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## SURRENDER THE NIGHT

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To Jason and Devon Jeske, my own two little heroes, with love.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

—The Holy Bible, PSALMS 30:5



SURRENDER  
THE NIGHT

## Part One

‘When lovely woman stoops to folly.

And finds too late that men betray. What charm can soothe her melancholy? What art can wash her guilt away?’ —OLIVER GOLDSMITH, “An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog”

## Chapter One

AWARENESS RETURNED SLOWLY to Katrina Lawson. Blackness. Constriction. Suffocation. It seemed a bottomless well had swallowed her, or ... a coffin. The burring in her ears quieted until she heard sounds other than her own heartbeat. Voices. Dripping water. Her gusting breaths slowed. She was not alone, entombed alive as in her nightmares.

Relief was short-lived as she realized two things: why she couldn't move, and who had brought her here. Oh God, now she knew why the tea he'd insisted on fixing her had tasted bitter. Katrina strained at her bonds. To be trapped, used and discarded like a soiled handkerchief ... She'd fought too hard, suffered too much to keep her self-respect. When her struggles tightened the silken cords, she went still and listened.

"My offering is a worthy vessel, quality in face and form, though not in birth. I shall display her to you all very shortly. You've never seen hair so gold, or eyes so blue," Viscount Sutterfield bragged.

The past three lonely years had taught her to depend upon no one but herself. After her father's death she'd gone in and quickly out of a succession of households, her dismissal each time owing more to her looks than her ability. That she neither sought nor wanted masculine attention didn't signify to the worried mothers and wives. They sent her on with lackluster recommendations, forcing her to accept work where she found it, no matter the dispositions of the males in the households.

Exactly so had she met Sutterfield. The son of her last employer, he'd lulled her, at first, with friendly smiles. She'd hoped that finally she wouldn't have to bolt her door at night and avoid dark corridors—until he accosted her one day in the salon, proving he was like the rest. His prudish mother happened upon their embrace. She believed her son's tale of Katrina's flirtation and dismissed Katrina without a character. Katrina had subsisted on her meager savings until, a few weeks ago, she'd finally found an old harridan so disliked that she'd been desperate for a companion. She'd hired Katrina despite her lack of references.

Now it seemed all her struggles had been for naught. If Sutterfield had been describing her a minute

ago, she could think of only one reason for his fulsomeness. She owed her uncertain existence the past few years to men such as Sutterfield. If only....

Her thoughts shied away from the first and only enjoyable position she'd lost because of a man. She'd sent him away, and part of her had regretted it ever after. But rake though he was, even he had not stooped to kidnapping.

After Sutterfield explicitly extolled her beauty, other men gave raucous calls of "Let's see the ware!" and "By Jove, take that dashed hood off!"

"All in good time, gentlemen, in the proper place during the ceremony," Sutterfield replied.

Katrina stiffened with dread at the word *ceremony*. All Londoners knew of the existence of the respectable clubs, like the Dilettanti, who shared a love for travel. But clubs devoted to debauchery, like the old Hellfire Club, had no purpose in a modern society, she'd believed. Thus she'd dismissed the recent newspaper accounts of a new club that had arisen devoted to the "worship of feminine pulchritude," as the *Times* had coyly put it. The article had then gone on to hint of the vile ceremonies performed there and the use of innocent girls by men masked as mythological figures. Several members of the lords were rumored to be involved in this club, which the *Times* named as the Grotto of the Satyr Society. After reading the article, she'd thrown the paper down in disgust, not believing the *Times* would devote space to such drivel.

Now she wished she'd paid more heed. Her panicked thoughts settled to hard fury. Virtue had bought her misery perhaps, but at her choice. She'd not lose it now to a worm like Sutterfield while she had breath to fight. Hooded, cloaked, and bound though she might be, she was not helpless. Men didn't expect a beautiful woman to be clever; they'd soon learn otherwise. Sutterfield first. Swallowing her revulsion, she quietened her chaotic thoughts to listen. She'd need all her wits to escape.

"Lord Pan, I salute you! May this vestal offering make me worthy to join your revelry."

Katrina heard the rustle of clothing and deduced that Sutterfield had knelt before someone.

"Is the grotto sealed?" asked a voice Katrina didn't recognize.

"Like a locked door that awaits only thy great key, O mighty Pan, to open for the pleasure of us all."

“Display thy offering,” Pan ordered.

Soft footsteps approached. Katrina had been propositioned and importuned too many times in the past years, sometimes obscenely, for the meaning of the exchange to escape her. She began to shake, fear and fury battling within her.

Hands fumbled at her waist, untying the cords holding her to the wooden bench. She was hauled to her feet, where she swayed, her hands bound behind her, her ankles tied together. The hands then went to her hood, loosed it, and ripped it off.

Cool air and blinding light assailed her at the same time. She savored both, breathing deeply and blinking, uncaring of the male gasps of pleasure. Moisture still glimmered in her large, slightly slanted eyes. The blazing chandelier illuminated the unusual peacock-blue color ornamented by thick, dark, and curling lashes.

If the eyes were the windows of the soul, Katrina’s soul was both pure and courageous. Diminutive she might be, but she stood straight, her chin high, her gaze clear and steady as she looked about. Her oval face was cameo perfect, her cheekbones high and delicate, her nose small and finely modeled. Her complexion was smooth and pale as Devonshire cream, tinted with strawberries at cheeks and lips. She would have had the face of an angel, but for that mouth. Wide, full, sensual, it both reassured and aroused the men, proving she was not only real, but all too human. She was an unschooled but promising temptress, strong yet weak, selfish yet magnanimous, wise yet reckless.

One last quality, blatant and untempered, was conveyed by that mouth: determination. Though she trembled, her mouth stayed unwavering, willful. It sat atop her pointed, obstinate chin like an unconquered peak, taunting every man present to seize it and claim it for his own. Her thick hair, loosening from its prim bun, capped her astonishing beauty like a heavy golden crown. It shimmered with highlights, brown, red, and every shade of gold devised by artist or Creator.

Escape her only imperative, Katrina ignored the hungry stares and looked about. Her heart pounded harder. She was in a cavernous, stone-lined room evidently close to the Thames, for water dripped down the walls. The stench of the polluted river was not disguised by the incense issuing obscenely from the

satyr figurine burners behind the stage. The oval-shaped room had been painted to simulate a grotto. Romantic it was not, however. Every boulder, every cave formation, from stalactite piercing down to meet stalagmite thrusting up, was painted to resemble two human forms in the act of copulation. Naked statues of cavorting gods and goddesses were strategically placed and lit, making the room seem a favorite trysting place for the gods.

Which was exactly what it was for these men who thought themselves divine. She glanced at the score of seated men masked as mythological figures and night creatures. The feel of their eyes made her skin crawl, and she looked quickly away. Her cheeks burning with contempt and embarrassment, she skimmed the room again, but could see no exit. She forced her attention back to the brightly illuminated, red-carpeted platform, to the two men proceeding with this mockery of a religious ceremony.

“She is doubtless not as young as some of your offerings, but have you ever had a fairer one?” Sutterfield asked, preening.

