

Claiming the Courtesan

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London, 1825

Justin Kinmurrie, Duke of Kylemore, looked across the tumble of stained sheets to where his mistress lay in apparent exhaustion. His Grace suspected the exhaustion was feigned, but he had been too well pleased to take issue with the hint of artifice.

He paused in tying his neckcloth to admire her supine body, naked, creamy and glowing in the afternoon light. The long legs. The delicately rounded hips. The slightly concave stomach. The magnificent breasts cushioning the pigeon's blood ruby pendant he'd given her two eventful hours ago to mark the end of their first year together.

For a long and delightful moment, his attention lingered on those lush white mounds with their rosy crests. Then his eyes traveled up to her face, pale and pure as any painted Madonna's.

Even after all this time, the contrast of the harlot's body and the saint's face sent a very masculine thrill through him.

She was beautiful.

She was the most notorious woman in London.

And she belonged to him, as much a part of his prestige as his perfect tailoring, his famous stables or his rich estates. He permitted himself a slight smile as he returned to dressing in front of the large gilt mirror.

"Shall I call Ben Ahbood to assist Your Grace?" Her extraordinary eyes, light gray and clear as water, were, as usual, expressionless in her gorgeous mask of a face. He sometimes wondered if they lay at the heart of her fascination—her innate detachment despite her skills as a lover.

No, it was more than that.

It was the promise that for the right touch, the right word, the right *man*, worlds of heat and feeling and meaning waited behind that serene gaze. The duke, for all his current well-being, had never deceived himself that he'd breached this formidable reserve. And after a year as her protector, he was beginning to understand he never would.

Did she guess how intriguing her distance made her? He would be surprised if she didn't. Emotional containment in no way meant she wasn't as clever as a glen full of vixens.

"My lord?"

He shook his head. "No. I can manage." In truth, her huge mute manservant, widely rumored to be a eunuch, made him uncomfortable, although he'd submit to keelhauling before he confessed that shaming fact.

She stretched her supple body, the body that both maddened him and gave him more pleasure than he'd ever imagined. Kylemore recognized the return of arousal. By the glint in her eyes, so did she, damn her knowing soul.

"It is not so late." One slender hand slid up to toy with the ruby. The movement drew his attention—as, he realized, she was perfectly aware—to the round, full breasts he found so alluring.

"I am not at leisure this afternoon, madam."

"That's a shame," she said neutrally, rising to scoop a blue peignoir from the floor. Kylemore deliberately ignored her naked back and the way her buttocks tightened as she bent.

Or ignored the sight as much as any red-blooded man could.

~~It had always been this way between them, from the moment he'd met her cool assessing gaze across a crowded salon six years ago. She'd been another man's mistress then. And she'd had another keeper since, in spite of Kylemore's efforts to capture her interest. She had only consented to the present arrangement after the exchange of a small fortune and contracts detailed enough to keep a coven of lawyers in a flutter for a month.~~

But if he'd believed that finally possessing this woman would end their subtle battle for dominion, he was to be sadly disappointed. If anything, the game between them was more intense than ever.

And while the world might consider the advantages his, he knew his mistress had equal puissant weapons of her own. Her beauty. Her detachment. And most of all, the fact that he'd wanted her six years ago and, curse her, he wanted her still.

With unwilling regret, Kylemore watched her veil her lithe curves with the peignoir. Not that the diaphanous silk did much to conceal the glories beneath.

She flicked her black waist-length hair away from her face and came to stand behind him. Their eyes met in the mirror, where he took such a lamentably long time to dress.

"I can't persuade you to change your mind?" She twined her arms around him and pressed her warmth to his back, filling his head with the scents of recently satisfied woman and the sensual ambergris perfume she favored. He closed his eyes as her deft fingers fiddled with the fastening of his trousers, then slipped inside to stroke his stiffening cock.

The speed and vigor of his response made him brush her hand away. A man at the mercy of her appetites was no more than a brute animal. "Next time."

She didn't show any chagrin, Devil take her. She merely shrugged, wandered across to lean against the carved bedpost and watched as he repaired her predations on his clothing. He pulled on his coat and turned.

"I thank Your Grace for your continuing kindness." She stepped toward him and kissed him on the mouth.

They rarely kissed, and a kiss as a gesture of affection was an unprecedented event.

But that's what this felt like to Kylemore. She wasn't trying to seduce him. After a year, he would recognize seduction. And he'd already given her the extravagant pendant. Even greedy as she was, she couldn't hope to coax another maharajah's bauble from his pocket.

No, he could only assume she'd kissed him because she'd wanted to.

That revolutionary idea had just taken hold when she drew away. The soft pink lips that had clung so sweetly to his—and sweet was the only word he could bring to mind—curled into a faint smile. "Good day to you, Your Grace."

He snatched at her hand and, still lost in the memory of her kiss—which was absurd, given the debaucheries they had indulged in all afternoon—raised her slender fingers to his lips with the reverence due to a princess.

When he lifted his head, he caught a bewilderment that matched his own in her silver eyes. "Good day to you too, madam."

He released her and strode from the room, down the stairs and out of the villa he'd bought her a year ago. But no matter how far he went, he couldn't quite banish the memory of her mouth on his in a kiss that was almost...*innocent*.

His infamous, dangerous, enigmatic Soraya. And he was no closer to understanding her now than he'd been six years ago.

She heard the duke's determined footsteps take him out of the neat little house. He always moved as if he knew exactly where he was going. It was one of the first things she'd noticed about him.

But for a moment, when she'd kissed him, he had looked young and unsure, not like the chill self-possessed Duke of Kylemore at all. Thoughtfully, she went behind a gaudy—and remarkably level—Chinese screen and replaced the aqua peignoir with a plain cotton wrap. There was a knock on the door just as she emerged.

“Come in,” she said, absently collecting discarded garments from the floor. The house had a full domestic staff, all on the duke's retainer, but old habits died hard.

A hulking figure in striped Eastern robes entered and observed her out of perceptive dark brown eyes.

“I've got those lasses downstairs heating water for your bath, Verity,” he said in the thick Yorkshire accent she had tried and failed to eradicate.

“Thank you.” Verity Ashton, familiar to the world as the incomparable Soraya, looked around the wreck of the bedroom. “I can hardly believe my time as Soraya is over at last.”

The man sighed and tugged off his flowing headdress. Immediately, the inscrutable Ben Ahbood, mute Arabian guardian to London's most scandalous demimondaine, became Benjamin Ashton, North Country farm lad and as unassailably English as pork pies or the white cliffs of Dover. “Did you save owt to his nibs?”

Verity ignored the hint of hostility toward the duke. Her younger brother hadn't approved of any of her protectors, but for some reason, he reserved particular opprobrium for Kylemore. An antipathy she suspected the duke shared, if he could bring himself to admit feeling anything for so lowly creature as a fallen woman's manservant.

“No, you and I agreed it's better just to disappear.”

Ben made a disapproving sound deep in his throat. “But now you're feeling bad about it. I don't know how a softhearted widgeon like you survives in this cutthroat world.” He took a tray from the dresser and began methodically stacking scattered plates and glassware. The disordered room, she knew, offended his sturdy yeoman's mind.

In his four years with her, Ben had never really reconciled himself to her profession. If he hadn't been a mere child of ten when she'd launched her present career, he would have stopped her, she knew. But then, if he hadn't been so young, if her sister hadn't been even younger, perhaps she'd have had some choice in the matter.

