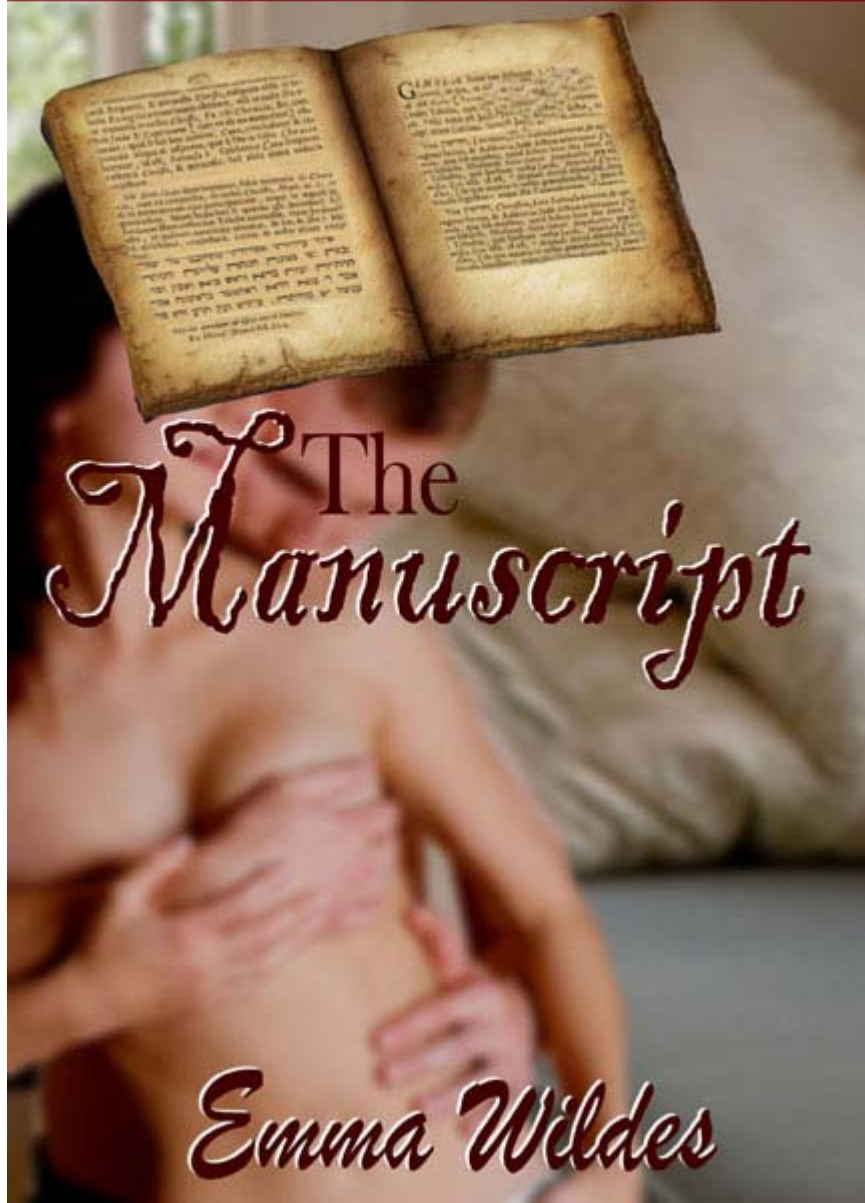


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THE MANUSCRIPT
The Sinful Gentlemen Collection 1
Emma Wildes

Warning

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Emma Wildes

The Sinful Gentlemen Collection 1

The Manuscript

Claire Fallon is destitute and desperate. Reluctantly, she agrees to become the mistress of the reclusive but deliciously handsome Viscount Ranleigh, even though the man has absolutely no idea she has been hired to warm his bed. Much to her chagrin, another part of her duties involves translating an ancient manuscript that ends up being little more than an apothecary's guide to recipes for sexual adventure...

Justin Howard has made a mistake, and he has paid a price. His wife is a promiscuous tart he can't escape...or can he? After his new assistant arrives to help him with his scientific experiments, he finds Claire not only opens a world of sensuous and uninhibited delights, but a determination to free himself from a situation that he can no longer tolerate.

A scientist and an ingénue prove love matters more than scandal, and it is possible to find some intriguing ideas for passion in *The Manuscript*...

THE MANUSCRIPT

The Sinful Gentlemen Collection 1

Emma Wildes



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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THE MANUSCRIPT
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The Manuscript

The Sinful Gentlemen Collection 1

By Emma Wildes

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Chapter One

The clock on the mantle ticked, the sound seemingly loud in the quiet of the elegant salon. Sitting perched on the edge of a settee upholstered in pale white silk, Claire Fallon wondered how on earth anyone would think to cover furniture in such a delicate fabric or choose a color that soiled so easily. Of course, the entire lovely room was furnished with the same impracticality, but then again the Duke of Astley undoubtedly simply replaced something if a speck of dirt landed on it, she thought cynically. When the carriage that had been sent for her pulled up in front of the mansion, her jaw had nearly dropped at the display of ostentatious wealth and privileged title.

Waiting chafed on her already highly-strung nerves and she longed to pace restlessly across the room. That did not seem lady-like and if there was anything she wanted to do, it was to impress her prospective employer, Astley's wife, the esteemed duchess Margot Tremont.

Her real question was, what particular position was she being offered? Since she hadn't actually applied for a job, Claire was a little uncertain why she was there.

Considering her dire financial state, she couldn't turn down an engraved invitation for an interview with the duchess herself.

"I am sorry I am late, Miss Fallon." A rustle of silk and a cool voice announced the arrival of her hostess. "Forgive me, please. I am going to eschew a formal introduction since you know who I am, and I, of course, know who you are because I invited you here. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, Your Grace." Hastily rising, Claire did her best imitation of a curtsy, curiously eyeing the woman who came into the room. The duchess was mid-thirties at a guess, but still attractive; her dark hair upswept, her complexion pale and only beginning to show a few fine lines. Her eyes were an unusual clear green, her gaze surprisingly direct, and she was dressed in the height of fashion in a rose-colored gown that complimented her lush, full figure. There was also the discreet gleam of diamonds about her throat and ears.

If the beautiful room hadn't already made her feel gauche and out of place, the duchess most certainly did. Claire felt suddenly very aware of her own shabby dress, several years old but still the best she owned, the material dark and serviceable, the cut not flattering. Wishing the woman would invite her to sit down again, she stood there politely, growing a little uncomfortable under what was an obviously thorough inspection of her person. Finally, the duchess murmured, "I see my friend Lady Arlington did not exaggerate about you. That pleases me. Sometimes she can be a very silly woman. Please sit down, Miss Fallon."

Sinking down gratefully, but still confused, Claire said, "Lady Arlington spoke with you about me? I find it hard to believe she would recommend me for anything. In fact, when I interviewed for a position as governess to her children, she barely gave me five minutes of her time."

The duchess smiled as she chose an opposite chair in matching cream and beige stripes, adjusting her skirts with languid grace. "Of course, she didn't. That's what she told me. She was quite outraged, did you know, that you would apply for the position at all. No one, in her opinion, that looks like you should expect a wife and mother, one who may not...how shall I say this ... be as slender or attractive as she once was ...to allow you in their household. The very thought gave her the vapors."

Claire could not help it; she flushed slightly. “I applied to care for her children, not tempt her husband,” she said tightly, unable to keep resentment completely out of her tone. Lady Arlington was not the only woman who had shooed her out the door after taking one look at her. In fact, despite her qualifications, which certainly exceeded those necessary for a humble governess, she was still unemployed.

Margot Tremont chuckled, her green eyes gleaming. “You underestimate the selfish insecurities of the shallow ladies of my class, Miss Fallon.” Lifting one dark brow, she said slowly, “I would venture to guess that your stunning beauty has caused you nothing but trouble now that you find yourself quite alone in this world.”

“I am not alone,” Claire responded, carefully keeping her voice even, “which makes matters worse. My younger brother is my responsibility, and yes, you are correct, Your Grace. I find my looks a hindrance.”

“It needn’t be.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The duchess looked bland, reclining slightly in the delicate chair, her gaze still disconcertingly direct. “I understand you can speak six languages, my dear. Is that true?”

“Speak six, read and write fluently in four.”

“Is one of them Latin?”

Claire nodded. “Of course.”

“Excellent.” The duchess smiled, a gleam of white teeth. “And you are inclined mathematically? Also able to work equations and all sorts of other complicated applications that task my mind just thinking of them?”

“My father was a professor of mathematics,” Claire confirmed, her curiosity growing by the second. “He believed women should be educated the same as men.” After a small hesitation, she said, “My true desire is not to simply watch over children. I could also be a tutor, negating the necessity of hiring someone else as well. I know the classics well. I also have a modicum of learning physics and chemistry-”

“You are a very remarkable young lady, in short.” Margot Tremont looked slightly amused as she interrupted. “That I have gleaned already. Beautiful and well-educated, but alas, destitute upon your father’s untimely death over a year ago. He was the youngest son of an earl, but disinherited because of his marriage to your mother, and

your grandfather refuses to aid you in any way though you have written telling him of your plight. An elderly aunt—the only relative left on your mother’s side—is trying to help you by keeping young William, but she can barely support herself and what money you do make, you give to her. He is just a child, am I right?”

Openly startled that the duchess knew so much about her, Claire nodded slowly. “Yes, seven years old.”

“And here you are, at barely twenty, forced to grovel at the feet of shallow society matrons for the dubious honor of making sure their ill-behaved children don’t squirt ink on the footman or push each other down a flight of stairs.”

It was close enough to how Claire felt about her situation that she felt color sting her cheeks. “If I could be judged on the merits of my intellect and not my looks, that would seem much more fair to me, Your Grace.”

“What if, Miss Fallon, you could be judged on both? I have a proposal I think you will find...interesting.”

