

## CARTE BLANCHE

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carteblanche

NOUN:*n* . Inflected forms: pl.cartes blanches: kärtblä sh ,kärtsblänch ,bl nch )

Unrestricted power to act at one's own discretion; unconditional authority

ETYMOLOGY: French:*carte* , ticket +*blanche* , blank.

*In the days before the world burned, the original definition of the term "carte blanche" literally meant "blank ticket." If one could obtain a blank letter or ticket stamped with the king's seal, one could write whatever they wished upon the paper. Many such papers were secured and sold for a price to ruthless men of power. Many people disappeared -- some into the dreaded prison called the Bastille and others into the murky waters of an undisclosed and unmarked death. And so carte blanche came to be known as limitless power and authority. The years passed, and in the latter days of the kings of Great Britain, men took mistresses as they always did. Also as always, the women who captured the lusts and interests of such men demanded something in return for their favors. The bargaining was intense as the doves negotiated everything but a wedding dress. The highest any kept woman could aspire was to be given a home of her own and a blank ticket of credit. --Ananda , ship's librarian Diasporaa.p . 194*

### Prologue

One of the last original colonists from Old Earth, Liana, stood on her balcony, eyes narrowed against the hot rays of Paradise's afternoon suns. One hand shading her face, she gazed out over the verdant, teeming jungle of New India. The huge orange sun that was the primary solar light shone down on the pale blue expanse of trees and underbrush, highlighting the turquoise fronds of the fur tea plants -- so named because the leaves of the indigenous plant were clothed with a soft, velvety covering that resembled the fur of some Old Earth animals. The smaller, dwarf sun, blizzard white and dying, bathed everything in double shadows.

Liana sighed. Sometimes she missed Earth with a pain that threatened to rip her heart apart. Green trees and grass, blue water and skies... Lord above, she missed the simplest things. Closing her eyes against the memories of a long-dead reality, she drew in a deep breath. She missed her parents, who had not been among those rescued.

She, of all her family, had been the only survivor of Earth's death throes. She had grown to maturity aboard the colony ship, ironically looked upon as one of the leaders. Her visions had given her a place of authority. After all, she had been the first to sound the alarm, though no one had heeded her. Amidst the turmoil of terror, the people had turned against all scientists, claiming rampant technology had stripped them of the atmospheric protection Earth had needed.

Liana's lips quirked up in a sardonic sneer. Never mind that scientists had been telling people for decades that they were destroying the stratosphere... that the ozone layer grew dangerously thin... At that point, the people weren't looking for answers -- they were looking for scapegoats.

She'd lived through the time of panic and horror, hoping never to be involved in such again. Now, she sensed a disturbance, dreamed a disorder, a glitch in the rightful order of things. Something was stirring;

something evil and insane rode the winds, targeting the family she'd adopted as her own. Targeting her new world.

*I am an old woman, retired and forgotten. I have earned my peace. What have I to do with the trouble coming upon this place and these people?*

Liana shook her head, her grizzled curls brushing against her thin cheeks. She had seen the end of civilization, had seen the old world burn. Just like then, she knew herself incapable of ignoring the danger to those she had come to love. She couldn't stand by and neglect to give a warning, much good it would do. Against her will, she recalled the emotional devastation of that long-ago time.

Long before Earth's sun had exploded, she'd dreamt of the great conflagration over and over again. Telling her parents had been futile. They wouldn't believe the flighty child she'd been, didn't believe such powerful, important visions could flow through her. The other adults had responded in the same vein. A melodramatic dreamer, they'd called her, idly brushing off her warnings and dire predictions. Nearer the end, they'd all believed, all listened, but they'd waited too late to take meaningful, effective action. During the chaotic days just before the end, they'd managed to save only a pitiful few. There were times when she still wished she hadn't been among those chosen to occupy a berth on one of the seven colony ships sent off before the massive nova destroyed the sun. From their vantage point light-years out from Earth, they'd watched in horror as the sun flares engulfed the planet, instantly killing those who'd had no other means of escape...

Throwing off the memories that haunted her still, Liana turned her back to the world outside. There was much she needed to do to prepare for the threat that drew nearer every day. Evil's stench surrounded the figure of the father, and she feared it might be beyond her capability to aid him. Even if she succeeded, the attack against her father would devastate Chastity, and she would need her old ayah in the days to come.

Liana tightened her lips. She'd sensed the seedling talents of a visionary in the girl years ago. Accepting the position as her ayah, she'd trained the young child. During those formative years, she'd grown to love the intelligent youth as the granddaughter she'd never had. This new world couldn't afford to lose the talents of a budding seer. Chastity must be protected at all costs.

Gliding over to her storage chests, Liana began packing for a prolonged visit. She just hoped she wouldn't arrive too late to do what little she could.

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The loud retort of a shot rang through the air, startling Chastity out of a light doze.

*"What the hell --?" That sounded like it came from Father's rooms.*

The book she'd been reading fell from her lap as she jumped up from the divan. Rushing out the library door, she tore through the corridors separating the duke's private quarters from the rest of the house. Her scandalous pantaloons -- held in oft-reiterated aversion by Papa -- gave her the freedom of movement she needed to reach her father's side as quickly as possible.

Heart pounding from the double rev of exertion and fear, she exploded around the last corner and skidded to a halt. Lungs laboring, she frantically dragged in enough air to shout, "Father!" as she burst through his bedroom door.

Sheer curtains fluttered at the bank of tall, open windows. Beneath onscreenless opening, her father laysprawled, his bloodied chest draped half out the low marble sash.

"Oh, my guardian angel-serpents! Papa!"

Chastity dropped to her knees beside her father, fingers scrabbling, pressing against his carotid in hope of finding a pulse. Her hands shook badly, hindering her efforts. A curse and a sob broke free as she took a deep breath and held it, fighting to steady herself and her hand.

“Powers Above... help me!” she pled, trying again for a pulse, this time at the wrist. Recalling a bit of medical trivia, she made sure not to grip with her thumb. A faint, thready beat pulsed against her forefinger and she collapsed in a weak huddle, thankful tears raining down her face.

She slid all the way to the floor and cradled her father’s head in her lap. “Why would someone shoot you, Father? What enemy do we have that I don’t know about?”

Just then, the thud of retreating footsteps sounded on the cobbled flagstone walkway, followed by the jingle of a harness and the whinnying of a horse. An outraged yell, a cry of pain, and the sound of clanging metal rang in the stable yard. She listened to the clattering hooves clip-clopping down the long dirt drive, and ground her teeth. Anger seethed within. Torn between wanting to catch the person responsible for harming the most important person in her life, and staying to see him out of harm’s way, Chastity cursed the unknown person but chose to remain with her father.

The perpetrator may have escaped today, but she would see the villain captured and repaid if it were the last thing she did in this life.

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“Oh, hell, no, Liana, I refuse to go! How could you expect me to just up and leave while my father is still struggling to survive?”

Liana sighed at the truculent look marring the earthy beauty of her former charge’s face. She’d raised this turbulent child and knew better than most what that expression presaged. If she wanted Chastity to walk the only path of safety she could design, she’d have to present her with logical, overwhelming reasons for going against her deepest instincts.

“And if you don’t go, who will catch your father’s would-be killer?”

The arrested glare was all she could have hoped for. Those velvety brown eyes went vague as the young woman’s focus turned inward. Her shoulders slumped. “Just the thought of having to deal with so-called ‘polite society’ turns my stomach. I don’t have it in me to sashay around like a weak reed, leaning on strong, protective men. I am a capable woman and I --”

“Of course you are capable. You are also *asmart* woman, and smart women know when to bend.”

“Bend?” She threw up her hands, her frustration and angst obvious to her old nurse. She’d never liked being confronted with a situation she had no control over. “Don’t you mean break, ayah? How far am I supposed to bend, Liana? If I go there pretending Father is... has died... Uncle David will believe he is my guardian. I haven’t turned eighteen, and by law, he will have control over me until that time. You know how greedy he is. What if he tries to marry me off?”

“Really, Chassy, why build mansions out of servants’ quarters? You need only insist any betrothal last until your birthday. Once you reach your majority, you have but to refute the match. Think, girl! Where else can you ferret out our culprit? It is up to you to give your father the time he needs. Our enemy can’t learn the attempt at eliminating the duke didn’t succeed. The next plan will definitely be more lethal.”

“Why can’t we tell my uncle and let him help?”

“Didn’t you just bring up your uncle’s greed? Unfortunately, your mother’s brother has always coveted wealth and power. I cannot dismiss the fact that he might be involved somehow. If he felt he could gain control of your family’s wealth through controlling you...” She shrugged and shook her head. “We won’t take that chance.”

“I feel so torn. On one hand, I want to find my father’s enemy, but on the other, I dread not being here if he should need me.”

The fear in Chastity's eyes hurt her. If it were in her power, her former charge would never have to deal with the pain of losing a parent or loved one before the ordained time. Unfortunately, those kinds of resources belonged to Beings of higher elevation than herself.

Sighing, she laid her palm on Chassy's cheek. "Child, if I could go for you, I would. I give you my word -- I won't allow further harm to come to your father. I have grown to tolerate him over the years. I will guard him for both of us. Go to your uncle. Find out what you can."

"What if I find...*him*?" Fear and anticipation warred in her voice and expression.

Liana chuckled, refreshing amusement momentarily displacing the dread she'd felt since before arriving at the duke's plantation. "I don't doubt that you will. It is fated, after all. I suspect what you are really asking is, 'How should I respond to the man who has been haunting my dreams for the greater part of my young life?' and my answer is: honestly and courageously."

"Huh! I'm no coward! I fear no man."

"I didn't say you did. However, you *do* fear giving in to the emotions of love."

"Love weakens a woman, steals her autonomy, and leaches her power. Once a man claims a woman, she becomes less in his eyes. I've seen it happen too many times to doubt my conclusions. Much as I love my father, I remember how he treated my own mother. She died of a broken heart."

"Chastity, you must stop allowing the past -- and someone else's past, at that -- to influence your future. Grab your destiny with both hands and wrestle it into a shape you can live with. Do not bow your neck to strictures, but in the same vein, do not allow fear or bitterness to color your decisions so that you reject the one thing that can fulfill you."

Chastity sneered. "You think I need a man to fulfill me? Are you saying a woman cannot reach fulfillment without a big strong man to lean on?"

"I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying that *you* need love to fulfill you. Do not be so focused on not allowing any man to dominate your will that you allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice." She placed a gnarled hand on Chastity's tense shoulder and squeezed. "Take my advice, young one. Don't be like your old ayah, Liana, who passed up the most glorious opportunity of her life and has lived to regret it."

Chastity wandered over to the window, eyes roaming the contours of her family holding. "It has been years since I've journeyed away from this plantation." She turned her head and met Liana's gaze. A small laugh escaped her. "My heart pounds at the thought of leaving these familiar surroundings, my home."

Over at the stable yard, the grooms were saddling twocelebeasts. The two women watched the giant steeds prance and stamp, their six huge feet shifting and moving in the odd pattern they used to produce the smooth gait they were so prized for.

Chastity swung back to face her old nurse, a frown on her face and accusation on her lips. "All right, I'll go. But then, you knew that, or the grooms wouldn't be settling thecelebeasts in preparation for a journey."

"You give me too much credit, little one. The grooms are preparing to travel to my home and fetch back my healing supplies. I'll be here longer than I had thought, since I plan to remain until this is all over. Besides, thecelebeasts are better suited for country riding. You'll be taking the ducal flitter into the city."

As she spoke, the air was gently displaced as a smooth, multi-windowed, cylindrical coach glided up to the main drive and hovered silently two feet off the ground. The door whooshed open, and a liveried chauffer stepped down and out and stood beside the craft, awaiting orders.

Chastity hugged her mentor and teacher. "I'm only doing this because you'd never give me a moment's

peace otherwise,” she teased, knowing it was usually the other way around.

“Report to me often,” Liana begged. “And watch your back. Trust no one. Don’t let anyone know you suspect foul play.”

Jaw hardening, Chastity nodded. “I’ll take care. You make sure to keep me up to date on daddy’s status. Let me know immediately if he --” She broke off on a shaky breath. “-- takes a turn for the worse.”

“I will, dear.”

The maids came out with her luggage and loaded it into the cargo section of the hovering vehicle. One maid remained in the transport. She took a seat facing a window, hands folded calmly in her lap. With a last goodbye embrace, Chastity entered the flitter and motioned for the pilot to take off.

The plantation fell away below, the panoramic view well-known and well-loved. Chastity had a fleeting notion to order the flitter about and return home. A frisson of fear slid down her spine and she knew -- as clearly as if she’d seen it in a vision -- her life was about to change.

## Chapter One

*Well, this is certainly not the way I’d choose to celebrate my birthday! Hunting for would-be assassins and breaking the stupid engagement my uncle has forced upon me.*

Standing beside her soon-to-be ex-fiancé on the wide landing of the lofty, ornate stairway, eighteen-year-old Chastity Tilson glared at the long queue of aristocrats lined up to make her re-acquaintance. Pert breasts riding high in a barely there bodice with no visible means of support, she managed to look both demure and daring in shimmering, glowing yards of shifting silver chiffon and lace.

Wasting half the evening greeting the stuffy upper crust of society was the last thing she wanted to be doing. She needed to be following the few clues she’d been given, not hobnobbing with people who all hated what she stood for: female independence. She refused to be at the beck and call of any man. Bowing and scraping didn’t suit her. She’d never done so and had no intention of starting any time soon.

Her uncle may think himself her guardian, but he and his handpicked puppet would soon learn better. Only her father had ever tried to boss her around, and he’d ceased that exercise in futility before her eighth birthday.

On her other side, Alicia, the marchioness of Avondale, leaned over and hissed at her *toplease* smile. Chastity glanced around and up, a sneer curling the right corner of her mouth as Alicia’s quiet plea sounded in her ear. She felt so much older than her cousin, it was always a surprise to realize the woman towered over her own petite frame.

“I have no intention of being polite to this pushy, nosy rabble.”

“Great gad, woman! Can you never act as you are supposed to? You disgust me.”

“How nice to hear you say so, Bernard. In fact, I’m pleased. I believe the little surprise I’ve planned for you later this evening will more than meet your expectations.”

The marchioness took a faltering step back, head whipping to and fro between the engaged couple. As their sniping continued, she began to look faint... and panicked. “Lord Karmon, Father expects such uncivilized actions of Chastity; however, he would be shocked to see you behaving so before our company.”

Bernard's face turned red and he looked away, lips drawn tight with anger, body tense with the effort to control his temper. "You are correct, of course, Lady Avondale." He gave a stiff bow. "My apologies. As usual, I lost my temper around your cousin."

Chastity hid her grin at Bernard's chagrin. Patting Alicia's arm, she gave the hostess of tonight's extravagant gala a pitying glance. "Poor Ali, forced by your daddy to play chaperone to your wild, New Indian relative. This re-entry into polite society isn't working, and it's obvious you've realized I am slated to be this season's most spectacular failure."

"Would you *please* stop snarling at your guests and *behave*?"

"*Your* guests, cuz," she returned out the side of her mouth, lips barely moving, "yours and Bernard's. I didn't invite any of them, so my behavior has been exemplary... relatively speaking."

Alicia's shoulders slumped. She did dejected well and managed to make Chastity feel guilty. After all, her quarrel wasn't with her cousin. Truthfully, she had always liked Alicia best of all her relatives.

"Doing it a little too brown, dear," she whispered.

Lowering her head, Alicia slumped more.

Chastity threw her hands up in surrender. "Oh, very well, I'll try to act *civilized* ... for your sake." She laughed at Alicia's exaggerated, relieved sigh, but the next guests had her wishing she could take back her rash promise. Gritting her teeth, she gave a curt nod and begrudgingly acknowledged the duke and duchess of Pettibone.

Slim to the point of scrawniness, Pettibone towered over his stout lady wife, his sour expression stealing what little handsomeness he had. Completely ignoring her, he greeted Alicia and Bernard, leaving his wife to trail along behind him.

Fighting back the wicked urge to do something to shock the spit out of the dour-looking aristocrat, she settled for batting her eyelashes at him as she snatched up his hand and vigorously shook the limp appendage.

The duke's appalled expression pleased Chastity to no end. He was trapped by his own interpretation of socially acceptable behavior. He couldn't retrieve his hand without committing a gross social gaffe.

She smiled full in his face. The duke froze in place. His eyes widened then flared with sudden heat.

*What? Why do men always get that look on their faces when I smile? Yuck!* Deciding she needed to stop smiling, Chastity shrugged off the incident and reached to shake the duchess's hand. She, at least, looked friendly.

The pale green eyes that met her brown ones held no censure, and the generous mouth curved in a motherly smile as the dimpled woman squeezed her hand. Unwinding a bit, Chastity gave the short woman a real smile in return. The duchess startled her by drawing her closer and furtively whispering, "My name is Lucynda. You need to come to me at the earliest opportunity, dear."

Already acknowledging the next guests crowding behind the royal couple, Chastity nodded absently. Trying to pay attention to names and titles and figure out what the duchess of Pettibone's secretive exchange had been about started a pounding headache behind her eyes. She gave up both exercises, content to have Alicia prompt her with names.

"*His Royal Highness the Grand Duke of Archer and Her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess of Archer.*"

Now, here were people she delighted in seeing.

Chassy's curtsy to the royal couple was deep and respectful. The king's brother and his wife had always been true friends.

"Chastity," the grand duke began in his powerful basso voice, "we were so sorry to hear about your father's demise. He was a good friend. We shall miss him." His voice never cracked, but she read his sincerity in the hooded look he shared with her.

"Thank you, Your Highness." She bowed again. "My father always held you in high regard, as do I."

"Has the murderer been apprehended yet?"

Chassy's lips drew flat, her eyes narrow. "Not yet, sir, but you can rest assured I will find the person or persons responsible for separating me from my father."

"Not now, Archer!" The low reprimand reminded Chassy she was not in a private place.

"Your Highness," she whispered, sinking into another deep curtsy.

Duchess Eileen pulled her up from her genuflecting and hugged her, pressing a warm cheek against hers in a sign of affection. "It is so good to see you out of mourning, Chassy. Life must continue, but we understand how you still miss him. Feel free to call upon us for any need, darling. You are like a niece to us."

Their words melted the shield of animosity she'd erected, and tears stung her eyes. She cringed, not willing to expose her true worry to the crowd of vultures comprising most of the evening's guests.

"Yes, indeed, you may call upon us, child." The grand duke curled his index finger under her chin and lifted her face. "Losing a loved one is hard, *liebchen*, but this is not the place to let others see your pain... or your anger." His low-pitched words were for her ears only.

Grateful for the support, Chastity nodded, letting him wipe away the evidence of her pain with his finger.

"Smile for me, now. Let me see that vaunted appeal others have mentioned," he urged with avuncular humor.

Obedying, she flashed the couple a wide grin and was shocked to see the man she thought of as an uncle stiffen and flinch back. The grand duke stepped back and reached blindly for his wife's hand, curling his fingers about hers as if he held on to a lifeline.

Unease roiled through Chassy. The smile fell from her face. She didn't want to understand his reaction, but was glad beyond words she hadn't seen lust glittering in his gentle eyes.

"That is a mighty weapon you wield, young woman," the grand duchess murmured, mouth curved in a wry grin. "Use it wisely."

*Huh?*

She pondered the grand duchess's words while the royal couple passed on. Another took their place, with another and another lined up behind those. Growing more frustrated by the minute, Chastity fidgeted beside her momentary fiancé and her cousin. "When does this interminable ritual end?"

Bernard drew away, distancing himself physically as well as emotionally. His nonverbal disapproval was biting and acerbic. "It ends as soon as the last well-wisher is greeted, and not before. *Cretin*," he finished, muttering under his breath.

His pompous attitude irked her, and she twitched her skirts to the side. He wasn't the only one who could convey disgust and dislike with a gesture. Giving him her back, she resumed greeting and smiling at the guests, her emotions as frozen as her fake smile.

Her uncle had done exactly as she'd prophesied, forcing a dynastic betrothal upon her almost as soon as she'd arrived. The duke of Eathrington was a familial martinet, holding the reins of his household in a tight, controlling fist. His wife and children all toed the line or faced the threat of disinheritance. He pretended he acted in Chastity's best interests, but he lied to himself as well as to her.

Bernard, Lord Karmon, was the only son of the neighboring aristocratic family. Lord Eathrington had long coveted the rich lands that marched along his northern borders and saw a way to ensure they would come into his hands. By offering Chastity's vast ducal lands as bait, he'd managed to get the family to agree to deed over the contested land. As soon as the marriage went through, the lands were his.

Little did her uncle know she had no intention of falling into line and being one of the quiet, retiring, brainless social butterflies he'd turned his own daughters into. This betrothal would end tonight. She would finally be able to rid herself of Bernard's possessive posturing and snide male attitude of superiority.

The party wouldn't really get started until midnight. When the clock struck, Alicia would have a huge cake rolled out, and the guests would wish her felicitations. Bernard planned to announce the date of their wedding.

Chassy'd made plans contrary to theirs. She could hardly wait. A few more guests to greet... a few more hours 'til freedom.

Tremendously bored, she barely noticed the last few people she greeted. A handshake, a curtsy, a regal nod of the head, depending on the social status of the ones presented to her. And then a commotion at the door distracted her. Gaze wandering toward the front door, she glimpsed the new arrivals.

She froze in the act of clasping the hand extended toward her. Mouth falling open, Chastity gaped at the tall gentleman passing beneath her elevated position at the top of the flaring staircase. Her spice-brown eyes followed his path, greedily drinking in the unadulterated male splendor.

"Great guardian angel-serpents... just look at him!"

Under the glittering light of a thousand flickering candles, the man's darkly tanned skin was a dramatic contrast against the pristine white of his neck linens. The tailored cut of his formal black tuxedo and skintight breeches emphasized the powerful outline of his magnificent build. The close-fitting cloth indecently hugged his body, highlighted the heft and jut of his sex.

"My god!" Chastity gasped, ignoring the shocked expressions of the bewigged nobleman standing before her, hand still outstretched for the acknowledgement she'd failed to make. He huffed, insulted when she absently shooed him out of her line of sight, and then literally pushed him out of the way when he didn't move fast enough.

Head a-swirl with the giddy rush of sudden arousal, she leaned over the banister for a longer, more focused look, craning her neck to keep *him* in view. She couldn't drag her eyes away.

"You are insufferable!" Bernard snatched her arm, pulling her away from the railing. "You're making a fool of yourself."

"Look who's talking," she snapped, baring her teeth and yanking her arm away. "Touch me again and I'll garrote you. I was going to save this for later, but since I can't stand your hands on me another moment, I'll tell you now: This betrothal is over!"

Bernard grimaced, distaste etched in every line of his face. "You don't have any say in ending our betrothal. Your uncle set it up, and he is the only one who can nullify it."



She brushed her hands together, ridding them of the slimy feeling of having touched Bernard, and shook out her skirts. Lifting her head to meet his gaze, she glared at the man who thought he owned her.

“Lord Karmon, I have officially gained my majority... and my independence. My money is not subject to my uncle’s control after tonight. I am not subject to my uncle after tonight. And I choose not to be subject to you, ever. Now get out of my sight; you’re obstructing my view.”

“You won’t be so saucy once your uncle hears about this,” he sputtered, face red with anger.

Ignoring his blustering, Chassy turned her back on him, no longer concerned with anything he might have to say. Moving to the stair rail, she also ignored the gasps of those who had gathered around to eavesdrop. Leaning over the side, she searched the crowd until she again sighted her prey.

“Ah! There you are, you handsome hunk, you.” She sighed dreamily as the man paused to speak to an acquaintance. As the two men spoke, he shifted until he was facing the stairs, giving her an unobstructed frontal view.

The man was gorgeous. No male should be built like that, endowed that well... If that bulge behind his pantaloons represented his cock at rest, she couldn’t wait to see it in full erection.

*Perhaps he follows the current fad and stuffs padding in his small-clothes.* Even as the thought crossed her mind, Chastity chuckled, shaking her head. Somehow, observing the fluid shifting of honed muscles as he maneuvered effortlessly across the parquet floor, she just knew there was nothing false or artificial about his athletic body. That bulge was all him -- every long, thick inch of it.

Liana had been right, as she usually proved to be. Fate had caught up with her tonight... and what a fate. Forgetful of her audience, she groaned deep in her throat, a gruff, sexy sound she’d never made before. Pressing both hands against her chest, she attempted to contain her thudding heart, her thundering pulse. Mind racing, she blinked drooping lids, striving to clear her racing thoughts.

Just the sight of him energized her, made her see colors where the world had been black and white. Her nose twitched as aromas assailed her -- the sweet, cloying miasma of a hundred different, battling perfumes almost overwhelmed her. Beneath it all, the scent of him, sharp and green, like new growth in a primal jungle, reached her, driving a spear of lust into her brain.

The knowledge of him thrummed in her blood. Since early girlhood, she had dreamed, had chased an elusive form through fantasy landscapes of recurring nightly visions. At first, they’d been frightening, disturbing, dark and mysterious. Over the years, the dreams had morphed into erotic fantasies that made it easy for her to reject the pale imitations of manhood surrounding her. None of her would-be swains could measure up to her dream lover.

Without having ever met him, she knew this man loved peas, but never touched liver. Knew he kissed divinely, liked his tea cold, and his sex hot and sweaty.

Certainty warred with confusion. How could she know such intimate details about the man, yet not know something as simple as his name? With no effort on his part, this man had already captured her attention. If she weren’t extremely careful, he could end up stealing her heart.

Hands shaking, she turned back to her cousin and gripped her wrist, intent on gaining some information about the man. “Ali, quickly, you’ve got to tell me who that gorgeous man is.”

“I don’t think I’d better. You’re already too starry-eyed over this man. He is dangerous with a capitol D.” Alicia leaned away to murmur an absent acknowledgment at some late-arriving guests.

Gnawing her bottom lip, Chastity waited impatiently while the young marchioness completed her hostess duties so she could get back to their conversation. She couldn’t help but notice how her cousin dealt with

each of her guests, the important ones as well as the not-so-important. Everyone was treated as if they were special.

If one didn't know better, they'd think Alicia loved hostessing. In fact, Chassy knew she abhorred these elaborate social events, but would do anything for her adored and adoring husband, Monty... Montgomery, marquis of Avondale, held political aspirations.

Ali's father, the duke of Eathrington -- acting as Chastity's new guardian -- had agreed to sign Monty's Indigent Bill if he would allow his wife to host this party. Of course, Monty had agreed, his hopes of political advancement winning over his dislike of his cousin-by-marriage.

As soon as Alicia finished her duty, Chastity spun her around. "All right, now give! Tell me everything you know about that man."

"You know, Chassy, I've always liked you. It isn't your fault that you had to spend the majority of your formative years in the uncivilized wilds of New India with eccentric uncle Cedric."

"Gee, thanks, cuz."

Ali raised her eyebrow at the sarcastic note in Chassy's voice. "You're welcome. Watching your outlandish behavior, while frightening at times, has been very entertaining. I wouldn't dare behave like you, but I'm actually enjoying this gala. At least, I was until you went ga-ga and your eyes popped over the one man you should never have seen."

"Who is he?" Chassy gritted her teeth. "I swear, Ali, if you don't tell me, I'll go ask him myself."

Alicia shook her head and tsksk-tsked at her charge's threat. "I believe you would, too. Very well, then, his name is Darian Acer, second son of the earl of Chesley. He's since been disinherited and is now known as 'Dare-the-devil' Acer -- 'Dare' for short."

"Darian..." She tasted it on her tongue. "I like it. It's a strong name, fit for a strong man."

"I wonder how he got in," Alicia mused aloud. "I certainly did not invite him." She faced Chastity and placed both hands on her shoulders, forcing her to pay attention. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she hissed, "Listen to me, Chassy ... Dare may be beautiful to behold, but unfortunately, he is not safe. He is *not* the kind of man a woman like you should pursue."

Chassy disengaged herself from her cousin's hold. "A woman like me...? Shall I tell you what kind of woman I am, Ali?" A practiced flick of the wrist set her dainty fan in motion, too late, trying to shield her expression. She hoped Ali didn't see the avid gaze she directed toward Darian Acer. "I am the kind of woman who wants Darian Acer."

Humming softly, Chassy twisted her neck and visually followed the gentleman's leisurely progress across the crowded ballroom, watched him saunter about with the unconscious grace of a Bengal tiger.

Women paused and stared when he entered their sphere. Conversations lagged and petered out until he passed by. The feminine attention he garnered didn't surprise her. She'd never seen such luscious eye candy, and she was sure the other women had just as good taste.

"It cannot be. You are the daughter and niece of dukes. He is the disgraced, disinherited son of the earl of Chesley. Since his family threw him out, his behavior has been notorious, and I don't like the way you are blatantly ogling him."

"I shall soon do more than ogle, believe me."

"I feel a sinking sense of impending doom here." Ali clutched at her chest. "I've never seen you so bemused. Are you bewitched? Father will have an apoplexy when he catches wind of the excessive

interest his wayward niece and affianced ward openly displayed for a man he holds in abhorrence.”

“After tonight, your father’s sentiments will have no bearing on what I do.”

“Posh! He’ll never countenance an alliance there, darling.”

“You mean *marriage*? ”

At her cousin’s nod, her lips curled up. She couldn’t help it -- she laughed. “First of all, I repeat, his desires no longer concern me; and secondly, one does not need *tomarry* to enjoy such a magnificent animal! Just *look* at him...” She followed her own advice and returned to doing so. “He is a fine specimen of prime male flesh.”

In a day when men wore their locks short and restrained or confined beneath stiff wigs, he allowed his black locks to flow in a wild sweep down over his broad shoulders. No ribbon confined the silky tresses that many women would have clawed eyes out to have as their own. Chassy giggled excitedly, licking her lips at the thought of getting her hands into that sleek, abundant fall of storm-dark hair.

“Shush! Do not even jest like that!” Alicia gasped. She glanced about, hoping no others had heard her cousin’s bold comments.

“It is so like you New British to restrict yourselves when it comes to sexual matters.”

“That’s a bold statement, even for you, cousin. Recall that *you* are also a New Britain noblewoman, and expected to act like one!”

“Pooh! Who was jesting?”

Alicia drew back. “Your attitude makes my heart pound. I feel trouble gathering around like acid thunder clouds. If you continue to refuse to be governed by what you call the ‘staid strictures of our shallow society’ ... I wish I could have gotten my hands around uncle’s irresponsible neck.”

“Why? Because I’ve been raised with all the freedom of a boy child, allowed to roam free in the jungles of Newer India with the children of servants? Trained to think?”

“That’s a start. The unorthodox beliefs you espouse are the direct result of your exotic upbringing. It doesn’t help that you openly scoff at society’s strictures, constantly courting censure. Your antics are keeping polite society in an uproar.”

Chassy raised her eyebrows. “Really, Ali... I cause uproar because I think nothing of flitting neck-and-nothing in Hyde Park, or of visiting Hookman’s library unaccompanied by a maid?”

“Not just those instances, though they were bad enough, but what about when you went into the slum-infested area of Whitechapel to find the home of that little chimneysweep?”

“He was injured cleaning the chimney in my rooms.”

“That’s the attitude I’m talking about. If you weren’t the daughter and niece of a duke and filthy rich in your own right, you would be a social pariah. Instead, you’ve been deemed an original, and every unattached male of any consequence was courting you before Father announced your betrothal.”

“My popularity shall be on the rise again when word spreads that I am once more available.”

“I doubt even your unrivaled popularity could withstand the rumor of a romantic association with Darian ‘Dare-the-devil’ Acer.” Alicia cautioned. “Everyone knows he compromised his own brother’s fiancée. When she was found increasing, she drowned herself, and the brother -- their father’s heir -- hanged himself two days later. His father publicly accused him at the double funeral, and cast him off when he

offered no defense. His poor mother died in a fire less than a week later. Some say she set the blaze herself, driven mad from the loss of her sons. His father had Darian turned away from the church. He wasn't allowed to attend her funeral."

Her voice dropped to an intimate whisper. "Since then, he has become naught but an amoral rakehell, flaunting his sexual excesses in society's face. On top of that, he is poor as a church mouse. It's rumored he has only his winnings at the card tables with which to support himself."

Chastity's fingers closed on her fan until the thin wooden boards threatened to snap. "What did people expect? That he would crawl into a corner and hide? He is not that kind of man!"

"How would you know what kind of man he is?" Alicia demanded, her eyebrows winging high in skeptical inquiry. "You haven't even met him yet, Chassy. Do you claim to be an expert on his innocence or guilt, or on how he would respond in any given situation?"

"I-I just know. I don't believe he is guilty at all," Chastity replied after a moment's startled reflection. "And as for making his acquaintance... There is no time like the present!" Laughing gaily, Chastity gathered up the voluminous drifts of her spangled skirts and sprinted down the wide staircase.

"No, Chastity! Wait!"

She didn't wait; she sped up, easily outdistancing her cousin who no doubt thought her mad, courting a looming social disaster. Joy spun through her. Feeling light and buoyant, caught up in the excitement of embracing her fate, she raced through the ballroom, her laughter trilling out behind her.

In the widening distance, she heard Alicia's hushed cries as she hurriedly tiptoed after her. Sparing a thought for her poor cousin's fashionably shod feet, she hoped her dogged relative would stop following her before those tottering heels landed her flat on her face. Besides, nothing she could say would stop this reckless tumble into scandal.

## Chapter Two

*Where the hell are you, Crofton?*

Angry and impatient, Dare stopped a waiter and deftly exchanged his empty champagne flute for a full one. He swept the crowded ballroom with a jaded black glare. Lifting his glass, he tossed back the high-priced bubbly, barely tasting it, his disregard an insult to the years spent in perfecting its exquisite bouquet.

His ire grew. Crofton had begged and pleaded until Dare had finally agreed to meet him at the Avondales' party, but he was nowhere in sight, and Dare's legendary temper was in danger of exploding.

Snagging another full glass, Dare gulped its contents down. He hated these debutante events, and never attended. Being here made him antsy, aroused buried memories. He preferred they stay buried.

He curtly refused a fourth flute from a hovering waiter. There wasn't enough champagne in the house to drown out the clamoring voices of the past. He needed something stronger... scotch or a good fuck.

Since an excess of scotch always left him with a headache, he decided on the latter. He swept the room again, this time with a darkly sensual intent to his midnight gaze.

Years of debauchery had honed his senses where women were concerned. His chest rose on a deep inhalation. He could smell the subtle aroma of sexual arousal a room away, even when masked by the

strongest perfume. He knew -- and played on -- the allure his salacious reputation held for these bored women of the upper ten thousand. He had but to wink and the majority of them would fall over themselves climbing into his bed. There was no uncertainty, no longer any delight to the chase or thrill of victory.

What chase? He'd grown weary of their eagerness long ago. Lately, it seemed the ladies' lust outstripped his. Emotionally, he was a deadened husk, and that was just the way he liked it. What did emotions have to do with lust?

Fucking was a matter of hips and lips, friction and heat, cocks and cunts. Contrary to rumor, he didn't accept payment for fucking. He considered the act a mutual scratching. Both parties received what they wanted. He made sure of that. No woman had ever claimed he left her unsatisfied, but once finished, he showered and left. He never slept with the women he'd pleased, never took them to his quarters.

This place held any number of likely bed-partners and he had no intention of going back to his quarters alone. Let's see... whom would he choose, which lady would partner him tonight? *Lady B*--? No. He'd had her early last year, and while she had been an acceptable toss, he made it a firm rule never to go back for seconds.

