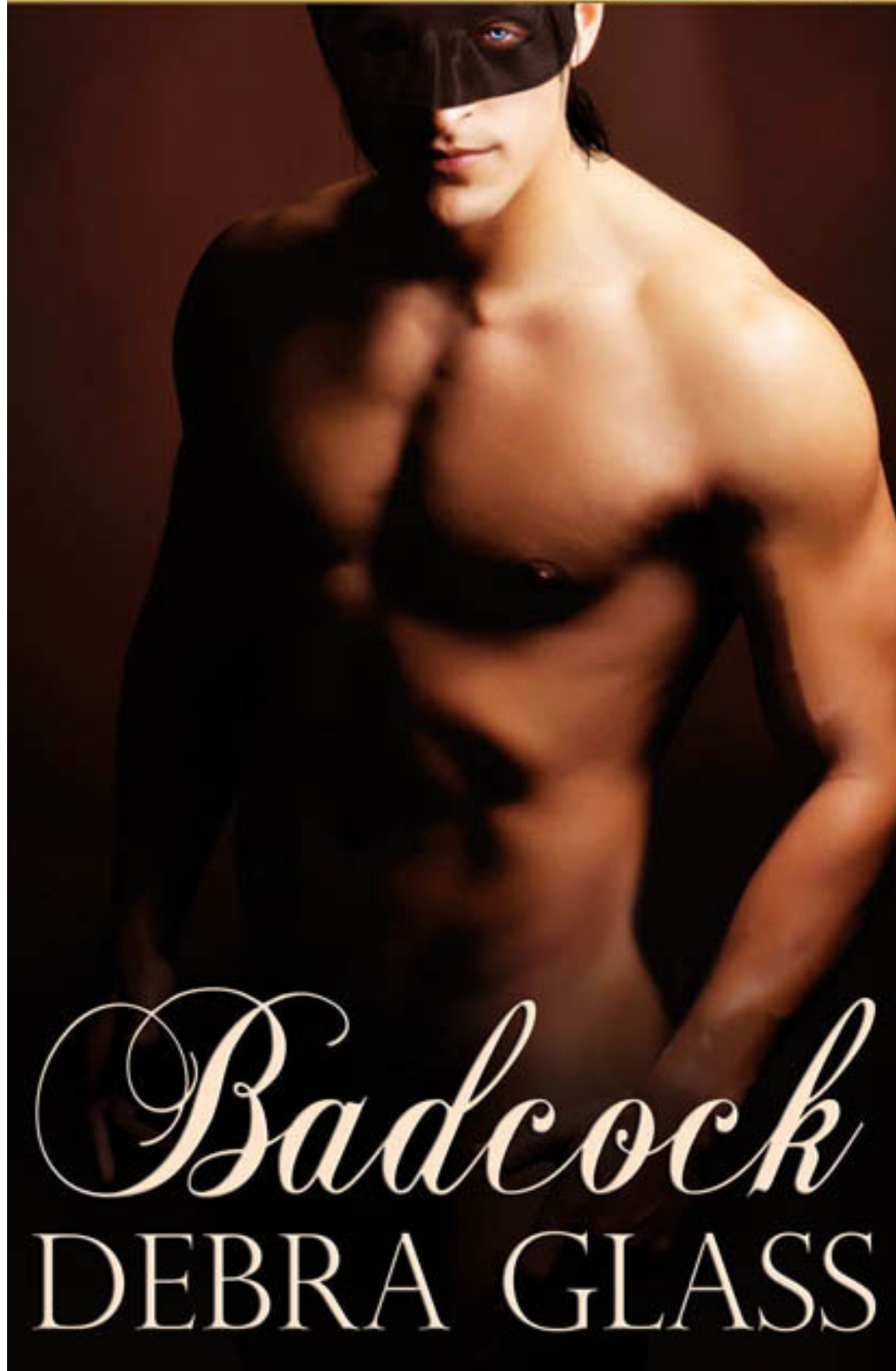


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



Badcock

DEBRA GLASS

Badcock

Debra Glass

When her fiancé trades her for an heirloom ring to a dashing highwayman who holds up their coach on a desolate country road, Sophia Astley is hurt and shocked. However, it soon becomes strikingly apparent to Sophia that *she* is the true gem Bad Jack sought. Intrigued, she willingly submits to every tantalizing taboo he metes out to her.

Dressed as a masked highwayman, Jack Badcock, Earl of Stafford, thinks he is acting out the fantasies of a woman he knows only through lurid letters. As Jack tames her with blindfolds, sensual spankings and an array of torrid toys, she plays her role as the abducted, submissive virgin convincingly—too convincingly. By the time Jack uncovers his fantasy lover's true identity, it's far, far too late.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Badcock

ISBN 9781419928598

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Badcock Copyright © 2010 Debra Glass

Edited by Meghan M. Conrad

Cover art by Dar Albert

Electronic book publication July 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

BADCOCK

Debra Glass

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to author Lynne Connolly for her help with early Regency period clothing, social mores, titles, and for letting me know it sounds really American to use the word “gotten.” Thanks, Lynne, for helping a Southern Belle bring British characters to life!

And to my friend, co-conspirator in plotting and fellow author Naima Simone. Thanks for being my sounding board and for catching all those little spots where I left out words because my fingers were flying too fast. (We did have the best table at the Reader’s Luncheon!)

Chapter One

"Stand and deliver!"

Sophia Astley glanced at her fiancé. "A highwayman? I told you we shouldn't have taken the Hounslow Road."

"Damn the luck," Ralph Crichton, Duke of Wisbech, muttered. "That carriage we passed with the broken wheel should have been the victim of this rogue. Now here we are alone without our entourage."

Ralph had insisted the second carriage in the ducal procession remain so his footmen could help repair Lord and Lady Huntingdon's wheel.

Sophia shook her head. "*No one* should have to be the victim of a robber."

"What's going on?" Ralph's aunt Millicent roused from her sleep.

"It's a highwayman," Ralph said through clenched teeth.

"A what?" Millicent asked, fumbling to hold her ear trumpet in place.

"A highwayman! We're being held up by a highwayman," he yelled into the device and gestured to the window.

"Marvelous," Millicent said, reclining against her seat once more.

Sophia dared to take a gander at the highwayman through the glass. Before today, she'd guessed highway robbers to be dashing, romantic figures who could have played the tragic heroes of romantic novels. She swallowed. Hard. In the case of this man, her preconceived idea had been correct.

He sat astride a black stallion, a pistol pointed skyward. The horse danced beneath him but he controlled it expertly, squeezing the animal with his thighs. Wearing a three-cornered cocked hat and black mask, the robber loomed salient against the backdrop of the stormy sky.

"Step out of the carriage!" he ordered.

Ralph leaned forward and looked past Sophia at the highwayman. "Begone. We've nothing for you."

The highwayman leveled the weapon at the window. "Step out. I'll not ask again."

Sophia reached for the handle on the carriage door.

"What are you doing?" Ralph demanded.

"He said to step out," she argued.

"He means to rob us!" Ralph cried.

"Of course he does," Sophia said and twisted the handle. "Would you rather him shoot one of us?"

Ralph groaned and moved past her. He leaped out of the carriage and pulled the step out for Sophia. Taking her fiancé's hand, Sophia alighted and joined him on the muddy road. She grimaced as the heels of her shoes sank into the mire.

The coach driver sat atop his seat, eyes wide, hands in the air. His blunderbuss rested uselessly at his feet.

"My aunt is within. She is aged and deaf," Ralph said. "Would you have me bring her out into the elements?"

"No need. I see exactly what I want," the highwayman said. A wicked grin claimed his sensuous lips and then he gave a devilish chortle. "Your money – or *your wife*."

Sophia bit her bottom lip as the robber's lurid gaze raked her in blatant appraisal.

"Get on with it!" Ralph declared. "We need to be on our way."

Sophia took an instinctive step back as the robber walked his horse closer. For a heart-stopping moment, his eyes held her whole. Her pulse pounded. She knew she should be repulsed by the brash stranger. Instead, she was intrigued.

Very intrigued.

The way his gaze lingered on her décolletage caused her nipples to pebble underneath her tight stays. She could not resist the urge to drag in as deep a breath as she could manage, knowing her breasts rose enticingly.

The highwayman's lurid grin widened. He swung lithely down from his horse and approached them. Dressed completely in black, he reminded her of the ghost in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, mysterious and darkly dangerous.

Sophia had the distinct impression he was more interested in *her* than in robbing them. The idea of this tall, blatantly sexual man ravaging her filled her head with deliciously sinful thoughts. Despite her entreaties, Ralph had hardly even kissed her. In fact, he'd chastised her when she'd indicated she was willing to bed him. While she knew it was inappropriate for a maiden to want more from a fiancé before marriage, she could not help her curiosity.

Shaking visibly, Ralph thrust his hands into the air. Sophia resisted the petulant urge to roll her eyes. All he had to lose was money. She, on the other hand, had much more at stake.

An image of the highwayman forcing her to commit unspeakable acts swirled in her head. Tendrils of desire spiraled into her loins in spite of their obviously dire circumstances. Doubtless this little encounter with this dandy highwayman would be the fodder for her fantasies for nights to come.

"That's quite a large gemstone on your finger," the highwayman said, pointing to Sophia's hand with his pistol.

She held up the garish ruby Ralph had given her as an engagement ring.

"D-don't take that!" Ralph squeaked. "It belonged to my mother. It's a family heirloom."

The highwayman chuckled. "Remove it for me, would you, dear lady?"

"Don't you dare take off that ring!" Ralph ordered.

A snort came from the highwayman. "M'lord, I would remind you that I am the one with the *cocked* pistol." His emphasis of the word *cock* was positively indecent. Sophia's stomach fluttered.

Ralph seethed. "Do not take off that ring."

Sophia's gaze darted from the highwayman to Ralph and back to the robber once more. She gripped the tight band of the ring and started to pull it off.

"That belongs to my mother!" Ralph cried.

"Darling, can't you see that he means to shoot me if I don't do as he says?" Sophia argued.

"I forbid you to remove that ring," Ralph said. By now his face was flushed scarlet.

"Well, well," the highwayman said. Something sexually sinister flashed in his eyes. "I wouldn't want you to disobey your husband. Come here."

He curled his fingers, motioning her to him.

Ralph grasped at her arm but Sophia tore away from him and crossed the road to where the highwayman stood. Up close, he loomed larger than life. Up close, she could see that his eyes were ice blue. Up close, he seemed far more dangerous than before.

Dark strands of hair escaped his queue and wisped across his sculpted cheekbones in the warm spring breeze. The rough black stubble shadowing his rigid jaw filled her with the urge to brush her fingers along his cheek. It was an urge she resisted.

He looked about thirty, the same age as Ralph. But this man wore his years far better than her fiancé.

"Aren't you voluptuous?" he asked. The hint of lavender mingled with horseflesh and leather wafted from his clothes. His breath smelled faintly of brandy.

Sophia tingled at his suggestive words and inviting stare. "T-thank you."

He chuckled again. The sound of it was evocative. Intimate.

Sophia could barely breathe. He studied her face as if he'd seen her before, as if he were trying to remember where. But they couldn't possibly have met. She would remember a man like this. Mask or no mask.

And then, he did the unthinkable.

Sophia gasped as his arm snaked around her waist. He hauled her against him and his mouth descended on hers, entreating her response. His lips tasted, nibbled and pried. His tongue teased and intruded. Sophia melted, opening her mouth to his, allowing him to plunder there as he would surely plunder their purses.

Awareness consumed her from the top of her coiffed head to the toes of her riding boots. His long, hard body pressed the length hers, crushing her breasts against his chest. His arm tightened, drawing her impossibly closer, causing her back to arch. His fingers splayed and ventured lower to cup her bottom and pull her loins against his. Some part of her was aware of Ralph's impotent protests but she shut that out. In her twenty-one years of life, she had never – not ever – been kissed like this before.

The highwayman kissed her as if he were well and intimately acquainted with her – as if it had never occurred to him that she might not want to be kissed by him.

And when he released her, Sophia staggered a step backward. Her entire body ached at the loss of his contact. She blinked, trying to regain her composure, wondering how he'd dared taken such liberties with her – and desperately wishing he'd do it again.

"You...you kissed that blackguard!" Ralph ranted at her rather than the highwayman.

Sophia ignored him. Her gaze linked with the highwayman's and held. Promise lurked in those blue eyes. She made an attempt to swallow but couldn't. Finally, he broke the spell by turning on Ralph. "If you forbid her to remove the ring, then I shall simply be forced to take the ring as is."

"As is?" Ralph asked.

"On the woman," he said and then turned to Sophia once more. "Get on the horse, love."

Her lips parted.

The robber gestured with his head toward his mount. "Get on the horse or—not that you would miss him much—I shall shoot your *valiant* knight." His tone was acerbic. In the course of a few minutes, the man had summed up Ralph's character and Sophia could not help but be amused.

He aimed the pistol at Ralph again. "As for you, m'lord, take down your breeches."

Ralph stared, aghast.

The highwayman smiled. "Take them down or I shall surely put in a bullet in you and you will lie dying knowing I am enjoying the pleasures of the flesh with your lovely lady fair."

Sophia's heart skipped a beat. Terror and lust entwined and rampaged inside her. Somehow, she knew her life would never be same when this day ended.

Ralph's hands trembled as he began fumbling with the fastenings on his breeches. "You are no gentleman!" he cried.

"Fear not," the highwayman chortled. "I don't intend to roger *you*." And with that, he cast a furtive glance at Sophia. "You, on the other hand..."

Her face flamed. He intended to ravish her. If she'd thought he was teasing before, she certainly didn't now.

"Get on the horse," he said, his voice low. Velvety. It wasn't an order but rather...*an invitation*.

The highwayman turned to Ralph. "Had you rather I take your woman or your ring, m'lord? Your choice."

"The ring is a priceless heirloom," Ralph blundered.

Sophia's gaze shot to Ralph. He stood with his breeches around his knees, the long tail of his shirt concealing his tackle. His face was mottled red with rage and Sophia could not help but think he'd been thoroughly unmanned.

Up until now, she'd thought—she'd been told, rather—marrying him would cause her star to rise to untold heights. But what kind of man would give up his fiancée for a ring?

"Well, well," the highwayman said. "That was an easy enough choice for you."

Sophia's lips parted as she looked to Ralph for some protest. Sneering, he looked away.

The highwayman flashed her a brilliant smile. "Sold for the price of a ring."

She knew she should object. This was impetuous, foolhardy even, but consumed with rage, she gripped the pommel and put her foot in the stirrup.

"The ring?" Ralph demanded.

Ignoring him, she climbed into the saddle and seated herself upon the massive stallion.

"My ring?" Ralph gaped, his expression betraying what he really was. Desperate and weak. Disgusted, Sophia looked away.

The highwayman laughed and then mounted behind her in the saddle. Sophia's back prickled at the sudden heat of his body, at the sensation of his thighs cradling her. He shoved the pistol in his belt.

"Let me see that ring of yours, love," he said, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke.

Shaking, Sophia held up her hand and then she watched, utterly stunned, as he took her hand in his and slipped the ring off her finger. His hand lingered, caressing for a moment before he flung the ring into the road.

"I say we've made a fair trade," the highwayman called to Ralph.

Sophia wound her fingers into the horse's mane as her abductor snapped the reins, wheeled the horse around and galloped away. She glanced back and her last image of Ralph was of him hobbling across the road to retrieve his mother's ring, his breeches around his knees.

He wasn't running after her. He wasn't reaching for the driver's gun. He wasn't even calling for her.

"Your husband is quite the imbecile," the highwayman said over the pounding of the horse's hooves.

Sophia turned away from the embarrassing sight. "He's not my husband."

The highwayman laughed heartily. "All the better, then!"

Holding both reins in one hand, he slid his other hand up the front of her bodice with shocking familiarity. Sophia cried out as he cupped and then squeezed one of her breasts. He let out a husky chuckle. "I can't wait to get you to the lodge," he said.

Dear Lord, what had she done? She should have fought. She should have played on his sensibilities as a gentleman who possessed at least some sort of conscience. She should have declared that she was a maiden, as yet unmarried.

Somehow, she didn't think any of it would have mattered.

Regret and expectation vied for prominence in her thoughts. In hindsight, she realized what he'd done to Ralph was reprehensible. The highwayman had humiliated him beyond reproach. But then again, Ralph had not even made an attempt to defend her honor.

Her abductor guided the horse off the main road and onto a narrow path. "Put your head down, love, lest you be scratched to pieces by briars and branches."

Sophia ducked and laid her cheek against the thick neck of the horse. Somehow, the highwayman wriggled out of his frock coat and threw it protectively over her head. She didn't know exactly how long they rode that way until he removed the coat.

Blinking, she straightened to discover they'd ridden deep into the woods. A rustic lodge sat nestled in the thick trees. Sophia wondered if it belonged to the highwayman or if it was just a place he'd happened upon. From the appearance of the moss-kissed roof and the well-kept exterior, she could tell someone of means maintained the lodge.

The highwayman swung from the saddle and leapt to the ground. "It's hardly Kensington but it will serve our purposes nicely for a couple of days."

Kensington? He spoke as if he were accustomed to much nicer lodgings. But what struck fear in Sophia's heart was his reference to *a couple of days*.

He reached up to her. Sophia hesitated. She debated snatching the reins and making a mad dash for it but she realized she couldn't tell which way they'd come. She sighed. She had little other choice to accept this man's offer to help her down from his mount. He lifted her easily and set her on the ground with a gentleness he didn't look capable of.

She stared as he brushed a loose strand of hair from her cheek. A lurid smile twisted his lips. "That was exhilarating. But I'll wager not half as exhilarating as what is yet to come."

"Are...are you going to hurt me?" she asked, suddenly terrified now that she was completely alone with this masked man.

"I'm going to follow your instructions to the letter, love," he said and lifted her chin so that he could press a kiss to her lips.

The word *instructions* played in her head, but only for a moment, chased away by the feel of his mouth on hers again. She wanted him to crush her against him and pillage her mouth again but he did not.

Instead, he kissed her lightly, released her and looped the reins around a hitching post. He patted the black beast on the neck. "I'll be back to see after you later, Armageddon." After that, he gripped her arm and manhandled her into the lodge.

The interior was cozily dark and consisted of one large room with a bed, a sitting area and a table and chairs.

Already, a fire smoldered in the hearth. A bottle of wine and fine crystal glasses awaited them. Luxuriant sheets had been turned back on the bed. Sophia's forehead furrowed. It looked as if he'd been *expecting* her.

But how could that be? He couldn't have possibly known *she* would have been traveling down the Hounslow Road today.

In addition to being made off with by a highwayman, there was something else amiss but Sophia couldn't quite figure out what.

He raked off his cocked hat and hung it on a peg along with his frockcoat. Dread washed over her anew when he began unfastening the buttons on his waistcoat. His clothing was far too fine for that of a man reduced to highway robbery. His speech was impeccable. In fact, Sophia wondered if he was really a highwayman at all.

After he draped his waistcoat on a peg, he strode confidently across the floor to the table and poured two glasses full of wine. He took a hearty drink of his and handed her a glass.

"Sir, exactly what do you intend to do with me?" she asked.

He laughed. "Oh, you do play your part well, love." His gaze dropped to the glass in her hand. "Drink! Or would you rather get straight to fucking?"

Shocked, Sophia gasped. "I...I am a maiden!"

At that he laughed so hard that he sputtered wine. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Once he regained a semblance of composure, he looked at her as if he were trying to be serious and was failing miserably. "And I am the lecher who will deflower you."

Trying not to show her fear, Sophia stared. "Are you mocking me?"

His smile faded into a leer and he took her glass from her. He downed the contents of his own and set both glasses on the table.

Sophia sensed something was about to change between them and although she'd been stunned by his passionate kiss earlier, cold terror seized her. His hand threaded

around her waist and he dragged her into his arms. With bruising force, his mouth claimed hers. She tried to resist. In vain, she pushed at his iron shoulders and struggled in the vise grip of his arms. It was futile.

His hand caught her head, cradling it, holding her to him until he took his fill of her mouth. "That's right," he murmured, his lips still against hers. "Fight me all you want but I wager you'll be begging me for this within the hour." He took her hand in his and thrust it between their bodies, pressing her palm over his arousal.

His very hard – very big – arousal.

Sophia tried to wrest her hand free but he only laughed and held her closer.

"Before this day is over you're going to feel my prick in each and every one of your delectably fuckable holes," he said in such a tone his threat sounded very much like a promise.

She gulped at the thought of him doing just that. The dark part of her wanted to try those things she'd only heard whispered about. The more practical side of her wanted to bolt out that door and run.

The dark chocolate overcoat of her riding habit fell down her shoulders, exposing her robin's egg blue waistcoat. When had he unbuttoned it?

He cocked his head to the side as he admired her. "Not quite as I remembered but beautiful nonetheless."

Sophia's kiss-swollen lips parted. "Do...do you know me?"

He traced a finger down the row of buttons on her chest, working his finger beneath and just between her breasts before tugging her so that she stumbled closer. "Intimately," he whispered, deftly unfastening the buttons of her waistcoat with one hand.

It, too, slithered down her arms and he tossed it in the floor. Another jerk freed her skirt and it fell around her ankles.

His eyes widened with interest as they skimmed down her corset and petticoat clad body and back up again. With expert ease, he loosened the laces on her corset and pushed it down over her hips. It occurred to Sophia that he'd done this before. Often.

"Wouldn't your *beau* love to see you now?"

Rage renewed itself when she thought of Ralph. He would be just as ruined as she when word of this got out. Trading a ring for her virtue! The very idea.

Sophia was aghast. No man had ever seen her in dishabille before. Ever! But instead of being humiliated, she was angry and...exhilarated—so exhilarated that she yanked her petticoat up over her head and then threw it in the floor.

She stood, heaving for breath as the highwayman's eyes drank in her almost naked form. "Very beautiful," he mused aloud.

In spite of herself, her nipples hardened under his gaze. Her channel pulsed and clenched.

He closed what little distance was left between them, removed his mask and before she could get a good look at him, he covered her mouth again. Sophia's eyes fluttered shut as she surrendered to his expert lips and tantalizing tongue. Curiosity mounted when his fingers glided down her arms until he held both her hands behind her back. But sheer panic surged when he dragged his mouth from hers and began binding her wrists with his satin mask.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Divesting you of your control as surely as I've just divested you of your clothes," he said flippantly.

"Untie me this instant, you miserable wretch!" Her command fell on deaf ears.

"Ah, spirited," he said and whirled her around so that her back was to him. A smart slap to her backside caused her to yelp. The sting transformed into a warm throb, sending wild impulses through her body that were in direction opposition to the protests from her brain.

She gulped as his warm hands moved around her waist, as his lips nibbled the nape of her neck.

"Sir, I beg you —"

He chuckled low. "See there. I told you that you'd be begging me."

Big hands moved up her body with deliberate slowness until he cupped both breasts. Sophia heard herself moan. The pressure of his hands and his mouth on her neck was almost too sensuous to bear. And when he rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, Sophia thought she would melt in his arms.

"I've been dying to feel you in my arms again," he murmured in her ear.

Again? Just who did he think she was? Was he mad?

He squeezed her nipples to the verge of pain. Right now she didn't care. She just didn't want him to stop. She'd never dreamed another's touch could be so insidiously good. He rocked his hips against her bound hands, grinding his hard phallus into them. Instinctively, she groped his member, shocked at how her body betrayed her.

He groaned in her ear. "Yes, love. I can't wait to be inside you. But first, there's so much more you've required of me. You're driving me mad. You know that, don't you?"

Driving *him* mad? Need unfurled through her limbs. She ached between her legs. Cream gathered in her center.

So this was desire...

She'd been curious to kiss Ralph but she'd never felt *this* for him. With the highwayman, it seemed as if her entire being would burst into flames and instinctively, she knew only he could quench the fire.

Both his hands moved down, down, until he caressed the slight swell of her stomach. Sophia watched, helpless as his fingers splayed wide across her sensitive skin. She wanted to squeeze her thighs together and at the same time, she was horribly impatient to get her boots off so she could be completely naked in this stranger's arms.

His breathing grew rough. So did hers. She kept trying to swallow but couldn't force her throat to work. Every muscle in her body tightened when his hands smoothed around her hips.

One hand splayed over the slight swell of her tummy and the other dipped lower. His fingers burrowed into the hair between her legs, probing, finding. *Oh, there!*

Now she wished she'd drunk that wine. She wanted to open her legs for him. She wanted to tilt her hips toward those inquisitive fingers. Instead, she grew rigid as shocks of pleasure pulsed from where he touched her.

Of course, she'd touched herself but this—a man's hand—was something she'd never imagined could be so wickedly wonderful.

Intruding thoughts that Ralph could have possibly followed them to this place leapt up in her mind. Minutes earlier, she would have hoped that was the case. Right now, she did not. She only wanted these feelings to continue.

The highwayman's fingers wriggled into her moist folds only to draw back up and circle her eager pearl again. Sophia's knees felt like pudding. If he hadn't been holding her upright, she would have wilted.

"W-what are you going to do to me?" she stammered.

"Everything."

Her pulse ran wild.

And just when she laid her head back against his shoulder to enjoy the pleasure he was wresting from her, he released her. Furious, she whirled, staggering off balance due to her bound hands.

Her mouth fell open at the sight of him without the mask. Unruly waves of black hair escaped his queue. Dark eyebrows brooded over his glittering blue eyes. His nose was slightly crooked. Masculine. In fact, everything about him defined the fact that he was all man.

Where Ralph looked graceful, almost feminine in his clothing, this man looked like a handsome swashbuckler. He was how she'd pictured the famed pirates she'd read about.

His snowy shirt gaped at the neck, revealing a dusting of black down on his tanned chest.

Ralph had been right about one thing. This man was definitely no gentleman.

