

"Felix has gone lame," he muttered, leaping down from the saddle.

"Is he all right?" she inquired, accepting his wordless offer to help her dismount as well.

"He'll be fine," Michael said, kneeling in the rain to inspect the gelding's front left leg. His knees sank instantly into the muddy earth, ruining his riding breeches. "He can't carry the both of us, however. Couldn't even manage just you, I fear." He stood, scanning the horizon, determining just where on the property they were. "We'll have to make for the gardener's cottage," he said, impatiently pushing his sodden hair from his eyes. It slid right back over his brow.

"The gardener's cottage?" Francesca echoed, even though she knew perfectly well what he was talking about. It was a small, one-room structure, uninhabited since the current gardener, whose wife had recently been delivered of twins, had moved into a larger dwelling on the other side of Kilmartin. "Can't we go home?" she asked, a little desperately. She didn't need to be alone with him, trapped in a cozy little cottage with, if she remembered correctly, a rather large bed.

"It will take us over an hour on foot," he said grimly, "and the storm is growing worse."

He was right, drat it all. The sky had taken on a queer, greenish hue, the clouds touched with that strange light that preceded a storm of exquisite violence. "Very well," she said, trying to swallow her apprehension. She didn't know which frightened her more—the thought of being stuck out of doors in the storm or trapped inside a small cottage with Michael.

"If we run, we can be there in just a few minutes," Michael said. "Or rather, you can run. I'll have to lead Felix. I don't know how long it will take for him to make the journey."

Francesca felt her eyes narrowing as she turned to him. “You didn’t do this on purpose, did you?”

He turned to her with a thunderous expression, matched rather terrifyingly by the streak of lightning that flashed through the sky.

“Sorry,” she said hastily, immediately regretting her words. There were certain things one *never* accused a British gentleman of, the foremost of which was deliberate injury to an animal, for *any* reason. “I apologize,” she added, just as a clap of thunder shook the earth. “Truly, I do.”

“Do you know how to get there?” he yelled over the storm. She nodded.

“Can you start a fire while you wait for me?”

“I can try.”

“Go, then,” he said curtly. “Run and get yourself warm. I’ll be there soon enough.”

She did, although she wasn’t quite sure whether she was running to the cottage or away from him.

And considering the fact that he’d be mere minutes behind her, did it really matter?

But as she ran, her legs aching and her lungs burning, the answer to that question didn’t seem terribly important. The pain of the exertion took over, matched only by the sting of the rain against her face. But it all felt strangely appropriate, as if she deserved no more.

And, she thought miserably, she probably didn’t.

By the time Michael pushed open the door to the gardener’s cottage, he was soaked to the bone and shivering like a madman. It had taken far longer than he had anticipated to lead Felix to the gardener’s cottage, and then, of course, he’d been

faced with the task of finding a decent spot to tie the injured gelding, since he couldn't very well leave him under a tree in an electrical storm. He'd finally managed to fashion a makeshift stall in what used to be a chicken shed, but the end result was that by the time he made it into the cottage, his hands were bleeding and his boots were dotted with a foul substance that the rain had inexplicably not managed to wash off.

Francesca was kneeling by the fireplace, attempting to spark a flame. From the sound of her mutterings, she wasn't meeting with much success.

"Dear heavens!" she exclaimed. "What happened to you?"

"I had trouble finding a place to tie Felix," he explained gruffly. "I had to build him a shelter."

"With your own two hands?"

"I had no other tools," he said with a shrug.

She glanced nervously out the window. "Will he be all right?"

"I hope so," Michael replied, sitting down on a three-legged stool to remove his boots. "I couldn't very well slap his rump and send him home on that injured leg."

"No," she said, "of course not." And then her face took on a horrified expression, and she jumped to her feet, exclaiming, "Will *you* be all right?"

Normally, he'd have welcomed her concern, but it would have been far easier to milk it if he knew what the devil she was talking about. "I beg your pardon?" he asked politely.

"The malaria," she said, with a touch of urgency. "You're soaked, and you've just had an attack. I don't want you to—" She stopped, clearing her throat and visibly squaring her shoulders. "My concern does not mean that I am more chari-

tably inclined to you than I was an hour ago, but I do not wish for you to suffer a relapse.”

