



HER LORD'S
DESIRE

THE FORBIDDEN SAGA:
WINTERCREST

BOOK
THREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MAGGIE RYAN

HER LORD'S DESIRE

THE FORBIDDEN SAGA - BOOK THREE

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Her Lord's Desire
The Forbidden Saga – Book 3

Women of Wintercrest

By

Maggie Ryan

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In exchange for shelter within its walls, the Lord of
Wintercrest Manor demands a high price...

Under his strict guidance, his ward will learn that actions are
never without consequence.

Her school days may be over, but her lessons have truly just
begun.

Between the professor who fancies her and the arrival of his
childhood friend, he knows her life will be turned upside down
yet again as a further demand is made of her...

Self-discovery.

He knows the truth... she is far more identical to his 'little
lady' than she cares to admit.

Previously titled: *Claimed*

PROLOGUE

“Will I really have suitors, sir?”

Edward sat back in his chair, seeming a little surprised that her first question hadn't been one demanding he explain his rules. She couldn't fault him as she hadn't expected that question to be the first thing that popped into her head, yet she discovered she really would like to hear his answer.

He smiled and answered, “Yes, my dear. I fear you shall have several.”

“You fear?”

Chuckling, he nodded. “I simply mean that you are a very beautiful woman, Lucille, and will draw the attention of most every available bachelor. That alone assures that, as your guardian, I shall have a lot to deal with. However, beauty is not the greatest gift you have to offer, and I want you to remember that you will only be allowed to court those men whom I decide are suitable. I warn you now, my criteria are very strict, and I doubt that many will meet my expectations.”

Lucy listened, a bit unsure how to proceed and wondering what possible gifts she had for any suitor. Setting that question aside, she shyly forced herself to ask another. “What of my expectations, sir? Shouldn't the choice be mine?”

Laughing as if he found her quite amusing, he shook his head. “Hardly, Lucy. Your father agreed that I was the proper one for Louisa and, Lucille, he also made it clear which type of man he wanted to be your mate. I find I not only agree with

his desires but, having you as my ward, I have decided his requirements were still far too lenient for you, little one.”

Lucy was suddenly missing her father and wished she could speak to both of her parents. “What... what did my father wish for me, sir?”

Edward took his time as if seriously considering her question and didn’t speak for several minutes. And when he answered, it was with a question of his own. “I believe you can answer your own question, wouldn’t you agree? After all, you are your sister’s twin. Your father wanted the very best for both of you.”

She looked at him, then looked away. Though almost afraid of his answer, she quietly asked her next question. “Someone like you, sir? Someone who treats his wife more like a child than an adult woman? Someone who has so many rules and... and if he is not obeyed, punishes her?”

“Yes, someone exactly like me,” he answered without a moment’s hesitation. “Someone who loves his wife—his little one—with his whole heart, his entire soul. Someone who would give his own life to protect his wife and what is his. Lucy, you will find that there are many types of men in this world. Your father was a very good man who loved his family fiercely. A man who, though you might not believe me, knew exactly what you require to live a completely fulfilled life. You don’t need and would never be truly happy with a weak man, Lucy.”

His words reminded Lucy of what Lord Eddinberg had said. She flushed, her hands twisting in her lap. “Are you... you going to teach me, sir?”

He smiled gently, saying, “Yes, Lucy. I will be but one teacher in your life. There are more than simple rules to live by in order to get through life. Your lessons begin under your parents’ tutelage and institutions are but another stage of a person’s life. Lessons in grammar, history, geography and mathematics serve to help make someone more intelligent. However, the value of life’s lessons is priceless. Life isn’t

simply something to get through one day at a time. Life is something that should truly be lived to its fullest.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

Edward leaned forward and gathered both of her hands in his. “I spoke of your beauty, but that is but a small part of who you are. You are a strong, spirited woman who has much to offer. Your mind is inquisitive, your heart is large, your soul is kind and there is a hunger, a craving within you that is just waiting to be set free. There were undoubtedly times when you believed you wouldn’t survive under the strap, and yet you not only did, you thrived with every welt painted across your bottom.” Ignoring her gasp and the shaking of her head, he grinned and squeezed her fingers again. “You did, little one, and you will also thrive as you discover passions you have no idea exist. However, you are going to have to trust that I, like your father, have only your best interests at heart. I promise that I will do everything within my power to find your ultimate teacher. You are young and innocent and have so much to learn. Your lessons will continue at the feet of your husband, whoever that will be.” He paused as if giving her a chance to consider what he was saying. Standing, his hands still holding hers, he pulled her to her feet.

“I want you to think about what we’ve discussed. I know you have many questions and most likely will discover many more. Now, it is getting late and it is time for you to find your bed.” He led her to the stairs and bent to kiss her cheek. “Good night, Lucille.”

He waited as if he expected her to ask another question. Instead, she found herself trembling at the answers he’d already given her. She’d thought she had come to know this man, but discovered she had no true knowledge of his identity. Oh, she knew that he truly not only loved her sister but considered her a great treasure, but she also knew she couldn’t comprehend how that love could also involve corporal, embarrassing punishment of the woman he obviously adored. And until she spoke at length and in privacy with Louisa, she’d never come near to understanding how her own twin, an

exact duplicate of herself, could not only accept her new lifestyle but seem to find happiness in it.

Edward's quiet passion in giving her his answers caused her heart to speed up and her blood to race. She found herself wondering if what he said could be true. Was she really as he described? Could she ever find fulfillment with a man she allowed Edward to choose? Could she even consider life with a man who would expect so much from her including things she had never before thought about? Could she find any semblance of happiness in a lifestyle that in any way mimicked the one she was presently living? Her head was aching with all sorts of thoughts and emotions. She felt she could not think of another thing and let out a small sigh.

“Thank you, sir. Good night,” she said softly. She knew that she'd have a thousand more questions to ask, but for now, she needed to think about all that he'd said. As she climbed the stairs, she realized she had been a pupil in her guardian's 'class' since her arrival at Wintercrest Manor though she hadn't wanted to admit it to herself.

CHAPTER 1

Charles Lloyds sat back in his leather chair and placed the letter he had been reading onto the surface of his desk. His heart raced as he ran his eyes over every word written across the heavy, cream-colored paper. He shook his head as if unable to comprehend what was being offered. Sitting forward once again, he lifted the letter and reread it for the fourth time.

It seemed he was being considered for the position of headmaster at the school where he had taught mathematics for the past several years. The previous headmaster, Mr. Thorne, had been stripped of his position at the behest of Lord Edward Wintercrest. While Charles agreed wholeheartedly with the school board's decision to remove the man, he had never once considered that he would be given this opportunity. He finally laid the letter down and stood. His long legs took him across the floor of his very small study. He felt as if he were an animal in a cage and changed direction, quickly striding down the steps of his front stoop, walking with purpose toward the city park.

Headmaster Lloyds? He grinned, discovering that he quite liked the sound of the title. His mind ran through everything that the position meant for him. Not only would his salary more than double, he understood that a larger, more prominent home was also part of the compensation package. He would attain a position that allowed him entry into an upper class of society. Important people who expected and demanded the best would enroll their daughters into his school, placing their precious offspring under his ultimate authority. He would have

a position he had never even considered before—a position that required characteristics he was unsure he even possessed. Thinking of what could be in his future made his mind go immediately to whom he wished to share that future with him. Miss Lucille Furniss, his former student, had captured his attention. He had spent a weekend not long ago, tutoring the young woman in an effort to teach her enough to pass her final mathematics exam. Though the girl had indeed passed with a perfect score, he knew she had paid a very high price for her diploma. Charles clasped his hands behind him as he began to walk along one of the many paths that wound through the large park. During his assignment at the highly respected Wintercrest Manor he had discovered a world, the existence of which he had only heard the vaguest rumors. It seemed that among the elitists of society, men no longer worried what most thought of them. They had the means and desire to live their lives exactly as they saw fit. Charles knew they did nothing to break any laws, but also knew they skirted along the edges of what most civilized people would consider acceptable.

Thinking of Wintercrest and the man who ruled his home so completely, he also remembered his first personal introduction to the lifestyle of absolute discipline. The memory of the young woman he was tutoring being paddled within his hearing after failing her first practice exam would remain with him forever. He also remembered how her guardian had required she lift her own skirts and bare her bottom for a strapping when she failed another quiz. He felt his heart hammer against his chest, remembering how lovely she had looked to him, her heart-shaped bottom lifting when commanded, her skin first paling as the leather licked along her flesh and then blooming a bright red with each upstroke of the strap in Lord Wintercrest's hand. Charles had felt both astonished and embarrassed at his reaction to Lucille's chastisement. His thoughts caused his stride to falter and he sank onto a bench along the side of the path.

He realized that if he were chosen for the position, he would be responsible for the education of many young women of society. One of the job's requirements was that he be able to administer corporal discipline. Not merely spanking or

paddling. The position represented the ultimate in discipline and meant that he would apply the cane upon any student's bottom who had the misfortune of being sent to his office for correction. Though he had to admit he had enjoyed watching Miss Furniss receive quite a strapping, he wondered if he were truly capable of wielding such an implement against a pale, bare bottom. The pride of being considered for the position was quickly turning into anguish. He had never had a woman across his lap for even a hand spanking. He was completely ill equipped to discipline some young woman whose parents had seen fit to place her into his care.

Sighing, he stood and turned toward home. Being an honorable man he would, of course, respond honestly to the proposal the letter had included. As just one educator of many in the city, he realized he had a course available to him. His lips curled up into a small smile as his steps quickened. The only recourse that made any sense was to practice what he'd been preaching to his pupils for years: accept your deficiencies and work to correct them. The sooner he could set his plans in motion, the faster he could begin his own lessons.

Having a definite plan sealed his resolve. Once back at his desk, he pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and, dipping his pen into the inkwell, began composing his response to the invitation. After blotting the ink of the bold script that filled the page, Charles slipped the folded letter into an envelope. Sealing it, he hoped that his honesty about his inexperience would not seal his fate. He could only post his reply on the morrow and pray for the best.

Later that evening, Charles slid into bed after extinguishing the lamp, his thoughts churning with dreams of a possible future. Though he was desperate to prove his worth to Lucille, he knew enough about the world to realize he must first prove his worth to her guardian. If he could not convince Lord Wintercrest of his ability to care for Lucille, it would not matter one whit what his desires were. Sighing deeply, he dismissed those thoughts as he slid into sleep, dreaming of the woman who had captured his heart and his mind.



AS CHARLES READ and reread his letter, Edward Wintercrest was also seated in a chair in his far more spacious study. Upon his return home from his afternoon ride to check on the estate, Henri, his servant of many years, had informed him that the day's post had been placed upon his desk. Thanking him, Edward had spent the earlier part of the evening enjoying dinner with his two girls. After the meal, he had spent an hour in the library playing a game of Jack Straws with his wife while his ward struggled with some sewing. Edward knew Lucille had spent the greater portion of her day at her task. He also knew she was worrying about the appointment she had been given to attend him in his study before she retired for the evening. When Mrs. Bremmer arrived to inform Louisa that it was time for bed, Edward helped his wife put away the game.

"Good night, Papa," Louisa said lifting herself onto her toes to press her lips to his cheek.

"Good night, Louisa, I'll join you soon," Edward said as he stroked his fingers down a long golden curl of her hair before giving a gentle pat of his hand against her bottom. He saw Lucille watching them. Her flinch when his hand connected to her twin's bottom told him just how nervous his ward was. Once Mrs. Bremmer had left the room, Louisa's hand held tightly in her own, he turned to speak to Lucy.

"Are you almost finished with your task, Lucille?" he asked.

"Yes, sir... this is the last pair," she informed him as her needle worked through the fabric.

"Good. When you have completed your duty, bring the completed garments to my study. I shall inspect your work at that time," Edward said, watching her lip tremble and her hand shake. "Lucille, don't make me wait long. You were naughty today and know what that means, don't you, little one?"

Lucy's head bobbed. "Y... yes, sir," she stammered, her voice barely audible.

Edward could not fault the poor girl for her obvious trepidation because they both knew that, unlike her twin, her evening was not yet over, and when she did find her bed, she'd most like be sleeping on her tummy.

“Good girl, I shall expect you within a half-hour,” Edward informed her before turning to leave the room.



THE MOMENT HE WAS GONE, Lucy dropped her face into her hands. She did indeed know what happened to naughty girls in this household. Naughtiness was never allowed, or ignored.

Lucy was gradually growing accustomed to life at Wintercrest Manor. She no longer found it strange seeing her twin dressed far beneath her chronological age. Louisa always wore a frilly dress adorned with large bows and ribbons, her dress covered by a crisp white pinafore. Though the sight of her sister dressed as a much smaller child had originally shocked Lucy, she had been extremely pleased to discover she was not expected to dress in the same style. Lucy continued to wear the fashions of the time and thought nothing more of it.

However, this morning, three weeks after she had graduated from school, her life had taken an unexpected turn. She squirmed on the settee, intensely aware of the state of her bottom under her new dress. As her heart pounded, she remembered how her day had begun and what had led to the dreaded appointment.



SHE AWAKENED with the sound of her door opening. Opening her eyes, she saw her lady's maid, Molly, coming into her room, followed by Mrs. Bremmer who was the head housekeeper as well as Edward's most trusted employee. Lucy sat up in her bed, her quilt to her throat as she watched Mrs. Bremmer begin to pile clothing from Lucy's wardrobe into the maid's arms.

“What are you doing?” Lucy asked as her wardrobe was systematically emptied. Mrs. Bremmer simply added the last dress onto the huge pile before speaking.

“That’s a very silly question. What does it look like I’m doing, Lucille?” Anna asked before instructing Molly to oversee the placement of the dresses into trunks to be stored. Lucy didn’t know what to say, or even if the question required an answer. She watched as her drawers were opened and items pawed through. Her face flushed as the housekeeper gathered chemises, corset covers and silk drawers and handed them to Molly who had already passed her armload of dresses to another servant for packing.

“I... I won’t have anything left to wear,” Lucy protested as several pair of her stockings were also taken from her drawers. Mrs. Bremmer ignored the young woman as she opened the next drawer and began removing corsets from their place. Lucy’s mouth gaped open as she watched. Though she had admitted to both Molly as well as her twin that she hated being forced to wear a tight corset, seeing them being piled high into Molly’s arms, she threw back the covers of her bed and was soon attempting to pull her belongings from Mrs. Bremmer’s hands.

“Stop! What do you think you are doing? These are my things.”

“Lucille, I suggest you abstain from arguing with me. I—”

“You have no right to take them!” Lucy demanded, cutting the woman off. “They don’t belong to you and I’ll inform Edward that you’ve stolen my things!” Even as she pulled with all her weight. Mrs. Bremmer’s hand remained clasped on the garment, her face drawing into a tight mask of disapproval.

“You are free to tell his lordship whatever you wish after I tend to your naughty bottom. But for now, missy, you will release your hold,” Anna said, her words causing Molly to gasp.

Shocked as well, Lucy lost her tug-of-war and almost fell when the last corset was ripped from her hands. It had been several days since Lucille had felt the shame and pain of being

spanked like an errant child. Hearing the housekeeper speak as if tending to a naughty bottom was an everyday occurrence caused Lucy's face to flush with red heat.

As if completely oblivious to the reaction her words had caused, Anna simply passed the garment to Molly. With her hands now free, Anna grabbed Lucy by her arm and marched her a few feet toward her desk. With her free hand, Anna pulled out the straight-back chair and dragged it to the center of the room. Lucy gave a short squeal as she was pulled roughly down across the woman's left knee after Anna had seated herself. The moment Lucy felt her nightgown being lifted, she began struggling with all her might in an attempt to squirm off the woman's lap. Anna soon had Lucy's kicking legs trapped, placing her free leg over her young charge's.

"No! Please, don't!" Lucy begged as her nightgown was rapidly being drawn up her legs and then halfway up her back. "Wait! I'm sorry!" she cried. "I... I just don't understand," she wailed as she felt her drawers being pulled down to expose her bottom. Lucy was humiliated being pulled onto the woman's lap and her bottom bared just like a naughty small child who had earned a correction. She was remembering her punishments at Edward's hand and the pain from those spankings.

"Stop, please... you... you can't spank me!" Lucy said her voice growing shriller with every word. "I'm a grown woman; I graduated from school... you... you can't do this. I'm a big girl!"

Anna actually chuckled. "Big girls do not throw tantrums and act like ridiculous little children, Lucille. Big girls do not screech and wail so that every person in the household knows they are misbehaving," Anna said. "You will settle yourself and ask me to give you a nice hard tawsing to teach you to behave like the 'big girl' you are claiming to be," Anna directed.

Lucy flushed realizing the statement had indeed been a stupid one to make. However, there was no way she would ever ask this woman to spank her.

When Lucy remained silent, Anna sighed. “Lucille, surely you must know by now that you aren’t going to win any arguments in this household. Not with the lord and, young lady, not with me. I’d think you’d have recognized that your guardian has granted me full authority over both you and your sister. Lord Wintercrest spends a great many hours outside the manor and it is my responsibility to guide both of his young ladies in behavior appropriate to their station.”

Lucy’s head had turned back to look at the woman while she gave a speech she truly didn’t wish to hear. Responsibility indeed. Proper behavior appropriate for their station? Her twin held the title of Lady Wintercrest... and even if Lucy had learned that the title was basically nothing but words under this roof, Louisa was still a respected woman of society. Surely this servant was overstepping her boundaries. Opening her mouth to remind the housekeeper of those very facts, she watched Mrs. Bremmer reach into her apron pocket and remove an implement.

“Close your mouth, Lucille, you are not a fish,” Anna said.

Lucy snapped her mouth shut, her face flushing at the chastisement but was suddenly far more concerned when her buttocks reflexively clenched the moment the black leather tawse was rubbed across her bared flesh.

Anna said firmly, “Lucille, I can sit here all day because I assure you, you will not be let up until you ask me for and have received a tawsing.”

Lucy gritted her teeth at the threat but decided that if the housekeeper could sit all day, she could simply do even better. She allowed herself to relax her muscles until she was draped like a boneless rag doll over the woman’s knee. She didn’t exactly know where to place her hands but she finally tucked them at her chin in order to keep them off the floor, determined not to support even an ounce of her weight.

“Comfy?”

A bit surprised to hear the question, Lucy squirmed before catching herself. Hanging upside down was not exactly conducive to comfort, but she’d die before admitting any such

thing. "Yes, thank you. And you? I'm not too heavy for you am I, Mrs. Bremmer?"

The servant actually chuckled. "Not at all, Lucille. After all, you're not the first young woman to be over my lap. Not counting your sister, I've raised five daughters of my own."

Lucy was surprised yet again. Turning her head, she looked up at the woman. "Really?"

"I don't tell fibs, Lucille," Anna said, her tone indicating she was a bit offended.

"I just mean... I've never seen you with any children."

"My daughters are all grown women with husbands of their own. My grandchildren are being raised as all little ones should to best prepare them for life. Learning to respect their elders and to behave in order not to be in the position you find yourself, missy." As if to emphasize exactly what that position might be, Anna continued to rub the tawse all over Lucy's upturned bottom.

Lucy turned back again, furious at herself for being caught up in a conversation in the first place when she was supposedly proving a point. She was also a bit angry that no matter how she tried, she simply could not seem to refrain from shuddering as the tawse moved over her skin and then moved down to rub against the very sensitive creases where her bottom met her thighs. Reaching up, she rubbed her fingertips across her forehead where a bit of a headache was beginning as the blood rushed to her head.

Several minutes passed before Lucy became aware of another presence in the room. She lifted her head briefly to see Molly had returned. Her maid's arms were full of clothing.

"Thank you, Molly," Anna said. "Just hang them in the wardrobe if you please."

Molly nodded and was soon placing identically styled dresses into the wardrobe. After she finished, she began to open the empty drawers in her dresser to place folded undershirts and new bloomers into them. As she bent to fill the last drawer with several pairs of stockings, she glanced over

at Lucy. Lucy flushed and looked away. Instead of a member of a highly respected household, she suddenly felt ridiculous and very childish turned over a lap, her bottom bared in the time-honored position of a disobedient child about to be spanked. She wiggled a bit and took several deep breaths, not quite understanding how exactly she'd wound up in this situation, but quite desperate to remove herself from it. She was extremely aware of every movement of the implement on her bottom and her color deepened. With a final sigh, she conceded.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Bremmer. I... I just don’t understand. I... I didn’t mean to disrespect you,” Lucy said in a soft voice. When the housekeeper didn’t respond, Lucy sighed and tried again, willing to offer apologies for what the older woman must have considered some type of slight. “I won’t speak to you in that way again. It was just a misunderstanding. There is no need to... um... to sp... spank me.”

Anna continued to stroke Lucy’s bottom with the tawse as if she hadn’t even heard Lucy’s confession. Lucy had no idea what the woman wanted but knew her head was really beginning to pound. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. If it makes you feel better, I admit I was wrong. But you can let me up now as I’ve learned my lesson.”

Despite her second attempt, it wasn’t Mrs. Bremmer who spoke next, it was Molly.

“If there is nothing else, Mrs. Bremmer, shall I go help the other girls pack Miss Lucy’s trunks?” she asked.

“Yes, Molly, you may,” Anna answered. “But first, ask Cook to go ahead with the service as there’s no reason everyone in the household be made to wait to break their fast. If you see his lordship, please inform him that I am waiting for Lucille to decide exactly how long she wishes to remain over my knee, her bloomers lowered to bare her little bottom before making her request for a proper tawsing.”

Lucy flushed yet again and saw Molly giving her a look that seemed to convey that as sorry as she was for her

mistress, she was very glad not to be forced to remain to witness seeing Lucy get her bum reddened.

“Yes, ma’am,” Molly said, giving a quick curtsy before leaving the room.

Angry at having her apologies totally ignored, Lucy was even more determined to win this ridiculous war. Her mum had always said one had to pick one’s battles and she was picking this one. Hell itself could freeze over before she’d surrender. The sound of voices had her lifting her head, tilting it in order to hear what was being said outside the door Molly had forgotten to pull closed behind her. Gritting her teeth, she prepared herself to ignore whichever servant entered her room. If a bit of embarrassment at having yet another person see her bare bottom was the cost of victory, so be it. Lowering her face to allow the witness anonymity, her head jerked up again when she realized that one of the voices she heard quite distinctly did not belong to any servant.

“I see, thank you, Molly.”

Those words were said in a voice she’d recognize anywhere and in a tone that had her buttocks quivering. Swallowing her pride, she said, “Please, Mrs. Bremmer, I... I accept now that you must have the authority to sp... spank me. Please, just this once... please forgive me. I... I promise never to speak to you with such rudeness again.”

“Child, that is not what you were instructed to do now was it?”

It wasn’t what she wished to hear, but at least the woman was speaking to her. Lucy felt her heart racing and swore she could hear every footfall of Edward’s boots on the floor of the hall and quickly answered, “No, but I’ve learned my lesson. I-I don’t need a span... spanking.”

“You were instructed to request your tawsing, young lady. You’ll find a bottom that has been attended to by an expertly applied tawse feels very different from one given a simple spanking,” Anna informed her. The leather continued to move and stroke Lucy’s bottom. “Try again, Lucille, as every moment you are making me wait to attend to your naughty

bottom will make your coming chastisement harder to accept. I'm afraid your poor bottom is in for quite the lesson already. Do you really wish it to be extended?"

Lucy hung her head, all thoughts of pleading for mercy draining from her body. Despite the past weeks of being perfectly behaved, it seemed nothing would stop this punishment. She might have thought she had been within her rights to question the removal of her belongings, but it was now quite obvious that Mrs. Bremmer considered her to have been defiant and disrespectful. And Lucy was all too familiar with what happened to little girls who were considered naughty. They paid the price for that naughtiness with any one of several horrid implements being applied to their bare bottoms.

"Please... oh, please, Mrs. Bremmer," she begged, her voice cracking as the first sob escaped her. "I'm so sorry... I... oh, God, please don't do this. I-I just didn't want to wear Louisa's clothes and be a little girl. It... it isn't fair... it isn't right for him to require this of me. I'm... I'm a grown woman," Lucy said, her voice breaking.

"We've already established that you are not a 'big girl,' Lucille. Regardless of your opinion, fair or not, disrespect and blatant misbehavior are never, ever overlooked in this house. You did not act as a grown woman and simply converse with me about something you didn't understand. Had you, perhaps you would have discovered your beliefs are incorrect. However, we will not be able to converse about anything except what is to happen to this poor little bottom. Now do your duty, Lucille, or perhaps you'd like your entire lesson applied right here?" Anna ended her statement with another swipe of the tawse against Lucy's sit spot.

The threat... no, the promise was the final push Lucy needed. "Please... please may I have my tawsing?" Lucy said as the first drips of her tears slid down her cheek to plop onto the carpet under her head. Anna finally lifted the tawse from the girl's bottom.

"Yes, you may."

Lucy stiffened and gasped. The words had not come from the housekeeper. Turning her head and swiping back the curtain of her hair, Lucy saw Edward leaning against the doorframe of her bedroom. She immediately turned bright red with shame. How long had he been standing there? How much had he heard?

“Please, sir... please, I’m so sorry,” Lucy tried, thinking perhaps she could show her contrition before the tawsing began. “I just didn’t understand what Mrs. Bremmer was doing with my clothing. I... I didn’t mean to be naughty. I promise to mind—”

“Of course you promise, Lucille,” Edward said, not moving a muscle. “It is so easy for a little one to promise anything when she is turned over a lap, her bloomers at her knees and her bare bottom positioned for punishment.” His words immediately caused the shame at her position to burn hotter, realizing this was all her own fault. Edward continued, “As you are aware, promises mean very little. Actions prove your desire and, young lady, since I’ve seen Molly coming up and down these stairs several times in the past half-hour, I’m quite positive that a simple misunderstanding is not all that is going on here. In fact, I’d be willing to wager that some little girl thought she’d outsmart her elders. However, as I’m sure you are now aware, that little plan failed quite miserably, didn’t it, Lucille?”

Feeling like the fool he most likely considered her to be, Lucy could only nod. “I-I suppose...” His lifted brow had her swallowing hard and rephrasing her answer. “I mean, yes, sir.”

“That’s correct and the only action you shall be doing in the next minute is to offer your naughty bare bottom to Mrs. Bremmer’s tawse, understood?”

When Lucy could only nod, he shook his head. “No, Lucille. I need to hear your answer so there will be no misunderstanding of what you are going to do. Tell me exactly what that will be.”

She'd not only lost the battle and the war, she had lost the entire campaign. Knowing her bottom would be burning for quite some time, she said, "I'm going to ask Mrs. Bremmer to forgive me and then I-I'm going to lift my bottom up and ask her to give me my tawsing... sir."

"That is correct," Edward said before turning to look at his employee. "After you release Lucille, have her spend her day tailoring her new drawers into the open style that you recommended. I've come to agree our little one will find the style quite the lesson. I believe having to tailor the drawers will teach her that she should be grateful for all that is provided to her."

"Certainly, my lord," Anna said and without another word, lifted the tawse and brought it down with a crack against Lucille's bottom.

The room was soon ringing with Lucy's cries and pleas for mercy. The tawse lifted again and again and again, bouncing sharply onto her bottom, each stroke sounding like a crack of a whip. Lucy learned that Mrs. Bremmer had been correct. Having her bottom tawsed was far more painful than either a hand spanking or even a paddling. Each stroke caused her bottom to burn and itch as the separate strands of the stiff leather bit into different spots on her buttocks. She was soon struggling, her hands clawing at the carpet, the tips of her toes scrabbling behind her where they were locked beneath Mrs. Bremmer's leg.

"Owww, please... please, no more!" she begged, shrieking as the tawse bit into her sit-spot. She no longer cared if the entire household heard her cries. All she wanted was for the horrid tawsing to stop.

"I'm sorry! Please, oh please, stop," she cried to no avail.

"I'll stop when I'm assured that you, missy, will never again question my authority or have any doubt about the painful lesson my tawse can deliver."

Lucy made the mistake of reaching back with her hand in an attempt to grab hold of Mrs. Bremmer's wrist. Anna simply

slapped the tawse against the back of Lucy's thigh, causing her to arch and screech again.

"Keep that hand down, little girl," Anna ordered slapping the other thigh. "Naughty girls are punished and must show they accept their punishment. Put your hands down and don't reach for your bottom again."

Lucy sobbed, but as the tawse continued to punish her thighs, she finally submitted. Once her hands were flat on the floor, the tawse was returned to her bottom. While the pain was still dreadful, it was less than the inferno burning on the backs of her thighs. Time seemed to stretch into eternity before the tawse finally stopped falling though the servant continued to rub the leather over the welts she had painted onto Lucy's bottom. Lucy continued to sob and gulp for air as she wagged her bottom from side to side. She swore she was burning more than she had under her guardian's leather strap or even Headmaster Thorne's cane. She moaned and continued to promise to be a good girl, not even truly aware she was speaking. Anna allowed her to cry for several minutes.

"Your tawsing is over. You are to rise and go stand in your corner. Keep your gown up and that naughty bottom displayed," Anna instructed as she released the girl. Lucy continued to sob, her chest heaving as she pushed herself off the housekeeper's lap and stumbled to the appropriate corner.

"Gown up, Lucille," she heard and sobbed harder realizing that Edward had stayed to witness her discipline. Lucy raked her gown up to bare her hot, aching bottom. She shifted from foot to foot, the burn so intense she couldn't remain still. When she felt a large hand pressing against her lower back, she instantly stiffened at the contact.

"Settle, little one. I know your bottom is burning but you must show your contrition and remain still during your corner time. If you continue to move about, Mrs. Bremmer will simply give you another dose," Edward warned her.

Barely managing to cut off the wail she began to utter at his words, she nodded and with a last little shuffle, she forced herself to still her legs. He removed his hand and used it to

brush her hair from her face. She turned her head just slightly but when she saw his look of disapproval, she immediately turned back and pressed the tip of her nose into the junction of the two walls.

“That’s my good girl,” he said, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Keep your gown up, your bottom out, and, Lucille, I shall see you in my study before bed.” Lucy couldn’t stop the cry at those words. Edward allowed it for a moment before continuing, “It has been several days since you’ve been given an appointment, Lucille. I am disappointed to discover you haven’t learned to be a good girl for me and Mrs. Bremmer. Perhaps another lesson this evening will help remind you that you’d rather behave than be put to bed with a hot, throbbing rear.”

Lucy lost her breath for a moment and then sobbed harder, her voice echoing her distress. She knew her bottom would eventually stop burning from the tawse but that the fire would be reignited this evening.



WATCHING EDWARD LEAVING THE LIBRARY, Lucy wiped her cheeks and once more picked up her needle. The memories of the day’s beginnings had only reminded her of how this day was going to end. The only thing she could possibly strive for now was to not make it any worse on herself. She made her stitches through the fabric as quickly as possible so as not to be late for her appointment. Lucille shivered as she made her final knot. She folded the garment and set it atop the pile that had gradually grown during the day. She twisted her hands together, massaging her sore and pricked fingers. She had been sewing for hours, and though grateful she was finally finished, she knew her punishment was not yet complete. She took a deep breath and forced herself to her feet.

Her face flushed as she felt her skirt slide down to cover her bottom. She had been sitting on the settee, her skirts lifted and wadded up behind her in order that her bottom was bare on the cushion of the settee. She had not been allowed drawers

all day long and had been conscious of her nakedness beneath her new dress. Mrs. Bremmer had reminded her each time Lucy had to sit to lift her dress properly. Lucy had been embarrassed when having to stand after taking her seat at the dinner table in order to lift her dress. She'd done so as quickly as possible and could only pray that neither Edward nor any of the many servants had seen her bare bottom being pressed to the surface of her chair. She swiped her hands down her skirts and then bent and picked up the stack of items. She stood, wincing a bit at the pull of the weals that burned hottest in the creases of her sit spots courtesy of Mrs. Bremmer's tawse. Taking another deep breath, she swiped a tear from her cheek and began the journey to her guardian's study.

