

"ALWAYS FABULOUS." JULIA QUINN

USA Today bestselling author of
This Rake of Mine

ELIZABETH BOYLE



HIS
MISTRESS
BY
MORNING

ELIZABETH BOYLE

HIS MISTRESS BY MORNING

 HarperCollins e-books

*To Nicholas,
for his boundless imagination
and unending curiosity.
And for saying one night,
“Mommy, what would you wish for
if you had a magic ring?”
and thereby inspiring this book.
To you, Peanut,
this story is lovingly dedicated.*

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Elizabeth Boyle's Marlowe Family Tree



Elizabeth Boyle's
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Chapter 1

London
May 9, 1810
An Ordinary Wednesday, or at Least One Presumes So

If one were going to define what gave a family that air of prestige amongst their peers, set them apart in the bustling *ton*, first and foremost you would list those admirable qualities of respectability, social standing, and, most importantly, wealth.

Of course none of those things described the Earl of Walbrook or any of his five children—with the possible exception of the earl's eldest son and heir, Sebastian Marlowe, Viscount Trent.

But we'll get to him in a moment.

Luckily for the Marlowes, they rarely noticed their pariah status in Society. Snippy mentions in gossip columns were of no interest to them. And if they had a host of detractors, they had one very enthusiastic admirer.

Miss Charlotte Wilmont. She thought them the most glorious family in London.

Why, their cluttered house on Berkeley Square, which housed the odd objects that the earl sent home from his travels, the leftover stage sets and costumes from the countess's numerous private theatrical productions, Griffin's scientific experiments, Cordelia's Roman treasures, and Hermione and Viola's collections of neatly clipped fashion plates from *The Ladies Fashionable Cabinet*, was more odd museum than house, but it felt like home to Charlotte.

Even now, standing in the middle of the foyer, awaiting her best friend, Lady Hermione, and dreading the terrible news she had to tell her, Charlotte couldn't help but feel a sense that she, plain and ordinary Miss Wilmont, belonged *here*.

She could just imagine what her mother, Lady Wilmont, or Cousin Finella, with whom they lived, would say about that. Especially when faced with the ornately carved chest that stood front and center in the entryway, decorated as it was with a rather large male fertility statue standing tall and erect atop it.

The ebony phallus would have been banished to the dustbin at Cousin Finella's. Feeling a little bit guilty for even casting a curious glance in its direction, Charlotte forced her gaze over to the silver salver beside it, piled up as it was with mail and notes and calling cards for the family.

Envy tugged at her heart over the sight of such a friendly pile—for no one invited her to soirées

and parties, called upon her cantankerous mother (for good reason), or sent lovingly penned letters expressing whatever it was one put into such tidings.

Surely Charlotte didn't know. No one had ever sent her a letter.

And atop it all sat the most coveted missive of all—an invitation to Lady Routledge's soiree.

Though Hermione had spent the last month expressing dread over having to attend the upcoming event, Charlotte knew her dear friend would have been positively distraught not to be invited. For Lady Routledge's annual evening had launched any number of young ladies from veritable obscurity onto that very coveted pedestal, the most sought after title a girl could attain: that of *Original*.

But to do that took a lady of some talent—able to sing, perhaps a dab hand on a pianoforte, or possess the composure to give a stirring and dramatic reading. Not that such a lack of proficiency didn't stop any number of hopefuls from getting up (or more to the point, being prodded up by their anxious mothers) and giving a rather, *ahem*, memorable performance.

Having had only lessons from Cousin Finella on the pianoforte, and neither an elocution or singing lesson, Charlotte would rather die than get up before the assembled ladies and lords, gossips and dandies, and make a cake of herself. So perhaps it was a good thing that society had forgotten Sir Nestor Wilmont's spinster daughter.

She was about to turn away from the overladen salver when a note peeking out from beneath the stack caught her attention, a tiding written in a neat feminine hand and addressed to *The Right Hon. the Viscount Trent*.

