

LOVE
MISUNDERSTOOD

a novel by
Ailene Frances

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to all of the incurable romantics in the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A SNEAK PEEK

ONE

March 1799

She made her way down the darkened alley between buildings that were constructed in such a way that the brilliant moon beams did not stand a chance of illuminating it. Her face laden with oversized spectacles distorting her vision and suffering from a mild case of night blindness, she did her best to steer clear of the multitude of hazardous obstacles cluttering the taxing and never-ending journey to her destination.

Elizabeth wished she dared remove the cumbersome wire rimmed spectacles assaulting the bridge of her delicate nose and prominent cheekbones. Finding her way through the poorly lit streets in the dark haze of predawn London was difficult enough without being encumbered by blurred vision. They were not even her glasses. Her vision was perfect. She secretly snatched them from the estate overseer's desk just before departing to help with her disguise. Since the spindly old man kept a variety of vision assistance, from wire rimmed glasses to magnifying lenses, she doubted he would miss them.

The frame of the pair she hastily selected transformed her striking aristocratic beauty into what could only be described as common and mousy. With the hood of her unlined, coarsely woven gray woolen cloak pulled low about her oval face and the oversized glasses there was little left exposed. She felt confident she would attract minimal attention from any curious onlookers she may encounter at this hour.

Elizabeth pulled her cloak tighter around her slender body, ignoring its rough assault on her tender flesh. Although the prickly fabric was not something she was accustomed to, she preferred enduring its rough touch to the bitter wind whipping through the abandoned alley. It felt abnormally cold for this time of year. Or, maybe it was not the weather. Maybe the weather was normal and she was colder than usual for another reason. Could it be from her fear of the being discovered before she was able to carry out her plans? Or, possibly her anticipation of what was to come?

Her pale yellow slippers, adorned with rows of multicolored beading blended to create a beautiful peacock, provided a flimsy walk. Their delicate constitution was certainly no match for the thick muck coating the final stretch of the dark, dank alley. Elizabeth heaved a sigh. She had almost maneuvered her way through

the perilous debris permeating her path without a mishap. She was so near. Now, she would be presented to the good Doctor Jameson with the all too questionable and unpleasantly thick goo coating a great deal of her slippers.

She should have taken the time to steal a more serviceable pair of shoes from one of the servants. When secretly preparing her costume for her big escape, she completely forgot about her footwear. Not only were her slippers not serviceable, they were far too fashionable in comparison to the rest of her attire. Elizabeth shook her head. She was reduced to stealing. She hated thieves. It was a thief who caused the death of her mother and father.

Her eighth birthday had barely passed when the courier arrived with the horrific news that her parents were killed during a robbery while enroute to court. Nine years later, Elizabeth still recalled that fateful morning as if it was only yesterday.

The soft, orange glow of the rising sun was just climbing up from behind the tips of the tree lined hillside and silken droplets of morning dew blanketed the estate's garden when the courier's horse pranced into their courtyard. Only a few of the servants were up and about. The absence of activity accentuated the loud echo of his lathered horse's hooves on the cobblestone.

Already awake, she clearly heard the courier's heavy pounding against the solid oak entry door directly below her open window.

The messenger had foregone using the wrought iron eagle's head door knocker, not trusting it to be loud enough to alert the residence of his presence at such an early hour.

Her room was positioned in the center of the second floor directly above the great hall. Although she could easily hear the muffled chaos the news caused, she was unable to make out the actual words being spoken.

She assumed the sense of dread she felt was over leaving the warmth of her cozy bed before the revival of a fire in the hearth could transform the cold stone floors and horsehair plastered walls into the welcoming haven she knew and loved. She sunk deeper beneath the folds of her thick coverings and watched the mist from her breath dissipate into the air like little puff clouds. It would not be long before someone would be in to stoke up the fireplace and she could inquire about the courier's disrupting visit. He was probably sent by a neighboring lord or lady in need of her father's ministering, not realizing her parents were on their way to court.

When the door opened it was not a servant with a bucket of hot coals for her fire who entered, it was her governess, Isabelle. Her reluctance was apparent as she shared the shocking news that would change Elizabeth's life forever.

Elizabeth's family spent her early years living blissfully in the country, with her father traveling back and forth to court as summoned. Both he and her mother loved the peaceful beauty of country living. But, when King George's health noticeably started to fail, it was her father's duty, as the senior royal physician, to be available at all times; something that could not be accomplished unless they took up residence in the king's court.

Elizabeth had developed a nasty head cold after disobediently playing in the light rain of an evening and chilling her body to the bone. Her brother, Herald, caught it from Elizabeth almost immediately.

Aware the king would frown upon the family arriving at court with two sick children but unable to delay their trip long enough to allow the children to recover their health, her parents reluctantly left their little darlings with in the care of Isabelle. The children were to join their parents as soon as they were healthy enough to be presented at court. That never happened. Instead, they were whisked off to London to live with their mother's brother, Lord Cyrus Roberts.

A childless widow with minimal inclination toward warmth and expression where Elizabeth was concerned, Lord Roberts provided her with her basic needs minus affection and love.

Elizabeth looked at the starless sky. The only hint of illumination came from the tiny sliver of the moon as it prepared to change places with the rising sun. Soot and smoke shot relentlessly from London's multitude of chimneys of all shapes and sizes as they were fired up in preparation for the day's cooking.

She wished it was easier to see her surroundings. She would have at least liked to know more about the goo that clung to her appendages before she continued on. Better yet, she would have liked to find a means of cleaning it off.

She was so busy musing about the goo on her feet she didn't realize she reached her destination until the alley was at a sudden end. Looking as far into her surrounds as she could, she slipped from the alley and made her way up the front steps of a large, red brick townhouse.

Lifting the ornate, solid brass knocker from the thick walnut door was no easy feat. She used both hands to wrestle the heavy, formidable looking lion's head far enough away from its cradle to produce an adequate sound when she released it. When a small aperture in the door, no more than six inches wide and two inches high, slid open within seconds after dropping the brass knocker she found herself staring into squinting bloodshot eyes that hinted of the blue luster of a youth gone by.

"Declare yourself!" bellowed a strong, steady voice.

“’Tis Lady Elizabeth Nottingham, sir. I come to see Doctor Jameson,” she replied far more confidently than she felt.

His gruff tone did nothing to soothe her already frazzled nerves. The silence seemed deafening while she waited, for what seemed like eternity, for the heavy door to slowly pull open.

“He is running behind, miss. I shall show you where to wait. Pray follow me and do not dawdle,” the steward stated in an authoritative tone.

There was something oddly familiar about his tall, gangly features as well as the way he carried his narrow frame. She eyed him briefly before sliding through the small opening he allowed between the door and its frame before he was able to heave the thick wooden mass fully open.

Once inside she immediately noted how his house coat was unusually grand for a member of the staff, even if he was in a position of authority. She found him frightfully intimidating. He was an easy twelve inches taller than she, forcing Elizabeth to tilt her head back when she smiled up at him in an attempt to soften his demeanor. Perhaps a little warmth sent his way would melt away some of his gruffness.

“Kindly refrain from smiling at me in that fashion, miss. It shan’t fetch the doctor any faster for you,” he huffed. “Now, pick your feet up and make haste.”

Elizabeth was not only shocked by his impudence in addressing her, but surprised by the perfect diction in which the man spoke. This was an unusual thing to find within a servant’s class. She considered questioning him about his perfect diction and fine dress but the thought passed as quickly as it came when they simultaneously looked down at the mention of her feet.

A mixture of a loud cluck, a squeal of dismay, and a gasp of horror escaped his lips with such fervor as to wake the dead, “What? Where have you been? You cannot come in like that, miss! The master will be furious if I allow you to track in that... What is it?”

Elizabeth’s agony over the condition of her slippers renewed as she lifted one foot and then the other. They were far worse than she imagined.

“I really cannot say,” she replied. “’Twas quite dark in the alley.”

“The alley? You traveled through the alley?” The old man made a loud ‘humph’. “Well, whatever it is, pray remove it promptly.”

He clapped his hands briskly and within seconds a slight, young housemaid who looked to be about Elizabeth’s age appeared carrying a thick rag.

Elizabeth assumed she must have been standing in the shadows. How else would she know I was in need of a cleaning rag?

As if reading her mind, the old man blurted out, "This is Sally. She carries that confounded rag with her wherever she goes. This is the first time it has come in so handy."

"I dare say," Sally exclaimed when her eyes settled on Elizabeth's slippers.

Elizabeth looked at Sally's weary expression and sighed. She thought how sad it was that the poor girl was summoned before her normal waking hour because of her dirty feet.

