

Lord Blackwell's Rude Awakening



JULIE TETEL ANDRESEN



Chapter One

Mid-July, 1814

Wiley Cross, just outside of Elstead

Max approached the library. He was about to announce himself to Richard, one of his oldest friends, when he caught a snatch of the conversation in progress on the other side of the door. The words "It's a large expense, I know, Charlotte, and I'm sorry I failed to mention it to you earlier" stopped Max from entering the room. He half-turned to go, knowing he should give the pair within their privacy. But something – call it curiosity – caused him to stay.

He overheard Richard informing his sister, Charlotte, of all that had gone awry during the recent repairs of the cottages on the east edge of their estate. The bungles seemed to have begun with the purchase of a great deal of thatch that turned out to be moldy, and the repairs went downhill from there.

Since Max had himself just inherited a cartload of moldy thatch, so to speak, he listened to the details of the discussion only half-aware of the tone of Charlotte's questions and of her responses to Richard's answers. However, somewhere in his brain he registered the way she remained calm and thoughtful and did not assign blame.

Then came a rather long pause. Charlotte broke it by saying, "It's a large expense, yes, and horribly wasteful, but we can absorb it. I know the places in my budget where I can make adjustments."

Thereafter the discussion wrapped up quickly. When Max sensed Charlotte was about to leave the room, he pulled himself into an alcove around the corner. He waited until her footsteps disappeared down the hallway before returning to the library door. He knocked once then entered before being invited in.

Richard looked up from the papers littering his desk and exclaimed, "Max!" He rose and crossed the room to clasp Max to his chest. "So glad you've come. Was hoping you would. Heard the news."

With a heavy heart Max accepted the sympathy implied in the greeting. When he was released from Richard's embrace, he said, simply, "Yes, the news."

Richard's expression affected appropriate dismay. He gestured for Max to sit then gestured at a decanter on a side table. "Brandy?"

Max chose a worn leather chair in front of the desk and sat down. He glanced over his shoulder to the wall of windows. He beheld a beautiful vista of a vast meadow spreading out from Wiley Cross, where the rolling hills of Surrey disappeared into the distance and merged with the boundary of his newly inherited estate, Thornton Park.

"I was going to wait until the sun went down to, ahem, celebrate," Max said, "but it has sunk low enough now, I think, to justify it."

Richard splashed enough brandy into two glasses to make the drinks stiff. "A healthy, new-born child is always cause for celebration," he said in such flat tones that Max had to laugh.

Accepting the glass Richard offered him, Max raised it and said, "To my newest niece. May she thrive."

Richard repeated the toast, took a sip, and asked, "And Eleanor?"

"She's an old hand at childbirth now. She's doing well."

Richard nodded and sat back down in the chair at his desk. He said, "Even if your sister-in-law had delivered herself of a boy, you would not have been let off scot free."

Max rubbed his chin. What Richard had said was right, but only partly. "It's one thing to act as the guardian of the estate until an heir is of age. It's quite another thing to –" here he stumbled against a hard truth and changed his phrasing from *secure the line* to "– be fully responsible."

Richard ventured, "At least you now have the title."

Max appreciated Richard's attempt to put a good face on the disaster that began two months before with Max's older brother's sudden death and culminated this morning with the birth of his brother's fourth daughter.

Max pronounced, "Lord Blackwell." He took a sip and savored the taste of the brandy but not his new title. He shook his head. "Never wanted it."

"You weren't raised for the position, it's true, but you'll adapt." Richard swept his hand above the papers on his desk. "It's not so bad, once you get used to it. And I believe Jonathan was a good enough steward to have left Thornton Park in reasonable shape."

"Reasonable enough," he agreed but refrained to mention the very rough financial edges he had discovered in the course of recent weeks.

Richard opened his mouth then closed it again. He dropped his cheery demeanor and said, "It's a damnable hand you've been dealt. How is it going for you, man?"

Since Jonathan's death from what seemed like little more than a head cold, Max had felt many things. Shock and sadness, certainly. Selfish resentment and shameful

anger to have gone – overnight! – from happy-go-lucky spare to grief-stricken heir, with the whole of his emotional landscape tinged with fear of his new burdens, fear of the unknown. And laced through it all was the feeling of his life spinning out of control.

He said with complete honesty, “I’m not going to cheapen our friendship by telling you I’m fine. I am not. You know how close Jonathan and I always were. My god, you loved him as much I did. The three of us in our youth forever kicking up larks, plaguing the neighborhood!” Here his voice broke and he took a different tack. “Of course he and I didn’t see one another as much once he took over the reins and set up his nursery, while I took up residence in town. Nevertheless losing him ... well, it’s like losing a part of myself, and now the whole falls on my shoulders. But I’ll adapt, as you’ve said.”

Richard said, his voice rough with emotion, “I’m sorry, old chap. You know I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

Max nodded. “I know, and thank you.” He took another sip of brandy and bethought himself of a piece of good news he had heard earlier in the day. Since raw emotions were no excuse for bad manners he put them both aside. Recalling a stray bit of information he said, “Let us speak of a happier subject.”

“Do you know of such at the moment?”

Max twirled his glass. “You cannot think of one?”

Richard’s face was an expressionless mask.

Max cracked a laugh. “Just because I’m in mourning doesn’t mean I’m incapable of fellow feeling for the happiness of a good friend. I’m speaking of your engagement and impending marriage. I’m to congratulate you – unless I’ve heard wrong.”

Richard’s brows flew up almost comically, and because he was cursed with fair skin a flush rose up his neck. He growled in embarrassed pleasure, “No, you haven’t heard wrong and, yes, Mrs. Wroxton – Amelia – has done me the honor of accepting my offer of marriage. I believe she knows you from town.”

“Ah, yes, charming woman.”

“Indeed, she is very charming, as you say.”

Since Max did not often cross paths with respectable widows, no matter how young, he had only guessed at this lady’s probable attractions. He sidestepped the issue of his lack of memory of being acquainted with her by saying, “I’m happy for you, Richard. You’ve been alone for too many years since losing your Jane, and I can only hope you made many secret trips to town to indulge in passionate trysts before

revealing your love to the world. How did you manage it?"

Richard's flush deepened. "I'm not sure I did manage it. It was Charlotte's doing, rather. Looking back I can see that she – and her many circles of friends whose various intersections I cannot keep straight! – concocted a list of eligible females and mounted what I can only describe as a... as a" He dropped off, clearly at a loss for words.

"Wedding campaign," Max supplied, nodding wisely, "which was so stealthily strategized you had no idea you had been a castle to besiege and conquer until your affections were engaged by one or another of the fair ladies they presented to you."

Richard laughed ruefully and took refuge in a sip of brandy. After a bit of bluster he said, "I do admire Amelia. More than that, really. I – I –"

Max held up a hand to forestall an embarrassing profession of love. "You need say no more! You have been a kind and steady friend to me in the last two months of my time of need, and it gives me great pleasure to wish you happy. It's a marvelous turn of events for your entire family."

Richard harrumphed. "It would be if only Charlotte hadn't taken a maggot into her head. Now that she has provided me with a wife, she is determined to move out. She means to take up residence with one of her lady friends in the village, so I gather. It is the outside of enough. This is her home, always has been and always will be!"

For Max, upon hearing these words, it was as if the sun dawned in his head and turned the dark night of his thoughts to bright daylight. He heard the echo of Charlotte's soothing voice as she worked through the problem of the moldy thatch. Calm, thoughtful, *competent* Charlotte. She was determined to find a new place to live. He needed a wife. Charlotte was perfect. His brilliant idea grew wings and took flight.

Max settled back in his chair. "Well, now, I, for one, am not sorry to hear of Charlotte's desire to move."

Richard's brows rose again, this time in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"As I said earlier, it's one thing to act as guardian of the estate until an heir is of age." He was now able to state his case forthrightly. "With the birth of my latest niece I'm now the one who has to secure the line."

"That's right," Richard replied, somewhat blankly.

"Which means I need a wife."

"Quite." Still blank.

Max pursued, "I know my duty, and I'm prepared to fulfill it."

Richard nodded once, as if impressed with Max's resolve, but then shook his head in mild reproof when Max added,

"And feel I must do so immediately."

Richard sighed. "Ah, Max, ever impulsive."

"No impulse this time, Richard."

He rationalized his statement thusly: after having acted on a sufficient number of flights of fancy which had turned out well (or, at least, had not ended in disaster), he had decided to understand them as end-products of long unconscious thought processes. Imagining Charlotte as his wife was simply the most recent, apparently long-incubated idea to come to life.

"I have a well-considered plan," he said, "involving marriage to a woman whom I've known my entire life."

"Good, then. Your plan might work. Who is she?"

"Charlotte."

Richard's face suffused a dull red. "*Charlotte?!?*"

Max waited to let the idea sink in. Then, with a frown, "I'm not sure if your shock betrays an insult to me –" he paused delicately "– or to Charlotte."

Richard gobbled a couple of words before he managed, "As your friend I've never given your reputation a second thought, but – but, in the context of my *sister*, well! Let's just say your reputation doesn't recommend you to a future father-in-law or, in my case, brother-in-law."

Max's argument was ready-made. "My relationship with women until now was determined by the fact I had nothing of true substance to offer. My resources have now changed and, as you've remarked, my estate is in respectable order. Furthermore, if it's of any concern to you, I broke amicably with my latest mistress even before Jonathan's death."

Richard was speechless for several moments before he was able to say, "You're known for your high-fliers. Beauties, all of them!"

"And so? We're speaking now of marriage and a wife."

“But – but ... Charlotte”

Max raised his brows in challenge, now convinced he was on the right track. Under other circumstances, Richard’s visible consternation would have been an object of amusement. Under this circumstance Max did not hesitate to use it to his advantage. When it was clear Richard could not finish his thought, Max slid in under his friend’s guard and said with a sly smile,

“You’ve had Charlotte to yourself all these years since the death of your dear Jane. Charlotte has been a mother to your son and the manager of your household, and my guess is she does it all perfectly. But perhaps she would also like to be a wife one day. And since you have told me of her plan to move out of this house, I would like to offer her a place in mine.”

Richard’s face was now bright red.

With a turn of fugitive humor, Max considered reminding Richard that he had offered to do anything to help. However, handing over one’s sister decidedly crossed a line, and the business of marriage was no laughing matter. Whatever the case, it wasn’t Richard’s consent he needed.

Max said, “What would you say to the idea we let Charlotte decide whether or not she would accept my offer?”

Chapter Two

Charlotte had her list of names in mind. The young women she was going to recommend to the new Lord Blackwell as eligible *parties* were all lovely and lively and, as long as she was alliterating, lithe. In short, they were everything she was not. She had never made any bones about her plain face and full figure. Thus, when she learned the new earl had requested a private interview with her, she was not at all chagrined to imagine he intended to enlist her help in finding a suitable partner. She was a good enough neighbor to wish to lend him a hand. She was also a woman, which meant she had long considered the new earl – oh, for heaven’s sakes, she had known him her whole life as her brother’s friend *Max* – to be an attractive specimen of masculinity.

And now here he was in her drawing room, standing at one of the long windows, facing away from her, his hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to be gazing over her garden, evidently collecting his thoughts. She admired the figure he cut with his dark hair curling around his collar, broad shoulders, trim waist, and muscular legs. She began to imagine each of the young women she had in mind for him at his side and was surprised she had time to entertain every name on her list. The present moment seemed to be the one occasion when Max was taking his time, for he was known for acting quickly. Richard called him rash.

At last she saw his back straighten slightly, his shoulders perfectly square. He turned. He smiled. The thought came into her head: *Some lucky woman is going to see this smile every day for the rest of her life.*

He said, "I've just been to see Richard."

"So I was told."

"He recommended I come directly to you." He bowed minimally. "Perhaps you can guess why I am here."

"Yes," she said, suddenly curious to learn which of the women she had in mind would appeal to him. She said, "I'm happy to help in any way I can."

His dark brows quirked slightly. It seemed her response had stopped what he was going to say next. "Help?" he repeated, as if bemused. "Indeed, yes, although it's a mutual helping, I daresay. Then I'll get right to it, with none of the roundabout I had thought might be appropriate. As for your help, Miss Wiley – Charlotte, if I may – I am hoping you will do me the honor of accepting my offer of marriage."

Charlotte blinked. She had the oddest notion the final rays of the dying day darted out from behind Max's back and into her body, jangling her nerves with surprise, disbelief, elation, and even fear. The fear gave her the sensation that she needed to duck, as if to avoid becoming prey to a big black menacing bird. The sensation was so odd she easily dismissed it.

She opened her mouth, found herself incapable of speech then closed it again. Since her gaze was riveted on his, she was aware his expression had changed, as if he, in turn, was surprised by her evident surprise.

The frown between his brows deepened. He took a step back and bowed again, more deeply this time. "Perhaps my offer is a distasteful one?"

"Oh, no, no," she assured him quickly, nearly choking. "You caught me unawares, that's all."

His smile was kind. "I beg your pardon. I should have led up to my proposal more slowly, as I had originally thought. But your offer of help made me think you and I were of like mind."

In her continuing surprise, she asked, "Why would I think my offer of help would be attached to a proposal of marriage?"

Max bowed now with great formality. "Given the relationship between our two families and the contiguity of our two estates, I imagined your strong sense of duty was asserting itself."

Before she could formulate a coherent response, he came and sat down next to her. His nearness caused her thoughts to wobble. He continued, his smile now rueful,

"I leapt too quickly to conclusions. In my eagerness I thought you meant you would come to my aid just as you came to Richard's when he needed you most. The difference being, of course, that your help this time comes with a change in marital status."

Was he serious? Wait. Did he say he was eager? She had no time to think the questions through because just then he took her hands in his, and her thoughts spun completely off balance.

He pressed her fingers. "Ah, but I see now what it is. Perhaps Richard did not know you're currently entertaining another offer of marriage."

Charlotte dismissed thoughts of the vicar's recent broad hints. "Good heavens, no!" she exclaimed and looked away.

"I'm glad," he replied.

At the warmth in his voice she braved a glance at him and saw him looking at her as a woman in the way she imagined a man would look at a desirable woman. Added to her confusion was now embarrassment. She felt herself blush and looked away again.

"So," he said, "you're not entertaining another offer. And you've said you do not find mine distasteful." His tone turned teasing, and she looked up to see his dark eyes twinkling. "I'm curious what kind of help you thought to provide me, if it was not to become my wife."

Would telling the truth be appropriate or even relevant at the moment? It took her but a flash of a second to realize the answer was No. She cast about for something to say and grasped at a straw. "I was going to offer to continue my support of Eleanor as I've been doing in these recent difficult weeks. Naturally I attended the birth earlier today."

"I know, and I thank you for that kind support." He leaned forward so their foreheads were almost touching. She caught the intermingled scents of fresh linen, shaving soap, and his skin, woody and intoxicating. He said gravely, "Speaking of Eleanor, think how much more easily you can continue to support her as her sister-in-law, as my wife."

She leaned away from him in an attempt to dispel her continuing confusion. She fell back on her ever-ready practicality. "Surely you've given your choice much thought."

"Indeed," he assured her.

"And run through your mind the eligible women of your acquaintance, considering each in turn."

"No, you're the only woman I've considered."

He stated the matter so simply she was further astonished. Then it occurred to her his principal aim was to have her shoulder the burden of helping Eleanor raise her four daughters. Perhaps he intended a marriage of convenience, one that did not include an intimate relationship. How could she ask about such a thing?

She attempted to pull her hands away, but he did not release them. As she tried to imagine life as his wife in name only, her swirling thoughts boggled and came to a stop. She needed to think his offer through. She needed to regain her mental footing. She was acutely aware how closely he was watching her. She opened her mouth, hoping to say something intelligent, but no sound came out.

"I have surprised you," he said gently, "and you have acknowledged as much. Once again, I should have framed my offer from the beginning with some explanation. Instead I am doing it backwards, and I regret any unpleasantness I have caused you. I should have explained from the first that I have long thought of you as the perfect wife and mother. Before Jonathan's death I had never contemplated having children of my own, but in the past weeks my desire for children has been in the back of my mind, and so you have been the only woman in my thoughts."

"Oh, I see," she said, seeing little beyond the fact he evidently imagined her as a real wife. Naturally he would need heirs. Why would he marry otherwise? Really, she needed to come to her senses. She had no time to do so, however, because the next thing he said was,

"And in imagining you the perfect wife and mother – " here he tugged her hands playfully "– it occurred to me you might like children of your own, while still remaining close enough to your nephew so you would not be abandoning him."

"Oh, I see. Yes. That's right."

Then came the magic words. "I was encouraged to make you an offer after Richard told me just now of your desire to move out of Wiley Cross with the arrival of Richard's new wife. I was hoping the prospect of a new home would make you look favorably upon my offer of marriage. That is what I meant when I said at the outset that we could be of help to one another."

The conversation was not destined to last much longer, and a moment or two later the words "Yes, I will marry you" managed to leave her lips. He sealed her acceptance with a kiss that left her tingling. He departed on the declaration that she

had made him a happy man, adding he would do what was necessary to procure a special license.

Before Richard burst into the room, she had just enough time to realize that before this interview, she would have been inclined to say Max barely knew she existed, much less imagined her perfect in any capacity. She appreciated his appeal to her sense of duty and her own desire for children in equal measure to his lack of appeal to tender emotions. She would have been horrified if he had revealed any knowledge of the way she admired him and if he had traded on it to win her acceptance.

Nevertheless, and despite the fundamentally business-like nature of his proposal, she had the sense she had just been swept off her feet. She was in too much turmoil to formulate the idea that a positive response to an offer of marriage could be secured as effectively by surprise and logical argumentation as by a declaration of love.

"My dearest Charlotte, pregnancy is not an illness and giving birth does not make one an invalid. Childbearing and childbirth are natural processes."

Charlotte was perched on the side of Eleanor's bed. "I know that, and I'm sorry if I've given offense with my protests, but I truly hate the idea of you giving up your chamber so quickly after having delivered your little Anna. You did beautifully yesterday. Nevertheless, moving this afternoon might well be a strain."

Eleanor was lying against the pillows, holding in her arms a red, wrinkled bundle of what looked to Charlotte to be a specimen of undercooked humanity. "It would be a strain if I were doing any of the packing and unpacking, but you know very well I'm not."

The truth of Eleanor's statement lay in the quiet activity surrounding them. Charlotte glanced around the room where chambermaids orbited. They were emptying wardrobes and dressers and filling trunks to be sent to the Dower House, their steps muffled by the thick Aubusson rug underfoot. Shying away from thinking of the space as hers, Charlotte admired the four-poster bed with its curtains of pale rose brocade. These matched the pairs of curtains hung at the two south-facing windows, each side gathered back with a heavy tasseled rope. Because the day was fine, the windows were open, and sweet breezes wafted. Near the windows sat a wingback chair and side table, offering a cozy spot for reading.

Her attention was momentarily caught by the gentle rattling of glass. She turned to see bottles of perfumes and pots of cream whisked off the top of the dressing table, wrapped in old newspaper and set in boxes. The table was a pretty confection with its gathered skirt of rose and gold silk and was paired with a dainty stool. Now cleared of trinkets, Charlotte saw the table, like the room, was losing the identity of its current occupant.

"As for moving," Eleanor added, "what must be done is best done quickly."

"But you could not have anticipated Max would marry so – so abruptly."

Eleanor appeared to consider the matter. "I don't think I have ever been able to anticipate what Max might or might not do. As for him marrying, well, it has been clear to me since the day Jonathan died –" she paused then amended, with a catch in her voice, "– the day after, perhaps, that I would be moving. I just knew I was having another girl. I also knew Max would do his duty."

Duty, yes. Charlotte needed to keep that in mind, which was easy given that her husband-to-be had framed his proposal in terms of a mutual helping. Later that evening, and in a more settled state of mind, she had thought through his unexpected offer. Being honest with herself, she had accepted it with a surprised and grateful relief. She had engineered Jonathan's betrothal because she knew it was a time for change both in his life and hers. However, it wasn't until Max's proposal that she sensed she had been drowning, because she latched onto his offer as one would grasp a miraculous lifeline.

Charlotte insisted, "But, still, moving is yet another upheaval for you in a short period of time."

Eleanor smiled and kissed her newborn's head. "They smell like butter biscuits, you know." Anna stirred in her mother's arms, mewled then cried openly and received a plump breast. Eleanor turned a sleepy and contented gaze at Charlotte. "I understand your concern, but I assure you it's misplaced. Yes, these last few months have been a trial. However, I'm all right. I can't explain it. I must be basking in the glow of new motherhood, because I feel ... lucky, yes, lucky with my four beautiful daughters and the prospect of you as a real sister."

Charlotte's smile was fond. "I must say your glow is visible, and I do believe our bond is strong enough that you would tell me if something were amiss. In truth, I think you are adapting better to rapidly changing circumstances than I am, because when I give myself a moment to think the new turn in my life, I feel quite terrified –"

Charlotte got no further because Eleanor's attention was pulled in an entirely new direction.

"Ah, here is it," Eleanor said delightedly when her abigail entered the room holding aloft a garment bag made of Holland cloth. "Your wedding dress!"

Charlotte was at Thornton Park because Eleanor had sent around a note saying she had the perfect dress for the bride-to-be. Charlotte's curiosity now was naturally as strong as Eleanor's delight.

The garment bag was laid across the foot of the bed and opened to reveal a gown a good forty years out of date. Charlotte's heart dropped.

Eleanor was quick to say, "I *know* it's old fashioned, and I had this fetched from the late Dowager Countess's collection. It came to mind because I thought the shade of peach might be perfect for your skin tone. Hold the bodice up next to your face, please. Yes! The color of the silk brings out lovely warm undertones in your skin."

Charlotte held the dress higher and turned it front and back. She must have been wearing a doubtful expression because Eleanor said, her delight unabated,

"The corset-like bodice is better suited to your hourglass figure than the current Empire waist. You'll make a beautiful bride, I promise you!"

Chapter Three

Charlotte was, indeed, pleased with her reflection in the mirror once Annie laced up the back of the bodice and shook out the skirts that were more voluminous than current fashion.

"It's a beautiful color for you, ma'am," Annie said, "and look how small your waist is."

When Charlotte eyed the neckline at some length, doubts crept in. She smoothed her fingers across the wide V that opened to the shoulder seams of her three-quarter-length sleeves. "I'm exposing quite a lot of skin here."

Annie's response was judicious. "The neckline is dramatic but not revealing."

It was true. The bodice revealed only a hint of cleavage, and there was no getting around the fact that her breasts generously filled out any dress she wore. Exposing the expanse of skin above her breasts could not be considered immodest, could it? She recalled a comment one of her dear London friends, Laura Lovehorn, had once made: "The most beautiful part of a woman's body are her collarbones." Charlotte saw that the neckline, which echoed the lines of her collarbones, brought them into beautiful relief. She felt a spurt of happiness.

The spurt died the moment Richard clapped eyes on her. She was awaiting him in the entryway. When he came down the main staircase, with Sebastian at his side, he visibly started and uttered a rather disapproving, "I say!"

She said quickly, "It was Eleanor's idea."

He grumbled but confined himself to saying, "It's too late to change, the wedding party is mercifully small, and the carriage is waiting."

Sebastian, eight years old and the apple of Charlotte's eye, piped up, "I think you look beautiful, Nani."

"You always think I look beautiful."

"But never before like a princess."

"Oh? A princess?" She curtsied. "Thank you, fair prince."

Alas, a boy's uncritical praise could not offset a grown man's misgivings, and her confidence was shaken. What was worse, she had already had the horribly unkind thought that she was glad her husband's family was in mourning, because it meant very few people would be in attendance at the ceremony. However, she had not gone so far to consider the wedding party 'mercifully' small.

The active prickly feeling that she was improperly dressed started when Richard handed her down from the carriage in front of the tiny Norman church in Elstead and walked her to meet Max who was waiting for her at the entrance.

Her husband-to-be ran his gaze over her gown, took her arm and said, "Lovely."

It was a compliment, and it sounded sincere, but it struck her as off. Men simply did not praise her looks. When she crossed paths with Doctor Marsh in town, he was given to say things like "You're looking well, Miss Wiley" or "In the pink of health, aren't we?" and the like. Whenever Charlotte had business at the church during the week or went to Sunday services, Vicar Allen said things like "Miss Wiley, you have your feet on the ground, and that is what one must admire most about you" and "You are a true Christian woman with a beautiful soul."

As they entered the church together she consoled herself with the thought that it would have been worse if Max had said nothing. Inside Mrs. Sarah Johnstone and her husband along with Miss Catherine Bromley, her best friends in the village, were already standing at the front facing the altar.

As they walked down the aisle, with Richard and Sebastian behind them, the prickly feeling intensified the closer they drew to Vicar Allen. This parish personage was facing them and frowning mightily. He also seemed to have turned to stone since he did not have the presence of mind to introduce Max to the villagers. That office fell to Charlotte.

She turned to Max. "You'll wish to meet my good friends, Miss Bromley, Mrs. Johnstone and Mr. Johnstone."

To their murmurs of "Your lordship, a pleasure" Max bowed to the ladies and shook Mr. Johnstone's hand.