*Lady S*--? Uh-uh. Groverton claimed she was a bed banshee; left teeth marks and scratches all over the man. He preferred his skin intact, thank you. *Young Lady C*--? Hell, no! The chit had "marriage mart" written all over her. Marriage! Ugh! It was enough to make a man's cock wilt.

"Dare! Glad you could make it!" A boisterous greeting accompanied the hearty slap to his shoulder.

Darian abandoned the amusing pastime of choosing tonight's lover to glower at his erstwhile friend and secret brother. "Where the hell else would I be, seeing as you badgered a promise of attendance out of me?"

Chezzan Crofton, earl of Rotham -- C.C. to his friends -- grinned. Smiling, he looked too innocent to be friends with the notorious Dare Acer. His dark morning-glory-blue eyes and his fair complexion were a gift from his mother. So was the thick blond hair, gleaming with highlights of platinum, that tumbled over his high brow and cascaded down his shoulders to be caught back in a thin black leather ribbon. But the chiseled profile, the cleft chin, the full, perfectly curved lips were the genetic legacy of his publicly sanctimonious father, the earl of Chesley. Even his height and muscular physique was a match for Dare's, and those with discerning eyes easily saw the familial resemblance. Chezzan was a golden, angelic copy of the darkly demonic Dare.

People who knew him -- like his brother and their cronies -- knew his looks were deceiving. Dare wondered for the hundredth time how they had come to be so close.

The unacknowledged son of his adulterous mother's noble lover, Chezzan had been raised as another man's heir, with all the trappings of wealth and position that came with the lie. Upon his beloved stepfather's death, he had used that wealth and social power to implement his long-awaited revenge. His first act had been to put his mother out of his family seat and cut her allowance to a bare minimum. Further, he barred her from ever stepping foot in any of his numerous dwellings, with the threat of cutting her funds totally. His next move had been to befriend his disgraced half-brother to annoy and toy with his "natural" father.

At twenty-seven, C.C. was as profligate as his elder half-brother, if not more so. He trusted few, especially the fairer sex, and callously used his spectacular looks to practice his amorous wiles.

"All right, C.C. Why am I here?" Dare asked, his low voice an irritated growl.

"I want you to meet a young lady," his brother replied, glancing about the room almost nervously.

"Dammit, C.C.!" Dare's thick brows came down over his glittering eyes. "Tell me you didn't have me cooling my heels for over an hour to meet a debutante."

“Not just any debutante, Dare,” C.C. protested. “Wait till you meet her. I tell you, she is nothing like the usual fare. This woman has spirit! Imagination! Verve!” His eyes lit up when he spied Chastity already coming toward him. “She’s making her way over here! I swear to you, Dare, this might be the woman I could give up all the others for!”

“I take it you haven’t fucked her yet,” Dare quipped, sure his brother’s unusual enthusiasm was merely a case of sexual anticipation and frustration.

Chezzan drew himself up to his full, impressive height. His narrowed eyes bored into his brother’s. “It is not what you are thinking, and I will thank you not to speak of her like that.” His low voice carried a cold warning.

Dare was taken aback by C.C.’s vehemence. “I suppose I must see this paragon,” he said, the playfulness falling away, “if you are serious about her.” C.C. was the only person left in his life he held in affection. “As your elder brother, I must determine if she is worthy of you. Do you mean to offer for her?”

The question gave the younger man pause. “I-I haven’t gotten that far yet,” he stammered, throwing out his hands. “But I do like her... a lot. Please, just keep an open mind.”

“You know how I feel about debutantes and their infernal search for husbands,” Dare reminded his smitten companion. “However, as you ask it of me, I will... attempt to be civil.”

“That is all I ask.” C.C. grabbed Dare’s sleeve. “Here she is! Chastity, allow me to introduce Darien Acer, my bro...er ... ah ... my best friend. Dare, Lady Chastity Tilson, ‘Chassy’ to her friends.”

Dare turned to greet his brother’s new interest and time stopped. The world went away. At six feet, six inches, Dare was used to feeling like a giant around the ladies, but this goddess’s autumn-highlighted curls didn’t even clear his shoulders. He would have to bend far to meet her moist pink lips. Better to lift her up to him.

He closed his eyes and saw her still. Saw her held against his bedroom wall while he pushed his thick erection into her small, tight sheath. He could almost feel the kiss he shared with her in this waking dream, taste the sweetness of her lips, savor the slickness of her pink little tongue...

He opened his eyes and she was there, staring back at him with a boldness that said she knew where his mind had gone. She was a concerto in fall colors -- rich brown hair, brown eyes. But what browns! Streaks of gold glinted among the dark mahogany strands. Her eyes sparkled, the lightest brown swirled with darker specks of... gold? Cinnamon? They were alive with humor and sexual awareness.

“Chastity,” he croaked. “What misguided fool named you so inadequately? You should be called Persephone... Aphrodite!”

The vision smiled, revealing a deep-seated dimple in her left cheek. “I am pleased to meet you at long last, sir,” she said, extending a gloved hand. “Aphrodite? Wasn’t she the goddess of love?”

“She was... and Persephone was a golden-eyed goddess beautiful enough to tempt the lord of the dead.”

He took her hand and held it for an inappropriate length of time, noting she made no protest. Turning her hand palm up, he deliberately brushed an openmouthed kiss on the exposed skin of her wrist, above her glove, tasting her with the tip of his tongue. Smiling against her skin, he felt her gasp, felt the involuntary press of her hand against the caressing movement of his lips.

“But you said... ‘At long last.’ My lady...?” he queried, unable to tear his eyes from her speaking gaze.

“I despaired of ever finding you,” she informed him, her words coming low and airy, as if she could not catch her breath. Beneath the veil of her evening gown, her chest rose and fell, her breasts quivered, and her nipples sharpened against the confines of her tight bodice. “For years, I have seen you in my dreams --”

“Are you sure you do not mean nightmares?” Chezann snapped, anger cracking his voice. His harsh words shocked Dare back into a realization of their surroundings. He lifted his head and met his brother’s gaze.

The young earl glared at him, his handsome face sullen with anger at his brother’s betrayal. He snarled. “I did not mean her for *you*, Dare!”

“I know, C.C.,” Dare answered softly, turning his head to address his brother, but keeping his eyes locked with hers. “Yet, she is...*mine*.” As the words left him, he realized he spoke the truth. His hand tightened on Chastity’s slim fingers and felt hers squeeze back in an unconscious statement of reciprocal possession.

“So you *do* make a habit of stealing women?” The soft-voiced taunt was a vicious attack, designed to hurt. It did.

“Oh, Chezann,” Chastity cried, “how unworthy of you... and unfair. I warned you. I told you I could not love you.”

The young earl had the grace to look shamefaced. “You told me you could love no New Britisher!”

Chastity nodded. “True, but Darian always appeared so dark... I did not know he was New British.”

“What is happening here?” Chezann demanded.

“Damned if I know,” Dare admitted wryly. Running his left hand through his gleaming tresses, disarranging their ordered fall, he struggled against the tidal wave of desire surging through him for this woman. “C.C., I would not hurt you for the world, but... I cannot back away from this, from her. Not even for you.”

Dare’s eyes met his brother’s, and the look in them caused the earl to suck in a shocked breath. “You bastard, you talk as if you know each other, as if you have a prior claim, yet *I know* you have never met. This is insane!”

“No. This is a miracle,” the woman whispered, an enigmatic smile softening the lush lines of her mouth. She turned to Alicia, who had just come up, and her lips curled in a soft, dreamy smile. “Dare and I are going for a walk in the garden. Don’t wait up...”

### Chapter Three

Dare led her down the marble steps into the shadowed realm of leaf and flower. He drew her into the heart of the garden where a maze -- its walls the dense, interwoven strands of tall bushes trimmed into fantastical shapes -- would shield their tryst.

Wandering deep into the interior, they strolled until the sounds of the party faded away, and the crickets’ song was heard above the gurgling of a small fountain. She sank down onto a cool stone bench and spread her skirts, demurely covering her slippers.

“Who are you and where are you from, angel?” Dare asked, walking over to her. “I cannot believe I could have missed you had you been here long.” He smiled at her. “Besides, you have a faint accent --?”

“I was raised in New India. But that is of no real interest to you.” Chastity challenged, turning to him and placing one gloved hand on his arm. “You want to know what my lips feel like... what I taste like.”

“Yes!” Dare agreed, dropping down beside her and sweeping her into his embrace. Bending her pliant body backwards, his lips dipped into the hollow of neck and shoulder, skimming the smooth exposed skin.

He opened his mouth on her, repeating his earlier caress of tongue against warm flesh.

She flung her head back, arching her breasts into the solid expanse of his chest, offering up the banquet of her body. He eagerly accepted her invitation, heart beating out of sync as he skimmed the tops of her breasts.

With breathless anticipation, he pulled back long enough to tug off her gloves. He wanted to feel her skin-to-skin, and the gloves were a hindrance.

With a sigh, she sank her fingers into the thick, black mass of his vibrant hair and he reciprocated, combing his fingers through her silky strands, glad she'd gone against fashion and worn it down.

"I have felt your phantom lips on mine forever, but you always left me wanting. Let me feel you now. Kiss me... kiss me..." she urged, using her hold to tug his head down to hers.

With a groan of excitement, Dare resisted her, determined to make her wait, make her as hungry as he. Stealing little nips and sips of her flesh, he nibbled his way up the column of her throat, his hands busy at the bodice of her gown. Triumph swelled through him when his hands at last touched warm, pliant flesh, and his fingers opened and closed over the full mounds of her breasts, plumping them, rubbing his thumbs over the rising crests.

A frisson of heat unfurled low in his belly when Chastity moaned with need and growing arousal. Her hand lowered to boldly cup the steely length of his penis, her fingers testing the rampant surge through the sturdy cloth of his pants.

Dare melded their mouths in a fiery kiss, his tongue speaking within the sweet, dark cavity of her mouth. It was an ancient language promising dark delights and endless ecstasies.

Beneath his studied assault, Chastity mewled and moaned and melted, drenching the fingers that had forged their way up the smooth flesh of her thigh to pry open the pouty lips of her sex.

He found her wet and creamy. "Oh, gods!" he groaned. "You are so responsive!" His praise was muffled against her swollen lips. He swirled a finger high up inside her tight passage. "So drenched and juicy... I want ataste, need to see if you are as sweet as you smell. Will you let me?" he asked, introducing another long finger into her honeyed depths and stirring, stirring.

Chastity squirmed on his hand, her inner muscle spasming on his marauding fingers. "I shall explode!" she warned him, her breath coming faster, harsher. "I feel as if a tumultuous storm is battering me from the inside out."

"No storms yet. This is too sweet to rush."

Dare eased his movements, backed down the pleasure, lengthening it, drawing it out. He eased his fingers out of her and stripped off his coat. Spreading it on the broad bench, he settled her back and went to his knees beside her.

She bit her lip as his hands coasted up her thighs, lifting her skirts. He met her eyes as the material bunched around her waist. Even in the dark he could see the wash of warm color change her face from white to pale pink cream. He stretched up to caress her mouth with his, tongue dipping and sliding along the slick surface behind her lips.

With a rough groan of need, Dare moved back down. His hands went before, pressing against the top of her thighs, widening her legs so he could fit between them. Against the soft, smooth, protected flesh near her womanhood, his face and hands felt rough and clumsy.

Brazen and bold, he opened her, his thumbs pressing the feminine lips apart. Leaning close, he took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet, musky aroma of her feminine scent. "Mhmm, you smell divine -- creamy and hot



and mouthwatering. I can't wait any longer. I have to have a taste..." He bent to her, his mouth hungry and hard against her tender skin.

She moaned, fingers burrowing through his hair to tug at his scalp. He loved the feel of her hands on him, urging him on. He nibbled on the sweet knot of flesh exposed by his unveiling hands, and her hips bucked. Tightening his hands on her, he held her down and fluttered his tongue in her welling juice, thrilling at the liquid proof of her desire.

"You taste delicious, darling. I'm going to slurp you up."

Gasping, Chastity grabbed her skirts, flattened them so she could watch him feasting on her, lapping the length of her weeping opening, taking her tender labia into his mouth.

"Guardian angel-serpents, that feels good!" Her body undulated, unable to hold still under his ministrations. She eased herself back on her elbows, bringing her legs up to clasp his head between her knees.

The sweet smell of her aroused flesh drove Dare beyond control. Hands palming her bottom, he lifted her hips, brought her to his mouth, and thrust his tongue deep into her churning passage.

A groan welled up in Chassy's throat, the sound rising like pleasurable agony. The vibration of her extremity rumbled in his chest, and he attempted to devour her, to drown her in sensation. He tongued and bit and drew and nibbled until she writhed beneath him, whimpering as she fell into a grinding completion.

He felt the explosions under her skin tightening her tendons and bowing her back. Her belly muscles rippled and she screamed her release, falling boneless beneath his ministrations.

Reluctantly, he dropped one more kiss on her quivering pussy before moving up to cover her lips with his, cutting off her scream before others could hear and investigate. Leaning his forehead against hers, he drew in several deep breaths, fighting to control the almost overwhelming urge to open his pants and release the huge hard-on throbbing behind the tight cloth.

His earlier need to fuck had transmuted into a need to be within this one woman. His body wanted no other. He greatly feared she'd just ruined him for any other woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You didn't enjoy that as much as I did," Chastity said when she regained her sanity. "Let me ease you," she offered, placing her small hand on his still rock-hard penis.

Dare captured her hand, held it prisoner against his begging erection. "This is not the time or place." He groaned, clenching his jaw, grinding his teeth at the tight, hot pressure compressing his cock. Her hand around him felt beyond good.

"Much as I would enjoy taking you up on your generous offer," he whispered with a wry smile, wishing he dared take advantage of her willingness, "we've been gone too long. I'm surprised some chaperone hasn't already come looking for you."

Unable to believe he'd actually refused the chance to have his cock sucked, he shook his head while he eased Chastity's skirts down, assisted her in righting herself, and helped her to her feet. And was there to catch her when her legs gave way, his strong arms supporting her slight figure.

With a shaky laugh, Chastity clung to him. "See how you make my knees weak?" she teased, trailing a hand down his chest to his groin and giving his penis a generous squeeze. "You were miraculous. Thank you."

Groaning, Dare took her rounded derriere in both hands and pressed her into his jutting hardness, trapping her hand between them. He took her mouth in a desperate kiss that swept them both into a dark, climactic

paradise. He felt her shiver, felt her melting, reforming around his jutting hard-on. He felt her in his soul. "I want you... need you..."

She gasped into his mouth. "I want you, too... so much!"

"Come to me soon! Tonight," he demanded.

"How and where?"

"Come to my rooms. I'll make the arrangements. Will you come?"

Chastity leaned against him and gave a shaky laugh. "I already *have* and no doubt I shall again!"

His laughter joined hers. Entranced with her, bewitched by her, he was amazed at how she lifted his dark spirits. Simply by existing, she had changed his beliefs about debutantes and marriage in less than an hour's time. She was right. *It was* miraculous. *She* was miraculous! "Chastity --"

She placed a hand over his lips. "Call me Chassy ."

"Chassy... Aphrodite... Persephone... my goddess! May I ask you an important question?"

Chastity's eyes lit up. "Before you ask, will you permit me to ask something?"

"Of course, my dear, whatever you wish." Dare smiled reassuringly. She had probably heard the rumors about him. He had never before attempted to defend himself. His pride hadn't allowed it. But for her, he would put the old stories to rest. And he could assure her she needn't worry he would continue to keep mistresses after their marriage. With her generous and passionate responses, she'd convinced him her erotic fire would supply all the warmth he would ever need.

Chastity eased out of Dare's arms. "I've heard the rumors about your brother and his fiancée --"

*Ah, just as I thought.* He reluctantly let her go. "I can explain --"

She held up a restraining hand when Dare made to interrupt. "I do not believe a word of that silly story." Her brisk, matter-of-fact words convinced him of her sincerity. Before he could thank her for the gift of her trust, she continued.

"I know about your resulting financial situation. I'm an heiress. I can make things easier for you, if you'd let me."

Taking a deep breath, she clasped her hands in front of her. "The solution to your dilemma is simple. All you have to do is accept my offer of *carte blanche*."

## Chapter Four

Body still so sensitive that her clinging nightgown was an irritant, Chassy flopped on her bed, fulminating thoughts running through her head. She was too heated and sexually frustrated to sleep, too angry at Dare for leaving her like this. How could he refuse her? How could he leave her aching and hurting like this?

With a disgruntled sigh, she rolled over and onto her feet. Tossing off the nightgown, she went to the window and pushed the casing wide, letting the night breeze in to caress her hot skin. It didn't help.

She'd hoped for something more exciting, but she would make do with her own hands. She'd learned to

masturbate at an early age, driven by the erotic dreams of a phantom lover who touched her with hands of fire. There were times when she burned, melted from the scorching heat of lust. Sometimes, the weather itself seemed to goad her into recklessness. Lying back on the bed, her hands moved in tandem with her memories...

