



These Haunted Hearts

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal, Historical, Horror

Description: On one fateful wedding day at Marston Hall in 1818, four linked destinies hover in the balance.

Josiah Aston, Earl of Stansfield, wakes to discover he's seventy years dead and he alone can free his beloved wife Isabella's tormented soul. But first he must convince her to trust him against all the evidence...

Lady Isabella Verney, beautiful and tempestuous, married the man of her dreams, only to die violently on her wedding day. Every clue points to Josiah as the murderer...

Is true love strong enough to defeat ancient malevolence forever?

Miles Hartley, Viscount Kendall, is society's ideal catch, but what does that matter if he can't convince Calista Aston that he loves her? When an age-old curse strikes, only by proving himself worthy of her faith can he save their happiness...

Lady Calista Aston, noted bluestocking, fears she loves Miles Hartley not wisely, but too well. On her wedding day, her doubts place her at evil's mercy. When death and disaster loom, is it courage or mad folly to believe that Miles loves her in spite of all her faults?

On one fateful wedding day at Marston Hall in 1818, will the lovers emerge triumphant or will darkness conquer all?

Expanded version of the story "The Chinese Bed", which originally appeared in the anthology, *The Mammoth Book of Ghost Romance*.

Total Pages (Source): 24

Chapter One

Marston Hall, Norfolk, May 1818

JOSIAH WOKE TO thick darkness.

He knew immediately where he was. Sprawled across the great Chinese bed at Marston Hall. His glorious, extravagant marriage bed. The king's gift to his dear friend, Lord Stansfield, upon the earl's nuptials. Josiah had expressed suitable gratitude for the royal generosity, but he couldn't avoid thinking a second-hand bed was a rum sort of present for a man supposedly in the regal favor.

Thick green hangings enclosed him, hangings cut from robes sewn for a Chinese princess's wedding. A wedding that had never taken place. The elaborate scroll accompanying His Majesty's gift had laid out the legend as a quaint piece of history. The princess's lowborn lover had betrayed her instead of stealing her away. Cursing all marriages, she'd poisoned herself on the day she was to marry a powerful warlord.

Or so the story went.

In search of warm, sleepy Isabella, Josiah's hand slid across the silk counterpane, feeling the raised patterns of embroidery under his palm. But he already knew his beloved wasn't lying beside him.

By God, he must have been half-seas over before he tumbled onto the cream cover with its thickly twining peonies and fragile pagodas. He was still wearing his wedding clothes. He hadn't been sober enough to undress. No wonder Isabella had

left him to sleep it off. His darling had a temper. He'd hear about his excesses soon enough. He deserved to.

He didn't even remember crawling into bed.

Which, now he thought about it, struck him as rather odd.

This couldn't be right. On his wedding day, he'd been drunk on love, not liquor. And he certainly didn't recall imbibing so deep that he'd collapsed insensible.

If only he could remember.

He frowned into the heavy stillness, struggling to bring events into focus. Most of the day was clear in his mind. But some...was not.

He'd spent all morning in a lather of wanting Isabella. He'd been so hungry to have his bride to himself, he'd dragged her away from the wedding breakfast with scandalous impetuosity. Lord Fenburgh, her drier-than-dust father, had frowned disapproval, but Isabella's black eyes had flared with excitement. Josiah had won a lusty wife, thank the angels. After weeks of curtailed encounters, she'd been as eager as he to consummate their chaste wooing.

He remembered her delicious, husky little moan as he'd kissed her ravenously, passionately behind one of the man-size Japanese jars in the hall, barely out of sight of the guests. He remembered fondling the sweet curve of her breast before towing her willy-nilly toward the carved oak staircase. She'd scurried to keep up, running with a rustle of silk skirts and a patter of delicate heels across tiled flooring. He'd swept his laughing bride into his arms and carried her up the stairs, golden light spilling over them from the high mullioned windows.

And then...

Something was badly amiss. He hadn't been drunk on his wedding day. His head remained clear and his mouth wasn't stale with alcohol. When he married Isabella, he hadn't needed intoxicants. He'd been delirious with happiness and itching to possess his bride. A glass of champagne to toast her bright eyes and a lifetime of joy to come. That was all.

So why was he lying all alone? And why couldn't he remember?

Where the hell was Isabella? She should be here. With him.

The darkness crushed him. Confusion ebbed and the truth slammed down like an ax.

Isabella was dead.

Crippling grief thickened his blood like gray sea ice. His memory remained disturbingly blank about details, but he knew without question that she was dead.

Of course he knew. They'd been so close in life, they'd shared a heartbeat.

Isabella was dead.

And so was he.

"Kiss me, Calista."

Austerely intellectual Lady Calista Aston giggled with an extremely unintellectual giddiness and allowed the handsome young man to tug her from the empty hallway into the shadowy bedroom. "Miles, I haven't got time," she said without sounding in the least convincing.

“I’ll be quick.”

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Through dimness created by drawn curtains, she shot him a disbelieving look. “That’s what you always say.”

As ever when she regarded the man she was to marry, her heart twisted in an agony of love. Tall, golden-haired, charming, Viscount Kendall was like a magical prince out of a fairy tale.

A tide of self-doubt threatened to drown her, in spite of her appearance of light-heartedness. She still couldn’t believe that this superb creature had chosen her from all the women in the world to become his wife.

She was a devotee of logic, of scientific process. Miles Hartley’s partiality for a bluestocking Long Meg like her seemed completely nonsensical. She’d imagine he was mad if she wasn’t herself victim to a madness impervious to research or reason or cold, hard reality. But while she recognized her affliction as permanent, how long would his madness last? Until tomorrow? Next year?

From the moment she’d seen him across her father’s drawing room, she’d fallen under Miles’s spell. She still recalled her incredulity when he’d proposed six weeks later. Desperately she’d hoped to become more secure in his love as time passed, but with every day of the last three months, her uncertainties had burgeoned. Now, on the afternoon before her wedding, they gnawed at her like starving rats on a loaf of stale bread.

She told herself a thousand times she was a silly goose. Miles said he loved her. He said it over and over. But at her deepest level, nothing convinced her that she was worthy of his regard. He was elegant and brilliant and gifted with a vivid masculine

beauty. He should choose a wife who was equally beautiful, a toast of society, instead of a drab wallflower like her. Calista was bitterly aware that with her straight brown hair and long, thin body, and strong Aston features, she was no beauty.

With his usual careless grace, Miles kicked the door shut behind him and drew her inexorably into his arms. Another shudder of love ran through her. It was dangerous to love a man as much as she loved Miles.

“It’s your fault.” He smiled at her as though she was as bright and lovely as a rainbow. “If you weren’t so delicious, I’d be happy with a mere peck on the cheek.”

“You’re a sweet-tongued devil.” The grim tenor of her thoughts lent the remark a sharp edge.

His smile turned wicked. “Let me show you.”

He kissed her and she melted into his arms. His mouth opened over hers and his tongue slipped between her lips to tease her into a fever. She was helpless against this passion. It terrified her even as she flung herself into the blaze. From the first, he’d made her feel almost painfully alive. If he ever left her, she had a bleak premonition that she’d never feel alive again.

Reluctantly she drew away. Tomorrow... Tomorrow when he kissed her, they wouldn’t need to worry about proprieties. Fear that wasn’t quite so delicious shivered through her. She wanted to lie with Miles more than she’d ever wanted anything, but she couldn’t help but worry that she’d disappoint him.

Tomorrow they’d share the carved bed that loomed behind her. The bed that was much closer than it had been. While kissing her, Miles had nudged her backward.

He caught her face between his hands. “Calista, darling Calista, if only you could see

yourself how I see you. You wouldn't torture me this way."

"We shouldn't be here alone," she whispered, resting her hands on his shoulders.

She didn't know why she lowered her voice. Something in this hushed, close room always made her want to tiptoe. Nobody else loitered on the upper floor of her father's hitherto neglected mansion on the Norfolk Broads. The servants were too busy preparing for the festivities and readying a long-empty house to welcome the onslaught of visitors. The guestrooms on the level below were bustling centers of activity, as was the ground floor where the wedding celebrations would take place. But here, high above the bleak but beautiful countryside, she and her betrothed were isolated.

Miles stroked his hand down her cheek with a tenderness that she felt to her toes. Clawing doubt receded on a tide of need. "Of course we should."

"Tomorrow—" she said on a fading protest as he gently pushed her back onto the mattress. When Miles kneeled above her, it sagged under their weight.

For all her pleasure in his touch, something in her didn't want to be on this bed—and not just because Miles tempted her to impropriety. She'd believed herself immune to the house's dark legends, but she discovered that she wasn't quite as level-headed as she thought. A Chinese princess had cursed this bed. In the full light of day, Calista treated such superstition with contempt. Here, in this shadowy room, malevolence whispered from the very wainscoting.

"I'm not sure I can wait until then." He rose above her, supporting himself on his arms.

She struggled to shore up the crumbling remnants of common sense. "It's only one more day."

“How cruelly you say that, as if my torment doesn’t signify.”

“Of course it matters,” she said unsteadily, panting with forbidden excitement.

The amusement ebbed from his face and she couldn’t quite interpret his assessing look. “I wish I believed that.”

She frowned. The gravity in his voice seemed out of kilter with their flirting. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that sometimes I feel...my passion for you outweighs your passion for me.” His voice was deeper than usual, his words more hesitant.

“No...” Shocked she stared up into the perfect planes of his face. Her eyes had adjusted to the dull light so that she saw the uncertainty that flickered in his hazel eyes. Miles Hartley, Viscount Kendall, wasn’t by nature an uncertain man. “No, Miles. You know I love you.”

“Then prove it.” His voice was harder than she’d ever heard it and his jaw set in an unfamiliar stubborn line.

Surprise held her briefly silent. She was used to his easy manner. But this man looked ready to take on the world and seize what he wanted from it.

“This time tomorrow, we’ll be married,” she said shakily. “You can’t tumble me here with the house full of people.”

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“So you say.” Still he looked as if he conceded nothing.

Calista grabbed his arms, feeling the tensile strength under the dark blue riding jacket. Right now, he seemed like a stranger. “Miles, what is it?”

He shook his head and his gaze slid away from hers. Disquiet filled her. She hadn’t been sure if he was joking when he’d started this game. Now she knew something was wrong. Something more than male frustration that she didn’t succumb without demur to his lures.

“Miles?”

He stared directly at her, his hazel eyes dark and somber as she’d never seen them. “It’s just—”

He paused, searching for words, he who never lacked a ready quip or a witty riposte. Her disquiet transformed into a coiling mass of adders hissing and squirming in her belly. She’d known this day would come. She’d known that he’d recover from whatever whim had made him want her. She braced for him to reject her, to send her back to the lonely prison her life had been until he’d miraculously fallen in love with her.

Miles spoke in a rush. “I feel you’re holding yourself back from me.”

He hadn’t said what she expected. She could only stare at him with a frown. “I don’t understand.”

But she did, oh, dear Lord, she did.

She'd never trusted this happiness. Self-preservation insisted she reserved a fraction of her soul from him. So that when the inevitable happened and he decided he didn't love her after all, she'd survive. What astonished her was that Miles had sensed the barriers she raised between them. She'd tried so hard to keep her doubts hidden and pl

ay the carefree bride.

He kissed her again, but the entrancing sweetness had leached away. Sorrow squeezed her heart even as she kissed him back. This was how it would be in years to come, she knew. Little by little, he'd realize what a poor bargain he made in marrying the Earl of Stansfield's awkward daughter. With every day, the glow that lit his eyes when he looked at her would dwindle until nothing remained.

They were so different. Why didn't he see that? He was famous for his graceful manners, admired wherever he went. She was ill at ease in company and likely to say the wrong thing. He was sophisticated and no stranger to sensual pleasure. She'd spent most of her life with her nose buried in a book. He was breathtakingly handsome. The best anyone had ever said about her was that her looks were unusual. She was well aware that "unusual" was a word that carried a thousand spiteful synonyms in its wake.

If she was brave, she'd end the engagement now and face down the scandal. She should make a clean break before Miles hurt her as he would undoubtedly hurt her. But she was too weak. She wanted all she could get of him. She wanted to hold on to the sweet knowledge that at least for a short while, he'd loved her. Even if only a little.

