



The Hunt for Mr. October

(The Rake Review)

Author: *Tabetha Waite*

Category: Historical

Description: It had been the moment Elwood Tyburne, the Earl of Belmont, was dreading for months. Ever since that Brazen Belle and her dastardly, Rake Review had started wreaking havoc upon all of his friends and acquaintances—some of which were wrongly accused—he had been in a state of panic. While Elwood would admit that he was a scoundrel, he didn't care to have the finger of justice pointing directly at him, turning him into some kind of twisted man of prominence, where he couldn't walk down the street without being heckled. He despised the attention, especially when he hadn't done anything—lately. In truth, he'd been doing his best to lay low. He hadn't gone to his favorite gaming hells for weeks, and he had gone so far as to dare to give up his favorite mistress. Unfortunately, it didn't seem that the intrigue was going to die down anytime soon, and it appeared he was about to have additional trouble in one tenacious lady...

Meliah Newton is on the search for the elusive Earl of Belmont. She has a dream to become a respected journalist, just like the Brazen Belle. She's convinced that if she could prove that Lord Belmont is a complete ne'er-do-well, she would finally get the recognition she has been longing to obtain. To her dismay, the man seems to be more of a challenge than she expected, but she has never been the sort to give up easily, and she perseveres, finally cornering the rat in his hole. What she hadn't expected from all this was her flaming attraction to him, nor the way her body melts under his expert touch. She knows he's only trying to seduce her away from him, but its only drawing her closer.

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CHAPTER 1

London, England

October 1, 1820

The hunt was on. Elwood Tyburne, Earl of Belmont, could feel it in his bones. The latest gossip rag had yet to announce the rake of the month in a monthly periodical entitled, “The Rake Review” where the anonymous, “Brazen Belle” would showcase her latest victim. Some inner intuition told him that he would soon be the next to face the ton’s wrath, although he hoped it was wrong. In January, when the first article had started circulating and mentioned that poor soul, Edward Johns, Elwood had found it rather amusing—like the rest of his cohorts—until a large target had been plastered on their backsides.

When it became apparent that this was to be a recurring theme, some men decided to curb their raucous natures for a time, while others ignored the threat and went about their merry lives, until suddenly, they were hearing wedding bells.

Elwood shuddered just thinking that he might be cornered in such a fashion. He had his peccadilloes, and he preferred to keep his freedom, thank you very much. His parents had actually been one of the few couples that enjoyed a happy life built on love. It was nauseating.

At one point, after his fourth, younger brother was born, he considered saying something about how much time they spent in the bedchamber, but he realized he would never be able to get the words past his throat before he choked on them.

He should be glad that his mother and father were happy, but it had soured his stomach when it came to finding his own love match. Sex was grand, but when you added the soft touches, the lingering glances from across the room, and that dreadful hand holding, that's where he drew the line. The idea of that much affection was quite unsettling. He was quite sure that one of his younger brothers would be glad to carry on the title should he pass on without any legitimate issue, so he wasn't too concerned about duty when there were plenty of opportunities for his father's marquessate to carry on.

Elwood's latest mistress had been the sort who enjoyed mutual pleasure, and other than a bauble or two, she was content to leave things at that. Unfortunately, he'd had to break things off with her. For all he knew, she could be the Belle who was writing these dreadful columns. Paranoia was starting to become very real with the bachelors of London.

He was most certainly in danger if he continued to display any sort of devilish behavior. He hadn't gone to any of his usual gaming hells, or dared to engage in any other sort of scandalous liaisons. He rode his horse to Hyde Park in the morning and imbibed at White's until he had to stumble back to his townhouse and stare at the wall of his study for the rest of the day, all while praying that this woman might tire of her latest entertainment, so he could return to his.

Since it was Sunday and every other man in London was shaking in their Hessians until Monday when the latest rake was revealed, Elwood decided that his presence was best served at church. It couldn't hurt his chances to engage in some divine intervention while he waited for the guillotine of society to claim the next male.

Donning his best attire, Elwood grabbed his silver headed cane and hat and headed out to where his curicle was waiting. He nodded to the groom who handed him the reins and then set his mount into motion. Along the way, he did his best to appear the upstanding gentleman who would be admired. He touched his brim in greeting to the

ladies and offered the men a nod of acknowledgement. He didn't give anyone the cut, and if there had been the chance he could help an older lady cross the street, he would have vaulted from his curicle to assist, just to prove what an upstanding pillar of society that he was.

When he entered St. James' Church, he sat throughout the entire sermon with a reverent expression on his face, doing his best to appear contrite for any past transgressions he might have embarked upon. As the service concluded, he made sure to continue with the same humble demeanor until he returned to home to Brook Street in Mayfair. The moment the door shut behind him, he headed for his study, ripping off his cravat as he went and going to the sideboard, where he poured a brandy and downed it in one scorching gulp.

If he survived another month of this inactivity, it might just kill him.

Miss Meliah Newton could hardly contain her excitement the next morning when the latest periodical of "The Rake Review" arrived in her greedy hands by way of a street urchin at her parent's residence on Brick Lane in Spitalfields. She had been eagerly awaiting the latest edition as soon as she recalled it was the first Monday of the month.

From the moment she had first caught sight of the gossip sheet in Samantha Mason's hands, Meliah had been fascinated by "The Belle." She hadn't been sure where she might continue to claim the article, as it was published in secret, but thankfully, her friend, Samantha, was an orange seller who often went into the heart of Mayfair, where it was being distributed, and since she was sweet on one of Lady Graves' footman, he had shared the information with her. Now, each month, Meliah begged Samantha for the latest release.

It was Meliah's single hope that she might become a noted writer like "The Belle," even if the price she had to pay was the same anonymity. She was weary of living

above her parent's weaver's shop, expected to carry on the family tradition when they were gone. But that was not what filled her heart with purpose. She loved writing and hoped to see her book in print on the shelves of Hatchard's someday. She was nearly finished with her first novel, and her mind had been racing, wondering how she might convince one of the printing companies to take a chance to publish her work. If she could only discover the identity of this notorious author and find out who she used as a printer, perhaps they might be willing to risk taking on another writer in secret. She wouldn't be averse to using a pen name, so long as she could hold her own words in her hands.

She pushed those dreams aside for the moment, and eagerly read the latest Rake Review. Although she hadn't known any of the gentlemen that had been previously mentioned, there were times when she felt some sort of... connection to them, but none so much as this month's mysterious Lord B.

Dearest Reader,

At long last, I must present a rake of the first order. Although he must have believed himself immune to my pen, I cannot allow his licentious ways to go unnoticed any longer. It is time that Lord B —is brought to the forefront of society.

I'm sure you are acquainted with the gentleman in question. It is not often any lady finds herself immune to his charm, nor those piercing blue eyes and ebony hair. I'm quite certain he doesn't need false padding to emulate such broad shoulders, or extra cushion in his shoes to reach that towering height. But I digress.

His attributes might be aplenty, but it's his character that has often been called into question. With his signature, silver-headed cane, that many might speculate hides a deadly sword, Lord B—frequents the worst gaming hells and dare I say it, once ran naked through a Cyprian ball while he was completely foxed. Later, it was rumored that he enjoyed some bed sport with not one, but two other partners, but there might

have been more. I believe I also overheard there was a whip and various other torture devices involved.

Quite scandalous!

He might have curbed these voracious appetites recently, fearing the lash of my review, but he can hide no longer. I am keen on finding the worst men of society to warn unsuspecting young ladies who might be in search of an honorable match, but although Lord B—might have a good family reputation, his own is quite tarnished. Although I admit that he has never promised any woman his undying loyalty, and has kept the same mistress for longer than I imagined he would, I feel it's only time to teach this rake a much-needed lesson in respect.

He claims that I am targeting certain gentleman without due cause, so I dare any lady to prove me wrong by noting one redeeming quality. If Lord B—wants to throw down this gauntlet, then I can assure you that the challenge will be accepted. It is my constant goal to bring these irrefutable rakes to heel, and I can assure you that there is just cause for the men I choose.

If I can say anything else about Lord B—it is that he is nothing if not determined. And as terribly stubborn as he is handsome. This is why I am offering this grand opportunity, dear readers, to not only bring another rake to heel and eat crow, but to enjoy the victory of doing so.

Enjoy the hunt, and remember to be forever brazen,

The Belle

Excitement started pounding in Meliah's veins. This was the moment she had been waiting for—the chance to prove herself. If she could find this Lord B—and announce that “The Belle” was absolutely spot on in her review, then surely others

might applaud her efforts.

All of her dreams could finally come true.

But then, she remembered one vital fact.

Glancing down at her simple brown frock, Meliah realized that she was sadly outmatched by some of the ladies of polite society. She had nothing suitable to wear to attract a rake's attention to uncover this truth, and certainly not the wit and charm to gain his confidence.

But just as Lord B—was determined, so was she.

Her friend might be an orange seller, but she had connections in the heart of the West End. Samantha frequented the best areas in London. Her friend spoke with maids and footmen alike, so surely, she could find a way to procure something more suitable for Meliah to wear. With the slight funds she had been saving, Meliah might be able to embark upon a journey to Mayfair and do some investigating on her own. Not only did she intend to try to learn more about this Lord B—but wouldn't it be remarkable if she could also discover the identity of the mysterious "Belle?"

That would certainly be an attractive enticement when she strode into the printer's shop with such pertinent information.

With a new lightness to her step, Meliah set to work for the day.

It was purgatory, or perhaps full-on hell. There was no other explanation for it.

Elwood had met his demise the moment that blasted gossip rag had been circulated.

It had been four days since he was mentioned—not so subtly, in his opinion—and

already, he was feeling the pressure of his newfound notoriety starting to wear him down. He found it impossible to find solace, because anytime he stepped foot outside of his townhouse, he was accosted by a hoard of women demanding that he declare his sins, like he was at some sort of confessional and they were all honorary priests. They were worse than a pack of braying hounds after a fox. Unfortunately, he was that poor fox.

The only place he could escape the madness, whenever he dared to step foot outside of his house, was at his club, and he'd found that to be almost unbearable at this point. If he wasn't being heckled by his fellow peers who dared to ask him for an autograph and then guffawing at their own jest, he had to suffer the notoriety that he had been the next rake written down in the betting books.

His mood was rapidly deteriorating and he wasn't sure any amount of alcohol would cure his ailment at this point. It was certainly time for him to start considering leaving London for a while. At least until the next review was circulated. By then, hopefully the focus would be on the Belle's next victim and he could be spared any more of this ridiculous acclaim he'd maliciously earned.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he glanced out the window and wanted to moan in dismay when he saw that there was a larger crowd awaiting his resurgence from White's. Deciding it was no use delaying the inevitable, he headed outside and grabbed the reins of his horse. He couldn't dare drive his curricule. It wasn't as fast as his gelding if he needed to make a mad dash to secure freedom.

As he stepped out into the crisp autumn air, Elwood recalled that he used to love this time of year. He had always enjoyed the way the leaves changed and drifted to the ground in a crunchy pile beneath his feet. When he'd been young, he used to rake them all into a pile and jump into the middle with pure abandon.

He wasn't sure why he brought that to mind now, nor why he suddenly glanced up in

that moment to spy a lone figure standing off to the side from the rest of his critics. She had a plain straw bonnet perched on her head and wore an equally simple pastel pink dress. He couldn't tell what color her eyes were from this distance, but he wanted to imagine that they were blue. Her figure was slender, but not overly so. She had curves in all the right places.

At any other time, he might have discarded her out of hand. She wasn't the usual coquette that he appreciated, because they knew when the line had been drawn. It was obvious this quiet, solemn woman was not a courtesan.

But it was this woman's calm, curious expression that captured his immediate interest. She simply observed from afar, instead of joining the rest of the assemblage who were eager to villainize him.

"Lord Belmont!" He cringed when a middle-aged matron nearly screeched in his ear. She waved about the latest review in her gloved grasp. "You claim the Belle is misleading society, and yet, you dared to use instruments of torture for?"

He held up a hand. "For the love of all that's holy, don't finish that statement." He glanced about the street where a governess was passing by with two of her young charges. He frowned darkly at the woman who had spoken and said through gritted teeth, "This is a public street where children are present."

"Indeed," she sniffed haughtily. "And yet, you are allowed to run amok through these streets like some sort of... of... animal!"

He crossed his arms. "I might be an animal, madam, but I daresay you are being the ass."

He mounted his horse while she gave an offended gasp behind him.

Elwood yearned to look back at the lady in pink once more, but he knew it was time for him to head home where he could find some peace.

And then, once it got dark, it would be time to leave town.

He looked right at me .

Meliah's common sense told her that he'd done no such thing, and yet, she knew that her eyes had not deceived her.

Following his departure, the group of women started to disperse. Meliah walked over to the one who had accused him so brazenly before she had a chance to depart.

Brazen —it abruptly occurred to her that she could be “The Belle,” hoping to convince those around her that this gentleman was everything that she had claimed.

“Pardon me.”

The lady lifted her eyebrows as she looked Meliah up and down, as if to decide whether or not she was important enough to converse with. She must have decided she was, but her tone was anything but friendly when she said curtly, “Yes?”

Realizing that she didn't have long to converse, Meliah asked, “Who was that gentleman?”

A snort was her initial reply. “That is Elwood Tyburne, the Earl of Belmont.” She wagged her finger close to her face. “If you are smart, miss, you would do well to steer clear of that libertine.”

With that warning, the woman flounced off. Meliah shook her head and decided that couldn't be “The Belle.” At least, she refused to believe she could be that

unforgiving. From Meliah's view, "The Belle" didn't sound rude in her columns. She was just warning unsuspecting ladies of the sort of men they should do well to avoid.

She wished she could actually converse with the true author, but as Samantha had told her, it was virtually impossible to learn her identity. Several had tried and failed before her.

In that regard, Meliah decided to devote her efforts to Lord B.

The Earl of Belmont .

She smiled as she rushed back to where her friend could be found with her orange stand. Meliah thought Samantha would be just as excited as she was to learn that her target had been discovered. Instead, the girl's brown eyes had widened perceptibly. "You can't mean to approach an earl ."

Meliah rolled her eyes. "I don't intend to just waltz up to him on the street and demand, 'Pardon me, Lord Belmont, but is it true that all these accusations have no merit? And if so, would you mind if I interviewed you so that I can fulfill my dream of being a writer?'"

Again, Samantha didn't appear amused. "That's not funny."

"I didn't say it was. But I do have a plan in mind, but you will have to tell me where he lives."

"Why?" Samantha eyed her warily. "What are you going to do?"

Meliah knew she couldn't reveal that part or she would never hear the end of it, and any chance she might have of carrying out her plans would never transpire. She needed her friend's help, but not at the expense of her blistered ears. "Please, Sam. I

swear I will never ask another favor from you again. Just trust me.”

She held her breath, because it seemed as though she wasn’t going to gain any more information, but in the end, Samantha sighed heavily. “Very well. Just don’t make me regret it.”

Taking it as concern for her wellbeing, Meliah allowed the slight chiding. She was warmed by her concern, and it wasn’t as though Samantha didn’t have a right to be worried. Meliah intended to make her way into Belmont’s townhouse and corner him into telling the truth. She hadn’t yet figured exactly how she might accomplish this yet, but she was sure she would figure it out before she was standing in front of him.

She was grateful that Samantha had gone along with the tale Meliah had spun to her parents, that she was spending the night with Samantha in Covent Garden, which was a decidedly shorter distance to Mayfair than Spitalfields. Meliah also owed her a debt for the use of the gown she currently wore. One of the ladies’ of the manor that Samantha’s sweetheart worked for intended to have it altered. But before it arrived at the seamstress, it had taken a slight detour.

Meliah crossed her fingers behind her back and prayed that this evening would go as well as she hoped it would, and then she said to Samantha, “I don’t intend the earl any harm, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s not, actually,” Samantha returned dryly. “I’m more concerned out what I might end up reading in the papers about you .”

CHAPTER 2

All was silent in the townhouse when Elwood checked his reflection in the mirror. He hadn't been too keen on asking one of his footmen to head to Drury Lane and see if there were any costumes that they might be retiring, but he had been desperate to sneak out of his townhouse without being observed. Although he was choosing to leave in the middle of the night, he didn't want to take any chances that he would be recognized, thus a disguise had been in order.

He'd gone so far as to hire an unmarked carriage that would take him to his hunting box where he could hide out in blessed solitude for the next few weeks until the worst of the pandemonium had died down. He had ensured that the proper provisions had been sent ahead, along with the threat to his faithful servants that anyone who dared to breathe a word of his whereabouts would be sacked without a reference. He demanded loyalty now, more than ever.

As he was checking to make sure the false brown moustache and beard were firmly in place, the cloak and robes of Prospero from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" concealing his form, he realized he had never sunk so low in his life. He was more than a bit resentful that he was being forced to abdicate his entertainments and scurry into hiding because some blasted woman with a vendetta had chosen to set her sights on him and not the true culprit of her angst. If he ever gained the opportunity to meet this thorn in his side, he would gladly give her a piece of his mind.

Elwood was about to turn around when from the corner of his eye, he spotted a slight shadow behind him. Instantly on alert, he grabbed the silver headed cane he always kept nearby and held it out in front of him toward the intruder as if it contained the

sword the article had claimed. Sadly, it was just a painted piece of wood. “Whoever you are, state your business and leave before I send for the watch.” He did his best to sound menacing, but when there was a snort, followed by a slight feminine chuckle, he was momentarily taken off guard.

“You look positively ridiculous.”

He frowned, pride overriding his anger at being accosted in his own home. Rather than refute her statement, because he had been thinking the same, he chose to ignore the slight and demanded, “How did you get in here?”

Although it was too dark to see more than her silhouette, he saw one shoulder shrug nonchalantly. “It wasn’t that difficult. I climbed the tree and let myself in the room next to this one since the latch was unlocked. Not a very secure residence you have, I might add. What if the intruder might have meant you harm?” Elwood blinked, having trouble following the conversation at this point. “When I heard movement inside here, I knew that this must be your chamber.”

He lifted a brow at the last, more impressed than he would like to admit. “What if I wasn’t alone?”

She shrugged again. “I would have waited.”

Slowly lowering his cane, he set the tip on the ground and leaned his hands on it. At this point, he was starting to become more curious about his late-night visitor, rather than actually annoyed. “What are you doing here?”

“I mean to learn what everyone else doesn’t have the courage to ask.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“If the rumors that ‘The Belle’ wrote about you are true or not.”

It was his turn to snort. “I see. You’re one of those desperate females who want to finish dragging my reputation through the mud until it is abused beyond repair.”

She paused. “Actually, no. I want to tell your side of the story.” Her gaze was direct, steady.

Elwood tilted his head to the side. There weren’t many women that he met who actually surprised him, but this woman was doing an excellent job. She wasn’t one to mince words and it was a quality not many ladies of his acquaintance held in abundance.

Before he could say anything more, she added, “My reasons for coming here today are purely selfish. I have aspirations of becoming a noted writer like ‘The Belle.’ I see my opportunity to prove my worth by interviewing you, and gain recognition of my own.”

“While happily destroying me in the process,” he reiterated dryly.

“An unfortunate occurrence, but it seems to me ‘The Belle’ has already managed to do that,” she pointed out. “I’m sure your reputation will recover in time. Perhaps not fully, but enough to salvage your title and prove to society that you are a worthy gentleman. There is nothing more enticing than a reformed rake, after all. That is where I come in.”

Despite himself, Elwood’s lips twitched. “Do I get the courtesy of your name since you are, not only accosting me in my bedchamber in the middle of the night, but are set on this course?”

Another pause. “How about Miss Smith?”

“An assumed name hardly seems very sporting, since you are expecting me to pour out my heart and soul to you for an advantage that I only see is one sided,” he murmured. He started to move toward the silhouette. “Perhaps what you’re really here for is a demonstration of my... talents?”

“Hardly.” She denied his claim, and yet, he heard the slightly breathless tone in her voice. “I just want to see if there is anything redeeming about you.”

He stopped, because he had a sudden thought, a purely wicked thought. “I admire your courage, so I have decided to tell you whatever you would wish to know, the entire sordid tale of my life to this point. But I insist on conducting the interview in private. I have a carriage waiting in the mews to take me to my hunting box for a time. If you are interested in my history, then you will have to join me.”

“You expect me to go with you, to God only knows where for an undisclosed amount of time, dressed in that ridiculous Prospero costume? And take you seriously?”

He blinked. Ignoring the second insult, and asked instead, “You are familiar with Shakespeare?”

“Somewhat. I have some friends who perform on the stage.”

“Indeed?” This woman continued to fascinate him. Perhaps she was a new actress. It had been some time since he’d seduced one of those. He crossed his arms. “It’s your choice, madam. I am leaving this evening whether or not you tag along. It makes no difference to me as society’s opinion has been swayed against me, and with just cause.”

He got the sense that she was torn. “Why should I trust you will remain a gentleman?”

Elwood grinned, but the beard likely hid the reaction. “For the same reason I don’t trust you. You shouldn’t. But then, I think you already knew that, didn’t you?” He headed for the door and he saw her shadow retreat further into the darkness away from him. He stopped, because he decided he wouldn’t mind having her along for the ride—in more ways than one. “Might I remind you that you came here . You approached me , and yet, when you have the opportunity to fulfill your dream, you would let something as inconsequential as me stand in your way?” He shook his head. “Perhaps you aren’t the one to discover the truth, after all.” He lifted his hand to his head in a silent salute. “I bid you adieu.”

Meliah’s heart was beating so fast that she wasn’t sure she could calm it ever again. She clenched her fists at her sides and tried to make a decision that wouldn’t ruin her life forever. On one hand, she had the chance to interview Lord Belmont, but on the other, there was certain ruination. Something told her that she already knew he was the licentious libertine that “The Belle” had claimed, but without the sufficient proof to claim otherwise, there wasn’t much she could take to the papers. She needed something that would make the printers take notice of her talents.

If she did this, and went with Lord Belmont, she would have to lay down a few rules. She must insist on his proper distance, and he would have to ensure that she was returned to Spitalfields by the following day. Otherwise, it wouldn’t just be her parent’s wrath she would have to face, but the rest of the shopkeepers who would gossip about her lengthy absence.

Meliah commanded her feet to move and she scrambled down the stairs after the earl. She rushed out the door and abruptly stopped—nearly colliding with his towering figure on the other side.

He was perched against the side of the manor. “I was wondering how long it would take you,” he drawled.

Meliah's breath caught. While he was still dressed as the character from one of the Bard's plays, it was the sensual look in his blue eyes that caused words to fail her. They caught the faint light from the moon and shone with a glimmer that promised entirely too much.

"I have some demands," she stated, although it lacked the conviction she had been hoping for.

"And what are they?" he asked softly, as his gaze ran the length of her body.

She had to fight the urge to put a hand to her stomach to quell the butterflies that were fluttering against her ribcage. "I need to be back home tomorrow."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid that's impossible. It will be a few days before I can secure passage back to the city for you. And if you want a full accounting of my life to find the one good deed buried deep, it will take longer than a single day." He scratched the side of his face and she wondered if the beard was bothering him. "Is that all?"

Some of her spirits sank at that, but she lifted her chin with determination. She would think of the issues she might face later. "I shall not be your next conquest," she added pertly.

"And here I thought I was to be yours," he drawled.

Her head was starting to spin. He spoke in such a way that she found it difficult to keep her own thoughts straight. She certainly understood why most believed him to be so callous.

"I'm waiting. What's it to be?"

Again, Meliah fought between her conscience and her desire to succeed in a field other than that of a weaver for the remainder of her days. “Yes.” For a moment, she was stunned that the word erupted from her so easily, but when he held out his hand to her, she found her own extending toward his in return.

She said nothing else as they entered the hackney. As soon as they were settled, he rapped on the roof of the carriage and they set off. It wasn’t until they started moving that her tongue unglued itself from the roof of her mouth. “I don’t have anything else to wear.”

His gaze swept her once more. “That won’t be a problem,” he murmured.

She gasped in outrage—but a rush of heat poured through her that wasn’t entirely rage. “Pardon me?”

He started to remove his facial covering. “It won’t be a problem to find something for you. It is easy to procure women’s clothing.”

