



# **REMEMBER**

**A Short Story by**

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## CHAPTER ONE

*London 1820*

A cold weight landed in the pit of Gerard's stomach at the sight of a lush brunette dressed in celestial blue circling her partner on the dance floor.

"She is the widow Beauchere?" Gerard asked Devlin.

Dev's surprised gaze darted to his face and Gerard realized he'd sounded most unlike himself. He resumed his habitual expression of boredom. "The one dancing with your cousin, I mean."

"Mmmm. She's the one." Dev's handsome face grimaced. "Dashed lovely, girl. Don't see how we are going to separate 'em. Devil take me if I do."

"Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to part that woman from your cousin." Gerard's body tightened at the idea of pleasure and Charlotte in one sentence.

Charlotte. After five long years. But not, he thought rather more in despair than in triumph, the Charlotte he remembered. The curvaceous form looked much the same. The violet eyes and glossy chestnut tresses struck achingly familiar chords. But for the rest? Pure artifice. A neckline designed to draw the male eye to the swell of creamy breasts. The full lips promising heaven to any man who won them. The kind of artifice that led a man to hell.

If he could only but see it.

Beneath the chandeliers, her skin glowed with the translucence of a pearl. A pearl he'd once claimed, only to discover he held nothing but smoke. Something as sharp as a knife twisted in his gut. Damn her for coming back to London and bringing with her a wealth of memories.

"You know her." His oldest friend Brian Devlin took a half-step back, his pale thin face rife with curiosity.

"I know her," he said without emotion.

"Biblically speaking?" Dev prodded.

Gerard allowed himself a grim smile. "For a man needing a favour, you ask a great many questions, Dev."

A brief tensing of his friend's lips acknowledged the set-down for which Gerard was famous among the *ton*. It was a brave man or woman, who took issue with his scathing tongue. And Dev, as a friend of long-standing, should know better than to pry into his love life. Not that he would call what he had engaged in anything close to what poets called love. That was a lot of sentimental twaddle.

"Will you do it, though, Duke?" Dev asked. "I can't think of anyone else who could draw her off more easily than you. My aunt is frantic."

He let his gaze wander back to Charlotte. Loss was a raw ache in his gut. Not something he would admit, even to himself. He gave a small shrug. "Why not?" After

all, he'd always had a sense of unfinished business. Words never said. Reasons never given. Perhaps he should take the opportunity to thank her for teaching a naïve youth about the vagaries of women.

Except it would be like thanking a friend for a knife in the ribs.

The sensual Madame Beauchere laughed up at her youthful partner. The fly in her web. Dev's cousin and heir to the Graves family fortune. The young but noble scion of an ancient house wore the expression of a besotted calf beneath his carefully arranged of sandy curls. Much like the expression Gerard once had worn plastered on his face.

Devlin sighed, his brow furrowed. "It won't be an easy task. She's got her claws firmly hooked."

Seeing her so beautiful, so womanly, longing hit him hard. The reaction shocked him to his core. He forced himself to remember Dev's description of her cold calculating pursuit of this young man, at least five years her junior. Her brazen temerity of sparked welcome anger, until heat joined forces with a surge lust for a delectable body he'd once known all too well. Something he quickly controlled, but didn't fight. Yes, he still wanted her. Only this time it would be different. This time he'd make it impossible for her to leave until *he* decided she would go. This time he would get her out of his mind and out of his blood entirely.

He gave his friend a cool glance. "You may bank on my success."

Something of his inner turmoil must have echoed in his voice, because Dev's frown deepened. "I hope you don't fall for the wench, too."

"I don't fall, Dev," he said gently. "I fell them."

The benighted ladies of the *ton* had called him Axe Arnfield for years. And they dropped at his feet with too much regularity to make life interesting. Indeed, their games bored him nigh unto death. At least Charlotte might represent a something of a challenge.

"Well, I hope you don't find you've met your match, by Jove," Dev muttered under his breath.

Once she had been his match. Now, she was simply another female to conquer and leave behind. "Don't be a fool."

Gerard observed her glide sensually down the set. Graceful, alluring and utterly feminine. He could see how an impressionable youth like Graves would end up under her spell.

"I'll introduce you when the set is over," Dev said.

"No need. She'll remember."

Devlin gave him a morose glance. "My aunt will pray weekly for your soul in gratitude."

He laughed softly. "Tell her not to bother. I don't have a soul." Not where Charlotte was concerned.

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Charlotte couldn't shake off the sensation of being watched. No, watched wasn't quite the right word. She had been stared at from the moment she arrived in London, mostly by jealous females. This felt more intense and not completely unpleasant.

She let her gaze wander the room as her feet followed the music. As a girl, she'd loved dancing, but now it was simply a means to an end. It showed off her charms and grace, and allowed her to flirt.

And then she saw him. The source of her discomfort. Leaning against a pillar. A tall exquisitely tailored man with dark blond hair and sardonic amusement in icy blue eyes. Their gazes clashed.

Heat flared in her body, the fire of desire, even as her heart twisted in pain and her stomach plummeted to her royal-blue slippers.

Gerard. The sound of his name in her head was echoed by a cry of fierce longing in her heart.

It could not be longing. Too much time had passed for her to care. It was no more than some faint echo from the past.

He acknowledged the brief meeting of their eyes with a slight dip of his head. *I dare you*, those cold eyes said. Her smile suddenly felt stiff, her cheeks tight.

Her heart rattled against her ribs while her mind absorbed this latest

disaster. *Nom d'un nom.* He wasn't supposed to be in Town. Her spy had promised he would not return from his country estate until autumn.

His gaze drifted away.

Perhaps she'd imagined the challenge. Perhaps he hadn't recognized her after five long years. Heaven help her, she hoped so.

Dragging her gaze back to Lord Graves as he took her hand in the centre of their four, she swallowed dry fear. Serious-faced and hazel-eyed, this kind rather innocent young man was the answer to all her prayers and Father's last hope of rescue from his dank Calais prison.

She smiled and he flushed a bright pink. She wanted to ruffle his gleaming curls, pat his shoulder. He was a nice young man. The kind of man to whom she could be a loyal and dutiful wife, given the chance. That he also had more than enough money to cover her father's debts made him the perfect suitor. If she could bring him up to scratch.

Worry gnawed at her stomach. Gerard's presence sent her mind spinning, her heart tumbling. He was a distraction she did not need at this critical point in her plans.

The cotillion concluded and Lord Graves walked her back to Miles O'Mally, her father's loyal friend and her supposed uncle. A dandy in his youth, Miles remained a fine figure of a man despite his penchant for flashy waistcoats. Tonight, ivory brocade embroidered with pink roses hugged his generous paunch.