Her mouth clung to his with a passion that made him regard her with a puzzled frown

when he finally raised his head.

“Calista?”

Her eagerness would surprise him. To protect herself, she'd fought to pretend coolness in response to his passion. But fear made her desperate to snatch what pleasure she could while he still thought he wanted her. Fighting the tears that would betray her misery, she stared up past Miles toward the tester above her head.

“It's just wedding jitters.” The excuse was losing its efficacy. She'd repeated it so often to explain fears that stabbed much more deeply than a bride's natural nervousness.

Once or twice, she'd come close to confiding her doubts to Miles. Every time, she'd stopped herself from speaking. If he took her seriously, he'd think she was appallingly poor spirited. Most of the time, she thought she was appallingly poor spirited. If he didn't take her seriously, he'd try and cajole her fears away as childish fancies. She couldn't bear that.

Unlike the counterpane, the tester was decorated not only with flowers and fanciful Chinese buildings, but also with faces. A wizened mandarin glowered down at her. His devilish black eyebrows tilted over eyes strangely stitched in vermillion. In her imagination, the face's smile turned demonic, as if mocking her futile yen for Miles to love her as she loved him.

“The best way to defeat your fears is to face them,” Miles said steadily.

Calista's eyes widened as she ripped her attention from the exotic embroidery. “You really want us to anticipate our vows?”

He shrugged and pressed his hips into her belly. Innocent and clumsy, she might be.

Brainless she wasn't. Right now Miles wanted her, whatever the future held. His hard heat made her tremble with desire.

"I don't want you to be afraid anymore," he said.

Then love me forever.

She stifled the plea. He'd think she was pathetic if she said such things. She needed to keep some pride to save her when he realized that marrying her was a mistake. "I'm not sure a scandal is a better choice."

"We wouldn't be the first couple overcome by lust before we meet the parson."

"We can't." With a trembling hand, she reached up to brush the fall of soft dark hair back from Miles's forehead. "You know we can't. Someone would catch us and Papa would have an apoplexy."

Calista already suspected that the world laughed behind its hands at her. She'd laugh herself at the idea of such a plain woman thinking that she was a suitable match for society's darling, Viscount Kendall. She'd laugh if she hadn't been so near to crying.

She stared up at his remarkable face and told herself that she wouldn't cry. She'd marry Miles tomorrow and take what came. She'd need every ounce of bravery, but abandoning the game before it started was too lily-livered to contemplate.

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Something in her expression must have convinced him that her courage stirred. His smile became less strained. “They wouldn’t catch us tonight.”

She caught her breath. “T-tonight?”

“Yes, tonight.”

He’d always been gentle with her. This hint of arrogance thrilled her. “Where?”

He raised his head and cast a telling look around the room. “Why, here, of course.”

Something other than excitement at the prospect of giving herself to Miles made her heart skip a beat. She’d stifled her fears of the future as she’d stifled them so often since her betrothal. But in this stuffy room, other fears stirred. “In the haunted bed?”

“I thought you dismissed the legend. That’s why you had the bed brought up from the cellars and put back together. You said a woman who believed in science would never fall victim to ludicrous superstition.”

Ordering the bed restored had been an act of defiance, not just against the tragic legend. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

His uncharacteristic ruthlessness faded into the affection that always warmed her. “In fact, you insisted this would be our marital bed, curse be damned. About the same stage you said you didn’t believe Marston Hall was haunted and the aspect was so pleasant, you wanted to live here instead of in one of my houses. You said that even if the doomed Chinese princess’s robes formed the bed’s hangings, her spirit was

long gone. She had no further influence over the living.”

“I didn’t say damn,” Calista prevaricated.

Miles laughed softly. She loved his laugh. Just the sound of it made the world a better place. Oh, she was so overwhelmingly in love with him. He’d destroy her before he was done, however much she battled to protect herself, however often she exhorted herself to be daring and seize this chance.

“Perhaps not. But you definitely said that even if wicked Josiah Aston was dragged from the Chinese bed on his fatal wedding day, the bed has no power to curse all newlyweds in this house.”

“I know my qualms sound absurd.” She’d always dismissed the tale of the Chinese princess drinking hemlock after her paramour deserted her. Somehow, today, as she lay on the bed and contemplated her own wedding, the gruesome tale gained fresh sway. “But I’d like formalities out of the way before I test the legend.”

“I’d like to banish any lingering specters with good earthy lust before I make an honest woman of you on the morrow, my love.” He paused, inadvertently giving her a chance to relish the endearment. “The specters in this room, who I don’t believe in at all. And the specters in your heart, who wield far too much power over you.”

Her show of bravado hadn’t fooled him one whit. She hadn’t fallen in love with a stupid man. Which occasionally seemed like a pity.

Miles rolled away and stretched out upon the heavy cream silk, his thoughtful gaze never shifting from her. Even recognizing the intelligence that lurked beneath his decorative exterior, she was surprised that he saw so much of her turmoil. Most people found her hard to read. Briefly the temptation to confide her fears hovered once more. Then like a coward, she avoided the questions in his eyes.

“You’re a barbarian, Miles, putting your boots on that cover. The embroidery is priceless.”

His lips curved in a lazy smile. “If you’re going to nag like a wife, beloved, at least offer me some husbandly privileges to sweeten the pill.”

“Miles—”

“Please.” He extended his hand toward her, palm upward.

Heaven help her, she was a hopeless case. She couldn’t resist him. She could never resist him. Which of course was a large measure of the problem.

Hesitantly she placed her hand in his and felt immediate warmth when his fingers closed hard and secure around hers. At moments like this, she could almost believe that the love in his eyes would endure through the years.

“You’re as wicked as Josiah Aston.” She hoped he wouldn’t hear the revealing huskiness in her voice.

His smile indicated that he recognized his triumph over his bride’s scruples. “Only with you, Calista.”

“If we’re discovered, we’ll be the talk of the county.”

“I’ll make it worthwhile.”

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

Actually she had no doubts he was a wonderful lover. His kisses set her ablaze. She’d spent the last months wandering in a daze of hunger for more than the circumspect

encounters they'd sneaked under the watchful gaze of parents and society. Her doubts, as ever, centered on her ability to satisfy him.

“And of you.” It was as if he read her mind. He sat up and pressed a fervent kiss to her palm. “Midnight.”

“Midnight,” she echoed, wondering just what she promised.

Chapter Two

FROM THE SHADOWS, Josiah watched as the lovers kissed for a few minutes more before the young man swept the tall, slender girl from the chamber. Their games and quarrels and barely restrained passion inevitably proved a poignant reminder of his wife. It seemed a grotesque, malicious jest that he was dead. And alone.

A poisonous brew of grief and frustrated anger swirled in his gut. He'd had a whole life ahead of him, a life of love and achievement and purpose. A life with Isabella at his side. A life with children and hope and happiness. A life he'd been denied.

Who were these two people who embraced on his bed and kissed and bickered, just as he and Isabella had kissed and bickered? Although Isabella had been a queenly creature. The girl's eyes betrayed a vulnerability that was foreign to his darling.

Calista's clothing was outlandish to his eyes. Too light a

nd simple to adorn a gentlewoman. Like a night rail rather than a garment any decent woman would wear in public. Where were her hoops? She wore no stomacher and her dress was belted high under her breasts. Nor was her chestnut hair dressed with proper care, just a simple knot half tumbled down her back after her tryst on the bed.

Yet her voice, her manner, her sense of ownership of this house—his house—indicated she must belong here. More, the radiance that warmed that too serious face when she smiled reminded him of his mother.

The man was a stranger. But Josiah was familiar enough with the demeanor of a

fellow desperately in love to recognize his plight. He was a handsome devil of about thirty, the sort women made fools of themselves over. But the intensity in his eyes suggested intelligence and a discomfiting level of perception.

The girl was something different. Plain and almost forbidding with her severe Aston bone structure, always more suited to masculine members of the family than females. Until she smiled, when she became almost as beautiful as Isabella Verney.

He must say he admired the man's spirit in luring his lady into sharing his bed before the wedding. Josiah had frequently tried to seduce Isabella, but for a girl famously indifferent to society's strictures, she'd surprised him with her prudishness. Strange because when he met her, the tattle had been that Isabella Verney was no virgin.

Josiah's mind worked furiously. He could make little sense of what he'd heard the couple say. What the hell had happened here?

He gathered that people had dragged him from the Chinese bed on his wedding day. Why? They hadn't mentioned his wife. Had she been there?

Wicked Josiah Aston?

The description seemed far too damning. Like any sprig with gold in his pockets, he'd been wild in his youth. But from the moment he'd seen Isabella the day after his twenty-eighth birthday, he'd known what he wanted.

The beautiful heiress Isabella Verney had been headstrong and at twenty-six, late to choose a husband. No matter. He'd recognized his destiny. A year of courting her had seen off a crowd of rivals, many of greater estate than he. Then, praise God, she'd admitted her love and consented to become his wife.

Had he possessed Isabella before everything went wrong? They'd married at Marston

parish church. He remembered that distinctly. Surely he wouldn't take her to wife without seeking his sweet reward. Yet something about the straining, bristling energy in his body indicated he hadn't had her. And he couldn't imagine he'd forget holding her in his arms.

The damnable thing was that his body continued to experience sensation, however false the perception. He recognized the day as warm for May. He was aware of the weight of his braided blue velvet coat, newly tailored for his great day. His non-existent blood still pulsed with desire for his absent bride.

So, no, he doubted he'd tumbled her before he...died.

Before he died.

Time had passed since his wedding day in 1749.

Years and years of it.

Time seemed determined to play nasty tricks on him. The space between waking and now, late afternoon, had passed in moments. He felt like he'd only stirred within the last hour, yet the tiny ormolu clock on the carved chest indicated a whole day had gone by.

What the devil had he done the day he married the love of his life? He urgently needed to find out. More than that, he needed to find Isabella. He couldn't endure being here on his own. An eternity without her was too cruel a punishment for any crime, however heinous.

He turned toward the door, left ajar after the lovers' departure. Neither had had the slightest inkling that he observed them. Gradually he came to understand the rules of this bewildering new existence. He could see everything around him while it seemed

that nobody could see him.

Moving provided yet another uncanny experience. Although his mind recognized that he had no physical substance, he felt that he walked like a living man, covered distances like a living man. Yet he kept tumbling into gaps in time when he was...nowhere. Confusion, questions, contradictions battered him.

Wicked Josiah Aston?

The bedroom was full of unfamiliar furniture, apart from the ostentatious bed. Little in the corridor was familiar either, apart from the faded wallpaper and the tall window at the end of the hall. He drifted through a few rooms, noting the occasional ornament or table that remained from his time in the house. The decorations weren't nearly so elaborate as they'd been in his day. Had the family come down in the world since his demise? Or was he just observing a change in fashion? The house was his house and yet it wasn't. Another difficult concept to impress upon his reeling mind.

Slowly, carefully, he made his way through the house, seeking Isabella and some clue to his fate. Nothing provided any indication, unless absence of evidence was indication enough. The double portrait he'd commissioned from Allan Ramsay for his wedding was nowhere to be seen. There were plenty of other family portraits hanging on the walls, most with the familiar Aston dark hair and blue eyes that he'd seen in his looking glass every day.

Frequently, in spite of his driving urgency to see his wife, he'd find himself transfixed by something he knew from his life. A painting of Venice that he'd bought on his Grand Tour. The library. The view across the park to the lake, a scene which had changed remarkably little. He'd stir to continue his exploration, check one of the household clocks, and find that an hour, two hours had passed. And still he had no idea what had happened to him. Or his darling.

All the bedrooms on the floor below the Chinese room were readied for wedding guests, but he didn't miss the house's barely concealed signs of neglect. Many of the rooms reeked of disuse, dust, stale air, in spite of windows flung wide to the late spring afternoon.

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Occasionally he encountered a servant or a wedding guest. They paid him no attention, confirming his suspicion that, as with the couple upstairs, they couldn't see him. In one bedroom, he found a half-finished letter inscribed at the top with the date. In horrified shock, he'd stared at the page.

God's teeth, it was 1818, nearly seventy years since his wedding. Since presumably his...death.

