



Sometimes, love is the
hardest lesson of all

A
LORDS OF LANCASHIRE
NOVELLA

JACKIE BARBOSA

The Lesson Plan
(A *Lords of Lancashire* novella)

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Chapter One



Lancashire, September 1794

The Honorable Miss Winifred Langston had achieved, through a combination of blind luck and careful contrivance, the prodigious age of twenty-one without ever having suffered the indignity of a London Season. Her luck came in the form of a doting, distractible father who seemed not to notice that his only daughter had long since reached an age past which gallivanting about the countryside dressed as a boy could be considered an excusable, childish prank. The contrivance came in convincing her brothers that, should she have her debut, it would be their duty to chaperon her to endless Society events at which they would be every bit as much “on the market” as she. As every one of them still possessed a good many wild oats yet to be sown, they were more than happy to help persuade her father that Freddie’s debut could surely wait until next Season.

And the next. And the next.

But now, neither providence nor machination could forestall the inevitable. In a mere two weeks’ time, the Langstons would complete their prescribed year of mourning for that doting, distractible father, and the new viscount, Freddie’s brother Nash, had come to the stark realization that if he did not marry off his little sister, he would be stuck with her for the rest of his born days.

There was nothing to be done for it, of course. Nash had always been the most imperious of her three brothers, no doubt the result of being the heir, and Freddie knew he would not yield now that his decision was made. That did not mean, however, that she had any intention of being happy about it.

Dressed as usual in her twin brother’s outgrown breeches, shirt, and waistcoat, Freddie sat cross-legged beside the river that separated the Langston estate from the neighboring, much larger property belonging to the Earl of Ormondy, dangling her fishing line in the icy water as she bemoaned her predicament.

“I shall have to wear gowns all the time and dance and take tea. And be *ladylike*.” The last word came out on a groan.

Thomas Pearce, who happened to be not only Ormondy’s spare but Freddie’s friend since both were in leading strings, sat on her left. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “If it would help, I’d marry you, Fred old girl. We could just carry on like always, then.”

Freddie's twin and perpetual partner-in-crime, Walter, emitted a peal of laughter from her right. "Are you mad, Tommy? You're not even three-and-twenty. You can't get married yet. Puts too much pressure on the rest of us chaps. Besides, you and Freddie as man and wife...?" He shuddered indelicately. "I'd rather contemplate the vicar and Miss Stanley engaging in intimacies than that."

Thomas's cheeks turned a hot shade of red, though whether at the thought of the elderly vicar and the stern headmistress of the girls' school in a torrid embrace or of himself and Freddie as a married couple, she couldn't be sure. Either one was rather alarming to contemplate.

"Well," he said staunchly, "if that's what it takes to keep your brother from forcing Freddie to marry some withered-up husk, I'm willing to make the sacrifice. Least you could do is support me."

So, marrying her would be a sacrifice for him, would it? *That* was certainly flattering. Although strictly speaking, she felt much the same. If she were to imagine marrying a Pearce, it would most certainly *not* be Thomas.

No, it was Conrad Pearce, seven years Thomas's senior and heir to their father's earldom, who moved Freddie's otherwise romantically disinclined heart, not to mention other considerably more unmentionable parts of her anatomy. Other young ladies might have waxed eloquent upon any number of his attributes. handsomeness—exceptional; his height—prodigious; the breadth of his shoulders—impressive; or the remarkable color of his thick-lashed eyes—silver and just as opaque as the real thing. But, though Freddie appreciated these qualities as much as any other female, these attributes were not the primary source of his appeal.

Quite simply, Conrad fascinated her by virtue of being everything she wasn't—levelheaded, self-contained, urbane, reserved—and that air of perfect, impenetrable composure seemed both a careful façade and a deliberate challenge. *Unsettle me*, it dared her. *Muss my never-out-of-place hair, put my impeccably knotted cravat askew, upset me with passion and recklessness*. She found it impossible to believe he was as imperturbable, as detached, as he appeared. Beneath that cool, polished exterior, she believed there lurked a kindred soul, and she ached to set him free from his prison of decorous self-restraint.

Unfortunately, despite years of trying, she had absolutely no hard evidence to support her suspicion. Conrad was about as likely to part with his good sense and marry her as he was to fly to the moon and back. He knew her far too well for that.

In point of fact, *everyone* in Winmarleigh knew Winifred Langston was not marriage

material, which was undoubtedly the reason Nash wanted to remove her to London. There he could foist her off upon unsuspecting gentlemen who might be kept from knowing, until too late, that the object of their affections could shoot the cherry off a cheroot at thirty paces whilst merrily puffing on one herself.

But certainly not if Freddie could prevent it.

She returned her attention to Thomas. "That's quite all right," she assured him, giving his arm a sympathetic pat. "No-one needs to make any sacrifices on my behalf. Nash can make me go to London, but he can't make me marry anyone, and he certainly can't make anyone want to marry *me*."

Far from appearing relieved, however, Thomas looked even more morose. "If the men in London have eyes, you'll have suitors by the dozen. Once you go, you won't be back. You'll see."

Freddie stared at him. Was he suggesting she was...pretty? Because, truly, nothing could be more ludicrous. Not that she was *ugly*, of course; she didn't think that. But she was boyish, sturdy, solid. Certainly nothing so frilly or feminine as *pretty*.

But now she couldn't help seeing Thomas through slightly different eyes. Did he see something about her that she herself did not? Did he perhaps actually *want* to marry her? That was a considerably more unthinkable possibility than that he would consider doing so a sacrifice.

"Oh, don't be maudlin," Walter interjected. "She'll be back come the end of the Season, right as rain, and we'll all just pick up where we left off."

Ah, that was more like it. Leave it to her sunny, never-malcontent brother to keep things in perspective. Of course, he *would* think that nothing would change, because as far as Walter was concerned, the world and everyone in it existed entirely to suit him, because, quite simply, most of the time, they did. He'd gone away to Eton and then Oxford and returned to find everyone and everything at Barrowcreek Park utterly unchanged, including himself. No doubt, he expected the same outcome from Freddie's impending excursion to London.

But what if, against all odds, London *did* change her? What if, inconceivable as it sounded, she discovered she actually *liked* wearing gowns and dancing and taking tea? What if she *wanted* to marry and behave like a lady?

Most of all, what if *this* was her last chance to be the outrageous and irrepressible Freddie Langston? What if, a tiny, traitorous voice whispered, this was her last opportunity to get Conrad to notice her—really *notice* her—before she lost him for

good?

She pulled her line abruptly from the water and got to her feet. "Well, if we're going to pick up where we left off when I return, we ought to be doing something more interesting with these last few weeks than fishing."

Walter gave her a sly glance. "What did you have in mind?"

Freddie grinned back at him. "A plan only a brother could love..."



Thomas was twitchy all throughout dinner. Oblivious as always, neither the earl nor countess seemed to notice their younger son's disturbance, but Conrad found it impossible *not* to notice.

Thomas had dropped his fork. Twice. He spilt wine on his cravat and choked on a bite of pheasant. Most of all, he *looked* miserable, his eye sunken, his color ashen. And as always, it fell to Conrad to sort out whatever scrape his brother had got—or was about to get—himself into. No one else would do it, least of all Thomas himself.

So, after the earl excused himself from the men's after-dinner port to sneak off to visit the mistress he kept in a tidy cottage in the village he thought no one knew of, least of all his wife and sons, Conrad seized the opportunity to ferret out the cause of his brother's distress. "So, what are Walter and Winifred up to now?"

"Freddie," Thomas correct reflexively, but not before a guilty expression crossed his face. "You know she hates to be called Winifred."

"So they are up to something, then."

But really, when were they not? The residents of Winmarleigh referred to the Langston twins not as Walter and Winifred, but as Salt and Pepper, for they seemed to have taken it upon themselves to provide all the spice to village life. Thomas, alas, was usually relegated to the role of butter, there to smooth things over after they'd gone badly wrong.

"I didn't say that," Thomas ground out irritably.

"You didn't have to. So, what is it this time? Dressing up in sheets to haunt the girls' school? Putting frogs in the baptismal font? Releasing a plague of locusts?" He was only half-kidding about the latter two.

Although if he were honest, Conrad would be forced to admit that Winifred Langston

didn't have to release either frogs or locusts to plague him. All she had to do was saunter by in a close-fitting pair of breeches, her heavy raven tresses escaping from beneath the cap she jammed on her head in a completely useless effort to camouflage her gender. As if any male with operational vision could mistake the owner of that slender waist and gloriously rounded arse for a boy. *He* certainly hadn't been able to since the summer he'd returned from Cambridge to discover that the tomboyish urchin who'd played with his younger brother was no longer a leggy, boisterous child, but a leggy, boisterous young woman with a figure that would have been right at home in Miss May's Pleasure Parlor.

Conrad shifted uncomfortably. If he was going to gather wool, he would prefer not to have it binding him in anatomically delicate locations.

His brother only proceeded to look more vexed. "This isn't funny at all, Con." He let out a slow, anguished sigh. "He's taking her away. To London."

Conrad raised an eyebrow. "Not much of a prank, that. I'd have thought Walter more cunning."

"Not Walter, Nash—er, the viscount. He insists it's time for Freddie to have her debut and...you know, get married."

"About time," Conrad muttered, ignoring the corkscrew of pain burrowing into his chest. It was only surprise that Nash was finally taking the girl in hand. "The sooner she's married off, the sooner Winmarleigh will be safe from her antics." *Albeit considerably less entertaining.*

Thomas's mouth hardened into a frown. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

Conrad stared at his brother with a growing sense of disorientation. "Wait. You're not saying you are...sweet on her?" Thomas looked away, but not before Conrad read the truth. "Bloody hell...you *are*."

"Damn it, Con, you wouldn't understand. She's just...she's *Freddie*, blast it all, and I don't want to lose her."

So Thomas *wasn't* in love with her? Well, that made the gnawing discomfort of his own inexplicable attraction to the chit seem less lecherous, if only barely. What would his brother—not to mention *her* brothers—think if he knew how many times Conrad had stripped her bare in his mind and proceeded to have his lascivious way with her?

"What makes you think you will lose her? It's only a Season. Plenty of ladies don't find husbands in their first Seasons." Or second or third. Especially not those who preferred

to wear breeches, ride astride, bait their own hooks, and shoot targets from horseback. Likely, it was only Conrad who had a carnal fascination with that sort of female.

Thomas rolled his eyes. "You must be blind if you can't see she'll be the toast of London. I may not be *sweet* on her, as you put it, but I know a beautiful woman when I see one. Just because we grew up together does not mean I can't see her clearly. Apparently, I'm the only one around here who can."

This was hardly the time for Conrad to admit that his eyesight was perfectly functional when it came to Miss Langston.

"We all have to grow up some day, you know. Even you and Miss Langston. Although, I suppose, hoping that Walter Langston will join the two of you in achieving adulthood would be too much to hope for."

"You're making light. The three of us have been friends for our entire lives, but now that we're grown up, one of us will be forced to move away, simply because she happens to be female. I hardly call that just or fair."

Fair or not, it was the way of the world. What did Thomas think Conrad could do about it?

"Marry her yourself, then."

No sooner had the words passed Conrad's lips than he wished them back. God, the only thing that would be worse than living in the same town with Freddie Langston while not being able to touch her would be living in the same household with her. Just the thought of his brother in bed with her sent an icy shard of rage through his gut.

"I suggested that. She turned me down flat. Doesn't think any of the London gents will want her, but I know better."

"Maybe she'll turn them all down flat, too."

"I'm sure that's what she thinks she'll do. But you know Freddie. She's too passionate by half, and she doesn't do anything by mere doubles, or even triples. When she gets to London, she'll throw herself into the balls and routs the way she throws herself into everything, and then she'll fall headlong in love." Thomas sighed. "And then she won't be back."

The icy shard that had penetrated Conrad's gut when he thought of his brother with Freddie twisted sharply as he envisioned the scene Thomas painted so vividly for him. Because Thomas was undoubtedly right. That was exactly how it would be when Freddie Langston arrived in London. She would take it by storm, and it would never be

the same again.

“So, she is going to let Nash take her to London without a fuss, then?”

Thomas chuckled. “Oh, hardly. In fact, I think she rather hopes to do something so outrageous, the news will make it all the way to London and Nash won’t be able to take her at all.”

And that was how, a few seconds later, Conrad discovered that the Honorable Miss Winifred Langston intended to visit Miss May’s Pleasure Palace just two nights hence. The reason in order to learn “what all the fuss is about.”

Conrad had a mind to show her. In the interest of not being called out for pistols at dawn by Nash Langston, however, he went upstairs and showed his hand instead.

Chapter Two



"You want me to *kidnap* your sister?" Conrad sputtered. He thumped his chest twice with his fist in an effort to coax the sherry he'd made the mistake of sipping at precisely the wrong moment down the proper pipe. He didn't wish to expire before he ascertained whether Nash Langston still retained full possession of his wits or had instead been sent round the proverbial bend by the pressures of becoming the head of his notoriously wild family.

The aforementioned gentleman leaned forward eagerly in his chair and nodded, giving Conrad even greater reason to doubt his friend's sanity. "Just so. She needs an object lesson in the dangers of her antics, and a good kidnapping by a highwayman is just the thing to do the trick."

"But...why not simply forbid her from going to Miss May's or, indeed, from going anywhere with Walter and Thomas until you leave for London?"

The young viscount rolled his eyes heavenward. "If you think forbidding my sister from doing anything is an effective means to prevent her from doing it, you don't know her nearly as well as I would expect after almost twenty years of acquaintance. Obedience has never been Freddie's forte."

Whether obedience would be Freddie's forte or not was somewhat difficult to say, since to Conrad's knowledge, she had rarely in her life been ordered to do or not do anything. He'd often thought what she needed more than anything else was a solid spanking and a clear injunction to behave herself. Her father and brothers had been too indulgent by half, and Freddie, more than anyone else, was paying the price.

Notwithstanding, he didn't think it wise to disagree with his friend's assessment of the young lady's character, particularly in light of the fact that he'd fancied himself delivering that spanking—and a bit more—one too many times for comfort. "Point taken, but don't you think this...remedy...is rather extreme?"

"Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. And you must admit, Freddie is never anything *but* extreme."

Indeed she was, Conrad thought with a grim smile. *Extremely lush. Extremely vibrant. Extremely beddable.* Although Conrad doubted that was what her brother had in mind when he used the word.

"Surely you can find someone else to play the part of the highwayman," he suggested

hopefully. "One of the servants or tenants, perhaps?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Even if one of them could carry off the masquerade without shooting himself in the foot or falling off his horse, she would browbeat him to the truth inside of five minutes. They're all more terrified of her than they are of me." The young viscount shook his head ruefully. "Besides, there are few men I'd trust with my sister's virtue. You probably haven't noticed, being as you've rarely seen her in a proper dress, but when she allows herself to look like a lady, she's really rather fetching."

Conrad suppressed a groan. If Nash knew exactly *how* fetching Conrad already found his sister, he'd find himself called out for pistols at dawn.

Fortunately, his friend failed to notice his discomfort and continued blithely, "All you need do is keep her in an out-of-the-way place for the night. Blindfold her and tie her up, give her reason to worry what may become of her, until I *ransom* her back. After such an ordeal, I warrant she should be chastened into behaving in a more appropriate fashion."