He thought briefly about lying to gain her sympathies, but instead he just said, “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Are you certain?”

“Quite. Chills don’t bring on the disease.”

“Oh.” She took a bit of time to digest that information. “Well, in that case . . .” Her words trailed off, and her lips tightened unpleasantly. “Carry on, then,” she finally said.

Michael gave her an insolent salute and then went back to work on his boots, giving the second one a firm yank before gingerly picking up both by the tops and setting them down near the door. “Don’t touch those,” he said absently, moving over to the fireplace. “They’re filthy.”

“I couldn’t get the fire started,” she said, still standing awkwardly near the hearth. “I’m sorry. I haven’t much experience in that area, I’m afraid. I did find some dry wood in the corner, though.” She motioned to the grate, where she’d set down a couple of logs.

He set to work igniting a flame, his hands still stinging a bit from the scrapes he’d incurred clearing the bramble out of the chicken shed for Felix. He welcomed the pain, actually. Minor as it was, it still gave him something to think about other than the woman standing behind him.

She was angry.

He should have expected that. He did expect it, in truth, but what he didn’t expect was how much it would sting his pride, and, in all honesty, his heart. He had known, of course, that she wouldn’t suddenly declare her undying love for him after one episode of relentless passion, but he’d been just

enough of a fool that a tiny little piece of him had hoped for such an outcome, all the same.

Who would have thought, after all his years of bad behavior, that he'd emerge such a hopeless romantic?

But Francesca would come around, he was fairly certain of that. She'd have to. She'd been compromised—quite thoroughly, he thought with some measure of satisfaction. And while she'd not been a virgin, that still meant something to a principled woman like Francesca.

He was left with a decision—did he wait out her anger, or did he needle and push until she accepted the inevitability of the situation? The latter was sure to leave him bruised and gasping, but he rather thought it presented a greater chance of success.

If he left her alone, she would think the problem into oblivion, maybe find a way to pretend nothing had ever happened.

“Did you get it started?” he heard her ask from across the room.

He fanned a spark for a few more seconds, then let out a satisfied exhale when tiny orange flames began to flicker and lick. “I’ll have to nurse it along for a little while longer,” he said, turning around to look at her. “But yes, it should be going strong quite soon.”

“Good,” she said succinctly. She took a few steps backward until she was butted up against the bed. “I’ll be right here.”

He couldn’t help but crack a wry smile at that. The cottage held a single room. Where else did she think she was going to go?

“You,” she said, with much the air of an unpopular governor, “can remain over there.”

He followed the line of her pointed finger to the opposite corner. "Really?" he drawled.

"I think it's best."

He shrugged. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Fine." And then he stood and began to strip off his clothing.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

He smiled to himself, keeping his back to her. "Keeping to my corner," he said, tossing the words lightly over his shoulder.

"You are taking your clothes off," she said, somehow managing to sound shocked and haughty at the same time.

"I suggest you do the same," he said, frowning as he noticed a streak of blood on his sleeve. Damn, but his hands really were a mess.

"I most certainly will not," Francesca said.

"Hold this, will you?" he said, tossing her his shirt. She shrieked as it hit her in the chest, which brought him no small measure of satisfaction.

"Michael!" she exclaimed, hurling the garment back at him.

"Sorry," he said in his most unrepentant voice. "Thought you might like to use it as a cloth to wipe up."

"Put your shirt back on," she ground out.

"And freeze?" he asked, lifting one arrogant brow. "Malaria or no, I have no wish to catch a chill. Besides, it's nothing you haven't seen before." And then, over her gasp, he added, "No, wait. I do beg your pardon. You haven't seen it. I didn't manage to get anything more than my trousers off last night, did I?"

“Get out,” she said, her voice low and furious.

He just chuckled and cocked his head toward the window, which was thrumming with the sound of the rain against the glass. “I don’t think so, Francesca. You’re stuck with me for the duration, I’m afraid.”

As if to prove his point, the small cottage shook down to its foundations with the force of thunder.

“You might want to turn around,” Michael said conversationally. Her eyes widened slightly in incomprehension, so he added, “I’m about to remove my breeches.”

She let out a little grunt of outrage, but she turned.

