Seven Years to Sin
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SYLVIA DAY
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There was something irresistibly exciting about watching athletic males engaged in physical combat. Their base, animalistic natures were betrayed by their unmitigated aggression and ruthlessness. Through their exertions, their bodies displayed a power that stirred a woman’s most primitive instincts.

Lady Jessica Sheffield was not immune, as she’d been taught a lady should be.

She could not take her eyes off the two young men wrestling exuberantly on the lawn on the opposite side of a narrow, shallow pond. One would soon be her brother-in-law; the other was his friend, a scapegrace whose wickedly handsome countenance spared him much of the censure he should rightly face.

“I would like to tumble about as they do,” her sister said wistfully. Hester, too, watched from where they sat beneath the shade of an ancient oak tree. A gentle breeze swept by them, ruffling the blades of grass flowing along the parkland to the impressive Pennington manse. The home sprawled beneath the protective shield of a wooded hill, its golden stone façade and gilded window frames catching the sunlight and creating a feeling of serenity for all who visited.
Jess returned her attention to her needlework, regretting that she had to chastise her sister for staring when she was guilty of the same conduct. “Such play is lost to women after childhood. Best not to covet what is beyond our grasp.”

“Why can men be boys all of their lives, but we women must grow old while we are yet young?”

“The world was made for men,” Jess said softly.

Beneath the wide brim of her straw hat, she snuck another glance at the two grappling young gentlemen. A barked command stilled them midscuffle and caused her spine to stiffen. Simultaneously, all their heads turned in the same direction. She found her betrothed approaching the two younger men, and the tension left her in a slow abatement, like the receding of a tide after a crashing wave. Not for the first time, she wondered if she would ever lose the sharp apprehension she felt whenever discord was evident or if she was so well trained to fear a man’s anger that she would never be free of it.

Tall and elegantly dressed, Benedict Reginald Sinclair, Viscount Tarley and future Earl of Pennington, strode across the lawn with the purpose of a man who knew well the power he wielded. She was both reassured by that inherent blue-blooded arrogance and wary of it. Some men were content with the knowledge of their own importance, while others felt the need to wield it indiscriminately.

“And what is a woman’s contribution to the world?” Hester asked with an obstinate pout that made her look younger than her ten and six years. With an impatient swipe at her cheek, she brushed back a honey-hued curl the exact shade of Jessica’s hair. “To serve men?”

“To create them.” Jess returned Tarley’s brisk wave. They would be wed in the Sinclair family chapel tomorrow before a carefully selected and elite gathering of Society. She looked forward to the occasion for a variety of reasons, not the least of which being that she would finally be free of her fa-
ther’s unpredictable and seemingly unprovoked rages. She did not begrudge the Marquess of Hadley his right to stress the value of social esteem and her part in securing it. It was the harsh manner in which he redressed her shortcomings that she deplored.

Hester made a sound suspiciously like a snort. “Those are our pater’s words.”

“And the dominant view of the world at large. Who would know that better than you and I?” Their mother’s ceaseless efforts to bear the Hadley heir had cost her life. Hadley had been forced to suffer through another wife, another daughter, and five years before finally seeing the birth of his precious son.

“I do not believe Tarley looks upon you as a breed mare,” Hester said. “In fact, I think he has a tendre for you.”

“I would be fortunate if that were so. However, he would not have offered for me had I lacked a suitable bloodline.” Jess watched as Benedict chastised his younger sibling for his rough play. Michael Sinclair looked sufficiently contrite, but Alistair Caulfield looked anything but. His posture, while not overtly defiant, was too proud to be remorseful. The three males made a riveting grouping—the Sinclairs with their rich chocolate-hued tresses and powerfully lean frames, and Caulfield, who was said to be favored by Mephistopheles himself with his ink-dark hair and devilishly attractive features.

“Tell me you will be happy with him,” Hester entreated, leaning forward. Her irises were the same brilliant green as the lawn beneath their feet, and they were filled with concern. Her eye color was a trait inherited from their mother along with their pale tresses. Jess had taken their father’s gray eyes. It was the only part of himself he’d ever given her. That was not a lamentable circumstance in her opinion.

“I intend to be.” There was no way to ensure that, but what point was there in worrying Hester needlessly? Tarley
was their father’s choice, and Jess would have to become accustomed to it, whatever the outcome.

Hester pressed on. “I want neither of us to leave this world with the pitiful relief our mother did. Life is meant to be savored and enjoyed.”

Jess twisted on the marble half-moon bench upon which she sat and placed her needlepoint carefully in the bag beside her. She prayed Hester would always retain her sweet, hopeful nature. “Tarley and I respect one another. I have always enjoyed his company and discourse. He is intelligent and patient, considerate and polite. And he is an extremely fine specimen of a man. One cannot overlook that.”

