



THE
SWITCH

Emma Wildes

The Switch
by Emma Wildes

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Dedication

For Abigail Brace ... we knew each other in another life.

Chapter 1

God in heaven, it had come. This was the day.

Opening her eyes, Jacqueline Ross saw soft sunshine falling in blocks across her bedroom, the sky outside her window a vivid blue.

Sitting up, she shook back her long hair and stifled a surge of nervous excitement as she reached for the bell pull. Already she was trembling in excitement, she thought ruefully, and the ceremony wouldn't be until late afternoon.

That was when she would become Lady Trevor, the bride of the sixth Earl of Hallworth. It was hard to believe that she could be so lucky as to actually marry for love when so many of her friends and acquaintances were forced to accept arranged unions based on financial and social reasons. The fact that her future husband was gorgeously handsome, infallibly considerate, and considered the catch of the season, made it all even more like some romantic fable in which the princess finds her heroic and dashing prince and they live happily ever after...

Tonight, she thought, her face heating, she would truly become his wife in every way.

"Good morning, miss." Her maid, Mary, bustled in with a tray, her smiling face reflecting Jacqueline's own joy. "It's a lovely day for a wedding, if I may say so."

Propped back on her pillows, Jackie agreed dreamily, "It's like a dream come true."

* * * *

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"I feel as if I'm trapped in a damned nightmare," Adam Trevor admitted in a strained voice, walking slowly across his study to stare out the window at the mockingly beautiful sky. *Not a cloud in sight*, he thought with cynical despair, when it would have been much more appropriate to his mood to have dreary droplets of rain cascading downward in an interminable downpour. "It's my damned wedding day, for God's sake."

Behind him, his brother sat in a shocked silence. Adam could almost feel Alex's effort to grope for words ... not even the *right* words, just anything to say to a man who had just admitted such a devastating secret. If their roles were reversed, he would also be speechless. Finally, Alex murmured hoarsely, "I assume you have been to more than one physician."

Without turning around, Adam replied wearily, "Hell, of course. Though, quite frankly, it isn't the most enjoyable thing to explain to anyone, even a doctor, that you are having trouble functioning as a man. I am also not anxious to have others know this—I'm sure you can sympathize with that sentiment." Slowly turning, using his cane, Adam felt the flush of a ridiculous shame climb up his neck. "They all say the same thing. When I was injured in the accident six weeks ago, the damage to the groin muscles probably restricts the blood flow in that ... crucial area." His smile was a twisted parody of the real thing. "All I know is that when I hold Jacqueline in my arms now, I feel the same ardent desire, but my body doesn't respond as it should. I just don't get ... hard. I couldn't believe it at first ... I have always tried to be

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so careful that she never noticed my reaction whenever I touched her, and believe me, I reacted as any man would."

"I'm sure. She's a very beautiful woman. However, as a gentleman, you can't really touch her yet; maybe your body knows that ... have you tried someone else?"

"Yes," Adam's face tightened, he could feel it despite his quest for control. "One of Eleanor's best girls ... a luscious brunette courtesan with undeniable talents. I was both humiliated and unsuccessful. Apparently, this does happen to some men from time to time, and she seemed to think nothing about it. I pretended to have imbibed a great deal of claret, and she laughingly tucked me into bed. Needless to say, it had never happened to *me* before, and that's when I became truly concerned."

"Does Jacqueline know about this ... this problem?"

"She's innocent, of course, and has no idea there's anything wrong. Hell, she's the last person I would ever tell." Adam added harshly and honestly, "You're my brother and there's no denying we're closer than most siblings, yet it sorely grates on my pride to admit this to you, much less to the woman I love."

"Jesus." Shoving himself abruptly to his feet, Alex crossed the room and fumbled with the brandy decanter. "I don't care if it's still morning, I need a drink."

"Pour me one, too," Adam muttered. "God knows *I* need one for the next part of our conversation."

Dashing brandy carelessly into snifters, Alex walked over and handed one to him, frowning his brow. "Next part? Please tell me the doctors predict you'll recover."

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The brandy burned going down and hit his empty stomach like a slamming fist; he took such a big gulp. Adam coughed and responded grimly, "They think so."

Sinking back into a leather chair, his long legs sprawled, and carelessly dangling his glass from long, elegant fingers, his brother asked cautiously, "Only *think* so?"

"No assurances. There is a lot of swelling still, and torn muscles take time. That could be the problem ... they think it is, and as it mends, the inflammation will hopefully subside and not impede the vessels necessary for normal sexual arousal." Adam took another deep drink of the bracing beverage in his hand and tried to sound matter-of-fact. "But ... it's possible I will never again be able to achieve an erection."

Saying the words out loud was worse than hearing them, he found, and hearing them had been like a knife being impaled through his chest.

Shoving his hand carelessly through his thick hair, Alex stared at him in sympathetic male consternation, a dawning realization of his true plight in his eyes. "Bloody hell, Adam, what are you going to do? Like you said, this is your damned wedding day."

Lifting his brows, he asked caustically, "Do you think I don't know that? Why the devil do you think I'm telling you something this personal anyway?"

If Alex was anything, he was blunt. He was also reckless, charming, and beyond a doubt, one of England's most determined rakehells, but he was always forthright. He said frankly, "Is it fair to your lovely betrothed to marry her,

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knowing you may never be able to be a true husband or give her children?"

That, of course, was the horrible moral dilemma, the one he'd struggled with ever since he realized there was a problem after the accident. "I love her," Adam said simply, moving to sink painfully into the chair behind his desk, setting his cane aside. "Passionately, completely, with every fiber of my being. I will do anything to have her as my wife. In fact, I think I'm about to prove that."

Obviously puzzled and concerned, Alex lifted his dark blond brows. "Stop talking in cryptic circles, would you? This is a mess, and yet you haven't even told your unknowing bride something that might seriously concern her future. It isn't like you, Adam, to be anything but completely responsible ... I'm the wild one, remember? What are you going to tell your gorgeous wife tonight when you don't consummate your union? Putting it off won't help anything."

"It might, if I recover. She doesn't have to ever know."

"That's an interesting delusion," Alex murmured incredulously, "and I'm not being cruel because you're my brother and I can't even imagine how you feel, but I happen to be fond of my future sister-in-law, and this doesn't seem very equitable to her."

Leaning his arm on his desk, Adam asked evenly, "How fond?"

"What?" Alex stopped, his brandy glass arrested at his lips.

They had always had the ability—perhaps it was those nine months spent in the womb together—to read each other's thoughts with uncanny precision. Adam just sat there and

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gazed at his brother with an unfaltering stare and saw at once when Alex comprehended what he was suggesting. "It would work," he said softly and quickly before his brother could protest, "think about it. Yes, she knows me ... but not in the muted light, in bed, where Jackie has absolutely no experience. She's a virgin, so she'll be nervous, and the last thing on her mind would be a suspicion that it was you, and not me, bedding her. In fact, the notion is ludicrous, isn't it? We're unusually close, true, but who on earth would think I would let my brother have carnal knowledge of my wife?"

"No one, because it's insane," Alex rasped out, sitting utterly still, his azure eyes narrowed. "Are you really asking me to *fuck* Jacqueline for you?"

Adam eyed the wavy dark blond curls that brushed his brother's neck, the straight nose—perhaps a little long, the high cheekbones and thickly-lashed blue eyes that were as familiar as looking in a mirror. He said unemotionally, "We *are* identical twins, Alex, and we have fooled other people plenty of times, including our own mother. In fact, most people can't tell us apart, even those who have known us for years. Fool Jackie and leave me forever in your debt."

"You can't mean it." The raw note in Alex's voice was a mixture of disbelief and an understanding of what it had cost to even suggest such a mad scheme. "How the hell would you endure it, Adam? You *love* her, you just said so, and I know it's true ... I envy you for it, if you want the truth, because I have never loved a woman in any other but the most physical of ways."

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"If it means I get to keep her, to be her husband, to smile at her over the breakfast table, and have her on my arm at the opera and the parties so the world knows she's mine ... that will make me endure it." It was the simple truth. He'd sat and weighed the myriad of his emotions one by one and found that risking losing her was simply not an option. "I don't want her to know about my condition. This is the only way. Luckily, you sold your townhouse and will be staying here at Hallworth, so when we switch places and you go to her, it will be easy."

"Christ ... you aren't even talking about just one night, are you?" Alex shook his head, looking uncharacteristically rattled, the suave smooth charm he was renowned for replaced by reluctant uncertainty. "I don't think we can pull this off, Adam. Yes, we look exactly alike, that I grant, but we aren't similar in personality. I am not sure I can even act the staid and responsible earl, especially in the capacity to which we are referring."

"Feel free not to. I have an intense passion for her, as a woman she senses it, and I have told her so. In the bedroom, everyone is allowed to be different. If as a lover, all Jackie knows is you, she won't think anything of the fact I am not the same during the day." His throat suddenly tight, Adam toyed with his now empty glass and said somberly, "Though I ask you to do this, the risk is entirely mine, brother. My happiness is what lies in the balance, that, and holding on to what I value in this world more than title and wealth. If she finds out, I will answer to her."

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"I suspect that's the truth," Alex said forcefully. "At the very least you are making her an unwitting adulteress. And as for myself, I am not sure what position you are putting me in."

"Desperate measures apply to this situation."

"I suppose they do."

"Then you agree?"

For a long moment, Alex sat there in frowning silence. Then he lifted his glass in a mock salute and drained it. He said darkly, "You are my brother. Did you ever doubt I would?"

* * * *

The mansion in Mayfair was alive with lights and people. The music swirled upward, the floor glittering with hundreds of guests as the orchestra played a popular waltz. The ballroom was resplendent with flowers, food, and champagne flowed like water. Everywhere there were guests drinking, laughing, and celebrating.

Celebrating the marriage of the Earl of Hallworth and his undeniably radiant bride.

It was true, Alex Trevor thought, as he watched his brother attempt a slow and awkward dance with a laughing Jacqueline in his arms, *they were a striking couple*. It was incredible, but his brother had pulled off the wedding ceremony with complete composure, not once by look or gesture giving any clue to his personal agony. Tall and blond, he gazed at his new wife with open and complete adoration, the cane he'd had to use since the riding accident that had

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almost crippled him in one hand, his other arm around her dainty waist.

Adam's bride was stunning at all times, but particularly this night in a wedding dress of pale blue silk strung with hundreds of tiny seed pearls, her shining auburn hair caught up in a cascade of gleaming curls that fell over her pale, slender shoulders. Her figure was enough to make any woman envious, full breasts emphasizing a slender waist and graceful hips, her ivory skin an arresting contrast to her rich hair, her long-lashed eyes a soft shade of gray so unusual that they were actually silver. Delicately featured and intensely feminine, upon her bow into London society, Jacqueline Ross had drawn the eyes of most of the young bucks of the *ton*, but as far as Alex could tell, she had fallen almost immediately for his brother and her affection had nothing to do with the title or wealth he offered her.

Dammit, they were in love and it was preposterous that fate had to meddle with such remorseless glee in their happiness.

Using him as a Satan's instrument, no less—the deceptive by-proxy lover who was supposed to make this a night an innocent young woman would remember forever.

Reaching for a passing tray, Alex wryly plucked a glass of sparkling wine from it and lifted it to his lips, draining it swiftly. To his dismay, he heard the huge clock in the outer hall begin to chime, even above the ripple of the music the distinct clang of the clapper intoning the midnight hour.

And this was the first time in his life, he reminded himself with sardonic humor, that he wasn't looking forward to

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fucking a beautiful, willing woman. His reputation as a profligate rogue was fairly earned ... he enjoyed women and had a healthy sexual appetite that he appeased quite often.

But tonight was not going to be a lighthearted romp between the sheets with some bored young wife of an elderly baronet, or a heated interlude with the newest voluptuous actress to grace the London stage ... tonight he was supposed to perform the ultimate betrayal he could ever imagine and make love to his brother's new wife.

Since it was the appointed hour, he didn't stay, but instead slipped out and went upstairs, as he had agreed to do, using a back servants' stairway, knowing they were all occupied with the bustle of having so many guests. Once in his own suite, glancing at the clock, Alex discarded his cravat. As Adam had instructed, he waited about thirty minutes and then picked up a bottle of fine French brandy and left the room.

His brother's young valet answered the door. Lifting the bottle with a grin, Alex said jokingly, "One last drink before he surrenders himself fully to the chains of matrimony, Harper. It isn't every day my only brother gets married."

"Of course, sir. The earl said you might stop by before he retires."

Adam was half-undressed, discarding his shirt. With perfect calm direction, he lifted a dark blond brow and said, "Thanks, Harper, you may go, and I doubt I'll need you early tomorrow for understandable reasons."

The boy colored slightly at the direct reference to the upcoming night, and then bowed away, closing the door

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behind him. Almost immediately, Adam said urgently, "Give me your shirt and jacket ... our trousers look close enough to be interchangeable. Here's my dressing gown, disrobe and put it on. I told Jackie I would give her half an hour."

Holding his brother's gaze for a long moment, Alex asked hoarsely, "You're sure? It isn't too late to explain it all to her ... she loves you; even for a jaded roué like me, that's plain to see. She'll understand—"

"No, damn it all, I can't stand the thought that she would know." Adam's face twisted in pain as he interrupted, his blue eyes shadowed and darkly desperate. "You'll take care with her innocence, I know that. Jesus," briefly he ran his hand over his face, "this is almost unbearable, but not as much as having her think of me as less than a man. Do you have any idea how much I love her?"

The concept of love wasn't something he was well-versed in, but Alex had stood by that altar and seen the look on his brother's face when he recited his vows before God and the company assembled. "Yes," he said softly. "I think I do."

"Here." Adam tugged off his wedding ring and extended it. "You'll need to wear this ... she'll expect it, of course. My advice would be to actually talk as little as possible, except what needs to be said, so she ... understands what you are doing. I don't want her frightened."

"If you are still certain you wish this, I promise to take every care with your new countess, brother."

"You know what the worst part of this is for me?" Adam asked as he slid his arms into the shirt Alex handed him, his mouth thinning into a cynical smile. "It's the fact that I *want*

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her to enjoy tonight, to experience sexual gratification and climax as you use that damned expertise you've perfected by gracing the beds of hundreds of ladies." He added softly, "*That* is how much I love her."

Not sure what to say, Alex cinched the silk dressing gown and stayed silent.

Slowly, his older brother extended the cane he now used to ease the pain from his injuries. "You might want this, though I don't use it all the time, and remember to limp." Adam murmured, "We'll exchange places once you are sure she's asleep." His mouth twisted. "Just come get me. Don't worry about the hour, I'll be awake."

Somehow, Alex didn't doubt that.

Chapter 2

A little trepidation was normal, of course. Her mother had said so just before she explained in a jumbled and almost incoherent string of sentences something about male urges and lying very still and how quickly it should all be over.

Jackie thought somehow there would be more to married life than *that*.

Especially with Adam, who was so intriguingly attractive in every possible way.

But it was all a little daunting, not to mention that the room was unfamiliar, the furnishings a little grandiose for her tastes with velvet hangings and heavy ornate furniture. There were even cherubs painted on the ceiling in some sort of frivolous fresco, their round, bare bottoms and impish smiles a little cloying. Adam had given her *carte blanche* to redecorate if she wished and perhaps she would, but right now, she was simply a very nervous bride, and the overdone bedroom of the countesses of Hallworth was her last concern.

The knock on the door was soft, but her new husband didn't wait for an answer before he opened it and walked haltingly into the room. Unused to seeing him in anything except formal clothing, Jacqueline was a little unsettled by the glimpse of his bare broad chest through the open throat of his casual dressing gown. Sitting primly on the edge of the bed, she swallowed and murmured, "My Lord."

"Madame." His mouth twitched at the stilted formality of her greeting.

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So very tall, with his eye-catching dark gold hair, clean masculine features, and lean muscular body, he was the epitome of every young girl's dreams ... however, he was also a decade older, and that translated to even a greater difference in experience. The last thing she wanted was to disappoint him in some way. As the older brother with more responsibilities, Adam didn't have nearly the reputation for seduction that his twin brother, Alex, did, but she knew with his good looks and titled position, there had been plenty of women in his past. Claspng her hands hard together, Jackie gave him what she hoped was an enticing smile, wishing her lips didn't tremble visibly.

In answer, he smiled back in a teasing heart-stopping dark way that made him look quite different than the usual cool self-possessed man she knew. "What on earth," he asked in open amusement, "are you wearing? Oh hell, let me guess, your mother chose that gown. Am I correct?"

Blinking because he had certainly never sworn in front of her before, Jackie bit her lip and nodded. It was true, she might be totally innocent in most ways, but she knew enough to figure out that being buttoned to the throat by confining material was not the normal way a woman greeted her new husband. Stifling an edgy laugh, she said, "I think she thought it might discourage you from exerting your husbandly rights."

"Nothing could discourage me from that," he remarked, moving toward the bed. "Now then, let's take this thing off as soon as possible. We've been engaged for months. I need to see you."

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Impatience was not exactly what she had expected, but then again, Jackie wasn't exactly sure *what* to expect. Flushing, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. Everything was different now between then, she realized as she gazed into the shimmering heated depths of his very blue eyes. Adam had always looked at her with tender solicitude, but what she saw in the eyes of the man so deftly unfastening her gown was something else entirely.

His hands felt warm and insistent when he pulled the filmy material down over her shoulders to let the night rail slide into a pool at her feet. Suddenly completely nude, heat scorched her cheeks when he took a small step back and deliberately ran his gaze up and down the length of her trembling naked body. The lights in the room had not been dimmed like her mother had assured her they would be, so he could see everything from her exposed breasts to the triangle of dark silky pubic hair at the juncture of her thighs. Just at the moment she thought she would expire of embarrassment if he didn't say something, her new husband murmured, "You are breathtakingly beautiful, but then again, I expected no less than the perfection I am seeing."

It took all her courage to not snatch the enveloping gown back up and hold it in front of her, but she loved Adam, she reminded herself, and every mature woman who had spoken to her about marriage had whispered how important this aspect would be to her husband. "I'm glad you find me attractive, my Lord," she managed to whisper, blushing even deeper.

