



A Wicked Encounter

Sammy Jo Hunt

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Dedication

For Adam, because you dared me to dream again.

To my sister Di, for a lifetime of love and support.

And to Jan, Karen, and Jen, you girls are the wind that carries me.

Thanks for helping me soar.

Foreword

For this story, the author has taken poetic license and created an alternate universe in which death penalty laws were never passed concerning homosexuality. The tale is set in 1792, when doing so would have yielded such a fate. In this universe, identical in every other way to English and French law of the time, male/male relationships were neither forbidden nor against the law. Marriage between same-sex partners was recognized under the law as acceptable, albeit uncommon, thus allowing the story to unfold in this fashion.

Additional allowances have been made wherein an illegitimate child has the right to lay claim to the estate of his or her birthright as in modern-day, and the law will uphold such upon proof of proper documentation. In essence, this is both a love story and a fairy tale. The author sincerely hopes the reader will set aside known historical fact in order to enjoy a romantic, harlequin-esque bit of fancy.

Chapter I

Near Devonshire, England ~ September 1792

The rain fell in blinding sheets, striking the outside of the coach with such force and fury, he thought it might pound through the thin walls and drench him at any second. Christopher Allwyne, the young Duke of Bellwood, sat perched uneasily in the corner of the seat, the heavy darkness pressing in on him. He bowed his head and uttered a quiet prayer, begging the universe to prevent disaster from intruding. The thudding of the horse's hooves, weighty and slick on the wet earth, could be heard through the carriage walls, their steady beat on the muddy road offering only the tiniest fragment of comfort.

Another quarter hour ticked by, or so Christopher thought, as he sat with his head leaning heavily on the pillowed back of the cushioned red velvet seat. Although the handsome phaeton had been built for comfort, on a stormy night even the smoothest roads became treacherous. His body jolted hard, at least the tenth time in the past five minutes, as the carriage wheels hit another water-filled pothole in their path. Christopher was tired, yet keenly aware of the fact his body would ache so badly by the time they arrived at Bellwood Castle that, even in his exhaustion, he likely would find no rest once his head hit the pillow.

The Duke thought back over the events of the past several weeks, letting the rhythmic beat of heavy hooves drone him into a stupor of semi-consciousness. He closed his eyes, only to open them again when a sharp flash of light startled him. The lightning and thunder boomed all around them. They must be nearing the center of the storm now, and his gut clenched tighter in anxiety at the patter of hail stones striking the carriage. Alarmed, eyes wide with fear, Chris sat clutching his leather carryall, fingers taut and white as they pressed hard into the leather scrollwork. Again, he tried to focus and mentally drown out the noise.

He was only on this road, traveling in the thick of night, because of the death of his rich Aunt Polly. She had been the Duchess of Bellwood, and had died from the pneumonia at the age of fifty-six. She'd left no children, and her husband, Henry, the Duke of Bellwood, had been killed some years earlier fighting against the Russians. The title of Duke then passed to Chris's father. The bulk of the Dukedom's wealth, however, had not been entailed to the title, and so therefore remained in Aunt Polly's possession during her lifetime. Unprepared for his aunt's premature passing, Chris now faced the possibility of inheriting additional family money. He hoped she'd seen fit to bequeath her fortune to him, but that remained to be seen.

Chris and his brother were now Aunt Polly's only surviving family, but Chris had been more than a nephew to her; he'd been like a son. She'd put him through law school and helped him start a practice of his own in London. Eventually, she'd even helped buy him a seat in the Cabinet.

With the untimely death of his own parents three years ago in 1789, the family title had passed from Nells Allwyne to Christopher. He missed his mother, Lady Camilla, but they had never been as close as he'd have liked. And his father's sternness had left him grasping for some form of parental connection. Aunt Polly, his father's elder brother's wife, had filled that role for him.

At the mature age of twenty-six, he'd never yet married, and for some reason, he simply had no desire to do so. The young Lady Kathryn, who pined for him back in London, was perfect for him at the ripe age of twenty-one. She was lovely, blond, and had the right genteel upbringing. She wanted him, he was sure, if her letters bespeaking her love were any indication.

He wrote back, but never committed to her. His heart simply wouldn't allow him to. He loved her, but his feelings were of a more brotherly nature, and that was never the proper grounds on which to begin a marriage. He hoped love would come in time, so he drew out their courtship, feeling he would know the right time to propose.

Chris felt as though his feet were on the path his parents would have approved of. It was the least he could do, to bring wealth, a good name, and recognition to his father's memory. Marrying Kathryn would also bring a fair dowry, not that he needed the money. His father had left him with a small, respectable fortune that would carry him well into his later years. Chris enjoyed his work as a barrister. Through his continued profession, as long as he handled his finances well, he'd always have more than enough.

But it had been more than two years since they'd begun a tentative courtship, and so far Chris was no closer to asking for Kathryn's hand. Her parents were growing tired of waiting for him. He feared that once he arrived back from this trip, Lord McDowell would set down the law, or send him packing. Chris needed to find a way to appease the family and buy more time.

He cast those thoughts aside in favor of contemplating what might lie before him now that his aunt had passed on. He'd always suspected she might bequeath him part of her fortune, because of how close they'd been. Still, Chris never thought he'd have to find out at such an early age. That part alone made him sad. He was greatly concerned about family and those he cared for. It seemed to be an innate part of his nature that he couldn't be false with others. This was both a blessing and a curse.

The Duchess of Bellwood had been a strong woman who'd run her husband's lands and businesses with the help of a trusted overseer. She'd loved and schooled Chris, showering him with gifts. Perhaps she'd been lonely at being left a widow and childless. But since the death of his parents, Chris had spent many a fortnight with her, talking and keeping the woman company. He'd spent hours reading or playing the piano or guitar, singing and bringing pleasure to her life.

Although Aunt Polly had kept much of her personal life from him, such as her early years in France before she'd married his uncle, she was still his closest family member. Now that his younger brother Dante was away at prep school and would be for another year, Chris felt the loss of Polly even more than he wished to admit. He'd known she was poorly the last time he'd been to visit, but with his duties in the Cabinet, he'd been unable to attend to her as frequently as he would have liked.

Had he only known just how ill she'd been, he'd have searched the countryside for the best physicians. Instead, he was on his way to pay his last respects, oversee the funeral services, and be present for the reading of Aunt Polly's will.

The sound of an explosion, though only thunder, snapped Chris out of his musings. It resounded deep and sharp, cracking the night with earsplitting force. A blinding bolt of lightning followed immediately after, illuminating the darkness and causing the horses to whinny and cry. Another sharp jolt shook the carriage as the vehicle careened off the road and rolled through a patch of rough earth. The terrifying scream of an injured animal met his ears and then he was falling... falling... The coach tipped onto its side with the force of an earthquake in slow motion. All four horses went down onto their sides in the mud, landing on top of each other, thrashing, kicking, and screaming wildly.

Aside from the wind and rain hitting the ground and the thunder rolling across the blackened sky, all became eerily quiet. Chris groaned, lying fully against the carriage wall, which was now the floor. His leather carryall had broken open, spilling its contents all over him, and he could feel a trickle of blood oozing down the side of his forehead. His breathing labored

as his heart slowly stopped racing, Chris lay still unmoving for several minutes and tried to get his bearings. He wondered why he heard no sounds of the driver, and feared the worst. Slipping in and out of alertness as he realized help was not coming, he forced himself to roll over, crawl onto his hands and knees, and attempt to stand.

His legs were wobbly and his gut churned with nervous energy. Chris called out for Thomas, his driver, but received no answer. Peering into the darkness that now completely enveloped him, he felt his way around, discerning that the carriage lay on its left side in the mud. His only means of escape was the right side door, which now served as the roof.

Reaching upward, he felt for the latch and turned it, trying to push the door up and open. The wind caught the door and threw it open, causing the door to slam down hard against the outer wooden wall. A pale stream of moonlight shone through the clouds as they shifted, sending a tiny shaft of light into the interior before disappearing again.

Bracing his foot against the front of the seat he'd been sitting on, Chris attempted to hoist himself up, pulling with all his might. Pelted with raindrops, his head moved up and out into the fresh, crisp night air, but the wind unexpectedly yanked hold of the door and brought it crashing down on top of his head.

Stunned from the blow, Chris fell, hitting the bottom side of the carriage with a thud. The last thing he felt was the spurt of blood from the gash on his forehead, exacerbated by the impact. He groaned in pain, then passed out cold.

Some hours later, Chris woke to the sounds of a voice calling to him gently. A man with long black hair, tied back at his nape, knelt near him inside the overturned carriage, holding a lighted candle. The door, or rather roof, was open and a moderate rain misted the man's head and shoulders.

"Come come now, Monsieur, up you go," he cajoled softly, shaking Chris's shoulder. Not waiting for Chris to respond, the man touched firm but tender fingers softly at the dried blood of the wound on his forehead. "Looks as though you've taken a nasty blow to the head. We'll need to get that cleaned and dressed as soon as we find some shelter," the man said in a thick French accent, his voice quietly reassuring. Oddly, he bent his head and pressed a tender kiss to Chris's forehead, opposite the injury. "Come, *mon amour*, we must get you out of here before you catch your death."

Chris's lids fluttered open. Muddled but becoming more alert, he stared up into intense cornflower blue eyes and the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. *Dear God*, he thought, *is that kohl lining his eyes?*

"Where am I?" he began, his brain slightly addled. He attempted to shake off his confusion. Then the memory of the storm and the accident suddenly rushed in. "Ohhh..." He groaned, the pain of being hit on the head and thrown inside the carriage coming back to him. He lifted a tentative hand to his forehead. "My man, my driver..." he mumbled, trying to think aloud.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur, he didn't make it. Looks as though he was thrown hard from the driver's seat when the coach overturned. And your horses... they were all seriously injured when they fell. They'll need to be put down, I'm afraid. My coachman will take care of it." He pressed his hand to Chris's shoulder in sympathy. "My name's de Lombard, the Marquis de Lombard. My coach came upon the accident as we were making our way east. That must have been a fierce storm you were caught in, and it's not over yet," the gentleman added half to himself, a steel

edge to his voice. He glanced up briefly at the rain hitting him through the open door.

Tender but slow, the Marquis offered his hand, pulling Chris up to stand on his feet. He swayed a little, and the man's strong arm came out to steady him. "All right?" he asked in concern. Chris nodded, murmuring his thanks. He was still a little dazed, but he looked up, and then down at the strewn contents of his bag. "Let me help you." The Marquis knelt to pick up the clothing and other scattered articles. Chris bent down, reaching for the items near him. Together they refilled his carryall and cinched it shut tight.

The Frenchman pushed the case out onto the upended side of the carriage, then snuffed out the candle and put it back in the pocket of his long black overcoat. He hauled himself up easily till he lay atop the carriage, then leaned back in, extending his hands to Chris. With a little effort, the Marquis hoisted Chris up and out. Relieved, Chris sat atop the coach breathing in the fresh air, cold rain hitting him in the face.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm grateful for your assistance, Monsieur. I don't know how I can ever repay you. You may have saved my life tonight," he added softly. The handsome man grinned, revealing beautiful, even white teeth. He had an amazing smile that lit up the night, along with Christopher's insides. The sensation was peculiar, and Chris tried not to think of why that bothered him.

"You're quite welcome, um...?" The Marquis hesitated, his eyes fixed on Chris.

"Oh, forgive my appalling lack of manners. I'm Chris. Actually, it's Christopher Allwyne. I hold the family title of Duke, but I've never quite become accustomed to it." For some reason, his admission left him embarrassed.

"Christopher, Your Grace? I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," the Marquis de Lombard said with a question in his voice. "Perhaps we can talk more later, and you can tell me all about yourself then. But for now, 'tis probably best if we find some shelter for the night. Are you from this area?" His eyes flickered over the general locale.

"My aunt's castle is somewhere near here, but since I don't know exactly where 'here' is, I'm not sure how far away we actually are," Chris replied. It drew raised eyebrows from the other man, but the Marquis only nodded in response.

"I believe we passed a small inn several miles back. If you don't mind, perhaps we might find lodging there, Your Grace," de Lombard said, indicating the way they'd come. "We need to tend to that cut on your forehead. It looks deep."

Chris nodded and began to climb down from the coach. Mid-step, a wave of dizziness afflicted him and he stumbled. His rescuer caught him by the arm to keep him from falling to the ground, his blue eyes wide with worry.

"Here, let me." De Lombard climbed down behind Chris and supported his body's weight securely. The man's lean frame, pressed firmly against Chris's backside, was warm and solid, and he smelled like leather and warm male spice. The sensation was pleasant, perhaps more than pleasant, the contact stirring unfamiliar yearnings inside Chris. Strong arms supported him as the Marquis eased them both down gently, until they stood on solid, albeit wet and muddy, ground.

"Thank you. You're most kind," whispered Chris, shaken from more than just his near fall. He watched as the tall man hoisted himself back up to grab his leather carryall, then gracefully land on his feet as he jumped back down beside Chris. The man took hold of his elbow and urged him toward a grand carriage that stood off to the side of the road.

A richly cloaked driver hurried to open the door for his master. Chris climbed inside. A small lantern hanging from the center of the ceiling cast a low but cheerful glow on rich velvet upholstery and heavily carved woodwork. The inside smelled just like the man himself, sweet

and spicy, of fine wood and heavy, tanned leather. The scent was pungent and filled Chris's nostrils like a drug. He sank into the soft cushioned bench and curled in on himself, closing his eyes for a moment. The Marquis joined him, after speaking quickly in French to his driver and giving explicit instructions on where he was to take them. The man nodded his compliance. "*Oui, Monsieur. Absolument,*" he answered, then folded up the coach stairs and shut the door.

A moment later, the coach lurched forward, the four black stallions glistening in the steady downpour as their powerful muscles contracted and began the task of pulling the carriage back down the road the way they'd come. The nobleman focused his eyes intently on Chris, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"You should rest. Close your eyes, Christopher. We'll be to the inn in a matter of minutes," he said reassuringly. Chris didn't argue. He was already too tired to complain or contradict and his head was beginning to throb horribly. He leaned back and drew his damp coat tighter about himself, closing his eyes. The sound of steady horses' hooves lulled him swiftly away, and he slept.

An insistent shaking of his shoulder roused Chris again. He opened his eyes, attempting to clear the fuzziness from his brain, and met an intense blue gaze.

"Christopher, wake up. We've arrived at the inn," came the man's voice. He was so close, his warm breath ghosted over Chris's cheeks.

It took all Chris's strength to force himself up and out of the carriage, allowing the Marquis to guide him inside. It was late, likely well after midnight, but Chris couldn't be sure. He just wanted a soft warm bed and some sleep. His host took care of everything, paying for their lodging and arranging to have food sent up to their room, along with some medicinal supplies so he could clean and dress the wound on Chris's temple.

A short twenty minutes later, Chris had stripped out of his wet clothes and climbed into a large feather bed with fresh linens and warm blankets. He was dressed only in his white cotton pantalets, reclining bare-chested against the pillows, as the innkeeper brought him a tray of hot soup and fresh baked bread. The Marquis had tenderly cleaned his face and temple, lingering longer than necessary and carefully bandaging the cut for him, when their food arrived. The buxom woman blushed as she hurried to her task setting out the meal, then left just as quickly.

"What's your name? I mean, you know mine, but I don't know your given name," Chris asked, suddenly curious. He looked directly at the other man who was sitting in a chair beside a small table, eating his fare.

"Evan. My given name is Evan," he responded softly.

Chris looked down and nodded once, taking a spoonful of soup and stuffing a piece of buttered bread in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment before responding. When he did, he said Evan's name, letting it roll off his tongue as though he were savoring the taste of it on his lips.

"*Evannnnn,*" he mused with a smile, drawing out the word with a lazy drawl. "The Marquis Evan de Lombard," he stated more forcefully to test the name. Then, raising his eyes, he met that direct, cornflower blue gaze again. "I owe you much, Evan. Thank you for taking such good care of me this evening. I'm most grateful to you for your kindness." Chris sincerely wished to repay his new friend. They stared at each other a long moment, a breathless energy hanging in the atmosphere. Then Chris broke the spell and looked away, nervousness settling in the pit of his gut. He took another bite of bread, hiding his emotions in the act of eating. But he could still feel Evan's eyes on him from where he sat. He resisted the urge to look up and meet that intense scrutiny. The sound of a spoon scraping the bottom of a porcelain bowl met his ears

as Evan resumed his meal.

A little while later, Evan stood and cleared away the dishes to the table, then went to shed his own heavy, damp clothing. Once he was down to his undergarments, he approached the side of the bed. Pulling back the covers on his side of the mattress, he glanced over at Chris. "We'd better get some sleep. Morning will be here all too soon, and we'll need to solve your lack of transportation."

Chris acknowledged the truth of those words, then scooted down into the blankets till he was laying on his side. "Goodnight, Evan. Sleep well." With a small yawn, he closed his eyes.

"Goodnight, Christopher," the man responded, then snuffed out the bedside oil lamp and quickly crawled under the covers.

Evan wasn't normally so at odds with sharing another man's bed, but something about those honest brown eyes filled his body with a sweet rush of adrenalin. He needed to keep his mind out of the gutter and on more appropriate matters. After all, he barely knew the man. He shut his eyes in a deliberate attempt to block out Chris's image, but it didn't go away, no matter how tight he squeezed his eyes shut. It was going to be a *long* night.

He awakened some time later in the darkness, listening for the sound that had roused him. Then he heard it again, a soft whimpering beside him. It sounded as if Christopher was crying, muttering in his sleep. He stirred restlessly, a sob escaping him, as he carried on a conversation with some painful phantom. Evan didn't even think, just reached out and ran a caressing hand along Chris's cheek. He felt wetness there, tears slipping freely down his warm skin. He brushed them away, then pulled Chris into his arms and held him tight. The smaller man clung to him like a frightened child in his mother's arms.

Evan bent and pressed a kiss to his temple, shushing him and murmuring sweet, comforting words of love near his ear to draw him from his nightmare. Chris's sobs softened, then quieted, and his eyes fluttered open in the dark. He looked up at Evan questioningly, their gazes meeting, then raised his mouth for a kiss. Evan couldn't resist, his moist lips fastening firmly down, tasting Chris like warm honey and moving insistently. His tongue pushed against the crease of lips that opened for him, granting him entrance into the sweetness of that hot little mouth.