How could he have no recollection of anything between that day and now? Where had he been for the space of two generations? Was it something to do with the Chinese bed where he'd woken? Was his spirit somehow attached to the bed? The young man—Miles, the girl had called him—had said it was only recently re-assembled. Did restoring the bed to use wake him from oblivion?

Only another question among so many.

Bewildering afternoon faded into bewildering evening, and still he searched. His eyes remained sharp as a cat's, whether the room was dark or lit with candles. Another strange result of becoming a wraith.

Finally as night deepened toward midnight, he opened the door to the chamber in the east tower. The room Isabella had chosen as hers for the night before their wedding. On the last occasion he'd entered this room, stealing a few forbidden moments to kiss his bride, it had been an untidy jumble of silks and brocades and feminine gewgaws. Her jasmine perfume had scented the air. Her two pugs had curled together on the red counterpane and scowled at him as an unwelcome invader.

Isabella had always had an uncanny ability to make any space uniquely hers.

A woman still slept here, he immediately realized. But a woman very different from coquettish, worldly Isabella. Even before he noticed the pink silk gown in the immodest new style spread across the bed, he guessed this room, with its lovely outlook over the gardens, now belonged to his descendant Calista.

No, if he'd died without issue—the idea still struck a discordant note like a hammer hitting brass—his younger brother George must have inherited. Most likely Calista was George's great-granddaughter.

Calista wasn't present. She must have accepted her sweetheart's entreaty to meet him. God grant her joy. He wished to Hades that he and Isabella had done the same.

He wandered across to lift a book from one of the tottering piles that litt

ered every flat surface. And only then realized that while he was invisible to all living beings, he could move physical objects.

What a deuced fool he was. Of course he could, he'd been opening doors throughout the house. In his lather to find Isabella, he just hadn't noticed.

After combing the rest of the manor, he'd hoped to find his wife in this room, but Isabella wasn't here. Was she anywhere? Or had her spirit ascended on high while his lingered to atone for some unidentified but clearly dreadful misdeed?

He glanced at the book. It was something serious and botanical. Definitely nothing Isabella would read. Her preferences had veered toward the sensational and romantic. And the room, apart from the massed books and papers, was much more orderly than any space Isabella ever inhabited. Even the set of scientific apparatus with scales and vials and microscopes on the desk in the corner was neat.

Josiah heard the door open behind him. Odd how his senses remained so attuned to the world when he no longer existed as a physical entity. Then all thoughts but one fled.

Isabella stared at him from the doorway.

Joy exploded with painful force. Isabella was here. She was here. Surely he could touch her. If he could lift a book or open a door, surely he could touch this woman who turned his world to sunlight.

“My love...” he choked out, stepping forward on shaky legs and reaching for her.

During their courtship, he’d inundated her with a thousand extravagant endearments. It had been a laughing game, what flamboyant compliments he could invent to please this woman he loved with such unfettered passion. He’d called her his treasure of Trebizond, his glorious angel of heaven, his exquisite diamond of Ind, his shining pearl of the Orient.

But all his playful praise had meant only one thing. Isabella was his love and he’d lay down his life for her.

“I’ve scoured the house for you.” He stepped closer, wondering at her silence, at her lack of movement toward him. She’d so rarely been still. It was part of the quicksilver brilliance of her character. She’d been endlessly fascinating, flashing like a jewel, his darling Isabella.

His darling Isabella who stared at him now as though she beheld a monster.

Her frozen expression made him pause before he touched her. His belly dipped with

foreboding. “Isabella?”

She was trembling and pale as she’d never been in life. He couldn’t mistake the terror in her beautiful black eyes. She still wore the sumptuous dress of blue French silk she’d had made for the wedding. Delicate pearls and summer flowers twined in her intricate coils of shining black hair.

In an unmistakable attempt to ward him off, she raised her hands. “Stay...stay away from me.”

Of all the numerous shocks of the day, this was the worst. What the devil had happened on his wedding day? What the devil had he done?

“I don’t understand,” he said dully, dropping his shaking hands to his sides.

“Don’t come near me.”

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She sounded so frightened, his lovely girl who had never been frightened of anything in her whole life. This was the woman who had galloped hell for leather at the most dangerous fences. This was the woman who had faced down her ambitious father, Lord Fenburgh, and insisted she'd marry no man but the Earl of Stansfield.

The Earl of Stansfield who apparently she now loathed.

Outraged questions jammed in Josiah's throat, but he could see she verged on fleeing if he pressed too hard for answers. Now he'd found her, he couldn't risk losing her. And who knew whether he'd ever find her again? He still wasn't sure of the laws that prevailed on this immortal plane.

Very carefully he stepped back, giving Isabella space and hopefully demonstrating benign intentions. He had to find out what was going on, but first he had to banish the dread from her expression. Her quivering fear hit him with the force of a blow to the stomach.

"I won't touch you." The words cut at him like razors. "Trust me, Isabella."

A disbelieving huff of laughter escaped her as she retreated onto the landing, preparing to run.

"No..." He surged toward her again before remembering that she didn't want him to touch her. Quickly he lowered his arms but not before he caught another flash of panic in her eyes.

Whatever he'd done, it set his intrepid bride quaking with fear. Good God, what was

going on here?

He forced himself to remain still. After a few suspenseful seconds, she too came to an unsteady halt against the balustrade at the top of the stairs. She watched him unwaveringly as if expecting him to strike at her like a snake.

She lifted her chin, a poignant echo of the vibrant woman who had led him such a dance before promising to be his. “You can’t hurt me anymore.”

He frowned in incomprehension. “Hurt you? I don’t want to hurt you.”

She flinched at the hint of impatience in his voice. “Don’t lie to me, Josiah.”

Sucking in a breath, he struggled for calm when everything inside him wanted to insist that whatever evil she thought he’d committed, it couldn’t be true. “I’d never lie to you.”

Bitter cynicism unfamiliar to the woman he’d known tightened her expression, although at least she stopped edging away. “Of course you would.”

With every moment, he understood less. Foolishly he’d imagined that he’d understand everything if he could just find Isabella. Well, he’d found her and the mysteries became more baffling than ever. “Won’t you tell me what I did, Isabella?”

Something in his tone must have convinced her to take his question seriously. A series of emotions crossed her face, fugitive as summer lightning. Fear. Puzzlement. Anger. Then a profound sadness to match the stabbing grief he’d felt when he’d woken without her and realized that he and his beloved were both dead.

Grim premonition gripped him. “Isabella?”

Her black gaze settled upon him, somber and lightless as he'd never seen it. "You murdered me, Josiah."

Chapter Three

GINGERLY CALISTA INCHED inside the Chinese bedroom, feeling her way ahead with fumbling hands. There was a full moon tonight so sneaking down from her eyrie in the east tower hadn't posed a problem. Unless she counted her nagging conviction that this was a mistake and once Miles discovered how inadequate she truly was, he'd cry off from marrying her, never mind the promises he'd made.

This room was pitch-black. The curtains remained drawn, blocking out the moonlight. With every step through Stygian darkness, the temptation to turn and run like a frightened rabbit grew.

She leveled her shoulders and told herself that ghosts didn't exist. Which did nothing at all to stifle her nervousness about giving herself to Miles. And very little to overcome her awareness of the oppressive, ancient spite infesting the air in this chamber.

Miles would mock her, but perhaps she might change her mind about insisting this would be their bedroom. The views were lovely, but the walls seeped with the memory of old tragedy. The possibly mythical princess. The far too real Josiah Aston and his murdered bride Isabella.

No, they'd choose one of the numerous pleasant chambers on the floor below. A girl could take her commitment to modern scientific thought too far.

"Miles?" she whispered, although there was little chance of being heard outside the room. Everyone in the house was asleep and this entire floor had been left empty for the guests who arrived tomorrow.

No answer.

Dear Lord, had he decided even before he had her that he was no longer interested? Calista told herself that it was no more than she'd expected, but even so, her belly cramped with misery.

"Miles?" she hissed more loudly, wishing to heaven she had a candle, even if it increased the chance of discovery. Then instead of staggering around like a blind woman, she could check the room, confirm he'd let her down and leave.

To try and stitch her broken heart together up in her lonely room.

Too mortifying to contemplate. She straightened, although nobody was present to witness her revival of spirit, and reached in front of her.

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She'd sit on the bed and wait a few minutes—at least that proved her courage, the bed was said to guarantee a violent death to any bride who lay in it. Easy to scoff at ridiculous superstitions in the light of day. Less easy when she stood in a closed room, straining to hear another person breathing.

A month ago, opening this beautiful, neglected house for her wedding had seemed a brave, positive act. Now, Calista reclassified the whim as rash and stupid. She counted herself the most rational of creatures, but something in this room wasn't right. Even someone as insensitive to the occult as she sensed the deep sadness surrounding her. The atmosphere's heaviness was more obvious now that she couldn't see. Air that should be still moved on her bare arms, making the hairs stand up on her skin. Since Isabella Verney's grisly death last century, there had been numerous accounts of specters at Marston Hall. That disciple of scientific method, Calista Aston, had always dismissed these reports as the victory of imagination over reason.

At this moment, she wasn't quite so sure.

Calista ventured another step and slammed into something big and warm.

Like a ninny, she screamed.

“Calista, you goose, hush now. You'll have a crowd in here. And if we're going to face down a scandal, I damn well want the pleasure first.”

It was Miles. Living, breathing, provoking Miles. Nothing unearthly visiting from the other side of the grave.

“Why didn’t you answer me?” Temper sent her nonsensical fears scampering into the shadows.

He laughed softly and put his arms around her. Until the first time Miles held her, she’d never felt she had a place in the world. He anchored her every time he touched her. She closed her eyes and relished his heat, even as her heart kicked into a gallop at the prospect of that strong, male body naked against hers.

“I wanted to tease you.”

“By scaring me silly and risking discovery,” she said crossly, although held so close, it was difficult to maintain her annoyance.

As if by common con

sent, they stood a few seconds without speaking, waiting to hear if anyone climbed the stairs to investigate the cry in the night.

The house around them remained silent.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come.” Miles drew away and led her toward the bed. Or at least she assumed he led her toward the bed. The darkness disoriented her. The darkness and the dizzy pleasure of being alone with Miles.

“I nearly didn’t,” she admitted in a low voice, following without resistance.

“Let me open the curtains.”

She shivered with the trepidation that his embrace had briefly vanquished. Any nervousness about ghosts receded under a more immediate fear of what was about to happen. “I’d rather do this in the dark.”

He laughed again. “How do you know?”

Miles seemed to take this encounter so lightly. One of the reasons she’d fallen in love with him was the way he responded to life with a smile. But something in her resented his failure to recognize her surrender as the huge concession it was.

“I don’t.”

“Then trust me. I’d prefer to do this in a blaze of light so I see every expression on your lovely face. In the absence of a hundred chandeliers, moonlight must suffice.”

She stumbled to a halt. He frequently called her pretty and his darling and other such flummery. The problem was that just now he’d sounded so genuine, if she wasn’t careful, she might start to believe him, in spite of the damning evidence of her looking glass. His casual reference to her beauty cut straight to her yearning heart. She wanted to be beautiful for him. As he was beautiful for her.

“Miles...” she said helplessly.

He raised her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on her palm. The caress tingled to the soles of her feet and she began to tremble, this time not with fear.

“Stay there,” he murmured.

Her skin tightening with wanton anticipation, she listened to him prowl around the room. He seemed to have an unerring instinct for where he went. With a swish of the curtains, moonlight flooded the chamber, turning black to molten silver.

She poised uncertainly, trapped between the craven urge to flee and a powerful hunger for this ultimate closeness.

She watched Miles at the window. The light limned him, turned him into a being from another world. The magnificent sight made the breath catch in her throat. He wore a loose white shirt and breeches. She'd never been so aware of his height or the lean strength of his body.

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He turned and at last she saw the smile that tilted his mouth. His eyes focused on her and the smile faded, replaced by an expression that looked like awe. He tautened into stillness as he surveyed her from her unbound hair to her bare toes peeping beneath the white hem of her simple night rail.

The moonlight was so bright, she saw his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed. She could almost imagine that he found her as breathtaking as she found him. His expression smoothed the sharpness from her uncertainty. The clamorous babble of thoughts in her head quietened to a low hum of need.

"You're undressed," he said huskily.

It seemed foolish to blush when they both knew she was in this room to offer herself to him, but heat flushed her cheeks. "I wasn't sure what to wear."