* * * *

Margot watched the young woman sitting across from her with a speculative eye. For once in her shallow and malicious existence, perhaps Cecile Arlington had actually done someone a favor when she rejected the very beautiful Miss Fallon as a possible future governess. Done them *both* a favor actually. Margot was so worried about her brother Justin she was at a loss, that is before she heard about the very intellectual and impoverished young Claire.

But now she had a plan.

Miss Fallon said with obvious uncertainty, “I am admittedly curious, Your Grace.”

Not precisely sure how exactly to put her proposition delicately, Margot hesitated, still examining her guest. Goodness, but the girl was lovely. It was almost hard not to stare, wondering how heredity could come together so perfectly. Her hair was not the fashionable blond of the time, but instead a rich chestnut that glimmered with golden strands, the mass thick and shining, enticing even when held back from her perfectly oval face in a plain knot. Her features were fragile and feminine, her mouth softly pink, her skin absolutely flawless and creamy ivory—but it was her eyes that made the most

impact: large and long-lashed, the color a deep true violet. Her figure was also something to envy, slender but voluptuous even draped in a hideous ill-fitting gown.

Clearing her throat, Margot said, “Would you like a glass of sherry, Miss Fallon? I feel I am being an ungracious hostess. While we sip our drinks, I will give you some background that will perhaps explain the reason I summoned you here.”

“As you wish, of course.” A faint furrow appeared between Claire Fallon’s arched brows.

Getting up, Margot went to the decanter and poured the wine herself, turning and crossing to hand one glass to her guest before returning to her own seat. Taking a bracing sip, she murmured, “You may or may not have heard of my younger brother, Viscount Ranleigh. He is somewhat of a famous chemist and not that long ago developed a pain elixir considered to be a revelation by the medical community at large. His specialty is complicated and his work time-consuming, but different scientists and physicians come from all over the world to see him. In his own way, he is a very famous man.”

Miss Fallon held her sherry in dainty fingers, her purple gaze politely inquiring.

“Recently,” Margot said smoothly, “he asked me to find him an assistant. He needs someone fluent in other languages to answer some of his letters, and also a person who can run calculations from his experiments.” A small smile touched her mouth. “I know he assumed I would look for a male since few females have your talents, but somehow, I think you could be the answer to a much larger problem than his stack of unanswered correspondence.”

The sudden light of hope in Miss Fallon’s glorious eyes was unmistakable. Her sherry forgotten, she stared, so still it seemed she might have stopped breathing. “Duchess, are you sincere? That would be...be perfect.” Her pretty face taking on color, the sherry in the girl’s glass tipped dangerously toward the edge as she stammered. “To be able to do something intellectually challenging would be like a dream come true for me.”

Margot said, “There are more duties entailed, Miss Fallon, before you become overly excited over this. Please, you must hear me out fully.”

“I would far prefer whatever else went with the job than caring for someone’s tedious children,” she said fervently.

“I have six of my own,” Margot said dryly, “and have always wondered how my nannies stood their job. The little heathens run her ragged.”

Claire Fallon had the grace to blush. “Not that all children are tedious,” she amended hastily. “William is a sweet boy and I’m sure yours are darlings, but some...” A slight shudder shook her slender shoulders.

“Yes, well, I don’t think mine qualify as darlings...just ask the duke. At any rate, I take it you are interested enough to hear me out?”

“Oh, yes,” the young woman breathed, clutching her sherry. “More than a little interested, I admit. I am sure I can accommodate whatever duties the position entails.”

Or whatever *positions* the position entailed, Margot thought with inner dark humor, wondering if she was insane to propose such a thing to an obviously bright yet desperate young lady. It was immoral at the least, no doubt of it.

The situation couldn’t be more perfect, right down to Miss Fallon’s extra obligation to her younger brother. If Margot had dreamed up a candidate for what she had in mind, she could not have done as well as the lovely Claire. Lifting her brows, she said evenly, “All right, we’ll see if by the end of this conversation you feel the same way. Here’s the rest of it, Miss Fallon. Justin is married, but his wife left him about a year ago. She is the daughter of a baronet, so she was respectable enough, or so we all thought, and he married her after a short courtship. Respectable is not the correct word to describe Caroline, however. Within months, she was unhappy with his obsession with his work and not much later, began a series of blatant affairs. He, of course, did not realize it at first, but the rest of us knew. I was furious but helpless to really do anything without hurting him gravely by explaining my suspicions. It turned out the only fortunate thing about this marriage was that no children were conceived in their short time together. She left after six months, decamping undoubtedly with one of her lovers.”

“How terrible,” Claire Fallon murmured, finally taking the first sip of her sherry.

“He has withdrawn even farther into his endless experiments,” Margot admitted, sitting back, letting out a sigh. “I am very fond of him and it hurts me to see how this one episode with a lying strumpet has shattered his world. My brother,” she added fondly, “suffers from an unusual malaise. He is a very nice man. Almost perfect, one could say.”

“I won’t mention a word of this in front of him.” It sounded like a sincere

promise, Miss Fallon gazing at her with straightforward hope.

It felt a little like coercion and a lot like blackmail when she said bluntly, “The job pays one hundred pounds a week. That is, I will pay you one hundred pounds a week in addition to whatever salary my brother pays you.”

“What?” Claire Fallon blinked, those incredibly lovely eyes incredulous. “A week?”

It was a staggering amount to someone almost starving. Money was not an issue and Margot had deliberately chosen an amount so ridiculously high it would not be turned down. “You will have to earn it, of course. Justin will think you are his new assistant, but in truth, what I want is for you to seduce him. I am hiring you, Miss Fallon, to be my brother’s mistress, as well as to assist him in his lab.”

There was a small silence.

Determinedly, Margot went on, “I doubt it will be particularly easy to lure him into your bed since he is still a married man and has an unfortunate sense of honor. However, he is a man and subject to male needs. Now that I have seen you, I think this will work. What my brother needs is a torrid love affair, something to take his mind away from his promiscuous viscountess. Since he rarely leaves our estate, it would be impossible for him to meet someone, so I decided to bring a woman to him. You will be ideal.”

Lounging back after dropping that cannonball, Margot saw a myriad of emotions flit across the delicate features of the young woman sitting in her drawing room, predominantly utter shock. Casually sipping her smooth sherry, she waited, hoping Claire would not get up and walk out in outrage. Her guest seemed to struggle with affront, her eyes dilating, her hand shaking as it gripped her glass with white-knuckled force, but there had to be a measure of interest as well, for she did not get up and leave. Imminent starvation and tedious children were apparently powerful forces, for after several minutes of silence, Miss Fallon said hoarsely, “I cannot find the words to respond to this. Are you serious, Duchess?”

“I don’t know what else to do. He simply cannot go on slaving away and feeling so utterly betrayed,” Margot explained, a certain frustration coloring her voice. “He is very handsome, and obviously intelligent, but not a man who relentlessly pursues every

woman in sight. Particularly not now. You are gifted in both mind and body, and he will respond to you, or so I hope. All I ask is that you try to coax him back to some enjoyment of life. He's not yet thirty. He should not be spending every night alone because of that harlot. She wanted his wealth and his title, but took his trust as well. I am determined to defeat her."

After that impassioned speech, Claire looked a little taken aback, her cheeks pink, her gaze veiled by her lowered lashes.

Persuasively, Margot leaned forward, her empty glass dangling from her fingers. "Think of it, my dear child. One hundred pounds a week to assist my brother in his laboratory and decipher some odd letters, plus the added bonus of being able to give pleasure to an attractive man who, I promise you, will give you pleasure back. I also have no objection to you bringing your young brother to the estate in Sussex, where you can tutor him between your duties and use the army of servants to keep an eye on him otherwise. The house is huge, the grounds extensive, with plenty of room for a child to play and run. The stables are very fine, as well, since Justin's other passion is riding. Think of it, your young brother can be well-fed, well-cared for and get to enjoy being a small boy."

It was a good strategy on Margot's part. Miss Fallon took a deep struggling breath, a sheen of tears in her glorious eyes. "That's very generous."

"I love *my* brother as you do yours. I may not have to fight to put food in his mouth, but I would do anything to see him smile again."

"I cannot believe," the lovely Claire muttered unevenly, "I would even consider this. My lady, I am not even sure I know *how* to seduce a man."

That small hint of capitulation made Margot suppress a glimmer of triumph. "I could have hired a skilled courtesan, but Justin would not respond to someone like that. Besides, he would catch on quickly enough and be angry with me for meddling. What he will like about you is your education and the ability to meet him on an equal level in some areas. Your extraordinary beauty will not go unnoticed either. It is like the gods dropped you suddenly in front of me as a gift."

That violet gaze changed, suddenly direct, almost challenging. "If your brother is such the perfect gentleman, would he even take to bed an innocent young woman that

works for his family? Deflowering a servant is certainly not the actions of the paragon you mention.”

“You won’t precisely be a servant, Miss Fallon, and you are right. Your virginity is a problem. Since he could never marry you, I don’t want him feeling guilty for ruining you once the two of you are lovers. He has to think you are experienced, at least somewhat. You will have to hide the fact you have never been with a man until it is too late.”

The girl looked a little curious under her shocked expression. “Can one hide such a thing?”

“Once you decide whether you are going to accept this offer or not, we can deal with your unfortunate innocence.” After a small pause, Margot said gently, “You are not a fool, my dear. Quite the opposite, in fact. Surely it has already occurred to you it will come down to this eventually. The asset of your education and background weighs nothing like the tremendous impact of your lovely face and form, and the Cecilia Arlingtons of the world are a perfect example. Someday you will be cold and hungry and there will be no choice of survival besides selling your alluring body, Miss Fallon. Men will pay for a beautiful woman such as yourself. It is an age-old bargain. Make it now with me, for what I offer is not degradation and the life of a whore, but a chance to make a great deal of money, to give your brother a happy life near you, and to help heal a wounded but very worthy man.”

Margot stood , lifting her chin in a deliberately regal and dramatic gesture. “You have a week to give me your answer. My carriage will take you back to your lodgings now. Send word once you have made up your mind.”