Being a woman who valued her sleep, the knowledge that she robbed the young housemaid of precious minutes of her much needed rest filled Elizabeth with remorse. Now the obviously overworked servant girl would probably be dragging around all day while she struggled to complete her duties. If only she had been more careful where she was stepping.

Trying to ease some of her guilt, Elizabeth smiled warmly at the tired looking wench. This resulted in the young woman blushing and looking away. The rose hue crawling up her cheeks brought out a hidden sparkle for the briefest moment before it slipped away into the abyss of her emotionless green eyes.

"What are you doing?" The old man roared. "Leave the wench to her business. I shall inform the doctor you have arrived." He glowered at Sally, "I trust you shall rectify this situation post haste."

"Yes, Master John," Sally timidly replied while she diligently scrubbed at the disgusting goo that clung stubbornly and threatening to destroy Elizabeth's expertly crafted, satin slippers. As she did so, the colorful beads in the pattern of peacocks fell loose and rolled across the meticulously scrubbed slate floor. "Oh, miss, I am so sorry. Your slippers are ruined for sure."

Elizabeth barely realized Sally's dilemma as she pondered the manner in which the servant addressed the steward. Master John? Surely a man servant, even the steward, would not be addressed in such a manner. Would he?

"Sally," Elizabeth's voice was barely audible. "Who was that man?"

"'Twas Master John, miss," Sally answered just as softly.

Sally stole a moment to steel closer look at Elizabeth. Young ladies rarely called upon the Jameson household, and certainly never without escort in the pre-dawn. Her clothing was that of a servant, but the steadiness of her violet, almond shaped eyes spoke of a woman who was sure of herself. Her skin glowed with health and her soft, supple hands had surely never seen a day's work. No, this young miss was no servant. Although for the life of her, Sally could not figure her out.

"What does he do here?" Elizabeth asked, oblivious to Sally's musing.

“Why miss, he’s the steward, miss. He’s in charge of the others in the house,” Sally responded with obvious confusion.

“You called him master, did you not?” Elizabeth’s tone was mildly impatient.

“Aye, I did that, miss,” Sally replied.

“Why?” Elizabeth asked.

Sally looked dumbfounded.

“Why, I don’t rightly know, miss,” Sally said in earnest. ‘Tis the way I was told to address him since the time I first arrived. I never questioned it, miss.”

“Why did he answer the door? The house has a footman, does it not?” Elizabeth continued.

“Aye, miss, several,” Sally replied.

Although Sally answered the questions as were presented, it was clear she preferred to be allowed to just do her job.

“Then why...” Elizabeth shook her head. It was obvious the housemaid would be of no assistance in clarifying John’s role. “I find this very strange, very strange indeed.”

Sally kept her head bowed toward the floor to hide a smile. She found it humorous that a lady who arrived at her master’s residence in the wee hours of the morning with her fancy slippers covered in some sort of disgusting goo, no escort, and dressed in a costume that obviously belonged to a woman far beneath her station would find anything going on in the household strange.

Before Elizabeth could ponder more about John, he returned and impatiently motioned her to follow him into a receiving room at the far end of the hall. She was not accustomed to being treated thus by servants, but held her tongue. Taking into consideration the fact that her costume belonged to one of her house maids, it was understandable that she would be taken for a woman of a lesser station. It just proved her disguise worked. If she was to get out of London undetected, no one except her new guardian, the good Doctor Jameson, should know her true identity.

The rustling of a young, fragile looking servant girl rousing from her slumber caught Elizabeth’s attention. She peered into the small cupboard beneath the stairs as she walked by just in time to be captured by a pair of large brown sleep infused eyes that spoke of the hardship of a servant’s life in eighteenth century England.

Taken aback by the stark reality of the girl’s situation, Elizabeth thought of how different her own life might have been had she not been born into society.

An orphan never fared well. Even in her position of privilege, her life lacked one of the most important necessities for happiness. Love.

Her uncle, an earl by birth, reluctantly took on the task of caring for Elizabeth and her brother after the death of his sister. He made it abundantly clear fairly early in their relationship that he preferred a different arrangement, but he refused to provide more gossip. His sister's rebellious ways managed to create plenty.

Lord Roberts made certain Elizabeth was well fed and impeccably dressed. He saw to it that she received the best education available for young women. He hired the best governesses and tutors that money could buy. He even provided her opportunities to do some light travel about England in order to broaden her view of their country.

Sadly, his heart stayed forever locked to her.

Elizabeth's mother, Lady Vanessa Roberts, shocked her family and society by rejecting the man of her parent's choice. She ran away and secretly married for love instead of openly marrying for wealth and status. To make matters worse, Vanessa married below her station to a man of middle-class society.

Ironically, both of Vanessa's parents died of consumption not long after her shocking announcement of her marriage to a bright and promising young doctor. No ministering by the family physician or their new doctor son-in-law could reverse the course of the illness that ultimately claimed them. Rumor spread quickly that the Roberts were driven to their grave by their daughter's shocking display of rebellion. Surely the consumption would never have consumed them had they not lost their will to live from the shame of their daughter's actions. Years later, whispers could still be heard amongst the more rigid members of the ton.

Although Vanessa's new husband, Thomas Nottingham, worked hard to develop an earnest reputation of being the best physician in London and even earned the respect and eye of King George, Cyrus would not move past the fact that his sister publicly shamed the family by marrying him. Even the king's gifting Thomas with the title of knighthood, a grand estate in the country, and a generous fortune did not change her uncle's stubbornness. Cyrus harbored the bitter belief that the nuptial between Vanessa and the noble imposter was what drove his parents to their death.

The only son and heir to their parent's fortune, Cyrus denied Vanessa her rightful inheritance and any recognition as family, even though to look at them you could not deny the connection. His obstinacy continued until her husband's increased status with the king forced him to do otherwise. He may have

eventually relented and given over Vanessa's inheritance, but he never truly befriended Thomas and there was a strain between brother and sister right up to the day she died.

Elizabeth's brother, Herald, as per the customs and laws of their country, inherited their parent's estate immediately upon their death. Three years her junior, the estate remained in trust with the law office of Simon and Jameson until Herald reached his sixteenth birthday. Elizabeth was left with a small fortune with the majority of it to act as a dowry. She was allowed to draw from it a small allowance for the day to day needs that were not met by her uncle while in his care.

She often wondered if her uncle would have been different toward her if she had been lucky like Herald and inherited her mother's fair hair, ruddy complexion and crystal blue eyes. Herald so resembled their uncle that those who were not aware of the circumstances often thought Cyrus was indeed the boy's true father. Cyrus favored the boy with so much affection that those unfamiliar with the situation would naturally mistake him for the boy's father.

She often pondered her uncle's disgusted reaction when he first laid eyes on her, 'Would that you would have taken after the Roberts, girl. Ye have your father's thick and unruly raven curls and perpetually rosy cheeks. Your skin may be that of your mothers, but those deep violet eyes are not of our bloodline. We have clear blue eyes. 'Tis your father's blood that dominates ye, child. All I see from your mother are the deep dimples in both cheeks and your petite and rather fragile looking physique. 'Tis a disappointment, to say the least.'

The fact that she would never feel the love that was showered upon her brother simply because she looked like her father was a painful realization to come to terms with. She often reminded herself how many girls in her situation found themselves in far less desirable circumstances and accepted the care he provided with humble gratitude. In fact, she was the model niece right up until the night he held a small, yet extravagant dinner party where he surprised her by announcing her engagement to the man she found herself seated next to all evening.

Elizabeth shuddered as she recalled the mixture of looks on the faces of the distinguished men and elegant ladies when her uncle stood at the end of the table that was laden with an abundant display of meats and fruits and raised his cup of newly imported coffee in a toast to the future nuptials of his niece and Lord Stephen Carlson. Some shone with admiration while others –primarily those of the ladies- displayed jealousy and envy.

Seated a little too snugly next to her, Lord Carlson immediately placed his hand over hers in a somewhat timid, yet possessive, manner while he smiled and nodded in response to the guest's applause and well wishes.

Could he detect her surprise? For surprised she was.

Stunned in fact.

Her uncle never even consulted with her on his decision. Was she not allowed even the slightest bit of say in respect to her future? Uncertain what to do, Elizabeth simply sat in her chair and stared at the oversized finely etched silver platter in the center of the table. It bore the weight of an enormous venison roast surrounded by baked apples, cherries and pears.

Having lived with her desires and wishes ignored since the fateful day her parents died, Elizabeth spent her years fantasizing about meeting a man who would love and adore her. She wanted a husband who would care about her needs, thoughts, and feelings. Most of all she wanted to marry for love. She clearly remembered the happiness and love her parents shared and longed to have the same for herself.