Hester’s smile brightened their shady location better than the sun could have. “Yes, he is. I can only pray that Father will make an equally handsome choice for me.”

“Have you set your cap for a particular gentleman?”

“Not entirely, no. I am still in search of the perfect combination of traits that will suit me best.” Hester looked at the three men, now talking with some seriousness. “I should like a husband of Tarley’s station, but with Mr. Sinclair’s more jovial personality and Mr. Caulfield’s appearance. Although I do believe Alistair Caulfield is likely the handsomest man in all of England—if not farther reaches—so I will have to settle for less in that regard.”

“He is too young for me to assess in that manner,” Jess lied, eying the object of discussion.

“Stuff. He is mature for his age; everyone says so.”

“He is jaded from lack of guidance. There is a difference.” Though Jess was plagued by too much restriction, Caulfield suffered from none at all. With his three older brothers taking up the expected roles of heir, military officer, and clergyman, there had been no role for him to fill. An overly doting mother had only worsened his prospects of learning any responsibility. He was infamous for his risk taking and inability to walk away from any bet or challenge.
In the handful of years Jess had known him, he’d grown wilder with every passing season.

“Two years’ gap is no gap at all,” Hester argued.

“Not when comparing a score and ten to thirty-two, perhaps. But comparing ten and six to ten and eight? That is an age.”

Jess caught sight of Benedict’s mother hurrying toward her, a sure sign that her brief respite from the whirlwind of final-hour preparations was over. She stood. “In any case, your admiration is best directed elsewhere. Mr. Caulfield has little chance of serving a useful purpose in this life. His lamentable position as the superfluous fourth son practically ensures he will achieve little consequence. It is a shame he has chosen to cast off the benefit of his good name in favor of reckless pursuits, but that is his mistake and it should not be yours.”

“I have heard it said that his father has given him a ship and a sugarcane plantation.”

“It is highly likely Masterson did so in the hopes his son would take his dangerous proclivities to a distant shore.”

Hester sighed. “I sometimes wish I could travel far, far away. Am I alone in such longings?”

_Not at all_, Jess wished to say. She thought of escape in passing, but her station was so narrowly defined. In that regard, she was at a greater disadvantage than women of common birth. Who was she if not the Marquess of Hadley’s daughter and the future Viscountess Tarley? If neither of them wished to travel extensively, she would never be given the opportunity. But sharing such ruminations with her impressionable sibling would be inappropriate and unfair. “God willing,” she said instead, “you will have a spouse eager to indulge you in all things. You deserve it.”

Jess untied the leash of her beloved pug, Temperance, and gestured to her abigail to collect her bag. As she moved to pass her sister, she paused and bent to press a kiss to Hester’s
forehead. “Cast your eye upon Lord Regmont at supper this evening. He is comely, most charming, and recently returned from his Grand Tour. You will be one of the first diamonds he meets since his return.”

“He would have to wait two years for my presentation,” Hester retorted with more than a little disgruntlement. “You are worth the wait. Any man of discerning taste will see that straightaway.”

“As if I shall have a choice in the matter, even if he was to find me intriguing.”

Winking, Jess lowered her voice and said, “Regmont is a close associate of Tarley’s. I am certain Benedict would speak highly of him to our pater should that become necessary.”

“Truly?” Hester’s shoulders wriggled with the fevered anticipation of youth. “You must introduce us.”

“For a certainty.” Jess set off with a wave. “Cast your eyes away from ne’er-do-wells until then.”

Hester made a show of covering her eyes, but Jess expected her sister would return to her perusal of the men as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Jess certainly would.

“Tarley’s tension is high,” Michael Sinclair noted, dusting himself off and staring at his brother’s retreating back.

“You expected otherwise?” Alistair Caulfield collected his jacket from the ground and shook off the few blades of grass clinging to the superfine. “He gains a leg shackle tomorrow.”

“To the Diamond of the Season. Not such a bad fate. My mother says Helen of Troy could not have been more beautiful.”

“Or a marble statue more cold.”

Michael looked at him. “Beg your pardon?”

From across the shallow terrace pool separating them,
Alistair watched Lady Jessica Sheffield cross the lawn toward the house with her little dog in tow. Her slender figure was encased from neck to wrist to ankle in pale floral muslin that clung to her with the breeze. Her face was turned away from him and shielded from the sun by a hat, but he knew her features from memory. He was irresistibly drawn to stare at such beauty. Many men were.

Her hair was a delight of nature, the strands longer and thicker than any other blonde he had ever seen. The tresses were so pale as to be almost silver, with streaks of darker gold adding richness to the whole. She'd worn it down on occasion before her presentation, but now it was as restrained as her deportment. For someone so young, she had the cool demeanor and reserve of a more mature woman.

