her lips. "It was the right thing to do."

"I had to, Very," he said quietly. "They have been as worried as you." He left off other, more pressing reasons he had to see them first.

She didn't answer him. Not with words. Instead, she slowly untied her robe and let it fall to the floor.

He'd seen her naked last night, felt her body under him, held her as they slept. Yet it still hadn't prepared him for the glory that was Very in the light of day. She was tall, as tall as Wolf. When they'd both stood next to him last night he'd noticed it in passing. He didn't remember that. What else had he forgotten? Not this, not Very's exquisite body. Unclothed she was a goddess—the Amazon he'd always called her. Her curves were generous, perhaps because of the baby. Full breasts and hips, large pink nipples, and a triangle of dark hair hiding her sex. He didn't know where to begin to love her first, he wanted to touch and taste everything.

"Will it be too much?" he asked, playing the gentleman, though it was difficult. "If you're sore or too tired from last night, we can wait."

From the bed beside him Wolf chuckled. It was a rough sound, as if Wolf were still half asleep. "For Very, there is no such thing as too much. She wears me out." He didn't sound as if he was complaining. Bragging, more like.

Very walked toward the bed and veered over to Wolf's side at the last minute, swinging around the corner with one hand on the ornate bedpost. "Perhaps Michael isn't up to satisfying me," she mused. Wolf moved his arm from over his eyes and the look he shot Very was heated. Very slid onto the bed and crawled up Wolf's body like a sinuous cat. She straddled him on hands and knees and, leaning down, licked his mouth. "But I know you are. Aren't you, husband?"

Wolf ran a hand up her arm, pushing her hair over her shoulder. "Well, I did take a vow," he said solemnly.

Michael enjoyed their play. He'd never really seen them like this. The words, the courtship, had all been between Michael and Very before. Wolf had always been a silent and stoic observer, their own private audience. Now Michael found himself in that position. It was disconcerting, but also a relief in a strange way. He hadn't been able to bear the burden of being at the center. The realization wasn't a new one. He'd figured that out while wandering up the Mississippi last year. He'd hardly stepped on America's shores before he knew that he wasn't running away from them, but from his own fear that he wasn't strong enough to bind them all together. His time away had not been wasted. There had been a great many realizations, the most important one being that he loved both of them more than he'd thought possible, and would do anything to earn their forgiveness for running away.

He rolled onto his side, pillowing his cheek on his bent arm, the better to watch them. He wanted to watch them fuck. A shiver of excitement chased down his spine at the thought. Very kissed Wolf, a slow, sensual glide of lips on lips before he opened his mouth and she licked inside. Michael could see it all from where he lay, every touch of tongue on tongue. He could practically feel their sighs of pleasure on his lips.

Wolf was rubbing Very's arms, but he stopped and reached between them to cup Very's breasts. When he rubbed his thumbs over her distended nipples, making her moan, Michael had to bite back his own response. Wolf kissed along Very's jaw while she arched her neck, her eyes closed, obviously enjoying his touch. "Would you like us to fuck for you, Michael?" he asked softly in between kisses. At his question Very lowered her hips, rubbing her cunt on Wolf like a cat in heat. Michael didn't bother to contain his groan of pleasure at the sight.

"Yes," he said roughly. "I want to see it." He reached out to run his hand down Very's spine, but she shied away at his touch.

"Oh, no," she purred, watching him through slitted eyes. "You just get to watch. Watch what we've been doing while you've been hiding in America." She rolled off the bed suddenly and yanked open a drawer in a table beside the bed. She pulled out an untied cravat, long and gleaming white. Her smile was predatory. "Over there," she gestured. "By the side of the bed."

"What?" he asked, confused. He looked over where she was pointing and didn't see anything there.

"Go stand there," she ordered him. "And grab the bedpost high above your head."

Michael just stared at her, shocked. Surely she didn't mean what he thought she did? "Are you going to tie me up?" he asked. He was as shocked at his own reaction as he was at her intentions. He was practically trembling with excitement over the prospect.

Her wicked smile was the only answer he got. She gestured to the side of the bed again. Slowly he climbed off the bed and grabbed the bedpost. Very scooted over on the bed in front of him. "Higher." She pushed his hands up until they were over his head, his elbows slightly bent. Just high enough to immobilize him, but not high enough to cause too much discomfort.

"You've done this before," he commented softly.

Very's smile deepened with mischief. "In one way or another," she answered obliquely.

Michael had visions of Very tying Wolf like this, or being tied herself while Wolf did all manner of delicious things to her. He took a deep breath to control his reaction, but he couldn't calm his cock down. It was hard and wasn't at all happy about just watching anymore. When she was done tying his hands, Very ran a sharp fingernail down the center of his chest and all the way into the nest of hair surrounding his cock. But she didn't touch him in any other way and he jerked his hips, trying to thrust into her hand.

Very backed away, shaking her finger at him as if he was a naughty child. "Uh, uh," she said. "None of that."

"Very, come here." Wolf's command drew Michael's attention. Wolf had been sitting there on the bed, one leg bent with his arm draped over his knee as he watched Very tie him up. Now he was pointing to the bed between him and Michael. Very obeyed immediately, eagerly turning from Michael to sit where Wolf told her. Michael didn't blame her. He wanted to see what Wolf was going to do, too.

"Are you going to fuck me?" she asked teasingly. "Please?"

Michael groaned aloud. "Yes, please."

Wolf laughed, a low rumble that made the hair rise on Michael's nape. He'd tried to imagine that laugh over the last two years, the laugh that said Wolf was going to fuck you hard and you were going to love it. Michael had missed that laugh.

"On your hands and knees again," Wolf told Very. "Facing Michael."

When Very laughed Michael wasn't surprised to find she sounded just like Wolf now. And it had the same effect on him.

Very did as Wolf told her, facing Michael with a smile on her face she couldn't conceal. This was going to be so much fun, tormenting him like this. And he loved every minute of it. He was so hard his cock was standing straight up. Or would be, if it didn't have a delicious little curve to it, so that the wet tip pointed to his right hip. And

it was wet, temptingly so. He was so aroused it made Very want to climb right up and thrust down on him, filling herself with that gorgeous cock.

"What happened?" Wolf reached over her shoulder and traced an angry red line along Michael's side.

Very had been so focused on his cock she hadn't seen it. She moved forward and touched the scar gingerly. Michael jerked away as he sucked in a breath. "Just a scuffle in New Orleans, is all," he replied too casually. "I'm fine now."

Very clenched her hands. He was keeping something from them. She didn't care. She didn't want to know. All she needed to know was that he was here now. Wolf started to say something, to ask Michael for details probably, but she interrupted him.

"Poor darling," she purred, kissing the scar. "I'm glad you're all better." She let her mouth drift down and placed an open-mouthed kiss on the side of his cock and Michael cried out as he thrust against her mouth. She sucked gently, and then Wolf's hand was on her shoulder, pulling her away.

"Now, darling," he said patiently, "I thought there was no touching?" He tsked, and Very thought she was going to come just from the insinuation of punishment in Wolf's voice. He liked to spank her, and she always came when he did. She loved it. Loved it when he draped her over his lap and spanked her like a naughty girl as he fucked her behind with one of his toys. She shivered, and Wolf laughed. "Shall we show Michael how we fuck, sweetheart?" he murmured against her ear, loud enough for Michael to hear. "Shall we show him all the things you like me to do to you?"

Very gave a jerky nod, her mouth going dry as all the moisture in her body pooled between her legs. As if reading her mind, Wolf nudged her thigh with his. "Spread your legs." She did as she was told, spreading them wide enough for Wolf to do whatever he chose to her. She desired it all, everything, while Michael watched and wanted them. Wolf gently pushed between her shoulder blades. "Hands down," he said quietly.

Very obeyed, bending over and setting her hands very precisely so that she was directly in front of Michael. Wolf nibbled on the cheek of her derriere, and then he placed featherlight kisses on a path up to her tailbone, dipping his tongue into the sensitive hollow at the top of her crease. Very was already panting heavily. She wanted this so much. Wanted to do debauched, depraved, decadent things with Wolf and Michael, all those things she'd fantasized about for years.

"Wolf." Michael's voice was strangled, pleading. As if he were the one Wolf was tormenting with his mouth when what he really wanted was cock.

"Yes, Michael?" Wolf asked as he massaged Very's bottom, pulling the cheeks apart and running his thumbs down the valley there. One thumb slowed and rubbed delicately against her tight opening, and without conscious thought, without Very having to do a thing, it bloomed for him, heat and desire making it flutter with sensation. She moaned.

"Wolf." This time Michael's voice was higher, and he choked off Wolf's name as if he was in pain.

Wolf's fingers glided lower, dipping between her legs. He cupped her mound, his palm grinding against her opening while he toyed with her clitoris with his finger. Very cried out and pressed against his hand. "You're very wet," he murmured. "Do you like this? Do you like showing Michael how good you are? How much you like to fuck?" On the last word he thrust a finger into her, and Very bucked.

"Yes," she moaned. "Show him for me. Fuck me." She could hardly think, she was so aroused. More aroused than she'd ever been. Michael had thought her a child when he left, but surely now he could see the woman she'd become, a woman who liked a man between her thighs and her lips, in her bottom. She liked to fuck, liked everything that gave them pleasure. She wondered what Michael would think of that and she looked up to see his reaction.

He was watching them intently, his face drawn tight with lust. His cheekbones stood out starkly, the dark blond stubble of his morning beard emphasizing the lines of them. His lips were thin, and yet the bow in front was still sharply defined. She wanted to trace that bow with the tip of her tongue. "Very," he said urgently. He thrust his hips at her and she realized his cock was at the perfect height for her mouth. She only needed to move forward just an inch or two, lean down and suck it in. He strained against the cravat tying his hands, his hips trying to lessen the distance.

"You won't get it loose," she said, her words slow and thick in her mouth, her speech made clumsy by desire. She fucked back on Wolf's finger as he thrust it inside, deep and hard. She whimpered. She knew better than to beg Wolf for his cock. He'd only deny her and tease her until she nearly cried with need. When he was like this he didn't relinquish control.

"Wolf," Michael begged. "Look at me, Wolf. Make her give me what we both want." He strained harder, pulling the cravat taut. It slipped a fraction, but it only tightened the knot. Wolf had taught her how to tie that knot. Michael growled in frustration.

"Lean forward a little more," Wolf told her, caressing her back as he continued to fuck her with his finger. Very did as he asked, but no more. For a moment Michael's face shone with triumph, but when she stopped short, still not taking him in her mouth, he cursed.

"Is this my punishment?" he asked sharply. "To be forced to watch you two fuck and not allowed to be a part of it?"

"Yes," Wolf answered simply. He pulled his finger out slowly and Very's breath hitched. Then his cock was there and she spread her legs even more, presenting herself to him like a bitch in heat. And she didn't care. She wanted him inside her, right now. He didn't disappoint. He slid into her, one long, slow glide until he could go no farther, buried to the hilt. Very heard his heavy breathing behind her, in counterpoint to Michael's labored breaths above her. Wolf gripped her hips and pulled out, then thrust back in, forcing her to rock forward slightly. She managed a weak smile as she realized what he was doing. With each thrust her mouth moved closer to Michael's cock, but then was pulled away as Wolf slid out.

Michael strained forward, his arm muscles bulging, his hips canted awkwardly, and her lips just touched him on Wolf's next thrust. He groaned. "Fine, then," he said through gritted teeth. "But I think you should know that this is no punishment. Just watching the two of you fuck will bring me."

"Hmm," was all Wolf said as he fucked Very, keeping a deliberate pace that filled her and felt so good, but kept her from the edge of climax.

Michael became intent on reaching Very's mouth, stretching to his limit, and she helped, a little. She rocked forward just a tad bit more with each thrust, and used her tongue several times, licking at Michael's cock. He shuddered in his bondage, groaning each time he felt it.

Wolf settled against her, no longer thrusting, just held deep within her, and he kissed the back of her neck, nuzzling her hair. Then he leaned over and rummaged through the drawer she'd left open in the table beside the bed. He pulled out a small bottle, and Very nearly cried with relief. "Yes?" he whispered as he kissed her ear. She nodded.

Michael had finally noticed that Wolf wasn't fucking her anymore. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice raw.

Wolf didn't answer. Instead he resumed his thrust and retreat within her. Michael became engrossed with Very's mouth again, until Wolf opened the bottle and poured a small amount between the cheeks of Very's bottom. Michael froze. Wolf rested a thumb against her back entrance, catching the oil and then he slid that thumb inside her.

Even as she moaned in relief at the dark pleasure of that penetration, Michael cried out, whether in shock or desire she couldn't tell. Wolf pushed his thumb all the way in, and then he began to fuck her with his cock and his thumb, one sliding out while the other slid in. Very shook with the intense feelings the double penetration caused.

Michael became frantic, tugging on the cravat. Finally he yanked hard several times, dragging the knot down the bedpost slightly until a large circle carved in the wood stopped him. But he'd given himself enough room to climb on the bed, his arms stretched as far as they could go over his head. His hips were directly in front of Very, his cock an irresistible lure in front of her mouth. She couldn't, not unless Wolf told her she could. She stopped moving with Wolf, just knelt there, trembling, wanting them both inside her.

"Do it, Very," Wolf said. "He's earned it." He pulled his cock and his thumb out of her as she leaned over and finally took Michael in her mouth.

He tasted divine, like desperation and depravity. Very had acquired a taste for those over the last few months. She sucked him deeply into her mouth, then paused a moment, took a deep breath, and let him slide right down into her throat.

"Very," Michael cried out. He was trying to watch her, stretched so far he couldn't really move his hips to fuck her mouth. All he could do was lean into her and let her have her way.

Wolf was silent behind them, but Very felt him watching, felt his desire in the hands on her as they trembled. His breathing was ragged. Very wanted to cry at him to move, to fuck her, but she couldn't without letting go of Michael, and she wouldn't do that. She was trying to swallow around him, but her needs were making her inept and she gagged. And then Wolf's hand was there, on the back of her head, moving her on Michael in a slow and steady rhythm. "Like that," he whispered, "like you do it for me. I love when you do this for me."

"I want to see that," Michael rasped. "I want to see you two do everything you've ever done together." A choked sound cut short the last word as Very slid down and then swallowed him again. "Damn. Damn," he whispered.

Wolf poured more oil on her, and she expected him to slide his thumb back in. Instead he pushed his cock against her and she did as he'd taught her, she relaxed and pushed against him and he slid deep inside her tight passage. She went still on Michael's cock as Wolf entered her, and she felt his cock jerk in her mouth at what he was seeing. "My God," he whispered.

Wolf slid out and in and Very couldn't stop shaking. She loved this, loved it so much. It was dark and forbidden and so sensual and depraved, and she just loved it. Every inch of him fucking her like this. She tried to keep sucking Michael, but the pleasure was too intense and all she could do was kneel there with Michael in her mouth and let Wolf fuck her.

She whimpered. She couldn't help it. She needed more. She loved that Wolf was fucking her like this, but she wanted Michael, too. She wanted them both inside her, not in her mouth but in her cunt and behind. She'd dreamed of it, and Wolf had prepared her for it. She didn't want to wait anymore.

Wolf knew her. He knew what she craved. But he wanted to hear her say it. He wanted Michael to know, to know and accept what she'd always wanted—both of them inside her, fucking her, together.

"Tell us what you want, Very," he said quietly.

He felt a flash of satisfaction as she let go of Michael as if she'd only been waiting for his permission. He loved her when she played like this, so submissive, his to command. He didn't want it all the time, but sometimes it felt so right, like today.

"I want you both," she whispered, her voice rough from Michael's cock and her own cries. A shiver went down his spine. He'd been trying so hard to maintain his control as they finally had Michael with them, living out a fantasy they'd shared in the past. Very played at being under his control, but Michael was. He could do whatever he wanted to him right now, he was so helpless and aroused. If Wolf wanted to pull out of Very and slam right into Michael, he'd probably let him.

"You have us," he told Very, petting the curve of her back with the backs of his fingers.

She shook her head. "No, inside me. I want to fuck you both."

"You are." Wolf was pushing her, making her say it. She wasn't a child anymore. She knew how to ask for what she wanted.

"I want you right where you are," she said impatiently. "But I don't want Michael in my mouth. I want him in my cunt."

"Yes," Michael said on forcefully expelled breath. "Do it, untie me. Let me have her. For God's sake, Wolf, please." Wolf looked at him. He'd been avoiding it because he knew he wouldn't be able to resist Michael's desperation. He was so damned irresistible when he begged for it, when he wanted it so badly he'd do anything for it. He and Very were alike in so many ways, and that was one of them. They could both be reduced to begging if he wanted it.

Michael was desperate, but his desperation unlocked Wolf's. It had been so long, he'd waited so long for this, for the three of them to be together. He couldn't make any of them wait a moment longer. He slid out of Very as gently as he could.

"Wolf," she moaned. She clutched at him behind her, trying to hold him in. "Don't. Don't leave me."

Wolf wrapped his arms around her and kissed her right between her shoulder blades. "I'll be back. I have to untie him."

"I should have thought of this before I tied him that way," she muttered.

"Lesson learned," Michael panted. He slid his knees back until he could get his balance again and then he climbed off the bed. Wolf kneeled in front of him and reached for the knot. Michael wasted no time. He leaned over and latched onto Wolf's nipple, sucking and biting it.

Wolf jerked, then pressed against his mouth. "I don't know if I can get this undone while you're doing that," he said with a shaky breath.

Michael let go with a lick. "I needed to taste someone," he said apologetically. "My mouth has been very lonely over here."

When the knot was untied Michael's arms dropped heavily to his sides and he grimaced. "I'm going to be feeling that for a bit."

Wolf rubbed his arms briskly. "Come on, you don't need them right now, anyway. We just need your cock."

Michael snorted with laughter. "I'm far too wound up to take offense at that. My cock is yours." He scrambled onto the bed, only falling on his face once when his arms refused to support him. He rolled onto his back and tried to drag Very on top of him. She pushed his hands away and climbed on top of him under her own power. Then she rested her cheek on his shoulder, her bottom in the air. Her entrance was glistening, just waiting to be filled by Wolf again. And she wanted it, desperately. He remembered the first time he'd taken her there, not long after they were married. She'd loved it from the first. She'd always loved the forbidden. He'd lost count of how many times they'd fucked that way, with a dildo in her cunt and Wolf in her back passage.

"Oh, yes, darling, just like that," Michael whispered. He ran a hand up her thigh and onto her plump cheek, squeezing. "I can tell you love it. I love it. He feels good, doesn't he?"

Wolf stared in amazement. Michael had never wanted to discuss what happened between them with Very. On that last night before he left for America, he'd told her in very crude terms how they fucked, but this was different. He was admitting how much he liked being fucked by Wolf. Michael's eyes met his. "I want it again," he whispered. "I want to feel him again." He looked away, kissed Very's temple. "But first you. I want to fill you front and back and feel Wolf move inside you. I want to be part of you both, part of this, at last. The three of us together at last."

Very hiccupped, and Wolf realized she was crying. She'd done that a lot lately. Everyone assured him it was the baby. But his eyes were misty, too. Because it was what they were all thinking—at last, together at last.

Very nodded, wiping her eyes with her fingers. "Yes," she finally said.

That was enough. Wolf moved behind her and slid inside without preamble. Very gasped and then she wiggled, pushing back against him. She tightened around him, holding him in. He wasn't going anywhere. He reached down and hooked his hands under her arms, pulling her up until her back rested against his chest. "Now down," he told her. He pushed one hand into the curls between her legs until he felt the entrance to her cunt and then he felt the tip of Michael's cock brush the back of his hand. He guided her down, felt Michael's cock slip into her through his fingers. Michael's neck arched as he closed his eyes, grimacing at the intense pleasure. As Very pushed farther down Wolf had to breathe deeply at the feel of Michael's cock sliding into her along his own length already buried deep.

When both he and Michael were fully inside her Very was shaking so badly she couldn't stay upright. Wolf lowered her back down to rest on Michael's shoulder and Michael buried his hand in her hair, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, wherever he could reach. He tilted Very's face up and kissed her mouth, ravaging it, forcing Very out of her love stupor, making her writhe on their cocks. She pushed away from Michael's kiss to lean her hands on his chest and began fucking them.

"Very, Very," Michael chanted softly, holding back, letting her lead.

Wolf was overwhelmed. He'd had Very to himself until this moment, and yet he couldn't regret finally sharing her with Michael. It was inevitable, the way it was meant to be and they had always known it.

He'd thought they'd be more frantic when they finally got to this stage. But instead it was slow, a sensuous roll of Very's hips that drove them higher and higher. Her motions pressed and rubbed Michael's and Wolf's cocks together inside her. Her plump cheeks cushioned Wolf's hips, hugged him inside her as she moaned at the feel of them, and Wolf had to bite his lip to keep from coming too soon.

"Yes," Michael said, his voice strangled. "Come on, Very. Come for us. I want you to come first."

Wolf pressed his chest into her back, pushed her hips down just a little to alter the angle of both cocks inside her and Very cut off a scream in the back of her throat. He grabbed her hips and held her still as he took over and fucked into her, rubbing her on Michael. It only took a few strong strokes before she stiffened between them and gave a cry of surrender, her body shuddering as she climaxed. Her passage grew tight and rippled on his cock and it took everything he had not to come yet.

"Don't come," he ground out to Michael. "Don't come yet."

"I have to," Michael cried.

"Don't," Wolf ordered. He grabbed Michael's hand and squeezed it as hard as he could. Michael pounded his head on the mattress a few times and gripped Wolf's hand so hard Wolf was afraid he'd break it.

When her climax was over, Very relaxed between them, breathing fast and hard. "Now," she told them. "Come now. Give it to me."

"What?" Michael asked in a tortured voice.

"She'll come again," Wolf told him, letting go of his hand. "She always comes when you fill her."

"Ah, God," Michael groaned. He put his hands over Wolf's on her hips and began to fuck her in a strong, steady stroke that Wolf matched.

Very gasped. "Yes," she cried out.

Wolf knew the moment that Michael came. He could feel it inside her, feel each jerk of Michael's hard length, and the heat of his release. With one stroke he joined him, shuddering in ecstasy as his own release gripped him. And just as he'd known she would, Very came again. She sobbed his name, clutched Michael's shoulders and let the pleasure take her.

Chapter Nine

Michael was starving. He sat there in Wolf's too small dressing gown and devoured the breakfast that a very curious footman had delivered. He was relatively sure the entire house was dying of curiosity. Some strange, bedraggled fellow shows up late one night in the rain and then the master of the house and his wife steal his clothes and disappear with him into their bedchamber for two days. By now tongues were wagging below stairs across London, soon to be above stairs once the valets and ladies' maids had time to bend their employers' ears with the tale. He sighed. When he'd left that had been one thing he was running from, the malicious gossip. Now he still cared about it, but he was man enough to face it.

He popped the last bite of toast into his mouth and looked across the small table at Wolf. He was sitting there in a properly fitting dressing gown reading the paper and drinking coffee. Christ, the sight of him doing something so mundane nearly made Michael cry with happiness. He'd had too many lonely breakfasts, wondering what Wolf and Very were eating, doing, saying. And here he was, eating toast with them. He closed his eyes for a minute, just to savor the sounds of Wolf's paper rustling and Very humming across the room as she drank her tea and looked out the window at the rain.

Thank God for the rain. It had kept them indoors for the last two days. No visitors, either. It was too dark and dreary outside to even think of venturing out of doors. Very had a wistful look on her face as she watched the street below. She was so beautiful she made Michael's chest ache. He remembered her as the girl he'd met years ago with her plump face and burgeoning body. She'd intrigued him even then, and in hindsight Michael thought it was because he knew that she would grow into the woman at the window now. Strong, beautiful, sensuous, intelligent—everything any man could ever want. Her dark hair gleamed even in the dull light coming through the rain, but her face was in shadow. She looked mysterious and sensual standing there, the shape of her body a silhouette under her thin wrapper, a portrait in various shades of gray.

