



RENEE ROSE

Pleasing
THE
COLONEL

Pleasing the Colonel

By

Renee Rose

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Spanking and other sexual activities
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Chapter One

She was surely going to die.

The carriage had rolled, skidded, and dumped them into a tight crevice and was now teetering directly above their heads, ready to complete its topple and utterly crush them. Rough hands grabbed her and moved her several feet over.

“Stand right here,” the voice attached to the hands commanded. It was deep and authoritative, like a man who was used to giving orders and having them instantly obeyed. “You there, stand near her and brace it with your hands.”

“Hello? Can you hear me?” a terrorized voice above the carriage

called to them. It was their driver.

“We're alive,” the commanding voice responded immediately. “All standing.”

“Thank God. I will go for help. The horses are gone and there's no way I can haul that carriage out myself.”

She heard a groan and a muttered curse. “Go back to my carriage and get the horses and my driver to help,” the commanding voice called back. “Just hurry, I don't know how long this thing will last before it falls on top of us!”

“Yes, sir. I will return as fast as I can.”

The commanding voice must belong to the military officer. He had just joined

their carriage a mile back when his own had lost a wheel. He had left his driver and carriage to join theirs, clearly in a hurry to reach London by nightfall. The other passenger was a young man, probably about her age— she would guess him to be 19 or 20 years old.

At this rate they might never see London again.

“Help me to prop it up,” the military officer commanded. He was endeavoring to wedge sticks and branches up between the rock surface and the carriage to lessen the chance of it falling.

“Here's one,” the younger man said as he handed him another branch, then turned to search in the dark crevice for

additional branches that might be used. She did the same, her hands trembling and her eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. She'd hurt her neck when she was thrown out of the carriage and hit the floor of the crevice, and her shoulder ached badly as well.

She found a thick, but short stick. It probably wouldn't do any good. She hung onto it anyway, continuing her search. She found two more and brought all three to the officer—a Colonel she thought she'd heard him tell their driver—though he hadn't said a word to either of them when he'd joined them.

“Thank you,” he said, taking them from her and jamming them in various

places around the carriage.

Dirt was still falling down around them, reminding her that at any moment, the entire thing could crash in on their heads. She went back to stand where the Colonel had positioned her before. It was right in the center of the carriage, so that if it fell the open door would provide room for her head.

The two men worked in silence for another fifteen minutes, until no more branches or rocks could be found. Then the Colonel ordered the young man to stand by her again.

“Are you hurt, Miss?” the young man asked her solicitously.

“No, sir. Not really. I'll suffer bruises and a stiff neck. If we ever get

out of here, that is.”

“We'll get out of here,” came the determined voice of the officer. She wasn't fond of military men, but in this situation his steely resolve and quick actions were a godsend.

“My name is Ned Bartlby,” the younger man introduced himself.

“Amanda Downy.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Downy,” he said. She felt something cold and metal pressed into her hand. “Take a sip,” he said, “it will calm your nerves.” He had handed her a flask of brandy. She hesitated, then decided he was right—if ever there was a time to drink liquor, it was now. She took a

deep swig, then gasped and shuddered as the liquid fire went down her throat. Bartlby chuckled.

“Take another sip,” he urged her.

“That's all right,” she choked, still coughing a bit, and handed it back to him. “Thank you, though.”

“And thank you, sir, for your immediate response to our danger.”

She thought she had directed her voice toward the Colonel, but it was Bartlby who answered.

“Oh, you're quite welcome.”

The Colonel's shadow grew closer until she could make out his face. “Thank *you*, sir,” she said clearly this time.

“I just hope it holds,” he said grimly.

“You stay right in this spot, Miss Downy, and don't stray from it.”

“Yes, Colonel,” she said. “It *is* Colonel, isn't it?”

He made an affirmative sort of noise, but said nothing else. After what seemed like hours, she sighed and settled herself down on the cold rock floor. Her legs were too tired to hold her any longer. Bartlby sat down next to her. “Have some more,” he said, handing her the flask.

She took a deep drink, shuddering again as it went through her.

“Have another,” he prompted when she tried to hand it back.

Well, if she was going to die

anyway, she'd might as well make it pleasant. She took another big swig and gasped.

“This would be a strange way to die, wouldn't it?” Bartlby mused.

“Aye,” she sighed. “It's not the way I ever imagined it.” The fire from the brandy he'd given her was warming her body nicely and she could feel her muscles relax. “That stuff is not half bad, once you get it down, is it?”

Bartlby chuckled and handed her the flask again. She took another deep drink and felt her head swim a bit. She hadn't eaten since morning and the liquor was affecting her.

“Do you live in London?” Bartlby asked.

“Yes. I was just visiting my mother in Huntington. She's taken ill.”

“Do you work in London, then?” Bartlby asked.

“Aye, I'm a governess. I've been there nearly five months.” She noticed vaguely that the liquor had loosened her tongue. Not that she'd said anything she might not ordinarily say, but she spoke without thinking. She felt a keen friendliness toward the young man, who may be the last person to see her alive.

“So do I,” said Bartlby. “I'm a secretary. Were you a governess somewhere else before this post?”

“No. My need to find work was a bit of a surprise, actually. My father died

six months ago, and it turned out that his estate was entailed. My mother and sister and I were forced to leave. My mother is staying with relatives, and my sister and I have both taken governess posts. She is in Banford.”

“I see. I'm very sorry to hear about your father.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice wavering. She felt a wave of grief at his offer of condolences. She had not allowed herself to think about her father's death since the funeral. Her eyes burned momentarily with tears. As if he sensed it, he passed her the flask again.

She threw back another large swallow and choked. As the liquid warmth burned down her throat, her

head swam. “The distant cousin who took over our estate is dreadful. We didn't have the time or means to remove our possessions or prepare in any way. My mother's sick because of it, you see,” she told him. He murmured something encouraging and she went on. “The grief of my father's death and the pain of having to beg a place with relatives have just been too much for her to bear.” She continued freely pouring a stream of words from her mouth. “It's not her first reversal of fortune though, the poor woman. Her parents were members of the French aristocracy. They were executed in the square during the Revolution and she was smuggled to

England as a child by her nursemaid.”

She had the vague notion that she was chattering too much, but couldn't seem to make herself care. He clucked sympathetically. Before she knew it, she was pouring out all the trials and tribulations of the past months.

“It was quite a shock for my sister and I. We weren't raised to work, so we had no references to start. I am ashamed to tell you that I lied to my employer about my previous experience, as I had none. One of our neighbors provided a false reference for me. Shocking, I know. It's not something I would ordinarily consider, but we were quite desperate, you see.”

“Well, of course you were,”

Bartlby said sympathetically.

Tears burned in her eyes again. "It hasn't been easy at all," she said, her voice choking. "The children are wonderful, but the rest of the household is perfectly dreadful. I haven't met the father, he's a military officer—in Burma right now, you know—but their aunt is horrible to me. She treats me like a member of the staff, which I suppose I am."

"No, you're not," Bartlby contradicted indignantly. "You're a lady. A governess is not *staff*."

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "But that's not how they see it. I feel as if I am constantly demeaned. Oh, but I don't

wish to complain. I do have one friend there, other than the children. Their nursemaid is quite sweet to me. Of course, I'm always covering for her when she disappears. She runs off to the stables to flirt with the carriage driver so she has to be my friend, doesn't she?"

Mandy found she could hardly stop her mouth from speaking now that it had started. "It seems ironic to me now that I'm practically penniless, considering how many excellent offers for marriage I turned down. My parents were a love match and so my mother always encouraged us to wait for love. Now here I am, borrowing against my future wages just to visit my sick mother." She sighed dramatically. "But I guess I don't

regret it. I'd rather be working and available to the possibility of love than trapped and financially comfortable with some stiff military officer or self-important parson. No offense to you of course, sir," she said to the Colonel. Her speech was starting to slur.

* * *

It seemed to Colonel Charles Watson that the young secretary named Bartlby was getting the lovely governess drunk on purpose. He was probably hoping to steal a kiss or make some other inappropriate advances on her.

"Here," the young man said, passing the flask to the lady again.

He simply couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer. "I think she's had quite enough," he said crisply. The young governess drew her hand back in shock, looking confused. At least she still had the good sense to respond to his implied rebuke. She seemed bright and was obviously well-bred in addition to being nothing short of beautiful.

"I think the lady can decide for herself," the secretary said coldly.

"No," she shook her head, as if trying to clear it. "I will trust the officer's judgment," she said slowly. "And I'll ask you to please not be rude on my behalf," she said primly, the natural sweetness of her voice

modulated with a slight rebuke.

Though it should not have had any effect on him whatsoever, he found himself pleased that she had accepted his judgment over the secretary's. He had joined their carriage only a half an hour before the accident—his own had had its wheel come loose and rather than wait, he'd accepted the offer to join theirs. Fate had obviously not been kind, however.

“Hello?” At that moment, a voice called down to them from above the carriage. They all scrambled to their feet.

“We're all right!” he shouted.

“All right, we are very carefully going to attach ropes to the side of the

carriage, and then see if the horses can pull it out.”

“Be careful when you attach the ropes,” he warned. “Do *not* put any weight at *all* on the carriage—we are directly beneath it, with nowhere else to go.” The danger of the carriage collapsing the final five feet into the crevice and crushing the three of them was very real, despite the precautions he'd taken by wedging stray branches in to hold it.

“Yes, sir. Understood,” the driver called back.

He waited, listening to the sounds above them. The dirt and rocks were pouring down around the carriage again,

and the creaks it made sounded ominous. The groans and cracking sounds only increased as the shouts above urged the horses to pull. He was concerned the carriage would break in two, rather than come unstuck. If it did, they were in danger of being struck by whatever parts fell. The shouts above took on a chaotic sound, with many voices yelling conflicting things at the same time and then a loud crack came from the carriage and pieces of it started to fall on them.

Charles instinctively grasped the governess and pulled her tight against his chest, pressing her head down and covering it as best he could with his hands. She clung to him and he could feel her soft small body trembling with

fear, her breasts pressing against his low ribs. Her hair was silky soft under his fingers and she smelled faintly of lavender. He could hardly blame the secretary for trying to take advantage of the situation to gain her attention—she was an extremely enticing package.

He waited until the cascade of falling carriage parts and stones had stilled. The bulk of the carriage had been pulled out, and he could see the darkened sky through the dust.

“Everyone all right down there?”

He reluctantly released the governess and brushed the debris off her back. “Yes, we're all right,” he called out.

“Colonel,” she pronounced decisively, as if she hadn't been sure which man had been holding her until he'd spoken. For some reason that ruffled him, though why he would care that she knew it was he who protected her was a mystery. He was not a young man trying to court a wife. He was a widower who did not plan on ever remarrying. Falling in love was not something he wished to repeat.

“I'm lowering a rope down to help you climb out. Can you see it?”

He moved away from the lady and reached for the rope, which came tumbling down the rocks. “I have it!” he called up. “Come, Miss Downy,” he

said, holding out his hand to her. She approached and he pressed the rope into her hands. “You're going to use your feet against the side of the rock wall and your hands on the rope to climb out, you see?” he said, boosting her up so that her feet scrambled against the wall and caught hold. “That's it. Now keep climbing. I'll give you another boost and then you see if you can do it for yourself.”

He used his hands to push her bottom, trying to ignore how pleasingly soft and round its shape was. The lady was still tipsy and appeared to have a difficult time negotiating the rope and the rock wall in the darkness, but eventually he saw with relief that she made it to the

top where two men pulled her to safety. He sent the secretary up next and then followed himself. To his relief, his own carriage driver had repaired the wheel on his carriage, and was ready to take him home.

“Would you care to ride in my carriage?” he asked the other two passengers.

“That's all right,” Bartlby answered. “Our driver has already borrowed a replacement carriage.”

“And you?” he asked Miss Downy. He couldn't wait to get home, but he also hesitated sending her off alone with the secretary.

“No, thank you—the driver has my

luggage loaded. Good night, sir, and thank you again.”

His conscience pricked him again at leaving her, but they were not far from London, and the driver was with them—surely she would be all right.

It had been almost a year since he'd seen his own children. His heart ached with guilt over having left them so long, even if it was to serve his country. He tried to enter the house quietly, but Violet, one of his staff members, came out to see who it was and then exclaimed, “Colonel! Welcome home!” so loudly that the entire staff and family came out of bed to greet him.

His sister Lucinda, ten years his junior, came running down the stairs in

her dressing gown, throwing her arms around his neck and nearly strangling him. He laughed and squeezed her, then greeted Mrs. James, her paid companion and chaperone, and was halfway through greeting the staff individually when Tom and Rosie came barreling down the stairs, shouting "Papa! Papa!" at the tops of their lungs. They balked when they actually reached the bottom of the stairs, though, timidity taking over.

"Come, children. Don't be afraid. I've missed you so much!" He crouched down and held his arms out. Lucinda nudged them forward and they approached him nervously, eyes downcast. He squeezed them both and

then picked them up, one on each hip, carrying them to their beds and tucking them in, promising to take them to the park the following day.

* * *

In the morning he sat down to breakfast with his sister and Mrs. James, and realized the only person he had not seen or met the night before was the new governess.

“Where is the new governess? I’ve forgotten her name.”

His lawyer had hired her several months ago when the previous governess did not meet expectations, so other than reading the letters about it, he knew very

little.

“Miss Downy,” Lucinda said, slightly sourly.

The name sounded familiar, now that she said it. “Are you pleased with her?”

“Oh she's wonderful with the children, yes,” Lucinda said nonchalantly, as if that part was the least of her concern.

“And?”

Lucinda shrugged. “She's everything you could ask for, I'm sure,” she said a little too primly.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Does that mean she's too pretty or too talented for your taste?” he asked drily.

Lucinda flushed. “Charles!” she

exclaimed indignantly, but then she laughed at herself. "Both," she said with an exaggerated sulk.

"Mrs. James, I was hoping your influence would have improved my sister's sense of grace. What is the point of a companion for a young lady if you cannot instill good manners in your charge? Or if you could not, surely you could have paid her compliments enough that she would not feel threatened by ladies who might show her up."

Mrs. James had paled at the rebuke. Only Lucinda was accustomed to his manner of speaking bluntly. She threw him an aggrieved look. "Well, I don't know why Miss Downy is late to

breakfast, unless she did not return last night as she promised. Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed. “Did you mean to sleep the whole day away?”

He stood up and turned to face the young lady entering the dining room, then stopped short in recognition, watching as her eyes widened and her face paled. Her expression was one of absolute horror.

* * *

Oh no. Ice washed over her and her mouth hung open in shock. It was the man from the carriage. *The Colonel.* Surprise flickered momentarily on his face as well, but then his face went

blank again, as it had appeared the night before.

“You must be the governess,” he said, inclining his head in a slight bow.

She swallowed. Her mind was reeling. All the things she had said the night before came back in a wash of anguish—that she'd lied about her references, that the family she worked for was dreadful. She could feel the blood drain from her face completely, and she swayed a bit on her feet. “Miss Downy,” she managed to choke out with a curtsy.

“Colonel Watson,” he said coolly.

She stood there trembling, waiting for him to tell her to pack her things, that was she dismissed effective

immediately, but he merely sat back down to his toast and jam. She stood there stupidly for another moment and then managed to walk to the table and take the seat opposite him.

“Have the children already eaten?” she asked, forcing herself to speak.

“Yes, Julie fed them in the kitchen this morning,” Miss Watson said crisply.

Had he not recognized her? Impossible. He most certainly had. But why say nothing? Was he sparing her the embarrassment? If so, she was grateful for the temporary reprieve, though she couldn't choke down much for breakfast. Miss Watson was prattling on, informing her brother of every member of their

societal circle, including all the gossip that Mandy had heard her repeat tirelessly for the past five months.

She was grateful when the children peeked their heads into the dining room. She smiled at them encouragingly and beckoned them in, speaking in French, as she always did, to help them learn it. “Come in, children. Are you happy your Papa's back?”

They came in cautiously and stood with a curious mixture of eagerness and formality. Rosie, the seven-year-old, clasped her hands in front of her and her brother Tom, the four year old, hid partially behind her. “*Oui, Mademoiselle,*” Rosie said, her accent perfect. Then the child switched back to

English. "Papa said he's going to—"

"*En français,*" she interrupted with a smile.

Rosie plowed ahead, used to her corrections, translating into her stumbling French. "Papa said he's going to take us for a ride in the carriage this morning, to go to the park. Would you like to come?"

She swallowed convulsively at the idea of being alone in a carriage with the Colonel. "If your father permits it," she managed to say, still speaking in French.

"Well, I'm not sure there will be room, will there?" Miss Watson interjected shrilly in English. "Mrs. James and I wish to go as well."

“Will you and Mrs. James take responsibility for the children, then?” Colonel Watson asked with one eyebrow raised.

Miss Watson blanched. She seemed to like her niece and nephew well enough, but considered their care to be beneath her. “Well, no, we wished to walk about the park, of course.”

“Then Miss Downy will accompany the children and me and you and Mrs. James may take the other carriage.”

Miss Watson looked irritated at that, but there was nothing she could say, as the Colonel's logic was sound.

“When do we leave?” she asked the

Colonel.

“When do the children have their lessons?”

“Lessons are normally from after breakfast till noon, but I am flexible. I'm sure the children are quite anxious to spend time with you after your long absence.” She dared a look at him and caught her breath a little when she found him regarding her coolly. He was older than she—at least by 10 years—but his face was handsome, with broad planes that gave him the look of strength and determination. He had dark curly hair and dark eyes that held a penetrating intelligence. She'd never been attracted to a military man, but suddenly she could see the appeal. She felt herself flush

immediately under his gaze, wracked with guilt and fear over the lies she had told to gain his employ. Something in his look told her he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“We will go after lunch, then. That will give me time to begin getting things in order here. All right, children?” he said, turning to look at them.

“Yes, Papa,” Rosie said.

Mandy's heart went out to her—the child seemed nervous. Not having seen her own father for so many long months seemed to make it awkward for her to interact with him now. Mandy stood and took the girl's hand.

“Come, my love, it's time for you to

read to me,” she said in French.

“And to me?” Tom asked in English, taking her other hand. He understood French but didn't speak it much yet.

“*Et pour vous,*” she said, squeezing his hand and smiling warmly.

She spent the morning fully engrossed in the children's lessons, because if she let herself think about the utter precariousness of her employment, she would surely fall apart. To get through lunch, she directed her attention to the children, engaging them in lively conversation in French about what they might see and do in the park. It wasn't all that different from usual, as she had always taken refuge in the children,

except that this time half her mind was occupied with worrying over every word the Colonel spoke.

Mrs. James did not accompany them to the park after all, so Mandy was not forced to ride in the carriage with the Colonel alone, which was a relief. Instead, Miss Watson rode with them and monopolized her brother's attention for the duration. Mandy was left to her own thoughts, which only served to increase her anxiety.

She was most certainly going to be dismissed. Why the Colonel was waiting, she couldn't guess. Perhaps he wanted to secure a new governess first. If not, she would have to ask him if she

could remain until the end of the month, as she had borrowed against her wages just to make the trip to see her mother, and didn't have a farthing to her name. If he did not allow her to stay, she would literally be on the street with no means to even hire a coach to get to her mother or sister.

She could try to sell her locket, she supposed. It was silver, a lovely oval shape with filigreed etching. Her father had given it to her on her sixteenth birthday. If she could pawn it at a shop somewhere, she might have enough money to get herself to her relatives. But how horrible that would be! They hardly had the room or means to keep her mother, much less her. Well, she would

just have to beg the Colonel to let her stay until he found a suitable replacement. It was her only option.

She entertained the children at the park—sitting on a park bench and sending them on a scavenger hunt for various things she invented for them to find—a feather, a heart-shaped rock, something purple, five different colored flowers, etc. They ran to and fro, eagerly seeking the items she named and racing breathlessly to bring them to her. She focused on them with only half her attention, as the rest of her mind was occupied with observing every move the Colonel made as he walked with his sister. The building tension was

dreadful.

She watched the pair round the corner toward her, Miss Watson stopping to speak with a group of ladies and the Colonel leaving her behind, advancing directly to where she sat. Rather than invite him to sit with her, she stood up before he arrived.

“Miss Downy,” he said coolly, more like an ending statement than the beginning of a conversation.

“Sir?”

“We have some things to discuss, don't we?”

Her heart beat faster than a little bird's. “Yes, sir.”

“After supper. In my study.”

“Yes, sir,” she squeaked. Just then

Tom ran up and wrapped his little arms around her leg, chattering on about the dove he had chased. Her eyes blurred with tears, realizing suddenly that she would have to say goodbye to these children who had become her whole world.

* * *

Miss Downy followed him to his office after supper, looking as though it were her death sentence. He was satisfied that she at least understood the gravity of the situation. Lying about a reference was an offense he didn't take lightly and it needed to be dealt with. However, from what he'd witnessed and

from interviewing the staff, it seemed that she was an excellent governess, despite her lack of prior experience.

“Miss Downy. Have a seat,” he said, settling himself behind his large desk and indicating the chair opposite it.

“Colonel Watson, if I may just make one request?” she asked in a rush, looking anxious.

He raised his eyebrows. “All right, Miss Downy.”

“Please, I beg of you, allow me to stay through the end of the month. I had to borrow against my wages for my holiday this past weekend, and I want to be able to make that up to you.”