With a light laugh, she fanned her face. "So energetic. I protest, I am quite parched."

"Let me fetch you refreshment, madame" Lord Graves said, his boyish eagerness sweetly appealing even to someone as jaded as she.

"A true knight indeed, my lord." She gave him a glowing smile of approval and he hurried away.

A twinge of conscience twisted her insides.

Why should she feel ashamed? She was doing exactly what the nobility had done for centuries, binding two families together for the good of both. She would be good for the feckless youth. A steadying influence. Not for a moment would he have cause to suspect her lack of emotional engagement. Never would he know the sting of betrayal. Such loyalty as she promised came at a price. Her father's freedom.

She leaned closer to Miles, her fan hiding her lips, her voice lowered. "You said Hawkworth was absent from Town."

The Irishman's florid face darkened. "Are ye saying he is not?"

"My dance, I believe," a rich tenor murmured behind her.

O'Mally's brown eyes widened, then his brow lowered.

Dread filling her heart, her breath held fast in her chest, Charlotte turned and faced Gerard.

The Duke took her hand. He deftly turned it over, his lips brushing the pulse point at her wrist as he bowed. Her mind went blank. Fire tingled up her arm. The searing scorch of his warm lips had taken no more than the time required to blink, yet left her trembling.

"Madam Beauchere," he murmured. "Such a delight to meet you again." The modulated voice held an underlying warning.

"I—"

"The music starts." One hand in the small of her back, the other clasping her fingers, he guided her between the guests onto the dance floor. One or two heads turned to look. Her mouth dried. Catastrophe had struck.

Her gaze travelled upward to a pair of mocking blue eyes. He was taller than she remembered. Broader. A man, no longer the boy for whom she had fallen, and more handsome than ever. "This is a waltz," she said, frowning. "I don't waltz. Ever." It always felt much too personal for her taste.

"Really?" He swirled her into his arms and onto the dance floor.

"Despicable," she muttered.

"I beg your pardon?" His drawl shimmered and danced over the skin of her shoulders as if he'd stroked her nape, yet all the while his hands remained decorously placed, his body the requisite distance from hers.

She glared up at him. "You did that on purpose. Made it impossible for me to

refuse without causing a scene. So I said, despicable."

His eyes warmed to cerulean and one corner of his mouth kicked up a fraction. Attraction sparked, crackling in the air like unspent lightning. Incendiary. Explosive. She found breathing a chore.

"I suppose I should be honoured," she said. "Although we lack a formal introduction."

"We need no introduction, Charlotte," he said with dispassion. "You knew me the moment you saw me. Just as I knew you."

He remembered. Her heart leapt with joy. Expending every ounce of willpower she possessed, she kept her expression coolly remote. "I wasn't sure if my memory was playing tricks, your Grace. You've changed a great deal since we met last."

An eyebrow rose. "We both have. You even have a different name."

"As do you. My condolences on the loss of your father."

He shrugged carelessly. "My congratulations on your marriage and my commiserations on your husband's demise." He sounded so languid, so bored, it was clear he felt little emotion about either event. Meanwhile revulsion churned in her stomach at her need to lie. His fault, she reminded herself. And hers.

No matter whose fault it was, she hated the pretence. But having killed off a non-existent husband to gain the freedom and respectability of widowhood, there was little she could do but accept his condolences. "Thank you," she said as calmly as her guilt would allow.

"You are all graciousness," he said.

"Hardly," she replied, arching a brow as a match to his insouciance. "I told you, I never waltz."

He laughed. The sound dark and deep. It tugged at something low in her stomach. Lower. A place not to be recalled in relation to this man.

"You used to waltz with me," he said. "Remember?"

How could she not. Night after night, for years, she'd dreamed of his touch, the sound of his voice, the words he'd spoken. All of it a lie. She summoned up her sweetest smile. "Your Grace is kind to recall me at all."

"And you, Madame Beauchere, are beautiful."

The words delivered in honeyed tones caressed her ear. A shiver ran down her spine at the promise of remembered pleasure. An offer of delights she had once mourned.

That part of her life was over. She must not let him distract her from her purpose. Father's life depended on her ability to net a husband with money. Panic tightened her throat. The Duke could easily spike her guns should he choose. He knew too much about her past. He was her past.

Would he expose her to the *ton's* censure? He'd been fond of her once. Might she convince him to say nothing? Dash it, she'd been prepared for the chance they would meet in the small world of the *Beau Monde*, but she'd prayed it would be later. After she married.

Forcing herself to relax, she let the music and the imperceptible pressure of his guiding hands carry her where they would. In truth, she hadn't waltzed since she was a young impressionable girl, when the world seemed a much kinder place.

"For a woman who doesn't waltz, you are delightfully accomplished," he murmured close to her ear, sparking waves of delicious heat.

With a coolly raised brow, she let him know she was not unaware of his intent to fluster. "You misunderstand, your Grace. I do not waltz as a preference, not because I cannot." She easily accomplished the complex turn beneath his arm. When he recaptured her hands he gazed deep into her eyes. A licking hot blue flame of naked desire, more potent than anything she'd seen in young Graves's expression, made her gasp.

This man, this duke, had no qualms about letting his intentions be known. Her heart picked up speed. Her pulse fluttered and raced. Her indrawn breaths barely filled her lungs until she felt dizzy.

Damn her for a fool. His gaze had plucked another chord. A song of yearning. A tune too close to her heart.

But giving a heart free rein required too high a price. Her father's life.

For a second, she entertained the idea of asking Gerard for help. He was rich.

He'd easily parted with a few hundred guineas to be rid of her once before. Her and Father.

She let the thought go the moment it entered her mind. He would surely not aid a man he'd deliberately set on the path to destruction. Given their past, allowing even a hint of her desperation to come to his ears would be a dreadful mistake.

Whirling in his arms, she pretended not to notice his blatant ardour despite the way her skin tingled and her blood burned its way through her veins. She lifted her chin and regarded him coolly. "Are you enjoying the season, your Grace? I don't believe I have seen you at any other ball or rout these past few weeks."

Amusement quirked his finely drawn lips. "Keeping track of me, Charlotte? I gather you only recently arrived in Town yourself."

"I am honoured that such an exalted personage would have taken note the presence someone as lowly as myself." She couldn't help the tinge of bitterness in her voice at the recollection of his harsh words sundering their earlier connection.

"Rare beauty never escapes my lofty attention."

The wry note in his voice surprised a chuckle from her lips. At least he was honest.

He smiled, and all at once she saw a glimpse of the boy she remembered from her youth, when he'd been bookish and kind, not the cold hard man his reputation said he'd become.

But she'd been different then, too.