He grinned and sucked her cream from his fingers with an irritating smack. And then he began unfastening the double row of buttons on his breeches.

Sophia's gaze riveted to where his long, well-shaped fingers deftly worked the buttons. He pushed his fall open with calculated slowness—as if what he had there would be a welcome surprise for her.

Welcome. Yes.

Surprise? Indubitably.

Intuitively, she licked her lips. She'd never seen a man's penis before. He ran his hand up and down the length of his thick shaft, rubbing his thumb over the swollen head. When he squeezed it, veins bulged.

"See how hard you've made me?" he teased softly. "If I'm to do everything on your list, love, then you must first take the edge off for me."

Sophia didn't understand but she couldn't wring her gaze from his arousal.

"Get on your knees," he said.

Her knees? Was he going to take her from behind like an animal? She knew she should be repulsed at the idea of such a thing but her traitorous sheath clenched over and over. Fire licked her inner thighs. She didn't protest but rather sank slowly to her knees on the thick fur rug.

Smiling wickedly, he caressed her cheek and thumbed her bottom lip. "I want you to suck my cock," he said.

Sophia got the distinct impression it was not a request at all but a command. Still, suck his cock? Take that...that *thing* in her mouth?

"I couldn't poss—" she began but he pushed the head between her lips and pulled her head close with his hand.

Sophia did not resist. Instinct consumed her and she closed her lips around him.

He let out an animalistic groan. "Oh, sweeting. Yes."

His words encouraged her and she began to work her tongue around him, alternately licking and sucking him.

"Heavens, that's good," he said, threading his fingers into her hair to hold her head captive.

She didn't stop to wonder if she was doing it correctly. His moans and the tension in his hands told her she was. He began to gently thrust into her mouth. She grasped that he wanted her to move that way for him. Is that how he would thrust his cock into her channel?

Desire to feel him inside her there flowed through her like molten lava. She wanted to stop sucking him. She wanted to beg him to fuck her. She was beyond caring if she was ruined. She was beyond caring about Ralph especially after his callous disregard of her.

Both his hands gripped her head. His cock pulsed and salty-sweet liquid spurted into her mouth. Sophia swallowed, sucking the rest until he withdrew from her mouth. His hands trembled.

He blew out a breath. "I've wanted to feel your mouth on me since the first time I set eyes on you."

Dazed she stared from her kneeling position as he did up his breeches. No! Was he finished with her? The hateful bastard!

He picked up her glass of wine and drank half its contents.

She struggled against the sash around her wrists.

“And now,” he said with an actor’s flair. “We can get down to the business of *punishing* you.”

Chapter Two

Punishing me? What on earth could he mean? Sophia's heart thundered.

"I acquired a nice little array of toys for you, darling," he said as he strode across the room to a chest of drawers.

"Toys?" she asked. "Are you insane? Release me!"

"Insane with desire," he said. "As you shall be momentarily."

He opened one of the drawers and withdrew something that looked like a tiny chain or a piece of jewelry. "I think we'll start with these," he announced.

As he turned and started toward her, she held her breath. Her gaze never left the item he held in his hand. What was it and what did he intend to do to her?

"On your feet," he said.

"No!"

That twisted little grin tugged at one corner of his mouth again. "You're only making it worse for yourself."

"Worse? How could it possibly be any worse than this?" she cried.

"Oh, it can—and will be. I promise you that," he said, his blue eyes sparkling. "Now, stand."

Sophia made an ungainly attempt but somehow managed to clamber to her feet. Perhaps if she cooperated, he would tire of her and release her. But secretly, she wanted him to do far more than that.

His gaze fell to her breasts. "So lovely, like two ripe pears just waiting to be plucked—and devoured."

He licked his lips and then bent his head to suckle one of her nipples. Biting her bottom lip, she watched him. His tongue flicked over the dusky tip, sending delicious

spasms through her being. His hand caught the weight of her breast, lifting and squeezing gently until she moaned her delight.

Everything inside her urged her to relax and enjoy this moment but she could not force the word *punishment* from her thoughts. Instinctively, she knew his idea of punishment would not be conventional.

Her lashes fluttered closed as she was overwhelmed into sensual sensations but her eyes snapped open wide when something hard clamped down on her nipple. "What the devil?" she cried, gaping at a jeweled bauble hanging from her breast.

The delicious pinch never let up and sent shockwaves stampeding to her channel.

He pressed a little kiss to the other breast and attached a matching device to that nipple as well.

"What are you doing?" she demanded but at the same time, she was stunned by how erotically beautiful her bejeweled breasts looked. And felt.

He stood back to admire his handiwork. "Shake them for me. I want to see the diamonds sparkle in the firelight."

"Diamonds?" she asked. Already, a furious blush infused her cheeks and neck.

"Shake your teats," he said with enthusiasm.

Shocked, Sophia stared. "I am no animal!"

He only laughed. "The harem ladies of the east wear such baubles and dance for their men. Dance for me."

"I will not!" she said, outraged. But oh, the scrumptious sensations these little clamps were sending to that aching little nubbin! She wanted to dance for him. She wanted to feel his mouth on her breasts again. She wanted him to burrow his fingers into the nest of hair between her legs and find that secret spot that made her come undone in the dark.

"Maybe you need a bit more persuading," he said, producing another length of chain. It too, featured a dangling diamond, larger than the ones suspended from her breasts.

Sophia couldn't move as he stepped up and looped the chain around her waist. He fastened it with a hook so that it hung provocatively around her hips. Then he arranged the chain so that the bauble hung directly in the middle.

"This one has a clamp too," he murmured in her ear, standing so close that his body countered hers.

She tensed when his fingers worked their magic between her legs again. She wanted to rock on his hand, to grind against him until she'd brought herself to orgasm.

She never got the chance.

She'd expected *something* but she was still shocked when a hard pinch locked onto the swollen bud.

He stepped back to look. Sophia's gaze dropped to where the diamond dangled from her mound. She throbbed. She yearned to close her eyes and melt into the vibrations coursing through her. Every inch of her craved his touch and his attention. Why was he torturing her so? This was maddening.

"I imagine you'll dance for me now," he mused as she quivered.

Every moment sent crazy jolts of pain laced pleasure through her body. She'd never known a woman could *feel* so much. Not like this.

She stared at her captor, ready to do anything he commanded if only he would assuage this rampant desire.

She shook her breasts, thrilled when his eyes widened.

"That's it," he cooed. "Look how pretty your jewels sparkle."

The clamp on her pearl was driving her mad. "Touch me," she said boldly. "Please."

"That's twice," he said. "Twice you've begged."

"Damn, but you're an infuriating, hateful bastard!" she exclaimed.

He laughed. "Naughty, naughty," he teased. "Do I need to heat up that bum of yours to coerce you to play nicely?"

Rage fueled by erotic need burned in her cheeks. "You've had your fun. Either fuck me or release me."

He pulled up one of the chairs and sat. "Come here and bend over my knee."

"Never!"

He motioned with his fingers. "Come here, you naughty minx. When I'm done punishing you, I will fuck you. Thoroughly. Several times. Do not doubt it."

Her channel pulsed. Cream oozed down one thigh.

"But not until I'm through," he said.

She didn't move.

"The sooner you come to me, the sooner I'll give you what you desire." He patted his knee.

She knew what he wanted. He intended to spank her. There was no way she could bring herself to walk over there with these clamps on all the most sensitive parts of her and bend over his knee to submit to a spanking. There just wasn't.

But the thought of him making good on his promise to fuck her *thoroughly, several times*, seemed an incentive she could not resist.

"That's it," he said and she realized she was walking toward him. "Come here."

Her heart seemed to pound in her throat as she bent over his lap. He pulled her down, positioning her belly over his thighs. The diamonds swung heavily, tugging mercilessly at her nipples and clitoris. She clenched her fists so tightly her nails bit into her palms.

A warm hand roamed up and down the back of a thigh while the other toyed with one of the baubles hanging from her nipple. She'd heard about men who enjoyed

inflicting such tortures on women. She'd never thought she would experience it first hand. And she'd never dreamed she'd love it.

Something about it gave her a sense of inner satisfaction. Normally, being stripped and spanked would be humiliating. But this—with this stranger—was anything but humiliating.

She sensed all of this was meant to inspire pleasure—that he was doing it *for* her instead of *to* her.

His fingertips tickled the sensitive flesh between her legs. "I'm going to spank you three times. Once for every time you begged me to fuck you."

She nodded. *Oh yes, get on with it and then fuck me.*

"But there's a catch," he said. "You must ask for each lick."

Shame burned in her face and radiated down her spine. Submitting to it was one thing. Asking for it was another.

His fingers lightly pinched the soft flesh of her ass. "Shall we get started?"

Sophia's breaths came in short gasps. She couldn't let him do this. But then, she heard her voice as if it belonged to someone else. "Spank me."

"Mind your manners," he warned.

"Spank me, please," she ground out. Her legs trembled.

He chuckled and then swatted her bum so hard she yelped. Heat seared her flesh, the flames licking down her thighs and back up to settle in her sex. She gnawed her bottom lip as he rubbed and massaged her behind until the sting became sweet warmth.

The pain was unlike any she'd ever known. It didn't hurt as much as it made her aware—so delightfully aware of all the hidden parts of her anatomy she'd been told were naughty to entertain.

Boldness consumed her. "Spank me, please," she whispered.

Another smack landed on her ass and again he rubbed out the smart sting. Tears inspired by need rolled down her cheeks as she requested yet another smack. "Spank me, please," she uttered, her voice cracking.

This time, she braced for it, squeezing her eyes shut as the blow fell.

Swat!

She groaned and hung her head, flooded with overwhelming sensations from the clamps and the spanking. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind a shard of disappointment surged that he was through punishing her.

"Untie me," she moaned, her voice muffled. "Untie my hands. Please."

Deftly, his fingers worked the knot at her wrists and she was free.

Knowing exactly what was at stake, Sophia pushed herself up and, facing him, she straddled his legs. Eyes dark with desire, he sat motionless as she hastily undid his fall and freed his hard cock. Doing this would most likely mean Lord Wisbech would cast her aside but in her heart, she knew a life as a ruined spinster would be far better than marrying a cruel man like him.

Heart thundering, she slipped the bauble off her clitoris and then raised herself onto him. The head of his phallus breached her defenses and slipped inside. Curiously, the pain that emanated from the loss of her virginity paled in comparison to everything else and she merely winced as she sank onto him. She sighed as he filled and stretched her.

So this was sex? So this was the taboo act that was only supposed to be shared in the marriage bed?

She couldn't imagine doing—or feeling—this with Lord Wisbech.

"Is that what you wanted?" the highwayman asked huskily.

"Yes," she whispered, adjusting to the fullness.

She shifted and the physical completion rendered her mindless. Moving restively against him, she clung to his shoulders and pushed at the floor with the toes of her boots until finally he gripped her hips and bounced her rhythmically on his lap.

Time and time again, she came down on his cock hard, tilting so that her that part of her that had been tortured by the clamp raked his body. The jewels on her nipples swung wildly, pinching and tugging until she wanted to scream.

His fingers splayed wide over her bottom, reaching and prodding her sensitive rosette. Sophia no longer cared what he did to her. Nothing was sacred any longer. Every thing, every inch of her body was made for her pleasure and the way he touched her made her feel whole for the first time in her life.

Wanting to feel and experience everything at once, she wrenched up his shirt and explored the hard planes of his chest. So hard. So male. Even in her fantasies, her dream lovers had never been so wonderfully masculine. Everything about him fueled her desire and deep within, she knew he had spoiled her for Lord Wisbech or any other man in her future.

He shifted to give her more ground to grind herself on his groin. New sensations burst within her and she realized she was on the verge. For the first time in her life, she was about to experience ecstasy at the hands of another.

So close. Lurking. Just there. She shut her eyes.

"Let it come with my cock inside you," he said and that was all the impetus she needed to let go.

Her climax unfurled and snapped like fresh linen on the line, caught in a merciless wind. Her channel pulsed around him and all the while, he encouraged her. "That's it, love. Yes."

Her orgasm was wickedly powerful. Shocks of all-encompassing pleasure pulsed from her scalp to her toes and all she was capable of doing was *feeling*.

A hand cradled her head as she collapsed against his chest. His other fingers traced up and down the length of her spine. His cock still throbbed inside her and as she

floated back to earth, she realized he hadn't experienced his own orgasm. She lifted her head far enough to look into his eyes. "What about you?" she asked.

"You took care of me earlier. From now on, this is for your pleasure."

She gulped at the thought of him taking her again.

He sat her up straight and released the clamps on her breasts before depositing them on the table. "Did you like that?" he asked with a grin.

She chuckled. "Yes."

"Good," he said. "Then you'll like the other toys I've brought for you as well."

He seemed so at ease, slumped in the chair with a naked woman straddling his lap. His shirt hung haphazardly on his body. His pants gaped. And it struck Sophia that she had never seen a more handsome man in her life.

"What should I call you?" she asked.

A dark eyebrow arched. "How about Bad Jack?" he asked as if he'd never given it any thought until now.

Odd. Most all infamous highwaymen had well-known nicknames but she'd never heard of a *Bad Jack* before.

He smiled and pecked her lips with a quick kiss before he set her off his lap. "I brought in some water to heat over the fire. You can clean yourself up a bit."

He stood and did up his pants before pilfering through a large basket on the table. "Hobbes sent along some cold chicken. I'm famished."

Hobbes? Since when did highwaymen employ servants?

While he spread out the chicken and other items in the basket, Sophia took the opportunity to clean herself. She noticed a spot of the blood on the cloth he'd provided for her but it was so insubstantial she doubted he'd seen it. She'd told him she was a virgin but he hadn't seemed as if he'd believed her. In fact, he'd accused her of playing her part well.

"Come. Have something to eat," he called.

She reached for her habit but he put up a warning finger. “No! No clothes. You are mine for two days and in those two days you will have no need for clothing.”

Two days? He intended to keep her here for two days? What then?

Her stomach grumbled and she eyed the chicken. There was no sense in worrying about what would happen after she left this place.

He had awakened her to a new life and she only wanted to enjoy it before she was shackled to Ralph for the rest of her life—if he would even have her after she’d been compromised by the highwayman.

He poured her wine glass full. “Come love, and I will feed you bite by bite and then I will have my dessert between your legs.”

* * * * *

Lady Huntingdon’s pulse raced as the coach pulled to yet another stop. Already, the broken wheel had put her hours behind and only a mile from the point where she was to meet her lover, John Badcock, Earl of Stafford.

She’d met *Jack* once before at a masquerade ball. Both clad in masks and costumes, they’d stolen a few moments pleasure in the host’s library. Since then, they’d written clandestinely and had both shared their naughtiest secrets, which they’d planned to enact this very day.

Elinor’s fantasy was to be ravaged by a highwayman and when Jack had come up with the idea of holding up their carriage and snatching her away right from under her husband’s nose, she had squealed with delight.

She’d thought he’d probably given up by now but when the coach rumbled to a stop on the Hounslow Road, hope surged.

Anticipation thrummed in her veins as she peeped out the window but dismay soon set in.

There was no highwayman at all.

Instead, they came upon Lord Wisbech, who'd generously lent his men to help repair their wheel. Wild-eyed, he stood in the road, his fine clothes in disarray.

"Your Grace! What happened?" she asked, but already she had a sinking suspicion she knew what happened.

Lord Wisbech darted to the window. "We were robbed by a highwayman!"

"A highwayman?" Thomas Warwick grumbled. "Which one?"

"How should I know?" Lord Wisbech fumed. "He didn't exactly introduce himself."

"How much did he take?" Thomas asked.

"He didn't take anything," Wisbech said. "Except my fiancée!"

Elinor gasped. Jack had made off with the wrong woman. "Pardon me," she said, interlacing her fingers to stop her hands from trembling. *Oh, no. No...*

No!

She wanted to scream in frustration but she knew she could not.

At this very instant, Jack Badcock was most likely in the throes of ecstasy in another woman's arms.

Elinor shook with rage. She wanted to divulge his actions, to make him pay. Surely he knew he'd abducted the wrong woman. But then again, it had been awfully dark in that library and they'd had much too much to drink.

The letters she'd written him had been very specific in sexual details. She had wanted to be tied, spanked, titillated – tortured.

She clenched her fists. All those things were happening right now – to that coltish little Jezebel she'd seen accompanying Lord Wisbech!

She reached for the door handle. "Please, step inside our coach. You must be worried sick about – what was her name, again?"

* * * * *

Sophia gripped the headboard. Ecstasy, so intense she could hardly tolerate it, rippled from the inside out. The muscles in her legs drew taut as she wrapped them around the highwayman's shoulders and held him close. His tongue swirled and speared. His lips feasted. His fingers prodded and probed.

The first orgasm had rolled over her in sudden ferocity. But this one burned and built in a slow and steady climb until she reached a precipice and toppled headlong over the edge.

Her hands found and anchored his head. Her legs fell open and she tilted up and toward him. She'd never dreamed she would find such pleasure with another.

Mewling, she lay helplessly until the last shivers of paradise subsided and melted away.

With a gentleness she didn't expect him to possess, he kissed the inside of her thigh.

Sophia blinked sleepily and watched him as he kissed his way up her hip, across the slight swell of her tummy, higher. She buried her fingers in his thick hair. "This is heaven," she whispered.

"Indeed it is," Jack replied and circled her areola with his tongue.

He could lose himself in those beautiful breasts alone. Moving to the other one, he held and squeezed her tight body. She seemed younger than he remembered. Smaller.

But there were other differences about her.

Hesitant and curious at the same time, she returned his kisses with a reckless lack of restraint. The Elinor he'd known had been a wine-swilling, sexually experienced woman. Suddenly, she seemed more interested in exploring than in satisfying the lust for a new lover.

He raised his head and looked into her hazel eyes. The tiniest smile pulled at her ruby lips. *What if...*

No.

He shook his head. Her coach had arrived at precisely the time they'd arranged to meet. Besides, he thought as he wrapped a lock of her black hair around his index finger, he would remember her thick tresses anywhere—having only the seen the back of her head the last time he'd fucked her.

He decided to toss out a little test. Just in case. "This time is better, isn't it?"

"Every time with you is better than the last," she said.

He relaxed. It was Elinor. Why else would she have come along with him so willingly? Why would she have engaged in such taboo sexual acts without protest if she hadn't arranged all this through her letters?

"What did you think of your jewels?" he asked.

She smiled. "I never imagined anything could make me feel so...so impassioned."

He toyed with the chain still skirting her hips. "Excellent. Then we shall surely play with them again later."

Her eyes darkened, the pupils almost filling the irises to turn them black. "And now?"

"Insatiable," he muttered as he shifted and prodded her with his cock until it slid inside.

She arched and gasped as he filled her.

"Black velvet," he said in her ear as he began to move.

"Black velvet?"

"That's what your cunny feels like. Warm, wet, black velvet." He pushed slowly all the way in and then dragged back until the head of his cock slipped just out of the opening.

Her hands clawed at his back, his buttocks. She writhed restlessly.

Restraining himself, he raked the head through her folds. "What do you want?"

She groaned. "You."

He chuckled low. "Tell me what you want. Tell me how you want it."

"All the way," she said, tugging.

Her motions were futile. If there was one thing Jack Badcock understood, it was a woman's desire.

He sucked at her neck, heedless of the marks his mouth left in his wake. "How. Tell me how."

"Hard. Fast," she whimpered.

"Don't be so impatient, love," he said. "Before you leave here, I will have rutted you so raw you won't be able to walk."

"Yes, oh yes." She rocked.

"But now, I want to feel your tight sheath gripping and holding me, milking me," he said and then traced the shell of her ear with the tip of his tongue. He drove deliberately inside her and then ground his groin into hers.

Her body hummed beneath his. Her channel squeezed in rebellion as he withdrew. Again, he pushed inside, his eyes fluttering shut as he lost himself in the wonder that was a woman. How long had it been since sex was something more to him than physical release? Perhaps it was the fantasy. Maybe it was the eroticism of the toys, of spanking her, but this—with her—ripped him from the reality of managing his estate, of living up to his deceased father's too-high standards—and from his pending marriage to a German aristocrat on whom he'd never laid eyes.

Instinct took over and he braced himself on his elbows to rhythmically thrust into her. He pushed all coherent thought from his mind and instead focused only on the physical, on the thrill of infatuation and secret romance.

Up until now, this woman beneath him had been a flirtation. Suddenly, he found himself entertaining thoughts of meeting her on a regular and frequent basis.

Her nails raked down his back sending shivers up his spine. "Pull my hair," he ground out.

At once, fingers entwined in the hair at his crown and tugged. Hard. "Fuck, yes," he said along with a string of other unintelligible expletives. His groin slapped hers over and over, faster and faster.

On the edge of explosion, he somehow managed to withdraw his cock. Winding one hand under her body, he held tight while his seed erupted between their bodies.

Temporarily sated, he rested heavily on top of her. She rained kisses against his neck and his shoulder. This was supposed to be a fuck. Nothing more than a fuck. So what was this insane urge he had to cradle her in his arms and hold her?

Without words, he did just that, somehow dragging the covers over their naked bodies as he pulled her into an embrace.

Chapter Three

Elinor paced in her room. She wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to be in Jack Badcock's bed. The bastard! The least he could have done was send word that he'd made a mistake.

"Miss Sophia Astley," Elinor sneered the name as if she were uttering the vilest words imaginable.

She stopped and stared out the window, not seeing the verdant hills of her husband's estate. It was hopeless. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't exactly mount a horse and take off in search of Jack Badcock's hunting lodge. First of all, she had no idea where it was. Second, while extra-marital philandering was accepted for men if carried out discreetly, it was taboo for women.

Elinor struck her own palm with a clenched fist. This situation was intolerable.

Surely to God he'd realized he was with the wrong woman. But if so, why hadn't he returned her? Elinor seethed. Although she'd only met him the one time, she'd gathered from his letters that he was a rake but he certainly wasn't the type to leave a woman at the mercy of the road.

Briefly, Elinor closed her eyes but images of her lover in the throes of passion with a strange woman swam in her head. He had indeed been fooled if that twit, Lord Wisbech, was to be believed.

It had been all Elinor could stomach to listen to his version of how the highwayman had dared to kiss his fiancée right there on the road.

And worse! How readily she'd climbed up on his horse. Elinor sighed. An ingénue. A virgin! No wonder Jack hadn't returned Sophia.

But then, Elinor got an idea. A wicked idea. She smiled and lifted her chin in triumph. If Jack Badcock did indeed realize he'd bedded the wrong woman, then Elinor could certainly make him pay.

She could see to it that all of society knew Jack had ruined the girl. And she, Elinor, would see to it that Jack's engagement to his German countess was broken.

She giggled without mirth, considering the possibilities at her fingertips.

* * * * *

Ralph sat in his study and stared at the ring in his hand. His face burned with shame when he recalled how that wretched highwayman had debased him—as surely as the scoundrel was debasing Sophia at this very moment.

Ralph dropped his head on the back of his chair and stared at the fresco on the ceiling. How would he be able to show his face after this?

Their wedding was less than a month away. How could he still go through with the ceremony knowing she'd been had by another man?

She hadn't even protested when the highwayman had pulled off her ring and thrown it in the dirt—further disgrace!

He sucked in a breath that whistled through his teeth. Sophia had not been the most advantageous match he could have made. His connections to the Duke of Gloucester could have procured him a wife with a higher rank but Ralph had been foolishly smitten by Sophia's hefty dowry.

Her unladylike advances toward him during their courtship hinted that she would not make a fitting wife and his suspicions had been confirmed when she mounted that horse and rode away with that base highwayman.

It was too bad Lord and Lady Huntingdon had come along so soon afterward. If he hadn't told anyone what happened, he could have waited until Sophia surfaced and then made a pact with her never to speak of the incident again. As it was, gossip would abound.

Ralph rolled his eyes. And worse, if he got an heir on her right off, then speculation would swarm society.

He breathed a heavy sigh. "What to do?"

He'd sent word to her parents but other than that there was nothing else he could do but wait. Hopefully, her parents would realize that involving the authorities would only cause rumors to fly. The best thing Ralph could hope for was that the highwayman would use Sophia and then kill her, leaving her body in the woods for the elements to ravage – and set him free to seek a *suitable* wife elsewhere.

* * * * *

It was dark when Sophia opened her eyes. Her body ached with delicious soreness, reminding her of every thing she'd done with the highwayman.

He lay on his side next to her, his eyes closed, his shoulder exposed. A tingle fluttered in her stomach. Even sleeping, he was astonishingly handsome. How could she ever be satisfied with Ralph after this?

Getting on that horse had led to the greatest adventure of her life. It had also led to her greatest disappointment. Before encountering the highwayman, she'd been content with her life, with her engagement to Ralph and all that their future together entailed. Now, how could she marry him, knowing he could never satisfy her and knowing she would never be content with a boring life as the wife of a callous ass like Ralph? He'd traded her virtue for a ring.

A ring!

The thought made her seethe with rage.

And yet, the contracts had been signed. He'd all but claimed her dowry. Over four hundred invitations had been sent out. The archbishop was granting them a special license.

Sophia closed her eyes. Maybe Ralph would use this incident as an excuse to break their contract. That would suit her just fine. But even doomed to the fate she desired –

spinsterhood—her life still seemed as if it were spiraling away from her. She felt as if she were a spectator with no control over her own destiny. Oddly, in the bed of a stranger—a man who'd abducted her—she felt completely in control for the first time in her life.

But this was an illusion. A dream.

He'd told her that at dusk, he would take her home. She sighed. Home. Were her parents worried? Had they told the authorities? Were they scouring the woods around the Hounslow Road, looking for her even at this late hour?

Was Ralph even now consulting with his lawyers to see how he could get out of marrying her?

What would she tell everyone when she finally returned home?

They would want to know the details. She brushed her palms over her own nipples, feeling them harden at her touch. Both were sore. Exquisitely sore.