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"I'm glad, too," he murmured, stepping back so close that she could feel the heat from his tall body against her bare skin. Putting one long finger under her chin, he tilted her face up and stared down into her eyes. "You do realize that we are past the point of chaste kisses and gentle embraces? I have no idea what your mother told you, but if it was some ridiculous advice to just lie there and let me have my way, you may dismiss that, sweetheart. I want to worship your glorious body with mine, giving us *both* equal enjoyment in the act of love. But you have to relax and accept the pleasure, and trust me that nothing we're going to do is wrong or unnatural."

Jackie smiled tremulously, reaching up one hand to touch his lean jaw, the caress light. "If there is anyone on this earth I trust, it is you, Adam."

Something flickered in his blue gaze and with a low oath, he slid his arms around her and pulled her against his hard body, his mouth coming down to cover hers. He was right, Jackie found, for there was nothing chaste about the way he kissed her, his tongue sliding deep between her parted lips, finding and tangling with hers, rubbing in exquisite friction. It felt decadent to have her naked body so tight against his, and she could feel the pounding of his heart through the thin silk of his dressing gown. A small gasp escaped her lips when he lifted his head and swept her into his arms to lay her on the bed.

He didn't remove his dressing gown, for which she was both grateful and a little disappointed. Instead he joined her and propped himself on one elbow, smoothing his hand over

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her bare shoulder, leaning forward to kiss her eyebrows, her temple, the sensitive spot below her ear. "You smell like flowers," he murmured in a seductive whisper that sent a shiver down her spine, "and taste like a promise of paradise. I have always admired the color of your hair, somewhere between sable and autumn leaves, and it feels like fine satin in my hands."

"Kiss me again." Jackie breathed, letting her eyes drift shut, as he obliged with another wicked foray of tongue and mouth. She'd always enjoyed Adam's kisses and sensed his barely leashed need when held in his arms, but this was not at all the same; this was elemental in some way and more of possession than seduction. His long lean body hovering over her felt large, male ... and predatory.

Freeing her mouth, his lips slid down her throat to capture the place where her pulse beat in a wild staccato, then slipped further down to graze her collarbone. She couldn't suppress a small shiver when one of his hands cupped her bare breast, a curious tightness starting to creep over her whole body. Her husband said with that uncharacteristic teasing smile, "I could not imagine a more splendid set of breasts, my Lady. Full and firm, yet soft and smooth ... as if created just for my hands and mouth, specially formed to my exact tastes." His heavy-lidded gaze fastened on that part of her anatomy.

Not sure what she was supposed to do, Jacqueline lay there fighting disbelief over the outrageous way he began to fondle and play with that portion of her body she knew men noticed and admired—but never understood how much until

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this moment. His thumbs smoothed over the soft tips, and she had to suppress a small cry, the sensation was so unique and intense. When he bent his head and took one nipple into his mouth and began to suckle and circle it with his tongue, she couldn't help it, a small whimper escaped, and her hands slid into the softness of his thick blond hair.

Was this passion? Jackie wondered as embarrassment over what he was doing was replaced slowly by languid pleasure. She felt so odd, like a mechanical toy being wound up too tightly, anticipation vying with her innate fear of the unknown act both mystified and forbidden until this night. He continued caressing and sucking, licking the soft undersides and exploring the valley between those now straining mounds with his mouth and tongue, until her nipples were stiff and tight, her full flesh feeling almost heavy with an unknown need. When he moved over her again to kiss her mouth, she clasped her arms around his neck and responded with an abandonment that surprised them both.

"Your body is not only beautiful, but responsive," he whispered against her lips, holding her close. "Can you feel the arousal I experience just from touching and looking at you? I'm so hard, I ache, Jackie."

She *could* feel it, she realized with a jolt. A long stiff length pressed against her thigh, and though he hadn't removed his dressing gown yet, the heat and size of it, through the material, was intriguing. "Are you ever going to take this off?" she asked Adam shyly, rubbing her hands over his broad shoulders, fingering the fine material. "You've more than seen me and I'm ... curious, I admit."

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"I'd love to, if you're ready. I'm doing my best not to rush you, sweetheart."

She nodded, watching from under the fringe of her lashes as he stood swiftly and shrugged out of his robe. Eyes widening, Jackie realized though he called her beautiful, he was as well, in a completely masculine way. His body was muscular and lean, his chest wide and tapering to a taut stomach, narrow hips, and long powerful legs. With his elegant bone-structure and tousled dark gold hair, he looked like some sort of Greek god, Apollo perhaps, as handsome as sin and gloriously male. Not having the slightest idea what he looked like in a normal state, his erect sex organ looked enormous, pulsing and dark against the flat plane of his stomach. It jutted out in a bold statement of what he wanted from her, and she felt a small thrill of both fear and pride she could so arouse him.

Somehow, that was supposed to fit inside her, but the idea of it seemed impossible.

When he moved back toward the bed, she instinctively edged away from that formidable erect cock, making him laugh lightly. "Don't be alarmed, I'm not going to do anything to you without warning. Come here, Jackie, I want to make love to you."

That husky whisper was persuasive, so was the way he eased onto the bed and looked at her. A dull heat had begun to collect between her legs, making her oddly restless. She didn't resist when he touched her again, his hand traveling the length of her body from shoulder to tight breast to hip to knee, and then upward along her inner thigh, his fingers

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drifting to the small thatch of pubic hair between her legs. Stroking lightly, he eased her legs apart a little with gentle urging, his hand sliding between to touch her most private place. She didn't quite expect the sensation of enjoyment she felt as his touch skimmed her sex with scandalous pressure, his seeking fingers probing and finding every secret, moist fold.

"You're a little wet," Adam remarked, his eyes dark and a smile playing on his well-shaped mouth, "but not ready enough, sweetheart. Tell me, how much do you trust me? How deeply did you mean it when you vowed today to obey me?"

Breathlessly, she relied, "With all my heart, you know that, Adam. I love you."

For a second, he seemed arrested, as if her words didn't so much reassure as disturb, then he lifted one brow. "All right, this is the first test, my sweet. Spread your legs, because I want to taste you."

"There?" she asked in a strangled voice, not able to hide her outraged amazement.

"Oh, yes."

He did mean it, she discovered moments later when the first stroke of his tongue slid into her cleft, his golden head lowered scandalously between her thighs. Jacqueline gasped and then moaned as he began a relentless sweet torture with his mouth pressed to her open sex, her body arching helplessly in response. Holding her apart with his hands, he resisted her efforts to pull away, keeping her in place as he insistently used his mouth to lift her to feverish heights she

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had never scaled. It was wicked; it was incredibly tantalizing, and all conscious thought seemed to fly from her head at the flagrant and audacious kiss. His hands cupped her hips, lifting her as he nibbled and licked between her legs, and any mortification was swiftly replaced with an inexplicable and undeniable hunger for something elusive.

Her body needed ... release.

When it happened, Jackie felt as if the world around her burst into a thousand fragments, the pleasure so vividly intense, she cried out with no reservations, shaking under the onslaught. Wondrous rapture spiked time and again and she shuddered until her body couldn't take it a second more. Adam finally lifted his head, shifting over her in lithe, supple grace, his body settling over hers. "You passed, sweetheart," he murmured, "and obeyed most sweetly. Now, let me make you a woman in the truest sense of the word."

* * * *

It was enough to shake his world, to make even someone as committed as he to only the most casual of affairs—and he was an expert in avoiding any semblance of permanence—question the lighthearted promiscuity of his existence.

Beneath him, his brother's lovely and utterly innocent wife—who had just experienced her first sexual orgasm, spread her legs to accept the nudging insistence of his hungry engorged cock, her silver gaze trusting with her small hands resting on his shoulders. Framed in the halo of her shining auburn hair, her lush body was flushed a delicate, glowing pink, her eyes half-veiled by long lashes. Her very perfect

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breasts lifted quickly in both anticipation—and, he guessed—repressed fear of the imminent consummation.

He was going to deflower her now, they both knew it, and she didn't even flinch as he tested the tightness of her opening. Though his body craved relief like a starving man looking at sumptuous repast, he hesitated, unwilling to relinquish the moment, the love shining in her eyes a revelation.

Dammit. Though he had never envied Adam the fifteen minutes he'd entered this world before him, or the fact he inherited the title, at this moment, he sure as hell envied him for the look in Jacqueline's beautiful gray eyes. The fact that he was the one to see it, not his brother, wasn't fair in the least to either of them, much less her. "I want to be gentle," he said thickly, "so tell me if I hurt you."

"If I understand it, you have to hurt me," she responded, her lashes half-lowered, her glorious rich hair spilling over the pale pillowslip in silken disarray. "Isn't that true?"

"Your maidenhead has to be ruptured," he admitted, easing forward a fraction, the tip of his throbbing erection now just inside her meltingly warm and soft vagina. She was hot and tantalizingly female, testing his restraint. "There will be a little tear, nothing horrible, and perhaps a few drops of blood. After this first time, it will never hurt again."

"Will it feel then like what just happened?" she asked huskily. "Oh, Adam ... that was marvelous. I have never experienced anything like that."

"It will," Alex promised fervently, meaning it, and kissed her, once again savoring the softness and sweet depths of her

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mouth. He edged inward and felt the moment his progress was checked, both by the sudden dig of her nails into his shoulders and the innocent barrier between him and ecstasy.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his last experience with a virgin over a decade ago. He'd almost forgotten how careful a man had to be with an innocent woman, but he was trying. "Christ, sweetheart, you are so small, so wet and hot."

"Do it." Jacqueline breathed in his ear, the order made in a sexy whisper he felt run down his spine like a chill.

Once he did this, he sensed suddenly, everything in the world would change. Not only his relationship with his brother, but his *life*. He liked fucking women ... and women liked him to fuck them, there was no question of it. It wasn't complicated. But once someone had made *love*, he decided, staring down into Jacqueline's expectant gaze, even if you were the worst of imposters, nothing else might do.

It frightened him, and he hung there, just barely inside her, his arms braced as he breathed with effort and fought a surge of panic.

Jackie's hand came up and softly touched his cheek, her fingers lightly caressing his jaw. She said, "Darling ... don't worry about me, I love you. A little pain is nothing compared to that, and I want more than anything to please you."

"You do please me," he said in raw honesty, "too much, in fact. Hold on, sweetheart."

His thrust inward was met with a slight flinch and widening of her eyes, but otherwise she made no sound. Perspiring, urgent, Alex pushed in as far as he could, embedding his whole rigid penis inside her, the sensation delicious and

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unbearably pleasurable. His hips wedged between her slim legs, he waited a few moments before starting to move, letting her get accustomed to his complete penetration.

And she moaned with that first withdrawal, a sound that surprised him in someone so inexperienced. What's more, she tilted her pelvis with unerring female instinct to take him deep when he glided forward again, as if guided by natural innate sensuality. Though he was throbbing and almost wild, Alex controlled himself and moved slowly in and out of her tight passage, taking care to not push so far in and hurt her. However, her recently lost purity was not evident in the way she clutched at him and closed her eyes in obvious carnal enjoyment of each thrust, her smooth tissue tightly gripping his moving shaft. Startled by the fact she was obviously building toward climax again, he increased the pace and was rewarded by her slender body suddenly going rigid after a few moments, Jackie's knees trapping his hips as she keened a low scream and tightened her inner muscles around his invading erection. Arching backwards, her lovely breasts trembled as she climaxed in open erotic abandon.

God in heaven, he thought as his body went out of control and he ejaculated with such intensity that a loud groan erupted from his throat, his extreme orgasmic rush both sudden and unplanned, an unusual event for someone so used to sex play that he could delay release for hours and hours, his typical stamina the result of both practice and jaded experience. He held there inside Jackie's luscious body, shaking with pleasure, until his cock ceased to flex and started to soften.

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Collapsing to his side, damp, breathless, and stunned, he gathered his brother's beautiful wife close in his arms and wondered if there ever had been a more wonderful, terrible deception perpetrated on the face of the earth.

And if all three of them had just been damned.

Chapter 3

There were still a few guests and a bevy of servants cleaning up the debris from the wedding party the night before, so Adam ordered a private breakfast served in a room right off the garden.

Jackie came down late, wearing a pretty dress of white eyelet embroidered with delicate roses and green leaves, and the flush on his young wife's cheeks when she looked at him said a great deal about what had happened the night before in her new bedroom she now occupied as the Countess of Hallworth.

Sitting down at the table in the airy breakfast room as he politely held her chair, Jacqueline gave Adam a shy smile, her beauty as always captivating his senses; her creamy, flawless skin, the dark luxuriant tint of her auburn hair, the long-lashed glory of her silver eyes. There was something else, too, he noted as he sat back down and lifted his cup with an unsteady hand, a certain aura now that replaced girlish innocence with a vivid sense of realized womanhood.

He wanted to kill his brother with his bare hands.

He also wanted to thank him from the bottom of his heart.

"Good morning, darling," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I didn't wake you, but you seemed to be sleeping so soundly." He *had* cautiously opened the door adjoining their rooms, his heart tightening to see her sleeping amid the tumbled sheets; her bared shoulders and disheveled silken hair an indication of what had transpired the night before. Very quickly, he had retreated, that one look almost killing him.

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"I wonder why," she responded, her color deepening. "I admit I was ... a little tired."

Bloody hell.

"Yes," Adam acknowledged, doing his best to look nonchalant with his back teeth grating together. "I apologize if I kept you up too late after such a stressful day."

It sounded lame to his own ears, and certainly to Jackie, for she laughed suddenly, her hand going gracefully to her mouth to cover her uncontrolled mirth. "Don't apologize, my Lord," she murmured meaningfully as a footman came in with a tray of food, "there is *certainly* no need."

He was not going to pull this off if he dwelled on the details of what might have happened between Alex and his wife, so with effort, he smiled and ignored her innuendo. "I wish we could spend the day together, but I'm afraid I have two meetings that cannot be cancelled, even for a newly married man. Perhaps we can take a carriage ride this afternoon, or a stroll in the park. It promises to be a beautiful day."

Pouring tea for herself with refined skill, Jacqueline said, "You do not have to entertain me, Adam. I know you are a busy man, and I have an inkling of what to expect as the new Countess of Hallworth ... your mother was most informative, don't forget, on my duties."

"She is a little overbearing, but you will get used to it. Just be glad she prefers the country and left this morning, bright and early," he remarked dryly. "And do not worry, the households seem to run efficiently without you pouring over each menu or supervising the maids, so you may do whatever pleases you and leave the rest to the staff. I did not marry

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you for anything besides the pleasure of your company, my dear."

"And an heir," she said with a light playful smile, looking incredibly lovely in the morning sunshine with her striking coloring and lissome figure, "do not forget, that is my first duty before menus or maids, my Lord."

"Of course," he agreed neutrally, studiously sipping his tea, not quite able to find a response to her lighthearted teasing comment.

"I suppose, truthfully, that is both our duty, if one really thought about it," his pretty young wife continued to tease, taking a nibble of toast, "since one can't do that alone."

Since there was every chance Alex might be the one to impregnate her, or even might have already since one night was certainly enough, it was hard to swallow the thought of a coming child. Changing the subject, he asked, "How long will Lady Kelton be in London, darling?"

"Indefinitely." Jacqueline looked pleased at the thought. "I might pay her a visit this afternoon since you will be busy ... with the wedding and all, I haven't really had time to talk to her yet. I wish Alex hadn't been so distracted last night for I tried to introduce them, and he practically *ran* away. It isn't like him to not notice someone so very attractive."

For God's sake, Adam thought bitterly, must every bit of their conversation remind him of what happened last night? There was a damned good reason Alex had been distracted—that being his upcoming stud service to his new sister-in-law. "He probably sensed your attempted match-making. If

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anything would make my brother run, it would be the idea of being sized up like a prize stallion by a calculating woman."

A spark of surprised indignation flared in the silver eyes of the woman across from him. "The very last word I would use to describe Cara is calculating. Have you actually looked at her, my Lord? She can have any man she wants. I just thought perhaps that Alex would appreciate her witty intellect."

Offending his bride was hardly his intention, but Adam was certainly not at his best. "All women pale in my eyes compared to you, darling, but yes, Lady Kelton is beautiful," he said in overt apology, reaching for her hand. Her fingers felt delicate and warm in his grasp. "But you know Alex. Undoubtedly he's afraid she's a lonely widow, anxious to find a new husband. He has a legendary aversion to even the idea of marriage, so you'll have to forgive him. Besides," Adam lifted a brow, "we might have started in a little early on the brandy ... I think he was a little foxed, if you want the truth. He retired as early as we did, right after he and I shared a final brotherly toast to our nuptials."

"Oh." Jacqueline gazed back at him with unconcealed affection, squeezing his fingers. "I guess I am guilty of wanting everyone to be as happy as we are. Cara did not have a good first marriage, so you're wrong there, she is decidedly *not* looking she told me, so Alex can relax. However, having a handsome man to squire her around would be pleasant, I'm sure, and Alex is nothing if not charming. She has spent a year in mourning, and as a life-long friend, I

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suppose I want to see her have some fun. She is everything Alex usually looks for, lovely, sophisticated, and—"

"Available," Adam supplied ironically. "That's usually the most important thing to my notorious twin. At any rate, I'm sure if she will be in London for a while, they will meet in the natural course of things." Standing, he lifted his wife's hand to his lips and kissed it gently, inhaling her delicate perfume. "I am sorry, but I have to go. I will see you at dinner, my love."

* * * *

The room was only half-furnished but it was coming along, and Cara Kelton sat back and surveyed the contents with a pleased smile. Selling the house in Bath hadn't been easy, she liked the charm and Roman feel of the city and London was a completely different sort of place with its bustle and noise, but then again, she needed a change. Nigel's death hadn't been a blow, quite the contrary since he'd been nothing but an oppressive bore, but she did feel some measure of gratitude to her late husband for leaving her a modest fortune and with it, independence.

All she needed now was a lover—an accomplished lover, one who didn't simply fumble around in the dark under her skirts.

"The Countess of Hallworth to see you, Madame."

Glancing up, Cara raised her brows at the stoic figure of her recently hired butler in the doorway, dusting off her hands with real pleasure. "Really? Please, by all means, show her in."

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Jacqueline, she decided when her friend entered the room, *glowed*. Exquisitely beautiful as always, this was something more. Being in love obviously suited her, and considering her new husband was not only rich and titled, but also devastatingly good-looking, it was no wonder she seemed to radiate happiness.

