

DISGRACED  
*Lords*  
SERIES

A *Kiss*  
OF *Lies*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRONWEN  
EVANS

# *A Kiss Of Lies*

DISFIGURED HERO REGENCY ROMANCE

THE DISGRACED LORDS

BOOK ONE

# BRONWEN EVANS



# *Contents*

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Want Sebastian's Story...](#)

[A Promise Of More Chapter One](#)

[FREE Novella - A Lady Never Concedes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Bronwen Evans](#)

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*To Gracie O'Neil, my fabulous critique partner, mentor, fellow author, and dear friend. I'm pretty sure that if I had not met you at my very first RWNZ conference, I would not be telling my stories and sharing them with the world. I can never repay you for all you have done for me. So, a big thank-you and hug will have to suffice.*

## Chapter One

London, England, November 1815  
“Get up!”

If not for the fact that the rage-filled voice bellowing in his ear was speaking English, Christian Trent, the Earl of Markham, might have thought he was back in France.

Certainly the press of cold steel at his throat flooded his brain with memories of the war: nightmarish memories, pain-filled memories. Memories he fervently tried, but hopelessly failed, to forget.

Experience had taught him that when one was in such a precarious position, with a sword at one’s windpipe, with the identity and reasoning of the attacker unknown, one was wise to act cautiously.

Without moving a muscle he pried an eye open and tried to focus on the person who was holding the deadly weapon at his neck. The slight movement of his eyeball sent pain stabbing through his head. His mouth tasted like sawdust. Christ, he must have drunk more than he thought last night.

“I repeat, *get up!*”

To emphasize his request, the attacker’s sword point pierced Christian’s skin. A small trail of warmth trickled down his neck.

In a ghostlike voice, so as not to disturb the pounding in his head, Christian answered, “How can I get up with that sword at my neck? I might still be half foxed, but I have

enough wits about me not to push myself upon your weapon,” and with his hand he batted away the blade.

The sword immediately swung back into place.

As lethal as the sword itself, the voice uttered, “That would save me the bother of killing you.”

For a split second Christian welcomed the idea of death before he doused it with an exhaled breath.

He ignored the cannonballs rioting in his head as he twisted and turned, desperate to untangle his limbs from the satin sheets wrapped around his naked body. He did his best to ignore the dizzying weakness his movements evoked. The headache had him willing the contents of his stomach to stay down.

Where was he? The brothel? He recalled he’d paid for a woman. He knew she’d shared his bed. He could smell her lingering scent.

He drew a deep breath and calmed his mind. He had always prided himself on his ability to use his brain more effectively than any weapon to get himself out of predicaments.

“You’re a perverted reprobate,” his attacker sneered.

He tried once more to rise. There was no doubt he’d rather collapse back into a drunken slumber, but through the degrading sickness, his body prickled with stark unease. It was like a second sense, and it had saved his life many a time before.

A movement in the shadows alerted him to a second man’s presence. This silent enemy moved across the floor to throw the curtains wide. Sunlight bounced off mirrors positioned strategically around the room, stabbing at Christian’s eyes like a sharp hunting knife. Christian put his hand up to ward off the sun’s blows.

The presence of the men in his room indicated he didn’t have the luxury of being able to lie down and resume his sleep. So much for drink-inspired oblivion. He’d not endured two years on the battlefield of France to die in a brothel in his own



country. Clutching the sheet to his body, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and attempted to lever himself up, gritting his teeth against the hammering in his brain.

He clamped down on his rising panic. Panic did not serve anyone. Fear was the enemy. He'd learned that many times on the battlefield.

"You'll pay for what you have done." The second man's voice indicated he liked to smoke—it was thick and gravelly. Like smoke, his anger was barely contained.

Christian's throat constricted, as if the proverbial noose were tightening around his neck. He didn't need a sword under his chin to understand that these men were serious.

His mind quickly evaluated the likely avenues of escape. The windows were the closest options. Although the room was on the second story, if he jumped, he could land safely on the hedgerow beneath. Alternatively, the bedchamber door was wide open, so if he could slip past both men, he could make it down the servants' stairs.

He *was* still at the brothel. The Honey Pot was high-class, and even though he'd been a frequent customer there since his return from the war, he had never, ever slept here.

He rubbed the back of his neck. What had happened last night?

Anger cleared the fog clinging to his brain, but only for a second. He ruthlessly clamped down on his temper. Anger was a weakness. When consumed by anger, men lost control. As a child he'd watched his father repeatedly lose control. His father's rages turned him into a man Christian did not recognize, and as a boy he'd suffered from the consequences. Besides, it led men to make impulsive decisions, and he was anything but impulsive. "Other than taking a little pleasure in this miserable world, what exactly do you—" He paused. "*—gentlemen* think I have done?"

"Pleasure? Pleasure?" The sword finally swung away as the man's anger overcame him, and he gestured wildly.

*“Pleasure? You brought a young, innocent girl here—here!—and defiled her,”* he bellowed.

Christian’s fists clenched the sheets. His voice held steady, his tone even. “I beg your pardon. Brought a girl here ... ? I did no such thing. I’ll call out any man who utters such scandalous allegations.” But because he was not stupid, Christian felt his world slipping out from underneath him.

He’d changed at Waterloo, and not just physically. The puckered, reddened flesh of his neck, upper right arm, and torso was a constant reminder to him, and everyone else, that he was no longer the man he once was. The ugly burns on the right side of his face twisted his mouth and eye, making him a monster. But it was his inner soul that had changed the most. He’d grown sick of the pain, the pity, and the nightmares. At first, the laudanum he took was a necessity due to the agony of his burns. Now he used the drug not to only dull the lingering pain of his wounds but also to soothe his inner torment. The memories of the flames peeling his skin haunted him still...

He’d been weaning himself off the opiate gradually—had he overindulged last night? He swore under his breath. Why couldn’t he remember?

He wiped a hand over his eyes, attempting to clear their drunken haze and get a clear view of his accusers. Christian swallowed back more bile. He was in trouble—the man before him was none other than the Duke of Barforte, with sword drawn. Looking past the Duke, Christian noted that the Duke’s eldest son, Simon—an acquaintance more than a friend—was the second man in the room. His sword was also drawn. Simon’s pale blue eyes looked at him with a coldness that made his insides recoil.

Barforte moved back to the bed. “We shall see the proof!” He pulled the sheets away from Christian’s disfigured body. “She’s marked you,” he said, gesturing down at Christian’s naked body, “with the blood of her innocence.”

Christian knew before looking upon his nakedness what he would see. But still he had to look. He glanced down past his

horrific scars, and the bile he'd earlier kept down rose again and entered his mouth.

Blood. Dried traces of blood.

Snippets from last night suddenly flooded into his head. Vivid images, erotic images that turned into confusion. He'd paid for a woman to come to his bed—Carla. Had there been more than one?

Christian gulped air into his tightening chest.

Yes, he'd drunk a lot last night. But he would have sworn he'd not taken laudanum. He had drunk enough to ignore the look of revulsion on his paid companion's face. Before Waterloo, although brandy used to leave him slightly befuddled, he'd always remembered where he was and, most important, who he was with. The fight against Napoleon had ensured that he learned to keep his wits about him at all times. Then he'd been badly burned. Now he seldom remembered what day it was.

He ran a hand over his mouth. *Think!* He turned toward the two men and summoned to his face a calmness that his rollicking insides did not feel. "Gentlemen, I think there has been some kind of grievous mistake."

"Mistake? Everyone saw my daughter leave the Duchess of Skye's ball in your carriage!"

Real fear clawed at his chest, but he stayed calm. "Grayson Devlin, Viscount Blackwood, took my carriage last night. I walked and hailed a hackney."

This was absurd. He had never even met young Harriet Penfold, the Duke's only daughter. He did not attend balls any longer. A man whose face sent children running from the room was an object of pity and embarrassment at such events.

He tried to stand up, but the Duke pushed him back down. Christian repeated his denial, snapping, "I did not bring Lady Penfold here."

"The state my daughter was in, I could get very little out of her except your name."

“It was not me. She is mistaken.” *Think, damn it.* Why would a chit he’d never met accuse him of such a crime? She couldn’t possibly be trying to trap him into matrimony.

The cold spread and coated his skin. Could he have done this heinous act during one of his blackouts? Could she have gotten into his bed, and then, in the throes of one of his nightmares, had he ... ?

He shook his head. The dense fog on his brain would not clear.

Simon spoke, his voice razor sharp, slashing at Christian’s already fragile conscience. “Now she’s a liar too. I would never have thought a man of your honor could do such a thing.” He coughed. “But I know of your condition. If not for that, and the fact you saved my brother William’s life on the battlefield at Waterloo, you’d be dead by now.”

The Duke didn’t look as if that counted for anything. “Pah! Previous heroics be damned.” He spat on the floor. “His father’s blood flows in his veins. I’m going to see you ruined. If I didn’t have to save Harriet’s reputation, I’d have you hung, drawn, and quartered. My daughter is hysterical, covered in bruises and cuts where you beat her, and is so traumatized she cannot be left alone.” He was purple with rage. “Like father, like son.”

Christian flinched under the low blow. He was not like his cowardly father. He’d proved it on the battlefield. Blood was not thicker than water. He would never hit or hurt a woman. Or would he?

He thought of the French woman who’d so casually set fire to the cart he had been trapped under, happy to watch his skin burn, and he knew, to his horror, this was no longer true.

To survive, he would. He’d do anything.

But could he have done such a vile act now that he was safe and the war was over? His mouth dried even further. In one of his blackouts, perhaps he would.

Fear, stinking fear, slid over his nakedness.

It seemed illogical that he'd been set up. He couldn't for the life of him understand why anyone would go to such elaborate lengths to discredit him. He was nothing, a nobody. His injuries had made him a recluse from society. He was the decorated war hero everyone pitied and no one wanted to look at. They admired his sacrifice for mother England, but they did not want the constant reminder of it.

His stomach churned. He hated the pity. The flinching when people saw his face he could take. He flinched at himself too, hence his aversion to mirrors. But pity ...

Simon voiced the question swirling in Christian's mind. "Would you have us believe someone has impersonated you? Why would this occur? Stop denying the changes in you since Waterloo, and do the honorable thing. Leave England, or I cannot say what my father will do to you."

Simon was right. Christian had no enemies that he knew of, and prior to the war he'd been one of the popular, lovable group of rogues known as the Libertine Scholars.

He and five of his friends had attended Eton together, and they'd taken to books and learning, drawn together by a desire to use their brains for more than just sport and whoring—not that they hadn't partaken of their fair share of those, and then some more. So much so, they'd earned the nickname of the Libertine Scholars, sin and learning being a wickedly exuberant combination.

Those happy and enjoyable days now seemed a distant memory.

Christian ran a hand through his hair and licked his cracked lips. "Could you pass me the water jug—please?" he asked, stalling for time so that he could try to make sense of what he was hearing.

"Bloody cheek," said the Duke, but Simon passed him a glass of water.

"I'd never do this." He stared hard into Simon's eyes and saw a shadow of doubt flickering in their uneasy depths. "I'd

never hurt your sister. I abhorred my father's behavior. I am nothing like him."

"Perhaps you committed this terrible atrocity because of everything you've suffered. Perhaps it has unhinged your mind." Simon could not hold his gaze. "I think it best if you leave England. And don't ever come back."

"I'm not running. I did not—I could not have done this." But his voice lacked conviction.

"You know you have not been yourself since Waterloo. Grayson—Lord Blackwood—tells me the blackouts have been getting worse. Can you honestly tell me you remember everything about last night?"

Grayson. Grayson was the only reason Christian was still alive.

Damaged, but alive. He still wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He shook his head. "No. On my honor, I cannot categorically state I remember everything about last evening. But surely the ladies of the house will vouch for me."

"We cannot find a woman among them who shared your bed last night. The madam didn't even know you were here."

This was getting ridiculous. Christian ran a hand over his face. God, he was tired. Since Waterloo he couldn't remember when he'd last had a proper night's sleep. His nightmares made sleeping next to impossible.

Every time he closed his eyes he felt the searing heat melting his skin and the horrifying smell of his impending death. The unbearable pain ...

He sucked a steady breath deep into his lungs.

The madam *did* know he was here. Christian was the Honey Pot's most consistent customer. What woman in her right mind would want to touch him unless paid to do so?

Christian stood and began pulling on his breeches. "I paid for a woman to come to my bed—I do remember that.

Something is amiss. I remember that the woman seemed very cheap. Usually I have to pay over the odds.”

Simon had the gall to look at him with pity. “You don’t remember bringing Harriet here?”

“God damn it, I did not bring your sister here. I walked here. I remember because I noticed the chill.” Christian suddenly halted in his dressing. “Maybe this has something to do with Harriet. Maybe someone is trying to discredit her, not me.” He swallowed. “If that is the case and I have been used as a tool for vengeance, then I will of course do the honorable thing and offer my hand in marriage to save her reputation.”

The room fell silent, and the Duke’s fists clenched by his side, his face flaring red with rage.

Holy hell, he’d said the wrong thing.

“So that’s what this has been about. You can’t get any gently bred woman to marry you, so you resort to dishonor in order to trap my only daughter.” The sword was back at his throat. “I should slit your throat from ear to ear.”

Christian looked toward Simon for understanding, but the coldness had returned to Simon’s eyes.

“You think I’d let Harriet marry you now? She’s so traumatized she can’t even say your name without shuddering. *You* marry her? Why, I’d sooner marry her to a leper.” The sword pressed into Christian’s neck. “No. I have a more fitting punishment in mind for you. With you out of the way, this incident never occurred. I’ll protect my daughter from disgrace and ensure Harriet marries a man befitting her station.”

Christian’s muscles tensed; the Duke wanted him dead. But he hadn’t survived months of agony to die at the end of a sword held by one of his own countrymen. Through lowered eyelids he appraised his chances of making it to the door. He’d learned that when the odds were stacked against him, it was far wiser to retreat, regroup, and live to fight another day.

He assessed the room, and a plan began to emerge in his mind. If Simon would just move away from the door, toward the windows, he could make it past the Duke. He might be

scarred, but he was healthy and strong, something that many of his contemporaries overlooked.

He feigned a move toward the window, and Simon, since his father's sword had the door covered, moved to block that avenue of escape—perfect!

Christian made for the door before the Duke even had time to blink, although the Duke's sword sliced Christian's neck on the way past.

Hell, what was one more scar?

His bare feet hardly touched the floor as he ran for the back stairs. For once, he didn't care that his twisted and marked body was on display.

He'd only just taken a couple of steps down when he scented danger in the form of floor polish—but it was too late. His feet slid out from under him, and he went down headfirst, tumbling down the narrow staircase. Tucking himself into a ball, he tried to protect his head.

He thought for one moment he might survive the fall unscathed, but when the iron doorstep came into view at the bottom of the stairs, dread set in. He knew he was going to hit it. He desperately clawed at thin air, trying to ensure he found the open doorway, but his actions were in vain.

*I hate it when I'm right*, was his last thought before his head collided with the iron doorstep. Then pain seared through his brain until, mercifully, everything went dark.



## *Chapter Two*

**Y**ork, Canada, March 1816

Mrs. Sarah Cooper, although ushered into Lord Markham's study by invitation, immediately felt the waves of animosity rolling off him. Gone was the fun-loving, handsome, and jovial rake she remembered spying on in her youth. Instead, she found a man whose love for life seemed as snuffed out as last night's candle.

She couldn't miss his scars, and saw that life had hurt him, marked him. As indeed it had her. He was badly burned over the left side of his face.

His once sensual lips appeared to curl at the corner as if he were permanently sneering. Lord Markham had let his hair grow longer than was fashionable, and he allowed it to hang about his face, probably in an attempt to hide the worst of his scars. As he swung round to greet her, she glimpsed his puckered cheek. The skin was pulled so taut, surely it must hurt to talk or eat. However, God had been slightly merciful, because his eye had not been damaged, nor much of the skin around it, he even had part of his eyebrow. She'd always loved the green of his eyes, as warm and welcoming as a summer meadow.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been free to run through tall grass. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been free, period.

Life hadn't transpired as she'd thought or hoped.

They had that in common.

Even though she'd heard of his injuries, when she saw them her feet tripped in shock. His burns made her think of pain. Her heart welled with pity as she took in his scars. Gone was the smile that had women forgetting everything, including propriety. Instead, the scars spoke of excruciating pain.

With her newfound inner strength, she steeled herself not to show any emotion. Besides, life on a slave plantation had introduced her to worse injuries.

Lord Markham, she was sure, would not appreciate pity. She needed to hide the fact that she'd seen him when he still looked like every woman's fantasy. If he thought she recognized him, it might prompt his memory, and she needed to remain anonymous. She'd never been formally introduced to the Earl, and therefore felt a modicum of safety.

Since she was pretending to be a governess, normally they should never have crossed paths. For in which world would a governess ever mix with a bachelor earl? Nowhere respectable, certainly, and this position called for respectability. She'd seen the type of women he'd been interviewing before her, and seen them being shown the door.

Sarah prayed the battle-scarred war hero sitting behind the imposing desk would remain unaware of how desperately she needed this position. Lord Markham—"Devil Scarface," as the local Yorkers cruelly named him—was not renowned for his sweet temperament. If he saw through her deception, there was no telling what he might do.

In the ordinary course of events, it should've been Lily Pearson's mother interviewing her for the position of governess, but since both Lily's parents had recently died, the task was left to Lord Markham, the girl's guardian.

Unlike most of York, she felt no fear in Devil Scarface's presence. She remembered the honorable, intelligent rake from her past, who was welcomed with open arms within the *ton*. Surely there was still a smidgen of the man he'd once been hidden beneath his scars.

In fact, her heart had obviously recognized something within the man across from her, for to her consternation, she

felt an altogether inappropriate emotion as she gazed upon the Earl's stern features.

Regardless of who or what he had become, Sarah not only contemplated the position of governess to Lily Pearson but coveted the role. She had never expected to be a widow at twenty-two, and certainly not in these circumstances. The idea of hiding in Canada for the rest of her life was too awful to bear. No, a governess on a large estate in Dorset would be preferable.

“Perhaps you could detail your previous experience, Mrs. Cooper. You appear to be rather young to be an experienced governess.”

His voice was comforting—rich and smooth. For a man of his size, she'd expected him to sound otherwise.

The Earl watched her intently, with eyes as rich as the emeralds she'd had to sell in order to reach Canada. Her escape from Virginia had been perilous, and in the colonies she'd been unable to rely on anyone to help a lady in distress merely out of honor. Yet it was amazing how the goodness of people's hearts overflowed once payment was offered.

She cleared her throat and answered in her haughtiest voice, hoping to sound mature and knowledgeable while maintaining her disguise. It had been two years since she'd left England, and Lord Markham had been away fighting Napoleon for six months before she left. It was unlikely he'd remember her. The Libertine Scholars avoided debutantes, very much in the manner of cunning foxes avoiding being torn apart by hounds.

“I'm skilled in all facets of a lady's education. I am also fluent in Latin, French, and German, with a sprinkling of Russian. I am rather good with numbers, and botany and anatomy are particular interests of mine.” That sounded sufficiently bluestocking and appropriate for a governess.

She watched with growing horror as Lord Markham's lips twitched at her boast.

“I’m not sure these are the skills my young ward will require in order to find an appropriate husband when she comes of age.”

The teasing in his voice transported her back to when she had been a young girl of fifteen. For a few seconds, Lord Markham’s disfiguring burns dissolved, and she was once again staring at the features of an Adonis, with lustrous thick hair shining as black as a starless night. Then the reality of the cruel scars invaded her vision once more, distorting the aristocratic handsomeness of his face.

He’d been a beautiful man once. A dark-haired, virile Greek god sent to walk among mere mortals. His injuries were a sacrilege. War had a lot to answer for.

He’d obviously read her thoughts and seen the fleeting look of pity race across her expression, because his mouth curled briefly at the corner. “The rewards of war.” He added dryly, “No matter. I assure you even I flinch at my reflection.”

His voice had become brittle, and she heard the note of pained cynicism underlying it.

He cleared his throat. “I believe you were going to assure me of your suitability for the role.”

Belatedly, she recalled where she was and why she was there. “Education is important—even for a woman.”

“Is that so?” he asked.

“I did hope that one of the infamous Libertine Scholars might see the value in a woman having a well-equipped brain.” She gazed into his eyes. “After all, beauty is unreliable. It fades with time—or is snatched away by God’s will. A match of the mind would make for a happier life.”

His eyes darkened and his voice hardened. “My injury was not God’s will. It was a French bitch who showed no mercy when she set fire to the cart I was trapped under.”

His eyes blazed with a similar fire, and his fists curled upon the desk.

She sat in shocked silence, wishing the ground would open up and send her to a real hell. She hadn't meant to bring up such terrible memories.

A moment later he uttered, "I apologize, Mrs. Cooper. That was uncalled for." His anger, quick to flare, just as quickly retreated. "You seem to be very well informed about my past. I take it you did not grow up in York."

She nodded while she tried to find her voice. When constructing her cover story, she'd decided it was safer to stick as close as possible to the truth. Lies were hard to remember.

"I grew up in the household of the Duke of Hastings." That was no lie. He sat waiting for more. She didn't care to expand on her answer. But Lord Markham did not appear to be the type of man to be fobbed off or fooled, she thought, swallowing hard.

Even battle-scarred, he commanded attention. Masculine and broad-shouldered, he reflected the trappings of his background—money and breeding. She took note of his high starched shirt collar, a pristine white cravat, and a superbly tailored coat of forest-green superfine cloth that matched his eyes. But it was his aristocratic bearing that lent him an air of unmistakable elegance. Scars or no scars, this man drew attention.

His eyebrows rose. "In what capacity, may I inquire? I have visited the Duke on several occasions. He has a daughter. She would be about your age, if I recall. You are too young to have been her governess."

Sarah swallowed hard. Fooling Lord Markham was going to take all the skill she had. "Yes, I knew her well. She was an only child, and lacked for company. I was the gardener's daughter, and her friend. Given my relationship with Lady Serena, I experienced all the advantages she was given, including sharing her governess. Hence, my education."

He stared at her, his gaze measuring for a moment, before asking, "I take it you haven't actually worked as a governess. Do you have any experience with children? Do you have children of your own?"

She did not let this bombardment of questions rattle her. She pondered a reply that would be at least half credible. Lies were a slippery trap. One lie often led to many more, until you had no place left to turn.

She gave an impression of ease by relaxing back in her chair, yet she could feel the muscles in her neck tightening. “No. This would be my first position as a governess, and I’ve never been blessed with children of my own.”

“Have you ever spent any time around children?” he probed.

She shook her head, feeling despair inch into her blood. He was not going to employ her. With a resigned sigh, Sarah simply said, “The one qualification I do have, is that I too lost my mother at an early age. I know exactly how Lily is feeling.”

He sat contemplating her, and then slowly smiled. The very same smile that had taken her breath away the first time she saw him, when only a young girl. Even now the smile stirred her insides, and her heart lifted. He was still stunningly gorgeous.

“Perfect. That’s the most important qualification I can imagine. Lily needs someone who can empathize with her. However, before I decide on the person most suitable for the position, I will seek Lily’s opinion.”

Lord Markham moved his left arm to pull the bell beside his desk, and grimaced. Lifting a searching gaze to his face, she detected a pallor to his complexion that she’d missed before. The blood drained from his face, and lines of pain fanned out from his stunning green eyes. It would appear his burns were more extensive than were visible to the eye. The realization aroused the most absurd desire in her. She’d seen far too much suffering during the last eighteen months. She wanted to go to him and offer him comfort.

Sarah shook herself mentally at such an inappropriate impulse. It was the one sure way to ensure she did not get the position. Finding him watching her with an unsettlingly candid gaze, she damped down her impulse to inquire after his health.

She'd master the art of servitude even if she had to bite her tongue in half to do so. She had to learn, and fast, that she was now subservient, and therefore should not engage her betters.



Christian, meanwhile, had been aware of Mrs. Sarah Cooper as a woman the minute she walked into the room. What man wouldn't be? He'd always been a connoisseur of all things beautiful, and this woman outshone them all. The round spectacles that were too big for her face, as well as the matronly cap covering hair the color of dried wheat, couldn't disguise the flawless beauty beneath.

His body hummed with awareness. Such composure and presence in one so young surprised him. She didn't look a day over twenty, yet she did not appear to be in awe of him at all. Usually his title had women fawning over him while trying to hide the fact they found him repulsive. Women thought that if they pretended to find him appealing, they would get what they wanted from him—namely, his title and money.

Mrs. Cooper looked directly at him with no hint of pretense. Either she was a consummate actress or the scars were really not important. She seemed completely focused on obtaining this position.

She also spoke in cultured tones. *Interesting.*

Listening to her words, two things struck Christian. One, she knew who he was, and two, she was right. Already during this short conversation, it wasn't her beauty that had caught and held his interest. It was her intelligence. She had been neither cowered nor flustered by his appearance or questions. It was as if she'd been around nobility all her life. She'd grown up in a duke's household. Now he understood her composure.

This was the first time since ending up in this hellhole of a backwater that Christian hadn't minded being stuck in York. Not if it introduced him to the delights of Mrs. Cooper.

He'd been in Canada since November last year. Over the long, frozen winter months, he'd wallowed here, consumed by anger so potent it had eaten him up from the inside. Christian could feel his anger growing stronger as each day passed. To be wrongfully accused of such a crime made him want to throttle something or someone—and that someone was Harriet Penfold.

He briefly closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. He'd battled all his life to control the violence deep inside him. Having seen what his father had become through not being able to control his inner demons, Christian strove to conquer his ever-present weakness and the burning need to give in to his temper.

When he was an officer, the war gave him an avenue to release his frustrations. Now, all he used to vent them was alcohol and sex. Both enabled him to keep his ill humor under control. Since being so unfairly stranded in York, he'd used—or, rather, abused—both ferociously. He hardly cared. Until he returned to England and could confront Harriet, he'd use anything to keep the dark rage away. Nothing consumed him more than settling the score with the Duke of Barforte and his lying daughter. Harriet had become an obsession. Why had she lied? Memories of that fateful night were returning. Harriet had not been in his bed, he'd swear on his mother's grave.

Once back on English soil, Christian was determined to ascertain the truth from Harriet, his accuser. He'd be sailing home as soon as he had an appropriate governess for Lily. Mrs. Cooper looked very promising—very promising indeed.

When he'd failed to escape the Honey Pot on that fateful day, all those months ago, Simon and his father shanghaied him onto a schooner heading for York, Canada, with only the clothes he had on his back and a few coins in his pocket. Obviously they were hoping he'd starve or freeze to death. He could hardly raise credit when he had no proof of his identity. The bank laughed in his face—a scarred ruffian proclaiming to be an earl, with no papers of introduction and no luggage!

If it hadn't been for Mr. Matthew Pearson, he probably would have starved, or perhaps frozen to death with the first



snowfall—just as the Duke had hoped.

Coward! If you had to kill a man, have the honor to do it while looking him in the eye.

“May I ask how the Pearsons died? It will help me when dealing with Lily’s grief.”

Her polite inquiry stabbed at his heart. She was the only interviewee who’d bothered to ask, the only one who showed an ounce of caring. “They were caught in a blizzard while returning from a function. They were trapped for five hours, and by the time the rescuers reached them, all had perished.”

It had been his reluctance to show his face in public that had saved him. He had chosen to stay in town and frequent the local brothel.

“Lily is fortunate that you have taken her in. I’m sorry for the loss of your friends.”

“I had only known the Pearsons for a few months.”

Her glasses slipped down her nose as she frowned. A small, delicate, gloved finger pushed them back up, but not before he’d glimpsed the deep blue of her eyes. “Oh. Because you took Lily in, I assumed that you’d known them.”

“No. I met Mr. Pearson when I arrived in Canada a few months ago. We went into business together.”

The day he’d arrived, Matthew had taken pity on an earl who had no way of proving who he was, and no access to any funds. Matthew took him into his home and allowed Christian to stay until he was able to contact England and access his considerable fortune. The bank was now no longer laughing. In fact, groveling had become their forte.

The two men were the same age, thirty-two, but they were from vastly different backgrounds. Matthew, born and bred in Canada, came from a good family of moderate means. He was contentedly married to Pamela, and they had a gorgeous twelve-year-old daughter, Lily. Matthew and Christian soon became firm friends. And Christian had never envied a man more. From where he sat, Matthew’s life seemed perfect.

There was never any doubt that Christian would take Lily back to England and raise her as if she were his own. He did not believe he'd ever have a legitimate child, and he recognized that Lily would fill the loneliness deep inside him.

So, three days ago, he'd placed an advertisement in the local *York Times* for a governess to sail back to England with them and to take charge of Lily's upbringing.

Given the colonial location and his reputation, he'd had the most unsuitable women applying. It seemed no respectable governess wished to work for Devil Scarface. Those who did simply wanted passage to England. That is, until the woman seated on the other side of Matthew's large maplewood desk applied.

She was the first woman who'd looked him directly in the eye in a long time. He found it disconcerting. The red rawness of the skin on his burnt face had faded over the years, but even so, it—he—was not a congenial sight.

She hardly seemed to notice.

Yet he had noticed her all right—too much. His body reacted to her ethereal beauty like a stallion scenting a mare. A flood of tangled emotions rushed through him. One of them was a current of regret. Ever since he'd been injured at Waterloo, he'd pretended that it didn't matter to him that his looks were gone. Anger and bitterness had soured his demeanor. Perhaps it would have been better if he'd died there and then. It was only when he saw a woman like Mrs. Cooper, with such grace and beauty, that the pain of all he'd lost swamped him in self-pity.

She sat opposite him, very composed, in a charming if somewhat dated lavender ensemble, the shade flattering her ocean-deep blue eyes. Her hair was pulled back severely under the cap. The only thing that seemed out of place was the golden hint of a tan and a nose covered in delightful freckles, as if she'd been outside for long periods without a hat.

Her vocabulary and demeanor spoke of maturity. As he assessed her, his whole body ached with the most basic human need.

He wanted her. Not just her body, but more ...

He wanted the dream he'd promised himself on the battlefields of Europe. A beautiful wife and family, a home, some shreds of normality, a few children to justify the future and to give him a tangible reason for having put himself through the horror of war.

He watched her nervously lick her lips. His groin tightened. He imagined the sleek wetness around him ...

He tried to cross his legs but hit his knee on the underside of the desk. Reality returned.

He'd be lucky if even a governess agreed to be his wife. The allure of his wealth and title meant that a desperate few still approached him. But he refused to marry a woman who'd have him only because of his title, and then lie rigid and cold beneath him in the marriage bed.

This woman unsettled him because she looked at him differently. She looked at him as if he were a kindred soul, as if she understood his pain and wanted to share it.

Good God. She looked at him as if he were whole.

A shudder racked his body and a flare of hope ignited before he hastily beat it down. He was being absurd. Why was a young woman of this caliber, closer to twenty than thirty, seeking a job that would have her spend most of her life tucked away in the country?

"Mrs. Cooper, I do wish to emphasize the position is not just for the duration of the voyage back to England. I would expect you to take up residence at my country estate in Dorset."

"That was very clear in your advertisement."

"I will be spending most of the year in Dorset. I will do no entertaining, and I have little call for visitors or friends. Life in Dorset will be very dull. You would be most unlikely to find another husband working for me."

"That would suit me fine. One husband is more than enough." The venom in her voice surprised him, and he

frowned. Had her husband mistreated her? His father had taught him just how vile and degrading a husband could make a marriage.

He raised an eyebrow. “Most applicants see the position as a means to get paid passage back to England. I’d hate to think that you might simply disappear after I’d paid for the voyage.”

“I’m a widow, my lord. Where would I go? I have no family left in England.” She shook her head, and a wisp of hair escaped her cap and brushed against her cheek; his fingers itched to tuck it behind her delicate ear. “No, it’s a long-term position I’m seeking. The quiet of the country will suit me perfectly.” She hesitated. “As long as I may ride and paint in my spare time?”

Riding and painting—these were the hobbies of gentry. They were skills Lily would need in order to make a good marriage, a marriage he approved of. He’d never let Lily be handed into the care of a bully or reprobate, as his mother’s father had done. He’d never put a title or elevated social position ahead of Lily’s happiness or safety.

He inclined his head. “I’m sure these can be accommodated. Lily will need to learn to ride. I have no idea if she’d like to paint.”

“Painting is something she could learn immediately. It might make the voyage to England less daunting if I got her to concentrate on painting the things she loves. To paint her mother while she still has a clear memory of her, for example.” Her smile faltered. “I wish I had thought to do so when I was younger.”

The musical melancholy of her voice played over his skin like a caress, matching the sympathy obvious in her face.

“I don’t want Lily to be subject to more change than necessary. Having just lost her parents, I don’t wish her to get attached to a governess who then ups and leaves her upon reaching England. The transition to a new country will be difficult enough. To add more change would be cruel.” He noticed Mrs. Cooper did not blink or flinch—either sign would have indicated that that had indeed been her exact intent. “I

will not take on anyone who may cause Lily further pain. Do I make myself quite clear?"

The woman nodded vigorously. "That is admirable of you, my lord. Most men do not understand what losing one's mother does to a small child."

Christian knew only too well. His mother had died when he was six. Worse, he lived with the memory that it had been at the hand of his father.

"I'd take it very personally if she lost someone else so soon after losing her mother. Very personally." He let the threat hang in the air.

"I would be very grateful to receive a position such as this." She swallowed and seemed to choke on her words. "To be alone in the world is daunting. To be alone and a woman is doubly so."

"Even for a woman with brains?" he said with a smile.

"More so, I suspect. I don't hide from the realities of life. I know what could happen to me."

His smile faded. "Then it appears we can help each other."

He relaxed back in his chair and studied her. Either Mrs. Cooper was the world's greatest actress or she really did wish to find the security of a position—wished it enough to take on Devil Scarface himself.

"The position is yours, if you'd like it. But on one condition."

The relief was obvious in her smile, and she offered her hand for him to shake. "Thank you, my lord, I'm most grateful. What is the condition?"

The rush of thankfulness through his body at her response should've been a warning. Could he live with a woman such as this in his house, reminding him every day of what he might never have?

Yes. He could live with a woman who was not afraid to look at him. It made him forget, for just one moment, that anything had changed.

That he had changed.

He cleared his throat. “It seems that I have been fortunate to find you with no current employment. You certainly have the qualifications I’m looking for, but the final decision will be Lily’s.”

She pulled papers from her bag. “Did you want to see my references?”

“That won’t be necessary. I find paper references a waste of good ink. It’s too easy to hide the truth in words, whereas a face is more revealing.” He gave the bell one long pull, and it wasn’t long before a small knock could be heard on the door. “Enter.”

Lily Pearson shyly entered the room, and walked around to stand next to his chair. She looked so sad and so alone. The urge to pull her to him and swear his protection was strong, but not in front of Mrs. Cooper, who’d think him unbalanced.

He gave Lily a warm smile, and his soul lifted when she smiled back at him. She’d not had much to smile about recently. He admired Lily’s resilience. She’d taken the death of her parents and the change in her position better than many had predicted. Mrs. Hobson, the housekeeper, said she still cried herself to sleep each night, but that was to be expected. He took her small hand in his.

“Lily, this is Mrs. Cooper. I’m thinking of offering her the position as your new governess, but only if you like her.”

“She’s very pretty,” Lily uttered before he could finish.

He could feel heat flood his face. “Yes, well, be that as it may, I suggest you two have tea together. After tea, you can then give me your verdict. Would that suit?”

Lily reached up and kissed his scarred cheek, and his whole body stiffened. No one kissed him nowadays unless paid to do so. Certainly no one kissed his scars.

Shocked, he sat like a statue until Mrs. Cooper said, “Shall I ring for tea?” She smiled at Lily. “Where shall we have it?”

Lily's face sobered. "Let's take it in the drawing room, where Mama always took tea." She walked away from his desk, collected Mrs. Cooper's hand, and said, "Come on, I'll show you. On the way we'll ask Mrs. Hobson to make the tea."

"That's a splendid idea." Mrs. Cooper turned to look at him over her shoulder.

He smiled encouragingly and stood. "I'll join you both in an hour."

She nodded and closed the door. He could hear Lily prattling to Mrs. Cooper as they made their way to the drawing room at the other end of the house.

He prayed Lily liked Mrs. Cooper. Guilt started raking its talons up his body. He hadn't hired Mrs. Cooper solely for Lily's sake. He had hired her also for his own.

## *Chapter Three*

Lily was busy eating one of Mrs. Hobson's scones. It gave Sarah a chance to think and absorb what had just happened.

Sarah looked around the feminine room and felt every muscle in her body relax. She sat back into her seat. She felt safe. She hadn't felt so safe in a long time.

It wasn't solely the warmth radiating from the fire in this cozy room, obviously decorated with a family in mind. It was because, for some reason, when she looked into Lord Markham's sad eyes, she'd sensed she'd be safe with him.

Having a husband whose cruelty was renowned, she'd learned to read people. It had saved her many a beating.

Turning her attention to Lily, she asked, "How old are you?"

"I'm twelve, but I'll be thirteen in September. You don't look very old. I thought all governesses were ancient."

She smiled at the little girl sitting so properly across from her. "I'm a fairly new governess. You'll be my first charge."

"Don't worry. You're my first governess, so I'm unlikely to know if you're any good at your job."

"Do you not want a governess?"

"That depends on who the governess is, and what I have to learn. I'm pretty sure Lord Markham won't let you beat me." Lily hastily rushed on, "Not that you would, anyway."



Sarah laughed. “I won’t beat you. You’re lucky to have Lord Markham as your guardian. He is a war hero back in England. Did you know that?”

Lily nodded while she ate her scone. “Papa told me that is how he got his burns. He said not to be scared of his lordship, and that he was a great man.”

“Are you? Scared of Lord Markham?”

Lily didn’t even look up from where she was spreading jam over her second scone. “No. He has been nothing but kind to me. If Papa trusted him, then I know Lord Markham will take good care of me.” She hesitated. “Besides, he understands what it is to be sad. He doesn’t scold me for crying. He’s sad too. Sad and alone ... just like me.”

Lord Markham did look sad. Sarah could read the Earl’s pain as clearly as you could see France from the cliffs of Dover on a cloudless day. She sensed his suffering. She knew a kindred soul when she saw one.

“The Earl of Markham was an extremely handsome man in his youth.”

Lily’s eyes opened wide. “You knew him when he lived in England?” she asked excitedly.

Sarah laughed. “No. I saw him once at a ball. I hid in the eaves of a great house, and watched all the men and women of high society. He was in his officer’s uniform. He looked very dashing.”

“He’s still dashing. Only one side of his face is burned. I tend to look at his unmarked side. Most of the time I don’t even notice his scars.”

Lily was right. He was still a very attractive man. A man in the prime of life. Heat prickled over her skin.

She hadn’t expected her body’s heated reaction to the pure raw masculinity of him. His burnt face—well, half-burnt face—seemed to add to his persona. The brooding, hooded look in his eyes and the disdainful tilt of his chin, as if daring the world to pity him, made for a potent mix of power and vulnerability.

When Lord Markham looked at her, it was almost as if he were regarding a piece of art hanging upon a gallery wall ... impersonally. Perhaps her disguise was working well. Perhaps she did not appeal to a man of his experience and discrimination. Why did she suddenly feel disappointed? What woman would not wish for his attentions, even with the scars?

It would have been impossible to take on the role of governess, stuck away in his country estate, if he was looking for her to fulfill another, more inappropriate role, that of his bed partner. It would complicate her situation, which was already too complicated for her liking.

She needed this job.

The main appeal for her was living quietly in the country. Such a location suited her needs too. But she thought it sad he chose to hide himself away. His injuries must be more extensive than he revealed. She'd noted his left arm looked stiff and painful when he moved it.

“What is England like? Will I like living there?”

Lily's question roused her from her thoughts, and she paused before answering. She looked around the room of this modest home. How did she tell this little girl her life was about to change dramatically? “Well, being the ward of the Earl will mean you will be mixing within high society. There will be loads of rules and formalities for you to learn. On the other hand, you'll live in a grand house, with your own maid, and probably your own pony.”

“But I'll still be alone.”

“You'll have me, and Lord Markham, and loads of servants. I don't think you'll feel alone for very long.”

“That's not the same as having a brother or sister.” She looked at Sarah with a serious expression on her face. “Lord Markham isn't married. Papa told me once that Lord Markham has to marry because he's the heir, and he must have a son. So, I'll eventually have other children to play with. I won't be alone then.”

Sarah's chest contracted. "Yes. The Earl will marry—someday."

Sarah wondered why he was yet to marry. Before his burns it would have been easy to find a wife. Women couldn't seem to get enough of the handsome rake then. But now ...

Her heart swelled with pity for the Earl. At one of her father's balls, when she'd been fifteen and too young to attend, she'd slipped up the backstairs and hidden herself so that she could peer over the banister, watching everyone below.

He'd arrived with a group of other young bucks. All were very striking, but Lord Markham stood out, even within such an illustrious ensemble. He seemed taller and broader than any other of the male guests, and his gruff laugh had made her spine tingle. He was dashing in his officer's uniform, and when he smiled, every woman there went weak at the knees, their fans fluttering wildly.

He had been the most sought-after man at the ball. It had annoyed her immensely to see her father's latest mistress, Lady Sophie Campbell, try to seduce him. Lord Markham rose significantly in her esteem when he skillfully swept her simpering attempts aside.

Sarah sighed. It was a shame, really. If he hadn't originally been so Adonis-like, with hair so thick and black and with long-lashed eyes a spectacular shade of pine-tree green, then perhaps one would not notice the hideous disfigurement as much. It stood in stark contrast to the beauty on the left side of his face.

She watched Lily take another bite of her scone. Her face was pinched in concentration, trying to keep the crumbs on her plate. She had copied every move Sarah had made since they had sat down to have their tea.

"How did your husband die?"

The question startled Sarah, and for a moment she could not speak.

"My mama and papa died because they got caught in a snowstorm. Lord Markham says they didn't suffer. They

simply fell asleep. Did your husband suffer?" Lily's smile died, and her face was solemn. "No one should have to suffer."

Oh, the innocence of the young! Some people deserved to suffer. Personally, Sarah hoped her husband was in hell, suffering greatly. She crossed her fingers behind her back and hoped God would understand. She lied to ease the child's pain.

"My husband was very old. He died in his sleep."

Lily nodded. A small tear slipped down her cheek. "Mrs. Hobson says there is no point in tears, but I miss my parents." She looked up at Sarah, anguish marking her young face. Sarah opened her arms, and Lily flew into them.

Sarah cuddled her close and let her cry. And cry. And cry, until slowly the tears dried up.

"Do you know that you can still talk to your parents? They mightn't be able to answer back, but they will hear you." She gently swept Lily's fringe of bangs out of her eyes.

"Even if I'm in a faraway country such as England? I have to go there soon with Lord Markham."

"Oh, honey, they are with you wherever you go."

"Truly?"

"They are up in heaven, but you will never be alone, because you carry them in your heart. You can talk to them wherever you are in the world."

Lily pushed herself out of Sarah's arms, went to the window, and looked up at the sun. Sarah could feel herself close to tears. Evidently Lily had thought she'd lose touch with her parents if she left Canada.

Just then the door opened and Lord Markham entered. Lily turned and beamed him a smile, then raced across the room and flung her arms around his waist.

"Mrs. Cooper says my parents will still be with me, even when I go to England."

The side of his mouth that was still mobile curled down as a frown crossed his features. Sarah hurriedly explained.

“Lily was worried that her parents wouldn’t hear her prayers if she left Canada. I explained that in heaven they can hear you wherever you are.”

For such a large man, Lord Markham moved with an agile grace and dignity. He crouched so that he was at eye level with Lily. “Is this what you have been worried about?”

The little girl nodded.

He stroked a finger down her cheek. “Sweetie, why didn’t you talk to me about it?”

“I thought you might be angry if I didn’t want to leave York.”

“I’d never be angry with you. You can ask me for anything and, if it is within my power, I will give it. I’d never lie to you, and I will always do everything I can to make you happy.”

Lily’s bottom lip trembled. “You promise? You promise you won’t take me to England and then—” A small sob escaped her. “And then, if I’m naughty, leave me all alone?”

He closed his eyes and hugged her tightly. “Never, never, never!” he declared with gusto. “I would never leave you, no matter what you did.” He drew back and held her at arm’s length, looking directly into her eyes. “Your father looked after me when I had no one. I intend to raise you and love you as if you were my own daughter. With every bone in my body, I promise to look after you always.” His perfect profile faced Sarah, and he smiled a bone-melting smile. “I’m Christian Trent, the fifth Earl of Markham, and I am giving you my word as a gentleman. Will you come with me to England and do me the very great honor of becoming my ward?”

Lily flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. “Yes. I want to come to England with you.” Lily lifted her head and sent a shy smile across to Sarah. “As long as Mrs. Cooper can come with us too.”

Lord Markham, still crouched with Lily in his arms, smiled over Lily’s head. “That would be perfect,” he uttered.

He kept holding Lily and smiling at Sarah. Lightness entered his eyes, and their habitual sadness was banished for a

moment. The sun caught him, and his hair shone as black as coal, his eyes as green and as bright as the first time she'd seen him in her father's ballroom. He looked serene—and utterly gorgeous.

She saw his shoulders tremble under Lily's hold, and the emotion of the moment overcame her. Sarah's heart gave a wild flutter, then a couple of extra beats, and then it began to pound hard in her chest.

*Oh, no. Please. No! It cannot be!* She hoped it was merely that Lord Markham's touch of kindness and warmth had engaged her senses sufficiently to make her forget who and what she was. She prayed that her childhood infatuation was not rearing its silly head again. It would ruin everything.

But deep down, Sarah knew it was more than infatuation.

For who had the strength to turn down a chance at realizing a girlhood fantasy?

His scars meant nothing. Lord Markham was all man, strong, vibrant, and honorable, and he was here, right in front of her—the very man she'd dreamed about for years. As she grew into womanhood, she'd assiduously followed his military career. She'd found the scandal surrounding his exploits as one of the infamous Libertine Scholars positively titillating. She'd envied his conquests. Dreamed of being his ...

That was until her father had forced her into marriage—forced her into hell.

And so when she'd read the advertisement for a governess for the Earl of Markham's ward, she'd known it was fate. Fate had brought her to him, at last.

He had always been her hero.

She had always kept an image of him in her head, to blank out the horrors of her life.

Even when her life was at its absolute worst, even when she had thought she could endure no more, even when, finally, she had become a criminal on the run ...



It was after midnight, and still Sarah couldn't sleep. She'd moved into the Pearsons' house that very afternoon. Lord Markham had suggested it would be of benefit if she took up residency immediately, since the house had to be packed before they departed for England in two days' time.

There was no doubt in her mind that those chasing her would not imagine she'd flee to England. If they did, they'd think she'd flee to her father. She'd definitely not run to her father. She hoped they had no idea she'd fled to Canada.

When her father had so cavalierly handed her over to the monster that was Peter Dennett, he'd ceased to exist for her. But returning to the home of her birth, England, was a calculated risk.

If she stayed in Dorset, remaining quietly in the background in her disguise as a governess, no one would find her. She bet her husband's henchmen hadn't even learned she'd made it to Canada.

Still, the constant worry was there. If they found her, it would be her word against theirs.

There was no such thing as self-defense against a husband. She'd learned by degradation that a husband could do almost anything to his wife. He owned her. If she was caught, they would likely hang her for murder.

The need to be vigilant and alert never left her. However, a few weeks on Lord Markham's ship, with no other passengers, would allow her the first opportunity in a long while for a good night's sleep. She couldn't wait. Her body hummed with repressed longing.

Her eyes drifted shut and a smile played on her lips. To sleep without nightmares ...

A bloodcurdling scream filled the night air. Sarah jerked upright. For a terrifying, horrifying moment her heart stood

still in shock. She thought her husband had come back to haunt her.

But the pain-filled screams came instead from the back of the house, from the direction of Lord Markham's room.

Sarah rose and donned a robe. She hoped Lily would not wake and become frightened. She lit a candle and moved quietly into the corridor. Lily appeared at her side.

"Don't be scared. It's only Lord Markham," Lily whispered. "He has terrible dreams. Papa told me Lord Markham is remembering the fire, and that I should block my ears and never mention his screams. It would embarrass him." She held out her hand. "I came to warn you, as I thought you might be afraid. I forgot to tell you about his nightmares before I said goodnight."

Sarah squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Lily, but it's all right. You go back to bed. I'm not scared."

Mrs. Hobson emerged too. "He's like this most nights. The first night it happened he scared the daylights out of me."

Another scream filled the corridor and echoed around it. "Take Lily back to bed, Mrs. Hobson. I'm going to see if I can make Lord Markham more comfortable." Sarah knew she'd not be able to sleep tonight unless she did something to ease his suffering.

She saw Mrs. Hobson frown as she took in Sarah's attire. Sarah guessed Mrs. Hobson thought it most improper, but Lily's presence halted any detailed conversation.

"If he's in the grip of a nightmare, he won't remember I've even been in his room. I'm a widow, Mrs. Hobson. I'm sure he's no different from my husband, or any other man, for that matter. Besides, we all need some sleep. We've a big day ahead of us."

Mrs. Hobson sighed. "You're right, of course. Come on, lass, back to bed."

Sarah hurried to Lord Markham's room with no idea of what she was going to do. But she couldn't bear listening to his tortured cries for one moment longer. She hated to see any



human or animal in pain, and over the last twelve months she'd seen more abuse and suffering than she could reasonably endure. Sarah was sure her husband's slave plantation had closely resembled hell on earth.

She entered Lord Markham's bedchamber and lifted her candle high so she could see. The room was sparsely furnished; the huge four-poster bed dominated the room.

The screams had died down to deep, resonating, soulful cries, and as she hurried toward the bed, she watched Lord Markham thrash about trying to escape the demons chasing him.

As she drew near, Sarah took a deep breath. All his thrashing had pushed the bedclothes away from his body, and he was naked. Her eyes welled as she took in the twisted and tortured mass of reddened flesh down one side of his body.

She marveled at his strength to endure.

Then she let her gaze wander over the rest of him. Lord Markham was magnificent. His body, while scarred, was so powerful, well-muscled, and, despite his burns, beautiful ...

He was all man. His stomach muscles rippled like waves as he struggled in his nightmare. Sweat made his skin shine, and the crisp black hairs on half his chest sparkled in the candlelight. God, she wanted to touch such perfection. What would he feel like? She reached out and ran a finger over his torso. Velvet ... steely velvet.

Just as her finger found the sheet lying low on his stomach, he jerked violently and the sheet slid down, way down, down past mid-thigh.

Sarah's face flushed, and she knew she should look away. Unable to help herself, however, she looked her fill. She'd never found anything remotely beautiful about a man's privates. Her husband had never given her any pleasure when he came to her bed. However, in his sleep, Christian looked like a larger, living, breathing version of the naked Roman statue in the pond on her father's estate, though the flesh-and-blood one was far more beautiful. She had to admit that, even

flaccid, Christian was remarkably impressive. It would appear there was nothing small about Lord Markham.

She was reaching out to touch him when he gave a near audible murmur. She abruptly jerked her hand away.

Sarah pulled back, shame heating her face. What had she been thinking of, to take such advantage of him when he was clearly so vulnerable? She'd obviously been around her degenerate husband far too long.

Placing the candle on the small table beside the bed, Sarah walked quickly to the dresser and soaked a handkerchief in his water jug. She noticed a small vial next to the jug. She undid the lid and sniffed. Laudanum! He obviously took it for the pain. No wonder he slept like the dead.

Pulling the sheet up, she sat on the edge of the bed and laid the damp cloth on his forehead. She stroked his face and hair and softly sang a gentle lullaby. She felt stupid singing to a grown man, but it appeared to calm him. Gradually his thrashing eased.

She kept singing as she stroked his neck and let her fingers trail toward his chest, feeling the leashed power beneath his skin. Normally she was wary of strong men, but something in his abject helplessness gave her the courage to stay within his reach.

She felt his muscles relax, and she lowered her head to whisper in his ear, "Shush, everything is going to be all right. You're safe. I'm here." And she kissed his cheek as she would have kissed a child in distress.

She felt him stiffen at the touch of her lips. His head turned until his lips touched hers. His eyes were still closed, and his breathing was regular.

She became a statue, too afraid to move lest he wake and find her mouth upon his.

Then his lips fluttered over hers, so lightly it could have been her imagination. Unlike the rest of him, they were soft, and then she could feel herself sinking into their warmth.

With no warning he deepened the kiss, and an altogether different type of groan escaped from deep within his chest. His arms reached for her and he pulled her on top of him, her thin nightdress just a flimsy barricade against the heat and power of his body. She could feel him hardening against her stomach as his tongue swept into her mouth, seeking, conquering, and finally chasing away his demons.

She fought the panic and the need to struggle. Would he hurt her? She would bear it as she always did with Peter, because she was too scared to wake him. She could lose her hard-won job. She should not have entered his room. What if he dismissed her after only one night?

She gritted her teeth, prepared to endure his touch.

But his startling kiss was like none she'd ever experienced before. It was full of tenderness, gentleness, and longing—things Sarah had never experienced in her husband's bed.

She closed her eyes and gave herself over to his kiss. For the first time she welcomed the arousing sensations besieging her as his lips moved enticingly over hers. Her body grew suddenly warm, her skin flushed as with a fever, and yet, oddly, she shivered under his expert onslaught. Surprisingly, she was aroused. After everything she'd endured in her husband's bed, her body recognized the difference in Christian's touch. Her breasts swelled, becoming heavy, full, and tingling; waves of heat fluttered and curled in her belly, and lower as well, right between her thighs. Her breath seemed to be suspended, even as it mingled with his.

Her husband had never made her feel this way. The only thing she'd ever felt for her husband was revulsion.

His mouth continued to languidly explore her, his tongue sliding into her mouth and tickling her moist interior, penetrating and withdrawing and encouraging her to return the favor. She slipped her tongue into his mouth and he groaned. Of their own accord, her fingers entangled themselves in the silky hair that curled at the nape of his neck.

“No, not Harriet ...”

The murmured cry uttered against her lips was laced with pain.

Sarah raised her head, mortified. Lord Markham was dreaming of another woman. Of course he was. She briefly wondered who the lady was, wishing for a split second that the man whose beautiful, scarred face was so close to hers, whose lips were still moist and glistening from her kisses, was dreaming of her.

A thick curl of raven black tumbled over his scarred cheek, and she found herself smoothing it back into place. She leaned down and kissed the savagely puckered flesh of his right cheekbone, willing away his pain. Sarah continued to sing softly, and stayed with Christian until the nightmare subsided and his breathing was deep and regular.

One of Christian's arms stroked her back, and she shivered in awareness at his maleness and at the impropriety of being in a virtual stranger's arms. But he didn't feel like a stranger. He felt safe. It was as if she sensed Lord Markham could fulfill her in some unimaginable way. As if together they could heal each other's pain and bring laughter and brightness into each other's barren lives.

Her sense that they belonged together shook her to her core. It was as inexplicable as it was profound. Sarah silently and thoughtfully contemplated the man beneath her. If only she were free to do as she wished. A woman running from the law had no right to form any attachments.

She ran her fingertips over his lips, the burn making his mouth appear cruel when she knew it was not. Drawn by an urge more powerful than reasonable, she bent her head and chastely kissed him again. She couldn't seem to stop kissing him, caught once more by the spell of his gentle lips and the sensual pleasure of his hard muscles making her breasts swell so painfully. Her body ached with a need she had never before imagined or experienced.

When finally she drew back and moved to leave his bed, her sense of loss caused her heart to lodge in her throat. She made her way to the door.

“Goodnight, my lord. Pleasant dreams. I forbid further nightmares this night.”

As she left his bedchamber, Sarah quietly closed the door behind her, but Christian’s eyes had opened and followed her departure with a longing that matched her own.

“I’ll hardly sleep now, filled with arousing dreams of you,” he whispered to the closed door.

Christian rolled onto his back and crossed his arms under his head. She’d touched him. Kissed him. Kissed his scars. Without being paid. She’d taken pleasure in his kiss, for no gain.

He’d awoken to her soft singing. His mother used to sing to him as a child. He hadn’t been dreaming. She’d kissed him. Kissed him of her own volition. And she’d let him kiss her, and she’d returned his kisses in earnest.

Why?

He could feel warmth infuse his soul, and his lips formed a half smile, as much as the burn damage would allow.

She’d sung to him. Like a child.