What began as a tentative exploration quickly turned into an inferno of heat and lips and tongues exploring each other, tasting and testing how far the other would let him go. A short moan floated onto the air from deep inside Chris. It went straight to Evan's cock, pumping it full of heat and rigid desire. He pushed Chris onto his back and rolled on top of him, kissing and sucking and licking every inch of neck and skin within reach.

"Oh, Christopher... I *want* you," Evan said with a strangled cry. His hands slid down between their bodies to knead the aroused flesh between his legs. He cupped Chris's bulge and rubbed against the hardening shaft, then slipped lower to fondle between balls and anus. Chris's hips arched up into the caress, seeking greater stimulation, and he groaned, a soft, sensual, desperate noise.

"Evan... oh, Evan..." he begged, the words falling like a prayer from his lips. Chris canted his hips, rolling them upward toward Evan in a gesture that urged him on, while his hands grabbed Evan's ass cheeks and squeezed hard for purchase. It had more than the desired effect on Evan, as it ground their cocks more forcefully together beneath the fabric of their underclothes.

“Off!” Chris whispered urgently, his hands slipping beneath the waistband of Evan’s linens, the only thing keeping them apart. It was maddening, this sudden urgency to be physically united. Evan pulled away briefly, and they both stripped themselves of their garments, tossing them aside. Then Evan was back between Chris’s legs, grinding the hardness of his need into the man, letting him feel his desire with each sharp thrust.

Putting two fingers in his own mouth, Evan brought them down dripping wet and pushed between Chris’s cheeks, entering him slowly, filling up his starving hole. Fingering him deeper to stretch him open, Evan watched as Chris moaned, legs falling wider apart, begging for more contact. Curling his fingers, Evan brushed hard against that sweet spot, and Chris came undone, thrusting into it, clearly burning for more. In and out Evan’s fingers slid, then back in deep to the hilt, touching, feeling over and around that bump that drew heavy gasps of pleasure and desire for more. He rubbed and stimulated Chris’s body till he writhed with need.

Keening hard, Chris arched his back beautifully, needy little noises whimpering in his throat. “Oh, God, I... take me Evan, fill me up, make me yours,” he gasped.

Immediately, Evan removed his fingers. Using a palm full of spit, he ran his hand down his cock and slicked himself, then buried his hard length balls-deep inside that hot, begging hole. Chris was hungry for it; they were both absolutely desperate. Once inside, Evan couldn’t hold still. He thrust in deeper, brushing that sensitive spot, drawing another whimper of pleasure and need from the small body writhing beneath him. Then Evan was moving, hard and fast, steadily building the intensity and the rhythm of their sex till they were both pulsing and aching and groaning with it. In and out... then back in... deeper... then deeper still. Evan was stretched out atop the other man, touching everywhere he could reach. His tongue speared down the smaller man’s throat, claiming that mouth as his own while his free hand pumped Chris’s engorged cock till they both reached the pinnacle of arousal.

A final deep thrust in and they climaxed together, both reaching their peak and crying out as they kissed and suckled each other’s lips and tongues. They rode out the high, coming together and spiraling out of control into the blackness. Jerking and arching into the long aftershocks of their lovemaking brought them closer together still, sweat and bodily fluids mingling together between their heaving chests. The intensity of their passion defied description, though neither possessed the capacity to speak, even if either one had wanted to. Instead they breathed heavily, sucking in huge gulps of air, finally coming back to themselves some moments later.

Chris let out an exhausted chuckle, followed by one from Evan. They laughed together as they recovered, their joy complete. Then abruptly, they were mouth to mouth again, devouring lips and tongues, nibbling and kissing the air from each other’s lungs. When they finally surfaced long enough to breathe, there still wasn’t anything either wanted to say. It had all been spoken in their lovemaking, their touching and giving to each other. Still out of breath and winded, Chris nuzzled Evan’s neck, burying his face against Evan’s skin.

“Just hold me,” he whispered, and Evan bit down gently into Chris’s shoulder, marking him as his.

“Mine,” Evan murmured into his ear, and hummed softly, contentedly, before licking over the wound to assuage the sting of his teeth on soft flesh.

“Mmmm...” Chris acknowledged agreeably, drifting off peacefully.

A few stray thoughts floated through his brain as he flitted in and out of consciousness. Truth be told, Chris was overwhelmed by what had just taken place between him and his newfound lover. It was a frightening reality to comprehend, that his destiny perhaps lay beside

him. A relationship such as this could change his entire future. He hadn't had that many affairs. But this one... this was different. Never had he allowed himself to succumb so quickly with anyone. And, even though he'd tested these waters with another lover in the past, never had he been moved to such physical and emotional depths of feeling and sensation. Sinking deeper into a relaxed state, hanging on the precipice of sleep, Chris decided he'd think about it tomorrow. Right now, he was utterly exhausted.

Besides, at the moment, there was nothing more he wanted. For the first time in forever, he'd found where he belonged. And it was right here... in the Marquis de Lombard's bed...

In Evan's arms.

Chapter II

Sunlight filled the room, streaming in through lace curtains and falling warm across the two naked bodies curled up together beneath the blankets. Evan blinked slowly, opening his eyes to the bright morning light. Coming quickly alert, he took in the room and its contents, his gaze finally coming to rest on the small, brunette-haired man snuggled in the crook of his arm beside him. Warmth filled his eyes and heart at the memory of mere hours ago, the knowledge that something extraordinary had happened in this room.

When Evan took a new lover, it normally didn't happen quite this way. He was somewhat of a well-known Casanova back in Paris and the surrounding villages, and more often than not, his love affairs lasted days or perhaps weeks. But only once had his heart been taken. That was a long time ago, before everything changed, before his world had been turned upside down with the news that came to him upon the death of his mother. That news had been life-altering, and he was still reeling from all it represented.

Nine years ago, he'd lost Sebastian, his boyhood love, at the tender age of twenty-one. Sebastian had enlisted in the French military and been killed within the first year of being away while battling against the Turks. Evan was devastated, turning to drink and many lovers to fill the painful void. He'd been with both men and women back then, testing the waters to know what felt right, hoping somewhere along the way he'd find another love that would fill his heart like before. But none had. The past nine years had been full of pomp and promiscuity, and some excellent lovers had lain in his bed. But none had taken his heart. That was before the arrival of the letter, the one his mother had left to him some months ago, to be read only upon her death.

His mother, the Marquise Leslee de Lombard, had had an illicit affair with the Duke of Bellwood more than thirty years ago. She'd been a young, vulnerable twenty-two-year-old when they'd met in Paris at a political ball held by King Louis XV, who was raising an army along with Russia and Austria to go to war against Prussia. The Marquis Pierre de Lombard and his wife Leslee had attended the ball in the spring of 1761, where they'd met and become friendly with the Duke and Duchess of Bellwood, who had been visiting from England.

Due to the Duke's enormous fortunes, his friendship and support had been in high demand by the French, Russian, and Austrian aristocracies and governments. Introduced at the royal ball, it had been love—or perhaps lust—at first sight between the Duke and Marquise. They'd had a dalliance that lasted for several weeks while Henry had been present in Paris for financial negotiations that were to support the upcoming war. Some weeks later, Evan's mother had discovered she was pregnant, and contacted the Duke to inform him of the impending birth.

The Duke had traveled back to Paris during the summer and met with Leslee to discuss the matter. She was never one to be false with those she loved. As a result, they'd decided it would be best to confide the truth to her husband, so they met with the Marquis to reveal their

secret. Pierre was heartbroken, but agreed not to divorce his wife because he loved her.

It was the Marquis' choice, to avoid a personal and political scandal of enormous proportions for all concerned, that the child should be born and reared as the heir to the Marquis de Lombard's title and fortunes. The Duke of Bellwood paid the Marquis the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds to insure his silence, and to provide for the child's care and education.

In order not to jeopardize the financial aid the Duke would offer the French-Russian-Austrian political alliance, which would also benefit the Marquis de Lombard, the Duke was allowed to wash his hands of the illegitimate child, and no one would be the wiser. The three agreed that the child would never be told of his true origins. Evan Michael de Lombard made his debut to the world at the beginning of the following year, 1762.

Several months later, the three powers went to war against Prussia, and by the end of that year, Prussia crumbled under the pressure and peace was finally restored with the Treaty of Paris. The only thing lost to France at the time was their North American Empire in the New World. Life went on, and no one learned the truth, least of all the ebony-haired boy whose birth had witnessed major political turmoil with the war that ensued.

Eleven years later, the Marquis de Lombard died of a heart attack at the age of thirty-six, leaving Evan to be raised by his mother. With his mother's help, he'd inherited his father's title and taken over his aristocratic duties. After the death of Louis XV in 1774, when the wars and political intrigue surrounding the involvement of the Duke of Bellwood had been dead and buried with the King, Leslee had drafted the letter to be delivered to her son upon her death.

The passing of the Marquise de Lombard six months ago had left Evan devastated, only to have his entire world turned upside down when he'd been presented with "The Letter" at the reading of his mother's will. She'd finally disclosed to him, in her own hand, the truth of his genealogy and birthright to the Duke of Bellwood's title and fortunes.

Along with her letter, his mother had bequeathed to him the original letter signed by the Duke, which discussed the transfer of twenty-five thousand pounds to the Marquis' accounts in Paris, to pay for the Marquis' and Marquise's silence, as well as cover the costs of the child's rearing and tutelage.

At the age of thirty, Evan now felt like he literally faced starting over in every aspect of his life. Although money wasn't an issue, one could never be too rich. It was the principle of the matter, the need to claim what was rightfully his. His birthright alone would allow him more privilege, as well as provide him with dual citizenship and titles in both England and France. With the added prestige of the Bellwood name and fortunes to his credit, Evan could continue to pursue his life seeking pleasure and fulfillment wherever and however he desired.

Evan's mother had also disclosed the Duke had been killed in battle against the Russians some fifteen years ago, and to her knowledge, the secret of Evan's true identity had gone to the grave with him. She assumed not even the Duke's wife had any idea he'd fathered an heir. Along with the letter Leslee had penned, the draft was the only remaining proof of his true parentage. He'd brought both documents with him to confront those in charge of the Bellwood estate. It was irrefutable proof that Henry, Duke of Bellwood, was Evan's father.

Evan had traveled to London a fortnight ago, making preparations to contact the Duchess of Bellwood and stake his claim to the title and fortunes that were rightfully his. While in London, the news had come to him that the Duchess had passed away, which had changed his plans, and he'd decided to make his appearance at the reading of her will. It would most likely be

the best course of action with the least amount of public repercussions for both families. Although he wouldn't back down on this, he still had a heart. Evan preferred using tact and proper etiquette to making a scene. He wanted what was his, but he didn't want the Duchess's relatives to hate him for it.

Jolted back to the present, he gazed down at the sleeping man lying in his arms and continued to ponder the miraculous events of the past twelve hours. He was never one to refuse to help a stranger in need, and the chance meeting with Christopher the night before had been the icing on the cake for the start of his new life. Perhaps now, Evan would finally have all he'd ever dreamed of, including love with the right partner to make it all worthwhile. He could only hope that Christopher felt the same way.

Somehow, Evan realized this affair was different. Christopher had taken his body, and in the process, stolen his heart without meaning to just by giving his love so completely. Those honest, deep brown eyes had captured what had remained elusive in all the others. Evan hoped it wouldn't... couldn't... be over after just one night. He must find out everything there was to know about His Grace, the young and beautiful Christopher Allwyne, and marry him if possible.

Watching the handsome man sleeping, Evan was intensely curious to know more about where this fair creature had come from: his life, his past, and his family, if he had one. Evan hoped to heaven above that there was no one else in Christopher's life, at least not romantically. If the way he'd given himself so freely to Evan when they'd made love, without reservation, holding nothing back, was any indication, he'd swear on both his fathers' graves that Christopher had no one else. That kind of passion couldn't be feigned. What had happened between them last night was real, he was certain of it. Praise be to all the gods that had overturned the young nobleman's carriage and allowed Evan to be the one to come to his rescue. He was confident that the universe had conspired to bring them together. There was no question in Evan's mind that the two of them belonged together.

A tender kiss pressed to Evan's mouth yanked him from his thoughts. Brown eyes held him intently, and Evan realized that Chris had been awake and watching him for several long minutes. Evan smiled warmly in response, and he eagerly returned the embrace, kissing those full, pouty lips till they reddened and shone with wetness.

"Bonjour, *mon amour*," Evan whispered joyfully.

Chris raised a hand to trail gentle fingers down the cheek of his handsome rescuer, his brain still a bit befuddled by sleep. "Mmmm... good day to you too," he answered, catching lovely bow-shaped lips to his in another long, languid kiss. They nuzzled each other's mouths thoroughly.

"Sleep well?" Evan asked with an arch of one black brow.

Chris nodded and sighed softly, stretching against the other man just a little, feeling a hint of soreness lower down, a pleasant reminder of their physical union. "Mhmm. You?" he asked between pressing a trail of kisses down the front of Evan's chest.

"I slept as never before, despite there being only a few hours left of the night," Evan said, his voice filled with wonder. "How is your head? Any pain there?"

"A dull ache, but nothing I won't live through, thanks to you." Chris chuckled. Then he sighed again. "I don't want to move, let alone get up and face the day. I'm content to stay right here with you for the rest of today."

Evan grinned at that. "I know just how you feel, *mon cher*. Alas, the day is young and I've some business to attend to this afternoon. Which means we need to decide upon transportation for you. But Christopher, I must know if I may see you again. What we shared last

night was beyond my wildest imaginings, and I cannot lose you after so short a time. I've only just found you, and I wish to continue our blossoming relationship. I hope you want that too," he added earnestly.

Chris looked up into serious cornflower eyes, struck by the honesty of emotion he found there. "I do want that, very much," he replied.

"Is there anyone else, Christopher?" Evan asked hesitantly. Chris's gaze fell at that.

"There is a girl back in London who waits for me, but I haven't committed to her because it never quite felt right. I think perhaps now I know why. I love her, but never felt that I was *in* love with her. I've only known you for a handful of hours, and I think perhaps I'm already falling in love with you. Do you mind, Evan?" Chris asked, then held his breath as uncertainty filled him.

A bright smile spread across Evan's face, and Chris's heart soared at the tender revelation. "No, I don't mind at all. I think perhaps it's the same way for me as for you, *mon amour*. This makes me very happy... very happy indeed," he admitted, a little breathless. Bending his head, Evan caught Chris's mouth and ravaged it firmly, tongues mingling for a long sweet moment.

It only took a few more kisses, and both men were sighing and keening, arching into one another's embrace. The mood quickly escalated, and heat filled both their bodies with fresh desire. This time, Evan didn't ask permission; he just moved. Slow and sure, their touching became more desperate with wanting, and when he filled Chris's body with his iron-hard shaft, their union was sweet beyond words. Urgent thrusting gave way to frantic hips driving home, Evan pounding Chris into the feather mattress beneath them. Moments later, with a fire and intensity that only soulmates share, they came together with a shout and a cry, their release swallowed up between them in the midst of frenzied, wet kisses.

Hearts blazing and lungs struggling for air, they sank into the pillows, breathing deeply. When they had calmed a bit, Evan rose and went to the pitcher of water setting atop the basin and poured a small draught. Using a soft moist cloth, he returned to bed and gently cleaned Christopher, and then himself. When they were both refreshed, Evan began to dress for the day in his travel clothes. Chris watched him from the bed as he moved about the room. A brisk rap at the door intruded upon their lovers' haven.

White linen shirt hanging open over his breeches to reveal a smattering of dark chest hair, Evan made his way over and pulled the door open. The same buxom woman from the night before stood there, holding a breakfast tray with a silver pot of hot tea. Evan held the door and stood aside as she entered the room and removed the discarded dishes from the previous night, then replaced them with their morning meal. Keeping her eyes averted from where Chris still lounged in bed, she bobbed a quick curtsy and left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Evan strode across the room and took a seat at the small table. "Care to join me for breakfast?" he asked, his gaze flickering appreciatively over Chris. He lifted the silver pot and poured them both a cup of tea, busying himself while Chris rose and pulled on his underclothes and breeches. Taking a seat opposite his host, Chris added a long pour of cream and several spoons of sugar and stirred his tea before taking a sip.

"Mmm, delicious," he said with a satisfied sigh. He lifted a hot buttered scone and lathered it with fresh fruit preserves, and then took a large bite. "Heaven," he breathed in between chewing, and gave a roll of his eyes. A small speck of jam didn't quite make it into his mouth, and Evan leaned forward and licked it off the corner of his mouth, grinning with mischief.

“Mmm, yes, delicious, and I don’t mean the preserves,” Evan said with a wry chuckle. Chris blushed, filled with pleasure at the compliment. Evan took a long drink of tea and then sighed happily. The next several minutes passed in relative silence as they savored rich scones dripping in preserves, hot tea, and sausages.

“So, where were you on your way to last evening when I came upon your overturned carriage? You mentioned something about your aunt living in the vicinity.” Evan finished his tea and reached for the pot to refill his cup. “More?” he asked, and at Chris’s nod, filled his cup as well.

“I’m to oversee the proceedings at my aunt’s funeral later this afternoon. Then tomorrow, I must be present for the reading of her will. I suspect she may name me as partial beneficiary of her estate, since she had no children of her own and we were quite close. Perhaps you’ve heard of her, the Duchess of Bellwood?”

The news hit Evan like a heavy blow to the stomach. Dropping his eyes to his plate, he struggled to respond, never having had the slightest suspicion that there might be some link between them. If the Duchess was Christopher’s aunt, then they were undoubtedly cousins. Evan’s heart sank, and he didn’t know what to say. Not wanting to create a rift between them at this early juncture in their relationship, he did the only thing he could think of. He lied.

Putting on a false smile, he met Chris’s gaze to find concern there at the long pause in their conversation. “That’s really quite amazing. I’m traveling to Bellwood Castle for the funeral, myself. My mother knew the Duke of Bellwood many years ago, and I was in London when I heard the news of the Duchess’s passing. I thought it only appropriate that I attend the funeral and pay my respects.”