“Oh, and get off the blanket,” he called out, peeling off his sodden clothing. “You’re soaking it.”

For a second he thought she would plant her bottom even more firmly against it, just to defy him, but her good sense must have won out, because she stood and yanked the coverlet from the bed, shaking off whatever drops she’d left behind.

He walked over—it took only four steps with his lengthy stride—and pulled the other blanket off for himself. It wasn’t as substantial as the one she held, but it would do. “I’m covered,” he called out, once he was safely back in his corner.

She turned around. Slowly, and with only one eye open.

Michael fought the urge to shake his head at her. Truly, this all seemed rather after the fact, given what had transpired the night before. But if it made her feel better to grasp at the shreds of her maidenly virtue, he was willing to allow her the boon . . . for the rest of the morning, at least.

“You’re shivering,” he said.

“I’m cold.”

“Of course you are. Your dress is soaked.”

She didn't say anything, just shot him a look that told him she did not plan to remove her clothing.

"Do what you wish, then," he said, "but at least come sit near the fire."

She looked hesitant.

"For God's sake, Francesca," he said, his patience growing thin, "I hereby vow not to ravish you. At least not this morning, and not without your permission."

For some reason that made her cheeks burn with even greater ferocity, but she must have still held him and his word in some regard, because she crossed the room and sat near the fire.

"Warmer?" he asked, just to provoke her.

"Quite."

He stoked the fire for the next few minutes, carefully tending it to ensure that the flames would not die out, stealing glances at her profile from time to time. After a while, once her expression had softened a bit, he decided to press his luck, and he said, quite softly, "You never did answer my question last night."

She didn't turn. "What question was that?"

"I believe I asked you to marry me."

"No, you didn't," she replied, her voice quite calm, "you informed me that you believed we should be married and then proceeded to explain why."

"Is that so?" he murmured. "How remiss of me."

"*Don't* take that as an invitation to make your proposal right now," she said sharply.

"You'd have me waste this fabulously romantic moment?" he drawled.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought her lips might have tightened with the barest hint of contained humor.

"Very well," he said, in his most magnanimous tone, "I won't ask you to marry me. Forget that a gentleman would insist upon it, after what happened—"

"If you were a gentleman," she cut in, "it wouldn't have happened."

"There were two of us there, Francesca," he reminded her softly.

"I know," she said, and her tone was so bitter, he regretted having provoked her.

Unfortunately, once he'd made the decision not to taunt her further, he was left with nothing to say. Which didn't seem to speak well of him, but there it was. So he held silent, pulling the woolen blanket more tightly around his barely clad body, surreptitiously eyeing her from time to time, trying to determine if she was becoming overchilled.

He'd hold his tongue, forked though it may be, to spare her feelings, but if she were endangering her health . . . well, then, all bets were off.

But she wasn't shivering, nor did she show any signs of feeling excessively cold, save for the way she was holding up various sections of her skirt toward the fire, vainly attempting to dry the fabric. Every now and then she looked as if she might speak, but then she'd just close her mouth again, wetting her lips with her tongue and letting out little sighs.

And then, without even looking at him, she said, "I will consider it."

He quirked a brow, waiting for her to elaborate.

"Marrying you," she clarified, still keeping her eyes on the fire. "But I won't give you an answer now."

“You might be carrying my child,” he said softly.

“I am very much aware of that.” She wrapped her arms around her bent knees and hugged. “I will give you an answer once I have that answer.”

Michael’s nails bit into his palms. He’d made love to her in part to force her hand—he couldn’t get around that unsavory fact—but not in an attempt to impregnate her. He’d thought to bind her to him with passion, not with an unplanned pregnancy.

And now she was essentially telling him that the only way she would marry him was for the sake of a baby.

“I see,” he said, thinking his voice uncommonly calm, given the hot rush of fury surging through his blood.

Fury he probably had no right to feel, but it was there nevertheless, and he was not enough of a gentleman to ignore it.

“It’s too bad I promised not to ravish you this morning, then,” he said dangerously, unable to resist a predatory smile.

Her head whipped around to face him.

“I could—how do they say it,” he mused, lightly scratching his jawline, “seal the deal. Or at the very least, enjoy myself immensely while I try.”