His grin grew wider, and the skin on the right side of his face pulled painfully taut.

He didn’t notice.

She’d sung to him. The sound healed and soothed his troubled soul.

Christian rolled onto his side and closed his eyes, his body humming as if he were now just one big grin. He gave thanks to God for sending him a woman like Sarah Cooper. He looked forward to her kissing him again. When he was fully compos mentis and could return her kisses in kind, he would give her more, much more, than a few chaste kisses.

## *Chapter Four*

**F**or the first time in almost twelve months, Christian awoke refreshed, largely due to a night of pleasanter dreams than his normal hellish nightmares. Images of Sarah's soft curves stretched out beside him, above him, and under him had filled his dreams.

He'd awoken to thoughts of her, and he'd pleased himself with dreams of Sarah riding erotically above him, her soft voice emitting passion-filled cries of pleasure, as her tight sheath milked him ...

He flexed his shoulder, hardly noticing its stiffness, as he pulled on his jacket. He felt invigorated this morning. Over the coming weeks he looked forward to making his dreams become a reality. Never since his body had been burned had he seen a woman look at him with admiration. He couldn't get the image of her blatant regard for him out of his head.

As he descended to the breakfast room, he felt an emotion close to happiness, which made his feet tread lightly on the stairs.

However, his seduction of Lily's new governess had to wait a while. Christian had many errands to accomplish before they set sail the next day. He wanted to make certain that the manager he'd employed to run the Canadian arm of the Pearson-Markham Trading Company was introduced appropriately throughout York and the rest of Canada as Markham's new man, ensuring that the supply contracts would be honored. Christian had no intention of returning to Canada, ever.

So it wasn't until he had sent an invitation requesting that Mrs. Cooper join him for the evening meal that Christian took a moment to think through the implications of seducing Sarah.

Though Sarah was young, the fact that she was a widow meant that she was not innocent. What husband wouldn't have had a body like hers in his bed every night?

But was he selfish enough to risk Lily's happiness and stability over a woman he scarcely knew? What if he tired of her—or, more likely, she met a better prospect than he? Any man of his standing, any gentleman with money, would welcome the delectable Mrs. Cooper into his bed.

Wouldn't she want a man who was not a burned husk?

How could he compete? Her beauty would be enough to send his fellow Libertine Scholars into a competitive frenzy for her favors. Prior to the war, he'd have rated his chances of winning her against such stiff rivalry as high, but now ...

He relaxed the fingers clutching the stem of his wineglass lest he snap it like a twig.

What if she left? What would Mrs. Cooper's leaving his employ do to Lily? He tugged at his cravat. Deep down inside, guilt ate at his soul. He wanted her as his mistress, and by God, he'd have her. He deserved some happiness.

What did that make him?

Selfish?

No! Human.

He had no idea what sort of reception he'd get when he reached English shores. Grayson was watching over his holdings. The Duke of Barforte was determined to see Christian ruined, but in order to effect this ruination, any action Barforte might take would be barely on this side of legal.

Mrs. Cooper was just the distraction he needed. She was a luscious body to turn to in the night, a refuge to sink into with her abundant charms, and an opportunity to forget, for a short while, all his troubles.

She was the precise balm he needed to comfort him while he righted the wrongs perpetrated against him. He remembered, among other things, the soothing quality of her voice while she crooned a lullaby to him last night. As in the tales of mermaids luring men to their doom, her serenity and compassion seemed to him like a life ring thrown to a drowning man.

And when it came to holding the nightmares at bay, he would take the panacea of seduction and comfort she offered.

While he was focusing on a particular diversion he would love Mrs. Cooper to perform on him, she entered the room. Given his mind's sensual wanderings, he could barely stand, and he was quite glad that the candelabra hid his groin from view.

“Thank you for the kind invitation, my lord, but isn't it a tad unusual for me to join you at the table?” Her words were spoken with a soft earnestness but no hint of annoyance. “A governess must know her place.”

He motioned for her to take a seat, not at the opposite end of the table from him, but at the place set beside him, on his left—his good side.

The vanity of men!

Taking his seat after her, he said, “I must apologize if my invitation makes you uncomfortable. Once we set sail tomorrow, Lily, you, and I will be the only people on board other than the crew. It will be a long voyage if we cannot converse with each other.” He gave a wry smile. “Besides, I'm not a great one for following society's rules, and tonight, Mrs. Cooper, I'm in need of intelligent conversation.” He poured her a glass of wine before adding, “You did say yesterday in your interview, quite forcefully, that you had a fine mind. Were you taking liberty with the truth, madam?”

Her chin firmed, and her lovely blue eyes met his. “No, my lord, that was not a lie.”

“Please, call me Christian. On board ship there is no reason why we cannot use our given names.” He didn't give



her a chance to protest. “You don’t appear to be wearing your glasses this evening, Sarah.” She stared at him with mouth open.

Her eyes flashed to deep midnight blue. “I don’t need them for anything but reading.” She added in a haughty voice, “It would have been polite to ask if I minded before addressing me by my given name.”

He tried to keep the humor from resonating in his voice. “But you don’t, do you?”

Her mouth widened into a stunning smile that took his breath away. “I don’t think it would matter to you if I did.”

It was a surprising response. Almost as if she was flirting with him. The blood heated in his veins. He regarded her with a critical masculine eye, trying to divorce himself from his body’s raging response to her femininity. Though she looked barely in her twenties, she had already been married. She was obviously experienced when it came to men—and experienced in parleying with them. He’d also seen little indication of servility in her behavior; in fact, he perceived almost an inbred arrogance, as if her intelligence gave her rights above her station. And her well-bred accent was unmistakably not that of a menial.

The slender hands and fine, silky smooth skin suggested good bloodlines. Perhaps, unbeknown to her, she was the Duke of Hastings’s by-blow. The Duke was known to have a few illegitimate offspring. Perhaps that was why she had been raised by one of the Duke’s servants and educated with the Duke’s daughter.

“What was it like growing up in the Duke’s household?” The question was unexpected and took them both by surprise. Her soft gasp told him it was inappropriate, but he badly wanted to know more about her.

“It seems a lifetime ago now. A far happier time ...” Then she clamped her mouth shut, as if she’d said too much.

Christian surveyed Sarah speculatively. So she’d been unhappy in her life. That confirmed the suspicions he had after

her comment yesterday about not wishing to remarry: her marriage had not been pleasant. He was a bastard for being so presumptuous in his plans for her seduction. If he wooed her, took his time in seducing her, treated her like a princess—a process he'd been an expert at before his injuries—then maybe she'd overlook his scars.

Christian waited until the meal had been served before continuing. “You have recently been unhappy?”

As if a curtain were closing on a play, her face emptied of all emotion. “My husband is dead. So yes, I have been unhappy.”

“If you don't mind my asking, how did he die?”

“I do mind, actually. It brings up bad memories.” She seemed to catch herself at his stunned silence. She turned to him with a false smile. “I'd rather hear engaging tales of your life as a Libertine Scholar, while you were studying at Oxford.” In a dream-filled voice she added, “It must have been a wonderful experience, all that learning.”

“And seduction,” he added, wanting to set her mind down the path he wished it to take.

She actually giggled. “Yes, I heard you cut quite a swath through the ladies.”

“Not so much now,” Christian stated in a tone curiously devoid of feeling.

“Rubbish. You're a handsome gentleman in his prime.”

He sat in shocked silence for a second, thinking it was a cruel tease. He stared at her intently. To his surprise, Sarah really appeared to have meant what she said. “Not with this disfigurement, for my face repulses women.”

Sarah gave him a startled look. His face did not repulse her. Her chief feeling when she regarded the raw scars was regret—regret that something so aesthetically pleasing should have been marred so terribly. To her, Christian looked exactly as she remembered him, a strikingly beautiful, virile tower of masculinity.

Softly she uttered, “How can an injury received in honor, in defense of England, be repulsive? You are still a very handsome man.”

His eyes bored into her, making her rash compliment send heat flooding across her cheeks. She set her glass on the table, her hand shaking under his intense stare. She breathed a sigh of relief when he said simply, “Thank you.”

They ate in silence for a time before he spoke again, “How is it that you have heard of the Libertine Scholars?”

Again Sarah reminded herself that the secret to lying was to stick as close to the truth as possible. “I heard about it from Lady Serena, of course.”

His brows furrowed. “I don’t believe I was ever formally introduced to her.”

“Oh, you have never met her.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and he attacked his food vigorously with his knife. “So she simply listened to gossip.”

“Partly, I would say. She used to watch you from afar. You were intimidating back then.”

He almost choked on his food. “Intimidating?”

“In uniform you could be, well, quite overwhelming. The first night she saw you, I thought she was going to faint.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous.” A blush covered his fine cheekbones.

Sarah laughed. “I’m not. She—we—were fifteen and we watched you from where we were hiding in the eaves at one of her father’s balls.” She gave an exaggerated sigh and fanned her face. “You looked very handsome in your brilliant red and white uniform.”

Laughter crept back into his eyes. “You have a better memory than I. I can’t remember the event.”

She teased him further. “Surely you can remember having to spend the night avoiding the Duke’s mistress, Lady Campbell. You went up in Serena’s estimation when you made

it quite clear to her you were not interested.” Sarah shook her head, “The way Lady Campbell intimately touched you ... I, that is, Serena, wanted to scratch her eyes out.”

Christian threw back his head and laughed. “Ah, now I do remember that night. She was like a mare in heat, after any stallion she could find to service her.”

“After Serena was introduced to society, she kept hoping to meet you at an event, but alas, it was never to be. She then followed your accomplishments on the battlefield and prayed every night that you’d return unhurt.”

His smile faded, and his eyes lost their sparkle. “She didn’t pray hard enough.”

She took a gulp of her wine. “She was gone before you returned home.” She tried not to let the tears well up.

“Gone? She died?” At Sarah’s silence he said softly, “How dreadful.” He reached across and stroked her arm lightly with his fingers. “I’m sorry. It’s devilishly hard, losing a close friend.”

A wave of feminine awareness washed over her. Was he offering comfort or something else? The label “devilish” was correct. Her eyes narrowed—his touch was the kind of caress a man might use to seduce a woman.

And she was tempted to let him.

However, in her situation, that was not a good idea. If she was dismissed, where would she go? She reached for her wine so as to move her arm out of his reach. “I’ve asked Mrs. Hobson to make up a bottle of ginger syrup for seasickness. Lily says she’s never been on a ship before. I thought it best to be prepared.”

He withdrew his hand and played with his napkin. “Lady Serena’s death makes you uncomfortable. I’m sorry to have brought it up, but there is no need to remind me of your position in this household.”

His deep green eyes held hers, a challenge flashing in their depths. He was daring her to stay and see where this led. This was an invitation she could so very easily accept.

“Perhaps you feel there is no need, but propriety requires me to say that yes, there is a need. Anything else would not be proper.”

Christian hated the rush of disappointment assailing him. Still, it was only day one. He had a whole voyage to work his long underused, but not forgotten, charms. He might not have a beautiful face anymore, but he still had a brain. His tongue was an equally compelling weapon.

Besides, he knew her weakness. He'd appeal to her mentally. He'd develop, embrace, and admire her undoubted intelligence.

It had been so long since he'd tried to seduce. Prior to his burns, women threw themselves at him. He was pleased to see his recall was exceptional. It was like riding a horse. If you fell off, you got back up and simply kept on riding. He felt his groin throb. He knew what he'd love to be riding right now.

He smiled inwardly. He hadn't been mistaken. He'd noted the look of desire in her eyes. For a few minutes she'd forgotten her position in his company. Unburdened from stifling formality, her personality shone, indicating a sense of mischief. Her banter was joyous and flirtatious. The warmth of her blue eyes indicated a sparkling joy for life that was contagious.

The ferocity of his desire to catch it—to catch her—almost overwhelmed him.

He flashed Sarah his smile of old. A smile the Christian of before the burns would have offered. A smile that was sensual in its nature and implication. “Come now, there's just the two of us here. As you mentioned earlier, an intelligent woman would surely take the opportunity to learn all that she could from one of the infamous Libertine Scholars.”

He watched her hand flutter to pick up her glass, then her tongue sliding from between her lips to wet them. “I'm sure there are many things you could teach me, my lord. However, I'd prefer to keep the lessons on topics that maintain propriety. If I am to be Lily's governess, my reputation is everything.” She seemed to gather her wits, and her fingers firmed around

her glass. She lifted it to her lips, almost in a toast, before saying, "After all, you did say that Lily has already had too many disruptions. I'd hate to be forced to resign my post once I reach England."

He didn't like it that she'd reverted to addressing him formally. "Christian. My name is Christian," he uttered coolly. "Let me assure you, Sarah, your reputation is quite safe with me. There is no reason I can think of that would ever force you to resign your post." He paused, wanting the implication of this to sink in, before looking deep into her eyes. "And my wishes are all that count."

He watched the pulse beating at the base of her throat, and caught the tightness around her shoulders. He was pushing her too far, too quickly. He was out of practice.

"Currently, my wish is to have a pleasant meal with an intelligent woman who will be sailing with me to England on a voyage of several weeks." He cut into his meat and shrugged, not looking at her. "I simply thought to get to know you better." He lifted his gaze to her. "Is that a crime? If so, I do apologize."

His diversion worked. Her shoulders relaxed, and she gave him a small smile. "I'm sorry. It's just this job means a lot to me. I'm simply worried about losing it."

He resisted the urge to touch her again. "You can have this job for as long as you require it, or until Lily is married," he said earnestly. "I give you my word. There, does that allay your fears?"

She drew in a breath at the parameters of the promise. She was an intelligent woman, and so she understood it was not that simple. There was more behind his vow. If he could, Lord Markham would turn this into an altogether different arrangement; it would eventuate in an arrangement that saw her share his bed. Her body reacted with an alarming need to respond to the tempting idea.

"I suppose so," she agreed reluctantly.

Her attraction to his lordship had not dissipated. If anything, the memories of last night, the vision of his nakedness, the feel of his muscled chest and his enticing kisses, flooded her body with an uncomfortable warmth.

Her fork slipped through her fingers and clattered onto the table. Had he been awake last night? Had her wanton behavior set him down this path?

Her face heated, and she glanced sideways at him from under her lowered eyelashes. He was still looking at her, trying to hide his shrewdness with an innocent expression.

“I’m sorry if my manners are not what they should be this evening. I’m tired from all the packing after so little sleep.”

His eyes narrowed, but his voice was calm. “You did not sleep well last night?”

She pretended to look uncomfortable while watching for any acknowledgement that he knew she’d been in his room. “You woke me up—well, woke the whole household, actually. It was upsetting. I hate to hear anyone in pain.” When he said nothing but continued to look closely at her, she added, “With your screams—I mean nightmares, I was told.”

He didn’t even blink. “I’m sorry. The rest of the household is used to my nightmares. Were you awake for long?” he asked, feigning innocence.

She stared at him for a long moment. He showed no sign that he knew she’d been in his room. A tingle of disappointment rippled over her. If he did not remember her visit to his room last night, then it wasn’t her compassion that had driven his interest. Therefore, he was like every other man she knew. He was simply reacting like a randy cad to a pretty face.

For a minute she wished she’d kept her glasses and cap on, as at least they served as a barrier to any unwanted overtures.

Yet Sarah didn’t think she was in any real danger. She knew he would not force his attentions on her. She did not believe he had a dishonorable bone in his large, overtly

masculine body. Look at how he'd stepped forward to care for Lily.

However, it was obvious that he did not mean to let their relationship remain platonic for too long. She sensed that, like a cat playing with a mouse, he intended to swat at her until she was worn down. Then he'd pounce. She even knew the time and place: tucked away at sea, where she'd be unable to escape.

Perhaps she didn't wish to escape.

But therein lay the danger.

Nevertheless, in her limited experience, danger was best faced head on. So she put down her cutlery and asked, "As you wish us to get to know each other, tell me, how is it you came to be in York?"

He gave a harsh laugh. "You don't expect me to believe you have not heard the rumors, do you?"

"I have heard many stories. I have no idea if any are true. Besides, I rarely listen to gossip."

"Indeed." His smile failed to hide his disbelief. "Then you are different from any lady I have previously known."

"More than likely, I would say."

"Let me see if I can recount all the wild stories." He sat back in his chair and gave a wry smile. "My fiancée broke off our engagement due to my disfigurement, and I left England brokenhearted."

"I would not blame you for needing to escape for a while, if that were true."

He shook his head. "Women's heads are filled with romantic notions. I had no fiancée, but I did have a mistress. When she saw my burns, she found herself another protector. But that did not leave me brokenhearted. I feel that I had a lucky escape."

"True. Any woman who is so dishonorable does not deserve you."



“Another story is that my fiancée left me for another man, and I fought a duel with him and killed him.”

She laughed. “I know that you did not have a fiancée, so I shall dismiss that rumor too. In fact, any rumor regarding fleeing due to your fiancée I shall ignore. Tell me, what is the real reason?”

His smile died, and his face darkened into a stern frown. “Do you really want to know?”

She nodded, but her throat was constricting. Did she, really?

“You should have asked me this question before you accepted the job.”

“Why? I doubt your answer would have made any difference to my decision.”

His black eyebrows drew together as he uttered, “Wait until you hear why I am in this hellhole. Then we shall see if you want this job so badly.” He studied her closely as if trying to ascertain her motives. “No one knows the truth. Only Matthew Pearson did. I’m not sure why I’m telling you except that you are only the second person to ask. I was shanghaied to York by the Duke of Barforte’s son, accused of raping the Duke’s daughter.” He put down his cutlery and grimaced. “Do you feel so sure about your decision now?”

“Is it true?”

“I—I beg your pardon?” he stammered.

“Is the accusation true?”

His smile held total admiration. “What a question!”

She shrugged. “It would appear to be the only question to ask.”

“At first, I could not recall.” At her puzzled expression, he continued. “The nightmares ... I cannot always remember everything that I do during them.”

Sarah’s face flushed. Like last night. Now she was certain he did not know she’d been in his room.

“But with time my memories have become clearer. I know with certainty that I did not have Harriet Barforte in my bed. I’ve never even met her.”

Sarah blanched. Harriet! That was the very name he’d called out in the throes of his nightmare last night. “But you did have a woman in your bed?”

He nodded.

“How can you be so sure it wasn’t Harriet?”

His face flushed scarlet and he squirmed in his chair. “Because I remember paying for my usual girl. Carla was in my bed that night.”

Sarah felt her heart clench in her chest. She couldn’t understand her inner response to these words. Why would the idea of him with another woman upset her so? She wiped aside the realization that she was jealous—how ridiculous. “Paying?”

He laughed harshly. “For a woman who only moments ago wanted to maintain propriety, this conversation seems to be spiraling into the unseemly.”

She waited politely, determined to get her answer.

He threw down his napkin. “Damn it, I was at the Honey Pot.” Seeing her frown, he swore under his breath. “A high-class brothel I frequented on a regular basis. My last mistress couldn’t leave me quickly enough when she saw my burns. I had not foreseen that even mistresses have standards. My wealth did nothing to mute the ugliness of my body, it would appear.”

Anger radiated from him, his temper barely contained. Before she could think of an appropriate reply he went on, “Now it’s my turn. How did a woman who grew up in the Duke of Hastings’s household end up in York, Canada?” His eyes blazed with suspicion. “How did you meet your husband, and why did he bring you here?”

## *Chapter Five*

**F**ear flickered in her eyes, real gut-wrenching fear. Yet he'd attacked out of a sense of self-preservation only.

Having to admit he had had to pay women to come to his bed shamed him. Prior to his injuries, he'd had to fight off the ladies. He'd rarely kept a mistress, hardly ever needing a permanent arrangement. There were plenty of widows and unhappy wives willing to share mutual pleasure whenever he required it.

His gaze did not waver from her face. Sarah was a widow, and he'd love to share his body with her too. Her response to him in his bedchamber last night was an incentive he could not forget. He knew she relished the prospect of coming into his bed. Last night she had not hidden her desire.

If only he'd been more awake, then she would not be playing this aloof "I'm too respectable" game. She would already be his mistress.

Why, indeed, was she playing with him, when last night it had been so obvious she wanted him?

Christian drank in the pallor of her cheeks. More to the point, why was Sarah so afraid of his questions?

His senses went on high alert. His intuition made him prickle with unease. What was she hiding?

"My husband didn't bring me here. After we married, we moved to Virginia. He had land there. However, instead of starting a new life, he died. It was his appendix."

"How is it that you came to be in York?"

“I had a friend in York who was going to help me find a position.”

He waited patiently while she apparently debated with herself about how much more she should reveal. He knew before she spoke that whatever she said would be a lie. He read her as easily as a blind man sees in the dark.

“I didn’t know anyone in America, and having just lost my husband, I wanted to be around people I knew.”

“Yet here you are, leaving friends and acquaintances to take a position that will see you rustivating in the country with no one you know. No friends or family nearby.”

He could see a fine sheen of perspiration coating her top lip, and her hands were shaking as she picked up her glass and took a sip of wine. She was lying, and doing it rather badly. That appeased him somewhat. She was not a consummate liar, so probably she didn’t lie very often.

She seemed to gather herself and turned to face him. “Frankly, it became apparent pretty quickly that I needed more than friends. I needed security. This job offers me that.”

He slowly nodded. She hadn’t lied about that. A woman of her beauty, without protection, would be a target for any ruthless man, especially here in the wilds of Canada.

For a moment he wondered how ruthless he was. Wasn’t he about to take advantage? But he had not imagined the effect of the fire in her eyes, the flush of her cheeks, and the touch of her hands on his naked skin. He knew she wanted him. All he had to do was get her to admit it.

Hell, if he had to, he’d have a nightmare every night.

“It’s getting late, my lord. We have a big day tomorrow, and I should like to retire.” She pushed back her chair and he stood to assist. “Thank you for a lovely dinner.”

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. He pressed a light kiss on her knuckles, pleased at the tremor he felt. “The pleasure was mine. Perhaps tomorrow night, on board ship, you’ll join me for a meal, and I can satisfy ...” He paused and gave a seductive smile. “Your curiosity about Oxford.”

For a widow, she blushed beautifully; his insinuation had not missed its target.

She pulled her fingers gently from his grasp and smiled. “I suspect I shall be busy settling Lily in. It will be strange and a bit scary, but exciting, for her on her first night on the ship. I’m unlikely to get her to sleep easily.” She turned and made her way to the door. She hesitated before leaving the room, and looked back at him over her shoulder. “But I thank you for the offer. Perhaps another night would be more suitable.” She gave him a look that sent his blood racing and his groin hardening. “For I do look forward to being completely satisfied ...” She paused again. “By your stories, of course.”

With that she closed the door on his startled face.

As he sank back into his chair, a genuine smile of amusement broke upon his lips. What a prize Mrs. Sarah Cooper was going to be when he finally got her into his bed.

But not before he learned all her secrets. He did wonder, for a fleeting second, whether the Duke or Simon had sent her to spy on him. But he couldn’t fathom why they’d bother. Stuck in Canada, he was no longer a threat to them, or Harriet.

No, he sensed that Sarah’s secrets were more personal in nature. He recognized a kindred wounded soul. The rush of protectiveness invading his empty soul surprised him. He didn’t like to think of anyone causing her pain.

She was too beautiful and compassionate to let anyone, or anything, destroy her. If she became his mistress, he vowed to protect her always. She would be his.

He rose to pour a brandy to take up to his room, for once not scared of sleep. He’d have no nightmares tonight. Tonight he’d dream of a fair-haired seductress, and relish the chase of making her his.

As he made his way up the stairs, he was pleasantly shocked to discover that for the first time in a long while he was genuinely happy.



The following morning it was a mad rush to get everything to the dock and loaded on the *Doreen*, a cargo schooner. Sarah was thankful for the glaring sun. It meant her large bonnet, pulled low over her face, protected her from any eyes that might be searching for her. She was determined to get on board and go below, remaining hidden from prying eyes until they sailed.

At this early hour, people on the docks were striding around purposefully, all the crew keen to get under sail, needing to make the mouth of the river to catch the evening tide.

She tried to keep her gaze from darting over the crowd. A shrewd observer might detect her nervousness, and their party didn't need any more attention. Lord Markham, leaving York to return to England, was a drawing card for every man and woman on the docks. She neither wanted nor needed all this attention.

Christian pretended not to notice the stares. He gripped Lily's hand as he strode along the dock with his head held high. Sarah followed behind, watching his legs encased in tight breeches tucked into shiny black Hessians, quite unable to take her eyes off the flap of his coat, knowing what lay underneath. Mentally she stroked the hard contours of his buttocks. She could recall—could re-create—the strong sensations she'd experienced when she'd touched his bare skin. That night in his bedroom, something buried deep inside her had surged to the surface and consumed her.

She wanted him.

As if sensing her wicked thoughts, Christian glanced over his shoulder. Their eyes fixed on each other, and his darkened to a deep forest green before Lily's excited chatter stole his attention away from her.

This journey was going to be either hell or heaven. Probably a mixture of both if she was going to be stupid

enough to give in to her growing desire.

Christian halted at the base of the gangplank. Lily was already hurrying up it. He stepped aside and allowed Sarah to precede him. As she moved past him, the heat of his large body and his sandalwood scent made walking up the rocking gangplank difficult, and she gripped the ropes for support. She could feel his eyes burning into her back and was ashamed at the way she swayed her hips provocatively for his benefit. A rush of irritation made her miss a step. It appeared she had no power over her body. Not as far as Christian was concerned, for sure.

Once everyone was on board, shouts rang out, ropes were cast off, and at last they were under way.

The schooner backed slowly away, and Sarah craved to go below deck to ensure she was out of sight, but a hitch in her plan was that Lily wanted to wave goodbye, and Sarah couldn't think of any justification for leaving Lily on her own on deck. Christian, meanwhile, was busy with Captain Weatherspoon.

Lily was tearful at leaving Mrs. Hobson behind. The housekeeper was a born and bred Canadian and would not leave the country of her birth. Her husband was buried there, and she wanted to stay close to his grave. Christian had ensured that Mrs. Hobson had enough money to live out the rest of her life in comfort. The few remaining Pearson staff had been found other positions.

“Goodbye, York,” Lily cried into the humid air as she waved frantically from the railing. “I wonder if I’ll ever see Canada again.”

Sarah put her arm around the girl’s shoulders. “You might come back one day when you’re older.”

Lily looked up at her. “Will I like England?”

“Well, the summers aren’t quite so hot.”

“That’s good,” Lily said, nodding.

“The winters are not as harsh. It very rarely snows in Dorset, but it’s a great deal wetter.”

She looked down and saw that Lily was no longer listening to her. Instead the girl was pointing at something on the dock. “Look at that man. He’s running along the dock alongside the ship. Is he trying to chase us?” She laughed out loud and called over her shoulder, “He’ll never catch us, will he, Lord Markham?”

Sarah swung away from the railing at Lily’s words, worried that her bonnet did not offer enough of a disguise. She’d ensured her fair hair was safely coiled on top of her head, as her coloring was an easily recognizable trait.

This was ridiculous. There was no way they would have discovered that she’d come north to Canada. Zachary had covered her tracks well. Who would have guessed that the wife of a plantation owner would use the Underground Railroad and escape with runaway slaves? The only difference between her and the runaways was that even though she’d made it to Canada, she was still not free.

Nor would she ever be free.

Sarah’s panic grew and she stepped backward, determined to go below. However, she slammed up against a wall of solid muscle. Strong arms reached out to steady her.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Cooper?” Christian did not release her, and for a moment she grew dizzy from the heat and feel of his hands. She looked up at his face, but it was in the shadow of the upper cabin.

She pushed herself out of his hold and stepped back against the railing, her face hidden from those on the dock. “I’m fine, my lord. I was heading below deck to unpack. I’d like to get both my cabin and Lily’s sorted out before we reach the open ocean.” She nodded toward Lily. “Just in case.”

“In case what?” piped up Lily.

Christian caught on immediately. In case Lily got seasick. He winked at Sarah and held out his hand to Lily. “Let me escort you around the ship while Mrs. Cooper unpacks. I’ll show you where it is safe to play and the areas that are out of bounds.”



Feeling as if all the eyes on the dock were upon her, Sarah slipped down the hatchway and into the shady bowels of the ship. For once darkness was her friend.



“Was it her?”

The tall, bearded man known throughout the Lake Erie territory as “Find Them Jack” was one of the best slave trackers alive. He slowly turned his eyes away from the deck of the departing *Doreen* and focused on the man behind him.

“I didn’t get a good look, but my instincts tell me it’s her.”

The other man cursed and swung away from the sight of the *Doreen* sailing up the river. “I have to be sure.”

Jack shrugged and spat. “I’m sure she’s on that schooner. She’s gone. The *Doreen*’s bound for England.”

The other man’s arm shot out to stop him from leaving. “How do I know you’re not lying? I’ve been tasked with bringing her back alive. What if she’s actually still in York?”

“She’s not. But you’re welcome to stay and look.” Jack stared hard at the man’s hand until he removed it from Jack’s arm. “Anyway, it’s not my problem anymore. My job was to find her in York. I’ve done that. My contract is complete.”

“A little late, though. I’m sure my boss will be none too pleased.”

Jack was a big man. Stretching to his full impressive height and flexing his wide shoulders, he uttered, in a tone that would scare the bravest of men, “If your boss has a problem with my services, tell him to come and see me.” Then he spun on his heel and walked away, calling over his shoulder, “You’d best check with the harbormaster as to what route they plan to take. The *Doreen*’s a cargo ship. They’ll likely be stopping along the way.”

The other man was pleased at how quickly Jack had found the woman. He’d made the right decision to employ Jack.

His anticipatory smile deepened upon hearing the ship would likely stop on route to England. He desperately wanted to catch her. Perhaps he hadn't lost her yet. The monetary reward for her capture was immense.

With blood racing and heart pounding, he swung around and headed toward the harbormaster's office. At the entrance, he turned and watched the *Doreen* disappear around the bend in the river before ambling in through the open door and speaking to the nearest clerk. "I'm wondering if you can help me. I've just missed the *Doreen*'s sailing and I wanted to pass the captain a message." He gave a polite smile. "What's the *Doreen*'s next destination?"

The young clerk chuckled. "Then your message will get to the ship when she docks at Plymouth. The *Doreen*'s sailing directly to England. Lord Markham's in a hurry to return home."

"Is the *Doreen* Lord Markham's ship?"

The clerk nodded assent. "Aye, she is."

With a polite thank-you, he stepped out into the sunshine, a thrill coursing through his veins. He now knew where to start looking for her.

What on earth was she doing with the Earl? Had Lady Serena Castleton known Lord Markham prior to her marriage? His lip curled in disgust. He knew who Lord Markham was, a burned war hero shunned by polite society. Why would that man want to protect her?

Had Serena Castleton used her body in exchange for protection? A woman on the run would need protection and couldn't be too fussy about whom she bedded in exchange for it, even a hideously disfigured man like Markham. She was certainly beautiful enough for any man to offer protection in exchange for her body.

Whore!

There was only one way to find out: follow the *Doreen* to England.

He would find her. Once clear of the docks, he strode purposefully to where a young boy held his horse. As he swung himself up into the saddle, he inwardly swore that no slip of a woman would evade him. He *would* catch her.

## *Chapter Six*

Lily, it turned out, was a magnificent sailor, although it was fair to note that the sea had been relatively calm ever since they left Canada.

The first night on board ship had passed smoothly. They'd all dined in the main cabin, adjacent to Christian's stateroom, before Sarah retired early to see to Lily. She'd wanted to ensure that the little girl wasn't nervous or scared. At night, in the dark, the creaks and groans of the schooner's wood and rigging could be frightening for a young girl who'd just lost both her parents and was being taken away from the only home she'd ever known.

Sarah read to her until Lily fell asleep. Then she'd crept to her own cabin and fallen into an exhausted, dreamless sleep. She'd managed to flee Canada without being caught. She prayed she'd be safe in Dorset.

Christian must have slept soundly too, because Sarah didn't wake until dawn, having had the best night's rest she'd had in weeks. No nightmares of Sean, her husband's vile overseer, chasing her, pinning her down, ripping at her clothes ... Unless Sean was a fish, he'd not catch her at sea. She gave a strangled sigh. He was as slimy as a fish. And stank like one too.

Once she was dressed, the lure of fresh air saw her climbing through the hatch. Arriving on deck, Sarah gloried in the dawn breaking in vibrant oranges and reds, spreading its light like a newly lit fire across the waves. No longer was the joy of being alive a forgotten sentiment.

She raised her arms and gulped in the fresh sea air, then slowly exhaled. She was going to enjoy this crossing. The pleasure of standing on English soil was one she thought she'd never experience again. A tear slipped from her eye and she wiped it away. She wished she could wipe the last two years from her memory just as easily. She might be returning to the home of her birth, but she could never return home.

Seeing the captain leaning on the railing, Sarah moved to his side. "Good morning, Captain Weatherspoon. It's going to be a beautiful day."

"Aye, lass. The winds are filling the sails. It'll be a quick trip down the coast to Jamaica."

"Jamaica?" Sarah tried to keep her tone steady.

"Lord Markham got an urgent missive as we were boarding. He asked me to change our route to sail via Jamaica." The captain smiled. "You'll enjoy the stop. Jamaica's a bit wild, but the scenery and sparkling waters are among the most glorious anywhere in the world."

With that, he touched his cap and strolled up onto the bridge. She turned back to lean on the railing, her pulse beating frantically.

She didn't want to go to Jamaica. Her husband owned a slave auction house on the island, the image of which she would never be able to wash out of her mind. They had made frequent trips to the island when each slave ship arrived with its desperate cargo.

Most of the gentry on the island knew who she was, because when they were first married, Peter had stopped there on their way home from England. He'd shown her off like a prize mare.

This was not what she needed to hear. Her snug feeling of safety evaporated like seawater on a sun-drenched deck.

She heard a footfall and knew who it belonged to: Christian. She tried to keep from turning to watch his approach, but it was as if an irresistible force made her pivot about until she was leaning back on the railing, her heart

beginning to beat rapidly as she soaked in his dark yet scarred beauty.

“Good morning, Sarah. When the day warms up, I dare say you’ll need a bonnet. You wouldn’t want the delicate skin on your face to burn. Although it seems you don’t appear to mind freckles.”

She struggled to keep from responding in a tart manner that she abhorred freckles. But earlier, when she’d seized an opportunity to make her hazardous escape from Virginia, she had not had time to grab a bonnet. It had been over a sennight before she’d been able to sell some jewelry and procure a change of clothes—including a bonnet.

“You’re right, of course. When I’m on deck in the full sunlight, I should wear a bonnet. I would not be a good example to Lily otherwise.” It would also help hide her identity when they landed. “The captain informs me we are detouring to Jamaica,” she went on, struggling to keep her question light. “How long will we be staying on the island?”

He tilted his head, studied her for a moment, and then smiled a cheeky grin like a young boy about to be let out of the schoolroom on a sunny afternoon. Christian’s potent smile made her completely forget about his burns. Her stomach did a little flip and she couldn’t help grinning back.

“My friend the Marquis of Coldhurst is residing in Jamaica and seeks my assistance.” He paused and scanned the ship. “I’m unsure how long we will remain on the island. It shouldn’t delay our arrival in England for long, and the stop should be very pleasant. I’ve never been to the Caribbean. Have you?”

She hesitated. “Yes. Yes, I have.” He waited expectantly. *Stick to the truth as much as possible.* “We stopped there on our way to Canada. A honeymoon, so to speak.”

He settled against the railing beside her, his unspoken questions hanging in the air. She could feel the warmth radiating from him. Christian was jacketless, but he’d donned a waistcoat and his cravat was tied tightly at his throat. He

looked dashing with his white shirtsleeves billowing in the light breeze.

The hardness of his body drew her closer. She could remember the feel of his muscles and could think of nothing better than touching him again. She told herself she should stand back and move away from him. Not only was his body overwhelming her, but he was about to embark on a series of personal questions she had no intention of answering.

Instead, she stayed standing so close to him that they were almost touching. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the wind ruffle his hair, pushing a few strands onto his face. She gripped the railing tighter, itching to reach out and brush the wisp off his face. She loved looking into his eyes. The deep green drew her in, comforted her, making her feel as if standing next to him was the safest place in the world.

“Did you have a choice in the selection of your husband?”

*Choice? Far from it!* “No.”

“I see.” He studied her. “I ... gather your marriage was not a happy one?”

*That’s an understatement.* Sarah should have been shocked at his inappropriately personal question, but she’d known since their dinner on her first night in the Pearson house that this conversation was coming. She also knew why he wanted to know the answer. There could be only one reason: he wanted to know if she’d be open to becoming his mistress. A woman still in love with her husband was unlikely to be looking for a dalliance.

She shook her head. “No, it was not.” She wasn’t a good enough actress to pretend that her marriage had been a congenial one.

Eyes back on the waves, he sighed. “I’m sorry. Some men are not cut out for matrimony.”

“As are some women.”

He shot a swift glance her way and half smiled. “I’ve yet to meet a woman who did not long for the security offered by marriage.”

“A happy marriage, perhaps.”

He leaned his elbows on the rail so that his head was level with hers. “I somehow thought those outside of the nobility could choose their marriage partners. I have always envied them, and swore I would only marry a woman I had genuine feelings for.”

She continued to stare across the ocean. “Life doesn’t always work out as we plan.”

Christian nodded. “Many marriages within the *ton* are not happy. My class marries for many reasons, not all of them noble. I realize that not all marriages offer security.”

She stiffened beside him. How could he know that her marriage had been anything but safe? She forced back down the memories of Peter’s viciously cruel treatment. Whispering into the wind, she said, “As it has been throughout the centuries, the weak are at the mercy of the strong.” She shrugged. “Unfortunately there are those who revel in the power behind their strength.”

His eyes narrowed as he took in her posture. “Did your husband hurt you?” His features lost their soft look: his chin became more prominent, his jaw more square, and his eyes darkened. Sarah could tell that he already knew the answer. “If he weren’t dead already, I’d call him out for you.”

Her eyes widened at his angry words. She couldn’t keep the contempt from her voice. “You’d have no right. I was his property. He could do as he liked.”

He stood straight and tall, his eyes flashing. “A man has no right to hurt anyone weaker or smaller than himself in any way.” He thumped the railing with a closed fist. “A bully should be punished. Do unto others ...”

She had a sudden disconcerting thought that he was speaking from personal experience. “Your declaration sounds personal.”

He stood ramrod straight, his fists clenched and his mouth taut. “My family has skeletons in its closet.”

“Was your father a bully?” she asked without thinking.



Christian closed his eyes as if the memory was too painful. He nodded.

“I’m sorry. It can’t have been pleasant growing up in your father’s house. I’m continually thankful I never got with child.” She’d made sure of it. It was the first thing Pippa, the Negro slave girl her husband had forced into his bed, had taught her. Pippa hated Peter as much as Sarah did, and they had tried to protect each other whenever possible.

Christian said, “I think that’s why my mother never had another child. She died when I was six.”

“So it was only you and your father for most of your childhood.”

He was silent and, like her, obviously reliving ugly memories. Suddenly Christian stepped back from the railing and with a warm smile offered her his arm. “It’s too beautiful a day to be sullied with the past.” He leaned closer, placed her hand on his arm, and, with a husky whisper that snaked its way into her heart, he added, “Here’s to new beginnings on our return to England.”

For a moment she was captured by the seductive promise in his voice, echoed by the warmth in his gaze.

To her, the idea of being held in the safety of his arms was far too attractive, and with every passing minute she spent in his company, it grew only more so. Long ago, when she was an innocent young girl, Christian had been an obsession of hers. With a little effort on his part, he could be so again. She knew she should pour cold water on his plan to seduce her, but ... he was skilled in the art of seduction, and their journey was going to make keeping her distance nigh impossible. After all, there were only so many places she could hide on a ship.

Sarah let him lead her away from the railing and begin a tour of the *Doreen*. And she wondered why, instead of feeling weighed down by the dangerous and unpredictable future she faced, her heart still felt lighter than it had in a long, long time.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Sarah spent most of the morning in the main cabin taking Lily through her lessons.

After lunch, Sarah allowed the girl to run about on deck, and then they settled in the bow of the ship with easels and paints and Lily received her first painting lesson.

To Sarah's surprise, Lily had talent when it came to colors. The technical aspects of painting and representing what she saw imaginatively would come with time.

Yet, despite the distraction, all through the art lesson Sarah's body thrummed with tension.

She could hear Christian training at the other end of the ship. He and the first mate, Gareth, were practicing sword fighting. The clink of striking steel reverberated in the sea air. Occasionally Christian came into view as Gareth beat him back. She could see the alluring definition of his rippling muscles as the sweat made the white linen of his shirt stick to his skin.

The practice seemed to be in earnest. She knew men were competitive, but something else was in play here. While Sarah washed and tidied herself for dinner, she reflected on Christian. He was rich, powerful, and strong, yet she felt no fear in his presence. From his comments about his father, she knew he would never take advantage of or hurt anyone weaker than himself.

She'd been around men who were truly evil. She knew the kind of men who felt they had the right to abuse and rape women because of the position they held and the brute power they wielded.

Christian, on the contrary, was a kind soul. He treated Lily with a gentleness that belied his size. He had looked after the Pearson staff and had been very generous with Mrs. Hobson when he was under no obligation to be so.

Besides, unlike her husband, he'd have no need to force himself on any woman; his appeal to the fairer sex was evident. Christian had no need to resort to physical force when his looks, title, and witty conversation would overcome any woman's resistance.

A worrying thought then invaded her mind. For some men it wasn't simply about sex. It was about power. Her husband had seemed to get more excited the more she resisted him. He liked her screams and watching her tremble in fear.

Making her way to the main cabin for dinner, Sarah swore she'd never quake in fear before a man ever again. She wouldn't give any man the satisfaction.

Lily was already seated at the table, her brown hair brushed neatly, with a soft curl falling over her shoulder. Lily was giggling at something Christian had just said. The girl had been completely won over by her guardian. Each time he smiled at her, her light brown eyes twinkled like stars on a cloud-free night. A warm feeling flooded Sarah's heart. She knew Lily would always have Christian as her protector.

No one had ever protected her.

Sarah didn't notice that the Earl had stood up when she entered. He must think her silly, standing in the doorway with a dreamy look on her face. But when she raised her eyes to his face and saw the same warmth he'd shown Lily reflected back at her, pinpricks of pleasure needled her skin.

"Mrs. Cooper, you look lovely this evening. Doesn't she, Lily?"

Lily nodded. "Mrs. Cooper's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." Her smile faltered and she moved to open the locket at her neck. "Except Mama, of course."

Sarah bent down to study the image. "You look just like her." She tapped her finger on Lily's little nose. "You'll be as beautiful as your mother when you're older."

Lily giggled. "I hope so. Then I can marry a man as perfect as Lord Markham. I'd ask him to wait for me to grow up, but I think he should marry you, because he's lonely and you make him smile."

Embarrassed silence cloaked the room. Sarah felt the sharpness of Christian's gaze boring straight to the center of her being. Sparks of emotion washed over her, rousing dormant and unwanted sensations she'd thought she had

buried under the pain of injuries inflicted by her husband's hand.

Her face ablaze, Sarah took the chair Christian pulled out for her, avoiding his eyes. "Out of the mouths of babes," he intoned softly in her ear as he bent down to push her chair in.

"That's a lovely thought, Lily, but earls do not wed governesses. His Lordship requires a lady of equal standing in society." She risked a glance at Christian, and his amusement at her words rankled. "You have a lot to learn, Lily, about the society you will be entering. You will be expected to behave in certain ways. There are rules that must be followed."

Lily shrugged her shoulders. "That's nonsense. Other ladies might not be as nice as you." She looked at Christian. "You let me choose my governess, so why can't I help you find a wife? Wouldn't your wife become my mother of sorts?"

Christian laughed. "I suppose she would. Of course I will seek your opinion before making such a serious commitment, sweetheart."

Lily leaned over and whispered, loud enough for Christian to hear, "See? Don't worry. I want him to marry you. Leave it to me."

Sarah's face felt as if it were suspended over glowing coals. But Christian merely winked at her. Before she could reply to Lily's ridiculous suggestion, Captain Weatherspoon arrived to take his seat.

After dinner, Sarah took Lily to her cabin to settle her down for the night. She read her a story and tucked her in. Sarah knew that returning to the main cabin was dangerous, as the captain had gone back up on deck, but her cabin was suffocatingly hot. When she arrived back at the main cabin, it was, as she'd expected, empty except for Christian.

He'd settled into the large wing chair by the open rear windows, his long legs stretched out before him, his trousers pulled tight across his muscled thighs. His cravat was pulled loose and she glimpsed the scars trailing down his neck into

the folds of his shirt. He was massaging his right shoulder and his sensual mouth was taut. He was in pain.

She had to fight everything within her to stop herself from going to him and offering to ease his pain. She was not supposed to know how extensive his burns were.

She bit back her inquiry of concern and entered the main cabin. The gentle breeze coming through the large open windows made the room bearable. She crossed the floor to join him, stopping to pour herself a coffee on the way.

When she'd entered, he had sat up and pulled his cravat together with one hand.

"It's only me, Christian. Your burns don't offend me," she uttered softly. "There is no need to hide them."

"They tend to upset people, women in particular," he answered gruffly.

She gave him a look that made it clear she was not like other women. "I have seen far worse."

He turned to look at her with raised eyebrows. *Stick to the truth*, she thought again. "My husband's holding was surrounded by tobacco plantations. Many of the owners treated their slaves no better than animals."

"Did your husband own slaves?"

Suppressed images passed before her eyes, images she knew she would be unlikely to ever forget. She remembered the screams and the smell of infected flesh from the whippings. She felt the return of the constant stomach upset that she'd lived with for over twelve months. "Yes. That's why I left as soon as he died. I could not stand the suffering."

"I'm sorry to have brought up painful memories."

She reached out and touched his shoulder. "You must have experienced terrible pain yourself. The strength to endure as you have ... I admire you. I can't imagine the courage and fortitude you would have needed to call on in order to survive."

His eyes closed, shutting out any emotion. “It’s simple. I wanted to survive. I wanted a lot more for my life, for the Markham name. I still do. I wasn’t about to let the French destroy me.” He reached up and covered the hand she had left on his shoulder. “Look at you. You seem to be a survivor too. I can tell your past haunts you. It’s in your beautiful eyes—in the shadows that lie within them.”

She wanted to cry at his pity-filled observation. “My marriage was not at all what I would have wished for.” *The understatement of the century.*

Christian ran his finger over his right cheek. “Some memories are impossible to forget.” His mouth curved in a rueful smile. “Unless we create pleasanter ones to replace them.”

She had no answer for that. He was right.

They sat for several minutes in companionable silence, both drinking coffee.

Sarah spied a fine chess set on the sideboard. “Do you play?” She pointed a finger at the finely carved pieces. He nodded. “Your chess set is exquisite. Where did you get it?”

Christian smiled. “My friend and fellow soldier, Grayson Devlin, Viscount Blackwood, gave it to me. It’s from one of his trips through the north of Africa. The pieces are made of ivory from elephant tusks. I played constantly in the army. Not much else to do at night when camped at the edge of a battlefield.” He stood and moved to the sideboard, where he picked up the king.

“It’s a finely wrought set,” Sarah observed, “but I hate to think of how such magnificent creatures had to die to make it. They have to kill the elephants first in order to extract their tusks, don’t they?”

Christian nodded. Then, seeing the mention of the elephants saddened her, he changed the subject. “Grayson and I played all the time. It helped clear our minds and focused us on strategy. Do you play?”

“I’m not bad,” she admitted. *Not bad? You little fibber!* She’d yet to meet anyone—man or woman—who could beat her.

“Care for a game?”

She inwardly laughed at the challenge in his voice. Men. They were so predictable. “Why not? It’s too hot to go to my cabin. At least in the main cabin we have the breeze.”

“Is your stateroom too hot? We could swap if you wish. I leave the door to my stateroom open and the breeze from the main cabin flows through.”

Sarah’s face heated. He’d give her his cabin? That would be like announcing to the world she was his mistress—and she wasn’t. *Worse luck*, she thought automatically, and flushed even more when she realized where her thoughts had been. *Stop it!* “My cabin is quite adequate for a governess, thank you. I need to be near Lily.”

His tight jawline indicated his irritation at her comment. Without another word he picked up the board and, without disturbing the pieces, carried the chess set to the small table positioned between their chairs.

Once he’d placed it on the table he said, “Thank goodness it’s not against the governesses’ code to play chess, or I’d become bored with my own company.”

“Perhaps I won’t be much of a challenge. That can be just as tedious.”

He raised one dark eyebrow and his eyes took on a rakish glint. “Then I’ll simply have to find another way to relieve our boredom.” He leaned in to refill her coffee.

She didn’t waver from his piercing gaze. “I’m sure I’ll not be bored.” She gave a sinful grin of her own. “I’m sorry to state that you will more than likely have to relieve your own boredom.”

He grimaced. “Since the responsibility of becoming Lily’s guardian has taken up much of my time, I’ve had to do far too much relieving.”

Sarah knew perfectly well what “relieving” meant in this context. This conversation was now beyond scandalous, the insinuations too direct. Sarah ignored his words and asked primly, “Shall we play? My move, I assume. Ladies first.”

“I don’t necessarily leave it up to the lady to make the first move. Often they are reluctant to go after what they long for. I, on the other hand, am never shy about going after what I want.” His voice was a low, husky caress. His long, slender fingers picked up a white pawn and moved it before she could reply. “To the winner go the spoils of war. What shall be my prize when I checkmate your king?”

Her traitorous body wanted to lean forward, stroke the hand that held the pawn, and purr, *Me—I’m your prize*. Reining in such disturbing thoughts, she bent over the board to concentrate on the game. His lordship believed he would be the victor, and she had no intention of surrendering this particular campaign without at least a strenuous battle.

A tense hour later, Christian uttered, “I see you have played this game many times, and that you’ve had a remarkable teacher. Who taught you?”

Damn. She’d forgotten that a woman of her standing would be unlikely to know how to play chess. “Serena’s governess. A lady whose family had fallen on hard times. She was an amazingly open-minded, well-educated, liberal woman.”

“Intelligent too, I wager. If you teach Lily even half of what she must have taught you and Lady Serena, then my ward will be quite capable of making her way in English society.”

“Thank you,” was all Sarah could manage. Inside she wanted to scream that intelligence, titles and money did not always save you. She looked at the chess board and inwardly smiled before moving her next piece.

With a look of horror, he uttered, “You’ve sacrificed your bishop to take my rook, but I see what you’re planning.” His voice, dripping with patrician arrogance and the calmness of



male supremacy, indicated that he thought he could still win. He'd yet to realize he was already defeated.

Christian pounced, as she knew he would. The game would soon be over.

It was an altogether different curse he issued a few minutes later. "I'm defeated." He sat back in disbelief, shaking his head. Then he looked at her and offered a seated half bow. "I always surrender gracefully to a beautiful woman. I lost, but I'm hoping that my punishment is even more enjoyable than the game." He lifted her hand, brought her fingers to his lips, and brushed her bare knuckles with a provocative kiss.

Abruptly Sarah snatched her hand away, but the laugh Christian gave was not one of defeat. It held warmth and something more. Had he too felt the scorching heat between them? Sarah couldn't seem to help herself. She immediately began thinking of ways to have him kiss her hand again. Kissing a woman's hand was the norm, acceptable and safe. What she dreamed of doing with Christian, however, was dangerous.

Christian rose. "I need a proper drink. Would you care for a brandy?" He moved to pick up the decanter and, leaning closer than required, offered her a glass. Even after she had accepted it, Christian remained close and whispered, his breath a soft caress on her neck, "As the winner, you may choose the spoils of war? As the loser, I shall do my utmost to ensure you receive your heart's desire."

She couldn't suppress the small tremors that both his proximity and his words induced in her. Her heart desired many things. However, she'd lost all hope that any of these desires would ever be fulfilled.

She could no longer count the number of times she had wished her mother had not died when she was young. She wished her father had had a head for finance. Most of all, she wished she'd not been born so beautiful. If she had been plain, perhaps her life would have turned out differently. Peter would not have looked twice at her if she'd been a homely woman, and her grasping father wouldn't have been able to sell her to

the highest bidder. As an ordinary-looking woman, she would not have been forced into a degrading marriage that had almost killed her.

With nervous fingers, she plucked at the sleeve of her dress. This flirtation had to stop. She was not a coward and she wasn't afraid to admit to herself that Christian attracted her greatly—indeed, too much. Each time she saw him, conversed with him, he became more enticing in her eyes. It would be easy to forget who she was, and that a relationship of any kind with him could not only put her life in jeopardy but destroy his.

Sarah decided it was time to stop this nonsense of a dream and get back to reality. To change the subject she asked, “I saw you on deck this afternoon. Is the sword practice to keep you from boredom or does it have a more sinister purpose?”

Christian lowered himself into his chair with a gruff sigh. He narrowed his eyes and pointed a finger at her. “Coward!”

“Spoken truly like an arrogant man who risks nothing by indulging in—in whatever he desires.”

“What is it you think you will risk? I've already promised you security for life regardless of what occurs between us. Yet you readily dismiss this scorching attraction between us.” He smiled inwardly as he saw her eyes widen at his direct approach.

“I see we are no longer hiding behind insinuations,” she replied. “Very well. I too shall be direct.” She raised her eyes to his. “I will never be your mistress. I've been owned by a man before, and I shall never put myself in that situation again.”

His mind balked at the mental image she had just conjured up. “Owned? I don't understand.”

She shook her head in exasperation. “My husband. To him I was nothing but a piece of property.” Her voice appeared calm and rational, yet she still made no sense to him.

Incomprehension colored his words. “You were his wife. How is that anything like a kept mistress?”

She gazed out of the cabin windows, sadness dimming the sparkle in her eyes. “You’re a man of title and wealth and privilege. Yet you were also an officer in the army. I suspect all your life you have issued commands and they have been followed.”

He nodded. “But in the army I had to follow orders too. I did not always agree with every command given to me, but I had no choice but to follow them.”

“What if your whole life was like that? A life of nothing but orders and commands? A life where you had no choice but to acquiesce?”

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I wouldn’t like it at all.” He paused, knowing now where this was heading. Obviously her husband had been a dictator. “I hope that I’m sensitive enough not to impose my will on others unless I have a very good reason.”

Sarah took a sip of brandy, her pursed lips forming a perfect pout. As he noticed this, heat crept around his groin area, making him very aware of a specific request that one never expected a wife to agree to—but a mistress, yes.

She raised a delicately shaped eyebrow and said, “Reason? My husband and I did not agree on the definition of a ‘very good reason.’ He did not take anyone but himself into account because he didn’t have to. Everyone and everything around him he considered his property—including me.” Her eyes welled up. “My husband’s word was law. I can’t live like that again.” She gulped back her tears. “I won’t.”

Was she talking about marriage? Panic hit him, stirring his stomach’s contents like a whirlwind. He knew that, as the Earl of Markham, he would be expected to marry. Did she think that because he was now ugly and unappealing, he’d marry a governess?

Pride rose like a rabid dog to grab at his throat. He coughed, trying to clear away his anger. “I think I may have misled you. I wasn’t offering marriage.”

She looked at him in shock and then gave a delightful laugh. “Don’t look so panicked. I would never dream of such a thing. Men of title do not marry governesses. I was talking about a mistress. A mistress has even fewer rights than a wife. A mistress is an employee of sorts. Someone you control, a woman who is solely at your beck and call. She is bought and paid for, owned in fact, is she not?”

Put in that context, it did sound like ownership. But no, in his case that was not true at all. His previous mistresses had always been free to end the affair as easily as he, yet none had ever done so—except for Eloisa. He frowned. Once Eloisa had seen his burns, she’d quickly moved on to Lord Heyworth.

“But everyone does the bidding of their employer. You, in your role as a governess, for instance. How is your current role any different?”

“Don’t be naive! I know precisely the duties expected of a governess. I know what I’m required to do in order to fulfill the role. I am happy to accept those tasks.”

He smiled arrogantly. “Nevertheless, I dare say that, given your marriage, you would understand how becoming my mistress could be very pleasurable.”

He saw her whole body spasm. She uttered softly, “I’m pretty sure there are no duties as a governess that can physically hurt me or degrade me.” Sarah downed the rest of her drink in one gulp and stood. “I’m not prepared to submit my body to a man for his use without the ability to decline some or all of his commands. A mistress—a mistress who wishes to maintain her employment, a mistress who has nothing but her body with which to earn a living—does not always have that choice. Nor, indeed, does a wife.”