‘Not of face, perhaps. But there is more to a woman. . . .’ Pan’s words seeped into the ambience, foul and insidious as the dripping water.

Katrina knew what would happen as Sutterfield reached out. She stayed still and submissive until he came close enough. When he reached around to unfasten her hands, she swooped down and latched onto his wrist like a rabid dog, putting all her fear and hatred into the bite. Despite his howling and struggling she didn’t let go until he boxed her ears with his free hand. When he backed off a step and tied his handkerchief about his bleeding wrist, she spat the residue of his blood into his face, then wiped her lips off on her shoulder.

Appreciative chuckles rippled through the audience.

Their humor fanned her ire. She turned her scornful gaze from Sutterfield’s furious face to the membership. “So, my fine lords, your estates, your mistresses, your horses, your cards, and your drinking are not sufficient amusement. You must needs make sport of those less fortunate than yourselves who wish only to be left alone—”

“Silence!” Pan roared. “The unholy ceremony is to be interrupted by no one!”

The watching men leaned forward in their chairs like leashed hounds straining after a bitch in heat. Her spirit, far from shaming them, seemed to have whetted their interest. She looked back at Pan, who was eyeing her sternly from his seat on the great red throne capped with goat horns. Very well, these men truly lacked human decency. But one characteristic they had in surplus: pride. That, surely, would be easy to wound. Wound it enough, and they might even let her go.

She tailored her snide smile after every lady who'd ever snubbed her. "Not even if it's based on a lie?" she asked softly. She felt Sutterfield's ominous stillness, for he knew that tone in her voice.

"Huh? What's that you say?" Pan demanded.

"This, er, novitiate"<sup>^</sup>—she looked Sutterfield up and down—"is perpetrating a falsehood upon you all by foisting me off as a virgin." Deliberately she paused, letting the suspense build, before concluding casually, "I've been his mistress for the past quarter and more." She looked down to hide her satisfaction at the angry rumblings of the membership.

Sutterfield sputtered, "But ... but that's not true! I offered her my protection, but she refused."

How she hated that word. It conjured up memories of the first man who'd made a mockery of its definition when he offered it to her. The thought bolstered her determination. "Toby, why didn't you give me my conge instead of ending our . . . association in such a way? Wasn't what we shared worth more than this?"

His wide brow gleaming with sweat, Sutterfield looked at Pan, who was conferring with his attendant, a man in a homed-owl mask. "I tell you she's lying to save herself." He advanced on Katrina, menace in every step. "Tell them the truth, you bitch, how you tormented me with your flirtatious glances, then froze me with your scorn when I took the bait."

The unfairness of the accusation stung her. A fool she might have been to accept his offer of friendship, but how dare he fault her for her human need of it? She put all her acting ability into her whine. "The truth, my lord? Such as your niggardly gifts of garnets instead of rubies, muslin instead of silk?"

Pan waved Sutterfield into silence as he began to interrupt. "If this is true, then you've seriously

breached our rules.” Katrina kept her eyes lowered, but her heart thrummed with hope.

“She lies, I tell you. . . .” Sutterfield’s voice trailed off. He turned on Katrina too quickly for her to react. Her wrists were free, her cloak untied and wrenched off before she could do more than flinch. Too late she lifted her tingling hands to scratch him, but the movement unbalanced her. She fell into his ready arms.

Chortling his triumph, he set her upright and held her struggling wrists behind her back, turning her to face the audience. Katrina looked down at herself, her gasp mingling with a score of masculine ones.

From somewhere came a muffled curse, but Katrina was too mortified to care.

Nor did she see, far back in the audience, a man surging to his feet, only to be jerked back down into his chair by the member in a Neptune mask sitting next to him. “Be quiet,” Neptune hissed to him. “If you interrupt the ceremony, you’ll be evicted.”

Katrina didn’t hear. She was too busy trying to free her arms to cover herself, but the viscount was far stronger. Katrina swallowed bile at the knowledge that he must have dressed her so while she was drugged. She closed her eyes and went still, hatred and fear building apace within her.

“Do you still not want her?” the viscount demanded. He unpinned her hair with his free hand and brushed through the glittering strands, bringing them forward and back so that they shielded then revealed the full bosom almost bared by the scandalous bodice.

Sutterfield’s voice grew husky with lust. “Even if she tells the truth, isn’t she worthy to be your consort, for one night, at least?”

The silence was broken only by heavy breathing as she was coveted by the score of rakes who’d thought themselves too jaded to be stunned by a female. Beautiful women were commonplace in England, especially in London, where many a comely country lass had come to make her fortune. But not a single member, even the wealthy ones who’d had a parade of mistresses, had seen a woman so rare. It was unusual indeed to behold a face so exquisite; it was unheard of for that face to be matched by a body Venus herself might have envied.

The blush-pink, tissue-silk night rail fell in sheer folds to the floor from the high, gathered waist. Her

long, perfect legs were plainly visible. Her hips were full but not wide, setting off the glories of her tiny waist and flat, smooth abdomen. And those breasts ... A universal sigh of longing whispered through the room. The fact that the tips of her breasts escaped their eyes, as did the apex of her legs, only whetted their appetites. Panels of pink velvet had been strategically inset for just that purpose.

The viscount smiled at their reaction.

After an anticipatory silence Pan came slowly to his feet. He turned to the membership. "Shall we put it to a vote?" he asked throatily. "Shall we this once bend our most sacred rule?"

"Aye!" came the reply. The echo bounced from ceiling to floor and back again.

Only one man didn't answer. He clutched the arms of his chair so hard his nails scored the velvet. Then his hands relaxed, as if he forced himself to patience.

While the men stared, savored, and salivated, Katrina kept her eyes closed. She trembled, even the sharp pangs of fear dulled by immobilizing despair. She was so tired of fighting. What had it won her? Scorn, contempt, and ridicule. Meaner employment every time she was released from a position.

The loss of the only man she could have loved ... How much better if she had succumbed to his dark fascination and known the joys of the flesh, however brief, than the pain and humiliation this night would surely bring. She blanked out all thought of Devon. After tonight she'd be fit for no man. Let them use her as they willed. They could chain her body but not her spirit. In the end she would be free, even if she had to fling herself into the Thames.

"Your offering is accepted," Pan said to Sutterfield. He gestured to the homed owl. "Take the unholy scroll to the novitiate." Pan retook his throne and fingered the flute he'd left on the chair arm.

The homed owl went to a long, ornate table that had huge silver bowls of fruit and heavy crystal wine decanters on both ends. In the middle a gilded cylinder was displayed like a holy book on a red, fringed velvet pedestal.

As the man brought the cylinder to Sutterfield Katrina could see its engravings. The realistic renderings of female and male genitalia made her blush, then pale. Both the owl and Sutterfield caressed the cylinder, eyeing her all the while. She didn't need to look at the membership to know their eyes

glittered with the same lust.