Plump and awkward. So innocent in her youthful adoration. Bitterness welled anew.

The musicians began their final flourish. She glanced around for Graves with her promised refreshment, but found herself on the other side of the dance floor and headed for the balcony doors.

"Where are you taking me?"

"The evening is warm. I thought you might like to take the air for a moment or two." He snagged two glasses of champagne from a passing footman.

She could insist he return her to her friends. She could play the haughty widow and make a scene, but the French doors were open and other couples meandered outside in the cool air on the well-lit terrace. A moment's fresh air posed no danger.

The challenge in his gaze gave her pause. Did he mean her harm? She had to know.

Young Lord Graves would wait. She rested her gloved fingertips on the fine wool of his sleeve. "You tempt me, your Grace."

"So I hope," he said softly.

Something inside her fluttered and stirred. Excitement. Passion. He tantalized her senses. Wickedly. More than any man she'd ever met. But then he always had.

They passed through the balcony doors and into the soft flickering glow of artistically placed flambeaux. He guided her down a flight of stone steps, along a pathway to a grotto lit by a single lantern hung above a stone frieze of nymphs by water. A fountain sparkled and glittered beside a stone bench. They were alone.

"Your Grace," she protested.

"Call me Gerard," he demanded. "It will be like old times."

Remember, her heart whispered.

"A time of youthful folly," she scoffed lightly, aware of his size, his hard male form in the softly shadowed small space. She glanced around. "How did you find this place?" She laughed. "Of course, you have been here before."

He didn't deny her accusation, but handed her a glass of champagne. His fingers, long and strong and warm, closed around hers as she grasped the stem. An intimate gesture of possession she tried to ignore.

"To us," he said softly and guided the rim to her lips. He held it there for a heartbeat, then let her go.

Absurdly, she missed his touch. She forced a sultry smile. "To you, your Grace," and tossed the liquid off, the froth of bubbles cool and tart on her tongue. "Now, if you will excuse me, I promised Lord Graves the next dance." She made to brush by him.

His arm caught her around the waist, swung her about to face him. "I will ride with you in Hyde Park in the morning."

She gasped. "How did—"

He laughed softly. "I hoped you hadn't changed that much." His hands captured one of hers and he lifted it to his mouth. Even through her gloves the heat in his lips scalded her flesh and curled her toes. "Tomorrow, Charlotte."

The promise held a threat. If she didn't find a way to stop him, he was going to ruin everything. Heart pounding, she turned and fled.

## CHAPTER TWO

Gerard trotted his mount back along Hyde Park's Rotten Row. She wasn't coming. The disappointment he felt at the realization surprised him, but not her absence. Cowardly wench.

He'd thought he'd forgotten her entirely, but her fragrance the previous evening—not the perfume she wore, but her own personal essence—had been as familiar in his nostrils as his own shaving soap, and far more intense.

He patted his gelding's high-arching neck. "We'll find a way to bring her to heel, old fellow." The sound of a steady canter coming up behind him brought his head up. He turned in the saddle. A grin broke out on his face as he recognized the rider. Late then, but here. And alone. Now that was a surprise.

Perhaps not such a coward, after all.

He rode to meet her. They drew up side-by-side.

"The dawn is all the brighter for your presence," he said, bowing over her outstretched hand encased in York tan.

Her chin lifted in a gesture of defiance. "Don't hand me a false coin, Gerard."

The sound of his name in her sweet low tones aroused his lust.

She was lucky she'd fled the grotto so swiftly the previous evening or he might have convinced her to let him engage in more than mere banter. The attraction between them had sparked and flashed like a mighty storm striving for freedom.

"A race," she said and was off, strands of her chestnut hair flying in the wind, along with the ribbons of her fetching bonnet.

He kned his mount and gave chase. The bigger horse gained ground and he soon overtook her. He slowed to let her catch up.

Laughing, she joined him. "He's a fine animal." She ran a glance over the gelding. "Will you sell him?"

"Not for any amount of money." But there was another price he would let her pay.

She pouted a little and he laughed. "Walk with me while the horses cool," he said and dismounted.

He saw the suspicion in her eyes, but he gave her no chance to argue, grasping her around the waist and lifting her clear of her mount. He held her as a groom would, calmly, impersonally. He did not want her to startle like her skittish little mare. Not yet.

He gathered the reins of both blown horses in one hand and walked by her side across the sward.

"I rarely find anyone willing to proceed at more than a trot," she said, her eyes twinkling, her cheeks blooming pink from their mad dash.

She looked lovely. As tempting as the fires of hell on a cold winter's day. He bit back a curse at his weakness. "I remember the way you rode the fields around Pentridge. I always expected you to break your neck."

The breeze toyed with the loose strands about her face and she held them back with one hand, her sideways glance full of amusement and perhaps a little misty. "You were just as bad."

He put a hand to his heart, but belied the movement with an ironic twist to his lips. "Where you led, I merely followed."

She laughed as he intended she should, but amid the light tinkling sound he heard a note in a minor key. Sadness? Regret?

Hardly likely.

"How did you know I rode here in the morning?" she asked, gazing out over the Serpentine.

"Common knowledge," he said. "But where is the trusty O'Mally?"

She shrugged. "He wonders at your reason for singling me out, when it is known you display little interest in marriage-minded females."

"Does he now?"

She nodded. A decisive little jerk of her pretty chin.

They walked beneath the boughs of an ancient spreading oak. He stopped to look down at her. "Didn't you tell him we once were friends?"

God, it had been so much more than friendship in the end. Or at least he'd thought so, until she ran off to France with another lover.

She shivered. A small little shudder that barely shook her frame. Her violet eyes darkened, like dusk over heather-clad hills, though her lips remained sweetly curved. "Yes, we were friends when we were young." She fell silent for a moment, her eyes distant. "Remember when we found the ruined castle in the woods? You were sixteen, about to go off to school?"

"We called it Camelot." His heart hammered at the recollection. "Romantic nonsense."

"You rescued me from a dragon."

She'd clung to him, terrified, when they heard the noises in the bushes.

"It was a cow."

A smile teased her lips. "And we laughed until we couldn't stand up."

"I loosed your hair and kissed you because you looked like Guinevere," he said, the pain of it stabbing his heart.

They'd made love many times after that day, but that was the first time. The sweetest time of his life. A myth. Just like their castle.

She raised her gaze and there was a hard light in the depths of her eyes. "I do think Miles is right, however. You are a man who does nothing without a selfish purpose."

A scathing condemnation from one such as her.

He stepped in front of her, the tree at her back, the horses at his heels. He tilted her chin with his free hand. He gazed into her shadowed eyes. She met his searching look without flinching.