CHAPTER 2

Edward heard the timid knock on his door and pushed aside the business correspondence he had been reading. He had already completed working on the household accounts while waiting for Lucille to finish her sewing and come to him.

“Come in,” he said and watched as the thick door slowly opened. Lucille stepped inside and turned to close the door behind her. Edward knew she was attempting to appear brave but knew her legs were probably shaking. She stood for a moment as if unsure where to go.

“Come here, Lucille,” Edward directed and motioned toward his desk. Lucy walked forward, her eyes darting to glance at the large armoire that held a prominent place in the room. Edward was aware of her thoughts knowing she was aware of what resided on shelves and hooks behind the beautifully carved teak doors. He watched her approach, his gaze raking up and down her petite form. She looked exactly as he desired. While not dressed anywhere as young as her twin, she no longer looked like a modern young woman either. Edward had placed a large order with a local seamstress and had been explicit in what he desired. Seeing his ward wearing one of the new dresses assured him he had made the proper choices for her attire.

The dress was a pale gray color with a wide bib collar of stark white. The bodice was plain and dropped to a low-waisted skirt where another white band encircled Louisa’s hips. Beneath the band, a skirt fell to land at mid-calf, the

dozens of pleats opening and closing with Lucy's steps. Below the hem of the dress, Lucy was wearing thin black stockings and her feet were shod in slip-on simple black shoes. Unlike the dresses Louisa wore daily, there were no large bows or unneeded adornments on this dress. Edward knew it resembled much more a uniform than any dress a young woman of courting age wished to wear. He smiled knowing that Lucy's wardrobes held nothing but duplicates of this dress though of different colors. Lucy was unaware of his perusal as her gaze finally shifted away from the armoire. When she had reached Edward's desk, she stopped, the garments held tightly against her chest.

"Did you complete your task?" he asked nodding toward the fabric.

"Ye... yes, sir," Lucy answered.

"Good, place them here, if you please," he instructed patting the area he had cleared in front of him. Lucy placed her pile where indicated and then stood back, her hands twisting in the fabric of her dress. Edward ignored her unease as he picked up the first item. He watched color rush from beneath the bodice of her dress, up the slim column of her throat to bloom across her cheeks as he unfolded the garment. Dropping his eyes to the soft white cloth in his hands, he began to check her work. Edward knew her embarrassment came from seeing him examine the intimate garment he was sure she'd never expected any man other than her husband to see much less to touch.

"You've done well, Lucille," Edward said admiring the small and even stitches. "I am pleased to see you took your time and did very neat work. I'm sure Mrs. Bremmer would agree with me."

"Tha... thank you, sir," Lucy said softly hoping against hope that her diligence in her work might be enough. "Mrs. Bremmer made me remove any stitch that wasn't neatly placed and redo it. I worked all day, sir," she added.

Edward smiled and looked at her. "I know, little one. Mrs. Bremmer has kept me abreast of your progress," he said.

“She’s also informed me that you will not be allowed to cover your bottom until I approve your work. That you’ve been reminded to lift your skirts and sit on your bare bottom since leaving your room after your tawsing. Is that correct?”

Lucy closed her eyes, her shame at being naked beneath her skirts obvious. Opening them, she answered, “Yes, sir.”

“I believe you have earned the right to wear your new drawers,” Edward said and stood. Lucy trembled even more as he stepped from behind his desk and reached out to hand her the item.

Lucy took the offered drawers. He knew that she had spent the whole day first removing the entire center seam from all her drawers. After the seams had been meticulously picked apart, he’d heard Mrs. Bremmer instructing her on how to turn under the raw edges and hem the long seam as two separate seams, leaving the crotch completely open. He was sure that Lucy was ignorant of the fact that he’d seen tears slide down her cheeks as she’d worked. How he’d seen her wince and place the tip of her finger into her mouth to suckle each time she pricked it with her needle as she worked.

He was also aware that his young ward had been informed that even when granted the right to don the newly stitched bloomers, Lucille might be covered, but with a very simple pushing apart the volume of fabric, her bottom would be both bare and very easily accessible to a spanking, paddling, switching, strapping or worse. She would quickly learn that fighting about her wardrobe earned her nothing but the punishment of wearing open-crotch drawers for the foreseeable future.

“Go ahead, Lucille. Put on your new drawers,” Edward instructed. Lucy whimpered but stepped awkwardly into the drawers and pulled them up underneath her new dress. Edward didn’t move or offer her privacy. He watched as her fingers fumbled to tie the ribbon around her small waist and adjust the fabric. After she had removed her hands from under her skirts and smoothed them down, he spoke again.

“Tell me, Lucille, do you find yourself now grateful for the clothing provided to you?” he asked.

She slowly nodded her head. “Yes, sir, than... thank you. I-I’m very sorry for the way I behaved this morning.”

Edward smiled. “I’m quite sure you are. Lift your dress and stand by the chair, Lucille,” he ordered stepping back and turning to walk to the armoire. As he unlocked the door, Lucy began to cry softly. He knew she was most likely wondering why he’d even bothered to give her the bloomers to wear when he was obviously going to punish her. He watched as she stepped to the chair and slowly drew her dress up to her waist. Her face turned a deeper shade of rose as her newly donned drawers came into view. Edward’s lips curled into a quick smile of amusement knowing the poor girl had no true idea of exactly what her new drawers offered. Looking at his choices and considering her behavior lately, his hand passed over the heavy wooden paddles, the small leather tawses, the crop and landed on his choice. Picking up the small, thin paddle, he returned to stand next to her.

“You have been a very good girl these past weeks, Lucille. I’ve been pleased that you’ve been working to learn your proper place at Wintercrest. Though my first view of you this morning was of you upended over Mrs. Bremmer’s knee, I was very proud when your first thought was not one of shame of having me see your bare little bottom, but was to apologize for your misbehavior. However, it was that very misbehavior that had me giving you an appointment this evening. I had sincerely hoped that you had learned that being naughty is never a good choice.”

She’d been unable to draw her eyes away from the paddle he was casually tapping against his leg, but he couldn’t blame her for that. They were both aware of exactly what a paddle could do regardless of its small size.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” Lucy said. “I-I wasn’t really awake yet and... and didn’t understand you had changed... changed my wardrobe. I... I know I shouldn’t have shouted or been rude to Mrs. Bremmer,” Lucy confessed. “But, sir, I did apologize

and... and I asked for a tawsing. I didn't mean to be disobedient—”

“And yet you were, Lucille,” Edward said. “You are having a problem taking a moment to both think about your words before they spew from your mouth as well as remembering to treat every single adult in your life with respect. Mrs. Bremmer's word is second only to mine. You are to do as she instructs every single time. If she decides you need to have your bottom reddened, you, young lady, will ask her to redden it for you. She is only doing her duty and attempting to raise you to be a good and proper young woman.”

He watched her eyes and saw the disagreement within their violet-blue depths. His little Lucy wanted to argue, but the fact that she simply bit her lower lip and nodded told him she was indeed learning her lessons.

“Yes, sir... I'm sorry, sir,” she said yet again.

He nodded. “I know you are, sweetheart, but I also know you are far sorer that you were given this appointment. Turn around and bend over the arm of the chair,” Edward said firmly. Lucy sobbed once but did as she was told. Her hands reached under the edge of the cushion as they had when she had received her last strapping in this very spot. Edward stepped closer and said, “Reach behind you and pull open your drawers, Lucille. You need to first bare your bottom and then make your apology and ask me for your paddling.”

Her eyes darted to his as his instructions made it crystal clear exactly why she had been mending all day. Her face flaming, her hands reached behind her to discover she could easily slide the fabric of her drawers apart, exposing her bottom to Edward's view. Her hands paused for a moment when she felt the first of the exposure. Edward was about to chastise her when, with a small cry, she finally pushed every inch of fabric off her bottom. With the exposure, folds of fabric fell to the sides of her hips, the slightly welted skin of her bottom as well as the backs of her thighs very well framed by the white cloth of her drawers before the fabric gathered again in cuffs around each of her slim calves.

“Very good, Lucille. Make your apology and present your bottom and let’s get this naughtiness paddled right out of you,” Edward instructed.

“I’m sorry,” Lucy sobbed as she rose to her toes and lifted her bottom to present it for chastisement. “Please may I have my... my paddling?”

Edward gave her his answer as his first stroke burned into her upturned bottom. She groaned and soon had her hands buried under the cushion as she attempted to accept her punishment with as much dignity as possible. Edward was proud of her, but continued to paddle her, the staccato cracks seemingly unbroken as his wrist flexed rapidly again and again until the entire surface of her bottom was pulsing and beet-red, its color heightened by the contrasting white of her drawers. He stepped forward and placed his hand onto her lower back, pressing it down hard.

“Bottom tilted higher, Lucille. I’m going to paddle your sit-spots so that you will remember the importance of being respectful to Mrs. Bremmer,” Edward said. She sobbed, but obediently rose slightly and moved forward on the chair. Her fingers tightened their grip around the cushion and she spread her legs a bit wider before tilting her bottom up to her guardian. Edward nodded in approval though she’d not seen him do so. Wanting her to know he was proud of her, he said, “That’s correct, Lucille. Submitting your bottom properly shows me that you do desire to be my good girl.”

Of course pride in her didn’t negate the need to complete her discipline. “Keep it well raised, little one,” he reminded tapping her bottom with the edge of the paddle. Turning the implement in his hand, he lifted it and brought it down against the very sensitive skin of the sit spot above her right thigh. The crack was loud but his ward’s cry of distress was even louder. Her legs began to kick up and down as she fought the searing pain of the paddling as he alternated between her sit spots, each crack accompanied by her pleas.

“Please... no... no more, please, sir,” she cried, her hands clutching at the cushion as her bottom wagged from side to side and then up and down.

Edward ignored her and continued to roast her sit-spots until they were as red as the rest of her bottom. He finally lowered the paddle and stepped back. Before him, lying over the arm of his chair, was a very well-toasted, crimson-red little rump. Edward replaced the paddle into the armoire as Lucy attempted to regain her composure.

“You may rise and go to the corner, Lucille. Keep those drawers well parted and your dress up. I want you to display that naughty red bottom correctly,” Edward said, moving back behind his desk. Lucy struggled to stand and then walked to the corner. She stepped into it and before leaning forward to press her nose against the wall, she dragged her skirt up to her waist, clamping her arms to her sides to keep her dress in place. Her hands dropped to once more pull her drawers apart, her fingers clasping and twisting in the linen to keep the halves from sliding back together.

Edward gave her one glance. “Nose against the wall then step back and bend forward a bit and push that bottom right out, Lucille. I need to see every bit of your red splotchy buttocks properly protruding from the rear of your new drawers.” He’d made sure his words accurately described the position he required as well as using the instructions to paint a visual image in her mind of how she’d look to him as well as anyone who might enter the room. Embarrassment was quite a good teacher indeed he’d found. With a sob, she obeyed, pushing her arse up a bit higher when he gave her the single word to do so. Satisfied, Edward nodded his approval. “Good girl, remain exactly as you are,” he said and turned back to the unfinished mail still waiting upon his desk.

Edward finished his business correspondence before reaching and pulling a bell cord on the wall behind him. He poured himself a glass of brandy while he waited. His eyes took in his ward as she stood in the corner. He was very pleased to see that she was now still, her cries having quieted to only the occasional snuffle. A knock sounded on the door and he called his permission to enter.

Mrs. Bremmer nodded to him and he motioned to the corner. She stepped forward and took Lucy’s upper arm.

“Come, Lucille, it is time for bed,” the housekeeper said softly. “I know you must be a very tired little one.” Lucy turned from the wall and additional proof that she was learning was evident when she didn’t release her drawers or allow her skirt to drop since she had not been given permission to do so. Anna led her to his desk and reached to pick up the remaining pile of drawers that Lucy had set upon the surface more than an hour earlier.

“I’m sorry I was naughty, sir,” Lucy said softly. “Tha... thank you for paddling me.”

Edward stood, and dropping a kiss on her forehead, said, “Good night, little one. I’m sure today’s lesson will help remind you to be a good little girl. To assure you remember your new undergarments will make it quite easy to tend to your bottom should you decide to be disobedient, you’ll keep your skirts up and your bottom out until Mrs. Bremmer gives you permission to cover yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

Edward observed her cheeks flush and watched the two women walk from his study. One was a mature, middle-aged woman dressed quite stiffly in her daily uniform, the other, a beautiful, petite young woman, her skirts lifted to her waist, her punished red bottom peeking from the parted fabric of her drawers.

CHAPTER 3

With Lucille even now being tucked snugly into her bed, he returned to his desk. The last pile of mail consisted of a few envelopes, heavy and sealed with wax. He smiled, thinking he was finally receiving a response to his own letter posted weeks ago. He slid his letter opener under the flap of the first envelope and broke the seal. As he pulled a thick parchment from the envelope and unfolded it, his smile broadened.

The first letter Edward read was from his childhood friend, Lord Lucas Huntington. The men had known each other for decades. If Edward had a twin, it would have been Lucas. The two had manufactured quite a bit of mischief throughout their childhood and had attended school together. Memories flooded through Edward's mind as he recalled receiving a very hard caning which had been followed by Lucas receiving his own. The memory caused Edward to remember the scene in Thorne's office where both his wife and his ward had bent side-by-side, bottoms bared and raised as they both went under the cane.

That day had been the beginning of a new openness at Wintercrest. No longer was his little wife allowed to live under any deception. Lucille was quickly informed that life at Wintercrest Manor ran far differently than she had believed. The secret was revealed that her twin sister, Louisa, lived her life far more like that of a coddled—yet strictly disciplined—child, rather than as a grown woman who was Edward's wife. Lucille had been shocked, but Edward knew from her behavior that she was gradually growing accustomed to her new life.

Edward pushed the thoughts of his girls away as he once more concentrated on the letter before him.

Lucas had been abroad for the past two years expanding his business interests. Edward was extremely pleased to learn that the man had recently returned to his own ancestral home, Hunter's Ridge, and was finally ready to settle down and marry. Edward and Lucas both shared the same proclivities and Lucas had been the first name to pop into Edward's head when he began to consider Lucille's future. Lucas wrote to inform Edward that he would be in town soon, which suited Edward well. He knew his friend would have fully approved of the session that Edward had just conducted.

Lucas was a man who also believed in firm discipline and that red bottoms were a necessary lesson for the females in his life. Having being the eldest in a large family, he had never hesitated to discipline any of his female siblings as well as the women he had courted. Edward found himself looking forward to the man's visit and was anxious to see his reaction to Lucille. Edward set the letter aside and picked up the next.

He was quite surprised to read its contents. The sender was not a name that had even crossed Edward's mind. He tapped the edge of the envelope against his chin as he considered the man's words. It seemed that his little ward had made quite the impression. Edward knew Lucille had been initially frightened upon meeting this formidable man. Edward shook his head but was still smiling. Whoever would have guessed that Pastor Reed, the leader of his community's church, was writing to inform Edward of his interest in calling upon Lucille. Edward placed the letter next to Lucas' and reached for another.

The final envelope did not contain a letter but held a formal invitation to the opening ball of the season. Lord and Lady Eddinberg were hosting the event, which told Edward many things. The couple had met Lucille during her celebratory dinner upon her successful graduation. They held a great deal of respect in society, both in what was considered 'normal' as well as the more selective one in which couples shared the lifestyle that Edward much preferred. The couple had been wed many years, serving as role models for how this

particular dynamic could be fulfilling for both partners. While Lady Eddinberg was allowed to dress according to her age and station whenever she left the privacy of her husband's estate, Edward knew that within their home, and often among their group of acquaintances, she was George's own special little girl, often wearing dresses comparable to the ones Louisa wore daily. Attending the party would be a wonderful lesson for both his wife and his ward. He would, of course, accept the invitation and knew both his girls would both be excited about the prospect of attending their first party.

Edward sat back in his chair and rolled the heavy crystal glass between his hands to warm the brandy before taking the final sips. He was very pleased with what he had read. He was also thinking of the letter he had written to Charles Lloyds. He had instantly known that the professor was interested in Lucille as a possible wife, instead of simply as his former student. Edward still retained several doubts about Charles' ability or even desire to tend to Lucy in the way she needed, but despite his doubts, Edward had to admit he was growing to admire and respect Charles and was willing to give him a chance. It would all depend upon the next few weeks and how Charles reacted to Edward's suggestions.

Edward rose from his desk and extinguished the lamp. He had several things to attend to in the coming weeks. He would speak to Anna in the morning so that she could properly prepare the house for Lucas' upcoming visit. Edward was looking forward to seeing his friend. He felt that Lucy was far more likely to consider Lloyds as a possible husband simply because she at least knew something of the man and his character, but he still felt Lucas was the most likely candidate to become Lucy's husband. Charles had been nothing but supportive and kind while tutoring Lucille, and Edward knew that his ward was most likely under the impression that her sweet professor was incapable of dealing with naughty young girls, as he had never had a cause or the right to punish Lucy. Edward grinned, knowing that despite his ward's innocence, he himself had witnessed Charles' reaction to the discipline Lucy had received upon failing her practice exams. Edward

knew that whatever the final outcome, the next few weeks would be educational and telling for everyone.

As Edward entered his bedchamber, his thoughts left Lucille and her possible suitors. All of his attention instantly focused on his wife sleeping peacefully, her hair spread across the white linen bedcovering like a golden halo, but he wasn't interested in an angel... not tonight. Stripping off his clothing, Edward slid into bed beside her, pulling her to lie upon her back as he slid her nightgown up until the mounds of her breasts were exposed and her nipples immediately puckered in the cool evening air. Leaving the gown bunched above the sweet globes, he moved to straddle her legs, smiling as he gently stroked her soft flesh before sliding his hands between her thighs and drawing her legs apart inch by inch. Louisa slowly came awake as he repositioned himself between her legs, his fingers running over her mons that he'd recently shorn. Without her golden curls, every inch of her sweet little quim was visible to his eyes.

"Papa," she whispered as she became aware of him.

"Yes, little one, it's your papa." Bending forward, he brushed his lips against the very top of her denuded mons before placing tiny kisses up her body, dipping the tip of his tongue into her navel and traced the undercurve of each breast before reaching her left nipple. Taking it between his lips, his tongue flicked rapidly across the turgid peak.

"Oh, Papa," she sighed and then moaned as his teeth began to nibble on the sensitive bud. Edward loved the sound of her sleepy moan and felt his cock stiffen as it nudged the entrance to her pussy.

Edward smiled, loving every time he heard the address she was beginning to speak easily. Letting her left nipple pop from his lips, he kissed down the valley between her breasts to take her right nipple between his teeth. Louisa arched her back and moaned again, her hands beginning to pull against the restraints she always wore when in her husband's bed. Edward slid into her easily as she had moistened the moment he lifted her gown. He rode her slow and easy, his mouth moving from breast to breast as he suckled and nibbled on her swollen

nipples. Louisa moaned as he drove deeper, stretching her sex in order to allow her body to accommodate his girth, watching her back arch and her hips wiggle a bit as she was forced to accept every inch of his shaft until she was completely full of her husband's cock.

“Such a good girl,” he said, moving to her other breast again to nip at that nipple until it was as furred as the other. “Opening her sweet little quim to take all of Papa's cock.” He watched her face flush as it never failed to do when he spoke freely. He was not a man bound by the rules of society and was certainly not going to censure his language when it had to do with the pleasures he was teaching his little lady. Sliding a hand between their bodies, he easily found the pearl of her clit.

“Oh... oh... oh.”

He grinned at the mantra she chanted, her hips lifting a bit as she chased the sensation that she was far too shy to admit she craved. He played with her clit, his fingers easily sliding over the bud made slippery by the cream of her arousal that was flooding her pussy and escaping with every withdrawal of his cock. He continued to press in and out of her, his mouth busy feasting on her breasts, his fingers circling, pressing and flicking over her clitoris, his cock pressing deep into his little angel before slowly withdrawing.

“Papa... I-I need to... oh, I-I'm going to...” She broke off, her body tensing for a moment before a sharp nip of a tender nipple had her remembering his rules. “I-I... Papa, please, may I take my pleasure?”

“Not yet, little one,” he said, loving the look of her eyes as lust fought for control. She was learning to hold back, to force herself to wait, yet she failed often enough that he continued to push her, to teach her that with denial came increased satisfaction if she managed to stave off that urge to surrender to her need. “Not unless you want Papa to turn you over and blister your bottom. Is that what you want, little one?”

“Nooo... no, Papa.”

Her groan was delicious as he continued to push in and out of her velvet warmth while his lips roamed from breast to

breast, teasing, licking, kissing, and nipping at delicious little nipples the color of the ripest raspberries. She moaned and arched beneath him, her fingers flexing open and closed around the silk ties that held her cuffed wrists securely to a rail on the headboard. Little mewls telegraphing her struggle to obey filled the air, the sounds engorging his cock as he pulled from her sheath, only to thrust back inside again. When he felt her muscles beginning to tighten, saw the flesh across her tummy begin to quiver and thousands of goosebumps pebble her skin, he moved from her breast to brush his lips against hers.

With his breath mingling with hers, he said, “Is your little clittie throbbing?”

“Yes, Papa,” she said, the words spoken directly against his lips as he was so very close.

“Do you like feeling Papa’s cock filling your sweet pussy when he fucks you?”

God, he adored watching color suffuse her skin and seeing the shame fill her eyes at the crude words he purposefully used. But more importantly, he absolutely loved feeling her body give an answer even before her lips opened to voice it.

Muscles convulsed to tighten along the length of his shaft as she whispered, “Yes, Papa.”

“Yes, what?” he prompted, pulling out of her and hearing her moan and feeling her hips lift as if seeking the return of the very subject of their conversation.

“I... like it, Papa.”

He chuckled and kissed her lightly again before pulling up and shaking his head. “No, little one. That won’t do. If you want Papa to give you permission to spend, you will tell me exactly what you like.”

Society did such a good job of assuring the innocent women of the world never learned of the pleasures of the flesh. Marrying a man was perfectly acceptable, of course. Even lying beneath one was condoned as long as the act was done with the express purpose of procreation. But when it

came to surrendering to the passion a woman could experience with her husband, the prudish old biddies attempted to keep that little nugget of gold unmined. Edward knew he was a strict man who demanded obedience, but he was also a husband who wanted both the sweet angel and the naughty little devil in his bed.

“Tell me, Louisa, what do you need? What do you like?” he asked again, withdrawing until he pulled almost free of her, his cockhead barely brushing the entrance of her quim.

Her eyes pleaded with him not to make her answer but he just smiled and bent to lick along the pink shell of her ear before taking a nibble of the soft lobe. “Tell Papa or there will be no spending... at least not for you, my little lady.”

The words spoken directly into her ear had her shuddering and her legs lifting to wrap around his hips in an attempt to pull him back inside but he only shook his head and sat back on his heels. Her gaze drifted from his to drop to where he'd fisted his cock, stroking along a shaft made slick by her cream. “Tell me, Louisa, or perhaps your silence is a request to take Papa's cock down your throat rather than have it filling your cunny?”

Her eyes lifted to meet his as she shook her head. He knew she understood that while she might not find her completion, there was never a shred of doubt that he'd spill himself within her body before the night was done. Rising to his knees, his movement was stopped when she finally managed to answer him.

“I like it when you fill me, Papa. I-I like it when you... when you take me...”

When he still didn't move to lie over her again, when she didn't have the strength to pull him into her body, when she realized that she'd have to answer if she had any hopes of finding her pleasure, she gave a sob and finally threw aside her modesty.

“Please, Papa, I like it when you put your... your cock into my pus... pussy.”

“And what else do you like?” he asked, pressing her a bit harder with both his question and his body as he guided his cock back to her soaking quim, dipping just a single stroke inside before withdrawing again.

“I like it when you... oh, Papa, please...”

“Please what? Tell me, baby girl.”

“I-I can’t... it’s not... not proper.”

“In this bed, when you are obeying your papa, it is perfectly proper. Tell me, little one what do you want Papa to do?”

Her eyes searched his as if seeking any judgement and finding none, she wet her lips and nodded. “I-I want you to... to fu... fuck me, Papa,” she pleaded, her need so intense that she not only released her shame, she found the strength to arch against him, grinding her swollen clit against his groin. “Please, oh, Papa, please fuck me now!”

There was the wanton devil he so loved to let loose on occasion. “That’s my good girl,” he said, sliding his hands beneath her hips and tilting her even higher. “Is this what you want?” he asked, driving forward in one thrust until he was balls deep.

“Yes!” she screamed, tears filling her gorgeous eyes as her body was consumed with a passion so great she simply had to way to control it. “Yes, Papa, more. Again, Papa, again!”

Edward gave her exactly what she craved, pounding into her, his balls slapping against her pussy with every thrust forward, her keens filling the air each time he withdrew. He was entranced by the curls of her hair undulating like a river of molten gold as her head thrashed side to side on her pillow. He watched nipples pull so tight they looked as if they could burst at a single touch and a swollen clit throbbing with every beat of her heart. He felt his balls draw up and knew she wasn’t the only one about to shatter.

“Come, now!” he demanded and like his obedient little angel, she did exactly that.

“Papa!” she screamed, her entire body going as taut as a bowstring before suddenly snapping, convulsing with such strength he gritted his teeth, feeling as if his cock had been captured by a vise. Every contraction of her quim milked his shaft until he threw his head back and his bellow joined their song of passion as he emptied, shooting his seed deep inside her womb. It lasted a lifetime that was over far too soon. When her muscles were only fluttering, her legs slid from him and he bent over her to kiss her once again.

“I adore feeling you spend and your pussy hugging my cock when I am buried so deeply within you,” Edward said, loving the way her face flushed at his words.

“Papa,” she said then smiled. “Thank you, Papa, for my pleasure,” she whispered, her breath so sweet against his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you as well, little one,” Edward said, kissing her softly before rolling off her. Lying on his side, he settled her against him, her small sweet bottom pressed into his groin. Louisa sighed and Edward smiled when a soft little purr told him his little one had fallen asleep with her gown still twisted above her breasts.

CHAPTER 4

Edward looked up from his seat in the library when Henri appeared. Louisa looked up as well from where she was sitting on her Papa's lap. Lucy was totally involved in the book she was currently reading and didn't move until Henri spoke.

"Sir, Mr. Lloyds is here," Henri announced.

Edward saw Lucy's head raise and her eyes dart toward the doorway as if to see her professor standing on the threshold of the room. Smiling, he gently removed Louisa from his lap.

"Thank you, Henri, please show him to my study," Edward said. Henri nodded and left the room. Edward guided his wife to sit in the chair he had just vacated.

"Papa, what does Professor Lloyds want? Lucy passed her exams."

"Yes, she did," Edward agreed. "But unless I speak with the man, I won't know why he's called now will I?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I suppose not."

"You girls behave," he said

"Yes, sir," the twins chorused. Edward smiled, still rather amazed at how two could become one. Sharing his home with the two young women certainly kept life interesting. He bent to press a kiss to the top of Louisa's head and then walked to his study. He opened the door and stepped inside where he saw Charles standing before the French doors that led to the garden. Charles turned at the sound of Edward's entrance.

“Good afternoon, Lord Wintercrest,” Charles said extending his hand. Edward shook it and motioned for Charles to take a seat.

“Good day, Charles,” Edward said and chose to seat himself in an adjacent armchair instead of distancing himself from his guest by sitting behind his large desk. “I trust you received my letter?”

“Yes, thank you, sir,” Charles said politely.

Edward smiled and leaned a bit forward. “Come, Charles, I believe you and I are beyond such formal titles. Please, call me Edward,” Edward said, wanting the younger man to feel relaxed in his presence.

Charles nodded his acceptance. “Thank you, Edward. I felt it necessary to come personally to offer my response to your suggestion rather than respond via the post. I’ve given it quite a bit of thought and find I agree with you. I find no other course available if I am to learn what is needed to feel capable of accepting the position of headmaster.”

Edward sat back in his chair and rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. He was pleased at the man’s words and appreciated the effort Charles was making to become prepared to take up the much desired position of headmaster at the girls’ former school.

“Wonderful, Charles,” Edward said. “I am very pleased to hear your decision. I assure you that you will find no better tutor than Miss Summers. She has run her exclusive school for years with great success. You will learn all you need, and I believe, find yourself acquiring an understanding of far more than just the skills required to fulfill the role of headmaster. I just ask you enter into your schooling with an open mind. These young women are educated in far more than reading, writing, or mathematics. They must be, in order to thrive in the positions for which they are being prepared.”

Charles swallowed hard and nodded. When first approaching Charles about his experience in dealing with wayward students, Edward had been impressed with Charles’ confession that he was totally uneducated in discipline of any

kind. Having seen his reaction when Lucille had been strapped in his presence, Edward had suspected as much and had been very pleased at the man's honesty. The detailed letter he'd posted to the professor's home had explained exactly what sort of school Miss Summers led. Edward suggested it as the best possible place for Charles to learn quickly how to administer the strict corporal discipline necessary for a headmaster.

"Thank you, Edward," Charles said. "I promise to do my very best. Believe me, the irony of your offering me a tutor is not lost on me."

Edward chuckled as he remembered employing this young man to tutor his ward. "Think nothing of it, Charles. We all must start somewhere. While it is surprising to discover your ignorance in the matter of discipline, I assure you that it is a course of study that will capture your interest. As you know, the school board, as well as myself, have no interest in placing another man like Thorne into the position. The role requires a man who can not only yield the rod on the occasions it is necessary, but will only do so while providing empathy for the very student whose bottom is being caned. You have shown that you not only have a great deal of patience, you genuinely care for your students' success. Your tutoring of Lucille impressed us greatly. It is the least we can do to allow you to have the tools necessary to feel you can make your final decision. If, after your studies, you agree that you feel capable of taking responsibility for our young women of society, I assure you the job will be yours," Edward said and watched the man smile.

"I truly appreciate all you've done in supporting my name with the others on the board, sir. I pledge to do my best to meet the expectations of a headmaster who will elevate Cressington Academy to an even higher level where all students will not only receive the very best education possible, but will do so without fear," Charles said.

Edward felt the need to correct him. "I guarantee that despite your sympathy, your students will always be a touch anxious. After all, the cane is an implement capable of leaving a lasting impression. A bit of apprehension is to be expected

when the girls know that you are the one providing them a well-stripped arse if they choose to be disobedient. The position is not one of popularity, but if fulfilled properly, will be one earning your students' respect."

The younger man nodded solemnly. "I understand and will do my absolute best not to disappoint you or my students."

"I've no doubt of your sincerity, Charles. All you lack is the confidence in administering corporal punishment when a pupil decides to test the very rules of the institution. But, with a bit of personal experience, I'm quite positive you'll have no problem fulfilling every part the position requires for several years to come." Edward knew the offer had come as a complete surprise to the professor and understood Charles considered this great fortune as a possible path to be able to woo Lucille's affections. Edward wasn't surprised when the man turned the conversation of their meeting to address a more personal matter.

"I also appreciate your allowing me the opportunity to call upon your ward, Edward. I admit she's not only the most beautiful young woman I've ever seen, but I find her absolutely fascinating. I swear to you that I will work exceptionally hard in order to prove my ability to not only court Miss Furniss but perhaps to sway her to become my wife."

Edward wasn't surprised at his enthusiasm but couldn't help but take a moment to realize this was but the first offer for his ward. He'd been preparing himself for this very thing from the moment Lucy had earned her diploma, but still, hearing a man mention marriage to his ward gave him pause. He'd grown quite fond of the young woman and would not just hand her over to anyone he didn't feel would serve all of Lucy's needs.