Sebastian, Charlotte sighed. Hermione's older brother and the heir to the Walbrook earldom.

Even as Charlotte rose up on her tiptoes and tried to spy some sort of indication who this missive was from (not that she couldn't make a very educated guess), the door from the back of the house swung open.

She straightened immediately, and to her horror, none other than Lord Trent himself strolled into the foyer. He was lost in thought and didn't even notice her as she shrank into the nearby curtains.

With *his* arrival, Charlotte went into a deep blush and that tongue-tied inability to sputter out an word that could be deemed intelligible.

Oh, bother, Charlotte, she chided herself, *say something, anything*.

What was it Hermione always said?

Truly, Charlotte, if you would but talk to him you would discover he is as dull as they come. Mother swears her real son was snatched away at birth and Sebastian left in his stead, for no child of hers could possess such a sensible nature!

A sensible nature? How could Hermione pronounce such a virtue as if it were a sin? Charlotte wondered as she peered out from the shadows of the curtains.

Certainly Sebastian's sensibility was one of his most endearing characteristics in her estimation. He'd taken over the family accounts and properties at an early age—just after his father had departed for his South Seas adventures ten years earlier. While the viscount's peers and friends had spent the last decade gadding about, Sebastian had kept the Marlowes afloat with careful management and a tight purse over his mother's and sisters' propensity for shopping.

Why, just look at what had happened to Charlotte and her mother when her own father had died! There had been no one to manage things, and as a result they lived with Cousin Finella.

And when Hermione exceeded her pin money, or one of Griffin's scientific experiments went awry and left half of Mayfair shaken from yet another explosion, or Viola brought home yet another stray dog, did Sebastian ever complain? Did he harangue them with lectures? Did his ire overflow into a great rage? Never. What Charlotte observed was a man who loved his family, patiently listening to their various complaints and observations and kept their scandal-prone and eccentric antics from leaving them completely beyond the pale of the *ton*.

Say something, she told herself again. Why was it in the quiet of the night, in her narrow little bed, she could think of a thousand witty things to say to him, but when she stood before him, opportunity as golden as a shiny new guinea, those fine words scattered like ha'pennies tossed to the crowds?

Of course in the shadows of the night, her perfect Sebastian was a bit more rakish, with a pirate's queue and a wicked gleam in his eye. And she was...well, she was dressed in blue velvet.

"Oh, Sebastian, you found me," she'd whisper. "I've been waiting for you."

(Perhaps that might not sound perfectly witty to anyone else, but to Charlotte just the notion of being able to put a sentence together in the presence of her pirate viscount sent her heart racing.)

Then he'd take her hand and draw it to his lips. "Charlotte, my dearest, loveliest Charlotte, will you, dare I?..."

She'd never considered what might happen next, but it certainly wasn't dull or prudent.

And right now, with him just a step away, her imagination raced and she was quickly turning into a quivering bundle of nerves.

Never mind that all he was doing was standing before the salver, sorting through the notes, tossing aside those for his mother and giving scant regard to the cards and other missives directed to him.

It was a good thing he hadn't noticed her, for it was all Charlotte could do to breathe as she looked at him, standing there in all his dashing glory. Dressed to the nines, he wore a dark green jacket, buff trousers, and shining black boots. His cravat, of the whitest white and perfectly tied, marked him as a flawless gentleman.

But in that same second, a cold dash of reason hit her as she realized where he must be going—for how could she have not noticed the bouquet of orange blossoms he'd deposited beside the salver?

That could mean only one thing: He was on his way to visit Miss Lavinia Burke.

Charlotte cringed. Lavinia Burke. It could only be pronounced with the same disdainful tone and inflection with which one said “bubonic plague” or “Napoleon Bonaparte.”

Not that the rest of London found her so. Miss Burke was this Season’s perfect debutante, and every mention of her (at least to Charlotte) held a particular sting.

For the girl was everything Charlotte was not.