“I think...I think the duke is an unhappy man,” she said softly, dismissing the old memories. She rarely dwelt on the past, but today was an ending, so inevitably she contemplated Soraya's beginning.

Ben cast her an unimpressed glance. “As unhappy as a great fortune and a pretty face and all a man can want could be. He's nobbut spoilt, that's all. He won't like losing his toy. But all that lovely brass will soon buy him another. Don't fret yourself over yon high-toned bastard.”

“Not saying good-bye seems shabby. We don't have to sneak away. When I became the duke's mistress, he knew the arrangement was only for a year. He signed a contract that said so.”

“He was so mad with lust back then, he would have signed away his soul if you'd asked. And he smiled as he did it. Take my word, lass—a written agreement means nowt to a sodding duke. When he got you, he'd wanted you for five long years. He meant to have you, never mind the price.”

She bent her head, studying the fine Turkish carpet beneath her feet. It was, in fact, the only genuine Middle Eastern item in the room.

“I suppose so.”

Not for the first time, she wished she'd never kissed the duke. Any demirep worth her hire knew

that was asking for trouble.

~~“You’re eight and twenty, Verity. You’ll soon be too long in the tooth for this lark. Then see i~~
high and mighty Kylemore thinks twice before changing you in for a fresher bit of muslin.”

Verity laughed briefly. “What an old crone you make me sound!”

Her brother smiled back. “Oh, I don’t reckon you’re ready for the knacker’s yet. But you’ve
planned this a long time. Don’t let misplaced pity change your mind.”

“You’re right.” The duke had always been a means to an end, her chance to leave this unnatural
life behind forever. He’d soon recover from whatever damage her departure inflicted on his pride.
“Soraya is no more.”

Ben’s smile widened. “That’s grand, lass. Aye, and I don’t mind telling you summat else—I’ll be
right glad to see the back of Ben bloody Ahbood, the sultan’s favorite eunuch, as well!”

An hour after leaving his mistress, the Duke of Kylemore stood in his large library, embroiled in
quarrel with his mother. This was in no sense an exceptional occurrence. Kylemore and the duchess
shared a difficult relationship at the best of times—and the best of times were fleeting and rare. But
today’s clash was even more bitter than usual.

“You will marry, Justin! You owe it to your name and your family. You owe it to me. You owe it
to the title.” This wasn’t a new conflict, but his mother had taken it up with particular vehemence this
afternoon. She stood opposite him, tall and slender, and blindly set on her wishes prevailing.

“There are times I believe the world would be a better place if the title sank into permanent
oblivion,” Kylemore said wearily, leaning one elbow on the carved marble mantelpiece and staring
down into the unlit grate.

“Justin! What would your dear departed father say if he could hear you?”

“My father was too addicted to drink, opium and the viler sins of the flesh to care.”

“How dare you say that?”

“Because it’s true.” Kylemore looked up. With a sense of inevitability, he watched his mother
shake out a scrap of lace to dab at her eyes.

“What in heaven’s name did I do to deserve a son who is so unfeeling?”

“I don’t believe that’s a line of argument you wish to pursue, madam,” he said icily.

His mother could produce crocodile tears at will. The sight of her clutching a handkerchief
evinced only ennui.

“Letitia would make you the perfect wife, Justin.”

Kylemore suppressed a shudder. “She’d make you the perfect spy, you mean.” His mother had
pushed her ward, Lady Letitia Wade, at him for years. But recently, her efforts had become
increasingly desperate, perhaps because she saw any hold she had over her son dwindling away
to nothing.

Margaret, Duchess of Kylemore, cared for one thing only—power. In its pursuit, she’d seduced
half the government, lied, connived and manipulated. Without a shred of compunction, she destroyed
anyone and anything that hindered her own selfish ends. He’d seen her in action often enough.

But her days of influence faded, and she knew it. Planting the whey-faced Letitia, always uttering
her creature, into her son’s household was something of a last stand.

The duchess’s delicate chin took on a stubborn line. “People are talking. If you don’t make
it right, the poor child’s reputation will be beyond redemption.”

“If there is gossip, it has only one source. And that is you.” Kylemore took a step closer. “I will

never take that sheep-featured little sneak to my bed. If tongues are wagging about her sleeping under my roof, perfectly well chaperoned, I might point out, that can easily be remedied. The dowerhouse ready for occupancy.”

His mother’s yelp of outrage held no artifice. “Leave Town? In the middle of the season? You must be mad. Everyone will condemn you for cruelty and neglect if you compel me to this monstrous act.”

Kylemore had had enough. He perhaps hadn’t hated his mother for his full twenty-seven years, but, God, he felt as if he had. And the ideal revenge lay so close to hand. The moment had arrived to show the duchess how truly monstrous he could be.

He permitted himself a cold smile. “I think not. The world will consider my actions perfectly reasonable in a newly married man.”

Of course, his mother didn’t immediately understand. Her fine-boned face, with its deep blue eyes and black, winged brows—a face whose twin he saw and loathed every time he passed a mirror—cleared with relief. “Oh, Justin! You were bamming me. Lud, I should have guessed. Letitia will be in a transport. She’s always held a *tendre* for you.”

Kylemore had no difficulty keeping his smile in place. “I doubt it.” The duchess’s ward was terrified of him, he knew. That the chit contemplated him as a husband without running screaming to the nearest nunnery spoke volumes for Margaret’s sway over her. “But I’m afraid you mistake me for Mother.”

The duchess was an astute woman, although vanity and self-interest sometimes clouded her judgment. “Don’t do anything rash to spite me, Justin. Remember the Kinmurrie honor,” she said abruptly somber.

“Oh, the Kinmurrie honor is uppermost in my mind, dear Mother.” He saw her flinch at the savage edge he lent the endearment. “I intend to bring home a bride to do that honor proud.”

“Justin...” She reached out to touch him, but he moved out of her reach. He was pleased to note she was seriously frightened now.

“I don’t expect a long betrothal, Mother. My wife will wish to take up her duties as soon as possible. Given the situation, you and Letitia should make arrangements for an early removal.” He bowed briefly in her direction. “Your servant.” He stalked out of the library, his mind hard with determination as bright as a diamond.

Verity was in the kitchen when the maid found her. “Beg pardon, miss, but His Grace is in the drawing room asking for you.”

“What?” She spun around too quickly and knocked the pottery candlestick she was packing to the flagstones.

“Oh, miss!” Elsie fluttered around her, wringing her hands at the shattered mess on the floor. “Oh, miss, don’t move or you’ll cut yourself.”

“It’s all right, Elsie.” Although, in fact, Verity had been rather fond of the sturdy brown candlestick. “Did you say the Duke of Kylemore was here?”

“Yes, miss. I’ll get a broom and sweep up the pieces.”

The terrified pounding of Verity’s heart blocked out the maid’s fussing. Why was Kylemore here? He called on her with almost military regularity on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. He arrived, he took his pleasure, he departed. Occasionally, he sent a carriage to bring her into Town for the theater or a party. But having left Kensington, he never, ever returned on the same day.

Was it a coincidence this was the very evening she meant to disappear from his life? He must have found out. But how? She'd been so discreet, so careful.

Her hands shook as she pulled off her grubby apron and stepped over Elsie, who was dealing with the remains of the candlestick. Verity hardly did the legendary Soraya justice in her plain gray muslin, but antagonizing the duke by making him wait seemed unwise. If he'd discovered her plans, she needed every shred of goodwill she could garner.

Although she sailed into his presence with her head high, her heart raced. Her intentions weren't strictly illegal, but strict definitions of legality became irrelevant if one's enemy was a powerful man. And a duke was about as powerful as a man could be.