*In New India, during the seasonal heat, the land sweltered under the two suns of Paradise. The damp, clammy air pressed close and heavy against her skin. At such times, she took to her room. Stripping off her clothes, she'd sluice her skin with the cool, room-tempered water in her washing basin.*

*The water always felt silky and slick running over her heated flesh, cooling her and heating her at the same time. Hands cupped, she would lift her bounty above her head and allow the coolness to flow down her face and over her shoulders. Each shining drop glistened in the afternoon lights, lending the sheen of diamonds to her skin.*

*After she'd rubbed the silken moisture into her thirsty skin, she would bring the basin to her bedside and again dip her hands in the basin. Lying back, she'd spread her legs and bring her dripping fingers to the hottest, aching part of her. Fingers swirling, she would dip and rub, dip and rub, working the cool into her tight folds until the heat swallowed up the coolness. Liquid met liquid, and she smoothed the slippery fluid over the small knot of nerves that rested at the apex of her thighs.*

*Languid minutes would pass as she pleased herself, rising on a drifting cloud of sensation that threatened to dump her into a cauldron of boiling delight. Fighting for breath, she would bring her knees up, hugging her hand between her thighs as she stroked and stroked, fingers slipping in the wet delta of her sex. Hips responding to the cadence of her pistoning hand, she lifted into her circling movements, melting as the summer heat invaded the room, crawled under her skin.*

*When her breasts swelled and nipples tightened, she lifted her hands to the pouty tips and twisted. Sharp spikes of sensation burned through her veins, connected the diamond-hard tips of her breasts with the pulsing core of her clit. When the crisis came, she crested with a smothered scream, her balled fist stuffed in her mouth.*

Her climax blasted through the memories. Shivering in the aftermath of her climax, she pulled her drenched fingers from her pussy and brought them to her lips. Rolling onto her belly, she drew the covers up over her head, buried her face in her pillows, and wept.

Dare had ruined her body for anyone but him. Her orgasm had been nothing close to the one he'd given her in the garden. When she came for him, she'd screamed aloud, the sensations so overwhelming, she hadn't cared who heard or even saw.

Chastity blinked her tears away. Body still aching, nipples still stiff and full, she firmed her jaw. There was only one thing to she could do. She'd present her offer once more. This time, she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

## Chapter Five

"You did *what*?" Alicia fell back against the mound of pillows, her cup of chocolate wobbling in her hand.

Chastity sighed. "I tell you, I thought the man would drop dead from a stroke, he grew so angry. I never suspected he'd have such tender sensibilities." She shook her head. "I don't understand what I said to anger him so. Don't all men want the freedom of sex without the ball and chain of marriage?"

“Surprisingly, not all do. I know a large number of men who revel in the married state. Once they get past the hurdle of the actual proposal, they settle down quite nicely.”

“He hadn’t proposed. In fact, he asked me to come to his rooms so we could finish what we started.”

“Well, technically, he couldn’t honorably ask you to marry him when you hadn’t officially broken your betrothal with Bernard.”

Chastity went over to the chocolate pot and poured herself a cup of her cousin’s favorite brew. Snagging a handful of scones, she walked over to where Alicia was lying. “Scoot over.”

Alicia drew her legs up and made room for Chassy at the foot of the bed. “Don’t keep me in the dark; what else happened?”

“First, let’s get back to what you just said. You know... that statement about how Dare is honorable? Is this the same guy you were warning me about last night, the guy who is supposed to be bad for me, a social pariah?”

The marchioness fluffed her pillows and threw herself back on them. “Everything I said is true. He’s all of that and then some. I think it’s worse that he can exhibit honor at times and still act so dishonorably when it suits him. Now give... tell me what he did after you dropped that bomb.”

Chassy took a sip of her chocolate. She kept her head down when she answered. “He turned me down. Flat. For a moment, I thought he would hit me. Then he left. That’s when I came back into the ballroom and made my public ‘hell-no-I-won’t-go’ speech to Bernard. He took it well, by the way, don’t you think?”

Alicia smirked. “As well as one of Father’s lapdogs could take it, knowing he’ll have to give the great man bad news.” She sat up. “All kidding aside, Dare is a dangerous man. Angering him like you said you did could have seriously scary repercussions.”

“He should be worrying about the repercussions I’m planning,” Chassy hissed. “Do you know how much it hurts to be left primed and ready, and then have the man walk off in a huff?”

“If Monty did that to me, he’d be sleeping in the nursery for a month!”

They laughed together.

When they subsided, Ali asked, “So what are you going to do now?”

“Make him change his mind, of course. I don’t want to be a virgin anymore, but since I met him, I don’t want anyone else to be my first. It has to be him.”

“You’re in love with him.”

She stiffened in her seat. “I am not! I’m in lust with him, yes, but not the other ‘L’ word.”

“I think you’re lying to yourself, cuz . I’ve never seen you like you were last night.”

Chastity stood up and placed her empty cup back on the tray with a little snap of her wrist. “When are you getting up? I want to go shopping.”

“I’m still sleepy. Monty kept me up late last night, celebrating Father’s name on his petition. His spirits were... shall we say... very elevated!” She brought a hand up to cover her giggles.

“I really don’t want to hear about you hitting the jackpot when I crapped out. Get your lazy butt up and out of that bed and get dressed.”

Alicia threw her covers back and swung her legs out of the bed. “You are such a tyrant. I’ll go, but I get to drive the flitter this time.”

““Oh, hell, no,” she said to the kamikaze flitter pilot. The last time you were at the controls, we were ticketed seven times.”

“Monty fixed them.”

“In seven minutes.”

“No one told me they had changed the speed limits there.”

Chassy raised her eyebrows. “They didn’t, Ali. They’ve been subsonic since the landing.”

“What can I say? I like to go fast.”

“What can I say? You’re not driving!”

Ali pouted while she signaled for her maid. “You are such a flathead when it’s anyone else but you acting up.”

“News flash! I may ‘act up,’ but I never endanger anyone by my actions. You can’t say that about your driving techniques. Get your bath, dress, and hurry up, or I’ll leave without you.”

Ali paused on her way to the bathing room. “And I want to go with you...*why?* ”

Chassy poked out her tongue. “Because I’m going to flit around ’til I find Dare’s hangout, and your nosy ass will miss all the action.”

With a laugh, Ali skipped into the disrobing room. “I’ll be out in ten minutes. Don’t dare leave without me.”

Chassy kept the smile on her face until the door closed behind Alicia. When she heard the snick, she sank down on the side of the bed and buried her head in her hands.

Ali thought they were going to find Dare so she could proposition him again, pressure him into an affair he’d already said he didn’t want; but she needed to find Dare and apologize, to ask him if they could start over again. Her mind shied away from the memory of how badly it had hurt when he’d turned her offer down.

Pain had flashed throughout her system, burning along her nerves like carbolic-acid-etched steel. The scary part had been realizing her pain had very little to do with still being horny as a celebeast in heat, and more to do with fearing he was walking out of her life before he’d walked into it.

Why did she only remember what Liana said when it was too late?

\* \* \* \* \*

The men rushed into the apartment, Dare shooing away the last of the persistent angel-serpents that clung, fluttered, cooed, and groomed him every chance they got. Going outside in the daylight hours always ended this way. Thank the gods the angel-serpents weren’t nocturnal beasties -- he’d have no social life at all.

“Damned persistent things won’t leave me alone.”

“You aren’t aggressive enough with them.” His brother never took his eyes from the flash of iridescent

colors. No one could ignore the beautiful, winged, snakelike creatures. Their presence drew fascinated stares and wishful thoughts of being accepted as a companion. In all of Landing history, no one had ever drawn a cloud of them the way Dare did.

“They know you don’t mean it when you shoo them away.”

“Oh, I mean it, all right. I just have no intention of accidentally angering one and dying a quick, horribly painful death.”

C.C. picked up the decanter of bourbon before glancing over his shoulder. “I don’t think you have to worry about that. Those serpents are highly protective of you. I’ve never seen the like. In fact, if we went according to legend, you couldn’t possibly be guilty of anything, because the angel-serpents only flock to those they’ve judged pure in heart.”

Dare snorted, amusement lighting his countenance. “I wasn’t feeling very pure in heart last night, I’ll tell you. After being propositioned by the woman I planned to make my wife, being pure was the last thing on my mind. I wanted to fuck her to within an inch of her life and then beat that last inch out of her.”

Chezann’s eyebrows twitched together. He tilted his head to the side and studied his elder sibling, a confused glint in his eyes. “You never came back into the house. I saw Chassy, and she looked like she’d been run over by an out-of-control celebeast. I wanted to ask her what happened, but when I got close enough for conversation, I saw her eyes...”

Dare jerked around to glare at his brother, quick panic running up his spine and jangling along his nerve endings. “What was wrong with her eyes?”

“They were lifeless. Dead. She looked traumatized.” C.C.’s voice held censure and disapproval. He flopped down on the long settee in the drawing room. “She didn’t deserve whatever it was you did to her. I didn’t defer my interest in her for you to mistreat her.”

“Mistreat her? Mistreat *her*? Hell, I was ready to offer her marriage, and she offered *me* carte blanche!”

After a moment of shocked silence, C.C. threw himself back on the settee, convulsed with laughter. “You’ve got to be kidding! She really offered you carte blanche? Oh, to have been a fly on the wall --”

“She really did.” Dare snapped, his words clipped and surly. He still couldn’t believe it. He had found the woman of his dreams, and all she had been thinking of was turning him into her gigolo!

“Well, what were the terms?” Dare’s younger brother could hardly get the query out without choking on his giggles. “I mean... was it a generous offer?”

“You find this funny, Chezann?”

C.C. sobered at the warning chill radiating from his elder brother. Dare only called him by his full name when he was beyond irked at him. But he could only maintain his sober mien for a moment before his grin broke out again.

“Well, yeah, but I can see you don’t.” Laughter erupted, and it took several tries to get his words out. “But you should, Darian, you really should,” he gasped. “The situation is hilarious!”

“You think so?”

“Look at it from anyone’s point of view but your own. The most notorious lady’s man of New Britain falls in love for the first time, and, before he can propose marriage, is propositioned as a mistress.”

Dare’s empty tumbler sailed past C.C.’s head to shatter against the far wall. Teeth clenched against renewed pain, he stalked over to his brother. “We connected last night. Even you had to have seen it. It

wasn't a figment of my imagination. Was it?"

"No, you didn't imagine it. I've never seen anything like it."

"Thank you for that." Dare clasped C.C. on the shoulder, gave a squeeze. "Anyway, when I saw her, everything clicked, fell into place. For the first time in a long time, my life felt right. You know, these last eight years people have clothed me in guilt until my innocence felt like an ill-fitting coat. No one believed it belonged to me."

No longer able to sit still or talk calmly without *moving*, Dare began to pace off the confines of the studio. "She took one look at me and saw straight to my soul. She *knew* I was innocent. Do you know what that meant to me? How it cleansed me?"

Dare inhaled and held the breath for a long time, then let it out slow and easy. His voice dropped. "Do you have any idea how I've felt all these years, knowing women spread their legs for me not because they think me innocent but because they believe I'm guilty? They fuck me for the nasty thrill of trysting with a murderer, a deceiver, a man with no honor or brotherly love. Society thinks I whore for money and labels me a gigolo. I used to deny the term, but what else do you call a man who allows himself to be used like that?"

"I call him brother."

Dare turned and looked at the only one who had expressed faith in him during the last eight years. His face relaxed and his lips quirked in a soft smile. "You saved my life, you know. I was at the lowest point when you came to me -- ready to put a gun to my head and pull the trigger."

Chezannodded at him as he arose and went to the bar. He poured them both another drink. "I kinda thought that might be the case when I approached you. I wasn't sure you'd allow me to help you."

Dare sighed and thankfully accepted the tumbler of golden liquor. "You offered me something inestimable that night. Your trust gave me back the love of a brother."

"I have never felt cheated. Over the years, you've returned whatever I gave a hundredfold."

Dare held up his glass and gazed into the amber depths. "You know what she did to me, *tous*?" He didn't wait for an answer.

"She took what was growing between us, took something fragile, sacred, and fine and turned it into something crude and sordid. While I was dreaming up ways to offer her love, honor, and fidelity, she was busy mapping out terms for a tawdry affair.

"For being ready to service her whenever she feels the need, I will have a fashionable townhouse fully furnished and staffed; a monthly allowance of three thousand pounds; and in addition, she will pay off all my outstanding debts. Oh, I forgot to mention she is a virgin," he snarled. "If *initiate* her without pain, the monthly stipend doubles."

Chezann's slaughter dried up. His eyes widened at the insult Chastity had served Dare. As he watched his older brother storm about his bachelor digs, his stance grew wary and cautious. "I'm glad she refused my suit," he admitted. "I don't think even *I* am up to handling a situation like this. Since I haven't heard any uproar, may I assume you hid the body?"

"I haven't killed her... yet!" Dare growled, angry again after verbalizing the chit's boldfaced terms. "I'm more tempted to whip her curvy ass. That wild little tumbleweed has gotten her way far too long. She needs trimming back."

"So what do you plan to do about it?"

Dare came to an abrupt halt, a smile widening his mobile lips, his eyes narrowing with some wicked intent. “I believe I shall accept Chastity’s offer. In the meantime, I’ll teach the forward little baggage the difference between being a wife and a mistress. Only after she admits the error of her ways will I marry her!”

“There’s only one problem with that scenario, brother.”

“What’s that?”

Amid uncontrollable laughter, C.C. got out, “*You’re* the mistress.”

## Chapter Six

The flitter hovered over the entrance of Hookman’s Lending Book Store. Inside the leftover technology of a dead world, Chastity and Alicia scanned the crowd, trying to decide where they should begin their search.

“I will never understand why the Touchdowns decided to pattern this world after Regency Britain. I mean, what was the point? Look at us. We might have been thinking to go back to a better time, a gentler time, but we brought their troubles with us.”

Alicia looked confused. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Our society is stable and --”

Chastity turned a disbelieving gaze on her cousin. “Do you ever listen to yourself? Who was the one who took me to task last night about visiting the *slum-infested* portion of Whitechapel?” She threw up her hands. “Ali, we have the super rich exploiting the super poor. Eventually, if something isn’t done, we’ll have the same upheavals that tore apart the original society.”

“But what can we do about it? We are only two women... how can we expect to change the world?”

Chassy looked grim. “We do it one step at a time. And we can teach our children to do the same. We have a responsibility to the underprivileged in our society. If we abandon them to their despair, we will be guilty of suicide, for our neglect will bring about our ruination.”

“Good galaxies, Chassy, I can’t wrap my mind around all this gloom and doom you are spouting. Today is too beautiful to spend it speculating on a dreary future that might not even happen. I thought we were supposed to be finding your boyfriend.”

“Dare is far from being a boy. There’s not a man in New Britain that can hold a candle to him.”

“There!” Ali shook her finger at her cousin. “That sentiment is probably why Monty can’t stand you. You’re quick to point out his shortcomings.”

“Hey, what does he care what I think? As long as you can’t see his shortcomings, that’s all that should concern him.”

“Chassy, isn’t that Chezann?” Ali tapped the onboard visual screen. It showed a figure walking away from Hookman’s.

“Yeah, that looks like him.”

“If we can find where he’s going, he might lead us to Acer. He can usually be found in his company. But we can’t just walk up to him in the street. We’ll go to Hookman’s and do some discreet snooping.”



At the thought of seeing Dare again, Chassy's heart thumped once and then settled back into a slightly faster beat. Her tummy felt hollow and cold. She pressed a hand to her middle, trying to contain the fluttery sensations beating there. "Yes, let's go find Dare. I have many things to say to him."

They exited the craft after setting the control for it to remain aloft and ready for reboarding upon their return. The ramp retracted when they reached the bottom, sliding soundlessly back into the skin of the ship.

The proprietor of Hookman's greeted them at the door, ushering the two women into his establishment with a lot of toadying and scraping. "Ladies, welcome, welcome to my humble shop. Allow me to serve you some tea while you browse our selection. You will find we stock the latest journals and novels. We even have a large section of romantic tales on the back wall."

The cousins exchanged an amused look, the need for words between them erased due to their practice of communicating with a glance or a raised eyebrow.

Once the manager seated Alicia, Chassy accepted the chair held out for her. Leisurely removing her gloves, she tucked them in her reticule before picking up the cup of steaming tea and plunking two cubes of sugar into the fragrant mixture. "We are seeking Lord Rotham. Has he been here today?"

The man wrung his hands, a nervous motion noted by both cousins. "The earl is a great reader. He was here earlier, as he is most days. However, I fear you've missed him. He left shortly before your own arrival."

"What a pity," Chassy purred, sipping her weak tea. "We were desirous of meeting with him." She unobtrusively slid a large-denomination pound note under her saucer, leaving the corner exposed.

"Perhaps one of your servers overheard his direction and can inform us of the next stop on today's travels?" Her fingers played with the bill, edging it closer toward the man.

The proprietor's eyes grew large and avid with lust for the money. She could almost see the wheels turning as he tried to figure out a way he could earn that amount of cash. "I will ask around right now. If anyone recalls something, you may be sure I will return and inform you immediately."

"Thank you," Chassy murmured.

"So kind..." Once the manager left, Ali sat back and sipped at her tea. "Well, so much for that. What shall we do while we wait?"

"Lady Chastity Tilson?"

Chastity looked up with a smile. A woman stood over her. She looked familiar. The smile left Chassy's lips while she tried to recall where she'd seen her before. *Oh, heck, the short, chubby woman from last night... what was her name, again?* "Yes, I am Lady Chastity. Lady...er ... ah...?"

Ali came to her rescue. Rising, she dropped a perfunctory curtsy and extended her hand in greeting. "Why, Your Grace, how lovely to see you. How are you this afternoon?"

*Oh, right!* Chassy recalled now. She was the pleasant-natured duchess with the rude husband. Pettibone, hadn't it been?

"Please, Lady Avondale, call me Lucynda." The sweet-faced woman turned her head and her soft green eyes hardened as she focused her attention on Chastity. "I had hoped to receive an early morning visit from you, my dear." Her voice chilled. "I knew your father... well."

Chastity's mind sprang to attention. This was the second time this woman had alluded to a meeting between them. What could she possibly have to discuss with her? Unless...*perhaps* ...? No!

On the face of it, it didn't seem possible that the mild-mannered, pudgy duchess of Pettibone might have information -- or somehow be involved with -- the person or persons unknown who had tried to kill Chassy's father. What else could she conclude, though?

"How well did you know my father?"

"Very well. We were... childhood sweethearts. I wanted the opportunity to, well... reminisce with you."

Cold spread through Chassy as she looked at this small, nondescript, grandmotherly woman and wondered if she'd been the force behind the blow that brought her father low. She fought to maintain her composure.