“That pale hair and creamy skin,” Alistair murmured, “and those gray eyes . . .”

“Yes?”

Alistair noted the amusement in his friend’s voice and strengthened his own. “Her coloring suits her temperament perfectly,” he said briskly. “She is an ice princess, that one. Your brother had best pray she breeds quickly or risk losing his cock to frostbite.”

“And you had best watch your tongue,” Michael warned, repairing his dark brown hair with a quick combing with both hands, “lest I take offense. Lady Jessica is soon to be my sister-in-law.”

Nodding absently, Alistair found his attention once again drawn to the graceful girl who was so perfect in both physical and social deportment. He was fascinated with watching her and waiting for some crack in the porcelain-smooth exterior. He wondered how she bore the pressure at her age, the very pressure he had grown intolerant of and now rebelled against. “Apologies.”

Michael studied him. “Have you some quarrel with her? There is an edge to your tone suggesting so.”
“Perhaps there is a slight sting,” he admitted gruffly, “from her failure to acknowledge me the other evening. Her cut direct was a marked difference in manner from that of her sister, Lady Hester, who is quite charming.”

“Yes, Hester is a delight.” Michael’s admiring tone was so like Alistair’s when speaking of Lady Jessica that Alistair raised his brows in silent inquiry. Flushing, Michael went on, “Likely Jessica did not hear you.”

Alistair shrugged into his jacket. “I was directly beside her.”

“Oh the left side? She is deaf in that ear.”

It took him a moment to absorb the information and reply. He had not imagined any imperfections in her, although he felt some relief to know there was one. It made her more mortal and less Grecian goddess. “I was not aware.”

“For the most part, no one takes note. Only when the noise is high, during large gatherings, does it become a hindrance.”

“Now I see why Tarley selected her. A wife who only half listens to rumormongers would be a blessing indeed.”

Michael snorted and started toward the house. “She is reserved,” he conceded, “but then the future Countess of Pennington should be. Tarley assures me there are hidden depths to her.”

“Hmm . . .”

“You sound doubtful, but despite your excessively comely face, your experience with women is not equal to Tarley’s.”

Alistair’s mouth curved wryly. “Are you certain?”

“Considering the irrefutable fact that he has ten years’ advantage on you, I would say so.” Michael threw his arm around Alistair’s shoulders. “I suggest you concede that his greater maturity likely gives him a superior platform from which to note hidden qualities in his own betrothed.”
“I dislike conceding anything.”
“I know, my friend. However, you really should concede defeat in our recently interrupted wrestling match. You were moments away from seeing me the victor.”
Alistair elbowed him in the ribs. “If Tarley had not spared you, you would be pleading for mercy now.”
“Ho! Shall we determine the winner with a race to the—”
Alistair was running before the last word was out.

Within hours, she would be wed.
As the dark of night lightened into the gray of predawn, Jessica hugged her shawl tighter about her shoulders and walked Temperance deeper into the forest surrounding the Pennington manse. The pug’s rapid steps crunched atop the loose gravel trail in a staccato that was soothing in its familiarity.

“Why must you be so picky?” Jess chastised. Her breath puffed visibly in the chill air, making her long for the warmth of the bed she had yet to crawl into. “Any spot should suffice.”
Temperance glanced up with an expression Jess swore was akin to exasperation.
“Very well,” she said reluctantly, unable to refuse that look. “We’ll go a bit farther.”
They rounded a corner and Temperance paused, sniffing. Apparently satisfied with the location, the pug presented her back to Jess and squatted in front of a tree.
Smiling at the bid for privacy, Jess turned away and took in her surroundings, deciding to explore the trail more thoroughly in the light of day. Unlike so many estates where the gardens and woodlands were invaded by obelisks, reproductions of Grecian statues and temples, and the occasional pagoda, the Pennington estate displayed a welcome appreciation of the natural landscape. There were places along the
pathway where it felt as if civilization and all its inhabitants were miles away. She had not expected to enjoy the feeling so much but found she did, especially after hours of meaningless interactions with people who cared only for the title she was marrying into.

“I shall enjoy walking you through here,” she said over her shoulder, “when the sun is up and I am properly attired for the activity.”

Temperance finished her business and moved into view. The pug started back toward the house, tugging on the leash with notable impatience after taking so long to find a proper piddle spot. Jess was following when a rustling noise to the left put Temperance on alert. The dog’s dark ears and tail perked up, while her tan muscular body tensed with expectation.

Jess’s heart beat faster. If it was a wild boar or feral fox, the situation would be disastrous. She would be devastated if something untoward happened to Temperance, who was the only creature on earth who did not judge Jess by standards she struggled greatly to meet.

A squirrel darted across the path. Jess melted with relief and gave a breathless laugh. But Temperance did not stand down. The pug lunged, ripping her leash from Jess’s slackened grip.