A look of astonishment filled Chris’s eyes. “That is a surprise, but a most pleasant one. Perhaps then, since I’ve no carriage now, we could travel the rest of the way together? I’d be pleased to have your company at the Castle. I’m an attorney, and will have some responsibility for making sure my aunt’s final wishes are carried out. Then we could spend a little more time together, maybe get to know one another better,” Chris said excitedly. “I’d really like that, Evan.”

Evan returned his smile, although the effort felt brittle. “That sounds lovely. Of course we can travel together. This will give us a chance to talk some more. I want to know all about you, Christopher. You must tell me about your family. I must know everything there is to know about you,” he said with genuine curiosity and affection. There were other reasons he needed to know about Chris as well, but he remained silent for the present in that regard.

Having settled the smaller details of travel, the pair finished eating, then completed dressing for the day. Less than an hour later, they were climbing into Evan’s carriage, after having given instructions to Michel, his driver. They set out about ten o’ clock that morning, with less than two hours drive ahead of them to reach Bellwood Castle.

While the steady beat of horses’ hooves droned on, Christopher told Evan the story of his life and family, and why he was traveling to his Aunt Polly’s funeral. He was excited that perhaps she’d named him as part beneficiary of her vast estate and fortunes. He’d loved the woman like a mother, and he didn’t seem the least bit timid about admitting this.

A weight of apprehension settled over Evan; Chris had no idea the shock that awaited him in the hours and days to come.

Chapter III

Sitting inside the lovely chapel on the Bellwood Estate, a few stray tears slid noiselessly down Chris's cheeks as he listened to Parson Chatham offer up a sermon on the life of the lovely Duchess of Bellwood and her contributions to her community of Devonshire and the surrounding area. There were more than a hundred people in attendance at the funeral service, and the late afternoon sun shining through the stained glass windows cast colorful streaks across the rows of patrons sitting in the old stone church.

Evan sat quietly next to Christopher, watching with an aching heart as his new love... no... his cousin and new lover's heart broke for the one relative left in his world that had offered him true parental love and support. Evan had let Chris prattle on excitedly for the two hours of their coach ride earlier in the day, and had listened to stories of Aunt Polly and their life together, and of the entire Allwyne family.

His own conscience was beginning to gnaw at his gut for keeping the truth from Chris out of fear of the man's reaction to the news. He only wanted what was his, but suddenly Evan felt as if he was an intruder, and that he had no right to make demands upon these people. His parents had been good to him, and Pierre had been a real father. But there had always been something lacking in their relationship; he'd just never been able to put his finger on what was missing. Now, looking back over the eleven years he'd had with the Marquis as his father figure, Evan could finally identify that elusive element: blood ties. And perhaps there had been a bit of jealousy as well, because Evan hadn't really been his son.

The thing was, he was the innocent one in the midst of all this mess. He'd never been told the truth, and in some ways he felt unbelievably betrayed. His own mother hadn't believed in him enough to tell him the truth while she was alive. Her post-deathbed confession had been a coward's way out.

Over the past several months as he'd tried to process the changes that had been forced upon him, Evan had begun to feel that perhaps he hadn't truly known his mother or father at all. The false pretenses upon which they'd raised him only served to reinforce that sense of frustration. And yet, he *did* know his mother; and she had been a good soul who'd loved him the best she'd known how.

Leslee had also accepted him in all his flawed imperfection as he'd sought the less-common love of men instead of women. She'd encouraged him in all he did and had never stood in the way of his finding fulfillment in whatever form he needed most. She'd been his greatest supporter in that regard, something Evan would always be grateful for.

Truth be told, there would never be anyone to replace his mother, nor the love she showered on him during his formative years. In this way alone, Evan's heart mourned Christopher's loss. He understood the acute pain and grief of having to say goodbye, far too soon, to someone genuinely too young to die. He found himself wishing he'd had a lifetime to know these people as he'd known his mother, the bitter taste of regret heavy on his tongue at the hand life had dealt him.

Reaching out, Evan grasped Christopher's hand and laced their fingers together, squeezing gently in reassurance. Brown eyes rose to meet his for a brief moment, shining with more unshed tears, before turning back toward the front of the chapel. The parson droned on about the merits of living a good life, and how showing kindness and mercy to one's neighbors was a quality the Duchess had possessed in great magnitude. Then the choir stood and sang *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*, followed by the congregation singing *Amazing Grace*.

There weren't many dry eyes in the place. The parson closed with a word of prayer, then concluded the service, announcing that the interment and graveside services were to include family, close friends, staff, and servants. Slowly, nearly everyone filed out of the church, save a handful of those most closely associated with Her Grace.

The company followed behind the parson, who led the way out the side door to the cemetery, four altar boys carrying the ornate coffin at the head of the line. Chris walked behind Parson Chatham, with Evan at his side. They arrived some moments later to where a fresh grave had been dug and stood aside for the lowering of the coffin. They watched in silence as the lovely wooden box slid into the earth. The parson made a few final remarks, committing *ashes to ashes and dust to dust*, then asked God to receive Polly, the Duchess of Bellwood, home to his tender bosom. He closed the service with another short prayer. The proceedings were all done and over with in less than fifteen minutes. The company dispersed and returned to the manor.

Hushed voices and quiet murmuring filled the halls of Bellwood Castle in honor of its dearly departed matron. A rich meal with rack of lamb was served with fresh bread and vegetables, and various minced and fruit pies. Wine was plentiful and consumed in large quantities, until those present had had their fill. Once the meal had been consumed, Evan and Christopher, the estate's overseer, Mr. Jenkins, the Duchess's lawyer, Lord Roger Wembley, her butler, Cheeves, and her lady-in-waiting, Agatha Marshall, retired to their various stations, or to the drawing room to relax. Chris's younger brother Dante had been too far away in Cambridge to make the long journey away from the university on such short notice, and Evan could see that Chris missed his brother's presence. Only the overseer and Lord Wembley joined Chris and Evan in the drawing room for brandy and cigars. They chatted quietly for the better part of an hour.

When the clock struck nine, they made polite excuses, citing fatigue and the long trip, as well as Christopher's carriage accident, as sufficient cause to retire early. The men agreed to meet the following day at two o'clock for the official reading of the Duchess's will, and they parted ways for the night.

Evan trailed slowly behind Christopher, watching his back and hips as they swayed with each step up the grand staircase that led to Christopher's own room in the Castle, given to him by his Aunt Polly because he'd stayed so often over the past years. Chris had told Evan that he'd even kept an armoire here filled with his clothes and a few possessions, as well as an extra guitar and some of his law and poetry books.

An enormous four-poster feather bed adorned the center of the room, its oak frame extending nearly to the ceiling, lined with heavy, gold damask draperies. Rich oriental carpets covered the floor and the decorations included art from ancient Greece and even Egypt. On the far wall stood a large portrait of a man and woman clearly in their prime of life. Evan went to stand before the painting. Though he had never laid eyes on the couple before, their features were not entirely unfamiliar.

Behind him, he heard Chris lock the door. Then Chris said, "Those are my parents. The painting was done when they were first married, and it's one of the few reminders of them that I have."

Evan turned to find Chris standing in the middle of the bedchamber, his eyes lost and forlorn. He took several steps toward him and opened his arms, and Chris rushed into them, burying his face in the crook of Evan's shoulder. Tightening his embrace around the small man,

he felt Christopher's reserves crumble and his shoulders began to shake as grief sat heavy on his heart.

Evan held his love while he cried, mourning the loss of his aunt. He wished to almighty God there was something more he could do to take away Chris's pain, knowing that when the truth came out about his own true purpose, he would only hurt Christopher more. He buried his nose in soft hair and inhaled deeply the scent of him. A moment later, their lips sought each other and met in a sweet, unhurried kiss. Like a drug, they drank in the taste of each other.

Parting a little as they stood in the middle of the room holding each other, Chris said, "How is it that I feel so close to you, as though I've known you all my life, when in fact I've only known you for a day?" He snuffled between short sobs and hiccups as he tried to steady himself.

"Because, *mon amour*, we are tied together by more than just what we feel in our hearts," Evan began softly. At that, Chris looked up, his head angling back to look in his lover's eyes.

"I very much like the way that sounds, my dear man. But, I'm not quite certain I understand what you mean."

Evan's eyes dropped briefly, and he ran his hands comfortingly up and down Christopher's back, then released him and took a step away. "That's because there is more to my being here than what I've told you." He hesitated, afraid of saying too much. Unfortunately, there was no going back now.

"Come again?" Chris waited, his eyes fixed on Evan, who shook his head and turned away, unable to meet Chris's gaze.

"I wasn't going to reveal myself until tomorrow during the reading of the Duchess's will, but I can't keep still about it any longer." Evan sighed deeply. "You and I are related, Christopher. We're cousins. Our fathers were brothers." As he spoke those damning words, his shoulders hunched forward.

Chris gasped, then let out a wry chuckle. "That's ridiculous, Evan. Aunt Polly and Uncle Henry never had any children. They were married for nearly twenty years before he died in the war," he said matter-of-factly. "If he'd had a son, Aunt Polly would have told me."

Taking a deep breath, Evan forged ahead. "'Tis true, my love. More than thirty years ago, the Duke of Bellwood bedded my mother in an affair lasting several weeks. It was in Paris, before the war with Prussia. Adultery is worthy of the guillotine, and the Duke, my mother, and my stepfather all entered into a contract to hide the truth before I was born. I was never told who my real father was until after the passing of my own mother six months ago. I am the son of Duke Henry, and the rightful heir to his title and estates." Evan held his breath as he took in the shock that slowly registered on Chris's face.

"Dear God in heaven, is there no one I can trust?" Christopher spluttered. His mouth hung open, and a debate raged openly across his features as he struggled to make sense of what Evan had told him. "Why didn't you tell me this when we first met? How could you seduce me and make me fall in love with you, when you knew all along who I was...?" His voice trailed off in horror.

"I didn't know, Christopher. I swear upon my mother's grave that I didn't know who you were, not until this morning while we were breakfasting, when you asked me if I knew of your aunt, the Duchess. Do you recall? And by then, we were already lovers, twice. Being cousins, my love, there is no sin," Evan said earnestly, trying to make him understand and ease the grief-stricken look in his blue eyes.

Chris turned away, running an impatient hand through his hair, ruffling it viciously. His

back to Evan, he began to laugh uncontrollably. It was a high-pitched, ugly, wild sound, edged with insanity and desperation. His shoulders began to shake. "My God, I don't believe this. It's simply too much for one man to comprehend. I lost both my parents to tragedy three years ago; my brother went off to university; Uncle Henry died in the war fifteen years ago; and now I've lost the only relative I had left. I'm completely alone save for Dante, and now you turn up out of the blue and seduce me, then tell me that I've been sleeping with my own cousin? Well... at least there won't be an heir." He let out a hysterical laugh. "Just kill me now!" he shouted, tears filling his eyes.

"But, Christopher..." Evan began haltingly. His cousin cut him off with an angry snarl.

Evan took a step toward him, a hand extended to touch his shoulder. "It's not as bad as you're making it sound. I love you, Christopher. I know I do, even though it's only been a day. And it's not uncommon for cousins to marry. I want to marry you and share the title of Duke with you, to give you part of everything that's mine, don't you see? Damn it, Chris, I had no idea things would turn out this way. 'Twas fate that brought us together last night after the storm before I had any knowledge of your existence. I wanted you the moment I laid eyes on you. 'Tis the God's truth, my love, I swear!"

Chris took a graceless step back, jerking roughly away from Evan's grasp. "Don't touch me. Keep your filthy hands off me, you liar! You don't even have any proof that what you say is true. Why would you torment me with such lies?" He darted around the bed so it stood between them like a great barrier. "Get out... get out now! I can't stand to look at you, much less let you touch me again. Just go away and don't come back. You'd better be gone before the morning or I'll have you thrown out, do you hear me?" Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Panting, they stared at each other for a long, tense moment, Chris wildly angry, Evan shattered in devastation, his heart tortured and hurting. A lone tear stole down Evan's cheek, stinging the skin as it went. He wiped it away, then boldly faced his lover.

"I cannot leave, not until I've accomplished what I set out to do. And you're wrong, Christopher, quite wrong. I have irrefutable proof of my true identity and parentage. I never wanted this to turn ugly, even after I realized we were cousins. I just want what is rightfully mine. You may turn on me, but it doesn't change the fact that I shall be lord and master over this estate. I love you and want you to share it with me; not out of obligation due to our blood ties, but because I've fallen helplessly in love with you in the short time we've spent together. I never thought I'd love again after I lost my Sebastian, but I was wrong. I had never yet met you. And even if you reject me now, I know you love me too." Evan paused, giving his words time to sink into Chris's brain, hoping they would melt the icy wall around his heart.

"Please... don't do this, Christopher. Give it some time. I know we can work this out. Just think about it, I beg of you. I'll go now because you've asked me to, but only just down the hall to another guest room. We must talk about this again when you've had the chance to calm down. I'm not leaving, my love, I cannot. I shall come to you again on the morrow." Evan's words were quiet, but firm. He turned and unlocked the door.

Eyes full of sadness, he cast a quick glance over his shoulder at Chris, who'd already turned his back. Evan slipped out the door, pulling it closed behind him. He stood outside momentarily, only to hear the lock click into place with sickening finality from the other side.

With a heavy heart, Evan found an empty room several doors away in the silent house and went inside, closing himself off in defeat from the rest of the world. It would be highly unlikely that the numbness of sleep would come to his aid tonight.

Chapter IV

Evan spent a nearly sleepless night alone in his room, his throat so dry he was unable to cry out the feelings of grief threatening to swallow him whole. He lay wide awake till the early morning hours, staring at the ceiling of his room, breathing in the slight tang of mustiness that permeated the grand old castle's halls. The other smell that met his nostrils was of fine lemon oil, used for polishing the many pieces of wood furniture housed throughout. It reminded him of home, his parents' estate on the outskirts of Paris. His family estate was the one place where he used to feel safe in his mother's care.

It was now a place that no longer held the same appeal since his mother passed, leaving him alone. The great halls were empty, every room bearing strong memories of her and his days growing up there. It was bittersweet. Evan would always love it there, but he'd hoped for somewhere he might make a new life with his own happy memories. It was time to shake off his painful sense of loss, and his disillusionment at the letter his mother had left him. It was time to reclaim his life; and in the process of doing so, he faced laying claim to a whole new identity and family history. He was anxious to learn everything about his new family.

Sometime well after three in the morning, he finally fell asleep. He was awakened by a young maid bringing him a tray with a pot of fresh tea, sausages, and griddle cakes with strawberry preserves and fresh whipped cream. It was only nine o'clock in the morning, he noted, as she pulled back the heavy draperies to allow in the bright morning sun. It hurt his eyes, intensifying the feeling of having been thoroughly drained of all emotion. His head ached, and he vowed that after he ate, he was going to go back to sleep. Since he was quite certain Chris wouldn't want to see him right away, he figured it was best to keep his distance until the reading of the will took place at two.

Once Evan presented the evidence of his birthright, Chris must see reason, even if he no longer embraced their relationship. Evan hoped his cousin would calm down enough to accept the truth; and that somehow, Christopher was an honorable enough man to at least acknowledge him as family. He chewed thoughtfully, swallowing a mouthful of sweet cream and strawberries, pondering his intense desire to continue their romance. He'd asked Chris to marry him last night, despite the fact that they were arguing. He hoped the tender feelings of love his cousin had begun to feel for him would somehow overcome the bitterness of shock and disappointment at Evan's revelation. He desperately didn't want to lose Chris... not now.

Having cried himself to sleep, Chris awoke to the sounds of Gemma bustling quietly about his room, setting out his breakfast tray and drawing back the draperies. Casting a bleary-eyed glance at the clock on the mantelpiece, he noticed it was just after nine. He groaned and buried his face in the soft down of his pillow, wanting to hide from life for the rest of... well... forever, if he could get away with it. At the gentle coaxing of the maid, he turned onto his back and sat up, reaching for the cup of hot tea she offered him. He gave her a small, grateful smile, and then took a sip of sweet, creamy heaven. She'd prepared it just the way he liked it, and he felt inestimably thankful for small pleasures.

Hot liquid coursed its way down his throat, warming his insides, slowly bringing him back to life. By the time he finished the first cup, Christopher felt almost human again. Refusing to think about Evan for the time being, he poured another cup, stirred in a liberal amount of cream and sugar, then dug into the delicious fare laid before him. It consisted of his favorites, griddle cakes with strawberry preserves and heavy whipped cream, and sausages.

Half an hour later, his stomach pleasantly full, he felt he might successfully face the day. When Gemma returned to collect the tray, he requested a hot bath to be drawn. He could benefit from a good washing to freshen up, needing all his faculties to face what lay before him. Evan was his *cousin*, for God's sake; he still couldn't quite palate the thought. Wrapping his mind around *that* little bit of earth-shattering news was going to take some time.

At precisely two o'clock, Christopher, Evan, Mr. Jenkins, and Lord Wembley, along with Agatha and Cheeves, all met in the library for the reading of Aunt Polly's will. Chris noticed that Evan sat in the back of the room, watching the proceedings with interest, but remaining silent. When their eyes met for the first time that day, Chris's heart hurt, and he had to look away, feeling as if he'd been burned by those hawk-sharp blue eyes. Evan never missed anything, and they both realized, in that moment, that both had spent relatively sleepless nights alone. They seemed to share an unspoken ability to communicate with just a glance.

Still, they didn't speak, and Roger began the proceedings by reading through the lesser bequests to personal servants. To Cheeves, the Duchess bequeathed one thousand pounds and continued employment at Bellwood until the man felt ready to rescind his post. He was also given a home at the castle for as long as he lived. The same was bestowed on Agatha, her lady-in-waiting. Both had fulfilled a lifetime of faithful service, serving the Duke and Duchess for more than thirty years each, and were well-rewarded for their loyalty and hard work.

