



The
Art
of
Seduction

LORI BRIGHTON

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Chapter 1

Clara Cameron was a firm believer that desperate times called for desperate measures. But as she stood in just about the worst part of London one could find, she never imagined she'd be *this* desperate. Still, it could be worse; she could be selling her virginity instead of merely her body.

The hired hack jerked to life behind her, horses neighing. Their eagerness to escape this hell evident in their quick step. Clara's heart leapt into her throat. Her only means of escape was currently thundering down the cobbled street without her.

Before she could utter a word or protest, fog enveloped the vehicle and muffled the thump of wheels on rock. Moment's later silence settled... cold and

chill, much like the weather. She was stuck. Truly stuck. Surely she must be mad to have come here. But what choice did she have?

None.

The word felt as dark and oppressive as the night. The streets void of vehicles, she had no means of getting home without walking. And even though it was the eve of Christmas, in this weather and in this part of town, she hadn't the slightest desire to stroll unescorted.

"You've truly trapped yourself now, you bloody idiot," she muttered.

Unwillingly, her gaze went to that tall building looming across the lane. Her salvation or her demise? There was no merry Christmas greeting coming from the weathered beast. No wreath, no holly. But then none of the surroundings buildings offered a cheerful greeting. No, here, in this hell, people didn't have the coins to celebrate the holiday. And there was no snow to cover up the dreariness. Only gray and brown sludge covering gray and brown buildings on gray and brown streets.

Clara took in a deep, trembling breath. Best to just get it over with. Clutching her cloak tightly to her, she darted across the lane, slipping and stumbling across icy stones. Reaching the stoop, she paused, her breath forming clouded puffs of air that hung suspended before her. Up close, the building was worse than she'd expected. Dried ivy crawled up brick, as if the monstrous vine was attempting to consume the building. She had no doubt the ivy would win.

What sort of person would reject celebrating the holidays in the warm bosom of his family and instead choose isolation and gloom? Certainly not the man she knew. Had she made a mistake? Was she at the wrong address? She glanced left, then right. An old woman shuffled down the lane, mumbling softly to herself. She didn't bother to look her way; merely another soul lost in the late night dreariness of London.

Clara pulled her hood lower, attempting to hide her features. But she knew, should someone sane pass, that a young woman on the streets at this hour would cause suspicion. She raised a gloved fist, only to hesitate.

I have no choice, she repeated. She lowered her hand. Her knuckles thudded against the wooden panel. Before she lost her nerve, she knocked again, louder, in quick succession. Shivering, from cold or fear, she wasn't sure, she stepped back and waited. A bitter drop of rain hit the end of her nose. She swiped at the drop and shifted back and forth in impatience.

“Hurry,” she whispered.

There'd been no heated bricks to keep her feet warm in the hired hack and her toes stung with numbness. Although her skirts were thick, the material did little to keep the wind at bay. She went down a step, hesitating a moment. Another drop of rain hit her cheek.

“Blast it!”

She was just about to turn away when footsteps thudded from behind the door. Clara's heart stopped. She refused to recognize that tremor as excitement. No. She wasn't excited, merely relieved. For that brief moment while she waited for the door to open, her heart actually stopped. The knob turned slowly. The door opened just a sliver, paused, then opened further. A thin man of plain features peered from the darkness. Not the man she was expecting...not a man she knew. Clara drew back.

"You're here for the position?" he asked in a refined voice that could rival the best of London butlers.

Of course Brendon would at *least* have a butler. What a ninny she'd been to think he was a recluse living alone in darkness and poverty.

She nodded, a quick jerk of her head. "Yes, I am."

"You're late."

"I apologize."

Slowly, he looked her up and down as if judging her worth, his astute gaze taking in every detail. Clare held her breath, waiting for his approval. She hadn't thought about what she'd do if she was turned away.

"Very well." He stepped aside.

Relief tasted sweet as peppermints. Giving the man a polite smile, she stepped gingerly across the threshold. Her smile fell. The dingy foyer looked uninhabitable. Only a small table holding a lantern decorated the sparse space.

“Follow me.” The butler took the lamp by the handle and moved up a narrow set of steps.

Clara rested her hand on the railing and started after him. The steps creaked and groaned under her weight, the only sound in the quiet abode. Each step further up, her heart beat a little faster. She’d refused to let herself think about the situation, but now... Light from the lamp slashed eerie shadows that danced and leered against the walls and sent her imagination spiraling. At the second story they didn’t pause. She had only a moment to study the long, dark hall and see that the place was just as dreary as below.

She shivered and quickened her steps, hurrying after the butler. She’d known Brendon had changed, but she hadn’t expected this. Why would a man of his means lease a house among this poverty? Why not merely hide away at his country estate?

They paused on the third floor. The butler glanced at her briefly, his gaze unreadable. “A moment, if you please.” He knocked on the only door at the top of the steps.

Almost immediately a gruff voice responded. “Yes, James, what is it?”

Clara studied that simple question, looking for signs of recognition. But the words had come too fast, leaving her unsure if she knew the tone or not.

The butler opened the door. A large, open attic spread before her, a blazing hearth the only source of heat. The area was occupied by a bed, a settee

and shelves lined with paintings and statues. Clara stood frozen on the threshold, her gaze pinned to those pieces of art. Beautiful pieces, talented pieces.

“The model you hired, sir,” the butler announce.

Footsteps thumped purposefully against floorboards, drawing her attention to the rest of the room as she searched for the man she knew so well. Would Brendon recognize her? Doubtful. It'd been ten years since they'd last seen each other. She'd been a mere fifteen years of age, a child really. He'd been twenty. Too old to notice a dotting girl. But she'd noticed him...how often she'd noticed him.

James quirked a brow, waiting for her to enter and obviously impatient to get back to whatever duties he held. Not cleaning, that was for sure. Swallowing hard, she stepped into the large attic room. The sound of wood creaking underfoot was barely audible over the thundering of her heart. The door shut with a thud. Clara spun around. The butler was gone, leaving her alone...with Brendon. This time more slowly, she turned.

A dark form shifted near a table laden with clay and tools. Her heart warmed, contracting almost painfully. Hungrily, she studied the man. He was tall, taller than she remembered. His broad shoulders were highlighted by the three lanterns placed on tables around the perimeter of the room. What clothing he wore, only trousers and a white shirt, were smudged with charcoal and dust. He was a mess, and he was lovely.

She took a hesitate step closer, narrowing her eyes. At least...she assumed it was Brendon. As his back was to her, she wasn't positive. Why wouldn't he turn? His indifference hurt more than she wanted to admit. She took her lower lip between her teeth. The man's dark hair was overly long, in need of a cut and not bothered by a queue.

The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to his elbows, showing sinewy, muscled forearms. He lifted a chunk of gray clay to a table, letting it fall with a thud that sent a puff of dust into the air. Clara resisted the urge to cough.

He shifted and a pistol came into view, a small gun gleaming on the tabletop, reminding her of what part of London she stood. Clara sucked in a breath. Why would he hole himself up in a place so dangerous? As if sensing her nervousness, he pulled open a drawer and pushed the weapon inside.

"Undress." His deep voice shocked and warmed her with recognition.

She'd known her old feelings would resurface in his presence. Known her heart would thunder madly. But she'd never guessed how painfully wonderful it would be to see him once more. It was him, after all. She'd recognized the voice anywhere, had heard it many nights in her dreams. Just as quickly as her excitement came, it dissipated as the meaning of the word he'd spoken settled into her fuzzy mind.

Undress? Heat shot to her cheeks. She'd been fully aware of what her position entitled. The letter she'd received upon applying stated quite clearly that

she would be nude. Now that she was here...the realization of what she was about to do fell into her gut like a stone.

“W..w..where?” She waited, breath held, to see if he’d recognize her voice.

He waved his hand dismissively. “Where you stand. Hurry now.”

Blast, but she couldn’t see his features. For some insane reason she needed to see his face just once before she undressed. He moved across the room, his strides long and purposeful. That confident stroll was so familiar, that memories assaulted her, rolling through her mind bittersweet. For a moment she thought she was fifteen again.

Even from afar, Brendon reeked of power. Deftly, he lit two more lanterns. It was only when he glanced back at her that she realized she was staring. She jerked her focus down and reached for the clasp on her cloak. Same square jaw, same lovely lips, same intense blue eyes. With fingers that trembled, she managed to slip the sodden material from her shoulders and settle the cloak upon the back of a chair. Her gloves followed.

“Your hair down,” he demanded unapologetically.

If he was always this curt, no wonder why he needed a new model. They’d be running out the door the moment he spoke. What had happened to the charming man she’d known? Quickly, before she lost nerve, she pulled the pins from her hair. The thick tendrils fell in dark waves down her back and around

her shoulders. She slipped the pins into her skirt pocket and paused, unsure how to proceed. Slow and seductive, or fast and sure?

“Hurry,” he snapped, his voice less than pleasant.