One hand ventured lower and she opened her thighs. Her middle finger skimmed her pearl. She was sore there, too, but that soreness only made her ache for more. A shard of desire swelled at the memory of his securing a heavy diamond to her *right there*. And his tongue! Oh, his tongue.

She'd never imagined two people would do something like that.

She tightened at the memory. Cream gathered in her channel, readying her.

She twisted to look at his face. What would he do if she reached for him? Would he reject her or would he climb on top of her and take her to heaven again?

Her pulse skittered. Tentatively, she worked her hand out from under the cover lightly brushed his bare shoulder. He moaned softly and the sound of it only fueled her desire even more.

What was it about this man who made her throw every last vestige of decorum she possessed heedlessly to the winds? Was it him or was she so desperate to stall her marriage that she'd done the most reckless thing possible?

Somewhere in her heart, Sophia admitted both were true.

She placed her palm over his warm skin and caressed his shoulder. He breathed in. The sound of air filling his lungs was seductive. And when his lashes blinked open, Sophia's heart skipped a beat.

A sleepy smile stretched his lips. He moved slowly, taking her hand and pushing it underneath the covers, down – until...

Sophia gasped when her fingers curled around his hard cock. Gazing into his eyes, she explored him, squeezing, moving her hand up and down, reaching with her fingers to probe his heavy scrotum.

"You touch me as if you've never touched a man before," he said in that rough velvet voice that drove her wild.

"Am I doing it wrong?"

"No, love, no," he said. "Your touch is very, very right. I meant that you seem a little shy."

He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "There is no need for shyness with me," he said as he rolled onto his back, dragging her on top of him so that she straddled his body.

"Find your pleasure," he whispered. His eyes sparkled as his gaze drifted down her body.

Sophia did not hesitate. Reaching between their bodies, she gripped his cock and guided it to her eager opening. He breached her and she moaned as she sank, letting him fill her to completeness.

He brushed her thighs and then caressed upward until he cupped her breasts. She arched toward him, groaning when he rolled her tender nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. He tugged them, drawing her down.

Rolling her hips, Sophia anchored his head and kissed him as he had kissed her that first time on the road.

* * * * *

She'd been quiet all afternoon. Seated behind her in the saddle, Jack breathed in the scent of her hair. She smelled like sweet perfume, like the outdoors – like sex.

When he told her to don her clothes, she'd grown pensive. He didn't blame her. He didn't want her to leave any more than she did. In fact, he could have spent another day – another week – a lifetime – with her in the hunting lodge.

She leaned heavily against him as the horse crept at a slow pace. Jack braced one arm around her waist. Damn, why did he feel as if he had a stone in his gut?

She'd not had this effect on him before. After the masquerade ball, he'd considered her a dalliance. When she'd boldly written to him, he'd been amused. A window of opportunity had presented itself and he'd dressed up like a highwayman. That was it. That was all it had ever been intended to be. Another dalliance.

But something had changed. For the last two days, he'd tried to figure out just where that change had taken place but he couldn't seem to grasp...

Oh yes. Realization washed over him like the warm spring breeze. He'd known the moment he'd kissed her. The first time he'd kissed her on the road. She'd been so different, hesitant at first and then pliant in his arms. For a moment, he thought he'd made a mistake but when she so readily mounted his horse, he knew better.

Now she would return to her life and her husband and he would return to Amberley and to managing his estate and preparing for his marriage to Hilda von something or other.

Wistful, he smiled as he wondered if Hilda would like to be spanked and tweaked and pinched. He doubted his bride to be was as adventurous as a seasoned woman like the one seated in front of him.

She shifted in the saddle and her bottom brushed his half-swollen cock. He couldn't help but growl. This morning, he'd fucked her from behind. After breakfast, he'd sat her on the table amidst the dishes, spread her legs and devoured her luscious cunny. By

noon, he'd thrown a rope over the rafters and tied her hands high above her head so he could truss her up in the jeweled clamps and flail her ass with a strap of leather.

His cock jumped at the memory of it. She'd writhed and thrashed and squeezed her legs together, rocking against the clamp on her clitoris until he'd had mercy on her and lifted her right onto his cock.

That had been their last time before they both dressed.

Jack scanned the wooded landscape. This little-traveled road was desolate and would probably remain so for the remainder of the afternoon.

"Whoa!" Jack called to the horse as he tugged the reins.

"Why are we stopping?"

He leapt down and reached up. "One more time. Right here. I can't let you go just yet."

Without hesitation, Sophia fell into the highwayman's arms. He tied the horse off to a nearby branch and then began unfastening his breeches. "Pull up your skirts and bend over."

She moved to the edge of the woods and dragged up the hem of her gown. Bracing her riding boot on a fallen log, she bent and grabbed hold of a tree just as the highwayman positioned himself behind her.

"Your arse is still red from where I spanked you," he said, raking his cock head through her folds.

Sophia shut her eyes, reliving every sweet lash he'd inflicted on her. He pushed up hard inside her and she struggled to hold her footing. His hands dug into the soft flesh of her hips and he held tight as he pummeled her.

His groin slap, slap, slapped hers. He grunted with every forceful thrust. Sophia wished she had the clamp on her clitoris. She wished she could get her hand under her multitude of skirts so she could rub herself while he fucked her.

"Have you had enough of my prick yet?" he asked.

No. Never.

When she didn't immediately reply, he smacked her ass. Hard. She mewled and clenched around him as the smarting sting spread through her bottom.

"Have you?" he repeated.

"No," she said breathlessly. *Take me back to the lodge. Please don't make me leave you.*

"I never did get inside that lovely little asshole," he said, slowing his pace so he could tantalize that virgin orifice with the tip of a finger.

Sophia tensed. After everything else, she wasn't ready for *that*.

"However, this is neither the time nor the place for that," he said and Sophia let out the breath she'd been holding.

She gasped when he withdrew, spun her around, lifted her half off her feet and pushed her spine against the tree. Her hair tangled in the branches. Bark scraped her palms. Breathless, she waited as he hastily ruched up her skirt and plunged his hand between her legs, searching, finding. *Oh, yes.*

She melted as he began to stroke the sensitive hillock so eager to be stimulated. "Jack," she heard herself say.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the tree trunk and rocked into his expert touch. One finger slipped inside her channel only to pull out and circle her clitoris again. He repeated the motion until she was a blithering, mindless fool in his hands.

He stepped closer, wedging his knees between hers. His mouth grazed her ear. "Come undone on my fingers, sweetheart. Yes, that's it. Just let go. Just let—"

"Oh! Oh, Jack!" she cried and even as bliss bubbled up inside her, he thrust his cock into her core again.

Sophia clung to him, to the tree. Frissons of pleasure reduced her to tears as he pounded her, driving her back hard against the solid oak at her back.

He moaned, pumping into her hard once, twice, a third time. And then he stopped. In the back of her mind, she realized he'd not withdrawn. He'd released his seed in her womb. Mixed emotions roiled. What they'd just done was dangerous, irrevocable. Some part of her didn't care. Instead, she held his head and kissed his mouth, his face. He kissed her back the same way and Sophia's heart lurched.

This was it. This was the last time he would ever kiss her. This was the last time he would ever be inside her.

She'd known it would end.

But she had not been prepared for it.

He dragged his lips from hers and gazed into her eyes. Everything urged her to look away but she forced herself to hold his stare. The ice in his blue eyes had melted into the color of the warm spring sky. She cupped his jaw. "Do you do this with all the women you abduct?" she asked, playfully, but in reality she desperately wanted to know.

"Only you," he said. One side of his mouth twisted into a somber smile. His fingers absent-mindedly caressed the side of her hip.

Sophia stared for a moment. A plea hung on her lips to beg him to take her away with him. She knew that was impossible. He was a robber. A scoundrel. He would doubtless die at the end of a hangman's noose.

A highway robber's career never lasted very long.

He inhaled before he slipped out of her and stepped back so that her skirts fell. "We should go. Your carriage awaits."

Carriage? When had he had time to arrange transportation for her? None of this made any sense whatsoever, but Sophia would worry about that later. Right now, she wanted to memorize his every handsome feature. The curl that escaped his queue. The tiny mole on the side of his jaw. The devilish arch of his eyebrows.

The prudent thing for her to do was to go home and marry Ralph. So why did her heart beg her to do something so utterly rash?

Jack reached for her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. The touch was so intimate—even more so than everything else they'd done together—that it caused a crazy lump to well in Sophia's throat.

When he tugged her hand, she hesitated.

Don't do this! Don't cry. Her reaction was foolish. Stupid and foolish. It was time to let this fantasy go and leave, to return to her well-ordered life. She swallowed thickly and allowed Jack to lead her and the horse back to the road.

He gave her a boost and lifted her into the saddle. Sophia winced as she sat on her sore bottom.

Jack climbed up behind her and kissed to the horse. With a snap of the reins, the horse moved along—much faster than Sophia would have liked.

* * * * *

Sophia's pulse began to race as the coach neared her parents' estate north of London. The driver hadn't asked her where she wanted to go until Bad Jack had galloped out of her sight and out of her life.

When the manor loomed into view, her hand flew to her chest as if she could prevent her heart from drumming its way out of her rib cage. Seeing the familiar grounds and ivy-clad stones brought reality crashing down around her with startling force.

She was ruined. Ralph would more than likely have his barrister break their contract. Her parents would be furious. No respectable man would ever ask for her hand.

"God's boots," she said aloud as the ramifications of what she'd done settled in with sickening depth.

Worse than any of that, she'd allowed the highwayman, a common robber, to plant his seed in her. What if he'd got a child on her? She closed her eyes and let her head fall hard against the back wall of the coach.

Her hand went involuntarily to her stomach. Ruined. Utterly and thoroughly ruined.

When the carriage halted in front of the house, a bevy of servants dashed out the door followed by her parents, Peter and Elizabeth Astley, the Viscount and Viscountess Bainbridge.

"Sophia!" Elizabeth cried.

A servant could scarcely pull down the coach steps and open the door for Sophia's mother trying to get to her.

Once the door was open, Sophia flew out and into her mother's open arms.

"My darling, did he hurt you?" she asked but then her eyes widened when her gaze moved from Sophia's face to her neck. "Oh no. No. No," she said, backing away as if she were afraid the plague were on her.

Sophia's gaze flitted from her mother's horror-stricken face to her father's.

"Come in the house," her father said tersely, snatching her roughly by the arm.

Her feet hardly touched the ground as he dragged her into the parlor and stepped in front of the footman to slam the double doors shut.

"Out!" he boomed to a maid who scurried quickly from the room.

Sophia began to shake.

As soon as the maid quitted the room, her father seized her by the shoulders. "Look at your neck! Did he have you?"

Sophia stared. She'd expected them to be angry that she'd been abducted, intent on catching Bad Jack and seeing him hang. She had never dreamed they'd be angry *with her*.

"I-I'm tired. I would like to go to my room a-and rest," Sophia stammered.

Her father's eyes blazed as he gave her a hard shake. "Answer me!"

She couldn't believe this. She'd been abducted through no fault of her own. She'd practically been given to the highwayman by her fiancé. But still, her face flamed when she thought of all the things she'd *willingly* done with Bad Jack. "Yes, he had me," she hissed.

Her mother wailed. "She's ruined!" she screamed. "Ruined!"

Sophia stumbled as she was pushed onto a settee and then she watched in horror as her father whirled and slapped his wife's face. "Shut up, woman! If no one else knows of this, then Sophia's marriage to Wisbech might still be salvaged."

Sophia trembled violently. She'd never seen her parents argue before. She'd certainly never seen her father strike her mother. She had to get a hold of herself. She couldn't let this happen – not because of her recklessness.

Not because of Ralph's greed.

She shot to her feet. "It was no fault of mine I was abducted by a highwayman. Certainly *Ralph* will not hold me accountable."

Her father breathed in great heaving gasps through his nostrils, reminding Sophia of an angry bull. "Look at you!" he raged. "You look like a slattern. Go to your room until I can figure out what to do with you."

At that moment, realization struck Sophia as surely as if her father had slapped her instead of her mother. If she had it to do over, she would go willingly with the highwayman. She'd do it in rebellion. Men controlled the world. They also controlled the fate of the women in their lives. It wasn't fair.

But what could she do about it? Hopeless, she started toward the door.

"Sophia," her father called. "Not a word of this. Do you hear me? Not a word. Not even to your maid. You had a riding accident. Do you understand?"

She nodded and twisted the door handle.

Climbing the stairs, she dismally thought about her plight. Her father was right. Ralph might still proceed with the wedding if word didn't get out that she'd been had—especially in the wake of his own cowardly behavior. But Sophia wondered if he would use it as an excuse to break their engagement. He'd never seemed all that attached to her and it wasn't as if her title was higher than his. Her dowry, on the other hand...

Would he give up the lands that came with marrying her to save his reputation?

Sophia wished he would. If the dowry were bestowed on her, she could live out her life as a spinster.

She might as well, she thought. Because she would forever compare any other man to Bad Jack. She sighed and in spite of her circumstances, a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. The only problem with that was that there was no comparison to Bad Jack.

* * * * *

"A letter for you, Lady Elinor."

Elinor looked up from petting her pug as the butler offered her a letter on a silver salver. Noting the sickeningly familiar wax sealing stamp, she inhaled and took the envelope. "Thank you, Porter."

He nodded and disappeared.

Elinor shooed the pug off her lap and thumbed open the seal. Her hands trembled as she withdrew the letter. Her pulse raced. She recognized the handwriting immediately. It was from Jack Badcock.

The bastard.

My darling,

I cannot wait to see you once more. These past two days keep playing and repeating in my thoughts. I must confess, I first thought this to be a simple tryst. But now I know what happened between us bespeaks so much more. I am on tenterhooks until I can hold you in my arms again.

Yours,

Bad Jack

Elinor read and reread the letter. Raging heat rose up her spine and flamed in her face. She leapt to her feet and began to pace. "The hateful bastard! Oh, the nerve of that wretch!" She wadded the letter and started to throw it.

Her thoughts jumbled in her head. She wanted to have her horse saddled so she could ride straight to Amberley and flay him with her riding crop. She wanted to hire a thug to pummel him to death while she watched every bone-crushing blow.

Her heart felt as if it would drum its way out of her chest. The scapegrace had found some inexperienced virgin a better lover than she, Elinor? Impossible! And oh, had he done all the things to his little ingénue that Elinor had wanted him to do to her? She squeezed her eyes shut trying to drive out the images of Jack Badcock cooing words of seduction to someone besides her.

She'd write him back. That was it! Elinor dashed to her secretary and yanked open the drawer. She'd tell that miscreant just what she thought of him. And she'd let him know what a stupid fool he was.

She snorted indelicately. Yes, she'd tell him that he'd bedded the wrong woman and was too big a dolt to know it.

She pulled a sheaf of foolscap out of the drawer and dipped her pen in a vial of ink as she sat.

My dear Bad Jack,

Her hand quaked violently as she tried to write. Her breaths came in short, shallow bursts and then all at once, Elinor thought better of writing a rash letter. If he didn't know that he'd taken the wrong woman, then she could devise a plan so diabolical that both the lovers would be ruined in society.

Elinor smiled and put her pen back to the paper. This time, she wrote in a calm, florid script.

Chapter Four

No one relaxed until Sophia got her monthly menses three weeks later. The situation with Ralph had been equally as tense.

While Sophia had not been allowed to leave her room, she'd peered out the window to see her father's lawyer coming and going daily. Sometimes twice in one day. She knew full well that the lawyer's visits concerned her marriage contract with Ralph.

Still no one had told her anything.

Bored to distraction, she had memorized every delicate curlicue in the pattern of her gold and blue wallpaper, every indentation in the gleaming crown molding, the dark shadows on the ceiling where the candle flames had burned too hot. She'd picked at a metallic silver thread in her favorite chair until she was certain it would have to be reupholstered.

Nerves in a state, she was unable to read, to write letters, to do anything but speculate what they might decide for her. She'd paced the floors until the heels of her shoes had marred the gleaming parquet. Infuriated that she had no say in her future, she'd beaten her fists on her dressing table until they were black and blue.

Sophia found the ignominy of it all outrageous. Why did English women accept their lot in life? Why couldn't they be more like the French women who entertained the educated thinkers of Europe in their grand salons?

But each day faded into darkness and still, nothing had been decided. Nothing had been solved and Sophia felt as if she were adrift on an ocean with no compass, no direction.

In the dark, she found solace in reliving every heavenly moment of her time with Bad Jack. She'd memorized every embrace, the feel of his mouth on hers, the feel of his tongue teasing between her lips to deepen the kiss. His arms had been warm and strong

and when he'd crushed her against him, every care she had in the world had withered away.

Her entire being had come alive under the pleasurable punishments he'd meted out to her and afterward, when he'd gathered her into his arms, soothed the sting and made love to her, she'd wanted to weep to release the overwhelming emotions churning inside her.

When she touched herself under the covers, it was Bad Jack's name she called in the darkness. It was his face she saw in her dreams.

The sound of a carriage approaching on the pea-gravel drive caught her attention. She darted to the window, hoping beyond hope it was the coach that had brought her home come to take her away again—to take her to Jack.

She'd fantasized that he was really a prince in disguise and would one day return to rescue her. But she knew better. That was only a child's dream—one she should quash before it threatened to destroy any future hope of happiness.

Her heart sank when she saw it was only her father's lawyer. She sighed and plopped onto a settee. Crossing her arms over her chest, she stared down at the robin's egg blue bows decorating her pumps.

When were they ever going to let her out of this...this prison?

Just as she stood to resume pacing, her bedroom door flew open and her mother ran in waving a paper excitedly. "The wedding is still on!" her mother cried.

Sophia knew she should be happy that Ralph hadn't cast her aside. She wasn't.

"And not only that," her mother blabbered on. "We've all been invited to a ball."

Sophia sulked. "I don't feel like going to a ball."

Her mother sighed in exasperation. "You must. It is your duty to appear on Lord Wisbech's arm and to dispel any rumors that may have circulated about you."

Sophia stared.

"And wear a dress that fits you well in the...the middle. We want no speculation that you might be with child."

Sophia gasped. "So, I'm to be paraded about as if nothing ever happened?" *Had it really happened or were those precious hours with the highwayman naught but a dream?*

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "Your wedding is one week away. Your father, God save him, has moved heaven and earth to secure the contracts with the Duke of Wisbech. You will not dishonor our family again."

"Is that all I'm good for? Connections? Contracts?" Sophia asked.

Her mother took a threatening step closer. "The duke could do better than you," she said vehemently.

A thousand retorts leapt to Sophia's mind, none of which she uttered.

"It would serve you well to learn discretion," her mother said. "And appreciation for your station in life."

Sophia crossed her arms over her chest. She did sound like a petulant child but the humiliation of being herded into marriage with a man she did not respect made her so.

"Set aside your callowness. The ball is tomorrow night."

* * * * *

"His Grace, the Duke of Wisbech and the honorable Sophia Astley!"

Sophia swallowed thickly as she forced a smile and accompanied her fiancé into the grand ballroom, where a long line of dancers moved through the intricate steps of a quadrille.

The room was large enough to support a small orchestra and the rich sound of strings and horns vibrated in Sophia's chest.

Ralph's country home was even larger and more well-appointed than this one but Sophia was equally impressed in the grandeur of this one. Pastel frescoes decorated the high, arched ceiling. Beeswax candles glimmered in gilt chandeliers. The ballroom floor was so highly polished it mirrored the dancers.

Smartly dressed servants in red coats and impeccably powdered wigs moved gracefully through the throng of guests.

"Who, again, is honoring us tonight?" Sophia whispered.

"Lord and Lady Huntingdon," Ralph said impatiently. "I've told you that twice already."

Sophia inhaled. Her mother had been right about speculation. As soon as they had been announced, all gazes riveted immediately to her tightly corseted waistline. She glanced at Ralph. His face grew redder by the second. He was embarrassed to be seen with her.

He'd been cool to her in the coach on the way here and had even gone so far as to tell her the only reason he was bringing her was to quiet the gossipers. Sophia wanted to shrink away from the prying eyes and from Ralph's clammy hand over hers.

"Why ever would Lord Huntingdon want to honor us?" Sophia inquired, wanting to do or say anything to dispel the awful tension.

"They came along after you were...after our recent...unpleasantness. I could hardly turn down their offer to restore your soiled reputation," he retorted under his breath.

Sophia eyed the striking woman standing next to a stodgy old man standing at the head of the receiving line. Rather than wearing the fashionable powdered wig, she wore her black hair coiffed high and adorned with a false white bird. The décolletage of her white dress plunged scandalously low. Her rouged lips stretched into a smug smile that sent a shiver racing up Sophia's spine.

Because Ralph's Aunt Millicent had tried to engage her in a frustrating and very one-sided conversation, she'd been unable to barely garner a glimpse of Lady Huntingdon when their carriage had been broken down on Hounslow Road.

And then comprehension struck. Jack had spoken to her as if knew her, as if their meeting had been arranged. He'd been expecting someone else. Sophia faltered. Dread welled. Lady Huntingdon?

There was most definitely a resemblance. An eerie resemblance. But...

Sophia hesitated.

"Come along," Ralph muttered through clenched teeth.

"Lord John Badcock, the Right Honorable Earl of Stafford!" the announcer's voice resounded over the din of conversation and music.

Sophia felt the overwhelming compulsion to look behind her. There was something oddly familiar about the name John Badcock. Perhaps it was her sudden trepidation. Perhaps she'd heard of him or met him at one of the parties last season.

"Welcome!" Lady Huntingdon greeted, stifling any opportunity Sophia would have to look at the guest following them into the ballroom.

She felt as if she were being inspected as Lady Huntingdon's gaze skimmed down and back up again. There was something in the woman's eyes Sophia couldn't identify. Something she didn't like.

"Your Grace," Lady Huntingdon said, deferring to Ralph. "It is so good to see you again. And this time under such better circumstances."

Ralph didn't miss the opportunity to elegantly change the subject. "What a lovely home you have, Lady Huntingdon."

"Thank you," she said.

Lady Huntingdon's eyes kept darting past them and it was all Sophia could do to keep from turning around.

"And this is your *darling* fiancée," Lady Huntingdon said, turning her attention back to Sophia. "Sophia, is it?"

Sophia dipped into a slight curtsy. Every nerve in her body grew taut with an expectation she couldn't figure out. "Yes," she said, noticing that her voice quavered. "Thank you, Lady Huntingdon."

Lady Huntingdon's lips twisted into a sneering smile. "Dear, have you met Lord Stafford?"

Donning her most gracious smile, Sophia turned, anxious to see who was behind her.

Her heart skipped a beat. Rendered immobile, she stared.

Bad Jack?

The highwayman?

Lord Stafford?

Sophia feared she might swoon.

Stafford's—*Jack's*—eyes widened but only for a split second before his gaze darted quickly to Lady Huntingdon and then back again.

"Lord Stafford," Lady Huntingdon greeted him gleefully. "It's so delightful to see you again. It's been nearly a year, hasn't it? Meet Lord Wisbech and *his* fiancée, Miss Sophia Astley."

Sophia shook. Heat crept into her cheeks and the back of her neck. She'd resigned herself to the fact that she would never see him again but, dear Lord, here he stood, looking, impossibly, more handsome than she remembered.

Every touch, every kiss, every taboo deed washed back over her in warm remembrance as she drank in the sight of his loosely queued dark hair, that sensual set of his mouth, his broad shoulders delineated by the perfect cut of his frock coat, and lower—oh, she dared not look in that direction lest she swoon.

Her heartbeat pounded with relentless force in her ears.

Lord Stafford nodded his head curtly. A mask descended over his features but Sophia did not miss the black look he gave their hostess.

Ralph made small talk while Sophia tried to keep from fainting. Her knees threatened to give way at any moment. The meal she'd eaten right before dressing churned in her stomach. Her mind ran rampant and she could not control the direction of her thoughts.

Memories of the two torrid days, naked in his arms, surged along with a riot of emotions that made her want to scream and run from the room.

Excitement reigned. He was here! He was real after all. And infinitely more gorgeous than she remembered. Taller even. His lips—she leaned forward ever so slightly as if magnetically drawn to him. To kiss him once more...

And then, bleakly, she thought, he'd never been a highwayman at all. He'd lied to her. He'd abducted her and had taken advantage of her.

Her fantasies crumbled into dust at her feet as common sense rallied.

He'd lied. He'd lied.

Sophia clenched her fists at her sides. Her gaze flicked to Ralph then back to Lady Huntingdon. Could everyone see how badly she trembled? Was her face flaming red?

Did *he* know what effect he had on her?

"Sophia, you're not looking well," Lady Huntingdon warbled.

"I-I..." she stammered.

"Perhaps you should get the lady some refreshment," Lord Stafford said, his gaze barely grazing hers.

That voice. She'd dreamed of it. She'd fantasized about hearing the black velvet sound of it whispering words of lust, of love in her ear. His eyes. Sophia blinked. She had to look away. She had to get out of this man's presence before she gave herself away.

"If you'll excuse us," Ralph said with a nod as he half-dragged Sophia across the ballroom toward the refreshment table.

Don't look back. Don't look back.

But she did.

It was a mistake.

Lord Stafford laughed and smiled at Lord and Lady Huntingdon as if he had not a care in creation. It was as if she, Sophia, had never intruded into his life, as if he didn't

recognize her—as if she'd never experienced the most intimate moments of her life naked in his arms.

"You've heard the rumors, as well," Ralph said.

Sophia gaped at Ralph. Did he know? Had he recognized Lord Stafford, too?

"Lord Stafford is the most reprehensible rake in all of England," Ralph said, sneering at the man's back.

"R-rake?"

"Surely you've heard," Ralph said. "Before returning from abroad last year, he cultivated the most vile reputation. No man's wife was safe in his presence and there was more than one maiden's character despoiled by association with him."