She rolled her eyes as she removed her straw bonnet. “I’m sure you find it so.” She couldn’t believe she was being so calm when she was riding in a carriage with a complete stranger who was known to be a ruthless scoundrel. Not only that, but she was speaking so boldly to a peer of the realm! Her parents would be aghast if they could see her behavior. But Meliah had always believed that it wasn’t a title that made a man a gentleman, but rather his character. And thus far, she wasn’t seeing anything that might suggest the Earl of Belmont deserved a glowing recommendation from society. She had the feeling that “The Belle” was completely accurate in her estimation, and yet, for some reason, that didn’t unnerve her like it should.

“To be clear,” he countered with all the arrogance of his stature. “I was referring to a local seamstress in the area. She generally has a few premade gowns on hand for gentry who are passing through the village and need something quickly.”

Meliah started to panic. “I didn’t bring sufficient funds with me to go shopping.”

He waved a hand. “Don’t concern yourself with the cost. Consider it a gift.”

She narrowed her eyes. “For what reason?”

Again, those eyes flashed. “Entertainment.”

Elwood was finding it entirely too intriguing when it came to teasing this mystery lady across from him. He couldn’t believe his fortune when she came barreling out of the house and almost directly into his arms. The fact that she was the lady in pink that he’d seen earlier that day pleased him more than he could say. Who would have guessed such an innocent looking female would be so precocious?

He was grateful that she had dispensed with the bonnet. It gave him the opportunity to admire her dark hair. It was difficult to see clearly in the dim light, but he was quite certain it was more than a plain, unassuming brown. He imagined that there were flashes of mahogany woven throughout to match her fiery spirit.

She crossed her arms as he removed the last of his costume. More comfortable, he sat back and observed his lovely companion. “I want to make sure you know I don’t intend to be the sort of entertainment you have in mind.”

“I was thinking no such thing,” he lied smoothly. “I am rather curious how long you intend to keep up this masquerade, however.”

She frowned, obviously perplexed. “What are you talking about?”

“Come now.” He coaxed. “It’s obvious that you’re working for the notorious ‘Brazen Belle.’ As if I would give you any further reason to incriminate myself, or make me look like an innocent cherub. The very idea is quite nauseating.”

She lifted her chin and looked at him warily. "I suppose we shall see."

He lifted a brow. "Why don't you get some sleep, Miss..." When she didn't supply her name, he sighed. "Come now, don't be stubborn. I refuse to refer to you by 'Miss Smith' the entire time when I know it's nothing but a stage name."

He could tell by the way she pursed her lips that she didn't want to offer that small courtesy, but since it appeared that she had been instilled with some sense of propriety, she reluctantly said, "Newton."

"Miss Newton." He tried the sound of it on his tongue. "Do you have a first name?"

"That should suffice," she snapped. "We are not friends, nor acquaintances. This is a business arrangement."

"And yet," he pointed out slowly. "You want to gain some rather personal information from me while I am asking for nothing in return but your company. I should think that gains me a first name."

He adored the mutinous glare she offered. But his ploy worked, just as he thought it would.

"Meliah."

"Very lovely," he murmured. He dared to cross the carriage and sit down beside her.

Her eyes widened and it was the first time he got a clear look at their color. It surprised him. "Green," he murmured.

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

“Your eyes are green,” he repeated softly. “Not blue as I’d imagined.”

“Why should you have imagined my eye color at all?”

“Because,” he returned huskily, as he lifted a hand and brushed a stray strand of hair away from her brow. “From the moment I spied you this afternoon, I found myself drawn to you for some inexplicable reason.”

“Did you?” He smiled at the breathless quality to her voice. She must have noticed it too, because she shifted.

“I did,” he confirmed. He allowed his thumb to slide along her full, lower lip. As he slowly dipped his head, he heard the sharp intake of her breath, but it was too late. He had pressed his mouth against her innocent sweetness. There was no doubt in his mind that she was untried, because her initial stillness was shock. But as he increased the pressure, moving gently against her lips, she started to kiss him back. He was aware of the restraint that still held her back, but there was a spark of interest. That would serve him well during his banishment from his usual enjoyments in London.

If this woman wanted to know if he was a true rake, if the words written about him were accurate or not, he might as well give her a taste of what he could offer. This curious little kitten was going to gain the full Belmont experience.

CHAPTER 3

When Meliah first set out on this escapade, she hadn't realized how dangerous this man could be. She thought she was immune to his charms, that her dreams would remind her of what was at stake should she allow herself to be overcome.

But nothing in her wildest dreams could have prepared her for the swirl of heat that started in her stomach and slowly spread throughout her limbs. Her head spun, and she had to cling to his shoulders in order to withstand the sensation of falling.

This wasn't just desire she was facing. This was dangerous territory, and she was starting to slip down this perilous slope entirely too quick—and easy.

Gathering her strength, Meliah pushed against him. Her breathing was rapid, her heartbeat the same, but she set her jaw and made sure that he knew she was serious when she said, "I think you need to return to your side of the carriage, my lord."

He dropped his hands into his lap and offered a lopsided grin before he moved back to where he'd been. "Forgive me. I was just testing your fortitude."

"Now that you have, I suggest you retain a respectful distance henceforth."

"Of course, Miss Newton." She clenched her fists when his grin broadened and he flashed a devastating smile. "Your every wish is my command."

Refusing to be pulled back into that devilish magnetism, Meliah turned her attention outside. Although it was dark, staring into oblivion was better than continuing to face

off with this dastardly villain. The only reason she remained was because he was the single thing standing between fulfilling her dreams and a life filled with toil.

Squaring her shoulders, Meliah kept her focus distant, until the gentle sway of the carriage started to lull her into a false sense of security. Feeling her lids grow heavy, she startled herself awake. She thought it was a bump in the road, but then she realized that they'd stopped. A glance out the window showed that the night sky was starting to give way to the dawn. Feeling a moment of panic that she must have dozed for a few hours rather than a few minutes, she reached for the door handle, only to have it opened from the other side.

"Where are we?" she demanded of the cretin standing there.

The earl waved his silver headed cane toward the large manor house behind him. "My father's hunting box north of London." He offered that same, heart stopping smile. "It's quite secluded, I assure you. We won't be disturbed while you conduct your... interview."

She narrowed her gaze and reluctantly took his hand so he could help her alight. "Does everything have to be some sort of innuendo?"

"I wouldn't be much of a rake if not."

She couldn't argue with that sort of logic, so she kept any further thoughts to herself for the moment as he led her up the stone steps. "Alas, we won't be completely secluded, unfortunately," he murmured in an aside to her. "There is the cook and the housekeeper who shall check on us randomly during the day. Lucky for you, I know where we can go where they won't find us."

A shiver trailed up her spine, and although Meliah wanted to say it was revulsion, she would be lying to herself. This man had a way of making her body respond even if

her mind was screaming at her to deny the sensations.

Meliah took note of the large white columns as they entered the house, and then the black and white marble floor at her feet. She stopped and looked up at the large, crystal chandelier, and felt her mouth fall slack at the sight of the sprawling, carpeted staircase that led to the upper floors. Two hallways led back to more rooms as paintings and tapestries lined the wooden beamed walls.

She had never beheld such splendor before, and likely wouldn't again. It would be so easy to imagine that she had fallen into some sort of fairytale, but soon enough, reality intruded to remind her that she was merely passing through these doors temporarily.

"I'll show you to your chamber."

Lord Belmont put his hand at the small of her back and guided her up the stairs. Their shoes made hardly any sound on the plush covering until they had reached the second floor, where they were greeted with another crisp, marble floor. This one was white and appeared both cold and inviting all at once.

When the earl opened a door halfway down the hall on the right, he moved aside so she could enter first. A lump immediately formed in her throat, because the large four-poster bed in the middle of the massive room looked much more inviting than her straw tick mattress back on Brick Lane above her parent's weaver shop.

A cozy fire was burning in the grate with more coal and wood sitting off to the side. A large wardrobe, dressing table and privacy screen made up the rest of the space. Tears stung her eyes at the knowledge that this was the closest she would ever come to living in such extravagant surroundings. Unless she succeeded with her plan and became the notable writer that she'd always hoped to be.

“Miss Newton?”

His voice was soft and she had to blink away the emotion that also threatened to clog her voice. “Yes?”

He regarded her steadily, more than she felt comfortable with. “I asked if the accommodations were to your liking.”

“Quite,” she returned, with a brief nod.

“Very well. I’ll see if I can find something else for you to wear.” He glanced at the bed, which now seemed larger than life with Lord Belmont standing right beside her. “Make yourself at home. I shall return shortly.”

As Elwood shut the door to Miss Newton’s bedchamber, a frown creased his brow. For someone who acted as though she were part of the gentry, both in manners and speech, she had appeared rather overwhelmed by the opulence around her. Of course, these surroundings were nothing compared to his townhouse, and more notably his father’s estate.

It made him wonder if she might be hiding some secrets of her own, and that bothered him more than it should. However, they had a few days in which to learn about each other, and he intended to do just that. For every question he answered, he intended to learn something about the lady.

Thus decided, he headed for the room at the far end of the hall. Although his mother hadn’t been at the hunting box in some years, she often kept some clothes here for emergency use in case her trunks were disrupted on the journey from London. Thankfully he had recalled that small detail, as entertaining a guest was the only thing that Elwood hadn’t prepared for in advance.

He gathered a nightdress, robe, and a day gown out of the wardrobe that he hadn't recalled his mother wearing before. She had entirely too many clothes, in his opinion, and it was a good thing, because he didn't really want to think about removing anything from Miss Newton's delectable body and knowing that they had graced his mother's figure first.

When he returned to her room, he offered a brief knock before he entered. He was surprised to see her standing in front of one of the floor length windows and looking out over the grounds.

She didn't move when he entered, but jumped slightly and turned when the door shut behind him. He held up the material before he laid the articles over a nearby chair. "These may not fit perfectly, but they should suffice until I can procure you something from the local seamstress."

She walked over to inspect the clothes and he watched as she rubbed the delicate lace between her thumb and forefinger. "Thank you."

As she dropped her hand, she fell silent, as if unsure of what to do next. In truth, she appeared almost shy as she stared at the floor. What had happened to that confident woman who had accosted him just hours earlier?

He moved to stand in front of her, and when her eyes lifted, he was glad to see a definite spark was in those emerald depths. He reached out to cup her cheek and although she didn't melt into his touch, he was glad to see that she didn't refuse him. "Are you happy, Miss Newton?"

She blinked. "I... I don't..."

He took pity on her. "I know it was an unexpected query. I was just curious as to your answer." When she didn't seem capable of speaking again, he chuckled. "Since you

are determined to ferret out the facts of that blasted article, I shall offer a simple truth about me.” He paused, wondering why he had thought to tell her anything at all, but he found the words spilling forth. “I’m not happy. My parents are ridiculously so, and I believe my brothers are content, but for me—” He shrugged. “Happiness is an emotion that continues to elude me.”

“How can you say that?” she whispered. “You are standing in the midst of all of this—” She waved her hand to encompass the room. “And you can actually claim you aren’t grateful?”

“Gratitude and happiness are not the same thing,” he pointed out. “I’m talking about this.” He took her hand and placed it on his chest, directly over his heart. “This organ that beats so steadily to ensure that I survive has never actually made me feel alive.” Standing so close to her, he could feel her every breath as it fanned his chin. “Passion—lust—that is the one thing that has come close to offering me the sole means of escape from my staid existence.” He lowered his head, until their lips were inches apart. “So I ask again—are you happy, Meliah?”

He could almost see the thoughts rushing through her mind. Finally, she said, “Writing. Writing makes me happy.”

“Is that all?” he whispered.

She visibly swallowed. “That’s all I know.”

He leaned down and murmured in her ear. “Would you like to know more, sweet Meliah?”

She opened her mouth, closed it. “I should like the respectable distance that I asked for, my lord.”

Disappointment mixed with respect coursed through him as he took a step back, released all contact between them. “Then I shall leave you to get settled, but I must insist that you join me for breakfast in the morning room.”

He started to leave, but she stopped him with a query. “Where is that?”

His lips twitched with amusement, but he carefully concealed it before he glanced back over his shoulder. “You’re a resourceful woman. I’m sure you will figure it out.”

The moment he was gone, Meliah grasped the bedpost before she sank onto the mattress. She swallowed hard, because she wasn’t sure how she might manage to survive being under the same roof with Lord Belmont and resist his rakish demeanor. Already, she was a flurry of nerves and she had merely shared a single carriage ride with him!

She set her head in her hands with a groan, allowing herself this moment of weakness, and then she got to her feet. She would have to rethink her approach to the earl if she intended to keep her virtue intact and gain the information she needed to impress upon society that she was the next Brazen Belle. He certainly wasn’t making it easy to prove he was other than the rake she’d claimed in her article.

Pacing about the room, she paused when she gained a look at the dressing table mirror. Her eyes widened when she caught her appearance. Her reflection showed a woman who looked as innocent as any other. She had believed the pink dress she’d gotten from Samantha was perfectly suitable. But she had to wonder if perhaps it was too much. It certainly made her look like a sheep standing before the dangerous wolf.

She immediately walked over to the gowns he’d selected for her and hoped it was something that might make a better impression, to prove to Lord Belmont, and to herself, that she was the resourceful lady she claimed to be—that she intended to be.

Unfortunately, it was still quite simple, a sprigged muslin with violet flowers embroidered on it. It was the nicest things she'd ever donned, other than the pink dress. Then again, for someone who toiled for a living, muslin was not generally a garment that might be found in her wardrobe.

Careful to remove her current gown so that she might return it to Samantha unhindered, she folded it as neatly as possible and set it on the chair, before she donned the other dress. She turned to the right and then the left to check her appearance. It was slightly big on her, but it was clean and a slight improvement to the pink.

Sitting at the dressing table, she started to rummage around in the drawers, hoping to find something other than the few toiletries on display. While she wasn't expecting to find jewels, she hoped for some perfume, or enhancements that would turn her into a coquette. When she came up empty handed, she set her elbow on the top of the table in discouragement. Without any cosmetics, she was forced to pinch her cheeks to gain some color. She untied her hair and brushed it until the long strands crackled. Pulling it back up into a knot at the nape of her neck, she had no choice but to re-pin it in a simple fashion. Again, it wasn't as though she'd had a reason to try anything different with her hair before.

She eyed herself critically in the mirror and then decided that, without the assistance of a ladies' maid, her current appearance would have to do.

She lifted her chin and decided that most of her cunning would have to rely upon her mannerisms. She already knew that the earl was a consummate rake. If "The Belle" hadn't decided to write about him, it would have been apparent from the first moment they had met that Lord Belmont was in a class of his own. It was evident in the way he walked with that debonair attitude, or the way he swung his cane with an air of confidence. But those eyes... those devilish, blue eyes that beckoned her, that enticed her to travel down the path of sin, were the most dangerous.

Very well then .

No further eye contact. It should be simple enough.

Gathering her courage, Meliah opened the door and made her way downstairs. She paused at the bottom of the staircase, thinking that she ought to smell some sort of food being laid out, but when there was nothing immediate to give away the direction she needed to be going, Meliah turned to the left and headed down the hall.

She peeked in the doors that were open, because he surely wouldn't expect her to check every door. However, she wasn't above investigating every inch of this house in due time. There was likely some sort of clue to his past that would reveal the earl's true nature.

When she heard the sound of clinking glass, Meliah walked into a comfortable room that was filled with brilliant sunshine. But it was the man in the midst of it all who captured her attention. The earl had changed, not into formal attire, but rather dressed down in a clean white shirt and buff trousers. Without the extra accessories of a cravat and waistcoat, he invoked a terribly intimate setting in the bright light of morning. She was particularly drawn to the strong column of his throat and the exposed part of his upper chest. When their eyes met, he dared to wink at her, because he likely knew what his disheveled appearance was doing to her peace of mind.

So much for forgoing any eye contact...

The man truly was a master in his art.

It was going to take all of her fortitude to withstand him, and not give in to temptation.

CHAPTER 4

Elwood was pleased with the scene he'd carefully prepared. It was ideal for seduction, and with the enticing figure Miss Newton presented in that dress, which hinted at those luscious curves and made him imagine that she were lying in a field of wildflowers, ripe for the plucking, he was eager for the day to begin.

However, all of that changed when he saw the resilience on her face. He admired her determination to push him away, but at the same time he despised it. No other woman had dared to resist him, nor had they wanted to do so. Dare he say it pricked his pride?

Clearing his throat, he straightened and waved a hand at the covered silver dishes in front of him. "I thought we might dine a bit more casually."

She chose a seat diagonally from him and sat so stiff and primly that he wanted to smile. "Did you prepare this yourself?"

He laughed. "Hardly. I told you that there are servants about if I am in need of them."

"And when you're not?"

He lifted the lid to find a vine of grapes. He grinned, and then popped one into his mouth. There was a small vineyard on the property that was carefully cultivated. Although it didn't produce much wine, the harvest was mature at this time of year. He'd nearly forgotten how much he enjoyed them. "They are carefully absent until I do." He allowed the second grape to hover near his mouth as he added, "Are you

scared to be alone with me, Miss Newton?”

“With Prospero?” she asked with a glint of mischief in her gaze. “I should think not.”

He smirked as he gently bit into the fruit and juice exploded in his mouth. He licked his lips, savoring every bit of it, and then swallowed. He picked up the plate and handed it to her. “You shouldn’t miss out on such a delight. These are grown on the property.” She eyed the offering warily, until it prompted him to say, “There is nothing to fear from such an innocent treat.”

“It’s not that.” She hesitated as she plucked one from the vine. “I’ve never had a grape before.”

He stilled, because he had to have heard wrong. Every single lady of his acquaintance had enjoyed grapes, as well as the elusive pineapple. Since this woman claimed to have not, either she had led a rather sheltered life, or she wasn’t actually gentry. He found the latter difficult to believe, since she appeared to be well versed in conversation and manners.

He was considering the prospect when she slipped the grape between her teeth. All of a sudden, Elwood’s attention was riveted on her reaction. Her eyes closed and as she chewed, he was quite certain he’d never beheld anything more erotic. The most practiced courtesans couldn’t invoke that sort of innocent demeanor, no matter how hard they tried. It was the unreserved reaction that could only belong to someone who was being introduced to something new.

His cock immediately responded, because again, he had the feeling she was new to most everything and he would love to teach her the most carnal actions he could contrive.

When she opened her eyes and that enticing pink tongue darted out to lick her lips,

Elwood was quite certain he was going to lose his self-control. But he managed to shift his gaze away long enough where his cock might cease its persistent throb.

“It was wonderful. Much better than I imagined. Might I have another?”

He wasn't sure he could withstand it, but he practically shoved the plate into her hands. “Have as many as you want,” he returned gruffly, and then he did his best to busy himself with the rest of the cook's generous offerings, as opposed to engaging in any further torture.

Ham, eggs, bread, cheese, scones—they were just a few of the delights that were laid out before him. It was a perfect selection to tempt any pallet, and what he had requested since he didn't know what sort of food Miss Newton preferred. Some of the ladies of his acquaintance had been known to be rather particular, but to his surprise, she took a little of everything that he offered and appeared to appreciate it all.

He wished it might be so easy to convince her to accept him as it was to tempt her with what was on the tray, but he told himself to be patient. It wasn't as though he hadn't faced a challenge before. The first day had yet to fully pass. He would have to earn her trust first, and then it should be easy enough to gain more.

“Shall I pour the tea?” she asked.

“Cream, but no sugar,” he replied.

He watched as she carefully picked up the teapot and poured. She served him first, and then she selected sugar but no cream for her own cup. He wondered if she always preferred her tea thus, or if she just wanted to ensure she was different from him.

Silence enveloped them as they ate. It was as if they had embarked on a mutual agreement. But as soon as Miss Newton sat down her plate, she wiped her mouth

with her serviette and looked at him, and he knew the inquisition was about to begin.

“Shall we start the interview, my lord?”

The corners of his mouth lifted, because he had to admit she didn't waste any time reminding him of her sole purpose for being there. He decided there wasn't any harm in humoring her. For the moment, at least. Folding his hands over his midsection, he said, “Why not?”

With a nod of her head, she reached into a pocket of the skirts and withdrew a sheet of paper. He was curious at first, but when he recognized the snippet from the paper, he wanted to groan. “Let me start by asking you this, my lord. If you are innocent of any wrongdoing, why shouldn't you want to clear your name as one of these notorious rakes?”

He lifted a curious brow. “Who referred to it as wrongdoing? I didn't see that in the article.”

She blinked. “How might you claim any different? It is mentioned that you went to a ball and engaged in certain—” She broke off and colored slightly. “—activities.”

When she paused, he prompted, “And?” He shook his head. “Surely you aren't referring to those activities as wrongdoing?”

“You wouldn't?” she gasped. “There is mention of a... whip.” She nearly whispered the word, as if to speak it aloud would condemn her as well. “It sounds like some sort of torture to me.”

He smiled tolerantly. “I can assure you that everything that happened was consensual.”

She seemed unable to comprehend this. “But?—”

He leaned forward. “My dear, Miss Newton, as a lady who is untried, there are some things that your virginal mind cannot yet understand, but I can assure you that such implements of torture, as you call them, can be quite pleasurable for everyone involved.”

Meliah tried to tell herself that she was horrified by the prospect of such ill treatment when it came to the bedchamber, but in truth, she was oddly curious. When Meliah was old enough to dare to ask her mother about what transpired between married couples behind closed doors, she had been very vague. The only explanation she offered was that men had certain needs that were required to be met and their wives were there to fulfill them. And that was it.

Meliah was given to understand it was a one-sided affair, and that the woman never enjoyed the act. Now, if the earl could be believed, he made it sound as though both parties were involved quite energetically. And with certain... accoutrements.

If anyone might tell her the truth on this particular subject, it would be Lord Belmont. “Are you telling me that satisfaction can be achieved this way? For a woman as well as a man?”

He eyed her steadily. “Indeed, Miss Newton. You are correct. There is a fine line between sexual gratification and a certain degree of pain. It tends to heighten the sensations within.”

“How?” The word emerged before she could stop it. Immediately, her face warmed with embarrassment, but he didn’t mock her. Instead, he was rather forthcoming, as if eager to reply. Although this wasn’t the interview that she’d had in mind, it was certainly going far to prove that he was the unrepentant rake that “The Belle” had mentioned.

“Emotions are running high,” he began, and Meliah found she was riveted on every word he spoke. “There are times when the pleasure almost becomes too much to bear. It’s as if you are on a spinning wheel and it is turning you in several different directions. When a touch of pain is introduced, it magnifies all those feelings, until you are in a state of pure euphoria.”

Meliah didn’t realize that she had been holding her breath until she released the air in her lungs in a sharp exhale. “Oh. I...see.”

His eyes glittered. “Any time you should like a demonstration, I would be willing to engage my services.”

She swallowed, but there was a slight swirl of heat that touched her midsection and traveled down lower, so that she wanted to press her thighs together to ease the ache. “I’m sure you would,” she murmured. She straightened. “I think that is enough for now. I shall take a walk about the grounds, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” Those blue eyes sparkled with a mix of amusement and mischief. “Fresh cool air is probably a good idea.” He rose to his feet when she did. “I believe I shall join you.”

Lord Belmont held out his arm and while Meliah was reluctant to accept, she didn’t want to be rude when she still needed more information to write her article, so she slipped her arm through his. The cords of his muscular arms were evident through his shirt and she wished that he were wearing a jacket, so it wouldn’t be so noticeable. When they stepped outside and found the day to be rather mild for the season, she wondered if it was actually the temperature, or the earl’s heat that kept her warm.

Her body was still humming with interest over what Lord Belmont had told her, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to entice him, as she’d originally planned. He might decide to call her bluff. With visions of whips rushing through her mind, she wasn’t

sure she was prepared to take things that far. As he'd stated correctly, she was a virgin, and such thoughts weren't just scandalous, they were foreign. Perhaps if she knew what the act of lovemaking was like, it might not be so shocking, but she wasn't sure such knowledge would still her pounding heart, only increase it.

Desperate to change the subject to more neutral ground, she asked, "You said earlier that your parents had a marriage based on love, but that you found it distasteful. Might I ask why when you seem to like... activities born of the same?"

He glanced at her and shook his head. "Lust is not love. The foolishness that poets spout, and the connection that my parents share is far removed from my preferences. I enjoy making love, but not being in love. It is wise not to confuse the two."