“Michael—”

“But how nice for me,” he cut in, “that according to my watch”—he was near enough to where his coat lay on the table to pluck his pocketwatch out into the open—“we’ve only five minutes to noon.”

“You wouldn’t,” she whispered.

He felt little humor, but he smiled all the same. “You leave me little choice.”

“Why?” she asked, and he really didn’t know what she

was asking, but he answered her, anyway, with the one bit of truth he couldn't escape:

"Because I have to."

Her eyes widened.

"Will you kiss me, Francesca?" he asked.

She shook her head.

She was only five feet from him, and they were both sitting on the floor. He crawled closer, his heart racing when she didn't scoot away. "Will you let me kiss you?" he whispered.

She didn't move.

He leaned toward her.

"I told you I wouldn't seduce you without your permission," he said, his voice husky, his words falling mere inches from her lips.

Still, she didn't move.

"Will you kiss me, Francesca?" he asked again.

She swayed.

And he knew she was his.



Chapter 19

. . . I do believe Michael might be considering a return home. He does not say so directly in his letters, but I cannot discount a mother's intuition. I know that I should not pull him away from all his successes in India, but I think that he misses us. Wouldn't it be lovely to have him home?

—from Helen Stirling to the Countess of Kilmartin, nine months prior to the Earl of Kilmartin's return from India

As she felt his lips touch hers, Francesca could only wonder at the loss of her sanity. Once again, Michael had asked her permission. Once again, he had given her the opportunity to slide away, to reject him and keep herself at a safe distance.

But once again, her mind had been completely enslaved by her body, and she simply was not strong enough to deny the quickening of her breath, or the pounding of her heart.

Or the slow, hot tingle of anticipation she felt as his large, strong hands slid down her body, moving ever closer to the heart of her femininity.

“Michael,” she whispered, but they both knew that her plea was not one of rejection. She wasn’t asking him to stop—she was begging him to continue, to feed her soul as he had the night before, to remind her of all the reasons she loved being a woman, and to teach her the heady bliss of her own sensual power.

“Mmmm,” was his only response. His fingers kept busy with the buttons on her frock, and even though the fabric was still damp and awkward, he divested her of it in record time, leaving her clad only in her thin cotton chemise, made almost transparent by the rain.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, gazing down at the outline of her breasts, clearly defined under the white cotton. “I can’t—I don’t—”

He didn’t say anything more, which she found puzzling, and she looked at his face. These weren’t just words to him, she realized with a jolt of surprise. His throat was working with some emotion she didn’t think she’d ever seen on him before.

“Michael?” she whispered. His name was a question, although she wasn’t quite sure what she was asking.

And he, she was fairly certain, didn’t know how to answer. At least not with words. He scooped her into his arms and then carried her to the bed, stopping at the edge of the mattress to peel away her chemise.

This was where she could stop, Francesca reminded herself. She could end it here. Michael wanted her—badly, she

could see quite visibly. But he would stop if she just said the word.

But she couldn't. No matter how hard her brain argued for reason and clarity, her lips could do nothing but sway toward his, leaning in for a kiss, desperate to prolong the contact.

She wanted this. She wanted him. And even though she knew it was wrong, she was too wicked to stop.

He'd made her wicked.

And she wanted to revel in it.

"No," she said, the word crossing her lips with awkward bluntness.

His hands froze.

"I will do it," she said.

His eyes found hers, and she found herself drowning in those quicksilver depths. There were a hundred questions there, not one of which she was prepared to answer. But there was one thing she knew for herself, even if she would never speak the words aloud. If she was going to do this, if she was unable to refuse her own desire, then by God, she would do this in every way. She would take what she wanted, steal what she needed, and at the end of the day, if she managed to come to her senses and put an end to the madness, she would have had one erotic afternoon, one sizzling interlude during which she was in charge.

He'd awakened the wanton within her, and she wanted her revenge.

With one hand on his chest, she pushed him back onto the bed, and he stared up at her with fiery eyes, his lips parted with desire as he watched her in disbelief.

She took a step back, then reached down and lightly

grasped the hem of her chemise. "Do you want me to take it off?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Say it," she demanded. She wanted to know if he was beyond words. She wanted to know if she could reduce him to madness, enslave him to his needs, the way he'd done to her.