He frowned. He didn't like the idea that she'd had to travel to see her sick

mother without the necessary funds. What if a carriage hadn't been found to bring her home after the accident? Would she have had the money necessary to secure lodging? The thought of her being alone in the country with no means to provide for herself made him feel inexplicably protective of her. "I wasn't planning on dismissing you," he reassured her.

Her mouth fell open. Clearly she'd been prepared for the worst.

"But I don't need to tell you how serious I consider lying about your references to be."

She nodded her head. "I understand, Colonel. I am terribly sorry.

I just was afraid you wouldn't accept me without real work experience, and I had none.”

“No,” he agreed. “Miss Downy, I have spoken with everyone in this household and not a single person could make any critique of your care and education of my children. That is the only reason I have decided to keep you on.”

She heaved a sigh, which drew his eye to her décolletage. Her skin was creamy white and her breasts were lifted and framed alluringly in a square-cut neckline. Feeling a prick of heat rising from the sight, he quickly looked away with a mental shake.

“Thank you, Colonel,” she gasped.

“I cannot allow your lie to go unpunished, however,” he said firmly. He would treat her as he would an errant soldier. In the military, they certainly couldn't dismiss the men for not following orders—they needed them. Instead, they flogged them so it wouldn't happen again.

He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a leather strap.

Chapter Two

Her hands turned ice cold as she realized what kind of punishment he had selected for her. She willed her body to move and stood up. *Be brave, Mandy*, she told herself. She clenched and released fistfuls of her skirts at her sides.

The Colonel had walked around to her side of the desk. He patted the top of the desk. “Bend over,” he said.

Her breathing was coming in fast, short gasps. She stepped to the edge of the desk and hesitatingly leaned over it.

“Lift your skirts,” he commanded.

Oh mercy. She had not adopted the

new fashion of wearing drawers under her dresses, so lifting her skirts would mean completely baring her backside for his view and punishment. Embarrassed by the mere thought, she slowly reached back and gathered the skirts of her dress and petticoat in each hand, hiking them up to her waist to expose her bare bottom for his view. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the humiliation that was making her skin feel hot and flushed all over. The edges of the skirts still hung over her bottom, offering a bit of cover, but she felt the brush of his sleeve and the skirts were flipped up onto her back. She shivered involuntarily and for some reason

remembered the feel of his hands on her bottom the night before, boosting her out of the crevice.

Her heart was hammering in her chest. She had not been whipped since she was eight years old and had smashed her sister's china doll in a fit of jealousy. She imagined an adult whipping would be much, much worse. She hunched her shoulders and lowered her head, her eyes still squeezed shut in anticipation. She heard the whistle of leather swinging through the air the second before it struck her buttocks and she gasped at the sting. Another fell and then another and another. Tears came to her eyes and she tried hard not to cry out, embarrassed beyond belief at the

humiliation of having her bare bottom chastised by her stern employer, and she was determined to take it all with a stiff upper lip. By the time he had applied the strap up and down her bottom two times, she found the pain was unbearable. She was starting to dance in place, jerking and flinching to avoid the strap, making soft little sobs. She felt a firm hand at her low back then, pressing her torso down and holding her in place. For some reason it made her feel further chastised, as if she had failed to hold still and take her punishment properly.

The strap continued singing through the air, its stinging bite now causing her to cry out each time it struck and tears to

flow freely onto the desk. It struck her upper thighs and she nearly screamed. On and on, he continued to apply the strap until she was sobbing. Her backside was on fire, a burning tingle on the surface and a tender soreness down deeper. Finally, she realized the strap had stopped swinging and she started to lift her torso, but the Colonel's hand on her back pressed her back down.

“I'm not finished,” he said. “It just seemed as though you could use a break.”

She wasn't sure whether to feel grateful for the break or to curse him that it wasn't over. She lay there, prostrate over the desk, her legs trembling, her face a wet mess of tears and her flayed

bottom still on full display to her employer. She tried to stop her cries, but it only caused her to make awkward snorting noises.

“Shhh,” he said, and the hand at her back made the slightest motion, as if to gentle her.

She gave up all struggle for control then, and lay her face down on the desk and let herself cry. She reached back and rubbed her burning cheeks with both hands. She had no idea how much time had passed before he cleared his throat, which she took as a warning that it was to begin again. Her hands were still covering her sore bottom and he took hold of one wrist gently and brought her

hand back up, passing her head and extending it until her arm was straight. He repeated the same action with her other hand, so that she was now pressed flat on the top of the desk, her arms extended above her head where she could grip the opposite edge of the desk. She tightened her fingers around the edge of the desk as the strap struck her again. She screamed immediately—the agony of the strap biting into her already chastised flesh was overwhelming. He hesitated, as if her scream had given him pause. Then he brought the strap down three more times and stopped. She prayed this time he was finished. It seemed he was, because she felt his hand lift off her back and he smoothed

her skirts back down to cover her throbbing bottom. She hissed, as even the fabric of her skirt felt rough against her chafed skin.

She remained bent over, trying again to calm herself, not wanting to show her face. A handkerchief was pressed into her hand and she buried her face into it, sobbing until there were no more tears left to cry. As the cries slowed, she felt his large, warm hand grip the nape of her neck and gently lift her from her position. She was stiff and he allowed her to erect herself slowly, and when he turned her around she kept the handkerchief to her face, not wanting to look at him or be seen. To her

astonishment, he pulled her against him, so that her wet face pressed against his broad barrel chest. He was a large, burly man—tall enough that her head rested below his chin without needing to tuck it. She hiccupped a few times and then let go and pressed her face into the comfort that was offered, grateful for the small kindnesses he had shown her throughout the horrible ordeal.

He smelled clean—of soap and faintly of cedar—and she could feel the hard muscles of his chest against her face. He still held her only at the nape of her neck, like a kitten held by the scruff, but she somehow felt enveloped by his strength. She remembered the way he'd taken charge of the situation the night

before—calm, efficient, and so very capable in an emergency. Despite the pain and humiliation of her position, she found Colonel Watson more than a little arousing.

* * *

He hadn't planned on holding Miss Downy. Well, technically he wasn't *holding* her, since he'd just put his hand on her nape. He felt the urge to wrap his arms around her and offer her comfort and reassurance. Punishing her had been so much more difficult than he'd expected. He'd found he didn't want to hurt her at all. At first he'd been aroused by the sight of her bared to him that way,

the quivering moons of her cheeks more lovely and enticing than he was prepared for, but that quickly disappeared as he'd administered the chastisement and listened to the poor lady's sobs. He was so stricken by her pain that he'd cut the punishment short.

That was how it had been with Gracie, his deceased wife. Punishing her for a serious infraction (which only happened twice) was one of the most difficult tasks he'd ever had to complete. It was odd that he would feel the same way about his new governess, who he'd only known for twenty-four hours. Yet her tears pained him.

When her crying calmed, he tipped her head back to face him. "I want your

word that you won't lie to me again," he said, keeping his voice gentle. Her thick hair had come unpinned during the whipping and a lustrous brown wave was falling into her face. Her lower lip trembled and he couldn't help but watch it, fascinated by the lushness of her mouth, lips the color of ripe raspberries. Though he should release her, he kept his hand there at the back of her slender neck, keeping her quite close to him. Without it, she surely would have taken a step or two back and he found he did not want her separate from him.

"I promise."

"I'm going to consider your employment to be on probation for the

next three months, Miss Downy. If you've proven yourself a capable and trustworthy governess by the end of that time period, you may stay.”

This pronouncement seemed to deflate her. Her shoulders sagged and she looked quite hopeless, which gave him a renewed stab of guilt. She must be extremely worried about her financial situation.

“Miss Downy, why is it that you needed to take an advance to visit your mother? What have you done with the wages you earned since you arrived?”

She blanched, as if she were to be chastised for her debt as well. He resisted the urge to stroke her cheek—the tension created by his holding her

nape was already building to the point of crackling. “We incurred some debt with our move—the relative who took possession of the house charged us rent for the month it took us to make arrangements to leave,” she said bitterly, and he recalled what she had said about that relative the night before.

“So you used your wages to repay your relative?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. And to support my mother and the relatives who have taken her in.”

“Well, I am going to cancel the debt of your advanced wages. I am certainly willing to provide you with the means to visit your sick mother.”

She looked moved. “Thank you, sir,” she breathed with gratitude.

Without thinking, he picked up the lock of her hair that had come undone and whisked it back, re-pinning it deftly. She looked surprised and only then did he realize that it had been too intimate of a gesture. Not that the way he'd been holding her against his chest wasn't.

He took a step back. This young woman had an intoxicating effect on him.

“Why don't you go on to bed now,” he suggested stiffly. His tone had made it sound more like an order than a question. It seemed he had been too long in the military to remember how to speak gently to a lady.

She curtsied. "Thank you, sir."

He watched her walk stiffly out of the room, feeling strangely agitated. He went to the sideboard and poured himself a brandy, swirling it in the glass before sipping. He was *not* feeling this way because he was attracted to his new governess. That simply wouldn't do.

* * *

In the morning her bottom felt tight and from what she could see by twisting around, it was still marked with several red welts. She'd slept on her belly that night, replaying the entire scene with the Colonel over and over in her mind.

Now she was worried about having

to face him. She felt exceptionally embarrassed that he had bared her bottom and taken a strap to it. Though the Colonel had been a complete gentleman in the way he offered his handkerchief and even his chest to comfort her, the whole experience had still been humiliating. She also worried about her probation. How strict would he be? She needed this position desperately. She wondered if she shouldn't start to look for a new placement.

She washed and dressed and headed downstairs, just as the breakfast bell rang. The Colonel was sitting at the table already, reading the London Daily Journal, his face hidden by the newspaper. She felt herself flushing just

at seeing him again. Hearing the children's happy voices, she turned from the dining room entrance back to the stairwell and waited as they came down the stairs with Julie.

“*Bon matin, enfants,*” she greeted them.

“*Bon matin, mademoiselle,*” Rosie answered brightly. Tom repeated the phrase, doing his best with all the syllables in “*mademoiselle.*”

“They can eat with me in the dining room,” she said to Julie, who grinned her thanks.

“Great! I'll see you after lunch, then,” she said, probably eager to sneak off and flirt with Lenny, the carriage

driver.

She took Tom's little hand in hers and listened to his stream of morning chatter, which was mostly recapping the activities of the day before. "Can we go the park again, *Mademoiselle*? Can we?"

"Tom, it was Papa who took us to the park, you'll have to ask him," Rosie said with great authority.

"That's true," she said.

Tom raced into the dining room but then slowed down shyly when he arrived at his father's side. The Colonel put down his paper and looked at his son. "Good morning, Tom."

Tom ducked his head a bit. Then he turned around and ran back to her side,

grasping her hand to pull her with him to face his father. She protested a bit, but allowed the boy to drag her. When they arrived at his side he looked up, expectantly. Tom wrapped his little arms around her leg and hung on tightly. “Is there something you wanted to ask your father, Tom?” she prompted.

Tom looked up at her for help.

“Go on. Ask him. Or else go have a seat for breakfast.” She wasn't about to help him out by making any request of the Colonel. She didn't want him to think it was her begging a favor, nor did she want the children to use her as a buffer between themselves and their father. Tom stood there a moment longer, but

then he turned around and pulled her back to sit at the table. She could hardly blame the child—she certainly had no courage when it came to facing that stern face of the Colonel, either. Did the man ever smile? She sat down gingerly, trying not to wince at the soreness from her strapping and praying above all that no one else at the table was watching her.

Miss Watson and Mrs. James were seated and the toast and marmalade was on the table already. A kitchen maid carried in a covered plate of poached eggs and set it in front of the Colonel. When he passed it to her, Mandy couldn't meet his eye—instead she focused intently on the plate of eggs,

which she used to serve the children and then herself.

Trying to recover from her fluster, she asked the children in French, “Where do our napkins go?”

“I know!” Rosie said, whisking hers to her lap. Tom did not appear to have understood the French.

“*Le serviette? Le serviette, Tom?*” she prompted him. Rosie leaned over and helped him and she gave the little girl a wink. As she turned back to her plate, she saw the Colonel regarding her with a warm look, but as she caught his eye his expression turned wooden again.

“There's a public ball tonight at North Park, Charles, will you take us?”

Miss Watson asked. The Colonel looked at his sister's eager face.

“Yes,” he said briefly, then returned to eating. He was certainly a man of few words, which perhaps explained why his sister used enough for both of them. She was chattering on to Mrs. James about which dress she was going to wear.

“You will dance with Miss Binghamton first,” she said to her brother, referring to her friend, an empty-headed snobbish girl who Mandy couldn't stand. Miss Watson went on, “She's been absolutely pining for your return and she told me she is hoping you will dance with her.”

The Colonel did not appear to be

listening.

“Charles?” she said sharply. “You’ll dance with Miss Binghamton first, won’t you?”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “My plan was to ask Miss Downy for the first dance,” he said simply.

Her heart stopped and she felt her face grow hot. She had not been invited to attend balls with Miss Watson in the past. She dared a glance at his face, but he was looking at his sister.

Miss Watson looked incredulous. “Oh. Are you coming, Miss Downy?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know,” she said, feeling awkward.

“Why wouldn't you?” the Colonel asked bluntly.

“Well, I haven't been invited, exactly,” she said, keeping the sour from her voice.

The Colonel's glance flicked to his sister and she thought she detected censure. “You're invited,” he said impassively.

“Well, all right,” she said, secretly pleased twice over—first, because Miss Watson was finally being shown proper manners by her brother (as a lady and not a servant, she should have been invited along to balls with them all along), and second, that the Colonel wished a dance with her, though the

thought of it was as frightening as it was exciting.

She thought of nothing other than the ball all day. She was completely distracted from giving lessons to her charges. She listened to Rosie read with only half an ear, sometimes failing to correct her mistakes and when Tom grew bored of the arithmetic lesson she was teaching, she relented too easily and took the children outside for a walk instead. She alternated between worrying about how she could possibly dance with Colonel Watson after what had passed between them the night before, and rejoicing that she would finally have a chance to interact in society again. She spent a lot of time

considering what she should wear to the ball, and whether this might be the opportunity to meet a proper suitor.

That evening, she put on one of her best dresses—a lavender silk—and pinned the front of her long chestnut brown hair up, allowing the back of it to fall down in thick waves. She peered in the only tiny looking glass she had and pinched her cheeks. She and her sister had their mother's face—pale skin with gray eyes. Their father used to say they looked like china dolls. But her favorite feature was her hair—her mother and sister both had finer, light brown hair, but she had inherited her father's dark thick mane. She made sure the front was

pinned back securely and went downstairs to wait for the rest of them in the sitting room. Miss Watson and Mrs. James came giggling in, all dressed up in their fine clothes.

Miss Watson surveyed her with a critical eye. "That's a pretty dress. Too bad it's in last year's fashion."

"That was rude, Lucinda," a quiet male voice said from behind them. The Colonel breezed past them to open the door, holding his arm out to usher them onto the street where the carriage was waiting. They squeezed in, with Miss Watson sitting next to Mrs. James and she next to the Colonel. She found herself looking at his long thigh, conjecturing that it must be strong and

muscled like his chest. She felt the anticipation growing for their dance together, and was almost wishing he hadn't already said he would ask her, because she was becoming more and more nervous about it as the moments passed. How on earth could she spend an entire thirty minutes in contact with the Colonel, her employer who had bent her over his desk and strapped her raw only the night before?

* * *

Greeting members of the *ton* was not his favorite thing. Unfortunately, having been absent from it for a year, everyone seemed to want his attention.

Though he had asked Miss Downy to dance at breakfast, there was no time to sign her card because she disappeared and before he knew it, he'd been roped into signing away the first three dances to young ladies whose overbearing mothers or sisters wielded their influence upon him. The first lady was Lucinda's choice for him, the profoundly empty-headed Miss Binghamton.

As he danced with her, he caught sight of Miss Downy standing off by the refreshment table as if trying to be inconspicuous. The poor lady knew no one. His sister had been a dreadful hostess to their governess, not inviting her to the balls or to socialize.

Miss Binghamton was turning on all

the charm, smiling and batting her eyelashes. From what he could tell, Lucinda was doing much of the same, acting as outrageously flirtatious as a girl could. He was utterly shocked by it and it made him angry with Mrs. James, whose chaperone duties came first and foremost as the young lady's paid companion. How could she think this sort of behavior was acceptable? He prayed no scandal had occurred around Lucinda or her behavior while he was gone.

When the dance was over he went to find Miss Downy where she was still standing, sipping on a cup of punch. "There you are. Are you hiding back

here?" he said, coming up from behind her.

Startled, she jumped, spilling a bit of her punch on the front of her dress. "Oh no," she moaned, and he pitied her, knowing how much these sorts of things mattered to young ladies at balls. He handed her his handkerchief, which only served to discombobulate her more. She dabbed at the punch without any real effect and handed it back to him with a sigh. He tore his eyes away from the bust of her gown where the punch had spilled, tamping down a resurgence of lust that swelled in him.

"I haven't had the opportunity to sign your card yet. Although I don't believe you ever said whether you

would dance with me this morning,” he said, watching a pretty color bloom in her cheeks.

“Oh, I—” She looked flustered. “I don't know...” she said uncertainly.

He held out his arm. “I insist,” he said.

She smiled just a little and shrugged. “You're the master,” she said lightly and he chuckled, delighted to note that she had a sense of humor. On the dance floor though, she neither said a word, nor looked at him and he would swear she was blushing the entire time. It was actually quite charming. Her innocence was sweet, though some devil part of him had ideas of educating it

right out of her.

“I hope that my punishing you does not preclude you from ever looking me in the eye again,” he said with a hint of teasing.

She jerked her head up to meet his eyes in surprise. “Perhaps just until I can sit again,” she countered wryly.

He chuckled again at her charm. “All right, I guess I can live with that.” He looked around the ballroom, searching for something else to say. His eyes came to rest on his sister and he watched her for several moments. “Is my sister always so... flirtatious with the men?”

Miss Downy glanced at Lucinda and then looked uncertain. “The *truth*,

Miss Downy,” he said with a bit of warning in his voice to remind her of the promise she'd made him the night before. It made her blush prettily again.

“Yes, I believe so,” she said reluctantly.

He nodded. “I have been away for too long,” he said.

“How long until you must leave again?” she asked.

“I've retired, actually,” he said. “Of course, I thought I had retired last time and then I was called back to duty to aid in the Anglo-Burmese War.”

“Is it resolved, then? The Burmese war?”

He shook his head. “No, but I did

my part. They needed help with training and strategy. I promised them a year and no more.”

“I see,” she said.

“I think, perhaps, it was a mistake to leave home,” he said.

She looked up at him inquiringly. “I don't think Mrs. James has proved to be a suitable companion to my sister, and the governess before you did not work out,” he sighed. “Clearly my lawyer did not take his duties in hiring you seriously, else he would have discovered you had falsified your references.”

Her face grew very red at that and she dropped her eyes, looking angry.

His heart contracted. He hadn't

meant to humiliate her. “Not that I'm unhappy with his choice,” he said, trying to relieve her embarrassment.

Her jaw clenched.

“—at all. I'm happy with his mistake,” he said carefully. “I only meant to say that business was not conducted as I should have liked it.”

She purposely looked away from him.

Damn. He had not meant to offend her.

The music ended at that moment. “Thank you for the dance,” she mumbled without looking at him, detaching herself and moving quickly away.

* * *

Mandy headed to the sitting room, relieved to escape her horrible employer. She was not going to make it through her probationary period. The man was impossible. To think that he had whipped her like the lowest of the staff and now was rubbing it in her face! What she needed to do was start applying for another position now, so that she had options if he decided not to keep her on. Yes, she would ask to borrow his newspaper the following day and check the notices for another governess position. That resolution made her feel marginally better. Thinking she might get a little fresh air, she was headed to the doorway when

she heard her name being called out.

“Miss Downy?” a male voice said.

She turned, puzzled. Although she knew the gentlemen callers who visited Miss Watson, she was not sure they would remember her name enough to call it out at a ball. She looked back and then recognized Mr. Bartlby, from the carriage accident.

“Mr. Bartlby, how nice to see you,” she lied. The truth was, she would have been happy to never see him again. It was his liquor that had loosened her tongue and made her say so many things she would not have told anyone. And she had no interest in facing the recipient of her innermost secrets at that moment, or ever, for that matter.

“The pleasure is all mine. May I have this dance?”

“Actually, I was just going to get a bit of air,” she said.

“Then I will join you,” he said.

At that, she panicked. She certainly had no intention of walking on the terrace with Mr. Bartlby. “On second thought, a dance sounds nice,” she managed, reaching for his arm. He beamed a smile at her and led her to the dance floor. She saw the Colonel, who was dancing with a very beautiful young woman and thought darkly that the girl was far too young for him. As they passed each other on the dance floor she felt his gaze on her, taking in her dancing

partner with that same inscrutable look he always wore. She felt shame remembering that the Colonel had witnessed her disgraceful drinking and open talking with this man. After the dance, she refused another, but couldn't seem to shake her suitor. He followed her to the tables and stayed by her side for the remainder of the evening.

“Say, isn't that the Colonel—from our carriage?” Bartlby asked.

“Yes,” she said dully. She did not want to tell him that the Colonel had ended up being her employer, but it was probably silly to hide the truth. “As it turned out, the Colonel is my employer.”

He looked at her, his eyes widening as he surely realized what a gaffe she

had made. "No!" he said in a scandalized tone. Clearly he loved the drama of it all. He leaned in conspiratorially. "So what did he say?"