Mr. Jenkins was given the sum of five thousand pounds and continued employment as overseer, along with the authority to continue running the estates and businesses owned by the Duke and Duchess. The only stipulation was that all final decisions were to be approved by her nephew, Christopher Allwyne, an attorney with good judgment and legal skills. As long as the businesses continued to turn a profit, Mr. Jenkins was promised employment until he desired retirement. Even for the modern age of 1792, it was truly a generous allotment. Jenkins smiled with pleasure at being remembered so substantially.

Then, on behalf of Lord Roger Wembley's contributions and lifetime of service as Aunt Polly's and Uncle Henry's legal representative, the man was given the sum of ten thousand pounds for his many years of service. In addition, what remaining legal fees that would need to be covered, up to and including the transfer of all holdings to the new heir, to be named hereafter, was also provided for. It would be left up to the judgment of the new heir if the man's services needed to be retained any further.

Moving on, Roger finally came to the reading of bequests for family members, including Dante and Chris. For his younger brother, Aunt Polly provided for all of his education costs, and a small inheritance of twenty-five thousand pounds to be delivered to him upon graduation from school. It was exceedingly generous, considering that Dante had lost his parents at such a young age. Although he and Polly hadn't been as close as she and Chris had been, she had provided for him as though she was his mother. Chris felt tremendous gratitude for such kindness. For the time being, he'd all but forgotten Evan's presence in the back of the room.

Then the moment he'd been waiting for arrived. With shaking hands clasped tight in his lap, Chris listened with rapt attention as Lord Wembley revealed his inheritance, and he was surprised beyond words at Aunt Polly's generosity and her trust in him.

"And to my dear nephew, His Grace, Christopher Allwyne, Duke of Bellwood, I bequeath the remainder of my estates, properties, businesses, and monies totaling over two and a half million pounds. Bellwood Castle was as much Christopher's home these past several years

as it was my own. I invite him to make it his permanent home, if he so desires. I loved Christopher like a son, and honor him as though he were my own child. Take care of our family, dear Nephew. I trust you implicitly to use good judgment, wisdom, and forbearance in all you do with our family's vast estates and holdings."

Roger's voice fell silent at the conclusion of the reading. The room was hushed, breathless, as Chris tried to comprehend the magnitude of his inheritance, when the sudden clearing of a throat interrupted his thoughts. All eyes turned to the sound, the Marquis de Lombard having stood to make an announcement. Chris's eyes grew wide, a sudden jolt of fear gnawing at his heart.

Taking the few steps that put him at the front of the library, Evan presented Lord Wembley with two letters, one from his mother, he explained, and the other in the Duke's own hand authorizing the transfer of hush money before his birth. The lawyer's eyes grew wide with shock as he read the contents of both documents. He drew a sharp breath when finally he met Evan's eyes.

"My God, this can't be true! The Duke never had any children, not to my knowledge," he declared in a voice tinged with outrage. Evan's brow rose in contradiction, and he offered a quiet challenge.

"I suggest then, that you have the handwriting analyzed and compared with known documents and signatures belonging to Duke Henry. I believe you'll find it to be quite authentic. I am the son of the Duke of Bellwood, and the rightful heir to his title and estates. My being his only living child takes precedence over the will left by Her Grace. She had no children, and it is completely understandable that she would make such bequests. But, one thing I am certain of, Lord Wembley, and that is that my mother would never lie to me. She would not fabricate such an untruth, since I am not wanting for either title or holdings. This is not about money. I am both titled and the beneficiary of my family's fortunes. I have more than half a million pounds to my name and a large estate in France. This is about my need to claim what is rightfully mine, denied me by my true father whom I never knew. Besides, have you not noticed the resemblance?" Evan walked over to a large portrait of the Duke that hung above the fireplace and stood beside it, striking the same pose as the man in the painting, rendered many years ago, when the Duke was young and strong.

Chris sucked in a breath of shock, along with everyone else in the room, as they beheld a man who shared so many physical similarities, in both looks and mannerisms, with Uncle Henry. There could be no doubt. They were witness to the miracle that the Duke truly had a living, breathing son. It struck Chris that this may have been why he'd felt as if he knew Evan, because the man had reminded him so much of his uncle when he was much younger. It took seeing them standing side by side, in essence, to bring the realization to crystal clarity. His heart beat painfully fast in the face of such obvious proof.

Roger cleared his throat, looking down at the documents still clutched in his hand, then back up at those sitting wide-eyed about the room. No one had dared utter a word in the aftermath of such a stunning admission.

"Perhaps comparing the handwriting samples is just a formality at this point," he said, "but it must be done for legal verification. Should there not be any dispute that these documents are real, and the handwriting is the Duke's, then the bulk of the estate initially bequeathed to Christopher will instead go to the rightful heir, the Duke's son. Since there is no other provision set aside for you, Your Grace, this will essentially cut you out of the will, unless the Marquis takes pity and is willing to provide an inheritance for you. Nevertheless, this is all preliminary

for the moment. I shall leave after dinner and head back to London to obtain the services of a handwriting expert. Once we know for certain as to the claims of authenticity, I shall return and discuss what changes will be necessary to the will of Her Grace. It will take me several days, perhaps a week to accomplish this. Marquis de Lombard, please stay on until I return. I wish to conclude these matters as quickly and efficiently as possible. Your Grace?" Since Chris was still the current acting beneficiary of the will, as well as having been the Duke of Bellwood these past three years, Roger looked to him for his approval.

Dropping his head in defeat, Christopher nodded in quiet consent. There was no way he could go against the law, and if Evan was his uncle's only child, then there was little he could do legally to stand in the way of what was rightfully his. His heart broke a little more at the realization that Evan had been telling him the truth last night. Why, he couldn't fathom. He should be overjoyed that he had discovered more family, a cousin, one that loved him, whom he also loved back. Instead, he was angry and frustrated without good reason. He felt deceived still, and that was what really hurt.

Evan broke in on his thoughts, his voice startling in the silence that had settled over the room's occupants. "I proposed marriage to His Grace last night. I love him, and if he'll still have me, I offer him half of all I shall soon possess, including sharing the title of Duke with me. As I said before, this isn't about money. It's about claiming what is rightfully mine. I'm not a selfish man. I don't want to take from him what the Duchess wanted him to have. It's clear that she loved him like a son, and I don't wish to diminish that in any capacity. I am willing to share. I just want to claim and embrace my true identity. Can you not understand that? No one in this room, least of all myself, was more shocked over the revelation that the Marquis de Lombard was not my real father. In all my years growing up, the truth was withheld from me and I never knew who my true father was. Now, I want to know everything there is to know about the man, my father, and to embrace his family as well. I bring additional wealth and holdings to the Bellwood estates. I should think that after the initial shock dissipates, these changes can be viewed as only positive. For I've no intention of bringing dishonor to the Duke's memory, nor that of his family. I shall do all in my power to prove to you that I am sincere. That includes you, Christopher. I love you." His gaze landed on Chris in a bold stare filled with heat and intensity.

Chris met Evan's gaze with grave regard, still unable to shake his ill feelings. Dropping his eyes to his hands, he clasped his fingers together, and then unclasped them again. "I don't know, Evan. It's all too much and far too soon for me to respond to such an offer. I need to know what Roger learns before I can make a decision. Forgive me if I'm still a little bit angry with you. I feel you deceived me when we first met, whether or not it's really true, I may never know. But until we know for sure concerning everything presented here today, I cannot make any decisions. In fact, I refuse. I'd be reacting, and I dislike making uneducated, spur-of-the-moment judgments when there is so much at stake. This is my life and my family you're talking about taking away from me. I'm entitled to feel a little hesitant. As Roger said, you'll need to stay on until he returns in a few days with proof that your claims are true. Until then, I see no need to discuss this further. You may retain the room you have chosen until he arrives. I'm going to go to my room now to rest. Roger, thank you for your loyal service. I shall wait anxiously for what news you bring. I'll see you all at the dinner table. For now, I bid you good afternoon." Standing, shoulders stiff and upright, Chris strode to the library door and disappeared through it, pulling it closed with a click behind him that left no room for disagreement.

The rest of those in attendance also dispersed, and Evan left to take a walk through the gardens. If this was going to become his home, he wanted to learn the lay of the grounds and

what lands he now possessed. He walked for a couple of hours, enjoying the cool fall air and stopping here and there to smell the late roses still blooming on the vine. If nothing else, it was quiet and peaceful, a place to think. He needed that right now, to the point of desperation. Even though he believed he knew the future outcome of Roger's inquiries, his stomach was still in knots at the tiniest possibility that the document might prove false. Like everyone else, all he could do was wait.

Dinner that night was a stilted affair, with little said amongst those at the table. The Marquis watched Chris as though waiting for something, an answer he had no ability to give. When he looked away to avoid drawing too much attention to himself, Christopher would watch him. They could feel their eyes on one another but could barely find words to communicate. It was such a drastic difference to their first day and night together. Chatting, getting to know each other, and making love together had been so free and easy. This was anything but. It was clear that things were no longer the same. Neither man knew whether they could ever be the same again.

Roger left shortly after dinner to return to London. Perhaps an hour later, when he was safely away, Evan, Jenkins, and Christopher sat quietly in the drawing room taking brandy and cigars. A quiet knock came at the door, and Cheeves entered and addressed Christopher.

"Your Grace, a courier just arrived with a letter for you," he said with formal propriety, taking several steps into the room and extending the letter to Chris. He took it and thanked the man, who then excused himself.

Opening the letter, Christopher read quickly, his brow furrowing, heart falling. He tried not to let it show, but Evan noticed it immediately.

"What is it, *mon cher*?" he questioned gently, despite the fact that Chris had barely spoken a word to him all day. "More disturbing news?"

Chris closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to meet his cousin's. He drew a deep breath inward. "No, no. It's just not something I was expecting. Lady Kathryn McDowell and her family will be stopping here at the Castle for a short visit on their way to the French Riviera for a holiday. The letter from Kathryn states they'll arrive tomorrow afternoon and have requested lodgings for the night. I haven't seen her for several weeks." His gaze dropped back to the neat scrawl of her handwriting lining the page.

An elegant brow rose questioningly in his direction. "You mentioned her name yesterday in the carriage. She's the lady from London who waits for you, *n'est ce pas*?"

Chris nodded his head briefly, unable to meet Evan's eyes. He felt a little guilty after confessing his love for the man just yesterday morning, and the memory of their time together at the inn was still fresh in his mind. It sent a warm shiver to the center of his body at the mere thought of the way Evan had touched him... everywhere. He could feel those eyes resting on him, watching him carefully. Despite the gentleness of his tone, Chris could tell there was more to the question than Evan's words conveyed.

"I see. And you'll of course be looking forward to seeing your friends. Perhaps their visit will be a welcome distraction from the loss of your aunt and my being here. I surely hope so. I shall look forward to meeting your Lady Kathryn. I'm certain she's as lovely as you've described," Evan said kindly, but also pointedly. His gaze never wavered from Chris's face.

"Mmm... perhaps a welcome distraction, at that," Chris concluded quietly, his eyes flickering to Evan's and then quickly away. Standing, he went to the bar and poured himself two

fingers of brandy and downed most of it, then filled his glass again. Unwisely, he was drinking too much, but no one said a word. For the moment, it was a coping tool. Within minutes, he began to relax; he yawned widely as he sipped the rest of the amber liquid.

“Think I’ll go up to bed now. It’s nearly ten, and I’m going to need to be rested in order to entertain guests tomorrow. Gentlemen...?” He swayed a bit when he stood too quickly. Evan and Jenkins stood, offering their goodnights from across the room as Chris filled his glass yet again.

Evan and Jenkins resumed their seats when he was gone, and Evan tried to draw the other man into conversation about the running of the Bellwood businesses. The overseer revealed little though, apparently still viewing Evan as an outsider despite his claims of being the Duke’s son. After another ten minutes of rather brittle chatting, Evan stood and excused himself as well, wanting to retire. He hoped he’d sleep at least a little more than the previous night.

Climbing the heavily carved staircase to the upper floor, Evan walked the length of hallway to his room. His hand upon the doorknob, he paused as the quiet strains of music floated to his ears. Turning his head toward the sound, he took several steps in the direction of the music, his feet leading him to Christopher’s door. Evan stood listening, his ear to the wood, as the gentle strumming of a guitar filtered through the heavy panel. A soft voice, forlorn and clear, wrenched his heart.

Feeling like he was eavesdropping, but unable to tear himself away, Evan continued to listen to the heartfelt melody, heartache pouring forth from every word and note. It was a love song, one he was unfamiliar with but nevertheless beautiful. At one point, the music stopped suddenly, and Evan could hear muffled snuffles and then Chris blowing his nose. Realizing his cousin was crying, guilt and indecision overwhelmed Evan with the desire to comfort the young man. His hand poised above the knob, he was just going to open the door and go in when the soft melody resumed. He paused briefly, then turned the knob anyway. At least it wasn’t locked tonight. He pushed the door open quietly, not wanting to disturb the man.

Peering inside the several inches of open door, he could see Chris entombed in a pile of pillows and blankets, a small oil lamp glowing softly beside his bed. The guitar was perched in his lap and his eyes were closed, his mouth forming an “O” as he mourned his heartache in song. He was the very vision of beauty and sweetness, so much innocence, yet... there was more. So as not to disturb him, Evan slipped inside the room, closing the door without so much as a whisper. The bed’s heavy damask curtains partially concealing him from view, he watched and listened without fear of being discovered.

Christopher’s fingers reverently strummed the strings as they made love to the instrument. Evan’s breath hitched as Christopher sang of a love that had gone away. He wanted desperately to wipe away that stricken look from his lover’s face, and he moved slowly toward the bed, careful to stay within the shadows. By the time Evan reached the corner of the bed, hidden now only by the curtains hanging there, his gut clenched and his heart raced. He felt as though he shouldn’t be here, intruding on such a private moment; yet he couldn’t bring himself to leave. He watched for another breathless moment, struck by the tears streaking down Chris’s cheeks. He longed to kiss them away.

When the music stopped, Evan’s feet carried him silently to the bedside. Sensing someone’s presence, Christopher opened his glassy brown eyes slowly, bringing the room into focus. Head tipping back and mouth open in surprise, he looked up to meet Evan’s gaze. With a

gentle hand, Evan reached out for him, grasping his chin between his fingers, drawing his face forward. Just as their lips were about to meet, Chris breathed his name, a question, a prayer, an accusation...

"Evan..."

Then Evan's mouth was on his, warm and firm, his tongue dipping in to claim Chris's. Evan's fingers tangled tightly in Chris's hair, pulling him in closer. He could taste the heaviness of brandy on his tongue, and felt if not heard the sob of desperation that shuddered through Chris's body at his kiss. Their mouths woven together, several long moments of needy embracing held them locked together, sucking tongues and nipping at lips, Evan's desire making him forceful and Chris's drunkenness leaving him panting with need.

Pulling away suddenly, they stared at each other; then Evan took the guitar from Christopher's hands and leaned it against the wall out of the way. Turning back, he pulled his linen shirt over his head and threw it down, then drew back the covers and slipped in beside his cousin.

"No..." Chris groaned softly, his voice torn with uncertainty at his inner turmoil. Nevertheless, he scooted over, making room.

"Yes," Evan whispered, rolling onto his side and pushing Chris back against the pillows. With as much brandy as he'd consumed during the evening, Chris was too weak to fight against his passion, and Evan knew it. Perhaps he was taking advantage, just a little, but he knew Christopher wanted this just as much as he did. When their mouths came together and Chris kissed him with all the pent-up passion and emotion of being too-long apart, Evan pushed aside any nagging doubts that this might be wrong.

Fingers threading through soft brown hair, Evan tenderly ravaged his lover's willing lips, his free hand moving between them to tug off Christopher's undergarments. He was only wearing his linens, having discarded his more formal clothing before taking to his bed. Insistent kisses led to the frantic marriage of mouths, and before long, Evan had divested them both of all clothing. They were skin to skin, heart to heart, and mouth to mouth. Even in his inebriated state, Chris's hands grappled roughly at Evan's hips, drawing him down harder to grind their groins together. It was sweet torture, their cocks rubbing together as their desire for one another grew. Chris moaned into his kiss, impatient, his heartbeat skittering hard and fast.

"Christopher, my love, I need you..." Evan breathed against his mouth, his free hand between them stroking both their cocks together. As he pulled and tugged, twisting the heads, Chris thrust into his touch, his fingers digging hard into Evan's hips.

"Please..." he sobbed, the sound a whimper caught in his throat. Evan continued to kiss him, stroking with his hand in time to the thrusts of his tongue.

"Please, what?" he pressed in between kisses. His mouth traveled over Chris's softly stubbled jaw. He nibbled a plump earlobe. Chris sighed with pleasure as Evan's lips and teeth moved to his neck, making their way down to the crook of his shoulder, blazing a fiery path to the tender flesh of his collarbone. Evan's mouth sucked at the pulse point, worrying the skin vigorously and leaving a definite mark in its place. He continued to suckle the spot, his tongue drawing slow circles into the skin.

Chris nudged his hardened shaft upward. "Please...oh, God...I need you inside me. Just...love me, Evan," he breathed in desperation, clinging with his arms around Evan. He groaned as Evan rocked more forcefully against him, arousal driving them both nearly out of their minds with want.

"As you wish, my love," Evan crooned softly, reaching for a jar of skin-softening salve

he noticed beside the bed. He released Chris just long enough to remove the lid and dip his finger into the thick, oily substance. Warming it in his hand, he moved to slick himself, his fingers finally gaining entrance to the tightness of Christopher's waiting body. Chris moaned, his pelvis tilting, his hole stretching to accommodate first one, then two, then three fingers. He felt tight, hot, and full as Evan's fingers massaged him inside and out.

Then he removed his fingers and Chris groaned in disappointment.

"Lift up for me, *mon amour*, let me in," Evan encouraged, guiding Chris's butt upward. He pushed the head of his stiff cock past the rigid ring of muscle. Then he was inside, pressing forward inch by agonizing inch, stretching Christopher's tight body open to accommodate his hard length. The heat was more intense than he remembered, and the salve was heavenly, having slicked them both to make penetration easier. Once embedded deeply, he paused, placing tender kisses along Chris's throat, giving his man a moment to adjust.

"Are you ready for me?" Evan asked hesitantly, pressing another warm kiss to Christopher's lips.