"Then we are alike," he said. Shielded by their horses, he dipped his head to claim her mouth. Slowly, gently he edged her hard up against the knotted bark of the great tree. He plied her lips gently. She welcomed him in. Her avid response fired his blood. He plundered her sweet depths with his tongue, swallowing her soft cries of approval. He braced to steady her soft pliant body as she melded against his length.

She'd made him laugh and she'd made him hunger. He would have her again.

He thrust his thigh between hers and she adjusted her stance to accommodate. He felt her heat and her desire rise to meet his own. Breathless seconds passed in a feast of the senses.

Then her hands rose to push against his chest, hard enough to let him know she meant it.

Reluctantly, he drew back and gazed down into her slumberous eyes. "I want you," he said, his voice a low growl.

Her smile hardened. "For you, the price is high."

"Name it."

"Marriage."

The word, spoken with determination and bravado, took him aback. He curled his lip in an amusement he did not feel. He shook his head and chuckled. "Charlotte. Oh, Charlotte. You are such a wicked tease."

Anger flared in her gaze. Her hand lashed out, but he caught her small boned wrist with ease. "Let me go," she said on a quick ragged breath.

He lowered his head and kissed the back of her hand. She tried to tug it free with a gasp of outrage. "Release me."

At his smile, she stilled. He searched her face for some clue to what she was planning next. Was this what they had become? Adversaries in games of the flesh? Apparently so. He pried open her closed fist with care and pressed a kiss to her palm, then nibbled at her bare wrist above the glove.

"Don't," she whispered. "Please."

"You used to like my kisses, remember?" he said softly against her milky skin.

She closed her eyes briefly as if he'd somehow caused her pain.

He knew her too well to believe it. "Get rid of the boy. You will never bring him up to scratch. Come back to me."

She wrenched her hand free, her colour high. "You know nothing."

She glanced over his shoulder. Her expression changed, became distant and cool. He felt the loss of her anger as he had felt the loss of her body against him.

"Stand aside, sir," she said in chilly accents. "Here comes a true friend."

He glanced back. "Ah, the so trusty O'Mally. Is he your friend? Or another of your lovers?"

She glared at him. "My escort. Sadly, he was a few minutes late or you and I would not be having this conversation."

He couldn't prevent the surge of jealousy in her trust of the elderly dandy, but he merely bowed. "Allow me to help you to mount." He brought her horse around and interlocked his fingers. She stepped up, her small hand on his shoulder, a feather-light grip. He tossed her up into the saddle, helping her settle her knee around the pommel. His fingers curled around her slim ankle encased in leather as he slipped her foot into the stirrup. When he looked up, she was looking bemused.

He returned her gaze and with effort remembered his purpose. "I will see you this evening."

She twitched her skirts into place and gathered the reins. "No."

"You and I have unfinished business." He glanced at the tree trunk where they had so recently been pressed against each other.

She flushed. "Our business was finished years ago."

"I find myself unconvinced," he said raising a brow.

She flicked her horse with the reins and left at a canter.

Gerard watched her greet the Irishman. They headed away from him.

"Tonight, Charlotte," he promised softly to himself. "And we will both be satisfied."

His body hardened at the thought. But another sensation invaded his chest. One he'd not felt for a very long time. An ache.

#

Almost midnight and still no sign of Hawkworth. She should be glad. She was glad. Desperately relieved. He would have spoiled everything and the end was almost in sight. She was certain Lord Graves was a hairsbreadth from an offer.

"You waltzed with Hawkworth yesterday," Graves pleaded, hurt in his eyes.

A mistake she should not have made, but one she could not entirely regret.

Fool that she was. The smile she gave him was full of apology. "His Grace did not entirely take account of my wishes." Her spoken ones at least.

The young man stiffened. "If he offered you some insult—"

"Not at all." She lightly touched his arm with her fan. "It was more a misunderstanding. Tonight, I have danced three dances with you, more than with any other gentleman. To dance again would not be seemly." Unless they were married. She let the unspoken words hang in the air.

Graves had continued to woo her against his family's objections and she would

not provide them with the ammunition of scandalous behaviour. Meeting the duke in the park could have brought it all crashing down around her ears. She'd thought to talk to him as a friend, beg him to leave her in peace, until he'd shown his true colours. Lust, not friendship, had driven him into her path. Again.

And her taunt about marriage had stabbed at the heart of matters between them. A duke did not marry the daughter of a debt-ridden sot, any more than the ducal heir could have done so back in the days when they were young and innocent. The old duke had been brutally frank. His heir would be more than pleased to set her up as his mistress, but never as a wife. Nothing had altered in the intervening years.

Certainly, Gerard was no knight on a white charger arriving to save her from her dragons.

"You will let me take you to supper," Lord Graves said, his jaw jutting. "You promised."

More whining. She contained a sigh of impatience and nodded gravely. "I am looking forward to it." It would be different when they were married. He'd be less inclined to remain underfoot. "If you will excuse me for a moment, I have a torn flounce that needs pinning." And a headache brewing.

The darling boy looked anxious. "Hurry back. I will fetch you some champagne."

Suddenly, she longed for respite from his constant chatter and jealous eye. Feeling suffocated, Charlotte fled the ballroom.

All would be well once they wed, her mind repeated like a mantra. She would make him a good wife. A helpmeet. A conformable companion. She would retire to the country and have lots of children she could love. And Father would be saved. And Lord Graves would be free to follow his fancy and join her or not. Whatever he decided, she would never complain.

She strode along the corridor to the ladies' withdrawing room.

An arm shot out from a doorway, curling around her waist and dragging her into a darkened room.

Her stomach jolted. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out when a warm finger pressed against her lips and a familiar voice said, "Hush."

The scent of his bay cologne swirled around her. "Your Grace?"

"Charlotte."

On his lips, her name was a dark caress. He cupped her face in his hands. "Have you forgotten my name so soon, sweet?"

The endearment tore at her heart, ripped open the wounds she'd so painfully stitched closed.

She jerked her head away to no avail. "Let me go."

He sighed. "I wish I could. Say my name."

"Gerard," she spat at him, desperate for release before she committed the error of this morning and gave in to his touch. "Let me go, before someone sees us."

He released her with a soft chuckle. "I love your spirit. I always did."

Shadows surrounded him in the unlit room, the shadows of her girlish dreams and the shadows of her lonely nights. "Why are you doing this?"

"This?"

"Plaguing me? Following me?" When you never followed when I most needed you, the broken voice in her head whispered. The voice she usually ignored. She turned away, strode to peer through the gloom at a portrait above the mantel. "Why did you drag me in here?"

The striking of a tinderbox sounded behind her. Candles flared to life, the room, a library, took shape around her as he lit the scattering of candelabra and the sconce between the bow windows.