"Yes," he gasped, the word coming out hoarse and ripped.

Francesca was no innocent; she'd been married for two years to a man with healthy and active desires, a man who had taught her to celebrate the same in herself. She knew how to be brazen, understood how it could whip up her own urgency, but nothing could have prepared her for the electrical charge of this moment, for the decadent thrill of stripping for Michael.

Or the staggering rush of heat she felt when she raised her gaze to his, and watched him watching her.

This was power.

And she loved it.

With deliberate slowness, she edged the hem up, starting just above her knees, and then sliding up her thighs until she'd nearly reached her hips.

"Enough?" she teased, licking her lips into a sultry half-smile.

He shook his head. "More," he demanded.

Demanded? She didn't like that. "Beg me," she whispered.

"More," he said, more humbly.

She gave him a nod of approval, but just before she let him see the thatch of her womanhood she turned around, wiggling the chemise up and over her bottom, then across her back and finally over her head.

His breath was coming hot and heavy over his lips; she could hear every whisper of it, almost feel it caressing her back. But still she didn't turn around. Instead she let out a slow, seductive moan and slid her hands up the sides of her body, curving slightly to the back as she passed over her *derrière*, then moving to the front when she reached her breasts. And then, even though she knew he couldn't see her, she squeezed.

He would know what she was doing.

And it would drive him wild.

She heard rustling on the bed, heard the wooden frame creak and groan, and she let out one sharp command:

"Don't move."

"Francesca," he moaned, and his voice was closer. He must've sat up, must've been seconds away from reaching for her.

"Lie down," she said in soft warning.

"Francesca," he said again, but now there was a hint of desperation in his voice.

It made her smile. "Lie down," she repeated, still not looking at him.

She heard him panting, knew that he hadn't moved, that he was still trying to decide what to do.

"Lie down," she said, one last time. "If you want me."

For a second there was silence, and then she heard him settle back against the bed. But she also heard his breath, now tinged with a dangerously ragged edge.

"There you go," she whispered.

She taunted him a little more, running her hands lightly over her skin, her nails skimming the surface, raising goose

bumps all along their path. “Mmmm,” she moaned, the sound a deliberate tease. “Mmmm.”

“Francesca,” he whispered.

She moved her hands to her belly, then slid them down, not deeply to touch herself—she wasn’t certain she was wicked enough to do that—but just enough to cover her mound, leaving him in the dark, wondering just what it was her fingers were doing.

“Mmmm,” she murmured again. “Ohhhh.”

He made a sound, guttural, primitive, and entirely inarticulate. He was nearing his breaking point; she wouldn’t be able to push him much further.

She looked over her shoulder, licking her lips as she glanced at him. “You should take those off,” she said, letting her gaze fall to his still-covered groin. He’d not undressed entirely when he’d removed his wet clothing, and his manhood strained furiously against the fabric. “You don’t look very comfortable,” she added, infusing her voice with just the barest hint of coy innocence.

He grunted something and then practically tore off his undergarments.

“Oh my,” Francesca said, and even though she’d planned the words as a part of her teasing seduction, she found that she very much meant them. He looked huge and powerful, and she knew she was playing a dangerous game, pushing him to his very limits.

But she couldn’t stop. She was glorying in her power over him, and she couldn’t possibly stop.

“Very nice,” she purred, letting her gaze roam up and down his body, settling directly upon his manhood.

“Frannie,” he said, “enough.”

She let her eyes level onto his. “You answer to *me*, Michael,” she said with soft authority. “If you want me, you can have me. But I’m in charge.”

“Fr—”

“Those are my terms.”

He held still, then settled back slightly in acquiescence. But he did not lie down. He was sitting, leaning back slightly, his hands on the mattress behind him for support. His every muscle was straining, and his eyes held a feline air, as if he were poised to pounce.

He was, she realized, with a shiver of desire, simply magnificent.

And hers for the taking.

“What should I do now?” she wondered aloud.

“Come here,” he answered gruffly.

“Not quite yet,” she sighed, turning toward him until her body was in profile. She saw his gaze drop to the hardened tips of her breasts, saw his eyes darken as he licked his lips. And she felt herself tauten even more, as the mental image of his tongue on her sent a new rush of heat through her body.