* * * *

The sound of angry voices came from the region of the stairs. Lying in her bed, shivering on the thin mattress, Claire listened to the threatening sounds, uttering a small prayer. The small room she had rented was the best she could afford with the meager savings she had left. It was both shabby and in a dubious neighborhood. Too often loud arguments broke out among the other tenants. Tonight, she simply hoped she would sleep safely until morning.

One hundred pounds...a week.

The sum was princely. It was even beyond that. It was a fantasy or a dark dream.

For her to become a prostitute, she acknowledged to herself, pulling the worn sheet up to her chin. No matter the florid phrasing or genteel aristocratic persuasion, that was exactly what the Duchess of Astley had asked of her. Of course, the woman was right to a certain extent—this was not the first offer she had been given to sell her body and if she chose to turn it down, it would probably not be the last. She knew poverty walked hand in hand with vulnerability. If she were cultured and high-born like Margot Tremont, she would have the world at her feet.

As it was, she had the world at her throat.

Claire turned over and fought the demons of indecision. Only a desperate woman contemplated sharing the bed of a man she had never met and accepted money for it. The trouble was, of course, she was that desperate.

She could have William with her.

The duchess was cunning, she decided with an unwilling admiration. The money was enticing, but her younger brother was a powerful weapon. She worried about him constantly and felt the weight of her responsibility every second of the day. Picturing him running around green lawns, climbing trees, having decent food and a chance to get started on his education ...it was almost impossible to turn it down.

Rolling over, she tried to go to sleep.

And failed miserably.

Chapter Two

Naturally, it was sunny again. The good weather was getting a little cloying, she thought petulantly.

Gazing out the window at the blue skies, Caroline Howard absently let out an obligatory moan, her attention not quite on the man moving so frantically between her legs, shoving in and out of her with absolutely no finesse. Young Pierre was handsome, but had proven a disappointment as a lover. For one thing, his erection was surprisingly small for such a tall boy, and his hands fumbled over her body with clumsy eagerness, betraying a lack of experience she found boring. He fucked like a rabbit, she decided in amusement as he pumped hard and fast, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Suddenly he froze and she felt the spew of his ejaculation as he came and breathed her name with what she supposed was reverent affection. When he opened his eyes, the dark depths showed chagrin. “I’m sorry, my lady,” he stammered. “That was so fast...I’ve heard women take longer...”

“Yes, yes,” she dismissed the apology. “Sixteen is a little young. I should have remembered that. And for your first time, well...you didn’t do badly. Just get off me, Pierre, and remember to never mention this to your dear papa. He would be angry with both of us, don’t you think? I expect him to propose marriage any day.” Not able to help cocking a brow in a coquettish arch, she smiled blandly. “How would you feel to have me as your step-mama? You could practice more ...on one of the maids perhaps, and I could

give you a second chance sometime. Now, run along and let no one see you leave.”

After the boy was gone, she stretched her nude body languorously, her hand slipping between her legs to finish the task Pierre had failed at so utterly. Unfortunately, the count, Pierre’s father, wasn’t a much better lover with little to no stamina. Spreading her thighs wide, she began to manipulate herself expertly to climax, closing her eyes.

It was ironic that of all her lovers, her husband had given her the most satisfaction. Justin was undeniably skillful in bed, his cock large and impressive, and he had sought her pleasure always before his own. For such a respectable scientist, he had proven passionate and virile...and there was no denying his dark good looks appealed to her. It had been a triumph of stage-worthy acting to play the innocent maiden and get him to propose, but she had pulled it off.

Then everything had gone wrong.

She had made a mistake in thinking the way to handle his neglect of her for his work was to make him jealous. The opposite effect was achieved, damn him and his high noble standards.

Panting, arching, Caroline pictured him in her mind as her orgasm built, and when she reached the peak, her fingers rubbing in wildly urgent circles, it occurred to her that perhaps it was time she left Italy and returned to England.

Time had passed. Maybe he would forgive her.

* * * *

Adjusting the drain tube in the basin, Justin Howard, Viscount Ranleigh, frowned. The mixture was not as it should be; the distillation cloudy and thick. “I must have botched the ratios,” he muttered, wiping his hands on a towel. “Damnation.”

Next to him, Rivers, his valet, watched the mixture nervously. “It isn’t going to explode, is it?” he asked, still holding the funnel.

Impatiently shaking his head, Justin said shortly, “No, of course not. That happened once, man. For God’s sakes, don’t be so jumpy.”

Young and thin, his face slightly freckled, Rivers attempted a sickly smile. “Forgive me, my lord, but I admit it, the laboratory makes me uneasy.”

“I have,” Justin said dryly, “figured that out. Not to worry, you’ll be glad to hear my sister writes that she has been interviewing different candidates and actually stumbled

across someone she thinks will make an excellent assistant. A certain C. Fallon, who can not only read and write Latin, but has other skills as well. Mr. Fallon is expected here in a day or two, so I won't need to call you to help me after his arrival."

"I am indeed relieved to hear that, sir." Rivers glanced down the long counter at the vials and glass beakers, rows and rows of neat jars containing powders and crystals, and shuddered.

Taking the funnel from the young man, Justin watched him scuttle out the door with amused irritation, and then set the apparatus aside. He'd been up early, at dawn's first light, and had a slight headache, compounded by the fact that he remembered he was supposed to dine this evening with friends. It wasn't that he didn't like Deidre and Ralph Cavanaugh—they had been neighbors his entire life. It was just that their invitations were extended in both friendship and overt sympathy.

If there was one thing he detested, it was that his acquaintances and even his family *pitied* him. If they understood even a fraction how relieved he'd actually been when Caroline had left him, they would be slapping him on the back in congratulations. Even on his wedding night, when his lovely bride had so unconvincingly surrendered her nonexistent maidenhead, he'd realized he had done an unforgivable thing as a scientist. He hadn't paid attention to the possible variables and taken Caroline's word at face value. Instead of searching out the facts, which would have told him before their nuptials she was a deceitful promiscuous woman, he had merely thought she was beautiful and well-bred, and since it was time he got married, she would do nicely.

Those few months in residence with his wife had been a lesson he would never forget. Once he realized just what she was, he had refused to bed her, knowing that if she gave him children, he would be stuck with her forever. Caroline had been furious, trying to seduce him at every turn, flaunting affairs with other men. When she realized he meant it and he would never touch her again, she had flown into a rage and told him everything about her sordid past. None of it surprised him somehow, but he was utterly disgusted at having married a whore. Both sickened and angry with himself for being such a fool, Justin had made her a devil's bargain. Giving her a small fortune to leave and never return, he felt it was money well-spent.

Never again, he vowed, reaching for the funnel to begin to set up the experiment

again, would he be taken in by a beautiful face.

* * * *

The drive was long and wound through an avenue of venerable trees, the manor house itself sitting up on a gentle sloping hill. Craning her neck a little so she could see the façade, Claire saw a sprawling Elizabethan structure made of stone, the walls hung with verdant ivy, the mullioned windows shining in the sun. The lawn was immaculately trim and there was a fountain flowing in the center of the circular drive, with gardens beginning on either side of the house and no doubt continuing to the back. The park itself had groves of trees and the whole place had the well-kept air of wealth and good breeding. Since she had been informed that the viscount lived here alone except for the servants, Claire could easily appreciate why there would be room to accommodate not only herself, but two more people. She had bargained a little with the duchess, and her Aunt Alma sat next to her in the carriage, along with William fidgeting in the opposite seat. Pointing out that she would need a chaperone of some kind if she were to live in the same house with the viscount, she had asked if Alma could also take up residence. The older woman could make sure William was supervised during the time Claire was at her duties, and serve to keep gossip at bay. The duchess had easily acquiesced.

“That is most certainly an impressive house,” Aunt Alma stated as they came around a curve, the manor in plain view. “The viscount must have a coin or two to rub together.”

“Yes,” Claire agreed neutrally.

So thin she looked almost fragile with bird-like bones and a slightly hunched back, Alma looked much older than her sixty years. Her condition was a malaise of the joints that crippled her often, and always much worse in the damp or the cold. Mentally, however, she was sharp and perceptive, and her pale blue eyes missed nothing. Reaching out a crooked hand, she patted Claire’s knee. “You will do fine, child. I am proud of you for being able to even be qualified for this position and your dear father would be as well. Don’t fret, and just do your best.”

Having left out how much she was being paid, saying only evasively that it was very well, and certainly not mentioning her secondary *duties*, for which she wasn’t sure she was qualified in the least, Claire managed only a sickly smile. “His lordship could

turn out to be quite eccentric. Most scientists are. I hope I please him.”

“Since he is male, I’d guess you will please him,” Alma murmured, settling her hand, which was curled into an almost claw-like shape, back in her lap. “You are such a pretty child. Let’s hope he doesn’t find you distracting.”

Let’s hope he does, Claire thought wryly. The duchess hadn’t exactly given her a time frame for this planned seduction, but for one hundred pounds a week, she probably expected results fairly soon.

The carriage rolled to a halt and her stomach turned over in response. A young footman opened the door and helped them alight. There was a woman waiting at the top of the stone steps that led to a massive double doorway. Stout and matronly, she smiled in a friendly fashion, and said, “I’m Mrs. Settles. Welcome to Ranleigh.”

The look of consternation that crossed the housekeeper’s face when Claire introduced herself was not very reassuring. The woman exclaimed, “I understood his lordship’s new assistant was to be a young gentleman.”

This was the first obstacle, and the duchess had warned her that she hadn’t specifically told her brother that C. Fallon was a woman. He was probably more open-minded than most men, Margot had said pragmatically, but that did not mean he might not object and she didn’t want to risk it. Claire said mildly, “Her Grace knew quite well I was female, and she hired me for my qualifications, not my gender.”

Now that, Claire knew with resignation, *was a blatant lie*.

Recovering slightly but still looking off balance, Mrs. Settles said, “Certainly ...of course. Your rooms are ready if you wish to follow me. Lord Ranleigh wishes for you to refresh yourself and get comfortable. He will meet with you later this afternoon, miss, to instruct you on your duties.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Settles.”