"Your Grace? What an...unexpected pleasure."

Slowly, he turned from contemplating the empty spaces on the walls. The picture dealer had been in the last hour with the unremarkable artworks Kylemore had deemed suitable for his mistress's abode.

Verity rushed in before he could speak. "I shall order tea. Or would Your Grace prefer to...go upstairs?" The bluntness was unworthy of the great Soraya, but she was badly rattled.

The duke's puzzled gaze settled on her with much the same expression he had worn facing the blank walls. "You look...different."

Verity could imagine she did. Soraya never appeared before her protector in less than her best—unless she wore nothing at all.

Kylemore considered the depleted room. "What is happening here?"

Verity gave Soraya's laugh—low, husky, endlessly suggestive. "Your Grace has caught me in a domestic moment. We are cleaning the house." With studied elegance, she subsided onto a chaise longue and gestured for the duke to be seated.

"We? I don't expect my mistress to play the household drudge. If you require more staff, you need only ask." He sat opposite her, all black-haired, hawk-nosed magnificence. His gentian-blue eyes surveyed her critically.

She shrugged. "I like to see my standards are met, Your Grace. The house is, after all, mine." She hoped he'd recall the reminder after she'd gone.

"You have a smudge on your cheek."

Unbelievably, she colored. She, who had traded her chastity for a livelihood at the age of fifteen. Today, it seemed, was to be full of singularities.

The kiss. The duke's second visit. And now a blush.

Perhaps the time had really come for the great Soraya to retire.

"I have displeased you with my appearance," she said evenly. "I shall go and change into a gown more appropriate to receive Your Grace." She started to rise.

"No, I am discourteous. I apologize."

Astonishment sent Verity back onto the chair.

Unprecedented indeed! She couldn't have just heard her proud, difficult lover say he was sorry.

The duke's expression was unreadable. "You could never be less than breathtaking."

"Thank you," she said, although his remark hadn't entirely sounded like a compliment.

"You will make a most spectacular duchess."

If she hadn't known better, she would have guessed he'd spent the day in his cups. Her fear had subsided enough for her to find Kylemore's odd humor irritating.

"It is Your Grace's pleasure to joke, I see."

Kylemore's eyes glittered with a hard light. "I am far from joking, madam." His deep voice took

on its customary tone of command. "I am here to inform you we will marry as soon as I have obtained a special license."

Shock forced a genuine laugh from her. "Now I know you really are mocking me." She stood meaning to serve him a glass of wine, but he reached out and caught her wrist, forestalling her.

"This is a strange answer to my proposal."

"I haven't heard a proposal," she said before she could stop herself.

"I want you to be my wife."

She stared down into his face, noticing the muscle that jerked in his cheek. Strong emotion gripped him, she realized. Not only that; he was, it appeared, serious about this crackbrained idea.

"Your Grace, flattered as I am by your interest, you must see what you suggest is impossible. When his jaw took on a stubborn line, she continued in a harder voice. "Even if the world, your name, and your family countenanced such a *mésalliance*, I am afraid my own pride would deny you."

"Pride?" He spoke as if the word were inconceivable in connection with a fallen creature such as herself. "This is a preferment beyond your wildest dreams."

"My dreams are surprisingly humble."

Beneath a growing sense of unreality, Verity was angry. Only an overbearing bully could expect her to be grateful for this lunatic offer. She was canny enough to see that he was hatching some scheme, although she couldn't fathom his purpose.

A more conceited woman would ascribe the duke's offer to a sudden surfeit of passion. But Verity knew better. He was plotting something to his own advantage. And she had no intention of becoming entangled in whatever he was up to.

Her, a duchess? The idea was comical in its unreality.

She kept her voice cool. "Pray release me. Your tender wooing is likely to leave a bracelet of bruises." Not precisely true. His hold was firm without actually hurting her.

"I'll let you go when you answer me."

"I thought I had." Necessity meant she'd devoted most of her life to catering to self-centered men. Now she'd reached her limit. "But as Your Grace insists, here is my reply. I have submitted to becoming your mistress, my lord. No power on earth could compel me to become your wife."

Perhaps if he'd phrased his ridiculous suggestion less arrogantly, she might have tempered her refusal. Or perhaps with escape so close, she couldn't contain her natural frankness, hidden so long by the pretense of being Soraya.

Furious color bloomed along his cheekbones. "You respond hastily, madam, and with a disdain I cannot believe I deserve. I have come to lift you from the gutter into an honorable state of matrimony."

"At least I am free in the gutter."

He surged to his feet and glared down at her. Even their most extreme moments of passion had never held so much genuine emotion. "You speak very lightly of gutters. You forget I could destroy you with a word."

The duke loomed over her, tall, powerful, his lean muscled body radiating strength. But Verity refused to cower before him. Verity, not Soraya. Somewhere in this encounter, Soraya had vanished forever.

"Very pretty, sir. I almost find myself charmed into accepting your suit."

Verity thought he might strike her, he who had never lifted a hand in anger to her before. She braced herself. She'd endured violence in the past. She could endure it again.

But unbelievably, he mastered his rage. He unclasped her arm with an ironic gesture. "There is no

purpose continuing now. You are overset and not thinking clearly.”

~~Verity forbore to point out that he'd hardly been a paragon of tranquility himself. He had at last released her, he spoke of going, and after this afternoon, she never intended to see him again.~~

Speaking normally was an effort. “As Your Grace wishes.” *Just go*, her heart cried. *Just go and leave me in peace.*

Secretly she had always liked the Duke of Kylemore, sensing the lonely battle he fought to maintain his facade of perfection. But his startling, woefully unsuitable proposal of marriage and his behavior in the last few minutes made her remember the old rumors of insanity running through the Kinmurrie line.

His high color indicated he was still far from calm. “I shall return for your answer tomorrow. In the meantime, spare some consideration for the Duchess of Kylemore’s jewels. They make today’s ruby look like a fairground trinket.”

So you believe me to be no more than a grasping jade, Verity thought resentfully. She didn’t want to blunt her sarcasm. “I assure you, my mind will dwell on nothing but diamonds and emeralds.”

That didn’t please him, she could see. “Tomorrow at four, madam. I await your consent.” Not a gentle kiss on the hand now. Apparently his mistress merited a courtesy his prospective bride did not.

Kylemore ignored her bobbed curtsey and stalked toward the door. “As you should know by now, I always get what I want. And do not doubt I want this marriage.” He sent a frosty nod in her direction, the picture of aristocratic male omnipotence, and left.

But when Kylemore rode up to the pretty little villa the next day, it was silent and empty. The notorious Soraya, his chosen weapon against his hated family, was gone.

Kylemore entered the house and in a matter of moments ascertained it was not only uninhabited but also looted of everything of value.

Had his marriage proposal frightened his mistress into precipitate flight? He wouldn't have said so. Soraya was a woman who scared easily. Yesterday, she'd seemed outraged rather than terrified.

Perhaps his parting threat had sent her scurrying for whatever bolthole currently sheltered her from a beguiling hide. But he doubted it.

From long habit, he kept a tight rein on his temper. Pointless to vent his fury now. No, far better to conserve it for when he caught up with the deceitful trull.

And he would catch up with her.

He paused in the parlor. He should have realized what was afoot yesterday when so much had been missing from the house.

Cleaning indeed! He'd wager the rapacious piece had never in her life encountered the sharp edge of a scrubbing brush. Although to be fair, she'd been dressed for it. He had a sudden piercing vision of her sitting before him in that remarkably shabby frock.