Wolf made a sound and Michael saw that he was watching Very, too. Very turned to them and smiled. She set her teacup down on the windowsill and then stretched, her arms high over her head as she arched her back and rose onto her toes, her body one long line of desirable, available woman. In spite of the fact that they'd done little more than eat and fuck for two days, Michael still felt himself reacting to the sight.

Wolf held out his hand to her and she came to him. Without a word he pulled her between his legs. She put her hands on his shoulders and Wolf nuzzled between her breasts, his hands sliding up her legs bringing her wrap with them, exposing her. Very melted into his touch. Wolf stopped when his hands rested on her lower back, just above that delicious derriere that Michael had been worshipping for two days. He

could see love bites marring the delicate, pale flesh and it set his blood on fire to remember how they got there.

Wolf turned her to the table and stood behind her. He looked over her shoulder at Michael and Michael's breath caught in his throat. Yes, he thought. Fuck her for me. Right here. Feed me your desire and lust for breakfast. I'm starving for it.

Wolf slid his hands down Very's arms and placed her palms on the table. Very was breathing heavily, they all were. They still hadn't said a word. They didn't need to. They all knew what was going to happen. What they wanted to happen. Wolf opened his dressing gown, but didn't take it off. It was burgundy velvet, as sensuous as Wolf was, framing his lean, hard body perfectly. He gently pulled Very's hips back and then her breath hitched and Michael knew, just knew, that Wolf had a finger inside her, making sure she was wet enough to take him. He might be domineering in bed, a little demanding, but he was never careless. He would never hurt her, not if he could help it.

Wolf looked down as he bent his knees slightly and then his hips jerked upward and Very cried out. Michael's stomach dropped into his cock. He felt a drop of liquid escape the tip, hot and wet and not enough. With a satisfied grunt Wolf began to fuck her, slow and hard. Very gripped the edge of the table and braced her legs, her eyes closed as she met each thrust with one of her own. Very didn't get fucked. She fucked. Michael hadn't realized there was a difference until the last two days. She absolutely loved it, every way they could do it she wanted, again and again. Wolf had been right, there was no such thing as too much with Very. She was always ready, always willing.

This was fucking at its most elemental. It was about Wolf's cock in her cunt and how good it felt. Very bit her lip and her cheeks flushed as Wolf's thrusts got harder, driving her toward the table. Her hands slipped and Wolf stopped, his breath like a small bellows. He reached one hand around and shoved it into the neck of Very's gown, cupping her breast in a tight hold. Very shuddered. Then his other hand slid under the front of her gown, between her legs. Michael couldn't see his hand, but his arm moved slightly and Very whimpered. He'd clearly found that little knot of flesh that made Very light up like a firework.

Once Wolf had a hold of her, he began to fuck her again, his angle slightly different. Very was making erotic little sounds in her throat, a mewling purr that Michael had come to recognize. She was going to come. Her hips were undulating in Wolf's hold, and Wolf's head fell back on his shoulders, his eyes closed as he fucked harder and faster into her. Suddenly she stiffened, her nails trying to dig into the wood of the table. When her orgasm faded, her eyes opened, sleepy and sensual. She watched Michael as she nodded. He knew what she wanted. She wanted Wolf to come inside her, to give her what she loved, filling her cunt and making her come again.

Michael's cock ached he was so aroused at what they were doing. At the anticipation. Because when they were done he was going to fuck someone. He had a feeling Wolf had already orchestrated who before he'd begun this breakfast session. Michael loved that about him.

When Very cried out Michael knew Wolf was coming. Wolf tried to keep fucking her, a growl deep in his throat, until he had to stop, wrap his arm around her waist and just hold on as he shuddered. Very's eyes were closed again and it looked as if she was holding her breath, she was concentrating so hard on the pleasure of her second release.

When they were both done, they collapsed like marionettes with their strings cut. Very's arms were shaking and Wolf had to pull her up off the table. They were laughing quietly, Very's head turned toward Wolf's as he kissed her temple. "I love you," he whispered to her.

"Good," she replied breathlessly, "because I'm madly in love with you."

"Good." Wolf sounded satisfied. No, more than that. Complete, as if Very's words were enough for him, enough to build his life around. Michael understood that. He wanted it.

He had to look away. This was probably his last time with Very and Wolf before he had to go. He'd asked for two days. This was day three. They'd come looking for him soon, afraid something had happened. He wasn't going to disappear. He'd done that too many times in the past. He would not run from his responsibilities again. But he dreaded Very and Wolf's reaction when he told them he had to go. He'd come back as soon as he could, but he had no idea how long it would take to clean up the mess he'd brought back with him from America. Another two days? Two weeks? Two years? He closed his eyes, missing them already.

He heard the rustle of clothing and glanced over to see Wolf guiding Very to him with his hands on her shoulders. He stopped her next to Michael's chair. Then he moved behind Michael. "Get up," he said softly. Michael rose from his chair and Wolf moved it around. Then he guided Michael as he had Very, sitting him back in the chair so that he faced the room instead of the table. This put him directly in front of Very. He smiled at Wolf, encouraging whatever he had in mind. He enjoyed Wolf's love games, but this was new. He was moving them like chess pieces, as if creating a little vignette for his own pleasure.

Wolf came to Michael and kissed him, a soft press of mouths, a quick swipe of warm, wet tongue across his lips, then he was gone. He slipped open the sash on Michael's dressing gown and spread the sides open, revealing his hard cock. He pulled back with a slow caress of Michael's chest. For the last two days, teasing little touches and too brief kisses were all Michael had been allowed with Wolf. They had been too focused on Very, and on being together, all three of them.

Wolf turned Very's back to him and pulled up her wrapper just as he'd done before, exposing her to Michael's gaze. Michael knew better than to reach out and grab her. Wolf would take her away then. This was part of the pleasure, part of the joy in these games. Holding himself back to await Wolf's pleasure. He'd gotten the impression from Very that it wasn't always like this with them. He knew it hadn't been like this between him and Wolf before he'd gone to America. He thought perhaps orchestrating their sexual reunion was Wolf's way of dealing with Michael's return and the changes it would bring to all their lives. Michael deliberately closed off that line of thinking. He

would only think about now, not the future, not even an hour from now. Just this. Just Wolf and Very and what they were going to do.

Wolf slowly lowered Very toward Michael's lap. Before he set her down he reached out and grabbed Michael's cock, aiming it so that he entered Very as she sat in his lap. Both he and Very gasped as Wolf smiled. "There now," Wolf murmured, "that's perfect." He stood back and looked at them, as if he were examining a painting he'd just completed.

"May I touch?" Michael asked. His voice was a little ragged, and he cleared his throat. "Please?"

Wolf's smile deepened. "Of course."

Michael's tense muscles relaxed as he gripped Very's hips and pulled her down harder as he pressed deep. She felt so good, so hot and wet with Wolf's release still inside her, coating Michael. He lifted her slightly, his cock sliding out and he felt how wet she was, how wet he was from her, and his hips thrust up, wanting more.

Very hummed, and squirmed in his lap. "It feels so good," she said fervently. "I'm still so wet from you, Wolf."

Wolf looked down at his soft cock and Michael's gaze was drawn to it, too. Wolf had a heavy bush of dark blond hair surrounding his cock, spreading up onto his firm stomach, his member a heavy weight hanging down between his legs. Even soft it was impressive. Michael could smell the sex on him, the semen mixed with Very's cream, and his mouth watered. Wolf took a step closer, as if sensing what Michael wanted. Michael leaned his head down and licked the end of Wolf's cock and then managed to suck the tip into his mouth without using his hands. He tasted so good to Michael, like home. Wolf dragged in a deep breath.

"Is that what you wanted, Michael?" he asked softly. "To suck me and fuck my wife?"

Michael couldn't answer. The words lodged in his throat, because, yes, that was what he wanted. Wanted more than breath or food or sun. Just Very and Wolf, in him, on him, like this. He wrapped his arm around Wolf's thigh, keeping him close, and swirled his tongue around the tip of his cock, savoring the flavor of Wolf and Very together, showing them what he wanted.

Wolf ran his hand through Michael's hair slowly. The sensuous fall of hair as it passed tingling against Michael's sensitive skin. "All right, Michael," Wolf said softly.

Very began to move on him, her hands on his knees giving her the leverage she needed. And so their dance went on, until Wolf had grown hard in Michael's mouth and Very was shivering in his lap, frantically riding him. And Michael was completely there in that moment, blocking out all but the taste and touch and sound of them.

Very began to come and Michael had to pull off Wolf to suck in air as he fought his own release within the tight clasp of Very's cunt. When she breathed a sigh of completion, Wolf pushed his fingers into Michael's hair again, pulling his head back.

"You've made me hard again, Michael. What are you going to do about it?"

As if he would leave Wolf like that, as if he weren't dying for the taste of his release in his mouth. Michael eagerly took the cock Wolf thrust at his lips, sucking him to the back of his throat.

"Mmm," Very purred, her head turned to watch them. "I love to watch you do that. It's so erotic and depraved." She nipped at Michael's chin and nuzzled into Wolf's pubic hair. "I love depraved," she murmured, her voice muffled against Wolf's skin.

Michael chuckled around Wolf's cock in his mouth and Wolf groaned. "Yes, my dear," he said a little breathlessly, "we have figured that out."

Very laughed, the sound low and sultry. "It wasn't a great mystery. Now quit torturing him and come. He's dying for it. And so am I."

It was as if Wolf had been waiting for her command. He thrust once, twice, fucking Michael's mouth and then buried his cock in Michael's throat and came with a strangled shout. He tasted so good, so hot and salty and like Wolf that Michael nearly cried as he swallowed all that Wolf gave him. And he came, came with an intensity that stunned and blinded him, until he saw stars behind his eyelids and had to fight for breath. And as Very came with him she laughed with delight.

"You're giving me my clothes?" Michael asked with a perplexed frown.

They'd just finished cleaning up after breakfast. Wolf had already dressed, but then he and Very had done that the last two days, making Michael parade around naked for their enjoyment. Personally, Wolf wanted to stay here in their bedroom another day. And then perhaps another.

He watched Very bite her lip indecisively. "Well, it's Thursday."

"Why can I have my clothes on Thursday, when I couldn't have them on Tuesday or Wednesday?" Michael asked, shrugging into his shirt. "Are you kicking me out?"

His voice had an odd ring to it, and Wolf looked at him sharply. But Michael was looking down as he stepped into his pants, his expression hidden.

Very stood in front of him smoothing her hand over his coat that she had draped over one arm. "I was afraid you'd leave again," she said quietly.

Michael froze, one boot in his hand. He dropped it and dragged Very into his arms. She stood there hugging his coat, her arms crossed defensively around her middle, her face pressed to Michael's shirt. "Darling," he whispered. He cupped her face in his hands and made her look at him. "It wasn't my lack of clothes that kept me here. It was you. You and Wolf. Even with clothes, I would have stayed." He grinned boyishly. "Although I probably still wouldn't have worn them."

Very relented a little and wrapped one arm around his neck. Her fingers toyed with his hair. "Truly?" she asked in a small voice.

Michael rested his cheek against the top of her head. "Truly."

Wolf checked his watch. "I shall see you downstairs. Very, you'd best get dressed."

She broke from Michael's embrace, laid his coat on the bed and walked over to her wardrobe. "I will. Don't worry."

"What is going on? Are we going somewhere?" Michael was pulling his boot on and so missed the sharp glance exchanged by Wolf and Very—his questioning, hers alarmed.

"No," Very said quickly. "Just downstairs."

Michael laughed as he sat up. He flipped his head to the side to get his hair out of his eyes. He'd made that gesture a thousand times in the last two days. Wolf found it terribly arousing for some reason. Michael had always worn his hair short. Wolf had never imagined he'd like it long like this. He'd had a hard time keeping his hands out of it the last two days. "Don't cut your hair," he said suddenly, and it sounded like a command. He was immediately embarrassed. Michael looked taken aback and Very was clearly startled by his outburst.

"All right," Michael agreed amiably. "I won't."

Wolf just nodded and then he turned and pulled the door open. He didn't look back as he left the room. He was anxious. Very hadn't wanted Michael to know about her fears, or even about Manchester. She hadn't told him so, but he'd guessed as much by her behavior and the silent signals she gave him when an opening to tell Michael had appeared in the conversation. But everyone was coming today. It was Thursday. How would they react to Michael's return? And would they tell him about Very's problems? Wolf just wasn't sure what was best in this situation. Michael had to be told, but did he have the right to do it? Shouldn't Very be the one to tell him?

The questions were still running through his mind when he heard Very and Michael coming downstairs together. They were chatting and laughing and he could hear them through the open drawing room door. People would start arriving soon. He was frankly surprised neither Kate nor Sophie was here already, but the weather was beastly today. Perhaps no one would come? He sighed as he looked out at the teeming rain. No, they'd come. They'd come to bring life into Very's self-imposed prison. And she wanted them to come today. She wanted to surprise everyone and show off Michael. She wanted them to see how wrong they'd been to believe Michael wasn't coming back to them.

Wolf was anxious about that, too. They hadn't discussed a damn thing in the last two days. Not a word about what Michael had done in America, why he'd stayed away, or why he finally came back. He'd said he'd received their letter, but he hadn't said that was why he returned. Very hadn't wanted to talk about any of that either. And so both he and Michael had let her stop those conversations before they could get started. Michael had seemed relieved not to have to talk about it, and that only increased Wolf's anxiety. Christ, if something were to happen now, if Michael weren't here to stay, Wolf didn't think Very would be able to take that sort of betrayal again.

He turned to the door with a practiced smile as the two walked in together. Very's arm was linked with Michael's, their heads together as they teased and laughed with

one another. He loved her. Wolf could see it. He could see how devoted Michael was to her, how happy he was to be with them again. He knew it like he knew his own name. Michael simply couldn't pretend this well. He hadn't changed that much in two years.

Michael stopped and looked around the room with a frown. Wolf saw him make note of the tray of cakes and extra chairs in the room. "What's going on?" he asked warily.

Wolf had to force himself not to question Michael's wariness. He had a right to it. They'd kept him in the dark, they hadn't told him what Thursdays meant. His wariness was natural. It didn't hide something. He wasn't hiding something.

Very was positively glowing with delight. Just the sight of her, that mischievous gleam in her eye that he hadn't seen in far too long, made Wolf breathe easier. He'd been right. Michael had been what she needed. They'd tell him, soon, tonight, he'd insist upon it if Michael didn't hear about it today. And then he could help them figure out how to deal with Very's fears. Looking at her now it was hard to remember she was paralyzed with fear at the thought of leaving the house. Wolf had an odd sensation of stepping back in time, three years ago, before Michael left, before Manchester, when he'd stood like this and watched Very and Michael tease and torment one another day after day.

Very didn't answer Michael's question. Instead she looked at Wolf. "What time is it?"

Wolf smiled at her enthusiasm. "Past time, actually. The weather is to blame, I'm sure."

Very nodded and let go of Michael's arm to arrange herself on the sofa. She spread her skirts out around her, her hands folded demurely in her lap. She wore a golden yellow dress with a high lace collar that made her neck look delicate and long, like a swan's. The color set off her dark hair and luminous skin perfectly. Her lips were berry red and slightly swollen from their kisses of the last two days. Would anyone else notice? he wondered. The diamonds in the ring he'd given her as a wedding gift caught the light as she patted her upswept hair, making sure it was perfect. She was perfect. She was everything he'd ever wanted and thought he'd never have.

He looked over her shoulder and saw Michael staring at her, too. He caught a desperate expression on Michael's face before he realized Wolf was looking at him and his face went blank. Wolf's stomach knotted. Before he could ask what was wrong, there was a knock at the front door. Michael jerked in surprise, and then spun toward the door, panicked. Very didn't see him. She just laughed happily as they heard Jenkins open the door. A flurry of voices erupted through the house, male and female, many of them loudly complaining of the rain.

Rather than increase Michael's panic the voices seemed to reassure him. His shoulders fell in relief and he closed his eyes as he breathed out heavily, a sigh of reprieve? Wolf was becoming more concerned with each passing moment. Michael had

been expecting someone else. Every line of his body, his expression and actions indicated it. Who?

Kate came in first, dabbing her face with a handkerchief. "We very nearly had to turn back, my dear," she was saying. "The roads are awash with this torrent." She lowered the handkerchief, a smile on her face, and then she saw Michael. She froze, her face almost comical with disbelief.

Jason and Tony were following her, arguing as usual. They always argued now. Wolf knew why. They were so worried about Very, and they felt completely helpless, a feeling that was anathema to them, as it was to Wolf. Every time they had to come here they argued. Jason nearly stumbled over Kate, who had stopped directly in their path. "Kate, what the devil?" he sputtered. He looked over and his face blanched. "Kensington," he said flatly.

"Damn." Wolf looked back at the door to see Derek Knightly standing there, staring at Michael as if he'd seen a ghost. "You came back." Next to him Sophie and Ian Witherspoon wore identical looks of suspicion.

Very burst into laughter, seeming oblivious of the undercurrents in the room. "Aren't you all surprised?" She jumped up from the sofa and went to Michael, wrapping her arm in his and smiling up at him, completely besotted. She was so vulnerable it made Wolf's heart seize. He loved Michael, had always loved him it seemed. But he recognized Michael's weaknesses. Very never had. To her he'd always been perfect. But Wolf knew his ability to break a heart, the thoughtless selfishness of his feelings. And that was what had been worrying Wolf since he'd looked down and seen Michael standing at the door two days ago. He wanted to believe he'd changed. He wanted to believe he'd returned to stay, to finally accept what they all wanted. To be with him and Very and make a life together. But wanting to believe it didn't make it so.

Michael smiled back down at Very, and the look on his face did a great deal to relax the tension in the room. He looked like a man who had found the holy grail, the end of the trail, the meaning of his life. He looked as if he would never leave her side unless he was dragged off in chains. "I'm surprised, even if they're not. Why didn't you tell me they were coming? When did you arrange this?"

"I wanted to surprise you most of all," she said. She kissed his cheek and then looked away, down at the floor. "They come every Thursday, rain or shine." She looked beseechingly around at their friends and family. "Aren't you going to say hullo to Michael?"

Wolf felt their gazes sliding over to him, but he refused to meet any of them, instead holding Very and Michael in his sight. This is what they wanted. The others would have to accept it. They had all railed against Michael for two years, cursed and condemned him, but only to Wolf, never to Very. And for two years Wolf had repeated the same thing, that Michael would return, although the last few months even he had stopped believing it. And now here he was. Wolf wished he felt more triumphant, wished he could celebrate as Very was. But he was a distrustful bastard, and love didn't negate that. And his friends knew him well enough to see that if he let them.

"Of course," Kate gushed with a huge smile. "Kensington!" She rushed over and presented her cheek to him, which Michael dutifully kissed. "We've missed you terribly, you naughty boy. And I want to hear all about America. Did you meet any savages?"

Michael laughed. "Only since I've returned to England," he teased, glancing behind her at Jason's scowling countenance.

Kate snorted and flogged Jason's arm with her handkerchief. "Say hullo, Jason."

"Hullo, Jason," he said obediently. He grinned as Kate hit him again. Everyone laughed, and the tension seemed to bleed out of the room. Suddenly everyone was there shaking hands and laughing. Very looked over at Wolf and the happiness on her face was nearly his undoing.

Michael felt as if he'd never left. They were all here, all his old friends. This was a precious gift and he didn't waste it. He wasn't sure when he'd see them again, and so he made the rounds of the room and basked in their welcome. But always there was either Very or Wolf at his side. He wasn't sure if that was his decision or theirs, and didn't care.

After a while he found himself alone in a corner with Daniel Steinberg, Ian Witherspoon and Wolf. Very sat on the sofa with Sophie Witherspoon on one side and Derek Knightly on the other. Very and Derek had been good friends before Michael left, and the three looked as if they'd spent many hours together just like that. Actually, everyone here seemed comfortable, as if they'd been here many, many times. They served themselves, and Simon and Jonathan had pulled out a chess set from a cabinet and were deep in a game.

He figured there'd be no better time to bring up a delicate subject. "I saw Harry Ashbury," he told Daniel without preamble.

Daniel barely flinched. "Did you?" Daniel inquired calmly. No further questions, nothing of his feelings for his old lover revealed. He took a sip of his tea. His response was so Daniel.

"He and I spent quite a bit of time together, actually," Michael said, watching Daniel for clues as to whether he should go on or not. Daniel looked mildly interested, which probably meant he was dying to know more. "I found him by accident, in New Orleans. We ended up spending a winter in St. Louis, stuck by the weather. Then we travelled back to New Orleans together." There was a great deal more to that story, particularly after they arrived in New Orleans, but now was not the time for that. He stopped, waiting for some reaction.

After a minute Daniel gave in. "And how was he?"

Michael wasn't sure how to answer that, so he stuck close to the truth. "He's changed a great deal. He's much harder now, and is well known in Louisiana as a trader and adventurer. He's a partner in a trading company with a wild Irishman

named Alec McCain.” Michael paused. “He’s lost an eye, makes him very recognizable. Had a fight with a Pawnee savage several years ago and barely got out with his life.”

Daniel didn’t say anything, just turned and put his half-finished tea down. “Has he? He must cut a rather romantic figure these days, then.”

“He asked after you.” Michael didn’t elaborate. He’d promised Harry he wouldn’t tell Daniel the things Harry had revealed to him when he was in his cups. He was drunk a great deal that winter in St. Louis. They both were.

“Is his wife with him?” Daniel asked wryly.

“You know she’s not,” Michael answered sharply. He tempered his tone. “But Nigel Hawthorne is.”

Daniel’s lips thinned. “With Harry?”

“No, with McCain more like.”

That clearly surprised Daniel, and Ian as well, who said, “Really? Is Hawthorne speaking again, then?”

Michael nodded. “Yes, although he keeps his own counsel as much as McCain shares his.” He smiled wryly. “The two are usually out trapping. America is a strange place these days. Where no one thinks twice about a titled gentleman spending months holed up in a cabin in the wild with a commoner, trapping beaver.”

Michael had been so intent on his conversation he’d stopped paying attention to the rest of the room. But the sudden quiet caught his attention and he looked up at Wolf. The other man was staring at the door, a strange expression on his face. Michael’s heart skipped a beat and he spun around to see his recent past had caught up with him.

“Lady Kensington is here, Mrs. Tarrant,” the frowning butler said, “looking for her husband, Lord Michael Kensington.”

Chapter Ten

Michael's first response was to grab Wolf's arm and try to explain. "Wolf, I was going to tell you. I swear."

Further explanation died in his throat as Wolf turned back to him. There was such a look of resignation on his face, as if Michael had just fulfilled his expectations. There was no shock, no denial. Just a resigned acceptance of more betrayal from him. It cut Michael to the quick. He turned to Very, to beseech her, for what he wasn't sure. Forgiveness? A chance to explain? But how could he? Not here. Not in front of all these people. He simply couldn't.

Suddenly Aurelie was babbling in French, frightened out of her wits by the large group of people, the anger on almost every face, directed at him, and at her. She didn't know they wouldn't hurt her. She didn't understand. She shrank back against the door, her hand held out to Michael. He'd waited too long. Hadn't he told himself this morning that he needed to get back? Of course she was worried and had thought the worst. They had barely dodged capture in New Orleans. And then he left her at his father's house, in a strange country among strangers, and disappeared for three days. Christ, everyone was right. He was a selfish bastard.

But Very merely looked curious, as if she didn't understand what was going on. Michael zeroed in on her. "Very, you must wait for me to explain. I can't right now. But you must understand." Instead of reassuring her, Michael's entreaty seemed to slam home what was happening. Her eyes grew big and round and she stood, knocking over cups on the table in front of her. Sophie and Derek stood, each trying to grab an arm but she shook them off. Michael took a step toward her, and she fled, pushing Sophie out of the way and running toward the door. But Aurelie was there, watching it all, crying and looking at Michael beseechingly. She was sorry. He could see she was. But it was his fault. His fault he'd stayed away too long.

As Very neared the door, he knew the moment she noticed. Aurelie was quite far along, the baby due in just a month or two. Very veered away from the door, coming to rest in the corner, her back against the bookcase there, gasping for air as if she couldn't breathe, her hands protectively over her stomach. Michael turned to Wolf but it was too late. Wolf had no time for him now. Instead he was rushing to Very, calling her name.