She frowned, because while the difference made perfect sense, his aversion to the kind of love that seemed to last, that her parents also shared, did not. "Why shouldn't you wish to give your heart over to the single person that fills you with joy? I should think most everyone aspires to find that sort of lasting bond."

"Prison does not appeal to me, and that is what I consider that sort of entanglement." He gave a mock shudder. At least, she assumed it was fabricated. Perhaps it was another truth. "If something dreadful should happen to my father, my mother would surely be destroyed by her grief, and the same if something were to happen to my mother for my sire. I don't want to give anyone that sort of power. What good is love if it can be stripped away, leaving nothing more than a shell of a wasted experience?"

Meliah considered his words for a time. "I would be inclined to agree, but wouldn't it be worse never to have known such a powerful passion?"

He paused their stroll and stood directly in front of her, so close that the light behind him was blocked by his towering height as he looked down into her eyes. "Passion comes in many guises. You will find love is unnecessary to engage the passion of

one's body.”

When he reached out and cupped her cheek, Meliah stilled. She was certain that he was about to kiss her. That would certainly prove that he was a rake of the first order, but when his lips touched hers, there was no demanding pressure. Instead, it was the lightest of kisses, but it made her head spin nonetheless.

She had to fight the urge to lift up on her tiptoes and deepen the embrace. She had expected a bit more from him, but it caused her toes to curl in her slippers, so perhaps it was perfectly right.

It wasn't until he straightened and dropped his hand that she found fault with his actions—and his words. “You have a lot to learn, my dear, Meliah.”

Stung, she was sure that she'd heard wrong. Was he truly insulting her innocence? “I search only for the real Lord Belmont, my lord,” she snapped. “That is all I need to know.”

She spun on her heel, intending to leave him where he stood, but he grasped her arm and pulled her back against his chest. “In that regard, I implore you to join me in my chamber tonight and judge my actions for yourself. You might find yourself pleasantly surprised.”

Meliah told herself that she ought to be furious at the blatant suggestion in his tone. Instead, she found her body fluttering with the awareness that was coursing between them. However, since she couldn't let such a slight stand, she lifted her chin. “You go too far, my lord. Your crass speech tells me that I have enough information to prove you are the rake that everyone believes you are. I shall have to search for inspiration elsewhere. Good day.”

Meliah removed herself from his grasp and returned to the house. She nearly stomped

up the stairs and had to refrain from slamming the bedchamber door behind her as she removed the muslin dress. She heard a rip at one point, but she was too blinded by a mixture of frustration to care. Surely, he couldn't believe that such callous behavior worked to charm anyone. If that was what women of his acquaintance found appealing, she was grateful she wasn't part of the nobility.

She slipped the pink dress that she'd arrived in over her head. Although it was slightly wrinkled, she did her best to smooth the material as she headed back downstairs.

She'd had enough of Lord Belmont in the past hour to last her a lifetime. She was going back to London by whatever means necessary. To stay was courting disaster with such a man.

CHAPTER 5

He knew he'd pushed Miss Newton too far when she stormed off. Elwood shoved a hand through his hair and reminded himself that she wasn't used to the sort of banter that he generally engaged in with some of his former paramours.

Determined to ease the unwanted tension between them, he went inside to find her heading purposefully toward the front door in a flurry of pink, fists clenched at her sides. Standing in the foyer, momentarily stunned, he found his voice and demanded, "Where are you going?"

"Back to London," she snapped, not once breaking her stride.

"How do you intend to get there?"

Her hand touched the doorknob. "I'll walk if I must."

Now she was just being unreasonable. It wasn't as if he could tell her that, but neither could he let her go. Not yet. She might be upset with him right now, but it would be deuced boring without her here. And if he was perfectly honest with himself, he enjoyed sparring with her.

He shot forward and shut the door just as she opened it. She didn't look at him, but set her jaw mutinously. "Let me go."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

Her green eyes turned on him and immediately froze him in place. He could almost feel the frigid air chilling him from that cold stare. “I believe I have enough for my article. As such, I find it unnecessary to remain with such a?—”

“I’m sorry.”

She paused, her gaze narrowing warily. “What?”

He clenched his jaw, because he knew he had to say it a second time. Enunciating each word slowly, he repeated, “I’m. Sorry.”

She crossed her arms. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I don’t generally say it.”

Elwood was being sincere, probably for one of the few times in his life. It was a strange sensation to apologize to anyone, to say the least, and he wasn’t really sure why he was doing it now, except he knew he’d been out of line by her standards.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head for a few moments. When she lifted her head again, she looked at him steadily. “I appreciate that, my lord, but I wish you would consider that I’m not your enemy. While I intend to learn the truth, it might be a refreshing change if another side of your character was revealed for society to see. Wouldn’t it be beneficial to clear your name?”

That is the one thing he couldn’t readily understand. “Why me? You could have cornered any of the other rakes that were featured by ‘The Belle,’ and yet, you hunted me down.”

She seemed to consider this. “Allow me to speak with candor, Lord Belmont. I have finished a novel, but before I dare to hope that anyone might publish it, I need this

article to prove that I am someone worthy of note. Unlike you, I don't have unlimited resources at my disposal. I'm the daughter of a weaver in Spitalfields and I have envisioned something more for my life. I am motivated to improve my circumstances, to enjoy things like grapes and fine linens, but it is not without hard work."

At this revelation, all of her determination made perfect sense. "I see." He crossed his arms and contemplated the situation before him, but there wasn't any other option but the obvious one. "In light of your honesty, I find myself in strange waters. I should like to help you fulfill that dream."

Her eyes widened slightly. "You would help me, knowing I'm not part of the gentry?"

He shook his head. "The peerage has never meant very much to me. I was born into the nobility. It wasn't by choice."

She tilted her head to the side and looked at him with more than a hint of skepticism. "Does that mean you would have done something different with your life should you have been given the opportunity?"

He considered the query, and realized that no one had ever asked him what he might have wanted to do with his life should he not have been an earl and a future marquess. He supposed it was because that was what he was supposed to do and there weren't any other avenues open to him. "I can't really say. Perhaps a shipbuilder? I always liked to craft things out of wood." Dear God, did I actually say that out loud? He had never told anyone that secret desire.

"Then who is to say you can't?" she returned. When he frowned, she waved a hand. "I don't mean a trade, but certainly you could engage in a hobby that combines something you enjoy doing. Perhaps build small ships in a bottle?"

He found himself smiling. He was quite sure that his former mistress would have laughed outright at the very image of him using what little patience he had to do such a thing. But now that the subject had been proposed, he decided that the idea had merit. Intrigued, he murmured, “I might consider it.” When the silence began to lengthen, he held out his hand. “If you would care to stay, I will give you a tour of the manor so that you might feel more comfortable moving about on your own.”

She lifted a brow. “You would allow me such freedoms, knowing that I might find something complimentary to incriminate your licentious character?”

He winked. “I am willing to take the risk.” He narrowed his gaze slightly. “Are you willing to do the same to stay with me?”

It wasn’t often that Meliah found herself at a loss for words, but when Lord Belmont actually apologized—she was truly stunned. Followed by his generous offer, she had to wonder if she had uncovered a different type of seduction, but deciding that she would give him the benefit of the doubt, and because she didn’t really want to have to travel all the way back to the city on foot, she accepted his hand.

His fingers closed over hers, but instead of doing something like rubbing his thumb along her hand to bring about a reaction, he merely allowed their clasped hands to fall to the side. It was odd to hold this man’s hand, to hold anyone’s hand really, but Meliah decided it wasn’t an unwelcome contact.

The earl led her back down the hallway that led to the morning room. Before they got there, he paused at one of the closed doors that she had passed by earlier. “This is the Belmont study.” With his free hand, he opened the door and began to gesture to various things about the room when he spoke. “Since this is a hunting box, you will see a lot of scenes depicting the same, and various antlers and taxidermy pheasants and grouse that my father has killed over the years. He has a fox about somewhere, but it is a prized possession, and often travels with him, so it is likely at the estate.”

“I didn’t realize that a collection of dead animals was so appealing to the upper classes,” Meliah murmured.

“It is for the most devote hunter,” he explained. “They consider their spoils as something of a trophy for personal achievements.”

She scrunched up her nose in distaste. “Couldn’t you just give someone a silver cup or some sort of thing?”

“That would be an idea,” he concurred. “But I think some of the peers, like my father, would think their prized study might start to resemble something of a butler’s pantry.”

Meliah laughed at the image of Lord Belmont surrounded by a room full of silver cups. “I suppose you’re right.”

He winked at her, but she didn’t find fault with the action. Instead, she found it rather appealing, and dare she admit, somewhat charming?

The tour continued about the rest of the lower level of the house with several parlors and sitting rooms in varied colors and décor. From the influence of the Orient, to more subdued, earthy tones of brown and green, it was obvious that the manor was meant to be a masculine refuge, rather than a place of frequent entertaining.

When she was introduced to the library, she was immediately in awe. There were two levels of books with a rolling ladder that went about the expanse, so that people could enjoy something on the top shelf, if it pleased them. Two dark leather, Chesterfield sofas were positioned in the middle of the room so that one might read in comfort, while a large, marble fireplace domineered the space between.

“This is wonderful,” she breathed, as they finally parted. She trailed her fingertips

along the leather-bound spines with their gilt lettering. There weren't just treatises or volumes dedicated to the art of hunting, but tomes from poets and respected authors. "I'm surprised there are so many novels here."

"I daresay that was part of my mother's influence." The earl rolled his eyes dramatically and she smiled. "Although this was meant as a haven for the Traverson line, she said that there needed to be a variety of books present in case someone wanted to read something of interest."

"I think I would like your mother," Meliah noted.

He must have observed how fascinated she was with the books, because he said, "You are welcome to peruse anything while you are here."

She turned to him with her mouth slightly agape. "Do you mean it?"

He stood a short distance away and watched her meander about the room. It was as if he was content just observing from a respectable distance. It was both unnerving and welcome at the same time. "Of course. You are a guest, and I did say you could explore the manor at your leisure."

"That is very kind."

He didn't agree, as his baser urges were still present, but he pushed them away and tilted his head to the side. "Shall we continue our exploration?"

Elwood was finding that, once he had pushed aside his lust toward the lady, Miss Newton was turning out to be quite a delight. She had a decided wit about her that he found intriguing, and her conversational abilities didn't bore him. That was certainly saying something, because he despised society events for that reason. He was generally attached to some empty-headed chit until he could contrive an excuse to

make his escape. If Miss Newton were at a ball, he would be hard pressed to leave her side.

He imagined her taking the ton by storm. She could easily be the diamond of the season and sought after by most of the eligible bachelors who claimed they had no desire to marry. As jaded as Elwood was about the wedded state, he had to admit that she was a pleasant surprise in both character and appeal. In another life, in another time, they might have become friends—perhaps more. But there was little he could offer her except a torrid affair, because he didn't want to become that moony-eyed imbecile he looked upon with such disdain.

Upstairs, there wasn't much other than the bedchambers, but there was his particularly favorite room in the manor, and that was the game room.

When he opened the door at the end of the hall, Elwood's gaze instantly went to the window seat that looked out over the familiar green rolling hills and the vineyard situated in the distance. Memories of his childhood assailed him once more. When he had joined his father as a young lad, he recalled the freedom he'd felt at running through these rooms. The marquess might have entertained one or two of his peers that he had invited for the hunt, but this was one of the few places Elwood could be where he wasn't under his mother's constant eye. His brothers had been too young to join them at the time, so Elwood had been spared the strict supervision of a governess as well. In those few weeks out of the year, he had discovered a love for the outdoors that had not waned.

“A billiard table?”

Miss Newton's query brought him back to the present. He headed toward the cues that were hanging up on a rack along the side of the wall. He took one down and handed it to her. “Do you play?”

She accepted the cue. “I can’t say that I have. Weaver’s daughters generally don’t make a habit of engaging in such frivolous activities.”

He offered a smirk as he gathered his own cue. “Fair point.” He arranged the colored billiard balls in the rack in the middle of the table and carefully removed it. “Watch my stance. I am going to make the break shot and then we can commence with the instruction.”

Elwood positioned the cue between his thumb and forefinger and ensured that his arm was perpendicular to the stick. Bending forward slightly, he kept his grip relaxed, but firm, as he set up the beginning shot. The satisfying crack of the balls splitting apart and rolling across the top of the table was a sound that he would never tire of hearing.

He smiled as he looked over at Miss Newton. “Your turn.”

She looked a bit hesitant, but she moved forward. She stared at the balls that were scattered and said, “How do I know what to aim for?”

He explained briefly, that the white cue ball needed to strike the red one and make it into one of the six pockets around the table. “If you do that, you get the chance to shoot again. If not, then it is my shot.”

“Seems easy enough,” she muttered, and then attempted to mimic his earlier pose.

Elwood had to stop from chuckling as she held the cue a bit too high. “Is this right?” she asked.

“Er... not quite.” He didn’t want to be too critical of her, because something told him that she would make a worthy opponent once she understood the rules. “Let me help you.”

Standing behind her, he put his hands on her shoulders and positioned her, and then he took the cue and whispered in her ear as he moved it into the proper place. “That’s it. No, loosen your grip a bit more.” He tried to keep his attention strictly on the match, but by the time she was ready to shoot, he was practically holding her. With her enticing backside brushing against his trousers, he feared he might be forced to break his earlier code of conduct.

He closed his eyes and prayed for fortitude as she took a slight breath. “Now?”

He swallowed. “Yes.”

She slowly drew back, and with his assistance, she gained enough momentum to send the cue ball rolling toward the red one. With a satisfying crack, it sailed toward the farthest pocket and dropped right inside.

“I did it!”

As she straightened and turned to him, he realized that he was close enough to see the sparkle in her gaze. Combined with the broad smile of victory on her face, it was a heady combination. “Indeed, you did.”

She swallowed and then adjusted her statement. “I suppose we did it, since you were kind enough to assist.”

He lifted a brow. With her pinned between him and the table, it would be so easy to coerce another kiss... “Kind? That’s the second time you’ve called me that. Does that mean you’ve altered your opinion of me?”

She narrowed her gaze. Perhaps she heard the husky note to his voice. “Not just yet.”

He leaned toward her and he had to applaud her fortitude when she held her ground.

“Perhaps I shall just condemn myself for good.” As his gaze fell to her lips, he waited for her to object or push him away.

She did neither.

CHAPTER 6

What am I doing? Meliah's conscience was screaming at her. Hadn't she just threatened to leave if the earl didn't curb his impulses? And yet, she couldn't very well criticize him for his behavior when she was allowing it to continue.

If she was honest with herself, she was already well aware of the sort of man that Lord Belmont was. She could write an article about the last few hours and it would be enough to prove 'The Belle's' accusations, under the belief that there was nothing left to save. So why was she staying? She wanted to attribute it to the fact that she had no way to return unless it was on foot, but that wasn't all. She would have to leave Lord Belmont behind and his presence was quite... exhilarating.

She had always been sheltered, forced to spend her days toiling to make ends meet. Perhaps for the first time in her life she wanted to be selfish and live the life she'd always imagined, the fairy tale for however long it lasted. Not only was the earl rather handsome, but she enjoyed the attentions that he was showering upon her. Was that so terrible—to feel wanted by such a man?

Although she didn't intend to give herself fully to him, surely there couldn't be any harm in a slight flirtation? He had told her that he would never force himself on any woman, and not just because he'd boasted that there was no need. It was true she didn't know him that well, but her instincts told her that he was being sincere.

And the slight kisses he'd given her before had merely intrigued her. Surely another small demonstration wouldn't be amiss?

As he slowly lowered his head, Meliah reached back and grasped the table's edge. Curling her hands around the hard wood, she closed her eyes as their lips met for the third time.

Again, the embrace wasn't hurried. It was as if he were trying to ensure that his actions weren't prohibited. She hardly dared to take a breath as he continued to explore her mouth, but when he ran the tip of his tongue along the seam of her lips, she gasped in surprise. When he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, she decided that perhaps that was enough.

She lifted her hands and put them on his chest, but when his tongue began to slide sensually along hers, she found herself clutching the edges of his shirt instead.

Meliah felt his hand at the small of her back as he pressed her closer to him. Her breasts brushed against his hard chest, and it wasn't an unwelcome sensation. In fact, it was particularly... nice.

As he deepened the kiss, his hand slid around to the side of her waist and slowly moved upward, along her ribcage. The breath that she had been holding abruptly released and her grip on his shirt increased. When his hand continued upward, his thumb brushing the side of her breast, heat immediately enveloped her body and her heart started to pound furiously.

Again, she considered pushing him away, but when his hand moved to cover her breast entirely, his wicked thumb daring to toy with her taut nipple, her head started to spin. She knew if she disengaged herself from the earl now, she probably wouldn't be able to stand on her own two feet.

When he moved away from her mouth, she gasped for some much-needed air, feeling that was the cause for her sudden dizziness, but when he bent his head and started to suckle her neck, Meliah shuddered. Waves of awareness pulsed through her body,

and she had to wonder if this was the usual behavior of a society rake. If so, she had to think that the ladies who had captured the attention of the gentlemen mentioned by 'The Belle' before Lord Belmont were very lucky indeed.

"Do you like it when I kiss you, Meliah?"

She thrilled at the sound of her name crossing his lips with that deep, seductive purr. "Yes." There was no point in denying her reaction when it must have been obvious that she was enjoying his attentions.

"What about when I touch you?"

He squeezed her breast lightly and her head tilted back. "Yes."

"Do you want me to stop?"

She should have given her previous answer. It wouldn't have been so difficult, but instead, she shook her head and dared herself to look at him. "Not yet."

His blue gaze was riveting, fixed on her face. "It seems you are eager to learn more about me then." A slight breeze struck her legs, and she froze when she realized he was lifting up her skirts. She was about to still his actions, but he added, "Do you want to know what I can do?"

At that, she refrained. Curiosity propelled her to know more.

At the soft touch of his hand on her inner thigh, Meliah bit her lower lip. His eyes darkened to chips of sapphire as he captured her mouth once more. She moaned as he immediately deepened the embrace. Passion shot through every fiber of her being, but it wasn't until he dared to slide a finger along her core that she ripped her mouth away from his.

“What are you?—?”

“Trust me,” he cajoled, and kissed her again.

Drawn back into this carnal world, Meliah tried to relax as he touched her intimately again. This time it wasn't so much a danger as an... interest. It was a strange sensation to have someone else's hands on her body, to touch her as she'd never touched herself.

She tried to tell herself not to be abhorrent of this moment. She would likely never have another chance to experience lovemaking, so it would be best to learn what occurred between a man and a woman to be better warned in the future.

She had just convinced herself that this was simply for learning purposes that she was allowing this to continue. That was, until he touched a certain spot that caused her to lift up on her toes and her entire midsection to quiver. She moved her hands to his shoulders and clung to him.

Dear heavens ...

It was meant to be another harmless flirtation. Just a slight, chaste kiss that would continue to tempt her. However, Elwood hadn't been prepared for her instantaneous reactions to his touch. It was like lighting a match to tinder and he was finding it difficult not to take things too far.

He certainly didn't want to scare her, nor did he want her first time to be against a pool table like some sort of dockside doxy, but when the moment struck, he was finding it difficult to ignore the sweet temptation that she provided.

He kept telling himself that she would tell him no, that she would put a stop to this madness since he didn't seem capable of doing so. For all of his sexual prowess, he

was being done in by this slip of a woman, a commoner—and a virgin, the sort of women he'd always eschewed. That should have been enough for him to remove his hands as if she carried the plague. Unfortunately, the problem was her blazing response to him. It was enough to fuel the flames of his own desire. It hadn't been that long since he'd been with another woman, and yet, the fire pouring through his veins was unlike anything else he'd experienced before.

As each one of her breaths became faster and more shallow, Elwood knew that she was getting close to her peak. He vowed that he would halt things after she had found her pleasure, while he took his release in solitude, regardless if his cock was throbbing in opposition to that idea. He wanted nothing more than to lose himself between those sweet thighs, but although he was a rake, he wasn't a man completely without a moral compass.

Then again...

She groaned, and the sound caused Elwood to grit his teeth. Her nails were digging into his upper arms and he intended to absorb every delightful half-moon that would be imprinted upon his skin.

He increased his movements until suddenly, she coiled and tightened. She gave a sharp gasp and then her eyes closed as she gave herself over to the ecstasy. Her hips rolled, as if she understood what was happening if her mind hadn't yet fully captured the concept.

He watched her lovely face flush, and he desperately wanted to see if that alluring shade of pink went all over her body. In the end, it was enough to know that he had given her that first taste of satisfaction. If she decided that they didn't go any further than this, he could live with the knowledge that she would never forget this moment with him.

He would surely never forget it.

As she was still recovering from the haze of passion, Elwood slipped his hand from beneath her skirts, but he wasn't sure she really noticed. Her gorgeous green eyes were heavy and it looked as though the late-night escapades which had abruptly turned into a morning tryst were starting to take their toll.

"You look tired."

She turned a bit sheepish, although her tone was light when she remarked, "Yes, well, I suppose learning billiards is quite exhausting."

He grinned at the quip, and then bent down and lifted her into his arms. Her eyes popped wide open. "What are you doing?"

"Carrying you to bed?—"

"Excuse me, sir," she began haughtily, "but I don't believe I gave you leave to?—"

"—to get some rest," he finished, effectively cutting off her tirade.

"Oh."

He chuckled as he carried her out of the room and down the hall to her bedchamber. The door was open, but instead of taking her all the way inside, he set her on her feet at the threshold. "I don't trust myself to go any further," he murmured. His cock was still quite furious at him for leaving things unfinished.

She nodded, and opened her mouth to speak, but seemed to think better of it, because she closed it and shook her head with a slight frown.

He took pity on her and offered the dismissal she was apparently having trouble saying. "Sleep well."

He turned on his heel as her door closed softly behind her.

Once the door shut, Meliah leaned against it with a heavy exhale. Her body was humming. She didn't know it was possible for her body to feel such raw emotion, but she certainly understood how Lord Belmont had earned the title of the current rake of the month. She couldn't dare try and explain her interlude with the earl, nor how she would never be the same because of it. With a few touches and softly spoken words, he had changed her, perhaps irrevocably. It was as if something wild and... primitive had been set free inside of her. Her purpose in following Lord Belmont was to learn the truth, but she feared she was in danger of learning much more than that before she returned to London.

And she wasn't entirely dismayed about it.

She walked over to the bed and flopped down on top of it, still fully clothed in the pink dress. This poor gown was going to be in shambles before she returned it. The seamstress was likely going to consider it a lost cause. The sad thing was that it wasn't Meliah's to begin with, so the guilt she was feeling from the temporary loan was starting to gnaw at her.

However, the attraction she felt toward the earl was stronger. And decidedly more dangerous.

Rolling onto her side, she contemplated everything that had happened. Her body was still throbbing in the aftermath of... whatever he'd done to her. Something told her she'd experienced what her friend, Samantha, referred to as the "Little Death." She had mentioned it was a sensation unlike any other and what the maids gossiped about when they thought they weren't being overheard by a simple orange seller.

For a moment, Meliah wondered if she hadn't soared to the heavens.

A sigh escaped her and she reminded herself that she was a writer, and she shouldn't be engaging in such shameful activity if she wanted to be considered as a respectful journalist. Her parents would certainly be horrified if they knew she was acting in such a manner without the benefit of a proper proposal.

She turned around and laid flat on her back again. Throwing one arm up behind her head, she contemplated her childhood, the fate of women, and the bleak future that stretched out before her if she didn't succeed in fulfilling her dreams. The earl carried enough power that he could put in a good word for her, and although he was a rake, he was still a peer of the realm. People took notice when a lord was speaking. She supposed she could strike a deal with Lord Belmont, but that wasn't how she wanted to earn her reputation. She wanted to achieve it by her merit, not because of any sort of bribery or browbeating attempt.

And yet, as much as she told herself to focus on the truth, she was curious to know more about this morning. Could that brilliant sensation happen more than once? Were there other ways it might happen?

The earl might not have intended to awaken her desires, but her mother had always claimed Meliah was a passionate child. She had always been eager to learn more about the world, to explore everything it had to offer.