Now he was angry. His mistresses had always had choices. “Don’t be ridiculous! I would never suggest a woman do anything she finds unpleasant. She could stop me at any time.”

She walked purposefully to his chair, laying a hand on his scarred cheek. He felt the softness of her touch penetrate to his very soul.

“How could anyone accuse you of being a rapist?” She shook her head. “Some men don’t let you decline their advances. Some men take with force. I’ll never put myself in that position again. Who’d protect a mistress when it was impossible to protect me as a wife?”

He cringed at the word “force.” Her husband must have been a monster. Christian wanted to hit something, but instead he uttered, “Why did you not turn to someone for help? What about your father?”

“Why do you think my husband, as soon as we’d married, took me away from England, away from anyone I knew? It was too late.”

He jumped to his feet, feeling caged and impotent. She’d been hurt, ill-treated, and God knew what else by her husband, a man who was supposed to love, cherish, and honor her. No wonder she was skittish about trusting a man.

In a blinding revelation, he knew he wanted to be the man she came to trust. She was too young to spend the rest of her life alone—scared of intimacy, scared to commit to another. He knew, for he’d faced the same thing himself. He doubted he could marry any of the ladies of the *ton*. Who would choose him over a man who was whole? Over a man who could be looked at in the bright sunlight and admired and desired?

He wanted to heal her and prove that not all men were like her husband. It would be both the easiest and hardest of tasks. Easy for him, because she was desirable beyond words; hard, because he was no longer the attractive rake he once had been. His face and upper body were twisted and disfigured. He could no longer simply smile and have a woman thinking of how good he’d look naked.

But Sarah was an intelligent woman. Surely she knew there was more to “relations” than the treatment she had received at her callous husband’s hands. Winning Sarah’s trust would be a prize in itself. To teach her about pleasure would heal them both. He knew it. He felt sexual tension fill him at the mere possibility.

He moved closer. "I'll protect you." He slid a finger down her soft cheek. "I'd never hurt you, nor allow anyone to hurt you ever again."

His words meant more to her than he knew, but Christian had no idea what he was offering to protect her from, or the danger he could face in doing so. She saw the pity and understanding in his eyes, and it was almost her undoing. It would be so easy to step into his arms and feel safe.

Instead, she turned her back on him.

When he moved to stand directly behind her, Sarah tensed, feeling his presence like a tangible caress. This scene in the main cabin was too intimate, yet she couldn't resist the traitorous warmth rising within her at his nearness. "I have no need of protection, except perhaps from you."

He made no move to step away. "Are you really so afraid I would treat you as your husband did?"

She gazed over her shoulder into his sad eyes and shivered. "No. I know you'd never hurt me. I'm too important to Lily." His mouth firmed into a grim and angry line. "Sorry. That was uncalled for. I know you'd never hurt anyone."

The gentle sway of the ship, the soft sea breeze, and the light of the full moon made the room appear magical. Her instincts were on a reckless path, her skin felt oversensitive, and her body was a mass of tingles and feverish longing. Why did he affect her so?

Then Christian touched her. His fingers threaded themselves in her hair, pulling down the neat chignon she wore. Feeling her breath falter, Sarah wondered if this was in fact a dream. Had she gone to bed earlier and was merely dreaming this? But no, his hand moved on, his fingertips tracing the shell-like shape of her ear, leaving a trail of exciting sensations in their wake.

As his thumb traced around her jawline and found her parted lips, her breath fled altogether. Words that would halt his arousing touch died in her throat and she stood mute, simply unable to utter a sound.

For the first time in her life she felt on fire from a man's touch. Her blood pumped hot and fast through her veins in her rising excitement.

Both his hands found their way into her hair, pulling at her tresses until they flowed freely, and then moving to the bare skin of her shoulders. The neckline of her linen dress was low enough to expose the swellings of her aroused breasts. She'd put on such daring attire because of the heat, she had told herself, but now she knew she'd only been fooling herself. Wasn't this what she'd been angling for all along? She knew he would desire her thus attired.

Perhaps his touch could heal her as much as her touch soothed him. Would he be able to help her overcome her fears and forget her sordid past experiences?

When his arms slid around her, his roughened palms stroking the bare flesh of her arms, she gave no resistance. Still she gave none as his fingers swept over the swell of her breasts and found their peaks beneath the thin linen of her bodice and chemise.

She should stop him.

"I can make you forget ..."

Swept up in the moment, she truly believed him.

He caught her nipples between his fingers, and with the gentle pressure he applied to them, he sent a torrent of fire raging through her body. At the same time, he pushed the trailing strands of hair off her shoulder and pressed his lips to the curve of her neck, the touch both hot and tender. Her knees weakened, and the ache in the pit of her stomach intensified sharply.

He was right. Already she was forgetting everything: who she was, where they were, why this was wrong. She was simply allowing the magic of his touch to seduce her. She was helpless to fight it. She didn't even want to fight it!

Sarah had never known passion before, but as they embraced, she found that his body was like a safety beacon at the entrance to a harbor on a storm-tossed night. If Christian

wished to make love to her, here, now, she feared she wouldn't have the sense to stop him. She'd never felt a man's tenderness before, had never experienced the kind of ecstasy his hands and voice were promising her. It would be so easy to fall totally under Christian's spell.

She desperately wished she could lose herself in his arms. She wanted him to show her the kind of carnal bliss she'd never experienced in her anguished and brutal married life.

He was kneading her breasts so slowly and exquisitely that the pleasure nearly melted her. She could feel the quivering in her limbs, her legs almost unable to hold her upright.

"You heat my blood with an undeniable craving," he whispered hoarsely.

She craved him in return. He filled her with a hopeful longing she scarcely had dreamed would ever come true. To feel the worshiping touch of such a lover, a man who would cherish her and keep her safe forever ...

Lost in the dream, she was barely aware that Christian was pulling at the bodice of her gown, ripping at the fabric of her chemise. The light breeze from the open windows teased her aching, bare breasts. Without pause, his thumbs moved in a maddeningly light caress over the hardened tips, making her shudder with desire.

He seemed content to merely pet her, as if anything else would frighten her away. For the first time in a very long time she wasn't frightened, and she had no intention of fleeing. How could she? Her entire body was aroused. His hands grew bolder, stroking the swollen globes, flicking the throbbing crests, cupping and teasing the buds with expert skill.

An unbearable ache spread down from her stomach, to between her thighs. Sarah arched her back, seeking something more intangible, thrusting her breasts against his skillful hands. At her movement, her buttocks came into contact with the hardened shaft of his arousal, proof of his own desire for her.

She groaned into the stillness of the cabin.



She felt him shudder, and one hand tightened on her breast while the other moved downward, his palm stroking over her ribcage and lower ... over her stomach ... and yet lower still, to the juncture of her thighs. His heat seared her skin through the cloth; his hand came to rest over her mound with his fingers probing determinedly through the linen of her skirts.

At this, Sarah's crooning cries of pleasure echoed in the night as she arched helplessly against him ...

## *Chapter Seven*

**H**er breathy whimpers and sultry pleading inflamed Christian's desire until he was consumed with a driving need to possess her. Yet he knew he could not rush her.

The feel of her buttocks pressing so tantalizingly against him made his member throb painfully in the tight confines of his breeches. Unable to resist, he turned Sarah in his arms and lowered his head to taste her skin.

Never had a woman driven him to such a maddening need so quickly. He bent her gently over his arm and his lips sought her breasts. He let his tongue glide around her taut peaks; he could feel her body almost humming as he licked closer and closer to her hardened tips. Her moans grew more urgent in the silence of the cabin. She arched back further, forcing her breasts closer to his mouth, silently pleading. Finally he gave her what her body was demanding. His mouth covered her and he suckled a turgid nipple, rolling his tongue around and over it in his mouth, suckling greedily until he was sure he'd mark her skin.

But he had an even fiercer urge to explore the rest of her silken skin and taste the sweet essence between her thighs. The thought of her lying naked before him, every inch of her ivory skin exposed to his touch and taste, her pale thighs open in welcome for him, was gnawing hungrily at him ...

He could feel her tremors burn through him in exquisite torture. He wanted her as badly as he'd wanted any woman in his life. But he wanted her pleasure more. He wanted her to know, feel, and experience the ecstasy of his lovemaking. He wanted Sarah moaning beneath him, sheathing him in her wet

heat, hearing her cries as she orgasmed, before finally sending him spiraling into his own release.

Unable to help himself, Christian tore his mouth from her body and cried out, his voice almost a plea, “God, I want you!”

She heard the note of desperation in his voice. He was nearing the point of no return. He wanted her so badly, so desperately ... Normally she was afraid of a man’s arousal. Her husband had hurt her when he came to her bed. Even now her body tensed at those raw memories.

But she knew Christian had a reputation as a magnificent lover. She’d heard the ladies of the *ton* talk. They spoke of his size and stamina, his ability to bring a woman to orgasm over and over again before he gave himself to his own release, and his reputed skill with both hands and tongue.

Prior to her wedding she hadn’t really understood much of what had been said. Even now she had no idea what an orgasm felt like. The ladies referred to it as the “little death.” What had occurred in her husband’s bed felt like death, certainly, but she was sure this was not what they had meant, because when they spoke of it their faces flushed and their eyes took on a dreamy, faraway look.

Besides, having seen his behavior toward Lily and those in the Pearson household, she sensed he was a protector at heart. He would not hurt her.

If she trusted him enough, he would introduce her to passion. Perhaps even wipe out the degrading and incapacitating memories of her husband’s treatment from her mind. Maybe then she’d become whole again.

He was watching her with emerald eyes so dark they almost looked black. She could feel his arousal pulse against her stomach and then, just like that, the old fear returned.

Not only fear of the physical act they were spiraling out of control toward, but fear about her future, her position, her need to remain hidden, and the need not to draw any attention to herself. Becoming Lord Markham’s mistress would

undoubtedly set tongues wagging because of his reputation as the disfigured infamous war hero. She couldn't afford to draw that kind of interest upon herself.

He saw her withdrawal before she had to speak. He reluctantly let her go and gently pulled up her bodice and helped her tidy her clothing.

“You're not ready to trust me. But I promise you, Sarah, if you give yourself to me, you'll not suffer in my bed. In fact, I'm sure I can boldly state you'll thoroughly enjoy yourself.”

She didn't hesitate. “I'm sure you're right, my lord. However, as I pointed out earlier, I'm not looking to become a man's mistress. Once I journey down that path, I'd have no other option but to continue to slide down it. The next man who becomes my protector may not be of such a kind disposition. I'm a governess, and a governess I shall remain.”

She watched him fight with himself over the implications. Finally he drew a deep breath. “You're right. My apologies. I simply hate to see you decide upon a life of loneliness when, with the right man, sex can be exquisite, rewarding, and pleasurable.” He ran his fingers through her hair. “You deserve more.”

She reached up and kissed his scarred cheek. “Thank you. Maybe one day I'll be ready to take that step—with the right man. But that is not you, Christian.”

He paled, and sadness filled his face. “Because I'm so hideous to look at, do I make you more afraid?”

“No!” she cried. She grabbed his arm. “No! How can you think that? If I didn't care about my reputation, if I was free to do so, I would be honored to become your paramour. But that is another of life's dreams that I must forgo.”

“Why?” he urged. “Why can we not simply be lovers?”

She turned away from him. It would be so easy to say yes, to forget the penalties of being exposed. “I can't because of the scandal. If it became known that I was your mistress ... I can't risk it. Think of Lily's reputation too. I could no longer be her governess. Lily would lose another person she's just come to

know and trust.” She swung around to face him. “I won’t risk it. Can you forgive me? I’m sorry if I have given you the wrong impression.”

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. He pressed a kiss on her knuckles before letting her hand drop back to her side. “There is nothing to forgive. I am thankful to have found Lily such a wonderful governess, and a friend to make my voyage more enjoyable. I hope the events of this evening will not stop you from playing chess with me again.”

She smiled. “It would make for a very tedious voyage if I couldn’t beat you at chess every night.”

He laughed, the tension of the moment broken. “I swear, by the time this voyage ends I shall beat you.”

“You’d best hope it’s a long voyage, then.”

With a twinkle in his eye, he replied, “I already do!”

She blushed and decided to change the topic. “I have something for you that might help you. I noticed that your right shoulder pains you.”

He nodded slowly.

“I obtained some liniment from Mr. Pearson’s groom before I left. They use it on horses when they strain a muscle. It doesn’t smell particularly pleasant, but my father used something like this in winter after a hard day in the garden. It should help ease the stiffness.”

“You think it might help? The muscles have tightened terribly.”

“I’ll go fetch some and we can try it out.” Before he could argue, Sarah fled to her stateroom to retrieve the liniment. Never in all her life had she so strongly wished to help someone. He had wanted to end her pain, but she couldn’t allow that. However, she could help ease his.

He was pacing the main cabin on her return and swung to face her when she entered.

She indicated the chair by the open window. “Please sit and remove your cravat, waistcoat, and shirt.”

He did not move. “I—that is, perhaps Gareth would be more suited to applying the liniment.”

Christian never before had had any qualms about his nudity in front of a desirable woman. He’d stripped and bared his body numerous times, proud of his physique. But the thought of his twisted, disfigured body being bared before such a perfect woman, whose skin was like soft velvet beneath his touch, made him as nervous as a virgin on her wedding night.

She had her back to him and was already opening the jar. “Don’t be ridiculous! I’m perfectly capable of administering liniment.”

When he still hadn’t moved, she glanced over at him and straightened. “What on earth is the matter? I have seen men without their shirts before.”

“Not with wounds like these.”

“I assure you, it’s nothing I have not seen before.”

Christian gave a wan smile. She was right, of course. He reluctantly moved to the chair. “I warn you. I’m not a pretty sight.”

“I think you’re one of the most handsome men I’ve ever seen, *even* with the scars.”

He swallowed hard. He’d love to believe her, but most women in England appeared to disagree with her. Not that he blamed them.

He slowly and carefully removed his upper clothes, while not daring to look at Sarah. He didn’t want to see revulsion or pity on her face.

He heard her indrawn breath as he pulled his shirt over his head, then felt her fingers gently trace the puckered flesh on his shoulder down to his torso.

“You must have suffered greatly. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. He had suffered. But he’d refused to die and give his enemies the victory of his death.

For months he had relived the pain over and over nightly in his nightmares. But now, with Sarah in his life, instead of the pain he had something beautiful to focus on. And it made him even more determined to make her his lover.

He felt the coolness of the balm on his skin, and his nose wrinkled at its obnoxious smell. But it was the feel of her small hands roaming over his skin that had him gripping the sides of the chair.

Her touch wasn't hesitant. Her strokes were firm and her fingers dug deep into the knots in his shoulders and arms. She didn't go easy on him. Yet it was a very pleasant pain. She worked silently, and he finally stole a look at her face. Her lips were pursed in a determined line. Her blue, blue eyes weren't filled with pity; they simply calmly checked over his scarred form, seeking out the most affected areas.

Soon both hands were working over the painfully taut muscles in his shoulders and upper torso. He watched her tiny fingers dig into his scarred flesh and couldn't help but wish they were exploring more of his body.

What would her fingers feel like trailing down his chest, caressing his cock, cupping his sacs, before moving up to grip his shaft tightly and sliding up and down? She'd need both her hands to wrap around his member, and to stroke him faster and faster, while edging him ever nearer to the brink of orgasm. He instantly hardened at the thought.

He shifted painfully in the chair, his hardness pushing at the opening in his breeches. If she looked down, she'd see her powerful effect on him.

Her hands stilled, and she looked at him in concern. "Am I hurting you? Is it too much?"

"No. It hurts just to look at you. You're so beautiful."

She ignored his comment, working her fingers deep into the muscles. "How did it happen?"

Memories assailed him. He almost gagged remembering the smell of his burnt flesh. She noted his reaction.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

He took a deep breath. “It’s silly, I know, but sometimes I can still hear the crackle of the flames, feel their heat on my skin, and smell my own flesh burning.”

She placed her fingers over his lips to hush him.

He pulled away. “No one has ever asked me about this before. Perhaps I *should* talk about it. It might chase away the ghosts.” She stood waiting expectantly. “A band of us were trying to take out a French cannon. The wagon on which it sat collapsed, and I was trapped under it.”

With a puzzled expression, Sarah said, “At my interview, you mentioned a woman had set fire to you.”

He briefly closed his eyes. He could still remember exactly what she looked like—young, pretty, deadly.

“When the wagon collapsed, a Frenchman fell from it and broke his neck. Maybe he was her lover. She decided to vent her anger on me. She walked to the fire, picked up a burning stick, and lit the gunpowder around the wagon. Then she stood back to watch me die an agonizing death. Thankfully, my friend and fellow soldier, Grayson Devlin, Viscount Blackwood, was there to save me. It took him longer than I’d have wished,” he added with a sad smile.

Sarah gaped in horror. “What cowardice! What a dishonorable thing to do! She lit it deliberately, knowing that you were trapped? How could she be that cruel? How could any woman?” She shivered despite the heat. “I could never do that to another human being.”

He gave a wry smile. “I’ve learned that gender is no indication of the cruelty a person is capable of.”

“But to destroy something so beautiful ...” She stood quite still. A blush swamped her cheeks, and her eyes traveled over the rest of him, starting at his face and moving down his neck, over his torso, then down past his stomach to his groin. There they stopped. There they rested—like a caress.

One of her hands unconsciously followed the pathway of her eyes, running over his chest—until she snatched it away,



horrified at what she'd just done. She dropped her hands from his body and stepped back.

The room filled with tension, and the air crackled like the moments before a thunderstorm.

Hope flared in his soul as she took a step nearer. He could read the confusion on her face. She was tempted. She was afraid. She desperately wanted to touch him.

He almost reached up and pulled her into his lap, but that wasn't the way to win her. Good things come to those who wait. He had a sea voyage of several weeks in which to seduce her. She wanted to learn about passion. He sensed she needed it like a healing balm. On board this ship he'd have no competition for her affections from other men.

No. He shook his head to clear her intoxicating scent. He'd not ruin it all with a callow, rushed attempt. Time was what was needed, and he had plenty of it.

He rotated his shoulder. "Thank you, Sarah. That does indeed feel much better." He gathered up his shirt and pulled it over his head.

She quickly collected herself. "I'm pleased to have helped. I'll administer the liniment each night, and I'd advise you to keep the arm and shoulder active during the day so the muscles don't stiffen up so much."

With that she bid him goodnight and hurried to her stateroom.

Christian sat in the chair for several minutes trying to get his rioting heart and hardened body under control.

How ironic to finally find a woman who desired him, burns and all, but who was afraid of passion.

He wondered what her husband had done to her. He hated to think of her being abused in any way whatsoever. Curiosity was eating at him. He had to know.

If her husband had been a plantation owner, then perhaps someone in Jamaica would know of him. He made a decision. He would stay long enough on the island to ascertain her

husband's true nature. Then he'd know exactly what he was dealing with and how to proceed with his seduction. Sarah Cooper was more skittish than a yearling colt, and given his lack of looks and his long abstinence from any other attempted seductions, he needed all the help he could get.

## Chapter Eight

The *Doreen* arrived in Kingston, Jamaica, in the middle of the night. Christian awoke early, the noise of the docks and the heat making it impossible to sleep longer. He dressed quickly, refreshed because once again the nightmares had been held at bay.

He looked forward to seeing Sebastian, his fellow Libertine Scholar. He'd left instructions that word be sent to the Marquis the minute the *Doreen* docked, and he looked forward to a few nights under Sebastian's roof. He wanted news from home—unbiased news. He knew his friend would not try to soften the gossip about Christian's disappearance from England. He wondered what story Grayson was feeding the hungry *ton*. He also briefly wondered what escapade had brought Sebastian to the tropics.

He partook of a coffee in the main cabin and then made his way up out on deck. It was already stifling hot, in spite of it being early morning. He needed something to do in order to burn off his restless energy.

Sebastian, forever the consummate rake, would be unlikely to arise before midday. Christian leaned against the rails, staring at the busy port. The sun glinted off the turquoise sea, and the glare from the white sand bordering the sweeping shoreline hurt his eyes.

Paradise!

As he marveled at such beauty, it was hard to remember this was not a trip he was taking for pleasure. He was returning

to his home, to face an unknown enemy determined to destroy him and his reputation.

Why?

The question burned in his brain, and yet he could think of no one who'd take such umbrage with him that they'd deliberately destroy an innocent man, or rape a young woman in order to dishonor him.

He lowered his eyes against the glare and ran a hand over his nape. It wasn't as if he were a saint; he'd had his differences and confrontations with various men, usually over women. Sometimes he wondered if it could be a woman who'd set him up, perhaps a jealous lover. God only knew he'd broken enough hearts in his time. But once the extent of his injuries became common knowledge, all his discarded lovers counted themselves lucky.

He sighed into the breeze. No, it wouldn't have been a former lover.

He pulled his pocket watch from his breast pocket. He was impatient to see Sebastian. Perhaps he'd heard more of what had occurred. What news would he bring from Grayson?

He stood straight and froze in his tracks. What if his friends thought him capable of such a crime? Would they think he'd finally succumbed to the evil of his father's influence? After all, his father's blood flowed through his veins.

He scowled down at the gently lapping waves. Suddenly his impending meeting with Sebastian assumed a different urgency. What reception would he receive? Would Sebastian's reaction be to advise him to stay in Canada?

He then caught Sarah's scent on the humid breeze a moment before she appeared beside him. He recognized her scent in his dreams. The fresh scent of flowers—lilies—always announced her presence.

She stopped several feet away from the rail. The bonnet on her head was tied tightly under her chin, obscuring most of her face and hiding her fair hair.

“Good morning, Sarah,” he said softly. “It’s a hot day in paradise.”

She gave a small smile. “Good morning, my lord.”

“Christian,” he uttered in exasperation.

“I agreed to such informal address when we are alone, but in company I would prefer formality. I don’t wish your friend to get the wrong impression.”

Christian laughed. “Lord Coldhurst is one of England’s finest rakes, so I’m afraid he’ll take one look at you and form the wrong impression anyway.” He shook his head. “Unlike me, if he were ever in the position of hiring a governess, your beauty would be the only qualification he’d be seeking.”

He watched her luscious lips tighten. “I see. Then perhaps Lily and I should stay on board the ship,” she replied in steely tones. “I’d rather not expose her to such behavior.”

He raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he should think about her suggestion. Sebastian’s blood would without a doubt rise upon seeing the beautiful, widowed Sarah Cooper, and he would definitely want her for himself. There was an unwritten rule among the Libertine Scholars: a woman was fair game no matter whom she supposedly belonged to—unless, of course, one of them was married to her. Wives, like sisters, would be safe from their seductive intentions. But lovers, mistresses—were all to be wooed and won away from their original masters. It was the fun of the game.

“Perhaps that would be a wise idea.” He noted her surprise at his agreement. “I’m not even sure what type of accommodation Lord Coldhurst has here, or even what he is doing in Jamaica.”

Sarah hesitated for a second before saying resignedly, “No. Lily will be disappointed not to get off the ship. It’s hot and stuffy. Plus it’s going to be a long voyage, and perhaps it would be fairer to let her disembark.”

Their conversation was halted abruptly by a commotion on the dock below. Christian moved to the railing on the other side of the ship and peered down. A carriage sat on the dock at

the bottom of the *Doreen's* gangway, and a man with rich mahogany hair was striding up it, yelling for Christian.

Sebastian Hawkestone, the Marquis of Coldhurst, had arrived.

Sebastian spied him as soon as he reached the deck and moved forward to hug him tightly. "Christian, you old sod, how are you?" Sebastian pushed him back and held him at arm's length. "I must say, you're looking very well for a man sent to purgatory."

Relief swept over Christian. Sebastian was the same old lovable, nonjudgmental rogue he'd always been.

"Come, I've brought some of my servants. They can organize your trunks. I thought we'd go to the local tavern and drink our sorrows away." He dug his elbow into Christian's ribs. "And see if we can get the scarred war hero bedded without being accused of rape."

Although the words were spoken in jest, there was an underlying tone of anxiety. Sebastian looked tired. There were fine lines around his eyes, and his mouth showed hints of strain.

The two men were interrupted by a loud but feminine cough behind them. Both men swung around and took in Sarah standing tall and proud behind them, holding Lily's hand.

Sebastian let out a low whistle. "I see you have more news to tell me." His eyes began sweeping over Sarah's luscious figure, taking in her pert breasts and the slender waist that flared to hips that were made to welcome and cradle a man between her thighs.

Then, instantly, Sebastian's demeanor changed. He stepped forward and bowed low before Sarah. "Forgive me, madam. May I present myself? The Marquis of Coldhurst, at your service." He took Sarah's hand in his and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

Christian's fists clenched as he watched Sarah's hand tremble under the force of Sebastian's looks and personality.

Christian had never known any woman to be immune to Sebastian's charms.

A flare of the green-eyed monster rose deep within him, and he only just prevented himself from stepping forward and tearing her hand out of Sebastian's grasp. Thankfully, Sarah gently but determinedly pulled her hand free.

She dropped a curtsy. "My lord, greetings."

Sebastian turned and gave him a questioning look. Christian cleared his throat. "May I present my ward, Lily Pearson, and her governess, Mrs. Sarah Cooper."

"We *do* have much to catch up on," was Sebastian's dry reply. He stood studying Sarah, and Christian could tell she was becoming uncomfortable.

Lily broke the silence. "Why is he staring at you like that, Sarah?"

"Have we met before?" Sebastian asked Sarah, ignoring Lily's comment.

Christian could not see Sarah's face, which was hidden from view by her bonnet, but he noted how tension invaded her small frame.

"I very much doubt it, my lord."

Sebastian frowned and seemed to be trying to peer under her bonnet. Finally he gave a wicked smile and said, "Obviously, wishful thinking on my part. I'm sure I would have remembered a lady of such beauty." His voice lowered and seemed to purr in the humid air. "I'm sure I'll remember you in the future, especially once we become better acquainted."

Christian couldn't see Sarah's reaction to Sebastian's comment, and for that he gave thanks. He already wanted to smash Sebastian's perfect white teeth down his throat.

Sebastian clapped him on the back. "I'm pleased I leased the villa, Roaring Pavilions, since you have company traveling with you. There is plenty of room. It's located in Sugarloaf Bay; it's a few miles from town, but the view and setting are

worth the journey.” He scratched his head. “However, I’m not sure we will fit all of us, including the luggage, in one journey.”

“Sarah”—Christian deliberately used her first name to proclaim his interest, and also to perhaps mislead Sebastian as to his true relationship with Sarah—“why don’t you organize for your and Lily’s luggage to be loaded, and take the carriage to the villa? It can come back for us later. Sebastian and I have some catching up to do.”

He did not look at his friend as he spoke, but he could almost feel Sebastian’s grin and knowing wink.

“Of course, my lord, as you wish. Come along, Lily.”

Lily ignored her outstretched hand and stayed in the same spot, even though Sarah had already turned to go below. She looked at Sebastian. “Can we swim? Is the villa near the sea?”

Sebastian smiled down at her. “The villa has two private coves with the whitest sand and bluest water. Tell Margarita I said she’s to show you the way.”

Lily let out a delighted squeal and couldn’t stand still in her excitement. “I’d never seen the sea until this voyage. And I’ve never swum in the sea. We had the river and lake in York, but not the sea. The water was always too cold to swim in.”

“The sea here is like a warm bath. You could swim in it all day if you wished.”

She beamed up at Sebastian for a moment before grabbing Sarah’s hand and pulling her toward the hatch. “Hurry, Sarah. It’s so hot I want to get to the villa in time for a swim.”

The men stood watching the pair until they disappeared below.

“Gosh, where did you manage to find such a beauty?”

“I assume you are talking about Mrs. Cooper—the respectable, widowed Mrs. Cooper, who happens to be in my employ.” His tone made it obvious to Sebastian how he would feel about anyone dallying with his employee, not that that was likely to stop a man of Sebastian’s appetites.



“And here I thought you were warning me off because she was your mistress,” Sebastian chuckled.

Christian turned on his heel and made to disembark. He called over his shoulder, “I need a drink.”

Within a few minutes they were ensconced in one of Kingston’s taverns. It was a few streets back from the sea and attracted a more genteel clientele. There were no drunken sailors, at least the majority of patrons didn’t stink, and the serving wenches were clean and pretty. No wonder Sebastian knew of its existence.

They settled into a corner table with tumblers of ale, ensuring that no one could overhear their conversation. Christian scrutinized his fellow Libertine Scholar, wondering what he was doing in Jamaica. The overt, forced merriment did not match the strain he noted on his friend’s face. He looked his immaculate self as usual, with not a crease in his expensive clothing and his hair elegantly combed back off his face. But he looked as if he’d lost weight, and no matter how relaxed he tried to appear, tension was emanating from his large frame.

“So, you are Lily Pearson’s guardian. How did that come about?”

Christian knew where this conversation was heading—Sarah. He didn’t want to discuss her, especially not with Sebastian. “Do we really have to talk about Lily first? I’m desperate for news from England.” He’d leave asking what was troubling his friend until they’d had a few drinks. It was obvious Sebastian was trying to disguise just how much trouble he was in.

Sebastian took a long gulp of his ale and leaned back with a sigh, tilting the chair onto its rear legs. “There is not much to tell. I’ve been gone from England for over a month. When I left, Grayson was working diligently on your behalf.”

“And ... ?”

“Grayson’s wondering why you haven’t sailed home sooner to demand that this litany of lies be revoked. The Duke

has kept it quiet, of course, but he's determined to bankrupt you in your absence. Questions and rumors about your disappearance are rife."

Christian hung his head and studied his tumbler. Inwardly he flinched, but he allowed none of the rioting emotions consuming him to escape from his calm façade. What could he say to that? He hadn't sailed for home immediately for two reasons. To begin with, he'd had no funds, and two, he couldn't remember if he'd done what he'd been accused of or not.

All his life he'd worried that he would become his father—evil, vicious, a bully. He could still remember, as a young boy, watching his father rape one of the maids, who'd been little more than a child herself. His father had no idea Christian was hiding in the linen closet, mere inches from where his father had the hapless girl pinned against the shelves. Christian had not really understood what was happening, but had been terrified by the girl's muffled screams and the violence emanating from his father.

He could see the servant's face and he watched the horror, pain and shock in her young eyes as his father raped her. He'd had to clap a hand over his mouth to stop himself from being sick.

He could still vividly remember her collapsing in a heap on the cupboard floor, sobbing when his father had finished. There was blood on the front of her dress. It wasn't until years later that he had understood what the blood had signified.

His father had stood over her, threatening her life if she so much as told a fly. She never did, and his father kept attacking her until she had got big with child, at which point he callously dismissed her.

Sebastian interrupted his thoughts. "Lady Harriet Penfold is still insisting it was you who abducted, raped, and beat her. Grayson is continuing to discreetly search for anyone who can come forward and refute that claim."

"I can't understand why the task is so difficult. I wrote and told Grayson everything, how I'd left the ball on foot and

walked to the Honey Pot. Someone must have seen me.” He paused. “Surely Carla verified my story.”

Sebastian shifted in his seat. His fingers drummed the table.

“Well, did Grayson find Carla, as I asked?”

“He found her.”

The relief Christian felt was palpable. “Thank God. What did she say?”

“Not much, as her throat had been slit from ear to ear.”

Christian sat back stunned. He quickly gulped down the rest of his drink. Carla had been killed—because of him.

“Whoever set you up has done a very thorough job.”

“You believe me, then? That I’m innocent?”

“Of course,” Sebastian declared. “Your body may be scarred, but you’re the same person under that puckered skin. You have the same thoroughly honorable heart and soul that adds Carla’s death to your already overburdened conscience.” Sebastian leaned forward in earnest. “It shouldn’t. You didn’t kill her. None of us ever believed you raped the Penfold girl either.”

Christian studied the grain of the table, his thoughts welling with emotion. “That’s why I didn’t return to England sooner. I couldn’t remember. I—what if I had done it? You know my father’s history. I had to be sure.”

“And are you? Sure?”

Christian nodded vigorously. “Absolutely. That’s why I’m coming home. I remember everything about the night, but I’ve had to wait because of Lily. Her parents’ tragic deaths were unforeseen. Her care is my lifelong responsibility, to repay her late father’s kindness.”

“Very noble of you, I’m sure. What I’d like to know is who’d want to destroy you. If it was your father’s reputation being destroyed, there would be hundreds of suspects, but you? Do you even have any enemies?”

Christian's chair suddenly became unbearably uncomfortable. "It has me completely baffled. I've been thinking of nothing else for months; my head hurts with the agony of it. But I don't even have one name for the list."

"Aren't we the saint?" Sebastian drawled.

Christian shook his head. "Chance would be a fine thing. I was off fighting against the French for the last two years. I didn't have the time or inclination to offend anyone."

"It couldn't be a woman scorned, could it?" Sebastian asked casually. "I've had a few run-ins with the odd vicious ex-lover. You haven't broken anyone's heart of late?"

Shame rather than alcohol burned at the back of Christian's throat. How could he admit that the only women he slept with now were those he paid for?

"No. On the Continent, during the war, I had no relationships where the woman would have been expecting more. Before Waterloo, I'd just set Eloisa up in London. She kept me pretty busy—too busy to dally with any other lady. The *ton* knew marriage was the furthest thing from my mind." Eloisa Foley was London's most sought-after courtesan, and Christian had taken immense pride in the fact that she'd agreed to become his mistress—his exclusively. But after Waterloo, she couldn't leave his protection quickly enough.

Sebastian cleared his throat. "Well, I'm sorry, I don't have any more to tell you. You'll have to wait until you speak with Grayson upon your return. Hopefully by then he'll have better news."

Christian slammed his tumbler on the table. "I had been hoping you'd tell me Grayson had already sorted out the situation and I could sail home and reside quietly in Dorset, at Henslowe Court. Now I'm going to have to go to London and ascertain the truth. Why would Harriet lie? There is more to this than meets the eye."

"At least you can fix your situation. I fear I'll be paying for mine all my life." The guilt in Sebastian's voice slammed itself forcefully into him from across the table.

Christian could read it in his friend's eyes: Sebastian was in deep trouble. "What has happened?"

"I too left England in rather a hurry."

"Why?"

Sebastian looked at him, his face a mask of sorrow. Christian knew that whatever was coming wasn't good.

Sebastian slugged back more alcohol as if it would wash his past actions clean. "A duel ... a duel that went horribly wrong," Sebastian said, each word biting and clipped, as though forced between clenched teeth.

Christian looked at his friend. Just about every Libertine Scholar had been involved in a duel at one time or another, usually over women. But among most gentlemen duels were fought to draw first blood only, and were fought not to kill the opponent but to gain satisfaction.

"I don't understand. You would never shoot to kill."

Sebastian shrugged. "I didn't." He ran a hand over his eyes. "It all happened so fast. It was Baron Larkwell. I thought I'd aimed over his right shoulder, but he went down like a shot stag. The doctor informed me he was dead, and Hadley, as my second, told me to run. So I slipped out of England quietly, and I'm waiting on Hadley's note to let me know when it may be safe, if ever, to return."

"Christ." Christian was left speechless. He signaled to the barmaid they both needed another drink. Finally he uttered, "I don't believe this. What a pair we make."

Sebastian thumped his refilled tumbler on the table. "I did not mean to kill Doogie Hennessy. You know me; I'm the best shot in England. How could I have *not* missed?" Sebastian's voice, low and strained, spoke of his inner pain at such an act, for it was illegal to duel to the death in England, and certainly frowned upon within society. Christian knew exactly what a man's death did to your soul, especially over something as foolish as a woman whom Sebastian would have already forgotten by now.

“This may be paradise, with the glorious weather and abundant willing females, but I can’t end my days in Jamaica. I’ve responsibilities in England. Responsibilities that include my estate and the Coldhurst riches, both of which my odious cousin is itching to get his hands on.” He gave a wan smile. “Hadley’s trying to get Prinny to issue a pardon. He’s positioning that I would never have shot to kill, and that perhaps Doogie may have deliberately stepped into the line of fire. But in my absence, I’m worried about my sisters. They are now defenseless. I can’t stay away too much longer.”

“Hadley will take care of them.” Lord Hadley Fullerton, was the Duke of Claymore’s younger brother, and the youngest member of the Libertine Scholars.

Sebastian gave a grim smile. “That’s what worries me. If it weren’t for my promise to Hadley to wait until he sends for me, I’d be tempted to sail back with you.”

Christian sat motionless, keeping his features blank. He was a selfish bastard. The last thing he wanted on board ship with himself and Sarah was the handsome Sebastian Hawkestone, the Marquis of Coldhurst. Carefully he said, “Sisters are off-limits. Even the Libertine Scholars have some standards and decency. My advice would be to wait for Hadley.”

His words were cut off by an ear-piercing squeal.

“Sebastian, my gorgeous man, where have you been?” A petite serving wench threw herself onto Sebastian’s lap, smothering him with kisses.

She was small in height and stature except for her ample bosom. How she didn’t topple forward when standing, Christian didn’t know.

The greeting was lavish and long. Sebastian took her lips in a kiss that stirred every man watching, including himself.

When they finally came up for air, Sebastian huskily said, “Susie, my sweet, I’m happy to see you.”

She wiggled in Sebastian’s lap. “I can feel that, my lusty lord.” She shoved her barely concealed breasts into Sebastian’s

eager face. “I’ve got a break coming up.” She nodded her head toward the stairs and the bedroom waiting to be romped in.

Christian’s body gave a twinge at the idea of a pleasant hour of unbridled relief. He envied Sebastian the opportunity. Given Sarah’s reluctance to become his lover, and the long voyage ahead, the temptation to indulge in some bed sport stirred within him.

“How accommodating, my dear, but do you have a friend for Lord Markham? It would be rude of me to desert him. Christian has only just arrived in Kingston.”

Susie turned toward Christian, and her mouth began to widen into a saucy smile—that is, until he turned his head and his full profile came into view. Suddenly her smile wavered and she murmured embarrassedly, “I’m—I’m not sure if Kitty’s free.”

Sebastian hadn’t seen her expression. He reached around from behind her and cupped each of her breasts, rolling her hardened nipples between his fingers. “Then I’ll simply have to share. Don’t worry my sweet, Christian and I have shared before, and the woman concerned was most appreciative.”

Susie’s face flooded with alarm. She made to rise from Sebastian’s lap.

Christian cleared his throat, trying to ignore the humiliating heat sweeping his face. “It’s quite all right, Sebastian. I’m happy to stretch my sea legs for a while. Don’t let me stop you.”

The relief on Susie’s face nailed the humiliation into his skin like a hammer on a coffin lid. Any and all desire died completely.

He watched Sebastian begin to frown as he looked quizzically at Christian and then toward Susie. It took all of a few seconds for Sebastian to ascertain her reluctance and the reason for it. Shock replaced his puzzled stare, and then embarrassment, embarrassment for Christian.

With a sweep of his arms, he removed Susie from his lap and placed her on her feet. With sangfroid, Sebastian quietly

said, “Well then, perhaps another day, when I no longer have guests. Come, Christian, let’s hire a couple of steeds and explore the coast on our way back to my villa. My carriage will collect your luggage later.”

They didn’t speak again until they reached the villa.

Roaring Pavilions stood on a small clifftop that jutted out into the sea, fifteen miles from Kingston. It was strategically positioned so that it had two private coves, one either side of the main house.

The homestead was two stories high, and the gleaming white painted wood reflected the glare of the baking sun. It looked like a jewel, its setting the lush gardens containing plants in every color of the rainbow. Beyond the lawn was the deep cerulean blue of the sea, its waters glittering like topaz in the sunshine.

It truly was paradise. If you had to hide out, there could be no better place.

The horses were handed to the young Negro groom.

To defuse the tension, Sebastian said, “Let’s head straight to the beach for a swim. Wash the heat off.” Without waiting for a reply, he led the way down the shell-covered path, through the tall coconut trees and jasmine-scented flowers, and toward the beach. As they approached the point where the white sandy paths branched off in different directions, leading to two separate coves, they stopped and stared at the picture-perfect scene on the beach at the bottom of the left-hand path.

Sarah, unaware that the men had arrived earlier than anticipated, had stripped down to her white linen shift. To both men it was obvious she was naked beneath.

Her hair was wet from a swim. It hung glistening down her back, the color darker now that it was wet, reminding Christian of champagne. She was watching Lily swim. A bright pink flower was tucked behind one ear, and when she bent to pick up a shell, the nearly transparent linen outlined her buttocks, giving an almost clear view of the delights a man would find there.



God, she was beautiful. Christian had never wanted a woman more. His erection was instant and urgent.

The intake of breath from both men was audible.

Sebastian gave a long, appreciative whistle. “That’s too much of a temptation for me.” He started to turn toward the path to go down to the beach.

Christian’s arm shot out to stop him.

“Please—don’t.”

Sebastian’s face broke into a knowing grin. “I never had any intention of invading their privacy.” He shot his friend a sarcastic look. “Just Lily’s governess, indeed! I knew there was more to it.” He glanced back at Sarah, a siren of the sea frolicking in paradise. “I envy you. It’s not often I’ve wanted a fellow Libertine Scholar’s lover.”

“She’s not my lover—yet. But I’d appreciate time to win her.” His words cost him, cost him dearly. His pride was stripped bare and he was almost weeping with impotence. How could he compete against Sebastian? His friend was a wealthy gentleman too, like him, but Sebastian was still handsome. Women fell at his feet, as if worshiping a god. If Sebastian wanted Sarah, no doubt he could have her. They both knew it.

He hated the desperation he heard in his voice. “You saw what happened at the tavern. You have no idea what it’s like to have a woman look at you with revulsion.”

“Don’t let one silly barmaid taint your thinking.”

“It’s not one silly barmaid. Unlike you, now if I want sex I have to pay for it. Pay for a woman who then lies beneath me unresponsive until I finish. Usually I ensure I’m so drunk that her reluctance doesn’t bother me. Hence why the night of the debacle at the Honey Pot is so unclear.”

Sebastian appeared to be trying to wipe the look of pity off his face. He said softly, “I’m sorry. Women are fickle creatures. We have always known that. That is why we don’t take them seriously.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s different about Mrs. Cooper?”

Blast Sebastian's uncanny ability to read people. Christian let out the breath he'd not realized he was holding until then. "She's the first woman since Waterloo who looks at me as if I'd never been injured in the war. She doesn't appear to mind the burns." He proceeded to tell Sebastian about her visit to his room the first night they met. "She let me kiss her and didn't recoil in disgust. There is definitely an attraction there, but her husband treated her cruelly and he frightened her badly. I don't know what he did, but she's scared of intimacy. I want—no, I need—the chance to heal her."

Sebastian stood silently watching Sarah on the beach below. Finally he uttered quietly, "So she can heal you?"

"That's very perceptive of you, my friend. Maybe she and I can heal each other."

Sebastian nodded. Christian pressed on. "You can have any woman you choose. Just don't choose Sarah. Is that too much to ask?"

Sebastian turned his back on the beauty below and began making his way down to the cove on the right. "I was never serious in my intention to seduce her. I merely wanted to stoke the fire, so to speak, and get you to admit your relationship. All this pious talk of her being an employee, indeed! I knew as soon as I saw her. She's far too young to have had any relevant experience." He looked back over his shoulder. "I hope she turns out to be a terrible governess, and then it won't matter when you grow tired of her as your mistress. You can simply fire her."

"Sometimes I forget what a cold-hearted bastard you are." Sebastian's parents had been a faithless pair. Jealousy and heated arguments filled the Coldhurst home. Both his mother and his father took numerous lovers. Christian knew Sebastian wondered if his father was his blood father at all. Once Sebastian's father died, his mother's affairs grew worse. The last straw was when Sebastian caught his mother in bed with her groom. Sebastian had been relieved when she died a few years ago.

Since then he'd held all women in low regard. They were merely instruments he played for his pleasure.

Christian followed him, his relief at Sebastian's disinterest in Sarah tempered by annoyance. "Just because I may end the affair doesn't mean I'd have to fire her. Sarah is remarkably well educated and could defeat any of us at chess."

"Hmmm ... that's interesting. Where is she from?"

"Why?"

"I'm sure I've met her somewhere before. I'll remember eventually."

Christian stilled in his task of removing his boots. "I doubt it. If any one of us had spied such beauty before, a challenge would have been laid down. You'd have already seduced her."

Sebastian pulled his shirt over his head. "Maybe she has a sister I've woken up with before."

"Perhaps ... I haven't asked about her family in any detail, but I have a funny feeling she's an only child—well, only in terms of who she believes her father to be."

"Believes? This is getting interesting."

"Have you ever visited, for any length of time, with the Duke of Hastings?"

"No. Only a ball here and there."

"Sarah grew up in his household. Her father is the Duke's gardener, and she was educated with the Duke's daughter," he said with a touch of derision.

Sebastian stopped undressing. "You think she's the Duke's by-blow?"

"She certainly has the bone structure, speech, breeding, and intelligence of our class. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd think she was gentry."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed and his mouth opened, then closed. "Hmmm ... I wonder ..."

"What?"

Sebastian, lost in thought, ignored his question. Finally he leaped to his feet. “Sarah is all yours. I hope you’ll remember my noble sacrifice. Besides, the minute I saw her on your ship, saw how territorial you were about her, I knew there was more to the relationship. I’ve never seen you so possessive over a woman.”

“People change; things occur that alter your life irrevocably. I’m not the same man I was.”

“That’s where you are wrong. You may have changed on the outside. We all do. Age changes us all. We cannot escape the ravages of time. You’ve changed slightly earlier and differently.” Sebastian’s face sobered. “But you are still the man I’ve known most of my life—honorable, kind, loyal and proud. No burns can take away who you are inside, unless you let them. If you slink around ashamed of the injuries you have received fighting for king and country, then others will perceive you that way too.” Sebastian’s gaze ran over Christian’s bared torso. “I can see what Sarah saw in you when she came to your room that night. You’re still a man in his prime, muscled and healthy. Walk tall, defy all the stares, and if you forget the burns, others will too. They will only see them if you focus on them.” He smiled and patted Christian on the back. “Give them something else to focus on and they will do so. Be the Christian of old. No woman could resist you then, and I bet with a new attitude, they won’t once again.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It is. There is nothing wrong with your mind or your cock—two very effective weapons when dealing with the fairer yet more vicious sex.” Sebastian shrugged. “You may just have to work harder than you’re used to. So women no longer fall at your feet. But honestly, sometimes the hunt can be more invigorating than an easy conquest.” He grinned. “If you want Sarah Cooper, go and get her. That’s what the Christian of old would have done. Nothing would have stopped him.”

“I *was* pretty skilled at seduction, and very successful too.”

“Not as successful as me.” With that Sebastian turned and ran into the sea, calling over his shoulder, “The swim will do

your damaged shoulder some good. I noticed you favored your right arm on the ride home.”

Christian stood naked on the beautiful beach and contemplated Sebastian’s sound advice. He looked down at his body and surveyed himself unbiasedly. Sebastian was right. He was a man still in his prime—fit, muscular, and well endowed enough to have received no complaints.

He *had* been living like a victim, feeling sorry for all he had lost, when he still had so much that was appealing. He looked around him at this paradise on earth. What a fool he’d been.

He was alive! He could still feel the sun on his face, see the wonder of nature—and experience passion and love, if he worked for it.

He’d struggled through torturous pain, and for what? Only to live half a life? How had he let himself forget how good being a part of this world could be?

He raced for the inviting, vivid blue sea, his spirits lifting. He was alive, and God damn it, he was determined to never forget that fact ever again. Once he’d finished his swim, he would begin his campaign for Sarah Cooper.

She too had been hurt. She was intending to hide herself at his estate, giving up on a life of happiness. She had forgotten what joy there was in family, friends . . . He would give the joy of being a part of this world back to her. He’d make her understand her life wasn’t over, and that she couldn’t hide from passion, pleasure, and happiness.

She deserved to be happy.

As he dived under a wave and struck out to swim along the shoreline, the world, all of a sudden, became a more inviting place.

## *Chapter Nine*

Christian was disappointed and angry that Sarah chose not to join them for dinner, but it did give him the opportunity to ask for Sebastian's help.

They'd retired to the library for a glass or two of whiskey and a cheroot. The doors out onto the tropical garden were open, and the humid, humming darkness was alive with lit lanterns.

"How long do you intend to stay in Jamaica, Christian? I have a favor to ask of you before you sail home," Sebastian said as he sauntered over to the decanter to refill their glasses.

Christian frowned. "I was wondering why you'd sent for me."

"I want you to take two letters to London for me, one to Doogie's mother and the other to my bank. I'd like them hand-delivered. I don't trust anyone but a friend with this task. I've made some financial arrangements for Doogie's family. I know they were expecting him to make a good match."

"Doogie has two younger brothers. The family won't be left destitute."

After handing him a glass of whiskey, Sebastian slumped back into his chair. "I know, but finding wives with good dowries will be delayed by years, as they are young boys, and I don't need their financial worries on my conscience as well." He raised an eyebrow. "Will you do that for me?"

"Of course I will." Christian twirled his glass in his hand, pondering whether he should ask a favor in return. Should he

involve his friend further in his affairs? Sebastian had enough problems of his own.

“Actually, I thought I’d spend a few days here at your villa, if that is all right with you.” He’d made his decision to stay over dinner. This island paradise was the perfect place for seduction, and he also wanted Sebastian to help him ascertain anything he could about Sarah’s husband, the despicable Mr. Cooper.

Sebastian broke into a wicked grin. “Ideal for seduction, is it not? It’s all this hot weather and beautiful scenery. It makes the ladies lower their guard. And wear fewer clothes.”

Christian laughed. “Is that why you picked Jamaica?”

“Well, it’s better than the back of beyond in Canada.”

“I should have known you’d have only one thing on your mind, regardless of the fact that you were fleeing England in disgrace.” Christian stretched out his legs and rested his glass on his stomach. He felt more relaxed and alive than he had in a long time. “You’re right, this island lends itself to seduction, but that is not my only reason for delaying my departure.” He contemplated the beauty of the lit garden and let its healing perfection soak into his soul. Finally he uttered, “From what little Sarah has told me, I believe her husband was a plantation owner, and I’m hoping someone here might be able to tell me more about him. Apparently they stopped in Jamaica on their honeymoon—something to do with slaves—before continuing on to Virginia. He must have met with someone while he was here.”

Sebastian puffed his cheroot. “Do you think knowing who he was might help you in some way?”

“It would help me understand how to help Sarah.” He shrugged. “I really just wish to know more about her. She’s an enigma.”

“Fine. We can go into town tomorrow and see if anyone has heard of Mr. Cooper and his beautiful young bride from England.” Sebastian sat silently, blowing smoke rings into the air. “I think Mrs. Cooper is more important to you than a

simple seduction. You wouldn't care so much about helping her. You like her and, I think, admire her.”

Christian was silent for a moment. He did admire her. Many women in her situation would not be as strong or as courageous as Sarah. She had not let her husband's treatment of her, the position he'd left her in financially, and the fact she was so far from home defeat her or make her bitter. She still had empathy for others—take him, for instance, and then there was Lily. Sarah treated his ward as if she were her own child.

Christian eyed his friend warily. “A man in my scarred condition gets few opportunities where women are concerned. I admit it—the idea that a woman doesn't find me repulsive is a powerful aphrodisiac.”

Sebastian gave a knowing smile. “It's more than that. I recognize the look in your eyes when you gaze upon her. I've seen it in other lovestruck fools. Such a look is possessive, tender, admiring. Your potential offspring would be stunning, by the way. Perhaps you should think less of seduction and more of making her your wife. If anyone understands how precarious life can be, it's you.”

“What, talk of marriage from the lips of a Libertine Scholar?”

Sebastian chuckled and held up his hands. “Not for me. Definitely, it's not for me—yet! I've too many women to get to know intimately before I settle down with a plain mouse of a wife. No grand love match for me, far too volatile. But you? I suspect love is very appealing to a man like you. Perhaps you're ready.”

Christian sat up straight in his chair and stared at his friend as if he were the smartest man he'd ever met. Was he ready? On the battlefield he'd pledged that when the war was won, he would marry and beget his heir. Then his injuries at Waterloo had almost taken his life. As he lay writhing in pain, he'd reflected on what a waste his death would be. No lover or wife would mourn his passing. He had no children to carry on the Markham name. He'd been saddened and disgusted with himself for neglecting his duty to ensure an heir. He'd fought



to ensure a better England, and it was his duty to protect his tenants, who relied on the Earl of Markham for their livelihoods and well-being. How would his death safeguard them?

As he lay recovering, he'd become even more determined to marry. It was not until he'd put a foot back into society that he'd understood the monumental task he faced in finding a woman who would tolerate his injuries. He had faced the humiliation of rejection. No one except the desperate wanted him. His title and money attracted those who, it would be kind to say, were on the shelf, or whose families were in financial strife. No one wanted to marry him just for him.

But Sarah hadn't once looked at him with revulsion. He felt that, somehow, she saw him, who he really was.

Christian admitted, "Your idea has merit. Prior to the war, it would not have been difficult to find a woman prepared to marry a Markham." Women had flocked to him like bees to honey. The tales of his father's brutality and the rumors surrounding his mother's death were disregarded, and women focused only on his looks, title, and wealth. "But now the pool of potential wives has diminished somewhat because of my hideous burns. Oh, don't misunderstand me—the title and money they like well enough. Just not the look of the man that comes with them."

Sebastian blew another smoke ring. "If Sarah is the Duke's by-blow, get him to recognize her. Society might then overlook her background."

He sat contemplating Sebastian's suggestion, letting the whiskey relax him. He'd almost died at Waterloo and he had no heir. It wasn't as if he had all the time in the world to find a suitable wife. Besides, he wanted a wife who would willingly share his bed, not one who would see it just as a wifely duty.

When Sarah had been in his room, he'd seen unbridled desire in her eyes—without monetary incentive. Plus there was no question that she was beautiful and intelligent, as well. And, if his hunch was correct, she came from good breeding stock.

He pondered the fact she'd been married for almost two years with no children. Then his mouth smiled at the memory. She'd told him she'd ensured there were none. Yes, she was clever and courageous.

She was a survivor, like him.

Whom better to form a partnership with? They were both too battered by life to believe in true love. But mutual respect, desire, and friendship would ensure a less lonely existence for them both.

But would she risk marriage a second time?

If he could reach out to Sarah and prove to her that he'd treat her well, like an equal, he would then show her how they could have a good life together. Maybe he would succeed in wooing her.

His stomach cramped with the realization that he'd have to do more than just seduce her. If he wanted her to take the risk of matrimony again, he'd have to win her trust. She'd already adamantly indicated she'd not marry a second time.

Building trust would take time. Well, he had time—the time it took to voyage home. Trust was hard to earn, but very quickly broken. He would have to make a plan and execute it carefully. His strategy had to be sound and his delivery flawless. If he let her know he was looking at her as a potential wife, she'd no doubt flee. Her views on matrimony were perfectly clear. She would not be owned again.

Christian needed her to think he only wanted her as a lover—a paramour and nothing more. If he could introduce her to the delights and pleasures of the bedroom, if he could teach her that life could be filled with joy again, then surely he'd win her trust. He wasn't expecting her to love him, but he hoped she'd be willing to make a life with him.

He rose and flashed Sebastian a rakish smile of old. "I have a plan, and there is no point in waiting a moment longer. If you'll excuse me, I've a painful shoulder that needs someone to attend to it."

Sebastian's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "Shoulder? Is that what they are calling it now?"

Christian left the room with a chuckle resounding deep in his chest. He felt wonderful.



It was absurd how much she had missed Christian's company this evening. She'd only known him a few days, but already her lonely soul cried out for the man's intelligent conversation and soothing presence.

A hot flame kindled her overheated senses. Conversation wasn't the only thing she had found appealing about Christian.

She fanned her face with the book she was attempting to read. It wasn't solely the humidity of the breezeless night making her feel so lightheaded. She leaned against the window seat, letting what little air there was wash over her and looking out over the lit garden, trying to spot the sea in the moonlit night. She could hear the lapping of the waves against the shore.

It was ridiculous. How could he have had such an effect on her this quickly?

She'd only known him a few days. But she'd worshiped him for most of her adult life. Not only was he the hero of her dreams, but he'd returned from the war a hero in real life. A hero all maidens dreamed of—gallant, brave, and distinguished.