That was when Jason planted himself in front of Michael. "You little bastard," he ground out, right before he slammed his fist into Michael's face.

Wolf gently closed the bedroom door. It had taken hours to get Very settled down. A small dose of laudanum had finally been required to get her to sleep.

Kate, Jason and Tony were pacing in the hallway. Wolf was grateful they'd stayed this long. He needed to get away, just for a while. He hadn't had a moment to really think about what had happened today. He'd been so concerned with Very. But now that she was asleep there was a pain in his chest that was making it hard to breathe. He looked at Kate. "Could you?" He indicated the door behind him.

Kate walked over and grasped his hand, her face sad. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, squeezing his hand. She sniffed and let go. "Is she all right?"

"She's sleeping now. But I fear if she wakes it won't be any better than it was before."

"If Kensington were still here," Jason growled.

Wolf shook his head roughly. "No." He took a deep breath. "Not right now. Christ, not now." He blinked, but the tears were coming. He turned away and began to walk to the stairs. "I just need some time. Please." He didn't wait for a response. Instead he quickened his pace and practically ran down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs it was only to encounter Sophie standing forlornly in the drawing room doorway. He pointed to the stairs over his shoulder. "Yes, go see her. Please."

She didn't wait for more explanations, just rushed toward the stairs. She veered over to Wolf at the last second and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Wolf," she said tearfully.

He pushed her away. "Go." She ran up the stairs. He looked over and saw Derek and Ian standing shoulder to shoulder where Sophie had been. He didn't want to see that right now, didn't want to see their togetherness, how inseparable they were. He waved a hand in their direction, turning blindly to the back of the house. "I have to...yes, and you stay. I'll just..." He walked quickly away, not caring if he sounded like an idiot.

He didn't even make it to his study. Just stopped and leaned back on the wall halfway down the hall. He slid down the wall and dropped unceremoniously to sit on the floor and covered his face with one hand as the tears won. This was it. The end of all his dreams. He'd had them, just like Very. Dreams that Michael would return and they'd live happily ever after, just like all their friends. Together at last. He snorted with bitter laughter through his tears. Foolish fairy tales were meant for children. He was a grown man and the truth was what he'd always known but denied—that kind of happiness wasn't possible, not for most people.

He caught a sob in his throat and then wondered why he bothered. There were no secrets in this house. Not anymore, not now that Michael was gone. And Very, what was he going to do for her? This was harder on her than on him. She'd never understood what Michael was capable of. She hadn't wanted to listen when people told her that he couldn't love her the way she wanted. She'd believed he was the hero of her dreams, and Wolf had let her. He'd let her set herself up for this betrayal. He hadn't protected her. He should have. But he'd thought her dreams and hopes and reckless

belief in Michael would make it all come true. He'd never been able to love Michael the way she did, without reservation, with absolute trust. He'd always held back, even before Very came into their lives. Because Michael had run from him. He'd run every time, during the war and then here in England. He'd run and then come crawling back. And Wolf had taken him back, for what reasons he wasn't sure. He just knew he'd wanted, and he'd needed, and Michael had given him what he craved, had filled those empty spaces. And Wolf thought he'd done the same thing for Michael. Until he left again.

And now it was just Very and Wolf, and she filled those empty spaces. He'd give her everything. He already had. He loved her the way she'd always loved Michael. Without reservation, with absolute trust. The strength of his love for Very made him rise each morning and lay his head down at night with dreams of tomorrow. She was stronger than she thought she was. They'd get through this. They could get through anything. Couldn't they? As if they didn't have enough already—the baby, Very's inability to leave the house.

He cried for everything that they'd dreamed of together. He cried for Michael, too, because he truly believed that now Michael wanted the same things they did. But he'd never been strong enough to face that kind of love, that kind of life. Michael was trapped in his fears. Fear of what people would say, fear that it was wrong to love Wolf, to want him, to want to have both Wolf and Very. He feared letting them down and hurting them, and so he did exactly that by running away. And now he was trapped in a misery of his own making, marriage to a woman he didn't love, and exile from Wolf and Very. His wife was an innocent victim of the love the three shared. Had shared. Would never share again.

"Wolf? Son?"

Wolf jerked his head up at the sound of Jason's voice. He stood a few feet away, Tony behind him. Somehow the sight of the two of them so worried about him, not just Very but him, settled him down. He gathered every shred of pride he had left and he sat up straight, his back pressed firmly to the wall. He stared up at the ceiling. "I'm fine."

Jason walked over slowly and then sank down on the floor next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving it a tight squeeze. "It will be all right," he murmured. "You'll get past this. We'll help. We'll be here."

Wolf wiped his face with his palms and suddenly there was a glass of whiskey shoved in front of him. He looked up to see Tony handing it to him, his face shadowed by concern. Further down the hall Derek and Ian leaned against the wall, not looking at him, drinks of their own in their hands.

"Sometimes, Wolf, life is just so fucking hard," Derek said grimly. He took a drink.

Wolf gave a watery laugh and raised the glass to his mouth. "Yes," he said roughly, his voice ruined by the tears, "so goddamn fucking hard." He drank the whole damn

glass in one shot. But it didn't drown out the questions. Why? Why had Michael married that woman? And why hadn't he told Very and Wolf?

"Where is he, Daniel?"

Wolf didn't even let Daniel get a greeting out before he demanded the information. He'd done a lot of thinking last night. Sleep had been impossible. Very had slept fitfully and cried silent tears, which scared Wolf more than anything else. He wanted her to rail against Michael and curse him, even lash out at Wolf. But no more silence. And with each passing hour his anger at Michael grew until it was suffocating him.

He'd heard Jason softly telling Tony that Daniel had slipped out and followed Michael yesterday. He wasn't going to ask Jason for the particulars. He didn't want Jason insisting on going with him, and he would. And then he'd punch Michael again and Wolf would never get his questions answered. So Wolf left the house this morning when Very fell into an exhausted sleep, and he'd come here, to Daniel.

Daniel set the paper down next to his tea. He was still at breakfast. "You're dripping on my floor," he calmly told Wolf.

Wolf shook his hat and rain droplets flew. He hadn't even removed his coat before marching into the dining room, much to the dismay of Daniel's butler who even now stood glaring in the doorway. "Tell me."

Daniel sighed as he stood up. "Come on," he said, "I'll take you there."

It was pouring rain. Not a gentle spring rain. A deluge, the rain came straight down, hard and soaking a man to the skin. The sky was gray, painting everything below it with the same light of misery. It perfectly suited Wolf's mood.

He strode down the street purposefully. He needed answers. Very needed answers. He should have insisted they talk. Michael had tried a few times, but Very had cut him off and Wolf had let her. Today he was going to get answers.

"Slow down," Daniel told him, "he's not going anywhere."

"Well, we can't be sure of that, can we? His past would argue differently."

Daniel grabbed his arm with enough force to stop him and spin him around to face the smaller man. "Do not make snap judgments," he said slowly. "You do not have all the facts."

And right then Wolf knew that Daniel did. Daniel knew and he didn't. And that angered him even more. "No, I don't. Because apparently Michael thought I was good enough to fuck, and good enough to let him fuck my wife, but not good enough to share the truth with." He yanked his arm from Daniel's grasp. "Are you going to tell me? Because he clearly isn't." Daniel's lips thinned but he remained silent. Wolf laughed wryly. "Yes, that's what I thought. So he's got you keeping his secrets now, too?" He shook his head. "How could you? You were here. You saw what we went through, what we're still going through, and yet you take his side." He took a menacing step toward Daniel. "Did you tell him? Did you tell him all our secrets?"

Daniel didn't back down. "If you mean about Very, no, I didn't tell him. But you should."

"You're damn right I should," Wolf growled. "Because he should know what he's done. She's a fucking mess because of this. Do you think she'll get better now? It may be years before she leaves the house now, if ever." He bit his lip and turned sharply away, walking again. His anger was gone abruptly, leaving a sucking wound in its place. Michael was gone. Again. And he'd left Wolf to pick up the pieces. Again.

Daniel caught up with him and they walked silently for several blocks before Wolf realized where they were going. "His father's?" he asked in astonishment. He looked at Daniel. "Why didn't you just tell me that? I know where it is."

"Because I didn't think you needed to be alone for the walk," Daniel replied simply, and Wolf felt like an ungrateful bastard.

"Thank you," he said gruffly.

Daniel pulled the collar of his coat tight against his throat. The rain was dripping from the brim of his tall beaver hat, as it was from Wolf's. "This bloody rain, however, has made me change my mind. I'll wait right here." He stopped next to a recessed doorway.

Wolf knew it was an excuse. Daniel had made sure he could handle seeing Michael, and he was going to wait here to see that Wolf got home afterward. Which meant he was expecting heavy damage from the meeting. Wolf almost backed down then, but one look at Daniel's knowing expression and he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Yes, you do that. Too wet by far."

Suddenly Simon slipped out of the shadows of the doorway. Wolf took a surprised step back. "What the devil are you doing here?"

Simon just smiled. "I thought things might be happening here today, so I came by."

Wolf frowned. "That's not even a good excuse. You couldn't come up with something better?" He turned and looked toward Michael's father's townhouse. "Why are you watching the house?"

Simon faded back into the shadows and Daniel followed. "We'll wait here," Daniel said.

Wolf knew he wasn't going to get any more out of them. The two could be as secretive as nuns when they had a mind to be. So he turned and kept walking. The stoop of the Marquis of Cheveton's home was visible in the rain, only a few doors down. It was still hard to believe that Michael would hold that title one day. In all their plans he and Very had rarely talked about that, about the obligations that came with an old title like that. The family had barely a farthing to their name, but the name was enough. Michael had been expected to marry well, a girl with a hefty dowry who would replenish the family coffers. He'd felt the weight of that like a lodestone around his neck. But they had all ignored it, a vague nuisance to be dealt with at some time in an undisclosed future.

Each step felt like a leaden weight settling on his shoulders, a gallows walk. He went slower and slower, until he stopped, standing at the foot of the steps to the marquis's door. It was too much. He couldn't take the first step. He couldn't knock on the door. Because he didn't want to face it. The questions he'd been asking, suddenly he didn't want to know the answers. He just stood there, like a fool, the rain pouring down on him, soaking him until he shivered with the cold weight of it, staring at the bleak, black door, held there by the knowledge that Michael was behind it.

Michael watched Wolf through the window. He was afraid to go out and talk to him. But he looked so desolate standing there in the rain. And it had taken a great deal of courage to come here. He'd never come for Michael before. He'd always waited. Waited for Michael to come back to him. If he had waited a while longer Michael would have gone back this time, too.

"Don't," his father warned. He came up beside Michael and pulled the curtain shut. "You can't, not yet."

When the curtain blocked Wolf from view Michael felt an irrational burst of fear, as if Wolf had truly disappeared. He turned and walked quickly to the door. "I have to. I owe that much to him."

"Michael," Aurelie pleaded from where she sat in the corner. She was wringing her hands.

Michael didn't want to see her distress right now. He didn't want to have to care about it. But he did. He stopped and looked at her kindly. "Don't worry. I won't tell him. Not yet. There's too much at stake. But I have to go to him, Aurie, don't you see?"

She nodded gloomily. "*Oui*," she whispered. "This is not his fault, or yours. Go."

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose. "Aurie," he said, but he had nothing to add. She was right. He hadn't done the wrong thing. Instead, for perhaps only the second or third time in his life he'd done the right thing. But he'd never meant it to come back and hurt Wolf or Very. He'd been clumsy. If he had waited to see them until it was all worked out, then...then maybe they would have forgiven him and not been hurt. Or maybe not.

"You will put us all at risk," his father warned, though his voice was weary and the reprimand lukewarm at best.

Michael ignored him and walked briskly over and opened the front door. They'd left the servants in the country. The fewer people here the less chance they'd be found. He knew this was risky, going outside. But they hadn't seen anyone watching the house for over a week. Very few people knew they'd left the estate in Somerset, so they were safe in London for the time being. That safety was what prompted him to go see Very and Wolf in the first place.

Wolf just stared at him as he walked down the steps. It was raining again. He'd forgotten that in his haste to go to Wolf. He had on no hat or coat. But he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but seeing Wolf.

When he reached the street he stopped in front of Wolf and they just stared at one another. Michael wanted to say a thousand things, but they were all locked inside. Some he couldn't say, some he had no right to say, not yet. Finally he managed to find the courage to whisper, "I'm sorry."

Wolf didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The regret was written on his face, and even through the rain Michael could see it clearly. Wolf's eyes drooped with sadness and exhaustion. He hadn't slept last night either, then. There was a steady stream of rain falling from the brim of his hat, almost obscuring him. Wolf pulled his hat off, holding it at his side as the rain drenched his short hair, plastering it to his head. Michael became aware of his own hair then, stuck to his cheeks and forehead, dripping into his eyes. He tried to flip it out of the way, but it remained stubbornly on his face.

Wolf reached up and tenderly picked the pieces of hair off his bruised cheek, and brushed it out of his eyes. Michael leaned into his touch. "Very?" he asked quietly.

"Don't," Wolf whispered. He took a step away from Michael. "Don't come back again."

His words were like a knife in Michael's chest. "Wolf, please don't," he begged. "Don't say that."

Wolf shook his head, about to say something else when a commotion behind him made them both turn to look down the street. Daniel and Simon were shouting, and a woman's cry echoed in the rain.

"Very!" Wolf took off running before Michael knew what was happening. It took a moment to realize Wolf meant the woman he'd heard was Very. She'd fallen on the street and Simon was helping her up. She was crying for Wolf. Michael ran after him. He wasn't allowed to reach her. Daniel grabbed him and pulled him away. He could only watch as Wolf pulled Very into his arms and held her tightly.

"Don't leave me," she was saying over and over again through her tears. "Please don't leave me." She had her arms wrapped around Wolf and was clutching his back so tightly Michael could see the whites of her knuckles. She was shaking and her teeth were chattering so badly it was hard to understand her.

Wolf had buried his face in her hair and his shoulders were shaking. He was crying. "I won't," he told her. "I won't ever leave you."

She was soaked to the skin. Like Michael, she didn't have on a coat or hat. Her long, dark hair hung in a sodden fall against her back, a wet portion falling over half her face. Her skirt was drenched, black with grime where it dragged on the ground. She had her eyes closed, as if she was deliberately blocking Michael from her sight.

Simon looked as shaken as Michael felt at the obvious signs of Very's distress. Had she run all the way from their house like that?

"You did it," Wolf said tearfully. "I knew you could." He bent and picked Very up in his arms. "Are you all right? My God, Very, you came. You came for me." He didn't look back at Michael, just turned toward home with Very in his arms. "I knew you

could," he said again as he began walking away. "I love you. I'm so proud of you." He sounded...happy. Michael didn't understand what was going on at all.

"Come on," Daniel said quietly. He pulled Michael with a hand on his arm back toward his father's house. "I'll explain." Michael spared him a glance, intent on watching Wolf and Very as long as he could see them. Daniel was shaking his head. "Honestly, the three of you are worse than the French with all of your secrets."

Michael turned back and watched Wolf and Very walking away, their figures growing dimmer as the sheet of rain blocked them from his view. Daniel was pulling him farther and farther away from them. There was no escape from his hold, and Simon stood guard a few feet away, looking between Michael and the retreating figures of his lovers. Then he could see them no more and he turned with a heavy heart to his father's house, and Aurelie.

Chapter Eleven

"She what?" Michael asked incredulously. Surely he had heard Daniel wrong.

"She hasn't left the house, until today, since the day she and Wolf were married."

He hadn't misunderstood then. He reached behind him and slowly sank down on the chair he found there. "Why?"

Daniel shrugged. "Fear, I suppose. After the massacre at St. Peter's Field back in August she began to have nightmares. We all assumed that it would pass. It has not."

"Massacre?" Michael choked out.

Daniel sighed. "I keep forgetting you don't know anything about it," he said almost to himself. He sat down beside Michael. "We went there for a rally in support of giving the vote to all men. Very is a staunch supporter of suffrage."

Michael shook his head. "Yes, I can see that. She was always a champion for the weak or the wronged." He remembered how angry she had been over her friend Sophie's painful and abusive childhood. She'd been ready to kill Sophie's dreadful family. She had always been so fierce, so fearless. But there was a new fragility about her. Michael had attributed it to the pregnancy. But that wasn't it. That wasn't it at all.

He grabbed Daniel's arm in a sudden panic. "Was she injured?" He tried to recall seeing any scars, and marks on her body, but couldn't.

Daniel shook his head and Michael was able to breathe again. "No, but the gentleman with her, Captain Macintosh, he was killed. He died in her arms, sabered trying to protect her."

Michael ran his hands through his soaking wet hair. "My God," he whispered. He'd seen the damage a saber could do to a man. "Where was Wolf?"

"There, with Simon and me, actually." Daniel's voice was sharp. "We were foolish to fall back and let Very and Macintosh get so far ahead of us. When the militia charged into the crowd it took us by surprise. Wolf ran ahead to find Very, and Simon and I fell back to try to rescue the crowd being trampled."

Michael shuddered and wrapped his arms around his middle. He was feeling the cold rain now. "How close did she come?"

Daniel understood the question. "Very close. We were lucky Macintosh was there to take the saber for her, or she'd be dead."

Michael leaned over, feeling ill. "Wolf still blames himself." It wasn't a question. He could see it now. In subtle ways Wolf had tried to protect Very during their time together. He'd let Very lead the conversation away from the things Michael should have told them, should have insisted they talk about. Now it was too late.

"Yes."

Michael sat up, an idea occurring to him. "They said you all come on Thursdays. It's to see Very, isn't it?"

"Yes." Daniel's answer was clipped.

"Because you blame yourselves, too," Michael said softly.

Daniel just looked away and nodded.

"What have I done?" Michael whispered brokenly.

Daniel laughed, which was so out of place it jerked Michael back from the brink of despair. "It would seem you've shocked her out of her fear of leaving the house," he said, with a wry smile. "Something none of us have been able to do. Your apparent betrayal pushed her beyond one fear and straight into another – losing Wolf, too."

Michael leaned back and laid his head against the back of the sofa dejectedly. "Wolf would never leave her, just as she would never leave him. They love one another too much. Far more than either one of them ever felt for me."

"Good Lord," Daniel drawled, "I'd hoped America would cure you of melodrama, but apparently not."

Michael glared at him. "You know I speak the truth."

"That they would never leave one another? Yes, that is true." Daniel adjusted the tails of his coat and shifted in his seat to face Michael directly. "They are married, Michael, in every sense of the word. They are far more suited than any of us expected. Without Wolf, Very would have sunk much lower than a mere fear of leaving the house. And she has become the sole reason for Wolf's existence."

Each word was a knife to Michael's heart. He'd wanted them to be happy, to love one another. But he hadn't wanted that love to crowd him out of their lives.

"But, Michael," Daniel continued, his tone very serious, "don't be fooled. They have survived these months, nay, years, together with one thought in mind – that you would return to them one day. They would hear no word against you in your absence. They would not listen to friends or family who told them you were never returning, that you did not want a life with them. Just days before your arrival in London Very asked me to find someone to go in search of you. Since they hadn't heard from you after sending the letter informing you of their marriage, they were convinced you were in jeopardy. Never, not for one day, did they stop thinking about you, or loving you."

"Until today," Michael whispered, clasping his hands together between his spread knees as he hung his head. "Wolf told me not to come back again."

Daniel made a scoffing sound. "He does not have all the facts. He sees nothing but a marriage which you kept secret when you crawled into their bed." Michael looked over to see Daniel scowling at him. "Which was, at best, imprudent, and at worst, unscrupulous." Michael nodded dejectedly in agreement. "Once you reveal the circumstances of your marriage and your current situation, all will be well."

"I wish I had your confidence." Michael stood up. He had to get out of these wet clothes. "I'm not sure the truth will be enough to earn their forgiveness." He took a few steps and then stopped and turned back to Daniel. "Have you forgiven me?" It was something that had haunted him for the past day. Had he thrown away not only the love of Wolf and Very, but also the regard of his friends because of a misguided sense of honor?

Daniel brushed lint from his jacket. "I? I have not forgiven you for spilling wine on my jacket in Portugal eight years ago. One can hardly countenance this misdemeanor in the face of such an outrage." Michael smiled weakly and Daniel relented. "I'm here, aren't I? And if you'd let me contact them, the others would come, too. I'm sure of it. We could use their help."

Michael shook his head. "No. I won't put them in danger. I've accepted your help, and Simon's, and I'm grateful for it, but no one else."

"Fine." Daniel sighed. "I will help you keep Aurelie and the baby safe. Have no fear. We will figure out what to do. And the sooner we get that taken care of, the sooner you can explain yourself to Wolf and Very."

Michael felt tears prick his eyes, his relief was so profound. Thank God for Daniel's incessant snooping and his insistence that Michael let him help. With his connections, Daniel could make Aurelie a Hapsburg princess if he wished, her lowly origins forgotten.

"I simply couldn't wait," he told Daniel. "It was selfish and stupid, but I had to see them."

"And that is probably what will make them forgive you," Daniel said matter-of-factly. "If you had waited until things were sorted out, your passion would have been questioned. But through sheer stupidity you may possibly have done the one thing they will understand."

* * * * *

Very stared at herself in the mirror. She was a wreck. Her hair was a rat's nest of tangles and the dark circles under her eyes looked as if she'd missed the mark with the kohl in the dead of night. She was too pale, as well. Weren't pregnant women supposed to glow with health? Unless they were sick, as her friend Maggie Neville had been. She'd looked green for several months. Very paused and surveyed the state of her stomach. No, she didn't feel like throwing up. As a matter of fact, she was hungry. As well she should be. She'd hardly eaten at all yesterday after her foolish dash through the rain to fetch Wolf home, weeping and screeching like a fishmonger's wife with her wayward man.

She sighed and reached for the brush. She was too practical to do extended melodramatic grief well. Which was too bad, since she wanted nothing more than to wallow in it for a while longer. But to what advantage? No matter how long she stayed locked up here the rain still came down, people had their hearts broken, and life went

on. She took a deep, shuddering breath. Her days of hiding were over. She set the brush back down with a shaking hand before she'd touched one tangled strand of hair.

Her cold hands were clenched together in her lap as she stared bleakly into the mirror. This was it then. The day she'd been dreading. The day she got off her pathetic arse and reclaimed some sort of life. She was going to be doing a great deal of apologies and vows of undying gratitude for a bit, wasn't she? So many people she owed for staying at her side through her recent idiotic behavior.

With a deep breath she stood up and went over to the little desk near the window. She pulled out paper and dipped her pen and dashed off two notes before she could think better of it. Then she rang for her maid.

She resolutely went back and sat in front of the mirror again. Picking up the brush she began to attack her hair. A knock sounded on the door and she jumped. "Yes?" she called out. She stuck her tongue out at herself in the mirror. *You ninny*, she thought.

"It's Betty, Mrs. Tarrant," her maid said through the door.

"Come in," she called back, throwing the brush down in disgust. Betty peeked in the door nervously. Very pointed to the desk. "Would you please ask a footman to deliver those? And then come back and help me dress. I can't do a thing with this hair." She frowned at herself fiercely in the mirror.

Betty's smile was so wide it almost dwarfed the relief in her eyes. "Yes ma'am." She bustled over and grabbed the letters. She spared Very a glance as she rushed out the door. "I'll be right back, ma'am, and I'll have you looking yourself in no time."

Very almost grinned into the mirror. Well, that would be a miracle, since she wasn't exactly sure who she was anymore. She grabbed the brush and tried to drag it through her hair again. No time like the present to try to figure it out, she supposed.

An hour later she descended the stairs, dressed and perfumed and armored as well as she could be to face the rather daunting task ahead. She heard the quiet clink of silverware and china from the breakfast room, and glanced over at the footman on duty in the hall. He nodded politely. "Mr. Tarrant is at breakfast, ma'am," he answered her unasked question.