The owl withdrew an inscribed roll of parchment from the cylinder and handed it to the viscount with a ceremonious bow. Sutterfield kissed the parchment as bade, then read: “Venus, I am thine! Receive me with thy bountiful charms and crown my wishes with excess of pleasure. No more shall virtue reign. I, by thy amorous self do swear, will abandon all that is chaste. Nothing shall share my favor while in thy presence but my most libidinous desires. I further swear I shall keep silent about this night’s proceedings and shall not admit knowledge of this society to aught but another member.”

“Hail, Brother,” the others intoned. The owl returned the parchment to its cylinder. With a last leer at Katrina he retreated.

She watched dully as Pan rose with slow majesty. He strolled toward her, his features masked, his eyes alive with intent. Katrina tried to back away, but her bound feet made her awkward, and she would have fallen if Sutterfield hadn’t steadied her. She was too numb with fear even to flinch when his hand dropped from her shoulder to her breast.

Pan frowned. “By the rights vested in me this night as Pan, no member touches her until I’ve had my fill.”

Sutterfield’s mouth tightened, but he nodded and backed off, seating himself in the chair the homed owl indicated on the corner of the stage.

“You shall be second, in accordance with our laws,” Pan assured him, then he closed the last step that separated him from his prey. He was reaching for the bodice of Katrina’s gown when an authoritative voice spoke from the rear of the dimly lit audience.

“Hold, Pan!”

Pan turned slowly, stiff with outrage.

A tall man wearing a unicorn mask with a gilded horn issuing from the forehead brushed aside Neptune’s cautionary arm and strode down the aisle. Neptune adjusted his mask and shifted under the members’ disapproving stares.

“This is his first visit, dash it. He has the right to interrupt.”

If the unicorn sensed the disapproval emanating from every quarter, he gave no sign. He stopped at the foot of the stage and looked up at Katrina. One white hand clenched into a fist, then slowly relaxed.

The murmurs of the membership roused Katrina from her apathy. She saw a man hovering at the stage steps who was severely but finely garbed in black brocade coat, black knee breeches, and black-and-gold waistcoat. His mask was realistic, and she wished with all her heart that he really were a unicorn, that symbol of purity, protector of virgins. Why had he interrupted?

“As your laws have been stated to me, each potential member has the right of challenge upon the completion of the ceremony. Is this correct?”

At the sound of that deep voice Katrina froze in recognition. Could it be? She stared at the arrogant tilt of the head, the finely shaped hands, and somehow, she knew. The heart she’d thought dead lurched within her breast. Feelings she’d not known in three years rushed through her, strengthening her crumpling spine. Gladness, hurt, confusion, yearning. And, briefly, hope. If anyone could deliver her from this conclave of rakes, surely it was he, king of the rakes. But . . . Why was he here? His very presence, “potential” member or not, made her worry.

And yet . . . How she’d longed to see him again. Now, when her very life was in danger, she could almost believe her despair had conjured him. Even masked, he aroused all the old unseemly yearnings. Those exciting, distressing months three years past flashed through her chaotic thoughts. She latched onto their welcome respite. The stage dissolved beneath her feet and became grass wet with dew. The heavy incense became roses heady with spring. And the dim chamber became the Kentish countryside, rolling like a carpet flung far and wide to welcome the sunny arrival of God. . . .

The early mornings were cherished moments in her busy role as governess to two unruly but lovable little boys. Her charges rose late, and these contemplative times fortified her for the busy days. The pain of her father’s death a few short months ago had dulled to an ache. These walks in the rose arbor made her feel close to him. How he had loved roses. Katrina paused to pluck a yellow bloom, its petals partially unfurled, but the secret heart of the flower untouched by sun or dew. She inhaled its pure scent.

A deep voice made her start. "What a charming picture. It makes me want to take brush to canvas, but I could never capture the proper hue of that glorious hair."

Katrina went beet red and brushed ineffectually at her unbound hair. She usually completed her toilette only after her walk. Today was the first time she'd had cause to regret her daring. Slowly she turned to meet the admiring gaze of the tall man who stood just within the gate. She sucked in a stunned breath. She'd seldom been susceptible to male handsomeness, but never had she met a man such as he. . .

Glorious. His face and form were glorious. He was dressed in riding breeches that clung to long, lithe thighs, and his thin shirt stuck to the perfect symmetry of his broad chest. But it was his face that riveted her.

Every feature seemed one part of a harmonious whole. His eyes were brandy brown and flecked with gold that sparkled now in the sunshine. His black brows and lashes were a pleasing contrast to his eyes and golden skin. His hair, unpowdered and tied neatly back at his nape, was also a surprise: it was dark gold, streaked with bands of primrose silk. The mobility of that full, sensitive mouth attested to his frequent, ready smile. Deep creases curved on each side, moving like wind gauges, she suspected, with his mood. They were in evidence now, and she knew he sensed her fascination with him.

She mastered her composure, looked down at the rose in her hand, and walked slowly toward him. However, when she reached the gate, he didn't move aside.

"Stay. Tell me your name." He didn't touch her, but the soft, sensual timbre of his voice wrapped about her like silk.

"Katrina," she whispered. She tried to step around him, but he sidestepped neatly.

She looked up at that. The breeze lifted a heavy curl of hair and flicked him in the mouth. He caught the tendril and tugged gently, bringing her closer until her skirts brushed his breeches.

"My name is Devon. I came to see about purchasing a horse. I intended to leave this morning, but perhaps I'll stay a bit longer."

Gently Katrina pulled her hair away and stepped back. He'd not introduced himself fully, but somehow she knew he was a lord. That nose set upon him too regally, and his air of confidence was too

assured for him to be less than a nobleman. “My lord, I am only the governess here, and this conversation is most improper. I doubt we shall meet again.”

Resolutely she flung the rose away. To her surprise he caught it neatly and brought it to his lips. He brushed the petals back and forth, holding her eyes all the while. Her mouth tingled, and she felt as if she’d been kissed. Making a strangled sound, she brushed past him.

Her ears burned with his promise, ‘ ‘We shall meet again, my lovely. Soon.’ ’

And they had. That very evening Katrina was invited to dinner for only the second time since she’d been employed. She accepted with some foreboding. She’d not been surprised to find seated across from her the man the other servants had, that afternoon, referred to as the Earl of Brookstone.

Katrina looked at the fawning expressions on the faces of her host and hostess. She knew the earl had not had to use much persuasion to get her employers to invite their governess for dinner. They were agog over their good fortune in having an earl sit at their table. He’d not find her so amenable, she resolved. So she answered his conversational gambits with monosyllables. She escaped as soon as possible, but she was to find that her distance only made him work the harder to bridge it.

He soon became a fixture in the house. The boys even took to calling him uncle. No matter how firmly she tried to put him in his place, or how desperately she tried to avoid him, he always popped up, as cheerful and charming as the jack-in-the-box she’d adored as a child. He sent her posies, he asked her opinion on the current affairs of state. Rarely had she met a man who enjoyed a woman’s brain, yet he seemed genuinely interested in her responses. They had more than one invigorating political discussion.