She'd settle for *half* that aura of joy and well-being. "Good afternoon, Countess," Cara said with mock deference, executing a small curtsy. "Welcome to my humble abode."

"Cara." Jacqueline gave her a quick hug. "It's a wonderful house and only a few blocks from us. I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you decided to buy a townhouse here in London."

"I've missed you, too, and hope you'll have time for me even as a busy married lady. The wedding, by the way, was absolutely beautiful. I'm a little surprised you and the earl have not departed on some sort of honeymoon journey."

Jacqueline shook her head, the corner of her mouth lifting a rueful smile. "While Parliament sits? Adam wouldn't think of it. He's the head of some sort of committee that has to do with the War Office. Perhaps later we'll go to Italy, or someplace warm, but for now, no. I don't mind staying here actually, and we can always go to the country house if London becomes too oppressive, though ... his mother is there."

"Ah, yes, with a husband, no matter how charming and handsome, there comes a mother-in-law. Luckily for me, Nigel's mother wants nothing to do with me since I failed to provide children." If there was one thing in this world Cara was grateful for, it was the opportunity to sever all ties with

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the Kelton family, though she would have wanted a child if God had blessed her with one.

At the mention of children, one of Jacqueline's slim hands went to her stomach, pressing there for a brief moment against the soft material of her gown. "It seems incredible to me that even now, Adam and I might have conceived a child," she said, if possible looking even more incomparably beautiful with a dreamy wistful smile on her mouth.

Cara felt a brief twist of envy, it was hard not to, but she loved Jacqueline like a sister. They'd grown up as neighbors in Kent, their parent's estates close enough that they had played together like sisters and even shared tutors and later attended the same finishing school. So while she might be envious, she did not begrudge her friend anything. "Come now, let's sit, and I'll ring for tea."

Settling on a settee near one of the tall windows overlooking the garden, waiting for their refreshment to arrive, Cara dropped her voice and asked in a stage whisper, "Now, we have shared everything our whole lives, no secrets between us. So ... out with it, Jack, how was it?"

Hallworth's new countess blushed at once, becoming color tinting her delicate cheekbones. "My wedding night?"

"Of course, darling, why else would I be whispering?" Cara laughed, enjoying the both the warm sweet afternoon breeze ruffling the curtains and Jacqueline's familiar company. "If we can't gossip about men, what use is it being two women with a free afternoon and a cup of hot tea? Do tell, is the handsome earl an accomplished lover?"

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Jacqueline blushed deeper. "I would guess so, though it isn't as if I have anyone to compare him to, is it? But ... I admit I thoroughly enjoyed it, but it was a little ... shocking. I never dreamed men and women did such things."

Cara sighed. "If I wasn't wildly jealous before—which I was—I am now, you lucky thing. I don't have anyone to compare him to either, but Nigel was a complete bumbling oaf in bed, and I loathed every minute we spent there together. Luckily, he drank so much that it wasn't too often. I have never worried too much that I didn't conceive a child, because there were honestly very few chances." It wasn't something she would admit to anyone but a lifelong friend.

"I knew you were unhappy, of course," Jacqueline said with sympathy in her gray eyes. "And I could imagine, now that I understand the ... mechanics of the act, if you will, that sexual relations might not be enjoyable if you were not madly in love with the man touching you so intimately."

"I am going to hope you are wrong on that score, my dear Jack," Cara said smoothly, that certain odd feeling of trepidation mixed with excitement stirring in the pit of her stomach like it did every time she contemplated taking a lover.

"I beg your pardon?" Jacqueline looked a little bemused; her elegant russet brows elevating, her lovely face a caricature of confusion.

"I mean I am hoping that being madly in lust will do, and I am going to find out as soon as possible."

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Jacqueline had never been slow and comprehension dawned quickly, her eyes widening. "You are going to have an illicit affair? With whom?"

Cara arranged her skirts with a languid movement, wondering exactly how to delicately put her request. "Well ... I do have to say that you are now related to one of England's most infamous rakes, a man known for both sexual conquest and amorous expertise, if all the whispers are correct. You actually gave me the idea last evening when you introduced us."

"Alex?"

"I don't want another husband, just a lover—someone who can show me whatever it is your gorgeous husband obviously showed you. I have to admit my marriage left me feeling a little cheated as a woman."

Jacqueline murmured, "I can understand that, and Alex is undeniably charming ... and of course," a dimple appeared in her cheek as she grinned mischievously, "very handsome, since he looks just like Adam. I swear even I can hardly tell them apart unless they are standing together."

"I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it," Cara confessed. "We have always made a practice of sharing everything, but it seems almost like we'd be sharing the same man."

"As long as we aren't *actually* sharing the same man, I don't mind," Jacqueline said serenely.

* * * *

The address was certainly not prepossessing, nor was the small foyer with its bare walls and utilitarian tiled floor. The

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woman, too, was diminutive and plain, wearing a shapeless dove-gray gown, unremarkable brown hair drawn back into a plain knot at her nape. Grave pale blue eyes surveyed him with calm assessment, and her smile was nothing more than a glimmer. "Lord Hallworth, I am Olga Henning. Dr. Trenton seems to think I can help you. Please follow me."

Adam had wanted to use an alias for obvious reasons, but his doctor had insisted that this woman was absolutely trustworthy and very selective in what patients she chose to treat, so he had acquiesced in his desperation and the appointment had been made. If anything could help him, he found that after the agony of waiting for Alex to return the night before, he was willing to do it.

The room he was taken to was also almost completely bare, nothing but a plain raised cot-like bed in the center covered with an immaculate white sheet. The drapes were tightly drawn and lights consisted of lamps that actually gave the space a bright glow. Closing the door behind her, Olga Henning said calmly, "I have the doctor's letter explaining the accident and your injuries, but will have to examine you before we can begin treatment of any kind. Please disrobe completely and know each time you come here, you will have to do so. My healing methods depend on trust and a connection with the patient. If you want me to help you, there are no arguments over what I ask you to do. Your title and fortune are meaningless here. Understand?"

Not quite used to such lack of deference, Adam stood for a moment, uncertain if this woman who Dr. Trenton had called "unconventional but surprisingly effective" was actually the

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answer to his problem. Certainly stripping down nude in front of a woman he didn't know was unsettling.

Then his hands went to untie his cravat as Jacqueline's lovely face came to mind, the image of her naked body snuggled between the sheets of her bed like a stiletto blade to the heart.

Olga took each item of clothing from him as he removed it, folding it neatly and setting it in a small pile on a chair, which was the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the bed. Sitting down, he couldn't help but give a small grunt of pain at having to lift his right leg and tug off the fitted boot.

"That hurts?" the woman asked.

"That hurts," he confirmed grimly, "like the very devil, Madame."

"You did not use a cane when you arrived here, yet you limped badly."

Standing up to unfasten his breeches, Adam explained, "I am trying to go without it. It does not seem to help the healing process to favor the injury too much."

"But neither do you want to strain it again," she murmured, watching him neutrally as he stepped out of his pants. "We'll see if you should resume using it or not, my Lord. Now, lay down on the table."

He did as he was bid, finding the surface fairly comfortable, with some sort of padding beneath him. Cool hands touched his upper right thigh, and then came to rest palm down on his groin, just at the juncture of hip and leg.

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"Tell me," Olga Henning said in her stoic voice, "about the accident itself. I need to picture it, to know exactly how it happened."

Lying in a sterile room completely naked with an unknown woman with her hands on his body was beyond bizarre. Adam swallowed and complied, "I was riding my prize hunter and we were coming to a fence—nothing to him for he was a spectacular jumper, and just as he took the short stride to take the jump, his foot went into a hole." The horse had been more than valuable, he'd been a splendid animal, and he continued hoarsely, "I actually heard the bone in his leg snap, and we both slammed into the fence, his body coming down partially on top of me as we crashed to the ground. I was lucky, actually, to not fare worse."

"And you regret the loss of the animal, don't you, my Lord?"

"Of course."

"You must let that go. It was not your fault, nor his. An accident, understood? I can feel your guilt and want it gone. What then?" Her voice was very low and soothing, her hands unmoving.

"I suppose I tried to get up ... I was dazed and nothing seemed to be broken, but when I got to my feet, I nearly doubled over from the pain. I was out riding alone and it was hours before someone came along. They put down Ulysses, of course, and brought me back to the house on a stretcher. I couldn't walk for two weeks, but gradually that part is getting better."

"When did you first notice the sexual dysfunction?"

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Trying to not openly wince at that all too appropriate phrasing, Adam murmured, "Two weeks before my wedding, I was in the garden one evening with my betrothed. She is very beautiful and I deeply desire her. Before when I kissed her, I had to actually suppress gaining an ... erection. I took her in my arms and was stunned to realize that though I enjoyed the embrace, my body did not respond in the usual way."

"Were you and she already lovers?"

"No, of course not. She is a lady. I was willing to wait for her."

"I see."

To his complete chagrin, Olga moved her hand then, slipping it between his legs to lift his testicles in her palm. "Your body still functions normally for these are very full, my Lord. Tell me, do they pain you? Are you able to relieve yourself with manual stimulation?"

Not sure how to answer such a damned personal question, Adam stayed silent, further nonplussed when she laughed, a light tinkle of sound in the sterile room.

"Every man does it," she informed him in open amusement, "this I am sure you know, Lord Hallworth. They must to relieve themselves, unless they are extremely sexually active. So, have you tried to do this?"

"Yes," he admitted, unsettled by the warmth of her hand cupping his balls.

"And nothing?"

"It was weeks ago, right after I discovered the problem. And no, nothing."

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The curt sound of his response did not seem to offend her. "You are understandably afraid to try again ... you can feel my hand, I assume? There is no loss of sensation?"

"No."

"Excellent." She let him go, her plain face smiling in the brightly lit room. "I fully believe I can help you, my Lord."

"God, I hope so," he said grimly.

Chapter 4

Turning her back to let her maid unfasten her dress, Jacqueline thoughtfully stared at the door connecting her room to her husband's. Stepping out of the garment, she absently slipped the pins from her hair and let the heavy mass fall over her shoulders and back.

Inviting Cara to dinner certainly had not worked out the way she had planned, she pondered. Though her friend had been lovely in ivory silk, her pale blond hair drawn into a chignon that showed off her slender neck and peaches and cream skin, Alex had barely done more than courteously carry on banal dinner conversation, showing nothing of his usual audacious charm. In fact, for whatever reason, though Adam and Alex were usually more in accord than any two siblings she had ever seen, there had been a certain indescribable air of tension ... nothing she could quite put her finger on, but then again, Adam had acted a bit strange during breakfast as well. Certainly he had been nothing like the teasing lover of the night before, but since the accident, she knew he'd been in quite a bit of pain.

Perhaps, she thought, a slight flush rising to her cheeks, he'd strained himself or something during their lovemaking. Certainly it had been vigorous and a bit physical—and gloriously pleasurable. Her body tingled remembering the sensation of how it felt as he slid in and out of her, how large and hard and infinitely wonderful it was when he invaded her female passage...

"Is there anything else, my Lady?"

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Shaking herself out of her abstraction, Jacqueline smiled. "Not tonight, but thank you, Mary."

The girl curtsied and left. Jacqueline found herself once again looking at the door, wondering if it was going to open this evening, or if she would be spending the night alone. Standing there in her chemise, she wryly contemplated the subtle nuances of marriage she knew nothing about. For instance, was she ever allowed to go to *him*? Everyone seemed to speak of husbandly privileges; surely wives had some say in whether or not they would make love?

Of course, men were enigmatic creatures at times and the last thing she wanted was for Adam to think he had married a wanton woman. She had done nothing to hide her enjoyment of her first experience with sexual intercourse, even as much as moaning freely and crying out during the peak of her pleasure. He'd seemed pleased at the time that she liked what he did to her body ... but if she asked for it, perhaps that made her a whore.

Uncertainly biting her lip, she stood there barefoot and half-dressed, wondering if all brides had this much desire for their new husbands.

It took all her courage to cross the room and grasp the knob of the connecting door, telling herself that she would simply ask after his injury if he acted shocked at her forward behavior.

To consternation, it was locked.

There was no mistake, the knob turned in her hand but the door was thoroughly fastened shut on the other side. Not certain why her husband would ever feel he needed to lock

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her out and blinking in confusion, she knocked lightly.
"Adam?"

* * * *

"Here." His brother fairly threw his shirt at him and moved to limp toward the dressing room. At the last moment, he muttered in a hissing whisper, "Her room, damn you, Alex, don't let her come in here. I'll not lurk here in the bloody dressing room while you take her."

Shrugging into Adam's shirt but not bothering to fasten the buttons engraved with the Hallworth crest, Alex strode across to the connecting door and unlatched it, cursing inwardly at being the one having to come up with an explanation for why it was locked.

And wondering with a traitorous sense of anticipation if tonight would be as astoundingly pleasurable as the night before. He was half-erect just thinking about it, and when he opened the door and saw Jackie standing there clad only in a lacy chemise, he hardened further. "My Lady?"

Her gaze glimmered with obvious uncertainty and she stammered charmingly, "I just wanted to ask you ... that is, to make sure your injury isn't paining you terribly. You were very quiet at dinner."

God in heaven, she was a beautiful woman. Slender with full, appealing curves, she was the very stuff of fantasy, his for the taking ... Alex stared down at where the lushness of her creamy breasts nearly spilled from the lacy material of her shift, his intent gaze examining that perfect swelling flesh, her nipples just a hint of coral color under the white

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material. With a practiced, lazy smile, he reached out a hand and slid his fingers into the valley of her cleavage, palming the silken weight of one breast, making her take in a swift breath. "Pain can be a relative thing," he said evasively, knowing Adam had gone to see a new physician that afternoon. "For instance, at this moment, all I feel is desire. Why don't you take this off," he removed his hand and pulled the ribbon on her bodice loose, acutely aware that Adam could probably hear them and sending a silent apology for what must be an agonizing eavesdropping experience, "and get into bed, Jackie?"

"I wasn't sure you would want—"

"I want."

It was a relief when she complied and he could step into the room and shut the door, closing off his brother's room and giving him the freedom to leave the dressing room and escape having to be in the next room while his wife made love with another man.

Watching as she shyly let her chemise slide off her shoulders and onto the floor, Alex caught his breath in wonder at the glory of her body, her innocent passion from the night before a vivid arousing memory. The triangle of dark hair at the apex of her slender legs gleamed in invitation, and her full breasts were uplifted and high, that lavish mass of auburn curls cascading over shoulders and down her back to her waist in a dark contrast to her flawless skin.

"Jesus," he muttered under his breath, his erection surging to full mast, filling his breeches with almost painful urgency.

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All his lovers were beautiful, but something about Jacqueline's delicate feminine allure stimulated him to loss of his usual easy control of an well-exercised libido. He played at sex, Alex realized as he stood there wanting her with a powerful, disturbing hunger, and the women he bedded played with him. It was one of his rules—never fuck anyone who might even remotely want anything but a pleasurable interlude.

He was sure as hell breaking it now. Jacqueline most certainly did not view what was about to happen between them casually. She wanted to make love with her husband, to give her body out of the passionate and complete ardor that came when she committed her life to someone else.

It *moved* him.

If he didn't love and respect his brother with a devotion that had bonded them from before the cradle, he would have told her the truth right then. Unfortunately, as he watched her climb into the bed, her graceful nude body illuminated enticingly by the light of one low lamp, he reminded himself sharply that he had agreed to this devil's bargain. He was just a tool, not a main player, and it was his brother's marriage in peril, so Adam was the only one who could make decisions regarding his dazzling wife.

In the meantime, Alex was going to assuage his intense carnal hunger in her welcoming arms.

Slipping out of the shirt he had just jerked on, he tossed it on the floor, almost forgetting to limp as he followed her to the bed. Jacqueline lay supine and obviously expectant against the sheets, her quickened breathing evident in the quiver of her bare breasts as they lifted and fell.

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Taking off his boots and breeches, he slid in next to her and immediately took her in his arms, nuzzling her slender neck. "Are you sore?" he asked, kissing the elegant line of her jaw.

Her swift intake of breath told him she felt every inch of his hard pulsing cock pressed against her stomach. "This morning a little bit. When I bathed, I noticed some discomfort," she confessed softly, her arms going around him to return his embrace. "But I suppose that is normal, isn't it?"

"I don't have to penetrate you," he told her, lightly brushing his mouth against her lips. "There are alternatives, ways we can pleasure each other without actually having intercourse."

"There are?" She shifted in his arms, pressing closer, the pliant weight of her breasts against his chest making his erection throb harder. "I suppose I am utterly naïve. You must find it a little ... boring."

"Like hell I do." Alex growled, capturing her mouth in a hot, urgent kiss. When he lifted his head, he pushed against her with an insistent thrust, his rigid shaft sliding against the soft swell of her stomach. "I think, naïve or not, you can tell a certain part of me is not at all bored, Madame. Besides, there isn't a man alive who does not want his bride to come to him pure and untutored."

There was unmistakable excitement in her gray eyes—an innocent yet womanly heat that he found almost pushed him over the edge. "I promise to be an apt pupil if you wish to ... tutor me. Oh, Adam, I liked what we did last night and want it again. Does that make me wanton?"

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"Absolutely not," he said hoarsely, gazing into her eyes with frank sincerity, "it makes you the most exciting woman I have ever touched, sweetheart. But ... let's make sure you are not too tender."

He watched her face as he moved his hand down her stomach, finding the soft curls between her thighs, her legs parting willingly at his intimate touch. Slowly he stroked her labia, sliding his touch over the tempting crease with very light pressure, hearing her light sighs of pleasure as he petted and fondled her sex, taking his time, enjoying touching her. Her cleft grew warmer under his carnal ministrations and slightly moist as it softened in evidence of her arousal. Probing into those damp folds, he sought the entrance to her vagina. The opening was small and amazingly tight, and he very carefully slid one finger inside her, feeling the sweet smooth walls of her passage with gentle exploration.

"A woman's body is a miracle," he said huskily. "There cannot be anything more wonderful in this world than what I am touching right now. You are like hot wet satin inside, sweetheart."

Lying beneath him, Jacqueline sighed, her lashes drifting low.

"How does this feel?" he asked in a hushed whisper, not certain he wasn't going to ejaculate just from touching her.

"Wonderful." Her hips lifted a fraction, making his finger slide in deeper.