What else did Lord Belmont have to offer?

She grinned, thinking of the possibilities. If she was going to go so far as to ruin herself, shouldn't it be with a known rake who knew how to properly please a woman?

She considered the shoemaker next to her parent's weaver shop and had to wince. He

was a middle-aged widower, and although he might have three children that toiled away in the shop with him, Meliah didn't think that he was capable of pleasing anyone but himself. He was a gruff sort that barked orders at his children and scowled at her when she passed by in the street. She definitely didn't want to know what it was like to lay with someone like that. Although her father had promised her that she wouldn't have to marry anyone unless it was of her choosing, Meliah had to wonder how long his generosity would last. She was one and twenty years of age, and although she might not be considered a full spinster as yet, she was approaching the age when she would be "on the shelf." She didn't want to be a hardship on her parents even if she was expected to take up the reins of the shop someday.

She supposed she would have to decide whether or not to continue allowing the earl's attentions—or keep things strictly off limits until arrangements could be made for her to return to London.

With that question still swirling in her mind, she finally drifted off to sleep.

When Meliah awoke, the sun was high in the sky. She squinted her gaze against the blinding light and checked the nearby clock. It read half past three.

She blinked several times, realizing that she had nearly slept the entire day away. Granted, she hadn't had a wink of sleep the night before, but if she didn't rouse herself now, the same would hold true for this evening.

Getting out of bed, she was pleasantly surprised to see a silver tea service on the side table and water in the basin. It was slightly warm, the tea still tepid, which proved that it hadn't been sitting there overlong. There was also a note which she assumed was from Lord Belmont, as the script was perfectly written with a masculine flourish. The idea that he had placed it there himself as she slept caused her stomach to give an excited flip.

I hope you are well rested. I have done as promised and procured a few gowns for you. They are in the wardrobe, along with some other things that most ladies deem necessary. Feel free to explore the manor at your leisure.

As her stomach rumbled, she was thankful to see cucumber sandwiches and cheese, as well as some fruit and various desserts.

She munched happily, and then washed the best that she could with the soap that had also been laid out for her use. She wondered if the earl had been responsible for that as well, or if one of the servants was in residence. If the latter was true, she could only imagine what the earl had said about her presence there.

She removed the pink gown and tried to smooth the wrinkles the best that she could and then removed a sprigged muslin gown from the wardrobe, woven with dark red leaves. After brushing her hair and braiding it into a neat plait, she wound it at the crown of her head and decided that she looked as serene as she could.

She opened her chamber door and glanced about the hallway. It was deserted. However, she wasn't sure what she might find—the earl lurking about perhaps?

She smirked, the image rather ludicrous, and headed for the kitchens. Lord Belmont had told her that she had free reign of the house, so she decided she would visit with the downstairs staff, if anyone was around.

Finding the back stairs, she made her way to the lower level, but found no one there. The ovens weren't on and it looked as deserted as the rest of the house upstairs.

Meliah took a deep breath. Very well . If she wasn't to introduce herself to anyone, she decided that it was time to do a bit of investigation. While she might not discover much about the earl at his father's hunting box, perhaps she might get fortunate. She glanced overhead and decided that most things that were hidden were generally in an

attic, so that was where she would begin.

She reached a door at the end of the hall, then she reached out and checked the knob, half expecting to find it locked. Excitement shot through her when she discovered the opposite was true.

Lifting her skirts, she climbed the steep stairs and waved a hand in front of her face as the dust was disturbed with every step. She tried not to think about anything scurrying underfoot and focused on the trunks and various hunting items that were revealed when she reached the main level.

Setting her hands on her hips, she glanced about and wondered where she might start her search. There were a few pieces of furniture that looked as though they hadn't been touched in years, so she passed them by, although she couldn't resist opening a drawer or two. Unfortunately, there was nothing but a collection of cobwebs inside, so she quickly shut them and moved on.

She paused before one of the trunks and lifted a lid to find it filled with various clothes that were at least four decades old. Two more proved the same. Obviously, she wasn't going to find anything of interest here.

She headed back down to the first floor and thought of the study. Curious, she made her way there, and peeked around the corner. Again, it was empty.

With a smile on her face, she headed for the large desk situated in the center of the room. Surely there had to be something here that would counter, beyond a doubt, what "The Belle" had written about Lord Belmont. She could speak of her own experiences, but that would simply tarnish her name and prove the article was correct. She needed something sweet, a letter written to his mother when he was a child, perhaps. Anything that couldn't be disputed, something that would cause the people of the printers to take notice.

She looked at the few papers on top of the desk, but found nothing more exciting than correspondence about the estate. Biting her lip, Meliah started opening drawers and rummaging about inside, but found nothing of import. She put her hands on her hips and glanced at one of the taxidermy animals with a scowl. “What are you looking at?”

When she thought she heard a noise, she froze and glanced at the open doorway. In hindsight, she realized that she should have closed it before she started riffling through the earl’s papers. It didn’t matter since she had come up empty handed yet again.

With a heavy sigh, she sank down into the leather chair and stared out the window with a slight frown.

A flash of movement outside brought her back to awareness and she got up and moved to the window. Glancing outside, her traitorous heart started to speed up when she saw Lord Belmont. He was seated atop a large, black stallion, but she hadn’t really expected anything less. An earl would have some of the best horseflesh that he could obtain.

He was seated loosely in the saddle as he rode into the stable yard and made quite a dashing figure as he did so. Wearing tall, black boots, he was casually attired in nothing more than a white shirt, and buff trousers. His black hair was windblown from the ride, and she could almost make out a slightly crooked smile on his face as he easily dismounted and handed his reins off to a waiting groom who had been unnoticed until that time. Truly, the servants were adept at remaining out of sight until needed.

He started to stride toward the manor, and it took a moment for Meliah to recall how to move her legs. Her gaze shot about the room, as she was desperate to find a place to hide, or at least look as inconspicuous as possible. Realizing that the best place to

do this was the library, she rushed out into the hall. By the time the front door opened and shut, she rushed across the room and grabbed one of the first books she found and sat down hastily—and waited.

CHAPTER 7

Elwood removed his riding gloves and slapped them against his thigh as he headed for the library. He wasn't sure if his sleeping beauty was still lost to dreamland, but he was finding himself deuced bored waiting for her to rise. He was enjoying the distraction of her pleasing company during his self-imposed exile from London, away from the hounds that were trying to dog his heels there.

If there was a silver lining to any of this disaster, it was Miss Newton. She was a surprise in so many ways, and he was eager to learn more about her. But then, he would have to reveal more about himself. Although he wasn't entirely eager to do so, considering his reputation as a rogue, he was enjoying the fact she wasn't completely convinced he was a ne'er-do-well. He actually appreciated that she wanted to learn about him before making a judgement about his character. Of course, after this morning, he had probably not endeared himself in that regard, but that didn't mean he hadn't stopped thinking about her.

In fact, he had done little else but think of her. It was why he'd decided to go for a brisk ride, to keep his desires in check. He couldn't very well ravish the woman when he was supposed to be acting the part of a gentleman. It was a rather novel experience for him, but he wanted to prove to Miss Newton, for some odd reason, that he wasn't the unrepentant scoundrel he was portrayed to be. Granted, what "The Belle" had said was true, but while a leopard couldn't change his spots, humans were not without redemption. While he wouldn't go so far as to say that was what he was hoping for from Miss Newton, he did want more than an interview for an article.

He walked into the study, intent on sending a missive to his solicitor, but paused and

continued on toward the library. It was the most logical place to search for Miss Newton since she had seemed fascinated with it the day before. He wondered if she was wearing one of the dresses he'd purchased for her that morning. He was eager to see if his measurements had proven true.

He stopped short when he entered. The object of his fascination was indeed, sitting prim and proper in one of the wingback chairs by the fireplace. She was wearing one of the gowns he'd personally selected, and he congratulated himself on his choice.

However, the lady didn't even glance up when he entered, but rather appeared engrossed in her novel. He narrowed his eyes, because he found it odd that her cheeks might have such high color. If memory served, his father hadn't carried many torrid novels, and the one she held in her hand wasn't the sort to gauge that kind of reaction.

He stared a minute longer, and then gave a light snort.

Walking over to her, he set a finger in the center of the page that she was supposed to be reading so thoroughly and said, "I've found it's easier to follow a book when it isn't upside down."

Her lips fell open slightly as she slowly moved the book upright. "Thank you," she murmured.

"Anytime," he returned smoothly. He plopped down in the chair across from her and set his gloves on a nearby table. He folded his hands and set them over his midsection. "You seemed engrossed when I came into the room. I daresay I'm impressed that you should have gotten through so much of—" He paused and leaned forward to read the title on the cover. "— The Portico: A Repository of Science & Literature ." He cleared his throat. "I didn't realize American literature was of such interest to you."

“It’s something to read,” she muttered as she shut the cover with a determined snap and set it aside. At long last she lifted her green gaze and met his look of amusement. “Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “I hardly entertained a word. Is that what you wanted me to admit?”

“Not at all,” he returned smoothly. As he lifted a brow, he added, “I was rather hoping you might admit that last night wasn’t a mistake.”

She blinked. “How did you come to the conclusion I was thinking that at all?”

He shrugged. “You are innocent, and not in a position where you might rely on your own money for survival. Without the bonds of marriage, you don’t have any other prospects except to continue the life of a weaver, assumably at your parent’s behest?”

She opened her lovely mouth, but nothing emerged, because it was the truth and she couldn’t deny it.

“Just as I thought,” he nodded. While Elwood hated what he was about to say, he had to know where he stood with her, and sometimes brutal honesty was the only approach he knew. “Other than trying to make a life for yourself as a writer, which you are hoping I shall provide enough information you might do so, I bet you consider intimacy as another form of bondage, like poverty, rather than mutual, physical pleasure. Naturally, you would consider last evening to be a horrific and detrimental experience that shouldn’t be replicated. I’m sure you consider me to be the worse scoundrel you’ve ever had the misfortune to meet and shall relish the opportunity to weep into a handkerchief and express what a sordid time you’ve had at the hands of the rake of the month when you return to London.” He tilted his head to the side, his gaze sharp and direct. “Am I very far off the mark?”

For a moment, Meliah could do nothing but stare at him. At first, she was almost too shocked to allow her brain to work properly. She had thought he might be a bit more

considerate of his words and her feelings rather than speak so plainly, but then, at least she knew where she stood with him.

But then, perhaps that was the point. Could it be that he'd spoken so crass in an effort to contradict himself?

Curious, she decided to put her theory to the test. She wasn't about to let him browbeat her into breaking down into hysterics or some other such nonsense, and she didn't want to ruin her life by acting inappropriately and throwing away any chance at marriage and a family, but she currently had nothing else to look forward to other than the long, toiling days of weaving.

She might as well take a chance while she had it.

Calmly folding her hands in her lap, a perfect mirror to his pose, she offered a tight smile. "I have never been one to 'weep into a handkerchief' as you so eloquently suggested. But you are correct in believing that I shall do whatever I can to make my own way in society by becoming a respected writer. While you seem determined to prove 'The Belle' right about you, you can be assured last night went far toward giving me more than a glimpse into your true nature. You could have taken advantage of me, but you didn't." When he lifted a brow, her smile widened, and she continued. "And speaking of last night..." She glanced toward the door then back at him. "Are any of the servants in residence? I know someone was here earlier because there was a breakfast tray in my room."

"Alas, I have already sent them home for the rest of the afternoon. The cook will not return until this evening."

"That might be regrettable—but for one thing." She got to her feet and for the first time, the earl looked a bit wary. However, she refused to break character. She had witnessed Samantha coerce her footman with a seductive, side glance, so surely she

could emulate her actions?

She slowly walked toward Lord Belmont with the same seductive glance. When she proceeded to lift up her dress to her thighs, exposing the skin above her stockings, she was assured that he was taking notice. His mouth had fallen partially open and he had yet to swallow. Tossing a leg on either side of the chair, she straddled him. Putting her hands on his chest, she leaned down and whispered in his ear, “That gives us plenty of time to be... alone.” She leaned back enough to look at him.

He actually looked ill. “Pardon?”

Meliah wanted to laugh aloud when his voice cracked slightly. She looked at him in wide eyed innocence. “Come now, my lord. Don’t be coy. Last night made me realize what you can offer me.” She dared to run a finger down the center of his chest. “I find that I’m quite taken with your attentions.”

She started to lean forward for a kiss, but he set his hands on her hips, not to bring her closer, but to halt her movements. “Miss Newton. Shouldn’t you be...ah...reasonable about this? Consider the ramifications of your actions should we embark on an affair.”

“Oh, trust me, I have,” she purred. “And I want more.”

She batted her lashes, but his hesitation had been enough to tell her what she’d wanted to know.

He stared at her in blatant amazement, and then it was as if he finally understood what she was trying to do. Immediately, that lazy grin was back in place and the grasp on her hips abruptly brought her closer to his groin, as if he had to prove he was the libertine. She instantly felt the hardness beneath her core and while she ought to be frightened or unsure, she found herself... intrigued. “I will gladly oblige, Miss

Newton. It shall relieve me of my extreme boredom while we are here.”

“Wonderful.” This time when she moved down to kiss him, he didn’t stop her. Instead, he reciprocated with a fiery temptation that her had almost squirming on his lap by the time he released her.

He gave a sigh, as if one of regret. “I forgot that I have an appointment this afternoon with the land steward that I can’t afford to cancel. It has to do with the future of this very house.”

She tried to adopt a pout and hoped that it appeared convincing. “That is a terrible shame. Shall you be gone long?”

He smirked. “I will make every attempt to rush back into your waiting arms.”

Disentangling herself from him, Meliah shook her skirts back into place. The earl rose as well, and when he started to walk away, he paused and lightly grasped her chin. “That was very well done, Miss Newton. You nearly had me convinced, but I can sense the unease that still pulses through your veins.” His nostrils flared. “And that is not all I sense.”

As he walked away, Meliah clenched her fists at her sides. She thought she was being the perfect seductress, but unfortunately, her ploy had failed miserably. The man was entirely too perceptive for his own good. And perhaps, the real gentleman he tried so hard to ignore.

Elwood closed the door of the study with a fist set upon the wood. His cock was pounding furiously, eager to finish what his little vixen had started. Who would have thought that such a sweet woman might be able to bring a reputed scoundrel like himself to his knees in such a fashion? Whoever had been teaching her the art of flirtation had done a superb job of it. It was all he could do to leave without

embarrassing himself. It had been years since he was a randy young man traversing the brothels of London, years since he'd been that shocked by such brazen behavior.

He froze. Could it be that she was 'The Belle' in disguise?

He was surprised he'd never considered it before. It would, of course, be the perfect way to hide in plain sight. Although he'd already been targeted as the victim for October, perhaps she had found a way to further bedevil her chosen rakes after the article was released? Was it to be his fate to suffer all month by desiring someone that he shouldn't be dallying with? The entirety of London might believe him to be the spawn of Satan, but truth be told, he wasn't completely without scruples. And he'd nearly proven that to Miss Newton just now.

He shoved a hand through his hair and decided that he would have to get to the bottom of this, although he had no idea how he might do so. Until now, 'The Belle' had been perfectly anonymous, without anyone able to discover her identity. However, he would exhaust all of the resources at his disposal if necessary to prove her identity.

He stopped in the middle of the room and shook his head.

Good God, he sounded mad.

Moving over to the desk, he sat down and dipped the pen in ink. It hovered over the paper on the desk until it started to drip. With a sigh, he set it back down, unused. The likelihood was highly slim that Miss Newton was the famed author of the Rake Review. He realized this was just a desperate attempt to keep his hands to himself.

He leaned his head back against the chair and wondered how he might use his time before the steward arrived. He hadn't been lying about that, at least. His father had written to him with the news that he would be expected. His sire had decided that his

failing health didn't allow for the hunting box anymore. Elwood had been so busy at his townhouse and carousing in London, that this place was starting to become a forgotten relic of his past. He'd had some good memories here, but perhaps his father was right and it was time for it to be passed on to the next owner. It was nice to know the vineyard was still profitable, so that it might benefit the next owner and gain them a bit more blunt for the efforts. Hopefully, he would be able to find a way to procure a bottle of wine from time to time.

When he heard the sound of Miss Newton's even step approaching, he tensed, waiting to see if she might knock, but she continued to pass by. He was equally disappointed and relieved that she hadn't attempted to talk—or further bedevil him.

He walked over to the window when he saw a flash of white from her dress as she passed by. She didn't wear any sort of outerwear, and he realized he hadn't offered anything to her. He should have felt very ungentlemanly indeed, if it wasn't for the fact the weather was still very mild for this time of year. Autumn had always had its particular delights—the foliage offering brilliant colors before the leaves fell from the trees.

Nevertheless, he didn't wish for her to catch a chill, and while his thoughts were elsewhere at the moment, he couldn't stop from rising from his chair and grabbing his greatcoat on the way out the front door.

Meliah was restless. She didn't have any other word for it. She wanted to blame her current state on the earl, but she knew it wasn't entirely his fault. She should be stronger than to allow her inner sentiments to bother her this deeply. One moment she was yearning for Lord Belmont's touch, and the next she was so frustrated with him that she was at sixes and sevens.

She rubbed her arms and realized that once her emotions had cooled off to a dull simmer, she was starting to feel the brisk wind blowing through the trees. Until now

it had been relatively warm, but a glance upward at the waning afternoon sky revealed gray clouds were starting to thicken and roll in. She thought it might rain soon and she shivered. It would mean she could be trapped inside with the earl. How very dreadful that would be, she told herself, and yet, she lacked the proper conviction of that statement.

She stopped to look out over the even rows of grapevines on the upper hill. She thought of the juicy, delicious fruit she'd consumed and decided she'd never enjoyed something quite so much before. It was a wonderful treat that she would likely never get to partake of again.

Her throat burned with the rise of regret within her. She had to succeed with this writing endeavor so that she might procure her own delights now and again. It would be satisfying to know she had only to depend upon herself to gain such luxuries.

Meliah startled when her arms were enveloped with a warm cloak. She turned her head to see Lord Belmont smiling at her. He moved around to face her and said, "I regret that I didn't purchase a pelisse for you this afternoon when I was in the village. I fear you will have to make use of my greatcoat until I can make another trip."

She didn't want to enjoy the warmth of the garment surrounding her, but she pulled it a bit closer and inhaled softly of the masculine, woodsy scent she had come to recognize as his. "That was kind of you, my lord. And please, don't trouble yourself any further on my account. It's not as if you were planning for me to join you in your self-imposed exile. I shall never be able to pay you back as it is."

"I ask for nothing in return," he said softly.

She wanted to believe that, but she wasn't entirely convinced. "Don't you?"

He frowned slightly as he placed his hands on her shoulders. "What I give you is not

charity, nor is it a bribe for some licentious purpose. I am not setting you up as a temporary paramour. You are a guest and as such, I have never denied anyone's comfort whether it be food, hospitality, or a few garments. Trust me when I say I have paid much more for fancy baubles to impress a female companion."

She tilted her head to the side. "I shall have to remember that for the article."

His arms dropped back to his sides. "That I use my wealth in exchange for sexual gratification?"

She appeared to have hurt him and she regretted it. "No. That you are generous when the occasion merits it."

He regarded her steadily and then offered a crooked smile that made her breath catch. "I appreciate that you are choosing to consider those gifts as more than what they actually were."

He started to walk forward and she fell into step beside him. "I daresay I have wondered something with each article that appears." She paused. "Does it bother you to imagine people think the worst of you?"

He glanced at her, and with his ebony hair tousled on his head, and those piercing blue eyes lit on her, she was nearly overset by his handsome appearance. "It bothers me when certain people think the worst of me." He stopped walking and added quietly, "I don't wish your opinion of me to be soured, although I can't readily express why I might care."

CHAPTER 8

It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours that Elwood had dared to offer another personal truth about himself. A truly honest one that he never thought he would tell anyone. If he started to make a habit of this, he might be crying on her shoulder about the milk he'd spilled when he was a child and the result of his error in doing so. He could have cursed his wayward tongue. That particular organ was supposed to be wayward in other matters entirely, but lately, he found it devoted to speech that he didn't particularly want to impart.

"Perhaps you care because you know that I am not the usual sort you are used to cavorting with."

"That is certainly true," he muttered, although the teasing glint in his gaze belied the heaviness of his words.

A gust of wind had her dress fluttering about her legs and he was offered a teasing glimpse at her ankles. Immediately, his cock jerked in his trousers and he tried to ignore the temptation that she unwittingly offered. As she held his gaze with those adoring green eyes, he realized how grateful he was that they weren't blue. That was the quintessential shade of most of the debutantes and while her disposition was decidedly different, he decided that her other characteristics should be as well.

He moved closer to her, unable to resist the urge to do so. She had woven some sort of spell around him and he was powerless to refuse her, although he told himself that he should. She was starting to mean more to him than a night of pleasure. "Meliah..."

“Yes?” Her voice was a breathless whisper and it proved that she was feeling the same intensity of this moment that he was.

“Would you find error in my actions if I kissed you?”

Her mouth fell open slightly and she dared to allow her tongue to dart out and lick her lips. It was almost enough to bring him to his knees. “I would not.”

To his everlasting gratitude, she moved toward him and lifted on her tiptoes, so that she might take the initiative and press her sweet mouth against his.

Elwood allowed her to take the lead before he returned the intimacy. He wrapped his arms around her and dragged her into his embrace, close enough that he could feel the fullness of her breasts as they pressed against his chest. He wanted nothing more than to toy with her taut nipples and cup those soft mounds of flesh in his palms, kneading them until she was whimpering for more. He already knew that she was a passionate woman. Her responses to him thus far had told him that much.

He also recalled that she was untried and all of these feelings she was experiencing were new and exciting. He would have to take his time and go slow. He wanted her to remember everything that they shared for the rest of her life, because something told him he would never forget her.

The sound of carriage wheels coming up the drive struck him and he reluctantly broke away. “The steward has arrived. I shall have to tell him what poor timing he has.”

He was graced with a slight coloring in her cheeks. “Don’t you dare!”

With a chuckle, he tweaked her nose, as if she were a child that he enjoyed teasing. He did enjoy that, to be sure, but he was not confused of her mature beauty in the

slightest. “If you are concerned about being seen, perhaps you might take the back stairs? I will come to you when our business is concluded.”

She eyed him warily, but she nodded. “Very well.” She gathered her skirts, but before she rounded the corner of the manor, she glanced back over her shoulder at him.

He offered a silent salute to her, and then she disappeared.

Elwood blew out a steady exhale and braced himself before he walked in the opposite direction to meet the steward for their appointed meeting.

Meliah’s heart was about ready to burst out of her chest when she returned to her chamber. She leaned against the door and attempted to recover her faculties. She wasn’t concerned about encountering the earl’s steward and coming up with a plausible reason as to why she was unchaperoned in the presence of a nobleman. Instead, she was anxious about her overwhelming reaction to Lord Belmont. She wanted to believe that she was standing strong against his advances, but he caused her to be unstable. With a single kiss, he’d upended her entire purpose for being there. She fantasized that they were embarking on some sort of illicit tryst rather than attempting to fulfill a purpose meant to secure her future.

She closed her eyes. Mayhap it would be best if she departed for London posthaste. At least then she wouldn’t be facing enticement at every turn. But if she did, then she was accepting defeat. Not only that, but all of this turmoil would be for naught. She knew that Samantha would cover for her as long as possible, but it wouldn’t be long before her parents would become skeptical of her continued absence. If it was noted by others...

Time was of the essence, and if she didn’t want to fall prey to this rake’s desires, then she had to think quickly. If she intended to write this article in response to ‘The Belle’s’ accusation, then she had to start putting ink to paper. She wouldn’t

accomplish anything by sitting there and trying—and failing—to withstand the earl's advances.

Opening her chamber door, she glanced about. It was blessedly empty, so she quickly made her way down the hall to where the earl's chamber was. She knew that only because she'd passed the single closed door in this wing on the way to the attic earlier that day.

Although she was treading in dangerous territory by braving the lion's den, she was in search of writing utensils and nothing more. Casting one more glance over her shoulder, she grabbed the knob and made her way inside, quietly shutting the door behind her.

As she did, the sound of thunder rumbled throughout the manor, the reverberation shaking the foundation to its very core. She shuddered, shaking off a sense of unease, as she moved further into the room.

