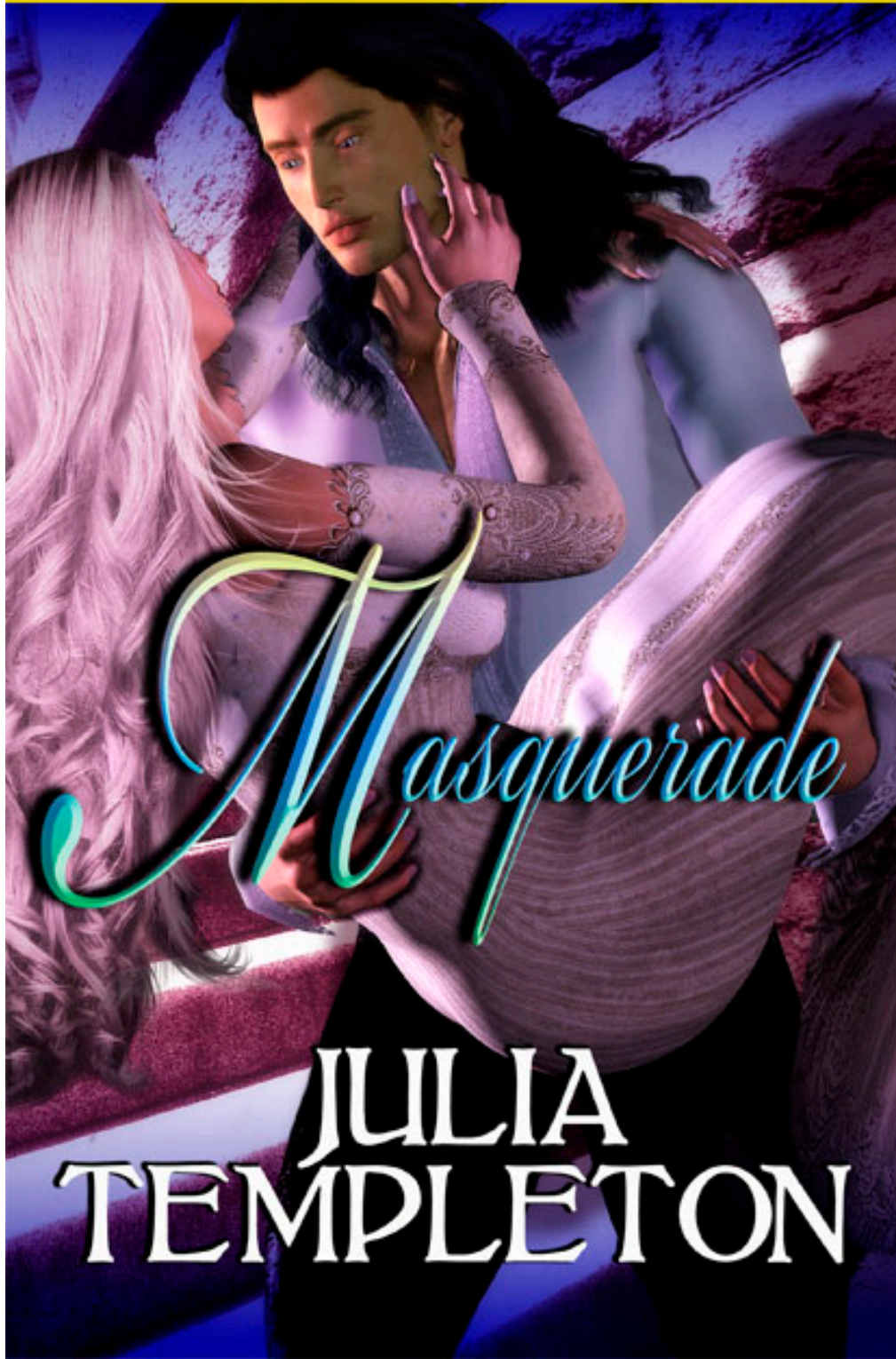


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Masquerade

JULIA
TEMPLETON

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

Masquerade

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MASQUERADE

Julia Templeton

Chapter One
London, England
1816

Freedom at last!

Brianna had dreamt of this moment for years. An entire London Season was hers for the taking! No more boarding school, no more nuns watching her every move. Now her beloved auntie would serve as chaperone for her and her sister for three wonderful months, and they would attend every gala possible.

It was a horrible thought, but she was relieved her betrothed, Reginald, the wealthy, thirteenth Viscount of Wellesley, was away on duty. A captain in Her Majesty's Royal Navy, Reginald took his duty seriously, and in fact had told Brianna upon their engagement six months ago, that he would be abroad for a good half of each year.

Thank goodness she was not very fond of the man who was old enough to be her father. True, at the advanced age of two and forty he was not horrible to look upon, but his ordinary features and nearly bald head made it hard for Brianna to think about her wifely duties in a positive light.

"Look at that," Angelica said, pointing to the enormous chandelier that stirred overhead, playing an eerie tune as Brianna followed Angelica into the black-and-white foyer of their aunt's rented townhouse on Park Place. "How beautiful!"

It was beautiful. Standing in the opulent entry full of marble statues and gold-framed pictures, Brianna had to pinch herself.

Freedom! How sweet it was.

"My dears," Aunt Freddie exclaimed, rushing down the staircase, her face split into a welcoming smile, her plump arms spread wide.

“Aunt Freddie!” Angelica and Brianna raced into her arms. She smelled of rose petals, the scent familiar and comforting.

Freddie kissed Brianna on the cheek and then Angelica. “Come, my pets. I will ring for a servant to bring cocoa to the parlor.”

Brianna glanced at Angelica and they shared a smile. Freddie had not changed a bit in the past five years. She still wore conservative gowns and her blonde hair in a severe bun, the style accenting the fullness of her chubby cheeks and huge blue eyes. The younger sister of Brianna and Angelica’s mother, and a spinster to boot, Freddie had smothered her nieces with love and affection. In truth, she had been more a mother than their own had been.

“Take a seat, girls. How weary you must be.”

The parlor was decorated heavily in pastels and gold, and amongst the plush furnishings was an overstuffed baby blue velvet settee with claw feet. Unable to resist the temptation after the long arduous carriage ride, Brianna kicked off her shoes and lay back with a sigh.

Thank goodness their parents were abroad. Ah, to spend a Season pampered by their wonderful aunt.

While Freddie fussed over them, a servant brought in cocoa. “Congratulations on your graduation, my dears. I know how happy I was when I left St. Andrew’s Academy for Young Ladies. I shall never forget Sister Hazel’s face as I walked out the door for the last time. One would have thought it was the Second Coming by the expression of glee on those haggard features.”

Brianna laughed as she took the cup of steaming cocoa from the servant. “You know, I believe Sister Hazel’s face beheld that same expression when Angelica and I walked out the door.”

“Indeed. I could hear a chorus of hallelujahs echoing clear out to the carriage,” Angelica added, taking a seat next to Freddie by the fire.

“Oh, and before I forget.” Freddie leaned over and opened a side table drawer and retrieved two letters. “These arrived from your mother just yesterday.”

Brianna opened her letter and scanned the contents. Their parents were in Greece for an extended holiday and would not be returning for three to four months. Brianna sighed with relief and continued to read. Her mother wrote briefly about the wonderful weather, made a mere mention of their graduation and how happy she was for both her and Angelica, then closed with a stern lecture on how to behave like a young lady while in London.

“Oh my God!” Angelica’s exclamation brought Brianna’s attention abruptly back to the present. Her twin stood and placed a hand flat to her chest. “I cannot believe they would do this to me!”

The letter slipped from her sister’s fingers. Freddie grabbed hold of Angelica and helped her back into the chair. “I am sorry, my angel. I could not dissuade your mother in this decision. I pleaded with her to reconsider.”

Angelica looked wounded. “You knew!”

“I could do nothing, I swear it,” Freddie said defensively, tears misting her eyes.

Her heart pumping like mad, Brianna snatched the letter, scanned it, and instantly understood her sister’s agitation. The letter, written by their mother’s hand, stated that Angelica was officially engaged to the Earl of Saxford. “Who is this Saxford?”

“I do not know much about him, other than what is whispered in drawing rooms throughout the city,” Freddie said, wincing. “His reputation with women is renowned. However, I do know that he is quite handsome, filthy rich, and has homes littered throughout Europe.”

“I couldn’t care less about estates or money, and I especially do not want to be married to a man with a horrid reputation.” Angelica’s eyes filled with tears. “I should have known our parents would do this. They could never be bothered with us. What better way to get rid of me for good than to marry me off before I have even set foot in

London? What does your letter say, Brianna? Is Reginald also on his way to London? Has your wedding been moved up in our parents' haste to get rid of us?"

"Now Angelica," Freddie said, obviously conflicted with loyalty toward her sister and her nieces.

Brianna quickly reread her letter, and breathed a sigh of relief that there was no mention of Reginald's early return. Tossing the letters aside, she asked, "What else do you know of this Saxford?"

Freddie chewed on her lower lip. "Well, he spends most of his time abroad, especially in France where his current paramour, an actress, lives."

"An actress!" Angelica exclaimed, wiping tears away with the back of her hand. "I hate him already!"

"His mother has been pushing him to marry for some time now."

Brianna nodded toward the letter. "It states he will be arriving in London by week's end."

"He could arrive at any time!" Angelica cried. "I would rather die than marry a rakehell."

"Perhaps tell Mother you do not wish to marry," Brianna added, knowing it was for naught. Once their mother made up her mind, she rarely changed it. Brianna had learned that lesson six months ago when she had pleaded with her mother via letter, asking permission to break off her engagement to Reginald. Her mother had sent a stern reply, *'Tis done, Brianna. This is the end of the matter. You are not to discuss it again. Regards, Mother.*

Neither Brianna nor Angelica had ever pushed their mother. Not after the time they had been ten. While attending the birthday party for Lord Elleson's nephew, Brianna had asked to ride a pony again. It had been Brianna's first time on a pony, and the experience had been thrilling for a girl who seldom had the opportunity to ride. Their mother had been too worried that the sunlight would damage her daughters' fair skin.

Her mother, with icy calmness, had smiled while she told Brianna that no, she would not be riding the pony again. Brianna had asked again, to the horror of a group of her mother's friends who all gasped at her boldness.

Brianna had paid for that act of rebellion with a firm spanking, and spent the next two weeks locked in her room.

She had learned a valuable lesson that day. She would not repeat the same mistake.

Freddie sighed heavily, looked at Brianna, then Angelica, before returning her full attention to Brianna.

Not liking the look on her aunt's face one bit, Brianna shifted. "What?"

Freddie clasped her hands together. "I just might have a solution to our little problem. It is rather reckless, but it might just work," she said, sitting forward in her chair. "Brianna, when Saxford arrives, you will pretend to be Angelica. You possess the wile and gumption to scare Saxford into calling off this marriage. Angelica is less...spirited."

Brianna's breath caught in her throat, leaving her momentarily speechless.

Angelica's expression turned hopeful. "Yes, that is a wonderful idea!"

Brianna shook her head. "Saxford would know I'm not Angelica."

Freddie lifted a brow. "How would he know the difference between the two of you? Your own parents cannot even tell you apart."

Brianna wanted to enjoy her first and last Season as an unmarried woman in London, not spend it trying to convince a man—a ruthless womanizer at that—not to marry Angelica. Plus, she had made a pledge to herself that once she left St. Andrew's, no more lies would pass her lips.

Angelica let out an exasperated sigh. "Please, Bree. You are the consummate actress. Even Sister Francis said as much. I wager it would take you just one meeting to offend him so greatly as to call off the marriage."

"Am I to take that as a compliment?"

“Will you do it?” Angelica asked, her voice and expression pleading.

Brianna, seeing the hope in Aunt Freddie’s face, and the desperation in her twin’s eyes, sighed with defeat. “All right. I’ll do it.”

* * * * *

A card from the Earl of Saxford arrived at the townhouse early the next morning, announcing he would be calling at two o’clock sharp.

As the clock struck two, a knock sounded at the door, dashing Brianna’s hopes that Nicholas Santrell, tenth Earl of Saxford had died en route to the townhouse.

Angelica rushed to Brianna and gave her a quick hug. “Thank you for doing this. I promise to return the favor one day.”

Brianna did not tell her she just might be doing the same for her where Reginald was concerned. Now was not the time to discuss it though.

“Are you sure you won’t join us? I am certain Saxford knows you have a twin.”

Angelica shook her head. “I would be too nervous, and I do not want to make matters more difficult for you than they are already.” She kissed her cheek. “Good luck.”

If Brianna were in her sister’s shoes she would be hiding nearby, listening to every word...instead of locking herself behind her bedchamber door. For being twins, they actually were not at all alike in personality.

“Give me a moment with him,” Freddie said, already heading down the staircase. Brianna stepped away from Angelica and took a final glance in the mirror. She smiled at her reflection. She looked hideous in the wool gown she’d borrowed from one of the maids. The dress fit too tightly across her breasts, too loosely at her waist, and was so short it exposed the pair of well-worn boots Brianna had not been able to throw out. To add credence to the ridiculous ensemble, she had brushed out her hair and tied it in a severe bun that was so tight, it made her head ache.

Saxford would take one look at her and run for the hills.

As Brianna headed down the steps, she tried to envision what the earl looked like. His reputation as a rakehell made her believe that he would not be all that horrible to look upon—yet money and title could make even the ugliest of men attractive. No doubt he would be cocksure, dressed extravagantly, following the latest trend.

She heard Aunt Freddie conversing with Saxford in the parlor. His voice was rich, deep, and not at all displeasing, Brianna decided as she entered the room. Her gaze shifted from her aunt to the handsome man who turned at her entrance.

Her stomach clenched.

What she'd imagined, and what stood before her were complete opposites. Saxford was tall and his dark, unfashionably too-long hair fell past broad shoulders, curling at the collar of his rather plain navy jacket. Simple, yet stylish black pants shaped a narrow waist and long legs, and his knee-high Hessians were so polished she could probably see her reflection in them.

"There you are, my dear," Freddie said, meeting her at the doorway. "Come and meet Lord Saxford."

The closer Brianna came to the man, the more she understood why he had such a wicked reputation. Saxford was not only handsome—he was absolutely striking. His crystal blue eyes, framed by long, thick black lashes, were startling in their intensity. To her utter horror, her knees went weak.

Perhaps Angelica should have a look at her intended before she called off the engagement.

In that moment Brianna had a flash of envy. To say Reginald paled in comparison to the earl was a vast understatement. Like comparing a donkey to stallion.

"Good afternoon, Lady Angelica," Saxford said, his perfect lips splitting into a grin that displayed straight, white teeth. Good lord, even the man's smile was flawless.

Brianna locked her knees, and fought the urge to rush back up the stairs and change into something gorgeous.

“It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance,” he said, his low voice sending a shiver of awareness up Brianna’s spine.

The pounding of her heart was a roar that filled her ears. As he took hold of her gloveless hand and brought it to his lips, she fought to regain her wits.

A difficult task when his soft, warm lips pressed against her suddenly heated skin. To his credit, he did not blink, nor furrow his brow at her ungloved hands. However, she did notice that his gaze shifted to her waist for a scant second. The slight quirk of his lips made her wonder if he noticed she had forgone a corset as well.

“The weather is unseasonably warm for London, is it not?” he asked, his blue eyes settling on Brianna in a way that made her shift on her feet. Those crystal blue orbs could make a woman melt. *But not this woman!* Her conscience all but screamed.

Brianna was not sure of the temperature outside, but inside the parlor, it seemed positively stifling.

“Indeed, the weather has been delightful,” Freddie replied, casting Brianna a look that told her she needed to snap out of it.

As Saxford and Freddie sat down, Brianna slid into the nearest chair, grateful to be off her feet. “How was your journey, my lord?” To Brianna’s horror, her voice came out a squeak. She cleared her throat and forced a smile.

“The trip was uneventful and quite enjoyable. It has been ages since I last visited London.”

“Ah, here is our tea,” Aunt Freddie said, smiling at the maid who entered. With her aunt’s attention diverted for the moment, Brianna could feel Saxford’s gaze boring into her, starting at the top of her head, and traveling oh-so-slowly to the too-short hem of her vile dress and scuffed-up boots. The side of his mouth lifted the slightest bit. Did he guess that she dressed this way on purpose? Something in his demeanor and cocky smile told her that might just be the case. And what kind of man looked at a lady in such a way, as though she were prized horseflesh? When she’d met Reginald, his gaze had not wavered past her chin even once.

But Reginald lacked the earl's wicked reputation.

Brianna settled back into the Queen Anne chair that proved to be as uncomfortable as her clothing. The dress cut into her underarms in a way that made her yearn to rip it off.

Now *that* would certainly shock Saxford.

Silence filled the room while the maid poured the tea. Brianna noted the way the young maid's cheeks flushed pink as she handed the earl a cup with a trembling hand.

No wonder the man rattled every woman he came into contact with. With a glance, he had made her knees weak. In fact, she wondered just how many women had run their fingertips over that strong jaw or those chiseled cheekbones...or kissed those perfectly formed lips?

Both she and Angelica had read the memoirs of the notorious French courtesan, Lady Devine. The treasured book had been smuggled to her by her best friend Peter, who attended a boarding school across the river from St. Andrew's. Both she and Angelica had snickered in delight when Lady Devine would comment at length at the size of her lovers' appendages.

No doubt Saxford had an impressive appendage. Brianna's gaze shifted from his face, over his broad chest and narrow hips, to the large bulge in his trousers.

Oh yes, Saxford had an impressive appendage all right.

Aunt Freddie cleared her throat and Brianna ripped her gaze back up to find Nicholas setting his cup on the side table.

Her heart raced. Thank God he had not seen her stare! It was bad enough her aunt had caught her wandering eye.

Brianna felt like a caged bird when Saxford suddenly stood, walked toward her and sat down in the chair beside hers—even being so bold as to pull the chair closer to her. He sat back against the crushed velvet, looking completely at ease, as though he was not meeting his fiancée for the first time. How confident and self-assured he seemed.

Well, two could play that game. She straightened her spine, ready for anything he threw at her.

“Congratulations on your graduation,” he said, flashing that blasted grin that had her heart beating in double-time. He fished for something in his pocket, and Brianna forced herself to keep her gaze above chest level, a task which proved rather difficult. Her stomach rolled when he pulled a small, velvet box out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She had not received an engagement ring from Reginald, though he had given her an emerald brooch she had never had the opportunity to wear.

Nicholas’ fingers brushed hers and she nearly jerked her hand away before catching herself. Feeling his gaze on her, she sat back with a steady breath and opened the box. Seeing pearl earrings, relief flooded her. Thank God it was not a ring. “Thank you, my lord. They are beautiful.” She handed the box back to him. “But I cannot accept such a gift.”

The light in his beautiful eyes faded and he frowned. “I would prefer you call me Nicholas, and I insist you keep the earrings. They are a gift.”

She would prefer he leave so she could once again think straight. Under his steady regard she felt her neck grow hot, which meant the color would soon rise to her cheeks. “Very well, *Nicholas*. I shall keep them.”

He smiled boyishly at her use of his Christian name and sat forward in his seat, taking one of her hands in his. Her stomach coiled tightly as his thumb brushed against her wrist. He had large hands—long fingers and though he wore gloves, she knew the nails would be nicely sculptured. They were hands that could bring a woman great pleasure.

To her horror, once again Lady Devine’s risqué exploits came back to haunt her. Brianna knew from that book alone a man’s hands could bring a woman unbridled passion. She compared his hands to her small ones and immediately wished she hadn’t. Her nails were bitten to the quick, a nervous habit she’d acquired at a young age, but a

habit that had been hidden by gloves. But today, in her effort to appear unladylike, undignified, and undesirable, she had no gloves to hide behind.

His thumb once again stroked her wrist, causing the hair on her arms to stand on end. "I will not be in London long, so therefore, I will not mince words." He took a steadying breath. "Lady Angelica, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Chapter Two

"I cannot marry you, Lord Saxford," Brianna replied, pulling her hand from his.

Nicholas flinched as though Brianna had struck him. "I do not understand," he said, frowning, clearly stunned by her refusal. "I thought you desired this marriage as much as I."

Brianna set the earrings aside. "Then you misunderstood, my lord."

"Nicholas," he corrected.

"*Nicholas*, I learned only yesterday that my parents had promised my hand to you. I knew nothing of this arrangement, and therefore I must reject your offer." Unable to meet his gaze, she lifted her cup with a trembling hand and took a sip of tea, daring a glance at Freddie.

Her aunt nodded with approval. Brianna set the cup down and it rattled on the saucer before she abruptly released it.

She glanced at Saxford. He did not appear in the least bit happy. Indeed, he looked a bit pale beneath his olive skin. Good Lord, most men would take one look at her and consider her refusal a godsend. And certainly any eligible woman of the ton would be delighted to take Angelica's place and become his wife. He could have his pick of all the debutantes in London, she thought with a pang of jealousy that shocked her.

"Angelica," he said, his voice low and husky. "I would ask you to reconsider."

Looking at her with those gorgeous blue eyes, and that boyish smile, she wanted to give him what he wanted. But she couldn't. She was already spoken for. *Why couldn't it have been me?*

She shook the thought away, forcing herself to remember the reason she was in this position to begin with. Kind, sweet Angelica could not marry this man. Her sister, bless

her heart, would not know what to do with a man like Saxford as a husband. He would probably have her in tears by their wedding night. An image of her sister sobbing came to mind, stiffening her resolve. "My lord, I have not spent any time in London. I would like to enjoy this Season." *And the last thing I need is a too-pretty fiancé, who is not even my own, ruining my plans.*

"You can have your Season. I will take you to all the galas." He smiled reassuringly.

He was absolutely gorgeous when he smiled like that.

Brianna ran a trembling hand down her face, forcing herself to once again think of Angelica.

"Are you well?" Saxford asked, his brows furrowed in concern.

She looked up at him, startled. Did he actually care? Of course he did. He could feel the duke's daughter slipping through his fingers. "I am fine." Brianna sat up straight and lifted her chin a good notch. He had forced her hand. The time for niceties had passed. It was time to be direct. "My lord, I understand that you have enjoyed a life of freedom."

A dark brow lifted, his blue eyes searching hers.

Good, at least she had his undivided attention. "I have lived the past five years in a boarding school where my every move was watched by an order of nuns who made it a point to make my life a living hell."

Aunt Freddie choked on her tea.

"I would merely like to enjoy some much-needed freedom."

Saxford sat forward in the chair, his shoulders tense under the fine fabric of his jacket. "I understand you yearn for freedom."

"Exactly, my lord!" Relief washed over Brianna in waves and she smiled. *Finally* he understood.

"I will give you all the freedom you desire. Being my wife will not be a prison sentence, Angelica."

She frowned. He did *not* understand. Not at all. He had been so certain she would say yes. Even now she stunned him with her rejection. He pursed his lips, which at the moment looked downright kissable. Nothing at all like Reginald's thin, clammy lips. How utterly disappointing that swift kiss in the school's library had been, under the watchful eye of three nuns.