Beautiful, of course, and damned fetching as always. But tall, straight and disdainful, as though she already were the duchess he planned to make her. And subtly, not the same person as the compliant courtesan he'd farewelled in the early afternoon.

When she'd sent him on his way with a kiss, damn her duplicitous soul to hell.

The Judas kiss.

He remembered her air of suppressed panic when he'd proposed. No, she'd plotted her betrayal long before he'd asked her to marry him. The house's forlorn abandonment reeked of a carefully executed departure.

He started to go upstairs when he heard a muffled thud from the back of the dwelling.

So he wasn't alone after all. With triumphant eagerness, he flung open the door from the parlor and found himself in a totally unfamiliar hallway. His heart pounded with an expectation that included a shaming dose of relief.

He strode down the shadowy corridor, his boot heels ringing on the flags. The kitchens had been cleared like the rest of the house. But here, all was not pristine. His eyes fell on a few scattered crumbs along the sink.

"Come out. I know you're here." His voice echoed in the empty room. "This is childish."

He began to bang open doors, coldly amused to think of the magnificent Soraya reduced to cowering in a cupboard.

But when he hurred wide the pantry door, he discovered instead a small servant girl, nearly catatonic with dread and clutching the remains of a bun.

"Jesus!" he cursed. "For God's sake, what are you doing? Come out at once!"

The girl whimpered, and to his horror, her eyes filled with tears.

"Stop that!" he snapped. "Where is your mistress?" *And mine*, he thought grimly.

She merely shook her head and pressed further away from him.

Kylemore took a deep breath. Terrifying the girl would render her useless as a source of information.

But beneath his impatience lingered a memory of just how it felt to be alone and defenseless and scared for your life. He bundled the unwelcome recollection back into the dark corner of his soul where it lurked with other events he had no desire to revisit—ever.

“Come, child. I mean you no harm.” He moved back from the door as if to prove his good intentions.

The maid didn’t budge, but at least she spoke. “Please, sir! Please, Your Grace, don’t hurt me. Mr. Ben turned us all off last night but I didn’t have nowhere to go so I hid down here. Please don’t hurt me.”

“I have no intention of hurting you,” he said with asperity, then immediately regretted it as she huddled into the wall once more. He deliberately gentled his tone. “You have my word. Come on where I can see you.”

He stepped away as the girl emerged reluctantly. “I know you, don’t I?”

Her curtsey was unsteady. “Yes, Your Grace. Elsie. I let you in yesterday. I didn’t mean no mischief by staying. Mr. Ben said we was all to go to Your Grace’s town house tomorrow for our wages. The buyers don’t take over until next week. I didn’t mean no harm, sir.”

Kylemore spoke as kindly as he was able, given the tempest raging inside him. “I’m sure you didn’t, Elsie. This will remain our secret if you agree to answer my questions. Our secret and I’ll give you a gold sovereign for your help.”

Elsie’s eyes rounded at the offer, although she still trembled. He assumed tête-à-têtes with the nobility were outside her ken.

“Yes, sir. Th-thank you, sir.” She bobbed into another curtsey.

“First of all, where is your mistress?”

Elsie shook her head. “I don’t know, Your Grace. She and Mr. Ben went off in a hired carriage last night. I was the only one left behind, but I didn’t hear their direction. They was both dressed for traveling, though.” Elsie, when not fearing for her life or virtue, was clearly far from stupid.

“Did they take all the household things with them?”

“No, sir. Only a few boxes in the carriage. Everything else was sold, even Miss Soraya’s clothes. Which was odd. She still needs to dress herself, don’t she?” Elsie relaxed into her story. “There’s been blokes in and out of the house all week carting away pictures and furniture and stuff.”

“And you believe the house has been sold as well?”

“Oh, it has, sir. A nabob’s moving in. I caught a peek at him last week—all brown and burnt hair, is, sir. Quite nasty. Why, Mr. Ben, he said…”

Suddenly Kylemore realized just what had niggled at him earlier. “Mr. Ben? You mean Ben Ahbood, the servant? He spoke?” he asked sharply.

Elsie’s confidence faltered and she looked at Kylemore with renewed nervousness. “Of course, sir.”

“And he has spoken this whole time?” A horrible suspicion grew in his mind. A suspicion that the mystery of Soraya’s disappearance wasn’t such a mystery after all but the oldest story in the world.

Elsie clearly thought his questions were insane. “Yes, sir. How else could he tell us what to be getting on with?”

“And how did this Mr. Ben sound?” he asked in a dangerous tone.

“How do you mean, sir?”

He curbed his impatience before he panicked her into her cupboard again. “Did he speak as I do? As you do? Did he sound foreign?”

She frowned. “I don’t know about foreign. He didn’t sound like me—or you either, sir.”

Given that Kylemore spoke with the clipped accents of the upper classes and Elsie had a decided Cockney twang, he couldn't say that narrowed the field much.

"And he and...and Miss Soraya." He nearly choked on the name. His mistress was lucky she wasn't here now or he might have choked her instead. "Did they seem close, friendly?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Elsie said with enthusiasm.

Then she must have perceived his hostile reaction to that information, because she went on. "Not in any untoward way, sir. Just friendly. Affectionate, like. Please don't get the wrong idea about Miss Soraya, sir. She was always awful good to us staff, whatever else she was, begging your pardon. When she gave all of us a month's wages extra and good references afore she left. Even though she said she was sure Your Grace would see us right anyway, considering we was really working for you."

Kylemore was in no mood to listen to praises of his absconded paramour. But Elsie had clearly been fond of Soraya, and apart from further encomiums on the jade's character, he could discover little else from the girl. Eventually he sent her on her way with the promised sovereign and instructions to see his butler at Kylemore House about work in the kitchens there.

Then he furiously combed every inch of the villa, although he already knew the crafty bitch he kept in such high style would have made sure nothing here could help him trace her. She hadn't even left him so much as a mug to smash, and by the time he'd finished his mad search, he dearly needed to smash something. Preferably Ben Ahbood's smug face.

All the time, his mind circled the problem of Soraya and just how much of a fool she'd made him in their dizzyingly expensive year together.

Ben Ahbood was not mute after all. If he was not mute, it was highly unlikely he was a eunuch either. And no man could know Soraya without wanting her.

So had she played Kylemore false with her manservant?

They had been living together, Devil take them. Only a soup-brained nitwit could imagine the relationship was innocent.

The idea of that hulking brute grunting over Soraya's pale naked beauty became too much. Cursing, Kylemore burst out of the house into the garden. He breathed deeply and struggled to order the anarchy hurtling through his head.

He was Cold Kylemore, famous for his self-control. No damned twopenny whore and her fancy man could disrupt his sangfroid.

Where the hell could she have gone? Why in the name of all that was holy had she left him? Had she really abandoned him for another lover?

Casting around desperately for clues to her disappearance, the duke thought back to what he knew of the woman who had shared his bed this past year. Surprisingly little, he realized.

Now, futilely, he wished he'd taken the time to find out more. But he had been so lost to his physical passion that he'd never paused to explore more than her body.

He turned sightlessly back toward the house that had witnessed some of the few happy hours of his adult life. With evening closing in, it loomed before him. Dark. Lost. Forsaken.

If that treacherous slut thought she had left the Duke of Kylemore similarly bereft, she'd learned nothing during their liaison.

And if she imagined she had eluded him with her lies and her midnight flit, she was wrong about that as well.