*...this is not the place to let others see your pain...*

The grand duke's words of last night echoed in her mind, gave her the strength to hold on to her control.

"Forgive me, madam. The wound is too new. I am barely out of mourning."

"I understand, my dear." She patted Chassy's arm. "Take your time coming to me, but remember that every day, the time grows shorter."

Chassy exchanged a shocked glance with Ali as the little duchess glided away.

"Your jaw is sagging." Ali couldn't keep the smirk off her face.

Chassy didn't respond, too busy trying to unravel the mysterious pronouncements Lucynda Pettibone seemed so fond of spouting.

She locked gazes with Alicia. "What was *that* about? Take my time, but time grows short?"

Ali shrugged. "Very strange mumblings, if you ask me. I feel like the patron who comes to the play in the middle of the act, incapable of catching up with the action or making any sense of the plot."

Chassy snorted. "You *did* notice she didn't give me a choice about coming, only a choice of when I came."

"And are you planning to go?"

"Oh, I really think I might." Chassy brought her cup to her lips and took a long drink. She didn't set the cup down until she'd drained it. "Let's get back to the flutter. I'd like to --"

"My ladies," the proprietor interrupted, "one of my waitresses overheard Lord Rotham saying he would be stopping over to spend some time at the Landing Museum. If you like, I can send a servant after him."

"That won't be necessary, thank you." Chassy stood and tugged her gloves back on. "The museum is a neutral place where we can accidentally bump into Lord Rotham. Your assistance will not be needed."

The man's whole posture fell. Chassy hid a smile. She'd forgotten the money she'd offered as incentive for his help. "The tea was quite delicious." She gestured toward the bill still sticking out from under the edge of her plate. "Please accept this token of our appreciation."

Stammering a grateful "Thank you, madam!" the proprietor whisked the plates, saucers, and cups off the table and wiped the top down. When he finished, the money had disappeared.

Chapter Seven

“Why, Lord Rotham, fancy meeting you here! I hope we are not intruding upon your contemplation of the antiquities housed here.”

A wry smile widened C.C.’s mouth as he bowed over Alicia’s outstretched hand. “Good afternoon, Lady Avondale. The intrusion of beautiful women is always a pleasure. Chassy ...” He bowed again, deeper.

“C.C.”

She smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes. It hurt to see her bright beauty. Hurt to know she would never love him or shine for him, never light up from inside at the sight of his face. Not like she’d lit up for Darian the night before. The light in her eyes had been like a thousand incandescent candles, hot and vibrant and burning with lust and something deeper.

“How may I be of service to you, ladies?”

Chassy cleared her throat. “Dare.”

C.C. lowered his eyelids, hiding the resentment he knew would be visible if he met her gaze right now. When he opened them again, he caught the cousins exchanging a speaking glance.

“You want Darian .” His voice sounded gruff even to his own ears.

“To know his direction, yes,” Chassy whispered.

“You want Darian .” He repeated his statement, his voice grown hard and implacable. She would admit the truth to both of them, all three of them, if she would have his help.

“Yes.” She met his gaze, her brown eyes direct and clear, and no shadows of deceit darkening the smooth surface. “I want Darian .”

The lights turned on within her, almost blinding him with her need.

“I will take you to him. But first we will escort Lady Avondale home.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“C.C., why did you insist on Alicia going home?”

He didn’t respond for a long time. She was about to ask again when he sighed, then tugged on the reins to turn and slow the celebeast -drawn carriage. He pulled over to the side of the busy street and came to a complete halt.

Turning toward her, he propped an elbow on his knee and cocked his head. “You want the truth?”

“Please and always.”

“I didn’t think you needed an audience when you met with Dare. I don’t know what you told Lady Stanton, but you and I know you aren’t going to be taking afternoon tea with my brother.”

Shock roared through her. Ignoring his sarcasm, she latched onto the one item of information she never would have expected. “Darian Acer is your *brother*?”

C.C. shifted impatiently. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Chassy, how could you not know? Open your eyes and really *see*. I thought you were more observant than most. You certainly stared at him enough last night to memorize his features.”

She blinked. When she looked again, she saw Dare in C.C.'s long limbs and bone structure. The broad forehead and strong jaw, the length of arms and legs, even the shape of the eyes, though the color was different.

One hand covered her mouth. "Oh, my god!"

"No, our father."

She couldn't stop gazing at him, searching for and finding more similarities. "Who else knows?"

He ticked them off on each finger. "Let's see... our mutual father, my mother and deceased father, and most assuredly Dare's mother, the poor thing."

Curiosity swamped her. "Darian is the elder?"

"Between us, yes. I am the younger indiscretion, the unadmitted sin. Darian and his other brother were the classic example of the heir and the spare. Darian was the spare. Only, it wasn't Dare's mother who wandered after the spare was secured, but our lordly father." The sneer in his voice clashed with the playboyish aspect he usually projected.

She nodded her understanding. In most good families, the partners married dynastically. Love rarely came into the equation. After the wife gave her husband two sons, the unspoken tradition allowed her to seek love elsewhere. Her mother and father -- well, her mother, anyway -- had suffered through the same type of marriage. Society never held the husband to the same standards.

"I don't know what to say."

"Congratulate us. We have wrested victory from the defeat and ignominy heaped upon us by a common enemy."

A half-smile stretched her lips. "Congratulations."

C.C. nodded and flicked the ribbons over the celebeasts' backs, setting them back in motion. "I hear congratulations are in order for you, also."

She bowed her head, finding it hard to meet his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I hear you are in the market to acquire a new mistress."

Her face flamed. "He told you."

"*Yelled* is more like it." The laugh that rumbled in his chest held no amusement. "I've never seen him angrier. Or more hurt."

The heat of embarrassment burned so hotly, her flesh felt inflamed. His eyes when they met hers were a hard, clear blue, fanning the heat to a higher blaze. "You don't approve of my offer to him, do you?"

"I don't approve of you hurting my brother. You are hard on a man's heart, Chastity. I find myself grateful you did not choose me."

Chassy gasped. "You're being mean, C.C."

"You're right. That was unworthy of me, milady. My apologies."

Her heart sank. "Oh, C.C., I don't want to lose your friendship over this."

"We're here." He pulled up on the reins, bringing the carriage to a halt. He jumped down and came around

to help her down from her high perch.

He looked too much like Dare. And though he was not his brother, being rejected by him was like taking a knife in the chest. Panic choked her, froze her forward momentum, and scattered her resolve. "I can't do this. Take me home. Take me back."

His hands were on her shoulders, shaking her. "Calm down! Listen, Chassy. Listen to me. My brother cares for you. In all the years we've known each other, he's never refused me anything, but last night he refused to back away from you, knowing how much I wanted you for myself."

He released her and stepped back. A gamine smile lit his handsome face. "So I sulked a bit. What can I say?" He splayed his open hands, lifted his shoulders in a rueful shrug. "I'm used to getting my way, but you haven't lost my friendship, and you won't."

She hugged him tight. "Thank you. You cannot know how much I appreciate that. You're about the only man I know who doesn't expect me to simper and bat my eyelashes like the usual run of silly debutantes. You don't belittle me for trying to better myself."

Chezzann laughed low and shook his head. "If I am such a paragon, how can you not love me?"

She placed a gentle hand on his cheek and he rolled his head into the palm of her hand, pressing against her skin. "I do love you, C.C. I just don't lust after you. One day --"

He raised a cautioning hand. "Please don't tell me some day I'll find a woman who will love me as I deserve. I couldn't stand that right now. Just make me one promise."

"Anything."

"If this thing between you and Dare doesn't work out, don't overlook me as a possible replacement."

Chassy closed her eyes and thought about that, thought about missing Dare, needing him, and finding his phantom echo in the lines of Chezzann's lithe body. Her soul rebelled against the notion, knowing it would kill her as surely as a knife through the heart. She raised a hand and rubbed the skin between her breasts, feeling the ache on a spiritual plane.

She wasn't aware of shaking her head so frantically her hair broke loose from its moorings and tumbled about her shoulders. Cognizance came back when C.C. rocked her against him, a hand smoothing from shoulder to waist and returning in a calming pattern.

"Bad idea, huh?"

She shuddered, buried herself closer for a moment as she fought to regain her equilibrium. Her hesitant words, when they came, were forced from a constricted throat. "You are so alike... it would be an abomination." She raised her head and looked at him, courageously meeting his deep blue gaze. "It wouldn't be fair to you. Every day, I'd be cheating you because when I touched you, loved you, I'd be touching Dare, loving Dare. It would make you a substitute... and you're worth more than that."

"I wouldn't care --"

She placed a finger across his lips. "Yes, you would. Eventually, you would. We'd end up hating each other. You'd hate me because I used you. You'd hate yourself for allowing me to do so. I'd hate you because you wouldn't *behim*. And I'd hate myself for hurting my best friend."

C.C. sighed. His chest rose and fell under her head. She could feel the slow, resigned beating of his heart. "Best friend, huh?"

“The best.”

He sighed again. His arms squeezed tight for a moment, before he released her and took a step back. “I guess I can live with that.”

## Chapter Eight

Chastity stood on Dare’s doorstep, rubbing her aching knuckles and wondering what had brought her to this state. A small, icy snake of fear curled low in her belly, hissing in warning each time she banged on the door. Bold as she usually acted, she’d surprised even herself by showing up on a man’s doorstep in broad daylight, determined to apologize for hurting his feelings, only so she could try to talk him into becoming her personal fuck toy.

She didn’t want just anyone. Her reaction to C.C.’s advances had proved to her she only heated up for Dare. And right now, the heat within her threatened to burn her to cinders. It wasn’t just about fucking. Not really. She hadn’t even done that, yet, so it wasn’t as if her entire life revolved around sex.

“Hey, lady, you can knock on my door anytime!”

She whipped around to find a crowd gathering. People passing by eyed her with knowing gazes and sleazy grins. Beginning to feel self-conscious, she shifted, hiding her face, and again beat on Dare’s door.

Where was he? Why didn’t he answer? C.C. had assured her he was inside, yet she’d knocked twice -- to her knuckles’ detriment -- and had received no response.

Hurt welled up; tears threatened to spill. She gasped as chills rippled across her chest and spread down her arms. A lump of ice formed in the pit of her belly, freezing her all the way to her soul. Was this his way of rejecting her... again? *Please, no!*

“DarianAcer! Darian Acer, you open this door! I’m not going away until I speak to you,” she yelled at the top of her voice, banging on the door with both fists, determined to get a response. He wasn’t going to get away with ignoring her.

The door opened abruptly and her hands, already in motion, landed against a firm, broad chest. Arms grabbed her and yanked her through the portal. “What the hell are you doing here?” Dare stuck his head out and scanned the street both ways before slamming the door shut. Turning to face her, he leaned against the door, his hands tucked behind his back.

“What were you trying to do... ruin your reputation and blacken mine even further? You know better than to show up at a bachelor’s digs without a chaperone.” He saw her mouth open and raised his voice, continuing before she could get a word in edgewise. “Chastity, you need spanking. Your behavior is unacceptable.”

His displeasure scalded her, hurt in a way her father’s frequent scolding never had. Her pain quickly gave way to anger. How dare he pass judgment on her when he was no angel himself? “You didn’t find it so last evening, when you begged me to come back with you so I could... presumably... *come* again.”

He had the grace to look shamefaced. “Don’t remind me. That was your fault --”

“Mine!”

“Yes, yours,” he accused. “You had me out of my mind with lust.”

Her lip turned up in a fine sneer. "Trust a man to blame the woman in these situations. I suppose I tied you down and had my wicked way with you until I rendered you totally under my control."

Long fingers raked a furrow through thick black hair. "Something along those lines, yes," he mumbled, flicking a guilty glance down at her.

"You lie!" Chassy wagged an accusing digit in his face. Stalking over to him, she stabbed her stiff finger at his chest, emphasizing each point.

"First, if I had been in control, you never would have left me last night. Second, I wouldn't have been standing outside begging for you to let me in. Third, I wouldn't still be a virgin... and a hungry one, at that!"

Dare straightened away from the door and loomed over her. His eyes gleamed with a growing fire, an intimate flame that seared the tips of her stiffening nipples and twanged the cord that ran between her breast and her vagina.

"You know, I wasn't going to see you again. Then I thought better of it. Why the hell not? If you want an affair, I'll give you one. After all, I come out ahead in this win/win situation."

He discarded his shirt.

"I get to fuck you any time I want, any way I want, without having to worry about having to marry you. And you can tell the whole world how you tamed bad-boy Dare-the-devil Darian Acer and made him heel at your feet."

His words set her belly quivering with nerves. Her labia swelled and moistened. Chassy backed up, eyes caught, held captive by the sheer power of his black, fathomless gaze. Her tongue darted out to bathe suddenly dry lips. She held up both hands, whether to ward him off or offer up her body, she didn't know. "Dare, you sound angry..."

"Baby, I ain't angry, I'm horny. I've got a boner a mile long I plan to shove up your hot little twat."

A wicked grin on his face, he taunted her with words she'd never heard, promised actions she'd never imagined. "You're getting a good bargain for your money, you know. I have it on the best authority that no one can suckle a nipple like I can. And hot, juicy pussy is my favorite dish. Most men want to cut to the chase -- a few kisses, a couple of finger-thrusts, then on to the main meal of fucking. Not me." He winked at her.

She moaned.

He began to stalk her.

"I like to linger over my food. I'll make you come two or three times on my tongue before I'll be ready to mount you. You've never had cock, and mine is on the large side, so I'll be hard -- excuse the pun -- pressed *to initiate* you without pain, but I'll manage it. Wouldn't want to forfeit that double bonus, you know. I'll have to open you up good, loosen your inner muscles with a finger or three."

She retreated further, never taking her eyes off his advancing form. Oh, god, he was beautiful. Even as menacing as he appeared now, he moved like living poetry in motion. Long legs fluidly, effortlessly brought him closer with every step. The shifting of his powerful thigh muscles drew her eyes to the huge bulge nestled between them. She pressed a hand over her heart to calm the frenzied pounding. Her other hand rested at the hollow of her throat where her pulse raced out of control. She swallowed thickly. "N-now..."

"Yes, now," he agreed, his voice raspy and low. "Once again you have taken control of me. I will not leave you. I am the one begging *you* to let me come in." His sinful mouth smiled at her, his lustful eyes stared into hers. "I will feed you so well from passion's cup that you will no longer be hungry... or a virgin."

The nether lips between her legs actually fluttered. They swelled and pulsed. A wash of liquid bathed her thighs, embarrassing her at how ready her body became by just listening to his provocative words. Conversing proved difficult. Two words trickled out. "Oh, god --"

"On the contrary..." His teeth gleamed in the afternoonsunlight, lips curved wickedly as he reached for the ties of her dress and began to unravel her.

## Chapter Nine

The plush, plump cushions of the red velvet settee made a decadent backdrop for her creamy, naked skin and the masses of brunette hair spilling over the side of the retiring couch.

Amidst slow, languid lovemaking, he'd removed ten hair-bobs, plying her with a honey-sweet, openmouthed kiss each time he tugged a shining silver pin loose.

Her body was his cornucopia of delights, her emotions so open and responsive to him. He loved everything about loving her. The way she shifted and moved, moaned and made those little helpless noises in the back of her throat... she made him feel like a conqueror.

"I'm going to savor every inch of you, taste and sample your face, shoulders, arms..." He propped himself up on an elbow and traced her eyebrows with his forefinger. "I want to explore the very veins beneath your skin, trace every rivulet and estuary back to their source."

She moaned and shivered under the caress of his hand, lifting toward the moving digit as it glided down her neck and skirted the outsides of her breasts. "S-s-source?"

He dipped his finger into the shadowed hill of her breast and stroked rhythmically, palmed a straining nipple and pressed down, pinching the tight flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Dipping his head, he put mouth to nipple and suckled, drawing strongly on the tender bit. Opening his lips, he swallowed the stiff morsel, hollowing his cheeks as he worked her determinedly, pulling on her crest until it popped out of his greedy mouth with a loud slurp.

She bucked beneath him. Her high-pitched mewl tightened the secret spots along his spine. The helpless sound hardened his cock and tingled in his balls. He played with her wet nipple, flicking it carefully, giving just enough of a sting to make her lift to him in needy supplication. Taking it back in his mouth, he used his teeth and tongue so devilishly her eyes rolled back in her head.

Not wanting her to crest, he released the tight nubbin and leaned back. His hand coasted down the flat, pale plane of her belly, the silky, unblemished skin a vast contrast to his calloused, rough palm. "Your pelvic bones are your inner shores. They contain a primal sea, a turbulent ocean that seeks to escape the confines of its fleshly prison."

He rubbed his hand over her mound, cupped her sex, and used his thumb to circle her clit. "Can you feel it cresting, the waves breaking inside you?"

"My bones feel liquid... like I'm melting. Too hot... too much..." Her body rippled beneath him, undulating in a sensuous curve that had him gritting his teeth and scrabbling for control.

Moving stiffly, afraid he'd fall upon her and ravish her, Dare lowered himself down her body until his hands and mouth reached the sheltered cove of her sex. Eyes glued on the glorious sight, he reverently parted her labia with his thumbs, exposing the flushed, swollen center that gleamed with the evidence of her desire for him.



“You humble me with your beauty and willingness,” he whispered into her flesh, stroking a path of fire up her fluttering folds. “There is a heartbeat in your pretty little pussy. Does it beat for me?”

“Y-yes... oh...*Dare* ...!”

Her broken response moved him, melted some of the anger that had built inside him over the years, made him want to cherish her. She was his bright flame, his salvation. He’d lost all desire for others, didn’t want anyone but her spread beneath him, accepting his touch and his worship.

Her hands clenched in his hair, tugging at his scalp. The small pain twisted in his gut, sparking an impatience to be inside her. Bending his head, he extended his tongue and lapped roughly at her little button of nerves. His teeth nibbled at her, nipped a sharp warning of coming turbulence.