"And this?" He slipped his finger out almost all the way and then added one, pushing in with dual penetration in a counterfeit demonstration of the act of love.

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"Yes." Her eyes closed all the way, her legs spread open wider to give him better access as he began to stimulate her with his hand, gliding out and then going in as far as he could, the long length of his fingers touching the entrance to her womb. Moisture gradually coated his fingers as he continued and there was little doubt that if she felt discomfort it was secondary to pleasure, for Jacqueline's breathless sighs turned to pants and then low moans.

Leaning forward to kiss her, he brought her to climax with the gentle, expert pressure of his thumb on the tiny nub of her clitoris. Her body tightened around his invading fingers, and he felt every bit of her pleasure with his mouth covering hers and his hand pressed between her open legs as her passage convulsed in small erotic pulses. Waiting until she relaxed beneath him, Alex removed his drenched fingers and smiled lazily into her flushed face. "You *are* an apt pupil, sweetheart. I think your first lesson went quite well, don't you?"

* * * *

Her husband lay on his back, his strong arms laced behind his head; his handsome face wearing that wickedly sensual smile. "Take me in your hand, Jackie. Don't worry, it doesn't bite."

On her knees, staring at the blatantly huge length of his erection, she felt intimidated by her inexperience, but then again ... considering how her body still felt warm and sated from his recent manipulation, she certainly did not want to disappoint him. Tentatively she clasped her fingers around

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the dark engorged organ that rose so high against the flat plane of his stomach and was rewarded as his eyes closed briefly and he gave a low curse.

"It's so ... hard," she said, marveling at the way it felt as she ran her fingers up and down his shaft, discovering this amazing part to life she didn't realize quite existed. Oh, she knew men were different from women and she had seen pictures of nude males before, but no one had quite explained the size and sheer magnificence of an aroused penis to her. It felt smooth as satin, but incredibly full and alive, and was ribbed with distended veins right up to the weeping crest. The jutting tip was crowned by a visible hole that at this moment leaked a clear, sticky fluid.

"It is certainly hard, but that's your fault," her husband said through gritted teeth as she smeared a little of the discharge from the crest, his voice quite unlike his usual calm, reserved tone. "You shouldn't be quite so lovely or passionate, sweetheart. I'm about to explode."

"Do you want to ... explode?" she asked teasingly, even as a novice at lovemaking recognizing the need in his body and voice. Lightly stroking that iron-hard length, she watched his face. "Tell me what to do."

"Just touch me," he commanded. "Squeeze gently and move your hand up and down. Jesus ... that's it. I'm so close, it won't take much."

He was right. As Jacqueline obeyed, his chest heaved and within moments, the rigid erection in her hand jerked forcefully, a spurt of hot creamy substance pouring from the

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tip onto his belly and lower chest. When his eyes finally opened, that intense blue gaze was unfathomable.

Staring at the rivulets of sperm on his muscled torso, Jacqueline murmured, "I didn't quite realize ... that is ... how extraordinary."

His smile was ruefully charming. "It's a little messy this way, but takes the edge off certainly. There's a handkerchief in my breeches, perhaps you could hand it to me."

She obligingly complied, bringing back the square and shaking her head as he reached for it. Kneeling next to him, she slowly wiped the sticky sperm from his body. It was erotic somehow to touch him as he lay passive, and she smiled when she rubbed the cloth over the hard surface of his chest. "I don't think I realized that sex was quite so ... elemental, my Lord."

"It is," he responded, his heavy-lidded blue eyes watching her intently. "Humans mate, just the same as animals, except we do it for the sensation and not simply to procreate."

"I cannot wait to bear your child," Jacqueline said truthfully, gazing at her husband and not hiding the emotion she felt so deeply. "And not simply to provide a male heir to carry on your title and inherit your wealth, Adam, but because I love you and can only imagine what it will be like to hold our baby in my arms. Maybe even now I've conceived—"

To her surprise, he didn't look pleased, but instead his expression became shuttered, and he reached for her abruptly, pulling her into his arms, cradling her body against his chest. "We have no control over that," he murmured into her hair, his voice almost gruff, maybe even dismissive. "God,

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you feel good against me, so soft and female. You beguile me, Jackie, you would any man."

Willingly snuggling next to him, relishing the close tender contact, she remarked quietly, "Not Alex, perhaps."

"What?" Her husband's reaction to that comment was sudden and unmistakable as he started, his arms tightening almost painfully. "What the devil do you mean by that comment? What does my brother have to do with anything?"

"He seemed quite remarkably indifferent to Cara Kelton tonight, even though she somewhat shamelessly flirted with him at dinner. For a man who is supposedly a profligate rogue with an appetite for lovely women, he certainly seemed immune to her obvious overtures. Is he seriously involved with someone and we don't know it?"

His grip loosened a fraction. "Alex? Well, I suppose it is possible, but I doubt it."

"She's very attracted to him ... I wonder if you could maybe speak with him, find out if there is someone else—"

"No." The unequivocal response was curt.

Tilting her face up, Jacqueline frowned. "I am not asking you to pry into his personal affairs—"

"Good, because I wouldn't. Forget my brother," he ordered in uncharacteristic harsh authority, "there are only the two of us in this bed." He moved then, rolling over slightly and taking her with him, his mouth finding hers with unconcealed hunger. It was a little surprising to feel such urgency since they had both recently experienced release and her hands went to his shoulders as her eyes drifted shut and she responded to his kiss.

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Perhaps there was something wrong between her husband and his twin after all, she wondered with a twinge of unease, banished when his hand drifted to cup her breast, his thumb swirling over the soft peaked crest. Obviously, he did not wish to confide in her, but then again, it was just as obvious he did want something else, something carnal and erotic.

And so did she.

Chapter 5

Adam glanced up at the clock on the mantle of the fireplace, noting the time. It was a dreary summer day, a gentle rain enveloping all of London, the gray skies showing not a hint of sunshine. The window in his study was streaked with moisture and the steady pattern of sound soothingly soporific, but he didn't feel in the least bit sleepy. Instead, he felt ... hopeful. At his session with Olga the day before, he had made some significant progress. He was anxious to see what might happen today. What was more, her technique of using massage to treat the affronted muscles in his groin worked for he already found it easier to walk, his cane completely discarded and his limp growing less pronounced.

He had been married a week and not touched his beautiful wife other than in the most casual affectionate gestures. Hopefully, the agonizing situation was going to change soon.

The knock was perfunctory for Alex came in before he could answer, shutting the door behind him and shaking the moisture from his hair. He'd been out riding even in the inclement weather, for his polished boots were shiny with droplets and his jacket damp, but he seemed not to care as he stalked over to the brandy decanter on a small table by one of the two chairs by the fireplace and said harshly, "This isn't working, Adam. And as much as you don't wish to discuss it, we're going to right now."

His brother was right, he did not want to talk to him about whatever went on behind the closed door of Jacqueline's room, but perhaps they needed to clear the air. After all, the

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only reason Alex went to her each night was because he requested it himself, so his jealousy was unreasonable. As neutrally as possible, he responded, "Very well, though I do not see how this isn't working. Jacqueline does not suspect a thing."

Dashing pale amber liquid into a glass, Alex gave him a level look and took a sip. "There you are wrong, brother. No, she doesn't think for a moment it's me and not you in her bed, but she does realize there is a sudden tension between us for she tries to ask me about it. I do my best not to talk at all, if you want the truth, so we aren't slipped up by some conversation you were supposed to be privy to, or worse, that I wasn't, but it is impossible to avoid speech altogether."

Since his brother was usually gone for at least several hours before they exchanged places again, Adam had to swallow the idea of extended lovemaking like a bitter pill. "This new treatment is helping more than I even hoped, Alex. This will all be over soon."

His brother's blue eyes were steady. "Rationally, of course, that's what I want. To go back to my old life, perhaps even give the enticing Lady Kelton the casual tumble she desires, like the jaded rakehell I am reputed to be."

They knew each other very well, and Alex seemed uncharacteristically serious. Adam felt a glimmer of dark dismay. "And irrationally?"

"Irrationally, I might be enjoying my role a little too much. Sex is completely different when the woman in your arms is deeply in love with you. Especially when she is as lovely and sensual as Jacqueline. You have no idea what you are missing

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and for your sake, I hope you find out soon. For mine, I selfishly hope not too soon."

Since Adam had counted on his brother's ability to approach sex with his usual emotional detachment, this was not a problem he had anticipated. "Are you telling me you are falling in love with my wife?" he asked through his teeth.

His brother didn't answer but moved to stare moodily out the rain-streaked window. "The worst part is when she occasionally does mention me. It's like I am a brother, one she doesn't really approve of but is fond of nonetheless. In her eyes, I am frivolous and irresponsible, and I am beginning to wonder if she isn't correct. You spend almost every minute of the day running the estate and filling your seat in the House of Lords, while I race horses and amuse myself with women whose morals are as lax as my own. I have not depleted my inheritance, but neither have I lifted a hand to increase it in any way, just drifting along like a wastrel. You and I are the same age, we come from the same circumstances and look exactly alike, yet look at you, with a beautiful wife who not only adores you, but also admires you as a man. You have position in society, a respected influence in our government, and the Hallworth estates have flourished under your care. Soon you will undoubtedly have a family as well, for Jackie cannot wait to get pregnant and bear you a child."

It was a curious turn of events to even be having this conversation finally with his lighthearted brother, and if the circumstances weren't so personally distressing, Adam would be glad to hear Alex finally wake up and realize there was

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more to life than parties and gambling and well-bred mistresses. "You can have everything I have," he said pointedly, "except, of course, her. With very little effort, you can begin investing your fortune, we certainly can always use more men with education and loyalty in Parliament, and as for a wife and family, there are plenty of lovely and respectable young women out there. I am sure you could have your pick, Alex."

"Perhaps, but then again, I am afraid I am spoiled by your gorgeous, passionate countess, brother. I'm not sure I believe there is another woman quite like her." Turning finally from his morose perusal of the drenched gardens, Alex lifted one dark blond brow in an ironic gesture. "I feel unworthy of even touching as much as her hand, but not to worry, I will continue in this charade if you wish it. However, beware, it is growing more complicated by the moment."

"I am very aware of that," Adam muttered. "My fear of losing her in the first place made me ask you to participate in this agonizing deception, but it is too late now to go back." Standing up, he glanced grimly at the clock again. "I have another appointment this afternoon. I hope it will go even better than yesterday. The therapy is unorthodox, but I am in much less pain and seem to be healing faster. Wish me luck, brother."

* * * *

Standing in just her chemise and sheer silk stockings on the pedestal, Jacqueline frowned in indecision. The green satin was a bit much, Jacqueline thought, though the

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seamstress tried diligently to talk her into it. She knew as a married woman she had more license with color and style in her wardrobe, but she was fairly conservative at heart. "The rose," she said finally, "and the ivory brocade."

"And you must have that divine material with the silver overlay, Jack," Cara informed her firmly. "It exactly matches your eyes and don't be a prude over the cut of the bodice either. Not all of us have such ... bountiful charms. Let Madame Isolde have *carte blanche* in that department at least. Your husband will be on his knees when he sees you."

"We'll be in public, so I somehow doubt that," Jackie muttered, "but I suppose I will bow to your sense of style. All right, the silver as well." There was no doubt Adam gave her a generous clothing allowance and she did need a few new gowns.

Once the modiste's two assistants helped her dress and they were ready to depart, Cara murmured as she adjusted her umbrella, "You seem quite pensive today. Is it the weather?"

"Not exactly," she admitted, though the steady rain did not help a bit. "There's a teashop around the corner, do you want to stop in? I know it is warm outside but I feel chilled."

Considering how well they knew each other, Cara wasn't fooled. "Yes, tea would be lovely. And then you will tell me what is bothering you. You've been married just a week, surely nothing is wrong, is it?"

"Probably not," Jacqueline said evasively, but once they hurried through the damp weather into the little tearoom and settled into a cozy corner, the smell of currant cakes heady in

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the air, she felt she couldn't quite meet her friend's eyes, toying with her cup once the tea was served.

Cara was never one to avoid an unpleasant subject. "Last week," she said pointedly, "you were glowing with happiness."

"Last week, I didn't realize it was going to be quite this way," Jackie said defensively.

"What way?" Cara, pretty as ever in a pale blue gown that exactly matched her light eyes, lifted her downy brows.

Not sure how to put her finger on her uneasiness, Jackie hesitated, then said quickly, "I thought I knew Adam. But now that I truly *know* him, things between us at other times have changed. He used to touch me at every opportunity—my hand, my cheek, if we were alone for a moment he would steal a kiss ... but now it is as if we are lovers at night, and polite acquaintances during the day. The change is subtle, but does exist, though perhaps it's the normal way of things and I am being too sensitive. You would think he would be more affectionate, not less."

Picking up a piece of scone and nibbling on it, Cara said thoughtfully, "He does not have to woo you any longer. You are his, and since it sounds like he exercises his husbandly rights with regularity, that might satisfy his needs enough he has ceased with the romantic gestures. I'd wager he'd be surprised if you pointed out your concerns."

"Men," Jacqueline agreed with a gloom to equal the drizzling skies outdoors, "are quite difficult to figure out. Alex is just as puzzling all of a sudden ... I am certain he finds you

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attractive, yet he does nothing, though I am sure he is worldly enough to realize your interest."

Cara shook her head, her pale blond hair softly gathered at her nape, a small rueful smile on her mouth. "I fear I am not sophisticated enough for him. Yes, I am a widow, but I was married only a short time, and Nigel taught me virtually nothing about the amorous side of marriage. Surely a man like him, one who embraces lascivious pleasure by all accounts, can sense my ... inexperience."

"I don't think it's you." Jackie picked up her tea, tasted it, and found she'd forgotten to add sugar. Reaching for the bowl, she added, "He seems as abstracted as Adam. After that night you came to dinner, he has been conspicuously absent during the day and most of the evenings, though according to my maid, he comes home much earlier than he used to, a decided change in his schedule from what I'm told. If there is some quarrel between my husband and his brother, Adam will not talk about it. If I ask, and I have, he immediately distracts me."

The memory of that distraction made her face heat, and Cara recognized her blush, laughing lightly, her smile mischievous. "Darling Jack, you are adjusting to a new life, and I think you are dwelling on the incomprehensible nature of men way too much. Your new husband is rich and good-looking, apparently an ardent lover, and you are probably one of the most envied women in London right now. As for Alex Trevor and his hard-earned reputation as a rake, well, I suppose there is every chance he is simply too tired to

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accommodate me if what they say about his sexual exploits are true."

At that airy and somewhat naughty speculation, Jacqueline laughed out loud. "Knowing Alex," she said, selecting a cake from the tray, "that might just be possible."

* * * *

"Tell me, how do you feel today?"

The cool, calm voice was soothing, as was the shuttered interior of the small room. Lying on his back, Adam murmured, "I took the stairs faster this morning and felt virtually no pain, which is incredibly encouraging."

"I agree, you are making great progress, my Lord." Olga kneaded his right thigh just below the hip, the pressure not nearly as excruciating as it once was. "In your mind, too, do you now acknowledge the possibility that your trouble will soon be solved?"

A practical man, he was not nearly as certain as she that just from believing in it, a person could make a difference in how they felt physically, but she was the healer and something was working ... so he said honestly, "I woke up this morning and immediately looked forward to our session, hoping there might be even more progress."

Her hands working in skillful, deft strokes, the woman touching him smiled. "That is an excellent attitude. Let's find out, shall we? I am going to try an experiment, but you have to participate fully, and it will be out of character for you to do so."

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Since nothing could be more out of character than to lie fully nude on a table in a small dingy house somewhere in a less than savory neighborhood, letting this enigmatic woman massage his groin, Adam stifled a cynical laugh. "I am not sure we are well-acquainted enough, Madame Henning, for you to know my character."

"Not so." Her hands pressed harder, kneading the tight, uncooperative muscles. "Let me tell you what I see, and we can discuss how close I come. To begin, you are not a controlling man in the sense you seek to dominate others, but you do like control, my Lord, am I right?" Without waiting for him to answer, she went on smoothly, "At heart, I think you are a romantic, very much in love with your pretty young wife, which you admit to me, but I am not certain you tell her often. Part of this reticence comes from assuming a great deal of responsibility at an early age. You were very young when your father died, were you not?"

"Thirteen," he acknowledged.

"Ah, becoming a titled gentleman at such a tender time of life could not have been easy. Exposing weakness is not the way to run estates and deal with problems. You are used to having things as you want them, for you work hard to make it go that way. Before this accident, I would venture you would have said your life was very orderly and settled. However, your horse pitching you into a fence and injuring you both gravely was not in your plans and it shook your ordered world, my Lord."

Never having actually thought of it that way, Adam blinked in surprise at her intuitive assessment. "I suppose," he said

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slowly, "that is true. I dislike it when events happen that I do not predict, and take measures usually to be prepared."

"But one cannot prepare for an accident, that is the very definition of the term. You must allow your mind to accept this before you will heal."

Stiffening slightly, Adam said curtly, "The problem is not with my mind, but my body."

"Perhaps at first. Yesterday you experienced a small physical reaction to manual stimulation. Let us try something a bit different today. I think you are ready."

Drab in her usual dull and ill-fitting plain dress, Olga Henning moved across the room, gathering a small bag. Lying there like some sacrificial offering, Adam waited, no longer quite as uncomfortable being naked in front of this odd but gentle healer, both anticipating and dreading the results of this trial. Part of what she said was true, to the extent he knew that nervousness over failure was debilitating and self-defeating.

Dear God, he prayed, shutting his eyes, let me be able to hold my wife and love her not only with my heart but my body

A cool weight settled on the center of his chest, and he opened his eyes, finding a small crystal pyramid there, only an inch or two high, etched with odd symbols that he did not recognize.

"This will help you channel your energy," Olga said in soft explanation. "Believe in it, for it works. Now, I want you to close your eyes again and relax."

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Closing his eyes, he found indeed there seemed to be an odd sensation humming from the object resting on his body.

"First clear your mind, my Lord, and then picture what it is you want most in this world."

Very easily, Jacqueline's lovely face sprang to mind. "As you wish."

"You tell me you desire your wife in the physical way a man wants a woman."

"Of course."

"Describe her to me. What attracts you to this particular woman more than any other, enough so you chose to wed her."