Her stomach fluttered, as if a flurry of butterflies had taken up residence there, when she remembered the way her heart had leaped at his every smile. Her knees always went weak when she saw his startlingly warm green eyes. Eyes that were filled with such sadness and compassion.

Every time she looked deep into their depths she got the strangest feeling that if she gave in to his seductive charms, he could offer her far more than pleasure. He could perhaps give her back her pride, her dignity, and her hope for the future.

She threw the book on the floor in disgust. What future? All she had to look forward to was a life of living in fear. Fear that someone would recognize her, or find out who she was and, worse, what she'd done. Find out that she was a murderess ...

She buried her face in her hands as violent shivers racked her frame. She was sick of having to be careful. The idea that she had to hide for the rest of her life was soul-destroying. Gone were her dreams of family, children—love.

Who could love her now?

Who could love such a coward? She should have stood up to her husband the first time he'd hit her. She should have swallowed her pride and fled his home and refused to go back, no matter the scandal that would have ensued.

She rose and paced the room. She was fooling herself. Her father would have seen to it that she was returned to her husband. The Duke would have told her to honor the agreement he'd made with Peter and to honor her marriage vows. He would have sent his only daughter straight back to a monster, all to save his pride. For if she had refused, Peter would have made sure everyone knew the Duke of Hastings had sold his daughter like a lowly slave.

On that dreadful night her world had changed forever. The night she'd killed Peter, he'd gone too far. He'd always enjoyed perversion, but he'd never let anyone else touch her. That night had been different, and she sensed he was tiring of her. She knew Peter could make her disappear, and no questions would be asked. He'd threatened her once before. Threatened to snap her neck if she didn't obey him, brutally teasing her with how he'd make it look as if she'd been thrown from her horse.

She pushed the palms of her hands deep into her eyes, trying to blank out the horrors she'd lived through. The things he'd done to her, made her do to him ... the thought of forced intimacies with a man—any man ... What man would want her now? She was dirty, tainted by Peter's touch and debauchery.

She was damaged, and she doubted she'd ever feel clean again, not even with Christian.

Would he understand she'd had little choice but to obey, or would he too look at her with revulsion?

Her breathing calmed and she thought about Christian's touch the other night. He'd been gentle. He'd made her feel special. Most important, he'd not forced her, tricked her, or degraded her. She couldn't imagine him letting anyone under his care get hurt.

Then, for the millionth time, she berated herself for being a coward and choosing to eat early with Lily, leaving the men to their privacy. She wanted to learn more about her wounded hero.

But, as usual, she was taking the cowardly way out. When would she ever get back her courage? As a debutante, she'd been fearless, flirting with and teasing her band of merry followers. Now she hid from everyone. No more flirting for her. Lord Coldhurst had wanted to flirt with her, she had noted.

Sarah was worried about the way Lord Coldhurst had studied her. She wasn't worried that he might try to seduce her. He would try, of that she was sure, for his reputation had preceded him. But he'd not succeed.

Three years ago she had been at a ball that Lord Coldhurst had also attended, and she had been introduced to him. Luckily, he was in hot pursuit of a widow, the stunningly beautiful Lady Sheridan. He'd had no interest in a young debutante looking for a husband. However, she did not wish to tempt fate. The less time spent in the handsome marquis's company, the better.

He might recognize her. Her nervousness had flared again and the sickness in her stomach had returned as soon as she set foot on the island. She was happy enough to be tucked away at Roaring Pavilions, but what excuse would she give if Christian insisted on them going into town?

She stopped pacing and stretched her arms over her head. It had been a tiring day. She still felt a bit lightheaded from all

the sun. She moved around her spacious bedchamber and blew out the candles, leaving the curtains undrawn, so that the moonlight flooded in. She stripped off her clothes and slipped into a thin cotton shift that only came to her knees. It was too hot for anything else. She left the windows open and, still feeling uncomfortably warm, lay on top of the covers.

She'd only just closed her eyes when she heard a soft rap on her door. It was probably Margarita. The housekeeper had promised to bring her a cool drink to help her sleep.

When she opened the door she felt the heat rise to furnace level when she saw who stood there. She took a few steps back in shock.

"I've come for my treatment. You promised you'd see to my shoulder every night. I've been downstairs waiting for you," Christian said lightly as he sauntered into the room, closing the door firmly behind him without seeming to care that she was semi-naked.

Sarah pulled her scattered thoughts together and rushed toward the foot of the bed to don her robe, but found Christian had beaten her to it. He stood holding it open for her.

"I prefer you as you are now attired—no, actually, it would be even more pleasant if you were naked—but I bow to your sensibilities." He hesitated. "At least, until we get to know each other more intimately."

Sarah hurriedly shoved her arms in the sleeves of her robe and wrapped and belted it around her. Tonight Christian was more potent and virile than ever. He had already divested himself of his cravat and waistcoat. He stood before her with his shirt open at the neck. She could see a glimpse of his tantalizingly muscled chest. Her body tensed under his probing gaze.

She looked at the twinkle in his eye and his relaxed posture. There was something different about Christian tonight. His smile was reminiscent of the rake she'd spied in the ballroom all those years ago. That was before her disastrous marriage, and before his horrific injuries.

He sat down on the edge of her bed and began removing his shirt. She watched, her vocal cords muted by the glorious display of sun-kissed muscle being slowly revealed before her. She couldn't wait to touch, explore, and stroke him.

She went to her dresser and gathered the liniment and a cloth. As she moved toward him he took in the length of her ... her breasts, her hips, and her legs as they flashed at him from within her robe. All the nerves in her body ignited under his sensuous gaze.

“Why did you not come and join us this evening?” he asked.

“I thought you and Lord Coldhurst might like some time on your own.”

As she reached his side, he ran a finger down her bare arm. “I would rather have spent the evening with you.”

Sarah swallowed at the pleasure his husky words provoked deep inside her. He was in a very playful mood, and although she should be concerned, she couldn't bring herself to chastise him.

Instead she dug some liniment out from the tin and, trying to keep her hands from shaking, began applying it to his shoulder. “Has it been hurting more than usual today?” she asked, pleased her voice sounded so normal.

“No.” His breath was like butterfly wings hovering over her skin. It was awkward with him sitting there on her bed. She had to lean over him to get to his shoulder.

He parted his legs and pulled her gently between them. “It's easier to reach me from here,” he said, his hushed voice somehow more intimate than the position she found herself in.

She tried to back away, aware that her breasts were practically brushing his face with each stroke she gave his shoulder. But then his arms came around from behind her to intimately cup her bottom, gently holding her in place.

“I don't need to be this close,” she said primly. His nearness made Sarah's knees shake, but not from fear.

He smiled at that. “Need, no. Want, yes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She put her hands on his bare shoulders to push herself out of his hold, but one look into his face and she stilled. He reached to touch her lower lip with the pad of his thumb.

Sarah drew in a sharp breath, but she could not get her arms to work. She couldn’t push herself away. It was the gentleness that undid her. If he’d tried to hold her by force, she would have fought him like a madwoman.

His hand left her bottom and moved up to her waist. He waited, his eyes—warm, inviting, and mesmerizing—holding her gaze. When she did not object, the hand slid to the tie of her robe and gently pulled it. The robe fell open, and he caught his breath as he saw her breasts straining against the thin cotton of her shift.

Sarah felt her nipples pucker under his heated gaze.

“So beautiful ...” He bent his head and nuzzled one breast through the material. She could feel his moist mouth gently exploring. He pulled back and blew on the wet material, making her nipples harden further.

She couldn’t stop looking into his eyes. He seemed to be willing her toward more, stroking her side and piquing her curiosity as he did so.

Dear God, he was delicious, with his dark-lashed emerald eyes hot with desire, his sensual mouth wet and lush; she no longer noticed the burns.

A shudder running through her made her grip his shoulders for support. His nearness and the heat radiating off his bared torso made her dizzy. She could feel the warmth of his body, his leashed power. He could so easily overpower her, but he didn’t. He was waiting, waiting for her to make the decision as to how far this would go.

What would it feel like to have him kiss her, touch her, make love to her? Could he help evaporate for good her nightmarish memories of abuse at the hands of her husband?



“We can go slowly, as slowly as you desire. I won’t even try to make love to you fully this night.” He kissed the bare skin above the swell of her rapidly rising and falling breasts. “Simply let me share with you a small measure of mutual passion. For a woman of such intelligence, don’t you wish to know how it could truly be between a man and woman? How it should be?”

She bit her lip, teetering on the edge of a monumental chasm. To say yes would alter her plans, she knew. She had the safety of her role as Lily’s governess. The reason the job was perfect was because of his injuries. He’d categorically stated he didn’t invite company. What if becoming his lover jeopardized her job? It would be dangerous to have to apply for other positions in England. The chance of her being recognized would grow if she had to find a position elsewhere.

Then there were her feelings. Already she felt far too much for Christian. What if she lost her heart to him? Once he grew tired of her, once he married—he would have to marry due to his title—how could she watch him be with a wife?

But, on the other hand, must she say no to him? She might never get the chance again to feel a lover’s gentle touch and not be afraid, to face her fears and regain her courage. For once in her life, she should do and have something just for herself—to think only of herself.

She knew many men and women had affairs that had nothing to do with the heart. Physical pleasure did not have to involve love. Could she separate the two? She’d been forced into the bed of a man she did not love and found no pleasure, only pain. But then Peter had never been concerned with her pleasure, only his own.

She looked deep into Christian’s eyes and saw only gentleness and understanding. Christian would be different. She knew going to bed with the Earl of Markham would likely be an experience she’d never want to forget.

But that was exactly what concerned her the most. At some point the affair would end and she’d have to forget.

An idea formed in her head. What if she controlled the end of the affair? She could stop their liaison before she fell in love with him.

A rush of confidence surged in her.

She'd do this for her.

And she'd do it for Christian too. Her inner voice told her he needed this as much as she did. They both needed to heal.

Sarah couldn't get the words to form, so she merely bent down and pressed her lips to his. He tensed beneath her touch and she instantly pulled back, a puzzled expression on her face.

He gently cupped her cheek. "You merely surprised me. I was hoping that you'd trust me enough, but I know the courage it takes on your part to allow me this privilege. Thank you."

"I know you won't hurt me. But promise me you'll go slowly." She felt her bottom lip tremble. "I don't know how brave I can be all at once."

Christian stood, his body rubbing hers, sending shocks of warmth over her skin. "You're beautiful," he whispered. "I won't take it too far tonight. Just say the word and I'll stop. I'd never force you to do anything you don't feel comfortable doing. You know that, don't you?"

She rested her head on his chest and listened to his heart pounding steady and true under her ear. "I trust you," she whispered.

She felt his body shudder in response. She felt him harden against her stomach, and for an instant fear returned and she wondered if she was doing the right thing.

He ran a hand over her back. "I can't help my reaction to the feel of your body. But I promise you, tonight is only about your pleasure."

To show her acquiescence, Sarah pulled back and shrugged the robe off her shoulders, letting it slide to the floor. She felt naked even though she still wore her shift.

Her arms rose and she wrapped her hands around his neck. He groaned and drew her close, until her sensitive breasts flattened against his solid chest. “I want you to introduce me to pleasure.” Her husky entreaty seemed to make him harden further. She heard him draw a sharp breath.

“I can’t imagine a task I’d enjoy more.”

When she raised her face to his, his breath fanned warmth against her mouth.

“I *choose* you to be my lover, Christian, nothing more. I won’t become your mistress. This ends when we reach England. I shall take up my role as Lily’s governess and nothing must taint that. Any gossip and I leave.”

At this moment he’d promise her almost anything. Her enticing offer to become his lover was music to his ears. He would do nothing to destroy the honor she was bestowing on him.

She’d known passion with no other man. He’d make damn sure she became addicted to his kisses, to his touch, and then he would set out to win her. She would become his wife.

He hoped that once she grew in confidence, once she healed, she’d not look at the battle-scarred shell he was and think differently of him. What if she decided to look for a man who was more attractive? Deep down inside he constantly struggled with feelings of inadequacy.

No woman had ever freely given her body to him since he’d been burned. Was Sarah doing so because she thought she was damaged too? What would happen when she realized she wasn’t? Her scars were internal, and once mended she’d still be a beautiful, intoxicating, sensually experienced woman. Men would flock to her. He inwardly grimaced. As if they didn’t do that now; Sebastian was enticed with just one look.

Christian, however, would be forever burned and forever judged by his scars, except with Sarah. With Sarah in his arms, he’d completely forgotten about his burns.

She was watching him with fire blazing in her beautiful blue eyes. “I feel selfish. What about your pleasure?”

He lowered his mouth and gave her a chaste kiss. “I’ll anticipate how good it will be when you finally allow me inside your body, sweetheart.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and his heart skipped a beat in response. He took her mouth once more in a gentle kiss. Her arms slipped to his shoulders and she ran her hands down his back. Still kissing her, Christian lifted Sarah in his arms and turned to lay her gently upon the bed. As she lay there, he took his time to remove the rest of his clothes. She watched him hungrily.

“You’re beautiful too.”

“Thank you.” He took her hand and brought it to his lips. He stood next to the bed and stared down at her. A tiny flutter of fear sliced at his confidence.

He cleared his throat. “I’d like nothing more than to light the lamp and see you clearly. However, you might like less light. Should I draw the curtains?”

She vigorously shook her head. “I want to see that it’s you, know that it’s you.” She gave him a wicked smile and reached for him. “Besides, I’ve seen your burns, and I still think your body is magnificent.”

“Truly? They don’t repulse you?”

Her heart welled at the vulnerability she saw in his eyes. When she was young, Christian Trent, the Earl of Markham, had never doubted that any woman would find him maddeningly attractive. It must have been devastating; a crushing blow to his pride, to have his body marked so.

She knew.

She clambered off the bed and, with more bravery than she felt, slipped the straps of her shift off her shoulders and let it slide down her body to fall at her feet. She stood naked before him. Then with a big gulp she turned, so that her back was presented to him, and lifted her hair.

She was scarred too.

Angry curses exploded from Christian's mouth, yet his fingers, as they traced the whip marks that crisscrossed her lower back, were gentle, as if trying to erase all her pain.

"He did this to you?" His voice was choked with a mixture of horror, seething anger, and pity.

She nodded, her mouth gone dry. "Does it make me less attractive in *your* eyes?" She held her head high, her shoulders tightening, waiting for his answer.

His answer was a press of soft lips on her bare back. "No. To me you're even more beautiful."

Only then did she turn. Christian took her hand in his and drew her onto the bed. They lay down next to each other, their breaths short and sharp.

The simple contact of skin against skin had a stunning effect on her. Their erotic intimacy made Sarah whimper and want to press her full length against him.

Christian took her mouth and kissed her thoroughly, slanting his mouth over hers, thrusting his tongue in deep to meet hers, while leaving her in no doubt that he wanted her, scars and all. For the first time in her life, she felt desire sweep through her. The aching need for something she could not recognize rose to consume her. She broke away from the kiss and said in wonder, "Oh, Christian, I never knew it could be like this."

He knelt above her and whispered, "There is so much more to pleasure. I'll teach you everything."

Sarah lifted herself up off the bed and kissed his lips in answer.

Christian gently pushed her back down. Resting on his arms above her, he took a few moments to drink in her beauty. She shivered under his gaze. Her honest and open vulnerability kindled a tender ache in his chest, while the rest of his body thrummed with desire.

He would not disappoint her.

Christian wanted her fully and utterly aroused. He kissed the smooth milky skin of her throat and ran his tongue along the delicate arch of her collarbone until his mouth found her sweet, ripe breasts. He teased her nipple, lapping as would a cat with cream, until she arched her back, keening. When his lips finally closed over her nipple, tugging and suckling it fully in his mouth, she gave a cry of surrender.

He moved further down the bed, kissing her stomach, his fingers trailing over her soft skin until he was positioned between her thighs.

He felt tension invade her limbs.

He crooned softly, “Relax, Sarah. I promise I won’t hurt you.” He looked up from between her thighs and saw a stab of fear in her eyes. “You’ll enjoy what I do next. But if you don’t, tell me and I’ll stop.” He reached and took her hand.

She curled her small fingers around his and, not even hesitating, simply nodded.

Sarah’s tension mounted when he didn’t immediately touch her. She could feel him sitting between her opened thighs, and she knew what he was looking at.

He was looking intimately at her. Peter liked to look in the same way as well. She swallowed back the bitter memories. He was not Peter.

“Perfect. You’re so very lovely.”

But her nerves came screaming back to life when his fingers finally stroked a path up her inner thigh. At first it was a light, teasing touch, sending wicked heat racing across her skin. But soon both his hands trailed up and down her splayed thighs, making her muscles clench. He kept touching her lightly until she felt her body respond further to his petting. Her limbs weakened and she felt herself sink further into the mattress.

“I love the way your body responds to mine.” The masculine sensuality of his voice diminished her embarrassment.

With one final stroke, his fingers reached the tangled nest of fair curls between her thighs, and she lifted her head in apprehension.

He admonished her. “Close your eyes, sweetheart,” he commanded. “Just relax and feel and accept the pleasure in my touch.”

One hand knowingly spread her thighs wider, while he ran one fingertip through the wet heat of her swollen inner lips, pressing against her cleft. Sarah gasped into the silent room but continued to allow his playful touch to roam over her feminine softness. Already her body recognized her need better than she herself did.

She could feel his fingers and hear the sound as he glided over flesh already swollen and slick with moisture. Her hips desperately wanted to move as he stroked, firmer and faster. Her body became tight once more, but not from nervous tension.

“Are you ready for more? Do you want more?” His voice was husky and deep.

“Yes. Oh yes.”

She felt him part her feminine folds, and then a finger probed the entrance to her body. He bent and kissed her thigh, sending delicious shivers up her spine. “You’re so wet for me,” he whispered against her skin.

Then she could feel him inside her. His finger gently entering her wet heat made her breath flee her chest altogether. His finger was set to tease, first withdrawing a fraction before returning, and then he seemed to press even deeper. At his gentle but firm ministrations, the rush of sensations sent spasms shivering over her body, and a low moan escaped from her lips.

At her encouragement, one finger became two. “Can you feel your body’s response to me? You like it, don’t you? I knew you would,” Christian stated with satisfaction. “Relax, enjoy, and let it happen.”

Let what happen—an orgasm? She'd never had one in her life. The rollicking sensations he was igniting in her blood thrilled her.

His thumb found the small nub of her sex and he rolled it back and forth, using the moisture from her arousal to glide purposefully over the intimate heart of her.

Her body was swamped with feelings. Sarah arched and gave a harsh cry.

Christian murmured in approval. "Touch yourself. Your breasts are tingling, your nipples are hard. Feel them. Take pleasure in your body's arousal."

She refused to feel scandalized by his words. She gave herself over to him and his sensual skills. She tentatively reached up and ran her fingers lightly over her breasts. The peaks throbbed, her nipples were taut, but it was the ache low in her body that gave her an exquisite agony.

Her breaths were coming in little panting gasps and Christian rose on one arm over her and took her nipple in his hot, wet mouth. Her hips lifted completely off the bed, so high she felt his rampant erection.

She got an urgent need to feel him too. She reached between them and wrapped her fingers tentatively around his rigid length. He was like velvet granite in her hands, smooth yet scalding hot. She moved her hand further down and cupped him. His sacs were taut and hard, fit to burst. She molded and lightly squeezed them, as he'd done to her breasts. Then she let her fingers play, running up the length of his shaft to tease the slick slit at the top. He groaned against her breast.

Lifting his head, he looked deep into her eyes. "Grip me tighter. Move your hand on me in time to my fingers within your body."

At her first glide up and down his hardened length, he took her mouth in a drugging kiss. His tongue slid deep into her mouth, mimicking the urgent thrusts he was making with his fingers. She tightened her hold on him and moved her hand in a rapidly increasing rhythm.



Soon he was moving his hips in time to her sliding hands, and she matched him, moving her hips just as frantically. She could feel something happening within her body, primal and addictive, calling out to every fiber of her being.

Her whole body was a mass of shudders. Her mouth broke away from his, desperate for air. She felt hot, weak, and yet all powerful at the same time. “Oh, God ... !”

“Don’t fight it, let it come,” Christian encouraged her, his voice hoarse and almost desperate against her mouth.

She could feel his fingers probing more insistently, felt his arousal seeping onto the hand with which she pleased him, and when his thumb once more caressed her slick, hardened nub, flames fanned over her body. She was straining for something, “Please ... Christian ... ,” she heard herself scream.

Finally something scorching and frenzied broke over her, and she shook and shuddered as hot bursts of indescribable pleasure jerked her body taut. A firestorm of sensations saw her flying above herself, her back arched, her body pushing against Christian’s hand, caught in the bursting inferno of shattering release.

Through a vibrant haze of color, she heard Christian give a deep, gravelly groan before his mouth once again took hers in a searing kiss. Then his hips flexed and his hot seed jerked from his body onto her still convulsing stomach.

He collapsed beside her, his ragged breaths matching her own.

Her mind was blank. She couldn’t process the feelings rioting within her chest. Never had she imagined how exquisite intimacy with a man could be. Pippa had tried to tell her, to describe the exhilarating joy and sense of satiation she would feel with the right man.

She turned her head to look at Christian. He was watching her with a look of satisfied triumph. He reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Are you all right?”

She blinked and tried to hold back the welling tears. She had never felt so good. She could barely get out the words. “It was lovely. I really wasn’t sure I’d enjoy it, but ...”

He raised her hand and placed a loving kiss on her palm. Then he rose and, grabbing a cloth, walked to her basin and wetted it before returning and gently cleaning his seed off her body. Then he lay next to her, pulling her tight into his arms, spooning her in front of him and stroking his very talented fingers over her curves.

“Was it what you had imagined?”

She shook her head. “No. It was more. It was as if my body wanted to escape my skin. I was flying... .”

He smiled tenderly. “Does that mean you’re not opposed to more? Lovemaking can be even hotter, even more explosive.”

Her mouth curved in a rueful smile. “I don’t see how, but I trust you to introduce me to more.”

At her words, Christian groaned and nipped her shoulder. “I’d like nothing better than to stay here all night and show you how much better passion can get, but I don’t want to overwhelm you on the first night.” He pulled away and pressed a kiss to her back. “It’s not every day a woman experiences her first orgasm.”

Sarah felt fractured, exposed, but still safe. In a small voice she asked, “How did you know?”

He rolled back against her and held her tight. “I saw it in the wonder and surprise and delight written on your face. You don’t hide your emotions. For a man making love to a woman, that sight is irresistible. A woman can easily tell when a man is aroused, but women have been known to fake their excitement.” He rose to peer over her shoulder at her face. “Never hide your passion from me. It arouses me completely.”

She felt her face flood with heat. “When you touch me, I don’t think I could hide anything from you.” That thought doused her euphoria with ice. She had terrible secrets to hide. If he knew what she’d done—no, had been forced to do—would he still look at her with that soft light in his eyes?

He noted her mental withdrawal and misunderstood. “Don’t let your imagination frighten you. I’ll not hurt you even when I’m finally inside you.”

But he was right. The thought of him impaling her with his erection was scary. He was much larger than her husband. Her husband had hurt her.

“It won’t hurt, I promise,” he whispered in her ear as if he understood her fear. “If you are prepared properly, I will fit you easily. You felt how slick and wet I made you. There will be no pain.”

She turned to face him on the bed. She ran her hand over his burns. “Thank you.” She watched his irises darken, and her attention shifted to Christian’s loins. The thick, swollen length of his erection rose quickly again under her gaze, almost to his abdomen.

“See how your body affects me. It doesn’t mean I’m going to pounce on you. You’re not ready. But soon you’ll be begging me to pleasure you all night.” With that he rose and pulled up his trousers.

“Thank you for having the patience to help me. Not many men would take the time.” She gulped. “Most would take by force.”

His hand halted on the buttons of his trousers. “If your husband wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him as painfully as I could. No woman should ever be taken by force.”

She didn’t have any answer for his fervent declaration. For most of her life she’d been forced to do what others wanted. The freedom she was finding in her new position as a widow was ironic, given that she was a fugitive.

Once he’d finished dressing, he bent and kissed her. When she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he groaned, and the kiss deepened until he pulled back and in a shaky voice said, “You’re testing me to my limits, madam.” He stroked his hand over her hair and whispered, “There will be more of this tomorrow night. The anticipation of what I intend to do to you will only add to your pleasure.”

“I’m already heady with expectation. Tomorrow evening seems a long way away.”

He laughed. It was a glorious sound. She wished he’d laugh more.

“Then I shall have to think of something to occupy you until then. Perhaps you would care for a trip into Kingston?”

She refused to let her horror crowd her face. “Perhaps ... although the thought of going into town in this heat, when we have at hand a white sandy beach and clear blue water, is not appealing. I’m sure Lily will agree.” The last thing Sarah wanted to do was to go exploring. What if someone recognized her?

Christian frowned. “Quite right. Lily would hate it.” He sighed and moved to the door. “Sebastian and I have business in town, so perhaps I’ll simply await your company at dinner.”

“I shall look forward to it,” she cooed, her sultry voice unrecognizable to her ears. While married, she’d done all she could not to arouse her husband’s passions. With Christian, she couldn’t help herself. She wanted him inflamed.

He opened the door and had a quick look up and down the corridor. Just before he slipped out, he promised, “I’ll wager not as much as I. Goodnight, darling. Pleasant dreams.”

Sarah sagged flat on the bed and fell into her old habit of biting her lip when worried. All thoughts of pleasure had been vanquished. How could she get Christian to leave this island as soon as possible? She had managed to put off the inevitable for at least another day, but wanting to swim wasn’t going to work every time he asked her to go into Kingston.

Sleep evaded her as she lay pondering just how she would stay hidden while in Jamaica. If she were brave enough, there was one option open to her—to keep Christian otherwise occupied.

No. She wasn’t quite ready for that.

Perhaps she could offer to paint Christian’s portrait. What with Lily’s lessons, and painting, she wouldn’t have time to leave Roaring Pavilions.

## *Chapter Ten*

**I**t was late in the afternoon. Sarah had been alone on the beach for the last half hour. Lily had gone to have a nap; she'd been exhausted by the sun and sea. Sarah had teased Lily, saying that if she swam any more she'd turn into a mermaid.

Sarah cherished this time to herself. Her life had been a nightmare for so long that she couldn't really absorb the dream it had now become. She smacked her palms against the fine sand. She had to rid herself of this smug satisfaction. She was still a fugitive, and as such, she would never escape the feeling of forever having to look over her shoulder and hide her true self.

Sarah hugged her knees to her chest and took in the view. If heaven existed, then Sarah thought this place must be a close second. She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. After her sleepless night, she'd taken the opportunity to doze, letting the heat from the sand comfort her.

But now she was far too hot, even under the shade of the palm tree. Clambering to her feet, she looked around. She was on her own. She peeled off her robe until she stood in only her shift. Gathering her courage, she ran squealing like a young girl into the sea. The light linen shift didn't drag her down as she swam out further. She felt alive and free, diving under the waves and marveling at the underwater world visible in the clear water. She looked back at the shoreline and decided to swim back to shore. She didn't wish to swim out too far, or she'd be exhausted. Sarah wanted her senses on full alert for this evening. Already the anticipation of her next foray into the

world of sensual delights with Christian had her stomach churning. She was unsure if it was in anticipation or trepidation.

Lost in the images of what would occur in her bedchamber tonight, she was halfway up the beach when an ice-cold prickly sensation made her stop and lift her head. She looked up to find Sebastian standing next to her belongings, where she'd left them lying under the tree.

Her head turned to sweep her surroundings. They were alone.

She couldn't keep the fear from crawling over her skin. Panic kept her rooted to the spot. Her shift clung to her body and she knew without even looking down that it was completely transparent. Sebastian's gaze looked her over thoroughly, his eyes roaming like fingers over her skin.

She watched with wary eyes as Sebastian bent down and picked up her robe.

Sarah looked wildly around—where could she run to? Would anyone hear her if she screamed? Her voice caught in her throat, and she couldn't make a sound.

He approached her from across the sand. His powerful frame of rippling muscle moved forward, declaring that this was his beach and he'd do what he liked on it. He did not even have the decency to keep his eyes on her face. His eyes swept over her form, lingering on her breasts and the junction between her thighs.

Sarah tried to shield her body with arms and hands. His response was a cold, tight smile.

She took small steps backward as he prowled nearer. She stopped moving when she felt the water lapping at her feet. There was nowhere to go.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She'd sworn never to cower before a man ever again.

He came to a halt in front of her, leaving only a gap between them small enough for a coin to drop through. He handed her the robe. "Cover yourself." He turned away from

her and began walking back toward her spot under the trees. He called over his shoulder, “You and I are going to have a little chat. Only then will I decide what I shall tell Christian.”

Her stomach plummeted to her feet. She realized without a doubt that Sebastian knew the truth. He had remembered who she was.

She walked back up the beach as if walking up the steps of the gallows. She was stupid to have thought she’d ever escape her punishment. This was it—if he knew about her husband’s death, he’d see her arrested.

He indicated for her to sit on the blanket. He remained standing, leaning against the tree.

“Why don’t you start by telling me how you managed to escape the clutches of an animal such as Peter Dennett?”

She looked up in surprise. “Most people thought my husband was a fine gentleman.”

Sebastian scoffed. “His brother may be a marquis, but he’s a pig of a man, nothing less than a bully and a sadistic reprobate.” Then his expression shifted. “Hold on. What did you say? I beg your pardon—*was*?” He straightened. “Are you telling me Peter Dennett’s dead? No one on the island has heard this news.”

“Then I’d like it to stay that way.”

“Why?”

She buried her head in her hands and felt the nausea well up her throat. “Because I—I killed him,” she sobbed. “I swear to you it was in self-defense.”

His face paled under its tan. Without hesitation, he replied, “I’ve no doubt.” He dropped down to his knees in the sand before her and gently pulled her hands away from her face. “Tell me.” He wiped away a tear. “Tell me what happened. I know what Peter liked to do to women. I witnessed one particular episode. His cruelty saw him banned from every high-class brothel from London to the Americas.” He turned her round slowly until he could reach her back. He pulled her robe and shift partway off her shoulders, as if already knowing

what he'd find. He cursed under his breath. "Does Christian know?"

She pulled her robe back up and swiveled to face him. "He knows Mr. Cooper mistreated me. Nothing more! You haven't even asked me why I killed him."

Sebastian waved a hand in dismissal. "I know why. Peter was evil." He eyed her knowingly. "I'm sure a whipping was not the worst he did to you, was it?"

She could only shake her head.

"What about your father, Lady Serena? Why didn't you go to the Duke for help? Christian would take you to him. No one would fault you for killing in self-defense. Not when the Duke of Hastings is your father. He surely would not allow any man to treat his daughter this way."

She looked up with a wry grimace. "He knew what Peter was like. He just didn't care. Peter offered to cover his debts in exchange for the honor of marrying his daughter. My father had huge gambling debts, and Peter ..." Her voice sounded small. "Peter was clever. He only paid my father enough to keep his head above water. I was nothing more than a commodity to my father. Shortly after our marriage, when I wrote him a letter complaining of Peter's treatment, he told me I had made a vow before God and that I should honor and obey it." Her body shook uncontrollably. "God! I'm sure the games Peter forced me to play would have had God wanting me to escape his clutches, not to become a slave for Peter's depraved amusements."

Sebastian ran a hand through his hair. "Christ." He stood once more and began to pace. "I certainly understand why you went to Christian for help. He's the most honorable man I know. He has a reputation for protecting the underdog, the underprivileged, and those who are bullied. He must have welcomed you with open arms." He gave her a wicked smile that knocked her breath from her lips. "For several reasons."

Rather primly she stated, "I didn't seek him out for help. He doesn't know who I am. He hired me to be Lily's governess. With the help of Zachary, one of Peter's slaves, I



escaped north to Canada. I needed employment, and Lord Markham advertised for a governess who wished to live quietly in Dorset. I simply thought it would be a great place to hide.”

“So you’re not using Christian to fight your battles.”

Her hand flew to her chest. “No! I don’t want him involved. If they find me and think he’s been aiding me ...”

“You haven’t told him any of this? He really thinks you’re Mrs. Sarah Cooper?” He stopped pacing and looked at her for several moments. “I believe that you acted in self-defense. Besides, you’re good for Christian. Not since Waterloo have I seen him this happy. Between ourselves, since his injury at Waterloo, I have been scared he was losing the will to live.”

Without thinking, she said, “We’re good for each other. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to ...” She looked away, blushing, and swallowed hard.

“You can trust Christian. Don’t listen to what anyone else might say. He’d never hurt a woman. He’d never, ever hurt you.”

He took her hand and pulled her to her feet. He placed a sisterly kiss on her forehead. “Go up to the house. I’ll keep your secret. However, I feel it best that we convince Christian to set sail for England as soon as possible.”

She nodded in agreement. “But how? What are you going to do?”

Sebastian hesitated for a second. “Well, I’m not going to tell Christian. You will.” As she started to protest, he held up his hand. “When the time is right. You’ll know when that is. But you need to leave the island before anyone recognizes you. When I was in town today, seeking information, no one had heard of a Mr. Cooper with a beautiful bride, but some mentioned that the lady I described was similar to Lady Serena Castleton, Mr. Peter Dennett’s wife.”

She shrugged and looked down. “I kind of implied to Christian that Serena had died. If he hears differently ...”

“It won’t take long before Christian hears and guesses who you are.” If Sebastian hadn’t been holding her arm, Sarah would have hit the sand when her legs buckled at what he had just said. “And believe me, Christian will demand to help you. Did he tell you how his mother died?”

She shook her head. “He told me she died when he was six.”

“She died at the hands of his father. Christian has spent his life fighting those who use their power to corrupt, bully, or abuse. He will stand by your side on this. It will become personal to him. He couldn’t save his mother, but he’ll want to ensure he can save you.”

She wanted to sink onto the sand and never get up. She couldn’t put Christian in that situation. He barely knew her. Besides, she could never tell Christian what Peter had made her do. If Christian knew about the things she’d done, he might think differently about her—about saving her. Could he understand why she’d had no choice but to comply? Would he forgive her? Respect her?

“I can’t ask that of him. It will ruin his life. You know the men of the nobility would never condone a wife raising her hand against her husband. It will be my husband’s overseer’s word against mine. No one will speak up on my behalf. Those who know what Peter did to me will be too scared of the repercussions to speak out. Who would believe the words of a slave? No one, not even my own father, will believe the tales I have to tell. If I even have the courage to tell them, that is. Either way I can’t win. Lord Markham would be ostracized for supporting a wicked woman such as me, and if the Duke of Barforte came forward and openly accused him of Harriet’s rape ...”

Sebastian placed his finger under her chin and lifted her face to meet his steady gaze. “If Christian learns the truth, you’ll have no choice. Due to his past, he will see it as a just crusade. He will want to protect you.”

She stepped back out of his reach. “Then he can never know.” Her voice shook with passion. “You must give me your

word as a gentleman that he will not learn the truth about who I am from you.”

Sebastian’s lips thinned and drew taut. Sarah could see his inner battle. He didn’t like the position she was putting him in. He would have to keep a confidence from his best friend, one Sebastian was aware Christian would wish to know. He ran a hand through his hair.

The harshness left Sebastian’s eyes, replaced now with pity. Sarah could not hold his gaze, shame making her feel as small as a grain of the white sand beneath her feet.

“No wonder Christian is drawn to you. The two of you have a lot in common,” he whispered under his breath. He shook his head. “I shall keep your secret. Marriage to a man like Peter Dennett has seen you suffer enough. But I ask something in return. If they find you, if you are ever arrested or in trouble, and if you won’t let Christian help you, then you must send word to me. I would be honored to speak in your defense and to help you in any way I can.”

A wave of warmth stronger than the sun above swept over her wet body. “So your reputation as a coldhearted rake bent only on his own pleasure is a cover for the compassionate man beneath.” She reached up and kissed his cheek. “I will remember your kind offer and call on you if I have need of help.”

“Go before I show my true colors and throw you on the sand and ravish you. I only have so much honor in me.” He gave her a slight push toward the path up to Roaring Pavilions. “I’ll think of something to get Christian to sail as soon as is humanly possible. Go! He’ll be back soon. He stayed in town to see that a message to Viscount Blackwood caught the next ship.”

Sarah started for the path, then quickly turned back and said, “I won’t forget your kindness. You’re a good man. Thank you.”

Sebastian’s faced turned red. “Don’t thank me yet. I still have to get you off this island without being discovered.” He gave her a seductive grin. “Any man who has had the privilege

of gazing upon your beauty would never forget who you are.” And just like that, the handsome rake was back. “I envy Christian.”

Sarah actually giggled as she raced up the path toward the house.

Standing off to the side of the track, Christian couldn't take his eyes off the beauty racing toward him. Her feet were bare, her hair was flowing out behind her, and he could hear her giggling. God, how he wanted her.

He'd hide in the bushes, jump out, sweep her into his arms, carry her to her bedchamber, and worship her body with his mouth. It was more for him than her. His need to taste her was like a drug.

Christian was just about to jump in front of Sarah and catch her up in his arms when a movement on the beach below stopped him.

Sebastian.

Sebastian was walking toward the sea without a stitch of clothing on. If Sarah turned around she'd see him naked.

Wait. But Sarah had just been on that beach.

On the beach alone with Sebastian—in a state of undress!

As if he were a character in a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, his body turned to stone from the shock. The cold started at his feet, and icy tentacles swept up his body until he couldn't move, crushing his chest under the weight of betrayal.

The sounds of the sea, the birds, and the wind caressing the trees evaporated. Christian became deaf to the world and blind to the beauty of the landscape around him. His world was now black and utterly desolate.

Then the air left Christian's lungs in a whoosh.

Sarah didn't see Christian hidden in the bushes as she ran happily past. He took in her wet hair, flimsy robe, and bare legs. The cold knife of duplicity slipped between his shoulder blades.

A rage unlike any he'd ever felt before engulfed him. His body shook, his heart pounded in his chest, and black spots swarmed before his eyes.

His hands curled into fists. He'd kill him! Sebastian had promised not to seduce her. He'd given Christian his word.

And here Sarah was, after one session of pleasure, falling for a practiced rake's seduction—even, he thought as he remembered her giggle, welcoming the seduction.

He went ice cold inside.

He stood struggling with the desire—no, rampant need—to storm the beach and pummel Sebastian until he could no longer move. Rage locked in Christian's throat, and he realized he was shaking.

He'd never felt closer to becoming his father's son than at this moment. The thought made him want to vomit.

He opened his mouth and gulped in deep breaths. He counted to a hundred and willed his all-consuming rage to dissipate. He stayed hidden in the bushes for what felt like hours but in reality was only until he saw Sebastian return from the beach, fully dressed. He was proud of the fact that he didn't stab Sebastian in the back as he passed. You should always face your foe. Anything less spoke of cowardice.

The blackness was retreating, but instead his mind had filled with awful images of her in Sebastian's arms. He pictured Sebastian's hands and lips on her bare skin and her responding with the ecstatic little cries that made his blood burn.

Now all he felt was revulsion, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach every time he thought of Sarah. Over and over again, he kept feeling the pain anew like a mighty blow to his face.

His imagination ran wild, visualizing what had occurred on the white sandy beach while he'd been racing eagerly back from Kingston.

*Fool. You utter fool!* Why had he ever thought a woman as beautiful as Sarah would settle for damaged goods? Women

always found Sebastian desirable. Now that she knew how it could be with a man, how could he blame Sarah for falling victim to Sebastian's charm?

No. He knew where the blame lay.

Sebastian.

He had to get Sarah away from Sebastian. Seeing them together each day would be torture. He thrust the disturbing images of the two of them from his mind and strode back to the stables. He found Gareth and beckoned him over.

"Can you ride to the *Doreen* tonight? There has been a change in plans. We must sail on tomorrow's tide. Can you let Captain Weatherspoon know?"

Gareth looked confused. "Tomorrow? I'm not sure the ship will be ready—"

"It will be ready. No excuses."

Gareth lifted his hat and scratched his head. "The ship might be ready by late evening. It's the men we will have to round up. They are on shore leave, as you'd said we would stay a few days."

"Then you'd best get moving. I want to depart tomorrow." With that final barked command he turned, ignoring Gareth's confused look. Steeling himself, he made for the house.

He had no idea how he'd sit through dinner with his betrayer. With any provocation, he'd be likely to plunge a knife into Sebastian's traitorous heart. The thought of food made him retch.

And then there was Sarah. He ran a tired hand over his face. He was tearing up in two. He couldn't bear to watch her flirt with another man. He couldn't bear to be near her knowing she'd been with his friend. Yet he couldn't make himself give her up.

All he knew was he had to get her as far away from Sebastian as possible. Only then could he think.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Christian made his way to the dining room. He'd delayed going down for dinner as long as possible, drinking several tumblers of brandy to take the edge off the cold, remorseless anger twisting his guts.

He hesitated outside the door to the dining room and drew in a deep breath before entering. Upon entry, he flicked his eyes toward the table and saw that tonight Sarah had chosen to grace them with her presence. So all it took was Sebastian's seduction to change her mind!

Now that she had Sebastian to look at and converse with, she'd deigned to join them. His chest tightened as he heard her laugh at some comment Sebastian had made. Just when he was sure he could not feel angrier, Sarah turned and noticed him. Her welcoming smile clawed deep into his chest. It appeared genuine, yet only hours earlier she'd been cavorting with his friend—or, rather, his ex-friend.

She looked ravishing this evening. Was that too for Sebastian's benefit?

"Good evening." He was proud of how normal his voice sounded. He relaxed his gait and smoothed his features. He maintained an easy, friendly expression.

Sebastian said, "A very sensible ploy, not arriving early for dinner. It's given me ample time to fill Mrs. Cooper's head with tales of your heroics."

Christian doubted very much that their topic of conversation had been him. Or maybe it had. Maybe they both

pitied him behind his back. Gut-wrenching anger tugged at his senses once more.

Christian could not avert his gaze from them. He was transfixed by the handsome couple. They were well suited. Sarah's fair hair and curls contrasted beautifully with Sebastian's auburn hair. Sarah looked at ease in Sebastian's company, more so than she'd ever seemed in his.

His Judas friend showed no sign of remorse over his treachery. But then again, Sebastian considered women fair game. Christian's stated interest in Sarah would be unlikely to stop him.

His jealousy got the better of him. Unable to wait until later, he spoke, wanting to watch the reaction on Sebastian's face as he told them they'd be leaving tomorrow. In a flash, he calmly said, "There's a change of plans, old boy. I have decided the sooner I can get to England the better. We leave tomorrow. I cannot delay any longer. Any more delay only leaves the field open further for Barforte."

He did not miss the quick glance shared between Sarah and Sebastian. Sebastian nodded. "I cannot disagree with that sentiment."

"Really? I do hope that this does not upset anyone's plans," he said.

Sebastian gave him a puzzled look. "What plans? You know my plans. I'm here until Hadley sends word."

Sarah looked briefly at Sebastian with a frown but said nothing, knowing it was not her place to ask questions.

"So you'd have no objection if I—*we*—leave tomorrow?" Christian moved his gaze to Sarah.

Sebastian's lips thinned, and Christian could tell his friend was annoyed. Sebastian understood the meaning behind his inquiry.

"Other than the fact I haven't seen you in several months, and I'd enjoy your company should you decide to stay longer ..."



“I thought there might be another reason why you’d be disappointed at my leaving.”

Sarah put down her cutlery and looked at the two men in turn. She’d picked up on the undercurrent of tension between them. “Perhaps I should partake of the rest of my meal in my room. You gentlemen obviously have something to discuss.”

Christian thumped the table with a closed fist. “Don’t leave!” His barely suppressed anger was reflected in the sharpness of his barked command.

Sarah gave him a startled look.

“Christian, you are making an idiot of yourself over nothing.” Sebastian’s lips curled up in scorn.

“Am I?” He took a bite of his food even though it tasted like ash in his mouth, and let his comment hang like a challenge in the air.

Of course Sebastian knew why he was angry. He had guilt written clearly all over his handsome features. Sarah, on the other hand, still pretended to have no comprehension of the situation.

“I am one of your oldest friends. Your thoughts malign me.”

Christian threw his glass across the room. It shattered against the wall. “Your actions malign me!”

Sarah collapsed back in her seat, her eyes wide and aghast at the violence in his tone and actions.

“I gave you my word.” Sebastian’s voice held more than a hint of steel, and he threw his napkin on the table. It was just as well it was merely made of cloth, such was the force of his throw. Sebastian rose and approached Christian. “I’ll excuse your idiocy because of what you have been through. Any other man I would have knocked senseless by now. Don’t expect much more leeway from me.”

Sebastian had all but issued a challenge. Christian pushed himself to his feet, toppling his chair backward with a crash.

He lunged at his friend, his fist connecting with Sebastian's chin, snapping his head back with a loud crack.

Sebastian quickly recovered and with a savage growl tackled Christian to the ground. Throwing punches at each other, they rolled on the floor. The sickening thud of fist on flesh echoed around the room. The dining table's contents rattled loudly each time they banged into the legs.

The men wrestled on the floor like children. Sarah jumped up to flee, and her glass slipped from her hand and toppled over, smashing mere inches from the men's faces. The blood-red wine seeped across the floor, bleeding like Christian's battered pride.

He glanced at Sarah. Her bottom lip was trembling, she was shaking like a leaf, and there were tears in her eyes.

Christian moved to reassure her, but she jumped back, away from his touch, more spooked than a hunted deer.

His heart stilled. He'd frightened her. The seething violence within his heart frightened even him. But he'd never hurt Sarah; he'd never hurt a woman. He'd never lose control the way his father had.

The two men pushed away from each other and sat on the floor, breathing hard.

Sarah backed away from the table, eyes wide and filled with revulsion. Without looking at Christian, she turned and ran from the room.

Sarah felt two pairs of eyes burning holes into her back as she left the room. There was an ominous silence behind her, testament to the private war being waged between them. She did not know what Sebastian had done, but the change in Christian was disturbing.

He'd lost his temper. He'd used his fists.

She'd trusted a man who so easily resorted to violence.

What had happened to the gentleness she had seen in him? Just when she'd begun to trust him, to trust a man, he'd

showed his true colors. He couldn't even have a heated discussion without resorting to his fists.

Now she knew better. Christian had a furious temper, for he'd unleashed it on an unsuspecting friend.

What would he do to her if she ever crossed him? What would he do if he ever found out the truth about her?

To think she'd almost convinced herself to go to his bed. *Fool! You know better than to trust any man, let alone an arrogant peer of the realm.*

Instead of looking forward to her sea journey, she now dreaded it.

"I ought to take you outside and finish knocking some sense into you." Sebastian looked disgusted.

Christian picked himself up and slumped into his chair, all the anger draining away, replaced by abject remorse. He inwardly kicked himself for having scared Sarah so. If he'd wanted to push her toward Sebastian, his performance tonight surely would have achieved that aim. He'd be lucky if she'd talk to him again, let alone board a ship with him.

"I saw you both on the beach," he said dully. His newfound joy at life had now plummeted in defeat. How had he let his temper get the better of him? He'd prided himself on his judgment, which now lay in tatters, utterly impaired.

Sebastian had the grace to look embarrassed. "This afternoon? Is this what your temper tantrum was about? Idiot! Did I not give you my word?"

"You were naked. I saw you walking into the sea as Sarah came up from the cove. She was giggling. She looked satisfied and happy." He shrugged his shoulders. "What was I to think?"

Sebastian sat down and threw up his arms in exasperation. "So without even talking to me first, that was enough for you to accuse me of breaking my word. My word!" He thumped the table, sending the cutlery rattling. "When I got back from town, all hot and sweaty, Margarita told me Lily had come back from the beach and had gone to rest, so I assumed Sarah

was with her. I went for a swim, not realizing Sarah was still down at the cove. Once I arrived, decently clothed, Sarah left.”

Christian raised an eyebrow. “She was giggling.”

He gave a wry smile. “Well, I must admit I might have bestowed some fanciful prose on such a beautiful lady. It was an impulse. I can’t help myself.” He looked straight into Christian’s eyes and without wavering said, “But I gave you my word I’d not seduce her. Nothing of a sexual nature happened between Sarah and me.”

Christian leaned forward and lowered his head onto his hands, unable to face Sebastian. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. When I thought of Sarah with you, I went a little crazy. I’m sorry.”

Sebastian sat contemplating his friend in silence.

“Since the incident with Simon Penfold and his father, it would appear I’ve forgotten how to trust. I know that’s no excuse. I should have trusted you. I should have remembered my mother’s favorite saying: ‘Temper gets you into trouble, but pride keeps you there.’”

When Christian was little, he’d asked his mother why Father was always angry. The above saying had been her reply. It was much later before he’d really understood her words. His father’s butler had told him the late earl had killed his mother in a fit of jealousy, believing she’d dallied with Lord Danvers, their next-door neighbor. It was all in his father’s head, of course. His mother had never strayed from her marriage vows.

Perhaps Sarah would be better off staying in Jamaica.

Sebastian rose and walked around the table to pour him a drink. “It’s not only me you have to apologize to. Sarah appeared upset when she left. From what you have told me about her husband, your display of anger most likely frightened her.”

At the first test of loyalty, he had acted exactly like his father, falsely accusing Sebastian, his friend, a man whose word was his bond. He’d never felt so ashamed of his actions, nor so terrified. Since the war, he’d become bitter. Bitterness

leads to anger, anger he had fought so hard to contain. He would not become consumed by his temper like his father.

He shot his friend a pleading look. “Can you offer any suggestions on how to fix this situation? Otherwise, you may find you have a house guest tomorrow. I bet Sarah is deciding if she’ll ever talk to me again, or, worse, if she’ll sail with me.”

“I assume your reason for leaving so soon was to get Sarah out of my clutches. As that is no longer necessary, perhaps you should revise your decision and stay a few more days and spend the time groveling at her feet. You need to show her you know how to conduct yourself as a gentleman.”

Christian shook his head. “No. Regardless of my childish jealousy, my rationale for leaving is sound. The longer I stay away, the more damage Barforte can do.” He drank the rest of the brandy before adding, “I need to get back to England and confront Harriet. If I face her, maybe she’ll recant her foul lies.”

For an instant he wondered why Sebastian looked relieved at his decision to leave. But he was too caught up in his own emotions to spend any time on the thought.

Sebastian nodded in agreement. “That was certainly Grayson’s impression. He gave me strict instructions to send you home immediately. I selfishly wanted you to stay awhile to ease my boredom. It would seem we both have apologies to offer each other. I shall miss you, even if you are acting like a possessive fool. This is why I avoid love.”

Christian looked sheepish. “When I get home I’ll help Hadley with your appeal. It’s the least I can do for making such an ass of myself.”

“I have to agree with your analysis about Barforte and the damage he’ll inflict. Harriet holds the key to all of this. However, I’m also worried that whoever killed Carla might also go after your witness. Harriet could be in danger.”

“Damn. You’re right. I’ve wasted too much time in Canada already. I can’t stay here any longer, even if I wanted to.”

“Grayson is keeping a watchful eye on Harriet. He has mentioned his concern over Harriet’s safety to the Duke, but Barforte has disregarded it. The Duke still believes you’re the guilty party. Some of Grayson’s men are providing discreet protection for his daughter.”

“I already owe Grayson my life. I don’t have anything else to give him.”

Sebastian looked out into the dimly lit garden. “Grayson feels responsible for your burns.” He poured more brandy down his throat.

“He’s not. I chose to go with him to silence the French cannon. It could have been he who became trapped.”

“You should tell him that. The guilt’s eating him alive.”

Christian stood. “I’ve told him that countless times. Perhaps if he sees me settled and happy, it will vanquish his unnecessary guilt.” He moved and stood in the doorway, staring up the staircase. “Speaking of the future and happiness, how do you suppose I can win back Sarah’s trust?”

“Tell her the truth. Tell her what you thought you saw. Perhaps she’ll understand then.”

Christian sighed and put his glass on the sideboard just inside the dining room door. “She’ll understand. But will she forgive? She abhors violence. She’ll not easily overlook aggression, and my temper truly frightened her.”

Sebastian stood beside him. “Then you’ll just have to earn her trust once more. It will be hard, but the rewards will be sweet. I almost envy you.”

Christian turned to his friend. “At least on board the *Doreen*, she’ll find it difficult to avoid me.” It was only then that he saw Margarita hovering expectantly near Sebastian’s study. He looked at his friend, amused. So that was the way of things. No wonder he did not bother with Sarah. He hugged his friend. “Will I see you before we depart?”

Sebastian inclined his head, signaling to Margarita as she stood in the hall. She slipped inside his study. “Probably not, my friend. I hate goodbyes. Don’t let Hadley forget about me.”

“I won’t. I hope to see you in England soon.” He turned and began making his way up the stairs. “Say thank you to Margarita for me. She’s made Lily and Sarah feel quite welcome. But not as welcome as you, it would seem!”

Sebastian’s soft chuckle followed him up the stairs.

Christian halted outside Sarah’s door. The urge to enter and beg her for forgiveness made every muscle in his body tighten, but now was not the time.

He’d said at the beginning that the seduction of Sarah would take patience. Having to be patient hurt him greatly, but the need to see her was physical torture.

If it meant winning Sarah, it was one burden he’d stoically bear.



Sarah paced her bedchamber. She kept her hands clasped firmly behind her back, knowing she’d bite her fingernails to the quick if they got anywhere near her mouth.

*What to do? What to do? What to do?*

Christian had a temper. He’d frightened her tonight.

She could refuse to travel tomorrow. She could be a coward and stay here. Sebastian would help her if she asked. The only problem was, she’d already formed a close bond with Lily. Lily would not understand. She’d be hurt yet again. Someone else was going to desert her.

Lily also filled a hole in Sarah’s life. While running from her past, while fleeing toward Canada, she’d known the life she’d always wanted was forfeit. There would be no husband, no children, and no loving family. Yet, since looking after Lily, her future seemed not so bleak. Suddenly she could see a chance at belonging, a chance at, if not having a child of her own, at least having a substitute one. She had Lily now.

She would love Lily as if she were her own.

However, the Christian at the table this evening was a stranger. He had been filled with anger and hate. His temper had been barely disguised by a veneer of respectability. How destructive could his temper get? Sarah had sworn never to put herself in harm's way again.

When hatching her plan to travel back to England as governess to Lord Markham's ward, she'd never fully considered how tenuous a relationship with an employer could be. She needed stability, especially as it would be dangerous for her to seek employment elsewhere. Once at his estate, if he learned how vulnerable she was, she would be at his mercy. Trapped, unable to turn to the law or indeed anyone for help, she would always be dogged by the fear of being arrested.

Sarah had thought she'd chosen well, that fate had sent her to Christian. She'd thought she knew him, the war hero whom the *ton* used to love. But did she know the real man underneath? The man who hid under the scars and heroic veneer?

She would be alone on his ship, with his crew, a long way out to sea. Memories of her horror-filled voyage to Virginia following her marriage made her stomach churn. The nausea she'd lived with most of her married life left her feeling terrified. She couldn't go through a voyage or experiences like that again. She'd been kept a virtual sex slave in their cabin. Her husband demanded that his customary rights be available constantly. He'd not let her out of bed until she'd gotten sick with cabin fever. Finally, after two torturous weeks, she'd been allowed up on deck for sun and fresh air.

It had been the start of her eighteen-month nightmare. A nightmare she'd escaped by creating another nightmare. She'd become a murderess ...

A small, persistent whisper in her head told her Christian wouldn't treat her like Peter had. Unless ... What if she upset him? What if she declined his attentions? After allowing him to pleasure her last night, would he expect to be able to bed her at his whim? No! She'd not allow it. With her husband dead, only she owned her body.



Her stomach knotted further, and she sank onto the corner of the bed. The memory of the night she'd fled her husband and Sean, her husband's overseer ... The images were more vivid when she closed her eyes. Zachary had saved her just in time. Onboard the ship, could she rely on Christian? She'd rather die than let herself be exposed to a violent temper again.

Would Christian force her if she refused him? She doubted it, but could she take the chance? In the dining room, he'd behaved like any nobleman stymied in his quest to get whatever it was he wanted. Most of the peerage did not understand the word "no." They did not respect the word "no."

For the first time since leaving York, she questioned her plan. She didn't really know Christian Trent, the Earl of Markham. She'd only ever seen him from afar. She'd formed a picture of an honorable hero, but who was he really? He'd admitted that he'd been accused of rape. What if it was true?