Blindfold her and tie her up? An image so frank and carnal that it shocked even Conrad flashed through his mind—Freddie Langston, naked and blindfolded, her wrists bound and secured above her head, her legs spread wide and tied to the bed frame, her glorious black hair fanned out around her like a thundercloud.

Heat suffused him, and he drained his sherry in one swift gulp.

Nash raised an eyebrow and gestured toward Conrad's empty glass. "Would you care for another?"

And another and another. At least if this conversation continued on its present course.

While Nash poured them both more sherry at the sideboard, Conrad tried to regain his composure. He'd come to the Langston estate this afternoon intending only to inform his friend of his sister's planned escapade so he could put a stop to it before the girl managed to ruin herself and her family so thoroughly neither could recover. The last thing he had anticipated was to be enlisted into a counter-escapade that was even dafter than the original.

No good deed goes unpunished.

Worse yet, he could see no means by which to escape his conscription. He could hardly admit that he was absolutely *not* to be trusted with Miss Winifred Langston's virtue; that he had, in point of fact, been lusting after her for years. And not in the polite, proper way a gentleman desires a lady he hopes to marry, either, but in the coarse,

vulgar way he wants a woman of loose morals.

"So, what do you say, Con?" Nash asked as he handed Conrad his refilled glass. "I'll see to it they have to take the coach instead of going by horseback and warn the driver that there've been reports of a ruthless highwayman preying on the road between Winmarleigh and Garstang. He'll pull over for you in a trice, and from there, you'll be in and out with Freddie in no time."

Winning internally at the phrase *in and out with Freddie*, Conrad considered his options, conceded he had none, and accepted his fate. He nodded. "I'll do it."

Nash beamed. "Excellent." He raised his goblet in salute. "To putting my troublesome little sister in her place."

"Indeed," Conrad murmured, meeting his friend's toast despite the certainty that he and Nash had entirely different visions of where, exactly, that troublesome young lady's *place* was.



Freddie grimaced as the carriage hit yet another rut in the road and her backside was once again separated from, and then forcibly reacquainted with, the thinly padded seat. Here, at least, was one good argument for skirts and petticoats; they offered one considerably more protection from the brutal beating of travel by coach than breeches. Even then, she was bound to be bloodied and bruised by the time she reached London, since it was highly unlikely that Nash would permit her to ride into Town on horseback.

"You haven't changed your mind about this, have you, Fred?" Walter asked, apparently noting her sour expression. "We can always turn back, you know."

In truth, she had begun to think better of this excursion within minutes of proposing it, but she wasn't about to admit that to her twin, who thought it a marvelous lark to sneak his sister into a house of ill repute. The problem was, as tantalizing as the idea was in theory, it had quickly dawned on her that it was likely to be rather boring in practice. What, after all, was she going to *do* in a house of ill repute? Certainly not what *men* did when they went to one.

In for a penny, in for a pound, that was Freddie's motto. She wasn't going to back out now despite her misgivings.

"That's not it. I'd just much rather be going on horseback than by coach." She wrinkled her nose as they hit yet another bump, dislodging a cloud of dust from the faded

curtains that covered the windows. "Don't you think it's odd that Hermes should have thrown a shoe on the very same day that Mercury got the colic?"

Like Freddie and Walter, Hermes and Mercury were twins, a pair of Arabian bays their father had purchased several years before his death with his son and daughter in mind. They were also, aside from Nash's gray stallion—the grandiosely named Thor—the only riding mounts in the stable, which was why Walter, Thomas, and Freddie had been forced to take the coach this evening rather than traveling, as they normally did, on horseback.

Walter shrugged. "Just a coincidence, I'm sure. Hermes is forever throwing shoes and Mercury has a penchant for eating things that don't agree with him."

Both were true, but Freddie couldn't shake the intuition that their mode of conveyance had been determined by contrivance rather than coincidence, although she could not fathom what anyone would gain by such machinations other than her annoyance. Perhaps that was enough for her older brother, however, who seemed of late to be wholly focused on being as irritating to her as possible, no doubt because he hoped she would decide to behave herself in London and get down to the business of selecting a husband if only as a means of escaping his needling.

She was forced to admit that he might be onto something. The idea of spending the rest of her days under his roof had become a less-than-attractive proposition over the past several months.

The carriage jolted to an abrupt halt, almost pitching her from the narrow seat and knocking her knees painfully into Thomas's.

"What the devil?" Walter muttered. He rapped his knuckles against the roof. "I say, Potts," he hollered to the driver, "what's the trouble?"

No answer was forthcoming, but the reason for the sudden halt in their progress became clear when the door to the carriage jerked open just a few seconds later. The person doing the jerking was not the driver, Potts, but a masked man clothed entirely in black and holding a pistol of impressive size.

A highwayman.

Freddie's brow furrowed. When had highwayman begun to prey on the stretch of road between Winmarleigh and Garstang? It wasn't exactly Hounslow Heath in terms of either traffic or fat purses.

While she contemplated this anomaly, Thomas raised one hand in surrender and patted

the coin pouch in the pocket of his coat with the other, raising a weak clank of metal. "We haven't much coin with us this eve, but we'll gladly give you every ha'penny if you will but permit us to be on our way."

Walter gave Thomas an angry scowl, no doubt irritated by the latter's hasty capitulation, but there really was no arguing with a pistol, and Walter knew it. He reached up under his coat to untie the strings of his own purse, but the highwayman cleared his throat and shook his head.

"I don't want yer coin," he growled in a broad Lancashire dialect. "What I want..." He stretched out a finger and pointed it straight at Freddie's chest. "...is 'er."

Chapter Three



Conrad steeled himself to hold both the pistol and his index finger steady. Although everything had gone swimmingly thus far, with the coachman just as intimidated as Nash had promised he would be, it could all go terribly wrong in a heartbeat. If he had to resort to actual violence to accomplish his goal, the masquerade would be over before it had really begun, since he was hardly about to shoot Walter or Freddie Langston, let alone his own brother.

Not that he could, even if he wanted to; as a precaution, he hadn't loaded the pistol, which meant it would be useless if any of his *victims* actually resisted.

Naturally, it was his brother who resisted first. "You can't have he—" Thomas began, then broke off, his eyebrows pulling together in a scowl as he fixed Conrad with a suspicious stare. "I say, how did you know he's a she?"

Conrad's blood chilled; he hadn't intended to reveal that he was aware of Freddie's gender. The word *her* had simply slipped out, no doubt because he was always aware of her femininity no matter how she was garbed. But now that he had let it out, he'd no choice but to go with it.

"Sure ye don't think everyone hereabouts don't know Viscount Langston 'as a sister what gallivants the countryside dressed like a boy?"

"So you know this is the Honorable Miss Winifred Langston?" Walter asked.

"Course I do," Conrad responded, settling into his role with a bit more ease as the familiar accents of his tenants began to roll more comfortably off his tongue. "Why d'ye think I'm taking 'er for ransom? Wouldn't do no good if she wasn't Quality."

"Well, you can't have her," Thomas declared stoutly, shifting his body so that, within the tight confines of the coach, his torso was positioned between Conrad's useless pistol and Freddie. He folded his arms across his chest. "I won't let you."

"What do you mean, *I*?" Walter bristled. "She's *my* sister. If anyone's going to protect her virtue, it ought to be me."

Conrad didn't know whether to laugh or groan. Leave it to his brother and Walter Langston to argue over who should be shot first in a futile demonstration of heroism. The fact that neither of them could possibly know the pistol was unloaded made their idiocy all the more poignant. God help them if they were ever waylaid by an actual highwayman.

"For heaven's sake, don't be a pair of ninnyhammers," Freddie huffed, clearly as exasperated with her companions' bravado as Conrad was. "The man's got a pistol, or did you think that was a cucumber?"

"But, Fred, you'll be ruined," Walter protested.

As if he had ever worried about his sister's reputation before...

Over Thomas's shoulder, Conrad saw Freddie wave her hand dismissively. "Nonsense. Nash will pay the ransom straightaway and then sweep the entire incident under the rug. No one but us will even know it happened."

"And how do you know he means only to ransom you?" Thomas fixed a baleful eye on Conrad. "He could just as easily ravish you first and *then* ransom you, you know."

"That's a risk I shall just have to take, because I am certainly not going to allow him to put a bullet in one or both of you and *then* kidnap me anyway. Now," she continued, giving Thomas a shove on the back, "do sit down and let me get out of the coach."

Thomas pitched forward, catching himself just before bumping his head on the opposite side of the carriage.

"You can't mean to go with him, Fred!" Walter grabbed her arm. "He might not just ravish you. He could *kill* you." His tone was no longer blustering, but pleading.

Uneasiness slithered up Conrad's throat as it dawned on him that Thomas and Walter weren't just putting on a show; they were genuinely concerned for Freddie's safety. And why shouldn't they be? As far as they knew, Conrad really *was* a highwayman, and while highwaymen might have a certain romantic reputation among the lower classes, aristocrats rightly regarded them with a healthy dose of fear.

Why had neither he nor Nash spared a single thought when planning this escapade to the anguish they would be inflicting on their respective brothers? They had both been so intent on ensuring that Freddie would be suitably chastened by her experience that the potential effect on her companions simply hadn't crossed their minds.

Come to think of it, the *one* person who seemed not the least bit troubled by the current turn of events was the one person who was supposed to be. Surely a well-bred young lady on the brink of being kidnapped by a brigand should be a trifle more...alarmed?

Instead, the lady in question was in the process of freeing her arm from her brother's grasp with a businesslike composure entirely at odds with the gravity of the situation.

"He could kill me, but he won't," she said with such complete, calm assurance that

Conrad knew at once she had figured out that this was all for show, although he didn't think she'd yet recognized him. She'd simply concluded, correctly, that Nash had orchestrated the entire thing and that she was therefore in no real danger whatsoever.

For two heartbeats, Conrad considered pulling off his mask and confessing the whole scheme. And he might well have done it had Freddie not stretched out her hand—bare and slender and elegantly pale—toward him and said, “Do pretend to be a gentleman and help me down.”

He couldn't have said whether it was her impudent suggestion that he feign being a gentleman or the tantalizing provocation of her naked hand so near his own, but some thread of control inside him snapped. Freddie Langston had always had the power to shake his composure, but as of this moment, she had torn his vaunted equanimity to shreds.

She was toying with them—him, Walter, Thomas, even the poor coachman. She knew what was afoot, and yet she kept it to herself, preferring to watch them all make fools of themselves. Conrad imagined she must be quite enjoying the show as they all danced to her merry little tune.

Which, in point of fact, was what she had done all her life. Every male in Winifred Langston's life—from her father to her brothers to Conrad's own brother—did as she wished, when she wished, for she had long ago mastered the art of making them believe that what she wanted was what they wanted. Well, no more. What *he* wanted was certainly not what she wanted, and it was well past time she learned that men were not playthings to be manipulated like marionettes on the strings of her whims.

Especially not *this* man.

He wrapped his black-gloved fingers around her slim wrist and pulled. Her chestnut-brown eyes widened as she tumbled out of the carriage and onto his waiting chest. She gasped at the same moment he released the air from his lungs on an involuntary *oomph* and their breath mingled, sweet and humid. Her parted pink lips hovered scant inches above his, and a flare of lust singed his veins as he registered how close he was to kissing her. All he would need to do was to slide his fingers around the base of her skull and draw her head down to his until their mouths met.

Except, of course, that this would require him to drop his pistol to free his hand, and that would not exactly lend itself to the completion of his task. Not to mention that he'd be kissing her in full view their brothers, both of whom stared balefully at him out the open door of the coach. Hardly the setting he had in mind.

Not that he had any sort of setting in mind for kissing her. He wasn't supposed to be

kissing her at all. Anywhere. At any time.

With a muttered oath and a renewed focus on his mission, Conrad tightened his grip on his captive's wrist while continuing to point the pistol menacingly in Walter and Thomas's direction. "The sooner ye 'urry back to Barrowcreek and deliver my ransom demand, the sooner this little lady'll be free," he told them, careful to continue disguising his voice behind accent. "If ye dally, I might forget to *pretend* to be a gentleman."

Freddie stiffened at his mocking repetition of her words. Perhaps she sensed she had pushed her kidnapper rather further than was wise, even if she did believe it was all just a sham.

Walter crossed his arms over his chest. "How much do you want?"

Conrad quoted the sum he and Nash had agreed upon. "Two 'undred pounds. Not an 'a'penny less. I'll meet 'im 'ere for the exchange at dawn. Tell 'him to come alone."

Walter blanched. "Alone? You could kill him, take the money, and keep m'sister."

"And even if you don't, how are we to know you'll return Freddie safe and, er..." Thomas cleared his throat, blushing furiously as he completed his thought, "...intact after an entire night with her?"

For the first time since he'd donned the scratchy black highwayman's mask, Conrad was glad he was wearing it because he could feel his face go as hot and red as his brother's. Freddie's lithe yet lush frame so close to his was more than enough temptation. He could already imagine all too easily what he could accomplish in one night with her; he didn't need any help, least of all from Thomas.

Forcing himself to remain in character despite the riot of lascivious images tumbling through his head, Conrad shrugged. "Ye'll just have to trust me."

"Trust a highwayman? How stupid do you think we are?"

Freddie twisted in Conrad's grasp in order to glare at her brother. "Oh, for pity's sake, if he meant me any harm, he'd have shot the both of you by now and got on with it. Just do as he asks. *Please.*"

For several long seconds, Walter stared at his twin, and Conrad had the eerie sensation that the two of them were speaking without saying a word.

At last, Walter set his mouth in a grim line and nodded. "Very well, we'll go." He gestured to the driver, who had watched the entire ordeal in silence, to resume his seat

and the man, obviously eager to escape the scene, hastened to do so.

When the coach finally rolled away in search of a wider stretch of road to execute a turnaround, Conrad closed his eyes with relief. The hard part was over. Now all he had to do was convince Freddie that he really *was* a dangerous highwayman and she wasn't at all safe with him. Given his current state of frustrated arousal, that shouldn't be much of a challenge. He bloody well *felt* dangerous.

With the golden-orange tinge of sunset fading into the blue glow of dusk, however, his first order of business was not to frighten her, but to get them both to the shelter of the abandoned woodcutter's cottage they'd be occupying for the night. Conrad was debating the relative merits of dragging her there on foot or hoisting her over his shoulder and carrying her when she sighed gustily. He opened his eyes to find her smiling up at him, a thoroughly disconcerting and unexpected reaction given the circumstances.

"Good heavens, I thought they'd *never* leave," she said.

Then, to his horrified delight, she snaked her free arm around his neck, pulled his head down to hers, and kissed him. Soundly. Ardently. And to be quite honest, very, very badly. And he had never been more thoroughly aroused by a mere kiss in his life.

Bloody well dangerous was right.

Chapter Four



For the fulfillment of a lifelong aspiration, kissing Conrad Pearce was not quite the earth-shaking, life-altering experience Freddie had anticipated. Oh, she couldn't say it was *bad*, precisely. He certainly tasted pleasant enough—delicious even, like a lemon syllabub, she fancied, with a hint of mint—and there was nothing at all wrong with the press of his firm, muscular body against hers.