"Mmmm..." Chris groaned softly in response, the sound a contradiction, a plea, and an acknowledgment all at once.

"I love you," Evan told him, then punctuated his words with a sharp thrust, pulling back just enough to do it again. Then they were moving together, finding a deep, passionate rhythm, their bodies knowing what to do without the need for words. Hips and buttocks slammed together in perfect unison, in time to the pace of their heartbeats. It was wild and heady, with animal sounds of pleasure slipping from their lips in the form of sighs and soft grunts as their bodies mated and their hearts loved. Deeper still he drove down inside, grazing against his lover's sweet spot until Christopher sobbed his release into the crook of Evan's neck, pulsing and shuddering, spilling his seed between them in a milky eruption of a hot lover's tonic.

Evan sped up his movements, bringing his boy through the final stages of pleasure, intense waves of ecstasy rolling through him with each deep thrust. The tightness of muscles clenching fiercely around him was enough to send him rocketing into his own release, his orgasm shaking him apart, starting in his toes and spreading through him like wildfire. Jerking and stuttering, he shot his load, emptying himself inside his lover's tight ass till he almost couldn't breathe.

Hearts pounding and chests heaving, Evan collapsed onto Chris, and they clung to one another sharing wet, messy kisses of love and completion. They remained joined together, not wanting to break their physical connection. When some time had passed and they came back to themselves, Evan nuzzled Chris's neck and sighed in contentment.

"Do you doubt any longer how much I love you?" he murmured. Chris fell still at the query, his idly caressing fingers pausing in their exploration of Evan's backside.

"I don't know," he began. Evan waited for him to continue, giving Chris time to work through his feelings. "I believe you love me when you say it, but there's still so much to consider... so many unanswered questions..." His words trailed away. Evan kissed him again, and Chris returned the tender expression. "You'll have to be patient with me, Evan. Please just give me more time." His brown eyes implored as he met Evan's gaze in the soft glow of the lamp. Bringing his hand up, he tenderly wiped the beads of perspiration away from Evan's brow. "I love you, and I know there's no point in denying it. But I can't make promises to you that I'm not ready to keep."

"Of course, *mon amour*. I understand. I want you to be sure of this, in every way. So I promise I'll wait for you. I may not be the most patient man when it comes to something I want

so badly, but for you, I'll try." Evan flashed him a wry smile. He placed another soft peck on Christopher's mouth, tongue sliding inside to deepen the kiss. They spent several minutes letting their tongues explore the taste of brandy, which continued to fill their senses. Eventually, Evan pulled away, his soft cock slipping out between them. He rolled over and reached down to where he'd dropped his linen shirt on the floor, and used it to wipe away the traces of their lovemaking.

Tossing the shirt aside, he reached over and snuffed out the bedside lamp. In the darkness, he said, "You've given me more tonight than I dared hope for. I can't tell you how much I missed you, even though our separation was only for a day. It felt as though I was missing a part of myself. Sleep now, my love. We'll talk more on the morrow," he whispered tenderly, cuddling Christopher in his arms. He pressed a kiss to his cheek and settled down to sleep, the lull of the clock ticking on the mantelpiece a gentle rhythm to carry them both away.

Chapter V

Having slept more soundly than he could ever remember, Chris awoke to the gentle stroking of his morning desire and moaned in sweet anticipation as the intensity for release built low in his belly. The room was still mostly dark, only a hint of morning slipping in under the draperies. Slightly addle-brained from far too much drink, part of him wasn't sure it hadn't been a dream. He keened and sighed, stretching as his hips shifted upward, enjoying the heated sensations coursing through his blood. It felt so good to be touched down there... oh yesss... just like that...

Arching his back when it all became too much, Chris cried out softly as release tore through him. Reality slammed him with the fact that he wasn't dreaming after all, just as the orgasm wrenched deeply through him, causing him to shudder and quake from his very foundations. Firm but gentle fingers tugged and twisted his cock, urging him through the fiery pulses that left him gasping, unable to catch his breath. He erupted like a volcano, a loaded gun exploding its contents in hot spurts of effervescent white ribbons. The hand continued to stroke him at a rough, quick pace, milking his cock for everything it was worth.

"Ohhhhhh...", he groaned in agony and ecstasy, for it hurt so deliciously. Then when those fingers stilled, only to be replaced by a warm mouth sucking him clean, Chris's eyes flew open with clarity. *Dear God... Evan!* How could he have forgotten? His cousin had come to him last night, making love to his body and laying claim to his soul like no one before. The cold reality of his weakness slapped him bluntly in the face, and he reached out to push the man away.

"Good morning, Christopher. Too much?" Evan asked gently, his voice a little raspy from its former task. He shifted his position and slid up beside Chris, leaning down to nuzzle the soft skin of his neck. He nosed and licked, kissing and running his tongue along the tender crevice. "I thought... what better way to wake you than to make love to you again," he murmured affectionately.

Chris turned his head away, more ashamed than at any time in his life. He had no answer for his cousin... and what's more, his lover. He silently cursed his body for being so weak he couldn't seem to say no to those skilled lips and hands, that cock that filled his body and made him feel more deeply satisfied than he'd yet experienced in his twenty-six years. Right now, he absolutely *hated* himself. It rose up like the gall of bitterness in his throat, choking him.

At Chris's continued silence, Evan must have sensed trouble. He paused, lifting his head, and looked at Chris in the dim light. Gently grasping his chin, he turned Chris's head to face him, forcing him to look him in the eyes. "What is it? What have I done? Tell me..." he begged quietly, caressing Chris's jaw and cheek with tenderness and concern.

A half-strangled sob of frustration erupted from Chris's chest, and he tried to look away, but Evan wouldn't allow it. He held him in a tight grip, refusing to let him run from this. Slowly, Christopher met his gaze, unable to hide the shame and doubt written clearly in the lines of his face.

"You regret me? You regret this love between us?" Evan's tone was guarded, and hurt laced his words. "I don't understand, Christopher. You wanted me last night, even told me you loved me, then asked for more time. I gave you my word I'd wait for you, give you the time you need. But I never thought you'd come to regret what's between us. Never has anyone loved me with such abandon. If this is not real, what we share between us as lovers, then what is? You hurt me, my love, more than words can convey."

Confused and distraught, Chris dropped his gaze to Evan's chest, the pain in those blue eyes more than he could bear to behold. But he was feeling it, too, this overwhelming desire to succumb to everything Evan was offering him, in stark contrast to his anger and determination to never see the man again. In the harsh reality of a drunken aftermath, Chris felt as if his feet were lodged in cement. He could neither stay nor turn and run. It was the cruelest punishment of all, this lack of resolution to make what seemed a fairly simple decision. Yet, the choice he made would affect everything he held dear, his very life and livelihood, with such immense scope that there was no room for error.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, the sound catching in his throat. The words barely left his lips when he regretted them instantly, the look on Evan's face more pained than if he'd struck him physically. He hastened to explain. "Evan, I don't know what I mean, I'm not sure what I feel. I didn't lie last night when I told you I loved you. I do. I just cannot reconcile myself to everything that's happened. Dear God, I don't know how to make this right between us," he sobbed. Tears slid freely down his face, and he sniffled softly, bringing his hand up to wipe away the salty moisture that stung his cheeks.

"What must I do to convince you?" Evan asked, still refusing to allow Chris to look away.

Chris let out a long sigh. "There's nothing you can do. It's something I must work out for myself. But Evan, I won't lie to you. When you make love to me, when you're with me, it's like nothing I've ever felt before. That part *is* real. I could never hide that from you. It's my heart and mind that are confused. If this was only about what my body desired, there would be no question what I would choose. I've never wanted anyone before with as much passion as I want you. It's as though I'm unable to refuse you. Never has anyone affected me so powerfully before. Still, I confess, I'm so ashamed of myself for giving into you last night. Even this morning, you've given me pleasure so complete there are no words to describe it. But I hate myself all the more for wanting you as I do. For that, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't tell you what you long to hear," he admitted sadly, shaking his head.

At that, Evan released him and pulled away. "Very well. You know how I feel, and you have my offer. I await your decision. But for now, I shan't trouble you again." His words were cold, tinged with finality. Slipping from the bed, he grabbed his clothes. Bare-chested, he pulled on his breeches and walked to the door, slinging his other garments over his shoulder. Hand on the doorknob, he turned and looked back toward the bed. His gaze coming to rest on Chris, he paused a moment before speaking, drawing in a deep breath. "Perhaps for the last time, I confess my love for you. I want you for forever, Christopher. We belong together. But I won't beg. Unless you come to me and indicate otherwise, I shall never speak of it again," he said with quiet conviction, then opened the door and left without looking back.

In some ways, Evan closed the door to his heart when he walked out of Christopher's room. For the first time since meeting his cousin, he realized that perhaps this wouldn't turn out the way he hoped. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and his heart clenched painfully, as if in the tight grip of a vise.

But there was no sense in being hurt over someone who didn't seem capable of loving him back; or at the very least, seemed unable to make up his mind. He was already tired of being refused, so perhaps it was better to let go now rather than dwelling on it further. Retreating to the safety of his room, Evan dropped his clothes on a chair and climbed into his own bed. It was just before seven and the sun hadn't yet risen. He might as well attempt to sleep.

Christopher sat blinking in stunned silence after Evan left his room. He'd expected the man to be upset, but he never thought his indecision would push him as far as that. His ominous promise, to never speak of his love for Chris again, hurt. He simply had to face the truth. Despite the fact that he'd brought this upon himself with his words and actions—something he refused to examine too closely at the moment—he hadn't quite expected such an ultimatum from Evan. Part of him wanted to chase after his cousin and plead for forgiveness for his selfish stupidity; the other part of him felt justified, even glad that he'd hurt the man. It sickened his stomach knowing he was taking even the smallest measure of satisfaction from that knowledge, that he had the power to hurt the man who loved him. What kind of masochist took pleasure in another's pain? The *worst* kind.

Silent, angry tears rushed forth, sliding down his cheeks, and Chris buried his face in his pillow and cried. He was the most pathetic excuse for a man: in love, but incapable of fighting for what he wanted, what his heart begged him to do. At some point, emotional and physical exhaustion rescued him, pulling him under the balm of sleep. In the world of the unconscious, he dreamed of happier, less complicated times.

Shortly after three o'clock, Lady Kathryn arrived along with her parents, Lord and Lady McDowell. Clad in a bright yellow gown made of rich goldenrod satin, she stepped down from the carriage, her long blond curls shimmering in the late afternoon sun. In some ways, it was lovely to see her. She really was quite beautiful. Christopher took her hand and drew her into a brief hug, murmuring appropriate pleasantries and inquiring as to their journey thus far. He pressed an affectionate kiss to her cheek before releasing her.

Stepping back a pace, he held out his hand and shook her father's hand firmly, then extended the same to Lady McDowell. Once the niceties had been exchanged, Chris invited them to come inside, instructing their driver and footman to bring their bags in and convey them to their guest rooms. Afterward, the carriage was driven round to the livery stable where the horses could be fed and groomed.

Once inside, Christopher showed them each to their rooms and promised to see them all later, at the evening meal at six o'clock. As he turned to leave Kathryn at her room, she asked if he would care to join her for a little while. Chris politely declined, stating he had to see to the evening's preparations, and promised to take her for a walk after dinner to see the sunset. It seemed to satisfy the woman, and she beamed brightly, placing a hasty kiss on his cheek. He felt a tiny prick of guilt at seeing her hopeful expression. He knew full well what that look meant. And knowing he'd spent two of the previous three nights making love in the arms of someone

else didn't help soothe his conscience at all.

Dinner was pleasant, with Kathryn telling Chris about all the latest gossip around London. Their meal consisted of beef tips and new potatoes, along with a hearty vegetable soup and fresh bread. Kathryn's parents were content to let the young people talk and visit, interjecting occasional comments whenever something of interest to them was discussed. From across the table, Evan sat watching closely as Kathryn batted her eyes at Chris, the glow of infatuation bright in her rosy cheeks. Chris saw Evan's distress, and thought he detected a spark of jealousy as those blue eyes flicked back and forth between Chris and Kathryn. Then Evan averted his gaze completely and made small talk with Kathryn's parents.

Christopher had introduced Evan as simply the Marquis de Lombard, his friend, visiting from Paris. He had felt it unnecessary at this time to reveal the fact that the man was his newly discovered cousin, about to take everything his aunt had left, away from him. Oblivious to the truth, the McDowells took an interest in Evan. He in turn smiled easily as he answered their questions, his charm a natural gift. His blue eyes glittering with laughter, his dark good looks attracted both mother and daughter. The McDowells wanted to know all about Paris, since that was one of their destinations over the next two months. It was a topic Evan seemed to warm to with ease.

When the conversation turned to more serious matters and Lord McDowell inquired as to how the funeral went, Chris sobered considerably. He related the events as they'd taken place, allowing his grief to show. Then Lady Kathryn questioned what had happened at the reading of the Duchess's will, wanting to know if Chris had realized some form of inheritance as he'd originally anticipated. Chris glanced at Evan, then looked away, explaining that there were some unsettled legalities concerning the will that were being looked into by Lord Wembley, and that he wouldn't know for certain until later in the week. The explanation seemed to satisfy the family, since they had particular interest in anything that might benefit their daughter, and themselves, when—and if—His Grace and Lady Kathryn were to wed. Chris only nodded, neither confirming nor denying the latter. He let the matter go, hoping the family would drop the discussion of marriage at the dinner table. Guiltily, Chris avoided Evan's eyes throughout the rest of the meal.

Once coffee and dessert had been served, Evan excused himself to take a walk around the gardens, claiming the need for fresh air. When he was gone, the others stood and followed suit, heading out into the cool evening. The sunset was in full vigor and, pairing off, each couple walked along the well-manicured lawns arm in arm. Kathryn chatted animatedly, holding tightly to Christopher's arm.

After a while, they took a seat on a stone bench beside a lovely fountain. Kathryn turned to Chris, her eyes imploring. "Perhaps I shouldn't press you, Christopher, but I'm becoming impatient. I've missed you so. When are we going to set our wedding date?" Her eager tone held a hint of frustration. "It's been more than two years since we began to talk of marriage, and I feel that we're both ready. Can we not make an official announcement to my parents?"

Chris looked away, unable to meet her gaze. Hanging his head, he said, "You know you have my affections, Kathryn, but I must be honest. I'm not sure I'm ready to get married."

The young woman grabbed his hands and held them tight. She opened her mouth to speak, when her parents burst in upon them.

"Did I hear you say you're ready to get married, Christopher?" With a wide grin, Lord

McDowell chortled. He and his wife had approached arm in arm from another area of the garden, and now he slapped Chris on the back in congratulations, completely having misconstrued the remnants of conversation they'd overheard. "It's been a long time coming, indeed; but we couldn't be happier for the both of you. Congratulations, my boy. You and our daughter will make a stunning couple. Might I suggest a Christmas wedding after we return from France at the end of November?" he said cheerfully. "We'll have it at our estate in London. We'll make all the necessary arrangements; just leave it to me and Lady McDowell."

Christopher glanced at Kathryn; her eyes were shining, and he found he didn't have the heart to contradict her father.

"I'm sure that will be quite lovely," he remarked carefully, unable to look any of the McDowells in the face. Kathryn squeezed his fingers excitedly, then pressed a soft kiss to his cheek.

"Then it's official, and there's to be a wedding celebration in mid-December," Lord McDowell said with a jubilant grin. "We'll arrange for an engagement party just after we arrive home. I'll write you with all the details."

"Perhaps we should go inside. It's getting dark, and the air has turned chilly," Chris said, needing to escape and be by himself. He felt like a cornered animal. He rose to his feet and Kathryn followed, linking her arm with his. They started off in the direction of the manor, her parents trailing several steps behind.

When they were only a few paces from the door leading to the study, Chris made a lame excuse about needing to attend to something on the grounds and promised to meet them back inside in a little while. He strode away with purposeful intent, although he had no idea where he was going. His legs carried him swiftly to the solace of the apple orchard, where he leaned against the trunk of a large tree. It was quiet, and he could think for the first time since the McDowells arrived. He didn't know how in God's name he was ever going to get out of this mess. He ran his fingers impatiently through his hair, inhaling deep, calming breaths of cold air.

When he felt more composed, he began the long walk back toward the house. He hadn't realized how far he'd run in his need to elude Kathryn's controlling father. As he approached the gardens just off the main terrace at the rear of the manor, he nearly tripped and fell as he ran smack into Evan in the darkness.

"I beg your pardon," Chris said, his heart leaping to life and his veins coursing with fire at the contact. Evan stood back, regarding him in the moonlight. His face was hard, eyes glittering with jealous rage.

"So, I hear congratulations are in order, Your Grace," he said with icy detachment. Chris regarded him in shock.

"What?" he questioned dumbly. With dawning horror, Chris's eyes narrowed. "You heard? How dare you eavesdrop on a private conversation!"

Evan smirked in reply, shrugging his shoulders. "I happened to be walking through the garden when I heard you talking with the McDowells. It was quite by accident, I assure you. Although, I'm not sure your sudden engagement could be termed the same way." A clear hint of sarcasm laced his tone. "Seems to me they've got your entire life planned out for you rather conveniently. And what... you've nothing to say for yourself? Oh, Christopher... you're such a fool," he added bitterly.

At those biting words, Chris's voice rose in indignation. "How dare you say such things to me! You don't know me or what I want, at all. You only think you do."

"Oh?" Evan's voice escalated as well. "Perhaps I'll just prove you wrong on that point."

Grabbing Chris roughly by the shoulders, Evan pulled him against his chest. His arms going around Chris's waist like an unforgiving iron band, Evan bent his head and claimed Christopher's mouth in a punishing kiss, ravaging his lips with great force, grinding them against his teeth until Chris tasted the tang of blood on his tongue. He whimpered in pain, fighting to push Evan away, even as his traitorous pulse quickened at the vicious onslaught.

Just as suddenly, Evan released him, shoving him roughly away. "You deserve each other. I hope you're very happy," he snapped. "When Roger returns with confirmation of my birthright, I want you out of my house, you dishonest little whore! Blood ties or not, you're no cousin of mine," he bit out vengefully, then spun on his heel and stalked away. He left Chris standing alone in shocked outrage, his heart torn into tiny shreds.