Inside the house was much the same as outside—well-kept and impressive. The main hall was very large, the floors gleaming, the ceilings high and decorated with moldings and painted scenes. A huge curving staircase led upwards, their progress slow due to Alma’s infirmity. William was awed and quiet, his wide blue eyes gazing around in wonder. He clung to Claire’s hand and she felt a rush of protectiveness at those clutching little fingers. He was too thin, but that would soon change, she promised herself

fiercely, giving a gentle squeeze of reassurance. The notion of giving her body was not nearly as shocking weighed against the well-being of her young brother. After all, what was an interlude of passion? A few moments naked in a man's bed, letting him take pleasure in her body, seemed like nothing in comparison to depravation and hunger.

William's room was down the hall a good distance from the top of the stairs, almost in another wing, and connected to Alma's by a doorway. Both were gracious in size and obviously part of the nursery suite. Her aunt's boasted a balcony overlooking the back gardens, a riot of glorious spring color in the afternoon sun. Mrs. Settles murmured, "Since your aunt is to be in charge of the boy, I thought this the best arrangement, if it suits."

Alma, leaning on her cane and looking bemused as she glanced around at the rich carpeting, shining furniture, the chair by the sunny open French doors to the balcony, said, "It is absolutely perfect. I can be outdoors without having to manage the stairs."

"The schoolroom is on the other side of the hall. There are books and toys...goodness, it will be nice to have it occupied again. It hasn't been used since his lordship was a child."

William's face lit up in almost heart-breaking joy and he tugged on Claire's hand. "Can I go see?"

"Go on," she said, her throat tight.

"But don't go anywhere else without telling me," Alma admonished. She turned as she smiled, her lined face looking years younger. "You go on, child, and settle in so you can meet with your employer. I'll mind William."

Her own room, she found as she followed the housekeeper, was actually in the same hall as the family apartments. "So you won't be stuck all alone in another wing," Mrs. Settle said with practicality. "His lordship is the only one who lives here all the time. It seemed like nonsense to put you anywhere else and more work for everyone." Eyeing Claire's face, she added hesitantly, "Though perhaps, now I may reconsider—"

Firmly, Claire said, "Don't bother opening another wing of the house for my sake. My grandfather, the Earl of Dwightfield, has a house similar to this one and keeps much of it closed. All those stairs and extra steps for the maids make no sense. This will suit me admirably."

She, of course, failed to mention that she'd only met her titled relative once, at her father's funeral. He had refused to acknowledge her presence or that of his young grandson, and had only briefly stared at his son's grave, then left in his crested carriage.

However, expectedly, her rank rose a notch in the housekeeper's eyes, as she had hoped it would. The fact she was of the nobility in some way at least gave her some status, and with it, a little authority. If she was going to have a torrid love affair with the viscount, being alone in the same wing would help a great deal.

Her gaze taking in Claire's demure chignon and her fashionable traveling gown—the duchess having insisted on a new wardrobe and supervising the selection herself—the housekeeper said deferentially, “As you wish, my lady. If you need anything, please ring. There's a pull by the bed. I will have someone bring up hot water at once.”

When the woman was gone, Claire sank down on the soft bed, taking in her opulent surroundings with an air of disbelief. She also had a balcony with a view of the vast park, and the warm breeze felt wonderful. Her room was gracious and beautifully furnished, the bed large and hung with silk, her trunk already sitting by the wardrobe.

The contrast between her sordid lodgings back in London was so stark, she stifled a small, almost hysterical urge to laugh. She had gone from rags to riches, it seemed, like a character in some luridly romantic novel.

Now all she had to do was earn it.

* * * *

Glancing up at the clock, Justin muttered, “Oh hell.”

He'd missed tea again, but that wasn't unusual. The problem was, he had distinctly told Mrs. Settles to have his new assistant in his study at four, and it was definitely now half-past. Washing his hands thoroughly in the special solution he had devised to remove the residues of chemicals, he shrugged out of his protective coat and left the laboratory.

Considering the volume of correspondence that seemed to swell every day, and the growing appreciation for his work among the medical community in countries around the world, he should have hired someone long ago and was looking forward to having some of the more tedious duties off his hands. Margot had surprisingly offered to do it for him, and though his sister wasn't in least interested in science or chemistry, he knew she

worried about him and had gladly let her give an initial screening of applicants. Hiring Mr. Fallon without letting him meet the young man wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but then again, if it didn't work out, he would simply let him go and start searching himself.

Mrs. Settles hovered in the hall outside his study, her plump face wearing an odd expression. "There you are," she said with uncharacteristic criticism. "I know I am not supposed to disturb you when you are working, but I contemplated coming to get you, my lord."

A little surprised, since he often lost track of time, he lifted his brows. "Is something amiss? Didn't Mr. Fallon arrive on time?"

"I...well, yes...in a manner of speaking, sir."

Amused, Justin asked, "How does one arrive in a manner of speaking, Settles? Here, I know I am late, but he will have to adjust to that as well, and I will apologize. Now please make more tea, it's my fault, I know, but I can't abide it cold."

After a palatable hesitation, his housekeeper said, "Yes, my lord, right away."

Watching her stout figure move efficiently away, Justin frowned. Then, shrugging, he opened the door to his study. "I am very sorry I am late—"

He stopped, halted mid-sentence as a young woman stood and turned to face him. His first reaction was a direct and completely male appreciation of her stunning beauty, his breath going in audibly. Slender, with chestnut hair that glimmered with golden highlights, she was dressed in a white day gown sprigged with tiny violets that exactly matched the unusual color of her long-lashed eyes. Her features were delicate, her skin like new cream, and the upper curves of her breasts lushly female and smooth above the bodice of her gown. Her mouth was pink and very soft as she smiled tentatively. "Think nothing of it, my lord."

His second reaction, of course, was confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

A tiny frown appeared between her perfectly arched brows. "You are Justin Howard, Lord Ranleigh, aren't you?"

At the moment, he wasn't sure. "Yes," he managed to say, realizing he stood like a gaping idiot, still holding on to the door handle.

"Claire Fallon," she informed him, confirming his worst suspicions. "I am your

new assistant.”

Like hell, he almost blustered out loud, checking himself just in time. Margot had really gone too far this time. “I am not sure I understand.”

“I applied for the position as your assistant,” she explained patiently enough, though her slim hands smoothed her skirts in a tell-tale nervous mannerism. “And your sister, the Duchess Astley, hired me. I promise you I can truly read and write in several languages, besides my understanding of mathematical processes. Having only a basic knowledge of chemistry, I cannot promise I will not need some instruction on running the data you collect, my lord, but rest assured, I will work diligently at it.”

After that composed speech, Justin was not sure what to say. Miss Fallon, however, gazed at him expectantly with those lovely eyes, and he managed to utter, “Forgive me, but I did not expect a woman. I am not sure this will work.”

“Why not?”

Confound the woman, had she never looked in a mirror? He could hardly say out loud that after a year and a half of sexual abstinence, he was unsure he could work side by side with her and pay the least attention to what he was doing. Instead he mumbled, “I suppose that I am hampered by the fact that I have never known a woman who could effectively do mathematics or would even want to attempt to try.”

Standing there in front of him, she said firmly, “I am very excited by the idea of working in the scientific field and particularly intrigued by your work, Lord Ranleigh. I also very much appreciate you allowing my younger brother and my aunt to live here. Rest assured, I will do whatever you wish to the best of my ability.”

Having the word ‘excited’ and the phrase ‘do whatever you wish’ in that impassioned speech was unfortunately suggestive, at least to his admittedly wayward mind. Justin was not sure if he had ever seen such a beautiful young woman in his life, and now he was going to spend hours and hours alone with her.

What if, he thought dismally, *she could truly do the job?* Sending her packing before giving her a chance, especially if she had two dependents, seemed dishonorable.

“Very well. Would you like to see the laboratory?” he asked resignedly. “And perhaps we could look at some of my notes and see if you feel you can effectively decipher them. I also have some old text written by an alchemist years ago, found in an

old abbey library. One of the tasks I would like to set to you is to unravel those scribbled words and set them down in a reasonable hand for me to look at. Who knows what that old monk might give us in knowledge, but I never have the time to sit and go over it with the painstaking care it deserves.” He warned, “I will also expect you to actually assist in my experiments. I work late often, get up early, and like today,” he gestured at the tea cart, “miss meals with regularity. In my opinion, it is not a job for the faint-hearted, Miss Fallon.”

Her smile was as lovely as the rest of her, glowing and sincere. She said, “Perhaps not, but it sounds wonderful, my lord.”

Chapter Three

Leaning forward, Claire peered at the pestle and mortar, the powdery substance being ground expertly by Lord Ranleigh's long-fingered hands giving off a pungent odor. Deliberately angling her body just a fraction of a turn, her left breast brushed his upper arm. She could feel the heat from his body through the fine lawn of his shirt, and see his reaction in the sudden tensing of his muscular shoulders.

Things were progressing nicely, in her opinion.

“The trouble with this is the characteristic bitterness and the insoluble nature of it. Few people can tolerate the taste, and the texture is also offensive, rather like eating chalk.”

Claire pressed just a little bit forward as if completely focused on the substance in question. “I can smell it and it is not at all pleasant,” she admitted, wrinkling her nose.

Justin Howard, on the other hand, smelled wonderful. Like clean linen, brandy, and something entirely male and completely intriguing. Standing behind him as she was, she could see the way his thick dark hair curled at the back of his strong neck, the clean angle of his jaw, even the thick fringe of his lashes. His eyes were a remarkable green like Margot's, his body tall and athletic—he simply had to be one of the most handsome men Claire had ever seen. Couple that with the fact he was brilliant intellectually and unfailingly polite and kind, and there was no denying he was a tremendously attractive man.