"I'm the lucky one," Miss Bromley said, her arms bearing a spray of white lilies, "to hand the new Countess Blackwell her bouquet when the time comes."

The vicar cleared his throat and the repeating of the vows began. The way the vicar mumbled and grumbled his way through the ceremony made Charlotte feel very self-conscious for no reason she could name. Nor did it help her confidence that Max's gaze kept straying to her gown. She could only imagine he wondered what kind of dowd he was marrying.

However on the score of small mercies, with the minuscule wedding party at the top of the list, could be counted the brevity of the service, the lovely kiss Max bestowed on her upon being pronounced husband and wife and the happy but subdued (under the circumstances) offers of congratulations from their witnesses. Furthermore, after signing their names in the parish registry, came the complete and welcome departure from all other wedding custom.

She was happy the potential well-wishers in the village (which included every last man, woman and child in Elstead and many people in the surrounding villages) knew enough to stay away out of deference to the significance of the black armband the new Lord Blackwell would be wearing. Thus were the bride and groom to be spared being pelted with sprigs of rosemary and thyme upon exiting the church in their newly married state, and she was to be spared from being widely seen in her old-fashioned dress.

She was also happy the ceremony was held in the early afternoon rather than the morning, meaning she need not preside over a lively wedding breakfast. Instead a sober evening supper at Thornton Park was planned for precisely six people: Mr. and Mrs. Johnstons, Miss Bromley, Richard, Max and Charlotte.

Max and Charlotte led the wedding party out of the church, Charlotte's left arm linked with Max's right, her right arm full of fragrant lilies. When they emerged from the cool dark of the interior into the sunlight, her new husband said, "It's a ride around our estates we've planned for the rest of the afternoon, isn't it, my dear?"

"Yes, I think it's a good idea," she said. "There are so many people you'll want to meet at Wiley Cross now that our families are joined. Or rather" – here glancing shyly at him – "so many who want to meet you."

"If that's the case," he said, gently altering the course in which she was heading, "you'll want to come this way."

"Oh!" she said, realizing that he was leading her away from the closed carriage she had arrived in and toward his open phaeton. She paused her step. "But I want to change into my riding habit."

"You do?" he said. "I see no reason. Your dress is very becoming."

She shook her head. "It's old fashioned."

"I can see that – and so?"

"Eleanor chose it."

"Did she?" he replied lightly. In response to her tug in the direction of Richard's carriage, he said, "If you're wanting to change clothes, I should point out that your trunks arrived at Thornton Park around noon today, and even if you decide not to change clothes, let me remind you that Fancy is now stabled at Thornton Park."

She felt herself flush and said quickly, "I beg your pardon." She made a great effort to settle her nerves. Of course she knew her belongings had been transferred from one house to the other. She had let her self-consciousness get the best of her. By way of excuse she said, "Old habits."

"Understandable," said her new husband equitably.

He handed her up into his high-perch, helped her arrange her skirts and large bouquet, and went around the front to take the reins from his tiger's hands. He stepped up into the vehicle, his tiger jumped on back and he set out at spanking pace toward Thornton Park.

As they drove she thought it would be helpful if she outlined to her new husband the relationships among the village folk, detailing her friendships with his two new acquaintances Elizabeth Johnstone and Catherine Bromley, among many others in the neighborhood. Although he was listening with every appearance of interest, she said after an opening bit (bethinking herself of Richard's impatience for social details),

"I certainly don't expect you to remember all of these names any time soon or even to keep them in mind at all, but you're going to have to get to know the villagers in Elstead and other surrounding villages and hamlets – the masculine half, anyway, and I thought it good for you to start with Mr. Johnstone today who is very well connected. You were spared meeting an onslaught of strangers, but we are going to have to arrange occasions for you to meet the locals, gentry and otherwise, little by little." She drew a breath. "I'll stop now."

"No need to stop," he replied. "I was finding your descriptions rather charming."

She looked at him and he met her regard with a pleasant expression. She looked away. She did not suspect him of making fun of her. She was only surprised he would be so agreeable. But why wouldn't he be?

"Charming?" she repeated with a hum of laughter. "So speaks the city dweller. I'd

call knowing the country connections a practical matter.”

“That, too,” he admitted, “and since I never thought I’d have to know them, it’s a great relief to know I don’t have to navigate them alone.”

She understood. The loss of his brother was undoubtedly still as painful as his new burdens were heavy. She paused to wonder if Max had chosen her because of her extensive network of friends in and around Elstead. If that were the case perhaps he had given careful consideration of her as his choice of partner. The thought buoyed her.

Since he had invited her not to stop in her descriptions of country connections she added a few more details about a local squire or two in order not to be churlish and then let the matter rest. Discussion turned to general topics such as the weather and prospects for the harvest and then to a genial dispute over the boundary line between Wiley Cross and Thornton Park, engendering what they acknowledged with a laugh to be their first marital spat.

Thus she arrived at Thornton Park as its new mistress in a good frame of mind. To her surprise Annie was waiting for her in the rose bedroom, and she attributed her surprise to her emotional state, which was one of ongoing disorientation. She was heartily glad to be out of her wedding dress and into her most comfortable riding habit.

When Annie had redressed her hair, she went down to the stables where, sure enough, Fancy had already been led out of her stall by one of the grooms who was holding the reins.

Max was already on hand and dressed for riding. He approached her and helped her onto the sidesaddle. When he had hoisted her to her seat, he looked up and commented, with a nod at her riding habit, “Perhaps it’s for the best you’ve changed your clothes. It might not do to career around our estates, visiting all and sundry, dressed as a pretty half-peeled peach.”

She was glad he turned away to mount Pharaoh because he had flustered her again with the simple word ‘pretty.’ By the time he had his seat and they were wheeling their horses away from the stables she had recovered her complexion.

Max pointed to the west. “Beyond the second rise to the edge of the stream,” he challenged, “to show you the proper boundary markers between the properties.”

She laughed and let him lead the way. She was comfortable on her horse and at home in the saddle. They worked up to a quick canter to get some distance from the house, but when they got to the second rise and were picking their way down a grassy slope, Max must have forgotten about settling the matter of the disputed boundary line. As they reined in their horses to a slow walk on the edge of the

meandering stream he said,

"Tell me how you do it – that is, did it."

"Did what?"

"Managed Wiley Cross."

"I don't – didn't manage it alone."

Yesterday she had taken steps to shift from her old life to her new one. At the moment, however, she was stunned anew to realize another of the abrupt disorientations of her life. She was now going to be holding household for Thornton Park. Was the dizziness in her head a result of her new husband's proximity?

"Yes, true," he acknowledged, "but I am new to complex budgets. You are not. You make a budget and then what? You follow it?"

At that she recovered her wits and laughed. "You make the perfect budget, one that has never been so perfect and then what? You alter it and alter it again and, oh, yes, alter it a third, fourth, fifth time a quarter until the next quarter rolls around when you make another perfect budget that requires you to cast about and cut a corner here and another one there, on and on. It's always something that throws a spanner in the works."

"Always?"

"Always. You've never experienced such?"

His shrug was slight. "I had an allowance, generous to be sure, and my expenses were rather fixed. I do have my vices," he said bestowing on her one of his attractive smiles, "but not in the way of gambling or horse racing or other expensive pastimes where money can be thrown down a bottomless hole."

His commentary was reassuring and, although she was mightily curious, she wasn't going to ask what vices he did spend his money on. Instead she said, "Just last week Richard had a problem with none other than moldy thatch. Last month what was it? A problem with the roof I had hoped could be put off until the autumn. Next month what will it be? I can only guess."

When prodded, she explained exactly how she accommodated the wasted expense on the thatch, explained her theory of reserves and said the best way to stay solvent was to also stay flexible. She paused then added, "I liken my budget to my linen closet. No matter how careful I am, sometimes it gets disorderly and must be restored to rights. Old linens thrown out and replaced, others mended. It's a feeling, really."

"What's the feeling?"

"Order and clarity," she said without thinking, "like a clean conscience."

He looked much struck. "Charming!"

There it was again, that word. She ventured, "The charm of novelty, perhaps?"

His glance was penetrating. He said slowly, "Perhaps."

It will wear off! she thought. It was bound to. Such a fine looking, well mannered, sophisticated man would eventually tire of simple country charms and her even more meager ones. She would not think of that now, especially not at the start of her marriage. If her husband subscribed to the adage "Begin as you mean to go on," then he meant to be a kind husband, and she should count herself fortunate.

In wordless agreement they led their horses back up the slope away from the stream so they could survey the fields and meet the crofters. Their private talk came to an end because as they crested the rise they saw Richard riding toward them, whereupon he joined them.

Chapter Four

Once seized by an idea Max always moved swiftly. Little more than forty-eight hours after imaging Charlotte to be the perfect helpmate, he was a married man preparing for his wedding night. He was immensely pleased with himself. The old-fashioned wedding dress had been an inspired choice on Eleanor's part. The afternoon ride had confirmed his belief in Charlotte's estate knowledge and budgetary competence, which gave him a further sense of satisfaction that he was a good judge of character. And, best of all, the wedding supper was thankfully brief, since their guests clearly expressed their understanding of the newly married couple's "need for privacy."

At one point in this bedtime preparation, his valet cleared his throat and took the liberty of remarking, "Been with my missus twenty years now, as your lordship knows, and so I hope you don't mind me telling you the first rule of marriage."

Of a sudden the phrase *Darden's Rules for Marriage* sprang to life Max's head. He decided to impose them this very night on his little wren, as he had come to think of Charlotte over the course of the day. He said brightly, "Quite right to remind me." He clapped his hands once. "Time for you to retire, dear Bailey. I'll manage from here on."

Bailey protested, "But I've only removed your tailcoat and Hessians, and I haven't yet told you – "

Max smiled his charming smile, the one Bailey never resisted, and cut him off with the words, "You're going to tell me the first rule of marriage is: A husband should never disagree with his wife."

"Yes, your lordship, that is, –"

Still smiling Max said, "I'm perfectly capable of removing my waistcoat and cravat myself" – he glanced in disapproval at the proper dressing gown Bailey had laid across the bed for him – "and I have a rule of marriage requiring a direct approach to my bride, one dispensing with several layers of propriety." He winked then wagged his finger. "Off with you now."

Bailey hesitated then left, clearly befuddled by his abrupt dismissal.

After Max stripped down to his shirt and pantaloons, he went to the closed door between his chamber and her ladyship's, upon which he rapped smartly twice.

He opened the door and strode into his new wife's quarters. Charlotte was seated at her dressing table with her back toward the door. Her abigail was behind her, unpinning her hair. At his entrance they both turned toward him and stared.

While he crossed the room, Charlotte rose to stand next to her abigail, mouth slightly agape. Before she could point out the obvious, he stopped a few feet from them, bowed toward his wife, and asked politely, "My dear, what's your maid's name?"

"Annie," she managed.

He turned toward the maid. "You're excused now, Annie. There's a good girl."

Annie, eyes wide, cast an enquiring glance at her mistress. Charlotte recovered enough to say with some dignity, "We're not finished."

"I can see that," he said. "I'll take care of the rest." He made a shooing gesture. "Run along, Annie. You deserve time off. It's been a long day."

Annie's gaze darted back and forth between her master and mistress. After a moment Charlotte gestured toward the door, giving Annie permission to leave.

The second the door closed behind the girl, Max stepped up to Charlotte and skimmed his fingers across her scalp, bringing her thick hair tumbling down her back and a shower of pins to the carpet. Her gasp of protest was stifled when he further unnerved her by sliding her dressing gown from her shoulders and letting it puddle at her feet. He then went to work on the bows and ribbons holding her night rail together. A moment later it too floated to the floor. He grasped Charlotte's hands, holding them down at her sides, and drew her to him, not passionately, only

protectively. He lifted his chin and set it on her head.

"I'm naked," she said on a shaky breath against his neck. Threaded through her soft voice he detected equal notes of outrage and disbelief. She began to tremble.

"I know," he soothed.

"But I'm naked," she repeated. Outrage seemed to take the upper hand.

He rubbed the crown of her head with his chin. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't think I will."

"Over time you will. It's the first of Darden's Rules."

Her body stilled. She said, "I've never heard of such a thing."

He lifted their clasped hands and rested them between her generous breasts. "Some of the married men in one of my clubs follow a set of guidelines." He released her hands and turned her so that her back was to him. He pressed gently against her shoulders to propel her toward the bed. He glanced down at her backside, which was as shapely as he had suspected. "The first rule is this: When the husband and wife are alone together in their bedchambers, the wife is always naked."

"Always?"

"Yes."

He led her to the spot where the bedcovers had been turned back and drew her down so that she sat on the sheets with her feet on the floor. He took his place next to her on the counterpane. They were close but not touching. The branch of candles on the side table cast a warm glow over her skin and created a deep shadow between her breasts. He had known from first sight of her in her wedding dress that he would enjoy his wedding night. He now saw it would be better than he had anticipated.

"Don't look!" she cried in some alarm, apparently feeling his scrutiny.

He obligingly turned his head away. "I won't until you're comfortable."

"I won't get comfortable," she complained. "Whatever the rule is, it's not fair."

"You think not?"

"Not now, with me naked and you dressed, and especially not in winter."

He chuckled quietly. "Ah, a practical point. I might have guessed. In winter I'll make sure the fires in our chambers burn brightly. But there's a good reason why I'm dressed and you aren't."

"There is?" she echoed skeptically, still obviously vexed.

"A woman's arousal is deeper and takes much longer to emerge than a man's, which is right on the surface most of the time. I'm dressed so I can restrain my own desire and attend to your pleasure first. You're naked primarily so you can settle into your body, which will make it easier for you to accept mine. I'm hoping that over time you'll also come to find my admiration of your nakedness enjoyable. For the moment I'll not look, as I've said, until I feel you're ready."

"It may take a while."

Was that a glum note he heard in her voice? She was honest in the expression of her feelings, in all events. He smiled. "We have all night."

She paused then ventured, "There's no hurry?"

"None whatsoever."

She said nothing more, apparently content to absorb his comments in silence. He judged her to be a quiet little thing but then remembered she had had no difficulty speaking with him either on the way back from the church or during the first part of their ride. After Richard's almost laughable intrusion – what did he think Max would do to his sister out in the open? – she had contributed little to the conversation, and at supper he noted she had kept the conversation going around the table by way of offering topics rather than expanding upon them.

At the moment her thoughtful appraisal of her current situation, even while he could sense she was struggling to hold on to her dignity, struck him as desirable. She had made her dislike of the first rule clear without enacting him a drama about it.

After a moment she asked, "Does the same rule hold for mistresses?"

He had to suppress a smile at the inappropriate nature of the question. "No, it's a rule only for wives."

"I see," she said slowly. "Mistresses probably already know to be naked without the rule."

He now had to suppress a laugh. He also wanted to divert her from the topic of mistresses, so he made a swift offensive maneuver. Keeping his face averted, he placed his hands on her knees and spread them apart. Her horrified intake of breath expressed her great displeasure, and she put all her muscle power into closing her

knees again. She was no match for his strength.

"No, no," he said gently. "You need to keep your legs open. I'll show you why." He closed her knees and held them together with one hand. With his other hand he caressed her back. "When your legs are together, your low back is tense." He placed both hands on her knees again and opened them. "Now your low back is more relaxed. Sitting this way is a release for you."

He kept his hands on her legs until he felt her resistance lessen. When she settled into the position, he lightly rubbed her knees before withdrawing his hands. He made sure to keep his gaze away from her.

"I want all of you to be relaxed," he said. "Every muscle."

Again she said nothing, but he could feel her quivering in shock and indignation. Her breath pattern suggested she was striving for equilibrium. Relaxation was well beyond her. He would leave her be for the moment.

Now that Charlotte had brought up the subject of mistresses, his thoughts drifted to his last one. Juliana had always been powdered and perfumed for him, with his gifts of jewelry winking on her earlobes and wrists. In his presence she was not always naked, strictly speaking, because she would greet him wearing a charming negligee meant to tease. She had a predilection for fur-lined mules with little heels that clicked gaily against any uncarpeted flooring. Juliana's conversation was sparkly and enticing and utterly without content.

His little wren made quite a contrast. At the moment he found her quiet simplicity attractive. He attributed his reaction to the continuing charm of novelty she herself had pointed out during their afternoon ride.

After a while she asked, "What's the second rule?"

Her question brought him out of his reverie.

"If there's a first rule," she said to his lack of response, "there must necessarily be a second."

The contrast between Juliana and his wife widened. Juliana would never have been capable of such a feat of logic. "The second rule is that the husband makes all the decisions regarding the couple's sexual relations."

He could feel her gaze swerve to him. He turned and looked directly into her eyes. They were her best feature, narrow but long and slanted up at the corners. The candlelight turned them bright silver when the sunlight earlier in the day had rendered them a flat grey. The candlelight also turned her masses of indeterminate blonde hair to caramel. She had her own kind of beauty, which was hardly classical

with her snub nose and wide mouth. A quiet beauty in harmony with her personality, he realized now that he was getting to know her. Her eyes, her hair, her pretty plump cheeks, her breasts, her arse, and all her fresh skin were very tempting to a husband on his wedding night.

Still holding her gaze he answered the question he read in the depths of her eyes. "Yes, all the decisions."

"But only in our bedchambers, is that right?" she asked.

He smiled. "I said all decisions regarding our sexual relations. I do not limit them to a place, such as the bedchamber." He saw her eyes widen at the idea that sexual relations might take place somewhere else, but he did not develop this theme. Instead, he answered the essence of her question. "In all matters other than our sexual relations I will take as much direction from you as you do from me."

Chapter Five

How many rules were there? she wondered. Furthermore, what did it mean for him to make all the decisions regarding sexual matters? And where could sexual relations take place other than the bedchamber? The stables came to mind, but she had no way to imagine a scene there in any detail. Nor did she ask the other questions because she was too overwhelmed to be sitting naked on the edge of her bed next to a man – her husband! – with her legs spread, as if she were some vulgar woman or a country boy with no manners. She said the thing uppermost in her mind,

"This is embarrassing."

"Then let's take your mind off matters."

"How?"

"Tell me about your beaus, which is to say now, your *former* beaus."

"I've never had a beau."

He replied lightly, "A woman is always at her most interesting when she is lying."

She countered swiftly, "I'm not lying."

"Do not tell me the vicar is not interest in you."

"I don't think he ... that is ... well"

"Precisely," he said on a humorous note. "And a certain doctor in the village."

She was surprised into saying, "Doctor Marsh?"

"Ah, so that's his name."

She saw her mistake. She should not have named him. However, she had lately wondered about Doctor Marsh's regards and comments, all of which were friendly and some of which were warm. The first conversation she had ever had in her adult life alone with an unrelated man was two days before when Max had asked her to marry him. The second was during the first part of their afternoon ride, which meant at the moment she was having her third conversation alone with a man naked and acutely embarrassed. Fortunately, the turn in conversation caused curiosity to trump embarrassment. She saw no reason not to ask,

"What makes you say the vicar and the doctor were interested in me?"

"When I encountered the good doctor in the village yesterday, his hostility toward me was only slightly better concealed than that of the vicar today, who, poor fellow, had to pronounce us husband and wife."

She had noticed the vicar's odd disposition but she had been more aware of her own nervousness. "You might be mistaken."

"A man does not mistake when another is interested in his woman."

She wondered if this were true. Since she did not have any real experience in this domain, she couldn't pursue the topic. She decided to be honest. "Normally a woman my age would know such things, but owing to – "

He interrupted, "How old are you?"

"Five-and-twenty."

"Ah, that's right," he said. "You're six years younger than Richard."

"Yes, well, the fact is my one and only season was interrupted by tragedy."

"Jane's passing. Of course I remember."

She said, as if from far away, "It was such a perfect pregnancy, no one could have predicted the outcome."

"And then you stepped into the role of mother."

Her memory of that horrible time was a blur, but she recalled how Max had been a good friend to Richard in those dark days and months. She counted in her husband's

favor his ability to be constant in his masculine friendships. She wondered whether constancy would mark his love relationships, but then she had no way of knowing if he had ever been in love. She put the topic of his love life out of her mind in order to concentrate on the matter at hand.

She nodded and said, "Yes, I became mother to Sebastian." She shrugged. "But even before that, early on in my season, I can't say I had any great experience with men."

"Did you dance at the balls?"

"I danced."

"Then where was your lack of experience?"

During her abbreviated season she had assumed the vast majority of her partners asked her to dance out of duty, since her fine family name was her main attraction. She had always been philosophical: not every woman could be a beauty. Since her husband could see her plainness for himself, his question was a strange one. She didn't know how to respond.

Fortunately he didn't require an answer. Instead he asked another question. "Have you ever been kissed?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Once."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What happened next?"

She had no idea what he was asking. "Why, nothing."

"I see," he said gravely. "His kisses did not awaken in you any response and so he went away to sea, crushed, never to lay eyes on you again."

She laughed. "Absurd! He lives in Surrey and in London, and I see him often."

"However, you did refuse him."

She wasn't going to talk about this subject, because it was still a little painful and probably always would be. Thomas Wilford was her first love from childhood and, she had thought, her true love for life. At a ball during her truncated season he had kissed her once on a balcony. The very next day, it seemed, her brother had suddenly needed a housekeeper and baby Sebastian a mother. A year later, when Thomas told Charlotte his parents required him to marry Susannah, she had

understood. He needn't have invented the story. Caroline had been his childhood playmate, while Susannah was his adult love. Susannah was pretty. And lively. Yes, Susannah's father was not only a marquis but also richer than Charlotte's family. Nevertheless, Charlotte had no difficulty working out what must have been Thomas's real feelings toward Susannah.

She sighed. None of it mattered at the moment, because she realized Max was only trying to goad her into telling him her secrets.

"No, I didn't refuse him," she said. "He married a dear friend of mine, I wished them happy, and the three of us remain fast friends to this day. There's no sad story here."

He paused at length before he said, "You took on a heavy burden that wasn't yours, and I'm sure the first few years were difficult. However, Sebastian has been well out of the nursery for some time and you could have had your choice of any number of men these past few years."

"No one has offered for me," she pointed out.

He flicked a finger under her chin. "A man needs some encouragement."

"You didn't need any."

"That's because after careful deliberation I knew exactly what I wanted."

Her mouth dropped open, and she turned to look at him. "You didn't think about your proposal at all, did you?"

He frowned a bit. "I believe I just said the opposite."

She felt smug, and her smile no doubt reflected her feeling. "When you proposed, you assured me you had given your choice much thought," she reminded him, "and so it was your slight emphasis just now on the words *careful deliberation* that gave you away – as if you needed to reinforce the misimpression you gave me earlier."

He murmured, "I have just married a woman who listens, analyzes, and then speaks her mind. I'll have to remember that."

She wasn't going to speak her entire mind. She had just determined he hadn't needed any encouragement from her because his emotions were not engaged, as were – according to Max – the vicar's and Doctor Marsh's.

In some triumph she said, "So you're not going to deny it."

"If we're speaking of impulsive action, my dear, I can only wonder why you accepted my entirely spur-of-the-moment proposal."

She was shocked – no delighted! – no shocked that he admitted his proposal had been whimsical. He really was as rash as Richard always said.

“Well, wife?”

She could not tar him with the brush of rashness without also getting some on herself. She said rather primly, “You convinced me to do my duty.”

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. While he kissed her fingers, he slanted her a very sly glance. He shook his head. “That’s not it, and so I ask again. Why did you accept my proposal?”

On the evening of his proposal her soul-searching had led her to this truth, “I didn’t want to live at Wiley Cross under another woman’s thumb – or worse! do her job for her – and only after Jonathan got engaged did I realize I didn’t want to live in the village without a grand household to run. I have a very managing disposition, you see.”

“I’m glad of it.”

In a further burst of honesty she admitted, “And I want children.”

“Then we’re of like mind.”

She felt her heartbeat quicken and thought she felt fear at mention of children, which could only be begot one way. She said in a rush, “What if this doesn’t work? Me being naked, I mean, and ... and with my knees like this I’m not relaxed.”

He lowered their clasped hands to her thigh. With his free hand he cupped her chin, turned it toward him, and tilted her face up. His gaze was piercing, causing her heart to spasm. His lips curved up in a half-smile. “Your pupils are dilated a delicious black leaving only a slim ring of silver around your irises, and your breathing is just the way it should be now.” He let go of her chin. He released the hand on her thigh. “I’m going to touch you.” So saying he put his hands on her shoulders and smoothed them first up her neck and then down her arms. Still holding her gaze with his, he circled her wrists with his thumbs and forefingers. “Your skin is also just right, warm and a bit dewy.”

She didn’t know what was happening to her, it was all so new, with her heart racing and her skin tingling.

“I’m going to look at you now,” he said. “I believe you’re ready for it.” He lowered his eyes, and his gaze roamed her body. He nodded. “Yes, definitely ready. See how your nipples have peaked on their own?”

