

A romantic scene between a shirtless man and a woman in a light-colored dress. The man is leaning in to kiss the woman's cheek. The woman is looking slightly away with a soft expression. The background is dark, making the couple stand out.

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SINFUL SURRENDER

Some desires can't be hidden...

BEVERLEY KENDALL

LUST, PLAIN AND SIMPLE

Missy took several steps forward. The glow from the solitary tallow candle suffused her in a warm light. James swallowed again, his breathing an audible rasp in the silence of the night.

“I know you felt something when you kissed me tonight,” she said softly.

James nearly groaned aloud, convinced his worst enemy had sent her to test him, torture him.

“Yes, and I believe you felt it too,” he replied, his voice harsh.

She displayed no shock or surprise at his crude reference to just how hard he’d been pressed up against her down in the study. In fact her eyes, appearing more gray than blue at present, grew smoky, her lids weighed down by desire. Her gaze dropped to his chest and then to the unmistakable distention in the front of his trousers.

James had nowhere to go. He stood exposed and trapped, caged like a hungry lion with a voracious appetite who’d just come upon his next meal.

“You’re very beautiful and I’m a normal male. It’s lust, plain and simple. Don’t make more of it than that. As I’ve told you before, any desirable female would elicit the same response.”

Again, she said nothing but took another step forward, the light now illuminating the full glorious length of her slim figure, her nipples jutting impudently against the soft cloth of her nightdress.

He throbbed. His whole body throbbed.

“Go back to your chamber,” he said, his voice strained and barely recognizable.

She took another step closer, bringing her within inches of his tightly wound form. “It’s more than lust.”

Prologue

Devonshire, 1852

The morning of the highly anticipated eighteenth birthday of Millicent “Missy” Armstrong—highly anticipated by her, not him—James Rutherford discovered too late that escorting her from the stables had been a monumental error in judgment.

If they hadn’t been walking the quarter mile back to Stoneridge Hall, she would not have stumbled and fallen. There would have been no need to assist her to her feet. He certainly wouldn’t have been jerked from his own, to land sprawled atop her, her slender arms wrapped tightly about his neck, pulling his head down so she could land an impassioned kiss on lips parted in surprise.

Damn and blast! This was precisely the kind of temptation he could ill afford and had done his best to avoid as this day had closed in on him with the swiftness of the finest pair of blacks in full gallop. A grown up Missy still suffering the pangs of a long held infatuation *and* entering the marriage market was a road fraught with endless pitfalls. One he’d obviously stumbled upon and currently had him cushioned by only the kind of softness and heat a female

could render. And yards upon yards of muslin.

For a shameful moment—or perhaps shameless—he didn't extricate himself from her embrace, as surely the friend of her brother would if he at all hoped to maintain the friendship. Instead, he savored the waft of her warm breath against his cheek and discovered the softness of her eager, exploring lips. He discovered she wore the faint scent of lilacs. But the worst of his discoveries was what sprang to rigid attention beneath the front flap of his riding breeches.

Good God, what the blazes was he doing? Armstrong would skewer him clean through if he knew the sorts of thoughts James currently entertained about his sister.

Emitting a hiss then a tortured groan, and with the sweet taste of her still on his lips, he scrambled from atop her, levering himself to a standing position. Never had the ground felt so uneven beneath his feet or his stance quite so unsteady. Swiftly, he turned and offered her his back, drawing in a ragged breath of the cool April air. A sweeping survey across the rolling hills of Dartington revealed not a soul in sight. He should be relieved there'd been no party to the kiss. He wished he could breathe easy. His raging erection made it all but impossible.

Sounds of her scrambling to her feet finally penetrated above the blood roaring in his ears, as did the brisk brush of hands against cloth as she went about ridding herself of dewy blades of grass and the dirt clinging to her green-checked day dress.

"James?" His name hitched in her throat, the lone syllable seeming to encapsulate a lifetime of yearning.

He briefly closed his eyes, suffering his remorse in silence as he could well imagine the accompanying wistfulness in her eyes and the faint tremble of her pink bottom lip. Ensuring his jacket adequately covered his state of arousal, and with his mouth in a grim line, he pivoted on his heel to face her.

"I thought you might actually like it if I kissed you. Might want me to kiss you."

Arresting blue-gray eyes peered up at him from beneath long, sooty lashes, her expression poignant in its vulnerability.

His reaction to her was inexcusable. Reprehensible, really. She was off-limits to him. Armstrong had made that point clear enough when he'd demanded James give her a wide berth, at least during her debut into Society. Her crush would inevitably run its course. Or so his friend hoped. And should Armstrong have his way, she'd marry the much admired and ardently pursued heir to the Wiltshire dukedom, the Earl of Granville. Why shouldn't she marry an exalted title, his friend had reasoned, now that the Armstrong family could no longer be considered impoverished nobility, their fortune regained and currently far in excess of most in the upper stratum of Society.

"Missy," James began, but her name came out hoarse, forcing him to clear the alien object—which he belatedly identified as his tongue—from his throat to begin again. "Missy, you're like a sister to me," he said with a solemnity honed to pitch-perfect sincerity.

Lying to her went beyond prudent, it was now a necessity. Unfortunately, for him—for them both—any sisterly feelings he'd had toward her hadn't been able to withstand her breathtaking emergence into womanhood. Her previously tall and thin frame had developed enticing, feminine curves, and the promise of beauty he'd first seen in the ten-year-old chestnut-haired child had far exceeded his expectations.

A look of hurt flitted across her face that had his heart constricting in painful response.

"I am Thomas's sister, *not* yours."

As if he needed a reminder. It was his relationship with Armstrong that kept him from taking what she was offering. Her beautiful body for his delectation. Although, in all honesty, even if her brother wouldn't have him strung up by the noose outside Newgate prison if he ever laid a hand on her, Missy deserved much more than giving away her innocence to a man who

could never be the husband she needed him to be. The kind of husband she deserved.

“What I’m saying is that I have no interest in you like that...in a romantic sense.” Lust was an entirely different matter altogether.

The sad fact was that truth *had* existed up until the prior year. What he wouldn’t give that it should exist again, that he be unaware again.

His innocence was interminably lost.

Chapter One

Devonshire, 1855

Missy quietly observed James perusing a book through the hand-span opening of the library door. An instantaneous burst of anticipation and desire collided inside her. Her breath hitched in her throat.