"Thank you," she murmured. At the footman's words, the noise from the other room stopped for a moment, and then she heard the scrape of a chair.

Wolf appeared in the open doorway, his face drawn with worry. Very was swamped with guilt. When would she stop worrying him? Probably never, she pragmatically surmised. Wolf was a worrier by nature. "Very?"

She smiled and it felt rusty, her mouth unaccustomed to it after only two days. "Good morning, husband," she said brightly. "I'm starving."

Wolf blinked in shock at her pleasant tone, but recovered quickly. He reached out and drew her into the room. "Well then, eat. That's generally what food is for."

Very laughed a little. "Yes, I'd heard that rumor." Wolf seated her and she smiled at Jenkins, who was watching her as closely as an old mother hen. "A little bit of everything, Jenkins, please," she asked. "This baby is demanding to be fed."

Jenkins colored slightly. He was so easy to discombobulate with mention of such private subjects as babies and breeding. She was going to enjoy that over the next few months. "Yes madam," he answered, and set about getting a plate ready for her.

When he placed the plate in front of her she gently touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Jenkins, for the way I ran off yesterday. I didn't mean to scare you."

Jenkins patted her hand awkwardly. "That's quite all right, madam." His voice was properly stiff. "I'm sure it won't happen again."

Very laughed. "No, no it won't. I promise."

"Good," Wolf said quietly next to her. Very started to apologize, but Wolf stopped her with his forefinger raised in the air. "No. Eat first. Talk later." He pushed her plate closer to her.

"Yes sir," she meekly replied.

She applied herself with single-minded determination to her plate. Before she knew it she'd eaten everything. "My goodness," she said with a replete sigh, "that was delicious."

Wolf had been sitting there sipping his tea, watching every bite that went in her mouth. He smiled. "I'm sure that cook can do better than toast and sausage later."

Very chuckled and indicated she wanted more tea. Jenkins brought her a new cup. "Thank you, Jenkins. Would you excuse us for a few minutes?" The butler didn't hesitate. He waved the footmen out and closed the doors after them. When they were alone Very turned to Wolf. "Thank you."

Wolf looked confused. "For breakfast?"

Very shook her head, tears threatening. She didn't want to do this with tears, but it had become her natural inclination of late. "No. For...everything."

"You don't have to thank me." Wolf scooted his chair closer to hers and placed his hand over hers on the table between them. "I love you."

Very turned her hand so that she could grip Wolf's tightly. "I know." She licked her lips. "But you have to let me fall."

"What?" Wolf's look wasn't confused. He understood perfectly. He just didn't want to do it.

"Don't you see?" Very tried not to become too upset. "You've worked so hard to protect me the last few months that you've made it unnecessary for me to be strong."

"Very, I—"

She cut him off. "I know that wasn't what you intended, but that's what happened. What I let happen." She sighed. "I need to be strong again. I want it. I need to learn to stand on my own, without your constant support."

Wolf lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "You are strong. You never stopped being strong. You just needed to figure that out."

She shook her head roughly. "No, you're wrong. I was weak. I was so weak I didn't think about you. I was too weak to be there for you."

"This was my turn," he said quickly. "Someday you'll catch me when I fall."

"Yes," Very said vehemently. "That's what I want. I need to know that I could catch you. I need to be strong enough to support you. I don't want anything to happen, but if it does I want to be ready. But I can't do that if I don't learn to shoulder my own burdens first."

"I never stopped believing in you." Wolf was so serious. "I always trusted that if you had to, you would catch me."

This time Very kissed his hand. "Thank you."

"You came for me yesterday."

Very took a deep, shuddering breath. "Yes."

"Why?"

Very looked away. "Are you sorry?"

Wolf's laugh was not a happy one. "About what? You'll have to be more specific."

"Oh, you idiot," Very mumbled. She forced herself to face him. "You could still have him. He's married, yes, but you could still be with him. And his new wife." She didn't even know her name, and she hoped she never did. "I wouldn't stop you."

Wolf raised his eyebrows, his expression cool. "You wouldn't?"

Very shook her head. "You loved him first."

Wolf leaned back in his chair and looked out at the dreary, overcast skies framed by the window. "So did you." He turned sad eyes on her. "This isn't what you wanted."

"Worse than an idiot," she amended. He gave that lopsided smile that crinkled one eye and made her melt inside. "You're a fool if you think this isn't what I want."

"Then we are evenly matched, for you are as great a fool as I if you think I would sacrifice this for anything, or anyone."

"Yes," Very agreed, "two great fools." She rested her elbow on the table and leaned her chin on her hand as she stared out on the bleak day that had held Wolf's attention just a moment ago. "I should have let him talk."

"He should have insisted. I should have insisted."

Wolf sounded so guilty, Very forced a smile for his benefit. "Yes, take the blame. I refuse to shoulder it alone, although we all know I was the one avoiding the truth."

"Let's blame him. He's not here to defend himself."

It was weak as far as humor went, but Very laughed anyway. It was better than crying. "Or to care."

"He cares."

Very heard every ounce of Wolf's pain in those two words. Because he cared, too. And this was why Very had come downstairs determined to face her fears and defeat them today. Because Wolf needed her. He hadn't needed her this much as long as they had known one another. But his heart was bleeding from all the pain he was trying to hide away, and only she could stem the flow and begin the healing. Making sure he didn't have to worry about her anymore was the beginning.

"I still love him," she said. It had to be said. In the dark of last night she'd realized that would never change.

There was a loud pounding on the front door that they could hear even through the closed door of the breakfast room. Wolf started to rise, alarmed, but Very put a staying hand on his thigh. "Don't worry," she soothed, "I've been expecting them."

"Them? Who?" Wolf slowly sat back down.

"I have a lot of thank-yous to make," she said with a wry smile. She pointed at him. "You were the first. This is the second."

The door flew open and Sophie rushed in. "My God, Very! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Very said with laughter in her voice. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Derek and Ian came busting in behind Sophie, Jenkins glaring at their backs. When he saw Very calmly sitting there, Derek fell back against the wall with his hand over his heart. "I aged ten years in the last half hour," he declared. He pointed at Very scowling. "Do not do that to us again. I could wring your skinny little neck."

Very threw her hands up in the air. "All the note said was to come over this morning at your convenience. What is so dire about that message?"

"Nothing," Ian declared. "But I happen to live with the two biggest nincompoops in the land, who were convinced you were out on the ledge, penning farewell notes before you leaped."

Very had never loved Ian's pragmatic nature more than she did at that moment. "I would never endanger such a fetching gown by soaking it in this bloody rain. Thank God yesterday's gown was ill chosen in color and style, and therefore of no great loss."

Sophie promptly burst into tears.

Wolf leaped to his feet and ushered the distraught Sophie into his seat. Very was almost ashamed of her laughter, but she really couldn't stop.

"How can you laugh at me?" Sophie demanded tearfully.

"Because it is so refreshing that someone else is having an emotional breakdown and not me." She smiled at Sophie and dragged her into her arms for a fierce hug. "I love you, you silly nincompoop."

Sophie hugged her back. "It's just...you sounded so normal." She jerked back, a horrified look on her face. "Not that you weren't normal before. But you've hardly been cross or sarcastic for months." She slapped a hand over her mouth.

Derek was laughing now too. "Exactly. We've missed our Very of the sour disposition."

"I am not sour," Very declared. "Merely slightly bitter at the proliferation of idiots among my private acquaintance." She looked pointedly at Derek, who merely shrugged.

"Oh, I've missed you," Sophie whispered.

"May I take your wrap, Mrs. Witherspoon?" Jenkins asked from the doorway.

Sophie started guiltily and then jumped up, looking at her dripping coat in dismay. "Oh, Jenkins, I do apologize." She started to unbutton it and Jenkins glided up behind her to help her remove it. Suddenly footmen were there taking hats and coats and replenishing the tea cart.

When they were all seated again, Sophie turned to Very. "What did you need us for, my dear?"

"Not all of you. Just you." Very took a sip of tea to fortify herself. "We are going out."

The silence that met her statement was punctuated by the shattering of glass. Very looked sharply at Jenkins who tried to hide his shock as he hurried over to clean up the broken glass one of the footmen had dropped.

"Where?" Wolf asked, his voice deceptively mild. "Don't you think perhaps it's too soon?"

"No." Very made sure to speak firmly and with confidence. "I have left some things undone recently. I feel that it is time to pick up where I left off."

"What exactly does that mean?" Ian asked. His tone was as even as Wolf's. Very wondered if the two men realized how alike they were.

"Fine. We'll take you wherever you wish to go." Derek said. He sounded determined rather than excited about the prospect.

"No." Very matched Derek in determination. "We do not need an escort."

All three men tried to speak at once. Very ignored them. Sophie was smiling softly at her. "I'll go anywhere with you, Very. You know that."

Now the men were arguing among themselves. Very sent up a prayer of thanks for their predictable natures. She gripped Sophie's hand. "I need you to know how grateful I am for all you have done over the last few months. You were one of my anchors when my life turned upside down. I couldn't have done it without you."

Sophie squeezed her hand back. "That's what friends are for, dear heart."

"Exactly." Very sat back, satisfied she was doing the right thing. "And now it's my turn."

Just then another knock sounded and Jenkins hurried out with an annoyed expression.

Wolf looked at her and she enjoyed his indulgent, amused smile. "Just how many people should we be expecting this morning?"

"Last one, I promise," she said, getting to her feet.

Jenkins appeared in the doorway then and announced, "Lady Vanessa Carlton-Smythe to see you, Mrs. Tarrant."

An extremely elegant young lady came through the open door. She cast a curious look over the assembly as all the men rose from the table. "I hope I am not disturbing you?" she inquired politely. "Your note indicated I should come as soon as it was convenient this morning."

"Good morning, Lady Vanessa," Very said, shaking her hand. "It is good to see you again." They'd met before her marriage to Wolf. Freddy, the Duke of Ashland had introduced them. They'd struck up a friendship of sorts over their mutual interest in charity work. Over the last several months Lady Vanessa had written her asking for her help with various charity events and Very had politely declined. She'd been a little worried this morning that Lady Vanessa would not answer her note much less appear so promptly.

Very turned to the rest of the room. "You remember meeting Lady Vanessa, do you not Mr. Tarrant?" she asked, the formality awkward in her mouth.

"Of course," Wolf replied smoothly. He stepped around the table to take her hand in greeting. "How do you do, Lady Vanessa?"

"Fine, thank you," she replied, her tone very formal. It made Very a little nervous, but she seemed to recall that Lady Vanessa was like that, cool and formal at all times. She was from a very old, very distinguished family. Her bearing made her appear years older than her true age.

"And may I present Mr. And Mrs. Ian Witherspoon, and Mr. Derek Knightly?"

Lady Vanessa bowed slightly at their greetings. "How do you do." She turned to Sophie. "We met at the Earl of Wilchester's ball in your honor."

Sophie blushed. "I'm sorry, I don't recall. I was very nervous that evening."

Lady Vanessa laughed and it transformed her into the young lady she was. "I can imagine. It is very disconcerting to have to meet so many new people in those situations." She glanced around. "I thought from your note you wanted to see the facility today, but we can do that another time," she told Very.

"Yes, I did want to go today. Today is perfect." She turned to Wolf.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "Perfect."

It wasn't until they saw Lady Vanessa's rather imposing carriage, complete with two retainers, that Derek and Ian relaxed. The three women were almost out the door before Wolf remembered to ask where they were going. Very wrinkled her nose. She'd been hoping not to have to reveal that until she had Sophie in the carriage. Lady Vanessa answered for her.

"We are going to the London Orphan Asylum for girls," she said, her surprise evident. "On Bethnal Green. I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

Sophie paled and Derek took a step toward Very, anger on his face. But Ian held him back. He was watching Sophie. "That's good," was all he said.

Wolf's look asked Very without words if she thought this was a good idea. She pulled on her gloves resolutely. "Lady Vanessa's family is a patron of the orphanage, as is the Duke of Wellington. She has asked me several times over the last few months if I would care to help with some of the day-to-day aspects of the charity work involved." Her courage began to falter, and she looked beseechingly at Wolf. "I thought it was a good way to...start."

Sophie forgot her own worries and hurried to Very's side. "It's an excellent place to start," she agreed staunchly. "I have been looking for a charitable cause myself. I hope it is all right if I accompany you?" she asked Lady Vanessa belatedly.

"Of course," Lady Vanessa said, watching the undercurrents with undisguised interest. "We would welcome your involvement as well."

Then Jenkins was opening the door and two of the footmen were holding umbrellas to usher the ladies down the steps to the carriage. Sophie and Lady Vanessa both stepped out and waited on the top step for Very.

She stopped at the door. She was having trouble breathing. What if she couldn't do it today? Her nerves were stretched taut. Wolf stepped up behind her and put a hand on her upper arm.

"I love you," he whispered. "No matter what."

"I know," she whispered back. She took that first step, breaking Wolf's hold on her. Then another, and on her right Sophie tucked her arm through Very's.

"You're doing marvelously," she said quietly.

Very took another breath, and it seemed as if the constriction around her chest eased a little. Suddenly on her left Lady Vanessa tucked her arm through Very's as well.

Very turned to her with surprise. Lady Vanessa smiled encouragingly. "You are. Don't stop now."

Clinging to old and new friends alike, Very made it down the steps and into the carriage.

Chapter Twelve

Very clutched Sophie's hand in the carriage. Probably too hard, but Sophie didn't complain. She never would. The carriage hit a bump and Very gasped.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Tarrant?" Lady Vanessa asked in concern.

"Fine. I'm fine." Her words were clipped and barely skirted politeness, but it was the best Very could do at the moment. Sophie pressed Very's hand between both of hers on her lap, and Very realized she was shaking.

"It's not nearly as bad as I thought it would be," she said to Sophie with relief. She hadn't swooned or cast up her accounts, thank God. She'd expected much worse than a few shakes and sheer terror.

"No, you're doing beautifully," Sophie praised her with a genuine smile.

"I'm sorry, Sophie," she burst out suddenly after a minute of silence. She needed to talk, to keep her mind off what she was doing. "I'm sorry I haven't been there for you the last several months. I know they've been trying for you. And then with my plight on top of it, well, it can't have been easy."

Sophie blushed and glanced at Lady Vanessa, who made a point of staring out the carriage window and ignoring their conversation. "Don't, Very," Sophie said quietly. "You are not to blame for my situation or yours."

Very laughed, and it was far too bitter for her taste. "Oh, I am most definitely to blame for my own situation."

Sophie huffed in annoyance. "All right, the baby is at least half your fault. But you are not in charge of what my body does or does not do."

"It is so unfair," Very said fervently. She flinched as she heard the whinny of frightened horses outside as the driver yelled out in anger. "No one deserves a baby more than you, Sophie. No one."

"I'm sure there's someone, somewhere, who deserves a baby more than me," Sophie said drily. "But thank you for the sentiment." She turned sideways in the seat to face Very squarely and gave her a stern look. "You had better not be up to something, Veronica Tarrant. We are going to the orphanage because Lady Vanessa wants help with the charity, aren't we?"

Very nodded, relieved that she could tell the truth. "Yes, we are. But Sophie, please don't close yourself off to the possibilities. Keep an open mind, that's all I ask."

The carriage lurched a little and someone called out again, their words unintelligible. Very grabbed both of Sophie's hands in hers.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by keep an open mind," Sophie said through clenched teeth as she winced. Very let up on the pressure of her hands holding Sophie's.

"I mean, if you see a girl you like, just spend some time with her and see." Very licked her dry lips and glanced nervously out the window for a second before slamming her eyes shut.

"Good heavens, we're not going to Almack's," Sophie quipped. Very couldn't help it, she laughed and Lady Vanessa covered a chuckle with a ladylike cough.

"Sophie." Very gave her a stern look.

Sophie sighed. "I promise I will keep an open mind. Better?"

"Better." Very flinched when something hit the carriage door. It's just a rock or something, she told herself.

"Are you going to be all right, Mrs. Tarrant?" Lady Vanessa asked. "We can turn around if you'd rather do this another day."

"No." Very tried to sound firm and confident. She failed completely, but Lady Vanessa was too polite to point that out. "I don't much care for carriage travel," she added lamely.

Lady Vanessa gave her a forthright look. "I am not unaware of your circumstances, Mrs. Tarrant. While I sympathize, I do not wish to cause you undue distress, particularly in your condition."

Very could feel how hot her face was from the blush suffusing it. "Did you know, before you arrived at my home this morning?"

Lady Vanessa adjusted her skirt, smoothing it out. "Yes," she said in a straightforward manner. "Most of society knows of your peculiar plight."

Very groaned and covered her eyes. "Good grief."

"Did you or did you not run down Marmot Street in the rain yesterday with no coat or hat? And Mr. Tarrant had to carry you home?"

Very sank low in the seat. Sophie put her arm around her defensively. "See here," she began, but Very waved her off.

"Yes." She decided to be as forthright as Lady Vanessa. "I was distraught by a personal setback. It was, however, a blessing in disguise. That was the first time I have left my home in over seven months."

"And now, today, we are going to the orphanage."

"Yes," Very answered.

"Good for you," Lady Vanessa said with a smile. "And please rest assured, both of you, that anything discussed in this carriage today will go no farther." She glanced out the window. "We're here."

Very looked out in surprise. She hadn't realized the carriage had stopped. Before she could respond to Lady Vanessa's promise, the driver opened the door.

The tour of the orphan asylum took over an hour because the children flocked around them like moths to a flame. Very let Sophie and Lady Vanessa ask questions of

the manageress of the institution, Mrs. Osphrey. Very was doing all she could to simply walk sedately and pretend she wasn't a powder keg of nerves. The children actually made it better. Despite their situation they were cheerful and excited at the new company, which broke up the monotony of their day. And Very couldn't help but respond in kind to their smiles and laughter. The orphanage was crowded, and Lady Vanessa told them that they had recently purchased land to build new facilities.

Sophie was looking both delighted and wistful. She was so good with children. If all went well here then Very hoped she'd adopt one of these little girls. How could she not be affected by their plight, no homes or families of their own? But Very would not push. If she had learned anything over the last few months during her self-imposed imprisonment, it was that you could tell someone what was best for them but that didn't mean they were going to do it. So she'd brought Sophie here to let her make the decision on her own. If all she ended up doing was helping these children with Lady Vanessa, then that was all right too.

"What is in here?" Sophie asked, pointing to a set of closed doors.

"Oh, that's the wing for the children who are ill," Mrs. Osphrey told them. She shook her head sadly. "The infirmary, but also children who were ill-treated, or cannot function among the other children anymore." She tapped her temple. "Many of them are slow-witted, or not right in their minds because of what happened to them before they were brought to us."

Very held her breath. Sophie had paled considerably and Lady Vanessa's lips were thin with disapproval or anger, Very wasn't sure which one. "May we go in?" Sophie asked.

The woman's face showed her shock. "Are you sure?" She glanced nervously at Lady Vanessa.

"Yes, please," Lady Vanessa replied. It was more a command than a question.

"Of course, my lady." The doors were unlocked, which surprised Very. So they weren't trying to keep the children inside, just shield them from the other children.

The corridor was quiet. It was dark, but Very saw windows at the end, and the doors to several rooms were open, and they all had windows as well. It was just the dull and dreary day infecting the orphanage. This section smelled of strong soap. They visited the infirmary, which only had two occupants, both suffering from stuffy noses.

As they approached a room at the end of the corridor, Mrs. Osphrey stopped them. "This is the room where the children who are...different are brought for the day," she said in a hushed tone. "Many of them are quite fearful. They don't like to be touched too much, are afraid of strangers, loud noises, those sorts of things."

"Have they all been abused?" Sophie asked in a whisper.

"Oh no," Mrs. Osphrey. "Some, yes. But most were born this way. I've seen it many times, poor little ones who were never meant to lead normal lives. I consider them a gift from God to remind the rest of us what a blessing our own lives are."

Very wasn't too sure of that assessment, but she kept her opinion to herself. She didn't work with these children every day as Mrs. Osphrey did. If that attitude helped her to deal with their situation then so be it.

As soon as they entered the room several children screamed and moaned in distress and ran away, if they could. It was clear that many of those children were as Mrs. Osphrey described, born deficient in some way. Very had heard of children like this, but she had never seen them. Her heart broke at the uncomprehending looks on their faces and at the kindness of the woman in charge of the room, who tried to soothe the children who were most distraught. The little ones huddled in her skirts and sought comfort from her. Very put her hand over her stomach, felt the small bump of the life there, the little person she already loved.

"Perhaps we should go," Lady Vanessa said uncertainly. "I don't wish to cause them distress." Very silently agreed. But one look at Sophie and she knew she'd be staying for a while.

Sophie's attention was on a little dark-haired girl backed against the wall in the corner. She was eyeing them warily, but her eyes were clear and intelligent. "Why is she here?" Sophie asked pointing. "The little girl in the corner."

"Margaret?" Mrs. Osphrey clucked her tongue. "Hasn't spoken a word since she came to us. She's been here almost a year. The doctor says there's nothing wrong with her. She should speak. But we can't get her to utter a sound. She helps Mrs. Clamp with the children here, though we think she's only five or so herself."

"Her family?" Sophie took a step toward the girl, and Margaret plastered her hands against the wall behind her, her eyes huge.

"None that we can find," Mrs. Osphrey told her. "She was found near starved to death in an abandoned room. No one could remember who used to live there, or ever seeing the girl before. We had to name her ourselves, since she couldn't tell us her name."

Sophie broke eye contact with little Margaret, who slumped in relief against the wall. Sophie turned to Very with a quiet smile. "I shall stay here for a while, if that's all right."

Very turned to Mrs. Osphrey. "Could you have some chairs brought for us, please?"

Mrs. Osphrey blinked in disbelief several times. Lady Vanessa stepped up. "Yes, that would be much appreciated. Mrs. Tarrant is in a delicate condition, and I'm sure must require a rest."

That was all it took to have Mrs. Osphrey rushing off to fetch chairs. Sophie didn't wait. Without looking at Margaret she walked over to the back wall and sat on the floor a few feet away from the girl. Sophie didn't spare her a look, just sat down and adjusted her skirts and reached up and took off her bonnet, setting it on the floor beside her. Margaret was instantly fascinated with Sophie's burnished red hair, gleaming in the dull glow of an oil lamp.

Very and Lady Vanessa sat quietly for some time, watching Margaret inch her way closer to Sophie, who ignored her completely. Some of the other children wandered over to Sophie and Margaret shooed them away. Very breathed a sigh of relief when Margaret finally picked up Sophie's bonnet and sat down next to her, playing with the ribbons.

"I can't believe it was that simple," Lady Vanessa commented from beside Very. "She didn't even speak to her."

"Why would she?" Very watched Sophie pull the pins from her hair so that Margaret could touch it. The little girl combed her fingers gently through the waving, coppery strands. "Why talk to someone who doesn't want to talk back? I'm sure people have been talking to her endlessly, trying to make her say something. The magic of Sophie is that she doesn't expect Margaret to be anything other than what she is."

"You sound as if you speak from experience."

Very flashed a wry grin at Lady Vanessa. "I think it's safe to assume you know I do."

Lady Vanessa nodded. "Yes. As I said, I'm familiar with the story of the Madwoman of Manchester."

Very closed her eyes in embarrassment. "Is that what they're calling me?" She glared at Sophie, who wasn't paying any attention to her. "So much for my friends and their honesty."

The other woman laughed softly. "Don't be angry with her. She was a staunch advocate for you while you suffered your..." She let the sentence trail off.

"Yes, my peculiar plight," Very said, using Lady Vanessa's words from earlier in the carriage. She frowned. "I thought you and Sophie had only met at Wilchester's ball."

"Oh, that's true," Lady Vanessa said. "I'm in the enviable position of having most of London pass through my drawing room at one time or another. I know almost everything there is to know about everyone."

"It must be quite tempting to use your knowledge to your advantage." Very wondered if she knew quite everything about everyone.

The gleam in Lady Vanessa's eye answered her unspoken question. "Yes, well, I don't really need that sort of advantage, do I?"