"Christopher!" a female voice demanded. It was Kathryn; in a flurry of skirts, she came running up to him. "I heard your voices from inside the house. What in God's name was that all about? What did he mean? Who's cousin?"

Chris whirled around to face her, unable to smooth from his face the anger, surprise, shock, and disgust at being caught in such a compromising situation. "What are you doing here?" he asked, tight-lipped, struggling to regain control.

"Don't avoid my questions, Christopher. What did he mean? Tell me now," she demanded again. Chris averted his gaze, unable to look Kathryn in the eyes despite the darkness of evening.

"If you must know, the Marquis proposed marriage to me, but I refused him," Chris murmured in defeat.

Kathryn sucked in a stunned breath. "He what? Why have you never told me?"

Chris let out a short, mirthless laugh. "Because it happened just recently. There was no time to tell you anything."

"I see. And what of us?" Her hands snapped to her hips. "Does this affect our engagement?"

Again, Chris let out a bitter snort of laughter. "Our engagement, indeed. You mean your father's edict that we marry. You know I didn't agree to marry you."

"Well, it certainly sounded like you did to me. And until you make up your mind one way or the other, I refuse to break my parents' hearts and tell them otherwise. As far as I'm concerned, we have a contract, and we will marry in December as you've agreed. I've waited a long time to be your wife. You owe me this."

Kathryn's voice softened as she went on. "Besides, you know you love me, and I love you. It'll work out between us, Christopher, you'll see. Just give it some time, my darling." Taking a step closer, she rested her hand upon his arm in a gesture clearly meant to help convince him. When he didn't answer, she apparently took it to mean acceptance. "Come along, my beloved. Let's go inside and join the others, and leave this unpleasantness behind. It's cold out, and I could use a glass of sherry. I suspect you could, too." She smiled and clutched his arm tightly, leading him back indoors and to the hearth.

The fire blazed brightly, sending its warmth into the room and melting the ice from around Christopher's heart. He downed a large swallow of brandy that burned his gut; he waited for the effects to numb his brain.

He wished desperately for some sort of miraculous reprieve...

Chapter VI

Christopher lay awake for hours that night, trying to figure out a way to get out of his

“commitment” to Kathryn and the McDowells. When a man married, he married the entire family, not just the bride. He’d spent the last year or more resisting a commitment because it had never felt quite right. He did love her, but not as a wife deserved to be loved. For Chris, those feelings simply weren’t there when it came to Kathryn.

On the other hand, they were *most certainly* there for Evan. But the anger and disillusionment he felt toward his cousin were just as real. At the moment, those emotions outshone what tender feelings had been growing in his heart. When Evan had called him a dishonest whore it had hurt him as no other name he’d ever been called before. The ridicule in Evan’s voice had shamed him, probably because he knew it was true; because he was acting like a spineless coward where Evan was concerned. As badly as he wanted the man’s love, he couldn’t bring himself to sacrifice his pride and give in. Perhaps with everything that had happened up until now, it didn’t matter anymore, because his cousin would likely never want to see him again anyway. He’d said as much in the garden, then essentially thrown Chris out on his ass, even though he didn’t have the right... at least, not yet.

Then there was the matter of this engagement that Lord McDowell had assumed was a given fact. Christopher groaned silently at the man’s overbearing boorishness. He was quite insufferable, making assumptions no one in his right mind should have come to when based on half a sentence. What to do...?

Still, as the hours ticked by, the more Chris thought about it, the more he began to resign himself to the fact that maybe Lady Kathryn was right. There was love between them, and perhaps their marriage would put an end to this impossible yearning for the Marquis. It was only Thursday, and they had shared all of four days together, getting to know one another. And in those four days, they’d lived through a lifetime of emotions and heartache. They’d been strangers, then friends, then lovers, and then, most shocking of all, cousins.

Then they had fought and spent a sleepless night apart, only to have Evan seek him out after he’d drunk too much... and they’d ended up right back in bed together. And, oh, the sex had been sizzling!

No, damn it! He refused to even consider that issue. That was what kept getting him into trouble, making him weak and indecisive where Evan was concerned. He wanted it just as much now as he had last night, which made him all the more angry. He was filled with shame and self-loathing at his inability to refuse physical gratification in favor of self-respect.

To make matters worse, the man had overheard everything that had happened in the garden earlier, and they’d fought bitterly yet again. Their breakup this time seemed virtually permanent and Chris saw no way to undo the damage that had been done. Perhaps it would just be better to accept the hand fate had dealt him, and marry Kathryn. At least he’d be respectable, then, even if his heart would never be satisfied.

His thoughts turned to the issue of the family fortune. Dear God... everything Aunt Polly had left to him was being stolen by a virtual stranger. It burned him up inside when he thought of it. Evan didn’t deserve to take his inheritance away from him... yet Chris had the sinking feeling that Roger would discover the documents his cousin had produced were genuine. He wondered cynically if the McDowells would still want him to marry their daughter if they knew he no longer had a potential fortune to inherit. The thought made him grimace, until he remembered that even without Aunt Polly’s money, he was still a reasonably wealthy man.

His own father had left him just over one hundred thousand pounds, but that was nothing compared to the two and a half million he stood to lose. From what the Marquis had revealed at the reading of the will, he had more than five times what Christopher possessed, and it left a

bitter taste in his mouth to know that he was losing everything to his cousin, who had no real need of any of it.

And all he had to do was say “yes”. Yes to marriage with Evan, to sharing his life and his bed, to claim what should have rightfully been his to begin with. He shook his head in distaste. There were too many ill feelings between them to reconcile all that had happened. Chris shook his head almost in wry amusement; but he felt anything but amused. Sometimes, love wasn’t enough. Not even for Christopher. He refused to sell himself to gain what should be his by inheritance. He wanted love but he valued peace of mind more.

Simple and stark in the darkness, like a bright flame lighting a dusky passageway, the knowledge that he preferred a peaceful existence to one of tumultuous passion and upheaval became clear. It made his decision easier, and Christopher knew in that moment what he would choose. He would accept his lot in life and marry into the McDowell family. Evan could have his money. Once Christopher was gone from this place, he needn’t ever see him again. He would settle down and make a respectable life with a beautiful woman for whom he cared. He would honor the duties of his Cabinet post, and continue to be a practicing attorney. It was a life most men would kill for.

With that, Chris pulled the blankets up to his neck and snuggled down more comfortably into bed. Satisfied this was the best choice, he closed his eyes and slept.

The next morning after breakfast, as Christopher helped the McDowells prepare to leave on their journey, Kathryn asked to see him alone for a moment. Taking him aside for a short walk on the lawn, she looked at him imploringly, something obviously on her mind. After they were out of hearing distance of the others, she spoke.

“Have you given any more thought to what I said to you last evening?” she inquired softly. She held herself this morning like a young, innocent girl, her wide blue eyes questioning.

Chris nodded in brief acknowledgment. “Yes. I thought of little else most of the night, to be quite honest.” He paused, and she waited for him to go on. “Perhaps you’re right, and we would be happy together. Go ahead and plan our wedding. I’ll let the engagement stand.” He looked away.

She placed a tentative hand on his arm. “Are you certain? I only want us to be happy, my darling. You know that, don’t you?” The expression in her eyes turned hopeful.

Christopher nodded silently, hesitantly meeting Kathryn’s gaze.

“Then, there’s just one more question I must ask you. The Marquis... Evan... I saw him kiss you last night. Did it mean anything? Or can you walk away from him and not look back?”

There was little reason to cover up the truth, so Chris answered her honestly. “It meant something, but it mostly represented the end of our relationship. I’ve made my decision, Kathryn. But there is something more you should know. There will be no inheritance for me from my aunt. Even though she left everything to me initially, Evan’s presence here isn’t by accident or invitation. He’s my Uncle Henry’s only son, unknown to us these many years. The estate will rightfully go to him and there’s nothing I can do to change that. As long as you can accept me for what I am, and with what inheritance I possess, then I suppose everything is already in order.”

“Then he really is your cousin,” Kathryn whispered in wonder.

Christopher nodded his head again. “Does that matter to you?”

“No, not really, I suppose. I’m just sad that you’ve lost your aunt’s inheritance. Still,

that's not why I want to marry you, Christopher. I want to marry you because we know each other and have a history together. I love you, and I know we'd be good for each other." She looked solemnly up at him. "Don't you agree?"

"We do have a history, that much is true. Very well, then. Proceed with the preparations for the wedding, and I shall see you back in London when you return from France. Once I leave this place, after Roger comes back with his news about the inheritance, I likely won't be returning here again. I don't think Evan and I will ever overcome our differences now. So, although he is family, I don't anticipate being close with him in the future."

Kathryn touched his arm again and smiled. "It's all right, my beloved. We'll have each other now, and you know my family has already embraced you. Don't think about it anymore." She leaned up to kiss him. They exchanged a brief, chaste kiss for which Christopher felt nothing, so unlike the kisses he and Evan had shared. Those were full of heat and desire and passion. He cast the burning memory from his mind. There was no sense in dwelling on what could never be.

The sound of Lord McDowell bellowing for his daughter broke in on them, interrupting their private moment.

"Kathryn!" he shouted from across the drive where he waited by the open carriage door. "We must get under way if we're to reach Paris by tomorrow night. Come along now. You'll see your Christopher again soon enough. Now say your goodbyes, and let's away."

Chris and Kathryn exchanged fond looks, and they made their way hastily back to the waiting coach. Exchanging a final hug, Christopher assisted her inside then turned to shake the hand of his future father-in-law. The man climbed inside the coach and took a seat beside his wife.

"Be safe in your travels. I'll see you in London upon your return," Chris said, bidding farewell to his guests. He shut the door and secured it tightly, then walked to the team of chestnut horses and gave one a firm slap on its rump to get them moving. He stood waving, watching as they pulled away and out of sight before he went back inside the manor.

With nothing but time on his hands now until Roger returned, he sought out the refuge of the library and called Cheeves to light a fire in the hearth. The idea of spending the day reading some of his favorite books of poetry appealed to him, and he asked that lunch be brought to him there. He had every intention of avoiding Evan for as long as he possibly could. It would prove pointless to rub salt into an open wound.

The next two days passed quietly, Chris's only contact with Evan being at the dinner table. They avoided one another like the plague, immature as it might have been.

On Saturday afternoon, Roger arrived back at the Castle with the news everyone had anticipated. The document was in Duke Henry's hand, and records had been located from thirty years back that verified the transfer of twenty-five thousand pounds to the Marquis Pierre de Lombard in Paris, France. Evan was vindicated, and Christopher was silently resigned to his fate. Life had dealt him a blow but the law was the law. There was nothing he could do now but leave as he'd been commanded.

He requested transportation back to London with Lord Roger, after the lawyer concluded the business of signing papers to transfer the Duchess's holdings into Evan's name. Chris no longer had a carriage of his own and would have to purchase a new coach and team when he returned to city life. They prepared to leave the next day around noon.

Chris packed his few clothes and belongings, books, and toiletries, and sealed them into a large travel trunk. He looked around what had been his room, his heart aching at yet more loss. Knowing he wasn't coming back was a painful reality. He'd spent many days and weeks here at Bellwood, and had many fond memories of his aunt. It felt like saying goodbye to his own home.

Taking a final look around the room, his gaze came to rest upon the portrait of his parents that hung upon the wall. In an act of pure selfishness, he walked over and took the painting down, placing it on the floor beside his trunk. This was *his* family, and the portrait was of his parents, people Evan had never even met... would never meet. He'd be *damned* if he'd leave it behind.

Roger's carriage had been brought round to the front of the house and was being loaded with their bags and Chris's trunk. Evan walked outside behind Roger, and shook his hand in thanks for his services. From across the drive, his gaze met Chris's.

For a tense moment, they said nothing, then Chris swallowed his pride for a brief instant and walked back to him, holding out his hand to shake it. Evan grasped it coolly and gave it a quick tug.

"Good luck to you, Evan. I hope you find happiness here." Chris didn't wait for a response, merely returned to the waiting coach and climbed inside. He didn't look back. Even from where he sat hidden inside the interior, he could feel Evan's gaze following his every move. Chris shook his head in sadness and closed the book on another chapter of his lonely life. Roger joined him a moment later, and the horses jolted forward.

That was the end of that.

The next two months flew by quickly, and Christopher found himself busily engaged in the practice of law with his existing clients, and occupied by his responsibilities to his Cabinet post. The weather turned bitterly cold and the snow began to fly. Most days were gray and harsh, and the depressing weather wore on his nerves.

The first he heard of the McDowells having arrived back in London was during the final week of November. He was sitting at his office desk when a courier arrived with a note from his fiancée inviting him to dinner the following evening at their London estate. He scrawled a quick reply and accepted, informing them he'd call at precisely six o'clock the following evening. He gave the courier several coins for his trouble and sent him on his way.

At dinner the following day, Chris greeted his fiancée with all the warmth he could muster. He wasn't excited about their impending nuptials, but he was also no longer dreading them. He accepted his obligations and would make the best of them. It was time to get on with his life.

Kathryn giggled eagerly about their time along the Riviera, and presented him with a handsome walking stick with a silver handle, a gift and souvenir from their trip. He accepted it with a hint of embarrassment, realizing he hadn't even thought to purchase an engagement ring for his betrothed while she was gone. He sheepishly admitted as much when they were alone later that evening in the parlor.

Christopher promised to remedy his lack of forethought with a ring to be presented at their engagement party. Kathryn's father was already busily arranging the affair for a week from Saturday evening, ten days away. He had time enough to make an appropriate purchase before

then. His commitment satisfied Kathryn, easing her slight pout at having been forgotten. Christopher begged her pardon, laying the blame on having been so busy with work and his Cabinet post duties. The woman smiled and promptly forgave him.

The following morning, Lady McDowell and her daughter sat in the study writing out invitations to the engagement party. They discussed whom to invite and whom to ignore, wanting only the best families in London to attend their lavish affair. This was an important party, an announcement to polite London society that Lady Kathryn McDowell was about to become Lady Kathryn Allwyne, wife of respected Cabinet member, Lord Christopher Allwyne, who had reclaimed his former title after the arrival of his cousin on the scene. They both had many friends and business associates that had to be included among those invited.

Several hours later, a maid knocked upon the door, interrupting their work to bring in a spot of tea and biscuits. While they ate and drank, they continued working. Mind alighting upon the subject of Christopher's cousin, it occurred to Kathryn that perhaps she should invite the newest member of British nobility in the area, His Grace, Evan de Lombard, Duke of Bellwood. He was one of the richest noblemen in the province, and highly sought after for social gatherings, she reasoned. He was also Christopher's cousin and only local family. It would be rude not to invite the man, a blood relation.

If she was honest with herself, however, the truth was that she needed to know that there was nothing left between her Christopher and the Duke. She wanted to put the memories of that kiss she'd witnessed out of her mind. It was her way of laying public claim to her future husband, dismissing all former suitors who served as a threat. Call it impetuous, perhaps even selfish; but without giving it further thought, she hastily scrawled an invitation and addressed it to Evan de Lombard before she could change her mind. She slipped it into the pile of correspondence, unbeknownst to her mother. The courier would deliver it without her parents' knowledge. At any rate, despite the formal invitation, she highly doubted the man would trouble himself to make an appearance.

Turning her attention back to the remaining letters to be written, she moved on, pushing all thoughts of the Marquis... no, the Duke... out of her mind. The sooner they finished these invitations, the more quickly she could get on with the more pleasant task of having her wedding gown made. She'd already chosen her design and needed to give her order to the modiste's dress shop downtown, across from City Hall. They made all of her best gowns, and she was excited to have one made of the finest ivory satin in a current Paris fashion she'd discovered while away with her parents.

The more Kathryn thought about how lovely she would look, and the glow of adoration she anticipated seeing in Christopher's eyes when she walked down the aisle at their wedding, the giddier she became. With so much to look forward to, and starting their new life together, it was going to be a wonderful Christmas this year.

It turned out to be the London social event of the season, not just a formal engagement party for the young couple. Nearly everyone on their list of two hundred guests turned out for the occasion. By eight o'clock Saturday evening, the enormous ballroom of the McDowells' vast estate was alight with countless candles burning brightly in the ornate chandeliers. People were dressed in their finest attire, swirling and spinning on the dance floor. Champagne flowed in

abundance, and an army of footmen circulated with trays of hors d'oeuvres and sweet cakes and pastries. Anyone who was anybody was there, celebrating in earnest.

Another dance ended, and the quartermaster tapped his stick. "My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, pray take your places for the Minuet," he announced. Dozens of couples shifted their partners and positions, standing at attention across from one another. Christopher offered his fiancée a lukewarm smile and made ready to take the next step. The orchestra launched into another piece. He took Kathryn by the hand and turned her around, careful to avoid stepping on her toes. He'd had far more champagne than he probably should have had, and despite his reservations, Christopher found he was almost enjoying himself.

Skirts swirled and swung, and gentlemen tapped their feet in time to the rhythm. Another set ended, and polite applause followed. Chris was hot and needed some air. He grasped Kathryn by the hand and led her from the floor, heading in the direction of a waiter carrying a tray of glasses filled with cold champagne. He took a glass for each of them and handed her one, then, his fingers at her elbow, guided her to a balcony with open doors. They walked out into the frosty night air for a short respite. In the background, they heard the quartermaster tap his stick again and call for the Spanish Waltz.

In the dark, Kathryn slipped her fingers into Christopher's hand, looking happier than she had in a long time. And why not? Her dreams were finally coming true, and she and her parents couldn't have been more pleased. The evening was a smashing success and everything was going exceptionally well. She turned to him, offering up her lips for him to kiss. Chris did as he was expected, but for him there was only the touch of wet lips that did nothing to stir his heart. He found it odd that her kisses aroused so little emotion in him.

"How charming," came a familiar voice with a distinctly French accent from behind them. A jolt of electricity radiated through Christopher's body at the sound. Out of the shadows of the balcony stepped the Duke of Bellwood, resplendent in a handsome suit of finest sky-blue satin. He took a sip of the champagne he held, taking in the shocked expressions of his host and hostess.

"What? No words of welcome for your cousin, cousin? I've only come to pay my respects and offer my congratulations to the bride and groom-to-be," he said with false cheerfulness.