She swung around. "Why, Gerard?"

He blew out the taper and tossed it in the empty hearth. A wicked smile touched his lips. "Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

She tossed her head. "You and a hundred others."

"You've grown cruel, Charlotte. The adulation of striplings has gone to your head."

The words were spoken lightly but they bore the sting of a lash. "You were the

same kind of stripling once," she replied wielding her own weapon.

In three strides he came to stand before her, his body no longer that of a boy but of a powerful male. Large and full of arrogant confidence. He grasped her shoulders, letting her feel his strength without causing her pain, his gaze searching her face, his lips thin, his eyes hard enough to break her. "That boy is gone," he said softly and his mouth descended on hers. Ravishing. Punishing. Blissfully hot. The kiss of a bold hungry man.

How she longed to yield, to feel again the joy, to relive their passion. Her body trembled with eagerness. Pride came to her rescue and she stiffened against his onslaught, fought for command of her traitorous body and heart.

He lifted his mouth, but didn't release her. "Why?" he murmured against her lips. "Why, Charlotte?"

She shrugged free from the circle of his arms, strode with short impatient steps to the window and parted the drapes. Outside street lamps wavered in the mist blurring her vision. An image of her father languishing in a French debtor's prison passed across her mind and hardened her resolve. "Why what?"

He came up behind her. "Why did you leave?"

She spun around. Incredulous. "Why would I stay?"

His jaw flickered. "And so here you are back again, married, widowed and once more plying your wiles on a green youth."

Pain like a clenched fist in her stomach almost doubled her over. "He is a fine young man."

"And wealthy."

Heat rose to her hairline. He made it sound so sordid. She paced away from him, her silk skirts catching at her legs, her heart beating a retreat. She clenched her fists against the fear. A terrible fear she could deny him nothing. "What makes you think you can once more interfere in my affairs?"

"Affairs? A good choice of words." He gave a hard laugh. "Have you forgotten what we had together?"

An ache carved a swathe through bone and muscle all the way to her soul. "We had nothing," she cried. "And you know it." She eyed the distance to the door. If she ran...

He cut off her retreat with one smooth step, held her upper arms. Fury blazed in his eyes along with the hotter fire of possession.

"We had this," he growled and claimed her mouth with a plundering kiss.

Even as she began to fight, he softened his mouth, wooed her with sensual lips, planted small kisses to the corners of her mouth, the tip of her nose, her closed eyelids.

Every inch of her face garnered his attention and her heart opened like a parched rose to a gentle rain.

Yielding, she sighed and twined her arms about his neck as her body remembered the sensations of his touch. He nuzzled her throat, kissed the pulse beneath her ear. "I missed you," he murmured.

"Oh, Gerard. I missed you too."

More kisses rained on her face and lips, tastes and licks remembered and yearned for during long tearful nights for years after they parted.

One step at a time, he eased her into the window embrasure. Under the spell of his delicious mouth, she startled when the window frame touched her back. He pressed into her, his thigh parting her legs, his hands cradling her face. "We did this in my house, remember?" he asked.

She laughed, a poor splintered sound.

He closed the curtain around them. Their own private world. As if they were young and innocent again. And deeply in love. At least, she'd been in love.

Not him.

His mouth found hers. Thought slipped away as their tongues tangled and danced to the music one heart played to the other, until dizzy and breathless she broke free. "How could I forget? It was a conservatory though, not a library. And your father almost caught us."

He kissed her jaw, her ear, nibbled the lobe, tasted her throat when she arched back against the frame to give him access.

Her insides ran hot, like melted honey, warm and golden and sweet. His scalding breath shivered across sensitive skin, his lips teased the rise of her breast.

She ran her hands through the silk of his hair, across the breadth of shoulders more manly, stronger than she remembered.

He licked the hollow between her breasts, his long clever fingers working free the tapes of her stays and tugging down the confining fabric down to find her nipples beaded and aching.

Open-mouthed kisses on rise of her breasts drove her wild. He suckled.

She moaned at the surge of desire. She clenched her fists in his thick wavy hair and her body tightened, remembering the bliss. Yearning to experience it again.

Gently his hand trailed down her hip, caressed her thigh, and inched her skirts upward. He stroked the naked flesh above her stockings.

"Gerard," she warned half-heartedly.

"Hush, sweet," he whispered and flicked her nipple with his tongue.

She melted.

The sweet pressure of his thigh against her sensitive woman's flesh made her squirm. So delectable. But not nearly enough.

"Put your leg up on the seat," he said softly. "Remember how you liked it like this?"

"Gerard, we can't. We mustn't."

He chuckled deep and low. "Say no, then, love. Say it now."

Love. Her heart stilled. How many times had he called her his love? Remember? How could she ever forget? And in remembering, free will seemed to flee. She was young again. Hopeful. Unable to deny him, for to do so would be to deny all the years she'd been alone. And lonely.

Dear sweet heaven, she'd missed him.

One large warm hand lifted her thigh and she rested her foot on the window seat. One hand drifted languorously down and cupped her buttock, steadying her, the other roved higher between her thighs. He took her mouth as he caressed and teased her, until she could do no more than moan her pleasure.

"You are ready, sweet," he said. "Let me in."

She gasped her assent and raked her hands through his hair, kissing his mouth as he unbuttoned his falls. One hand easily lifted her up. She brought her legs around his waist and clung to him. A moment later, his hard flesh sought entrance to her body.

She lowered herself onto him, with a sigh.

He groaned against her neck. "My Charlotte," he said. "Mine."

Pleasure cast her onto tossing seas where tempests raged. He held her in arms of steel, driving deep and hard, her spine protected from the harsh wood at her back by his hand. She was transported to another realm, a place of naught but pleasure. A place where she gave as much as she took and the bright light of completion beckoned.

A place where love reigned supreme.

His ragged breaths rasped in her ear. "Now," he demanded. "Now, darling."

She ground against him, seeking to break the bonds of earth.

He thrust into her, his hips sensually twisting.

She shattered. He came with her.

Together they drifted on the warm current of hard-breathing bliss. His forehead dropped against her shoulder. "Dear heaven," he muttered.

Suddenly aware of her surroundings, of what they had done, thoughts rolled around in her head in bits and pieces, while her body stretched like that of a luxuriating cat. She shifted in his arms and he carefully lowered her to her feet. He fixed his clothing, then helped her with hers, tying her tapes, hiding her bosom rosy with his kisses.

He drew open the curtain.

The library door swung back. She couldn't see the intruder as Gerard moved in front of her, protecting her from view.

"Your Grace?" Graves' voice, exceedingly puzzled.

Charlotte shrank into the shadows.