She wasn't about to tell him or anyone that the Colonel had bent her over his desk and applied a leather strap to her bare backside. "Well, he wasn't happy. But he decided to keep me, on a probationary period."

"That was lucky," Bartlby said.

"Yes." At that moment, she saw the Colonel looking pointedly at her from the across the room, signaling silently that he was ready to go. Miss Watson and Mrs. James were standing near him and he had a look of annoyance on his

face.

“Oh! It looks like it's time for me to go!” she said, jumping to her feet. “It was nice to see you, Mr. Bartlby.”

“The pleasure was mine. Wait—may I call on you?” he called after her as she rushed away.

“I'm sorry, I have to go now!” she called rudely over her shoulder.

The Colonel's face was stone. Miss Watson and Mrs. James seemed a trifle subdued themselves. They were all nearly silent on the carriage ride back.

Feeling restless and disturbed, she checked on the children before she retired. Lying in bed, she listened to the sound of voices and footsteps that gradually quieted as the house settled

down. Then she heard the low rumble of a male voice coming from one of the rooms in her corridor—which didn't belong—the Colonel's bedroom was at the other end. She listened closer and thought she heard someone crying out. It seemed to be coming from Miss Watson's room. Thunderstruck, her first scandalized thought was that Miss Watson had a man in there with her. But who? And how? Her heart picked up as she wondered if she ought to inform the Colonel. But listening intently, she realized instead that she was hearing noises that ought to be familiar to her after her ordeal the night before—the sound of leather slapping bare flesh and

the cries of a young lady being punished.
The Colonel was whipping his sister.

She realized with dismay that if she could hear Lucinda's punishment, there was a good chance that her own had been heard by the household the night before. That thought was completely mortifying. Her thoughts strayed again to that painful and intense interaction. She felt a flare of heat low in her belly and a shiver ran down her spine, remembering the scene. There was something about the Colonel's willingness to wield his authority with a leather strap that some traitorous part of her found extremely arousing. It was diametrically opposed to the part of her that found it absolutely barbaric. Well, he was a military man,

after all. She imagined him in Burma, giving orders to troops of men. Had there been women under his authority there? The thought made her sear with jealousy.

She allowed her fingers to wander between her legs, touching herself slowly, surprised to feel more wetness there than she had ever noticed before. She drew in a ragged breath and thought of the feel of the Colonel's muscled chest under her cheek, of that warm, sure hand at the nape of her neck. What if he had punished *her* in her own chamber? Right here on this bed? She kicked the covers off her body, feeling suddenly feverish with heat. Her fingers dipped deeply

into her slick folds, probing the eager opening there. She rolled over onto her belly and pulled her nightshirt up, exposing her bare bottom to the open air. She imagined herself lying prostrate before him, her quivering flesh expecting the cruel sting of his strap. She pushed her hips into the bed, her middle and fourth fingers breaching the entry to her sex, diving deeply as the heel of her hand undulated over the sensitive area above it. How would he comfort her after a whipping in her bedroom? With a hand on her back? On the backs of her exposed legs? *On her bottom?* She stopped her breath as a climax rocked through her and she squeezed her legs together, pumping her hips over her hand

and tightening her still-tender cheeks so that they ached in the most pleasurable way possible. She remained frozen like that for a long moment, panting, dazed. Then she slowly relaxed and released her cramped fingers, ashamed at where her thoughts had just led her.

Chapter Three

“We will be moving to the country house tomorrow, ladies, so please pack your things and plan accordingly,” the Colonel announced at breakfast the following morning. He was determined to get his household in order. He had punished Lucinda the night before for her scandalous behavior at the ball, and now he was going to remove her from London for a time, until he could be certain she could act as a lady should.

“What?” Lucinda protested in a shocked voice. “Charles, no! There's nothing to do in the country, no dances, no one to call upon—nothing!”

“Mind yourself, Lucinda,” he said warningly, and she had the grace to flush. Miss Downy stared at him with her big, pretty gray eyes and Mrs. James looked flummoxed. When breakfast was over, he cleared his throat. “Mrs. James, in my office, please.”

She followed him in and he indicated a chair. This woman was not an employee worth punishing. He let her know how disappointed he was in her service and summarily dismissed her. The woman burst into tears and rushed out of the room. Next, he made sure all of the household staff knew to make preparations for their departure.

By the middle of the following day,

he had successfully relocated his family to their country manor, and felt satisfied that it was exactly where they needed to be. When everyone was settled in, he walked out to the stables, eager to see the horses he hadn't seen since he left the country. He was surprised to see that he was not the first member of the household to visit the stables.

“Miss Downy!”

She gasped and whirled around, looking uncomfortable.

“Are you fond of riding?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, a bit flustered. “Your horses are beautiful.”

He smiled. He liked the way she'd said the word “beautiful”—she had a breathy quality to her voice that made

his blood rush. And when she spoke French... he brought himself back to focus on the horses. "Yes, I'm quite proud of all of them." He considered her. She probably could ride as well as she could do anything. She certain had had an excellent upbringing. "How well do you ride?"

"Well enough," she said modestly. "Quite well, I suppose. Will you permit me to ride?" She was always cautious with him and on one hand, he appreciated the respect, while on the other, he'd love to see more of that natural charm he had glimpsed at the ball, before he'd angered her. She glanced up at him and their gazes locked

—her unusual gray eyes holding his captive so that heat flooded his senses.

He took a step closer to her. “Of course, you are welcome to ride anytime.”

She smiled at him—a slow, sweet, grateful smile that lit up her face. “Thank you, Colonel. Do the children ride?”

He shook his head. “Regretfully, no. I haven't been around to teach them myself, and I haven't trusted it to anyone else.”

“Perhaps you will find I am trustworthy,” she said.

“Perhaps so. Though I am happily not leaving them again.”

“Right, of course,” she said quickly. “Quite so.”

“Would you care to go for a ride now?”

“Now?” she was surprised. “Well... yes, I'd love to!” Her smile was breathtaking. He felt suddenly that there was nothing he wouldn't do to see that look on her face more often. Pleasing Miss Downy had just jumped to the top of his priorities.

He gave the stable boy orders about which horses to saddle, and soon they were trotting off. Miss Downy rode side saddle on Pina, the pinto mare, and he on Banto, a large brown steed. She followed as he led slowly at first, pointing out landmarks, giving her a tour of his family property. He'd grown up

here and loved it deeply. He found he wanted to show her all of it—the small stream that gurgled through, the outskirts of the dense wooded area to one side. The lush meadow, speckled with wildflowers. He was gratified by her appreciation of everything, her periodic murmurs of “how lovely!” or “look at that!” and the way her thick waves of hair bounced as she rode.

He breathed in the country air and relaxed into the gentle lope of his horse. Even Miss Downy was relaxing into the ride. He had never seen her look so comfortable and content... not that he'd known her for long.

He picked up the pace to a gallop on the way back, and asked her to lead

because he liked to watch her ride. She cantered off, tossing her thick glossy hair, a natural smile of joy stretching her face. His pleasure turned to fear, though, when she urged the mare over a series of jumps. Though she took them expertly, his veins had filled with ice and it was not until she had executed them all flawlessly that he relaxed in the saddle again.

Back at the stables she dismounted, a healthy glow in her cheeks and a happy expression on her face.

He dismounted and grasped her by the shoulders. "Miss Downy, if you ever scare me like that again, I will bend you over my knee and spank you raw!"

Miss Downy stared at him in amazement. Her cheeks colored but her mouth twitched as if she were hiding a smile.

“Colonel Watson, did you think I was in danger?”

He shook his head grudgingly. “No. Clearly you're an excellent rider. But *warn* me next time before you go showing off like that!”

Her face broke into a broad, beautiful smile and her eyes danced on his face. “I suppose I was showing off a bit,” she admitted. “But I assure you I do not take unnecessary risks.”

“See that you don't. Especially where my children are concerned,” he

said, more gruffly than he meant to.

Her smile faded and she curtsied. “Of course, Colonel,” she murmured, tension closing her expression. She turned and walked swiftly back to the manor.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, cursing his talent at offending his governess. It was for the best—maintaining an appropriate distance from her was only proper. Except why, then, was he so disappointed at losing her smile?

Supper that evening was a tense affair. Lucinda was seething about the move to the country, which he had expected. She didn't like being taken away from London and having her

companion dismissed any more than she liked getting spanked for her behavior at the ball. He needed to connect with her in a positive way, but hadn't had a chance yet.

At the moment, she was watching Tom struggle to butter his bread with a look of impatience. She snapped at Miss Downy, "Why on earth aren't you helping that poor child?"

"Because he gains dexterity by doing, not watching," Miss Downy replied evenly.

Miss Watson had nothing to say to that, other than to sniff, which made Miss Downy frown. When the governess remarked that the chicken cordon bleu

was excellent, Lucinda pounced again. “I suppose, being half French, you know how to cook dishes like these?” she asked condescendingly. Miss Downy didn't miss the barb, which was meant to point out her lower status as someone who had to cook her own food.

“Actually,” she contradicted, “I was not raised to cook. We had servants for that.”

“Oh really? How strange it must be for you to be working now.”

That was probably too close to the truth not to hurt, and Miss Downy's jaw clenched as her ears colored, and her eyes dropped to her plate.

He gave Lucinda a cold gaze. They were going to have to have another

“talk.”

* * *

“I’ve just put the children to sleep,” Julie said, poking her head through Mandy’s door. “Jane and I were going to meet in the cellar for a bit of girl talk if you want to join us.”

Girl talk? She wasn’t sure what that entailed, but it sounded better than sitting in her room alone. She closed her book and smiled. “Thanks, I’d love to,” she said, following Julie out.

She had never been to the cellar before, but it was clear that it was the place where the staff could relax, away from the eyes of their master. It was

clean and comfortable—crates had been set up as chairs and there was a jug of ale and glasses. Jane, one of the kitchen staff, was pouring the ale as they came down and she stopped short when she saw Mandy.

“I invited Miss Downy to join us,” Julie explained, brushing her mop of strawberry blond curls away from her face.

Jane gave her a curious look but then smiled broadly.

“Welcome, Miss Downy. Ale for you?”

“Thank you for the welcome. And no, thank you, on the ale,” she said, hoping she would not come off as too stiff and starting to feel like she really

should not have come. If she considered herself a lady and not a servant, what was she doing passing time with the servants?

“Violet's coming too. Should be here by now.”

As if on cue, the cellar door opened and Violet, the chamber maid, traipsed down the stairs with a broad smile. She also stopped in her tracks when she caught sight of Mandy and Julie was forced to explain her presence once again.

“So, why do you think the rush to get out of London, eh?” Violet asked once she'd been reassured that Mandy was in their inner circle.

“I think Miss Watson must've got herself into some kind of trouble. Do you think that's true, Miss Downy?”

Mandy's belly tightened. She felt distinctly uncomfortable about gossiping about the family. She shook her head. “No. I don't think there's any trouble.”

“Well, can you believe it about Mrs. James?” Julie prodded.

“Served her right,” Violent declared. “She was never anything but nasty to me.”

“I agree. She was a right old cunt,” Jane said stoutly.

Mandy tried to hide her shock at the language her ears had never been permitted to hear before.

The sense of anxiety she'd had since the ale had first been passed was growing stronger with this sort of talk. She was on probation, after all. What would the Colonel think of her participating in this little conversation?

“What do you think of the Colonel, Miss Downy? You'd never met him before had you?” Julie prodded.

To her chagrin, she felt as though her cheeks might be turning pink. “I... I don't really know what to think yet,” she stammered.

“He's handsome, isn't he?”

“Oh well, yes, if you like stiff military man who never smile,” she said, sounding more cranky than she meant to.

The girls giggled. “He used to smile, back when Mrs. Watson was still alive,” Violet said.

That made Mandy feel even crankier. “Oh really?” she asked stiffly. “What was Mrs. Watson like?”

“Oh she was delightful. Quite charming—always thanked us and told us how great a job we were doing. She was the type of lady you work hard to please because she makes you feel like you're doing her a special favor.”

Mandy felt she disliked the perfect Mrs. Watson. “How did she die?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

“She took a fever two years back,” Julie said.

“And was the Colonel quite distressed?”

“Oh aye. Devastated, he was. Poor man. He hasn't been the same since, I'd say, wouldn't you, Jane?” Violet said. “Will you pass the ale?”

Mandy picked up the jug of ale and slopped a little passing it over. *Dear Lord*. She really needed to get herself out of here.

“Well I, for one, hope we don't stay in the country for too long. I like London,” Julie said.

“You like flirting with your carriage driver!” Jane teased.

“Oh I doubt it will be too long before we head back. Miss Watson will

complain to 'igh 'eaven 'bout how bored she is without her balls and parties to attend.”

“I'm not sure the decisions are up to Miss Watson anymore,” Mandy heard herself say tartly, though she regretted it immediately. Joining in this gossip was unbecoming.

The others laughed. “Right you are,” Julie said with a smirk. “I imagine that's why he's dragging us all to the country, isn't it?”

She didn't want to confirm it and she hid the smirk that threatened to twist her lips. “Well, I'm feeling a bit sleepy,” she said, hoping for the opportunity to extricate herself without giving offense. “If you will excuse me?”

“Oh sure, thanks for joining us!” Jane said.

“Good night,” the other two chorused.

She got up and gave them all a friendly smile before she headed up the stairs, hoping it didn't look like she was rushing. She opened the door to the kitchen, only to find the Colonel standing there with a piece of bread and jam in his hand. She stifled a gasp, praying he had not overheard her gossiping.

* * *

“Where have you been, Miss Downy?” She had just emerged from the cellar steps wearing a distinct look of

guilt on her face.

She sucked in her breath. “In the cellar, having a word with Julie,” she said quickly.

He could smell ale on her. “Have you been drinking?” he demanded, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“Certainly not!” she retorted, drawing herself up.

Her indignation seemed truthful. He looked at her closely. “You smell of ale.”

“Oh...” She looked flustered and glanced down at her dress. “I... I guess I spilled a little on my dress,” she stammered.

He pursed his lips. “Who else is down there?”

She hesitated and looked like she didn't want to tell him.

“You promised me the truth, remember?”

She nodded and swallowed. “Violet and Jane,” she confessed. His house staff. Probably down there gossiping about the family. He was disappointed that Miss Downy would join them. Actually, he was surprised to find that he felt almost hurt about it.

“Tell me again what *y o u* were doing down there,” he said grimly.

She took a deep breath and then spoke in a rush. “Well, Julie stopped by my room after putting the children to sleep and invited me down. I agreed—I

didn't really know what to expect. I quickly realized my mistake but it took me a little bit to extricate myself politely.” She gave him a pleading look, which melted all his irritation.

He hid a smile. “I see,” he said mildly. “Then I don't need to tell you that it is entirely unseemly for you to be in my cellar with the staff?”

“No, no. Not at all. I understand that completely, Colonel, and I apologize.” She looked relieved.

“Very well. Good night.” Somehow, as she turned to go, his hand moved of its own accord to deliver a sharp slap on her backside. He froze, realizing that he certainly should *not* have done that. She had frozen, too, but

did not turn to look at him. She started toward the door, only turning back when she reached it. “Did you require assistance in the kitchen? Shall I make you a cup of tea?” she asked.

He could feel his ears growing hot. “Thank you, Miss Downy, that won't be necessary,” he said stiffly.

She curtsied, and he could swear he saw a slight smirk playing on her lips as she turned to go. He sat down at the table and put his head in his hands. What on earth had caused him to do such a thing?

* * *

“The weather actually looks nice

enough to walk today,” Miss Watson observed at the breakfast table.

Mandy felt like rolling her eyes. Miss Watson only went outside when the weather was the perfect temperature—not too hot, not too cold, no wind, no clouds that looked like they might rain. “Are you sure?” she intoned, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice. “I think there might be *one* tiny cloud in the sky.”

She couldn't help it. Her sensitivity to Miss Watson's moods had increased since they'd arrived at the country manor and now she found herself readily at the defense every time the lady opened her mouth. Indeed, between being on the defense of Miss Watson's barbs and trying to avoid any criticism from the

impossible-to-please Colonel, she was becoming quite high strung herself.

Her only escape was in walking and she took advantage of being in the country by going on long, solitary walks in the afternoons, enjoying the fresh air and nature. She had received a letter from her sister Anne that day, forwarded from the London apartment. Though Anne didn't complain, she could read between the lines enough to know that she was not happy at all in her new position. She sounded extremely lonely and homesick. Mandy had been more resolved than ever that she should have employment in case her sister's did not last, so she'd sent off a few letters of

inquiry about governess positions. If the Colonel was going to dismiss her after her probationary period, she needed to have options.

As she walked that afternoon, the sky grew overcast. The Colonel had said at lunch that she ought to skip her walk in case of rain, but determined to have her only peace, she'd gone anyway. Now it seemed he had been right. She hunched her shoulders as the first drops began to fall. She was still a long way from the house. When the rain started to fall steadily, she stopped and huddled under a tree to wait for the precipitation to abate. Instead, the sky opened up in a drenching downpour, and the tree she'd chosen to huddle under offered little

protection. With a sigh, she gave up trying to avoid getting wet and started walking again, keeping her head ducked under the pelting drops. The sound of the rain hitting the tree leaves and the puddles on the ground was so loud that she didn't notice a horse and rider approaching until they had ridden right up to her.

“Miss Downy!”

She looked up in surprise.

“Colonel!”

He reined in the stallion and turned the large horse around so that his left side faced her.

“What are you doing, riding in the rain?” she asked in astonishment.

“Looking for you!” he exclaimed and she felt a rush of guilt that he had felt it necessary to come and rescue her. She should have listened to his advice on the weather. Would he hold it against her that she hadn't?

He reached down and caught her around the waist, easily lifting her to sit side-saddle in front of him. His strength took her breath away—he was a large, muscular man. She sat stiffly, too surprised to speak. His arm was wrapped around her waist, his left knee supporting her legs. He drew her closer to him. She had never been so close to a man in her life. But that wasn't true—there was the time when he held her after

the whipping. And when he'd protected her from falling rubble during the carriage accident. Thinking of both those incidents gave her an unusual fluttering feeling in her low belly.

“You're freezing!” he accused.

She was shivering—there was no denying it. She stammered, “No, I'm fine. But thank you for coming for me, I am truly grateful.” She didn't feel courageous enough to look over her shoulder at him, considering how close his face was to hers.

“You're welcome. Curses, you're really cold. I should have brought your cloak. Here, lean into me and see if you can't gain some warmth that way.”

Slowly, uncertainly, she leaned her

back against his large chest, relaxing into his form and the motion of the stallion as he loped back. Her wet dress and petticoat stuck to her skin, providing no barrier at all to the heat of his flesh, which felt exceptionally warm against her chilled back.

“Is that better?” he asked, his mouth so close to her ear that she could feel the heat of his breath. His voice was low and rumbling. She had found it gruff before, but now it seemed deeply masculine—the embodiment of male strength and virility.

“Yes,” she managed to say, realizing she left the “sir” off and wondering why it sounded so right. His

arms felt solid and strong encircling her as they supported her and guided the horse at the same time. It was an odd feeling—despite the awkwardness of riding in such close quarters with a man she should not be so near, she felt comfortable—safe and cared for, somehow.

At dinner that night, Miss Watson chided her for walking. “I can't believe you went for a walk when you knew it might rain.”

“Not all of us feel like sulking about in our rooms all day just because we're in the country and not with the London *ton*,” she snapped. She had spent a cozy afternoon drinking chocolate and watching the rain run down the windows

with the children, but now Miss Watson's words nettled her.

“Enough.” The Colonel gave the command softly, hardly looking up from his plate, but it had the effect of freezing her in her place. Her eyes flew to his. He gazed back with a tired expression.

“Forgive me,” she murmured.

When the meal was finished, the Colonel said, “Miss Downy, in my study please.”

Her heart quickened. Was he angry that she'd walked when he'd warned her not to? Or was it about snapping at his sister? Dread prickled across her skin as she followed him into his study.

It was much like the study in his

London apartment, and a massive oversized walnut desk stood in the middle, with two wooden chairs facing it. There was a velvet covered settee and a plush sitting chair off to the right. He sat down behind his desk and indicated that she should sit in one of the chairs across from him. She sank into the seat, fidgeting with her silver locket and looking at him expectantly.

He just sat and regarded her for a moment. Then he said, “Miss Downy, I realize that you were not welcomed with the appropriate level of warmth and friendliness by my sister during my absence.”

She was stunned. She had never expected any acknowledgment of the

kind.

“I was hoping that she would come to it on her own, but if it would make you feel better, I will require her to apologize to you.”

“Oh, I—uh, no, that won't be necessary,” she stammered, feeling her face grow hot. She suddenly felt quite silly for harboring resentments. She remembered how she'd complained that night of the carriage accident, and felt certain the Colonel remembered her bitterness.

“I want you to know that I have spoken to Lucinda about her behavior.” He was silent a moment, regarding her. She opened her mouth to thank him, but

he waved her to silence. “She has been making an effort all week, but now it seems to me that *you* may be the problem.”

Mandy found she couldn't breathe. She felt a wash of hot and cold run through her body. She could not speak.

“Living with the two of you has become unpleasant for me. I can't enjoy my meals in peace without feeling tension and hearing waspish comments. It must stop. *Immediately*. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Yes, sir,” she choked, her mouth feeling dry, disappointed that she had displeased her employer again.

“Good.” He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a ruler. *Oh no.*

Her eyes widened, fearing she knew what he had in mind. “I spanked Lucinda and I'm going to spank you, too,” he said matter-of-factly.

