

A romantic scene featuring a man with dark hair and a woman with dark hair and red lipstick. The man is leaning in to kiss the woman on the cheek. Another woman with blonde hair is visible in the background, looking towards the man. The background is dark and moody, with a red patterned fabric visible on the left.

The Seduction of Sarah

*He is everything
she fears...and desires.*

CYNTHIA
CLEMENT

KISSING SARAH

Alex brushed his lips across hers and sent a shiver of delight through her body. Sarah knew she should stop this before it went any further, but as she moved to escape Alex brought his other arm up to stop her.

“Stay,” he pleaded. “You cannot ignore what is between us.”

Sarah moistened her dry lips, her eyes shying away from the intensity of his gaze. Alex wanted her. There was no denying the attraction between them, but the risk was too high. Sarah could not afford to lose her freedom to any man, especially not the man who was going to wed her cousin.

“We should not be here like this,” she whispered.

“It is too late.” Alex moved his head closer and Sarah closed her eyes as his warm brandy-scented breath tickled her nose.

He captured her mouth slowly, gently nudging her lips and then easing his tongue in. An exquisite lethargy stole throughout her body. She surrendered to his kiss, allowing herself to be drawn into the web of pleasure he wove ...

The Seduction of Sarah

Cynthia Clement



ZEBRA BOOKS
KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.
www.kensingtonbooks.com



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

Table of Contents

KISSING SARAH

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

[*Chapter 21*](#)

[*Chapter 22*](#)

[*Chapter 23*](#)

[*Chapter 24*](#)

[*Chapter 25*](#)

[*Chapter 26*](#)

[*Chapter 27*](#)

[*Chapter 28*](#)

[*Chapter 29*](#)

[*Chapter 30*](#)

[*Epilogue*](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

To my mom and dad—

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I love you.

Chapter 1

July 1823

Sarah sank down in the cool water, savoring its motion against her bare skin. She closed her eyes and sighed. The birds were chirping and the frogs were croaking their protests to Sarah's daily invasion into their undisturbed privacy. Their sounds calmed and soothed her.

"I had forgotten how refreshing a morning swim could be." A deep, husky, male voice sliced through the early morning silence. "Shall I join you?"

Sarah's head whipped around, cool water splashing her face. She looked into the steely gray eyes of a giant. He stood on the shoreline, leaning against a horse as dark as midnight. Beast and man were perfectly matched. Sarah shivered, her heart beating frantically.

"There is no need to stop on my account." The man moved away from his horse, his strong leg muscles straining the fabric of his tight riding pants. "I have never seen a more beautiful body."

"Please," Sarah begged breathlessly, ducking farther down in the water. "Turn around and allow me to get out."

The man grinned wickedly. "I cannot oblige you."

"Do not be ridiculous." Sarah moved her arms faster to keep afloat. Her initial shock was fast changing to anger. "Your behavior is ungentlemanly."

The interloper shrugged his powerful shoulders indifferently. "Agreed, but living by the rules has always bored me."

"You cannot expect me to leave the water while you stand there." Sarah's chest was beginning to tighten in panic.

He tilted his head toward her and she inhaled sharply when she saw the jagged scar that ran down the right side of his face. Sarah's stomach knotted in renewed fear. She was alone and naked with a stranger who stood between her and safety.

"You have no reason to be modest. I have been watching for several minutes. I do not think I have ever witnessed anything more sensuous. You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen."

Sarah's stomach knotted as anxiety crawled up her spine. "You are not easing my fears," she snapped.

He walked closer to the edge of the lake, loose stones crunching beneath his Hessian boots. He stopped at her pile of clothes and bent to pick up her drying sheet. "I will make it easy for you. All you have to do is come and get your clothes."

Sarah shook her head. "I cannot trust you."

"I see your dilemma." The man took the sheet between his hands and spread it out as if to welcome her. "What other choice do you have?"

"I will stay here until you leave," Sarah stated with a lifted chin. "You must have other things to do besides tormenting a helpless woman."

"You are not without power. I would not be dallying with you otherwise." He moved closer to the shoreline, the sheet still held out between his hands. "I have

thrown caution away, willing to face rejection just so that I may know your name.”

“Will you leave me alone then?”

“Perhaps.”

Sarah debated for several seconds before reasoning it would not hurt. In the six weeks that she and her cousin Caroline had been staying at Caldern, they had not met anyone. Sarah would probably never see this man again. “It is Sarah.”

“A lovely name for a beautiful woman. I am Alex.”

“Now leave,” Sarah demanded in a raised voice.

Alex frowned and then shook his head. “No.”

“You promised!” Sarah swatted the water with her clenched fist. “That is unfair.”