"My cousin said you wanted to see me? Am I interrupting?"

Gerard moved, shifting as if to shield her, but somehow failing.

"Charlotte?" Graves choked out.

Her face flamed as she met his distraught gaze. All her hopes crumbled at the sight of his dawning realization and shock.

"Pardon my intrusion," the young lord said, all stiff and hurt.

The library door slammed shut.

Fool. Such a fool. She'd let the memory of past pleasure destroy her future. And that of her father.

Gerard turned to face her, regret in his eyes.

"He was looking for you," she whispered. "How did he know to find you here?"

"I'm sorry."

He didn't sound sorry. He sounded guilty.

She frowned "How did he know to find you here?"

He shrugged.

She had to find Graves. Find some way to explain. She ran to the mirror—saw what he had seen—her hair in disarray, her face flushed. What had she done?

She turned to leave.

The door opened to admit a thin pale gentleman, Lord Grave's cousin, Brian Devlin. "It worked," he crowed. He halted as he saw her. He winced. "Madame Beauchere."

She looked over at Gerard, whose expression was distant, almost wooden. Everything tumbled horridly into place. A pain seared her heart. "You planned this. Both of you. How could you, Hawkworth? You deliberately ruined my life once, you and your father. How could I not have guessed you would do it again?"

She rushed for the door.

"Charlotte," Gerard said. "Wait." He turned to his friend. "Leave us."

Shock filled Devlin's expression. "As you wish." He stomped passed Charlotte.

She folded her arms over her chest. It was all that was holding her together.

"Don't bother apologizing. It is not going to help."

#

The old anger rose to claim him. The deep bitterness of loss. "I have nothing to apologize for. Don't tell me you love Graves. You don't know what love is." He couldn't restrain his bitter laugh. "And neither do I."

"Not something I need to be told," she spat.

"You must have thought a great deal of this Beauchere fellow to leave me for him."

She stared at him blankly for a moment, then glanced away. "There is no Beauchere. There never was. I could hardly claim to be a maid." She shot him a look that held more than mere loathing, it held heartbreak.

He recoiled. "Are you telling me you never married?"

"How could I marry? After we..." She made a small hopeless gesture with one hand. "But now, Father is ill. He needs medical attention. Relief from his debts. I couldn't see any alternative." The stiffness in her back flowed away. She hunched her shoulders and turned her lovely face to gaze into the empty hearth. "Gerard, why are you still here? You've won. Just like before."

The defeat in the slump of her shoulders jangled every nerve in his body. Her words clanged off-key bells in his mind.

A cold feeling spread through the pit of his stomach. "What do you mean, 'just like before'?"

She looked up, her eyes hopeless. "It is over with, Gerard. Let it lie." She forced a smile. The pain in her lovely eyes knifed through the wall he'd built around his heart when she left. He wanted to gather her close, kiss away the crease in her brow, promise her the world. But he didn't dare trust her after she'd lied about loving him. He was no longer a besotted youth and he wanted the truth from her lips. "What about before?"

A look of pained disbelief filled her expression. She gave a hard laugh. "I'm talking about when you offered me a *carte blanche* as your mistress. You knew I would never accept."

Anger raced through his veins in a hot tide at the lie. "You have the wrong man, madame."

She stared at him. Slowly her eyes became cold and hard. "Hide behind your father, if you will. I am done here. You've seen to that very nicely, I must say."

The weariness in her voice, the shadow of humiliation in her expression, made him feel physically ill. But that was weakness. "Where do you go?"

"Back to France. I have other strings to my bow." She dipped a curtsey. "Your Grace."

A surge of pain in his chest stole his breath. Had he somehow misjudged her? Pride froze him rigid as she walked out of the door.

### CHAPTER THREE

Damnation. He really had hurt her. The expression on her face when she saw Graves in the doorway had been like a kick to his chest by a carthorse.

Bloody hell. He'd been so sure she didn't care tuppence for young Graves. So sure he'd be able to woo her back into his life with the one thing they'd had that was perfect. Where the hell had he gone wrong? Doubt niggled in the pit of his stomach. What the hell had she meant about an offer of *carte blanche* and that bit about him hiding behind his father?

The more he thought about it, the more he had the feeling he'd made a terrible mistake. Had his father decided to take matters into his own hands when Gerard had refused to give Charlotte up? He could certainly recall his father's glee at the news of her sudden departure followed swiftly by a litany of suitable brides. And his fury when Gerard had been unable bring himself up to scratch. He'd never been able to put on the shackles of a loveless marriage, even though he really didn't believe in such romantic nonsense.

If his father had done something to make her go... Something underhanded. His heart sank at what he now saw as a very real possibility. He had to know. And there was one person who would, if pressed, tell him the truth.

Dev wandered back into the library rubbing his hands and Gerard wanted to hit him.

"That's it, then," Dev said. "I had the devil of a time convincing him not to call you out, but he finally agreed that she wasn't protesting so must have been willing."

Gerard shot him a glare. "What the deuce were you thinking, bursting in here like that? Listen to me, and listen well. Say one word about this, you or your idiot cousin, and I'll cut out your tongues and feed them to the lions at the Tower."

"What do you take me for? The lad is hurt and a little bitter, but he'll do as he'd told. Now perhaps he'll find a girl of suitable station."

Red blazed behind Gerard's eyes. The urge to defend Charlotte's suitability for any man. The urge to tell his friend she was worth twice his cousin. With considerable effort, he held his tongue

Dev stared down at Gerard's fists bunching the front of his coat. "Damn it, old man. What is the matter with you?"

Gerard released him. "Nothing."

His friend's eyes widened. He groaned. "Not you too. Is the wench some sort of witch?"

"Don't be stupid." Gerard strode for the door.

"Where are you going?"

Gerard thought for a moment. A wry smile pulled at his mouth. "I'm not sure," he finally said. "Heaven or Hell. But first I need to find my carriage."

#

"Will you not tell me what happened, dear heart?" Miles O'Mally followed Charlotte from the clothes press to the trunk she was filling.

She turned and glared. "His Grace the Duke of Hawkworth happened." She dropped the armful of clothing into the trunk.

"What did he do?"

She put her hands on her hips and sighed. "You will find out soon enough. It will be all over London tomorrow, if it isn't already."

"Young Graves didn't make you an offer?"

"No. And he won't. He caught me in a compromising position cleverly engineered by the duke."

"I'll kill him," Miles said. "Hang him up by his thumbs. I'll make him marry you."

"I wouldn't marry him if he was the only man in London." Not that he'd ever make her an offer. His behaviour showed without doubt he considered her little more than a soiled dove. "Please leave my room. I'm packing." She marched back to the clothes press.