She frowned, reminding herself there was nothing to fear from this man. She knew Brendon. Had taken tea in his parlor almost every day that summer ten years ago. At least, she’d known him at one time. Now...well, now she wasn’t sure.

Bemused, she settled on the chair closest and pulled off her boots. She paused as she reached for her stockings. He’d seen her bare feet before, that day he’d stumbled upon her wading in the creek. There’d been no embarrassment then, only shyness, nothing erotic in the sight of her fifteen year old toes.

Slowly, she dragged the rough wool down her legs. Her attention slid to that large bed settled so comfortably in the corner of the room. Was the attic where he slept, ate, worked? Like an animal trapped in a prison? Her stockings dropped to the floor. Her feet bare, she paused once more, wiggling her toes against the chill boards.

She had lovely, slender feet, or so Mamma had said. As if it was something to be proud of, as if she could land the match of the season by the shape of her toes alone. She quirked her head, wondering if Brendon would think they were lovely.

He cleared his throat, startling her. Clara snapped upright and reached for the buttons of her bodice before thinking twice. But as she met his gaze, she paused, her hands at her throat. He was watching her through narrowed eyes, studying her in a way that made her feel hot and chilled at the same time. Her breath caught and held. Had he finally recognized her?

His hooded gaze slowly traversed her body, starting at her head and working its way down her form. Did he study her as an artist did a subject, or as a man did a woman? Vaguely she was aware of the last button of her bodice coming undone under her nimble fingers. The material parted, leaving her corset and shift exposed. Beside her mother and maid, no one had ever seen her in a state of such undress. The realization made her feel oddly seductive, wicked.

He tore his attention away, focusing on the table in front of him. "I'll do a clay model first."

"Of course."

He'd given up everything to become a reclusive artist. Yet...it fit him somehow. Those lovely, long fingers. Those emotional eyes. That brooding, romantic man she'd fallen in love with. Yes, he could be happy as an artist...but he obviously wasn't. Sorrow hung around him as thick and heavy as her woolen cloak.

Paula's letter shifted through her mind. Clara could still remember every word of that missive sent to her over a year ago.

My brother has given up on life, I fear. The death of his wife destroyed Brendon's spirit. He's holed himself into a shack to practice art...art for Heaven's sake. Mother is appalled and has claimed father is turning over in his grave...

Only a man who'd loved his wife well would mourn this hard. Part of her adored him for that, part of her hated him. Swallowing the sudden lump in her throat, Clara dropped her bodice to the chair, hoping the movement might shock him from his solitude.

She was more than pleased when his shoulders stiffened. Her skirt followed in a swoosh that had him jerking his head upright. Suddenly, she found herself in only her shift and corset and yet no shyness prevailed. Only a thrilling sense of victory pulsed through her veins. She would gain his attention one way or another.

"Can you..." She paused, wondering how far she could tempt the beast. He lowered his gaze and for a brief, embarrassing moment she thought he'd refuse.

Finally, he looked up. "Yes?"

"Can you help?"

He sighed, as if annoyed. Yet, with quick and sure steps he came closer. Clara's heart pounded. The urge to run, to stand her ground, to hide...all flew

through her mind at once. Instead, she froze and waited for him to see her for who she really was. His sister's friend, his peer, his love.

He paused only a few feet away. Those brilliant blue eyes pierced hers but no recognition warmed his gaze. Instead, a reluctant smile lifted the left corner of his mouth, a smile that hinted of youth and days passed. A smile that tore at her heart.

"You've never done this before, have you?" he asked.

She shook her head. Heat moved from her neck into her cheeks. He didn't recognize her. Yet, he was close, so close she could see the gray flecks in his eyes.

The sudden sting of tears burned, but she would not cry. Those harsh planes, the dark scruff on his chin and cheeks that said he hadn't shaved in days...it was Brendon, *her* Brendon. The man had haunted her dreams for years, but he didn't recognize her. Had she meant so little to him?

"Turn around." His voice was gruff again.

She turned on unsteady legs, and the room wavered before her. Determined not to do something ridiculous, like faint, she focused on the chill breeze seeping through the windows. Perhaps she'd made a mistake coming here. But the moment he stepped closer all concentration fled. A warm and welcoming heat radiated from his body. When his fingers actually rested against the nape of her neck, she jumped, the feel shockingly intimate.

“It’s all right,” he murmured softly, his breath a warm promise across her neck.

Clara closed her eyes, her body trembling in delight, begging for more even as her sensible mind told her to return home immediately. His hands brushed her hair over her shoulder, lingering in the strands longer than necessary. Why did he pause?

Just as suddenly as he had stopped, he started again. His fingertips skimmed down the arch of her neck, sending shivers over her skin. She closed her eyes, resisting the urge to sink into his warm body. How often had she dreamt of him touching her? But never like this...no, her dreams had been childish dreams of holding hands and sincere kisses. But now...the inside of her body seemed to have melted and she wouldn’t have been surprised if she fell into a puddle at his feet.

Deftly, he worked the clasps down her back until the corset parted and her lungs had room to expand. He tossed the stiff material to the chair. Free, she had to resist the urge to rub her tingling breasts.

He wandered to the windows, dismissing her. “There. Now come. No need to be nervous. I won’t bite.”

No, he wouldn’t apparently. But she just might.

“Remove your shift and we’ll get started.”

Remove your shift. Bold words that frightened and thrilled her. But she was merely a stranger...he didn't recognize her. He'd probably seen hundreds of women naked. To him, she was no different. But to her...to her she would not be naked in front of a stranger, but the man she'd dreamt about for ten years now.

Clara's fingers bunched around the material at her hips. Modesty fought with desire. Could she do it? She'd come so far, risked so much... how could she not? Swallowing hard, she slowly pulled at the soft shift. The hem skimmed her calves...higher to her knees...higher to her thighs. Her heart pounded. Clara froze.

He'd barely gotten a look at her face. What if she turned and he recognized her? Why had she believed she could take this position and be completely indifferent to the man? She'd been fooling herself. A stupid, stupid girl.

But she needed the coins. She needed her freedom. She had no choice. Brendon was paying well and she knew he'd be discreet, a gentleman...at least he had been. Was that gentleman still there, lurking underneath the gruff exterior? She could only pray he was.

Taking in a deep breath, she pulled the shift over her head and dropped it to the chair.

Chapter 2

Dark clouds hovered above crumbling buildings that would do little to keep the weather at bay. Leaky roofs, broken windows...should it rain, the occupants would be chilled and soaked within minutes. Brendon stared unblinkingly at the grim scenery below. For days it'd been dreary, matching his mood.

In the months of solitude, he'd drank himself into a stupor, he'd slept the hours away, he'd worked on his art... he'd done everything possible to forget his previous life. And now, because of a blushing, innocent beauty it all came rushing back.

She reminded him of the milkmaids back home, their sweet innocence so refreshing. Or the debutantes at their first ball, nervous yet excited. Or a wife on

her wedding night, eager and tempting. He flinched at the comparison and raked his hands through his hair. He would *not* remember.

At least twenty females had come and gone as he searched for the perfect muse. He'd wondered if he'd ever find someone to inspire him, or perhaps he was doomed to a life of emptiness. And now with one look, he was terrified he'd found her. Perhaps it was her scent, sweet and clean, like dew on a country morning. Or perhaps it was her eyes, a particular shade of hazel that reminded him of spring fields in Devon. Or perhaps, it was the mere fact that she stood half-naked in the middle of his room.

A stab of loneliness clenched his gut. It had been months since he'd had the pleasure of a woman. She was lovely. Beautiful. What man wouldn't be attracted to her? Dark hair that caught the firelight and glistened, beautiful breasts that stretched the bodice of her gown. Smooth skin that glowed pink like the inside of a shell...

He stiffened. Bloody hell, that flush couldn't be from embarrassment, could it? He'd told his butler to find him someone a little more inexperienced, yet he hadn't expected a virgin. Gads, just the thought made him blanch. He shook off the feeling. There was no possible way an innocent had come to this part of town for a few measly coins.

Still, curious, he started to turn toward her when a carriage rolled to a stop across the street. Brendon paused, his gaze narrowing. He couldn't say why

the vehicle caught his attention, other than the fact that the black lacquer and gold finish proclaimed the vehicle belonged to one of wealth and stature and therefore obviously not from the area.

A gent looking for a whore? Or something worse? He'd witnessed just about every vile thing one could possibly imagine while residing here. Repulsive acts that made a person's blood curl. And that's why he'd picked this place, knowing the destitute area would match his mood. Knowing he didn't deserve to live the life of a wealthy gent. A punishment... and it was.

Depression threatening once more, he turned away. He didn't get far before he froze in midstep. The woman stood naked in front of him... completely and utterly devoid of clothing like an angel dropped in all her glory to hell. Perfect porcelain skin, aglow as if lit from inside.