She knew very little about the man to whom she was just publicly promised other than he stood about a foot taller than she and sported a handsome mustache when first they'd met; which he since shaved off. He possessed steel gray eyes that reached deep into a person's soul when he looked at you. When he smiled, women -herself included- tended to become weak-kneed. But, was this enough to make her want to marry him and spend the rest of her life with him? Hardly!

Having just returned from the colonies, Lord Stephen Carlson was the talk of London society, as well as one of its most sought after bachelors in the ton. Thirteen years Elizabeth's senior, he sailed from England in search of adventure fifteen years prior and returned only recently at the request of his father, who suffered from an acute breathing affliction.

The heir to a dukedom with an estate that could rival that of a king's, Stephen set his affairs abroad aside and dutifully assumed the role of estate master. Within days over his father's badly neglected duties were in his competent hands.

Elizabeth considered her plight. Most women would have swooned with delight at the prospect of becoming Lady Carlson. After all, Lord Carlson would one day be amongst the most influential men in England. His tall, muscular frame filled out his jacket and breeches in a way that was certainly pleasing to the eye. His ruddy complexion, chiseled jaw, and steel gray eyes -that were accentuated by sun-kissed auburn hair that looked as if it might become dark brown if left without exposure to the sun for any length of time- could certainly

take one's breath away. On the rare occasions when he donned a wig, it seemed to accentuate his magnetism. Yes, any woman would consider herself fortunate indeed to become the wife of Lord Stephen Carlson.

But, she was not any woman.

After living for the past nine years as the ward of a man who could not, or would not, open his heart to her, she was determined not to spend the rest of her life in a loveless marriage. Remembering how happy her parents were together and knowing they defied convention and married for love, she promised herself she would do the same. She fully intended to honor that promise.

It did not matter to her that Stephen Carlson was to inherit a king's fortune. Nor did she care about the impressive fortune he reputedly acquired on his own while abroad. It did not matter to her that she would one day become a duchess with grand households at her disposal, both in England and abroad. It did not matter to her that this marriage gave her an opportunity to redeem the family name that had been sullied -in the eyes of her uncle and some stiff-lipped members of the ton at least- by her mother's actions. It did not matter to her that he was extremely handsome and vigorous. It did not matter to her that his adventures abroad left him with a charismatic air of mystique. What did matter was that he acted cold, reserved. He was clearly incapable of loving her the way she wanted to be loved.

The way she needed to be loved.

The way she dreamed of being loved her whole life.

Since Stephen returned to England less than a fortnight ago -after an absence of almost a decade-, Elizabeth found herself in his company on multiple occasions. They were first introduced at Molly Regent's party and spent the briefest of time discussing the weather. Both were guests of the Countess Weston in her private box at the theater where they found themselves seated scandalously close during a performance of William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*.

Although Elizabeth found Lord Carlson's good looks and the fact that he did not follow the trend of wearing makeup to enhance his features appealing, and their conversation proved entertainingly light and trivial, she was wary of the unfamiliar hot and fluttery sensation she felt in the pit of her stomach whenever he was near. Having grown up lacking the privilege of being allowed a circle of friends like youngest girls of her social status enjoyed, she had nary a confidant to explain these occurrences and was forced to resort to her own reasoning. Since the feeling left her confused and uncomfortable, she determined it must be bad. Since Lord Carlson was the instigator of these bad emotions and sensations, he too must be bad.

Stephen called upon her uncle on numerous occasions after her initial introduction to him. Each time he spent most of his visit barricaded behind the thick walnut doors that secured her uncle's private study from prying eyes and ears. He was sometimes in the company of just her uncle and other times joined by a few of his business associates. After the meetings dispersed, Stephen religiously made his way into the parlor where he spent the briefest of moments with her in trivial conversations followed by awkward silence.

Elizabeth noted how their private interactions were in stark contrast to the animated, light hearted interaction she experienced during their public meetings. Since they both traveled in the same social circle, she took this menial, uncomfortable attention as the ever popular and socially conscious Lord Carlson merely fulfilling an obligation of being polite before taking his leave. Never, in her wildest dreams, would she have considered he was courting her.

When her uncle shocked her by publicly announcing he agreed to give her hand in marriage to this aloof man who left her uncomfortably unsettled whenever he was near without even discussing it with her prior, she wanted to scream and run from the dinner table.

Of course, social etiquette would not allow it.

Life was a tortured blur during the few short months that led up to her wedding day. During this time, the visits from her fiancé dwindled in length and frequency, which suited her just fine.

Her governess, Madeleine Hardy, already completed the term of her contract, but agreed to remain in residence as Elizabeth's companion and waiting maid. She was also to act on behalf of Elizabeth's deceased mother by assisting her with the selection of her gown and trousseau.

Madeleine was a mere ten years Elizabeth's senior. Having been raised the daughter of a gentleman before her father's death necessitated she take up a position as governess, she dove into the task with excited zeal. She was so excited by the events that she failed to recognize how Elizabeth did not share one ounce of her enthusiasm.

For Elizabeth, her days were spent in despair. Was there no one who understood or shared her sense of over-whelming loss and confinement?

She was pondering just this fact while shopping for ribbons to match the new silk brocade she commissioned to be made into a morning robe. She was walking down Market Street when she ran into a very old colleague of her father's, Dr. Jameson.

Although her uncle Cyrus cared little for the distinguished doctor, her father had been a close friend. In fact, her father thought so highly of the Jameson

family as a whole, Dr. Jameson's brother -the Jameson in the law firm of Simon and Jameson- was entrusted to manage their inheritance until they came of age.

Dr. Jameson took it upon himself to visit the earl's home and inquire on Elizabeth and Herald's wellbeing on more than one occasion. The fondness the young woman and the old doctor developed for each other was a result of these visits.

"My dear, I understand you are to be wed to Lord Stephen Carlson," Dr. Jameson bowed enthusiastically before taking her hands in his. "He is to inherit a dukedom, is he not? Well done, I say. Well done."

So pleased was she to be in the company of this comforting older man, Elizabeth easily excused the fact that he ignored the latest fashion trend of a clean shaven face and sported an outdated waxed salt and pepper mustache and goatee and an overly powdered, ill fitted wig that sat mildly askew on his head. His attempt to follow the trend to enhance his features with a little makeup here and there proved entirely unflattering and could easily be labeled gaudy. The combination of such gave him a comical appearance. Despite his ill-fitting appearance, Elizabeth's eyes shone with genuine friendship. She was completely oblivious to the stares of passersby.

Her old friend's brows knit together with concern while he listened to Elizabeth stammer her gratitude for his well wishes. This was not the excitement of a young woman about to be married. Upon closer study, he could see how her normally rosy cheeks were pale and her usually brilliant, deep violet eyes looked dull and hallow. Could she be unwell?

Feeling the need to confide in someone, Elizabeth accepted the doctor's offer to join him for coffee. Fortunately, they were not far from one of the few coffee houses in London inclined to entertain women.

The rich aroma of freshly ground coffee beans tantalized her senses as she allowed the doctor to escort her to a more secluded table toward the back of the dimly lit room. She motioned Madeleine to place herself in a distant yet suitable location away from them, allowing her some privacy before entering into the doctor's confidence.

During a lengthy conversation, over freshly brewed coffee lightened with lightly browned sweet cream and complemented with sweet almond biscuits, Elizabeth expressed her despair about her uncle's promise for her to wed without even so much as a whisper to her prior to announcing it publicly. She felt even though her uncle adequately attended to her basic needs, he had not considered her feelings since that fateful day her parents died and she became his ward. She was positive the match between herself and Lord Stephen Carlson was intended

to serve the earl's ego and political station far more than it was to serve her happiness and wellbeing.

Having been denied the privilege of marrying the love of his early years due to her improper station in society, Lord Michael Jameson opted to remain a bachelor and all but walked away from mixing and mingling with the nobility. He dove into science and medicine as a means to help him heal his broken heart. Yes, he fully related to Elizabeth's desire to marry for love and, yes, he certainly understood how she might feel her uncle was simply trying to unload her at the first opportunity to the highest bidder. After all, a girl of seventeen with a hefty inheritance and respectful allowance could certainly not be considered someone destined to become an undesirable spinster and was hardly a burden to her ward. Surely Lord Roberts could have waited a bit longer and have allowed his young ward the opportunity to fall in love.

Elizabeth's dissatisfaction with her uncle and her situation was a boon for the quirky doctor. He saw before him a golden opportunity. For some time, he'd longed to travel and explore the recently emancipated colonies. Alas, being the middle son and not heir to the family's wealth, he could not fund such a journey. Since his brother was in charge of Elizabeth's inheritance until she married, he was privy to certain information and was well aware that she had the means fund a trip around the world several times.

Since the girl fully intended to run from her present situation and start life anew, why not really run? Why not venture somewhere the earl would never think to look?