No, the trouble was that the kissing part was rather awkward. The first problem to be reckoned with was her nose...and his...and how to keep the two from bumping into each other. The second and considerably more dangerous hindrance was the way their teeth knocked together as she ground her lips fiercely into his. At this rate, she feared she might cut her lip or, worse, chip a tooth.

And of course, the foul man was doing nothing whatsoever to assist or encourage her efforts. He probably knew exactly what to do with noses and teeth at times like this, but instead of demonstrating the proper technique, he simply stood there, stiff as a block of wood, unmoving and unmoved.

Like always.

It was decidedly discouraging. Perhaps there wasn't a wild, kindred spirit hiding beneath that composed exterior, after all. Perhaps he truly was as dispassionate and imperturbable as he appeared. How...disappointing.

She was on the verge of abandoning the experiment altogether when he made a low, strangled noise at the back of his throat. Before she could make the remotest sense of what that sound might mean, he had released her wrist, wrapped both his arms around her waist, and was kissing her back.

Soundly. Ardently. And very, very skillfully.

Instead of mashing his lips directly onto hers—her own, untutored technique—he tipped his head to one side so that their mouths met on an angle, preventing further nose collisions. And though his kiss was every bit as passionate as hers had been, he communicated his fervor with lips that were soft but unyielding, gentle yet demanding.

Joy and triumph made her giddy. He *did* want her. He would never be able to deny it now. Not when his mouth plundered hers with such undisguised hunger. Not when he groaned as she parted her lips beneath his and met his exploring tongue with tentative sorties of her own. And certainly not when the ridge of his erection nudged her

abdomen, as thick and hard as the barrel of the pistol he pressed against the small of her back.

This was how she'd imagined it would be to kiss Conrad Pearce—sweet, scorching, sublime. What it was not was *satisfying*. To the contrary, the longer the kiss went on, the more needful and desperate she became.

She couldn't get close enough to him. Couldn't taste him enough, couldn't touch him enough. Her skin felt too tight, her breasts were achy and tingling, and the delicate flesh between her legs grew swollen and damp. She had always imagined that kissing was an end to itself, an act to be enjoyed purely on its own merits; now she understood it was simply a prelude. And more importantly, why gentlemen didn't kiss respectable young ladies unless they intended to marry them.

Because she knew where this was leading. Even a sheltered, well-bred girl couldn't grow up in Lancashire, surrounded by sheep and sheepdogs, without gaining a rudimentary grasp of the mechanics of mating, and Freddie had been neither sheltered nor particularly well-bred. She'd simply never considered the possibility that kissing—which neither sheep nor sheepdogs did, after all—would make her want more. Much, much more.

But it did. The idea of Conrad bending her over, thrusting that utterly male part of his anatomy inside of her was strangely appealing. Thrilling, even. The mere thought of being so completely at his mercy, of being impaled and possessed by him, made her heart beat like thunder. The sound was so deafening, it seemed to come not from inside her, but outside, like horses bearing down on her at tremendous speed. Even the earth beneath her feet shook.

Without warning, Conrad wrenched his mouth from hers. Freddie released a frustrated sigh at the abrupt and unexpected loss.

"Bloody hell," he cursed, this time giving no thought to disguising his voice behind the broad accent he'd feigned earlier. He squinted down the road in the direction of Garstang.

Her frustration evaporated. There really *were* horses bearing down on them at tremendous speed. The coach must have made a wide enough point in the road to turn around and was now headed back to Barrowcreek Park at a breakneck pace. Although she could not yet see the carriage, thanks to the small bend in the road a hundred yards or so distant, she could unquestionably hear and feel its approach.

In seconds, they would be caught and her one chance to make Conrad Pearce see that they were meant for each other would be lost.

Fortunately, Conrad seemed to be thinking the same thing. Well, perhaps not about being meant for each other, but about being caught.

"Move. Now," he ordered, yanking her in the direction of the trees.

The horses came into view just as Conrad and Freddie reached the edge of the road. She squeaked with surprise as he all but threw her to the ground and then rolled her through the twigs and sticks that littered the forest floor into a small depression a few feet away.

They came to rest there, her on top, in the most intimate of embraces. He might as well have been naked, for she could feel every sinewy muscle of his body in this position. The sensation made her squirm, and she lifted her head to look down at him, wondering if he was as affected as she.

His hand closed around the back of her head to prevent her from raising it further. "For the love of God, keep your head down and stop wriggling about."

She grinned at the strained edge of his voice, for although it might have been due to irritation and not arousal, the stiff shaft prodding her belly argued otherwise. Still, she did as he bid. Any movement might make them visible.

The coach thundered past without stopping. Conrad exhaled sharply, and she realized he'd been holding his breath.

Several minutes passed before he allowed her to move. When he did, it was unfortunately not to pick up where they'd left off, but to push her off him, rise to his feet, and pull her rather unceremoniously to hers. After brushing the detritus from his clothing while she did the same, he took her by the hand and led her further into the trees.

"Where are we going?"

"Shelter." He didn't look at her as he said the word, and she noted he was making an effort to disguise his voice again. But why? Did he really think she didn't know who he was? That she would have kissed a complete stranger, to say nothing of a complete stranger who also happened to be a criminal?

Well, perhaps he did. It wasn't as if everyone didn't expect Winifred Langston to do the unexpected, not to mention the outrageous. If anyone would kiss a ruthless highwayman who'd just kidnapped her, she supposed it would be her. Or at least, Conrad Pearce might well believe that.

She had known, of course, that the highwayman was Conrad from the moment he'd

poked that ridiculously oversized pistol into the coach. All right, to be fair, she hadn't *known* then, but she had suspected. Although he'd done a more than credible job of disguising his voice, and the mask obscured his features quite adequately, his build and bearing had seemed immediately familiar to her. She'd spent years studying him, after all; she ought to recognize him anywhere.

Still, she hadn't truly been sure until he'd yanked her from the carriage and she'd landed against him. Then she'd *known*. Another man might share his size, his shape, even his posture, but no other man could have his smell—a combination of cloves and bergamot with a rich, buttery undertone that was his and his alone. At that moment, she'd made up her mind to go along with it, to pretend she didn't know who was kidnapping her and why.

Nash had undoubtedly devised the entire scheme with the intention of frightening her into behaving in a more ladylike manner. Which was, of course, absurd. It was a demonstrable fact that wearing gowns and sewing samplers didn't make one any less likely to be attacked by brigands. But she had learned long ago that men rarely thought logically when it came to persuading women, primarily because they mistakenly believed women were illogical. Like most women, however, Freddie was perfectly capable of logic, and that capacity compelled her to thoroughly consider her next course of action.

As she trudged alongside Conrad toward whatever shelter he had devised for them, she debated the relative merits of admitting that she had recognized him at the outset versus continuing to pretend she had no idea who he was. On the one hand, she hated allowing him to believe she would have kissed him if he were anyone but...well, him. On the other, however, if he knew she was aware of what he and her brother were up to, he might reasonably conclude there was no point in keeping her through the night. He would take her back to Barrowcreek tonight, and that would be the end of it. Her one opportunity would be just as squandered as if they'd been caught on the road in a torrid embrace by Walter and Thomas.

In point of fact, she could think of no scenario in which telling the truth would be to her advantage. Moreover, if it ever became to her advantage, she could always confess then.

Her mind made up, her step lightened. As she picked her way through the thick undergrowth, working hard to keep up with Conrad's longer stride, she almost laughed as she tried to imagine making the same trek as a properly be-gowned and be-slippered young lady. She'd have long ago snagged her skirts to rags and worn through the soles of her shoes. Really, if a woman were to be kidnapped by brigands, she would be wise to wear breeches and a sensible pair of boots for the occasion.

The forest suddenly opened into a clearing in the center of which stood a small, weathered stone cottage. The door had once been a dark shade of green, but the paint was now mostly peeled away, revealing the gnarled oak surface beneath. It hung at a slightly odd angle, and the only visible window was boarded over. Given the size of the saplings that grew up hither and thither, the cottage hadn't been inhabited in years. The newly thatched roof and a stack of freshly split firewood near the door—enough for one night—were the only evidence of recent occupation. That, and the thin wisp of smoke curling from the whitewashed chimney.

It was all rather...quaint. Some might even say romantic.

Freddie cast a sidelong glance at Conrad. "This is our shelter for the night?" she asked dubiously.

Although his expression was unreadable beneath the mask, she knew he mistook the reason for her incredulity when he answered, "Not quite the luxury accommodations yer used to, but I reckon ye'll survive one night."

She opened her mouth to say that she thought it looked quite luxurious indeed under the circumstances, but then quickly clamped down on the thought. The last thing she wanted to do was give him any reason to suspect she might be onto the game. Certainly, she should not point out that if his goal was to convince her she was in grave peril, he'd have done better to choose a place that seemed a bit more threatening to spend the night.

Once he let her inside and closed the door behind them, however, she was forced to revise her opinion. The single room was dimly illuminated by the glow of the dying fire and two lamps, one of which sat atop a rickety wooden table framed by two equally rickety wooden chairs. The other lamp sat in the far corner on an inverted wooden crate next to the only other piece of furniture—although it was stretching the definition of the word to call a mattress piled with blankets *furniture*.

One mattress, not two. Which could only mean he did not intend for both of them to sleep on a mattress. And she had a strong suspicion she knew which of them would be afforded that luxury.

Her gaze darted back to the table, and apprehension curled in her stomach as she realized that what she'd initially taken for a crumpled linen cloth was in fact a sturdy-looking length of rope.

As if reading the direction of her thoughts, Conrad gestured toward one of the chairs. "Sit."

Her stomach churned in earnest now. It seemed the time to tell the truth had come already. She could scarcely seduce him if she were tied to a chair. And although the seduction would be just as thwarted by the truth, she would prefer—all things being equal—not to spend the night in such an uncomfortable position. If all was lost, she would prefer to mourn her defeat in the comfort of her own bed.

Still, she hesitated. There must be *something* she could do to prevent this from being the end of everything.

“Sit,” he repeated, impatience threading his voice with steel. As he spoke, he reached for the rope, making no secret of his design.

Did he really think she would give in so easily? Without a fight? Perhaps he did, given that she had cooperated so readily with the kidnapping, but he didn’t know her nearly as well as she had always imagined if he thought she’d permit anyone to tie her up without a fight. Not even a *real* highwayman.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “No.”

“Sit in the chair, Miss Langston. Now.” The words were both soft and menacing.

She’d never heard him speak with such deadly calm, and it sent a shiver down her spine that was half apprehension, half anticipation. She cursed the mask that obscured his features and expression. Without them, she was operating purely on instinct. If she was wrong, if she misread the signs that told her he was fighting not anger or annoyance but desire, she would regret forever what she was about to do.

Then again, when had Freddie Langston ever allowed the possibility of regret or consequences to interfere with her decisions? The answer, of course, was never—or practically never, at any rate—and this was hardly the time to start.

Licking her suddenly parched lips, she dove into these uncharted waters head first. “Make me.”

He took a step toward her, the rope dangling from the fingers of his left hand. “Make you? With pleasure.”

Chapter Five



In some murky, rational corner of his mind, Conrad knew he shouldn't take the bait any more than he should have participated in that kiss she'd so enthusiastically pressed on him. Or, more accurately, on the man she believed was her kidnapper, for he had yet to see any evidence that she recognized him.

He could think of no reason she would not have called his bluff by now if she knew. Freddie Langston seldom passed on an opportunity to make a mockery of the males in her life, and she would find nothing more amusing than calling him out on this absurd charade if she had unmasked it. Not to mention, he was the last man on earth she would kiss on purpose; she had made it apparent on more than one occasion that she found him stiff and stuffy and self-righteous.

Stiff wasn't half wrong, he thought with a mental grimace.

That was the worst part, wasn't it? Even believing he was a highwayman who had kidnapped her for ransom, Freddie Langston was still trying to work her wiles on him. She had never met a man she couldn't bend to her will, and had yet to be shown there might be one out there who wouldn't crumble like a tea cake in the face of her machinations.

Nash had been right about one thing: for the sake of her own safety, his sister needed to learn that sometimes the safest and best thing to do was to obey.

He advanced. She backed away. He reached for her wrist and grabbed air. From the opposite side of the table, she threw him a saucy grin. Since chasing her with the table between them would be pointless, he picked it up, lantern and all, and set it to one side. At that maneuver, her eyes widened with what might be genuine alarm.

There was no place for her to go but past him, for only a few feet of floor space separated them from the fireplace. Confident of claiming his prize, he stood perfectly still before pouncing...only to trip over the chair she toppled in front of him as she sprinted past him toward the other side of the room.

If he had been less irritated—and less bruised—by her trick, he might have made more of the fact that she did not head for the door. Instead, he disentangled himself from the chair, righted it, and glared at her.

And rather wished he hadn't.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was beginning, as it always did, to escape the

confines of her cap. Black, wispy tendrils clung to her forehead and curled along her jaw line. His fingers vibrated with the need to brush those curls aside and replace them with his lips. He wanted to wrench the fool cap from her head and release the rest of those dark, heavy tresses. Most of all, he ached to strip the mannish attire from her body and take her right there on the mattress, without pretense or decency, until he quenched his depraved desire to have her.

No matter how hard Freddie Langston tried to look like a boy—and even tried to be *named* like a boy—she was a lady. Not to mention a virgin. And virginal ladies must be wedded, then bedded, not the reverse. Moreover, they must be bedded gently and sweetly, preferably with their shifts bunched up around their waists while they lay beneath the covers, enduring and thinking of England. A man satisfied his need for earthier pleasures with a courtesan or his mistress, not his wife.

Besides, Conrad's purpose here was to discipline her, not debauch her. And thus far, judging by her expression, he was making a shambles of it.

Standing with her legs slightly apart and her hands resting on her hips, she met his gaze steadily, her dark eyes glittering with triumph. She thought she'd beaten him. That he would simply fold up his tent and give up without a fight because she'd managed to escape him once. Which was exactly why it was imperative for him not only to persevere, but to win. To demonstrate to her, once and for all, that she couldn't best every man in the world with a bit of trickery and surfeit of confidence.

This time, he didn't hesitate; she could scarcely widen her eyes in surprise before he leapt forward and grabbed her by the elbows.

This time he did what he'd considered on the road and threw her over his shoulder. She pounded his back with her fists and wriggled in a furious effort to escape, all to no avail. When he reached his destination, he shifted her from his shoulder to his lap as he sat on the chair she'd so recently toppled. He settled her across his thighs, face down.

"What are you doing?" she cried, twisting to look over her shoulder at him.

He smiled grimly. "What someone should have done long ago."

"You can't mean to..." she gasped, but before she could finish the sentence, he raised his hand and brought it down across the firm swell of her buttocks. She jerked and let out a squeal that sounded more outraged than pained.

"I don't merely mean to," he said coolly, "*I am.*"

He demonstrated the truth of his words by delivering another open-palmed blow to her

sweetly rounded arse, and then another and another. She squirmed and struggled, but he continued until he was certain her white cheeks must be reddened with the imprint of his hand. The sound of his hand slapping against her flesh filled him with a profound sense of satisfaction. He had feared losing control in this moment—when he at last had her at his mercy—but instead, he was filled with an almost preternatural calm.