His joyous smile made her toes curl against the Turkish rug at her feet. "Or not, as the case may be."

"Or not."

She waited in an agony of pleasurable suspense for him to seize her, ravish her into delight so that she had no chance to remember the dictates of propriety. But he approached slowly, as though afraid if he moved too abruptly, she might vanish. By the time he stopped in front of her, she trembled with apprehension and desire. Her body felt too small a vessel to contain the storm of emotions raging inside her.

He reached out to smooth her hair away from her face. His touch always turned her

knees to custard. Now, when the bed and all it portended filled the shadows behind him, the glance of his hand set her burning. If such a seemingly innocent touch had this effect, she'd most likely combust into ashes before they were done tonight.

Calista bit her lip and stood in shaking stillness as he trailed his hand across her neck and shoulders. His touch felt like a discovery rather than a seduction. Although of course she was seduced. Her heart thundered and her breasts tightened against the thin lawn of her nightdress. He glanced down and her blush heightened as she realized he saw her beaded nipples pressing against the fine white material.

"Beautiful," he whispered, running his hand down her side then up again.

A tremulous sigh escaped her. This tender wooing lured her deeper and deeper into the turbulent waters of desire. She should move, speak, do something to encourage him. But his touch was so delicious, she found herself unable to do anything beyond accept this worship. His scent was spicy, clean. Familiar, yet with a musky tinge that awakened her senses.

Through the haze of pleasure enveloping her, she managed to send up a silent prayer. That the reverence she read in his face would last. That he'd still love her after he'd taken her to bed. That he'd look at her like this in the morning when she stepped inside the Marston parish church to pledge herself to him for the rest of her life.

Finally after what felt like an eon of teasing touches, Miles cupped her breast in his large, capable palm. His thumb brushed her nipple and she sagged as sensation roared through her. At last, at last he bent his head and kissed her with a ravenous ardour that outstripped anything she'd experienced before. She sighed and gave herself up to pleasure. The doubts that harried her drowned in a torrent of passion.

Clumsily, trying not to break the kiss, he tugged off his shirt. They both laughed breathlessly. Then laughter died and heat shuddered through her as she flattened her

hand on the bare skin of his chest. They'd snatched occasional moments of privacy, but never before had she been free to learn the mysteries of his body at her leisure.

She moved closer, pressing her hips into his. He was hard and ready. He'd wanted her this afternoon. Now even the most innocent woman would know that he wanted her to the point of madness. She had the evidence of his erection against the softness of her belly. There was his jagged, rasping breath and the shaking need he betrayed as he fondled her through the nightgown. Soon even that frail barrier became unbearable. Roughly he wrenched it over her head and flung it away.

The daze of sensual pleasure receded. For the first time, Calista was naked with a man. Self-consciousness rose like a tide of icy water. The night wasn't cold, but the air chilled her skin.

Awkwardly she broke away, but Miles caught her hand and stopped her retreat. Gently but inexorably, he turned her toward the moonlight flooding through the window.

"Exquisite," he breathed.

She wanted to argue. To insist that she was too tall, too thin, that her breasts were too small. But the veneration in his face held her quiet and, for once, she poised on the verge of believing that a man could find her lovely.

He reached out to trace the outline of her body. The subtle curves and planes. This time there was nothing between her skin and his seeking, gliding fingers. This time when he kissed her, she sensed a new wildness. As though now she'd revealed her nakedness, the last wall between them crumbled.

Calista became lost in a dark forest of sensation. Of soft sighs and stroking hands and pleasure she'd never imagined in all her twenty-five years. When he touched her

between the legs, she jerked on a strangled moan of shocked delight. Desire became a molten weight in the pit of her belly. She clung to his shoulders and instinct made her lean forward and bite him on the chest. His gasp conveyed astonished appreciation, then the world whirled as he swung her up in his arms and carried her the few steps to the Chinese bed.

For the first time in her life, she listened to a man undressing. The whispering slide of fabric on skin was almost unbearably erotic. She snatched at another breath. Henwit she was, she kept forgetting to breathe.

This new universe of physical pleasure left her floundering. How

she wanted to be brave, spirited, reckless, but shyness overcame her and she closed her eyes.

When she found the courage to look at him again, Miles came down over her, blocking the moonlight. He supported himself on his arms and he seemed large and powerful and resonating with an alien masculinity. For the space of a second, arousal faded and old fears stirred.

“You make me feel too much,” she whispered.

The fierceness faded from his eyes and his smile made her feel cherished. “I love you,” he murmured.

Calista wanted to tell him that she loved him too, but the declaration jammed unspoken in her throat. She was too conscious of his nakedness, of his barely leashed passion. While she reveled in his passion, it daunted her, too.

A low keening sound escaped her and she ran an unsteady hand through the soft hair that flopped forward over his high forehead. The overflowing tenderness in her heart

made it impossible to hide her quaking vulnerability.

The shadows and his position braced over her meant she could no longer see his expression. But as her hand drifted down his face, she felt him smile. He sucked in a deep, shuddering breath and bent to kiss her, with a return of reverence.

“You drive me mad, Calista.”

Her nervousness leached away, leaving only love and need. She arched toward him in unmistakable invitation. Fear found no place in this incandescent moment. Her voice was firmer than it had been since she’d entered the room. “Make me yours, Miles.”

“My darling.”

Carefully he parted her legs and slid between them until she cradled him against her body. His hand found once again that place that set her quivering with pleasure. By the time he angled his hips forward, her breath emerged in ragged gasps and her body tightened, striving to reach an unimagined destination.

“I’m afraid,” she admitted. Not just because of what he was about to do, but because this joining would make her forever his, whatever anguish lay ahead.

“Trust me, Calista,” he said again and pressed into her body.

However much she wanted this, the experience was odd, disagreeable. She tensed against the invasion. He felt impossibly big, as though he’d tear her in two if he continued.

He kissed her deeply, hungrily. For a fleeting moment, she forgot that seeking pressure between her legs in the hot delight of his mouth exploring hers. She whimpered a protest when he raised his head to stare down at her through the shadows.

“I want you, Calista. I want you as I’ve never wanted another woman.” His voice was raw with sincerity.

In this precise moment, she had no doubt that he was hers completely, whatever challenges the world flung at them in the future. That flash of perception gave her the courage to tilt up toward him. “I want you, Miles. Don’t stop.”

He made a low sound of satisfaction, but still he was gentle as he inched further inside her. Gradually she became accustomed to his size and weight. Then just as she wondered if perhaps there was hope of pleasure, he moved more purposefully.

The sharp, sudden pain made her cry out. She muffled her distress against the damp skin of his shoulder. She dug her fingernails deep into his back as her body tensed for more discomfort.

For a long lightless interval, he remained motionless, his body joined to hers. She felt him drag each breath into his lungs. She felt each ripple of muscle as he adjusted infinitesimally to fit himself to her.

Slowly the searing pain subsided, leaving in its place a sense of unbreakable intimacy. Tonight she and Miles made vows with their bodies that they would repeat much less powerfully with words tomorrow before the vicar.

As if sensing her body’s acceptance of his possession, he began to move with luxurious enjoyment. All her love for him focused on this overtly physical act, this union, this gift they both shared. The sweetness extended beyond anything she’d ever imagined.

She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the rising tide of joy. The rhythm built until it pounded at the doors of heaven, carrying her toward paradise on a surge of unearthly sensation. At the height of her pleasure, she broke through into a place of

dazzling brilliance. On a soft cry of rapture, she clenched around him, claiming him as hers, come what may.

As she floated softly down from the golden realms, held safe in Miles's arms, Calista basked in a peace unlike anything she'd ever known.

Chapter Four

HE'D MURDERED ISABELLA?

Josiah staggered back to escape the preposterous accusation. Appalled denial kept him silent as he stared aghast at Isabella. But even while everything in him rejected what she'd said, the day's confusing hints about his wicked reputation and his woeful fate slammed into him. Over and over. Until he wanted to scream "enough!"

"No." The word emerged as a croak.

The unwavering certainty in Isabella's eyes. The certainty combined with fear in a woman who would have faced down the devil without flinching. These, these almost convinced him.

Almost...

He could never have killed her. Never. Never. Never.

Nothing she did would stir him to violence. There must be some mistake, some misunderstanding. He clung to that one waning hope while all other hope drained away.

Like biting down on a cracked tooth, he tested the truth of her assertion against what he knew of himself. If he'd killed her, he'd feel it in his bones, in his blood.

No, on his honor, no.

“I don’t believe you,” he said, still in that artificial voice that didn’t sound like the man who had sworn to Isabella that he loved her and he’d devote the rest of his life to her happiness.

“Don’t you remember?” She regarded him with horror, as if the repudiation of his crime was worse than the act itself.

“I don’t remember because there’s nothing to remember.” In his desperation, he rushed toward her, but came up short when she cringed against the railing.

“Don’t touch me.”

The loathing in her voice made him feel ill. He spread his hands in a gesture of nonaggression and stepped back. “As you pointed out, I can’t hurt you now,” he said with a hint of snap. “You and I are beyond the reach of physical injury.”

Her delicate features were drawn and her great dark eyes glittered with wariness. “I don’t...I don’t want to see you. Can’t you go back to where you came from?”

“My love—”

“Don’t call me that,” she demanded with a trace of her old imperiousness. He was mightily glad to see something remained of his Isabella, apart from this timorous girl.

“Why not?” He drew himself to his full height and matched her hauteur. “That’s what you are. Seventy years haven’t changed how I love you. An eternity won’t change that.”

“You don’t love me,” she said sulkily, wrapping her arms around herself in a protective gesture that made him want to smash something. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t have killed me.”

He stifled the urge to rage, to tell her that she knew him better than this. Temper wouldn’t bring them through this mess. Isabella still looked like she might flee at the slightest sign of danger from him.

From him? The thought beggared belief.

Josiah struggled to keep his voice steady. “Tell me what you remember.”

She straightened and cast him a disdainful look familiar from life. She’d always been haughty and headstrong. “Surely you know.”

He’d always liked that his beloved was no pliable reed, but a woman ready to battle him head-on for what she wanted. Right now, damn it, her stubbornness operated against him and he wasn’t nearly so pleased with her strength.

Josiah slumped against the wall, folding his arms to stop himself reaching for her. It was torture to be so close without touching. “Humor me.”

She cast him an unimpressed glance under her thick sweep of black lashes. It was a look that had never failed to make him want her. The effect remained as powerful on the other side of the mortal divide.

“You act as if I owe you answers. I owe you nothing.”

He stared into her beautiful face and knew in every cell of his body that he couldn’t have killed her. There had to be some mistake. He sighed and chanced honesty. “All of this just seems so absurd. That you could credit I’d do you harm, when you know I’d give up the hope of heaven for your sake.”

The brief flicker of amusement, black as it was, was the first sign of softening in her manner. “I’d suggest that our presence here indicates we’ve both given up our hope of heaven.”

“The last thing I remember is stealing you away from the wedding breakfast,” he said evenly, not fool enough to find too much encouragement in the faint thaw. At least with every second that passed, she looked less likely to take to her heels.

“And then you murdered me.”

“Just like that?” He arched his eyebrows in unconcealed skepticism. “I went straight from kissing you in the hall to pricking you with my pocket knife? Or did I come into possession of a loaded pistol somewhere between vowing a lifetime’s devotion and getting you into bed?”

“You have no right to mock me.” Anger sparked in her black eyes. The push and pull between them was familiar, no matter how much time had passed. Although the ridiculous truth was that he felt like he’d only seen Isabella yesterday, when they were both alive and blissfully in love.

He shook his head in bewilderment. “It seems so unreal, sweeting. That we’re dead and at Marston Hall and it’s seventy years since I held you in my arms. And that you imagine I killed you.”

“You did kill me,” she said sullenly, stepping back into the room from the landing with a graceful sway of her wide skirts. His heart lurched with dizzying relief that at least she stayed. “Now you think it’s funny.”

“Anything but.” His tone was cool, and he didn’t make the mistake of interpreting her approach as an invitation to touch her.

What would it be like to touch her? Could he even touch her?

He could touch inanimate objects, but what about someone formed from the same indefinable material that he now was?

“You pushed me down the stairs in a fit of jealous rage.” She spoke as though her impossible statement ended all argument between them.