Rich. Fashionable. Witty. Youthful. And most loathsome of all, extremely pretty.

Since being proclaimed an Original by no less than three reliable sources (the *Morning Post*, Lady Routledge, and, of course, the impeccable and fastidious Brummell), the popular heiress was now the most sought after young lady in London.

Charlotte couldn’t think of Miss Burke without some highly uncharitable notion springing to mind, but today, of all days, she saw not only the gaping chasm between herself and the other girl, but the impossibility of her own most closely held dream.

“Oh, gracious heavens, Charlotte,” Lady Hermione Marlowe called out as she flew down the stairs, “I thought you would never arrive! Is it a huge fortune? A tremendous one? For if it is, I saw the most perfect gown yesterday at Madame Claudius’s shop that you must buy at once. She made it up for another woman, but now the lady has disappeared and I do think it will fit you perfectly. But first we must go to the park, for it is nearly three, and you know who will be riding by and I have a new pose that I am sure will catch his attention.” She struck it at once and it was vastly ridiculous, but Charlotte was still struggling to find the words to speak to Sebastian, let alone answer Hermione. Not that her friend noticed, for she continued on in her own distracted way. “Why, I daresay between your new dress and my fine stance we will make that odious Miss B—” At that moment, Hermione noticed her brother and faltered to a stop.

Sebastian gaped at her as if she had gone mad. “Whoever are you talking to, Hermione?”

“Charlotte,” she said, pointing just beside the cabinet.

Sebastian turned around, his eyes widening with surprise at the sight of her so close by. “Miss Wilson, I didn’t see you there.”

Oh, the humiliation of it. He hadn’t been able to discern her from the draperies *and* he couldn’t even get her name correct.

Charlotte stepped forward out of the shadows, a little bit too hastily and not quite as gracefully as a lady might hope for, and she bumped into the chest.

The earl’s prized phallus teetered and tipped, then toppled over. Charlotte caught it just in time, relieved that she hadn’t broken the smooth and solid statue, but in the next moment realizing that now she stood before Lord Trent holding a huge male...male...oh, bother, piece of anatomy.

The heat of a searing blush rose to her cheeks. “I, um, yes, well, um,” she stammered.

Hermione, nearly always poised and confident, came to her rescue, descending the stairs in record time and scooping the statue out of her hands and setting it firmly back up on the chest as if it were merely a proper Wedgwood vase.

“Sebastian, you are the most trying brother alive,” she was saying. “Her name is Wilmont. Not Wilson. Not Wilton, but Miss Charlotte Wilmont. My dear friend for these past five years, and the fact that you cannot remember her name marks you as the worst sort of ninny who ever lived.”

“My apologies, *Miss Wilmont*,” Sebastian said, bowing ever-so-slightly toward her.

Charlotte nodded, not trusting her tongue to do anything more than flap insipidly.

Hermione wasn't done. “You should be more considerate of Charlotte. She has just come into a great fortune and will, in no time, be the toast of the town.”

Charlotte's gaze wrenched from Sebastian to her friend, her head shaking furiously. “Oh, no, it isn't like that.”

“Silly girl!” Hermione wound her hand around Charlotte's arm and tugged her up to Sebastian with a great flourish of her other hand, as if she were presenting royalty to him. “Miss Wilmont's great-aunt died and left her an immense—”

“Hermione!” Charlotte protested. “Don't!” Oh, this was turning into a terrible nightmare. First the phallus, and now this!

The girl's hand fluttered again, waving aside the objection, as if it were nothing more than unnecessary modesty. “Charlotte, it isn't like everyone isn't going to know when you turn up in society in the finest gowns, at all the best parties. Being exceedingly wealthy won't turn you into a vulgar little chit, like some people we know.” Hermione tipped her nose and shot an accusing glance at the bouquet. “You aren't going to call on *her* again, are you?”

Sebastian's brow arched. “And whatever business is it of yours?”