For once, he'd bested her. For once, he'd left his mark on her, however temporarily, instead of the other way around.

His mission complete, he was preparing to shift her from his lap and into the chair when she whispered a single, muffled word.

"Please."

"Had enough, have you?" He chuckled to himself. She was probably more shocked by the fact that he'd managed to catch her than by the spanking itself.

"No," she panted, shaking her head. "Please, don't stop."

Conrad froze, certain he'd either misheard or misunderstood her. "What?"

She shifted her hips, causing a spontaneous and near-painful rush of blood to his nether parts.

"Don't stop. It makes me feel...tingly and warm." As she spoke, she tightened and relaxed the muscles in her thighs reflexively in what he recognized as an attempt to heighten the sensation she was feeling.

Arousal.

The space between his ears roared. He'd engaged in "games" of this sort with a number of intrepid—and *expensive*—courtesans in the past, but their spirited participation could hardly be considered entirely genuine, let alone spontaneous. Yet, unbelievably, lying arse-up across his lap and clearly *enjoying* being disciplined, was the woman for whom all the others had been proxies. The one woman he had always longed to capture and tame and possess. Because, when it came to it, the only woman worth having on her knees was the one who would be the greatest challenge to get there.

It was that thought that gave him pause. This was too easy. Now it was Freddie who seemed to be giving in without a fight, and Conrad knew her better than that.

She was clever and resourceful. Perhaps she was *feigning* desire in an attempt to throw him—her kidnapper, he amended mentally—off his stride and gain the upper hand. It was, in fact, exactly the sort of trick he would expect from her.

Well, it wouldn't work. There was, after all, an easy way to call her bluff.

He pushed her from his lap. "Stand up and take off your breeches," he ordered.

Rising from the floor where he had unceremoniously dumped her, she blinked her confusion. "You want me to do what?"

Crossing his legs at the ankle, he leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. The chair wobbled slightly at the change in his weight. "Remove your breeches. Drawers, too, if you've got any on."

"But..." She worried her lower lip, her brows drawn together in disbelief. "You mean, now?"

He was amused by her sudden loss of bravado. It seemed she had been quite prepared to woo her kidnapper into treating her more gently, but now that he appeared likely to take her invitation to the logical conclusion, she was considerably less sure of herself.

Perhaps *now* she would finally understand why her provocative clothing and behavior were so bloody dangerous. They made a man imagine things he shouldn't. Do things he oughtn't.

Maybe now she would realize just how much trouble she was in and let him tie her up in the chair for the night as he had planned. She wouldn't be all that much more uncomfortable there until dawn than he would be on the mattress. There was certainly no chance he would sleep a wink tonight. Not with his cock at full attention and his mind filled with images—both real and fictitious, though every bit as vivid—he'd likely never banish.

"Oh yes," he said firmly, nodding. "Now."

"Very well, then. If you insist."

It was Conrad's turn to stare in disbelief. She couldn't mean to... She wasn't actually *going* to...

But she did, and she was.

Worse yet, he couldn't look away. Not when she bent over and pulled off her boots one by one, revealing the taut curve of each shapely calf. Not when she straightened and unbuttoned the fall of her breeches with steady, confident fingers. And certainly not when she slid her thumbs beneath the waist of those breeches and dragged them downward, briefly exposing the creamy white flesh of her hips and the triangle of dark curls at the apex of her thighs before her white shirt draped down to cover them. Last to

appear was the sleek musculature of her thighs, honed by years of tree-climbing and horseback riding to a sinewy leanness that might have seemed boyish were it not so easy to imagine those long, slender limbs wrapped around his waist while he buried himself inside her.

Heat suffused him as she stood and tossed the breeches to the floor. No drawers. With the tails of her coat hanging down behind her and her shirt front reaching to mid-thigh, she seemed not a whit perturbed by her state of undress. And God help him if she wasn't the loveliest, most desirable creature he'd ever seen in his life. In all his lurid dreams, he'd never conjured her up to be as half as beautiful as she truly was.

"What now?" she asked, her tone as placid as if she were asking him the time of day.

So much for calling her bluff.

He cleared his throat. For better or worse, he had to finish what he'd started. "Come here."

She took two steps closer but remained just out of arm's reach. Saucy minx. She had to know he meant close enough for him to touch her.

"Closer." He made her come all the way to him, until their knees almost bumped.

"What are you going to do?" Her voice quavered a little now.

Conrad closed his eyes and steeled himself. "I'm going to find out if you were telling the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"About how you felt when I spanked you."

Her expression turned quizzical. "How are you going to...?"

He didn't give her time to finish the question. Actions spoke louder than words, after all.

After nudging her bare thighs apart with his hands, he slid one palm up between them. As soon as his fingers met the dewy, petal-soft flesh at her core, he knew. She hadn't been feigning anything; her pussy was slick and the scent of her arousal permeated the air like a heady perfume. Her clitoris so swollen that she gasped, her knees wobbling, as he grazed the small bud with his fingertip.

Conrad couldn't suppress a groan of pleasure—or was it agony?—at this discovery. If a spanking could bring her to such a heightened state of arousal, what would happen if

he touched her like a lover? If he were to strip her of the rest of her clothes, lay her on the mattress, and explore every inch of her glorious body at his leisure? But the question hardly needed asking, for the answer was apparent in the haze of need darkening her eyes until they were almost black and in the rush of moisture that greeted his continued exploration of her most forbidden territory.

He couldn't—shouldn't—take advantage of her desire for him. A desire that wasn't even for *him*. The knowledge that it wasn't he, Conrad Pearce, she was responding to, but a stranger, a criminal who was holding her hostage, should have been enough to dampen his own arousal to cold, wet ashes. Perversely, the knowledge inflamed him, because for as long as she believed he was a ruthless highwayman and not the safe, familiar neighbor she'd known since childhood, she was his to command.

His to use as he saw fit.

Conrad prided himself on his self-control. On his ability to keep a tight rein on his emotions, on his mental faculties, on his physical responses. He never fully surrendered; even in the throes of passion, there was always a part of himself he kept locked away. It was safer that way. He *liked* it that way.

Or so he'd always believed. Until now. Because when the thread of his control snapped and he admitted to himself the futility of resisting the inevitable, he wasn't sorry. Instead, he was glad. Relieved, even.

Tonight, he was finally going to have Winifred Langston in every crass, carnal way he'd ever dreamed. Naked and spread out beneath him like a banquet, her hips lifting to meet his every thrust as he made her come for him, again and again. Naked and astride him, riding his cock with the same abandon she rode her horse. Naked and on her knees while he took her from behind, tunneling inside her until he pierced her wild and reckless heart. Until she was his.

Only tomorrow would he consider the possible consequences of possessing a force of nature.

Chapter Six



The moment of Conrad's surrender was one Freddie was sure she would remember—and cherish—for the rest of her life. She hadn't been sure she could manage it. Even when she was taking off her breeches, preparing to offer herself to him, she'd doubted her ability to breach his reserve and make him throw caution to the wind. Even when he'd slipped his fingers between her thighs and groaned with undisguised delight, she'd wondered if he would finally be able to unleash the truest angels of his nature.

The angels that were devils.

But when, instead of removing his hand from her sex and pushing her away as she feared he might, he began to stroke her sensitive, swollen flesh in earnest, she knew she had won.

"God help me," he muttered thickly, "but I can't keep my bloody hands off you."

Exultation ballooned inside her, making her chest ache and her skin tighten almost painfully. She felt as if exhilaration would turn her inside out.

He couldn't keep his hands off her. *Conrad Pearce* couldn't keep his hands off her. The man who never did anything without weighing the risks and benefits, who never took an action without considering the consequences, couldn't stop himself from touching her.

He wasn't going to stop. Not until he'd finished what he'd started, and if she didn't entirely understand what that meant beyond the most rudimentary mechanics, she didn't particularly care. She wanted whatever he wanted, however he wanted it.

"Open your legs wider." The command rumbled from somewhere deep in his throat, dark and insistent and a little menacing. As if he would force her to his will if she failed to do as he ordered. The fact that the mask still concealed all of his face save his mouth and chin, preventing her from reading the emotions in his expression, only heightened the sense of danger.

Fortunately, Freddie loved danger. Thrived on it, even.

Although her legs had gone liquid and were therefore disobliging, she managed to maintain her balance while spreading them farther apart. Immediately, he slid his free hand behind her, seized a handful of her still-stinging backside, and angled her hips toward him. The position was awkward and difficult to maintain, but before she could voice an objection, he leaned forward and buried his face *there*.

Yes, *there!* Her eyes widened with shock, but she didn't once consider pulling away or putting a stop to it.

At first, he merely nuzzled the curls at the apex of her thighs, a gesture that seemed indulgent, even sweet. Just when she thought, with some disappointment, that this was all he meant to do, one of his fingers found her entrance and plunged inside. And then...oh God...and then, his tongue delved in between the folds and traced circles over and around that tiny, aching bead of flesh.

Her knees threatened to buckle, and she clawed for his shoulders to steady herself. What on earth was he thinking, doing such a thing? It was appalling, scandalous, indecent!

And if he stopped, she would kill him.

She arched her hips to meet his tongue and fingers, her entire body trembling with the unfamiliar pressure building inside her. Not that she hadn't touched herself there before. She had, and she knew that the pressure would climb and climb until it eventually broke apart into a pleasurable release. But nothing she had experienced alone could compare to the sensations he evoked. Everything was hotter, brighter, sharper. The climax, when it came, might tear her apart.

Digging her fingers harder into his shoulders, she clung to him for what was surely her life as the tension rose to something very near agony. The slapping sounds of his finger moving in and out of her and the wetness of his tongue sliding over her flesh were both obscene and desperately, terribly exciting. She feared equally that it would end and that it would never end.

But, of course, it did end. Suddenly and violently. The first tremor took her by sneak attack, and then there was no stopping the rest. Defenseless against the onslaught, she twisted her hips in an effort to prolong the siege as wave after wave of pleasure shook her. Just when she thought it was over, Conrad added a second finger to the one already filling her, and another surge engulfed her, briefer but more intense than the first.

Her body was still shuddering with tiny aftershocks when he lifted his head, slipped his fingers from her body, and wiped his arm across his mouth. "Take off everything else," he ordered. "I want you naked when I fuck you."

Fuck. The word was wicked and evocative. She'd thought herself wrung out, incapable of being aroused again. She was wrong.

With trembling fingers, she shed her coat and waistcoat and then began to remove her

cravat. He sat in the chair, unmoving, his gaze—hooded by the mask—fixed on her. She paused when the length of linen was halfway undone.

“Aren’t you going to undress, too?” she asked.

One corner of his mouth turned up. “No.”

“Oh.” She pursed her lips. Her knowledge of such matters was limited, but she felt fairly certain some degree of undress on the part of both parties was prerequisite to the undertaking.

“I told you I wanted *you* naked. That’s all you need to worry about.”

This answer did nothing to allay her confusion, but she went back to unwinding the cravat. It occurred to her that taking off men’s clothes in front of a man was strangely intimate. Not that she had the experience of taking off women’s clothing to compare it to, but nonetheless, it seemed to her they were sharing something they wouldn’t otherwise—as if her actions were a mirror for ones with which he was deeply familiar.

That impression held until she pulled the baggy white shirt off over her head, revealing the one, unmistakably feminine item of her attire. Her stays. Tied at the back, they were also the one item of clothing she could not remove herself.

“You’ll have to help me with this,” she said nervously.

He nodded and made a twirling gesture with his fingers, indicating she should turn around. She breathed a small sigh of relief and presented him with her back. There was a quick tug on the laces and the garment, which she’d had her maid do up especially tight to better conceal her figure, slid to the floor. Released from captivity, her breasts tingled and swelled as blood rushed into them, bringing her nipples to immediate and almost painful attention.

Freddie had considered her breasts little more than a nuisance since they’d blossomed, rather dramatically, to their current unwieldy size. After all, they mostly seemed only to get in the way, either by drawing attention to themselves when she dressed in ladies’ clothing—What was it about them that acted like a magnet for men’s eyes?—or by refusing to be easily concealed when she did not. But now, the ungainly beasts seemed to have some utility, for as she spun to face Conrad again, there was no mistaking the hitch in his breath when he saw her. She didn’t particularly care what other men thought of her breasts, but the fact that Conrad plainly liked them was quite gratifying.

“The cap, too.” He was growling now, impatience threading his voice.

She tugged it quickly from her head. Her hair, which had long since begun its inevitable

escape from the pins she futilely used to secure it in place, tumbled in a thick mass to the middle of her back.

For several long, unnerving seconds, he seemed content merely to look at her. She shifted from one foot to the other. Her skin prickled with nervousness. Did he expect her to *do* something? How did he imagine she would know what to do if he didn't tell her? Thus far, he'd been very precise in his directives. If the rules had changed, he ought to have warned her.

At last, he leaned forward in the chair and said, "Touch your breasts."

A pang that was equal parts lust and shame sliced through her belly and gathered in a thudding pulse between her thighs. She was already so wet there, from his saliva and her own body's fluids, it seemed impossible that she could become wetter, and yet she did.

"Don't *you* want to touch them?" Her voice, thready and breathless, hardly sounded like her own.

His lips curved in a smile that could only be described as wicked. "I want to watch you touch them first."

"But...why?" It was all so mysterious and confusing, this play between men and women. Nothing at all like she had imagined.

He shrugged. "Because I do. There doesn't have to be a reason."

Swallowing her embarrassment, she slowly brought her hands to her breasts, cupping them lightly in her palms.

"Squeeze them and push them together."

A pulse ticked between her thighs as she followed his instruction.

"Brush your thumbs over the nipples."

The hardened, sensitive peaks tightened even more than before.

"Good." His breathing had become slightly more irregular, and he rested his hand over the bulge in his breeches. "Now pinch them."

Freddie gasped as a white-hot bolt of need shot from her nipples to her sex. Closing her eyes, she plucked at them even more aggressively, twisting them between her fingers, and was rewarded with an even stronger pulse of sensation than before.

It had never occurred to her before now that her breasts could be such a center of pleasure. Her gaze shot to Conrad's masked face.

"How did you know?" she asked, a bit chagrined by the discovery that he understood something about her body that she herself did not.

"Experience," he responded gruffly. "My experience also tells me that you're ready to be fucked. And I'm certainly well past ready to fuck you."

He lifted his hand from his crotch. While she'd been plucking at her nipples, he'd unbuttoned the fall of his breeches and freed his shaft from his drawers. And dear Lord, it looked *huge*, far larger than she'd imagined when she'd felt it pressed against her belly.

How on earth was *that* going to fit inside her? No wonder women were advised to close their eyes and think of England when they did their marital duty. It was a marvel, really, that any woman allowed her husband anywhere near her bed after the wedding night.

For the first time, a tremor of actual fear wound its way down Freddie's spine. Up to now, she'd been in for a pound, but now she wasn't so sure. Not when the pounding in question involved *that*.

"Are you afraid I'm going to hurt you?" Conrad asked.

Her expression had clearly communicated her thoughts. "How can you not? It's...too big, surely."