She brought one hand to her breast, curving around the underside, pushing herself up, like some delectable offering. “Is this what you want?” she whispered.

His voice was nothing but a growl. “You know what I want.”

“Mmm, yes,” she murmured, “but what about in the meantime? Aren’t things sweeter when we’re forced to wait for them?”

“You have no idea,” he said roughly.

She looked down at her breast. "I wonder what would happen if I do . . . this," she said, and then she moved her fingers to her nipple, rolling it about, her body twitching as the motion sent shivers down to the very center of her being.

"Frannie," Michael groaned. She glanced up at him. His lips were parted, and his eyes were glazed with desire.

"I like it," Francesca said, almost in wonderment. She'd never touched herself this way, never even thought to until this very moment, with Michael as her captive audience. "I like it," she said again, then brought her other hand to her other breast and pleased them in unison. She pushed them up and together, her hands making a sultry corset.

"Oh, my God," Michael moaned.

"I had no idea I could do this," she said, arching her back.

"I can do it better," he gasped.

"Mmm, you probably could," she acceded. "You've had lots of practice, haven't you?" And she shot him a look, one of sophisticated elegance, as if she were comfortable with the fact that he'd seduced scores of women. And the strange truth was, until this very moment, she rather thought she had been.

But now . . .

Now he was hers. Hers to tempt and hers to enjoy, and as long as she had him exactly where she wanted him, she wasn't going to think of those other women. They weren't here in this room. It was just her, and Michael, and the sizzling heat rising between them.

She edged closer to the bed, batting his hand away when he reached toward her. "If I let you touch one, will you make me a promise?" she murmured.

"Anything."

“Nothing more,” she said, her tone slightly officious. “You may do what I allow you and nothing more.”

He nodded jerkily.

“Lie back,” she ordered.

He did as she asked.

She climbed onto the bed, not allowing their bodies to touch in any way. Raising herself onto all fours, she let herself to sway above him, and then softly she said, “One hand, Michael. You may use one hand.”

With a groan that sounded as if it were ripped from his throat, he reached for her, his hand large enough to grasp her entire breast. “Oh, my God,” he gasped, his body jerking as he squeezed her. “Both hands, please,” he begged.

She couldn’t resist him. That one simple touch was reducing her to pure flame, and even as she wanted to exert her power over him, she couldn’t say no. Nodding because she could barely speak, she arched her back, and then suddenly both of his hands were on her, kneading, caressing, whipping her already heightened senses into a frenzy.

“The tip,” she whispered. “Do what I did.”

He smiled stealthily, giving her the impression that she might no longer be quite as much in charge as she thought, but he did as she commanded, his fingers torturing her nipples.

And as promised, he was better at it than she was.

Her body bucked, and she almost lost the strength to hold herself up. “Take me in your mouth,” she ordered, but her voice was not so authoritative any longer. She was begging him, and they both knew it.

But she wanted it. Oh, how she wanted it. John, for all

his ebullience in bed, had never loved her breasts the way Michael had done the night before. He'd never suckled her, never shown her how lips and teeth could make her entire body squirm. Francesca hadn't even known that a man and woman could do such a thing.

But now that she did, she couldn't stop fantasizing about it.

"Come lower," Michael said softly, "if you want me to remain lying down."

Still on her hands and knees, she leaned down, allowing one breast to swing achingly close to his mouth.

He did nothing at first, forcing her to swing lower and lower, until her nipple was brushing lightly across his lips.

"What do you want, Francesca?" he asked, his breath hot and moist over her.

"You know," she whispered.

"Say it again."

She wasn't in charge anymore. She knew it, but she was past caring. His voice held the soft edge of authority, but she was too far gone to do anything but obey.

"Take me in your mouth," she said again.

His head snapped up and his lips nipped her, tugging her down until she was in a position for him to have his leisurely way with her. He tickled and teased, and she felt herself sinking deeper into his spell, losing her will and her strength, wanting nothing but to lie down on her back and allow him to do whatever he wanted to her.

"Now what?" he asked politely, not releasing her from his lips. "More of this? Or"—he swirled his tongue in a particularly wicked fashion—"something else?"

"Something else," she gasped, and she wasn't sure if it

was because she wanted something else or because she didn't think she could stand one more minute of what he was doing just then.