Becoming his mistress no longer loomed as an unwanted part of her new job, but had taken on a certain appeal, if she was honest. After a week at Ranleigh, she had settled into her duties and hopefully made some progress toward her ultimate goal. He was not indifferent to her as a woman; she'd known that from the moment they had met. However, the duchess had been correct, he was the consummate gentleman. Seduction would have to be initiated by her.

Justin's brows came together, his frown reflecting inner contemplation. "I sent some of this to Dr. Sherwood in York. He has a clinic there and treats patients with chronic pain, but I have not felt his results were conclusive enough to continue with the difficulties of trying to pursue ways of making it more palatable."

Remembering how Alma had struggled even to get out of bed that morning, Claire forgot for a moment that she was practically hanging on top of her new employer and said, "My aunt suffers constantly. Perhaps we could conduct our own small experiment and see if it eases her discomfort. In the week we have been here she has been fairly spry, but her affliction comes and goes. Today is not a good day."

"I'm not a doctor," Justin objected, but then added thoughtfully, "I could send word to Sherwood and get an idea of the dosages he used. It would be nice to be able to ask the patient firsthand for data. That's a good idea, Miss Fallon." Turning, he smiled approvingly.

Straightening, since the only other choice would be to fall into his lap and that seemed a little too obvious, Claire murmured, "I am sure she would be agreeable. She is really not terribly old—my mother's eldest sister—but she walks as if she were past the century mark. It is a good thing William is well-behaved or she could never keep track of him."

Her breast tingled oddly from where it had touched him. In fact, both her breasts felt a little tight. His green gaze was direct and she felt a small flush in her cheeks as she stared back and their eyes locked for just a moment too long.

Standing suddenly, Lord Ranleigh muttered, "I have been very pleased with your work so far. Have you made much progress on the manuscript?"

"A little, my lord."

He cleared his throat, busying himself with putting away some tools and vials.

“We’re essentially done here, Miss Fallon. If you wish to go work on the piles of paperwork I have plagued you with, please feel free.”

With a sense of inner feminine satisfaction, she saw his hands were not quite steady. Claire said demurely, “Very well. I will be in your study then. If you need me in any way, let me know.”

* * * *

Hellfire and damnation.

Justin watched his beautiful assistant leave the laboratory in a graceful swirl of muslin skirts, the gleam of her rich chestnut hair catching the light before she closed the door.

If you need me in any way...

Hell yes, he needed her. He needed her underneath him, those lovely slim legs spread wide as he entered into her soft heated passage, her perfect breasts quivering with each thrust of his hard cock, her soft pink mouth parted as she moaned her pleasure...

And those lascivious thoughts made him somewhat of a lecherous bastard, he reminded himself ruefully, sinking back down into his chair. He actually shook with repressed desire, her delicate scent lingering in the usually sterile air, the sensation of her warm, firm breast against his arm a distinct vivid memory. Caroline leaving had been the best thing in the world, but the truth was, he had not lain with a woman in way too long.

However, even if he’d had an orgy of satisfying sex recently, he reluctantly acknowledged, he would probably still want the delectable Miss Fallon.

Who on earth would imagine the perfect assistant—efficient, intelligent, educated, and eager to work—would take the form of a seductive, gorgeous goddess? What’s more, she was pleasant and polite, and his staff already fond of not only her, but also her young brother and ailing aunt. The house had never felt particularly empty to him he was so used to living alone, but it was nice to hear the occasional ring of childish laughter. Since Claire now dined with him in the evenings, he realized just how bereft he had been of companionship.

And sex.

His erection strained against his fitted breeches and he shifted with an inward curse. Conducting experiments and dictating notes was infinitely less comfortable with a

perpetually hard cock. Relieving himself in the privacy of his bedroom hadn't done a bit of good either, since that wayward part of his anatomy knew full well the woman it wanted slept only a few bedrooms away. All she had to do was walk into a room and he began to swell and ready for her.

The current situation was untenable.

However, he couldn't think of a single reason to dismiss Claire. She did an excellent job and though he would normally be suspicious of Margot, Miss Fallon was truly qualified for the position she had been hired to fill. What's more, he simply couldn't stomach sending her off, penniless and caring for two needy dependents.

However, if she stayed, he was very afraid he would go mad.

He was a married man, Justin reminded himself bitterly. He couldn't offer any woman his honorable intentions. Damn Caroline and damn himself.

Too late, he told himself with an unwanted twinge of humor. He was already in hell.

* * * *

Smoothing her hands over her silken skirts, Claire looked dubiously in the mirror. Margot had suggested she wear this dress if she sensed Justin was weakening. It was a shade scandalous in her opinion, the mounds of her breasts nearly overflowing the bodice, the dark indigo color a foil for her pale skin and almost exactly matching her eyes. She looked, she decided wryly, like a woman bent on enticing a man.

His lordship's hands had trembled, she reminded herself as she adjusted the neckline a shade, trying without much success to pull it upward. Surely that meant something, didn't it? Nervously, she licked her lips, seeing her eyes were very wide and dark.

Tonight...she might lose her virginity.

Tonight...Justin might touch her and take her...if she could act like an experienced lover for the time it took to get into his bed.

Anticipation made her stomach quiver as she walked sedately downstairs to the dining room. Justin was already there, politely rising to his feet the moment she entered the room, his expression enigmatic. In dark, formal clothing that emphasized his wide shoulders and dark coloring, he was striking and overwhelmingly male. Claire took in a

breath and said calmly enough, “Good evening, my lord.”

“Miss Fallon. You look very lovely tonight, if I may say so.” His gaze strayed briefly toward her décolletage, just the merest glance, but enough to tell her he noticed.

She was a trifle uncertain just exactly how the evening was going to proceed, but that seemed a good start. “Thank you. Your sister was kind enough to help me acquire some decent clothes before I left London to come here. I am afraid my wardrobe was hopelessly dated and worn.”

“Yes,” he said almost grimly as he came around to hold her chair, “I thought that dress smacked of Margot’s exquisite taste. She has a flair for dramatic colors and it would appeal to her to enhance the exotic color of your eyes. Would you like some wine?”

He thought her eyes were exotic? Claire smiled, pleased at the compliment. “Yes, thank you.”

The dining room was huge and very formal, and she had the impression that Lord Ranleigh had rarely used it before her arrival. Mrs. Settles had confidentially informed Alma that he dined often in his study, working himself nearly to death. Her open affection for her employer was endearing, and Claire had noted that all the staff at Ranleigh held the viscount in similar regard. Sitting down, she lowered her gaze and accepted a glass of ruby liquid with murmured thanks.

Seating himself across from her, Justin took a drink from his own glass. “I saw a great many of my notes are all rewritten and filed already...you had a busy afternoon.”

Claire *had* worked like a fiend. If there was one thing she was determined to prove, seduction or no, it was that she could do the job every bit as well as any man. “The manuscript is also most...interesting,” she murmured, unable to keep a slight flush from rising into her cheeks. “It is written only very loosely in Latin, interspersed with Greek and some form of French that must include words from a local dialect I have never seen. My impression so far is that whoever composed the work collected recipes for homemade cures and medicines, often not able to directly translate the ingredients.”

“So he jotted them down in whatever language came closest, is that it? Interesting.” Justin lifted his ebony brows. “Tell me, do you think it is worth making you wade through it? Have you come across anything even remotely intriguing?”

Hoping the flickering candlelight hid her blush, Claire said, “I...cannot quite comment on that, my lord. This first part so far seems to be dedicated to...er...substances that enhance the experience of...” It was ridiculous to stammer over a few simple words in front of the man she hoped to later bed, so she took in a breath and finished with a rueful smile, “sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.”

He stopped for a moment, arrested in taking a sip from his glass, and then almost carefully set it aside. “I see. Well, I am not sure that knowledge of those particular compounds will save the world. You may skip that part if it makes you uncomfortable, Miss Fallon.”

“Not at all,” Claire said with what she hoped was unruffled serenity. “No knowledge is ever wasted. I am finding it all very fascinating, though I must say for a saintly monk, our author relishes describing each particular effect in great detail. I am also a little astounded at the sheer quantity of substances listed.”

“I suspect aphrodisiacs go back as far as man and woman.” The comment was bland, something a staid scientist might say, but there was a shimmer of something in those green eyes that made Claire feel slightly breathless.

Claire said with shocking—even to her—suggestion, “It would be fascinating to find out if any of them actually work, wouldn’t it, my lord?”

The arrival of the footman with their soup cut off his reply. Intensely aware of the man sitting opposite her at the shining table, Claire began to eat, her mind not in the least on her food.

Unbridled ecstasy for both parties, the monk had written, comes from a man indulging himself in a woman’s female passage.

She wondered if it were true.

* * * *

Tugging off his cravat, Justin tossed it aside in careless frustration. Things were most certainly going from bad to worse. It was a little more than any man should have to endure to sit across from a stunningly beautiful woman and have to participate in any conversation that mentioned sexual intercourse.

If he hadn’t been half-erect at just the sight of Claire in her dark blue evening gown, he had certainly swollen to full mast when she wondered if any of the aphrodisiacs

actually worked.

Now that, he thought darkly, was an experiment he would gladly participate in.

His shirt was half-unbuttoned when he heard the soft knock. It was fairly late, since he had gone back to laboratory to take his mind off of his incipient desire for his young assistant, so he was a little surprised. Crossing to open it, he caught his breath sharply.

Claire stood there in the dark hallway, her long shining hair loose. The tumbled tresses fell in silky waves over her shoulders and down her graceful back. She wore a thin nightdress in a fine white material, her slender shoulders bare, her long-lashed lovely eyes gazing up at him. She said softly, "I am sorry to bother you, my lord, but I have been waiting for you to come up. I would have gone to the laboratory, but I had already undressed."

"Can't it wait until morning?" he asked more harshly than he intended, unfortunately not able to tear his gaze from where her nipples were visible through the sheer material. "This isn't very proper, Miss Fallon."

Glancing back at the darkened hall, she shrugged. "Who is going to know? Everyone else is in bed."