He chuckled. "I'm flattered, but I can assure you, it is far from too big. A woman's body is made to take a man's cock, even one larger than mine, and while it may hurt when I first breach your maidenhead, I promise you will feel nothing but pleasure after that."

"I don't know..." She bit her lip. "What if it doesn't stop hurting?"

"I'll make you a promise. If it doesn't stop hurting, I'll stop fucking you."

"Really?" She was dubious. From what she had gleaned from some of the conversations she'd overheard her brothers engage in, once the act had begun, men were reluctant to stop if not incapable of stopping before reaching the conclusion.

"Yes, really. But maybe it would also reassure you to become a little better acquainted with this fellow first. It's not nearly as formidable as you think. Come here and take it in your hand."

Her arousal, which had been momentarily dampened by her trepidation, resumed its ticking pulse between her thighs. She *did* want to touch him. She was fascinated by the way this part of his anatomy jutted, so tall and proud, away from his body, as though it were a living, breathing creature with a mind of its own.

Tentatively, she placed her fingers on him. To her surprise, his flesh was silky smooth, almost velvety, especially toward the tip. Intrigued, she wrapped her palm around the shaft, marveling that it could feel both hard and soft at once. As she slid her hand along the length, up toward that downy head, he let out a low groan and a tiny droplet of fluid appeared in the slit at the peak. Curious, she dragged her thumb over the liquid, which she found to be fine and slippery.

“Take it in your mouth. The wetter we both are, the less pain there’ll be.”

That made sense, but Freddie didn’t need a rationale for doing what he told her. For reasons she had no interest in examining, she loved following his directives. The more wicked and wanton his demands seemed, the more she enjoyed complying with them.

She dropped to her knees, and he spread his thighs to allow her better access. As she parted her lips, he threaded his fingers into her hair and guided her down. He smelled earthy but tasted of the ocean...and of wild, delicious sin. She didn’t resist when he forced her to take his entire length, until the downy head rested at the back of her throat, and then pulled her up again. And then again, mimicking in reverse the action of his fingers thrusting inside her earlier. She understood the drive instinctively and tightened her lips as he worked her mouth up and down along his shaft.

Perhaps his hand in her hair and his control of her motions should have made her feel helpless and constrained, but she had never felt more powerful or triumphant. She loved the way his cock pulsed and surged beneath her tongue, rather like an excited puppy seeking her attention and affection. She loved the taste of him—bitter and salt and *man*. Most of all, she loved the certainty that she was giving him pleasure. As much as he had given her.

She tightened her lips and pressed her tongue harder against the ridged underside of his shaft, determined to bring him to completion. For a few seconds, he allowed her to take the lead, but then he groaned and halted her movements.

She gave him a reluctant frown when he pulled her away. “Why did you stop me?”

“As much as I’d love to come in your mouth, I promised to fuck you, and if we keep this up, I won’t be able to. At least not as soon as I’d like to.”

“Oh.” Since she had no idea what he meant, she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

His lips twitched as he suppressed a smile. He obviously knew how confused she was, but he also clearly had no intention of relieving of her ignorance. "Straddle my lap."

Her apprehension returned, but she remembered his assurance that the pain would be less if they were both wet, and at this point, that was definitely the case. She got up from the floor and spread her legs so she could sit on his lap. He cupped her buttocks, and she winced as the contact revived the sting of the spanking.

"Hurts?" he asked.

"A little."

He shifted his hands to her hips and positioned her so that the tip of his cock rested just *there*. "I'll give you something else to think about."

She had no time to reconsider the wisdom of what she was about to permit. In a single, swift motion, he pressed her down onto his shaft as he thrust upward. The pain was sharp and immediate, but surprisingly brief. There was a tearing, burning sensation but then, almost as soon as she registered the discomfort, it was gone, replaced by a glorious fullness and the burgeoning ache of renewed desire.

Something else to think about, indeed. She closed her eyes and let out a little moan that was part satisfaction, part impatience. As delicious as this was, she knew there was more. And she wanted to experience all of it.

"Do you wish me to stop?" he asked, his tone both solicitous and taut with barely leashed desire. He would stop if she told him to. But he wouldn't like it if she did.

Fortunately, she was breathless and so needful she would die if he stopped. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Please fuck me, Con."

Chapter Seven



Please fuck me, Con.

Con. The shortened version of his name she always used when she teased him. Which was often.

Bloody hell, she *knew*. Had known all along.

He should stop. Right this second. She'd played him just like she played every man in her life.

Except, of course, he could no more stop himself from making love to her than he could stop himself from breathing. Now that he was inside her, it would take an act of God to keep him from finishing. He wasn't even certain that he would have stopped if she had asked him to. Despite his promise.

He slid his palms beneath her arse and began to fuck her, keeping his movements slow and shallow at first in deference to her innocence. Although her maidenhead had given way with less difficulty than he'd anticipated—But then, what did he know about maidenheads?—he suspected she would experience some residual tenderness, at least to begin with.

Conrad would have liked to believe that he was a thoughtful, considerate lover. That he waited until her desire matched his own to increase the speed and depth of his thrusts. The truth was, he was merely lucky that she was as aroused and impatient as he. Already, he could feel her muscles squeezing him, signaling her impending release. And not a moment too soon, because his own orgasm was near, tightening his balls, pulling at his cock.

Her head drooped back, her eyes closed, lips parted. He had never seen a woman more fully surrender herself to the act, and he was filled with a profound sense of both duty and desire. When she came, it would be fierce and beautiful.

And he would be responsible for her pleasure. He ought to be furious with her for her deception, but he wasn't. Instead, he was grateful. Even relieved. Oh, not that she'd pretended not to recognize him, but that she had recognized him. That it was him she had chosen, not some nameless, faceless stranger.

"Kiss me, Freddie," he demanded. "Kiss me when you come."

She raised her head and opened her eyes. They were dark and glassy with passion. He

thought perhaps she hadn't fully understood his words, but then she leaned forward and pressed her sweet, hot mouth against his.

He took her without mercy now, pounding into her untried pussy while their tongues fought a winning battle with one another. Her muscles tightened then spasmed as she fell apart into a climax that was every bit as violent and glorious as he'd imagined it would be. He followed her within seconds, his balls clenching and releasing as he poured his soul into her body along with his seed.



Conrad pulled off the hot, itchy highwayman's mask with a sigh of relief. After wearing it for hours, he had considerably more respect for the restraint of the bandits plying the English countryside. The fact that they bothered wearing the cursed things to conceal their identities rather than simply shooting everyone they robbed seemed almost like a form of charity.

Freddie gasped, widening her eyes and dropping her jaw. "Conrad!"

He rolled his eyes at her blatant attempt to feign surprise. Did she really think he didn't know? That she could pull the wool over his eyes again?

"Don't try to play me for a fool, Winifred Langston. You've known all along it was me."

She licked her lips. "Oh. I said your name, didn't I?" Her cheeks pinkened as she clearly remembered what she'd said when she'd let her knowledge slip.

He wished he could say the effect was not becoming. That it didn't make him want to fuck her all over again.

"Yes."

"Are you *very* angry?" She winced as she asked the question, although he wasn't sure whether this was due to guilt or sore muscles as she unwound herself from his lap.

He tucked his slackening cock into his fall. "No. But I'd like to know why you didn't tell me you knew."

"Because if I had, you'd have taken me straight home to Nash." She turned her back to him and walked to the mattress as she spoke.

The glorious half-moons of her arse still bore his mark in the form of fading red handprints. As she bent over to retrieve a blanket from the mattress, he caught a glimpse of her pussy lips, still swollen and glistening with the juices of their

lovemaking. His desire, which should have been slaked for hours, roared back to life. When she wrapped the off-white woolen blanket around her shoulders, concealing her nudity, he wasn't sure whether he was regretful or grateful.

She spun to face him again. "If you'd taken me home, none of this would ever have happened. And I wanted this to happen, Conrad. More than I've ever wanted anything."

He couldn't allow the triumph that pulsed through him at her declaration to divert him from his purpose. "And what if you were wrong? What if it hadn't been me?"

"But I wasn't wrong, was I? So why bring it up?"

His fall once again buttoned, he pushed out of the chair and crossed to where she stood. "Because you could have been. Because I might actually have been someone who meant you harm."

She smiled and shook her head. "But I could never be wrong when it comes to you, Conrad Pearce. I've wanted you half my life. I'd know you anywhere, anytime, in any guise."

All the things he meant to say and do fell away with that simple admission. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. And when he was done kissing her, he drew her down to the mattress and made love to her. For the rest of the night.

For the rest of his life.

What had he done?

Chapter Eight



"We'll be married as soon as the banns can be read, of course."

Freddie stopped tucking in her shirttails and shot a glance at Conrad, who sat in one of the two chairs they'd made such wonderful use of during the night, pulling on his boots. His expression was as resigned as his tone.

He was going to marry her because he felt he *had* to, not because he wanted to. Not because he loved her. The buoyancy went out her heart as if it were a boat taking on water.

"Unless you'd rather we went to London and got a special license," he added quickly when he caught her frown. "If you're with child, time is of the essence."

Those words, delivered with such stoicism, blew a hole clean through the deck of her former contentment.

What a fool she'd been to think that *fucking* him—she would do well to remember that course term for sexual congress and not the sweeter ones like *lovemaking*—would change how he felt about her. She had three brothers, for heaven's sake. If anyone should know how little the physical act meant to most men, it was she. Although her brothers undoubtedly thought she was unaware of their dalliances with women of uncertain virtue, she wasn't blind or stupid, and they weren't as careful as they thought. None of them had ever been moved to a romantic impulse by a simple tumble in the hay.

Why should Conrad be any different? Except that, damn it, he *was* different, and last night had been anything but simple. Despite her inexperience, she knew their coupling had been nothing short of extraordinary.

Apparently, the only one of them that mattered to was her. It wasn't the emotional intensity of what they'd shared that moved him to propose marriage, but guilt that he had "ruined" her.

She almost snorted with incredulity at the notion that such a glorious experience could ruin anyone. The only thing that would ruin her would be to marry the man she loved when he didn't love her in return.

"That won't be necessary." She finished shoving her shirt into her breeches and donned her waistcoat, attacking the buttons with furious speed. Maybe if she ignored the lump growing in her throat, it would disappear.

Conrad got to his feet, his expression brightening a bit. "That would be preferable, but only if you are certain you don't mind the stigma of an eight-month babe. People *will* talk. It will be difficult explaining why we want a special license to your brother, but—"

"I mean it won't be necessary for us to marry at all."

He looked for all the world as though she had slapped him. His features slackened with shock and confusion, and his mouth opened and closed in a classic imitation of a fish out of water. It was as if he simply couldn't believe that she would refuse him. As if he thought himself a prize so exquisite he was worth winning at any price.

His jaw flexed, and his eyes hardened to a steely, implacable gray. "Of course, we must marry. After last night, we have no other choice. Surely you realize that."

She stooped to pick up her coat, knowing her face would flame when she said the words that had formed in her mind. "So you marry every woman you fuck?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Then I see no reason why I must marry every man I fuck."

He was upon her in two steps. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he forced her upright so she had no choice but to look into his face. "I'm the *only* man you've fucked."

If she wasn't careful, she might have allowed the fierce possessiveness and pride in his tone to seduce her into believing he wasn't demanding that she marry him out of a misguided sense of responsibility. She might even have allowed herself to fancy that he was only using that responsibility as an excuse to get what he truly wanted.

But for once in her life, Freddie was determined to be careful.

She shrugged out of his grasp. "All the more reason we should not wed, then. You have an unfair advantage in fucking and not marrying."

"Stop saying that word."

Her coat half on, she blinked at him innocently. "Marry?"

"No, damn it. *Fuck*. Stop saying *fuck*."

"Why? You said it last night. Multiple times, as I recall."

"That was different." He had the grace to flush.

She yanked on the other sleeve of her coat, a little harder than she intended. "Very well. What word would you prefer I used?"

That struck him speechless.

"No alternatives?" When he only looked at her helplessly, she continued, "In that case, since you have apparently not felt the need to marry any of the other women you have previously fucked..."

She thought she heard him moan. Good. A little pain served him right. Although she was becoming rather frightfully comfortable saying the word, to be honest.

"...I see no reason that you need to marry me, either."

"You could be with child. My child."

"And none of the other women could have been?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

He raked his fingers through his hair. She probably should not have taken quite as much delight as she did in watching him ruffle it. "I didn't say that. Stop twisting my words. You know very well that none of those women were like you."

"You mean they were the sorts of ladies who work in Miss May's Pleasure Palace, and therefore they could have no expectations."

"Yes," he said triumphantly, no doubt convinced he had won the argument. "Precisely."

"Well, then you will be pleased to know that I have no expectations, either. You needn't marry me on that account."

Conrad exploded. "The hell I needn't. You're a young lady of quality, Winifred Langston, however much you try to pretend otherwise, and for once, you're going to behave like one and do as you ought instead of as you want. And what you ought to do, when you have been as thoroughly ruined by a gentleman as you have by me, is marry him...and be grateful that he offered of his own volition."

If he wanted to rub salt into the wound he'd already cut open, he could not have chosen better, more effective words. But he also could not have chosen better, more effective words to prove that she was in the right to reject him.

Later, she would allow herself to feel the pain. For now, all she felt was an unnatural calm. A kind of emptiness, so hollow and cavernous, she might fall in and never claw her way out.

When she spoke, it seemed as if someone else was saying the words. "I am grateful for the offer, Conrad, but I still refuse it. There are only two people who know I am *ruined*,

and no one else will know unless you or I tell tales. I have no plans to do so, and I cannot imagine you are anxious to confess our sins to my brother."

"And if you have conceived a child? I will not permit our child to be born into bastardy. Not to mention that the truth would come out rather quickly."

She sighed. A pregnancy would be impossible to conceal, and Nash would soon wring the facts from her. The only thing that could be worse than marrying Conrad because he demanded it would be marrying him because her *brother* demanded it.

"We should know within a few days. If my flow does not arrive on time, then I'll send word to you."

"And you will marry me then?"

She nodded. "I am not so selfish that I would put my own desires before the best interests of my child."

Conrad swallowed and turned away. He probably didn't want her to see the relief flooding his face. And in all honesty, she couldn't bring herself to be angry at him for feeling that way. She'd pushed him last night, forced him into doing things he'd never have done without temptation. Kissing her, spanking her, and—she had to close her eyes to prevent herself from swaying with the deliciousness of the memory—fucking her.

She had fancied she was doing him a favor, giving him permission to reveal and revel in a part of his nature he felt compelled to repress. Instead, it seemed she had only managed to give him a glimpse of a side of himself he reviled. Conrad didn't long to be wilder and less inhibited, didn't secretly ache to live his life with more passion and less restraint. He *liked* being a staid, upstanding English gentleman.

Most of all, he certainly didn't long for a wife like *her*. What he wanted was a proper, well-bred lady who would wear only skirts, stitch samplers, and lie quietly beneath him while he bred his heirs upon her.

Just because she'd got him to play the part of a ruthless highwayman didn't mean that was who he wanted to be. But if he wasn't the bold, demanding lover she'd been with last night, then he wasn't the right man for her because she could no more imagine lying quietly while her husband did his business than she could imagine giving up breeches or making clean, neat stitches in a piece of cloth.