"Damn her," he whispered into the encroaching night. "Damn her to hell." He could no longer bear to be here, where Soraya had been and now so abruptly was not.

The empty house seemed to mock him as he mounted his horse. Ignoring the animal's snort

protest, he wheeled around and galloped for London in a furious clatter of hooves.

~~He rode hard. He rode blindly. He rode without a care for the fine horseflesh between his thighs.~~
And all the time, his mind beat out a rhythm of the chase.

Soraya, Soraya, Soraya.

Only when he was back in Town did necessity force him to ease his breakneck pace. When his horse nearly trampled a woman crossing the street, he took a deep breath and hauled on the reins.

He shook his head to clear it and looked around at the twilit city. How strange that life should continue normally for other people when his own world had changed so irrevocably in the space of an afternoon. Around him, shopkeepers closed up, children played with hoops and tops and dolls, and families took the late spring air. All perfectly usual. All things he'd seen ten thousand times before.

His attention focused on a pair of sweethearts poring over a shop window. A tall young man and a pretty blonde girl.

How he hated them. How he wanted them dead.

And he wanted them to scream as they died.

A woman in a stylish bonnet moved past them, a small woman with a trim waist and a fashionable air. A woman who moved with a peculiar grace.

His breath caught in his throat.

He flung himself from the saddle. In this crowd, he had a better chance of catching her on foot. And by heaven, he meant to catch her.

The woman turned the corner out of sight.

Soraya had underestimated him indeed if she'd thought he wouldn't find her so close to home.

Without a thought for his horse, he set off at a run. He treated the people in the street as so many inanimate obstacles, hurling them out of the way without excuse or apology, not pausing when he recklessly knocked a child's hoop flying or sent a puppy skittering out of his path. Only one thing mattered—that the traitorous strumpet didn't escape him.

As he rounded the corner, he slipped and almost fell. When he steadied himself against the rough brickwork, the jade was ahead of him, looking for all the world as if she was enjoying a pleasant evening's stroll.

Oh, she would pay for what she'd done to him. She would pay with everything she had to give. And then he would demand more. And she didn't even know her short-lived bid for freedom had ended.

How delightful. How he would laugh when he saw her face.

His lips curved in a wolfish smile as he contemplated his inevitable triumph over the presumptuous baggage.

He dived forward and grabbed her, not caring how his fingers bit into that slender shoulder. The woman gasped and turned.

But he already knew.

"I beg your pardon?" she snapped in outrage.

Kylemore's hand dropped away as an awful weight settled on his heart. This was not Soraya. Soraya was too clever to risk discovery after what he now recognized as all her planning.

"I was mistaken, madam. My apologies. I thought you were someone else."

"Keep your hands to yourself, sir, until you are sure of whom you are accosting!" She was an attractive piece, past first youth, but with a nice sensual mouth and flashing dark eyes. Once, he might have taken the time to soothe her temper and discover whether that shapely figure was a product of corsetry alone.

Kylemore made his excuses again, but in truth, he'd already forgotten the woman. He flicked her from his mind with no more thought than he'd give a speck of lint on his coat. Less thought, in fact. His tailoring was always high on his list of priorities.

He headed back to where he'd leaped so precipitately from the saddle. God knew if his horse would still be there.

But some public-minded citizen had tied it to a hitching post outside an inn. At least he wouldn't have to walk all the way to Mayfair—although in his present frame of mind, it might be safer if he did.

He mounted and rode on, but his attention was focused far from the capital's busy streets.

Where could Soraya be? He had known her six years. Something over that time must hint at her whereabouts.

With a pang he didn't want to examine, he recalled his first sight of her. Like lightning from a clear summer sky, she had just arrived in London from Paris. Her protector then had been Sir Eldred Morse, a rich and aging baronet who had held some embassy position in the French capital. Sir Eldred was a bachelor with a passion for beautiful things. And by far the most beautiful thing in his famous collection was his young mistress, the incomparable Soraya.

Kylemore, frankly curious to view this creature who had set the men of the ton on their collective ear, had met her at Morse's town house shortly afterward. He'd been unprepared for his reaction, although the level of the furor should have warned him.

Because, of course, London had seen beautiful women before.

But Soraya was...more.

One look at her across Sir Eldred's drawing room and Kylemore had known the same urge to possess and conquer that had raised his reaving ancestors from minor Highland lairds to dukes of the realm.

But the cool-eyed beauty's lack of interest in him had been insultingly plain. Nothing he did or said, no material inducement he dangled before her exquisite nose could separate her from her elder lover.

That season, every man in the beau monde seemed to scheme to steal her away. Until it finally became obvious she was, astonishingly, perfectly content to remain loyal to her keeper.

And that was when her real notoriety started.

Three young men, all bright hopes of their generation, shot themselves for love of her. There were duels, several killing matters, even though the survivors must have known their victory brought them no closer to obtaining what they so desperately desired.

Within months of her arrival, Sir Eldred Morse's mistress was the most hated and most idolized and most scandalous woman in England.

Kylemore observed the chaos with increasing frustration. Surely he could do something to make her his. But all his power, all his fortune, all his attractions couldn't shift her from her damned, inexplicable devotion to the portly baronet.

Secretly, he sent investigators to France to ferret out what they could about her. But she'd been both as famous, as faithful and as elusive in Paris as she was in London.

Of course, rumors abounded, but all proved infuriatingly difficult to substantiate. Some said Sir Eldred had rescued her from a Turkish harem—or a harem in Egypt or Syria or Persia. Unlike the heroics for the notably sedentary baronet, although the evidence of the girl's name indicated some exotic origin.

If her name really was Soraya, which Kylemore had always doubted.

Other people believed she was a laundress Morse had picked up in the alleyways around Le Halles. Or she was a former child prostitute who had seen her chance with the rich English milord and taken it.

Kylemore always treated these tales—and even more outlandish stories he heard over the years—with skepticism. His own guess about her, if she was indeed French, was she came from a respectable family that had fallen foul of the Revolution or Bonaparte. He'd lay money that breeding lurked somewhere in her background. Her effortless self-possession outdid any fine lady he knew.

Perhaps she was English. She spoke the language as well as he did.

“Watch it, yer lordship!”

The shout wrenched Kylemore back to the present. A thickset countryman clutched at his horse's bridle, clearly trying to save himself from being knocked down.

The famous Kinmurrie glare cowed the fellow, although Kylemore knew the bumpkin was only guilty of wandering unwittingly into his path. He forced himself to concentrate on reaching Grosvenor Square without causing damage either to himself, his mount or London's traffic.

The moment Kylemore slammed into his town house, his mother appeared at the top of the staircase. Since their argument yesterday, he had deliberately avoided her. He wondered with distant amusement just how long she'd been hovering above, waiting for him to come back. He hoped it was hours.

“Justin, I must speak with you.”

He stripped off his gloves and handed them to the attendant footman. “Not now, madam.”

She marched down the steps with elegant determination. “What plans are you making? What is this ridiculous talk of an engagement?”

“I shall inform you of developments.” He turned toward his library.

His mother forgot her self-importance to go so far as to hurry after him. “That's not good enough! And you cannot really expect me to leave London!”

He whirled on her as he reached the door. “I have spoken, madam. And as head of this family, you expect to be obeyed. You and your ward will be gone from this house by week's end.”

“Justin, this is cruel. This is...”

He didn't know what she read in his face, but his expression must have been daunting enough to convince her that retreat was the wisest course. And the duchess was a woman who quailed at nothing.

“As you wish,” she said in a subdued tone he'd never heard from her before.