“Bloody hell. Temperance!”

In a flash of tiny limbs and fur, the two creatures were gone. The sounds of the chase—the rustling of leaves and the pug’s low growling—quickly faded.

Tossing up her hands, Jess left the walkway and followed the path of trampled foliage. She was so focused on tracking, she failed to realize she’d come upon a large gazebo until she very nearly ran into it. She veered to the right . . .

A female’s throaty laugh broke the quiet. Jess stumbled to a startled halt.
“Hurry, Lucius,” the woman urged breathlessly. “Trent will note my absence.”

Wilhelmina, Lady Trent. Jess stood unmoving, barely breathing.

There was a slow, drawn-out creaking of wood.

“Patience, darling.” A recognizable masculine voice rejoined in a lazy, practiced drawl. “Let me give you what you paid for.”

The gazebo creaked again, louder this time. Quicker and harder. Lady Trent gave a thready moan.

Alistair Lucius Caulfield. Inflagrente delicto with the Countess of Trent. Dear God. The woman was nearly a score of years his senior. Beautiful, yes, but of an age with his mother.

The use of his middle name was startling. And, perhaps, telling . . . ? Aside from the obvious, perhaps they were intimate in a deeper sense. Was it possible the roguish Caulfield had a tendre for the lovely countess, enough that she would have reason to call him by a name not used by others?

“You,” the countess purred, “are worth every shilling I pay for you.”

Dear God. Perhaps not an intimacy at all, but a . . . transaction. An arrangement. With a man providing the services . . .

Hoping to move on without giving herself away, Jess took a tentative step forward. A slight movement in the gazebo prompted her to still again. Her eyes narrowed, struggling to overcome the insufficient light. It was her misfortune to be bathed in the faint glow of the waning moon while the interior of the gazebo remained deeply shadowed by its roof and overhanging trees.

She saw a hand wrapped around one of the domed roof’s supporting poles and another set a short ways above it. A man’s hands, gripping for purchase. From their height on the beam, she knew he was standing.
“Lucius . . . For God’s sake, don’t stop now.”
Lady Trent was pinned between Caulfield and the wood.
Which meant he was facing Jess.
Twin glimmers in the darkness betrayed a blink.
He saw her. Was in fact staring at her.
Jess wished the ground would open and swallow her whole. What was she to say? How was one supposed to act when caught in such a situation?

“Lucius! Damn you.” The weathered wood whined in response to its pressures. “The feel of your big cock in me is delicious, but far more so when it’s moving.”

Jess’s hand went to her throat. Despite the cold, perspiration misted her forehead. The horror she should have felt at finding a man engaged in sexual congress was markedly absent. Because it was Caulfield, and he fascinated her. It was a terrible sort of captivation with which she viewed him—a mixture of envy for his freedom and horror at the ease with which he disregarded public opinion.

She had to get away before she was forced to acknowledge her presence to Lady Trent. She took a careful step forward . . .

“Wait.” Caulfield’s voice was gruffer than before.
She froze.
“I cannot!” Lady Trent protested breathlessly.
But it was not the countess Caulfield spoke to.
One of his hands was outstretched, extended toward Jess. The request stunned her into immobility.
A long moment passed in which her gaze remained fixed on the twin sparkles of his eyes. His breathing became harsh and audible.
Then, he gripped the pole again and began to move.
His thrusts began slowly at first, then became more fervent with a building tempo. The rhythmic protests of the wood battered Jess from all sides. She could see no detail beyond those two hands and glistening gaze that smoldered
with a tangible heat, but the sounds she heard filled her mind with images. Caulfield never took his eyes from her, even as he rutted so furiously she wondered how the countess could take pleasure in such violence of movement. Lady Trent was nearly incoherent, coarse words of praise spilling from her lips between high-pitched squeals.

Jess was riveted by this exposure to a side of sexual congress she'd been mostly ignorant of. She knew the mechanics; her stepmother had been most thorough. Do not cringe or cry when he enters you. Try to relax; it will decrease the discomfort. Make no sound of any kind. Never voice a complaint. And yet Jess had seen the knowing looks of other women and heard whispers behind fans that hinted at more. Now she had the proof. Every pleasured sound Lady Trent made echoed through her, tripping over her senses like a stone skipping over water. Her body responded instinctively—her skin became sensitive and her breathing came in quick pants.

She began to quiver under the weight of Caulfield's gaze. Although she longed to run from the purloined intimacy, she was unable to move. It was impossible, but it seemed as if he looked right through her, past the façade forged by her father's hand.

The bonds holding her in place broke only when Caulfield did. His serrated groan at the moment of crisis acted like a spur to her flank. She ran then, clinging to her shawl with both arms crossed over full and aching breasts. When Temperance dashed out of a bush to greet her, Jess sobbed with relief. