

# Lisa Kleypas

## Worth Any Price

To my mother-in-law, Ireta Ellis,  
for your love, generosity, and understanding,  
and for making me happy whenever I'm with you.

Love from a most appreciative daughter-in-law,  
L.K.

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# Prologue

## London, 1839

He was twenty-four, and it was the first time he had ever visited a brothel. Nick Gentry damned himself for the icy sweat that had broken out on his face. He was burning with desire, cold with dread. He had avoided this for years, until he had finally been driven to it out of desperate carnal need. The urge to mate had finally become stronger than fear.

Forcing himself to keep moving, Nick ascended the steps of Mrs. Bradshaw's red brick establishment, the exclusive business that catered to well-heeled clients. It was common knowledge that a night with one of Mrs. Bradshaw's girls would cost a fortune, as they were the best-trained prostitutes in London.

Nick would easily be able to pay any price that was required. He had made a great deal of money as a

private thief-taker, and on top of that, he had garnered a fortune from his dealings in the underworld. And he had earned a great deal of notoriety in the process. Although he was popular with most of the public, he was feared by the underworld and detested by the Bow Street runners, who regarded him as an unprincipled rival. On that point the runners were correct—he was indeed unprincipled. Scruples had a way of interfering with business, and therefore Nick had no use for them.

Music drifted from the windows, where Nick could see elegantly dressed men and women mingling as if they were at an upper-crust soiree. In reality, they were prostitutes conducting business transactions with their patrons. This was a world far removed from his flash house near Fleet Ditch, where buttock-and-file whores serviced men in the alleys for shillings.

Squaring his shoulders, Nick used the lion's-head brass knocker to rap sharply on the door. It opened to reveal a stone-faced butler, who asked what business he was about.

Isn't that obvious? Nick wondered irritably. "I want to meet one of the women."

"I am afraid that Mrs. Bradshaw is not accepting new patrons at this time, sir—"

"Tell her that Nick Gentry is here." Nick shoved his hands into his coat pockets and gave the butler a grim stare.

The man's eyes widened, betraying his recognition of the infamous name. He opened the door and inclined his head courteously. "Yes, sir. If you will wait in the entrance hall, I will inform Mrs. Bradshaw of your presence."

The air was lightly scented with perfume and tobacco smoke. Breathing deeply, Nick glanced around the marble-floored hall, which was lined with tall white pilasters. The only adornment was a painting of a naked woman regarding herself in an oval mirror, one delicate hand resting lightly at the top of her own thigh. Fascinated, Nick stared at the gold-framed picture. The female image in the mirror was slightly blurred, the triangle between her legs painted with hazy brush strokes. Nick's stomach felt as if it were filled with cold lead. A servant wearing black breeches crossed through the hall with a tray of glasses, and Nick's gaze dropped swiftly from the painting.

He was intensely aware of the door behind him, of the fact that he could turn and leave right now. But he'd been a coward for too long. Whatever happened this night, he was going to see it through. Clenching his fists in his pockets, he stared at the gleaming floor, the swirls of white and gray marble reflecting the glow of the chandelier overhead.

Suddenly a woman's voice broke lazily through the air. "What an honor it is to receive the celebrated Mr. Gentry. Welcome."

His gaze traveled from the hem of a blue velvet gown to a pair of smiling sherry-colored eyes. Mrs. Bradshaw was a tall, wonderfully proportioned woman. Her pale skin was lightly dotted with amber freckles, and her auburn hair was pinned up in loose curls. She was not beautiful in any conventional sense—her face was too angular, and her nose was large. However, she was stylish and impeccably groomed, and there was something so appealing about her that beauty seemed entirely superfluous.

She smiled in a way that caused Nick to relax in spite of himself. Later he would learn that he was not alone in this reaction. All men relaxed in Gemma Bradshaw's agreeable presence. One could tell just by looking at her that she didn't mind coarse words or booted feet on the table, that she loved a good joke and was never shy or disdainful. Men adored Gemma because she so clearly adored them.

She gave Nick a conspiratorial smile and curtsied low enough to display her magnificent cleavage. "Do say you've come here for pleasure, rather than business." At his brief nod, she smiled once more. "How delightful. Come take a turn through the drawing room with me, and we will discuss how you may best be served." She came forward to slip her arm through his. Nick jerked slightly, checking the instinctive impulse to fling off her hand.

The madam could hardly fail to notice the rigidity of his arm. Her hand fell away, and she continued to chat comfortably, as if nothing untoward had occurred. "This way, if you please. My guests often like to play cards or billiards, or relax in the smoking room. You may chat with as many girls as you wish before deciding on one. Then she will show you to one of the upstairs rooms. You will be charged an hourly rate for her company. I have trained all the girls myself, and you will find that each has her own special talent. Of course, you and I will discuss your preferences, as some of the girls are more willing than others to engage in rough play."

As they entered the drawing room, a few of the women cast Nick flirtatious glances. They all looked healthy and well tended, entirely different from the whores he had seen near Fleet Ditch and Newgate. They flirted, chatted, negotiated, all with the same relaxed manner that Mrs. Bradshaw possessed.

"It would be my pleasure to introduce you to a few of them," came Mrs. Bradshaw's gentle voice in his ear. "Does anyone catch your eye?"

Nick shook his head. He was usually known for his jaunty arrogance, for having the smooth, easy banter of a confidence trickster. However, in this foreign situation, words had deserted him.

"Shall I make a few suggestions? That dark-haired girl in the green gown is exceedingly popular. Her name is Lorraine. She is charming and lively, and possesses a quick wit. The one standing near her, the blond... that is Mercia. A more quiet sort, with a gentle manner that appeals to many of our patrons. Now, Nettie—that is the little one by the looking glass—is practiced in the more exotic arts..." Mrs. Bradshaw paused as she observed the stiff set of Nick's jaw. "Do you prefer the illusion of innocence?" she suggested softly. "I can provide you with a country lass who makes a most convincing virgin."

Nick was damned if he knew his preferences. He glanced at them all, dark-haired, blond, slim, voluptuous, every shape, size, and hue imaginable, and suddenly the sheer variety overwhelmed him. He tried to imagine going to bed with any of them, and fresh sweat broke out on his forehead.

His gaze returned to Mrs. Bradshaw. Her eyes were a clear, warm brown, surmounted with ruddy brows a few shades darker than her hair. Her tall body was an inviting playground, and her mouth looked plush and soft. But it was the freckles that decided him. The amber flecks decorated her pale skin in a festive spray that made him want to smile.

"You're the only one here worth having," Nick heard himself say.

The madam's fiery lashes swept downward, concealing her thoughts, but he sensed that he had surprised her. A smile curved her lips. "My dear Mr. Gentry, what a delightful compliment. However, I do not sleep with the patrons of my establishment. Those days are long past. You must allow me to introduce you to one of the girls, and—"

"I want you," he insisted.

As Mrs. Bradshaw saw the raw honesty in his eyes, a faint wash of pink spread across her cheeks.

“Good Lord,” she said, and laughed suddenly. “It is quite a trick to make a woman of thirty-eight blush. I thought I had forgotten how.”

Nick did not smile back at her. “I will pay any price.”

Mrs. Bradshaw shook her head in wonder, still smiling, then stared at his shirtfront with concentration, as if struggling with some weighty matter. “I never do anything on impulse. It’s a personal rule of mine.”

Slowly Nick reached for her hand, touched it with great care, drew his fingertips across her palm in a cautious, intimate stroke. Although she had long hands befitting a woman of her height, his were much larger, his fingers twice as thick as her slender ones. He caressed the damp little creases on the insides of her fingers. “Every rule should be broken once in a while,” he said.

The madam lifted her gaze, seeming fascinated by something she saw in his world-weary face. Abruptly she seemed to make a decision. “Come with me.”

Nick followed her from the drawing room, heedless of the gazes that pursued them. She led him through the entrance hall and up a curved staircase that led to a private suite of rooms. Mrs. Bradshaw’s apartments were elaborate but comfortable, the furniture deeply cushioned, the walls covered in French paper, the hearth glowing with a generously stocked fire. The sideboard in the receiving room was laden with a collection of glittering crystal decanters and glasses. Mrs. Bradshaw picked up a snifter from a silver tray and glanced at him expectantly. “Brandy?”

Nick nodded immediately.

She poured golden-red liquid into the snifter. Expertly she struck a match and lit a candle on the sideboard. Holding the snifter by its stem, she turned the bowl of the glass over the candle flame. When the brandy was warmed to her satisfaction, she gave it to him. He’d never had a woman do that for him before. The brandy was rich and nut-flavored, its gentle spice drifting to his nostrils as he drank.

Glancing around the receiving room, Nick saw that one wall was lined with bookshelves, every available inch of space occupied with leather-bound volumes and folios. He drew closer to the shelves, investigating. Although he could not read well, he discerned that most of the books were about sex and human anatomy.

“A hobby of mine,” Mrs. Bradshaw said, her eyes gleaming with friendly challenge. “I collect books about sexual techniques and customs of different cultures. Some of the books are quite rare. Over the past ten years, I have accumulated a vast wealth of knowledge about my favorite subject.”

“I suppose it’s more interesting than collecting snuffboxes,” he said, and she laughed.

“Stay here. I’ll be just a moment. While I am gone, you are welcome to view my library.”

She went from the receiving room to the adjoining room, where the end of a poster bed was visible.

The leaden feeling returned to Nick’s stomach. Finishing his drink in one gulp of smooth fire, he set the glass aside and went to the bookshelves. A large volume bound in red leather caught his attention. The antique leather creaked slightly as he opened the book, which was filled with hand-painted illustrations. His seething insides tangled in a huge knot as he saw drawings of bodies writhing in sexual positions more peculiar than anything he could have imagined. His heart hammered against his ribs even as his cock surged with aggravated desire. Hastily he closed the book and shoved it back onto the shelf. Going back

to the sideboard, he poured another brandy and downed it without tasting it.

As Mrs. Bradshaw had promised, she returned soon, coming to stand in the doorway. She had changed into a thin dressing gown trimmed with lace, the long sleeves draping in medieval points. The white silk garment revealed the pointed crests of her full breasts, and even the shadow of hair between her thighs. The madam had a magnificent body, and she knew it. She stood with one knee eased forward, protruding through the opening of the dressing gown to display the long, sleek line of her leg. Her blazing hair rippled over her shoulders and down her back, making her look younger, softer.

A shiver of longing chased down Nick's spine, and he felt his chest rising and falling in a labored rhythm.

"I'll have you know that I am selective about my lovers." The madam gestured for him to come to her. "A talent such as mine should never be squandered."

"Why me?" Nick asked, his voice turning raspy. He drew nearer, close enough to realize that she wore no perfume. She smelled like soap and clean skin, a fragrance far more arousing than jasmine or roses.

"It was the way you touched me. You instinctively found the most susceptible places on my hand... the center of the palm and the insides of the knuckles. Few men have such sensitivity."

Rather than feeling flattered, Nick experienced a flare of panic. The madam had expectations of him—expectations that he was guaranteed to disappoint. He kept his face expressionless, but his heart dropped in a sickening plunge as she drew him into the warm, firelit bedroom. "Mrs. Bradshaw," he said awkwardly as they approached the bed, "I should tell you—"

"Gemma," she murmured.

"Gemma," he repeated, every coherent thought scattering as she pushed his coat from his shoulders and helped him remove it.

Untying the knot of his sweat-dampened cravat, the madam smiled up at his flushed face. "You are shaking like a boy of thirteen. Is the notorious Mr. Gentry so intimidated by the thought of bedding the famous Mrs. Bradshaw? I wouldn't have expected it of such a worldly man. Certainly you are not a virgin, at your age. A man of... twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four." He was dying inside, knowing there was no way he could deceive her into believing that he was a man of experience. Swallowing hard, he said hoarsely, "I've never done this before."

The ruddy arcs of her brows inched upward. "Never visited a brothel?"

Somehow he forced the words up from his aching throat. "Never made love to a woman."

Gemma's expression did not change, but he sensed her astonishment. After a long, diplomatic pause, she asked tactfully, "You have been intimate with other men, then?"

Nick shook his head, staring at the patterned wallpaper. The heavy silence was broken only by the drumming in his ears.

The madam's curiosity was almost palpable. She ascended the moveable wooden step that had been placed beside the tall bed, and climbed onto the mattress. Slowly she reclined on her side, relaxed and catlike. And in her infinite understanding of the male sex, she remained silent and waited patiently.

Nick tried to sound matter-of-fact, but a tremor broke through his voice. "When I was a boy of fourteen, I was sentenced to ten months on a prison hulk."

He saw from Gemma's expression that she understood immediately. The wretched conditions on the hulks, the fact that men were chained together with boys in one large cell, was hardly a secret. "The men on the ship tried to force themselves on you, of course," she said. Her tone was neutral as she asked. "Did any of them succeed?"

"No. But since then..." Nick paused for a long moment. He had never told anyone about the past that had haunted him—his fears were not easy to put into words. "I can't bear to be touched," he said slowly. "Not by anyone, in any way. I've wanted..." He paused for a moment, floundering. "At times I want a woman so badly I almost go mad with it. But I can't seem to..." He fell helplessly silent. It seemed impossible to explain that for him, sex and pain and guilt were plaited together, that the simple act of making love to someone seemed as impossible as making himself jump off a cliff. The touch of another person, no matter how innocuous, triggered a perilous need to defend himself.

Had Gemma displayed a dramatic reaction of horror or sympathy, Nick would have bolted. However, she only regarded him thoughtfully. In a graceful movement, she swung her long legs over the bed and slid to the floor. Standing before him, she began to unbutton his waistcoat. Nick stiffened but did not move away. "You must have fantasies," Gemma said. "Images and thoughts that excite you."

Nick's breath turned shallow and quick as he shrugged off his waistcoat. Remnants of volatile dreams swirled through his head...lewd thoughts that had left his body charged and aching in the empty darkness. Yes, he'd had fantasies, visions of women bound and moaning beneath him, their legs spread wide open as he worked himself between them. He could not possibly confess such shameful things. But Gemma Bradshaw's brown eyes contained an invitation that was nearly irresistible. "I'll tell you mine first," she offered. "Would you like that?"

He nodded cautiously, heat spreading through his groin.

"I fantasize about being naked before an audience of men." Gemma's voice was low and molten as she continued. "I choose one that captures my fancy. He joins me on the stage, and performs any sexual act I wish. After that, I select another, and another, until I am completely satisfied."

She tugged the hem of his shirt from his trousers. Nick lifted it over his head and dropped the damp garment to the floor. His cock throbbed painfully as Gemma stared at his bare torso. She touched the heavy pelt of hair on his chest, much darker than the brown hair on his head. An appreciative sound came from Gemma's throat. "You're quite muscular. I like that." Her fingertips ventured through the matted curls and stroked the hot skin beneath, and Nick took an instinctive backward step. Lazily Gemma gestured for him to come back. "If you want to make love, my dear, I'm afraid you can't avoid being touched. Stand still." She reached for the top button of his trousers. "Now tell me your fantasy."

Nick stared at the ceiling, the wall, the velvet-draped windows, anything to avoid the sight of her hands at his crotch. "I...want to be in control," he said hoarsely. "I imagine tying a woman to a bed. She can't move or touch me...she can't stop me from doing anything I want."

"Many men have that fantasy." The backs of Gemma's fingers brushed the stiff underside of his cock as she attended to the last buttons. Suddenly Nick forgot to breathe. The madam leaned closer, her breath whisking through the curls on his chest. "And what do you do to the woman, after she is tied?" she murmured.

His face darkened with a flush of mingled arousal and embarrassment. "I touch her everywhere. I use my mouth and fingers. . . I make her beg me to take her. I make her scream." He set his jaw and groaned in his throat as her long, cool fingers encircled his shaft and freed it from the trousers. "God—"

"Well," she purred, her clever fingers tracing him down to the hilt and back up to the tightly swollen head. "You are a most generously endowed young man."

Nick closed his eyes, reeling from a powerful onslaught of sensation. "Does that please a woman?" he asked unsteadily.

Gemma continued to stroke him as she replied. "Not all women. Some cannot comfortably accommodate a man your size. But that can be managed." She released him gently and went to a large mahogany box on the bedside table, lifting the lid and searching through its contents. "Remove the rest of your clothes," she said without looking at him.

Fear and lust clashed violently inside him. Eventually the lust won out. He shed his clothes, feeling vulnerable and painfully impassioned. Gemma located what she was looking for, turned, and tossed something lightly to him.

Reflexively Nick caught the object in his fist. It was a rope made of claret-colored velvet.

Perplexed, he watched as Gemma untied her dressing gown and let it fall to her feet. Every inch of her strong, supple body was exposed, including the wealth of vibrant hair at her groin. With a provocative smile, she climbed onto the bed, revealing her generously rounded backside in the process. Leaning back on her elbows, she nodded toward the length of velvet clenched in his fist. "I believe you know what to do next," she said.

Nick was amazed and bewildered that she would make herself so completely defenseless to a stranger. "You trust me enough to let me do that?"

Her voice was very soft. "This will require trust on both our parts, won't it?"

Nick joined her on the bed, his hands trembling as he tied her wrists together and anchored them to the headboard. Her sleek body was completely at his mercy. Climbing over her, he bent his head and kissed her mouth. "How can I please you?" he whispered.

"Please yourself this time." Her tongue touched his lower lip in a light, silken stroke. "You can attend to my needs later."

Nick explored her slowly, his apprehensions dissolving in a flood of heat. Lust roared through him as he found places that made her writhe. . . the hollow of her throat, the insides of her elbows, the tender undersides of her breasts. He stroked, tasted, nibbled at her skin, becoming drunk on her smoothness, her female fragrance. Finally, when his passion built to an unbearable height, he lowered himself between her thighs and pushed into the wet, warm depths he craved so badly. To his eternal humiliation, he climaxed with only one thrust, before he had satisfied her. His body shook with unbearable pleasure, and he buried his face in the mass of her flaming hair as he groaned harshly.

Gasping in the aftermath, he fumbled at Gemma's tethered wrists. When she was freed, he rolled to his side, away from her, and stared blindly at the shadows on the wall. He was dizzy with relief. For some unfathomable reason, the corners of his eyes stung, and he closed his eyes tightly against the hideous

threat of tears.

Gemma moved behind him, her hand settling lightly on his naked hip. Nick flinched at her touch but did not move away. Her mouth pressed against the top of his spine, a sensation that shot down to his groin. “You have promise,” she murmured. “It would be a shame for your abilities to go undeveloped. I am going to extend a rare invitation to you, Nick. Come visit me from time to time, and I will share my knowledge with you. I have a great deal to teach. No payment will be necessary... only bring me a gift now and then.” When he did not move, she bit gently at his nape. “After I’m through with you, no woman in the world will be able to resist you. What do you say to that?”

Nick rolled over and pinned her to the mattress, staring down at her smiling face. “I’m ready for the first lesson,” he said, and covered her mouth with his own.

## Chapter One

### Three Years Later

As was his long-standing habit, Nick entered Gemma’s private suite without knocking. It was Sunday afternoon, the time they met almost every week. By now the familiar scent of the place—leather, liquor, the hint of fresh flowers—was all it took to begin the low hum of arousal in his body. His desire was unusually strong today, as his work had kept him away from Gemma for a fortnight.

Since the first night they had met, Nick had followed Gemma’s rules without question. There had been no other choice, if he wanted to continue seeing her. They were friends, of a sort, but their interactions were strictly physical. Gemma had evinced no interest in what was in his heart, or even whether he had one. She was a kind woman, and yet on the rare occasions when Nick had tentatively spoken of matters other than the superficial, he’d been gently dismissed. It was just as well, he had realized. He had no wish to expose her to the ugliness of his past or the complex tangle of emotions he kept locked inside.

And so once a week they joined each other in bed with their secrets safely intact...the instructor and her ardent student. In the luxurious cocoon of Gemma’s gold-papered bedroom Nick had learned more about lovemaking than he had ever thought possible. He’d gained an appreciation of female sexuality that few men acquired...the intricacy of a woman’s pleasure, the ways to excite her mind as well as her body. He learned to employ his fingers, his tongue, teeth, lips, and cock with both delicacy and strength. Most of all he learned about discipline, and how patience and creativity could make even the experienced Mrs. Bradshaw cry out until she was hoarse. He knew ways to keep a woman balanced on the edge of ecstasy for hours at a time. He also knew how to make a woman climax with nothing more than his mouth on her nipple, or with the lightest brush of his fingertip.

The last time they had met, Gemma had challenged him to bring her to orgasm without touching her at all. He had whispered in her ear for ten minutes, painting sexual images that became ever more exquisitely lurid until she had flushed and shivered beside him.

Thinking of her lush body, Nick turned warm with anticipation, and he strode into her parlor. He stopped short as he saw a young blond man seated on the velvet-upholstered chaise, dressed only in a wine silk robe. It was, Nick noted dazedly, the same robe that he made use of whenever he came to visit Gemma.

She had made no promises of fidelity to him, and he had no illusion that he had been her only lover for

the past three years. Still, Nick was startled by the sight of another man in her receiving room and the unmistakable tang of sex in the air.

Seeing him, the stranger flushed and sat up from his relaxed position. He was a stocky, fair-skinned youth, with enough innocence remaining to be embarrassed by the situation.

Gemma walked out of her bedroom, wearing a transparent green negligee that barely covered the crests of her rose-brown nipples. She smiled as she saw Nick, seeming not at all perturbed by his unexpected arrival. "Oh, hello, dear," she murmured, as relaxed and friendly as always. Perhaps she had not planned for him to discover her newcher amiin precisely this manner, but neither was she distressed about it.

Turning toward the blond man, she spoke to him softly. "Wait for me in the bedroom."

He threw her a glance of heated adulation as he obeyed.

As Nick watched the man disappear into the next room, he was reminded of himself as he had been three years earlier, callow and burning and dazzled by Gemma's sensual arts.

Gemma lifted a graceful hand to stroke Nick's dark hair. "I didn't expect you to return from your investigation so quickly," she said without a trace of chagrin. "As you can see, I am entertaining my new protégé."

"And my replacement," Nick said rather than asked, while a cold feeling of abandonment crept over him.

"Yes," Gemma said softly. "You have no more need of my instruction. Now that you have learned all I can teach you, it is only a matter of time before our friendship becomes stale. I would prefer to end it while it is still enjoyable."

It was surprisingly difficult for him to speak. "I still want you."

"Only because I am safe, and familiar." Smiling affectionately, Gemma leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Don't be a coward, dear. It is time for you to find someone else."

"No one could follow you," he said gruffly.

That earned a tender laugh and another kiss. "That shows you still have much to learn." A wicked smile gleamed in her clear brown eyes. "Go find a woman who is deserving of your talents. Take her to bed. Make her fall in love with you. A love affair is something everyone should experience at least once."

Nick gave her a sullen glance. "That is thelastdamn thing I need," he informed her, making her laugh.

Drawing back, Gemma casually unfastened her hair and shook it free. "No good-byes," she said, depositing the hairpins onto the table by the chaise. "Imuch preferau revoir. Now if you'll excuse me, my pupil is waiting. Have a drink before you leave, if you like."

Stunned, Nick stood immobile as she drifted into the bedroom and closed it with a firm click. "Jesus," he muttered. An incredulous laugh escaped him at having been so lightly dispensed with after all they had done together. Yet he couldn't summon any anger. Gemma had been too generous, too kind, for him to feel anything but gratitude.

Go find another woman, he thought numbly. It seemed an impossible task. Oh, there were women everywhere, cultured, common, plump, lean, dark, fair, tall, short, and he found something to appreciate in all of them. But Gemma had been the only one with whom he had ever dared to unleash his sexuality. He could not imagine how it would be with someone else.

Make someone love him? Nick smiled bitterly, thinking for the first time that Gemma didn't know what the hell she was talking about. No woman could love him...and if one ever did, she would be the greatest fool alive.

## Chapter Two

She was here. He was certain of it.

Nick surveyed the party guests intently as they milled in the gardens behind Stony Cross Park. His hand slid into the pocket of his coat, finding the miniature case that contained Charlotte Howard's portrait. Slowly his thumb caressed the glossy enameled side of the case while he continued to gaze at the crowd.

His two-month search for Charlotte had led him to Hampshire, a place of heather-carpeted hills, ancient hunting forests, and treacherous valley bogs. The western county was prosperous, its twenty market towns abundantly filled with wool, timber, dairy products, honey, and bacon. Among the Hampshire's renowned estates, Stony Cross Park was considered to be the finest. The manor house and private lake were situated in the fertile Itchen Rivervalley. Not a bad place to hide, Nick thought wryly. If his suspicions proved to be correct, Charlotte had found employment in the earl of Westcliff's household, serving as a companion to his mother.

In his pursuit of Charlotte, Nick had learned everything he could about her, trying to understand how she thought and felt, how others perceived her. Interestingly, the accounts of Charlotte had been so contradictory that Nick had wondered if her friends and family were describing the same girl.

To her parents, Charlotte had been an obedient daughter, eager to please, fearful of disapproval. Her disappearance had been a staggering surprise, as they had believed that she was resigned to the fate of becoming Lord Radnor's bride. Charlotte had known since early childhood that the well-being of her family depended on it. The Howards had made a bargain with the devil, trading their daughter's future for the financial benefits Radnor could provide. They had enjoyed his patronage for over a decade. But just as it had come time to give the devil his due, Charlotte had fled. The Howards had made it clear to Nick that they wanted Charlotte found and given to Radnor without delay. They did not understand what had prompted her to run, as they believed she would be well served as Lady Radnor.

Apparently Charlotte had not shared their views. Her friends at Maidstone's, the upper-crust boarding school Charlotte had attended, most of them now married, had reluctantly described a girl who had become increasingly resentful of the way Radnor supervised every aspect of her existence. Apparently the school staff, desirous of the generous financial endowments Radnor provided, had been happy to enforce his wishes. Charlotte's curriculum had differed from everyone else's; Radnor had chosen the subjects for her to study. He had mandated that she was to retire to bed an hour earlier than the other students. He had even determined how much food she should be allotted, after observing during one of her visits home that she had gained weight and needed slimming.

Although Nick understood Charlotte's rebellion, he felt no sympathy. He had no sympathy for anyone. Long ago he had accepted the unfairness of life, the cruel twists of fate that no one could avoid forever. The tribulations of a schoolgirl were nothing compared to the ugliness that he had seen and experienced.

He would have no compunction about bringing Charlotte to Radnor, collecting the remainder of his fee, then putting all thought of the luckless bride-to-be completely out of his mind.

His gaze chased restlessly over the scene, but so far there had been no sign of Charlotte. The great house was filled with at least three dozen families, all of whom were attending what amounted to a month-long house party. The annual event was hosted by Lord Westcliff. The daytime hours were devoted to hunting, shooting, and field sports. Each evening had entertainment, such as soirees musicales, and dances.

Although it was nearly impossible to gain one of the sought-after invitations to Stony Cross Park, Nick had managed to with the help of his brother-in-law, Sir Ross Cannon. Nick had decided to pose as a bored aristocrat who needed to refresh himself with a few weeks in the country. At the request of Sir Ross, the earl of Westcliff had extended an invitation, having no idea that Nick was a Bow Street runner on the hunt for a runaway bride.

The myriad of lights hung from the oak branches caused the women's jewels to glitter madly. A wry smile tugged at one side of Nick's mouth as he reflected how easy it would be to strip these pigeons of their finery. Not long ago he would have done exactly that. He was an even better thief than he was a thief-taker. But now he was a runner, and he was supposed to be honorable.

"Lord Sydney." A man's voice interrupted his thoughts, and Nick turned away from the terrace to face Marcus, Lord Westcliff. The earl possessed a formidable presence. Although he was of only average height, his form was broad and exceedingly muscular, almost bullish in its heavily developed power. His features were bold and decisively formed, his shrewd black eyes set deep in his swarthy face.

Westcliff looked nothing like the slender, fair peers who occupied the first circles of society. Were he not dressed in elegant evening clothes, one would assume he was a dock-worker or journeyman. However, Westcliff's blood was unquestionably blue. He had inherited one of the most ancient earldoms of the peerage, a coronet that had been won by his ancestors in the late 1300s. Ironically, it was rumored that the earl was not an ardent supporter of the Monarchy, nor even of hereditary peerage, as he believed that no man should be insulated from the toils and concerns of ordinary life.

Westcliff continued in his distinctive gravel-scored voice. "Welcome to Stony Cross, Sydney."

Nick executed a shallow bow. "Thank you, my lord."

The earl regarded him with an openly skeptical glance. "Your sponsor, Sir Ross, mentioned in his letter that you suffer from ennui." His tone made it clear that he had little tolerance for a wealthy man's complaint of excessive boredom.

Neither did Nick. He chafed inwardly at the necessity of affecting ennui, but it was part of his ruse. "Yes," he said with a world-weary smile. "A debilitating condition. I have become decidedly melancholy. I was advised that a change of scene might help."

A surly grunt came from the earl's throat. "I can recommend an excellent cure for boredom—simply apply yourself to some useful activity."

"Are you suggesting that I work?" Nick summoned an expression of distaste. "Perhaps that would do for someone else. My kind of ennui, however, requires a careful balance of rest and entertainment."

Contempt flickered in Westcliff's black eyes. "We shall endeavor to provide you with satisfactory

amounts of both.”

“I look forward to it,” Nick murmured, taking care to keep his accent clean. Although he had been born a viscount’s son, too many years spent in the London underworld had given him a lower-class cadence and woefully soft consonants. “Westcliff, at the moment what would please me most is to have a drink, and to find company with some delightful temptress.”

“I have an exceptional Longueville Armagnac,” the earl muttered, clearly eager to escape Nick’s company.

“That would be most welcome.”

“Good. I’ll send a servant to fetch you a glass.” Westcliff turned and began to stride away.

“And the temptress?” Nick persisted, smothering a laugh at the way the man’s back stiffened.

“That, Sydney, is something you will have to obtain for yourself.”

As the earl left the terrace, Nick allowed himself a swift grin. So far he was playing the part of spoiled young nobleman with great success. He had managed to annoy the earl beyond bearing. Actually, he rather liked Westcliff, recognizing the same hard-driven will and cynicism that he himself possessed.

Thoughtfully Nick left the terrace and wandered down to the gardens, which had been designed with both enclosed and open spaces, providing countless pockets of intimacy. The air was dense with the smells of heather and bog myrtle. Ornamental birds trapped in an aviary chirped wildly at his approach. To most it was doubtless a cheerful clamor, but to Nick the ceaseless trills made a desperate sound. He was tempted to open the door and set the damned things free, but it would have little effect, as their wings had been clipped. Stopping at the riverside terrace, he surveyed the dark sparkling flow of the Itchen River, the moonlight that washed through swaying filaments of willow and clusters of beech and oak.

The hour was late. Perhaps Charlotte was inside the house. Casually exploring his surroundings, Nick wandered to the side of the manor, a residence built of honey-colored stone and cornered with four towers that reached six stories in height. It was fronted with a distinctively large courtyard sided with stabling, a laundry, and low buildings to house the servants. The front of the stables had been designed to mirror the chapel on the other side of the courtyard.

Nick was fascinated by the magnificence of the stables, unlike anything he had seen before. He entered through one of the ground-floor archways and found a covered court hung with gleaming harnesses. A pleasant mixture of smells filled the air; horses, hay, leather, and polish. There was a marble drinking fountain for horses at the back of the court, sided by separate entrances to the horse stalls. Nick walked across the stone-flagged floor with the light, almost soundless step that was habitual for all Bow Street runners. Despite his quietness, horses shuffled and snorted warily at his approach. Glancing through the archway, Nick discovered rows of stalls filled by at least five dozen horses.

It seemed that the stables were empty save for the animals, and Nick left through the west entrance. Immediately he was confronted with an ancient ironstone wall almost six feet high. There was no doubt that it had been built to protect unwary visitors from falling over the steep bluff overlooking the river below. Nick stopped in his tracks at the unexpected sight of a small, slim figure poised atop the wall. It was a woman, standing so still that at first glance he thought she was a statue. But a breeze stirred the hem of her skirts and teased a lock of pale blond hair free of her loose topknot.

Fascinated, he drew closer, his gaze riveted on her.

Only a reckless fool would balance on that uneven wall, with certain death awaiting if she lost her footing. She did not seem to recognize the fatal drop looming before her. The tilt of her head indicated that she was staring straight ahead, at the night-darkened horizon. What in God's name was she doing? Two years earlier, Nick had seen a man standing with that peculiar stillness just before he had jumped to his death from a bridge over the Thames.

As Nick's gaze raked over her, he saw that the hem of her long skirt was caught beneath her heel. The sight spurred him into action. Moving forward in a few stealthy strides, he lifted himself easily, soundlessly, onto the wall.

She did not see him coming until he had almost reached her. She turned, and Nick saw the flash of her dark eyes just as she lost her balance. Seizing her before she could fall, Nick hauled her against his chest. His forearm locked securely just beneath her breasts. The simple action of pulling her body against his was strangely satisfying, like a puzzle piece snapping neatly into place. She gave a low cry, automatically clutching at his arm. The loose lock of fine blond hair blew across Nick's face, and the fresh, faintly salty fragrance of female skin rose to his nostrils. The scent made his mouth water. Nick was startled by his instant reaction to her—he had never experienced such visceral response to a woman. He wanted to leap from the wall and carry her off like one of the wolves that had once roamed the medieval forests, and find some place to devour his prey in private.

She was rigid in his hold, her breath coming in gasps. "Let go of me," she said, prying at his arms. "Why the devil did you do that?"

"You were going to fall."

"I was not! I was perfectly fine until you rushed at me and nearly knocked me over—"

"Your heel is caught in the hem of your skirts."

Moving cautiously, she lifted her foot and perceived that he was correct. "So it is," she said shortly.

Having rescued people from every conceivable situation, Nick was accustomed to receiving at least a perfunctory show of gratitude. "Aren't you going to thank me for saving you?"

"I have excellent reflexes. I could have saved myself."

Nick let out an incredulous laugh, both annoyed and fascinated by her stubbornness. "If it weren't for me, you would have broken your little neck."

"I assure you, sir, that this so-called rescue was entirely unnecessary. However, since it is obvious that you are going to persist... thank you. Now please take your hands from me." Her tone rendered the words devoid of appreciation.

Nick grinned, appreciating the fearlessness of her manner, despite the fact that her heart was pounding wildly against the inside of his wrist. Carefully he loosened his arm and helped her to turn by slow degrees. She wobbled a little and dug her fingers into his coat sleeves in a spasm of anxiety. "I've got you," he said steadily.

She faced him, and they both froze as their gazes locked. Nick forgot the wall beneath his feet. It seemed as if they were poised in midair, in a blue wash of moonlight that made everything look unreal. Recognition shot through him like a bolt of lightning. Incredibly, he found himself staring into the features that had almost become more familiar to him than his own.

Charlotte.

“I’ve got you,” he repeated with a faint smile.

## Chapter Three

“Sit,” the stranger told Lottie, his huge hands closing around her shoulders and pushing her down. She obeyed carefully, lowering herself to the wall with her legs dangling. The man swung to the ground, landing lightly from the six-foot drop. He held up his arms for her. Lottie hesitated as a cold fist seemed to squeeze around her heart. Every instinct warned her not to jump into his arms. He looked like a predator waiting to snatch her.

“Come,” he murmured. The moon struck glints of jolting blue in his eyes.

Reluctantly Lottie leaned forward with her arms outstretched. As she repelled from the stone surface, her hands settled on his shoulders, and he took hold of her waist. He tempered her descent with an ease that betrayed immense physical strength. His hands lingered at her waist, assuring her balance before he released her.

Standing with him on the ground, Lottie was struck by his size. The stranger was unusually tall, with broad shoulders, and big feet and hands. Although he was well dressed, wearing the new cut of coat with long lapels, and loose-tailored trousers, his dark hair had been cut unfashionably short, and his face was clean shaven. That was unusual among the elegant crowd at Stony Cross Park. Stylish gentlemen let their hair grow over their collars, and sported side-whiskers and moustaches. This man didn’t even have a wisp of a goatee to soften the obdurate line of his jaw.

He indicated the wall with a jerk of his head. “Why were you standing up there?”

For a moment Lottie couldn’t speak as she stared up into his handsome face. Nature had been spendthrift with this man, bestowing him with bold, princely features and eyes as blue and intense as the heart of midnight. The cynicism in those eyes was a fascinating contrast to the touch of humor that lurked at the corners of his wide mouth. He looked to be about thirty—the time in a man’s life when he surrendered the last vestiges of callowness and came fully into his maturity. No doubt women of all ages were instantly enthralled by him.

Gathering her wits, she managed to answer him. “I enjoy the view.”

“You could obtain the same view from the safety of a window.”

A faint smile touched her lips. “The view is far more rewarding when there is some risk involved.”

He grinned suddenly, as if he understood exactly what she meant. His roguish smile was dazzling, nearly causing her heart to stop. Lottie couldn’t stop staring at him. It seemed that there was something important and unspoken in the air, as if they had once met but she had forgotten the occasion.

“Who are you, sir?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Perhaps I’m your guardian angel.”

“You don’t look very angelic to me,” she replied skeptically, making him laugh.

He bowed and introduced himself. “Lord Sydney, at your service.”

Lottie responded with a curtsy. “Miss Miller. I am employed as a companion to the dowager countess.” She gave him an openly speculative glance. “The guest list for Lord Westcliff’s house parties is quite exclusive. How did you manage to get an invitation?”

“The earl was kind enough to offer his hospitality on the recommendation of a mutual friend.”

“Have you come to hunt?” she asked. “Is that why you are here?”

“Yes,” he said with a puzzling, ironic edge to his tone. “I hunt.”

A burst of music came from the direction of the al fresco party, and they both glanced toward the back gardens. “I came to have a look at the horses,” Sydney said. “Forgive me for intruding on your privacy.”

“Do you intend to return to the party now?”

His dark brows lifted in teasing challenge. “Are you going to climb back onto that wall if I do?”

Good Lord, it was preposterous for one man to possess so much charm! Her lips quirked with an irrepressible smile. “Not tonight, my lord.”

“Allow me to accompany you back to the house, then.”

Lottie made no protest as he fell into step beside her.

It was hardly unusual to encounter his sort at Stony Cross Park. Most days, one couldn’t throw a coin without hitting some brawny male in search of sport. In the past two years Lottie had been approached by many of them. But there was something different about this one. He did not have the sense of ease, the aimlessness of the other aristocrats who frequented this place. She sensed the ruthlessness that lurked just beneath his facade. She did not feel quite safe around him. And yet at the same time, she felt oddly compelled to lure him closer, to make him smile again.

“You seem to have no fear of heights, Miss Miller,” he commented.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” she said confidently.

“Everyone is afraid of something.”

“Oh?” She sent him a provocative glance. “What could a man like you possibly fear?”

To her surprise, he answered seriously. “I’m not fond of enclosed places.”

The gravity in his tone made her heart thump heavily. What a voice he had, deep with a tantalizing raspiness, as if he had just awakened from a heavy sleep. The sound seemed to gather at the top of her

spine and slide downward like heated honey. "Neither am I," she admitted.

They stopped at the door of the south tower, where many of the upper servants, including herself, were housed. Light streamed from the glittering windows and pooled onto the graveled paths. Now Lottie saw that his hair was not black but brown. A rich, dark shade of brown, the short glossy strands containing every shade between maple and sable. She wanted to touch his hair and feel it slide through her fingers. The immediacy of the urge confounded her.

Stepping backward, she gave him a regretful smile. "Good-bye, my lord. And thank you for being a most agreeable escort."

"Wait," he said, with an urgent note in his voice. "Will I see you again, Miss Miller?"

"No, my lord. I fear my time is fully occupied by the dowager countess."

The words did not dissuade him—she saw it in his eyes. "Miss Miller—"

"Good-bye," she repeated warmly. "I wish you a very pleasant stay, my lord." She left swiftly, conscious of his unnerving regard.

As soon as Lottie reached her room, she locked the door and sighed. Since she had come to Stony Cross Park, she had often been approached by male guests who had made overtures to her. Until tonight she had never been tempted by any of them, no matter how handsome or accomplished. After her experience with Lord Radnor, she wanted nothing to do with men.

Had Radnor been kind instead of calculating, gentle instead of dominating, Lottie would have been able to reconcile herself to the prospect of marrying him. However, Radnor's intentions had been clear from the beginning. He wanted to control every aspect of her existence. He planned to destroy every facet of the person she was and replace her with a being of his own creation. Marriage to him would have literally been worse than death.

Her parents had refused to acknowledge the obvious, as they desperately needed Radnor's financial patronage. And it had grieved Lottie to leave them, as she was well aware of the repercussions they would face. She was often haunted by guilt, knowing that she should have sacrificed herself to Radnor for their benefit. However, the instinct of self-preservation had been too strong. In the end, she couldn't keep from bolting, and somehow providence had led her to Hampshire.

As Lottie had expected, her freedom had come with a price. She often awakened sweat-soaked and cold from nightmares of being dragged back to Radnor. It was impossible to forget—even for a moment—that he had sent people to look for her. Any perception of safety was illusory. Although her life at Stony Cross Park was pleasant, she was trapped here as surely as the birds in the aviary, their wings clipped to make them into animals neither of the ground nor of the air. She could not go anywhere, or do anything, without knowing that she would be found someday. And that had made her doomed and defiant, and unable to trust anyone. Even a handsome young man with haunting blue eyes.

Rather than return to the al fresco party, Nick went to his own room. His trunk and traveling case had already been unpacked by the servants. His clothes were neatly stacked in the mahogany gentleman's chest and hung in the armoire, which was redolent with the scent of cloves.

Impatiently Nick shed his coat, waistcoat, and his gray silk cravat. Stripping off his shirt, he bunched it in one hand and used it to blot the sheen of sweat on his face, neck, and chest. After dropping the wadded-up linen to the floor, he sat on the bed, which had been fitted into an alcove opposite the door. He removed his shoes and stockings, and lay back clad in only his black trousers, his gaze directed at the wood-paneled ceiling of the alcove.

He finally understood Radnor's obsession.

Charlotte Howard was the most bewitching woman he had ever met. She radiated a remarkable force of will that somehow conveyed the impression of movement even when she stood still. Her body, her face, every part of her was a perfect amalgam of delicacy and strength. He wanted to sink inside that vibrant warmth, ride her to peacefulness, and bury his face amid the silky curves of her breasts. He imagined her relaxed and smiling, her skin flushed from his caresses as they lay together in bed.

No wonder Radnor wanted her. And yet in his attempts to possess her, the earl would soon extinguish everything that made her so desirable.

Nick knew it would be relatively easy to whisk Charlotte away to London before the Westcliffs were fully aware of what was happening. He supposed he should do it in the morning, using the element of surprise to his advantage. Deeply troubled, he laced his fingers behind his head. "I'm not afraid of anything," Charlotte had told him. Although he didn't believe that, he admired her for saying it. Of course Charlotte was afraid—she knew what Radnor would do to her when she returned. However, that was not Nick's concern. His only responsibility was to do what he had been paid for.

On the other hand...

There was no need for haste. Why not stay at Stony Cross Park for a few days? He would not be required to report at Bow Street for another two weeks, and the woods of Hampshire were far preferable to the soggy, ill-smelling mess of London. If he remained here for an extra day or two, he would be able to learn more about Charlotte. He needed to find out if she was all that she seemed to be.

Rolling to his side, Nick considered the idea. He had never broken his own rules before, one of them being that he never allowed himself to develop personal familiarity with his prey. However, he had never been one to respect rules, even his own.

The thought of Charlotte made him hot and irritable and thoroughly aroused. Gemma had ended their arrangement six months ago, and he had been celibate ever since. It wasn't that he lacked desire... in fact, he was burning with unspent passion. And he had met many willing women. But he was not interested in the ordinary or the mundane. He wanted a woman who could provide the sexual intensity he needed. Such a woman would either be inordinately experienced in the bedroom... or not experienced at all.

Reaching over the side of the bed, Nick searched in the discarded heap of his clothes and found the miniature. With an expertise born of habit, he pressed the catch of the enameled case and flipped it open. Settling on his back, he stared into Charlotte's exquisite little face.

Is it you? he thought, tracing the line of her cheek with his fingertip. Desire filled his cock and caused it to stiffen unmercifully. His lashes lowered slightly as he continued to watch the tiny painted face, and his hand slid down to the aching jut of his arousal.

As was her daily habit, Lottie took an early-morning walk across the landscape of Stony Cross, over steep hills covered in heather or forest, past bogs and ponds and glades that teemed with life. Most of the guests at the manor, including Lady Westcliff, slept late and took breakfast at the hour of ten. However, Lottie had never been able to adapt to such a schedule. She needed some form of exercise to rid herself of an excess of nervous energy. On the days when it was too cold or stormy to walk, she fidgeted inside until Lady Westcliff erupted in exasperation.

Lottie had devised three or four different walks, each lasting approximately an hour. This morning she chose the one that began along Hill Road, crossed through a medieval oak and hazel forest, and passed the source of a local spring called the Wishing Well. It was a cool, damp morning typical of the beginning of May, and Lottie drew in deep breaths of the earth-scented air. Dressed in a gown with loose ankle-length skirts, her feet shod in sturdy mid-calf boots, Lottie trod energetically away from Westcliff Manor. She followed a sandy track that led into the forest, while natterjack toads hopped out of the path of her oncoming boots. The trees rustled overhead, the wind carrying the cries of nuthatches and whitethroats. A huge, ungainly buzzard flapped its way toward the nearby bogs in search of breakfast.

Suddenly Lottie caught sight of a dark shape ahead. It was a man, roaming through the forest, his outline partially obscured in the mist. A poacher, perhaps. Although Lottie stopped at some distance, he had unusually sharp hearing. His head turned as a twig snapped beneath her boot.

Lottie held her ground as he approached. She recognized him at once, the fluid, almost catlike grace of his movements. He was casually dressed in shirt-sleeves and a black waistcoat, with boots and decidedly ancient breeches. Lord Sydney... looking disreputable and indecently handsome. She was surprised to see him there, when all the other guests at Westcliff Manor were still abed. Even more surprising was her own reaction to him, a surge of excitement and gladness.

“Good morning,” Lord Sydney said, a faint smile playing on his lips. His dark hair was disheveled, and his cravat had been carelessly tied.

“I wouldn’t have expected you to be out at this hour,” she said cheerfully.

“I never sleep past sunrise.”

Lottie nodded toward the path he had been contemplating. “Were you planning to go that way? I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Why not?”

“That path leads to marshy ponds and very deep bogs. One unfortunate step, and you could find yourself drowning in mud—that is, if you haven’t been done in by raft spiders or snakes.” She shook her head in feigned regret. “We’ve lost some very nice guests that way.”

He smiled lazily. “I don’t suppose you would care to recommend an alternate route?”

“If you go the other way, you’ll come to a bridlepath that leads to a sunken lane. Follow it to the gatehouse garden, go through the opening in the hedge, and you’ll find a path that takes you to the top of a hill. From there you can see lakes, villages, forests, all spread before you... the view is breathtaking.”

“Is that where you’re headed?”

She shook her head and replied impudently, "No, I am going in the opposite direction."

"But who will save me from the bogs?"

She laughed. "You can't accompany me, my lord. It would neither be seemly nor wise."

If they were seen together, it would cause gossip. And it would most certainly displease Lady Westcliff, who had warned her never to take a "follower," as it was politely called.

"Do you wish to be alone?" Lord Sydney asked. A new expression crossed his face, so quick and subtle that hardly anyone would have noticed it. "Forgive me. Once again I have trespassed on your solitude."

Lottie wondered at what she had seen in his eyes for that fragment of a second... a desolation so vast and impenetrable that it shocked her. What could have caused it? He had everything a person required to be content... freedom, wealth, looks, social position. There was no reason for him to be anything other than ecstatic over his lot in life. But he was unhappy, and everything in her nature compelled her to offer him comfort. "I am rather too accustomed to solitude," she said softly. "Perhaps some company would be a pleasant change."

"If you're certain—"

"Yes, come along." She gave his athletic form a deliberately challenging glance. "I only hope that you'll be able to keep pace with me."

"I'll try," he assured her wryly, falling into step beside her as she continued her walk.

They approached the trunk of a huge oak that had fallen across the path. Insects buzzed lazily through the rays of strengthening sunlight that streamed in from above. "Look," Lottie said, gesturing to a dragonfly as it flew and dipped before them. "There are more than a dozen varieties of dragonfly in this forest, and at least a hundred different moths. If you come at dusk, you can see purple hairstreak butterflies—they gather right there at the tops of the tr—"

"Miss Miller," he interrupted, "I'm a Londoner. We don't care about insects, except to consider how they may best be exterminated."

Lottie heaved a theatrical sigh, as if vexed by his lack of interest in the subject. "All right, then. I will refrain from describing the many varieties of aquatic beetle we have here."

"Thank you," came his fervent reply. "Here, allow me to help you over that oak—"

"No need."

Lottie hopped onto the fallen trunk and walked along the gnarled surface, showing off her physical coordination with no trace of modesty. When her efforts were greeted with silence, she glanced over her shoulder and discovered Sydney walking right behind her, his footing as sure and easy as a cat's. A startled laugh escaped her as she made her way to the end of the trunk. "You are quite agile for a gentleman of your size."

Lord Sydney let the comment pass, his mouth twisting to indicate that his agility was of no consequence. "Why did you become a lady's companion?" he asked as Lottie jumped to the ground, her feet rustling

through the brittle layer of leaves. He followed her, landing in the same spot she had. Curiously, he did not make nearly as much noise as she had, despite the fact that he was easily twice her weight.

Lottie chose her words with great care. She disliked talking about her past—not only was it dangerous but the subject filled her with melancholy. “My family is poor. There was no other choice for me.”

“You could have married.”

“I’ve never met anyone that I wanted to marry.”

“Not even Lord Westcliff?”

“Lord Westcliff?” she repeated in surprise. “Why would I have designs on him?”

“He’s wealthy and titled, and you’ve resided beneath his roof for two years,” came Sydney’s sardonic reply. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Lottie frowned thoughtfully. It wasn’t as if the earl was unappealing—quite the opposite, in fact. Westcliff was an attractive man who shouldered his responsibilities and considered it unmanly to complain about them. In addition to his own strict morality, Lord Westcliff possessed a dry wit and a carefully concealed sense of compassion, and as Lottie had discreetly observed, he employed his courteous manners as skillfully as a weapon. Women were drawn to him, although Lottie was not one of them. She sensed that she did not have the key to unlock his innate reserve... nor had she ever been tempted to trust him with the reason for her uncompromising solitude.