“Yes, as I wish,” he said savagely, knowing that nothing, in fact, was as he wished.

He strode into his library without a backward glance. Soraya didn't know what she'd unleashed on her lover by deserting him. But she would find out. And she would be sorry.

Kylemore poured himself a brandy and downed it in a single gulp. He was usually a man of abstemious habits. His father's pathetic example had always stood as a warning against the dangers of self-indulgence. But now he refilled his glass and collapsed in a chair in front of the fire. He had agreed to meet his cronies at his club, but he was in no mood to act the civilized gentleman tonight.

The liquor's warmth couldn't melt the chill inside him. What was Soraya doing now? Had she left him for another protector? Was his humiliation already public knowledge? Did the world snigger tonight at the thought of Kylemore's mistress fleecing some other rich blockhead? 24 ANNE CAMPBELL

How his rivals would gloat at his rejection. How they would fawn over the fortunate fellow who was now Soraya's keeper.

He swore and flung the empty glass into the fire.

~~Had she taken another lover? Or had her favors become her brawny manservant's exclusive prerogative? The thought aroused another burst of sick anger. Just when had Ben Ahbood become an inseparable part of Soraya's mystique?~~

Kylemore couldn't remember the first time he'd noticed the brute. He'd certainly been with Soraya after Sir Eldreth's death three years ago, when the male half of the beau monde had predictably gone mad trying to secure her interest. Two other dukes had been in the running, as well as an Italian prince and one of the tsar's cousins, not to mention a parcel of fellows holding lesser titles.

In the six months Soraya took to consider her next step, there were more duels between especially excitable supplicants. Although thankfully, this time, the self-destructive element among society's sprigs controlled their inclinations to end it all.

Kylemore had been sure of himself—and of her—and had remained above the vulgar displays of masculine competitiveness that kept London buzzing that season. He'd always known at some bone-deep level she would be his. And she'd known that too. She put up a great show of indifference, but some link, some invisible thread tugged her inexorably toward him.

So he stood apart from the fray and waited for her inevitable choice. Only to watch Soraya do the utterly unanticipated.

From her clamoring legion of admirers, she chose James Mallory. Not a whiff of a title. A mere Mr., a shy young man recently back from India. Of good but unremarkable family. And rich. At least there she'd lived up to Kylemore's expectations.

If his inconvenient fascination for the chit had allowed, Kylemore would have given up the game then and there. She'd had her shot at greatness and instead given herself to a commonplace milkmaid with no social polish, however deep his pockets were.

Although to be fair, James Mallory had cut quite a dash after Soraya singled him out as her lover. He'd soon developed enough town bronze to snare one of the season's prettiest heiresses. To whom, then, amazingly, he showed every sign of fidelity.

Which meant Soraya was back seeking a protector.

Not that she gave any indication her sudden freedom was unwelcome. And by this stage, Ben Ahbood, or whatever the bastard's name really was, had been very much in evidence.

Of course, she had neither explained nor excused. The legendary Soraya's factotum was a much more Arabian Samson. If the world disapproved, she shrugged her straight, slender shoulders and proceeded just as she pleased.

This time, Kylemore left nothing to chance. No gentlemanly hanging back, no self-confident hesitation in expressing his interest. The morning Mallory's engagement to Lady Sarah Coote was announced, Kylemore presented his card at Soraya's house. He'd waited five years. He had no intention of waiting one moment longer.

Soraya appeared neither delighted, dismayed nor disconcerted to find a duke in her parlor at a quarter of eight, an hour more suitable for breakfast than for callers. Instead, she listened calmly and, Devil take her, had said she would think about what he proposed. Her protector hadn't been in evidence, although Kylemore would have happily faced him down if he had.

But, Kylemore remembered with a churning in his belly, Ben Ahbood had admitted him to the house, then sent him on his way. And the lout's manner toward him had done no honor to his dignity as a duke.

Soraya's response had come a week later, couched in a swathe of legalities. Kylemore's original offer had been extravagant. She requested he increase it to a king's ransom, including clear title to a

property and goods he gave her.

~~And, he remembered now with another unpleasant twinge, after a year, if either party were dissatisfied, the arrangement ceased forthwith.~~

Oh, she'd been clever, his grasping, cunning mistress. Clever and faithless. And he'd been guilty of fatal complacency.

She'd been overtly true to her two previous keepers. He should know—he had cast every lure to coax her away. But perhaps she'd duped everyone and her real allegiance was to the blackguard who lived hugger-mugger with her.

Her subtle hints about Ben Ahbood's sexual incapability had been a masterstroke. Kylemore had always admired Soraya, but her audacity now took his breath away.

His excellent brain—like his looks, inherited from his despised mother—clicked back into working order. Coldly, calmly, he vowed to track down the cozening trollop and her lover.

The blood of generations of ruthless men ran in his veins. Soraya had no idea what she'd started when she played the Duke of Kylemore for a fool. He smiled in cold anticipation of the day she discovered the mistake she'd made in betraying Justin Kinmurrie.

Alate summer storm had stirred the North Sea off Whitby Sands into fury. Verity flung the veil back from her black bonnet and stared out into the windswept world around her. The beach was almost deserted, and no one would notice the widow Symonds hold her face up to the cold gale or smile out at the restless ocean.

She'd been in Whitby for three months and still could hardly believe that the transition to her new life had been so easy.

The scandalous Soraya had left London with her manservant. Several days later, the respectable widow Mrs. Charles Symonds had taken a house in this Yorkshire fishing town with her brother Benjamin Ashton.

I'm free, I'm free, her heart chanted in time with the gray water lashing the shore.

I'm free. I'm independent. My life is my own at last.

I'm free, but becoming uncomfortably damp, her more practical self pointed out as spray flew up to darken her black bombazine. She chuckled and moved back from the edge.

The townspeople, all good sturdy Yorkshire folk, had been mildly curious about her arrival with her brother but had soon accepted them. Verity Symonds was still in deep mourning for the young husband she'd lost to a fever six months ago. The young husband who had left his relict perfectly well provided for, by all appearances.

Mr. Benjamin Ashton, too, seemed a good enough chap, clearly from local stock, as he, unlike her sister, hadn't lost his accent. In fact, it was soon bruited about that Mr. Ashton sought a suitable property where he could establish a sheep farm.

As she climbed the steps to her house at the top of the ridge, Verity considered whether she'd stay in Whitby. She loved the sea and the old town and the brooding ruins of the ancient abbey on the hill. The place was far from the eyes of society and conveniently close to the moors, where her brother had always wanted to settle.

Ben had hated London. She found it an immense satisfaction to witness his transparent happiness at resuming his true identity. At last, he followed his own ambitions after playing her silent bodyguard for so long. Helping him fulfill his dreams was the very least she owed him.

Not for the first time, she wished she could remove her sister from the school near Winchester.

where she'd boarded since she was five years old. How wonderful to reunite the entire Ashton family. But the risk was too great that Soraya's notoriety would taint Maria's future.

Wherever Verity went, Soraya would always cast a shadow. That sobering thought accompanied her up the last of the steep rise to her lodgings.

She let herself into the house and paused in the confined hallway to remove her bonnet and gloves. Her brother's voice was raised in anger somewhere at the back.

This was strange enough to make her hurry toward the sound. But as she neared the kitchen, was the second voice she heard—soft but clear, and as cutting as a saber through flesh—that made her stop.

The Duke of Kylemore had found her.