With great enthusiasm, the doctor used his persuasive abilities and painted a picture of freedom and happiness like no other with his description of the newly formed country. A country founded on the preface of freedom.

Elizabeth had not really thought of traveling far away from the only home she ever knew, especially as far away as across the ocean. She had never been to sea. To travel across the expansive ocean to a land as raw as that of the colonies was a frightening concept to her. There was a copious amount of whispers in good society concerning the barbarians who fought against the king's army alongside half-naked natives. It was reported they even practiced slavery, something that was no longer done in civilized countries. The colonies the doctor described sounded nothing like the barbaric land the gossip so vividly portrayed. When he reminded her that the very refined and respected Lord Stephen Carlson, the very man her uncle chose for her to wed, spent the last decade of his life there, she agreed it must indeed be the kind of land he was describing to her. It truly must be the land of new beginnings and freedom.

The picture the good doctor painted for Elizabeth made the newly emancipated country sound like a dream come true. Noting that a trip of this magnitude would prove costly, she agreed to fund their travel as long as he took care of the arrangements and acted as her escort for not only the duration of the trip, but also once they reached land.

The doctor assured her it would be an honor and a privilege to become her guardian until she met and fell in love with the man of her dreams. He urged her to tell no one of their plans. Her uncle was an influential man and the Carlson's equally so, if not greater. Should their plans be discovered before they were executed, the consequences could be far too dire to even whisper about.

They parted company with the promise to meet again within the week. Both walked with a lighter foot. Both moved with an air of excitement. They had a plan. For Dr. Michael Jameson it represented the adventure of a lifetime. For Lady Elizabeth Nottingham it held freedom and the promise of a new life with love and happiness.

“Beyond the pale, girl, tell me you did not come alone!” Dr. Michael Jameson bellowed as he entered the room with his steward, John, close at heel.

The genuine petulant fretfulness expressed in the doctor's voice as he strode across the thickly woven wool carpet and took his seat in an overstuffed, green tapestry chair startled Elizabeth. She had not witnessed this side of her old friend during his short visits over the years. He had always been jovial and warm while telling her stories of when he and her father were young doctors making their way in the world.

“Why, yes I did,” she replied stoically.

“Now, why would you do something so bloody stupid? Why, 'tis unheard of! Do you not know how dangerous the streets are at night? And... devil take me... what nonsense did I hear? You came through the alley?”

They were about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime and he was nervous and decidedly anxious. The last thing he needed was undue stress upon his aging countenance because of the thoughtless actions of this young woman.

“'Twas faster sir,” Elizabeth replied hesitantly.

Hearing her response to the doctor's fury, Elizabeth, regrettably, had to agree with him. What had she been thinking? His reaction to her thoughtless method of travel was surprisingly vivid. What would he say if he knew the rest? Dare she tell him she confided, just a little, to Madeleine about her plans and the fool

woman turned her in? Dare she admit that her uncle insisted on marrying her immediately to Lord Carlson in order to avoid yet another family scandal? Dare she tell him she had been Lady Carlson for well over a week?

She dared not.

“I thought it best to keep as few people as possible in-formed of our plans, thus I did not hire a carriage and took a route that would prove speedy and require less walking. I am sorry if I upset you, sir,” she replied as she looked at the floor.

She suddenly felt quite foolish.

“No matter, dear child,” the doctor sighed. He seemed to realize his harshness and put his temper in check. Returning to the man she knew so well, he continued, “You are probably right on that account. The less informed the better. Even a cabbie knowing your whereabouts could prove a risk. ‘Tis a might scandalous an act we are up to, I dare say.” He shook his head, allowed a broad smile to consume his face, and chuckled, “‘Tis indeed an adventure.”

“Indeed,” snorted John, seemingly not enthused. “One that could cost you dearly, you, old fool. You are very likely sailing to the heathen colonies to be scalped or worse.”

Elizabeth raised a brow in surprise at the unusual familiarity Dr. Jameson’s man servant used while in his company. Noticing her reaction, her new guardian threw his head back in hearty laughter.

“Lady Elizabeth Nottingham, might I introduce my brother, Sir John Jameson? I realize you have met, but I am certain you were not properly introduced.”

John bowed low, concealing his amusement as best he could.

“Your brother,” Elizabeth gasped, “but, I thought...”

“Yes, and you are correct. He does indeed serve as the household steward,” Dr. Jameson chuckled. “Not because he needs to, mind you. In fact, he is my eldest brother. The family fortune,” the doctor swept his arm around the room, “this house, and all that is in it belongs to him. No, he does it not out of necessity, but out of desire. For some unfathomable reason, he enjoys playing the role of my man servant.”

“Quite right,” John nodded enthusiastically as he did his best to conceal his amusement.

“How very strange,” Elizabeth mused.

“Indeed,” the doctor agreed.

Somehow Elizabeth did not feel she was privy to the entire story, but she accepted their explanation. For the moment, there were more important issues to

tend to. John's strange behavior could be addressed at a later time, if it was to be addressed at all.

"Am I correct in understanding that you stepped in a rather strange substance while journeying here?" her host asked.

"Yes, I am so very sorry. It was extremely difficult to see my way tonight." Upon noticing the dark look returning to the doctor's face, Elizabeth checked her words, "Your house maid did her best to get most of it off to avoid my tracking it through the house. I am sorry to say my slippers did not fare well, but I believe nothing was tracked in."

"I am not as worried about you mucking up my house as much I am about you infecting yourself. These alleys are full of disease. I shall have a bath set up for you. Sally will help. We shall burn those clothes. The wardrobe I ordered for you arrived yesterday. Select a sensible travel costume after you have cleaned up and meet me in the dining room. We shall have a light fare before heading down to the docks." He stood up to leave, "I beg you do not dawdle, my dear child. I have no doubt that they will be looking for you at first light. We must make haste if we are to accomplish this."

Fortunately for all concerned, Elizabeth had not discussed the whole of her plans to Madeleine and Dr. Jameson's identity was spared. Knowing the good doctor as she felt she did, she was certain he would not have followed through with their plans had he realized that she was already wed to the very man she sought his help to escape. She decided that it was best to keep that fact a secret until after they set sail for the emancipated colonies.

TWO

Stephen leaned against the ship's weathered rail and made a mental note of its need for maintenance while he watched the English shore transform into a tiny, thin line that looked about to fall off the edge of the ocean's waters. It was good to be back on the open sea, even if it was under such unhappy circumstances. Sailing always made him feel free and alive. It was a feeling he especially craved after the heartache and trauma the last few months provided.

The stuffiness of London society was in stark contrast to the freedom of his life in the raw and newly formed United States. Even if he had not learned of his bride's voyage to the new world, he would have returned to it eventually. His bride's outrageous antics provided him with the excuse to do so earlier, and with his father's blessings.

Upon summons of his ailing father Stephen returned to England immediately, although reluctantly. The affairs of his family's estate were in turmoil and he was required at home to assist. The duke was unwell and his physicians were unable to diagnose the cause of his ever worsening breathing ailment. To add to the upheaval, the overseer, Mr. Eversmith, suffered a tragic fall from his mount while chasing poachers off their land and died from a broken neck. With his father bedridden and the overseer deceased, the lands and management of the estate were in dire need of attention. His mother's letter begged him to make haste in returning to assume his father's duties as the duke of their grand lands, even if he had yet to inherit the title.

Concerned that his son was still unwed and the possibility that he may not see the birth of the future of his bloodline, the duke made inquiries about eligible young ladies for his son. He finally settled on the daughter of Sir Thomas Nottingham.

Although born a merchant's son, Nottingham had been a distinguished physician who caught the king's eye and was awarded a title and a fortune. He also managed to marry into an old and established family, which took away a considerable amount of the sting of his less than noble birth. Whatever the girl lacked in pedigree, she made up for with her delicate, aristocratic beauty and sizable dowry. The Duke was taken by the way wisps of dark, unruly hair framing her delicate oval face. It accentuated her deep violet eyes, prominent cheekbones and thick, lush lips. She proved well-schooled in etiquette, displaying ever the demure and well-bred lady whenever seen in public.

Although slight in frame, she seemed hearty enough. Inquiries provided nary a report of illness to her credit. Yes, Elizabeth Nottingham would do nicely to add to the duke's legacy, very nicely indeed.