She needed to speak with Sebastian. He would know the truth about the allegations, and he wouldn't lie to her. Sebastian had sworn that Christian would never hurt her. Would he? She needed to understand the inexplicable change in Christian's behavior. What could be the cause of his temper tantrum this evening?

If Sebastian thought it was safe to sail with Christian, she'd continue on with the voyage.

She jumped to her feet, the need to find Sebastian as soon as possible propelling her toward the door. With her hand on the latch she halted. Damn. She'd have to wait until Christian went to bed. Sarah leaned on the door and pressed her ear against it. She doubted the men would be too late. She'd seen Margarita skulking in the shadows and knew the housekeeper was waiting for Sebastian.

If Sarah wasn't mistaken, Margarita held more than the position of housekeeper in Sebastian's household. She was a beautiful woman. Her chocolate-colored skin, jet-black hair, and eyes the same emerald green as Christian's gave her an exotic look. Every man looked at Margarita when she walked by.

You'd have to be blind not to catch the looks shared between master and servant. Sebastian's lust-filled gaze followed Margarita's every step, and her eyes sparkled with blazing desire in return.

Sarah envied the couple. No one else in the household seemed to mind. The affair would be frowned upon in England. Household staff were a vicious and jealous lot—one of the reasons she could not be a governess and Lord Markham's paramour. It would cause too much talk, and anyone envious of her position could cause trouble. If they chose to dig into her past ...

Hearing no sound from the corridor, she opened the door—and stifled a scream as she stepped directly into a solid mass of muscled heat.

Christian!

He caught her and held her lightly. He immediately dropped his hands from her person when she gave a distressed cry and tried to pull away.

“I'm sorry if I startled you. I've come to apologize for my boorish behavior this evening. If it's any consolation, I feel like an idiot.”

She stepped back into her room, all senses wary of his sudden contrition.

“May I come in and explain?”

She was about to shake her head, but his eyes, reminding her of a lost puppy's, tugged at her heart. Would it hurt her to listen?

“You may enter, but the door stays open.”

“Of course.” He entered her room and moved to the windows. He stood with his back to her, his hands moving nervously, his shoulders tense. Why didn't he speak? What was he waiting for? Perhaps he was still trying to find an excuse?

“When I came back from town this afternoon, I was informed you were still down at the beach.”

Sarah barely managed to stop the “Oh, no!” from slipping out of her mouth. He’d seen her with Sebastian! Understanding dawned bright on her face. He turned at her muffled squeak of comprehension.

An elegant eyebrow rose. “Precisely! When I saw Sebastian walk naked—”

“Naked? He was never naked.” She felt heat flare in her face. “At least, not while I was present.”

“I didn’t know that. I—”

She finished for him. “Jumped to the wrong conclusion.” He nodded. “Your display of bad manners this evening was what, jealousy?” she asked incredulously.

Christian’s face flooded with color, and he looked sheepish. “I thought what we shared the other evening was special. When I thought you’d been with Sebastian I was shocked, hurt, and angry. I thought you did not feel the same about ...”

Anger slid over her, hanging about her body for protection. “You obviously think very little of me if you thought I could share myself so readily with another man one night after allowing you into my bed.” The room reverberated with the harsh, accusatory tones of her voice. “Did you think my reluctance and terror at intimacy were all an act?”

He turned his face toward her and struggled to express himself. “Since my burns, no woman has willingly shared my bed. I have to pay them. Even then they usually have to fill themselves with alcohol in order to bear my touch. I could not —” He paused, and she could see his Adam’s apple moving. “I still cannot believe you welcomed me into your bed, especially given the circumstances.” His shoulders straightened and he stood tall. “I am telling you this to gain not your pity or forgiveness but your understanding.”

And just like that, he crushed her bitter anger into little pieces. She’d been focused on her hurt and her injuries, but it appeared his injuries ran just as deep. His scars hid deeper internal wounds that he kept hidden from the world. He was a

proud man, and she realized what it had cost him to admit this to her.

She reached out and stroked the battle-injured face, the face she could very easily learn to love. “The fact that I gave myself to you and trusted you not to hurt me should have told you how much I value your friendship. Didn’t that make you wonder why a man like Sebastian would appeal to me?”

He ran a finger under his cravat. “I used to be a man like Sebastian. I know what appeals to him.”

“I’m talking about me.”

He hung his head, reminding her of a naughty schoolboy. “I didn’t consider your feelings. A man with Sebastian’s experience knows how to seduce. And you’re a beautiful woman.”

She sighed. “Even I can see Sebastian has eyes only for Margarita.”

He looked even more sheepish. “I only noticed that tonight. I’d been too busy noticing you to see what was before me. I’m sorry.”

Heat flared in her cheeks. Inwardly she was flattered he noticed her more than a woman as beautiful as Margarita. “Apology accepted.” She saw relief wash over his handsome features, although he still looked nervous. She added, “Your behavior tonight proves that perhaps we are moving into our relationship too fast. You obviously don’t know me.” She shivered. “Unlike consummate rakes, I could never—that is, I would never—have an affair with more than one man at a time.”

“I should have known that about you. In fact, I did know that about you. I’m not sure what came over me.” Sauntering over to the daybed under the opened windows, he sat, resting his elbows on his knees, placing his chin on his fists. “I have the Markham temper. I’ve too much of my father in me. I’ve always kept my anger on a tight rein, and up until today, I’d always taken pride in my ability to control my emotions.”

Sarah furrowed her brow. “It isn’t good to bottle everything up. The sea is calmest before the storm.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked away. “Often, once unleashed, the storm becomes too wild.”

“Look at me!” Sarah walked to stand in front of Christian. “You were hurt, disillusioned, and angry tonight. You lashed out. But you didn’t stay angry. You didn’t let the anger consume you.”

“I frightened you.”

She smiled. “You did.” Moving closer, she sat next to him and draped her arm around his shoulders. “But if I wasn’t so damaged, I’d remember men have arguments. People have arguments and tempers flare. Not all arguments end in extreme violence, death, mayhem ... As I said, sometimes it’s good to clear the air.”

He turned his face to press a little kiss into her palm. “You’re not damaged.”

She dropped her gaze from his and whispered, “You have no idea.” He cupped her cheek and raised her head. She shook free of his hold and smiled. “It was Sebastian you wanted to destroy, not me. Besides, you’ve shown that you’d never physically hurt me.”

He let out a low snort. “I’ve done nothing of the kind.”

Sarah gazed tenderly at him. “You could have forced yourself on me when I came to your room the very first night. At first I thought you were asleep the whole time, but now ... you were pretending, weren’t you?”

“I thought you were a dream,” he said in stark, quiet honesty, a rueful smile tugging at his lips.

She giggled and slapped his knee. “Still, on the ship you could have taken advantage of me. You knew how fragile I was, how raw, how much I needed to be healed. But you behaved like a true gentleman, even when you were aroused.”

“Just looking at you arouses me.”

She ran her fingers through his silky hair. “Then we will have no more talk of apologies. We will start afresh. Let’s promise to talk to each other if we ever feel confused.” He moved his arm and placed it around her waist, drawing her closer. She pressed on. “Tell me about your father and this notorious Markham temper.”

Bleakness invaded his face. “I’m not sure you’re ready to hear this story. Anyone weaker or not in a position to fight an earl was fair game.” He hesitated before adding, “Especially women. Are you sure you want to hear more?”

She nodded. “I want to know the things that happened in your life. The things that shaped you into the man you are today. I already know about your valor on the battlefield. Lady Serena heard that you were considered a great commander and leader of men.”

“I had a lot to make up for. My father was the least honorable man I have ever known.” He laughed drearily. “He ruled with intimidation. The servants lived in fear of his rages and punishments.”

“What of you? Did he mistreat you?” she asked softly.

Christian briefly closed his eyes, a pained expression on his face. “No. I never bore the brunt of his temper. He never once hit me or disciplined me. At first I was pleased not to incur his wrath, but then ... I saw how the staff looked at me. They looked at me as if I were my father. They were too scared to speak to me, let alone befriend a lonely boy. I grew up in solitary confinement.”

“What about friends?”

“I had no friends until I was sent to school. All the neighboring families knew what my father was like, and refused to let their children come to the house. Occasionally I’d get invited to their homes, but the children would taunt me to try and make the infamous Markham temper explode.”

Sarah petted him, smoothing his black forelock out of his eyes, offering silent, uncomplicated sympathy.

He drew in a deep breath. “I hated the fact I was spared. I wanted to help those around me and shield them from harm, but I couldn’t understand how I could help when they wouldn’t let me. They branded me evil without giving me a chance to prove I wasn’t.”

“Your father must have loved you very much if he singled you out.”

“Hardly,” he said dryly. “It was guilt. I look like my mother.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I barely remember her,” he whispered bleakly. “I was six years old when she died. I can scarcely recall what she looked like, but I do remember her perfume—lavender—and the way she’d cuddle me close if I was ill or hurt. She lit up the nursery when she came to visit. All the staff loved her. She was gentle, quiet, and compassionate—all the things my father wasn’t.”

Sarah was quiet for a moment. Even though Sebastian had told her, she knew Christian had to say it, to speak of it. “How did she die?” Outwardly she sat very still, but inwardly she cried for the young boy he’d been.

He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. “At the hands of my father,” he said, anguish clear in every note.

“An accident?”

She flinched at the pain underlying his whisper, and she let him feel for her hand and grip it tightly. “I’ve never told anyone apart from Grayson and Sebastian. I was too young at the time to understand, but Roberts, my father’s butler, told me years later. Father beat her and then pushed her down the stairs at Henslowe Court.” Christian just looked at her, his eyes filled with sadness. “When I reached manhood, I couldn’t confront him because of what he might do to Roberts. But Father knew I knew. He could not look me in the eye, and he began to drink even more, which made it worse for everyone. So, finally, I left. I left home and joined the cavalry. Fighting to help defeat Boney helped ease the anger and helplessness burning inside me.”

She pressed a chaste kiss on his lips and he pulled her onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and regarded him matter-of-factly. “You are nothing like your father. You take after your mother in more than looks. You’re gentle, kind, compassionate ...”

“God, I hope so, because there’s more. He did terrible things. I pray every day that I don’t have his bad blood coursing through my veins.”

“What could be worse than killing your mother?” she asked in shocked surprise.

“I have at least one half sister that I know of.”

“Know of?” She knew whatever he was about to say was terrible, for his muscles tightened beneath her fingers.

“When I was ten years old, I used to play hide-and-seek with the governess. During one of the games I’d hidden in the linen cupboard, unbeknown to my father. He dragged a maid inside and raped her. He discharged her from service when she was big with his child. She threw herself off a bridge soon after the child was born.”

Sarah stilled in his arms, nausea churning in her stomach. His father was a rapist. Her mind rebelled at the thought of Christian being this man’s son, but they were very different. She admired how honorable he was, considering his upbringing. He’d been born to privilege and power but did not abuse it. He wore his status with pride and humility, knowing that being wealthy and a peer did not necessarily make a person a good man.

“Once my father died, I tracked down my half sister and offered to stand by her and support her, but she’d have none of me. Not that I blamed her. I send her money. I will provide her with a considerable dowry should she marry, and we write to each other occasionally. I don’t know how many others are out there. Their fate constantly haunts me.”

“It’s admirable that you want to right so many wrongs, but you are not responsible for your father’s mistakes.”



Christian stroked a hand down her arm. “That’s easy for you to say. I should have done more.”

“As a woman, I know how powerless women can be made to feel.”

He asked, “Your marriage?”

She nodded. “On my husband’s tobacco plantation, I tried to help the slaves. He mistreated them terribly. The first few weeks I was constantly ill, fearful that I’d go mad living with the unfairness of their lives and the parallel that could be found to mine. I was owned, as they were.” Her eyes filled with unshed tears. “Then Pippa, one of the household slaves, told me I shouldn’t feel guilty about circumstances I could not change. The fact I tried was enough.” She pressed her palms to her eyes, willing the tears not to fall, and quietly said, “The fact I couldn’t change my situation, or theirs, only made it worse. The powerlessness ate at me. I withered away as if struck by a cankerous disease.”

“Let’s hope your husband is getting what he deserves where he has gone.”

She started. “I beg your pardon?”

He frowned. “He died. If you believe in a heaven, then there must be a hell.”

She shivered in the humid air. “Is it awful of me to hope he’s suffering?”

He kissed the top of her head and murmured against her hair, “No. I’m glad we’ve talked. I’m hoping my behavior this evening won’t make you leave my employ. Lily—Lily and I—will be very disappointed if I have driven you away.”

She softened her tone, to cushion the blow of what she was about to say. “You have no right to be jealous of me. I do not belong to you. I thought that I was quite clear on that point.”

“I know I have no claim on you. I know your freedom is very important to you. I shall try to keep my feelings of inadequacy under control and rein in my jealous tendencies.”

This time she allowed herself to smile. “You have no reason to feel inadequate. You are the only man I have willingly shared myself with, ever. I did not come to that decision lightly.”

Sarah couldn't believe how blind she'd been. Here was an honorable man. A man who seemed as lost in this world as she was. A man who, like her, was looking for something—someone—to fulfill his life. She knew she could never be that someone for him, an earl. But she looked forward to the voyage to England and sharing a little of herself with him. She looked forward, with more desire than she thought possible, to the prospect of learning all about passion from this man.

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a chaste kiss to her fingers. “I'm honored, truly. I shall endeavor to earn back your trust and respect, for I treasure the gift you bestowed on me last night. Please say you'll give me a chance to know everything about you and, at the same time, share everything about myself with you.” She saw his throat work hard to swallow. “Will you give me—our relationship—another chance?” he said, hurrying his words. “We can take it slowly, and leave off the physical aspect until we are comfortable with each other.”

“What if I don't wish to wait?” she teased.

His face lit with a radiant smile. It was a smile that tugged at her heart and sent her pulse racing. He stood and walked to the bed, depositing her gently on the covers. “I am at your command. You may set the pace, and I shall eagerly follow.”

His words sent a flood of warmth through her. She'd never been in a relationship of her choosing. It felt nice to be wanted, but most of all it was glorious to be respected. It was wonderful to be listened to attentively, to be apologized to sincerely, and, above all, not be treated as a mere possession to command. She knelt, reached up, and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“No. Thank you.” He bowed from the waist. “I shall leave you to rest. We'll be leaving early tomorrow.”

“I hope we are not leaving Jamaica because of any misunderstanding with Sebastian?”

He shook his head. “No. Sebastian’s news from Grayson was not what I had hoped. It’s imperative that I get back to England as soon as possible. The longer I wait, the harder it will be to clear my name.” He made his way to the door, and suddenly she didn’t want him to leave. She wanted him to stay and make love to her.

Too scared to ask directly, she rose from the bed and said, “Would you like me to rub some liniment on your shoulder before you go?”

He hesitated at the door and gave her a look that would melt an iceberg. “I’m not sure that would be wise. I’m finding it hard to resist you.”

She let her actions speak for her. She undid the tie to her robe and let it slip onto the floor, revealing her sheer white shift.

“Moments ago you said you’d follow my lead. Tonight I want to show you that you have no need to be jealous or feel inadequate. I agreed to be your lover for the duration of this voyage because I desire you. Let me pleasure you tonight.”

His grip tightened on the door latch, his knuckles turning white. Then, slowly, he closed it.

With his back to her he asked, “I want you so badly. I’m not sure I can control—”

She quickly crossed the room, taking his hand to lead him back toward the bed. “I’m doing this for me.” She undid his cravat and began removing his jacket. “I’ve never had the freedom to be in control, to do as I please, or want.” In this heat, he wore no waistcoat under his jacket, so she pressed her lips to the expanse of defined muscle she’d just exposed as he helped her lift his shirt up and over his head.

“Will you allow me to be in command?”

He stood looking down at her, his eyes swirling shades of green, hot with desire. “Relinquishing control to a beautiful woman, that’s my definition of heaven!” He reached for her.

“However, I’m a better leader than follower, and I’m quite sure you’ll appreciate the difference.” And he took her lips in a deeply arousing kiss.

## *Chapter Twelve*

**H**er gaze dropped to his lips. “Make love to me.”

He breathed in sharply. “Thank God! I’ve wanted you since the first night you came to my room.”

She smiled seductively and drew her shift up and over her head.

Christian drank in her nakedness. “Beautiful!” His voice was hoarse with desire. He licked his lips, and hope and rampant need flared within his soul.

“I’m not an expert in giving pleasure, so you may have to guide me, but you will allow me free rein.”

He could only nod in agreement, for his mouth had gone dry. To his utter astonishment, Sarah dropped to her knees in front of him and began to unfasten his trousers. The brush of her slender fingers through the material as she worked at the buttons was excruciatingly arousing, and his member pulsed with a pounding blood flow, hardening him further. He almost gasped out loud as she finally tugged open the last button and freed his erection.

“Sarah,” he said hoarsely as she began to stroke his cock, her caresses making his entire body tremble. “This is such sweet torture.”

Wiping a bead of semen from the engorged tip, she uttered, “I’ve never explored a man before. I’ve never wanted to. You make me want to learn every inch of you.” She smiled up at him, a sensual siren replacing the nervous woman of last night. She slipped her finger in her mouth. “You taste ... nice,” she

said artlessly, staring at his erection with open curiosity. He watched her regarding him studiously, and he'd never seen anything so arousing. She was a sensual, naked siren, revealing lush curves and flowing fair hair. His balls tightened painfully.

Her lashes lowered and he couldn't believe the rush of molten heat spearing through his veins as he anticipated her next move. She leaned forward with unmistakable intent. Her soft lips slid over the head of his erection; the sensation was indescribable.

He hissed through his teeth. "God, Sarah." He placed his hands on her head, gently tugging her up and away from his body. "I can't take much more."

Her reply was a murmured denial, her mouth still wet and hot upon him. She began to suck gently, and all thoughts fled from his head.

A low sound rose from his chest, and his body shook with the effort of not pushing himself deeper into her mouth. He held back, letting her have her way. She was leading and he was definitely following.

He was holding on—just—but she cupped his balls and he felt his control loosen. "Sarah, please. Have mercy."

Her mouth left him, and he looked down on the most exotic sight a man could see, that of her lush, wet lips kissing the tip of his member and smiling. "I'm leading ...". She slid her tongue up and down the length of him. "I like being in control. I want to see you lose yours."

"Keep that up for a bit longer and you'll get your wish," he growled.

Her answer was to continue her ravishment of him. Her mouth tightened around him again, sucking deeply and with more purpose than before.

Christian trembled, his body swamped with unrelenting pleasure. Then he felt his testicles tighten in preparation for ejaculation. He desperately wanted to come, more desperately

than a dying man wanted to live. Every muscle went taut as he tried to hold off his release.

He communicated his body's knife-edge hold on control by sinking his hands into her hair.

With one final lick she let him leave her mouth. He wasted no time in scooping her off the floor and crossing with her to the bed. He practically tossed her onto the covers, her fair tresses flying around her creamy skin. She rose up onto her silken limbs, her lips a luscious pout. "That was not very submissive behavior, my lord."

"There is only so much a man can take. If you want me to make love to you, then you'd best take pity on me and allow me to dampen down my desire before I ruin both our nights."

She licked her lips and gave an amused chuckle. "It would seem that to be in control, you must know when to surrender it."

"I promise you'll not regret your surrender."

He eased her down on the bed. If he was to ensure her pleasure, he needed a minute to douse his raging need, which wasn't helped when his glittering gaze feasted on every inch of her nude form. "Command me. Where would you like my mouth, my lips ... ?"

"Everywhere," was her husky reply.

"Your wish is my command."

He nuzzled her breasts, letting his lips glide over the plump mounds, dipping to kiss the valley between her breasts. She sighed in approval as his mouth found one taut nipple and gently rolled it around his mouth, licking with his tongue. Her sighs turned to soft moans as he suckled her. She was liquid heat beneath him, her soft curves inflaming his ardor, while he still struggled for control over his rampaging need to sink deep between her thighs. He stayed suckling her breasts until at last he felt a modicum of restraint.

Then he kissed down her stomach and nestled against her soft skin when he saw her grip the sheets in her hands, while her hips lifted slightly off the sheets. Her body recognized his

moves and cried out for his attentions. His hands touched her silken thighs, and she needed no further encouragement to part them so that he could slide between them.

He glanced up at her succulent body. Her eyes flew open.

“I’m waiting to be commanded. Where should I kiss you next?”

Her hips lifted in answer as she pleaded with him. “You know where I want your sinfully wicked kiss... .”

Holding her gaze, he slowly lowered his mouth and licked through her wet folds. Her eyes closed and her head fell back on the pillow with a sigh.

He pressed his mouth against the sensitive moistness of her sex. Licking and stroking with his tongue, he teased her just as she had teased him, and he could feel her arousal when the small nub between her folds began to swell against the pressure of his mouth. “You taste of the sweetest nectar. I swear I could live on nothing else.”

“God, don’t stop. I order you, beg you, to make me come!”

He smiled to himself as he bent and enthusiastically obeyed. He found her nub and gently sucked. Then he licked until he felt her body stiffen. He teased her for a few moments longer before finally plunging his tongue deep inside her. Her cries of pleasure filled the room, inflaming him even more. In moments Sarah convulsed, her hands gripping handfuls of his hair as she shuddered and moaned. He rose onto his knees to watch the beautiful sight, but became alarmed when small trails of tears leaked from the corner of her eyes.

He gently stroked her stomach and quietly asked. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you? Is this not what you wanted?”

Her lids fluttered open and she smiled as he imagined an angel would smile. “That was beautiful, almost surreal. I never realized how fabulous making love could feel. It touched me here,” and she placed his hand over her heart.

He understood completely. His heart had pounded in unison with hers. He’d never wanted to pleasure a woman as much as he wanted to with Sarah.



He lay down next to her. “But we haven’t really made love. This is simply the delicious appetizer before the main course. If you are too full to continue tonight, or you’d like to change the menu, simply tell me. After all, I’m yours to direct.”

She rolled onto her side and, facing him, looked down over his body. “It would be unfair to leave you in such ... condition.” Her fingers trailed over his burns, over his chest and stomach, her destination clear in her gaze. She wrapped her small hand around him, and he lay back on the bed with a groan welling deep in his chest.

Sarah rose to her knees next to him, and her free hand traced his chest and stomach while she stroked him intimately. “You’re so beautiful ...”

“You make me feel beautiful. You make me forget my scars, forget everything but the feel and touch of you.”

She was breathtaking. The graceful curve of her bared shoulders, the gentle mounded slope of her pert breasts, and the flawless perfection of her naked skin were all he could desire. Not to mention the alluring rose shape of her soft mouth, with the darker color of her brows a contrast to the fair luster of her hair.

Christian couldn’t wait. He’d spend in her hand if she continued much longer. He firmly took both her hands and tugged her so she lay atop him. “If you want a full feast, you’d best stop toying.”

She gave a delightful giggle. “Enough of the food analogies! Let’s eat.”

He grinned, pulling her right on top of him. “You wanted control. This position gives you that. When you’re ready, and I hope it’s soon or I’ll give a very bad performance, simply slide me into your body, at your own speed.”

She raised herself and guided him to her opening. Holding her pensive gaze, he encouraged her with a smile. She tentatively began to lower herself, and it took all of Christian’s reserves not to thrust up to meet her welcoming heat. She was

tight and hot, and his limbs trembled at her torturous descent. Finally she was sheathing him fully, and she let out a pent-up breath.

“It feels wonderful. Tight but wonderful, and there’s no pain.”

“If a woman is prepared properly, there should never be pain.” He could feel a bead of sweat slide down his temple. God, how he wanted to thrust, to plunge into her tight heat, but he held back. This was her night. Her chance to understand that pleasure should be mutual and that a man should, and could, put the pleasure of his woman before his own.

Sarah experimented. She rocked gently upon him, and a smile lit up her face. She leaned down and kissed his chest, running her tongue around his areola before gently biting his hardened nipple with her teeth. He raised his hips and pushed slowly into her in response.

She moaned against his chest and sat up. “Do that again,” she requested breathlessly.

He was more than happy to oblige. He pushed into her, his hips lifting off the bed, and the sight of her full breasts swaying with the movement was a sight he could not resist. He rose and nibbled down her slender throat, lingering for a moment at the point where her pulse beat fast and light. Sarah made a small sound as his thumb circled the luscious crest of her pink nipple. Her skin was soft silk beneath his touch, and infinitely feminine.

Her little cries grew in volume as he licked her mounded flesh, taking her erect nipple into his mouth, suckling deeply. He could feel Sarah’s arousal in the way she rode him and whispered his name into the silent room.

Sarah had never known a man’s possession of her body could feel so good. It was as if she were on fire. Her body clamored for Christian’s touch—his lips, mouth, hands, fingers ... it did not matter. Letting him love her was what she craved.

Her head dropped back and her body responded to his driving rhythm. She used her legs as she would when on a

horse, to ride him. Each thrust sent a wave of almost painful pleasure through her, and she could not stifle her moans.

He fell back on the bed with a stifled groan, and she followed him down, her lips seeking his in a branding kiss. She thrust her tongue deep into his mouth, wanting to taste him as he drove deeper within her body.

She rocked more forcibly, and her sex slid over his sweat-covered muscles. Desire spiked and fed her hunger. She moved restlessly, seeking the glorious shattering finale to come.

She sat up and gasped for air, the intense satisfaction capturing her breath. Her pants filled the darkened room. It was so good she called out in feverish pleasure, not even trying to mute her cries.

Christian's hands were now gripping her hips, and he was thrusting powerfully. She pushed down to meet him in equal urgency. She wasn't frightened as his thrusts grew in speed and intensity. She glanced at his face. His eyes were shut; his long dark lashes lay against tanned cheeks. He was lost to the world of pleasure, as was she.

The sharp bite of his fingers on her skin increased as the rhythm escalated, and Sarah realized she was going to climax. With a loud guttural groan, he pushed deeper yet. She could feel him as far as physically possible within her, and the sensation of his thick, turgid length made her erupt with such intensity that her body shook. Rapture took her prisoner and held her captive as Christian continued to thrust into her.

He quickly followed her to bliss. A loud roar reverberated around her as he arched frantically, holding her tightly upon him, calling out her name as his seed flooded deep within her.

When Christian could finally breathe again, he pulled her down into his arms and hugged her tightly, showering the top of her head with little kisses. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself. You're much too tempting to simply lie back and not participate."

"I'm not complaining."

He stroked down the small of her back. “That was amazing.”

Sarah pushed out of his hold. She stared down at the utterly tempting, devilishly handsome man who’d just made magical love to her. “That’s an understatement.” She beamed at him. “I can’t explain how wonderful it felt to be in your arms.” She hesitated before saying, “I know it’s not always like that. What we shared was special. Well, special to me, anyway.”

He stroked her hair and squeezed her tighter. “You’re special.” To have overcome a brutal husband and have the courage to let another man bed her was astonishing. “Thank you. Thank you for trusting in me.”

Sarah tilted her head sideways so she could see his face. Without all the formal clothing, his black locks tousled against the white pillow slip, his disfigured cheek visible in the weak moonlight, he did look menacing; however, he was anything but. She swept her gaze over his lean body and, without thinking, reached and touched his scars. He flinched beneath her touch.

“I hate to think of you in pain,” she whispered.

“That’s the one saving grace about pain. The memory dulls it. Oh, I can still vividly recall going out of my mind from the agony, but I can’t actually remember what the pain felt like. Not that I try to relive that day; my nightmares do that often enough, and I can never escape in my dreams.”

She continued to caress him, willing the ugly memories away. “Do you think the nightmares will ever end?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps they will fade with time. I’ve gotten used to them.” He spoke so matter-of-factly, she wondered at the calm behind his words.

“Have you ever talked to anyone about what happened?”

“Talking won’t change the outcome.”

“But it might help. It might stop the nightmares.”

“Grayson knows. He was there. He saved me. If it hadn’t been for him ...”

“How did he rescue you? What did he do?” She could tell he didn’t want to relive the day, but it might help him to let it out.

“As the wagon collapsed, Grayson fell, knocking himself out. I was trapped beneath and at the mercy of a revenge-filled Frenchwoman. My inhumane howls managed to pierce Grayson’s dead sleep. He awoke and threw his coat over my burning skin, freed my hand, and then had to try and save me from my injuries. A friend who lay all but dead in his arms. Simply putting out the flames only began my battle to survive.”

Sarah tried to repress her shudder. The pain would have killed a weaker man. “Who helped you recuperate?”

He shifted restlessly. “I had Roberts and the rest of the staff.”

“You didn’t have anyone special?”

He turned to look at her as if she were asking a ridiculous question. “No.” His tone was harsh. He blinked and looked away. He looked out the window at the still night. “There was no one. My mistress thought I was going to die, so she found another benefactor as quickly as possible. Eloisa was not the type to hold anyone’s hand. A man’s wallet was of more interest to her.”

“I can’t understand what men find so pleasing in such an arrangement.”

He stared at her for ages before he said, “Having met you, I don’t either. I could never go back to that sort of paid arrangement.”

“I would have never left your side if I’d been there.” Sarah bristled with anger. Who could abandon a man as good and as kind as Christian when he was so badly wounded? Christian would never have left Eloisa if she’d needed help. It was startling to realize that she had known him a short while, yet it felt like she’d known him all her life. She understood the

essence of the man, and a part of her wanted to tell him the truth. She should confess her sins and rely on his sense of gentlemanly honor to provide a haven for her. But doing that would be selfish. It would cause him distress. Besides, she'd accepted her lot. He would lose more than his position in society for trying to help her. He needed to truthfully state he had no idea who she really was. She would not make him an accessory to murder. Not when he was already under suspicion for a heinous crime himself.

Besides, there was nothing he could do for her that he wasn't already doing, be it without his knowledge.

He was already protecting her by giving her a job and taking her home to England. She was clothed, fed, housed, and respected. She'd found a place where she could belong. He was already helping her overcome the nightmare of the last two years, by teaching her about goodness, trust, real passion, and pleasure.

The pain deep in her chest was more to do with unattainable opportunities. As Lady Serena Castleton, she could have been more than a short-term affair to a man such as this. She could have become his wife, a mother to his children, a true lover. Now she could be nothing more than a temporary paramour. He would move on and eventually marry. She would have to stand by and watch. As long as he was happy, she could bear it.

He noticed her sudden silence. Rolling to the side of the bed, he stood and collected his clothes. "It's late and we're sailing tomorrow. I'd best let you get some sleep." He bent to kiss her cheek. "Thank you for a very special night. I look forward to many more."

"Remember, it's only until we reach England. I'll hold you to your promise." She thought she glimpsed a defiant look in his eyes, but it was so fleeting she couldn't quite understand its implication. She didn't want to ruin this night. "Until England," she repeated.

He continued dressing in silence. She watched the moonlight dance over his magnificent body, and her heart gave

a lurch as she recognized the sensations his body aroused in her: protection, fierce loyalty, desire, and—far worse—love. She wanted to love this man. She wanted to be free to love him and to show him he might be damaged on the outside, but inside he was beautiful beyond words.

But that was a dream that could never come true. This was her punishment for her sins: to find the man of her dreams and to be unable to ever acknowledge him.

Once he was fully dressed, he moved to the door. With his back to her and his hand on the latch, he said quietly, “A part of me wants to be in England tomorrow, so that I may stop this nonsense with Harriet and get on with my life. But devil take me, a part of me would sail around the world for eternity to keep you with me.”

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. For once she was speechless. Pleasure and warmth radiated through her, but by the time she found her tongue he was gone.

She lay back and stared with deep sorrow at the ceiling. It was probably just as well. For what could she say to a man who, through circumstances beyond their control, could never truly be hers?

## Chapter Thirteen

**P**lymouth, England, June 1816

They were home.

It was still nighttime when she woke. Sarah drifted back to awareness, still exhausted from their urgent lovemaking. Christian had made love to her over and over again through the night, their desperation growing with each caress and kiss, knowing this would be their last night together. The ship barely rocked. They were no longer in open sea. She knew they'd docked at Plymouth sometime around midnight.

Her time as Christian's lover was at an end.

She listened to the soothing rhythm of his soft, deep breathing and turned her head on the pillow, gazing for a long moment at the wonderful man sleeping beside her. She wanted to paint this moment in her memory so she'd never forget his kindness, goodness, and gentleness.

*Christian.*

She knew she'd never stop thinking about his touch, his smell, the sinful words and sounds he made as he thoroughly loved her. She lay still, desperate to soak in the contentment filling her, yet at the same time needing to loosen the connection to him, so she could walk away without completely dying inside.

A tender smile played at her lips as she studied him. He'd hogged most of the small bunk, as usual, almost pushing her onto the cabin floor. She didn't mind. It gave her an excuse to lie close to him, to hug close to his warmth.



Christian slept on his stomach, facing her, his hand resting possessively on her breast, the sheets tangled loosely around his long, muscular legs. His dark hair fanned across his cheek, hiding his scars and highlighting his remaining facial beauty. Her eyes drank in the rest of him. Every time she saw the burn marks flowing over his bare back she wanted to stroke and soothe. But she didn't want to wake him just yet. She let a wistful sigh escape her.

It was hard not to touch him when she knew the velvet warmth of his skin and the safety of his embrace. Even if she was no longer his lover, he would always protect her. She loved him even more for that.

She should go back to her cabin and get ready to start her new life. She should go before he woke. He would try to stop her, try to talk her into continuing their relationship, and God help her, she could so easily cave in to his persuasion. How could she walk away from the best thing that had ever happened to her? How could she walk away from true love?

She inwardly gritted her teeth and called on the strength of her willpower. The longer she lingered, the greater the chances he would wake, and she couldn't take a scene. Raising herself up gingerly from the mattress, she tried to slip away from under his hand. Unfortunately, he moved and his fingers curled in her hair, stopping her from standing. She lay back down.

*Now what?* She turned her head to examine how best to free herself, but met his open, piercing emerald eyes. The sinfully black and enticing lashes gave him a sultry look. A look she could have done without.

A sleepy yet invigorated voice said, "Don't go! This doesn't have to end."

"You know as well as I that it does."

Christian flinched at her soft yet firm response. His heart beat erratically, his body tense. He was not quite sure what was happening to him. He sat up and stared out of the porthole at the Plymouth dock. Dawn was about to break. They'd arrived in England late last night, too late to disembark. He

was pleased, for it gave him one more night with Sarah. It was an unforgettable night, a night he never wanted to end.

He should be thrilled at being able to walk on English soil at long last and confront his nemesis. He needed to work out who had defamed him and why he'd spent so many months in purgatory. But instead, all he could think about was the warm body lying in this bunk beside him.

She sat up beside him and pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "The voyage home—that was our deal, you recall. We both know I cannot be Lily's governess and your lover. You took on the role of Lily's guardian. Her name is now linked with yours. Any scandal surrounding you will affect Lily. We must put her first."

Deep down inside he knew Sarah was right. Yet he wanted to keep her, no matter what. Society be damned! He was a recluse as it was. Although he was an earl, the only women he'd find willing to marry him would certainly only be after his title and fortune. Having had a taste of pure, unselfish giving, he could no longer settle for less. Sarah gave herself to him for no other reason than that it was her heart's desire. She wanted him—only him—scars and all. She had become his lover, expecting nothing from him but pleasure.

She deserved so much more than to spend her life as a governess. She was beautiful, witty, charming. But for the happenstance of her birth, she would have been a leader among the women of the *ton*. Men would flock to her beauty, and the women to her kindness and generosity of spirit.

He looked over his shoulder. "You could marry me." The words flowed from his mouth before he had the sense to understand what his declaration meant. She'd told him countless times she feared matrimony and the power it would give someone over her.

If he needed further proof of her selfless, giving nature, he had it. Her look of astonished expression faded to a gaze of guarded tenderness.

She shook her head. "If only I could!" was her anguished reply.

“There is nothing to stop you from marrying me.” He paused. “Unless you’d be embarrassed to be seen by my side.”

She flinched at his words and dropped her gaze to the rumpled bedsheets. “Don’t be ridiculous. I simply mean that an earl cannot marry his ward’s governess. It’s not done.” Her voice seemed strained.

“I’ve never been surer of anything.” He raised her chin with his finger and searched her face. “Sarah Cooper, for the first time in my life, I feel I’m seeing life clearly. I know that what we share is special. This type of ... friendship doesn’t happen to everyone. I want to embrace it. Nothing is more important to me than you. Nothing!”

“You say that now, but once you are home, will you change your mind? You’re not thinking clearly. We have had a passionate few weeks. I’m not sure with which part of your anatomy is making this life-changing decision. Given time, you may find a woman of your own social standing more appropriate. I’d hate to see you trapped by your honor. I know you. Once your promise is given, you’ll not renege on it.”

He caressed her face with his fingertips, emotion choking him. “This is much more than a whim to me now, or even a matter of honor. I won’t want to renege.”

“I’m touched.” She placed his hand over her heart. “It’s enough that you would offer marriage, that you’d want me to be your wife, when I come to you with nothing of value.”

“I value *you*.”

She shook her head. “I’m a governess. You should be marrying a lady. Society will pity you and laugh behind your back, and I know what a proud man you are.”

“Who’s to know you’re a governess? I can say I met the delicious Mrs. Cooper in Canada. Nobody needs to learn I met you because you applied for a job in my household.” He grew a tad wary as her eyes flared with panic at this.

“But what if they find out I grew up in the Duke of Hastings’ household?”

“Being with you, sharing the last few weeks together, I’m positive there is more to your birth than you know.”

She gasped.

“Could it not be possible that you are, in fact, the Duke’s daughter?”

“Serena is gone.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I mean illegitimate daughter. Why else would a duke allow a gardener’s child to befriend his daughter? The Duke of Hastings is not known for his sentimental nature.”

She looked away and in a whisper said, “If that is the case, it would be even more inappropriate for you to offer marriage.”

“Not if I could persuade the Duke to recognize you.”

“No!” Her anguished cry startled him. She scrambled out of bed and began dressing. “Even if it were true, I could not do that to my mother, the woman who raised me. Perhaps once she dies I could think about it... .”

Puzzled, he tried to read her expression. She was hiding something. She was afraid of something. “This isn’t about being owned, is it? I had hoped that you’d learned to trust me and to know I’d never hurt you.”

She halted in her dressing and pressed her fingers to his lips silencing him. “I do know that. I know the honorable man you are, and I’m so proud and flattered by your offer. But now that we are back on English soil I must put your needs first. You have troubles enough without an unknown woman, from a humble background, appearing as your wife.”

“I don’t deserve you,” he whispered, gazing into those magnificent blue eyes. Standing, he took her beloved face into his hands. He kissed her with a sudden aching ardor. For, whether she was ready or not, and by any means he could, Christian Trent knew he would make Sarah his wife.

“You deserve all the happiness in the world,” she answered, her eyes welling with tears. “Let me do what I feel

is right. *Please.*”

He gave a shuddering sigh. Tears were Sarah’s true weapon. He hated to see her cry. “I can’t bear to let us go. To see you every day, yet not be able to hold you, smile at you, touch you, love you ... Won’t you at least consider becoming my wife? Would it be so terrible if society shunned us? We’d have each other and our children. When I was fighting at Waterloo, all I could think about was surviving and begetting an heir. Now all I can think about is having a child who looks like you—boy or girl, it would make no difference.”

She cupped his cheek softly and smiled. “Oh, Christian, you are such a good man! I—I am so lucky to have met you.” She almost said she loved him, but she feared he’d never take no for an answer if she declared what was in her heart.

How could she marry him when she’d make him a laughingstock if she were ever caught? If anyone discovered she was Lady Serena Castleton, she’d face the death penalty and he’d have married a woman branded a murderess. Worse, then he’d have to watch her hang. It would be better to break his heart now than lead him further toward scandal, ridicule, and ruination.

She breathed in rapidly, trying to quell the pain ricocheting around her body. Fate was a cruel master. Here she was, being offered something she’d dreamed of, a man she’d wanted all her adult life, and she had to say no, both for her sake and for his.

Her denial was a huge weight descending to crush her in her chest. “The sun’s almost up. I must get back to my cabin. We will talk of this no more. You are a man of your word, and you promised me that our relationship would revert to what was proper once we reached England. I expect you to keep your promise.”

His eyes flashed with determination and his chiseled jaw tightened. “I will honor your wish. We are no longer lovers. But I gave no promise about not wooing you. I once was considered quite the seducer.”

She gulped, realizing his words were true. He could make her want him with simply a smile. If he seriously courted her, how was she to resist him?

“You will marry me.”

Without replying, she crossed to him and kissed his cheek. “Goodbye, sweet, wonderful Christian. Thank you for showing me that not all men are selfish, egotistical monsters. Thank you for sharing a short part of your life with me. I won’t ever forget your kindness.” She straightened and moved to the door. “When next we meet, I will be the respectable governess, Mrs. Cooper, and you will be my employer, Lord Markham. Everything will be as it should be.” Unable to look at him again without bursting into tears, she exited and rushed toward her cabin to cry until she had no more tears left.

Christian did not stop her. He watched her go, and a piece of his heart went with her. Pain ripped through his chest, hurting him more savagely than when he had been burned. He spoke to the empty cabin, which seemed to close in around him. “This is not over yet, my darling.”

True to his word, Christian had been nothing but proper since they’d disembarked. A part of her couldn’t help being irritated at his seemingly easy acceptance of her decision. As in two sides of the same coin, she wanted him to woo her and, at the same time, observe all the proprieties. But if he should woo her, what if she couldn’t resist?

The journey from Portsmouth to Dorset, while comfortable, was strained. The carriage bounced over rough roads, the loud rumbles of wheels on stones unable to cover the silence within. Christian barely acknowledged her presence. Even Lily noticed the tension inside the carriage. The little girl’s excitement at being in England and heading toward her new home waned as her guardian seemed lost in thought. Finally she curled up on the seat and lay sleeping, her head resting on Sarah’s knee.

Sarah cleared her throat. “My lord, how long will the journey to your home in Dorset take? Will we have to stop somewhere for the night?”

He turned cool eyes upon her. “Lily is asleep. There is no need to be so formal.”

She ignored the provocation. “I packed clothing for Lily and me into one bag just in case we are to stay overnight at an inn.”

He nodded. “Good. We will be stopping. However, we are not going to Henslowe Court. A note from Grayson was waiting when we docked. He informs me that Harriet is still in London until the end of the season. The sooner I confront her, the sooner this nonsense stops.”

She bit her lip to hold back a cry. How could she go to London, especially during the season? Surely someone would recognize her. “You are not dropping Lily and me in Dorset?”

He leveled a hard stare at her and curtly replied, “No. I want you with me.”

“Want Lily with you,” she prompted.

He smiled blandly. “Do not play dumb. No. I want *you* with me. As I am your employer, you will go where I desire.” His hot gaze left her in no doubt as to exactly what he desired.

She ran her tongue over her dry lips, refusing to acknowledge the flush of panic searing her skin. She also refused to get into an argument with him when he was in this piqued mood. “As you wish, Lord Markham.” Since he threatened her with his status, she’d address him accordingly.

He threw his gloves on the seat beside him and sighed. “There is no need for this. When we are alone, surely we can be adult about this situation.”

For self-preservation, Sarah knew she could not. She felt her eyes fill with tears. “I can’t. I’m sorry. It will be too hard. The only way I can remain in my position is to start afresh. Start as I should have started when you employed me in Canada. I’m a governess within your household. That is all.”

“That’s never all you’ll be to me.”

She held his blazing stare.

He snorted and turned away, still scowling. “Stubborn woman. Sometimes I wish you *were* simply after my title and fortune.”

They arrived in London at dusk the next day. They’d stayed overnight at an inn, and Sarah made sure she roomed with Lily. That move made for a very frosty reception the next morning. Christian did not appreciate being outwitted.

Fortunately, he had sent word ahead to the staff at his London house to expect them. The servants busied themselves seeing to the luggage, while Christian urged Lily and her up the front steps and into the entrance hall.

“Welcome home, my lord.”

“Glad to be back, Roberts. May I introduce my ward, Miss Lily Pearson, and her governess, Mrs. Cooper? I trust Mrs. Boyle has readied rooms for them.”

There was a cough at his side, and Mrs. Boyle stepped forward. “Of course, my lord, and if they would like to follow me, I’ll show them to their rooms and they can freshen up before dinner.”

He watched Sarah and noted that she seemed unfazed by the opulent surroundings, yet another sign of her upbringing. He knew the Duke of Hastings’s home was even grander than his own. She did not look at him as she followed plump, friendly Mrs. Boyle.

“I shall see you at dinner, ladies,” he called after their retreating backs. He could hear Lily already exclaiming over the house as they made their way gracefully up the stairs.

“There is a pile of urgent correspondence waiting in your study, my lord. Lord Blackwood has not been by in over two weeks.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Did you mention to him the urgency?”

“I did, but got no response. I finally sent one of the staff around to his townhouse, only to be told he’d left London.”



His temper flared. “Left London? Where did he go? But I have only just arrived.”

“I believe Lord Fullerton knows more. There is a note from him. It says he’ll call around as soon as it’s convenient.”

“Thank you, Roberts. Send for him immediately. Now I’d like to wash and change before he gets here.”

Lily was still busy exploring her room and excitedly helping her new maid, Eliza, unpack. Sarah had suggested to Eliza that Lily have a bath and a rest before dinner.

Sarah’s lips formed a tight line when she saw her room. She’d been placed in a guest room down the hall from Lily—a room not befitting her station as an employee, for it was too grand.

Christian was heralding his strategy.

When she hesitated in the doorway, Mrs. Boyle asked, “Is the room not to your liking? Lord Markham was quite adamant that this room be yours.”

“I’m sure he was,” she muttered under her breath. She turned and smiled at Mrs. Boyle. “The room is lovely. Grander than I was expecting.”

“Lord Markham explained to the staff that this is what you are used to, being you’re distantly related to the Duke of Hastings, and fallen on hard times. I could tell as soon as I saw you enter the house you were from quality.”

Sarah’s smile fled in an instant, replaced by cold, numbing fear. He’d told people she was distantly related to the Duke? She knew how servants gossiped. Soon it would be all over London that a woman related to the Duke was now in his household. How long before anyone put two and two together and came after her?

The best-laid plans of mice and men ... She was definitely the mouse in this story. Trapped! She should leave, and leave at once, but where would she go? Perhaps she could suggest that she escort Lily directly to Dorset without him, saying that it would be expedient to be out of his way while he fought to

clear his name. It would protect Lily from gossip and innuendo, she'd tell him.

If she had to, she would give him an incentive to let her leave. She knew what sort of incentive he'd want. But right now every cell in her body called to her to flee. And she'd do whatever it took to remain safe.

Lord Hadley Fullerton didn't arrive until dinner was about to be served. Impatient as he was to talk privately, Christian wanted to see Sarah more, so he suggested the men talk after they'd eaten.

The men then discussed Sebastian's situation. Hadley hoped to have good news soon. He felt sure that with the right inducement he could secure a pardon from the Prince.

"Damn it all, if I'd negotiated harder, Sebastian could have sailed home with you, Christian."

"I believe he's unlikely to feel the desire to rush home too soon."

Hadley stretched his long legs out toward the fire, even though the evening was uncommonly warm. "Ah, a woman."

Christian shrugged. "What else would keep Sebastian from England?"

Just then Roberts entered and announced, "Miss Lily Pearson and Mrs. Cooper."

The men rose to their feet as the ladies entered. Christian wanted Lily to dine with them on her first night in her new home. He wanted her to feel included in his life.

Lily looked delightful. Eliza had set her hair, and Christian's chest swelled with pride as she rushed over and gave him a curtsy.

"Thank you, Lord Markham," Lily gushed. "My room is lovely, and you brought all my things from home. That was very kind of you." She threw her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

"I wanted you to have something of your parents with you. This is as much your home now as it is mine."

A man coughed beside him, and he looked at Hadley Fullerton, his friend and a consummate rake. Hadley's eyes were locked on Sarah, Christian saw, and a possessive fire ignited inside him. *She's mine*, he wanted to scream.

"Lord Fullerton, may I present my ward, Miss Lily Pearson, and her governess, Mrs. Cooper."

Hadley approached Sarah, the image of a cobra just before it was about to strike, and it took massive reserves of Christian's willpower not to growl and position himself between them.

But his shoulders relaxed with satisfaction when he noted that Hadley's rakish charms had absolutely no effect on Sarah. In fact, she looked pale, as if she was about to be sick.

"Governess? My God, I thought it was you the minute you entered the room. Lady Serena ... I didn't realize you'd remarried. My condolences. What happened to Dennett?"

Christian shuddered and froze. His world tilted from under him, and involuntarily he moved to brace himself, as if for impact. *Lady Serena ...*

Clarity struck him, an axe blow poised to finish him off. He looked at her, aghast. She *was* Lady Serena Castleton. She'd played with him. She'd concealed her true identity from him, and there could be only one reason. She'd never had any intention of staying with him.

She'd used him.

He recoiled from her, sickened.

He looked at her, this stranger, this betrayer. Hadley kept on talking. Each word he uttered was a knife cut to his fragile psyche. Each syllable pushed the blade in deeper. Hadley prattled on as if everything were normal, yet it wasn't. She'd lied to him.

Why?

As his rich, good-looking friend, oblivious to the tension in the room, continued to address Sarah, or Serena, Christian tried to contain the anger moving as rapidly as venom through

his veins. He drew on his inner strength, counted to ten, and exhaled through his mouth. He would not lose control, not now, nor ever, especially not in front of Hadley.

And he'd be damned if he didn't have a good reason to be angry. She'd told him Serena was dead. Wait, no! She'd said she was gone. . . .

He stared at the woman who'd shared her body with him for the last few weeks, and nausea rose once again. She'd implied Lady Serena Castleton was dead. He thought they'd shared everything, and that he knew her as well as he knew himself. It was all a lie. She was a lie. A complete stranger, it seemed.

He hadn't gotten to know her at all.

Serena dropped her gaze and shifted nervously on her feet. Hadley still had hold of her hand.

"Lord Fullerton, it's wonderful to see you."

Her words fed his anger. She obviously knew him, and knew him well. How well? Jealousy flared yet again and mixed with his potent fury.

Hadley stepped back, a frown chasing across his brow. "I can't believe the Duke of Hastings's beautiful daughter is a governess now. What on earth has happened? I haven't heard that the Duke is in financial distress. I thought your marriage to Dennett solved that problem."

She swallowed, her slender neck rippling with anxiety. Christian glowered. "Mrs. Cooper, I find that a very interesting question myself. I'd love to hear the answer."

Hadley looked between them, and realization dawned. "The devil take me! You did not know her true identity?"

"No." He wanted to say more, but Lily was watching and listening to the adults with an open mouth.

Roberts interrupted the tense scene by announcing, "Dinner is served."

An icy calm descended over him. "Thank you, Roberts." He turned to Lily and offered her his arm. "Shall we go in?"

Lord Fullerton, will you escort Mrs. Cooper?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Christian left the room, Lily walking beside him. He couldn't bring himself to look at Serena. He'd been looking forward to eating; now his stomach churned too much to even contemplate a morsel.

The anger emanating from Christian set Serena's teeth chattering. She'd never forget the look on his face when he realized who she was. She'd never forget the play of confusion, hurt, anger, and pain that ran over his face.

She'd utterly hurt him. And she would wound him more savagely when she explained further. She knew now there was no way around it. He would demand answers and she couldn't lie to him. She thought Christian was a fair man and a good man.

Tonight she'd learn if Christian was a forgiving man.

What would he do when he knew the truth about her killing her husband? Would he be revolted by the fact he'd slept with a murderess? Or would his mother's death at the hands of his father mean he'd understand her predicament? Would he realize she killed in self-defense? Perhaps he'd even forgive her for the sin she'd committed.

He might understand killing in self-defense, but she knew in her soul he'd not forgive her deceit. He'd hate the fact she'd lied to him.

Christian refused to look at her or address her during the meal. She tried to eat, but the food tasted like soot in her mouth.

Lord Fullerton seemed embarrassed. He talked to Lily, avoiding engaging either herself or Christian in conversation. Lily was happy to chatter about her life in Canada, her parents, and the voyage to England.

As soon as dessert had been consumed, Serena rose. "Come, Lily, it is time for bed. We should let the men discuss their business."

She was a coward. She was in full retreat.

“Goodnight, Lord Markham and Lord Fullerton.” Lily walked and placed a kiss on Christian’s cheek. “I know I’m going to love it here in England.”

The men stood as Serena reached for Lily’s hand.

“Goodnight, ladies,” Hadley cheerfully murmured, ignoring Christian’s scowl.

She hoped she’d bought herself some time. If she fled to bed, Christian would have to wait until morning to interrogate her.

She was almost through the door when Christian called, “We’ll talk later, Mrs. Cooper.”

Later? What did that mean? “I shall make myself available in the morning, my lord.”

He took his seat without further comment, a mutinous stare fixed firmly in her direction.

She narrowed her eyes at him. She’d promised herself that she would not cower before any man. She might be in the wrong about deceiving him, but she’d not beg for understanding. She’d done what she had to do to survive.

With a final glare she swept out of the room.

## Chapter Fourteen

“**W**hat the hell is the matter with you?” his friend turned on him as soon as they heard the ladies’ footsteps fade. “You’re angry. Why? I can perfectly understand why Lady Serena would not want the world to know her fallen circumstances.”

Christian turned away to hide his pain, for he did not want Hadley to know how badly she’d hurt him.

“There is more to it than that?” his friend asked.

He looked at Hadley and raised a shoulder in a shrug.

“Good, God. She’s your mistress! Tell me I’m wrong. She’ll be completely ruined if the *ton* learns of it.”

“She is not my mistress.” His words were true. She’d been his lover briefly, but she was in no way his paid companion. That would tarnish what he’d believed to be a pure and selfless love. It would appear that was not true. Serena had used him.

Hadley looked his fill and raised his eyebrows. “But she was. I forgot what a crafty devil you are with words. She was, what—your lover? You gave her the job in payment?”

“No.”

“No to what? No, not your lover, or no, no payment?” Hadley asked dryly. At Christian’s continued silence, he probed, “No? That’s all you’ll tell me?”

He nodded. “Until I’ve spoken to Sar—I mean Serena, you will leave this situation alone and speak of it to no one.”

Hadley ran a hand through his hair. “Of course, I wouldn’t dream of gossiping about the girl.” He looked at Christian with an angry expression. “You of all people should know how I detest gossip.”

“I need a bloody drink. You have news for me. I dread to think what else I’ll learn this night. Sit down and fill me in on the Duke of Barforte and his lying daughter.”

“The situation is serious. Barforte has blackened your name in all the clubs. He’s hinted that you are responsible for Carla’s murder. He is portraying you as a vile bully, like your father. The old rumors about your mother’s death have begun circulating again, and your absence from England has done nothing to quell the talk. It’s good you are home,” he added. “Further, I suggest you show yourself in public at numerous events. Brazen the talk out. Show them you are not in hiding.”

Christian shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He’d looked forward to socializing when he thought Sarah—Serena—would be on his arm. He’d show the world that not all women thought him hideous. But now his confidence had gone. Was the story she’d spun him about her marital abuse true? Was the relationship they’d shared a convenient fuck on the voyage home or just her way of managing him? No wonder she’d turned him down so easily. She was not a lowly governess thankful for a deformed earl’s attentions, but the daughter of a duke. With her beauty and breeding she could have any man she wanted.

Serena obviously did not want *him*, or not anymore. Well, he didn’t need her either. It was time to put his troubles first and find the person responsible for this litany of lies.

“Carla’s death is the piece of the puzzle that could tell us more. Did Grayson discover any leads?”

Hadley shook his head. “No. He still has Bow Street Runners investigating.”

“I must admit I’m surprised Grayson isn’t here. Where is he? I thought he was going to sound out Harriet—delicately, obviously. If anyone can handle a lady, it’s Grayson.”



“As a matter of fact, I’m not exactly sure. I received a cryptic message from him about aiding Lady Portia Flagstaff and I haven’t seen or heard from him since. Most unlike him, I must say.”

Christian tried to shrug off his concern. “Portia has been the bane of Grayson’s life since he promised her brother he’d look out for her. When a man dies in your arms begging a favor, only a cur would refuse. How could Grayson know she was more spirited, and far more trouble, than her brother ever was?” He took a long drink. “I’m sure he’ll turn up eventually—once he’s extracted Portia from whatever trouble she’s got herself into this time.” He refilled his glass. “Did Grayson speak with Harriet?” The catch in his voice was a clue as to how important what Grayson might have learned could be.