Hermione groaned. “It is every bit my business. Miss Burke is a terrible snob and I can't believe you would even contemplate pursuing her. If I thought for a moment you loved her, that might be a consideration, but I don't think even you could be that dull.”

The viscount tossed the letters back atop the salver and retrieved his orange blossoms. “I am not going to have this conversation with you.”

His tone spoke of finality, one that would not brook any further interference, but Charlotte knew better than to think that Hermione would respect her brother's authority. The Marlowes were infamously informal, and that Hermione would ignore her brother's position as de facto head of the household was no surprise.

Luckily, Fenwick, the family's butler, made a timely arrival with Sebastian's hat, gloves, and coat, saving the brother and sister from a complete row. Sebastian handed the sprays of orange blossoms to Hermione as he shrugged on his coat and pulled on his gloves.

The sweet and spicy scent of oranges curled around Charlotte's senses, and her earlier feelings of envy returned, as if carried on a zephyr.

Flowers. And callers. And balls.

How she had dreamed of those things in the past few weeks, ever since she and her mother had received the letter from the solicitor announcing Great-aunt Ursula's death and Charlotte's inclusion in her will.

Sebastian reached for his bouquet, and Hermione held the blossoms back. "I think you are making a terrible mistake," she told him, her nose wrinkled, as if the sweet flowers held all the appeal of a pile of horse droppings.

"Then it is mine to make," he replied, taking his flowers and frowning at her interference.

"Whyever would you want that prosy Miss Burke when there are plenty of other ladies who would make a better choice?" At this, she nudged Charlotte forward. Again. Oh, there was nothing subtle about Hermione. "Miss Wilmont's fortune will make Miss Burke's ten thousand a year look paltry."

The heat in Charlotte's cheeks was nothing compared to the black pit knotted in her stomach.

"Hermione, please," she whispered. "Don't do this."

The girl was not going to listen, not when she had a chance to cast anything up at her sensible and dull elder brother. "I declare by tomorrow Charlotte will be the most sought after young lady in London, especially now that she's inherited—"

"A ring," Charlotte sputtered. "All I received was a ring."

That brought Hermione's crowing to an abrupt end. "But your mother said you stood to inherit..."

Charlotte shook her head, the sting of tears bringing an even greater threat of humiliation.

First the disastrous news from the solicitor that Aunt Ursula's storied fortune was nothing but a fiction, then her mother's rage at being so deceived, so cheated, and now having to face it all yet again and in front of Sebastian, no less.

"But all our plans," Hermione whispered, shooting a glance at her brother, then back at her friend. For a moment she wavered, but this was Hermione Marlowe, and she was always a veritable fountain of hope. "Is it a big ring? A large diamond perhaps, or a ruby or emerald? Just enough to buy the gown at Madame Claudius's?"

Charlotte tugged reluctantly at her glove until it came off. She turned her face away as she held out her hand.

"'Tis lovely," Hermione said, trying to sound cheerful as she inspected the odd little ring. She glanced up. "Are you sure there wasn't more to your aunt's bequest? Some property perhaps? An

annuity the solicitor overlooked? Annuities are often overlooked, I've heard."

Charlotte shook her head. "Nothing. Nothing but this ring."

Her friend's eyes grew moist with tears, the spring running over. "Oh, Charlotte, this is a tragedy. A horrible, wretched tragedy." As a Marlowe, Hermione resorted to dramatics, pulling out her handkerchief and sobbing as if the lost fortune had been destined for her pockets.

Charlotte gulped, holding back her own tears. She'd done admirably well at the solicitor's office but now in front of Hermione, and in front of those wretched orange blossoms, it was terribly hard not to give over to a well-deserved spate of tears.

"Yes, well, if you will forgive me," Sebastian said at all this overwhelming feminine display of emotion. He nodded to Charlotte, and then said to Fenwick, who until now had been standing near the stairs, ever at the ready to serve, "Tell my mother I will be dining with the Burkes, so do not expect me home."