Even her employers began to look indulgently upon his time with her. After two weeks, when he was at their house more than at his lodgings at the village inn, they invited him to stay, giving Katrina meaningful looks as they did so. Katrina knew their thoughts. What a sensation it would cause if their governess should make the catch of the year. They were simple country gentry who’d seldom been beyond Kent’s borders, and they hoped so perfect a gentleman would make their educated, innocent governess a proper offer. Katrina suspected otherwise, but her fears didn’t bolster her defenses, which grew weaker under the barrage of Devon’s smiles.

He moved into a guest chamber, “to enjoy rustivating after the hectic pace of town,” as he put it. He went on rambles with her and the boys, acting as both protector and tutor. He helped her teach the boys to fish; he escorted them on long, invigorating rides about the countryside.

Almost six weeks after their first meeting he took her and the boys on a picnic. After eating, the boys went to the stream to skip stones while Devon stayed behind to help her pack the remains of their hearty fare. All was put away when silence ensued. Katrina started as Devon lay back on the blanket and pillowed his arms under his head.

“Do you ever make pictures in the clouds?” he asked lazily. She glanced up. Puffy white clouds drifted overhead like enormous cotton wads. She pointed at one. “That one looks like a frog squatting on a lily pad.”

“Ribbet . . . ribbet . . .” Devon croaked. A frog lazing under a tree nearby gave a startled leap, catching their attention. Katrina could have sworn the look in his bulging eyes was offended as he hopped majestically off, croaking in a firm way, as if to show them how the thing should really be done.

Devon’s deep, rich chuckles joined her musical laugh. When he laced his fingers with hers, it seemed natural to lie down beside him. She followed his pointing finger.

“There. A unicorn. See it leaping over a hedge?”

She squinted, then nodded. “How often did I dream of them, as a child.” How happy she’d been, serving her father’s parish. How hastily had she been evicted from the parsonage by the new vicar . . .

Devon propped himself on an elbow to look down into her misty eyes. “And do you dream no longer?”

Wordlessly, she shook her head, moved by the tenderness in his gaze.

“What a shame. Did you know the unicorn is the protector of virgins?” His tone went even softer. “How easily can I see you, hair streaming down your back, fairy wings beating behind you as you ride away to your hidden kingdom. Let me take you there.”

How she longed to believe his fervency, but she did not dare. With an effort she reminded herself of the difference in their births. She was not so naive as her employers; if this lord had an offer to make her,

it would not be a proper one.

Even so, she thrilled to his touch when he brushed her thick hair away from her brow. “I can make you happy again, Katrina mina. You’d never know need, nor want, nor loneliness in the kingdom we’d make together.”

Wide blue eyes stared into darkening brown ones. His endearment drifted away on the breeze, but the power of it had already lodged in her heart. Katrina shifted, not quite able to move away from the soothing pleasure of that hand. Oh, to be loved again. But no matter how heady his touch, she suspected what he felt had little to do with love.

The morals that were her bedrock stayed firm. “There is no such place on this earth,” Katrina responded quietly. “Nor has been, nor will be, since God evicted us from Eden.”

“How do you know? Come, let me show you that a little bit of Eden can be with us always. . . .” He finished the last word against her mouth. Maidens dreamed of such a first kiss. His mouth was gentle, soft, and sweet. Entreating rather than demanding. Hinting at what joy his warm hands and hard body could offer, if only she would accept. Every tender slide and silken caress made her yearn for fuller knowledge. When he deepened the kiss, she arched beneath him and ran her hands through his hair, loosening it from the queue. It fell, thick and soft as her own, about his shoulders.

She felt his heartbeat accelerate to a drumlike cadence that echoed somewhere deep and empty within her. He broke the kiss only to slide a fiery trail down her neck to the soft hollow of her throat.

“Ah, Katrina mina, come with me, let me cherish you as you deserve. Horses, servants, a house, jewels, whatever you desire. I’ve never wanted a woman so.”

His words ripped through her sensual haze. She pushed him away and sat up, brushing her own loose hair back over her shoulders with a shaking hand. “You know my background. My father was a vicar. I’d not dishonor him, much less myself, so.” She tried to rise, but he caught her wrist and pulled her back down.

‘It dishonors you to be offered a more secure, easier way of life?’

“Secure? For how long? A month? Maybe even only a week?”

He thumbed the throbbing vein in her wrist until she wrenched away. “You do yourself a disservice. I’d want you much longer than that. You’re different to any woman I’ve known.” He cocked his head as he studied her, and had it been any other man, she might have believed the bewildered uncertainty in his gaze, as if he didn’t understand her power over him. “And even at the end I’d see you were cared for—”

“Like an old dog. No, thank you.” She laughed harshly and rose, calling for the children. They spoke little on the ride back, and the brooding look about his mouth made her glad to escape upstairs to her room. She pleaded a headache that night at dinner, but a servant knocked soon after and told her she was requested below. She considered refusing, but then she straightened. This would be the last time she’d have to face him, she sensed. She’d do so with all the courage of the convictions she knew were right. She marched downstairs.

Devon was in the study, nursing a glass of port. He straightened from staring out the window at the sunset and turned to look at her. He tossed back the dregs of his wine and snapped the glass decisively down on a table. The servant discreetly closed the door, leaving Katrina alone to face the greatest temptation of her life. Conviction suddenly seemed a poor substitute for the passion she was rejecting.

He seated her courteously on the settee, then sat beside her and took her hand. “Would it do me any good to go on my knees?”

“What do you mean?” she whispered, her heart leaping with hope.

He looked puzzled, then uncomfortable. “I regret any . . . misunderstanding. I plead for your favors, but I want you to know I would keep you safe and cherish you under any circumstances.”

Her heart settled back like a lump in her breast. Delicate as it was, the disclaimer was still an insult. “If I were of your world, you’d not offer me a slip on the shoulder.” He shifted his feet, but did not reply. She looked down at their twined hands and droned, “I know you don’t intend to insult me, but you do. My blood may not be blue, but I have just as much pride in my name as you do in yours.”

“Pride is a poor substitute for companionship. Take it from one who knows.” He lifted her chin to delve into the resolute depths of her eyes. “What happiness do you think you’ll find as an outcast, neither

servant nor family member?’ When she flinched, his tone gentled. “You deserve better, Katrina. Your strength of conviction only makes me admire you—and want you—more.”

He eased his arms about her waist and pulled her face against his waistcoat. “And you, my dear, want me. Come, kiss me. Deny then, truly, your longing to accept my offer, and I will bother you no more. You have my word, as the Earl of Brookstone.”

When he lifted her chin to lower his mouth over hers, Katrina didn’t turn aside. She owed herself this last memory. . . . But at the touch of his lips, she forgot to store up images for the lonely future and reveled in the present. This time his passion was bare, so raw that he quivered with it. He bent her back over his arm and urged her mouth open. She was shocked at the sudden hot probe of his tongue, but the deep exploration made her long to open every secret place for him. Somehow she knew she belonged with him. His lips fit so perfectly over hers, his chest shielded her from harm, his arms cradled her like a treasure beyond price.