She would have gasped if she were able to breathe at all. Instead she made a tiny little squeaking noise. The Colonel stood up and walked calmly to the settee, where he sat down.

Chapter Four

“Come here, Miss Downy.”

Miss Downy had stood when he did, but now looked as though she were rooted to the spot as she stared at his position on the couch, probably realizing that he expected her to lie across his lap for her spanking. She made another tiny unintelligible sound.

“Come. Now,” he said firmly.

She obeyed him, walking over and stopping to stand before him, looking doubtful. He offered her his hand and guided her across his lap, helping her situate a small pillow under her upper body for comfort. He pulled up her skirt

and petticoat and blinked, overcome by the urge to caress the soft skin underneath them. He squeezed his eyes closed and shoved the thought firmly away, arranging the skirts in a business-like manner, out of the way.

He could sense that she was holding her breath, her entire body stiff, listening. He was starting to regret having her over his lap. He'd chosen it because he meant for the punishment to be mild, but she wasn't his wife and this position put her so very close to him, her soft flesh pressing against his hard thighs in an intoxicating manner. It was impossible to be unmoved by the sensuousness curves presented precisely

for his chastisement. In fact, it was pure, delicious agony.

Well, all he could do was mete out the punishment as properly as possible and get it behind them. He picked up the wide wooden ruler and brought it down sharply across the low center of both her cheeks. He continued striking, watching as she flinched and squeezed her cheeks together. He brought the ruler down in the same place a dozen or so times, knowing it would really cause the burn to set in. The lovely governess was really squirming, still squeezing her cheeks and trying to hold herself stiff as a board.

He paused and gripped her bare thigh—the one closest to him—and

pulled it toward him, parting her legs so he had better access to strike the tender flesh there. She gasped and he realized she must feel quite vulnerable with her thighs parted, as it showed the sweet little pink slit of her sex. He paused to take in its full glory. *Oh Lord.* He shook his head and tried to clear it, bringing the ruler down on the back of her thigh.

He brought it down again and again, trying to ignore the way his body was responding to the beautiful sight of her bared and undulating bottom. She wriggled and writhed in a vain attempt to get away from his stinging blows. He held her waist firmly, but her hips still managed to dance about, bucking and

twisting as she cried out. Her wriggling over his manhood was unfortunately causing him to become more than a little aroused.

Like an idiot, he stole another peek at her sweet little sex and could swear he saw moisture glistening there. Her writhing stilled and he feared that she could feel the stiffened member below her. He pushed her hips away from his, moving her closer to his knees, where she was not as stable. His arm couldn't hold her waist as securely this way and he knew that she could probably throw herself off his legs if she wanted. He brought the ruler down on her reddened bottom even harder and faster now, hoping to distract her from his arousal.

Or distract himself by applying himself to his task. *Or something.*

When her bottom had turned a deep red, he stopped. He wanted to rub those cheeks for her, to show his appreciation for the way she submitted to her spanking, but of course that wouldn't be proper. Instead, he smoothed her skirts back down and lifted her to standing, then guided her to sit next to him on the couch. She had shed a few tears, but more than anything she appeared completely flustered. She hissed a bit as her full weight came to rest on her tender backside. He handed her his handkerchief, which she used with enthusiasm, hiding her face from him.

He thought he saw her eyes dart a glance at his lap, but fortunately, he'd distracted himself enough that his shaft was no longer tenting his pants. They sat stiffly next to one another as she recovered her ragged breathing. He turned to her and cupped her chin, lifting her face to his. She looked terribly vulnerable as she met his eyes and it emptied him of any sternness—real or feigned. He wanted to hold her and comfort her and tell her she was forgiven. But again, he couldn't.

“From now on, if I hear either you or Miss Watson snipe at the other, I will bend you *both* over my desk and strap you soundly. Is that clear?” The words

he spoke were stern, but his tone was quite mild; he couldn't bring himself to treat her harshly.

She nodded quickly. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Go on, then," he said gently.

He watched her go and then leaned his head back on the couch with a groan, the image of her squirming bottom, her parted thighs, and her sweet, delicate sex seared forever in his mind.

* * *

At lunch several days later, the Colonel handed her a letter. At first she thought it might be a job offer from the letters of inquiry she had sent out, but

instead it was from her cousin Joseph Belford, the relative who had taken over her father's estate without helping her family in the slightest. She felt that familiar ire rise in her as she opened the letter.

Dear Miss Watson,

I am writing to you, as you seemed to be the only female in your family capable of handling any business affairs. I believe I have given you enough time to come to some arrangement for the remainder of the property belonging to your mother; namely, the pieces of furniture and the two ponies that you requested I not sell. I simply cannot continue to board

your ponies here at Helmcamp. It is absurd that you should have requested such a thing. Likewise, we have moved the furniture into the old stable, but cannot continue to keep it either, as we will be purchasing new horses and will require the use of both stables.

If you cannot collect these belongings within the next two weeks, I will sell them and send you the proceeds. Please respond at once.

Sincerely,

Joseph R. Belford

Mandy blew her breath out with a huff, her hand squeezing the letter so

tightly that it began to crumple. She pressed her lips tightly together and blinked back the tears burning in her eyes, her mind whirling with angry thoughts. The Colonel's outstretched hand appeared before her, and without thinking, she handed him the letter. Then she started, realizing what she'd done, and looked at him with dismay. She should not allow her personal problems to appear to affect her ability to conduct herself professionally.

The Colonel read it in silence, then stretched out his hand for the envelope. Again, she found herself automatically handing it to him. He studied the return address. "I would guess this is a half-day's drive from here," he said,

considering her. "We'll go tomorrow."

She looked at him, stunned. "Wh-what?"

He nodded definitively. "We'll go and get your furniture and ponies and bring them here."

Tears filled her eyes and spilled over before she could stop them. She dashed at them with the back of her hand, completely overcome. "Colonel Watson—" she brushed at her tears again and swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thank you, sir," she managed.

"It is nothing," he said dismissively. "Let's eat, shall we?" he said, waving to the table.

The following day, true to his

word, he called for the carriage as well as an empty wagon, hitched to a second team of horses. They set off, the two of them alone together on the journey to the home that was no longer hers. It did cross her mind that it was unseemly for her to travel unchaperoned with the Colonel, but then she immediately dismissed the thought. He was nothing if not of the utmost propriety, and there was the driver of both the carriage and the wagon attending them, so she was not truly alone with the man.

A variety of thoughts flitted through her head as they sat silently in the carriage. She remembered vividly the fateful carriage ride she'd first shared with the Colonel—the one which had

nearly ended in disaster. He'd not said more than a word or two on that ride, either. She hadn't liked him when he'd joined their carriage. He had seemed so very stuffy and formal and the atmosphere in the carriage had quickly become stifling.

But then he had been so very capable during the emergency, whilst she had acted like a little fool, drinking brandy and letting her tongue fly loosely. How different he seemed to her now that she knew him. She could see the kindness underneath the stern exterior, though in retrospect, she should have seen it that night, too.

She considered the way he had

wiped clear the debt of the advance she'd taken to visit her mother, how he'd come to collect her in the rain, and now this favor, which was overwhelming, really. He was giving her the day off, taking the trouble to personally escort her, providing his carriage and wagon, and offering to keep her furniture and ponies indefinitely. It was truly more than generous. It actually made her uncomfortable to think of him in this light. She'd preferred disliking him as the rigid military man who'd punished her at the end of a leather strap.

She studied the planes of his handsome face. He had a large, square jaw that seemed to go perfectly with his tall, imposing frame. His eyes were

dark, the same brown as his hair, which was generally well-kept.

He glanced up and caught her staring. Her breath hitched in her throat and she could not seem to make herself look away—as if her eyes were magnetized to his. A strand of his brown hair had fallen out of place and was hanging over one cheek and her hand actually lightened in her lap as if she were going to stroke it back. With great effort she wrenched her gaze away from his and stared out the window, praying she would not blush as she was prone to do.

They arrived at her family's former home by noon. It produced such an odd

mixture of emotions to return—joy at the familiar landscape and the memories, and pain at the reminder of her father's death and the knowledge that this property would never again be hers to enjoy. She closed her eyes and turned her head away from the window to find the Colonel's eyes resting on her face, with a look that vaguely resembled sympathy. She forced a bright smile. “We're here at last.”

“Indeed.” He looked out the carriage window. “No wonder you like my property so well.”

“What? Oh! Yes, the landscape is quite similar, isn't it?”

Mr. and Mrs. Belford both stepped out of the house after looking out the

window to see their arrival. Mr. Belford was a tall, arrogant man and his wife was a plump, high-strung, self-centered lady. They were both surprised to see the fine carriage and the two teams of horses arrive, complete with a wagon in tow. She smiled a little, thinking that they probably never dreamed she would be able to respond to their demands.

“Miss Downy!” Mrs. Belford exclaimed when the Colonel handed her out of the carriage. “What a surprise!”

She greeted them politely and introduced the Colonel as her employer. For once, she appreciated his cold demeanor, as it seemed to fluster the Belfords. “Won't you come in for

luncheon? The cook was just preparing some cold sandwiches, I believe.”

“Thank you, that would be delightful,” she said, though she really felt it would be anything but. Ever efficient, the Colonel asked Mr. Belford to send a servant to show the two drivers where to find the furniture for loading and to prepare the horses. At lunch the Colonel made polite conversation with Mr. Belford, and she was pleased to notice that Mr. Belford seemed properly impressed with him, having heard of his military career and his relations.

“I think it's quite generous of you to have taken on Miss Downy, considering her lack of experience,” Mrs. Belford

had the nerve to say.

Mandy clamped her teeth together. That wretched woman was trying to embarrass her. Not that she could possibly have known that Mandy had lied about her references... unless the neighbor who had vouched for her had told her. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she was filled with a sudden sense of loathing. They meant to embarrass her in front of the Colonel.

* * *

“I consider myself immensely fortunate to have hired someone as qualified and intelligent as Miss Downy. I can't imagine there's a better governess

to be had, frankly,” the Colonel interjected, irritated that Miss Downy's relatives would treat her so wretchedly.

He watched Miss Downy flush and flash him a look of gratitude, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. It made him even more angry to see how much his defense meant to her. Somehow this poor young lady had taken the responsibility for her entire family after her father's death, and these relatives had not helped her at all. It was despicable. He felt like throttling the pompous Belford right there.

“So what will you ever do with the furniture? I hope it hasn't turned to rot sitting in our stable all this time.” Belford placed a subtle emphasis on

“our stable,” as if to remind Miss Downy that none of this belonged to her anymore.

“The Colonel has kindly offered to store it for me,” she answered matter-of-factly.

Lunch was concluded and he had no intention of dawdling there allowing the Belfords to continue to insult his governess. He went directly outside to see that his men had completely loaded the furniture and hitched the ponies to a lead attached to the wagon.

“We will be off then,” he said rather curtly.

“Give our regards to your mother,” Mr. Belford said to Miss Downy as she

bid them goodbye.

It lacked sincerity, and Miss Downy smiled tightly. “Thank you, I will.”

He offered her one hand and used the other on her low back to help her into the carriage. Her waist was so slender and pleasing to touch that he found himself wishing he could assist her climbing in and out of carriages all day. He climbed in after her, settling in for the return carriage ride. He watched with amusement as Miss Downy stole glances at him and then chewed her lip nervously.

“What are you frowning about?” he asked at last.

She tugged at her locket—a nervous

gesture he'd noticed previously. "I'm just realizing that perhaps I am wasting your time and resources."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the truth is, I insisted my cousin save our furniture more out of ire with him than out of any true sentimentality. The ponies, I do indeed love, but the furniture... I mean, it's not that I am so very attached to it, although some pieces are quite nice. It's more that I couldn't stand the idea of Belford throwing our things away, or selling them for a pittance."

He nodded his understanding.

"But now you've gone to all this trouble to come here and load it up..."

and I'm a bit embarrassed, actually. Not all of it is high quality and..."

He couldn't help but chuckle—she was adorable. She looked at him in surprise. "You amuse me, Miss Downy."

She looked disconcerted. "How so?"

He looked out the carriage window for a moment, thoughtfully, then back at her, hiding a smile. "You are..." he waved his hand. "I don't know. I find your confession quite charming." He smiled at her with fondness.

She blushed. "You're not angry? To have gone to all this trouble of hitching a wagon and carting the furniture all the way back just because I didn't want to give my cousin the satisfaction of

disposing of it himself?”

He smiled at her indulgently. “I don't mind in the slightest. Your cousin treated you poorly and you deserve to preserve your dignity by having your belongings restored to you.”

She sat back with a shocked look on her face. He laughed again. “Does that surprise you, Miss Downy?”

She met his eye and he was surprised to see tears glistening there again. “Thank you,” she said with sincerity. “Truly.”

His heart tugged at that. She was pure sweetness. He reached over to pat her hand but before he knew it, he had picked it up and was drawing it toward

his mouth. Fortunately, he stopped himself in time—it was not acceptable to kiss the inside of her wrist, nor to pull her into his arms, nor to kiss those raspberry lips. Instead he squeezed her hand and offered understanding, “You know, Miss Downy, you've taken on an enormous responsibility since your father died—handling your family's financial matters without any help.”

Her composure broke and she choked back a sob. He rubbed his thumb soothingly over the back of her gloved hand.

“My father asked me to take care of my mother and my sister after he'd gone,” she said in a strangled voice. “And I've done the best I can, but it

hasn't been enough. We are all separated, and neither of them is happy with their new situation.”

“You said your sister is a governess in Banford?” he asked gently.

She looked at him ruefully. “Yes. Is there nothing I said the night of the carriage accident that you didn't commit to memory?”

He chuckled. “Not all of it was damaging,” he reassured her.

“I miss my father so much,” she burst out confidingly. “I never knew how quickly and completely one's world could change.”

His own heart constricted. He remembered that feeling distinctly from

his wife Gracie's death. "Aye, death is a cruel mistress," he said with feeling. "Anyway, I don't want you to feel as though you must shoulder it all alone. I am here to help."

She sniffled. "I am overwhelmed by your generosity."

He released her hand and gave her his handkerchief.

After a moment, she looked at him with an impish little smile growing on her lips. "I must confess that I'm not truly sorry that I lied about my references, else I never would have gained your employ."

He tried to frown, but failed completely and laughed instead. "I cannot approve of your methods," he

said, “but I'm not sorry either.”

* * *

Perhaps because traveling alone with him made Mandy realize just how kind the Colonel was underneath his cold exterior, she began to deplore the stiffness in him even more. Observing him with the children, she noted how they still had not warmed up to him—their own father—and remained formal and nervous in his presence. Considering the children had no parent but him, this seemed tragic.

She noted it particularly when he joined their riding lesson later in the week. His very presence made both

children, and therefore the horses, nervous. Fortunately, he had a good way with the animals and he soothed Dusty, her own pony from Helmcamp, which she had chosen as the perfect mount for the children. She had grown up riding Dusty and he was calm and reliable. She had the stable boy saddle him after showing the children how to brush him and feed him a few small carrots.

The Colonel's presence made her nervous, too, she realized. She felt self-conscious about her teaching skills. "Rosie, you'll ride first. Come climb up on this rail, please. All right, now." She lifted the girl onto the horse, sitting astride. "I'm having her learn to ride astride first, sir," she said, feeling

compelled to explain herself. “Then she can transition to side saddle when she's a bit older and more comfortable.”

“Agreed.”

She took the lead rope and led Dusty out of the stable into the open air. Rosie had a huge smile on her face as she held the reins.

“Not so tightly, no—hold right here,” the Colonel corrected Rosie's grasp on the reins. “Now sit taller. Sit straight through your spine. That's it. You're leaning to one side. Move to your left. Your *left!*”

Rosie struggled to follow her father's barked commands, getting more and more anxious. Dusty pulled at the

lead rope to look back at his rider. Mandy corrected the pony and soothed him by stroking his head.

“All right, now move the reins this way to show him how to turn. More. *More.*”

So the lesson continued, with the Colonel giving the commands and his daughter trying her best to follow them. By the time he helped her down, the little girl's smiles had disappeared completely and she looked rather withdrawn.

“All right, Tom, are you ready for a turn?”

The little boy, normally fearless to try anything, looked doubtful. “I want to go with Miss Downy.”

“Yes, dear, I will walk with you, just like I did for Rosie.

“No, I want *only* Miss Downy,” the boy insisted.

“Don't be ridiculous,” the Colonel snapped and lifted the boy onto the pony. He placed the reins in his little hands and kept one hand on his back to hold him in place as Mandy slowly led the pony around. Tom didn't make a single sound and his face was screwed up tightly with nerves. After walking him back and forth a bit, the Colonel deemed the lesson over and lifted the child down.

“Rosie, would you like another turn?”

“No, sir,” the child mumbled.

“It takes practice to become a good rider, Rosie. If you're going to be lazy about it, I'm not going to take the time to teach you.”

At that, Rosie's face slowly crumpled as she appeared to be trying not to cry. *Curse him!* Mandy shot a nasty look at the Colonel as she put her hand on Rosie's shoulder and turned her toward the manor. “Come on, sweetheart, let's go have a cup of chocolate,” she said, holding her other hand out behind her for Tom to catch as he ran up to them.

At dinner that night, Tom chattered excitedly about riding Dusty to his Aunt.

“His name is Dusty,” he told her. “And he's very tall. And I learned to make this noise,” he said clicking his tongue as if urging the pony along.

Miss Watson laughed and said, “That's perfect, Tom!”

Tom climbed to his knees on his chair to look at her better and in the process, knocked over his glass of milk.

“Tom, sit down! Look what you've done now!” the Colonel barked at him. The boy, who'd had a rather long day with the riding lesson, burst into a loud wailing cry. “That's enough!” the Colonel snapped.

Mandy had righted the glass immediately and was mopping up the spilled milk with a napkin. Julie

appeared in the doorway at the sound of Tom's cries, ready to whisk him away. Mandy stood up herself, scooping Tom into her arms. "I'll take him, she said grimly to Julie, then glared at the Colonel as she marched out. Really, that man was too much! It was one thing to be stern with the staff, but his children were simply children. He had absolutely no sensitivity to their feelings, nor had he really tried to get to know them in any meaningful way.

She carried Tom upstairs and rocked him to sleep in the nursery. Julie appeared with Rosie in tow and put her to bed. She sat beside the girl's bed after Julie had kissed her goodnight and left.

“Your papa loves you very much,” she said.

Rosie looked at her, as if measuring the truth of her words. The child was only seven but already she was perceptive enough to know when an adult was just saying something to make her feel better. “It's true,” she said firmly. “He just doesn't know how to act around children. He's been ordering around soldiers for years now, and he needs to be taught how to treat a child.”

“Who is going to teach him?” Rosie asked.

She met the girl's frank stare and took a deep breath. “I guess that's my job,” she said resolutely. “I will go speak with him now,” she said, kissing

the girl's forehead and then standing up.

* * *

“Come in,” the Colonel called to the knocking on his study door.

Miss Downy entered, looking disgruntled. “I'd like a word with you, if you don't mind.”

He set down the paper he was reading. “No, I don't mind. Would you care to sit down?”

“No, I wouldn't,” she said firmly and started pacing around his room. “I think you probably already know that—that I find you more than a little frightening.”

He raised his eyebrows. Whatever

he'd expected she might say, it was not this.

“Well, I do. And I'm fairly certain your entire staff does, too. You never laugh, you rarely smile, and hearing praise from you is so unusual that I assume it's not genuine when it is given.”

He frowned and was about to tell her she was completely out of line, but she interrupted him.

“None of that would matter to me, except that it affects your children. Your *children*, Colonel. They're just children! You simply must be a little more sensitive when dealing with them. They are not soldiers.”

“Are you referring to the riding lesson?” he demanded, trying to

understand where her ire had originated.

“It's not just that! They hardly know you after you've been away at war for over a year, and then you come marching into their lives, issuing commands without even trying to understand them!”

He stared at her. “What *exactly* has upset you?”

“Upset me?” she asked, looking disconcerted. “I'm not upset, the children are. Well, yes, it's about the riding lesson—but it's about more than that. Have you tried spending time just playing with them, or laughing, or reading to them?”

He opened his mouth, but she plunged on. “No, you have not. They

only hear from you when you are displeased. You really don't know them at all. Do you have any idea that Rosie has two loose teeth, for example? Or that Tom is afraid of thunder?" She paused, her arms folded across her chest. "Do you know what their favorite things to eat are? Or how easy it is to make them laugh?"

He narrowed his eyes, standing up from behind the desk. "Why are *you* so upset, Miss Downy?"

"I'm not—well, it's just that I care," she said and then flushed, "—about the children, I mean—not about you. I mean, I do care about you—" She flushed even deeper. "For heaven's sake, Colonel Watson, this is not about me!" she

snapped shrilly.

“Kindly mind your tone when you speak to me,” he said quietly.

“I apologize,” she said, swallowing. “But you are the only parent Tom and Rosie have. They do not have a mother to reassure them that their Papa is not really to be feared. No mother to tell them that he may seem gruff, but he's actually the kindest man she knows.”

He was vaguely pleased to hear that she found him kind. But then she ruined it by appearing suddenly shocked and saying, “Or perhaps their mother was afraid of you too?”

Hearing her mention Gracie angered him. “You have no right—” he

thundered, but the fear on her face made him stop and take a deep breath.

“I know I don't,” she whispered, backing toward the door. “But I promised Rosie I would talk to you.”