“I did not promise. I said perhaps.” Alex moved to a large rock at the water’s edge and sat down.

“You are despicable,” Sarah hissed. “What do you intend?”

“Nothing,” he assured her. “I will not harm you. I give you my word of honor.”

Sarah debated her next move while watching his face. It was devoid of expression. She was already late in returning back to the house and Caroline would be furious. Still, she could not trust this stranger.

“All men want something.” Sarah shivered as a burst of anger flared in Alex’s eyes and then was immediately hidden by half-closed lids.

“You obviously forget yourself,” he said coldly. “Who gave you leave to swim here?”

“I did not realize permission was needed,” she returned, averting her eyes from the frigid glare of his. She had been swimming in this lake since she had first discovered it a month ago. “I know it is not proper to be swimming ...”

“You did it anyway,” Alex interrupted calmly.

“Yes,” she agreed, turning back to him. His impassive face gave her no clue to his intentions. “I hope you will not mention it to anyone?”

“One moment you are questioning my word, and the next you are asking me for it?” Alex queried with a scornful laugh. “I can see you have a pretty strange view of men.”

“My views have been shaped by men.” Sarah lifted her chin defiantly.

“That may be so,” Alex granted smoothly, “but you still have a problem. Are you going to leave the water?”

Sarah’s teeth were chattering and she suspected there was nothing that would persuade this man to leave her alone. He was immovable. He had already admitted to spying on her, so she had no secrets to hide.

Abruptly, she swam to the shore, rose and walked to the water’s edge. She watched Alex’s eyes widen and then warm in appreciation. She straightened her shoulders and scowled at him, but he only smiled.

“Truly exquisite.” He stood and handed her the sheet. “I am glad you did not try to cover yourself with your hands. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Sarah wrapped the sheet about her and then shook her dark hair from her face before moving away. Her cheeks felt warm, but she refused to act embarrassed in front of this man. He would take that as a weakness; one he could exploit.

“I would not have been swimming if I had realized I had an audience.” She went to her clothes, but his voice stopped her.

“You have only yourself to blame,” he reasoned, walking toward her. “A proper lady

would never consider swimming in the nude.”

“A proper gentleman would have left when he realized my situation,” Sarah retorted. A deep laugh was her only answer. Sarah clenched her teeth together tightly and bent to pick up her clothes, but he was there before her.

“Let me help you.” He held out her chemise and drawers. “You cannot stand here all day shivering.”

Sarah grabbed the garments and turned away from him. She put the undergarments on with one hand, the other holding the sheet in place. When she was covered, she used the sheet to dry her hair.

“How did you find this place?” Alex demanded in a brusque voice. “Everything is so overgrown on the estate. The lake is not easily seen.”

Sarah looked back over her shoulder at the dark stranger. He was a giant of a man, standing over six feet tall with massive shoulders. There was a sense of power and control about him. His face was impassive, but his eyes burned intently as they assessed her. The puckered skin of his scar stood out against the deep tan and dark whiskers of his face.

“I come this way often. It may look hidden, but the pathways are still usable. This is in good condition compared to other parts of the estate.”

Alex nodded his understanding, his jaw tightening slightly. She picked up her dress and moved to go around him, but before she could escape, he reached out and clasped her arm. The drying sheet and dress fell to the ground.

Sarah inhaled deeply, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. Alex’s hand touched her cheek softly. Shivers of awareness danced along Sarah’s body.

“Will you tell me where you live?” he asked quietly. “I would like to see you again.”

Sarah shook her head and pulled against his arm. “There is no need for us to meet.”

“I disagree.”

Sarah watched breathlessly as Alex’s muscles tightened beneath his riding jacket, holding her there effortlessly. He moved closer, his breath tickling the skin of her face. His body loomed over her, blocking out the sun. Sarah felt her heart race.

“Let me go.” Sarah’s voice caught in her throat, sounding more like an invitation than a demand. A smile of satisfaction spread across Alex’s face. He lowered his head and brushed his mouth over hers lightly.

His lips quivered against hers, warm and inviting. Sarah gasped at the stab of pleasure that flooded her body. She swayed closer to Alex, her own lips grazing his before the kiss ended. For a brief second she wondered if it had been real, but her lips still tingled as she ran her tongue over them.

When Sarah looked up, molten silver eyes met hers. The pounding of her heart echoed in her ears, everything forgotten except the man who held her. She tried to look away, but Alex’s eyes kept her captive. It was as if she could see into his soul and God help her, she wanted to feel the thrill of his lips again.

His hands eased across her back, drawing her closer to him. A rush of heat exploded in her womb as the long, hard length of Alex pressed against her. A groan escaped her lips as shivers of sensation cascaded and spread throughout every nerve in her body. She ached with a need she had never known before.