Weak, silvery light filtered in around the edges of the boarded up window. It was time to end the charade.

"It's dawn," she said. "We should be going, or Nash will wonder why we're late."

Conrad nodded as he finished knotting his cravat. Freddie's heart squeezed so tight, she feared it might have stopped beating altogether. Clad entirely in black but for the small triangle of his white shirt peeking out above his waistcoat and that blindingly white strip of linen around his throat, he was painfully handsome. Somehow, her intimate knowledge of the fine architecture of the body that lay beneath those layers of clothing only intensified his attractiveness.

She wanted nothing more than to drop to her knees in front of him, open the fall of his trousers, and take that beautiful cock of his back into her mouth. If she thought it would change his mind—if she thought it would make him love her—she would have done it.

But in her heart of hearts, she knew it would only be more proof that she wasn't the proper lady he craved. Freddie felt fairly certain that just as well-bred English roses didn't ride astride or smoke cheroots, they didn't love sucking cock or being fucked like one of Miss May's paid harlots. But Freddie did, and that wasn't going to change. Especially not now that she knew precisely how wonderful those things could be.

A wry smile touched her lips. Odd that, although she hadn't made it to Miss May's as she'd originally intended, she'd learned *exactly* what all the fuss was about when it came to mating. For that, she could not bring herself to be sorry.

Conrad started for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

He paused and looked over his shoulder at her, his brow furrowed. "I don't think so."

She pointed to the table, where his black highwayman's mask lay in crumpled ball. He had to be wearing it when he turned her over to Nash for the "ransom."

If she hadn't known better, she might have mistaken the expression that crossed his face as one of regret. She might even have imagined that he'd forgotten the mask on purpose, hoping she wouldn't notice, so that they'd be caught out.

"Oh, right," he said, nodding. "Foolish of me to forget."

He held out his hand. She tossed him the mask, which he caught and donned without further comment.

The charade was over; let the charade begin.

The one where she impersonated someone who didn't have a broken heart.

Chapter Nine



"Viscount Langston is here to see you, sir."

Startled, Conrad looked up from his morning coffee. At not even ten of the clock, it was far too early for standard social calls. Peele, the butler, made this calm announcement from the arched doorway that separated the dining room from the main hall. Pressed, polished, and proper as always, the aging servant appeared utterly unperturbed by this anomaly. But then, it was Peele's job to be unperturbed by even the most outlandish events.

Conrad took another slow sip of his coffee in an attempt to soothe his rattled nerves. It had been nine days since the night at the woodcutter's cottage. Freddie had promised that she would contact him if she suspected a pregnancy, but what if she hadn't? What if she had conceived but hadn't kept her word to let him know? If Nash had found out...

Conrad's chest felt weighted by concrete blocks. He'd trusted her promise and spent the better part of the previous week on tenterhooks, alternately hoping that she had conceived a child and that she hadn't.

He was a seething mass of contradiction on the matter. He wanted her. Ached for her. To the point that he lay awake at night, stroking himself until he was spent as he replayed every wicked moment of their encounter. He doubted he would ever again find a woman whose craving for submission and surrender seemed so perfectly to mirror his own need for domination and control.

And yet...and yet, she was still Freddie. Wild, irrepressible, intractable Winifred Langston, who always did exactly as she pleased and never obeyed anyone. Except him when he had ordered her to take off her clothes, spread her legs, suck his cock, fuck him.

Hell and damnation, he *had* to stop going there.

But that was the real problem, wasn't it? He *would* go there with her. For the rest of his life, if he married her. He would never be able to treat her like a wife; he would always treat her like a mistress. Like a whore. And that unsettled him for reasons he couldn't entirely explain, even to himself.

Added to that was Freddie herself. She might bend to his will in the bedroom, but would she be equally compliant when it came to the demands of being an aristocratic

wife? If they married, she would one day be his countess, and his countess must be a model of domestic feminine virtue. Even if Freddie consented never to wear breeches and henceforth to ride sidesaddle, he doubted she would ever fit anyone's picture of a proper English lady.

Least of all his own, because he would be fucking her every night like anything *but* a lady. How on earth could he ever reconcile that?

"Sir?" Peele repeated.

Conrad cleared his throat and set down his coffee cup. "Yes, of course. He's waiting in the front parlor?"

The butler nodded, bowed, and turned to depart.

"Er, Peele?"

The servant promptly faced him. "Yes, sir?"

"Did the viscount seem...well, out of sorts? Angry?"

Peele's expression almost never hinted at emotion, but his sparse, graying eyebrows rose ever so slightly. "I'm sure it isn't my place to say, sir."

"I'd like you to make it your place." Conrad needed some hint of what he would face when he greeted his friend.

The butler frowned, clearly displeased with this directive. "In that case, I would say his lordship not only did not seem out of sorts, he seemed quite cheerful. One might even say jolly."

With these words, Peele bowed and beat a hasty retreat, no doubt concerned he would be asked to do something else he considered improper.

Conrad made his way to the parlor, feeling more puzzled—and worried—than ever. If Nash wasn't here to demand satisfaction for his ruined sister, then why had he come so early? Even out here in the country, where the day began and ended much earlier than it did in Town, no one made rounds until at least noon.

When Conrad reached the front parlor, a large room that was made to appear much smaller by the fussy, frilly décor his mother favored, he found Nash pacing in front of the fireplace. His friend caught sight of Conrad as he came through the open door and greeted him with a grin that was nothing if not jovial.

"Ah, there you are. I was afraid I'd caught you still abed. Sorry to have come so early,

but I wanted to see you before we leave for London later this afternoon.”

Conrad blinked. *Leave for London? This afternoon?* “I thought you weren’t planning to leave until the first of October.”

“I wasn’t, but that’s changed, and it’s all thanks to you, my friend. I don’t know how you did it, and Freddie won’t tell any of us what happened—not even Walter, and she tells him everything—but whatever it was, it worked better than I could have hoped. She’s completely chastened. Not only has she given up her breeches, she actually demanded yesterday that we leave for London as soon as possible. She says she is anxious to begin the search for a husband, if you can believe it.” Nash shook his head as if he couldn’t quite believe it himself.

“Is she?” Conrad asked mildly, even as his innards churned with a strange mixture of hot and cold rage.

“Yes. Quite a surprise, don’t you think?”

Not as surprising as you might think. Conrad could think of at least one very good reason for Freddie to be anxious to find a husband. But as he considered this possibility, it dawned on him that even if his suspicion was wrong and she wasn’t carrying his child, the very notion of her marrying another man made him want to tear something apart. He could no more imagine her in another man’s bed than he could imagine himself in another woman’s.

And that, really, made what he had long believed was too complicated and impractical to ever work seem simple and even sensible. Why *couldn’t* he marry his friend’s younger sister? Why *couldn’t* he marry his younger brother’s friend? And why *shouldn’t* his wife be his mistress? It would certainly be much more efficient that way.

“In any event,” Nash went on, oblivious to Conrad’s inner dialogue, “I just wanted to come by and let you know just how much I appreciate what you’ve done. I know you weren’t keen on the notion, and frankly, I wasn’t entirely convinced she wouldn’t sniff out the masquerade in a minute or simply shrug the whole thing off as an amusing adventure. But somehow, you frightened her straight out of her breeches, and for that, I owe you a debt of gratitude.” He thrust out his hand.

Conrad took his friend’s hand and shook it, although he could not bring himself to accept his thanks. Not when he had already violated the man’s trust. Not when he had every intention of doing it again. “What time will you be leaving for London, then?”

“As soon as the coach is ready and our trunks are packed. If Freddie were any other woman, the packing alone would take days, but of course, she hasn’t much in the way

of appropriate attire to bring." He chuckled. "The one downside to this enterprise is that it's going to cost me a small fortune in London to purchase her a proper wardrobe, but if it results in her being happily married, it will be worth it." As the two men released hands, Nash sobered. "I know it may seem as if I'm trying to foist her off on some other unsuspecting gentleman, but in all honesty, I have genuinely worried about her since our father died. She couldn't go on being a child forever, could she?"

"No, of course not," Conrad agreed, although the truth was that the only people who'd behaved like children were her father and brothers. "And I'm sure the man who marries her will know exactly what he's getting himself into."

Because that man will be me.

Nash laughed. "Perhaps you're right. The leopard doesn't truly change its spots, does it? Freddie will always be Freddie, won't she?"

"So, you'll be heading out in a few hours?"

"Shortly after lunch, barring any unexpected delays." If Nash thought Conrad's insistence on knowing the timing of their departure was odd, he didn't show it.

"Well, then, you'd better be going to oversee the proceedings." *And to give me time to delay them.*

Preferably forever.



Dabney, Freddie's lady's maid, was delirious with excitement at the prospect of going to London. This was not merely because she had always longed to see London for herself—a Lancashire girl by birth, she had never even been as far as Manchester, let alone a city as grand as London—but because for once, she would have something useful to do. Freddie had never been much of a charge when it came to exercising Dabney's not inconsiderable training as a hairdresser and cosmetician. Though she never complained, Freddie was well aware that her servant felt herself wasted in the service of a young lady who cared more for horses and target practice than for ball gowns, jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles.

Now, she rifled through the gowns in Freddie's wardrobe, declaring each one more unsuitable than the last while nonetheless meticulously preparing them all for packing in the enormous trunk that occupied the center of the chamber. Her own assistance not remotely needed for the enterprise, Freddie curled in the window seat that looked out over the expansive front lawn of Barrowcreek Park and wondered if she would ever see

it again.

But, of course, that was melodramatic. She would marry and live somewhere else—perhaps in London, perhaps on a country estate in some other part of England—but she would always be welcome here. She and her husband would surely come and visit from time to time, whether for house parties or her brothers' weddings or holidays. But it would never again be *her* home, and that loss, along with the others she had suffered in the last few days, ripped at her heart like tiny claws.

She should have been relieved when the evidence that she had not conceived Conrad's child came precisely on schedule. Instead, she'd been filled with a puzzling but nonetheless crushing sense of disappointment that sent her to her bed for the entire day. It wasn't that she regretted her decision not to marry Conrad, but rather the bittersweet certainty that she would never carry the child of the man she loved. The notion was so sentimental and absurd that she stayed in bed for the better part of the following day, just to be sure she'd rid herself completely of her inexplicably feminine melancholy.

London was bound to be good for her. She needed to get away from Barrowcreek, from Winmarleigh, from Thomas and Nash and Walter. From everything and everyone that made her think of Conrad and her ridiculous infatuation with him. Her heart wasn't broken; she was made of sterner stuff than that. But it was bruised. In London, it could heal, and the sooner she got the damaged organ there, the better.

Blinking to dispel the tears gathering in her eyes—really, the upstairs maid ought to be sacked, for she was doing an execrable job when it came to beating the dust out of window seat cushions—Freddie realized it had been some time since she had heard the maid mutter something uncharitable about one of her gowns. She turned to see how Dabney was getting along, and—

"That was a fine imitation of Lot's wife. For a moment, I actually thought you'd turned into a pillar of salt."

Freddie's heart threatened to crash out of her rib cage. *Conrad*. Dressed once again in black, but this time without the highwayman's mask, he stood in the center of her bedchamber, inches from her bed and the colorful pile of gowns Dabney had stacked on it.

The world tilted drunkenly as Freddie struggled for breath, for continued consciousness, for anything intelligent to say.

"What are you doing here?" Alas, that was probably not the cleverest opening salvo.

"At this precise moment, I am pondering the incongruity of discovering you own this

many dresses.”

Willing her wobbly legs to some semblance of rigidity, Freddie stood up. “You know that’s not what I mean. I want to know why you’ve come here. Does Nash know you’re here?” Before he could answer, she shook her head. “But no, of course, he doesn’t because you wouldn’t be in my bedchamber if he did. In which case, how did you get up here without anyone stopping you?” She narrowed her eyes and glanced suspiciously around the room. “And what have you done with my maid?”

“Are you done now?” His tone held a quiver of amusement.

“For now, yes.” She crossed her arms over her chest. When his gaze immediately dropped to her bosom, she uncrossed them, not because she was offended by his interest in her breasts, but because his interest in them caused an answering heat to blossom in her abdomen and between her thighs.

“Very well, then. Let’s take the questions in reverse order, as I believe that will be easier. Your maid left when I arrived in the doorway; I believe she had the impression I wished to be alone with you. Since she was entirely accurate in that assessment, I didn’t argue when she departed. I got to your chamber by coming in through the servant’s entrance, which I realize is entirely improper, but then, so is everything else about my being here.”

“Are you mad? Dabney is sure to go and tell the butler, and then Nash will find out. We’ll have to marry.”

Conrad shrugged. “That’s a risk I’m more than willing to take.” He was so calm, so...*resigned*, it made her want to scream.

“Well, I am not. You need to leave.” She pointed toward the door. “Before someone finds you here, and we’re forced into something neither of us wants.”

He didn’t budge from his spot beside her bed. “You have no idea what I want.”

Her temper flared. “Well, then, for heaven’s sake, *tell* me, because I haven’t the foggiest notion what—”

When he moved, it was with what seemed to be super-human speed. In an instant, they were toe-to-toe, and in the blink of an eye, they were lip-to-lip. And Freddie suddenly didn’t care at all what she might be forced to do, as long as Conrad kept forcing her to kiss him.

Compulsion had never been sweeter.

Chapter Ten



Conrad hadn't intended to kiss her. He hadn't planned, in fact, to touch her at all...at least not until he had got her to agree to marry him. But when it came to Winifred Langston, it seemed that what he planned to do and what he actually did rarely had much in common.

Not that he could say he minded the discrepancy. It was difficult to object to anything that involved the softness of her breasts pressed against his chest or her fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck or the sweet-hot tang of her breath mingling with his. To think that he had nearly allowed her to slip from his grasp, that he had almost made the colossal blunder of believing himself better off without her. She was a mass of contradictions, as impossible to predict and control as the weather, and yet somehow, she yielded to him and made him feel like a god. How could a man be better off living without that? Without bliss.

With a groan of regret, he lifted his mouth from hers. Her eyes were dark with surrender and desire, and he knew he could have her bent over the bed, her skirts around her waist and her drawers around her ankles, with just a word. She would do anything for him, and that was a power he must never, ever take advantage of. Not even to ensure he got the one thing he most desired.

"Does that answer your question?"

She gave him a blank look. "Question?"

He smiled. "You asked me to tell you what I want. What I want is *you*."

"You want to fuck me, you mean." She rolled her eyes. "I know *that*."

When she'd said more or less the same thing to him in the cottage the other morning, he'd reacted badly. Their lovemaking had been much more to him than mere fucking, but her casual use of the word combined with her rejection of his marriage proposal had made him imagine it hadn't been more to her. That had been poorly done of him, as had the proposal—which hadn't been a proposal at all, but an order. And if there was one thing Winifred Langston never did, it was to obey an order.

Unless, that is, it was an order to do something she knew was wicked and forbidden.

"You're right. I *do* want to fuck you. Right now, as a matter of fact. On your bed. Or perhaps in that window seat, with your face pressed against the glass so that anyone who happens to look up can see the expression on your face when you come."