"Where are we going?"

She stopped and took a deep breath. "Damn it, Miles, you know what I have to do." She dropped her head and covered her eyes with her hands. She choked on a lump in her throat that refused to be swallowed and took a few deep breaths around it. "There's no help for it. I will accept Count Vendome's offer."

"You will not." The shock in his voice made not the slightest impression on her flayed nerves. "The man is a pervert. Old enough to be your grandfather."

"What other choice do I have? He'll be generous. I'm ruined here. Hawkworth saw to that. The news will be all over London by now. Vendome has offered to pay Papa's debts." He wouldn't marry her though. He already had a wife.

"Ah, damnation." The Irishman's voice was thick with tears. Miles cried easily. Unlike her. Until last night, when the tears hadn't ceased for hours. That was yesterday. Today, she was wrung out. Dry as death.

All the starch seemed to go out of the elderly man. He sank onto the edge of her bed. The ropes creaked beneath his weight. "Don't do it, girl. I love your father like a brother, but he'd not wish such a fate upon you. Even if you rescue him this time, you know he will succumb again. He can't help himself. One roll of the dice and he's lost to reason. I should never have encouraged him to go to France."

"I thought if we came back to England and lived in the country. Away from temptation...." But there was no hope of that now. No, Vendome was her only choice. Somehow, once Father's debts were paid, she'd have to find a way to keep him from the tables.

"Your pa doesn't deserve the sacrifice," Miles said with a thump of his cane of the floor. "Walk away while ye can."

"I can't." Father needed her. He might be a weak man, but he was a kind and generous to a fault.

A knock sounded below.

Miles cocked a brow.

"It must be the carter for the trunks. Please, Miles, be a dear. Go down and ask him to take carry out the boxes that are ready to go and let me finish packing."

A deep voice drifted up from the hallway.

"Doesn't sound like a carter. Sounds more like an argument."

Her heart sank. The only person she could think it might be, was her erstwhile suitor. She'd wounded him dreadfully yesterday. He no doubt wanted an explanation. He certainly deserved one. She straightened her shoulders. "It must be Lord Graves. I'll go down."

"I'll come with you. Make sure the young hothead does nothing rash."

She worked her way around the trunks piled up on the landing. Miles followed her down the stairs.

The gentleman at the bottom of the stairs was facing away from her, but he looked too big to be Graves, too broad.

"Hawkworth." Her hands clenched into fists.

He turned. "We need to talk."

"Let me at him," Miles said over her shoulder. "You'll talk to the point of my sword, Duke. Or better yet, speak with the mouth of my pistol."

Hawkworth would hurt him. "No, Miles. He's done quite enough damage." She stared at Gerard's hard angular face, the bleak eyes that only seemed to warm when they rested on her. Her heart quivered. No. She must not let him do this to her again. The heat in his gaze was all about lust, not love. "Please leave, your Grace. You are not welcome here."

He glanced up at the baggage. "You are leaving so soon?"

"Your little scheme worked. You should be pleased with yourself."

A pained look crossed his face.

"Not accustomed to plain speaking, your Grace? I do beg your pardon, but I have little time to pander to your delicate sensibilities. I bid you good day."

"I have something I wish to say to you," he said stiffly. He glanced at Miles. "Privately."

"You unmitigated cur!" Miles roared, jabbing his stick in the Duke's direction.

Charlotte put out an arm to hold him back. "We said all we had to say yesterday."

"Please, Charlotte. Five minutes. No more. After that, I will never trouble you again. Unless you wish it."

She froze. "Why on earth would I wish it?"

"Blackguard!" Miles yelled, and lunged at him.

"Easy old man," Gerard said. "You could get hurt."

Not an idle threat. Gerard was a big man and known for his skill in the boxing ring. Charlotte stepped between them. "Very well. Five minutes." She gestured to the drawing room. Gerard stepped inside. The moment she stepped in and turned to face him, Gerard closed the door in the Irishman's face. He turned the key in the lock.

Miles thumped on the door. "I'll kill you if you harm one hair of her head."

She took a seat on the sofa and folded her hands in her lap. "The great Hawkworth having altered the course of my life for a second time, is now here for what purpose? To gloat?"

He took a deep breath. "I wish to apologize for what happened."

The pain in her chest grew worse. Of course he would apologize. He was a gentleman. And what he had done, they had done, in that room was appalling. Shocking. But it had always been the same between them. The ungovernable passion. Only the love had been one-sided.

If she was truthful? She was almost relieved. Young Lord Graves deserved to find real love. The puppy love he felt for her would soon have faded and while she would have done her best to make him happy, she would have found the guilt of using him a heavy weight to bear. Vendome was a whole other prospect. He had no illusions. "I am sure Lord Graves will recover in due course."

"I am not speaking of what happened yesterday."

Her heart stilled. Frozen she stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

He visibly swallowed. She'd never seen him so nervous. Not since the first time they... Heat flushed up from her belly. Oh why did she have to think of that now?

#

Gerard hated the mistrust in her eyes. The fear. Yet she had every right to fear him after what he had done.

For the first time in a very long time he found himself tongue-tied. Uncomfortable, as if his skin didn't quite fit. As awkward as a young lad plucking up his courage to speak to an attractive woman, for God's sake. "I want to make amends. To make your life easier. If you will allow."

She stiffened, outrage filling her expression. "Certainly not."

He wasn't surprised. Why should she allow him to assuage his guilt? He

deserved to feel guilty after what his mother had revealed to him yesterday evening when he arrived home. "You won't have to acknowledge my assistance in any way."

"Publicly, you mean?" she said her voice full of ice and something else, a kind of painful resignation. She waived a hand. "You couldn't get your way by a frontal assault, so you have decided to launch another line of attack."

He stared at her blankly, then felt a rush of heat beneath his skin. Anger at her accusation and embarrassment that he deserved her scorn. "You mistake my intention," he said in as dispassionate tone as he could manage, when all he wanted was the taste of her mouth on his. He had already decided that anything of that nature was out of the question. It would be taking unfair advantage, knowing how easily she succumbed to his seduction.

And besides, he would never know if her responses were for him, or out of gratitude. And that he could not bear. "I am here because I know now that my father treated you abominably. He forged a note with your signature telling me you were leaving for France with another man. I should have sought you out. Heard the words from your lips, no matter how much they might have hurt. Instead, out of injured pride, I stood back and let you go. I can only apologize for what he said I offered you. It was untrue and despicable."

She closed her eyes, briefly. "Perhaps I also was wrong and should have tried to see you before I left."

The admission gave him leave to hope she would let him offer her aid. "You are blameless for my father's actions. You must let me make amends."