Along with the identity of his choice of brides, Stephen's father provided him with a brief history of her family. As the only surviving heir to the family's mercantile business, Thomas Nottingham inherited at an early age after his mother, father, sister and brother were stricken by a gripping illness that took hold of their bodies and possession of their lives so quickly there was no time to diagnose, let alone treat the horrendous affliction. When Thomas returned from a buying trip, he discovered he was not only an orphan, but the new owner of a business he cared little about. Grief stricken, he decided to sell the business and study medicine. He was determined to become the best in the medical field so he could help prevent what happened to his family from happening to others. His choice in vocations proved to be a very wise decision. Skilled as a physician and eager to progress in life and make himself worthy to stand beside the woman who stepped down in her station the day she agreed to be his wife, Thomas managed to catch the King's eye and affection enough to be awarded a knighthood and a rather extensive estate. To this he added his own considerable inheritance. Out of this estate, Elizabeth stood to receive a respectable fortune upon her wedding day. The duke felt these factors far outweighed the scandal of her parent's defiant elopement.

The earl's description of Lady Elizabeth to the duke was that of a dutiful, young woman who was well schooled in the social graces and worldly events. Although he would sometimes witness an occasional high spirit not suitable of a lady—no doubt inherited from her father's common side—he was certain was well influenced by proper society and educated enough to be a model wife, mother, and head of household to compensate for any undesirable residue that may have remained within her common breeding.

Stephen wrestled with telling his father he developed an acquaintance with a socialite in the colonies. She was a striking southern belle from the plantation nearest his in Georgia. He found her witty as well as lovely to look at. He was considering courting her prior to being summoned to return home. It even crossed his mind to court her in spite of the summons.

After much thought, he decided against it. He knew that once his father made a decision of such magnitude, he would not be prone to change it. There was also the fact that, even though she was not of the purest pedigree, the Lady Elizabeth Nottingham was still of a higher and much more acceptable station for the taste

of British society than Miss Paulette Moore. This was something a future Duke needed to keep in mind.

Stephen sighed and braced himself for the inevitable. He would have to shift his attentions from the fiery warmth of his beautiful and charming southern belle who he had grown quite fond of to the cold aloofness of a prim and proper English gentlewoman whom he knew nothing about, but had somehow passed the scrutiny of his father enough to be selected as his bride. Such an undertaking might take a bit of getting used to.

Keenly aware that neither the earl nor his father's description of Elizabeth included beauty, Stephen appealed to be allowed to view her on a few occasions without her knowledge of their intended nuptials. He explained that he wished to see her in her own element when she was not necessarily at her best behavior as a woman might be should a man be courting her. To himself he admitted that if she was not comely -which he assumed she was not- he would like to be prepared for that fact and have time to adjust to the sacrifice he would be making for his family's sake. It would also afford him the opportunity to discover what it was about the young chit that gave his father cause to overlook her less than perfect pedigree and acceptance into the family. It was a puzzlement that weighed heavy on him.

Had he not been absent from London society for such a long time, Stephen would have been aware of Lady Elizabeth's rich, exotic beauty and witnessed her impeccable manners and perfect etiquette during the many events she attended since her coming out ball. Taking into consideration the ten years that Stephen was away from London society while residing in a primitive land, Earl Roberts humored him and granted his odd request. Besides, there was the matter of the marital contract to be worked out before they could even think of going public with such an announcement. A marriage was a serious business venture and need not be rushed. He would allow Lord Carlson the time he requested to observe his niece, although an odd request it was.

Stephen was invited to several events where he was able to interact with Elizabeth. Although his young bride-to-be was far more reserved than his fiery southern belle, Miss Paulette Moore, she still displayed a warmth and innocent zest for life that Stephen had not anticipated and was extremely pleased to discover. As a bonus, and much to his relief, he found her beauty to exceed any of the women he ever laid eyes on, including Miss Paulette.

In all his travels he had never seen such a combination of porcelain skin, rosy cheeks, rich violet eyes, and thick, carefree raven hair on a petite, perfectly

proportioned female body. The fact that she appeared fragile, but healthy, only served to make her even more appealing.

He found her irresistible.

It took every ounce of his strength and reserve to hold back and not declare his love for her the moment he was introduced at the Regent's party. Knowing she was his betrothed, he struggled vehemently with the jealousy that swelled within him each time he watched her dance with the most eligible gents in the room. Never before had he found his emotions so difficult to keep in check.

The tortuous delight of being seated so near Elizabeth during the opera Countess Westbury invited him to almost proved to be Stephen's undoing. Upon a few stolen glances in the countess's direction, he could have sworn he caught a fleeting look of amusement on the Countess's gracefully aged face before she pulled it into check. Was her amusement at his expense? Did she realize his torture? He would put nothing past the bored aristocracy that was always in search of some small amusement to help them get through their days.

The terms of marriage negotiations with the earl were decidedly more complex than Stephen would have expected. He heard whispers here and there that Earl Roberts found caring for his niece troublesome and tedious. Wagging tongues insisted that the earl would have much preferred taking on the care of his nephew and being spared that of his niece. When his negotiations with Stephen proved in favor of his niece's future wellbeing, it came as a great surprise.

Although the earl's demands were fair and just, they took time to arrange. This caused a delay in the announcement of their intended nuptials, which was something Stephen found regretfully tortuous. He would have much preferred to have London know the beautiful Lady Elizabeth would soon belong to him. He particularly wanted to flaunt this fact to the wolf-like gents who flocked around her at every public event she attended.

Stephen found his meetings with Lord Roberts difficult to endure when he knew Elizabeth was somewhere under the same roof. He struggled with a burning longing to be sitting in her company and would have agreed to anything to shorten the meetings to be free to seek her out. Much to the earl's delight, he practically did.

It was common for women to seek the company of Lord Stephen Carlson and he found them easy to entertain. It was because of this fact that he was so frustrated when he finally had the opportunity to be alone with the beautiful Lady Elizabeth and could not summons his manly charms. He thought her lovely and delicate; like an exotic bird. For some unknown reason, he could not shake the gnawing fear that his exotic bird might fly away. Her overall effect on him was

overwhelming and he inevitably became embarrassingly and uncharacteristically over-heated and tongue-tied. Within minutes of seating himself in the room with her all wittiness and gifts of conversation left him. Frustrated by his boyish behavior, he found himself making excuses to shorten his stay and escape to the welcoming embrace of the fresh air outside.

Immediately upon his first encounter with Elizabeth, he realized how ridiculous his request to have their arrangement kept secret was. He loved her from the minute he set eyes on her. When the earl finally surprised him and announced their engagement during the intimate dinner party, Stephen's heart almost leapt from his body with excitement and anticipation. Without thinking, he placed his hand over hers in open display of affection.

The cold clamminess of Elizabeth's velvety skin as he enveloped her hand with his own was the first indication that perhaps the beautiful and delicate Elizabeth was not as happy about their intended union as he. It was like a bucket of ice thrown in his face. He never expected her to be non-desirous of a union with him. It was every woman's goal to make a fine match. He was so accustomed to women practically throwing themselves at him in pursuit of marriage that the possibility of a woman not wanting to marry him never even crossed his mind.

He cursed himself for catering to his own selfishness and not courting Elizabeth properly right from the start. If he learned nothing else, he was certain that a woman expected and desired to be wooed and cooed into loving her future husband. Even those who were in loveless marriages gone awry at one time enjoyed the pleasures of a courtship. His selfish fears had denied this lovely woman one of the most important experiences of a woman's life. He was woefully sorry. Fully intending to make it up to her, Stephen made a silent vow to court her for the time remaining in their short engagement.

Since Stephen's father was seriously ill, the doctor whispered concerns on more than one occasion that if he did not improve soon, death would more than likely ensue. Because of this, the wedding was set for less than forty-five days from the announcement, providing only enough time for the banns to be read, Elizabeth's wedding gown to be made by the best dressmaker in London, and a menu to be planned by the best cooks and pastry makers in the city. Lord Cyrus Roberts may not have concerned himself with Elizabeth's happiness, but he certainly monitored his own reputation with great care. Therefore, only the best of the best would be allowed to create a wedding that would be the talk of London society for months to come.

Sadly, before Stephen was even able to begin his courting ritual, his intentions came to a crashing halt. His opportunities were severely impaired when his father's health took an acute turn for the worse. The demands for the wellbeing of his family's estate that were placed on the newly engaged Lord Carlson were of such that he found little time for anything other than keeping a close watch on business affairs. Sadly, his visits with Elizabeth were far and few between. What worsened the situation was how his continual and irritating shyness impaired his ability to express his thoughts and feelings whenever he did find the time to be in her company.

Even though the earl's sudden request for a quick and quiet wedding took Stephen and his family by surprise, it was generally well received. His father was most anxious to see his only son and heir to his fortune and title satisfactorily wed before he died, and Stephen as equally eager to take this beautiful and exotic goddess, Elizabeth, as his wife. The groom and his family were more than happy to oblige.