Her eyes widened, and she took an unsteady breath. He knew she was imagining him doing exactly what he had described. So was he, which made it rather difficult to concentrate on the rest of what he had to say.

"But that's not why I want to marry you."

"No," she cut in acerbically, "you *have* to marry me because you *ruined* me."

He shook his head, regret slicing through him. "I know I said that, and I'm sorry that I did. It was stupid and thoughtless." Taking her hands in his, he searched her face with what he hoped was his most earnest, genuine expression. Because the words he was about to say were more earnest and genuine than any he'd ever uttered.

"The only one of us who's ruined here is me. You've ruined me for any other woman, long before that night in the cottage. I think it happened the first time you sauntered by me in a pair of breeches." A rueful chuckle escaped him at the memory. "But you were only sixteen and Nash's little sister, not to mention my younger brother's friend. There wasn't anything I could do about my feelings that wouldn't get me called out for pistols at dawn, so I tried like bloody hell to ignore you."

"While I was doing everything I could think of to force you to notice me. The more you ignored me, the harder I tried to find ways to ruffle you."

"Well, rest assured that your methods were quite effective. I could no more ignore you than I could ignore a blizzard in August. But surely you can see why I thought I *ought* to."

She nodded, a wry smile lifting one corner of her lips. "I thought you just didn't *like* me very much."

"Oh, I didn't. I didn't like that you were constantly reminding me of how much I wanted you...and how impossible it would be for me to have you. I thought the only way I'd ever have any peace of mind was to get you out of Winmarleigh altogether, which is why I agreed to Nash's ridiculous kidnapping plan in the first place. When it was over, I knew you'd leave for London, and my torment would be over."

"And instead, I just tormented you even more." She squeezed his hands. "I'm not a very good lady, am I?"

"Oh, you're good, sweetheart. Very good." He gave her a wink and waggled his eyebrows so there could be no mistaking his meaning, but then he sobered. "But that's still not why I want to marry you. Or at least not the primary reason. I want to marry you because life without you would be orderly, predictable, and very, very dull. At

base, I'm a dull, unimaginative man—"

"You are *not*!" she protested indignantly.

He pulled a mock frown. "Have you never learned not to argue with a man who's trying to apologize?"

"Well," she said slowly, "I'm not sure that it's ever happened before. I don't usually inspire apologies; I issue them."

"And then go right back to being your incorrigible self."

"It worked, didn't it?" she asked, her bright brown eyes twinkling with merriment.

"Far too well," he agreed with a laugh before asking sternly, "Now, are you quite finished?"

She composed her face into a mask of studiousness and nodded solemnly.

"Very well. As I was saying, I am rather dull and unimaginative, which means I had a difficult time imagining myself married to someone who is...well, not. It was only when Nash came by this morning to tell me you were leaving for London that I realized how very ridiculous I was being, thinking I should marry someone as proper and priggish as myself." She opened her mouth to object, but he wagged his finger in admonition. "Uh uh uh, no interrupting while I'm debasing myself." He dropped down on one knee. "I love you, Freddie Langston. Will you do me the great favor of marrying me to keep me from becoming a dreadful bore and an insufferable stuffed shirt?"



Freddie needed every ounce of her self-control—a quality she was not renowned for having in any significant quantity—to keep from throwing her arms around Conrad's wonderful neck and shouting that yes, *yes*, of course she would marry him, the silly fool. And perhaps, if she had been a kinder, sweeter sort of person, that was what she would have done. But after the misery he'd put her through, not just these past nine days but most of the past five years, she felt he ought to suffer through at least a few more seconds of uncertainty.

Withdrawing her hand from his, she tapped her index finger to her pursed lips. "Hmm. I must admit that is a much prettier proposal than the last one you tendered me, and yet..." She pretended to ponder the question very seriously.

"And yet?" he repeated, his voice a low, impatient rumble.

"It's just that...I was quite ready to say yes, but that was before the second time you told me how dull and unimaginative you are. Now, I'm not so—"

He was on his feet in a trice. "Left to my own devices, yes. But *you* quite inspire my creativity. Shall I demonstrate?"

Before she could answer, he had taken three strides away from her and shut the door to her bedchamber. Finding the door had no locking mechanism, he turned his eyes in the direction of the heavy trunk that occupied the center of the room. With a mischievous glance in her direction, he walked over to it and shoved it in front of the door.

"That won't keep anyone out for long, but long enough for what I have in mind."

"And what *do* you have in mind?" she asked. Surely not what she thought. Not what she hoped. He wouldn't risk it. Would he?

"You and me. In that window seat. Now."

He would. And, heaven help her, so would she.

They could be interrupted at any moment, caught *in flagrante*. By her *brother*. But when he advanced on her, unbuttoning his fall and releasing the rock-hard length of his cock as he approached, she didn't care. She wanted this—wanted him—too much.

He pointed toward the seat, stroking his erection with a slow, idle motion. "Hands and knees, facing the window, skirts up around your waist."

That familiar twinge of longing corkscrewed its way through her belly and settled as an ache in the delicate flesh below. There wasn't any question at all of what she'd do. She would obey, and in obeying, heighten her own pleasure. What was it about surrendering control to Conrad that made her feel so free? She didn't know and, as she followed his directive and bunched up the fabric of her dress, she didn't care to examine the reasons.

Maybe it was just that everything he asked her to do was a hundred times more wicked—and therefore more exciting—than anything she could think of herself.

His fingers found and opened the slit in her drawers. He dragged them through the moisture that had gathered there, coasting between the swollen, sensitive lips. She trembled at his touch, glad she was safely on all fours and couldn't topple over.

"I've been dreaming of this every day," he muttered. "Of having you just like this, on your knees, wet and ready for me."

"So have I," she admitted, then gasped as the velvety head of his cock replaced his fingers. Greedy for more, she rocked her hips back toward him.

"Patience, sweetheart." He slid the head up and down the valley, coating it with her juices before lining up to plunge—

Thump, thump, thump.

The sound of footsteps and voices came from below-stairs. Freddie could make out the unmistakable tenor of her older brother's voice. Raised. Furious.

"Oh God, Nash is coming," she moaned.

"Then we'd better hurry," Conrad answered and filled her snug passage in one fluid, delicious motion.

She took a slow, cooling breath through her teeth as Conrad withdrew and drove back in again. And again. And again. Her heart thudded in her ears in time with the feet that pounded nearer and nearer to her chamber. Up the stairs, along the corridor, almost upon them now. Somehow, her anxiety that they were about to be caught increased her ardor. She shook with the need for release, the pressure building with each thrust of his cock, each beat of her heart, each echo of a footfall.

"Touch yourself," he whispered near her ear. "Make yourself come."

Her face flooded with a heat that was half embarrassment and half pure, wanton lust. It seemed so personal, so intimate to put her fingers there, to rub herself *there*, but that was ridiculous when he was already doing the most personal, most intimate thing imaginable to her.

"Do it." The order was more urgent this time, a growl.

Knowing she'd collapse without both arms to balance her, she went down on one elbow, resting her sweat-dampened forehead on her forearm. The effect of this small change in her position was dramatic; the sharper angle made Conrad's cock feel bigger, thicker, deeper inside her. The difference was obviously apparent to him, too, because the tempo of his thrusts quickened, and his breath blew hot and hard across the back of her neck.

She found the spot between her legs with her free hand and brushed her fingers across it. Tentatively at first, then with more confidence as pleasure built on top of pleasure, spiraling higher and higher...

Bang bang bang. "Freddie! Pearce! Open this door." *Nash.*

The door handle clicked, and then there was a scraping noise as the chest moved a painful inch across the floor. It wouldn't be long before he was in the room. She was in so much trouble. He was going to kill her. Or Conrad. Probably both of them.

But that knowledge didn't stop her climax from crashing over her in a burst of colored lights. As the spasms gripped her, Conrad joined her, his warm seed pouring into her like a soothing summer rain.

The chest rattled and rasped again as the door was shoved and it scooted another few inches. "What in bloody hell is going on in there?"

"I'm asking your sister to marry me," Conrad answered, his voice surprisingly steady for a man whose body still shuddered with the aftershocks of orgasm.

There was a long moment of silence. The only thing Freddie could hear was the beating of her heart and Conrad's fractured respiration.

"What's her answer?"

She turned her head and looked at Conrad. He raised an eyebrow. *Well, what is your answer?*

"Yes," she said softly, so only Conrad could hear. As the last of the tension left his body and he nodded, she shouted loud enough to be heard throughout the entire house, or maybe even the entire county. "Yes! Her answer is yes."

Epilogue



Thomas Pearce had made one accurate prediction: Freddie Langston took London by storm. It was just that she did it as The Honorable Mrs. Conrad Pearce.

The sudden, simultaneous arrival in Town during the off-season of both the Langston and Ormondy families had caused a stir among the few aristocrats who remained in residence. The stir became a virtual din when the middle Langston brother, Geoffrey, took leave from his infantry brigade on the eve of its scheduled deployment to the Continent. The wedding itself took place the following day, and anyone who was anyone who lived within a day's drive of London was in attendance—invited or not.

But somehow, it was not the hasty wedding with all its scandalous inferences that people remembered and talked about months later, but rather Mrs. Pearce's astonishing facility with firearms. The story held that a child's kite had become stuck in a tree. His nurse, despairing of ever retrieving the beloved plaything, had been prepared to drag the sobbing boy home when Mr. and Mrs. Pearce, quite newly married, came upon the scene. Quickly ascertaining the difficulty, Mrs. Pearce withdrew a flintlock pistol from her reticule, and, after shooing aside the bystanders who had stopped to gawk, aimed for the scarcely visible string from which the kite dangled, cutting clean through it with a single shot. The kite then drifted unharmed to the ground, to the utter delight of the boy, his nurse, and the astonished crowd.

Since then, Mrs. Pearce's reputation had been further burnished by her skills as a horsewoman. Shortly after their arrival in London, her husband purchased for her a smart new phaeton and a spirited team to draw it, which she handled with such ease and confidence that even the conservative set who felt women ought not be permitted to drive were forced to commend her proficiency. Though it was deemed somewhat peculiar that she eschewed riding horseback in Hyde Park, no one speculated as to the reason. Certainly, no one considered it remotely possible that such a fine equestrienne might not know how to ride sidesaddle. There were, however, persistent rumors that Mrs. Pearce had accompanied her husband to Tattersall's in the guise of a boy to assist him in choosing of the matched bays, but as there was no solid evidence to support the allegation, the worst the gossipmongers could do was admire her for getting away with it...if she had, indeed, got away with it.

In short, Freddie Langston, who had never nurtured the faintest concern for either respectability or popularity, had nonetheless managed to become the most sought-after young matron in Society. She was called upon to give shooting and driving lessons to the daughters of dukes and earls. She was invited to every at-home, every dinner party,

every ball. And all of this without learning to dance a single reel, sew a straight stitch, or play a recognizable tune on the pianoforte.

Conrad leaned in the doorway of his wife's chamber as her maid readied her for whatever social engagement she had been invited to this afternoon. The relentlessly unconventional Freddie *had* made a few concessions to convention since their marriage, amassing an impressive collection of very fashionable gowns to complement the breeches, coats, and waistcoats she still kept in her wardrobe for "special occasions."

A smile pulled at the corners of his lips as he recalled the last such occasion. They'd gone to see a decidedly licentious floor show hosted by an underground men's club. The results once they'd returned home had been equally licentious...and considerably more satisfying.

The memory brought an immediate surge of lust to match the swell of pride he felt at having this woman—this clever, unique, talented, and utterly wanton woman—as his wife. To think he'd believed *she* needed to learn a lesson, when all along, it had been him.

Love, it seemed, was the most difficult lesson of all. At least he'd finally learned it. But perhaps that had been the plan all along.

He cleared his throat to make his presence known. She was going to be late for her engagement, whatever it was. Very late.

The End

The Lords of Lancashire Series

If you enjoyed *The Lesson Plan*, you may be pleased to know that both Walter Langston and Thomas Pearce will be getting their own stories in the not-too-distant future. Be on the lookout for Walter's story, *Hot Under the Collar* in April or May of 2012 and for *A Matter of Indiscretion*, Thomas's book, in October or November.

In the meantime, you can spend time with some related characters in Jackie's two short stories from Harlequin Spice Briefs, *Grace Under Fire* and *Taking Liberties*. Cover copy and excerpts follow.

Jackie has also published the following titles:

The Gospel of Love novellas (contemporary)

According to Luke

According to Matthew

According to Mark

The *Ever After* series (historical)

Carnally Ever After (digital only, short story)

Behind the Red Door (novella anthology in digital and trade paperback)

Unconnected novellas and short stories:

The Reiver (Scottish historical, free short story)

The Pleasure Club: The Priest (contemporary erotica)

Comrades in Arms (historical mmf ménage, short story)

Unwrap My Heart (contemporary Christmas-themed novella)

Jackie is a happily married mother of three who makes her living writing technical training materials for the software industry. She lives with her husband and children in Southern California. She holds a BA in Classical Studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and an MA in Classics from the University of Chicago.

You can learn more about Jackie's current and upcoming titles on her website at <http://www.jackiebarbosa.com>.

An Excerpt from *Grace Under Fire*

By Jackie Barbosa

Available in digital format from Harlequin Spice Briefs

While most of Society views Lady Grace Hannington as a clumsy laughingstock, Atticus Stilwell and Viscount Colin Fitzgerald see their perfect partner—a woman who is more than enough for not just one man, but *two*. She is well-bred enough to be the wife Colin needs, with a blossoming sensuality both men cannot wait to taste.

But Grace will also need strength to withstand the ton's scrutiny if she agrees to their scandalous arrangement. Can Atticus and Colin show her enough wicked pleasure to convince her to become theirs forever?

Chapter One

London, 1795

It was a truth universally acknowledged that Lady Grace Hannington was the most inaptly named young lady in all of England, if not all Christendom. Within two months of her debut, she had ruined at least a dozen gowns—none her own—and half as many cravats by spilling tea, wine, or some sort of sauce upon them, trod heavily upon many a gentleman's slippered toe, and broken the nose of one unfortunate chap with a misplaced elbow during a reel. That list of missteps did not encompass the full measure of the lady's sheer gracelessness, however, for she was forever nursing some sort of self-inflicted injury, ranging from a sprained wrist and a stubbed toe to this evening's glorious and ill-concealed black eye.

Atticus Stilwell wondered from his vantage on the opposite side of the crowded ballroom how she had come by that shiner. Not that it mattered. With or without the swollen, bluish-purple tinge beneath her eye, she was by far the loveliest woman in the room. Oh, perhaps not in the classic sense of a delicate English rose, but then, she stood a head taller than any other lady in the room—and fully half the men—and her hair was an entirely too flamboyant shade of red for traditional beauty.

In fact, everything about her was lush and flamboyant, from the blazing color of her unruly curls to the ripe red of her too-wide lips to the plump mounds of her generous tits. Though he could only guess at what lay beneath the loose folds of her high-waisted gown, he imagined a slender waist curving into broad but perfectly proportioned hips and from there into shapely legs that would go on forever. Though she was consigned by her ungainliness on the dance floor—and nearly everywhere else—to the role of a

perpetual wallflower at Society events, Atticus saw the woman she could blossom into if only she were freed from the expectations of fashion and propriety.