Frustrated at her wayward thoughts, she looked away long enough to take a sip of tea and consider her next move.

"As my wife, you will want for nothing. All you have to do is tell me what you desire, and," he snapped his fingers, "it is yours."

Was it so impossible for him to understand she did not want him? Of course, he couldn't contemplate the rejection, because it had never happened before. Even she wondered if she wasn't doing Angelica an injustice by calling off the wedding. After all, how bad could marriage to one of the most handsome, richest lords in England, be?

"Angelica," Aunt Freddie said, her rigid tone saying more than words ever could.

All right, she must be done with it once and for all. This man was a rakehell so renowned, rumor had it he'd left a string of broken hearts across the continent and was fast working on France. Knowing his reputation, he probably even brought the actress with him to London. The very thought infuriated her so much it gave her the push she needed to be blunt.

"My lord, I want freedom—as I am quite certain you can understand." If Angelica expected her to act, then so be it. She lifted her chin a good inch and flared her nostrils in a technique that Sister Francis had sworn made Brianna look fierce. "I have spent my entire youth at different boarding schools throughout England, never getting to experience what other girls my age have. I have never had a Season. I have never known what it is to ride in the park with friends, attend balls, or go shopping on a whim." Although she knew she was in serious danger of overacting, Brianna lifted her fist in the air for emphasis. "I want freedom. A freedom that has eluded me for all my eighteen years. I do not want to lose that. Not now, not ever!"

Pleased with her performance, Brianna rested both hands in her lap and gauged Saxford's reaction. To her dismay, he did not appear moved by her little speech. In fact, he ran a thumb over his full bottom lip. "Let me remind you what your father said—"

"My father knows very little of my desires. In fact, I would be hard-pressed to say he knows me at all. Honestly, I have not seen him once since my tenth birthday."

Shock flashed across Saxford's face, to be quickly replaced by sympathy. She did not want his sympathy. She wanted him out of her sister's life, so they could enjoy what little freedom they had left.

Nicholas rested an elbow on the chair arm, his expression serious. "I was not aware you felt that way. Both your father and mother left me with the impression you thought well of the match."

Brianna managed a smile. "You did not give me time to respond to your letter. I apologize you had to come all the way from Paris—especially when you are so fond of that city's fine theater," she added on a whim.

His brows furrowed and his gaze searched hers. Good! He now knew that she knew about his mistress. She could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. He glanced at Freddie, who looked quite pleased with how things were progressing. "I would very much like to take Lady Angelica for a ride in the park. With your permission, of course?"

Brianna mouthed the word "no". Nicholas abruptly looked her way. She smiled innocently and reached for her tea.

"I fear Angelica is still too tired from her long journey. I am certain you understand, my lord?"

Nicholas opened his mouth, but a knock at the door interrupted him.

Hearing a masculine voice he sat up a little straighter, a frown marring his handsome features.

A second later the maid walked in, a bouquet of flowers in her arms. "These would be for you, dear Bri—bright Angelica." The young woman winced at her mistake. "I shall put these in water."

"Thank you, Maria," Brianna replied.

"They are for you?" Nicholas queried, his voice harsher than it had been seconds before.

Seeing how irritated he was Brianna smiled, genuinely pleased. "Indeed, they are my favorite." Yellow roses. No doubt from Peter. The same Peter who had introduced her to the wicked Lady Devine, and who had left boarding school two years ago and now resided in London. Peter would be the only person, aside from Angelica, who knew that yellow roses were her favorite.

"An admirer?" Nicholas queried again, his long fingers tapping on the wooden arm of the chair.

She shrugged. "I suppose you could say that."

The muscle in his jaw ticked as he watched her intently. The forced smile did not fool her one bit. He was furious. "It is highly improper to receive flowers from another man when you are engaged, do you not agree?"

"And it is highly improper to bring your mistress along to London when you are to meet your fiancée," Brianna blurted, unable to stop herself from voicing her suspicion. "Do *you* not agree?"

He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Brianna fumed. Ha! He *had* brought his mistress with him! The cad!

Irritated by the newfound knowledge, Brianna summoned her floundering courage. "Lord Saxford, I will no longer mince words," she said, her voice low and intent. "Despite the fact you would like to believe I am your possession, that is not at all the case. I have male friends, whom I shall continue to see, just as I am certain you will continue to entertain certain women while in London and abroad. How you conduct

yourself makes no difference to me. Therefore, the very idea that we marry is ludicrous. I do not desire a husband, and most assuredly I have no intention of marrying a man whom every disreputable woman in London—and no doubt Paris—has seen in the flesh.”

And that, she thought with an inward smile, should effectively mark the end of the shortest engagement in history.

* * * * *

Nicholas shook his head as though to clear it. Certainly he had not just heard the prim and proper Angelica Stafford, eldest daughter of the prestigious Duke of Durham, a young lady who had received her education at the hands of a highly respected order of nuns, say what he thought she’d said?

Yet as he stared at her, those gorgeous light green eyes of hers narrowing with each silent minute that stretched between them, he realized with a start she had indeed said the words, and even worse, she meant them.

How had she known about Vivienne?

Her mother would not have told her, would she? Nicholas thought back on his recent visit with the duchess. The forty-year-old woman appeared a decade younger, her cool beauty making men of all ages turn for a second look. Though she had seen Nicholas and Vivienne at the theater, Lady Durham made no mention of his mistress. If rumor was correct, Lord Durham also kept a mistress.

He had to admit that Angelica was stunning, but her taste of style left something to be desired. Her mother had called her...delicate? What, pray tell, was delicate about the woman sitting opposite him, dressed in an appalling gown, telling him vehemently that she did not want to marry him?

She was a duke’s daughter and there would be offers aplenty—despite the efforts she went to by wearing the ridiculously frumpish dress that could not hide the pleasing

curves beneath. And those eyes! Light green and almond-shaped, they watched him with an intensity that made the blood heat in his veins.

Delicate? Apparently Angelica was right about her parents not knowing her, for there was nothing about her that would be called delicate—save for the classic features of her face. True, she was beautiful with her honey-blonde hair pulled up in a tight chignon that drew attention to those gorgeous eyes that were watching him with something that mirrored disdain.

Disdain was something he was not used to from women—particularly from the one he planned to make his wife. It confounded him that Angelica had no desire for that station. In fact, she seemed to barely tolerate his presence.

“I think you are...a gentleman,” she said, her tone hardly convincing, “but I know we would never be happy together. Perhaps you should consider marrying your French paramour. I am sure she would leap at the chance to make your relationship binding.”

Nicholas felt like he had been socked in the stomach. She certainly knew how to be blunt. “How do you know we could not be happy?” he found himself asking, much to his surprise. Why did he not just walk out the door and be done with it? Pick another woman from his mother’s short list of eligible daughters of London’s wealthiest aristocrats.

The honest truth was he not only wanted to know the answer—he *needed* to know why Angelica was so certain he could not make her happy.

Her full lips lifted at the corners, displaying small white teeth. Such a saucy smile. A smile that brought her beauty to another level. How he yearned to rip that ugly dress from her body and thread his fingers through her silky hair. Feel her soft skin. Taste the sweetness of her lips. For he knew beneath the ridiculous disguise, Angelica was a temptress, a woman who knew how to make a man squirm.

She cleared her throat. “My lord, with all due respect, I am not the type of woman who will be happy sitting in a country estate, waiting for my husband to come home to me, wondering if he is with his current doxy.”

She did not even blush when she uttered those words. A part of him wanted to leave and be thankful he had escaped the marriage noose to this outspoken woman, yet another part of him was intrigued. Who was this woman who tried so earnestly to reject him?

Plus, if this wedding were called off, then he would have to find another suitable candidate out of his mother's meager list. Her sister, a twin, was engaged to a wealthy viscount, a captain in the Royal Navy. Though the viscount was a well-respected man, rumor had it he had the personality of a post.

As he looked Angelica in the eye, those gorgeous light green orbs burning into his, he felt a sudden urge to win her over. His body did not lie. He desired her...immensely.

Angelica glanced past his shoulder. "Will you look at the time? I apologize for cutting our visit short, Lord Saxford, but it cannot be helped. I have a previously scheduled engagement. Isn't that right, Aunt Freddie?"

The portly woman nodded vigorously. "Indeed, my pet. Lord Saxford, it was a pleasure meeting you," she said, already standing, her cheeks like two red apples as she beamed at her niece.

Angelica headed for the front door, leaving him no choice but to follow her out of the room and into the hallway. He watched her retreating back with appreciation. The horrible dress could not hide her tiny waist—miniscule even without the corset—her softly flared hips, or her impossibly long legs. A smile came to his lips at the same time she turned. One graceful hand already rested on the doorknob, and her eyes narrowed slightly, as though she could read his thoughts.

"Lord Saxford, I hope your return trip to Paris is uneventful." The words were said with little enthusiasm as she whipped open the front door, leaving him to take his coat and hat from the servant who all but pushed him out the door.

This had hardly been the meeting he had expected with his fiancée. *Fiancée*. The word held a certain ring to it that he'd earlier ignored. Always it had been about his honor and duty to his family and his heritage. As his mother constantly reminded him,

the time had come for him to settle down, have children and be responsible. He needed an heir, and he wanted this woman to be his wife. The knowledge left him reeling.

Unfortunately Angelica did not reciprocate his feelings. She shifted on her feet and released a heavy sigh. He lifted her stiff hand in his own and kissed it, lingering far longer than appropriate. He saw the pulse in her throat beat in double-time and hid a smile. Though she had denied him at every turn, she was not as unaffected as she pretended. His stomach clenched. Then again, maybe it was fear or revulsion that made her pulse leap?

The thought did little for his already deflated ego.

He pressed his lips firmly against her hand, her scent invading his nostrils. She smelled of lavender and the slightest hint of vanilla. A nice combination. "May I call on you tomorrow?"

She flinched. "I thought you would be most anxious to return to Paris."

"Then you would be mistaken."

Her nostrils flared. "I have plans tomorrow."

"The next day?"

"I fear I am busy all week."

He reluctantly released her hand, and it did not help his confidence when she took a step back and let out another exaggerated sigh. For the first time in his life he was at a loss as to what to say to a lady. He knew women, knew how to flatter and charm them to get his way, but Angelica was different. She was the only female who had denied him. "Saturday, then?" Dear God – had that been desperation in his tone?

She stared past his shoulder as though bored out of her mind. "I fear I have a previous engagement."

He counted to ten...twice. "Then I shall have to take my chances."

"Good day," she said, taking another step back, and shutting the door in his face.

Chapter Three

To Brianna's great dismay, Saxford did not book passage back to France. Instead, he stopped by the townhouse each day, bearing bouquets of roses—in every color save yellow.

Brianna watched from the upstairs window as Freddie chatted with him. Each time she caught sight of his dark head and broad shoulders, her heart would skitter. Once he had even looked up at the window, and she had jumped out of the way...but not before she had seen his handsome face.

That face kept her awake at night. Even the cool air from the open window could not ease her heated flesh. Every time she closed her eyes, it was his face she saw, those clear blue eyes with long dark lashes staring at her with desire.

There was something about the handsome earl that had crept under her skin. Something that made her very uneasy.

Each morning she awoke, her cheeks stinging with color as she recalled the wicked things they had done in her dreams.

She had never had those types of dreams about Reginald. Indeed, to her dismay she could not even conjure up the viscount's features. Not even the color of his eyes. They most certainly were not the beautiful shade of blue of Saxford's...

Oh for God's sake! What was wrong with her?

She was still asking herself that question five days later when Aunt Freddie walked into the drawing room where Brianna and Angelica played a game of chess. She had an enormous smile on her face. "Girls, we will be attending the Radcliffe's Ball tomorrow evening...and *he* will be there!"

Brianna's stomach clenched. She did not need to ask who *he* was. Saxford would be at the ball, as would the majority of the ton. Though she told herself she was not ready

to step into society as Angelica, something resembling excitement rippled along her spine. For nearly a fortnight she had been hiding in the townhouse, terrified to leave for fear of running into Saxford.

Tomorrow she would see Nicholas...and she would have to put an end to this sham of an engagement once and for all.

"We need to find dresses for both of you," Freddie said, a wide smile on her face that spoke of anticipation. "Let's go shopping. I will change and meet you in the foyer in half an hour."

Angelica stood, nearly upending the chair in her haste. "Must I attend?"

Freddie's brows furrowed. "My dear, you cannot stay hidden in this townhouse the entire Season. Plus, Saxford must know that the Duke of Durham has twin daughters. He will think something amiss if only one of you attends the Radcliffe's Ball."

"She is right," Brianna said, grateful that her sister would be able to see Nicholas in the flesh. Perhaps she would have a change of heart? And why did that bother Brianna so much? What if Angelica did marry Nicholas? The thought was too horrible to consider. It could *not* happen.

"Half an hour, girls." The door shut behind Freddie, and Brianna cast a glance at Angelica, who stared down at the chessboard.

"Bree, I am afraid Saxford will not take no for an answer. Look around," she said, nodding toward the newest bouquet of roses. "He is determined."

Brianna had been growing increasingly uncomfortable with each day that passed, not knowing how far Saxford would go to win Angelica's hand. She had hoped he would take her silence as a resounding no, once and for all. "You know...Saxford is quite handsome, and as Freddie mentioned, filthy rich."

Angelica frowned. "I will not marry him, Bree. I will not."

"But what if—"

"I am in love with someone else," Angelica blurted.

Brianna could not have been more surprised if her twin had sprouted wings and flown about the room. "With whom?"

Angelica swallowed hard. "You will think me silly."

"I would not," Brianna replied, though she was more than a little intrigued, especially given the two of them had been virtually inseparable these past five years, and they'd always had a connection. Often times Angelica would say exactly what Brianna had been thinking before saying it aloud...and vice versa.

"I am desperately in love with Sean McColroy." Angelica looked at Brianna like she should know the name.

Brianna shook her head. "Who is Sean McColroy?"

"Bree, certainly you know Sean?"

Brianna furrowed her brows, her mind racing. "Sean McColroy? The only Sean I know is the groom who worked at St. Andrew's stables. Oh my – Angelica, tell me that is not of whom you speak?"

Angelica's cheeks turned pink, confirming Brianna's worst fear.

"Angelica, he is a groom!"

"Indeed, he is," Angelica said, lifting her chin defiantly. "But he is also the sweetest, kindest, most loving man I have ever met." Her voice rang with conviction.

Brianna ran her hands down her face. Their parents would never allow Angelica to marry a groom. "No way, no how. Impossible. You come from two different worlds. He is penniless. You think you love him, but how do you know for sure?"

Angelica dropped her gaze and picked an imaginary string from her gorgeous day dress. Brianna almost mentioned there would be no more expensive gowns for Angelica if she married a groom, but she refrained.

"He told me he loves me more than life itself, and that he would follow me to the ends of the Earth if he has to." Angelica straightened her shoulders. "I sent him word yesterday, telling him of my engagement to Lord Saxford. I feared word would reach

him at St. Andrew's. I assured him that you were going to masquerade as me, and the whole engagement would be called off."

"You did not!" Brianna groaned inwardly. The last thing she needed was Sean showing up. "Angelica, this is madness. I know you believe you love Sean, but what can he give you? You, who are accustomed to the finer things in life."

"Money does not buy happiness, Brianna. I expect you of all people to understand that."

Brianna saw the desperation in her sister's eyes and felt her resolve slipping. "Angelica, I do understand how you feel. You know how I feel about marrying Reginald, but what choice do I have? This is our lot in life, as much as we hate it. As mother said, we must endure."

"I believe I am pregnant, Bree."

The words were as effective as a cold dash of water. Brianna stared at her twin with mouth agape. "When? How?"

Angelica could not keep eye contact. Instead, she stared down at the chessboard. "A little over two months ago when you and the others visited the museum in York."

"You said you were too ill to go."

Angelica nodded, and finally lifted her gaze. "Yes, well, I lied. Sean and I went to the river instead."

And they had done more than just swim.

Brianna wasn't sure which angered her more—the thought that Angelica had made love to a man and hadn't told her, or that she had managed to get herself pregnant, and by someone so below her station.

Either way her sister was in deep trouble. Brianna took a steadying breath. If possible, things had just gone from bad to worse. Any man, including Saxford, would be furious to discover his wife was not only no longer a virgin, but pregnant with another man's child. Her mother would kill Angelica, and then she would kill Brianna,

for Brianna knew her mother would accuse her of leading her “angelic” sister astray. Always it had been that way, even as children. “Well, you have one of two choices— you can marry Saxford and hope that he believes you are a virgin and your baby is born premature, or you can marry Sean.”

“I *will* marry Sean.” Angelica rounded the table and reached for Brianna’s hands. “Help me, Bree. Please!”

* * * * *

Nicholas woke at the crack of dawn, his body drenched in sweat.

It had been ages since he’d passed such a restless night. He blamed the blonde-haired witch who had denied him so vehemently two weeks ago. Two very long weeks.

Every night he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, contemplating his seduction of Angelica.

And seduce her he would. He was determined.

If she would ever see him. Each day he visited her townhouse, and each day she refused to see him. Like a lovesick boy, he had attended every function he’d thought she would attend, only to find she had not come.

One day at a time. He had many years of experience when it came to the delicacies of wooing a woman. Indeed, he had learned early on that a necklace could make all the difference in the world. Then again, he had never wooed a duke’s daughter. Though Angelica had been raised by nuns, and had lived a fairly sheltered life, as her mother had put it, she was still a woman. And all women loved to be pampered and treated like a queen.

And spoil her he would.

Soon she would not be able to deny him.

He envisioned her as she had been in his dream. Naked, lying on red satin sheets, her glorious blonde hair falling all about her in thick, silky waves. It did not help knowing he would not be able to bed his bride until his wedding night.

He had contemplated visiting a brothel, yet he saw those green luminous eyes as they'd looked at him and heard the words that would burn in his mind forever...that every woman in England and France had seen him naked.

He ran a hand down his face. It had been fifteen long days since he'd been with a woman. The longest he had ever been without a woman.

Thinking about Angelica, his fingers slid over his stomach and down his rigid length. He closed his eyes, reliving the dream, the smile on Angelica's face as she had told him to come to her. She had gone up on her knees, her pink nipples hardening under his stare.

She had looked at his cock and licked her lips, her eyes full of anticipation. "I want you, Nicholas."

He'd stepped to the edge of the bed and she had taken him into her mouth, rolling her sweet tongue over his cock head. She tasted him, smiling before taking him fully into her mouth. Sweat dripped off his forehead, onto the sheets.

His balls lifted, his rhythm increasing, a slap echoing in the room as he came with a low-throated groan, his hot semen shooting onto his belly.

Slowly his heart rate returned to normal, and he stared at the ceiling.

Angelica would be his...very, very soon.

* * * * *

The ballroom was absolutely enormous. The crowd of over four hundred guests milled beneath three elaborate gold chandeliers. Six sets of double doors had been opened to allow a cool breeze into the room. Thank goodness, since Brianna had started sweating the moment they'd been announced.

It appeared everyone was more than a little curious about the Duke of Durham's recently engaged daughters. The guests swarmed them the moment they stepped into the ballroom.

Brianna had never been so nervous in her life. It was one thing to lie to Saxford in the comfort of her aunt's drawing room. It was an entirely different thing to masquerade as her sister in front of every aristocrat in London.

Thank God they had spent the past decade in different boarding schools. No one would know the difference between them. Once this Season was over, Angelica and Brianna would have to hope that Lord Saxford never set foot in England again.

She shuddered, thinking of their fragile mother, a woman who would not understand the masquerade at all. Indeed, if the truth ever surfaced, Brianna would no doubt spend the rest of her life in a convent. Her mother had always threatened Brianna with such a fate, always muttering that it would do her good since she was too unfeminine, too spirited and not at all dignified like Angelica, the pride of their family.

In their childhood, before their mother had put a halt to such activities, Brianna had preferred hunting and horseback riding to embroidery and tea parties. In contrast, Angelica excelled at all things feminine and would make any man a dutiful wife. But she would *not* be the wife of Lord Saxford.

At her side Angelica took a deep breath and released it unsteadily. Her sister looked radiant in a blue silk gown that clung to her slender figure. "I believe Marianna tied my corset too tight."

"You shall be fine," Brianna murmured, her gaze scanning the crowd. She wasn't sure who she was more nervous for—herself or Angelica. After all, Angelica would have to remember to go by Brianna's name tonight. With a trembling hand she smoothed out the skirt of her French gauze gown. The light green dress was exquisite, the color matching her eyes perfectly. The low bodice had been embroidered with silver and emerald green ribbon, and was so low as to make Brianna a little self-conscious. If she sneezed, she'd be in danger of exposing herself. Her fingers brushed over the emerald brooch Reginald had given her on their engagement. She wore it to serve as a reminder of her upcoming marriage. A difficult task when Nicholas was around.

“You will pull this off without a hitch, my dears,” Freddie said with conviction, as she nodded at a group of young men who’d been ogling them the past quarter of an hour.

The men did not approach, no doubt since she and Angelica were no longer on the marriage market. How unfortunate that neither one of them had been able to at least be courted by some of the gentlemen here, a handful of which were quite good-looking. True, not as striking as Saxford, but a good deal better than Reginald.

The one thing Reginald did have over Saxford was his sterling reputation. The man, though lacking in certain social skills, or so the rumor mill told, had never been linked to a woman.

Not so Saxford. Case in point, the actress. The knowledge that Nicholas had brought the strumpet to London still infuriated her. Aunt Freddie had even learned the woman’s name while having tea with a friend. Vivienne de Vassey. Apparently the woman was dark-haired, with brown eyes, creamy white skin, and her dress was always impeccable...which had spurred Brianna to make sure she looked exquisite tonight.

“He is here, to the right of the stage,” Freddie said, a nervous tone to her voice.

Ignoring the sudden pounding of her heart, Brianna followed Freddie’s gaze to find Saxford, dressed in black formal attire, which only complemented his good looks. Damn, why did the man have to be so gorgeous? He had to realize his appeal to the fairer sex. How could he not when every woman within fifty feet gawked – no doubt dreaming of dancing with him – or perhaps doing more? She closed her eyes, trying hard to dispel the image of him naked. It was bad enough that she fantasized about him in her sleep. To do so in the light of day was just too much.

Brianna glanced at Angelica to see her reaction. Her twin’s throat convulsed as she watched Saxford. Her gaze lingered. “He is too pretty,” she said, her nose wrinkling.

Too pretty? “And that is bad?” Brianna asked, surprisingly relieved by her sister’s reaction to Saxford.

To Brianna's horror, an image of last night's dream, one that would have made Lady Devine proud, came back to haunt her. Saxford crawling up her body, his impressive appendage brushing against her stomach—rock-hard, throbbing—then resting against the juncture of her thighs. Heat pooled low in her belly, making her insides tingle.

Brianna shook away the image. Dear God, she had to get this night over with, get him out of her life for good. She would not have a moment's peace until then. Blatant honesty was the best approach.

Freddie fanned herself vigorously. "He has noticed us. It will not be long now."

"I think I am going to be sick," Angelica said, slipping into a nearby chair.