How long did Verity stand in that dim corridor while her foolish sense of security leached away to nothing? Later, common sense told her it must only have been seconds. Dread held her immobile. She had a prescience of doom as relentless as those pounding waves upon the beach, where she'd been so stupidly sure of herself.

When awareness returned, she was halfway back to the door. If she ran far enough and fast enough, surely Kylemore wouldn't follow. Britain held a thousand places to hide. Or she could go abroad. He'd never trace her in America. Or New South Wales. Or wildest Borneo, if it came to that.

With shaking hands, she reached out for her bonnet, then realized just what she was doing. She couldn't flee with merely the clothes she stood up in and the few coins in her reticule. The sound of a crash, probably a chair smashing on the flagstones in the kitchen, made up her mind for her.

The duke had no legal claim on her. She'd held her own against him as Soraya. Verity Ashtor was no lesser creature. She took a deep breath, turned and headed toward the kitchen.

The duke pinned Ben to one wall, his cane across her brother's throat. The sight of her lover after so long made Verity's breath hitch with fear as she paused in the doorway.

"Come on, you lying bastard. Hit me! You know you want to," Kylemore taunted in a low, jeering voice. "Hit me, for Christ's sake."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Ben, thank God, kept his fists by his sides. "But magistrates don't encourage the lower orders to beat up the bloody nobility. I won't hang for the sake of your sodding pretty face, Your Grace." This last with utter contempt.

A jerk of the stick against Ben's Adam's apple made him gag. "If you don't hang for that, Lord knows, you'll hang for something else."

"Stop it," Verity said firmly. Her apparent calmness hid trembling terror. "For pity's sake, there's no need for this!"

Neither looked at her.

The duke continued, still in that same soft, teasingly threatening tone. "How does it feel to know she gave it all to me for so long? To know you begged for another man's leavings? Did you listen at the door to hear every sweet little moan and sigh she made as I did exactly what I wanted to her?"

"I said stop it!" Verity insisted more sharply. The duke had discovered most of their secrets—how else had he found them? And he was clearly mistaken, and fuming, about her relationship with her former manservant.

Ben's smile was scornful. "You're nowt to her but a nice fat fortune. Every moan and sigh meant gold. Gold for her and gold for me. So, my lord, still feel so bloody high and mighty?"

Verity glanced across to where her maid-of-all-work watched from the corner with a mixture of avarice and horror. Whatever else resulted from this afternoon, her chances of remaining in Whitby as a respectable widow had just disintegrated. But before she worried about that, she somehow had to stop her lover from murdering her brother.

Kylemore smiled back at Ben with a distinctly vulpine curve to his lips. "Perhaps it was you she was gulled. While your filthy hands defiled that perfect white flesh, she lay there wishing for a real man."

Ben's face twisted with revulsion. "You? A real man? You're nowt but spleen and vanity tricked out in fancy rags. When the lass wanted a real man, she knew where to turn."

Dear heaven, if she didn't do something quickly, there would be bloodshed. The scent of impending violence rose another notch. While Ben might outweigh the duke, Kylemore's lean body was lithe and strong, as she was intimately aware.

"Listen, you idiots!" With unsteady hands, she grabbed a large blue-and-white platter from the dresser near the door.

"I'll kill you." Unbelievably, Kylemore's voice didn't rise, although Ben, she saw, struggled to contain his thirst to fight back. She knew if her brother made the slightest retaliation, the duke would set out with utter mercilessness to destroy him. That cane concealed a sword. He'd shown her the mechanism one afternoon in Kensington.

"Then who will hang, Your Grace?" Ben asked snidely.

This had gone more than far enough. "You're both acting like schoolboys!" She lifted the platter and deliberately dashed it against the flagstones.

The sound of smashing crockery echoed in the suddenly silent room.

Her gesture finally captured their attention. The duke turned toward her, his blue eyes blind with anger. Ben, too, looked in her direction, although the duke's stick kept him trapped. She realized that through all their squabbling over her, neither had actually known she'd been in the room with them.

She drew herself up and spoke with all the authority the woman who had once been the greatest Soraya could muster. "Benjamin Ashton, stop baiting him. We're in enough trouble." She turned to the duke. "And you, Your Grace, let him go."

Kylemore's lip lifted in a sneer. "Pleading for your lover, madam?"

She resisted an urge to hurl more crockery. "He's not my lover." Then, momentarily forgetting the respect due to his exalted rank, she spat, "He's my brother, you damned fool."

"Your brother." Strangely, Kylemore didn't even consider questioning the truth of her assertion.

He stared at the woman he'd at last found, then around the stark little kitchen. He hadn't noticed much about it when he'd stormed in to find the abhorred Ben Ahbood showing every sign of being home. All he'd wanted then had been to kill. The incongruity of this adequate, but hardly luxurious house as a setting for his jewel of a Soraya hadn't registered.

But it registered now as he took in the details of his surroundings.

"Yes, my brother." She moved forward and righted the chair he'd knocked over when he'd lunged at his rival.

Except his rival was apparently no rival at all. He'd tormented himself night and day over chimera.

"Let him go. Your quarrel is with me," Soraya said. In spite of all the hatred he'd expended on her since her disappearance, that husky voice fell on his tortured, lonely soul like rain on parched earth.

He lowered his stick, and Ben Ahbood—Ben Ashton, he supposed—slumped gasping against the wall. The hostile black eyes, familiar now as they had been in the Arabian manservant, focused on him.

"Get out," the younger man rasped.

"Oh, be quiet, Ben," Soraya said wearily. She looked across at the maid. "Marjorie, please clean up this mess." She turned on her heel. "If Your Grace would follow me? Ben, stay here. I wish to

“speak to the duke alone.”

~~Kylemore almost laughed. She did a damn fine job of turning a drama of Shakespearean proportions into a domestic comedy. He even found himself following that straight, black-clad back down the hallway and into a neat parlor. Discovering his exotic mistress ensconced in bourgeois—and apparently chaste—respectability was the last thing he’d pictured.~~

She turned to face him, her chin up. He could have told her she was wasting her time trying to blend in with her lackluster environment. No one—no man, in particular—would ever believe she was born for anything but sin.

The howling beast that had taken up residence in his heart since she’d gone quietened as she leveled her cool gray eyes on him. “I owe you an apology, Your Grace.”

That was the very least she owed him, the unscrupulous baggage. He’d prefer her on her knees begging forgiveness. But that wasn’t Soraya’s style, as he should have known.

She went on in the same dispassionate voice. “I wanted to tell you it was over, but my brother insisted you’d make trouble and I allowed him to persuade me against my better judgment.”

Her brother had been right, Kylemore thought grimly. “Rich protectors are deuced thin on the ground in this backwater, I’d have thought.”

A spark of annoyance lit her eyes. “That is of no consequence, Your Grace. I don’t seek a rich protector. I have retired. My life will be one of blameless propriety and good works from now on.”

He did laugh out loud at that. He couldn’t help himself. “What a charmingly nonsensical notion, my dear Soraya.” He paused. “Except you call yourself Verity Symonds, don’t you? Am I permitted to know your real name after our long and...*close* acquaintance?”

She looked uncomfortable, although he couldn’t tell if it was at the implication of deception or his reference to their liaison. “It’s Verity Ashton. And I don’t see why my ideas are nonsensical. Although your stoush in the kitchen has destroyed any future I might have had in Whitby. I can imagine Marjorie keeping her mouth shut about a duke brawling with Mrs. Symonds’s brother.”

“I found you once, I can find you again,” he said evenly.

She looked unconcerned at his threat, blast her. “Why would you bother? A man like you has no trouble getting someone to warm his bed. There’s nothing special about me.”