Consistent with his insouciant observance of societal norms, only a starched tan linen shirt and dark green trousers graced his lean frame in casual elegance. On his feet, he wore a pair of high black Wellingtons. However, his notably absent waistcoat and neckcloth only served to magnify the aura of power and intrigue about him and enhance his charismatic appeal.

And he was alone.

With James, Thomas and Alex dogging each other's steps, the task of getting him to herself this visit had been one worthy of a spy for the Crown. Such a shame it had come to this, all the sneaking about she'd had to do.

With James constantly jaunting off to one country or the other and coming home for only snatches at a time, they had had scant contact over the past three years. He claimed it was for business but she suspected she had factored largely into his frequent and lengthy absences.

It could have just been a coincidence that his excessive travels had commenced two

weeks after the incident. The kiss. She suspected it had been her impetuosity that had earned her the subsequent years of avoidance and neglect. But, it was the news of Miss Adelaide Bash's betrothal that would confirm her suspicions, providing the nail and hammer that would etch it into stone.

Part of the landed gentry, Miss Bash was pretty—though not uncommonly so. And while her family was land rich, over the years their finances had been ravaged by either flood or drought. However, her lack of rank in high society and the paltry sum of four hundred pounds that comprised her dowry didn't dissuade Miss Bash from setting her sights on no less than the handsome, wealthy heir to a viscountcy, Lord Alfred Neville.

Many in the *ton* were amused that a gentleman's daughter would be so presumptuous as to believe she could rise above her station and marry one of their own without what it would cost to pave Westminster Bridge with gold. *Truly, even those crass American females seeking titled husbands are heiresses of great fortunes*, had been only one of the more generous remarks bandied about by some in the august set.

For the most part, people watched the whole affair with little more than passing interest, certain nothing would come of it save a bruised pride and a broken heart, and that was if her heart was truly engaged. Far worse was the waste of the five hundred pounds or more it must have cost to fund her debut.

Missy, however, devoured Miss Bash's methods like a how-to manual, taking note of the way the woman had flirted without being forward and had shown an interest in the young lord without appearing at all humbled by her origins. The gentleman's daughter possessed the poise of a lady accustomed to a life of privilege, and the polish of the star pupil from Mrs. Landry's Charm School—a most esteemed finishing school.

Yet Miss Bash—all of only eighteen—emanated a sensuality that had gentlemen young

and old watching her too long, too frequently, and with far too much interest. The recipient of all her attention and efforts was smitten to such a degree he formally requested her hand in marriage three months to the day after their introduction.

Their courtship had illuminated everything Missy, herself, had done wrong. She'd approached James with the over-eagerness of a puppy let loose to run free for the first time. She hadn't flirted, teased, or even coaxed. Instead, she'd crashed down on him like a cyclone, too much in love and too impatient to test her new maturity, as if the stroke of midnight had suddenly given her allure beyond her years.

Her face heated with the memory of just how much cheek she'd had. What had she expected, that the kiss she'd forced upon him would result in a grand declaration of his undying love and a betrothal ring? Such an undertaking required more panache and far more subtlety—as Miss Bash had clearly shown.

Missy could only thank heavens she was wiser now, possessing restraint that would have done her well back then. As this year would commence her fourth foray into the marriage market and her sister waited patiently to make her own debut, Missy couldn't afford another such mistake if she at all hoped to succeed with James.

Straightening to her full height, she smoothed a hand over her loosely pinned chignon before pushing open the heavy oak door. In a rustle of voluminous petticoats and shimmering silk, she entered the grand library of Stoneridge Hall.

Decorated with the lord of the manor in mind, the room boasted floor-to-ceiling walnut bookcases, a rich mahogany escritoire, and two large area rugs sitting atop gleaming hardwood floors. She'd always felt at home here, especially when her father was alive. Today, however, a whole field of butterflies had taken up residence in her belly, and clamored to come out.

Missy gently pressed the door closed with a decisive click. James turned at the sound and

stared at her. For a moment something flashed in his eyes, something she could not quite discern. Abruptly, his expression shuttered.

“Hello, James.”

“Missy.” A perfunctory nod accompanied his greeting.

As she saw him so rarely these days—his smile was even more a stranger—and the polite one he bestowed upon her now didn’t particularly encourage conversation. Her hopes of wedded bliss and dark-haired, blue-eyed babies had faltered under the weight of time passing with no results. But that connection they’d once shared—one she’d thought occurred once in a lifetime affair—wouldn’t permit her to cast a handful of dirt upon a pine box, or prop flowers against a headstone to signal her dream’s demise. At least not just yet.

“Don’t you think it best if the door remained open?” he asked, his voice a pleasing blend of polished speech and velvet roughness. She gave a faint shiver. Everything about him was beautiful, including his voice. She’d missed the sound of his deep baritone as much as she’d missed him.

“Why, are you afraid to be alone with me?” she asked lightly, trying to strike the right chord between impudence and timidity. Balance was the key.

James’s countenance was severe, as if her presence was something to be endured in tight-lipped silence. His Adam’s apple then gave a convulsive bob under a hard swallow. She couldn’t be certain whether she had discomfited him or if she had nicked his last frayed nerve. She gathered she’d soon find out.

Mustering up all her courage, Missy closed the distance between them. When she drew to a stop, only a couple feet from where he stood, he queried with a quirk of one dark eyebrow.

“Are you aware we haven’t been alone together since the day I turned eighteen? I’d begun to think you were avoiding me.” Missy paused before asking, “Have you?”

Again, an indecipherable emotion flashed in his crystalline blue eyes, before a potent smile spread like sun warmed molasses across the chiseled beauty of his visage. No longer polite, it engaged. The kind that could make a woman swoon. However, a puppeteer's string might well have lifted the corners of that sensuous mouth, for his eyes continued to watch her intently, cheerless and sober.

"I beg your pardon?" He sounded faintly abashed, which was absurd as James hadn't an abashed bone in his entire body.

A surreptitious sweep of his form had her hands tingling with the effort to keep them at her side. She tingled in other places proper ladies dared not think of. But then, had she ever considered herself terribly proper with fantasies that could have her barred from Society had she made even one a reality? No, proper she definitely was not.

"It's just that we used to be...close. Now I rarely see you. What else am I to think when you have all but vanished from my life?"

The dimples slashing his bristled cheeks all but disappeared, and through lowered lids and spiky lashes, inky black pupils stared back at her. Her claim had obviously hit a nerve because he remained mute for seconds too long. The James of years ago had never been at a loss for words.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," he began, ending the palpable quiet and speaking in a melodic tone best for soothing babies and small animals. "You must be aware that business interests frequently take me out of the country for long stretches at a time. Believe me, I'm a stranger to many."

So, she was now one of many?

"But even when I see you, like at present, you're so...different." He treated her with not even the warmth of an acquaintance, much less a friend of ten plus years. He was a stranger, cold

and distant, the antithesis of the James she'd known not so long ago. And all her attempts at resurrecting what little life, if any, remained in the bond they'd once shared had been met with forced smiles and guarded eyes. But sadly, that was not the worst. She'd rather those stilted pedestrian conversation than the sheer nothingness that had grown between them, and existed still.

"My life has been quite hectic these past several years." He didn't quite meet her gaze and made no effort to expound on the nature of this 'hectic' life, which now hadn't any room for her.

"Too busy for me?" Despite her efforts to keep things light, all the years of bottled up longing, frustration and anguish managed to seep its way into every word.

Years ago, he'd made it a point to make room for her in his life. When she was twelve, he had taught her to ride astride against Thomas's objections months after she'd been thrown from her mare and broken her arm. And how could she forget how he'd taken the blame when she'd broken her mother's favorite Wedgwood vase? And when her brother and Alex had taken to teasingly calling her "beanpole", he had nicknamed her "peaches". He'd claimed it was for her peaches and cream complexion, and for weeks after Missy hadn't walked, she'd floated. He'd been the man of her dreams come to vivid, intoxicating life.

It had taken only one single misguided moment to ruin all of it, she thought, recalling the deafening silence that had accompanied them on their long walk back to the house...after the kiss. Silly girl.

James visibly swallowed as his gaze flitted about the room. After a restless search, his regard returned to settle on her.

"That's not it at all," he said, his voice strained.

"Then what is it?" With a naturalness borne of habit, Missy reached out and touched his

arm. James jerked sharply back from her touch.

Even before his arrival that morning, James had known this confrontation was inevitable and had anticipated it like a murderer welcomes his punishment. She'd met him at the front entrance, a new sultry air exuding from her, no doubt affected just to tempt and torment him. As if she hadn't already been desirable enough. She'd had a look in her eye that told him, come hell or high water, she'd trap him alone this weekend. He'd decided to make it easy for her, easily extricating himself from the company of her brother and Cartwright's, who remained down at the stables. Best to get the whole thing done with, and hopefully peace of mind—if not body—would be his reward.

But as he stared into her eyes, he silently cursed himself for what he had to do. Causing Missy pain could—and should—put a man to shame. But he had no other choice but to discourage her. Nothing had changed in the years since her debut. Despite the intense pull of attraction he had for her, his future wife would not expect love or fidelity. Missy would expect all that and then the moon.

Then of course he had Armstrong to think of. Although their friendship had met with several challenges over the years, their bond had grown only stronger after each adversity. But the durability of that bond would snap as easily as thread catching on something sharp if he dared to make any overtures toward his friend's sister, even in the name of courtship.

James had been at Armstrong's side and matched him step for step in living up to the label of unrepentant rakehell. He could hardly blame his friend for his opposition to any match between them. In any case, Armstrong's gratitude to Granville had blinded him to all other suitors. Not that James remotely thought of himself in that light. Quite the opposite. He was as unsuitable for Missy as a man could be.

This all would have been so much easier if he didn't have to see her at all. Lord, if not for the insistence of Lady Armstrong, he'd have dispensed with the visits to Stoneridge Hall altogether. Anything to keep temptation out of arm's reach.

He had to think of her and do the right thing. The gentlemanly thing. Composing his expression, he regarded her somberly. "I'm sorry, my reaction was uncalled for. But truly, I'm not avoiding you. It's simply that in the natural course of life, our relationship was bound to change."

"Yes, *that* I quite understand. What I don't understand is why our friendship should diminish altogether."

The note of hurt in her voice had him clearing the thickness in his throat while reminding himself again he was doing this for her. "But you must understand that we are bound to grow apart. Your thoughts and energies should be directed at finding someone suitable to marry. One of the fine gentlemen of the *ton*." Though the very thought of her directing her attentions at Granville or any of those wild bucks brought him little ease. Ruthlessly, he squashed those feelings.

"Would you consider yourself a fine gentleman?" she asked softly, staring up at him, chestnut tendrils wisping each creamy cheek.

Her question hit James with the precision of a marksman's shot. Missy in all her forward naïveté had been hard enough to resist, but Missy flirting, her beautiful eyes flashing the time old invitation, was like asking a healthy male with normal sexual desires to cease thinking of sex.

Swiftly, he turned away to gather his wits. For several seconds he occupied his hands, releasing the death grip he had on the book to return it to its place on the shelf while the intensity of her gaze singed the back of his head.

What could he say that wouldn't cause her more hurt? "No."

“I beg to disagree,” she countered just as softly as before.

She might not say so if she knew some of the wicked things he wanted to do to her...outside the sanctity of marriage. Moreover, she wasn't looking for a liaison, brief or otherwise. What she wanted was ten times worse. She wanted permanency—marriage and children. What sane man would submit to tying himself down like some hapless fool? None, if he excluded his father from what surely had to be an endless list.

“It doesn't matter what you believe.” Or what she said or did, he would remain strong.

She advanced toward him until she stood near. So close that the ruffled flounces on her yellow skirt brushed his trousered legs, and the tips of her breasts hovered only inches from his chest. Her high, firm—

He gave his head a mental shake in an effort to stop the direction of his lurid thoughts. Lusting after Armstrong's virginal sister wasn't only highly inappropriate, it was dangerous. No woman was worth the sacrifice of the friendship with a man as close to him as a flesh and blood brother.

“Do you know what I believe we should do?” she asked, all innocent seduction. She regarded his mouth with such stark desire, had he been tinder he would have burst into flames.

Tamping down a surge of unwanted lust, James wished the sight of her didn't remind him just how long it had been since he himself had enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh. Something he fully intended to rectify the moment he set foot back in London.

“Nothing. We should do nothing, Missy.” Was that his voice, strangled and weak?

Life, at times, was patently unfair, he concluded, taking in the length of her slender body. She was exquisite from her jaw-dropping face, to her small, perfectly shaped breasts, and a waist he could easily span with his hands. Memories of shapely calves and ankles peeping out from beneath her riding habit flitted through his brain. And he could well imagine—*had imagined*—

gently curving hips, and long slender thighs beneath the layers of her frothy skirt.

Blast! Why did it have to be this hard? And in every conceivable way.

Smiling as if she knew something he didn't, she reached up with white slender fingers and stroked the taut line of his jaw. He gave an involuntary flinch and took a quick step back to dislodge her hand, his breath a harsh puff of air.

"I believe I spoiled things between us, kissing you like that. I readily admit I was young and foolish. I don't believe I even opened my mouth, did I?"

For a moment, James couldn't think of one sound reason not to pounce on her and take her on the floor. Then reality seeped in to the only area in his brain not listening to his cock.

"That's enough, Missy," he said in a stern, reprimanding voice.

"Enough of what?" she asked and ran the tip of her tongue along the lower curve of her lip, before worrying its cherry lushness in deep concentration.

James stood frozen. Mesmerized.

It required considerable effort, but he managed to drag his gaze from her mouth after a telling pause. He feared if he didn't remove himself from her immediate proximity, his state of arousal would grow too obvious to conceal. And her scent, a faint wisp of lilacs, had already enveloped his senses and was fogging his usually lucid mind with lust.

Crossing the red and black Oriental rug spread beneath a small sitting area in the corner of the dome-shaped room, James took a seat in an armchair beside the stone fireplace. He didn't intend to abandon their discussion; she'd just hunt him down, relentless as ever. At least seated his body's reaction to her would be hidden from view. No need to hand deliver her the weapon to bring about his own doom.

Missy stood where he had left her, perfectly still, her expression uncertain for a moment. Then, as if finding her resolve, she marched over and took a seat on the adjacent blue damask

sofa.

She stared him square in the eye. “As I was saying before, I believe my impetuosity has been the cause of our distance. But I believe I’ve come up with a solution of sorts.” Then her expression softened and her voice dropped to a near whisper. “If we were to do it one more time, you know, clear the air as it were, we could end much of the curiosity.”

If her suggestion had been issued solely to discomfit him into tongue-tied silence, she could easily claim success. “And whose curiosity are you speaking of?” he finally asked, his tone a quiet rumble.

She had the grace to look sheepish. “Well, I suppose mine.”

Proper young ladies did not proposition men. It was unseemly. And entirely too tempting. James was torn. Torn between the desire to haul her onto his lap and have her satisfy the fire raging inside his trousers, or putting her over his knee to give her the spanking she had obviously lacked as a child. He did neither. Instead, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Either option would likely end the same way. With her moaning beneath him.

“Missy, this is complete nonsense.” His agitation and her closeness brought him to his feet once again, to cross the length of the room and perch himself against the mahogany desk.

A lengthy silence followed as she thoughtfully regarded him.

“You would not do it for the sake of our friendship?” She rose from her seat.

James steeled himself as she advanced upon him. The cadence of her gait caused her skirt to billow in her wake, and brought to mind the gracefulness of a young gazelle. A young gazelle in heat. Without an ounce of shame, his member twitched again.

“Is it because of my brother?” She peered up at him with those gorgeous slate-blue eyes.

He averted his gaze in an effort to cool his ardor, and found himself staring at the large oil painting of the late Viscount Phillip Armstrong hanging on the dark paneled wall. He must

have been in his forties when he sat for the portrait, his dark hair sprinkled with gray and fine wrinkles fanning the corners of his piercing blue eyes. What would he think of his eldest daughter's boldness and her choice in husbands? On both counts, James hardly thought he'd be pleased.

Directing a steely gaze back to her, he said, "You're forcing me to be more plainspoken than I would have liked. As I told you in the past, while I have great affection for you, it has never risen to the level of anything remotely romantic." Unless thoughts of stripping her naked and feasting on her delectable flesh could be considered romantic.

"So are you not curious at all? Your feelings for me have remained the same? That of a sister?"

"That's correct."

He gave the response with the sort of haste only the guilty employ when facing execution. A convincing liar he was not.

"Are you quite certain?"

A look of disbelief flared in his pale blue eyes. He thought her impertinent, but if she failed, she'd seriously have to consider a proposal from someone else if she wanted to marry at all. A more despairing thought she couldn't imagine but sadly a possibility she had to entertain.

"Truly, I've had quite enough of this," he growled, and then made a move as if to brush past her, his face a formidable mask of barely contained emotion.

She made an instinctive move to stop him. Their torsos collided, the tips of her breasts flush with the solid wall of his chest. The pleasure staggered her, the contact exquisite. His hands came up, but whether to push her away or pull her near she would never know, for he seemed to catch himself, dropping them to his sides as he took a cautious step back.

“One kiss, James, how could it possibly hurt?” Missy had never known the motivating power of desperation, fear, and waning hope until that precise moment. Until her audacious dare saturated the air in something thick and fiery hot.

His expression remained impassive and only the tight tick of his jaw conveyed the tenuous hold he had on his composure. Without saying a word, he stared down at her upturned face.

At length, he asked, “And after, what then?”

“I guess that will depend on our response. Were we to enjoy ourselves and be willing to explore the possibility of pursuing a more, er, intimate friendship, then perhaps you’d be in agreement to remain in London and participate in the London Season.”

He regarded her with cold, flat eyes. “No.”

“I see,” she said, only slightly put off by his biting response. If he truly saw her in the light of a sister, surely he would have jumped at the opportunity to prove it. She didn’t think a kiss would have been too much of a hardship to accomplish that end. It is not as if they had never kissed before. Perhaps, he was afraid one kiss would not be enough.

His refusal gave her hope.

James’s fists contracted spasmodically at his side. Missy was certain at that moment he’d like nothing better than to throttle her. Well, his days of steering the course of their relationship were over. She refused to waste one more year waiting for the man she loved to realize how perfect they would be together. Something potent existed between them. She’d known it since the age of sixteen. And it was that potent, indefinable something that had kept her from losing all hope over the arid years. No, as of today she planned to assume control. Ruthless, seductive control.

“One day you will proposition the wrong man,” he bit out coldly.

“Or the right one.” Offering him a small smile, she then pivoted on her kid leather heel and quit the room.

Chapter Two

“Armstrong will have you hanged, drawn, and quartered if you so much as touch her.”

James’s head snapped in the direction of the voice of Alex Cartwright. His friend sauntered into the library and dropped into the Rococo- styled winged-back chair.

“I passed Missy as she was leaving,” Cartwright elaborated, making no attempt to stifle a highly amused smile.

Sending him a disgruntled glance, James made his way back to his recently vacated chair to settle in with a weary sigh. “It’s his sister he need concern himself with. I’m certainly not the problem.”

Cartwright chuckled. “So, have you properly discouraged her? Any hope she’ll accept Granville’s suit—or that of any of the other dozen gentlemen who have requested her hand?”

James emitted a humorless laugh. “I quashed any hopes of marriage between *us*, which is all I can do. I can’t very well force her to accept proposals from men she has no desire to wed, even Granville.” He detested the way he uttered the man’s name as if it were an invective.

“Well as long as you remain unwed, I doubt she’ll seriously consider another.”

A fact that should have saddened James, but failed miserably in that regard. But truly, a married Missy would be far less dangerous than the one who plagued him now.

“I’ll say one thing for Missy, she’s certainly loyal and tenacious if nothing else.” Regarding him from beneath a shiny black lock of hair, Cartwright remarked, his gray eyes sparking with a speculative gleam. “I must admit, I’m surprised you aren’t the least bit tempted. Why, before her debut, the two of you were thick as thieves.”

“Yes, my mistake,” James grumbled, leaning forward to prop his forearms on his thighs.

“Mistake?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? I took pity on her. She was painfully thin, awkward, shy *and* young when we met. Lord, the poor child had just lost her father. I merely intended to bring her out a bit, put a smile back on her face. If I’d had the slightest notion a little attention would all result in this....” And they both were well aware of just what *this* was. Missy still infatuated. Missy still pining for him. And worse still, Missy unwed and going into her *fourth* Season. Lord, she shouldn’t have required a third much less a fourth.

Cartwright gave a short, dry laugh. “Well you did an admirable job. Armstrong should be thanking you instead of bemoaning the fact she believes herself in love with you.”

Believes? James had to stop the reflexive raising of his eyebrow, quickly thrusting aside his momentary affront at the word. “Regardless, she’s an innocent *and* his bloody sister. Each would be a disaster in and of itself, but together it’s nothing short of suicide. Anyway, she’s hardly my type,” James scoffed, flicking a dismissive hand for additional effect. The more he’d repeated it over the years, the easier the lie had rolled off his tongue.

People could say what they would about him, he didn’t particularly care, but they could never say with any veracity that he dallied with innocent, well-bred women. And he certainly wouldn’t start now, no matter what or *who* the provocation.

Cartwright’s brow shot up as he snorted in disbelief. “Except for the ailing and elderly—and even there I’m sure some exceptions could be made—any man who has red or, more

importantly,” this he said in an arid tone, “blue blood running in their veins would snatch her up if she’d just give the word. She has everything—beauty, lineage, and money. She’s any man’s fantasy come true.”

Experiencing an odd tightening in his chest, James eyed his friend. “Even yours?” The two words felt wrenched from his throat, sounding overly harsh and accusatory to his own ears. He immediately wished he could call back the question. He wasn’t some jealous suitor, and certainly didn’t want to come across as such.

Cartwright gave a short dry laugh as he rose to his feet and headed toward the sideboard, which held a lone decanter of brandy and several tumblers. “If she wasn’t like a sister to me, I’m quite certain she would be.”

James’s smile touched only his mouth. He had thought much the same until she’d started giving him cockstands. Perhaps the difference being Cartwright had bounced Missy on his knee when she was still in nappies. He and Armstrong had attended Eton together as boys. James had met the men years later while studying at Cambridge, where the three had formed a deep bond of friendship.

The prior day, he and Cartwright had joined Armstrong at his country estate in Devon, the seat of his viscounty, for the viscountess’s annual winter ball. James knew they were not invited solely for the purpose of male companionship or their rapier wit. As one of the most sought after bachelors in all of London (well, certainly since he’d managed to replenish the Armstrong coffers) his friend’s motives were purely mercenary. By forcing them to attend his mother’s ball, Armstrong effectively deflected some of the attentions of the marriage-minded mothers and their daughters, especially as James would someday become the sixth Earl of Windmere. Outranking Armstrong, James was a much more desirable target for those who considered a man’s title the height of his distinction. And Cartwright, despite his status as second

son to the Duke of Hastings, had enough money to placate many of the socially ambitious mamas, and more than enough good looks to enamor their aristocratic daughters.

Cartwright eyed him and continued. “I believe Missy would make you a fine wife. Certainly a far better one than you deserve,” he chided. “But under vastly different circumstances.” Picking up the decanter, he jerked his head toward the brandy, and asked, “Will you have one?”

James nodded absently. “Such circumstances as...?” he asked, knowing full well it was a mistake to continue along that particular line of questioning.

“First, I’d have to set aside the fact that your interest in women is notoriously short-lived and Armstrong would never countenance you as his brother-in-law. That said, under the condition you believed in the notion of fidelity, and actually had the capacity to fall in love.”

For some odd reason, Cartwright’s comments stung. He had the capacity to love. Just not a woman in the “till death do us part” sense. Moreover, he had yet to meet a gentleman who practiced fidelity—and only a handful of women for that matter. At least the married women of his acquaintance.

“Well I have no intention of marrying her. Who are you now, the *ton’s* matchmaker? I daresay I can choose my own wife. And at a time I require one,” he said, allowing his sarcasm free reign.

His own father hadn’t married until the age of thirty-five and James could not conceive of one reason he shouldn’t follow in his example. Which gave him another seven years until he needed to make any such decision. When he did marry, his wife and children would reside in the country, while he discreetly kept a mistress in Town. That was how it was done, his parents being the perfect example.

“Yes, given your views on marriage, I imagine you will choose someone like Lady

Victoria, the venerable ice maiden.” Cartwright headed back to the sitting area, drinks in hand.

“At least with her, a man knows what he’s getting.” James accepted the glass from his friend, immediately tipping it to his mouth for a swallow.

He’d rather a passionless wife from the start than have her turn into a cold fish after she’d produced the requisite heir and the spare, just as his mother had done. He’d see the earldom pass to his younger brother, Christopher, before he’d become a man like his father, reduced to begging himself for sexual favors from his own wife. He’d never sacrifice his self-respect on the altar of marriage to the illusion of romantic love.