"Charles, I have agreed that you might call upon Lucille," Edward said and the man's attention was captured fully. "However, I feel I must inform you that you are not the only man who has sought such permission."

Charles' wide smile slipped but he managed to compose himself after a brief moment. "I see. I admit I hadn't given thought to having competition for the lovely young woman. But, I suppose it would be far too much to expect otherwise. As I said, Lucy... excuse me, Miss Furniss, is quite the woman. Any man would be proud to claim her as his."

Edward nodded. "Yes, that's true but it will take a special man to make that claim." Edward saw Charles' eyes flit about the study, his mathematical mind easily adding up the costs of the furnishings, the books on the shelves, the hand-woven rugs, the expansive floor to ceiling windows behind the huge mahogany desk. When his shoulders slumped a bit, Edward shook his head. "Now, Charles, there is no need to fret. A man's value has far more to do with his character than his bank account. And if you think about it, I believe you'd agree with me that you are entering into the courtship with an advantage. After all, Lucille already knows you and has come to trust in you as well."

Charles relaxed and smiled, his hand running along the leather. Edward knew the young man was remembering how Lucy had not only spent several hours with him in studying, but he had witnessed her in a truly shameful state bent over the arm of the chair in which Charles was now seated, her face buried in the brocade cushion to hide her shame as she reached to lift her skirts to bare her bottom to receive a strapping from her guardian for failing in those very studies. The fact that she had remained mostly comfortable in his presence despite the humiliation of what was quite a private moment definitely served to give Charles a leg up in Edward's mind.

"Thank you, Edward," Charles said and moved to press his case just a bit. "Perhaps I shall be able to further my head start. With your permission, perhaps you would allow me to escort Miss Furniss this evening? A nice walk to the park would offer her a lovely outing... perhaps even an ice-cream to enjoy?"

Edward smiled at the man's eagerness but couldn't fault him for it. "Since it has been a few days since Lucille has been in need of punishment, I feel she has earned a treat. I'm sure

she would love an outing,” Edward said, and then stood, Charles following suit.

Though Charles did a fair job of hiding his surprise at hearing Edward’s mention of punishment, Edward caught it in the flash of color across the younger man’s cheeks as well as another glance at the chair he’d just abandoned. If Charles was to ever become successful as both a headmaster and a suitor of what Edward and others sharing his proclivities referred to as special little ones, the man would need far more than lessons in how to wield an implement. He’d need to learn to better mask his emotions. Gesturing for the man to precede him, the two began to walk from the study.

“Thank you, Edward. I... I must say I am quite taken with your ward. I confess that I won’t hesitate to claim any advantage available to me,” Charles said as they stepped into the hallway.

Edward chuckled but didn’t reply. He knew his friend, Lucas, would soon have an even greater advantage. With his impending arrival, he would have immediate access to Lucille as he would spend time under the same roof. He didn’t feel it necessary to inform Charles of any competition other than allowing him to know he was not the only man interested in luring Lucille away from Wintercrest Manor.



LUCY WAS INDEED THRILLED WHEN, after dinner, Edward nodded to Charles who then spoke.

“Miss Furniss,” Charles said as he helped Lucy from her chair. “Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to the park? I believe there is an ice-cream stand that we can visit as well. Do you like ice-cream?”

Lucy smiled, and then she remembered that she was not in control of her own life. She turned to the head of the table.

“Sir, might I accept?” she asked politely, seeking his permission before even answering Charles’ request.

“Yes, little one, if you’d like. You’ve been a very good girl lately and haven’t given me cause to punish you for several days,” Edward said.

“Th... thank you, sir,” she stammered, her face flushing as she turned to Charles. “I’d like to walk with you, Professor Lloyds,” she said. She saw his smile, and hers brightened. “And, yes, sir, I really like ice-cream.”

“Then, my dear girl, you shall have a double scoop,” Charles said with a chuckle. Lucy accepted her cloak from Molly and allowed Charles to drape the material around her shoulders and then turned to say good-bye to her sister. Her smile slipped when she saw Louisa’s wistful look.

“May Louisa go with us, Professor Lloyds?” Lucy asked, looking up at him as she placed her hand on his arm.

“Of course she may, if that is what you wish and Edward agrees,” Charles said and turned to Edward. “Perhaps you’d both like to walk with us?”

“I’m sure Louisa would love that, Charles,” Edward said and Lucy saw her sister release the breath she’d been holding in anticipation of her husband’s answer. Edward continued, “We will join you for a little while, though I’m afraid we must return soon, as it will be time for Louisa to retire.” Louisa flushed, but didn’t protest, her small body almost quivering with delight. “Molly, please bring Louisa’s cape as well,” Edward said. When the maid reappeared, Edward draped it across his wife’s shoulder and bent to speak softly.

“You’ve been a very good girl as well, little lady,” he said, and saw her smile.

“Thank you, Papa,” she said, not even hesitating to address her husband as he preferred.

Lucy darted a glance to see Charles’ reaction to an address normally reserved for one’s actual father, but if he found it strange, he said nothing. He tucked Lucy’s hand in the crook of his arm and soon the four were walking down the sidewalk toward the city park.



LOUISA WATCHED her sister as she listened attentively to whatever Charles was saying. She turned to her husband.

“This is wonderful, Papa, thank you,” she said again. Edward squeezed her hand and smiled.

“You are welcome. I know your life can be difficult at times, but I want you to understand that I appreciate it when my little lady works hard to be a good girl. Lucille has been very well behaved since her last paddling. I believe she will also work hard on being a proper young woman and deserves a bit of fun as a reward,” Edward said.

Louisa smiled and lifted her head, turning to take in the sights around her. The air was brisk, but Edward knew her cloak would assure she wouldn't chill too much. He kept her safely beside him, her hand never allowed to slip from his arm. When they reached the ice-cream stand, Edward bought her a double-dip of strawberry ice cream and watched as her tiny tongue darted out to lick up the creamy treat before withdrawing back between her full lips. His cock instantly grew hard in his pants and he saw her face flush when her eyes met his.

“We shall finish our treat on our way home, Charles,” Edward said. “I trust you to have Lucille home within the hour.” Lucy appeared quite surprised to find Edward allowing her to remain in the park, but said nothing, most likely having no desire to question his unexpected leniency.

“Certainly, Edward,” Charles agreed. “Thank you for a lovely evening. Good night, Lady Wintercrest,” he said as he gave her a small bow. Louisa smiled and thanked him as well. She tucked her hand into her husband's arm as he led her back the way they had come. They climbed the steps leading to the double doors of the manor.

“I believe your eyes were bigger than your tummy, little one,” Edward said when he saw that she'd not yet managed to finish her ice cream.

Her smile was as sweet as the treat when she lifted the cone to him. “I wanted to share it with you, Papa. It’s really, really good.”

Edward grinned and bent to take a huge bite of the frozen cream. Smacking his lips as she giggled, he shook his head. “Tasty but not anywhere near as good as the nibbles I take from my own sweet girl.”

“Papa,” she said, her face as pink as the strawberries she’d consumed. After they entered the house, Edward bent to wipe her mouth with his handkerchief.

“Go with Mrs. Bremmer, little lady,” he said. She smiled and ran her fingertips over his cheek.

“Thank you, Papa,” she whispered and went up onto her tiptoes to brush her lips across his. They were still chilled from the ice cream and Edward felt his cock twitch again. He knew his own little one would soon be suckling and enjoying more cream the moment he joined her in their bed. From the look of desire shining in her eyes, she realized it as well,



AS LORD and Lady Wintercrest returned to the manor, Lucy and Charles settled on a park bench to enjoy their cones. Lucy was quiet now that her sister and guardian had left them. She found she had no idea what to say. Though she had grown comfortable in Charles’ presence, that had been when their roles were properly defined. Now that she had left Cressington Academy, she felt uneasy.

“Relax, Miss Furniss,” Charles said quietly as if sensing her growing distress. “There are no quizzes or exams for you to take. I simply wish to get to know you better as the young woman you are, not as my former student. I find I am very attracted to you.”

“You are?” she said, surprise evident in her tone as her face quickly flushed at the attention.

“Yes, and to that aim, I have sought permission to call upon you, Lucille, and simply ask if you can possibly see me as a suitor?”

Lucy’s heart pounded as his words sent them down a new path. She found herself remembering how Edward had told her she would most likely have suitors and understood that Charles was her first. She smiled and lifted her eyes to his. She saw the sincerity in his gaze and felt her stomach flutter. Suddenly the vision of him witnessing her punishment at the hands of her guardian played in her mind. Her ice cream was forgotten as the memory returned full-force. Attempting to push the thought away, she looked about the park, becoming aware that she was dressed far differently than other young women being allowed an evening’s outing. She glanced around, seeing several girls giggling and flirting with their escorts. Every single one of them was wearing a fashionable dress, their hair pinned up and faces colored with face-paint to enhance their features. Lucy dropped her eyes and saw her own dress. Today she was wearing one of a soft mauve, though it still had the white collar and band about her hips. She wore the simple slip-on shoes over her plain black stockings. Her hair had been brushed and plaited that morning by Mrs. Bremmer and the thick braid hung down her back. She suddenly felt foolish and wished she had never left the house. What sort of man could possibly find her the least bit attractive? She looked like some sort of overgrown child rather than a young woman of courting age. Darting a quick glance at her former professor and tutor, she couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps his so called attraction had to do with seeing parts of her that should never have been revealed to any suitor.

“Lucille?” Charles said, his tone telling her she had failed in concealing her increasing distress. “Are you feeling well? Do you feel ill?” he asked, his concern apparent.

She wished she could lie, but she simply shook her head and tried to fight the threatening tears. It was only when she felt something cold on her hand that she remembered the ice cream that was no longer a treat.

Seeing it drip onto her fingers, Charles reached out to take it from her. “Please, Miss Furniss, have I said something to offend you? I assure you I have no desire to frighten you. Please tell me what can I do?”

Lucy knew her actions were causing him distress and hated herself for it. He had never ever been anything but incredibly kind to her. The only thing she could think to do was to be perfectly honest as secrets had lost their appeal when learning of the one her sister had tried to keep when she’d wed a man such as Edward Wintercrest.

“I don’t know why you’d want to court me, Professor,” she said, so quietly Charles had to bend closer to listen to her. “I... there are so many beautiful young women who don’t dress like this,” she said her fingers plucking at her skirt. “I’m not like them. You know that Ed... I mean, my guardian, disciplines me. You don’t want to waste time courting me. Not when there are so many others who would suit a man such as you far better.”

“Miss Furniss, I assure you that there is no one I could possibly imagine better suited to me than you. Heavens, I’ve thought of little else but you since I saw you last. I don’t care how you dress; you are a beautiful young woman. You are the very reason why I am trying to procure the position of Cressington’s headmaster,” he said.

Lucy’s eyes widened and flew to his. “Headmaster?” she said, her heart beating hard against her chest. “You... you are going to be headmaster of the academy?”

Charles heard the disbelief in her voice. “Well, I hope to be,” he said honestly. “I know it will take some additional training, but you, for one, should understand how studying can reap great benefits...”

Lucy immediately moved away from him. The only experiences she had ever had with any headmaster included having her bottom caned and her morals questioned. Obviously having seen her strapped, her professor now wished to cane her! She stood without thinking and turned to run away. Charles rose, dropping both their cones to the ground

and grasping her arm before she managed to move more than a few feet.

“Lucy, stop, please,” he said.

“Let me go!” she cried vehemently, pulling against his hold. When he instantly released her arm, she began to run back the way they’d come. She knew her flight was drawing attention to her but didn’t care. All she wished to do was reach the manor and run to hide in the safety of her room. She gave a strangled laugh when she realized she was able to pick up speed only because her legs weren’t hindered by the long heavy skirts the other young ladies in the park were wearing. Her lungs could draw in great gulps of air because they weren’t restricted by a tightly laced corset. The reality of her new wardrobe was both a relief and a taunt as it reminded her of how horribly inadequate she felt. If this is what courting entailed, this shame at knowing how very different she was, she wanted nothing of it and would refuse any supposed suitors who came to call.

She could hear the sound of Charles’ footsteps pounding behind her as he attempted to catch up to her. Turning the corner that would lead to Wintercrest, she heard him calling out for her to stop. Looking behind her to see him gaining on her, she shook her head and she raced into the street.

“Lucille, stop this instant!” Charles bellowed, reaching out to grab her arm and pulling her back onto the sidewalk as the carriage that had almost run her over passed in a flurry of horses’ hooves and turning wheels. She stood, her chest heaving from her run, and felt him shaking her arm.

“What in the bloody hell are you thinking? You didn’t even look before running into the street!” Charles demanded, as his patience finally frayed. “You could have been seriously hurt or even killed! Why are you running from me like I was attempting to attack you? I demand you explain yourself, young lady!”

She attempted to pull away and was shocked when she felt his hand connect—hard—with her bottom. She gasped and looked up to see his eyes widen as well. Obviously

understanding what he had just done, he instantly released her arm. Lucy stood still, her heart pounding, as she tried to assimilate what she was feeling. With no true answer, she simply burst into tears and threw herself into his chest. Charles staggered from the impact but regained his balance and closed his arms around her small form.

“Shh, Lucy, shh,” he said, as he attempted to quiet her. “It’s all right, Lucy. I don’t know why you are so frightened, but Lucy, shh, stop crying and talk to me,” Charles said. When she didn’t immediately answer, he simply held her closer and let her cry.

He bent to kiss the top of her head, something she had seen Edward do to his own wife. Lucy felt the pressure against her head, but didn’t know what to do... what to say. He was shorter than her guardian, the top of her head resting just under his chin where it didn’t reach much higher than Edward’s chest when he’d held her the same way. Feeling both ridiculous and rather confused as to why the man had smacked her and then kissed her, she finally pulled back, embarrassment suffusing her face.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Professor. I... I didn’t mean to be naughty,” she said as she stepped away. Charles dug in his pocket and handed her his handkerchief. Lucy wiped her eyes and offered it back, remembering that last time he had offered her such comfort. Charles evidently remembered as well.

“Keep it, Lucy,” he said softly. “Perhaps one day I won’t have need to dry your tears.” She flushed but offered him a small smile. Returning it, he continued, “I don’t believe you were being naughty, Lucy. I believe you were just frightened. Can you tell me what scared you so?”

She slowly nodded before realizing they were standing on the open sidewalk, in full public view, his arms wrapped around her. And while she might be dressed as a younger girl, she was an unmarried, unclaimed, un-chaperoned young woman. She looked around and then up at him. “People are staring at us.”

He cleared his throat also taking a look around. “Perhaps we should return to the park?” he suggested.

Lucy shook her head, already quite tired of being the center of attention. She had no desire to return to where others might wander into the park and wonder at her dress or her tear-stained face.

“May we just go home, please?” she asked.

“If you promise you won’t bolt away and once we return to the manor, you promise to speak to me,” he offered.

She nodded and they stepped further apart. She flushed as she realized just how they must have appeared. She allowed him to tuck her hand into the crook of his arm. They were silent for the remaining journey, Lucy attempting to calm herself and wondering how she was going to explain to her guardian that her entrance into society to find a suitable mate had been doomed from her very first outing.



THEY ENTERED the house far earlier than Edward had deemed. He had only just sent his wife up to bed when he heard the door open and saw his ward slip inside, followed by Charles. Edward watched as the young man helped Lucille with her cloak, removing it and then laying it on the bench by the front door. Neither seemed aware of his presence near the bottom of the stairs.

“Shall we speak in the library?” Charles said quietly. Lucy nodded and they walked past the stairs, unaware they were being observed. Edward shook his head wondering at their behavior. His eyes had immediately seen evidence of tears on Lucy’s face. He would have instantly stepped forward to demand an explanation, but Charles’ own face and his concern had stopped him. It was obvious the young woman was upset, but Edward would wait to judge until he had all the relevant facts. He waited until the couple entered the library before stepping down the last few stairs. By the time he entered the

library, Charles had seated Lucille on the settee and was sitting beside her, his hands clasping hers in her lap.

“What happened?” Edward said making sure he kept his voice low and controlled. Charles looked up and flushed, obviously feeling a bit guilty.

“I’m not exactly sure, sir,” he said. “We were simply enjoying the park when Lucy became distressed. We... well, I was speaking of my interest in courting her. I...” he paused, taking a moment to compose himself. He straightened his back and strengthened his voice, “I was telling Miss Furniss of my desire to further my ability to care for another. I was about to tell her about the position I have been offered when she became quite upset. The next thing I knew, she had practically run all the way back to Wintercrest.” Edward saw Lucy’s face and saw her embarrassment. He, unlike, Charles had instantly understood her reaction.

“Did you mention the position is that of headmaster?” Edward asked as he crossed the room to seat himself in a chair across from the couple.

Charles looked at him and nodded. “Yes, I’m sure I did. Though I don’t know what that has to do...” his voice drifted off as the truth finally dawned on him. “Oh, bloody hell,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “I have been a fool. Lucille, please forgive me. I didn’t even think about Thorne or... or what happened. Please say you forgive me. I can’t believe I was so careless,” Charles said forlornly.

Edward sat back and shook his head. Lucy responded to strength and firmness. Charles was practically begging for her understanding and Edward wondered how far his pleas would get him. Lucy looked first at Edward and then at Charles who was now seated with his blond head in his hands rather than holding her hands.

“I’m sorry, Professor Lloyds,” she finally said. “I didn’t mean to cause you discomfort. You did nothing to cause my reaction. I just heard you say that word and all I could remember was the awful things Headmaster Thorne said to me,” she confessed.

Charles lifted his head and reached for her hands again. “I promise I won’t be that kind of headmaster, Lucille. I hope you know I felt just awful about what happened. Your guardian has gone out of his way to make sure that Cressington Academy will be in far better hands. Even if those hands aren’t mine, I promise that the future students will not have to live in real fear of their headmaster.”

Lucy flushed at his reassurance. “I know, Professor. Headm... no, I don’t suppose he has that title any longer does he?”

Edward smiled and shook his head. “No, Lucille, he lost that honor the moment he discredited yours.”

She smiled and nodded, relaxing a bit before continuing, “I know you aren’t like that horrid man, Professor. I know you are kind and gentle. You have never frightened me. I know you would never hurt me or anyone. Please, sir, I have no excuse. It’s I who must ask for forgiveness.”

Edward wondered if the man seated across from him was aware of the meaning hidden in the words his young ward was speaking. She was not speaking as if she were a young woman who thought of Charles as a man she could love. Her tone was sincere, her words were kind, and yet her countenance was one of a student asking for forgiveness from a favorite teacher. Nothing in her manner showed her interest in him in any other manner. He watched as Charles closed his eyes for a brief moment and then released her hands.

“There is nothing to forgive, Miss Furniss,” he said as he shifted away from her. “You are a wonderful young woman who was treated very unfairly. I admire you so much. Please, let’s forget about this. I shall give you time to consider my words. All I can ask is that you don’t make your decision simply because of my position. I can always refuse the opportunity if you find you simply can’t tolerate me as headmaster.”

Lucy appeared quite shocked at his words as she understood Charles was giving her power that Edward knew she had never expected. She looked across the way and saw

him watching her. As hard as it was to maintain neutrality, Edward gave her no clue as to what her response should be. She reached out and placed her hand on Charles' arm.

“Thank you, Professor,” she said. “You are a good man.”

Edward could practically feel Charles cringing at her words. As kind as they were, he knew the man didn't want her to think of him as only a 'good man'. The young suitor must desperately want the woman he was wooing to think of him as 'her man'.

“I'll say my good night,” Charles said and gave her a small bow before turning to Edward. “Thank you again, Edward,” he said stiffly. “I will keep you informed of my progress.”

Edward stood and walked to the door with Charles aware that he'd calmed enough to address him by his Christian name. “Don't give up so easily, Charles. No weak man will ever truly win Lucille's heart. She needs a firm, strong hand as well as a loving heart to capture her love. I assure you, she can overcome her fear of the position.” He nodded at Henri who had appeared, letting him know their guest was ready to depart. “What she would never be able to dismiss is if she were to see you weak and unsure. Take the opportunity you've been offered to learn and learn well and quickly,” he warned, knowing Lucas was arriving soon.

“Thank you, Edward. I appreciate all you have done for me,” Charles said. “I assure you, I will do my very best and take your words to heart.” He hesitated for a moment before shaking his head and adding, “I apologize again for this evening.”

“Apologies are unnecessary, Charles. You have done nothing wrong. I hope to hear from you by the end of the week,” Edward said, opening the front door. Charles nodded and slowly walked down the steps. Henri had the coach ready to once again drive the professor home.

Edward closed the heavy door. He walked down the foyer with the intention of going into his study for his nightly drink. As he approached the library, he became aware that Mrs.

Bremmer and Lucy were standing in the doorway. He stopped and turned toward them.

“Excuse me, sir,” Lucy said quietly. “I know it is time for me to go to bed, but I’ve asked Mrs. Bremmer to wait a moment. I’d like to speak with you if you’d allow it.”

Edward was impressed with her polite request. “Certainly, Lucille,” he said. “Shall we speak in my study?” He saw her face flush and one hand move behind her as if to protect her bottom from any attention. He gave her a soft smile. “Lucille, remember what I’ve said before. My study is not only used to tend to naughty bottoms,” he assured her and saw her color deepen. “Little one, it is where we may speak in private.”

She hesitated, but then nodded. “Thank you, sir,” she said, and when he motioned for her to precede him, she stepped into the hallway.

“I shall call you when we are done, Anna,” Edward said to his housekeeper. He knew she’d just returned from putting Louisa to bed and had no idea what had transpired in her absence. But being in his family’s service for decades, she didn’t ask questions, but simply nodded.

“Yes, my lord,” she said and turned to walk away.

Edward followed Lucille and opened the door of his study. The lamps had already been lit and the room was suffused with a soft light.

“Please, sit,” Edward said motioning toward the chairs before his desk. Lucy hesitated, and he could imagine she was picturing herself bent over the arm of the chair, offering her bottom for chastisement. Edward understood her discomfort. Whereas his wife had often joined him in the study simply to read or to stitch her tapestries while he worked at his desk, his ward had only experienced her bottom being tended to in the room. Future misbehavior would see both the women’s bottoms bared and blistered in his study, but he didn’t wish for Lucille to be afraid of stepping across the threshold if she’d done nothing wrong.

“Perhaps you’d be more comfortable on the settee?” he suggested. She nodded and soon was perched on the edge of the leather settee. Edward positioned the large leather ottoman in front of her and seated himself. She was practically shaking and he reached forward and took her hands into his own. She stiffened but stopped twisting the linen handkerchief in her hands.

“Relax, little one,” Edward said. “You have nothing to fear. Please speak freely.” Lucy took several moments to form her thoughts and he didn’t rush her.

“I want to apologize, I suppose,” she began hesitantly. “I didn’t mean to cause a scene. Do... do you think he hates me now?”

Edward smiled, though her eyes were lowered. He also chose his words carefully.

“I appreciate your apology. However, it is unnecessary. I know you were frightened and simply reacted,” he assured her. Lucy lifted her eyes to his, as if she was somewhat surprised at the gentleness of his voice. He smiled down at her. “Lucille, just as I will defend Thorne’s right to cane your bottom,” he said, and felt her attempt to pull away. “No, honey, I don’t believe you can argue his right to do so at the time, can you? After all, both you and Louisa broke rules I’m sure the poor man never even considered possible when you switched places in his institution.”

“No... I suppose not,” she admitted.

Edward nodded. He welcomed her honesty even if given a bit begrudgingly

“As I was saying, I will defend his right—and duty as Cressington’s headmaster—to punish you. However, I will never condone his verbal accusations and attack of your character,” Edward said. Her eyes met his again and he saw she wasn’t quite convinced of his sincerity. “Lucille, he had no right to frighten you so. You are an innocent young girl and he is a mean-hearted man. Remember, I told you there are many different types of men in this world?” She nodded and Edward squeezed her hands.

“Good, well, Thorne is simply an evil man. He abused his position of trust, and, little one, despite the pain he caused you, you should also feel proud.” Her eyes showed her confusion and he smiled. “It is because of that attack that his true nature was visible. He has been removed from his position and I assure you, the future students of your school will appreciate your part in that.” He was pleased to see her relax and even saw the corners of her mouth lift. He squeezed her hands again and then gently pulled the wadded cloth from her hands. Her face flushed, but she released it to him.

“Lucy,” he said and she lifted her eyes again. “This is a handkerchief is it not?” She nodded, her brow furrowed as if wondering why he was asking such a question. He smiled. “You aren’t frightened of this simple cloth are you?”

“Of course not,” she said softly, shaking her head. “It can’t hurt me.”

Edward nodded. “Correct. However, do you remember the cloth I put into your mouth?” he asked and saw her memory of being gagged reflected in her eyes as well as painted in a pretty brush of pink across her cheeks. She didn’t answer, but gave him a slow nod. “That’s right. I used my handkerchief to teach you a lesson, but, Lucille, it is only a word. Your professor gave you his handkerchief to give you comfort.” She nodded again but he knew she still didn’t understand.

“Lucy, every school needs a headmaster,” he began, and saw her flinch. “Not every headmaster is like Melvin Thorne. Can you tell me you believe your professor could possibly become the sort of man that Thorne was?” He saw her become aware of his train of thought.

“No, I don’t think that,” she admitted.

“Then, Lucy, you have nothing to fear. Just as handkerchief is a word, so is headmaster. Words cannot hurt you, little one. Professor Lloyds is simply trying to better his life. If he accepts the position, he will have a much better future. Trust in him, little one; trust that the same man who showed nothing but concern while tutoring you, will also show concern for any student he must attend to. You know the only

students sent to his office will surely deserve to have their bottoms caned. Trust him to do so with a true concern for their well-being.”

Lucy didn't speak for several moments as she mulled over his words. He knew she was an astute young woman and would conclude that her fright was unnecessary. She knew Professor Lloyds was a good man. She smiled when Edward tucked the handkerchief back into her hands.

“Sir,” she said softly as she returned to her earlier question. “I still acted the fool. Do you think he believes me to be nothing more than a silly child?”

Edward leaned forward and drew her into his arms. She came to him willingly, her cheek pressed against his chest as she accepted his comfort.

“Sweetheart, I assure you that he does not. I believe the man to be quite infatuated with you,” Edward said, and then kissed the top of her head. “I believe you will discover he will ask to escort you again. What you need do, Lucille, is determine if you believe you can love a man who is more than likely to become a headmaster, knowing what that entails.”

She blushed hotly, but her embarrassment didn't keep her from asking another question. “May I ask a question... I mean without you getting upset?”

Astute or not, Edward understood it would take experience before his ward truly trusted that he wasn't constantly looking for any trivial excuse to turn her bottoms up. “Yes, Lucille. You may ask me whatever you'd like, as long as you do so respectfully.”

“Thank you. I was just wondering... do you think Charles is like you, sir?”

This time it was he who took time to consider his response. After a few moments, he gave her a soft smile. “I'm not attempting to dodge the question, Lucille, but to be honest, I really can't say as yet,” he admitted. “I believe Charles is a good man, and he has definitely earned my respect, but, little

one, I can't say I believe he is the proper man for you." She appeared a little shocked at his openness.

"There are many types of men, remember?" At her confirming nod, he added, "Rest easy, Lucille. I told you that I would guide you as you begin courting. I am promising you now that I will not choose a man I feel you cannot grow to love. You need to trust me and, little one, I will trust that you will follow your heart." She looked into his eyes for a long moment and then nodded as if seeing his promise reflected in their depths.

"I'll try. Thank you, sir," she said.

"You are most welcome, little one," he said and then stood and walked to pull the bell cord to summon Mrs. Bremmer. Lucy stood and straightened her skirts. As if having an epiphany, Edward saw her eyes widen as she ran her fingertips across the white bib of her dress.

"What is it, little one?" he asked, not wanting her to retire with any question she might have unanswered.

"It wasn't just hearing Charles speak that word... headmaster," she said with a little nod and a smile as if proud she'd managed to say the word without flinching. "It scared me and I ran, but not only because of that. I saw all the other women in the park and none of them looked like me. They wore dresses of the latest fashion and pretty little hats and had face paint on to enhance their beauty—"

"Lucille, you have no need of such things..." he began only to see her wave her hand as if to cut him off. Nodding, he gave her permission to continue.

"It's not that, sir, it's the fact that... well, I realized that it really doesn't matter... I mean how one looks does it? In the grand scheme of things, what matters is finding a man—the right man—who loves me in spite of what clothing I wear or how plain my face is without any blush or pretty stains for my lips. The only thing of any lasting importance is finding a man who loves me"—her eyes met his as she lifted her head—"as deeply as you love Louisa."

Touched by her words, he smiled and reached down to cup her cheek in his palm. “Thank you for that, little one. You aren’t only beautiful, you are quite wise as well. Never forget you are a very special girl, Lucille, and I promise to do my very best to make sure you find that man.” He bent to kiss her cheek before opening the door to find Mrs. Bremmer waiting. He watched as Lucy slipped her hand into the older woman’s.

“Good night, sir,” she turned to say.

“Good night, little one. Sleep well.”

CHAPTER 5

Louisa and Lucille finally found a chance to be alone. The next day, after they had been awakened from their naps, Mrs. Bremmer gave them permission to get some fresh air. Louisa made sure they were out of sight before taking her sister's hand and pulling her deeper into the gardens.

"Where are we going?" Lucy asked, though she knew she'd follow her sister anywhere.

"To my secret place," Louisa answered, and giggled. Lucy found herself smiling as well and her sense of adventure was piqued when her sister stepped off the paved path and pushed through some low hedges and then moved several more feet into the trees. "Come see," Louisa said as she parted the thick branches of a huge weeping willow tree. Lucy stepped forward, and ducked into the opening. Her breath caught as she realized the tree branches sweeping the ground around them formed a large hidden room.

"Oh, Louisa, this is wonderful," Lucy said, turning in a wide circle as her sister beamed. The girls sank onto the carpet of green that grew in the shady den. As one, they began to pluck the purple flowers that bloomed among the thick ground cover. Fingers nimbly twisted delicate stems as the twins worked to chain the flowers together, something they had often done as small girls. After a few minutes, Louisa spoke.

"Are you ever going to tell me, what happened with your professor?" she asked. Lucy flushed, causing Louisa to smile. "Did he kiss you?"

Lucy looked at her sister in shock. “Of course not!” she said. “He... he wouldn’t take such liberties, Louisa!”

Louisa feigned remorse at asking such a personal question and then giggled. “Well, how will you know if you like him if he is too proper?” she said.

Lucy smiled and shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if he’ll ever escort me again,” Lucy confessed.

“Why? What happened?” Louisa asked, the flower chain in her hands momentarily forgotten.

“He spanked me,” Lucy confessed.

“He what!” Louisa said loudly and then she lowered her voice. “Spanked you? Why?”

Lucy added another flower to her chain before shrugging. “It wasn’t really a spanking. Nothing like when Edward... um, you know.” She gave a quick look to her twin as if afraid she’d offended her, but simply saw Louisa nodding.

“I do know, but we can talk about Edward in a minute. Tell me if your professor didn’t spank you, what exactly did he do?”

“He just swatted me when I ran out into the street without looking. There was a carriage coming, but I was so upset I never even saw it until he pulled me back. That’s when he swatted me,” she confessed and when her sister simply shook her head, added, “but it was rather embarrassing. Everybody around could see us!”

Louisa’s hair swung as she shook her head. “I’m surprised a swat is all you received, Lucy. If Papa saw me do that, I guarantee I wouldn’t be able to sit for a week. He hates it when people he loves put themselves into danger.” She then looked closely at her twin. “Tell me, how did you feel when he spanked you?” she asked.