Alex lowered his head, letting his tongue slide across her lips before plunging into

her mouth. His tongue raked sensuously against hers, stroking and teasing, building a fire deep within her. It burned slow and hot. Sarah trembled, her knees weak as a shock of arousal stirred within her. Her mind warned that the flames would scorch her, but she no longer controlled her reactions. She leaned into Alex, surrendering to her body's wishes and his demands.

Sarah reveled in Alex's hungry exploration, savoring the sensation of her tongue dueling with his. Rational thought was impossible. The only thing that existed was the passion that burned between them. Sarah was lost in the moment, frightened yet enthralled by the awakening response within her. Her body throbbed with need and desire.

Alex's hands roamed across her back moving lower until he cupped her buttocks with both hands. With a swift, deft motion he brought her closer to him. A jolt of intense pleasure twisted inside her.

As if from a great distance, Sarah heard the snapping of a twig and the horse's protesting snort. The spell was broken. She struggled to free herself from the gossamer that held her entranced. Alex eased the pressure of his lips, his hands smoothing her away from him. How long the kiss had lasted, she did not know. Breathlessly she stared up at Alex, her body numb, in shock at her response to this stranger.

"Forgive me," he whispered hoarsely. "I could not resist."

Sarah shook her head in denial. "You should not have done that. You gave your word." She was twenty-seven years old and had never experienced a kiss like that.

"True," he agreed, his hand brushing the hair away from her eyes. "But now you understand why we must meet again. We are explosive together."

"Are you suggesting an affair?" she asked incredulously.

He smiled at her seductively. "It is clearly the next step in our relationship."

Sarah pulled away and slapped his face with a speed that surprised them both. The sound of it reverberated through the air. She covered her mouth in horror as the right side of his face turned red.

"Obviously you did not like my suggestion," he observed dryly. "A simple 'no' would have done."

"I am sorry," Sarah apologized haltingly. "I reacted without thinking."

"You are not a young girl." Alex bent down and picked up her dress. "You are also not inexperienced. Why should my suggestion shock you?"

"It would shock any woman of breeding."

"I had not considered that," Alex admitted with a sneer. "I do not expect to find women of breeding bathing in the nude."

"How dare you!" Sarah felt the anger burn within her and she held her hands tightly by her side. "You have the manners of a boar."

"Now is not the time to discuss it." Alex held out her dress. "You will catch cold standing like that."

Sarah looked down at her wet chemise and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. The thin material clung to her breasts, exposing more than it hid. She grabbed the dress and held it to her chest. This man made her forget herself and that was dangerous.

"I wish to dress in privacy." Sarah noticed a gleam appear in Alex's eyes and her breathing stilled. She did not understand the effect he had on her, but she must escape.

"Of course." Alex turned to look back at the lake.

Sarah went behind some bushes. Instead of dressing, she crept away from the shoreline, hiding in a small grove of oak trees on the north side of the lake until she heard Alex gallop away.

Sarah looked down and realized she was still holding her dress. With shaking hands, she pulled the dull gray silk material over her head and secured its tape fastenings. She quickly coiled her long brown hair around her head and placed her cap over it.

Sarah almost ran back to the house, barely noticing the magnificence of Caldern. The rising sun's orange glow reflected off the red sandstone of the castle, causing it to burn with a blazing brilliance. The castle came alive under the sun's fiery strokes, but its beauty was lost on her this morning.

When she arrived at the kitchen she was greeted by a flurry of activity. It looked as if all the servants had converged in one place. She waited in the doorway until Cook had finished ladling food onto a serving dish. Johnson, the butler, then barked orders to the footmen, who gathered the dishes from the table. They all hurried out to the dining room and everyone gave a sigh of relief.

"It is busy this morning." Sarah walked over to the Cook who was resting against the table.

"That it is," the plump woman agreed. "What with the Marquess arriving."

"The Marquess is here?" Sarah asked in disbelief. Somehow she had not thought the man real. They had been waiting for him to appear for over a month now.

Cook gathered together her pots. "He arrived late last night. Never a warning to anyone, but Lady Caldern will be pleased. She has been trying to convince him to return home for the last six months. It certainly will be good to see Master Alex again. Been gone since he was sixteen. He's grown into a fine man."

"I am sure he has," Sarah mumbled, her mind reeling with the news.

"Lady Caroline began ringing a few minutes ago. She'll be anxious to meet the Marquess." Cook handed the pots to one of the kitchen helpers and then turned back to the stove.