"You're dining with them?" Hermione sputtered, this alarming news shocking her out of her distress over Charlotte's loss. "Whatever for?"

"Because I was invited," he told her. "And I like the company."

Hermione made a sputtering noise, then collected herself enough to follow him. "Am I to suppose you are also going to their Venetian breakfast tomorrow as well?"

"Of course," Sebastian told her. "You and Mother had better be there, and on time." With that, he turned and opened the door.

"There you are!" said the woman standing on the front steps, her hand upraised as if she had been about to pull the bell.

Charlotte cringed. *Cousin Finella.*

Because of their impoverished state, Charlotte and her mother, Lady Wilmont, lived with her mother's cousin, Finella Uppington-Higgins. Finella had inherited the house years ago, and combined with the small amount Lady Wilmont received as Sir Nestor's widow, it was just enough for three frugal women to scratch by on.

"When I couldn't find you in the park, I suspected you might come *here*." Finella sniffed and took a discerning and critical glance around the Marlowe foyer. When her gaze fell on the fertility statue near the salver, what little color she did possess drained from her pale features, and she looked instantly away. A stickler for propriety, she thrust out her hand and said in a tight voice, "Come along, Charlotte. Your mother needs you at home. Now."

Oh, Charlotte knew what that meant. Her mother was in high dudgeons and wanted an audience for her laments and agonies over Aunt Ursula's broken promises.

Hermione leaned close and whispered softly, "I understand. Come back as soon as you can. We'll find a way for you to have your heart's desire."

At this, Charlotte's gaze flew not to her friend but over to Sebastian.

Her heart's desire. Holding orange blossoms for another woman. A woman, if gossip was correct, he would most likely marry.

Charlotte wondered what Cousin Finella—or, worse, her mother—would say if she let loose with her own loud and strident lament.

Probably have the same shocked reaction as the one Finella was exhibiting, for the lady's gaze remained locked on Lord Walbrook's prize cock sitting atop the chest of drawers.

A museum piece, he had written when he had sent it home from a South Seas island. As such, Lady Walbrook had dutifully and proudly displayed it without batting a lash at the impropriety of such a treasure.

From the narrow glint in Finella's eyes, Charlotte had no doubt of her cousin's opinion as to the earl's treasure, and just exactly where it belonged.

"Charlotte, now!" the lady managed to choke out.

After shooting an apologetic glance at her friend, Charlotte allowed herself to be led down the steps.

"Good afternoon, Miss Wilmont," Sebastian said as he strode past them, sidestepping an elderly street vendor tottering down the street with a basket clutched in her wrinkled hands.

"Flowers, milord?" she asked him. "For the young lady?"

"Um, no thank you, madam," he said, holding up his own offering. "These should be quite adequate."

"If you think so," she said saucily, pushing her way past Finella and Charlotte and muttering under her breath. "Orange blossoms, bah!"

"Farewell, Lord Trent," Charlotte whispered after him, feeling as if this was the last time she would ever see him. That wasn't true; she'd probably see him again tomorrow, for she was forever coming over to see Hermione, but from now on she would have no more hope, no more dreams, no more wishes left when it came to Sebastian Marlowe, Viscount Trent.

"Good riddance," Cousin Finella muttered. "What you see in that family I will never understand."

Charlotte didn't bother to reply. There was no use arguing with Cousin Finella—the lady had a very hard and narrow line of what was proper and what was correct, and any deviation, even the slightest hint of impropriety, was enough to propel even the loftiest of families from Cousin Finella's good graces.

Not that anyone in the *ton* gave a whit as to what Finella Uppington-Higgins thought of them, but Finella continued to believe that she was the lone voice of decorum in London, and she went about her

duties with the diligence of a Tower guard.

By this time in the afternoon, Berkeley Square was filled with carriages—happy couples, dashing rakes, and carefree Corinthians making their way to the park for the afternoon promenade.