Heat burst through his body; carnal and pulsing. He wanted to touch every inch of her; run his hands down her curves and study her form. He wanted to paint her. He wanted to carve her likeness from marble so that she would be remembered forever. Hell, he wanted to *taste* her, touch her, breathe in her feminine scent.

An uncomfortable tightness rushed to his groin. Slowly, his gaze lowered from her face to her breasts. Soft, lovely mounds that would fit perfectly into his palms. His mouth went dry. Mauve colored nipples that were peaked hard, begging to be kissed. His fingers curled. Narrow waist, hips that flared into long

legs...legs made for wrapping around a man. This was no whore. This was a goddess.

Brendon sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth, his gaze jumping back up to her face. She was boldly watching him, yet underneath that sharp gaze, an innocence lingered. He'd told his butler to find him a more genteel woman, and he had. But at what price? Why was she here? A widow down on her luck? His gaze dropped to her belly. Then, up to her breasts.

There were no signs that she'd had a babe. He'd spent time with widows...women who'd had children. Their breasts had enlarged, marks across their belly and thighs from the skin stretching. How old was she? Twenty, perhaps more? There was something about her that screamed youth and vitality. Something that made him want to pull her into his arms, if merely to soak in her essence and forget the ugliness that surrounded him.

"Where shall I sit?" she asked, her breasts rising and falling so temptingly with each sharp pant. Was it fear that made her voice so breathless, or could it possibly be desire? No, he wasn't that fortunate.

Brendon forced himself to blink, realizing he was staring. "The settee."

His voice was gruff with need, and he wondered if she had any idea how much he wanted her. The heat pulsing through his veins demanded attention, demanded he lay her upon the sofa and have his way with her. He'd experienced

lust since Eileen had died, but never this strong. With a stiff gait, he moved toward the table, away from the model.

“Here?” She pointed timidly toward the sofa.

He nodded, not daring to look directly at her.

Rarely had he been attracted to one of his models and for the most part had remained quite professional and aloof. He wasn't going to change today. But there was something about this woman...an innocence, yet a directness that he admired, that he *desired*.

He settled behind the table and pulled the chunk of clay forward, the texture cold and damp under his hands. Forcing away lustful thoughts, he focused on that chill, gritty feel. “Today, I'll merely do a clay model.”

She nodded as she moved toward the sofa. Unwillingly his gaze lifted. Her gait, like a cat, sleek and mysterious. That long, dark hair whispered promises across her back. And directly below those shimmering strands, a round, pert bottom begged to be grasped. Without thought, his fingers curled, digging into that soft clay. But even as he wanted her, there was something more nagging at the back of his mind.

He grimaced and pulled his grip free, shaking off the clumps that stuck to his skin. Was it her looks? Her voice

At the settee, she paused. Brendon could only wait with baited breath to see what she'd do next. She tucked her chin to her chest, then peeked over her

shoulder at him. Their eyes locked. His heart stopped for one brief moment. Did she have any idea what an erotic pose she made? The entire room seemed to fade and all that remained was *her*. Something whispered through his mind ... something nagged at his memory. She broke contact by lowering her gaze and settling on the settee. The moment was gone.

“How do you want me?” she whispered.

He had the insane desire to laugh. Her words immediately brought to mind all sorts of nefarious ideas. Where did he want her? He could think of a few places. As if sensing the way of his thoughts, she crossed her arms over her chest, hiding those perfect mounds from view. But her show of modesty did little to quell his intense desire.

“Down, on your side.”

Gingerly she rested on the edge of the settee. Like a woman who new her value, she lowered slowly, seductively, upon the worn seat. “Like this?”

Laid out like an offering with her lean body stretched across the sofa, the animalistic need within him roared to life. He took in a deep trembling breath, refusing to give into temptation. She was not for him, no one was. “Your back to me. Rest your arm over you head.”

She rolled over, her backside exposed, and raised her arm in the air in a ridiculous pose that spoke more of awkwardness than sexuality.

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “No.” He stood and moved toward her, forcing his gaze to remain firmly planted above any tempting body parts.

It was obvious she had little if any experience posing. Hopefully she’d make a quick study, that is, if he decided to keep her on. He knelt by the settee and wrapped his long fingers around her narrow wrist. It was only then that he realized his hands were still covered in clay. The contact gave him pause. Her skin was smooth, her touch hot. The clay slid easily over her skin, seeming to melt with the contact. Would he melt as easily?

He finally noticed her stillness and lifted his gaze to her profile, just visible. Her shoulders were rigid, her breath coming out in soft, shallow pants. She stared straight ahead like a doe cornered by a hunter. Those full lips quivered, those high cheekbones flushed enchantingly with color and her lashes flicked down and up rapidly, as if she feared closing her eyes for too long. Confusion gave way to a rush of familiarity that nagged once again, a sensation he could not ignore.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

She swallowed hard. “I’m no one important.”

Why did he have the feeling she lied? Slowly, he lowered his gaze to her shoulders. Dark bruises marred her upper arms. Injuries he hadn’t noticed before. Anger fought with shock. He would not ask her. No, he wouldn’t care. Unable to

help himself, he drew his finger down the side of her face, leaving behind a slash of gray clay across her cheek. She visibly shivered.

“Where have I seen you before?”

She shrugged, a quick jerk of her narrow shoulders. “Perhaps you’ve seen me on the street.”

Her answer didn’t feel right because he couldn’t imagine her on the street. Sipping tea in a parlor, yes. Even the pampered mistress of a gentlemen. But here, on the street? No. Yet here she was, bruised and battered and laying quite naked on his sofa.

With her arm still resting over her head, her body was deliciously exposed. He drew his fingers down her side, leaving behind a trail of slippery clay. He paused briefly near her breast, one breathless moment. Then lower, sloping down her waist, up over her hip. He stopped there, his palm fitted against the warm curve. A small sound escaped her lips, something that sounded deceptively like a moan.

Even as he refused to believe what he’d heard, desire shot straight to his groin. He clenched his jaw, forcing sexual thoughts aside. “If you’re in trouble, running from a husband or jealous lover, I want no part.”

She flinched, although she made quick work of smoothing her features. “I merely need the money.”

“Why?”

She let her chin fall to her chest, her hair a veil of shimmering locks that hid her features. “I need to leave.”

That surprised him. Escape was more like it. “Where to?”

“America.”

His gaze narrowed. The only sort who escaped to America were criminals or the destitute. What was she embroiled in? A sudden overwhelming urge to protect her rolled through him.

Damn it all, he would not get involved. He merely wanted to be left alone. “Leave. Gather your things. Whatever it is you’re running from, I want no part.” He surged to his feet.

“What?” She stood and grabbed her shift, jerking it over her head. “No! You can’t. Please.”

He barely flinched as he attempted to ignore the pleading tone of her voice. “I can and I will.” He stomped across the room, pausing near the table where pottery tools were scattered haphazardly about the worn wooden surface.

He didn’t care. No, not any longer. Perhaps at one time her pleading eyes would have gotten a response, but not now. Pretending sudden fascination with straightening the pile, he didn’t dare look at her. “I’ll pay you for today’s work.”

“No! Your butler said a week...a week’s pay!” She raced to him, her bare feet whispering across the floor like a dancer across a stage. Without pause, she latched onto his arm. Her touch shocked him, pleased him in some perverse way.

“Please, I need the money!” she begged.

Anger mixed with frustration in a burning combination. He turned suddenly and gripped her smooth shoulders. With a gentle push, he backed her up against the brick wall. She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes wide.

“Tell me the truth. What are you running from?”

Her lower lip quivered, indecision flickering in her eyes.

His fingers tightened. He would not release his hold until she told him the truth. He would have the truth for once in his life. “Tell me!”

She closed her eyes, her body sagging. “I can’t marry him.”

Confusion held him captive for one brief moment. All too quickly the reality of her words sank into his gut. “You don’t want to marry, that’s what this is about?”

She opened her eyes, those hazel orbs shimmering with unshed tears.

“Yes.”

He released his hold and stumbled back. The sudden urge to laugh overwhelmed him. A marriage? This was about an unwanted marriage? “And so you’ll do this...pose nude so you can *what?*”

She sniffled as she fought her tears. “Procure enough coins to travel to America.”

He raked his hands through his hair, releasing a wry laugh. “And do what when you achieve your goal?”

She shrugged and looked at the floor, but not before he noticed the flash of annoyance that turned her hazel eyes a pure green. She looked so innocent standing there with her bare toes peeking out from the hem of her shift, her hair long and loose around her shoulders, but she had a bit of a temper. Damn, if he didn't appreciate that.

“You obviously haven't thought this through.”

Her gaze jumped to his. “You know nothing about me.”

She was right, but why did he have the feeling he did?

That vulnerability was back, a softening of her eyes that had his heart clenching. “I can't marry him.”

Brendon sighed. He had a sister, he wasn't a complete arse. “Why is he so horrible? Is he old? Have a limp? Missing teeth? Does he not buy you enough trinkets?”