Sophia gulped. Bad Jack—Lord Stafford—had made her feel special. Adored. Her insides hollowed. He'd taken her virginity without any care of what she was risking. And that last time they'd been together...

The room started to spin around her. That last time, he'd filled her full of his seed and sent her packing like a used up scullery maid. At the time, she'd thought he was a highway robber. But now! Now that she knew he was a gentleman... She inhaled as deeply as she could in spite of her tightly laced corset.

She quaked with rage. Her hands ached to slap him.

The bastard!

Ralph pushed a glass of champagne into her hand. "Drink this. You're starting to look peaked."

Across the ballroom, Jack had a difficult time keeping his gaze away from the woman who'd just been introduced to him as *Sophia Astley*. What the devil had happened? And here, Elinor chattered on as if nothing in the world were amiss. He felt trapped in his own skin. He desperately needed to talk to Elinor—and to Sophia.

She'd been genuinely stunned when she'd seen him.

His instincts had been right. He had abducted the wrong woman. Somehow, Elinor knew and seemed to be having a grand time of watching everyone squirm. He wanted to throttle her.

He wanted to throttle himself. How could he have been so stupid? He asked himself the question over and over even as a thousand justifications rose in his mind. He'd only seen Elinor in a mask. And that had been nearly a year ago! *Miss Sophia Astley* was no innocent rose. She'd climbed onto his horse without protest. She'd also climbed onto a good many other things without protest.

Furtively, he cut his gaze at her. She stood with her back to him, downing a glass of champagne as if it were water.

The memory of her straddling his lap and that first time he sank his cock into her sweet, creamy cunny flooded his thoughts. His prick swelled and he inhaled trying to dispel the lurid reminiscence.

Had she been a virgin, then? He recalled her face when he'd first entered her. Biting her bottom lip, she'd flinched but only for an instant.

Still...

What a colossal ass you were! He rubbed his throbbing temples as more memories surfaced. She'd been hesitant to take him in her mouth initially but she'd quickly warmed to it. God, had she ever. New positions had caused her eyes to grow wide with wonder before swirling dark with desire.

And then there were the spankings and the nipple clamps...

He blew out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. *She must have been terrified out of her wits.*

And yet, she'd responded. Her body had moved with a life and will of its own. She'd initiated sex with him. He glanced down at his burgeoning erection and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

He had to get her away from that fop of a fiancé so he could explain. He turned to Elinor. "I will speak with you later," he said tersely. "Lord Huntingdon, always a pleasure."

Elinor's laugh rang in his ears as he walked away.

He wished there were something stronger here to drink than champagne. His gaze riveted once more to Sophia. Blast! Why hadn't she said something? Why hadn't she declared herself a virgin?

An ugly memory settled in his head.

"I...I am a maiden!"

"And I am the lecher who will deflower you."

He hadn't believed her. He'd thought she was playing a part. He inhaled sharply. What now?

He looked at the man by her side. Lord Wisbech. Surely, everyone—including Lord Wisbech—had known Sophia had been disgraced. Jack wanted to retch when he recalled kissing her on the road right in front of the man.

But then, Ralph hadn't exactly stood up for Sophia's honor. In fact, he'd traded her for a ring. At the time, Jack had thought the man was a relative, perhaps a lover. If he'd known Wisbech was her fiancé and that he was willing to trade her virtue for a damned bauble, Jack would have put a bullet through the bastard's cold heart.

Jack's gaze drifted down her lace trimmed sleeves to the hand holding her champagne glass. She wasn't wearing that damnable ring now. A murderous sense of possession welled in him that he quickly tamped down.

He reminded himself that he was engaged. So was she.

But another memory reared. *Sophia with her back against a tree, her skirts bunched up around her waist...*

His gaze dropped to her narrow waist. He'd been reckless. Still, the thought of siring a child in her caused conflicting emotions to rise in him. Emotions that made him

want to march through the merry line of dancers, take Sophia in his arms and claim her as his own. Then there was his cooler side. He tried to will that part of him to the forefront.

He'd lived a capricious life on the continent until his father's death last year. Now he was the earl and with the title came vast responsibility, not only to his family name but to the many people who lived and worked the lands he controlled.

His engagement to Hilda von Kesslering would increase those holdings both in England and abroad as well as the Stafford bloodline.

If he were wise, he would leave this place. He would never speak to Sophia Astley again or interfere in her life.

But right now, Jack was far from doing what was wise.

The music stopped and a new quadrille was announced. Wisbech tugged at Sophia's elbow. She shook her head no even as he wrenched the champagne glass from her hand and thrust it onto a nearby servant's tray.

This was Jack's chance. His gaze searched the sea of faces, stopping on a girl who smiled invitingly at him. *Ah, yes.* He started toward her. "Would you like to dance?" he asked gallantly.

She giggled as Jack took her hand and led her to the line. "Excuse me," he said, wedging into the dancers so that his turn to dance with Sophia would come up soon. He stared at her. Tonight, she was dressed in a gown of pale yellow and cream. Her black hair had been coiffed loosely with two ringlets descending enticingly into her décolletage. She was magnificently dressed but her beauty could not compare to the sensual vision in his memory of her naked with her hair tumbling in disarray about her shoulders.

Her gaze caught his and she looked away quickly. A blush pinkened her lightly powdered chest. Jack did not look away. He watched her as he executed the steps of the dance, as he moved down the line with his partner, as he turned and stepped back.

Not a moment too soon, his turn came to dance with her. Her eyes grew wide as they came together and when she put her hand in his, a little shock jolted through him.

“Meet me on the terrace after this dance,” he said intimately.

The dictates of the dance left her no time to refuse.

Still greeting guests in the receiving line, Elinor gloated. It wouldn’t be long before the two lovers would chance a meeting. She’d watched how Jack had chosen his partner and even more carefully had chosen his position in line so that he could speak to Sophia.

How terribly sad it would be, she thought with glee, if Jack were to lose his German countess and Sophia were to lose her duke.

The dance ended and Elinor’s lips twisted into a smug smile as she watched Sophia Astley hurry toward the terrace doors.

* * * * *

Sophia’s heart thudded so hard against her rib cage, it hurt. She tried to breathe in the cool evening air. She willed herself to be calm. It was impossible.

She looked around the wide terrace. A couple spoke in hushed voices on one side. Steps led down into an immaculately manicured garden lit with festive paper lanterns.

Where was he?

She clutched the balustrade, leaning against it for support.

A noise in the shrubbery caught her attention and she looked up to find Jack. He motioned for her to come down and join him. She glanced over her shoulder to make certain no one was watching before she rushed down the steps and into the garden.

She shouldn’t be meeting him. She shouldn’t ever speak to him again. Not after what he’d done to her. He darted into a copse of trees and she followed. No one would see them here.

She was breathless by the time she caught up with him. He stopped and turned, standing an arm's breadth away. The urge to rush into his embrace came over her in a deluge. She struggled to resist.

Panic quickly replaced her desire.

Gone was the look of lust from his eyes. Instead, he seemed stricken. Sad. Apologetic.

Sophia didn't know what she had hoped for. A stolen kiss? A vow of love? Even a promise to see her again...

She sensed she would get none of that.

"Sophia, is it?" he asked.

She nodded thinking it strange that after everything that had happened between them, this was the first time she'd ever heard him utter her name.

"Do you mind if I call you Sophia?" he asked.

Love. Darling. Sweetheart. That's what you called me before. She shook her head and lowered her lashes. How could she still be so shy after everything that had happened between them? "You may call me Sophia."

"First, I must apologize for what happened," he said. "I...I thought you were someone else."

"Lady Huntingdon?" Sophia asked, finding her voice. Why was her heart aching so badly? It wasn't as if their relationship had been anything more than physical.

In reality, it had been a *mistake*.

He nodded. "Yes. I made a grievous error."

Sophia didn't know what to say. She wanted to tell him that it didn't matter, that those two days had been the most wonderful moments of her life but she couldn't bring herself to say the words.

His forehead furrowed. "But...it appears as if...as if your marriage contract still stands."

"Yes."

He sighed. "Are you...have you got your..."

"I'm not with child," she said, casting her eyes down. She stared at the polished toes of his buckled shoes.

"Good," he said. "Then...I suppose there's no harm done."

Her gaze collided with his once again. No harm done? Outrage infused her. No harm, indeed! Her reputation was all but destroyed. Her father had been forced to up her dowry so much he faced financial ruin. Sophia pursed her lips. She would now be married off to a man whom she did not love while the ghost of a highwayman who never really existed at all loomed in her fantasies.

She shook. Her fists balled and before she could stop herself, she flew at him, flailing away. One hard punch landed against the stone wall of his chest before he caught her wrists. He twisted her in his arms, holding her effortlessly with one arm and clamping his hand over her mouth. She struggled, clawing at his sleeve. Every inch of his body countered hers.

"Hush," he whispered urgently in her ear. "Be still."

Gasping for breath, she stopped fighting him. "Release me or I'll scream."

"And further sully your reputation?" he asked, his mouth hot at her ear. "Being seen alone with me won't endear you to your precious duke, Sophia."

"You're a rake. Everyone says so."

At that, he laughed. His thumb brushed maddeningly over her nipple. Sophia tensed. Unwelcome desire unfurled. "Please let me go," she said, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

His breaths grew harsh. "No."

Sophia's eyes closed and she relaxed into his embrace. For a brief moment, the world ceased to exist. The music coming from inside the house faded. Night insects and

the toads in the nearby pond stopped their chirping. There was only Jack and his embrace and this frenetic need fueling her desire.

"Nothing can come of this," he said and Sophia understood that he was trying to convince himself more than her.

He turned her to face him but he did not let her step an inch away from him. His gaze seared her. Sophia knew his intentions and the memory of him making love to her rose and quickly became her undoing. His stare dropped to her lips and instinctively, she wet them with the tip of her tongue.

"Sophia," he growled huskily as his head descended.

Her heart soared as his mouth came down on hers, hard and hungry, inflamed by the long weeks of absence and yearning.

Sophia tried to remember that he was a rake, that he'd mistaken her for that hateful Lady Huntingdon, but when he nipped her bottom lip, coaxing her response, all lucid thought eroded.

Her fingers threaded into the hair at his nape. She arched into him as his hand splayed wide across her back. His other hand cupped her bottom and dragged her desperately closer. Sophia opened her mouth, admitting his tongue as his arousal hardened between their bodies.

Here. Now.

Mindless, she cleaved to him as his kisses drifted from her mouth to her cheeks, to her sensitive neck. What was it about this man that drove her beyond the edge of reason?

Her eyes snapped open when he suddenly seized her shoulders. He stared at her, hard. "Do you want to marry the duke?"

She gaped.

"Do you?" he asked, giving her a little shake.

No. I loathe him. "I must."

Something bleak shone in his eyes and he released her. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I've no right to speak to you that way."

"You've no right to do anything to me," she blurted.

"You're correct," he said and inclined his head respectfully before he brushed past her.

Sophia stood, stunned. When she finally managed to move, she brushed her fingers across her lips. She could still taste his mouth. The masculine scent of his skin and hair lingered in her senses.

She swallowed as realization sank to the toes of her jeweled pumps. She'd missed the opportunity to tell him she didn't want to marry Ralph and she may have missed the opportunity to spend the rest of her life with the only man who had ever made her feel alive.

"Wait," she called but he was already gone.

"Here she is, out here in the garden!" Lady Huntingdon's voice rang out.

Sophia quickly smoothed down her dress. She hoped the rouge on her lips wasn't smeared. There was no time to repair it, though, because Lady Huntingdon was headed straight for her with Ralph on her arm. Hatred for the woman welled.

She'd planned this party just to watch Jack's reaction when he realized he'd been with the wrong woman. Lady Huntingdon was downright diabolical.

"Are you unwell?" Ralph asked. The way his eyes lingered on her mouth made Sophia want to hide.

"I-I'm fine," she said. "I just needed some air."

Lady Huntingdon's gaze flitted around the garden and Sophia knew she was looking for Jack. "Whatever were you doing out here in the garden?"

Sophia cleared her throat. "Admiring it, Lady Huntingdon," she said sweetly. "Your gardener must be a treasure."

Lady Huntingdon flashed a knowing smile. "Indeed, he is."

"Shall we go back indoors?" Sophia asked, desperate to find a mirror.

Lady Huntingdon ignored her plea. "I thought I heard Lord Stafford's voice out here?"

"I last saw him dancing with one of your guests," Ralph said.

Sophia resisted the compulsion to smile. Ralph had rescued her but Sophia could only hope he'd done so unwittingly.

The hard look in his eyes, however, bespoke the contrary.

Lady Huntingdon snickered. "Lord Stafford's trysts will soon come to an end," she said pointedly. One delicate eyebrow arched wickedly. "You do know that he's engaged to the most delightful German countess, don't you?"

Chapter Five

Sophia sat across the coach from Ralph with her hands folded in her lap. They hadn't spoken since leaving Lord Huntingdon's country home.

Her parents had left the party even earlier but apparently, Ralph had found Lady Huntingdon most entertaining. Sophia had been obligated to sit and listen to the woman drone on and on about Jack and his engagement.

Sophia knew far more than she wanted to about the legendary beauty of Countess Hilda von Kesselring.

Ralph had leveled a blank stare on her for most of the night and Sophia wondered if he recognized Jack as the masked highwayman who'd humiliated him.

Rapt in worry, she'd never been more miserable in her life. The entire time she'd searched the crowd of guests for Jack but he'd obviously quit the party after their meeting in the garden. In one night, her entire world had been upended. She'd thought Jack was a highwayman.

Far from that, he was an earl—a devastatingly handsome earl who was clearly attracted to her. Her heart sank. He'd thought she was that hateful Lady Huntingdon. And yet, Sophia's insides tensed into a knot as she recalled the kiss they'd shared.

Just when she'd resigned herself to the fact she'd never see his face or feel his kiss again, there he'd been in all his tanned skin, blue-eyed glory. Even though she'd been confused and angry, she'd been powerless to resist him.

Ralph cleared his throat. "Why do you think Lady Huntingdon was so interested in the goings on between Stafford and the countess?"

Heat swarmed into Sophia's cheeks. Although she'd been thinking about Jack, hearing his name mentioned brought on a merciless wave of shame. "I can't imagine,"

Sophia said, letting her gaze drift out the window. The night was so black she couldn't see a thing.

Ralph shifted. He inhaled sharply. "I wonder if it had anything to do with why you were talking to him in the garden."

Sophia gasped. "I wasn't—"

In an instant, Ralph was across the carriage with his fingers curled around her throat. Startled, Sophia stared.

Ralph's eyes blazed in the dimly lit coach. "I saw you. *I saw you*. Do not lie to me."

Sophia gulped. "I...I went out to get some air. I may have spoken to him in passing. Really, darling, I...I don't know why you're so upset."

"Why I'm so upset?" he mocked her as he returned to his seat. He snorted. "You have thoroughly disgraced me. Everyone in England knows I'm marrying damaged goods. You're not fit to be my wife any longer. You're not fit to be any man's wife."

Sophia trembled with anger and fear. "Then, why...why are you marrying me?"

"Are you really that stupid?" he sneered.

Sophia remained silent.

Ralph laughed and the mirthless sound of it chilled Sophia to the core. "Your dowry," he said as if she were a fool.

His words stung but she refused to give him the satisfaction of watching a single tear fall. A confession of the whole incident with Jack threatened to gush forth but she kept her tongue in check. It wouldn't lessen her plight to sully Jack's engagement.

"After I told you what a lothario he was, you still rushed to steal a moment alone with him," Ralph chided. "Did a taste of forbidden fruit turn you into such a whore that you cannot see fit to wait until our wedding night?"

Sophia shrank with the realization that in one week she would be wedded to this cruel man. He would want to do the things with her that Jack had done.

Her stomach churned and she gagged.

"Is the thought of fucking me that reprehensible to you?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Fear not. Once I get an heir on you, I'll seek my pleasure elsewhere," he continued.

So will I, Sophia thought dismally as the coach rolled to a stop outside her home. Outside, the footman scurried to pull down the steps. Sophia started to move toward the door but Ralph seized her wrist and squeezed so hard she winced despite the satisfaction she knew her discomfort gave him. "If you ever embarrass me again, I will kill you," he seethed.

Sophia jerked her arm away from him and alighted from the coach. Shaking from head to toe, she hurried into the door a servant held open for her. She didn't look back as she heard Ralph's driver kiss to the horses. Her heart pounded as she gathered up her hem and raced up the stairs. *How dare he!*

She wanted to throw something. She wanted to cry. How could she ever go through with this marriage? She couldn't bear the thought of that man doing to her the same things Jack had done.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she stopped and leaned against the wall of the dimly lit hallway. No one was still up. The house was deathly quiet. But even in the stillness of the silence, Sophia felt hopelessly trapped.

Despite her circumstances, a shard of longing passed through her. What if Jack weren't engaged? What if he wanted to marry her?

She was merely being foolish. That would never happen. Why would a man give up an engagement to a countess for a minor viscount's daughter?

Forcing her feet to move again, she shuffled to her room. She dreaded ringing for her maid to come and undress her. The hour was so late and she hated to awaken Trixie, but Sophia saw no way to get out of her dress and corset without her.

She twisted the knob and stole inside intent on tugging the bell pull.

"Good evening," a voice called from the shadows.

Sophia gasped. Her hand flew to her heart. "Jack!" she cried. "What are —"

He was across the room in an instant. "Hush," he said as he crushed her in his arms.

His mouth sought hers, his lips prying, tasting, nipping. Sophia melted, clinging to his shoulders as he kissed her. Was this a dream? If it was, she never wanted to awaken. Her heart soared only to come crumbling back down around her. She pushed at the hard wall of his chest, finally breaking free.

"How did you get in here?" she asked breathlessly.

A rakish smile played on his lips. "Evidently your father doesn't pay his staff well enough. They are not immune to bribery."

"You're awful," she hissed, struggling to recall all the reasons she could not give in to her desires—to him. "Who do you think you are that you sneak into my very bedroom and...and —"

"Strip you naked and fuck you?"

At the seductive sound of his voice, her resolve wilted.

"That's it, love," Jack told her, stepping closer so that he could gaze into her eyes. His thumb grazed the line of her jaw. "Allow me this."

She swallowed. Her body screamed at her to allow him anything he wanted. She couldn't think. Everything that had happened tonight closed in on her. "W-why?" she managed to stammer.

"Why?" he asked, unfastening her gown. "Because I can't get you out of my thoughts. Because the idea of spending another minute without you naked and in my arms is unthinkable to me."

Her gown opened, revealing her corset and petticoat. She held her breath as the fine silk whispered down her shoulders. She made no move to stop him as he traced the lace-trimmed top edge of her corset with the tip of his finger. His eyes followed

wherever he touched her. "Because I can't let the sun rise before I taste your beautiful nipples or bury my cock in your luscious little —"

"Stop," she protested. She needed to distance herself. The scent of him, his heat, his voice all combined to intoxicate her. "You're engaged."

"As are you," he said, reaching behind her to deftly unlace her corset. The confining fabric discarded, he began untying the bow that held up her wide panniers.

Sophia didn't need to be reminded of her engagement. Not now. This was foolish and risky but she could no longer stop herself. Her panniers fell down her legs as Jack claimed her mouth again.

Furiously, they pulled laces and tugged and unbuttoned until finally, Jack lifted her out of the pile of her clothes and carried her to the bed. Her body quivered as his naked form moved over her.

"Just once," he said. "Just let me sate this desire and I'll pleasure you until the sun comes up, Sophia."

And then, before she could take her next breath, he was between her legs and inside her and Sophia thought she would die from the sheer heaven of completion. She buried her nails in his back and entwined her legs around his, rising beneath him to meet his deliberate thrusts. She couldn't believe she was doing this in her own house, in her own bed. Jack was here and she was once more in his arms.

She dragged her knees up. The bed groaned as Jack's groin smacked hers over and over until his face contorted and he withdrew, taking his cock in his hand. A ribbon of liquid unfurled, stretching all the way up to her shoulder as he finished with his hand.

Breathless, he collapsed beside her on the mattress. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he whispered.

She twisted onto her side and touched his face, raking her fingertips over the bristly stubble on his jaw. "Why?"

"I lose all control with you," he said languidly. "I promise I will make it up to you." He reached between her legs.

She caught his hand in hers "It's all right. There's time for that. Right now, I just want to feel your arms around me."

Without hesitation, he enveloped her in an embrace. Sophia let out the breath she'd been holding.

"I wish this moment would never end," she whispered against his skin.

He hugged her tighter in response.

"What's happening between us?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"I don't even know you and yet...I can't stop thinking about you, about being with you," she confessed.

"You do know that I would never have taken advantage of you had I not thought you were someone else," he said.

She stared. He'd told her as much. She wanted to believe him. "You thought I was Lady Huntingdon."

"Yes. For that I humbly apologize," he said and laughed. "I met her at a masque last year and...that was about the time my father died."

Sophia listened. She wished she'd known him then—before her engagement to Ralph. Before Jack's to Hilda von Kesselring.

He continued. "I was rather reckless before I inherited the earldom."

"You're still reckless," she said, tracing circles on his chest with her fingertip.

"Agreeing to dress up like a highwayman and abduct a woman out from under her husband's nose was to be my last hurrah before marriage," he said, chagrined. "You must have thought I was mad."

"I suppose I did," Sophia told him. "But I didn't care. I, too, wanted to be reckless. Just that once."

"Once, it appears, was not enough," he said and smiled.

Sophia's stomach turned a somersault. *A million times would never be enough for me.*

He sighed. "Now I find myself tediously managing my estate and dreading returning to the House of Lords."

"What about the countess? Are you looking forward to the marriage?" Sophia couldn't help but ask.

"I've never even seen her," he said. "In fact, I'm not certain she even speaks English. My German is *furchtbar* at best."

Sophia laughed. "It's not horrible."

He snorted. "I just can't imagine listening to someone speaking German in the throes of passion."

Sophia didn't want to imagine Jack in the throes of passion with anyone else. "Do you ever think it's terribly unfair that we, as aristocrats, are made to marry for position and title?"

"I've never questioned it," Jack said.

"I hadn't either—until that day on Hounslow Road."

He pinned her with a stare as if he were gauging her veracity.

"You asked me if I *wanted* to marry Ralph," she said. "You must have at least considered the possibility."

"I was wrong to ask you that."

"Why did you?" she prodded, dying to hear that he loved her, that he wanted her instead of his German countess.

"Sophia, you are engaged to a duke. Do you realize that you will be a duchess? That your children could one day be in line for the throne?" he asked.

"Is that the delicate way of saying I'm meant to be nothing more than a brood mare?" Renewed anger at the lack of control she had over her situation roiled.

"I haven't considered it that way," he said. "I suppose the trade is a life of comfort and leisure."

Sophia shot up on one elbow and looked down at him. "Comfort? I'd rather be a happy farmer's wife than be married to Lord Wisbech."

Jack grimaced. "Oh, I forgot about *him*. He appears as if he pays more attention to fashion than most women but as far as faces go, he doesn't look too ungainly."

"That's just it. He cares for no one but himself."

Jack threaded his fingers into the thick hair at her temple. "As you said earlier, it is your duty to marry him."

Sophia stared for a moment before she rested her head on his chest. "Why did you ask me if I wanted to marry him?" she inquired again, her voice muffled by his skin.

His chest rose and fell with a deep breath. "Ride me, love."

"Answer my question."

"I've already compromised you," he said.

"Why, Jack?" She was adamant.

He flipped her onto her back and branded her neck and collarbone with kisses that threatened her very sanity.

"Stop," she said unconvincingly. "Talk to me."

Her hands wound into his thick hair as he moved to her breasts. He laved one nipple while he tugged the other one with possessive intent. Sophia arched into his touch. "Please answer me," she mewled.

But his kisses were traveling farther down, across the sensitive plane of her stomach and lower to where he nudged his shoulders in between her thighs. Sophia's protests died on her lips as his head descended and his tongue found her treasures.

The pleasure was too much to bear. She drew her knees up, allowing him to push them wide open until the muscles strained and burned. No place was sacred. He licked

and suckled and prodded with his tongue until Sophia was a writhing mass willing to allow him anything he wanted.

Bliss crept closer, lurking just outside her reach. Moaning his name, she tugged his hair, holding his head captive where she wanted him the most. "Oh yes," she gasped. "There. Don't stop."

His mouth latched onto her clitoris. His tongue vibrated over the keen little bud, bringing her closer and closer. A finger pushed its way into her channel to arouse her even further. Finding some magical spot, he tickled and teased and Sophia exploded.

Glorious vibrations undulated, glimmering from her center to the tips of her toes and fingers like a storm-driven tide. Still floating, she became vaguely aware of his kisses moving back up her body until he was inside her again. Thrusting. Holding. Kissing.

Senseless, Sophia clung. Still whirling, she realized he'd pulled out of her and pushed her hand down to where she gripped him to milk every last drop of his essence onto her stomach.

Awareness didn't return until she felt his mouth at her ear. "I asked you if you wanted to marry him because I want you with me."

Immense joy flooded Sophia. Her eyes flew open and she pushed at his shoulders until he lifted himself far enough up to look into her eyes. "You what?"

"When I thought you were Lady Huntingdon, I resigned myself to a life of clandestine meetings but when I discovered you were not yet married, I realized that we could be together," he said.

Her heart soared. He wanted to *marry* her? "But how will I get out the contract with Lord Wisbech?" she asked.

"I will come forth. I will announce that I've compromised you."

"My parents would be mortified," she said, imagining their reactions.

"There's no other way," he said.

Sophia sighed. "My father worked so hard to get Ralph to uphold the contract after...after you abducted me. Papa even increased the dowry. Perhaps you could offer to accept a lesser dowry."

Jack suddenly appeared stricken. His smile faded. "Oh, Sophia...I've misled you."