That cut him to the heart. Rosie had asked for help? With him? The pain of it burned him and he hardly noticed as Miss Downy slipped out the door. He sat down at his desk, his eyes burning. Perhaps he was too gruff with the children. He put his head in his hands. He suddenly missed Gracie as deeply as he had during the months right after her death. Miss Downy was right—his children needed their mother. And more importantly, so did he. Without Gracie, he was utterly lost with their children.

He tossed and turned all night, alternating between feeling guilty, composing an angry defense to Miss Downy, and in his better moments, thinking about how he could make things better for the children. There were also thoughts about Miss Downy's blush when she'd said she didn't care about him. Why had she made such an impassioned plea? Did she care more than she admitted? But that line of thinking was irrelevant, because he wasn't going to pursue Miss Downy. He'd already experienced the pain of losing a wife—he had no interest in opening himself up to that sort of pain a second time. Except that he found that

the more he turned all the thoughts over in his head, the more he became clear that he cared very much about Miss Downy's impression of him. It disturbed him greatly to think that she was truly afraid of him, and that she did not think he was a good father to his children.

He woke the next morning feeling as confused as he'd been the night before.

“Good morning, Lucinda, Miss Downy,” he said stiffly at the breakfast table.

Miss Downy's butter knife clattered to the floor and she looked flustered. “Oh! Oh dear. Good morning, Colonel,” she said, ducking her head under the table to retrieve it. He sat down and

noted that though she seemed to be stealing glances at him when he wasn't looking, she refused to meet his eye. He felt a wave of reluctant gratitude that she had spoken to him, despite her fears. She truly cared about his children—if not him. The trouble was, he was starting to want her to care about him.

Deciding a ride would clear his head, he went to the stables and had Banto saddled. He took off without a particular direction in mind and ended up riding past his neighbor's property. He saw his neighbor's children—who were almost too old to be out romping around—playing with a dog. He slowed his horse to watch. A dog. Yes! It would

be a perfect way to lighten the mood with his children. He recalled hearing his neighbor say that they'd had a litter of collie puppies. He led his horse up to the children to inquire and left with a squirming, happy little puppy tucked inside his coat.

He returned home and left the puppy with the groom in the stable before entered the manor, feeling as eager as a child himself. "Where are the children, Julie?"

"Tom is still napping, sir," Julie told him, "and Rosie is right here in the kitchen with me."

"Rosie," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "When Tom wakes up, I want you both to come find me. I have a

surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Rosie asked eagerly.
“What is it?”

He laughed. “If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it? I don't want to show you without Tom, so be sure to find me as soon as he's awake.”

“All right, Papa,” Rosie said, skipping around the room. “I wonder what it could be?” she asked pointedly, but he just shook his head and smiled. He went to his study to wait.

In about a half an hour, he heard both children clamoring down the hallway toward his study, talking excitedly.

“Papa, Papa! Where's Papa?” he heard Tom shout excitedly.

“Wait! He's this way—in the study!”

Chuckling, he headed out and met with the two eager children, as well as Julie and Miss Downy, all clustered around to see what the surprise was.

“Are you ready for your surprise?”

“Yes, Papa!” the children chorused. He led them out of the manor toward the stables. When he got there, he opened the door and retrieved the wriggling puppy, who was making a tiny, high-pitched yipping sound. The children went wild with excitement and he noted with satisfaction the look of delight on

Miss Downy's face as well.

* * *

The Colonel gently handed the puppy to Rosie, and Tom became very angry and impatient, pulling at his sister's arms.

“Wait, wait, it's all right,” Mandy soothed him. “Here, sit down, Rosie, so you both can play with him.”

“Her, actually,” the Colonel said. He had a smile on his face, which transformed him completely, and she found herself staring for a moment, contemplating how handsome he was. She was thrilled about the puppy—not only because she loved puppies and this

one was adorable, but her heart was also fluttering happily in her chest because the Colonel had truly listened to her.

“She's a collie,” he told the children. “They came from Scotland, originally. They're sheep herding dogs.”

“Are we going to get sheep?” Rosie asked eagerly.

The Colonel threw back his head and laughed. “No, I got her as a pet for you two.”

“What do you say to your father?” Mandy prompted.

Rosie set the puppy down and scrambled to her feet, throwing her arms around her father's waist. “Thank you, Papa,” she said. Tom followed suit, wrapping his little arms around his

father's leg, which was as high as he could reach. "Thank you, Papa," he said in his sweet little voice.

The Colonel patted both of them. "You're welcome," he said. He hesitated a moment, then he sat down on the ground with the children to their great delight. "What shall we name her?" he asked.

The puppy ran in circles, then stopped and yipped. "Let's name her Barkley," Rosie said.

"Barkley... that's a nice name. What do you think, Tom?" the Colonel asked.

"Yes, we can name her Barkley because she barks," he said excitedly,

trying to catch the quick little wriggling animal. The Colonel caught Barkley and set him in Tom's lap, but the excited puppy could not be contained. They laughed as she scrambled out, running from one to the other of them, trying to lick and jump, wagging her tiny tail. The Colonel lay back in the grass, resting his head in his interlaced hands, watching. The puppy scrambled up on his chest and tried to lick his face and he pushed it away with a laugh. Tom thought that was very funny and he leapt on top of his father's chest as well.

“Oomph! Not the knees, son. Try again—jump on me, but land with your belly. Oomph! Your belly, not your knees,” he laughed. “Your knees hurt

Papa.”

Mandy was so touched by the scene that tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She looked around for Julie and saw that the nursemaid had faded into the background, leaning against the side of the manor. She realized she ought to do the same thing and started walking away, but the Colonel called her back. “Don't go, Miss Downy,” he said softly.

She smiled and returned to sit down with the three of them. The truth was, she couldn't wait to get her hands on that adorable puppy. She held it and stroked it and cuddled it until it calmed down a bit and then she set it in Rosie's lap, stroking the soft fur and murmuring to the

little puppy until it closed its eyes and fell asleep. “Puppies sleep a lot,” she told the children. “She just used up all her energy playing with you and now she needs a short rest,” she smiled. “Just like Tom needs a short rest after lunch.”

“Can she nap with me?”

“Can she come inside the house, Papa?” Rosie asked eagerly.

The Colonel rubbed his face. “Yes, I think that would be all right. So long as we train her well not to bark or soil in the house.”

“How do we do that?” Rosie asked.

“Well, we scold her when she does,” he said, catching Mandy's eye for a moment. “I can help—I understand I'm

quite good at it,” he said with a wink and a wry grin.

She laughed and ducked her head, her face growing warm.

The children brought the puppy into the house and showed her around to every servant before making her a little bed to sleep with them in the nursery.

Mandy woke that night to the sound of the puppy's whines. She got up and crept in. Julie's bed was empty and the crying puppy came running to her, tail tucked, head lowered submissively. She scooped her up and soothed her.

“You probably have to do your necessaries, don't you, sweetheart?” she asked, then lifted her chin away from the

puppy's eager licks. She carried her downstairs and opened the back door, setting the puppy down to do her business. She sat on the back steps and breathed in the summer night air, whispering softly to the puppy so her voice wouldn't carry to the open windows above her.

Just then, the back door burst open with such violence that Mandy let out a shriek. The Colonel stepped out, shirtless and carrying his officer's pistol, ready for war.

Chapter Five

“Miss Downy!” Charles exclaimed, relieved that she was not an intruder of some kind. He lowered his weapon. “I’m sorry I frightened you. What—?” He caught sight of the puppy. “Oh, of course.” He sat down beside her. She was in her dressing gown, so he could see her ankles peeking out, and her bare hands were pale in the moonlight.

The way her eyes trailed curiously over his bare chest lit a fire in his low belly. For the briefest of moments, he imagined what it would be like to have her fingernails running lightly over his chest hair, or her head lain upon his

shoulder as she slept. But that sort of thinking would get him into trouble.

“I'm sorry, I should have thought Julie would have taken care of the puppy's needs. Was she sleeping?”

Miss Downy seemed to hesitate. He had not forgotten what she'd said the night of the carriage accident. Julie was not always reliable. “She wasn't there—perhaps she was in the kitchen,” she offered.

“Ah,” he said, wondering why she covered for the nursemaid.

They watched the puppy in silence for a moment. “The children love her,” she said, stealing a glance at him.

He looked down at her, noting the

way the moon lit part of her face, making her delicate bone structure look even more beautiful. “Am I doing better?”

She flushed and ducked her head. “You're doing wonderfully,” she said to the ground. Then she peeked back at him. “I'm sorry for all those things I said.”

He looked at her fondly. The truth was, he loved the way she squirmed under his stern authority—he liked to watch her blush, and bite her lip, and duck her head. It was so sweet and submissive. But he hadn't enjoyed hearing that she was *terrified* of him. Actually, that had hurt a good deal more than he'd care to admit.

“I appreciated that you had the courage to be honest with me that way,

even though it wasn't what I wanted to hear," he said. He looked down at their two pairs of bare feet lined up together and she followed his gaze. "You reminded me a bit of their mother, the way you marched in there and let me have it."

She looked at him in surprise.

"She wasn't afraid of me, by the way. At least, she was never afraid to speak her mind the way you did last night. I miss her," he admitted.

Miss Downy's face held warmth and understanding as she gazed up at him.

"I'm sure you do," she said softly.

"Last night I realized how truly lost

I am without her—I don't have the slightest clue how to raise children.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—”

“No, you were right. I'm glad you confronted me. As I said, it's the sort of thing my wife would have done. I might have warmed her bottom for the disrespectful manner with which it was delivered, though.”

She peered at him from under her lashes. “Are you going to warm my bottom?” she asked coyly, shocking him and sending a jolt of desire through his body.

He smiled slowly and then quickly reached over and plucked her up from her seat, bending her over his knee. She gasped and he chuckled as he gave her

bottom three sharp slaps before setting her back down and grinning at her. Her face turned pink but she giggled. His eyes traveled down to her lips and he leaned forward slightly, imagining for a moment that he might kiss her.

But just then Barkley came scrambling back, jumping eagerly, pawing at his leg and jerking him back to reality. He stood up abruptly. Kissing his governess was *not* in his plan. “Good night, Miss Downy,” he said. “Thank you for taking care of Barkley like this.”

“It's all right,” she said lightly. “I am happy to be governess to Barkley as well.”

“Governess is one thing, nursemaid is another,” he said, determined to go and find his errant servant.

He checked in the kitchen for Julie and heard voices in the cellar. He listened to hear who was speaking. He heard Julie's voice distinctly. “How long do you think it will be before the Colonel offers for Miss Downy?”

“Nay, I don't think it will happen,” he heard Violet respond.

“Oh come on, you've seen how he looks at her! Who could blame him, she is as lovely as they come!”

“Aye, but she's not interested in him. You remember what she said—too stiff. Too military!”

His chest tightened at that. Not that it mattered to him. Because he was *not* planning to offer for Miss Downy or any other woman. Besides, that wasn't news to him. She'd said as much the night of the carriage accident and again when she barged into his study the night before.

He stepped away from the door as the two women came up from the cellar. He let them worry a bit under his stern gaze, wondering whether he'd overheard them or not, and then made certain Julie understood that she was responsible for the puppy.

As he lay in bed that night staring at the darkened ceiling, angry thoughts toward Julie and Violet swirled through

his head. But somehow he ended up holding his stiffened shaft in his hand and thinking instead of Miss Downy's parted lips. He thrust away his conscience, which warned him that thinking of her this way was a mistake, and instead allowed himself to remember how she'd felt squirming over his lap, her naked bottom so deliciously spankable, her beautiful sex presented for his viewing. He climaxed sooner than he would have thought possible. Apparently the thoughts he'd been denying himself about his lovely governess had only been gaining power in the place he'd locked them away.

* * *

“Miss Downy, come quickly!” Rosie exclaimed, bursting into the sitting room where she'd been cross-stitching. The child had a wild, panicked look that sent her heart racing.

Mandy jumped off the sofa and threw down her cross-stitching, following the girl out of the house at a run. She could hear Tom wailing before she saw him.

“Look!” Rosie pointed toward the old stable—the one that was no longer in use because it was falling down. There, perched on the roof, was one terrified little boy, screaming with a pitch in his voice that she had never heard before. It looked as though one foot had gone

through the roof and was now stuck. He was crouched there, on his hands and one knee, with the other leg enveloped by the roof.

She raced over. "How did he get up there? Where is Julie?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Rosie wailed.

Two of the stable men had come out to see what the noise was, and the Colonel and Miss Watson had arrived, breathless. "Harry—the ladder—now!" the Colonel ordered.

Mandy ran around the back of the old stable and saw how Tom must have climbed up—from the fence, to the old windowsill and upward—there were enough foot and handholds to do it. She took a breath and began to climb. On the

side of the building, she heard the ladder hitting the roof and the sound of rapid steps climbing. The Colonel leaped onto the roof at the same time she arrived. He looked at her with surprise, but then turned immediately back to Tom and started walking carefully across the old roof. He only made it two steps before the roof collapsed under his weight.

She screamed in terror, then instantly regretted it, as Tom answered her scream with one of his own that lifted every hair on the back of her neck. One of the Colonel's legs had gone through, but he'd caught himself with his hands and scrambled back up. He didn't move, looking as if he were too wary to

attempt it now.

She took deep breaths to calm herself, relieved that the Colonel had not plunged all the way through.

“Tom! Come to me,” he beckoned to the child.

“No!” the child wailed, clearly too petrified to move.

Mandy inched ever-so-slowly past the Colonel.

“No!” he barked. “It's not safe, Miss Downy. Harry! Get me a rope.”

“Yes, sir!”

“It's all right, I'm quite a bit lighter than you are,” she said with a forced calmness, side-stepping very slowly toward Tom.

“Miss Downy...” the boy sobbed,

holding his two arms out to her.

“Shh... Miss Downy's coming,” she soothed him. “Don't worry... Miss Downy will get you. It's all right. Everything's going to be all right.” She kept talking as she slowly, slowly made her way closer to the child.

She had almost arrived without falling in. *Thank God for small miracles.* She inched closer and before she was close enough, Tom stood from his crouch, yanking his leg back out of the roof, and literally launched himself into her arms. The shock of it caused her to stumble back and she heard shouts and gasps from the Colonel and those on the ground, but she did not fall.

Moving even more slowly and carefully now that she had her precious cargo in hand, she inched her way back toward the Colonel and the ladder. The Colonel had stood and moved to a place where the roof beam could support him. He stretched his long arm toward her and as soon as she was able, she grasped his hand. His strength and steely will poured through his grasp as he pulled her toward him and the safety of the support beam.

Tom clung to her tightly, his arms around her neck and his little legs squeezing her waist. The Colonel started to reach to take the boy, and then seemed to change his mind.

“ere's the rope, Colonel!” she heard Henry calling from below.

“It's all right, it's not needed. Hold the ladder to assist.”

He looked at her, considering, while he rubbed Tom's back soothingly. “If Papa goes down first, would you let Miss Downy hand you to me?” he asked the boy.

Tom sniffed and lifted his head. Then he nodded slowly.

“All right. I'm going to go halfway down, then Miss Downy will pass you to me.” He went calmly to the ladder and then descended partway before reaching his long arms up toward her. She felt dizzy looking over the side like that, but

she took a deep breath and carefully disengaged Tom from her body to hand him down. The Colonel took the little boy easily, placed him on his hip, and climbed down with one hand.

Julie was there to take Tom from his arms and then the Colonel turned back to Mandy. “Come down now, Miss Downy.”

She hesitated. It suddenly looked very frightening. She hadn't climbed a ladder since she was a child.

“Turn around and climb down backward,” he instructed.

Oh right. That felt more familiar. She searched for the top rung with her foot and once she found it, she quickly made her way down until she felt large

hands at her waist, lifting her to the ground. Tom reached for her again, which didn't make Julie too happy, though she usually didn't mind. Her face looked quite pale and frightened.

She felt furious with Julie for having left the children unattended, and she wasn't the only one.

“Where in God's name were you, Julie?” the Colonel thundered.

“I—I...” she trailed off.

As angry as she was, Mandy suddenly feared Julie would lose her job over this and she didn't want to see that happen. She knew Julie had nowhere else to go—no family, nothing. “I think there was a misunderstanding, Colonel,”

she improvised quickly. “Between Julie and I... about which of us was supposed to be watching them.”

The Colonel turned to her, his eyes flashing. He took hold of her chin and brought her face closer to his. “Really, Miss Downy?” His voice conveyed his doubt.

She hesitated. “Yes, sir.”

A look of disappointment flickered across his face. “You promised me you wouldn't lie,” he said in a very quiet voice.

Her gut tightened convulsively. *Oh God.* Her probation! Now she was facing dismissal as well. Her eyes filled with sudden tears. “I'm sorry,” she whispered, her eyes pleading with him

for forgiveness.

He looked at her for a long moment. “Why would you lie?” he asked in the same low tone. No one else could hear him, but the intensity with which his burning gaze held her captive made her insides turn to fire.

She swallowed convulsively. “I—I just...” she trailed off. “Please don't dismiss her, Colonel?” she whispered.

He looked at her for a moment longer, then he released her chin. “You take care of the children until bedtime.” He turned to Julie. “Go and wait for me in my study,” he commanded.

Julie bobbed a curtsy, her face displaying unmasked panic, and walked

quickly back up to the manor. Mandy's heart was still slamming in her chest and now she must somehow get through the next hour or more trying to contain the feeling of dread that had filled her as she wondered and worried what consequence would face her. Had he said he would dismiss her if she lied again? She couldn't remember. She only knew she had given her word she would not. She walked slowly to the manor with the children in tow, somehow managing to comfort and reassure them. The Colonel passed her with his long-legged strides, looking grim and carrying a riding crop. She sucked in her breath, wondering if it was for her or for Julie or both.

She never thought she'd be wishing for a whipping, but in fact, she was absolutely praying for that end. It was far better than losing her position. But he'd put her on probation to prove her trustworthiness and surely he would consider this a violation. She felt tears burning behind her eyes again. On top of her fear of being dismissed or taking whatever punishment the Colonel might mete out, she felt disappointed in herself for breaking her word to the Colonel. She hadn't realized it until that moment, but she had come to truly value her employer's regard for her, and to think that she had lost it now was devastating.

* * *

It was against his better judgment that he whipped Julie rather than dismissed her. It was not solely based on Miss Downy's appeal to him, though she had more influence on him than he cared to admit. But the children loved Julie and she'd been with them since Rosie was born. She'd practically raised them since Gracie had died. He didn't think it was fair to them to lose anyone else who they loved, despite the fact that she was not as reliable as she should be. He could only hope that the riding crop had instilled some fear in her so that she would not shirk her duties again. She certainly did seem appropriately remorseful.

He went to the sideboard and poured himself a snifter of brandy as he waited for Miss Downy. He drained it and went to sit behind his desk. The sense of heaviness he felt about dealing with her was not based in anger. He was hurt. She neither trusted his judgment, nor respected him enough to speak the truth.

He heard a light tap on the door and she entered. Her eyes filled with tears the moment she looked at him and the weight on his chest only increased. She shut the door and crossed the room to sit in the chair opposite him, not waiting for the command. Her lips were trembling, and she brought one hand to her mouth to

cover it, meeting his eye with tears now streaming down her face. Her eyes strayed to the top of the desk, where the riding crop was still resting, and he saw a muscle jump at her temple.

She uncovered her mouth. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I'm really, really sorry."

"I need to know I can trust you, Miss Downy."

"I know—I know. I understand and I won't try to deceive you again. *I promise.* I was just—I was afraid you would dismiss Julie, and she has even fewer people in this world to turn to than I do."

"I understand that. Perhaps instead of lying you could have made an appeal

on her behalf.”

She blinked at him and then nodded. “I should have done so,” she said, bowing her head.

“You appear truly remorseful, Miss Downy,” he said, standing up, wanting to get this over with as quickly as he could.

She stood up as well. “I am, sir. I truly am.”

“Very well. Bend over the desk.”

The look of relief on her face disturbed him as he realized that once again, she must have worried that her position was in jeopardy. It saddened him that she'd been so afraid. That desire to protect her, to soothe her and make her feel safe, surged up again. He shook

his head, wondering at the tumult of emotions he felt surrounding this young lady.

She'd leaned over the desk of her own accord, and had pulled the skirts of her dress and petticoat up before he commanded it. She started weeping before the first stroke fell. He delivered a stinging blow, and she cried out. He brought the riding crop down again. She clenched her cheeks and gasped. She shifted from foot to foot as if to alleviate the sensation. He brought it down again and she cried out each time, then began quietly sobbing. Each time he brought the crop down to bite into her tender flesh he left a red line that stood out as a welt. Again and again he brought it

down, gritting his teeth at the unpleasantness. When he decided it was enough, he smoothed her skirts back down and tossed the riding crop on the desk where she could see it.

After a moment, he handed her his handkerchief. She erected herself and then stunned him by throwing herself into his arms. The heaviness in him drained, replaced by a deep warmth of affection. He held her and stroked her hair and back as she pressed her wet face into his chest. He allowed his lips to brush her hair, smelling the faint lavender scent and feeling the silky smoothness of her thick mane. Perhaps she felt his lips on her head, or maybe she realized she

should not be standing in the circle of his arms, because she tried to pull away then, except he did not let her go. He held her tightly against him.

“I don't want you to be angry with me,” she said into his chest, her words muffled by his shirt and distorted by her tears. “I've been working so hard to please you. I feel like I always bungle everything.”