She looked bewildered. "Precisely what are you proposing?"

With his limitless wealth he could do anything he pleased. The difficulty was how to manage her father. The man was as feckless as he was charming. He'd thought long and hard about the problem all night. Finally, a solution had come to him in the early hours of the morning.

"You have been accepted in London as a widow. There is no reason to leave."

"There will be reason enough after the events of yesterday evening."

"Graves will say nothing. Nor will Devlin. They have agreed."

"Ah, the power of a dukedom."

"Sometimes the power can be used for good rather than evil."

The tightening of her lips didn't signify agreement.

"They will not speak of it," he said.

"Very well, they remain silent. What then?"

He'd forgotten what a practical turn of mind she had. She wasn't only beautiful, she was also intelligent. "I will provide you with an annuity sufficient —"

The atmosphere changed from frosty to arctic in the blink of an eye.

"Let me finish before you make up your mind," he said before she could speak.

"Very well." She looked and sounded distinctly unimpressed. As she should. He hadn't exactly shown himself to worthy of her trust. Far from, it in fact.

It would be best not to sound too eager, too hopeful, case she suspected his motives. "The annuity will be set up anonymously. You can say it was left to you by your dear departed husband."

"And my father?"

He tried not to show his distaste, despite his belief her father had been as much to blame as his own. "It will be enough to keep him in style. Since you will be in charge of the funds, it will be up to you to keep in line as far as his debts are concerned. Perhaps O'Mally will help."

The icy expression on her face slowly melted away, leaving a kind of wonder. "Are you certain you want to do this?"

"I feel it is my duty."

The shadows returned. "Your duty."

Now why the hell did she sound disappointed.

"Once you think about it, you will see I am right," he urged. "Your reputation will remain in tact. The money will be enough to entice a suitable suitor. Or, if you prefer, you may remain in solitary state."

"Free to entertain myself as I please."

The very idea made him want to gnash his teeth. "Exactly. The money is yours

to do with as you will."

"Even if I marry?"

"As long as you live."

Her expression softened. "Your generosity is overwhelming."

Wasn't it. After his father had caused her untold harm. "It is the right thing."

She nodded.

"Then you will accept?"

#

Bewildered by his change of heart, Charlotte gazed into his beloved face. He looked different today, younger, a little less sure of himself. Less like the hard-edged nobleman she'd seen these past few days and more like the youth she'd loved.

"And you want nothing in exchange?" she asked.

His expression, which had been almost distant up to now showed something else. A mere flicker across his face. Of longing? But he was shaking his head, his lips firm, his eyes cool. "I have given you every reason to doubt me, but I swear it is not so. Indeed you will never need to see me again after today. My man of business will take care of the necessary arrangements. O'Mally can see to your interests."

So in control. So different from the man who had kissed her beneath the tree in Hyde Park and the man who had stolen her very soul with his passion the previous evening. Which was the real man? And why did she want to know? Why not just take his offer and be done with him?

For her, there had never been another man other than Gerard. Her first and only love. Would she walk away with the money the way she had as a girl thinking he despised her? Or should she demand more? If she didn't at least try, would she not regret it for the rest of her life?

The beat of her heart faltered at the thought she might never see him again. Or that she might see him across a crowded room and pretend they had never met. It wasn't right. She still loved him. Deeply.

Yet she was terrified she was misreading his feelings. "Gerard—"

"Don't," he said.

She stared at him.

"Don't deny me this chance of atonement, Charlotte. Please. Don't let me regret the past any more than I already do, because your pride won't let you take my money."

"I never wanted your money."

"I know that. It was my father who thought the worst." He gave a short laugh. "He said love had no place in the home of a Duke. It certainly had no place in my home. My mother and father barely spoke. I sometimes wonder how they managed to produce an heir at all." He turned away. "I wanted something different." His voice cracked.

"And yet you never married."

"I never met another woman I wanted to marry."

Another. The choice of word offered infinitesimal hope. "Gerard, I am so sorry."

He swung around, his gaze full of anguish. "Sorry? What do you have to be sorry for?"

"For the years we lost," she said softly, throwing caution to the winds. She had to take this one chance.

"Charlotte, what are you saying?"

She took a deep breath, leapt off a very high cliff above a very deep abyss. "I never stopped loving you."

He shook his head in denial as if he didn't believe what he was hearing. Her heart lodged in her throat, waiting for him to speak, to let her down gently, to tell her the past was the past and he had nothing but money to offer.

A stride brought him across the room to stand in front of her. He went down on one knee. "Do you mean it? Truly?"

She nodded. Her heart far too full of hope for speech.

"Can this be true?"

He didn't believe her? But then why was he grasping her hands in his trembling

fingers, pressing hot kisses to her knuckles the way he had the first time she plighted her troth. "My love," he said. "My own dearest love."

"Are you sure?" she asked, thinking it not right to expect so much of him. "For all your assurances, I doubt Lord Graves will keep the details of our tryst to himself."

"Then no one will be surprised when we tie the knot."

"For a man who came here with the expressed notion of paying me off, you are exceeding set on a different course of action."

He grinned at her. "Trust you to see the irony of it all. To be honest I didn't believe you could ever forgive me for failing you. Will you, Charlotte? Marry me?"

He tempted unbearably. Yet she had to be sure it wasn't for the wrong reasons. For honour. "Why?"

"Because I will never give up plaguing you until you agree. Because I have been living as an empty shell since you left. I can give you a dozen reasons. A hundred if you like."

"Only one is required."

He held her hands in both of hers. "I love you. Heart, body and soul."

The tears she'd been holding back, spilled over. "The only one that matters."

"I love you. Now and forever, not matter whether you stay or go."

"After what happened in the library, people will all say I trapped you."

He handed her his handkerchief. "And they will be right. You trapped me the day we met in the fields behind my house."

"It seemed we were both snared that day. I love you just as much now as I did then. Perhaps more."

He leaped to his feet. "Then it is settled."

She winced. "Father is as bad as ever he was, if not worse."

He silenced her words with a quick kiss. "Hush. You and I will deal with your father together, with the help of O'Mally, if he will. He's been a good friend to you these past many years. I am sure between the three of us we can manage one elderly gentleman."

She laughed through her tears. "You are far too good for me, you know."

"Not a bit of it. I'm a selfish man. I want the children you promised me. Remember? A boy who looks like you and a girl who looks like me."

"Oh, yes, darling Gerard. I always remembered."

He claimed her mouth. In the heat of their well-remembered passion, she forgot everything but him.

Dear Reader, I hope you enjoyed this short story. This book is dedicated to the Hussies who have been an encouragement and a guiding light in this new venture of mine.

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Warm Wishes,

Ann Lethbridge

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