She tilted her chin high and stared directly into his eyes. “He tried to take advantage of me.”

He started to roll his eyes, thinking perhaps her fiancé had attempted an innocent kiss, but then his gaze fell to those bruises on her upper arms. His gut clenched. “What happened?”

She looked at the ground, her cheeks turning red. “He tried to...force himself on me.”

Brendon rubbed his hands over his face. “Christ.” He turned and paced across the room. He’d seen no other marks upon her body, perhaps this fiancé hadn’t gotten far. He paused near the windows, the dark sky heavy and cold. What the hell would he do with her? He couldn’t send her back now...

The pattering of footsteps had him glancing over his shoulder. She scurried across the room and picked up her clothing. The cloth was fine. Perhaps the brown dress was plain, but it was obvious she came from money. Who was the bastard who’d hurt her? Who was *she*? No doubt he knew her fiancé. Perhaps he’d even met her in the ball rooms of London and that was why she seemed familiar. She pulled her stockings over her narrow feet, preparing to flee. The tiny part of humanity left inside him protested.

“Stop,” he demanded.

She froze and looked up.

“I can’t guarantee the entire week.”

Relief smoothed the tightness from her features. She nodded.

Before he second-guessed himself, he moved to his table. Unconsciously, his hands clenched and unclenched as if the movement could erase the feel of her skin on his. But he had a feeling he would never erase the feel of her from his mind. Bloody hell, what had he done?

Chapter 3

Clara assumed she'd feel horrifyingly embarrassed sprawled out naked like a Christmas goose in front of Brendon. At the very least, ashamed. Oddly, after an hour, she'd grown use to the lack of clothing. In fact, she felt rather free with nothing binding her parts so tightly she could barely breathe. How her mother would be horrified to know that not only had her daughter posed nude, but that she'd been comfortable in her natural state. A smile lifted the corners of her lips. No, ladies were not supposed to be comfortable naked.

A shiver of heat traveled her spine. She swore, even without looking at him, that she knew where Brendon's attention riveted. First, on her profile, then back, her bottom, lower to her toes. The chill room did little to cool her flushed body. She felt hot, breathless and even seductive under his scrutiny.

Every so often sounds from the night filtered through the dingy curtains. Carriage wheels rattled across cobblestone. Coarse voices arguing on the streets. But for the most part, the silence was their cloak of safety. A comfortable sense of companionship permeated her very being. A feeling she'd never experienced at home.

Sudden tears stung Clara's eyes. Not wanting to give into melancholy, she plucked at a loose thread on the settee cushion. She didn't want to leave England. Not that she fancied London, but she did love the countryside where she'd spent summers as a child. The rolling green fields, the wildflowers, the streams where she'd wade. She didn't want to leave her homeland...she didn't want to leave Brendon, yet she must.

The scratch of metal tools against soft clay was the only indication that Brendon still worked. As much as she wanted, she didn't dare look over her shoulder, too afraid he'd read the emotion in her eyes.

"And do what when you get there?" he'd taunted.

What would she do when she made it to America? She hadn't thought much past earning enough money to procure a ticket aboard a ship. She only knew that she needed to leave. She could have sold her jewelry, but Mamma kept a tight rein on the family glory. Perhaps a few of her own lesser trinkets would fetch a coin or two. Enough to keep her fed until she found a position as a

governess. But money wouldn't provide companionship, wouldn't love her, hold her.

A sudden gust of wind battered the panes and jolted Clara from her thoughts. The house trembled, threatening to collapse around them. Clara bolted upright. The windows burst open, banging against the walls. She smelled the snow right before a whirlwind of flakes swirled into the room, stinging her exposed skin. At any other time she would have been delighted by the Christmas weather. Clara gasped, crossing her arms over her chest. Papers rattled from a nearby table, lifted and took flight.

"Damn." Brendon jumped from his chair and raced toward the windows.

Clara stumbled from the settee, her bare feet hitting the cold wooden floorboards. "I'll gather your drawings."

She reached out, arms wide to scoop the pieces of paper to her body. One landed tightly to her breasts and one to her nether regions. Brendon pushed the panes shut with a soft thud. The howl of the wind faded and the soft patter of snowflakes on the glass was all the noise that remained. He turned, those brilliant blue eyes gleaming with speculation. For one long moment they merely stared at each other.

There was something in his gaze that made her hot, breathless, *nervous*. Clara swallowed hard, realizing only a couple pieces of paper hid her favors and wondering how the bloody hell she would give them back without feeling like

she was undressing all over again. He took a determined step forward and she had to resist the urge to move back. She had to remind herself that this was Brendon, the man she'd loved for years.

Yet, the last time she'd seen Brendon, he'd been a young lad. Now he was a man...a very large, very handsome man. A man who's eyes burned with something she didn't quite understand, something that frightened and excited her.

Every step closer sent her pulse racing faster, the urge to move more urgent. Only a breath away, he paused. The crisp smell of snow combined with his musky scent, swirling around her, muddling her senses. Slowly, he reached out and took the first piece of paper from where she had it clutched to her lower belly. Reluctantly, she released her hold. He set the drawing upon the table. With his gaze focused on her, he took hold of the paper she held to her breasts. He gave a gentle jerk, pulling the sheaf loose and leaving her completely naked.

“Why is there a carriage out front?”

She frowned and shook her head, confused by the sudden question.

He stepped closer, the tips of his black boots touching her bare toes. So close, she had to tilt her head back to keep his gaze. Anger hovered around him, heavy and dark. “Did you take a carriage here?”

Unnerved, she stepped back. “Y...yes, but a hired hack.”

His gaze narrowed slightly and he took another step forward. “It’s not yours?”

There was a sudden hardness in his eyes, a hardness she didn’t recognize, a hardness that gave her pause. She stepped back again, her shoulders pressing into the cold brick wall. Her body was trembling and she had to remind herself over and over that she knew this man. He would not harm her. He would not.

He leaned forward, bracing his large palms on either side of her face and trapping her between his body and the wall. “Who are you?”

She found she could no longer look him in the eyes, frantically shuffling through her brain for some sort of response. If she told him the truth, he’d send her home. She didn’t want to leave, she didn’t want to leave *him*. He stepped closer, his hard form pressed to her naked body, fitting to each dip and curve. Clara sucked in a breath, her gaze focused on that pulse thundering in the side of his neck. She shifted against him, attempting to make room, but there was nowhere to go. He wouldn’t budge.

His face was close, his lips closer. “Tell me who you are.”

But she couldn’t tell him. Clara’s body quivered, whether from want or fear, she wasn’t sure. His hard thighs pressed to hers, his chest to her breasts. She was losing control of the situation and her freedom was suddenly slipping from her grasp. Oddly, she didn’t care. Her mind spun with confusing thoughts.

Then she knew... suddenly she knew what she would do. She should have pushed at his shoulders, she should have slapped his face, she should have done anything to prevent this madness. Instead, she tilted her head back, lifted on her tip toes and leaned forward. She closed her eyes as her lips pressed to his. Brendon sucked in a sharp breath, his body stiffening. He didn't move, merely stood there, frozen in place.

Did he not wish to kiss her? Had she misjudged the heated look in his eyes? Desire gave way to embarrassment. Heat shot to her cheeks. Dear Heavens, what was she thinking? She shouldn't have come here...she shouldn't have... Clara tore her mouth away and fell flat on her feet.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't—”

Brendon growled low in his throat. His muscled arms wrapped around her waist and he jerked up against his chest. His lips pressed hard to hers, demanding, torturing her with heady delight. Any embarrassment fled and all that remained was an intense hunger.

Clara's hands fluttered to his chest, her fingers slipping into this open shirt where she could just peek the dark curls. It felt right, dear Lord, it felt right being his arms. His tongue flicked across her lips. With a sigh, Clara opened for him. Brendon made quick work of sliding his tongue into her mouth, and surprised by his bold kiss, she allowed it. Shock gave way to heat, a pulsing heat

that made her knees weak. Nothing mattered. Not her family, her responsibilities, nor her fiancé. Nothing mattered but Brendon and his touch.

This is what she'd wanted. Had always wanted. Growing dizzy, she slid her arms up his shoulders, wrapping her hands around his neck and holding tight, afraid he'd let go, afraid he'd leave her. His male scent swirled in the air—earthy clay, spicy male. A warm scent that sent her mind reeling. The trials of life fell to the wayside and all she could do was *feel*. Feel the soft, worn texture of his linen shirt against her peaked nipples, the eagerness of his lips against hers, the hardness of his desire pressing to her lower belly.

Need flared through her blood. She didn't understand her intense attraction, never had, but she didn't care. She only knew she wanted Brendon to touch her, to stroke her and finally he was.

Brendon's hands, slick with clay, slid down her spine, cupping her backside and pulling her up against his hard erection. Clara moaned, her arms tightening around his neck and moving closer, cuddling that arousal between her thighs. This was no soft, gentle kiss of a besotted country gent. Nor the rough biting pressure of her fiancé. This was beautiful, heated, amazing.