A woman who was more than enough for not one man, but two.

She shifted in her chair, causing her breasts to come dangerously close to overtopping the lacy edge of her gown's scooped neckline, and licked her lips. Her gaze darted in the direction of the table upon which the lemonade bowl rested, and beside which he and Lord Fitzgerald had been lurking for the past twenty minutes.

Atticus glanced at Colin. "Are we in agreement that she is the one?"

His friend—for although the word friend did not capture the depth of their affection and attachment, it was the closest one available in the English language—nodded. "She is perfect."

Atticus's balls tightened with anticipation as Lady Grace rose from her chair, knocking it dangerously askew in the process. She whirled to catch it before it toppled over, and her dark green skirts billowed crazily about her legs, affording him a tantalizing glimpse of a trim pair of ankles before they settled back into place. He could scarcely wait to plant kisses upon those ankles, then upward along her calves and thighs before setting his mouth to the sweet, juicy flesh between...

An elbow connected with his ribs. "Pay attention. She's coming," Colin hissed.

She soon would be if Atticus had anything to say about it. Then he realized what Colin meant.

Time to put their plan in motion.



Grace negotiated the potted plants and clusters of people separating her from a desperately needed glass of lemonade without incident. Really, this was a considerable improvement over her performance at the ball she had attended last week, when she had caught her foot on the—ridiculously, she thought—long train of Lady Aberdeen's skirt and gone careening into a large fern. It would not have been quite so humiliating had she not righted herself only to land flat on her backside when she walked directly into the glass door that led to the retiring rooms, resulting in the fading black eye she sported this evening.

She huffed to herself in righteous indignation. If they didn't want people to walk into glass doors, they oughtn't keep them so clean!

Breathing a mental sigh of relief, she reached the table upon which the lemonade bowl stood without tripping or bumping into anyone...or anything. If she could simply down her refreshment here without having to transport it elsewhere, she might avoid the ignominy of yet another mishap involving spilt liquids. After pouring herself a full glass, however, she realized it was not to be. The music had ceased and a queue of thirsty dancers was building behind her.

Drat and blast!

Balancing the cup carefully in one hand, she stepped away from the table and toward the ever-growing throng of people lining the walls. Upon seeing her and noting the full glass clutched precariously between her fingers, the sensible folks parted like the Red Sea in the face of Moses. A few, however, watched without stepping aside, among them two gentleman Grace felt certain she had never seen before.

If she had seen them, she surely would have remembered, for each was uniquely arresting. They stood side by side, and from a distance, one might have imagined them nearly identical in appearance. Both were tall and fit, dark-haired and strikingly handsome. But where one man had gentle brown eyes, the other had piercing blue ones. And the differences didn't end there.

Grace found her gaze drawn first to the brown-eyed man. The crease in his left cheek made him appear jolly and good-natured, a man who might be prone to easy laughter. And yet, there was an edge of danger to him, evident in the strong set of his square jaw and the slight, hawkish hook at the end of his nose. Her hand trembled as she realized his eyes were caressing her, lingering appreciatively at her lips, the curve of her neck, the swell of her breasts. A peculiar heat washed over her—not the embarrassed sort, with which she was intimately familiar, but an exciting, pleasurable, and utterly foreign sensation that settled, most outrageously, between her thighs.

Feeling her face flush, she looked away, only to have her gaze caught and held by the blue-eyed man who stood next to him. He, too, studied her with an intensity that trapped her breath inside her lungs. This man's countenance gave no hint of kindness or humor, though it was possible he was even more handsome than his companion. His long, narrow face was marked by sharp, high cheekbones and, more ominously, by a scar that slashed from his left temple to just below his ear. The sort of scar a man gained in hand-to-hand combat and survived only because he dispatched his opponent to the good graces of his Maker.

She shivered, but she wasn't cold. Oh, no, she was doubly hot, for Sir Blue Eyes licked his lips, as if anticipating something sweet and wicked. How did she know that? She couldn't say, except that his eyes seemed to savor her as if she were a fine wine or a rich

dessert.

Her steps faltered, and lemonade sloshed over the rim of the cup and onto her hand. The cool stickiness of the liquid wrenched her from her entirely inappropriate thoughts, but it wasn't enough to prevent what happened next.

As she snatched her gaze away from Sir Blue Eyes and focused on maneuvering around the two distracting gentlemen, she tripped. How or on what, she couldn't have said, for there had been no obstacles in her path. All she knew was that one moment she was upright, and the next she was tumbling forward, sprawling toward the ground, the cup flying from her hand as she strove to break her fall.

And then, miraculously, the falling stopped.

Warm arms cradled her tight against a solid chest. The cup clattered to the floor, and she realized the front of her gown was cold and wet. At least this time, she had spilled something on her own dress, not someone else's.

"I'm qu-qu-quite all right," she murmured, not daring to look up and see whether it was Sir Blue Eyes or Mr. Dimpled Cheek who had caught her. Either one would make her knees wobble and her stomach flutter.

"But quite damp," came the amused reply.

Mr. Dimpled Cheek, then, she decided.

"As am I," another male voice observed.

Sir Blue Eyes. Oh dear, she had spilled the lemonade on him as well as herself. So much for having ruined only her own clothing. How mortifying.

Mr. Dimpled Cheek set her on her feet. "We'd best get you to a retiring room to clean up, my dear."

Grace finally dared to lift her gaze. Her stomach flipped, just as she'd expected. "That's quite all right, sir. I can manage on my own."

Mr. Dimpled Cheek grinned. Sure enough, a deep, devilish crease appeared there. "I beg to differ."

"B-b-but my ch-chaperone..." she protested, glancing to the opposite side of the ballroom where she'd left Aunt Georgie. The elderly woman sat precisely where Grace had left her, dozing in her chair.

"Is otherwise occupied," Sir Blue Eyes supplied. "Please, allow us to escort you, my

lady.”

She oughtn’t, of course, but the wetness seeping through her bodice and into her stays was a compelling reason to quit the ballroom as soon as possible. Besides, what harm could befall her between here and the retiring rooms in a townhouse full of people?

You could be eaten by the Big Bad Wolf. Or wolves, her cautious, sensible side argued.

She looked from one man to another, and the heat in her belly thickened at the expressions on their faces. Not pitying nor condescending, but admiring. And hungry.

A treacherous, irrational voice whispered in her head. *Would it be so awful to be devoured?*

~ End of Excerpt ~

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An Excerpt from *Taking Liberties*

By Jackie Barbosa

Available in digital format from Harlequin Spice Briefs

Lady Leticia Blake has wealth, beauty and, most important of all, numerous marriage proposals. Tish knows precisely what she wants in a husband: a man who can fulfill her deepest, darkest and most unladylike fantasies. But as a respectable debutante, she has no means to test her admirers' arts in the bedchamber. Not unless she turns the tables and takes liberties with them—starting with tempting Viscount Nash Langston....

Chapter One

London, 1795

Lady Leticia Blake was accounted by her peers to be the most fortunate of debutantes, the possessor of an embarrassment of riches in the form of wealth, wardrobe, winsomeness, and, most important of all, wedding proposals. Rumor held that in her first Season she had received—and declined—no less the five offers of marriage, and a similar number in her second. Now, as her third Season prepared to draw to a close, what everyone, including her parents, wanted to know was when she would decide to piss or get off the pot.

Or so her father said as he paced the fine Turkish rug that graced the floor of his library.

“Now see here, lass,” the Marquess of Avingdon huffed, wagging an accusatory finger at Tish, who sat with her hands folded in her lap in one of the oversized armchairs, “I won’t mince words. Your mother and I have seen fit to give you free rein for three Seasons, but even my pockets aren’t deep enough to bankroll a fourth, especially since you’re no closer to choosing a husband now than you were on the day you curtsied for the bloody Queen.”

His whiskered face had turned a rather unhealthy shade of red, and Tish experienced a pang of anxiety at the possibility he’d experience an apoplexy if he didn’t calm himself.

“That’s not true, Papa,” she said, hoping to appease him with a dose of reason and hard data. “I’m much closer now than I was when I debuted. After all, I know I don’t want to marry any of the men I’ve turned down.”

Unfortunately, this observation seemed to have the opposite of the desired effect. “And a fine lot you’ve refused, too. Three earls, a duke’s brother, and half a dozen other

perfectly respectable gentlemen. Tell me, lass, of the ten or so you've still got trailing after your skirts, are there *any* you'd consider marrying?"

Tish looked down at the floor and chewed her upper lip. "Well, yes, but..."

Her father grabbed her chin and tilted her head so she was forced to look up into his angry blue eyes. "No buts. Choose one of them by the end of next week."

"Next week?" The words came out on a squeak.

"Aye, lass." His expression softened at her shock, however, and he gave her chin a gentle caress. "You've had plenty of time to decide what you want in a husband. If you don't know by now, there'll be naught for me to do but decide for you."

Tish stared at her father in horror and confusion. "But you promised you'd let me choose my own husband."

"And so I will, lass, provided you do so in the time I've allotted you." He dropped a fond kiss on her nose and straightened. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm expected in the Lords in half an hour." He turned and marched out of the room without so much as a backwards glance at his supposedly beloved daughter.

Tish wanted to argue that she knew *precisely* what she wanted in a husband, and that was exactly the problem. She wanted the kind of husband whose kiss would make her toes curl and her knees buckle, whose touch would cause her skin to tingle and her stomach to bottom out. One who could fulfill her deepest, darkest, most unladylike fantasies.

And oh, she had so many of those.

The trouble was that as a young lady of gentle breeding and good reputation, she faced the same dilemma as her sister: she had no means of testing the fitness of her candidates *but* talk. True, she could easily rule out those gentleman who turned her stomach in entirely the wrong way, but it was quite impossible to discern whether any of the handsomer gentleman who paid her court might be "the one" when she spent her entire life under the watchful eye of one chaperone after another. Not to mention that all of her suitors seemed regrettably determined to behave like gentlemen, which meant they made no attempt to spirit her off to some private alcove or darkened garden path for the purpose of taking liberties with her person.

What she needed, she thought irritably, was to take liberties with *them*.

And that was when it came to her. The greatest idea in all history.



Viscount Nash Langston was already in a foul mood when he walked into White's that afternoon. He'd received news yesterday that more than half the corn crop at his Lancashire estate was underwater due to flooding, and this morning he'd learned that a shipment of sugar cane in which he had invested had failed to arrive on schedule and was likely languishing at the bottom of the ocean floor. Neither loss would crush him financially, of course, but together they would place a substantial burden on his resources for the next year or so.

Not what a man in hot pursuit of the ton's most sought-after debutante needed to improve his standing, either in her eyes or those of her parents.

Nash had come to the club with the intention of retiring to the back room and drowning his sorrows in imitation of his fortunes, but was swiftly diverted from his goal by the boisterous goings-on surrounding White's notorious betting book. Under normal circumstances, he would have paid them no heed, for he found the subjects upon which his peers placed their wagers frivolous or dangerous or, as often as not, both. But today was different, because as he attempted to walk past the crush of bodies crowding around the book, he heard three words that stopped him dead in his tracks.

"...Lady Leticia Blake," boomed Lord Gastonbury, who was unofficially in charge of collecting members' markers when the wagers exceeded five hundred pounds. "Place your bets."

What the bloody hell were they betting on that had to do with Tish Blake? Nash eyed the group of so-called gentlemen pressing Gastonbury and had a sick feeling he already knew the answer.

He sidled up to the only man in the room who seemed to have no interest in participating in the proceedings. Lord Colin Fitzgerald was a bit of an enigma, having only gained entrance to White's upon his recent marriage to the former Lady Grace Hannington. The fact that he shared his wife with his close childhood friend was no secret, but since the influential dowager Countess Aberdeen had seen fit to shower the union with her blessings, no one felt it safe to give either of the Fitzgeralds the cut direct.

Nash for his part could care less whom Fitzgerald shared his wife with, provided he shared the information Nash wanted to know.

"What is the wager?" he asked his peer, attempting to appear mildly amused rather than genuinely interested.

Fitzgerald took a sip of the tawny liquid in the glass he held and sent Nash a bored look. "The Duke of Hapsborough has just put one thousand pounds on marrying Lady Leticia Blake before the end of the Season."

Nash blinked slowly, once then twice. The answer came as no surprise, yet fury blurred his vision.

Hapsborough no more deserved Leticia Blake's hand—or body—in marriage than he deserved to be named Chancellor of the Exchequer. Not only was the man a notorious spendthrift, he'd acquired a reputation among the demimondaine as a one-stroke wonder. "His Grace comes as quickly as he goes," they tittered when he wasn't about to overhear. But if the typically cash-strapped duke was willing to place a wager of a thousand pounds on the prospects for their union, he must be damned sure of them. That meant Nash's prospects had been correspondingly weakened.

Damn it, he'd been so sure he was making headway with her. That she felt the same current of desire between them as he did. Aware of her penchant for refusing marriage proposals, he'd moved slowly and deliberately to reassure her that he wasn't like the others. That he wanted her not for her dowry or her bloodlines, but for herself. Perhaps that had been a tactical error. Maybe instead he should have dragged her into a darkened alcove, pressed her up against the wall, and demonstrated his interest in the most unmistakable way possible.

What if Hapsborough had already signed a betrothal contract? Nash clenched and unclenched his fists. Leticia deserved better.

And better meant Nash.

Just as he was on the verge of acting on his instinct to fight through the crowd and plant the duke a facer, the unmistakable figure of the Earl of Randley—unmistakable because he was second only to Brummel in fashion and elegance, from the height of his collar to the intricate folds of his cravat to the length of his tails—pushed through the throng, a fistful of notes in his hand. "I'll see Hapsborough's thousand and raise him a thousand that I will be the one to marry the lady in question by the end of Season."

A collective *whoosh* of surprise escaped the crowd, and Nash's hands went lax. If Hapsborough's wager was remarkable due to his customary insolvency, Randley's was extraordinary for precisely the opposite reason—the earl was as fastidious about money as he was about his wardrobe, and he never spent a farthing unless he knew exactly what he was getting. If Randley was willing to gamble the outrageous sum of two thousand pounds, he must be supremely confident in the outcome.

But why? How could they both be so certain of marrying the same woman? Especially

when she'd rejected proposals from so many gentlemen before them. Each must have received some indication that the lady favored his suit, yet both could not be right.

Which, he realized with a glimmer of triumph, could only mean that both might well be wrong.

Despite this rather obvious conclusion, the gentlemen surrounding the book clamored to place their own wagers, some on the duke, others on the earl, and a few on both. A wry smile tugged the edges of Nash's lips as it occurred to him that every one of them would lose their shirts if *he* was the one who succeeded in marrying her.

And why the hell not? Randley's wager had just leveled the playing field.

"You have a horse in this race?" Fitzgerald asked mildly as he set his now-empty glass on the table behind him.

Nash gave the man next to him an appraising glance and decided, for reasons he couldn't entirely explain, to like him. "Yes, I do," he admitted.

Viscount Fitzgerald raised an eyebrow. "Really? Who?"

Nash grinned. "Me."

~ End of Excerpt ~

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