"Excuse me, Miss. Could I have this dance?"

Brianna whirled around at the familiar voice. "Peter!" she squealed, throwing herself into her friend's arms. "I hoped you would come. I have been wondering when you would finally surface."

"You're suffocating me, pet," he said, putting her at arm's length. "I would not have missed this night for the world."

He bent and kissed Angelica on the cheek before bringing Freddie's hand to his lips. "And you must be *the* Aunt Freddie I have heard so much about."

Freddie beamed. "Indeed, I am, young man. It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

"And you as well." He embraced Brianna again. "Could I steal her for a dance?"

Freddie and Angelica nodded.

Peter always put Brianna at ease, and as they danced she stared at him, looking for the face of the boy she remembered, and instead finding a man. A very handsome man.

"So Bree, how does it feel to finally be free of the nuns?"

"Call me Angelica," she whispered into his ear. "And it is wonderful to be free at last."

He laughed under his breath. "Right. You are masquerading as your dear sister." His lips quirked. "Bad girl."

"It is only temporary. Trust me, this time next week I hope that Saxford is back in France, and I in turn am having the time of my life."

He grinned again, and she let her gaze wander over him. His brown hair was long and a bit unruly, as though he'd repeatedly run his fingers through it. Thick lashes framed hazel eyes that sparkled with mischief.

"I cannot believe it is you."

His brows furrowed into a frown. "Come, I have not changed so much, have I?"

"You are a man, Peter."

"And you expected differently?" He tried to look wounded and failed.

"There is nothing of the boy left in you."

He darted a glance to the décolletage of her gown. His smile was nothing short of wicked. "And there is nothing of the girl left in you." He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Look at those breasts. They are marvelous, darling."

She shook her head. "You have not changed, have you?"

"Lord, I hope not." He sobered a little, becoming serious for a moment. He even went so far as to keep a respectable distance between them. "Your letter surprised me. You know you are playing with fire, do you not? What of your captain, Viscount Wellesley, is it? If he were to learn his betrothed was masquerading about London as her twin, and with Saxford, it would cause quite a scandal."

"No doubt he would be shocked."

Peter shrugged. "Your captain would not be happy, I'm sure, but then again, he might not care if you take a lover."

"Peter!"

"Dear, even you must know the man is not known for his liaisons with women."

"Meaning?"

“There are rumors...”

“What kind of rumors?” Brianna asked, curious why Peter tiptoed about the subject.

“A man of his age, who has never been married, or even associated with a woman.” He tilted his head to the side. “I think you know what it means, Bree.”

Brianna watched him watch her, and realized with a start he was serious. She leaned close, whispering in his ear, “You think he prefers men?”

Peter bit his bottom lip. “I dare say, it might be possible. After all, he has spent years on a ship, with no women in sight. I recall in one of your letters to me that he had told you he enjoyed his time at sea, and that he hoped you would not resent him for the time you spend alone, as is customary for a captain’s wife.”

She had never even considered such a thing, but it did make sense. “Then perhaps my marriage will not be so bad.”

Peter snorted. “Well, that is one way of looking at it. But be wary of your other problem, my dear. Saxford is used to getting what he wants. In fact, I would bet my life he is plotting against me as we speak.” He dared a glance over her shoulder. “Indeed, he looks like he might call me out. Perhaps I should have come prepared.”

Brianna made a turn and saw for herself that Peter was not exaggerating. Saxford watched them closely and he did not look happy in the least. He had made his way to Freddie and Angelica’s side. Poor Angelica. She looked pale, ready to faint.

“He is a handsome devil, isn’t he?” Peter said, pulling Brianna out of her unwanted thoughts.

“Peter...” she warned. “Tonight you are to act the suitor. Do not be making eyes at Saxford – else it will ruin the ruse.”

Peter shrugged. “You cannot blame me for being slightly envious. The man is walking temptation.”

How true that was. Peter had told her years ago that he enjoyed being with both men and women, and as shocking as that declaration had been, it had not made her feel any differently toward her friend. Angelica had not been quite as accepting, asking Peter a lot of questions, some that were rather embarrassing.

But Peter had been patient, and blunt to the point that Angelica had walked away.

They'd never spoken of his preferences again.

"Angelica is in love with another man," Brianna blurted, wanting desperately to change the subject.

Peter lifted a brow. "Do tell."

"You cannot say a word to anyone. Promise me."

He pulled her tighter to him, a devilish smirk on his handsome face. "Tell me, or I will ravish you here on the spot."

She snickered. "You are wicked."

"No more wicked than you, *Angelica*," he whispered in her ear.

To anyone else they would look the happy couple. Perhaps too comfortable, particularly since she was spoken for. Surely all of London knew of the engagement. Indeed, with a fleeting glance at the onlookers, she knew they were the subject of observation. How could they not be when Peter flirted so outrageously, and she was doing little to stop the charade. But stop it she must, at least with everyone save Nicholas. She did not want word getting back to their parents, who would come home early at the first sign of trouble. Not for concern of their daughters, but the scandal it would cause the family name.

"I dare say even Lady Devine herself would have a hard time turning him away."

To Brianna's horror her cheeks heated, and Peter laughed under his breath. "Ah, so you have not forgotten the tales?"

"How could I? They are forever imprinted on my mind, and it is all your fault."

He kissed her cheek. "I shall have to send you her latest volumes. They are even more scandalous than her previous works."

"I can hardly wait to read them," Brianna said with a laugh.

"I have missed you, my dearest friend," Peter said, kissing her cheek. "I am so happy you are here."

Touched by his sincerity, she smiled up at him. "And I am happy you are here, too."

Chapter Four

Nicholas could not believe Angelica's transformation. Indeed, his fiancée was nothing short of breathtaking in her exquisite gown, which complemented her slender figure and matched the color of her eyes perfectly. Her honey-blonde hair had been masterfully styled, piled on her head in thick ringlets, showcasing her long, elegant neck...which at the moment he would love to strangle.

He had been shocked to see Angelica's sister here. It was the first time he had seen the twins together, and the impact of their beauty was astounding—one wearing a blue gown, and the other green. He had known from across the room that Angelica wore the green gown. It was the way she moved, the way she laughed, the mischievous twinkle in her eye. Brianna seemed much more demure than her sister, shy almost. In fact, the way she avoided his gaze made him think she shared her sister's opinion of him.

That, or perhaps she pined for her captain, Viscount Wellesey.

Poor thing. She would be spending a lot of time alone. Perhaps he and Angelica could visit her often, and likewise she would visit them. Determined to win both women over, he turned to Brianna. "Lady Brianna, may I inquire as to whom Angelica is dancing with?" he asked, not certain he really wanted to know.

When she did not reply, he repeated the question. Looking startled, Brianna's cheeks turned crimson. "Sorry, my lord, my mind was elsewhere. Angelica's dance partner is Lord Cowdray."

Damn, he was a blue blood. "Have you known him long?"

She nodded. "Indeed, we attended schools directly across the river from each other."

No wonder Angelica seemed so relaxed in his presence. It was obvious to everyone who watched the two were well acquainted. He had watched the embrace, the smile on

both their faces. In truth, they looked like lovers, dancing far too close, seemingly unaware that the entire room watched them.

And the crowd watched him as well, no doubt gauging his reaction. It took everything within him to remain calm.

“I am pleased that Angelica is feeling well enough to attend.” He had been turned away from Freddie’s townhouse every day with the same excuse—Angelica had a headache, or she was resting. Seeing her in such good spirits made him question the validity of her claim to be ill.

On one occasion he had even caught sight of her, watching him from the second-story window. His heart had skipped a beat, and he had waved...but she had jumped back, away from the window.

Why was she so dead-set against marrying him? Once again he recalled the yellow roses, and the smile on her face upon receiving them. Could this man who danced with her now be the very one who had sent her the roses? Nicholas had a horrible feeling that might be the case.

The music finally stopped, and to his great relief Angelica and her handsome partner left the dance floor. As she approached, Nicholas drank in everything about her. The slight flush of her cheeks, her full lips lightly rouged, the emerald necklace that hung about her slender neck and rested against the swell of her ample breasts. And nice breasts they were, firm, a handful, swelling above her bodice, enticing a man to look.

He could see her long legs through the thin material of the gown. She wore a corset tonight, and even gloves. His cock stirred to life as he stared, imagining for a fleeting moment what she looked like beneath that gown. He desired her intensely, and it shocked him to the core. No matter where he went or what he did, her image burned in his thoughts. He had imagined she was a beauty behind the horrible disguise, had known it from the moment they met. The reality far outweighed his expectations.

Angelica’s partner lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, gazing at her intently. Nicholas shifted on his feet, his fingers clenching at his sides. Never had he

known such fury. Worse still—Angelica seemed to be unaware of anyone but the handsome man as she beamed up at him with complete and utter adoration.

Nicholas honestly didn't know which one he wished to strangle more.

It was not until they were right upon him that Angelica finally acknowledged his presence. Her light eyes held his and to his shock, his heart gave a hard jolt. She was stunningly beautiful, and when she smiled, flashing small, white teeth, he had to resist the urge to pull her into his arms and ravish her.

"My lord," she said with a nod, and to his great disappointment, the man at her side did not release her.

Nicholas nodded. "How nice to see you this evening, Lady Angelica." Unable to help himself, he turned his full attention to the man beside her. He extended his hand. "Lord Saxford. And you are?"

"Peter Branson, Viscount of Cowdray. I am pleased to meet you," the man replied, extending his hand.

Nicholas released the viscount's hand, and his gaze shifted to where Angelica's hand still rested on Cowdray's arm.

To his dismay, neither seemed ready to part.

"I thought you would return to France by now," Angelica said, lifting a tawny brow.

He forced a smile. "I have no intention of leaving."

"Does your friend Vivienne not need to get back?"

He was shocked she knew Vivienne by name. The moment he'd left Angelica's aunt's townhouse, he realized the huge error in judgment he had made by bringing his mistress to London. Though Vivienne had only been here for a few days before he'd sent her packing, the damage had been done.

Angelica smiled smugly, obviously pleased she had rendered him speechless.

To add to his dismay, Cowdray asked, "Who is Vivienne?"

Angelica glanced at her friend and replied in a too-sweet voice, "Vivienne is Lord Saxford's mistress."

Cowdray winced.

"She is no longer in London," Nicholas blurted, his gaze fixing once again on Angelica.

"Does that mean you will be joining her soon?"

"As I mentioned before, I have no intention of leaving London."

Her smile faded before his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I have business to attend to, and I will not leave until I am satisfied."

He heard Brianna gasp. He turned to find Angelica's twin vigorously fanning her cheeks. "Are you well?" he asked, placing a hand at her back, fearful she would faint.

She nodded, abruptly stepped away from him, her eyes widening as she glanced at her twin. How different these two women were, for all that their looks mirrored the other. One painfully shy, the other bold and outspoken. In truth, he felt immensely grateful to have won Angelica's hand versus her sister's.

Cowdray leaned close to Angelica. "Perhaps I will take Brianna out for some fresh air," he said, the words stirring a ringlet at her ear. How Nicholas itched to knock out the viscount's perfect teeth.

Angelica smiled softly at Lord Cowdray. "That is a wonderful idea. Thank you, my darling."

My darling! Nicholas's jaw clenched tight.

Cowdray kissed Angelica's cheek, and extended an arm to Freddie and one to Brianna.

Angelica watched the trio walk away, her gaze fastened on Cowdray's broad shoulders. To add to his discomfort, she even sighed.

"Who is he?" Nicholas asked, his voice harsher than intended.

Angelica looked at him as though he were daft. "Viscount Cowdray."

“That is not what I meant, Angelica, and well you know it.”

She straightened her spine and lifted her chin. “Peter is a *very* good friend of mine.”

Now she was calling Cowdray Peter? Nicholas took a deep, settling breath.

“A *very* good friend, hmm?”

Angelica’s lips curved into a coy smile. “Indeed, Peter and I go way back.” She glanced past his shoulder for a moment. Was she searching for Cowdray? The man hadn’t been away for thirty seconds, for goodness sake. Her gaze slowly returned to his. “So, will you be leaving London soon?”

He took a step closer. “I already told you, I have no desire to leave the city. In fact, my solicitor is showing me rental properties tomorrow.”

Her light eyes widened at that bit of news. “It is not your custom to stay in London,” she said matter-of-factly, disappointment evident in her tone.

“Usually, no.” Nicholas took a glass of wine from a passing servant’s tray. He grabbed another and handed one to Angelica. His fingers lingered on hers for a moment, and he was shocked at the charge that raced through him. She must have felt it too, for she ripped her hand away, nearly spilling the wine on her exquisite gown. “Suddenly I find myself...interested in enjoying London to its fullest.” He touched his glass to hers then tossed back the wine in one swallow.

* * * * *

Enjoying London to the fullest!

More like he wanted to watch her every move! Dear God, and the entire Season! She would have no freedom to speak of. In fact, he would watch her incessantly, or have someone else watch her, while he was out carousing with one of his current paramours. It was dreadfully unfair! Her first, and last London Season as a single, well sort of single, woman, would be spent avoiding a fiancé that was not even her own. A dark, sinful rakehell that made her think wicked, unladylike thoughts. Brazen thoughts

for a woman betrothed to another. If Reginald only knew what his intended was up to. He would keep her locked away.

Though she would never admit it, Peter's information on Reginald's sexual preference made her more than a little wary. Could he prefer men? True, it would not be so horrible to be with a man who would not want her to perform her wifely duties, save for the sake of having children. And though at one time she might be relieved by such a thing, now she was not so sure. Growing old with a man who didn't love her suddenly seemed unfathomable, especially a man who would never love or desire her. She would spend the rest of her life wondering what it would be like to have a man like Saxford in her bed each night.

Brianna shivered at the possibilities, imagining him again as he'd been in her dreams last night. Even now the blood warmed her veins, making her ache for the unknown. Feeling Nicholas' steady regard, she brought the glass to her lips, and drank the entire contents in two swallows.

"You are thirsty it seems," he said with a wolfish smile.

"Indeed, and I still am."

"Well, then we shall have to remedy that, won't we?" He nodded to a footman, who obediently rushed over.

It wasn't wise, Brianna knew that even before she downed the second glass, which burned the entire way to her stomach, but she needed to calm herself for what was to come. Saxford would not be leaving London, and Angelica might just have to marry him. An image of Nicholas and Sean on a dueling field came to mind. The young groom would not stand a chance against a man like Saxford, who no doubt had seen many an opponent in his day. The rogue! Brianna reached for yet another glass, and tossed it back.

Nicholas watched her over the rim of his glass. Damn him for staying in London!

Why would he want to stay when she, or rather Angelica, so obviously did not want to marry him? For God's sake, there were hundreds of eager young women in this

very room who would leap at the chance to marry him. But apparently he was dead-set on marrying her sister, for he didn't so much as glance at another woman.

Rather, he stared at her, and she forced herself to keep his gaze. In truth, his features were arresting—long dark lashes fanned against high jutting cheekbones. His straight nose led her to believe he did not participate in the popular sport of boxing, and his lips were nice—fuller than most men's, yet still masculine.

And those lips now curved into a smile, letting her know by expression alone that she had been caught staring.

Brianna glanced past him and spied Peter, Angelica and Freddie coming their way. *Thank God!* She instantly relaxed. Peter would know what to do.

Nicholas followed the direction of her gaze and frowned. "Shall we dance?" he asked, not waiting for an answer as he took the empty glass from her hand, set it on a nearby table, and pulled her out onto the dance floor. He held her close—far closer than necessary. When she tried to put distance between them, he held her even tighter and locked his arms. "Is Cowdray in London for long?"

Brianna smiled. "Indeed, he is."

"You appear...close."

Speaking of close—he held her far too intimately, every hard inch of him pressed against her. She could not think when he held her so close, reminding her of her traitorous dreams. Her nipples hardened and her heart hammered loud in her ears. "Peter is very dear to me. In fact, I'm sure we will be inseparable these coming months."

A nerve in his jaw twitched. "Were the roses you received the other day from him?"

"Why yes, they were."

His shoulders stiffened and his hand tightened around hers. She looked into his handsome face and wished not for the first time that he were ugly. It would have made things so much easier.

"Is he the reason you refuse me?"

If only he knew the truth.

“Indeed. I love him,” she blurted, forcing herself to meet his gaze. At least she did not lie. She did love Peter...as a friend.

The words had the desired effect. It seemed a storm cloud had moved in, so fierce was Saxford’s expression.

Confused by her growing attraction to this man, she took a deep breath and said, “My lord, let us end this farce of an engagement here and now, and just get on with our lives.”

The next thing Brianna knew she was being danced out onto the veranda, past surprised guests and right into a private dark corner. Her back was suddenly up against cold stone, and strong arms on either side of her body held her immobile. “We will marry, Angelica. Of that I promise. I know you have heard unflattering things about me in the past, but let me assure you, that is the past. I sent Vivienne home and we are finished. I want you, Angelica...only you.”

How she wanted to believe him as he stood there staring at her, those blue eyes sparkling in the moonlight, intensifying his exotic beauty. Those incredible eyes shifted lower, to her lips. And for a moment she wondered what it would be like to be his wife, to wake up to that face every morning.

His gaze searched hers, and she swallowed hard. His intent perfectly clear. He was going to kiss her!

Perhaps it was the liquor that simmered in her veins and made her feel all warm inside. Or perhaps it was the wonderful feeling of having his hard body pressed against her, promising things she had no right accepting.

Whatever the reason, she found herself lifting her face to his.

His lips hovered over hers. “You will be mine, Angelica. Mine and mine alone.”

Brianna sighed as his lips covered hers.

Chapter Five

Nicholas had Angelica exactly where he wanted her. Pinned against him, and unable to get away. All night he'd been wanting to do this, and now that he had her, he wasn't about to let her go.

Especially given that Lord Cowdray and Angelica seemed a little too close for comfort.

His lips hovered over hers.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"What do you think I'm doing?" he replied, his lips brushing against hers, softly, gently.

For all her fire, she had gone suddenly still. In fact, he could see her tremble, and the pulse at the base of her neck quickened.

She swallowed hard. "Release me now."

"No."

Her gaze found his, the beautiful green orbs staring at him with something akin to horror...and something else that completely stunned him.

Could it be the chit desired him?

Perhaps there was a chance to win her over, after all...

She opened her mouth to protest, but he was faster, and he kissed her, softly again, but firmer.

He could feel the quick intake of breath a second before his tongue slipped between the seam of her full lips.

Stifling a groan, he claimed her mouth, the sweet taste of brandy still on her lips. He deepened the kiss, growing more aggressive, urging her to play with him.

And she did.

Her mouth opened a little, and her tongue slipped against his, testing.

He felt the pounding of her heart against his own, and then the feel of her fingers as they wove through his hair.

Thrilled by her abrupt change his stomach tightened, and heat flooded his groin. So the lady did desire him.

What a relief.

One hand dropped to her small waist, his fingers stroking the soft material and feeling skin beneath.

Her fingernails grazed his neck, her other hand falling to his chest. Encouraged by her boldness, he cupped her breast, the nipple hardening instantly beneath his palm.

Indeed, she filled his hand perfectly.

His fingers toyed with her nipple, brushing over the soft material again and again. She seemed to enjoy his touch, moaning low in her throat, and even stopped kissing him. No doubt too caught up in what was happening to her body.

Oh the things he would teach her.

And he knew in his heart that she would be a fast learner. In truth, she may very well make him a faithful man.

Maybe.

Of course the thought of her with another man already set his teeth on edge, and they had not even known each other for two weeks. Once they were married though, everyone would know she was his and not to be flirted with. He would have to keep her with him always, for he had seen the men watch her tonight, a smile playing at their lips as the twins walked by.

He did not have to wonder about the wicked thoughts that raced through their minds.

“Saxford, stop,” she said, pulling away so fast, her head hit the wall.

She winced, and he pulled her into his arms, his fingers gently massaging the back of her head. "I'm sorry, my dear. Does it hurt?"

Dropping her gaze to his chest, she replied, "Not as bad as my pride."

"What do you mean?"

She looked up at him, her eyes dark with passion. "You know what I mean. I had no intention of kissing you, Saxford, and well you know it." She tried to pull away, without success. He held her firm.

"Do you not like my kisses?"

She watched him, her eyes wary. He could tell she wanted to deny him even that much, but she didn't deny it. Instead her gaze shifted to his lips. "I like your kiss, Nicholas."

He could not help it. He smiled, and even laughed. "I know I have not acted the gentleman this evening, but know this. I will not hurt you in any way. Stay with me, Angelica. If only for a little while. You have not given me a fair chance."

"A fair chance? You dance me out on a darkened veranda, hold me captive against a wall, while you proceed to kiss me. Do you call that fair?"

"You said you liked my kiss."

The side of her mouth lifted the tiniest bit. "Yes, well, I cannot lie. Though it doesn't shock me, given your reputation."

He knew they treaded on dangerous ground, especially given her knowledge of Vivienne. "I will always respect you."

Angelica stared at him, mouth slightly open. "You jest?"

"I swear it, Angelica."

To his surprise, he actually meant it.

With each second that ticked away, he could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. He kissed her again. He could not help it. Her beauty drew him like a bee to

honey, and as his arms wound about his shoulders he fought the compulsion to carry her away, back to his hotel and make love to her all night long.

But he couldn't. This was the daughter of the Duke of Durham, and if the duke himself discovered he had ravaged Angelica, his intended or not, on the veranda at the Radcliffe's Ball, where anyone could come upon them, he could very well lose more than Angelica's hand.

"We are not finished, Angelica. You know that."

She opened her eyes slowly, and nodded.

"Does marrying me make you unhappy?"

Though she shook her head, he had the feeling she was not being truthful. There was a lot more to Angelica than he knew. It would take time to win her over. He honestly wanted to woo her in the greatest sense of the word.

And woo her he would, until she no longer looked at him with wariness, but desire...and maybe even love.

"Come, let us return to the festivities."

"Nicholas?"

Hearing his name on her lips gave him immense pleasure, and the look in her eyes warmed his already burning blood. How he ached to make this woman his in every way. To bring her to life, and let her know what could happen between a man and a woman.

The shared bliss. "Yes, my love?"

She looked shocked by the endearment. "Why do you wish to marry me?" She watched him intently, chewing her bottom lip as she awaited his answer.

She had no idea how gorgeous she was, especially when she watched him, a hint of vulnerability both in her expression and voice. "Because you light up a room when you walk into it, and when you smile every man, myself included, desires you."

A smile tugged at her lips.

“You are incredibly beautiful, Angelica. A wonderful woman full of life and great promise.”

She seemed embarrassed by his compliment, making him wonder if she had received many over the years. True, she had been kept away from London and men, and chances were the nuns at St. Andrew’s frowned upon vanity.

“What made you want to marry a woman you had never even met, particularly a woman who has not been a part of society? A woman who has spent the past five years in a convent in the north of England? Why not pick a woman that is more like you?”

“Meaning?”

She shrugged. “Like Vivienne.”