Brendon's knee nudged between her thighs as his body pushed her up against the brick wall. "Beautiful," he whispered.

His lips moved to her neck, that knee between her legs holding her upright. The coarse texture of his trousers rubbed against her sensitive skin.

Clara moaned, her head lulling back as she slipped her fingers into his hair, entwining in the silky strands. Over and over he sucked, licked, nibbled his way down her neck until heated desire fought with chills. Frantic for more, her trembling fingers undid the buttons of his shirt. Impatiently, she pushed the material from his broad shoulders, leaving his torso bare.

He shifted, the lamplight highlighting the harsh muscles along his chest and arms. The strength there amazed her, frightened her. Clara sucked in a breath, her fingertips hovering over his warm skin, afraid that if she touched him she would wake and this would all be a wonderful dream.

He lowered his head to the hollow of her throat. “Dear god, why are you doing this to me?”

She wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of his question. If anyone was doing anything, it was him. Clara felt like she was merely following his lead, but oh how she didn't mind. His lips pressed to valley between her breasts. Need clenched her belly, flaring through her body and taking over her senses.

She hadn't known it would feel like this. She knew what men and women did. She was five and twenty for Heavens sake. She'd heard the maids talking, realized the act could be delightful. But she'd had no idea being in Brendon's arms would be this wonderful.

His hand slid under her knees and he scooped her up into his arms. He held her, eye to eye, their lips only a breath away. Each sharp intake of air sent her nipples brushing against the crisp hair on his chest.

“Tell me to stop,” he demanded. “Tell me.”

But she couldn't, she *wouldn't*. She'd known the moment she'd stepped into the attic what she really wanted. To hell with her supposed fiancé. To hell with the money she needed. She would have Brendon before she left for America. Feeling bold, she crushed her mouth to his. She would give him no time to think, no time to regret, no time to stop her bold actions.

Brendon groaned and turned. In three quick strides he was at the bed. Clara fell back onto the soft mattress. Brendon followed. She felt deliciously trapped underneath his hard weight. His mouth found hers in a searing kiss and any thoughts scattered to the wind. She was acutely aware of where his warm hands roamed, acutely aware of his tongue rubbing intimately against her own.

He caressed each of her curves as if she was a work of art to be admired. Slowly, his hands followed the lines of her body lower...lower... to her hips. He shifted, his knee wedging between her thighs. His touch was bold, yet soft and gentle. She squirmed under him, needing more, wanting more...wanting him to touch her everywhere, kiss her everywhere. She knew it wasn't rational, yet she couldn't seem to get enough of the man. His mouth moved to her collarbone and

her hands found his hair, slipping between the cool strands. Lower still he moved until she felt the warmth of his breath over her chest.

“Lovely.” His darted out to lick a hard bud, then took her breast into his warm mouth.

Clara groaned, arching her back. Her insides quivered and an unbearable ache settled deep between her thighs. Restlessly, she shifted. She couldn’t take it, couldn’t take the need, the desire. He pulled away and moved lower, his hands sliding down her body and leaving behind trails of wet, cold clay.

At her belly, he paused. In that moment, reality invaded. Clara squeezed her eyes shut. Embarrassment fought with desire. His warm breath brushed across the place between her thighs. She knew what he intended.

Oh god, he wouldn’t.

He did. With his hands he jerked her legs further apart. Before she could summon the strength to push him away, he lowered his head. Clara gasped, her back arching.

People didn’t do this, did they?

His tongue slipped between her folds. The ache in her belly swirled lower, tightening unbearably. Clara dug her fingers into the sheets, biting her lower lip to keep from crying out.

“You like that?” he asked.

Like? Like it didn't even began to describe what she was feeling. Before she could respond, he was licking her again, sucking, tasting. The wind battered the windows, shaking the house, or was that her body trembling? Dear Heavens, she wasn't sure anymore where her body ended and began.

Brendon pulled away, trailing kisses up her stomach, chest, neck. Those brilliant blue eyes met hers and for one breathless moment nothing existed but him. His hair fell tousled around his face, his eyes intense and piercing. This is the man she'd dreamt about for years, the passionate man she'd fallen in love with.

"Tell me your name," he whispered.

She couldn't deny his request. "Clara."

He slid from the bed and quickly discarded the rest of his clothing. Clara had only a moment to study his beautiful body before he was covering her again. His tongue dove between her lips for a quick, but thorough kiss.

"Dear God, you taste sweet."

He shifted, his knee parting her legs. His arousal, hard and hot, pulsed between her thighs. Clara's breath caught. She didn't dare move, raising his hips so the smooth tip of his erection pressed to her folds. The world suddenly stilled.

He rested his forehead to hers, their breaths mingling. His body was trembling and she knew he held back, for her sake. "Bloody hell, what you've done to me."

A need consumed her, an incomprehensible need to have him, all of him deep within. She lifted her hips. His erection slipped inside her. She was desperate, desperate to have more. Her hands found his tight bottom and she pulled him closer as she lifted her hips once more.

“Damn.” Brendon pulled back.

Clara groaned and slid her fingers up his back, then boldly she lifted her head and drew her tongue over his lips. He growled low in his throat and she knew in that instant she had him.

Without pause, he lunged into her.

A slight sting momentarily interrupted her pleasure. For a brief shocked moment, Clara didn't move, afraid more pain would come. Brendon's harsh breath fanned across her face, a comforting caress. He shifted. Aching need replaced any sting. Clara closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of Brendon so close.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he demanded and she didn't dare refuse.

She slid her legs over his muscled thighs, the act taking him further inside. Exquisite pleasure tightened low in her belly, thrummed under her skin beating in time with her heart...his heart. They were together, as one.

“Yes, please.” Clara breathed in their scent, intoxicated by the heady mixture of love making. Brendon's strong arms held her close as his hips lifted, lowering, rocking in a rhythm that brought their bodies impossibly close.

Her insides tightened as pleasure rippled through her body, a flood of release. She arched her back, meeting him thrust for thrust. This is what she wanted, what she'd dreamt of, what she needed. She needed *him*.

"Brendon," she cried out, her nails piercing his back.

Pure white pleasure burst through her being. Vaguely she was aware of Brendon's entire body going tight, his muscles flexing under her fingers. Vaguely she was aware of Brendon crying out as he thrust into her one last time.

Chapter 4

Brendon pulled away from Clara and rolled onto his back, staring up at the dusty beams above. He couldn't seem to breathe, to think, to feel anything but the vibrant buzz coursing through his body. Blast it, what had he done? He hadn't lost control like that in...ever. He was an arse. A complete arse. If only she'd protested. If only she'd slapped him. If only she hadn't kissed him back so hungrily...he could have at least stopped himself. But she hadn't. No, she'd touched him as eagerly as he'd touched her. And with her bold touch he'd lost all sense of who he was.

He slid Clara a glance. She lay beside him, staring up at those same beams and looking as perplexed as he felt. And even now, he wanted her again, and again and again. Slowly, his gaze scanned her form. Gray slashes contrasted

against her pale skin. Dried clay left behind by his hands. On her soft breasts, her flat belly, her rounded thighs...almost as if he'd branded her.

Clara she was called. He'd always liked that name. It made him think of summers past, of innocence and purity. An innocence she no longer possessed, thanks to him.

Clara.

Was he so desperate for human contact that he'd bed the first clean woman he came into contact with? Whether she be a virgin or not? And she was a virgin, he knew that much.

She took in a deep, trembling breath as if preparing for some great speech. He could imagine what she'd have to say to him. Bloody hell. He tossed the quilt over her body and bolted from the bed. He didn't need to hear her words, he knew he'd burn in hell.

Naked, he stalked across the room to the small table that held a pitcher of water. He should have been more careful with her. Instead, like the arse he was, he'd rutted her with a need that would frighten most women, even experienced women. He dipped a cloth in water, wrung it, and made his way back to the bed. His hands still shook with the need to touch her, his body still ached with a need to have her. He would not give into temptation again.

Gently he settled on the edge of the bed. Even more gently, he wrapped his fingers around her right wrist and straightened her arm. He didn't look at her,

he couldn't, too ashamed of what he'd done. Slowly, he rubbed her arm with the washing cloth, erasing signs of the clay, signs that he'd touched her.

Finished, he reached for the edge of the blanket, which she'd tucked neatly under her chin. Finally, he met her gaze, just a flicker up, to see her wide eyes watching him, then down again. He tugged the blanket from her grip, exposing her breasts.

Instantly her rosy nipples beaded. Brendon swallowed hard and rested the cool cloth against her chest. She sucked in a breath, whether from the cold or his touch, he wasn't sure. Slowly, he made circles against her skin, rubbing away the clay. All the while, she watched him, those beautiful eyes piercing his very soul.