A cold chill swept over her heart. She swallowed. "Misled me?"

"I...I wasn't speaking of marriage. I'm contracted to Countess Hilda," he said. "I was asking you to become my...my mistress."

Hot tears pricked her eyes. A hard lump welled in her throat. Jack wasn't asking her to marry him. Not at all. He was asking her to give up a lofty title to be his...whore.

She sucked in a faltering breath.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said and tried to kiss her.

Sophia twisted her head away from him. "Leave."

"Sophia?"

"Leave. Get out. It's almost dawn. Someone will see you here," she said, refusing to look at him.

For what seemed an eternity, he remained motionless but finally, the bed shook as he climbed out of it. Sophia turned onto her stomach and held her breath as he dressed and then disappeared through the servant entrance to her room.

Only when she was certain that he was gone, did she allow herself to give in to the tears. Although she'd been crushed by Jack's declaration that he wanted her only for a mistress, a part of her had wanted to accept even that little part of life with him. The more reasonable part of her knew she could never bear sharing him with another woman—especially one that he would call his wife.

Marrying Ralph and tolerating his cruelty would be less of a punishment.

* * * * *

Jack found Armageddon where he'd left him tethered to a tree. After untying the reins, he swung into the saddle and dug his heels in. The horse galloped into the darkness.

It seemed every time he left Sophia he felt more and more an ass. Why did she seem to bring out the worst in him?

The sun crept up over the horizon, back lighting the woods and casting them in an eerie glow to which Jack was all but oblivious. He'd had no right to make such a request of her. She was engaged to marry a duke. She wasn't some shepherd's daughter or even a lesser or impoverished aristocrat. She was a woman with a future—a future he'd nearly destroyed.

Did he not have any more self control than to slip into the bed chamber of an unmarried woman and ravage her?

She was right to order him out.

He'd tried to keep his mouth shut. He hadn't wanted to tell her but right there with his spent cock still pulsating between them, the words had bubbled up out of his throat before he'd been able to stop himself.

His mistress.

He wanted to kick himself. Hard.

He hardly knew the woman. It wasn't as if they were in love. Hell, he'd never been in love. But he knew well enough to realize that this was an infatuation. Perhaps after they were both married and had produced heirs, he would resume his seduction of Sophia.

But until then, he knew he had to do his damndest to stay away from her.

Since the first time he'd kissed her on Hounslow Road, he'd been addicted to her, poisoned by her. No woman had ever consumed his thoughts or dictated his fantasies the way Sophia reigned over them.

He'd wanted to turn her over his knee, to dominate her into submission until she agreed to willingly become his mistress. He wanted to tie her hands, to spank her. God, how she loved that! No other woman had ever responded to him the way she did. It was as if she were as obsessed with him as he was with her.

Even now, he wanted to spin his horse around and ride straight back but he knew he couldn't do that. As duty-bound as she was to marry Lord Wisbech, he was evenly obligated to Lady Hilda. Neither of them could shirk their commitments without severe repercussions.

As Armageddon trotted along, Jack hung his head. Sophia had thought he wanted to marry her. At the time, he hadn't known that was what caused the look of joy in her eyes but...it had been genuine joy. She'd seemed truly thrilled at the prospect of becoming his wife.

"Well," he mused aloud. "She's young. She has a lot to learn. Lust does not a happy marriage make."

But it never hurt.

Amidst all Jack's other confusion there was one thing he knew for certain. He must forget all about Sophia Astley, for in a week's time she would be married to another man.

Chapter Six

Shortly after noon, Sophia dragged herself downstairs. Her whole body ached and worse, her heart was shattered. In a matter of seconds, she'd gone from ecstatic to crushed.

Mistress.

She shuddered. She couldn't imagine herself closeted away in some London flat, shunned by society while she waited for Jack to leave his wife and heirs to devote time to her. "Unacceptable," she muttered aloud as she neared the breakfast room where her parents were still dining.

She stopped just outside the doorway when she heard her name mentioned.

"Lady Huntingdon seems to have taken quite a shine to Sophia," her mother said.

Her father let out a harrumph. "Someone needs to take that girl under their wing and teach her how to behave."

"I'm not certain Lady Huntingdon is the proper person for that but apparently she has invited our Sophia to go visiting with her tomorrow. Look at this invitation."

No! Sophia clenched her fists. She would not go anywhere with that awful woman. Lady Huntingdon only wanted to taunt and torment her about Jack. Sophia had no doubt of it.

She just would refuse the invitation. Summoning all her courage, she strode into the breakfast room. "Good morning, Mama. Papa."

"Sophia!" her mother greeted. "You've received the loveliest invitation from Lady Huntingdon."

"I have no time for invitations. My wedding is Saturday next," Sophia said blandly as a servant appeared to draw her chair out for her.

Her mother's eyebrows knitted up. "Peter?"

"You'll accept and you'll go," he barked.

Sophia seethed. "I found the woman detestable."

He leaned forward. "You will accept and you will go. And you will keep your opinions of others to yourself."

* * * * *

When Lady Huntingdon's carriage arrived, Sophia was surprised to discover two other ladies would be accompanying them. Sophia knew the Honorable Miss Pansy Pettigrew but did not know the other young woman, introduced to her as Miss Lydia Markham, whose father was a baronet.

"My dear Sophia," Lady Huntingdon greeted with false sincerity.

Sophia tried not to cringe. An elegantly attired footman stood by the coach to help her inside. Once she was in and seated, the carriage was underway.

"And to think," Lady Huntingdon said. "By this time next week, you'll be a duchess."

Sophia didn't need to be reminded. The wedding seemed as if it were hurtling toward her at breakneck speed and there was nothing she could do to prevent it from crashing headlong into her.

"I don't know how your father managed it," Lady Huntingdon said, still smiling prettily.

"Managed what?" Sophia asked and immediately regretted it when she realized she'd been baited.

Lady Huntingdon's gaze flitted to Misses Pettigrew and Markham and then she contrived a look of shock. She leaned slightly forward. "To get Lord Wisbech to agree to uphold the contract—especially after what happened to you. Poor dear."

Hot anger boiled in Sophia. She clenched her fists in the folds of her gown to keep from clawing the woman's eyes out. How could Jack ever have mistaken her for

this...this creature? The day had just begun and Sophia didn't know if she had the resolve to continue. She'd been taught to hold her tongue in such cases but one swipe of a cat's claw deserved another.

"It was simply awful," Sophia said, quickly catching the attention of the other ladies. "The things that highwayman forced me to do!"

Miss Markham's brown eyes widened. "W-what sort of things?"

"I swore I would never speak of it," Sophia said dramatically. "But you are my friends. I can tell you, can I not?"

"Of course you can," Miss Pettigrew blurted.

"Did he...did he...have you?" Miss Markham inquired boldly.

Sophia's eyes darted to Lady Huntingdon's. "Several times."

The other ladies gasped but Lady Huntingdon's eyes narrowed.

Miss Pettigrew placed her hand over Sophia's. "You must have been terrified."

Sophia nodded. "Even now, I fear he will steal into my room at night and have his way with me again."

Miss Markham fanned herself.

"Wisbech must be sorely disappointed that he will not be your first," Lady Huntingdon said, her voice low and menacing.

Sophia shrugged. "What's done is done," she said simply. "But I doubt anything in my life will ever match the excitement I experienced at the hands of the highwayman."

Miss Pettigrew sighed. "Oh, I wish he would abduct me."

"And me!" Miss Markham added.

The two girls giggled hysterically and fantasized aloud about highwaymen. Sophia looked at Lady Huntingdon and lifted her chin haughtily. She knew the woman had expected her to fold, to wither and whine, but Sophia had not and would not give her the satisfaction.

Lady Huntingdon, however, had a surprise for which Sophia was not prepared. "Speaking of seducers," Lady Huntingdon said sweetly. "I haven't told you on whom we plan on calling."

"Where are we going?"

"Do tell?"

Sophia's insides hollowed.

Lady Huntingdon's gaze bore into Sophia's. "To Amberley, John Badcock, Earl of Stafford's country house."

* * * * *

Sophia shook as the four of them alighted the carriage in front of Amberley. She sucked in a breath as she took in the grandeur of the manor. A new façade had been added to the front but it blended seamlessly with the rest of the architecture. Ivy meandered gracefully up the gray stone on one side. Roses of all colors grew in pots and along trellises. Two great wolfhounds raced around the corner of the manor and bounded toward them.

"Murphy! O'Malley! Heel!" a voice boomed.

Looking in the direction of the sound, Sophia shielded her eyes with her hand. Her stomach turned a somersault.

Jack sauntered toward them, pausing to give his obedient dogs a pat on the head before continuing. When he saw her, his eyes widened but quickly, the mask descended again. He would not divulge their secret to these other women.

God in heaven, why did he have to be so handsome? Clad in form-fitting cream riding breeches, black boots, a fine linen shirt and a pale green waistcoat, the sight of him took her breath.

As usual, strands of his loosely queued hair provocatively escaped a ribbon as black as his own locks.

His eyes grew dark as he neared Sophia. She sank into a curtsy.

"Lord Stafford, I've brought some of the local ladies to call on you," Lady Huntingdon trilled.

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "Lady Huntingdon," he greeted tersely and then his gaze found Sophia's.

She swallowed thickly.

"Sophia," he said with a respectful nod.

Her face blazed. "Lord Stafford," she said softly while Lady Huntingdon looked on with wicked satisfaction.

After introductions were made, Jack invited them inside.

The house was so large Sophia had assumed it would be cold and unwelcoming. She was wrong. The interior was as opulent as the exterior. Richly patterned wallpaper lined the walls. Hardly any space was devoid of an ancestor's portrait or countryside landscape.

A dark Tudor stairwell ascended to the upper floors.

The scent of leather and wood fires and Jack permeated the entire structure, making Sophia long to return to that cozy lodge nestled deep in the woods.

Her gaze scanned the thick wooden beams in the ceiling. So this was where he lived. And slept. And bathed. And breathed. Chills raced up and down her arms despite the late spring warmth.

Their little party followed Jack into the drawing room. The heels of Sophia's shoes sank into the thick carpet covering the floor. Jack's dogs trotted to a massive fireplace where they curled up on thick pillows Sophia assumed had been made just for their comfort. Books filled the bookcases that stretched to the high ceiling and what wall space wasn't consumed by bookshelves was taken up by more portraits and landscape paintings. The heavy drapes had been drawn so the midday sun could spill through the tall windows.

Once all the ladies had seated themselves upon the plush chairs and settees, a servant appeared with a tray of refreshments.

Jack sat casually in a chair that appeared to have been made for him. Long fingers curled around the armrests. His legs were crossed, drawing Sophia's attention to the thick muscles in his thighs—muscles she'd felt contract against her while he'd pumped into her.

She inhaled as her gaze drew to the bulge at the juncture of his thighs. What was this wild need to be joined with him? Why him? Was it because he'd had her? She forced her eyes to his face and their gazes met briefly before he nonchalantly looked away.

In public, he could be so cool and calm. So cavalier. She, however, felt as if every nerve in her body was about to snap.

She glanced at Lady Huntingdon, who watched them both like a cat toying with its prey.

As the others discussed the weather, parties and other mundane subjects, Sophia sat, her mind a thousand leagues away.

Her marriage to Ralph was in days. Days. And here she was, in the drawing room of the most enigmatic man she'd ever known—a man who dominated her thoughts and her fantasies—a man about whom she harbored a dangerous infatuation.

Certainly these feelings churning inside her weren't love. But as she looked around his home and drank in the comfortable surrounds, the well-thumbed books, the contented hounds and the easy, unpretentious grace, she knew she *could* love Jack.

He uncrossed his legs and readjusted himself in his chair. Without looking directly at him, Sophia's gaze held him whole. Every movement, every breath, every tap of his finger on the armrest caused desire to unfurl and pool in her loins.

"My lady," he said, his voice ripping her from her reverie.

"Yes?" she said.

"I had asked the ladies if they might care to take a turn on the grounds. It's such a lovely day and a shame to waste the sunlight. My gardener says he expects rain tomorrow," Jack said gently.

She nodded. "Yes, that would be nice."

He slapped his thighs as he stood. "Well, then. Shall we?" he asked, offering his arm to Miss Pettigrew.

Sophia knew circumstances forbade him to offer his arm to her but still she smarted that Miss Pettigrew could take slight advantage of a touch that would right now mean the world to Sophia.

As they strolled out the double doors leading into the garden, Lady Huntingdon sidled up next to her. Sophia shrank.

"How does it feel to be in his presence and know he has not a care for you?" Lady Huntingdon asked under her breath.

Mistress...

He'd asked her to be his mistress. Certainly, that had to indicate she meant something to him. She wanted to blurt it out to Lady Huntingdon but she daren't. The vile woman would twist even that small triumph into something sordid and ugly.

This time, Sophia heeded the voice in her head that told her to keep quiet. Anything she said to Lady Huntingdon now would result in her causing a scene.

"Lady Huntingdon," Jack called. "Come have a look my roses."

Lady Huntingdon gave Sophia a little smile of impious victory before she rushed to Jack's side.

At the risk of being thought of as pensive, Sophia took the opportunity to wander away from the others.

Jack's garden was lush and informal, like the rest of his home. Like him. Sophia could not help but imagine herself the mistress of Amberley. With Jack, it seemed as if

all the rigid mores of society faded into the distance, as if she could once again be that carefree sprite she'd been for two days in the arms of a highwayman.

Now that highwayman's face was just ghostly hidden smoke in her mind, replaced by an earl who'd scarcely acknowledged her.

This place, this life, this man would never be hers. Not even if she accepted the offer to become his mistress.

She'd wandered so far into the garden she could no longer see the others. There were only the chirping birds, the warm sunlight on her cheeks and bosom and the pebbled path under her feet. When she came upon a concrete bench, she arranged her skirts and sat.

She suddenly heard something stampeding through the thick bushes. Startled, she looked up to discover one of Jack's dogs loping toward her. At once, the animal was upon her, his massive gray head nuzzling her hands, begging to be petted.

Sophia scratched the dog's ears. "Which one are you?" she asked. "Murphy or O'Malley?"

"Murphy."

Sophia's gaze shot to Jack who stood admiring her from the path.

"That's enough, Murphy," he said, coming closer. The dog bounded away.

"I'm sorry," Sophia blurted. "I didn't know Lady Huntingdon —"

"Neither did I," he said, taking his seat next to her on the bench.

Instinctively, Sophia tensed. His heat radiated, warming her bare wrist. His proximity caused tingles to skitter up and down her spine.

"Your home is...lovely," Sophia said.

"You don't find it too shabby?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said. "I find it...comfortable."

A little smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "I didn't appreciate this place until I returned from Europe."

"Ah, yes, I recall you've been abroad."

"I toured the continent for several years...until my father fell ill." He sighed. "Shortly after I returned, he died."

"I'm sorry," Sophia said, not knowing what else to say to comfort him. Boldly, she placed her hand over his.

The muscles and bones in his hand tensed but only for a brief second before he twisted his hand and laced his fingers with hers.

Sophia's heart thundered.

"Have you reconsidered my offer?" he inquired.

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. I will take whatever little piece of yourself you can give to me. "No," she replied. "There are my parents to consider. My father has gone to tremendous lengths to see that I am well married."

Jack snorted. "What about Wisbech? Where does he fit into your considerations?"

"Wisbech is a brute."

"A brute to whom you are engaged to be married," Jack said. "Why did you choose him? Why did you agree?"

"Agree? I had no say in the matter. My father's lawyers and Wisbech's lawyers drew up the contract and I was *told* I would be marrying him," Sophia said.

"When is your wedding?" he asked.

"Saturday."

"And you are resolved to go through with it?" Jack asked.

"If I don't marry Ralph, no one else will offer for me. I'm spoiled goods. Remember?" What good was arguing with Jack when she wanted so desperately to feel his mouth on hers? Sophia's head ached.

His lips set in a grim line and a muscle in his jaw twitched. "If you accept my offer, I will provide for you and —"

She cut him off. "If I accept your offer, I will be shunned by my family, my friends. I will be a pariah in society, unfit to attend parties or balls."

"You could live in Paris. You could have a marvelous life there if you would but accept," he offered, caressing her palm with his thumb.

It all sounded so wonderful. So right. But then, she recalled that he would be married to another, beholden to another. It would never be enough for her. Even though mistresses and lovers abounded in the lives of married men and women, the thought of sharing him was unthinkable.

"Sophia, you do know that if circumstances were different, that if you and I were both free, I would —"

"Don't say it," she whispered urgently. She couldn't allow herself to hear the words, not when exhilaration and heartbreak vied for prominence within her soul.

He inhaled. "Don't let Lady Huntingdon taunt you. She'll tell you vile stories about me."

Sophia parted her lips to protest, to tell him that she would never believe anything bad about him but he continued before she had a chance to speak.

"Before I returned here, before my father died, I lived a reckless life," he confessed. "I drank heartily. I loved whomever I pleased without a care for the consequences. Lady Huntingdon was a woman I felt could take care of herself. If I hadn't been so self-absorbed I would have quickly seen that you weren't her."

"Are...are you saying what happened between us was a mistake?" Sophia asked, her voice tremulous.

He placed her hand back in her own lap. "I am trying, once again, to apologize."

"No, Jack," Sophia said. Panic surged. Something monumentally awful was about to happen. She knew it as surely as she knew her own name. And in a futile attempt to stop it, to stop him from saying the words, she said, "I love you."

He stared.

Sophia's breasts heaved with quick breaths. "I do. I love you."

His eyes squeezed shut for a moment and then he opened them. "Sophia, it was a mistake. You were a mistake. Had I known, I would never have taken you that day."

Hot tears stung her eyes. "Jack—"

He gained his feet. "It was a mistake." And with that, he turned and walked away, disappearing into the thick garden.

Sophia swatted at the tears that spilled from her eyes. What had she done? What had she admitted? Oh, dear God, why had she made such a grievous error? What could she have possibly gained from it?

Looking up at the sky, she blinked, trying to dry her tears. It would not do for Lady Huntingdon or the other ladies to see she'd been crying.

Sophia breathed as deeply as she could given her tight stays. Jack had made his intentions abundantly clear. She'd acted foolishly. She'd allowed herself to fall for a man she could never have—a man who would take her as his mistress but not his wife.

A man who'd called her a *mistake*.

"Sophia!" she heard Miss Markham's voice. "Sophia, we are preparing to leave!"

Sophia stood and smoothed down her skirts. Inhaling, she tamped down the heartache and tears. It would do her good to get away from this place and from Jack Badcock—forever.

* * * * *

From his study window, Jack watched Lady Huntingdon's coach pull away. When he'd seen Sophia stepping out of it just two hours earlier, his spirits had soared. Although he'd known at once Lady Huntingdon had brought her here to torment her, he'd hoped—just for a moment—that Sophia had come to accept his offer.

Why was she so stubborn? Why couldn't see what sort of life he could offer her? Once he'd produced heirs with Lady Hilda, he would be free to do as he pleased with

whomever he pleased. There was no shame in having a lover if one kept it discreetly behind closed doors.

I love you.

Love.

What a foolish notion! How could she possibly think she loved him? What had given her that idea?

Only a silly female would confuse passion with something else. He shook his head as darker thoughts intruded.

That's why he'd had to say such hateful things to her. Why he'd been forced to tell her that what happened between them had been a mistake.

The look in her eyes had nearly crushed him and if she'd shed the tear that lingered in her lash line, he would have gathered her into his arms and made love to her right there in the day lit garden.

Life was about responsibility. His fist throbbed and he realized he'd been clenching it. Flexing his fingers, he shook his head. Responsibility. His father's death had taught him that.

Jack watched the coach disappear around a bend of tall shrubs. Before his father's death, he'd lived a carefree existence. Feeling blissfully immortal, he hadn't considered his future. All that had ended when he became the earl, when he realized what a vast responsibility he had to the title he'd inherited.

It was then he'd put aside his philandering ways. He'd known encouraging Lady Huntingdon had been a mistake but it had been a year and he'd been lonely for female companionship. He'd never dreamed he would make a far greater mistake in riding off with the wrong woman.

He rolled his eyes when he thought of how foolishly he'd acted.

Now he'd ruined her and, worse, he couldn't get her out of his mind—or out of his dreams.

She'd called Wisbech a brute. Jack found it difficult to imagine that foppish dandy acting brutish at all but he recalled how Sophia acted in Wisbech's presence. She shrank from him. When she'd thought he, Jack, was a highwayman, she'd climbed onto his horse and had left with him with only one look back at Wisbech. He'd traded her for a ring.

A ring.

What sort of gentleman traded his fiancée for a jewel, heirloom or not?

And then her thoughts turned back to Jack.

Love.

Sophia didn't love him. If she did, she wouldn't be marrying a brute who'd traded her for a bauble. She'd consent to become his mistress and live out a life of pleasure and ease in Paris, far from Wisbech and society.

Jack drew in a sharp breath and even as he called himself mad, he yanked the bell pull to call for a servant to saddle Armageddon.

* * * * *

It was all Sophia could do to keep from falling apart as Lady Huntingdon dragged them mercilessly from manor to manor.

Sophia had learned to remain in the company of Miss Markham, who seemed to genuinely like her companionship. As long as she was with the other ladies, Lady Huntingdon's thinly veiled but sharply aimed barbs lost most of their sting.

Besides, Sophia didn't need Lady Huntingdon's reminders that she would never be anything more than a common doxy to Jack. It was good that Jack had told her she'd been a mistake. It was good that he'd been so cruel. Now, she could walk down the aisle and marry Lord Wisbech without her...love—mortified, she remembered how she'd expressed her love for Jack. She cringed every time she remembered it but now, she could marry without some silly notion of love getting in her way.

By the time the carriage pulled up in front of her house, Sophia was exhausted.

She bade her farewell to Lady Huntingdon and to Miss Markham but Miss Pettigrew snored soundly from her position slumped in the corner of the coach.

"The next time I see you, you'll be Lady Sophia, Duchess of Wisbech," Lady Huntingdon said snidely.

Sophia ignored the remark. She took the footman's hand and descended the coach steps.

Before the footman could close the coach door, Lady Huntingdon leaned forward and smiled without mirth. "That is, unless something unfortunate happens."

* * * * *

"He's impoverished!" Jack's friend, Hugh Darlington, exclaimed as he sank into a leather chair at their gentleman's club.

Jack sipped his brandy. That would explain why he was so desperate to marry Sophia despite the fact that she'd been spoiled.

"He's the scorn of society," Hugh said, rising to refill his snifter. "Everyone knows some highway robber had his fiancée."

"Yes," Jack said. It panged him with guilt to no end. "I heard about that. Most unfortunate. But if he is so impoverished, then what of his servants?"

Hugh scoffed. "He can't keep them in his employ."

"Why not? No funds?"

Hugh shook his head. "He's known to have a foul temper. Rumor was that when his father was alive, Ralph beat a servant girl so badly she died later."

Jack stared at the paneled walls without really taking in the richly waxed wood and the plush crimson carpeting of the club. "Why was he not brought up on charges?"

"His connections to the Duke of Gloucester, as far as I know."

"*Wisbech is a brute,*" Sophia's voice echoed in Jack's head. Had Wisbech already shown her his wrath?

Jack heaved a sigh and swirled his brandy around in the snifter watching the legs of the amber liquid cling to the crystal before cascading downward. This revelation complicated matters. Greatly. He'd decided to end it with the girl, to let her have her grand title and her place in the *haut ton*.

But now?

She'd wanted to marry him and instinct told him she was holding out for just that. But there was still no way he could marry her. For God's sake, her own wedding was tomorrow. Sophia had to be realistic about matters.

Jack closed his eyes briefly. There was simply nothing he could do. Nothing he *should* do. His first assessment of the situation was correct. What had happened between them was a mistake.

A mistake that he would do well to put behind him.

Chapter Seven

Sophia's wedding gown was the most feminine, delicate thing she'd ever worn in her life. Made of shimmering gold and silver silk, the stomacher was embroidered with a floral pattern. An angelic cloud of fichu lined the bodice and instead of the fashionable three-quarter-length sleeves, the sleeves of this dress were short, descending just below the shoulders. Scalloped laced made the skirt appear to fall in elaborate tiers. Each scallop boasted its own embroidered design.

The panniers were nearly as wide as her arms reach and could not be fastened into place until she'd arrived at the church.

Her mother had insisted on powdering Sophia's highly coiffed hair until it was silvery white and decorating it with several garish ostrich plumes.

Gazing at herself in the looking glass, Sophia could see how Jack had mistaken her for Lady Huntingdon. She didn't look like herself. She looked like one of the grand ladies of the *haut ton*...or a ghost, she thought miserably.

She *was* a ghost. In just a matter of hours, she would be wed to Lord Wisbech and she felt as if she were marching to the scaffold instead of the altar. She gagged and swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. "I feel as if I'm going to be sick," she complained.

"Don't you dare vomit!" her mother railed. "Trixie has done too fine a job on your face for you to go and mess it up."

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other while the servants fussed around her, powdering and adding touches to her makeup and hair. Already she was weary of this and the day had only just begun.

Thunder boomed and rain pelted the window panes, matching Sophia's black mood. Lightning spiraled and an ear-shattering strike followed. Startled, several of the servants jumped.

"I knew we should have stayed with Wisbech last night. The coaches will never get through this mud," her mother complained.

Sophia could only hope the roads were impassable.

Her mother darted to the window. "The carriage has arrived. Come, come. We don't want to be late."

It took three servants to help Sophia lift the heavy hem of her skirts so she could descend the stairs. One footman wielded an umbrella over her head while another footman held her hand as she bent so as not to undo her piled-high hair and plumage as she entered the carriage.

She did not harbor the excitement she felt most brides held on their wedding days. Instead, she dreaded this day as she'd dreaded no other in her life because she knew what would follow when the sun went down and she was alone with her husband.