"You're in charge," he said, his voice holding the barest hint of mocking. "I'm yours to command."

"I want . . . I want . . ." She was breathing too hard to finish the sentence. Or maybe she just didn't know what she wanted.

"Shall I offer you a few selections?"

She nodded.

He trailed one finger down the center of her belly to her womanhood. "I could touch you here," he said in a devilish whisper, "or if you'd prefer, I could kiss you."

Her body tightened at the thought.

"But that presents new questions," he said. "Do you lie back and allow me to kneel between your legs, or do you remain above me and lower yourself onto my mouth?"

"Oh, my God!" She didn't know. She just didn't know that such things were possible.

"Or," he said thoughtfully, "you could take me into your mouth. I'm quite certain I would enjoy it, although I must say, it's not really in the tenor of the interlude."

Francesca felt her lips part with shock, and she couldn't help but peer down at his manhood, large and ready for her. She had kissed John there once or twice, when she'd felt particularly daring, but to take it into her mouth?

It was too scandalous. Even in her present state of debauchery.

"No," Michael said with an amused smile. "Another time, perhaps. I can tell you'll be a most cunning pupil."

Francesca nodded, unable to believe what she was promising.

“So for now,” he said, “those are our options, or . . .”

“Or what?” she asked, her voice more of a harsh whisper.

His hands settled on her hips. “Or we could just proceed right to the main course,” he said commandingly, exerting a gentle but steady pressure on her, guiding her down toward the evidence of his desire. “You could ride me. Have you ever done that?”

She shook her head.

“Do you want to?”

She nodded.

One of his hands left her hips and found the back of her head, pulling her down until they were nose to nose. “I’m not a gentle pony,” he said softly. “I promise you, you will have to work to keep your seat.”

“I want it,” she whispered.

“Are you ready for me?”

She nodded.

“Are you certain?” he whispered, his lips curving just enough to taunt her. She wasn’t sure what he was asking, and he knew it.

She just looked at him, her eyes widening in question.

“Are you wet?” he murmured.

Her cheeks grew hot—as if they weren’t already burning, but she nodded.

“Are you sure?” he mused. “I should probably check, just to make certain.”

Francesca’s breath caught as she watched his hand curve around her thigh, moving toward her center. He moved

slowly, deliberately, drawing out the torture of anticipation. And then, just when she thought she might scream at it all, he touched her, one finger lazily drawing circles against her soft flesh.

“Very nice,” he purred, his words echoing her own.

“Michael,” she gasped.

But he was enjoying his position too much to allow her to rush things along. “I’m not sure,” he said. “You’re ready here, but what about . . . here?”

Francesca nearly screamed as one finger slipped inside of her.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured. “And you like it, too.”

“Michael . . . Michael . . .” It was all she could say.

Another finger slid into place next to the first. “So warm,” he whispered. “The very heart of you.”

“Michael . . .”

His eyes caught hers. “Do you want me?” he asked, his voice stark and direct.

She nodded.

“Now?”

She nodded again, this time with more vigor.

His fingers slid out, and his hands found her hips again, guiding her down . . . down . . . until she could feel the tip of him at her opening. She tried to move her body down onto him, but he held her in place. “Not too fast,” he whispered.

“Please . . .”

“Let me move you,” he said, and his hands gently pushed at her hips, edging her down until she felt herself being stretched open by him. He felt huge, and it was all so different in this position.

“Good?” he asked.

She nodded.

“More?”

She nodded again.

And he continued the torture, holding himself still, but moving her body down atop his, each impossible inch of him sliding into her, stealing her breath, her voice, her very ability to think.

“Slide up and down,” he commanded.

Her eyes flew to his.

“You can do it,” he said softly.

She did, testing the motion, moaning at the pleasure of the friction, then gasping as she realized that she was sliding farther down onto him, that he wasn’t yet entirely embedded within her body.

“Take me to the hilt,” he said.

“I can’t.” And she couldn’t. She couldn’t possibly. She knew she had done so the night before, but this was different. He couldn’t possibly fit.

His hands tightened on her, and his hips arched slightly up, and then in one mind-numbing jolt, she found herself seated directly atop him, skin to skin.

And she could barely breathe.