Pointing that out didn't help matters one whit. Neither did the fact that her full breasts swayed enticingly when she lifted her shoulders. Forcing himself to look into her eyes, Justin said firmly, "I am sure you are tired, and I am as well. We will discuss whatever brought you here tomorrow."

"There's something missing." She stubbornly did not move. "A key. The monk mentions he wrote out an entire key as a reference guide, listing all the mixtures and what they treated, plus where they were in the book. It isn't with the manuscript itself. I wondered if you had it elsewhere. It would be much simpler to only study the portions of the text that interested you and skip the remedies for boils and colic."

She had a point. If she had been anything other than half-dressed and so damned gorgeously desirable that his erection was back in an instant, throbbing painfully inside his trousers, he would have gladly gone down to his study and searched for it. Hoarsely, he said, "Your enthusiasm is admirable, my dear, and I will check tomorrow, how is that? Now...good night."

He was in the act of closing the door, when he heard her say, “I rather hoped you might invite me in, my lord.”

Justin froze, staring at her through the half opening. “What?”

There was no doubt she was a little uncertain, but she said plainly enough, “I might be wrong, but I rather had the impression perhaps you found me somewhat attractive—”

“You are the most beautiful, intelligent woman I have ever met,” he interrupted almost involuntarily.

Her gaze lowered a fraction, veiling those incredible violet eyes. “Thank you. You are very handsome and appealing, as well. Doesn’t it seem natural that we should address the issue of the attraction between us?”

“Address it?” he repeated stupidly, wondering if he had inhaled some sort of toxic fumes that were giving him hallucinations.

“In bed.” Claire lifted her arched brows a fraction, still standing demurely in the hallway.

Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself he was almost a decade older and undoubtedly more experienced if her blush was any indication, and he needed to be the voice of reason. “I want to,” he admitted candidly, “more than you know, but you are essentially in my care, and I am honor bound not to violate that trust.”

Her smile was tremulous, a curve of her soft lips. “I am a grown woman, on my own in this world. If I choose to take a lover, it is not your responsibility. If I were bedding one of the footmen, would you interfere?”

“I might rip his heart out,” Justin growled, the thought of her lovely, soft body in another man’s arms unpalatable.

She laughed then, a small hiccup of sound, and moved closer, slipping inside the door and putting her hand on his bare chest where his shirt gaped open. The sensation of her cool palm on his heated skin shattered his resolve in an instant, and his arms were suddenly around her, pulling her close, his mouth coming down to capture hers. The kiss was long and hot, his tongue invading and exploring, her body soft and willing against him. There seemed no doubt of her desire as she put both her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him, pressing the weight of her full breasts to his chest, her mouth parting

eagerly for the foray of his tongue. Finally lifting his head, he shoved the half-open door closed with one foot and lifted Claire into his arms.

Carrying her to the bed and laying her down, he reached for the hem of her nightdress at once, so eager to see her nude body that his heart pounded like a drum. Stripping her bare, he simply stood for a moment, surveying long smooth limbs, gloriously full firm breasts tipped with rosy crested nipples, and the intriguing and utterly feminine apex of silky hair at her white thighs. Her eyes were wide and dark, and her long curls, the color of chestnuts in autumn, spilled across the white linens of his bed.

“My God,” he whispered. “Nature achieved perfection on the day you were born, Claire. Are you certain you wish to give yourself to me? I can offer you almost nothing in return.”

“If you give me pleasure, that is enough,” she said in hushed tones.

Disrobing as fast as he could, Justin accepted that challenge, settling next to her and pulling her back into his arms so he could taste her silky, warm mouth. His rigid cock rubbed her thigh, need bleeding through his veins. He nuzzled her neck, her fragrant hair, nibbling on her earlobes and the satin curve of her shoulder. Feeling the rapid beat of her heart, he worshiped the valley between her soft breasts, those creamy mounds filling his hands, the nipples taut and high. Suckling the crests, he listened to her restless sighs as he readied her body, his hands roaming everywhere. Impatient because of his rampant need, he wanted her to climax quickly, so he moved lower, easing her thighs apart.

Her cleft was as luscious as the rest of her delectable body, just beginning to glisten with arousal, the soft folds of her labia slightly damp. Stroking his fingers over her sex, Justin watched Claire’s face with narrowed eyes, gauging her enjoyment, seeing the flush of embarrassment deepen to something more as she allowed his intimate touch. With his forefinger, he found the nub that he knew was the center of sensation for every woman, touching it, parting her so he could see the pink vulnerable tissue that protected it. Claire gasped when he began to very lightly circle, feeling betraying moisture cover his fingers, the small bud beginning to swell and rise with the stimulation.

“I have to taste you,” he said, ignoring her shocked protest when he lowered his head and covered her with his mouth, sucking on the same spot, using his tongue and teeth to lightly abrade and arouse. Keeping her prisoner for the tender assault between her

legs, he held her hips as he ate her sweet, weeping sex, knowing even before he felt the tell-tale tremors that she had reached that elusive orgasmic peak, her nectar flowing into his mouth. Claire arched and cried out, her legs falling wide open in sexual abandon, giving him more access as he kept her hanging there, her slim body shuddering and twisting in vivid release.

He waited until she went still, her lashes spiky on her cheeks, her body lax.

He rose up and adjusted himself between her legs. “I hope you don’t mind, my dear, but there is every chance this won’t take long. However, we do have all night...so forgive me.”

Her lashes fluttered and lifted. She said in unabashed wonder, “Anything. Right now, Justin, I would forgive you anything. God in heaven, that was glorious. No wonder our monk babbles on so about divine pleasure.”

He liked the way she said his name. It made him feel like her lover, the man who just brought her an intense and unfeigned climax. Leaning forward, he kissed her thoroughly, prolonging his pleasure by resting the tip of his rigid penis at the small, tight entrance to her vaginal passage. “Anticipation has to be by far the most potent aphrodisiac of all,” he told her, his voice thick with need. “I cannot wait to have you.”

Claire looked up at him, her small hands touching his shoulders, her legs open to accommodate his penetration. “Then don’t wait,” she whispered back. “Take me now.”

* * * *

Claire tried consciously to not tense in any way when she felt the nudge at her female opening, a little apprehensive over the sheer size of his erection, not previously aware that a man’s penis was so big in full arousal. Justin loomed over her, braced on his muscular forearms, his face dark with desire as he slowly pushed inside her body. The moment he reached the barrier of her innocence, she knew it, for he stopped, a trickle of sweat sliding down his lean jaw.

His green gaze was unreadable. “You are a virgin, then.”

“If I had to review the data, I would say not for long,” she murmured teasingly, still almost lazily sated from what he had done to her just moments before. “And certainly not innocent any longer, whether you rupture my maidenhead or not. So, please, pray continue, my lord. Considering what just happened to me, I am dying to know what

comes next.”

“It will hurt,” he said, though it was obvious it took a great deal of effort for him to stay so still.

“Take me at my word when I say I don’t care.” Lifting her hips a little, Claire tried to take him deeper.

After one long second of hesitation, he gave a low curse and moved forward. The slight tearing sensation was brief, followed by an almost overwhelming feeling of invasion and possession. Deep inside her, throbbing and huge, his male organ felt as if it now owned her body. Stretched wide, Justin’s leans hips wedging her legs apart, Claire experienced a primitive kind of elation, the pain of his entry negligible compared to the glory of being wanted so fiercely.

“Is it tolerable?” he asked hoarsely, staring down at her, his green gaze both tender and full of unconcealed fire. When she nodded, still adjusting to the sensation of having her passage so stretched and filled, he kissed her softly and then began to slide out.

She shivered, the glide of his retreating sex kindling an inexplicable feeling of loss. When he surged forward, she let out a small moan, accepting him, wanting more. It was as if her whole body burned and he was the hot wind fanning the flames. Establishing a erotic rhythm, moving in and out with slick motion, Justin went faster each time until she realized that her muscles were tense, her back arched and waiting for his next thrust, every nerve tight and needy.

It washed through her again, that tide of supreme physical joy, making her cry out and fall back, clutching wildly at Justin’s shoulders even as he went rigid above her and she felt an explosive heated release of liquid flood her vaginal canal. Eyes shut, he gasped out her name, his hips locked against her thighs, his erection pulsing inside her.

Moments later, when he rolled to his side and pulled her close, Claire whispered, “He was right.”

Justin’s fingers paused in the act of sifting through her tangled hair, his arm close around her. He said in amusement, “Who was right?”

“Our monk. He said there was ‘unbridled ecstasy for both parties when a man indulges himself in a woman’s female passage’.”

“Good God. Here I thought I was giving you a scholarly manuscript, not the lurid fantasies of a celibate scribe.”

Snuggling a little closer, relishing the feeling of being held, Claire mumbled defensively against his sweat-sheened chest, “I am finding it very enlightening, my lord.”

“I’m sure,” his response was dry, “but it sounds not in the least what a virginal young lady should read.”

“I am no longer a virgin.”

“Yes, I know.” His arm tightened a fraction. “Claire, I have never said anything, but I am sure you have heard I am married.”

A flicker of warning stirred in her brain despite her physical contentment. “I know, my lord.”

“I was foolish. It isn’t an easy thing for a man to admit.”

“We all make mistakes. Yours is just of the more permanent variety.”

“Unfortunately.” Irony was heavy in his tone.

Leaning up on one elbow, Claire shook the hair out of her face. “I expect nothing from you, Justin, know that. I...I admire you, both as a man and as a scholar. In my circumstances, I hardly expect to marry well, so my lost virginity is inconsequential. Besides, should I ever meet someone who I hold in high enough regard to tie myself to them for life, they would have to be open-minded enough to realize that I am a grown woman. No woman expects her husband to come to her bed pure and untried.”

Lying there nude, he lifted an ebony brow, looking impossibly handsome and a little tousled. “How very modern, Miss Fallon. I am guessing you wish to keep our personal relationship quite separate from our professional association?”

“Absolutely.”

“We,” he said, pulling her back into his arms, “can certainly try.”