He lifted her face away from his chest, but then turned it to the side and pressed it back so that her cheek was leaning against him. He stroked the side of her face with his thumb, drying her tears at the same time. “I was hurt by your lie, Miss Downy,” he said with genuine pain. “It tells me that you don't

trust in my discipline or my authority.”

She seemed to consider that. She pulled her head away from his chest and met his eye. “You're right. I mean, you're right that I didn't trust. But I should have. And I do now.”

“Thank you,” he said simply. He felt as though she spoke the truth, and it soothed his ruffled feelings. They stood there in silence for a moment. Then he said, “You were extraordinarily brave today up there on the roof. I can't thank you enough for the way you rescued Tom.”

He gradually released her. Then, feeling a throb in his hand, he opened and closed it a few times. At least three

dozen splinters were embedded in the meat of his palm from his fall on the roof. The flesh was red and inflamed now.

“Oh, your hand!” she exclaimed. “Colonel, your poor hand.”

“It's all right. I just need to get a knife to try to pry the slivers out.”

“A knife, no! I will get a needle from my sewing bag. That will work far better. Wait here—I'll be right back,” she said and scurried away, wiping at her face and trying to straighten her hair. When she returned, he had seated himself on the settee. She sat beside him and pulled out her pin cushion and selected a needle. Removing her gloves, she took his hand into her lap and started

to work on the splinters, one by one. She worked at them with patience and care, squeezing and pressing at the flesh to get to the splinters, her eyes darting to his face as if to gauge whether she was hurting him.

It was difficult because of the direction of their entry; the angle of his hand was all wrong. She kept trying to turn his wrist until he laughed. "I don't think my hand turns that way, Miss Downy!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she gasped, chagrined.

That made him laugh again. "Here, let's try it this way," he said. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her

tightly against him, then gave her the hand that was around her. The angle was much better now, and he liked the feel of her nestled against him. She was practically in his lap, and his body responded with a flush of warmth and a tingle across his skin. Miss Downy seemed to relax, which was such a rare occurrence that he found he wanted the moment to never end. He watched her deft, slender fingers working out each sliver and imagined taking up her naked hand and kissing it.

“Am I forgiven?” she asked timidly, darting another glance his way.

“Yes, Miss Downy, you are forgiven,” he said soothingly. “I would never punish and not forgive.”

Her cheeks turned a beautiful shade of pink, and she avoided his eye, working diligently on his slivers. Her submissiveness and her obvious desire to please him moved him. He had a momentary vision of pulling her all the way onto his lap and burying his face in her inviting décolletage. Instead, he allowed the pain of the needle and the slivers to assuage the hunger building within him.

* * *

Mandy felt alternately happy and like she might burst into tears at any moment the following day. The intensity of Tom's mishap, the strain of having

disappointed the Colonel, the residual pain of her spanking, and the extraordinary closeness she had shared with the Colonel while tending to his slivers left her quite shaken. She felt quite shy for the next several days and it was only a household illness that allowed her to put it behind her. By the end of the week, almost everyone in the manor had fallen ill—servants included.

“Miss Downy, I dare say you have your hands full here,” the apothecary Mr. Sutton said as he handed her a bottle of laudanum and instructions for how to use it. The members of the household were all laid up in bed with fevers, rashes, and sore throats.

“Thank you, Mr. Sutton,” I

appreciate your coming here. She saw him out and went to the kitchen to stoke the fire and heat some water for tea. No one had eaten anything in at least a day, but she was trying to press them with tea and now she had the opium to take the edge off their discomfort. She brought it to the Colonel first, as his fever seemed to be the worst. She leaned over him and mopped his brow with a wet linen and he woke, blinking and staring at the view she was accidentally providing of her bust. She withdrew the wet cloth and busied herself with giving him a healthy dose of laudanum. He took it, thanked her, and laid back down, promptly closing his eyes and going back to sleep.

She made the rounds of the rest of the house. Julie was not well, but was still doing an admirable job caring for the children despite her own discomfort. Most of the servants were ill, but those who'd been ill first seemed to be improving, which helped calm her worst fears that the entire household was going to die. It was a miracle she wasn't sick. She'd felt a little tired and her throat had been scratchy for a couple of days, but that had been the extent of the plague's effect on her. *Thank God.*

By the time she'd made the rounds of the house, it was time to check on the Colonel again. She went in his room and wet the linen cloth, sponging his

forehead and face. He groaned and covered her hand with his own. She tried to extricate it gently, but he reached out with his other hand and grasped her breast, kneading it gently, rubbing her nipple with his thumb. She froze, the shock of thrilling sensation shooting from her peaked nipple to her low belly. The Colonel's eyes were only half open and they were unfocused. He made a soft little moaning sound. Surely he did not know what he was doing—it was the opium that caused him to behave this way. She tried to ease away, but his arm snaked out around her waist and pulled her off her feet and into the bed with him.

“Ah, Gracie,” he mumbled.

Gracie. That must have been his wife. “No, it's Miss Downy,” she said, but he went on as if he didn't hear her. He pulled her in snugly against him, so her back fit against his front and his hot feverish hands roamed up and down her body.

“Why are you wearing clothes to bed?” he mumbled. “You know that's not allowed...” The words were strict, but he spoke them in a warm, rumbling purr. She tried to roll away, but it was impossible; he was holding her firmly with an arm about her waist. His other hand was searching her body, pulling up her skirts until he found skin and growled in approval. His hand ran up

her leg and over her hip, then stroked the curve of her bare bottom. She was paralyzed with the sensation—too shocked to breathe, too entranced to speak. The hand made its way back over her hip and dipped between her legs, fingers tangling in her silky curls, probing deeper.

She clamped her thighs together as tightly as she could, but then the Colonel spoke right into her ear, his hot breath warming her face, the deep timbre of his voice making her shiver. “Open for me,” he murmured and her legs parted of their own accord.

His fingers slid up and down the slick entryway of her sex and then one finger gently entered her. She gasped and

clutched at his hand, tightening her thighs again, but he whispered, "Shh." The movement of his fingers felt so wonderful, yet at the same time her mind was frantic with the impropriety of what was happening. She felt a great sensation building in her, half need from the pleasure he was producing, and half terror that he would suddenly wake up and realize what he was doing. But he did not realize and there was nothing she could do to move out of his arms, anyway. At least that's what she told herself as she closed her eyes and followed the delicious sensations he was producing in her. As the pleasure became more urgent, she thrashed her

legs about, still clutching his hand, rolling her head from side to side until she reached the crescendo, her muscles tightening around his finger, her thighs gripping like a vice, her own voice crying out.

“Mmm... that's my girl, Gracie,” the Colonel murmured and kissed her ear. Hearing him call her Gracie helped pull her from her languor and she struggled once again to free herself. He laughed, though. “Where are you going? I'm not nearly finished with you yet,” he said.

She felt his hand moving behind her and then the tip of his hardened sex pressed against her entryway and she panicked completely, kicking and

thrashing until she'd freed herself and jumped to her feet. The Colonel sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes, staring at her, still unable to focus. He seemed to know now that she wasn't Gracie, though—his look was full of confusion. She turned and fled the room as quickly as she could.

Chapter Six

He woke feeling like death itself. His mouth tasted like it was filled with cotton, and his limbs were heavy and aching. He'd had a dream about Miss Downy. No... oh, Lord. *Not a dream.*

Had it been real? She'd been nursing him and he had pulled her into bed with him. God forgive him, he hoped it had been a dream. He threw the sweat-soaked sheet off and climbed out of bed. He needed to find out for certain. He pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt, but didn't bother with anything on his feet. After searching the upper floor for the governess and not finding her, he

went downstairs.

“Miss Downy?”

He found her in the kitchen. She jumped and made a little shrieking sound as she whirled to face him where he stood in the doorway. The look on her face said it all. It had not been a dream. She had never looked less happy to see him.

“Colonel,” she squeaked, composing her face. “Are you hungry?”

“No. I came looking for you.” He studied her tight expression, walking toward her slowly, his mind running over what he could remember. She set down her tea cup and stood up.

He took her gently by the shoulders

and peered into her face. “I think I just had a dream. Except I'm not sure if it was a dream.”

She flushed and blinked rapidly.

“It wasn't, was it?”

She swallowed. “Sir?” She was going to pretend that she didn't know what he was talking about.

“I'm sorry—I was confused.”

“Yes,” she said. “You called me Gracie. The opium confused you, that's all,” she said reassuringly.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I thought you were Gracie, although how I made such a mistake... I wouldn't have to wrestle Gracie in our own bed...” He shook his head to clear it. *What had he done to her?*

“It was the laudanum. It's all right.”

“What did I do...?” he moistened his lips that were cracked from the fever. “What did I do, exactly?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, Colonel. You were just confused,” she said a little too firmly.

That was a lie, he could tell. “I think I did something horrible to you.”

She looked distinctly uncomfortable. “It wasn't *that* horrible,” she mumbled.

“What was it?”

“Nothing. I told you—nothing.”

He brushed a wisp of hair away from her face. The poor girl. He'd put her in such an awkward position. Of

course she wouldn't want to talk to him about it. "You promised not to lie to me again," he said softly, tenderly.

Tears glittered in her eyes. She looked away from him. "I do not wish to lie. It's just that I couldn't possibly say it."

He reached in his pocket for a handkerchief, but found it empty, so he used his thumb instead to brush away a tear.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Please let me go, sir," she said, taking a step back and looking around as if someone else might come in.

"Come," he said, putting a hand behind her back and propelling her out of the room. He led her to his study. She

balked a little at the doorway. “Shh, you're safe with me,” he murmured coaxingly.

He closed the door behind them and led her to the massive desk. When they reached it, he put his hands on her waist and lifted her up to sit on its surface. “I believe I put my fingers between your legs. Is that true?” he said.

She bit her lip and looked away, her neck and ears turning pink.

“I am so terribly sorry, Miss Downy. I have embarrassed myself, and humiliated you, and you do not deserve any of this. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Of course,” she said quickly, as if trying to end the conversation as quickly

as possible so she could escape.

“Is that all I did?”

When she didn't answer, he said, “Let me ask it this way... are you still a maid?”

“Colonel, *please*,” she begged.

He lifted her chin. “Yes or no?”

She pulled herself away from him.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” He couldn't tell if she was lying, because she looked so uncomfortable. “I mean...did I put anything else between your legs? Other than fingers?” He peered intently at her, hoping to read some answer on her face.

“*Colonel!*”

“Forgive me, it's just that... it's hard for me to tell whether you're lying

or just embarrassed.”

“Let me go, Colonel,” she said forcefully and slid her bottom off the desk, brushing past him toward the door.

His heart was beating in an irregular rhythm. Had he bedded his governess? He would marry her if he had—it was the only decent thing to do. But he needed to find out for certain what had happened. And if he hadn't—he had still violated her. He must find some way to make it up to her.

* * *

They avoided each other for the next two days, until the household had recovered from the illness and things

returned to normal. By then, he'd thought of a way he might atone for his incredible gaffe.

“Miss Downy,” he said at breakfast that day. “You did an admirable job nursing the entire household through its sickness. I think you deserve a holiday.”

She stared at him with surprise.

“Would you like to visit your mother?”

“Well, yes! I would love to... but can you spare me?”

“Well of course the children will miss you, but I think we can manage,” he said, forcing a smile. “It will be fully paid, of course, and you'll travel in my carriage.” He still had not ascertained whether something more had happened

between them, but his guilt over what he had done was overwhelming. A visit to her mother was the best thing he could dream up to offer her.

The look of happiness on her face was a gift. “Thank you, Colonel!”

“You're welcome, you deserve it. Go and pack your things—you can leave as soon as you're ready.”

When she returned with her packed bag, he handed her up into the carriage himself. “Thank you, Colonel,” she said.

He caught her gloved hand and looked at her intently. He was half afraid she would never return. “I'll send the carriage for you in one week's time.”

“I will be ready for it,” she said.

He nodded and waved as the carriage left. He hoped that was true.

But a new anxiety came four days later when he received a letter from a lawyer in London. He opened it and read, his skin turning to ice as he skimmed over the words. It was a reference check for Miss Amanda Downy, his governess—it seemed she had applied for another position. He balled up the letter and threw it across the room, feeling a rush of possessive anger. She wanted to leave. She was leaving.

Was it because of what he had done to her? Had he ruined her and she hadn't confessed? Was she too humiliated to

face him again? He stood up and paced his study, his hands curling into angry fists. How could he have violated her like that? He was so terribly ashamed of himself. He would have to offer for her—that was the only solution. He knew she had no interest in marrying a man like him, but if he had compromised her innocence, he must take responsibility.

He considered getting in his carriage that instant to visit her at her relatives', but he didn't want to cause her more embarrassment. No, he would wait. If she refused to return when he sent the carriage for her on Saturday, he would go for her then.

* * *

“Miss Downy!” The Colonel came out to meet the carriage when it arrived back at the manor, which surprised her. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” She took the hand he offered to climb down and flashed him a grateful smile. While she was away, she had resolved to pretend as though nothing had happened between them, steeling herself against all the embarrassment she might otherwise show. Unless she missed her guess, the Colonel had not done the same. He seemed somewhat agitated, though his familiar wooden mask was still in place.

“You missed all the fun, Miss Downy!” Miss Watson exclaimed when

she entered the manor. “We have new neighbors in the area—the Livingstons. Miss Livingston and her sister Miss Jane Livingston have been by to call and they invited us over to dine with them while you were away. Mr. Livingston is their brother, and his friend Mr. Bates is quite charming,” she said with a sly smile.

Mandy remembered that smile from their days in London—it meant Miss Watson had a love interest. Unlike when they were in London, this time Mandy felt interested—she was growing to really like Miss Watson and wanted her to be happy.

“Charles promised we could have a dance here when you returned, didn't you, Charles?”

The Colonel was hovering in the doorway. He nodded briefly. Her heart gave a little skip to hear that he had wanted to wait for her return. "So when will it be?"

"How about tomorrow night? Charles?" she asked, turning to her brother.

"Yes, that should be all right," the Colonel said distractedly before he turned and left them to their feminine discourse on who to invite and how to best arrange the furniture for the ball. Mandy was just as excited as Miss Watson for the dance. They spent hours discussing the menu and refreshments and asking the servants to rearrange the

furniture in different configurations.

When the following night arrived, she wore her best dress—a green silk and taffeta affair with a plunging neckline. She wished she had some beautiful necklace to show off, but her silver locket would have to do. She pinned most of her hair back, allowing only a small portion in the back to tumble free.

The Livingston party had been invited to dine with them before the dance and when they arrived, Mandy was introduced to Mr. Livingston, the two Miss Livingstons, and Mr. Bates, their family friend.

“I hope you don't mind, my private secretary has just arrived from London,

and I've brought him along as well," Mr. Livingston said, and Mandy caught her breath in dismay. Mr. Bartlby.

Bartlby looked smugly delighted—he must have known he would see her here tonight. "Yes, we are previously acquainted," he said, shaking the Colonel's hand.

"Indeed," was all the Colonel said.

Bartlby was introduced to Miss Watson and then he turned to Mandy with an excessive bow. "Miss Downy," he said theatrically. "How lovely to see you again."

The feeling was not mutual. She curtsied, murmured her pleasantries, and retrieved her hand as quickly as she

could, darting a glance at the Colonel, who was watching with his most wooden look. She knew it really wasn't Bartlby's fault that she never wanted to see him again. The problem was that he reminded her of her own bad behavior the night of the accident.

When the dinner was announced, Miss Watson was the perfect hostess, calling the women by rank to precede her into the dining room. She adopted the new mode of seating arrangements, seating gentlemen and ladies alternately around the dining table so that the Miss Livingstons were seated to either side of the Colonel at the head of the table, and Miss Watson sat at the opposite end with Mr. Livingston and Mr. Bates to either

side of her. Being of the lowest rank, Mandy was seated in the middle, between Mr. Bates and Miss Jane Livingston and across from Bartlby.

“So, how long will you be in the country, Mr. Bartlby?” she asked politely.

“Only a fortnight, I imagine. Then I shall return to take care of Mr. Livingston's business in London,” he said self-importantly.

She murmured the appropriate sounds to that information.

“We hear you are teaching the children perfect French,” Miss Jane Livingston ventured.

She smiled at the lady. “My mother

was French, so it's not because I've studied well—I learned it from the cradle,” she said humbly.

“Indeed, your mother was an aristo, was she not?” Bartlby asked, looking pleased with himself for knowing.

Mandy flushed. She wished he did not know so much about her and that he would keep his mouth shut about the information he had.

“Oh really?” Miss Jane Livingston said with interest, and the remainder of the meal she answered questions from the lady about her mother's escape from France during the revolution.

After the meal they retired to the drawing room, which had been arranged for dancing. Miss Watson had invited all

the neighboring society to fill out the crowd, though the Livingston party and their party were really the only young people of marrying age. It was too small of a ball to use dance cards, so the gentlemen simply approached the ladies and asked them to dance.

“Miss Downy, would you do me the honor of the first dance?” Bartlby inquired, as she'd known he would.

She smiled wanly. “Of course,” she said. He led her to the floor and they began to dance. She managed to make inane conversation with him as she watched the other couples dancing by. The Colonel was dancing with the elder Miss Livingston and Miss Watson was

gazing with rapture at Mr. Bates, her dance partner.

The Colonel asked Mandy to dance next. He had chosen a waltz, which was a favorite of hers, but required them to be quite a bit closer to each other than other dances. He was an excellent lead, his arm wrapped firmly around her waist, his steps sure and clear. Despite the residual awkwardness between them, she enjoyed the feeling of him holding her close and controlling her so easily.

She prayed he would not mention Bartlby or the incident again, but he looked as though he had something distinctly on his mind. "Miss Downy?"

"Yes, sir?"

He said nothing for a moment, as if

he was thinking of how to phrase his words. “Have you applied for another position?”

Oh. She tripped, missing her dance step, and he had to catch and guide her back into the dance. She bit her lip and looked at him guiltily. How had he discovered? They must have contacted him for a reference. Was he angry? “Sir, I just—” she took a breath and exhaled. “I just wanted to have a back-up plan in place in case I did not pass my probationary period.”

His expression slowly cleared, and she felt him relax a bit. “I see. Yes, of course, the probation. That was prudent of you.”

She was relieved that he wasn't angry. "I'm sorry—perhaps I should have informed you that I was doing so?"

He shook his head and then shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's all right. Have you received any offers?"

She shook her head warily. "No, sir."

"So you do not plan on leaving?"

She shook her head.

"You may consider your probationary period over, Miss Downy," he said firmly, as if he were giving her bad news rather than good.

"Thank you, sir," she said, venturing a look at him. For once his eyes were not boring through her.

Instead, they skipped around the room, as if he were purposely avoiding her eye. In fact they did not settle on her face much at all for the remainder of the dance.

* * *

He certainly had not wished to marry Miss Downy.

And yet he felt a peculiar disappointment knowing that he now did not have to offer for her. She had returned, she had not sought a new position because she could not face him, and she was pretending as if nothing had happened, all of which should have pleased him. Except that he felt strangely

empty now. As if the idea of her merely being his governess was no longer enough. But that was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

He felt relieved when the dance was over, though it irritated him a bit that the insipid Bartlby asked her for another dance. He asked Miss Jane Livingston for a twirl and enjoyed her good manners and pleasant conversation. He noticed Mr. Bates had asked Lucinda for a second dance as well, and though normally two dances in one night might signify an intention to marry, in this case the party was so small that it could be overlooked. He needed to be watchful, however, as Lucinda no longer had a chaperone to carefully observe her.

At the end of the night, after the guests had departed, the three of them sat for a cup of warm milk before bed. “That was lovely. Thank you, Charles,” Lucinda said, looking happy.

It was nice to see her spirits up again. He smiled affectionately at her. “I’m glad you’ve found some entertainment here in the country at last,” he teased.

“What do you think of the Livingstons?” she asked.

“I like them,” he said without expanding, his thoughts returning to the unpleasant fact that Bartlby had intruded into the party and had asked Miss Downy to dance twice.

Lucinda looked impatient. “Any of them in particular?” she prodded.

He shrugged.

“And what do you think of Mr. Bates?” she asked eagerly.

“I hear he's penniless,” he replied baldly. Livingston really had paid her quite a bit of attention.

Lucinda recoiled. “Really?”

He dragged his mind back to the conversation. “Yes. He's been to university and is a trained architect, but I think he prefers to ride the coat tails of Mr. Livingston to being a member of the working middle class.”

Lucinda looked disconcerted. “Oh, well, yes. I suppose he did mention

architecture at one point... but I thought he simply didn't have to work.”

“Well he doesn't, does he?” he said, unable to leave out a slight condemnation in his tone. He had no patience for men who didn't make their own way in the world.

The following morning he woke in a foul mood, with a heaviness that sat in the middle of his chest. At breakfast, Lucinda also seemed to be in a temper. He ignored her, too confused with his own tumultuous emotions to pay hers any mind. He decided to go for a ride to clear his head.

He cantered with Banto, his mind running in circles. Marrying Miss Downy was not necessary. Clearly she

was willing to put the incident behind them, so he should follow her lead. If in a month's time he observed that she was in distress, he would know that something more had happened and he would marry her. He knew she had no desire to marry a stiff old military man like himself, but he could at least offer her comfort and honor.

When he returned he saw Miss Downy and Lucinda sitting together embroidering and was pleased at first, until he noticed the scowl on Lucinda's face. Frowning, he stood in the doorway unobserved. He had warned the ladies about their bickering and he was fully prepared to spank them both again if

necessary.