"No, you don't," Very agreed. Lady Vanessa was young, attractive, wealthy and from one of the oldest and most distinguished families in England. Her advantages were too numerous to count.

They watched Sophie for a minute as she put her bonnet on an unsmiling Margaret, who reverently patted the satin ribbons. Lady Vanessa broke the silence. "I much prefer your nickname to mine."

That got Very's attention. "You have a nickname?"

Lady Vanessa crinkled her nose, marring the perfection of her face. "Well, not a nickname, I suppose. But I am referred to, behind my back mind you, as That Girl Who Was Tossed Aside By Ashland in Favor of a Penniless Vicar's Daughter."

Very winced. "Yes. My nickname is at least alliterative. And much shorter. The Madwoman of Manchester," she intoned ominously.

Lady Vanessa laughed. "Quite so."

"Ashland and the duchess adore you," Very said sincerely.

Lady Vanessa raised an imperious brow. "And Mr. Haversham?"

Very huffed. "So you do know everything."

"Well," she conceded, "that I saw with my own eyes." She sighed. "I know Ashland thinks he is helping by showing me favoritism, but I wish he would stop. It just reminds everyone that I was supposed to marry him and he chose another."

"He means well."

"Of course he does," Lady Vanessa agreed. "He is a darling man. I think I would have enjoyed being married to him. Oh, except for the part where he was in love with someone else."

Two someone elses, Very amended in her head.

"Do you think it's wrong of me to want to marry someone who loves me?" Lady Vanessa asked wistfully.

Very felt bad for her because ladies of her station were not allowed to marry for love. "No. That's what I did, and it is the most wonderful thing in the world." And it was. It was.

Lady Vanessa gave her a lopsided grin. "You could have lied to make me feel better."

"Marriage to someone who loves you is a terrible bore. Even worse if you love them, too. Really. Just awful." She tried to sound sincere, but she just couldn't make light of what she and Wolf had together. Not now.

"You're right," Lady Vanessa said with another laugh, "it doesn't sound believable at all."

"Who will you marry?" Very was curious. No one had shared any gossip about an engagement or love affair involving Lady Vanessa.

"I really don't know. I was raised to be a duchess." She flashed a wicked smile. "There aren't that many dukes lying around the market, you know, much to my dear papa's chagrin."

"No," Very said with a laugh. "It isn't as if you can pick one up from the fishmonger."

Lady Vanessa looked thoughtful. "There aren't very many peers suitable for marriage at all, actually. I'm afraid I'm a bit adrift." This time when she turned to Very

her smile looked a little forced. "But Papa is looking for someone. Perhaps a stray European prince or count. Or even a wealthy, untitled gentleman of good family."

"Is that what you want?"

Lady Vanessa looked completely taken aback at the question. "That's irrelevant. It's what will happen. I do not control my own destiny and I never have. It was only a matter of pride that let my father agree with my decision not to hold Ashland accountable for breaking our engagement."

Very couldn't imagine being deprived of the power to decide your own destiny. Intellectually, of course, she understood the laws and even that it did happen, every day. She said a silent thank-you to Kate and Jason and Tony, who had let her make her own decisions, good or bad. She decided to let the subject drop for now because she didn't want to upset Lady Vanessa. "I suppose the duke and duchess and their interfering ways are the reason you persisted in contacting me about joining your charitable endeavors. Not that I'm complaining, mind you," she quickly added.

"Yes. They asked me to keep trying. They were worried about you, and with the children they simply weren't able to come to town and see to it themselves."

How like them. Even absent, they managed to find someone to interfere in other people's business. "You could have lied to save my pride."

"No. It was your sterling reputation and renown as a great philanthropist." Lady Vanessa wasn't looking at her as she said the obvious lie in a monotone.

Very laughed. She found that she liked Lady Vanessa Carlton-Smythe far too much to be offended.

Lady Vanessa was looking out the window. "This rain is biblical. Will it ever stop?"

Very smiled. "No matter. I won't let it stop me."

Lady Vanessa smiled back. "Good. I shall send a favorable report to their graces."

"My lady," Mrs. Osphrey interrupted. "Mr. Tarrant is here with Mr. Witherspoon. They are waiting for you and the ladies in my private parlor."

"Oh, goodness," Very said, standing up quickly. She got a little lightheaded and both Lady Vanessa and Mrs. Osphrey grabbed her arms as she wobbled.

Lady Vanessa looked alarmed, but Mrs. Osphrey merely nodded knowledgeably. "It's the babe, Mrs. Tarrant. Ladies in your condition ought not to move too quickly."

It was the first time she'd been affected that way by the baby. Tears sprang to her eyes as she placed her hand over her stomach. She glanced back at the children in the room, most of them calm now, having grown accustomed to them over the last hour or so. She was fiercely glad she had come today. It put so many things in perspective.

Sophie was trying to catch her eye. When Very focused on her, she pointed to Margaret. Very understood her to mean she wanted to stay a little longer. "Mrs. Osphrey," she said politely, "I believe Mrs. Witherspoon would like to stay a while longer. Is that all right?"

Mrs. Osphrey watched Sophie and Margaret for a minute. "Yes, ma'am," she answered slowly, "I believe that would be fine."

When they left the room, Very became chilled and nervous. She realized with a start that she had felt perfectly fine in the enclosed room. She set her jaw with determination. She would not falter now. She had done it, and would do it again. But when she saw Wolf standing there waiting for her she wanted to collapse with relief.

"Sophie?" Ian asked, looking behind her. Derek was standing with his hands behind his back, scowling at her from across the little parlor.

"She has made friends with a little girl," Very told him, sliding her arm through Wolf's. She clutched his hand in hers. "She wants to stay a little longer. Margaret, the little girl, she..." Very glanced at Lady Vanessa.

"She's been abused and doesn't talk." Lady Vanessa didn't mince words because she didn't know of Sophie's past. Ian blanched and fell back a step while Derek's scowl intensified. "Mrs. Witherspoon seems to have touched the girl in some way, and they are sitting together."

"Then we will wait until she is ready to go," Derek growled.

Lady Vanessa looked between him and Ian and then turned to Mrs. Osphrey. "If that is all right? I'm afraid that I must leave, as I have an engagement this evening."

"I could stay," Very offered, though it sounded as insincere as she felt. She did not want to stay. She was suddenly exhausted and wanted nothing more to go home with Wolf.

"No," Wolf said. "You need to go home and rest."

"The gentlemen are welcome to wait here," Mrs. Osphrey said, casting curious glances around the room, sensing the undercurrents but not understanding them.

"Thank you," Ian said with smile and a bow, and Mrs. Osphrey blushed like a schoolgirl. With his handsome face and courtly manners Ian could charm just about anyone. He turned to Very. "And thank you," he said softly.

Very smiled and rested her head on Wolf's shoulder. "No, you may not. I didn't do it for you."

Ian laughed. "Even so."

Wolf donned his hat and tugged Very to the door. He held it open for Lady Vanessa and then led Very outside. "How do you feel?" he asked, his voice low so no one would overhear. They walked together under an umbrella while following Lady Vanessa and her footman.

"Exhausted and triumphant," she said.

They said an amiable farewell to Lady Vanessa after seeing her to her carriage. "You must come to tea next Thursday," Very said. She would dearly love to see Lady Vanessa among her friends. She was going to open up a whole new world to this young woman. Social reform, unconventional relationships...Very nearly laughed with delight when she thought of the very proper Lady Vanessa having tea with Derek.

"I'd be delighted," Lady Vanessa replied with a smile. "I shall be the toast of London after facing the Madwoman of Manchester in her lair."

Wolf's head jerked around and he became tense with alarm. Very lightly punched him in the arm. "Yes, what about that? You never told me that's what people were calling me. I could have become a right villain with an appellation like that."

"I...I..." Wolf stuttered.

Lady Vanessa laughed. "Until next Thursday then," she said as she climbed into her carriage.

Chapter Thirteen

The rain had stopped. It was enough of an event to have everyone talking about it. For once, the weather was not just a convenient avenue of conversation. Their drawing room had been full of visitors for the past three days, ever since Very had left the house and gone to the orphanage. Not just dear old friends, but acquaintances from various reform societies and ladies' auxiliaries. The word had apparently spread that Very was once again active. Only a few alluded to Manchester and the past few months spent trapped inside her own home.

The activity and the company were good for her. It helped keep her mind off Michael. Not completely, of course. She still wondered each morning where he was and what he was doing. Wondered if he'd left London or if he was still at his father's townhouse. Wondered about his wife and the baby, and where he'd met her, and if he loved her. But in a strange way, the days they'd spent together locked away from the rest of the world seemed like a dream now. She could almost imagine he'd never returned from America if it weren't for the ache in her heart and the hurt in Wolf's eyes.

Today she and Wolf were enjoying the pleasure of each other's company, spending a quiet day together. They had informed Jenkins they were not receiving visitors, except for family and friends of course, but no one had come by yet. It was before luncheon, far too early for visitors.

"I'd forgotten what the sun looks like," Very said as she laid her head back on the sofa and watched the breeze ruffle the cloak of new, green leaves on the trees in the garden. They had the French doors open and she could smell the wet earth mixed with chimney smoke. A month ago she couldn't have done even this, sit here near the open doors looking out on her garden. Did she have Michael to thank for this? In a painful way, yes. Because he had shown her there was no way to protect yourself from hurt, not even locked inside a prison of comfort and security. Some things could hurt as much as a saber, but the bleeding was invisible, the damage all inside.

Wolf looked lost in thought, as she had been frequently over the last few days. They hadn't really talked about Michael that much. What was there to say? They both knew that dream was over. But she wasn't ready to talk about it and clearly neither was Wolf. Eventually they'd move on with the life they'd built together over the last two years. And soon there would be three of them. She closed her eyes with a smile and rubbed both hands over her growing stomach.

"Are you feeling well?" Wolf sounded alarmed.

Very laughed and opened her eyes. "I feel wonderful. You must stop worrying."

"I'm trying," he said ruefully, "but you know it's my favorite pastime."

"Yes, I do." She patted the seat next to her. "Come and sit by me."

Wolf got up immediately and came over, sinking down next her and holding her hand. She put her head on his shoulder and felt him relax. They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

Very must have dozed off. She was awakened abruptly by a knock on the door. Wolf shushed her and patted her knee and she settled back against his shoulder. "Come in," he called out.

Jenkins entered the room and closed the door behind him. He looked extremely unhappy and Very sat up in alarm. "What is it, Jenkins?"

He cleared his throat. "You have visitors. I tried to tell them you weren't receiving today, but they insisted."

Very relaxed with relief. "Oh, that's fine, then. Who is it?" She reached up and patted her hair, trying to see if it was a mess from her short nap. She looked out the French doors as a strong breeze fluttered some papers on the small escritoire in the corner. Clouds were moving in again. Drat this weather. They'd have to close the doors. She rose from the sofa intending to do just that. Wolf lent her a hand from where he remained lounging comfortably in the pillows. Jenkins' answer stopped her in her tracks.

"Mr. Steinberg is here with Lord and Lady Kensington."

Very whipped around to face the butler with an astonished expression on her face. Her stomach felt as if it had fallen to the floor along with her jaw.

"I beg your pardon?" Wolf asked in a quiet voice.

Jenkins swallowed noticeably. "I am sorry, sir. But I didn't want to presume to have them escorted out. Mr. Steinberg has always been welcome here."

"What exactly did Mr. Steinberg say?" Wolf stood as he asked the question and came to Very's side, gently taking hold of her elbow. She leaned into his support, stunned.

"He said it was imperative you hear what they have to say."

"Tell them —"

Very cut him off. "Show them in."

"What?" Wolf was incredulous.

She took a deep breath and sat down. She'd surprised herself as well. But she needed to see them. Needed to hear what they had to say. She doubted it would make a difference. The bridge had been burned beyond repair. But there were things left unsaid. She'd thought she could move forward into the future, but she now realized that they'd been standing still for the last few days, as if waiting for this meeting.

"Please, Wolf," she asked. "I need to see him." A strange sort of excitement flowed through her at the idea of seeing them.

Wolf looked uncertain, and Very could have kicked herself. She hadn't thought about his feelings. Perhaps it was too soon for Wolf? "If you'd rather not, I understand," she hastened to assure him.

"No," he said, with a shake of his head. "You're right, of course." He walked over and closed the French doors as the rain started to fall. He stood there with his back to the door. "Show them in, Jenkins."

"If you're sure, sir." Jenkins seemed unhappier about their decision than he'd been about Michael's appearance.

Very arranged her skirt and suddenly remembered her hair. "Oh! Is it all right?" she asked Wolf, smoothing it down.

He gave her a barely there smile. "It's perfect. You're beautiful."

His sincerity settled Very's nerves. "Flatterer," she mumbled.

Wolf laughed, but the sound was cut off as the door opened.

"Lord and Lady Kensington and Mr. Steinberg," Jenkins intoned from the doorway. He was able to infuse a great deal of disapproval into the innocuous announcement.

Very looked at Daniel for several heartbeats, trying to read on his face what this meeting was about, but as usual he was annoyingly enigmatic. The door closed and she forced herself to look past Daniel, at Michael and his wife.

Michael was pale, with dark circles under his eyes. He had a large fading bruise on his cheek. Very remembered then that Jason had hit him the other day. His shoulders were slumped and his jaw set. So this meeting wasn't his idea. He didn't meet Very's eyes, nor Wolf's. She let her gaze brush over his new wife, just long enough to see her delicate features, exotic coloring, and curvaceous figure, far advanced in pregnancy. She clung to Michael's arm as if she'd fall right over without him.

"Good morning, Very, Wolf," Daniel said politely. "We're sorry to intrude, but we need a few moments of your time."

Michael's refusal to meet their eyes and the fact that he was letting Daniel do the talking set Very's blood boiling. "Why?" she asked rudely. Daniel's eyes widened in surprise. At her tone, she supposed. But what did he think they were going to do when he showed up on their doorstep, straining their friendship by bringing Michael and that woman here?

"We have a favor to ask."

Very's eyes nearly crossed as a flood of anger brought her to her feet. "You have the temerity to bring that liar into my house? With that...his...and ask for a favor?"

From the corner of her eye she saw Wolf wearily sit down in a straight-backed chair in the corner, about as far from Michael as he could get. He hadn't spoken a word.

Michael finally spoke. "I am asking for the favor." His voice was rough, and she could tell the words came hard.

"No, you are not." She didn't care how angry she sounded. "You are letting Daniel ask for it. You are letting Daniel speak for you. You should be ashamed. Too ashamed to show your face here."

"Fine." Michael did not return her anger in kind, which infuriated her. "I will do my own talking. Yes, I am ashamed. And yes, I am asking for a favor. Do you think this is by choice?"

"I no longer know what to think." Very swept her skirt behind her as she marched across the room and back again. "You were able to walk into this house and lie your way into our bed." She saw his new wife flinch. Good. Let her get a taste of what to expect from her new, lying husband. "You had no trouble making that choice."

"You have no idea how hard that choice was," he said quietly.

Very growled and whirled around. "You deceitful bastard." She took two steps and slapped him as hard as she could across the face. She didn't even care that it was the same cheek Jason had hit.

His wife gasped and backed away, and Daniel quickly took a step in their direction. Michael held up a hand to stop him. He turned his face to the side to show her his unmarked cheek. "Shall I turn the other cheek?" he asked coldly.

"No." At Very's clipped response he turned back to face her, and again she slapped his bruised cheek. "I hit better with my right hand."

She turned and walked away, not waiting for a response from him. Her heart was pounding and she could feel the throb of each harsh beat in her temple. Her hand hurt she'd hit him so hard. She'd had no idea how much anger had been locked inside her over his betrayal. Thank God he had come today. Thank God she was finally able to tell him what she thought of him. She was breathing so hard it sounded as if she'd run a race. "I cannot believe I thought I loved you," she said in low voice that trembled with rage as she slowly turned to confront him. "Years. Years I wasted thinking you were someone you're not. The tears I've cried over you. The worry, the heartache. I should have known better. From the first you denied me, treated me like some dirty little secret. The shame!" She threw her hands over her face and then flung them out again. "How ashamed you were that young, virginal Veronica Thomas had forced you to abandon your principles while you shoved your hands under her skirts. Argh!" She made a fist and shook it at him. "And the suffering you've put poor Wolf through. I could kill you. And now you're back. Because lying and making fools of us time and again wasn't enough. No, now we are supposed to help you?" She laughed harshly. "Absolutely not."

"Very." Wolf spoke quietly, but it cut through her hysterics. "Let them talk, please. The sooner we hear them out the sooner they can leave."

She ached for him. He sounded...defeated. Broken.

"You have nothing to say to me?" Michael asked. His tone was neutral, but his fists were clenched at his sides.

"No." Wolf didn't look at him. "Very has spoken for both of us, I think."

Michael clenched his jaw at Wolf's remark, but said nothing. Very turned from him then and walked over to Wolf. She sat on the arm of his chair and he put his arm around her. She was shaking. "What do you want, Michael?" he asked.

"I don't believe we need to ask anymore," Michael said stiffly. "The answer is obviously no."

"Tell them." It was the first time his wife had spoken since they'd entered the room. Her words were flavored with a unique accent. Very vaguely remembered her speaking French the last time she was here.

"No." Michael started to lead her to the door, but Daniel stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Will you put her in more danger because of your pride?" Michael quickly glanced at Very and Wolf and then glared at Daniel. "For their pride, then? Tell them."

Michael looked straight ahead at the wall. "We came here seeking sanctuary. Aurelie is in danger and we need a place to hide until we can figure out what to do."

Very scoffed. A likely story. "Why? She hardly looks the villainous type."

Michael did not answer. Instead, his little wife stepped forward. "Because I am an escaped slave, and they hunt me here in London now."

Very gasped beside him while Wolf just stared at Michael's wife. Could it be true? Her skin, a moment ago as light as porcelain to him, now seemed to carry a hint of color. Her dark hair was hidden under a bonnet, but a few strands had escaped and lay on her neck in tight curls. But her features, her bearing, her speech, none spoke of bondage.

Was this just another lie?

Her name was Aurelie. Wolf tried it out in his head. Lady Aurelie Kensington. It had a ring to it, he had to admit. But if she was a slave, then she had no money. So Michael must have married her because he loved her or because he'd gotten her pregnant. Wolf didn't like either option.

"She speaks the truth." Michael had his hand on his wife's arm, and Wolf could see that his hold was preventing her from saying more. She nervously bit her lip as she watched Michael uncertainly. Was she not supposed to tell them?

"We managed to escape New Orleans before they caught us. We'd hoped that they would not pursue her to England."

"I'm not well versed in the law concerning these cases," Very ventured, "but I do know that according to the Mansfield decision as soon as she set foot in England she was free."

Michael looked at her in surprise. "Then you are more an expert than I. Daniel sought counsel today and was informed of this."

Very shrugged, though Wolf noted she was blushing. It broke his heart, that she was still pleased at praise from Michael. "I am acquainted with several people who are working toward the abolition of slavery and the abhorrent trade that promotes it. The case has come up several times in discussions."

Michael's wife began to cry, and he solicitously ushered her over to the sofa, producing a handkerchief for her. His ministrations were thoughtful and caring, but not those of a husband. Wolf put himself in Michael's position. If Lady Kensington were Very he would take her in his arms and comfort her. Michael merely stood beside her, his hands clasped behind his back. And she seemed content with that.

"I did not know," she said, sniffing delicately. "You cannot understand what this means to me, this news." She pounded a fist against her chest. "I breathe now as a free woman. I have never done so before in my life." She wiped her eyes, not a delicate motion, but a firm swipe for each one, as if she were trying to stem the flow of tears. "*Ma b  b  * will be born free." She looked away, overcome, and Michael put his hand on her shoulder. She patted it affectionately.

They were...friends. Wolf made the realization with a level of relief that shamed him. He shouldn't care anymore. He shouldn't care whether or not Michael was happy or satisfied in this marriage he'd made. But he did.

"Her freedom is not in question," Michael said. "Not now, at least. But her safety is. There is a bounty for her if she is returned to her former...to America." His hesitation made Wolf think better of him. How hard this must be for her. "Two nights ago we barely managed to escape from some brigands who entered my father's house intent on taking her. My father was injured."

Very started to rise from the chair, but sank down again. "Is he all right?" she asked. Wolf could feel how tense she was next to him.

Michael nodded. "He left for Somerset today. Simon traveled with him wearing my hat and coat. They brought the little opera dancer Simon's been seeing, dressed as Aurie. Hopefully they will lead any other hunters away from us, at least for a few days."

"How did they find you?" Wolf asked.

"I don't know." Michael turned away, hiding his face. "They knew what ship we were on, I suppose. They must have discovered my identity from the ship's passenger list and tracked me to father's."

Wolf put the puzzle pieces together. "They didn't know you were there. I remember now. The knocker wasn't on the door. They must have thought the house was empty. Until I went there the other day."

Michael sighed. "We can't know that. There are a multitude of possible explanations."

"Where have you been staying?"

"With me." Daniel entered the conversation again. "They fled to my house after the attack."

Wolf pressed his fingers against his forehead. "Of course. This is why you and Simon were watching his father's townhouse."

"Yes. We weren't sure they'd escaped pursuit, and it turns out we were correct."

"But why?" Very asked with a puzzled expression. "Again, I am not terribly familiar with slavery or those who suffer under the practice, but a bounty large enough to entice pursuit across the ocean seems excessive for her. My apologies," she said stiffly to Michael's wife.

The other woman's expression as she looked to Michael spoke volumes. She was very frightened of something. Wolf had an idea why her former master hunted her so obsessively, but he would not venture to say here. He did not wish to humiliate her further.

"There are extenuating circumstances." Michael's answer was given quickly, and it was clear he did not wish to take the conversation further. For once Very did not push. "We can't continue to stay at Daniel's. His is a bachelor lodging. Someone will notice our presence there if they haven't already."

"Not only that, but it isn't very secure," Daniel added. "I never thought I'd be entertaining someone who required protection. I've barely slept for two days. It's wreaking havoc with my usually impeccable appearance."

Wolf merely gave Daniel an exasperated look. He was perfectly tricked out, as usual.

"Why here?" Very demanded. She crossed her arms mulishly. "Daniel this reeks of your interfering machinations."

"Not so," he defended himself as he walked over to the door, checking the cuffs of his stylish jacket as he went. "This is the perfect hideaway. No will expect them to be here. If no one leaves this house and you have several visitors for the next few days, no one will think it odd. And Wolf has turned this unassuming townhouse into a veritable fortress over the last few months to make you feel safe, my dear. So, you have unwittingly created," he waved his hands around, indicating the house around them, "the perfect sanctuary."

"Where are you going?" Very asked sharply as Daniel reached for the doorknob. She rose from the chair arm and took several menacing steps in his direction.

"I am off to fetch reinforcements. It took two days to convince Michael to come here and to agree to bring in a few more friends to help watch the situation." He deliberately avoided looking at Wolf when he added casually, "And I'm going to visit Barnabas James."

Wolf shot to his feet. "Absolutely not." Just hearing James' name made his skin crawl.

Daniel turned then and smiled pleasantly. "Yes, I most certainly am. He can help. And unlike you, I do not have an aversion to him."

"Who is Barnabas James?" Very asked him.

"He was our superior in the war," Wolf answered. He remembered James' cold smiles and pitiless orders. He had no scruples and even less honor. They had all been in thrall to him. He'd had them believing the sun couldn't rise or set without his

permission. They'd killed for him. And he'd made them believe it was for a cause, a noble one at that. And in the end the cause had been James' career.

"You have always blamed James for things that were out of his control," Daniel said, thin lipped. "And whatever choices I made were mine and mine alone."

"I don't know what that means, but I know I don't like it," Very declared. "If Wolf doesn't think you should go see this person, then you shouldn't go."

"Very loyal of you, my dear," Daniel said dismissively, "but uninformed and irrelevant. James has the power to make hunting Aurelie very difficult and unpleasant for anyone who tries."

"How? Who is he?" Very wasn't dissuaded that easily. Daniel should know better.

"He's now in charge of some shadowy and no doubt questionable department at the Home Office." Wolf didn't hide his distaste.