Hadley shook his head. “Not good news, I’m afraid. She swears it was you. She says the man had a scarred face, and the voice was refined.” He stretched. “Unfortunately, she hates you and would be happy to see you dead, as would her father.”

“What the hell do I do now?”

Hadley leaned forward. “I’d start my talking with the Runners. Ask them what they have found. Then I’d continue as if nothing were amiss. Resume your foray in society. Having Lady Serena Castleton on your arm would certainly aid your cause. Helping a damsel stranded on the other side of the world would be a perfect tale of heroism. Not that you need any more tales of your heroics—your sacrifice at Waterloo is still talked about.”

“You mentioned her husband, Dennett. What was he like?”

Hadley raised his thick black eyebrows and then laughed at him, shaking his head. “Why didn’t you ask Sebastian? He and Dennett knew each other very well. They hated each other. Dennett was too good-looking for Sebastian’s taste. He was too much competition for the ladies Sebastian wanted.” He sobered. “I’m being facetious. Sebastian hated him because Dennett was a sadist. He liked to abuse women. Dennett beat one of Sebastian’s regular ladies at the Honey Pot and almost killed her. I thought Sebastian was going to choke the life out

of Dennett by the time he'd finished with him, but Maitland pulled him off. Sebastian had Dennett banned from most of London's high-class brothels, and some lower ones, in retribution."

Christian's cold hardness toward Serena thawed a fraction. In all likelihood she hadn't lied about her husband's violence.

"Yet, the Duke married his only daughter to Dennett?"

"Money." Hadley's expression was undisguised distaste. "Serena's marriage happened indecently quickly. They left as husband and wife for America before the *ton* had even heard of the match."

Christian kept his tone neutral. "Did Sebastian know Serena Castleton?"

"I'm sure he'd been presented to her, as we all were." He nodded "That is, except you and Grayson. Both of you were in France when she was presented. The Duke shopped her on the marriage market like a prize mare. He wanted payment for the honor of marrying his daughter. He needed the money." He took a swig from his brandy balloon. "She is damn beautiful. There were many who were tempted, but not Sebastian."

Bloody hell! Sebastian had been aware of who she was when they were in the Caribbean. That's why he'd been down on the beach with her. Christian knew his friend had been hiding something. He believed Sebastian when he said he'd not seduced her, so it must have been her identity he was keeping secret. But why did Sebastian protect her? Why hadn't Sebastian confided in him? He would have—unless Serena had sworn him to secrecy.

He needed to talk with Serena.

"I wonder what happened to Dennett and why she remarried so quickly."

Hadley's words were an echo of the thoughts churning in his brain. Who was Mr. Cooper? Was there even a Mr. Cooper? For some reason his gut clenched, and for the first time he considered the fact that Serena might be in some kind of trouble. This was the only reason he could think of as to

why Sebastian had not confided in him. Was Sebastian helping her? If Sebastian had given Serena his word, he'd not break it, not even for Christian.

“I'd like to know the answer to that myself.” He rose. “Thank you, Hadley. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help Sebastian. I'll seek out the Bow Street Runners first thing in the morning, but a part of me desperately wants to confront Harriet.”

Hadley rose and slapped him on the shoulder. “It's good to have you home. By the way, a word of warning. I know you're going to confront Serena. Be aware that losing your temper is unlikely to get you anywhere. She's used to a bully. You're more likely to attract bears with honey, if you get my meaning.”

Irritation flittered over him. Hadley never shrank from speaking his mind, the privilege of being a younger son and not having to care about politics within society. But this matter was between Serena and himself.

“I know,” he admitted under his breath.

“If she's in trouble, she's liable to run away. And I suspect she is, given she's not using her father's influence to take her rightful place in society.”

“Agreed. There is certainly more to her story, and I intend to find out what it is as soon as you take your leave.”

Hadley moved to the door. “I'm gone. Let me know how it turns out.”

Christian smiled wryly, and Hadley took his leave.

His mind whirled with fears and doubts as he slowly walked up the stairs toward Serena's room.

Serena heard the heavy footsteps echoing in the corridor, coming yet closer to her room, and she knew Christian wouldn't wait until morning. The time for running had long passed. Besides, she had faith that he would help her. He might despise her when he heard her tale, perhaps even hate her, but he'd not hand her over to the law.

She rose from her bed and donned a robe. Moving toward the banked fire, she scooped up more coal and stirred the embers. The room was like ice, or maybe guilt was simply making her feel cold.

She'd barely seated herself in the big wing chair when Christian entered and closed the door after him. No knock, no request; he simply entered.

It was, after all, his house.

As he moved across the floor toward where she sat, she could almost see steam coming off him. His contained rage was palpable.

She couldn't make out his expression in the firelight, the only light in the room. She'd purposely kept the room in shadows. A pronouncement of guilt was easier in the dark.

She swallowed the putrid distaste of her pending confession. She didn't wait for him to speak. "I'm Lady Serena Castleton, or I was. I became Mrs. Peter Dennett just under two years ago. Now I'm his widow. That, at least, is no lie. But Mrs. Cooper is a figment of my imagination."

He moved to stand directly at her feet, towering over her chair. "Is that why you played your little games with me, by leading me on with the little scraps of passion you deemed to throw my way? Blaming Dennett's mistreatment—Christ, please don't tell me that was all a lie too?" Christian's voice chilled the room, its echo cold and unfeeling.

"His mistreatment of me is no lie. It was worse than you could possibly imagine." Serena reached out a hand and touched his arm. She felt him tense under her touch. He shook her off.

"I could never understand my father's rages at my mother, but God help me, I'm just holding on to my composure. Violence is simmering just below the surface. Be careful. I won't stand for any more lies."

Serena didn't flinch. She knew the man in front of her better than he knew himself. He would not hurt her. He was

nothing like his father. He was hurt and angry. And he had every right to feel that way.

Without even looking at her, Christian lashed out verbally. “I should have known you weren’t what you seemed the day we met. The way in which you appeared to ignore my disfigurement as if it were inconsequential had me fooled, Serena. I thought I was immune to women’s falsehoods. I’ve seen many try to trick me. Those who wanted my fortune threw themselves at me while shuddering in revulsion at the thought of having to share my bed. But yet again, the fairer sex has brought me down as no man has ever done.” The glow from the fire threw light on Christian’s face. “You should have trusted me.”

Her heart melted at the pain in his voice. He was more hurt than angry. What had Lord Fullerton shared with him?

She licked her lips, wishing she had a large glass of whiskey to drink for courage.

“What I feel for you is real. I tried to resist you. How could I allow myself to become involved with you when I knew nothing could come of it? I tried so hard to ignore the burning passion you ignited in my blood, but heaven help me, I just wasn’t strong enough.” A sob escaped from deep within her chest. “Christian, look at me, please. You’ve got to believe me.”

“I don’t have to do anything where you are concerned, madam. Your betrayal taints every memory of our voyage.”

“How have I betrayed you? I haven’t betrayed you. I simply did not tell you the whole truth,” Serena cried.

“You didn’t trust me enough. You must have realized how I felt about you. Christ, I asked you to marry me.”

“I wanted to tell you, but that would make you an accessory to murder. I couldn’t do that to you.”

His eyes opened wide in horror. “Murder? Christ, *who are you really?*” He began to turn away from her.

Anger flared in Serena. She deserved a chance to be heard. She grabbed his arm. “Please, you’ve learned what Peter was

like or else you would have simply thrown me out into the street. Will you listen to my side of the story before condemning me? I thought you, of all men, given your mother's death, would not judge me without a fair hearing."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Go on. Tell me everything." His tone sounded calm and reasonable. A spark of hope ignited in her soul.

"I don't know where to start."

He took the other chair by the fire and indicated she should resume her seat. "I find the beginning the best place."

Serena pulled the robe tightly around her. If she was to strip her soul bare, she'd rather do to it without being naked to his gaze as well. She began her confession. "As with most distasteful tales, my story revolves around money—or rather, the lack of it." She drew in a shuddering breath. "My father loves to gamble, and he got himself into some financial straits. Unbeknown to me, he owed a huge amount of money to Peter Dennett."

Christian clenched his hands on his lap. "You were the settlement of the debt?" She nodded and looked away. He had to ask. "Why did you agree?"

Self-loathing coated her words. "Because I was young and stupid, and Father swore it would help the family, and Peter was the brother of a marquis, handsome and charming. I did not love him, but I thought my life would at least be content. It was unlikely I'd marry for love, anyway. The man I loved didn't even know I existed." She looked directly at Christian with a raised eyebrow.

"Me?" he asked. "You were in love with me? We'd never even been introduced."

"Perhaps 'love' is too strong a word. Infatuated, actually. Remember the stories I told you about Lady Serena spying on you at her father's ball?" His face suddenly turned a charming shade of red at the memory. She sighed. "It was silly infatuation. I know that now. What I feel for you now is—"

well, I can't find the words. Love is deeper, more consuming, and less selfish. I was just a silly girl."

She chewed her bottom lip. "No, I'm being too hard on myself. I wasn't silly; rather, I was naive. I gave in to Father's plan because I never knew men as evil as Peter Dennett existed in this world. Perhaps if women were not kept in the dark about such people and their perversions, I would not have been so easily fooled."

There was barely any light in the room, and she was glad he could not see the wash of shame over her face.

"It wasn't until the bishop completed the vows that I even understood Peter was taking me away from England. They'd kept everything from me." She could feel the tears welling. "I never thought I'd see England again. And—" She gulped back another sob. "Once on board the ship, in my husband's bed, I didn't care. All I cared about was surviving." She couldn't hold the tears back now. A sob rose up and escaped before she could slap her hand over her mouth.

In a flash, Christian rose and gathered her to his chest, pulling her down onto his lap. "You're not alone now." He cupped her face tenderly and wiped a tear away with his thumb. "What happened when you got to America?" he asked softly.

She briefly closed her eyes. "He treated me literally like one of his slaves. One time he even had me stripped and lashed when I denied him his husband's rights. He meant it to serve as an example to his slaves—if the master treated his wife like that, what would he do to them if they disobeyed? That was his twisted thinking. You saw the scars on my back. He took pleasure in humiliating me. He seemed to relish seeing me in pain. After one episode, I couldn't walk or leave my bed for over a week. I knew if I stayed much longer, he'd kill me."

Christian's hand tightened on her knee but he said nothing.

She wiped the tears from her face. She'd cried too many tears already because of Peter Dennett. "Then one night he brought a male slave to my room." Her voice faltered, and she

gave an anguished cry. “I can’t—I can’t tell you this. You’ll be revolted by me... .”

He pulled her tight against his chest, the heat from his body warming the chill inside her soul. “Nothing done to you against your will could ever revolt me. I just want the truth,” he whispered against her cheek. She clung to him, praying he’d understand and forgive her.

“He ordered me to let the slave service me while he watched.”

“If he weren’t already dead, I’d kill him.” The venom in his voice sent a flutter through her heart, and her hope rose at his words.

“It was Zachary, husband of Pippa, a slave who worked as my maid. She and I had become firm friends. Peter used to regularly abuse her too.

“Zachary was brought to my bedchamber and told what to do. Peter sat in a chair at the side of the bed, naked and fully aroused. He was going to take his pleasure by watching another man fuck his wife. He instructed Zachary to make the rape look real or else he’d rape Pippa again, promising to hurt her badly this time.”

She’d never forget the agony of Zachary’s choice reflected in his eyes. “He had to hurt one of us—me or Pippa. As he should have, he chose not to hurt his wife. As he approached the bed he kept apologizing, kept asking God for forgiveness.”

Christian tightened his hold and started gently rocking her on his lap.

“It was Zachary’s pain that made my temper snap. I was not so victimized yet as to sit helplessly by. I fought. I refused Peter’s request and began screaming at him. I told him that he could beat me all he liked, but I’d never sin before God for him. He ordered Zachary from the room, and I thought I was in for a whipping. Instead, he started to strangle me, his hands tight around my throat. I couldn’t breathe and I began to see stars. I knew he was trying to kill me. I managed to reach for



the decanter of whiskey I kept by my bed. It was heavy and made of thick glass. I smashed him over the head with it.”

“Clever girl.”

“Zachary raced in upon hearing the crash and the thud of Peter’s body hitting the floor. There was blood everywhere. It poured from his wound. Zachary checked Peter and told me I’d killed him.” She covered her face with her hands. “I didn’t mean to. All I could think about was surviving.” Great racking sobs engulfed her body, and Christian simply rocked her, smoothing her hair and whispering that everything would be all right.

“You acted in self-defense.” He reached into his coat. A second later he passed her his handkerchief. “Is this why you remained incognito?”

She raised reddened eyes. “There is more. Zachary told me to collect my valuables and we would run away together with Pippa. We would try to make it to Canada. He and Pippa had been planning such an escape for months. They thought having a white woman along with them would help if we were stopped. They could pretend to be my servants.

“Zachary left to get Pippa and we arranged to meet at the stables. I grabbed my jewelry and made my way quietly to the meeting point. However, not quietly enough, as it turned out. Sean Burcher, my husband’s overseer, caught me. He’s a lecher.” She caught her breath. “He’d been watching everything through a peephole in my room. Unbeknown to me he’d been spying on me for months.”

“Christ. Your father’s a dead man. How could he hand you over into this sort of life? How could he not take the time to find out who and what Peter Dennett was?”

“I’m sure he knew. He just didn’t care. I wrote to Father, hinting at what Peter was like. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him the complete truth. Father’s reply stated that I was married before God and that it was up to me to behave like a dutiful wife and not invoke my husband’s wrath.”

“Invoke his wrath—Christ!” Christian ran a hand over his face. “Well, I bloody care.”

She gave a tentative smile. “Burcher tried to rape me, but Zachary once again saved me. We tied Sean up, and all the while he was yelling and cursing and swearing that he’d hunt me down and make sure I was hanged.”

She looked at Christian. “I don’t want to hang,” she uttered with quiet determination. “Not for killing a man like Peter Dennett. The world’s a better place without him.”

Christian remained speechless, studying her with an expressionless face. “So, my advertisement for a governess was very opportune. You probably saw it as a godsend. A grotesque and desperate earl you could easily sway, just with the batting of your eyelashes.”

She sucked in a breath of indignation at his words. “No!” she cried. “I thought you were fate, an angel sent to save me. Besides, if you recall, I tried to hide my looks.”

Reaching out a hand, she stroked his cheek. “I thought it was God telling me he was helping me, for I used to worship you from afar. I dreamed of becoming Lady Markham right up until the day I was married to Peter Dennett.”

“I see.” The short, whispered words rushed from him on an exhalation, as though someone had punched him in the stomach, or perhaps stuck a dagger through his heart. “But now that you are safely hidden in England, I’m not such a catch, am I? Better to simply use me for protection, is that right?”

“How can you even think that after all we have shared?”

“How, my lady? You seemed quite averse to marrying me or remaining my lover only a few days ago. In fact, as soon as we stepped onto English soil, it’s as if you no longer needed me.”

She swallowed hard. A trifle pale, but with a look of stony resolve, she took his hands in hers. “With every breath in my body, I swear I wanted to accept your proposal, but how could I? How could I become your wife without the world realizing

who I was? Then I would have dragged your good name through the mud. I know you. You would have defended me. How could I let you fall in love with me and then let you watch me hang? It was better to hurt you now, before we became entwined too deeply.”

He bent and kissed her lips chastely. “It’s too late for that. I’m already in deep. And you’re right. I will defend you until my dying breath. You killed in self-defense and are blameless.”

Christian could still recall his mother’s anguished cries in the night. It wasn’t until he was much older that he’d come to understand what they had signified. His father had beaten his mother. His father had killed his mother. He’d not see another innocent woman die because of a brutal bully. Unlike his mother, Serena would not be left alone and helpless.

“Oh, Christian, how on earth can I prove that? There is no way Sean Burcher will tell the truth. I cut him with a knife. I escaped. I humiliated him. My only other witnesses are slaves. What British court would take the word of a slave over a white man? Peter is the brother of a marquis!”

“Sebastian can testify for you. He’s also a marquis.” He hugged her, pulling her tightly against his chest. “He knows of Dennett’s behavior. Dennett almost killed one of Sebastian’s lightskirts with his sadistic tendencies. I’m sure we could find other men willing to testify to Dennett’s debauched character.”

“Lord Coldhurst did say that all I had to do was ask and he’d come to my aid.”

“Ah, so he did know who you were when we were in Jamaica. I thought he was hiding something.” Christian couldn’t hide the stab of hurt in his tone.

“Don’t think too badly of your friend. I made him promise not to tell you who I was. He was only protecting you. That’s why he interrogated me at the beach. He too thought I was abusing your good nature.”

When she finished speaking, Serena met his stare with a look of guarded tenderness. Blue shadows from the moonlight

sculpted his face as she searched it for signs of how he was feeling.

“He must have believed you were genuine, for we came to blows over you, yet he did not reveal your identity.”

“In York, when I entered your study that first day, I can’t explain my reaction to you. I was drawn to you in exactly the same way as I had been when I was a young girl. I inwardly cried when I saw your wounds, and wondered how anyone could mark something so beautiful. I knew in that moment we would be good for each other. I got the overwhelming impression that somehow we could heal each other.”

“You were the first woman to look me in the eye since I received my burns. That was what impressed me.”

“I saw past your injuries to the man underneath. You were still the good, honorable, and kind man I had worshiped from afar.” She cupped his cheek. “And you’re still my beautiful, sexy hero.”

He could barely breathe. “You still think I’m beautiful?”

Her gaze trailed lingeringly over his finely chiseled face and drank in his potent male beauty. “How could I think otherwise? You are beautiful, both inside and out. Look at what you have done for me. You have had the patience, kindness, and understanding to help a woman overcome her worst fears. I can’t imagine how empty and cold my life would have become without the touch of another human being—without your touch. And here you are protecting me even after you’ve heard about everything I’ve done, and that I had deceived you as well. I’ve never wanted any man the way I want you.”

“Would you want me even if I couldn’t protect you?”

“Christian, I never ever expected you to protect me. I still don’t. I never thought you’d be interested in me as a lover in the first place. I was more than happy to be Lily’s governess. After what Peter did to me, wanting to be intimate with a man was the last thing on my mind. I couldn’t bring myself to let any man near me. It was you who pursued *me*.”

What she said was true. If she'd been trying to manipulate him into protecting her, she would have taken the opportunity to seduce him the first night she came to his room. Instead she'd simply stayed to ease his nightmare, to help him, not herself.

But what would happen when she became free of the charges? If he aided her in getting the charges dropped, would she still stay with him? He wanted to help her regardless of what it might cost him. Once she became Lady Serena Castleton once again, men would flock to her. Would her feelings for him turn to pity, and would she decide she could do better than an ugly, disfigured war hero?

He could force her hand right now. Marriage! He'd help her if she married him. But did he want her on those terms? If he made marriage a condition of aiding her, he'd never know if she truly loved him or if she felt nothing more than pity.

Christian struggled with himself. Did he still want to marry her? Could he protect her if she became Lady Markham?

They would both be dragged through the courts, and the process would tarnish his name still further. Then, there was the situation with Barforte. Would the Duke use Harriet's rape against him? Would Harriet's accusations be listened to and believed? Was his word of honor still recognized by his peers? Would it be enough to protect Serena?

He could never live with himself if he promised her the protection of his name only to discover that his name was now not enough to save her.

Despite all this, he could not live without her. He knew that much. He had to think long and hard before deciding on a course of action. Her life, and therefore his own, depended on the decision he made.

Lifting her tense hand from where it lay on his chest, Christian bent his head, closed his eyes, and slowly kissed it. He heard the unsteady inhalation of her breath as her tears fell upon their joined hands. Her tiny sob melted his heart, and he covered her hand in kisses, every movement strengthening his resolve to reach deep within himself and protect her for the

rest of her life. She would not end up dying young because of the brutality of her husband.

She was not alone, unlike his mother had been.

“We will think of a way to clear your name. For more than anything in the world, I want you to become my wife and the mother of my children. I love you, my beautiful girl.” He rested a hand on her belly. “You might already be carrying my child, and I want that more than anything.”

She put her hand on top of his and leaned in to press her lips to his scarred cheek. As she drew back she said simply, “I love you too.” At his look of disbelief she added, “Truly. It’s as if I’ve always loved you.”

“I don’t care about the past, Serena,” he whispered in a surge of fierce loyalty. “I want you to forgive yourself for what happened. God must agree you’re innocent, because he was helping you when he brought you to me. And I will lay down my life before I see you hurt further. We will work out a way to set you free. But I need time, time to consult with my lawyers and to build a substantial case. I’ll not reveal your identity until we are ready to win.”

“What if we can never prove it?” she asked in a subdued voice.

“Then we will retreat to Henslowe Court and live our lives in secret. I’m not giving you up, not ever. If we have to flee to the ends of the earth in order to stay together, we will. You, me, and Lily.”

“You would do that for me?”

“I’d die for you!” he exclaimed passionately.

“Even knowing what I have done and that I deceived you?”

“Yes,” he answered. “You’re not a murderess. You’re a survivor. A woman who was brave enough, and clever enough, to escape her fate. For I’m sure that had you stayed with Peter Dennett, he would have eventually killed you, just like my father killed my mother.”

“Brave? I’m not brave. I was petrified of him. The things I let him do to me ...”

She looked at him with overwhelming self-hatred burning in her eyes.

“You’re brave because you took the risk of trusting again. You trusted me. I’m still humbled by that honor. You didn’t let a man like Peter Dennett destroy you or your life. What’s more, you have faced your fears. You let me into your bed. You trusted me with your body, and after what you’ve been through, that is quite an accomplishment. It’s something I will remember and cherish for the rest of my life.”

“Thank you. Thank you for believing in me.” She hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry I’ve put you in this position. Perhaps it would be better if I left, just walked away forever. What will Lily think when she hears I killed my husband?”

“We will explain everything to her. Like you say, women should not be kept in the dark about men such as your husband. A woman shouldn’t have to defend herself against such violence. There is no excuse for Dennett’s actions, but there is for yours.” They held each other tightly. “You gave yourself to me and you are mine, mine to protect and to love.”

She leaned closer and kissed his brow. “I don’t deserve you, sweetheart.” She trailed soft fluttering kisses across his forehead, his eyelids, and his aristocratic nose. “I love you, Christian Trent. I hope you won’t live to regret this.”

“I’d regret it more if I let you go. I’ve wanted you so badly these last few days, I thought I’d combust.”

She moved to sit astride his lap. He’d believed her without any proof. He had accepted her deception as her right, given her situation. He still offered her his protection, and, most of all, he’d told her he still loved her. She wanted to prove how much his love and support meant to her. He had healed her and she was going to spend her life healing him and proving to him just how attracted she was to his radiant beauty, both internal and external. No man had moved her as much as he had. And no man had made desire flare with simply a smile. The pleasure he gave her when he worshiped her with his

body, she would never take for granted. Tonight she wanted to make love to him. She wanted to give him untold pleasure with no thought to hers.

She captured his glittering gaze and with trembling hands freed his thick straining phallus from the confines of his breeches. His breathing grew ragged as she stroked him in her hands. She briefly left off her ministrations and untied her robe, shaking it off. Grabbing her night rail, she lifted it over her head.

He groaned and lowered his mouth to her breasts. She quivered as his warm hands clamped atop her thighs. She rose to her knees and guided him into her body. Her instigation of lovemaking, her willingness to take the lead, ignited something wild in him, just as his passion had set her soul on fire.

“I would never let any other man be where you are now. I’ll never love anyone the way I love you.” She set about proving how much he meant to her. She hoped by demonstrating how willing she was to make love with him, by loving him utterly, he would feel like a whole man again after the shattering blows to his pride of having not only his body but his face mocked and pitied by others. Each time she said she loved him she saw the flicker of doubt in his eyes. She wanted him to know her heart and know she spoke the truth.

She rocked slowly upon him watching the emotions play across his face. She loved the way he cupped her breasts; they fitted his hands perfectly. When he stroked her hardened nipples, she shuddered. He leaned forward and suckled each breast reverently. She rose to tease the tip of his cock before plunging down until he was buried to the hilt inside her.

He leaned back, his head resting on the back of the chair, and closed his eyes in bliss. “This is heaven. I never want to be anywhere else.”

His hand sought for the space between their bodies to find some part of her to pleasure, but she wouldn’t let him. “This is for you. I want you to enjoy me and think of yourself only for a change.” With lowered lashes, he accepted his gift.



His hands gripped her hips, and he couldn't help but begin to thrust up into her. He let out a deep groan. After a few more slow teasing strokes, he gripped her harder, holding her so he could thrust just the way he wanted. She let him take control, for this was for him.

She could feel his breeches rubbing against her bare skin but did not dream of stopping him. Never in her life had she imagined that giving herself so completely to a man in this way—body and mind, heart and soul—could feel so wondrous.

She watched him, drinking in the beauty of his tense face, observing how the muscles in his neck corded with the tension of his desire, and how his eyes were hazed with passion and need.

His hunger for release grew and he thrust hot and hard between her legs, urgent and commanding with long, deep thrusts, almost dislodging her from his lap. She could feel her breasts bouncing with each deepening thrust.

His eyes flew open and he clutched one of her breasts in his hand. "Oh, God, Serena!" he gasped harshly, then went rigid and on the next mighty thrust he was seized by his climax with thunderous force. She leaned forward to clutch his shoulders in order to stay seated. His groan was long and penetrated to her very soul.

Afterward, only his panting filled the silence. He pulled her against him and hugged her tightly. She stroked his head. "I love you," she whispered.

Still holding her close, he answered, "I hope you always will."

She smiled into the dimly lit room at his pensive murmur. "I'll keep saying it all my life until you believe it."

Christian's hand splayed against her back, a finger stroking her spine. "Are you going to marry me, then?"

She leaned back, disentangling from his warmth, and shivered. "Do you still want me, knowing you may never be

able to tell the world about me and knowing you may be unable to ever acknowledge our children?”

“I don’t care about any of that. I just want to know that you’ll always be mine.”

“We don’t need to be married for me to promise that.”

“So that’s a no?” She heard the disappointment and sorrow in his voice.

She trailed her fingertips down his cheek. “That’s a yes, my darling. I would be honored to marry you.”

She was delighted to see a fragile bud of true, deep trust begin to unfurl in the depth of his eyes. He pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

“No more secrets between us, Serena. Promise me that.”

“You have my word,” she whispered as he gifted her with another kiss. “No more secrets between us, ever.”

## *Chapter Fifteen*

**C**hristian awoke the next morning filled with new determination. More than anything, he had to clear his name. If he were to aid Serena, his reputation must be spotless. He could ill afford to have the Duke of Barforte step forward and blemish his character with false accusations, or worse, deliberately set out to hit back at him by ensuring Serena hung.

He left the house early before she awoke, and headed directly to the meeting with John Farnham of the Bow Street Runners.

As he drove through the London streets, he couldn't get the terrible image of Serena dangling at the end of a rope from his mind. He'd had a nightmare again last night, but this time it wasn't the smell of burned skin tormenting him.

Serena had been beside him in bed to comfort him, and she gave herself to him to help chase the bad dreams away. Little did she know they were dreams of her impending death. He'd forced from his mind the awful image of her eyes bulging and her legs waving in the breeze as the breath was choked from her body, replacing it with the pleasure he took from her. She'd offered her lush curves and silken skin to him to ease his suffering. She gave generously, whispering words of love and devotion in his ear.

He couldn't believe he'd found a woman he wanted to share his life with. On the battlefields of France, he'd dreamed of meeting a woman he at least liked the look of, and had hoped they would rub along well enough, and that he'd sire a son to continue his title. But to meet a woman who

commanded his heart and soul was completely unexpected, especially considering his burns and hideous looks.

He had recognized from the very beginning in Canada that this woman was different. The minute she'd walked into his study in York and hadn't flinched when she saw his face, he'd known she was the one. His biggest fear was that he wouldn't be able to save her. Would fate be so cruel as to send him the woman of his dreams, only to let her be ripped from his arms?

Somehow Serena had given him back to himself. For too long, he'd been pitying himself. So what if his looks were gone? There were others far worse off than him—Serena, for one. At least he was perfectly capable of defending himself, of living a full and deserving life. Serena had had any chance of happiness ripped from her, first by her grasping father and then by her evil husband.

How shallow he'd become.

He was ashamed of his actions these last few months. He swallowed, deciding he would try to overcome his shortcomings.

He couldn't fail her. Serena had put her fate in his hands. The last thing he wanted to do was to fail her. For in failing Serena, he'd destroy any chance of his own happiness.

She should be the one scared and unable to sleep, but this morning, in wonder and reverence, he had watched her while she slept. He marveled that a beauty of such tiny stature had so much resilience and strength of character, even after enduring all that she had. He hadn't hidden the fact that she would have to tell the world her story, and probably bare her back for all to see her whip marks.

For a woman of such a proud and noble upbringing, washing her dirty linen in public would be excruciatingly painful.

A fierce, tangled burning in his chest reminded him of his mission. What he now felt for Serena—the firestorm inside him, a primal certainty that he would walk through the fires of hell for her if he had to—was almost as painful as his burns

had been. Her love had determined the course he now took to see her saved.

She was worthy of being saved. And by God he'd shrug off this cloak of self-pity and prove himself worthy of her faith and of her love.

By the time he'd returned from his unsatisfactory meeting with John Farnham, his mood had darkened. The Runner had found no leads regarding who'd killed Carla, but Farnham did know it couldn't have been Christian. He'd been on the ship bound for Canada at the time of her death. Although, as Farnham rightly pointed out, it didn't mean he hadn't arranged for her to be killed in his absence.

Worse, Christian wasn't looking forward to the opera tonight. He was attending with Hadley, having agreed to accompany him and Sebastian's two younger sisters. Debutantes! That ought to get the *ton's* notice. Two Libertine Scholars with debutantes on their arms. A first for both men, and one that he did not welcome.

Seated in the library, he sat contemplating how wonderful his life had become since Serena and Lily entered it. He was waiting to say goodnight to Serena before he left to collect the Hawkestone ladies. She was occupied putting Lily to bed. The little girl was coping well with being in a new country and strange house. The resilience of the young was enviable. How he wished for their fortitude and ability to throw off sorrow.

He was on his third brandy. He wasn't looking forward to this first foray back into society. He would be tormented by the endless questions that would be thrown at him about where he had been and why he had left England. He felt guilty because he was using Lily as his excuse. He would claim that he'd gone to bring home his ward and see to his Canadian business ventures.

He looked up as Serena entered the room. "I wish you could come with me," Christian said before he could stop himself. "I'd much rather have you on my arm tonight."

"How like a Libertine Scholar to want two women on his arm. I'm sure the young Lady Hawkestones are quite looking

forward to your company.” She bent and kissed his cheek. “I’m rather jealous.”

“There is no need. I would much prefer to be attending with you, and only you.”

She looked at his face. With an inward smile she sighed. He was pouting like a schoolboy. They’d had this discussion earlier.

“This afternoon your lawyer recommended we ensure our case is well organized and the witnesses sound before we rashly draw attention to my identity.”

He pulled her so she lay sprawled on his lap, and kissed her soundly. “I know, but I want to show you off to the world.”

“Stake your claim, you mean?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. She couldn’t help being sensitive to any mention of ownership. However, when she gazed into Christian’s eyes and saw the love, she didn’t seem to notice the conflicting sentiment.

“No. I’d hoped that when we marry, you’d stand by my side, as my partner, so that we could share the good and bad times together,” he answered.

She did not doubt him. She kissed him back. “I hope this will be the end of our bad times.” He deepened the kiss, and she could feel his erection nudging her bottom. With reluctance, she eased her lips off his. “You should go before I decide you should stay in for the night.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he growled resignedly.

“I’ll be here eagerly waiting for you.”

The progress toward his private box was painfully slow. The foyer of well-dressed people, milling about like scavenger birds disguised as peacocks, seemed to be totally focused on his arrival. It appeared everyone in the theater wanted to converse with the returned hero, who’d suddenly disappeared for several months, only to, just as suddenly, arrive back into the fold, with a mysterious ward in tow, no less.

In addition, the young debutante on his arm caused a major sensation. Lady Marisa Hawkestone was the jewel of the season. Every young buck was lining up to talk with her. Her presence on his arm caused a twitter among the married ladies. Christian couldn't wait to get her safely tucked into the box. The last thing he needed was for the forceful married women of the *ton* to be avidly matchmaking.

"People appear to be jumping to a totally wrong conclusion about our relationship," she said. "I'm sorry if it's making the evening uncomfortable for you."

Noting Marisa's smile, he riposted, "I've known you since you were a babe in arms. You're nothing of the sort. You're enjoying seeing me squirm."

She laughed gaily and a tad too loudly, causing more eyes to turn their way. He wished the performance would start so that they would be forced to take their seats. He continued to push their way through the throng, enduring the inane conversations along the way. Once they were safely in the box, Marisa said, "I am enjoying myself." She nodded her head toward the box opposite them. "It might make Lord Rothburg come to heel when he spies me on the arm of the handsome and heroic Lord Markham."

He looked at her critically, trying to judge if her words were in jest. "I beg your pardon. You think being seen with me would make him jealous? Hardly!" At her surprised gasp, he added, "Before I left for Canada, I didn't seem to be overly popular with the ladies."

"Men, they can be so dense! Rothburg doesn't see your scars. He simply sees another man on my arm whose company I am appearing to enjoy." She leaned in closer and examined his face. "Besides, I'm sure once a woman gets to know you, the scars would diminish in importance. I hardly notice them now."

He'd heard those words before, from Serena. A spark lit deep inside him. Perhaps she had been sincere in her pronouncement of still finding him attractive. Perhaps he'd

been the only one full of pity and self-hatred, so wrapped up in himself he'd failed to see people's true reactions.

"Take it from me, Christian—I may call you Christian, mayn't I?" she asked as she leaned intimately into and ran her finger down his arm. At his shocked expression, she whispered, "All for the benefit of Rothburg, my lord. I'm a debutante looking for love, and nothing incites truer devotion in a possible suitor than the threat of a rake. Although if you weren't Sebastian's best friend and obviously already in love with someone else, you would have been at the top of my list of dashing, virile men worthy of becoming my husband."

"My scars did not put you off?"

"No, my lord, because I know *you*. Besides, what woman doesn't want an experienced lover? From the stories I have overheard about the Libertine Scholars, you're very experienced."

Bloody hell! This was Sebastian's little sister. He felt his face flush. "You'd better not let Sebastian hear you talking like that. Wait—love? How on earth do you know I'm in love?"

She sat back and waved her hand toward the filled theater. "Look at all the men here. They are all studying women. Beautiful women, of course. Men do not attend the opera for their own pleasure—well, most don't. They suffer through it for a woman. You, my lord, have not looked at or been interested in any female since we entered the building. My pride was a little hurt at first, until I realized it wasn't me that was lacking. It was all females. If that doesn't signal loudly that you're besotted, nothing else does."

This time he was the one to chuckle, drawing both a frown from Hadley and a glare from Lord Rothberg across the way.

"Why is she not with you, this lady of yours?"

His smile died. "A long story, I'm afraid."

She moved closer. "I'm not really an opera fan. I only came to torment Rothberg. He's being very stubborn. What is it with you rakes and your fear of matrimony?" To send Rothburg's temper soaring, she placed a hand on Christian's



sleeve. “Why don’t you tell me your story? I’m assuming you met her in Canada. If it was someone from London, I would have heard about her—unless, of course, she’s someone totally unsuitable. Is that the problem?” she asked excitedly. “Have you fallen for one of your doxies?”

“Christ, no wonder Sebastian was so concerned about leaving you alone in England. A young lady should not know of such things, and no, my love is not a doxy. She’s the daughter of a duke, actually.” This slipped out unawares.

Marisa frowned. “A duke’s daughter? The only duke’s daughters I know of are Harriet Penfold and Serena Castleton. Serena married Mr. Dennett—in an indecent rush if you ask me.” She frowned, her pert nose twisting in puzzlement. “And he took her to America. So that leaves Harriet. Is it Harriet? But I’ve heard she’s been unwell ...”

The mention of Harriet’s name saw him grip the armrests. “Never you mind who it is, madam. Unlike you, I happen to find the opera soothing. You’ve tortured Rothburg for long enough. He looks as if he’s about to race over here and challenge me to a duel, and with my injury that could prove life-threatening. Sit back and listen. Don’t worry, Rothburg will be in this box at the interval.”

True enough, no sooner had the curtain fallen for intermission than Rothburg was in their box. Christian wanted to laugh at Rothburg’s obvious jealousy; instead, he slipped out to get refreshments, and came face-to-face with Simon Penfold and his father, the Duke of Barforte.

“Markham! I don’t know how you have the audacity to show your face here,” the Duke hissed. “What if I’d brought Harriet?”

“I wish you had. Then I could straighten this mess out with her. I did not touch your daughter,” he stressed adamantly but quietly. He looked around and nodded politely to those soliciting greetings. “This is neither the time nor place to have this discussion. I suggest we meet tomorrow and get this sorted out. There is more to this than either of us is aware of. Carla, the woman who was with me that night at the Honey

Pot, was found with her throat slit shortly after you threw me on the boat to Canada. Someone wanted me framed for rape and murder. When you shanghaied me, you ruined their plan. I, for one, would like to know who is out to destroy my reputation, and you should be concerned for your daughter's safety. For if Harriet and I meet, she'll realize it was not me and then their game is up."

"He's right, Father. Lord Blackwood did try to warn us. I can't believe that Blackwood, Coldhurst, and Fullerton would side with Markham if he were guilty. They have too much honor." Simon turned to Christian. "I have two men shadowing and guarding Harriet at all times. I took Viscount Blackwood's words to heart."

The Duke looked at him in surprise. "You did?"

"William came to me privately. He said he owed Christian his life and he was adamant Lord Markham could never have harmed Harriet." Simon extended his hand. "I am ashamed of what we did to you. We should have listened to you. I quite understand if you'd like satisfaction."

Christian looked at the hand before him and slowly reached out and shook it. "I'd rather you helped me ascertain the truth. Let me talk with Harriet in your presence. What harm can it do? Wouldn't you like to catch the real perpetrator?"

The Duke sighed and ran a hand over his face. He hesitated somewhat, then looked Christian in the eye. "If Harriet agrees to meet you, I'll allow it. But I won't force her; she's been through enough. I'll send word tomorrow."

The relief coursing through Christian's veins was like water to a parched man. He shook the Duke's hand. "Thank you, sir." After they took their leave, Christian wanted to shout the news from the rooftops, but the need for discretion prevailed. And the one person he particularly wanted to share it with wasn't there with him.

He reentered the box, and Marisa smiled up at him. "I hope you don't mind if Lord Rothburg joins our party."

Here was his chance to escape. “How fortunate, for I have just received an urgent missive from my ward’s governess and must depart. Rothburg, may I entrust you to keep Lady Hawkestone company until Hadley can see the ladies home?”

Marisa’s tried to hide her smile of delight under false concern. “I do hope your ward—Lily, isn’t it?—is not ill.”

“I suspect it is nothing more than a touch of homesickness. Lily has only just lost her parents and is now in a new country. It will take her time to adjust.”

The relief on Rothburg’s face was not feigned. He stood and shook Christian’s hand. “Leave it to me, old boy. It shall be my pleasure to keep Lady Hawkestone company for the rest of the evening.”

Christian pulled Hadley aside and shared his news regarding the Duke agreeing to a meeting with Harriet. “I’m leaving Marisa with Rothburg. You don’t need me to help you see the ladies home.”

“You’ve fallen badly, haven’t you? You can’t go one evening without Serena.” Hadley shook his head. “I can’t say I’m surprised. You were the only one of us who always wanted a home, hearth, and family. I’m pleased for you, truly I am.”

Serena was already asleep when he crept quietly into her room. She’d obviously tried to stay awake, for a book she’d been reading had slipped from her hand and was lying open on the covers. He quietly picked it up, closed it, and put it on the table beside her bed.

In the dim light from the one candle still burning, he stood for a moment soaking in the innocent beauty of her in sleep. He frowned as he noted the dark shadows under her eyes. He took a second look. She looked tired, and he also observed that she’d lost weight. Her exposed arms looked as if there was no flesh on her bones.

The urge to wake her to share the news regarding a possible meeting with Harriet, his accuser, warred with his conscience, which was telling him he should allow her to rest.

The news would still be well received in the morning. She'd be happy for him.

He stood contemplating the temptation of her and he was unable to resist.

Serena moved, rolling over. Half awake, she asked, "Is that you, Christian?"

He brushed the hair off her face and tenderly kissed her cheek, "Shush. Go back to sleep. I'll be here in the morning."

"What time is it?"

"It's just before midnight. I left the theater early."

"I missed you in my bed," she murmured before she turned over and with a contented sigh went back to sleep. Those were the sweetest words he'd heard from anyone in a long while.

Christian slipped quietly out of his clothes, slid soundlessly into the bed beside her, and thought, as he gathered her in his arms, that he knew the perfect way to wake her in a few hours' time. He loved the feel of her in his arms. He craved the intimacy and knew that he'd not be able to sleep anyway, not unless she was by his side. He fell asleep with a smile on his lips, dreaming of the morning's pleasures to come.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

**S**erena awoke in the soft predawn light to the pleasant sensation of butterfly soft caresses fluttering over her stomach. Was she dreaming? The sight of Christian worshipping her body with his hands and mouth sent that singular warmth she recognized as desire building between her legs.

“It’s almost morning. I should throw you out of my bed,” she murmured, sleep still befuddling her thinking.

He raised his head and moved back up her body. “Not quite the response I’d hoped for my efforts,” was the reply. “I couldn’t stay away. I’ve waited all night to make love to you. You looked exhausted when I came home.”

“Oh.” She smiled at him. “I’m not tired now, so don’t let me stop you.”

“As always, I’m yours to command, my sweet.”

She sank lazily into the mattress and let him love her. His mouth settled on hers for a thoroughly ravishing kiss. Her breathing became short and she could feel her body respond to the call of his hardness. His mouth trailed down the contours of her neck, nipping at the base where her pulse pounded. As he bestowed kisses all down her body, her nipples puckered. She adored the sensation of them brushing against his muscled chest. As she arched beneath him, he took one ridged peak into his mouth and she moaned. He suckled and feasted, building her need for climax to the point of exasperation.

Then she almost cried out in disappointment as his hot, wet mouth left her breast, and his lips skimmed down to the tense

muscles of her abdomen and he stroked his fingers through the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs. Then excited anticipation gripped her. He was going to love her with his mouth again. She needed no encouragement to part her thighs wide for him. She opened willingly, a testament to how much she trusted this man.

At the first lick of his clever tongue, her hands bunched into fists in the bedclothes. She looked down and lost herself in the exotic sight of Christian, his dark hair teasing her thighs, his head bent between her legs, leading her on the tumultuous, wicked and glorious journey toward pleasure.

And what pleasure! He knew exactly what she liked, desired, and needed. The rapture as his tongue began to tease and stimulate her in just the right spot ... with just the right pressure ...

She moaned into the room, the sound of him lapping intimately adding to her urgent passion. She wished she could hold off, playing out the intense feelings he awoke in her, but too soon she gasped and began to tremble in unbridled ecstasy, her climax a vivid burst of colors behind her closed eyes. She was barely aware that she had clenched her fingers tightly in his hair as she lay shaking from her release.

She opened her eyes to see him leaning over her, his eyes molten and hot with his own need. She opened her thighs wider. "I need you inside me, now," she whispered against his lips.

His response was a husky plea. "God, I couldn't think of any other place I'd rather be."

Christian moved over her and thrust into her still quaking body—heavenly! He'd just started stroking deep within her when raised voices and a loud pounding could be heard coming from down the hall. It sounded as if people were seeking him, urgently knocking on his bedchamber door.

He groaned. "Christ, not now."

"Who would be here at this hour?" She grabbed his arms and felt herself grow as cold and brittle as hailstones. "Perhaps

someone's found out about me.”

Christian sighed and withdrew from her body. Rolling off the bed, he stood for a moment as if to gather himself, then donned a robe and moved to the door. He opened it a smidgen and peered out. Pulling his head back inside the room, he looked over his shoulder at her and smiled reassuringly. “Stay here. I’ll be back soon.” Before she could protest he slipped out and the door closed ominously behind him.

She heard male voices in the corridor and someone enter his chamber.

She hurriedly rose and grabbed her own robe. Walking to the window, she felt the claws of despair lengthen, ready to strike. She carefully pulled back a drape to sneak a look at the street below. What she saw there made her heart rise into her throat and her legs turn to jelly. It was the Bow Street Runners.

Had she run out of time? Serena slowly turned and began to dress. An eerie calmness settled over her as she realized at last she would no longer have to hide. One way or another, this terrible journey would end. Tears filled her eyes. Now that she’d met Christian, there was only one way she prayed it would end. She wanted a life with Christian. She touched her belly. Even now she might have created his child—their child. They wouldn’t hang her until after the baby was born, surely. The thought of never seeing her child grow up, never seeing the man or woman that child would become, was, in her view, too great a punishment for her crime.

Once she’d finished dressing, she sat by the unlit fire and waited. The cold invading her soul had nothing to do with the lack of heating. Her day of reckoning had arrived.

It felt like eternity before Serena heard a commotion at the front door positioned below her window. She rushed to the window just in time to see Christian’s massive shoulders disappear inside the carriage parked below. Where was he going?

She watched the carriage draw away and silence descended over the house. She stood at the window, biting her

lip, watching until they turned the corner. The sun had risen, but its warmth through the glass did not thaw her.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. She crossed the room and opened the door to find Roberts standing on the other side, looking his usual calm self. He passed her a note. "His lordship asked me to deliver this with a message to say he won't be detained for long."

"Detained?"

"That is all I know, my lady."

So even Roberts had learned of her true identity.

"Miss Pearson is already in the breakfast room. She was asking after you."

Serena itched to read the note. "Tell Lily I'll be down shortly."

"As you wish, madam." He turned and walked back down the corridor.

She closed the door and leaned against it. She looked at the note she held in her hand and knew that what she would read in it would determine her next move: stay and fight, or flee. She moved to the bed and sank down on its edge. With shaking fingers, she broke the seal and briefly closed her eyes before forcing herself to read.

Dear Serena,

Fear not. The Runners were not here for you. Your identity remains secret. They were here to question me about an incident that occurred during the night related to Harriet's rape.

Harriet's rape? Last night? What was the incident that had anything to do with Christian? She kept on reading.

I'll explain more upon my return. Be assured you're safe.

Yours, Christian

Concern for Christian was tempered with relief. She could stay. She stood and smoothed out her skirt, and her thoughts turned to Lily. She was here to do a job and she should do it.



She tucked the note into her bodice and made her way downstairs.

The day had flown by. She'd taught Lily basic French in the morning and, for light relief, some music. Like her art, Lily had an ear for music, but not a memorable voice. She would become quite an accomplished piano player, but not a singer. After lunch, Lily wanted to go for a walk. Serena didn't dare step out in public, so she used the excuse that she didn't know the area and they'd wait for Christian. Instead, they'd spent time in the garden, and Serena amused Lily with some of her favorite Greek myths.

It was only when the two of them had partaken of an early dinner and Lily was getting ready for bed that Serena began to worry. Where was he?

Later, she was ensconced in the library, trying to read, but her nerves were fraught and she couldn't keep her leg from jiggling in anxiety. She was too scared to ask Roberts if he had had any news. His most recent reply of "No news, not since the last time you asked, five minutes ago" was as rude and as pointed as Roberts could allow himself without impertinence.

She looked at the clock on the mantle. Seven-thirty. Her bottom lip stung, chewed raw from worry. What else could she do but sit as patiently as possible and wait?

Finally she heard the front door and someone being admitted. Serena forgot all decorum and bolted from the room into the hall, only to barrel into a solid muscled chest that didn't feel familiar. Strange hands gripped her arms to stop her from falling.

It was Lord Fullerton.

"Where's Christian?"

Lord Fullerton looked over his shoulder. "Perhaps I could talk with you in the library?" He nodded toward the room she'd just vacated.

She let go of his forearms and silently reentered the room. He indicated for her to take a seat, but she couldn't sit. Instead, she paced in front of the fire.

“Christian’s been detained by the magistrate on suspicion of the rape and murder of Susan Potts, a laundry maid connected with the opera house.”

Serena stopped her pathetic pacing, all her breath leaving her body in shock. Murder? She vehemently shook her head, talking to no one in particular. “No. Christian could never hurt any woman.”

“I concur. Plus I know he’s innocent. He left the opera early to return to you, and the murder happened at three o’clock this morning. He has an alibi.”

She flopped down into the nearest chair. “Thank God. Then why has he been arrested?”

“He’s been set up, just as the rape of Harriet was a setup.”

“Why? Why are they fixated on discrediting and ruining him? What can I do?”

Hadley took the chair opposite and rubbed a hand over his face. “You’re not going to like it.” He dropped his hand to the arm of the chair and looked closely at her. Serena’s stomach clenched. “His alibi is you, but he refuses to let you come forward. He won’t jeopardize your safety. If he does, the magistrate will want to question you and your real identity might be revealed.”

Her eyebrow rose. “But it might not. What else are you not telling me?”

He sighed and looked away. “Even if you do come forward as Mrs. Sarah Cooper, being a rich man’s mistress might not be enough to sway them. In all likelihood, they will still force Christian to go to trial, and then your identity would be revealed.”

“Why would they not believe me?”

“If the magistrate believes you are Mrs. Sarah Cooper, he may well think you want Christian released for the money and position he affords you.”

The sudden clarity was blinding. They’d view her as a fallen woman. Instantly she knew what she had to do. “But if I

go to the magistrate as Lady Serena Castleton, he'd believe me then, wouldn't he?" She clutched her hands tightly in her lap. "Or he'd have no choice but to believe me, once my father's name is mentioned."

Hadley smiled. "I knew you'd understand. Christian won't be happy about this. He doesn't want you in danger."

She swallowed back her fear. "I don't want to be in danger either, but if I want to be with Christian for the rest of my life, at some point I'm going to have to come forward. It may as well be now, when I can do some good." She rose on steady legs. This was the right thing to do for all of them. "Can you acquire an appropriate gown in order for Lady Serena Castleton to look her best? I might need a maid to set my hair. There is no one better to intimidate a magistrate than an angry and insulted duke's daughter."

He took both her hands in his and pressed them to his lips. "Thank you. I will do all I can to protect you, as will Christian. I knew what your husband was like, as did most of the *ton*. That will definitely help your cause. Most will believe that you had to kill him, and it would have been in self-defense." He ignored her welling tears and added, "Come, I've organized Marisa Hawkestone, Sebastian's sister, to help us. She's waiting nearby with her maid."

It was close to ten o'clock at night by the time Lady Serena Castleton managed to gain an audience with Mr. Simpson, the magistrate. Christian had been held the whole day. They had to summon Simpson from his home, and he was not well pleased.

The magistrate's office was small, crowded, and very stuffy, yet Serena's poise was magnificent. Her regal manner and haughty air saw the magistrate shrink in stature before their eyes. Christian had never been more proud.

Taking the only seat in the room, she spoke. "I demand to know on what charge you are holding Lord Markham."

Simpson looked uncomfortably around at the men crowding the room. There stood John Farnham, Hadley, and

Christian. The magistrate had no idea how to delicately answer her question. “My lady, it is a matter best left to men.”

“I see.” Her tone clearly indicated that she did not. “Lord Markham is a special friend of mine. I have been informed that he is being held on very serious charges relating to a crime perpetrated last night.”

Simpson looked once again at the men in the room and cleared his throat. “That is correct, my lady.”

She stood and waved her hand at Simpson. “Well then, release him you foolish man. He was with me last night, so it would have been impossible for him to commit any offense.”

Simpson’s face colored further. “With you, my lady?”

Looking down her nose, she sighed. “Are you questioning my word?”

Simpson looked as if he’d like the floor to open and swallow him. “Absolutely not, your ladyship. It’s just ... well, I don’t think you understand the timing of the incident. It was around three in the morning and a man fitting Lord Markham’s description was seen fleeing the scene.”

“I understand the timing completely. I, unlike you it seems, am not stupid. It is as I have stated. Lord Markham, *Christian*, was with me.”

Christian tried to hide his smile as the implications of her statement began to dawn on Simpson.

“I see you understand the delicate nature of this situation. I could not keep quiet and see an innocent man charged. I am counting on your discretion. I’m sure you wouldn’t like to have to explain to my father, the Duke of Hastings, how his daughter’s name became fodder for society gossip.”

Simpson at last had grasped the situation. “Of course, Lady Serena. I will be the soul of discretion. If Lord Markham was with you, my lady, then that is adequate proof of his innocence. However, just one question: from what time last evening was Lord Markham with you?”

“From around eleven-thirty, when he got home from the opera. He left the opera during the interval, so desperate was he to see me.” She turned a seductive smile Christian’s way. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

“I am always desperate to see you, my love. And yes, Simpson, Hadley here has already vouched for my movements at the opera.” Though Simpson did not believe Lord Fullerton, no doubt he would not be so boorish as to refute a lady’s claims.

Hadley smiled smugly while Simpson shuffled papers on his desk. “It would seem I owe you an apology. But you must understand that I needed to thoroughly investigate such a serious crime, given what Mr. Farnham divulged in connection with the Penfold girl.”

Christian nodded. “And I hope you continue to investigate this crime as well as the Penfold rape, as it is obvious that—”

The door to the office flew open and a young lady entered, seemingly in a great deal of distress. “Where is he? I’ve been a coward for too long, and now he’s been allowed to hurt another woman. I should have spoken out before, no matter what the cost was to my reputation.”

“Calm down, Harriet. This is not the way to deal with this matter,” said her brother Simon, who tried to enter the crowded office behind her.

It was none other than Harriet Penfold, the Duke of Barforte’s daughter.

“Where is he?” she screeched, eyes wide as she looked around the tiny room, scanning every male face there. “I know he’s here, Simon told me. I want to confront him. Where is Lord Markham?”

With one final sob, she collapsed into her brother’s arms. Serena hurried forward and offered her the only chair. Harriet sat down, utterly defeated. “He’s not here. Fled like the coward he truly is.”

Christian stepped forward, trying to keep the anger from his voice. “I am Christian Trent, the Earl of Markham. I assure

you—”

Harriet’s eyes screwed up and her lips firmed in anger. She turned to her brother. “What nonsense is this? How dare they mock me?”

Simon crouched next to his sister. “Harriet, this *is* Lord Markham.”

She shook her head. “You are not Lord Markham. Lord Markham’s scars were on his forehead and scalp, where the burns were at their worst; his scalp on the right side had no hair.” She shuddered, remembering. “He was hideous. This is not him.”

Relief flooded through Christian, and he immediately sought out Serena’s gaze. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and her face was alight with a smile of relief. Still looking at him, she crouched on the other side of Harriet and took her hand.

“Do you know who I am, my dear?”

Harriet nodded. “Lady Serena Castleton.”

“Then believe me when I tell you this man is indeed Lord Markham, Harriet. Why did you think the man who hurt you was Lord Markham?”

Harriet closed her eyes and a tear slipped from under her lashes. “Because he told me over and over again to remember that he was Lord Markham.” Her eyes flashed open. “But if he was not you, why would he say that he was?” She began crying again.

Serena hugged her. “Because he wanted to ensure Lord Markham was blamed for this heinous crime against you. It’s not your fault, Harriet. You are the victim in all of this. Someone has used you, playing a truly evil game with you in order to discredit the Earl.”

Christian crouched down in front of Harriet and took her hand. “Don’t cry, my lady. I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to bring the man to justice. I want to catch this evil creature as badly as you do.”

Harriet's sobs halted and she opened her eyes. There was such pain in their depths that Christian realized Harriet had been hurt far worse than he had ever been. She reached out and tentatively touched Christian's face. "I'm sorry for accusing you, and for all your trouble, for everything you've suffered on my account."

He pressed a kiss to her palm. "Don't be. It is I who should be apologizing to you. I believe you are an innocent victim in a plot to tarnish my name and destroy me. I swear I'll find out who did this and ensure he's punished severely."

He stood and shook Simon's proffered hand. "I suggest we escort the ladies home and reconvene in the morning to determine our next step. I won't rest until he is caught. The man's dangerous. He's not only hurt Harriet, he's also killed Carla and Susan Potts. You must watch over your sister," he softly said to Simon.

"I'll see the guard is kept up. I'll also be at your house first thing tomorrow morning. I should have put more work into hunting down the perpetrator. William defended you, and I knew, deep down, you were innocent. My father will be mortified when he learns the truth. Christ, we sent you to Canada!"