For minutes on end he kissed her, his mouth and caressing hands proclaiming in the age-old way his yearning. There was a fine edge of desperation to the way he clutched her so tightly, as if more than lust drove him. In response her own muddled emotions surged beyond her control. What else mattered but this? She moaned under his kiss, then shyly answered the demanding thrusts of his tongue.

He broke away, his chest heaving like a bellows. “Oh God, Kat, tell me you don’t want me and condemn us both to perdition.”

Her eyes fluttered open and fixed on his flushed face. Her lips, tender from his passion, tried to form the words, but could not. She shook her head and buried her face in his shoulder, no longer able to control her tears.

He petted her back and shoulders, making soothing noises. “There, don’t cry. I’m not worth a single tear upon that lovely face. Shhh . . . I’ll torment you no more.”

When she hiccuped, he set her away and dried her tears with his kerchief. “So . . . you do want me. What are we to do about it?”

Wearily she leaned her head back against the settee. “Nothing. I’m not meant to be a kept woman,

Devon. If I thought I would be happy, I'd accept your offer. But my shame would eat away at me, until there was nothing left but regret. Is that what you want? Eventually I'd hate not just you, but myself."

He gritted his teeth, but shook his head.

Feeling as if every bone would crack, she forced herself to her feet. "Then there's nothing left but good-bye." She turned to leave, then whirled and flung herself into his arms for a last wild kiss. When he tightened his grip, she wriggled free and ran toward the door.

His harsh tone stopped her after three steps. "I'm letting you go, Katrina mina, not for my sake, but for yours. But . . ." He strode around her to meet her eyes. She had heard whispers about the exploits that had earned him the nickname Demon. She'd doubted their veracity, but the look in his eyes now made her wonder if she should have given them more credence.

"I may be the first to offer you protection, but make no mistake. I'll not be the last. Your beauty will tempt every man who meets you. If your resolve stays firm, then you will be safe in your ivory tower, your unicorn protecting your chastity." His tone hardened. "But know this: If you succumb to another after rejecting me, I will consider you fair game. Then, Katrina mina, one way or another, you will be mine."

Their eyes held for one last time. She read her own confused feelings in his: yearning, regret, desire, resolve. She nodded her understanding. "Good-bye, Devon."

"Good-bye, Katrina. Be happy." After a last long, encompassing look he was gone. Leaving her alone. She was glad, she told herself—but tears trickled down her face as she listened to his receding footsteps, then the gentle closing of the door.

Katrina blinked and found herself in a present that was even more distressing than the past.

Be happy . . . How very little of that she'd known after sending him away. Sometimes, in the quiet of her lonely heart, she'd regretted the choice; now, finding him here, she knew she'd been right. And to see him dressed as a unicorn when he was a menace to every comely female's virtue—he desecrated all the romantic dreams she'd woven about him.

The thought did not occur to her that he'd worn the mask to help her identify him, and to reassure her. That he'd come to save her, believing in her virtue. That the length of his strides attested to the anger that he felt at hearing, from her own lips, that she'd been another man's mistress, after refusing him.

Katrina's emotions were too muddled to allow for clear thought, but the shock of his presence had been cathartic. Fury bolstered her. How wrong she'd been about him. He was not here to help her; he was here to get at last the only thing he'd ever wanted of her. In any way he could, had he not warned her as much three years ago?

Watching him now as he strode up and down, arguing with Sutterfield about his understanding of their rules, she wondered why she'd not recognized him forthwith. She knew that fluid, arrogant stride; the walk of a man born to conquer. She knew that splendid physique; the build of a man who relished a fight.

"Enough! The right of challenge was plainly explained to me, and I exercise that right now. I usurp the role of Pan." Devon stood casually, one foot propped on the first step, one long, white hand caressing the wooden banister. The membership muttered resentfully, but quieted, one by one, as that glittering horn was turned toward them like a bared dagger.

Oh God, it was true ... he only wanted to be first. He'd not come here to save her, as she'd at first thought. Indeed, how could he have known she'd be here? She hated him, she told herself, yet her heart quickened when that horn was turned to her. Even behind the mask, the hungry sweep of his gaze made her breath catch. Three years dissolved into mist as she felt, full upon her lips, that last desperate, arousing kiss. She looked away. She'd not respond to him. Never again. Over and over she told herself she despised him. Aided by fury, she almost believed it.

Pan stiffened and glared at the unicorn. "If you know our laws so well, you know of my right of refusal." He swung about and raised his hands to touch Katrina's breasts.

In a single bound the unicorn leaped up the three steps. He drawled suggestively, "Then we shall settle our dispute as decreed by your laws."

Pan turned to face his challenger. Tense silence prevailed in the chamber. Only Katrina was close

enough to hear Pan's quickened breathing.

"I don't wish to fight with you—"

"Then step aside." No quarter, no compromise. His way, or none. The demand surprised no one, Katrina least of all. She looked back at Pan and knew that beneath his grotesque mask, he'd paled.

His fists clenched and unclenched as he looked from the unicorn to Katrina, then back. The unicorn's clothes enhanced rather than disguised his broad chest and muscular thighs. With a gnashing of his teeth. Pan swung about and marched back to his throne.

And Katrina was left alone in that brilliant pool of light with the only man she'd never been able to forget. The only man who'd tempted her to forgo the morals she lived by and revel with him in sin. Her eyes betrayed her ambivalence as she looked up at him, but then outrage won.

"You needn't bother with the mask, my lord. My nightmares have left me intimately acquainted with you." She bit her lip as she realized how her words could be construed.

He seemed taken aback at her hostility, then he said suavely, "I'm flattered I figure so prominently in your dreams, my dear Kat. It does my heart good to know that you remember me after such an age." He removed his heavy coat and pulled it over her shoulders to cover what he could, ignoring the protests of the membership. His movements were negligent, but his hands lingered possessively until she wrenched away. She wavered on her bound feet, but she managed to brush aside his steadying hand.

Angry at her contradictory feelings, Katrina refused to be mollified. "Heart, my lord?" she shot back. "You've a molten lump of coal in its stead."

Several gasps came from the audience. Devon Alexander Tyrone Cavanaugh, eighteenth Earl of Brookstone, paused in drawing off his mask. The watching rakes waited for his retribution, acerbically verbal if not physical, for Demon Devon was not known for his temperance. Nor was he known for his predictability, so they were not greatly surprised when he chose to be amused.

Cricking her chin up with a negligent finger, he teased, "Perhaps. But coal is known for its enduring, fiery properties—as I will soon prove to you." Male snickers rippled through the chamber at the implication.

“It’s also known for fouling all it touches,” she said clearly, her mouth curled in distaste.

The chuckles died. All eyes went to Devon.

He was still for a moment, then, with a smothered oath, he ripped off his mask and flung it aside. “By all that’s holy, wench, then you’d best take to wearing weeds, for you’ll be black from head to toe soon enough. Besides, it’s hard to foul something that’s already dirty.” He snapped his teeth closed and took a deep, calming breath. His hand stroked her chin with a gentleness that was poignantly familiar to Katrina. “I’m sorry, Kat, but you’re making this deuced hard on both of us,” he whispered.