She looked down at herself at the same time he released her wrists. The next thing she knew, he grasped her waist and lifted her up as if she weighed no more than a baby. He turned her so that she was sitting on his knees, facing him, her legs spread on either side of his thighs. When she recovered from this latest surprise of finding herself straddling his legs, she discovered she was not as embarrassed as she might have expected to be. Her half-acceptance of this new position might have been due to the distraction of his hands caressing her breasts and her fascination with his absorbed expression as he played with her nipples. While he rolled them gently between his thumbs and forefingers she squirmed on his thighs. This action caused his lips to curve up a fraction, but he did not lose his concentration or focus of interest.

“Beautiful,” he said after a moment. He slid his hands around her back and pulled her closer to him. He lowered his head and put his lips first on one nipple and gave it a lingering kiss then moved his lips leisurely to the next.

She gasped at the pleasurable sensations ricocheting through her body.

Chapter Six

He tilted his head up. “You like this?” Since his question required no answer, he continued, “We’ll introduce kissing on the lips” – he paused to reflect then decided – “later. For now it’s enough to keep our attention” – here he slid his hands back around her sides, smoothed them over her thighs, and brought them to stop so that his thumbs were pressed at her very crux – “here.”

He parted her delicate folds with his thumbs. He sought her pearl and found it already slick. He caught the sweet scent of her arousal. Very inspiring. With both thumbs he circled her pearl slowly then slid his fingers into her folds, gathering the moisture. He glanced up and met her gaze. Her lips were slightly parted. He read on her face and in her eyes her confusion and desire and eagerness and embarrassment, and he decided the combination of emotions was entirely charming. He was inclined to congratulate himself on his choice of wife. Outside the bedchamber his little wren would give him not a moment of trouble, while inside it – and anywhere else he decided to engage in sexual relations – she was likely to give him quite a lot of passion.

Which was beginning to grow before his eyes and at his fingertips. Lovely. He saw her close her eyes then open them determinedly. She blinked once and closed them again. She suppressed a moan. Such a promising beginning. His patience was paying off. Before it wore off, however, he needed to make adjustments.

He stilled his fingers, bringing her eyes open. He whispered into her ear. “Help me to take off my shirt, if you would, please.”

She reached out and moved her fingers down the row of buttons, managing a little

clumsily to release each one in turn. Arriving at his waistband she tugged and withdrew his shirttails. She hesitated then opened his shirt to slide it off his shoulders. He liked the interest she gave to his bare chest.

In order to get the shirt off, he had to release the hold on his treasure. With a few shrugs he was able to toss the shirt aside, after which he laid her down. He arranged her with her arms above her head, wrists crossed. He placed his palms against hers and smoothed his fingers up hers, to open their slight cramp. He feathered his fingers over her eyelids, closing them. Then he ran his hands down her arms to her armpits, over her breasts, down her belly, around her hips, and under her thighs. He put a forearm under each knee and bent them so that her feet were on the bed. Then he delicately widened her knees. This time she did not resist him. He ran his eyes over her and thought he had never seen a more delicious expanse of soft, white, firm flesh. He was going to enjoy sinking into it.

He removed his pantaloons and small clothes and stretched out beside her. He propped an elbow on the bed and put his head in his hand. With the other hand he dipped his fingers back into her folds. When she opened her eyes at his touch, he bent over her and kissed each eyelid in turn, forcing her to close them again. Then he brought her to her point of points, which was a very good thing, because by now the sight and feel of her had strained his patience, and the sounds of her moans were near to breaking it.

He moved over and lay on top of her, keeping most of his weight on his elbows, which were crooked at her sides.

Before he entered her, he whispered. "I'm going to have to hurt you."

She whispered back, "I know. It's not your fault."

He pushed in a fraction. She was hot and tight and wet. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath. "I think so."

He loved the feel of her breasts against his chest. "Good, but let me know, if you're uncomfortable" – he continued to enter her – "or want me to go more slowly."

He met her natural resistance to his entrance and paused.

She said, somewhat doubtfully, "Are we supposed to be doing this?"

"Yes," he assured her, preparing himself to break the barrier.

"No, I mean talk, while you're ... um"

He'd never bedded a virgin. "Normally, no. In this case, I thought it'd be better for

you if you could tell me what was on your mind.”

She paused then said, low and sweet, “The talk in Parliament concerning proposed corn laws is causing a stir in the village.”

When he registered what she had said, an involuntary thrill coursed through him. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her. She opened her eyes, which were dancing with mischief, put a hand over her mouth, and started giggling.

He knew just what to do. He withdrew from her, sat up then pulled her up, rather roughly, while he simultaneously swung his legs over the side of the bed. He slung her across his knees, face down, arse up. He planted a hand firmly in the middle of her back and caught her legs between his to minimize her thrashing.

With his free hand he rubbed his palm over her shapely white globes – she had a very attractive arse – and said, “Naughty wives need to be punished. It’s Darden’s third rule of marriage.”

“Oh, no!” she said, trying to pull her head up so that she could see him. “I didn’t mean to be naughty. It’s just that it felt so absurd to be stuck ... like a pig! ... that I couldn’t resist saying the most absurd thing I could think of.”

“As I said: naughty.” He continued to rub her buttocks in order to bring the blood up to prevent her from bruising.

“No, not naughty,” she countered with spirit, “absurd!” Her writhing to be released had no effect on him whatsoever. “That’s what my comment was!”

He stilled his hand and queried quietly, “Are you contradicting me?”

She caught her breath and went limp, but only for a moment. The next her whole body tensed again. “Does this count as one of those decisions the husband makes regarding sexual relations?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not really going to spank me, are you? That seems a bit ... strange. Extreme, perhaps.” She added, “Not – not what I would expect from a well-bred gentleman.”

He chuckled softly and commented, “What a valiant attempt to appeal to my better nature.”

“Yes,” she said brightly, if a little indistinctly because her hair was falling all over her face, “your better nature!”

He removed his hand from her buttocks, took a handful of hair, and lifted it so he could look at her. "My dear," he said in dulcet tones, "you have shown me that you like to play. Given that, I'm going to deny neither of us this pleasure."

"This pleas -? -aarg!"

He had let go of her hair and smacked her a sharp one where her buttocks met the tops of her thighs. He had no intention of hurting her, and he knew the exact force to exert for the initial pain, slight enough, to resolve itself into desire. Such a beautiful arse to redden with a only half-dozen swats, for he wanted this be over almost as soon as it began, so that she wouldn't have a chance to get into her head and decide she needed to be resentful or angry.

When he finished the quick spanking, he thrust his fingers between her legs and found exactly what he had hoped. She was now even wetter, so he determined she had loved this little bum burning. Just to make sure, he pulled her head up by her hair and saw her eyes glistening with tears and desire. With no further ceremony, he let go of her hair then grasped her waist and lightly tossed her on her back on the bed, stretched out over her again, and in one stroke entered her hot liquid silk smoothly and completely.

He pushed right through her barrier. He didn't worry about the possible pain he had caused her because she was already milking him and moaning so loudly he no longer felt the need to attend to her. He gave himself over to a very delightful ride.

When they were finished, he eased off of her. He got out of bed and went to the washstand where a bowl of now tepid water sat. He brought it and a washcloth back to bed. He placed the bowl by the bed, dipped the cloth then moved over her. When he began to pry her legs apart, she sat up.

"Oh, my goodness, no, no!" she protested, trying to scoot away from him. She swiped at the washcloth. "I can do it myself!"

He held the cloth away from her. "You are not the one to decide."

She halted her movement but not before clamping her legs together. "It's too ... too much. After everything else, please, no, no more."

He merely shook his head and leaned toward her. He spread her legs and attended to his task, enjoying himself greatly and thinking that ownership of a woman's quim was a fine thing. When he finished, he wiped himself then let the washcloth fall into the bowl on the floor. He lay her back down and pulled her against his side. "There now," he said quietly, as he stroked the top of her head. He slid his hand down her hair so that he could free it from being pinned to the bed by her shoulder.

"Thank you," she said then murmured meditatively, "So this is what all the fuss is

about.”

He chuckled and went back to stroking the top of her head.

Some good while later, he was roused from a light slumber when he heard a gasp at his side and felt a quick motion in the bed. He opened his eyes to see her seated back on her calves, sheet drawn up to her chin, eyes wide.

It took him a moment to register the problem. “You were startled,” he said quietly, reaching out to her. “Come. It’s all right.”

“Yes,” she said on a sigh of relief. “I’ve never slept in a bed with a ... well, you already know that. You see, I wasn’t expecting”

“I understand,” he soothed and encouraged a second time, “Come.”

She slid down on her side facing away from him, and he drew her back to his front, draping his arm across her waist. The moment their bodies made contact hers stiffened slightly.

After several moments he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“This, um, seems very, um, intimate.”

“More intimate than what we’ve already done?”

“Well, I mean ... what we did before was necessary.” She paused at length before she said, “This seems ... optional.”

“Optional,” he repeated, fitting himself more firmly against her backside. She shifted, as if to get away. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Another lengthy silence. Then, “I don’t know you very well.”

Although this situation was as new to him as it was to her, the newness for each was different, and since he had the advantage, he pressed it. He guessed that his erection, which was pushing at her buttocks, was at issue and was probably what had awakened her. Instead of pointing out the entirely natural condition of his body in contact with hers, he moved the arm holding her so that his hand could caress her forearm. He said,

“Skin to skin – the best way for a man and a woman to get to know one another.”

She turned her head, shot him a glance that was skeptical, speculative and seductive all at once then lay down again. He was stunned. Those eyes! She might as well have said she dared him to try more smooth talk. So, a challenge.

"Let me see how well I can get to know you," he said sliding his hand up her arm to her breasts while kissing the back of her neck. "Ah, yes, you are very responsive, as I've already noted. If I touch you here" – pinching first one nipple then the other – "you feel it here." He lay his palm flat on her belly. Her delicate quiver was palpable, and the hitch in her breath was audible.

Emboldened he slid his fingers down to her crux, more than pleased to find her wet. He took his time, coaxing and caressing, until her sighs became gusty. Not too much later she surrendered to him, turning toward him, arms open. He happily accepted her invitation as well as her pace. He was captive and captivated between her thighs.

So slow, so satisfying.

Chapter Seven

She came to awareness of her surroundings, little by little. The candles had long ago guttered in their sockets, and it was the dead of night, just as it had been the last time she had been roused from slumber to wakefulness to find a man in her bed. She was still lying on her side, and she felt an alien appendage poking at her buttocks, which is what had wakened her last time around. Her first thought was: *Oh no, not again.*

Oh yes, again.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked.

"Only if I give you one."

"Are you giving me one?"

"No."

The next thing she knew she was turned on her stomach, her hips were hoisted in the air, her breasts pressed against the linens, and he was behind her. She felt his hands frame her hips and his knees spread her legs. He pressed his groin flush against her buttocks, and his member slid between her legs. His hands slid around her hips, over her belly, and he found the places he had found earlier, the ones she had previously hardly known existed.

His fingers stroked the bud between her legs. It swelled beneath his touch, just as it had the first time he had touched her, when she had been straddling his legs, and the second when she had been startled awake. This time the new position – starkly submissive with her legs splayed and her arse high up – increased her sensitivity, and her eagerness for more flamed through her instantly and beyond her control. His fingers glided and slid. He explored her nether lips, swirled around her entrance,

gathered moisture then moved back and put exquisite pressure on her nub. She was vaguely aware of moaning her pleasure. When one of his fingers started to go back high and press at a different entrance, she froze.

He stilled the movement of his finger at her puckered rosebud. He bent forward and whispered into her ear, "Don't worry. Nothing with happen now, love. I'm simply awakening you to all of your body, particularly the parts that interest me most." He took a deep breath and braced a forearm around her waist, pulling her tight against him. With his other hand he guided himself into her slick entrance.

Being stretched and filled was still new but now not so alien. She felt the benefits of the position because he could be both inside her and manipulate her in the way that was shocking, humiliating, and pleasurable all at once. Soon her shock and humiliation were swamped by her pleasure, and she realized her husband now had both more control and more ability to unleash his power. With his hands on her hips, he pounded into her. She felt the force and wanted more. She pushed back, reveling in the exquisite unspooling of all hesitation, limitation, and inhibition. When that mysterious, unexpected, beautiful feeling glittered through her veins and muscles and sinews, rendering her body rigid with the touch of the infinite, she further lost all will to consider herself a separate entity, to live apart from his body. At the same time he collapsed on her back.

She savored the aftershocks of pleasure darting through her each time he pulsed against her, evidently continuing his own pleasure. She lay there boneless, hazily experiencing her body as a bowl of thick white cream. He eventually withdrew. He rearranged their limbs so that she was on her side, he was on his back, and his hand lay heavily on her raised hip.

As she regained normal breathing and the mental gauze created by her sensual intoxication cleared, she began to collect herself. She was dimly aware of the power of this act of joining. She had no words to name what this power might do to her, but she felt an uncomfortable feeling lurking behind a dark corner in her mind, and a thread of fear rippled through her. It was thick enough to snag her wandering attention. An errant memory drifted into her head of the moment her husband had proposed. Her nerves had jangled with surprise, disbelief, elation ... and fear. But fear of what?

Her mental gears were too crunchy, and she had no energy to sift through her feelings to find an answer. However, even in half-consciousness she was ever practical. Before falling off the edge into a deep sleep, she registered a far-off thought to keep some part of herself to herself.

The next thing she knew a man's hand was moving between her thighs and another hand was at her shoulder, turning her over.

Groggily she swatted at the hand between her thighs. She managed to say, thickly,

“Don’t bother me. Go away.”

To her relief she felt him leave the bed. She cracked her eyes. She could tell from the scurrying shadows the day had not yet broken, but it was creeping close. She snuggled into the covers, lazing between sleep and consciousness, enjoying a capacious space of mental ease, which was all the more delicious for the marrow-deep satisfaction she felt in her every bone in her body.

This exceedingly pleasant state came to an abrupt stop. One moment she felt her husband’s weight on the bed and the next moment her wrists were imprisoned and her arms drawn up over her head.

Her eyes flew open. She tugged at her arms and turned her head enough to see her husband tying her wrists to a slat in the headboard with a long silk tie. She looked up at him. He was kneeling at her side, looming above her. He looked down at her. Through the shadows she could just discern a slight gleam in his eyes and the outlines of a dressing down he was wearing. The bedcovers had been disarranged, and her breasts were completely exposed. He couldn’t see every detail of her body, but with him now dressed and her naked, she felt unbalanced and embarrassed, as she had been at the beginning of the evening.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, wide-awake now and indignant.

He pulled the bedcovers completely off her body, spread her legs, and shifted his body to kneel between them. “You forgot that I make all the decisions concerning our sexual relations.”

She caught the note of humor in his voice. A fizz of excitement spurted through her. She understood her situation. “You’re going to punish me for telling you to go away?”

He nodded. “You’re quick. I don’t have to explain why you are to be punished.”

She managed, breathless, “Will you tell me what my punishment is to be?”

“Orgasm denial.” He nudged her thighs farther apart. “Tit for tat.”

She wasn’t sure exactly what he meant, but she soon found out. He stroked and slid his fingers over and around her slit, and when she was about to find the current in the stream that would send her over the glorious waterfall, he stopped his ministrations. She searched in the darkness to meet his gaze. She saw his brows raised in anticipation, and she was able to read the challenge in the depths of his eyes.

When he didn’t say anything, she realized he was waiting for her to speak. “I was half-asleep when I denied you,” she said in her defense, “and didn’t mean to deny

you.” She was going to say *It’s not fair*, but she didn’t think such a statement would get her very far. Neither did her excuse of being half-asleep. He shook his head.

She tried again. “I’m sorry.”

Still no good.

“All right then,” she said. She made a move to get up but succeeded only in rattling the headboard. “You can untie me now.”

He clamped his hands down on her thighs then slid them down and around her crux. He stroked and feathered and swirled. Once again when she was about to dive with abandon into the warm and wonderful river, he drew back and put his hands on his hips. Once again he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

She could think of nothing to say.

He repeated the process one or two more times. Her discomfort mounted.

At one point he said, “I said you were quick, but apparently I misjudged.” He glanced toward a window. The curtains were drawn, but slivers of early morning light squeezed through. “We can keep this up all morning, if need be.”

She imagined that whatever this torture was about, it would be far worse if he could see every crevice of her body and every expression on her face. There were still enough shadows to give her a measure of cover, and she wanted to end this as soon as possible.

“No, please,” she said, “not all morning. Please.”

His expression lighted. “Ah?”

“Please?” she ventured again in a small voice.

He nodded and gave her a smile of satisfaction. “Please what?”

She groaned involuntarily. He wanted her to beg for it. She twisted against her bonds, which only made him smile wider. She writhed inside. Begging for his touch seemed a more humiliating prospect than anything else they had done so far.

He sat back on his heels, waiting. When he was through waiting, he moved toward her again, and she said quickly, “Yes, please ... I’m ready. Really I am. I’m begging you to end this.”

He paused mid-movement. “Surely you can speak more sweetly than that.”

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath then said, as evenly as she could, "Dear husband, how you pleasure me. I beg you to touch me and burst the dam to let me swim out into the ocean with you."

He cocked his head. He formed his lips soundlessly around the words *swim out into the ocean*. His expression was considering. Then, "Very prettily said."

She was relieved once by his verdict and twice by his decision to end her quivering frustration, which he did by quickly bringing her to quivering pleasure. He then released her wrists from their prison of the sash to his dressing gown. A few moments later he satisfied her again with his own satisfaction. This time he didn't linger at her side. Instead he took his tie, belted the gown he still wore, and got out of bed. He pulled the covers down, turned her on her stomach, and administered several quick spanks on her bum.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, turning her head to look up at him. "What's that for?"

He gave her three more then replied, "You can sleep as long as you like, but since I won't be at your side, I'm giving you a way to remember me." He reached between her legs and touched her in a way that raised her attention but did not fully arouse her. "I'm leaving you with this: Darden's fourth rule is that all the wife's organisms belong to the husband."

She did not immediately seize his meaning.

At her momentary incomprehension he laughed. "I didn't mean to put an idea in your head, but at the same time I'm glad I did, since it wasn't already there. What I mean is, when I leave, you are not to touch yourself to seek pleasure."

"I hadn't been intending to do so," she said. She had also not been intending to put the provocative note in her voice when she said so, but there it was.

He chuckled. "You may think about it, but you may not act on the thought. I'll know if you do. And then you'll experience real punishment."

She could only gape at him.

He gave her one last light swat and said, "You'd be wise to practice sitting before coming down for breakfast. You won't want to display your discomfort to the world."

He turned and left the room.

She pulled up the bedcovers in a huff. Now she had four rules to conjure with. Rule Number One: the wife is always naked in the bedroom. Rule Number Two: the husband makes all the decisions concerning sexual relations. What was the third?

She drew a momentary blank. Oh, yes, naughty wives get punished. And now Rule Number Four: all the wife's orgasms belong to the husband.

She turned the last rule over in mind. Good thing she was too tired to try breaking it. As she drifted off, she wondered if Rule Number Four couldn't be considered a corollary of Rule Number Two. By that logic, so was Rule Number One. So, then, what about Rule Number Three? Logic. No logic. And who was this Darden of Darden's Rules? Finding no answer to any of her questions, she fell into much-needed sleep.

Chapter Eight

Max was feeling quite energetic when he returned to his bedchamber. Bailey was naturally not in attendance, since Max did not ordinarily rise before ten o'clock, and the sun was only now just cresting over the horizon. His uncharacteristic early rising meant that he could attend to the first item of business: flush out the curious and satisfy their curiosity.

He strode to his bedchamber's door to the hallway and pulled it open. His action was so swift and unexpected that the pair of servants hanging about her ladyship's bedchamber door were startled into begging his lordship's pardon and stammering inventions of what they were doing precisely there at this unlikely hour.

Max figured the two fools to be the unfortunate pair who had drawn the short straw to stand the last watch of the wedding night. He waved away their incoherent explanations with a trenchant, "Tell your colleagues his lordship took his pleasure four times and pleased his ladyship six – no, seven – times. Now be good fellows and send me Annie."

Their mouths dropped open in a comical mixture of awe and dismay.

Since, in any case, some account of his wedding night was going spread to the staff in all the major houses of the county by nightfall, Max was happy enough to let his prowess be known. However, at no time did he wish to figure as a satyr. "I need to give Annie instructions for her ladyship's morning. Enough now!"

With another wave of his hand the hapless pair stumbled off down the hallway.

Bailey arrived a minute later, full of mortification to have not been in his master's chambers at the appropriate moment. Max soothed him with the information that nothing could spoil his good mood, whereupon Bailey firmly pressed his lips together, which told Max all he needed to know about how quickly the tally of his wedding night had spread throughout the manor house.

Max was ready for the day at the extraordinary hour of seven o'clock. When he left his room he found Annie wide-eyed and fair trembling outside his door. He was a

dab hand at putting young girls at ease.

He smiled benignly and said, "Thank you so much for coming, Annie, for now you and I can make her ladyship's morning all that she deserves." He had to suppress a smile at Annie's visible relaxation in the face of his mild words. "I would like you to look in on her every fifteen minutes to half-an-hour to see if she has stirred. I'd like her to be able to rest as long as she'd like. When you see she's ready to rise, please have a nice hot bath ready for her."

Annie was near to glowing pink with pleasure at this prospect of serving her ladyship the morning after her wedding night, and she assured her kind lordship she would do exactly as he requested.

He descended to the dining room where he made very good work of a copious breakfast of ham and eggs, some fried potatoes, a cheese soufflé, several biscuits, two bowls of fresh strawberries, and a tankard of small ale. Then it was off to his library where he opened up the budget, hoping to tackle some of the thornier financial issues his brother had left behind. He asked to schedule a late-morning meeting with his bailiff, but this worthy meeting had to be postponed because shortly after ten o'clock he received two unexpected guests, namely Richard and Sebastian. He met them in the dining room, since the butler had imagined the hour suggested the pair would want breakfast.

Richard presented himself under the pretense that Sebastian – the strapping boy Max had briefly met the day before and who, Max surmised, likely did not appreciate having to don a dress coat, crisp shirt, and nankeens two days in a row – greatly desired seeing his auntie and would not be put off. Richard explained, entirely unnecessarily, that of course Charlotte figured in Sebastian's life not so much as his auntie but rather as his mother, and so Max was to understand it would have been cruel on Richard's part to deny Sebastian's fervent desire to see her.

It seemed to Max that Sebastian was more interested in the strawberries than in seeing his beloved aunt, but he kept this thought to himself. "Sebastian will have to wait," was his somewhat amused response, "because Charlotte's not down yet."

Richard blinked, astonished, "Not down yet? What is she about?"

"At the moment I don't know," Max said, "but my guess is she's sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Richard repeated, still incredulous. "Sleeping at this hour? Charlotte's hardly slept beyond seven o'clock a day in her life, and her one day later than that was due to a slight head cold."

"When I left her at six o'clock," Max informed him, "she seemed to have every intention of staying in bed and sleeping."

Richard glanced at Sebastian, noted his son was engrossed in choosing the plumpest of the berries, and fairly hissed at Max, "What did you *do* to her?"

Max derived an ignoble pleasure from being the legal protector of a woman another man desperately sought to protect. Yes, the other man was her brother, and, yes, the other man was a good friend. Nevertheless, he had not foreseen that his whimsical choice of bride would afford him such disparate pleasures as a wife who was playful and passionate in bed and the spectacle of a brother-in-law misguided enough to make a complete cake of himself. In all ways Max's day was off to an excellent start.

With cool civility he inquired, "You don't mean for me to share the particulars of our wedding night, do you, my good man?"

Richard's chest puffed up, a flush crept up from under his collar, and he looked ready to deliver himself of his scathing opinion of Max's inglorious past, but Max headed him off with the query,

"More coffee?" Max lifted a finger, which brought a footman around to refresh his guest's cup. "Help me out, if you would, Richard. I've been meaning to ask you about the ins-and-outs of haying season."

With a little more coaxing, Max was able to get Richard onto the topic of estate management, about which he was generally well informed, which was to say, better informed than Max. The more Richard spoke, the more Max decided to listen, and the more Max learned. Talk ran along friendly lines for the next hour and came to a stop only when Charlotte put in her appearance.

She entered the dining room and was about to utter her greetings, but the words never left her mouth because Sebastian immediately sprang up from the table and threw himself against her body, crying in delight, "Nani, Nani!"

Charlotte took him in her arms, pressed his face against her bosom, kissed the top of his head, and smiled down on him. She chided lovingly, "Little scamp! Did you tease your father to leave his accounts so that you could come plague me?"

Sebastian smiled up at his aunt with such blinding love and devotion that Max was moved to think that perhaps Sebastian had been the prime mover in engineering this most wildly inappropriate social call.

Sebastian had also stolen Max's march, and Max needed to retrieve his position. He rose and crossed to Charlotte's side, holding out his hand to her. She naturally had to accept it, at which point she also disentangled Sebastian from her, abjuring him to "be a good boy and show your new uncle your fine manners."

Max led Charlotte to the chair on his right, and as he seated her, she looked up at him with a bland smile and took her place without the least trace of wincing or

squirming. His response was a nod of appreciation.