Her mother and father elected to ride in the coach behind and another carriage carried the trunks and servants who would attend them during the day. And as the procession pulled away, Sophia watched her house and the grounds so familiar to her disappear.

Tears stung her eyes, threatening to fall. She blinked. It wouldn't do to ruin all the hard work Trixie had done to powder her face white. She jostled as the coach rolled over a rough patch of road. It wasn't much farther to the church and already, Sophia's heart twisted with trepidation.

Rain drove against the coach and outside the thunder and lightning continued to rage.

"Stand and deliver!" a voice rang out over the din of the storm.

Sophia's breath froze in her lungs as the coach rumbled to a halt. Peering through the rain, she saw Jack, clad once more in his mask and cocked hat. What the devil was he doing?

"Step out of the coach, m'lady," he said from atop his stallion.

At once, Sophia flung open the door but her father had already alighted and started toward Jack. "Are you the miscreant who abducted my daughter? I'll see you hang!"

"Help me down!" Sophia whispered urgently to the coachman. He climbed off his seat, leaping down into the mud to pull down the stairs for her.

"My business is with the lady," Jack said, fingering the pistol jammed in his belt.

"Don't get out of that coach, Sophia!" he father ordered. "You'll muddy your dress and shoes. Sophia!"

But already, she had stepped down, heedless of the rain and mire.

Jack walked his horse closer. "I will make my offer once more," he said and held his gloved hand down to her.

Sophia stared.

This was the single most romantic thing that had ever happened to her. She could go with Jack right now. She could take him up on his offer to install her in a Paris apartment. She could run away from all this. From Lord Wisbech. From all of it.

She could be with Jack.

Her heart pounded so hard it hurt. Did she love that much? Did she love him enough to have only part of him?

She looked at her father. His face flamed red with rage. Her mother gawked from inside the second coach.

"Will you bind yourself to a man you think a brute or come with me?" Jack asked.

Sophia's gaze connected with his again. Despite all the arguments she'd used to forswear her feelings for him, she could not deny that she loved him.

And yet, he'd made no promises to her other than that he would care for her. He'd not avowed his love. This was too much to consider. She felt as if she would burst with indecision.

Even if she didn't accept Jack's offer, if she rejected Wisbech, then she knew no man would ask for her hand. Not after what she'd done with Jack.

"What do you want? Money? Jewels?" Sophia's father's voice dragged her back to the present.

"I want Sophia," Jack said.

"You've already spoiled her and cost me a great deal more than she's worth!" her father ranted.

It was then that Sophia realized she'd made her decision the moment she'd stepped out of the coach. She put her hand in Jack's and without a word he hoisted her into the saddle. Armageddon spun around. Sophia glanced back as the horse raced away, snickering when mud spattered Peter Astley's face.

* * * * *

Jack didn't let up on Armageddon until they were back at the hunting lodge. He leapt down from the saddle and dragged Sophia with him.

Her heart took wing as his mouth descended on hers. Clinging desperately, she returned his kiss with a passion that rivaled his own. "What am I doing? I'm such a fool," she gasped in between kisses.

Rain washed down her face and dripped from his cocked hat but she didn't care.

He put a gloved finger to her lips. "Hush, do not question your decision. Not now. Not today." His mouth found hers again, his tongue tenderly tasting before spearing between her lips as if he could lay claim to her by the act of kissing her.

Sophia's knees went weak as Jack drove all thought from her mind. Desire welled and pooled in her abdomen and her body took on a will of its own.

"I want you out of this damn gown," he said. "I want your hair down and loose."

"I can't think about that right now," she said, frenzied.

Erotic need inflamed her and she knew she would not be satisfied until she'd had him inside her. "Please," she implored, groping to find his manhood erect and ready for her. Lust consumed her.

His hand caught hers and she gathered up her drenched skirts as he led her into the lodge.

They made it no farther than the table. "Bend over," Jack ordered but he was already pushing her face down.

She gripped the wood as he yanked up her skirts and roughly pushed them out of his way. His foot kicked hers out so that she spread her legs. Fingers plundered her folds.

"God, you're wet," he growled and then she felt the head of his cock searching and then breaching.

Her head fell on her hands as all sensation spiraled to her center. The more he filled her, the more she wanted and she heard her own voice encouraging him in ribald language. "Fuck me, Jack! Yes. Harder. Oh, dear God! Yes!"

His groin slammed hers in punishing, rhythmic repetition. Sophia's low-heeled shoes lifted off the floor with each thrust. The heavy table legs grated the floor as it shifted from their exertion.

She let out an animalistic groan, wishing she could reach between her legs to massage her throbbing bud. Jack's fingers burrowed into her soft flesh, squeezing until she thought she could bear it no more. With each stab, his breath left his lungs in an uneven rush. The feel and sound of it surrounded her, transported her.

Ecstasy crept ever closer, skirting just out of her reach. So close. Oh, so close. *Jack...*

And then, before she could finish, he dragged his cock out of her and slid it between her ass cheeks. Hot seed spurted onto the small of the back as he rocked through her cleft.

"Damn you, damn you!" she cried, clawing at the table top.

A hand pressed her back down on the table as he stepped aside. Sophia struggled until a smart slap landed on her backside. "Oh!" she cried as heat shined through her flesh.

"I love you like this," he growled. "Bent over with your arse in the air."

His tone both frightened and excited her. She quivered.

"You're mine now," he said. "And I will do things to you that will make you beg me for mercy."

Sophia's thighs trembled. Wetness from her juicy channel coursed down one of her legs. Fingers dipped into that wet center and slathered it over her pearl and back to her rosette. She gulped. Intuitively, she knew he intended to violate her there. Her sheath clenched at the thought.

"You like it when I play with your ass, don't you?" he asked.

She whimpered.

Her eyes closed. She felt drunk with the passion he inflicted on her. "Just, please, finish me."

She wanted out of this wet gown, these soggy shoes. One limp ostrich plume stretched like a dead animal across the table. "Please," she said as he continued to circle her anus with his cream-coated fingers.

She couldn't accept him there. It wasn't possible. She couldn't bear it. But even as she dreaded it, she lifted her rump and spread her feet farther. In spite of herself, she knew that part of her was softening to his touch, awaiting his intrusion.

But, never, could she admit to herself or to him that she wanted it.

One fingertip wriggled inside the rim.

"Oh!" she yelped, tensing.

"Relax, love," he said, caressing her bottom with one hand while his finger continued to tease and prod.

"I can't," she said, clenching her fists.

"You will," he assured her.

Her pulse skittered as he pushed harder. "No, no!" she cried. Frustration mounted. She'd been on the edge and he'd stopped. She ground her teeth and groaned but he just laughed. She'd never known such sweet torture.

"Tell me you want my finger inside you," he said. "Tell me you want me to stretch you and ready you to take my prick up your arse."

Her heart seemed to beat in her throat. Why didn't he just bind her wrists and take from her what he wanted? "Please..." she begged.

"Please, what?"

"Put your finger inside me," she said. Her fists unfurled and her fingers splayed on the table. She braced for pain but instead, when his finger slipped into her most private recess, surprise flooded her at how good it felt.

"That's it," he cooed. "So tight. So slick."

His fist pushed up tight against her bottom. *He's all the way inside!* Sophia shuddered.

"I have a toy made just for this particular orifice," he told her. "It's made for you to wear."

The thought of him inserting an object *for her to wear* there caused her channel to contract over and over. She tried to desperately to swallow.

He stepped between her legs again, this time reaching with his other hand, groping until he found her hungry pearl. Jolts of pleasure raced through her. *Yes. Yes. Don't stop.*

He rubbed and kneaded the swollen spot while his other finger began to slip in and out of her rosette. This was too much. She couldn't tolerate it. With an animalistic moan, she began to ride his hand, rocking, moving any which way she could to assuage this burning need.

Her body took over her pleasure and she stopped trying to bring herself to orgasm. Instead, she surrendered to his invasion, feeling herself soften and open, and then bliss crowned. Intense spasms racked every part of her he touched. Trembling, she accepted it, let it inundate her, let it carry her soaring to that place she only went when she was with Jack.

At some point, she realized he'd released her and that she still stood, bent over the table with her multitude of skirts and petticoats ruched up. She inhaled, the mere act of breathing causing her to throb anew.

His hands reached under her torso and he gently lifted her to her feet. Knees weak, she faltered and would have fallen were it not for his strong arms about her.

A smile stretched his lips. "We should get you out of these clothes."

Still dazed, she nodded and leaned back against the table as he unhooked and untied and unfastened. Layer by frilly layer, her clothes fell away until she stood, wearing only her petticoat. Slippers and stockings followed. The grin never left his face—in fact, it widened—as he gingerly withdrew the wilted ostrich plume from her hair. "What do you find so amusing?" she asked.

"You're a mess. Your powder is streaked. And...what's this?" he asked, peeling a silk beauty mark from her face.

"Mama insisted."

Jack flicked it off his finger. "I insist that you look natural." His gaze appraised her. "Come, would you like to bathe?"

Sophia scanned the room. "There's no bathing tub here."

"Ah, but there is the most delightful little stream just behind the lodge," he said, weaving his fingers with hers. He tugged and she knew any protest would be futile. Besides, it would be freeing to wash the remnants of pomade and powder from her hair, to feel her locks hanging loose.

Barefooted, she followed Jack outside. The rain had let up so that now, only a dwindling drizzle remained. Droplets of water dripped from tender spring leaves. Sophia marveled at the feel of the mushy woodland carpet under her feet. She'd never been barefoot outdoors before. She had the feeling that with Jack, she'd be doing many things she'd never done before.

When they arrived at the bank of the creek—Jack had been understating when he'd referred to this as a stream—he began removing his clothes and throwing them over the branch of a tree.

Sophia watched in awe. Would she ever become accustomed to the sight of his naked form? After he pulled off his frockcoat, waistcoat and shirt, her hands ached to move over his broad shoulders and down his muscled arms. Even the removal of his boots seemed deliberate. Teasing. Her mouth went dry as he pushed down his breeches, revealing his manhood. His expended cock jiggled with his movements against its nest of black curls. Lower, his sac hung high and tight to his body, tempting Sophia to explore that part of him as well.

With him now, she held no shame in displaying her own nudity or looking upon his. Instead, she admired him as God's ultimate perfection on earth.

Chuckling, he took himself in his hand and playfully shook his cock at her. Sophia giggled and as Jack stepped into the creek, she wrenched off her petticoat.

He offered his hand. "Much better," he said as she stepped into the cold, briskly moving water.

She shivered. "It's cold."

"It's a bit deeper in the center," he said, leading her in that direction.

Sophia delighted in the feel of smooth pebbles and soggy silt between her toes. "I can't swim," she confessed.

"It's not that deep," he assured her. He was right. In the very center of the creek, the water was only hip deep on him and waist deep on her.

He drew her against him and gave her a quick kiss before he dipped her backward into the water. Sophia clung to his muscled arms as he laid her head in the water so the swiftly moving water could wash away the concoction of powder and sticky pomade. Her feet lifted and she wrapped her calves around Jack's sturdy thighs. His hands moved under her back and he held her so that she floated while she washed her hair clean.

When she was through, he helped her stand. Her body countered his in the water and she luxuriated in the feel of his wet skin and the current rushing between and around them. His eyes moved over her face. "I'm pleased you chose this. That you chose me."

His words slammed her with the thought that right now, she would be marrying Lord Wisbech if she'd stayed in the coach. Any qualm she had that she'd made the wrong decision evaporated in Jack's embrace. Yet even in her happiness, she could not forget the fact that he was still obligated to another.

What did it matter? Few people—especially aristocrats—married for love. She was foolish to think a marriage license would change anything between them.

"You're trembling," he said. "I'll build a fire and you can rest a bit."

* * * * *

Ralph gaped incredulously at Sophia's parents. Lord Bainbridge's buckled shoes were muddied. His hair escaped his queue and hung in damp strands. Lady Bainbridge's eyes shone and tear tracks marred her face powder. Why were they so late? And where was Sophia?

His gaze flicked past them and his stomach tightened with the knowledge something was terribly wrong.

The church overflowed with impatient guests who murmured amongst themselves and Ralph knew the whispers were about him. About Sophia. He inhaled a shaky breath.

Lord Bainbridge cleared his throat and leaned in so close Ralph could smell the sweet powder in the man's hair. "My daughter has been abducted – again."

Ralph blinked. "She was *what*?" he raged. His gaze flew from Sophia's father to her worried mother and then back again.

All the guests were assembled. The vicar was ready. This was impossible.

Lord Bainbridge rubbed his jaw. "She was abducted by the same highwayman," he said, his voice low and hot.

Ralph shook with anger. His temper flared and he struck his fist against the stone wall of the church.

"This is a house of God," Lord Bainbridge said under his breath with a glance at the wedding guests waiting for the bride to arrive. "I'm positive we can set the authorities on this outlaw and find her."

Ralph fumed. He'd counted on her dowry to get him out of his financial straits. Heat rose from his neck to his face. He felt as if he would burst. "I don't want to find *her*," he seethed. "I want what's due me."

Lord Bainbridge glared. "This was no fault of mine. If anyone is to blame, you are for allowing the scoundrel to take her in the first place."

"Don't put this off on me, Bainbridge," Ralph hissed. "She went willingly with that brigand."

A muscle in one of Bainbridge's eyes twitched and Ralph knew it was the truth. He also knew he was indeed to blame. If only he'd insisted the highwayman take the ring instead of Sophia. He wanted to stamp his foot but forced himself to resist the impulse.

Instead, he heaved a great breath, turned on his heel and stalked from the church amid the gawking and guffawing guests. "What kind of thief takes a woman over a valuable jewel?" he asked himself aloud once he was outside. His heart pounded. Something was vastly amiss. What would a common outlaw want with Sophia? Ralph simply could not figure out this intolerable situation.

Ralph scoffed at the sight of the carriage decorated with flowers waited to spirit the newlyweds away. Sophia had humiliated him in front of every member of the *haut ton*. How dare she!

When he found her, he would wrap his fingers around her slender neck and squeeze until she was dead. Even now, his fingers ached to do the deed. He clenched his fists. The bitch!

But more pressing than this ignominy was his financial state. What would he do for money? Even if she returned, he could never marry now, not with such a dark cloud of scandal over her head. He would be disgraced.

Disgraced!

"Your grace," a voice called.

With a sharp snort, he whirled to discover Lady Huntingdon. Something mischievous flashed in her eyes as she lifted her rose colored skirts to chase after him. What the devil did she have to be smug about?

Once she caught up to him, she stopped and placed a bejeweled hand over her heaving bosom as she caught her breath. "I know where Sophia is," she said, winded. "And with whom."

Chapter Eight

Sophia lay on her stomach as Jack traced lazy circles on her back with the tip of his finger. Bathed and at least temporarily sexually sated, she floated. She'd never been so entirely relaxed in her life. Here, she had no worries. No cares.

All that mattered to her was pleasing Jack. Society's rules did not apply here.

Twisting onto her side, she regarded her lover. "Am I a wanton?" she asked.

His black eyebrows knitted together. "A wanton? Why ever would you ask such a thing?"

She swallowed. "Because I...because I'm *here*."

"That doesn't make you a wanton, love," he said, brushing a kiss against her forehead. He toyed with a damp strand of her hair.

She sighed. "But I allowed you to...to...We've done things that are...sinful," she said, gazing at him from under modestly lowered lashes.

At that, a smile played on his sensuous lips. "And will do them again and again and again."

Suddenly, coy, she batted her eyes playfully. "It's not just that," she told him. "It's that I...I want you to do those things to me."

"Be very specific," he teased, curling a lock of her hair around his index finger. "Tell me in vivid detail what you would like me to do. I am your most humble and willing servant, my lady."

She giggled and slapped his shoulder lightly. "I'm being serious."

He wagged his eyebrows at her. "So am I."

She groaned. "Seriously, Jack. The last time you brought me here, you thought I was someone else. Someone who *desired* to be...spanked and...and punished."

Chagrined, he grimaced. "I apologize. I will never spank your delectable little arse again."

"No!" she said quickly. "What I'm trying to tell you is that...what I'm *asking* is am I a wanton because I *enjoyed* those things?"

He laughed. "Of course not, love. Many women enjoy tantalizing torments."

"But why? Why would I find being...spanked by you...pleasurable?" she asked.

"I don't know but I would venture to guess that perhaps you enjoy having your control taken from you. Without the ability to say no, you have permission to indulge in your most secret desires," he said.

He made sense. She'd been taught all her life that women were to merely endure copulating for the sake of siring offspring. But Jack had only spilled his seed in her the one time.

It was as if he weren't interested in creating sons. Was it because she was not and would never be his wife? And although she'd already avowed her love for him—and knew without a doubt that she'd love this man until her death—he'd never divulged any feelings for her.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You seem pensive. You don't regret your decision, I hope. Because I fear it's too late to turn back now."

"No," she said. "I will never regret it. I hope you don't, either."

"Darling, no," he said, drawing her closer. "No. Never."

She averted her gaze. "But you...I know how children are created and you...you don't...you haven't..."

"Sophia," he said, surprised. "Do you want my children?"

"I—"

"I was protecting you," he said. "I want *you*. I want us to enjoy one another and if there comes a time when you desire children, I shall certainly give them to you. As many as you want."

She bit her bottom lip. She'd never considered he might care enough about her to protect her from becoming pregnant. Suddenly, she loved him more than ever because it was abundantly clear to her that she was completely safe with this man.

"But for now, let us explore each other," he whispered. "Let me do all the things to you that please you." His warm hand drifted down her side and over her hip. His touch reignited her desire. Liquid heat unfurled in her abdomen and pooled between her legs.

"I want to do all those things with you," she said. Her gaze penetrated his so there would be no mistaking her intention. "Right now."

His pupils enlarged, nearly obliterating the blue. He took her face in his hand and kissed her. His lips plied hers gently at first and then with insistence. Her stomach somersaulted when his tongue slipped through the opening she left for him. That was all it took. With a soft growl, he began to devour her. His hand grazed down her body, stopping to caress her breast and tug her nipple, then lower, skimming her belly to dip between her legs.

He dragged his mouth from hers. Intoxicated with need, she blinked, trying to focus.

"If, at any time, you wish me to stop, merely say stop," he said. "You may protest all you want. Tell me no. Tell me you cannot bear it any longer. But when you tell me to stop – when you use that word – I will stop. Do you understand?" he asked.

Comprehension emerged that he had offered her a password. He intended to take her to the very edge and beyond and all the control belonged to her with one word. *Stop*. She nodded.

Her pulse accelerated.

He threw back the covers and climbed out of the bed. "Get up," he ordered. "Bend over and put your hands on the table."

Sophia swallowed thickly. What had she done? For what had she asked? Her body tingled in anticipation as she crawled out of the bed and padded to the table. Her

mouth went bone dry as she watched him pilfer through the chest of drawers where he'd kept those delicious vices for her nipples the last time she'd been here.

She had an inkling of what he was after because he'd *threatened* her with it earlier. Her pearl swelled.

He withdrew the leather strap he'd used on her bottom the time before and looked back as if to gauge her reaction. She gulped but she did not protest. No matter what he said, she knew her behavior smacked of lurid licentiousness.

She actually anticipated—welcomed—being whipped like a wayward child. She loved bending to his will, being given permission to enjoy all the sensations her body had to offer to the fullest.

"I predict you will rebel when I force you to wear this," he said, lifting a stubby, cylindrical shaped object out of the drawer. It was nearly as big around as Jack's cock but only half as long.

Even from here, she could see that it was covered with smooth leather and thicker at the base than at the top. The base tapered like some sort of stopper. Attached to it were several lengths of thin leather strips that looked like a pony's tail.

Rebel was hardly the word! He couldn't shove that thing up inside her. It was impossible. It would never fit. It would hurt! But oh, his finger had felt good in there.

Her heart drummed against her rib cage.

Stop hung on her lips but she inhaled, not yet ready to utter her codeword. Her rim tightened as if she could resist his invasion.

Along with the strap and the object intended for her bottom, he also brought with him a jar and the rope he'd used to tie her to the rafter before. He placed the object on the table in front of her. Sophia felt her eyes widen. Up close, it looked even bigger than before.

She tried to blot out that he'd originally acquired the thing for Lady Huntingdon's pleasure but somehow, knowing another woman desired such tortures – even a woman as reprehensible as Lady Huntingdon – gave Sophia a dash of comfort.

The leather strap licked the back of her thighs and she yelped.

"Bend over," he told her.

At once, she bent so that her torso rested on the smooth, cool wood. Her channel clenched furiously.

Laying the strap aside, he removed the lid from the jar and liberally coated his fingers with some sort of greasy substance. "This will aid this particular little toy's entry into your tight little asshole. Spread your legs."

Trembling, Sophia inched her feet apart. Her breathing grew shallow as Jack generously spread the goo over and around her rosette. Her eyes closed. She'd never dreamed she would derive such pleasure from that part of her body but when his finger slipped inside, she tensed and lifted her chest off the table.

His hand quickly left her as he snatched the strap and applied it once more to her buttocks. "Stay down!"

Immediately, she dropped to the table once more. Heat prickled and licked through her bottom and thighs. Her pulse throbbed in her temples and behind her eyes as his finger sought her hole again.

Biting her lip, she endured the fire rimming her anus as he pushed inside. Almost at once, the pain subsided, leaving only a need to be filled there, to be violated there. He withdrew the one finger and then she felt something thicker intruding. Two fingers?

"Relax," he told her and she exhaled, feeling herself soften to his encroaching fingers.

"That's it," he cooed.

Just when she was beginning to accept him, he removed his fingers yet again. Sophia ached around her own emptiness but she quickly realized that she void she

experienced would not last long. Jack coated the leather phallus with the cream and slid behind her once more.

"Tell me you want this in your arse," he said.

Her lips parted but she could not utter the words. Asking for someone to insert such a rude-looking object into her most private recess was unthinkable. She whimpered.

Smack!

One hand landed smartly on her bum while the other teased the outside of her hole with the tip of the toy. "Say the word," he said. "I will not proceed without your acquiescence."

Even knowing what was coming next, she shook her head.

Slap!

She shook, imagining the red handprints on her pale flesh, luxuriating in the fire blazing in her backside.

"Tell me to put it inside you," he said. "Tell me you want to wear my little gift. Tell me you want me to stretch you so my cock can fill you there."

Her nipples swelled. Her cunny creamed. And before she could stop herself, she said, "Put it inside me."

Slowly, insidiously, the slick, smooth leather breached her rim. Sophia held her breath as her body wondrously stretched to accommodate its girth. Her anus seemed to gobble the device up and squeeze tight around the tapered bulb at the bottom. Instinctively, she cupped her own breasts and pinched her nipples between her fingers.

Her bottom felt so deliciously full.

He swished the strips that formed a tail so that they tickled the backs of her thighs. "What a pretty tail you have, little pussy cat."

Squeezing her legs together, she rocked, enjoying the sensations unfurling within her. Awareness teased her that he was doing something with the rope. Throwing it over

one of the rafters again? She didn't care. All that mattered was assuaging this lust rampaging through her body.

His voice dragged her out of her pleasure. "Stand up for me."

"No," she said. There was no possible way she could stand with this thing inside her.

"Bad kitty," he said and smacked her ass again.

She groaned. Being spanked felt even better with this toy embedded in her bottom.

"Stand," he commanded.

Her head swam as she pushed her torso up with her hands.

"Look between your legs," he said smugly.

She glanced down, bending slightly so she could see the fine leather tendrils snaking halfway down her thighs. It did indeed look like a tail.

He took her hands and secured each one with the two ends of the rope and then, reaching behind to wiggle the toy inside her, he planted a possessive kiss on her lips.

The fingers of his other hand found and tweaked one of her nipples. Hands bound, Sophia writhed helplessly against him.

And then, with a suddenness that shocked her, he dipped and lifted her thighs over his shoulders. She held tight to the ropes as he stood, hoisting her legs with him.

Big hands cupped her bottom, guiding her treasures to his hungry mouth. Sophia dropped her head back, hanging as he devoured her, alternately sucking at her nubbin and then spearing her channel with his tongue. The combination of his mouth, his hands, and the plug stuffed up her ass while she hung from the rafters was almost more than she could tolerate. The pleasure was so good, so overwhelming, all she could do was accept it. She heard long, low moans and realized they were own.

The tips of his fingers worked the plug so that she was constantly reminded of its presence in her hole, the same way his tongue prodded her channel so that she knew she was open there.

Wrestling the ropes, she used them to grind herself against his mouth. She gripped him with her thighs, fighting him for the pleasure he gave her. The leather tail swung, further enhancing the sweet torture the device offered.

Ecstasy built and Sophia clung to the ropes, using the tension to arch up and toward him. The orgasm she experienced was like none other she'd ever had. Spasms rolled from both holes, sending the sweetest vibrations through her limbs, to her toes and fingers, even to her scalp.

She rode his mouth until the last frenzied throe tailed off. His hands softened and he gently lowered her. But instead of setting her on the floor, he impaled her on his bone-hard cock. She gasped at the sensation of his phallus in her channel while the thick plug was still lodged in her ass.

Mindless, she cleaved to the ropes with her hands and to his hips with her legs as he pumped with relentless abandon into her.

"Does that feel good to you?" he ground out, his voice punctuated by his forceful thrusts.

"Yes."

"I can feel that toy up your bum with the head of my cock," he told her.

Sophia could not utter a word. She felt so thoroughly full, so whole, that she was rendered senseless. Her arms ached. Her wrists burned. Her bottom ached. Her backside stung where he'd spanked her. The muscles in her legs strained as she fought for a hold. The pressure of his groin grinding her sensitive clitoris was far too much and once again, she found herself lolling in the throes of an intense orgasm.

She soared, drifting in sensation until finally she realized she was standing, hanging limply from the ropes while he worked to untie her. She sighed. "Oh, my. That was amazing."