He took her other arm. Still, she didn't move, didn't take her gaze away from his face. He clenched his jaw, sweat dampening his skin despite the cool temperature. Slowly, he pulled the blanket lower, exposing the soft curls at the junction of her thighs. He rested his hand on her warm belly. Her muscles jumped. He smoothed the cloth down the outside of her legs, over to her inner thigh, swiping away clay and blood. The proof he didn't need, but there all the same. She was a virgin. He was a bastard.

The cloth swept across those soft curls. Her lashes fluttered down as she sucked in a breath and arched her back, almost as if...as if his touch felt good. Desire shot straight to his groin, his erection surging forward. He tossed the cloth

to a table. He would not take her again. He might be a bastard, but he wasn't completely evil.

She shivered and opened her eyes. The room was cold, and she was colder. With a sigh, he settled beside her chilled form, stretching out his body next to hers. He could give her warmth, at least. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. Almost immediately her stiff body sank into his.

Without a word, he closed his eyes, reveling for one long moment in the rightness of it all. He missed this...a woman's sweet scent...her soft body.

Clara's hand crept up his chest, her fingers spreading through the crisp hair.

"Why?" he whispered.

Her hand paused against this heart. She knew the question he asked, he was sure of it. Yet the silence grew.

"Tell me."

She tilted her head back, her hazel eyes meeting his. "Because I've wanted this for years."

Her words shocked him.

"Brendon," she cried out, her nails piercing his back as he entered her.

His heart skipped a beat.

Brendon.

She'd called him Brendon. His butler would never have used his given name, yet somehow she knew.

Brendon tossed the covers aside and bolted from the bed. His heart slammed so loudly in his chest that surely she could hear it. Teeth gritted, he jerked on his trousers. Bloody hell, what was going on?

Half dressed, he spun around to face her, his fingers fisted. "Who the hell are you?"

The confusion in her gaze gave way to wariness. She hesitated, then pushed herself upright. "I told you my name. Clara."

Clara.

With that simple statement, that husky voice, suddenly he was gone, thrown back in time.

She was looking at him. Always watching him.

"Clara likes you, you know," his sister's voice broke into his thoughts.

He tore his gaze from the dark-haired girl sitting under an oak and smiled at Paula. "I know."

Paula slid her arm through his and watched him slyly. "And...do you fancy her?"

He rolled his eyes, yet couldn't help but glance at Clara once again. She was looking away, pretending interest in the garden. She would be beautiful...some day when she was old enough. He knew that. But he couldn't

wait for someday. His father had already picked out his future wife and he wasn't sure he could ever think of Clara as anything other than a child.

"Well?" Paula prodded.

He tweaked her nose. "If she was five years older, perhaps."

"Clara."

He hadn't realized he'd said her name out loud until she responded.

"Yes?"

It was there. How could he be such a dunce? Those innocent, hazel eyes. Those pink, lush lips. But she was older now...even more beautiful...stunning really. He should have felt odd...terrible...*wrong* having slept with the woman who was his sister's childhood friend.

He didn't.

He felt...right.

"Clara?" Legs weak, he settled on the edge of the bed, his gaze scanning every feature on her familiar face. He couldn't seem to look away.

She focused on her lap and drew the blanket up to her chest, her face flushed, her eyes downcast. He didn't like to see her this way, shy and unsure. He liked her bold, as she had been when he'd kissed her. He moved closer and cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Clara."

Her gaze flashed with uncertainty. "Yes?"

He smiled. A smile of half bewilderment, half awe. “My God, Clara. How could I have not known it was you?”

She sucked in a breath, her face draining of color. “You remember.”

It might have taken him longer than it should have, but of course he bloody remembered. How could he forget? “What are you doing here, Clara?”

She jerked away from his touch and slipped from the bed. In a flurry of movement, she reached her clothing. “I’m so sorry.”

He surged to his feet, only to hesitate, afraid if he touched her, he’d offend her and she’d run. Hell, he didn’t know what to do. “No, please. Don’t leave.”

She paused, and glanced over her shoulder. There was so much emotion in her hazel eyes that his heart clenched. For one long moment they merely stared at each other.

“Your sister sent me a letter,” she finally whispered. “She told me everything. About your wife...” She dropped her gaze to the floor.

He flinched. He could imagine what she thought of him. The world thought he was a bastard, why not her too? No wife left her husband for another man unless her husband was evil, they whispered. How he wished he could ignore those sidelong glances whenever he went out into public.

“You left everything behind,” Clara continued, having no idea the way of his thoughts. “Your money. Your responsibilities. You’d become an artist, she

said.” Clara smiled softly as she pulled her shift over her head. “I remember you drawing...always drawing.”

Not even his wife knew he liked art. But then there were a lot of things his wife hadn't bothered to learn about him. And he hadn't bothered to tell. No, their relationship had been superficial, at the most.

“What happened?” He started toward her, slowly, afraid of frightening her away.

She shrugged, refusing to look at him. “You know my parents, they like to spend. We're...rather destitute.”

His stomach churned and he froze. Dear god, was this about money? “You want money?” He turned his back to her, his heart beating frantically. “You didn't have to sleep with me, Clara. I would have given you whatever you needed.”

“No! I'm not...I'm not a whore.”

He raked his hands through his hair. Hell, he didn't know what to believe anymore. If she wasn't here for money, if she didn't think he was the bastard the rest of the world thought he was...then...

“Father promised me to a man I'd rather not marry. Your sister told me you were studying art, paying models...”

His heart broke, crumbling into the pit of his belly. “And so you came for the position.”

“No. I came for you.”

He turned, needing to see her face. Only truth shone in her eyes. *Him.*

She was here to see him. No. It couldn't be true. It was too damn beautiful to be true. “Who is it, this man, your fiancé?”

She paused for a long moment. “Lord Desmond.”

His fingers fisted, his nails biting into his palm. He hadn't met the man but he knew of him. “He's three times your age and known for his cruelty.”

“I know.”

As, most likely, did her parents. They'd sold her. Damn it all, he was tired of the harshness of life. Tired of selfish bastards...tired of people like him. If he hadn't married for money, his wife might have lived. If he'd loved his wife, she wouldn't have had to find love in the arms of another. If he'd been more attentive, she wouldn't have left him that evening to go to her lover and she wouldn't have been killed in that carriage accident with the babe she carried. A babe he wasn't even sure was his. He should have never married her. Anger gave way to desperation.

He couldn't save his wife now, but he sure as hell could save Clara. “I'll kill him.” He stalked across the room and scooped up his shirt, punching his fists through the arms.

“No! Brendan, you can't! He merely kissed me.” Clara rushed toward him, latching onto his hands. “Please. If anything were to happen to you...”

Merely kissed her. Perhaps, but the bruises on her arms said he'd done it with a force not needed. She released his fingers and clutched the front of his shirt, surprisingly strong for such a small lass. Tears stung her eyes making them glow a brilliant sea green.

His knees grew weak. She cared. Dear God, she still cared about him after all these years. "Get dressed."

She shook her head, those sable brows drawing together in confusion. "Why?"

He knew, in that moment, what he was about to do was right. "Get dressed. We're getting married."

She moved, as if the shock had literally pushed her back. "Don't be ridiculous. We can't..."

He was in front of her in one long stride. He gripped her shoulders and jerked her forward, his mouth finding hers. It was a hot kiss, hard, demanding. Just when she slumped into him, he pulled back. "Do you still love me?"

Heat shot to her cheeks. Obviously embarrassed, she dropped her gaze to the ground. Her silence was like a punch to the gut. Was he wrong?

He gave her a soft shake. "Do you?"

Her gaze met his. "Yes, damn you. I've forced Paula to tell me everything about you for the last ten years."

He grinned, his heart warming. This was right. For the first time in almost three years, he felt alive again, he felt hopeful. “Then get dressed.”

Those tears she’d been trying to hold back, slipped down her cheeks, one... then another and another. “I won’t. I won’t let you marry me just because you feel some sort of guilt.”

He sighed and brought her close, holding her warm body gently to his chest. “Clara, there are a million ways I could help without marrying you. Hell, I could give you a purse full of coins and send you on your way.”

“Then why? Why do you want to marry me if not because of guilt?” she whispered against his chest.

He pulled back, slid his finger under her chin and tilted her head up. “Because this night I’ve felt more alive than ever. I’ve *felt*... finally after feeling nothing but numbness for years, I’ve felt again.”

He slipped his fingers into her cool strands, cupping the sides of her face. “Tell me you’ll marry me.”

Her lower lip quivered, tears glistening in her eyes. He knew her answer, it was there in her gentle smile, in her beautiful gaze, but he needed to hear the words.

“Clara?”

“I—”

Before she could respond, the door burst open, splinters of wood dancing across the floor. As one they spun around. A man stood in the doorway, a pistol pointed to the temple of Brendon's trusty butler.

Chapter 5

Brendon pushed Clara behind him, so quickly that she suddenly found her view blocked by his broad shoulders. She stumbled back, the edge of his work table biting painfully across her bottom. Dizzy with fear, she latched onto his shirt, regaining her balance.