He, Richard, and Sebastian accompanied her for her late breakfast. Afterwards Sebastian insisted she read him a book, his favorite, which he had had the foresight to bring, so Sebastian and Charlotte repaired to one of the saloons. Max and Richard went to the stables and, accompanied by the bailiff, took a ride around Thornton Park, whereupon Max began in earnest his education about the running of a large estate.

After the ride a late luncheon was in order, and Richard and Sebastian readily accepted the invitation to stay. It was during the course of the meal that Max discovered yet another reason for Richard's absurd and untimely visit.

"So, now, Charlotte," Richard said at one point, "what are we going to do about the wedding?"

Because his wife had just taken a bite of cold salmon, Max addressed the question he thought Richard was asking. "I took the liberty of contacting the *Times* day before yesterday so that the notice of our nuptials could appear on the very day."

Only the slight quirk of Charlotte's brows suggested Max had spoken amiss. She swallowed, dabbed her mouth with her napkin and said to him, her tone light, "Well done, sir. I'm glad to know about the notification and must immediately write my friends in London before they ring a peal over my head for not having told them myself!" To Richard she said, "We will continue with the wedding plans such as they have already been laid out."

So, Richard was referring to his own upcoming wedding and not to his sister's, which would have been more topical. Max heard in Charlotte's measured response that she had suffered no similar confusion.

"But now everything is different," Richard pursued, "which means that the wedding plans might also be different."

"Why should you think so?"

"Because I must suppose that when Amelia comes next month to visit, she would have expected you to be at Wiley Cross to lend a helping hand in the planning."

Charlotte turned to Max, her face a perfect mask, "Would you object, sir, if our future sister-in-law, Mrs. Amelia Wroxtton, took up residence for a week at Thornton Park while she and I take care of the many preparations for the celebration we intend for September?"

Max saw the trend. Charlotte might now be a married woman, but Richard would not so easily cede his possession of her. Max had no desire to share her, either, but

he could hardly refuse her direct request.

"Mrs. Wroxton's visit sounds delightful, and it will give me a chance to" – here he almost stumbled into *meet her* and recovered with – "further my acquaintance with her."

Charlotte turned back to her brother. "You see, Richard. The problem is solved."

Max took due note of the fact that his dear old friend looked very far from a man whose problem had been solved.

"And to remind you," she continued, calm and collected, "I went over with Mrs. Charter every last conceivable item of household management the day before yesterday, and I am entirely satisfied she can manage matters in the interim."

"She is hardly you," Richard objected with an unhappy frown.

When Richard had ridden out to join them in their afternoon ride the day before and then with his early arrival at Thornton Park this morning, Max had imagined Richard was trying in some way to defend Charlotte from Max. Now he saw, plain as day, that Richard was simply jealous and wanted Charlotte completely for himself. Max's desire for her insensibly increased.

She replied, "I was very green when I started, as you may have forgotten, and Mrs. Charter taught me everything I know. She is a treasure, and your dear Amelia will soon discover how helpful she is."

Thus was the discussion at an end. The meal did not last much longer, and soon Charlotte was saying good-bye to her brother and giving Sebastian one last hug and then another for good measure.

Charlotte made no comment to Max about the intrusive visit of her brother and nephew. He dearly wanted to know her opinion about it, but before he could ask, she said, rather briskly,

"I have work to do, as I am sure you do, too, sir." So saying she turned away. "I'm off to do my correspondence." She checked her step and shook her head. "No, first I'll organize our evening meal then meet with Mrs. Haddon, as Eleanor advised me to do, and *then* I'll tend to my correspondence." She nodded, as if satisfied. "I'll see you in the dining room, shall we say around six o'clock?" She looked away as if in abstraction. "I'll try to fit in a quick trip to the Dower House before then." Her gaze returned into focus on him. "It's country hours we keep, you know."

He bowed. "I'm well aware."

As she headed toward the kitchens, he watched her departure with the oddest

feeling he had just been dismissed and was equally oddly torn between feeling annoyed and amused.

Chapter Nine

Not wanting her abigail to suffer another abrupt dismissal by her husband Charlotte hurried through her evening toilette, had Annie braid her hair for the night then gave her the rest of the evening off. The girl seemed a bit surprised she would not be helping her mistress into her nightclothes but made no comment.

Charlotte quickly undressed completely, recalling Rule Number One. Then she hastily put her clothes away and slipped into a light wrap. She stood at one of the open south-facing windows and gazed down into the sleepy flower garden it would now be her duty to tend. She wished she possessed, instead of this practical dressing gown of cotton, a more enticing negligee of silk alluringly tailored to catch her husband's eye. Then – and not for the first time in her life – she recalled the adage of the sow's ear and the futility of trying to make her face and figure into a slim and beautiful silk purse. So, plain cotton her nightwear would remain.

Throughout the day she had tried her best to keep at bay her thoughts about their wedding night. Now she could think of nothing else, and her ideas were as flighty as her emotions, darting and dashing. She had been shocked – no, *should* have been shocked – by what they had done. At the time she had simply gone along with it – again, no – had *participated* in it. And she had liked it, too – no, no, no – not mere liking. She had *wanted* it. What they had done, what she had felt – was it normal?

She stood there long enough for the moon to rise and her spirits to sink. Perhaps he wasn't coming to her tonight. Perhaps he had had enough. With the marriage consummated he likely hoped she was already pregnant, his duty done.

Just as she was imagining Max on his horse racing toward London and his favorite gambling hell and mistress, she heard a knock on her door, and in walked her husband in his shirtsleeves and pantaloons. He caught her eye, frowned and made a quick gesture for her to shed her dressing gown.

"Sit there, please," he directed, pointing to the center of the bed.

When she let her gown drop and walked over to where he was standing, he didn't take his eyes off her. She felt the first spurt of pleasure. So much for needing a pretty silk negligee. Only when she seated herself in the center of the bed with her back against the headboard did he turn away and fetched the candle from her dressing table. He placed it on the bedside table next to her and said lightly,

"There, now, I can see you better."

Then with a luxurious sigh he stretched himself out across the foot of the bed. He lay

on his right side, extended his right arm, bending it at the elbow, and propped his chin in his hand.

"So, tell me how your afternoon went," he invited lazily.

"Well," she temporized, not imagining him to be keenly interested in housewifery, "it was the usual kind of afternoon, I suppose, although busier than I am used to – which is only to be expected, since it's early days yet, and I've so much to learn."

He hummed a noncommittal response. "I suppose so," he said, "but this isn't the moment to be circumspect."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, you were quite right to keep our conversation at the dining table on the surface with so many attentive ears hovering about! But now it's just you and me."

She was confused. She was naked. He was clothed, just like their start the night before, but now he was lying several feet away from her, and she was supposed to make conversation?

"I'm glad to have heard at dinner that Eleanor is doing so well," he continued, "and I'm sure that bit of news is being mightily chewed over below stairs at this very moment. However, your avoidance of other subjects led me to believe you would not speak about them in such a public space, and your reluctance gave me to imagine that I would like to hear about them now."

Hardly without thinking she quoted back to him his words to her of the night before. "I have just married a man who listens, analyzes and then speaks his mind. I'll have to remember that."

He smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement. With his free hand he gestured for her to continue.

She said, not mincing matters, "I don't think Mrs. Haddon will suit."

"No?"

"No." She let out a long sigh. "After our meeting, I had to wrestle with the possibility that I jumped to conclusions, but the longer I thought about it this afternoon the more I know we are not a good match."

"So, that's it, then. You turn her off?"

"Of course not."

"No?"

"Well, I mean, a situation like this has to be handled correctly."

"Ah! Of course," he replied in a way she heard as mock solemn.

She was struck by the absurdity of her situation, with her husband looking at her, seemingly attentive to her personnel problems, while she was seated naked, fully exposed to his gaze, bathed in candlelight. She pressed the point uppermost in her mind, making a mental note not to overplay it, and said,

"Country manners come into play here, sir."

"Enlighten me."

"I cannot turn her off, because it would cause her undeserved humiliation and everyone in the neighborhood would know it. I also have no desire to be the evil queen of the county or to make Eleanor think she had hired a less-than-adequate housekeeper."

"So what are you going to do?"

"It's simple really, which does not mean easy, and I will need Mrs. Johnstone's help certainly. I learned from Eleanor this afternoon that Mrs. Haddon has two newly married daughters. My idea is to put out feelers for any posts close to one of them to which Mrs. Haddon would be suited and of which Mrs. Haddon would be apprised. Then it would be a smooth matter of her explaining to me why she would want to leave Wiley Cross, and I would be delighted for her good fortune."

Her husband must have had some notion of how posts got filled in town because he said, "Yes, I see, you must function as your own employment agency while keeping all personal relationships intact."

"Exactly."

"How does Mrs. Haddon fall short?"

She took a deep breath. "It's hard to put my finger on, but I know for a certainty she is not as exact as I would like. If I need one hundred candles I don't want to calculate for ninety or for one hundred and twenty. An occasional miscalculation is to be expected, but she repeated the phrase 'more or less' a few too many times this afternoon, and I don't want to have to anticipate and compensate for her imprecisions as well."

As her last two words slipped out of her mouth she wished she could slip them back in, but it was too late.

"As well as what?" her husband asked pleasantly enough.

"This is very strange," she said by way of not answering him. "You are dressed, and I am" – here she spread her arms – "in all my glory."

He raised a mobile brow in appreciation. "I'm enjoying your glory enormously."

"But shouldn't we ..." she paused then ended in a rush "... be getting on with it?"

He seemed to consider the question. Then, meditatively, "Yes, if my desires were driving the evening, we'd be well into it, and perhaps even now preparing for another passage."

"Oh!" she said with a slight gasp.

He placed his free hand on his chest and said with an improbable mix of humility and cockiness, "You think I rate my prowess too high?"

She laughed but declined to answer the question, hardly knowing what to say. Instead she said with some puzzlement, "So your desires aren't driving the evening?"

"Apparently not. I'm waiting for you."

"I thought you made all the decisions in the bedroom."

"My decision this night is for your desires to drive our interactions."

"Well, then – " she began, making a move toward him.

He cut her off with an implacable smile and the words, "As well as what, dear wife?"

He plainly wasn't going to let it go. She sat back and covered her face with her hands then dropped them. "I meant no disrespect to you or your accounting abilities, of which I haven't the slightest notion. You have said this isn't the moment to be circumspect, which is the same thing as saying it to be the moment for honest dealing – "

"A very good principle for a husband and wife to follow in their bedchamber, don't you think?"

" – yes, of course," she said reflexively. But then, her thoughts racing ahead, she decided she did not want him to tell her the details of his private life and torture her with tales of his mistresses (not that he would) but just in case he thought absolute honesty was good in marriage (and she was quite sure the brutal version of it

wasn't) she added quickly, "But only in matters of the estate or ... or ... children, things that concern the two of us as husband and wife!"

"Quite." He let the word hang in the air and held her gaze with his.

She didn't have a choice. "When I said 'as well,' I wasn't referring to mistakes you might make. Rather, I was referring to Richard's. Please don't tell him I said so, but he exasperated me times out of mind with his bungling. The moldy thatch this month matched for doltishness his decision to override our bailiff's – correct and eventually implemented! – plan for draining in the south field last fall, which can only be topped by his insistence on –" She folded her lips. "You have the idea."

"You have put me on my mettle."

"I did not intend to do so. Nor do I imagine myself so puffed in conceit that I could or should tell you how to do your accounts."

"I wouldn't mind if you did," he said but did not linger on the point. "And finding a new post for Mrs. Haddon, do you expect it to take long?"

"A month, if I'm lucky."

"A month!" he repeated wryly. Then, very provocatively, "Please don't tell me that patience is a virtue. I'm nearly at the end of mine."

The look in his eyes was irresistible. Desire, like a plant seeded deep in the earth seeking to surface, flowered full-blown in her belly. She began to understand the reason for Rule Number One but she also wanted the cover of darkness, so she asked,

"May I blow out the candle?"

He shook his head. "But now that I see your desire has reached the level of mine, here is what I want you to do."

His instructions were explicit.

Chapter Ten

The next few days passed in comfortable routine. Their days were devoted to work, and their nights were athletic. Then came the morning his wife informed him, "Dear sir, I am indisposed. Is there a rule concerning this circumstance?"

He did not immediately understand.

"It's not that I do not want to be naked this evening," she explained. "It's rather that I

cannot in all practicality be naked.”

“Ah,” he said and hastily invented a rule. “During the wife’s courses the rules are suspended, and the husband retreats.” He saw an opportunity. “I’ll leave for London today, then. There’s much for me to catch up on there.”

She nodded and went about her business. A few hours later, when he was ready to depart, she stood on the shallow steps of the entry to see him off.

“Did Cook give you the packet I asked her to make for you?” she asked.

He had walked his raw brute, Pharaoh, from the stables to the front of the house and was holding the reins in one hand. In the other was a neatly folded linen square, which he held up for her inspection. “This is sure to tide me over until I get to Southwark and the inn I tend to frequent when going to or from London.”

“Ah, you have a favorite inn. What’s the name?”

“Very unimaginatively: The Bridge.”

She smiled and began, “I see. It’s on the Thames –”

“– next to London Bridge,” they finished in unison.

She laughed then paused. She opened her mouth and the next moment folded her lips, as he had seen her do on occasion. She was usually very careful when she spoke, which he appreciated, and when she spoke unguardedly she spoke honestly, which he liked even more. Even after such a short time being married he thought he could read his little wren very well. He took no particular pride in his abilities, however, since he found her transparent.

“Yes, dear? You have something to say?”

She met his gaze directly. “I’ve had a few days to think about something you said. Just a passing comment.”

He raised his brows, in invitation. When she did not immediately respond, he prompted. “And my comment was – ?”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” she replied then frowned. “In the context of me saying I wouldn’t presume to meddle in your accounts.” Her brow lightened. “Do you remember?”

He certainly did, and he was pleased this opportunistic kernel had found fertile ground.

“And so I was thinking that with you out – out – I mean, with you tending to business in London”

Had she been about to say *with you out of the way*? There it was again: the feeling of being dismissed leaving him torn between annoyance and amusement.

She soldiered on, “... I could look over your books, and see if I can’t find a way for our two budgets to coordinate. To familiarize myself with things, you see.”

He nodded and said, “Full-well knowing that despite writing out the most perfect budget in the world, a devilish spanner will inevitably be thrown into the works.”

She understood his indirect permission to enter his financial affairs and looked pleased to have had her words quoted back to her. “You are a good listener, sir! Well, then, have a safe ride and a good meal at the Bridge.”

She waved him off and returned to the house. As his horse’s hooves ate up the gravel of the drive and then turned onto the lane that would lead him to the main highway to the city, he felt undeniable relief to leave the dust of Thornton Park behind him. He looked forward to slipping back into the pleasures of his former, carefree existence – to the extent possible and for as long as possible. He hardly spared a thought for his dependents. With Charlotte at the helm, she would look after the estate and do all that was right.

It wasn’t until he was seated on the terrace of The Bridge, making fine work of a trencher of sirloin and watching the muscular murk of the Thames slip by that he was struck by an odd thought: Charlotte had not asked him how long he would be gone, what he was going to do while gone or even where he was going to do it. It was just as well she had not asked, since he did not know the answers to the first two questions. Now that the third had come to mind, he realized he was no longer in position to take up residence at his snug house on Upper Curzon Street. He was going to have to open Blackwell House on Hanover Square.

Still, the odd thought teased him. She had not asked, and there had to be a reason why. He reconsidered his wife’s supposed transparency. Was she circumspect and careful not to pry into his private life? Or was she simply incurious and glad to have him out of her way?

He did not know the answer and was inclined to think he didn’t care, and since he hadn’t come to London to think about her, he turned his musings to other matters, namely to possible evening amusements.

He arrived in the late afternoon at the grand town home of the Routledge family, which was still festooned with black crepe. Since his visit was a surprise, he found the staff somewhat sluggish but functioning and his brother’s trusty butler, Goforth, highly apologetic.

"Nothing to apologize for, my good man!" Max assured the flustered head of the staff with a calm smile. "You had no warning of my arrival, and all we need to do now is to press forward from this moment."

Goforth visibly relaxed. "Thank you, my lord, and I'd like to be the first in this household to congratulate you on your very fine marriage."

For a split second there he had forgotten all about it. Amused to be reminded he said, "Yes, indeed, thank you, a very fine marriage."

The older man nodded wisely. "Miss Wiley – that is, her ladyship – is held in high esteem here."

Max confined himself to saying, "I'm glad to hear it."

His voice must have had enough puzzlement in it for Goforth to explain, "You see, a number of the staff here at Blackwell House are relatives of those at Wiley Cross, and so they have either met Miss Wiley – that is, her ladyship – in person or have heard about her. All those who work for her consider it an honor."

"That is lovely to hear," he murmured but he was understandably surprised and so queried, "Relatives between the staffs at Wiley Cross and Blackwell House?"

"I see what must be your lordship's confusion," Goforth said quickly. "You would think the relations would be between your Thornton Park and Blackwell House, and there are one or two, but with the countess – that is, the Dowager Countess – preoccupied with raising young children these past few years, she took direction from Miss – oh, drat – I beg your pardon!" He broke off and started again. "The new countess helped the now Dowager Countess with staffing considerations."

Max blinked at what must be the scope of Charlotte's employment agency capabilities. He now had no doubt she would settle the matter of – what was her not-quite-up-to-snuff housekeeper's name? yes, Mrs. Haddon – in the manner she had described.

Goforth was not finished with surprises. "And as to that, given the suddenness of the various upheavals in your family, your lordship, which none of us have been able to sufficiently mourn or celebrate, it was the case that his late lordship's man, Kingsley, necessarily lost his job, and Miss – that is, your new countess found him a place last month on the Hamilton estate in Essex."

His wife's network extended beyond Surrey into Essex? Impressive.

"Which means –"

Max held up a hand, in a staying gesture. "I'll send for Bailey in the morning. I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself for the evening, and I can already anticipate that dinner will be a simple affair. My palate is easy to please."

Goforth organized a group of footmen to fetch the new earl's belongings from his bachelor establishment in Mayfair then accompanied his lordship as he made his rounds of the ground floor saloons and acquainted him with the army of servants Max had never had a reason to know well. He felt a pang to realize they had received no direction from him in the last few months and now looked at him with hopeful expressions. He suspected the house might look untended, as well it likely should, and wondered what Charlotte would think – but quickly banished any thought of her opinion.

He opened the door to his brother's library – *his* library – but did not step in, only glanced around. When his gaze fell on the mountain of papers littering the desk, the grief of his brother's passing assailed him anew, as did the weight and fear of his new responsibilities. If the accounts in town had as many rough edges as did the ones at Thornton Park, he had a nasty pile of work ahead to deal with – made worse, he saw now in retrospect, for having avoided it for these past months. He wondered again what Charlotte would think – and quickly banished that thought as well.

Opening an unpleasant budget would be a task for the morrow. Today was for the exercise of newfound freedom. As he dressed for the evening his thoughts buzzed around the idea of finding a new mistress. He made a mental note to inquire in his clubs about the availability of delectable new opera dancers on the scene.

He walked out into Hanover Square and a glorious evening, choosing to go on foot to the first of his two main gentlemen's clubs. When he turned down Swallow Street in the direction of Saint James's he relished the pavement beneath his feet, the city bustle surrounding him and even the occasional jostle to which he was subjected. How good to be once again in the midst!

At White's the first person he ran into was his good friend George Lovehorn who shook his hand heartily and hailed him thusly, "Blackwell, good to see you! I had no idea you were in town."

"Just arrived."

"Excellent," Lovehorn said and pointed to a far corner in the front room. "I've come to meet Harvey. We're all of us old friends here, don't you know, so come, join us."

Max chose a club chair, ordered a single-malt when a waiter materialized, and settled in. It was not to be supposed he would not receive congratulations on his marriage. These were duly offered and glasses were raised.

"The time you've had these past few months," Lovehorn pursued, shaking his head

mournfully, then eyed him keenly. "You've borne up well, and I have to count you a sly dog for marrying Charlotte Wiley."

"Well done," Thomas Harvey seconded enthusiastically.

Max shifted in his chair. He had expected to hear the usual things one said upon acknowledging a marriage, and so he was rather surprised – and pleased – with the strength of these congratulations.

Looking from one man to the other he asked politely, "You've met my wife?"

Lovehorn cocked his head, considering. "Maybe once or twice. Not lately, but my Laura is a great friend of hers, and when she read the announcement of your marriage in the *Times* she was beside herself with happiness."

Harvey chuckled and added wryly, "My Emma's reaction likely rivaled your Laura's."

Thereafter ensued a discussion of this particular circle of friends, whose ranks apparently also included Elizabeth Norton, all of whose husbands were known to Max although he had not known until this moment their wives were friends with Charlotte. The further news imparted during this discussion was Laura's probable visit to Elstead and in particular Thornton Park in the very near future. Talk then turned to farming, a bit of Tory politics and finally a summer scandal, which always enlivened this sleepy season when nothing much happened.

Next Max ventured down St. James's Street to Brooks's, which was Whig, but because Max was both apolitical and affable he was happily received in both clubs. The reaction to his marriage at the Whig bastion was similar to the one he received at the Tory end of the street, and he learned more about his wife's apparently large and intersecting circles of friends. He wasn't quite sure how Charlotte managed her social life. She had masses of female friends but did not circulate much in Society, meaning that the husbands knew only that their wives liked her.

He knew he had chosen his wife well on the two most important scores – her brains and her body – but he didn't need the whole world to know it. The ease of her social acceptance, he now learned, was an added and unexpected attraction.

Perhaps he was something of the sly dog Lovehorn had called him; and perhaps his wife was less of a little wren and more of a – well, he didn't know. A nightingale or a woodlark? He'd have to study up on songbirds.

Because his brother's death was still so recent, he could not engage in respectable social affairs outside his clubs. He could, however, attend less respectable ones, the kind frequented only by men or only by men of his class and women of another. So he ended the evening at one of his haunts in Southwark and got in on a card game where no one cared whether or not he was observing strict mourning.

He returned to Hanover Square at three o'clock in the morning to discover that Bailey was already ensconced in his chambers. He roused to attention when his master entered them.

"Good heavens!" Max exclaimed. "The sight of you is a true surprise. A pleasure as well."

"I arrived about half-an-hour after you left this evening," this worthy informed him. "You see, after you rode off from Thornton Park, her ladyship remembered you had no man at Blackwell House to tend to you, and so she sent me on the double, so you'd not be inconvenienced."

"Of course she did," Max said smoothly.

"Hired a carriage for me, she did, because she knows I'm unfit for the saddle."

"And how does she know that?" he asked, his mind now boggling at the extent of his wife's knowledge of seemingly ... everyone and everything.

"She asked which I preferred, a horse or a carriage."

Max attributed his stupidity to the lateness of the hour. "Very logical."

Bailey nodded. "She said it was a practical matter."

Chapter Eleven

Charlotte was horrified to discover she missed her husband physically. At the same time she was glad for the distance from him. She needed to settle her thoughts and emotions, and now she had a lovely visit to look forward to from Laura Lovehorn. Charlotte was even happier that Max had gone to London because she would receive Laura alone. She hoped her good friend's visit would restore her to a sense of her former, independent self.

A couple of days after his departure, she was at his desk in the library, grappling with a truly perplexing amount of financial disarray, when the whole of her husband's plan unfolded in her mind's eye like a morning glory. She felt a rather strong stab somewhere around the region of her heart – she couldn't help it – but she quickly blunted it. Instead she decided to admire the beauty of his plan and how easily she had been led to go along with it.

He had surprised her with a proposal, married her two days later, imposed a strange set of rules in the bedroom that, just as strangely, were very effective in cementing her to him physically. In the first week of marriage he had been consistently charming to her. He was furthermore even-tempered and frequently lighthearted. In

bed his focus was on her and pointed, too pointed sometimes, she thought, given the way he could never keep his hands away from those places between her legs. And he was a passionate man.

But care for her as anything more than a highly competent housekeeper he could not. Richard must have managed to convey to him over the years the real role Charlotte played in the smooth running of Wiley Cross, and Max, clever man in need, went straight for the practical solution. She could even admire him for having chosen her and then luring her into his accounts with the simple statement "I wouldn't mind if you did." He had done nothing more than to leave ajar the door of helping him. She was the one who had pushed it open and walked right on through.

It wasn't until this moment of full realization of his motives that she was able to name the emotion rolling off him as he prepared to leave for London several days before: it was eagerness.

She felt affection for her husband (it would have been impossible not to) but kept this budding feeling in check as much as she could. It was difficult because Annie had put him on a pedestal.

"Such a lucky woman you are, ma'am, to have such a husband," Annie would chirp while she dressed her mistress's hair for bed.

"I do count myself fortunate," she would readily admit.

"Such an attentive, loving husband, oh my," Annie would sigh. "It's a love match."

Here Charlotte alternated between laughing and crying on the inside, while Annie, caught in the romantic story of her own making, waxed eloquent about his lordship's evident love for his new wife and how he was everything wonderful and good.

Charlotte didn't mind the responsibility Max had tacitly turned over to her. She didn't resent him for it, either. She was good at what she did, and she rather liked having the full control at Thornton Park she had never had at Wiley Cross, which was too frequently bedeviled by Thomas's ineptitudes, as she had expressly told her husband.

So, she didn't mind her responsibility, she didn't resent her husband for it, but her calm acceptance didn't mean she wasn't also a little hurt. She attributed the dent in her emotions to a chink in her emotional armor, the one last part of her little girl's heart that had never shriveled as a result of constantly witnessing her prettier sisters on this earth turning the heads of handsome young swains. This part of her heart still yearned to be loved and admired. It – willful organ knowing nothing of reality! – still clung to a belief that such was possible.

She had long ago put aside any regret that she was poor in looks, because she was rich in friendships. Her husband treated her with respect and apparently found her desirable. What more could she ask? She would not be so greedy or foolhardy to expect his love. She resolved to put her heart into the running of Thornton Park.

Four days after Max's departure Charlotte was once again standing on the shallow stone steps of the entry as Laura's carriage rolled up and heaved to a halt. Laura surged out of the carriage and caught her friend up in a warm hug.

"You look *wonderful*," Laura exclaimed, "positively blooming."

"And you, my dear, are your usual picture of Town Bronze."

Laura was a beautiful and vivacious brunette who had the great fortune to have blue eyes. She struck a pose in her stylish dress then took in her surroundings. She said, "It's hardly a change of place for you, is it? I had not imagined Thornton Park would look so much like Wiley Cross."

"Tudor footprint," she observed, "determinedly unsymmetrical with half-timbered gables and a thankfully newish Georgian interior. So, you're right, not so different from what I'm used to."

"But then again *everything* is different, isn't it?" she said, wagging her brows. "You'll tell me all about it. I can't wait!"

Once Laura had settled her things in the blue chamber prepared for her, she descended the central staircase at the foot of which Charlotte stood waiting for her. Linking arms, Charlotte drew her friend into the pretty parlor she had chosen for herself, sunny and hung in gray silk with an upholstered sofa of yellow silk and a scattering of matching chairs. The tea tray was set on the table in front of the sofa, upon which the two dear friends took their seats, and Charlotte served.

Accepting the cup Laura said, "Naturally we understand why your wedding had to be private, strictly family! But you cannot imagine how much Elizabeth and Emma and I lamented not being able to be there with you, to dress you, counsel you, celebrate with you – oh, any numbers of things!"

Charlotte laughed and agreed and said whatever nonsensical thing came into her head as a response.

"And you married none other than Maximilian Routledge, the new Lord Blackwell! My! The announcement of your marriage in the *Times* had the effect of a bolt of lightning. You cannot imagine the scores of young women who gnashed their teeth and rent their hair in disappointment."

Charlotte, who did not circulate much in town, was nevertheless attuned to town

ways. However, even the least attentive person knew that in the battle for eligible titled gentlemen, town and country marched in unison, and the siege was laid by the mothers of hopeful daughters.

"I can only imagine," Charlotte said.

"And he chose *you*," Laura said, as if savoring a personal triumph, which it was, because Laura always said Charlotte would eventually make a brilliant match.

"Yes, well," Charlotte said, coloring a bit, "we're neighbors."

"Indeed you are," Laura said with a playful arch to one brow.

"And ... and he needed a wife," Charlotte added.

"He could have had anyone. Truly." Laura reached out and placed her palm on Charlotte's hand. "I must say I have a new opinion of him."

Charlotte's heart skipped a beat. "You had a bad opinion of him before?"

Laura laughed. "Not at all! Although he is friends with the husbands in my set, being unmarried, he often socializes in places with more entertainment to be had than in a room full of staid married couples."

"He told me he doesn't gamble or bet on horses, so I'm not worried on that score. I can only imagine you mean he seeks out the company of women."

Laura gave Charlotte's hand a squeeze before she removed it. "I know nothing about his former love life."

"But surely you were aware of some of his flirts."

Laura gave the statement her consideration. "He's naturally flirtatious, and I've always found him charming. Do you not think so?"

"Indeed."

"And he's" – here Laura searched for a term and then clapped her hands as if in discovery – "happy-go-lucky. That's what he is. While he has never made a spectacle of himself by acting as the life of the party, he has always struck me as a man who follows his pleasure, while harming no one and leaving no trail of ugly gossip in his wake."

"That's good," Charlotte said to this, adding a tentative, "I think."

"Given my impression of him as happy-go-lucky, you see, I wouldn't have been

surprised if he had married some empty-headed thing with a lot of money and been done with it. Instead, he made a very wise choice in a wife. He now has a true a helpmate. That's all I meant by having a new opinion of him."

"His brother's death was grievous, and perhaps that event has transformed him," Charlotte said. She had discussed the tragedy and its effect on Max more than once with Eleanor and Richard, among others.

"More credit to him, then. He rose to the seriousness of the occasion."

Charlotte repeated glumly, "Helpmate. It sounds rather dull. I wouldn't mind if he, well, admired me, you know, as a man admires a woman."

Laura dismissive "Pish!" was intended to stop Charlotte's train of thought. "You're going to unpack a bag of moonshine, and I'm not going to hear it. I *know* your first Season was marred by tragedy, and I *know* you've grown very comfortable in your adult roles, and I truly do *believe* you on the various occasions when you've said you'll be fine if you never find a husband. I have long told you that yours is a quiet beauty and some discerning man – whose regard you return – will notice. I'm not going to recite for the hundredth time the list of men thrown your way in whom you've shown not a shred of interest. You could have been married with children of your own any time these past several years."

Charlotte wondered if it was because she had held Max so long as her masculine ideal that she was unable to consider other suitors. It had not taken her more than a minute or two to consider his proposal before accepting it.

"Still, it's not a love match, Laura."

"Early days," Laura said with an airy wave of her hand, and then the two were off and away talking about Richard's engagement to Mrs. Wroxtton, Sebastian, Laura's children, the latest *on-dits* and household tips. They finished up with Charlotte listing all the visits she had planned for the two of them over the next few days.

The next afternoon, since Laura was as keen a horsewoman as Charlotte, the two decided to ride to the village for their visit with Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Bromley.

Making their way down the village lane Laura asked, with idle curiosity, "So tell me, dearest Charlotte, what's the most surprising thing you've discovered about being married?"

Charlotte laughed and said the first thing that came to mind, "I had no idea the term 'wedding night' referred to the whole night! It never before occurred to me that marriage would be such an interruption" – she trailed off when she saw her friend's inquiring gaze fixed on her, and she finished her thought in a small voice – "to sleep."

Laura's pulled her horse to a stop. Charlotte necessarily also drew rein. Laura's silence was electric. She broke it by asking, "You didn't sleep the whole night?"

Charlotte hastily repaired the misimpression. "Of course I slept! I only mean I didn't sleep the whole time," adding lamely, "you know."

It was apparent Laura didn't. She asked boldly, "What time did you retire on your wedding night? "

Charlotte estimated, "Eight or eight-thirty in the evening."

"And what time did your husband leave your side?"

Charlotte guessed, "Just before dawn."

"And he did not retire to his own bedchamber?"

Charlotte replied, "Well, no, he did not."

It took quite a bit of round-about-ation before Laura was able to formulate the question, left delicately unfinished, "How many times?"

Charlotte scanned the surrounding countryside, sunk deep in the lush lull of summer. She looked back at her friend, made a face of extreme discomfort and said, "It depends on what you're counting."

Laura's beautiful blue eyes were as round as Wedgewood saucers. A hushed, "Goodness!" left her lips then she blinked a few times before she said, somewhat bewildered, "You said your marriage is not a love match."

Charlotte shrugged. "How does one talk about such things? I don't know."

"Neither do I, but I am rapidly coming to the conclusion one *should*. And immediately! I gather your husband is not cooing sweet nothings into your ear and telling you he loves you. However, he is certainly doing *something*, and I would be ... be grateful for you to enlighten me, dear Charlotte."

Charlotte was now acutely embarrassed, but she was still able to see Laura's genuine curiosity. "I'm not sure I can enlighten you," she said quietly. "I don't have the words for it, as I've said. We all know that men, um, like women and" – she shot Laura a look, hoping Laura would understand Charlotte was talking about sex and not love – "what I've learned is that some husbands also like ... um ... to play with their wives."

"Yours is one of them, I gather."

Charlotte managed to express in disjointed fashion the thought that, yes, he was.

“And do you like him playing with you?”

Charlotte’s blush became furious.

“Another yes,” was Laura’s considered opinion.

By tacit agreement they clicked their reins and continued on toward Elstead, but Laura wasn’t finished with this most fascinating conversation. “So you feel something more than his satisfaction.”

She felt quite a bit more, meaning that what she and Max did together and how she felt about it was not normal, rather more beyond it. Perhaps Laura was right, and they should share their experiences. “Yes, I feel something more than his satisfaction, namely my own, which is maybe like eating something delicious and wanting more of it.”

Laura paused at length before saying, “I love George, truly I do, but, well, when it comes to our martial relationship,” she said with a twist to her lips, “the phrase ‘wifely duty’ comes to mind.”

Charlotte had heard the phrase but now found it odd. “It’s more of a game.”

“Game,” Laura repeated with interest. “So, when he’s away, you aren’t secretly pleased he won’t be coming to you at night?”

“Now that he’s away, I miss him, I miss it.”

“How long will he be gone?”

“I have no idea.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“No.”

Laura pondered this response for a long moment or two. “That’s always my first question when George has to go somewhere. Why didn’t you ask Max?”

“Because I was quite sure he didn’t know the answer.”

Laura pondered this response even longer then said, “Game, is it? Hmm.”

Charlotte said quickly, “Please, Laura, don’t tell anyone I miss Max.”

"I won't!" Laura assured her.

"Or really anything about our conversation. Please, no. Nothing!"

Laura hesitated. "I think Emma and Elizabeth deserve to hear a thing or two. I won't tell them *you're* the source. Don't worry about that!"

Charlotte had to be satisfied with Laura's discretion, and she was rather glad to have some idea of where her marital relations stood.

Chapter Twelve

Somewhere in the midst of his second week in town Max began noticing the speculative glances one or two of the respectable wives of several of his friends cast his way. Not openly, no. Only when they thought he wasn't looking. He'd long been the object of open regards from the less respectable wives of at the edges of his social circle. He never hesitated to flirt, and he sometimes accepted clear invitations. However, these new looks from the respectable wives were not flirtatious. Then, what were they?

He shook off the question. He was imagining things. He then remembered his idea of finding a mistress that had floated into his head his first night in town. It had apparently floated right out again because he had done nothing about it. Now he wasn't going to bother, because he had begun to notice that things in town felt a trifle flat. He figured the slight pall was due to the fact that several of his most amusing cronies were elsewhere at the moment. It made good sense to return to his wife and the satisfactions of Darden's Rules.

At the end of that week Max returned to his principal seat to find his wife in a front parlor in conversation with a woman he did not recognize, likely the new housekeeper. Her appearance meant that Charlotte had rid herself of Mrs. Haddon in half the time she had predicted. The two women were pouring over what looked to be an inventory, and at his entrance, his wife looked up, gave him a slight smile and informed him she would be with him in a few minutes. He should have been impressed with her resourcefulness and focus. Instead he was annoyed.

If he were to indulge in a moment of honesty, he would acknowledge he was, in fact, more than merely annoyed. This, however, was not the moment because upon being summarily dismissed this time no opposing feeling of amusement balanced it out. Instead he regretted having limited his power of decision-making to their sexual relations. He would have very much liked to snap his fingers, demand her immediate attention and then put her over his knee. Or perhaps he would start by putting her over his knee and then demand she never dismiss him again. However, he could not alter willy-nilly the dynamics of their relationship he himself had established – and promptly congratulated himself for being fair-minded.

And then, equally promptly, shook his head at his unaccustomed pique and his puerile need to congratulate himself, which was nothing more than a paltry attempt to tap out the slight dent in his male pride.

So he went to the library to cool his heels whereupon he surveyed the unaccustomed order on his desk. He picked up the topmost ledger and began to flip through the pages. He easily saw where his brother's hand had ceased and his own began. Then he turned to the most recent pages and ran his eye down the columns. At the sight of Charlotte's neat numbers he felt something turn over in his chest, but he was in no mood to examine what it was.

He put the ledger down and walked to one of the long windows. He looked out over a beautiful view of a prosperous estate in splendid summer. He hardly registered it. All his efforts were bent toward mastering his impatience.

By the time Charlotte arrived a few minutes later, he had himself well in hand and felt his natural light-heartedness reassert itself. He turned and smiled and held out his hand as he walked toward her. Perhaps his mood was improved because he was happy to see her.

She came forward, accepted his hand and curtsied slightly.

He bent over her hand and kissed the back of it but not her lips. He had not yet introduced kissing on the lips into their interactions. He ran his eye over her. She wore her toilette with her customary unassuming air, but he had a nice enough eye for ladies' fashion to discern she had acquired a few of the latest touches, and her hair was more becomingly arranged to frame her siren's eyes.

"You're looking well, my dear," he said.

She withdrew her hand and thanked him. "Laura Lovehorn, who came for a visit as you know, was determined to bring me into fashion."

He thanked her for her kind letter, informing him of the visit. "It so happens Mrs. Lovehorn's husband also told me of her plans."

She nodded and gestured toward the desk. "Would you like me to show you what I've done in your absence?"

"I'd rather hear about Mrs. Lovehorn's visit," he said, gesturing away from the desk and toward a pair of chairs arranged near the window where he had stood.

She accepted his escort, and he helped to seat her. When she had settled her skirts, she folded her hands in her lap and looked at him, expectantly. After a moment she said, "We had a wonderful time together. She and I had so many people to see."

He sat down and put his elbows on the armrests of his chair, clasped his hands together, and propped his chin on them. He returned her enquiring gaze. After a moment, he said lightly, "And?"

"And what?"

"I've expressed my eagerness to hear about your activities."

She seemed surprised. "I would prefer to show you," she said, glancing at the desk, "because what I have mostly done is organize the accounts."

"But that is very dull," he said and immediately saw his error.

"To you, perhaps," she said. She must have seen on his face or in his eyes some flicker of the emotion he was not yet willing to name because her eyes widened slightly and she opened her mouth only to close it again. "To – to many people, I am sure," she said, "but not to me. I like making order of accounts."

He attempted to recoup by saying, "Like having all the sheets and pillowcases neatly folded in the linen closet and the pleasure of a clean conscience."

She blinked and said, "You are a very good listener, sir, as I've remarked before."

Good. He had recovered. "I'm delighted to hear you think so. Your love of order, like so many other things about you, is charming. But surely when Mrs. Lovehorn was not here, you did not sit, day after day, at the desk doing sums."

She shook her head. "I am forever careering about the countryside because I have so many people to see. Oh yes, Sebastian came over on occasion. And Richard."

When she fell silent, he prompted, "And you evidently placed Mrs. Haddon somewhere –"

"Fauresfield."

"Ah, the general neighborhood," he observed, "and then hired a new housekeeper."

"Yes, Mrs. Porson, a cousin to Mrs. Charter."

"The housekeeper at Wiley Cross."

"Yes."

"And you had the presence of mind to send Bailey to London. I thank you."

"You're welcome."

He dropped his forearms to the armrest and mused playfully, "Why does the phrase 'pulling teeth' come to mind?"

Her expression betrayed puzzlement and something else he couldn't quite name. She held up her hands. "I don't know."

He chuckled. "I'm attempting to make conversation."

"Oh," she said and seemed to fight to quell a slight blush. She dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry! I thought you'd prefer a more efficient account of my activities."

She looked up at him again, and the look in her eyes – was it beseeching? – caused something inside him to spasm. She was at all times a surprising creature, and her effect on him equally surprising.

"Last time we were together I recall you had no difficulty making conversation." He paused then went straight to sexual suggestion. "When we're together I think you do better without your clothing. You're more forthcoming."

She slanted him a shyly suggestive glance and looked away. Now that was more like it! He got the blush – strong and desirous – he had been angling for.

Responding to his challenge she refolded her hands in her lap and said, "So, about my new housekeeper. It was, as it turned out, a stroke of luck that Sebastian had a head cold a few days ago and wanted me to come to Wiley Cross. At one moment I got into conversation with Mrs. Charter, which was only natural. I hadn't planned to tell her about my search for a new head housekeeper, but since the news was known of Mrs. Haddon's remarkably fortunate job in Fauresfield – in the very village where one of her daughter's lives! – Mrs. Charter was able to put a word in my ear about her cousin."

"Mrs. Porson," he interjected to show her he could keep up.

She nodded. "I had only to ask Mrs. Charter whether her cousin had the very qualities that endeared Mrs. Charter to me, and she said directly, 'Yes, Miss, she does.' And that was that."

"When did she start?"

"Today."

"Ah." Did he feel better that his wife had been preoccupied just now with a new employee and so had not dropped everything to greet him? He frankly didn't know.

She continued, "And because I see you are taking to heart your duty as head of the

household in your desire to understand the distaff side of the estate, I will now give you the story of Kingsley, since you've mentioned it."

She paused, and he guessed she was testing him. Had he mentioned someone named Kingsley? He could not recall it, although the name sounded familiar. He opened his mouth to stall for time, but his slight pause had been telling, and now time was up.

"Yes, Kingsley," she said, "who was your brother's –"

Although he had got there a fraction of a second too late, he interjected, "Of course, Jonathan's valet, the one who was turfed out, and you landed him in Essex." When he searched for the name of the estate and came up empty-handed, he pointed out, "I didn't mention Kingsley, I only thanked you for sending me Bailey."

Did she just *smirk* at his attempt to correct the record? A second later he couldn't say for sure because her smile was pleasant. "That's right. I know Sarah Hamilton well enough to know some of her staffing needs, that is, in this case, her husband's need. It was just a piece of information I had floating in my head. So it worked out."

"Indeed, neat and, as is your preference, efficient." He could have added 'impressive' since Sarah Hamilton was no less than the Duchess of Woodley.

She added, her smile now sweet, "As a point of information, Kingsley and your Bailey are second cousins."

He suppressed a laugh. She had just humored him with a story she had not imagined he wanted to hear but whose convolutions he deemed (there was no other word for it) charming, and it was the kind that was not wearing off. At the same time he had found himself on shifting ground these past few minutes. Now was the time for him to take charge.

"I do thank you for the information, my dear. We'll have dinner at six, during which I'll regale you with my exploits in London, and then we'll retire at eight, following the usual rules. Do you have any questions?"

She glanced once more at the desk. "Would you like me to show you what I've done? I made some notes we could go over –"

He cut her off with the words, "You've been exceedingly helpful thus far but from now on I can manage."

She left him wearing a slightly puzzled expression. He went to his desk and bent his full attention to mastering an activity he had thought only a few scant weeks before he would not enjoy.

Recent experience had enlarged his perspective on enjoyment. He had long thought

he preferred the expansive pleasures of the flesh, but this strange business of marriage revealed to him a taut and sinewy layer beneath the pleasure and that was control, the very essence of Darden's Rules.

He was forcibly struck how different was a wife from a mistress. A man controlled his mistress from the day he engaged her to the day he dismissed her. In contrast, his wife now possessed his name and all his worldly goods, and he could not dismiss her. It was true he was in control of their sexual relationship, but now he wanted more. He would start by reclaiming the domain of influence affecting him the most, namely the running of his estate. He was fortunate to have a head for numbers. Now he also had a taste for them.

At one point he glanced down at the sheet of paper she had left to the right of the ledger. He picked it up and scanned the notes she had neatly penned. For the third time in an hour he felt a spasm in his chest. A phrase involving the word 'heart' tiptoed around the edges of his consciousness. *Change of heart*, was it? No, that wasn't right. Something else, then.

Chapter Thirteen

"You're looking rather self-satisfied," she remarked.

"I am," was his lazy reply.

She was seated naked, of course, while he was stretched out across the bed, clothed in his shirt and pantaloons, looking as relaxed as a man could be. His gaze was roaming around her body in an almost meditative fashion.

"Still thinking about London?" she prompted, recalling his dinner conversation.

He rose up straighter on his elbow and looked her in the eye. "London?" His smile was amused. "This is not an occasion when a man's thoughts wander, my dear. You have my full attention."

"Then, what? I know you were imagining something."

He nodded. "I was thinking this spot is the perfect angle to appreciate the curve of your cheeks."

She gasped and immediately slapped her palms over her cheeks, thinking he was making fun of her.

Frowning in disapproval he said sternly, "Remove your hands."

Surprised by his abrupt change of tone, she did as he bade.

His frown lightened to one of mild query. "Why would you interfere with my pleasure? You see" – he lifted a finger and began to outline her body in the air – "the curve of your cheeks is in harmony with the slope of your shoulders and the very lovely lines of your breasts, then curves in to your equally lovely waist and then out again to your hips. Your thighs and calves have the same lines. I happen to like them best not when I can see them but when they're wrapped around me."

Nothing in his tone suggested he was anything but serious, and squirmy desire inevitably started moving about in her belly like a frisky ferret. In his presence she sometimes could not prevent her imp of mischief from popping out. "Ah, so that's why you married me."

He chuckled and said offhand, "I married you for your money."

She laughed. "You haven't even asked after my competence."

"No?" he said as if searching a thought. "Then it must be that over the years Richard has made it very clear to me that you are plump in the pocket."

Because they were at the start of the evening game, she wasn't going to contradict him by saying that Richard had only a vague idea about her inheritance. However – and unfortunately – the word 'plump' made her self-conscious, and she could think of no retort to keep the game going. Suddenly embarrassed she turned away from him a bit.

He challenged, "What?"

Uncomfortable, she answered, "It's as if I have to start from the beginning again."

"I've been gone too long. A mistake, clearly." His expression became more focused. With a rather predatory sound in his voice he said softly, "Turn back toward me or risk a spanking, naughty wife."

This prospect instantly dissolved her discomfort and rekindled her desire. The look she threw him over her shoulder caused him to lunge at her, making her squeal in delight.

"So we have made progress," he said with great satisfaction.

She reveled being in his arms again. "Only a bit," she said, now finding her rhythm in the exchange, "but it still feels like our wedding night."

"You'll get your spanking, witch," he promised her, shrugging out of his shirt, "but only when I'm good and ready to mete it out."

He pressed his nose to the place behind her ear and breathed her in. From her

cheeks to her thighs his hands traced in the flesh what his finger had outlined in the air. The sport was on.

Over the next week and a half Charlotte became aware of a change in her husband and in the balance of their relationship. A feeling floated around him, hovering, one she couldn't quite put her finger on it. The best she could say was that she had the sense he had become, contradictorily, both more absent to her and more present.

He was more absent in the sense he no longer requested her help, although they routinely communicated on matters requiring coordination. He was also more present because she knew through various comments dropped here and there by the staff that he had come to take a strong interest in the running of the estate. The bailiff, in particular, seemed extremely pleased with the new lordship's stewardship.

She should have been pleased not only that her husband had taken up the reins but also that he had taken them up so firmly. But she was not. Not wholly, anyway. She didn't understand what he was doing, because his involvement seemed to negate his reason for marrying her, and although she had been hurt by the realization he had originally thought of her as little more than a living breathing crutch, the withdrawal of his need for her made her feel a little useless.

She hoped to be breeding soon in order to fulfill one of her duties. It was true she was quickly learning the ropes at Thornton Park and staying on task. Nevertheless, no matter what she did, she had the growing feeling of being the wrong woman in the wrong position. Or something. She didn't know what, other than that she was out of sorts.

Unfortunately she could not attribute being out of sorts to pregnancy.

Her cycle of the moon came around again, and so she informed her husband after breakfast, "It's that time of the month."

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to the back of it. "Are you disappointed?"

"A little."

"We have time."

She couldn't help herself. She asked, "Any plans to go to London?"

He shook his head and confined his answer to a simple, "No."

One of Charlotte's most pleasant duties was visiting Eleanor and her daughters on a regular basis.

In the afternoon she made her way over to the Dower House, this time primarily on

a personal mission. When she and Eleanor had discussed all they needed to, she screwed up her courage (remembering how useful her exchange with Laura had been) and said, "I have a question to ask you."

Keeping a benign eye on the girls playing on the floor and the baby in the basinet next to her Eleanor said, somewhat abstractedly, "Anything."

"What do you think it means if Max complimented my cheeks?"

Eleanor quickly transferred her attention to her dear sister-in-law. Her eyes dancing with interest, she held up her hands. "It means he finds your cheeks attractive."

"But they're not, objectively speaking."

Eleanor reached her thumb and forefinger out to nip at one. "They're very pinchable."

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Laura says I have a quiet beauty, I know, but the belle of the ball can say whatever she wants. She was never a wall flower."

Eleanor settled back into her chair and placed her hands on her midriff. "What are you asking, really?"

"I don't know. Why would he say such a thing?"

"I suppose it depends on the context."

She could hardly divulge the context, and it was possible that at that exact moment her husband had been admiring her. Maybe?

After a moment Eleanor said, "Do you want to know what I see?"

She sighed. "Like Laura, you can say whatever you want. You're pretty, and I'm not. Let's just admit it. Max is a very attractive man."

"That he is, and I'll add that he also likes women."

Charlotte groaned. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"All kinds of women," Eleanor added.