"Thank you for the apology, but your father loves his daughter. I would have done far worse to anyone I believed had hurt Lily." He turned and smiled at Serena. "Besides, I would not have met Serena if you'd not shanghaied me."

"You're too understanding. If there is anything you ever need from the Barfortes, don't hesitate to ask us."

Without further ado, they exited the magistrate's office and Christian hurried Serena into his carriage. The last thing he needed was for her to be spotted with him. She'd just risked her life in stepping forward to clear his name. To win a case of self-defense when her husband's brother was a marquis was most definitely not a certainty.

He looked at Hadley and let his fear sharpen his words. "What the hell were you thinking, bringing her here?"

“I was thinking that she’d be worse off with you in jail on a murder charge. You’d be no help to her then.”

He ignored the pained look on Hadley’s face. “Bloody hell, how long do you think it will be before word gets out that she’s in London?”

“You mean that she’s in London *and* she’s staying with you?”

“Yes.”

Serena looked at both the men in turn. “Stop it. Don’t talk about me as if I’m not here.” She turned to Christian. “We knew this day was coming. At some point I was going to be charged. I can’t clear my name otherwise. It might simply come sooner than we had expected or planned for.”

His grip tightened on her hand. He relaxed his hold at her grimace. He couldn’t bear it if he lost her now. “You should not have risked coming forward until my lawyer advised you to do so.”

Hadley leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “Look, we have perhaps two days to prepare a strategy for her defense. I’ve already sent for Sebastian. I only hope we can delay any trial date so that he makes it back to England in time. He knew Dennett, and his testimony will carry considerable weight. I’m sure we can find others only too keen to rally to our cause. Dennett was a pig of a man.” He reached out and patted Serena’s hand as she clung to Christian’s knee. “We will clear you.”

Her stomach churned at the thought of what was to come, and Hadley’s assurance did nothing to settle it. Christian’s face was grim and Serena wished she could remove his worry lines and make him smile again. He’d been cleared of rape and murder. He should be happy that his name and reputation were restored. Instead she’d burdened him with her own problems.

Once the news broke, his reputation would be tarnished because he was helping her—a murderess. If it became known they were lovers, their position would be even worse. She’d be



branded a hussy who'd killed her husband and then taken up with an infamous war hero for suspect motives.

"Perhaps it would be better if I moved out of your house."

Hadley nodded. "I agree. It does her reputation, and case, no good, labeling her your paramour."

Christian's face paled and his voice wavered. "Where do you suggest she go?"

"I've already taken care of it. Marisa and Helen have agreed to have her as their guest. I'm sure Sebastian would allow it."

Serena shook her head. "Absolutely not. They are young debutantes. Think of what accommodating me would do to their reputations." She bowed her head. "And what about Lily? She's alone in a new country. She'll think I've deserted her."

"Their aunt, Lady Alison Coldhurst, is in residence. Sebastian's aunt is considered a pillar of the *ton*, and if we can convince her to defend Serena, not only will it maintain Serena's respectability, but it will also ensure that the judge takes her good character into consideration."

Hope of an acquittal fluttered into life in Serena's heart. "I was a favorite with Lady Coldhurst during my coming-out season. Perhaps I might be able to persuade her myself."

Hadley raised an eyebrow at Christian. "It certainly couldn't hurt to try."

"God damn, it!" Christian's despair soaked the carriage. No one knew quite where to look. Christian rapped on the roof. The carriage halted and he gave the driver Sebastian's address, his decision made. She prayed Lady Coldhurst would see her. She had no idea whom she'd turn to if the lady would not admit her. She only knew she could no longer stay with Christian. It wasn't fair or safe for him. She didn't like him having to shoulder her sins. And Lily ... "What about Lily?"

"I'll explain everything to Lily and she can come and visit you every day." Christian's hand tightened its hold on hers. He raised it to his lips and pressed a firm kiss to her fingers.

“We belong together. If Lady Coldhurst will help us, then I’m happy to be separated from you for a short time.” His hot, possessive gaze met hers. “But you will be my wife. Lily, you, and I will be a family. Never, ever doubt it, my love.”

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Christian arrived home from their meeting with Sebastian's aunt. It had gone remarkably well. So well, in fact, that Serena had stayed on with her and he'd returned to his townhouse alone. He ordered the maids to pack her things and have them delivered to Sebastian's house.

In the morning he'd have to have a talk with Lily and explain everything. He hoped Lily would understand the change in Serena's name and circumstances. Lily had already experienced more changes than any young girl should have had to face. However, Lily had also showed herself to be resilient. Lily would be happy to gain Serena as a stepmother, of that he was sure.

His other thought was that he'd also have to advertise for a new governess. Surely a suitable governess would be easier to find here in London. Perhaps Lady Coldhurst could be persuaded to help in this regard as well.

He walked to his study and, before taking his seat, headed directly for the brandy decanter. He poured himself a large glass. He glanced at the clock. It had been a very long day. Farnham had had arrested him at six the previous morning, and it was now almost two in the morning. He really could do with a bath, but he wanted to collect his thoughts now that he had a bit of peace and quiet.

Who on earth would have gone to such elaborate lengths to discredit him? He sat in his large, high-backed chair and mentally went over the list of men he thought might want to see him brought to his knees.

Joseph Trent, his father's younger brother, was the only person who would benefit from his demise. Without a son, Christian's title and estate would revert to Joseph. But the man was well into his sixth decade and had little interest in society. Christian didn't believe it was him. Joseph had never married and therefore had no heir. Christian had always suspected Joseph kept to himself because he preferred men to the ladies. If this rumor was true, Joseph would not seek the limelight.

No, it wasn't Joseph.

Had he grievously offended anyone recently or, for that matter, in the past? There had been the obvious manly fights, usually over women, but as he'd never before cared deeply about any woman, these were unlikely to be the cause.

His head throbbed with a mixture of tiredness and frustration. Planning a strategic defense would be so much easier if he knew who his enemy was. At the moment, he was totally in the dark.

The tumbler dropped from his fingers onto the table, luckily not tipping over. A sudden flash of inspiration made his stomach clench. Could this be about his father? Was it revenge on the Markham name because of something his father had once done? In all reality, this made more sense.

He needed to make a list of potential perpetrators. He rubbed a hand over his face. Christ, it would be a long list. He'd need Roberts's help, for the butler was the one who knew the most about his father's crimes, those committed when Christian was a young boy as well as those perpetrated when Christian was an adult and living away from Henslowe Court.

He sat at his desk and pulled out the folder containing correspondence and information from his lawyer. But the print swam before his eyes. Even in his exhaustion, his head was still full of Serena.

His Serena. The thought of her made a small smile break over his lips. He drew in a deep breath. He could still smell her fragrance on his clothes. Her scent, her smile, her taste, was forever with him ... God, how he wanted her.

He should concentrate on seeing her free first. Then he'd fight to ensure she stayed his.

Just as he'd begun to devise instructions for his lawyer regarding the appropriate strategy to employ in Serena's case, his concentration was interrupted by a commotion outside his study. Minutes earlier, he'd heard the horses in the street below. He had assumed it was the neighbors returning from some ball or other. It was, after all, early in the morning.

However, the commotion outside his front door continued, and shortly thereafter, a knock sounded at the study door and Roberts entered.

"What are you still doing up? I will be working for a few hours more. You may as well go to bed."

"You have visitors, my lord."

"At this hour?"

He glanced up and was surprised to see Hadley standing behind the butler. Hadley looked so somber, his heart almost stilled in his chest. He instantly knew that the men standing at his study door had come for Serena.

She'd stepped forward to clear his name, at great risk of the hangman's noose. He owed her everything for that, but more important, he loved her.

He'd get them to agree to remand her into Lady Coldhurst's custody until the trial. He would not let her be held in a prison cell. His title should count for something, along with his honor as a gentleman. He'd hired the best lawyer, and they would build a case of self-defense. Christian hoped she'd agree to tell her story in court. She'd need to be examined by a physician to provide evidence of the abuse.

He sat back in his chair, trying to present a calm façade to face what was to come. He needed a clear head in order to win the first battle and, ultimately, the war.

Before he'd had a chance to take a deep breath, the door to the study flew out of Roberts's hand and opened wide. Roberts was desperately trying to block the doorway, but a tall, well-

dressed stranger pushed Roberts out of the way. The stranger strode into the study, followed by Hadley.

Roberts calmly stated, “I’m sorry, my lord, the gentlemen wouldn’t wait to be introduced. I tried to stop them... .”

“Thank you, Roberts. That will be all,” Christian said as two more men entered the study. Hadley looked angry, the other three menacing.

Roberts bowed and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

“I’ve come for my wife. Where is she?” the stranger demanded without any pleasantries.

At the word “wife” Christian thought he’d heard incorrectly. Then he went cold inside, while his palms became clammy. He knew who this man was.

Peter Dennett was alive and well.

At first relief swamped him. She hadn’t killed Dennett after all. She wouldn’t have to stand trial and wouldn’t have to face the gallows. She could stay at Henslowe Court, with him.

Then reality hit, and his heart rose in his throat. A series of curses issued silently through his lips. He could barely breathe.

She was still married. Married to Dennett.

She wouldn’t be for long, he told himself not if he had anything to say about it. Dennett would never get his hands on her again. He’d kill the man before he’d let that happen.

He had to play for time and signal Hadley to go and warn Serena to stay hidden.

“I beg your pardon. I don’t believe we have been introduced,” Christian said, trying not to portray any emotion, keeping a grip on the bloodthirsty rage surging inside him. All he wanted to do was leap across the desk and throttle the man with his bare hands. Dennett had hurt Serena—defiled her, abused her, and caused her untold pain. But killing him, no matter how satisfying, would do Serena no good.

“I’m Christian Trent, Earl of Markham, and you are ... ?” he uttered as if he were unperturbed, extending his hand to the enemy.

“My lord, may I present Lord Peter Dennett from Virginia,” said Hadley, moving forward to make the introductions.

Ignoring Christian’s outstretched hand, Dennett’s steely gray eyes looked right at him. “I don’t have time for this. Where is she?”

“I don’t mean to appear rude, but as I don’t know you, I’m highly unlikely to have had the pleasure of meeting your wife.”

Christian kept his eyes fixed on Dennett, who stared steadily back at him. He could feel the hatred pouring out of the man. Emotion was playing all over Dennett’s evil face—anger, hostility, and, yes, triumph.

Christian took his measure. Dennett was in his late twenties, well dressed and exceedingly handsome. Christian’s mouth twisted in wry surprise. The way Serena had described her husband, he’d thought Dennett would be as ugly as hell. It appeared he was only ugly on the inside.

Christian’s guts twisted at the thought of Serena having belonged to this man. Sickening images plagued his mind. It was as if his nightmares had sprung to life. Dennett couldn’t still be alive and here to claim her. This couldn’t be happening, he told himself, even though his mind knew the truth of it.

“Are you sure you’re in the right house?” He had to buy himself time to think. How long would it be before Dennett learned she was at Sebastian’s house? He had to warn her.

With a sly smile, Dennett ventured, “She told you I was dead, didn’t she? Silly bitch—she only knocked me out.”

Christian offered no comment and watched with satisfaction as Dennett’s mouth grew taut in displeasure.

“Lady Serena Castleton is my wife,” Dennett stated, “and she is legally bound to me. As you are clearly a gentleman, had you known of this, I’m sure you would have sent her

home, where she rightfully belongs. Obviously this has come as a shock, and I forgive you your oversight. However, as I have now made the situation clear, would you be so kind as to summon her? I intend to take her home.”

From the look in Dennett’s eyes it was clear he forgave nothing. If Dennett believed they had been lovers, he certainly wouldn’t forgive Christian for sleeping with his wife. Christian swallowed his bile. He knew who would pay for the affront—Serena.

“I employed a Mrs. Sarah Cooper, and she left this household soon after she’d come forward as a witness to help clear up a misunderstanding surrounding me.”

Dennett’s smile taunted him. “Don’t lie. I’m not some stupid lackey you can fool with your status and title. My brother is a marquis. Where the hell is she? Bring her to me!” He thumped his riding crop against his knee-high boots for emphasis.

Thoughts ran wildly through Christian’s head, crashing and sliding and almost tipping him over the edge of sanity. How long could he hold Dennett off before the law would force him to hand her over? He had to get her away from here. He looked at Hadley. Hadley gave a slight shake of his head, as if to say, *I can’t help you.*

Christian gulped at his brandy, hoping to wash down the bile that was threatening to choke him.

He set the tumbler back on the desk. “I think you may be mistaken,” Christian coolly stated. “The only young female under my roof and protection is my ward. I think, Mr. Dennett,” he almost sneered, “you’d best take your leave.” That was all Christian could think to say on the spur of the moment; he had to get rid of these unwanted guests, and fast. He would die before he gave Serena back to her husband.

“Sarah Cooper is Serena.”

“That hardly seems likely, but as she is no longer in my employ”—that was the truth, she wasn’t—“it does not concern me. If you can’t keep hold of your wife—”



The man standing behind Dennett interrupted, “She was here this morning. I saw her.”

Christian chanced a glance at Hadley, who nodded. Christian prayed he understood his meaning—get to Serena promptly. Hadley, unobserved, edged closer to the door.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Christian said, his tone icy.

Christian knew the law. Serena had no rights here. Dennett could take her; she legally belonged to him. But they would have to go through him to do it. He’d been too young to protect his mother, but he would protect Serena, always.

“Lord Markham, don’t take me for a fool. Serena is my wife and I know she’s here. I have sources, people who have seen her.”

“I’ll admit a Mrs. Cooper was in my employ, but I state categorically that she is no longer employed in this household,” he said in a frigid tone.

“Mrs. Cooper is Serena. I want the woman who is masquerading as Sarah Cooper brought in front of me now, or I’ll have my men search this house from top to bottom.”

Christian didn’t move. He stood calmly, defying Dennett. He would not allow himself to lose his temper and let Dennett get the better of him.

“I have missed her terribly. The nights have been so lonely without her.” Dennett grinned lecherously at Christian. “I have a lot of lonely nights to make up for... .”

Rage roared in Christian’s head. Images of Serena and this man in bed possessed him. His stomach rioted with nausea. It took all his self-control not to leap across his desk and thrash Dennett senseless, but that would give the game away.

“Mr. Dennett, there is no call for that tone. Lord Markham is a gentleman, and if he says Serena is not here, then we must take his word for it.” Hadley had finally come to his aid. “After all, it is not Lord Markham’s fault you have, ah, misplaced your wife.”

Christian almost smiled.

Dennett's face grew purple with rage. "I should simply take his word because he is a gentleman?" he spat.

"Well, as a gentleman, I should be asking you how you came to lose your wife in the first place. What would make her want to leave you, run from you, hide from you—attempt to kill you? Perhaps your wife did not find the nights as pleasurable as you did, Dennett." Christian's voice was cold.

Dennett's companions held him back as Dennett lunged at Christian. "You son of a bitch! You have Serena and I'm not leaving here without her, even if I have to tear this place apart stone by stone. Bring her to me *now*." Dennett was ranting, mad, a man possessed by uncontrollable rage.

In a dangerously quiet voice Christian said, "You will take your men and leave this house immediately. My patience has ended. I've said Serena is not here. My word is all that matters in this house."

As if on cue, the door to the study opened to reveal two further Libertine Scholars—Maitland Spencer, the Duke of Lyttelton, and Arend Aubury, Baron Labourd.

Hadley smiled. "Did I forget to mention I'd invited these gentlemen for a nightcap?"

"Can we be of service, Christian?" Maitland asked as he leaned nonchalantly against the door frame, filling it with his massive bulk.

Seeing the two men, especially Maitland, the fight left Dennett and his men. "This isn't finished. I will have my wife," Dennett snarled. "Serena is not yours. She belongs to me, and I'll never let you have her. I'll petition the Crown if I have to. There is not a court in this land that will rule against me." Peter Dennett turned and stormed out of the study.

Hadley lagged behind, waiting until the three men had left the house. "They have no idea she's at the Coldhurst house. I'll follow them to see what they will do next." He looked bleak. "This won't end here and you know it. The law is in his favor. In their eyes, he has every right to take his wife."

“Not if we can prove abuse, surely. Do you think that would be the honorable thing to do? Hand her back to someone from whom she fled thousands of miles, risking life and limb and reputation?” Christian held his temper in check at the unfairness of the situation, but only just. He hung his head, running his fingers through his hair in exasperation and despair. “We’ll help her fight for a divorce. We can prove his cruelty.”

Reaching the doorway, Hadley turned to Christian. He hesitated before saying, “May I give you some advice, Christian? Get Serena as far from here as possible. A man like Dennett does not fight fair. Who knows what he might do if he finds her,” and he quietly left the study.

Maitland, with his usual cool, clear logic, said, “I’ll put a discreet watch on the Coldhurst residence. We need to know if any of Dennett’s men are sniffing around. But I agree with Hadley—get Serena out of town at once. Is there somewhere you could take her where they’d not think to look?”

Christian sank into his chair, head in hands. What a mess. Fullerton was right. The law was not on his side. But in spite of that, right was.

Arend interrupted his morose thoughts. “I have a cottage near York. No one knows of it. My mother and I stayed there when we first arrived from France. I bought it years later for sentimental reasons. I never go there. You’re welcome to use it.”

How appropriate—they’d come full circle from York, Canada, to York, England. “Thank you. But how can I help her from York? I’m of more use here.” He humbled himself. “Could you take her there?” he asked Arend.

Arend Aubury was more English than French, even though he was French by birth. His family had fled the revolution when he was a child. He had a debonair presence the ladies could not resist. His dark coloring labeled him as foreign. His olive skin was highlighted by his brown hair, and his almost black eyes gave him a Mediterranean look. His heritage was there for all to see, and Christian trusted him like a brother.

Maitland spoke up before Arend could answer. "If you stay, on what grounds will you fight her case? You know the law. For women, adultery is no grounds for a divorce even if the husband does agree. As far as mistreatment is concerned, it's his word against hers regarding his cruelty. Unless Serena can prove that her life was at risk, it will be almost impossible for her to get a divorce, particularly if Dennett does not agree."

For one moment, Christian wanted to hit his heartless friend. He bristled like the black, short-cropped hair on Maitland's head. Short and to the point was Maitland, there was no doubt of that. He had no idea of polite discourse, nor did he care. But Christian didn't need the helplessness of his situation spelled out so plainly. "She can prove it with scars."

Maitland's cool demeanor seemed to desert him momentarily. "Scars? Bloody bastard."

"Better idea: we'll make her a widow." Arend's slight French accent sounded so evil.

Christian was sorely tempted by his suggestion but shook his head. "If I could do it in an honorable fashion, I would, but as for cold-blooded murder? That would not be principled. I'm damned if I'll stoop to his level." He gulped down his brandy. He jumped to his feet. "That's it. A duel. I'll challenge him to a duel."

Maitland rose and pushed Christian back into his seat before going to refill his glass. "I concur. Your honorable solution is logical, since she can show he mistreated her. The world will be a better place without Dennett."

"We need to keep her safe and hidden from Dennett until then." A possessive fire inflamed his skin. Serena was his. She belonged to him, and he was not about to give her up to anyone, especially not to a husband who'd likely sail away to ensure she disappeared for good. He didn't even put it past Dennett to kill her.

"Even killing Dennett honorably in a duel, Prinny will be hard pressed to pardon you. After all, Serena is Dennett's wife, and his brother is a marquis. However, if the Prince could be persuaded that it is a question of a lady's safety ... Lady

Serena always was one of his favorites. Besides,” he drawled, “Prinny is always in need of money, and you, Christian, have a lot of it. Hadley has secured a signed pardon for Sebastian, so let us pray that when Prinny sees Serena’s scars and hears of her treatment, a large amount of coin will soften his stance.” He shook his head. “And let us pray the Marquis is not overly fond of his brother!”

So Christian had his solution. “Damn! I should have challenged him tonight. Even if I have to flee England, I can take Serena with me, and I’ll at least save her from that monster.”

Arend burst his euphoria. “Aren’t we forgetting something? Your left shoulder does not function well and it’s your dominant hand. Is it your shooting arm? Has the burn damage affected your ability to hold steady and aim? What if he kills you? Then who will help Serena?”

“One of you will. Sebastian has already promised to help her.” The thought of any man with Serena cut him up inside, but if he died in this duel, he’d want to see her protected. He’d want to see her happy.

Arend smiled. “A better solution would be to ensure he doesn’t kill you. I’d like to see you practice, and perhaps we could treat the tightness in your shoulder.”

Christian rotated his arm through the air. “Serena has been rubbing liniment into the muscles, and it does help.”

Maitland stood. “Good. Then we have a plan. A risky plan, I admit, but the odds are in your favor. Dennett has never fought a duel. He prefers to run and hide.”

Christian rose too. “Then what will make him fight this one? I don’t want Dennett taking drastic action in an attempt to avoid a duel—it might put Serena in further danger.”

Maitland patted him on the back. “We will have to challenge him in an open forum, in a place where he will have no option but to accept. Then I’ll start a wager on the outcome at White’s. If it’s public knowledge, it would look very suspicious if anything happened to Serena.”

Arend rose and collected his gloves from the table by the door. "I agree with Christian. Dennett will try to run. He only brutalizes those weaker than himself. We will have to ensure we keep Serena safe and away from him until after the duel. With a dishonorable man like Dennett, there is no disputing she's in danger."

As the two men left, Maitland promised, "All of us will stand with you. Keep Serena hidden at the Coldhurst residence until the duel. If the duel goes according to plan, then make for Arend's cottage near York. You can stay there until the scandal dies down."

## *Chapter Eighteen*

**M**aitland arrived at the Markham townhouse just after breakfast. Hadley had ascertained that Peter Dennett was attending the yearling auction at Tattersalls this afternoon. He wanted stock to take back to America.

This is where Christian would issue the challenge. Half of the male peerage would be in attendance, all eager witnesses. The yearling sale was the premier event at Tattersalls.

It was a somber ride to Hyde Park Corner. Christian wanted the business over and done with. Dennett would die on the dueling field, or die if he came for Serena. His death was the only certain outcome. Christian was still the best shot in England. His damaged shoulder had caused no trouble when aiming a gun in practice.

They had to be ready. Serena had to be protected.

Maitland looked around as they rode through Hyde Park's main gates. "Arend's men are watching the Coldhurst house. I don't want you to worry about her. You need to concentrate on the duel. I'm taking you for pistol practice after this, and then we'll see to loosening your shoulder."

"I have to see Serena first."

Maitland sighed and turned to face him in the saddle. "I knew you'd say that. It is best left until later. There's no point in upsetting her before the deed is done."

How did Christian explain to a man who let so little emotion enter his life that he had to see her? If the duel did not go his way, he wanted to have said all the things he felt for her

in his heart and to have let her know that he'd willingly die a thousand deaths to see her safe.

“There are instructions I must give her should I not be successful.”

“Tsk! You won't fail her.”

“You don't know that.” He gazed silently at Maitland, but his friend's stare remained steady. Maitland truly believed he'd win. “If I don't, you have to promise me you'll save her.”

“I'll do better than that—I'll kill Dennett myself. I don't care how. I'll make it look like an accident. An evil like his must be extinguished. Serena can hate me all she likes, it matters not to me. I'm not as honorable as you, Christian. I see no downside to his death.”

Relief flooded through him. “Thank goodness you're a friend. I'd hate to become your enemy. I hate Dennett too, but for me, death must be honorable.”

Maitland gave a rare smile. “That's why you're the hero.”

It didn't take long to find Dennett. He was surrounded by young ruffians, most already worse for drink. Sean Burcher, the man who'd tried to rape Serena, was by his side, Dennett's ever-attentive shadow. Rage flared bright within Christian. He drew in deep breaths, praying his temper would hold. He had to look the aggrieved party, but it was difficult to do when issuing a challenge over another man's wife.

Maitland and Christian dismounted and handed the reins to a groom. “We won't be long. Walk them around and give them only a little water. We shall be leaving soon.”

As they approached Dennett's band of followers, the man spied them, and instead of becoming defensive he welcomed them with a beaming smile.

“Lord Markham, the war hero and collector of runaway wives. I assume this isn't a social call.”

Christian stepped forward and clenched his fists at his side, lest he knock the bastard's teeth down his throat.



“Peter Dennett, I hereby challenge you to a duel, at dawn tomorrow at Kenwood, Hampstead.” Christian removed one of his riding gloves and formally slapped it across Dennett’s face.

Dennett laughed. “How dramatic you are! Surely it is I who should be challenging you. Serena is, after all, my wife.” He glanced briefly at the faces surrounding them. He took note of the small gathering that was quickly growing as the tale of the challenge went racing around the crowd.

A tad quieter now, Dennett asked, “And what if I do not accept this challenge?”

Christian didn’t give him the opportunity to decline. In a raised voice he stated, “Choose your second. At six tomorrow morning I shall expect you at Kenwood. If not, I will assume you are the coward Lady Serena Castleton says you are, and you will never see her again.”

“Haven’t we jumped a step? Where’s the ‘choose thy weapon’?”

A hint of unease settled low in his stomach. He grew uneasy recalling the smirk of triumph on Dennett’s face as he’d uttered the challenge. It was as if Dennett had been expecting it, as if he was eager for it.

“For your information,” Dennett went on, “Lord Carthors will be my second. Won’t you, Arthur?”

“Indeed,” the drunken buffoon at Dennett’s side muttered.

“And, the weapon I choose is the rapier.”

A gasp ricocheted around the gathered crowd. Spencer’s eyebrows knitted together in a frown, and Christian understood Dennett’s glee at the challenge. The damage to his shoulder from the burns made his flexibility almost nonexistent. Christian would not be at his fighting best.

Someone in the crowd called out, “I say, old chap, that is not very sporting of you. Lord Markham carries an injury.”

For once Christian gave thanks for the Markham temper. He could use it. He would need his anger to fight through the

pain. Having to duel with a rapier leveled the skills of the two men. So much for thinking killing Dennett would be easy.

The angry hum was growing audibly in the crowd, as Dennett had not withdrawn his choice of weapon. Christian held his hand up for silence.

“Rapier it is, then.” Under his breath he added, “I’ll enjoy skewering you with it. I knew you were no gentleman when I saw the whip marks you left on Serena’s skin.”

“If you’ve seen those marks, then it would appear my wife needs another lesson in discipline. When you’re dead, I’ll make her pay. I’ll have her down on her knees, screaming my name—”

Maitland had to intervene as Christian lunged for Dennett’s throat. But Christian shrugged his friend off and reined in his anger.

“You’ll keep until tomorrow. If anyone’s going to be down on their knees begging, it will be you. You’ll be begging for your life and I’ll show you the same mercy you showed Serena—none.”

Dennett’s laugh followed him as he made his way back to his mount.

Maitland uttered dryly, “Apart from the fact you might now lose, that went rather well. We have plenty of witnesses, and not a one of them will care if you kill Dennett, not after his cowardly display of dishonor. Rapier indeed!”

With ice-cold certainty Christian said under his breath, “I’ll defeat him. I have too much to lose.”

“When we get home, we need to get that shoulder seen to.”

Maitland and Hadley spent the rest of the afternoon working on his shoulder and testing its strength.

Hadley stood back and dropped his sword. “Better. The liniment has helped, and if you stretch it out beforehand, the arm should actually loosen the more you fight. We can’t do any more today. I suggest I arrive an hour before the duel and we work further on the knots.”

“Serena’s treatment throughout the voyage back to England has definitely helped. It’s in much better shape than it’s ever been.” He towed his chest and drew his shirt back on. “Speaking of Serena, has anyone told her about Dennett?”

Both men looked at each other and the floor. Hadley cleared his throat and spoke up. “I thought it best to wait until the duel was over.”

“In case I died?” He eyed them both. “I’m going to see her, so don’t try to stop me.”

“As if we could,” Maitland stated dryly to his departing back.

Christian worked hard to make certain he wasn’t followed when he left the house. He wanted—no, needed—to see Serena to tell her the news, and make sure she was safe.

He didn’t know how she’d react to the fact her husband was still alive. With relief that she wasn’t a murderess, most likely, followed by the awful realization that she was still his wife and therefore his property.

Taking Serena to his bed had made her an adulteress.

Yet he couldn’t seem to care. She belonged to him, and no one was going to tell him otherwise, especially not a fiend like Peter Dennett. Dennett didn’t deserve her.

He sent his carriage out as a decoy and then shimmied over the neighboring walls and through a series of back gardens to reach Sebastian’s house, a block to the north.

He entered the house through the servants’ entrance and noted Arend’s men guarding the house. He still couldn’t get the tension in his stomach to unfurl. Until Dennett felt his blade, Serena was not safe.

The butler went to find her. Christian stood looking out the window at the garden, contemplating the unpleasant task before him. Fear snaked down his spine. He wouldn’t lose, for if he did, he would have failed her.

Serena’s scent filled the room as soon as she entered, and his body started to hum in recognition. He turned to face her,

and as she drew near, he pulled her into his arms.

She rested her head on his chest. “Is it true? Peter’s alive? Marisa told me.” She trembled like a slender willow tree on a windy day. When Christian didn’t respond, she shuddered and added, “Thank God. At least I’m no longer a murderess, merely an adulteress.”

“No. You did not know he was alive.”

“But he’s still my husband.”

“Yes, he made that perfectly clear.”

“He’s met with you? What did he want?”

He raised an eyebrow at her question. “You cannot guess?”

Her face paled further. “He knows about us? God, he’ll kill me. I’m his property.”

“He’d have to take you over my dead body.”

Her breath exhaled sharply at the shock of his words.

She stepped back out of his arms and straightened her shoulders, as if her posture could ward off what was to come. “How long do I have before he comes for me?”

“You’re not going anywhere with him.”

Serena let his vehement statement lift her spirits, even though she knew he lied. Peter Dennett owned her just as he owned his slaves back on the plantation. No law in England could stop him from reclaiming her. No one would let the brother of a marquis be charged with cruelty. Dennett would find a way to silence her before he’d let that happen.

In the eyes of the *ton*, Peter was the hardworking younger son of a good family, a pillar of English society. He was handsome and charming. He had the *ton* fooled. Nobody saw his dark side. And those that did, hid like ghosts in the night, scared of the power his family wielded.

She crossed to the desk, conscious the large piece of furniture was not the only barrier that now lay between them. She could never be Christian’s wife. Not now.

Softly she said, “You can’t save me, Christian. I won’t let you.”

He followed her and pulled her back against his chest, his arms wrapped around her waist. “I can and I will.”

“It will be less painful if you let me go.” She knew he’d never agree to that. He was far too honorable. She’d have to leave—run. Forever running.

His eyelids lowered, shielding his gaze. “I love you. You put yourself in danger to clear my name and I cannot forget it.” He placed his hand over her stomach. “Besides, you might be carrying our child. I want you by my side, to be my family. I won’t let Dennett get his hands on you or our baby.” He kissed her cheek. “We belong together. Two wounded souls who found love. I won’t walk away from that. Not when I know you’re better off with me.”

“I’ll have to leave here. I can’t bring a man like Peter Dennett into the Coldhurst sisters’ lives. Think of what could happen to Marisa and Helen. It’s not safe. To get to me, he’d destroy anyone who stood in his way.”

Christian hugged her tighter. “Dennett doesn’t know you’re here. We have time to plan how to defeat him. I suspect he thinks I’ve hidden you away at Henslowe. Hadley’s discovered Dennett has dispatched his men to Dorset. I’ve alerted the staff.”

She turned in his arms and looked at him. “What do I do? Tell me. It’s hopeless. I’m trapped. He’s never going to leave me alone. I wish I *had* killed him.” Her sob escaped before she could stop it, and she hated herself more when she saw the pain in Christian’s eyes.

Picking her up, Christian walked to the settee and sat, pulling her onto his lap. He stroked her face with his finger, wiping the tears off her cheeks while she cried. She couldn’t stop. All the tension of the past few months seemed to flow out with her tears. The relief of not being a murderess was like a rebirth, but now reborn, she was still not free.

“We have come up with a way to free you.”

She sniffed. “The only way I’d ever be free is if Dennett was to die.” She paused and cried, “God, how awful to wish another person dead. Look at what I’ve become.”

He kissed her head. “I love you, and you’re correct. Dennett dead is the only way to know you’d be truly safe and free of that monster.”

Serena went stiff in his arms, not quite believing what she heard. She pushed out of his hold and sat up. “Tell me you aren’t going to kill him.”

“You said it yourself. It’s the only way.”

She shook her head. “No! You, a murderer? You’d never live with yourself. You despise violence. For you it’s a last resort and a matter of honor. You can’t kill him. You’d come to resent me for turning you into someone you’re not.” She stood and paced the floor. “No. I can’t let you do it.”

He came up to stand behind her. His breath was warm on her neck when he finally spoke. “There is no question of *let*.” He pulled her back against him, hugging her tight. “And I’m not going to kill him in cold blood. It’s a matter of honor—your honor. Perhaps if my mother had had someone to champion her, she’d still be alive today. I’ve challenged him to a duel. He mistreated you, and I shall make him pay.”

Serena noted the tension in the strong arms holding her. Anger seethed in him. He was angry on his mother’s behalf too. Guilt started to swallow her up. He could die if he faced Peter. This duel would not halt at first blood. It would be to the death. She turned in his embrace and searched his face. His features displayed no sign of the dangerous force he could become. His battle scars made him look weak. It was a false mask, for his feats of bravery and courage on the battlefield were legendary. He was lethal with a pistol.

Even so ... She bit her lip and let the worry envelop her. Peter was also good with a pistol.

“I won’t let you die for me. I’m not your mother. I’m prepared to fight him in court. I don’t care about my reputation.”

“That could take years.” He put his fingers to her lips. “You know a man like Dennett won’t let it get to court. He’d see you dead first.”

She buried her head in his jacket. She could hear his heart pumping steadily. “I can’t stand the thought of you letting him take a shot at you. He’s good.” His heart sped up beneath her ear and he tensed. Serena looked up and caught the quick flash of something in his eyes. He was hiding something. “The duel *is* with pistols?” she asked slowly. “Remember, we promised there’d be no more lies between us.”

His reply was reluctant. “No. He chose rapiers.”

Her hand flew to his injured shoulder. “He’s done this on purpose. He knows you’re injured. Oh my God!” She looked with horror at Christian.

“Yes, but he doesn’t know about your treatment. The liniment you’ve been applying is working. The shoulder is more mobile than before, and Hadley is going to work the liniment in deep before the duel. I’ll be perfectly fine.” He kissed her lips. “Let’s not argue. I came here to spend some time with you.” He pushed her toward the door. “Go and lock it. I want to show you how much I love you,” he said tenderly.

With a heavy heart and a sick stomach, Serena locked the door. She tried to put on a bright smile as she walked back to where he lay sprawled on the settee.

There was no way she could let him fight this duel. If he got hurt or was killed, she would not be able to live with herself. This was her mess and she would sort it out.

As she straddled his lap and bent to take his lips in a sensual kiss, she made a plan. She deepened the kiss, desperation in each movement. She fumbled to release his erection from his trousers. He seemed to sense the urgency too, pulling her breasts free of her dress with little finesse.

This would be the last time she made love with Christian.

Tomorrow she would be either dead or Mrs. Peter Dennett once more.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

**T**hey'd made love quickly and urgently, and when it was over she was left with only his scent and the memories of his touch.

That's all she had left of him.

He'd kissed her goodnight. It felt more like a goodbye. He made her promise not to interfere. He held her as if he never wanted to let her go, and told her how much he loved her.

Then he was gone. Marisa and Helen soon came and found her. They too were upset and worried, and did their best to offer comfort. She wished they would leave her alone, because Serena had come to a decision. She couldn't let Christian sacrifice himself on her behalf. She'd rather die.

She had to leave. She hated to break a promise, but she would not let him die for her. What about Lily? Who would look after the little girl if something happened to him?

Suddenly Serena desperately wanted to see Lily and secretly say goodbye. She had to try to explain why she was leaving. She didn't want Lily to ever think that Serena had left because of something she'd done.

Once she'd said goodbye to Lily, Serena would take beautiful memories with her that she hoped would sustain her into old age. Or for however long Peter let her live. She knew she risked her life returning to a man like Peter, but Christian's life meant more to her. He had Lily and the estate to care for. He would not be in a life-threatening position if he had never met her.



A half hour later, she asked Marisa and Helen for some privacy. They reluctantly left her, concern and fear flashing across their faces.

She sat patiently waiting for the house to quiet, planning her move. She would set the clock back, back to the night she'd fled Virginia, and right the situation.

Dusk was fast approaching. There was no way Arend's men would allow her to leave the house. She'd have to sneak out to visit Lily to say her goodbyes. She'd leave the same way Christian had arrived, over the garden wall at the back of the property. If he could get in unseen, she could get out unseen.

Serena changed into clothes more befitting a governess. If she could sneak over the wall, she'd walk as a servant to Christian's.

Getting over the wall at the back of Sebastian's garden was not as easy as Christian had made it seem, but she managed by using the vines that twined over the wall.

Once on the street, she walked with purpose, head down, as if she were simply a servant on an errand. Once she made her way the two blocks to Christian's imposing mansion, she entered via the servant's entrance.

The cook gave a shriek when she pushed back her hood. "Lord, lovey, you scared me." Then her face colored and she became flustered, curtsying and saying, "Beggin' your pardon, my lady."

"Hello, Mrs. Clarke. Don't tell anyone I'm here. I've just popped round to see Miss Pearson as a surprise. Is Lily in the playroom?"

"She'll be right pleased to see you. Been pining, she has. Hardly ate any of her supper."

As she removed her cloak, Serena suggested, "Why don't you fix a tray of food for us both and I'll try to coax her to eat something."

"Bless you, my lady."

Once Mrs. Clarke had put fresh bread and two bowls of delicious stew on a tray, Serena took it upstairs.

Her heart broke as she entered the playroom and glimpsed Lily curled up on the daybed, her eyes red-rimmed and her expression so sad.

“I hear you haven’t been eating, young lady.”

“Serena!” Lily’s face broke into a smile and she raced across the room.

“Mind the tray. I thought I’d have supper with you.”

The smile vanished from Lily’s face, and it crinkled up as if she were going to cry again. “How can you eat when Lord Markham might die tomorrow?”

It was just as well she’d put the tray down on the table or she would have dropped it. How had Lily heard about the duel? She couldn’t turn to hug Lily because the child had wrapped her skinny arms tight around Serena’s waist from behind and was sobbing against her back.

Lily must have overheard something. Surely Christian hadn’t told her about the duel. He wouldn’t be that cruel.

She gently prised Lily’s arms from around her waist and turned round, smoothing her hand over Lily’s hair. “Shh, sweetheart. Crying isn’t going to help Lord Markham. Neither is making yourself ill. Come, let’s eat something and then we’ll have a talk and decide what to do.”

Lily pulled back and wiped the back of her hand across her face, brushing away her tears. “You’re right. We need a plan.”

Serena knew she was only putting off the inevitable as she set the small table in Lily’s playroom.

“I miss you,” Lily said as she buttered her bread and dipped it in the stew.

“I miss you too. I wish it could be different. But ...”

Lily put the butter knife down. “Lord Markham says that after the duel you’ll marry him. I want that so much, but I feel so guilty too.”

“Guilty? What have you got to feel guilty about?”

Her face turned pink. “I overheard Lord Markham tell Lord Fullerton that he’d marry you once Dennett was dead. I know Dennett is your husband.”

Serena frowned. “Overheard? I hope you have not been eavesdropping, young lady.”

Her flush deepened. “Well, I knew something was wrong. Lord Markham explained why you’d had no choice but to leave us for a short while, and that you were hiding from your husband, who was a very bad man.”

Serena gave her a small smile. “He is a very bad man.”

“Why did you marry him, then?” Lily asked.

She looked into the child’s face and struggled for words. She didn’t want to frighten her, or make her untrusting, but sometimes knowledge was safety. “I didn’t know his true character before I married him. I let his looks blind me to his faults. There is a lesson to be learned there, my girl. A pretty face can hide evil. I didn’t take enough time to get to know him.” She shuddered. “If I had, I would never have married him.”

“I wish you had killed him,” she said in anger. “Then Lord Markham would be safe and we could all stay together. Now I might be left on my own again.” She looked pleadingly into Serena’s eyes. “Whom will I have to love then?”

Whom indeed. Serena could not promise her a home. She’d never take a child into Peter Dennett’s world, and if Christian failed, she would have to run once again. She’d be running forever... .

“Lily, darling, I don’t want you to worry. The duel won’t take place. I promise you that. You won’t lose Christian.”

Lily looked somewhat mollified and they continued to eat in silence. However, being a bright child, Lily clearly was working through Serena’s bold statement. “How? How do you know the duel won’t take place?”

Lily's eyes had narrowed and Serena knew that if she lied, Lily would never trust her again. "Because I'm going to stop it."

"How *exactly*?"

She put her spoon down, food now forgotten. "I'm not sure. I've yet to come up with a plan."

Lily's eyes widened in horror. "Don't you dare go back to your husband. I heard the men talking. Lord Fullerton said your husband would kill you if you did. I couldn't bear that," and she started to cry again. "Promise me. Promise ... on my mother's grave."

Serena swallowed back her own tears. "I'm not sure what else I can do."

"What if I asked your husband? Or better yet, talked with Lord Markham? Father used to say, 'Who overcomes by force hath overcome but half his foe.'"

Serena sat stunned as the Milton quote came from the mouth of such a young lady.

"I never really understood what Father meant, but now I understand. If Lord Markham kills your husband, it won't end well for any of us. Lord Markham will be punished."

When she didn't say anything—what could she say?—Lily's shoulders slumped and she looked defeated. He would be punished, as this duel *would* be to the death. Peter thought he held the advantage, and with rapiers he definitely would. Now her tears flowed freely.

Lily took one look at Serena's tears and pushed back from the table and ran crying into her bedchamber. Serena felt the hopelessness begin to swallow her up. She was so tired. Tired of being afraid, not just afraid for her but also for Christian. Her battered soul needed comfort, but Lily needed comfort more.

She followed Lily into her room, climbed onto the bed, and pulled the little girl into her arms. They clung together and cried.

Soon sleep overtook them both.

In the early hours of the morning, Christian was woken by a knock on his bedchamber door. It was still dark outside. With no preamble, Arend and Hadley strolled in.

“Time waits for no man, and we are running out of it. That shoulder needs to be treated. I’ve requested a hot bath to loosen the stiff muscles, then I’ll work in the liniment.”

Arend added, “I’ve got hot bricks being readied for the carriage to keep the muscles warm and loose on the ride to Hampstead.”

Christian realized they were taking his mind off what was to come. He rose and pulled on his robe, walking to his writing desk in the corner of his bedchamber. “Before we get started on my preparation,” he said, drawing out a bunch of sealed letters, “I’ve some notes that I wish to hand into your care.”

“Christian, don’t. We will see you through this fight. Right is on your side.” Hadley’s defiant words seemed to choke him, and he refused to take the letters Christian tried to hand him.

“There is a letter for Serena. I’ve named Maitland as Lily’s guardian, and I’ve split my considerable fortune between Serena and Lily. The title and estate obviously go to my uncle Joseph as the next living heir.”

Arend stepped forward and took the letters from his outstretched hand. “I’ll also ensure Serena and Lily are safe. Rest assured, Dennett will die should he win this duel. I’ll not let him take Serena.”

Christian couldn’t speak, so he merely nodded.

His valet announced the bath was ready, and the gentlemen went to work.

Serena didn’t know why she had awoken, but she was pleased she had. It took her a moment to realize where she was—in Lily’s bed in Christian’s home. She relaxed back with a smile.

Seconds later a curse issued from her lips as she noted it was nearing dawn. She had to get to Peter. The duel must not

take place. Damn it all. She'd fallen asleep when she should have been making her way to Peter to beg for Christian's life.

She moved silently so as not to wake Lily. Pushing aside the blanket she'd pulled over them last night, she slipped from the warmth of Lily's soft bed. She bent to place a butterfly-light kiss to Lily's cheek, and gasped—for Lily wasn't in her bed. It took only moments for the dread to invade her limbs. She knew exactly where Lily would have gone, and as Serena ran through the house frantically calling for Roberts, she prayed she wouldn't be too late.

"How much of a head start does she have?" Maitland's stoic calm was all that held Serena together.

"Thomas said he heard Jack leave about half an hour before five this morning. They've gone together." Thomas was Christian's head groom, and Jack his son. "I should have known she'd make friends with the household children her age. We've been here over a week and she's lonely."

Maitland's lips thinned. "You're sure she's gone north?"

"Thomas says that Jack knows where Kenwood is. What boy doesn't know the infamous dueling ground? Besides, he knew his son was up to something last night. He'd been behaving oddly. The two of them have planned this. Lily inferred we had to have a plan."

"There is no need to panic. Arend and Hadley will ensure they are kept safe and out of harm's way. Hadley won't let them see the duel."

"That's if they make it there in one piece. Anything could happen to them. I blame myself. I knew how upset she was last night, but it never occurred to me she'd try to ride to Christian's rescue." Underneath the cold, clammy fear, there was also pride. Clever girl.



The sun had risen by the time the men congregated at the edge of Kenwood's Wood Pond, within South Wood. As well as

Dennett's party, they had quite the audience. Especially since word had spread of Dennett's choice of weapon—rapier. Most found his selection dishonorable. Dennett had very few friends in attendance.

Christian removed his coat and waistcoat and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He swung his arm in an arc, rotating his shoulder in wide sweeps. Thankfully it was more mobile than it had been in a long while. However, in order to win, he'd have to finish Dennett off quickly. His shoulder would tire sooner than Dennett's.

Although he'd not had much practice with the rapier, the war had seen to it that he'd used a sword. The feel of steel in his hand once more was comfortable, like a friend he'd not seen in a long time. He practiced with a few thrusts and parries.

Soon the call came for the two men to take their places. Christian shook hands with Hadley and Arend, closed his eyes and prayed for victory, and tried to put all thoughts of Serena from his mind. Totally focused, he turned and walked to face the man who had the one thing he wanted more than life itself. Serena.

He would not fail her.

"Ready to die, Markham?" Although Dennett's words were spoken confidently, there was a line of sweat beading his upper lip and forehead.

Christian performed a mocking bow. "Only one of us will be dying today, and it won't be me."

"Pretty confident for a man who up until a few days ago had limited use of his arm." He barked a harsh laugh. "I knew you'd be stupid enough to issue a challenge, and you fell into my trap." He took his stance, whispering so that only Christian could hear, "How long do you think Serena will survive once you're dead? So easy to lose someone at sea, but we'll have a chance to reacquaint ourselves before she is washed overboard."

Christian flexed his blade. “You really are a bastard, Dennett. I hope once I’ve skewered you, you die a slow, agonizing death.”

With that, Dennett came at him with a flurry of thrusts. Christian immediately went on the defensive. Usually, defending adequately won the duel. Very rarely did an aggressive attacker win, but Christian didn’t have the luxury of a long battle, and by the looks of it, Dennett knew that. He knew if he kept Christian in a defensive pose he’d wear him down.

Keeping his body centered and upright, Christian parried each of Dennett’s thrusts. His strategy was to wait, defend well, and seize the opportunity when it came.

And it would come. If he pretended to tire, Dennett would become overconfident and an opening would present itself to thrust directly into Dennett’s black heart.

Only flaw was, he might actually tire first. Remorselessly, Christian parried each of Dennett’s thrusts. Dennett pushed him round, forcing him back.

The fight raged, and it didn’t take long for his shoulder to start burning. He pushed the pain from his mind. Dennett must have sensed weakness, and his thrusts became more aggressive. Serena’s face smiled at him from behind his eyelids, and suddenly rage overtook Christian. He moved from defense to attack, his thrusts imbued with the strength of a man fighting for the woman he loved. He used his feet well, lunging to his left while forcing his sword up and under Dennett’s sword arm. Christian’s rapier’s point touched bone; he’d sliced Dennett’s armpit.

“Now we’re even—your shoulder’s damaged too,” he snarled to his nemesis.

Dennett let out a roar, his teeth bared, his eyes burning with hatred. He renewed his attack, blood dripping down his side from his injured armpit.

Up until this point Christian had ignored the rumblings of the crowd, but now they rose to a roar. Out of the corner of his



eye he spotted a horse, or pony barreling toward them. His lack of concentration cost him as Dennett's rapier grazed his scarred cheek. He could feel blood flow.

At the scratch, a feminine scream rent the air and the pony barreled into the fighters, sending Christian flying one way and Dennett the other.

"Don't you hurt Lord Markham, you horrid man."

Oh, my god, it was Lily. And Jack! He'd kill Thomas for allowing his ward near the fight.

Christian scrambled to his feet, desperately looking around for Arend. Dennett was on his feet and moving toward Lily's horse. Fear clenched in his gut. If Dennett tried to hurt her ... But then Lily moved her horse closer and belted him over the head with her crop. "You leave Lord Markham alone. I'll not let you kill him, you bully."

Her words saw the fifty-plus men around the dueling field burst into raucous laughter.

Just then two more horses arrived with Serena and Maitland riding upon them. Maitland grabbed the bridle of Lily's horse and began to lead the child from the field.

Serena saw the trail of blood running down Christian's cheek, and her face paled. She jumped down and ran to his side. "Please don't do this. Please ... for me. I couldn't bear it if you were killed."

They stood staring at each other, both breathing heavily.

"I won't lose, sweetheart. I have too much to live for. You." He nodded. "Lily." And then he covered her stomach. "And our children." She made to speak, but he lifted his hand to cover her mouth. "I know his moves and I know how to kill him. Let me end this. Have faith in me."

He watched her swallow hard. "I do have faith, but I'm so scared."

He moved closer and was drawing her into his arms when a gunshot rang out across the field and Serena slumped into his arms.

Christian's heart leaped into his mouth. Serena!

Lily screamed and the crowd stilled. Everything happened slowly. Serena began to sink to her knees, as Christian tried desperately to deny what he'd heard, what he was seeing.

There was always a doctor present at a duel, thank God. "Get the bloody doctor," Christian yelled to the men standing openmouthed behind him.

Maitland had taken off in the direction the shot came from, his horse flying over the ground.

Hadley was holding Lily back; the child was sobbing and trying to get to him, but all he could think about was Serena.

He laid her gently on the grass. Her breathing was raspy, and he felt his world slipping away. She was his world, his future, his everything. He threw back his head and howled with pain.

Serena gulped in big breaths of air, trying to calm her panic. She was still alive. The euphoria of that fact waned as pain twisted like a knife in her chest. She knew she'd been hit with a bullet.

She looked down her body, trying to see the gaping wound, but her vision began to blur. Was she dying? She must be, for through a haze she saw Christian's face filled with fear peering down at her.

Words tried to form, but she couldn't get them out.

"Shush, sweetheart. I'm here. Save your strength. You're going to be fine. Promise me you won't die. Fight, Serena. Fight to live and be with me."

Fight? To be with Christian, she'd fight. They'd have to drag her kicking and screaming into either heaven or hell before she'd relinquish her life.

Before the darkness overtook her she murmured, "I love you."

"She's been shot through the right shoulder. I don't think the collarbone's broken." Christian's voice was full of concern. "The bullet's still in there." He ripped off the bottom

of his shirt and pressed it to the wound to stanch the flow of blood.

“Stand back, please. Let me through.” The doctor bent over her and cut the ties of her riding jacket with a knife. Blood was everywhere. Looking at Christian with pity, the doctor handed him a stack of cloths and said, “Push down on the wound. We have to stop the blood.”

Men were milling all around. Christian was on his knees beside Serena, the duel forgotten.

But Peter Dennett hadn't forgotten.

Men and horses were everywhere, and all eyes were focused on Christian and the woman bleeding on the ground. Dennett snuck around the outside of the crowd, inching ever closer to Christian.

He drew a dagger from his boot and hid it in his palm, Christian's back his target. He knew just where he would plunge it: right through his neck. Christian wouldn't be able to make a sound, and he would die quickly and quietly; some might think him overcome with grief. Plus the dense crowd might hide the assassin's escape. He could be long gone before anyone ascertained what he'd done. He'd make for Great Plymouth and his ship, sailing home.

Both Christian and Serena would be dead. Her wound looked fatal to him, for blood soaked the ground. Either way, live or die, she would not have Markham.

So close now ... . He eased the dagger fully into his hand, twirling it round to grip the handle. When his hand rose like the head of a snake ready to strike, a surge of triumph sent his pulse pounding. But before he could thrust the blade home, pain lanced his chest and he looked down in disbelief to see the tip of Christian's rapier sticking from his chest. He glanced in disbelief over his shoulder into the cold, hard eyes of Arend Aubury, Baron Labourd. The satisfied smirk breaking over his killer's lips was the last thing Peter Dennett ever saw.

Maitland had seen the shooter before he fired. The South Wood provided good cover and he was having trouble keeping

up with the culprit. However, in his haste to escape, the shooter was leaving an easy trail to follow.

Maitland knew he was close when a shot and ball whizzed past his head. He crouched low over his horse and rode forward. Through the trees he spotted a man running. Luck went his way once more. The shooter was on foot.

He kicked his stallion hard, and after a couple more long strides, Maitland leaped from his horse, tackling the culprit to the ground. They rolled in the dirt, pinecones digging into his back. Being a big man, he managed to land one resounding punch that rattled the shooter's teeth and made his eyes roll back up into his head, out cold.

Maitland stood and brushed himself off, straightening his clothes and cravat. He whistled for Thunder. Thank goodness the shooter was small, for he managed to throw the prone body over Thunder's back before riding back toward the dueling field. He prayed Serena was not dead. He'd almost lost his friend at Waterloo. Christian's burns seemed to suck the life from him. He knew that if Christian lost Serena, he would become a dead soul.

He shuddered in the saddle. Part of him envied Christian's ability to feel so deeply, while the rest of him was thankful he couldn't, for Serena's loss would be more than Christian could bear. He never wanted to become that vulnerable.

He found Arend's carriage, bound the man's hands and feet, and threw him on the floor of the conveyance to be questioned later.

Then he made his way to the now much smaller crowd on the dueling field.

Maitland approached Arend and was greeted by the words "Dennett's dead and Sean Burcher has scarpered." At Maitland's surprised look he explained, "I caught Dennett about to stab Christian in the back while he was distracted by Serena's injury, and skewered him first. With Christian's rapier, which happened to be lying at his feet."

“How poetic,” was Maitland’s dry response as he stepped over Dennett’s corpse. “I’ve got the shooter tied up in the carriage. He’s knocked out.” He looked to where Christian knelt beside Serena. “How is she?”

“The shot is not fatal. They’ve slowed the blood loss, but the bullet’s still in there.”

“Best we get her home, then.” With that, Maitland walked to Christian’s side. “Is she stable enough to move?”

The doctor rose to his feet, wiping the blood off his hands with a cloth. “Yes. Clean surroundings are required. We need to get that bullet out before infection sets in, and close the wound. She’s lost a lot of blood.”

Christian was in shock. His face pale and drawn. He cleared his throat. “Where’s Lily?”

“Hadley took her and Jack home. Come, let me carry her to the carriage for you.”

“No. I’ll carry her.” As he lifted Serena into his arms, she gave a small groan.

“The doctor will travel with you, while Arend and I follow in Arend’s coach.” Maitland was his usual cool, logical self, and right now Christian needed that to keep him from falling apart.

*Please let her live.*

## *Chapter Twenty*

**T**he interrogation being held in Christian's stable was going relatively well.

The culprit, a man called Jock Fanselow, was hanging from the rafters by his arms. The position was most uncomfortable, verging on downright painful. Arend and Maitland didn't care.

They wanted answers. After a few well-aimed punches and a threat to his manhood, it didn't take long to get some.

"Lord Markham was supposed to stay in Canada. Then the Duke of Barforte would continue to think him responsible for raping his daughter, and Markham's reputation would eventually be destroyed, and he'd also be ruined financially."

"Ruined? But why, what did he do?"

"I don't know. Didn't care neither. All I know is now that Lord Markham was back in England, he had to die. My employer wanted him disgraced, then eventually killed. The aim is to destroy the Markham name and all who bear it."

Arend eyed him suspiciously. "Only Lord Markham?" A well-aimed kick loosened Jock's tongue further.

"No. All the other Libertine Scholars as well, all six of them."

"All of them?"

"Aye. My employer has plans to ruin all of you. Then kill you. But I'm only contracted to kill Lord Markham."

“So you weren’t to kill all of us?” Arend’s menacing tone left Jock in no doubt he meant business.