Sarah nodded weakly before walking out of the kitchen. When she was safely in the hall, she leaned her head against the dark oak-paneled wall and tried to steady her breathing. The knot in the pit of her stomach grew leaden. The stranger at the lake had said his name was Alex.

Sarah's mind flooded with images of the man who had caught her swimming. She had thought he looked familiar. Now she knew why. When she and her cousin Caroline had first arrived at the remote Cumberland estate of Caldern, they had been shown a picture of the Marquess when he was a boy. The man at the lake was that boy. He was the man her cousin intended to marry.

Chapter 2

Sarah tapped lightly at Caroline's door and then entered. It was a large, bright room with a southern exposure. The floral walls and bed coverings complimented Caroline's willowy, blond beauty perfectly.

"Where have you been?" Caroline demanded querulously. She was sitting in front of a dark mahogany vanity table, brushing her hair. She did not turn around when Sarah entered the room, but glared at her in the mirror. "You have been gone for hours."

"I was outside less than an hour." Sarah walked into the room and sat on the bed.

"It seemed like forever," Caroline cried petulantly, her limpid blue eyes accusing. "I need you here. That is why Father sent you with me."

"No need to talk such nonsense," a voice admonished from the dressing room. Nellie, their maid, came into the room, her arms full of dresses. "Mrs. Wellsley is with you for chaperonage and support. She is your cousin, not your servant."

Sarah smiled at Nellie and stood up. "Good morning, Nellie. Let me help you with those." Sarah took the dresses and put them on the bed.

"The least she can do is be here when I need her." Caroline slammed her hairbrush down on the vanity top. "The Marquess finally decides to come home and where are you?"

"I was collecting herbs." Sarah began spreading the gowns out on the bed. "Surely these dresses are too elaborate for morning wear?"

"I need to look my best," Caroline exclaimed. "Unlike you, I prefer to attract men. I would never bury myself away from the world if my husband died, no matter how much I loved the man."

Sarah's stomach tightened painfully and her hand froze above the bed. Caroline's last words reverberated in her head. How could her cousin believe Sarah had actually loved her husband? No woman could have loved a man like Stephen Wellsley. A gentle hand on her shoulder nudged her out of her reverie and she looked up to see Nellie's understanding face.

"You go and sit down. I can look after Lady Caroline," Nellie whispered. She led Sarah to a daybed and motioned for her to sit.

"I wish you would pay more attention to your family and less to those herbs," Caroline whined, turning around to look at Sarah directly. "You are always off attending some sick village person or working in the stillroom. You are never here when I need you."

"It is what I do," Sarah explained gently. "People rely on my herbs and healing knowledge."

"Well, I rely on you too." Caroline's full red lips pouted prettily and she tossed her long blond hair behind one shoulder. "You know I am nervous about this meeting. I do not need to worry about you."

"I have never given you any reason to fret, Caroline." Sarah straightened her shoulders and looked directly at her cousin. "If you are anxious about meeting the Marquess, then why did you agree to your father's ridiculous plan?"

"It is no such thing," Caroline defended. "The Marquess will make the perfect husband. He is rich, titled, and still young enough for me to appreciate him. The rumor in London is that he is quite handsome. That is all I require in a husband."

"You have not met him yet," Sarah reminded. "Perhaps you will not like him." The ruggedly masculine face of the man at the lake flashed through Sarah's mind. There was little chance her cousin would not admire him. He was definitely attractive.

"That is why we are visiting Caldern." Caroline stood up and walked to the bed. She pondered the dresses for a few seconds before choosing a pale pink, silk confection. "We are here to meet each other and see if we will suit. Nothing could be more civilized."

"I suppose," Sarah agreed quietly. "You are talking about the rest of your life, though. This is the man you will have to live with."

Caroline turned around and looked at Sarah in disbelief. "You are such a romantic, Sarah. This is a marriage. We will eventually go our separate ways once the children have been born."

"Uncle John and Aunt Alice do not have a marriage like that," Sarah reminded her cousin.

"They are so provincial." Caroline sighed heavily and then stepped into the gown that Nellie was holding open for her. "I want to live in London with the people who really matter."

"Does that mean your parents are unimportant because they spend most of their time in Somerset?" Sarah asked in outrage.

"Now you are twisting my words." Caroline straightened the bodice of the dress on her shoulders and looked behind as Nellie began to do the tapes up. "Father is an earl, so of course he counts. I just want to have a life that is not centered in the country."

"The Marquess's estate is in the north. It is only hours away from the Scottish border and several days' drive away from London. You will likely never see a social life," Sarah explained patiently.

Caroline looked back at her with narrowed eyes. "I do not believe you can be so silly, Sarah. The Marquess can live wherever he wishes, but I intend to stay in London."