“I don’t believe you were invited in,” Brendon growled.

Always the knight, he was shielding her body with his. Unable to resist, she stood on tiptoe and peeked over his right shoulder. The familiar pale face sent her heart plummeting to her feet. No. No, he couldn’t have found her. She’d been so careful! Clara bit hard on her lower lip, the pain her punishment. How could she have put Brendon in danger?

Desmond stood arrogantly near the door, his gray, weathered face a mask of confidence. Beside him, a strange man held a pistol to the butler’s head. James

looked more annoyed than frightened. Still, just the site of that gun sent bile to Clara's throat. *Her fault*. All of this was her fault. She'd been so selfish to come here. So selfish to steal this moment with Brendon.

Desmond slowly pulled the leather gloves from his hands. The site of those pale, stout fingers brought horrible memories to mind...him...touching her flesh. Clara shivered.

His dark eyes slowly scanned the room and by the look on his face, he found the place lacking. "I am here for my wife."

Clara's fingers dug into Brendon's shirt. The word *wife* made her stomach clench. The bastard. They weren't married yet and if she had her way, they never would be.

"No one here is married, that I know of," Brendon replied.

The strength in Brendon's voice calmed her...for a brief moment. But it was gone as quickly as it had come. She hadn't wanted this. She'd never meant to put him in danger. Guilt flared bitterly in her gut. There was only one way to rectify the situation. Releasing her hold, she started to move. Brendon raised his arm, blocking her.

"Please," she whispered, looking up at him. "Let me go."

He didn't bother to glance down at, but kept his gaze pinned to Desmond.

"No."

Desmond started forward, slowly traversing the distance between them. “This is what you’ve left me for?” He quirked a gray brow, amusement flashing in those dark eyes and damn, if she didn’t feel that same sickening fear she’d always felt when he was near.

A confident smirk spread across those thin lips, as if he knew her fear. That same look he’d given her the moment he’d smashed his mouth to hers. He’d intended on doing more than kissing her that evening. Fortunately, he hadn’t gotten the chance. But she wasn’t innocent any longer. No, she’d given her virginity to Brendon. It was the one thing, no matter what, that Desmond could never have.

“A poor artist?” He looked Brendon up and down. “Pathetic.”

Desmond was smaller, much, yet he was cruel in a way Brendon could never be. The closer he got, the harder her heart slammed against her chest. She would not let Brendon give his life for her.

Desmond paused a few feet away and held out his hand. “Come, Clara. Come now, and no one will be hurt.”

Objection roared in her ears. Her body began to tremble for she knew what she had to do, with Brendon’s consent or not. She would give herself to the demon. She’d had one night of heaven, and she would cling to the memories of that one night for the rest of her life.

“Don’t come, and your pathetic friend and his man servant will die.”

She rested her hand on Brendon's back, his muscles stiff under her touch. "Please, Brendon, let me go."

Once again, he didn't bother to look at her. "Don't be ridiculous."

Irritation momentarily replaced her fear. She narrowed her eyes and frowned up at him. Damn it, didn't he understand she had no choice? "I'm not ridiculous, I'm being practical!"

He snorted. Snorted, for God's sake.

She stomped her bare foot. "I am!"

"Enough!" Desmond roared, his pale face flaring an unflattering shade of red. The man was losing control, the monster slowly being released and Brendon merely stood there as if they were watching some odd animal in a curiosity shop.

Panic welled. She swallowed hard the lump of tears that clogged her throat. "Please, Brendon, let me go."

He didn't bother to turn. "I can't."

Such a simple response. He *couldn't*. Why? Guilt? Because she was Paula's friend? Didn't he realize he could die because of her? Perhaps he wanted to die, wanted to follow his wife to the afterlife. Well she wasn't going to allow it!

She stood on tiptoe, the side of her face pressing to his. He felt so wonderful, so incredibly wonderful. How badly she wanted to wrap her arms around his waist. She closed her eyes briefly and breathed in his scent.

“You have no choice,” she whispered next to his ear.

“Behind you, in the drawer, my pistol. Get it,” he murmured so softly that for a moment she thought she’d misheard him.

Desmond slapped his gloves against an open palm, the sound like a gunshot through the room. “Come now, I tire of waiting.”

Clara shuddered, her bare toes curling into the floorboards. What if she couldn’t reach the pistol in time? She closed her eyes briefly and prayed, prayed that just this once everything would work out the way it should.

And then he touched her. Brendon took her hand, briefly squeezing her fingers in his.

She knew she had no choice but to try. Slowly, she lowered herself to the heels of her feet. Hidden behind Brendon’s wide shoulders, she took one a brief moment to calm her harsh breathing. Reaching behind, her fingers fumbled across the smooth tabletop until she felt the cool porcelain of a knob. She wrapped her fingers around the handle and slowly opened the drawer.

“And what will you do if she doesn’t leave?” Brendon mocked. “Shoot us?”

“If I have to. That’s completely up to you.”

Clara ignored their conversation, ignored the way her heart leapt at their words. The drawer squeaked open. She froze, cringing. But the opening was just

large enough that she could slip her hand inside. Paper, pencils, an inkwell. She leaned back, fumbling further.

Brendon crossed his arms over his chest, his fingers resting against his side, so close, so temptingly close. “And you think the death of a famous artist will go unnoticed?”

“Famous?” Desmond chuckled. “You live in nothing more than a shack.”

Thank God she couldn't see her fiancé's face or she just might lose her nerve. He thought he had the upper hand, perhaps he did.

Brendon's fingers drummed against his side, his expression bored. “You shouldn't judge by looks alone, you know.”

Where was that damn pistol? Frustrated, Clara shoved her hand right. Her fingertips hit cool metal. Relief sank into her gut. She wrapped her hand around the handle and pulled the pistol free. The weapon was smaller than she'd expected, the silver gun fitting in the palm of her hand.

“Really?” Desmond said. “Then please, you must tell me who your clients are?”

“Well,” Brendon shifted, his legs braced apart as if preparing for battle.

“I just recently worked a marble statue for Lord Clemmons.”

“Hmm,” Desmond replied, obviously not impressed.

“And then there is the statue I'm currently working on for the Queen.”

There was a moment's of silence. Stunned, Clara froze, the pistol pressed to her racing heart as she stared at the back of Brendon's head. The Queen? He must be jesting, wasn't he?

Desmond tsked, clicking his tongue in that annoying way of his. "Why do I find that highly unlikely."

Brendon shrugged. "Perhaps I'm lying, but are you willing to risk it?" He wiggled his fingers, an unspoken plea to hand him the weapon?

"Here," she whispered, pressing the small pistol into his palm.

"Yes," Desmond said. "You know, I think I am willing to risk it."

Brendon stiffened, it was her only indication that something was about to happen. He swung his arm forward, the weapon pointed directly at her fiancé. "They might not think twice about an artist being shot dead, but they will an earl."

Clara almost laughed. How utterly divine! She'd almost forgotten Brendon was an earl and held the confidence to go with the position. Unable to resist, she stood on tiptoe and peeked over his shoulder.

Desmond had paused, his throat working, those beady eyes darting from her to Brendon, as if searching for the truth. "You lie."

"He's not lying, you bastard," Clara snapped.

Brendon settled his hand on her hip, pushing her back. "Clara, damn it, stay behind me."

She smiled apologetically. She couldn't help herself. For the first time in days, hope tempted her to believe in happily ever after.

"You're mad," Desmond seethed, yet he took a step back all the same.

"No earl would live in this hell."

Her fiancé's henchman started trembling. "Ye...ye said it would be easy! I didn't sign up for this, mate."

Desmond's head whipped toward the man. He wasn't use to servants questioning his demands. "You will stand your ground!"

But the man was already lowering his pistol and stumbling back toward the door.

"I'll give you five pounds to leave now," Brendon offered, a casual offer that belied the seriousness of the situation.

The man nodded.

Brendon kept his gaze firmly planted on Desmond. "James?"

The butler frowned, but reached into his vest pocket and gave the coins to the man.

The man shoved the butler forward and raced out the door, leaving Desmond alone, abandoned. Just like that, the tide had turned. Glee swept through Clara. For the first time in months she felt brave, she felt sure.

Desmond stepped back, his gaze jumping from James to Brendon. "She's been promised to me!"

Brendon sighed. “Not anymore.”

James latched onto Desmond, holding tight as the man twisted and fought for release. “She’s a whore!”

Brendon moved faster than Clara thought possible. In two quick strides he was on the man. He slammed the butt of the pistol against Desmond’s head with a sickening thud. Her fiancé, who’d been so frightening only two days ago, crumpled to the floor, out cold.

“James, take the man downstairs, tie him up and get the constable.”

The butler nodded. With a grunt, he rolled Desmond out the door. There was a thump, thump, thump as her fiancé fell down the steps. Then there was only silence.