"That sounds even worse. Do you know who he's been involved with?"

Eleanor shrugged. "I would on occasion hear only if he were in a liaison with a married woman of note. There's likely a baroness or a marchioness in his past."

Charlotte whimpered.

"My point is," Eleanor said with emphasis, "as a man who likes women, he evidently has the great good taste to look at you and to like what he sees."

Charlotte had not previously considered the possibly large scope of her husband's taste, so Eleanor had made a fair point.

"And now I'll ask again. Do you want to know what I see?"

Charlotte nodded then braced herself.

"You're very womanly, and now more so than ever. You've a milkmaid's figure and an easy face to look at, and I'm guessing Max is well pleased with himself."

After breakfast on the third day of her women's courses her husband came around the table to help her up from her seat and asked politely, "May I return to your bed this evening?"

"One more night, please," she requested just to be sure.

He nodded respectfully, and the very next night after that he was back.

She had grown accustomed to being naked in their bedchambers and she liked the way her desire stirred the moment he laid eyes on her. He had told her on their wedding night she would come to find his admiration of her nakedness enjoyable, and he was right. She was even gradually willing to accept the extravagant compliment he had offered her on her curves, beginning with her cheeks. Over time she had to acknowledge that, yes, he must find her body, at least, attractive, because there was no doubt he found her desirable and enjoyed their sport.

But it was easy for a man to take sexual interest in a woman, wasn't it?

That night, when they had finished their love making, she was wrapped in his arms, with her back to his front.

"Oh, I do like this, you know."

He nuzzled her neck. "I'm glad."

She was relaxed enough to say, "I wonder what it would be like with another man."

His nuzzling stopped. "You have one in mind?"

She laughed at his icy tone. "No, of course not. I was just wondering." She shrugged. "It's not as if I'll ever find out. I'll drop the topic."

He turned her smartly to face him. "Oh, my dear, you are treading on very thin ice now. You cannot drop the topic."

"No?"

"No. Now tell me why you asked the question."

Surely prompted by a freak of temper, she said in all honesty, "I was led to thinking about other men because I wondered what it's like for you with other women."

"You mean: What it *was* like for me with other women," he corrected.

She snorted daintily, quirked a skeptical brow and began to turn away. The moment she moved her shoulder was the moment he hoisted her up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and spread her across his lap. He caught her scissoring legs in his, pushed her torso down, and began to rub her upraised cheeks.

She was about to protest and beg his forgiveness, but he started spanking her, and the light stinging sensation was so perversely pleasurable she had no will to resist. She writhed and wriggled and moaned her reactions. She was so aroused that when he stopped and sat her up again, she put her hands on his shoulders and shoved him down on the bed and immediately straddled him. Since he, too, had been aroused by the spanking, she impaled herself on his erection. She would have given herself over to the wash of sensations flowing through her except his hands immediately clamped her hips and stopped her motion.

"I make all these decisions," he reminded her quietly.

Her imp of mischief was wide-awake. She allowed herself the impudence of lifting one knee, twirling around with him still inside her, to face away from him. She thrust her bum toward him, looked over her shoulder at him, and tossed out,

"So punish me."

"With great delight," he said.

Instead of giving her the truly burning spanking she wanted, he lifted her off of him, pressed her face down on the bed, spread her legs, and thrust his hand between them. He played with her pearl and folds until she was aroused to the edge of release. Then he withdrew his fingers, got out of bed, and headed for the door to his bedchamber. Before he left her room, he said, sternly,

"You know the rules."

He did not return that night.

She arose unrested, unfulfilled, and miserable. She could not imagine being more miserable, but the day was young, and it was possible she lacked imagination. She took the coward's way out by dawdling so long getting dressed that Annie was moved to ask if her ladyship was ill or – on a hopeful note – feeling the effects of some other condition.

She descended to the dining room to see her husband seated at his usual place at the table, far past the time he had established of late to take his breakfast. He was reading what looked to be correspondence and making notes. He did not look up when she came in. She bid him a very quiet Good Morning. He did not return the greeting.

Misery was too mild a word to describe what she was feeling. She was not going to reveal it, however. Not if she could help it.

She tried a few bites of egg. They did not go down easily, but she was determined to make a show of an appetite. She buttered a piece of toast with some deliberation and added jam. She nibbled. She drank her coffee. She nibbled some more. When her heart was so heavy she thought it would fall into her feet if she did not leave the room, she pushed her chair back and began to rise.

"You'll accompany me to the library," her husband said. He gathered up his papers, rose from his chair and came toward her.

She wanted to say *Yes, what a relief you're speaking to me*. She wanted to say *No, I'm really very busy*. Her moment of indecision allowed him to reach her side, and before she replied one way or the other, his hand was on her elbow. He escorted her out of the room, down the hall and to the library. Upon crossing the threshold, he closed the door and locked it.

He walked to his desk and sat down in the chair behind it. He placed the papers in his hand on the desktop and returned to working on them. He did not look up when he commanded her to "Undress."

"Excuse me?"

He looked up. His gaze was not friendly. Her easy-going, unfailingly polite husband had vanished. "You heard me."

"Here?"

"Yes, I want you naked."

She looked around the room. There were three long windows overlooking the gardens, one near his desk, one in the middle of the room and one at the far end.

Only the curtains on the window at the far end of the room had been opened. If she approached his desk to undress, she would be safe from being seen by anyone passing by outside the library. It occurred to her he had planned this particular punishment.

“Now.”

This one word got her going. When she was in front of the desk, she looked back at the far window with the curtains open, just to make sure no angle would be afforded to prying eyes. Satisfied, she began to fumble with the buttons at the back of her dress. She eventually managed to peel it off and let it billow down to the floor. Her white clothes came next then stockings and shoes.

She was standing naked in front of the desk but he did not look up. He pointed to the right of the desk and said, “On your knees.”

She did as she was told. She was now less than a foot away from his booted leg.

“Sit back on your heels and open your knees.” Only then did he look down at her. “Wider.” He looked her up and down. “Still wider.” He paused again. “Although it’s dim in here, I still want to see everything. Yes, that’s it.”

He began to apply himself to his work.

She sat there, prey to conflicting emotions. She understood she was being punished for having taken the initiative in their sexual relations the night before. She would have preferred a spanking, but of course he was not going to indulge her preference. She wanted to point out he was wasting her valuable time, but she didn’t think it would have any effect, because he already knew it.

Her misery dissipated in her struggle to understand, in light of her present punishment, that he hadn’t rejected her the night before. He had simply asserted the initial conditions he had insisted upon. And if part of her discipline was to be at his side, she had to be happy, because it felt good.

Oh, no. Maybe it was feeling too good.

Chapter Fourteen

He congratulated himself on not having confined the rule about the conduct of their sexual relations to the bedchamber, a true stroke of genius. He was enjoying himself immensely and quickly concluded that the execution of tedious correspondence should always been done in the presence of a voluptuous naked woman. In a better-regulated world, such attendance would figure as a wifely duty.

He rather liked that her hair was pinned up for the day, because its arrangement

emphasized her nakedness. Such a lovely angle he had on that nakedness, too. Her shoulders sloped beautifully to rounded arms. Her breasts were magnificent with pretty nipples of the palest pink, her waist was curvaceous, and she had just the slightest, most enticing belly. He loved her breasts, but at the moment he decided it was her arse he preferred. He imagined asking her to change positions, to get on all fours and raise her arse up and toward him. On second thought, if she did that, he would cease working and take her. No, he wouldn't ask her to change positions, because her gratification was not part of her punishment.

And gratified she would be, because he could tell she was aroused. Her nipples had puckered. Her sweet musk wafted lightly in the air. He saw her arousal on her face – or, rather, he could see her attempts to not display it. Her eyes were cast down, but he had no doubt her pupils were dilated. He now had a new view from which to admire the curve of her cheeks to the curves of her shoulders and breasts. Beautiful harmony.

He glanced at her from time to time, but he did not need to be looking at her continuously in order to derive pleasure from her presence. He could tell she was in some emotional turmoil, but he guessed that on balance those emotions were pleasurable, even titillating. He had known she had been unhappy at breakfast, but he completely underestimated the degree of misery she experienced. She was so unexpectedly sexually playful at times that he did not suspect how easily she could be wounded and how closely she guarded her heart.

Despite these blind spots, he was coming to the conclusion his wife was not as transparent as he might have first thought. He had been accustomed to the cajolery and flattery of mistresses who coyly fished for compliments. He did not know what to make of a woman who had frank sexual interest but no turn for sweet-talking, one who blurted an interest in mistresses on their wedding night, playfully angled for a spanking on his return from London and expressed a curiosity about sexual relations with other men while wrapped in his arms.

He recalled her smirk during their exchange (clothed, unfortunately, which put him at a disadvantage) upon his return from London. He saw a way to turn the tables.

After a good hour of silence he said, "The third item on the list you left for me last week concerned discrepancies in Jonathan's budget that added up to a large deficit."

She looked up at him, her siren's eyes wide with an emotion whirling somewhere between bemusement and befuddlement.

Perfect! He had dumbfounded her. "Do you remember it?"

She wrinkled her brow, still looking up at him in wonderment. "Almost five hundred pounds, yes. I'm not likely to forget it."

"An enormous sum."

"Indeed and might represent the entire annual expenses of a thriving enterprise in London."

He nodded. "I did some digging and discovered that, three years ago, Jonathan lost the money in some risky government consol bonds."

"Oh?" she said. Then, "Oh. He tried to plug the budgetary holes with money he didn't have and made quite a mull of the books, didn't he?"

He hummed his confirmation. "And this digging on my part produced the news, confirmed by my solicitors yesterday, that Jonathan subsequently attempted to right his wrong by buying a different set of bonds, and these are currently worth three hundred pounds."

"A handsome sum," she said. "What are you going to do with it?"

He let her absorb the information that she was not the only one who knew her way around money before saying, "I'll wait until I've gone through the accounts at Hanover House in town and see what is needed where."

So saying he stood up and reached a hand down to her to help her up. When he met her gaze he was taken aback by the strength of the desire in her eyes. Her silent entreaty was as naked as she was herself. He was on the verge of giving in, giving her what she wanted, but he pulled himself back, knowing that if he gave in to her now, his control over her in this domain would unravel.

She placed her hand in his and rose to her feet. He said, "I thank you for your obedience, my dear."

Her gaze never wavered. Her desire was as clear as her demand.

It was a test of wills. He was determined to win.

He said, "You may get dressed now."

She looked down at the puddle of her clothing and frowned. "Can you help me? I doubt it's a good idea to call Annie."

He helped her, although touching her put his decision not to be intimate right then and there to a severe test. Once she was put to respectable rights, she turned to go. Before she arrived at the door, he said to her back,

"We'll resume our usual arrangement tonight. I'll demand you try again what you did last night, and this time I'll reward you with a nice spanking."

At that she turned to look at him over her shoulder. The glance she sent him was full of speculation and promise. She said, "You have my complete and continuing obedience."

He could not complain. His little wren was quite the saucy minx.

Not long after the titillating incident in the library, he felt he could spare some days in town. He wanted to set about putting things in order at Hanover House, and he wanted to gad about town with his wife. Thus, one morning at breakfast he said,

"I'm planning to go to London the day after tomorrow for a few days, my dear. Although town is thin of company this time of year, a few of my set will be attending a special sale at Tattersall's."

"Oh, are you a member of the Jockey Club?"

"I am."

She looked impressed. "Oh my, very exclusive. Are you in the market for horses? I had thought Thornton Park well stocked."

"A stable can always use another fine horse," he said. "Mostly I thought it would be a good opportunity for you to come with me and meet a few people, although we aren't yet fully out in society." He smiled his most winning smile. "You might enjoy getting to know Hanover House and the running of it."

"I'm sure I would," she replied promptly, "however I'm so sorry I won't be able to join you, because Mrs. Wroxton is coming for her visit three days from now."

"Mrs. Wroxton?" he repeated. The name sounded familiar.

"Richard's affianced wife," she reminded him. "Well more than a month has passed since the day after our marriage –"

"When Richard's nose was out of joint," he broke in, recalling the breakfast and his new brother-in-law's appalling intrusion.

"It was rather, wasn't it?" she agreed with a moue of rebuke for her brother, "and you'll remember I put Richard's ill humor to rest by offering to host Mrs. Wroxton here at Thornton Park. She and I will be finalizing the details of their wedding, which is planned for next month. She wants a September wedding in Surrey, you see, when the air is a bit cooler and the fields are still so full and lovely."

He had reason to be vexed at Richard a second time over the matter of this wedding – and now that he was keeping score, he bethought himself of the times Richard had

leaned on Charlotte in recent days for one thing or another, sometimes involving Sebastian, sometimes not. He would be happy when Richard was remarried and no longer had an excuse to lean on Charlotte.

Disappointed though he was, he kept his tone light and his smile in place when he said, "So be it."

A tiny crease formed between her eyes. "I thought I had reminded you of the visit last week." She shook her head. "But now I can't remember if I did or not, and if I did not, I'm sorry."

He couldn't remember whether or not she had reminded him of their houseguest, but it hardly mattered, because either way she was not to accompany him. The idea of cancelling his plans to town had only to occur to him to be dismissed. He could not let her think she controlled his movements.

So he went to London, attended the special sale at Tattersall's, caroused in a modest fashion at his clubs and made his first forays into the Hanover House accounts. The days he spent alone were salubrious, because unlike his first visit, when he had endeavored to put Charlotte out of his mind, this time he allowed his thoughts to dwell on her when she came to mind.

One afternoon, while seated at his desk in the library, he put his pen down after a thought popped into his head: his wife's calm and competence had so far exceeded his first imaginings of her suitability that he was willing to entertain the idea that his spur-of-the-moment decision to marry her was not the final flowering of a long incubated plan. Rather, it was a case of dumb luck.

His world after Jonathan's death had all but collapsed, and Charlotte was helping to restore it to order more quickly and easily than he could have imagined. Furthermore, she was so far from any woman he had ever sought out that he did not know what or how to think about her beyond their legal, economic and sexual bond. He liked her. This much was obvious to him. Apparently many people did. But did he have tender feelings for her?

Having never been prey to sentimental romantic attachments himself, he felt the question deflect off him and land on her. Interesting to consider what might be her feelings for him, and so he attempted to do so ...

... and drew a blank.

He stood up abruptly and walked the few steps to one of the long windows. Looking out over the square, lined with grand houses, the center shaded by mature trees, he was shocked to realize that his little wren was not only not transparent emotionally, she was completely opaque. With a turn of mirthless humor he began to suspect he was not as good a judge of character as he might have thought.

He caught flashes of emotion from her, now and then, but they were elusive. And she had never asked him anything of a personal nature. Certainly she was sexually responsive to him, and he must suppose she liked him. He hoped he had given her no reason not to, because he had entered the union much like he approached a social engagement, the difference being that in marriage he played the role of agreeable guest and thoughtful host both at once.

Coming to no conclusion on his wife's emotional state he pushed the matter from the center of his thoughts and returned to his work. Nevertheless, the topic of her feelings for him began to intrigue him. Gently simmering in the back of his mind strategies for discovering her state of mind and heart bubbled and popped.

He spent a bit more time in the city than he had anticipated, meeting with his solicitors and studying up on The Exchange so he could understand why his brother's investment in governmental consols had gone awry while the India Bonds were doing well. He had half a mind to buy some Old Annuities. However, like his decision to pass on one or two of the showy horses at Tattersall's whose high stepping had drawn his admiration, he would dip his toes into investing only once he had his entire financial situation well in hand and firmly in mind.

Chapter Fifteen

Charlotte was appreciative of the note her husband sent ahead apprising her of his return date. For some reason, before he left for town this time around she had received the impression he meant to stay a week or less. However his time away had stretched to two weeks, meaning he had found sufficient diversions, which she resolutely didn't think about. It was an advantage to know when he was to return. It gave her a chance to collect herself.

He arrived toward the end of a beautiful summer's afternoon in one of the earliest days of September. She left the house to greet him by way of the doors in the main saloon leading to a terrace. He was crossing from the stables toward the terrace, as she guessed he would. When he saw her he hastened his step, and when they were face to face he lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. She felt the pleasurable tingle all the way up her arm and across her shoulder.

He dropped her hand. She stepped away and curtsied slightly. She felt the same jumble of emotions upon seeing him again this time as she had the first time he returned to her from London. She looked toward the house, as a way of avoiding seeing anew how attractive he was, and said, "You'll tell me all about your adventures in London at dinner, which brings me to my first question: What time would you like it?"

He followed her lead and fell into step beside her. "An hour from now will do."

She braved a glance at him again. "Since you're apparently not sharp set enough to demand to eat immediately I'll guess you had a latish lunch at The Bridge."

He smiled. "Your guess is correct. I also want a chance to clean up."

She glanced away and wondered whether she would ever grow tired of his smile. She informed him, "You'll be happy to know Bailey arrived some hours ago."

As they entered the house by way of the main saloon he said, "Yes, I sent him ahead this morning. He's not accustomed to travel, so I'm a trial to him."

"Do you have any desire for a replacement for Kingsley in town? I'm sure I can find you a manservant with no trouble."

The look he sent her set her insides to quivering. "You've offered more than once."

"Only one other time," she objected, in case he thought she was nagging him. "Last week, I think, in correspondence."

"Which makes this time more than once," he riposted. "I'm quite sure you can find me a manservant, dear wife, and it's not that I don't trust you, but think! If you find me someone, I would never be sure you hadn't planted a spy."

He was teasing her, as he sometimes did. She ventured, "Oh? What goes on in your dressing room is so interesting? I wouldn't have thought."

This mild nonsense came to an end when they stepped into the hallway near the main entrance. He stopped, looked up and down the hall then at her. His brows raised in inquiry he asked, "Is there something going on? There seems to be quite a lot of activity in the house. It's not usually like this, is it? Especially not at this hour."

She laughed and enjoyed the feeling on stepping onto the firm ground of household matters in his presence. "Yes, indeed, there is something going on. The wedding is in just a few days, and there is quite a lot to do."

He frowned. "So soon?"

She laughed again. "I wrote you – over a week ago it was – with some of the particulars of Mrs. Wroxton's visit. I believe I also reminded you of the date of the wedding."

"I'm sure you did," he said, somewhat vaguely. "Time must have slipped away."

"There's no harm. If you had stayed away another day or two, I would have written to call you home."

He looked at the servants busily darting in and out of rooms. "But the ceremony is in the village and all other activities are at Wiley Cross." He paused, as if searching a memory then said, "And I'm quite sure you told me the wedding was to be small."

"I think my exact description was 'not large.' First of all, you should know that a good housewife never wastes a social event, even if she is not the principal hostess. It's always an opportunity to muster staff pride and spruce things up, and I mean to take full advantage of it. Then, too, you should also know that although most guests will be housed at Wiley Cross, a few of my friends – our friends – will stay here."

He gave his head a shake. "You've told me as much, yes, I recall now. Truly my head was in other matters."

She confined her reply to a nod. "I'll excuse myself now to make myself useful in the kitchens while you seek your chambers."

Before he left to go up the main staircase he said suddenly, "The Lovehorns, the Harveys and the Nortons are to be our guests, are they not?"

She turned, pleased he remembered these mundane details and surprised by the penetrating look in his eye. "Yes, as we agreed. I hope the arrangement is still acceptable."

His smile was particularly charming. "It's an excellent arrangement."

At dinner she did not ask him about what had preoccupied him in town. She simply listened to his account of his comings and goings, asked questions when appropriate and looked for any sign that he was other than what he appeared to be: a man happy to be home. That night they resumed their marital congress, and since these activities were always welcome to her, she was satisfied.

In the early afternoon two days before the wedding George and Laura Lovehorn arrived at Thornton Park. Later that afternoon Thomas and Emma Harvey made their appearance. The next morning came Charles and Elizabeth Norton. That evening, namely the day before the wedding, Charlotte organized a dinner at Wiley Cross for all the guests, which numbered forty. She made sure that Mrs. Wroxtton was understood to be the hostess of the event, although for the sake of propriety this lady was staying in the village with Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone until she became the new Mrs. Wiley.

Charlotte could not have been happier. She loved being among her friends. She loved being at Wiley Cross conferring behind the scenes with her former staff. She loved making sure all the guests were well tended and that Mrs. Wroxtton was the star of the show.

When the dinner was over the gentlemen finished their port and joined the ladies in

the main saloon. Charlotte was circulating and tending to tea, after which she stepped to the side to observe.

At one point she found her husband at her side. He queried, "Enjoying yourself, my dear?"

"Immensely," she said with great satisfaction.

"It's all your doing, isn't it?"

They were standing at a bit of a remove from the main action in the room, which happened to be Laura telling an absurd story of social disaster to the delight of her audience. Since she sat next to Amelia Wroxton, it was to this lady Laura was principally telling her story (while graciously including everyone else), and so it was the bride-to-be who was the center of attention – as well she should be, in Charlotte's opinion.

"Even down to the seating arrangements, I'd say," he added.

She saw no reason to deny it. "I have a very managing disposition, as I've already told you."

"And which is why you married me," he pointed out, rather provocatively, "so you'd have more than a house in the village to manage."

Good heavens, she had acknowledged as much on their wedding night! She laughed and tossed back, "You married me for my money, so we're an unscrupulous pair."

"Yes, we are," he said. "Tell me, does managing require you to stay on the sidelines?"

A particularly warm note in his voice when he said *Yes we are* drew her gaze to him. Did she see something flicker in the depths of his eyes? Although he was always correct with her, he seemed to be on the verge of flirting. Because she had never been on the receiving end of the art, she could not know for sure. She glanced away again, her unruly heart flipping in uncertain happiness.

She glanced back and wagged her forefinger. "You can't manage from the center. So you could say that at this very moment and exactly where I'm standing I'm in high croak."

He chuckled appreciatively. With a nod toward the circle of guests rapt in Laura's story, he said, "I see. The queen and her court think they're in charge of the proceedings, but they're not. You are."

To this bit of teasing she said on a laugh, "I don't manipulate, I connect." She had never put it this way before, so she embroidered a bit on the idea. "I like to connect

people, yes. This person should know that person. That person should know this person."

"And their rank doesn't matter."

"Not at all," she replied then amended, "Well, it helps to know rank in order for the connections to be done in the right way."

"So, the sidelines is it for you?"

"You can get so much more done when whatever you want to do is not about you," she replied. "If that's the sidelines, then yes."

He paused long enough for her to think she had surprised him. Finally, he said, "I would like an example."

"This very gathering."

He cocked his head. "My dear?"

"There are forty people here this evening, including you and me and, most importantly, Eleanor, which makes me happy she could attend this event, as well as everything tomorrow. I figured forty to be just at the limit of whom I could invite, because you are still in mourning, as is Eleanor. Our wedding was naturally limited to six and everyone understood, but I knew this low number wouldn't fly with Amelia. In fact I had to gently steer her away from thoughts of inviting a hundred guests, because attending such a sizable social gathering would have been in very poor taste for you, and Eleanor would not have been able to attend at all."

"I do believe 'gently steer' is equivalent to manipulating," he pointed out.

She opened her mouth to contradict him then conceded, "Call it benign manipulation if you like. I'm happy when more than one person's interests are served."

"So you chose the number forty, to limit any negative consequences for me and in order to include Eleanor."

"Ah, I couldn't merely choose the number forty. I had to *argue* for it. You see, I let all potentially interested parties know the guest list well ahead of time and the rationale for each guest. That way, anyone who felt they should have been invited would understand why they weren't, and no one would hear about it after the fact and then gossip negatively about it."

"And how was news of the guest list received?"

"Everyone expressed their understanding, sent their good wishes to the happy

couple and asked after Eleanor.”

“I applaud your methods, but they sound exhausting.”

“I didn’t do it alone. Laura did her part in town, as did Emma and Elizabeth, and of course Sarah and Catherine, that is, Mrs. Johnstone and Miss Bromley, have friends and family all over this corner of the world.”

He turned to her and presented her with a brief, formal bow. “I am in awe, and I congratulate you. And now a thought occurs to me. You once told me that ... let me see, how did you put? ... you are forever careering about the countryside because you have so many people to see. I’m assuming you had that freedom even before you became a respectable married woman hardly two months ago.”

She had never really thought about it before. “Perhaps owing to the fact that I took on the role of mother at seventeen and went out so often in company with Richard I was considered more of a matron.” She held up her hands and spoke honestly, “I’ve lived here my whole life. Everyone is used to me, so I suppose I’m looked upon as a comfortable old shoe no one really notices they’re wearing.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “Speaking as the husband, I prefer to think of you as a soft slipper. The image is, needless to say, for me and me alone.”

Flattered, aroused, surprised, perplexed, embarrassed – she hardly knew how she felt. She could manage only a weak “Thank you, sir” before she felt the need to firmly turn the subject. “I hope you’ve had a chance to greet everyone. Miss Bromley was so pleased earlier this evening when you remembered her by name.”

Their conversation didn’t last much longer. She stayed where she was a few moments more, savoring her happiness.

It lasted another ten minutes and then was shattered.