Lucy was still trying to figure out how she felt about even confessing the act. “It really wasn’t like that, Louisa. He only struck me once and seemed embarrassed about it. It didn’t hurt, but I did cry because I was so ashamed of dressing like this and knowing all the other girls are able to dress in the best

fashions to impress their suitors. And even though I've realized that the way I look shouldn't matter to a man who loves me, I can't help but bet that those other girls don't have suitors who feel free to smack their bottoms!"

Louisa shook her head and smiled, reaching for another flower and passing it to her twin before plucking one for herself. As she worked to add it to her chain, she said, "You'd be surprised, Lucy. I've found that there are many, many women who live as I do. I'm glad you are becoming more—if not comfortable—at least more acceptable of the clothing we're expected to wear." She paused to press a hand against the pale violet colored skirt of her dress which Lucy had to admit was far younger appearing than the forest green skirt she had her legs tucked beneath. Looking up again, Louisa smiled. "Not that I'm allowed to wager, but I'm willing to bet that you'll discover you are not the only eligible female who is being presented by a strict guardian. Your professor is quite the lucky man if Papa gave him permission to court you. Charles doesn't strike me as a man who has ever given much thought to fashion... how many men truly do? He'll be back before you know it," Louisa said firmly.

"You think so?" Lucy asked remembering Charles had said he didn't care about fashion. She relaxed and smiled as she added another flower to her chain.

"I'm sure of it," Louisa assured her, reaching over to give her twin a hug.

As the two continued to pick and pass flowers back and forth as they worked, Lucy found herself telling her sister about her conversation with Edward. "Edward also said that he believes Charles will call again."

Louisa smiled and reached out to pat her sister's arm. "Don't worry, Lucy," she said, as she took up her chain again. "If Papa says so, it is the truth. Besides, I've seen the way Charles looks at you. I think your professor is half in love with you already."

Lucy sat quietly wondering at her sister's words. Did Charles love her? He had confessed to being attracted to her,

yet did that mean he loved her? She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know, Louisa, I... I have nothing to offer him.”

“Of course you do, silly,” Louisa said rolling her eyes and giving a giggle. “You have yourself. He could do no better than to take you as his bride,” Louisa assured her.

Lucy found herself uncomfortable with the thought of marriage. She still wondered if she was more like her sister than she wanted to admit. She picked up a flower from her lap and rolled the stem between her fingers as she gathered her courage. “Louisa,” she said quietly. Louisa lifted her eyes and tilted her head as if knowing her sister was about to speak of something that concerned her on a deeper level.

“Do you... do you ever feel bad about... well, about your life? I mean... I’m not sure I could ever marry a man who is so strict.”

If Louisa was surprised at the question, she didn’t show it. In fact, she nodded, dropping the chain to her lap pulling her legs up and wrapping her arms around them. Placing her chin on her knees, she sighed. “I’ve been waiting for you to ask me,” she admitted. “Part of me wishes I could simply tell you it’s none of your business, or... or make up some story that would satisfy you, but I never have lied to you.”

“You weren’t exactly truthful when I first arrived at Wintercrest,” Lucy said.

Louisa nodded and had the grace to flush. “But I didn’t flat out lie.” The girls were silent for a moment before Louisa continued, “Did you ever stop to think that perhaps I was scared a bit too?”

Lucy was about to shake her head when the truth hit her. Of course Louisa had to have been scared. Even if she’d never actually admitted to the fact, Lucy had seen her blushing, had watched her lip tremble when being witnessed in her childish dresses or the day she’d been discovered wearing an actual nappy. Suddenly feeling a bit ashamed of herself, Lucy nodded. “I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel uncomfortable. I-I just never expected to find you...”

“Dressed like a little girl?” Louisa provided. It was Lucy’s turn to flush as Louisa continued, “Lucy, I am happy. I love Edward and he loves me. I know it is hard to understand.” Shrugging her shoulders, she admitted, “I don’t even admit to understanding everything. This is a lifestyle I never knew existed. I can’t say that I enjoy being spanked so often, but I’ve learned that Papa only punishes me when I’ve been naughty. It’s really not that different from when our father disciplined us. The rest was hard at first and I... I was scared that you would no longer love me when you discovered that I am treated more as Papa’s child bride than his wife.”

Lucy felt her sister’s pain and sat forward and threw her arms around her twin. “Oh, Louisa,” she said, “Don’t ever think that. You are my sister, my twin... we are part of each other. I will always love you.” Louisa hugged her sister hard and the girls sat back again.

“Thank you. I love you so much,” Louisa said, handing her sister another flower. “I know we just admitted that clothing shouldn’t matter, but I can’t honestly say it didn’t bother me when I first was put into little girl dresses. There are times when I see a woman dressed in some elegant gown and I feel envious. And, it was really hard being made to take a nap every day in my nursery,” she said. Lucy’s eyes immediately widened.

“Nursery?” she asked. “Edward calls his room a nursery?”

Louisa’s face flooded with color and she looked around the interior of their little world but didn’t meet Lucy’s eyes.

“Louisa? I’m not going to judge you, remember?” Lucy declared, hoping she would remember that promise.

“No, Edward’s room is his though I share it most nights. But... yes, Lucy,” she said quietly. “I... I have my own room at the top of the house. Papa made it for me. It’s an actual nursery where I take my naps every day.”

Lucy thought about her sister’s words and discovered she wasn’t all that shocked or perhaps she had suspected something like this. She remembered hearing the occasional sound above her head when she was in her room. She had

asked Molly, but now understood the girl had most likely not been free to tell her of the existence of the room. She was aware of her sister's hesitancy in admitting yet another secret.

“Is it pretty?” Lucy asked.

Louisa lifted her face and gave a soft smile. She nodded her head. “Yes, it is very pretty,” she said. “Our old toys are on shelves. Remember our dolls?” she asked. Lucy nodded her head and Louisa smiled. “They are in my room. I... I will let you have yours if you want.”

Lucy started to shake her head, but then smiled, remembering how many hours the girls had spent playing with the twin dolls. “I'd like that,” she said. Louisa reached out to hug her sister, hard. The girls clung to each other, finally acknowledging that though their lives were different now, they were still bound to each other and always would be. They spoke of other things and then heard their names being called. They quickly added the last flower to their chains, and again as one, each draped their chain over the other's head. By the time they met Mrs. Bremmer, who was waiting further up the path, their hands were swinging between them, smiles making their beautiful faces shine.

“It's time for tea, little ones,” Anna said, and smiled brightly when they each released each other's hand and reached for her own. “Did you enjoy your outing?” she asked.

“Very much, thank you,” Lucy said with sincerity. She had far more questions to be answered, but the time spent with Louisa had finally managed to assuage her need for assurance that her sister was truly happy.

“I'm glad you've both been such good little ones lately that you've not only earned the playtime, but can enjoy it without having a red bottom,” Mrs. Bremmer said as if such things were part of normal conversations between servants and mistresses on every estate.

“Yes, ma'am,” Louisa said, sparing Lucy having to answer.

CHAPTER 6

Later that evening, when Edward went to bed, he was surprised to find his wife awake. She was usually already deep asleep by the time he joined her.

“Are you feeling well, little one?” he asked, as he laid the palm of his hand against her forehead. Louisa nodded.

“I’m fine, Papa,” she assured him. “I... I just wanted to talk to you.” Edward smiled, wondering if every evening would find him having heartfelt discussions with one of the girls. He undressed and slipped into bed beside his wife. Before he drew her to him, he reached up and unbuckled the cuffs restraining her wrists. She smiled and was soon lying close to him, her head on his chest. Edward stroked his fingers through her long hair, playing with a golden curl while waiting for her to speak.

“I think I made a mistake today, Papa,” she confessed. Edward was a bit taken aback. It was a very rare occurrence for his little lady to be naughty and not be caught. Mrs. Bremmer seemed to have an uncanny ability in ascertaining any misbehavior, and usually tended to the miscreant before he even arrived home. His housekeeper had reported that both girls had been very well behaved all day. Hearing his wife confessing a mistake was a surprise.

“Tell me, little one,” he said.

“Lucy and I were talking today and I mentioned my room,” she said softly.

Edward understood she didn't mean the one they were currently occupying. "Your nursery, isn't that what you mean?" he corrected.

Louisa nodded against his chest. "Yes, sir," she agreed. "I didn't mean to. She asked if I was happy and I told her that I was. I-I told her that at first I wasn't, especially about my nursery."

Edward was silent for several minutes well aware that his little one was holding her breath as if trying to determine his feelings. He smiled and bent to kiss the top of her head to reassure her he wasn't angry. In fact, he was quite pleased she'd seen fit to make the confession to him.

"What did Lucille say?" he asked.

Louisa smiled. "She asked if it was pretty."

Edward was surprised. He would have expected that Lucille would be upset and even angry that her twin had a room not only designated as a nursery but an actual nursery where Louisa slept every single day. His ward's response told him that she was accepting her sister's life. He gently moved his wife from his chest only to sit her up and then pull her nightgown up and over her head. Louisa shivered as he tossed her gown to the floor.

"I know it was naughty, Papa," Louisa said, her fingers twisting in her lap, her eyes searching his.

Edward settled himself against the headboard and reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear. "It seems to me that you're trying to tell me something more, Louisa. Tell me, little one, do you need a spanking to be able to forgive yourself?"

Louisa flushed at the question, but her head nodded. Edward was willing to bet he wasn't the only one a bit surprised at her answer. He patted his lap and with another blush, watched as his wife crawled forward to lay herself over his thighs.

"Papa," she said quietly. "May... may I have my spanking?"

Edward had not intended to spank her. He understood she had made an honest error. However, she was his little one. She felt guilty and he knew that she was a true submissive and would not truly accept his forgiveness without first having her bottom warmed. He lifted his hand from where it had been resting on her beautiful little bottom and gave his wife what she needed. Louisa was soon sobbing as he lit a fire in her backside. Despite his original intent not to spank her, when she was across his lap, no matter that she'd willingly put herself there, he'd punish her. She was not to be released until he felt that she was a well-spanked little girl. When her bottom turned from pink to a bright red, Edward stopped and lifted her up and off the bed.

“Go to your naughty corner, Louisa,” he said. She nodded and ran naked to place herself against the wall. Edward smiled at her quick obedience and enjoyed the sight of her red bottom in the soft light of the room. After only a few minutes, he called her to him. Louisa turned, her face showing her surprise at his leniency but quickly ran to the bed where he lifted her and put her back over his knees. She dared not speak, but waited for her husband to guide her. He rubbed his palm over her hot bare bottom. Edward knew what his wife expected, but he did the opposite.

“I forgive you, little lady,” he said. “I told you that your secrets would be no more. I suppose I should have expected this. Has she seen your nursery for herself?”

“No, Papa,” she said. “I didn't know if you would be upset with me. I did tell her about our dolls. Is that okay?” she asked, her voice quivering just a bit as a result of her spanking and nervousness about the possibility of another. Edward smiled, knowing his little wife slept with her doll in her crib every afternoon. His hand continued to stroke her bottom and he chuckled.

“Well, since I've already spanked your little bottom, I suppose that's fine. Perhaps you should give Lucy her doll. Do you think she would like that?” he asked.

“Yes, Papa, thank you,” Louisa said as another smile appeared. “I know she loved Nellie when we were little.”

“You, my girl, are still little,” he reminded her. She flushed but nodded, giving him a smile that had his heart skip a beat.

“I know, Papa. I’ll always be little to you.”

“That’s right, as long as you live, even if we have our own little ones one day. You may have to grow up for our children, but Louisa, in this room you will always and forever be my special little lady. You will always go across my lap and be spanked when you are naughty,” Edward said, and Louisa nodded, accepting the truth of his words. After another few minutes, Edward continued, “I know that sisters tend to tell each other almost everything, Louisa.” He moved his hand to press against her inner thigh. She shuddered but obediently opened her legs for him. Her bottom still burned, but Edward knew that wasn’t the only place his little one felt a throbbing heat. With another gentle press, he forced her to she spread herself even more.

“However, little one,” he said as he moved his hand from her thigh to cup her sex. He found it already slick and getting even slicker and he smiled. “Some things are not to be shared. This, for example,” he said, as he roughly pushed two fingers deep into her body. Louisa moaned and he felt another gush of moisture flood her pussy as he began to thrust his fingers in and out of her. Her little bottom was soon rocking back as if to meet and accept his fingers as deeply inside her body as possible. Edward smiled softly. “Or this,” he said, his voice very low as he removed his fingers from her and used them to rub circles around her clit. It swelled under his attention until she was panting over his lap, her small hands clasping at the sheets beneath her. “Or this.” He continued his demonstration by patting her hot bottom and saying, “Spread yourself open for Papa.”

Though her face immediately turned pink, she moved her hands behind her and grasped the punished globes of her bottom and pulled them apart. “Wider, Louisa, you know how to offer me your bottom-hole properly,” Edward said, and watched as she instantly obeyed him. Satisfied, he placed one hand over one of her own and brought his other hand to her offered bottom. Louisa held her breath when he began to press

a fingertip against her bottom-hole. She gasped loudly, but didn't shriek or protest—or even attempt to pull away—as he penetrated her small opening with first one finger, but then soon adding a second, into her bottom. She was a very good little student in his school of life. He scissored his fingers, watching as her small opening was forced to stretch. Each time he played with her bottom, it was with the purpose of moving one step closer to being able to claim her most intimate opening with his cock. He remained silent for several minutes, continuing to stretch her, to drive his fingers deep.

“These are private things, Louisa. You will not speak of what happens in a marriage bed. Lucille is an innocent and shall remain that way until she weds. It is not your place, nor, little lady, is it even mine, to speak of such things. Just as you did, your sister will train at her husband's feet. He is the only one to speak of these things. It is his right and his alone to train Lucy in the ways that will bring them the most pleasure. To rob him of that privilege is to rob your sister of the joy in learning the passions waiting for her to experience. Do you understand me?”

“Ye... yes, Pa... Papa,” she managed to moan as he continue to work her body. “I promise never to share anything... anything like... like this.”

Edward nodded and then removed his fingers rather roughly, causing her to give her first small cry of discomfort. Edward lifted her from his lap and sat her down beside him.

“I do not mind that your sister knows you suckle a bottle when given one,” he said, and reached out to take one of her hands, placing it around his erection. He saw her face flush as she quickly understood his intentions. He nodded and then placed his hand on the back of her head and gently guided her down to his lap. She obediently opened her lips and took him inside her mouth and began to suckle. “Until she is wed, and understands the ways of men, I will not have her discover you suckle my cock as penance when I've had cause to spank or paddle your bottom, Louisa,” he said, and watched as her cheeks flushed. He knew she found the act of taking his cock in her mouth as very wicked and though he was sure she'd not

be running to admit to such an act, he wanted to make absolutely sure she remained silent about the things she did in their marriage bed or when kneeling between his legs.

Edward allowed her to continue for several long moments, enjoying every lick of her tongue against the head of his cock or draw of her cheeks as she suckled hard. Finally, he pulled her from his shaft and pushed her onto her back. He draped her legs over his shoulders. Louisa's eyes showed surprise as he positioned himself. He had never before interrupted her penance without first reaching his culmination. Edward bent to suckle at her breasts. She arched up to meet his mouth, her nipples hard and tight with her arousal. Edward lifted his mouth from her breasts. "Or this," he said, before ramming hard into her. She moaned, arched her back and reached behind her for the rails. Edward smiled as her hands grasped the bed, her hips moving to match his rhythm.

"This, Louisa"—he thrust forward hard, his balls slapping against her sex—"this is only shared between a man and his wife, a Papa and his special little one," Edward said. "Men have different desires, little lady, and it is only her husband that Lucille will need to learn to please. She is not to go into any marriage with knowledge that might cause her to question her husband's directions. Just as you are learning to serve me as I desire, your sister will one day service her own husband."

"Yes... yes, Papa," she gasped, taking in his words, her body tightening as he took her hard and fast.

Edward knew she was incredibly close to her culmination as he withdrew, lifted her ass higher and rammed into her again.

"Her husband will teach her that she is capable of incredible pleasure, Louisa," Edward said, pushing deep within her, placing his fingers on her erect clitoris and pinching it hard. She moaned deeply, her hips rising and thrusting against his fingers. "Only her husband will allow her to learn the difference between a burning bottom from his hand, or the burning between her legs when he pleasures her with that same hand." Louisa was moaning as he kept her on

the razor's edge of completion with his words and fingers meant to fill her mind with erotic pictures.

“Ye... yes, Papa, ohhh, Papa... please... please...” she moaned, her insides spiraling up to the pinnacle of ecstasy.

“Only her husband will teach her to beg for permission to take her pleasure, to explode around his cock or on his fingers or in his mouth,” he said softly, watching the desire to spend spread over every inch of her beautiful body and face. “Only her husband will say, ‘Take your pleasure, little one’ just as I am saying to my little lady. Take yours, Louisa, take it now,” he demanded, and within a single breath, she obeyed, her body arching as he drove her over the edge, her cries of intense pleasure filling the same air that her earlier cries of pain had occupied. Edward poured himself into her as she contracted.

It was another several moments before he could speak again. He pulled from her body and turned her onto her stomach. Louisa was too sated to understand immediately what he was doing.

He used his hands to once again spread her bottom cheeks apart and thrust his finger deep inside her bottom. “Remember my words, little one, for if I discover you have disobeyed me, not only will I put you over your punishment pillow and cane you harder than you’ve ever been caned before, I will fuck your arse.”

He continued to frig her, his finger moving in and out of her bottom knowing she was remembering the plugs he often used to punish her or remind her to behave. He had told her that one day he would claim her bottom as his own. He wanted her to understand, however, that the promise he had just made would not be that type of claiming. “If you disobey me in this, I will not gently open your ass with my fingers or allow you to prepare yourself with one of your little plugs. I will cane you until your bottom is a hot, throbbing inferno and then you will pull apart those burning globes and hold them open while I push my cock inside your arse and give you a hard punishment fuck. Is that perfectly clear, Louisa. Do you have any questions?”

“No... Papa. I... I understand. I promise... I will remember,” she said. “I won’t tell Lucy anything about... about this.”

Edward knew she would remember both his promise and prayed she’d remember hers. He slowly removed his finger from her and then guided her to her hands and knees. Gripping her hips, he was soon buried deep inside her pussy, bringing her to another culmination. After filling her yet again with his essence, he gathered her to his side and kissed her gently.

“Thank you, Papa,” Louisa said sleepily.

“I love you, Louisa,” he said. “Just remember.”

“I will, Papa, I will,” she promised again.



THE NEXT EVENING when Edward returned home he heard the sound of carefree giggling. Following the sound, he found his two girls sitting on the floor of the library, playing with their dolls. He leaned against the doorframe and simply enjoyed watching them. He knew that there would be many days of appointments given, many a time one or both bottoms would be bared to him for discipline. However, for this moment, he found he was a very contented man.

CHAPTER 7

Lucy climbed nearly to the top of the library's ladder, a small puff of frustration blowing a strand of hair off her face as she stretched to reach the object of her desire ensconced upon the uppermost shelf. Just another few inches. Moving up another step, she tried again. Lifting onto her tiptoes, she almost managed to touch the book's spine when her concentration was suddenly shattered by a man's voice.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?"

Lucy's heart almost stopped beating, releasing a piercing scream as she felt her feet going out from under her. Before she could take a breath, she found herself tucked under a strange man's arm, suspended in the air. Unable to make sense of what was happening, she dragged oxygen into her lungs and gave another earsplitting screech, her arms flailing and her feet kicking. A hard hand began to rapidly swat her bottom.

"No!" she screamed as her struggles increased. Unlike the single smack she had received from Charles, whoever this man was, he was spanking her repeatedly, and her bottom was beginning to burn, despite its covering.

"Stop it! Put me down!" she demanded, too surprised to cry. One of her feet finally managed to connect to his leg and she heard him let out a breath.

"Settle down," the man said, as she continued to struggle in his arms. Holding her out from his body as if she weighed nothing more than one of the books on the shelves beside

them, she watched a grin spread across his face. “For such a tiny thing, you make a lot of noise, don’t you?”

Furious, her feet continued to kick as though somehow that would help her reach the floor. When they only churned up air, she slapped her hands against his chest. “I said, put me down!” she demanded, observing the smile that betrayed his amusement at her predicament. She suddenly became aware of his hands at her waist, the heat seeming to sear through the fabric of her dress. She struggled harder to escape and saw his smile widen.

“I didn’t realize that Edward had got himself a kitten,” he said chuckling. “And a feral one at that,” he added when she continued to kick out and attempt to scratch at him. “Settle down now, little one. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“You didn’t scare me!” she said, though his chuckle and his lifted brow told her he certainly didn’t believe that little fib. “Put Me Down!” Lucy hissed, and when she wasn’t immediately released, she reached out and slapped him. His smile dropped off his face as he discovered Edward’s little kitten had claws.

Not only shocked, but already regretting her action, she felt her face heat. “Oh, God... I’m sorry! I... I didn’t mean to —”

“Slap me?” he suggested.

She nodded, but realized he had still not released her. She dropped her hands to his forearms and began to push against him. She might as well have attempted to move a mountain. His jacket might have provided concealment, but the muscles of his forearms were rock solid. The only reaction to her effort were that his hands tightened their hold.

“I would have thought your husband would have taught you better manners by now,” he said. “I would think that instead of attempting to strip the flesh from my bones, you’d be thanking me, Lady Wintercrest. After all, I did just save you from a nasty fall.”

She shook her head and huffed, denying his ridiculous claim. "I was perfectly fine before you scared me to death. And you..." Remembering his address, she changed the direction of her thoughts to add, "I'm not Lady..." but was interrupted when he barked out a laugh.

"I'd say I must agree," he said, ignoring the flash of anger she directed at him. "Ladies do not go about striking their guests. I should spank you properly for that alone."

Lucy was furious and was about to tell the infuriating stranger as much when suddenly she feared he might decide to do just that.

"I said I was sorry. Now, would you so be so kind as to please put me down," she asked, her jaw clamped tightly. She felt as if she were nothing more than a doll he was playing with. He slowly lowered her until her feet felt the floor and then even more slowly released his hold on her tiny waist. Once free, Lucy took several steps backwards and unconsciously rubbed the back of her dress. He was the largest man she had ever seen in her life. He was both taller and broader than Edward, who towered over her.

"Who... who are you?" Lucy said, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm your house guest, Lady Wintercrest," he said, and when she shook her head vigorously, he misinterpreted her movement. "I assure you that I am," he continued. "I would think you would have been expecting me or does Edward find it unnecessary to inform his little wife when he invites old friends to visit? You may not be aware that I was coming, but I promise I have no plans to harm you."

"Harm me? Sir, you just spanked me! Do you believe it is correct to strike another man's wife?" she hissed, even as her heart pounded and her blood seemed to be rushing through her veins. She could easily remember the feel of his huge hand slapping at her bottom, his single palm almost covering her entire bottom with each hard smack.

"I wasn't striking you," he corrected. "In fact, I wasn't truly spanking you."

“You were!” Lucy said, placing her hands on her hips and stomping her foot.

“If you think that was a spanking, little one, then Edward has grown quite soft,” he said with a grin. “I barely even tapped your bottom.”

Lucy slowly backed away until she was pressed up against the bookcases. Suddenly she realized that he truly believed her to be Edward’s wife and yet still had no problem tending to her as if she were nothing more than a wayward child. She understood that whoever he was, he was a man of Edward’s ilk.

He reached out to gently place his hand on her arm. Lucy started and felt her entire body shudder at the contact, her stomach fluttering. Her face must have shown her distress because he quickly had his hands on her shoulders.

“Breathe, Lady Wintercrest, just breathe. You are safe. Nothing is going to happen to you,” he said. He stepped closer and heard her moan. He was about to speak again when another person joined the conversation.

“What on earth have you done now?” Mrs. Bremmer said, as she and Molly came running into the room. “Why were you screaming?” When she looked from Lucy to the stranger trapping her against the bookshelves, the housekeeper’s entire attitude changed.

“Lucas?” she said.

Lucy didn’t know which was more shocking. The fact that the older woman could squeal like a young girl or the fact that the huge man released his hold on her, turned to Anna and swept her off her feet. Both Molly and Lucy’s mouths dropped open at the sight of the man twirling around in a circle with Mrs. Bremmer’s hands clutching his shoulders and her face beaming.

Laughing, Anna finally asked to be put down. Lucy watched as he gently placed her onto her feet and wondered why he hadn’t immediately done the same for her when she’d

demanded it. Her mouth snapped closed and she crossed her arms across her chest.

“Lucas, you’re days early,” Anna semi-scolded.

Lucy watched as Lucas, whoever he might be, simply smiled and then laughed.

“Now don’t be angry with me, Miss Anna,” he said. “I finished my business early and found I couldn’t wait to come and meet the young woman Edward wrote me about. If she is anything like Lady Wintercrest here, I’m sure he has his hands quite full.”

Lucy felt her face heat and wished she could simply disappear. Molly giggled but Mrs. Bremmer looked confused.

“Lady Wintercrest?” she said and then turned to Lucy. Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Missy, have you been passing yourself off as your sister again?” she demanded.

Lucy shook her head. “No, ma’am. He didn’t give me a chance to explain,” she said as her eyes zeroed in on the stranger. “He grabbed me off the ladder and scared me to death. He... he even...” She paused, not about to admit this complete stranger had spanked her, especially not when it appeared that the housekeeper had greeted him like some long-lost son... and a favorite son at that. Tossing her head and ignoring his grin, she said, “This is all his fault. All I wanted was to get a book to read and he just grabbed me.” She wasn’t about to let this Neanderthal’s actions cause her to be punished for something that she’d had absolutely no control over. “If he doesn’t know his own hostess, you can hardly blame me!” She saw that the man’s grin had been replaced by a look of confusion which only grew when he heard Edward’s voice.

“Lucas Huntington,” Edward called, as he and Louisa walked into the library. Lucy watched as he released his wife’s hand and strode across the library. The two men were soon wrapped in a bear hug. Looking around, Lucy was glad to see she wasn’t the only one watching in amazement as they pounded each other on the back. Molly looked as surprised as Louisa as her twin walked over to join them.

“Who is that?” she whispered.

Lucy shrugged, “Apparently he’s your house guest.”

“What?” Louisa said, her gaze going from Lucy to where the two men had separated and yet stood grinning at each other.

“Don’t ask me,” Lucy said, shaking her head which was beginning to pound with everything that had occurred.

“Come, I want you to meet my wife,” Edward said and pulled the man toward the girls. Lucas took a step and then froze.

Lucy’s head felt a bit better at seeing the man’s expression. Served the man right. It wasn’t her fault he’d made a fool out of himself. After all, she had tried to correct his error.

“There are two of them?” Lucas said, his eyes moving from Lucy to Louisa and back again before looking at Edward. “You could have told me.”

“And spoil my surprise?” Edward said with a laugh as he reached out to draw Louisa to his side. “Lucas, may I present my wife, Louisa.”

Lucas looked down her and made a small bow. “It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Wintercrest,” he said and bent to kiss her cheek. Edward gave his shoulder a push.

“She’s mine, Lucas, so no more kissing my wife. You may address her as Louisa,” Edward said, reminding his friend of his wife’s station. “Louisa, this huge oaf is my childhood friend, Lord Lucas Huntington.”

Louisa nodded, smiled and made a small curtsy. “Welcome to Wintercrest, Lord Huntington,” Louisa said. “I know Papa has been looking forward to your arrival. It is a delight to have you visit our home.”

Lucy wasn’t watching her sister; her eyes were glued to Lucas. If he was surprised to hear Louisa refer to her husband as ‘Papa’ he hid it well. So well that Lucy was even more certain that the two men shared far more than childhood memories.

“I assure you, the pleasure is all mine, Louisa,” Lucas said, giving her another small bow before turning his attention back to Lucy. “Then this little feline’s name must be Miss Furniss,” Lucas said.

“Feline?” Edward said, his brow lifting.

Lucy tensed waiting to be chastised for striking his guest, but Lucas only chuckled. “Just a little misunderstanding,” he said, turning to her again. “I owe you an apology, Miss Furniss,” he said, his tone far more soothing than it had been when he’d been scolding her. “I didn’t mean to either scare you or embarrass you.”

Despite Lucas’ brushing off their encounter, Lucy saw Edward’s eyebrow lift at the confusing conversation.

“Can someone please enlighten me? What exactly has happened here, Lucille?” Edward asked.

Lucy took a deep breath, noticing the man had not apologized for spanking her! “I was just getting a book, sir,” she began. “Lord Huntington yanked me off the ladder and wouldn’t put me down. I never once said I was Louisa. In fact, I repeatedly try to tell him he was mistaken, but... he... he just wouldn’t listen!” Lucy said in a rush.

Lucy saw Anna shaking her head and though she prayed the woman wouldn’t find it necessary to intervene now that she’d explained what happened, that prayer went totally unanswered.

“She was screaming as if being murdered, my lord. Nearly put me in an early grave,” Anna said, pressing her hand over her heart. Lucas dropped an arm around her to offer her comfort while Lucy couldn’t help but think the woman had missed her true calling as she should have been on the stage.

“Edward, I take full blame,” Lucas said. “I wanted to surprise you. I didn’t knock; I just came in. I found this little one teetering from the ladder and decided to rescue her—”

“I was not teetering!” Lucy declared, rolling her eyes and then realized she had just interrupted a very important guest of Edward’s. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said seeing Edward’s eyes give

her a warning. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She knew she should quit but couldn’t seem to stop herself. “But, I was perfectly fine. I was just getting my book when he... he grabbed me and wouldn’t put me down even though I asked several times!”

Lucas’ laugh had her eyes narrowing even as the sound had something inside her tummy fluttering.

“Edward, your little ward might be the size of a kitten, but I assure you she can fight like a lioness. She even showed her claws and slapped me when all I was doing was saving her from breaking an arm or a leg or even worse,” Lucas said, ignoring Lucy’s gasp. He simply continued with his version of the story. “Of course, if I’d known she was capable of clinging to shelves with those claws, I suppose I would have simply stood back and watched the show.”

Lucy felt her face burn as a flush rose up her neck. He made her sound like a silly, stupid girl. She had climbed the ladder hundreds of times without all this drama. Edward had looked away from his guest and directly at her when Lucas said she had slapped him. Lucy found herself waiting for Edward to give her an appointment or simply decide to spank her right where she stood. Edward shocked her when he laughed loudly.

“It’s about time someone took you to task, Lucas. You can’t think you are in true danger. As you’ve mentioned, Lucille is a tiny little thing. Perhaps if you had been your usual charming self, you would have been able to make her purr instead of hiss with fright.”

Lucas laughed and, releasing Anna, made a show of bowing to Lucy. “Forgive me, little kitten, I concede you are correct.”

Lucy looked up and then between the two friends. She saw Edward’s smile and saw that his friend was still bent in an exaggerated bow.

“Might as well forgive him,” Edward chuckled. “Otherwise I fear we’ll be subjected to his ridiculous pose until you do.”

“Oh... um, of course. I... I forgive you,” Lucy said softly, her face heating anew. She was most definitely not accustomed to hearing someone other than herself or Louisa ask for forgiveness. She felt her insides twist as she tried to understand what she was feeling. Despite Lucy’s discomfort, with the exception of the housekeeper, the rest of the group seemed amused.

Mrs. Bremmer, evidently was nowhere near as forgiving as her employer, walked up to Lucy. “I would think a hand slapped against your bottom would serve you much better than all this bowing, Lucille,” she said sternly. “Imagine what Lord Huntington must truly think about your behavior. He is simply being polite. We all know that proper young ladies do not go about caterwauling like banshees or slapping houseguests.”

Lucy dared a glance at Lord Huntington to see him observing the reprimand, but not contributing to it. His lips curled as if Lucy and he had decided to share some little secret, or as if daring her to admit that his hand had indeed popped against her posterior. She dropped her eyes, her stomach twisting even more, not about to volunteer anything so humiliating, praying no one ever learned about all that had happened.