"You have not seen or spoken to him in nearly five years," Daniel said impatiently. "He is not the same man we knew in the war. None of us are the same."

"You are. And that's his fault." Wolf knew he was crossing a line, but it was for Daniel's sake. Because any help James offered would require payment. And there was only one thing James wanted more than power, and that was Daniel.

Daniel's back stiffened at the implied insult. "There was a time you proudly counted yourself among his, and my, subordinates." He glared at Wolf. "Respectability has made you intolerant and quite, quite rude."

Michael sighed. "I only know James by reputation. But, Daniel, if Wolf thinks it is dangerous to ask for his help, then perhaps we shouldn't."

"We can go to O'Shaughnessy." Wolf quickly walked over to the escritoire and picked up some stray papers from the floor. He grabbed a pen. "I shall write to him now. If anyone can stop a kidnapping, it's a criminal. O'Shaughnessy carries a great deal of weight among the class of men who take on such jobs."

"Who is O'Shaughnessy?" Michael asked.

"He's Kitty's...friend," Very said obliquely. "Rumor has it he is involved with some of the more disreputable businesses in London."

Daniel snorted. "Involved? The man owns them."

"Perhaps," Wolf said, feeling a bit defensive of the man who had become, if not a friend, an esteemed acquaintance. "But he helped us find Sophie when she was kidnapped, which probably saved her life. And Kitty adores him."

Michael sat down. "What the hell has been going on while I was gone?" His anger was directed at Wolf. "You've introduced her to a criminal element, taken her to riots and nearly gotten her killed. Have you lost all your common sense?"

Wolf threw the pen down on the desk as he glared back at Michael. "Did you just have the stones to criticize me for the way Very and I lived while you were hiding in America? How dare you."

"No, I criticized your failure to keep her safe," Michael responded bitterly. "And I dare because I trusted you. I left her in your care with the understanding that you would watch her."

"I was not a child who needed a nanny," Very snapped at him. "I was a woman who needed a man, and that is precisely what I got from Wolf. So you may stop worrying now and go back to America."

Lady Kensington gasped. "Non!"

Very winced. "No, I didn't mean that." She huffed in annoyance and crossed her arms again. "Go back to your father. When it's safe. Argh! I'm trying to say we don't need you anymore."

Michael stood abruptly. "You have made that abundantly clear." He bowed, punctiliously polite. "My apologies." He turned to Daniel. "Shall I accompany you to see James?"

Daniel sighed, and it was clear he was annoyed with the lot of them. "No. The less you are seen about, the better."

"Then I shall see to our things." Michael started to follow Daniel out the door, but then stopped and turned to his wife, obviously flustered because he had completely forgotten about her.

"Go," Very said in disgust. "I shall see your little wife to your room." Michael looked wary, and Very laughed, although not with great humor. "I won't bite." She snapped her teeth at him.

Michael set his jaw and with a crisp turn left the room, closing the door behind him.

"We will need two rooms."

Wolf was a little shocked to hear Aurelie speak. No, Lady Kensington. It wasn't as if they were intimate. They weren't even acquainted, actually. Michael had never introduced her. Wolf's temper spiked. He really had become a bounder and a cad.

"Oh," Very said politely. "You don't care for his snoring?"

Lady Kensington leaned back on the sofa looking weary and delicate and ethereal. Wolf was sure Very was grinding her teeth. "Does he snore? I didn't know." She met Very's stare directly. "We have never shared a bed."

Very put her hands on her hips. "Is that so?" she challenged. She gestured at Lady Kensington. "Another immaculate conception?"

"Please, sit." Lady Kensington gestured to the seat across from her. "And Mr. Tarrant, would you join us?"

Wolf was curious. If she and Michael had never shared a bed, then that certainly changed the tenor of his recent actions. Whose baby did Lady Kensington carry? Wolf had a sinking feeling in his gut.

Very warily sat down, disbelief written on her face. Wolf joined them.

"I met Kensington in New Orleans approximately three months ago." She placed her hand over her stomach. "*Ma b  b  * is expected next month."

"I don't understand what you are telling us." Wolf met her direct gaze with one of his own. "If you have something to say, then say it."

Lady Kensington waved her hand, as if shooing his words away. "It was right after the uprising in New Orleans. I took advantage of the confusion and I escaped from my master's house."

"Uprising?" he asked, settling back in his chair. She clearly had her own agenda in the telling of her tale.

"*Oui*, the slaves on a plantation there revolted, and it spread to the city."

Very gasped beside him. "We've heard nothing of it here in London."

Lady Kensington shrugged in a very French fashion. "Why would you? It has only been a few months, and the revolt was ruthlessly suppressed. The rotting heads of the slaves hang along the plantation drive now."

"Oh God," Very said weakly. She blindly reached for Wolf's hand, and he grasped hers in an iron grip.

"I escaped with the help of my dearest Marguerite," she said softly. She stared off into the distance, and then pulled a handkerchief from her little reticule and wiped her eyes. "She died not long after, caught by the slave hunters."

"She was a slave too?" Very asked quietly.

Lady Kensington shook her head. "*Non*." She gathered her composure for a moment. "She was my master's wife." She sniffed and looked down at her lap. "And my lover."

Chapter Fourteen

Very collapsed against the back of her seat and Wolf would have done the same if he weren't already resting against his.

Lady Kensington looked at them pleadingly. "Kensington found me then, right after they'd taken Marguerite. He smuggled me out of New Orleans. He and Monsieur Ashbury."

"Harry?" Wolf asked, still in shock.

She nodded. "*Oui*. He is a big man in New Orleans. He owns a very successful trading business there." She blushed. "And he knew me, before my last master bought me." She faced them directly again. "He bought me from a brothel in New Orleans, you see, where I had been raised and then, working there."

"I see," Wolf murmured. Very was crushing his fingers in her clasp, but he didn't protest.

"Your former..." Very paused. "That is, Marguerite's husband, the baby is his." Very made it a statement, not a question.

"*Non*," Lady Kensington denied vehemently. "*Ma b  b  * is mine and Marguerite's. Not his. Never his."

Very was chewing on her bottom lip. "Why did he marry you?" In a tiny voice she finally asked the question that had been tormenting her and Wolf.

"The captain of the ship, he would not let me on unless we were married. He thought I was a whore at best, a slave at worst." She squirmed in her seat, trying to get comfortable. She sat forward and rubbed her lower back. "Monsieur Ashbury, he had the ticket to come back here with Kensington. But he gave me his, yes? So Kensington married me to get me on the ship, and Monsieur Ashbury, he stayed. Our marriage is not really a marriage."

Wolf put his chin on his closed fist as he turned and stared blindly out the window. It wasn't what they'd thought at all, was it?

"When I protested, he said to me, 'She is already married, so you may as well take my name or it will go unused.'" She looked at Very. "I believe he was speaking of you." She took a shaky breath. "I am still grieving over Marguerite." She shook her head. "And I cannot feel that way about a man. I told him this before I agreed. And he told me about you two."

She wasn't done driving the knife home, either. "He almost died on the trip here. We were set upon right before we left New Orleans. He was injured, slashed with a knife. He contracted a fever, and was sick most of the voyage home. We stayed at his father's in the country until he was well enough to come to London."

Very was extremely quiet beside him. "Why did you come to London?" Wolf asked.

"To see you, I think," she said with a little smile. "But also to make sure I was safe. Kensington said we needed the law to do that, and the help of his friends." She shook her head with an awestruck expression. "He knows *le duc*"

Wolf laughed. "Yes, we all know *le duc*."

"But why didn't he just tell us all this?" Very cried out as she rose from her chair and began pacing in front of Aurelie. "Your story is a moving one, but the fact still remains that he lied to us by not telling us about you. He came to our bed under false pretenses. I can't forgive him."

"That is my fault," Aurelie said sadly, "and I regret it now." She scooted forward to sit on the edge of the sofa. "I didn't know you, I knew no one here in London, and have learned the hard way not to trust anyone. And so I begged him not to tell you. I was afraid. Afraid you would turn me in for the bounty and send me back to America. I made him swear not to tell anyone. He wanted to tell you, but he couldn't break his word."

"He still could have told us." Very argued. "He knows us. He knows we would have helped. We would never have betrayed you."

"And you would want him to break an oath like that?" Aurelie was incredulous. "You want a man who would do this?"

Very just shook her head. She stared at Wolf, as if he had the answers. He didn't. He felt like Very, yet he understood Michael's reasons. He didn't know what to do. He did have an answer to Aurelie's question, however. No, he would not want a man who could break an oath like that.

Aurelie sighed and waved him toward her. "And now I must rest. The *bèbè*, she tires me."

Wolf obediently got up and lent her a hand as she rose awkwardly. "Let me get Jenkins to show you to your room."

Her smile was strained. "*Merci*. And while I rest, you three must resolve this, no matter what that resolution is. He is killing himself over it."

Very heard Wolf come back into the room after leaving Lady Kensington in Jenkins' capable hands. She didn't turn from the window. "I hate that the rain came and made us close the doors."

"I don't want to talk anymore about the bloody rain."

Wolf's irritation stung Very's wounded pride. "Then you may refrain from comment."

"Would you stop staring out the damn window and talk to me?" Wolf jerked her around to face him with a hand on her arm.

She tore away from his grip. "You said you didn't want to talk."

Wolf put one hand on his hip and ran the other through his hair in irritation. "Please, Very. I need to talk about it. I can't pretend anymore. This is it, this is the moment we have to make some decisions."

Her anger fled and despair took its place. "I can't! I don't know what to do. How am I to make decisions or talk about it when I don't know how I feel?"

Wolf put his hands on her shoulders and she met his gaze. He looked as conflicted as she felt. "I think you know how you feel. That's not the problem."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "Then tell me. Tell me what the problem is."

Wolf let go of her shoulders and rubbed her upper arms, warming her from the inside out. "Do you know why we love someone?"

"What?" That wasn't what she'd expected him to say.

He sat down on the arm of the sofa, and for once he looked inelegant. He slumped there, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. He stared out the window he'd made Very abandon, but she could tell he didn't see it. He was looking inward.

"Why does a person love another? What makes you love someone in particular, and not someone else?"

"Well," Very said tentatively, not sure he really wanted an answer. "I don't know."

Wolf laughed softly. "I don't either." He chewed his lip a moment. "You can say, 'Oh, I love his wit, or his strength, or his tenderness. Perhaps his kindness or his intelligence.' But the truth is that he may be no more witty, no stronger, no more tender, or smarter or kinder than any other man. Less so than many, actually. And still you will love him."

Very knew then. She knew what to say and do. And it scared the breath out of her. "Perhaps he is that way only with you." She went to Wolf and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on the top of his head. "I know that you show your tenderness to me, and not the world. Your strength is mine to lean on, your kindness and wit gifts to me." She moved in front of him and he looked up at her. "And yet I also know, as I have always known, that these are not mine alone." She crouched down in front of him and held his clasped hands between hers. "We will always love him, won't we?" she whispered. "Because to us he is all these things and more, even though logic dictates that he is not. The rest of the world doesn't need to understand."

"Yes," he said, with a finality that made the decision no decision at all, really. It simply was.

"Then we will forgive him, and we will find a way to make this work."

She stood up, but Wolf didn't let go of her hands. Instead he held her in place and gave her a searching look. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, at peace with her decision. "Yes. One reason I was so mad at him today was that when I saw him, I still wanted it. I still wanted the dream we've shared all these years. I still wanted him to be with us. And I thought we couldn't have it." She tugged him up off the sofa. "But I also know that we need to set some rules this time

around. Honesty, faithfulness, togetherness, I expect all those from him. I won't tolerate any more lies, or any more running. I may never stop loving him, but I won't be anyone's fool."

Michael stared sightlessly at the rows of books on Wolf's shelves. He shouldn't be in here. Yes, Jenkins had shown him the room when he'd asked where he might find a book to read, but that didn't mean Wolf would welcome his presence in his study. Michael refused to look anywhere but at the books. He wouldn't fill his hungry gaze with the sight of Wolf's chair, where he must have sat for hours, or the sofas and chairs where he may have held Very in his arms. The table full of liquor decanters was just visible in his peripheral vision, and it was a temptation. But he avoided it. God knew what he'd do here in their house if he got drunk. Something unwelcome and untoward he was sure.

The door closed behind him and he swung around to see Very and Wolf standing there looking at him expectantly.

He started to walk to the door immediately. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I was simply looking for a book to pass the time." He stopped and took a deep breath. "Let me assure you that we will not be an inconvenience. If all goes well with James, we may be able to leave as soon as tomorrow." He went to resume his walk to the door, but Very stepped into his path. She reached for his face, and he flinched, expecting another blow. Instead she caressed his bruised cheek. She'd done a fine job of darkening the bruise from Jason's fist that had been going away. It felt a little swollen again.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. Michael stood there stunned as her arms slid around his shoulders and she held him tight, her cheek pressed to his chest. He was afraid to return her embrace. What did she expect him to do?

"You are a lying coward," she whispered, "and I love you dearly."

"What?" He felt like an idiot, but he had no idea what she was about.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she said, shoving him away. Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You will not make oaths of secrecy to anyone but us ever again."

"She told you." He couldn't believe the relief rushing through him at the knowledge that he didn't have to keep anything from Very and Wolf anymore.

"Yes." Wolf answered. He was watching Michael with a gaze so hungry and desperate Michael began to sweat. Not even when they'd been locked together upstairs for days in their protracted reunion had Wolf looked at him like that. It was a look he hadn't seen since before he'd run away. "For that we forgive you. An oath is something we understand quite well. And since you clearly do as well, it is what we demand of you now."

"I don't understand." He couldn't follow what Wolf was saying, not after hearing that glorious word "forgive".

"I can't do this again, Michael," Very said. Her voice broke and she turned away. She walked over to Wolf's desk and turned back to him, her arms crossed tightly,

almost protectively. She looked so vulnerable. "I can't let you back in only to turn around one day and find you gone, run off over some slight or misconception. This marriage," she held out her hand to Wolf and he went to her side, "has taught me many things." She took a deep breath. "Before I came to your father's the other day, I had not left this house in over seven months."

"I know. Daniel told me, right after you both left." His chest constricted. That she had hurt so much, been so frightened, and he hadn't been here to protect her. He would never forgive himself for that, no matter what they said.

"Then you know Wolf stayed beside me through all of it," Very told him solemnly. "There were times I thought I was mad, and I'm sure others told him I was. But he never faltered, or ran. He was my rock. I need to know that I can count on you the same way, Michael."

"You can," he choked out.

"We loved you and you knew it. And you left anyway." Wolf's tone was accusatory. Well, he had every right to be so, didn't he?

"My head was trying to lead the charge instead of my heart, I'm afraid. And my head said that trying to have it all with you and Very was going to cause misery and pain for everyone." He knew it was the wrong thing to say when Wolf's cheeks flushed with anger.

"Your leaving caused misery and pain. She was very angry for a while, but when you didn't return, and then I got a letter from you from America, she cried." He closed his eyes. "She didn't show those tears to anyone but me. You drove her into my arms by leaving. I cannot regret that." He laughed but there was more pain than amusement in it. "We fell in love around your desertion. Ironical, isn't it?"

Michael jaw tightened. "No, you didn't. You were falling in love before I left. I saw it in both your faces that night."

"Is that why you left? Jealousy?" Wolf shot back. "Such a stupid emotion. We were beyond it."

"Maybe I wasn't." Michael's anger melted away almost immediately. "I don't want to fight," he said quietly. "I don't know why I keep doing that. I become stupid and stubborn, when I should be telling you how I feel instead. You must be patient with me."

"Then tell us," Very pleaded, her hands out in supplication. "Tell us how you feel. The truth. Why did you leave? Why did you stay away so long? Did you only return because of Aurelie's plight?"

"No! Did she not tell you that we were coming back? Harry and I? That's why I brought her here, because I wasn't going to let one more thing keep me away."

"What kept you away?" Wolf asked.

Michael wearily sank down on the nearest chair. "Everything, it seemed, was conspiring to keep me from coming back to you." He shook his head. "No. Honesty,

right?" He leaned back and blew out a breath. "I should have turned right around the minute I got to New York. I wanted to, but it was that very desire that convinced me I needed to stay for a little while. I thought we all needed time to cool off and think about what we were doing. When I'm around you two I can't think dispassionately. All I can think about is you, and how much I want you. So I thought if I wasn't with you, I could think logically about where we were heading."

"And where were we heading?" At Very's tremulous question, Wolf moved behind her and slid his arms around her waist. She leaned back into him as if it were the most natural thing in the world, her hands rubbing on his arms. It still shook him, to see them like that. To know he missed out on the intimacies that led to that sort of togetherness, the instinctive need to seek and offer comfort to one another.

"Here." His voice was rough with emotion. "About to make a commitment to one another, to make vows of honesty, loyalty and fidelity that will be tested at every turn in a world that does not accept this kind of love, a love between three people." He looked directly at Wolf. "Vows of love between two men."

"And you feared that."

Wolf's words were a statement, not a question. But Michael answered anyway. "Yes. I feared not being strong enough to live up to the commitment. I feared censure from society and my peers, my family. I feared for Very and what it would mean for her, a woman intimately involved with two men."

"And so you didn't return. Where did you go?" Very asked.

"I thought I would just visit Washington. I wanted to see L'Enfant's design, and they rebuilt their president's lodging, the White House. We burned it, you know, during the war." Michael couldn't help but be excited as he told them of his travels. "I met President Monroe there. I simply walked up and introduced myself to a fellow at the door there, and the next thing I know I'm having tea with the president."

"No!" Very exclaimed. "Did you really?"

Michael laughed. "I did. He wanted to get an 'Englishman's take on this whole slavery business'," he quoted in his best Virginia accent. It wasn't very good, but he made them laugh. The topic sobered him, however. "I really didn't know anything about it, then. I wish I could sit down with him now. They are having a great debate about territories wanting to become states, and whether or not slavery will be allowed there."

"But you met Aurelie in New Orleans," Very said. "How did you get from Washington to New Orleans?"

"I ran into a group of young Englishmen traveling around America. Can you imagine? As if it were the continent." He laughed. "I somehow ended up on a boat with them and we drank our way from port to port until I ended up in New Orleans." He glanced at them sheepishly. "I wish I had a better story to tell. But I was miserable and I couldn't decide if I should return, and being drunk was a great deal easier than thinking about it."

"But surely you weren't drunk for two years?" Very asked with horror.

"No, not all that time, but a good portion of it. Harry Ashbury found me in New Orleans. Dragged me away and convinced me to go to St. Louis with him. We traveled by steamboat up the Mississippi River. I have never seen the like." He shook his head, not able to properly put into words the sights and sounds and majesty of that great river. "You must see it one day, both of you. It is magnificent. What a land we lost."

"And then?" Wolf prompted.

"It was really too late in the season to be traveling north. Winter struck. The snow was piled as high as the roof."

Very scoffed. "Oh, please." He shook his head, and at his expression her eyes grew wide. "Truly? That much snow? Why, that is enough to kill a man!"

He laughed. "They have adapted. But Harry had business in St. Louis. He runs a very successful trading business now. Can you believe it?"

"You told us, the other day," Wolf murmured.

Michael blushed. "Quite so, I did. Anyway, we stayed with Chouteau and his wife. He's the leading citizen there, founded the city, built it with his own two hands." Michael shook his head, still amazed at the very notion. "Made a bloody fortune in the fur trade with the natives. They'd make him king if they could." He looked down, afraid they wouldn't believe what he said next. "All I could think about was returning to you two by then. I harassed poor Harry nonstop until he finally agreed to return during a snow melt." He looked up at them through his lashes and was relieved to see they looked sympathetic. "During that time, we spent a lot of time talking about you two, and about Daniel."

"Daniel?" Wolf said in surprise. "I thought that affair was one-sided."

Michael shook his head. "At the risk of bringing Very's wrath down upon my head, I promised not to tell anyone the things Harry said during that drunken winter in St. Louis." Very looked unhappy at that, so he amended it. "But I'm sure I can rely on you two not to reveal any of it to Daniel." That seemed to satisfy her, but she didn't press for the information. "The result was that he decided to return with me. We made the arrangements, and then all hell broke loose in New Orleans. There was a slave revolt and the city erupted in violence. In the midst of that hell, we found Aurelie, hurt, devastated and in fear for her life. So we took care of her. And here we are."

"Did you really tell her that she might as well take your name because I couldn't?" Very asked in small voice.

Michael cleared his throat, embarrassed that Aurelie had revealed so much. "Yes. I had just gotten your letter, you see. They held it at Harry's office for our return. Not knowing when we were coming back, they didn't want to send it on and possibly miss me. So I'd just found out you were married. I wasn't unhappy, truly. I knew that it must be a good match for you both. I saw that with my own eyes before I left. But I also knew that I wanted this." He gestured between the three of them. "I knew I would not marry anyone else."

"Oh Michael," Very said breathlessly. She pulled gently from Wolf's arms and he let her go. She came and knelt at his feet. "This is what we want, too." She touched his cheek again. "Can you forgive me? I was so angry and miserable thinking that I'd lost you forever."

He cupped her face. "I should have told you before that. But the time never seemed right." He shook his head. "Honesty, Michael, honesty," he said under his breath, and Very laughed. "I was afraid to tell you. I was afraid you'd kick me out and never speak to me again. The truth is I was planning on telling you that morning because I had promised Aurie to be back by then. But then everyone showed up and it wasn't the right time."

"And then you ran out of time." Wolf spoke from where he still stood by his desk.

Michael nodded stiffly. "You weren't surprised." He looked at Wolf sadly. "That was the hardest part. You were looking at me as if you'd expected it, expected betrayal. And I thought then that you would never forgive me, not just for Aurie, but for everything. Because you didn't trust me."

"You were right." Wolf sighed and looked at the floor. "I held back. I didn't trust you. You must understand how painful your leaving was for me."

"Wolf—"

"No," he said, not unkindly. "Let me finish. I knew, you see. I knew that you were afraid of what we had. And I knew I was the cause of it."

"No. The fault was mine, not yours." Michael spoke firmly as he pulled Very up from the floor. She slid onto his lap and he'd never felt a more welcome weight. He pulled her in tightly, rubbed his cheek against her hair. "I was a fool, running from heaven because I was afraid of hell."

"If I had not been there, if it were only you and Very and your love for her, then you would never have run. The two of you would have married and lived happily as Lord and Lady Kensington. Don't lie to me, Michael, or to yourself."

"But you were there, and had been long before I met Very. The truth is I loved you. I loved and needed you in the same way, with the same intensity, that I loved and needed Very. If you had simply walked away it wouldn't have changed a damn thing. I would have felt the same."

"Exactly."

Michael sucked in a shocked breath. "I didn't realize...I never thought of it that way. I never put you in my place."

Very kissed his cheek. "Yes, we know you were an idiot." That earned a chuckle from Wolf. "But you have always been our idiot. If anyone should have walked away, it was I. I was the innocent instrument of doom in our ill-fated love affair."

"You what?" Wolf laughed outright. "Bloody hell. The dramatics."

"Be quiet," Very said sharply. She focused on Michael and ignored Wolf's snort of disbelief. "If I hadn't thrown myself at you, you and Wolf would have continued as you were, content with one another."

"You didn't throw yourself at me. I was the aggressor. And we were never content." Michael gave her a lopsided grin and then winced. His cheek was killing him. "We were desperate and aching and lonely, but never content. We were locked in a cycle of advance and retreat, forever bound, though we struggled against it."

"You struggled," Wolf amended. "I was content to be bound to you. But you are right. It was never an easy bond because you didn't want it."

"No, I didn't." He was through lying and avoiding this conversation. "My love for you has always troubled me. It is not the way things ought to be, and you know it, no matter what we see around us in the small sphere of our intimate acquaintance. And I am too much a child of society not to chafe under that sort of impropriety. I cannot apologize for that. It is the way I was raised."

Wolf was looking at him incredulously. "I think that is the first time you have ever shared the way you truly feel." He cleared his throat. "And now?"