Even so, reasons for the rushed marriage danced through Stephen's head as he stood in the cozy, ancient chapel with only a few of their closest relatives in attendance and watched Elizabeth slowly make her way down the aisle toward him. Since their engagement was not a lengthy one from the start, he was certain something was amiss to cause this unexpected shortening of it.

Stephen frowned as he took in the vision of beauty that was now standing so near that he could revel in her sweet, delicious scents. She was robbed of the pleasures of a proper courtship and now her right to experience a dream wedding was crushed. He did his best to peer through the silver threads of the thick, white voile shrouding her beauty. He may have been a man who appreciated and respected customs, but at this particular moment he wished they had forgone the custom of the veil. There should be a law against covering such beauty for even the briefest of moments.

The fact that Elizabeth was wearing the latest in wedding gown colors did not go unnoticed. She looked a vision in her billowing layers of rich, white satin adorned with creamy pearls. She decided against the modern hip and buttock pads, opting for the older and more traditional pannier beneath her skirts; creating a somewhat regal swag when she slowly made her way down the aisle. They may have eliminated the big wedding, but they at least managed to procure the perfect gown. Surely this fact pleased his beautiful young bride.

His frown deepened as he thought about the social association with the color of her gown. Although white was the latest rage in fashion, a white wedding gown was also intended to portray virginity and innocence. For a while, the

church was in an uproar over the open flaunting of what should be kept private, but with both the fashion world and social mind-set insisting on it, the church eventually calmed down and accepted the new trend.

Could Elizabeth's virginity be a factor in rushing this wedding? After all, their marriage was unexpectedly and most urgently pushed forward by several months and practically being held in secret. They had not even completed the reading of their banns. This lack of the completion of the reading of the banns was a concern Stephen expressed. He was assured by the earl that it was a small issue that they could work around as he urged the young lord to move forward with the wedding. The earl's determination to marry his niece off so quickly could only mean one thing. The lady was wearing virgin white falsely and was probably with child.

Although the thought that another man enjoyed what he coveted as his own and had planted his seed within her velvety depths was difficult to bear, Stephen did his best to look past it. He was, after all, a man of the world and therefore should understand such things. The closed doors of London society did not necessarily promote the chastity in their women like one might assume. Since he became her betrothed but a few short weeks ago, he would accept her indiscretions as the actions of a foolish girl who grew up without the proper guidance a mother would have normally provided. One could hardly expect a governess who was very nearly the age of her protégé to give the girl the same guidance as a mother might give. As for her uncle... it was clear from the start that he was neither up to, nor desirous, of the task.

Suspecting something was amiss, Stephen engaged in a brief discussion with the earl about the possibility of Elizabeth having experienced an interlude and the need to marry being so great that even a day's delay would not do. He expressed clearly that although he would oblige the earl with his request, if his niece was with child, he must insist on reserving the option of sending the child to the earl for care. Not only did Stephen feel he should not be expected to care for the result of the foolish girl running amiss due to improper supervision by her guardian, there was also the possibility of a male child being born. Surely the earl realized that it would be impossible for him to claim such a child as his own when the laws required the family fortune go to the first born son. After all, his primary purpose for marrying Elizabeth was to produce an heir to carry on his family bloodline. Of course, something of such a delicate nature would not be further addressed until the sex of the child was known.

Although it was obvious that the earl was put out by Stephen's assumptions, mode of conversation, and insult to his guardianship, he readily agreed. His desire to be free of his niece seemed overwhelmingly acute.

Now, -seeing his bride-to-be standing so lovely and so near- his body quivered with anticipation. Stephen regretted his words with her uncle. It did not matter if Elizabeth was with child. It did not matter that she had gone amiss. All that mattered was that she was going to be his. He was marrying the sweetest, most beautiful woman in the land. No... in the world. That was all that mattered. All he had to do was shed his foolish awkward nervousness whenever she was near and life would be perfect.

Although Elizabeth never voiced as such, her actions made it painfully clear during their brief engagement and equally brief wedding ceremony that she did not desire marriage to him. Assuming her heart was captured by the father of the child budding in her womb, Stephen overlooked her obvious sulking and resigned himself to the possibility that theirs was likely to be one of the typical marriages of arrangement. Such marriages were all too common in London society. Although he prayed she might one day love him, he hoped they would at least work things out enough to be friends. After all, the bonds of a genuine friendship could prove to be quite rewarding. He regretted his arrogance and thoughtless assumptions as he recalled their wedding night.

Thinking he was not dealing with a virgin, his only focus in mind was to possess her wholly and wipe away any trace of the man who tasted her pleasures before him. To add to the situation, he drank his fill of courage during the reception as a precaution against that cursed nervousness that always arose in her presence. It would not do to have his body fail him during the sealing of the nuptials.

She fought him, of course, but that was to be expected. They were, for the most part, strangers and she was forced to marry him when she loved another. Curiosity for her lover's identity entered his mind only fleetingly before his intoxicated lust for his new bride took over. It did not matter that she resisted. He was certain she would come around after a few evenings in his bed and forget all about the man she left behind. He was, after all, a very accomplished lover.

If only he had not been so foolish and drank so much during their small, but elaborate reception.

She'd remained by his side as a new wife should for the majority of the evening, excusing herself only to take care of necessities. As per usual, her nearness caused his emotions to run rampant. He wanted to hold her close and whisper that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and declare how

he loved her from the moment he met her, but his tongue would not cooperate. His loins ached with excruciating anticipation. He would have given anything for the opportunity to take her there and then, but social etiquette kept them apart.

While he remained distorted inside from the tortures of her nearness, yet calm on the outside for all eyes to see, those in attendance praised what a lovely couple they made. Stephen could hardly endure it. He saw only one recourse for a man who suffered so.

Drink.

So, drink he did.

By the time he finally found himself alone with his beautiful bride in their newly acquired townhouse and was free to adorn her with his professions of love without the risk of a room full of listening ears, his mind was duly dulled by champagne and cognac. He was unable to articulate a single word. His body, on the other hand, came alive with a mind of its own. Frustrated over his incapacitated speech and unable to keep his urges in check, he wasted no time in bedding his new bride and claiming her sweetness as his own.

That was an act he would regret for the rest of his life.

Had Stephen's mind not been so fogged with alcohol, he would have realized his new bride was not fighting him off with all her might because of her love for another man. She was battling out of fear and confusion over what was happening to her.

Had Stephen's senses been more alert, he would have recognized that his delicate flower was not educated as to what went on between a husband and wife. He would have realized that she needed coaxing and caressing to bring her to a state of acceptance of what was about to occur before he plunged his manhood deep into her velvety depths so unceremoniously.

Had Stephen been sober, he would have noticed the resistance that her virgin body gave him.

Alas, Stephen had not been sober.

Upon awakening the following morning with a head that felt like someone bashed it with the dull side of an ax. He was immediately humbled by his drunken folly. His heart twisted and he was filled with remorse when he rose onto one elbow and looked down at his still sleeping bride laying pinned beneath his bulk. Elizabeth's eyes were swollen and red from a tear-filled night and the remnants of her finely sewn dressing gown were all askew. In his haste to possess her, Stephen had not even taken the time to remove it and spare the expertly sewn silk from his ravaging. Needless to say, the gown was ruined.

It was painfully clear that he passed out atop her small, beautifully shaped bosom upon completion of their consummation. If not for the softness of the thick feather mattress, his muscular body would have surely crushed her petite and delicate frame. As Stephen moved to the side of the bed the unmistakable signs that he'd bedded a virgin boldly coated Elizabeth's gown and the bed covering, as well as parts of his own body. He groaned, sickened by his own actions.

Never before had he been so brutish with a woman – not even with the whores he occasionally bedded. How could he have been so idiotic as to allow himself so much drink? How could he have been such an animal, such a monster? What was it about Elizabeth Nottingham that caused him to act outside himself?

Stephen found the experience of a willing seductress much more compatible to his tastes and had therefore never bedded a virgin. Even so, he knew they needed to be treated much differently than the way he treated his poor young bride. His recollection of their battle was a hazy fog. From the bruises on her tender flesh, her swollen eyes, the torn gown, the stained bed covering, and the scratches on his chest, he was positive he treated her more like a whore than a new bride. No, worse than a whore. He provided no cooing and coaxing her fears away. Even a whore would have received that courtesy. The unbridled lust Stephen worked so hard to control got the better of him. The fact that it was released by an excess of alcohol magnified the situation.

Ashamed and embarrassed by his barbaric actions, he debated what to do. Since it was clear she was not pouting over the loss of a lover, he could only assume that his new bride simply did not find him appealing enough to want to marry. Of course, after last night, he could hardly expect her to like him enough to be his friend, let alone love him.