She told herself that her single objective was stationery, but she had to stop and appreciate the masculine interior around her. From shades of browns and deep greens, it gave the impression of standing in a dense forest. There was a certain solidarity and mystique that surrounded her. With a glance at the large four-poster platform bed, she had a sudden vision of herself and Lord Belmont tangled beneath the bed coverings, their naked bodies writhing in the moonlight pouring through the window?—

Another crack of thunder caused her to snap out of her reverie, as she wondered where such torrid thoughts had come from. Perhaps the earl was teaching her more than even she was aware.

She hastened her steps to the writing desk situated in a corner of the room. Meliah was glad to discover everything she needed to start drafting her article. Clutching the items in her grasp, she headed for the door when she heard the unmistakable sound of

footsteps in the hall.

Her movements halted, and her eyes widened. If the earl walked in and found her there, he would surely continue their earlier seduction, and in such close, intimate confines, she had no doubt that he would succeed. Especially after she'd been picturing their own sordid outcome.

The steps paused, and she heard him knocking at her door. When he called her name, she found her chance. She glanced at the wardrobe and decided it would have to do. She prayed that he wouldn't need to change his clothes anytime soon.

As the sound of his approach became apparent, she nearly dove into the massive wardrobe. She shut the doors just seconds before he walked into his chamber. She hardly dared to breathe as he began to move about. She suddenly felt rather foolish for hiding like some sort of rat in a hole, but rather than face him directly when she was still too vulnerable, it was the only solution.

The doors to the wardrobe weren't closed completely, and she dared to lean forward and peek out through the sliver of light that revealed the center of the room, while keeping her writing implements clutched against her chest. She watched as he flashed back and forth in front of her vision, until he finally sank down in a chair near the fireplace. She noted that he was holding a tumbler of some sort of liquid, presumably alcoholic, as he slouched in his seat.

As a trail of perspiration traveled down her lower spine, she considered jumping out of the wardrobe on the pretext of a surprise, but it was what he did next that caused her to cease all movement—nearly all thought completely.

Lord Belmont grabbed his shirt from behind and brought it up and over his head, leaving his entire chest bare. If that wasn't shocking enough to see his strong, chiseled chest with its light array of hair around his pectorals, she was positively

scandalized when he reached down between his legs and began to stroke himself through his trousers.

Meliah's mouth fell open slightly and her eyes widened. Her breathing began to deepen, and the air inside the wardrobe suddenly became quite stifling. She told herself that she should look away, that this was a private moment that shouldn't be shared, but she couldn't force herself to do so. It was much too... engaging not to observe.

His head leaned back against the chair and she could see the corded lines of his neck muscles become more pronounced as his movements increased. He paused long enough to down the rest of the contents of his glass and set it aside before unfastening the flap of his trousers and freeing his engorged manhood.

Having never seen a man in full erection before, Meliah was fixated on the appendage, and when he wrapped his hand around the length and began to pump himself in earnest, she actually started to feel flushed, perhaps even faint.

As he stroked with purpose, he exhaled light groans, deep rumbles in the back of his throat that had her hand tingling, slowly inching toward her core. She stopped at her hip, gathering the material of her dress in her grasp while she throbbed with unrequited desire. The fingers of her other hand dug into the writing utensils held tightly against her.

His hips started to move in time to his actions and soon there was a slight glisten at the tip of his cock. She held her breath as he gave one more thrust and ejaculated across the lower half of his abdomen.

As he was using his discarded shirt to clean up the aftereffects of his orgasm and tucked himself away, he said quite clearly, "Did you enjoy the show?"

Elwood's head was still buzzing with the force of his release, but only because he had been imagining that the enchanting Miss Newton was lurking about somewhere. He wasn't completely convinced that she was here when he'd walked into the room, but as he started to test his theory, he attuned his hearing to any unusual noises. He heard it the moment he'd released his cock. She might not have realized that she had gasped, but he had.

Using his own fantasies, as well as the knowledge that she was watching him, it was enough to send him over the edge without much effort. As he basked in the pleasure that followed, he couldn't resist calling out. He should have probably gotten dressed and left the room, acting as though he hadn't sensed her presence, but it was too tempting to let her know her observance hadn't been discounted.

And he was genuinely curious to know if she'd enjoyed his performance.

The wardrobe doors flung open and Miss Newton came flying out. Her cheeks were high with color and she clutched something against her chest as she rushed toward the door. It was obvious that she intended to make a quick escape.

That, he couldn't allow. He wasn't about to act as though this episode hadn't just taken place.

He set himself to rights, rushing to catch her arm just as she was about to cross the threshold. He slammed the door shut and spun her around, trapping her against the hard wood and an arm on each side of her. "My dear, Miss Newton. It seems that you have been somewhere you shouldn't have. At the very least, you could have told me you were here so you could have joined in."

She refused to meet his steady gaze. Instead, her green eyes fluttered as they darted about the room—lighting everywhere but on him. "I need to... go."

He reached out and gently stroked the side of her jaw. "I know what you really need," he whispered.

Her eyes closed. "Don't do this," she pleaded, although she lacked the proper conviction.

"What am I doing?"

She swallowed. "Making me want you."

He smiled. At least she was being honest. "How is that a bad thing?"

Finally, those green eyes met his. "How can you say that? There is no future in an affair between us. When it's over, you shall go your merry way, but what of me?"

"I know how to prevent children, if that is what you fear."

She shook her head. "What of love? The danger you might pose to my heart?"

He had to snort. "Don't tell me you're one of those romantic dreamers? I thought you had more sense than to be drawn into the world of poetry and prose."

As if to remind him who was in charge, she lifted her chin a determined notch. "Not everyone is as cold hearted as you, my lord. Some of us desire emotion and adoration."

"Are you quite sure, my sweet Meliah?" he purred. The hand that had touched her face so delicately moved downward to trace her collarbone and then along the neckline of her bodice. He made sure to take his time when he reached the rounded tops of her breasts. For his efforts he was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath, similar to what he'd heard on the other side of the wardrobe door.

Immediately, his cock stirred.

“If you would just allow me the chance to prove how satisfying it could be between us, you would learn that fighting the inevitable?—”

The items in her grasp fluttered to the floor. Disengaged from his flirtations, Elwood glanced down. That was when he realized the mistake he’d made. Clenching his jaw, he bent down and wordlessly gathered the items and calmly held them out to her. “It seems you dropped something.”

She accepted the paper, quill, and sealed inkpot just as serenely. “Thank you.”

“If you needed any writing implements, you could have just asked me, rather than acting the thief behind my back.”

She had the good grace to turn slightly pale. “I...didn’t realize...”

“Your subterfuge would suggest otherwise.” For some reason, her actions felt more like a betrayal than he wanted to admit. For women he’d treated in the same fashion in the past, he wondered if this numb acceptance is what they had felt. With a frown, he stepped away and presented his back to her. “Forgive me for stopping you from your work since it is your only reason for being here.”

There was a brief pause, as if she might have been trying to think of what to say, and then he heard the door close softly on her departure.

Deciding that he needed another drink, he walked over to the sideboard and poured himself a brandy. He told himself it shouldn’t matter whether or not she was there for a single cause, but it still bruised his pride that she was still intent on that single purpose.

He moved to the window and glanced outside at the rain that had begun to fall in earnest, although he didn't recall seeing a single drop.

CHAPTER 9

That evening, Meliah wavered on whether or not to leave the sanctuary of her bedchamber and join Lord Belmont for dinner. She was feeling the strain over what dress to wear when there was a light knock at the door. Nerves immediately rose up within her midsection, but when she answered the summons, she spied a middle-aged woman standing on the other side with a kind smile, a simple brown dress, and her graying brown hair pulled back into a tidy bun. She was petite and stout, the type of common persona that Meliah was used to conversing with on Brick Lane.

“Good evening. My name is Mrs. Salisbury, the housekeeper.” Surprise must have instantly registered on Meliah’s face because the woman chuckled. “I gather you weren’t expecting me?”

Meliah recovered her shock and offered a welcoming smile in return. “No. I daresay I wasn’t. During my stay here I was starting to wonder if the earl was actually being truthful when he claimed that he had any servants at all to attend him here.”

“Yes, well, we are around when needed. He is gracious to allow us time to attend to our families and other duties in the village while paying us a full-time wage.”

Meliah found herself curious by that revelation, but then an alternative reason occurred to her. “I assume you are referring to the marquess.”

“Oh, no, miss. Lord Belmont has been more than accommodating. His father, Lord Traverson wanted to see the hunting box sold off a few months ago, claiming he was getting too advanced in age to appreciate the hunt any longer. It was under the earl’s

authority who ensured we were not without a position if that came to pass.”

This came as a surprise to Meliah, who had already decided to villainize the earl, along with the rest of society. But if what Mrs. Salisbury said was true, then Lord Belmont had been rather generous indeed. A true contradiction of the man in which he was portrayed by “The Belle.” It was another facet to his personality that he seemed eager to hide, but was starting to come to light.

“When Lord Belmont wrote that he would be needing to come to the cottage a few days ago,” the housekeeper continued. “We wanted to ensure that his kindness was repaid in full, that he was compensated with three hearty meals a day and a clean and tidy place to stay.” She nodded her head. “Of course, we were asked to look after you, as well. As such, I decided it was past time to make my acquaintance.”

This was the perfect opportunity for Meliah to find out if the earl’s staff was truly loyal or not. “I do appreciate that, Mrs. Salisbury, and although I don’t wish anyone to get the wrong impression about my presence here. I?—”

The lady was already waving away her explanation. “You don’t have to worry about gossip spreading unnecessarily. Everyone in the village has been touched by the earl’s kind consideration in one way or another. You won’t find anyone who speaks a cross word about him.”

“Is that so?” Meliah murmured. “In that regard, would you mind if I joined you tomorrow afternoon and hear what the earl has done? There has been a... story published in the London papers that didn’t speak very highly of Lord Belmont and I am determined that the truth is revealed.”

Mrs. Salisbury put a hand to her chest. “Upon my word, I should be grateful if you were to quiet such unfounded rumors. I can promise you that the earl is nothing but the sole of thoughtfulness.”

After the housekeeper parted a short time later, Meliah closed the door with a considering frown. It was strange to think that the paragon Mrs. Salisbury had spoken of so highly was the same man as Lord Belmont. Although her experiences with him had been nothing but hospitable in regard to her lodgings and the gowns he'd purchased for her, it was his mannerisms and his charisma that didn't fit. Now that she'd been told there were two sides to the earl, she was more curious than ever to find out which part of his personality was genuine and which part was fabricated.

An image of a whip flashed in her mind and a frisson of fear mixed with something else entirely slid down her spine. When her host had spoken of a line between pleasure and pain, she had to wonder if there was any truth to that as well. She had no doubt that the earl would be more than willing to assist her in that regard, but for now, she was more interested in the gentleman that no one in London really seemed to know.

Donning a light blue, watered silk dress, Meliah decided that she would head down to dinner after all. She wasn't sure if Lord Belmont was still cross with her, and honestly, she wasn't sure if she was still upset as well, but it was best that they discussed their disagreements instead of letting them fester any longer.

On the off chance that Miss Newton decided to join him for the evening meal, Elwood had donned a pair of black trousers, a silver waistcoat, and black dinner jacket. He'd asked the housekeeper to starch one of his cravats and he'd tied it into a perfect knot at the base of his throat.

If he couldn't seem to act like a gentleman around her, perhaps he could look the part.

He heard movement out in the hall and while he expected it to be Mrs. Salisbury coming to let him know he would be dining alone, he was pleasantly surprised to see Miss Newton walk across the threshold.

For an instant, his heart stuttered to a halt. He had imagined that shade of blue would look remarkable with her dark hair and sparkling green eyes, but he hadn't known exactly how enticing her every movement would make him physically uncomfortable. In all of the women he'd courted and generally bedded over the years, none of them had made him feel as if he'd been punched in the solar plexus. It proved that Miss Newton was unlike any other woman of his acquaintance—and he wasn't quite sure how to feel about that.

He moved from the head of the table and pulled out her chair to the left of his.

She offered him a slight smile that he wasn't sure how to interpret. "Thank you, my lord." After she sat, he resumed his seat.

"Would you care for some wine?" he offered, holding up the decanter.

She cast him a wary glance, but then inclined her head. "Please."

He poured the red liquid in the crystal tumbler and realized that although he generally despised stilted silences, he was more concerned how this evening might end. He was still a bit distracted from earlier when he'd discovered she'd been rummaging for pen and paper to use as weapons against him. To say he'd felt a little betrayed was more than an understatement. The longer he'd had to reflect on his recent behavior, he certainly hadn't made much of a lasting impression, not in the way she might prefer, at least.

"I wanted to apologize for earlier today."

As if reading his very thoughts, she spoke the words he nearly uttered aloud. "It's ironic that you should say that, because I was going to say the same." She laughed lightly, and he suddenly found it one of his favorite sounds in the world. "I appreciate your consideration, but you were only being true to your... nature, whereas I

attempted to disguise my reasons for being in your rooms, however innocent they might have seemed at the time.”

He thrilled at the slight hitch of color that appeared on her cheeks, as she seemed to recall the moment she’d been revealed. “You did nothing wrong. I certainly haven’t given you any reasons to warrant becoming an ally thus far.”

“Not particularly,” she said slowly. She hesitated as she took a delicate sip of her wine. “But I still have to wonder if that is the real Lord Belmont.”

He tilted his head to the side, stiffening slightly. “What do you mean?”

She shifted her eyes away. “I might have learned something about you today that has given me cause to alter society’s opinion.” She took a deep breath and met his gaze directly once more. “I find that, while I used to want to agree with ‘The Belle’s’ perception of you, I wish to prove her wrong even more.” Elwood’s brows lifted at that. “Whoever the author of the Rake Review is obviously had a sour relationship of her own, which is why she wants to council other women. Or else, she considers it to be a lark and she doesn’t care if she injures anyone in the process so long as people are reading her articles.”

Elwood had thought both, although he knew no one would take his opinion into consideration, especially after he’d been targeted as “Mr. October.” To hear Miss Newton speak so plainly about the authoress, he had to believe that his original assumption that she was “The Belle” was no longer in question. It had been a short-lived theory with no actual proof as it was.

“I intend to make my way into the local village tomorrow,” she added. “Mrs. Salisbury has kindly offered to come around in her wagon and?”

“Absolutely not.” Elwood hadn’t meant to make his voice sound so harsh, but neither

did he like the idea of her out on her own without his protection. He took one look at her mutinous expression and realized that he had to explain himself or else he would have an irate female on his hands. “What I meant to say was that I am more than capable of taking you into the village.”

“While I do appreciate that, my lord, I’m sure you have things to do.”

He snorted. “At the moment, the only thing I have at my disposal is boredom. Truly, you would be doing me a service by allowing me out of this prison for a brief time.”

She lifted a brow and finally relaxed her posture. “Very well. I can’t fault you for wanting to return to some semblance of society, even if it isn’t the crowd you are used to entertaining.”

His eyes held hers as he murmured, “On the contrary, I’m finding this secluded existence more appealing with each passing day.”

Meliah was grateful that they were interrupted by a middle-aged woman with gray hair and a younger man with curly, dark brown hair. They were each carrying a silver serving tray and set them down in front of the earl and herself.

As the lids were removed, Lord Belmont gave a sigh of appreciation. “It smells heavenly.”

“It’s your favorite, my lord,” the older woman said with a wink at Meliah. “Lobster bisque. For the main course, I chose haddock in a butter crème sauce with a side of boiled potatoes and mashed peas and apple crumble for dessert.”

The earl put a hand over his heart. “You are irreplaceable, Mrs. Jacques.” He nodded in acknowledgment to her companion who was acting as the footman. “Mr. Hanovan. May I present my guest of honor, Miss Meliah Newton?”

Meliah inclined her head as she savored the scents of the fare laid out before them. Her stomach was starting to growl just thinking of the delights awaiting her. “Thank you for such a lovely fare.”

“You are quite welcome. Any friend of Lord Belmont’s is a friend to me.” She smiled kindly and as she took her leave, Meliah noted that Mr. Hanovan lingered a moment longer as he regarded her. She had to admit that he seemed to be a nice man, and not much older than her, if she had to hazard a guess. But he was sadly lacking the one thing that drew her to the earl time and again, and it had nothing to do with a title or wealth, but rather the devastating attraction that stole her breath and weakened her knees.

She picked up her spoon after her host had done the same and blew lightly on the steaming soup. The moment it touched her tongue, she moaned lightly in delight. “It’s delicious.”

“Hmm,” her companion said around another mouthful. “Mrs. Jacques is truly an artist in the kitchen. When my father decided to part with this hunting box, she started her own eating house in the village. I have known people who came all the way from the heart of London to sample her fare, myself included. Thankfully, I had only to ask her to drop by on occasion when I arrived.”

Meliah shot him a coy glance above her spoon. “It does seem that you have made quite an impression on the local assembly. I’m looking forward to learning more about this side of Lord Belmont.”

He gave a lopsided smile that made her look away, lest she was pulled even further into his spell. Then again, perhaps it wouldn’t be so terrible to lose herself with him. “Don’t get too excited. The villagers are wont to embellish upon my good nature.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” she countered. “They seem quite enamored of you.”

He sighed dramatically and flicked his eyes at her bosom, allowing them to slowly move upward to meet her gaze once more. “Would that the same sentiment could be told of you.”

She laughed lightly and took another sip of her wine for courage. “I didn’t say I wasn’t attracted to you, my lord. I just see the wisdom in not giving in to my reaction to you. A lady in my situation has to be cautious.”

He sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his midsection. For the moment, the unfinished meal before him was forgotten. “What if I offered a proposition that would benefit us both?”

Again, her focus was wary. “And what is that?”

“Become my mistress. I vow that I will be generous, and when the time comes for us to part ways, you won’t have to toil as a weaver. You could live the independent life that you yearn for yourself.” He tilted his head to the side. “What do you say, Miss Newton?”

CHAPTER 10

Elwood held his breath. He prayed that he hadn't overstepped and caused her to refute any progress that his servants might have made on his behalf, but neither was he appreciative of the thought that she would soon be leaving him. For someone he'd only known for a handful of days, he admired her integrity, and applauded her passions. He merely wished that they were shared in his bed, and not just on the paper she so desperately wanted published.

She cleared her throat and gently wiped her lips with her serviette. "While I admit that is a wonderful offer for a woman in my unfortunate position, I daresay I have dreams that I want to fulfill first. Until that is done, I can't commit to anything more than a brief acquaintance."

His heart sank, but he allowed a smile to spread across his face so she couldn't readily read his disappointment. "I respect your dedication to your craft, Miss Newton. Just know that the offer stands if you change your mind."

She inclined her head and when she pushed back her chair, he was honor bound to stand when she did. "This was a lovely dinner and conversation, my lord, but the hour grows late and if I wish to accomplish anything in the morning, I should retire."

He glanced at the clock on the mantel. "It's only half past nine."

"That may be true," she concurred. "But I am not used to the same town hours that you are. When you work for a living, you are taught the merits of rising with the sun."

As she took her leave, Elwood watched the gentle sway of her derriere and nearly groaned aloud. It was too bad that he was a man of such voracious sexual appetite, or he might have taken her rejection a bit easier. However, when he couldn't seem to rid her from his thoughts, and her very presence was torture, he knew he had to do something to persuade her to accept his offer. His desire would accept no less.

For tonight, however, he would have to resort to sleeping alone.

He trudged up the stairs, but as he passed by Miss Newton's room, he heard the sound of sloshing water.

He froze. Dear God, was she in the bath ? When had that been approved?

Nearly groaning aloud, his heart started to pound as he stepped steadily closer. Surely he was just hearing things and the fates weren't so unkind as to allow?—

A soft moan caused any other conscious thought to fade into oblivion.

He grasped the edge of the doorframe and stared at the hard oak, as if he could see through it to the naked woman on the other side. Instead, he was forced to use his imagination as the gentle mewling sounds she made caused his cock to turn as hard as marble. It throbbed with an urgency that almost surprised him. It had been years, during the true rowdy years of his youth, since his manhood had been so insistent. Then again, Miss Newton was different from the rest.

As the sounds continued, Elwood closed his eyes and let his imagination take flight.

Meliah had intended to do as she'd said and go to bed when she arrived at her chamber, but when she entered the room and found the copper tub filled with steaming water, she hadn't been able to resist the temptation it presented. It had been a long time since she'd been allowed to indulge in something so lovely. And this one

was much better than the cramped washtub her parents had. She didn't know if the earl or someone else was responsible for such a luxury, but she wasted no time in removing her clothes and sinking down into the heavenly abyss.

A bar of lavender scented soap had been set out near the edge, as well as a soft, white linen. She intended to make good use of them, but for now, she leaned back and enjoyed the sensation of the warm water lapping over her skin.

She gripped the edges of the tub as she closed her eyes and sighed in contentment. However, it wasn't long before something shifted. The water that had been innocent suddenly became seductive, as if being led by Lord Belmont himself. The ripples became his hands as they touched and teased her, the heat the feel of his breath as he licked the side of her neck.

Her fingers tightened as the image grew in intensity. She pressed her thighs together and saw the earl standing over her body, caressing her breast, waist, hips with his wicked gaze before he reached into the water and allowed his hands to follow the same path.

Meliah braced her feet against the opposite end of the tub as her legs fell open slightly. She had never before considered touching herself intimately, but recalling the glorious feeling that had pulsed through her at the earl's hands, she found that she wanted to replicate it.

Biting her lower lip, she pictured Lord Belmont's hand slipping down, down . When her finger grazed her core, she allowed a soft moan to escape. Recalling the rapid movements he'd made, she attempted to mimic the same actions and soon found her body starting to coil with her efforts. Her breath was coming in short pants, her back arching off the edge of the tub.

It wasn't until she allowed the flash of memory of the earl taking his pleasure when

she'd been hiding in the wardrobe that the pressure built to the point of pain.

Abruptly, her eyes popped open. Was this what he'd been referring to when he'd mentioned the line between the two worlds?

She quickly got out of the tub and without even drying off, she grabbed her robe from the end of the bed and wrapped it around herself. Her body was still humming, demanding the satisfaction that she craved, but she found that she didn't want to reach that pinnacle by herself. She wanted to share it with someone. With Lord Belmont.

But did she dare approach him with the request without expecting anything more than a night of bliss in return, even if that was all she could give?

She started to pace her room, desperate for her mind to quiet so she could put this torture behind her and go to sleep, but when she heard the sound of a gruff noise on the other side of her door, she walked forward without conscious thought.

Meliah yanked open the door and gasped when she found the earl standing there with a pained expression on his face. She glanced down and noticed that his trousers had a decided bulge and realized the reason for his discomfort. Immediately, her cheeks heated. "My lord, what are you?—?"

"For the love of all that's holy," he gritted through his teeth. "Shut the door so that I'm not tempted to put my face between your legs."

She lifted a shaky hand and gathered the top of her robe together. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she asked, "How long have you been standing here?"

His nostrils flared, another indication that his control was tenuous. "Long enough to know that you were pleasuring yourself."

The blood rushed away from Meliah's face, but then returned in a flurry. If she had been waiting for the opportune moment to invite the earl into her bedchamber, this was it. The throbbing between her legs was still insistent.

Deciding not to think anymore, she released her grip on the robe and slowly untied the sash holding it closed. Allowing the damp material to slide to the floor, standing in front of Lord Belmont in all of her naked glory, she whispered, "I've found it's so much better when you pleasure me instead."

Elwood didn't have to be asked twice. Stepping over the threshold, he kicked the door shut with his booted foot and lifted her into his arms. He wished like hell he'd removed more clothes after dinner than just his jacket, but he didn't need to be unclothed to do what he'd promised—what he wanted to do to her.

He carried her over to the bed and laid her down on it horizontally, where her legs were dangling off the edge. He bent down on the floor and lifted her legs, spreading them wide. Her core glistened at him, as if urging him to come forward. He was more than happy to oblige.

He bent forward and licked a perfect swipe up her center. The sensual gasp Meliah uttered from deep in her throat for his efforts was more than enough for him to continue. He inhaled her feminine scent, the musky scent that made him want to spiral over the edge into oblivion. There was something about women that drove him crazy with lust, but the nectar that Meliah offered was more potent than anything else before.