Vivienne again. He had a horrible feeling he would spend a lifetime dodging that bullet. To his surprise, he actually felt remorseful that he had brought pain to Angelica by carelessly bringing his lover to London. If only he could go back in time.

“And what of the money I bring to the table?”

She certainly didn’t mince words. “I have no need of your money, Angelica. There are many reasons I wanted to marry you.”

“My father’s titles and money to start,” she blurted.

“No,” he said, though his mother would disagree.

“But it is a nice enticement, I’m sure. I know my dowry includes lands in England, Scotland, Ireland and Greece.”

He knew better than she what her dowry included. Her parents had been incredibly generous, and he knew he was indeed a very lucky man for having asked for her hand before anyone else had.

She truly was a prize worth fighting for.

But he had no intention of fighting anyone else for her affection.

A light breeze blew across the gardens, sending a lock of blonde hair across Angelica’s lips. Before she could do likewise, he brushed it away, his fingers lingering

on her soft, full lips, which were slightly parted. He loved the way her upper lip flared up the tiniest bit.

Though he told himself he would keep his hands to himself for the rest of the night, he had a hard time remembering that pledge. Laughter reached out to them, reminding him that their absence would be noted soon. Taking her face between his palms, he kissed her, tasting her lips again.

Heat flowed through his veins, swooping low into his groin, to his aching cock, which yearned to be inside her honeyed walls.

A virgin. His wife.

He could not wait until the final consummation. Perhaps he could move the wedding up a few months. Damn, if only her parents weren't abroad. He'd marry her tonight if possible.

It would be near impossible for him to keep from touching her until then.

She moaned low in her throat, and he deepened the kiss, his stomach tightening as she grew bolder and met his strokes. He could not wait to tutor her in the ways of love.

Someone cleared their throat nearby, and Angelica jumped away like she'd been shot. Nicholas turned to find Cowdray, Aunt Freddie and Brianna watching the two of them. Cowdray had a strange expression on his face, as though he didn't know whether to smile or frown, while Aunt Freddie's eyes were the size of saucers, and her mouth was slightly agape. But it was Brianna who looked ready to faint. Her face grew paler by the second.

Angelica looked at her family, then to him, and then finally at the ground between them.

"I was just getting ready to take Angelica on a turn about the garden. Would you like to join us?" Nicholas asked, being sure to direct the question to Aunt Freddie, Angelica's guardian. By all rights the woman had every reason to be furious with him.

The older woman looked ready to deny his request when Cowdray looked at her and shrugged. Aunt Freddie glanced at the double doors they had just exited, then back to Nicholas. "For a short stroll only. Lord knows people will start talking if the two of you do not appear soon."

"They have little to talk about, as Angelica is my betrothed. Certainly even the aristocracy can forgive a man for stealing a kiss from his fiancée."

Aunt Freddie merely lifted a brow, her gaze shifting to Angelica. "Well, let's be about it then, shall we?"

The older woman approached and took his elbow, while Angelica and Brianna walked with Cowdray, who didn't look irritated or jealous in the least.

Perhaps he had read too much into their relationship?

Nicholas motioned for the trio to go before he and Freddie. It worked out nicely, so that Nicholas had a nice view of Angelica's backside. The dress dropped down in the back, just the tiniest bit, giving him a nice view of her shoulders and slim back. He could not wait to press kisses along her neck and shoulders, down her spine, and over her rounded bottom. His cock twitched as he imagined taking her from behind, sinking deep into her heated warmth.

Stop thinking about her in that way, boyo, his conscience all but screamed.

Yet his body would not comply. He had never wanted a woman so badly.

"I do not appreciate you taking advantage of my niece, Lord Saxford," Freddie said, breaking the silence. She kept her voice low, so that the others could not hear.

"I would never hurt her, Aunt Freddie. You know that."

She looked surprised he had used the endearment of aunt, and opened her mouth as to correct him, but snapped it shut.

"I know I have not been wise in...certain matters, but I assure you I have remedied the situation. It will not happen again."

"I have to wonder if my niece is the right woman for you."

He stopped in mid-step, shocked she would be so blunt. To his further dismay, her hand dropped back to her side. How was it that all three women disliked him so?

“In truth, I would think you more suited to someone that is used to London and all the social aspects of the ton. My niece, though outspoken, is still like a newborn to the ways of this city. Allow her this freedom, Lord Saxford.”

“I will not harm her, nor would I allow her to be harmed.”

Freddie watched him for a long moment, and glanced over at the trio who had stopped ahead of them, all intent on their conversation.

Nicholas extended his arm again, and Freddie took it, albeit reluctantly. “Am I so horrible?”

The sides of her mouth lifted in a sweet smile, and he wondered how it was this beautiful woman, who so clearly loved her nieces, had remained a spinster. True, her beauty did not rival her older sister’s, or even her nieces’, but her personality and quick wit enhanced her physical attributes. Had he been older, he would not hesitate asking for her hand. “Have you ever been in love, Freddie?”

She looked shocked by the intimate question, and he wondered if perhaps he had not gone too far. He had been warned many times that he often treaded on dangerous ground, and this might be one of those occasions. Freddie’s cheeks flushed, and she quickly glanced away. “Once, a *very* long time ago.”

Fortunately, the trio ahead continued on their walk about the garden. Nicholas knew winning Freddie’s affection would only help him in his quest to win Angelica over. The more he knew about all of them, the better his chances. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “My father did not approve.”

“Was he right in his judgment?”

She laughed, the sound making Nicholas smile. “Indeed, my father was right, though I never told him as much. He would have never let me live it down. Within a

year's time this *ahem* – unmentionable man lost his entire fortune. He sailed to America and was never heard from again."

"And he is the only man you've ever loved?"

She nodded. "I know it sounds silly, but it's true. I believe things were meant to work out that way, as shortly after my father grew frail, and it was I who cared for him."

"You are a good person, Freddie. I hope you know that."

Her eyes narrowed. "You are trying to win me over, aren't you, Lord Saxford? I'll have you know my loyalty lies with my nieces, both of whom can be very persuading."

"Please, call me Nicholas, and yes, I am – and will – win you over. I do not know fully why Angelica is so vehement against marrying me, but I am here to convince you otherwise."

"Do you think bringing your mistress to London is a way to win your fiancée over, Lord Saxford?"

He could feel heat rise to his cheeks and he forced a smile. "I realize my error in judgment, Freddie. I do, and I will spend the rest of my life making it up to Angelica. I assure you that Vivienne is no longer in my life."

"A tiger cannot change its stripes, Saxford. You of all people should know that, dear boy." A playful smile touched her lips.

"Well, this tiger will change his stripes, of that I promise."

Ahead of them, Angelica laughed loudly, as did Cowdray, who kissed her cheek.

Every muscle in Nicholas' body tightened.

Freddie snickered beside him. "Careful, you are beginning to look the part of a jealous suitor."

"Obvious, is it?"

She nodded. "Very."

"Should I be concerned with Cowdray?"

The words had no more left his mouth, when Angelica rested her head against the viscount's shoulder. Nicholas had never been jealous of another man before, yet now it took all his self-control not to knock Peter's lights out. "I think it is time we return to the ball, don't you agree?" He managed to keep his tone under control. "I'm certain stories are already circulating."

Freddie smiled. "Indeed, I believe you are right."

"Come, my pets," Freddie said to the trio, who looked disappointed at her request, but walked to them without comment.

"One more thing, Lord Saxford."

"Nicholas."

"Nicholas. I do not want to ever see you alone with my niece again. Is that understood?"

A little stunned by her firm tone Nicholas had no choice but to nod. "Understood."

But as Angelica stepped up to him, her eyes sparkling with devilment, her lips still red from his kisses, he knew that might be one deal he would not live up to.

Chapter Six

Brianna took another drink of her tea. She had not had the courage to go downstairs and face Angelica or Freddie this morning. Last night had been a disaster where the masquerade was concerned.

She could not have failed more miserably, and to have been caught by Angelica, Freddie and Peter had been like a nightmare come true.

Why in the world had she allowed Saxford to kiss her like that?

It was the biggest mistake she could have made.

What had she been thinking?

When he had danced her out onto the veranda, she should have insisted they return to the ball. But she had been unable to say a word, so caught up in the moment, in being trapped by a man the likes of Saxford.

It was as though the moment he walked in the room all logical thought went straight out the window.

Thank goodness Peter was coming by this morning. She needed his guidance...and his opinion. She couldn't share her thoughts with anyone but him. Angelica would probably not even talk to her this morning.

Angelica's silence in the carriage last night had been almost too much to bear. In fact, it made more impact than any argument could have. Brianna had seen so much in that silent stare.

Brianna ran a hand down her face and glanced at the untouched plate of food sitting on the side table. Freddie had sent it up an hour ago, but she had no appetite.

A knock sounded at the door and she jumped. Her heart hammered loudly.

What if Saxford had come calling?

Her stomach tightened, even as excitement rushed along her spine. "Who is it?"

"Lady Brianna, Lord Cowdray would like to speak with you," Maria said through the door. "Should I tell him to return later?"

Brianna put on her robe and tied the belt. "Send him up please."

"Are you certain, Lady Brianna?" the servant asked, her tone implying it would not be at all proper for a young, unmarried woman to entertain a man in her chamber. She was beyond caring what anyone thought. She needed to speak to Peter without anyone else listening in.

"Yes, bring him up please."

A minute later footsteps sounded outside the door, and a second later a knock came.

"Come in," Brianna said, grateful when Peter walked in. He smiled widely, his gaze shifting over her. "Well don't get dressed on my account."

"Aren't you the humorous one?"

"You're just upset because we saw you kissing Saxford."

Her cheeks blazed. "I don't know what came over me. I honestly don't."

"Saxford came over you," he said with a chuckle. He slipped his hand into his waistcoat pocket and brought out a dark red leather volume, with gold pages. "This is for you. Lady Devine's latest."

"You're joking?"

Peter shook his head. "No, it's for you, my dear. I know how much you've enjoyed her past works. Now that you're on the verge of becoming a married woman yourself, I thought you might use some lessons from Miss Devine. She has grown quite scandalous and even more daring in her word choices."

Excited, Brianna took the book from him. "You've already read it?"

"Of course!"

She flipped quickly through the pages, stopping to see the illustrations. "I thought you'd like that, Bree. Pictures, which will be even more beneficial to you."

Snapping the book closed, she tossed it on the bed, trying to forget the explicit picture she'd just seen. "What am I going to do, Peter? I'm honestly afraid that I will not be able to persuade Saxford to break this engagement."

"He's quite determined, and I'm fearful your sister may very well have to marry the man."

Brianna's stomach turned over at the thought of Nicholas as her brother-in-law. What if Angelica did marry Saxford? That would mean she would have to see him on every family occasion, and that would be nothing short of hell.

An image of her sitting beside Reginald, while Angelica and Saxford sat at the opposite side of the table, came to her, making her nauseous.

"Your eyes tell the story, Bree." He flicked a string off his pants. "What if you were honest with your mother about Reginald? Tell her you favor Saxford instead."

"She won't hear it. I wrote her six months ago and told her I didn't want to marry Reginald."

"And what was her response?"

"That the matter was not to be discussed again." Brianna shook her head. "If our parents find out about Sean, they will force Angelica to marry Saxford even sooner...which he seems all too keen to do."

Standing, Brianna paced the floor. "What if I just tell Saxford the truth? Perhaps he would understand."

"You can't take the chance of him reacting negatively. And your father would be angry with you for going to Saxford to begin with."

She ran her hands down her face. "I cannot believe this is happening. Here I thought I would be able to enjoy one Season before I became a married woman."

"It is not all that bad, Bree."

"Yes it is."

"You seemed to be enjoying that kiss."

She stopped pacing. "I did enjoy it, Peter. That's what scares the hell out of me."

Peter smiled. "Tell me what it felt like."

"How can I?" She touched her mouth.

"Try."

"His lips were soft, gentle. At least it started that way, but then it turned harder, more..."

"Intense?"

"Yes, intense. At first it was just the touching of his lips against mine, as soft as a butterfly's wings, but then his tongue traced the seam of my lips, and I opened to him. He tasted of fine brandy and a hint of mint. I felt his hands on my hips, and they tightened as the kiss deepened."

"Did your heart race?"

She grinned, remembering the sensations. "Yes, and then he touched my breast, his fingers brushing over my nipple. I have never felt such a sense of exhilaration. It was as though there was an invisible string from my nipples to the center of my being. In that moment I yearned for him in a way I never thought possible."

Peter bit into his bottom lip. "That, my dear is desire. Lust in all its beauty. Animal attraction. And I think what makes it even more special is the fact he is forbidden to you."

She frowned. "Forbidden?"

"Yes, you're engaged to another man, and Saxford is your sister's intended. It does not get any more forbidden than that, Bree. You cannot have him, so it makes him even more desirable. It is the oldest story in the book. One wants what one cannot have."

Was that indeed part of the titillation? That she couldn't have him? She didn't think so, but perhaps Peter was right. She just knew she had never been so attracted to

another man the way she was to Saxford. Honestly, she was not attracted to anyone else. As though no one else could compare, and this man, for whatever reason, manifested everything she ever desired. What a dilemma!

“Maybe it’s just because he’s a wonderful kisser that I feel this way.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “No, I doubt it.”

“What do I know? I’m sure another man could make me feel the same.”

“Want to try out the theory?”

Brianna looked at Peter, who stood.

“What do you mean, try it out?”

“Come here,” he said, coaxing her toward him.

“You don’t mean...”

“Oh but I do. You seem so adamant that you do not desire Saxford. Let’s see if you react to another man’s kiss.”

He did have a point.

And who better to experiment on than Peter, her old, faithful best friend? That wasn’t wrong, was it?

Determined to put her mind at ease once and for all, Brianna put her hands on either one of his shoulders, while he placed his hands on her hips. She leaned in and kissed Peter softly.

Peter had nice lips, soft and gentle like Saxford’s...but she did experience that same heart-pounding feeling she had in Nicholas’ arms.

Perhaps if she deepened the kiss?

Growing bold, she coaxed his mouth open, and deepened the kiss. He tasted sweet, like sweets, not at all unpleasant, but not at all like the kiss she had shared with Nicholas.

The squeak of the door should have alerted her, and it would have had she not been so intent on feeling something in Peter’s kiss.

Unfortunately, what did alert her in the end was Angelica's loud gasp. A moment later Peter was ripped out of her embrace, and Nicholas belted him square in the face.

* * * * *

Nicholas had never been so furious in all his life.

Seeing Angelica in the arms of Cowdray had been too much. He had not meant to hit the younger man, but he'd been too furious to just stand by and do nothing.

Angelica, after helping her friend to his feet, had not even had the grace to blush. She still wore her nightclothes, which made Nicholas wonder if Cowdray had just arrived, or if he had just woken.

He felt physically ill.

"Angelica, why didn't you knock?"

"We did knock," Saxford said, his jaw tight. "You were obviously too occupied to hear us."

"I think perhaps we should allow Brianna to dress," Peter said, pressing a hand to his swollen jaw.

"You mean Angelica," Nicholas said, his heart rate finally returning to normal.

Peter blanched. "Of course. Yes, I meant Angelica. You must have rattled my brains as well, Saxford. And this conversation can be continued downstairs."

Brianna swayed on her feet, and Nicholas held onto her. "Are you all right, Lady Brianna?"

The timid woman shook her head vigorously. "No, I am not well. I need to lie down. Peter, will you please assist me to my chamber?"

"Of course," the viscount said, a concerned expression on his face. He turned to Angelica. "I'll be downstairs."

Nicholas shut the door behind them.

More than a little aware that Nicholas remained her chamber, Brianna sat down at the vanity. She was shocked when she looked in the mirror to find him standing directly behind her. "What are you doing?"

"I should be asking you that very question, Angelica." His voice deadly calm.

"We need to continue this discussion downstairs. I shall be down posthaste."

"We will discuss it now."

She turned on the seat and looked up at him. How beautiful she was. "Nicholas, I do not wish to marry you."

"You wish to marry Cowdray?"

She shook her head.

"Yet you were kissing him...wearing your nightclothes, and nothing else. What am I to believe, Angelica? Another man in your chamber, with no chaperone? What if the tables were turned?"

She would be furious. She had been furious when she'd heard about Vivienne...and that had been before she'd kissed him.

"Are you aware that you can see everything through that wrapper?"

Her eyes widened. "I think you should go."

With blood roaring in his ears, he pulled her to her feet, his mouth crashing down on hers with all the desperation he had been feeling since walking in and finding her in Cowdray's arms. He did not want to lose her to any man.

The kiss that started out rather harsh, softened. Every inch of her soft curves pressed against the front of him, and his body responded in kind.

Her hands, which had been down at her sides, now wound about his neck, her fingers playing with a lock of hair. He could feel her melting into him, and when she moaned softly, he could not help but smile just a little.

His fingers slid along her spine, up and down in a gentle rhythm. As he deepened the kiss, his tongue stroking against hers, he grew bolder, his hand moving over her rounded buttock. How high and firm it was. He squeezed, and she gasped.

He hid a smile.

To his astonishment, she did not push him away. Reaching beneath the wrapper and chemise, he touched her bare skin and her breath caught, but she didn't stop him.

Encouraged, his fingers wandered over her hip bone, then down to the curls of her womanhood.

She stopped kissing him back, her eyelids opening.

He stilled his hand for a moment, coaxing her back to the kiss, his free hand anchoring the back of her head as he kissed her nose, each eyelid, each cheek, her ear. The tip of his tongue brushed over the curve of one, then slipped inside. She gasped, and started to pull away.

He held firm.

"Nicholas." He heard the hesitation in her voice.

"Shhh, just let yourself feel."

She nodded, and he kissed her again. He could sense her excitement, and knew that she had grown as excited as he. Once again he traced her hip bone, then moved to the silk that covered her woman's mound.

He needed to show her how good it could be between them. Wipe out every sexual memory of any other man, save him. Not wanting anything between his skin and hers, he lifted her night rail with his free hand. His fingers brushed over the tight curls there, and slipped over the slick folds of her womanhood.

She shocked him by taking control of the kiss, her arms tightening about his shoulders, arching her back, her tongue dueling with his frantically.

His cock rock-hard, he glanced at the bed, never so ready to fuck a woman as he was at that moment.

But he would not take her here. No, he would give her but a sampling of what their lives would be like once they married. She needed to know that he could make her feel things no other man could. Ever.

Not even her friend the viscount.

Just the memory of her in Peter's arms made him furious, and a thought occurred to him. What if she were no longer virgin?

There was only one way to find out.

He slipped a finger into her slick passage. Her breath caught, and he held her tight with his free hand. Again she stopped kissing him, almost waiting for him to continue.

Slowly, he slipped one finger up to his knuckle, in and out. He gritted his teeth. Oh but she was tight, so snug his cock bucked in response. He continued, his finger going deeper each time, until he reached the barrier he had sought.

Her maidenhead was intact.

He couldn't help but smile, and she reared back. "Why are you smiling?"

How wounded she looked. "No, I am smiling because you please me so much, Angelica. You are so beautiful when you are in the throes of passion. I cannot wait to make you my woman in every way."

Her expression changed instantly from fear to something else. "This is wrong."

He shook his head. "No, this is right. We're good together, Angelica. We are."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and he kissed the top of her head as he continued once again. His thumb brushed over her clit, and she gasped, but did not pull away. Her breathing became labored, and she lifted her hips against his hand. He sensed her frustration, the need to find completion. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and then he felt it. The tiny tremors against his fingers, growing with intensity by the second. Strong inner muscles squeezed his fingers as a deep moan escaped her lips.

He sensed her surprise, her excitement, which told him this was a new experience.

His heart rejoiced.

She kissed his neck, her nails digging into his shoulder as her juices anointed his finger. "Come, get dressed, my love. I want to take you for a ride in the park."

She looked up at him, her cheeks red, her eyes glazed. A woman who had just experienced her first climax.

"I shouldn't."

"Angelica, please. I want you to come with me."

Chapter Seven

Forty-five minutes later Brianna sat across from Nicholas in his luxurious carriage. One would not know from the rather plain exterior that the inside had every amenity one would need while traveling. The seats themselves were of a beautiful burgundy colored velvet and extremely comfortable.

She glanced at the man across from her, and the hair on her arms stood on end remembering how he'd touched her. How handsome he was in his snug buckskin pants and white shirt. A rather casual, but very appealing look. The white shirt hung open at the neck, exposing a little of his olive skin. Heat pooled between her thighs, tingling in anticipation of what was to come.

Though she wore a rather conservative gown with a high neckline, not to mention a cloak, she still felt naked.

After all, the man had practically seen all of her. Or rather *felt* all of her.

And it had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

He had known how to touch her, making her insides melt. The sensations had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and already she ached to experience them again.

But to do so would be dangerous.

Lord knew she already treaded on shaky ground.

And poor Angelica. It would be just a matter of time before Aunt Freddie guessed why she was tired and given to fainting of late.

"You look lovely this afternoon, Angelica."

Angelica. Oh but to have him call her Brianna. How tired she was of this whole masquerade. She just wanted to jump into his arms and let him finish what he had started in her room.

“Are you cold?”

She frowned. “No, why?”

“You’re trembling.”

So she was. Little did he know her trembling had nothing to do with the cold, but rather her emotions and feelings toward him. Never had she been so confused.

“Come here.” He patted the seat beside him.

“Why?”

He laughed, the sound pleasing, and she suddenly felt incredibly childish. “Because I want you to get a better view of the park.”

Doing as he asked, she sat next to him, making sure to leave space between them.

At least she wasn’t forced to have to look at him this way, and could instead watch the passing landscape.

There were other carriages, phaetons, curricles, individuals on horseback and even a few couples walking hand in hand. All walks of life. Rich, poor, men, women, children. “It seems as though all of London is out today,” he said, as though reading her thoughts.

“Indeed.”

“Have you seen much of London since you arrived?”

No, I have been hiding from you. She shook her head.

“Well, then allow me to be your host.”

“I would not want to monopolize your time.”

He frowned. “Why not? You are my betrothed.”

If only it could be. She dropped her gaze to the diamond stud in his cravat. “What if you could not marry me? Who then would you marry?”

He laughed at first, then sobered a little when he realized she was serious. "I have no other choice, because I want you." His gloved hand rested a fraction from hers, and he brushed his pinky over hers. A nice gesture meant to soothe her, but instead it ignited the fever within her. She wanted him, and it frightened her beyond words.

His gaze shifted to her lips, his blue eyes turning dark. Her stomach turned and a moment later they were kissing, his mouth hard against hers.

Somehow she ended up on his lap, her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders. Her hands moved to his hard chest, then lower over his stomach. His cock reared up against his navel, pushing against her hip, desperate to be free.

"We must stop, Angelica," he whispered against her lips.

She opened her eyes finally, and was horrified to see that they had come to almost a complete stop. Ahead of them carriages lined the gravel path, and all around them riders and people enjoying the break in the weather.

And a few of those people had seen the heated kiss, for they stared, their faces showing surprise.

Oh dear God. What had she done?

Seeing her distress, Nicholas ripped the curtain closed but it was too late. The damage had been done. By tonight all of London would know what had transpired between them this afternoon.