“Naturally a man of Westcliff’s position would never entertain that kind of interest in a lady’s companion,” she said in reply to Lord Sydney’s question. “But even if we were on the same social footing, I am certain that the earl would never regard me in that way, nor I him. Our relationship—if one could call it that—does not possess that particular...” She paused, searching for an appropriate word. “Alchemy.”

The word hovered gently in the air, dispelled only by the sound of Sydney’s quiet voice.

“Surely alchemy pales in comparison to the safety that he could offer you.”

Safety. The thing she wanted most, and could never have. Lottie stopped and stared into his dark face. “What makes you think that I am in need of safety?”

“You’re alone. A woman needs someone to protect her.”

“Oh, I have no need of protection. I have a very pleasant life at Stony Cross Park. Lady Westcliff is quite kind, and I want for nothing.”

“Lady Westcliff won’t live forever,” Sydney pointed out. Although his words were blunt, his expression was strangely understanding. “What will you do after she is gone?”

The question caught Lottie by surprise. No one ever asked her such things. Perturbed, she took her time about replying. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “I suppose I never let myself think about the future.”

Sydney’s gaze was riveted on her, his eyes an almost unnatural shade of blue. “Neither do I.”

Lottie didn’t know what to make of her companion. It had been easy at first to think of him as a spoiled

young aristocrat, with his beautifully tailored clothes and perfect features. But on closer inspection, there were signs that conveyed the opposite. The deep-cut shadows beneath his eyes betrayed countless sleepless nights. The harsh grooves on either side of his mouth gave him a cynical look that was odd for a man so young. And in unguarded moments such as this, she saw in his eyes that he was no stranger to pain.

His expression changed like quicksilver. Once again he was a lazy rogue with mocking eyes. "The future is too boring to contemplate," he said lightly. "Shall we continue, Miss Miller?"

Disconcerted by his swift change of mood, Lottie led him out of the forest to a sunken road. The morning sun rose higher, chasing the lavender from the sky and warming the meadows. The field they passed was filled with heather and emerald sphagnum moss, and dotted with tiny red sundewrosettes. "They don't have views like this in London, do they?" Lottie remarked.

"No," Lord Sydney agreed, although he seemed distinctly unenchanted by the quiet rural beauty around them.

"I gather you prefer town life," Lottie said with a smile. "Tenements, cobbled streets, factories, coal smoke, and all that noise. How could anyone choose that overthis?"

The sunlight touched on the mahogany and gold highlights in his brown hair. "You keep your beetles and bogs, Miss Miller. I'll take London any time."

"I'll show you something that London doesn't have." Triumphantly Lottie led him across the sunken road. They came to a deep muddy basin filled with water that spilled from the bank beside it.

"What is that?" Lord Sydney asked, viewing the sloshing hole dubiously.

"A wishing well. Everyone in the village visits it." Busily Lottie searched the pockets of her walking skirts. "Oh, curse it, I haven't got any pins."

"What do you need pins for?"

"To drop in the well." She gave him a chiding smile. "I thought everyone knew that you can't make a wish without a pin."

"What do you want to wish for?" he asked huskily.

"Oh, it isn't for me. I've made dozens of wishes here. I wanted you to have one." Giving up her search for a pin, Lottie glanced up at him.

There was a strange look on Lord Sydney's face... blank, painfully surprised... as if he had just been kicked in the stomach. He didn't move or blink, just stared at her as if he couldn't quite comprehend her words. The silence between them became thick, and Lottie waited in helpless fascination for him to break it. Wrenching his gaze away, Lord Sydney gazed at the field of heather with puzzling intensity, as if his mind were striving to wrap itself around something that didn't make sense.

"Do make a wish," Lottie said impulsively. "I'll throw a pin in the well for you the next time I come."

Lord Sydney shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was oddly hoarse. "I wouldn't know what to wish for."

They continued in silence, making their way over a muddy patch and following the sunken road to a footbridge that covered a small stream. On the other side of the stream, a damp meadow beckoned, blazing with waist-high yellow meadowsweet bushes. "This way," Lottie said, lifting her skirts to her knees as they traversed grass and heather and approached a barrier of hedge and fence. "Beyond the hedge, the footpath leads back through the forest to Stony Cross Park." She pointed to the tall arched gate, so narrow that it would allow only one person to pass through at a time. Glancing at Lord Sydney, she was relieved to see that he had recovered his composure. "The only way through is that kissing gate."

"Why is it called that?"

"I don't know." Lottie considered the gate thoughtfully. "I suppose because a kiss would be the unavoidable consequence of two people trying to pass through it at the same time."

"An interesting theory." Sydney paused inside the narrow gate. Leaning against one side of it, he sent her a challenging smile, knowing full well that she could not go through without brushing against him.

Lottie raised her brows. "By some chance are you expecting me to test it?"

Lord Sydney lifted one shoulder in a relaxed shrug, watching her with a vagabond charm that was nearly irresistible. "I won't stop you, if you feel so inclined."

It was obvious that he did not expect her to take up the challenge. Lottie knew she had only to roll her eyes and reprove him and he would step aside. However, as she considered her response to him she became aware of a painful hollowness inside. She had not been touched by anyone in two years. No impulsive girlish hugs from her friends at Maidstone's...no caress of her mother's hand, no sweetly childish kisses from her younger siblings. She wondered what it was about this man that had made her aware of the deprivation. He made her want to tell him her secrets—which was, of course, unthinkable. Impossible. She could never trust anyone, when her very life was at stake.

She realized that Lord Sydney's smile had vanished. Without being aware of it, she had drawn closer to him and now stood within arm's length. Her gaze flickered to his mouth, so wide, masculine, full. Her pulse escalated to a wild rhythm as temptation exerted a force stronger than anything she had ever known...as strong as fear, as deep as hunger.

"Hold still," she heard herself say. Carefully she laid a hand on the center of his chest.

The instant that Lottie touched him, Lord Sydney's chest moved beneath her palm in a strong, quick breath.

The violent thump of his heart against her fingers filled Lottie with a curious tenderness. He seemed to be frozen, as if he feared that any movement might frighten her away. Softly she touched his lower lip with her fingertips and felt his hot breath fan against them. A butterfly left its resting place on the gate and flew away, a trembling stain of color in the air.

"What is your name?" Lottie whispered. "Your first name."

It took an unaccountably long time for him to reply. The bristly fans of his lashes lowered to conceal his thoughts. "John."

He was so tall that Lottie had to stand on her toes to reach his mouth, and even then she couldn't quite

manage it. Catching her waist in his hands, he compacted her gently against his body. Suddenly there was a strange, lost look in his eyes, as if he were drowning. Hesitantly Lottie slid her hand around the back of his neck, where the interlaced muscles had gone rigid.

He let her tug his head lower, lower, until their breath mingled and their lips touched in a sweet, supple kiss. His mouth remained warm and still against hers, and then his lips began to move in soft brushes. Disoriented, Lottie swayed in his grasp, and his arm slid around her back to hold her securely. Instinctively she nudged upward, straining on her toes as she sought to deepen the tender pressure. But he was careful to keep his passion under tight rein, refusing to take any more.

Gradually she eased away from him, sinking back to her heels. She dared to touch the side of his face, relishing the warmth of his skin against her palm. "I've paid the toll," she whispered. "May I pass through the gate now?"

He nodded gravely and moved away from the threshold.

Lottie crossed through and wandered past the hedge, surprised to discover that her knees were a bit quivery. Her companion followed in silence as she walked along the footpath that led to Stony Cross Park. When they had almost reached the great house, they paused in the shelter of an oak tree.

"I must leave you here," Lottie said, her face dappled by the overhead boughs. "It wouldn't do to be seen together."

"Of course."

A wistful ache gathered inside her chest as she stared at him. "When will you leave Stony Cross Park, my lord?"

"Soon."

"Not until after tomorrow evening, I hope. The village has a wonderful May Day celebration. Everyone from the manor comes down to watch."

"Will you?"

Lottie shook her head immediately. "No, I have seen it before. I will probably remain in my room with a book. But for a newcomer, the festivities would be entertaining."

"I will consider it," he murmured. "Thank you for the walk, Miss Miller." And with a polite bow, he left her.

After breakfast, Charlotte pushed Lady Westcliff's wheeled chair along the paved walks of the estate gardens. Nick watched from an open first-floor window, able to hear the regal old woman as she lectured Charlotte.

"There is no substitute for daily inspection," Lady Westcliff was saying, gesturing with a bejeweled hand. "Weeds must be pulled as soon as they show. Plants must never be allowed to grow outside their proper places, or they will ruin the proportion of the garden..."

Charlotte appeared to be listening respectfully as she guided the chair along the path. The ease with which she maneuvered it belied the vehicle's obvious weight. Her slim arms were surprisingly strong, and she showed no signs of tiring as they proceeded along the hedgerow.

Nick watched her intently as he tried to sort through the anarchy of his thoughts. His usual appetite had vanished after their walk this morning. He had not eaten breakfast. . . had not done anything, really, except to wander around the estate in a sort of daze that appalled him. He knew himself to be a callous man, one with no honor, and no means of quelling his own brutish instincts. So much of his life had been occupied with basic survival that he had never been free to follow higher pursuits. He had little acquaintance with literature or history, and his mathematical abilities were limited to matters of money and betting odds. Philosophy, to him, was a handful of cynical principles learned through experience with the worst of humanity. By now, nothing could surprise or intimidate him. He didn't fear loss, pain, or even death.

But with a few words and one awkward, innocent kiss, Charlotte Howard had devastated him.

It was clear that Charlotte had changed from the girl her parents, friends, and Radnor himself had known. She had become accustomed to living in the moment, with no thought given to the future. The knowledge that she was being hunted, that her days of precious freedom were limited, should have made her bitter and disillusioned. And yet she still threw pins into wishing wells. A wish. The flicker of hope that implied. . . it had struck at his soul, when he had believed he had no soul left.

He could not give her to Radnor.

He had to take her for himself.

His hand closed around the painted wood casement, gripping hard to assure his balance. Otherwise, he would have staggered from the violent surprise of his discovery.

"Sydney."

The sound of Lord Westcliff's voice startled him. Nick was not pleased to realize that he had been so absorbed in watching Charlotte that his customary alertness had vanished. Keeping his face blank, he turned toward the earl.

Westcliff's features seemed even more harshly cut and uncompromising than usual. His dark eyes contained a hard, cold gleam. "I see that you've taken notice of my mother's companion," he remarked softly. "An attractive girl, not to mention vulnerable. In the past, I have sometimes found it necessary to discourage a guest's interest in Miss Miller, as I would never allow any of my servants to be taken advantage of."

Nick returned Westcliff's steady regard, aware that he was being warned away from Charlotte. "Am I poaching on your preserve, my lord?"

The earl's eyes narrowed at the insolent question. "I have advanced my hospitality to you with very few conditions, Sydney. However, one of them is that you leave Miss Miller alone. That is not open for negotiation."

"I see." Suspicion ignited inside him. Had Charlotte confided in her employer? He had not thought that she would trust anyone, even a man as honorable as Westcliff. However, if she had taken that chance, then the earl would undoubtedly offer strong opposition to her being removed from Stony Cross Park. It

was also possible that Charlotte had earned his protection by sleeping with him.

The thought of Charlotte naked in another man's arms brought an acid taste to Nick's mouth, and he was suddenly filled with bloodlust. It must be jealousy, he thought incredulously. Christ.

"I'll leave the choice to Miss Miller," Nick said flatly. "If she desires my presence—or absence—I will abide by her preference. Not yours."

Nick saw from the warning gleam in Westcliff's eyes that the earl did not trust him.

The man had good instincts.

## Chapter Four

The English celebration of May Day varied from village to village. It had been derived from an ancient Roman festival honoring the goddess of springtime, and over time each region had added its own customs in addition to the standard Maypole dance and a-maying songs. Nick had vague childhood memories of the May celebrations in Worcestershire, especially the man dressed as "Jack-in-the Green," who cavorted through the village completely covered in fresh greenery. As a small child, Nick had been terrified by the sight of the plant-festooned man and had hidden behind his older sister Sophia's skirts until he had gone away.

It had been a long time since Nick had seen a May Day celebration of any kind. Now, from his adult perspective, the sexual connotations of the holiday were more than obvious... villagers dancing with the phallic staffs, the May King and Queen going from door to door and sprinkling "wild water" on the household inhabitants... the streets adorned with hoop-shaped garlands featuring pairs of marigold balls hanging in the centers.