When he lifted his head, his face shone with her intimate juices. His stomach muscles clenched in need and dread as he watched her swoon under his ministrations.

Her face had gone slack. Her sherry-brown eyes, glazed with the pleasure he’d worked into her body, gleamed behind heavy lids. Her breasts quivered with each unsteady breath. Her rosy nipples stabbed up toward the ceiling in a begging arch. He could chart the waves of her inner sea under the thin skin of her belly.

A growl rumbled low in his chest as he stood and flung off the rest of his clothes. Intemperate, impatient, he kicked off his shoes, snatched at the buttons holding his trousers together, ripping the cloth in his hurry.

Freed, his cock sprang up, ruddy and red and aching, already dripping with the need to be buried in the hot, wet channel he’d stretched carefully with two fingers.

Sighing with relief, he gripped his erection with one hand and cupped his balls with the other, hissing at the heat pouring up his spine from the base of his cock.

Feeling like the greenest youth, he slid his fist up and down the stiff length, desperate to bleed off some of the pressure before he slammed into Chassy and fucked her as if she were a dockside whore. She didn’t deserve that kind of initiation. She’d trusted him to see to her deflowering, and he was damned if he’d botch this for her.

His hand moved faster, milking his throbbing hard-on.

*Almost there...*

A slight noise shattered his concentration. He opened his eyes and glanced up to find Chassy leaning on her elbow, legs wide open, the fingers of one hand buried in her cunt. Her thumb compressing her clit, she watched his frantic movements, her wide brown eyes avid on the steely jut of his cock.

It was almost too much. Biting his lip to distract his rising lust, Dare increased his movements. Running his fist over the mushroom-shaped head, he gathered the slick moisture to ease his way.

“Dare.”

He looked at her. “Yeah?” he croaked, cleared his throat. Conversation was the last thing on his mind.

“You wouldn’t let me taste you last night. Can I, please?” She gestured at his reddened cock.

His hand slowed and stopped while he debated with his better half.

*This time is supposed to be for her!*

*Yeah, well, she wants to suck cock -- who are you to deny her?*

*And it'll help take the pressure off. Oh, hell, yes. For sure!*

*Okay, but don't let her swallow this first time.* Might put her off.

His cock led the way to the settee, bobbing with eagerness. She didn't waste a minute. Her hand gripped him, brought him to her mouth, and a second later her lips closed over him, wrapping him in silken heat and darkness.

What she lacked in finesse, she made up for in willingness. She ran her tongue down his length, swirled it along the distended vein that ran the underside of his cock. Joy juice dribbled from his slit and she lapped it up, smacking her lips at the taste.

"Yum."

"*Soglad* you like," he managed, hands fisted in her hair. He rethought his decision not to spend in her mouth. Nothing thrilled a man more than watching his woman swallow his come. Ejaculating in a tight cunt came a close second, but having Chassy on her knees before him, her mouth working him so eagerly -- that won the laurels.

At the last minute, he held to his resolve and snatched his cock out of her mouth. He had to fight her for it. Moving out of reach, he fisted his hard-on and jacked it furiously, aided by the moisture her mouth had supplied.

His cock jerked and, with a groan of completion, he erupted, his seed shooting from him as he pumped his hips in time to his pistoning fist.

Sidestepping the pool of semen gleaming whitely on the dark hardwood floor, he returned to the settee and her, his mouth twisted in a self-derisive grimace. "You've unmanned me, Chassy. Before now, I've never feared failing my partner to the point I had to bring myself off before mounting her."

If possible, her eyes widened even more. "But doesn't that mean you can't do anything now?" She pointed to the cooling pool of come.

His lips parted in an amused smile. Her question showed her true innocence. He gestured at his lower body. "Take a good look at me."

He waited until she obeyed him, until her mouth fell open at the sight of his still rampant cock. "Now I can take you as slowly as you need, baby."

She reached up and circled his cock, surprising him, her fingers warm and smooth on his aroused flesh. "I need you, want you, any way you will take me."

He eased her hand off him, his balls gone shockingly tight again. *Sosoon*. "Damn, Chassy, you're a dangerous woman! That kind of action will get you fucked instead of courted."

"I don't need courting." She pouted, coming up on her knees to wrap her arms around his waist. "I need you deep inside of me, filling my emptiness. Only you can do that."

"I can hardly contain myself as it is. When you talk like that..." He shook his head. "Lie down and lift your legs up."

She quickly obeyed, and he circled her ankles with both hands, lifted her legs higher and stepping up between her wide-splayed thighs. Rubbing his cock up and down her shallow groove, he pressed hard enough to part her labia, hard enough to slide the tip of his bulbous head through her drenched folds.

Her flesh was hot and wet, and he could see her clit pulsating, her intimate sex lips fluttering. Imagining her closing around his swollen penis was enough to push his vaunted control to the limit.

He gathered his courage and met her eyes, knowing she could see mingled hope and fear in his. "You're so wet and ready. That kind of reaction can't be faked. You really want me?"

She nodded, looking confused at his question. "I really want you, not your wicked reputation or your notorious past. Just you, Dare -- and your cock in my pussy, fucking me like you mean it."

*My heart in your hands, loving you like no one else ever will*. But he hadn't gathered enough courage to say that out loud. "So be it." He rubbed against her again, cock sliding and slipping in her wetness. She was as ready as he could make her.

Using his thumb and middle finger, he parted her and fit his dripping head to her opening. Taking a deep breath, he began pressing, slowly easing his way in.

Her flesh parted and gave way before him, reforming around his thickness like a tailored glove, firm and tight. Nothing had ever felt better than her pussy opening and clenching around him, welcoming him, taking him as deep as he could go.

*Not quite*, he thought, coming up against her maiden's barrier. He slowed his forward momentum.

"We've encountered a road block." His voice gruff with holding back, he commanded, "Take a deep breath and lift your hips to me."

When he felt her inner muscles relax, he surged into her, breaking past the thin membrane guarding her innocence.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Dare, take me! Make me yours!" She cried out, but not with pain. And he pulled out -- her nether lips clinging to his thick width -- just enough to slam back into her.

Her body quaked, breasts and belly shaking with the impact. He rolled his hips and fed her another inch of his cock, gasping at the sensation, his blood racing, fire running from the back of his legs, up his buttocks, and into his balls.

Sinking down over her, he took her lips, devoured her mouth, thrusting his tongue into her honeyed depths to the same cadence he thrust into her pussy. He drove in, drove deep, *deeper*, trying to find his home, his soul. "Damn it, Chassy, you feel so good, so tight, so hot..."

Her legs dropped from his shoulders and clasped about his waist, her body working with his, straining to take him in and hold him. "More Dare... harder and deeper... *deeper*, damn you!"

"Oh, hell, yeah!" Dare shouted, increasing the depth and angle of his strokes. Drawing his hand back, he slapped her flank, a sharp pat that was more sound than fury.

She erupted under him, screeching and arching and twisting. Her legs tightened about him, clung as she tried to climb up his body.

"Again! Do that again!" She panted, eyes wide, gazing up at him in wonder, the brown depths revealing a lust that rivaled what poured through him.

The growl he released was part wild animal and all male. "You like that, baby?" he asked, bringing his hand down again, a little harder. He could feel her intimate muscles grab hold of him, squeezing his cock with desperate strength. "I can feel you do. Okay then," he said, returning to devouring her mouth as he rained a flurry of hard spanks to her flanks and the lower curve of her luscious ass.

Throwing her head back, she screamed, convulsing and shuddering. Heat poured over his cock head, a

liquid stream, filling her pussy and spilling over as she climaxed in his arms.

Her explosion triggered the beginning of his, and he bared his teeth, groaning as his spine stiffened. Semen boiled in his balls, the weighty sacs drew up close to the base of his penis. His cock swelled and lengthened, preparing to spew, and her pussy seemed to shrink around him, becoming a tighter fit.

A firestorm of heat slammed into the back of his head, bowing his neck as flames licked up his spine. Mouth open in a soundless wail, he locked his fingers in the cheeks of her ass and lifted her into his thrusts, driving his cock to the depths again and again. Knees shaking, he leaned against the settee and folded her legs over his arms, rolling her bottom up for better purchase. One hand curled around her thigh and attacked her clit, rolling and tweaking it, tugging and stretching it, flicking it hard.

“Come, damn you. Come now!” Voice hoarse, he shouted orders at her, desperate for her to finish climaxing before he came like the original landing shuttle, crashing through the atmosphere and burning to cinders.

She dug her nails into his back, clinging to him like a leech as her orgasm slammed into her. Thankful for mercies shown, he dropped his head to her shoulder and nuzzled her fragrant skin as he drilled into her a few more times before pressing in as far as he could go. Pressing in and letting go.

Come blasted through his cock, pulsed deep and hot in her core. His hips bucked and rolled as waves of semen poured out of him like a jet stream. He continued working her clit as he emptied himself inside her and collapsed at her side.

With a groan, she pushed up on her elbows and dropped a kiss on his open lips before flopping back down beside him in a boneless sprawl. “Thank you... thank you...”

He’d never felt more complete.

## Chapter Ten

A week later, she woke to a broad finger running tight circles around her puckered opening. She reared in fright. “What are you doing? Stop that!”

“I want to fuck you here.”

“No way!”

“You’ll love it. I promise to make it beyond good for you.” He pushed against the tiny orifice, fingertip sinking in and stretching the untried opening. It burned.

She slapped at his hand, twisting to lie on her back. Staring up at him in hurt accusation, she shook her head no. “I may have been a virgin, but I know enough to figure out you’re too big to get inside of there. Your finger doesn’t even fit. You’d rip me open.”

“I won’t.” Dare’s hands gripped her thighs and lifted, bowing her up until her anus was again exposed to him. His eyes gleamed with a shocking heat. She’d never seen such lust or such fevered intense wanting. Her lips went dry. Down below, her vaginal lips were drenched with the flow of her arousal.

He took quick advantage of her involuntary reaction. Lowering his chest over her thighs, he held her in place, freeing his hands to roam at will over the round curve of her hips and between her legs. He gathered her juices and spread them over her cheeks, rubbed them over and in the puckered door. Her muscles clenched, pushed his finger out. He slapped her butt.

“Stop squirming. You’re no longer a virgin... except for here... and not for long.”

His insistence irritated her. He’d pinned her so securely she could do no more than wiggle beneath him. Staring up at him, using words as a whip, she lashed at him. “I said no, Dare! And since I pay the shot, I call the play.”

The glow in his eyes snapped off like a light turned out by an impatient hand. He released her and backed away, his eyes hooded and shielded from her gaze. His jaw clenched so tight she could see the muscle ticking beneath the skin, while his lips folded in until their sexy curve disappeared. Without a word, he stood and walked away.

“Dare, where are you going? Come back. I didn’t mean to say that.”

Pausing in the bedroom doorway, he looked back, chiseled face stern and closed -- the face of a crusader confronting a dragon. “It sounded like just what you meant to say.”

She couldn’t believe how easily he’d taken offense. Why did men always do that?

“I also said I was sorry, and I meant that, too. Please, come back.”

Head tilted to the side, he weighed her words, his options, and then approached her, steps dragging. The loss of his eagerness was a bitter taste on her tongue.

“Why be sorry? After all, you spoke only the truth. Look around.” He unclenched his hands, fanned them to indicate their surroundings. “Everything you see is yours: this flat, the furniture... me. Like my apartment, my servants, and clothes, you’ve bought me, soul and body.”

Tears started, stinging her eyes. “No!” She sat up, held out her hands. “Oh, Dare, I never... I don’t want you thinking I just want to own you. I’d rather die than hurt your feelings. I...”

He caught her hands and subdued them, his face still and blank. When he spoke, his voice was harsh enough to grind stone into gravel. “Hush, babe, don’t fret so.”

Once she was calmer, he carefully placed her hands in her lap and withdrew until he faced her from a space of two or so feet.

“We all make choices, Chassy, and I don’t regret making this one. While I fully intended to continue rejecting your offer out of hand, I hadn’t steeled myself to finding you on my doorstep. Your beauty knocked me off kilter. I couldn’t resist you.”

He wiped the tears from her face. Bending, he pressed his mouth against hers, licked the seam of her lips, wordlessly demanding she open to him. “I don’t regret my choices... often.”

She hiccupped. “I don’t want you to ever regret choosing me. I knew your father had disinherited you, knew you were short of money. I have an obscene amount so why should you be in need. I didn’t figure you for the sort of man who accepts charity, so I racked my brains and came up with the idea of offering you carte blanche.”

He flinched, and she was quick to notice the betraying movement. “Why are you so bothered by the term?”

“To be the kept man of a woman is degrading. No man worth his salt would be comfortable in such a situation.”

Chastity bristled. “So if I had accepted the same offer from you, I would be a degraded woman in your sight?”

His eyebrows creased in a quick frown. "Of course not."

"What would be the difference?" She leaned on one arm and cocked her head, eyes narrowing as she perused his stiff posture. "Haven't you ever offered carte blanche to anyone?"

"No." He looked relieved to be able to answer in the negative.

"But you have had mistresses...?"

His answer came slower this time. "Of course, yes. I'm a man. I've been married for a long time, Chassy. You can't possibly have expected me to come to you a virgin."

She crooked an eyebrow. "Why not? Why must women be the ones to remain pure while you men flit from pussy to pussy like damned tom cats? Why haven't you ever offered any woman carte blanche?"

Exasperation sounded in his heavy sigh. "I have never cared for a woman enough to honor her with that level of trust."

"Ahh!" Chassy sagely nodded her head. "I have never offered a man carte blanche before. Until now, I have never cared enough for a man to honor him with this level of trust. But to you, my offering is an insult. Perhaps you would have preferred to be the one offering the blank letter... to uphold your manhood!"

"Damn it, Chassy, I would have preferred to be the one offering marriage."

Dare closed the short distance between them. Easing down on the mattress beside her, he cradled the back of her head and drew her into a soft, warm kiss, his lips gently moving on hers. An eon later, he pulled back and met her eyes. "From the first time I saw you, marriage was the only thought in my mind. I knew immediately we belonged together. Before you walked into view, I'd been searching for a likely fuck-partner. Then I saw you. Not a woman there could hold a candle to you. They all faded to shadow. Every man in the Avondales' ballroom became my enemy. I didn't want their eyes on you, didn't like seeing the lust they felt for you. I didn't fall in love with you, Chassy -- I stepped into it with both eyes open."

She could drown in his gaze, lose herself in the wide, fathomless black pupils. The naked truth shone out of them, and her heart lurched somewhere in her chest. She recognized love when she saw it. Crying, she flung herself into his embrace.

"I'm so sorry." She gulped on tears, moved beyond the capacity to hold them in. "I'd dreamed of you all my life, measured all other men against your standard. I was used to wanting you, but there was no reason to expect you to feel the same connectedness. I've never wanted marriage before meeting you, and because of what father terms my 'hoydenish behavior,' I never dreamed you would want to marry me. I thought I could settle for an affair. Your rejection almost ripped my heart out of my chest. I'd never felt such pain."

"I refused the carte blanche because I wanted more. I still want more -- more even than marriage with you, Chassy, I don't want a society bargain like my parents endured. I'd like a true partnership, a blending of our hearts and bodies. I want to have children with you... not just an heir and a spare. I want so much..."

Smiling through her tears, she lifted her hand to his beloved face, tracing the mobile lips and firm jaw. He dipped his head and rubbed his cheek against her palm, the gesture oddly submissive and manly at the same time. "I want to give you everything you desire. Everything."

His face snapped up, eyes glittered with newly awakened lust. "You mean...?"

Though still wary of all it might entail, she wouldn't deny him anything. Nibbling on her bottom lip, eyes shyly dropping from his dark gaze, she nodded. He didn't allow her to escape so easily. A finger beneath

her chin lifted her head until she found herself mirrored in his pupils. "Say it."

"I want you to take my anal virginity." Her voice trembled.

He chuckled. "Now say it like you mean it."

She couldn't fool him. He knew her too well, understood her fears better than she did. But she could do this because she loved him and trusted him not to willingly hurt her. Laughter welled up at the thought of how he would react to her next actions.

With a last puckish kiss, she backed up on her knees, turned, and stretched her upper body out in a lazy curve. Widening her legs, she lifted her bottom, presenting her cheeks to him in a saucy pose that had her juices running forward to dampen the tight curls covering hermons . She gave her ass a flirty little wiggle and couldn't hold back a sharp sigh when the flat of his hand landed against the rounded curve of her buttocks.

"Oh, you're a nasty little thing, aren't you?"

He rubbed the stinging spot, bent and strung a line of sucking kisses along the crease between her full cheeks. She shivered and moaned at the intense and frightening feelings his touch awakened. She'd never felt such heat from simple mouth-to-flesh contact.

Another slap fell, sharper than before. Her nipples tightened.

"Get that ass higher in the air... and get those legs further apart. I want to see your sweet little pussy winking at me."

She obeyed, shaking with the arousal his words caused. The muscles low in her belly clenched and quivered. "Flying angel-serpents, Dare. I love when you talk to me like this!"

"I promise you, you're going to love everything I do to you." His hands coasted up and down her back, soothing her jangled nerves before he stung her bottom with another random swat.

Her knees gave way, but his forearm was under her, around her waist. He lifted her back into position and barked an order for her to remain still. She felt his hand between her legs, two fingers tunneling into her dripping vagina, a little rough and urgent. Just the way she liked.

"You are such a little slut puppy, aren't you? I've never felt you so wet." He clicked his tongue at her. "NaughtyChassy . Why are you pretending to be reluctant when you obviously want this ass fucking?"

He didn't give her time to answer. Good thing, because she couldn't have spoken to save her life. He was right. With lightning quickness, she'd gone from leery to lusty. Butterflies still beat frantically in her belly, not from dread of what was ahead, but from fear he might think she still protested and cease his thrilling actions.