“Lucille!”

Anna’s sharp tone voice had Lucy turning back to her. “Oh... I’m sorry. I—”

“Child, I swear, you didn’t hear a word I was saying. Are you sure you didn’t hit your head?”

“I promise there was no *hitting* involved, Miss Anna,” Lucas said.

Anna gave a disbelieving harrumph, shaking her head. “As I was saying, Lucy, before I decide to turn you over my knee, I suggest you get upstairs and change your dress. Your antics ripped your skirt. Lord Wintercrest does not need to waste his money on fine dresses if you are so careless with them. You will spend this evening repairing the damage,” she said, motioning for Molly to escort Lucy to her room.

Far too embarrassed to look at anyone, Lucy said, “Yes, ma’am, I’m sorry,” before turning to follow Molly. Before they were halfway across the library, she heard Lucas speaking and turned back to see the man had Mrs. Bremmer hugged to his side once again.

“Don’t be upset with the little thing, Miss Anna,” Lucas implored, “It truly was my fault.”

Anna shook her head and Lucy was a bit surprised to see that the housekeeper was looking up at her beloved lad with less than an adoring stare. “Well, young man, unless you wish to learn to mend, I suggest you let me decide what is needed. You’ve obviously grown soft in your travels,” she said, and Lucy saw him grin and barely managed not to cry foul when she saw the housekeeper slap her own hand against Lucas’ chest.

“Don’t forget, I’ve known you since you were in short pants, Lucas Huntington. I just pray that you come to your senses soon.” Lucas laughed, and after bending to kiss her cheek again, he bowed to her as well.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a smile. “I’m sure Edward won’t hesitate to remind me of my duties.”

Anna shook her head even as the man darted a glance toward Lucy, letting her know that he was aware she was listening. Remembering what had happened the last time she’d been caught eavesdropping, Lucy quickened her steps.

“Dinner will be ready soon so don’t be late,” Anna said before adding, her tone changing to one of great affection, “I’ll inform Cook to make your favorite pudding for dessert. After, all, it isn’t often that my second-favorite young man manages to get home to visit.”

“I can’t wait,” Lucas said as Lucy finally crossed the threshold and turned with Molly toward the stairs at the end of the hallway.

CHAPTER 8

Lucy walked slowly downstairs. She had changed into another dress and was holding the torn one in her arms. Expecting everyone to be seated for dinner, she was surprised to see that the dining room was empty. Hearing voices, she turned and walked toward the library. She stepped into the room with the intention of placing her dress in her sewing basket. Before she took another step, she froze. Professor Lloyds was standing at the fireplace opposite her, in conversation with Lord Huntington. She must have made some sound because his head turned and his gaze found hers. She felt her face heat, remembering the last time she had seen him. Lucas followed the direction of Lloyds' gaze and saw her frozen in mid-step.

"Ah, there's the little kitten," Lucas said. Lucy's eyes moved to his and her color heightened.

Louisa, standing by her husband, swiveled her head between her sister and the two men before giving a small smile. Edward, seeing that his ward had not moved into the room, beckoned to her.

"Come, Lucy, I'd like you to meet my guest," Edward said. Her guardian's voice broke the spell and Lucy moved her gaze to him. She walked over to him and Louisa and only then realized that a beautiful woman was standing on the other side of him. Edward reached out and took her arm, pulling her closer.

"Lucille, may I present Miss Eleanor Summers," Edward said. "Miss Summers is a dear friend of mine," he added.

Lucy gave the woman an awkward curtsy, as one arm was holding her dress and Edward hadn't yet released her other.

Eleanor smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lucille. Your guardian speaks highly of you and I can see why," she said. "You didn't exaggerate, Edward. You are a very lucky man. Your wife and ward are not only exact mirror images of the other, they are both have a beauty that their innocence only enhances."

Lucy turned to see her twin's face heating, exactly as she felt her own was doing. "You're very kind, Miss Summers," Louisa said when Lucy could think of absolutely nothing to say. She felt as if her head had been spinning since she'd been plucked off the ladder.

Eleanor laughed. "I'm not sure I can claim that kindness is my greatest asset as I value obedience and honesty far more, but thank you, Louisa."



AS THE WOMAN SPOKE, Charles excused himself and Lucas watched as the man moved toward the others. Leaning against the mantel he smiled, content to watch the action unfold.

"Good evening, Miss Furniss," Charles said quietly. "I trust you are well?"

Lucas noticed that while Lucy seemed grateful for the interruption it took her a moment before she nodded and another before remembering her manners.

"I'm fine, thank you, Professor Lloyds," she said.

Lucas might appear casual but his every sense was evaluating the scene as he gazed at those gathered around Edward. It was obvious that while the professor was infatuated with Edward's ward, she wasn't quite as taken with him. Eleanor was no stranger to Lucas as he had visited her establishment many times before he left the country. He had learned quite a bit under her guidance and fondly remembered more than a few of her students. His eyes raked up and down

Lucy's form before doing the same to Louisa's. He had been correct about their size, both were very petite, and though they were dressed differently, he'd agree with Eleanor. The two were exact replicas of each other. He saw Louisa looking at him and then at the professor, before looking at her twin with a smile. Lucas grinned as well. The woman might be dressed as someone far younger would be, but he had no doubt that Edward's wife was as astute as she was beautiful. He found he couldn't wait to speak with his old friend in private and discover all that had happened in his absence. Meanwhile, he would be quiet and simply observe.

A servant appeared in the doorway and announced that dinner was served. Charles stepped forward and offered his arm to Lucy. She glanced at Edward and saw him nod. She took the offered arm and then had to release it when she realized she was still clutching her mending.

"Allow me," Lucas said stepping forward and plucking the dress from her hand. Lucy's mouth dropped open and she flushed at his action. "I feel responsible, after all, it is I who caused your dress to tear."

Charles gasped and looked between the two. "What does he mean, Miss Furniss? He ripped your dress?" Charles asked, and actually took a step toward the much larger man.

Edward chuckled. "It was an accident, Charles," Edward said. "There is no need to call Lucas out for it. He was simply keeping Lucille from taking a tumble from the library ladder. Come, Mrs. Bremmer will not be happy if we spoil all her efforts by being late to the table."

Charles tucked Lucy's hand firmly into the crook of his arm and nodded. Lucas grinned, and after dropping the ripped garment into what appeared to him to be a sewing basket, turned and offered his arm to Eleanor who had allowed the others to precede her from the room.

"Shall we?" he asked.

She looked up at him with a knowing smile. "Do I sense the little one has already captured your attention, Lucas?" Eleanor asked quietly.

“How can anyone’s interest not be piqued, Eleanor? How often have you seen identical beauties under one roof?” Lucas said, and then chuckled. “Although one seems to be a lamb and the other a lioness.”

Eleanor’s eyebrow quirked at his words. Lucas might have appeared to be just teasing, but Eleanor was very experienced with men and their interests. She smiled and squeezed his arm.

“Hmm, I’ve never dealt with twins, but it shall be educational I do believe,” she said.

“And a great deal of fun,” Lucas said with a grin as they went to join the others. “I suppose I should apologize for arriving early and interrupting your dinner party, but I’d be lying if I did.”

Eleanor laughed and gave his arm a squeeze. “You always were rather incorrigible, Lucas. I fear Mr. Lloyds has more of a battle than he possibly expected.”

“And exactly what is your part in this, may I ask?”

Eleanor smiled and shook her head as they reached the dining room. Speaking softly, she said, “You may ask, but that doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

Lucas chuckled and reaching the table, gave her a small bow before pulling out her chair. Taking his seat, he looked across the table to where the subject of his interest sat. He watched as Charles took a sip of the full-bodied Bordeaux that Lucas had helped Edward choose from his extensive wine cellar.

“I believe you will enjoy this wine,” Charles said to Lucy. “Shall I pour you a glass, or would you prefer to try the white?” he asked.

Lucas watched as Lucy flushed and shook her head.

“No, thank you. I’m not allow... um... I don’t really like... I mean I usually just drink—”

“Charles, it is well known that kittens prefer cream,” Lucas said, picking up the crystal pitcher of milk and pouring some

into Lucy's glass. She lifted her head and shot him a glance that was very unlike a loveable kitten.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," the professor said.

Lucas poured a small amount into another glass. Picking it up, he took a sip. "It is delicious isn't it? I suppose one forgets that sometimes the simplest things are the most refreshing, wouldn't you agree, Miss Furniss?"

Ignoring him, she turned to speak to Charles. "No need to apologize, Professor," she said sweetly, and gave him a smile. "I'm sure the wine is delicious, but I do prefer milk with... um..." Lucas watched her gaze dart to a servant who was carrying a tray where the meal's main course sat beneath a large glass dome. "With... um... chicken?" she finished.

"But I believe that's a pheasant," Charles said, confusion on his face.

"Fowl... I meant, with fowl," she said, her face pinkening quite prettily.

Lucas thought her ruse might have worked if she hadn't picked up her glass to take a sip. Although she attempted to hide her grimace, it was very clear that milk was not her first beverage choice.

"I suppose fowl is a rather ambiguous term," Lucas said with a chuckle that earned him a glare from across the table.

"Make sure you sample the cheese course, Lord Huntington," Lucy said, her voice dripping with honey. "I'm sure a *creature* such as yourself will find it most enjoyable."

Lucas grinned, finding her quite enchanting despite the fact that the little minx was calling him a rat. "Why thank you, kitten," he said, smiling as he tipped his glass toward her in a silent salute. "I shall look forward to everything you have to offer." He watched as her eyes flashed at him and her face turned as red as the wine she'd refused. She finally dropped her gaze and Lucas shook his head in amusement before turning his attention to Eleanor.



AS THE MEAL PROGRESSED, Lucy remained the sole object of Charles' focus. She alternated between shooting Lucas glares when she caught him looking at her and embarrassment over how to properly respond to the professor's attention. By the time the meal was over, she felt exhausted. Charles pulled back her chair and again offered her his arm, which she took automatically.

"Perhaps I can persuade Edward to allow you another walk?" Charles suggested, bending close to her ear. Evidently he had not spoken softly enough.

"As lovely as the outing sounds, I'm afraid you should not tempt our girl," Lucas said, as he walked toward them. "I would offer to take on her duty myself, since I still feel rather guilty, but I'm positive my mending would not meet Mrs. Bremmer's standard of excellence. Still, I suppose Lucille might be persuaded to take the risk, as she seems to enjoy putting herself in dangerous situations."

Charles looked confused while Lucy was furious. She was about to take the insufferable oaf down a peg or two when she saw Mrs. Bremmer shaking her head, though the woman was smiling as if she found Lucas' antics amusing.

The housekeeper quickly cleared the air. "Professor, what Lord Huntington is attempting to convey is that Lucille has mending to do. Lucille, you may retire to the library and get started," Anna ordered. "Professor Lloyds, perhaps you'd prefer to join the adults in the parlor?" she suggested.

Lucy felt both embarrassed and relieved. The day had contained too much newness for her. She had grown accustomed to strict schedules and rules. Though it had originally galled her to be forced to adhere to such strictness, she had discovered that her days had become filled with a calmness that was unfortunately now quickly becoming stress. Being surrounded by all these people, especially Lord

Huntington, was confusing her and producing feelings that she didn't know how to decipher.

“Yes, ma'am,” she said almost gratefully, and slid her hand from Charles' arm. “Thank you, Prof...” The sight of Lucas behind Mrs. Bremmer, managing to grin even as he nibbled around a cube of cheese caused her to forget what she was saying as her pulse began to race. She knew he found her most amusing. Forcing her eyes from him she once more placed her hand on Charles' arm and looked up at him. “It was so wonderful to converse with you during dinner, sir. Perhaps you'll be so kind to ask me again when I've not been made to pay for another's mistake.”

Charles looked confused as Lucas chuckled but nodded immediately and smiled when he looked back at Lucy.

“You may count on it, Miss Furniss,” he promised.

Anna rolled her eyes and took Lucy's hand from Charles' arm. “We shall see what Lord Wintercrest decides, but for now, this little one needs to remember her place or chance going to bed with a hot bottom,” Anna said sternly.

Lucy blushed as she remembered the hand that had connected again and again to her bottom. She couldn't meet anyone's eyes as she hurried to the library. She knew both men had heard the housekeeper's words and she was scared that the woman just might decide to make sure they understood that Lucy was not an important guest in the house. Despite the fact that she was the ward of Lord Wintercrest, in this house, she was nothing more than a little girl who should remember just how quickly she could be turned bottom-up over someone's knee.

Seeing that the annoying man at least knew what a sewing basket looked like, she picked up her dress and dropped onto the settee. Choosing a spool of thread, she threaded a needle and began to work tiny stitches in the fabric to repair the ripped seam. As she stabbed the needle through the material, she imagined it was that Edward's friend's skin, instead. She shouldn't be sitting here mending a dress he had torn. She shouldn't be sitting here at all. It was his fault that, instead of

walking out with a wonderful man who obviously still wished to court her, she was made to do something she was quickly learning to absolutely despise. As she felt the needle stab into the pad of her finger, she moaned and put her finger into her mouth.

“Bloody hell,” she mumbled, sucking on the injury.

“Lucille!” she heard and instantly knew she was in deep trouble. She found herself being yanked up from the settee, her mending falling to the floor. She saw Lord Huntington standing behind the housekeeper and dropped her gaze.

“Vulgar words are never to come from your mouth,” Anna scolded, dragging the girl toward a nearby chair.

Lucille instantly understood her intention. “Please, don’t,” she begged. “I... I didn’t mean to curse... I... I stabbed myself,” she attempted to explain, holding her finger out, a small bead of blood providing evidence of her injury. It became clear that the housekeeper had no care what caused the misbehavior; she only cared to correct it. With Lucy’s arm held firmly in her hand, she was about to sit when Lucas stepped forward.

“Mrs. Bremmer, there is no need for this,” he said. His voice was no longer light or teasing. Lucy felt herself shiver at the absolute tone of authority in his voice. She felt Mrs. Bremmer straighten beside her.

“Sir, it is my duty to correct this little one when she is naughty,” Anna said firmly, her pose stiffening at his objection.

“I’m not questioning your authority nor am I attempting to undermine you, Miss Anna,” he said using a softer tone. “I agree vulgarity is not something any young girl should be allowed.”

“I should hope so,” Anna huffed, nodding in total agreement.

“However,” Lucas continued, “as I’ve taken responsibility for the dress, I find I can’t allow Lucille to be punished for my crime. My actions have already cost her an outing with the

professor as well as an injured finger. They shall not cost her a hot bottom as well.”

Lucy’s heart stuttered in her chest realizing he was not going to allow Mrs. Bremmer to give her a spanking, but felt embarrassed at the directness of both his gaze and his words.

“Than... thank you, sir,” Lucy said softly, her bottom relaxing from the clench that had begun the moment she was jerked to her feet.

Lucas turned his gaze to hers. “Don’t thank me yet, kitten,” he said, his eyes locked on hers as she felt her face flush hotly. “You do not deserve to have your bottom roasted, but, young lady, you do deserve to have your mouth washed out.”

Lucy’s mouth dropped open for an instant and then clamped tightly shut not wanting to think for a single instant that she agreed with him. However, it appeared that Mrs. Bremmer couldn’t agree more.

“An excellent suggestion. I shall tend to it immediately, sir,” Anna said, and tightening her grip on Lucy’s arm, began to pull her out of the library.



LUCAS WATCHED them go and shook his head. He had returned to the library to retrieve a package meant for Edward. He picked it up from the table and then bent and retrieved the dress that had fallen to the floor. He set it once more on top of the sewing basket. He knew Lucy would be returned to finish her task and would be doing so with a squeaky clean mouth. He grimaced remembering the housekeeper’s soapy cloth in his own mouth when he was a young boy. He might have saved Lucy from a spanking that he knew she truly deserved, but feared any appreciation she might have had would disappear as her mouth was expertly cleansed by Anna. He was still thinking about the taste of soap bubbles when he returned to the front parlor to rejoin the others. Louisa, who was sitting very quietly next to her husband, looked at him

closely. Though he gave the package to Edward and was thanked for the gift of fine cigars, he had the distinct feeling that Edward's wife knew his mind was elsewhere. Her head tilted to the side as if she knew something had transpired in his absence and when her smile slid from her lips, he knew she understood that it hadn't been pleasant.



WHILE THE OTHERS conversed in the parlor, Lucy was returned to the solitude of the library and pressed back down onto the settee and the dress placed back into her hands. She blinked rapidly, trying to clear the sheen of tears from her eyes. Her bottom might have been spared, but her mouth and tongue were burning. Mrs. Bremmer had dragged her into the kitchen and scolded the entire time she scrubbed out Lucy's naughty mouth. Lucy was soon gagging and spitting as bubbles frothed from her lips like some sort of rabid animal. Mrs. Bremmer washed her mouth two additional times before releasing her, obviously not caring that several kitchen staff witnessed the cleansing.

"You might think you were saved, young lady," Anna said, as she escorted Lucy back to the library. "However, tomorrow you will apologize to Lord Huntington and your guardian. I will not have any guests in this house think we allow little girls to speak as if they were raised in a gutter. Do not make me remind you to do as I say," she warned. "If I have to do so, I promise you, your mouth will not be the next part of your anatomy that is filled with soap!"

Though Lucille wasn't clear on what the housekeeper meant by that statement, she simply nodded her head. "Yes, ma'am, I'm so sorry. I honestly didn't mean to curse," Lucy apologized.

Anna nodded and waited until Lucy was busy working on her mending before saying, "Have that done quickly, Lucille; your bedtime is only a short while away."

“Yes, ma’am,” Lucy said, blinking rapidly to hold tears at bay, and moving her fingers as fast as possible, she worked the needle in and out of the fabric. Lucy grimaced each time she swallowed, swearing she could still taste the horrid soap coating her tongue and throat. When Molly entered to tell her it was time for bed, Lucy had just finished snipping the thread. Standing, she carefully folded the dress neatly before putting in on the settee, knowing that Mrs. Bremmer would inspect the dress and decide if her work met her high standards. She followed Molly up the stairs, vaguely aware of voices coming from the front parlor, praying that no one saw her. She was embarrassed and so tired that all she wanted was to crawl into her bed. Within minutes of slipping between her cool sheets, Lucy had her doll clutched to her chest as she fell into sleep.

CHAPTER 9

Edward kissed his little one good night when Mrs. Bremmer entered the parlor. Once Louisa had left them, the men accepted glasses of brandy from Eleanor and lit their cigars. Charles was a bit concerned that the conversation obviously was going to include Edward's houseguest. He forced himself to straighten in his chair. If he was suitable material for the position of headmaster, he could certainly converse about what was necessary. He would simply pretend that Lord Huntington was the patron of one of his future students.

"Tell me, Charles," Edward said making himself comfortable in his chair. "How have you enjoyed your schooling?" Charles could not stop a smile from crossing his lips.

"It has been very educational, Edward," Charles said. "I can't thank you or Eleanor enough for the opportunity."

Eleanor smiled and reached out to pat his arm. "Edward, Charles is a wonderful student. He has already captured the heart of many of my little ones. He is a very quick learner as well," Eleanor said with a smile.

"Since when have you accepted men... especially grown men as students in your school, Eleanor?" Lucas asked.

"I seem to recall you were quite the willing pupil in your own time," Eleanor said.

Charles found that little tidbit quite interesting and was about to question Lucas, when Eleanor suggested, "Tell

Edward about your first experience with the cane.”

Charles felt his face flush just a bit at the memory. He had spent every day from breakfast until bedtime at Eleanor’s school. He had been astonished that not only such a school truly did exist, but that Eleanor’s students were all beautiful young women who were being taught how to be obedient and absolutely submissive to their future husbands. He had seen paddlings, strappings, switchings and even a birching during his time there. He considered Eleanor a highly refined woman, but had quickly realized she was absolutely wicked when it came to dishing out discipline. She had one simple rule and enforced it every moment of every day. Naughty little girls were not coddled. Naughty little girls were bent over, divested of their drawers and had their bottoms roasted until there was no doubt of the sincerity of their contrition.

What had amazed Charles the most, though, was that after causing such discomfort to what he’d learned was addressed as a *little one’s* derrière, Eleanor was just as quick to offer words of encouragement, as she gently wiped tears off the flushed cheeks of her charges’ sorrowful faces. Charles had witnessed each punished girl wrapping her arms around Eleanor and begging for her forgiveness, making promises to be better behaved. Though the air often rang with the sounds of cries or pleas for mercy not given as naughty bottoms were strictly corrected, the school also echoed with the delightful peals of laughter and giggles. It had all led to his being advised that it was time he demonstrated what he had learned. Clearing his throat, he looked at his audience and told his story.



“OUR LITTLE WILLAMENA was warned earlier this week that if she didn’t improve her attitude, she’d end the week with a sound caning. If you are accepted for the position of headmaster, Charles, administering the cane will be your responsibility. Do you feel properly prepared?” Eleanor asked, as they discussed it in her office. Charles felt his heart

beat faster, but realized he was no longer nervous at the thought.

“I shall do my best,” he said, and smiled. “Of course, I would appreciate any instructions you deem necessary, so that the poor child will feel properly chastised.”

“Believe me, Charles, a caning makes a fine impression on a small bottom, regardless of who wields the rod. Give her twelve of your best strokes just as you practiced earlier. I’m sure that by the time you release Willamena, she will have learned a lesson, regardless of your expertise,” Eleanor assured him as she smiled.

Charles nodded and stood when she did. In his youth, the count of a half-dozen strokes was used to correct a young man’s misbehavior. Eleanor, he had learned, did not follow normal standards. Any girl under her authority who earned correction deserved to be completely and very thoroughly disciplined whether it be by a hand or, as this moment demanded, a cane. As she walked to the door to usher her student inside, Charles remembered how it had felt to use the cane against a pillow Eleanor had placed upon a chair for him to use for practice. He looked at a large urn where several canes stood ready for use.

“Willamena, you may come in now,” Charles heard Eleanor say. He turned to watch as a young woman entered the room, her steps slow and hesitant. He was surprised to see that this woman was older than most of Eleanor’s students. He knew most of her girls came to her at just a few months before or after reaching their majority. While most of the girls were betrothed upon their enrollment, Charles was informed that a select few actually chose the school for themselves. He was learning that, for some inexplicable reason, those women simply understood that they wished to live their lives in submission and obedience to dominant men. They trusted Miss Summers to place them in homes where their wishes could be fulfilled by men she had carefully selected.

As for the woman before him, Willamena appeared to be at least five or six years older than her sister students. Eleanor took the young woman’s arm and guided her to stand in front

of Charles. The girl would not look up, her eyes remaining glued to the tips of her boots.

“Professor Lloyds,” Eleanor said using his title to evoke his authority over the poor girl. “This is Willamena Johansson. She comes to us already wed for two years. Her husband has enrolled her with us as he attends to business matters out of the country. It seems that Willamena was quick to forget her place without his presence in the past. She was often seen in the most expensive shops as she recklessly spent her papa’s hard-earned money. Isn’t that correct, Willamena?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl said softly, as Charles watched her face turn pink and her hands twist together.

“Though I’m sure her papa taught her the error of her ways once he received the bills, Baron Johansson decided the best place for her in his absence is under my care. He left strict instructions as to her discipline. I fear Willamena needs a very sound lesson to remind her that, married or not, accompanied by her husband or on her own, her behavior is always to reflect her station as a proper young lady,” Eleanor explained.

The young woman stiffened slightly. “Please, ma’am... you can’t—” the young woman began but was cut off immediately by Eleanor.

“You’ll discover that I most certainly can, Willamena,” Eleanor said firmly. “Did you not promise your husband you’d behave under our care?” The girl gave a slight nod of her head. “Correct,” Eleanor said. “Do you believe your husband would approve of your behavior, young lady? You have been manipulative and argumentative all week. You have also received several warnings as well as spankings and yet have chosen to remain stubborn and arrogant. What would the baron do if you behaved like this under his roof?” Eleanor asked.

Willamena shuffled her feet, her hands now twisting in the fabric of her skirt, which Charles noticed was of the proper length for married women. If she were not standing in front of him, her eyes lowered and her hands fidgeting in her guilt, he

would have assumed she was a guest of Eleanor's, not a student subject to her authority and discipline.

"I asked you a question," Eleanor said, and Charles heard the woman give a soft sob before she finally lifted her eyes and met Eleanor's.

"Please, Miss Summers, I... I'm sorry. I just feel so silly among your students. I mean, I am a baroness!" Willamena said, her voice showing her shock at her situation. Eleanor smiled and reached out to trace her finger down the woman's cheek where the first tear had finally fallen.

"Ah, little one, you are not the only titled student I've had in my school. Many a lady, duchess, and other women of your station have benefitted from being under my roof. Your title does not matter here. It gains you no special treatment nor does it exempt you from necessary punishment. All men expect their little ones to behave, most especially those who have had years of lessons at their husband's feet. If you choose not to do so, you give me no choice but to follow your papa's instructions. As a baroness, Willamena, you should set a proper example for your sisters. They look to you for guidance and having a childish tantrum during class is not the sort of lesson they need to learn, is it?" Eleanor said softly.

"No, ma'am," Willamena admitted, her eyes moving to glance at Charles. Charles saw Eleanor nod at him from where she stood next to the woman.

"Willamena," Charles said making his voice firm. "I believe Miss Summers asked what your husband would do if he found you to be so naughty. And, though she's repeated it twice over, you've yet to answer her. Do so immediately, if you please," Charles instructed.

The woman flushed hotly at the command. "He would puni... punish me, sir," she said very softly.

Charles nodded as if expecting nothing less. "How would he punish you, Willamena? What would he do if he discovered you continuing to do the same naughty things even after you've received several warnings?" Charles asked as he removed his jacket and placed it across the back of his chair.

“He... he would sp... spank me, sir,” she confessed, stammering a bit as she continued to watch him, her eyes going wide as he began to roll up the sleeves of his shirt. It was quite clear she understood he was preparing to do exactly that. “No, please... I... I won’t do it again, please don’t do this,” Willamena said, turning back to beg Eleanor for leniency.

“You made the choice to misbehave, Willamena,” Eleanor said firmly as she shook her head. “Naughty girls need to have their bare bottoms punished, don’t they, little one?” Eleanor asked using words that she’d explained to Charles would put either her students or his future ones into the proper attitude for a sound spanking. “Naughty little girls, be they eighteen, twenty-five or even fifty, need to bare their bottoms and submit to discipline to help them learn to be good little girls for their husbands or papas.”

“Please!” the young woman begged again as Charles moved toward the large urn. As he selected the cane he would use, she began to sob harder.

“I... I won’t be naughty again! I promise I will be a good little girl. Please, please, ma’am, please won’t you just paddle me? Please, oh God, please don’t let him cane me!” Willamena begged.

Charles was struck by how quickly the woman had changed. She was no longer the dignified Baroness Johansson, she was simply Willamena, a little girl who had been very naughty and knew she would be punished for her choices. He watched as Eleanor guided her errant pupil to the settee and turned her to face it.

“You’ve already been spanked and paddled to no avail, little one. I’m afraid we both know you’ve earned a good, sound caning, Willamena. Now, little one, remove your drawers and lift your skirts for Professor Lloyds. You need to show us how sorry you truly are by submitting yourself to your punishment. You will feel far better after you’ve paid the price for your naughtiness,” Eleanor said.

Charles watched as the young woman sobbed but obeyed. She soon had her drawers untied and after they dropped to the floor, she stepped out of them, bending to pick them up and folding them before handing them to Eleanor. Charles watched as Willamena took a deep breath before reaching for the hem of her skirts. She gave him one last look, her eyes shining with her tears, her lower lip trembling as she silently begged for mercy. Charles felt a moment's hesitation as he saw her tear-stained face. He understood that if he were officially offered the position of headmaster, many a young woman would be making a tearful plea for forgiveness when sent to his office for corporal discipline. Charles realized that Eleanor was watching his every move. Though he vividly remembered smacking Lucille's bottom, he knew it had gone mostly unnoticed by the girl. By the time he was done here, though, he knew that Willamena would be very aware that she had been soundly disciplined. He steeled himself to do his duty to the best of his ability.

"Skirts well up, miss," Charles said, and then pointed at the settee with the cane. "Bend right over, elbows on the settee and lift your bottom high," he further instructed. He didn't realize he was holding his breath until the young woman sobbed, but bent over the settee after pulling her skirts up. Charles saw her well-rounded bottom pushed toward him. He briefly compared hers to that of Lucille's he'd seen in a similar position when he'd witnessed the strapping given to her by her guardian. Whereas Lucille's bottom was much smaller and heart-shaped, Willamena's was much broader and far plumper. Charles quickly realized that just as every individual was different, he would soon have the opportunity to compare many a naked posterior if he earned the position of headmaster.

"Onto your elbows, Willamena," Eleanor reminded her, and Charles knew she was also reminding him to make sure his instructions were always followed. Charles felt his throat tighten as he watched her lower her elbows to the settee, which both lifted her bottom and caused it to push further out into the room. He glanced at Eleanor to see her give him a nod.

Charles took a deep breath and lifted the cane. He remembered the lessons with the pillow and stepped forward to carefully measure the distance needed. As he lowered the cane to press against the offered buttocks of Baroness Johansson, he felt a calm descend over him.

“Stay in position, Willamena,” he said sternly. “Your behavior has earned you a dozen. Extra strokes will be added if you fail in your duty to submit properly to your discipline. You’ve admitted your naughtiness and it is time for your bottom to pay the price with a proper caning. Are you ready to begin, young lady?” Charles made sure he spoke in a firm, no-nonsense way. He wanted the woman to understand he was going to do exactly as her husband would wish.

Willamena gave a sob. “Yes, sir, I’m so sorry I was naughty, sir.”

Charles nodded and tapped the cane gently against her buttocks. “I know you are, but we are here to take care of that naughtiness. Relax your bottom, baroness, let your buttocks hang loose so that each stroke will do its job to teach you your proper duty,” Charles said repeating words that Eleanor had taught him in a calm yet authoritative manner. Willamena’s soft cry spoke of her embarrassment at his instruction, but he watched as the young woman softened her buttocks until they were rounded and no longer clenched.

Satisfied that he had her in the proper frame of mind for her discipline, Charles lifted the cane and placed the first stroke. As it landed across the top of the offered cheeks, Willamena moaned deeply. Charles saw that, though he’d placed the stroke where he’d intended, the weal was not immediately apparent as he knew it should have been the moment the rod cracked against her flesh. He tapped her bottom again and then lifted the cane higher over his shoulder. The second stroke cracked much louder when he remembered to flick his wrist with the blow. Willamena lifted her head and cried out loudly as the weal rose on her bottom only slightly below where the first had landed. Charles stepped a bit further away and snapped the cane forward again, this time nodding

as the weal instantly bloomed on her flesh, only the divide of her buttocks disrupting the linear red line.

“Nooo!” the woman sobbed, her head arched back at the fire of the stroke. “Oh, please, sir, please, not so hard... I... I can’t bear it,” she sobbed, but remained in position.

Charles looked to Eleanor, who simply shook her head and smiled.

“You shall bear it, Willamena, and thank me for it after we are done,” Charles said, as he tapped the cane lower on her cheeks. Stroke after stroke cracked against Willamena’s bottom, forming almost a perfect pattern down the surface of her buttocks. Charles’ aim had only allowed a slight overlapping of two weals. Willamena was soon wailing, her knees bending after each stroke was given and received. Nine lines of fire decorated her rump before Charles paused and allowed the girl to compose herself before receiving further instructions.

“Naughty little girls need to have a hot bottom to remind them to be good girls. Now, bend further forward please, baroness, and push up your naughty bottom so you may accept the next strokes right on your sit-spots,” Charles ordered. Willamena sobbed hard as she bent forward, covering her face with her hands as she willingly submitted the most sensitive part of her bottom to the cane. Charles nodded, appreciating her immediate submission though he knew her bottom had to feel as if it were on fire. He was further pleased when she remembered to loosen her thoroughly wealed bottom.