Nick stood on a hill near the manor house with a crowd of other guests, watching the riotous dancing in the center of the village. Hundreds of lamps and blazing torches lit the streets with a golden glow. A cacophony of laughter, music, and singing filled the air as women took their turns at the towering Maypole. Blasts from hunting horns frequently punctuated the din. Young men danced with ropes woven of tail hair from cattle, which would later be dragged through the night dew to ensure a good milk supply for the next year.

"I expect good hunting tonight," came a masculine voice from nearby. The speaker was Viscount Stepney, a brawny young man with a well-known penchant for skirt-chasing. His companions, the lords Woodsome and Kendal, broke into lusty laughter. Seeing Nick's questioning gaze, Stepney explained with a chortle. "The village girls will go a-maying until morning. Catch one of them in the woods, and she'll let you do anything you want. Even the married ones do it—they're allowed to remove their wedding rings for this one night."

"And their husbands don't object?" Nick asked.

That question made the lords laugh in unison. "Why no," Stepney explained, "they are too busy chasing fresh young tails themselves to give a damn about what their wives are doing. A pleasant holiday, is it not?"

Nick smiled slightly, making no reply. Clearly Stepney and his companions considered it great sport to spend ten minutes coupling with peasant girls in the woods. "A poke and a wiggle," as Gemma Bradshaw

had dryly described the lovemaking style of most of the men who frequented her establishment. They had no conception of real sexuality, no requirement of a woman save that she spread her legs. Obviously a quick mating between strangers afforded a certain kind of release. But that was too simple, and too easy, to satisfy Nick. Thanks to Gemma's tutoring, he had developed a complex palate.

The image of Charlotte's face, her dark eyes and pointed chin and sweet mouth, hovered at the back of his mind. Let Stepney and his friends go in search of a quick tail-tickle. Nick had far more interesting prospects.

"Come, Sydney," the viscount urged. "The village girls will become available immediately after the betrothed of May is chosen." Seeing Nick's unfamiliarity with the phrase, he explained, "A lad of marriageable age lies on the green and pretends to sleep. The girls who are willing to marry him race to be the first to awaken him. The first one to kiss him will be able to claim him as her betrothed." He smiled lecherously and rubbed his hands. "And the other girls—all in need of consolation—scatter into the forest, waiting to be caught by enterprising fellows such as myself. You should have seen the one I captured last year—black hair and red lips—ah, what a fine little mount she was. Come, Sydney—if you're fleet-footed, you'll catch one for yourself."

Nick was about to refuse when his gaze was caught by a new cluster of girls grasping the Maypole ribbons. One of them seized his full attention. Like the others, she wore a white peasant dress, her hair covered by a red cloth. At this distance her features were difficult to discern, but Nick recognized her at once. A rueful smile curved his lips as he recalled Charlotte's saying that she intended to stay in her room with a book that night. No doubt the Westcliffs would disapprove of her attending the village festival, and so she had chosen to go in disguise. Fascination and desire swirled inside him as his gaze tracked Charlotte's slim figure. She wound in and out of the Maypole circle, her hands flung exuberantly high over her head.

"I believe I will join you," Nick murmured, accompanying the eager rakes down the hill.

Laughing recklessly, Lottie joined the mass of maidens who waited in tense readiness to race to the village green. From what she had been able to deduce, the betrothed of May was an exceptional catch this year—the butcher's son, a handsome blond lad with blue eyes and a fine physique, and a guarantee of inheriting a profitable family business. Of course Lottie had no intention of trying to reach him. However, it was fun to join in the game, and she was entertained by the excitement of the girls around her.

The signal was given, and Lottie was carried along with the village girls in a frantic rush. The wildness and noise was such a contrast to her quiet existence at Stony Cross Park that she felt a jolt of exhilaration. She had spent so many years learning proper comportment at Maidstone's, and struggling to remain inconspicuous as a companion to Lady Westcliff, that she couldn't remember the last time she had raised her voice. Caught up in the moment, she howled with laughter and screamed as loudly as the determined brides-to-be around her as the group swarmed over the green. From somewhere ahead, a jubilant cry rang over the crowd. The victor, a robust red-haired girl, clambered onto her new fiancé's broad shoulders, exultantly waving a bouquet of wildflowers. "I did it!" she crowed. "I got 'im, 'e's mine!"

Cheering, the villagers surrounded the newly betrothed couple, while disappointed maidens scattered and ran toward the forest. A host of eager men followed, ready to begin the night's a-maying.

Smiling, Lottie followed at a relaxed pace, having no wish to be the focus of some overexcited lad's amorous attention. In a few minutes, the revelers would pair off, and she would sneak back to Stony Cross Park. Stopping at the edge of the forest, she leaned against a heavy-crowned sycamore and sighed in satisfaction. Her knees were pleasantly weak from dancing and wine. This was the first year she had actually taken part in May Day, rather than simply watched, and it had been even more enjoyable than she had expected. A tune played insistently in her head, and she sang to herself in a whisper, her eyes closed as she rested back against the smooth, mottled bark.

Go no more a-rushing, maids in May,  
go no more a-rushing, maids, I pray,  
go no more a-rushing, or you'll fall a-blushing...

Although all was still and quiet around her, some instinct warned she was no longer alone. Pausing, Lottie lifted her lashes and recoiled as she saw a dark shape right beside her. "Good Lord!" She stumbled backward, and a pair of hands gripped her shoulders, steadying her.

Sputtering in surprise, Lottie flailed at her captor in a bid for freedom.

"Easy," came a masculine voice, rich with laughter. "Easy. It's me."

She gasped and went still, staring up at his dark face. "Lord S-Sydney?"

"Yes."

"You nearly frightened me to death!"

"Sorry." He grinned, his white teeth gleaming in the darkness. "I didn't want to interrupt you."

Lottie laughed and pushed at him, mortified to be caught singing to herself like some half-wit. "How did you find me?"

"It seems to be a talent of mine." Sydney released her and leaned one shoulder against the sycamore, his careless smile at variance with his alert gaze.

Lottie felt for her kerchief, which had been dislodged in the flurry of activity. "I covered my hair—I can't think how you recognized me."

"I know the way you move."

She did not reply, experiencing a mixture of pleasure and uncertainty. There was a compliment implicit in the statement. But he was a stranger... he had not known her long enough, nor well enough, to distinguish something so intrinsic and subtle.

"Did you enjoy the May festivities, my lord?" she asked as she tied the kerchief back into place.

"I enjoyed watching you."

Her eyes narrowed in pretend-menace. "Do you intend to tell anyone that you saw me here?"

Lord Sydney leaned closer, as if to impart some highly confidential news. “Not if my life depended on it.”

Smiling, Lottie leaned her shoulder against the tree trunk, mirroring his posture. “Are you going a-maying, like the other young men?”

“That depends.” A flirtatious gleam entered his eyes. “Are you going to run through the forest in hopes of being captured?”

“Decidedly not.”

“Then allow me to escort you back to the house. I shouldn’t like for you to be waylaid by some impassioned village youth.”

“Oh, I would outrun any of them,” Lottie said confidently. “I know these woods quite well, and I am small enough to dart easily among the trees. No one could catch me.”

“I could.”

“A man as large as you? I think not. In these woods, with all the underbrush, you would be as noisy as a rampaging elephant.”

His body tensed subtly, his appreciation of the impudent challenge almost palpable. “You might be surprised—” he began, and paused as he was distracted by a feminine squeal from somewhere to the left of them, as a village girl was “caught” by a randy young man. A moment of silence, and then a loud moan of pleasure filtered through the trees.

When Sydney turned back to Lottie, she was gone.

Laughing inwardly, she slipped through the woods like a wraith, raising her skirts to her knees to keep from being snagged by branches. She maneuvered easily through the maze of trunks and flexible saplings, until finally all was quiet and there was no sign of anyone behind her. Pausing for breath, Lottie glanced over her shoulder. No movement, nothing except for the distant sounds of May Day carousing.

Either Lord Sydney had decided not to give chase, or he had lost her in mid-pursuit. A triumphant smile curved her lips—she had proved her point. Turning, she continued toward Stony Cross Park—and shrieked in alarm as she walked right into a hard male body.

She was caught against a deep chest, a pair of powerful arms subduing her easily. It was Lord Sydney, his low laugh tickling her ear. Stunned, she leaned against him, requiring temporary support as she strove to recover her equilibrium.

“How did you get in front of me?” she asked breathlessly.

“Flank speed.” His gentle fingers sought to restore her kerchief, but it slid from her fine, slippery hair, revealing the neat braided coil at her nape. He let the cloth drop to the ground. A smile wove through his voice. “You can’t escape me, you know.”

The teasing words seemed to contain a hint of warning.

Lottie stood in the shelter of his body, absorbing his warmth, his spicy masculine scent. How had she

come to be alone in the darkness with him? She did not believe in happenstance. This could only be a result of her own relentless attraction to him...an attraction that seemed to be returned in full measure. As they both fell silent, Lottie became aware of a nearby couple, their entwined figures barely visible through the trees. The muffled sounds of sexual revelry brought a rush of heat to Lottie's face.

"Take me back to the house, please," she said.

Lord Sydney released her. Lottie stepped away, almost bumping against the large tree behind her. Following, he pressed her against the wide trunk, using his arms to protect her from the rough bark. Her breath caught sharply. Her hands slid to his upperarms, where the brutal swell of muscle was manifest through his coat. She knew that he was going to kiss her, that he wanted her. And heaven help her, she wanted him too.

He stroked the curve of her cheek with a single fingertip, so carefully, as if she were a wild creature that would bolt at the slightest sign of haste. Her breath quickened as he touched her chin and tilted her head back in an angle of surrender.

His gentle mouth descended to hers, molding, coaxing, until she parted her lips with a gasp of pleasure. The tip of his tongue stroked the edge of her teeth, ventured farther, brushed the inside of her cheek in a burning, delicate exploration. The kiss made her light-headed, and she wrapped her arms around his neck in a desperate bid for balance. He let her have more of his weight, pinning her securely between his body and the unyielding oak at her back. She twisted and pulled at him, until he made a soothing noise and ran his hands down her back. The slow caress only sharpened her need, making her arch against him in a blind, instinctive search. She felt something against the fabric of her rough-woven skirt...the intimate bulge of his sex.

The rigid length of him matched perfectly in the notch between her thighs. His hardness pressed into her softness, his mouth possessed hers with wicked skill, while his arms surrounded her. Sliding her hands into his hair, she curved her fingers around his scalp, beneath the thick locks that gleamed like silk in the fragmented moonlight. A harsh breath escaped him, and his lips slid along her throat. Even in her innocence, she sensed the wealth of experience in his careful touch, the hunger he kept so tightly shackled.

Her peasant blouse had slipped over one shoulder, revealing the white gleam of her skin. His fingers stole to the ribbon of her gathered neckline and tugged deftly, causing the crumpled linen to slide downward. Gradually his hand eased beneath her chemise. Her cool, soft nipple tightened against the calloused pads of his fingers, the peak turning harder and warmer with each circling stroke.

Lottie pressed her face into the crook of his neck and shoulder. She had to stop him now, before her will was completely demolished. "No. Please stop. I'm sorry."

His hand slid from her blouse, and he touched her damp lips with his fingers. "Have I frightened you?" he whispered.

Lottie shook her head, somehow resisting the urge to curl into his embrace like a sun-warmed cat. "No...I've frightened myself."

For some reason her admission made him smile. His fingers moved to her throat, tracing the fragile line with a sensitivity that made her breath catch. Tugging the peasant blouse back up to her shoulder, he retied the frayed ribbon that secured the neckline. "Then I'll stop," he said. "Come—I'll take you to the house."

He stayed close to her as they continued through the forest, occasionally moving to push a branch out of the way, or taking her hand to guide her over a rough place on the path. As familiar as she was with the woods of Stony Cross Park, Lottie had no need of his assistance. But she accepted the help with demur. And she did not protest when he paused again, his lips finding hers easily in the darkness. His mouth was hot and sweet as he kissed her compulsively... swift kisses, languid ones, kisses that ranged from intense need to wicked flirtation. Drugged with pleasure, Lottie let her hands wander to the thick dishevelment of his hair, the iron-hard nape of his neck. When the blistering heat rose to an untenable degree, Lord Sydney groaned softly.

“Charlotte...”

“Lottie,” she told him breathlessly.

He pressed his lips to her temple and cuddled her against his powerful body as if she were infinitely fragile. “I never thought I would find someone like you,” he whispered. “I’ve looked for you so long... needed you...”

Lottie shivered and dropped her head to his shoulder. “This isn’t real,” she said faintly.

His lips touched her neck, finding a place that made her arch involuntarily. “What’s real, then?”

She gestured to the yew hedge that bordered the estate garden. “Everything back there.”

His arms tightened, and he spoke in a muffled voice. “Let me come to your room. Just for a little while.”