"As your husband, he will have total control over where and how you live, Caroline. Do not rush into a marriage with someone you know nothing about," Sarah pleaded.

"We are hardly rushing." Caroline walked back to the vanity and sat down. Nellie gathered her hair and arranged it on top of her head. "We have been waiting in this horrible drafty castle for over a month now."

"The house is no such thing," Sarah denied. "If you would not insist on staying indoors, you would see how lovely the estate really is. Besides, if you wish to become the Marchioness, you should be meeting the people who live and work here."

"That is hardly necessary. I am not marrying a common vicar like you did." Caroline twisted a ringlet across her bare shoulder and then stood up. "Right now my only concern is securing the Marquess's interest. He still has to propose."

Caroline walked to the bedroom door, but before she opened it, she turned back to Sarah. "You look a complete mess. Please change that gown before you come down for breakfast. I would hate the Marquess to get the wrong impression of my family."

Without another word Caroline left the room. Sarah sat staring at the closed door in

silence for a few seconds before she shook her head and smiled. Caroline, as the only daughter, had always been spoiled, but Sarah had never realized how insensitive Caroline had become since being presented in London two years ago.

“Take no mind of her,” Nellie said briskly. “She has been cooped up in this place for too long. You know how she needs the company of young people.”

Sarah sighed heavily and stood up. “I understand, Nellie. You do not have to be concerned with me. I just hope Caroline does not do anything foolish.”

“If you will forgive me, Mrs. Wellsley,” Nellie said with a small cough. “Lady Caroline will always take care of herself first.”

“True, but I cannot like this plan of my uncle’s.”

“Lord Hart is very cautious,” Nellie advised briskly. “He has few options left with Lady Caroline. She has driven away all the eligible suitors, so he believes an arranged match would suit her best.”

Sarah nodded her head. “Lady Caldern and he have been friends for many years. I know Uncle has made certain that Lord Caldern is an honorable man and will not hurt Caroline in any way. I suppose I will just have to trust his opinion.”

“It is not easy for you,” Nellie murmured.

“I am past that part of my life.” Sarah walked over to Nellie and gave her a hug. “I have my herbs and healing now.”

“That you do.” Nellie moved away to the bed and began to gather up the discarded gowns. “You’d best go and change. Lady Caroline was right about that dress. It looks as if you dragged it through the mud.”

Sarah looked down and felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. There was dirt smeared all over the front of her dress and a small tear at the hem. She had been in such a hurry to escape the lake that she had not realized the condition of her clothes.

“I will go and change immediately.” Sarah left the room quickly and went to her own bedroom in the north wing.

She was in an older section of the house and even though Caroline would have abhorred it, she loved her room. It was large, with the stone exposed on the outer wall. The bed was at least a hundred years old and the dark burgundy tapestry window and bed coverings were probably the same age. Sarah relaxed the moment she set foot in the room.

She shed her dirty gown and selected a clean one from the wardrobe. She dressed and then took her cap off to redo her hair. It took her a few minutes to rearrange her braid and then to cover it with another gray silk and lace cap. When she was satisfied, she left her room and went downstairs to the dining room.

Caldern had been built over several centuries and now consisted of several wings and additions. The formal dining room was in the newest addition in the south wing. It was a large room that could easily accommodate fifty people. The oak paneling added an air of elegance that was enhanced by the numerous works of art that hung on the walls. Each successive generation of Calderns had left their touch on the room.

Sarah entered the room quietly and walked to the first of three ancient sideboards that stood against the wall. It was closest to the doorway where the servants carried in the food. Breakfast was informal at Caldern, with people wandering in whenever they rose in the mornings. Sarah helped herself to a poached egg and a slice of ham before sitting at the table.

Caroline was not in the room, but that did not surprise Sarah. Her cousin was seldom awake at such an early hour and she never ate much in the morning. Her quick departure meant the Marquess had not been in the dining room. The rest of the household was present, though.

“Good morning Mrs. Wellsley,” Lady Caldern greeted stiffly. “You are later than usual.”

Lady Caldern sat at the end of the table. She was in her late fifties and still retained a portion of the beauty that must have been truly spectacular in her younger years. She had pale brown hair, heavily streaked with gray, but it was covered with a dark mauve turban this morning. She wore a matching mauve morning dress.

“Lady Caroline needed my help,” Sarah explained, accepting a cup of hot chocolate from Johnson. “I understand Lord Caldern arrived last night.”

“It is high time my exalted half brother returned,” Lord Bryan Norward snapped from across the table. He was a young man of about twenty-eight who always wore a slightly bored expression. He had light brown hair and green eyes. His looks and charm were rumored to have captivated most of the women of the area.