When an opening in traffic appeared, Finella was about to tug Charlotte across the street, that is until a devilishly fast curricle came racing through the throng.

Finella hauled Charlotte back, and when she spied the driver, she said, “Avert your eyes, child. It’s that *Fornett* woman.”

Charlotte did as she was bid, only because it afforded her another glance at Sebastian, who was nearly to the corner.

Some of the drivers shouted at Mrs. Fornett, decrying her madcap pace, but there were also whistles and catcalls from the more dashing men nearby.

For Mrs. Corinna Fornett was one of London’s most notorious courtesans, and her arrival, whether on the streets in her smart carriage and its infamous matched set of blacks or at her private box at the Opera House, always caused a stir.

And so it seemed, she also stirred Lord Trent. Charlotte watched in shock as the very proper and straitlaced viscount, the only Marlowe who never gave Society a moment of gossip, actually tipped his hat at this scandalous woman.

Admonition or no, Charlotte turned and looked back at Mrs. Fornett, if only to see what it was that had caught the viscount’s attention with such an uncharacteristic display.

The lady wore a red dress—a gown one certainly didn’t expect to see on the afternoon parade, but there she was like a vibrant peony set amongst a field of forget-me-nots. Atop her head sat a smart hat with jaunty plumes and a wide black ribbon that fluttered down her back.

While it would be easy to say that any woman who dressed in such an outlandish fashion in the middle of the afternoon would stop traffic, Charlotte spied right there and then why it was that Corinna Fornett held London’s men in her thrall.

She sat in the driver’s perch with her nose tipped up and her eyes alight at the mischief she was causing. The reins sat in her hands with an easy grace, belying the fact that her horses looked ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

It wasn’t that Mrs. Fornett was a beautiful woman, for in truth she wasn’t that unlike Charlotte in coloring, with her brown hair and fair brow; rather it was the confidence with which she carried herself that set her apart from every other female on the street.

With the traffic parting before her, like Cleopatra making her entrance into Rome, Mrs. Fornett took her due as if it was her birthright, no matter that popular gossip held that she was the bastard daughter of a smuggler and a serving wench. Cousin Finella’s opinion or the petty gossip of matrons held no sway over the lady. She wasn’t cowed by propriety—rather quite the opposite. She let her notoriety and very improper reputation spread out before her like a wave.

~~Charlotte raised herself up a little bit straighter and took one last peek at Sebastian before he turned the corner.~~

He too was taking another appreciative look at Mrs. Fornett, until he glanced down at the flower in his hand. The slight smile on his lips faded, and he turned to continue on toward Miss Burke's.

If only, Charlotte thought...If only, she wished...

I could be the woman he loved.

For a moment, all the hubbub and clatter of the street faded away, leaving Charlotte in a swirling void. The ring on her finger grew oddly warm, and a wave of dizziness swept over her.

She swayed and teetered on the uneven cobbles. *Dear heavens, whatever is wrong?* For the first time in her life, she thought she was going to faint.

"There now," Finella said with a bit of uncharacteristic concern in her voice. She took Charlotte's arm and steadied her. "You've had a trying day as well, I imagine. Poor child. Come home, and once your mother is done with her wailing, we'll make the best of all this. There is nothing else that can be done."

The finality of her words snapped Charlotte out of her odd reverie. And then just as quickly as the odd sensations had overcome her, they were gone and once again, London came alive around her, and there was nothing left to do but fall in step beside Finella and hurry home.

To her dull life, and to a future with no hope of love.

Meanwhile, the old woman selling flowers paused. "I wouldn't be so sure of that," she whispered after Charlotte. "I wouldn't be so sure."

Chapter 2

May 10, 1810
A Thursday of Some Note

When Charlotte awoke the next morning, she could feel the warmth of the sun on her face, but she kept her eyes closed, if only to avoid facing the day for a few moments more.

Her mother had spent the entire evening decrying Aunt Ursula's cruelty, lamenting how the ancient lady had led them on for years about Charlotte's supposedly priceless inheritance, and then leaving her just a small, worthless ring.