Resigning himself to his self-inflicted fate, Stephen decided to bed her until she got with child. Then he would leave her alone and allow her to live as the rest of London society seemed to live. He had no desire to force himself on a woman who truly found him repulsive any more than he had to. If it were not for the fact that he was expected to produce an heir, he would have walked away and never touched her again.

He sighed. Such is the lot of the aristocracy. Surely Elizabeth understood this. She may not have had a mother to instruct her, but she was a lady born and bred and some things were simply common knowledge. She would have to endure bedding him until the family line was secure and then he would set her free. She could remain in London and he would travel between his estate in

England, his plantation in Jamaica, and his plantation in Georgia. Surely she would be tolerant of the rare visits this type of schedule would allow him.

The only flaw in Stephen's plan -besides the tortuous fact that he loved her- would be if the first child Elizabeth bore was a girl. If that should happen, he would have to remain in England and bed her until an heir was presented.

He would worry about that later.

Stephen avoided Elizabeth all day. He was far too ashamed to look at her, let alone enter into a conversation. If their paths did happen to cross and they had a need to address each other, the bare minimum was spoken.

When evening came and he once again entered her chambers, he found her reluctantly huddled in the middle of her bed with the richly embroidered covers pulled tight around her neck. His petite young bride looked small, innocent, and frightened on a mattress that looked spacious enough for her entire wait staff to slumber on.

He moaned with remorse for his own stupidity. If he had not been expected to impregnate Elizabeth immediately for his ailing father's sake, he would have left the room and allowed her the peace her rich violet eyes so clearly begged him for. If only his father was not so ill, he could delay things and give her time to recover from their wedding night fiasco. Actually, he too would have appreciated some time for the memory and guilt of his drunken abandonment to dissipate.

Stephen did his best to avoid Elizabeth's haunting stare as he crossed the room and poured himself a hefty amount of brandy in a straight stemmed, intricately etched, wide-mouthed crystal goblet.

Her wide eyes never left him.

Tossing back the amber liquid as quickly as he could, he had another, and then another. Relaxation spread through his body almost instantly as the brandy's warmth reached his stomach. Its artificial power surged through his veins, giving him the courage he needed to finally face her.

Glancing in Elizabeth's direction, he poured a small amount into another glass and walked to the bed.

Cringing as far away from her new husband she was able, while still retaining coverage over her slender body proved impossible. The weight of his bulk as he sat down on the edge of the bed tossed her closer and the covers no longer guarded her as they once did. Her chemise slipped, exposing her silken shoulders, as she struggled to regain composure.

He absent-mindedly traced her exposed flesh along her collar bone with a finger as he offered her the brandy. His thoughts fought his lustful anticipation

of what was to come. She was so lovely, so delicate and beautiful. His body responded on its own. He told himself it would be different this time. He consumed only enough brandy to take the edge off his boyish nervousness, not enough to make him drunk. He was in complete control now and would move slowly, sensually. He would woo her and show her what it was like to be loved by a man. He would wipe the memory of last night with his kisses and tender touch.

“Drink this. Twill loosen you up,” Stephen said gently.

“I do not wish to drink.” Elizabeth spat with squeaking emotion.

She may not know her husband well, but she conversed with him enough over the months to know she detected a mild slur in the handsome man’s voice and wondered how much he drank before he entered her bed chambers and downed half a decanter of brandy before her very eyes. It was all too obvious that Stephen disliked bedding her just as much as she disliked bedding him.

“Tonight you do,” Stephen commanded with a little more force than he intended.

Upon seeing Elizabeth’s eyes open wide with fright, he heaved a deep sigh. This was not going well. He had no experience wooing a reluctant woman. If only she could like him just a little. This would be so much easier... and pleasurable. He wanted to walk away and leave her at peace. He was at a loss at what to do or how to act.

Taking a deep breath, he continued in a manner less abrupt, “Please drink this. Twill relax you just a little.”

Elizabeth raised her chin defiantly, “I do not wish to...”

“Drink it,” He blurted in frustration with a controlled voice that was barely above a whisper.

Stephen found the entire situation incredibly frustrating. He was not prepared to deal with a woman who resisted him in this manner night after night. He had no idea how he should be acting. The fact that Elizabeth was so obviously repulsed by him when he wanted nothing more than to lay with her forever surprised, infuriated, and devastated him.

Elizabeth was stunned by her new husband’s sudden display of aggression. What type of man had she married? Her uncle assured her he was a well-bred young man who came from the finest of the finest. He would be able to provide for her and her children better than most husbands could. He seemed so quiet and, well... dull during their brief times together. He certainly managed to fool people by hiding this horrific side of his nature quite efficiently. One would never guess this side of his persona when he is out and about. Never.

It was no secret that Lord Stephen Carlson was the most sought after bachelor in London society. Her good fortune was pointed out to her by more than one person on many an occasion. If they knew about his drinking problem would they think so highly of him?

Had it really been good fortune? Remembering Stephen's drunken assault on her tender and innocent flesh just the night before, and hearing his aggressive manner just now gave Elizabeth cause to wonder just how fortunate she really was to have married the most sought after bachelor in London society.

Having watched him drink far more in a short period of time than was recommended over the course of a full night she determined she had the misfortune to have married a drunk. She heard whispers about such things. Would he beat her now? She prayed for a reprieve until she and the doctor could execute her plan of escape.

Thinking it best not to provoke him, Elizabeth took the glass and unceremoniously tossed the amber liquid down her throat. She rarely found cause to drink brandy. On the few occasions she did she found it quite distasteful and rarely let more than a few drops touch her lips. Therefore, she was not prepared for its fiery assault as it caused her throat to contract. Spinning into a fit of coughs and gasps, she struggled to suck in air.

Stephen pulled her close and patted her back in an effort to ease her discomfort. The sweet scent of lavender that mingled with the coarse heavy curls of her shiny, thick raven hair filled his nostrils, accentuated his headiness, and tantalized his loins. He groaned with dismay as unbridled lust twisted and beat at him in an unmistakable demand to be set free. It was like a wild beast seeking freedom from its cage.

Stephen summoned all his might to subdue his urges, for subdue them he must. He had no intention of repeating his actions from the night before. Tonight he would move slowly, carefully. Even if his wife did not desire him, she could at least enjoy the experience. He pleased enough women to know that the mind did not require love for the body to enjoy its pleasures.

Realizing his intentions, Elizabeth pushed Stephen away with all her might while she struggled to free herself. In doing so, the lace of her loosely draped chemise fell off her shoulders, exposing a small, perfectly formed breast. Was this seemingly innocent goddess torturing him on purpose?

"Please. Not tonight. I... I hurt," Elizabeth wailed in frustration.

Although she did not want to anger him, she wanted even less to repeat the nightmare of the night before.

“Sadly, my dear wife, I know of no way of avoiding the hurt. I assure you that you will not feel hurt tonight like you felt last night, if you feel hurt at all.” Stephen looked away and sighed, “Had I realized, I would have done things differently.”

“Realized?” Elizabeth had no idea what he was referring to.

“’Tis no matter,” Stephen smiled. “Now, remove your gown please.”

Elizabeth froze. Was he serious? Did he actually expect her to remove her clothes like a wanton woman? Surely he was jesting.

“Shall I remove it for you?” Stephen asked gently.

When Stephen moved to do just that, Elizabeth scrambled quickly to the other side of the bed. She had no intention of baring her body for this brute of a man. Not now, not ever. A sudden decision struck her and she was no longer concerned about angering him. Let him beat her until her body was covered with bruises. Surely the pain would be less to endure than a repeat of the night before.

Stephen caught the edge of her gown and tugged in an effort to subdue her. He wanted nothing more than to make this night a pleasurable experience for the young exotic beauty before him, but her repulsion of him was not making things easy. He never had to force a woman to bed him. He found the experience degrading. He was at an absolute loss at what to say or do.

“We must create an heir,” Stephen growled in frustration. Perhaps if he explained the situation to her, she would calm down. “Then, my dear wife, I shall leave you alone.”

Elizabeth stopped short. What was it that she detected in his tone of voice? Could it be that her new husband found this situation just as distasteful as she did? She had not taken into consideration the fact that perhaps Lord Stephen Carlson married her to appease his father and not out of a desire for her. It had not occurred to her that he may have been forced to marry her, like she was forced to marry him. Was that why he drank himself drunk on their wedding night? Was it to block out the fact that he must bed her? Did he find her so undesirable?

Having no mother to confide in and no married friends, Elizabeth was not clear on what really went on between a wife and a husband. She assumed what she experienced the night before was typical behavior. That being the case, she was not anxious to repeat it. Could it be that he too was reluctant? Had it hurt him like it hurt her? These were things she did not know and had no one to ask. She certainly was not going to ask him.

The thought that the two of them were coupled against their will never entered her mind. Until now.