Even Aunt Freddie, Peter and Angelica would hear it, perhaps even before she returned from this ride. "They will talk," she said, almost to herself.

He nodded, and strangely he didn't look pleased, but rather concerned. Could it be the man had a conscience, after all?

"I didn't mean to take advantage of you, Angelica, particularly in front of others. I will never hurt you. I hope you know that."

"I am as much at fault as you."

His lips curved, flashing a reassuring smile. "Perhaps we should move up the wedding, as not to cause further scandal."

She shook her head. "That's impossible."

Frustrated, he ran a hand through his hair. "I am trying hard to understand you, Angelica. I am. Last night when I kissed you, I was certain you would finally see how good we could be together. I can give you a good life. I would be a faithful husband to you."

She couldn't help but give him a skeptical look.

He placed a hand over hers. "I would, Angelica. Give me a chance to prove myself. I'll be loyal and faithful to you. I will never betray you."

How she wanted to believe him. "So much that you would not need a mistress?"

He did not so much as blink. "So much that I would not need a mistress."

"What if I were to take lovers?"

His eyes narrowed. "You will never take lovers, Angelica. You will never have the need."

She couldn't help but smile a little, and he instantly relaxed.

"Is it because of Viscount Cowdray that you refuse me?"

"I am friends with Peter."

"You are more than friends. Friends do not kiss as you did."

It would be impossible to explain why she'd kissed Peter without giving away her feelings. "I was merely curious, that's all."

"Curious?"

"Yes, I wanted to know if his kiss would make me feel differently than yours."

He watched her for a long time. "And did it?"

"It did."

He frowned. "In what way."

“I didn’t feel the same fire as I felt with you.” Now why has she been so blunt?

The sides of his mouth curved, and he looked almost boyish. He leaned in to kiss her, then pulled back, obviously torn since he’d told her he regretted kissing her in plain sight. His fingers entwined with hers. “I am glad you feel fire when I kiss you, because that is how I feel when I kiss you too.”

* * * * *

The house had grown as quiet as a tomb.

When Nicholas had dropped her off after their ride in the park, Brianna had gone straight to her room. She heard Angelica knock and peek her head in, but Brianna feigned sleep.

She had no desire to face her sister right now. Or her aunt. Even Peter could not bring her out of the doldrums.

What a situation she had gotten herself into. It had seemed so easy to begin with. Be rude, discourage Saxford and he would go away. But he had not. Instead he had stayed and now had made his way into her blood. He was like an itch that could not be scratched.

No one had ever made her feel this way, and she doubted another would.

What if this was her only chance at happiness? What if she spoke with her father and mother and asked if she could marry Saxford instead?

Her father had made a deal with Reginald though, and his word was as good as gold. He never broke it. Ever.

Which meant she would marry the captain and spend the rest of her days in a lonely old mansion in the south of England, with nothing but her children to make her happy.

Already she despised the life that lay before her.

But if she were to marry Saxford, then everything would be so different. If he could remain faithful and be a good husband, and father, then why would a woman wish for anything else? If only...

She sighed and turned toward the window. The red leather volume sat on the side table and she grabbed it.

Snuggling under the covers, she started reading the latest exploits of Lady Devine. In this installment, Lady Devine traveled to Egypt, and while traveling on camelback across the desert had been taken captive by a powerful, handsome sultan, a young man who had a harem of over two hundred women at his disposal.

This sultan with his long dark hair and delicious golden skin, made Lady Devine cry with passion the first time he had touched her. And each night he chose her, leaving the rest of the women seething with anger.

And in Brianna's mind Nicholas became the sultan...and herself Lady Devine.

Brianna's breasts grew heavy, her stomach taut, her skin sensitive to the sheets that brushed against her.

The sultan wished for me to have all hair removed from my body, and I did so to please him. How sensual it was to feel no hair beneath my fingers as I pressed against my woman's mound. Heat flooded my insides, my sheath tightening in anticipation as the sultan lay bowed above me, his beautiful body taut, muscles playing beneath his olive skin.

And between us his huge cock came to life. The head turned a purplish hue, throbbing and pulsing. Enormous too, the length rising past his navel.

I pressed my thighs together so great was my desire.

I needed him as he needed me, and I arched my hips, greedy for his huge cock. Oh how I wanted him to fill me with every inch of that huge member.

Brianna glanced at the door guiltily. Her entire body pulsed with need. She cupped a breast, the nipple taut against her palm.

Using her fingers as Nicholas had, she touched her nipple, pulling on it.

Heat pooled low in her belly, down to her women's flesh. She rubbed her thighs together and continued to read.

The sultan's thick rod rested at my woman's center. I ached for him a way I never dreamt possible. I knew the other women watched us from their hiding spaces in the walls, little holes that enabled them to spy. Even some of the male servants watched. One of the sultan's women told me of the lovemaking that went on behind those walls. Knowing that they watched us, my cream pooled between my thighs, my folds slick, my channel tightening as I anticipated the sultan's cock swelling within me, filling me, stretching me, for he was bigger than any other lover I'd ever known.

"Do you want me inside you, amber eyes?" the sultan asked, poised above me, his dark eyes heavy as he awaited my answer. Though I knew he would take me even if I said no, I nodded, because I did not want to wait a second longer.

"Say it," he demanded.

"Yes, I do want you inside me," I said, spreading my thighs wide to receive him, my hips arching against him.

"Deep inside you?" he asked, lifting a dark brow.

"Yes, deep inside me." I gasped as his long rod filled me, stuffing me to where I cried out in pain. He stopped for a minute, waiting for me to adjust to his size.

He bent his head and took a nipple into his mouth, pulling on it with his teeth, flicking his tongue over it time and again.

My inner walls hugged him, my juices coating his cock, allowing my tissues to stretch and take him even farther.

Brianna's hand wandered from her breast, down her belly, to the soft downy curls covering her sex. She touched the tiny nub that Nicholas had brushed against earlier today and gasped at the sensation.

It seemed that little bundle of nerves controlled her entire body. With each stroke of her finger, her body tightened more. She closed her eyes, imagining it was Nicholas' hand that stroked her now.

The sultan's strokes were slow, with a practiced rhythm that had me arching my back, and digging my heels into the silk sheets.

The eyes watching us only intensified my pleasure, and I turned my head to see. I heard moans coming from there too.

"Look at me, amber eyes," the sultan said, and I did. His brown eyes turned darker as his thrusts increased. I spread my thighs wider.

He went up on his knees, and brought my knees over his shoulders. A strange angle, but one that made him fill me even more completely. I watched as his thick length entered me over and over again.

Brianna closed her eyes for a moment, imagining Nicholas above her, his thick length filling her so completely. Her insides tightened, and her fingers pressed harder against the nub of flesh.

Her hips arched against her hand. She continued to read.

It was then my release came, like a pounding of my heart that translated to my body, coming in ripples that started like tiny waves slapping upon a shore, but soon growing to huge waves that pounded hard against the sand.

I came with such an intensity that my honeyed walls clamped against his cock, pulling his seed from his huge shaft.

The sultan thrust two more times, and withdrew, his cream pumping from his cock, onto my body in a hot stream, leaving me bathed in it.

Brianna closed her eyes as her climax came, her body thrumming with that now familiar sensation. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

Lady Devine had been right. A climax felt much like she'd explained.

Only after her heart had settled down did she open her eyes.

Her cheeks turned hot as she realized what she had just done. She had pleased herself for the first time...and it had been wonderful. Yet as thrilling as it had been, she felt empty and knew the only way she would feel that completion was if Nicholas made love to her.

Never had she been so aware of her body before. Nicholas had been the cause of it, and until he took her to his bed, she would never know such pleasure.

She remembered the feel of his cock pressed against her hip. He had been huge. And Lady Devine said a man being huge was a very good thing.

And though she herself would soon be married to another man, she wanted to experience making love to Nicholas Santrell, Earl of Saxford. She wanted him to take her virginity. She wanted him to show her how to give and receive pleasure.

What harm could there be in that?

And afterward she would tell him the truth. She would tell him that she was not really Angelica, but rather Brianna, the older twin who was engaged to marry a sea captain she had only met on one occasion. A man who would never make her blood burn like he did.

A man who would never give her the joy that only Saxford would give her.

And she knew that with all her heart.

Chapter Eight

Brianna had no desire to attend a soir ee at Lady Mondele’s estate on the outskirts of London.

“Lady Mondele is a very aggressive, yet influential woman, my dears,” Freddie said, fanning her cheeks with her newly purchased fan. Brianna had noticed her aunt taking care in her appearance since the Radcliffe’s Ball. Angelica had mentioned that Freddie had met an older gentleman, a third son of the elderly Baron Kilinger. Perhaps that meeting was the reason Freddie wore a gorgeous new gown with a daring over-the-shoulder cut that showed her ample bosom.

Like Brianna’s and Angelica’s dresses, the sleeves were long and full. The Vandyke hem showed a good deal of ankle and the brand-new white satin slippers fit a bit too snug. But Freddie had loved the shoes so much, she said she would endure the ache rather than forego style. Their aunt even wore a turban of embroidered crepe with ostrich feathers.

Where Freddie’s dress was made of blue silk, Brianna’s was made of cream, the color changing under different bits of light. Angelica’s was a touch darker, and they both wore their hair up, ornamented with a coronet of flowers that Aunt Freddie had picked out for them.

“I wish we did not have to attend,” Angelica said, pulling back the carriage curtains and sighing loudly. “I am so tired.”

Freddie’s brows drew together. “You slept over ten hours last night, dear...and rested again this afternoon.” Their aunt put a hand to Angelica’s brow. “Are you coming down with fever?”

Angelica shook her head, two pink splotches blooming on her cheeks. The signs of pregnancy were all there, including fainting. It was only a matter of time before anyone else found out.

"I am fine, Aunt Freddie. I just have not been getting enough rest. Though I retire early, I seem to toss and turn all night."

Brianna knew that was a lie, for she had checked on her once or twice after retiring to find Angelica snoring soundly.

"How late will be staying, Aunt Freddie?" Brianna asked, already looking forward to returning home to read more of Lady Devine's latest exploits.

"Dinner starts at six, to be followed by a soirée."

Angelica sighed. "Must we stay? What if we just stayed for dinner, Aunt Freddie?"

There was no mistaking the disappointment in their aunt's eyes. Yes, it seemed that the kindly old baron had found a place in their aunt's heart.

"We should stay for a little while," Brianna blurted, much to Freddie's obvious relief. "We need not cause speculation, and to leave early would surely do so. Plus, it would be rude to leave so soon."

"But must we stay until midnight?"

"We shall see, Angelica," Freddie said, looking a little irritated. Even more surprising, their aunt looked at her reflection in the carriage glass and patted the turban. "You do not think my gown is too revealing, do you girls?" Even as she asked, she pulled at the material of her bodice.

Brianna shook her head. "Of course not! I think you are beautiful, Aunt Freddie. Every man attending will appreciate your efforts, and compliment your dressmaker for her skill."

Brianna smiled at her twin, who quickly looked away. How dare Angelica still be mad at her for kissing Nicholas. She might try and see how very difficult it was to deter a man, especially one as determined as Saxford.

As if reading her thoughts, Angelica said, "I wonder if Saxford will be attending."

"Of course he will be attending," Brianna said, doing a miserable job at masking her irritation.

"Then you shall have yet another opportunity to tell him you do not wish this marriage."

"I have told him on every occasion, Angelica."

Angelica lifted a pale brow. "And yet he is still in London..."

Brianna straightened her shoulders. "What are you implying? That I have made no effort?"

Angelica sat forward in her seat. "I think you like him."

"Girls..." Aunt Freddie warned.

"You could do a lot worse, Angelica," Brianna muttered between clenched teeth. How she yearned to follow that statement up with...*like a lowborn stable boy*, but she wouldn't. Aunt Freddie, though loyal to the two of them, might just go to their mother with that bit of news.

How tempting it would be to pass off the responsibility of that information to someone else.

Angelica watched her, her lips pursed into a frown.

"I have done what you've asked of me, Angelica. I cannot help that Nicholas is bound and determined to marry you."

"He only wants our money."

Now that stung.

Brianna shrugged. "Perhaps that's what *all* men want from us, Angelica. At least Saxford is already wealthy in his own right. Perhaps even more so than Father."

Angelica's cheeks turned bright red, and she quickly looked away, brushing back the curtain with a trembling hand. "And there is Saxford's carriage. Indeed, he is

standing on the steps, speaking to a beautiful brunette. I wonder if that isn't the actress."

Brianna looked in the same direction as her sister. Sure enough Nicholas stood on the steps, his hand at the back of a beautiful brunette, laughing at something she said.

Jealousy ripped through Brianna with a force that stunned her.

"He sent the actress packing, I hear," Aunt Freddie said, smoothing out her skirts as the carriage came to a halt. "I doubt that is the same woman."

"Perhaps he said that he did, but in reality he did not."

"Or perhaps it's another acquaintance," Brianna snapped. "Just because he is speaking to the woman does not mean that he is bedding her."

Angelica snorted. "We are speaking of Saxford, remember?"

It seemed that no matter what she did, and where she went, she could not escape the beautiful blue eyes of Nicholas Santrell. The memory of his lips on hers, and the touch of his hands on her body still made her blood stir.

How tempted she was to write her mother and tell her of the quandary, especially moments like this when her sister proved difficult and unappreciative of her efforts.

Perhaps their mother would listen? Maybe she would allow Brianna to marry Nicholas if she only knew how much Brianna desired him?

But how could she say such a thing, particularly to their mother, who would then ask why Angelica would agree to such a thing?

Then the truth would be told.

And all hell would break loose.

Nay, she had no choice. She must end the relationship once and for all. Tonight.

* * * * *

Nicholas saw Angelica the instant she stepped out of the carriage. A vision in an off-the-shoulder cream-colored gown made of fine silk and trimmed with rose-colored

ribbon. Her blonde tresses pulled into a flattering chignon, adorned with a crown of flowers. A simple pearl necklace and earrings finished the ensemble.

Simple yet elegant. That's one of the many things he liked about Angelica. She would be a joy to spoil. No doubt her years in the convent had taught her that material possessions meant little. A convent-bred wife had never even entered his mind, though he knew many friends who would consider nothing but a woman raised in such circumstances. He always thought it an incredibly odd quality, especially when the men themselves spent hours enjoying every hedonistic pleasure London had to offer.

God forbid their intended harbor any wicked thoughts.

How hypocritical.

Angelica smiled at a footman who helped her down from the carriage. It seemed each time Nicholas saw her, she grew more beautiful...and even more desirable.

How fortunate he had won her hand. Thank God for his mother, the ever vigilant socialite who never missed an opportunity to further the family fortune.

If only he could come to understand why she was so dead-set against marrying him. He had his men check into this Peter, Viscount Cowdray. What he discovered had put his mind at ease somewhat. Nothing negative had been said.

He did not gamble, and seemed to get along well with both women and men. It had been something his good friend and solicitor Edward Lenard had said that had him thinking not all was as it should be when it came to Viscount Cowdray.

Watch his mannerisms, Edward had said.

It was as though Edward had implied Cowdray might not have a preference where his sexual partners were concerned.

Whatever the case, Nicholas was certain that he was well on his way to winning Angelica's affection.

She desired him. Of that he had no doubt. Tonight he would push his suit again. He would not leave her alone until she said yes.

“Please excuse me, Lady Napavine,” Nicholas said, kissing the woman’s hand. Lady Napavine had been married to his good friend for over a decade. A beautiful woman who adored her husband and their young sons, she had also been a childhood friend of his sister’s. He hoped that Angelica would one day befriend the woman.

“I would very much like to meet your intended, Lord Saxford,” Lady Napavine said, a kind smile on her face.

“I would be delighted to make the introduction,” Nicholas said, already heading toward the trio who were making their way toward him.

Off to his right Nicholas saw a group of young men. They had been watching the new arrivals, and every last one of them straightened as the twins and their aunt walked by.

Nicholas fought the urge to clear his throat loudly. Rather, he quickened his pace and bowed before the women. “Aunt Freddie, Lady Brianna and Lady Angelica. May I be the first to say how beautiful you all look this evening.”

Freddie absolutely beamed, her apple-like cheeks a flattering pink. “Thank you, Lord Saxford.”

“You are a vision,” he added to Freddie, shocked and pleased by the woman’s sudden transformation.

He glanced at Angelica, who smiled the moment he’d offered Freddie the extra compliment. Seeing that grin, his heart gave a fierce tug as their eyes met. Women usually did not keep his gaze for long, save for those who were a bit bold, implying they wished something more than just conversation. But she didn’t blink or look away.

“Lord Saxford,” she said with a welcoming nod.

He took her gloved hand within his own and brought it to his mouth, kissing it softly.

How he wished it were her flesh and not the silk glove against his lips. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the sweet, innocent scent he would forever associate with this woman. Vanilla, with a hint of lavender. How refreshing she was...in *every* way.

Brianna stood to his right, and before he forgot his manners, he turned to her, greeting her the same way. Unlike Angelica, she did not keep his gaze, and even looked mildly irritated when he kissed her hand.

“May I escort you into the party, ladies?”

“Of course,” Freddie said, motioning him ahead.

He extended his arm, however, it was not Angelica who accepted it, but Freddie. The twins walked ahead of them, which gave Nicholas a nice view of Angelica’s backside. She kept her shoulders ramrod straight.

He liked the cut of the gown, and how it showed the delicate lines of her back and shoulders. The cream lamé fell over her slim hips and buttocks, outlining their perfection. If he had to hazard a guess, he would say she did not wear but one petticoat tonight. Positively stunning.

“Beautiful,” he heard one of the young men who had watched the girls ascend the carriage. The cockier of the group even took a step toward the twins.

Angelica turned to look at the man, but did not smile or encourage him.

Hand on heart, he made a sweeping bow.

Angelica smiled and nodded, and turned to her sister to whisper in her ear.

Nicholas caught the man’s attention and frowned. The boy quickly realized his error, when his friend nudged him with an elbow. Nicholas then heard his title announced. The boy flushed red and scattered with his pals.

He had best get used to men ogling his wife. She was a beauty who made heads turn, his included. He would feel much more confident if she would just reciprocate and tell him that she would like to marry him.

Perhaps tonight would be that night.

They entered the hallway, and spent the next hour milling around the party. Shortly after they had taken their seats at one of the three long tables lined up in the cavernous room. Luckily the hostess had seen to it that Nicholas was seated beside Angelica.

Having stopped to speak to an elderly man, Angelica finally made her way to her seat. Nicholas stood and held out her chair, and she smiled before sitting down.

That smile had his heart rate accelerating. How ironic a simple smile could give him so much hope.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

She turned to him, a pale brow lifted. “I did, thank you. And you?”

“I slept very well.” He leaned closer. “You were there.”

She frowned. “In your dreams?”

He laughed under his breath. “You appear stunned by my confession.”

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “I guess I have never had a man confess such a thing.”

“And would you confess such a thing?”

She looked away quickly, so fast that he had to believe that he had made an appearance in her dreams. The thought pleased him immensely. “I have, haven’t I?”

She reached for her glass and nearly toppled it, but saved it just in time. With trembling hand she brought it to her lips, taking a long swallow of wine. Her throat convulsed as she swallowed hard.

“And what did I do in this dream?” he whispered, keeping his voice low enough that only she could hear it.

She set the glass down, and met his gaze. “You are rather arrogant, aren’t you?”

“I’m just asking you a simple question, Angelica.”

“One I would rather not answer.”

“So I did make an appearance in this dream.”

She flushed and quickly looked away. "What if you did?"

His heart did a little flip. "And what did we do?"

Her eyes widened a little. "Lower your voice, sir. There are others about that might not understand our conversation."

"I do not care one whit what others might think. I care only what you think."

Her gaze shifted to his lips and stayed there for a moment. Did he dare hope that she thought of the kiss they had shared? The same kiss that played itself over and over in his mind? "If only you knew what we had done in my dreams."

* * * * *

Brianna fought the urge to fan herself. The current conversation made her more uneasy than she would ever admit to Saxford.

Blast the blush that had rushed to her cheeks the moment he had confessed to dreaming about her. If only she could lie easily and say outright that she did not dream of him. But she hadn't, and now he knew the truth of the matter.

And how pleased he looked too.

Flashing his white teeth, making her already pounding heart accelerate.

Conversation ensued. The beautiful brunette who had been talking to Nicholas upon their arrival took the place to Nicholas' right. The woman smiled widely, and even leaned in to say something to Saxford, who grinned wolfishly.

Damn, he had such an easy manner with women. So completely at ease. So self-assured.

If only she could do likewise.

An older gentleman took the seat to Brianna's left. "You are the niece of Fredrica Caugnon, are you not?"

Recalling the man from the Radcliffe's Ball, Brianna nodded. "Yes." Glancing down the table, she saw Freddie looking back at her, a hopeful expression on her face. This

must be the reason that Aunt Freddie had taken such care in her appearance tonight. The baron.

Gray-haired, weathered skin, the baron had beautiful blue eyes that twinkled. Kind eyes.

Ready to do anything to help out her aunt, Brianna grinned. "Indeed, I am. I am the luckiest of girls to have such a wonderful aunt."

The older gentleman beamed. "I had such a wonderful evening when I met her. I could not believe that I had been living so close to her, and had never met her."

A sign that their aunt had definitely fallen far off the shelf. "Aunt Freddie was pleased to meet you as well, Mr..."

"Lord Henchley."

Yes, it was the baron. "Lord Henchley, yes that is it. How wonderful to see you again."

Taking another sip of wine, Brianna decided not to beat around the bush. "Lord Henchley, have you been married?"

The older man's smile faltered a little, and Brianna worried that she may have overstepped propriety. Lord knew, it would not be the first time. "Indeed, I have, my dear. Many years ago. I have been widowed these past six years."

"Six years. That is an awfully long time to be alone."

He nodded. "Yes, it is...but when you are in love with someone, it is not so easy to forget them."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes, I do. All grown, thank goodness. Four sons and a daughter."

"Do they live in London?"

"Only one of my sons. He has always loved the city, but the rest of my children took after their mother, and all fond of the country. She always enjoyed the slow pace, God rest her soul."

“I have spent the past five years in a small town outside of York.”

“Returning to the city must be a difficult adjustment.”

“I am warming to it, I must admit. There is a lot to do, and Aunt Freddie is such a jewel.”

Lord Henschley beamed. “Yes, she is.”

“Perhaps you would like to stop by this week and have tea with me, my sister and my aunt.”

The man’s eyes twinkled. “I would enjoy that very much, Lady Angelica. Very much, indeed.”

The dinner bell rang and servants proceeded to serve the first course of turtle soup.

Brianna tasted the lukewarm soup, glancing to the man at her right.

To her dismay, Nicholas still spoke to the brunette.

She set her glass down right at the same time she felt something high on her thigh.

Resisting the urge to look down, she instead glanced toward Nicholas. It had to be his hand, especially since it was on her thigh, closest to him.

Nicholas glanced at her for a moment, a smile curving his lips.