“So, Mr. Bartlby seemed quite taken with you,” Lucinda said coldly.

He stiffened involuntarily.

Miss Downy spoke carefully. “I don't think so, it was just that there were so few young women to dance with.”

“You might be well suited.”

“If you're referring to his financial status, I suppose that's true. But I think there's more to a marriage than matching finances, don't you?”

“Well, of course *you* would say so. Your ambition would be to marry above yourself, wouldn't it?”

Miss Downy flushed with anger. “Above myself? No indeed, I would take a love match over all else any day. It's

only the very *narrow-minded* who think that all that matters is wealth and status,” she snapped.

“It's only the *bourgeoisie* who believe in love matches!” Lucinda shot back.

“No more!” he interjected, startling them both. He'd had enough of this intolerable bickering and he especially didn't care to hear about choosing husbands. “Both of you, in my study. *Now.*”

Miss Downy and Lucinda stared at him with twin expressions of horror. They slowly rose to their feet and he motioned them past him toward the study.

“Bend over the desk and lift your skirts.”

Miss Downy raised her eyes to his and when she took in his stern expression, they filled with tears. He felt a pang of regret that he must punish her, and his face softened in sympathy, but he merely lifted his chin toward the desk. She swallowed and lifted her skirts, bending reluctantly over the large wooden desk. Lucinda's face was angry, but she knew him well enough not to plead or argue. She leaned forward on the desk and pulled up her own skirts.

He took his strap from the desk drawer. When the soldiers fought in the ranks they had a method for resolving it.

Both were put to hard labor and neither could be excused from it until the other gave his consent. It forced them to concede to the other to save themselves. But his sister was as stubborn as he was, and he wasn't sure whether this would work. He walked to the side of her. She was holding her breath. The two hard strokes with the strap sounded loud in the quiet room. Lucinda gasped and cried out. Then he turned to Miss Downy and delivered two biting swings with his strap across her round bottom. He returned to Lucinda and delivered two more, then applied the strap twice again to Miss Downy. Tears had leaked out of her eyes by now and she was panting from the pain of it.

“Tell me, Lucinda, has Miss Downy been punished enough?” he asked.

Lucinda turned her cheek and stared at Miss Downy. “No,” she said, gritting her teeth, obviously blaming her for their predicament.

“Very well,” he said, and delivered two more snaps of the strap across her buttocks and then across Miss Downy's. The governess whimpered.

“Miss Downy, has Miss Watson been punished enough?” he questioned.

“Yes!” she gasped. He wasn't surprised. Miss Downy was a smart woman and not particularly prideful. She had probably caught onto his tack.

“Lucinda, has Miss Downy been punished enough?” he repeated.

“No!” the woman gritted again.

He heard Miss Downy blow out her breath like a curse and he repeated, “Very well,” and brought the strap across his sister's reddened cheeks again. He struck her upper thighs on his second swing and she let out a loud yelp.

He repeated the action with Miss Downy's poor bottom, but he did not swing as hard and he did not strike the backs of her legs.

“Now has she, Lucinda?” he demanded.

Lucinda's jaw was clenched and her lips were tight. Her eyes were still

furious. "No!" she shouted.

He lost patience with his sister. He brought the strap down on her again and again, at least eight times. When he stopped his heart went out to Miss Downy, who was obviously cringing in despair, fully expecting she would get equal treatment. He walked to her side and tossed her skirts down.

"Leave us."

Miss Downy stood up from the desk and walked quickly out of the room, wiping her eyes, probably happy to escape.

* * *

She went to her room and tried to

nap, but found she couldn't sleep. She felt badly about her argument with Miss Watson, not because she felt she was in the wrong, but because she understood the woman's resentment had come from her own pain. Miss Watson had been serious about Mr. Bates as a suitor but she didn't imagine the lady could forgive his financial situation. Even if she did, it seemed unlikely the Colonel would approve of the match, either.

She sighed. She wanted to help—Miss Watson loved Mr. Bates, and unless she missed her guess, Mr. Bates loved Miss Watson, but they were hindered by his circumstances. She wondered whether the Colonel might help if he understood the full picture. He

was normally very quick to read a situation, but he had seemed distracted the night before after the ball, and she didn't think he realized how much Miss Watson cared about her would-be suitor. Certainly the Colonel had wealth to spare, and connections throughout all of England. He could surely help Mr. Bates find work, if he were willing.

After dinner she resolved herself to speak to the Colonel. She knocked on his door and entered, pacing about his study, the swish of the fabric of her shift irritating her sore bottom. He was sitting behind his desk, regarding her with his cool, intelligent gaze.

“What is it, Miss Downy?”

She stopped her pacing and examined the books on his shelf. She still hadn't decided whether she could actually speak to him or not.

“Is it about what happened this afternoon?”

Her hand went instinctively to her backside. She swallowed and turned to pace the length of the room again. “In a manner,” she said at last.

He sat behind his enormous desk and watched her with his impassive expression.

“Did you think your punishment was unfair?” he prompted.

“What?” she said in surprise. “No. Well, I mean...” She shook her head.

She really did not want to be in the position of analyzing whether his punishments were fair or unfair. It actually had made perfect sense to her the way that he had pitted them together against him in their punishment, asking each to concede that the other had had enough.

“It's... Colonel—”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“You see, I want to tell you something because I think you can help. But it's not my business, really.”

The Colonel raised his eyebrows. “That hasn't stopped you before,” he said sardonically. “Tell me.” His voice carried the quiet authority that she found

impossible to disobey. "Sit down," he said, indicating the chair opposite him.

She eyed the wooden chair doubtfully. "I'd rather stand, if you don't particularly mind."

She was exceedingly grateful that he didn't smirk at that. "Of course," he said smoothly. "I wasn't thinking."

She did walk to stand opposite him. She leaned on her hands on the desk, and then suddenly was discomfited by the realization that she had only hours earlier been bent over it, and she moved back abruptly. She thought she saw the tiniest twitch at the corner of the Colonel's mouth, but she might have imagined it. Again, she was grateful that

he did not have the temperament to tease.

She took a deep breath, then hesitated, meeting his eye warily. She sighed. "Miss Watson is in love with Mr. Bates. You did not notice?" She could tell by his surprised expression that he had not. "Your assessment of him last night dashed her hopes and that is why she was so quarrelsome today." She stopped suddenly, hoping it didn't sound like she was in here to blame the other woman.

The Colonel blinked several times. "Does Mr. Bates love Miss Watson?" he asked at last.

She shrugged. "I have not been taken into her confidence, but it appears to me that he does."

“I see. I see.” The Colonel stood up. “Thank you for sharing this information with me.” Then he interrupted himself. “Is there more?”

She shook her head. “No, sir.”

“Very well. Thank you. I do appreciate your trust in me.”

She could feel that he was dismissing her, but she felt unsettled. “You will try to help, sir?”

“I will consider what you have told me, Miss Downy,” he said noncommittally.

Disappointed, she curtsied and left the room.

* * *

Miss Downy held a very romantic view of marriage. He leaned back in his chair and considered what she'd just told him. Though she had not made a specific request, the underlying message was clear: he should arrange matters so that Lucinda could marry the man she loved.

But marriages based on nothing but love rarely lasted, in his experience. It takes more than love to weave a happy life together. A couple must be well-matched socially and temperamentally. It was better to choose a decent spouse rationally, because the love would follow if both parties were open to it. That was how it had been with Gracie.

He stood up and paced the room as

Miss Downy had just done. His objections to Mr. Bates were very real. It appeared the man was too lazy to earn his own living, which bothered him. But perhaps he would be willing to change? He shook his head. Why was he even thinking this way? Because Miss Downy wanted him to?

A sense of anxiety had come over him. If he believed in acting upon one's attraction for a member of another sex—if he believed in love as the basis of a marriage—then he must face the glaring truth that he had feelings for his governess. The manor had seemed empty while she was away and his disappointment over not having to offer for her had been clear. Yes, he loved

Amanda Downy. He sighed. It was true. Even if he looked at things rationally, he could see that she would make an excellent match for him. She was well-bred, intelligent, and well... quite beautiful. Moreover, she'd already taken on a partnership role with him if he considered the way she'd come to give her opinion, first about the children, and now about Lucinda. He had been afraid of the pain of losing another wife, yet wasn't it more painful to live alone this way, when he could have a chance at a second match?

Now what? He sat back down in his desk chair and did what he had been best at in the military: he devised a

strategy. He sent an invitation to the Livingston party to dine at the manor the following week.

On the evening of the dinner party, Bates sat beside Lucinda and worked his charm and Charles watched her reluctantly warm under his attentions. After dinner, Mr. Livingston suggested an evening walk, but Charles pulled Bates aside and invited him for a brandy in his study. The man looked torn between taking a moonlit stroll with Lucinda and hobnobbing with him, but good sense won out. "Thank you, Colonel, I'd like that," he said politely.

In the study, he poured them each a snifter of brandy. Then he asked him directly, "Are you interested in my

sister, Bates?”

Bates recovered from the bluntness of the question quickly and met him squarely in the eye. “Yes, Colonel, I am.”

“And what do you have to recommend yourself?”

“I am a trained architect. I have not taken a position in the past year because Mr. Livingston insisted I travel with him, but as of yesterday, I have submitted inquiries to several firms in London.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Because of my sister?” There was no reason to pussyfoot about. He wanted to understand Bates and his motivations

completely. He had already requested a full background check on the man from his lawyer, who he had lambasted for not checking Miss Downy's references.

“Yes,” he said simply, again meeting his eye directly.

He liked the man. He handled himself well and had taken appropriate steps toward making himself suitable. “I have some connections. I'm sure it would be easy enough to find you a position. That is, if you are truly qualified. Do you have anyone to recommend your work?”

“Yes, sir. My professors would recommend me and I spent three years in France working on public building projects. My employer there would

certainly write a recommendation.”

Charles nodded, satisfied. “If you are able to secure a position, you will have my blessing to offer for my sister.”

Bates looked stunned and exceedingly grateful. He shook his hand. “Thank you, Colonel. I will take very good care of her, I assure you.”

They finished their brandies in pleasant conversation and then headed outside to find the rest of their party. He still had the second half of his plan to execute. They met the Livingstons and Lucinda coming in the back door. “Where is Miss Downy?” he asked in what he hoped was a casual tone.

“Outside, taking a walk in the rose

garden with Mr. Bartlby,” Lucinda said absently, intent in conversation with her new friends.

He frowned and felt his heart pick up speed. Why was Miss Downy walking unchaperoned with Bartlby in the garden? It was highly improper, not to mention... he shuddered slightly at the jealousy that had just surged through his entire being. He opened the back door and walked toward the garden, telling himself that she might require his assistance if Bartlby was not behaving as a gentleman.

He stopped when he caught sight of them. Bartlby's head was bent to hers and they were kissing. As Bartlby withdrew, Miss Downy looked up over

his shoulder and caught Charles' eye with a look of dismay.

He turned abruptly and went into the house, his breath pulling shallowly in his ribs.

Chapter Seven

Oh no. Her heart constricted painfully. She started for the manor without a word, but Bartlby caught her arm. “I’m sorry, Miss Downy. Please forgive me. That was totally inappropriate. It’s just that—I haven’t stopped thinking of you since the night of that carriage accident.”

Mandy stared at him in shock. The image burning in her mind was that of the Colonel’s shocked and disappointed face. Her thoughts swirled around her in a jumble and her belly felt as though it were filled with lead.

She pulled her hand away from

Bartlby. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bartlby, I am not the sort of lady who kisses men in the garden." She started to walk back to the manor and he hurried to catch up with her.

"Please wait, Miss Downy. I did not mean to offend."

"I must retire now," she said, her voice thready with nerves.

"Of course, Miss Downy. I apologize again—I did not mean to be so forward. Will you allow me to call tomorrow?"

She could not even answer that question. "Excuse me, Mr. Bartlby," she said unevenly, stumbling into the manor and up the staircase without bidding the

rest of the guests goodnight. She closed the door to her room and leaned against the door. *Good heavens.*

The Colonel had seen her kissing Bartlby. What would he think? She felt ashamed that he had seen her behaving inappropriately. She'd had no idea Bartlby would kiss her, but she should have known better than to walk alone with him in the garden.

Would he consider her behavior grounds for dismissal? Or worse, would he force Bartlby to offer for her now that he had compromised her with that kiss? He was the sort of man to step in and act as her guardian since she hadn't one. The thought made her feel sick. She didn't want to marry Bartlby. The truth was,

when Bartlby had kissed her, all she could think was that she wished he were the Colonel. And now that the Colonel had witnessed their kiss, well, any chance there might have been for such a thing had evaporated. She sat down on her bed and blinked back tears.

Well, there was nothing she could do tonight. In the morning she would make it clear that she was not interested in Bartlby. She heard the guests departing in their carriage. She blew out her lantern and threw herself onto her bed, knowing she would not sleep well. She tossed and turned, seeing the Colonel's shocked face before her over and over again.

In the morning, she resolved to apologize to the Colonel for her inappropriate behavior and try to measure by his reaction whether he had any personal interest or not. But considering how wooden the Colonel could appear, her hopes for success were not too high. She went downstairs to the breakfast table, only to find Miss Watson sitting alone.

The young lady looked particularly pleased that morning. “Good morning, Miss Downy. How did you sleep?” she inquired politely.

Mandy eyed her suspiciously. “Not so well, actually. Where is the Colonel this morning?”

“He's gone to London,” Miss Watson said primly.

“What?”

“Yes, he said he had business to attend to and he left quite early.”

She sat down in shock, absorbing that information. Could it be he left because of what he'd seen in the garden? Surely not. Yet he'd mentioned nothing about leaving for London. She frowned until she caught Miss Watson studying her curiously.

“You must be happy?” the young woman said.

“Pardon?”

“About Mr. Bartlby's attentions?”

“Oh, well... no. I'm not, actually,”

she sighed.

Miss Watson peered at her. “Did he offer for you?”

“No,” she said frowning.

“Oh!” Miss Watson looked taken aback.

Mandy wondered if she knew he'd kissed her in the garden.

Miss Watson chewed her lip a moment. “Mr. Bates is applying for a position as an architect in London with a friend of Charles,” she said, obviously trying to temper her good news to match Mandy's more dismal look.

“That's wonderful,” Mandy said. “Does that mean you will consider him if he proposes?”

Miss Watson nodded happily. “He

already has. And Charles agreed, provided Bates gets the position. He even said he would give us the London apartment and an annual income,” she beamed happily.

“Congratulations!” Mandy said, genuinely happy for her. “When will you marry?”

“I don't know—I was thinking in a month's time. Three weeks to post the banns and an extra week to be sure my dress is ready.”

“That sounds perfect.” Mandy looked down at her toast and found she simply could not stomach it. Though she was happy for Miss Watson, the talk of weddings only compounded her own

distress. When the children appeared from the kitchen as a welcome diversion, she stood up hastily and called to them, “Come children, it's time for lessons!”

Bartlby called in the afternoon and asked her to take a walk with him. After some polite chatter, he launched into the subject on both their minds. “I want to apologize again for causing you distress last night. I was not planning to simply kiss you and say goodnight, Miss Downy. I had planned on asking for your hand in marriage.”

Mandy opened and closed her hands, feeling the sweat pooling in her palms. She felt slightly dizzy. “Mr. Bartlby,” she began after a deep breath.

“I just—I simply—I cannot accept your offer.”

“I know you're looking for a love match,” he said and for the thousandth time she cursed her unrestrained chatter from that night of the accident. “I love you, Miss Downy, and I think you could grow to love me, too.”

She blinked at him. “Mr. Bartlby, I —” She had no idea what to say. “I cannot,” she finished lamely.

He cocked his head and looked at her. “Because you don't love me?”

She nodded.

“Well, I'm going to continue to court you, Miss Downy, in hopes that I might win your heart eventually,” he

declared. “Will you allow me that much?”

She sighed. “On one condition,” she said.

“Yes?”

“No more kisses.”

Bartlby grinned at her. “You have my word,” he said and departed with a hopeful air that made her cringe.

She spent the next several days in a state of misery, waiting for the Colonel to return, worrying about what he thought of her. On the fourth day since the Colonel had left, Miss Watson said, “Miss Downy, you've been pacing around the manor for days now. Would you like to go for a walk?”

“What?” she asked, jerked out of

her miserable thoughts. “Oh, yes, I should like that.” She stood, retrieved her parasol and hovered near the door, waiting for Miss Watson. Unlike her, the young lady had been in an exceptional mood ever since the dinner party.

They strolled up the path and Miss Watson said, “I wrote to my brother and told him that you refused Bartlby's marriage proposal.”

Mandy stopped, surprised. “How did you know that I—” She stopped. Well of course it would be obvious that she had refused. Otherwise, she would have declared the good news.

“I told him you have been walking around the manor for the past three days

wringing your hands.”

“You didn't!”

“I did,” she said with a smug smile.

“And I wouldn't be surprised if he returns tonight.”

Mandy stared at Miss Watson, her surprise at their sudden camaraderie around the issue closest to her heart taking her by storm. How the young woman had deduced her feelings was beyond her. “Am I so obvious?”

Miss Watson smiled. “I don't know why I didn't notice it sooner. Well, perhaps I did, but I didn't want to admit it. There's an attraction on both sides, I am certain.”

Mandy flushed with pleasure. “You think so?”

Miss Watson nodded and took her hand. "I said I was certain."

"I hope you're right," she whispered, feeling terribly exposed and vulnerable.

* * *

The carriage pulled up at the manor and he sat in it for a moment, unwilling to climb out and enter. He had read and re-read Lucinda's letter several times, to be sure he understood what she was trying to tell him. If she was right, Miss Downy was interested in him. If she was wrong... he had still not managed to tamp down the emotions that had been storming through him since he'd seen

Bartlby kissing Miss Downy.

He sighed. He couldn't stay in the carriage all day. He climbed out and walked into the manor, simultaneously thrilled and dismayed when Miss Downy came to the entryway to greet him. He found he was unable to offer her more than a curt nod before he escaped into his study.

A few moments later there was a light tap on the door and he called, "Come in."

Miss Downy entered. He was standing at the sideboard, pouring himself a brandy. She approached him and stopped a few feet away.

"Colonel, I—I wanted to apologize to you for going to the courtyard with

Bartlby.”

He said nothing.

“I'm sorry because... I truly wish to retain your regard.”

“My regard,” he said coolly. “What kind of regard do you mean? My regard as your employer?”

“No. Yes. What I mean, is...” She took a deep breath and plunged forward, “Well, I was hoping for the kind of regard that Bartlby was offering.”

His heart jumped painfully and he felt a surge of pure possessive desire for her. He closed the distance between them, grabbed her, and kissed her roughly, his lips capturing her mouth like he was staking a claim. She gasped

when he released her and he could feel her trembling beneath his touch.

“That kind of regard?”

“Yes, sir,” she gasped.

He kissed her again—a bruising sort of kiss, almost a punishment, filled with all the heat and passion he had been trying to ignore since the day he'd met her. His tongue plunged into her mouth, taking her as completely as he could with just a kiss. She groaned and responded to his onslaught, meeting him with her own ardor, her little tongue tangling with his, her lips moving. When they parted, she stared up at him, swaying on her feet a bit as if she were dizzy.

“Will you marry me, Amanda

Downy?”

She gave a little bark of nervous laughter and then beamed a brilliant smile. “Yes, Colonel Watson.”

He kissed her again, a kiss that started as rough as the first two but ended soft and slow and tender. Her lips were eager, her tongue sweetly inquisitive. She was standing on her toes, leaning against him so that he could feel the apples of her breasts pressing into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her slender back, running one hand up and down it as the other tangled in her hair. He explored her mouth, enjoying the feel of her body against his as he reveled in the knowledge that she

was his now to kiss as often as he pleased. When they parted he stared down at her and stroked her cheek tenderly.

“You're willing to be 'trapped and financially comfortable with some stiff military officer'?” he inquired, reminding her of the words she had spoken that night of the carriage accident.

She groaned. “I was a fool. I wish I'd never opened my mouth that night.” She looked into his eyes earnestly. “If you recall, I said I'd rather be available for a love match.”

“Yes.”

She swallowed. “So in this case, the love match just happens to be with a

stiff military officer.”

His heart flipped in his chest. He gazed at her lovingly and ran his thumb along her lower lip. “Incredible,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows. “Incredible?”

“That you should love a stiff old man like me.”

Her eyes filled with tears and she stood on her tiptoes to reach his lips with her own. He met her halfway and showed her the sweetest of kisses, filled with love and tenderness and the promise of more to come.

* * *

“Are you stalling, Mrs. Watson?” the Colonel—Charles, as she was learning to call him—teased as she sat in her chemise, combing her long hair on their wedding night. Excitement and trepidation were bubbling up in her as her first night as a wife approached.

They'd had a double wedding. The Colonel had sent for her mother and sister, inviting both of them to live permanently at the manor as his guests. He and Mandy had married first, followed by Miss Watson and Mr. Bates.

Charles had taken her to Bath for their honeymoon. He came up behind her now and put his hands on her shoulders.

She whirled around, jumping a little. He took her hand and pulled her to standing.

“You don't need to be nervous, my sweet.” He bent his head and met her lips with his, gentle at first, then turning hungry—his tongue demanding access and caressing her lips and the inside of her mouth with insistence. She returned the kiss, reaching her arms around his neck, pressing her body to his. He groaned. “Come to bed,” he said hoarsely.