In his mind's eye, he could see his wife's lustrous hair, her fragile lovely features, and of course, the opulent curves of her glorious body. "There are many things, her lively sense of humor, her generous spirit, her undeniable intelligence ... but I'm afraid I am a typical male and at first it was her beauty. I usually prefer blonds, but she is stunning. When she made her debut into society, men were falling all over themselves to court her. However, the moment we were introduced, we both seemed to realize there was a certain special fire between us. Within a month, we were engaged."

"But you have not yet consummated that love ... that will change soon. Picture it, my Lord. Everyone has fantasies, indulge yours right now. Her arms around you, her lips against yours, her legs spread open to invite your pleasure. You know she will be warm and wet and very tight ... can you imagine how good it will feel to penetrate that heat and hear her breathless sighs as you take her?"

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There was something hypnotizing about Olga's soft voice, or maybe it was the odd crystal, but Adam could almost feel the slick gliding friction of intercourse, and smell the sweet scent of Jacqueline's delicate perfume. Her skin, he knew, was flawless and smooth, and she would be perfect between her legs, her labia pink and pouty, her thighs slim and pale. And her breasts ... so full and high and firm in her fashionable gowns—he knew what they must be like in his hands. He could almost taste her sweet nipples, feel them in his mouth as he suckled and licked, cupping that full delectable weight in his hands as he mounted her...

He was getting an erection, he realized only dimly, unwilling to let go of his astonishingly vivid fantasy. He would withdraw slowly and then slide back in so far he could feel the trembling in her womb, stretching her wide. Those sensitive tiny inner muscles would clench his probing shaft, hold and milk him, and it would be so damned good, he could hardly hang on. As her climax rose, he would be able to feel her nails dig into his shoulders, his testicles tightening, preparing to spill his seed in scalding force when she reached that perfect orgasmic peak and arched beneath him, calling out his name...

"Jesus," he muttered, aware suddenly of the throbbing in his balls and his uneven breathing. He wasn't fully hard, he saw, but there was definitely an improvement from even the day before. Sweat soaked the hair at his temples and a droplet ran down his neck.

"That is enough, I think, and went well. Is it painful?" Olga asked placidly, removing the crystal and resuming her normal

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skillful technique of manipulating the muscles that had tightened during their little exercise in arousal.

"I haven't had sexual release in almost two months," Adam said thickly, lying there and feeling almost weak from both hope and what he just *almost* experienced. "To be truthful, Madame Henning, my body craves it even when it cannot seem to achieve it."

"But as you felt, it will." Her confidence was unmistakable and comforting. "If even thinking of your wife can bring on such sexual excitement and response, just imagine how it will be to actually engage in intercourse. In fact, that is my advice. Practice by thinking of her whenever you can find some privacy and relax, and see if you can come to completion. Once that has happened and you know you can ejaculate, my Lord, then it is time to take her to bed."

"Practice self-stimulation," he muttered with sardonic and unwilling humor. "The irony of this situation is too much. I have had willing women in my bed since I was fifteen. Masturbation is not something I thought I would need once I married the most beautiful woman in England."

"Soon," Olga promised, "you won't. And I think, my Lord, from what I can tell of your rather impressive size, she will be a very lucky lady."

Chapter 6

A summer moon illuminated the bedroom; the tall French doors open to the balcony and letting in the scent of the earthy wet garden below. A waft of cool air brushed her heated bare skin as Jacqueline lifted her hips, the exquisite sensation of heated withdrawal making her gasp out loud. She bent her knees when the man braced above her plunged back into her passage, allowing him the greatest penetration, a low moan of pure bliss torn from her throat. Fevered need seemed to encompass her whole body, right down to her toes as he buried his hard insistent cock deep inside her hungry body, the tingle of approaching climax twisting in her stomach.

"Yes," she whispered in agonizing need, "oh, Adam ... yes." Her hands were frenzied at the small of his back, as if she could force him in farther.

In answer, her husband leaned down to kiss her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth as wildly as he swept back into her body, his hard chest brushing her uplifted breasts. "Come for me," he said in a wicked, suggestive whisper as he withdrew again. "Let me give you paradise, sweetheart."

Even as he spoke, it happened. Jackie could feel her passage helplessly tighten around his next surging thrust, the resistance deliciously increasing liquid sensation, every nerve exploding with acute joy. Her hands flew to his muscled upper arms, grasping hard as if holding tight would keep her from flying off into space, her eyes drifting shut as she cried out in uncontrolled pleasure, her cleft pulsing and the center of her

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universe for those glorious peaked moments. Adam also went rigid and stopped moving, his release signaled by the hot flood that erupted inside her, filling her vaginal channel as his erection flexed and spilled a turbulent rush of sperm. Poised and very still, he held himself there and when her lashes finally lifted, Jackie found his blue eyes intense as he stared down at her.

"Uhm," Jacqueline murmured in a languid teasing tone, sliding her fingers along his lean jaw, "thank you, my Lord, for paradise..."

"Thank you," he replied softly, "for being so divinely generous with your passion, sweetheart." His kiss was as tender as the other had been carnally evocative, his lips gently molding to hers, his mouth firm and tasting slightly of brandy.

Jacqueline kissed him back, her arms sliding up around his neck, since the way he held her after sex was one of her favorite things about an act that held a myriad of delights. His embrace seemed almost reverent in the afterglow of intercourse, as if he couldn't quite believe she was there in his arms. This time, when he moved to withdraw, she tightened her hold and said against his mouth, "Don't go. I like you inside me."

"As you wish. I only seek to please, my Lady." He looked almost boyishly amused at her request, incredibly attractive with his tousled dark blond hair, his fine features lit with that sinfully charming smile she saw at no other time than when they were in bed together. He shifted his weight to his elbows, keeping their bodies intimately entwined as he rested

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between her open legs. Adam was usually so reserved and polite, it was nice to explore this side of him that she had no idea existed.

Sated but savoring the feel of his long lean body on and in her, Jackie rubbed her hand over one broad shoulder and sighed in contentment. "I must admit, I'd heard some rather mixed reviews on this aspect of marriage, but I find it ... pleasing."

Arching a brow, he reached down and kissed the tip of her nose. "Only pleasing?"

"All right," she laughed, "perhaps even very pleasing. How's that?"

Her husband laughed, a low rumble in his chest. Sifting his fingers gently through her long, tumbled hair, he said, "The compliment humbles me, madame. Though I have noticed you seem to be learning quite fast, just as you promised."

"I think I must have an excellent teacher."

"Do you? The good news is our instruction has just begun."

"What a delightful notion."

Through the fringe of her lashes, she studied his face, each feature familiar, yet always seeming a little different when they were like this together, so casually without the restrictions of servants around them and his multitude of daily responsibilities absorbing his mind. Though reluctant to do anything to spoil the mood of closeness and rapport, Jacqueline said tremulously, "I do wish we could spend more time together during the day, but I realize how busy you are. Being with you here like this is so special to me, Adam, you can't know how much."

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"I quite obviously enjoy it, too, my Lady."

"I am more than just in love with you, I *love* you with all my heart."

That impassioned speech seemed to leave him off-balance, but his gaze softened. "You humble me again," he whispered in a voice that sounded not at all like his usual smooth speech. "Any man would feel blessed by the gods if he were able to taste your sweet mouth, to touch your luscious body, and to feel this," he moved inside her, just a fraction of pressure of his hips against her thighs, "is like visiting heaven. In your arms, Jacqueline, I have found the true meaning of making love."

It wasn't quite a return of her sentiment, but then again, men were different from women, and Adam had never been very free about expressing his feelings to her. Only on the day he'd proposed marriage had she realized just how deeply he felt, and that unguarded moment would be a cherished memory forever. In the six months of their engagement, too, he'd said he loved her very rarely, and when the words were spoken, she valued how much it meant for him to say them. "I like it, too," she responded playfully, tugging him down so she could lick his lower lip. "How long do you think it will take before ... that is, we are conveniently in the right position, and..."

His laugh was more of a growl and the tender look in his eyes was replaced instantly with a salacious gleam. "I'm halfway there already ... Jesus, Jackie, you inflame me. I'm not eighteen anymore, yet I'm already getting hard in minutes."

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He told the truth, she could feel the enjoyable awareness of his returning erection swelling and stretching her passage, those soft walls still sensitive and slick with his discharge. It felt wonderful, and she sighed in open joy, smiling up at her lover. "We could do this all night," she suggested, not completely teasing, the idea of making love over and over sending a certain excitement through her. Testing him, she tilted her pelvis and that slight friction made her already wet, hot sex soften further. "I think I'd like that, would you?"

"Hell, yes," he rasped and kissed her throat.

And when he began to stroke and fondle her breasts, she almost climaxed just from his touch, her awakened sensuality something new and wonderful, like a favorite toy.

Her doubts were foolish, she told herself, drowning in pure unadulterated pleasure under the pressure of his skilled, roaming fingers. Nothing was wrong with her marriage or her husband. In fact, everything was ... perfect.

* * * *

"Where the fuck have you been?" Adam fairly snarled the words before he could help himself. It was nearly dawn, and God knew there were servants up and about.

Alex tossed him his own dressing gown. Wearing only his breeches, he looked pleasantly exhausted, with a small dark smile on his mouth. He said coolly, "Funny you should use that word..."

"Good God, Alex, shut up, that's not amusing. What happened, did you fall asleep? Christ, it's almost light outside, what if someone sees me going to my room?"

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His brother lifted one brow. "No, I didn't fall asleep. Do you want more details than that? If so, I'll oblige you. Otherwise, I'm damned tired."

All night? Feeling almost sickened with the tide of jealousy that swept over his body, Adam clenched his fists involuntarily and briefly contemplated wiping that satisfied look off his twin brother's face. However, a voice of reason whispered somewhere against the beat of fury inside him, an early morning brawl in Alex's room would probably be the end of the deception and also his marriage. Taking a long, deep breath, he said hoarsely, "No details, thanks. And like you, I've been up all night, though not for the same reason. I've been here, imagining you with my wife, and after about four hours passed, I wasn't sure if I wasn't going to flat out lose my mind. After six, I was pacing so fast, that it's a wonder I didn't strain my injury again."

"Damn you, you started this." Alex looked strained suddenly too, his mocking smile giving way to something that might have been a similar sort of pain. "At least she's yours, Adam. I'm going to be left with nothing except discontent and a remembered taste of something that wasn't ever mine. Even if I get her with child, I'll get the privilege of watching you claim it and raise it as your own."

Not sure how to respond to that, tired and resentful as hell, Adam shrugged into his robe. "At this moment, it is understandably difficult for me to feel sorry for you," he muttered.

"And it's understandably difficult for me to feel sorry for you," Alex countered harshly, standing there bare-chested,

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his blue eyes hard as diamonds, "and at this point, what's the difference if I fuck her just once, or we do it all night? That's another damned reason I'm not exactly thrilled I agreed to this unholy masquerade. Your beautiful wife loves sex, brother. She's a natural, hot as hell and enough to drive any man wild. Perhaps you had a long night imagining us together, but I will have the rest of my life picturing you enjoying her delectable passionate body whenever you wish, and I suspect that will be often unless you are a complete fool."

It was easy enough to imagine Jackie, considering her vibrant personality, embracing the earthy side of life, and after all, she had an expert teacher to guide her into the world of erotic sexual experience. Adam clenched his jaw and fought down another violent urge. "Neither one of us needs to discuss this right now," he said curtly, moving across the soft carpet of his brother's bedroom toward the door, the low ache in his right hip and thigh a decided contrast to the actual pain that simple movement would have brought him just last week. Reaching the door, he turned woodenly, seeing that Alex had slumped into a chair, one lean hand thrust into his hair in a gesture of evident frustration.

Adam said quietly, "A few more days, I think, and this will all be over. I am improving fast now, and hope to be able to assume my rightful role as not only Jacqueline's husband, but also her lover. Think about what I said yesterday afternoon, Alex. There *is* someone out there for you, a woman who will not only warm your bed, but your heart. If nothing else,

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maybe this hellish playacting will bring something wonderful into your life."

Lifting his head, Alex smiled wearily. "To a certain extent, it already has. That is the problem. I am reluctant to relinquish it."

Adam spent his entire existence as the serious one, the responsible one, with his twin being the charming, careless rogue. When they were children, Alex had tended to be the mischievous rascal, a charismatic scapegrace who wiggled out of disaster or punishment with an impish smile and facile explanation. As a grown man, he had handled his life the same way, carelessly using his looks and glib tongue to seduce everyone from titled highborn ladies to chambermaids into his bed. Adam told his brother coolly, "The trouble is, though I dropped Jacqueline into your lap, no pun intended, you did not court her; you didn't agonize over what ring to purchase for your engagement; you did not perspire at the very thought of how you would propose to her. I fell in love with her the first time I saw her, a revelation in emotion for someone like me, who tends to be more reserved than otherwise. I determined I would marry her if it was in my power to convince her to have me. I *worked* at winning her and miraculously, she agreed to become my wife. Between us, there is more than just passion, there is true affection and regard."

His gaze enigmatic, Alex rasped, "I know that and I do not need a lecture, damn you."

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"My point is—don't want what I have, but instead fashion your own happiness, Alex. No one will give it to you, it has to be sought and earned."

"Thanks for the insight, but as a man who has everything, I am sure it is easy to be so smugly self-righteous." The comment was caustic and laced with underlying discontent.

Adam opened the door. "I do not have everything yet," he murmured glancing out into the hall, relieved to see it deserted, "but I sure as the devil plan to soon."

* * * *

It was a little embarrassing to sleep until noon, though Jacqueline was well-aware society ladies did so on a regular basis after long nights at balls and parties. However, she had retired fairly early, and her husband had as well, so there was probably little doubt as to the source of her fatigue...

"It is going to prove to be a nice afternoon, my Lady." Her maid, Mary, a slightly plump, good-natured girl only a year or two younger than herself, spoke brightly as she whisked back the long curtains. "I declare, I am sick of all the rain, so I'm glad of a peek of sun. Oh yes, His Lordship wished for me to remind you that tonight is the Cowes' ball and you accepted the invitation."

Adam had remembered ... of course he had, since he was careful about details like social schedules. Clearing her throat, Jacqueline murmured, "Thank you, Mary. Could I have some hot water and a small luncheon, maybe?"

"Right away, my Lady."

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Lying there, waiting for her water to be delivered, Jacqueline rolled over and stretched her nude body luxuriously under the sheets, smiling as she remembered the remarkable vigor and duration of her husband's passion. The stickiness between her thighs was evidence of what had transpired between them time and again, and she gloried in the knowledge that she could give him such pleasure. He'd been the ardent lover, whispering wickedly sensual suggestions in her ear, kissing her deeply, holding her close in the aftermath of orgasmic bliss...

And he'd left her, like he had the successive nights before. Jacqueline had been aware of his departure as she drifted to sleep, feeling the shift in the mattress as he slipped carefully out of bed, rousing enough to be aware of him picking up his dressing gown and quietly going back to his own room. She wasn't sure why, but it hurt a little to realize he didn't want to actually sleep with her, but came to her bed for one purpose only. It was true, they had separate bedrooms, but most aristocratic couples did, and the household was set up that way. That didn't mean she didn't crave the simple joy of hearing his breathing in the dark or waking in the morning next to him.

In fact, her happiness diminished perceptibly as she remembered she had never asked him about why he felt he needed to lock the door between their two rooms each night when he undressed. They were lovers, so modesty could hardly be the issue. Besides, Adam was a handsome, experienced, confident man and certainly didn't seem the

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least bit self-conscious in his nudity ... why would he lock out his own wife? It made no sense.

Frowning, she looked out the window at the brilliant blue sky.

* * * *

Drinking away his afternoon was probably not the best choice, since he'd gotten so little sleep, but under the circumstances, Alex was pretty sure he was entitled to some self-indulgence. Picking up the glass of whiskey, he drained it and reached for the bottle to pour another. From the private Hallworth box, he could see the horses on parade for the next race, the jockeys looking diminutive on the sleek, huge animals, his own colors of black and silver shining in the perfect warm sunshine. Rajah had a fighting chance of taking this race, he mused, watching the toss of the horse's head with a practiced eye, gauging his mood even from his distance. The stallion was a beauty, a rangy roan with an incredible stride, but he was also temperamental and edgy and back in the paddock, had thrown a fit over being saddled, injuring one of the lads.

If he won, Alex decided cynically as the horses began to line up, he would sell him. He was getting a little tired of pampering the brute. Maybe he would take the money and invest it in that new shipping venture Adam had recommended. His brother was damned shrewd when it came to money and had an undeniable Midas touch.

And when it came to women, he was undoubtedly astute as well. Recalling the sweet, fiery responsiveness of

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Jacqueline's voluptuous body made Alex give an inward curse, the pervasive memory something that lingered like a drug. His brother's exquisite wife gave herself with delightful and unexpected enthusiasm for someone so inexperienced, though with a few more nights like the one before, she would hardly be considered a novice. She had climaxed in his arms enough times that he'd lost count, and he had surprised even himself with the degree and duration of his own sexual excess.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Not even aware someone had entered the box, Alex glanced up, his abstracted attention going to the woman standing so quietly by the table, an expectant look on her lovely face. Not certain he was fit company for anyone, much less a woman he knew was interested in him sexually, he suppressed an ungentlemanly groan and essayed a reluctant smile as he got politely to his feet. "Lady Kelton. How nice to see you. Of course, please sit down."

"Thank you." Her smile was reserved, and she sank down gracefully into the opposite chair. "I'm being rather bold, I'm sure ... but I saw you had a horse entered and assumed you were here. Jacqueline tells me you are fond of racing, so I suppose we have something in common."

"How nice. Would you care for some refreshment, my Lady?"

The signal for the horses to take position blared, and as he gestured for sherry and a glass to be brought for his unexpected guest, Alex gratefully focused his attention on the track below them. The stands were full because of the

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incomparable weather, and the murmur of the crowd rose when Rajah resisted being led into his spot, his jockey openly cursing and fighting to keep him subdued. "Uncooperative bastard," he muttered, forgetting for a moment a lady was there—the whiskey probably—then murmured instantly, "My apologies."

A small musical laugh rang out. Cara Kelton said, smiling, "No need, I am not an ingénue. He does seem to be rather high-strung. Tell me, do you have other horses?"

"A small string. Less than ten usually, sometimes more."

"I've thought of buying one or two as an indulgence. Perhaps you could suggest a trainer."