"And now, hell, I have been through too much, seen too much, hurt too much. This world is not big enough to outrun my love for you. And I have realized that the only contentment I have ever found was with you both. Not just you." He kissed Very's jaw. "And not just you," he said nodding in Wolf's direction. "But both of you. I am no philosopher. I am not, since we're being entirely too truthful, even a man of advanced learning. But I'm not stupid, either. For whatever reason, Fate decreed that I should love you both and for some inexplicable reason that you should love me in return. A man cannot fight the power of Fate."

"Let's be really, truly honest," Very said slyly. She kissed a path up along his neck and bit his earlobe and he nearly moaned at the unexpected thrill of it. "A man cannot fight the power of Very."

"Only a fool would want to," he replied laughingly, "and I will never be a fool again."

"What about the power of Wolf?" Wolf came to them, his stride the sleek approach of a predator. "Will you fight me later, when I finally claim what you say is mine?" He put a hand on the back of Michael's neck and squeezed slightly until Michael looked up at him. Wolf leaned down and kissed the bruise on his cheek and then licked his lower lip.

"I am no one's fool." At his breathless reply, he felt Wolf's lips against his curve into a smile.

Chapter Fifteen

"Are you sure Aurie will be all right by herself?" Very fretted. She chewed her nail in indecision. "While I am loath to miss the chance to finally see you two fuck, a favorite fantasy by the way, I'm worried about her."

"Oh God," Michael moaned.

Very had just escorted Aurelie to her room, and left her in the care of a sweet maid named Mary.

"She'll be fine, Very," Wolf assured her. They were walking to their bedroom and Wolf gestured directly across the hall to Aurie's room. "She's right there. We'll hear her if she needs anything."

"I like her." Very couldn't believe she was saying that. Just this morning she'd wanted to rip her hair out by the handful. "I'm so glad her English is better than my French. Honestly, my French is horrible."

Wolf nodded. "It really is. It makes it so hard to play duke and French maid with you."

Michael sputtered with laughter and Very hit Wolf in the shoulder. "Cad. Besides, you much prefer my broad Yorkshire dialect when we play milkmaid and lord of the manor."

"Hmm," Wolf hummed appreciatively. "But my favorite is still stable boy and Hungarian princess."

"You speak Hungarian?" Michael asked Very.

Very laughed. "No, but neither does he so he doesn't know the difference."

"Enough," Michael said, laughing.

"Truly," Very said, returning to what she was saying before Wolf interrupted her. "After all Aurie's been through, she still has a sense of humor, and compassion."

"Yes." Michael stopped while Wolf opened the door. "She has that curious French sort of fatalism, combined with a slave's focus on the present."

"What do you mean?" Very asked, ready to be offended on Aurie's behalf. She just couldn't think of the other woman as a slave. It didn't fit her at all.

"She says that slaves learn at a young age to appreciate the present, the moment as it were, because they have no control over the future or the past. I think that has served her well these past few months. I hope once things settle down she doesn't dwell on her misfortunes."

"We shall see that she doesn't," Very emphatically declared.

Wolf grabbed Michael's arm and dragged him into the bedroom. "Let us all focus on the present, shall we?"

Very followed them into the room and was no sooner through the door than Wolf slammed it shut and shoved Michael up against it. Michael had no time to react before Wolf's mouth was on his, hard and rough and desperate. The sight made Very weak in the knees. She was finally, finally going to see them fuck. She'd enjoyed their three days together, and being the center of attention for most of that time, but she was ready for this now. Ready to share this one final, forbidden, erotic pleasure that would seal them all together.

That kiss looked so good Very wanted some of it. She sauntered up and grabbed a handful of Wolf's hair and yanked him back a fraction of an inch, just enough to fit her mouth near theirs and slide her tongue into the tangle. Both men made satisfactorily desperate sounds, Michael's more of a moan while Wolf growled and gave his head a jerk to free his hair. She slid her hands down over their firm rumps and right into the snug, hot space between their legs. She cupped the heavy sacs there and this time both men groaned. She chuckled and rubbed up against Michael's side.

"Very," Michael gasped.

"I'm sorry," she said with false sincerity, "did you think I was only going to watch?"

Wolf laughed. Very's heart skipped a beat at the sound of it, so dark and sensuous and carefree in a way it hadn't been in so long. "You do like to watch, darling, but only when it suits you."

"There have been other men she's watched you with?" Michael asked, and though he tried not to show it she could hear the hurt in his voice.

Wolf crowded closer to Michael, his hips tucked tight between Michael's spread legs. Very's arm was caught between Michael and the door, but she didn't care. She enjoyed the slight jerk of Michael's body at the move, the way the rhythm of his breathing broke and then started up again in quick, sharp gasps. "No," Wolf told him. "She likes to watch me when I pleasure myself."

"Damn," Michael gasped, "I'd like to watch that, too." He thrust back against Wolf, rubbing his thigh between Very's legs. It felt so good she purred like a cat.

"You will," Wolf promised in that rich, dark voice of his. "And you'll do it for us."

"Will Very?" Michael was panting at the mention of it.

"If you are a very, very good boy," Very answered, straining up on her toes to bite his jaw. "I might let you watch me. Would you like that?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Michael chanted with a devastating little grin. The grin remained as he leaned his head against the door and closed his eyes, as if he were imagining her touching herself.

Wolf was nuzzling under Michael's chin and Michael turned his face to her. His eyes were open now, and glazed with want. Very gave him a wicked smile. "Come on," she said, tugging his hand. "I want to play."

Very's idea of play was killing him. As far as Michael could tell it consisted of her and Wolf tormenting him with their mouths and hands endlessly. They had kissed, licked, sucked and stroked every inch of him. He'd lost track of time. He was desperate with need, and they weren't done yet.

The two were sucking his nipples together, and each had one hand wrapped around his cock, Wolf's down low, Very's high. Wolf had told him to keep his arms pinned to the bed over his head. If he moved his arms, they'd stop. He wasn't moving his arms. Very was running her thumb over his leaking slit and he shivered with each pass. He couldn't take much more. But he knew what was coming, and if he just held out he could come with Wolf inside him. His neck arched back as Very bit his nipple sharply. A small cry escaped, and both of his lovers pulled away with gentle kisses. The silken glide of Very's hair across his stomach made his shoulders curl off the bed. "Your hair feels so good," he said. His voice was a raspy shadow of itself, made rough with his moans and the effort he'd made to subdue them when possible.

"Up," Wolf said. He sat up on his knees and pulled Michael up after him. Very lay indolently on her side watching them with hooded eyes, her weight on her elbow. She was simply gorgeous, like a pagan queen with her long dark hair and voluptuous breasts with their pink, aroused tips. The curve of her stomach made him want to worship her and the new life she held.

When Wolf bent him over to his hands and knees on the bed he could have cried with relief. But then Wolf lay down under him and pressed his knees out, pulling his hips down low so he could take his cock in his mouth. "Wolf," he cried out. He didn't get an answer. Wolf remembered just how he liked it, that clever tongue gliding around his shaft and a gentle suction on the sensitive tip. It was perfect. His arms trembled at the pleasure streaking through him and he thought he might collapse.

Then Very was behind him, kissing her way down his spine, her hair leaving a wake of shivers in passing as it caressed his back and sides. Her fingers were featherlight against the backs of his thighs, up and down, driving him mad. He had to force himself not to thrust deep into Wolf's wicked mouth to escape that teasing touch. She gently cupped the lower curve of his buttocks, where it met his thighs, and lifted them, as if plumping them for her pleasure. And then she purred. God, he loved that sound. He'd never heard anything like it until a few days ago, those idyllic days when all that mattered was that the three of them were finally together. It was a sensual sound he'd come to crave from her. It meant she was pleased, not just physically but in every way. He hadn't understood that at first, that it was a purr of contentment.

This one sounded like a purr of ownership, and he wanted to roll over and beg her to take him. His reaction shocked him. Before, he'd always led their sexual encounters. Very had been a willing and eager participant, but too innocent to know much of

anything. It wasn't her skill that had attracted him, but her essence, her independence and pride. She'd begged him years ago, although he understood now that she didn't know what she was asking for. Now she knew what she wanted and she didn't beg. The docile role she'd played just a few days ago was just that—a role. This was the heart of her, a woman who took what she wanted, who wasn't satisfied with less than total possession of a man.

Very's lips moved from his lower back down onto his bottom. She bit his cheek and the pain made him jerk his hips, stuffing his cock deeper into Wolf's greedy mouth. "Careful," Wolf growled. "I don't want to hurt him."

Very licked where she'd bitten him and another shiver coursed through him. He was sweating. He could feel the cool air against his damp, overheated skin. The arch in his lower back, his brow, his neck, between his legs—those places were all slick with sweat. His hair was so wet it clung to his temples, and when he licked his upper lip he tasted his own salt.

"Wolf wants you to fuck his mouth," Very stated baldly with a little slap to his abused bottom. "If he didn't he wouldn't be down there offering it."

Wolf moaned around his cock and Michael obliged him. He didn't fuck him hard and fast, that wasn't what Michael wanted. Instead he kept up a steady firm stroke, in and out, tormenting both of them with his restraint. His arms were shaking with the effort. Then Very sucked on his sac from behind and he shouted in surprise. He could only kneel there biting his lip, unmoving, as she kissed and nibbled that sensitive spot between his balls and his back end.

Wolf slowly slid his mouth off his cock. Michael was no longer in control of his body's reactions. He shook and sweated and jerked his hips, seeking their touch as much as trying to get away from it. "Stop," Wolf said, "he's too close." Michael groaned in thanks for his compassion.

"Me too," Very said with a desperate edge to her voice. She slid around to Michael's front.

"Oh God," Michael whispered. He closed his eyes to her tempting naked form, afraid the sight of her so eager and aroused would set him off before they were done with him.

He felt Very's hands on his cheeks, turning his face up just a moment before she kissed him passionately. She ran both hands through his hair to the back of his head and gave him one of the most carnal kisses he'd ever had the privilege to be a part of. When she broke the kiss she bit his lower lip hard enough to make him grunt in protest, then she let it go with a pop and a laugh.

"You are so delicious," she whispered in his ear, "I could just eat you right up."

While she'd been kissing him, Wolf had crawled out from between his legs. Just as Michael felt the cool, slick glide of oil in his crease, Very nibbled his earlobe and whispered, "But first Wolf gets to fuck you. He's waited so long."

"Finally," Michael said on a relieved exhale. Both Wolf and Very laughed. "I have waited so long, too," Michael told them. He couldn't join their laughter. He felt raw with need. "I've had no one since I left, you know. When I came back, here with you two, that was the first time since the last time with you, Wolf."

Very and Wolf both stilled at his admission. "Oh Michael," Very whispered in a trembling voice.

Wolf cupped his bottom, one long, elegant finger snuggled into his crease. "Then I shall be good to you, I promise." He kissed the inward curve of Michael's back and then he nudged his hole with a finger. "Are you ready?"

Michael nodded. "More than ready. Ready to kill for it."

"Will it bother you if I watch?" Very asked tentatively. Her hesitation was so out of character Michael looked up at her in surprise. "Before you left you didn't seem eager for me to watch, to be a part of this."

Michael snorted with laughter and then sucked in a deep breath as Wolf pushed his finger inside him. "Yes," he said through clenched teeth. "I want you to watch. I always wanted you to watch." He stretched his neck from side to side, trying to relieve the tension gripping him as Wolf tunneled deeper into him. His erection was flagging slightly, but from experience he knew he'd be raging hard by the time Wolf slid his cock into him. Wolf was so damn good at this.

He tried to explain, to keep talking to distract himself from what Wolf was doing. "That was one of the things that bothered me the most, the things I wanted to do with you and wanted you to watch Wolf and me do. I thought," he shook his head in an attempt to deny the pleasure streaking through him as Wolf's finger retreated and then advanced further, making speech difficult. His breathing was labored. "I thought that it was wrong, all the things I wanted, don't you see? But now—Christ!" he called out sharply. Wolf had added another finger, deep and merciless. The initial burn faded after a few deep breaths, becoming an erotic pleasure that few understood. But they understood, Very and Wolf. They knew.

Very gave him a knowing little smile, then she scooted right in front of him and cupped his cheek to lay his head against her breast. Her heart was pounding nearly as fast and hard as his. She rubbed his back with her other hand, across his shoulders and down to the upper curve of his buttocks, and then back again. Instead of soothing him it enflamed his senses and he felt his cock hardening, lengthening at the thought of what she was watching Wolf do to him. He turned his head slightly and captured her hard nipple in his mouth. Very squeaked in surprise and then she grabbed a handful of his hair as she pressed him harder against her, arching her back as she moaned.

"I completely understand why you both like to watch each other when you love me," Very said with wonder. A tremor shook her as Michael used his teeth on her nipple. He forced himself to be gentle as Wolf fucked him with his fingers. Each new drop of oil, each additional finger, drove him closer to losing control again.

"Take me," he ground out between clenched teeth. "Take me now. I can't last and I want to come with you inside me. I'm sorry. I simply haven't the stamina to hold off. It's been too long."

"Yes," Very agreed fervently. "Oh, yes, please."

"Sit in front of me and spread your legs."

"What?" Very was leaning far over his back watching Wolf work him. Michael shoved his shoulder forward, moving her back a bit.

"Sit down so I can put my mouth on you," he demanded. "I want to taste you, taste your pleasure at watching Wolf fuck me for you."

Very scrambled to do as he asked while Wolf chuckled low and deep behind him. "Is that why I'm doing it? For Very?" He pulled his fingers out of Michael and then Michael heard a sound that could only be Wolf coating himself in oil.

"This is possibly the most decadent thing we have ever done," Very said, spreading her legs and bending her knees, presenting herself to Michael.

"I hope you enjoy it," Michael told her, "because I plan to do it many, many times." He lowered his torso onto his forearms and licked a path from one end of her exposed sex to the other, moaning aloud at the flavor of her. Her taste was familiar, but the experience of being able to do this to her after so many years of denial was still new and exciting. Her fingers brushed through his hair. He loved that feeling, loved how much both she and Wolf liked to do that.

Very's hips thrust upward. "Oh, I do, I do," she said breathlessly.

Wolf's cock touched him, seeking entrance. He pressed and pressed until Michael relaxed and pushed back against him. Wolf slipped past the tight opening and into his passage and Michael's breath hitched. He groaned as Wolf slid in all the way.

"He fills you so perfectly," Very said. There was a dreamy quality to her voice, as if she were lost in this moment.

Michael's response was much, much more physical. His cock surged and his dark passage tightened around the flesh invading him. It felt so good, deliriously good. As good as he'd imagined it would, all those times he'd fisted his cock to the memories of past fucks with Wolf. But this time it was more intense. This time Very was here. The first time Very saw it. He'd been so worried about that. Worried she'd see him as less of a man if she knew how much he liked to be fucked. If he'd had the breath for it he would have laughed at how foolish that fear had been. Her soaked cunt and breathless sighs proved how much she liked it, how much she liked the same things he did.

He had to taste her again. When he lowered his head it changed the angle of Wolf's cock and Michael surged back against him, wanting more. Wolf laughed breathlessly and then he began to move, small thrusts that grew with each pass in and out. Michael became lost in a haze of a pleasure he'd only dreamed of. Very against his mouth, her taste on his tongue, her sighs in his ears, her scent surrounding him while Wolf took him. She'd see how Wolf owned him, how having Wolf's cock inside thrilled him. He moaned and moved in counterpoint to Wolf, increasing the power of each thrust. He

was eating at Very, devouring her cream, relishing the kiss of her silky lower lips against his, the brush of her damp curls against his chin. He thrust a finger into her welcoming heat and her sheath hugged him, begging him to mimic Wolf's movements inside him. Keeping that rhythm was difficult when all he wanted to do was stop and drown in a tide of pleasure.

Suddenly Very cried out. He saw her fists clenching handfuls of the bedsheets and she shuddered, her sex holding his finger so tightly all he could do was rock it from side to side as she came harder than he'd ever seen her do before. He touched the tip of his tongue to the little knot at the top of her slit and flicked it repeatedly. With each flick a distressed cry was torn from her, until she collapsed back against the bed.

It was only after her climax ended that Michael realized Wolf had stopped moving during her peak. His breathing was as ragged as Michael's. Wolf's fingers clenched his hips hard enough to bruise and Michael hoped he wouldn't let up. He wanted to be marked there. He wanted to look down and see the proof of Wolf's ownership on his skin again.

"I love to watch her do that," Wolf said, his voice as rough as his breathing. "I hadn't realized how much I'd enjoy watching you bring her when we were like this. Damn, damn, damn." With each curse Wolf rocked into Michael, hard little bursts of emphasis. "I want to fuck you so hard right now," he whispered. "I want to give that to you for pleasuring Very so well."

And it was true. He wanted to fuck Michael, but Michael had been right earlier. His reasons were far more complex today than they had been two years ago. Now he wanted to fuck him because he was Michael, because he wanted him, because Very wanted it, and because Michael could bring her to orgasm so perfectly, for Wolf. For Wolf to see and enjoy. They were his. In the end that was it. They were his, to fuck and watch and love however he wanted. Because to do so made them happy, and because they wanted to please him. Because they loved him.

"Do it." Michael's hoarse whisper scraped over his sensitive skin and he shuddered. "Fuck me, Wolf," Michael begged. "I need you to fuck me again. I've dreamed of it."

Wolf slid his knees out, forcing Michael's farther apart. He put a hand on Michael's chest and pulled him up, so that his arms were stretched to their limit holding him up against Wolf. "I can't move," Michael protested. That's precisely what Wolf wanted. From his vantage point Michael was perfect like that. His bent knees were splayed wide, his perfect, round arse canted up in back for Wolf to plunder. His shoulders and arms bulged with muscles straining to hold him the way Wolf wanted him. So big and rough and all his. His man to fuck as he saw fit.

He pushed his hips up and drove his cock deeper into Michael, who gasped and arched his back. "I know. This is about me fucking you. Not the other way around." He knew this wasn't going to be a rough, hard fuck. This was going to be slow and gentle

and deep. The kind of fuck they'd rarely had before, because it had always been about desperation and need back then. Something Michael fought until he couldn't stay away anymore. This time it was about acceptance and love, and Wolf wanted, needed to convey that through the physical act. Wolf knew, somehow, that Michael would welcome that kind of tenderness in a fuck far better than hearing the words.

Wolf slid his hands around Michael's hips, to the front of his legs where thigh met hip. It was such a delicious part of Michael's body, that soft, warm crevice. Wolf pulled on Michael's hips with that hold, driving him back onto Wolf's shallowly thrusting cock. It was hard and intense, and with each meeting of Michael's sweet arse against the cradle of his hips Michael took a short, sharp breath, exhaling with a little moan Wolf wasn't even sure he was aware of.

Very crawled over on her hands and knees and kissed Michael. She didn't touch him anywhere else, just their lips clinging to one another. He could almost feel how delicious it was to swallow those little moans, Michael's short sharp breaths blowing into her mouth. She didn't make it easy for him. He had to strain to keep his mouth on hers while still fucking Wolf. But he did it. His moans became cries, and Wolf knew he was close.

So did Very. "May I share it?" she asked Michael in a whisper against his mouth. "Will you share how good Wolf makes you feel?"

"Yes," Michael cried out as Wolf drove hard into him. Wolf held himself there as Very turned herself about and lay down under Michael. Her legs came up and wrapped around Michael's thighs, over the top of Wolf's hands, her heels on Wolf's hips. Then she guided Michael's cock into her sheath. All three of them moaned, Wolf because he felt the clench of Michael's passage in reaction to his entry. Very grabbed Michael's waist and pulled herself up higher, taking Michael deeper.

Michael was trembling, letting them do the work. Wolf liked it that way. He liked that he and Very were giving him this. "Please fuck him," Very pleaded with Wolf. "He needs it so badly, darling. And I want it, I want to feel it."

Wolf pulled out a bit and then jerked Michael back onto his cock. Michael's neck arched, his head falling back as he cried out weakly. Wolf didn't relent. He did it again and again and Michael shook with pleasure under him.

"We dreamed about this," Very told him, her hands rubbing his chest and shoulders, holding onto his muscular arms as she fucked him. "Talked about all the ways we wanted to fuck you together."

"You did?" Michael gasped. "Tell me."

"I would beg Wolf to describe it to me," she whispered, as if it were a secret. "And he'd tell me how good you were, how sweet it was to fuck you."

"I didn't just tell her," Wolf added, his voice so low it was almost a growl. "I showed her. I fucked her just like I used to fuck you."

"I can't last," Michael confessed. "I'm going to come. Come with me, Wolf. Don't leave me, Very. Let me give it back to you."

“Yes,” she told him, her hands were constantly in motion on him, her hips moving in concert with Wolf’s. She was breathless with excitement, he could hear it in her voice. His Very. She was so carnal and sensual, and theirs. Not his, theirs. She had always been theirs and it felt so right. At this moment Wolf couldn’t think of anything more perfect than this, the two of them fucking Michael like this.

Michael’s muscles locked and he clamped down on Wolf’s cock as he whimpered. Very was moaning and Michael’s hips were jerking uncontrollably and Wolf knew Michael was giving her what she craved. And so Wolf gave Michael what he’d begged for. He came with them, he filled Michael and it felt as if they were all home at last.

Chapter Sixteen

A crash and the sound of breaking glass woke Very. She was disoriented for a moment, as Wolf and Michael both sat up, one on either side of her.

"What was that?" Wolf barked. He threw the covers off and rose from the bed.

"It came from downstairs," Michael told him. He grabbed Very's shoulders. "Stay here. Do you hear me? Lock the doors after us and don't open them unless it's Wolf or me on the other side."

"Don't be ridiculous," Very said. "There are a great many other people for whom I would open the door. Really, Michael, don't be so dramatic."

Wolf snorted from the other side of the bed. "Indeed. One of the footmen is probably drunk and crashing around." He had his pants on already and was heading for the door.

Michael grabbed his pants from the floor and hastily crammed his legs into them. "You two don't understand. This isn't the first time in recent months I've been awakened by a sound in the night. And each time it's ended up with me and Aurie fleeing for our lives."

"Aurie," Very said in a panic. She started to get up.

"No!" Both Wolf and Michael called out quietly. "Michael is right. Be sensible and stay here until we know it's nothing to worry over. It will set our minds at ease if we don't have to worry over you, too," Wolf added. He came back to the bed and kissed her cheek. "Please?"

Very crossed her arms and huffed in annoyance. "Fine. But do hurry up. That sounded like a rather large crash. See what it was before anything else in the house gets destroyed. Oh, and if it is Joseph," she called after them, referring to the footman already on her list for previous drinking episodes, "tell him this is it. I'll have to let him go."

Michael grabbed her and kissed her hard and fast on the lips. "Fine. Now stay here and behave." He ran out the door after Wolf. "Lock this," he ordered.

Very rose from the bed and locked the door as soon as he left. She felt foolish doing so, but she wouldn't put it past him to turn right around and check. She found her chemise lying over the back of a chair and pulled it on. Her dress was underneath it, and she pulled it over her head, too, although it seemed silly to get dressed. They'd probably be back in bed in a matter of minutes. She grinned. Since they were all awake, perhaps she could convince her men to play a little more.

She was trying unsuccessfully to do up the buttons on the back of her dress when Aurie's scream stopped her in her tracks. Without thinking twice about it, she unlatched the door and ran across the hall.

Beside the bed Aurie was struggling with a large man who was standing behind her holding both of her arms at the elbow as she tried to break free. She was ungainly with her big belly, and she was so small compared to the man that the fight was decidedly uneven. Very grabbed an empty vase from the table by the door, ran up behind him and smashed it against the back of his head. He let go of Aurie and fell to his knees, his hands protectively covering his head.

"Come on," Very shouted. She grabbed Aurie's hand and dragged her out of the room. She ran toward the stairs, where she heard Wolf and Michael yelling down below. They reached the landing, Aurie panting beside her, holding her belly. "Are you all right?" Very asked.

Aurie nodded. "*Oui*. Just frightened."