She followed him to the bed. “Charles,” she began anxiously.

“Yes?”

“When you were ill—when you thought I was Gracie—you told me wearing clothes to bed was against the

rule.”

Charles began to smile.

“Do you have a rule... about clothes in bed?” She wanted to know everything that was expected of her. She wanted to know how to please him.

Charles's smile had taken on a wolfish look—there was a hunger there that made her skin feel warm and prickly. He sat on the bed and pulled her to stand before him, between his knees. His hand caressed her thigh, moving slowly up and leaving a trail of heat on her leg. He lifted her chemise as he stroked, lifting it over the curve of her hips, sliding it higher as his large warm hand molded to the curve of her back.

His other hand assisted as he pulled the chemise up over her head and tossed it onto the floor. She shivered, not from the cold, but from the feeling of exposure. Charles's hands stroked up her sides to cup her breasts where he teased her nipples with his thumbs. Heat streaked through her like a fire as she felt her breasts lifting to meet his hands. He drew her closer and brought his lips to her breast, sucking and tugging on the nipple with his warm mouth. He flicked the peaking nipple with his tongue and she shivered at the sensation. He pulled back and surveyed her trembling form with satisfaction.

“Yes, little wife. The rule is no clothes in bed. I want full access to what

belongs to me,” he said firmly, but the husky sternness in his tone made her pulse race with desire rather than fear now.

“Yes, sir,” she said with a seductive smile.

He pulled her down onto the bed and kissed her smile, taking her lower lip gently between his teeth, tugging at it a bit. “Good girl,” he said when he released her. He sat up and peeled off his own clothing. She remembered his torso from the night he'd come out half dressed with his pistol in hand, but the sight of all of him in his full naked glory made her tremble with desire now. His entire body was sculpted with muscles,

the large frame providing the perfect canvas for their magnificence. Her desire was unfortunately matched by anxiety. She was following his lead, but her thoughts kept circling to worries about what was expected of her and how she would please him. She had no idea what she was doing.

He climbed onto the bed and crawled over her, making a line of kisses up her neck, causing heat to flood between her legs. His fingers reached down between them, as they had that time he'd thought she was Gracie. She tried not to stiffen when she felt his probing fingers, but she found her anxiety about what to do was growing. She squeezed her thighs together

instinctively.

“Hmm...” Charles said musingly. He rolled her onto her belly. She gasped as he brought his hand down sharply on her bare bottom.

“Wha—?”

Another slap. The delayed sting of the first slap was starting to set in as he continued spanking, slapping her over and over again. She alternately gasped and held her breath, wiggling to dodge his punishing hand, horrified that she'd somehow offended him. He stopped and rubbed his hot hand over her burning flesh and she moaned softly at the pleasure of it. What was he about?

His fingers dipped between her

legs again and he made a satisfied sound. “Ah,” he purred. “You see? Your body knows who its master is.”

She was confused for a moment, and then she realized that the way his fingers slid over her was different this time, her natural juices had lubricated the entrance to her sex and it was slick and open to him now. She parted her thighs and tipped her pelvis back, eager for his touch now. He chuckled and slapped her bottom again before rolling her onto her back. Charles slid his fingers up and down her honeyed folds, taking time to circle slowly around the nub at the top in a way that made her arch and pant with need. One of his fingers breached her entryway and slid

inside her and she stilled, feeling the intense reverberations of pleasure and heat it produced. He slid in a second finger, stretching her tight passage so that she flinched just a bit, but he went slowly enough that the pleasure outweighed the discomfort.

He slid the two fingers in and out, deeper and deeper until they reached the hilt and he curled them inside her, tickling her inner walls so that she thought she would burst from the tension building within her. "Please," she whimpered. She did not know what she was asking for, but Charles knew.

"Yes," he murmured in a hoarse voice, pushing his fingers still deeper

until she exploded under his touch, her muscles tightening around his fingers, ripples of release rolling through her entire body. He waited until the ripples had stopped and then he covered her mouth with his, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as he simultaneously pulled her knees up, positioning himself above her. Limp with spent need, she was his puppet now—there was no tension left in her, no unease or fear. She circled his neck with her arms and kissed him back, sucking at his tongue in encouragement.

She felt the hardened head of his sex pressing between her legs and she moaned softly as he rubbed her entrance with it. He slowly pushed inside of her until she winced and gasped at a sharp

pain. He stilled and lowered his lips to hers again, murmuring soft encouragement until she began to press her hips up at him, encouraging him to move again within her. He went slowly and she melted into the sensation of his thick length gliding in and out of her, winding up her need a second time until it became almost painful. She started to moan her protest and he smiled and picked up his pace, driving into her with a force that satisfied even as it gave her slight pain.

Just when she was feeling supremely uncomfortable, clawing at his shoulders for release, she broke, waves of pleasure cascading through her. He

paused until her shudders stopped, then drove into her again with vigor until he climaxed. She watched it with great interest—feeling an overwhelming sense of satisfaction at his obvious gratification. She curled into him afterward, tucked against his chest with his arm under her head, feeling the joy of their post-coital union.

“Charles... why did you spank me?” she ventured after a peaceful silence.

He stroked her hair. “It's just a way to help your body get ready. You felt the difference, didn't you?”

She nodded. “But why does *spanking* make me ready for... that?”

He chuckled. “I don't know. It's the

animal in us, I suppose.” He had slid his finger between her legs again and was stroking gently. She sighed with the delicious pleasure of it.

“But you don't always have to spank?” she asked uncertainly.

Charles roared with laughter. “No, my sweet,” he said, still chuckling. “You were just a little nervous, so your body wasn't ready. It won't take long before you warm up to me.”

“What if I don't?”

He gave another bark of laughter. “Then I will have the distinct pleasure of spanking you every time.”

She giggled. “Aha! Now I understand it—you enjoy spanking me!”

“Mmm hmm,” he said lazily, his finger still stroking all around the outside of her sex.

“You were aroused that night you spanked me with the ruler, weren't you?” she demanded.

He chuckled. “You felt it, didn't you? I'm sorry for that. I never should have taken you over my lap that way.”

“Were you always... aroused? I mean, every time you punished me?”

“No. Well, yes, a little. I've wanted you since the day I first met you on that carriage.”

Mandy pushed herself to lean on her elbow so she could see his face. She was shocked and thrilled by this

admission.

“It's true. So I wasn't aroused by punishing you, because inflicting pain like that isn't pleasurable, but I was certainly moved by the sight of having you bared to me.”

“Were you moved by punishing Julie?” she asked suspiciously, feeling a flicker of jealousy.

He laughed. “Don't tell me you're jealous when I spank another woman?”

“You didn't answer the question,” she said stubbornly.

He stroked her hair back from her face. “No, my sweet, I was not moved in the slightest by punishing Julie.”

She settled back against his chest. “Good,” she said.

* * *

After Gracie, Charles never thought he would want another wife, but his new happiness with Mandy eclipsed the pain of Gracie's loss. The children had also been ecstatic at the news that Mandy was to become their new mother and she had slid into the new role seamlessly, with Tom already calling her Mama by the time they married. Both children had taken to Mandy's relations instantly as well, relishing the warm attention they were paid by their new aunt and grandmother.

And teaching Mandy the delights of the marital bed was a pleasure beyond

expectation. She was so innocent, yet eager to please. On the second night of their honeymoon he found her waiting for him under the sheets.

“Did you follow the rules?” he asked teasingly, gently tugging at the sheet. She clung to it for a moment, but then released it, allowing him to expose her magnificent naked body. “Good girl,” he murmured approvingly.

Her mouth curved into a smile and he marveled at how quickly her sweet innocence had turned coy. She was more tantalizing than any woman he had ever met. He pulled the sheet all the way off the bed and surveyed her full glory. A blush rose to her cheeks as he took his time absorbing every beautiful detail—

the way her hair fanned out on the pillow, the delicate lines of her collarbone leading to the perfect notch at her throat. Her pink-tipped breasts were a perfect handful—ripe and firm, made for suckling. Her belly was flat, her waist narrow, accentuating the flare of her hips. Beneath the dark silky curls between her legs he could see the perfect lips of her sex. It beckoned to him and he knelt above her and parted her thighs, putting his head between them. He licked into her hot core, sucking and penetrating, then withdrawing to trace circles around her pleasure center with his tongue. She bucked against him and he grasped her

bottom to hold her firmly in place, torturing her with his tongue. She arched and moaned and opened like a flower for him, her fingers coming down to tangle in his hair. "Charles," she moaned with an edge of urgency in her voice. He slid a finger inside her and searched for the little button of flesh deep within her that hardened when he touched it. When he found it, she began to thrash against his mouth and hand, making little whimpering cries that built into one loud cry as her muscles contracted around his finger.

He sat on the bed and pulled her across his lap, his hand connecting with her perfect upturned bottom with a resounding slap. She jumped and

wiggled as he continued to redden her backside. The sight of her beautiful, undulating bottom was almost more than he could stand, and it gave him a thrill of triumph that he could claim it as his own now. Amanda Downy belonged to him.

“Charles, no!” she protested. “I was ready this time! You can't do that!”

“Who says I can't, Mrs. Watson?” he said with mock sternness.

She giggled and seemed to actually raise her bottom to meet his hand. He gave her three more smacks and then laid his hand on her warmed bottom and lightly stroked the luscious curves. One finger slid in between her cheeks and she squeezed them together in protest.

He gave her another spank, chuckling. “Don't worry, my little wife, I'm not going to take you *there* tonight. We'll save that for another time. I just want to look at what belongs to me.” He slid two fingers between her legs and found that after her spanking, her sex was even more slick and swollen, if that were possible. He murmured in approval. “I'm going to take you from behind this time,” he said thickly, sliding her off his lap and onto the bed. Instinctively, she knew to part her legs and roll her hips back for him and he slid into her easily. He went gently, knowing there was probably still soreness from the previous night, but she lifted her hips back to welcome him with each gliding stroke, seemingly eager for

it. He watched with fascination the way her back arched and the way her fingers burrowed into the quilt, her mouth open to let out soft grunts and groans. As the intensity built, she thrust back at him each time he met her, creating a friction that added to the delicious sensation of her hot, wet sheath. He slapped her round bottom a few more times before he held her hips firmly and pounded into his climax. She followed immediately afterward, letting out a cry of triumph, shivering to her toes with the sensation.

“Good girl. That was very nice,” he murmured approvingly in her ear as he lowered himself down beside her and stroked her back.

She rolled into him and threw a leg over his hips. “I want to learn to please you,” she said softly, her fingers exploring the muscles of his chest.

“You already do please me,” he said, stroking her lips with his finger before reaching for her and kissing her deeply. “You please me very much.”

The End

The Knight's Prisoner (Coming Soon from Renee Rose)

Danewyn, a tavern prostitute, has always been cursed with the Sight—the ability to see into the unknown. It is an ability she has learned to hide from others. But when she slips and makes a prediction about the Red Fox, the rightful king of Briton, she is overheard by a member of his band of rogue soldiers. Captured and carried off for questioning, she finds herself prisoner to Sir Ferrum, an enormous knight with scars covering half his face. She quickly

discovers that Ferrum's discipline can be harsh and unyielding, yet his firmness is matched by a gentleness that she has difficulty reconciling. As the two grow more intimate, Danewyn must decide whether to continue her plans for escape or accept her new role as Ferrum's woman and Seer to the Red Fox.

Sir Ferrum has never had a woman that he didn't have to pay for, and he believes the little whore Danewyn's sexual offerings are given only to gain favor. Even so, it is impossible for him to keep his hands off her, and she seems unafraid of the harsh animal passion she ignites in him. But things threaten to fall apart for them when she chooses to wield sex as a weapon for the Red Fox's

cause. How can he ever trust that what she offered to him was real?

Excerpt

She was smart. She didn't struggle with him, surely knowing that she couldn't win any battle of strength, but her eyes darted around as if she were measuring her escape routes. She took in where the horses were tied and where the men were gathered. He could practically feel her making her plans to get away.

He took off his sword belt and slipped the scabbards from it as he sat down on the stool with an arm around

her waist. She was exquisitely beautiful. Her coloring was very light—clearly she was of Viking, Saxon, or Angle blood. It was said the Angles had been so named because they looked like angels. If that were true, she was surely Angle-born because he'd never seen anyone who looked so lovely. Her hair was a pale blond and her skin was light. She had wide-set blue eyes that were angled down at the out corners, giving her an innocent look, with lashes that were so pale they were almost invisible.

He'd seen no smile from her since they arrived, although he'd seen a fake-looking one when she was trolling for men back at the tavern in London. He had a feeling the pinched, serious look to

her face was a habitual expression for her. He had a strong desire to discover just what would ease that worry for her—to protect her from the life that had obviously given her hardship.

“Let's get your punishment over with, shall we?” he asked. She was already breathing quickly in anticipation of the spanking. He pulled her gently across his lap and dragged her skirts up over her legs to bare her pert little bottom. She squeezed her cheeks together when the air hit them. He rested his hand on the soft orbs.

He tried to remember whether he'd ever whipped a woman before. The way his cock had gone rock hard made him

doubt it. He would surely have remembered such an experience. He doubled the sword belt and cracked it down on her bottom with about a quarter of his strength. She jerked in response, but made no sound. He continued, giving her a few seconds between each stroke to recover before delivering the next one, watching the way the her skin turned from cream, to a light rosy blush, to a deeper crimson as the lines of the belt started to stand up in puffed striation. She still hadn't made a sound, but she wriggled plenty, which did not help alleviate his intense arousal for her. He ended the whipping with five much harder strokes—his foster father had always done it that way, to show how

much worse it could have been. They got a sound out of her—she cried out with each one, her voice starting to take on the sounds of sobbing by the last one. He lifted her to stand in front of him and rubbed her hot cheeks. Her skirts were still up, so he was caressing her bare bottom and he suddenly realized how perfectly improper it was. He jerked his hands away and allowed the skirts to fall down to her ankles.

She had tears glinting on her lashes and her chin quivered, but surprisingly, she didn't look angry with him, which confirmed his impression that life had been hard for her—as if she'd come to expect pain and humiliation. She

lowered slowly to kneel between his knees and stunned him by reaching to free his erection from his leggings. “You don't have to do that,” he choked, but her mouth was already opening, and the part of him that desperately wanted her mouth on his cock overruled the part of him that felt it was wrong.

“You want it,” she murmured, and he gasped at the feeling of cold air on his moistened cock.

He let his head fall back and forced himself to breathe. “Aye,” he grunted, knowing full well he was being played by her, and not caring in the slightest. She tightened her lips and rubbed up and down just over the head of his penis several times, then opened her mouth

wider and took as much of his length as she was able. His cock jerked in happy response to her attentions and he groaned. She sucked hard on the outstrokes, using her fingers to massage his ball sac and the fleshy area behind it. Though he'd just had a whore several hours ago in London, he felt like a young man who'd never been touched by a woman before. It took her no time at all to bring him to the brink of ecstasy and he warned her before he spilled his seed, but she kept him into her mouth, swallowed, then sat back on her haunches and studied him, still without a smile.

He stroked her head, then buried

his fingers in her hair. It was starting to come free of its braid, and he worked to unwind it, the silky waves spreading over her shoulders like a mantle. “You didn't have to do that,” he said hoarsely.

She shrugged. “I chose to. And you wanted it.”

He shook his head. “Aye, but not like that.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?” she said, standing from her crouch.

“I mean, I would want it to be freely offered, not given by a woman I've captured and beaten, who has no other options but to suck my cock.”

He'd always had a habit of saying the exact wrong thing to a woman. This was no exception. A look of pure fury

darkened her face and her fist swung in an arc and hit him in the mouth. He allowed the blow to fall, partly because he figured he must deserve it, and partly because he thought it was amusing that she would try to hit him.

She packed more force than he would have guessed was possible for such a little thing. His lip split and blood ran down his chin. Her eyes widened when she saw the blood and a look of panic crossed her face. He snatched her up quickly because she looked like she was about to bolt. She thrashed around as he held her by the waist and he considered whether he ought to spank her again. He didn't want to. He sat back

down on the stool and pulled her onto his lap, holding her tightly until she stopped struggling.

“I'm hopeless with women,” he admitted, hoping to soften her with his own humility. “I always say the wrong thing.”

He felt all the fight go out of her. She twisted to look at him.

“How did that offend you?”

She frowned and looked for a moment as though she wanted to hit him again, but seemed to reconsider. She pressed her lips together and looked away.

“No. You can't hit me and then give me the silent treatment.” He took her little jaw in his hand and turned her face

back to him with his eyebrows raised in a warning.

She flushed a little and her shoulders sagged. She looked at him sullenly for another long moment before she said, “I meant that not as a bargaining tool—I gave it freely.” She shrugged. “To repay you for your gentleness with me.”

His heart lurched at that. *Gentleness?* He couldn't recall any woman who had ever found him gentle. He had always been Ferrum the Giant, the rough, ugly ogre who terrified women with his scars, his size, and his lack of finesse. He swallowed and stroked the hair back from her face. “I

apologize. I meant you no offense. I just don't want you to—never mind. I'll shut it before I offend you again.”

At that, she smiled, reluctantly. It was the first genuine smile he'd seen on her and it confirmed that she was truly an angel from heaven. There was a dimple on one cheek, her teeth were white and straight, and the warmth that came into her face transformed it. She wiped the blood from his chin with her thumb, rubbing it on his tunic and then licking her thumb to wipe off the blood that had dried. Apparently dissatisfied, she leaned forward, her little pink tongue starting to extend. *God's teeth.* His breath hitched as she met his face with her tongue, actually licking his cut

clean like a cat. He groaned and his hands tightened on her, the need he had just spent returning anew.

“You're not going to set me free, are you, Sir Ferrum?”

He shook his head to clear it and blinked at her. “It's not for me to decide,” he answered honestly, though he knew the answer was no. She studied him and he could see the intelligence in her eyes. She said nothing but he was almost certain she was making her plans for escape.

“Do you need to relieve yourself before bed?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said, standing up. He led her out of the tent to the trees to take

care of the necessities. Back in the tent he wrapped a bit of linen around her wrists before binding them with the rough rope. Then he bound one of his own wrists to hers, so that if she tried to work them free in the night he would feel it. He led her to his bedroll and lay down, pulling her down as he lowered himself. They lay facing one another, their bound hands between them. He watched her eye the bonds.

“Forget about escaping, little flower. You won't get away and if you try it, the whipping I give you will be so much worse than the one you I gave you tonight.”

Her jaw set at that, which confirmed his suspicions. He was going

to have to keep a very close eye on her.

More Books by Renee Rose

Deathless Love

Kate Strand has always had a crush on Dominic, the owner of the club where her band plays, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that he's a vampire. But when he sniffs out her predilection for spanking and brings her fantasies to life one night, she falls head over heels. The trouble is, Dom is allergic to relationships, or so it seems.

Dom loves knowing how to turn Kate on and domination comes naturally to him. But he believes he likes Kate more than is good for either of them. In his mind, mortals and vampires don't

mix, and the best thing he can do for her is stay far away. But when another vampire targets Dom, Kate gets tangled in the dangerous web and Dom finds himself prepared to sacrifice his own life to save hers. Can he get her back alive? And if so, will they find a way to be together?

Betrothed

Young Lady Julia is offered by the king as a war prize to the Duke of Pembroke after her father tries to forcibly take the Duke's land. Worried that she will suffer as a result of his animosity, she runs away dressed as a page, only to unwittingly end up in the very same Duke's army.

Bronson, the Duke of Pembridge, is not fooled by the little page's disguise for a moment, and offers the lady his protection, not realizing that he is the man she is hiding from. As the attraction between the two grows, Julia is ultimately forced to face her fate and learn her place as the wife of a man she's come to love.

Loving Lucia

Marco Donarati, the Count of Parma, had no interest in taking a new wife. He got his pleasure from the working ladies, and that suited him just fine. Marco's greatest passion is reserved for his fledgling winery, and therefore he cannot bring himself to

refuse when Italy's leading wine maker, Don Edoardo Dante, offers him a source of funds with which to improve his vineyards. In return, the Count reluctantly agrees to make Dante's red-headed daughter Lucia the next Countess. When he makes the deal, Marco never suspects that he might actually grow to care about his lovely young wife.

Passionate and eager to please, Lucia must navigate her new role as Countess to a husband who holds her at arms' length. When the Count becomes guardian to her twin sister as well, things really heat up. Tested by trials, betrayals, and jealousy, Lucia and Marco must find their way together and often the quickest route is with her bent

over his knee for a bare bottom spanking. Will her wholehearted submission and love be enough to break down her husband's resistance and win his heart for her?

Courting Celia

Celia Dante is notorious for her headstrong ways and getting into mischief. This time, she's out to seduce Tomi, her brother-in-law's handsome steward and the man she cut her teeth flirting with as a young girl. But in addition to losing her virginity to the rakish Duke of Tuscany, her colorful past includes joining her twin sister and brother-in-law in their bed, a fact which Tomi has a hard time

swallowing.

When Tomi seems to reject her, Celia's pride spurs her to set herself against him, in spite of the fact that he does not hesitate to pull her over his knee for a sound spanking. As her spirited actions escalate, Tomi must decide whether he's willing to put aside his jealousy and fully take her in hand, or whether he will let her go and leave Parma forever.

Renee Rose Links

You can find author interviews, excerpts of upcoming books, and general thoughts from Renee Rose via her blog, her Facebook and Twitter pages, and her Goodreads profile, using the following links:

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