If he only knew how she’d longed for him . . . She stared at him, wishing with all her heart that they’d met again under different circumstances. The years had changed him little. Dissipation should, by rights, have eaten at that gorgeous face, but if anything, he’d become more handsome in his maturity. Those lashes were still as lush as a girl’s, that mouth as fine and mobile, that hair as striking a contrast to his black eyebrows. He looked what he was, a peer of the realm, with arrogance, pride, and breeding in every patrician line. He did not look like a libertine so debauched that he’d earned the name of Demon Devon before he attained his majority.

However, that hungry, possessive look in his eyes proved the name appropriate. She felt his angry determination to win what he believed she’d granted another. She cursed the self-preservation impulse that had made her claim to be Sutterfield’s mistress, but she owed this . . . demon no explanations. Her chin wrenched away from his caress. Whether this night led to a pedestal bed or a watery grave, she’d face the end with pride intact. As long as she didn’t succumb to his dark fascination again, she’d naught to be ashamed of.

They stared at one another, the man and the girl, forgetful now of their audience as they battled silently with their eyes. You’ll not reject me this time, he warned; take my body, then, but you’ll never win more of me, she replied. Katrina didn’t flinch when the earl grew impatient at their soundless contest, fastened his long, strong hands on her shoulders and hauled her to her toes. His soft voice made Katrina shiver.

“Once, I let you go when you claimed distaste for me. I can’t help wondering if, even then, you were

the innocent you proclaimed. Now, by your own words, you've no virtue to guard. So come, my dear, show me what you've learned. And by God it had better be worth the wait."

Gripping her jaw in one hand, he wrapped his free arm about her waist and bent her backward. She tried to turn away, but he secured her chin and lowered his angry mouth over hers. Three years before, his patient, wooing embraces had turned her bones to jelly. This kiss was a demand, a brand of intent. He was too experienced to be brutal, but the practiced movements of his mouth could not disguise his purpose; to prove to her, once and for all, that he was master.

She was equally determined to prove that no man would enslave her. She didn't waste her strength in struggles. She stayed limp, unresponsive. Only she knew how hard she had to fight the tears of regret for what might have been. . . .

The cheers of the watching satyrs recalled them both to reality. Slowly, Devon drew away to look at her amid calls of "Put it to her, old boy!" and "Get on with it, man. Give the rest of us a chance!"

He glared at the membership, then he looked back at Katrina's flushed face. Her steady gaze showed only disdain. A cruel twist settled about his mouth. "Well, Kat, " he drawled, "what's it to be? Slow or quick? A thing of art or an animal coupling?"

She swallowed when he turned her toward the bench with a courteous hand at her elbow, but her tone was even. "Why, do what you do best, of course." When he paused to shoot her a surprised look, she concluded nastily, "Wallow in the dirt like the animal you are."

She watched in fascination as his expression grew black. She almost expected horns to sprout from his head, so appropriate did his sobriquet seem at that moment. Perversely she was glad that her actions only made what was to come more brutal. Far better for him to act true to form as the knave he was than to weaken her resolve with that spurious tenderness. When they stood beside the bench, she clenched her teeth so hard her jaw quivered. She waited, sick in body and in heart, for what was to come.

Only she heard his soft curse and his "By the saints, Kat, you tempt me to treat you as you deserve."

She frowned, but her confusion was dispelled when he turned her to face him, her back to the audience, and lifted his hands to her breasts. With both forefingers, he traced the seams where velvet met

silk, his touch so light she barely felt it. He watched the white flesh above quiver as her heartbeat accelerated, then he slipped one hand beneath the jacket to cup her buttocks. Instinctively, she tried to shrink away, but he pulled her closer, closer, until her breasts crushed against him. He lowered his mouth to warm her lips with his breath.

“You’ll not send me off so handily off this time, Kat, and leave me yearning for more.” When she looked at him disdainfully, his cheeks flushed with the fury that she sensed was driving him. “Ask me nicely, and maybe I’ll get you out of here.”

She bit her tongue to keep the plea back, but the atavistic fear she could not control was stronger. “Please, take me away.”

His tense muscles relaxed a bit. “Go on.”

“I’ll not beg, damn you!” she spat, even as she trembled.

He lifted a negligent eyebrow. “No? We shall see.”

He pushed her away, and she closed her eyes, fearing she’d feel her gown ripping. When his fingers instead closed the coat and buttoned it, her eyes flicked open. He met her confused stare directly, and for the first time she realized that more than fury was motivating him. Emotions more complex than lust roiled in those harlequin eyes of light and dark.

Yes, there was anger there, and revolted pride, but was that sadness, too, and yearning? Before she could be certain, he felt in the pocket of the jacket she wore, then turned to fling something at Pan’s feet.

“My considerable winnings for the night are yours, my fine satyrs. A thousand pounds is recompense enough for one female, I believe, no matter how lovely.” By the time Pan’s stunned gaze lifted from the purse at his feet, the earl had hefted Katrina over his shoulder and started down the stage steps.

“See here, Cavanaugh, you can’t just make off with another man’s offering,” Pan shouted over the angry mutterings of the satyrs.

“No? Then fetch the magistrates to stop me. I’m sure they’d find this little group most illuminating.” The protests stopped midspate.

However, Sutterfield was not so easily intimidated. He overturned his chair as he leaped up, then he

vaulted from the stage and ran to block Devon's path. He snatched the cane he'd propped against the base of the stage and wrenched out the concealed sword.

Devon halted. Katrina dangled from his shoulder, limp with shock. Relief followed, and finally came jubilation. He was saving her! Despite the angry words she'd hurled at him he was saving her. Was she wrong about him after all? Her exuberance muted as she heard the scrape of steel and realized why Devon had paused.

‘ Demon or no, you'll not take what's mine without a fight.’

“Yours, Sutterfield? I've wanted this woman for three years and have yet to taste her. You know enough of me to realize I don't share. Now I suggest you stand out of my way.” Devon's voice grew hard. “Lest you learn firsthand how little I like having my possessions manhandled before me.”

“No, damn you! She'll not leave this chamber until I've pounded some of those saucy airs out of her.”

Devon sighed, then he set Katrina down on the first stage step. Katrina shuddered at the insane rage in Sutterfield's usually benign blue eyes, but Devon just shrugged.

“She's a jade, I agree, but I found her long ere you did, and if the only way I can keep possession is by pinking you, then gladly I shall do so.”

Someone handed him a sword. He folded his sleeves back, revealing his corded forearms, then climbed the stage steps, taking slices out of the air with the weapon as he went.

Katrina shrank back as Sutterfield followed him, but he ignored her. She looked at the membership. All watched the two men assuming the *en garde* position. Her fingers steady now, Katrina bent to untie the cords about her ankles. As Devon had just said in his exchange with Sutterfield, she was merely one more woman to him. She didn't dare risk that he'd let her go, not with the past between them, and present events egging him on. She cast a stealthy glance about the room, seeking the exit.