When her hands were free, she rubbed her wrists and then turned to place her hands on the table. "Get this thing out of me."

The swat that landed on her backside surprised her. Startled, she looked back to find him grinning. "Oh no, pussy cat," he said as he sat, his legs sprawled wide. He motioned her to come to him with his fingers. "On your knees, kitten. Suck my cock."

A smile pulled at Sophia's lips as her gaze dropped to his glistening member. She sank to her knees and crawled stealthily toward him. He gave a little laugh and his fingers threaded into her hair as she engulfed him in her mouth.

* * * * *

Lord Wisbech's eyes widened. "The Earl of Stafford and the highwayman are one and the same?"

Elinor nodded. She gauged Wisbech's reaction carefully. She'd taken a risk admitting she'd known the highwayman's identity all along. A big risk. Wisbech could hold her responsible. He might even attempt to name her in a breach of promise suit against Jack and Sophia.

Lord Wisbech's face grew increasingly more mottled with rage. This was foolish. She should never have confided in him.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

Elinor took a deep breath. She had to lie. It would not do to let Wisbech know how deeply she was involved. "I overheard them planning the deed when we visited Amberley."

Wisbech trembled visibly. "She planned to leave me standing at the altar? To embarrass me in front of my peers?"

Elinor cast her gaze to the ground. "It appears so, my lord." From under lowered lashes, she regarded him for a moment. His nostrils flared with each breath. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Why didn't you say anything to me beforehand?" he asked, his voice low and menacing. Murderous.

"I...I should have. Certainly, I didn't think she would go through with such a foolish plan. After all, isn't Lord Stafford engaged to a Pomeranian lady of some sort?"

Something sinister flashed in Wisbech's eyes. "Indeed he is, Lady Huntingdon. Indeed he is."

* * * * *

Jack sipped a glass of wine as he watched Sophia doze. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight than her, sated and sleeping with her delicate fist curled loosely against the sheets and her black hair trailing in stark contrast across the white pillowslip.

Abducting her from her own wedding procession had been pure idiocy. What had he been thinking?

And yet, he did not, for one moment, regret it. No matter what damage their relationship would cause her in society, she would still be better off with him than with Lord Wisbech.

Jack had always remained aloof when it came to the affairs and deportment of others but he could not allow himself to stand idly by, knowing that Wisbech had a penchant for physical cruelty. The thought of that bastard laying a hand on Sophia enraged Jack.

Besides, society reeked with debauchers and debauchery. Jack could not imagine Sophia becoming a disenchanted harridan like Lady Huntingdon. Despite all the things they'd done together, Sophia was still very innocent and very emotionally fragile.

Keeping her that way was the least he could do, especially after he'd stolen her innocence – and her hopes for an advantageous marriage.

A pang of guilt threatened to rise but Jack tamped it back down.

No use feeling guilty now. The deed was done. She was his mistress now.

His.

Knowing that at least some part of her belonged to him evoked something possessive and carnal within him. Nothing could dampen the physical desire he had for her. With his past dalliances, he'd always been able to walk away, to forget. Not with Sophia.

Her face, her words, her kisses, her touch had haunted him since that day he'd put her in a coach and sent her away. When he'd found out she wasn't Lady Huntingdon, he'd been unable to stay away from her.

He drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. He should have stayed away from her. When his father died, Jack had promised himself that he would be the responsible man his father had been. He'd put aside his trifling behavior, his heavy drinking, the gambling—all of it. He'd made a good match with Lady Hilda. And now...

Now all he could think about was spending every waking hour with Sophia. He wanted to protect her, to please her, to feel her arms around him and to hear her whisper the words he'd heard her say that day in his garden. *I love you.*

His insides churned.

I love you.

Other women had avowed their love for him but he had never believed them. He hadn't wanted to believe Sophia.

And yet...

He warmed at the memory of her standing in the pouring rain and putting her hand in his earlier this morning. A smile played on his lips when he recalled how ridiculous the wilted ostrich plume looked in her carefully coifed hair. Even then, he'd wanted to strip the powder and plumage and panniers away. On Sophia, it seemed false and foolish. He wouldn't care if she ever put another stitch of clothes on her body. His cock stirred at the thought of keeping her perpetually naked.

How wonderful it would be if he could shirk his duties and society so he would never have to be separated from her for an instant. A dark cloud descended on his thoughts. His own wedding was only weeks away.

He buried his face in his palm and massaged his throbbing temples with his fingertips. *This* with Sophia could not have come at a worse time in his life.

He had a responsibility to his title, his servants and staff, not to mention the estate. Part of that responsibility meant siring an heir – with a wife. His stomach twisted. Why did the thought of being with another woman rankle him so? That had never been a problem before. When he'd been in Paris, he'd had his pick of willing women. Sometimes two a night. Sometimes two at a time. He grinned in spite of himself.

Sophia turned over and Jack watched the sensuous movements of her legs under the covers – those legs that had been wrapped around his neck earlier. He grinned. His cock lurched and without thinking, he gripped and squeezed it.

He couldn't get enough of her. He would never get enough of her. No matter whom he married. In one gulp, he downed the rest of his wine and then gained his feet.

It was high time Sophia awakened from her nap.

Jack sat on the edge of the bed and trailed his fingertip down her exposed arm. Her skin felt like silk. Soft. Smooth.

She moaned softly as he pulled the sheet down. Leaning over her, he kissed the delicate shell of her ear and then raked his teeth lightly along her earlobe. Sleepily, she voiced her pleasure. Jack's kisses moved to her neck where he nibbled and sucked until he elicited a giggle from her.

Twisting onto her back, she smiled and for an instant, Jack couldn't breathe. Trust and adoration shimmered in her dark eyes. She'd never looked more unguarded, more vulnerable – more beautiful – than she did at this moment. He stared, drinking in the sight of her, mesmerized until she broke the spell by reaching for him.

With a soft growl, he ripped down the covers and moved over her. She welcomed him, opening her thighs and reaching to guide his hard cock into her channel. He sighed as he sank into the tight, wet heat of her sheath.

Her body was soft in all the right places. Her nipples stabbed at his chest. Her legs wound around his. Her hands roamed over his back, her nails dragging deliciously against his skin.

Burying his face in her hair, he breathed in the sultry scent of her. With all the powder and perfume washed away, he inhaled that fragrance that belonged only to her, reveling in the scent of sex and skin—and Sophia.

“Oh, Jack,” she whispered.

Her body rose beneath his, countering his slow, deliberate thrusts. Out, in. Out, in again. *Sophia*. He cupped her head in his hand, anchoring her as he braced to penetrate her farther, faster.

Her thighs parted wider. His groin ground hers and his sac pushed up hard against her bottom. The harsh sounds of their breaths mingled with the wet suction of their lovemaking.

He ached for release. *Oh yes, almost there...* But no. Sophia had not found her own release yet. Difficult as it was for him, Jack pulled out and moved down. Sophia's fingers threaded into his hair as he sought out her cunny. He moaned as his lips closed over her swollen clitoris. Her essence filled his mouth. He chewed her, sucked her, drank her. Sweet and sexual, her cream drove him wild with the urge to bury himself in her once more. A frisson shook her body and her fingers tightened in his hair. The idea that he was giving this pleasure to her flooded him with emotions he could not identify. All he knew was he wouldn't stop until she cried his name.

The muscles in her legs tensed and when he pushed a finger inside her channel, she bucked up hard against his mouth. He clung with his lips, sucking and tonguing relentlessly, holding her to prevent her wriggling away as her back bowed so that only her shoulders and head were left touching the bed.

Jack continued his oral onslaught until she grew limp in his arms, until she cried, “Stop, Jack!” Then he reared over her and drove into her intent on placating this unquenchable lust.

Chapter Nine

Lord Wisbech trailed his finger down the barrel of one of his deceased father's dueling pistols. The honorable thing to do would be to call Lord Stafford out, demand satisfaction.

Lifting the pistol out of the case, he drew in a sharp breath. Wisbech curled his finger around the trigger and aimed the pistol at the wall, imagining leveling it on Stafford. A burst of wicked joy filled him with pleasure. Holding his chin high, he straightened and squeezed the trigger. The hammer clicked but Wisbech only wickedly imagined the explosion of gunpowder.

Calling Stafford out would be the honorable thing but hardly the prudent thing to do. Wisbech sneered. He'd heard of Stafford's reputation with a pistol. Gossip abounded that Stafford had wounded several and killed at least one man in duels during his time abroad. Challenging him would hardly be sensible.

Ralph snorted. Sophia wasn't worth the risk.

Casting the pistol aside, he downed his snifter of brandy in one gulp. Every nerve in his body was taut to the point of snapping. He felt as if he'd been rendered impotent. Bringing a breach of promise suit against Sophia would be expensive and even if he won the suit, he didn't have the funds to file it. Besides, courts were loath to award a man damages, as it was widely considered a woman's prerogative to change her mind.

Was there nothing he could do to get satisfaction?

Sophia and Stafford had humiliated him beyond common decency and Ralph knew he would not be satisfied until he had been vindicated.

Perhaps the delightful and conniving Lady Huntingdon would have an idea.

* * * * *

"But I don't want to leave this place," Sophia said as she nestled into Jack's embrace.

He chuckled softly. "We can't stay here forever. And besides, we drank the last of the wine."

Sophia smiled but inwardly she wished they could remain here where the outside world seemed far away, where she could linger in Jack's arms and pretend he was not betrothed to another.

"I'm afraid of what Lord Wisbech will do," she confessed.

"Afraid? Of that halfwit?" Jack pulled her even closer so that her forehead rested against his chest. "Why? Did he threaten you?"

She worked her fingers through the soft dusting of hair there. "Once."

Jack's body tensed and Sophia regretting confiding in him.

"When?" he demanded.

"After Lady Huntingdon's party," she said. "It was nothing really. He just told me not to embarrass him again."

"Or what?" Jack asked, obviously aware that she hadn't related the entire encounter.

She swallowed. "He said..." She blinked and tried to draw away from Jack. Intuitively, she knew nothing good could come of telling Jack how Ralph had threatened her.

Jack, however, did not release her. His arms tightened. "What did he say to you?" he asked. "I've heard of his reputation. A mean sort, that one."

Mean was hardly the word to describe Ralph. Cruel was a far better summation of his character. "I'm sure it was just an idle threat," Sophia said.

"No matter. What did he say?"

"He said...he said he would kill me," Sophia confessed.

Jack drew in a sharp breath and expelled it with deliberate slowness. "I won't lie to you, love," he said. "After you visited me with Lady Huntingdon, I inquired as to his character."

Sophia's heart skittered. After telling her their meeting had been a mistake, he'd cared enough to ask after her. She batted her lashes against the hot tears in her eyes. "What did you learn?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"He's a tyrant who flogs his servants for the least infraction—and he's impoverished."

"Impoverished?" Sophia wrenched herself from Jack's embrace and propped on her elbow. "What?"

"He has no money. None."

"The lying bastard," Sophia said. But, darkly, she remembered him telling her that the only reason he was marrying her was because of her dowry. Her heart twisted that a man would only want to marry her for money. He'd never had even an inkling of love for her. At first, she'd thought she could grow to care for him. After all, he was handsome. He was titled. His houses seemed well appointed.

When she had agreed to be his wife—or rather when her father had *informed* her she would be his wife—she'd never known the passion she'd come to know with Jack. She'd always wanted more from Lord Wisbech, some show of affection. But there had been none. None!

That wasn't true with Jack. Even now, his hands sought her out, reaching to brush an errant lock of her hair behind her shoulder.

"Do not concern yourself with Wisbech," Jack told her.

"But—"

He pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. "Not now. Not right now."

His eyes darkened. Sophia recognized the look. Desire. Her stomach fluttered and her channel tightened in anticipation.

His fingers skimmed lightly down her arm, over her hip and around her bottom, where he cupped her toward him possessively. "I haven't yet been inside that fetching little lovebud of yours."

Sophia sputtered a laugh. "Lovebud?"

He smiled. "Lovebud." One eyebrow arched wickedly.

"I don't think I'm quite ready for that," she protested although her heart leapt at the thought of him invading her there. The little plaything he'd pushed up that hole earlier had felt far better than she ever imagined.

Jack's eyes narrowed devilishly. "After all the spankings I've met out to you, I can't believe you would dare deny me. I'm keeping count of your refusals, you naughty minx."

He scooted out of the bed and Sophia's mouth went dry as he headed for the chest of drawers. Her pulse seemed to beat in her throat as he returned to the bed with the leather strap and the jar of cream he'd used to lubricate her bottom before.

"Get on your knees," he said.

She shook her head but her traitorous cunny contracted wildly.

"Twice," he said and smirked. "That's twice now."

Her eyes fell to his erection. "I can't possibly take you inside me...*there*."

"Oh, three times." He put the jar on the little table beside the bed and snapped the leather strap against his thigh. "Three, my sweet. Are you ready to get on your knees or will you protest a fourth time?"

Heat circled her rim. Deciding she could not take more than three swats with the strap, she twisted onto her knees.

"Head down," Jack said.

Sophia dropped her head and shoulders to the mattress, knowing she was fully exposed to him. Dear Lord, what kind of woman welcomed this sort of thing?

She nearly swooned when his warm palm fondled her bum but just as she relaxed into the delectable sensation, the leather smacked her ass. She cried out as the sting coursed through her like wildfire and then abated into a slow, smoldering throb. "One," she heard herself say, her voice muffled by the bed linen. Her toes curled as she awaited the next fall of the strap.

She did not have to wait long. *Smack!* "Two," she sighed the word and gripped handfuls of the sheets. She'd never dreamed being punished could feel so wonderful. The bite of the strap made her feel alive. In some odd way, it prepared her for the pleasure to come.

Her nipples swelled and she took her breasts in her hands, pinching the tight little buds as the third blow burned through her backside. "Oh yes," she mewled, releasing one nipple so she could reach between her legs to massage her yearning clitoris.

Jack's fingers slathered cool goo around her rosebud and she tensed. "No, love," he coaxed. "Relax. This will give you pleasure. I promise you."

Panic swamped her. "But—"

"Remember your word," he told her, pushing a finger inside her.

The finger felt...*good*. Oh, so good. She relaxed as he explored her and when he finally removed his hand and climbed onto the bed behind her, she was ready for him.

Or so she thought.

The head of his cock nudged her nether hole and she ached to feel him inside her but when he breached her rim, she bit her bottom lip to keep from begging him to stop. White-hot pain shot around the opening.

"Relax, sweet," he cooed.

"I can't."

"Relax. Let me inside you," he said. "God, you're tight."

Her breaths came in short pants. "Jack..."

His fingers squeezed the soft flesh of her ass. "Put your fingers in your cunny," he rasped. "I want you to know where my cock is."

She slid a finger into her wet channel as he trespassed farther. "Oh!" she cried but he was all the way inside. The pain subsided and in its wake was pure bliss.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," she moaned. "Fuck me, Jack. Fuck my ass."

His fingers trembled as he gripped her and began to piston her hole. Sophia spiraled as she worked her hungry clitoris. Her thighs trembled and just when she thought she would cry "stop" ecstasy consumed her. Her body clamped down around him until he stopped moving and somewhere in the sweet solace of passion she realized his cries mingled with hers.

* * * * *

"You can't very well call him out," Elinor told Lord Wisbech. "He's a sure shot and would most likely kill you."

"Blast it! Don't you think I've considered that?" He paced.

Elinor watched him. Lord Wisbech was as fair as Jack was dark and where Jack boasted an almost coarse build, Lord Wisbech was fashionably elegant. Attired in a bright lemon frockcoat and bone breeches, he was the epitome of an English gentleman. He wore his flaxen hair swept back and tied with a narrow black ribbon. Brass buckles gleamed on his pumps and the lace at his cuffs floated exquisitely over his well-shaped hands and jeweled fingers. Another flourish of lace jutted from his collar. Elinor had never seen a better dressed man.

He certainly hid the fact that his funds were seriously depleted very well. Elinor knew better than to suggest he file a breach of promise suit. He might entertain the notion of having her retain his legal representation for her part in bringing the two lovers together.

"Maybe irony will play a part and a highwayman will do him in," Lord Wisbech mused.

Elinor stared as a wicked idea played in her thoughts. "What if that highwayman were *you*?"

Lord Wisbech's gaze collided with Elinor's and her lips drew into a smile. She continued. "No one would question a highwayman murdering a gentleman. Outlaws are rife along the roads to and from London."

"Are you suggesting I masquerade as a highwayman and kill Lord Stafford?" Lord Wisbech asked.

Elinor shifted on the settee and stroked her snoring pug's head. Wisbech was enraged enough to kill Jack and Elinor was surprised that she felt no qualms about persuading the duke to go through with it. This was like a game—a game she was determined to win.

Although she had not been publicly humiliated as Lord Wisbech had been, Jack's rebuke and blatant interest in his little virginal lover had been an insult that Elinor could not ignore.

When she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she saw an aging woman. Not even heavy powder could conceal her wrinkles. When she removed her wig, she noticed increasingly thinning hair. Her once-renowned beauty faded day by day and Elinor knew it.

She did not relish a future as an aging dowager who sang the praises of glory days long past and Jack's disinterest was only one more step toward the inevitable. A cold chill crawled up her spine as she lifted her gaze from the sleeping dog. "Yes. I am suggesting you kill Lord Stafford. Do what you like with his whore but after what she's done to you, I should think you'd like to see her dead and buried as well."

Lord Wisbech pursed his lips and began pacing once more. Elinor held her breath as she waited for the gleam to appear in the duke's eyes—the confirmation he would go through with it and put an end to Jack and his doxy.

"I don't know..." he mused.

"If I were you," Elinor prodded, "I would want to sample what Lord Stafford stole from me."

Wisbech stopped pacing. Turning, he stared.

Elinor leaned slightly forward. "I would want her to know what she so carelessly tossed away."

A smile curled his thin lips. Triumph surged as Elinor watched the sparks flash in Wisbech's eyes.

* * * * *

"I don't want to leave either," Jack said and pressed a kiss to Sophia's forehead.

Although every muscle in her body ached and she was completely raw between the legs, Sophia could not bear the thought of leaving the hunting lodge. Panic welled every time she thought about putting that horrid wedding gown back on. But since it was the only garment she had to wear, she had no choice. Partly, she feared where they would go. To Jack's house?

How could she go there and pretend to be his wife when she was merely a mistress? Knowing Lady Hilda would be moving in and taking her place as Lady Stafford caused a knot to well in Sophia's throat. She'd thought she resigned herself to the fact that he was promised to another—but accepting a situation and liking a situation were two different things.

"We've no food," Jack said as he slipped his shirt over his head. Standing in his bare feet and wearing nothing but his breeches and voluminous white shirt, Sophia found him more handsome than ever.

"I...I can't wear *that*," she said pointing to the heap of fabric that was her wedding gown.

Jack looked at the pile of rainwater stained cloth and then back at her. "What if I give you two more days?"

Heedless of her own nudity, she bolted upright in the bed. "Would you?"

He crossed the short distance to her and reached out to caress one of her breasts. "I can go and gather a few provisions and something for you to wear. Would that please you?"

She climbed onto her knees and embraced him. "Yes! Oh yes!"

His mouth sought hers and his hands roamed over her back and down over her buttocks. Sophia melted in his embrace, opening her lips to his intruding tongue. She moaned into his mouth. Joy filled her. Two more days! She could scarcely believe it. No one had ever treated her so well.

He tore his mouth from hers. "I ought to tie you up and fill your bum up with that cattail while I'm gone."

She clenched at the thought of it. "How long will you be gone?"

"No more than a couple of hours," he told her.

"I have a better idea," she told him. "I will bathe while you are gone and await your return. Then you can bend me over your knee and punish me thoroughly."

His hand covered hers and he pushed it over his burgeoning arousal. "Look what you've done. I won't survive two more days here with you."

She gave him a squeeze before guiding his hand between her own legs where she knew she'd grown wet for him. "Look what you've done to me," she said coquettishly.

He hooked one hand under her leg and pulled her down on her back before he undid the fall of his breeches. Sophia sighed happily as he dragged her to the edge of the bed and plunged into her.

He was not gentle. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips, holding her thighs open wide for his frenzied assault. The muscles in his jaw clenched. Perspiration beaded on his upper lip. His gaze fixed on the place where they were connected. He pummeled her, hard and fast, his thrusts forcing the air from her lungs.

Taking charge of her own pleasure, Sophia found her clitoris and she rubbed furiously until the spasms racked her body and she heard herself crying his name. Still wresting the last shard of pleasure from her pearl, she watched through hooded lids as he withdrew and jacked his cock, spewing a shimmering ribbon of semen onto her belly.

Breathing heavily, he leaned on the bed. "Damn, woman!" he gasped. "I love watching you touch yourself." He blew out a breath and grinned.

Sophia pushed herself back in the bed and then crawled under the covers. If he was going to be away for two hours, a nap would make the time go by far faster.

Jack eyed her as he did up his breeches. "You'll be the death of me," he teased and then his face grew serious. "Do you know how to fire a pistol?"

"Me?" she asked. "No."

He lifted the flintlock pistol he'd placed on a shelf. "This is loaded and packed. You have only to aim and pull back the trigger," he said as he put it on the table beside the bed.

Sophia gaped. "Surely I won't be needing it."

"I don't expect anyone to trespass on Stafford lands but a stray hunter or two pass through on occasion. While they would not tangle with me, I don't know what they'd do upon finding an alluring and naked woman all alone." His expression softened as if he realized he'd frightened her. "Not to worry, love. This lodge is well hidden. You will be safe here."

She nodded.

"Are you certain you don't want to accompany me back to the manor? I can send someone to London to procure an apartment for you straightaway," he said.

"No!" she said, clamoring for the two days more he'd promised her.

He brushed his palm over her hair. "Very well, my pet. I will return as quickly as possible. After he tucked his shirt into his breeches, he leaned over her and pressed a

kiss to her forehead before he finished dressing. He bade her a quick farewell and then galloped away.

The tiny lodge seemed desolate without him. Already, Sophia's heart ached. Dismally, she realized this is how she would feel every time he left her company. Even though she knew he would return shortly, she felt empty. And yet, possessing at least a tiny part of Jack was far better than being Duchess of Wisbech.

Maybe it didn't matter that she would never be his wife. She would never have to perform the duties expected of a wife or worry about society any longer. Since her coming out, she'd never cared much for society, not having grasped the nuances and intricacies needed to shine. She's much preferred the company of a good book to a gossiping girlfriend.

She closed her eyes and wiggled her toes under the covers, wondering what her future would hold. Everything had been carefully planned for her and she'd thrown it all away when she'd taken Jack's hand and climbed into the saddle with him.

Now her destiny was uncertain but she welcomed whatever lay in store for her. As long as she was with Jack nothing else much mattered.

* * * * *

Laden with serviceable clothing for Sophia and provisions enough to last them two more days, Jack whistled to himself as his horse sauntered back down the road toward the hunting lodge. Even his manservant, dour old Hobbes, had remarked on Jack's light mood.

He'd never felt this way before. Carefree. Smitten with the idea of stripping off his clothing and crawling back into that bed with Sophia. Darkly, he wondered what cruel twist of fate had crossed their stars. If only he'd met her before his arrangement with Lady Hilda and before Sophia's contract with Lord Wisbech...

Impatient, he urged the horse on faster. Already his brain was scheming up ways to persuade Lady Hilda to cry off.

"What the devil are you thinking?" he asked himself aloud when he realized what he was doing. His horse snorted as if in response. Jack patted the animal on the neck. He was actually entertaining thoughts of marrying Sophia—imagining her as mistress of Amberley and the mother of his children! He shook his head as if he could dispel his wild imagination. Circumstances made a marriage to Sophia impossible. He had a responsibility to his estate, to his title. Sophia was...well, she was...

A winsome smile played on his lips. Sophia was beautiful. She was daring. She was amorous. *I love you...*

A shudder tore up his spine at the memory of her unguarded confession. At that moment, he'd vowed to himself to stop toying with her. After all, he was the libertine—the one experienced in such matters. He knew better than to entertain notions of love.

He exhaled roughly. He'd been surprised there hadn't been a hailstorm of gossip regarding Sophia's disappearance on her wedding day. And Hobbes, professional that he was, did not even flinch when Jack had assigned him the task of finding a lavish apartment in London. Surely the old man knew what Jack was up to.

Doubtless, Lady Huntingdon had spread talk of the scandal all over the countryside. It only stood to reason that she would muddy both their names, especially since she obviously felt slighted.

But why hadn't the news reached Amberley? Jack's gaze lingered on the Armageddon's mane. Something was amiss. Terribly amiss.

"Stand and deliver!" a taunting exclamation arrested Jack's attention.

His gaze shot to the source of the voice—and to where two pistols were trained on him. Surprised, but not shocked, Jack stared at Lord Wisbech.

Jack tugged Armageddon's reins and the horse nickered as he halted. "Shall we settle this like gentlemen?" Jack asked.

Wisbech burst into mirthless laughter. "Gentlemen? *Gentlemen?*"

Immediately, Jack began scanning the desolate road. Woods lined either side. There were no sounds of any approaching carriages or riders. Wisbech was angry. Justifiably so. Jack dragged in a deep breath. He hadn't really thought Wisbech had anything of this nature in him. He'd assumed that the duke would quietly set his sights on another bride with a handsome dowry. Evidently, that wasn't the case.

"Was it gentlemanly of you to abscond with my bride right under my nose?" Lord Wisbech sneered.

"That was an unfortunate mistake, Your Grace," Jack said, still grasping to assess his predicament.

"Perhaps," Lord Wisbech agreed. "But what about the second time? I've heard all about how you plotted to disgrace me on my very wedding day."

"Plotted?" Jack asked, realizing Lady Huntingdon had indeed been scheming. At this point, there was nothing he could say to placate the duke.