Lady Wilmont had even gone so far as to demand the object of her distress from her daughter, with every intention of consigning the mocking bit of gold to the fire. But oddly enough, Charlotte had been unable to pull it from her finger. The little ring, despite a good bit of soap and lard, had remained on her hand as if only to vex Lady Wilmont further. So Charlotte, at Cousin Finella's quiet urging, had sought out her bed and taken refuge in a night of dreamless sleep.

She stretched a little, wishing she could spend the entire day in the drowsy warmth of her bed, that is until she stretched a little further under the covers and her toes bumped into something warm and solid.

And alive, for it moved and stretched right along beside her.

"O-o-o-oh!" she gasped, her eyes springing open.

Then, just as suddenly, her shock over finding something, or rather, someone, in her bed gave way to a newfound horror—she wasn't in her own bed.

And this certainly wasn't her room.

She blinked and gaped at her opulent surroundings, perhaps more stunned by the unfettered wealth around her—red brocade curtains, gold fringed swags, red and white chinoiserie paper on the walls—than by the fact that there was someone sharing her bed.

Her bewildered gaze fell on an enormous, gilt-framed painting of a naked woman who looked vaguely familiar. Why, if she didn't know better, it was a portrait of—

"Lottie?" murmured a deep, sleepy voice beside her. "Lottie, my love, where are you?" A thick masculine arm wound around her waist and tugged her under the coverlet and into his warm embrace.

Suddenly she was surrounded by the scent of bay rum and an air of something else, a deeply masculine essence that tugged at her senses, enticed her to inhale deeply, and beckoned her closer.

“Mmmm, there you are,” he said as he nuzzled at her neck, while one of his hands found her breast, his fingertips brushing over her nipple.

“Good heavens!” she cried, struggling to escape his grasp, to wiggle free of this wretched tangle even as he pulled her further under the covers and rolled atop her, covering her with his, dare she say it, *naked* body.

And he wasn't the only one who had no clothes on. Her nightgown was missing. Which meant...

The heat of a devastating blush rose from her bare toes to the rosy tips of her...Charlotte shuddered, panic setting in as this blackguard continued to stroke her with no regard for propriety.

At least she could be thankful for the coverlet over them, so she couldn't see this shameless man. And she did her best to ignore a tiny errant and very suggestive thought that “just one peep” wouldn't hurt.

No! she chastened herself, clinging to every lesson in self-control she'd ever learned from Cousin Finella. What she needed to do was muster enough courage to cry out, set up an alarm, but even as she drew in the necessary breath, his lips captured hers in a kiss.

Not a kiss like she'd imagined—soft and gentle, full of loving tenderness and honorable intentions—but one that claimed her as if it was his right, his due.

Hungry and avid, seeking and taking.

So much so that when his tongue swept over her lips, teased her and taunted her to open up to him, a delicious thrill ran down her spine.

Like a memory of something she had no right to claim, and every bit as dark and dangerous and persistent as Mother and Cousin Finella had once whispered about—but without all the rest of their dire admonitions about “painful” and “dreadful” and “turgid deviltry.”

No, her body reveled in a hazy warmth that made her languid and restless all at once.

Oh, heavens, what was wrong with her? She needed to escape this man immediately. Balling up her fists, she pummeled at his wide shoulders, tried twisting out from beneath him, but her efforts only garnered rough laughter.

“Lottie,” he growled into her ear, in a voice both familiar and sensual, “are you in one of *those* moods this morning? Hmmm. Whatever the lady wants.”

Lottie? Why did he keep calling her that? And whatever did he mean by “one of those moods”?

She all too quickly found out.

Suddenly her arms were trapped over her head and his hips pinned her to the mattress. Then his

mouth crashed over hers and he kissed her again. This time with a savage hunger that frightened her.

“There you are, my little wildcat,” he said between kisses. “I know how to tame you. Wait and see that I don’t.”