They both looked over the rail and Very's heart sank. Wolf was wrestling with a ruffian in the hall below and Michael was nowhere to be seen. The night footman lay in an awkward sprawl next to the open drawing room door. There was no way they could go down there. Very turned to take Aurie to her bedroom, but the man she'd conked on the head was leaning in Aurie's doorway. When he saw them he stumbled out into the hall.

"Bitch," he snarled. "I'll get you for that."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Very said. She dragged Aurie to the stairs and began to climb them, pulling Aurie up with her.

"Where are we going?" Aurie asked. Her voice shook with terror, which only fortified Very's resolve. No one, absolutely no one, was leaving this house with Aurie tonight.

"Follow me," she said, breathless with a healthy dose of fear. "But do hurry, Aurie! He's coming."

Her urgency cut through Aurie's fear and the small, heavily pregnant woman did go a little faster. They could hear the heavy, uneven footfalls of their pursuer close behind. When they reached the top floor Very raced to the safest room she could think of, the fencing gymnasium. The door had a heavy lock, and was stocked for battle.

Very raced in and turned, waiting for Aurie to struggle through the door. She went to slam and lock it, but a heavy weight rammed into the door, throwing it open and driving Very back several steps. Their pursuer came into the room, glaring furiously at her. His neck and collar were soaked with blood, as were his hands, which he'd clearly tried to wipe on his shirt. He was a gory sight.

His gaze narrowed on Aurie. "Come here, girl. They wants you alive, but they didn't say nothing about still talkin'." He took a step toward her and Very ran over and threw herself in front of Aurie, throwing out her arms to protect her.

"Don't you dare! I shall have your liver for breakfast, you...you...monster." She was rather proud of herself. That sounded quite vile and dramatic.

"I'll smack you so hard you'll see stars, you little bitch, and I'll be happy doin' it," he said, not ruffled a bit by her vicious threat. "I owe you one, and mean to pay up before I takes the slave."

That gave Very a little shiver. He was much better at threats.

"Very!" Michael yelled.

"Here! Here we are!" she yelled back. "In the gymnasium!"

"Where the devil is that?" he hollered. He sounded closer, at the top of the stairs, perhaps.

Aurie's kidnapper recognized how close he was, too. He spun to the door and slammed it shut, locking them in. He turned with a grin. "Only one way in."

Very put her hands on her hips. "Only one way out, idiot."

The man pointed to the window, his menacing smile growing. "Not so. Throw you out over there, and I think it'll clear the way for me to get this one out the door." He walked over and opened the window all the way. She would definitely fit through there. The rain blew into the room on a chill wind, and Very shivered.

Very swallowed audibly while Aurie gasped behind her and grabbed her arm. She tugged and whispered, "*Les épées*. Run him through."

Very would have been amused at her bloodthirsty tone if she hadn't feared for her life. The blackguard heard Aurie as well, and his eyes darted to the wall behind Very. She spun about and grabbed the first sword she could reach, a saber. When she turned back around he was two steps away from Aurie, who was retreating as fast as she could. Very brandished the sword at him, swinging it so close for a moment she thought she might have nipped his nose with it. He jerked his head back and danced out of the way.

"Here now," he said, moving away as she tracked him with the tip. "Don't be hasty."

Michael was pounding on the door. "Very! Very, open the door."

"Aurie, open it," Very told her, watching the man. Michael pounded again and Very glanced over at Aurie. It was all the opportunity the kidnapper needed. He dove, not for Very but for Aurie. Aurie squealed and ran back to the far corner. Very had run over to put herself between the attacker and Aurie, and the man turned and headed for the wall of weapons. His dash for Aurie had clearly been a ruse. He'd been planning to arm himself.

He grabbed a saber from the wall and Very's heart sank. Her breathing accelerated and sweat trickled down between her shoulder blades.

"Not so brave now are you, missy?" he taunted. He waved the blade around wildly and Very nearly sighed with relief. He had no idea what he was doing.

"Who was that?" Michael called frantically. He pounded and pounded on the door.

"Michael, I know you're there," she called out in frustration. "You can stop pounding!"

The silence was abrupt. "Sorry," he called through the door. "Open up."

"There is a very large man wielding a saber between us and the door," she informed him.

"Tell him I will end his bloody fucking life if he so much as touches either of you," Michael yelled through the door furiously. The next sound wasn't a fist, it was hard kick hitting the door and rattling it on its hinges. Very's eyes jerked to the door at the sound.

Aurie screamed and Very refocused on the man in time to see him lunging at her. She parried his inept thrust, but there was enough force in the blow to drive her back several feet. Aurie scurried to stay behind her.

"Very!" Michael yelled through the door. He was frantic, she could hear it in his voice, but she needed to focus on the threat in front of her and not on soothing his fears.

He came at her again, slashing the air with mighty swings of his arms. Very backed up, waving her hand behind her to keep Aurie moving with her.

"Very, the window!" Aurie screeched. "Stop, he gets you to the window."

Very's heart leapt into her throat and she scrambled to avoid his saber as she changed direction.

"You won't get her out of there," Wolf called through the door. He sounded far calmer than Michael. "We've subdued your compatriots, and now outnumber you. There is no escape with the women."

"I don't need both of them," the kidnapper called out. "Just the one. The other is going out the window."

Aurie let out a sob behind her. "Let him take me! I cannot let him kill you."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Very said, narrowing her eyes at the miscreant. "He's not going to kill me. He's a bumbling idiot."

He roared and came at her. Very was ready. She parried his swings and then attacked. The saber was unwieldy in her hands, but she managed some effective hits. She wasn't trying to kill him, the thought of actually cutting him at all with the sharp blade made her stomach churn. She was having unwelcome visions of the carnage at Manchester. And so she whacked him on the arm with the side of the heavy blade.

He cried out and grabbed his arm, backing away from her. His face wore a terrifying scowl. "Wasn't going to kill you ugly, but by God, you little bitch, you deserve it." When he swung at her again Very saw the blade slipping in his hands. They'd been bloody when he'd entered the room, and she guessed now they were damp with sweat, too. Hard to hold a saber like that.

A huge crunch came from the door. Very wasn't sure what had made the sound, but there was cursing from outside. "I'm telling you it won't cut it," Michael said. "It's too thick."

"The window!" Very cried. "Come in the window!"

There was silence outside the door for a moment and then the sound of running feet.

Her attacker looked good and mad now. "If you cost me this bounty I'll be back to break your fucking neck," he growled. Fucking came out like "fooking", and for some reason that scared Very more than anything else.

In the next second Aurie surprised them both. She sneaked up behind him and swung a wooden chair at the back of his legs. He went down like a felled tree, hollering. Very stared at Aurie with wide eyes. She really hadn't known the little woman had it in her. Aurie shrugged in a very French gesture.

"Michael's coming," Wolf shouted through the door. "He's going to climb in the window."

Very grabbed Aurie again and pulled her behind her as she backed away from the man struggling to his feet. Very kicked his fallen saber away from his reach and retreated. There was no need to challenge him now, not if Michael was coming. He may have lost his saber, but Very wasn't a fool. She just had to keep him away for a few more minutes. Then from behind her Aurie moaned and cursed under her breath. "What? What is it?" Very demanded.

"The *bébé* is coming," she said breathlessly.

"You have got to be joking," Very said. She was not pleased, to say the least. "Your timing is terrible."

Aurie let loose with a string of French that Very couldn't understand, and probably didn't want to. It sounded a tad angry.

Very's opponent stood there swaying and glaring at them for a moment, then he turned to the window. He limped over to it quickly. Damn! Very hadn't thought of that, that he could get Michael as he came through the window. She was about to call out when he did the most outrageous thing. He attempted to crawl out the window himself.

"What are you doing, you fool?" she yelled. As off balance as he was, with a bad leg now it seemed, he didn't really think he was going to climb down, did he?

He turned back to her, halfway through the window, but whatever he was going to say was lost as his grip slipped on the wet window frame. Very was stricken with horror as his eyes widened and he tumbled out head first into the garden three stories below. Aurie's scream rang in her ears.

The sickening thud was barely audible over the sound of the rain, but Very still heard it and flinched.

"*Mon Dieu*," Aurie whispered from behind her.

Suddenly an almost inhuman howl rent the air outside. "Very!" Michael screamed.

She ran to the window to see him kneeling in the middle of the garden staring in horror at the broken body on the ground. It was teeming rain, she could hardly make out that it was him. And then she realized he thought that was her. The man had

threatened to throw her out of the window. "Michael!" she screamed. "Michael, I'm fine! I'm here!" She waved frantically from the window. She didn't realize until that moment that she still held the saber.

His gaze shot up to her and he covered his mouth with the back of one hand for a second. Then he got to his feet and ran over directly under the window. "Are you all right?" he shouted up. "What about Aurelie?"

"We're fine. But, Michael, the baby is coming. You must fetch the doctor."

Wolf was pounding on the door again and Very was about to go open it when a man stepped out of the cover of the bushes. He was far more sinister than the poor kidnapper lying broken below could ever have hoped to be. Very would have been alarmed if Daniel hadn't been standing by his side. The stranger calmly walked over to the body and nudged it with his boot. Then he looked up at Very. "Mrs. Tarrant, I presume?" He took off his hat and bowed, as if he weren't standing over a dead body in the rain. "Sir Barnabas James, madam, at your service." He put his hat back on and then said, almost as an afterthought, "I do not, however, deliver babies." He looked at Michael then and Very heard him say rather sarcastically, "I'd hoped you were going to climb up to her balcony, Romeo." A motion of his hand in the direction of the bushes produced a small swarm of men who collected the body and disappeared into the rain.

"Let me summarize, if I may?" Sir Barnabas asked politely an hour later in the drawing room. His smooth voice caressed Very's skin like a serpent's tongue. She shivered. There was something about him that was as compelling as it was frightening. He was dark complexioned, with eyes so dark they looked as black as his short, thick hair. His coloring made him appear quite, quite sinister. The looks he gave Daniel were positively carnivorous. The man had no shame.

He was annoyingly condescending. He had not a hair out of place whereas they all looked like drowned rats. How was that possible? She hadn't even been out in the rain. She frowned at him and he smiled, as if he could read her thoughts and he found her amusing. She simply could not like him, despite his handsome looks and inherent power.

"Lady Kensington is being hunted for the bounty her former owner has placed on her head, although it would seem the bounty is to be transferred only if she is still alive, correct?" he asked Very.

She nodded stiffly. "Yes. That's what he said."

"Just so," said Sir Barnabas, as if she were a particularly pleasing performing monkey. She frowned harder. "The problem is not her freedom, which is not in question, of course. But rather that you wish to keep her former circumstances from becoming public knowledge? And guarantee her safety, naturally."

"Yes," Michael said belligerently. Very didn't blame him. Sir Barnabas had made it sound as if Michael were a worm for not wanting people to know Aurie had been a slave.

"Lady Kensington wants to keep her former circumstances private," Very protested. "I cannot blame her. She has been through enough without having to suffer the humiliation of a public outcry over her situation. And now the baby is coming. What would people say about that?"

Sir Barnabas merely raised a supercilious eyebrow at her outburst. "Indeed," he murmured. Oh, she hated him.

He was sitting in a chair before the fire, as if he were the one in need of warmth. Poor Michael's teeth were practically chattering after running out in the rain with nothing on but a pair of pants. He'd pulled on a shirt and jacket, but he still looked cold.

"Why?"

No one answered for a moment. "What do you mean?" Michael asked.

"I mean," Sir Barnabas answered, speaking slowly as if to a child, "why is her former owner offering such a large bounty for her?"

Michael's mouth opened and closed several times. Finally he said, "He fathered her child."

Sir Barnabas pointed straight up. "The one she is delivering now?" Michael nodded reluctantly. Sir Barnabas shrugged. "The bastard child of a slave? What is that to him?"

Michael's hands clenched into fists. "Aurie escaped with the help of his wife. He was planning to pass Aurie's baby off as his legitimate child. His wife could not have children."

"And now his wife wants the child?"

"She's dead. He killed her."

Sir Barnabas' eyes went wide. "And Lady Kensington saw this?"

Michael shook his head again. "No. I misspoke. He had her killed by his slave hunters. Aurie recognized them. She and Aurie were both taking the child from him."

"Ah. So he wants to keep her quiet. She knows too much." This was apparently a satisfactory reason. Sir Barnabas steepled his fingers and tapped his lips with his forefingers as he observed them all. Finally he spoke. "I'm afraid there's very little I can do. It is not a legal case, as we have already established. And she does not fall under my purview, or anyone else's that I can think of. You dispatched one band of brigands this evening. I'm sure you're more than capable of doing it again should the need arise."

"Surely there is more you can do," Wolf asked stiffly. He hadn't spoken since Sir Barnabas' arrival. The two had barely acknowledged one another with stiff nods and averted eyes.

"Why should I?" Sir Barnabas asked calmly. "What have you done to deserve a service from me, Tarrant?" He gestured at Very and Michael. "Why should I protect your menagerie of lovers?"

Wolf's lips thinned and his jaw flexed, but he remained silent.

"Just as I thought," Sir Barnabas said with disgust. "You cast aspersions on my name, sully my reputation, and act like a petulant child about circumstances none of us,

including myself, were in control of, and yet you expect me to clean up your mess, as I have always done."

Wolf went pale at Sir Barnabas' little speech. "I have done no such thing."

"Really? Did you think your accusations wouldn't reach my ears? That I didn't know you blamed me for your ability with a rifle and a good, sharp knife?" Sir Barnabas stood. "You were an excellent spy, Tarrant, and an even better assassin. But I have no need of you now. You have nothing to offer me anymore."

Very was shocked speechless at his casual revelations about Wolf's activities during the war. No one else in the room seemed surprised at all.

"Enough." Daniel stepped forward from his place by the door. "You will be duly compensated for this favor. You have considerable connections because of your position at the Home Office, not to mention the favors that are owed you. Use them to ensure Lady Kensington's safety."

At Daniel's mention of compensation Sir Barnabas' anger increased. "Of course. They sent the martyr to me. I've already tasted your wares, Daniel. What have you to offer now that I haven't tried before?"

Daniel showed no outward emotion at Sir Barnabas' crude and belittling outburst. "You only prove to them that their low opinion of you is correct, Sir Barnabas, with comments such as that." He flicked a speck of rain off his coat sleeve. "And you know damn well that's not the way of it."

"Would you like me to beg?" Very asked pleasantly. There was more than one way to skin a cat. She stepped in front of him and went down on her knees.

"Honestly," he said with disgust. "Is this really necessary?"

"I'm begging," Very said. "I am on my knees begging you to please help us."

"Very, don't," Wolf said sharply.

Very didn't take her eyes off Sir Barnabas. He was watching her closely. "This is what he wants, Wolf. He wants to humiliate you the way you've humiliated him over the years. Isn't that correct? You want to get yours back because they've all hurt your feelings with their criticism. Poor Sir Barnabas. Only doing his job. And you ungrateful wretches have the temerity to make him feel bad about it." She smiled grimly. "If I ask they will get down on their knees and beg as well." Michael immediately stepped to her side. "Will they have to do that, or is this enough?"

"You, Mrs. Tarrant," Sir Barnabas said quietly, "court disaster with the blithe indifference of youth and inexperience. And a woman such as you on her knees before me is worth more than the same gesture by any man here." He broke eye contact with her and walked to the drawing room door. "I shall see what I can do," he said dismissively. He opened the door and walked out. "Daniel," he said without turning around. It was a summons.

Daniel rolled his eyes and followed Sir Barnabas out the door. He leaned back in around the doorframe with a smile for Very. "That means he'll help. I shall be back

tomorrow to see how Lady Kensington fares," he said. "I think he likes you." Then he disappeared again.

They heard Daniel greet someone in the hall and then Dr. Peters appeared in the door. He looked at Very oddly where she was kneeling in front of the fireplace. She blushed and scrambled to her feet.

"Don't you people ever have a normal day? You know, get up, have breakfast, talk about the bloody, boring weather, that sort of thing?" Dr. Peters complained. He walked into the room and fell down into a chair. He looked exhausted, far more than he ought to. Granted the sun hadn't risen yet, but Very didn't think it was lack of sleep that had him looking so thin and fragile. Very had always had a soft spot for him after she almost bashed him on the head the first time they met. And he had saved Jason's life once. But his haunted eyes hinted at stories she didn't want to hear.

"How is she?" Michael asked.

Dr. Peters scoffed. "She's fine. Knows more about this business than I do, I expect. She says she's hours to go before the baby arrives, and she's quite right I do believe. But because of the circumstances of her labor, I think I'd like to stay if I may? I wouldn't want to leave only to have an unexpected complication arise. Better to stay and be thought a foolish old maid for worrying." He smiled to take any worry from his words.

"Of course," Very rushed to assure him. "We'll have the room next to hers made up for you." She looked up and was happy to see Jenkins standing in the doorway. He and the other servants had been locked up downstairs during the fracas earlier. The dear man had nearly had an apoplexy trying to get out to help them.

"I'll see to it," he said with a slight bow and disappeared.

"So you're back," Dr. Peters said to Michael. His tone was pleasantly free of censure.

"Yes," Michael said, a little dazed at the turn in the conversation.

"Always knew you'd be back," the doctor said with a grin. "You were never that stupid. Couldn't think of anything that could keep you away. Nothing better than this, anyway." He waved between Very and Wolf.

Michael smiled back. "No, nothing better than this." There wasn't an ounce of shame in his voice.

"Is the baby yours?" Again there was no censure in the doctor's voice.

Michael shook his head. "No."

"Going to claim it?"

"Yes."

The doctor nodded. "Good. I'll make a note it's yours, then." He stood and then paused, giving Michael a hard look. "No matter what?"

Very bit her lip. It was the one thing they hadn't discussed, the implications of the baby's appearance. Although how Dr. Peters knew, she had no idea.

"No matter what," Michael said without hesitation.

Dr. Peters nodded and wandered toward the door. "Going to go check on my patient and get some sleep. I highly recommend you all do the same. Once her labor intensifies, no one will be sleeping, I guarantee. Are you going to join me for the delivery, Mrs. Tarrant?" he asked without stopping his ambling walk. "Some don't recommend it for young mothers-to-be. Me? I think forewarned is forearmed."

"Yes, I'll be there," Very said. She wasn't frightened of it at all. She was excited at the prospect.

"Good, good," the doctor mumbled and walked out.

The three of them stood there staring at one another for a minute. Very started to laugh first. "I'm not sure what to do now. What a night!"

Wolf and Michael joined her. Wolf snagged Michael by the arm as he came to Very. He kissed her tenderly. "I couldn't be more proud of you. Thank you. It should have been me."

"Of course it shouldn't have," she replied. "Because that's what Sir Barnabas really wanted. This way we win and he knows it. That's so much better."

Michael laughed. "You've learned to bluff and strategize nearly as well as Wolf."

"Better than Wolf." Wolf picked up her hand and kissed it gallantly. "I gave up trying to out-think our Very a long time ago."

Her heart skipped a beat when he said "our Very". She was, wasn't she? Finally theirs at last.

"I can't believe you held that brute off with a saber," Michael said with wonder. He hugged her tightly. "I was so scared. And I couldn't reach you, neither of us could. You were locked in that damn prison of a room fighting for your life and we were helpless."

Very laughed. "I wasn't afraid. Well, a little afraid. But not like I thought I would be." She pulled back and looked between her two men. "A few weeks ago I couldn't have done it. But I know I'm stronger than that, now."

"You had to fight your way out," Wolf whispered with a proud smile. She knew he was talking about so much more than what had happened tonight.

She reached for his hand. "Yes, yes I did," she said. "And I'll never be held captive by my fears again."

Michael looked between her and Wolf. "Neither will I," he whispered.

His reward was a kiss from both of them.

Epilogue

Very trailed her hand in the water over the side of the boat. She tipped her head back to feel the sun on her face. It was exceptionally hot for August. She knew she should be uncomfortable. Women as far along in pregnancy as she were not supposed to like the heat. She loved it.

"Here, put your head on my shoulder," Michael said quietly. He scooted closer so she could reach him.

With a sigh she leaned on him and he rubbed her back. A child's shrill shriek sounded behind them and Very watched Wolf wince. She laughed. "Soon you'll have two in the house."

He rustled the paper he was reading. "I am studying news of my investments. At the rate my household is increasing, I will need to triple my wealth."

Very watched Aurie on shore as she stood in the shade rocking baby Stephan to and fro, talking with Aunt Kate. Her companion, a blonde woman in her thirties, stood nearby, keeping an eye on her. "I don't believe Agatha will actually move in, darling. She is married, after all."

"Now that Aurie has finally relented and let Agatha into her bed, nothing shall remove the woman. Aurie, the baby, and free room and board. What more could any self-respecting anti-slavery advocate want?" Wolf said drily. "I dare say Grimshaw will be happy to be rid of her so he can carry on with his debauches unimpeded by a principled wife."

"I like Agatha," Michael said in her defense. "She's rather practical for a woman, and has a good head on her shoulders."

"And she walks the baby in the middle of the night so we don't have to," Very added.

"Amen," Michael muttered.

Derek chuckled from the dock next to them. "Are you actually going to take the boat out on the lake?"

"No," Wolf said, turning another page in the paper.

"Why not?" Derek asked. He snagged a page of the paper and Wolf frowned at him.

"What if Very were to go into labor in the middle of the lake?" Michael asked in horror.

Derek shrugged. "You'd row her to shore."

"That's what I said," Very told him. "But they won't listen to me."

Derek looked her over. "Well, you are rather big these days. It would take a crew to row you to shore."

Very patted her tummy. "I think there's more than one, but Dr. Peters disagrees."

Just then Margaret ran up to her father screaming in delight as little Anthony chased her onto the dock. "Papa help!" she yelled, laughing loudly. Derek grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap, tickling her. It was hard to recognize the silent, tormented little girl they'd first seen hiding in a dark corner in the orphanage all those months ago.

"Why is she wearing a man's hat?" Wolf asked.

Margaret settled the miniature beaver on her head.

"She likes it," Derek said, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world.

"And the riding boots?" Wolf asked, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"She even wears them to bed," Derek said with a smile. The big man and the little girl held out their feet shod in identical boots.

"Hmm," Wolf answered. "I think she is aping the wrong fashions."

Margaret scratched under her arms and made a face. "Ooo oo ooo," she said, imitating an ape.

Wolf made a grab for her foot and she scrambled out of Derek's lap with another shriek and went running to Ian, who scooped her up in his arms. Sophie turned and wagged her finger at Wolf in warning, but he just laughed.

"So, when are those babies due?" Derek asked.

"Oh, I expect they'll be here by tomorrow morning," Very said.

"What?" Wolf yelled. He threw the paper aside and it fell into the lake.

Michael moved her off his shoulder with shaking hands. He was as white as a ghost. He started to touch her stomach, but yanked his hand back as if he was afraid of hurting her. Very laughed and pulled his hand down just as another contraction hit. He must have felt her stomach tighten because for a moment Very thought he might fall unconscious into the lake and float away, like the newspaper.

Wolf was inelegantly stumbling onto the dock, nearly upsetting the boat. By now they had everyone's attention.

"Are you sure?" Wolf asked in a panic. He stood there staring at her wide-eyed.

She nodded. "Yes."

Margaret had run back over, Sophie not far behind. "We're going to have another baby!" Margaret yelled, clapping her hands.

Wolf reached for her and he took her hands and pulled as Michael supported her back and pushed her up onto the dock. "Why didn't you say something?" Wolf said in exasperation. "You should be home."

"I didn't want to sit inside all day," she said. "I wanted sunshine and fresh air."

Wolf stopped and so did Michael. "We don't have to go home," Wolf said in understanding.

Michael nodded. "You can have the baby right here."

Very laughed. "Well, I don't want to do that." She cupped first Wolf's cheek and then Michael's. "I'm not afraid of being in the house. I just wanted to be here today."

"And now?" Wolf asked.

"Take me home," she said with a contented sigh. "I'm ready now."

Wolf picked up her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "So am I."

Michael hugged her. "So am I," he whispered in her ear. They were the sweetest words she'd ever heard.

About the Author

Samantha has a Master's Degree in History, and is a full-time writer and mother. She lives in North Carolina with her husband and three children.

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