Lottie responded with a trembling laugh, knowing exactly what would happen if she allowed that. “Absolutely not.”

Soft, hot kisses drifted over her skin. “You’re safe with me. I would never ask for more than you were willing to give.”

Lottie closed her eyes, her head spinning. “The problem is,” she said ruefully, “I am willing to give you entirely too much.”

She felt the curve of his smile against her cheek. “Is that a problem?”

“Oh, yes.” Pulling away from him, Lottie held her hands to her hot face and sighed unsteadily. “We must stop this. I don’t trust myself with you.”

“You shouldn’t,” he agreed hoarsely.

The sounds of their breathing mingled in the darkness. He was so warm and strong that Lottie could barely keep from flinging herself at him. Instead she forced herself to think rationally. Lord Sydney would be gone soon, and the memory of this night would fade in time. She was not so weak-willed, or foolish, that she could be so easily seduced.

“At least let me walk with you to the house,” Lord Sydney urged. “If we are seen together, you can explain it as a chance meeting.”

Lottie hesitated, then nodded. “And we’ll part company at the back terrace?”

“Yes.” Offering her his arm, Lord Sydney accompanied her to the double-sided stone staircase at the back of the manor. They were both silent as they ascended to the terrace that overlooked the main gardens. Abundant light from the great hall shone through the glittering multipaned windows and French doors. The terrace, often the location for guests to smoke and drink port, was unoccupied, as nearly everyone was either in the village or playing cards and billiards inside.

A lone figure relaxed in a chair by the railing. He drew lazily on a cigar, exhaling a thin stream of smoke that drifted in the air like a vanishing wraith. The scent of expensive tobacco tickled Lottie’s nostrils as she reached the top step.

Her stomach flipped uneasily as she realized who the man was.

“Lord Westcliff,” she murmured, curtsying automatically. Uneasily she wondered what he would make of the fact that she was accompanied by Lord Sydney.

The earl remained seated as he surveyed the two of them. The refracted light from the windows gleamed on his coal black hair and cast angular shadows across his blunt, strong features. “Miss Miller,” he said in his gravelly voice, and nodded coolly to her companion. “Sydney. What convenient timing. There is a matter that I wish to take up with you.”

Certain that her employer was displeased with her, Lottie lowered her gaze to the stone flagging of the terrace. “My lord, forgive me. I went to watch the festival in the village, and—”

“You did more than watch, it appears,” Lord Westcliff observed mildly, his keen gaze sweeping over her rustic attire.

“Yes, I took part in the Maypole dance. And Lord Sydney offered to escort me home—”

“Of course he did,” the earl said sardonically, taking another pull on his cigar. Blue-gray smoke whirled and eddied upward. “There is no need to look so distressed, Miss Miller. As far as I am concerned, you are not prohibited from seeking entertainment in the village—although it would doubtless be wise not to mention such activities to the dowager countess.” He gestured with his cigar. “You may go now, while I discuss a few things with Lord Sydney.”

Lottie nodded in cautious relief. “Yes, sir.” As she began to depart, she was astonished to feel Lord Sydney’s light, restraining hand on her arm.

“Wait.”

Lottie froze in utter confusion, her face flooding with color. She could not believe that he had dared to touch her in front of the earl. “My lord,” she murmured in protest.

Sydney did not return her glance; his gaze was fixed intently on the earl’s harsh features. “Before Miss Miller takes her leave, you had better tell me what this is about.”

“This is about your so-called family,” Lord Westcliff said softly. “And your so-called past.” The quiet words rang with condemnation. Lottie realized from the earl’s expression that something was very wrong. If any warmth had lingered from the enchanted moments in the forest, it vanished abruptly.

Bewildered, she stared at Lord Sydney. His face had changed somehow, no longer quite so handsome,

but suddenly hard and cold. To behold him now, one would believe that this man was capable of anything. Suddenly, she could not believe that a few minutes ago she had kissed that stern mouth, that his hands had caressed her intimately. When he spoke, even his voice sounded different, his accent a bit coarser. The aristocratic veneer had been stripped away, revealing the stony layers beneath. "I would prefer to discuss this in a more private setting," he said to the earl.

Westcliff inclined his head with icy courtesy. "There is a study in the family wing. Will that serve?"

"Yes." Sydney paused deliberately before adding, "Miss Miller will accompany us."

Lottie stared at him blankly. His request made no sense. Suddenly she felt cold all over, and a shiver chased down her spine. "Why?" she asked through dry lips.

"She has nothing to do with this," Lord Westcliff said curtly, rising from his chair.

Lord Sydney's face was dark and still. "She has everything to do with it."

Lottie felt herself turn white. The entire surface of her body seemed to prickle and burn, as if she had fallen into a frozen pond. She found it difficult to speak or move as a paralyzing suspicion crept over her.

The earl dropped his cigar to the terrace and crushed it with his foot. A touch of uncharacteristic impatience edged his tone. "Miss Miller, will you be so kind as to join us? It seems that we have a small mystery to solve."

Nodding in a puppetlike fashion, Lottie followed the earl into the house, while her instincts screamed for her to flee. She had little choice but to play the scene out, however. Forcing herself to behave calmly, she went with the two men to the private study, its rosewood paneling glowing ruddily in the lamplight. The room was hard and uncompromising, with minimal upholstery and sharp angles, and no ornamentation save for a pristine row of stained glass windows.

As Lord Westcliff closed the door, Lottie took care to keep as great a distance between herself and Sydney as possible. A sense of foreboding nearly made her ill. She could not bring herself to look directly at Lord Sydney, but she was intensely aware of him.

Lord Westcliff spoke. "Will you have a seat, Miss Miller?"

Lottie shook her head dumbly, afraid that if she moved at all, she might collapse.

"Very well." The earl's attention moved to Lord Sydney. "Let us begin with the information I received today. Immediately upon your arrival at Stony Cross Park, I undertook to make certain inquiries about you. I suspected that you were not being entirely truthful in some regard, although I could not quite put my finger on what it was."

Lord Sydney appeared relaxed but watchful, his blue eyes hard as he returned the earl's stare. "And the results of your inquiries, my lord?"

"There is no Viscount Sydney," Westcliff said bluntly, ignoring Lottie's gasp as he continued. "The family line ended approximately twenty years ago, when the real Lord Sydney died sine prole mascula superstita—without surviving male children to establish a legitimate claim to the title. Which begs the question...who the hell are you? And what is your purpose here?"

“I’m Nick Gentry.”

Although Lottie had never heard the name, Lord Westcliff seemed to recognize it. “I see,” he said softly. “That explains Sir Ross’s involvement. You’re about some business for Bow Street, then.”

Lottie gasped in astonishment as she realized that the stranger was a Bow Street runner. She had heard of the small, elite force of officers who did everything from solving murder cases to serving as bodyguards for royalty. They were known for their ruthless efficiency and courage, and had even achieved a celebrated status in higher social circles. No wonder this man had seemed so different from the other guests here. “I hunt,” he had told her, conveniently omitting the fact that his prey was the two-legged variety.

“Not always,” Gentry said in response to Westcliff’s question. “Sometimes I accept private commissions.” His gaze moved to Lottie’s tense face. “Two months ago I was hired by Lord Radnor to find his runaway fiancée, Charlotte Howard, who has been missing for two years.”

Lottie was utterly still, while cruel pain burst inside her chest and leaked all through her. Her mouth shook with violent denial, but no words would come out. Instead she heard a high-pitched, incoherent cry, only later realizing it had been her own. She was not aware of moving, but suddenly she was across the room, clawing at Gentry’s dark face, while rage and terror swooped around her like attacking buzzards.

A savage curse rang in her ears, and her wrists were snatched in crushing vises, but she did not, could not, stop struggling. Sweat and tears poured down her face, and she breathed in sobbing screams, fighting for her life, for the freedom that was being ripped away from her. Somewhere in her mind she knew that she was acting like a madwoman, that this would do her no good, but she could not seem to stop herself.

“Stop it, Lottie,” Gentry snarled, giving her a hard shake. “Calm yourself. . . for God’s sake—”

“I won’t go back!” she shrieked, panting furiously. “I’ll kill you first, oh God, I hate you, hate you—”

“Lottie.” The cold voice of sanity cut neatly through her writhing torment. It was Lord Westcliff’s voice. One of his powerful arms slid around her from behind, and he hauled her away from Gentry. She reared back against him like a terrified animal. “That’s enough,” Westcliff said against her ear, his arm tightening into a steely band. “He won’t take you, Lottie. I swear it. You know that I always keep my word. Now take a deep breath. Another.”

Somehow the earl’s stern, quiet voice reached her as nothing else could have, and she found herself obeying. He guided her to a chair and forced her to sit. Lowering to his haunches, he pinned her with a steady, black gaze. “Stay still. And keep breathing.”

Lottie nodded jerkily, her face still streaming. “Don’t let him come near me,” she whispered.

Standing, Westcliff shot the Bow Street runner a glance of obsidian ice. “Keep your distance, Gentry. I don’t give a damn about who has paid you to do what. You’re on my estate, and you’ll do nothing without my consent.”

“You have no legal claim on her,” Gentry said softly. “You can’t keep her here.”

Westcliff responded with an arrogant snort. Going to the sideboard, he poured a small quantity of amber

liquid into a glass. Bringing the liquor to Lottie, he forced her trembling fingers around the vessel. "Drink this," he said curtly.

"I don't—" she began, but he interrupted in a tone of absolute authority.

"Now. Every drop."

Grimacing, she downed the liquid in a few gulps and coughed as her lungs and throat were filled with velvet fire. Her head swam, and she regarded the earl with watering eyes. He extracted a handkerchief from the inside of his coat and gave it to her. The linen was warm from the heat of his body. Blotting her face with it, she sighed shakily. "Thank you," she said hoarsely. She kept her gaze fastened on him, unable to look at Gentry. She had never dreamed that such devastation was possible... that her ruin had come in the form of a handsome man with cruel eyes and raffish charm... the first man she had ever kissed. The pain of betrayal, the crushing humiliation of it, was too great to bear.

"Now," Westcliff said evenly, taking a chair beside Lottie's, "your reaction to Mr. Gentry's revelation would seem to confirm that you are indeed Charlotte Howard." He waited for her brief nod before continuing. "It is also true that you are betrothed to Lord Radnor?"

Lottie was reassured by the earl's powerful presence, knowing that he was the only thing that kept her safe from the predator who lurked nearby. Staring into Westcliff's blunt features, she struggled for the right words to make him understand her situation. As the earl saw her agitation, he surprised her by reaching out and taking her hand in his square one. His grip, so strong and secure, seemed to drive away the incapacitating fear. Lottie was amazed by his kindness. He had never shown her this kind of consideration... had never seemed to take much notice of her, actually.

"It was never my choice," she told him. "It was arranged when I was a child. My parents promised Lord Radnor my hand in return for his financial patronage. I have tried very hard to accept the situation, but Radnor is not rational—not sane—in my opinion. He has made no secret of his plans—he regards me as some kind of animal to be trained to his satisfaction. Suffice it to say that I would be better off dead. You must believe me, I would never have resorted to this otherwise—"

"I believe you." Still retaining possession of her hand, Westcliff glanced at Nick Gentry. "Having been acquainted with Miss Miller for quite some time, I can only assume that her objections to marrying Radnor are valid."

"They are," came the runner's flat response. He lounged near the fireplace with deceptive laziness, resting an arm on the marble mantel. Flames cast tongues of red light over his dark face. "Radnor is a swine. But that is beside the point. Her parents have agreed to the match. Money—a great deal of it—has changed hands. And if I don't retrieve her, Radnor will send a dozen more like me to do the job."

"They won't find me," Lottie said, finally managing to meet his gaze. "I'll go abroad. I'll disappear—"

"You little fool," Gentry interrupted in a low voice. "Do you plan to spend the rest of your life running? He'll send another man after you, and another. You'll never have a moment's peace. You can't go fast enough, or far enough—"

"That's enough," Westcliff said curtly, feeling the shiver that ran through Lottie's body. "No, Lottie will not go abroad, nor will she continue to run from Lord Radnor. We will find a way to resolve the matter so that she may lead a normal life."

“Oh?” One of Gentry’s dark brows lifted in an mocking arch. “This should be interesting. What do you propose to do, Westcliff?”

The earl was silent as he considered the matter.

As Lottie continued to stare at Nick Gentry, she tried to think past the welter of emotions. She would find some way out. She would be damned if she would be taken to Radnor like a lamb to the slaughter. Her thoughts must have been obvious, for Gentry’s gaze was suddenly touched with flinty admiration as he stared at her. “As I see it, you have only two options,” he said softly.

Her voice shook only a little as she replied. “What are they?”