Chapter Four

Mrs. Settles looked like a cat that had eaten the proverbial cream. Margot sat with her in her private sitting room in the apartments reserved for the staff, the late afternoon sunshine shifting across a patterned rug. There were chintz curtains at the windows, and the tea cozy was the one Margot remembered from childhood, when she used to sneak off to the housekeeper's room for tea and a little gossip. In what she thought was a confidential whisper, Settles said loudly, "I suppose what they do is work all day in the laboratory. But I can tell you, Your Grace, it isn't what they do at night. Mind you, I've never seen his lordship so relaxed and happy, and Miss Fallon is the epitome of grace and kindness, so we're all happy for them both, never mind it's a bit scandalous."

Fighting the urge to clap her hands in undignified glee, Margot concealed her satisfaction by saying, "She is a very beautiful young woman and poor Justin has suffered too much at the hands of that strumpet. I suppose I shouldn't say this, but I rather hoped Claire would make him re-enter the world a little."

"You should see him look at her. It would fair make you jealous to see such affection." Mrs. Settles' smile faded a little. "It's unfortunate, of course, the way it works out. He might have married Miss Claire had that scheming hard-faced harlot not gotten her hooks into him."

That was a little surprising and Margot was not certain it was welcome news. She wasn't sure she wanted her brother to fall in love. She just wanted him to have a little fun.

“Do you think so?”

Mrs. Settles nodded vigorously, her teacup precariously balanced in her hands. “I’ve known you both since you were in nappies. Do you think I wouldn’t know when he found the right woman? Think about it, Your Grace. She likes his work, in fact, she supports and helps him. She also complements him in other ways, her beauty aside. I hear them laugh and jest together, yet they also discuss science as if they were good friends, not lovers. I tell you, fate was in a foul mood when she brought Lady Caroline to his lordship’s attention. If he met her now, knowing Miss Claire, he wouldn’t have given that woman a second glance.”

It had been almost two months now since Claire Fallon had arrived at Ranleigh...and it certainly seemed she had done her part. More than her part, Margot pondered, hoping suddenly she hadn’t done more harm than good. She had even received a note from her brother’s new mistress, declining any more money, yet since the affair obviously continued, maybe Claire had also fallen in love. Rising, she said blandly, “Settles, thanks for the tea and the information, you know I can’t resist a cup with you whenever I come home. However, I must run back to London. I just stopped by to see Justin and say hello...you know the duke, he hates it when I am away. Keep me informed if there is anything else I need to know.”

Sitting like a queen in a small kingdom, Mrs. Settles smiled serenely, “Yes, dearie, you know I will.”

* * * *

Lying lazily on her stomach, nude and replete from her recent climax, Claire read, “A woman is the vessel for a man’s seed, her body a temple he worships with carnal adoration. When his sword strikes a blow between her legs, she shudders with the power of it.”

Lounging back against the rumpled bed linens, Justin laughed, mirth lighting his face. “Is that so?” His hand traced a long line down her spine, coming to rest on one bare buttock. “Tell me more, love. This wretched doggerel is fascinating.”

Frowning theatrically at the scattered pages, Claire quoted, “He claims that wartseed, whatever on earth that might be, will make a woman moan with such loudness that she fair shakes the timbered walls.”

“How enlightening.”

“And, good heavens, should she ingest a toad’s tongue mixed with garlic—”

“I would shudder at the thought of even touching her,” he interrupted. “Then again, I like kissing you so the toad’s tongue garlic mix might help you in your quest for orgasmic bliss, but somehow I doubt it would aide me.” His voice dropped a notch.

“Speaking of which, roll over, darling.”

Considering they had just finished making love shortly before, Claire was a little surprised when she complied and saw that his shaft was fully erect and high against his flat stomach, the tip distended and pearled with semen. His heavy-lidded gaze scanned her body with open lust, and the smile she loved curved his firm mouth. “My goodness, my lord,” she murmured, lowering her lashes a fraction as she stared at his erection. “Have you been reading the manuscript behind my back and ingesting some new concoction?”

He reached for her, pulling her on top of him. “No,” he said softly, “I have been spending a great deal of time having sexual congress with the most beautiful woman in the world. Now, spread your legs, Claire, I want you to ride me.”

In past weeks of unbridled erotic license, it seemed they had tried every position possible and this was one of her favorites. Complying instantly, she straddled him and closed her eyes as he held her hips and lowered her, her fingers wrapped around his rigid penis as she guided it to her feminine entrance. Sighing with satisfaction, she felt him fill her with inexorable hard heat, her passage throbbing and thick already with semen from their previous lovemaking.

Claire set the pace, her hands on his muscular shoulders as she moved up and down, the friction delicious and beguiling. Justin watched her breasts as they trembled and shifted with each motion, his green eyes glittering, his dark lashes shadowing his modeled cheekbones. Her body was so in tune to his that he seemed to sense exactly when to thrust upward slightly, bringing a feverish moan to her lips as the need for release built and grew. When his hand glided from her hip to between her legs, touching the exact spot with precise expertise, she exploded, sinking down deeply and letting out a small scream, her thighs gripping his body just as her inner muscles clenched his cock.

His eyes drifting shut, Justin responded to her wild abandon by flexing suddenly,

a groan coming up from his wide chest, his ejaculation drenching the entrance to her womb. Sinking down on to his damp body, Claire lay limply on his chest, their bodies still joined. "I love you, Justin," she breathed.

It was the first time she had said it, and the man beneath her went very still, only the rapid pounding of his heart giving any indication of movement. His hand came up slowly to touch her chin, lifting her face so he could look into her eyes. "Are you certain? You are very young, darling, and I am your first lover. Passion is one thing. Love something else entirely."

Claire smiled. "I think I can tell the difference. If for some reason, heaven forbid, we could never make love again, I would still feel the same way about you."

"Heaven forbid is right," he said fervently, a teasing smile playing on his lips. Then his expression sobered. "In light of your revelation then, I will tell you I am thinking of divorcing my wife."

Shock made her mind go blank for a moment. Claire shook her head, sitting up a little in a flurry of loose, disheveled hair, still straddling his hips with his softening shaft inside her. "You can't, Justin. It...it isn't done."

"Not often," he agreed pragmatically, "and never without a great deal of expense and even more scandal. The only reason I didn't consider it before is because of Margot. As the Duchess of Astley, she has a very prominent place in society. The indignity of the gossip will hurt her more than me, as I almost never attend social functions and spend almost all my time here in the country."

The duchess. Just the mention of her brought up another point that Claire had been trying to avoid facing. Justin had no idea that his sister had hired her to sleep with him. In fact, in light of how well the seduction had gone and how happy she was, Claire had composed a letter already to the duchess, asking her to discontinue paying her. Justin gave her a very reasonable salary for her duties, and though it felt odd taking money from him considering their relationship, she needed to look to William's future. In a small voice, she said, "Do not do this for me."

His hands caressed her hips, sliding down her bare thighs. "I am doing it for myself actually. There is every chance you will eventually bear me a child. I would like it to be legitimate and able to inherit my wealth and title."

“You wish to marry me?” Claire stared at him.

His brows lifted. “Yes, indeed. What do you imagine, Claire, that I would casually seduce you? I would like to think I am not that kind of man. The only way I can reconcile the fact that I have made you my mistress under my own roof is to set things right. We have been discreet but there isn’t a person in this house, or undoubtedly the surrounding countryside, that does not know we are lovers. I would like them to also know I love you and wish you to be my wife.”

Justin loved her.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she swallowed hard to fight a thickness in her throat. “I do not know how to feel about this...idea of yours,” she whispered. “I always rather hoped my grandfather might relent and at least accept William as his heir. For all I know he is named such in his will. It’s more me he hates since I resemble my mother. A scandalous marriage will not help my brother.”

Calmly, Justin shook his dark head. “We cannot live our lives to please other people, love, especially an old fool who may never relent. William will have everything he needs, I will see to it.” He grimaced. “However, Margot might be a little difficult over this, although I know she wants to see me happy.”

“She does indeed,” Claire murmured faintly, as she eased off of Justin’s body and lay down next to him.

One thing was clear, she was going to have to see the duchess right away.

* * * *

Caroline looked at the butler with regal haughtiness. “If the duchess is out, I will wait for her. She is, I remind you, my sister-in-law.”

The man looked unruffled but his face reddened slightly. “I am aware of your relationship, my lady. And I did not say she was out, she is occupied. If you wish to leave your card, she will send along a note with an appointment time.”

“How absolutely ridiculous,” Caroline snapped. She had traveled halfway across Europe to discuss the possibility of reconciliation with Justin and getting Margot on her side was paramount. The two were foolishly fond of each other, holding a sappy affection that Caroline had always found a little nauseating but would now come in handy. She planned on subtly blackmailing Margot into helping her. Caroline was fairly sure that if

she threatened to stay in London, socializing as Lady Ranleigh and making it clear that Justin was a jealous husband and they were estranged because of it, her sister-in-law would relent and see the advantages of helping her convince Justin to take her back.

She could almost feel his cock between her legs already, big and hard...

“I will see the duchess now,” Caroline said with lethal conviction in her voice, “or I will make such a scene as you have never witnessed. Unless she is with the prince regent, I want you to take me to her this instant.”

A small bead of sweat had appeared on the man’s brow, but he merely inclined his head. “I will try once more then, Lady Ranleigh, to inquire if her Grace will see you.”

Giving him no more than a few seconds, Caroline followed quietly out into the hall, seeing him pause by the door to the informal salon. When he knocked and went to open it, she breezed past him, actually giving him a small satisfying shove as she passed. “Hello, Margot,” she said sweetly, seeing the outraged expression on her sister-in-law’s face as the duchess rose abruptly to her feet at her entrance. “Sorry for being so brash, but I really must see you. It is about Justin, so I knew it would be important to you also.”

Margot’s face was decidedly unfriendly and her tone sardonic when she said, “Do come in, Caroline. And do not apologize for being rude. You cannot help it and one gets used to it, like a rash that will not go away.”