The pressure on her thigh intensified, and his fingers moved up and down her leg, bringing her gown with it, until his fingers touched her bare skin.

The sensation was not at all unpleasant. Indeed, heat rushed through her, stirring the blood in her veins, rushing to the flesh between her thighs, pulsing. Her nipples hardened against the bodice of her gown.

How she ached to have him touch her there.

The woman across the table smiled at Brianna. There was no way she knew what was happening, was there?

Brianna’s hands fell to her lap, and she pushed his hand aside with one of hers. It did not work. Instead, he held onto her hand, his fingers entwining with hers.

Warmth continued to spread throughout her as his thumb brushed over hers. The action seemed soothing, and it worked, for she grew more relaxed, and as she looked about the table she realized that no one would know what happened beneath the table but the two of them.

The others were all too occupied to give any notice.

Nicholas lifted his spoon with his free hand and ate the soup, all the while his fingers slipped from hers to her thigh once more.

She ate her soup as well, not tasting it at all, too focused on what was happening beneath the table. She did not stop him, but rather followed his lead and proceeded to eat, acting as though his hands did not touch her so intimately. So close to her women's flesh, which throbbed for him. Never had she been so sensitive.

His fingers brushed over her mound, causing the breath to lodge in her throat. The spoon slipped from her fingers, and clanged against the china.

Everyone at the table turned toward her. Horrified, she flashed an apologetic smile and continued to eat, not looking at anyone, particularly the man at her side who continued to touch her, undeterred.

Could he not see how he rattled her to the point of unreason?

His palm flattened on her thigh again, slipping beneath her napkin, his fingers sliding between her thighs, coming close to that tiny nub of nerves she had found just last night.

The climax she had experienced by her own hand would be nothing compared to what Nicholas would do to her.

And he would. Nothing would stop him. She knew that now, and the thought made the hair on her arms stand on end.

With the pad of one long finger, he drew a circle around the nub of skin Lady Devine called a clitoris. She could feel her cheeks grow hotter by the second, and hoped no one else noticed the change in her complexion. She gently set the spoon down.

Nicholas continued to eat, and even answered a question directed at him by the brunette.

All along he touched her. He did not miss a beat, even laughing at something the woman said.

Thankfully Lord Henchley was occupied with his soup, for she could not speak if she wanted to. She just wanted to feel. To know what it felt like to have a man touch her so intimately. To feel like wax dripping off a candle, as Lady Devine had put it.

The pressure on her sensitive clit intensified and Brianna had to fight from lifting her hips. Such exquisite pain and need.

Nicholas sat his spoon down, reached for his glass and took a long swallow. He set the glass down and leaned toward her, his breath stirred the hair at her ear as his finger flicked over her clit quickly. "I cannot wait to have you in my bed," he whispered, his lips so close, she nearly groaned.

And then it happened. Her body tightened and released, her channel pulsing, her soul singing as she climbed even higher, like jumping off a cliff.

"That's it," he said, his fingers pressing hard against her clit, feeling her spasms.

Nicholas grit his teeth, wishing he could be inside that tight channel right now. To experience that tremor with her, and take her even higher.

Her cheeks turned warm, her eyes darkened. How ready she was for him to take her.

A rose ready to unfurl.

A body in need of awakening.

She trembled beside him, and he ran a soothing hand over her thigh, before bringing the napkin to his lips. He had noted his good friend, Lord Tabor, down the table watching them, no doubt guessing at what was happening beneath the table. He winked at Nicholas, before looking away. Thankfully Aunt Freddie had Lord Henchley

Masquerade

engaged in conversation, and now Nicholas would act the gentleman for the rest of the meal.

At least until the soirée began...

Chapter Nine

"We should leave," Angelica said, fanning herself vigorously with her fan. Many of the guests were out on the dance floor, including Nicholas.

The woman was the brunette, who had been his dinner companion and the one he'd been speaking to upon Brianna's arrival.

Who was she? Brianna had a suspicion the woman was married to a much older man, who at the moment stood with a group of other men, obviously uncaring that his wife had been talking to Saxford all night.

Brianna wanted to claw the woman's eyes out.

What the hell was wrong with her?

And why had she allowed Nicholas to touch her so intimately?

But she had been right. A climax by his hand had been much more intense than by her own hand. "Aunt Freddie is enjoying herself with Lord Henchley. I hate to interrupt her," Brianna said, wishing Peter was here to keep her company.

He had sent her a message earlier, saying he was unable to attend. Something about his mother arriving unexpectedly. He had signed the note with an exaggerated *HELP ME, P!*

Her friend could always make her laugh. Indeed, she could use a good laugh right now.

Brianna's humor fled the moment the brunette laughed gaily.

Digging her nails into her palms, Brianna forced herself to look away from the couple.

"Oh my goodness, Aunt Freddie and Lord Henchley are out on the dance floor." Angelica nodded toward the pair.

Glad for the interruption, Brianna could not help but smile. Aunt Freddie positively beamed as she went through the steps of the quadrille.

A young man approached Brianna and Angelica, and she recognized him from the group of men who had been on the steps when they first arrived tonight. "Would you like to dance?" he asked Angelica, who immediately declined. His speech marked him as an American. Tall, blond, and with an easy smile, Brianna thought him rather good-looking, though he couldn't hold a candle to Nicholas. Damn, but she could not get the man out of her head.

"Thank you, but no," Angelica said, doing her best to look apologetic.

He frowned and turned to Brianna, who said, "I would love to."

The man extended his arm and Brianna took it. They joined the group of dancers just as the quadrille ended and a waltz began.

Her partner looked pleased as he took her in his arms. "My name is Oliver Wilson."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Wilson. Have you been in England long?"

"For nearly a year now. I am taking a break from my studies."

"You attend Oxford?"

"Cambridge, and I recently graduated."

"We have something in common then."

He quirked his head a little to the side. Though handsome, there was a cockiness about him that she found unappealing. "You graduated from Oxford?" The slight curve of his lips let her know he jested.

"No, not Oxford, but a school in Northern England."

"Ah, and you are now in London. Free to do as you please."

She could feel Nicholas watching her. She could sense him, and indeed saw him from the corner of her eye. He stood with a small group of men, nursing a drink.

She smiled widely up at the handsome American. "I wish I could say I am free to do as I please, but that would not be entirely true."

“Yes, it is different for women in England.”

“In America the women have more freedom?” she asked, intrigued, silently wishing she had been born on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean.

He nodded, flashing a nice smile. “Yes, they do.”

“You speak from experience?”

“I have a younger sister.”

“I envy her that freedom then.”

“I imagine being the daughter of the Duke of Durham, you live a somewhat sheltered life.”

“Do you mock me, sir?”

He shook his head, his gaze shifting over Brianna in a way that made her miss a step. She was flirting, and well this man knew it. No doubt every person in the room knew it too, particularly the dark-haired, blue-eyed man that watched so intently.

He tried to look injured but failed. “I do not mock you, Lady Angelica.”

The mention of her sister’s name made her sober. Everyone in this room knew her as her twin. Everyone believed that the quiet, demure woman sitting on the chair by herself was Brianna, and not Angelica.

No...Angelica now was the aggressive, spirited twin, engaged to Lord Saxford, while Brianna was the quiet, shy, soon to be bride of an older Navy captain.

He pulled her a little tighter, and leaned in to her. “You are beautiful, Angelica. Breathtaking.”

At that moment Brianna looked up to find Saxford walking toward them. And she was not the only one to notice. It seemed everyone had become aware of the gorgeous earl making his way through the crowd.

Her heart accelerated.

She glanced at the American and smiled. “Thank you, Oliver.”

Nicholas tapped Oliver on the shoulder, and the American turned, a frown on his handsome face.

Nicholas' smile did not even begin to reach his eyes. "May I cut in?"

An obviously disappointed Oliver looked ready to deny him, when Nicholas said, "I have not had the opportunity to dance with my fiancé yet."

Oliver stepped away from her, and with a curt nod, left them.

Nicholas took her in his arms and held her tight. Immediately her heart accelerated. She felt the touch of his fingers, as though they burned right through the material of her gown.

What was it about this man that made her lose all sense of herself, and made her think of unladylike things?

"I see that your aunt is enjoying herself," Nicholas said, smiling easily at her.

She looked up at him, her insides tightening. "Yes, she is."

"Lord Henchley is a wonderful man."

"He seems to be," she replied, her gaze shifting from his to just beyond his shoulder. Others watched them intently, no doubt speculating.

"Who is the brunette?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

He smiled, his eyes narrowing slightly as he watched her closely. "Lady Napavine. A good friend of my sister's."

"Your sister's?"

He nodded. "Yes, I have a sister. Did I not tell you?"

"Yes, Christina and I grew up in nearby villages. We have known each other for years, and in fact she was my sister's best friend for many years." He nodded toward a group of men. "She is married to Lord Napavine, the tall fellow over there."

Relief flooded Brianna. "Where does your sister live now?"

"She is living in the highlands of Scotland, happily married to Laird McFarland."

"A Scotsman. How romantic."

He laughed, the sound pleasing.

"Is she younger than you?"

He nodded. "By four years."

"You must have doted on her."

He flashed a smile. "Yes, as did all my brothers. She is the only girl, so we were incredibly protective."

He had brothers as well. There really was so much she did not know about Nicholas. "What is her name?"

"Analeise."

"A beautiful, feminine name."

He laughed again. "Yes, a feminine name, but rest assured she acted more like a boy than a girl, much to our mother's distress."

Brianna smiled, knowing that she would get along very well with Analeise.

"She was forever getting into scrapes, but we would always help when we could."

"Do you have nieces and nephews?"

"I do. Seven. Four nephews and three nieces."

"And I'm sure you spoil them all."

"Yes, I do."

"Do you look forward to having children?" Now where had that question come from?

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers for a long moment. "I cannot wait to have children with you. I hope our daughters have your eyes, and your beautiful hair. It's like pale silk." He reached out and took a lock of hair between finger and thumb. "I will buy her ribbons in every color."

Her throat grew tight at the image of Nicholas with a little girl in his arms.

Not just Nicholas' daughter, but their daughter.

“I bet you will be a wonderful father.”

She could see the shock in his eyes, and she wished not for the first time that the situation could have been different. That she could have been Angelica, the second born twin. The one not engaged to a stoic older Navy captain, who already warned her of the lonely life ahead of her.

If only...

“You frown, Angelica. Why?”

His breath, hot against her neck, smelled of fine brandy.

“I wish things could be different.”

“I will give you everything you wish for...if you let me, Angelica.” His lip touched her ear, causing the hair on her arms to stand on end.

The song ended, and he took her by the hand. She did not question where they were going. At this point, she did not care. She only wanted to be out of the stifling room, away from Angelica’s prying eyes.

They headed out the set of double doors, into a long hallway. They passed by an elderly couple who sat on a bench in a small alcove, the woman’s head on the man’s shoulder.

Nicholas’ fingers tightened on hers. They walked up a flight of stairs, and then stepped into a room off to the right.

In that moment she was as desperate to be with him as he was to be with her. He seemed to know where he was headed, and she did not question him.

The room had been decorated in creams and yellow. The deep, cherry wood furniture complemented the light tones. A candelabra let off the only light.

He led her to the settee where he sat down and instantly pulled her into his arms. They kissed like lovers parted for too long.

She did not hold back the longing she had been denying. Too many emotions rushed through her. She needed to understand what the pull was, put it to rest, and God willing, be able to move forward with her life.

Be damned rules and masquerades.

She wanted only to feel. At least for this night.

His fingers tightened on her hip, his thumb brushing up along her side. The hair on her arms stood on end, and she groaned low in her throat as he deepened the kiss.

He cupped her breast, weighing it in his hand, his fingers moving over the hardened peak.

Every nerve in her body pulsed with energy. How wonderful to be touched in this way. Her blood rushed through her veins, into places that ached for this man in a way she never imagined.

Growing bold, she slid her hand from his hip, to his hard stomach. The muscles clenched beneath her fingers, but he did not push her away. Lady Devine had said a woman could please a man with the brush of her fingers over his manhood. The pads of her fingertips brushed over his length, and immediately his kiss deepened.

His hand closed over hers, guiding her to touch him. Such a strange sensation. The feel of his hard shaft, and imagining what it would be like to have him deep inside her.

She grew moist and more excited as his erection grew even harder. Her channel tightened, a delicious ache growing there.

A gasp alerted Brianna that they were no longer alone. Brianna glanced up to find Angelica at the door. Her hand went to her mouth, and she slammed the door shut behind her.

Dread filled every inch of Brianna. Hopefully Angelica would keep mum and not tell Aunt Freddie what she had witnessed. "I have to go," she said, already standing.

Nicholas pulled her back down. "Just one more kiss."

She leaned over and gave him one last kiss.

* * * * *

Angelica did not make eye contact with Brianna.

They had been in the carriage for ten minutes, listening to Freddie's exciting recall of everything she had learned about Lord Henschley.

Brianna had smiled, genuinely pleased that their aunt had found such happiness. To think that all these years she had been alone, with no one to share intimacies with.

How lonely her life must have been.

And how lonely your life will be, her conscience screamed, reminding her of her betrothal to Reginald.

Disappointed that Angelica did not share in the conversation, Brianna patted her aunt's hand. "I think he is a wonderful man, Aunt Freddie. And a fabulous dinner companion."

"He said you were lovely, my dear. I appreciate you saying such nice things about me as well." Her cheeks turned a brighter shade of pink. "He has asked me to dinner on Wednesday."

Brianna hugged her aunt. "I am so happy. Isn't that wonderful, Angelica?"

Angelica smiled for the first time in hours. "Indeed, it is. I am intensely happy for you, Aunt Freddie."

At least she meant it.

"Did you enjoy yourself, my dears?" Freddie asked.

Brianna nodded. "I did."

Angelica lifted a brow. "You certainly did."

Freddie frowned and looked at Brianna. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing," Brianna said, a touch too quickly. Damn, her aunt could always read her, and now would be no exception. "I just stepped out with Lord Saxford."

"Stepped out where?"

Angelica glanced out the window.

“Actually we went to an upstairs room.”

“Brianna!”

Brianna could feel her cheeks turn hot. “We just talked.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Angelica did.”

“Ah...” Freddie ran a hand down her face. “I believe I am guilty because I was lax in my chaperone duties.”

“It isn’t your fault, Aunt Freddie. Saxford wanted to talk to me where it would be quiet.”

“You must be careful of men like Saxford, my dear. He is bound and determined to make you his wife, and he will go to any lengths to make sure that happens. Trapping you might be his way. Scandal is the best way to assure a marriage will take place.”

Just like the carriage ride.

“I fear that we may just be in over our heads on this one. Perhaps we should leave London.”

Brianna’s heart sank to her toes. She didn’t want to leave London...or Nicholas.

Good God, did that mean she loved him?

Was that even possible? After all, they had only known each other for a week. Perhaps it was lust, plain and simple. Just like Lady Devine had felt for her legion of lovers.

Would another man make her feel like Nicholas did? Could Reginald?

She knew the answer.

No.

“Where would we go?” Brianna asked, her heart breaking at the thought.

“Perhaps Paris.”

“That far?” Angelica asked, her tone implying the idea did not thrill her.

"You're right, Angelica," Brianna said, knowing her sister was too sick from her pregnancy to endure a trip across the English Channel. Of course being in a carriage for any length of time was not a good idea either.

"What about the house in Breshire? Mother used to speak of it often."

Freddie pursed her lips. "Yes, we spent many a summer there. It is a small home, but with lovely grounds, and it is only two hours by coach. That might be just what we need to clear our heads."

"But what of Lord Henchley?" Brianna asked, in a last-ditch effort to stay in London.

Freddie shrugged as though it didn't matter, but Brianna knew differently. "I am certain he will understand."

"But you are to have dinner on Wednesday."

"I can put it off until my return."

"Why don't we wait until Thursday to leave then?" Brianna said, knowing she would see Nicholas at least one more time before they left.

"Brianna, you must tell Saxford that you will not marry him by Monday," Angelica said matter-of-factly. "Then we will leave town and tell no one where we are going. I'm sure once he realizes you are gone, he needs to find someone else to marry."

"And I will tell him it's over for good this time. In fact, I will go there in the morning. By this time tomorrow night, your wedding to Saxford will be called off."

Freddie squeezed Brianna's hand. "I know how difficult this has been for you, my dear. You have had so much on your mind with your own fiancé, and to have to pretend you are serious and divert Saxford's attention must be taxing."

Tears burned the backs of Brianna's eyes. Little did her aunt know that Nicholas had gotten under her skin. The very thought of making love to Reginald, or even kissing him after what she experienced with Saxford, made her stomach churn.

Worst of all, she had fallen hopelessly in love with a man she would never be able to marry.

Chapter Ten

Nicholas woke to a pounding at the door.

His valet, Charles' muffled voice came next. "My lord, you have a visitor."

Squinting at the ormolu clock on the fireplace mantel, Nicholas made out the hour as just after six in the morning. Far too early to receive visitors. True, he often woke by seven and started his day with a ride around the park, but he needed that small exercise to get his mind working and cleared for the day ahead, but he had slept terribly last night, too worried about Angelica. "Send them away, Charles."

"My lord, she is quite distraught."

She? That brought him wide awake and he sat up on an elbow. Thinking that Vivienne had returned to throw herself on his mercy, Nicholas ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. "Come in, Charles. No need to speak through wood when we can converse like two gentlemen."

The valet entered, his wig askew, his cravat a bit cockeyed. Apparently this visitor had stirred Charles as well. His valet had been the son of his father's trusted butler, a man of impeccable manners. Charles had grown up with Nicholas and the two had been more friends than lord and master. "Who is this woman?"

"I believe she is your betrothed."

That brought him even more awake. "Lady Angelica?"

Charles nodded. "Indeed, my lord. The very one."

Instantly alert, Nicholas was out of bed and pulling his pants and shirt on. "Tell her I shall be down immediately."

"In what room should I seat her?"

"My study."

“And shall I offer tea, my lord, or will the lady be leaving too soon?”

“Absolutely make her tea, and offer her a scone or whatever you can salvage up this time of morning.”

“Yes, my lord,” Charles said, shutting the door behind him.

Angelica had come to him? Could it be that she had finally succumbed to his pressure to marry him? And why did she come so early? That did not bode well...unless Freddie was with her, demanding he marry her now because of his scandalous behavior with her in the carriage.

Actually, that would make matters much easier for him.

Yesterday after he had pleased Angelica in her room and then later in his carriage...in plain sight of the upper crust of London, she had become quiet, sullen, and he feared she may regret her actions.

Now he was almost certain that whatever she couldn't say yesterday, she had found the courage to say to him now.

He swiftly finished his ablutions and headed for his study, his heart knocking hard against his chest. As he entered his study, she stood.

Dark circles made the green of her eyes more pronounced, and they looked swollen, as though she'd spent a sleepless night crying.

Her tea sat untouched, as did the scone. Not a good sign.

“Are you unwell, Angelica?”

She stared at him for a moment, saying nothing. He saw so much in that stare. Uncertainty, fear, regret. And even before she said the words, he knew why she had come.

“I cannot marry you.”

He took a seat behind his desk, and ran a finger along the clean edge, trying hard not to argue with her immediately. It had taken courage to come here alone, and he

would hear her out. He was tired of this game they played, and he didn't understand it, especially given her response to him the last few times they had been together.

They had a connection, and they were both fiercely attracted to each other.

What could possibly be wrong?

"Are you in love with Peter?"

She frowned. "This has nothing to do with Peter."

"Then who?"

"You will not understand."

"Probably not, but perhaps you should try to explain."

"I cannot marry you...because I'm already engaged to someone else."

Nicholas' stomach rolled. At first he thought perhaps she teased him, yet as the minutes ticked away he could see the truth in her eyes. "That is impossible. Your parents..."

"My parents were not aware of my engagement."

Jealousy rippled along his spine. "Who is this man?"

She swallowed hard, her throat convulsing and she dropped her gaze to his desk. "Someone that worked at St. Andrew's."

St. Andrew's was an all-girls school...taught by only nuns, but certainly there were men on staff. However...none who would be of a class to marry a duke's daughter.

"Who is he?"

"He is a groom."

He laughed without mirth, certain she could not be serious, but then she caught his gaze and realized that she was not lying. "You are in love with a groom?"

She nodded. "Yes, and I'm having his child."

Now he knew she lied, for he was more than aware that she was still virgin. For her to go to such lengths to devise a story showed how desperate she was to get out of this marriage. It made no sense.

He stood, and rounded the desk, to where he stood directly in front of her. He rested his hips against the desk and looked down at her, forcing her to make eye contact.

She did. Her cheeks turned bright red, but she did not look away.

“You are lying to me again, Angelica.”

“I must go,” she said, standing, flustered, especially when she realized she would have to brush against him to pass by to get to the door.

He reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders. Every inch of her was pressed against him. “You leave so soon?”

“Let me go.”

“Stay a while longer. Tell me again why you cannot marry me. What is this groom’s name?”

“Sean.”

She said it without hesitation, making him wonder if perhaps she had indeed fallen in love with this groom. Well, she could forget all about the other man. He took her chin in his hand, and lifted it. “If you look me in the eye and tell me you do not desire me, then I will let you go. You will never hear from me again.”

He could see her pulse quicken, sense her nervousness as her gaze shifted to his lips. “I do not desire you,” she said, the words little more than a whisper.

He shook his head. “I said you would need to look me in the eye when you said it, else I will have a difficult time believing it.”

Her entire body trembled, and her eyes filled with tears.

“I do not desire you.”

He watched her for a long moment and she held his gaze. Even though he knew she lied, he nodded. “Very well. I will bother you no longer. I wish you and your groom much happiness, Angelica.”

Stepping away from her had to be the hardest thing he had ever done, but he did. He walked toward the door, and pulled it open with more force than necessary.

She walked past him, her scent enveloping him as she did. He couldn't help it. He reached out to her, and pulled her close, his mouth coming down on hers.

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, holding tight, her mouth opening and her tongue parrying with his.

Never had she been so willing, and he sensed her desperation as much as his own in that passionate kiss.

He shut the door with his foot, and backed her against it. She moaned low in her throat and his hand moved over her hip to cover a breast. His thumb flicked over a nipple and he heard her groan.

He needed no further urging.

Lifting her in his arms, he walked to the chaise and laid her down, joining her there after he helped her off with her boots. He kicked off his own as well, and then covered her.

She accepted him greedily, and he lay completely over her, taking his weight on his elbows, kissing her as her hands roamed over his back, and down over his buttocks.

His cock lay hard against her belly, his need growing by the second.

He lifted her skirts with one hand, and felt she had not bothered with drawers. No doubt in her haste to come to him, she had not bothered.

And he was glad. No deterrent.

He stroked her folds, elated to find her already wet for him. "Nicholas," she said, her words a silent plea.

She was so ready. Her face flushed, her eyes dark with passion, her lips open, her body wet and waiting for him to claim her.

He did not want it to end so soon though. He needed to work up to the actual consummation, and he would not do it here in his study. No, he would take her in his

bed, something he'd been yearning to do since he met her. Not a tumble on a chaise in a ground-floor study where the curtains had already been pulled back, and the gardeners even now worked the grounds.