"Forsythe," Alex said absently, relieved when the starting gun went off and the roan took off like a demon with a vengeful angel on his heels. "He's honest and that counts for a lot. And I've seen him with my horses; the passion is genuine. I can have a word with him, if you are sincere. There are never any empty spots in his stable, so he only takes on new bloodstock if someone recommends you."

"You are too kind. And I'll take your word, since your horse appears to be winning. Can he hold that pace? Johnson's black stallion is a little small, but he has barb blood. In the turn, he is going to hold his own, and in the stretch, you could be in trouble."

For the first time, Jacqueline's friend actually gained his attention with that remark. He glanced over at her, momentarily distracted from the race. In pink silk that suited her fragile pale beauty, she gazed at him with clear intelligent light blue eyes. Almost delicately slim, she was very feminine,

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obviously refined, and not at all like the usual languid jaded women who circulated in his circles. "You *do* go racing," he said bluntly, a little intrigued. "That's refreshing."

Her mouth was soft, and it curved wryly when she smiled. "I am assuming you refer to all the women who approach you with subterfuge in an attempt at seduction."

Good God, he was certainly not very glib today, but she was certainly also being unsettlingly blunt. "It happens," he admitted frankly, giving her an appraising look. "But, please, I wasn't implying you were in that category. We barely know each other."

"But I *am* in that category, which I have a feeling you know. Jacqueline isn't good at keeping secrets; her nature is much too honest. I am assuming she told her husband of my interest ... who immediately told you." Her smile deepened, a dimple appearing in her cheek. "However, that all aside, don't look now, but I think your horse is about to win."

She was right, he found when he turned around. Rajah had focused his considerable energy in the right place, and at a flat out and very impressive run, left most of the field in his wake. Alex always liked racing, and it was even better when winning was part of the equation, so he found himself smiling broadly and reaching for the whiskey bottle. "That calls for a small toast," he said, amazed that considering his black humor of just minutes ago, he felt almost jovial.

"Certainly." Cara Kelton lifted her glass, her eyes sparkling. "Winning is the ultimate joy, isn't it?"

"Not exactly," he replied softly, his lashes lowering a fraction, the innuendo escaping before he could help it.

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"That," she said serenely, "is what I've heard. My problem is, though I was a married woman, I don't quite believe it. Rumor has it you could help me with that."

Blunt was not quite the word. Alex registered her speech with a small amount of shock despite his experience with very forward ladies, even though he'd been told—when Jacqueline thought he was Adam—outright of Lady Kelton's attraction to him.

It was not exactly fair to the lady in question, nor was the fact he was not in a situation currently where sexual need was a problem. Nonetheless, the delectable Cara was more interesting than he had first perceived. He'd only been around her when his sister-in-law was present also, and right or not, Jacqueline's presence in the room was infinitely distracting to him.

"At any other time," he began diplomatically, "I would be—"

"Receptive?" Her smile faded a fraction and her glass of sherry trembled a little in her hand. "Jackie thought there might be someone else, though no one is talking about it."

Jesus, he hoped not, considering the other someone was his sister-in-law. "I would like to think I can be discreet," he said quietly. "There is someone ... special. But she's married. Happily."

"Oh." Lady Kelton looked a little discomfited and confused. "But then why—"

Now *that*, he realized, had been saying too much. Setting aside his whiskey, he formed a charming smile with effort and interrupted, "It does not mean we can't be friends and even

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meet at the races. Did you know Lord Halpin is running that young filly of his in the fifth? I've heard she's like lightning and so well-behaved, he lets his young daughter ride her."

Lady Kelton was apparently polite through and through, *and* able to recognize a deliberate change in subject, though there was more than a hint of curiosity in her light blue eyes as she murmured over her glass of sherry, "Is that so?"

Chapter 7

The crowd moved like a living organism, swelling into the corners of the huge ballroom, swirling fashionably dressed couples on the dance floor and easing out the French doors onto the terrace to escape the stifling heat—all the time talking, laughing, moving in constant ripples of sound and motion.

Extracting herself from the grip of the somewhat lecherous and elderly Lord Bowman with a polite parting smile as the music ended, Jacqueline navigated the sea of bodies, looking for her husband, who for understandable reasons, could not dance. With several hundred people crammed together, it was difficult to find him, but she eventually spotted him with a group of other well-dressed men, his height being an advantage, and the unusual dark gold of his thick hair. He turned as if he sensed her approach, and lifted a brow with a slight smile on his well-shaped mouth, taking her hand when she got close enough and tucking it into the crook of his arm. "Hello, darling. I warn you we're talking politics. Gentlemen, you have all met my lovely wife."

Jacqueline acknowledged the greetings with a gracious smile for everyone, and then made a mock face. "Do not let me interrupt. Tell me, what is our dear friend Bonaparte up to these days? Last I heard, Lord Wellington had penetrated into Spain."

Young Lord Wittcomb said zealously, "After Talavera and his victories at Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, Lord Wellington has proven to the Frogs he means business. Mark my words,

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he'll push them back into France, and we'll soon march down the streets of Paris."

"He is an able commander, I am sure," Jackie commented neutrally. Wellington had plenty of critics both in Parliament and within the Horse Guards. She'd learned enough from Adam to keep her comments innocuous when in a crowd.

"My Lady, he is brilliant." Lord Wittcomb was obviously a fan.

"Your enthusiasm and confidence is endearing, Andrew, but why would a beautiful lady want to hear about war?"

The sound of the cool drawl behind her made Jacqueline turn to look at the man standing right behind her left shoulder. Her brother-in-law gave her a small polite bow and a lazy smile. "Good evening, Jacqueline, you look ravishing, as always. Hello, Adam, did you hear about Rajah this afternoon?"

Her husband nodded, his blue eyes narrowing slightly. "I did. Congratulations. I hear it was an impressive race."

"It was."

"You're late, and I smell the brandy from here, so I take it you've been celebrating."

"Of course." Alex's grin was unrepentant, and he stood there in his elegant and well-tailored evening clothes, the mirror image of the man at her side—but infinitely different by expression and demeanor—as the rest of the group offered solicitations and handshakes.

He turned toward her. "It would be my continued good fortune if the new Countess of Hallworth would consent to dance with me. Do you mind?"

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She felt it again, Jackie thought, standing there with her fingers lightly resting on her husband's sleeve, the slight glimmer of something in the air, something not quite right between the twin-boys-turned-men who had remained fast friends over their entire connected lives. Adam stiffened slightly, though it was perfectly acceptable for her brother-in-law to dance with her and she had done so before often enough.

Her husband waited just a fraction too long before he said, "Of course not."

"I'll stand in substitute since you are still incapacitated," Alex said, taking her hand, his blue eyes gleaming with his usual reckless charm.

"How kind of you," Adam murmured, and there was a distinct edge to his voice that Jacqueline hoped none of his friends caught as easily as she did.

It wasn't until they were on the dance floor, swirling among the other guests to a lively waltz, that Jacqueline asked quietly, "Adam won't answer this question, but perhaps you will, Alex. Have the two of you quarreled?"

If her brother-in-law was drunk, he gave no indication of it, moving with superb lithe grace, leading her with effortless ease through the steps. "What makes you think that?"

The evasive reply made her sigh, looking up into his face, noting the slight set to his sensual mouth. "I *feel* it," she explained. "The two of you have always been so in accord. It's almost eerie how well you get along, since you are basically so different. I would hate to think our marriage is affecting that bond, but that seems to me when it started."

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Looking down at her, his lashes half-lowered, Alex didn't respond at once, and Jacqueline felt a ridiculous slight blush rise to her cheeks. It was uncanny how much he could look like Adam, she thought as they moved to the dreamy music, especially with that glittering almost salacious half-smile on his mouth. Her brother-in-law was infamous for his masculine charm, but apparently both brothers could summon that particular expression which made a woman's heart beat faster when they were in their arms. Only Adam—in her experience—reserved it for the bedroom alone.

Alex finally murmured, "Your marriage to my very lucky brother has made me reassess some points of my life. Other than that, my Lady, I cannot comment. If he doesn't want to discuss it with you, he'd sure as hell not thank me for doing so."

Her breath went in slightly at his language, for Alex might be a rake, but he had never been anything but a gentleman around her, and gentleman did not swear in front of ladies. On the other hand, she realized with another twist of unease, Adam occasionally did so ... but he reserved that for the bedroom, as well. She said evenly, "Very well, I understand it is between the two of you, though it seems to me that whatever is going on should be resolved. Adam isn't pleased over it, that much I know, and all I wish in this world is for him to be happy. Talk to him, Alex, and I am sure you can settle things with your brother. He is beyond everything a reasonable and intelligent man, and you two share so much."

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"Oh, sweetheart, you have no idea," he said cryptically, his hand tightening at her waist, and giving a short laugh as he stared down at her.

They were dancing a little too close, Jacqueline thought uncomfortably a few moments later when her breasts brushed his jacket, and she too could smell brandy mingled with the clean scent of fresh linen and masculine cologne. What was worse, she hadn't even noticed at once the almost scandalous tightness of his embrace, swaying in his arms in comfortable familiar intimacy, as if he, not Adam, was her lover...

Oh, sweetheart, you have no idea...

Good God, she thought in sudden horrified shock, a wayward notion coming in like a stray bullet, lodging itself in her brain. She stumbled over a step, held upright by her brother-in-law's capable, firm grip.

It couldn't be possible...

Could it?

* * * *

When he got a chance to wrap his hands around his brother's neck, he was going to enjoy strangling him.

Adam sprawled on the seat of the carriage, his long legs extended, a harsh throbbing in his hip indicating he wasn't quite ready yet for romantic waltzes, which was another thing his brother had gotten to enjoy with his beautiful young wife before him.

Damn Alex to hell.

"It's an unnaturally warm evening," Jacqueline murmured, sitting almost primly across from him, her face still a trifle

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pale. "Perhaps that's why I so suddenly felt ill. Thank you for leaving early."

"Darling, don't be ridiculous. There is no need to thank me, your well-being is paramount."

Her eyes, so intensely lovely and silver in the dim light of the lantern, looked enormous, framed by long, thick lashes. In a dark blue gown that contrasted with her ivory skin and set off the ruby glints in her lustrous hair, she looked like a dream come true, so breathtaking that he had to keep himself from reaching across the carriage and taking her into his arms. The neckline was hardly immodest, but evocative enough that the firm upper curves of her tempting breasts had drawn the eye of more than one man at the ball, which he didn't mind until Alex had arrived.

His brother could usually hold his liquor with amazing resilience, and Adam had only seen him truly drunk once or twice, but he had been on the edge tonight. Short of public refusal, he couldn't keep his wife and brother from dancing, but he'd known it was a bad idea the moment he'd seen that half-defiant and carelessly insolent look on his twin's face. It was an expression he recognized, and usually spelled some kind of trouble.

Watching that waltz had been a lesson in self-restraint, especially since Alex had brazenly held Jacqueline too close for propriety, the two of them striking and well-noticed as they moved, her spectacular coloring and alluring beauty a foil for his brother's rakish good looks. Adam had caught more than a few speculative glances and arched brows as the dance continued, and it was probably just as well that Jackie

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had felt faint and requested they go home. Luckily, she seemed a little better now, though she had definitely been trembling when he handed her into the carriage.

"It would be best, I think, if you go straight up to bed," he suggested gently, "and get a good night's sleep. You were up far too long last eve," he managed to not stumble as he said the words and kept his expression neutral, "and that coupled with the oppressive temperature of the ballroom is no doubt the culprit."

"Perhaps." She gazed at him, her eyes half-veiled by those thick lashes. "What about you ... you rose before me. Are you tired, my Lord?"

Grateful to feel they were slowing down and approaching the mansion, Adam said smoothly, "I am a little more accustomed to late nights and early mornings. Trust me, darling, you'll feel better with some rest."

"Alex is likely to have a headache in the morning," she remarked, adjusting her skirts. "He seemed not quite himself."

Not certain if she wanted him to comment on his brother's somewhat outrageous behavior, he said cautiously, "Rajah is an unknown factor, and racing him is always a matter of luck. With a few more wins like today, Alex can probably sell him to stud someone's more placid stock. Forgive his inebriation."

"Do you?"

That question caught him off-guard, just as the door to the carriage opened and he moved to get out. "I beg your pardon?"

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"Forgive him? I think he was needling you by deliberately holding me in such a scandalous way."

She was right, of course, but it was more than that too, and that made the question extremely hard to answer. There were times when his wife's considerable intelligence was unfortunate. Getting out of the carriage and ignoring the twinges in hip and thigh, Adam took his wife by the waist and lifted her down with polite courtesy. "Perhaps."

Looking up at him, her lovely face touched by fickle moonlight, Jacqueline asked softly, "Perhaps you forgive him, or perhaps he was being deliberately provoking?"

Succinctly, Adam admitted, "Both."

To his relief, she didn't say more as they climbed the steps and went inside, the huge house well-lit despite the late hour. Escorting her upstairs, he advised her maid, "Her Ladyship isn't feeling well. Please make sure she gets to bed immediately."

The girl hovered instantly, her brown eyes wide with concern. "Yes, my Lord, of course. Here, my Lady, let me help you undress."

Leaving his wife with a smile and a light brush of his mouth on the back of her cold hand, Adam went back downstairs, finding his need for a brandy to be intense and undeniable. His study was stuffy and he opened the windows, letting in a small but sultry breeze. Removing his jacket, he dashed liquid into a glass and took a long bracing sip.

Since Jacqueline was indisposed, at least there wouldn't be the issue of an inebriated Alex thinking he would make love to her.

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"Jesus," Adam muttered out loud, recalling the intense and open look on his brother's face as he danced with her at the ball.

The situation was untenable and needed to change. All he needed was a little more time...

* * * *

Despite the glistening sunshine, Jacqueline felt her hands tremble as she lifted the tiny glass of sherry. "Look at me, I'm shaking."

"I see that." Cara looked acutely concerned, her pretty face puckering in a frown. "Good heavens, please, tell me what it is. I am about to expire from suspense."

"This is between us only."

"Of course. You know me better than that."

"You won't believe it," Jackie said flatly, and swallowed a bracing mouthful of an unladylike quantity. "I don't even think I believe it, yet deep inside, I know it to be true."

"Know *what* to be true ... Jack, don't be so mysterious. Tell me why you are here and so frantically upset. You arrive here in a welter of nerves and tell me you need to talk to me, and now you won't *talk!*"

Was it possible to even say it out loud? Looking around the very civilized and refined interior of her friend's formal parlor, the case clock in the corner ticking each ordinary second away, the gleaming walnut table in front of her set with a tray and crystal decanter, the oriental carpet stretching out in muted complex colors ... Jacqueline wondered once again if she was simply losing her mind.

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Swallowing, she closed her eyes briefly and remembered that darkly sensual teasing smile, so unlike Adam...

"I don't think I have ever slept with my husband," she said starkly.

Cara's face went blank for a moment, confusion in her pale blue eyes. "What?"

She clarified bluntly, "I am convinced that I have never, not once in the almost two weeks we have been married, had ... marital relations with Adam." Her throat thickened as she spoke, and she took a convulsive sip of sherry.

"But ... my dear Jack, what are you saying? I admit it, I am not following you. You told me it was wonderful and you enjoyed—"

With a grim, small smile, Jackie interrupted, "I did. I do. Quite frankly, the sexual part of my marriage is wonderful."

"To say you are confounding me is an understatement. How can you arrive here and say you've never done something, and in the same breath, say you have and it's wonderful?"

"I said I'd never done it with my husband. He and Alex are so much alike that is hard to tell them apart."

That stopped Cara cold, her expression going from confused to astounded. "*What?*"

No longer able to sit, Jacqueline got to her feet, pacing across the room in restless agitation. "I haven't the slightest idea why either one of them would do it, but I think they switch places. There is so much evidence that I am right I cannot even catalogue it all for you, but the most compelling being last evening, when I danced with Alex at the Cowes'

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ball. Without even realizing what was happening, I felt very at home in his arms, so much so that I thought nothing of him holding me so scandalously close. I am sure anyone watching thought I was with my husband." She added on a breath, "And those who knew I wasn't, thought the same thing I am thinking now, that my brother-in-law and I are lovers."

"You ... you simply cannot be serious," Cara gasped.

"Can't I?" Jacqueline swung around, grasping the top of settee. "Let's see. Last eve, Alex called me casually sweetheart. Adam never calls me that, except, of course, in bed. He calls me 'darling' as a term of endearment. When we are intimately engaged in sex, occasionally my husband slips and uses a swear word ... which Alex also did in front of me last night. What's more, the man who comes to me each night has a certain smile—I cannot describe it, but it is infinitely recognizable—and I can tell you though Adam has never smiled at me that way, Alex certainly did last night." There was more, too, things too intangible to put into words; like the way Adam now never touched her during the day, the strain between the two brothers, even the scent of Alex's strong male body next to hers as they danced, evoking a subtle physical arousal that had certainly never happened before, her cleft dampening slightly as he held her, her breasts tightening in vivid awareness of his recognizable touch. "He locks the door between our rooms when he retires," she added quietly. "I assume so I won't catch one of them coming or going. I found it inexplicable when I discovered it, but it makes rather perfect sense now."

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Clad in green dimity, her slender body showing her disbelief by her tense posture, Cara wildly shook her head. "Smiles, a locked door, and a slipped swear word ... that isn't enough evidence. You surely cannot believe your husband would allow his own brother to bed you ... oh, my God." Her hand flew to her throat, her face suddenly still.

Whatever revelation had suddenly happened for her friend, Jacqueline wasn't even sure she wanted to know. She waited, watching, her mind whirling still with traitorous accusation she could not quite absorb.

"Alex told me yesterday he was secretly involved with someone married," Cara said very slowly. "In fact, he told me she was *happily* married, which made me question quite logically why she would have an affair in the first place. I don't think he meant to let it slip, but he was drinking."

Feeling suddenly as if her legs would not support her, Jacqueline leaned on the back of the sofa. She whispered, "If I am wrong about this, I'll feel like the most veritable fool on earth. And if I am right, I'll feel even more blind and stupid. My only defense is that I was so nervous and uncertain that first night ... and of course, in retrospect, I remember thinking how different Adam was from his usual reserved self, how ardent and skilled at making me enjoy our lovemaking."