“Very good, Willamena, your papa would be pleased,” Charles said before lifting the cane again.

Strokes ten and eleven cracked loudly in the room, each raising a weal along the line where her bottom met the tops of her thighs. Willamena was wailing now, her face buried in her cupped hands, her bottom wagging up and down and side to side in a futile effort to ease the burning across her cheeks. Charles stepped slightly to the side and tapped the cane on a diagonal across the weals raised on her bottom. He had learned that this was considered ‘closing the gate’ and as he

gave her the last stroke, harder than any previous, the weal immediately rose across the previous weals as she shrieked from its delivery. He smiled noticing that the lines did, in fact, resemble an innocent garden gate.

“Ohhh, please... I’m so sorry, sir! Please... no more...” Willamena sobbed as her bottom bounced wildly.

Charles wasn’t even aware he’d stepped closer to her until he felt the raised lines he had painted onto her posterior. Tracing over her flesh with his fingertips, he was amazed at the heat each weal gave off and realized he could feel the ridges of each one. A delicate cough had him looking to see Eleanor shaking her head. Slightly embarrassed, he lifted his fingers from the punished posterior and stepped back.

“Willamena,” Charles said softly. “You may rise and go to the corner to consider your behavior. Keep your skirts up and your caned bottom properly displayed.” He watched as Baroness Willamena Johansson, a respected woman of upper society, slowly stood, her face tear-streaked as she kept her skirts off her well caned bottom.

“Than... thank you, sir,” she said.

“You are most welcome. You did very well in offering your bottom, little one. I am sure your husband would be proud of you for accepting your caning so well. I’m proud of you as well,” Charles said and smiled at her. She returned his smile with one of her own before walking to the corner where she buried her nose against the wall and pushed her bottom well out into the room. Charles kept her on display for a half-hour, simply watching her after he returned the cane to the urn.

Eleanor seated herself at her desk and entered the details of the session in a journal. Charles knew she would go over everything with the woman’s husband upon his return. Charles couldn’t help but hope the baron agreed that he’d done a proper job in punishing his wife. As Charles considered that, he also wondered if perhaps Willamena had simply missed her husband or perhaps it was as simple as the fact that the woman missed having her bottom tended to by her strict papa.. Regardless, her derrière now bore a dozen distinct weals with

only the first less prominent than the others. It would be at least a few days before the miscreant sat without remembering this session.

For the first time since he'd opened the envelope containing the news that he was being considered for the appointment, Charles felt himself capable of handling the position of headmaster. He'd not faltered during the administration of his first caning, nor had he felt he'd been unduly harsh. His strokes had been purposeful, and without a doubt, hurt quite fiercely, yet he remained calm and concerned about the poor woman's feelings. If the baroness' tears were any proof, his choice of words when lecturing Willamena had been more than adequate to enforce the feeling of guilt and the need to willingly atone for her naughtiness. After the punished Baroness received Charles' permission to remove herself from the corner, Charles handed her the discarded drawers and watched as she stepped into them, a blush upon her cheeks.

"I don't expect you'll forget your husband's wishes for good behavior any time soon," Charles said, as the woman stood after adjusting her clothing.

"No, sir, I'm sorry I was so naughty. I'm sorry you had to cane me but thank you for the lesson," Willamena said softly, but with respect in her tone.

Charles was surprised when she unexpectedly threw her arms around him. He hugged her gently in return, knowing she was seeking a bit of comfort after her painful discipline.

"Just see to your better behavior, my dear. I'm sure your husband will have another lesson for your bottom upon his return," Charles said, and then took her arm and led her to the door.

She turned back into the room, "Thank you, Miss Summers, I'll try to be a better role model for my sisters," she said.

"I'm certain you shall, my dear," Eleanor said with a smile. "Now, hurry along, as I'm sure Nanny Bishop is waiting to put you to bed. Remember, no rubbing that aching bottom, baroness. Remind Nanny to tie your hands to the bed. I would

hate to have to call you back into my office again this evening if your hands were discovered where they are not to be.”

Willamena blushed hotly, and Charles’ breath caught as the rather cryptic warning became clear with the memory of seeing a sheen on the baroness’ inner thighs as she writhed from the administration of the rattan rod.

“Yes, ma’am. I... I’ll remind Nanny Bishop, ma’am. Good night.”

Charles watched her walk down the hall, again amazed at the realization that no one would necessarily know that the baroness had just gotten her bottom caned. He closed the door and turned back to Eleanor. He was unable to hide the smile of satisfaction lighting his face. Eleanor smiled back.



THE OCCUPANTS of the parlor had been silent as Charles related his story. Even Lucas, who had no prior knowledge of the reason for the man attending Eleanor’s school, was impressed. He could easily picture the scene. He glanced at Edward and saw him smile and nod his approval.

“He did an excellent job, Edward,” Eleanor said. “I have no reason to doubt that Charles will make a fine headmaster for the school. He not only saw to the baroness’ discipline with a firm hand, she left feeling far better after paying for her naughtiness, without feeling shamed by the experience. I assure you that the young women attending Cressington will be quick to discuss just how effectively their new headmaster wields a cane. If hearing the baroness fairly howl as the cane bit into her ample rump was any example, the entire student body would soon know it would behoove them to avoid being sent to Headmaster Lloyds’ office.” With a coy smile, she looked from Edward to Charles. “Though he must remember that while it would be perfectly acceptable to offer a hug in comfort after the punishment has been accepted and the lesson learned, touching the weals across a student’s bare bottom

could very well lead to misunderstandings. Unless, of course, she is enrolled in a different sort of institution.”

“I apologize for that,” Charles said, his face warming. “I’m not exactly sure what came over me.”

Edward grinned. “I have to admit, I’m really rather impressed, Charles. Eleanor is not one to give compliments when they’ve not been earned. If the only criticism she has of your performance is your need to feel the tactile evidence of your delivery of the strokes, well, I’m certainly not one to hold that against you this once. To hear her accolades about your abilities leaves me no doubt that you are exactly the sort of man needed to fill the position.”

“Thank you, Edward, I can’t thank either you or Eleanor enough,” Charles said, and gave her a slight bow. “Though I now admit that young women need a firm hand, I will always believe in giving comfort after their poor little bottoms have paid the price of their naughtiness, but I will assure I not overstep any boundaries. I will do my very best to keep your high regard.”

Eleanor laughed. “I’m sure you shall, Charles,” she agreed and then added, “Perhaps a certain ward we both know won’t agree, but, sir, you shall make a fine disciplinarian for any naughty bottom.”



EVEN AS CHARLES SMILED, Lucas frowned. Though he had already known that the professor was courting Lucille, he’d had no knowledge that this lifestyle was totally new to him. Before he could question Edward granting his permission, his friend stood and walked toward Charles.

“I’m sure the school board will agree, Charles,” Edward said. “I believe congratulations are in order, Headmaster Lloyds.”

Charles stood as Edward came forward to shake his hand. “Thank you, Edward,” Charles said. “But, sir, I must ask for your patience in informing the board.”

Lucas knew it was very rare to catch Edward off guard, but he appeared to be quite surprised by Charles' comment.

"May I inquire as to why?" Edward asked.

"I feel I need to speak with Miss Furniss before I accept the position."

Lucas shook his head, wondering at the man's indecision. What sort of man turned down an opportunity to a better life, not only for himself, but for any future wife and possible children? What did Miss Furniss have to do with a man making the best decision for his family? Had his friend softened in the years Lucas had been abroad?

Edward didn't speak for a moment, but then nodded. "As you wish, Charles," he conceded. "I don't suggest you wait long, though. It is important that whoever takes the position do so at the earliest opportunity. The board is anxious to have the matter decided, and the man will also need time to settle into the position before the term begins."

"I understand, sir," Charles said.

Eleanor stood and put her empty glass down onto the table by her chair. "It's getting late, Edward," she said with a smile. "Thank you so much for a lovely evening. It was a pleasure to see you again, Lucas. Shall I be watching for your visit to meet my newest little ones?"

Lucas smiled, took her hand and pressed a kiss against it. "You never know, Eleanor," he said, charmingly. "I promise to visit if for nothing else than to see you again." If Eleanor was surprised at his words, she didn't show it. She nodded and was soon walking with Charles toward the front door. As they all reached the door, Charles turned back to where Lucas stood beside Edward.

"Lord Huntington?"

It was Lucas' turn to be surprised when the professor addressed him. "Yes?"

"I realize that you are not only a house guest of Edward's, but an old friend as well. I also understand that you seem to be interested in Miss Furniss. While I could pretend it is nothing

more than you assuring the young woman is comfortable with your residence in her home, I'm not one to bury my head in the sand. I feel that would serve neither of us, so may I speak frankly?"

"Please do," Lucas said.

"I may not be a lord, and I will never have the advantages that your birthright gives you, but rest assured, sir, I intend to give you a run for your money, Lord Huntington." Pausing, he chuckled as he pulled on his coat. "Though, you have to admit, Miss Furniss' response to you has been, shall we say, less than enthusiastic?"

Lucas was spared the need to respond when Edward chuckled and Eleanor laughed. He simply inclined his head thinking the professor had no idea that the first instinct of a passionate feline was to show her claws. Accepting the challenge, he also knew that it was only the strongest lion in the pride who could pin the female down and earn the right to make her his.

Charles turned to Edward. "I'd like to call on Miss Furniss tomorrow. There is a poetry reading at the library. With the discussions we've had concerning literature on our outings, I think she would truly enjoy attending if that meets with your approval, Edward," he said with a quick look toward Lucas as if to make sure he understood that while he might be a novice at wielding a cane, this was not the first time he'd escorted Lucy.

"That will be fine, Charles, and I'm sure Lucille will be pleased," Edward said. Charles shook both men's hands and then escorted Eleanor down to the waiting carriage.

CHAPTER 10

Edward and Lucas settled in Edward's study. After taking a sip of his brandy, Lucas leaned back in his chair.

"Okay, I admit it, you definitely picked the best of the lot. Your girls are not only beautiful, there is something about them that has one wishing to peel back every layer of that beauty to discover that it is far more than skin deep." He grinned and shook his head. "Though Lord knows how you managed to get Louisa to agree to wed you."

"What can I say, her taste is impeccable." At Lucas' chuckle and lifting of his almost empty glass, Edward smiled as he reached across to freshen his guest's drink. "And as long as you're in the confessing mood, you might as well admit you're just jealous."

"Consider my confession complete," Lucas said. "Last time I was at Wintercrest, you were fighting off the rather determined mothers of the ton as they pressed their precious daughters upon you. Tell me how exactly did you manage to snag not one, but a set of such perfect femininity." Settling back in his chair, he warmed the glass of brandy between his palms as he waited for the lucky bastard to fill him in on what he'd missed in his time away.

Once Edward finished telling of how he'd met Louisa and their rather rapid courtship and marriage, he then told him about the tragic accident that had caused the death of the twins' parents. Lucas watched as his lifelong friend's expression turned somber. "It was actually quite eerie,"

Edward said, the amber liquor in his snifter remaining untouched as he absentmindedly swirled the brandy while memories played in his mind. “I made a vow to Joseph accepting the responsibility of Lucille as well if anything happened to him and his wife, Ruby. I truly never expected to have to keep that promise within but a few weeks after I’d wed her sister, but fate doesn’t really give a damn about what we expect does it?”

Lucas shook his head, both men sitting quietly for several minutes. Finally, he looked over to meet Edward’s gaze again. “They might be identical in appearance, but they are different. Your little Louisa is the quieter one. She has an air about her that has one thinking of serenity.” Chuckling, he shook his head. “Lucy, on the other hand, has a fierce spirit. Despite her attire and her obvious submission to authority, I believe she is far more the hellcat than the kitten,” Lucas observed.

Edward’s knowing grin confirmed his agreement with his observation. “You haven’t lost your astuteness, my friend. Though Lucille has certainly come a very long way since she’s become my ward, there remains a band of steel beneath her soft exterior. But, when have you ever run from a challenge?” Edward asked. “I don’t see Charles running, and believe me, every bit of this is new to him. I suppose the question is which one of you can teach steel to bend but not break?”

While Edward was still smiling, Lucas knew the question was a serious one and with the mention of the professor’s name, he also understood that Edward was not going to simply hand him his approval on a silver platter despite their history together. His first impression of Charles Lloyds hadn’t been all that high though he had nothing to truly base his feelings on. However, hearing the man tell his story in the parlor and seeing the obvious approval in Eleanor’s expression, he realized that both she and Edward truly respected the quiet teacher. And the fact that Charles had spoken frankly, effectively firing the first salvo, he had to give the man far more consideration than he’d thought. Rather unused to competition, Lucas smiled, finding himself looking forward to the challenge.

“Don’t worry about me, Edward,” he assured his friend. “I have no intention of hurting your kitten.” He paused as Edward rolled his eyes. “I warn you though, I do have the intention of making her purr.”

“I would expect nothing less, Lucas, but let me warn you,” he said, leaning forward, his voice firm and tight. “I have come not only to respect Lucille, but to love her as well. I think you would be a perfect mate for her, however, do not take advantage of my friendship. There will be no dalliances here. You are not to attempt to win her if it is only to put another notch in your belt. She is not one of Eleanor’s students. Her spirit is indeed strong, but she is an innocent and, Lucas, she shall remain so or you shall deal with me.”

Lucas heard the warning and understood. He nodded and setting his snifter back onto the table between them, he stood. “I understand, Edward,” he said, “I give you my oath that I will behave myself.”

Edward nodded as he tossed back the rest of his drink. The men extinguished the lamps, left the study, and climbed the stairs, giving a final good night as Lucas turned to walk toward the guest chambers while Edward turned in the other direction toward his room. As Lucas undressed and moved to extinguish the lamp, he added a final vow to himself, “I will heed your words, Edward, but I promise you this... I will win her heart.”



THE NEXT MORNING Lucy found herself wondering where Lord Huntington and Edward were, but was grateful to be able to make her apology to Mrs. Bremmer without the man bearing witness. The housekeeper seemed pleased with the exchange, but that didn’t keep her from plopping her charge back down on the settee and handing her the mended dress. Lucy sighed seeing that more than half of her stitches had been removed. As Louisa sat sewing a tapestry in a chair nearby, Lucy redid her work. The next time Anna checked, Lucy watched, massaging her fingertips as several stitches were again

removed. Clamping her mouth shut, Lucy simply accepted the dress for the third time.

When Lucy looked up at the sound of footfalls, it was to see Lord Huntington entering the room. She watched as he approached Louisa's chair and asked to see her work. Lucy knew that, unlike her, Louisa was an expert seamstress. The colors of her threads popped off the linen, bringing the scene to life. Every decorative stitch was beautifully placed as well.

"This is Wintercrest," Lucas said, with a smile.

"Yes, or rather, I'm attempting to depict the gardens of the estate," Louisa said, running her fingertip over the raised bumps of hundreds of tiny French knots in different hues of pink that made up the hydrangea blossoms that bloomed in beds near their willow tree.

"I recognize the pathway that runs along the bottom of the terraces. You do beautiful work, Louisa."

Lucas' praise had Lucy's eyes dropping to her work. Instead of vibrantly colored threads, her needle held a single gray strand. There were no intricately worked designs, only a line of boring stitches and even those weren't perfectly placed. Sighing, she unthreaded her needle, using its point to pick out the last few stitches she'd made, saving Mrs. Bremmer the trouble.

"I thought you finished your mending last evening, Lucille," Lucas said.

Lifting her eyes, she glared at him. "I did, but obviously Mrs. Bremmer is not as appreciative of my efforts as you are of Louisa's," she said, her tone indicating her anger. She saw the smile leave his face.

"Careful, little one," he said. "I appreciate your spirit but am far less accepting of useless anger. I saved your bottom last night because I accept the blame for tearing your dress. However, don't think I won't hesitate to tend to it myself in the future if your tone does not change."

Louisa gasped, and Lucy's mouth opened to protest, but at the sight of his eyes and his unflinching expression, she closed

her mouth. And when the brow over his right eye lifted, she swallowed hard and nodded, dropping her eyes back to her lap. She was angry but also felt a bit guilty as she remembered he had stopped Mrs. Bremmer from spanking her. Her face flushed at his veiled threat and her blood rushed through her body, her tummy feeling as if the butterflies had left Louisa's tapestry to settle inside her belly. Lord Huntington might be a total stranger to her, but she had absolutely no doubt the man meant exactly what he'd said. Remembering that Edward had said they'd been friends since childhood and Mrs. Bremmer had mentioned knowing the man since he'd been in short pants, it was obvious Wintercrest Manor was not only familiar, it was his second home.

"Yes, sir," she managed to say, if only in an effort to keep her bottom safe.

Bending down, Lucas looked at the seam she'd been repairing. "There is beauty in all things no matter if elaborate or simple, Lucy, and pride to be found in all jobs well done."

She was surprised at his words and was about to nod when he pointed at the few stitches she'd just redone for the fourth time.

Smiling and lowering his voice as if conveying some great secret, he added, "Those remind me of the flagstones lining the garden paths..." Pausing, he waited until she raised her gaze to his before adding, "You know, serviceable even if a trifle crooked." He grinned when she growled.

As he straightened and picked up a book off a table, she couldn't help but regret she hadn't 'accidentally' stabbed him with her needle. Perhaps doing so would allow some air to escape the insufferable man.



OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, Lucas discovered that winning her heart was not going to be as easy a task as he'd originally thought. Lucy made every attempt to avoid being in his presence. When they ate their meals or whenever he did

manage to be in the same room, she was unerringly polite. Lucas found it somewhat amusing at first but quickly found himself irritated by her constant curtsying, thanking him profusely for every little thing he passed her while at the dining table, or continuing to address him as Lord Huntington with a voice that sounded like it was dripping treacle. He did not complain or reveal that he was unamused, but would catch Edward looking at him with a knowing smile. Lucy never went far enough to warrant discipline, but he found himself thinking more and more about upending the small woman and trying to spank some sense into her. He found he missed the spirit in her voice and the fire in her beautiful eyes.

Originally, Lucas had been unconcerned about Charles Lloyds. However, as several evenings passed with Lucille being escorted by him to the neighborhood park or even on long walks through the gardens surrounding Wintercrest, he did begin to wonder what he was doing wrong.

Lucas also became aware that, even as he was watching Lucille, Louisa was watching him. He found he approved of her sister's diligence, understanding that Edward's wife simply wanted what was best for her sister. One afternoon, Lucas returned to the house earlier than usual leaving Edward in town where he had a meeting. The house was too quiet. He sighed to himself, wondering how he could get past Lucy's barriers. He went through the house and out into the gardens, walking down the paths and chiding himself for his inability to form a plan.

He had seen Lucille saying good night to Charles the evening before. After the man left, Lucas, from the shadows of the parlor, saw the girl reach up and touch her cheek. He instantly knew that regardless of how innocent Edward thought the girl was, she had obviously just been kissed. He shook his head, fearing that he was falling further and further away from her mind. He was surprised when he found himself thinking about what was best for the girl. Was he simply trying to win her because he hated to lose? Would she be better off with Charles?

Lost in thought, Lucas' reverie was interrupted by the faint and distant sound of feminine giggles. He glanced behind him, but saw nothing. He looked all about, but again didn't see anything that could have produced the very delicate, nearly imperceptible laughter. Then it came again, and realizing that it was off the path, he stepped down a level to another terrace, and walked softly toward the appealing voices. About to skirt around a huge weeping willow tree, recognition suddenly stopped him. It wasn't only the pink flowers from Louisa's tapestry that he recognized, it was Lucy's voice that he heard coming from behind the branches of the tree right in front of him.

"He kissed me," he heard Lucille confess, and he froze in place.

"Who kissed you?" Louisa asked.

"Louisa!" Lucille said sounding as if she were shocked. "Charles, of course, who else might have cause to kiss me?"

Louisa's soft laughter preceded her response. "Our Lord Huntington? Can't you see that both men are battling for your attentions?"

"Don't be a silly goose," Lucy said with a huff that had Lucas experiencing a feeling that was quite alien to him. Recognizing it as rejection, he could only grit his teeth.

"Well, I might be silly, but you have to be blind..."

When he heard nothing more, Lucas chanced taking another step closer to the concealed bower to assure he didn't miss a single word.

"You've been avoiding him, haven't you?" Louisa asked and Lucas found himself nodding as that was exactly what Lucy had been doing.

"I have not," Lucy denied and he felt his fingers twitch as his eyes lifted to look at a branch hanging a mere yard away. Little ladies who told blatant lies were apt to find their legs well striped for their deceit.

"Do you want to hear about the kiss or not?" Lucy continued and Lucas set aside the urge to snip a branch at least

for the time being.

“Of course I do,” Louisa confirmed. “What was it like? Did it make your tummy tingle?”

Outside their secret place, Lucas felt his own gut clench as he awaited Lucy’s response.

“It was nice, I suppose,” Lucy said.

“Oh,” Louisa said, sounding as concerned as Lucas felt. He heard Edward’s wife continue, “The first time Edward kissed me, my tummy was all aflutter and I felt as if I would simply burst into flames.”

Lifting an imaginary glass in a toast to his friend, Lucas heard a sigh and was grateful it sounded far more like one given in discontent rather than one of satisfaction for a stirring kiss.

“It was only on the cheek, Louisa,” Lucy defended herself. “I wasn’t expecting it. I’m sure it will be better if he does it again. I... I certainly didn’t tingle.”

Lucas almost laughed. If this was her reaction to her first kiss by a man who was constantly calling on her, then he felt hope bloom again. However, he reminded himself that Charles was still the only one of them who was kissing the lovely little minx regardless of how inadequate those kisses were. The gloves were coming off, he decided. He would no longer stand in the background. It was past time for him to step up and teach the little kitten how she could be made to purr. Not even realizing that he had answered his earlier questions, Lucas decided he was the better man for a certain little tiger. With a plan in mind, he slipped away, leaving the girls to their private hideaway.



THE NEXT DAY, Lucy was sitting in the library reading a book when Lucas put his plan into action. “Don’t fail me,” he said, giving his first soldier a gentle shove earning him a high-pitched cry of protest.

The sound caused him to step back further as it had Lucy's head lifting from the pages of her book. Lucas saw her look of surprise as she jumped up from her chair, dropping her novel on the chair's cushion.

"Oh, you are precious," she cried, as she ran to the small white bit of fluff wobbling into the library. She soon had the small kitten scooped up in her hands and was pressing her nose into the soft, white fur. "Where did you come from?" she asked the kitten, as she looked around. She stiffened slightly as Lucas walked into the room, his smile bright only to see her smile narrow.

"You always look like you could use a good cuddle," he said, and watched her face color.

Lucy looked at the kitten she was stroking and he knew she was considering putting it down and ignoring him, however, the small animal gave a soft meow and then licked her finger with its tiny pink tongue. Her entire face lit as if the sun had risen inside her and Lucas wished he had thought of licking her finger. He felt himself becoming aroused and quickly brought himself under control. He was saved from speaking when Louisa joined them and immediately squealed her delight. The girls were soon seated on the settee, the small bundle between them as they stroked the kitten.

"Oh, Lucy, it is so cute," Louisa said, and looked at Lucas. He again knew why Edward had picked the young woman. Her face was shining with joy, all over the presence of a tiny cat and her sister's obvious happiness.

"I thought Lucy might enjoy a kitten and be willing to call a truce," Lucas admitted. Louisa smiled.

"It is such a sweet offering, sir," Louisa said, as if totally unaware that his words had caused her sister to stiffen. "Have you picked a name, Lucy?" she asked. Lucy shook her head, glancing over at him as if still trying to decide if she was happy with his gift or angry at him for using an innocent little creature to further his cause.

Not about to concede the first battle, Lucas walked to the settee and crouched down, reaching out to stroke the kitten's

white fur with his finger. “Yes, Lucy, what name have you chosen, little one?” He was rather pleased to note that her eyes widened a fraction and a pretty blush rose to color her cheeks at his nearness.

“How about Charles?” Lucy said, looking at Lucas with a fake smile on her face.

Lucas could practically feel the cavities forming at the sweetness dripping from her, but he didn’t bite. “Well, I suppose that’s as good a name as any, Lucy,” he said, as he kept his eyes glued to hers. “However, little one, she might prefer a girl’s name as she is soft and tiny and beautiful.” He watched her eyes soften and her breasts heave a bit as he ran his fingertip over hers as if by accident. “This little kitten is definitely not a mangy tomcat.” He realized she’d been holding her breath but now saw her eyes beginning to flash as he teased her. That was not the sign of victory he was hoping for.

“Breathe, Lucy,” he said, and when she did, taking in a rather large gulp of air, he smiled and dropped his eyes back to the kitten. It really was a very appealing little thing. He found himself hoping that no matter where the kitten had come from, it had already stolen Lucy’s heart even if he was having a far harder time of doing so. “I was teasing,” he said. “Though Charles won’t work, how about a variation? Perhaps Charlotte?”

“No, she seems more... I don’t know... regal than a Charlotte does. What do you think about Cleopatra?” she asked, lifting the most amazing pair of eyes to him.

What Lucas thought was that perhaps she was finally tiring from the effort required to ignore him. Giving her a smile, he nodded. “I think that’s a beautiful choice,” he said. “Regal like the strong, fierce Persian line she comes from and yet innocent of the ways of the world, just like her new owner.” Hearing Louisa’s soft gasp and seeing the look of pleasure in Lucy’s eyes, he smiled. Not wanting to push his luck, Lucas stroked Cleo’s fur once more and then said, “Welcome to Wintercrest, Cleo,” before standing.

“Thank you, Lord Huntington,” Lucy said softly, looking up at him. “I... I hope Ed... I mean, my guardian... allows me to keep her.”

Lucas found himself extremely glad he was able to reassure her. “I’ve already spoken to Edward, Lucy. Cleopatra is yours if you want. Consider her a new beginning for us.” It might be questionable if she’d given a shiver of delight or a shudder of disgust at his suggestion, but Lucas knew for certain that the smile she gave lit her entire being as she scooped Cleopatra from her lap to bury her nose into her snowy fur once again. Lucas saw Louisa smile broadly at him and he winked at her. She clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle and he grinned just as broadly. “She is your responsibility as well, Lucy,” Lucas warned her. “I don’t want Mrs. Bremmer angry with us because Cleo causes her additional work.”

“Yes, sir,” Lucy said quickly. “I’ll do everything for Cleo, I promise.”

Lucas knew she would be as good as her word. He was more than pleased. Not only was it clear she adored his gift, she had called him ‘sir’ without her usual false connotation of politeness. His determination increased as he knew he’d never be content with hearing the word spoken so sincerely only this one time.



THE GIRLS WERE FUSSING over the kitten when Edward found them. He smiled as he drew Louisa away from Cleo to pull her onto his lap. After giving her a kiss, he bent to whisper in her ear.

“Should I get you a kitten as well, little lady?” he asked.

Louisa smiled and shook her head. She lifted herself to whisper in his ear. “No, Papa, I have you to cuddle.”

Edward smiled his pleasure at her response and she felt his lips pressing hard against hers. Louisa felt the familiar tingle of arousal flow through her body. Even as she returned the

kiss, she had a moment's thought as to how her sister had described her first kiss from Charles. She knew that only a few weeks ago, Lucy would have settled for almost anyone who could take her from Wintercrest. She prayed that her twin would no longer wish to do so. She deserved happiness and Louisa wanted her to wait however long it took until she found her heart truly captured. Her thoughts left her sister as Edward kissed her again.



ACROSS THE ROOM where he was standing by the bookcase where he'd plucked whom he'd first thought to be the lady of the manor from the ladder, Lucas smiled at the two. Edward might demand his wife be his child-bride, but it was obvious to anyone seeing the couple that Edward loved Louisa with all his heart.

The presence of Cleo did lighten the mood between Lucy and Lucas. She no longer went out of her way to avoid him. Lucas was pleased, but realized she was still accepting invitations from Charles. The man always seemed to be joining them for dinner and then escorting Lucy out for long walks and ice-cream cones. During one of his endless visits, one evening Charles had presented Lucy with the gift of a stuffed mouse on the end of a stick. Lucy was delighted but Lucas wanted to throttle the man. Lucy was his kitten!

“Just to be clear, the toy is meant for Cleopatra,” Charles had said, laughing when Lucy had pointed the stick toward Lucas before dangling it in front of her kitten.

Everyone except Lucas had laughed as Cleo immediately pounced on the mouse. His little kitten might believe she was playing with a rat, but it was time to discover that he too had claws.

Lucas found that his friend was not going to take sides, either. “I’ve known you forever,” Lucas said one evening over their after-dinner drinks in Edward’s study. “I know how you think, and, Edward, I can’t believe you have allowed your

ward all this freedom. What happened to the stern guardian you used to be?"

Edward laughed loudly and slapped his friend on his back. "Don't blame me for your failings, Lucas," Edward said. "Feeling like you are fighting a losing battle, do you?" he asked.

Lucas shook his head knowing Edward was baiting him. "No, just wondering how long you intend this game to go on. I'm telling you, Lucy is not truly interested in that... that professor!"

Edward didn't laugh this time. Instead he studied Lucas' face for a moment before saying, "I've promised both Louisa and Lucille that I would not be quick to force Lucille to accept some man simply because I chose him," Edward admitted.

Lucas was a bit surprised but nodded. "That's admirable of you, Edward," he said and then laughed. "Doesn't do me any bloody good, but, hell, it is admirable. There aren't too many men who would take the feelings of their wives much less their wards into account in making such a decision."

"Well, we both know these two females are not like any others," Edward said, and refilled his friend's glass. "That's what makes the battle worth the effort. After all, if one could simply pluck victory from the air, it wouldn't be as sweet."

Lucas had to agree, though he didn't have to like it.

CHAPTER 11

Only a week was left before the opening ball. Edward decided to make his announcement that night after dinner. Once the four had gathered in the library, he pulled his wife down onto his lap. Louisa smiled and snuggled into his chest.

Edward was aware of his friend's eyes on them and smiled. He was so incredibly pleased with how Louisa had not only accepted the role he desired, she thrived in it. Edward could not have chosen a more perfect mate. He saw Lucas' gaze move to Lucille and smiled. If he had to guess, he'd wager the man was picturing how Lucille would look wearing a more childish dress, her hair loose and held back with a ribbon. How she would feel nestled in his arms, how she'd smile lifting her lips to his for yet another kiss. Perhaps he'd been a bit lax in helping direct his ward's attention to a man he knew was so well suited for her. Yet, he had no intention of going back on his word. Childhood bonds were strong indeed, but the ties between a man and his wife were unbreakable. If Lucas wanted to ever discover the answers to the questions clearly written in his expression every time he looked at Lucille, he would need to up his game and quickly.

With that in mind, Edward began to speak. "Girls, I have an announcement to make," he said and watched as both girls turned their full attention to him. "We will be attending the opening ball of the season on Saturday."

Louisa squealed and clapped. "Oh, Papa," Louisa said, "How wonderful! Who's hosting? Where will it be held? What

will we...”

Edward laughed and stilled her questions with a kiss. He noticed that his ward had still not said a word. “Lucille? Does my news not please you?” he asked. Instead of answering, he watched as his ward flushed and looked away.

“Lucy?”

“It sounds wonderful, sir,” Lucy said though she didn’t sound like she believed her own statement.

Louisa looked across the distance and evidently had the same thoughts. “Lucy, it will be fun,” Louisa said. “There will be lots of pretty dresses...” her voice trailed off and she turned her face to her husband’s. “Papa, will we... may we... I mean, I don’t mind, but since this is Lucy’s first real ball, perhaps she could—” she attempted but Edward interrupted her.