The duchess, Caroline saw with a spark of envy, was dressed as always in the latest style, wearing a cream linen beribboned gown that emphasized she still had a lovely figure for a woman her age. Making a mental note to see if her own maid could duplicate the intricate knot of the duchess’s hairstyle, Caroline laughed lightly. “You always were so droll. I love the gown of course. You look marvelous.” Her attention shifted to the other person in the room, a young woman dressed far more plainly, but with excellent effect. Sitting in a delicate chair, her pale face dominated by eyes that actually looked purple in the waning afternoon sunshine coming in the tall windows, she was strikingly lovely. With swift critical assessment, Caroline saw smugly that the girl’s hair was not gloriously blond like her own, but unfashionably brown, yet...it was extraordinarily pretty, she unwillingly conceded to herself.

Since she was looking pointedly at her guest, Margot apparently had no choice to introduce her, for she said coolly, “Caroline, this is Miss Fallon. Claire, meet Lady

Ranleigh, Justin's wife."

The girl's wide eyes held a puzzling look of horror. She got convulsively to her feet and her hands fisted in her skirts. Instead of politely responding to the introduction, she said abruptly, "I cannot do this, Your Grace. Don't expect me to be cordial to this woman."

Margot said conversationally, "Don't worry. Remember, my dear, she is not here at my invitation."

Her interest sharpening, Caroline felt a prickle of irritated warning. Since she had never met Miss Fallon before, this must have something to do with Justin, she guessed shrewdly. At that very moment, an extremely damp and perspiring butler announced, "Your Grace, your brother, the Viscount Ranleigh, wishes to see you."

* * * *

It was an interesting tableau if one was into melodramatic confrontation and uncomfortable liaisons. Justin paused in the door of the salon, taking in Caroline's presence, Claire's pale face and trembling lips, and his sister's covertly guilty expression. Without preamble, he asked bluntly, "What the devil is going on here?"

When all three of them exclaimed, "Justin," he stifled an inward groan.

Caroline, he saw with detached observation, looked well, her skin glowing, her pale blond hair twisted into an intricate style. Her gown was blue, a little low-cut for the early afternoon, her ample cleavage displayed for all to see. She licked her lips as she stared at him, a deliberately seductive mannerism he well-remembered. It sickened him to see the woman he had once vowed to cherish forever—and now that he truly knew what it was like to be in love, those words said so long ago were a travesty compared to the depths of what he felt for Claire.

In a sultry whisper, Caroline said, "Darling...I had just dropped by to see your dear sister on my way to Ranleigh. I so missed you!"

He fended off her theatrical attempt to throw her arms around him, catching her firmly by the shoulders and saying blandly, "Why on earth would you be on your way to Ranleigh, Caroline? You are not welcome there, as you well know."

Her lower lip stuck out a little and she gazed at him with limpid innocent eyes. "Justin...don't tell me you haven't forgiven me? Surely, you cannot forget our passionate

love?”

“You seem to be rather free with your passion, my dear.” Releasing her shoulders, he stepped back as if withdrawing from a viper. “Call me dull and conventional, but I somehow hoped the woman I married would at least consider fidelity as part of her obligation to me.” Out of the corner of his eye, Justin saw Claire move convulsively, as if she would run from the room if they weren’t blocking the doorway. “However,” he continued, “it is fortuitous to find you here. I have had investigators looking for you for over a month, since I wished to petition for divorce.”

“No.” Caroline’s refusal was instant, her pretty face hardening into an unattractive mask. “Absolutely not, Justin. I won’t agree to a divorce.”

“That’s fine with me,” he agreed blandly. “But your husband might object.”

Before his eyes, Caroline’s face went feral, her blue eyes like diamonds without depth. “I do not know what you mean. You are my husband.”

“I would be,” he said gently, “if you had not married your father’s stable boy at the tender age of fifteen. Simply because that hapless young man was sent away does not mean he ceased to exist, Caroline. Your father tried to fix the mistake and also allowed you to become a bigamist without saying a word, but when some Italian count contacted him in the interest of asking for your hand in marriage a few months ago, he knew you were up to something again. Apparently it was too much for the poor man. He wrote to me finally, telling me the truth. I got the letter yesterday, and I have to tell you, I have never felt so free.”

In the background, Margot murmured gleefully, “Halleluiah.”

Breasts heaving, Caroline looked like a cornered animal. She spat icily, “I am your wife. We were legally wed.”

“You are an adulteress and a scheming bitch,” he responded coolly. “Now that I am in love with a beautiful, honest woman who gives me not only her body but her heart, I thank God on bended knee that things have worked out so well. Give me your felicitations, my dear, for I am to be married to the woman of my dreams.”

His gaze lifted past Caroline’s contorted features to where Claire stood as if stricken by her chair in his sister’s elegant, refined drawing room. He smiled.

Her response was a quiver of her slender body and he saw her gloriously lovely

eyes shimmered with tears. Barely noticing that Caroline pushed past him to sweep out of the room, he stared at his future bride. “Claire,” he said tenderly, “why on earth would you weep? Things could not have turned out better for us.”

It was Margot that cleared her throat. His sister actually looked like she wanted to squirm, an unusual state for a regal, wealthy, beautiful wife of a peer of the realm. She stammered, “Justin, Claire is most worried you will be upset with her...er...well, both of us, to find out I hired her.”

Starting to cross the room to take Claire into his arms, Justin halted. “I know you hired her.”

“Well, yes. But perhaps not the whole truth of it.” Margot’s smile wobbled a bit, and then she said darkly, “Dash it, I don’t know why I feel guilty about this, because it worked out perfectly, but she insists I tell you the truth.”

Since Claire stood there like a tragic figure in a Greek play, he stifled the urge to laugh. “What truth?”

“I hired her to seduce you.” Margot spoke bluntly and quickly. “You seemed so lonely and absorbed in your work and I thought she would be a pleasant distraction.”

He had been taken in by Caroline, but Claire’s innocent passion was not something contrived, he knew that as well as he lived and breathed. Not able to resist needling them both a bit, he commented with a lifted brow, “I see. Tell me, how much is a virgin sacrifice worth these days? The whole situation is rather ironic, isn’t it? My supposed wife is the farthest thing from an innocent one can imagine, and my hired mistress is as pure as the day she was born when she comes to my bed.”

Claire spoke for the first time, her voice strained. “I fell in love with you at once, Justin, and I returned every dime she paid me.”

“I fell in love with you at once,” he replied mildly, “and I knew from the very beginning you and Margot were up to something. I was a fool one time already. That was enough. Besides, darling, your seduction was effective, but hardly the operation of a skilled harlot. I was more than willing to succumb.”

Claire’s soft tempting lips trembled and her violet eyes were luminous. “You are not angry and betrayed?”

“I am ecstatic and overjoyed.” With two strides he crossed to sweep her into his

arms. “Live with me,” he whispered, kissing her lightly, forgetting his sister’s presence as he cradled her body, “love with me, and give me children. I bless whatever powers brought you to me, and celebrate fate’s gift of freedom from Caroline.”

Winding her arms around his neck, Claire kissed him back passionately, saying into his mouth, “Yes, yes, yes.”

Epilogue

William stood, the pole in his hands, his small sturdy body poised on the shore. Next to him, Claire watched Justin give him instructions as the water rippled and her young brother tried to reel in the fish. They looked good together, man and boy, and she felt a familiar lump in her throat over her good fortune.

“Your husband,” Aunt Alma said fondly for probably the hundredth time, “is a decent man.”

“Yes,” Claire agreed dreamily.

“He will make a good father,” Alma said, pointedly eyeing Claire’s slightly rounded stomach.

“I know.”

“But do not keep him from his experiments. I can hardly believe how much better I feel since I started taking that concoction you two came up with.”

“Coating the substance in gelatin was my idea,” Claire pointed out. “It makes it at least palatable, doesn’t it?”

“I swallow it quickly, but gladly,” Alma conceded. “Tell me, what are you working on now?”

A small smile touched Claire’s mouth as she remembered the results of their latest experiments. Some of the monk’s aphrodisiac recipes had proven very effective. In fact, the night before they had made love over and over, and she had climaxed with an

intensity she could not believe. Justin had also claimed to have reached a new pinnacle of orgasmic sensation, and they had lain in each other's arms in sated wonder afterwards.

Primly, she said, "We are formulating a compound that will make people...happy."

Alma frowned, watching as William landed his fish. "A happiness elixir? Is that possible?"

"Only," Claire answered mildly, "if one finds the perfect man."

THE MANUSCRIPT

THE END

Emma Wildes

Emma Wildes loves the infinite variations of romance in all its forms. She believes that passion makes the world go around...and delights in being able to write about it.

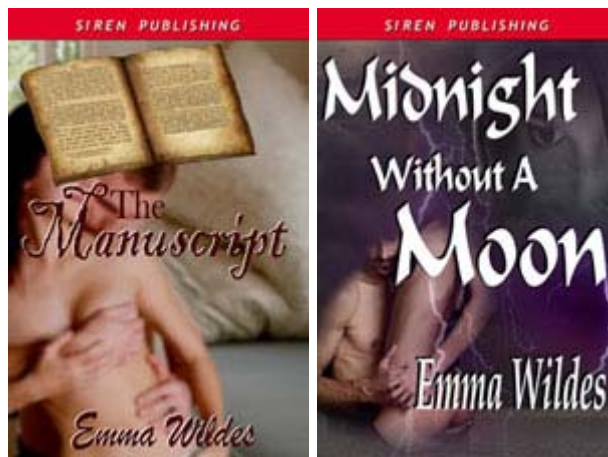
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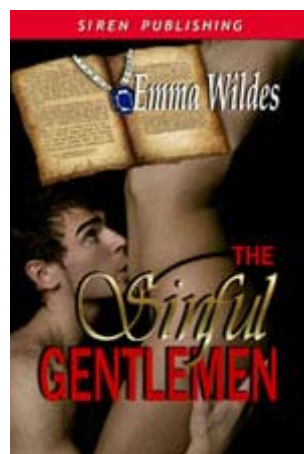
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