"Your husband, whether your suspicions are based on fact, or the most flagrant flight of fancy I have ever heard, probably *is* skilled, Jack. He's almost thirty and undeniably one of the most handsome men in England. Just because he is a little more cautious than his flamboyantly attractive brother does not mean he is not as good a lover. You cannot

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go by what you experienced in his arms, or that he was different from what you expected in bed. No, you must have facts to support such an extreme accusation."

Walking with wobbly legs around the settee to sink down again and reach for her abandoned sherry, Jacqueline said in a wavering voice, "There is no accusation. How could I accuse the man I love of such a terrible deception? I guess I feel as if I have fallen down a flight of stairs and can't catch my breath, so I needed to talk to someone. Telling Adam that I think this is out of the question."

"I cannot imagine what he would do if you are wrong," Cara agreed, toying with her glass, her gaze grave and weighted. "And, dear Jack, you *must* be wrong."

"One would hope so, but I don't think that is the case ... there are so many small things ... it is mortifying how easily I was fooled. Did he think I would never catch on to this macabre impersonation?"

"*He* being which one?" Cara picked up the sherry decanter and refilled both their glasses. "If you are the woman currently taking Alex Trevor off the market, he is happy with the arrangement. At least that is the impression I got from our conversation yesterday. Of course, he would not say much. My direct approach met with polite rebuff."

He *was* probably too tired to bed anyone else, Jacqueline thought in an agony of embarrassment, remembering their fevered and prolonged intervals of sexual intercourse. The love play had been alternately tender and flamingly passionate, and when she recalled some of the inventive positions they had used ... her cheeks heated and she

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clutched at her glass of wine with tight fingers. "I am talking about my husband, of course." Allowing a short pause in which she summoned her courage, she asked brokenly, "Do you think Adam has a mistress who keeps him so satisfied he simply isn't interested in me?"

Perched on the opposite settee, Cara instantly shook her head. "No ... how ridiculous. Look at you, what man wouldn't be interested? And besides, why marry you?"

"What if," her worst fears, formulated through a second nearly sleepless night, tumbled out in almost incoherent haste, "I'm simply suitable to be his countess and she isn't? After all, my father is also an earl, my family tree traces back to the Plantagenets, and I had a sizeable dowry. Not that Adam needs my money, but maybe he simply wanted to get marriage over with and beget an heir ... and he decided to let his twin do *that* for him. What if he loves this other woman—"

"Who doesn't even exist," Cara broke in staunchly. "Your imagination is running wild, Jack. I've seen how he looks at you. Do you think *you* wouldn't know if he loves you or not?"

"I thought he did." Remembering looking into her husband's eyes as he recited his vows not fourteen days ago made her feel a little better. He'd either been utterly sincere or else should have taken to the stage.

"Still think it," Cara ordered crisply. "Now, drink up your sherry and we'll devise some sort of plan on how to test this absurd assumption of yours ... oh, dear, what are you going to do the next time evening falls and he ... er ... whichever one it is, comes to you?"

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"That problem has occurred to me," Jacqueline admitted. "Last night I feigned illness, though the truth is, I was sick with confusion, so it wasn't that much of a stretch. I don't know how to handle it tonight ... but I cannot deny him his husbandly rights. The fact I suspected something would be obvious, since so far I have ... been enthusiastic about that aspect of married life."

Her friend stopped, arresting in taking a drink. She asked in a stilted tone, "Is it that good, Jack?"

Slick hard heat, the glorious feeling of possession and penetration, the strength and force of his body over hers as he thrust between her open legs ... and the marvelous summit to be reached together, bodies fused as one, a supreme sharing of elemental physical pleasure.

"Yes," she admitted softly, blushing.

Chapter 8

His head ached like the very devil and his mouth was dry as a ball of American cotton. Rising up on one elbow, Alex groaned out loud and tried to focus on his surroundings. The room was familiar but certainly not his own; with tasteful but very feminine pink satin bed hangings and a huge dressing table with a gilt mirror. The sheets too, smelled vaguely of attar of roses.

"Well ... look who's back from the dead. How do you feel, darling?"

Vivian, Alex thought, relaxing slightly and falling back on the mattress at the sound of her amused voice, vague glimpses from the night before drifting back. The festivities at the track, the glorious weather, dinner at the club after toasting Rajah's win...

His brow furrowed. Surely he'd gone somewhere else...

"Like I've been hit in the head by a bottle of brandy," he admitted, shifting to look at the other side of the enormous bed. Sure enough, his former mistress lay propped next to him on a sea of silk pillows, her cherry-red mouth curved in a playful grin. Clad in a sheer negligee, her dark hair around her shoulders, she looked a little like a sinful, alluring sorceress, all full curves and pale pink flesh.

"You *were* hit in the head by a bottle of brandy," she said in a mischievous mocking tone of sympathy. "And let's not forget the claret and champagne. Darling Alex, you know better. You never drink too much."

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He did know better, but that did nothing to alleviate his current discomfort. "I must have forgotten how it feels the next day," he muttered, his arm going across his eyes. "Jesus, can you draw the drapes? It's damned bright in here."

"The drapes are drawn," she said soothingly, "and my cook is preparing you her special remedy. I've tried it before ... it isn't pleasant, but it works miracles."

"Something to look forward to, no doubt." Opening one eye, he asked, "How the devil did I get here? I don't remember a damned thing."

"We ran into each other at the ball." Vivian Maxwell gave a delicate cough. "I thought perhaps you could use a friend to make certain you didn't do anything else imprudent in your incapacitated state, and I brought you here. Taking you home didn't seem wise, since your brother might have been less than sympathetic to your condition."

Considering he was stark naked, Alex asked, "Did we ... er..."

"Fuck?" Vivian supplied, lifting one dark well-plucked brow, the vulgar word not surprising in a woman who delighted in flaunting convention. Dragging home a drunken former lover was perfectly in character for her. "No, I'm afraid you began to snore quite boringly the moment I actually got your clothes off."

And it was damned ironic, Alex knew, that he felt relieved, like he owed Jacqueline fidelity or some ridiculous notion of something close to it.

Jacqueline.

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Hell. He remembered dancing with her at the ball ... visions of pale flawless skin and a dark blue dress floating back. She'd been beyond lovely, those lush breasts he knew so intimately swelling above the neckline of her gown, her silver eyes wide and full of concern as she asked him why he and Adam so obviously wanted to rip out each other's throats ... and worse, he recalled how he'd held her, like a lover, so close he could feel her soft graceful body as she moved to the music and smell the delicate scent of flowers that drifted from her gleaming hair...

"Shit," he muttered. Adam undoubtedly wanted his head on a platter, and at this moment, he wasn't sure he didn't deserve that particular fate. His unruly desires aside, he didn't want to ruin his relationship with his twin brother. It was one of the things he valued most in the world.

Vivian stretched sinuously, the motion lifting her large breasts in a provocative motion. "So, tell me, darling, between you and I, of course, is there something between you and your brother's pretty young bride? I'll grant you she's attractive, if you like women that slender who have hair such an unusual shade. It isn't quite red, is it, nor brown either ... I'm not sure what you'd call it."

"Auburn," he said automatically, remembering the silken mass of it in his hands, the pounding in his temples a tangible pain. "And no, of course not. Jacqueline is very much in love with Adam."

"I didn't see the fateful dance, but people were whispering that you were not exactly holding her in a brotherly fashion and looking at her like you might be a little—"

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"Look, Vivian," Alex interrupted, acute guilt not helping his headache one bit, "I was drunk. I don't even really remember dancing with my sister-in-law," he lied. "So if I was indeed holding her too close, it was probably to keep my balance. Feel free to disabuse anyone who mentions it of the notion that there is anything but polite affection between the Countess of Hallworth and myself."

"Such vehemence. Of course, I believe you, but your reputation will make people speculate ... you know the jaded *ton*, darling." Her smile was purely angelic, though Vivian was the furthest thing possible from divinely innocent.

It was true, society tended to gnaw at any hint of scandal like a dog after a bone, and though he learned long ago to ignore it, Alex suspected neither Adam nor Jacqueline would be pleased to be the center of such avid conjecture. "I almost didn't attend the ball at all, and now I wished I'd listened to that little voice in my head and gone home to sleep off my afternoon revels."

Her laugh rang out, light and musical. "I didn't realize that you even *had* a little voice, Alex. My memories include sexual licentious excess and infinite lascivious pleasure. In fact, you are a very talented man, darling, which more than a few women in London, and I suspect other places as well, know. However, circumspect you are not. One does not get a reputation for sinful seduction by listening to some inner voice that urges caution." Vivian gave another big theatrical sigh. "I've missed you, you know, I didn't realize how much until you landed here naked in my bed. No one else has your stamina, darling, or such a glorious cock."

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"I'll have to owe you, my dear Vivian," Alex said sourly. "Sex would be a marvel in my current state."

Leaning over to rub her hand across his bare chest and gaze into his eyes, she purred, "But you *will* keep me in mind?"

* * * *

"His Lordship is still out, my lady, and Lord Alex has not yet returned home."

Nodding, Jacqueline knew she was a coward to be relieved to not have to face either one of them just yet, especially since her emotions were still a roiling mix of disbelief and suspicion. If Cara was right and Adam did love her, why on earth would he let Alex come to her bed in his stead?

And if she was wrong, and he didn't truly love her but was seeing another woman, she would die of a broken heart, she was sure of it.

"Oh, Madame, I almost forgot, this missive arrived for you while you were gone."

Taking the plain white envelope from the impassive butler, she murmured, "Thank you, Maxim."

Trailing up the stairs to her room in dispirited unease, Jackie waited until she was inside to open it, a little curious since it bore no seal. The stock, too, was coarse and not at all like the fine vellum most invitations or social announcements came on. Inside, the note was written in a plain script, and she read it with a sinking heart, a lump coming up into her throat.

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Sitting on her bed, Jackie fought back tears and wondered just who on earth Olga Henning was and why she wanted to meet with her.

And why she wanted Jacqueline to not mention the note, or the meeting, to her husband.

Glancing at the ornate gilt clock on the mantle, she saw it was nearly four o'clock already, though the instructions said specifically to not come early. Squaring her shoulders, she told herself if this woman had anything to do with why Adam and Alex were deliberately tricking her in such a devastating way, she needed to go. She went over to the mirror, brushing out her long hair and pinning it back up, contemplating changing her gown, but deciding the light blue day dress was becoming enough, the way the material gathered below her breasts flattering, the color giving some warmth to her pallor.

There wasn't a woman on earth, she acknowledged wryly, that wanted to meet her husband's lover and not look her best. Going downstairs, she waited for the carriage to be brought around again, giving the address to the driver and settling into the seat with a feeling of unreal dread.

Her life had been a fairy tale just a short time ago. She had married the man of her dreams—a titled gentleman by day, a virile handsome lover by night. Freely and passionately, she had given herself in whole, both her heart and body, and thought she was getting the same in kind.

An illusion. All of it.

It was precisely five o'clock when she alighted from the carriage, her driver giving the rows of dingy houses and the

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muddy street an askance look. "This is the address, my Lady, but are you certain you should go in unescorted?"

"I'll be fine," Jacqueline responded, hopefully sounding more composed than she actually felt. It was puzzling to see the house she'd been directed to was small and unprepossessing, with peeling paint and square blank windows. Going up the steps, she hesitated a moment before giving a sharp rap on the door.

Her confusion grew when the woman who answered proved to be nothing like the siren she had imagined, but was instead middle-aged and very plain, her clothing unfashionable and well-worn, nothing animated about her except a pair of very intelligent pale blue eyes. "Olga Henning?" Jackie asked, not quite able to keep the quiver out of her voice.

"I am she. Lady Hallworth, please come in."

Bemused, she complied, following the strange woman into the shrouded interior of the house, noting abstractly that though it was sparsely furnished, it was scrupulously clean, and the kitchen, where she was led by her mysterious hostess, smelled warmly like baking bread.

"As you can tell, my Lady, I have no grand parlor to entertain aristocratic ladies, nor do I need one in my profession. I thought we would be more comfortable here. Please sit down."

The space was small, holding nothing more than a scrubbed table, two chairs, and a hearth for the cooking fire. "Just what *is* your profession?" Jacqueline asked uncertainly, sinking into one of the two chairs, feeling it wobble slightly on

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the uneven floor. "You must forgive me, but I am avidly curious to know why you sent me a note requesting this meeting."

Olga Henning lifted her thin brows, sitting down in the opposite chair. "And even more so why I asked you to keep it secret, am I right?"

"Yes."

Tilting her head and not answering, the woman studied her openly, the inspection thorough, a small smile hovering on her mouth. "Your husband told me you were the most beautiful woman in England. I must say I thought perhaps his deep affection for you biased his opinion, but now that I see you, I might be inclined to agree. You are very fair, Lady Hallworth."

It wasn't at all like the flowery compliments she was used to receiving, but Jackie wasn't sure she had ever been so sincerely flattered. She said somberly, "Thank you ... Adam spoke with you about me?"

"You are the reason he and I are even acquainted, my Lady. Most certainly, if he wasn't so desperately in love with you, he would never have sought my services."

To say she was overjoyed to hear that sentiment spoken with such pragmatic certainty was a gross understatement. Jacqueline's eyes filled with turbulent tears, her mind no less confused over her suspicion of the switch, but relief taking the place of sick dread over the possibility of Adam's infidelity. This woman did not seem a likely candidate as mistress. Blinking, she managed to ask, "What services?"

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"I can feel the energy of how distraught you are and wondered myself many times how you were coping with the current situation. Tell me, did you know your husband had sought less conventional help for his unfortunate condition?" Olga Henning leaned forward, intent and with evident sympathy in her pale eyes, looking a little like a benign witch with her drab gown and lined face. "I am a healer, and though my methods are not always supported by the medical community, your husband's doctor referred him to me."

Instead of that explanation helping, Jacqueline grew more bewildered by the moment. "What condition?"

"The impotence resulting from his recent accident, of course."

"Impotence?" Wrinkling her brow, Jacqueline repeated the word, not quite certain exactly what the woman meant.

Suddenly sitting back, Olga Henning narrowed her eyes. "Now, *I* am confused. You have been wed nearly two weeks, according to your husband. Did you not wonder why he never came to your bed?"

A sort of dawning realization came through then, like a spark of light in a pitch-black tunnel. "Oh, God in heaven, are you telling me because of his injuries, Adam cannot ... that is ... he's..." Jacqueline's hands flew to her cheeks, everything falling into place, right down to why her husband allowed Alex to stand for him when it came to bedding her.

"Impotent, yes. Or at least, he was." A nod confirmed her conclusions. Gazing at her with unconcealed curiosity, Madame Henning said, "You didn't know?"

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"How would I know something like that? Especially when he ... oh, God." Jacqueline's throat closed, her first reaction vivid intemperate anger.

"When he ... what, my Lady?"

"Was such a damned fool." The admission was a furious whisper. "Men are so hard to know ... I suppose he didn't want me to find out, believing I would think less of him." Then, looking up and realizing this woman already knew a great deal about their unique problem, Jacqueline explained tremulously, "He has a brother, an identical twin. I didn't suspect anything until last evening. I have been in agony ever since, wondering why on earth he and Alex would switch places, thinking I was losing my mind for even imagining such a thing."

"Substituting his brother in your marriage bed? That's a rather inventive and unique solution," the other woman said. Then she added softly, "He must love you a great deal to sacrifice that precious time with you to another."

"What?" Jackie practically shrieked, knowing if faced with either of them now, she would gladly skewer them through. "He lied and deceived me!"

"Yes."

"And you condone this?"

"No. But understand it ... well, yes."

Something about that very calm and practical observation made her anger subside slightly. Olga was right, Adam did little without reason. Controlling herself, she managed to say reasonably, "I cannot understand why he didn't simply tell me."

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"Pride. Your husband, my Lady, is a very capable, intelligent, and purposeful man. He is not at all used to not being able to do something he sets his mind to, wouldn't you agree?"

That certainly did describe Adam, and Jacqueline nodded woodenly.

"Can you imagine how humiliating to have to tell the woman he loves he cannot perform the sexual act? For any man, it would be devastating. To a man who has just wooed and won the beautiful woman who has captured his heart, it would be terrible. Since he hoped to recover soon, I suppose he thought the deception would be worth it to be able to keep you."

"I love him," Jacqueline declared fiercely, anger still struggling to replace her baffled confusion now that she understood what was going on. "He's a fool if he thinks my affection for him was based solely on physical attraction. I would have waited until he was healed."

"He's a lovesick fool, certainly, for only a desperate man would allow anyone else to touch his wife." Olga smiled, a glimmer of sympathetic understanding. "And you must understand the real problem, which is his deep fear he will never recover. His body is recuperated to the point that I implicitly believe he could successfully achieve a normal level of sexual excitement and complete the act of love. But there is a fear in his mind that he will try and fail. That fear is more debilitating than his injury. That is why I sent for you."

"Madame Henning, I do not think I am willing to tell Adam I know everything. That surely will not help matters, although

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I admit I do not know how to handle it otherwise. This is all so—"

"The solution is simple, Lady Hallworth. I have done all I can to heal his body. The rest is up to you. You must seduce your husband."

Slumped in the rickety kitchen chair, Jacqueline rubbed her forehead in a frustrated gesture. "If he will not come to my bed, I don't really see how that is possible."

Olga laughed, a light sound. "I realize you are a new bride and very young, but people make love in many places besides the bedroom. You are so very lovely, my Lady, and there is little doubt His Lordship feels an abiding passion for you. Tempt him, give him no chance to retreat, no choice but to touch you, to kiss you. I think you can easily arouse him to the point in which he will forget his self-doubts in his feverish need to have you. Once he has performed successfully, I am sure all your troubles will be behind you."

Not quite, Jacqueline thought uneasily, remembering Alex's possessive embrace as they danced at the ball the evening before. But it was certainly worth a try.

Chapter 9

"Dinner wasn't exactly comfortable," Alex said quietly, still looking a little pale and drawn as he wandered into the room, obviously both restless and unhappy. "I'm damned sorry, if you even want to hear it."

The problem was, as angry as he'd been the evening before, Adam believed that his twin hadn't meant to be quite so publicly reckless and that he genuinely felt remorse. Alex wasn't inconsiderate, and most certainly a gentleman enough to regret any whispers that might brush Jacqueline's reputation. Adam said neutrally, "It's just as well the predatory Vivian dragged you off to her lair. I cannot say how I might have reacted if you had come home. Jackie claimed she was faint from the heat, but I think you embarrassed her."