Shock held him motionless. Could he have done that? Could he have done that and forgotten?

Their courtship hadn't been undiluted harmony. He'd loved her to distraction and she, knowing that, hadn't been above teasing him. From the first, he'd been unsure of her chastity. Talk had been rife about what liberties she'd permitted her previous suitors. Even so, he couldn't imagine killing her. Isabella could lie under every man in the Royal Navy and Josiah would still want her.

With difficulty, he kept his voice even. "Why? Had you betrayed me?"

She didn't meet his eyes. "Of course not. I loved you."

"And I love you." Foreboding filled him. Her unease was visible. Nor did he miss the significance of the past tense in her statement. "Whatever you did, my beloved, I wouldn't hurt you."

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" She raised her hands to her ears and turned away in a fury. "I told you what happened. Now go away and never come near me again."

Her distress lashed at his heart, convincing him further that he could never injure her. "Isabella, tell me what you remember, not what you've heard a string of confounded gossiping fools say in this house."

Her shoulders trembled. Damn it, he'd made her cry. His voice softened and he fought the urge to take her in his arms and reassure her. She was no longer the terrified cypher who had discovered him in the east tower, but he knew she'd scarper if he pushed her too far. "Sweetest love, tell me."

She turned. "I—"

She raised a shaking hand to her lips as though afraid to say the words. But when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly steady, for all that her cheeks glistened with tears. "I was on the landing at the top of the grand staircase above the great hall. All the wedding guests were shouting and crowding around something on the floor. I bent over the banister to see and realized that it was my body. Lying on the tiles. I...I tried to say something, to tell them that I wasn't dead at all, I was here alive. But even though I cried and screamed and pleaded, nobody paid a moment's attention. Then

my father gathered the men and they rushed upstairs and grabbed you. The family story is that you were hauled out of the Chinese bed, but that's not true. You were standing next to me looking down into the hall. I tried to call out to you, but you didn't hear me either."

Josiah frowned. "Do you remember me pushing you?"

Reluctantly she shook her head. "No. But everyone says you did and that was the law's verdict. My father had you carried off to London in shackles. You were tried in the House of Lords. Then they hanged you. You never said a word in your defense."

Her matter-of-fact tone confirmed her unshakable faith in what she said. He felt like all the blood drained from his body. Which was lunatic. He had neither blood nor body.

Dear God, what an awful fate. For anyone. Perhaps it was a mercy he remembered nothing. His silence at his trial was a damning detail.

She was still speaking. "After that, they closed up Marston Hall and dismantled the bed, saying it brought bad luck. I've been here alone for seventy years, barring the few servants who acted as caretakers." In spite of the misery in her face, her lips twisted in a wry smile. "You'd think, given I was the innocent party, I'd waft up to heaven and you'd linger to expiate your sins down here. Where have you been?"

There was so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to disagree with in her dramatic story. But his resistance to what she'd told him was purely emotional. He had no facts to go on. Nothing she said had stirred a shred of memory in him. His history remained a blank from the moment when as the happiest man in the world, he'd swept Isabella into his arms.

He forced himself to answer, although where he'd been was one of the least

important issues between them. “I don’t know. I woke up in the Chinese bed last night. I remember marrying you, then kissing you behind the vase, then carrying you up the stairs. That was almost seventy years ago with nothing in between.”

“There’s a wedding in this house in the morning. Perhaps that conjured you from hell.”

He wished she sounded like she was joking. “I don’t think I’ve been in hell. Or if I have, I don’t recall it. It’s like no time has passed since we wed. When I woke up, I thought I was still alive. That you were still my wife.”

Her lips twisted in another bleak smile. “I suppose I still am. Although we vowed to stay together till death us do part, and death did indeed part us. It’s quite a conundrum. One for the ecclesiastical courts, I’m sure.”

It was his turn to find her mockery grating. How could she accept so unquestioningly that he’d murdered her? When she’d known how steadfastly he’d loved her.

But then she’d had nearly seven decades to come to terms with what had happened. He’d only been extant for one bewildering day.

“Don’t,” he couldn’t help saying.

She shot him a hostile glance. “Perhaps your spirit is attached in some way to the bed. The thing’s been in pieces in the cellar since they shut the house. They only finished reassembling it yesterday.”

The theory made as much sense as anything else in this topsy-turvy world. So many mysteries. So many puzzles. But just one was important. Had he killed this vivid woman he adored?

He forced himself to ask the question. “If you don’t remember, how can you be sure?”

Her eyes remained guarded. It hurt him to think how openly she’d once trusted him. “I’ve had plenty of time to listen to the people at the hall talk about what happened. We quarreled in the Chinese bedroom. The servants heard us.”

Their wooing had been a tempestuous affair, marked by passionate clashes and even more passionate reconciliations. “We were always quarreling. That was nothing new.”

She shrugged, although he didn’t find her nonchalance convincing. “This time, your rage attained such a pitch that you shoved me down the stairs.”

It could make sense, he supposed, with another man and another woman. But still the story seemed wrong. Yet what did he have to place in opposition to what had been accepted for nearly seventy years? Isabella believed he’d killed her. Family history confirmed he’d killed her. What did the revulsion in his soul matter compared to all these hard facts?

“I cannot believe it. I will not believe it,” he said in a flat voice, even as cruel reality beat at him, insisted he accept the completely unacceptable.

She regarded him sadly and for once he saw past her anger to her desolation. “No, you don’t want to believe it. Neither did I.” She paused. “But you will, over time. Anything is possible over time.”

When she slipped out of the room and left him alone, he didn’t have the heart to stop her.

Chapter Five

CALISTA OPENED HER eyes. She lay naked atop the lavishly embroidered counterpane of the Chinese bed. The room was still dark. If she'd slept after discovering such astonishing pleasure in Miles's arms, it hadn't been for long.

Wincing, she shifted carefully. Her body ached with unfamiliar twinges. But what did fleeting discomfort matter now that Miles had opened a blissful new world to her?

Miles slept at her side, curled around her as if he couldn't bear to let her go, even in sleep. Inside this closed room, she was overwhelmingly conscious of the pervasive scents of sex and sated male.

As she stared up into the darkness, she wondered if she could endure such happiness. If she could endure the possibility of losing such happiness.

Better to die now...

Puzzled, she frowned. What had prompted that bleak thought?

Reaching her peak in Miles's embrace, she'd finally accepted that she'd been wrong to give her fears such a hold over her. She and Miles were meant to be together. When his body had thundered in

to hers, she'd believed that she'd never doubt his love again.

Except that those words that dragged her back toward the quicksand of doubt weren't

just in her mind. Someone had spoken to her. In a low, insinuating tone that made her skin prickle. She wasn't sure whether it was man or woman. The unidentified voice was low and infinitely noxious.

No. No, this couldn't be happening. It was impossible. Calista Aston was a devotee of scientific process. She didn't believe in disembodied voices or curses or spirits.

Except that she'd heard that horrible voice most distinctly.

When she stared up at the tester, she saw two tiny pinpoints of bright red above her. Two tiny pinpoints of red that focused on her in a way that both frightened and fascinated her.

With a shiver, Calista realized that the lights emanated from that same malevolent face she'd noticed this afternoon. The wrinkled, gleeful face that had mocked her fragile hopes of finding happiness in marriage.

The red eyes glared back at her, filled with fiendish intelligence.

Perhaps she was dreaming. Dreams could seem so real, couldn't they? And even after such rapture, the pressures of the last days might add a grim tenor to her fantasies.

Everything in the room remained black and silent. She told herself this must be a dream. But she was too aware of Miles beside her, the possessive weight of his arm across her breasts, the soft sigh of his breathing, the heat of his body pressed to her side.

Fear tightened her belly and tasted sour on her lips. She was undoubtedly awake.

And unable to break the hold those two burning red eyes exerted. Transfixed, she stared upward. The eyes pierced her to the soul. Her weak, frightened, imperfect soul.

The eyes saw all her faults and inadequacies. All her unrequited longing for Miles to love her forever.

Just as they had earlier, the eyes derided her futile yearning. They knew her wishes would never come true.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” she whispered into the night. “This is all imagination.”

Beside her, Miles stirred without waking. The eyes above her didn’t waver. The steady scarlet glow was uncomfortable, unwelcome, but still Calista couldn’t look away. Suddenly, in spite of the warmth of Miles’s body, she was deathly cold.

A whisper came to her ears. Hissing. Caustic. Knowing.

Accept that you’ll never be enough for him.

The voice’s cruel assurance sliced through her. Closing her eyes, she insisted again that she didn’t believe in ghosts. She’d never been a fanciful woman. She’d always been hostile to anything she couldn’t measure with her own senses. Scornful of weaker minds that credited influences beyond the here and now.

She felt neither hostile nor scornful now. She felt scared and alone and defenseless. And helpless to combat the truth of the voice’s poisonous insinuations.

Let Miles go, Calista. Let him go. He’ll tire of you before long. Perhaps even now he plots how to leave you.

To escape the taunting voice, she turned her head away, crushing her cheek into the tasseled silk pillow. She desperately wanted to argue, but the voice said everything she’d told herself again and again since she’d fallen in love with Miles. The voice caught her doubts and turned them into excruciating actuality.

“You’re not real,” she muttered. “You’re not real.”

The voice didn’t even bother contradicting her agitated denial. Instead Calista heard a laugh replete with such evil that she wanted to run screaming from the room. Except that those glinting red eyes, like living rubies, held her trapped.

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You've had your measure of joy. More than you deserve. Give up and leave Miles free to find someone who will make him happy. You want him to be happy, don't you? He'll never be happy with you.

The eyes flickered toward the door without releasing their influence over her. She knew that the voice, the eyes, wanted her to leave the bed now, to leave Miles's side.

"No," she said almost soundlessly, while forces she couldn't see and didn't understand tugged at her, compelled compliance. She squeezed her eyes shut, although some preternatural sense knew that the red lights still burned down at her like twin flames of hell.

You know this happiness won't last. Don't let your joy turn to bitterness. Come with me. I'll give you peace.

"I've found peace."

Again, that low, contemptuous laugh. The voice obviously considered her answer completely fatuous. Unfortunately, right now, so did she.

Still she fought back. When Miles had held her in his arms, she'd felt his love like a living entity. She couldn't believe he'd been lying when he said he loved her. He'd been so tender, so passionate, so eager to show her pleasure.

Of course he loved her. He loved her.

Yes, he loves you now. But for how long?

“Forever,” she whispered, but both she and the voice knew she lied.

For long silent minutes, she and whatever malign spirit inhabited this room battled one another. And all the while, doubts scuttled through her mind like cockroaches.

She resisted until the pull became too strong to withstand.

Slowly she sat up. Miles’s arm fell away from her. Immediately she felt the absence of his protective embrace.

Even as what remained of her real self insisted that she still possessed an independent will, she tugged her nightdress over her head. It was almost a relief to give in to the voice’s power. She’d fought her doubts for so long. She found strange but powerful consolation in finally surrendering to them.

Come. Come with me. You’ll never be sad again. You’ll never have to see love grow old and hopes fade to nothing.

Now that she cooperated with its demands, the voice was no longer evil. Instead it was sweet. The sweetest sound Calista had ever heard, apart from Miles telling her he loved her.

Would she ever hear him say those words again?

Come with me, Calista. Come to a wonderful realm where you’ll never be sad again.

She could no more ignore the voice’s commands than she could make herself stop loving Miles.

As she rose from the bed, she heard Miles mutter something, but the ruby eyes prevented her from speaking to him or looking back. Instead she drifted toward the

door, already open, although she knew it had been firmly shut when she and Miles lay together.

The moon floated behind the huge mullioned windows, showing her the way. Brighter than the moon, those two red lights lured her further along the hallway.

“Calista?” Miles voice behind her was thick with sleep.

She struggled to answer, but her trance-like state robbed her of speech. She faced toward the door, toward the freedom the voice offered her if only she obeyed.

“Calista, where are you going?” Through her daze, she registered that he sounded worried, loving. She heard the bed creak as he shifted.

He doesn’t really love you. You know that.

The voice no longer taunted. The words only pierced so deeply because they were true. Miles might believe that he loved her now. After what they’d just shared, even she believed that he loved her now.