“With the right inducement, I may be persuaded to let you go, in which case you will continue to hide from Radnor until you’re caught again. Or . . . you can remove yourself from his reach permanently.”

“What do you mean?”

Lord Westcliff intervened in the taut silence. “He means marriage. Once you are married and legally under another man’s protection, Radnor will cease his pursuit.”

Lottie’s gaze dropped to the strong hand covering hers. “But that is impossible. I don’t know any men who would be willing . . .” She stopped, feeling ill and bitter.

“It is possible,” the earl countered calmly.

As Lottie stared at Westcliff with wondering eyes, Nick Gentry’s quiet jeer cut through the air. “Planning to make her your countess, my lord?”

The earl’s face was expressionless. “If necessary.”

Stunned, Lottie clung to his hand tightly before withdrawing from him. It was inconceivable that Westcliff would be willing to make such a sacrifice. Perhaps she could reconcile herself to the prospect of marrying without love. After all, anything was preferable to becoming Lady Radnor. However, the earl was a good, honorable man, and she would not take advantage of him that way.

“You are remarkably kind, my lord,” she told him. “But I would never marry you, as you deserve far better than a marriage of convenience. That is too great a sacrifice for you to make.”

“It would hardly be a sacrifice,” he replied dryly. “And it is a logical solution to your dilemma.”

Lottie shook her head, her fine brows knitting as a new thought occurred to her. “There is a third option.”

“What is it?”

A great icy calmness settled over Lottie, and suddenly she felt removed from the scene, as if she were an impartial onlooker rather than a participant. “I would rather not say just yet. If you would not mind, my lord, I would like to have a few minutes alone with Mr. Gentry.”

## Chapter Five

Nick had known that Lottie would not react passively to the news that he had hunted her down on behalf of Lord Radnor. But the passionate fury of her response when cornered had startled him. Now that she had regained her self-possession, she stared at him with a desperate calculation that he understood all too well. He thought her magnificent.

Although Lord Westcliff clearly did not agree with Lottie's request, he complied with a frown. "I will wait in the next room," he said, as if he expected Nick to fall on her like a ravening animal as soon as the door was closed. "Call out if you require assistance."

"Thank you, my lord," Lottie murmured, giving the earl a grateful smile that caused Nick to boil with jealousy. He would have required little provocation to drive his fist into Westcliff's aristocratic face, especially at the moment when he had taken Lottie's hand to comfort her. Nick had never been possessive of anyone in his life, but he could barely tolerate the sight of Lottie accepting another man's touch. Something was happening to him—he had lost control of the situation, and he was not certain how to regain it. All he knew for certain was that Lottie was necessary to him. . . that if he could not have her, this endless feeling of being hungry, unsatisfied, cold, would never leave him.

Nick remained by the fire, relaxed except for his clenched fist on the mantel. Silently he damned Westcliff for this turn of events. Nick had planned to impart the news to Lottie in a gentle way, and soothe her fears before she had a chance to fly into a panic. Now Westcliff had fouled things up considerably, and Lottie was understandably hostile.

She turned to him, her face pale, her eyes reddened from her tears. Her expression was composed, however, and she looked at him with unsettling intensity, as if she were trying to see inside his mind. Her searching gaze made him feel oddly threatened.

"Was it all an act?" she asked quietly.

Nick blinked. He, who had endured countless hours of scrutiny and interrogation and even torture, was completely thrown off by the question.

"I know that some of it was," Lottie said. "It was part of your job to gain my trust. But you went quite a bit farther than necessary." She approached him with hypnotic slowness. "Why did you say those things to me tonight?"

God help him, he couldn't answer. Worse, he couldn't look away from her, and she seemed to be staring through his eyes into his soul.

"The truth, Mr. Gentry," she insisted. "If I can bring myself to ask, surely you can bring yourself to answer. Did you mean any of it?"

Nick felt a light sweat break out on his face. He tried to close her away, to deny her, but it was impossible. "Yes," he said hoarsely and clamped his mouth shut. The devil take her if she wanted him to say anything more than that.

For some reason, the admission seemed to make Lottie relax. Nick couldn't begin to imagine why. Finally managing to rip his gaze away from hers, he stared blindly into the dancing firelight. "Now," he muttered, "perhaps you can explain what the third option is."

“I need protection from Lord Radnor,” she said bluntly. “Few men would be able to hold their own against him. I believe that you could.”

The statement was matter-of-fact. . .there was nothing complimentary in her tone. Nevertheless, Nick felt a flicker of masculine pride that she recognized his abilities.

“Yes, I could,” he said evenly.

“Then in return for your protection and financial support, I would be willing to be your mistress. I would sign a legally binding contract to that effect. I think that would be enough to keep Lord Radnor at bay—and then I would no longer have to stay in hiding.”

His mistress. Nick had never anticipated that she would be willing to lower herself that way. However, it seemed that Lottie was ultimately a pragmatist, recognizing when she could not afford to keep her principles.

“You’ll let me bed you in return for my money and protection,” he said, as if the word mistress required definition. He threw a cautious glance at her. “You will live with me, and accompany me in public, regardless of the shame it causes you. Is that what you’re saying?”

Her cheeks turned bright red, but she did not look away from him. “Yes.”

Desire flooded every part of his body with primal heat. The realization that he was going to have her, that she would give herself to him willingly, made him light-headed. His mistress. . .but that wasn’t enough. He needed more of her. All of her.

Deliberately he went to the settee, a somewhat utilitarian piece upholstered in stiff burgundy leather, and he sat with his legs spread. He let his gaze travel over her with pure sexual appraisal. “Before I agree to anything, I want a sample of what you’re offering.”

She stiffened. “I think you’ve sampled quite enough already.”

“You’re referring to our interlude in the woods this evening?” He made his voice very soft, while his heart pounded violently in his chest. “That was nothing, Lottie. I want more than a few innocent kisses from you. Keeping a mistress can be an expensive proposition—you’ll have to prove that you’re worth it.”

She came to him slowly, her slim form silhouetted in the firelight. Clearly she knew that he was playing some kind of game with her, but she hadn’t yet realized what the stakes were. “What do you want from me?” she asked softly.

What he’d had from Gemma. No, more than Gemma had ever given him. He wanted someone to belong to him. To care about him. To need him in some way. He didn’t know if that was possible. . .but he was willing to gamble everything on Lottie. She was his only chance.

“I’ll show you.” Nick reached out and caught her wrist, pulling until she half-sat, half-toppled beside him. Sliding a hand behind the nape of her neck, he bent over her, finding her pulse with the tip of his tongue. At the same time, he brought her hand to his crotch, cupping her slender fingers around the straining shape of his erection. She stiffened and gasped, suddenly leaning against his chest as if her strength had deserted her. Gently he drew her hand up the length of his shaft, to the round head that pushed impatiently against the taut broadcloth.

A ragged sound escaped him, and he tugged at her blouse, filled with gratitude to whoever had designed a garment that made a woman's body somercifully accessible. Her exposed breasts gleamed in the firelight, their tips soft and pale pink. Lottie turned her face to the side, her eyes tightly closed. Pulling her farther over his lap, Nick cradled her in one arm, while her bottom rested on the rigid mound of his erection. His calloused fingers slipped beneath one bare breast, lifting the silken weight to position her for the slow descent of his mouth. A quiver went through her as he opened his lips over the tender nipple, stroking until it strained against his tongue. Lottie's hands half-raised as if to push him away, but suddenly her fingers clutched around the lapels of his coat, and she let out a whimper of pleasure. The sound electrified him. He used his tongue to trace circles around the stiffening nipple, making her writhe like a cat in his arms.

While he continued to suckle and tease her breasts, he slid his hand beneath her skirts, finding the plain hem of her drawers and the thick cotton garter that fastened her stockings. Becoming aware of the hand that intruded beneath her skirts, Lottie clenched her legs together, a crimson blush spreading over her face and breasts. He caressed her over the crumpled linen, sliding his palm over her hip and stomach, then moving to the soft curls lower down.

"Don't," she said, her eyes still closed.

Nick kissed the pink curve of her throat and the fine edge of her jaw. Her skin was so thin and satiny that it was almost translucent. He wanted to kiss her from head to toe. "That's not how a mistress stalks," he whispered. "Are you reneging on your offer, Lottie?"

She shook her head, unable to speak as his palm pressed on her mound.

"Then spread your legs."

She complied jerkily, her thighs parting, her head falling back against his supportive arm. He caressed her over the fragile fabric, gently rubbing the hot furrow until the linen became damp beneath his fingers. He was aroused by her efforts to stay quiet and still, her face turning scarlet, her legs stiffening as he teased her intimately. Finally she moaned and clutched at his wrist imploringly.

"That's enough," she gasped.

His cock pulsed violently beneath her. "Is it?" he whispered, sliding his fingers into the open slit of her drawers. "I think you want more."

Her body jerked in his lap as he found softly matted hair...plump silken flesh...the wet entrance to her body. Kissing the arch of her throat, Nick played with the velvety thicket. "Sweet little curls," he breathed near Lottie's ear. "What color are they, I wonder? Blond, like the hair on your head? Or darker?"

Shocked by the question, Lottie stared at him with an unfocused gaze.

"It's all right," he said, opening the soft cleft. "I'll find out for myself...later."

She arched as he found the tender peak that had been hidden by the protective folds. "Oh...oh, God—"

"Shhhh." He nipped the lobe of her ear. "You don't want Westcliff to hear, do you?"

“Stop that,” she said shakily.

But nothing would stop him now. He caressed her skillfully, circling the point of delicate fire. Her buttocks lifted away from the hard length of his erection as her hips strained toward his hand. He brushed the swollen bud with the calloused tip of his thumb and slid his middle finger inside her, until it was completely submerged in the luscious channel.

Lottie’s breath shortened, and her thighs clamped around his hand as he thrust and withdrew his finger in an easy rhythm. He felt her inner muscles tauten as she labored and twisted, fighting instinctively for release from the excruciating tension. Nick lowered his head to her breasts once more. The tips were taut and rosy now, and he blew against one of them softly before drawing it into his mouth. With his finger sunk inside her, and her nipple throbbing against his tongue, he experienced a triumph he had never known before.

Lottie struggled helplessly as climax remained elusive, a moan of frustration escaping her. Withdrawing his finger from the sweet depths of her body, Nick settled his damp hand on her taut stomach, rubbing in soothing circles. “I’ll take care of you later,” he murmured. “I promise.”

Lottie moaned again, arching desperately against his hand. He knew what she wanted, and he longed to give it to her. His nostrils flared as he detected the heady perfume of female desire. Heat pumped through him, and he nearly lost all self-control as he thought of burying his face between her thighs, plunging his tongue inside her...

He shuddered as he forced himself to pull her skirts down, covering the sweet flesh he craved. Westcliff was waiting nearby, and now was not the time or place to indulge himself further. Later there would be time to make love to Lottie at his leisure. Patience, he counseled himself, taking a few steadying breaths.

Lottie crawled from his arms and huddled at the opposite end of the settee. She was gorgeously tousled, her cheeks dewy and deeply flushed in the flickering light. Fumbling with her bodice, she covered her breasts.

Their gazes met, hers bright with shame, his frankly calculating. And then Nick went in for the kill. “I do want you,” he said. “In fact, I would probably stoop at nothing to get you. But I don’t want you as a mistress. I want full, irrevocable ownership. Everything that you would have given to Radnor, or Westcliff.”

Realizing what he meant, Lottie stared at him as if he were a lunatic. It took a full half-minute for her to recover enough to speak. “Do you mean marriage? What difference would there be between marrying you or Lord Radnor?”

“The difference is that I’m letting you choose.”

“Why would you be willing to shackle yourself to me for a lifetime?”

The truth was something that Nick could never admit to her. “Because I want the convenience of a wife,” he lied. “And you’ll do as well as any other woman.”

She sucked in a breath of outrage.

“Make your choice,” Nick advised. “You can keep running, or you can become someone’s wife. Mine or Radnor’s.”

She gave him another one of those long, searching stares that made the hair on the back of his neck rise. Damn, he hated it when she did that. Once again he could not blink or look away, and she appeared to read his thoughts in spite of his will to conceal them.

“Yours,” she said stiffly. “I’ll be yours.”

And he let out a slow, nearly imperceptible sigh of relief.

Lottie struggled from his lap and straightened her clothes. She went to pour herself some brandy from the crystal decanter at the mahogany sideboard. She was dizzy, and her knees felt like jelly, which were good indications that more spirits were the last thing she needed. Moreover, she was still technically Lord Westcliff’s servant, and no one in such a position would ever think of helping herself to some of the master’s liquor. On the other hand, such distinctions had become blurred after the stunning revelations of the evening. She was bemused by the realization that she had received two marriage proposals in one night from vastly different men.

And the things that Nick Gentry had just done to her—no, she would not think about that now, while