"I might even have embarrassed myself, if that is possible. If Vivian Maxwell lifts her eyebrows at you, then you have certainly crossed some unwritten line."

"I believe that."

"I regret it, I just said so, but Jacqueline didn't exactly pull away," Alex pointed out, dropping into a chair, his rangy body carelessly sprawled out. "Why do suppose that is?"

Very coolly, Adam said, "What are you saying?"

The night was cool, the air almost dank as it mingled with the odor of musty books and long past fires. The comfortable room was lit by two low burning lamps, and outside came occasionally the mournful call of a night bird and the racket of a passing carriage.

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Alex expounded slowly, "Whether or not she consciously recognized me, her body responded to my touch. Perhaps that's why she was so upset. As an intelligent woman, she is now wondering why on earth she felt that way in my arms. I think our little game is up now, brother."

"Which is why the damned dance was such a bad idea." Adam got to his feet and glanced at the partially open door, though most of the servants were certainly retired for the night. "And kindly keep your voice down, would you?"

"What do you want me to do about tonight?"

The quiet question was almost humble for his normally self-assured brother. Adam paced across to the study door and closed it. "I told her I had a lot of work to do, which isn't a lie, and was tired. She doesn't expect me."

"In that case," Alex's smile was thin as he got to his feet, "I'm going to my club for a while. I haven't decided yet about Rajah, but have had several offers. The usual crowd should be there. Rest assured, I will acknowledge my boorish behavior to all and sundry, exonerating your countess."

After his brother had gone, Adam sat down behind his desk but couldn't quite concentrate. After an hour, he gave up, settling for a glass of brandy instead of ledgers and banking statements. He felt a little drained, the tension of the past two weeks taking a toll, though his injury had hardly pained him all day, only a few twinges here and there, a reminder of the infirmity which had caused such havoc in his life.

Not just his, he acknowledged wryly, but also Jackie's and Alex's. In retrospect, he'd been quite selfish in his stubborn pride, asking his brother to sacrifice his honor, and not even

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giving his wife the courtesy of the truth, so she had no choice at all.

He'd thought, dammit, it would be simple.

And the excruciating part of it was, he felt so much better but still wasn't willing to risk failure quite yet by taking Jacqueline to bed.

"My Lord?"

"Yes?" Not even having heard the door to his study open, Adam straightened in his chair. His wife, clad in a pale silk dressing gown, came into the room and quietly closed the door behind her, even the inadequate illumination giving enticing hollows to her slender body, draped as it was in clinging fabric. Swallowing convulsively, he asked with a credible calm voice, "What is the matter? I thought you would be long asleep."

"I can't without you." Long-legged and incredibly alluring with her glossy hair loose around her shoulders and back, she walked across the room. Lashes half-lowered, she looked at him from across his cluttered desk. "When will you be done?"

Hell and blast.

She was beyond beautiful, the most undressed she had ever been in front of him. In fact, he realized with a jolt that she was nude beneath her robe, the carelessly tied sash at her waist not keeping the front together adequately. The curve of one pale perfect breast was visible, even the dark hint of a pointed nipple.

And he responded. His lower body tightened, his stare focusing on that full luscious exposed mound. "Not for a

while," Adam managed to say, tearing his gaze away to her face. "Go back to bed, darling."

"Do I have to?" One russet brow lifted suggestively as she rounded the desk, and before he realized her intentions, she had settled into his lap, one arm going around his neck as she pressed against him. Her mouth brushed his. "Let me ... distract you, Adam."

She was everything sweet, feminine, and enticing. The soft roundness of her bottom against his hard thighs sent a spiking primal lust through his whole body, her female scent drifting in the air. Without conscious thought, his arms went around her slim waist, pulling her closer even as he murmured reproachfully, "We're in my study, Jacqueline."

"So?" Her tongue very lightly traced his jaw.

"It isn't a very ... comfortable place for this sort of activity."

"You aren't ... comfortable?"

If she hadn't wiggled slightly, her robe opening further, he might have been capable of answering that question. As it was, he felt it all; her slight clasp around his neck, the weight of her full breasts on his chest through his linen shirt, not to mention the warmth of her enticing posterior rubbing against his growing erection. "Maybe a little," he admitted and kissed her.

Not in the way he had ever kissed before. During their engagement he had tried to curb his carnal needs and protect her innocence, not giving free rein to his urgent desires. However, when her lips parted invitingly, he couldn't help but plunder her mouth with a sudden relentless onslaught of

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need, his tongue plunging deep inside, finding every corner. She kissed him back as well, clinging to him with enchanting abandon, every inch of her warm, beckoning womanhood.

When Adam lifted his head finally and looked into his wife's lovely gray eyes, he felt powerless to ignore, much less resist, the open passion in her gaze. And when she swiftly undid the belt of her dressing gown and it slid off her shoulders to pool around her hips and his lap, he couldn't help but be riveted by her sensual, graceful beauty. She was everything a man could want: lush, perfumed, devastatingly female and available.

"Now, then," Jacqueline twined her arms tighter and rubbed against him like a sleepy cat, her bare, sumptuous breasts abrading his shirt, "you're only a little ... comfortable?"

It was as if something ignited inside him, a fire that swept through and answered her siren's call, a need unleashed by the open and generous offering of her magnificent body. Almost without realizing he had moved, Adam found he'd lifted her in his arms and effortlessly moved to lay her on the thick carpet by the fireplace, all notion of pain obliterated by his overwhelming desire. Without bothering to do any more than unfasten his breeches, his now throbbing erection sprang free and he shoved her knees apart without finesse, positioning himself between her slim legs and driving his hard cock deep into her moist soft heat.

Beneath him, nude and receptive, Jacqueline arched with a soft, low cry, and for a moment, he thought he'd hurt her, until she clutched at him and moaned in open satisfaction. Not quite expecting such a level of unmitigated carnal

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response, he groaned in return, his body—so deprived for the past months—compelling him to quick completion. Adam began to move in impetuous need, withdrawing and gliding forward with quick hard strokes, finding the woman beneath him welcoming his pumping invasion with bewitching enjoyment. She was wet, she was tight, and she was so hot it singed his nerve endings with mounting erotic bliss.

He almost could not believe it when he felt her tremors begin and she arched in orgasmic release, her climax so quick and so wild that had he not been personally and selfishly intent, he would have marveled at it. However, considering his own climax was ready to burst, he wasn't able to do more than pull her close as he drove into her to the hilt at the last shuddering ecstatic moment, pouring scalding semen inside her passage with such force his body jerked under her imploring hands, a fine sweat soaking his lawn shirt, his booted feet braced on the floor.

Silence descended except for his own harsh breathing, his face buried in the wealth of outspread hair, her arms loosely clasped around his shoulders...

And acute pleasure hummed in every pore of his body.

Turning his head once he had the strength, Adam found an odd wetness on his face, amazed to realize it was his own tears. Whispering to his wife, he said, "I love you, Jacqueline ... so very, very much."

* * * *

They made love the second time in his bed, the joining more leisurely, an exploration of sensation, and if he didn't

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sense she knew it was a voyage of discovery; then he was blinded by his own enlightened relief over the new turn in their relationship.

After the second time he had climaxed inside her, Jacqueline held her husband close, relishing the strength of his lean body, the thick silk of his hair beneath her questing fingers, the fresh masculine smell of his sweat dampened skin. He fell asleep in her arms, an almost exhausted slide into a slumber so deep, unconscious, and quick, she wondered if he had even slept for more than a few hours at a time in the past two months.

Withdrawing a little, lifting to one elbow, she watched the moonlight slide over his peaceful face, seeing the slight lines by his elegant mouth, the length of his lashes on his stark cheekbones, the bulge of muscle in the arms that had held her with such strength and sheer need. His broad chest was ridged with hard planes, his stomach flat ... and though he resembled Alex in every single physical way, there was nothing even remotely similar about them when they made love.

And despite the deception, she realized with tenderness and the generosity that comes from loving someone completely, all was forgiven.

It hadn't been easy for him—he had not been giving her away, and in truth, neither did she think Alex had simply taken selfishly either. That, more than anything, had been what fooled her, the fact that the man making love to her had seemed emotionally as well as physically engaged.

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She, in fact, had been blessed in a way, to have known two such wonderful men in the most intimate sense. Her life lay with Adam, there was no doubt of that, and never had been, despite his insecure worries, but Alex had touched her soul. Giving an innocent woman her first taste of carnal pleasure, he had managed to initiate her with tender skill, his sense of humor and charm making the journey both exhilarating and wonderful.

In the morning, Jacqueline thought as she sank back down and snuggled close to Adam's long length, she would have to address that issue, but right now she was so happy she couldn't remember ever feeling so content.

Her lashes lowered, and she sighed as she drifted away.

* * * *

The stables were quiet at this time of day, and it was Alex's favorite time to visit. Handing his last lump of sugar to a sleek bay mare he'd owned for years, he rubbed her nose as she crunched it from his palm, giving her a final pat and dusting off his hand.

"Good morning."

Startled at the sound of the familiar female voice, he turned to see Jacqueline standing behind him. Clad in a soft rose morning dress, her shining hair in a loose chignon, she looked pretty and feminine and infinitely out of place in the middle of a working stable. Not hiding his surprise, he said, "Good morning ... what are you doing here, Jackie?"

"I need to talk to you. Maxim said you were off to visit your horses, so I had Robert bring me over."

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"I ... see." There was something in her expression that made him wary, a glimmer in those lovely silver eyes. Alex asked evenly, "I take it this is important enough for you to chase halfway across London to find me. I believe the office is deserted, shall we go in there?"

"Privacy would be best." She nodded coolly.

"This way then, my Lady." Feeling a certain grim resignation, Alex escorted her down the neat rows of the paddock, curious equine eyes watching their progress. The office was a small, sparsely-furnished room that the trainer kept for speaking with his owners. One large window overlooked the yard, and there were a couple of comfortable chairs, a small table with several decanters, and some large framed portraits of his most famous winners. Alex offered Jacqueline a seat, taking one opposite and sitting down. Lifting a brow, he inquired, "Now, what is so urgent?"

Her lashes lowered a fraction, and she sat primly, her hand neatly folded in her lap. "As of last evening, Adam," she said calmly, "has recovered."

"Bloody hell," he muttered involuntarily, trying to ignore the jealous pang, staring at her in consternation. "You know?"

"The night of the ball, I figured it out easily enough." A light flush touched her smooth cheeks, but her gaze was straightforward. "I felt like a fool, if you want the truth, for being so gullible, but who would imagine it was you, and not him, in ... in my bed. It never even occurred to me to suspect such a thing until you smiled at me while we were dancing."

Not bothering to even try to deny anything, he asked hesitantly, "You came to such a conclusion from a smile?"

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Her mouth quirked slightly, and her blush intensified. "Perhaps you don't realize it, Alex, but you have a certain way of smiling at a woman that is *extremely* ... shall we say, effective in announcing your interest in a certain activity that we, apparently, engaged in many times."

"I remember," he said softly, "only too well. And though I know both Adam and I owe you an apology ... if that would even begin to suffice for such a deception, please know we both are not unscathed. He will have to live with the knowledge I was your lover ... and I will have to live with knowing he *is* your lover."

"I don't want an apology. In fact, I don't ever want him to know I discovered what was going on. Though," she added dryly, "how two such sophisticated and experienced men could be so naïve to think I wouldn't figure it out when your roles were reversed is a surprise to me. You look uncannily alike, but quite frankly, in bed are not at all the same."

Not wanting to think about her and his brother entwined in bed together, Alex tried to banish the image, and queried, "How the devil did you find out why he came up with this mad plan in the first place? No one knew but myself and his physician."

She shook her head, a few tendrils of soft hair brushing her slender neck. "I cannot tell you how I found out, but I am very glad I did. I have been miserable the past two days, wondering why on earth he would ask you to make love to me in his stead. I am not particularly worldly in the functions of the male body, and it never even occurred to me that

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anyone could have such a problem. I thought he had a mistress."

"I doubt my brother will ever even notice another woman on this earth now that he has you, Jacqueline." The words were spoken with quiet sincerity. "He is a very lucky man."

"Thank you." Her response was hushed, and her expression softened. "Oh, Alex, thank you for everything. You were a very ... good teacher. In fact, I do not regret what happened between us, as bizarre as that may seem. You taught me both tenderness and joy, and though I have no idea what my wedding night would have been like with Adam, I wouldn't change a thing about the one I had with you."

His throat tightened at her generous words, as genuine as her innate sensuality, and he said hoarsely, "That memory will haunt me as well. Will I ever meet someone like you? God, Jacqueline, if I gave you anything, I am glad, but you gave me a discontent with my shiftless and superficial existence. I have always avoided the word marriage like it was a curse, but if you were free, I would wed you tomorrow."

Her lips trembled slightly as she smiled, but the small shake of her head was denial. "Alex, you do not love me. You enjoyed me, and I would guess playing the role of the considerate husband was something unique in your experience with women, but I know Adam *loves* me. I always wondered why when we were intimate and I expressed my feelings, you would only tell me how much you wanted me. I thought it was simply Adam's conservative personality, but

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now that I know the truth, it makes sense. You couldn't say it because you didn't feel it."

Watching her, he asked quietly, "And he said it last night?"

"Oh, yes." Her eyes were alight, her face instantly radiant with memory.

"I'm jealous," he admitted ruefully, "but hopefully it will pass soon. To be honest, I don't know if I am specifically jealous of his possession of you, though that is part of it, but I am certainly jealous of what you have together."

A small smile of understanding passed between them, an acknowledgement of the shared secret and the shared moments, which would not be forgotten.

Jacqueline spoke first, breaking the silence. "I need to get back ... Adam and I are going to take a ride in the park. I just wanted to speak with you so we could exist without any awkwardness between us." His sister-in-law stood to leave, but suddenly paused, looking serenely beautiful, her silver gaze compellingly earnest. "She is out there ... all you have to do is open your heart."

And it was amazing, but Alex; jaded, notorious, and previously indifferent to the notion of romance except in the most physical of ways, actually believed her.

Epilogue

Adam slammed his glass down on the desk. "I'm going to climb up the trellis, I swear to God. If I burst in through the window, they can't stop me." He almost meant it, his frustrated anxiety making him crazed enough to do it.

Looking beyond amused at his uncharacteristic agitation, Alex laughed out loud. "That I'd like to see. The exalted and proper Earl of Hallworth scaling the walls of his castle to visit his lady fair. On the other hand, you're her husband. Demand to be let in through the door in the normal way."

"The midwife is adamant that I will be in the way and a distraction. She's actually afraid I might faint and distress Jacqueline, for God's sakes, and insists it happens occasionally when husbands are there for the birth, so she won't allow it. The damned door is locked to keep me out." Pacing across the room, he muttered darkly, "Blood and thunder, you'd think they'd have the decency to send down a maid or something at intervals to let me know what is happening."

"I don't think females quite comprehend our helpless fear over this sort of thing. Besides, Jacqueline is doing the difficult part, so their attention is very naturally on her, with, I'm afraid, little sympathy for you. Relax, brother, childbirth is something women have been doing for ... let's see, since the dawn of time? She's had a healthy confinement, and she will give you a healthy child."

Please let that be true, his prayer spun upward, hopefully reaching the powers that controlled this sort of thing—a whole

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child and his wife delivering it without complication. Adam's heart froze into a solid block of ice every time he imagined losing her. "She wants this babe so much ... we both do," he said thinly, reaching convulsively for his brandy glass. "But I never imagined I would be so afraid for her."

"Your wife is a very special woman," Alex agreed, the mirth fading from his face, for a moment giving a glimpse of somber introspection.

Though they had agreed that the deception they had perpetrated was behind them, Adam couldn't help but say quietly, "We both know that this baby could be yours. Don't tell me you aren't thinking it. With the timing of the conception, it might have been either one of us."

Alex shook his head, saying firmly, "It's yours either way, Adam, all legal claim aside. A result of your love for Jacqueline."

That was true, in a sort of convoluted logic, and he felt a little relieved, knowing Alex felt that way. With a small laugh, he remarked dryly, "At least I know it will look like me."

"True," His brother chuckled, then, grinning, he added, "And I am hoping this child is a girl."

"So you'll remain my heir?" Adam asked wryly, "or because girls are more trouble than a crate of irate wildcats?"

"Guess." Alex cocked a brow, laughing. "I haven't ever craved being the stodgy old earl, so I would say the second reason is more viable."

"My Lord?" A soft voice spoke from the doorway.

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Whirling around, Adam saw a young maid there, her face wreathed in a timid smile. "Her Ladyship requests your presence upstairs."

"It's over?" he demanded fearfully. "Tell me, is she well?"

"She told me not to say anything except that she wants to see you, sir."

He didn't even remember his feet touching the stairs but somehow he was suddenly by her bedroom door, hearing the thin wail of a welcome new voice with heart-stopping wonder, his hand shaking as he pushed open the door.

At any other time, he would have refrained from betraying his emotions so openly, but the sight of his wife, disheveled, damp with sticky perspiration, and still managing somehow to look astonishingly lovely, brought stinging tears to his eyes. The child in her arms evoked no less of a rush of joy, and he crossed the room to fall on his knees by the bed, grasping her hand and unable to say other than in a rasping unnatural voice, "Darling."

"Adam." Jacqueline's voice also sounded odd, exhaustion mixing with joy, her pale face framed by a halo of ruffled auburn hair. "I hope you aren't disappointed, but we have a daughter. And she is beautiful."

Damn Alex, he thought in remote amusement, for getting his way. But truthfully, if he pictured a miniature Jacqueline, all winsome smiles and tousled russet curls, he felt nothing but elation.

Rising up to kiss his wife lightly on the mouth, he smiled at her and said sincerely, "Why would I be disappointed? A girl is perfect."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Wildes is the author of twelve novels and numerous short stories. She loves to write, read, and cook, in that order. Living in rural Indiana, she delights in those rainy days, sultry days, snowy days, sunny days ... all are good for sitting down in front of the computer. Please visit her at www.emmawildes.com, and if you like regular romance or mystery, www.katherinesmith.net. Look for *Hot Sahara Wind*, due out from Whiskey Creek Press Torrid in July 2006.

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