She heard the rasp of steel sliding against steel, and compelled, she paused to look over her shoulder. Most of the light in the gloomy room was trained upon the stage. Weaving candle flames reflected upon shiny, twisting blades. The viscount thrust, the earl parried. Sutterfield lunged, Devon blocked. While Sutterfield was a tall, strong man, his small paunch testified to his leisure activities. Devon, on the other

hand, showed in each liquid move what an avid sportsman he was. His fencing had the mark of every master swordsman: He made it look easy.

The end was soon apparent to all but Sutterfield. Devon's hair glittered under the lights. His muscles moved like well-oiled cogs grinding toward one purpose—victory. Katrina saw the ease with which he parried Sutterfield's craftiest stabs, and her lurching heart settled back in her breast. No, she had naught to worry about but getting away. She waited until Devon made his move, slashing where he'd been tapping, lunging where he'd been retreating, then she eased around the corner of the stage toward the door she'd spied between two statues.

When several members glanced at her, she leaned her elbows on the stage as if seeking a better vantage to watch. When they looked back at the duel, she darted for the door.

Devon turned his head at the flash of movement. Grinding out an oath, he slammed Sutterfield's weak parry aside with a riposte that found its mark. Sutterfield screamed and fell to his knees, clutching his wounded shoulder, but Devon paused only long enough to fling the sword away. In four strides he was off the stage, landing on his feet at a run to pursue Katrina.

"She's not worth it, Cavanaugh! You'll find her a block of ice beneath you," Sutterfield yelled.

Katrina flung a look over her shoulder as she touched the doorknob. She saw Sutterfield, grinning malevolently at her, and a bare twenty paces behind her, Devon. She couldn't see his expression since his back was to the light, but she didn't need to. His determined pursuit made his intent clear.

She threw the door open and ran as if the demons of hell pursued. Some other time she might have laughed at the apt analogy, but she was too occupied in fleeing for her life. For without the right of choice, life had no meaning to her at all. . . .

She found herself in a man-made tunnel. She darted a look each way. Blackness at one end, light at the other. She ran, so intent on reaching that reassuring pool of gold that she didn't even notice the rough cobblestones under her bare feet. But she felt *him*. First as a presence behind her, then she heard steps pounding closer, closer. If she could only reach that light, she could scream for help. She was so near. Yet the five feet were leagues, the unbridgeable gap between safety and ruin. Strong hands caught the back of

her jacket and hauled her to a stop.

The shock was too much. She began to scream, to struggle, to kick and bite. “No! You foul excuse for a man, let me go.” Even when he stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth, she still cursed him through it. When he hefted her over his shoulder, she pounded his back with her fists and wildly kicked her legs until an iron-thewed arm squeezed her knees closed.

The laughter in his voice only made her angrier. ‘ ‘Damme, m’girl, I never thought I’d be in the position of pushing your legs *together*. ’ ’

She was plopped inside a black lacquered coach onto a plush red seat. Devon leaped in beside her. She tore the handkerchief away and drew breath to scream, but they lurched away. There was no one to hear, anyway. She closed her eyes and counted to twenty. Then, leaning back with grim control, she played with the lapel of his jacket and lifted her eyes to his.

At first she was puzzled by his good humor. Head tilted back against the cushions, legs sprawled before him, he exuded no anger at her attempted escape. To the contrary... That devastating smile, cheeks creased, eyes sparkling with mischief, made him seem the best of both boy and man. Only her inner insistence that he was the worst of each—spoiled as a brat and ruthless as a roue—kept her impervious to its force. He breathed easily, as if his recent exertions were no more strenuous than a Vauxhall stroll, but she wasn’t fooled. Let her reach for the door handle and that laziness would evaporate. Perforce she realized, abruptly, why he wasn’t angry.

He enjoyed the chase as much as the capture.

She didn’t hide her bitterness as she said, “I’m glad I afford you amusement, your lordship. Would that I could claim the same.”

His smile deepened into a cocky grin. “Ah, but I’ve never wanted to amuse you, Kat. I’m determined upon an entertainment of a different sort.” His eyes dropped to her legs, which were dimly visible through the wispy gown.

She almost tore the lapel braid, so hard did she have to resist the impulse to cover herself. “And if I’m still determined to decline the pleasure?”

He sighed, and the gold sparks flashing in his eyes dimmed. “Don’t, Kat. Don’t make me angrier than I already am.” Honesty at last.

The, softer side that had yearned for him for three lonely years longed to tell him the truth. That he’d come the closest of any man to gaining her favors. Perhaps she owed him that much—had he not obviously decided to keep her for himself. That, she could not forgive.

Her bent head reared up. She leaned toward him. ‘I may be only a vicar’s daughter, I may be poor, I may be alone. But one choice I do have, one thing no one can ever take from me—my right to bestow my favors as I choose. And you, my lord, with all your wealth, your charm, your breeding, and your looks, cannot do a thing to stop me.’”

Her quiet tones arrested the hand brushing back his loosened hair. His jaw tensed, then he slowly lowered his hand. He looked down, his thick black lashes shielding his thoughts. When his eyes flashed up, they were bright brown, lucid as warmed brandy. She saw admiration there, and liking. Her heart thrummed. Would he let her go? She looked down to disguise her tension.

“As you say, my dear. You have that right. I ask you once more to grant me that boon. I’m not such a bad fellow. You’d find me generous. More generous than Sutterfield, I warrant.” She shook her head wordlessly, staring at her lap. Had she been looking at him, she would have been forewarned. Frustration, anger, and desire crossed his face in rapid succession. His mouth firmed with resolve.

But his voice betrayed only courtesy when he murmured, “Very well. You win.” He rapped against the window between him and his coachman. When it opened, the earl said, ‘ ‘Peter, I know our direction now. My dear?’ ’

Katrina flashed a disbelieving look at him. He stared back, his regret ostensibly genuine. Her heart lightened, and the terrors of the night began to ease. In dazed tones she gave the direction of her most recent employer.

The crotchety old woman was a sea captain’s widow who had been well provided for, but she pinched every penny until it bled and was as parsimonious with Katrina’s time. The old woman never failed to introduce Katrina to her friends as connected, if on the wrong side of the blanket, to a baronet. But when

they were alone, she treated her as the meanest scullery maid, taking evident pleasure in her position of superiority over one of higher birth.

Katrina had grown wiser, if more bitter, with every lost position. After the penury she'd suffered when Sutterfield's mother dismissed her, she'd vowed to keep this last post, no matter what. If suppressing her pride and accepting menial tasks were the price of security, then she'd gladly pay. While she wasn't happy, she was resigned and grateful that at least her current employer had no close male relatives.

How she'd explain coming home so late dressed as she was she didn't know. Still, maybe she wouldn't have to. The butler was not above a bribe. Katrina was so occupied planning her excuse that she didn't notice the way Devon watched her.

His eyes were alert, eager. His slouch, hands in pockets, nevertheless had a ready air, as if he awaited only the most favorable moment to spring. But his voice was genuinely sympathetic. "Poor Kat. Is the old biddy really so difficult?"

She looked at him in surprise. "How do you know she's difficult?"