But she was too awkward, too plain, too adoring, too clever. Too...Calista Aston for him to love her forever.

That’s right. That’s right. Better to save yourself a lifetime of pain. You know it’s what you want.

The voice promised tranquility, an end to the spiteful chatter that tormented her mind. She thought she’d found rest in Miles’s arms, but she’d been deceived. Only the ruby eyes could give her rest. She turned toward the twin red lights almost in relief, ignoring Miles calling after her. His voice seemed to come from far away, although he was mere feet behind her in the bed.

Purpose gripped her as she headed for the staircase. Her mind kept enough hold on reality to recognize that it was still dark, the middle of the night. But as she followed the dancing lights in front of her, she could see as clearly as at midday.

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Down one flight of stairs. A turn. Across the broad landing with its blue and red Turkey carpet.

Ahead loomed the polished oak of the grand staircase, winding steeply to the black and white tiles in the hall below.

The same black and white tiles where seventy years ago they'd found Isabella Verney with her neck broken. A woman betrayed by her lover. That lover had paid with a humiliating execution and an unmarked grave.

Miles will betray you, too. You know that.

"He hasn't betrayed me yet," she whispered, taking another reluctant step closer to the top of the stairs. Even that much resistance required all her strength. Her feet felt weighted with bricks, but still she couldn't cease her forward momentum.

He will. He will.

"Calista? Calista, what is it? Did I hurt you?"

As if through a mist, she heard the slap of running feet down the stairs from the upper floor, then rushing toward the landing where she stood. Miles grabbed her arm. After what they'd just done, his touch was heartbreakingly familiar. Something stirred inside her, something beyond the reach of the voice's allure.

"Calista, speak to me." Miles's bewildered concern penetrated her daze. "Are you sleepwalking?"

Feeling the Chinese mandarin's displeasure, she faced Miles, blinking slowly. It was odd. A strong light shone on him, although she couldn't discern its source. It was a thousand times brighter than the moonlight.

He looked handsome, ruffled, worried. He'd tugged his breeches on before he chased after her. Her wondering gaze traced his body, as though she saw him for the first time. The powerful, lean torso; the long legs; the elegant bare feet planted on the polished boards of the floor. Even his feet were beautiful.

All of him was beautiful. Too beautiful for her.

Yes, too beautiful for you. You've always known that, haven't you?

Her rational mind shrieked at her that she must question what was happening, assert her wil

l against the forces that ensnared her. But it was easier, almost pleasant to accept the voice's dictates.

Without responding to Miles's questions, she faced the stairs, venturing nearer to the void. The eyes hovered ahead of her now. Chips of burning red, glowing hotter and hotter.

"Calista!" She heard the genuine panic in Miles's voice. What on earth had him so worked up? "You're too close to the edge. Be careful, darling, it's dangerous." His hand tightened on her arm and he wrenched her back.

"No..." she moaned, straining toward the stairs. The one word shattered whatever spell held her mute. She turned to stare at him and said what she'd always believed but never been brave enough to say aloud. "You will stop loving me."

Astonishment made him drop his hand and falter back toward the wall. “What bloody nonsense is this?”

“It’s true.” She spoke almost indifferently. With every inch closer to the stairs, the pain of endless longing receded.

“After what just happened between us, how dare you say that?” Temper darkened his eyes. “Don’t tell me it’s because you don’t love me. The woman who lay in my arms tonight was aflame with love.”

An eerie calm had descended upon her soul. She loved that calm almost as much as she loved Miles. She summoned a regretful smile. Didn’t he understand this was for the best? Eventually he’d be grateful that she’d taken this action, the only possible action.

“Of course I was. I love you. And I know you believe you love me. But it won’t last.”

“Like hell it won’t.” He sounded angry and confused. “We’re getting married tomorrow. I’ll swear my life to you.”

“And you’ll regret it.”

“Rot.”

He was so brave and honorable. Her heart overflowed with love, love without the bitter tinge that had so often accompanied her recognition of how vulnerable he made her. In a few moments, she’d never be vulnerable again.

She stared at him steadily. “Goodbye, Miles. I have loved you so dearly.”

“Damn it, Calista, answer me. Answer me, for God’s sake. What’s happening?” He

dashed forward and his grip closed hard and strong around her arm as if confirming he'd never betray her. "This isn't you. Whatever this is about, we can solve it. Don't give up on me. You're a fighter. It's one of the things I love about you."

He kept insisting he loved her. And she knew he wasn't a liar. A flash of doubt pierced her certainty that no good could come of their marriage.

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The red eyes ahead of her glittered with anger.

He's lying. You know what you have to do.

Of course Miles was lying. She listened to the voice as though to an old friend. The voice knew she couldn't survive losing Miles's love.

"Let me go, Miles," she said evenly.

"Never," he insisted. "I'll never let you go."

For all his determination, he sounded in such despair. Regret lurked beneath her serenity, but not strongly enough to make her pause. If only he understood that she did this for him. "You have to."

With a strength she didn't know she possessed, she managed to tug free of him. She made no conscious effort to move, but suddenly she was several paces away from him, standing beside the carved post at the far corner of the staircase. In the bright, eerie light, she read the denial, the disbelief, the confusion in Miles's beautiful eyes.

"Farewell, my beloved," she whispered and turned inexorably toward the grand staircase.

Chapter Six

JOSIAH LURCHED FORWARD to wrench Calista to safety but his grip slid uselessly away. His dead man's hands could gain no purchase on living flesh.

Her eyes were dazed as she stared ahead, listening to voices he couldn't hear. A fusillade of sparking red lights circled angrily around her like darting ruby swallows.

Some disturbance in the air had drawn Josiah to the landing above the great hall, as though the encroaching evil demanded that he witnessed its latest triumph. He glanced up in despairing frustration and met Isabella's anguished gaze. She stood just behind Miles and the furious sorrow in her expression scored Josiah's heart.

Miles hadn't moved since Calista had struggled free and teetered toward the lip of the stair. "Calista, look at me."

When something in his commanding tone compelled the girl's attention, the lights burst into a storm of flying vermillion. Jerkily, as though some force resisted her action, she turned to face him. In her loose white nightgown, she looked like she already hovered on the edge of the spirit world.

"This is for the best. You know it is." She didn't sound nearly as tranquil as she had and Josiah read something in her blank blue eyes that looked like terror.

Miles was pale and a muscle jerked in his lean cheek, but he didn't shift toward her. Josiah guessed the man recognized that any reckless move would prompt disaster. "Do you love me, my darling?"

Her face was ashen with sorrow and regret. Her slender throat moved as she swallowed. "I'm doing this because I love you."

The mortal participants in this drama were lit as brightly as if they stood on stage at the Theatre Royal. Calista looked torn and distraught. Miles's jaw set with a stubbornness that indicated he intended to fight whatever forces threatened his beloved—and prevail. His eyes were dark with torment and his hands opened and closed at his sides as though he struggled against grabbing Calista and defying the

powers that possessed her.

“No, you’re not,” Miles said with absolute certainty.

The girl cast a longing glance down the stairs but, thank God, didn’t move. “All right, I’m doing this because you don’t love me.”

“You know that’s not true. You’re doing this because you don’t trust me.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then you’re doing this because you don’t trust yourself.”

“Why wouldn’t I trust myself?” she asked with a hint of irritation.

“Because you never have. You don’t think you’re worthy of my love.”

She licked lips reddened with kisses, or Josiah was no judge of women. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving how remarkable you are, if only you’ll give me the chance.” Miles paused and Josiah could see that he frantically scrambled for words to convince Calista to stay with him, to resist the baleful presence that hunted her.

Miles stared straight at her and his voice rang out. “Come to me, my darling. Break away from whatever holds you and come to me.”

She faltered toward him before she stopped, trembling. “I...I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I’m not free.”

“You’ll be free if you trust me.”

He sounded so sure. Josiah wondered how he could be so sure. For one piercing moment, he envied Miles. Much as he’d adored Isabella, he’d never been so certain of her, even when she’d pledged her life to him.

After a fraught instant of silence, Miles chanced a step in Calista’s direction.

He was too eager. She jerked back. For one horrifying moment, she teetered on the top of the stair. She cried out and grabbed the banister, but it was a near thing.

Josiah released the breath he hadn’t realized he held. Dear God, tonight mustn’t end in tragedy, as his own wedding seventy years ago had ended in tragedy. Yet he could do nothing to prevent calamity. He was cursed to be merely an observer. Frustration was a rusty taste in his mouth. Glancing at Isabella’s stricken expression, he could see that she too chafed under her inability to intervene.

“Trust yourself. Trust me. Trust our love.” Miles’s voice cracked with emotion. “For God’s sake, Calista, don’t throw away what we have because you’re frightened.”

“Trust myself—”

The girl hovered on the step. Josiah poised in sick dread for her to lean a few inches backward and topple to her death. The red lights performed a stately minuet around her, as though celebrating a victory ahead

y won.

“Yes, trust yourself.” Miles’s voice lowered to vibrating intensity and his gaze burned into Calista’s as if sheer force of will could convince her to return to him. “I love you. If you destroy yourself, you destroy me too.”

For a moment, Josiah thought she hadn’t heard him. He braced for her to fall. Hope and wretchedness warred in her eyes before at last, she ventured one shaky step toward Miles.

Again she wavered in trembling indecision. The red lights blazed in a frenzy around her.

Whatever held her was strong, it was malevolent, and it wanted her dead.

For an endless moment, red fire meshed the girl, threatened to immolate her. Calista moved no closer to Miles and with her surrender to its promptings, the red light grew so bright that it hurt Josiah’s eyes.

“For God’s sake, Calista, run!” Josiah shouted at her, but she didn’t hear. The glaze in her eyes hinted she couldn’t even see Miles anymore.

“They can’t hear you,” Isabella said, her voice shaking with grief and horror.

“Don’t leave me,” Miles whispered, reaching out without touching Calista. Surely it was too late. The red lights’ power seemed too strong for frail flesh and blood to vanquish.

Still Calista didn’t move. The girl’s eyes were stark with longing and doubt and fear. Her gaze didn’t waver from where Miles stood, but heaven knew what she saw.

Josiah's belly knotted with anguish. And how must Isabella feel, witnessing events that so closely mirrored her own death? And yet again on a wedding day.

Don't let this lovely girl die.

Calista didn't move or speak. For a long moment, Josiah thought that the evil had won. Bleak hopelessness chilled him. Love was strong. But not as strong as the powers of darkness. Hadn't he already learned that from his own fate?

Then he watched Calista suck in a deep breath. Purpose, courage, life flooded her features. Slowly she straightened and raised her chin with fresh defiance.

"I trust you, Miles." Her voice emerged with steady confidence. "I trust you and I love you and I want to be your wife."

The red lights ruptured into a blinding cascade of flame, silhouetting her in scarlet, but this time Calista proved herself immune to their lures. She smiled at Miles with the radiance Josiah had noticed the first time he saw her. She wasn't beautiful, but when she smiled, she seemed beautiful.

With a stumble, she burst free of the seething cloud of red. Miles groaned and dragged her into his arms, muttering an incoherent litany of love and relief. Calista sagged against him in exhaustion and started to cry.

Around her, the red lights circled in confusion, then one by one, winked out to nothing. The air suddenly seemed cleaner, cooler, untinged by the low buzz of malevolence.

Josiah glanced up to see Isabella approaching him, a smile transfiguring her face, too. At last she looked like the woman he'd kissed so passionately on their wedding day. At last he read neither suspicion nor hatred in her eyes as she looked at him.

She reached for his hand. It was the first time she'd touched him since he'd woken to this new century.

“Isabella—” he stammered. Turbulent hoped crammed his throat, making a wreck of eloquence.

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She was trembling. So was he. Her touch contained magic. It always had. Now she made him feel alive, as if he was once again that joyful bridegroom of so long ago. His fingers closed hard around hers in a silent assertion of union that he defied her to deny.

How fiercely he'd loved her, loved her still. And staring into her brilliant black eyes, he could almost imagine that she remembered just how she'd loved him in return.

He could never have killed her. Never. Whatever she'd done. Whatever she believed. He'd rip his beating heart from his chest before he'd hurt her.

She raised a finger to her lips and turned to watch as Miles and Calista drew apart. Calista stared across at Josiah and Isabella and one of her beautiful smiles lit her expression, almost as if...