His fingers dug in her liquid channel again, gathered the creamy moisture, and slathered it into the crease of her ass and all over the puckered entry to her most secret place. One well-lubricated finger pressed into the tight orifice, and she jumped, shocked at the pleasure pouring over her at the intrusion.

The finger retreated, surged back in. It hurt. And it didn't. His finger's movement became her focus. In...hurting ; out... wondrous delight. In...pushing against resisting tissue, and out... gliding along nerve-rich membranes.

Her entire body registered what happened in that one place, became malleable, pliant. Soon the inward movement blended with the outward until the pleasure grew and swelled.

And stopped.

Dare's lips nuzzling her lobe, his tongue swirling in her ear, his voice gruff and hoarse, whispering dark secrets as his hands soothed and petted, brought her down where she could think again.

She didn't want to think -- she wanted to feel.

"That was just my finger. Think about having me fuck your tight, sweet ass with my long, thick cock." He rubbed said cock against her, slid it up and down her crease and circled the broad head over her anus again and again.

She pushed back toward him, showing her willingness, her desire for him to take her last virginity.

A heavy groan sounded in her ear. A moment later, his hands were gripping her cheeks, prying them apart. He sank down, fit his cock to her pussy, and took her from behind, burying himself to the hilt with one thrust.

His fingers plucked her nipples, tugging and pinching and rolling the aching tips until they throbbed and burned. He buried his mouth in her neck, sucking her flesh between his teeth, leaving his mark on her, in her. He pounded into her, his hips slamming against the cushion of her ass, his wiry pubic curls scraping the sensitive skin of her bottom.

Seated deep within her, he helped her sit up, her back to his chest. He showed her the rhythm he wanted her to maintain, then set to work tormenting her clit. One hand worked lazy patterns on the heaving surface of her belly, while the other tweaked and thumbed the stiff bit of flesh at the zenith of her thighs. Not content to pinch and pull on her clit, he stuffed two fingers in her pussy, alongside his pistoning cock.

The resultant pressure was too much. She screamed, bucking against his thighs, the pleasure so intense she thought her body would disintegrate under the onslaught.

He tipped her head back and took her mouth, his tongue forceful and insistent. She opened to him, his woman to command, demanding more from him even as she surrendered.

He gave her more than she sought, working his fingers in tandem with his cock, his thumb riding her clit, supplying a counterpoint to his thrusts... and his other hand rooting at her ass, a finger forging past her sphincter.

Bliss.

Ecstasy.

And at the climax... his words in her ear, his promise of things to come. "One finger is nothing, love. When I fuck your ass, you are going to melt. You are going to go nova from the explosions, I promise you. But I'm not going to take your sweet ass until our wedding night. I want you to be able to wear white at our ceremony, so we'll keep at least one virginity intact."

"Dare, please!"

## Chapter Eleven

Darian had an appointment in the city. Forced to emerge from their weeklong sex-fest, Chastity decided she might as well utilize the empty hours until his return, to fulfill her promise to visit the duchess of Pettibone.



“This won’t take long, I promise. Two hours, tops.” Dare kissed her, his lips and tongue knowing just where and how to touch her to make her go weak with longing. “By then, I’ll be ready for some more of your sweet, rich pussy.”

“Keep it up and you’ll miss that appointment.” She wasn’t kidding. They’d spent the entire night fucking, barely taking a break between torrid sessions, and he had but to kiss her to have her primed for more hot action. “You’ve made me need you again.”

“I need you, too,” Dare groaned. “Right now.”

Glancing left and right, finding the street empty, he snatched her up in his arms and entered the hovering flitter. Hurrying to the long couch in the back, he deposited her on the firm cushion.

Her skirts went up about her waist in a quick move that screamed of plenty of practice. His buttons flew from their loops, and his cock sprang out, thick and high. He entered her so fast she barely had time to spread her legs.

“Damn, Chassy, you’ve got me hard as a glazed brick.” He groaned. “I’m afraid this won’t last long. Come soon, or forever hold your peace.”

Chassy shuddered as heat and laughter ran through her. She clutched at him, arms about his shoulders, legs clinging tight to his flexing buttocks. “How can you make me laugh when you’re fucking me so hard I want to scream?”

He gritted his teeth. “I don’t know... I don’t care. I have to come now, baby. Oh, god, tell me you’re there!”

She flung her head back as lightning struck, sizzled down her nerve endings. “I’m there! I’m there!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Slumped on the couch, Chastity barely had the strength to push her skirts down. Thank goodness Dare had programmed the flitter with the coordinates for the hours-long journey to the Pettibones’ main residence and set the controls to auto-flight before he left.

Wriggling to get more comfortable, she settled back against the leather squabs and closed her eyes. Immediately, a vivid memory of Dare, naked and aroused, formed in her mind.

Chassy’s slips widened, parting in astonishment as she shivered with rising need, sexual heat blossoming between her thighs. There was no controlling her body’s reaction to its new conditioning.

Chilling fire raced up her spine, spilled across her shoulders, and flowed down to her breasts. Static electricity snapped and sparked in the tips of her engorging nipples. Her clit throbbed in time to the increased beating of her heart.

*Glorious flying angel-serpents, but the man was gorgeous... and he can fuck!* Through the roaring of her pulse, she seemed to hear Dare’s voice urging her to grip him tighter, ride him harder. Her muscles closed on nothing, and she pressed her legs together, rubbed her thighs against each other, desperate to ease the flames licking at her from within.

She shifted on the seat, twisting in need. She couldn’t believe how quickly her lust had risen. Though abashed over missing Dare so soon, she couldn’t help but wish he was with her now, *in* her, once more filling the empty chasm of her welling vagina with his thick, hard cock.

He’d done this to her. Made her perpetually horny, addicted her to the frequent thrusting of his body in hers. She was a junky for the climaxes he wrung from her with such ease.

Chastity sighed, thinking about how she'd begged him to take her anally, to use her any way he wanted. Liana had been right to warn her of the folly of passing up life's greatest adventure, but she'd neglected to warn her about the stubbornness of men.

He'd fucked her numerous times last night, but he'd never satisfied her curiosity or satiated her longing for the salacious act of sodomy. Oh, he teased and flirted, ran his fingers and mouth over and around what he called her "tiny rosebud," but now that she longed for him to do so, he wouldn't fuck her there.

Her body made hot and itchy by the memories of their lovemaking, she ached with the urge to turn the flitter around, hunt him down, and force him to satisfy her needs.

Driven half-wild, she gathered the slim skirts of her morning gown in one hand and hoisted a leg up on the seat. She slipped her hand between her thighs and let her fingers coast over warm, damp flesh.

Muscles twitched and jumped beneath the surface as her body tensed, anticipating the pleasure ahead. Her breath caught, stalled in her throat as her hand reached its destination. Twirling a finger in the tight curls covering hermons, she circled her clit, fingertips slipping in moisture as her copious flow coated her hand.

A frown puckered her brow. The sensations weren't as strong or sweet as when Dare touched her, stroked her. She pinched her clit, hoping to ignite something more than frustration, but the feelings eluded her.

With a tortured groan, Chastity withdrew her hand and let her head drop back on the plush leather. Reaching for a handful of tissues, she cleansed herself as well as she could. Finished, she tossed the sodden mass into the trash and smoothed her skirts down over legs still weak and shaky.

DarianAcer was going to pay for making her immune to anyone but himself. When she returned home, she was going to fuck that man bowlegged.

## Chapter Twelve

"I am here to see the duchess." Chastity handed her card to the cardboard-cutout figure pretending to be the Pettibones' butler.

The thin, haughty man took the small rectangle between thumb and forefinger, holding it from his body as if he feared infection. "Please be seated, Lady Chastity." His nostrils flared and chin lifted as he indicated a backless retiring bench situated a few feet away. "I shall ascertain whether Her Grace is at home."

"...to *you*," he might as well have added. His supercilious tone said he doubted the duchess would deign to meet with the likes of her.

Chassy settled on the thin cushion with ill grace. *Damn pretentious man.* "You'd think *he* was the duke and not the servant with all the airs he put on," she muttered half under her breath.

*I'll show him airs! He'd best remember I am the daughter of a duke, myself.*

The butler returned quickly, his mouth drawn in a disapproving moue. Reluctantly polite, he intoned, "If milady will follow me...?"

Giving her his back -- instead of inviting her to go before him as he ought -- he led the way down a long, wide hall.

Chastity made an unladylike moue of her own as she trailed behind the butler. The loveliness of the

duchess's décor caught her attention, and she quickly found herself drinking in the magnificent artwork and furnishings.

Covered in pale ecru cream wallpaper that intersected with a furniture rail bisecting the upper and lower halves of the walls, the wide corridor stretched for what seemed acres before her. Blond wainscoting covered the bottom half.

When she recognized the pale paneling as stykewood, found only on the winter continent at the top of the world, her eyebrows shot up. She whistled soundlessly, impressed against her will. Stykewood wasn't easy to come by. This corridor represented wealth on a scale unknown to most of Paradise's inhabitants. Until today, she'd been aware of only one person rich enough to afford to panel a hallway with the stuff: her father.

*Why would the duchess summon me? What could possibly be behind her furtive comments? Why did she insist time was of the essence?*

Chassy sighed. She'd asked herself these questions over and over and had yet to come up with any reasonable answer. She hoped the duchess had good information, or at least a lead on her father's would-be killer, because she resented having to be away from Dare for even the short time this morning visit would take.

The butler halted before tall double doors and gestured for her to wait. Flinging the panels open, he stepped into the room and announced, "The Lady Chastity Tilson to see you, Your Grace."

Chastity sank into a graceful curtsy. "Your Grace..."

"Well, it's about time, young lady!"

Chastity's head snapped up. Her eyes widened in shock. Glad tears blurred her vision. "*Father!*"

"Yes, *Father*. Your poor old father who has cooled his heels for over a week, waiting for his wayward daughter." He held his arms out, a teasing smile wreathing his face.

Completely forgetting the presence of the duchess, she flew into her father's embrace, reduced to the little girl who had often sought comfort in his lap. In his arms, the constant fear and dread she'd lived with since his injury fell away. Only now did she realize how heavy the burden of wariness had weighed on her. Feeling light enough to fly, she laughed aloud, hugged her father, and burrowed closer as reaction finally set in.

He patted her back, his tentative, awkward caresses so much a part of their relationship. Poor Dad -- he never knew what to do with her when she became emotional. She'd used his confusion to her advantage many a time.

With a last hiccup, Chassy leaned back and scanned her father's face, searching for signs of lingering illness. His face glowed with health, his ruddy complexion offset by his dear, familiar bushy eyebrows. He caught her watching and waggled them at her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered a heartfelt prayer of thanks. Her brows lowered and she stepped back, hands shooting to her waist. "You want to tell me why Liana stopped sending me reports? And why you never wrote to tell me you were okay... and why you hid *here*, instead of coming to Uncle David's house?" She gasped, remembering something Liana had said. "Is he involved? Is that why you didn't...?"

Her father laid a finger across her lips, shushing her. "No, David may be a scoundrel, but he would never sully his hands by becoming involved in a murder. It wouldn't be proper."

He fished out his handkerchief and mopped up her tears. "There. Are you better now?"

She nodded, blowing her nose vigorously. She held out her hand, playfully offering to return the sodden cloth. She knew his fastidiousness. With a wry chuckle, the duke shook his head and backed away from the limp rag. "I think not, young lady!" He pointed at the used napkin. "That's yours... at least until you have it laundered."

They both laughed, recalling numerous such times in their shared past. Cedric sobered. "It is good to be reunited with you. I wouldn't have believed how much and how soon I missed you, child."

"I missed you, too, Daddy."

His face softened at the beloved term. "You haven't called me that in a long time."

She smiled, tears near the surface again. "I know."

"I need your help, Chastity."

"Anything, of course."

"You're not going to like your part, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean? What part?"

Cedric exchanged a cryptic glance with Lucynda before addressing Chassy. "I understand you've begun an affair -- uh... *an association* with young Darian Acer." A scowl twisted his face. "Not the sort of information a father wants to hear about his only daughter, by the way."

Chassy's face flamed, the heat sudden and intense. She hated blushing. It made her look guilty when she felt no such emotion. "To be precise, I offered him *carte blanche*. We have since decided to marry."

Cedric grimaced. "You'll be marrying, but the groom won't be Dare-the-devil Acer." He said the name with a sneer in his voice.

Cold speared through her chest. Dread's chilled fingers twisted her gut in knots. "Don't blame Dare for this situation, Father. I love him and he loves me. I hurt him dreadfully by offering him *carte blanche* when he planned to offer marriage. He refused me, but I wouldn't take no for an answer. I seduced him into making love to me. I can't marry another, not even for you."

"Utter nonsense, m'dear. Most of Society doesn't hold such antiquated ideas anymore. You're the daughter of a duke, and the man I have in mind will gladly overlook your absent virginity. Talk to your uncle. Have him arrange the match."

"No. Besides, I still have a virginity ... of sorts."

Her father's entire face twitched as her meaning sank in. His mouth twisted. "Too much information, Chassy," he wheezed, thumping his chest with a closed fist. "Have a care for my heart, young lady, and remember you're talking to your father." He sobered. "Have you forgotten I am trying to flush out a killer?"

She frowned in confusion. "How will my marrying some man advance your program?" She thought a moment. "You know who it is. You've always known."

"Yes. However, I am not at liberty to disclose the person's identity..." He glanced over at the rotund duchess. "A prior promise constrains me."

She followed his gaze and another piece of the puzzle fell into place. "The duchess has something to do with this. That's why you came here."

Cedric nodded. "Her husband is an old friend. He is remaining silent about my visit while I clear up the misunderstanding with the crown. He knows nothing of Lucynda's involvement."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Neither do I, but that doesn't matter. I've promised to marry Darian Acer, and I intend to honor that promise."

"And so you shall. Your groom is none other than the earl of Chesley."

The ringing in her ears drowned out her father's voice. She heard nothing after the words, *earl of Chesley*. Vertigo swept over her and she fumbled her way to a settee. Plopping down, she closed her eyes and concentrated on staying conscious.

"His *father*." Angry tears flooded her eyes. Hatred for the man who'd abandoned his own son blazed within, the flames so hot their residue charred her vision, turned everything gray. "I loathe him," she spat. "You have no idea the pain he's put Dare through. He wouldn't even allow Dare to attend his own mother's funeral! And this is the man you want to marry me off to...?"

"Chesley' is a Landing title. Under the circumstances, he's a fitting choice. You might not be able to do better."

She countered, a sneer curling her lip. "I can do *alot* better! His title does not erase his past. The earl of Chesley -- your contemporary -- is an old man, a mean, womanizing despot. He drove his son away and drove his wife insane with his infidelities."

"You know, Cedric, Chastity's right. I certainly wouldn't want any daughter of mine tied to that monster." Lucynda joined the conversation for the first time.

Chassy smiled at her, thankful for the support. Her father raised his hands in surrender. "All right, you two, I know when I'm beaten. You needn't marry the man, but I need the ceremony to take place." The two women opened their mouths to protest, and he hurried on before they could get their angry words out. "To *almost* take place." He noticed their skeptical expressions. He placed his right hand over his heart. "I give my solemn promise I'll stop the wedding before vows are exchanged if our culprit doesn't show up."

"You'd better... or I will." Chassy stood up, righted her dress, and made sure she had her reticule. "I need to get back and tell Dare about --"

"No, you can tell him nothing."

Chassy's hands tightened on the strings of her small purse. "Of course I must. He's sure to hear the rumors about town, and I don't want him upset or thinking I'd actually marry his father, for star's sake."

Her father came to her, placed his hands on her shoulders, and drew her into his embrace. "Does your Dare love you enough to forgive you?"

"What are you saying, Dad?" she whispered, tears clogging her throat. She didn't want to hear whatever it was. The thought of making Dare believe she would dump him for another... seeing the hurt betrayal in his eyes... She closed hers. "I can't bear to hurt him."

"If Dare learns the truth, his reaction will not be authentic. Our prey has eyes and ears among society. They will know if something, any little thing, is amiss. We'll lose this opportunity. I'm not the only target. My would-be killer has to think you are in my confidence. You have now become an equal or greater threat."

He patted her shoulder, offering the only comfort he knew how. "People who know Dare will look for him to react a certain way. We need your ex-lover's anger, his hurt bellowing, to make this appear legitimate. When this is all over, I will explain everything to him. I promise to make all right again."

“What if he can’t forgive me, Dad? What if I lose him forever?”

“If he truly loves you...” Her father paused at the fierce look she shot him.

“What do you know of true love?”

He paled.

“If I lose Dare over this, I’ll never forgive you. Your killer might as well shoot me, too, for I’ll be dead inside.” Sinking back down onto the settee, Chastity folded her arms on the raised rolled arm, tucked her face in the crook of her elbow, and burst into jagged tears.

### Chapter Thirteen

It had been two weeks since Chastity gave Dare his conge, and Chezann was becoming worried. Dare hadn’t gotten over being dumped. It didn’t look as if he ever would. “Dare, please stop. If you drink any more, I’ll throw up.”

“Shut up, C.C.,” Darian snarled, snatching the brimming tumbler from the reluctant waiter before his brother could intercept. His hand shook as he brought the glass to his lips. “I can still *smell* her -- *taste* her, so I can’t have drunk enough, yet.”

Chezann propped his elbow on the bar, his chin on his palm, and gazed in pity at his older brother. He’d never seen Dare like this. Even in the days directly following the death of his brother and mother, his sibling had radiated an air of aloofness, maintained the impression he was impervious to pain.

Today, the man looked a mess. Clothes wrinkled and unkempt, he slouched at the card table, idly rifling a worn deck of fago cards. Hair uncombed and beard unshaven, his bloodshot eyes glared out at the world, counting every inhabitant his mortal enemy.

C.C.’s eyes narrowed. Jaw tight, he thought about Chastity and her fickle heartlessness, glad beyond words she’d seen fit to pass him up. The woman played hardball with people’s emotions, and he wished she’d one day experience even a small portion of the pain she so blithely dished out.