Noticing his wife was deep in thought, Stephen took advantage of her unguarded state and reached for her shoulders. His large, weathered, yet well-manicured, hand barely gripped her gown before she spun away, leaving him with a fist full of fabric. As she pulled against his hold, the delicate trimming of her lightweight garment tore from its meticulous stitching. He scowled. It was not his intention to ruin yet another gown. What would the servants think? If he kept this up, he would not have to worry about how to get the gown off this breath-taking creature for she would have nothing left to don.

In her struggles to release herself from Stephen's ever-increasing grip, Elizabeth unwittingly forced an arousal in him that he could no longer deny. With a goodly amount of brandy coursing through his veins, all sensibility and caution was lost as his body took charge on its own accord. It ignored anything his mind might think that would stop him from fulfilling his needs and desires.

His lips burned against her skin, while he wantonly explored her feminine treasures. Within seconds he regained control of his senses and his love making shifted from that of a heated animal to the soft and sensual caresses of a most adept lover.

Stephen spoke the truth. The experience was not painful for Elizabeth as it was the night before. In fact, his tender ministrations were so wildly enjoyable that she was sure she would lose herself in ecstasy at any moment. Her mind reeled in confusion. Was she supposed to enjoy it like this? Was she expected to respond or should she simply allow him his pleasures like a dutiful wife? She had no idea.

Although Madeleine proved more than efficient when it came to her education on etiquette within society, a wife's house management duties, and world affairs, not once had she carried on a woman-to-woman discussion with Elizabeth about husbands and wives and what happened between them behind closed doors. The subject seemed practically taboo. If it was referred to at all, it was with a whisper that crept out from behind her hand. Elizabeth attributed it to the fact that Madeleine never even possessed a beau to kiss, let alone a man to marry.

Accustomed to being on guard so as not to displease the man of the household, Elizabeth decided it was best to remain as still as she could while her husband took his pleasures. She held her breath and closed her eyes as tight as they would close and used every ounce of strength she could find while she struggled to keep her composure in check. It took all her strength to subdue the moans of pleasure that threatened to escape her throat. It would not do to upset

him with her selfish wiggling and squealing from this absolutely incredible experience.

The thought of having to remain stoic and stiff while she endured such delightful pleasures for the rest of her life was crushingly sad. Was this her fate? How did wives around the world do this? Those who did received her humble admiration, for she did not think she could possibly bear it night after night. It was no small wonder why so many women encouraged their husbands to take a mistress. Being alone in bed would be far less punishment than the tortures of having to subdue one of the most pleasurable sensations a body could have.

Elizabeth did her best to remove her thoughts from the pleasures of the flesh in hopes it would help her retain her calm demeanor under Stephen's wildly arousing ministries. In doing so, she found herself recalling the laughter and pleasurable conversation that transpired between the two during the many social engagements they simultaneously attended. She recalled how handsome he looked as he stepped onto the dance floor at Lord Milo's ball. His deep throated laughter caused shivers of delight up her arms and down her back at the Andersen's picnic. She recalled how well his muscular thighs rippled when he maneuvered his stallion next to her carriage while outing in the park. He was a handsome and virile man any woman would be overjoyed to claim as hers. Yet he was hers. He was hers and he was here doing the most marvelous things to her body while whispering the most wondrous devotions in her ear. She loved him for it. She loved him for everything. Oh dear, she loved him.

The ecstasy of realizing the truth of her feelings for Lord Stephen Carlson clashed with the knowledge that he married her out of duty and nothing more. She was crushed to the core. She loved a man who did not love her. Yes, he spoke devotions while in the throes of passion, but surely they were simply words in a moment of passion. He made no mention of love outside their coupling. He'd made it perfectly clear that once she gave him a son they would have nothing more to do with each other. What joke of fate? How could God be so cruel? She was a dutiful ward of her uncle and a model young lady to society. She accepted her situation after the death of her parents with grace and dignity. All she desired in return was one thing and one thing only... to be loved. Now, her dreams of that happening were crushed. She was married to a man who did not return her love. She was no fool. She listened to enough conversations to understand that men enjoyed women without loving them. This was certainly what must be happening now. It was impossible for him not to be enjoying the sensations of their coupling, was it not? He certainly seemed to be enjoying himself.

The situation was just too saddening. Thank goodness her plans to escape with Dr. Jameson were still in the making. Would the doctor come through with a message that all was in order soon? She fervently prayed that it be so.

Feeling Elizabeth's stiff body beneath him frustrated Stephen even more. After his initial lustful attack on her person, his senses returned and he did his best to show as much tenderness and consideration as he could. It was a difficult task to be sure. The woman's beauty and appeal was of such to drive the best of men mad. One could not be too harsh on him for his occasional loss of control.

He pulled himself up and looked down on Elizabeth's slight frame while she lay looking anywhere but at him. She looked so small and vulnerable. Her eyes were dry of tears but filled with what looked be sorrow. He sensed her mind preoccupied. Did she wish herself away? Did she find being with him that distasteful? Did he sicken her to such an extent that she could not allow her body to relax and enjoy his expert ministries of pleasure? Never had he failed in bringing a woman to the heights of passion, yet it seemed he had failed now... and with his own wife.

Stephen prayed Elizabeth would conceive an heir soon so he would no longer be required to force himself upon her. As beautiful as she was, he found the situation sickening. There were plenty of women wherever he traveled who were willing to throw themselves at him for just one night in his bed. He had no need or desire to keep returning to a woman who recoiled and remained like a piece of wood beneath him, even if she had captured his heart and he thought her to be the most beautiful creature he ever encountered.

Having been summoned by his father to assist with matters of estate after only a few weeks with his passionless bride, Stephen expected to be gone the better part of a fortnight. Although he was remorseful about leaving his young wife so soon without having accomplished the removal of the cold barrier between them, it could not be helped. Their fortune, and the inheritance of their future heir, required his immediate attention.

He questioned the waiting maid selected from his staff by Elizabeth upon the dismissal of Madeleine Hardy after her treason -at least that was how Elizabeth viewed it- about her mistress's female cycle and learned she was expecting her moon time soon. He would have liked to have continued to lay with her in the night for at least another week to fortify the possibility of producing an heir as well as break through that shell of resistance and get her to realize, understand, accept and respond to his love. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done about it. If he was unsuccessful at begetting her with child already he would simply have to start again when he returned. At least it would provide him with a

greater opportunity to win her over – not to mention additional time making love to her.

His duties at his father's estate took surprisingly much less time than Stephen anticipated and he found himself returning home after only a few days of absence. Those few days were all it took for his reluctant bride to slip off in the night and disappear. He would have never thought his socially proper Elizabeth capable of doing such a thing. Was the concept of being his bride that reprehensible?

He initially joined in the general panic of the household while they speculated on what could have become of their young mistress, but after questioning Lord Roberts about the possibility of him knowing something of his niece's whereabouts and discovering that thwarting her original plan to run away was the reason behind their rushed marriage, he quickly realized that the earl's insistence of an early marriage had not in the least deterred his headstrong niece's plans. His bride had not been kidnapped or taken against her will. It was clear his beautiful, reluctant wife ran away.

Furious with the earl's deceitful actions, Stephen commanded he remain silent about what occurred. He was certain that the man's pride would keep him so. After all, he was still suffering -in his mind, if nowhere else- from the shame of his sister's actions so many years ago. Stephen then put on a ruse to the rest of the world. He claimed his wife longed for time away from the city, so they took up residence in a small cottage his family owned in the upper country and would remain there until she was ready to continue their honeymoon abroad.

People smiled and nodded in agreement about how lucky Lady Elizabeth was to have secured such a loving husband. Few husbands would grant his wife's every wish like Lord Carlson was doing, even if they were just newlywed.

Fortunately for Stephen, his family was long standing in London society and had strong connections in influential places. It took but a few days to trace Elizabeth's actions to the doorstep of the Jameson household. After a lengthy, heated, and impending conversation with John Jameson, Stephen was able to learn of the doctor's scheme to act as Elizabeth's guardian in exchange for her funding their journey to the emancipated colonies.

John explained to Stephen how he was the eldest brother and the doctor lived on his good graces. Because of this, the doctor convinced Elizabeth to use her inheritance money to fund their trip. Knowing how naïve Elizabeth was to the ways of the world, Stephen imagined that would not have been too difficult a task. Somehow, the conniving scoundrel also managed to solicit his other brother -who was a lawyer and the trustee to Elizabeth's inheritance- to release a

considerable amount of her inheritance money to them. It mattered not to Stephen that John was uncomfortable with the idea and acted practically against his will. He held the entire Jameson family accountable.

Stephen's first concern was to find his wayward minx of a bride and bring her home. Once that was completed, this family of scoundrels would be duly dealt with.