"Do you see them?" she whispered to Miles.

The young man kept his arm around his bride's shoulders. "I do."

Astonished, Josiah realized that he and Isabella had become visible to the couple. He raised his hand in a heartfelt gesture of blessing and Miles bowed in acknowledgement. Isabella curtsied with flirtatious grace, her wide skirts swaying into a graceful bell.

"It must be Josiah Aston and Isabella Verney," Calista said breathlessly. "You know, he doesn't look...wicked."

“No, he looks like a man besotted. Believe me, I know the signs.” Miles pressed his lips to Calista’s hair in a caress that expressed adoration and gratitude in equal measure.

“Calista and Miles, I wish you both—” Josiah began, but Isabella squeezed his hand and shook her head.

“They can’t hear us.”

“But they can see us.”

“No longer,” she said softly.

Calista turned to Miles. “They’re gone,” she said regretfully.

“Yes.” Miles drew her closer into his body. “Do you believe in ghosts now?”

The girl responded with a choked laugh. “I don’t know. I suppose I must.” She tilted her chin so that she could gaze into her lover’s eyes. “Whatever I believe, we’re going to burn that bed and throw the ashes into the sea.”

Miles smiled down at her as if he beheld a priceless treasure. “We are indeed, my love. Now kiss me before I go mad.”

“With pleasure,” she sighed and pressed her lips to Miles’s with a sensual confidence that gladdened Josiah’s heart.

Josiah blinked to clear his vision as a strange wall of gray descended. He blinked again, but still the fog enveloped the couple, made them seem strangely distant for all that they embraced only a few feet away. The gray encroached on everything around him except Isabella who still burned as brightly as a candle in his sight.

Isabella's regard was open and trusting as he'd longed to see it. "Do you remember everything, Josiah?"

Just like that, he did.

Memory crashed through him with the force of a towering wave. Reeling under the onslaught of recollection, his clasp tightened on Isabella's hand. "When you told me you weren't a virgin, I acted like an ass and lost my temper. We were in the Chinese bedroom."

"Standing near the bed." She released his hand and turned to face him.

He'd acted like an ass but he hadn't killed her. He'd known that he hadn't, he'd known it to his bones, but it was a mighty relief to have the truth confirmed. "You remember too?"

"Yes. At last. I was so angry with you. Angry and guilty. I should have told you before we married, but I couldn't bear to think you'd forsake me."

"I'd never forsake you," he said.

"I know that now." Without giving him time to digest that extraordinary expression of trust, she went on. "Then a voice started to repeat every petty resentment I'd ever felt toward you and somehow made the resentments cause for hatred."

"Whatever possessed Calista possessed you." It wasn't a question.

"Wicked red eyes and a snide whisper telling me I needed to escape you any way I could before you broke my heart." Her voice cracked and her eyes glittered with tears. "Oh, my love, how could I have doubted you? Can you ever forgive me?"

Josiah smiled down into her lovely face and reached out to cup her cheek. He could still hardly believe that at last he was free to touch her. “I’m the one who should ask forgiveness.”

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With breathless speed, long ago events slammed into order. He'd carried his bride into the Chinese room and started to kiss and undress her. He'd never been so happy in his life—he'd never imagined such happiness was possible—until she'd abruptly pulled away and whispered a shaken confession that she wasn't a virgin.

Like an arrogant blockhead, Josiah hadn't told her that her affair didn't matter a tinker's damn, that she'd married him and he'd love her forever. Instead, he'd succumbed to an excess of masculine pride and started to shout his disappointment and anger at her. Isabella's remorse had swiftly transformed into characteristic defiance.

Then with an eerie abruptness that made sense to him now that he'd witnessed the deadly forces stalking Calista, Isabella had fallen silent. She'd cast him one last look as though her heart shattered into a thousand pieces, then whirled away and fled the room as if devils pursued her.

Devils indeed.

Panicked by her incomprehensible actions, he'd abandoned his pique and his pompous insistence on a full confession. He'd raced after her down to the next floor, but not fast enough to save her from flinging herself down the stairs. Barely had her terrified scream echoed through the great hall before she lay broken and silent on the tiles below.

After that, the world went mad. Nobody, particularly Lord Fenburgh who had never liked him, ever questioned that the Earl of Stansfield had killed his new bride. Josiah had been too numb with grief to mount a convincing defense. Part of him, a large

part, had believed that the trial in London, the disgrace, the hanging were just punishment for failing to protect his beloved.

His beloved...

“And now, my glorious Isabella, we have eternity,” he said gently, extending his arm with a formal gesture, as if they were guests at a court ball and he invited her to dance.

“I can’t wait,” she whispered, smiling at him as she’d smiled at him at their wedding so many years ago. She accepted his arm and turned toward the stairs with an elegant flick of her skirts.

His heart finally at peace, Josiah escorted Isabella down the curved staircase and into the light.

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The Winter Wife: A Christmas Novella

Chapter One

North Yorkshire, Christmas Eve, 1825

THE CRASH OF shattering wood and the terrified screams of horses pierced the frosty night like a knife.

Sebastian Si

nclair, Earl of Kinvarra, swore, brought his restive mount under control, then spurred the animal around the turn in the snowy road. With icy clarity, the full moon lit the white landscape, starkly revealing the disaster before him.

A flashy black curricule lay on its side in a ditch, the hood up against the weather. One horse had broken free and wandered the roadway, harness dragging. The other plunged wildly in the traces, struggling to escape.

Swiftly Kinvarra dismounted, knowing his mare would await his signal, and ran to free the distressed horse. As he slid down the muddy ditch, a hatless man scrambled out of the smashed curricule.

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“Are you hurt?” Kinvarra asked, casting a quick eye over him.

“No, I thank you, sir.” The effete blond fellow turned back to the carriage. “Come, darling. Let me assist you.”

A graceful black-gloved hand extended from inside and a cloaked woman emerged with more aplomb than Kinvarra would have believed possible in the circumstances. Indications were that neither traveler was injured, so he concentrated on the trapped horse. When he spoke soothingly to the terrified beast, it quieted to panting stillness, exhausted with thrashing. While Kinvarra checked its legs, murmuring calm assurances, the stranger helped the lady up to the roadside.

The horse shook itself and with a few ungainly jumps, ascended the bank to trot along the road toward its partner. Neither animal seemed to suffer worse than fright, a miracle considering that the curricule was beyond repair.

“Madam, are you injured?” Kinvarra asked as he climbed the ditch. He stuck his riding crop under his arm and brushed his gloved hands together to knock the clinging snow from them. It was a hellishly cold night. Christmas tomorrow would be a chilly affair. But then of course his Christmases had been chilly for years, no matter the weather.

The woman kept her head down. With shock? With shyness? For the sake of propriety? Perhaps he’d stumbled on some elopement or clandestine meeting.

“Madam?” he asked again, more sharply. Whatever her fear of scandal, he needed to know if she required medical assistance.

“Sweeting?” The yellow-haired fop bent to peer into the shadows cast by her hood. “Are you sure you’re unharmed? Speak, my dove. Your silence troubles my soul.”

While Kinvarra digested the man’s outlandish phrasing, the woman stiffened and drew away. “For heaven’s sake, Harold, you’re not giving a recitation at a musicale.” With an impatient gesture, she flung back her hood and glared straight at Kinvarra.

Even though he’d identified her the moment she spoke, he found himself staring dumbstruck into her face. A piquant, vivid, pointed face under an untidy tumble of luxuriant gold hair.

Furious and incredulous, he wheeled on the milksop. “What the devil are you doing with my wife?”

Alicia Sinclair, Countess of Kinvarra, was bruised, angry, uncomfortable, and agonizingly embarrassed. Not to mention suffering the aftereffects of her choking terror when the toppling carriage had tossed her around like a pebble in a torrent.

Even so, her heart lurched into the wayward dance it always performed at the merest sight of Sebastian.

She’d been married for eleven miserable years. Their short interval living as man and wife had been wretched. She disliked her husband more than any other man in the world. But nothing prevented her gaze from clinging to every line of that narrow, intense face with its high cheekbones, long, arrogant nose and sharply angled jaw. He looked older than the last time she’d seen him, more cynical if that was possible. But still handsome, still compelling, still vital in a way nobody else she knew could match.

Damn him to Hades, he remained the most magnificent creature she'd ever seen.

Such a pity his soul was as black as his glittering eyes.

"After all this time, I'm flattered you recognize me, my lord," she said silkily.

"Lord Kinvarra, this is a surprise," Harold stammered, faltering back as if anticipating violence. "You must wonder why I accompany the lady—"

Oh, Harold, act the man, even if the hero is beyond your reach. You're safe. Kinvarra doesn't care enough about me to kill you.

Although even the most indifferent husband took it ill when his wife chose a lover. And Kinvarra had always suffered an overabundance of pride. There wasn't the slightest hope that he'd mistake Alicia's reasons for traveling on this isolated road in the middle of the night. She stifled a rogue pang of guilt.

Curse Kinvarra, she had absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.

"I've recalled your existence every quarter these past ten years, my love," her husband said equally smoothly, ignoring Harold's dismayed interjection. Although the faint trace of Scottish brogue in Kinvarra's deep voice indicated that he reined in his temper. His breath formed white clouds on the frigid air. "I'm perforce reminded when I pay your allowance. A substantial investment upon which I receive woefully little return."

"It warms the cockles of my heart to know that I linger in your thoughts," she sniped. She refused to cower like a wet hen before his banked anger. He sounded reasonable, calm, controlled, but she had no trouble reading the tension in his broad shoulders or in the way his powerful hands opened and closed at his sides as if he'd dearly like to hit something.

“In faith, my lady, you speak false. Creatures of ice have no use for a heart.” A faint, malicious smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “Should I warn this paltry fellow that he risks frostbite in your company?”

She steeled herself against Kinvarra’s taunting. He couldn’t hurt her now. He hadn’t been able to hurt her since she’d left him. Any twinge was merely the result of temporary shakiness after the accident. That was all. It couldn’t be because this man retained the power to stick needles into her feelings.

“My lord, egad, I protest.” Fortunately, shock made Harold sound less like a frightened sheep. “The lady is your wife. Surely she merits your chivalry at the very least.”

Harold had never seen her in her husband’s company, and some reluctant and completely misplaced loyalty to Kinvarra meant she hadn’t explained why the Sinclairs lived apart. The accepted fiction was that the earl and his countess were polite strangers who by mutual design rarely met.

Poor Harold, he was about to discover the nasty truth that the earl and his countess loathed each other.

“Like hell she does,” Kinvarra muttered, casting her an incendiary glance under long dark eyelashes.

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Alicia was human enough to wish the bright moonlight didn't reveal quite so much of her husband's seething rage. But the fate that proved capricious enough to fling them together tonight of all nights wasn't likely to heed her pleas.

"Do you intend to present your cicisbeo?" Kinvarra's voice remained quiet. She'd long ago learned that was when he was most lethal.

Dear God, did he plan to shoot Harold after all?

Her hands clenched in her skirts as fear tightened her throat. Lacerating as Kinvarra's tongue could be, he'd never shown her a moment's violence. But did that extend to the man she planned to take into her bed? Kinvarra was a crack shot and a famous swordsman. If it came to a duel, Harold wouldn't stand a chance.

"My lord, I protest the description," Harold bleated, sidling further away. He'd clearly also heard the unspoken threat in Kinvarra's question.

Oh, for pity's sake. Was it too much to wish that her suitor would stand up to the scoundrel she'd married as a silly chit of seventeen? Alicia drew a deep breath of freezing air and reminded herself that she favored Lord Harold Fenton precisely because he wasn't an overbearing brute like her husband. Harold was a scholar and a poet, a man of the mind. She should consider it a mark of Harold's superior intelligence that he was wary of Kinvarra.

But her insistence didn't convince her traitorous heart.

How she wished she really was the callous witch Kinvarra called her. Then she'd be

immune both to his insults and to this insidious attraction that she'd never conquered, no matter how she tried.

"My lady?" Kinvarra asked, still in that even voice that struck a chill into her soul sharper than the winter wind. "Who is this...gentleman?"

She stiffened her backbone and leveled her shoulders. She was made of stronger stuff than this. Never would she let her husband guess that he still had power over her. Her response was steady. "Lord Kinvarra, allow me to present Lord Harold Fenton."