He started a rhythm that soon had her hips moving restlessly. Her hands clutched the coverlet, her back arching and gaining him a perfectly desirable view of her pert breasts and their delicious rosy peaks. He intended to feast on those as soon as she reached her release.

“My lord...”

That could not be borne. Regretfully, he paused to say, “My name is Elwood. Say it.”

She groaned in frustration. He adored it.

“Elwood.”

He loved the way it crossed her lips. It gave him a sense of possession he’d never cared to feel before. “What do you want from me, sweet Meliah? What do you need?”

He slid a finger into her passage and she groaned again. “Pleasure.”

She was so hot and tight, a perfect combination. He wanted to tease her more, to make her release that more intense, but he was starting to find the pain he was feeling was almost too much to bear. He returned to her core and slid a second finger in place, the rhythm matching that of his tongue.

It didn’t take long for the muscles in her legs to tighten, her breathing to suddenly cease, and then a small cry erupted from her as her body began to quiver. A purr erupted from his throat as he absorbed every ounce of her orgasm. She was perfection itself and the thought that she might offer herself to anyone else was one he didn’t want to consider at the moment.

Perhaps never.

When her body started to relax, he slowly rose above her. Although it was the worst sort of punishment he could do to himself, to see the sight of her flushed bare body spread out on the bed and not be able to take things further, he couldn’t help but look his fill. “You are exquisite,” he breathed.

She lifted herself on her elbows and he might have mistaken the slightly wicked gleam in her eyes if it wasn't for the fact that she said, "Don't say you want to leave?"

"Want is a particularly mild word when it comes to what else I imagine doing to you."

She sat up straighter and keeping her gaze on him, she said, "Then do it."

Meliah shocked herself nearly as much as she appeared to surprise Lord Belmont—correction, Elwood .

It seemed... right to call him that. Especially after what they'd shared. What they were about to share.

Her stomach fluttered at the heated look in his gaze. His blue eyes had darkened to the shade of glittering sapphires, and her heart was pounding with desire. Although she had just experienced one of the most wonderful sensations, she found that her maidenly apprehension had vanished. She was eager to learn more of what Elwood could teach her. While there was still the uncertainty of what might happen after this affair had concluded, she had resigned herself to the inevitable. And was enjoying it immensely.

"Be careful what you wish for," he murmured as he began to loosen his cravat.

Meliah was finding it difficult to draw a full breath as he tossed the linen to the floor in a flutter of forgotten silk. That should have been the cautionary action to wake her up from this sensual spell, but she didn't want to think about anything but the pleasure he continued to promise in his eyes. The air pulsed with raw energy and his virility. She knew this was going to be a night that she never forgot for the rest of her life. She told herself to put an end to this foolishness, but she wasn't inclined to

listen.

His waistcoat was next and an action as simple as shrugging those broad shoulders out of it made her want to press her thighs together again. His shirt was next and when he revealed his sculpted chest, her fingers itched to reach out and touch him. He was... magnificent.

The perfect rake.

Again, that should have been the warning to stop this before it was too late, but she realized she had been lost to this man the moment she'd agreed to climb into his carriage in London.

She swallowed any further hesitation and asked, "May I... touch you?"

Rather than reply, he reached down and grasped her hands. Bringing her to her feet, he placed her palms on his pectorals. "Anywhere you like."

She nibbled at her lower lip, wondering what he might like. She had the feeling he would instruct her, but for now, she was eager just to explore his body. She slid her fingers along the entirety of his chest and was awestruck with how the corded muscles in his shoulders bunched when she drew near. She grasped his shoulders and slowly made her way down to his wrists, her gaze following her every movement.

From there, she slid a coy look at him and then moved around to his backside. He turned his head and watched her with a clenched jaw until she disappeared behind him. Now that he wasn't watching her, she felt emboldened. She pressed her breasts against his bare back and slid her hands down the sides of his ribcage until they reached the point where his waistband began.

"Take them off," she demanded softly.

Without a word, he obeyed. Unfastening the flap, he slid them down over narrow hips. She could just see the tip of his jutting manhood eagerly awaiting her next command. She reached around and slid the side of her hand along the thick length. She was surprised at how hard it was, and yet, so smooth to the touch.

Curiosity won out over the last of her apprehension and she moved back around to his front. He had returned his focus to her and when she slid her hand back down to his member, he grasped her wrist. He guided her palm to curl around his length and began to stroke himself up and down.

She vividly recalled the way he'd moved in his chamber and so she quickly mimicked the same actions. For a moment she wondered if her mouth might fit around him and offer the same results.

She lifted her focus to him. "Is it possible for me to please you as you did me?"

He closed his eyes and made some sort of noise. "My God, you'll be the death of me."

"Does that mean no?"

He opened his eyes, and if she wasn't mistaken, his expression was more of a grimace. "The moment you sucked me into that tempting mouth I wouldn't last very long and that is not how I want this night to go. I want to lose myself in you."

With that, he grasped her hand and placed both her arms around his neck, pulling her flush against him. There was nothing between them any longer and Meliah should have felt vulnerable.

Instead, she felt... free.

CHAPTER 11

Elwood imagined tying Meliah's wrists to the bed posts and so many other torrid fantasies, but he reminded himself that she was an innocent. He had to be patient with her and not ruin this moment when it must be disconcerting enough for her. However, she hadn't seemed to offer any sort of hesitation thus far, only curiosity, but that was what was going to unman him more than anything else. The way she'd stroked him had caused his entire body to tighten on the brink of release. It had taken everything within him to halt her movements.

He might be a rake, but he had never been in the habit of not ensuring the needs of his partners were met before his own.

Looking into her expressive green eyes, he saw the dizzying effect he was having on her senses. It was a heady, but also very humbling. If he'd been a true gentleman, he would have stopped right then and not taken things further, but he wasn't a saint. Especially not when he was so close to that glorious rapture to be found between her thighs.

Bending down, he captured Meliah's lips and kissed her for an eternity, until they had to part to draw breath. "Turn around," he ordered. He was pleased that she didn't question him, but did as he asked. "Do you trust me?"

She glanced over her shoulder, and after a hesitant nod, she said, "Yes."

"Put your hands around the bedpost." She clutched the hard wood as he gathered his cravat. He returned and wound it around her wrists, effectively keeping her in place.

“Is that too tight?” he queried.

“No.”

He could hear her breathing deepen further, but he felt confident it wasn't due to fear. She was a passionate woman who'd never been allowed to express her sexual desire. Now that he was giving her that freedom, she was an apt pupil.

Next, Elwood walked over to the dressing table where he'd spied a simple, blue ribbon. “Close your eyes,” he said, and she did so. He placed the ribbon over her eyes and tied it gently at the back of her head. “Too tight?”

“No.”

Her easy acquiescence would have made him smile had his cock not been demanding satisfaction. He pressed his chest against her back and reached around to cup her breasts. Molding the flesh with his hands, he tweaked her nipples until they were hard peaks. He could tell she enjoyed his ministrations, because she moaned in pleasure. “Spread your legs, Meliah.”

She did so, and while he kept his left arm around her to toy with her breasts, he reached down between her legs and began to tease her once more. When her movements started to become more urgent, he knew she was ready for him.

Taking his cock in hand, he poised the head at her entrance. He clenched his jaw, knowing that there was no turning back after this. He had to make sure she knew it too. Sweat started to break out on his brow, but he made himself say, “It's your last chance, Meliah. Tell me to stop or?—”

“Please, Elwood...”

It was the breathless gasp that changed everything.

He moved his arm and put it around her waist to steady her while he pushed forward and fully impaled her. There was a momentary stiffening of her body as he held her, waiting for her to acclimate herself to the intrusion. A trickle of sweat slid down his cheek, so he tried to withdraw.

“No, please. I’m fine?—”

He pushed back forward and immediately her pleas ceased. When he started to slowly move in and out of her body, it didn’t take long for her to understand the rhythm. She started to swivel her hips back and forth, grinding herself on his cock until it was almost impossible for Elwood to withstand. As his movements began to increase, he was pleased to find that she was starting to relax. He kept one arm around her waist and used his other to grasp the post in front of her. He saw her breasts swaying with each thrust and he clenched his teeth to try to make this moment last as long as possible.

When she started to tighten around him for another reason, he could feel his body preparing itself for an explosive release. He had a momentary thought that he didn’t have a sheath ready, but neither was it a truly conscious consideration. He was past the point of coherence as she started to climax, her body’s vibrations sending him pounding into her until his cock erupted. His buttocks tightened as he spent himself into her body. The pleasure seemed endless, like nothing he’d experienced before.

Absolute.

Meliah’s head was spinning in the aftermath. She wasn’t sure if she was in pain, or in perfect harmony. Everything seemed to be upside down.

But in the very best way.

She could feel her bonds being loosened and something soft and warm enveloping her before she was lifted in a pair of strong arms. Elwood carried her to the bed and laid her down, and then he finally removed the slip of material around her eyes. She blinked at the light that filtered back into her vision, and when she spied his face, she couldn't help but give a slight smile. "That was—" She faltered, realizing that she couldn't put a name to what she'd experienced.

"Yes. It was," he agreed with an answering smile.

Their eyes met and held and Meliah knew that she was in very real trouble of falling in love with this man if she hadn't done so already. It was insanity to think that her heart might betray her in such a short time, but she supposed there wasn't a time limit to emotion. Sometimes it slowly fluttered in the air and then settled over a person like newly fallen snow. Other times, she'd heard of a passion-filled union that devastated both parties. Unfortunately, these were the affairs that eventually faded with time. Once the attraction faltered, then the heart did too.

"You seem lost in thought. Already having regrets?"

She was thankful that his voice was gentle and without censure. She gathered the edges of the blanket a bit more securely about her. She told herself it wasn't a tactic for security, but instead, she was basking in the glow of being a changed woman. "Not at all. If I didn't want that to happen, I wouldn't have allowed it."

He lifted a brow. "Perhaps you were swept off of your feet by a notorious rake."

She wanted to laugh, but there was an edge to his voice that kept the amusement at bay. "I suppose tomorrow will prove whether or not you have any redeeming qualities, Lord Belmont."

He reached out and grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I know you

will never agree in public, but in private, I must insist that you call me by my given name.”

Meliah’s heart started to pound, but not because she felt threatened by him. In truth, her eagerness to replay their recent tryst was causing a strange ache between her legs. Although she told herself it was folly to consider it, he was a difficult man not to crave fully.

She opened her mouth slightly and allowed his name to fall from her lips in a soft whisper. “Elwood.”

Instantly, his gaze darkened and she could tell she’d gained his attention. “I’m starting to believe you’re the true threat.”

She relaxed her grip on the blanket and it slipped from her shoulder. “What makes you say that?” she asked coyly.

His nostrils flared, but instead of joining her, he said, “As much as I would enjoy taking you up on your tempting offer. I fear I must decline. You would surely regret that tomorrow when you are taking an uncomfortable ride into the village.” He trailed a finger along her lower lip. “However, if you wish to entertain me tomorrow evening, I would be more than willing.” With that, he straightened. “I will see that a fresh bath is brought up for you.”

As he left, Meliah released a sigh. She looked at the ceiling and tried to make sense of the madness that had taken hold of her. She had always been an obedient child, doing everything that her parents asked. She had never given them more than a moment’s worth of trouble, had been raised to take extreme care with her reputation. And yet, the moment she went on the hunt for Mr. October, she suddenly forgot everything she’d ever been taught. She was becoming more like a lady of the night rather than a merchant’s respectable daughter.

She shivered, trying not to think of her father's disappointed expression and her mother's irritated rant if they were to discover her actions. While this should have made her lament everything that had happened in this room tonight, she found that she was doing the opposite and pondering the next evening, and if Elwood might make good on his promises.

He wasn't going to be able to sleep at all. Not a wink.

Elwood paced his chamber. He shoved a hand through his already disheveled hair and tried to contemplate his next move, but unbeknownst to him, he'd never been in such a predicament before. He had taken advantage of women's innocence before, surely, but never had he grown a conscience after the deed was done. Not only that, but like Meliah, her predecessors had allowed him into their beds knowing the ramifications of their actions. And Elwood decided that if they were that foolish, then they deserved whatever they had coming. However, most of these women were spoiled debutantes who thought they could gain a husband of their choosing by offering their body instead of something more substantial—like a keen mind and a sharp wit.

Meliah had both of those qualities in abundance and so much more. That was why he was finding it hard to shake off the guilt that wanted to swallow him. He told himself that once he'd had his fun with her, he would send her back to London without a second thought. But instead, the joke was on him, because he was starting to have feelings for her. Dangerous ones.

Of course, she was completely unsuitable. His parents weren't demanding in any way, but they would find fault in his choices if he were to start courting a commoner. They would expect him to wed a lady of quality, and preferably, one who brought something of import to the union, whether it be wealth or further connections.

He had never cared for either, as wealth was something he'd never had to worry about. As an earl, he had plenty of doors of society opened to him. He held a card at

Almack's and a membership at White's. For someone like Meliah, with her simple background, it would be ultimately more difficult to gain her entrée into the circle of ladies that constituted the upper echelons of society. Even though she would be elevated to a countess if they wed, they would likely snub their noses and give her the cut direct.

This was unsettling to Elwood, perhaps more than the idea he was actually considering the prospect of marriage. He'd never cared to have a family or children, but he found that he wanted to save Meliah from the fate of toil that awaited her should her dreams fail. He could easily speak to the printers about accepting her work, perhaps offer a monetary bribe, but if Meliah found out about his involvement, he knew she would never forgive him for interfering.

He poured himself a glass of brandy and sank into a chair by the fire as he continued to contemplate what to do. Perhaps he should go to Meliah's father and ask his permission for her hand. It would be the honorable thing to do, and if their involvement was brought to light in spite of that, he feared it would destroy what hope she might have to live an independent life. The last thing he wanted to do was to see her hopes crumble before his very eyes. He wanted to ensure her happiness, to make all of her dreams come true.

In the end, he decided that the only way to accomplish that was to let the truth of his actions become public knowledge. Meliah would have to counter "The Belle's" article and tell the world about the real Lord Belmont, that even a despicable rake could be charitable by nature and have a care for those less fortunate. He preferred to keep that part of his life secret because he would rather people think he was a selfish bastard who only cared about his own desires. That was expected of most men of his rank. To reveal that he could actually be considering of others would cause every matchmaking mother in society to come knocking on his door.

Right now, there was only one lady who had managed to capture his regard. For all

the women that had thrown themselves at his feet in the past, their faces and names faded into oblivion when compared to Meliah. She was the incomparable he'd always scoffed at, thinking that the perfect woman couldn't possibly exist.

He'd been wrong.

As he downed his brandy, he decided that once tomorrow's adventures had concluded, he would make a trip to London to speak to Meliah's parents. Whereas the thought of matrimony caused him no end of dry heaves, he found that it wasn't quite as unappealing as it might have been before. But he supposed the right person made all the difference.

He suddenly groaned, because he feared he would turn into his parents after all. But for the first time he didn't mind the comparison.

Meliah's eyes fluttered open to the sun shining through her window. She smiled and closed them again, before she gave a gasp and shot straight up in bed. She'd never slept past the dawn for as long as she could remember, and yet, it had to be mid-morning already.

She threw the covers off herself and removed her nightdress.

After the second bath had been prepared the night before, Meliah found that she was grateful for Elwood's consideration. The warm water was soothing against the parts of her body that were suddenly more sensitive than before. It was strange how everything had felt so different, and yet, still the same.

After she'd bathed and dried off, she'd donned the nightdress and climbed into bed, wonderfully exhausted. But now, she had to scurry about and try to get dressed before she lost any more of the day. Thankfully, it was looking to be a rather pleasant one. Or perhaps that was just how she saw it now. Could it be that her vision had changed

as well? That everything around her appeared more... vivid?

She donned a light yellow muslin and after she pinned her hair into a simple chignon, she pinched her cheeks to add a bit of extra color, and then she headed downstairs.

When she reached the dining room, she was surprised to find that a silver tray was waiting for her—as well as the earl. “Good morning,” he greeted upon her entrance. He had been reading the paper, but now he folded it and set it aside as she took her place at the table.

“Good day,” she returned evenly. “I apologize if I kept you waiting overlong. I don’t generally sleep so late.”

“I didn’t want to wake you, as you seemed to be so peaceful.” He glanced at the clock. “It’s only half past nine. I generally rise much later, but as you said before, I keep town hours like the rest of the ton.”

Meliah was still thinking about the fact he’d been watching her sleep and her heart jumped in her throat. The gesture both thrilled her and touched her heart.

“That was kind of you,” she murmured. She fell silent as she started to consume the ham and eggs. She realized that when she returned home to her parent’s house, she would no longer be accustomed to this sort of luxury each morning. It would be back to gruel and hard bread. The very image had her thoughts turning distant for a moment.

“Is everything well?”

At the sound of the concern in the earl’s voice she forced a smile on her face. “Of course.”

He didn't seem convinced. If anything, the frown between his brows deepened further. "You seem distracted." He exhaled heavily. "I was hoping you wouldn't already be despising me for last night?—"

Meliah reached out and grasped his hand. "Believe me, that is not the reason if I have any distress."

He regarded her solemnly, as if trying to gauge if she told the truth. "Yet you won't tell me what is bothering you."

"It's of no consequence and it certainly doesn't reflect poorly upon you. Please don't concern yourself with it anymore." Leaving half of her food uneaten, she wiped her mouth with her serviette and pushed her chair back, compelling him to do the same. "Shall we head to the village?"

CHAPTER 12

E lwood wanted to know what had suddenly upset her, but either Meliah was too embarrassed to say what it was that discomfited her, or she was too distraught to confide in him, he knew it was not something as inconsequential as she would like him to believe.

No doubt she might be worried about the possibility of being with child. He would ensure that any heir of his would not suffer the brunt of being called a bastard. He had already decided that he would take Meliah as his wife if she would give him but a chance to prove his worth. He hoped that their journey into the village to speak with some of the locals would do just that.

He drove them in the curricule that he had borrowed from Mrs. Jaeques. The day was bright and sunny, and Meliah's yellow dress made her appear as lovely as a spring daisy. She was certainly a welcome respite from the rest of the landscape that was starting to wither with the waning autumn. Soon all the leaves would be crushed by the turning of the wagon wheels and the branches on the mighty oaks would be barren. The grass had already lost its green luster and the nights were starting to linger.

Of course, with Meliah to warm his bed every night, he wouldn't mind the darkness at all, so long as a lantern remained burning so he could properly appreciate all her feminine curves.

He shifted in his seat, just imagining the sight of her bare skin shining in the soft glow of a flickering candle.

“Where are we going first?”

Elwood wasn't sure if she spoke out of genuine curiosity, or if the silence was becoming too much to bear. “The haberdashery.”

“Really?” He could hear the surprise in her voice. “Have you done much for the community in regards to women's fashions then?”

“No.” His lips twitched. “I intend to see that plain straw bonnet you own is properly decorated.”

Her green eyes widened, and she adopted a slightly sheepish expression. “There is no need. Truly.”

“Why not?” He tilted his head to the side as he glanced at her. “And if you say it's because you won't be able to pay me back, don't bother. It's a gift.”

Her cheeks colored slightly. “It isn't mine.” She exhaled heavily, as if grateful to finally be free of the burden of her subterfuge. “My best friend, Samantha, is an orange seller in Mayfair. She is seeing one of the footmen for a prominent family, and before you ask, I shall not reveal his identity. It is because of him that she was able to... procure the pink dress and bonnet for me.”

This was interesting news. “Indeed?”

“Yes. The gown was supposed to be on the way to the dressmaker for repairs, but—” She worried her lower lip. “I'm afraid it was waylaid. I fear that the dress will not be presentable at all once I am able to return it.”

“I suppose the reason for the dress was?”

“To gain your notice so that I could enact my original plan, yes.”

She appeared so chagrined that Elwood couldn't help but laugh. He didn't just chuckle, but he let loose a grand wallop of deep stomach rumbles that had her glaring at him. “It's not that funny.”

“Of course, it is!” he wheezed. “To imagine that I am rumored to be a rake worthy of ‘The Belle’s’ notice, and yet, I am waylaid by a woman in a dress that is not even her own. You must appreciate the irony in the entire situation.”

Her lips finally twitched. “I daresay when you put it that way it sounds a bit ridiculous.”

“More than a bit,” he countered. “I shall be the subject of everlasting ridicule if you dare to add that to your article.”

“I'm not going to write it.”

She spoke so low, and while he was still trying to control his merriment, he nearly missed her confession. “Pardon?”

She straightened her shoulders and looked him squarely in the eye. “I said, I'm not going to write it.”

He blinked, any further amusement vanishing. “But it was your entire purpose?—”

“I know,” she admitted with another heavy sigh. “But I've found a certain... change of heart when it comes to writing about you any longer. I would feel like the worst sort of hypocrite when my recent actions have not been of any credit to me.”

Completely sober, Elwood halted the pair pulling the carriage and set the brake as he

allowed the reins to go slack in his grip. He reached out his other hand and laid it gently on her upper arm. "I would gladly bear whatever sort of punishment is coming my way if only to make sure that all of your dreams come true. Writing is your passion, and I would not let you strip yourself of the possibility of becoming published."

"Oh, make no mistake. I shall still do my best to approach the printers with my novel, but I will no longer do it by using someone else to succeed, however much I might try to make your good qualities shine through." She shook her head. "It was wrong of me to pursue you the way I did in the first place. If there is anything I regret about our time together it is that."

Meliah could tell that she'd shocked him, but she would rather not dwell on the fact that her actions had been for naught. Being with Lord Belmont might not have fulfilled her dreams the way she had initially intended, but she would hold their memories close to her heart for the rest of her days.

She placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Let's enjoy the day, shall we? I should still like to spend it with you."

He inclined his head, but as he picked up the reins once more, he said, "This conversation is not yet over."

She wasn't quite sure how to take that, but rather than spoil another moment that she could carry with her when they parted, she remained silent on the subject. Hoping to turn the tide on the earl's morose mood, she asked, "What is the name of the local village?"

"Doncaster."

His stilted reply didn't hold much encouragement. "We are in Yorkshire?" she

prodded.

“Indeed.” He finally glanced at her. “Have you not been this far north?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t been out of London.”

He blinked, and then she saw the slight softening of his expression. “In that regard, I’m pleased to be your honorary guide, and you must allow me to procure something for you to celebrate your first holiday.”

Meliah had never considered looking upon her time with Lord Belmont as an actual holiday, but now that he’d mentioned it, she found the idea quite appealing. “Only if it is something small,” she noted. “I shouldn’t accept that, but I daresay I can’t find it within me to say no.”

He smiled. “As you shouldn’t.” He dared to wink at her and she could feel the heart immediately start swirling in the pit of her stomach. “Consider it payment for putting up with my beastly nature these past couple of days.”

She laughed a bit breathlessly. Had it truly been such a short span of time that she’d known the earl? What a wicked whirlwind. “You have been rather unruly, but you are not without redemption.”

His brows drew together slightly, as if he were seriously contemplating that statement. Not wanting him to be upset for long, she quickly turned the conversation to inquiring about his younger days. She asked him about his childhood, and he regaled her with stories that nearly had her in tears with merriment. She wasn’t surprised to learn that he was just as incorrigible then as he was now.

As they entered the outskirts of Doncaster, it didn’t take long before his presence was noted. Broad smiles appeared on most everyone they passed as they offered a curtsy

or friendly wave. Meliah noticed that she was looked upon curiously. No doubt they would be under the assumption that they were courting.

When the earl guided them to the local livery and handed his reins off to a man who came out to greet them, he tipped his hat to the earl. “My lord.” When his focus lit on her, there was an obvious question in his gaze.

“This is Miss Newton. She is a guest at Belmont Hall.” He looked at her and his blue eyes twinkled. “She fancies herself something of a writer and wanted somewhere quiet to work on her next novel.” The groom murmured something noncommittal, obviously not as impressed with the earl’s fabricated tale as he’d made it seem.

He offered his arm to her and they walked away. “Why did you say that?” she whispered.

“Isn’t it true?”

“Well, I suppose, but the way you phrased it?—”

“Are you a writer or not, Miss Newton? If so, then perhaps you have gained some resources for your next story.”