"Come, let us go somewhere more comfortable."

He stood up, and extended his hand. She bit her bottom lip and looked to the door, then back to him. He expected the next words to come, the "I have to leave now", but instead she took the hand he offered and smiled.

He felt that smile all the way to his toes.

He collected their boots and they exited the study, making it to his room without coming upon any of his servants. He knew Charles would make sure they would go undisturbed for the better part of the day.

Once in his room, he set their boots down, and then pulled her into his arms again.

He framed her face with his hands, kissing her softly at first. "You are so beautiful, Angelica. Every time I see you, I think you are even more perfect than the time before."

Her lips curved, but she said nothing. He saw the nervousness there. Knew what she must be feeling and how strange this must be.

How wonderful it was to be her first.

He would make sure she would have a hard time forgetting it. He kissed her forehead, her nose, each cheek, and then her lips again.

Slowly he began working on the buttons at the back of her gown. Soon the dress weighted against her elbows and he broke off the kiss, to push it down and off her. She stepped out of it. A silk chemise, with a pink bow and rose trimming would be the next article to come off. He kissed each shoulder, untying the bow that held the bodice together. With a whisper it fell to her feet.

She stood naked before him. Perfectly formed. She trembled, and her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. He longed to stand back, to look his fill of her, but he did not wish to embarrass her further. It was enough that she stood before him now, in the

early morning light, a woman never before touched by a man. A girl who would soon be a woman. *His* woman. His cock jerked as his gaze shifted to her full breasts, the nipples a rose-pink hue.

"You're beautiful," he whispered in her ear, her curls stirring. He kissed her neck, the pulse beating wildly there, and then the swell of her breasts. One then the other.

Her fingers went to the buttons of his shirt, and he smiled as she clumsily unbuttoned each, and then pushed it off his shoulders and tossed it aside.

Next she worked the buttons on his pants. Her hands trembled fiercely, growing clumsier, and she even cursed under her breath. "Should I help?" he asked, his cock growing painfully hard against the buttons.

"No, I shall manage," she said, a determined smile on her face.

And she did. A second later his pants were down, and then next his drawers, until they stood naked, facing each other.

She stared at him for a long time, and he let her look her fill, not at all embarrassed. No doubt she was curious, and he had never been ashamed at what God had given him.

"You are so...large."

The compliment pleased him greatly, and his cock responded, growing longer and thicker under her gaze. She reached out and touched the head, her fingers brushing over the slit there.

He swallowed a groan as she grew bolder, her fingers encircling him, testing his weight. "It *does* feel like velvet over steel."

His hand caught her wrist and she looked up with a start. He could not keep the smile from his lips. "How do you know of such things?"

She looked startled, and ripped her hand from his. "I did not mean to insult you."

He smiled then, touching her cheek. "I am not angry with you, but rather curious how you could make such a comparison."

She bit into her bottom lip. "You would think me wanton if I told you the truth."

"Never," he said, meaning it.

"Have you ever heard of Lady Devine?"

He frowned. "The French courtesan?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Are you to tell me that you have read Lady Devine's exploits?"

Her cheeks turned bright red, and he had his answer. He laughed, and pulled her into his arms. "You little vixen. I would have never guessed. How did you manage to read them while living at St. Andrew's? Certainly the nuns would not have allowed it."

She laughed nervously, the sound making him smile. "Peter would bring them over. We would sneak out at night and meet him by the river. By the light of a candle we would read the stories, and sometimes we even snuck them into the school, but soon there were searches, so we stopped, too afraid of our parents finding out."

"Your sister read them as well?"

"You look surprised."

"She does not seem the kind of girl who would be do such a thing."

She opened her mouth as though to argue, and then closed it. "And I am?"

He kissed her then, silencing any more questions. She seemed not to mind, as her arms wrapped around his neck.

How exquisite she felt in his arms, her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples hardening. His hands moved down her back and over her heart-shaped buttocks.

He lifted her, wrapping her legs about his waist, and he walked to the bed. His cock pressed against her mons, and he could feel the heat down there. Laying her down slowly, he stood and looked down at her.

Amazingly beautiful. Never would he forget this moment.

Slowly his gaze moved down her body, over her firm breasts, her flat stomach, and the patch of pale curls guarding her womanhood. He kneeled on the bed, and kissed her breast, his tongue laving the hard peak.

She moaned low in her throat and arched off the bed.

His tongue flicked over the nipple time and time again. Her fingers wove through his hair, holding him tight as he pleased first one nipple, then the other. Her breaths came in tiny pants. He moved down her body, dropping kisses over her belly, her navel, then lower to the slick folds.

She came off of the bed when his tongue stroked her there. "Nicholas!" she said, pushing at his head.

He looked up at her, could see the shock on her face. Surely Lady Devine had written about the wonders of oral stimulation. "Trust me, my dear. Just trust me."

She nodded, and lay back down. He dipped his head again and this time kissed the inside of her thigh.

Her fingers gripped his hair, pulling it. He grew bolder, stroking his tongue over her slit, and over her clit. With each stroke of his tongue her thighs fell open, and she arched her hips.

"Nicholas," she said on a moan.

"Do you like what I'm doing?"

"Mmmm," she said in reply.

He sucked hard on her sensitive nub, while his fingers played with a nipple.

"Oh my God," she said, as her body found its completion. Her entire body went taut, and then he felt the pulsing against his lips.

She opened her eyes, and he lay over her, his cock resting against her slick center. He entered her slowly, inch by inch.

She winced a little as he continued, her body stretching to accommodate his size. A snug fit, and he wondered if perhaps she would be able to take all of him.

"This will hurt once, and only once. I promise you that."

Nodding, she relaxed, and he slid in the rest of the way, busting past the barrier that marked him as her first.

She bit into his shoulder and he could see her wince, so he didn't move. Her delicious heat surrounded him, clamping around him so tight.

Gritting his teeth, he started to move, very slowly, wanting her to get used to the feeling of him inside her.

He kissed her again, and then bent his head to take a nipple in his mouth. She shifted beneath him, her hips arching off the bed.

He could wait no longer. His thrusts quickened. Thankfully her channel stretched to accommodate his size. Sweat beaded his brow but he waited, wanting her to come with him.

Then it happened. Her cries filled his ears at the same time her channel locked around him, pulsing, drawing him in deeper, pulling his seed from him.

Though he knew he should pull out, especially since he had not bothered with protection, he waited until the last possible moment before he withdrew.

With a satisfied groan, he came, and fell to her side, pulling her into his embrace.

Chapter Eleven

Brianna awoke and found herself looking into a pair of clear blue eyes.

Nicholas Santrell, the Earl of Saxford lay naked beside her, and he had been watching her as she slept.

“Good morning,” she said, drawing the sheet up to her chin. Modesty had come a bit late, given all they had done in the past few hours, but the virgin she had been came roaring back to life.

She glanced at the clock on the wall, shocked to find hours had passed. She should get going. Angelica would grow suspicious when Brianna didn’t show up for breakfast.

Though she knew she should feel remorseful, she didn’t. The only regret she did have was failing Angelica yet again. When she had arrived here this morning, she had every intention of telling Nicholas the truth. At least the truth from Angelica’s point of view. True, he didn’t know she was not Angelica, but he had heard the true story why Angelica could not marry him.

She had been ready to march out the door and forget Nicholas forever, but then he’d had to grab her wrist and pull her against him.

Not like she’d fought him, and if he’d let her go, she would have been heartbroken.

What a fix she was in now.

His lips curved into a smile that made her heart miss a beat. “Good morning,” he said, his tone sensual.

If possible the man was even more beautiful with his hair all ruffled, and his eyes heavy-lidded and sleepy-looking. Those full lips, and what they had done to her made her feel suddenly very warm.

Good gracious, this man had touched her—and tasted her—in ways she'd never dreamt possible. Certainly, Lady Devine had spoken of such things in her memoirs, but Brianna had always thought those were things only a courtesan would try.

"It is a bit late for blushes," he said, taking her by surprise and pulling her on top of him, so she lay completely flat against him.

And she could feel every inch of him. Every hard inch of him.

"See what you do to me?" he asked, playfully. Lord, but he was handsome, and to her horror she knew she had indeed fallen head over heels in love with him.

"Straddle me," he said against her lips, and she reared back.

"What?"

"Straddle me. Put one knee on either side of my thighs. You can ride me."

She did as he asked, embarrassed that he could see her naked body. His cock reared between them, long and thick. Her insides tightened, and moisture pooled between her thighs.

"Take me inside you." he said, his hands at her hips, lifting her, guiding her.

She took him slowly into her body, the tissue still sensitive from the day before. She winced, and he stopped. "If it hurts—"

"No," she said quickly, sitting down hard, taking him completely within her. "You feel enormous."

"Ride me," he said, lifting her, showing her what he wanted her to do.

Her breasts bounced as she shifted her hips and he seemed entranced by the movement, cupping her breasts. He reached up and took them into his palms, rolling her nipples between his fingers. How sensitive they were!

He came up off the bed and took a nipple into his mouth, sucking her hard. How wondrous it felt to have him pleasuring her so, with his cock embedded deep inside her.

So many sensations at one.

Never had she thought this possible between a man and a woman.

Her body tightened, building to that beautiful crescendo she had learned about just hours ago.

Nicholas' fingers tightened around her hips as he reached his own completion, and she fell against him as her channel pulsed around his hard, thick length, trying to catch her breath.

With a satisfied groan he met his own climax. His hand ran up and down her back, soothing her.

She could stay like this all day.

If she was married to him. Sobering with impending reality, she said, "I must return home. I'm certain that both Freddie and my sister are very concerned."

"I don't want you to go," he said, and she looked up at him. He meant it. He actually didn't want her to go, which made leaving even more difficult.

With a sigh of regret, she rolled off him and came to her feet, mindless of her naked state. "Can you return tonight?"

His blue eyes shifted over her possessively, and when their gazes met, she saw the heat there. Pleased that he desired her, she shrugged. "I do not know yet. Perhaps after Freddie and my sister have gone to sleep. I don't know. I suppose it all depends on what happens in the next few hours."

"What will you tell the groom?"

She knew that question would come, but she couldn't answer it. Not now. Not when so much was uncertain. There were too many things they hadn't said to each other. So many lies. She had to sort things out and soon.

"You would marry him still?"

He came off the bed, and stood behind her, his hands firm on her shoulders. "Angelica, you will marry me. You could already be carrying my child."

Strangely, she knew she should be horrified by such a prospect, especially given that her sister might have to marry this man. She wondered for an instant what their child would look like, and smiled imagining a boy, the mirror image of Nicholas. "If only it were that simple," she said, turning in his arms, enjoying the feel of his naked body against hers.

How she wanted to return to that bed, to do the things that made her blood burn and her soul sing.

"It can be that simple, Angelica. Let me talk to Freddie. Let me talk to this groom. I can pay him for his trouble."

"Like I told you before, I am in love with him, and I am going to have his child."

He lifted her chin with his fingers. "Angelica, you are virgin. Do you see the blood on those sheets?" he said, motioning to the bed and the red stain there.

Her cheeks burned, and she dropped her gaze to his chest. She should have known that he would discover the truth. In truth, it had been said that some women didn't bleed when they lost their virginity. Something about riding horses astride could break the hymen. Well, she had ridden astride on a few occasions, but it didn't seem to have affected her.

He lifted her chin again. "I do not know why you cannot tell me the truth. I have to believe that there is something that is keeping you from becoming my wife, for I know you desire me. I see it in your eyes, and your body does not lie. I will be your husband. I will be the first, and God willing, the last man that ever touches you."

The possession in his eyes took her breath away. She opened her mouth, ready to tell him the truth, but a loud rapping at the door stopped her.

"There is a Lord Cowdray here," the valet said from the other side of the door.

"Peter!" Brianna said, horrified that her friend had come looking for her. Peter would know in a glance what had happened between her and Nicholas.

Nicholas looked to the door and then to Brianna. "Why is he here?"

“My sister probably sent him.”

He brushed a curl over her ear and kissed her tenderly. “Everything will be all right. Trust me.”

He wrapped his robe about her, then pulled on his pants. He didn’t bother with a shirt, but walked to the door and opened it.

Brianna wished a hole would open in the floor and swallow her whole.

Peter’s gaze shifted from Nicholas to Brianna, then to the rumpled bed.

“Your aunt and sister are looking for you. They will be here shortly.”

Brianna needed no further urging. She gathered her dress and underclothes and escaped into the sitting room to dress quickly. She didn’t bother with her underthings, but instead wrapped them into a ball.

She caught her reflection in the cheval mirror and it startled her. Her hair hung to her waist in a tangled mass. Her cheeks were pink, her lips swollen. She looked like a woman who had been bedded...and quite soundly at that.

Nicholas opened the door. “I thought you might need some assistance.”

Tears clogged her throat, so she shook her head. “Don’t worry, Angelica. Everything will be fine. You’ll see.”

Angelica....

She wanted to tell him that nothing would be right ever again. That he had ruined her for any other man. That she would, within a few months time, have to perform the act of a lifetime while spending her wedding night with Reginald, all the while wondering where Nicholas was and with whom.

No, nothing would be right.

Why had she done this to herself? It had been bad enough when she had dreamt about making love to him, but now that she had already gone ahead and done the deed, the repercussions were even more intense.

More detrimental.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, concern in his voice and in his eyes. “You need not bear this alone. I will come with you and tell your aunt myself.”

She buried her face in his chest, taking his comfort, knowing that this would be the longest day of her life.

Once she stopped crying he helped her button her dress and with a kiss, he opened the door.

Peter smiled gently and extended his arm. Good old Peter. Nonjudgmental Peter, who even now patted her hand reassuringly.

“I will call on you later,” Nicholas promised, and without another word, they left.

* * * * *

Thankfully Brianna and Peter had arrived back at Aunt Freddie’s townhouse a full twenty minutes before Freddie and Angelica returned.

Brianna had had time to wash her face and brush her hair. Peter had suggested she wear the same gown she had left in, but to at least put on her underclothes. She had done so and now sat at the table with the three of them.

“I do not know how we did not see you at the park. We must have circled it a good half-dozen times,” Angelica said, her brows furrowed.

“I have had friends say they would meet me there, and they never find me. It is a common occurrence,” Peter said, taking a sip of tea. “I just happened to find her sitting on a bench, watching the ducks play in the water.”

Bless Peter...he could lie without blinking.

Angelica looked relieved. “You should have left us a note, Brianna. We were terrified.”

Terrified that she had been with Nicholas, not that something had happened to her. If only they knew the truth. “I’ll be sure to leave a note next time.”

Freddie picked at her plate and said very little, making Brianna wonder if her aunt hadn’t guessed the truth.

She caught Peter's gaze and saw that he was thinking the same thing by the slight widening of his eyes.

"How about we play a game of charades after dinner?" Brianna said, before taking a sip of tea, hoping to change the subject.

"I think I will take a nap," Freddie said, pushing her chair back. "I did not sleep well last night. If you will excuse me."

No doubt Freddie was depressed at the prospect of leaving London so soon after meeting Lord Henschley. They all watched in silence as she walked to the door. Angelica met Brianna's stare. When their aunt's footsteps faded, Brianna turned to her sister.

"You were with him, weren't you?" Angelica asked, little more than a whisper.

Brianna nodded.

Angelica closed her eyes. "Bree, what have you done?"

"The same thing you did with Sean."

Angelica swallowed hard, and glanced at Peter, then Brianna. "You told him as well?"

"No, she didn't," Peter said, pushing his plate away. "But that is neither here nor there. What we have to worry about now is getting out of town before scandal hits. You could have been seen arriving at Saxford's house without a chaperone this morning, Bree. Word spreads quickly, and it could very well reach your parents...all the way in Greece."

"We leave for Breshire tomorrow."

"Perhaps tonight would be better," Peter said, lowering his voice.

Brianna's stomach tightened. She felt nauseous. "I have made a mess of everything, haven't I?"

Angelica shook her head. "No, you haven't. I have. I am the one that put you in this position to begin with. I should have just been honest with everyone from the beginning. I should have told Freddie about Sean and the baby."

The cup slipped from Peter's fingers and shattered on the table. "Baby?" Peter shook his head as though to clear it.

A footman came running, but Angelica shook her head and the man retreated.

"You are pregnant with the groom's child?" Peter asked, pressing his hands together, as though in prayer.

Angelica nodded.

"Your parents will never allow you to marry him."

Brianna's heart broke for her sister, because now she understood what it was to love a man. To want him so deeply that you would do anything to be with him.

That was how she felt about Nicholas.

She loved him...and she could not have him. Just as Angelica could not have Sean. What a fine mess they were in.

"Our parents will make Brianna marry Reginald, and me marry Nicholas."

If possible, Brianna felt even more ill at that moment.

"Yes, they will. But what if you were to marry Sean at Gretna Green?"

"They would be furious and no doubt disown me."

"But you will be married to the man you love. The man whose child grows in your womb."

Angelica nodded. "The scandal would be horrible."

Peter shrugged. "It would, but your family will survive it. It is not the first time a daughter of the peerage has fallen in love with a man beneath her station. The story is as old as time itself."

Brianna could see the hope in her sister's eyes. "What can we do then? We leave for Breshire, and I know Sean will be arriving here any day."

"I will stay here and wait for him then," Peter said. "You go with your aunt. Pretend that nothing is amiss. Put Freddie's fears at ease."

“I feel guilty leading her astray,” Brianna said, lowering her voice, fearful a servant might overhear them. “Aunt Freddie has been so kind to us, and look at what we’ve done to repay her. Our mother will never forgive her.”

“Perhaps, but would you rather marry Nicholas and be miserable for the rest of your life, only to make your parents happy? In time all will be forgiven.” Peter reached out and took Angelica’s hand. “We make our own happiness.”

Angelica’s lips curved a little. “I want to marry Sean.”

Peter grinned. “And so you shall.”

Chapter Twelve

Nine o'clock at night, and not a single light flickered at the townhouse.

Very odd since every other time he had visited, the place had been lit up like Brook's on a Friday evening.

"My lord, shall I stay?"

Nicholas glanced at his footman, who looked ready to bolt. The night had turned brisk, signaling a change in the weather.

"I shall find my way back, Giles. Do not fear."

"Very well, my lord," Giles replied, looking relieved as he pulled his coat tighter about him.

Nicholas knocked at the door again.

Misgivings worked their way up his spine. All day he had been waiting for Aunt Freddie's arrival, wondering if the spinster would be aware of what happened to her niece.

Rather than dread the meeting, he instead looked forward to it. Angelica had been so adamant about not marrying him, that now the matter could be put to rest once and for all.

He still could not understand why she had lied to him though. The strange story about the groom.

The door opened. The footman wearing a gray wig and formal attire looked mildly irritated. "The women are asleep, my lord."

"It is rather early, is it not?" Nicholas replied, not liking the way the man fidgeted. Something was not right here. Not at all.

“Will you tell Lady Angelica that I dropped by, and that I shall return tomorrow?”
“I shall tell her, my lord.” The footman nodded, before shutting the door.

Glancing at the upstairs window where he had seen Angelica on a previous occasion, he fought the urge to throw a pebble to see if she would answer.

Instead, he walked down the steps, ready for the long walk home when out of the corner of his eye he saw a movement in an upstairs window.

His heart gave a hard jolt.

Angelica. Wearing only her night rail, her long blonde hair flowing about her like a cloud.

In the bright moonlight, she looked pale, her eyes puffy. His insides churned. Had she been crying? She motioned him up.

He held out his hands. “How?” he mouthed the word.

She opened the window, and he had his answer.

Ivy clung to a trellis that ran up the front of the townhouse. The plant looked hearty enough, but he had no idea if it could bear his weight. He could see himself scaling a wall a decade earlier, but now he could easily fall and break his neck.

Glancing again at the woman looking down at him, he figured it would be worth the risk.

Checking to make sure no one was headed his way, he jumped over the railing, and then started his ascent up the trellis, which thankfully had been made out of iron rather than wood. If the iron hadn't rusted, then it should hold his weight easily enough.

“Careful,” Angelica said, reaching her hand out to him, urging him faster. Hearing a man's voice from down below, he stopped climbing, his fingers tightening around the iron. Angelica had obviously seen the man as well, for she disappeared from the window.

Hopefully the man would not look up. He could imagine the scandal it would cause.

Heart hammering in his ears, he waited until the footsteps passed before climbing again.

He grabbed hold of the window casing, and pulled himself into Angelica's room. She gave him no time to brush off the clinging leaves or dirt. Instead, she went into his arms, her warm body melting into him.

All the fear he had been experiencing melted away with that tight embrace. Honestly, she did not attempt to let go. Once her grip loosened, he put her at arm's length. He lifted her chin with gentle fingers. "What is wrong, Angelica?"

He brushed away her tears with his thumbs. "What is it? What has happened?"

"Nothing. I'm just glad to see you."

In his heart he knew that she kept something from him, but he didn't push her. There was so much he didn't know about this woman, particularly the story about the groom and the possibility of her being pregnant with his child. The reason she could not marry him. Nothing added up, and he would get to the bottom of it. But now was not the time. Instead of questioning her, he lifted her in his arms and lay her on the bed.

She watched him as he took off his jacket and tossed it over a chair. How beautiful she was, her skin pale in the moonlight, the thin night rail of pale blue silk pulled tight against her slender body.

"Is the door locked?"

She nodded. "But we must be quiet. My sister's room is just beyond the sitting room there," she said, nodding toward the wall.

He kicked off his boots and joined her on the bed, telling himself he would be content to just hold her tonight. She needed comfort, not a seduction.

But it seemed she had something else on her mind than mere comforting, for she nuzzled against him, trying to get closer.

She lifted her chin, staring at him, her eyes still bright with tears. "Kiss me, Nicholas," she said, pulling his head down to meet hers.

The moment their lips met, her mouth opened and her tongue brushed against his. She hung to him so tightly, obviously needing his comfort for more reasons than he knew. Or perhaps the tears were because she was no longer a virgin. He had heard some women mourned afterward.

He hoped that was not the case.

She hugged him so tightly, he could scarcely breathe. His fingers ran the length of her spine, before palming her buttock.

She lifted her leg over his, arching her hips against him.

Already hard, his cock swelled against his belly, aching to be inside her hot core again.

Her hand shifted from his chest, down his stomach to the band of his breeches. She trembled, her fingers clumsy, which only excited him further.

Never had he made love to such an innocent, and he reveled that he would be the one to teach her the ways of passion. He would never grow tired of her.

Anxious to feel her bare skin against his, he pushed his pants down and off, followed quickly by his shirt.

She did likewise with her night rail, tossing it aside before going into his arms once more.

"I want to touch you in the same way you touched me," she said, her fingers moving over his cock lightly, then more firmly. When she went up on her knees, her intention became crystal clear.

He swallowed hard.

If she touched him with that sweet, hot mouth, he would most surely come before she found her release.

She bent her head and tasted him, her soft, pink tongue running over the slit.