Amazingly, she wasn’t being coy or eliciting flattery—she’d always been remarkably free of the usual female wiles. But surely she knew she was a woman beyond the common calling. She was the incomparable Soraya, whatever damned name she chose to call herself now.

With difficulty, he kept his voice neutral. “So after the deal of trouble I expended to find you, I’m to go on my way without a murmur of protest?”

“You were angry. You thought I’d deceived you. Now you realize that isn’t the case. I haven’t taken another lover and have no intention of doing so.” She moved forward to the door, clearly trying to end the interview. “So you see, there’s nothing here for Your Grace. Soraya no longer exists. Verity Ashton and her brother can be of no interest to you. You’ve satisfied your curiosity about who became of your mistress.”

“Yes,” he said, although, of course, he lied. His curiosity, if anything, was more consuming than ever. “This new life will pall. You weren’t born for obscurity.”

“After my years of public notoriety, obscurity will be a blessing,” she said. He could see that she was sincere, deluded creature that she was. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Oh, I understand,” he said. “More than you can know.”

Hadn’t he wasted his childhood yearning to be just an ordinary boy from an ordinary family? But maturity had brought the knowledge that some burdens were never to be laid down, no matter how

unwilling, how unfit, how resentful the bearer.

His spectacular mistress still needed to learn this lesson.

“I believe we have nothing more to say to each other. You were a generous and kind lover, Your Grace. Please don’t make me remember you otherwise.” The presumptuous slut even had the gall to smile at him when she opened the door, as if dismissing an inconvenient caller. “Good day.”

He bent his head in a show of acknowledgment, although in reality he did it to hide a surge of ferocious need. “At least do me the courtesy of accompanying me to my carriage.”

With predatory avidity from under his lashes, he saw her glance nervously around the room, as if seeking an excuse to refuse. She wasn’t quite as self-possessed as she wished to appear, but her compulsion to speed him on his way superseded sensible caution. “As you wish.”

With false decorum, he presented his arm. After a tiny, telling hesitation, she took it. The lightly irritatingly reluctant contact burned. Her touch had the same effect on him it always had. If anything, his hunger had only become fiercer after so long without feasting on its desire.

Soon, he soothed his rioting appetites. Soon all you want will be yours.

As they moved out into the mean little hall, her scent surrounded him. Fleeting, it disoriented him. It made her Soraya and not Soraya.

His worldly mistress had always floated in a cloud of musk and ambergris. The woman at his side smelled of violet soap. Although far from unpleasant, it was vaguely unsettling, as though he somehow set his revenge on the wrong target. But beneath the fresh scent of flowers lingered the haunting essence of the woman he craved so endlessly.

Her brother waited outside the parlor. He clearly, and rightly, suspected Kylemore’s intentions. *canny laddie, Benjamin Ashton*, Kylemore admitted to himself.

“His Grace is leaving,” Soraya—Verity—said.

Ashton looked unimpressed. “Just like that?”

“I’ve found out what I wanted.” Kylemore looked around the poor dwelling with unconcealed derision. Good God, Soraya belonged in a palace, not in this hovel.

“You won’t be coming back, then,” the young man said flatly. It wasn’t a question.

“No,” Kylemore said and meant it.

“I’ll just see His Grace to his conveyance.” She looked troubled. He couldn’t blame her. The atmosphere of loathing and mistrust was thicker than the impenetrable sea fogs that regularly swept along the Kylemore coast.

“I’ll come with you,” the fellow said.

Silently, they left the house and climbed the short distance to the peak of the hill. Kylemore had left his carriage near the abbey, not wanting to risk either his fine vehicle or expensive horseflesh on the precipitous streets.

“Well, here we are,” Verity said.

He found it damned hard getting used to her new name. But whatever she called herself, nothing changed the fact that she was his. He glanced down at her perfect face and read the relief there. She must have expected the worst when she’d found him in her kitchen. Now she’d congratulate herself on bringing events to such a favorable conclusion.

Favorable to her anyway, the manipulative jade.

Kylemore nodded to his two brawny footmen before he shifted his hold on her arm so that she couldn’t escape. “You can’t think I’ll let our association end this way, my dear. Or has changing your name chased away all your wits indeed?”

She tried to pull free. “It ends this way because I say it does, Your Grace,” she said sharply.

He smiled, admiring her nerve. Unluckily for her, nerve would do her no good where he meant to take her. “I’m afraid the wishes of a self-serving demirep are of no consequence.”

He was delighted to see her assurance evaporate as she registered his implacable tone. Frantically, she looked past him to her brother. “Ben, do something!”

Kylemore snapped out a command in Gaelic, and the stalwart Ben Ahbood found himself restrained by two even more stalwart Highlanders, brought precisely for this purpose.

“Let her go, you bastard!” Ashton shouted. “I’ll bloody kill you for this!”

The girl tugged and wriggled to break free, but her strength was no match for his. “Don’t hurt him! None of this is his fault.”

Kylemore tightened his grip and focused a blazing glare on her distraught features. “No, it’s yours. And you will pay. Now, if you stop fighting me and get into the carriage, I promise your brother won’t be harmed.”

“Don’t do it, Verity lass!” A few feet away, Ashton made a creditable job of defending himself, even against such odds.

Kylemore inclined his head toward the coachman, who hadn’t left his perch. “Pray turn your attention to my man, madam. I’m sure you’ll agree cooperation is preferable.”

The gray eyes darted upward and widened as she observed the gun the driver pointed directly at her captive brother. Immediately, she stilled in Kylemore’s hold.

“I will come,” she said calmly. All trace of emotion left her voice. “You can let Ben go.”

“Not just yet,” he said, preparing to hand her into the carriage and not even pretending to conceal his exultation. He’d caught her, and this time, nothing in heaven or on earth would stop him keeping her. He spoke in rapid Gaelic over his shoulder. “Hold him in the abbey until nightfall. On a stormy day like this, there shouldn’t be many people about to wonder what you’re doing. Knock him out if you have to.”

“Verity, don’t go with him!” Ashton struggled uselessly to shake off his captors and lunge to his sister’s aid.

The sister merely shook her head and gave him a sad smile. “I’ll be all right, Ben.”

“Get in,” Kylemore growled, refusing to be moved by her courage. She’d brought this disaster on herself when she’d betrayed him. Anything he did to her was more than deserved.

She cast a disdainful glance up at the leveled pistol and then at the duke. “As Your Grace desires.” She made no attempt to hide the irony in her words.

Kylemore followed her inside and slammed the door after him. The shades were drawn, but even in the gloom, he saw that the gaze she turned on him was stony. The formidable control, so familiar after a year together, was back in place. She meant to freeze him into letting her go.

Too late, my lady, he thought with a bleak spurt of humor. I’ve been frozen all my life. The particular demon is only at home in snow and ice. He heard the coachman shout to the horses and Ashton’s blasphemous protest as the coach rolled into motion. The scheme had proceeded with perfect smoothness. But then, his plans usually did.

Kylemore scooped up several lengths of cord from the bench beside him. “Put out your hands.”

“I will not be bound.”

God, what a woman she was. Most females would be caterwauling to the skies by now, but his mistress sounded as though she attended afternoon tea, not her own abduction. He knelt before her, balancing himself against the coach’s swaying. “I’ve tied you up before. You enjoyed it.”

Of course, the cheap jibe didn’t rattle her. He hadn’t imagined it would. She merely settled her rain-clear gaze on him. “I consented to those games, Your Grace. An important difference.”

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