“I agree,” Lady Caldern said with a nod of her head. “It has been a year since he inherited the title. His indifference to his responsibilities is unacceptable.”

“But Mother, he was in India when Douglas died,” Lady Julianna Norward objected in a timid voice. “You cannot fault him for that.”

“True,” Lady Caldern admitted. “He has been in London for the last six months, though. I sent numerous missives demanding his attendance at Caldern and he saw fit to ignore them all. I cannot forgive that.”

Privately, Sarah agreed with Lady Caldern. The general state of disrepair and neglect that pervaded Caldern was atrocious.

“He left Caldern very angry with Father,” the quiet, hesitant voice of Lady Julianna reminded them.

Sarah looked at Lady Julianna Norward with surprise. She was a shy, fragile, beautiful young woman of twenty. Sarah had never heard her answer her mother back before. She usually accepted her mother’s criticism and faded into the background.

“What would you know of such matters?” Lady Caldern snapped loudly. “You were nothing more than a babe still in the nursery.”

“Mary used to tell me about Alex.”

“I will not have that woman’s name mentioned in my house.” Lady Caldern glared at Lady Julianna until the young woman hung her head in defeat. “I am ashamed that a daughter of mine would associate with a creature such as her.”

Sarah glanced questioningly at Lady Julianna, but the young girl’s face was expressionless. The only Mary Sarah knew lived in a small cottage on the estate. She was well liked by the villagers and had a grown son who had made his fortune in the Americas. Sarah could not imagine why this woman would cause such a reaction in the Marchioness.

“Now that Father and Douglas are dead, you should have her removed from Caldern land,” Lord Bryan stated.

“If it were within my power, I would.” Lady Caldern’s knife clattered on her plate as she put it down. “I have heard enough this morning. Mrs. Wellsley, if you are finished I would like to show you the tapestry I need repaired.”

“Certainly,” Sarah replied. She put down her napkin and rose from the table to follow Lady Caldern from the room.

“I am so happy Lady Caroline mentioned your skill with the needle.” Lady Caldern stopped outside the dining room door and turned to Sarah. “The work you have done with repairing the linens and bedcovers has been appreciated.”

“Thank you, Lady Caldern,” Sarah murmured. The household mending was another area that had been neglected for years and Sarah had been spending a good portion of her day in the fourth floor sewing room.

“I enjoy handwork. The quiet gives me time to think about the best treatments for my patients.”

“Yes, of course,” Lady Caldern harrumphed. “You have been making yourself quite useful. I am glad your uncle insisted on sending you along with Lady Caroline.”

Sarah smiled slightly and remembered the coldness of Lady Caldern’s initial greeting. They had reached the stairs and she started to climb them. She turned to speak to Lady Caldern, but stopped when someone cleared his throat.

“Fanny.” A firm male voice echoed in the large hallway.

Sarah saw Lady Caldern stiffen, her eyes narrowing and her mouth grimacing into a thin line of disapproval. Footsteps came toward them.

“I am busy, Alex.”

“As am I.”

Sarah’s stomach tightened into a knot and her breath stopped in her throat. Panic threatened to overcome her and she gripped the balustrade to prevent herself from falling. The tall, dark figure of the man she had met at the lake swam before her eyes and she quickly lowered her head to avoid his glance. She felt his eyes turn her way and her hand tightened on the railing as she waited for him to recognize her.

Chapter 3

Alex leaned against the solid oak newel post. His eyes scanned Sarah and then turned back to Lady Caldern. “Why have you not answered my summons?”

“I am attending to a household matter.” Lady Caldern walked down the stairs and stood in front of him. “I will be with you shortly.”

“I asked you to come to the library when you had finished your breakfast. I am not in the habit of waiting.”

“When I have finished my duties, I will meet with you,” Lady Caldern replied in a voice hardened with reprove.

“You have no duties at Caldern unless I say so,” Lord Caldern explained in a deceptively soft voice before bowing to his stepmother. “We will discuss this now.” Without another word he walked into the library.

Lady Caldern stared at the open door for a few seconds before she looked at Sarah. “I must apologize for my stepson’s rudeness. It seems that his years away have not been to his benefit.”

“I understand.” Sarah loosened her grip on the railing. “I will find the tapestry on my own. There is no need for you to trouble yourself.”

Lady Caldern nodded and then walked to the library. She entered the room and shut the door quietly behind her. Sarah sagged into the stair railing and took a deep breath of relief. The Marquess had not recognized her. Perhaps if she remained in the background and did not call attention to herself, she would be able to successfully avoid the man.