Her lips twitched and she finally relented. “Perhaps you are correct, my lord.”

For a time they strolled down the main thoroughfare of the town. It was quite freeing to walk alongside a man like Lord Belmont without a care in the world. Whenever someone stopped to inquire about their day and gain an introduction to Meliah, the earl continued to regale her attributes. They must have wondered where her chaperone was, but no one said anything against the earl, and many of the others were impressed that she was a prospective author.

The lady who ran the millinery said as much when they entered her shop. But when the earl walked over to a bonnet and glanced at her, as if trying to decide something, she had a sinking sensation. “Don’t think about it,” she warned.

“You said you would allow a gift.”

“Yes. Something small, like a... letter opener or something useful.”

He held up the bonnet he’d been perusing. “Is this not useful?”

She set her mouth in a mutinous line. “It’s not generally something a weaver’s daughter might wear, so no.”

He scoffed, and without taking his eyes off of Meliah, handed it over to the shop owner. “We’ll take it.”

As they left the shop, hat box held loosely in his grasp, she asked, “Why did you do that? I explained what was acceptable and what was not.”

“There are two answers I might give for that,” he noted nonchalantly. “One, I’m not in the habit of doing what other people tell me, and two—” He paused and turned to her. “I wanted to see you dressed as you deserve.”

Meliah wasn’t willing to air her grievances out in the middle of the street, but she could tell that this obstinate man wasn’t going to listen unless she became more forceful. “It doesn’t matter what I deserve or not. It’s my situation, and that doesn’t call for fripperies such as that. If you were to give that to me, I daresay I will be forced to sell it rather than find an occasion in which to wear it, so you might as well keep it for your next paramour.”

He sighed, a slight frown forming between his brows. “Forgive me, I suppose I didn’t

think?—”

“No, you didn’t.” Meliah glanced about and the earlier cheer she’d imagined had suddenly turned into curious onlookers watching their exchange. Dear God, what was she doing there? She must have forgotten reality for a time, lost to the luxuries that would never be a part of her future. She had come there with a purpose, but somehow, that had faded, while her emotions had risen to take its place.

She looked at Lord Belmont— Elwood —with his slight stubble along that strong jaw, the dark hair and piercing blue eyes, and she realized that she had fallen prey to more than just a deceptive rake.

She had fallen in love.

In three days.

Putting a hand to her stomach, she feared she might retch at the danger she had put herself in. Without knowing exactly how it had happened, she had lost all control. “I’m not feeling well. If you don’t mind, I should like to go now.”

He grasped her elbow. “Of course.”

She was grateful he said nothing more as they made their way back to the livery. After he assisted her into the carriage, he climbed into the vehicle and with a flick of the reins, they were on their way once more.

When they were safely out of earshot of any villager, Elwood asked, “What’s really bothering you?”

“Nothing.”

He clenched his jaw. “You can’t expect me to believe that.”

She didn’t reply, but looked out over the landscape.

“Meliah, answer me.”

She spun on him. “Leave it alone. I don’t want to discuss this with you.”

He’d had enough. Pulling back on the reins, he set the brake and put his hand on her arm. He was surprised to see her green eyes shining with unshed tears. “Talk to me, Meliah. What is it?”

“Please, just take me back home. To London. Where I belong.”

He lowered his head and tried to make sense of her sudden change in spirits. “Is it the bonnet? If it bothers you that much, I will return it right now.”

She closed her eyes and his chest ached at the pain that shot through the center of it.

“All I ask is that you just let me go.”

“How can you ask that of me now?” Her eyes opened and he grasped her other arm, dragging her to him for a kiss that left them both wanting more. “Is it the article you say you will no longer write?” He found he had to swallow past the lump in his throat before he could speak again. “It’s all true. Is that what you wanted to know?”

She gasped. “What?”

The grip on her arm tightened slightly. Not enough to cause pain, but combined with the look on his face, he hoped it was enough to convey his seriousness. “Every word that was written about me was true. I did it all. I was the most worthless rake that you

could ever hope to meet. Anyone would have warned you to steer clear from me and with just cause. I would court a lady just for fun and discard her at the earliest opportunity. The thought of being with anyone for long turned my stomach. I was with my last mistress for four months. It was the height of any relationship I've had thus far." Elwood found that once he had started speaking, the words wouldn't stop. This confession had been long overdue. "I brought you here because I thought it would be a lark, have a bit of fun before you went back to London, but there is... something about you that I can't explain. I just know that I've never felt this way before. It's madness, it's absolute insanity, and I have no idea how to react to it, except make a complete fool out of myself, apparently."

His mouth crooked, hoping that she would laugh at his attempt at a jest. But her continued silence was almost condemning. She looked ill, as if she had bitten into something unsavory. And for the first time in his life, he started to feel true fear. "I know I don't have the right to ask you to stay, but I would make it worth your while."

She stilled. "You're asking me to be your mistress again?"

"Yes. No." He shoved a hand through his hair. "I don't know. I just know I don't want whatever we have to end yet. I don't want you to go back to London."

She exhaled slowly. "You know it's impossible for me to stay and retain my reputation. I would never survive the scandal."

"You think I would just toss you to the wolves when we parted?" He shook his head. "I might be a scoundrel, but I'm not ruthless, as much as you might believe me to be. You would be well compensated." When she looked back over the distance of the rolling hills beyond, he put a finger under her chin and urged her back around to face him. "Say something, please."

CHAPTER 13

Meliah wanted to tell him that she appreciated his candor, but the fact he had taken her to his father's hunting box with the sole purpose of seduction made her wonder if the words he spoke now could hold true. For a man with such an unsavory background as Elwood had lived, could it be possible for him to know anything other than deceit?

This entire endeavor had been foolish. She should have never thought she could take on a man like Lord Belmont. She had been naïve in the extreme to think otherwise. And to believe she had the talent to compare to someone like "The Belle." It was another folly she must regrettably face. It would be best if she ended things now before any more damage could occur and return home, confide to her parents what she'd done while praying that they would forgive her reprehensible actions.

"You need to take me back to the village."

He released his breath and she could hear the relief as he did so. His hands dropped back to his sides. "I would gladly let you talk to anyone you?—"

"I wish to secure passage back to London."

He had been about to release the brake, but at her statement, he paused. "What?"

She dared to lift her gaze to his and tried to look past the sudden flash in his blue eyes. "You heard me."

It took a moment for him to recover. “You won’t even consider my proposition?”

She softened her tone slightly. “I appreciate your honesty, but committing to something that dangerous is a bit... more than I am willing to agree to right now.” She glanced down at her lap. “Besides, it’s likely for the best that this association ends between us now before things get completely out of hand.”

“Association?” he laughed with a bitter tone. “Is that all you believe us to be?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” she snapped in return. For a moment, their gazes clashed. “Since you were so open with me, allow me to be the same. You asked if something was bothering me this morning and I realized I was staring at a plate of ham and eggs.”

When she paused, she could tell he didn’t follow.

“That is a luxury that not many people in my world dare to hope for,” she explained softly. “The truth is we are nothing alike. I might wish for something different, but it shall never be. I need to accept that, just as you are an earl and are expected to do your duty to your family and your line with someone who properly fills that role. Commoners and the peerage don’t mix, unless it is during a special event where the downstairs servants must cater to the upper floors.”

“Meliah—”

She held up a hand. “You cannot contradict me on this because you know it’s true.” He clenched his jaw mutinously, but remained silent. “That is why I’m telling you to let me go now, to send me back to London. We both know the article I meant to write was a sham. I could have never gone through with trying to destroy anyone’s reputation beyond repair, should they become my worst enemy. I certainly couldn’t have done it to you, and although I would like to stay, I must begin to think

rationally. The fairytale has ended and I would do well to return to reality.”

He regarded her for a long time, and then seemed to resign himself to her decision, “Very well.” He flicked the reins and continued toward the manor. “But I refuse for you to take the mail coach when I can take you there myself.”

Tears stung Meliah’s eyes. The prospect of accepting his illicit offer had been entirely too tempting. The single thing that kept her from saying yes wasn’t just the doubts about his sincerity, but she was afraid that when he decided he was done with her she wouldn’t be able to withstand the despair of leaving him.

She was grateful when they finally reached the manor so that it might give her time to collect her thoughts, but when she noticed a coach sitting in the drive with the crest of the Marquess of Traverson emblazoned on the side, the breath froze in her lungs. It didn’t help that she heard the earl mutter a curse beneath his breath. “Stay here.”

As he climbed down from the curricule and tossed the reins to a waiting groom, Meliah gathered her skirts and climbed down as Lord Belmont disappeared into the manor. She wasn’t certain what his father might be doing there, but neither did she intend to allow cowardice to keep her immobile.

The last thing Elwood needed was this unwanted interruption. He had told his sire that he was handling things with the sale of the hunting box, so he didn’t understand the reason he was there. Not only that, but he was hoping to mend things with Meliah, to compel her to stay with him so that he might convince her not to leave.

“Ah, there you are.” Elwood hesitated as his father came walking forward from the direction of the study. His voice did not sound pleased. “I was told you had gone into the village.” He paused and if possible, his expression turned darker. “With some gel that you’ve invited to stay here.”

Elwood held up a hand. “You don’t understand. We?—”

“Spare me any further excuses,” his father snapped. “I am well aware of your continued exploits. I was hoping that the distraction of the hunting box might have reminded you of your duty to the family, but I found it difficult to ignore the threat of scandal when you are mentioned every time I turned my back. I daresay I have been hoping you might curb some of your appetites and settle down and start a family. Now I have begun to despair you ever shall. I came here, hoping to learn that the rumors being circulated are unfounded, only to learn you are cavorting with some woman who, no doubt, has loose morals.”

“It’s not like that,” Elwood gritted through his teeth. He was about to lose his temper, which he knew would be the wrong thing to do. Most generally, his father was right about everything, but in this case, he had missed the mark. “Miss Newton is a writer.”

“Is she?” the marquess snorted, unimpressed. “There seems to be a lot of interest in that regard lately.”

Elwood clenched his fists. His father had never been a cruel or unkind parent, but he could be harsh if the situation warranted it. When it came to his eldest son, he had always found it necessary to make his opinions known. “If you were hoping for a marriage announcement, I’m not certain I could live up to the glorious expectations that you and Mother share.”

“There is nothing wrong with being devoted to a spouse,” his father countered firmly. “So long as she is of the proper lineage. Is this woman you’ve been consorting with the same ilk as that actress you were so besotted with some months ago? Or perhaps she is like the mistress you recently dismissed?” He shook his head. “Some days I fear that the title was wasted on a wastrel like you.”

Elwood refused to let words do much damage, but they hurt nevertheless. “Perhaps it

was.”

The air crackled with unbridled anger, and although Elwood and his father had never come to blows, he wondered if that day had finally arrived.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, but if I might interject?—”

Elwood and his father both swiveled their heads to the front door where Meliah stood silhouetted in the afternoon light.

“This is a family matter,” his father thundered. “It doesn’t concern you.”

For an instant, Elwood’s fists clenched. Very few people stood up to his father. He was an imposing man with his proud stature and salt-and-pepper hair, but he wasn’t going to allow Meliah to absorb the brunt of his anger when it was directed at him .

Meliah walked forward as if she hadn’t just been ordered to stand down, and offered a slight curtsy. “Forgive the intrusion, Lord Traverson, but Lord Belmont speaks the truth. I am a writer and I was here to write an article about him.”

“Were you now?” the marquess muttered, unimpressed.

She cleared her throat, and he narrowed his gaze on her. Elwood tensed, prepared to step in if necessary. “You shall be pleased to note that Lord Belmont has been nothing but considerate during my time here.”

“I’m sure of it.” His father glared at him.

“You should also know that the villagers have nothing but the highest respect for him and your family.” She took a deep breath. “When I arrived here, I was under the same misconception that you are now. Granted, the earl might have sowed a few wild oats

before now, but I am confident that he is more than capable of making you proud. He came here with the sole purpose of abiding by your wishes. He met with the land steward just yesterday, and I believe he received a favorable report regarding the state of the modest vineyard on the grounds. And might I say they are some of the finest grapes I have ever consumed.” She paused to brush at her gown and pat her hair, and Elwood found his father looking at her quite curiously, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to make of the lady.

Elwood thought she was magnificent. With a few, carefully chosen words, she had managed to diffuse an otherwise, heated encounter.

“Now, if you will both excuse me, I was just about to pack my belongings and return to London. I have been away long enough, and I shouldn’t wish to cause any further undue speculation.”

With another curtsy, she turned and headed up the stairs.

Meliah could feel both pairs of eyes boring into her as she took her leave. She was proud of herself for adopting such a calm demeanor when her heart had been about to pound out of her chest. Her mother would have been horrified to know that she’d dared to speak so boldly to a high-ranking member of the peerage, but she couldn’t just stand by and watch him berate Elwood in such a manner. For all of his faults, he had become particularly special to her.

She entered her chamber and shut the door, releasing a deep breath as she leaned against the solid oak. Closing her eyes, she told herself not to cry. Before she’d made her presence known, she had overheard what Elwood had said about his parents and living up to their expectations. His mocking tone further proved that he might never be capable of anything more than a brief affair with anyone. He claimed she was different, and yet, he spoke of love and happiness as if it was distasteful in the extreme.

Then again, it wasn't as if anything more would come of their association. The difference in their stations would never be fully overlooked by society—by anyone.

She opened her eyes and pushed away from the door, determined to leave before she was incapable of doing so and truly ruining her life beyond repair.

Glancing about the room, she made to gather a few things, but then she remembered that none of the items there were hers. Lord Belmont might have procured some of the items from the village for her use, but she considered them a temporary loan. As much as she hated the thought of donning that dreaded pink dress, she knew it was the only thing she could truly leave with, and even that wasn't hers. She had deluded herself for too long. It was time to remind herself who she was—and where she belonged.

A soft knock came at the door and she prepared herself to see the earl on the other side. When she opened it, she swallowed past the lump of regret in her throat. She realized how much she would miss him. She let her eyes roam over his face, over every hard line and virile part of him, to hold close to her heart and lock away in her memory.

He seemed to be doing the same, and when he caught sight of the dress she was wearing, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I can see you are determined to go."

"I told you I was," she returned softly.

He seemed to be waging a war within himself, until he finally shut the door behind him and dragged her into his arms. "What can I do to convince you to stay? Just one more day?"

Meliah's emotions were starting to crack. She had to be strong, but he was making it almost impossible to resist him. "I can't stay here and be the sort of woman that your

father accused me of being.”

“Don’t you dare compare yourself?—”

“If I stayed,” she smoothly interjected. “There would be no difference.”

Again, his face was a mix of emotions. “Damn it all.” With that, he turned and yanked the door open, striding out into the hall.

Meliah watched him go until he disappeared from sight, and then she dared to head down the stairs. When she reached the foyer, she wasn’t certain what she might do next. Elwood had told her he would escort her to London, but considering their current difference of opinion, she could no longer expect to rely on his good will. However, she found she didn’t have to concern herself with the task, because to her surprise, the marquess was waiting for her. “I am returning to London, and I would be glad to escort you.”

Now that some of her bravery had disappeared with her encounter with Lord Belmont, she found herself at a loss for words. “I couldn’t ask that of you, my lord?—”

“Nonsense. I am heading back to my estate and it would be foolish to make you wait any longer to return home.” He glanced past her to where Elwood had disappeared. “Unless, of course, you have another reason to remain.”

She had to force herself not to turn around to see if he was there when something told her he wasn’t. “No. There is nothing left for me here. I shall gratefully accept your generous offer, my lord.”

CHAPTER 14

Elwood slumped in his chair in the study at his London townhouse, convinced that he had been wrong before. He thought he'd slipped into the realm of hell when he had been chased with the proverbial pitchforks and torches, but it was nothing compared to the misery he was going through now.

He hadn't intended on coming back here so soon, knowing that Meliah was somewhere in the same vicinity, but he told himself that he intended to suffer whatever ridicule and misery that he might have to endure because he was deserving of every bit of it.

It had been a sennight of self-loathing that he'd been unable to shake since she'd left. He had exhausted all his efforts at ridding his guilt in more than one bottle of brandy, but it had been for naught. As soon as his mind was able to regain some semblance of normalcy, his thoughts were flooded with Meliah and how he'd managed to ruin the one thing that might have actually mattered in his life. At the same time, he despised the way he yearned to run to her house and beg her forgiveness and pour out his heart. After running from love for nearly twenty-eight years, it had struck him unaware, and with all the force of a lightning bolt to the chest.

Determined to focus his attention on something other than Miss Newton, he riffled through the mail on his desk that had been sorely neglected. He passed over the invitations and correspondence that held his mother's handwriting, but paused when he saw a notice from his solicitor.

Feeling a shiver of apprehension traveling up his spine, Elwood broke the seal and

read the brief, but overwhelming missive that claimed he'd found a buyer for the hunting box and they were ready to take possession as soon as he could find a time to meet. Although it was the marquess' choice to sell the land, he'd left it up to Elwood to finalize the particulars on his behalf. For all his faults, he had succeeded.

Tossing the letter on top of the desk, he put his head in his hands. It was as if he was losing another part of himself by letting that box go to someone else. But what purpose did he have to keep it? His townhouse was more than enough for a bachelor and when his father passed, he would gain the estate. His younger brothers all had residences and families of their own. That cottage was being sadly neglected of late, except for his recent stay there, and it was right that it should be sold. And yet, something rebelled at the idea of selling it. He had a lot of good memories from his childhood there, and then, of course, he would always remember Meliah and their brief liaison whenever he returned. That alone should have been enough reason for him to sign his name on the paperwork and hand over the keys, but he continued to hesitate.

There was a knock at the door and a footman walked inside. The stiff, formal man bowed respectfully to him. Again, Elwood thought of the staff that kept watch over the hunting box and he lamented their easy banter when they waited on him. But London was entirely too formal. Servants weren't about to cross that invisible line. He'd never bothered to think about the class difference so much before, because he'd grown up with the way things were supposed to be—but they were also the way things Meliah thought they should be, and he didn't like that comparison. “My lord, the marchioness is here to see you.”

Elwood groaned inwardly. He glanced down at his rumpled clothing and the discarded jacket that was thrown over the settee. “Tell her I'm busy?—”

“Really, Belmont, you don't have time for your own mother?”

Elwood smirked as the elder woman sailed into the room. She looked as she always did, perfectly put together and fashionable. She was still a very handsome woman with her intelligent blue eyes and faded black hair threaded with bits of silver. She had always been the epitome of what a lady of breeding should be, and not only did his father love her for her smooth way of dealing with any situation, he adored her because his love was without restraint.

Elwood had never been immune to her charm and had nothing but respect for both of his parents, but right now, he wasn't in the mood to humor anyone.

He didn't rise at her entrance, but rather leaned back in his chair and waved a hand at her. "Of course, Lady Traverson," he drawled. "I thought my footman was referring to someone else entirely. My mistake."

She lifted a brow as she walked over and stood in front of the desk, staring down at him. "Don't be cross, Elwood." He knew when she adopted that tone and used his name rather than his title, she was expressing her annoyance. "You didn't return my letter. Since I learned of the horrid state you were in when your father returned home, I thought you might be acting foolishly." She stared pointedly at the nearly empty bottle close to him. "I see that you have, but not in the way I might have hoped."

He snorted. "Like marry the chit?"

"Actually, I hoped you had."

At that, Elwood perked up slightly. "What are you talking about? She's a commoner. No doubt both you and father would have an apoplexy if I dared to elevate a weaver's daughter to a countess."

She lifted her chin slightly. "While it has always been expected for you to marry a debutante worthy of the family lineage, it is not a requirement. Both your father and I

have always wanted your happiness. There are very few couples in society that manage to obtain love and I have found much joy in doing so. That does not mean I don't expect certain qualifications for a potential daughter-in-law, but from what your father has said, Miss Newton acted with all the decorum and proper speech as any young lady who might choose to impress you by vying for nothing more than your title."

Elwood wasn't sure if he could quite believe what he was hearing. He sat forward slowly. "Are you actually saying that you are both giving your blessing on a match?"

"You find that difficult to comprehend?" she returned evenly. Sitting down in front of him, she set her hands together in her lap and said, "My dear boy, while you are a man grown and have done what you wished for a number of years, I was starting to despair that you would ever find someone to settle down with. It would be best for the entire family if you cease causing scandal and become the honorable Earl of Belmont, future Marquess Traverson, that we all know you can be. If this is the woman who can manage the impossible, then by all means, I am overjoyed that you have found someone who has captured your heart."

A strange sort of buzzing began to ring in his ears. Normally, it meant he was about to collapse from the strain of trying to ward off the marriage minded mothers and their daughters they kept flinging in his direction. But this time, it was the anticipation of approaching Meliah and bending down on one knee in front of her.

Unfortunately, there was one more impediment that kept him from running out the door. "I suppose wonders never cease," he murmured. "But what if her modest background is revealed? She will be ostracized from polite society."

His mother lifted a coy brow and rose to her feet once more. "You have always been resourceful in your endeavors. I'm sure you will find a way to make it work, if Miss Newton is whom you truly want. Your father and I will do what we can to support the

union, but it will not come lightly for either of you. You just have to decide if she's worth it."

On that note, she turned on her heel and sailed back out the door.

Elwood blew out a heavy breath, his mind suddenly racing. His mother had given him a lot to consider, not the least of which was the approval he didn't think he would obtain.

But it was enough.

Meliah was enough.

"Meliah?"

She blinked and looked up at her mother. "Yes?"

The middle-aged woman looked tired, her simple brown frock hanging loosely on her frame, but it was the concern in her tone that caused Meliah's heart to sink. "I called your name three times. Are you sure everything is well? You haven't been yourself since you returned from your extended visit with Samantha in London."

It was the same question that her mother had posed for the past week, and yet, Meliah was no closer to an answer. At least, none that would be truthful. She continued to mourn the loss of Lord Belmont, although she'd tried to convince herself that he had probably already forgotten her completely. They hadn't parted on the best of terms, and he was likely still upset she'd chosen to leave instead of stay and cause her heart further grief when they eventually parted.

"I think I just need some fresh air," she noted.

“Of course.” Her mother looked at her curiously, but Meliah couldn’t focus on that too much, or else she might find herself breaking down and explaining her actions, and that wouldn’t be good for anyone. Her mother might sympathize for a time, but her father would surely be disappointed. The knowing looks he’d given her upon her return had nearly made her reveal the guilt of her actions.

Meliah walked outside and sat down on the stone steps in the alleyway beside her parent’s shop. She stared at her plain shoes that were starting to need repaired again. The coarse wool gown she wore irritated her now that she’d worn fine muslins.

Tears stung the back of her eyes knowing that such luxuries were never to be hers again. But it was more than the fashions and the extravagant surroundings that she missed. She thought of Elwood constantly, the warmth of his touch and the feel of his lips on hers. She yearned for just a glimpse of him, but that would be a mistake. He likely wasn’t back in London yet anyway. There were still more than two weeks of October and the new rake would not be revealed until the following month.

Nevertheless, she had caught herself contemplating a return to the hunting box and begging Lord Belmont to take her back. But she couldn’t do that to her family—to disrespect them by being another man’s mistress.

When the marquess had dropped her off near the Floris perfumery on Jermyn Street, Meliah had made haste to find Samantha and her orange cart. To say that her friend had been worried sick with her absence had been an understatement. After she’d explained in detail the whole sordid affair from her time with the earl, her devoted friend’s face darkened with malicious intent.

“He is just as horrible as ‘The Belle’ claimed!”

Meliah had immediately risen to his defense. “I believed so at first, but there is something... different about him from before. I can’t explain it.”

“Because he has used you most ill and convinced you that he isn’t the worst man to walk this earth!” Samantha snapped, but then she’d softened her tone with a regrettable look in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Mel. I am not without blame. I encouraged you, so some of that guilt lays directly on my shoulders.”

Meliah closed her eyes and released a heavy sigh. She still recalled every word of that exchange and she lamented hurting Samantha, because how could she tell her she’d fallen in love with the earl after such a short acquaintance? She would never believe it.

Following that unwanted exchange, Meliah had returned home and told her parents her fabricated story about being with Samantha. Afterward, exhaustion had settled in and she’d gone to bed and slept until the next morning. When she arose, the first thing she had spied was her novel, sitting inconspicuously on her desk. She recalled the hours she’d spent writing by dim, tallow light, her hand aching from holding the pen so long into the night.