“I believe both my girls deserve to have new dresses for *their* first ball,” he said, gently correcting her. “I’ve already arranged for a seamstress to come to discuss making new dresses for both of you.”

“Oh, thank you, Papa,” Louisa said practically bouncing with glee. “See, Lucy, we will have new dresses! There will be music and dancing and food,” Louisa said, and then giggled. “I bet there will be lots and lots of men there who might want to meet you!”

Edward watched as Lucy looked at her sister as if she were speaking a foreign language. About to ask her for the truth in what was keeping the joy of a party from her face, he realized he wasn’t the only one to sense her discomfort. Lucas went to sit beside her on the settee. She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn’t seem to even realize he’d done so until he spoke.

“Lucille,” Lucas said softly, “tell us what is frightening you about this invitation.”

Lucy turned to him, her eyes wide, hesitating a moment before giving a shake of her head. Edward saw the indecision about what she should confess or perhaps choose to attempt to keep hidden from both him and Lucas in the crinkling of her

nose and the biting of her lip. Evidently Lucas read her just as well as he stood and moved to the fireplace to scoop Cleo from the fancy basket he'd gifted to Lucy a few days earlier. Returning to the settee, he gently set the sleepy feline on Lucy's lap before settling down beside her again. Edward noted that without speaking a single word, his friend had comforted her, her posture relaxing, her face softening as she began to stroke the small ball of fluff.

It was a far more satisfactory response than the one she'd given by screaming profanity before running out of the house when learning the secret behind the walls of Wintercrest Manor. Satisfactory, but definitely not pleasing as it did nothing to clear the confusion that had descended upon her the moment he'd made the announcement about the ball.

"Little one," Edward said softly, "I thought you'd be excited. This will be your first party of the season. There is no reason to be nervous. Do you remember the night of your celebratory dinner upon your graduation? You were introduced to Lord and Lady Eddinberg? Did they frighten you in any way?"

She looked a bit surprised at the question but shook her head. "No, sir. They were... were nice."

Edward smiled. "Yes, they are and they are also the couple hosting this ball. You weren't uncomfortable that night, so tell me why you seem so frightened now."

Lucy's gaze flitted from his to Louisa's, to the man sitting beside her before dropping to her pet on her lap before she answered softly, "I-I don't want to be the source of amusement, sir."

Edward wasn't the only one who seemed taken aback by that statement. Lucas shot him a glance and then focused on Lucy.

"What on earth do you mean by that?"

She turned to face him, the question seeming to allow her to shake off the shroud of despondency Edward's question caused to descend on her.

“Don’t mock me, sir,” she said, “You know exactly what I mean.”

Lucas shook his head. “I assure you that I don’t, Lucille. It might come as a surprise to you, but none of us are mind readers.”

Louisa proved otherwise as she said, “You think Papa meant that the seamstress will be making you... us, the same sort of dresses we wear now, don’t you?”

Lucy nodded. “I-I don’t want to go to any party dressed like a little girl. I know I said that clothes don’t matter... but...”

“A ball is different, is that what you’re trying to say, Lucy?” Lucas asked gently.

At her nod and her blush, Edward smiled to reassure his ward. “Lucille, you will have your choice of gown.” He saw her look of surprise and continued, “Within reason of course. I want my girls to feel beautiful, though I don’t believe either of you need fancy dresses for that. I’m aware that you are courting, Lucille,” he said, and saw her dart a glance to Lucas and her flush deepen to that of a rose in full bloom. “It might surprise you, little one, that even a stodgy man such as myself understands that you deserve to have a wonderful, magical night before you become an old married woman like my little lady here.”

Louisa reached up to pat Edward’s cheek. “Papa, you are far from boring, and I’m not old!”

Edward laughed and gave her forehead a quick kiss. “Of course you aren’t, little one. I simply meant that your sister has yet to join in the bliss of matrimony.”

With a smile, Louisa turned to her twin. “We shall make sure that the seamstress fashions you the most beautiful gown in the world, isn’t that right, Papa?”

“It is,” Edward agreed, pleased to see the sadness dissipate on Lucy’s face and the smile that took its place.

“Thank you, sir,” Lucy said. “The ball sounds like a lovely idea.”

Edward wasn't surprised in the least to find his friend pushing his advantage of being a participant in the exchange.

"I'd be honored to escort you, Lucille," he said.

Lucy seemed surprised and when she turned to look at him, Edward understood the thought of having an escort had never occurred to her.

"Will... do you think Char... I mean, Headmaster Lloyds will attend?" Lucy asked.

Since her head was turned toward him, Edward knew she wasn't aware that her question had the muscle in Lucas' jaw clenching as he gritted his teeth. His reaction had Edward stifling his grin. The man was as besotted with her as was the newly announced headmaster.

"I'm sure he shall be, Lucille," Edward said, having already requested the Eddinberg's extend him an invitation though he saw no benefit in admitting doing so.

Lucas shook his head slowly, looking from the woman he desired to gape at Edward as if silently asking if the man knew he was basically offering up the professor on some sort of platter. Edward just grinned broader. As he'd told Lucas, the only victories worth winning were those requiring a well-planned attack.

"Sir, won't the four of us be going in the carriage together from here?" Lucy asked. Edward nodded, practically strangling on a chuckle as he saw her smile and turn her attention to his unsuspecting friend.

"Then we shall all be really escorting each other won't we? I wouldn't want to hurt Headmaster's Lloyds' feelings. I'm sure you understand, Lord Huntington," she said. "Isn't that the proper thing to do, Sir?" she asked Edward.

Make that a well-planned attack as well as the ability to alter a perfectly executed campaign to overcome the occasional setback. "I suppose that will be fine, Lucille," he answered, knowing his friend would certainly not appreciate his concession. "It is kind of you to not wish to hurt either Charles or Lucas' feelings. I'm certain that they shall both

make it a point to entertain you at the ball.” He saw Lucy’s face split into the happiest smile he’d seen since Cleo had become hers. He found he couldn’t help but tease his friend just a bit more. “Regardless, Lucille, I feel certain that the moment you enter the ball, you will find many an admirer anxious to ensure your dance card is full.”

When Lucy actually giggled at that possibility, Edward considered his announcement to finally be the success he’d sought.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “I gladly accept the invitation.” Edward couldn’t hold back his laugh. Louisa giggled as well, experience teaching her exactly who did the accepting in their family.

“You are welcome, little one,” Edward said, and then continued, “I want to remind you both. Any naughtiness between now and the time of the ball and you will not only have your bottoms spanked, you will stay home. And though I’m sure I don’t need to point out, I also expect both my girls to be on their absolute best behavior during the ball. Don’t make me regret allowing either of you to play dress-up and attend the party by having to lift your new dresses and spank you.” Both girls looked at each other and then at him, both nodding and answering in perfect unison.

“Yes, sir.”



LUCAS SMILED, as he witnessed the way of twins. He was disappointed that Lucille had not immediately consented to his offer of being her formal escort. Ever since the night that Charles had told Edward that after discussing it with Lucy, he would be pleased to accept the position of headmaster, it seemed he was around even more often. Though it continued to annoy him, seeing Lucy smile he knew he couldn’t be angry with her. She was obviously quite excited and he knew he wouldn’t be the only man aware of her petite beauty once she arrived at the ball. He looked down to see that Cleo was

climbing onto his lap, her little nails poking through the fabric of his pants. He gently plucked her off and smiled. Even Lucy's little pet didn't bother to hide her claws.

CHAPTER 12

Monday found both girls in the library, where several bolts of fabric were draped over every available piece of furniture and the game table's surface was covered with so many patterns that the forest green felt was completely obliterated from view. Mrs. Bremmer sighed for the hundredth time as both girls seemed quite incapable of making any sort of final decision. She heard the seamstress going over the same ideas she had already covered twice. Finally, Anna clapped her hands loudly to get their attention.

"Girls! Unless you want to either go naked to the party or wear a dress you currently own, I suggest you decide what you want. Mrs. Palmer and her staff will not have enough time to make one dress let alone two if this continues," Anna said.

Lucy stared aghast at the housekeeper for an instant, actually imagining walking into a formal ball wearing nothing but her birthday suit. When she heard a giggle, she snapped her head around to look at her twin.

"I'm sorry, but you should have seen your face," Louisa said not sounding the least bit apologetic. "Don't be so gullible, Lucy," Louisa giggled again. "Papa wouldn't allow either of us out of the house without the proper clothing. But, I'm afraid Mrs. Bremmer is right. You choose first and then I'll pick," Louisa offered.

Feeling a tad bit foolish, Lucy perused the choices again, finally picking up a bolt of sapphire-blue fabric and then saw her sister's expression. Draping a length over her arm, she

held it up against Louisa. “This is perfect for you, Louisa,” Lucy said, knowing it was the one her sister favored. Louisa smiled brightly and Lucy knew she had made the right decision. This was a very special night for her sister. Lucy knew Louisa had grown accustomed to her life and that she even found happiness in it. However, she was seldom out of the house and Lucy wanted her to remember the ball for a long time. If anyone deserved to have a magical night, it was her twin. Spying a bolt practically hidden beneath another, Lucy walked across the room and pulled it free only to have the cloth immediately taken from her.

“Most definitely not,” Mrs. Bremmer said, her gray head shaking. “Red is not a color for young girls,” she said and handed the fabric to the seamstress and gave her a look that Lucy was all too familiar with.

“I brought a wide range of choices upon Lord Wintercrest’s request,” the seamstress said appearing completely unfazed by Anna’s disapproving scowl.

“Regardless, I’m positive that Lord Wintercrest would not appreciate either of his girls wearing red unless he placed the color on them himself. Choose something else, Lucille.”

Lucy flushed, knowing exactly what part of her anatomy could easily be turned as red as the silk fabric. She couldn’t help but wonder if Mrs. Palmer had any idea that veiled reference had Lucy instantly visualizing that the only red she’d be wearing would be on her spanked bottom unless she made another choice. Giving the red silk a final glance, Lucy reluctantly turned toward the remaining bolts.

“It was a very pretty color though. It reminds me of the fine red wines that are in the cellar,” Louisa said, moving to stand beside Lucy. “Here, take the blue, Lucy. I’ll choose something else.”

“No, Louisa, that one is for you,” Lucy said. She saw Cleo playing among some ribbons that had fallen to the floor and bent to pick her up. The cat mewed at her in distress. “Shh, it’s all right,” Lucy crooned softly as she gently removed a ribbon that clung to one of Cleo’s paws. “There now, perhaps you’d

best play in your basket.” After placing her pet on the pillow in her bed, Lucy straightened and smiled. Walking to a bolt that was leaning against the fireplace, she made her decision. Stroking the green fabric, she said, “What about this?”

Louisa clapped her hands. “Oh, it’s beautiful. It matches Cleo’s eyes perfectly!”

Mrs. Bremmer sighed, obviously relieved that the decision had finally been made. Or at least the fabric choices. Exactly how that cloth was going to appear proved yet another dilemma.

“Child, are you trying to put me in an early grave?” Anna said, plucking yet another pattern from Lucy’s hand. “You will not be wearing a gown with such a low neckline or one that has no sleeves. How on earth do you expect to keep it up?”

“I assure you, Mrs. Bremmer, my designs and my staff’s tailoring would assure the young lady would not be... shall we say, in danger of exposure?”

“Let’s say that neither of my girls will be seen in anything scandalous. They are good girls and their clothing will reflect that even if I have to thread my needle and stitch up their gowns myself.”

Lucy suddenly feared she’d do exactly that. Looking toward her sister for support, she was surprised when Louisa shared the pattern she’d chosen.

“Louisa, your Papa said you could pick whatever you wanted. Why do you want such a simple, dress?” Lucy asked, after seeing the final sketch Louisa handed to the seamstress. The dress seemed rather plain and unadorned, unlike the ball gowns that were the current fashion.

Louisa gave her sister a smile. “This is what I want, Lucy. I would feel silly and uncomfortable in a fussy dress. I want to make Papa proud of me,” Louisa said, and then showed the first sign of hesitancy, looking at the pattern again. “Why do... do you think it will be ugly?”

Lucy smiled and gave Louisa a hug. “Of course not. It will be a lovely dress, Louisa,” she assured her. “You make

anything you wear beautiful. I know he will be happy with your choice.” Sighing, she looked down at the papers in her hand wondering which would Lucas prefer. When she realized whose name had instantly popped into her head, she shook her own. She must have thought of Lord Huntington because Louisa had just mentioned Edward. Nevertheless, she still had absolutely no clue as to which pattern to choose.

“Louisa, will you help me with mine? Which of these do you think would suit me?”

Louisa smiled and after asking for the loan of Mrs. Palmer’s pencil and a piece of paper, Lucy watched as her sister sketched a design that took the best features from three separate patterns and combined them into a new design.

“Louisa, that’s perfect!” Lucy enthused. “Maybe just add a few more things,” she continued, taking the pencil and making a few final notations before passing the sketch to Mrs. Palmer. Lucy was thrilled as the dress was far more fashionable than the drop-waist dresses she wore every day. It had sleeves but they would fall off her shoulders and while the neckline was scooped, it wasn’t as daring as some of the other designs had been. She could practically see the dress in her mind and couldn’t wait to try it on and feel like a grown woman once again.

Lucy was very pleased when Anna nodded her approval for the new pattern. The seamstress took her final measurements, amazed that the girls were not only identical in appearance, but were also the exact same size.

“Though it is a very limited timeframe, Lord Wintercrest’s generosity has allowed me to hire an additional helper. I’ll return with the gowns for the first fitting in two days’ time. Even if alterations are necessary afterwards, we will have plenty of time before the ball. As her assistant gathered the supplies she’d brought, the seamstress hugged the twins.

“You will be the belles of the ball, girls,” Mrs. Palmer said. The twins smiled and thanked her, as Mrs. Bremmer led her from the house before sending her charges to the table for their luncheon.

“Don’t make a fuss,” she warned both as the three made their way upstairs after the last bite of the pudding Cook had prepared for dessert had been eaten. “You will both take a nap and be grateful for the rest. I swear if I didn’t have a million things to do, I’d be crawling into my own.”

Lucy laughed and realized that for the first time, any trepidation she’d felt when with the housekeeper had disappeared. She wasn’t foolish enough to think that the woman had miraculously changed her ways and would never again pull her tawse out of her pocket to lay it across Lucy’s bare bottom, but Lucy now saw her as a woman who truly cared for them and not just as a servant doing Edward’s bidding.

CHAPTER 13

Lucy stood at the top of the stairs. Her hair was piled on top of her head and secured with jewel headed pins. Molly had spent an inordinate amount of time choosing just the right tresses of hair to pull free to curl down her neck to frame her face.

“Go ahead, Miss Lucy,” Molly whispered from a few feet behind her. “You look so beautiful. Have a wonderful time at the ball.”

“Thank you, Molly,” Lucy said. She felt incredibly nervous as she placed one hand on the banister and lifted the heavy length of her gown with the other. Taking a deep breath, she took the first step and then another, carefully descending the long staircase. Seeing the people waiting at the bottom, she hesitated. As if sensing her presence, Lucas was the first to lift his eyes.

Lucy froze, one foot planted on a stair, the other hovering above the next tread. Suddenly she couldn't breathe, much less move. Hair the color of winter wheat gleamed as if touched by the light of a full-moon and his blue eyes darkened to that of a cloudless midnight sky. But it was the slow curling of his lips that had her heart beating so hard in her chest she wondered how it didn't break through her skin. She felt her cheeks heating as if he were touching her though he remained several feet away.

“I didn't think it possible you could be more beautiful, but tonight you are absolutely stunning, Miss Furniss,” he said softly, bowing slightly.

At his voice, the other three people turned as one. Lucy's eyes immediately found her sister. Louisa wore a gown of sapphire blue that enhanced her eyes which shone with happiness. Her blonde hair had been curled and flowed around her delicate shoulders like a curtain of gold. For a moment, the sisters had only eyes for each other.

"You look just like Mother," they said in unison. Their smiles and giggles broke Lucy's paralysis, though Lucy felt tears prick her eyes with the memory. Blinking rapidly to keep them at bay, she felt something pressed into her hand. Lucas had climbed the stairs to offer her his handkerchief.

"Don't cry, little one. Your parents would be so very proud of you and your sister."

"Thank you," Lucy said softly, dabbing at the corners of her eyes before she finished descending the staircase, Lucas at her side. Seeing the tilt of her sister's head and the confused look on her face as her gaze swept from the hem of her gown to the neckline, Lucy looked down to see what could possibly be causing the crinkle of Louisa's nose. Seeing nothing out of place, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"What happened to the pearls? And the flounces?" Louisa asked, gesturing to Lucy's neckline and wrists.

"Oh, I removed them," Lucy said, running a finger along the unadorned neckline of her dress, before tucking the handkerchief she still clutched into the fitted cuff of her sleeve which was no longer covered in several layers of lace. "You were right. They were just... a bit too fancy."

"I may not know much about fashion, but I know this," Lucas said with a smile. "You have no need for another thing. You are the picture of absolute perfection."

Lucy felt her tummy fluttering and the heat beginning in her breasts moving up to color her face. She found she had no words.

"And, I must say, your sewing skills have improved greatly," Lucas said.

Lucy rolled her eyes though she was grateful for the teasing as it finally allowed her to relax. “I can’t take all the credit. Mrs. Bremmer was kind enough to help me.”

“All I can say is Lucas is correct. You are truly stunning, Lucille,” he said. “I’m proud to have the most beautiful bride in the world as well as her enchanting sister with me tonight,” Edward said.

Lucy thanked him, admitting to herself that she was impressed with both men’s appearance. They were wearing their very best evening attire, their shirts were perfectly pressed, the white looking even starker beneath the tapestry of their vests. The trousers and coats of their tuxedos were an ebony black. Both men looked incredibly attractive.

“You look quite handsome, sir,” Lucy said, smiling as she stepped forward to brush a bit of lint from Lucas’ lapel. He smiled and captured her hand, holding it close over his heart. She felt her own heart leap and her smile faltered at the look in his eyes. She pulled her hand away and slowly opened her fingers. A few strands of white lay on her palm.

“Cleo?” she asked, smiling as he grinned.

“Yes, it seems you are not the only kitten capturing my attention,” he said, and she felt the flush grow hotter and the butterfly wings flap faster in her belly.

Louisa’s giggle had Lucy turning to see Edward smiling as if it were very entertaining watching his friend. Lucy couldn’t help but smile back when she realized that she was finding the attention quite captivating as well.

“Come, Lucas,” Edward said, clapping him on the back. “We’ve kept Henri waiting long enough.”



LUCAS RELUCTANTLY NODDED as he accepted his coat that Edward offered. Speaking low so that only Edward could hear, he said, “Truth be told, I’d much rather skip this silly dance. I

could keep Lucy here or, even better, take her to Hunter's Ridge."

Edward laughed loudly and slapped his shoulder. "First of all, Lucy has earned the right to attend her first ball and you will not be denying her the pleasure. Secondly, I do believe that you are only now beginning to fear that perhaps the charm you've always taken for granted might not be enough to claim my ward's undying affection."

Lucas shoved his arm into a sleeve and glanced over to where the twins were quietly listening to Mrs. Bremmer.

"As you said before, Edward, this is not a game, so I'd ask you not to make light of it. I'm not about to sound retreat any time soon."

Edward only laughed again as Lucas finished pulling on his coat and moved toward the women and Mrs. Bremmer.

Anna motioned to Molly who stepped forward, handing the housekeeper some gloves.

"You look lovely, girls," she said, holding out a pair of gloves to Louisa before turning to offer another to Lucy. "Your choices in gowns were perfect as both are beautiful. I am proud of both of you." Accepting the cloak Molly still held as if unsure whom she should offer it to, Anna passed it to Lucas who smiled and draped it across Lucy's shoulders.

After giving both girls a final look, Anna nodded. "Now, go along and I hope you both have a wonderful time" Almost as if realizing she was being rather sweet, she wagged a finger and added, "But remember what I said. You represent Wintercrest Manor. Don't give me cause to add a blush to the cheeks beneath those pretty gowns."

Lucas grinned as the cheeks on the women's lovely faces colored.

"Thank you, ma'am, we'll behave," the girls chorused together.

Lucas offered his arm to Lucy, pleased that she didn't even hesitate to smile up at him as she placed her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“I confess I feel a bit like Cinderella,” Lucy said, as Lucas guided her down the stairs to the waiting carriage.

“I’m honored to play the part of your Prince Charming even if for far too short a time,” Lucas said, as he took her arm to help her into the carriage. She hesitated, looking back at him, and he could have kicked himself for reminding her that he wasn’t the only man vying for that coveted role. Forcing himself to smile, he gestured toward where a slender foot was poised on the step to the carriage. “Ah, my dear, I fear you have forgotten your slippers,” he teased, pleased to see glance to her feet and then at him, smiling as she acknowledged the velvet, emerald green boots were definitely not made of glass.

Once she was settled on the seat opposite Edward and Louisa, he entered to sit beside her. Once the carriage door was closed, Henri climbed onto his seat and flicked the reins. The carriage lurched and began to roll forward.

“Papa,” Louisa said, as she laid her hand on his arm, “I hope our carriage doesn’t turn into a pumpkin at midnight.”

Lucy looked at Lucas and at his grin, she allowed the giggle that she couldn’t suppress to bubble from her throat. Lucas’ chuckle joined hers, making her laugh even more delightful. While she attempted to catch her breath, Lucas explained that Louisa’s comment was just further proof of how connected twins were as Lucy, too, had just been speaking of the fairy-tale.

Edward bent to kiss his wife’s forehead. “You have no need of a pumpkin, my love. Consider me as your fairy Godpapa as I have no intention of letting my little princess out of my sight. I promise you will have a safe journey home, my dear.”

Louisa giggled and Lucy smiled, and when the carriage hit a rut, bouncing her into Lucas, he was extremely pleased that she didn’t feel the need to pull away.



WHEN THEY ARRIVED at the Eddinberg estate, Lucy and Louisa's chatter ended as both were awed into silence. The drive was lined with hundreds of candles and every window seemed to glow as if to welcome them. The girls had the curtains at the windows pushed aside as they took in all that they could. As Henri drove the carriage closer to the front door, Edward gently pulled his wife's hand from the curtain. Lucy found her fingers taken by Lucas, his hand totally engulfing hers as he followed suit.

"Girls," Edward said softly, but capturing their attentions instantly.

Lucille expected him to encourage them to behave and no doubt remind them of the consequences if they disobeyed.

"I want you both to know how honored I am to escort you this evening. You have both worked so hard and I am very proud of you both."

Though Lucy knew she most likely should have learned by now that Edward was constantly capable of doing the unexpected, she was both surprised and pleased by his praise.

"Thank you, Papa," Louisa said and slipped her hand into his.

Lucy looked at Lucas and then at her guardian. "Thank you, sir, for everything. I shall do nothing to bring you shame," she promised.

Edward smiled and reached out to pat her hand. "I know you shan't, little one," he said again, then looked between the twins. "You've both have changed a great deal since you arrived at Wintercrest. Now, let us go see if this ball is anything like the one in your books, shall we?"

The girls both nodded and were soon being escorted up the stairs to the veranda. The front doors were standing open, flanked by tall candelabras and urns of flowers that filled the air with their sweet scent. Lucy was extremely nervous, and felt the flutters in her stomach multiply the closer they got to the door. Despite her dress and the compliments she had received, she felt far more like an insecure young girl than a

grown-up woman. Stepping inside and joining the reception line, Lucy began to tremble. The constant murmur of the crowd seemed to disappear though Lucy could see lips moving as they conversed, she simply could no longer hear!

“Lucy, what’s wrong?”

Startled, but realizing that she couldn’t be deaf if she heard Lucas’ voice, she felt her face flush as she shook her head, grateful when Lucas didn’t push her to answer. Instead, he placed his free hand over hers and gave her fingers a squeeze.

“There is no reason to be frightened, little one. I would never let anything harm you,” he said, the very thought of her being injured physically or emotionally stirring an instinct he’d never felt before threaten to overwhelm him. Her face was far too pale despite his promise and he gave an exaggerated sigh and added, “Though by the time we finally greet our host and hostess, I may be far too old and feeble to waltz the loveliest woman here around the dance floor.”

His grin had her relaxing a tad, his words making her smile and realize that perhaps the guests’ conversations were no longer quite as audible due to the strains of music she became aware of floating through the air. Looking about, she turned her face up to his.

“I know you’re teasing, but you may be right. There are an awful lot of people here, aren’t there? I hear the music but can’t even see where it is coming from.”

Lucas tilted his head before answering. “I promise you shall see every violinist, cellist, violist, pianist and flute player as you twirl by. When you need to rest, we shall enjoy a repast of the delicious foods being offered. And if you’d like a breath of fresh air, I’ll escort you out onto the terrace to enjoy the gardens.”

Lucy sighed as they took another step forward. “I wish I wasn’t so short.”

“Why on earth would you wish that?”

“Because I can’t see anything but people and you can see all of that.”

Lucas' laughter had some of the people around them turning to see what was so amusing and Lucy blushing, wishing she hadn't said anything. She attempted to pull her hand free and only then realized instead of a single hand lightly lying on her escort's arm as was proper, she'd had fingers of both of her hands clinging to his arm. Her effort was thwarted when Lucas simply tightened his hold over hers.

"I'm not laughing at you, little one," he said. "And while I am taller than you, we'd have to pull another book from the library shelves to find the giant I'd need to be to see all that. It's just that I've been to a few balls in my life and it's been my experience that musicians will be seated on a small balcony above the dance floor, we shall find tables laden with food, and these events are attended by a great many people milling about"—he bent down to speak quietly so only she could hear—"some having applied a tad too much cologne assuring that I, for one, will need those gulps of fresh air quite often." Grinning, his hand lifted to pull a tendril of her hair off her cheek. "As for you, little one, you not only are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, your size is absolute perfection. But, any time you wish to see above the crowd, simply ask and I shall be more than happy to lift you up."

Lucy could not blame the press of people for the warmth that suddenly swept through her. Not when that heat was caused by the thought of being lifted into the arms of the man standing beside her, knowing that he'd keep her safe, that she could lie her head against his shoulder and wrap her arms about his neck.

Time seemed to stand still, the crowd disappearing as he gazed down at her. Her heart stuttered and her blood raced through her veins at the look in his eyes. She felt as if he could see far more than her appearance... as if he could see deep inside her. Not a single word came to her and she'd never been more grateful for her guardian when it was his voice that had Lucas breaking contact and turning forward again. When Lucy felt her legs shaking, his response of another squeeze of his fingers told her that Lord Huntington was indeed a man who saw far more than one might wish.

Taking a deep breath, she watched as Edward shook Lord Eddinberg's hand, kissed his wife on her cheek and then turned to present Louisa. Louisa dropped into a perfect curtsy and accepted the kiss Lord Eddinberg gave her cheek.

"You are even more beautiful since the last time I saw you," Eddinberg said approvingly. "Edward, your little one does you quite proud." Lucy saw her sister blush with their host's approval. She also saw that the moment she was free to do so, Louisa slipped her hand back into her husband's.

"Thank you," Edward said with a smile. "Your own little lady looks like an angel this evening."

Lucy gasped softly at the address Edward had used and watched Lady Eddinberg smile and drop her own curtsy, her cheeks also flushing as she smiled at her guest and thanked him softly. Could she be like Louisa? Were there other women attending the ball who were child-brides as her twin was? Before she could look more closely at the women around her, her attention was captured by her host speaking, feeling her face heat at his question.

"Don't tell me that your sweet little ward did something so naughty that you didn't see fit to allow her to attend our party, Edward," Eddinberg said.

Lucas' chuckle snapped Lucy's gaze to him. "It's not funny! He thinks I'm... naughty!"

Lucas' eyes shone in amusement. "You must be smaller than I thought as he obviously can't see you there," he said pulling her around from behind him. "Of course, if you don't sheath those claws, you'll be proving him correct," he teased before, with a tilt of his head, he silently instructed her to listen as the conversation continued in front of them.

"I had so looked forward to seeing her again and hearing her progress. I've already had to reassure a gentleman that she was expected, and I can't bear the thought of disappointing him. Your headmaster has been wearing a hole in my floors awaiting her arrival," Lord Eddinberg chuckled.

Lucy shot Lucas a gaze when she heard his intake of breath only to see he no longer appeared quite so amused. She wasn't about to comment on that fact as she'd totally forgotten that Charles was not only going to attend, but had obviously arrived ahead of them.

"It seems that Charles is quite infatuated and has done his best to consume all of Lucille's free time," Edward said. "I assure you, sir, that no one has a proper claim as yet. Lucille was very excited with your invitation and is quite looking forward to enjoying her first social event."

Edward stepped to one side and Eddinberg smiled seeing the subject of their discussion clutching the arm of a huge man.

As Lucas stepped forward, Lucy attempted to step back, seeing that she was next in line to offer her greeting. Lucas bent close to her.

"Remember, Lucy, Cinderella only had her fairy Godmother to help her. You, kitten, not only have me, you have the strength of a lioness."

She looked up at him and saw his jaw had relaxed, his smile was genuine, and the gentleness in his eyes calming.

"Make Cleo proud," he said softly.

When he stepped back, offering her hand to Edward to take, Lucy lifted her head and straightened her shoulders. And when Edward turned her toward their host and hostess, Lucy smiled and dropped into a curtsy before rising to accept the kisses Lord Eddinberg pressed to each of her cheeks.

"You look lovely, my dear," Lord Eddinberg said.

"I'm so glad you could come," his wife said, giving Lucy a welcoming smile.

"It's very kind of you to invite me."

Lady Eddinberg smiled and reached out to give Lucy a quick hug. "I think we're going to become good friends. And, just in case we don't have time to talk later, please have a very good time."

“Thank you, I’m sure I shall,” Lucy said and realized she meant it.



AFTER LUCAS GAVE his own greeting, the four were free of the reception line and stepped into a large room that had been cleared for dancing. Edward watched as the girls took in everything, their eyes wide with delight. Several servants offered trays of tidbits as others served glasses of wine. If Lucy seemed surprised when he plucked two glasses off a tray and presented one to Louisa, she managed to suppress it. He grinned, thinking that she had probably imagined being offered a glass of milk. Taking his cue from Edward, understanding that this was a special evening, Lucas soon had a glass in each hand and turned to offer one to Lucille.

When his friend’s smile dropped from his face, Edward turned to see Charles walking toward Lucille. The man’s face showed the depth of his desire for the young woman. Edward watched as Charles reached out and drew Lucille into his arms, and when he dropped a kiss to her cheek, he was a bit shocked at the man’s arrogance. However, when he saw her blush and then smile, as well as saw Lucas’ glare, he simply grinned and didn’t step forward to interrupt. This was a game that needed to be played through to its ending. He’d only step in to referee if absolutely necessary

Lucille was soon dancing with Charles as Lucas stood with two glasses in his hands. He wasn’t aware of Edward until he heard him chuckle. “Don’t tell me the hunter has lost the edge,” Edward teased, as both of them looked across the dance floor as Lucy was twirled and moved about the room.

Lucas lifted the first glass to his lips and quickly emptied it. As he began to sip from the second, his lips turned up in a smile. “Oh, believe me, Edward, this hunter never loses the scent of his prey,” Lucas said, and put the empty glasses onto a nearby table.

Edward and Louisa watched as he practically stalked out onto the floor just as the music ended the dance. He was soon holding Lucille a bit too close and informing Charles that he was sure he had this next dance. Edward and Louisa watched her sister's face and saw her flush. She looked beautiful and unsure of what was happening.

"Seems, I was too long in line, Edward," Lord Eddinberg said as he and his wife joined the couple. "Your lovely young ward needs no introduction at all." Edward smiled and shook his head. He pulled his wife closer to his side. "It appears she is going to ruffle quite a few roosters' feathers before the night is done," he added as additional men were taking advantage of the fact that Charles and Lucas had allowed the subject of their attention to remain unclaimed.