Sarah spent the rest of the morning repairing the tapestry. In the afternoon she visited with her patients in the village. She had successfully avoided the Marquess all day, but when she went to her room to dress for dinner she knew there was no escape. She prayed he would not tell anyone about her swimming.

Sarah sat down at her vanity and looked into the mirror. She frowned and rubbed her hands across her face. For the first time in years, she did not feel pleasure in her appearance. Her brown hair was tightly wound around her head and all that remained was to cover it with the gray satin cap sitting on her vanity. She looked like the nondescript servant her family wanted her to be. No one would notice her, but that brought little solace this evening.

“You look unhappy.” Nellie’s strident voice broke into Sarah’s musings.

“Just nervous,” Sarah explained. She stood up and went to the bed where Nellie was waiting with her evening dress. The dress was a plain gray gown without lace or frills.

“I know it was hard for you to come with Lady Caroline, but your uncle was right.” Nellie adjusted the skirt of the gown and then began to fasten it at the back. “Caroline needs guidance and you would never disappoint your family.”

“I owe them too much.” Sarah straightened the collar of the dress and then picked up her cap. “Uncle John gave me a home after Stephen died and now I only want to live my life in peace.”

“It might feel safer that way, but I am not fooled.” Nellie took the cap from Sarah’s

hands and placed it on her head. "I have known you a long time. Do not let one man destroy your dreams of children."

Sarah moved away from Nellie. "I am older. I have everything I need to keep me content."

Nellie shook her head and put one hand on her hip. "You are hiding from the world."

Sarah unconsciously pulled at her cap, moving it until it was almost in her eyes. "I must go. I cannot be late for dinner."

Sarah turned away and left the room swiftly. She did not want to dwell on Nellie's words. They had been too close to the truth. Sarah had almost reconciled herself to a life without children until she and Caroline had arrived at Caldern. Everything had come flooding back during her first days here. All the memories and dreams she had once believed in.

Perhaps it was the newness of the area or the people she was meeting, but for some reason she could not bury her sense of loss. Visiting Caldern had reopened a wound that had not fully healed. Many nights she had gone to bed crying, something she had not done in years.

Sarah took a deep breath and forced herself to think about tonight's dinner. She would again be meeting the Marquess. There was a slight possibility of him recognizing her from this morning, but Sarah brushed that thought aside. He would have eyes only for Caroline.

She approached the drawing room doors quietly and slipped into the room unnoticed. She was moving toward the window seat where she usually sat, when Lady Caldern's voice halted her.

"Mrs. Wellsley, please come here," she demanded in an imperious tone.

Sarah turned to Lady Caldern. She stood with Lady Caroline and two men near the fireplace. When Sarah reached them, Lady Caldern took her arm.

"You must meet my stepson and his friend Mr. Stanton."

Lady Caldern moved her to a man wearing a bright sea blue waistcoat and black evening suit. His attire was shockingly bold and Sarah thought he was a dandy until she glanced at his face. His soft, brown eyes were bright with curiosity, his eyebrow quirked questioningly.

"Mr. Stanton, this is Mrs. Wellsley," Lady Caldern announced.

"Mr. Stanton," Sarah murmured as she curtsied.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Wellsley." Mr. Stanton made a neat bow and then turned back to his conversation with her cousin.

"This is my stepson, Lord Caldern." Lady Caldern's strident voice forced Sarah to turn and look at the tall dark man who stood beside Mr. Stanton. Her heart beat rapidly. He seemed indifferent and bored, his dark eyes barely glancing in her direction.

Anger replaced Sarah's fear. For some inexplicable reason his indifference was an insult. She forced herself to look at him directly, daring him to recognize her. His eyes darted over her appearance quickly and his head inclined politely at Sarah's slight curtsy.

"Mrs. Wellsley is Lady Caroline's cousin," Lady Caldern explained. "She has been gracious enough to visit with the villagers and help them with her herbal treatments. I

am afraid we have trespassed on her kindness, too. Her skill with a needle has been most useful in repairing the household linens.”

“A marvel among women,” Lord Caldern agreed. “The estate has been sadly neglected of late. Any effort to help is appreciated.”

“I trust that things will improve now that you have arrived,” Sarah murmured quietly as he began to turn away.

Lord Caldern paused in his movement and glanced back at Sarah. “Have we met before, Mrs. Wellsley?”

“I am certain we have not,” Sarah answered quickly. Her breath caught in her throat at the searing glance Lord Caldern gave her. She lowered her head in an attempt to escape it.

“Perhaps in London?”

“Sarah has never been to London,” Caroline interjected. “She refuses to go anywhere. Father had to insist she accompany me to Caldern.”

Sarah cringed at Caroline’s words, her cheeks blushing with mortification.