He reached out and touched the silky soft tresses, winding them between his fingers. She smelled of vanilla, the scent intoxicating, yet innocent.

Just like Angelica.

She took him more firmly into her mouth, farther each time. For having never attempted such an act, she showed definite skill. He smiled inwardly, certain that Lady Devine had something to do with her knowledge.

The blood warmed in his veins, rushing through his belly and into his cock.

For several minutes she licked, sucked, and pleased him, until he knew he would blow if she didn't stop. Knowing he would spend himself if she did not stop, he quickly flipped her.

Stunned, she lay on her back, her brows furrowing into a frown. "I did not please you?"

He smiled and kissed away the frown. "You pleasure me too much, my love. I won't finish before you. I want us to experience this together."

He lowered his head and took a pink nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth and tongue.

Her head fell back onto the pillow, her mouth opening in pleasure. His fingers played over her other breast, palming the globe, rubbing the erect nipple between finger and thumb.

She arched against him, her heart pounding loud.

He kissed a path from her breast, over her flat stomach, and to the curls that guarded her femininity. Her musky essence permeated his senses, driving his need higher.

Her thighs fell open, and he kissed the sensitive skin there, his tongue stroking her slit.

He heard her intake of breath, the shock in it. Teasing her clit with his tongue, he took his time, knowing these were new sensations.

Brianna looked down at Nicholas as he pleased her.

Had it not been for Lady Devine's books she would have never known that a man would taste her as Nicholas did now.

And how wonderful it felt, like every nerve was connected to that part of her.

And he seemed to know her body better than she did. Tasting her, licking her, sucking in that place that made her want to scream to the heavens.

For surely it was like the "little death" as Lady Devine explained it, each time she climaxed.

Her body built toward that wonderful high. That sensation that felt much like an arrow being shot into the sky – ever higher, until it hit that pinnacle, then dropped back to the ground.

She cried out her pleasure, feeling the thrumming of her body, the pulsing that continued.

Looking down at him, positioned between her thighs, doing such wicked things to her, made her blood burn even more. And though she had already come, he continued to pleasure her, stroking her slowly, his tongue flicking over her clit, then sucking. She reached out to him, her fingers weaving through his dark hair, anchoring him there.

When she met her completion a second time, she was certain she had no energy left. But then he crawled up her body, his thick shaft pressing against her swollen folds and she felt a rush of adrenaline.

He entered her, filling her completely. The pain she had experienced yesterday no longer there, replaced by a wonderful sensation.

Her hands moved over his strong back, along his broad shoulders. His thrusts were slow, fluid, gaining in speed and intensity with each second.

The bed rocked against the wall, and he stopped for a moment, glancing at the far wall where, on the opposite side, Angelica lay, hopefully fast asleep.

He bit into his bottom lip, looking down at her as he thrust again. His gaze held hers, his blue eyes dark, his lids heavy.

Her heart missed a beat, for he looked so primal, his need so obvious.

She felt on fire.

The sides of his mouth curved a little, his strokes quickening yet again.

The knocking of the bed against the wall continued, and she was suddenly lifted from the bed. Still joined, he walked a few feet to the rug, and lay her down gently. He continued to make love to her there, his strokes faster as he held her hips steady.

Sweat gleamed on his brow, and on his stomach, their fluids mingling, making a slapping sound with each thrust. She didn't care if Angelica could hear them. The only thing that mattered was this moment and this man.

Then it came, the wonderful completion she had been building toward. Clinging to his shoulders, she bit back her cry, and let out a small moan as she came.

A moment later he joined her, stifling a groan as he kissed her.

How could she get this man out of her system? How could she leave tomorrow and face the prospect of never seeing him again?

The thought made her sick to her stomach.

Reginald could never make her feel the way Nicholas did. She would never love him the way she loved this man.

How she yearned to tell him how she felt. The emotions, the thoughts that raced through her head now and every time they were together.

"I hope your back is all right," he said, a smile on his face.

She smiled, her heart trip-hammering. How beautiful he was. Perfect in every way, especially now when he flashed his boyish grin.

Oh to wake to his face every morning.

He looked beyond her, his brows furrowing. Before she could react, he reached out and lifted Lady Devine's latest volume, which had been stashed beneath her bed.

How embarrassing.

Her cheeks burned. "Nicholas," she whispered, trying to rip it from his hand.

He smiled devilishly. "You are a brazen young woman, Lady Angelica," he said, reminding her of the deceitful game she played.

Though there was no light, the moonlight spilled into the room and allowed enough light to read. And read he did.

"The sultan filled me with his enormous shaft, filling me so completely that I gasped in sheer delight." His lips quirked. "Angelica, you are a wicked girl."

She buried her head in his shoulder. "Stop."

With a laugh, he lifted her in his arms and lay her back down on the bed. "Never be embarrassed by reading Lady Devine. I think she has done a wonderful job initiating you into the ways of making love. I would like to take credit as well," he said with a boyish grin. "I hope we did not alert your sister to my presence."

"She is a hard sleeper. If she had awakened, she would have knocked before now."

"I should leave soon."

Her heart missed a beat. "No, stay awhile."

He seemed pleased by the request, and lay down beside her, pulling her into his strong arms. "For only an hour, and then I must go. I would hate to ruin your reputation."

She heard the laughter in his tone and frowned. "Do you jest, sir?"

"Sir, is it?"

She nodded. "My lord."

"I never jest, Angelica. And I would prefer you called me something far more intimate than 'my lord'."

"Like?"

The teasing left his voice and his features. "Husband."

He was serious. For a moment she allowed herself the luxury of believing that their future could happen. That she would marry him, and that they would spend every night like this, wrapped in his arms. "I would like that." At least she did not lie.

“Are you finally ready to marry me?” he asked, hope in his eyes.
She nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Chapter Thirteen

"Brianna, hurry. The carriage is waiting!"

Angelica's voice rose from the stairway, and into Brianna's room. Their trunks had been packed and carried downstairs earlier, and now she could no longer put off the inevitable. She had no desire to leave the townhouse or London. Last night had only confirmed her feelings toward Nicholas.

She loved him. Most desperately.

"Ready?" a male voice said from the doorway.

Peter. Wearing a dove gray suit, he smiled at her.

"You can stop this, you know."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "How?"

"Tell your parents the truth. Tell them that you love him, and wish to marry him. Tell them you will be miserable without him."

She looked away, toward the bed where Saxford had made love to her hours before.

He had held her tight for the hour he said he would, and then he had dressed, kissed her lightly, and descended the trellis the way he had come.

"I am engaged to Reginald."

"But you could be carrying Saxford's heir."

"I know."

"Brianna!" Angelica again, her voice growing more shrill.

Peter stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "Your sister will wait, while this cannot. I will say my peace now, for I may never have another chance," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I love you, and I will not stand by and watch you destroy the only happiness you will ever know."

“But I told Angelica that I would help her marry Sean.”

“Why is your position any different than Angelica’s? It’s not. You fell in love with a man who is not your fiancé, just as Angelica fell in love with a man who is not her fiancé. You both desire other men, period. That is the long and short of it. You are willing to do whatever you must to ensure your sister’s happiness, but what of your own? Your parents will be furious when they learn of Angelica’s marriage to Sean, so maybe you should plan to marry Nicholas before they come home.”

He made it sound so easy. “Because Nicholas will probably not want to marry me once he learns the truth.”

He shrugged. “How can you be so certain? I have a feeling he will understand once it has been explained to him.”

“But it is too late. We are leaving London now.”

“Write him then. Tell him in a letter, and I shall deliver it myself.”

Brianna had considered writing Nicholas a million times, but had lost her nerve each time.

“I have a feeling your parents would come around eventually. After all, if they thought Saxford good enough for Angelica, why would he not be good enough for you?”

“Because I am already engaged to my father’s good friend.”

“Engagements are meant to be broken, my dear. Even when friends are involved. Not every match is the right one. Surely your parents know that. You love Nicholas, and if I’m not mistaken, he loves you as well.”

Her heart leapt. “Do you think so?”

He nodded. “I do. Bree, do this. Marry Nicholas. Make your own happiness. Your parents have spent their entire lives making decisions for you. I would think you weary of them directing your life from afar. Do not let them make this decision for you.”

“Do you think he will forgive me?”

“There is only one way to figure that out.”

* * * * *

Nicholas walked up the steps to the townhouse, a bouquet of yellow roses in hand, relieved to see several lights on. He had managed a few hours of sleep when he'd come home after making love to Angelica on her bedroom floor. Business had kept him away, but all day he could not get her out of his mind. She had gotten under his skin, to the point he could scarcely think of little else.

His knuckles barely touched the door when it opened, and not by a footman.

Viscount Cowdray. He tried to keep the disappointment from his voice. “Hello Lord Cowdray, is Lady Angelica at home?”

“Come in, Lord Saxford,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

Nicholas stepped in, looking toward the staircase, hoping Angelica would be joining them.

“Come, follow me, will you?” Cowdray said, not waiting for Nicholas' reply. “Beautiful roses, by the way.” His lips curved in a knowing smile. “Yellow roses are her favorite, but I'm assuming you knew that.”

Again, that little wink.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, stepping into the same parlor where Nicholas had met Angelica almost three weeks ago. It was hard to believe so little time had passed from that first meeting.

Peter sat in the chair closest to the fire. He pulled a letter from his waistcoat and handed it to Nicholas, who set the roses on a nearby table.

He broke the wax seal, and read.

Nicholas,

I have lied to you from the first moment we met.

His heart started to race and dread filled every pore.

I am not Angelica, but Brianna, your intended's twin. You see, my sister fell hopelessly in love with a groom at the school we attended in York. I did not lie to you about that, but you see it was my sister I spoke of, and not myself. I was asked to masquerade as Angelica, to do what I could to break off the marriage, as she was pregnant with the groom's child and wished to marry him. For the life of me I did not imagine that this request would be so difficult, nor did I realize that I could fall in love with the very man I was supposed to deceive. But I did fall in love. Oh Nicholas, if only I would have had the courage to tell you this last night, as I'd wanted to, when I lay in your arms. I love you, and I pray that you will forgive me.

I have traveled to Breshire, our home outside of London. Angelica's groom will be arriving at the townhouse any day now. My dear friend, Peter, who is no doubt there with you now, is awaiting Sean's arrival. My sister does not know that I have written this letter, nor does my dear Aunt Freddie. I pray that you keep this information secret and tell no one. If you cannot forgive me, I will understand. I did not mean to hurt you. I will always be sorry.

Yours always,

Brianna.

Brianna. Not Angelica. He pinched the bridge of his nose. And suddenly it all made sense.

"She loves you, you know."

He looked up at Peter, who watched him intently. Surprisingly he felt little anger that he had been duped. "I still do not understand why she could not just tell me."

Peter ran a hand through his hair. "Because the story has another twist. Brianna is engaged to another man."

Those words were as effective as a fist to his gut. Of course she had been. The twins' mother had told him about Brianna's engagement to Viscount Wellesley, the Navy captain.

"When is she supposed to marry?"

"Reginald will be on leave in the fall. He intends to marry her before he ships out yet again."

How could a man marry a woman like Angelica, no, I mean *Brianna*, and then leave her?

“Does she care for this Reginald?”

Peter shook his head. “No. She met him the day of their engagement, and she wrote her mother, telling her she did not wish to marry the man, but as always, her mother insisted she marry Reginald.”

Reginald. He clenched his fists.

“As always, Brianna will be the dutiful daughter and marry him without a word.”

The nerve in his jaw flicked. “There is not a chance in hell that she will marry Reginald.”

The sides of Peter’s mouth lifted. “I was hoping you’d say that.” He stood and walked toward a door. He called out, and a moment later a young man of the same height as Cowdray entered the room.

“Sean, this is Lord Saxford. Nicholas, I would like you to meet the groom.”

Nicholas stood and shook the other man’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you as well,” the groom replied.

Peter clapped his hands together. “All right, now that the pleasantries are aside, how about we take a carriage ride to the country?”

* * * * *

Aunt Freddie’s laughter filled the dining room of Breshire Hall. The small country house had been a pleasant surprise. Warm and cozy, the grounds were immaculate, complete with a pond and rose garden, full of roses of every color, even her beloved yellow.

Brianna glanced at Angelica, who watched the couple who had not taken their eyes off each other since his arrival. Lord Henchley had not been able to wait to see their aunt, and had traveled the hour by horse. And Freddie had beamed when she opened the door to find the baron standing there with a bouquet of wildflowers.

She had immediately put them in a vase.

Brianna had no appetite, as she worried whether Nicholas had read her letter or not. Knowing Peter, he would hunt Nicholas down and give him the letter himself if he didn't show up. The question was, would Nicholas forgive her for masquerading as Angelica? And would Angelica forgive her for telling Nicholas the truth?

After all, Nicholas could very well tell others of her deceit, and then the scandal would be horrific. Even Reginald might bow out.

But Nicholas would not do such a thing. She knew he cared for her, but just how much remained to be seen.

Did he love her? That, she didn't know.

But she loved him, she knew that for certain now, and she would not marry Reginald.

She couldn't. And if her parents refused to forgive her, then so be it. She would live out the rest of her days with Freddie.

Her aunt's laughter once again brought her out of her musings. Yes, she would live with her delightful aunt, and perhaps Lord Henchley, who seemed to be more than a little smitten with their aunt.

Aunt Freddie, as though just now realizing her nieces were present, gave both Brianna and Angelica a concerned look. "My dears, you are not eating."

Brianna forced herself to take a bite and smiled. "But I am, Aunt Freddie."

Angelica took a bite of roasted duck.

"Good. I would not want you to waste away."

Little did she know Angelica would soon be showing signs of pregnancy, and perhaps even Brianna would as well.

A month ago the very thought of having a child out of wedlock would have horrified her, but now the idea did not seem so very awful at all.

At least she would have something to remember Nicholas by. She allowed herself a moment to imagine their child, and she smiled to herself.

No, a child would not be such a horrible occurrence. She would be the parent her mother and father had never been. She glanced up and met Angelica's stare. As always, her sister seemed to know what she was thinking, and they smiled, but this time it was a, "we are finally grown up," smile.

Here all along Brianna had thought that Angelica's pregnancy would be a bad thing, but in essence, it wasn't at all, but rather a gift. The one thing that would come out of her love for Sean, the groom.

Later that evening Lord Henchley sang for them, a pleasant baritone that made Aunt Freddie blush like a young girl. What a delight to see their aunt so very happy.

Wishing the couple goodnight, Brianna and Angelica headed toward their rooms.

"Do you think he will come?" Angelica asked, as she opened her chamber door.

There was no need to ask who "he" was.

Brianna squeezed her hand. "I know he will. He loves you, and he will do what he must to have you. He will go to any lengths to be with you, I feel it in my bones."

Angelica smiled, though Brianna could see the hesitation in her eyes. She had been without her love for two weeks now, and the separation was beginning to show on her sister's face. The uncertainty. "I hope you are right."

Brianna kissed her sister's cheek. "I know I'm right. By the time you open your eyes in the morning, he may very well be here."

With that, Brianna walked to her room and changed her clothes. She sat for a long time, looking out at the lake, the moonlight reflecting off the still surface. The rustling of trees soothed her nerves, so she decided to keep the window open.

She had packed Lady Devine's novel, but she did not wish to read the book, for it would only remind her of Nicholas.

Nicholas.

Her throat tightened with unshed tears and all the fears that had been racing through her mind since the time he had climbed out the window. From the moment she had signed her name to that letter he had feared losing him forever.

A letter that would either damn her or save her.

God let it be the last, she prayed, closing her eyes.

Hearing a noise outside her window, Brianna opened her eyes. While at St. Andrew's she had grown accustomed to the sounds of the country, finding them soothing compared to the continual noise of a city like London.

It seemed like an eternity since she left St. Andrew's. Lord she felt as though she'd grown ten years in the past fortnight.

She rolled onto her side just as something, or someone crawled through the window.

Her heart missed a beat. "Nicholas?"

All she could see was a flash of white teeth, and then he was at her side. "Thank goodness I have the right room. I was afraid I would have a lot of explaining to do if it was your aunt's room."

She could scarcely believe her eyes. "Did you get my letter?"

He nodded and then his lips touched hers.

All the fear she'd been feeling melted away under that kiss.

"Will you marry me, Brianna?" he asked. The sound of her name on his lips was like heaven.

"Yes," she said, hugging him tight.

"Good. We head for Gretna Green in the morning. The four of us."

"The four of us?"

"Yes, Sean is with Angelica."

"And Peter?"

“Making sure that Aunt Freddie remains occupied, though I did see Lord Henchley’s carriage outside. He will be making the journey with us to Scotland. He said he would not miss it for the world.”

Insanely happy, Brianna smiled against his lips. “He is a wonderful friend.”

“Yes, he is. Perhaps we should share the good news with him,” Nicholas said, starting to pull away.

Brianna shook her head. “Not yet.”

He pretended to scowl, but failed. “What are you thinking, my love?”

“That I want to make love to you.”

He tried to sound scandalized, but failed. “But what if someone hears?”

Just then a low groan sounded from the vicinity of Angelica’s room.

She reached down and felt his hard arousal.

She smiled.

He slipped out of his clothes and into the bed, helping her out of her chemise. Pulling her on top of him, she reveled in the feel of his long, hard body, pressed toe to toe.

Her sheath tightened. Unable to wait a second longer, she shifted, to where his cock head pressed against her dewy center.

Sitting down on him, she took him within her, inch by inch, slowly, savoring the feel of length stuffed inside her. He released a groan of contentment, his fingers curling about her waist, urging her to ride him.

Nicholas looked up at his beloved Brianna and smiled. Beautiful, her hair down about them, her back arched, her nipples pebbling.

His gaze shifted lower, over her hips, and to the pale curls that covered her sex. Watching her slide up and down his length, his cock coated with her dew, he felt like the luckiest man alive.

Her mouth opened, and he knew she reached her climax, her gasp filling the room as her insides clamped around his cock, pulling him deeper into her warmth.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out, and at that same moment he shot his seed deep inside her.

He no longer worried about her becoming pregnant.

In fact, he wanted to have many children with her.

His wife.

She fell on him, her heart pounding hard against his chest as she fought for breath. "I'm so glad you came after me."

He laughed, a low rumbling that made Brianna smile. "I'm glad I came too."

"Do you think it will always be like this?" she asked, lifting her head to look at him.

"I hope it will be. It's hard to imagine it any other way."

"I feel bad that Freddie will have to deal with our parents' wrath. Our mother has never been quick to forgive."

Nicholas traced the outline of her lips with his finger. "She will forgive all of you, especially once she realizes how we love each other."

Startled by the declaration, Brianna asked, "What did you say?"

He smiled, that wonderfully devilish, boyish smile. "I love you, Brianna."

Those had been the words she'd been waiting to hear for a lifetime.

"I love you, too."

Epilogue

Scotland

The small inn on the border of Scotland rang with merriment as the small crowd celebrated two weddings on this most beautiful day. Brianna smiled at her husband, as he lifted her in his arms, and ascended the stairs, much to the delight of the crowd below.

Though Freddie had been upset that the girls had not been honest with her from the beginning, she had not kept them from making the trip to Gretna Green. Her only regret, she said, was that she could not come with them to witness the event.

But she would have to stay home and “face the music” as she put it, fearing that their parents would be arriving any day. Freddie had made the girls write their parents a letter, explaining themselves. Freddie said she would stay in London to welcome them home, and break the news herself, since she felt partly to blame. Lord Henschley said he would make sure no harm came to their aunt.

And he had meant it.

As hard as it had been to write that letter to her parents, it was even harder to write the letter to Reginald, a virtual stranger who she knew would be extremely angered at the turn of events.

But she could no longer care what others thought of her. Peter had been right. She needed to find her own happiness, and she had.

She was married to Saxford, the man of her dreams, and that’s all that mattered to her.

Even better, her sister had married Sean.

Any concern that Brianna had about her sister's choice of groom had ended when she saw the two of them together. The love and determination had been as strong at that moment as they had been when she had said her vows.

Yes, today was a very good day indeed.

"You're smiling. Are you happy, Lady Saxford?"

Lady Saxford. How she loved the sound of her new title.

"Immensely happy," she said, kissing his strong jaw. In his arms she felt so safe, so loved.

Entering their small room, she smiled, seeing the yellow rose petals spread out over the simple quilted comforter.

"Peter," Brianna said, as Nicholas put her on her feet.

"Actually, it was me."

Surprised that her husband was more romantic than she had given him credit for, she kissed him. "How thoughtful! And how very sweet, my love."

Nicholas helped her with the buttons on her gown, kissing her shoulder as he helped her slip it off.

In turn, she helped him with his jacket, waistcoat, shirt and pants, until they stood toe to toe.

"Oh, I have something else for you," he said, going to his bag and pulling out a box.

"What is it?" Brianna asked, untying the ribbon.

She pulled out a black tome with gold lettering. *Lady Devine and the Pirate*.

She laughed. "You are wonderfully wicked, my husband."

"Most men would be intimidated, wondering if their woman wasn't reading these books and thinking of other men. But I have faith that it is only my face you see when you make love."

She tossed the book aside. "It is. You and only you."

He kissed her, bending her back, to where he kissed a path down her neck and to her breasts. He sucked her nipples into hard, sensitive peaks, before moving lower. Urging her to sit on the edge of the bed and spread her thighs, he went down on his knees between them.

Anticipation filled every inch of her as he kissed the insides of her thighs, then stroked her hot slit with his long, velvety tongue.

As though reading her wicked thoughts, he looked up at her, the sides of his mouth curving as his tongue stroked her clit time and time again, before sucking on it.

She came with a ferocity that left her shaking. He stood up, and turned her around, to where she was bent over the bed, his cock head probing at her from behind.

Excitement pounded in her ears as he entered her slowly, stretching her, filling her so completely, she gasped in delight.

He reached beneath her and caressed a breast, while his other hand slipped to her mons, his fingers playing over her clitoris time and again.

The multiple sensations had her arching her back, to take all of him, to feel every thrust, every stroke.

He rained kisses along her neck, urging her to come for him. Drenched, she cried out as her climax came, pulsing around his thick shaft.

Brianna's woman's dew anointed his cock with each thrust. Hearing her soft cries, he came, holding her hips firmly as he gave her every drop of his seed.

She fell onto the bed, and he lay down next to her, pulling her against him, to where he spooned her body.

Deliciously sated, he kissed the back of her neck. "I am so happy things worked out, my love."

"You mean you aren't upset about the masquerade?" she asked, glancing back at him.

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. If it hadn't been for the masquerade, then I wouldn't have known the real Brianna. I believe things turned out just like they were supposed to."

"And I'm glad they worked out so well," she said, cuddling into his warmth.

About the Author

Julia Templeton has written contemporary, historical and time-travel romances for magazines and book publishers and, most recently, romantica for Ellora's Cave Publishing. She also pens novels under the pseudonym Anastasia Black with writing partner and fellow Ellora's Cave author Tracy Cooper-Posey. Aside from her passion for writing, Julia also enjoys reading, listening to music, collecting research books, traveling and spending time with family.

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