"This is exactly why I plucked my little lady straight from her father's lap," Edward said, and bent to kiss her gently. "I will never regret claiming her as mine before another man could even set his eyes upon her." Louisa blushed and smiled as he wrapped both arms around her and pulled her against his chest.

Eddinberg clapped him on the back. "As did I, my boy," he said with a chuckle, and pulled his own smiling wife onto the floor.

"I'm glad you did, Papa," Louisa said with a contented sigh. "I don't think I would have liked having men fight over me like that," she giggled and pointed toward the floor. Lucy was standing with her hands on her hips, shaking her head as Lucas and Charles were obviously exchanging heated words.

Edward grinned and shook his head. He watched as a man he knew was a prominent barrister bowed to Lucy and then observed in amusement as his ward nodded and was soon being whisked away from the two rivals. He heard Louisa giggle again at the looks on Charles and Lucas' faces when they realized that Lucy had tired of their discussion over her dance card by choosing an altogether different man.

"I fear it will be a long night," Edward said as he pulled Louisa onto the floor.

“But, Papa,” she said as he started the dance, “it won’t be boring.”

“Too true, my love, too true,” Edward chuckled, and danced his bride around the room.



LUCY’S MIND was whirling as she was expertly guided to weave among the other couples dancing around them. She had not stopped dancing from the moment Charles had led her out onto the dance floor. She had lost sight of both Charles and Lucas when she had agreed to be whisked away from their argument. Knowing it improper, she tried to hide her smile of amusement. Mr. Birkenstone, her current partner, seemed very pleased to have been able to tempt her into a dance. As he twirled her past Lord and Lady Wintercrest, he tilted his head and gave them a nod. Lucy saw her sister smile and returned it.

Some of her earlier fear had dissipated with the sights and sounds that surrounded them. As they once again danced past Charles and Lucas, Lucy smiled and admitted to herself that while Lucas presently looked a trifle bit cranky, he too had a part in making her feel as if perhaps she did belong here after all. When the music drew to a close, Edward walked toward them.

“Good evening, Nathaniel,” he said as he shook the man’s hand. “I see you’ve managed to draw my ward away from both Charles and Lucas.” Nathaniel bowed his head in acknowledgement.

“Only because both were fools to leave such a prize unattended, sir,” he said with a chuckle before turning to smile at Louisa. “Louisa, you are absolutely charming this evening. Is your papa ensuring that your own dance card is filled or might I have the privilege of escorting you for this next dance?”

Lucy watched with interest, his request presented in a way that left no doubt that the guest list did indeed include adults

familiar with the lifestyle that her guardian and her sister shared. She saw Louisa blush, not responding to the man's question verbally, instead, looking to her husband. Edward gave her a smile, even as he placed her hand into Nathaniel's offered one.

"I'd love to," Louisa answered, now that she had been given permission. Edward took Lucy's hand in his, and as soon as the music started for the next dance, the two couples joined the men and women swirling about the floor.

"Are you enjoying yourself, little one?" Edward asked, looking down into the flushed face of his ward. "Is the party meeting all your expectations?" Lucy flushed, and again knew why her sister had fallen in love with this man. He was extremely charming and attentive to her, and though she knew he wouldn't hesitate to turn her over his knee and spank her when he felt she needed it, tonight she knew he was truly concerned about her happiness.

"It is lovely, sir," Lucy answered sweetly, seeing her sister laughing at something that Mr. Birkenstone was saying. "I... I was a bit nervous," she admitted, and saw his acknowledgement in his eyes.

"You expected to see little girls in short dresses and bows aplenty, perhaps?" Edward teased, causing her cheeks to heat. When she nodded, he pulled her a bit closer. "Even papas know their little ones enjoy a bit of dress-up, Lucille. We may prefer to keep our girls cloistered in our homes, but we realize that isolation from all the world only tends to stifle contentment," Edward said softly. "We all adore the women who have honored us by becoming our wives, Lucille, be they dressed in fashionable finery attending a ball or dressed in frilly dresses attending to their papas in their homes."

Lucy nodded, and realized her understanding of this lifestyle had grown. No longer did she think of her sister as being denied happiness. Having seen Louisa blossom over the past few weeks, she had discovered that this was exactly where her twin belonged. She knew that Louisa was still held to both a structured routine and a strict set of rules that were far more restrictive than even her own. She had heard her

sister cry as she promised her papa that she would be his good girl, even as he spanked her bottom in their room down the corridor from her own. Despite the sound of her sister's pain as she was being chastised, Lucy knew she was extremely happy.

She flushed slightly, acknowledging to herself that she had heard other sounds as well—moans of pleasure, and cries of passion that had caused her skin to pebble with goosebumps and had her wishing to have a man cause her to make those same sounds.

“I know, sir,” Lucy finally said. “I know you love Louisa and I will always thank you for that. She is happy, and I understand better now.”

Edward smiled and pulled her closer in order to bend to kiss the top of her head. Lucy smiled at the fatherly gesture and felt loved and protected. “Thank you, sir,” she said. “Thank you for being my guardian and for helping me to find myself.”

“You don't need to thank me, little one,” he said hoarsely, “It has been my pleasure, to watch you take this journey, Lucille, and I am deeply honored to have you under my wing.”

Lucy felt her eyes sting as they filled with tears. She had fought so hard to prove she was an independent, modern woman. She had fought to deny that deep inside her heart, what she truly desired was to find some man exactly like the one holding her. Despite her barriers and denial, it seemed both her father and her guardian had been correct all along. She and Louisa were identical, in even this.

“Don't be sad, Lucy,” Edward said softly. “This is a night for joy.” The music ended and he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and then grinned when seeing she'd already pulled Lucas' from beneath her cuff. She smiled and then giggled as his eyebrow quirked. “Seems your collection is growing, little one,” he teased. “Now, dry your eyes and make those two”—he turned her to see that both Charles and Lucas were pushing their way through the crowds toward them— “make them

prove that they deserve one of the most special little girls in the world.”

Lucy smiled and impulsively lifted herself onto her tiptoes and brushed a kiss across Edward’s cheek. “Yes, sir,” she said, and then giggled before she tucked the small cloth away again. “This is one order I must say that I am truly looking forward to obeying.”

Edward’s loud laugh echoed about the room, causing many a head to turn to look at the two of them.

CHAPTER 14

The façade of the ball being one from a childhood fairy-tale was peeled away a few hours later as Louisa and Lucille climbed the stairs to the second floor. Lady Eddinberg's maid had given them directions where they might go to freshen themselves. As they reached the top of the stairs and turned into the corridor, they saw a couple a few feet in front of them, the girl's upper arm being held by her companion. Before the sisters even heard the girl speak, they knew she was in some sort of trouble.

"Please, sir, please! I'm sorry. I promise I won't do it again. Please don't span... spank me," they heard the girl pleading softly.

The twins looked at each other and silently moved to the left side of the hall intending to slip past unnoticed. They'd not yet made it past when the man turned, his eyes finding the sisters.

"Ah, good evening, girls," he said as if he greeting them while holding a large wooden paddle in his free hand was perfectly normal.

Louisa spoke first, while Lucy's shocked stare moved between the man she instantly recognized and the beautiful young woman whose face had turned scarlet and was already showing traces of tears.

"Good evening, Pastor Reed," Louisa said, and gave him a curtsy. After straightening, she softly hissed, "Lucy."

Reminded of her manners, Lucy followed suit though her curtsy was wobbly and her greeting was a far softer and hesitant, “Sir.”

“Does your papa know you are running about upstairs, Louisa?” Reed asked.

Louisa nodded. “Oh, yes, sir, we are just going to... um, freshen ourselves. Papa is waiting downstairs,” she answered, her hand tightening its grip on her sister’s.

Lucy felt her face heat, the awkwardness of both the conversation and situation keeping her silent.

“Very well then,” Reed said. “See that you both return to him quickly, young lady. Heaven knows little girls are tempted to forget their places when allowed to run about without supervision. Being allowed to dress like women tends to foster naughtiness.” Though he was directing his comments to Louisa, his eyes were boldly raking up and down Lucy’s small body, causing her to shudder and catch her breath as he continued, “All of you girls should be properly attired instead of flaunting yourselves in these ridiculous gowns, thinking it acceptable to act as if you are adults.”

“But we—” Lucy began.

“Do not interrupt when I’m speaking, young lady,” Reed snapped.

Lucy saw that she wasn’t the only one to flush at the disgust evident in his voice, though she had to wonder if the other two were a bit angry as she was. He’d cut her off before she could remind him that they were actually all adults no matter what roles they played.

“I suggest you pay attention instead of attempting to interrupt your elders, young lady.”

Remembering Lucas’ words, Lucy forced herself to sheath her claws. The look in his eyes as well as the implement in his hand, helped in her decision that the safest route to take was to remain silent. “I apologize for interrupting,” she managed, her refrain in addressing him as sir again, a tribute to the lioness Lucas had spoken of.

Obviously her slight slipped right past the pastor as he gave a grunt before continuing. “As I was saying, perhaps if little Camilla were wearing a proper dress, she might have remembered it is not appropriate to flirt and flaunt herself when she believed her betrothed wasn’t looking. Acting like a common harlot is severe naughtiness that must be corrected just as severely.”

Reed paused for a moment, his gaze moving back to the culprit. “Lift your skirts, young lady,” he said almost casually.

Camilla moaned at his order, and Lucy could easily imagine the poor girl’s bottom clenching at both her shame and the thought of her impending punishment. She felt Louisa give her hand a squeeze as two pair of identical violet eyes watched as Camilla lifted her skirts and petticoats slowly.

“Please, Pastor Reed, please not here,” Camilla sobbed.

His answer was to lift the paddle and use it to motion for her to continue.

Camilla clenched her eyes shut as she obeyed and lifted her clothing to her waist. Louisa gave a soft gasp and Lucy a moan, instantly understanding the embarrassment the poor girl was feeling. Instead of the pretty silk bloomers the sisters had been allowed to wear, Camilla was totally naked beneath her petticoats.

Reed noticed their reaction and Lucy knew Camilla had as well, despite her attempt to hide behind her tightly closed eyes.

“I agree, it is shameful to have your drawers removed by your fiancé before he sends you upstairs to receive your lesson. Perhaps spending the rest of the evening with a hot, paddled bare bottom will remind Camilla to remember to whom she answers, so that she doesn’t make naughty choices. However, we are about to take care of that little mistake, aren’t we, little one?” he asked as he looked down at the young woman beside him.

“I-I didn’t think... I never meant to... I don’t want... please!” her voice trailed off with a soft sob beseeching him

with her eyes. His gaze never wavered from her, his intention crystal clear to all three girls. Camilla gave a final sob before she lowered her head, accepting that she was going to be thoroughly paddled for the mistake of not thinking through the choices she had made. Her voice was soft as she nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s correct. All of you girls must learn that every adult here accepts the responsibility of making sure all little girls behave properly. Fortunately, I have been tasked to give you the necessary reminder,” Reed said, and then turned and nodded to Louisa and Lucille. “Little Camilla’s is not the first bottom I’ll have reddened this evening and I suggest you heed my words, girls, before I have cause to add yours to the tally. Tend to your business and then immediately return downstairs,” he reminded them. “Now, I must ask that you excuse us, as I have a hard lesson to apply to Camilla’s very naughty bottom.”

The sisters watched as he turned to open the door behind him, pulling Camilla inside. The moment it shut behind the couple, Louisa sagged against the wall.

“Oh, sweet Lord,” she whispered, her hand at her throat. “I’m so happy that Papa rejected his request to court you, Lucy,” she said. “He has always frightened me. I... I think he likes spanking all of us far too much.”

Lucy felt her skin grow cold at her sister’s words. She had no knowledge that Pastor Reed had requested permission to call on her. The thought of going anywhere with the man made her feel ill. She had no personal experience with his discipline, but had witnessed the aftermath every Sunday after services. There were always at least a few women who deeply regretted their behavior by the time he returned them to their papas with very hot bottoms and apologetic demeanors. The man reminded her of another—Mr. Thorne. Edward had successfully removed the man from his position and as she jumped with the first crack of the paddle and the first cry from the unfortunate girl receiving it, she wondered if he’d consider Pastor Reed worthy of the position his congregants had placed him in.

She felt Louisa tugging on her hand and fled with her down the hall. They quickly attended to their necessities before returning to the hall. They both winced as they once more passed the door behind which they heard but did not mention the sounds of Camilla's voice raised as she begged for her punishment to stop and the horrid sound of the paddle cracking against her bare bottom, as her pleas were ignored and her chastisement given. Looking at each other, as if in silent agreement, the twins gave up any pretense of maturity, clinging onto each other's hand as they fled as fast as they could the length of the corridor, sliding around the corner to run down the stairs to the safety of the ballroom.



LUCAS SAW the twins returning from upstairs and began to walk toward them when Louisa dropped her sister's hand and dashed past him without so much as a glance. Perplexed, he turned his attention back to Lucy and the remainder of his smile immediately faded at the look on her face. She appeared even more frightened than she had before the ball had drawn her into its magic. He quickened his steps and was about to reach her when Charles appeared and took her arm.

“Are you ready for something to eat?” Charles asked, and then also grew concerned when he obviously saw the same shudder run through her that Lucas did as he joined the two at the foot of the staircase.

“What is it, Lucy? Are you ill?” Lucas asked. When he saw Louisa and Edward approaching as well, he suggested they move away from the stairs. Lucy didn't even seem aware when Charles pulled her into a small alcove.

Edward stepped forward and took Lucy's other arm. Charles wisely released his hold and stepped back into Lucas. He apologized, but Lucas didn't respond. He wished the man would leave him to attend to whatever was bothering Lucille. She had left the dance floor with a smile on her face, though it had disappeared upon her return.

“Lucy,” Edward said softly, drawing her close to him. “Louisa told me what happened. I’m sorry you had to witness Camilla’s chastisement tonight,” he said, as he lifted her chin to force her to look at him.

Even from a few steps away Lucas could see that her eyes were huge in her pale face, the violet depths showing a shimmer of unshed tears. His fingers clenched into a fist as the urge to hit something... or someone... who had caused Lucy pain flared within him. He listened as Edward, a man he’d known his entire life to be as hard and unyielding as a stone wall softened his tone, gently running his hand down Lucy’s back until the visible trembling eased.

Speaking even softer, he said, “It’s unfortunate, but little one, you do know that misbehavior is simply not tolerated. It is a treat to be allowed to attend a party and Camilla knew the consequences of being naughty. I wish she had made different choices but instead she chose to test her fiancé’s tolerance and discovered it definitely did not include allowing her to be disobedient and disrespectful to those around her. We both know she deserves to have her bottom heated don’t we?”

Lucas wanted nothing more than to take Lucy into his arms and offer her protection from her obvious distress. He forced himself to remain still, despite wanting to suggest to Charles that it would be best he disappear from what Lucas considered a matter best served by family members—and himself, of course. Seeing that Louisa was also looking distressed, Lucas extended his arm and she stepped closer to him so that he could draw her to his side. Lucas was relieved when Lucy finally spoke.

“No,” Lucy said as she looked up at her guardian.

“Lucille, I thought you’d come to understand that there are consequences to—”

“Oh, yes,” Lucy said, not even seeming to realize she’d just interrupted her guardian.

Lucas was rather amazed that Edward let the rudeness go and then was shocked when Lucy stomped her foot before shaking her head. Not wishing her to receive the same fate as

whoever this Camilla was, Lucas said, “Breathe, Lucy. Take some deep breaths and then tell us what had you looking as if you were going to faint.”

For the first time since she’d returned, Lucy seemed to actually see him. Nodding and giving him a very shaky smile, she did as he suggested, taking a moment to simply breathe and compose herself.

“Better?” Edward asked.

“Yes... I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so... so—”

“It’s fine, little one. Nothing is going to hurt you here,” Edward assured her.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, looking around, her face flushing. “I wasn’t disagreeing with you about, is just that Camilla didn’t sheath her claws like Lucas said.”

Edward lifted his gaze to his friend’s. “Does that make any sense to you because I’m at a total loss here.”

Lucas grinned and nodded. “I believe Lucy is saying that Camilla didn’t make the right choices tonight. Is that correct, Lucy?”

“Sort of... what I mean is that I’m not really upset because Camilla is being spanked. If she was naughty, well then, she only has herself to blame, right, sir?”

If Edward was still at a loss, he definitely wasn’t the only one... although it appeared that Louisa wasn’t surprised at all. When both Edward and Charles looked over at him and Lucas could only quirk an eyebrow as he wasn’t able to decipher exactly what Lucy was attempting to convey.

A soft sigh drew the men’s glances back to Lucy. “I know I’m making a mess of this, but when Louisa told me that you... that Pastor Reed asked you...” she stopped and this time it seemed Edward’s confusion cleared as he looked over at his wife.

“It just slipped out, Papa,” she confessed. “When he said all those awful things and Lucy started to argue and then when we heard him paddling Camilla, and Lucy looked so scared, I

was just so grateful that you turned him down that I couldn't stop myself from telling her how you'd refused his request to... to court her. I... I can't imagine..." She didn't continue, but shuddered as if to demonstrate the level of her disgust.

"Girls," Edward said looking between the two. "Did I not assure you both that I would never allow a man to court Lucille whom I did not respect enough to be able to both tend to her discipline as well as her heart? Did I not say I would not choose a man I felt Lucy could not feel she could learn to truly love?"

Only Lucas seemed aware that Charles had taken a step forward, his chest puffed out like some absurdly proud peacock. Not about to give the man any advantage, no matter if it was only in his mind, Lucas said, "So you weren't about to faint in fear, but in relief, little one?"

"I've never fainted," Lucy said. "I was just a bit... um surprised."

Edward continued, his voice a bit firmer, "One day I pray you both learn to trust my every word and learn that all I desire is that you both are happy and loved, even when you are trying to squirm out of a deserved spanking."

Lucas saw the twins give each other a look and then nod as they looked back up at Edward, both looking a bit chagrined. Edward sighed and motioned for his wife. Lucas released her, noticing that she showed no hesitancy in going to her husband. Edward soon had both girls held in his arms and pulled them close. Lucas wasn't happy that it wasn't he who was offering Lucy comfort, but he was glad that it wasn't the professor's arms around her.

"I'm sorry," they chorused and Edward smiled.

"You are both forgiven," Edward said, everyone in the alcove well aware of how different the outcome of the conversation could have been. "This is a party, ladies," he reminded before releasing them as smiles appeared on their faces. "While other little ones might decide to be naughty tonight and have their bottoms reddened, my girls have done nothing but make me proud. No doubt tomorrow's sermon will

be a lesson on obedience and submission. However, that is tomorrow and the night is still young. Come, the buffet has been prepared and there are many more dances to enjoy!”

He looked over at Lucas and Charles and shook his head as they both took a step forward as if to relieve him of one of his girls. “No, gentlemen, I fear you shall both have to wait a bit. I find I wish to enjoy the delicious repast with both my girls,” Edward said, his smile tender. Louisa and Lucy both shot the rejected men smiles as they placed their hands in the crook of Edward’s elbows as he guided them to another room where tables were laden with dozens of tempting choices.

Camilla’s plight forgotten, all Lucas could do was follow Charles as they all went to eat. Lucas couldn’t believe his best friend truly intended to hog all of Lucy’s attention when he was the very one who had written to state he wished to introduce his ward to him. Instead of serving her himself, he had to watch as Edward helped the twins pile their plates with shrimp, cheeses, fruits, offerings of succulent meats and crusty bread. After he seated them at a nearby table, fate helped in keeping Lucas and Charles away as the Lord of Wintercrest didn’t even have to move more than a step away from the twins. As if by magic, a servant appeared to offer him a tray of beverages and he had glasses of champagne sitting before the women before Lucas could blink.

Lucy sampled the delicious fare, her nose crinkling as the bubbles burst on her tongue. Her delight was evident as she giggled, no longer appearing nervous or frightened, despite what she had witnessed upstairs. “I do love champagne,” Lucy announced as a smile lit her face. “We should have it far more often.”

Edward laughed. “I’m sure Mrs. Bremmer would disagree.”

Lucy’s giggle served to enhance her beauty and caused Lucas’ heart to skip a beat. She truly was the most incredible creature he’d ever had the privilege of knowing. As he sipped from his own flute listening to the conversation of the twins with Edward, he wondered if Lucy was even aware of the immensity of what Edward had done. Not only in refusing

Reed's request, but in allowing Charles and, he had to admit, even himself, the opportunity to vie for her affection. Did the beauty before him realize the enormity of the gift she'd been given? One that very few women in the world were ever offered? Cinderella may have been given a glass slipper but Lucy had been given something far more precious, far more magical. She had been given the gift of choice.

CHAPTER 15

Only Lucas' upbringing and respect for Edward allowed him to behave like a gentleman. After picking at the food on his plate, he'd finally allowed it to be taken away the moment Lucy announced that she couldn't swallow another bite. He managed to beat Charles to her side by the barest margin only to find the man practically performing a solo dance around the perimeter of the dancefloor following their every step to assure he was right there the moment the last notes of the violin faded away.

Every time he saw Lucy being led onto the dance floor by another man, his instinct was to pull her away. Every time he caught Edward's amused glance, he wanted to throttle his best friend for deciding to be soft-hearted at a time when Lucas wanted him to flat out declare that Lucas was his one and only choice for his ward. Each time the professor turned headmaster approached Lucy to claim yet another turn, he wanted to tell him to bugger off. He wanted her back in the carriage seated next to him. He wanted her trembling hand on his arm so that he might hold it under his and offer her comfort. He wanted her to look up at him as she had earlier, to see the fear disappear from her eyes and then to be filled with wonder. Hell, he wanted her teetering on a ladder so he had reason to pluck her from its rungs and spank her bottom for being so careless and to show her that he was the one she should choose. What he did not want, what he could not stand for another moment, was to see Charles Lloyds bend to kiss her.

As the evening progressed, it seemed to become apparent that all besides Lucas understood that Lloyds was to be declared the victor in claiming the sweetest prize at the ball. Lucas gritted his teeth as he watched Charles escorting her onto the dance floor yet again.

“It seems Charles is taking every opportunity to press his advantage,” Lucas heard Edward speaking behind him, turning to see him and Louisa watching the couple waltz away.

Despondent, all Lucas could do was concede. “I swear it wasn’t for my lack of desire, Edward,” he said. “I wanted to be the one to teach her to purr. I wished it with all of my heart and soul.” They stood watching as the young couple seemed lost in each other while the music moved them about the floor. Eleanor joined them and smiled, as she too saw the couple dancing.

“Don’t fret so, my dear Lucas,” she said, placing her hand on his arm, “remember that there are many special little ones awaiting their own papas.”

“I hope they’ll find them, Eleanor, but I’m afraid it won’t be me,” Lucas said, wanting to look away from the only woman he’d ever wanted, but unable to do so.

“Perhaps not tonight,” Eleanor said softly, patting his arm. “Give yourself some time and then perhaps you might come visit me as you promised.”

Lucas finally glanced over at her but knew he didn’t appear as a man anxious to make such a visit. At that moment his only desire was to claim the kitten with whom he had fallen in love. “I believe it is time I return to Hunter’s Ridge.”

Edward took a long moment looking at Lucas, yet not speaking. “What is it? Are you questioning the fact that if I can’t have her, I still wish her to find happiness?” Lucas asked calmly though it took a lot of effort not to rant and rave like the disappointed boy in the schoolyard who discovers he’s the only one not chosen to play. “Even if it is with Charles?”

“No, what I’m questioning is why you can’t see that this ceased to become a battle a long time ago. You may have

begun thinking the smell of victory was what you sought only to discover you are consumed with the sweet aroma of blossoms the same shade of Lucy's eyes. Instead of adding a trophy to your wall, the hunter has discovered that she will never be prey. She is a woman who will never make it easy but, by God, as I've learned, it will be worth the effort to simply see light in her eyes every time they open when she awakens beside you. For the first time in your life, Lucas, I believe you are discovering the difference between infatuation and love. The only real question that remains is exactly what you're going to do about it." Edward cut off any chance of Lucas replying by taking Eleanor's arm and leading her onto the dance floor.

Louisa waited for a moment before placing her own hand on Lucas' arm, causing him to look down at her. "Please don't give up so easily, Lord Huntington," she said softly. "The clock has not yet struck midnight."

Lucas finally rewarded her with a wry smile as he shook his head. "As your husband just said, this isn't a battle nor is it a fairy-tale." Taking her into his arms, he stepped out onto the floor not wishing to ruin the evening for this very special woman. "Edward is an incredibly lucky man to have found his own princess who is not only beautiful and wise, but may have the one thing that I need."

"What would that be?" Louisa asked.

"You know Lucy better than anyone. I've watched you two communicate without even speaking, I've seen the awareness of each other you have before the other even steps into the room. As much as I concede that Edward is right, I am as well. I'd rather walk away if that means Lucy is happy even—"

"For such a huge man, you are acting like some inexperienced little boy," Louisa said, ignoring Lucas' look of disbelief at her audacity in cutting him off. The music ended but they still stood face to face as she shook her head and sighed. "Lucas, Lucy was happy when you gave her a kitten. She was happy when she enjoyed a walk in the park with Charles. She is happy when we play with our dolls or when she gets lost in a good book. My sister is very happy when

Mrs. Bremmer allows her to drink anything but milk with her meals. What I'm trying to explain is that happiness is something that can be found in so many things both big and small, Lucas." She paused to look across the dance floor and Lucas followed her gaze to where Edward was listening to something Eleanor was saying, but as he caught his wife's eyes, his entire face lit up as did the small woman's standing beside him as she returned her gaze to him.

"I'm not saying it's not wonderful to be happy, it is. But to settle for happiness would be to deprive yourself of so much more. The feeling you have when you wake up beside the one person on earth who has not only claimed your heart but your very soul? That, Lucas, is pure joy. Did it never occur to you even once that perhaps no matter how happy Lucy is, she is waiting for the *right* prince to find her?"

This feeling was a new experience for Lucas. Though he had never lacked for female attention, he had also never been scolded in such a polite manner. Looking from one sister to the other, he felt a surge of hope and realized that he'd been about to surrender far too soon. "Thank you, Louisa," he said. "You're absolutely right. Let me take you back to Edward—"

"I can find my own way to Papa," Louisa said, pressing her hand against his chest to give him a shove. "You, sir, have a princess to claim."



HE'D ONLY PARTNERED with Lucy for a few dances out of the dozens she had enjoyed. On the first dance, she had still been a bit unsure of herself and he had made every effort to offer her support and encouragement. Another had seen her smiling and happy, her nervousness forgotten as she enjoyed the ball. Every dance had been memorable, but this one was the most important dance of his life.

"I told you that you would be the belle of the ball, Lucy," Lucas said, before pulling her into his arms for this dance. She blushed which he found charming and Charles' eyes shot him

daggers which he completely ignored. Lucas continued speaking as he led her through the intricate steps of the dance. “It’s hard to remember my frightened little kitten. I suppose I no longer need to worry because all I see now is the lioness I knew you had within you.”

Lucy looked up at him, her violet-blue eyes locking onto his. She stumbled a bit but his hand at her waist steadied her easily. “You’ve captured every man’s heart tonight—including mine.”

Her gorgeous eyes widened and her lips opened but nothing came out as she stumbled again. Lucas accepted the blame as it was his duty to lead her, to make the dance flow as effortlessly as water and yet he’d failed. Louisa’s words had given him hope, but Lucy’s continued silence was threatening to fell him and told him the truth. As the beautiful melody ended, he saw Charles striding toward them. Never in his life had he felt such a crushing weight as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “I hope you find every happiness, Lucille.” About to release her, he shook his head. “No... that’s not true. I wish you the joy you’ve given me from the first moment I saw you teetering on that ladder.”

About to release her hand, her question stopped him.



“DO YOU THINK CLEO IS PROUD?” she asked, attempting to bring the smile back to his face that she’d seen less and less often as the night wore on. She watched as the heat she’d seen in his eyes when he’d spoken of his heart was replaced by sadness and wished she hadn’t spoken. Even though his hand tightened around hers, she felt him moving away. He hadn’t answered her question and his eyes had moved to look over her head.

“Lucas,” she said, her heart pounding in her chest. He looked so distant and it frightened her. He closed his eyes briefly at the sound of his name coming from her lips and when they opened, the smile he gave her looked forced. His

free hand lifted and he stroked a finger down her cheek, the touch soft and yet it felt as if he were the very essence of the fire she felt beginning to burn beneath her flesh.

“Yes, little one, Cleo is very proud of you tonight. You have nothing to fret over and nothing to fear. I’m just sorry that... I only wish I...” he paused as she felt another touch, this one from Charles who had laid his hand on her shoulder.

“What?” Lucy asked, sensations swirling through her as Lucas stepped away and offered her a small bow and another smile.

“This is your night, princess and it has been an honor,” Lucas said, and with a final look at the joined hands, finally released her.

Before she could speak, Lucy was turned and pulled into Charles’ arms as he bent to kiss her lips for the first time. His lips pressed hard against her own and when he released her, she gasped for air, her mind spinning. She wasn’t aware of the room crowded with people watching the drama of the evening draw to a close. She wasn’t aware that Edward and Louisa stood only a few feet away. She wasn’t aware that Pastor Reed stood watching, his disapproval coloring his face. She didn’t see the soft smile of Lady Eddinberg as she stood next to her husband, his arm holding her to his side. She didn’t notice Eleanor Summers standing across the room, as she chaperoned her young students. All she felt was the burn on her cheek where a fingertip had been and the ghostly presence of her former professor’s lips against her mouth as her hand lifted and a finger touched her lips. She saw Lucas standing alone even as Charles beamed and reached for her again.

Suddenly as if a veil had been lifted from her eyes, Lucy’s mind cleared and her smile was breathtaking to observe as it lit her entire face. Every person in the room watched and smiled remembering the first time they had known they were in love. Not a person moved as Lucy stepped forward, her arms lifting to wrap themselves around the man who had captured her heart. As she drew his head down and kissed him, she understood what her sister had meant. She knew she had found her true self as well as her soul mate. The depth of her

emotions was revealed as the lips beneath hers branded her with his claim. Every fiber of her body now burned with the desire for this man, this one man to teach her the passions that had been ignited deep within her soul.

Edward began to clap his hands in approval as every guest witnessed a real fairy-tale coming to life. The room was soon filled with the sound of dozens of people clapping as they smiled and chuckled. Safely tucked into the loving arms of her husband, Louisa smiled as she heard the clock chime the magical hour of midnight. Her twin was not only the belle of the ball, she had outdone Cinderella—she had two men desperately in love with her. She looked into her husband's face and saw his smile reflected hers. They both watched as Lucille Rose Furniss stepped forward to claim her Prince Charming.

The End

LUCY CONTINUES her lessons and begins her new life with the man she chose the night of the ball in *Her Lord's Claim – The Forbidden Saga – Book 4*. Look below for the other books of the series and follow Lucy and Louisa's journeys as the Women of Wintercrest.

THE FORBIDDEN SAGA

Her Lord's Birch - Book 1

Her Lord's Law – Book 2

Her Lord's Desire – Book 3

Her Lord's Claim – Book 4

Her Lord's Discipline – Book 5

Her Lord's Demands – Book 6

Her Lord's Rules – Book 7

Her Lord's Delights – Book 8

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Ryan is a USA TODAY bestselling author in Victorian/Historical, Contemporary, Western, and Paranormal Romance. As a multi-published and Amazon Top 100 bestselling author, she loves flirting with the forbidden and writes about strong, stern alpha males and sassy, capable women who discover that life without spice and a bit of fire isn't worth living. Maggie hopes you will curl up in your favorite chair and take the journey with her.

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