“At least you’d never have to worry about being cuckolded if you married her. I’m sure she’ll find the begetting of heirs distasteful enough,” Cartwright said with a laugh, settling back in his seat, his long legs stretched wide before him.

Lady Victoria, the youngest daughter of the Marquess of Cornwall, was said to have put the ice in icicle—or so many gentlemen claimed. With countless proposals over the course of five Seasons, bets were being made at White’s and Boodle’s as to whom her mother would force her to marry and at what age. Others wagered she’d defy her mother and would end up being relegated to the shelf.

James thought the lot of them spiteful and cruel. He personally liked Lady Victoria. Not because she was beautiful, but because she had never displayed an infinitesimal amount of interest in him as a man. Unlike most of the man-hungry misses of the *ton*, she made him feel he could lower his guard in her company. With her, he was safe.

“At least I’d be assured my heir was truly my heir,” James said wryly.

“Is that your fear? That your wife will try to pass another man’s by-blow off as yours?”

“As it will be the *only* thing I will require of her, it would be nice if I had some amount of certainty the child was mine.” James downed the rest of his drink with one long swallow and

then pushed to his feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to retire to my guest chamber until supper is served.”

Cartwright tipped his glass toward him, a small smile playing across his lips. “I suggest you use the servants’ stairs if you wish to avoid a certain miss fairly haunting the halls.”

Before James could respond, Armstrong appeared in the doorway, a glove dangling from one hand, while he removed the other with short, deft tugs.

“Good, you’re here,” he said, pinning James with a green-eyed stare. “We need to discuss Missy.”

Good Lord, what now?

Dressed in a hunter green coat and breeches, and a pair of scuffed knee-high leather boots, it appeared his friend had been riding. A fact confirmed once he started toward James, bringing with him a faint whiff of horseflesh and the outdoors.

A sideways glance and a casual inclination of the viscount’s head served as his greeting to Cartwright. He halted in front of the low center table and tossed his gloves on the polished redwood surface. Standing opposite him and close enough to note the faint tick of his jaw, James raised one eyebrow in query.

“A change of plans,” Armstrong said in that clipped manner of his.

James blinked. “Pardon?”

“This thing with my sister. You keeping your distance until she finds a husband.”

“Ah yes, the brilliant plan. It’s been a smashing success, wouldn’t you agree?”

Cartwright, always one who loathed omission from discussions of this sort, chimed in,

James and Armstrong treated him to similar dark glares. In response, Cartwright lifted his shoulders in an innocent shrug while trying to maintain a guileless expression.

With an acute sense of apprehension, James directed his attention back to Armstrong and

asked, “What of Missy?”

For a moment, his friend said nothing, merely watched him. When he commenced speaking, he did so slowly, as if a great deal of thought had gone into every word. “After all this time, it’s quite obvious your absence has done little to diminish her affections. In fact, I think she believes herself more in love with you than ever. Dug in her heels is what she’s done. Do you realize she’s turned down over twenty proposals of marriage since her debut?”

That many? A rush of heat suffused James’s face as if the blame could be laid squarely at his door. Thrusting his hands deep into his trouser pockets, he widened his stance but didn’t respond.

“My mother will not allow Emily to debut this year with Missy still unsettled. If I don’t act now, I’ll have all three of my sisters out in the marriage market tripping over each other.”

“What more do you want me to do? What more can I do? Until this yesterday, I hadn’t seen her since your mother’s birthday celebration, which was almost seven months back. And if you recall, it was at the viscountess’s insistence that I attended. Should I now take up residence in France?”

“The Duke has a flat in Paris. He’d never let it to me, his own flesh and blood, but perhaps if you asked him...?”

James ignored Cartwright, finding little humor in his attempt to interject wit into the exchange.

Armstrong’s mouth edged up at the corners. “I assure you, nothing so extreme. What I’m suggesting is that we reverse the strategy. Your absence has only made you into a figure in her head. Grander than life, like some fictional romantic hero. She needs to see you out in society at all those damn events charming and flirting with women. Beautiful and attractive ones. She’s never seen that side of you.”

James knew what he meant. She'd never seen the rake in him. The charmer. The seducer. Not that he'd ever had to do much seducing. Then of course, months later, when it was over and the thrill of the affair was over, he could walk away without once looking back.

"Perhaps then," Armstrong said, continuing to press his point, "she'll realize how ill suited the two of you are and hopefully cast Granville in a better light. Though why in the world she has done nothing to encourage him is beyond me. I mean, the man's heir to a damned dukedom. And it's not as though he's old and decrepit. Most women would give up their best face cream to be in her position."

Good God, the way he went on about Granville, one would think the man was a bloody saint. Being heir to a dukedom was simply a happenstance of birth, not indicative of a man's core character. And what the hell was Armstrong thinking in asking him to spend an entire Season in such close proximity to Missy? The effort to keep his hands off her was hard enough. Damn hard.

"You've always had a soft spot for her and I know you want her happiness and well being just as much as I do. I realize I'm imposing on our friendship again, but I want my sister married and settled by year's end. All the better if it's Granville." Armstrong paused, and drew a breath. "Why don't you begin tomorrow evening at my mother's ball."

Swallowing hard, James met his gaze without blinking. This would all be for her long-term benefit. *His* misery would be short-lived. When put to him like that, he could scarcely refuse. "I will do what I can."

A smile lit Armstrong's face. "Good. I knew I could count on you. And knowing you as I do, I have every confidence you'll succeed."

* * *

The evening of the ball, air so cold it would make Jack Frost weep gave winter a glacial

presence. Even the snowflakes long enraptured by the season refused to fall.

Inside the warm, gray stone structure of Stoneridge Hall, Missy remained by her mother's side as they greeted the last recently thawed guest in the queue, the dowager Countess of Stockwell.

For what seemed an eternity, the dowager recounted in excruciating detail every bump and gully she'd encountered on her harrowing journey to Stoneridge Hall. If Missy had not been aware that she lived a short distance down the road on the neighboring estate, she'd have sworn the dowager had traveled days and ridden through Siberia on a hunger-weakened reindeer to get there.