She had ignored it then, and she continued to do so. She had planned to gain notice by confirming “The Belle’s” article, but now, she had nothing to make the printers take notice of her talents. She certainly wasn’t confident enough in her writing to do anything about it at the moment. Perhaps someday soon she would dare to find the courage.

“There you are.”

Meliah’s eyes flew open and she lifted her head to see her father standing in the doorframe. She got to her feet and brushed off her skirts. “I’m sorry, Papa. I was just gathering my thoughts. I’ll return to work?—”

“There is someone here who wishes to speak with you.”

Immediately, a strange fluttering started in the pit of her stomach. “Who is it?”

He smiled tightly. “First, let me say that I have noticed some reticence in your work since you returned from London.” She started to open her mouth, but he held up a hand. “Please, let me finish.” She fell silent. “I started to wonder if perhaps you are here because you have to be, not because you want to be. Your mother and I would like to see you take over the shop, but if you prefer another occupation, you have only to say so. I don’t want to pressure you into something that will make you unhappy for the rest of your days. Life is difficult enough for people in our position without despising waking up in the mornings.”

He glanced away, and Meliah wondered, for the first time, if he was speaking from experience and had a certain resentment toward his own occupation.

“I suppose I just want to secure your happiness above all else. But for a single woman in your position, it is difficult to do that.” His focus swung back to her. “In that regard, I have taken the liberty of speaking to the baker’s son about securing your hand in marriage. He is waiting at the front of the shop to speak with you, and I hope that you will consider his proposal. I believe that having a husband and children will suit you much better than this life.”

For a moment, Meliah couldn’t speak. Shock kept her immobile. When she finally found her voice, she was about to decline the offer, but it was her father’s hopeful expression that caused her to hesitate. It was obvious that he was trying to do something right by her, and considering her actions of late, along with the slim chance that the earl might ever arrive to offer himself in the baker’s stead, she squared her shoulders and reminded herself that things could be much more difficult. The baker’s son had always treated her with polite decorum, and although she might not feel the same sort of all-consuming passion that Lord Belmont had caused in her chest, at least she could rest easy knowing that she had done the right thing by her parents. Happiness would surely come in time.

“Of course, Papa. I am sure he is a good choice.” She walked over and grasped his hand. “I love you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “And I, you.”

As they walked away together, Meliah was rebelling at the idea of being with anyone else but the earl, but this man was here and Elwood was not, so what other choice did she have?

CHAPTER 15

Elwood had some things to do before he could offer himself to Meliah without any restraint. He was grateful that some of the attention regarding his notorious status as Rake of the Month had dimmed, so that he could leave the sanctuary of his townhouse without getting bombarded by half of society's irate females.

He spoke with his solicitor and once the arrangements had been made, he headed for Mayfair. He didn't know the name of Meliah's parents' shop, but he knew an orange seller who did.

He did a bit of asking around, but it didn't take him long to find someone named Samantha, who soon confirmed she was Meliah's friend. She was a plain girl with brown hair, and as he approached her, her welcoming expression hardened.

"Good day, madam. My name is?—"

"I know who you are, Lord Belmont," she returned stiffly. "If you are here about Meliah, I'm afraid I can't help you."

He frowned. "Please, I must know where to find her."

She glanced around to make sure they weren't being overheard, and then she hissed, "You would do well to leave her alone. She has a chance to get over you and move on. She is to be married and?—"

He instantly held up a hand. "Wait. What did you say?"

Her brown eyes narrowed with a wary glint. “Meliah is betrothed. Matthew is a kind man and will treat her well, unlike you, who only wants?—”

“You misunderstand,” he snapped. “ We want the same thing—Meliah’s happiness. I think I can give that to her.” He stopped himself. “I know I can give her that. But not if I don’t have a chance to plead my case.”

The girl crossed her arms. “Why should I help you when it has taken you this long to figure out if you care for her or not?”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “Suffice it to say I’ve never been in this position before. Neither do I intend to confess my life to you in the middle of the street where anyone might hear, but I will do it if that is what it takes.”

For an instant, she continued to glare at him, but she eventually softened. “Brick Lane. Number 17?—”

She hadn’t finished speaking before Elwood was rushing off. He climbed into his phaeton which was waiting a short distance away, grabbed the reins and headed for Spitalfields.

He found his way to Brick Lane and inspected each of the faded signs before he spied Number 17. He didn’t waste time making his way to the front of the establishment and pushing his way inside.

When he stepped over the threshold, the first thing he heard was the unmistakable, clanking sound of a loom. There was also the scent of various dyes permeating in the air. Having never been into a weaver’s shop, it took him a moment to recall why he was there.

Meliah .

There was a pause in the rhythmic motion of the loom as a small, statuesque woman came into view. She wore a simple cap over her hair and a welcoming smile, but it was the green eyes that captured his attention. They were exactly like her daughter's.

"Mrs. Newton?"

She looked surprised. "Yes, sir?"

He removed his hat and set it to his side. "I was hoping to speak with Miss Newton. Is she here?"

Rather than reply, she looked behind her, where a man of average height and build appeared. He had faded brown hair and a direct gaze. Again, Elwood was reminded of Meliah, most notably the first time they'd spoken—when she'd accosted him in his bedchamber. "Might I ask your business with my daughter?" he asked.

Something told Elwood that Meliah hadn't said anything to her parents about him. "I was wanting to speak with her about a prospective... position."

Mr. Newton nodded his head, although his expression wasn't entirely confident that he believed his claim. Elwood didn't care, so long as he found Meliah. "I'm sure she would be interested, but she has just become recently engaged. She may not have time for what you have in mind."

Elwood could feel panic starting to set in. "I should still like to speak with her if you will but tell me where she is."

Her father glanced at his wife and then seemed to make a decision. "They went for a walk, but should be back momentarily."

Elwood inclined his head and then returned his hat to his head. "Thank you, Mr.

Newton.”

With that, he turned on his heel and went outside to wait.

Meliah had a slight smile on her face as she conversed with her betrothed. It was so strange to think of the solemn man beside her as her future husband. Of course, the more time she spent with Matthew, the more she was able to convince herself that he would be a good man to spend the rest of her days with.

He wasn't devastatingly handsome like Lord Belmont, but neither did he seem to be the type to stray when the years passed and they grew weary with one another. He was considerate, offering his arm to her as they walked, but after he asked permission to do so. She had no doubt that he would be a caring lover as well, regardless if the idea of laying with anyone other than Elwood made her sick to her stomach.

However, for her family, she was determined to go through with this union and make the best of it. She could certainly do much worse.

Matthew continued to speak about their future together and how he planned to take over his father's shop someday, and how they would have to live above the bakery. “Father promised me that we could have the bed and he would sleep elsewhere?—”

She winced at the idea of her father-in-law listening to them consummate their marriage night after night, but she smiled and nodded, as if she agreed to everything he promised and was glad to do so.

“I daresay your parents must be doing well for themselves if they have the gentry knocking at their door.”

At the change in topic, Meliah glanced at him. “Pardon?”

He nodded in front of them. “Do you know him? He appears to be walking this way.”

Meliah turned her head, and suddenly, everything around her faltered. Her steps came to an abrupt halt, as did the air in her lungs.

“Meliah?”

She heard Matthew calling her name, but she couldn’t seem to focus on anything but Lord Belmont as he strode purposefully toward her. Her hand covered her pounding heart as he stopped before them.

“I need to speak with you.” He barely spared a glance for Matthew and that didn’t settle well with her.

Coming to her senses, she motioned to her fiancée. “This is Matthew Wilde. My betrothed.”

She thought she heard the earl mutter, “Not if I have anything to say about it,” before he grasped her elbow and steered her in the direction they had just come from.

“Sir, I must protest?—!”

The earl turned back to him and said, “No, you won’t. You shall allow us to speak in private because I asked nicely. If you do that, I will make sure to offer a sizeable donation to your father’s bakery.”

Matthew’s eyes widened, and he practically backed down the street with a bow. “Of course, sir! Thank you very much!”

As Lord Belmont continued to steer her in the opposite direction, she found her anger outweighing her delight upon seeing him. “That was completely uncalled for! How

dare you browbeat him into doing what you want? I had hoped that you had changed?—”

“I have,” he snipped. He glanced about and then steered her down an alley between two other shops. Pinning her against the brick wall with his body, he said, “I can’t abide the thought of you giving yourself to someone like that... boy .”

She gasped in outrage, but her breathing had begun to deepen. “Matthew is two and twenty, a year older than me, but with infinitely more manners than you! I cannot believe that you are considered a gentleman. He ?—”

His mouth covered hers, and any further discussion was dismissed by the hot invasion of his kiss.

She was starting to fall down that dreaded abyss of carnal desire, but she forced herself to stop this madness. Putting her hands on his chest, she tried to push him away. She couldn’t make him budge at all, but at least he ceased his exploits.

“Do you still want to talk about him—or us?”

She narrowed her eyes. “There is no us. You wanted me to be your mistress and I cannot disrespect my parents like that. I refuse to do it.”

“I’m not here to ask you to consider that proposal any longer. I am here because I want you to accept another.”

Her eyes widened, and Elwood could tell she was confused. He reached out and traced a gentle line along her smooth jaw and then traced her full lower lip with his thumb.

“What are you saying?” she whispered.

He grinned, knowing that she would be thrilled. “I want you to marry me.”

Again, there was that astonished hesitation, but when he expected her to throw her arms around him with enthusiasm, she shoved out of his embrace and turned on him with emerald fury shining out of her gaze. “You’re too late, Lord Belmont. I’ve already given my word to marry Matthew.”

This time, he was the one who was taken aback—until he realized that she was serious. “Meliah, you’re not thinking sensibly—” He reached for her, but she slid just out of reach.

“I most certainly am. My time with you was a whirlwind, a passion filled frenzy that would have never lasted. You told me yourself that you can’t abide affection, that sex is the only thing that matters to you?—”

“That was before I met you .” Elwood was starting to get desperate. All the wonderful things he’d imagined might happen were starting to fade into oblivion. He gave a heavy exhale. “How can I prove to you that my adoration is genuine?”

She said nothing.

He thought of what he’d done earlier that day and while he had wanted it to be a surprise after their wedding day, he decided that he needed to reveal his trump card now. “What if I told you that I’m keeping Belmont Hall?”

He was glad to see interest spark in her eyes. “I thought your father wanted to sell it?”

“He did, but there were too many memories there for me to ignore. From the days of my childhood, the vineyard—” He slowly moved closer to her. “—and recently when you were there, I realized that I couldn’t part with it. I intend to fill the nursery and do what my parents always wanted me to do—marry and start a family.”

Elwood waited patiently for her to understand the ramifications of his actions. He prayed that she would see how much she meant to him now.

“I think it’s wonderful what you are doing,” she began, her voice trembling as she spoke. “But what happens when the honeymoon has reached its conclusion? I don’t want to be another conquest, Lord Belmont. I want to be with someone who will love me and cherish me the way I deserve.”

His mouth twisted. “And you believe Matthew is the one who can accomplish that?” He reached out and grasped her arms. “I felt the way you responded to my touch. You are the one who is facing an unsatisfying future with a man who is entirely wrong for you. We belong together, Meliah.”

Her throat worked as she swallowed. “I’m sorry,” she whispered harshly. “But like writing, it is just another impossible dream. I have made my decision. What happened at that hunting box was a mistake. We were a mistake. You have to let me go and move on as I have done. Goodbye, my lord.”

Elwood wanted to stop her, but when she pulled away from him, he did as she asked and let her go. However, what she didn’t know was that he was determined, and he wasn’t going to lose this fight so easily.

He might have lost this battle, but he would win the war, and he knew what to do to ensure victory.

CHAPTER 16

Three weeks later...

Meliah glanced at her reflection in the looking glass on her dressing table. Although it was aged with time, it told her what she needed to know. It was her wedding day, and her eyes were red and puffy from the crying she'd done the night before. The sunlight pouring through the single pane window was almost ridiculous in its glory when she was feeling so miserable on what should be the most joyous day of her life.

Surely Lord Belmont had to know how much she would suffer from his words, how desperately she wanted to believe him and ignore the rest of the world and run away into his waiting arms. It was her pride that kept her from doing so, and the love for her mother and father. They had sacrificed much over the years to ensure that she'd had a good education and had a roof over her head and food in her belly. There were times it was tough, but they had survived.

She would survive Lord Belmont too.

There was a knock at her door, and it opened to reveal her mother. Meliah turned in her pale yellow frock with tears shining in her eyes. She tried to say that they were tears of joy, but there was no use deceiving herself. At least she could take heart in the veil that had been handsewn by her mother years ago as part of her trousseau. The chest also included a soft, wool blanket, a handmade cloak, and several embroidered handkerchiefs. However modest it all might be, she couldn't have asked for more to begin her new life.

“You look lovely, Meliah,” her mother said lightly. “Are you nervous?”

She hoped this wasn't the moment when her mother gave her the wedding night talk. It was much too late for that. She feared what she might do if Matthew learned she was no longer a virgin, but considering his innocent actions lately, she was doubtful he would be able to tell. “I'm fine,” she returned demurely.

Her mother paused, and Meliah wondered if something was amiss. Unable to keep her curiosity to herself, she asked, “What's wrong?”

She waved a hand. “Why don't we sit down.” Meliah did as her mother suggested. Once they were settled across from each other, Meliah noticed the paper held in her mother's grasp. Immediately, a shiver of apprehension trailed up her spine.

“Are you truly in love with Matthew?”

Meliah hadn't been prepared for such a direct question. She cleared her throat. “I'm sure, given enough time, that it will grow, the same as it did for you and Papa.”

Her mother sighed heavily. “I don't want this marriage to take place unless you are truly happy.” She glanced down at the Times . “After reading a certain article this morning, I have to wonder if your heart is already spoken for.”

Meliah's brows drew together. “What are you talking about?”

The paper was handed to her. “See for yourself.”

Trying to keep her hand from shaking, Meliah took the paper and slowly unfolded it. Turning to the gossip section, she started to read. When her ears started to buzz and her eyes blurred, she had to read it once more. And then another time...

I was recently targeted as the Rake of the Month by the notorious, Brazen Belle. For those in society who know me, you will have understood that particular title was highly earned. I had every intention of remaining just as I was, but there is something I have learned during my recent exile from society.

I took pleasure in whatever form I could find, whether it be a partner (or several) and my own devices. In the recent days I've discovered something very interesting. While I used to eschew mutual affection of any sort, I found someone who has made me complete. She is the other half of my soul that I did not know was missing. Because of her, I want to be a better person. I want to leave my licentious days behind me. I want... her.

Alas, she is to be married to another this very day and I am at the crux of my honor whether to interfere and ruin what might be a perfect union, or whisk her away to Gretna Green where she will be mine forever. I have always been a gentleman who took what he wanted without a second thought, further proof that I am forever changed.

Perhaps you might help to redeem my soul, readers of society. The lady in question is Miss N—and she lives on Brick Lane. Her parents have a modest weaver shop and I pray this sends some extra business their way, but more than that, I wish for one last chance to prove my devotion.

I shall be in Hyde Park this very morning, in which you may all witness my victory—or my demise. I am laying my entire heart bare for the world to see. I am on hands and knees, pleading that I might win this fair lady's hand. She is perfection itself and whether or not I am left standing alone at the end of the day, it is not anything less than I deserve for my past transgressions.

While Miss N— was supposed to be the one writing an article about me to showcase her writing talents, I fear these words had to be left to me in the form of a sincere

apology. I know I have used her most ill, but I vow that I will spend the rest of my days atoning for my sins if she would just meet me today.

With bated breath, I await...

Lord B ? —

“When did this happen, Meliah?”

Meliah slowly lowered the paper. She considered adding to her list of transgressions, the lies that continued to mount, but instead, she leaned back in the chair and felt her chin quiver. She covered her eyes with her hand. “I hardly know where to begin,” she whispered.

“How about from the beginning?”

She opened her eyes and glanced at her mother, who wore an empathetic look on her face. Taking a deep breath, she started to speak. She told her everything that happened, from the time Meliah had conceived the idea of writing an article to gain “The Belle’s” notice, to the day she came back to London. She wanted to conceal her actions during her stay at the hunting box, but she knew it was impossible. She would have to reveal all if she intended for her mother to fully understand her dilemma.

When she was finished, her mother gave a slight nod. “I think it’s clear what you must do.”

Meliah shook her head with a heavy sigh. “I wish I was that confident in my decision.”

“You know that you can’t enter into a marriage with Matthew under fabricated conditions. It wouldn’t be fair to either of you to begin your future based on lies.”

Meliah said nothing, as she had confessed as much to herself already. “And if what is written here is true, it sounds as though you have the chance very few have—to choose someone who makes you truly content. You can have wealth, adoration, and raise a family in the best circumstances.”

Meliah’s heart broke at the tears filling her mother’s eyes. “I have never once asked for more or regretted my modest upbringing with you and Papa.”

“I know you haven’t,” her mother returned gently. “Which is why I think you are one of the most deserving people to be blessed with such good fortune. I encourage you to run to this man at once and embrace everything he has to offer, but only if you love him in return.”

“I do.” Meliah swallowed over the lump forming in her throat. “But what about Papa? I don’t want to disappoint him. Or Matthew?—”

“Matthew is young, and he was encouraged into this union. He will recover, and there will be no harsh feelings. As for your father?—”

“I only want what is best for you.”

Meliah’s focus swung toward the doorway where her father was standing. She rose to her feet with a gasp. “Papa, I?—”

He waved a hand. “There is no need to explain. We all do things we might wish differently. The best thing I ever did was choosing your mother to be mine. Now you must do the same and follow your dreams.”

Meliah rushed over to him and threw herself into his arms. “Thank you, Papa.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t feel you could come to us with this revelation before now.”

His gaze was piercing, and Meliah had never been able to withstand it. She shuffled her feet and said softly, “I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me for acting with such abandon.”

“Sometimes the heart knows before we do,” her mother said as she walked over and put her arm around her husband’s waist. “It’s time to grasp your happy ever after.”

Meliah looked from one of her parents to the other, and without taking time to remove her veil, she rushed out the door.

Elwood yearned to pull on the tightly knotted cravat at his throat, but he refrained. He wanted to make sure he looked resplendent, whether he left this park as the happiest man alive—or the most despondent. Whatever the outcome, at least he could look his best when his pride fell apart. As well as his heart.

He sat on the bench, alone. There was a bouquet of flowers at his side and his grandmother’s sapphire ring in his pocket, his silver headed cane at his side, but that was all. He was sitting out in the open, vulnerable to all the prying eyes that surrounded him. In truth, it was a circus. If he wasn’t mistaken, he thought he spied a chestnut seller hawking his wares nearby.

Elwood attempted to keep his focus serene, without the tight lines of concern, but it was a struggle when he didn’t know if Meliah had read his article. It had taken all of his efforts and pleading to get it added to the paper. He could tell the printers weren’t pleased with the extra material, but he had made sure to accommodate them handsomely for their efforts.

He tugged at the sleeves of his dark blue superfine jacket and brushed away a stray bit of dust from his buff trousers. His black boots reflected the sunlight with how polished they were. He had ensured that everything was perfect for the occasion. He would have taken credit for the mild, late October day as well, but there were some

things that were beyond his power of manipulation.

Elwood glanced upward to the trees that were still trying to hang on to the last of the summer's leaves. They had lost their green pigment, fading to brown and becoming crinkled from the process of hibernation. But yet, the sign of hope that they didn't yet want to give in to the winter gave him the same sort of anticipation. Surely the fates wouldn't be so cruel as to send him on this spiraling romance only to lose everything just as quickly.

But perhaps it was to be exactly that.

He could have just been taught a harsh lesson. He might have finally learned to love, only to have his future ripped out from under him because he had done too many things to be regretful for. He wouldn't be surprised if it happened that way. The last revenge of the mysterious "Belle," who wanted to ensure that each and every rake reaped what they sowed.

Elwood decided that, no matter what occurred this day, he would leave with his head held high, and know that he had finally lived—because he knew what he'd been scorning for so many years.

True love.

It wasn't just a spark of passion, but an enduring change to his entire way of thinking. It was knowing that he had found the one person he could ever dare to stay with until death separated them, and then believed with all of his heart that they would be together forever in the twinkling stars in the glorious heavens.

His mouth curved in a smile, because if he would have spoken aloud, he knew how besotted he would sound, but neither did he care. His entire demeanor had changed.

The fine hairs on the back of his neck began to lift, as if in preparation for something.

His heart started to pound, and he returned his focus in front of him. He blinked, and then held his breath, wondering if he was actually beholding something real, or a dream borne of his imagination.

He slowly rose to his feet, and as Meliah started to move closer to him in her ivory gown and veil, he realized that she was truly there.

He waited for her to approach him. It seemed as if the minutes ticked by endlessly as he waited for her to stand before him. He could almost hear the collective intake of breath all around them, the crowd slowly starting to move in closer to overhear the exchange...

“Was it true?”

For a moment, he was at a loss, but then his rational mind took over. “Every. Word.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before now?”

He gave a one-sided shrug. “I suppose I just didn’t know how.”

She tilted her head to the side. “What changed?”

He dared to take a step closer. And then another, until he could reach out and cup the side of her face. “You.” He smiled slightly. “It was difficult to put into words what I feel about you. It’s like the tide crashing over the rocks, or a ship pitching on the sea. It’s turbulent, but there’s also nothing to compare it to. All I can hope to say is that I love you.”

She gave a sob and without warning, she threw herself into his arms and pressed her

lips against his.

The deafening sound of cheers went up all around them, but they ignored them all. Elwood kissed her back with all the adoration he felt toward her, and she returned the embrace in kind with every ounce of passion she possessed.

When they parted, he glanced down at her. “I think we are making a stir in society, and most definitely a scandal.”

“How wonderful,” she returned with a broad smile on her face. “At least that way everyone will know that the hunt for Mr. October has concluded and I have captured him.”

EPILOGUE

N ovember 1

“Are we nearly there?”

“Patience, my dear.”

Meliah was anxious to find out what her husband had in store for her for their honeymoon. It was quite irregular that anyone might actually choose All Saints Day as the day for their marriage, but they had both agreed it was rather ironic in how it suited them, and that surely there was a bit of divine intervention involved in bringing them together.

The ceremony that morning had been simple, yet elegant. She had been nervous that something might happen that would ruin their special day, but both sides of their family seemed quite pleased with the union. Although it might take some time for the rest of society to come around to the fact an earl had married a weaver’s daughter, her husband didn’t seem to mind, and she had assured him time and again that she didn’t care for balls and soirees, that as long as they had each other she was content.

As the carriage rolled to a halt, Meliah wished to remove the blindfold that Elwood had placed over her the moment they had left London. What she did enjoy was the pleasurable experience he’d given her on the way to their destination. It was the first time they had been intimate in some time and she had been yearning for his expert touch.

He certainly didn't fail her expectations. But thus far, he never had.

Her body heated just thinking of the next few days to pass. He vowed that neither of them would often leave the bedchamber and she was looking forward to it. He claimed that it was because he needed an heir as soon as possible, but she knew it was merely because he wanted to keep her alone. She had no complaints.

Once she was on the ground, his deep voice rumbled, "Are you ready to see your new home, my lady?"

It was still so strange for Meliah to think of herself with a title, but from the moment she had said, "I will," she had become Lady Meliah Tyburne, the Countess of Belmont. "You know the answer to that," she sighed impatiently.

He chuckled, but then he removed the covering around her eyes. She blinked to allow her eyes to adjust to the light, and then she glanced at him with a sparkle in her green eyes. "Belmont Hall. I daresay I've missed it greatly."

"I'm happy to hear that." He put his arm around her. "I hope we might make more wonderful memories here to cherish." He paused. "Of course, since are the mistress here, you are welcome to decorate it however you wish, or if you prefer?"

She silenced him with a kiss. "I love you, and I love this wonderful house just as it was the day you brought me here and I stepped over the threshold. Now, take me to bed, my lord."

Arching a dark brow, he reached down and lifted her into his arms. "Anything for you, heart of my heart."

As he strode through the front door, he kicked it shut behind them.