She wasn’t about to wait and see anything this ruffian had in mind. Charlotte pulled her wits together enough to find the air to scream for help. But even as she drew in a deep breath, his lips took possession of one of her nipples, sucking the tip into his mouth and letting his tongue whirl over the surface until it was pebbled and tight.

His kiss, his touch had bewildered her innocent senses, but this, this feeling he drew from her as easily as one might pluck a daisy, sent a shock wave of desire through her that rocked her virtue right off its foundation.

And her desperate cry turned into a gasp of surprise.

“Ah, yes, little Lottie, I know what you like,” he told her as he moved from one breast to the other and began working his hypnotic magic over again. Then he shifted again until something hard and insistent thrust against her thighs, between her legs.

And here all these months she’d thought the Earl of Walbrook’s South Seas prize had just been a grand exaggeration of male endowment.

No, having now been presented with solid evidence, she realized there was some truth in her mother’s dire warning of “turgid deviltry.”

If that wasn’t bad enough, he’d caught her hip with another hand—gads, how many limbs did the fellow possess—and tugged her closer to him.

Closer? He wanted to get closer?

Indeed he did, for he shifted yet again, pushing the tip of his manhood so it dove deeper toward her very ruination (as if waking up naked with a man wasn’t enough).

Yet in his efforts to completely ravage her, she realized he’d let go of her arms, released her hands as he’d caught hold of her hips, and was even now steering a course she had no intention of undertaking—no matter that her body seemed quite willing as her hips arched upward, seeking out his offering with a mind of their own.

She caught the top of the coverlet and yanked it down, only to find herself blinded by the sunlight streaking through the gauzy window covering.

Charlotte blinked and shook her head until the red curtains came into focus, then the oddly familiar painting across the room. Then, and only then, was she able to look up at the face of her assailant.

A man she knew only too well.

“Lord Trent?!” she cried out.

His face split into a wide grin. "You're further along than I thought, if you're calling my name already," he said, as if it were a grand joke. "But you needn't be so formal, Lottie, my love. A rousing 'Sebastian! Oh, now, Sebastian!' will suffice."

He swept down to kiss her again, his hips moving perilously toward her ruination as they thrust down to meet hers.

Lord Trent. Naked. Atop her. Calling her Lottie?

'Tis all a dream, she told herself, and for a split second that logic gave her some reassurance. Yet, honestly, whenever in her dreams had Lord Trent suckled at her breasts, as he was doing now, or ever in her imagination had his fingers raked through the curls...*down there*...her thighs parting willingly before him, allowing him to stroke her expertly with an intimacy that sent mesmerizing bolts of pleasure racing through her?

When in any dream had his fingertip rolled over the nub hidden there? How could a dream lover know about that place when she barely knew of its existence?

Oh, heavens, this was no dream.

She struggled out of his grasp, towing a bit of sheet with her.

"What do you think you are doing, my lord?"

"I thought I was doing you a favor." He grinned, wickedly, rakishly. "Doing us both a favor, if you know what I mean." He started to crawl toward her, crossing the expanse she had hoped would deter him.

"Stop right there," she ordered with as much force as she could muster pointing at an imaginary boundary in the sheets. "My lord, I don't know how it is that you are here, or how I am here, but I will not—"

She was cut off when his hand snaked under the linens, caught her by the ankle, and tugged her back into his embrace.

"You had too much wine last night," he teased. "It's made you cantankerous this morning." He nuzzled her neck again and said in a thick voice, "Let me wake you up properly."

His fingers went back to work teasing a path toward her cleft, and that delicious tempting warmth started to cloud her reason....

Oh, Sebastian! Now, Sebastian...

Whatever was she thinking? Charlotte's reason clamored back to the forefront and she found the wherewithal to scramble out of his grasp once again. "What do you think you are doing?"

"I told you, I'm waking you up."

"Like this?" She tugged the sheet higher.

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