Thankfully, the finely plumed headdress of Lady Bailey, a peer and counterpart of the dowager, captured Lady Stockwell's feckless attention. Halting in mid-sentence, the dowager's brown-eyed gaze pinned her next quarry. Quickly excusing herself, her steps sure and swift, she hastened toward the refreshment table where Lady Bailey could easily be captured innocently sipping a glass of punch.

In unison, Missy and the viscountess expelled heartfelt sighs of relief.

"I don't believe I have ever met anyone quite so long-winded," the viscountess said. She turned and stared down the long stretch of gleaming marble floors leading to towering front doors. "I do hope all is well with Lucky."

Missy hoped for her brother's sake that the horse would live up to its name. Her brother's prized mare had gone into labor late that morning, but by the afternoon it had become evident there were difficulties with the birth. When the men had heard the news, they had rushed down to the stables where they remained ever since. That had been four long hours ago, and one tortuous hour since their first guests had heralded in.

Fearing if she spoke, she'd reveal the depth of her despair, Missy nodded mutely in

response. She desperately hoped to dance with James this evening. When he returned to London, she didn't know when she'd see him, if at all during the coming Season. With only two days at her disposal, she had to make every minute count.

"Now it is time for you to go dance and enjoy yourself." The viscountess smiled and flicked her fingers in a shooing motion. "Claire appears to be having a fine time with Mr. Finley, and I know many of the gentlemen are waiting patiently for you to conclude your hostess duties so they may accompany you to the dance floor."

Missy spotted her friend executing the steps to a quadrille. She looked lovely in her pale blue taffeta gown, a beautiful strand of pearls adorning her neck. Claire, the only daughter of Baron and Baroness Rutland, lived on the neighboring estate to the south. They had become fast friends as children, Claire claiming seniority by one year.

"Lady Armstrong."

With her attention elsewhere, Missy had failed to see Lord Edward Crawley's approach. Broad-shouldered and husky, he topped her five-foot-nine-inch stature by no more than two inches and wore his light brown hair, in her opinion, overly long.

"Good evening, Lord Crawley. I expect you are here seeking my daughter." The viscountess blessed him with a brilliant smile. He responded with a white, winsome smile of his own, his tawny eyes respectfully admiring the viscountess, resplendent in her royal blue satin gown. Her mother looked far too beautiful to have given birth to four children, and certainly too youthful to have a son just three years short of his thirtieth.

Lord Crawley's gaze then arrested on Missy and he did nothing to disguise his romantic interest. "That is, if Miss Armstrong will grant me this dance?" he said, with a gallant bow and a proffered arm.

After a quick glance at her mother, who inclined her head in approval, she accepted his

white-gloved hand, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor where a waltz had just commenced.

“You look lovely this evening,” he said, drawing her into his arms.

“Thank you,” Missy replied, her tone polite. With experienced ease and surprising grace for a man with his muscled stature, he whirled her into the throng of swirling gowns of every conceivable color and hue, and pristine black dress coats, trousers and waistcoats.

Their fathers had been peers in the House of Lords but the frequency of their meetings had seen a marked decrease after her father’s death ten years prior of an apoplexy fit. They’d renewed their acquaintance during the course of her first Season. Missy knew with but the slightest bit of encouragement from her, Lord Crawley would ask Thomas for her hand. However, he fell into the vast category of all men other than James—the group who had a better chance of ridding London of its fog than gaining her affections.

As they moved smoothly on the polished floors, Missy began to feel ill at ease under his admiring regard. As they were of similar height, in order to avoid eye contact, she directed her attention over his shoulder and took an idle tour of the hall.

Globe lamps illuminated the three-storied room, its cream walls appearing yellow under their warm glow. Ornamental shrubbery obscured the three-piece orchestra discreetly tucked away near the French doors leading to the walking gardens. A plethora of potted plants and fluted vases containing daisies and lilies dotted the circumference of the room infusing it with a fragrant scent. Her focus drifted toward the double doors to the hall entrance and skidded to a halt. Her heart lurched and her breath hitched softly.

James had arrived.

In that moment, their eyes connected.

James's body instantly responded to Missy's gaze. He wanted to look away but couldn't will his eyes to obey. A feeling of drowning in the fathomless sea of her gray-blue eyes rolled over him in a wave. She was breathtaking—and dancing in the arms of another man. A niggling sense of irritation had him clenching his jaw.

Crawley. A more pompous fool he would never meet. The few times he'd run into him in the halls of Cambridge, Crawley had impressed him as being one of the privileged *ton* who exalted his station over those he considered his minions.

"Missy looks ravishing. Wouldn't you agree, Rutherford?" Cartwright spoke sotto voce, sending him a sidelong glance, the semblance of a smile ghosting his dark features.

James ignored his knowing look and did his level best to keep his expression impassive, helpless to do anything else but continue to watch her.

"Will you look at Missy. She has half the men fairly champing at the bit eager to make her their wife." Armstrong said with a sigh worthy of a Shakespearean player at St. James Theatre.

With the knowledge he had been doing little else since they'd arrived, James wrenched his gaze away from her and turned to Armstrong. His friend appeared more at ease now the ordeal with his horse was over, his features having lost the strained look of worry. The tired mare had delivered a healthy foal just the hour before, and they had left the foal nursing comfortably with its mother.

"I wonder if Granville has shown." Armstrong gazed about the hall.

"You need only follow the trail of women and he's sure to be holding court at center stage," James said with a hint of unintended wryness in his tone. He had nothing against the man. Granville had certainly been good to Armstrong after his father had died. It had been he who had introduced his friend to Lord Bradford, who subsequently aided Armstrong in his financial

recovery.

Granville was exceedingly well liked by both men and women, and not only because of his rank in Society. What was not to like? He was amiable, good-looking and intelligent, although somewhat guarded at times. And the latter certainly wasn't a crime as people had said the same of him.

It was just that... James immediately closed off the direction of his thoughts. Further dissecting his reasons would do him little good.

"Oh yes, there he is," Armstrong said, directing his attention to the south end of the room.

Following his friend's stare, James spotted Granville in the thick of a mass of hooped skirts and dangling dance cards, his dark head visible above the throng.

At that moment, Missy danced into his line of vision, instantly knocking thoughts of the earl from his mind completely. Against his will—and going against every bit of common sense he possessed—her allure drew his attention once again and he sensed danger lurked perilously close.