Clara stood still, alone, afraid to move. Afraid this was all merely a dream. “You shouldn’t have done that.” He turned toward her. Tears stung her eyes, Brendon’s form blurring. No one had ever protected her so, no one had ever cared.

“Are you jesting?” His voice was calm, too calm for what they’d just been through.

“No!” She swiped angrily at her tears. “You don’t need more problems.” She spun around and scooped up her clothing. “I’ll...leave. Continue with my plans. No one need know that you almost killed a man for me.”

She started past him. Brendon reached out and latched onto her upper arms. “Clara, you’re not going anywhere.”

She couldn’t look at him, afraid that if she did, her resolve would crumble. “Please, just let me go. You’ve had enough heartache, I don’t want to bring more and he will, Brendon, he’ll bring you problems you don’t deserve. He won’t relent.”

“You think I’m afraid of that man? I didn’t lie when I said I was an artist for the Queen.” She jerked her gaze toward him. He quirked a brow, his face set in arrogant lines. “One word from me and Desmond will be on a ship set for Australia.”

His assurance didn’t help. She sniffed and looked at the floor. She supposed he wasn’t worried, but she was. How could she not? It was perfect, too bloody perfect, too good to be true.

Brendon stepped closer. “I’ve been through so bloody much, that nothing frightens me...nothing but the thought of you leaving.”

Her heart lurched. He didn’t mean the words, did he? She peeked up at him through her lashes. Only sincerity crossed his features. Still, she couldn’t believe his words, not after so many years of wanting him from afar, of spying on him at balls and dinners. “You’re lonely, you merely want companionship.”

He released his hold and swept past her toward that desk. “When you were fifteen, so sweet and kind, I admired you. The way you always helped

others. I prayed you wouldn't change." He reached into the drawer and pulled out a stack of letters tied together with twine.

"A year ago my sister started sending me these. Do you know what they are?"

She shook her head.

"Letters Paula wrote. Letters you'd sent to her."

Clara pressed her hands to her temples, fighting her confusion. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

He held that stack of letters to his chest as if they meant everything in the world to him. "God, Clara, you'd grown into such an amazing woman. I came to know you through these letters. I came to appreciate you, to care for you." He started toward her. "These letters were the only thing that kept me going, my only link to humanity."

Her heart soared. "Brendon." No longer could she stand so close and not touch him. She reached out, taking his hand in hers.

That musky scent of his tempted her senses. "Do you know what's in these letters?"

She shook her head.

He smiled, a heart-stopping smile. "Things about you."

"Me?"

“My sister had the insane thought that if she could show me how wonderful you were, I’d break free of my melancholy. That I’d move on...toward you.”

Hope flared sweet and tempting. “I always did like your sister.”

Brendon pressed the stack of letters to her heart. “I know about when you fell into the pond last year trying to pick that flower.”

Well that wasn’t the best thing to retell. What was Paula thinking?

“I know how you made sure the children in your shire had shoes last winter. How you gave food to Mrs. Miller’s family when their father died.”

He set the letters on the desk and gripped her shoulders, bringing her close. “I know you hate to eat lamb because you think the animals are too sweet to kill. That you love iced lemon.” He slipped his finger under her chin, tilting her head back and locking his gaze on hers. “I know that you still read those gothic novels. I know that three months ago when some woman belittled my sister, you slapped her with your fan.”

Clara flushed again, looking away. “She was rather vile.”

Brendon brought her close, his heart thumping madly against her cheek. His scent wrapped around her in a warm cocoon she never wanted to leave. “But most of all, I know that I fell in love with you through those letters.”

Clara’s heart stopped. For that split second as the words sank in, her hear stopped. Impossible, it was utterly impossible. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” He leaned back, slipped his finger under her chin and tilted her face upward once again. “You made me laugh. Your letters were the one thing that kept me going.” He gripped her shoulders. “Tell me you care about me.”

She stared into his eyes, the man she’d loved ten years ago. The man who stood before her now, changed, yet still the same. Life didn’t happen this way, did it? Girlish wishes and dreams didn’t come true.

“Clara?” he said her name, his gaze flashing with uncertainty.

She had a chance, a chance for happiness. She’d be mad to say no. Clara smiled and threw her arms around his neck. “You know I do, Brendon. You know I love you.”

He rested his forehead to hers, their breaths mingling as one. “Tell me you’ll show me happiness again. Tell me you’ll show me life. Marry me.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I will.” Grinning she pressed closer to him. “I do love you and I will...I will marry you.”

With a growl low in his throat, Brendon lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers, sealing the deal.

Epilogue

The sound of happy chatter faded as Clara closed the door tightly behind her. A low fire crackled in the hearth, the light a soft orange and red that sent dancing, festive shadows across the walls.

In the corner of the room, an evergreen glistened with glass ornaments and candles. A beautiful, magical world. Her heart warmed as happiness flowed through her body. A stunning room, in a stunning country estate. But it was that tall, broad shouldered man standing near the tree who caught her attention.

“Darling,” she said softly.

Brendon turned, a guilty smile upon his handsome face. He lifted the bundle in his arms and nuzzled his face against the baby’s downy head. “We’ve been found.”

Clara fought her smile. “She’s supposed to be sleeping, you know.”

“She was crying.”

The man had the impossible habit of giving their daughter whatever she wanted. The moment she cried, he was there, cradling her. Lily would be ridiculously spoiled, Clara thought, with a sigh. Yet, how could she complain when Brendon spoiled her just as much?

She sidled up next to him and peeked down at their daughter. At only a couple months old, she was round and pink and lovely. Unable to resist, Clara leaned down and pressed her lips to the child's smooth forehead. The baby smelled fresh, new.

"She's so lovely," she said, in a completely unbiased way.

"She looks like her mother."

Even now after a year of marriage, Clara's cheeks flushed at the compliment. She'd had so little in her life but Brendon was making up for that. He moved away and settled Lily in her cradle. At the sound of whispers against glass panes, Clara moved closer to the windows. Flakes hit the glass just like that night a year ago. But now, instead of a dingy city, the countryside met her gaze, rolling hills awash in pure white. Chill wind seeped through the windows. Just as Clara began to shiver, she felt Brendon's presence. Closing her eyes, she sank back into his muscled arms.

"Have I told you today that I love you?" he whispered against her ear.

She smiled. How often he told her. "Yes, I believe so."

He slipped his finger under her chin and tilted her head to the side. “I don’t deserve you.”

Her heart clenched. Clara turned in his arms. “You deserve everything you’ve gotten and more.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested the side of her face on his beating heart. “You think I don’t know about the food you’ve sent to London every month?”

He stiffened in surprise. “Who told you?”

“I’m your wife. I know everything.”

His hands cupped the sides of her face. “I couldn’t abandon them, not after witnessing their hardship day after day.”

“I know.” She rested her palm on his chest, his heart beating strong and fierce. “You’re a wonderful man, my love. You just have to learn to accept that.”

Brendon started to lower his head, when the door opened, light following Paula into the room. “I knew I’d find you two here. Always sneaking off.” She shook her head, her blond curls bouncing. “Just as a reminder, you do have guests and they’re currently making their way to this very room.”

Clara grinned, Brendon groaned.

“Come along then.” Paula moved toward the cradle and scooped up Lily, snuggling her close. “We’re going to sing carols.”

Brendon rolled his eyes.

“And you will join in!” She swept out of the room, taking Lily with her.

Clara stood on tiptoe and pressed a quick kiss to her husband's lips. "I suppose there's no escape."

He grinned a wicked grin. "Oh, there's always an escape." Before she could question him, he took her hand and pulled her across the room toward the bookshelves.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He took hold of a gargoyle carved into the corner shelf and pulled down. The bookcase opened, revealing a narrow set of stairs.

"The perfect way for couples to meet unseen."

Clara grinned. "Very wicked indeed."

He jerked her into the small corridor and pulled the door shut. From the other side she could hear Paula and the guests entering the room.

"Where did they go now?" Paula's muffled voice asked.

"Oh leave them alone, my dear. I believe they've found a better way than singing to entertain each other," someone replied.

Clara gasped as the muffled voices broke into laughter. Heat shot to her cheeks. "They'll know!"

Brendon pushed her up against the wall, his warm fingers bringing up her velvet skirts. "Do you mind?"

His lips found her neck as his warm hands brushed against her outer thighs. Clara sighed, sinking into his muscled form. She didn't mind a bloody thing when he touched her. "No. No, I don't believe I do."

"Good." He dropped her skirts and scooped her up into his arms.

Her skirts rustled as he moved up the steps. Clara leaned closer and snuggled her face into that spot where his neck met his shoulder, the spot that held his scent. Giddiness swelled within, threatening to burst her heart. Even now she couldn't believe her luck, couldn't believe her life had turned out as it had. "Where does the staircase lead?"

His teeth flashed white as he smiled wickedly down at her. "To the perfect place, my love. Our bedchamber."