Harold performed an uncertain bow without stepping any nearer. "My lord."

As he straightened, tense silence descended. Alicia shifted to try and warm up her icy feet, fulminating against the bad luck that threw her in Kinvarra's way tonight.

"Well, this is awkward," Kinvarra said flatly, although she saw in his taut, dark face that his anger hadn't abated one whit.

"I don't see why," Alicia snapped.

It wasn't just her husband who tried her patience. There was her lily-livered lover and the perishing cold. The temperature must have dropped ten degrees in the last five minutes. She shivered, then silently cursed that Kinvarra noticed and Harold didn't. Harold was too busy staring at her husband the way a mouse stared at an adder.

"Do you imagine I'm so sophisticated that I'll ignore discovering you in the arms of another man? My dear, you do me too much credit."

She stifled the urge to consign Kinvarra to perdition. Just as she stifled the poignant memory that once he'd called her his dear and his love and he'd meant it. Once,

briefly, long ago. “If you’ll set aside your bruised vanity for the moment, you’ll understand that we merely require you to ride to the nearest habitation and request help. Then you and I can return to acting like mere acquaintances, my lord.”

He laughed and she struggled to suppress the sensual awareness that rippled down her spine at that soft, deep sound. “Some things haven’t changed, I see. You’re still dishing out orders. And I’m still damned if I’ll play your lapdog.”

“Can you see another solution?” she asked sweetly.

“Yes,” he said with a snap of his straight white teeth. “I can leave you to freeze. Not that you’d notice. Your blood has always been colder than Satan’s icehouse.”

Her pride insisted that she send him on his way with a flea in his ear. The weather—and what common sense remained under the urge to wound that always flared in Kinvarra’s vicinity—prompted her to sound more conciliatory.

It was late. She and Harold hadn’t passed anyone on this country road. Bleak, snowy moors extended for miles around them. The grim truth was that if Kinvarra didn’t help, they were stranded until morning. And while she was dressed in good thick wool, she wasn’t prepared to endure a night in the open. The chill of the ground seeped through her fur-lined boots and she shifted again, trying to revive feeling in her frozen feet.

“My lord...” During the year they’d lived together, she’d called him Sebastian. During their few meetings since, she’d clung to formality to keep him at a distance. “My lord, there’s no point in quarreling. Basic charity compels your assistance. I would consider myself in your debt if you fetch aid as quickly as possible.”

He arched one black eyebrow in an imperious fashion that made her want to clout him. Not a new sensation. “Now that’s something I’d like to see.”

“What?”

“Gratitude.”

He knew he had her at a disadvantage and he wasn't likely to rise above that fact. She ground her teeth and battled to retain her manners. “It's all I can offer.”

The smile that curved his lips was pure devilry. A shiver with no connection to the cold ran through her.

“Your imagination fails you, my dear countess.”

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Her throat closed with nerves—and that reluctant physical reaction she couldn't ignore. He hadn't shifted, yet suddenly she felt threatened. Which was ludicrous. During all their years apart, he'd given no indication he wanted anything from her except her absence. One chance meeting wasn't likely to turn him into a robber baron ready to spirit her away to his lonely tower where he could have his way with her.

Having his way with her was the last thing Kinvarra wanted, as she was humiliatingly aware.

Nonetheless, she had to fight the urge to retreat. She knew from dispiriting experience that her only chance of handling Kinvarra was to feign control. "What do you want?"

This time he did lean closer, until his great height overshadowed her. Close enough for her to think that if she stretched out one hand, she'd touch that powerful chest, those wide shoulders. "I want—"

There was a piercing whinny and a sudden pounding of hooves on the snow. Appalled, disbelieving, Alicia turned to see Harold galloping off on one of the carriage horses, legs flailing as he struggled for purchase without stirrups.

"Harold?"

Her voice faded to nothing in the night. Her beau didn't slow down. In fact, he kicked his mount's sides to encourage greater speed. She'd been so engrossed in her battle with Kinvarra, she hadn't even noticed that Harold had caught one of the stray horses.

Kinvarra's low laugh mocked her. "Oh, my dear. Commiserations. Your swain proves a sad disappointment. I wonder if he's fleeing my temper or yours. You really have no luck in love, have you?"

She was too astonished to be upset at Harold's departure. Instead she focused on Kinvarra. Her voice turned hard. "No luck in husbands, at any rate."

Kinvarra suffered Alicia's hate-filled regard and wondered what the hell he was going to do with his troublesome wife out in this frigid wilderness. The insolent baggage deserved to be left where she stood, but even he, who owed her repayment for countless slights over the years, wouldn't do that to her.

It seemed he had no choice but to help.

Not that she'd thank him. He had no illusions that after she'd got what she wanted—a warm bed, a roof over her head and a decent meal—she'd forget any promises of gratitude.

In spite of the punishing cold, heat flooded him as he briefly let himself imagine Alicia's gratitude. She'd shed that heavy red cloak. She'd let down that mass of gold hair until it tumbled around her shoulders. Then she'd kiss him as if she didn't hate him and she'd—

From long habit, he stopped before the flaring images became too interesting. A thousand fantasies had sustained him the first year of their separation, but he'd learned for sanity's sake to control them since. Now they only troubled him after his rare meetings with his wife.

This was the longest time he and Alicia had spent together in years. It should remind

him why he eschewed her company. Instead, it reminded him that she was the only woman who had ever challenged him, the only woman who had ever matched him in strength, the only woman he couldn't forget, desperately as he'd tried.

He smiled into her sulky, beautiful face. "Poor Alicia. It seems you're stuck with me."

How that must smart. The long ride to his Yorkshire manor on this desolate night suddenly offered a myriad of pleasures, not least of which was the chance to knock a few chips off his wife's monumental pride.

She didn't respond to his comment. Instead with an unreadable expression, she stared after her absconding lover. "We're only about five miles from Harold's hunting lodge."

The wench didn't even try to lie about the assignation, blast her impudence. "If he manages to stay on that horse, Horace should make it." Fenton showed no great skill as a bareback rider. Even as Kinvarra recognized the wish as unworthy, he hoped the blackguard ended up on his rump in a muddy hedgerow.

"Harold," she said absently, drawing her cloak tight around her slender throat. "You could take me there."

This time his laughter was unconstrained. She'd always had nerve, his wife, even when she'd been little more than an untried girl. "Be damned if you think I'm carting you off to cuckold me in comfort, madam."

She sent him a cool look. "I'm thinking purely in terms of shelter, my lord."

"I'm sure," he said cynically.

Still, in spite of his jaded view of the world and its inhabitants, he couldn't completely stifle his rankling surprise that Alicia had at last chosen a lover. In spite of their lack of communication, he'd always known what she was up to. Since leaving him, she'd been remarkably chaste, which was one of the reasons he'd allowed the ridiculous separation to continue. Clearly living with him for a year had left her with no taste for bed sport. A bitter acknowledgement for a man to make, by God.

Recent gossip had mentioned Lord Harold Fenton as a persistent suitor, but Kinvarra thought he knew enough of his wife to consider the second son of the Marquess of Granville poor competition. Bugger it, he should have listened to the gossip.

By all that was holy, her taste had deteriorated since she'd abandoned her marriage. The man was a complete nonentity.

Perhaps one day she'd thank her husband for saving her from a disastrous mistake.

And the bleak and stony moor around them might suddenly sprout coconut palms.

"No, my love, your fate is sealed." He slapped his riding crop against his boot and tilted his hat more securely on his head with an arrogant gesture designed to irritate her. "Horatio travels north. I travel south. Unless you intend to ride the other carriage horse or pursue the clodpole on foot, your direction is mine."

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“Does that mean you will help me?” This time, she didn’t bother correcting his deliberate misremembering of her suitor’s name.

She was lucky he didn’t call the toad Habakkuk and skewer his kidneys with a rapier. Alicia was his. Kinvarra had known that from the first moment he saw her, slender, unsure, but full of a wild vitality that still beckoned

him, whatever else divided them. No other damned rascalion was going to steal her away. Especially a rascalion who lacked the spine to fight for her.

Kinvarra strode across to his bay mare and snatched up the reins. “If you ask nicely.”

To his surprise, Alicia laughed. “Devil take you, Kinvarra.”

He swung into the saddle and urged the horse nearer to his wife. “Indubitably, my dear.”

Her suddenly cavalier attitude made it easier to deal with her, but it puzzled him. Her lover’s desertion hadn’t cast her down. If she didn’t care for the fellow, why in Hades accept his advances? Yet again, Kinvarra realized how far he remained from understanding the complicated creature he’d wed with such high hopes eleven years ago.

He extended one leather-gloved hand and noted her hesitation before she accepted his assistance. It was the first time he’d touched her since she’d left him and even through two layers of leather, he felt the burning shock of contact. She stiffened as though she too felt that unwelcome surge of response.

He'd always wanted her. That was part of the problem, God help them. He'd often asked himself if time would erode the attraction.

Just one touch of her hand on a snowy night and he received his unequivocal answer.

She swung onto the horse behind him and paused again before looping her arms around his waist. He'd always been hellish aware of her reactions and he couldn't help but note her reluctance to touch him.

Good God, what was wrong with the woman? She'd been ready enough to do more than touch rabbit-hearted Fenton. Surely her long-suffering husband deserved a little friendliness after coming to her rescue. With damned little encouragement, too, he might add.

Compared to the cold night, she felt warm and soft against his back. His lunatic heart dipped at her nearness, even as he told himself that the warmth and softness were lies. Alicia Sinclair was made of stone. Or at least she was when it came to her husband. If he forgot that, she'd drag his soul through the razor-sharp thorns of hell again.

But the warning fell on deaf ears. When she touched him, he could think of little else but how long it was since he'd held her in his arms and shown her how strongly she inflamed his unruly passions.

The mare curveted under the double weight, but Kinvarra settled her with a curt word. He never had trouble with horses. It was his wife he couldn't control.

"What about my belongings?" she asked, calm as you please. The lady should demonstrate proper shame at being caught with a lover. But of course, that wasn't Alicia. She held her head high whatever destiny threw at her.

It was one of the things he loved about her.

He quashed the unwelcome insight. “There’s an inn a few miles ahead. I’ll get them to send someone for your baggage.”

He clicked his tongue to the horse and cantered in the opposite direction to the one Fenton had taken. Which was lucky for the weasel. If Kinvarra caught up with Fenton now, he’d be inclined to reach for his horsewhip. What right had that bastard to interfere with other men’s wives then scuttle away leaving the lady stranded?

Alicia settled herself more comfortably, pressing her lovely, lush body into his back. She hadn’t been this close to him in years. He was scoundrel enough to enjoy the contact, however reluctantly she granted it.

Maybe after all, he should be grateful to old Harold. He might even send the poltroon a case of port and a note of appreciation.

Well, that might go too far.

“Is that where we’re heading?” She tightened her arms. He wished it was because she wanted to touch him and not just because she sought a more secure seat. He also wished that when she said “we”, his belly didn’t cramp with longing for the word to be true.

Damn Alicia. She’d always held magic for him and she always would. Ten long years without her had taught him that grim lesson.

The reminder of the dance she’d led him made him respond in a clipped tone. “No, we’re going to Heseltine Hall near Whitby.”

“But you can leave me at the inn, can’t you?”

“It’s a poor place. I couldn’t abandon a woman there without protection.” He tried, he

really did, to keep the satisfaction from his voice, but he must have failed. He felt her tense against his back, although she couldn't pull too far away without risking a fall.

“And who's going to protect me from you?” she muttered, almost as if to herself.

“I mean you no harm.” For all their difficult interactions, he'd only ever wished her well. “You didn't come all the way from London in that spindly carriage, did you?”

“It's inappropriate to discuss my arrangement with Lord Harold,” she said coldly.

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He laughed again, against all sense, enchanted with her spirit. “Humor me.”

She sighed. “We traveled up separately to York.” Her voice melted into sincerity and he tried not to respond to the husky sweetness. “I truly didn’t set out to cause a scandal. You and I parted in rancor, but I have no ambition to damage you or your name.”

“Whatever your attempts at discretion, you still meant to give yourself to that puppy,” Kinvarra bit out, all amusement abruptly fled.

Alicia didn’t answer.