"Evan..." The word fell from Chris's mouth in a whisper. It took him a moment of staring at the intense eyes and heavenly lips he remembered so well, before he recovered enough to feel outrage. "What in God's name...?" He looked to his fiancée, then back at the Duke. "Why are you here? Kathryn, why is my cousin at our engagement party?"

She cleared her throat, obviously uncomfortable. "I... I felt it only proper to invite him, since he is, after all, your family."

"Ah... I see the cat's out of the bag and you've told your fair lady of our family ties." Sarcasm tinged Evan's words. "I wonder what else you've told her." His tone held a warning.

"Christopher, what is he...?" Kathryn began, but Chris cut her off mid-sentence.

His anger rescuing him from his shock, he found his voice. "Kathryn, please go back inside. Our guests must be looking for you. I'd like to have a word with the Duke if you don't mind." His order left no room for argument. Her wide eyes held the hint of fear, and she nodded in acquiescence.

"Your Grace," she said, dropping a quick curtsy in front of Evan before making a hasty retreat. Chris recognized the effort it took for her to make the gesture. Despite everything he had told her about the man, she was still required to show respect to those of highest nobility. She

cast an anxious glance over her shoulder as she departed, no doubt realizing she'd made a grave error in judgment by inviting Evan here.

Trying to make light of the situation, Evan casually asked, "Care for a dance, My Lord?" In the bright moonlight, his eyes glittered as sharp as a serpent's and didn't miss a thing. Chris answered him with a bitter retort.

"Based on our last conversation, I think perhaps it would be best if you left," he said acidly.

Evan emitted a short bark of humorless laughter. "What did I do? Don't you love me anymore, cousin?"

"How dare you come here and turn my engagement party into a circus! I want you to leave."

Evan's eyes narrowed, the lines of his face turning hard. "If you don't care for me anymore, what does it matter if I'm here or not?"

His query met with stony silence. Suddenly, the Duke's demeanor changed, and he tossed his glass over the balcony in fury. It crashed to the ground below, shattering in a million pieces. "I know I told you I'd never speak of my feelings for you again, but I've been miserable without you. God damn you, Christopher! I love you, and I know you still love me. You cannot marry that woman. You belong to me!"

The next thing Christopher knew, he'd been pulled into Evan's arms and held so tight he couldn't catch his breath. At first he struggled, attempting to push his cousin away, but the man was taller and stronger; Chris was trapped as Evan kissed every last bit of remaining air from his lungs. Not until that silky tongue claimed his in an all-out duel did he relent, suddenly overwhelmed by sensation and a rush of emotion. He stopped fighting, and a soft, shuddering moan floated onto the night air as he found himself kissing back with enough pent-up anger and desire to sabotage even the best well-laid plans. Chris's arms snaked around Evan's neck, drawing him closer.

"Oh God..." he sobbed in anguish, sharing kiss after heated, wet kiss. Without warning, Evan's hand moved between them, slipping down the front of his breeches to squeeze the head of his cock, and Christopher was lost. Fresh passion ablaze between them, he allowed his lover to fondle and stroke him, kissing him senseless while jerking him off beneath the fabric of his clothes. All ability to speak or think coherently disappeared with each tug of those long fingers. Evan's thumb traced a path along the underside and over the slit of his engorged shaft, drawing lazy circles through the beads of moisture leaking from the head.

Christopher keened, his hips jerking forward as he thrust into Evan's touch; a deep sigh erupted from within his chest. "I shouldn't let you... dear Jesus... more *please*," he begged, trying to resist but failing miserably. Clinging to his cousin, Chris could only think about one thing. And he both wanted—and needed—it right now, with a desperation that frightened him.

"Oh, hell... oh God, oh God, oh God! Take me, Evan, make love to me. I've missed you so God damned much..." Completely broken, he shoved his lover back into the corner of the balcony, out of view of passing guests. Hidden by the darkness, Chris pulled back, his eyes glazed over with desire as he beheld Evan's face. Seeing it was the same for him, Chris turned around, pulling Evan's arms around him from behind, offering himself as a sacrifice.

"Holy mother of..." Evan stuttered, then pushed Christopher's breeches down to his ankles, bearing his backside. Falling quickly to his knees, he pushed his tongue between Chris's cheeks and speared it inside, drawing a raspy groan from Chris at the pleasurable sensation. Chris braced himself against the edge of the stone balcony wall, while his cousin licked him,

thoroughly penetrating his hole with saliva.

Standing again, Evan opened his own breeches one-handed, while his other hand remained tightly around Christopher's waist, stroking his cock from the front. He kissed Chris's neck then bit him sharply in impatience. "There's no time to properly open you up," he breathed near Chris's ear, "so this might hurt."

Christopher's breath hitched in his throat in anticipation of being filled to overflowing. "Oh, God, yes! Hurt me, Evan. Make me feel you."

Then he was stretched open to accommodate Evan's huge cock, hard and pulsing with desire.

Evan rammed into his cousin's ass, eliciting a sharp cry from his lover. Unable to stop, he pounded into that firm, round ass, pummeling deep inside and using his free hand to bring Chris off. Each thrust inside felt better than the one before. Christopher was his! He was made for this... for his cock... his love... his pleasure alone...

The long absence apart fueled the fire that burned between them, and sparks flew as their bodies mated in frenzied unison. Chris came first, spilling the evidence of his passion in hot trails over Evan's fingers, his hole clenching tightly around Evan's rigid length. He grunted loudly as if unable to hold the sound inside. His heart pounding so violently he thought it might burst, Evan groaned, jerking and thrusting fast, pumping his seed deep inside his man's waiting body.

A few more erratic thrusts and Evan reached his climax. After a breathless moment he pulled out, spent and heaving hard, their frantic lovemaking having winded them both. Evan turned Chris gently in his arms to face him, his anger spent with his release. Embracing him fully, their lips met in a passionate kiss, both men clinging to one another, drinking in their own unique tastes. Still partially unclothed, they stood there for a long time, panting and sucking tongues and lips, rubbing their spent cocks together and sending chills along both their spines. Their hearts, minds... their bodies... belonged together. It all seemed so simple.

"I love you," Chris sobbed between kisses. "I'm so sorry I pushed you away. What a fool I've been," he admitted as Evan placed quick, hard staccato kisses all over his face in a show of reverence and love.

"Perhaps I was the bigger fool, trying to force you to choose something you weren't ready for," Evan confessed. "I'm sorry for being so blind. I'll never force you to do anything again that you don't want to. Can you forgive me, my love? You know there'll never be anyone for me but you, I swear it."

"It's all right. We'll work it out, Evan, somehow..." Chris broke off with sudden horror. "Dear God... Kathryn!"

There was nothing he could do now but break off their engagement. There was no way he could go through with that farce of a marriage. He knew now he could never love anyone but Evan.

Just as he was about to state the obvious to the man who owned his soul, a bloodcurdling scream shocked them back to reality. Kathryn stood just outside the open doors, taking in the sight of Christopher in Evan's arms, their nakedness a witness to the sins they'd committed.

Her eyes full of hatred and intense jealousy, she screamed, her voice a high-pitched shriek. "Oh, my God, what have you *done*? Christopher, how could you?" Without waiting for an answer, she whirled and ran back inside, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Stunned into silence, the two men froze where they were until the sound of angry voices and shouts began to reach their ears. Quickly, Evan bent down, pulling up Christopher's pants. He fastened his own breeches just in time to face an enraged Lord and Lady McDowell, who

rushed onto the balcony. By the stricken looks on both their faces, Christopher didn't doubt this would be an enormous public scandal.

"I'm so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen..." he began, struggling for words.

Lord McDowell broke in on his attempt to apologize. "Get out! Get out of my house and don't come back, you filthy scoundrel!" he bellowed in horrified anger. "And take that French bastard with you! I'll ruin you forever, Christopher Allwyne!" Lady McDowell merely turned her back, clearly appalled by the intimacy of the scene before her. Just like that, Chris and Kathryn's engagement was no more.

Watching them retreat into the house, Evan let out a wry chuckle. "I've been called worse, and I suppose it's a fitting epithet." He turned to Chris. "So now that you're free, My Lord, will you, Christopher Allwyne, in front of all these people, marry me?" he asked, grinning helplessly. Chris began giggling irreverently at the irony of everything, his snickers quickly turning into all-out laughter.

"Are you sure you'll still have me? I fear my reputation's been permanently tarnished, Your Grace," he said.

Evan grinned wickedly. Blue eyes flashing with desire, he said, "Oh, I'll have you, Christopher... again and again and again!" A graceful brow arched brazenly in challenge. Fully aware of their genteel audience, Evan was deliberately making a statement for their benefit, a claim to what would always be his... and Chris didn't contradict him. "As for the present, I think perhaps we've over-stayed our welcome, don't you agree? Shall we, my love?" He gallantly presented his arm to Chris. "I think it's time we sought out a priest and had him marry us."

Christopher took his fiancée's arm and, smiling, they walked together through the scandalized crowd of partygoers. Heads held high and shoulders erect, they didn't look back.

This was absolutely, *without question*, going to make tomorrow's front page headlines of London high-society news.

Chapter VII

"Do you, Evan Michael de Lombard, Duke of Bellwood, take Lord Christopher Nells Allwyne, as your lawfully wedded husband... to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, forsaking all others, till death do you part?" asked Father Bradley, the local parish priest.

It was after ten o'clock when they'd found the priest getting ready to lock the doors of the enormous church. Evan had approached the clergyman, begging him to perform a quick wedding ceremony. And now here they were, standing in front of an ornate altar next to a marble statue of Christ...

"I do," he answered with complete surety. His blue eyes sparkled with love, good humor, and a hint of mischief. Evan took a large emerald ring from off his hand, a family heirloom, and placed it upon Christopher's ring finger.

"And do you, Lord Christopher Nells Allwyne," the man continued, "take Evan Michael de Lombard, Duke of Bellwood, to be your lawfully wedded husband... to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, and forsaking all others, till death do you part?"

Christopher looked up, beholding the love of his life standing beside him, a hopeful, expectant look upon his cousin's handsome face. Even in light of being publicly and socially scandalized, Chris couldn't quite bring himself to give a damn. He was so happy to be with Evan in this moment, nothing else mattered.

“I most certainly do,” he announced with absolute conviction. He returned Evan’s grin with a wide smile of his own. It felt so marvelous to finally be able to say it aloud. Evan was his, and they belonged to each other. Now the whole world would know it, too.

Father Bradley’s face softened into a smile, pronouncing the final words of the ceremony, while a deacon looked on as witness to their mutual agreement.

“Then, it is with the utmost pleasure that I pronounce you husband and husband, joined by the bonds of holy matrimony in the sanctity of marriage, until the end of your natural lives. Treat each other well, and love each other much, and never forget to say *I love you*. For what God has joined together this day, in the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and ninety-two, let no man put asunder. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit... Amen.”

Both men spoke their “amens” in quiet unison, giving their agreement and consent to be married with the utterance of one single word. It was both the perfect ending and a beautiful beginning to the story of their love.

Sharing a brief, chaste kiss, they sealed their promise with the tender touch of lips.

Following the priest to the room just off the chapel, they scrawled their signatures at the bottom of the certificate of marriage, witnessed by the young deacon and signed and sealed by the hand of Father Bradley. The newlyweds each shook the priest’s hand in gratitude, and quietly departed, a sense of hushed wonder settling over them.

Outside, the snow had begun to fall, and there was a gentle covering of angelic white upon the ground. Their steps were silent as they approached the Duke’s carriage. His man was there waiting to open the door for his master.

“Michel, take me and my husband home,” Evan commanded in a soft, firm voice.

“*Oui, Monsieur, immediatement,*” replied the Frenchman with a smile of approval. His eyes twinkled as he held the door for his master and new spouse. He waited until they were safely inside the carriage to secure the door.

Climbing atop the driver’s seat, Michel pulled his coat tightly about himself, pulling a heavy woolen blanket onto his lap. It would be several hours until they reached Bellwood Castle and home. The coach lurched forward, the team of four black stallions anxious to get moving to stave off the chilly night air. The horses pranced and snorted, bobbing their heads, blowing out streams of white steam into the air from their nostrils as they anticipated their task. Michel cracked the whip lightly, and the carriage pulled into the lane, heading out of the city, leaving London, its bright lights, intrigues, and excitement behind them.

Inside the carriage, Evan lifted one of the velvet bench seats and reached below, retrieving a heavy lap blanket stored within to keep them warm. Closing it, he took a seat and patted the velvet cushion beside him in silent invitation. Chris moved across the coach and sat down beside him, his new husband covering them both with the blanket and tucking them in snug and warm.

When they were comfortably settled close against one another, Evan reached inside his coat pocket and produced a small silver flask full of brandy. He opened it and took a drink, offering the container to his cousin. They shared several sips of the heavenly liquid, passing it back and forth as they drank, warming themselves in the process. While Chris held the flask, Evan reached upward and turned the flame up high inside the lantern that hung from the center

of the ceiling. It cast a bright glow and radiated a bit of additional warmth to ward off the chill.

Sighing in contentment, Christopher closed his eyes and leaned his head upon Evan's shoulder. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought this was how the evening would end. Not in a million years could he have foreseen throwing away his engagement to Lady Kathryn in favor of marriage to the Duke of Bellwood. He'd all but accepted that he might never see his cousin again. So if miracles truly happened, then he was living one right now.

Christopher snuggled up to his lover and was rewarded with a gentle kiss to his brow. He might have awakened this morning resigned to a fate that left him cold and empty, but tonight he'd be going to bed a happy man.

Since the night they'd first met on the high road to Bellwood Castle, the couple had celebrated their love numerous times. For now, both men were content to wait until they returned home to consummate their marriage. Having already made love so passionately earlier in the evening, it wasn't even a thought on either man's mind.

Instead, they savored the quiet knowledge that they were now a legally married couple, able to share title, lands, and more. They were cousins, yes, but more importantly, they were partners in love, sharing a deep, abiding understanding between them that would stand the test of time. They were part of each other, bound by blood, soul mates at heart.

The soft, steady clip-clop of horses' hooves upon newly fallen snow was a hypnotic sound. It acted like an elixir, drowsily lulling both men into sleep. They were safe, warm, and happy, and tomorrow they would wake in each other's arms to a new day: one of hope, of dreams having come true, and the knowledge that they need never be separated again.

The loneliness, loss, and heartache of the past, in both their lives, was already a fading memory. Their lives held new promise, and the future looked bright. They were a family; and come what may, they would face it all... together.

Chapter VIII

The morning of Christmas Eve day dawned bright and beautiful, a fresh snow having fallen during the night, making the landscape look new and virginal in its coating of blinding white. It was a stark contrast to the heavy forest of pines that surrounded the Bellwood property. Everything in nature had donned its regal finery, making ready to celebrate the winter holiday.

Looking out the window, Evan gazed lovingly at the hills surrounding his new home. The snowy scene was pristine and utterly breathtaking, like a layer of fine white diamonds that glittered and sparkled in the light. He noted the thin layer of clouds that remained above the valley, signaling the storm was moving out, the cold December sun having finally broken through to shed its faint warmth on the countryside.

Turning away from the window and allowing the draperies to fall closed, the Duke returned to his bed and climbed in between the blankets. It was early, but with the sun being up, he didn't want to go back to sleep. Excited to make this a special day in honor of Christmas, Evan leaned over and nuzzled the shoulder and neck of his beloved, nosing softly until Christopher began to stir. Placing tender kisses upon overly warm skin, he nibbled playfully with his teeth until his husband's eyes flew open wide.

"Whaaah...?" came the sleepy inquiry.

Evan chuckled slyly. "It's about time you woke up, my love," he said. "The day's a-wasting, Christopher, and I desire your company to go cut down our first Christmas tree."

Yawning widely, as if to clear cobwebs of sleep from his brain, Chris took a moment to consider the request. "Mmm... and here I thought you woke me up to have my company right

here, for other, more *enticing* reasons.”

Evan placed a firm peck upon his lips, then drew away smiling. “Oh, no, *mon amour*. If I should have my way with you right now, you’d be far too fatigued for what I have in mind later this evening.”

The newlyweds had taken to making love at least once every day, if not more. Their long, two-month separation had fired their desires for one another, and they’d been putting their time to good use making up for being apart. They had spent their honeymoon at the manor, just lounging in bed for several days, rekindling their romance. They could take a holiday in the spring and travel later. Since being reunited, they’d only wanted to be alone together.

Now, after two weeks and two days of married bliss, Christmas was upon them. It was time to celebrate this most festive season of the year.

“Come, come now, my Christopher, time to get up. The sooner we go find our tree, the sooner we can return in order to take care of other, more *urgent* matters.” Evan snickered, wetting his lips with his tongue in a deliberately wanton insinuation. “Besides, I promised my darlings, Satan and Warlock, we’d give them a good workout this morning.”

Christopher groaned in frustration. “You really do dote on those two horses, Evan. You know that? It’s freezing out this morning, and I imagine it snowed more last night. As much as I love you, taking those horses out for a gallop in the snow isn’t high on my list of priorities. We have grooms for that kind of thing.”

“You know I like to keep the lead horses of my team in excellent physical condition. Is that so odd?” Evan asked. His question was met with continued resistance. He arched a brow in challenge. Evan was well aware Chris was being difficult on purpose. This required a change in tactics. He decided to use another approach. Blackmail.

Examining his nails in a bored fashion, he said, “Very well, my love. If you don’t get up off your lazy ass and come with me this morning, I shall refuse to fulfill my conjugal duties for an indefinite length of time.”

Chris’s mouth fell open in shock. “You wouldn’t dare! Besides, I don’t think you could keep your hands off of me, not even for a *single* day! You like our conjugal arrangement even more than I do.”

Evan smiled a Cheshire cat grin. “Try me,” he teased, wiggling his eyebrows. “You know how I can be when I want something badly enough.” He gazed expectantly upon his husband with mild amusement.

“Oh! You’re an insufferable *ass*!” Christopher accused in outrage, now fully awake. He sat up in bed and reached over to spank Evan’s behind to punctuate his point. Evan winced, but kept up his playful pretense.