“We are grateful to your father.” Lord Caldern spoke indifferently, but when Sarah glanced back at his face, his eyes were sparkling with amusement. He recognized her!

“No need to be,” Caroline said with a scornful laugh. “She is always helping others, even if it means neglecting her family.”

Sarah looked at Caroline with a frown. Her cousin was being more cruel than usual and she did not understand why. Caroline glared back at her and then tossed her head defiantly. Sarah could see no obvious reason for her anger. Caroline looked stunning in a light blue gown that matched her eyes perfectly. Mr. Stanton seemed mesmerized by her. His eyes had not left her face since he greeted Sarah.

“You have described a paragon of virtue, Lady Caroline,” Lord Caldern observed dryly. “It seems unlikely that such an angel would neglect her own family.”

Sarah flinched at Lord Caldern’s sarcasm. She looked at him boldly before speaking. “I believe you exaggerate, my lord.”

Lord Caldern inclined his head slightly. “You may be correct, Mrs. Wellsley. I am certain that you have a few faults. Perhaps something done in privacy that you would not like others to know about.”

“You are mistaken, my lord.” Caroline disagreed with a shake of her head. “My cousin has always been above reproach, even when she was a young girl.”

“Perhaps, Lady Caroline,” Lord Caldern admitted. “We all have secrets, though.”

“Nonsense.” Lady Caldern interrupted with a snort. “You are making Mrs. Wellsley extremely uncomfortable.”

Sarah held herself still, her heart beating frantically. Lord Caldern seemed determined to bait her, his very look threatening to uncover her secret. She could not allow him to continue in this manner. Her initial anger had changed to fear. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she had vowed never to let a man terrorize her again.

“As we have not met before, Lord Caldern, your comments are extremely rude. I resent your attitude.” Sarah looked at him directly, daring him to reveal her swimming.

Caldern tilted his head to one side, a small smile played across his mouth, as he seemed to debate her words. “Perhaps you are right, Mrs. Wellsley,” he agreed smoothly. “I believe I have mistaken you for someone else.”

“Whom could you possibly mistake my cousin for?” Caroline demanded incredulously.

“That is hardly kind,” Caldern admonished severely.

“Enough,” Sarah insisted in a strangled voice. Her cheeks were red with embarrassment and all she wanted was to escape. “I do not wish to be spoken of in such a manner. Please excuse me.”

Sarah turned abruptly away and walked to the window seat. She sat down with a sigh of relief and barely noticed when Lady Julianna sat next to her.

“How are you?” she asked quietly.

Sarah smiled and turned to the timid woman beside her. “An introduction to your brother was more of an ordeal than I expected. I will be fine shortly.”

“Alex is my half brother,” Lady Julianna corrected. “You were lucky. He treated you better than your cousin.”

Sarah frowned. No man had ever been able to resist Caroline and it seemed unlikely that Lord Caldern would be immune. “There must be some mistake.”

Lady Julianna shook her head. “I was present when they met in the library. Alex was indifferent to Lady Caroline’s flirtations and told her they would deal better if she did not try so hard to please him.”

Sarah closed her eyes and grimaced. Caroline’s temper had sent many of her suitors running. “What happened?”

“Lady Caroline picked up a vase and flung it at Alex and then asked if that pleased him more. Alex said that at least it was honest.” Lady Julianna paused for a few seconds before continuing. “I am afraid Lady Caroline flew into a rage and then stormed out of the room.”

“How did Caldern react to that?”

“He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his papers.”

“No wonder Caroline is being so cruel this evening. She cannot bear to have her will thwarted.”

“Alex was wrong,” Lady Julianna insisted. “A gentleman should not treat a lady in such a manner.”

“Perhaps not,” Sarah agreed with a sigh. “But your brother does not seem to be fooled easily.”

Sarah glanced at Caroline, noting the artificial gaiety in her laugh. Her back was turned to the Marquess and her attention was focused solely on Mr. Stanton. Lord Caldern seemed totally impervious to Caroline’s attempt to make him jealous. He was speaking with Lord Bryan and raised his glass to his mouth to take a drink when his eyes collided with Sarah’s.

Her mouth went dry as the noise of the room faded away. There were only two people in the world, their eyes locked in a moment of recognition. Sarah felt as if the world were spinning. Nothing in her ordered life had prepared her for the rush of emotion that welled up inside of her. Thankfully, Alex looked away. He inclined his head slightly and then turned back to his half brother.

Sarah took a deep breath, clasping her hands together to hide their trembling. She had never experienced such an intense or private moment before. She wanted to run and hide, but Lady Julianna’s quiet voice brought her back to the present.

“I visited Bates today and he seemed much improved. He mentioned that you had