Because they would be leaving soon she went outside to see to the two carriages that would take the party of eight back to Thornton Park. The vehicles had been parked on a side drive. Upon returning to the house, she took a dirt path she often used that skirted the garden. The night being very fine, guests were circulating outside. She walked past two women whose backs were to her at the very moment one of them said,

“Can you believe it? He married her?”

The other replied, “Quite astonishing.”

She hurried her step and diverted her direction down another path leading away from the house. At one point she stopped, put her hands on her midriff and bent

over in pain. One of the women was definitely Amelia's sister. The other might have been Amelia's cousin or even her aunt. Charlotte had only first met them this day and so wasn't sure who was who in the dark.

Sidelines, sidelines, sidelines. No, she didn't even want to be on the sidelines because they were too close to the stage. Here on a darkened path at a remove from unfriendly eyes was where she wished to stay. But she couldn't. She had picked herself up before. She would do it again.

But the night was ruined.

It only got worse when Max did not come to her bedchamber.

Chapter Sixteen

Upon returning to Thornton Park Max invited his friends into his library whereupon they shed their coats and loosened their ties. Max liberated several bottles of aged scotch from a liquor cabinet, gathered a few glasses and set them on a tea table in the center of a seating arrangements. They splashed their glasses liberally and got comfortable in their chairs.

Since they were all wealthy landed gentlemen they spoke of farming in general and the harvest in particular, which topics led to the upcoming shooting season, the hunt and the various improvements they planned for their estates.

Max was much struck by the shift in his relationship to these old friends then turned the idea the other way around: they had shifted their relationship to him. They were of an age with him, and he had known each one for more than ten years. But it was only now that he was included as one of them, married and in charge of a large estate. Before he'd been the younger son and a carefree bachelor, and they had likely treated him like one.

Max didn't know if they were conscious of the change, but now he was being asked his opinion on tenants and other things about which he would have quipped, as recently as four months ago, "Ah, you lucky first sons! I'm forever to be deprived of such arcane knowledge."

When Lovehorn got up to go to the liquor cabinet and returned with a bottle of brandy, he briefly clapped Max on the shoulder as he passed by. Settling back in his chair he said, "On the way home Laura told me that your Charlotte was likely responsible for everything that happened this evening. You could have fooled me. I thought the Wroxton woman was in charge of the festivities. Whoever did them, they were well done!"

Murmurs of assent followed the last remark. Max didn't think Charlotte would want him to confirm Laura's suspicions, so he said merely, "She likely helped. It would be

only natural, since our estates are so close.”

“And she was once in charge of Wiley Cross,” Lovehorn added, “or so I’ve inferred from various things Wiley has said over the years.”

“Perhaps,” Max agreed.

“And now Thornton Park?”

“She takes care of the household, yes. I take care of everything else.” He did not mention that she had alerted him to the five hundred pound problem in his budget. He did say, “Her grasp of things makes my job easier.”

“Wiley was grumbling tonight about losing her to you,” Harvey said. “I’m sure you’ll be happy when this wedding business is over and Charlotte’s attention isn’t divided.”

Max raised his glass to that. “Here, here.”

Norton sighed. “First you think you’ll never marry. Then you meet someone, and even then you don’t want to end your bachelorhood. Finally you can’t do without her.”

With the liquid warming his innards and relaxing his thoughts Max had the dreamy idea that perhaps Norton was right.

They spoke of their wives and children for a bit then talk moved on to the business ventures both failed and successful in the latest news circulating around town. Finally the hour became so late that when they decided to retire Max did not think it fair to wake Charlotte, especially after all she had done this day and the days preceding.

The next morning, he knew it behooved him as host to arrive early at the dining room. Sure enough Charlotte was already there, standing at the buffet fiddling with various covered dishes, despite the presence of two footmen who would be serving. He crossed to her side to take her hand by way greeting, and when he did her smile was tight and her gaze did not meet his.

Thinking she must be preoccupied with tasks, since her mood was clearly so different than her buoyant one of the evening before, he asked, “What can I do to help?”

She looked at him then, as if surprised by the question. “Thank you for asking, but there is nothing for you to do except eat a little something now. You already know we’ll be leaving here around ten o’clock for the church after which we’ll have lunch at Wiley Cross.”

He was going to mention that he and the others had had a late night of it and he hadn't wanted to disturb her by coming to her bed. However, at that very moment, Laura and George entered the dining room, and he didn't think Charlotte would appreciate anyone overhearing his remark and making the obvious inference.

Charlotte greeted her guests then made some noise about something left undone and disappeared into the kitchens. Truly disappeared. He was glad he had shown up early and was on hand to preside as host, since the hostess was nowhere to be seen.

As the guests assembled in the dining room the only remark on Charlotte's absence was Emma Norton's laughing, "And where is our dear Charlotte? Likely at Wiley Cross in the kitchen!"

He didn't see her again until they were ready to get in the carriages to take them to the church. He was pleased to see her in an improved mood. She was more relaxed and her smiling interactions with her guests seemed genuine.

Apparently the soon-to-be new Mrs. Wiley had more of a taste for pomp than did Charlotte, for the ceremony in the village church was quite a bit more elaborate than theirs had been. To be fair he had no idea what kind of marriage ceremony Charlotte would have preferred had there been time and lack of mourning to take into consideration. On second thought, as he sat next to his wife in the front row, listening to Vicar Allen go much more smoothly through his lines than he had with them, he thought Charlotte would under any circumstance likely have wanted a practical occasion with few frills. He added the caveat: unless she thought she was entering a love match.

Interesting thought.

When Max noticed the vicar's gaze stray to Charlotte a second time, he took his wife's hand in his and covered it with his other hand. Charlotte looked at him with an unreadable expression in her siren's eyes. He briefly turned up the corners of his lips. With her hand in his he suddenly realized himself to be quite hare-brained. He had initially thought the guests in his household would give him an opportunity to discover the state of his wife's heart. He saw now that one did not find out about such a delicate matter simply by asking someone else about it.

The ceremony ended. The wedding party moved on. The luncheon at Wiley Cross was perfect, as expected. Max felt again the sense of a new identity and understood how marriage was not just a bond with a woman it was also a bond with a community, a kind of belonging and a kind of responsibility. He liked it. It suited him. As if dropping in from another planet, he wondered, with a wry turn of humor, *Hmm, just how long has this whole marriage business been going on?*

An afternoon ride was in order. Ten couples, including the new bride and groom,

went to their respective quarters to change clothes, after which they saddled up and met at the stream, which Richard claimed to run on Wiley Cross property.

"Thornton Park property, my good man," Max contested.

"It's the boundary between the two," Charlotte said diplomatically, "and I'm the only one of the three of us with the authority to make the claim."

Then they were off, cantering across sun-drenched fields of harvest green and gold. It was to be expected such a large group of riders would break off into smaller ones, and as they began to form smaller parties Max maneuvered to separate Charlotte from the others. Presently the two of them were trotting along a bridle path on Thornton Park property Max knew well, heading toward a copse.

At a break in the thicket of trees Max drew rein and dismounted then helped Charlotte down.

"What is this?" she asked, looking around.

"Our nest for the next bit of time," he said, with a gesture ushering her into a secluded space.

Her eyes widened and then she looked around furtively. "We can't! Everyone will know we went off."

"Every group will think we're with a different one. Come. We need to make up for last night."

Some expression flitted across her face so quickly he hardly registered it. He took her chin in hand and lifted it so she would have to look him in the eyes. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said, with a small shake of her head. "No, really, nothing."

"You didn't think I didn't come to you last night because I didn't want to, did you?"

She blushed. "No, I guessed you were with your friends, downstairs."

"We were very late, and I imagined you had been asleep long since."

"Which makes your early arrival in the dining room this morning all the more impressive."

He bowed slightly and replied, "Country hours."

Seeing how much she liked his remark, he pulled her into the thicket and took appropriate advantage. Soon she was naked. With his arms full of delicious skin he

pressed his nose to her nape, took a deep breath and said, "Earthy."

She took his face in her hands and turned him to look at her. Her silvery eyes were already swimming with lust. She challenged, "Did you just say I smell like dirt?"

He reared back enough to take off his shirt. "I know what you want, naughty wife," he said and proceeded to give her everything she wanted and more.

When they were both sated, they were lying on their sides on a bed of leaves, her back to his front. With his arm around her waist he could feel her belly when she silently chuckled.

"What?" he asked.

"Now I really do smell like dirt."

He rubbed his nose into her hair. "Delicious." Then he said, "I'm planning another trip to Hanover Square in a few days. I'm selling my house on Upper Curzon Street along with the horses. They're an unnecessary expense. I thought I could do the sale from here, but there are too many details to settle from a distance. I'd like you to come with me."

She paused then turned in his arms to look at him over her shoulder when she said, "But Sebastian will be coming to Thornton Park tomorrow when Richard and Amelia embark on their wedding journey."

He searched his memory. "Did I not hear that Sebastian would be spending the week with one of his cousins?"

"Sadly, no, and it was more of a step-cousin from Jane's side of the family. We have such a small family, as you know. The offer seemed promising at first but, alas, it fell through. Perhaps it's for the best. Sebastian will have the week with me or us, if you're here."

He had the oddest sense she had just lied, flat out, to his face. He let the matter drop. If he pressed, she could easily cover her lie.

He had not consciously planned for this second invitation to join him in London to occur in a weak moment when she was awash in the pleasures of lovemaking. However, he had thought that perhaps his first invitation, delivered at the breakfast table, had been too business-like. This second invitation was spur-of-the-moment.

So. The next week he would go to town as planned, and he would do what he needed to do, which would include dining with the Lovehorns. He was sure he could find a way for Laura to come up with the perfectly brilliant idea of hosting a small, mourning-respectable party for Max and Charlotte in London in October.

Chapter Seventeen

The morning of the wedding Charlotte awoke with a headache. She had slept badly and dreamt of savage birds of prey. She was not going to make it through the day if she didn't talk with someone. As quickly as she was able, she escaped to the Dower House and the shady garden where Charlotte knew Eleanor took breakfast, weather permitting.

"Good heavens," Eleanor said upon seeing Charlotte. "Is there a problem?"

"Not with anything to do with the wedding plans," Charlotte said, taking a seat at the wrought iron table.

When she eyed the basket of muffins, Eleanor invited her to have one.

"I can't eat a bite," she said, her stomach churning unpleasantly. "I'm sorry to intrude on the only part of your day where I know you have it absolutely to yourself, but I have to ask you two questions, and I have to be far, far away from the house."

Eleanor passed Charlotte a cup of tea, which was all the encouragement Charlotte needed. She proceeded to tell Eleanor the story of Amelia's relatives talking behind her back.

"But you were not named by name," Eleanor objected.

"Who else could they have been talking about? Especially since they had never met me before."

"I can answer your question. They were likely still talking about that harpy Lady Marsh who was a favored topic of discussion last night, which you would have known if you had taken part!"

Charlotte had heard of this lady but only vaguely. "What about her?"

"She somehow got that very stupid and very rich Baron Godfrey to marry her, when the whole world knows she has slept with every other peer of the realm and is in fantastic debt."

"You're remarkably well informed."

"I am now as of last night."

Charlotte was reassured. What she had overheard had likely been about another woman. That made sense. Her appetite returned. She helped herself to a muffin. They chatted amiably until Eleanor asked,

"Now, what's your second question?"

Charlotte shook her head. "It's gone now." She had overreacted to what she had thought were unkind remarks aimed at her and said in cruelty behind her back. It now followed that her husband had not come to her last night because he had been up late. He may have also been drinking and didn't want to come to her inebriated.

Eleanor stretched out her hand and laid it on Charlotte's forearm. "Please, please, dear sister, change your way of thinking. You have to confront something. I don't know what it is. Only you do."

Charlotte was silent.

Eleanor continued, "Several of us saw you and Max speaking together in a corner last night, and when he brought your hand to his lips, I thought we were going to swoon. It was a gallant gesture. A lover's gesture."

Yes, yes, that had been a special moment. The phrase *soft slipper* floated through her mind. She sighed heavily. "I'm so glad I came. Thank you, dearest Eleanor." She rose. "I'll send someone around to fetch you when we're leaving for the church."

The rest of the day had passed pleasantly and as planned, even desirously and unplanned (on her part) given their passages in the copse, until that moment when Max ambushed her with an invitation to London.

Just to be on the safe side and in case Eleanor had been wrong about the target of Amelia's relatives' discussion, Charlotte hastily invented the story about Sebastian staying at Thornton Park while his father and new mother were on their wedding journey. At the same time she schemed to undo the plans already in place for Sebastian to spend a week with his cousin from his mother's side of the family. She would find a way to make sure he would spend the week with her at Thornton Park.

Not but a week and a half later, Charlotte was calmly attending to her correspondence at breakfast when she eagerly opened a letter from Laura. She began reading and her smile immediately reversed itself into a frown.

"Anything the matter, my dear?" her husband asked from across the table.

She collected herself. "Oh, no," she said, summoning a smile. "I misread a line, but now I see everything is just fine in the Lovehorn household. Just fine."

Her husband's response was noncommittal.

She returned her attention to the news Laura had sent her. It seemed her dear

friends – all three of them, which included Emma and Elizabeth – were inventing ways to circumvent proper mourning befitting her husband's household in order to celebrate Charlotte's marriage in some public way, in October, well in advance of the Season. And in London, no less.

Charlotte was determined to find equally inventive ways to nip their ideas in the bud. Propriety had weight. She would wield it in her favor.

She finished her breakfast and set about the day's duties. She was grateful for all she had to do, because her household activity occupied her thoughts front and center while her emotions simmered with a very different sort of problem. It had been waiting in the wings all these weeks. She had felt its presence the very moment Max had offered for her, but it had retreated. Now it had swooped out of hiding to perch on her shoulder. A vicious black hawk cawed,

"Little fool!"

She recalled the fear mixed with surprise, elation, and disbelief that had coursed through her at the moment of Max's proposal. Now she could identify the source of that fear. It was the fear of being seen with him. These past weeks she had been perfectly content to remain comfortable and cozy in the gentle embrace of her friends and family in Surrey. She dreaded facing the critical eyes of London society as Max's wife. It did not bear thinking on.

Try as she might, she failed to dissuade her friends of the need for a party. At some point in her correspondence, Eleanor's words came to her: *You have to face something. I don't know what it is. Only you do.*

She had to face going to London with Max and being seen with him. She couldn't put it off forever, but she could organize her social life there to be as inconspicuous as possible. She would find a way to be buffered by her loving friends, off center stage and well on the sidelines. She was sure her friends would understand.

As it turned out they did, to a certain extent.

October came, as it inevitably would, and Charlotte, equally inevitably, entered Blackwell House as its mistress. Because she already knew the families of part of the staff so well, she settled into her role with no difficulty. Her arrival in London as the new Lady Blackwell was off to a good start. The next day Laura's visit further allayed Charlotte's initial fear at the prospect of being in town with her husband.

"Thank you for coming," Charlotte greeted her friend. "Now you can see me in all my grandeur and help me make plans for the house, as you urged me more than once during the wedding at Wiley Cross."

"Most happy to help!" Laura replied. "Indeed, the house is very grand. And how

fortunate that Norton House is just as spacious and across the square from you." Her brows shot up in anticipation. "Oh, the party Emma is planning!"

"About that –" Charlotte began, leading her friend into one of the well-appointed saloons as she motioned for a tea service to be brought.

"Not another word," Laura interrupted. "Your responses to the idea were perfectly civil, but I could read between the lines and saw you weren't as enthusiastic about the idea as Emma and Elizabeth and I were. So we decided not to associate your wedding with Emma's event next week, which Emma was then free to turn into a slightly larger event, more like a *soirée*. Only Emma and Elizabeth and I – and then, of course, you and Max – will know that the event is in any way connected to you as a celebration."

"So it's to be a private understanding among us, then?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes, and I'm guessing this is what your dear husband wants, as well."

"Oh?"

"When he dined with us last month," Laura said, "the idea of such a celebration came to me, and when I voiced it, Max – very correctly! – expressed some hesitation about any acknowledgement of your marriage that might offend Society, given the circumstances. He was appreciative of my desire to do something for the two of you, but it seemed he would not be comfortable with anything large or public."

"Oh?" Charlotte repeated.

"You know he dined with us when he was in town?"

"Yes, he mentioned it, of course," Charlotte acknowledged, "however, he said nothing to me about having discussed your plans for the event."

Laura shrugged. "Husbands rarely take an interest in social events. He would never even have remembered our exchange by the time he saw you next."

As they settled themselves on a charming settee, Charlotte wondered if her husband's memory was truly so selective.

The tea tray arrived, and Charlotte was feeling better and better about Emma's *soirée*. No grand ball. No dancing. No one to think of her as a guest of honor. A damping response to the proceedings from her husband. All good signs of an occasion where she could blend into the background and perhaps even enjoy herself.

Their discussion veered toward the gowns, whereupon Laura informed Charlotte

she had already made an appointment for the two of them the next day with her favorite modiste.

"Madame Clarice on Chancery Lane," Laura said, "at ten o'clock in the morning. We have little time to spare and if we start tomorrow morning, we'll have time for more than just one fitting. We can have our breakfast afterwards."

"I'm eager to try Madame Clarice after hearing you sing her praises for so long, and you are always in the first stare of fashion."

"I'll choose a new shade of blue," Laura continued. "If I wear any other color George always teases. Now for you" – here Laura ran a critical eye over Charlotte – "I'm hoping we can find the exact shade of peach of your wedding gown, the one Eleanor told me was so becoming on you."

Charlotte was about to demur then stopped. This was the moment to change her way of thinking, as Eleanor had encouraged her to do – and as Laura had said for years on end. "Yes, the color was rather pretty, I think," she admitted, taking rare pleasure in accepting a compliment. With a burst of new-found confidence, she added, "I'd also like to try a new hair style. What fun we will have!"

The next morning's outing was indeed diverting, and they spent a pleasant hour at the modiste's. Madame Clarice took little time creating the idea for Laura's evening toilette, since Mrs. Lovehorn was her long-time client. Charlotte, on the other hand, was described by this fashion expert as, "A challenge, Lady Blackwell, but a good challenge. I'm sure I have the shade of peach you are looking for."

By the end of the first fitting Charlotte was feeling good. At the very end, however, her relative calm was roiled. She and Laura were at the door when a very pretty young woman entered the shop.

This was the moment Madame Clarice said, "Good-bye, Mrs. Lovehorn. Good-bye, Lady Blackwell, what a pleasure it is to serve you."

Charlotte felt the pretty young woman's eyes sweep over her. The woman's perfectly arched brows rose.

When they were outside the shop, Charlotte had to ask if Laura knew the woman.

Laura shook her head. "Not really. I've seen her, but she's not in our circle. I have a vague feeling she has a marquis in her family. Good enough birth, I'd say."

Charlotte also had to ask, "Did you see the look she gave me?"

Laura's expression turned arch. Her smile was crafty. "She gave you a look? Envy, my dear, envy. Get used to it!"

Charlotte did not think the woman's expression had been envious. It was rather contemptuous. Fear returned. The vicious black hawk on her shoulder squalled,

"Watch out!"

Charlotte wanted to spirit herself away to a darkened pathway behind her house at Wiley Cross where no one could see her. In reality she was standing on Chancery Lane in bright daylight, visible to all. She blurted, "I'm at a crossroads."

Laura gave her an enquiring look.

"Let's eat," she said. "I'm famished. I'll explain during our meal. What's it to be at this hour, breakfast or luncheon?"

"We'll decide at Grillon's. In Mayfair, which isn't so very far from here, but still I think we should take a hackney cab."

The discussion at luncheon was productive. Laura was delighted to see her dear friend open to rethinking her wardrobe, and she was sure Max had something to do with this newfound interest. Charlotte was inclined to agree that Max had helped her get on a new path of thinking of herself in feminine terms but was still somewhat fearful of it. However, she knew of no other way to face her demon, that vicious black hawk. She needed to look at him in the eye and stare him down. She wanted him off her shoulder, once and for all.

She boiled it down to this: "If I'm going to spend any time in town, which it seems I must, then practically speaking, I must establish a style of my own."

After they finished eating they returned to Madam Clarice's where Charlotte described to the clever modiste the cut of the bodice and the skirts of her wedding gown.

Madame Clarice was impressed. "With a figure such as yours, Lady Blackwell, I think it positively inspired to highlight the beauty of your collarbones. The rest speaks for itself! Your sister-in-law suggested the style for you, you say? I'd like to meet her!"

The length of the perfect shade of peach silk was brought out from the cutting room where it had not yet been worked on, and Madame Clarice began holding it up, here and there, pinning.

After a minute or two, Charlotte said, "No, no."

"Have the courage of your convictions," Laura said, bracingly. "It will be beautiful."

"I'm not referring to the style," she said, "but the color. The peach is right for my skin

tone, I agree, but with the cut it's too much. I want a more subdued color and effect. A shade of green, say, in the same saturation as the peach."

The hunt for the perfect green was extensive and ended only when Madame Clarice searched far back in her stock and found a bolt of mulberry silk shimmering between sea foam and new leaf. The moment she held it up to Charlotte standing in front of the cheval glass, all three women gasped.

Charlotte, who had never thought twice about an ensemble she wore not even once in her life, felt a tremor of elation.

Madame Clarice said in tones of respect, "Lady Blackwell, it is a honor to serve you."

Wiping a tear from her eye, Laura said, "I'm proud of you, Charlotte dear."

Chapter Eighteen

On the day of Emma's soirée the only question on her husband's mind at breakfast was whether they should walk across the square or take their carriage.

She had to laugh and decry his suggestion they take a carriage. "We can walk very well, I think, with no loss to our consequence!"

"That's not what our next-door neighbors think. I saw Norton the other day and he said the Bradleys always take their carriage, even if it's to transport them the fifty yards." He pinched her chin and patted her cheek. "When we arrive on foot, everyone will know my wife was raised in the country."

"Everyone knows it already," she scoffed at his teasing but was rather pleased by his mood, for it served to calm her down.

He had been light-hearted all day. While she was getting ready he came into her bedchamber with a long thin box in hand.

When he saw her in her dress from another era given modern touches by Madame Clarice, he stopped and stared then bowed deeply.

His stunned silence was better than a spoken compliment.

He recovered enough to say, "I had thought I was coming with something extravagant for you." He opened the box. "The Routledge diamonds." He held up the drop earrings. "But now I see they're mere accompaniments. Nevertheless I would appreciate it if you would wear them."

She loved the earrings the instant he helped her put them on. However, when he

placed the necklace around her throat, she balked.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked given her reaction. "You don't like it?"

"It's beautiful," she said, "but see how its V-shape is like an arrow pointing straight here." She touched her cleavage. "My décolletage is modest, and I don't wish to draw attention to this precise spot."

He withdrew the necklace and said, "Another husbandly lesson learned. Yes, I'm happy to keep that spot to myself."

She thought herself very brave to point out, "And the necklace takes away from my collarbones. You see, that's what the neckline is supposed to emphasize."

He ran his gaze across her décolletage. "More beautiful than diamonds," he said, adding playfully, "Could your collarbones be my favorite new body part of yours?"

She laughed.

"Try the bracelet, then. What do you think? Your arms are very pretty. I want to keep them to myself as well, but if some man wishes to admire your wrist, I will not object."

Thus it was by the time they crossed Hanover Square to Emma's elegant house ablaze with light, Charlotte was relaxed and encouraged to think the evening would be all right.

It began enjoyably enough, even though there were quite a few more guests than Charlotte had been led to believe – or the number of which she had willfully minimized in her mind. Max's black armband guaranteed they would be treated with both warmth and reserve, and Charlotte's friends had made it clear in advance to the invited guests that the new Lord and Lady Blackwell were attending the occasion more in the light of a neighborly gathering.

This explanation was easily swallowed by the majority who, unbeknownst at first to Charlotte, were very curious either to set eyes on her for the first time or to judge her anew as the unexpected choice of a very dashing man. Also unbeknownst to Charlotte were the whispers stirring about her and her husband.

After Laura's visit to Thornton Park in July, Laura had discreetly informed Emma and Elizabeth of her fascinating discussion with Charlotte concerning the activities on her wedding night. Emma had eventually unmoored Charlotte's little barque of a comment *It depends on what you're counting* by telling it to a friend outside their circle. Thereafter, it began to sail widely in the social sea and eventually created a wave of speculation about the new Lord and Lady Blackwell's sexual life that had swelled over the last few weeks. By this evening it had grown to proportions to

match the actual intensity of it.

The first hint of anything amiss in the evening came when Charlotte encountered Thomas and Susannah Wilford. Susannah was generous in her expressions of health and happiness for the newlyweds. Thomas was correct in offering his congratulations, but Charlotte, who had known him her whole life, could sense he was aggrieved. She also could not fail to notice the way his gaze roamed over her dress and lingered a half-second too long on her breasts.

The first thought to cross her mind was that Thomas did not approve of her husband. Perhaps Thomas knew something about Max's reputation that her women friends did not, and she felt a little quake of insecurity. The second thought to cross her mind was that Thomas did not approve of her being married.

Her second thought was confirmed when Thomas maneuvered her through a set of open doors out onto the balcony and a pleasant October night.