"My dear Kat, I could list every sorry position you've won and lost in the past three years. You've left a blazing trail everywhere you've been, you know. Half the young pups in the ton are infatuated with you. I've made it my business to keep informed. That's how I knew about tonight. . . ." His rough tone evened out again when she looked startled and opened her mouth to interrupt with a question. "Not that it matters now. At any rate this position, I opine, shall be your last."

Later she would scorn herself as foolish. She should have read the true meaning behind his last comment. She should have been warned by the fact that he'd kept himself apprised of her movements. Waiting for her to fall . . . But at the moment, because she was so weary, so delighted that he had, apparently, come tonight to aid her, she squelched her suspicions and took his words at face value. He was not without compassion after all. He was letting her go, even believing the worst.

"I, too, hope to stay here for a time. She's not really mean, just used to having her own way." She smiled at him for the first time that night.

His face relaxed into the old charm that had thrilled her such an age ago. And could thrill her again—if she let it.

“Ah, then, she’s not so different from others we know, is she?” He dropped a wicked, suggestive wink.

She laughed. The sound was rich with the enjoyment of life that had once been hers. His hands went deeper into his pockets as he shifted restlessly on his seat.

“Is it yourself you’re speaking of, or me?” she teased back.

His reply was husky. “Both, m’dear. Both.”

Their eyes met. Something flickered in that steady brown gaze. Hesitation? Yearning? But the emotion went too quickly for her to define it. She spoke then in a rush, before she lost her courage.

‘Thank you for saving me tonight. I truly was not there by choice—’

“I don’t doubt that.”

“And I confess I didn’t expect you to let me go—”

“Did you not?”

“But I shouldn’t judge so quickly. That’s one of my worst faults, my father always said—’

“He knew you well.”

“And I shall always remember you kindly for your help this night.”

“How gratifying. Can you show me, perchance, this last time how grateful you really are?”

That steady, challenging stare was too powerful. Her gaze dropped to his broad shoulders. Strong they were. Strong enough to ably bear all her troubles. For one traitorous instant she longed to accept his offer. More between them was unthinkable, for he was not only one of the wealthiest men in England, his title was one of the oldest. In contrast she was not only poor, alone in the world, but her background was only partly genteel. Her father had been the bastard son of a minor nobleman, but her mother had been a baker’s daughter. No, the only alliance they could ever have was an illicit one. A rake he might be, but he was proud of his name and cognizant of his responsibilities. He’d wed only a blue blood as wealthy as himself.

The knowledge sharpened rather than appeased her yearning. No, she couldn't become his mistress, but she could share with him a last embrace. Fodder to feed her foolish dreams, she scorned herself, but had he reeked of brimstone in that moment, she still could not have denied him. Or herself.

"Yes, Devon," she whispered, calling him by his name for the second and last time. At least so she thought.

He went still, but she didn't see his longing, for her eyes were closed. His hands cupped her cheeks to tilt her face to his. His mouth brushed hers, fresh, redolent as her childhood memory of the warm bread in her grandfather's kitchen. She savored the gentle kiss that was just as hearty, just as addictive, but instead of sating her, he left her hungry for more. When he pulled her into his arms, she went gladly.

The gentle suction deepened, hardened, as he urged her lips apart. He teased the comers of her mouth with tiny nibbles, then licked the tingling nerves. When she instinctively opened her mouth wider, he delved inside, learning all the exotic tastes and textures she'd long denied him. His arms tightened until his waistcoat buttons dug into her bosom, but she didn't notice. Her hair flowed over his arm as he pressed her back against the seat, his tongue knowing every sweet crevice and secret hollow of her mouth. But when he eased back to unbutton the jacket, she came to her senses. She pressed her hands into his shoulders.

"That's enough—"

His pleasure-slurred voice disturbed the hairs near her ear. "Give me more than a taste. I'm starving for the full course, Kat."

Her body screamed with the need to let this go where it would, but Katrina had been raised to respect the power of thought. She mastered her pulsing weakness and pushed harder, slipping out from under him. "No, I tell you! I owe you my gratitude, and you have it. Thank you again. But don't spoil my memories by insisting on more." She scrambled to the other side of the carriage, her bosom heaving, her cheeks flushed.

His hands reached out as if to grab her, then they clenched and dropped. He turned to wrench the curtain aside and peer out.

When Katrina had swallowed her tears, she let herself look at him one last time. And for the first time she let herself think of what she was giving up in the name of morality. The feel of him, hard, warm, secure, had aroused so many urges within her. For scented sheets, a dark room, a bottle of wine; freedom, blessed freedom, from right, wrong, morality, or duty. But even more, he made her long for hearth and home, for shared travail and laughter.

This last need, its nobility made ignominious by circumstance, bolstered her. Far better to suffer now at this parting than to grow to care for him even more, then be cast aside when he was bored. She didn't fool herself like so many had done that she alone could be the one to capture his heart. She knew he had one, but she sensed no woman had ever touched it. She was neither foolish enough, nor brave enough, to believe she could be the first. She forced herself to turn away.

She, too, watched as the scenery slowly became familiar. When they were a street away from her employer's house, she mumbled, "Please stop here. It's best that they don't see your carriage."

He didn't move to tap on the window, so she repeated herself, louder.

His reply was most peculiar. "Please, Kat. I ask you once more. Go with me. Let me show you what we can give one another."

"I cannot. Now please, stop."

Again no reply. His shoulders lifted in a weary sigh. Then, quietly, "Very well, my dear. On your head be it."

She stiffened. She jerked the curtains farther back and saw that they'd already reached the respectable but plain brick house. She lunged for the door, but he tugged her back, opened the coachman's window, and pulled a card from his pocket.

"Give this to the butler, Peter, with my regards. Tell him I've come to collect Miss Lawson's things, that she'll be staying with me for a while."

Her eyes, widening with dawning horror, settled upon him. His features had never been more perfect, more ruthless, or more cold. He might have been masked, for he showed no hint of human kindness or remorse.

The night's events exploded upon her. Dazed, she blinked at him, all the more afraid now that her brief reassurance had been snatched away. "No, please, I don't deserve this," she whispered.

"Do you not? Then I shall remember to make my gifts suitable to your sense of worth." When she drew breath to scream, he covered her mouth with his palm. He pulled her struggling arms behind her back with his free hand and added matter-of-factly, "I needn't explain that this will indeed be your last position. Of this sort, at any rate. After word of your new venue reaches the ton, no respectable woman will have you in her house."

When she went limp, his eyes sharpened upon hers. "Don't treat me to these die-away airs, my girl. You couldn't have kept your, er, nocturnal activities secret much longer, anyway. You'll find me more generous than Sutterfield. Just give me the passion I know you stifle. You'll remember how much you want me, after you've calmed down."

His words were a buzz in her ears. She shivered, so enervated by the repeated shocks of this night that she stayed limp, fighting nausea and weakness, until the carriage bounced as her bags were put in the back. Soon they were tooling away, the yellow wheels chattering upon the cobblestones like lecturing voices chiding her for stupidity. On she went, deeper into the blackest night she'd ever known, a demon her only companion. . . .