“Oh, my God,” he groaned.

She just sat there, rocking back and forth, unsure of what to do.

His breath was coming in fits and starts, and his body began to writhe under hers. She grasped his shoulders in an attempt to hold on, to keep her seat, and as she did, she began to move up and down, to take control, to seek pleasure for herself.

“Michael, Michael,” she moaned, her body beginning to sway from side to side, unable to hold itself up, unable to maintain strength against the hot tide of desire sweeping across her.

He just grunted, his body bucking beneath her. As promised, he wasn’t gentle, and he wasn’t tame. He forced her to work for her pleasure, to hold on tight, to move with him, and then against him, and then . . .

A scream ripped from her throat.

And the world quite simply fell apart.

She didn’t know what to do, didn’t know what to say. She let go of his shoulders as her body straightened and then arched, every muscle growing impossibly taut.

And beneath her, he exploded. His face contorted, his body lifted them both off the bed, and she knew that he was pouring himself into her. Her name was on his lips, over and over, decreasing in volume until it was the barest of whispers. And when he was done, all he said was, “Lie with me.”

She did. And she slept.

For the first time in days, she slept deeply and truly.

And she never knew that he laid awake the whole time, his lips at her temple, his hand against her hair.

Whispering her name.

Whispering other words as well.



Chapter 20

. . . Michael will do what he wishes. He always does.

—*from the Countess of Kilmartin to Helen Stirling,
three days after the receipt of Helen's missive*

The days that followed brought Francesca no peace. When she thought about it rationally—or at least as rationally as she was able—it seemed as if she should have found some answers, should have sensed some sort of logic in the air, something that might tell her what to do, how to act, what sort of choice she needed to make.

But, no. Nothing.

She'd made love to him twice.

Twice.

To Michael.

That alone should have dictated her decisions, convinced

her to accept his proposal. It should have been clear. She had lain with him. She might be pregnant, although that did seem a remote possibility, given that it had taken her a full two years to conceive with John.

But even without such consequences, her decision should have been obvious. In her world, in her society, the sort of intimacies in which she'd engaged meant only one thing.

She must marry him.

And yet she couldn't quite summon the *yes* to her lips. Every time she thought she'd convinced herself that it was what she had to do, a little voice inside of her argued for caution, and she stopped, unable to move forward, too scared to delve into her feelings and try to figure out why she felt so paralyzed.

Michael didn't understand, of course. How could he, when she didn't understand herself?

"I shall call upon the vicar tomorrow morning," he'd murmured at her ear as he helped her mount a fresh horse outside the gardener's cottage. She had awakened alone sometime in the late afternoon, a brief note from him on the pillow beside her, explaining that he was taking Felix back to Kilmartin and would return shortly with a new mount.

But he had only brought one horse, forcing her once again to share the saddle, this time perched behind him.

"I'm not ready," she'd said, a sudden rush of panic filling her chest. "Don't go see him. Not yet."

His face had darkened, but he didn't allow his temper to rise any further. "We will discuss it later," he'd said.

And they'd ridden home in silence.

She tried to escape to her room once they reached Kilmar-

tin, mumbling something about needing to bathe, but he caught her hand, his grip firm and unyielding, and she found herself alone with him, back in the rose drawing room of all places, the door shut firmly behind them.

“What is all this about?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” she stalled, trying desperately not to look at the table behind him. It was the one upon which he’d perched her the night before, then done unspeakable things to her.

And the memory alone was enough to make her shiver.

“You know what I mean,” he said impatiently.

“Michael, I—”

“Will you marry me?” he demanded.

Dear God, she wished he hadn’t just come out and said it. It was all so much easier to avoid when the words weren’t right there, hanging between them.

“I—I—”

“Will you marry me?” he repeated, and this time the words were hard, with more of an edge to them.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered. “I need more time.”

“Time for what?” he snapped. “For me to try a little harder to get you pregnant?”

She flinched as if struck.

He advanced upon her. “Because I’ll do it,” he warned. “I’ll take you right now, and then again tonight, and then three times tomorrow if that’s what is required.”

“Michael, stop . . .” she whispered.

“I have lain with you,” he said, his words stark and yet strangely urgent. “Twice. You are no innocent. You know what that means.”