Her hair, pinned loosely at her crown to allow burnished chestnut curls to brush her neck and bare shoulders, looked soft and shiny, unlike the pomade-laden stiffness of most of the other ladies present. She wore a pale blue gown, the bodice lovingly hugging her slender torso, the cut-off-the-shoulder neckline revealing an expanse of creamy, porcelain skin. In the short, and long, she looked magnificent. And, by the openly admiring stares being cast her way, he was only one of the many men who had taken due notice. Like hounds on the prowl, they circled the periphery and watched as if getting ready to pounce.

Unfortunately, the men's late arrival and relative anonymity didn't last long. Within minutes of making their appearance they were surrounded by a gaggle of mothers and their debutante daughters. *This* was what James dreaded most about these affairs, the lack of subtlety

had become not only accepted by the *ton*, but expected.

Lady Stanton initiated the barrage with her two less-than-comely daughters whose names failed to stay in his memory moments later. And Lady Randall was not to be outdone as she dragged a chubby, sallow-faced girl whom she introduced as her niece, Miss Margaret Crawford. The poor girl only made fleeting eye contact with the three men before resuming her intent regard of the wood planks of the highly beeswaxed floor.

Between polite nods and feigned smiles, James searched the large hall for venues of escape. As eligible, titled gentlemen were not so easy to come by, he had to get away before the crowd grew any larger. Spotting the viscountess at the opposite end of the room gave him the perfect excuse.

“If you will pardon me, ladies, I’d be remiss in my duties if I didn’t pay my respects to our hostess.”

Quick to seize on the opportunity for a clean exit, Armstrong echoed his sentiments. Before anyone could blink, their long strides had eaten up sufficient distance to leave the growing crowd of crestfallen women behind. A look back revealed Cartwright had been less fortunate. Lightly palming the pale elbow of one of Lady Stanton’s daughters, he proceeded to escort the tittering miss over to the refreshment table.

James smiled. It was Cartwright’s just desserts for needling him.

James looked spectacular in his formal wear. Like many of the other gentlemen present, he’d opted for white tie and tails. A fine wool coat with a satin collar and lapels further accentuated his broad shoulders. A strip of black satin arrowed down the sides of his trousers, which skimmed long, lean legs. As he and Thomas crossed the room and navigated the treacherous waters of marriage-hungry debutantes, their striking but contrasting good looks and

elegant appearance had ladies' necks craning, and their fans and eyes fluttering.

Missy had never been so anxious for a dance to conclude. While she tracked his progress, happily noting it ended at her mother's side, the strains of the waltz played in joyous finality. After declining Lord Crawley's persistent offer for refreshments with an amiable smile, she hastened toward the men, along the way turning down another half dozen invitations to dance.

"As you can see, the men are here," the viscountess remarked, upon her arrival.

"I hardly think we were missed from the bevy of gentlemen vying for Missy's attention," Thomas teased.

"You mean Lord Crawley? You know quite well he is an acquaintance, nothing more." Even as she made light of her brother's comment, her senses were finely attuned to James standing silent at his side. She didn't want him to fear there were rivals for her affections. She was his. Always had been and would always be—if only he'd allow it to be so.

James made a sound in his throat, his narrowed gaze flitting to Lord Crawley, who stood with three other gentlemen, his regard fixed on Missy. When the brawny lord noticed their accumulative regard, he held up his glass in salutation. Thomas nodded his acknowledgement. James's jaw tightened.

"Which gentlemen present this evening wouldn't find Millicent absolutely breathtaking?" the viscountess said, her face beaming with maternal pride.

Thomas smiled and Missy flushed. James's gaze flickered to her before he quickly glanced away. All the while, his expression remained impassive.

Taking a swift look around, the viscountess said, "Thomas, I do believe I see Charlotte Ridgeway. That pink gown is quite becoming on her, wouldn't you agree?"

Thomas chuckled wryly. The viscountess was not known for her subtlety, and Missy was certain that her mother's relationship with Lady Ridgeway had something to do with her timely

observation. It was well known that Lady Charlotte had a *tendre* for her brother. With a mock bow, a tight smile, and a hard, quick look at James, Thomas obliged his mother and left to seek out the lady in question.

“And James,” the viscountess said, turning to him, “since it appears you have frightened away the gentlemen with that glower of yours, why don’t you take my daughter on a spin about the floor? She has grown quite accomplished in your absence.” The word absence held a note of reprimand, undoubtedly in reference to the prior two years he’d begged off from attending the annual event. Her mother did however, quirk her mouth in a manner that had a softening effect. Not quite a command, but close.

A dark flushed stained James’s dimpled cheeks as he inclined his head toward Missy and extended his hand. She could barely contain her joy as he escorted her back to the dance floor. He drew her into his arms, taking one of her hands in his, placing the other one circumspectly on her waist. She fairly shivered at the touch. Keeping his head stiffly erect, he stared fixedly over the top of hers and commenced the waltz.

A peek through a wealth of dark lashes revealed a rather stern-faced James, his gaze directed off in the distance. Then, as if he felt the weight of her stare, his gaze flickered down to her upturned face. Not even a smile broke his granite features. He must still be miffed with her over the incident in the library. Which meant only one thing; she’d simply have to redouble her efforts.

“My mother was right. You look absolutely forbidding this evening.” She kept her tone light and teasing.

“You know these are hardly the sort of affairs I enjoy,” he said in a remote voice.

“And just what kind of affairs do you enjoy?”

At her question, his hand tightened on her waist, bringing her closer to his hard frame.

Something dark flashed in his eyes.

His response was slow in coming. “Certainly none that can be spoken about in mixed company.”

“Perhaps it is something I, too, would enjoy.”

James, a gentleman known for his grace as a faultless dancer, misstepped. It was a small enough error the casual observer would have overlooked, but not someone who had committed every nuance of his demeanor of the past ten years to memory.

“Yes, it appears you are very eager to learn” —he subjected her to a hard, almost angry stare, dropping his gaze to linger in the vicinity of her breasts a fraction longer than could be considered polite— “the more basic aspects of life.”

Heat led a charge up from her chest to her face but instinct and his firm lead glided her across the floor. When the dance concluded, instead of escorting her back to her mother’s side, James clasped her lightly by the elbow, and led her toward the arched doorway hidden from the rest of the hall by two oversized potted ferns. With his head high and stiffly erect, he steered her down the hall and into a small study.

Trembling with a mixture of trepidation and excitement, Missy was only too happy to follow his lead...once again.