Jock shook his head. “No. I’ve no idea who the other assassins are. My employer’s right careful. If I’m caught, I won’t know anything else about the others and be able to spill the beans.”

“Your employer is astute, even if he’s not a good judge of employee. You shot the wrong person. You’re lucky Christian isn’t here. He’d kill you with his bare hands for hurting Serena.”

Something flickered in the depths of the man’s eyes.

“Or was it a mistake? I heard two shots fired.” Comprehension dawned and Arend leaned in close. “You were supposed to kill her too. Why?”

“The lady might work out who has started this game of revenge. The rumor is, she knows my employer. She has five more men to destroy yet. Their reputations are to be tarnished too, and she doesn’t want loose ends.”

“She?” Maitland and Arend spoke together.



Christian paced before the huge open fireplace in his drawing room. Three times he’d crossed the room to go upstairs to Serena, but each time Hadley stood in his way.

“The doctor and Mrs. Butler will take care of her. You would be no use to them given the state you are in. They have to get the bullet out, and even though she’s still unconscious, it will hurt her. Do you really want to see her in pain?”

“It’s taking too long.”

“The doctor worked on the battlefields at Waterloo. He’s taken out many bullets. He is simply being thorough. Keep it neat and clean, he said. Boil water, he said. We are doing exactly as he requests.” He handed Christian a glass of whiskey. “Sit. Drink this.”

Christian let his friend guide him to the chair by the fire. He gulped down the whiskey and let the heat from the smooth liquid warm his cold body. Hadley took the seat opposite.

“I still don’t understand what happened. Who fired at us? They must have been after Dennett? If he wasn’t already dead I’d kill him myself, duel or no duel.”

The doctor had told Christian that Serena would likely recover, but it was hard to believe the reassurances when she lay so still and unresponsive in the bed upstairs.

Finally the doctor entered the drawing room. “The bullet’s out and her wound is cleaned and stitched. The dressings need to be changed regularly and the wound cleaned with alcohol. Now I’m afraid it’s a waiting game. Infection is the enemy.”

“Can I see her?” Christian asked.

The doctor nodded. “She’s not awake. Let her rest. She needs to conserve her strength.”

He didn’t need to say more. Christian had seen many men in the war survive their initial wounds only to succumb to the silent and invisible enemy—gangrene.

Christian shook the doctor’s hand. “Thank you.” The doctor just looked at him with pity.

Before he went upstairs to see Serena, he turned to Hadley. “Please, let Lily know Serena is fine and I’ll come and see her tonight.” Hadley had taken Lily to the Coldhurst residence. She would remain there until they knew Serena was out of danger.

Once in her room, Christian sat next to Serena’s bed and took her hand in his. Closing his eyes, he prayed she’d live. He almost had his dream. Dennett was dead and Serena would be his wife—if she lived.

“Fight, darling. Live. We almost have our dream. Don’t let anything snatch my—our—happiness away. I love you so much... .”

He laid his head on the pillow beside her head and let the tears flow.



In his time of need, his fellow Libertine Scholars didn't desert him. Jock Fanselow was being held by the magistrate, his arrest kept secret. They didn't want anyone to know he'd been caught. The less the enemy knew, the better, since they were still so much in the dark over who wanted all six of them disgraced and then dead.

The men took it in turns to sit with Serena. Christian told them to talk to her. He remembered that when he had been delirious from the pain of his burns, the sound of those he knew had helped him to fight to stay in the land of the living.

Worry gnawed at him until his stomach churned with it. He hadn't eaten or slept for days. His mind and body were stretched to breaking point. He was exhausted, frayed, and choked with fear that she'd die. If Serena did not recover ... well, he would not think of that possibility. He could not face the world without her in it.

She was everything to him. Her beauty made him speechless and her kindness brought him to his knees. Every day since he'd met her, he thanked God for sending her to him. His dreams on the battlefields of Europe, of a full and happy life, fell or soared with her.

Plus, what would he tell Lily if she died? Christian had given her a good talking-to regarding her escapade to the dueling field, but he couldn't scold too hard. She was too upset about Serena. Besides, Lily's interference may well have saved his life. He'd never know if he could have bested Dennett.

He'd also finally relented and let Lily visit with Serena. He'd hoped it might make her open her eyes. Lily sat and chatted to her and was so brave. But she cried in the carriage all the way back to the Coldhurst residence.

With every moment that she lay comatose, he felt cold emptiness creeping back into his soul. His friends tried to reassure him, but they knew he was suffering. He didn't even bother to mask his raw emotions. One day they too would meet a woman who was their reason for living, and then they would understand his terror.

He'd been out riding this morning. He had to clear his head and pour his energy into willing Serena to survive. He was just walking back from the stable when Arend came out of the front door and stood waving from the porch. "Christian, hurry! It's Serena. She's awake."

Excitement flooded him, but he repressed it. She wasn't out of the woods yet, but it was a start, and as he began to run for the house, a smile tugged at his mouth. He raced inside and bounded up the stairs, his fatigue falling away like a loose cloak from his shoulders.

Serena was giggling at something Hadley was saying just as Christian burst through the door with Arend close behind him. When she saw his haggard face, her smile died on her lips—he'd been worried about her.

Love overflowed in her heart and filled her gaze as she reached out a hand to him.

He crossed the room to her bed in two long strides and stood speechless for a moment, staring at her with welling emerald-green eyes. He reached for her hand and grasped it firmly in his, as if he were never going to let go.

He sank into the chair by her bed, recently vacated by Hadley, and brought her hand fervently to his lips. His long-lashed eyes closed as if in silent prayer.

"I'm fine, Christian," she whispered. "I'm strong like you and I'm going to live."

He pressed her palm to his cheek and hoarsely said, "I'm going to bloody ensure you do." He opened his eyes and, with a shaky voice, said, "I thought I'd lost you. I can't live without you."

"I don't intend to ever get shot again. Once is more than enough," she quietly said. "But Hadley's told me the best news ever, Peter's dead."

"Yes," and he broke into a beautiful smile. A smile that made his scars invisible.

He moved onto the bed and pulled her gently into his arms, careful of her heavily bandaged shoulder. She hugged him

around his neck with her good arm and rested her head atop his hair, breathing in his scent. Right now his scent was the best thing she'd smelt in a long while.

She twirled his hair at his nape in her fingers, loving the feel of his hard body next to hers.

"Peter's dead, and you're alive," she whispered into the room. "I still can't believe I—we're—going to get our happily ever after."

He pulled back from her, and she could see him searching her face for her reaction. She stared at him defiantly. "I should be sad, but I won't pretend. I'm glad he's dead."

He bent his head and kissed her lips. "That makes two of us. He can never hurt you again."

She sighed. "Don't be angry, but I made Arend and Maitland tell me what happened and about the man you captured while we waited for you to return from your ride."

Christian didn't care what they'd told her. All he cared about was she was awake. "I could never be angry with you. I love you too much."

There was a cough from Maitland. She'd forgotten they had an audience. "Yes, yes, you love Christian and he loves you, and Dennett's dead, but we still don't know who paid a man to kill you. We have a common enemy, and that's the first puzzle. The second is why he, or she, as we have ascertained, needs Serena dead too."

"What about Sebastian? I wonder if our enemy hasn't had a hand in what happened at his duel with Baron Larkwell. If so, when he returns to England, he'll be a target. Christian, he doesn't know about the threat. You have to warn him." Serena owed Sebastian, and the thought that he was vulnerable ...

Maitland straightened up from where he was leaning on the bedchamber wall. "A note has already been sent, but who knows how long it will take to reach Jamaica or if Sebastian is still there."

"Where's Grayson?" Maitland asked.

Arend looked the most concerned. “I didn’t want to alarm you all until Serena had recovered.” They all looked at him. “Grayson didn’t turn up the other night. That is, he left me to my own entertainments.”

Hadley spoke up. “He hasn’t been at his house in over a se’nnight.”

“Roberts told me he had stopped coming to the house to deal with my correspondence almost three weeks ago.”

Serena put her hand to her mouth. The men shifted uncomfortably in the room. She clutched at Christian’s sleeve. “Do you think he’s ... ?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. Perhaps if we understood why we’ve all been targeted, then we could work out where to start looking for Grayson.” He rubbed his thumb over her palm.

“If they were after you, why kill me as well? Did you learn more from the man you captured?” she asked.

Christian looked at Arend. Arend cleared his throat. “He said that you know his employer and that you might work out who *she* is. We all assumed it was a man but now ...” He shook his head.

Serena chewed her bottom lip and thought hard. “But I have no idea what he was talking about. How would I know anything? I’ve been away from England for the past two years.”

“Then whatever is driving this person to target all six of us must have happened several years ago.”

“That is what I cannot understand. If this incident happened several years ago, I would have been a young girl. I lived on my father’s estate. I hadn’t ever been to London, even. Father did entertain at Hastings, though.”

Maitland walked to the end of the bed. “Then, logically, it must have occurred at your house in Hastings.”

Arend muttered under his breath, “That can’t be right. I’ve never been to the Duke of Hastings’s estate.”

Serena said, “The rest of you have. I was introduced to Maitland. I think Father saw you as a marriage contender because of your wealth.” Maitland merely shrugged. She continued, “I clearly remember Hadley flirting outrageously with me at one ball.” That earned Hadley a scowl from Christian. “And I observed Grayson, Sebastian, and Christian from afar on a few occasions.” A flush of embarrassment flooded her face when she caught Christian’s grin. “You were all too busy chasing loose women to be bothered with a debutante.”

In a husky voice Christian stated, “If the others would leave, I’d be quite happy to ‘bother’ you.”

Her face flushed again, as did the rest of her body. She couldn’t look away from the molten desire in his eyes.

“You said he stressed that it was all six of us.” Hadley said. “If Arend hasn’t been to Hastings, then that theory seems faulty.”

Arend slowly straightened. “But my father visited your estate many times.” He looked at the other men. “You don’t think this could have anything to do with our fathers, do you?”

Serena bit her lip. “If it happened when I was a young girl, it would be more likely that this situation was of your fathers’ making.”

Arend slapped the bedpost. “This is not making sense.”

She couldn’t hold back a yawn. Her shoulder ached, and her head swirled trying to remember everything. She caught Christian watching her.

Christian’s eyes didn’t leave her face. “Can you gentlemen leave the room? I’d like to check Serena’s wound, and she needs to rest. I’ll meet you downstairs and we can discuss this further, while Serena’s resting.”

From the look in his eyes Serena doubted he had rest on his mind. Her reaction to his command was instant. Despite the pain, her pulse leaped, her body grew warmer and a sizzle of longing swept through her.

The three men exited the room, Hadley the only one to comment as he closed the door with a chuckle. “She does need rest, Christian. Do try to remember that.”

Serena prayed he didn’t remember that for at least the next hour.

She shouldn’t have worried, for as soon as the door closed he wriggled closer and lay down beside her, gathering her protectively in his arms.

“There is only one question I’d like to know the answer to.” The light in his eyes dimmed and his features took on a cautious look. He let out a shaky breath. “Serena, will you marry me?”

With her free hand, she cupped his face and her heart hurt when she saw the uncertain look in his eyes.

“How could you doubt I would? I love you. *You!* I didn’t go racing toward the duel other than to save you and Lily. You are both my world—my heart. I was scared for you. It was always about you.”

He remained mute, emotion gripping him. He took her face between his hands and gazed down at her. “You’re free of Dennett. You’re a widow now. Once you reenter society, half the men in England will line up to offer for you. You could have your pick.”

“Then I pick you.” She nestled down against his chest with a sigh. “I could not have lived if I knew you had been killed trying to save me.”

His grip tightened around her. “I could not have lived knowing I’d failed to save *you!*”

She pressed her lips to his neck. “Thank goodness neither of us has to face that prospect.”

“For now, but we still have an enemy on the loose. A very dangerous enemy, it seems.” Christian lifted her face to his and kissed her, hard. His mouth slanted over hers in a fierce, claiming need. “Oh, God,” he finally breathed, “I thought I’d lost you, and I’m not going to lose you again. I can’t.”

“You won’t.” She threaded her hand through his. “Together we shall work out who is out to destroy the Libertine Scholars. We can make a list of everyone your fathers ever wronged.”

“It will be a long list,” Christian noted dryly. He hesitated before adding, “Although if it includes all six of us, it does make sense that maybe the villain is common to all our fathers.” He sat up excitedly. “That narrows the field considerably.”

“Maitland will be our greatest asset—he thinks so dispassionately and logically.” She smiled and lay back on the pillows. A wave of tiredness washed over her, and she briefly closed her eyes.

He lay back down next to her and stroked down her arm. “I haven’t even asked how you are.”

“I’m fine now that you’re with me. I’m a little sore and just a tad tired.”

He kissed her forehead. “Go to sleep, my lovely.”

“I think I shall.” She closed her eyes. “Don’t leave me. I want you here when I wake up.”

He took her hand in his. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She nestled down against his chest with a sigh, feeling wonderfully safe and cherished, knowing at last she was exactly where she belonged—with the man she loved and had always loved.

Christian watched sleep consume her, delighted that in her slumber, a smile still played on her beautiful lips. She looked happy, and his heart sang with the joy of it.

Tiredness mixed with hope saw his eyelids drooping. He hadn’t slept in over two days. With his fingers threaded through hers, he listened to the beats of their hearts and as sleep overtook him, he marveled at how perfectly in rhythm the beats were.

As the dream of his future life with Serena played out in his head, he knew that with her by his side, they would conquer any obstacle thrown in their path to happiness.

He was thankful that the biggest obstacle was gone—Peter Dennett.

For it meant Serena was truly his. Lady Serena Markham. Her name swirled through his brain.

He loved the sound of it.

He loved her.

And he'd allow no one to take her from him.



## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Serena awoke sometime in the night needing a small dose of laudanum. Christian came to, instantly awake. He mixed a small amount with brandy and made her drink it before he gently cleaned the wound and applied a fresh bandage.

“I’m sorry that your beautiful skin will be scarred. You may find you’ll have to wear a certain style of dress to cover it.”

“I’ve always found your scars rather sexy.”

Her words were slightly slurred. The opiates and alcohol had taken effect.

He was angry that such creamy perfection was marred, but at least he’d managed to save her life. That was what was important. His soul felt at peace for the first time in, well, forever. His mother would have been proud of him.

She rolled onto her side to face him, careful of her injured shoulder. Her naked breast pressed against him; her nightgown scrunched down to her waist from when he’d bandaged her wound. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

Her soft mouth was a temptingly short distance away. “Go back to sleep, darling. I can wait until you’re well.” Even though it would make for a very uncomfortable night, Christian thought, with his erection straining uncomfortably against his breeches. He hadn’t undressed before he’d fallen asleep, and he’d hardened the minute he’d woken in her arms. With her scent filling his nostrils, her luscious curves filling his hands, and then seeing her naked breasts when he’d

attended to her wound meant he'd get no further sleep this night.

"Kiss me, please." Her fingers traced the line of his jaw and brushed along his lips. "I want to make love to you as a free woman. Not as a murderess or an adulterer, but as your fiancée. Then I might finally feel clean."

He heard the plea in her voice and his resolve began to crumble. "What about your shoulder?" He'd secured her arm in a sling close to her body so she couldn't move it and damage the stitches.

She placed her hand on his chest and pushed him onto his back, rising over him to straddle his thighs. "I think this will work but you'll have to help me undress you. My one free hand can only do so much."

And her *only so much* was to caress his rampant erection through his breeches. He groaned into the silent room. It had been several days since he'd made love to her, and he wanted her with a hunger verging on insanity. He wanted to claim her, mark her as his own, and wipe the memory of Peter Dennett from her mind. He wanted to love her, this woman who had chosen him, had wanted to be with him and who had risked her life to save him, burns and all. He'd do anything for her. Serena leaned down, her one bare breast pressing into his chest. "Perhaps now I'm scarred you won't want *me*," she teased.

"Don't be ridiculous. A scar means nothing to me. I love you! You the person, the brave and courageous woman who for two years went through hell, and had the determination to claw her way back."

"Touché. Now, I don't ever want to hear you doubt how I feel about you again. You'd battled through unimaginable pain to survive, and I swore that if I had to go back to Peter, I too would be like you—brave and strong, strong enough to survive, and one day come back to you."

In her drug-addled state she did not comprehend what she had confessed. "You came to the duel to offer to go back to him to save me?" Christian exclaimed in horror.

She tensed above him. "I'd have done anything to save you," she said, cupping his face. "I would have killed him myself if I could. Peter was handsome as sin on the outside, physical perfection to be precise. Women threw themselves at him, yet he was rotten to the core inside. Every day I was with him, I wanted to die." Tears fell from her eyes. "But you are so filled with love, kindness, and goodness, that it makes your outer scars invisible. You're the most beautiful man I have ever met, and I count myself the luckiest woman in the world to claim you as my own."

He didn't know what to say. He finally understood what a treasure he'd found in Serena. She was the daughter of a duke. A woman of incomparable beauty, who, if she chose, could have all of society at her feet, yet she wanted him and would marry him, a man the rest of society could hardly bear to look at.

She tugged at his shirt. "Now, if you please, clothes off. I'd like to demonstrate just how beautiful I find every inch of your body."

How had he come to deserve a woman such as this? He decided to send Simon Penfold and his father, the Duke of Barforte, an extremely large gift. He even wanted to thank the villain who was set on ruining him. For if not for her deception, he would never have been in Canada and been able to meet or help Serena, and she would never have been there to save him from a life of self-pity and self-loathing.

He was lucky, very lucky. Immediately after Waterloo, when he'd lain in mind-numbing pain, struggling for life because of his horrific burns, he'd thought God had turned against him. But he hadn't.

"I'm a very lucky man," he whispered into the darkness.

"I beg your pardon?" Serena said.

Christian chuckled. "No. I beg your pardon. I'm terribly slow at getting naked."

Christian's pulse beat heavy in his groin at her answering seductive, languorous smile. Together they hurried and

fumbled to get rid of his shirt, breeches and underclothes.

Straddling his body once more, Serena purred. Holding his gaze she leaned down and lapped at his nipple exactly like a cat. One delicate, tiny hand caressed his burned right shoulder.

Christian gripped the sheets with his fists as she slowly let her mouth and hand roam over his chest and stomach, moving tantalizingly toward his groin. He half rose off the bed as her lips brushed the head of his cock, and a deep groan escaped into the room.

“God, that feels so good,” his voice was hoarse as he lay back down, happy to let her pleasure him.

Her answer was to take him into her mouth and run her tongue around the sensitive head of his member. She began to suck and he closed his eyes, willing his body not to surge into her mouth. Her hand found his sacs and gently squeezed them. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, as her mouth worked its magic on him. She felt like heaven. Her mouth was hot and wet upon him. So good, it was almost painful. He wanted to come so badly.

His hips lifted. He couldn't help it. But he was worried about jostling her shoulder. He half sat and tried to lift her gently off him but her mouth clamped down firmly on him.

“Christ, Serena. Please ... Have pity on me. I can't take much more,” he gasped.

She lifted her head and licked her lips. “I could become addicted to the taste of you.” Then with sultry eyes, she rose and moved up to straddle his groin. Maintaining eye contact, she guided him into her sleek, wet entrance and sank slowly down, taking all of him deep within her body. He fought every screaming impulse to surge into her.

She was extremely tight and hot. It was almost too much. He gripped her hips, trying to hold her still, his breath coming in gasping pants.

She tried to move, fighting his hold. “Love me, Christian. I'm free. Make it feel like it was my first time with you.”

“Making love to you always feels like the first time.” And he surged into her, his hips lifting and withdrawing, careful not to jostle her shoulder. His powerful strokes, moving in and out of her tight sheath, sent pulses of pleasure to every corner of his body. Egged on by her moans of pleasure, he knew he wouldn’t last much longer.

He reached down to where their bodies joined and found her hardened nub. She ground down onto his fingers and threw back her head, her mouth open in a silent scream.

As her climax rose, he felt her tighten around him, milking him, and he gave a roar as his own release powered through them both, filling her womb with his life-giving essence.

She collapsed limp against his chest, small sighs of contentment escaping from her half-open mouth.

They lay there, thoroughly sated, staring at each other and stroking each other’s bare skin. He kissed her occasionally on her forehead, her eyelids, her nose and cheeks.

“I love you, Christian.” She gave a small sob. “More than words can ever say. Thank you for your patience and understanding. But most of all thank you for loving me.”

“I’m the lucky one. I have you.” He enfolded her in his arms. “My fiancée ...” He loved saying the word. “I love you, sweetheart.”

Christian whispered a quote from Marcus Aurelius, the Roman leader and his favorite philosopher. “Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.”

Serena had all his heart and always would. Nothing else mattered.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

**T**he next morning, after they'd slept late, Christian helped Serena bathe. It took much longer than the three men waiting downstairs would have liked, but then they'd never seen Serena naked. She was a goddess; her beauty would tempt any man, and Christian had no willpower where she was concerned. When Serena invited him to join her in the tub, who was he to decline?

Over an hour late, and leaving the bedchamber floor soaking wet, the couple finally arrived downstairs with Christian carrying Serena in his arms. They entered the drawing room and he placed her gently on the settee.

Serena was pleased to discover the men had held breakfast back for them. Hadley gathered some bread and eggs for her, along with a cup of strong tea. "Do you need help in eating?" he asked.

"If you could put some marmalade on the toast, I'll manage."

Over a jovial breakfast, the men teased Christian about becoming a mother hen, laughing at the way he fussed over her, ensuring she was comfortable and that she had enough to eat.

The moment she'd finished her meal, and as she sat comfortably sipping her tea, the mood in the room turned somber.

"I've thought about this all night and I hate to say it, but this mystery starts with you." Maitland's words sent a chill

through her. “If you know something, we have to work out what that may mean for us and our safety.”

Serena set her cup down with a shaking hand. “What if the man was simply making that bit up? I mean, I’ve thought about it too, and I can only remember meeting your fathers once, when I was ten years old. My father had some sort of party, at Wilton House, on our estate.” She rubbed her forehead, “It wasn’t a ball. In fact, I don’t remember seeing many women there. Father seemed to keep them hidden away.”

The men shifted in their seats and looked at each other. Christian cleared his throat. “I think it was a party where the women were perhaps paid to attend.”

Serena’s mouth fell open. “You mean they were ... they were ...”

“Women of ill repute,” Christian finished as the others nodded.

“Well, I can’t remember my father holding another such event—not at Wilton House, anyway.”

“Then perhaps something happened at this function that dissuaded him from ever holding another. That would make sense,” Maitland said dryly. “Whatever occurred, you’re somehow connected.”

Serena chewed her bottom lip trying to remember anything about the week just after her tenth birthday. She sighed and with palms upturned in defeat admitted, “I’m sorry. I don’t remember anything.”

The men all started talking at once, arguing over what the next move should be. They grew louder as they each tried to talk over the other, and a small memory began to grow large in her mind. She’d seen this exact scene play out before. She remembered a group of men, a vastly different group of men, arguing viciously.

“Stop!” she cried out. The men became silent immediately. Serena leaned forward. “I remember when I was young, that there was a terrible argument one night. I was spying, as usual.

Some of the men came to blows. Arend, your father was the most upset, and he left Wilton House that very night. I remember he tried to persuade Grayson's father to leave too. A young girl was being led into one of the rooms as he left. His parting words were, 'What you are doing dishonors the word 'dishonorable.' It is beneath contempt. Perhaps the French got it right—the aristocrats are diseased.'" She grimaced. "I screamed at his words. I thought there was some horrible disease in my house, and I didn't want to die in agony like my mother had. Father saw me, of course, and I was dragged upstairs to my room. I wasn't allowed down again until his guests had left."

The men sat looking at her in silence. Tears began to well in her eyes. "I'm not a girl of ten anymore. They did something to that young girl, didn't they?"

Christian moved to sit beside her and folded her into his arms. "It's more than likely, yes."

Maitland jumped to his feet and paced the room. "The bastard—my father ..." It was the most emotion Serena had ever seen him display. "This has to be the incident. I remember my father coming back from the week at Wilton House and locking himself in his study for days. He drank himself into oblivion. I simply thought he'd lost everything at the gaming tables. But this—this makes my stomach churn."

"What is *this*? We don't really know what happened."

Hadley looked pointedly at Serena and said, "I can hazard a very good guess." Serena glanced at the men and saw their reluctance to discuss the topic in front of her. But they had an idea about what they believed had happened at Wilton House all those years ago. Quite frankly, given her own experiences, she didn't want to know.

"Christian, if you don't mind, I think I'd like to lie down. I'm tired."

He jumped to his feet, gathered her into his arms and, without another word, carried her back upstairs. As he laid her gently on the covers, she said, "You are not your father." She could read the shame in his eyes and in the lines of his



furrowed brow. “There are some evils in this world that, due to circumstances, can never be righted. You should not have to pay for your father’s sins.”

He kissed her. His lips were gentle, giving.

“I know you are right, but I have forever lived with the shame of my father. It hangs over me, a smothering cloud of disgrace.”

“Then once this is over, we shall blow the clouds away. Clear the air and never look back. Looking back will only hurt us. We need to make new memories and live a good, honest life. That’s how we can make up for the past.”

“God, I love you,” he whispered into her hair before departing back to his friends.

Once Christian had settled into the comfortable chair left vacant for him, Hadley began, “We need to identify the girl and what actually happened to her. Then we will be able to ascertain who is seeking retribution—her father, brother, or husband.”

Maitland spoke up. “You’re assuming it’s not the girl herself.”

“She’d need money and power to hatch this plan.”

Christian felt sick. “Christ, you don’t think she was a member of the *ton*?”

Maitland shook his head, “No. That doesn’t make sense. Surely whoever was her guardian at the time would have sought revenge already.”

“Serena’s father didn’t guard her.”

Arend said, “If, like we all assume, they raped and toyed with a young innocent—all of them—she could be dead for all we know. They may have killed her to keep her quiet.”

Silence invaded the room.

Finally Christian spoke. “My father would have been perfectly capable of killing a young girl to stop her from talking.”

Hadley stood and, with the brandy decanter in his hand, walked around topping up their glasses. “So what do we do now? We have to get word to Sebastian. He needs to know, and his sisters need protection. I hope he’s on his way back from Jamaica by now. I hope word of his pardon, and our warning, has reached him. As for Grayson, we need to find him, urgently. He has no idea he may be in danger.”

Christian regarded him. “The first thing I’m going to do is get Lily and Serena back to Henslowe Court in Dorset. I’m marrying Serena as soon as she’s well. They will be safer in Dorset. Besides, I want to go through my father’s papers and journals in the attic. I might find a clue as to who our nemesis is.”

“Cracker idea,” said Maitland. “We should all do that. We can’t move Serena for a few more days. Let’s meet at Henslowe a se’nnight from Saturday and make a more precise plan.”

“Since Somerset borders Devon, I’m also going to ride to Devon and try to locate Grayson,” added Hadley. “We may actually have a small advantage.” Three pairs of eyes looked at him expectantly. “The villain thinks Serena and Christian are dead. The longer we can hide the fact she and Christian are still alive, the better.”

Christian pulled a face. “She’s alive, and she’s bloody well going to stay that way!” He looked at the men surrounding him. “I’ll do nothing to put her or Lily in danger. *Nothing!*”

Maitland quietly said. “She’s already in danger. All of us are. I suggest we ride to Dorset together and separate there.”

Arend offered a toast. “Here’s to setting our fathers’ ghosts to rest, and to enjoying a few more days of Christian’s hospitality.”

As the men drank, Christian reflected on the fact that Serena wasn’t safe yet. She’d escaped the frying pan only to step into the fire. Well, he’d been burned once and he was not about to let anyone, regardless of what his father had done, destroy the only true happiness he’d ever known.

He swallowed a large gulp of fiery liquid. If his enemy wanted a fight, a fight to the death, he'd give her one.

## *Epilogue*

**S**erena's wedding to Christian was held a week later, quietly on the Henslowe estate, in the small chapel. It had to be a quiet affair. The villain must not learn that she and Christian were still alive.

Peter Dennett's death had been dealt with by the magistrate. Arend had not been charged, as they accepted that he'd acted to save Christian from Dennett's dishonorable behavior. Dennett's brother, the Marquis, had taken his body home to their estate. It appeared there was not much love lost between the brothers. In fact, not many people mourned Peter's passing.

The men continued to hope the villain thought both Serena and Christian were dead. Jock Fanselow had been shipped quietly out of the country to Australia. However, Christian was being very protective of Serena, insisting on a very small and quiet wedding.

Serena didn't care who was present as long as she married Christian. Besides, she had the most important people in her life present. Her stepdaughter, Lily—Christian had signed the adoption papers two days ago—and all of the Libertine Scholars, bar Grayson, who was still missing. That was the only damper on their special day. She knew the men were worried.

Sebastian had arrived in England a few days ago. He'd sailed back from Jamaica shortly after them, news of his pardon having finally reached him.

What was even more astounding was that Sebastian arrived at their wedding with a wife in tow. He was married to none other than Beatrice Hennessey, the sister of Doogie Hennessey, Baron Larkwell, the man he'd killed in the duel. Serena had yet to find out how that had come about!

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Christian turned to Serena, took her hand, and placed it on his arm. He stood looking back at their friends in the chapel. Neither of them had family present, apart from Lily. “I wish I could have shared our special day with the world.”

Serena smiled up at him. “I’m not. I have you all to myself. Besides, it hardly matters to me who shares our day as long as I have you for my husband.”

He bent and placed a kiss on her lips.

Together they began to walk back down the aisle, and as they neared Lily, Serena reached out a hand for the little girl. She slipped out of the pew and took Serena’s hand. “You look beautiful,” Lily whispered.

Something warm and wet slipped down Serena’s cheeks and blurred her vision.

She had a family, a family who loved her.

She looked at her handsome husband, blind to the blight of his burns, and let the tenderness and love in his gaze warm her from the inside out.

“My family,” she sighed. She was filled with gratitude that she’d found Christian—and Lily. All the pain of the past two years melted away. She’d have endured far worse to find this special happiness.

She wanted to focus on the future. They would have a future. She’d fight tooth and nail to ensure their time on earth together was all she’d dreamed of.

She’d let no one take this joy from her. Both Christian and Lily—and even she—deserved some happiness in their lives. Now that she had both a husband and a daughter, the joy in her soul single-handedly banished the hollow empty feeling inside

her. The inner wounds were healed and she was now focused on a new beginning.

Watching Christian sign the marriage documents, she couldn't help remember the last time she'd done this. She'd known, as she signed her name next to Peter's, that the marriage was wrong. A second sense had told her it was a terrible mistake. She'd felt only fear.

Now, as she took the quill with a steady hand, her signature appearing in bold strokes on the document, a peace settled over her heart. This time she felt cherished and protected and desired.

She felt loved.

Sebastian approached to sign his name as their witness.

"You look beautiful."

"Thank you. And not just for the compliment. Thank you for keeping my identity secret in Jamaica when Christian was your friend."

Sebastian looked at Christian. "I'm not sure your husband has forgiven me for that yet."

"We'll discuss what you owe me later." Serena laughed at her husband's dry tone.

"Don't you dare punish him for helping me. He'll have better things to do than deal with your sulking; he too is newly married."

All three of them looked across the church to where Beatrice stood.

Sebastian looked back at the register. "Don't give me that smug look; it's not a love match like yours. You know me, Christian. Love is something I avoid at all costs. This is merely a marriage of convenience."

Serena was wise enough not to comment, but there was a story here and she meant to find out more. Sebastian had been a true friend when she needed him and she was determined to repay the favor. From the heated looks darting between

Sebastian and Beatrice, she wondered if the handsome rake was deluding himself. This could be fun!

Then she looked at Christian, her husband, and remembered the first night she'd seen him, when she was a young girl. He'd been so handsome, so resplendent in his uniform, he'd taken her breath away. She knew now that what she'd felt for him was a young girl's romantic idealism. She was nothing like the girl who had worshiped him from afar that night. The world had marked both of them. Now her love for Christian was richer and deeper and all-enduring.

As if reading her thoughts, Christian hugged her close and whispered in her ear, "I love you so much."

"I've always loved you. And I'll love you forever, Christian."

"I'll hold you to that promise."

They joined Lily and the men and made their way through the connecting passage back to the main house, where the staff had put on a wedding breakfast.

She was now Lady Serena Trent, the Countess of Markham. Unlike Shakespeare, Serena knew what was in a name. Love. Loads and loads of love.

## *Want Sebastian's Story...*

**Read on for a sample of A PROMISE OF MORE**

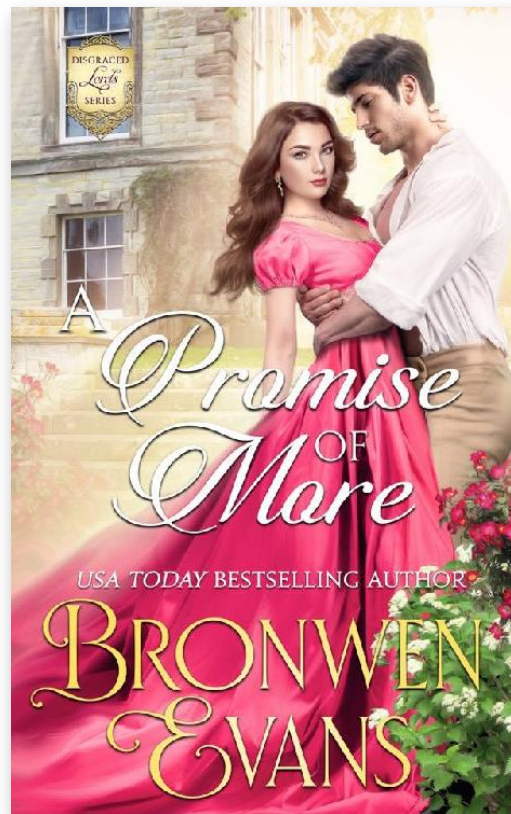
**I**n the second novel in USA Today Bestselling author Bronwen Evans's sexy *Disgraced Lords* series, two very independent souls find themselves fighting to resist a deepening passion.

When Beatrice Hennessey sets out to confront Lord Coldhurst, the notorious rogue who killed her brother in a duel, her intent is to save her family from destitution. She's determined to blackmail the man into a loveless marriage. She'll make the wealthy Lord Coldhurst pay for the rest of his life. But while greeting his ship, Beatrice takes a tumble into the Thames—only to be fished out by a pair of strong masculine arms that tempt her to stay locked in their heated embrace forever. That is, until she realizes those arms belong to Sebastian Hawkestone, Lord Coldhurst himself.

The little drowned mermaid has an interesting proposition indeed; one that Sebastian is surprised to find quite agreeable. Although he's had women more beautiful, she is pleasing to the eye, and besides, it's time he fathered an heir. Beatrice promises to be the ideal wife; a woman who hates him with an all-consuming passion is far too sensible to expect romance. However, it isn't long before Sebastian's plan for a marriage of



convenience unravels, and he's caught up in the exhilarating undertow of seduction.



# *A Promise Of More*

## *Chapter One*

**L** *ondon, April 1816—five months later*

Despite the earliness of the hour, and the crowded bustle of the dock, Beatrice Hennessey stood out like, well, like the notorious rakehell Lord Sebastian Hawkestone, Marquis of Coldhurst, would stand out in a nunnery.

She hated standing out. She lived in a world where she took great pains to blend in. She was nobody of note, and definitely not one to buck the respectable trends of the *ton*.

It was absolutely scandalous to be alone on the busy dock. The trepidation she'd felt in dismissing the hackney and driver over two hours ago was nothing to the mortification she was feeling as the men, and some women, leered at her. Dressed as a respectable lady, the fact she was standing on the filthy Thames dock unescorted made her as visible as a diamond necklace dropped in an east end street.

Stupidly, she had thought her presence might go unnoticed.

The longer she stood looking at the ship berthed in front of her, the more lecherous the stares became. Originally, the looks had been simply curious. As a lady, where was her escort? Why was she here? Did she have anything of value?

She had sent the hackney away because she could not afford to keep it waiting. She carried nothing of value. She was alone because there was no one else to count on, no one else to do what must be done to save her family.

However, two hours later when she still stood in the same place, with her hands clasped firmly in front of her, the mood

of the men and women around her had changed to contempt, overlaid with a veneer of politeness, worn as thin as her remaining patience.

Where was Coldhurst? She'd assumed since he had been away from England for several months he'd arise and disembark early, possibly as soon as his ship docked. She'd been wrong there, too.

However, the worst assumption she'd made was about the place she should confront the scoundrel. Beatrice wasn't the only woman waiting at the bottom of the gangplank to Coldhurst's vessel, *The Seductress*. Several ladies of questionable character made a flagrant display of their wares, determined to be the first to 'sell' the goods on offer as sailors came ashore.

Beatrice didn't judge the women. If Lord Coldhurst didn't help her, she might well end up in their position, albeit, she hoped with a more refined level of clientele.

Her shudder wasn't entirely due to the early morning chill. Squaring her shoulders, she acknowledged the idiocy of her approaching Coldhurst alone. His last correspondence, however, had left her no option. It was time to take the bull by the horns—or some similar body part. She did not doubt Lord Coldhurst possessed horns. After all, he was the wicked devil who had fled England in disgrace several months ago.

Coldhurst owed her and owed her family, especially her ten-year-old brother, the new Baron Larkwell, a debt he could never repay. Yet Coldhurst wouldn't be the only one to pay. If her two younger sisters and two infant brothers were to survive and maintain their place in society, Beatrice had little choice but to sell herself to the devil.

Had Doogie lived, he would have married an American heiress whose father wanted a title for his daughter. A title from a distinguished yet impoverished family. A title in exchange for more money than any of them could imagine. The killing of Doogie by Lord Coldhurst had stolen their financial security. It seemed only right and just that he should

restore the coffers he had brutally destroyed when he'd shot Doogie.

Pain filled Beatrice's chest as it always did when she thought about her younger, foolish brother. She bit back the tears and channeled her grief into her rising temper. Two hours she had waited alone and unprotected on this smelly, dangerous dock, because she could ill afford to keep a hack and driver waiting.

Chin high Beatrice marched toward the gangplank politely weaving through the other 'ladies'. But as she stepped onto the gangway, a rough hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Just where the hell do you think you're going." The underdressed, and therefore probably appropriately dressed, prostitute looked her up and down. "No female is 'llowed on board unless invited by the captain."

Beatrice removed the woman's grimy hand from her now dirt-smearred shoulder and said, "Unlike you," Beatrice hesitated, deciding to be both honest and polite, "ladies, I have important business with a passenger."

The prostitute laughed out loud, nodding to the women behind her. "I've seen you waiting. You're not expected. We've all got important business with them on board. You don't get no special treatment. Get back in line." And she pushed Beatrice backward into the now angry flock of screeching women.

The other women were far from gentle as they continued to push her away from the gangplank. The last woman in the group gave her an almighty shove and Beatrice ended up on her backside on the filthy dock, still tightly clutching her reticule.

She sat stunned for half a breath. Then anger surged through her as she clambered to her feet and, with jaw set, began pushing her way back through the melee of chattering and cursing women.

Finally, once more at the foot of the gangplank, she tapped her original assailant on the shoulder. The woman turned round. “My business,” Beatrice said before the prostitute could open her mouth, “is not your type of business. We are not in competition.”

The woman gave an ugly laugh. “Pah. I know who came in on that ship—is lordship. And when a man’s been at sea for a few weeks, he ain’t fussy about the quality of the goods. So piss off and wait your turn.”

This time the violent shove wasn’t backward. It sent Beatrice sideways. She tried to steady herself, clawing the air, but it was too late. She tripped over a loose plank and pitched forward, arms flailing, over the side of the dock and into the water. Her scream ended as water filled her mouth.

She sank like a cannon ball, the freezing water soaking into the many layers of her clothing, the weight pulling her under. She sank like a stone. She tried to kick her legs, stretching toward the murky sunlight above. Her lungs tightened to a bursting point and soon black spots swarmed in front of her eyes. She was going to drown. How could she die? She was all the hope her family had left. She inwardly railed at her fate. Now look what she’d done! What would become of them all without her?

A double curse on Lord Coldhurst.

The last thing she remembered was a strong, muscular arm encircling her waist, and then she was being drawn up, up, up.

“She’s coming round. Stand back and give her some air.”

Beatrice felt nothing except a bone-chilling cold. Her teeth chattered. Her eyelids were too heavy to open, but she wondered if, should she manage to pry them apart, would Doogie be there to greet her.

However, any thought of being dead vanished when a very large, very masculine hand pressed hard on her chest. Water spewed out of her mouth. Her nose. As she choked and

retched, the hand simply flipped her on her side as if she were nothing more than a landed fish.

“She’ll be fine once the river she swallowed comes back up.”

Through the agonizing cramping and heaving of her stomach, the authority-saturated voice calmed her. She focused her mind away from the need to be sick and onto the man’s deep baritone voice. The sound flowed as smooth as her favorite sherry, stroking her insides, calming the rollicking within and giving her courage.

Beatrice forced her eyes to open. She blinked the blurs away. Blinked again. She was lying on her side. The hardness beneath her cheek was wood. She was on a ship. They were men’s legs, sailor’s legs, all except one pair. Those well-shaped calves covered by dripping wet stockings were bootless. The legs obviously belonged to the refined voice she’d heard.

She adjusted her head and blinked again, following those bootless legs up the sodden trousers to the clinging shirt, all of which delineated a body that was no stranger to exercise. Exquisite was her first thought. And then she reached his face.

Her breath caught in her throat and she was drowning once more. Not exquisite. Arresting. Arrogant. His ruthlessly handsome face was looking at her as if it were her fault she’d fallen in the Thames. Worse, his eyes held another emotion deep within, heat and lust. The grey blue of his eyes penetrated the cold, and the wickedness within seemed to warm every inch of her skin.

She glanced away and down her body. The sight that greeted her made her gasp and try to sit up. Someone had ripped her dress open and her stays lay several feet away in tatters. Her breasts were on full display for those on deck to see.

Heat flamed in her face as she tried to pull the tattered sides of her soaking clothes together. She didn’t know where to look. No wonder he stared. No wonder he looked so....

“You tore my dress.”

“Guilty.” The deep, seductive notes of his voice mocked her. “A ‘thank you’ would suffice. I did just save your life.”

Of course he had. Blast the man.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” she mumbled, too embarrassed to look anywhere but at her feet.

“It was my pleasure. Sebastian Hawkestone, Lord Coldhurst at your service, my lady.”

*Coldhurst.* It would have to be Coldhurst who had saved her. He was the last man on earth to whom she wished to be indebted. She’d only ever seen him from a distance, having never been introduced to the notorious rake, but his reputation for being as handsome as sin preceded him. That must be why his presence was having such an effect on her.

Confound it. She’d heard Lord Coldhurst was a handsome man, and the reaction of her body made it impossible to deny the truth. He was exceedingly handsome, his look dark and very dangerous. With his dark-brown hair and chiseled, harsh, yet gorgeous features, he would be any woman’s fantasy. Any woman’s fantasy but hers!

His sinful lips curved in a mocking smile at her obviously assessing gaze.

She held her head high. “I know who you are. If not for you, I would not have been here in the first place.”

“Really, how fascinating.” He looked down at the dock below them. “I’m flattered. Such a warm welcome from lovely English lasses, although you’re in a different class to the rest of the ladies at the bottom of the gangplank, I think.” His finely arched brows knitted together as his eyes swept over her.

Indignation momentarily robbed her of speech. Her chin lifted. “I’m not here to *welcome* you.”

His skeptical study made her flush even hotter. “The Captain informs me you were waiting with the other, shall we say, ladies? However, I do not believe I’ve had the pleasure...”

When she remained silent, he added, “I must admit falling into the Thames is a unique way to gain my attention. Your charms are quite adequate from what I have seen. However, I must inform you that if you are after a protector, I never keep a mistress. But if you’re interested in a brief interlude of immeasurable mutual pleasure, I’m all ears.”

She didn’t require the previous lung full of water to splutter. “How dare you! I am not here for your pleasure, my lord. I’m here to collect on a family debt.” At his confused frown she added, “I’m Beatrice Hennessey.”

His seductive smile disappeared immediately, and his hands fell from where they were bracing his hips. The eyes that moments ago gleamed with a blatant invitation were now filled with guilt and pain. Perhaps he wasn’t as callous as his actions had dictated.

“As I wrote in my letter,” he said, “I’m sorry for your loss. I should never have allowed the duel to proceed. If I could change what happened that morning, I would. I did not mean to kill your brother. I’m sure my shot was wide, and the Prince Regent agreed that it was a terrible tragedy because of the mist and fog that winter’s morning, and has issued a full pardon.”

He’d paid for a pardon, more like. The Regent was always desperate for money. Suddenly Beatrice was very tired. She sat in her wet clothes, the cold numbing every part of her. Her heart clawed in her chest, thinking of her brother and the unfairness of what she now had to do.

She took a deep breath. “This is not the time or place to have this discussion.”

He obviously agreed with her. The words were scarcely out of her mouth when he bent and scooped her into his arms. Even though his shirt was soaked, the heat coming off his muscled chest seared as if she’d strayed too close to a roaring fire. She held the tattered edges of her dress together even tighter and let the warmth seep into her bones.

Lord Coldhurst strode with her down the gangway to his cabin, where he deposited her gently on his bed. His manner made it clear his motives had no nefarious purpose.



He passed her a towel. "Best rid yourself of those wet clothes. I'll find dry garments for you." Then he left her.

She sat staring at the closed door. Finally, when the increasing ferocity of her shivers almost made her fall off the bunk bed, she rose and stripped off her ruined dress. Another expense, she thought as she peeled sodden stockings down her legs. Terrified of Coldhurst's return before she was decent, Beatrice made quick work of drying herself with the towel. Then, spying a blanket at the foot of the bed, she wrapped it around her, and was instantly engulfed in Lord Coldhurst's scent. It was a heady mixture of stale cheroots, a spicy cologne, and maleness.

A knock at the cabin door made her jerk her nose guiltily from the blanket.

Lord Coldhurst entered the room and handed her what appeared to be a clean garment very similar to what the ladies on the dock were wearing. "It's all I could find." With that, he turned his back and pulled his shirt over his head.

She couldn't help her cry of outrage. "What on earth are you doing?"

He turned with a quizzical look at her cry.

"Even though you might want it for me, I'm not about to let myself die of cold. Don't look if it offends your sensibilities."

She said nothing. She'd lost her ability to breathe. To think. To move. But she hadn't lost her ability to look at him.

She shouldn't be so affected. He was a rake, a man of decadent passions with a terrible reputation. Her brother's killer. Yet that expanse of sun-kissed bare skin was stunning. She blamed the months he'd spent in the Caribbean. No man should look so....

With no sign of embarrassment, he continued undressing. With wide shoulders, a broad chest corded with lean muscle, a hard flat stomach, and narrow hips, he had the physique of a Greek god. She wanted to believe she was immune to his treacherous handsomeness, but his masculinity had become

both heat and light, drawing her to his beauty like a moth to flame. She could feel her wings flutter and begin to singe.

Her pulse went wild, even as her mind shrieked protest. He was a man as salacious as her father. She despised her father. Men as contemptible as her father, she would normally sail to the ends of the earth to avoid. Besides, Coldhurst had killed her brother.

That thought slapped her into action, and she finally turned her back. It took supreme effort for her not to sneak a quick look when she heard breeches and stockings being removed. She'd never seen a fully naked man before, only statues, and mostly they were discreetly covered. Her mouth felt dry, and she tried to swallow. What would he look like if she turned round? She would *not* look. She was not interested. She wasn't...

“You may turn round now.”

Beatrice did and almost turned back again. Although dressed, given who she was, he was not attired to an appropriate standard.

He'd pulled on a cambric shirt and a pair of black drawstring linen trousers—if one could call such an item “trousers.” And his feet were still bare.

“I'm surprised you didn't spend the time while I was dressing to do the same.” His eyebrow rose in a knowing smile.

*Curses.* She felt heat invade her cheeks. “I'd prefer you to leave the room while I dress.”

His smile deepened. “You don't trust me. Very wise. I don't have your will power. I would peek.”

Of course he would. “Why does that not surprise me? A man of your low moral fiber will have forgotten how to behave like a gentleman, if you ever knew.”

“Ah, on such brief acquaintance you seem to know me so well. We have established that you are not here to warm my bed. In that case, I pray you quickly explain what you are

doing here, so you may be on your way and I may pursue an activity that is far more pleasurable.”

“I will not have a conversation with you while I’m naked.”

White teeth flashed in his tanned face. “You could always change your mind and do something else with me while you’re naked.”

“Have you no respect? You killed my brother, and now you proposition his sister.” She stood, the blanket wrapped firmly around her. She could barely contain her shaking, but whether from cold or anger she wasn’t sure.

“I’d rather jump back into the Thames.”

Coldhurst frowned. “Forgive me, my lady, but I cannot understand your reason for seeking me out.” He paused, and his hands rolled into fists. “Unless it’s to extort more money from me.”

The blanket almost slipped from her grasp. “Extort? You sent the money. Blood money. We did not extort nor ask for any recompense. Judas’s thirty pieces of silver? Guilty conscience, my lord?”

He’d written to her from Jamaica, where he was ‘rusticating’ after the duel. He’d organized funds for her family, which had been gratefully received. The money had not been enough.

Anger flared in the depths of his eyes. “It was not I who issued the challenge.”

“But you accepted. A man who is known for his expertise with weapons, agreeing to a duel with a young, stupid man, barely more than a boy.”

The shrill pain of the memory had her lean on the cabin wall for support. The day Doogie died dawned like many before, except this time, he’d arrived home from his previous night’s carousing in a casket.

In a low voice he said, “I went through with the duel to teach the young fool to be careful whom he challenged in the future. I swear I aimed wide of him, but his inexperience and

the cloaking mist, must have caused him to deviate off his mark.” He added softly, “I did not intend to kill him, and I shall regret his death for as long as I live.”

Two tears rolled down her cheeks. She quickly dashed them away with one hand, while the other hand continued to clutch the blanket as though it were a life buoy.

“Well, you taught him a lesson all right.”

He sighed. “Why are you here?”

Beatrice swallowed several times, trying to grasp her courage for this despicable task. She forced herself to stand tall, but in her naked state felt absolutely ridiculous and exposed.

He moved toward her. She took a wary step back. She was tall enough that he didn’t dwarf her with his massive size, but she still had to steel herself to meet his intimidating presence without flinching.

“You aren’t afraid of me?” he asked, his voice as mesmerizing as a snake charmer who turned out to be the snake.

She was afraid of him, but not because he’d killed her brother. She was deadly afraid for an altogether different reason. She fought for control of her scrambled senses. She was afraid of him because for the first time in her life she was suddenly acutely aware of a man. Of the raw virility that seemed to surround him. “You may be a killer, but I’ve heard you are a man of honor.” At least she hoped he was, or her visit would be in vain. “I doubt you’d hurt a woman.”

“Not unless she asked me to,” Coldhurst said. “And then only in a mutually pleasurable way.”

She had no idea to what he was referring, but it was doubtless sexual in nature. Everything about him screamed sex. Doogie had issued his challenge because he’d found Coldhurst in his mistress’s bed.

Men were so stupid to fight and die over who was having sex with whom. From what she knew about men, they slept with anyone who let them. From what she knew of sex,

admittedly not much, it seemed a messy, unnecessary business, except to beget children.

“No doubt you are deliberately trying to make me uncomfortable with your innuendo,” she retorted coolly, adopting her most regal air. “I’m twenty-five years old. I am not a debutante who will faint at the mention of sexual congress.”

His smile flickered as if he were trying to hide his amusement. “Sexual congress? How prim. How proper.” He reached across the small space to brush her cheek lightly with the back of his knuckles. “Only a virgin could say sexual congress with such disdain. Either that, or a woman whose lovers were completely inept.”

Sebastian felt the animal stirrings of his body. Her lips parted and he heard her soft intake of breath. He’d obviously been without a woman for too long to lust after Doogie Hennessey’s spinster sister. For all that, he felt his loins heat, knowing she was naked under his blanket.

She was passably pretty. Not a ravishing beauty, but then very few women would look delectable after receiving a dunking in the Thames. Her hair clung in lumps to her head, the strands auburn-burgundy mixed with muddy-river brown sludge. Yet her eyes, the deep green of uncut emeralds, sparkled, probably with anger, and turned her plain features into something more. Her lips stretched taut with disapproval, but their bow shape made him want to kiss her. To kiss away the bleakness on her face. That she did not wish to be here was obvious. Then why was she?

He suddenly realized he had been staring at her for longer than was polite.

“You need to get dressed,” he said more harshly than he intended. “You shouldn’t be here. Your reputation would be destroyed if it were known you were in this cabin, let alone in it with me, naked. I’ve done your family enough damage as it is.”

She nodded. “True. But it’s that very reason that sees me take this desperate and abhorrent step.” She met his gaze. “Do

you know what Doogie's death has meant to our family?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I know the late Baron was to have married Penelope Gelher."

"And..."

"And that marriage settled your family's financial problems."

"That marriage," she corrected, "would have saved my mother, my sisters and brothers, and myself from the poorhouse."

The guilt rose to choke him once again. "I hadn't realized it had come to that."

She looked away. "If not for the funds you sent us while you were, shall we say, 'rusticating' in the Caribbean, my family would be there now. I used all the money to clear my father's and brother's debts. But now there is no more."

He balked. "But I sent your family a small fortune."

She blushed to the tips of her petite ears. "What can I say? First my father, and then my brother, took licentiousness to a level Marie Antoinette would have applauded."

"Then might I suggest you follow in your brother's footsteps? Arrange an advantageous marriage."

She finally smiled and his insides froze as the reason for her presence struck his brain like a lightning bolt. Damn. No. No, no, no... He wanted to step away. He wanted to run. Sail back to the Caribbean.

And then his worst nightmare put itself into words from within those lips he'd recently thought so kissable, and he knew he'd be powerless to refuse her.

"You're correct, Lord Coldhurst. If I wish to save what remains of my family, my marriage to a wealthy man is now my only option. At my age, and with my prospects, I have no hope of securing such a marriage this side of never. Why do you think I'm here? Only desperation and the need to save my siblings would allow me to marry a man like you.

A man responsible for the death of my brother.”

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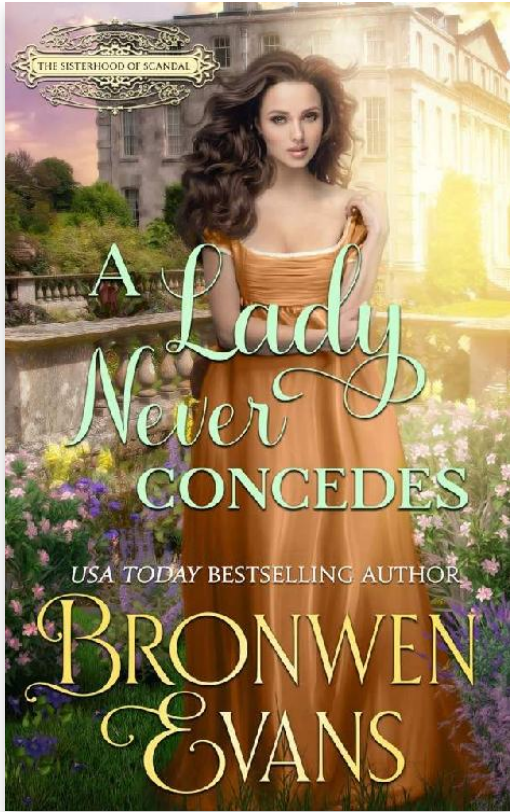
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## Acknowledgments

Another book *finished* and *published*—for an author, there is no feeling like it. But taking a book from inception to shelf involves a team of special people. To my numerous beta readers, thank you so much for your detailed feedback. You push me to tighten my stories and make them better. I must also acknowledge the members of The Beau Monde, who ensure I have my Regency facts straight and are a willing source of information. Finally, thanks go to Bron's Bold Belles. When I'm down or unsure of a story, you jump in and lift my spirits so that I can continue to let the characters crowding my head emerge on the page. Which, after all, allows me to live my dream job, that of storyteller.

## About the Author



USA Today Bestselling author Bronwen Evans is a proud romance writer. She has always indulged her love of storytelling and is constantly gobbling up movies, books, and theatre. Is it any wonder she's a proud romance writer? Evans is a three-time winner of the RomCon Readers' Crown and has been nominated for a RT Reviewers' Choice Award. She lives in the Hawke's Bay, New Zealand with her two Cavoodles, Brandy and Duke.

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