“And you, my love, are a spoiled child! This is our first Christmas together. Where’s your holiday spirit?” Evan demanded, quietly serious.

Looking slightly more contrite at being rightfully chastised, Christopher relented. “Blackmailing, aristocratic devil,” he muttered under his breath, deliberately loud enough for Evan to hear. Evan treated him to a wide grin, for he knew he’d won this round. If there was one thing Evan was sure of, it was that Christopher knew he didn’t make idle threats, even if this one might have been stretching the truth a bit.

Still grumbling, Chris climbed out of bed while Evan looked on, a huge grin still curving his lips. After a moment, Evan pushed himself off the bed and walked over behind his husband who was preparing to don his riding breeches. Slipping his arms around Christopher’s waist, he pressed a warm kiss to his neck.

“You love me, Christopher, you know you do,” Evan said placatingly, chuckling some more. “If I didn’t challenge you regularly, you’d grow bored with me. And you know how I love to keep things interesting.” His voice turned seductive with promise. “You also know I’ll make it *well* worth your while to accompany me now, when tonight I wrap my lips tight around you and suck you till you come in my mouth. And afterward, I’ll pound your beautiful ass into the mattress when I fill you with my pulsing hard cock.” He tempted Chris further by sliding his hand down to cup the semi-rigid bulge that twitched beneath his touch. Chris groaned, his body already responding to the erotic teasing.

“You really are the devil, you know,” he whispered, leaning fully back against Evan’s body. Evan’s shoulders shook with laughter as he embraced Christopher affectionately.

“Perhaps... but you know you wouldn’t want me any other way.” He kissed Chris’s neck. They held their embrace for another quiet moment. “Now, get dressed quickly and I’ll meet you downstairs at the breakfast table.” Evan leaned in to nip one of Chris’s earlobes. Releasing him, he gave a firm swat to Christopher’s butt, receiving a dark glare for his continued teasing.

With a triumphant spring in his step, Evan went to his own wardrobe and pulled on heavy breeches and a thick sweater in preparation for being out of doors. After pulling on a pair of riding boots, he glanced up at Chris and gave him a wink, then disappeared through their bedroom door, shutting it as he left.

Less than an hour later, they were dressed in heavy wool coats and scarves and had walked outside to the stables. They mounted their rides, Evan on Satan and Christopher on Warlock, both black stallions at least seventeen hands high. Grabbing the reins of a third workhorse outfitted with a sled, Evan tied them to his saddle horn. The chestnut was well-equipped for their outing, loaded down with an axe, saw, some hand tools, a length of strong rope, and a large piece of folded burlap. When all was in order, the couple set off at a fair gallop in anticipation of their conquest. In the brisk winter morning sunshine, the men headed into the lower valley where the snow wasn’t quite as deep, in search of the perfect Christmas tree.

As they rode, they talked about what they hoped the New Year would hold for them, as individuals and as a couple, their earlier verbal sparring forgotten. They rode for nearly half an hour to a meadow on the Bellwood estate that overlooked a small lake. Spotting a small thicket of several dozen pines that looked to be no more than ten feet tall, Chris signaled that they should stop and investigate.

Sliding down from the saddle, both men trudged through a half foot of new snow to a cluster of trees that looked young and healthy. Walking around tree after tree, they finally decided on an evergreen that was around nine feet tall and had a full, even shape. They returned to the horses to get the axe, saw, and other tools, and busily went to work.

Some twenty minutes later, the pine came crashing to the ground, snow flying everywhere in an icy cloud, and the men sawed off the unnecessary branches near the bottom to prepare the trunk for a platform to stand on. Once finished, together they rolled the burlap around the tree and secured it with rope, then placed it atop the sled and tightened it down.

Chris and Evan refastened the sled to the chestnut’s harness and remounted their own rides. Heavily laden down, and with Satan and Warlock leading the way, the couple began their return trip at a much slower pace. Guiding the horses and sled across the snow-covered landscape, the duo proudly hauled their find back to the manor, both men having caught the

Christmas spirit. Since they had to climb out of the valley, the trip provided all three horses with a good, much-needed workout. Their combined efforts had also given Evan and Christopher the opportunity to work together as a team to bring their prize home. It was exhilarating, the hearts and lungs of both man and beast exerting madly with the effort.

After turning their horses over to the stable hands, Evan and Chris retreated inside to the warmth of the drawing room. Peeling off the layers of heavy garments, they stood drying their clothes and warming themselves in front of the fire. Fingers, noses, and toes slowly thawed from the heat that radiated out into the room.

When they were sufficiently restored, Evan turned to Chris and touched his cheek in tenderness. "Thank you for humoring me this morning and coming with me. It just wouldn't be Christmas without a tree."

Christopher smiled, his heart filling with warmth. "You're welcome, Evan. But would you really have carried out your threat?"

Evan blushed slightly and shrugged his shoulders. When he wanted to appear innocent, he had the ability to smile with those wide blue eyes, rendering Christopher weak in the knees. The man could have gotten away with murder whenever he did so. "Perhaps, but more than likely not. You're right that I cannot keep my hands off my gorgeous husband for very long at all," he admitted with a hint of sheepishness. Face coloring, he giggled as Chris narrowed his eyes.

Smirking, Chris growled in retort, "In that case, I think I should like to punish you in my own special way."

Lips twisting in a wry grin of amusement, Evan laughed. "And I very likely deserve whatever it is you have in store for me."

Grasping Christopher's chin between his thumb and forefinger, Evan drew him closer and pressed warm, probing lips to his. Their tongues met and tangled briefly, a promise of what was to come later. "And after you exact your punishment on me, I'm going to ravage you... everywhere," he whispered breathlessly, eyes sparkling with heat and promise.

Suddenly serious, Christopher regarded him through his lashes, slanting a seductive glance at his husband out of the corner of his eye. "I'm looking forward to it," he replied softly. Their lips hovered intimately close, yet not touching. Warm breath fanned their cheeks as they held each other's gazes, locked in a sensual moment of anticipation, their stomachs fluttering. A moment later their mouths met, only to be interrupted by a brisk rap at the door. Separating quickly, Cheeves entered, announcing that lunch was served.

Suddenly realizing their stomachs were growling, they followed the man from the room, but with a shared look and a silent promise to continue later where they'd left off. It was, after all, Christmas Eve, and there was the tree to decorate, rum and eggnog to be drunk, and sweet Christmas pudding to be eaten. There were kisses to be exchanged underneath the mistletoe and carols to be sung in celebration of the birth of Christ. And after everything, Old Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas himself, might pay them both a visit with a gift or two. It promised to be a delightful afternoon and evening.

Having spent the afternoon engaged in various activities, some a bit secretive, Evan and Chris retired to the drawing room where the staff had brought the tree and set it up beside the

fireplace. There was a box of small glass figurines and strings of ancient satin ribbons and bows, and they spent the next hour decorating the branches, completing their work with the addition of two dozen small candles.

After a lovely dinner complete with a perfect Christmas pudding, the young lovers returned to the drawing room with hot rum and eggnog. By the glow of firelight, they shared the work of lighting the candles upon the ornate branches of the tree. When everything was in readiness, they called for Agatha and Cheeves to join them.

"Christopher, my love, will you play for us?" Evan asked his husband. The four of them gathered round the fire to share a few carols, with Chris on the guitar.

They sang *Adeste Fideles*, *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*, and *Greensleeves*, and followed that with Evan's personal favorite French carol from back home, *God From On High Hath Heard*. They concluded the music by singing *Hark, The Herald Angels Sing*. Afterward, they shared a toast and Christopher offered each of his most faithful servants, who were as much his family as Aunt Polly had been, a Christmas gift of twenty pounds each. Touched to tears at his thoughtfulness, Agatha kissed Chris on the temple and thanked him, while Cheeves gave him a hearty handshake. Sharing a final toast in celebration, they parted company, Chris and Evan asking to not be disturbed for the remainder of the evening.

Once they were alone, Evan fetched an enormous white bearskin stored in a pile of blankets and laid it upon the floor in front of the fireplace. Christopher joined him, and they sat down with their drinks and a few pillows. Toeing off their shoes and formal jackets to get comfortable, they arranged themselves in a reclining position beside one another, basking in the warmth.

"I have something for you... a gift," Evan began. Reaching behind him to an item previously hidden from view, he produced a small, ornately carved square box. His eyes were tender and a little uncertain as he offered it to Chris.

He took the proffered box with a soft smile, deeply touched. Opening it, he found a large gold ring with an enormous white diamond in the center, set in a plain but elegant setting.

As he looked up in surprise, Evan said, "I thought this was the perfect opportunity to give you a proper wedding ring, since our marriage was quite sudden and there was no time to plan ahead. Do you like it?"

Christopher glowed in response. "I love it. It's strikingly beautiful in its simplicity. Thank you. Shall I return the emerald you gave me the night we married?"

Evan grinned and shook his head. "No, you're to have them both. It's one of the de Lombard family heirlooms left to me by my mother. It's been in our family for generations. And since you're my family now, it's only fitting to bestow it upon someone whom I love more than life itself."

Chris's eyes moistened at the tender bequest. "I shall treasure it always, and it will forever represent the love we felt the night we first exchanged vows." Christopher slipped off the emerald and placed it on his other hand. Then he held out the box and lifted his hand expectantly. "Will you?"

"Of course," Evan murmured softly, taking the box and removing the ring from its bed of velvet. He took Christopher's hand and slipped the large ring upon his ring finger, then raised it to his lips and kissed it. "I love you, Christopher. You rescued me from a lifetime of emptiness and you fill my heart like no other. May we always be this happy together." His tender little

speech brought tears to both their eyes. Christopher sniffed with happiness, raising his lips for his husband's kiss. Their lips met and ignited a flame as they shared a deep, heady exploration of tongues. After a moment, Chris drew away and reached for his coat, tossed aside earlier on the floor.

Fidgeting with it briefly, he searched the pockets until he found what he was looking for. Withdrawing a small, paper-wrapped parcel, he handed it to his lover with a smile. "I couldn't resist, either. Merry Christmas, darling," he said, his eyes still wet with tears. Evan took the present from his outstretched fingers and touched it reverently.

"You didn't have to," he whispered gratefully.

"I wanted to. Go on... open it," Christopher urged. He watched as Evan untied the string and peeled back the brown paper. The firelight revealed a tiny miniature portrait of Chris in an ornately carved gold frame. Raising his gaze, Evan looked at Christopher with adoration, his cornflower blue eyes shining with love.

"It's beautiful," he said quietly, then swallowed, unable to say more.

"I wanted you to have a part of me with you always, so I had it made for you. I wasn't sure it would be finished in so short a time, but the artist delivered it yesterday," Christopher eagerly explained.

Evan swallowed hard again, pausing a moment to compose himself. Taking in the miniature image inside the gilt frame, he raised his eyes again. "It's perfect. I'll keep it with me forever. But know this... you're always with me. I've never been more content, knowing that now we belong to each other."

Heart overflowing with gratitude, Chris couldn't contain the love he felt for his strong, beautiful man. "And you're always with me, as well. I love you, Evan. For the first time in my life, I'm no longer desolate with loneliness. Thank you for loving me."

Laying aside his gift where it wouldn't be disturbed, Evan stretched out along the bearskin which served as a rich, thick bed. "And now, I'm going to lay you down and make sweet love to you, till you cry out your release in my arms," he breathed, pushing Chris onto his back and leaning down to claim his lips. When they met, the heat that had been simmering between them since early that morning erupted into a wildfire.

"Mmmm, touch me, please..." Chris mumbled against his mouth. His hips canted up, nudging against the taut thighs holding him down. Evan groaned in pleasure at his eagerness. He proceeded to undress Chris with agonizing slowness, punctuating the undoing of each button with a kiss upon the skin revealed by each one. They spent an inordinately long time undressing one another, building the suspense.

When at last they were free of all clothing, Evan's heated gaze roamed appreciatively over Chris's supple body. Nudging his thigh between Christopher's legs, Evan moved against him, rocking their bodies together as his knee moved up and down. The movement created delicious friction, their cocks bumping, rubbing together and sending shivers of electricity along their spines. Fingertips trailing like the touch of a feather down Chris's stomach made him arch with desire, as Evan continued to kiss his mouth, jaw, ear, and neck.

Hot breath fanned his skin and Chris moaned his pleasure at each velvet touch of lips. His body ached with the need to be filled, to be satisfied in the way that only Evan could. His insides clenched in growing passion, anticipating the union of their bodies.

"Evan..." he whimpered, growing desperate, his hands and fingers digging into the firm cheeks of Evan's backside. His hands roamed impatiently, caressing and kneading muscled flesh, trying to draw that rigid heat inside him.

In response, from somewhere on the floor, his lover produced the familiar jar of salve they kept in their room. He opened it, dipping two fingers into thick oil. He warmed the substance in his hands and then coated himself with it, before beginning the slow process of opening Chris up. His fingers slid inside that tight hole, reaching deep and massaging the spot that made Chris see stars. He panted hard with want, knees falling further open in silent invitation.

He moaned softly, his voice catching, the feel of his husband's fingers sliding in and out an erotically stimulating sensation. "Harder..." he breathed when three fingers filled him.

Evan complied, taking pleasure in the desperate noises that slipped mindlessly from Christopher's lips. The sounds filled him with passion and sent little jolts of desire straight to his cock. He was hard and ready...

Removing his hand, Evan knelt between his man's legs, lifting them off the rug and looping them over his shoulders. Pressing back, he spread Chris open, bearing his glistening hole to his gaze. Lowering his head, he ran his tongue along the outside, then arched it and pushed inside the tight ring. With firm, insistent little flicks, his tongue tasted his lover's ass, swirling wet and sliding in and out, driving the poor man clear out of his mind.

"Oh, God... Evan..." Chris sighed in breathless agony. "*Please...*" he begged again, trembling as if every last nerve tingled with fire.

"Shhh, my love, I've got you," Evan replied, moving to position himself on top. One hand guiding his length, Evan pushed inside, the ease and slide of his cock into tight, wet heat the culmination of their foreplay. He grunted softly at the intensity of the feeling as Chris's hole gripped tight around him, accepting him inside. Mouth coming down to claim bruised lips, their tongues danced a slow waltz while their bodies moved together in a rhythm of tense rapture.

Tender, yet savage, their desire increased, the need for release burning hotter as they maintained the steady pace of their lovemaking. Evan slipped his hand between them when he heard his lover's breathing quicken, grasping his shaft and stroking him hard. Three, four, five sharp tugs and Christopher convulsed, his body clenching tight as the muscles in his pelvis prepared to fire. A breathless pause ensued for an instant, then an orgasm set his body ablaze, sending a brilliant, blinding light racing through his brain.

Breath hitching, back arched in ecstasy, a tingling rush of pleasure and adrenalin engulfed him.

"*Ohhhh...*" Chris cried out, spilling his release over Evan's fingers.

With deep sharp thrusts, Evan buried his cock deep inside, his own body drawing taut like a bowstring, signaling his approach. As he beheld the pure look of rapture on his lover's face, his own climax converged with full fury. Like a loaded trigger being pulled, he shuddered and jerked, pumping his man's body full of sweat and cum. It trickled out and dribbled down between Christopher's thighs, their love reaching completion.

Winded and thoroughly spent, they cuddled one another, content to share soft wet kisses till their hearts steadied and calmed. Christopher ran his fingers through Evan's sweaty hair, lovingly combing the bangs out of his eyes. "Perhaps I'm biased, but when you're inside me... it's so good... I don't know how I ever lived before I met you," he admitted, his whispered words of love a prayer of wondrous gratitude. "No one makes me feel the way you do."

Evan sighed in contented exhaustion. "It's the same way for me, my love. Just promise me you'll never leave again. Those weeks without you were the worst torture of my life," he confessed. "I couldn't bear to lose you. I'd wither away and die of a broken heart." As if to prove his words, he stole a deep, lingering kiss from his beloved's lips. The tenderness and raw

emotions of love served as a binding tie between them.

"I won't, Evan," Christopher replied. "I never will. There's nothing more I need, as long as you're here beside me."

Pushing himself to his feet, Evan left him briefly, walking to the stack of blankets in the corner, choosing a silky soft one of heavy down. Chris watched in awe as that tall, svelte body of firm muscle and sinew gracefully moved about the room, his spent cock still half hard and protruding proudly in the glow of firelight. Christopher smiled to himself at how fortunate he was... they were... unabashedly raking his gaze over the sight of such male beauty. He would never grow tired of looking at that body... of loving the heart of this man...

Evan returned to his side and spread the comforter out, then sank to his knees and lay back down. Resting his head upon his husband's chest, Christopher snuggled deeper into the safety of Evan's side, making a happy noise.

"Hold me until the morning comes," he said. "I want to wake with your arms about me."

Evan smiled in answer, tucking his arm around Chris's shoulders to draw him gently in. By the glow of golden flames, yet warmed far more by love, Evan and Christopher fell asleep, limbs tangled together. This was only the first of many Christmases they would share with each other, but it might have been the best. In the eyes of both men, the universe had conspired to bring them together one lone, dreary night, to unite them in a love so strong they would never be the same.

They were better human beings for it, and glad of it. This quiet knowledge is what brought them peace, the blessing of knowing neither of them would ever be alone again.

This had been, without doubt, a truly enchanted Christmas.

The End

About the Author

SammyJo Hunt was born and raised in sunny Southern California. She grew up an avid reader and romance novel enthusiast and has always loved to write and create. She has never married and has no children. She now lives in the Midwest with her striped tabby cat Bug. Currently, she holds a BA degree in Social work, and is a graduate student pursuing a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy and Substance Abuse and Addictions Counseling. She plans to work with the LGBT communities, and especially struggling children and teens.

As much as SammyJo loves helping people, she also loves to write sensual stories. She spends plenty of spare time with the wheels of her imagination turning about how to get hot boys in bed together. SammyJo discovered the world of fan fiction and fell in love with reading erotica. Always enjoying a good challenge, she decided to give writing original M/M romance and erotica a try. After being encouraged by other wonderful authors in this genre to follow her dreams, SammyJo has achieved her goals to become a published novelist. She's excited to bring you amazing original fiction that will take readers on an enchanting journey of discovery and love, while stealing away to another world for a short time.

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