When she looked around and realized they were alone, she said, "Oh, Thomas, we've become separated from our party."

He slanted her a glance rich with emotion. Facing out into the gardens below, he put his hands on the stone balustrade and said quietly, "I always knew this day would come, and you would be married."

She placed her hands on the balustrade as well and let her gaze absorb itself in the soft dark before her. Deliberately misinterpreting his comment, she replied, "Well, then, you were more sanguine about my marital prospects than I ever was."

"Charlotte –" he began.

Her heart quickened. She cut him off with, "Don't say another word."

She suddenly saw he meant to declare himself. During these last seven years of his marriage to Susannah, he had always held Charlotte's hand in greeting longer than strictly necessary. He had always smiled at her more warmly than she was willing to acknowledge. He had always found ways for a private word or two with her, asking her how life was at Wiley Cross and how Sebastian was getting along.

She had chosen to interpret these exchanges as examples of the continuing affection of a childhood playmate. At larger social events he had always hovered near her. She thought he was good protection from judgmental eyes. Now she wondered if he had played a game of keep-away. He couldn't have her but neither could anyone else.

Thomas did not obey her injunction. "Does he love you? Well?"

Surely he did not expect her to answer such a ridiculous question.

As if he could not help himself, he asked, "Do you love him?"

She replied quietly but her voice rang with reproach, "Thomas."

She took a moment to catch her breath then hastily returned to the main saloon, leaving Thomas on the balcony. Her gaze searched for Max, but he was nowhere to be seen. She was a jumble of nerves, and she wondered how soon they could leave without seeming horribly rude.

As she made her way through the throng, looking for refuge, she tried to maintain her composure. She smiled at the many people who glanced her way – surely not speculatively, no, surely not – and stopped whenever guests wanted to introduce themselves, which was often.

By the time she found a quiet place on the sidelines, in the safe harbor of a duet of matrons paying court to the Duchess of Woodley, she began to suspect that she and she alone was the center of the attention of this occasion. She did not think her dear friends had meant to expose her in this way. She was quite sure they meant to do something special to please her. But she was too new to feeling good in her skin and confident of her looks to feel comfortable being the center of attention at an occasion attended by the most beautiful women in London.

"Charlotte!" Sarah Hamilton hailed her. "You're the very woman my two dear friends here want to meet."

Her unhappy suspicions were confirmed.

"Your dress is a sensation," Sarah said, eyeing her appreciatively. "Quite splendid."

"The idea was for the dress to suit me," she said, a little weakly, "and to blend in at the same time."

"I've known you forever, my dear, and love you like a daughter. I know you've lived your entire life retired in Surrey, but you're Lady Blackwell now. You're going to have to accustom yourself to some attention."

Chapter Nineteen

Max was standing on one side of the main saloon near an opening to a corridor leading to a balcony. He was idly twirling a glass of champagne and intermittently watching his wife on the other side of the ballroom converse with her many friends and acquaintances.

For the first fifteen minutes after their arrival, he had circulated with her. However, he had no desire to live in her pocket all evening, so he excused himself when she

fell into easy conversation with a group. He usually liked to be in the mix of the conversations, the drinking, and the cards in the side parlors, but tonight he did not miss these diversions. He was happy to survey the situation. To see what he could see.

At one moment he felt a clap on his shoulder. He turned toward a handsome older gentleman with a shock of white hair and crinkling blue eyes.

"Darden! Good to see you!" Max gave the man a hearty handshake.

"I've been looking for you," Darden said. "Didn't expect to find you on your own, but here you are. So many new turns in your life."

"I'm glad you've found me," Max replied. "I owe you a debt of gratitude."

The older gentleman immediately understood. "Yes, the rules," he said. He followed the line of Max's gaze to Charlotte. "So simple. So effective. So little known and practiced. Except by painters, of course. Artistic expression is only a small part of why painters choose to study the female nude. In point of fact, they know their models are aroused by their nakedness and the rapt attention of the artist on their bodies." He waved this away. "But I wander. Tell me. The rules, they're working well for you?"

"Famously."

"So I gathered," Darden said, "which is why I was looking for you."

Max frowned. *So Darden gathered?* Max looked at the man in inquiry.

"Your wife is causing a minor ruckus," Darden said. "Now, how do you think of her?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ruckus, yes," Darden repeated. "Once again: how do you think of her? What image do you have of her?"

Surprised by the question he answered, "She's my little wren."

Darden fixed his gaze on Charlotte at length then nodded. "Perfect. So different from your usual birds of paradise." To Max he said, "Well done! She's both airy and sedate, and she does an excellent job of hiding herself in the branches. Or she likely has until now. But tonight people have been interested enough in her to discover in her hiding place."

"But what's this about a ruckus?"

"Only that – for no reason I can quite identify – it has become widely believed you have a marked preference for your wife who, it is also widely believed, is extremely satisfied with your attentions."

Max thought of the speculative looks he continued to receive on occasion from respectable women. He felt a stab of anger to imagine the men in the room speculating about his wife. "Good God!" he said savagely under his breath, "Could the word my servants at Thornton Park spread about my wedding night have seeped into general knowledge?"

Darden dismissed the idea. "Don't think so. All servants from the big houses compare notes on their master's and mistress's nightly activities, but they always keep it among themselves. It's a matter of status and a competition they jealously keep to themselves."

"Then how does the speculation arise?"

"I am quite at a loss to explain it, dear boy. My best guess – not an entirely satisfactory one – is that your acquaintance has noticed you have shown no interest in mounting a mistress."

Max cracked a cynical laugh.

"Amusing, I agree. Or have you managed to hide one of your fine-plumed lady birds in some remote nest?"

Max shook his head.

"Any plans for one?"

"None."

"Why not?"

Max looked at Darden. The words *Because I love my wife* hovered on his lips, but he did not utter them. He shrugged.

"Well, then. It's customary to congratulate a man on his marriage, but we are not having that conversation. Instead I'll congratulate you on your choice."

Max was about to take offense.

"No, don't pucker up," Darden said. "I can see it from here, you know, the thick bluish purplish light around her, quite dense. It fairly pulses. The woman with whom she is speaking – Susannah Wilford, I believe – has a very thin pale yellow light. It hardly quivers. The difference between them is visible to me. And so what I really want to

know is this: how did you know to choose her?"

Max was about to say he had known her his whole life, she was a competent housekeeper, and she was already a friend to his sister-in-law and so could easily help with his four nieces. However, Darden clarified,

"I'm mean, quite frankly, how did you know she was a sexual natural?"

Max would not have tolerated the question from another man. He was not sure he could tolerate it from this one.

"I ask, dear boy, only because I thought I was the only one with the gift."

Max recalled Darden telling him, some years ago, how Max reminded him of a younger version of himself. However, he had said it in a context not necessarily complimentary to Max – or to Darden's younger self. Now Darden's comment was made as if Max were his equal. Max had the impression he had just been invited into a very exclusive club. He gave the question some thought.

"I overheard her speaking with her brother," Max said, "calmly resolving a problem he had created. I thought I could do no better than to have a wife like that. But now that you ask your question, I think I was responding not to what she said but rather to her voice." He put it into words. "She has a siren's voice" – adding – "and a siren's eyes." His heart suddenly filled with happiness. "Her voice is as beautiful as she is herself, inside and out."

The revelation gave him a lift of delight to sweep any self-doubts aside and to reimagine himself a jolly good judge of character, indeed. He congratulated himself to have chosen the perfect wife by following his best instincts. He recalled sitting at his desk when a phrase involving the word 'heart' had rattled around his brain. He had thought it might have been some kind of change of heart. Instead he now knew he had found his heart.

Darden looked at him, impressed. "I'm glad I asked. Now what are you going to do about her?"

Max was nonplussed. "Do?"

"I mean, other than enjoy her abundant charms."

Again, Max felt a spurt of anger that another man should speak of his wife in such a frankly sexual way. Nevertheless, Darden was a man who once boasted he could read the sexual energy of any woman at fifty paces and had just proven it. He was also the man who had created *The Rules*. It behooved Max to find out what he meant.

"Do you have a suggestion?"

"Protect her," Darden said in rather steely tones. "You were right to identify her as a little wren. Now you must do your job."

Max was suddenly anxious to be at Charlotte's side. He looked around but she had left the spot where he had last seen her.

"Go, my man," Darden recommended. "We've finished our conversation. I'm glad we had it."

Max agreed a bit absently that he, too, was glad they had spoken. As he moved through the crowd, he thought he glimpsed the skirts of a green dress, the shade of Charlotte's, sweep around the doors to the balcony. He made his way there but stopped when he heard the voices.

A man said, "Charlotte."

His wife replied, "Don't say another word."

Max peered around the corner and saw them standing a foot apart. Their backs were perfectly straight, their hands out resting on the stone coping, not touching. He withdrew and flattened himself against the interior wall.

The man persisted. "Does he love you? Well? Do you love him?"

Charlotte's answer was soft but vibrated with emotion. "Thomas."

Max did not wait to hear more. He made his way from the door toward an exit. The heart he had lately found turned to a hot burning coal inside his chest. When he had overheard Charlotte's conversation with Richard those few months ago, he had thought himself so clever to imagine Charlotte as the calm and competent housekeeper who could solve all his problems – and he had just congratulated himself on his cleverness. Overhearing her conversation with Thomas now, he had very different thoughts about himself, none of them at all flattering.

He was reminded of the old adage that eavesdroppers were rarely rewarded with glad tidings. Of those tidings only one word filled his ears. *Thomas*. Just that one word, ripe to bursting with Charlotte's emotions. He had heard it in her stinging reproach. Now in a jealous rage he interpreted it to mean, "Thomas, you should know better than to ask." Thomas, the man who had kissed her and married another. Thomas from Surrey. Thomas Wilford, surely. The man she couldn't have. The one she evidently had in mind when she had wondered *out loud!* what it would be like to be with another man.

Thomas. The one who should know better than to ask. The one who should know of

her undying love.

Max was in a state of shock so strong that hard truth broke through. He had married on a whim a woman he had thought he needed only to treat with respect and she would relieve him of crushing burdens. Instead, she rendered his old life dull, pleased him beyond measure, and had made him – dare he acknowledge it now? – happy. His delectable little wren, deep in a tree, nestling with him. And he had given not one thought – *not one thought* – to whether she had a preference for him. Oh, he knew he satisfied her sexually. Apparently everyone present knew that! But where had she given her heart?

He had been thoughtless. Careless. He winced away from the term *arrogant*. He circled around it, tried to confront it. He had always had any woman he wanted. That wasn't arrogance. That was his reality. Now he was confronting a new reality. He did not like it. He could not get his thoughts off one name, uttered with complete passion on a balcony. It caromed through him, rattled his very being. When had she ever uttered *his* name – on a balcony, in their bed, anywhere?

Two thoughts: *Better that his eyes were open. And: He loved his wife.*

He paused to absorb these fresh observations. He felt a little better for facing the truth, painful as it was. Yes, *better that his eyes were open* both to the fact that she loved elsewhere and that he loved her. And, if he was thinking of better and worse, it was very much better to be Charlotte's husband than to be that idiot Wilford who had passed her over for whatever reason. Max would consider at a later date whether or not he had been an arrogant bastard or simply insensate when he asked her to marry him. One thing was for sure: he had ample Blackwell pride. He was going to act on it.

His interior was still in disarray, but he summoned his pride and felt in enough command of himself to reenter the saloon. He made his way through the crowd, pausing to speak here and there, senses sharpened, able to more easily interpret the inquiring looks coming his way.

He spied Charlotte at the far end of the room seated on a settee, speaking with three other women, one of which was the Duchess of Woodley. Perfect. He knew just what to do: protect his little wren.

He stepped up to the ladies, made his bow, and moved to stand in front of his wife, his hand outstretched.

"Are you ready to leave, my dear? I know it's early, but I think everyone will understand if we keep our amusements to the minimum."

She turned and looked up at him. In her long grey eyes he read relief and another strong emotion he could not identify it. It might have been anguish, and if it were, he

could only hope Wilford was watching them, suffering in his turn for what he could not have.

She put her hand in his, and he had the satisfaction of knowing she was his and his alone. Linking her arm in his, he made their excuses to the group then sought out their host and hostess to thank them for a very enjoyable evening.

Enjoyable, hah! His evening had ended in disaster, but it would get better. He was going to take his wife home and make violent love to her. But first he was going to exorcise Thomas by making her confess.

Chapter Twenty

Charlotte was grateful Max had come to rescue her, relieved that this public scrutiny would soon be over. Unfortunately, this worthy goal required leaving her hiding place in the corner and crossing the crowded room in company of her handsome husband.

Her confidence was not yet strong enough to withstand the many looks continuing to come their way. She did not yet know how to swim in the social sea and here she had been thrown into the deep. Her vicious black hawk hovered but had not perched on her shoulder. She did her best to keep him at bay, to keep her head above water, but still she feared many of the guests were wondering what strange idea had come into Max's head in offering for her.

She didn't want to be looked at. She didn't want to be talked about. The exposure was bad enough, but then Thomas had been horridly vulgar and had all but ruined their long friendship. At last Max had come and saved her.

They walked out into a beautiful evening and down the wide shallow steps to the square. Once outside in the cover of shadows she breathed a hearty sigh of relief.

"I share the sentiment," he remarked.

"Relief?" she queried. "Did you find there were too many people at the event and too many of them were looking at us?"

"I was concerned only about the male half of the population looking at you." In response to her raised brows he said, "It seems I'm not the only man with a very discerning eye. From the very beginning of our marriage I've been aware how many men want some part of you, beginning with your brother." He held up a hand to stop her protest. "Of course, Richard has no sexual interest in you. Nevertheless his preference for you and your company is strong. Tonight, well, tonight! I got a sense of the degree of your attractions, and so I think it a very good idea to support your preference for the countryside."

She looked up at him, and sense of complete devotion for him enveloped her. She leaned against him. "Thank you."

"Except, of course, when I want to gad about town with you."

She smiled. "That's the nicest thing you've said to me thus far, and you've said many nice things, and that's why –"

"I was rather pleased with comparing you to a soft slipper," he murmured.

"– I was hoping for a relaxation of the rules tonight," she continued then blushed at this reminder of his compliment.

He frowned. "Relaxation of the rules?" Then frowned again. "Is that a blush?"

"Yes," she said, thinking the reason for her blush obvious. When his brow didn't lighten, she straightened away from his side and explained, "I remembered your compliment."

"Are you sure that's the reason?"

She was bewildered. "Quite sure."

"Then why would you want a relaxation of the rules? And exactly what kind of relaxation do you have in mind?"

"I need to be alone."

He halted them in their tracks. "Alone? Oh no, not tonight. Especially not tonight."

"Especially not tonight?" she repeated, not yet understanding they were talking at cross-purposes. "I've had too much exposure. I can't take any more. Not even from you."

His regard was particularly penetrating. They began to walk again. "Your feathers are ruffled."

She was disturbed by the unsettling trend of the conversation and yet pleased by his perfect understanding of her feelings. "That's it exactly, my feathers are ruffled."

"And I'm the one to soothe them."

"But when we're together, things go in a specific direction, which might be called a further ruffling of my feathers, welcome though it always is. Tonight I need time alone just to calm down, to think."

"About another man?" he asked with enough edge in his voice to startle her.

"Goodness, why would I want to do that?"

"We'll address the question soon enough."

They had arrived at the entrance to Blackwell House. Within fifteen minutes she found herself naked and seated on his lap facing him, her cheek on his shoulder, her legs straddling his clothed waist, her arms wrapped around his clothed torso.

He was stroking her unbound hair. He whispered into her ear. "You cannot imagine how much I want to give you a spanking."

"You see," she said, "that was my point earlier. I'm hardly going to have my feathers soothed with a spanking. In any case, I haven't done anything to deserve one."

"Ah, but, I haven't decided whether it should be erotic or punitive."

She shifted her cheek to rest against his jaw. "Punitive?"

She felt the snort of his unreleased laugh. Then he sighed. "My anger is misplaced. It's not directed at you. It's directed at me."

"You've been speaking in riddles since we left Norton House."

"Have I? I wish you would tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"The secret of your heart."

The question seemed unfair. "The topic does not seem to fall under the category of sexual relations where you make all the decisions."

"Ah, a legal point," he said, lightly. "Quite right." He slid her arms over his shoulders. He put his arms around her back and pressed her to him. "But I'd still like to know." He nuzzled her neck. "We have all night."

She rubbed her chin against his neck. "You've said that before."

"I did, and I recall that night went rather well." When she did not respond he turned her chin to look at her. "What, no?"

"Yes, rather well," she agreed but she still didn't want to answer the question because she didn't think it was fair and she didn't quite have the answer.

He shook her gently. "What would you call this embrace?"

Wrapped around him, she would call it comforting. She also found it arousing. She couldn't think about arousal now, of course, and in any case she was feeling enough emotional confusion she wouldn't have been able to distinguish the erotic from anything else at the moment.

"Would you say we're in an embrace of conflict?" he asked.

"N-no."

"Would you say we're embracing in a loving manner?"

That's exactly what she would say. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's all right," he said gently. "I have you, little love. I want you to have all the relief you need."

"I got the relief I needed most immediately upon leaving the party."

"Then why did you want to be alone instead of with me?"

"I already told you: I had had too much exposure and didn't want more. And I hate that I like what we're doing right now and that you were right to insist we stay together. That is, I like it except for all the strange questions." She bethought herself of the strangest. "Like the one about me wanting to think about another man."

He stroked her hair and said quietly, "Be assured of my love, even if you love another."

She heard the second half of his statement and straightened slightly. "Another? Who would I love but you?"

He seemed surprised. "You love me?"

"I don't know," she said honestly, because she had been resisting falling in love with him for so long. "Probably. I don't think I would want to love anyone else."

"Then why were you were in such turmoil? I thought I caught a look of anguish in your eyes when I came to take you from the party."

She registered the first half of his statement. "You love me? *You*" – she pointed at him then at herself – "love *me*?"

"Yes, I've been in love with you for a while, but I realized it only tonight, fool that I am. If you're not in love with someone else, then why did you feel anguish? After my

handsome admission," he said with mock pique, "I think I deserve an answer."

"Everyone was looking at me tonight," she said. "It was - it was *horrible!*"

Chapter Twenty-One

"But you looked magnificent," he objected. "Did you not think so?"

She went still in his arms for several long seconds before saying, "I'm too new to this. I'm not used to it. I've never had to think about my looks – rather, I've never thought much of them, and since for a woman beauty is her most valuable currency, I always thought I was poor."

"I was happy to show you off tonight," he said in an attempt to have her see herself the way he did.

"I'd rather not be shown off," she said with heart-breaking entreaty.

He recalled how Darden had extended the metaphor of the little wren to say how she liked to keep hidden.

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "You want to keep hidden in the branches. That's where you like to be. Is that it?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Like in a tree? That sounds nice. Or on the sidelines, as I've told you."

Max was almost breathless. She wanted to manage from the sidelines. She had told him as much. He said in a rush, "I have a confession."

"Oh, no," she said, putting her face in her hand. "Here it comes."

He pulled her hands away from her face. "Here comes what?"

"You thought I was thinking of another man because you were thinking of another woman."

He laughed. "I suppose I deserved that, but no. And didn't I just tell you I loved you?"

"Oh, that's right," she said, as if suddenly remembering an item on her shopping list.

He laughed again. "Try and keep up, my dear. Lord knows, I've been working overtime to keep up with you. There have been a couple of times I've feared you would find me wanting in my management of the estate, as you did so quickly with Mrs. Haddon's housekeeping, and I didn't want to risk your good opinion of me."

"Really?" she said, as if impressed and then she smiled, somewhat impishly he thought. "And the confession?"

"I'm the one who engineered this evening's soirée."

She gasped.

"My darling, please forgive me. I was happy tonight for the whole world to look at you. For the whole world to know you're mine."

"Please don't do it again."

"I won't," he replied quickly then thought again. "But, wait. You just said you're not used to the attention, that you're too new to it. Do you think you could accustom yourself?"

"Sarah certainly thinks I should."

"The Duchess of Woodley?"

She nodded. "Yes, she said so tonight."

His wife's vast connections and her evident success in attracting the interest of the Ton at this evening's soirée gave him an idea. "I wonder whether you've been guilty of making a category error. Your whole life, in fact."

"Category error?"

"You must be rubbing off on me, because I am now finding a benefit to taking your always practical, sometimes logical point of view. To think that my education at Cambridge would have any application to my real life."

"What do you mean?"

"Does Sebastian find you beautiful?"

She shrugged. "Yes, of course."

"And Laura?"

"She's always telling me I have quiet beauty, yes."

He nodded. "What about Thomas Wilford?"

Her eyes opened wide. "What of him?"

He countered, "You're not going to answer my question?"

"No, honestly, why do you ask?"

"Remember what I told you about Vicar Allen and Doctor Marsh?"

Her eyes widened in memory. "About how a man knows when another man is interested in his woman?"

"Very good!"

"I don't know why you asked about him, but I can tell you he ruined our friendship this evening."

"He doesn't want and probably never did want your friendship. Although I have no intention of asking him, I am sure he finds you as beautiful as I do."

"You find me beautiful?"

"Very."

She considered his statement in silence. Then, "Where's the category mistake? Which is also to ask: what is a category mistake?"

"When two sets of circumstances occur together and you confuse the reasons for one with the reasons for the other."

"All right."

"You like to manage from the sidelines. You like your place in the branches of the tree. This preference is independent of your physical attributes, not due to them."

"Am I a bird?"

"To me you are, yes."

"Lately an ugly black bird has come to sit on my shoulder and says mean things. He has a poor opinion of my looks."

"Is he still there?"

In tones of wonder she said, "He's flown off." She gripped him tighter and shuddered.

He felt her real relief course through her body. "I'm glad."

"But I hope he doesn't find another poor girl's shoulder to alight on."

"Let's hope not, but my guess is he was yours alone. Now, do you think you could tolerate being in Society a bit more than never?"

She paused before saying, "Let me think about it."

He kissed her neck. "While you're thinking about it, do you want to do something?" He nipped her earlobe. "I have an idea."

She pushed him away, playfully. "I'm not finished with this conversation yet. I may actually be liking it."

"Shall I tell you every day that you're beautiful?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather you tell me every day that you love me."

"I will be happy to do so."

She asked, somewhat shyly, "Have you never regretted marrying me?"

"No, and you?"

"No, but I'm not the one who made the impulsive offer."

"That's right. You're the one who made the impulsive acceptance."

"It's not the same thing."

"Enlighten me as to the difference."

She frowned and swatted at him. "You're impossible."

"So says the person who cannot tell me the difference. Really, my love, why did you accept my offer?"

He held her chin as he looked into her eyes. He saw realization dawn in their grey depths. "I – I – well, I think it's because you smell good."

No response could have pleased him more. He chuckled. "And do you know why I made my offer?"

"Because you wanted me to run Thornton Park."

He winced and commented mildly, "Who was that ne'er-do-well? I'm sure I'd like to punch him in the nose. No, the day I offered for you your beautiful voice drew me,

and that was even before I saw you. Say my name.”

“Max?”

“With more conviction, please.”

She tried again. “Max.”

He smiled and sighed. “I’m hoping you’ll remember to say my name again at the appropriate moment.”

She paused to interpret his meaning then bumped her fist playfully on his forearm. “I’ll remember,” she assured him then insisted, “Are you positive you wouldn’t change anything about the last few months?”

He felt a relief, perhaps akin to hers, in shedding his dual role as agreeable guest and thoughtful host. He felt the great wonder of having a true partner, the one person in the world in whom he could confide and with whom he could share his fears and his sorrows, his plans and his joys.

Giving Charlotte a place in his heart gave him room – paradoxically, so it seemed – to expand his understanding of himself, an understanding that had been limited when he thought only of himself. Now that he had true feelings for another person, he no longer felt the fear that had come over him when confronted with his new life. So, too, were his initial anger and resentment gone. However, he did allow himself to feel and acknowledge his grief.

“One thing, my love. I wish Jonathan hadn’t died.”

She hugged him, stroked his hair, and he was comforted.

“I can’t explain it,” he said with a heavy sigh, “because I wouldn’t want to give you up now for anything. If he hadn’t died, I doubt I would have had the wit to offer for you. There it is: a contradiction. I want both my brother alive and me married to you. In the end I can only have one.”

“I know,” she said, and her siren’s voice told him in these two words that she understood his conflict and shared his grief. “Life is strange the way it gives and takes at the same time. It’s unpredictable.”

He was able to dwell on the loss of his brother now, safe in his love’s arms. He did not have to bury his feelings or distract himself with idle pleasures to keep the pain at bay. He could sit with his loss and pain at the same time he could feel grateful for the comfort surrounding him while he mourned. Charlotte had known Jonathan, of course, but Max now wished to tell her about him the way he had known him.

But not right now with Charlotte naked and wrapped around him. At the moment he desired a different kind of communication with her.

“Do you know, love, that we’ve never kissed?”

She nodded.

“Do you want to?”

She nodded again, now somewhat eagerly he thought.

He smiled and brought his lips to her. “Well, then, this is how it goes.”

The End