"Yes. Lady Huntingdon overheard you. Again, very ungentlemanly of you, Stafford."

"There was no plot," Jack said, eyeing the pistols warily.

Wisbech snorted. His white stallion took a menacing step closer. "You expect me to believe you abducted her against her will?"

"No," Jack said, becoming angry. "It's very simple to understand. She preferred a life as my mistress rather than spending one day as your wife."

Wisbech's pale face blanched and time seemed to move at half speed as he aimed one of the pistols and fired. The explosion of gunpowder shattered the summer birdsong. Armageddon reared and shrieked as the bullet tore into his shoulder.

At once, Jack dismounted the injured animal and started toward Wisbech intent on beating him bloody beyond recognition but Wisbech leveled his second pistol on Jack and fired.

Chapter Ten

Sophia had no idea how long Jack had been gone but her nerves knotted in anticipation of his return. She climbed out of the creek and twisted her hair to ring the water out of it. Two more days. She smiled when she thought about it.

She would enjoy two more heavenly days with him before she had to face the world as a man's mistress. Surely there would be scandal. She would be the subject of gossip for the entire season or until some other controversy occurred to catch the *ton's* attention but secluded in an apartment or traveling abroad, it wouldn't matter.

Sophia only hoped Jack's marriage to Lady Hilda would not crush her. Knowing he would be sharing the bed of another woman—even if only to produce heirs—broke Sophia's heart.

After retrieving her chemise from the branch of a tree, she slipped it over her head.

"Well, well," a voice startled her. "If it isn't Lord Stafford's whore."

Sophia froze as her gaze collided with Lord Wisbech's. Incredulous, she blinked but he was still there. "Where's...where's Jack?" she asked.

Dressed in black, Lord Wisbech appeared sinister. Sophia tensed as he started toward her. "Jack?" he asked and a rueful smile stretched his thin lips. "*Jack* is dead, my dear."

Sophia trembled. She gaped. "D-dead?" she asked but her mind refused to accept it. "Where is he? Where?" Her voice rose hysterically.

Ralph smirked. "Lying on Hounslow Road with a bullet through his chest. Cut down by a highwayman."

Realization stunned her. "You killed him. You...you bastard!" Anger engulfed her like an inferno. Her first reaction was to fly at him, fists flailing but somehow she

resisted the urge. *The pistol.* Jack's pistol was inside on the bedside table. He'd left it to keep her safe and he'd died because he'd been more interested in protecting her than himself. Guilt seethed, vying to override her rage.

Lord Wisbech advanced. Murder and revenge flashed in his eyes. He would kill her, too. Sophia did not doubt it. Lunging, she raced toward the lodge but Ralph followed on her heels, subduing her easily.

Heart thundering, she kicked and flailed at him. She flinched when her nails raked down his heavily powdered face. "You bitch!" he railed and slapped her so hard with the back of his hand that she sprawled to the ground.

The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth and she spat as she scrambled to regain her feet. His hand knotted in her hair and he yanked hard, dragging her back toward the creek.

Sophia struggled, clawing at his hands, scrabbling on the ground as she tried to gain some semblance of footing but all to no avail. The scream that tore from her throat died as he hauled her into the creek and pushed her head under the water.

Panic surged as she fought to hold her breath. Just when her thoughts began to dim, he pulled her above water. She gasped and sputtered.

"I told you I would kill you if you embarrassed me again," he said and plunged her back under the water.

Sophia did not doubt that she would die this day. Part of her welcomed it. She could not go on without Jack.

An eerie calm descended over her and there was only the water rushing around her ears and the sound of her last breath bubbling out of her lungs. Acceptance that she was about to die inundated her and without warning, Ralph wrenched her back to the surface. "That should take the fight out of you," he said. Confusion muddled her brain as he heaved her back toward the bank.

Coughing up water, she was no match for his masculine strength as he lifted her and shouldered her back to the lodge. Why hadn't he just let her drown? Why?

His hand squeezed her backside and Sophia suddenly knew why he hadn't killed her. He intended to rape her!

Summoning all the strength she had left, she pummeled his back with her fists and kicked her feet but it was too late.

With a laugh, he flung her onto the bed. Careful not to glance in the direction of the pistol lest Ralph see it and take it from her, she propped on her elbows and burned at stare into him. Loathing consumed her.

"You're vile," she told him.

He tore the fall of his breeches down and Sophia's gaze dropped to where his cock reared from a nest of white-blond curls. She inched backward but he seized her ankle and dragged her back down. He grasped at her free foot but she wrenched free and jammed her heel into his face. Her eyes widened when she heard his nose crunch.

Wailing, he took two faltering steps backward, covering his bleeding nose with his hands. "You bloody wretch!" he bellowed but as he charged for her again, she scuttled backward, groping for the pistol.

With a coolness she had no idea she possessed, she aimed the weapon, pulled back the hammer and squeezed the trigger. The pistol discharged with an earsplitting blast. Acrid smoke filled the air. Lord Wisbech's eyes rounded as his hand went to his chest. Stunned, Sophia watched as the life drained out of his face and he wilted to the floor with a thud.

Shaking and gasping for breath, she scrambled to the edge of the bed, ready to beat him with the butt of the pistol if he wasn't already dead. His eyes stared, fixed on nothing.

A sob racked her shoulders. "Jack," she murmured under her breath.

"Sophia!"

Her heart skipped a beat. She whirled to discover Jack, his hand over his chest. Blood oozed between his fingers. "Sophia," he gasped and collapsed in the threshold.

"Jack!" she cried and darted to his side.

"Wisbech ..."

"He's dead," she said, trying to examine Jack's wound.

His skin was so pale, Sophia feared the worst. She knew nothing about dressing an injury. Her joy at seeing Jack alive quickly turned to cold terror. "What do I do?" she asked.

"I need a...a physician. Leave me here and go to Amberley—" he said but Sophia interrupted.

"I won't leave you. Can you ride at all?"

"Armageddon's been shot, too." Jack coughed and Sophia blanched at the sight of blood on his lips.

She had to make a decision and she had to do it fast. Her gaze flew to the horse and then back to Jack. "I'll walk if I have to but I'm not leaving you here," she argued.

Instinctively, she snatched the sheet off the bed and tore the edge of it with her teeth so she could rip it into strips. Hands trembling, she quickly used the remnants to staunch Jack's bleeding. He groaned when she pressed hard against the wound. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice quavering.

His skin had grown icy. "You're going to be fine," she said as she worked to secure the makeshift dressing. "I'll get you home."

He didn't fight her as she scooped her arm under his shoulders and coaxed him to stand. With difficulty, he leaned against her and allowed her to help him back to his horse.

Armageddon nickered in protest as Jack hefted himself into the saddle. He slumped down on the horse's neck, clinging to the animal's coarse black mane. Sophia rushed into the house and returned with a blanket. After throwing it over Jack, she climbed into the saddle behind him and took the reins, saying a silent prayer the horse was strong enough to make the trek back to Amberley.

Sophia didn't care that she wore nothing more than her chemise. Her only concern was Jack. Unmoving, he lay lifeless across the horse's thick neck. Fearing the worst, she kept her hand on his back to make certain he was breathing. A lump welled in her throat but she refused to give in to tears. Not now. If Jack was going to die, she didn't want the last thing he heard on this earth to be her sobs.

"Jack?" she asked as the horse finally stepped out of the woods and onto the road leading to Jack's estate.

He grunted.

"We're almost there, darling. I promise I will see you safely home," she promised.

He muttered something she could not discern and she didn't have the heart to ask him to repeat it. At least he was conscious enough to make a sound.

Armageddon stumbled and Sophia's heart skipped a beat. "Don't stop now, horse." She squeezed her eyes shut, holding her breath until the horse trudged on. Her heart twisted for the stalwart animal but she didn't have any other choice than to urge him forward.

Jack's shoulders slipped and Sophia quickly righted him, sighing her relief when he moaned. "Don't leave me, Jack," she whispered. "Please don't leave me."

This was all her fault. If only she'd married Lord Wisbech as she should have done, none of this would ever have happened. She should have been patient enough to produce heirs for Lord Wisbech and then she could have done whatever she wanted with Jack.

Foam began to ooze from Armageddon's mouth. *No, no! Don't die now, horse. Please, it's just a bit farther.*

She searched the area for a horse, for a carriage for anyone. Where was everyone? Why was there no one else on the road? No one who could help? As it was, she couldn't push Armageddon any faster but she could lighten his load.

She slid out of the saddle and taking the reins encouraged the horse to follow her as she picked her way barefoot over the gravely, muddy road.

The thick woods thinned and up ahead, Amberley loomed like a shining beacon in the afternoon sunlight. "We're almost there!" Sophia cried, glancing back at Jack.

He lay motionless across the horse's back. Terrified, she quickened her pace. "Come on, horse. Faster."

Tugging the reins, she half dragged the wounded beast toward the gates at Amberley. She debated running ahead and leaving the straggling animal to proceed as he could but she couldn't bear the thought of leaving Jack.

At the gate, the horse finally collapsed. Sophia cried out as Armageddon drew his last breath. Jack landed with a grunt on the ground next to the mortally wounded animal.

"Get Hobbes," Jack croaked.

Dragging up the wet hem of her chemise, Sophia flew toward the manor as fast as her feet would carry her.

A bevy of servants met her halfway up the drive. "Hobbes," she gasped breathlessly. "I need Hobbes. Lord Stafford is injured."

But already, several men were running out to collect their master. Exhausted, Sophia stared after them and just as she started to go to them, a coat encircled her shoulders. "Come inside, my lady."

Her gaze clashed with Hobbes'. "But—"

"The others will bring his lordship. Come inside and let one of the maids see to you," he said calmly.

Only then did Sophia look down at her soiled and tattered thin chemise and her bruised and cut feet. Pain she hadn't allowed herself to feel earlier seemed to soak through her skin straight to her bones.

"Come inside, my lady," Hobbes said, gently coaxing her with his arm around her shoulders.

Half-dazed, she let her gaze wander to where the men were already lifting Jack. A rider blazed down the drive.

"See, Martin is going for the physician," Hobbes said. "Come inside where we can care for you."

Fighting off the darkness threatening to render her unconscious, Sophia nodded and allowed Hobbes to escort her toward the door. It was only then that she noticed the coach and six in front of the house, a grand conveyance drawn by six magnificent white horses — a coach fit for a queen.

Or, rather, a countess.

Sophia faltered. "Is she —"

"Lady Hilda only just arrived," Hobbes said.

Sophia stubbed her toe on the steps leading up to the entry. Hobbes righted her and she stumbled into the house alongside him. The last thing she saw before she mercifully lost consciousness was the most angelic, beautiful, blonde woman she'd ever seen in her life.

* * * * *

Slowly, Sophia became aware of silky smooth sheets and the soft, warm mattress. She felt as if she were awakening from a long, deep sleep and then suddenly, everything washed back over her in a heart wrenching torrent.

Gasping, she bolted upright in the bed. A young servant girl tried to entice her to lie back down on the pillows. "Be still, my lady."

Sophia resisted. "Where am I?" she asked, blinking as she took in the lush bed chamber.

"Amberley."

Sophia's gaze collided with the girl's. "Jack..."

The servant pursed her lips.

Sophia clutched her arms. "Tell me he lives," she said desperately.

Something dark and bleak lurked in the girl's eyes. "The fever is on him."

"Fever..."

"Yes, ma'am. The doctor fears the worst."

Sophia fell back on the pillows. "This is all my fault," she muttered.

"Ma'am, you should rest. You've been through quite an ordeal yourself. Your feet were cut to shreds and your face..."

Instinctively, Sophia touched her jaw, recalling how Wisbech had sent her reeling. She winced at the shock of pain.

"It's terribly bruised, ma'am," the servant said.

Realizing she was clad in night clothes, Sophia looked about for a dressing gown. "I must go to him."

The servant's eyes widened. "I'm afraid you can't do that, ma'am."

"Can't?" Sophia asked. "What do you mean, can't?"

The girl cast her eyes down. "His betrothed is with him."

Sick realization plummeted to Sophia's stomach. The woman she had seen in the foyer had been Jack's fiancée – the German countess. Tears filled Sophia's eyes and she twisted away so the servant wouldn't see her crying. "Would you please see how he is doing?" Sophia asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the girl said and slipped out of the room.

Sophia buried her face in her pillow and shook with sobs. Wisbech had tried to murder her. He'd tried to kill Jack and might yet succeed in doing so. And poor Armageddon...

Aside from the thought of losing Jack, nothing had ever caused her so much heartache as the knowledge she had no right to be by his side when he might be dying.

Why were women willing to give up so much for love while men lived their lives freely?

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all. Sophia heard herself say as much aloud. Her heart ached for Jack. He was somewhere in this house, languishing injured in a bed, hurting...wondering...

He was so close and still, so far from her reach.

"Sophia?" a strangely accented voice called.

Sophia lifted her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Mortified, she found herself eye to eye with the countess. Instinctively, Sophia drew the covers higher as if she could hide herself from Jack's angelic bride to be. "Your Grace," she greeted in a tremulous voice.

"You are feeling better?" the countess asked.

Sophia tried to push herself up to sit but lost her resolve. "A little."

Every muscle and nerve in her body felt as if it would snap with tension. She had not expected to ever, ever be confronted by the countess. What was worse, Sophia could not tear her eyes from the woman. She'd never seen hair such a pale blonde before. And the countess's eyes shone as deep blue as an October sky. Her lightly powdered skin was absolutely flawless. Every movement she made attested to her aristocratic blood and upbringing.

"How is...how is...*he*?" Sophia asked unable to utter Jack's name to this woman. Somehow, it seemed far too intimate, too presumptuous.

The countess's eyes darkened and her copious bosom rose and fell with a deep breath. "He is...delirious."

Sophia's lips parted. Despite her swimming head and feeble arms, she pushed herself up.

The countess averted her eyes momentarily before their gazes connected once more. "He calls for you...incessantly."

Sophia didn't dare to hope. Her breathing quickened.

"I fear he will die," the countess said. "Will you go to him?"

Without hesitation, Sophia threw back the covers. "I need a robe," she said.

She could scarcely believe a countess was acting as her handmaiden as the beautiful blonde retrieved a dressing gown and rushed to Sophia's side to help her don it. Her knees shook as she tried to stand. Blackness threatened her vision but Sophia refused to give in.

"I will help you," the countess said, hooking an arm around Sophia's waist.

Sophia was too stunned, sore and shaky to take in the easy opulence that was Amberley as she leaned heavily on the countess. Luckily, it wasn't far to Jack's bed chamber. She feared she would collapse if she had to walk much farther.

She was hardly prepared for the sight of Jack lying motionless in the center of his monstrous bed. A tired-looking physician passed his bloodletting tools to a waiting servant. He eyed Sophia before going back to the task of binding Jack's wrist. "You shouldn't be out of bed."

"Lord Stafford asks for her," the countess said adamantly.

Hobbes stood near the wall, his face wan and drawn.

Sophia shook as she neared the bed.

"Send for the vicar," the physician told Hobbes.

Jack was dying? Sophia refused to believe it. She climbed onto the side of the bed and clasped his cold hand in hers. "Jack?"

She swallowed thickly. "Jack?"

"He's been unresponsive for two days," the doctor said blandly. "I suggest you make your peace with him."

Sophia tenderly brushed Jack's dark hair back from his forehead. "Darling, I'm here," she whispered, shutting everything and everyone else out of her thoughts. "I'm with you. I won't leave you."

His hand tightened on hers but she didn't want to hope. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him—not because of her own selfishness. If only she'd been strong enough to forego love and marry Lord Wisbech ...

"Sophia..." he breathed her name.

Tears poured down her cheeks. "Don't leave me, love. Stay here with me. I...I love you, Jack. Please be strong."

He heaved a deep breath and a cough rattled in his chest—but his hand still clutched hers with an iron grip.

* * * * *

Jack opened his eyes. The room was dark except for a single beeswax candle on the bedside table. The wick had grown long and was in need of trimming. The last few days were a blur. All he could recall was terrible pain in his chest, an excruciating cough, shivering with fevered chills and a soft voice urging him to be strong.

Vaguely he recalled that a blonde goddess had been in the room—his fiancée, Lady Hilda. There had been talk of her arrival but he had not expected her this soon. Although she had been attentive, he had wanted Sophia.

As awareness seeped back, he realized warm fingers were entwined with his. He shifted and noticed the dark head on the bed beside him. Sophia? He brushed his palm over her hair and immediately, she lifted her head.

Her eyes widened dramatically and a slow smile claimed her lips. "Jack," she whispered, pressing her palm to his forehead. "Your fever has broken."

Even in the dim light, he could see the awful bruise on her cheek. "What did he do to you?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

She cast her gaze down. "It doesn't matter. He's dead now."

Jack's heart lurched. "I wasn't there for you. I'm so, so sorry, Sophia."

She shook her head. "What happened was my fault. If only you hadn't left your pistol. If only I'd...If only I'd married him..."

"Don't you ever say that again," he warned. "Do you hear me, Sophia? Don't you ever utter those words again."

"But you nearly died...because...because of me." A tear coursed down her face, eerily highlighting the purplish bruise. Jack resisted the compulsion to brush it away, fearing touching her would hurt her.

"I would die for you," he said, feeling a surge of something unexplainable cresting inside him.

She moved over him and softly pressed her lips to his. When her hand cupped his jaw so she could deepen the kiss ever so slightly, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close.

Ignoring the dull aching in his chest, he held her as tightly as he could to kiss her thoroughly. Her tongue teased his lips tentatively and when he opened his mouth to her, she moaned and took her sweet fill of him. At that moment, he realized he could never marry Lady Hilda – not when he was hopelessly in love with Sophia.

His responsibility to his father's wishes and title no longer mattered. If Lady Hilda brought a breach of promise suit against him, he would gladly hand over everything he owned.

But he would do anything, say anything – give up everything – to spend the rest of his life with Sophia by his side.

"Lord Stafford!"

Sophia quickly drew away at the sound of the physician's voice. Her heart skittered with joy and love. Still dazed from his kiss, she stumbled when hands gripped her shoulders and swept her away so the physician could examine Jack.

"Someone awaken the countess," another voice said.

And then Hobbes' sleepy face loomed into Sophia's view. "My Lady, you should step out."

She stared, trying to tell herself it was all right, that Hobbes was correct. Obviously, Jack still intended to keep her as his mistress. He wouldn't have kissed her so sweetly if he hadn't. And yet...

The thought of having to leave his side because the woman who would be his wife *had to be awakened* and brought here broke Sophia's heart. After all, she was the one for whom he had asked. She was the one who had kept vigil for a day and a night.

Hurt and dejected, she reluctantly allowed Hobbes to walk her back to her room.

"I'll have some food brought up," Hobbes said.

"No, thank you," Sophia said, hugging her arms to herself. She couldn't possibly eat now, not when her heart had been ripped out and dashed to the floor to be trampled.

Instead, she shucked her dressing gown and crawled into her cold bed, staring at the window as the light of dawn grew brighter and brighter. Knowing Jack had emerged from the claws of death filled her with tremendous joy but her happiness was bittersweet because right now, the woman who would bear his children—his legitimate children—a woman he didn't even know, was by his side.

Long, torturous hours passed as Sophia lay, staring, refusing to think, refusing to feel. What on earth had she agreed to?

But inwardly, she knew the moment she got word that Jack wanted to see to her, she would fly to him with open arms. It wasn't because she accepted second place in his life, she would go because she loved him that much.

The sounds of horses, carriage wheels and men barking orders drifted through the thick leaded glass window panes. Had someone arrived?

Sophia pushed back the covers and padded barefoot across the room. Drawing back the lace panel, she peered out the window, watching, stunned, as the countess stepped into her grand coach. As soon as she was inside, the coachman kissed to the horses and the royal procession of horses, carriages and footman were off.

"Why would she leave?" Sophia muttered out loud. And then realization struck. Her blood drained, pooling in her shaking legs. Her fingers flew involuntarily to her lips. Her breath froze.

Jack was dead.

There was no other explanation.

She whirled, searching frantically for her dressing gown. No. No! This couldn't be. She hadn't got the chance to tell him goodbye. She hadn't got to tell him that she loved him.

Hands shaking violently, she shrugged on the thick garment. Just then, a tap came on her door and it opened. The servant girl who'd been with her when she'd awakened the previous day stood there. She bobbed a curtsy. "Come with me, please, My Lady. Your presence is needed in his lordship's chamber."

Immobilized, Sophia gaped. "Is he—" She stopped short, unable to utter the word that hung on her lips.

"I'm only told to bring you to his chamber, ma'am."

Biting her bottom lip to keep from sobbing, Sophia followed the maid down the hallway. Her heart felt like a stone in her chest. Heavy. Hard. Jack was dead. She knew it. Why else would the countess and her entire entourage have gone away?

The servant stopped at the door. "You may go in."

Sophia searched the girl's eyes for some inkling of grief but there was none. She gulped as the girl opened the door to admit her. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she stepped inside fully expecting to find Jack lying in state.

Instead, he sat in the bed, resting against a thick bank of pillows. A wide smile claimed his lips when he saw her. Sophia squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again to be certain she wasn't imagining it all. "Jack? I thought—"

"Darling," he called, waving her to come to him.

Thankfully, no one else was in the room. "I thought you were—"

"Come here!" he called, laughing.

He was alive! And he was smiling and laughing. After the fact saturated her, she darted across the vast chamber and climbed onto the edge of the bed. "I thought you had died," she said, tears pouring unchecked down her cheeks.

"Died? Heavens, no," he said. "I'm much better. In fact, I'm very well now that you are here."

He cupped her face and lightly brushed the pad of his thumb over the bruise.

"But I saw the countess leaving and—" she began.

"Ah," he interjected. "Yes. She's gone."

"Gone?" Sophia asked. "I don't understand. She left? Because of me?"

Jack nodded. "Yes."

Sophia hung her head. "I'm sorry."

He tilted her chin up so that she looked into his eyes. "Sorry? I thought you'd be happy."

"I would never do anything to jeopardize your future," she said.

He laughed heartily. "Sophia, you silly minx. I asked her to leave. I cried off."

Sophia stared, disbelieving.

"I told her I couldn't marry her," he continued.

"But—"

"How could I have possibly married her...when I am so utterly in love with you?"

Sophia's lips parted. She wanted to pinch herself to make certain she was not dreaming. He *loved* her?

"As it turns out, she is in love with some Russian nobleman. She was thrilled to break the engagement," Jack explained.

Speechless, Sophia searched his eyes. She could hardly believe it. Too much had happened for her to absorb it all.

One side of Jack's mouth twisted into a lopsided winsome smile. "Darling, will you marry me?"

Marry him? Marry Jack? Sophia smiled as she let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Everything she had ever hoped for, everything she had ever wanted, hovered within her reach. Everything. But rather than answering him with words, she fell into his embrace and responded with a kiss that would leave Jack Badcock, Earl of Stafford, without a doubt that her answer was yes.

Epilogue

The cloud of scandal had completely dissipated by the time Sophia and Jack married. As it turned out, everyone in society had regarded Lord Wisbech as a brute and no one was surprised that he'd tried to murder Jack.

While Sophia's parents, looking to avoid public scandal, came to the wedding, Sophia had relatively little to do with them beforehand. Her mother had tearfully begged her forgiveness and Sophia had happily given it to her.

But while Sophia's parents and most of the *haut ton* had been in attendance to witness the marriage between the two lovebirds, one person had been conspicuously absent—Lady Huntingdon.

Sophia hadn't been shocked to hear the gossip from her friends, Misses Pettigrew and Markham. Apparently Lord Huntingdon had discovered Lady Huntingdon engaged in a compromising position with the gardener and, weary of her exploits, had sent her to spend the rest of her days in a convent.

The two young women didn't know enough to relate all the details, but Jack had learned through friends that the gardener had given Lady Huntingdon the dreaded pox. Sophia found it difficult to feel sorry for the woman, knowing the part she played in the horrible events that nearly cost Jack his life.

Their wedding had been the high society event last fall and even though she and Jack regularly enjoyed each other's company, they had not returned to the hunting lodge together since the mishap.

Today, that would change. History would be laid to rest with only the good memories remaining.

Sophia smiled to herself as she sat atop the mare that had been sired by Armageddon before the horse's tragic death. This horse, named Storm, was just as

beautiful, if not a smarter horse, than Armageddon and Sophia had been thrilled when Jack had presented her with the stunning black mare.

Although Hobbes, some of the staff and the coachman knew, Jack had no idea what Sophia had in store for him.

Spring thunder rumbled in the distance and she glanced back at the darkening sky, hoping the carriage would come along soon. Finally, she heard the rumble of wheels accompanied by the pounding of hooves on the road. The Stafford coach rolled into view.

Grinning, Sophia checked to make sure her domino mask was in place before she adjusted her feathered cock hat and drew her pistol. Spurring Storm, she rode full out toward Jack's coach, rearing to a dramatic halt just beside the passenger door as the carriage ground to a halt. "Stand and deliver!"

Jack's hearty laugh pealed in her ears as he stepped out of the coach.

About the Author

Growing up in the south, where the air is thick with stories steeped in legend and truth, Debra came by her love of romance novels honestly. Well...sort of. At an early age, she pilfered from her grandmother's extensive library and has been a fan of the genre since.

A full-time freelance writer, Debra especially enjoys combining history, mystery and a touch of taboo to weave stories with unforgettable, haunted heroes.

She lives in Alabama with her sexy real life hero, a couple of smart-aleck ghosts and a diabolical black cat.

Debra welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Debra Glass

Bad Kitty

Bought and Paid For

Death by Chocolate

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy I *anthology*

Having Patience

Lucid

Phantom Lovers 1: Gatekeeper

Phantom Lovers 2: Shadowkeeper

Phantom Lovers 3: Watchkeeper

Restraint

Spirit Lifter



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com