Dare didn’t deserve what she’d done to him. It wasn’t right for her to use him then discard him for... *How had she put it?...* “The catch of the season.”

“If she’d chosen any one other than my *father*, I could have understood it.” Darian had lifted his head and mumbled the words through dry, cracked lips. One glimpse of his eyes had C.C. lowering his, unwilling to see that level of gut-deep pain.

“I mean, let’s face it -- I’m *not* the best catch. Disowned by my family, looked down upon by society -- she could easily find a better man than --”

“Oh, hell, Dare. Spare me the self-pitying spiel.” C.C. slapped his hands on the table and leaned into his brother’s surprised face. “I’ve had it up to here with your sad rendition of a woman scorned.”

Dare straightened up, his back stiffening against the chair. His lips thinned as he narrowed his eyes and tried to focus on his brother. “I thought you, of all men, would understand.”

“The thing is, I do understand, Dare. I understand that you are going to sit here drinking yourself to death while the woman you love marries our father.” The thought made him sick to his stomach. Maybe he could

make his brother sick enough to put a halt to the monumental disaster taking place as they spoke.

“Just think about it... in a little while they’ll leave the church. Knowing our randy parent, he won’t wait long before he lifts her skirts -- probably stop along the way and fuck her in the carriage. Yeah, and while he has her heels in the air, she can grip his thick cock with her pussy -- Hey, did I ever tell you how my mother went on and on about him being built like a horse? --and scream his name. Can’t you hear it?” Speaking in falsetto, he chimed, “Oh,Darian , yes... fuck me with your big cock, ram that pole up my tiny little ass!”

“Motherfucker , C.C., shut the fuckup! ”

Outside, a cloud of angel-serpents spun and dipped in frenzied flight, their shrill cries disturbing and nerve-jangling.

C.C. watched them, stunned at how they mirrored Dare’s emotions, had always done so. They and his brother shared a connection that had baffled the naturalists for years. No one else, before or since, had bonded with so many of the finickyavians .

Moved by Dare’s pain, irritated by the high-pitched screams of the serpents, he still couldn’t allow himself to stop prodding. The wedding was scheduled for twelve o’clock, and it was past eleven. He had to shake Dare’s aplomb, force him into action before it was too late.

“Ah, but you’ve already heard those words, haven’t you?” His hand gripped his brother’s arm. “Can you bear thinking about her calling *your* name while she lies under our grunting father, getting your next little brother or sister plowed into her? Can you *bear* it? Because I don’t think I can. I don’t want that lecher putting his filthy hands on her. If you don’t want her, I’ll take her. I’m going to try to stop the wedding.”

A thud sounded against the window, and then another and another until the glass shook under the impact. The angel-serpents were attacking the window, trying to get in, trying to get to Dare .

A waiter, frightened at the cacophony, ran from the room, a salver held over his head as a protective shield. On desperate impulse, C.C. went to the window and flung it open.

A cloud of small bodies rushed past him,arrowing toward his brother. At the last minute, most veered off, content to circle his head and coo at him. Four of the largest mantledDarian’s shoulders and arms, rubbed their sinuous heads against him, their tiny forefeet petting and rubbing him. The fifth creature settled in his lap, reared up to place her small feet on his chest, and stared into his eyes, crooning a little trilling song.

Dare broke.

C.C. reacted quickly, knowing his brother would rather die than expose his feelings to the public. “Everybody out!” he shouted, waving his arms and herding the patrons and serving staff from the establishment. As he pushed the complaining owner toward the door, he thrust a thick wad of bills into the man’s hand. “I’m renting your place for the rest of the afternoon. Keep everyone out of here.” The owner shut up and closed the door behind him, his face wreathed in smiles.

C.C. returned to his brother to find him literally covered in angel-serpents. Their mournful accompaniment was the perfect foil for a strong man’s tears, but the low, ululating cries raised the hair on his arms.

Dare’s shoulders heaved as sobs poured from him, a rain of tears flooding his face. His body shook uncontrollably. “I love her. I love her until my heart hurts with it. I’d walk barefoot across glass shards to her, and she threw me away like yesterday’s trash.”

“If you’d walk across glass, how hard can it be to walk across town? Or are you going to sit here and wallow in sorrow when you have one more chance to change her mind?”

“You didn’t hear what she said to me when she gave me that obscene amount of money and told me we were finished. That she had a position to maintain and, as a society lady, she was expected to wed a

particular type of man.”

“Wait, Dare, hold it!” C.C.’s heart thumped with excitement. “She said all that, in those exact words? Are you sure?”

“It’s burned in my memory. Her words will smolder in my mind ’til the day I die.”

A grin spread his mouth wide. “Oh, brother, you need to get home and clean up. Better yet, clean up later. We have a wedding to halt.”

“What are you talking about? Haven’t you heard a word I said?”

He couldn’t help smiling. “I heard you, Dare. After all my work on getting you two back together, I want the first boy named after me... ‘Crofton,’ not ‘Chezann.’ No one deserves to be stuck with a name like ‘Chezann.’”

The angel-serpents’ lilting song registered the renewal of Dare’s hope before his face revealed what he was feeling. “You know something I don’t?”

“I know she must have been trying to give you a message, but she sent it through the wrong brother. Chassy is totally against society marriages and never planned to make one. Her father and she fought about it on a regular basis. If you don’t believe me, ask her.”

“I believe I will.” Dare surged to his feet and jammed his arms into his jacket, his abrupt movements startling his bevy of angel-serpents. They flew up and circled him, crying and -- C.C. could swear -- giggling, their iridescent wings a beautiful kaleidoscope of ever-changing, shifting colors.

C.C. opened the door and out they flew, staying in tight formation around Dare’s rushing figure. He brushed past C.C. with a muttered apology, long legs carrying him after the serpents, which were all heading toward the Landing cathedral in the midst of town.

“Hurry up, little brother. We have a wedding to crash!”

## Chapter Fourteen

Chastity sighed deeply. Listening to her young cousins chattering about her wedding did nothing to raise her spirits.

“Be still. I only have a little more to do.” Alicia spoke around a mouthful of pins. Stoically holding her pose while Alicia fidgeted and twitched and pinned her gown in to place for what felt like the tenth time, Chassy sighed again.

“All done. Now, step out of the dress. The seamstress needs to take it up one last time.” Getting up off her knees, Alicia dusted the non-existent dust from her shins. “Thank goodness the wedding is today. You’ve lost so much weight, we’ve had to take your dress in five times.”

*I haven’t lost enough weight to suit me. I want to fade right away and become nothingness.*

“I wish my father were here.” *So I can strangle him for making me do this.*

“Oh, honey, I know!” Ali threw her arms around her, gave her a loving squeeze. “But soon you’ll have someone of your very own. Someone to keep you company and --”



Chassy stared at Ali as if she had two heads. "Are you totally insane, Ali? The earl of Chesley is the biggest womanizer since Landing. The man's a sleaze, a dog -- my apologies to dogs everywhere -- and a total reprobate. How could you possibly imagine I'd be happy with him?"

Ali swallowed. "B-because you asked father to arrange a contract of marriage with him...?"

"*Arrgh!*" Chassy reached toward her hair, seriously contemplating yanking the unruly mass out by the roots.

"Don't do that!" Ali screeched, running forward and grabbing her cousin's hands. "The hairdresser took two hours creating this masterpiece. Don't you *dare* make a mess... Oh!" She slapped palm over her mouth. "I said the 'D' word. I'm so sorry."

Chastity tapped her cousin's forehead. "I know you have a brain in there, Ali; I've heard it rotating."

"How can you be so mean on your wedding day?"

"Oh, this is the day to be mean, trust me."

One of the cousins stuck their head around the door. "The bridegroom has arrived. Everyone get ready."

The seamstress returned with her modified dress and helped her slip it carefully over the hairdresser's masterpiece.

Shrieking and laughing, the girls scrambled to get ready. Grabbing up their bouquets and slipping on their shoes, they lined up in order.

Chassy couldn't help smiling. In their gowns colored all rainbow shades, her little cousins looked like a bunch of willowy flowers. The one good thing this mock marriage had done was bring all her family together. It had been eons since she'd seen most of the people that had gathered under one roof to wish her happy.

The duchess of Pettibone sailed through the door, cutting a swath through the spectators and participants with equal disdain. "Everybody out, please; I need to speak to the bride."

Alicia bristled. "I'm the matron of honor. Why do I have to leave?"

"Because you *are* the matron, dear, while she is an unmarried woman without a mother. I am here to deliver the requisite prenuptial speech. Now shoo!"

Once the room emptied, she turned to Chassy with her usual calm smile. Lowering her voice, she whispered, "Your father is secreted off the main sanctuary. We've wired the small office so he can monitor everything. I have to get back out to my husband now." She started for the door.

"Hey!"

She looked back. "Yes, dear?"

"What about my talk?"

The grandmotherly duchess chuckled. "My dear Chastity, you have been Darian Acer's lover. I should be asking *you* for advice. You could probably teach me a thing or three." She winked as she stepped through the door and closed it gently behind her.

Chassy took a deep breath. Time to get this show on the road...

\* \* \* \* \*

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of friends and loved ones to unite these two people in holy matrimony...”

Chastity glanced through the hazy gauze of her veil at the tall man standing beside her -- Dare's father, and C.C.'s. *He looks like them... or should I say, they look like him? Dammit, why can't everyone see how much he resembles C.C.?*

The width of shoulder and length of leg, all three men shared between them. The differences were in their coloring. C.C. had to take after his mother, his blond, blue-eyed handsomeness a far cry from his half-brother. While Dare probably hated that he looked so much like the father who'd thrown him away.

She snuck another sideways glance at the man towering over her and saw the strong line of jaw was the same as his son's. So were the liquid black eyes, shadowed with long, thick lashes. Shoulders and chest and thighs, all found their echoes in the beloved flesh she'd recently stroked and measured. A fleeting question regarding similarity in length elsewhere crossed her mind, and she grimaced and shooed it away. She didn't care beans about the earl's hidden assets. She was a one-man woman.

She wished the murderer would hurry and show up. This ceremony was getting frighteningly close to becoming real.

“If there be anyone here who knows just cause why this marriage should not go forward, let them speak now or forever hold their peace!”

“I know!”

“I know!”

The crowd gasped in one voice as the words rang out from opposite sides of the church in synchronization.

Chastity whipped about, searching for a glimpse of those who'd shouted their opposition. That had not been her father's voice, but she could have sworn one of the voices had been female.

The priest's stentorian tones rang out. “Come forward and state your objection before God and this assembly.”

Darian stepped from behind a pillar and made his way toward the front of the church. C.C. followed close behind. “I claim the woman by dual right of possession and declaration. She belongs to me.”

Chastity stopped breathing.

He looked magnificent. His hair wasn't combed, and his clothes were wrinkled and...not up to his usual sartorial elegance, but the expression in his eyes as he approached lit her heart until it flamed like a miniature sun.

“No! I'll not lose another son to an unworthy female. I'll see her dead, first!”

A shot rang out, the sound deafening and echoing in the vaulted chamber. A hard push from the side sent Chastity hurling down the stairs, out of the path of the projectile.

*Screams.*

*Shouts.*

*Pandemonium.*

Strong hands lifted her off the floor. “Chastity, darling, are you okay?” Those beloved hands ran over her shoulders and arms, traced her torso, checking for injuries.

Dare.

Laughing and crying, she went into his arms, everything and everyone around her fading into insignificance measured against the joy of having the only man she'd ever loved at her side. "Oh, Dare, oh, darling, I'm fine now that you're here." She looked around. "What's happening?"

Darian's slips tightened. He drew her tighter against his shoulder. "Apparently, my mother is still alive, but perhaps not for long. She just tried to kill you."

Chassy stiffened. "What? Where's my father?"

It was his turn to stiffen. "Chassy, don't you remember? Your father is dead."

She avoided his concerned eyes. "Yeah, well... he's about as dead as your mom is." She cringed at his stony expression. "I can explain..."

He nodded, lips folded in a disapproving line. "Later. Right now, I need to check on my father. He took the shot meant for you when he pushed you out of the way."

"Oh, my goodness," she gasped. "Is he all right? Does this mean I can't hate him any longer?"

That surprised a smile out of him. "I think he'll be fine. He's still worthy of hate. It didn't look too serious. Probably just a flesh wound. Come on." He took her hand and pulled her after him.

She held back. "Wait. I want to ask the priest something."

She walked over to the prelate and tugged his sleeve. He bent to her, listening with a growing expression of shock and doubt. When she finished, he laughed aloud and nodded. "Well, why not, milady? Stranger things have happened in this church."

## Epilogue

"I am glad your father reinstated you to your title and inheritance, but so sorry about your mother." Chassy snuggled up beside her new husband and slipped her hand into his. He squeezed her fingers, feeling a mix of emotions hard to put a name to.

"Thank you, darling. She was truly insane. I never dreamed she'd try to kill you again. When she came at us, the serpens thought she was attacking me. At least it was quick, if painful. Being struck by so many angel-serpens -- the venom acted blindingly fast."

"She wasn't really to blame for her actions. Our father drove her out of her mind with all his infidelities." C.C. lounged on the couch opposite them, sipping brandy and recovering from the wild events of the day.

"At least he wasn't to blame for our brother's fiancée's death. According to what Mom confessed, he was blind drunk when Eschell crawled into his bed, and he never knew he'd slept with her. Her mistake was bragging to Mom about the pregnancy. When Daniel discovered Mom after she'd drowned Eschell, she begged him not to turn her over to the authorities. You remember how he was?" he asked C.C., sorrow threatening to crush him as he recalled the brother he'd worshiped while growing up under his shadow.

"I remember. Straight as an arrow, but lamentably narrow in thought."

That gave Dare pause. "That's a pretty dead-on evaluation. Anyway, the only alternative for him was to

end his own life. And she killed her maid in order to fake her death in that chamber fire. She disappeared and started a new life away from father and her guilt over Daniel's suicide. Strange," he mused almost to himself, "she killed several people and suffered no remorse. Daniel kills himself and she can't live with that. I wonder if she ever loved me."

Chassy leaned up and kissed him, peppering soft kisses all over his face. "I love you. That's all that matters."

Everyone was quiet for a while. After a few more sips, Chassy broke the silence. "I didn't catch how your father came into this, Chassy."

She turned her face toward him but didn't lift her head from Dare's shoulder. "Simple. Father caught sight of Dare's mother in New India and recognized her. He and the earl had been drinking buddies. He told me she hated him almost as much as she did her husband. She blamed Dad for some of your father's excesses. Thinking he would contact your father and tell him her whereabouts, she came to our plantation and tried to kill him." She shrugged. "We decided I'd come to New Britain and pretend she'd succeeded, to give Father a chance to recuperate. The day I visited the duchess of Pettibone was the day he revealed this plot to flush out your mother. She was such a stickler for upholding appearances, he figured she wouldn't, couldn't, allow your father to remarry as long as she lived."

"I didn't find out until you did that the duchess was her half-sister and your aunt. Your mother refused to recognize her. Their relationship was nothing like you two have. Father had made her a promise long ago never to reveal her relationship. The duke of Pettibone never knew she was not her father's true daughter."

Chastity looked up, and Dare saw her beautiful brown eyes swimming with tears. "It almost killed me to hurt you like I did. I told Father if I lost you, the murderer might as well have shot me, too, for I would be dead inside."

"You can't lose me."

"Unless he's buried in angel-serpents." C.C. chortled. He pointed over to the mantle where two serpents reclined, their wings furled along their backs, drowsing in the heat of the fireplace.

"I think you taught them about windows, C.C." Dare's accusation made Chassy smile. "When we came home, we found all the windows ajar and over twenty serpents checking out the house. I'm worried over what you've started."

"Then my work here is done!" With a laugh, C.C. jumped to his feet and placed his empty glass on the tea table. He touched Dare's shoulder in a fleeting brotherly caress and leaned over him to kiss Chassy on the mouth.

"Hey, none of that, young buck!"

He chuckled at Dare's not-so-fake grimace. "Relax, bro. I'm just kissing the bride... and my new sister." He opened the door. "I imagine I won't see you again until you two lovebirds decide to emerge from your nest."

Before he could close the door, a serpent zipped out the narrow opening and fluttered above his head, chittering madly. Eyes widening, C.C. tentatively raised his arm, offering the angel-serpent a perch. Moisture added a luster to the blueness of his eyes when the dainty creature settled carefully on her new friend.

"Did you see that?" he asked, his voice hushed with awe.

The serpents on the mantle giggled and trilled, their amusement so obvious, Dare wondered how he had missed seeing their high level of intelligence for so long.

“C.C.”

“Yeah?”

“Congratulations. Now get out. I have to relieve my wife of her virginity, and you are cramping my style.”

“But...”

His little lady serpent grabbed his earlobe between her two tiny forefeet and tugged just as Chastity reared up and threw a couch pillow at him. It missed him by an inch.

With a resigned sigh, Darian untangled his limbs and climbed to his feet. Stalking over to the still open door, he pushed his brother through, whispering, “C.C., I can’t name what I can’t make.”

“Huh? Oh...*oh!* Okay.” Dare shook his head as his sibling finally caught on. For a rakehell, C.C. was awfully slow sometimes. “‘Crofton,’ remember, not ‘Chezann’!”

Latching the door, Dare leaned back, placed his hands behind him, and smiled at his wife. “You know, it occurs to me that C.C. needs to settle down.”

“You men are all alike. Once you get married, you can’t stand for your friends or brothers to remain single.” Chassy sat up and tossed off her gown, baring her lush breasts to his interested gaze. “Enough about C.C. Come fuck me!”

Dare sauntered over to the love of his life, hiding a grin. “Oh, I don’t think he’s ready for marriage. I was thinking along the lines of him finding a good woman willing to offer him *carte blanche!*”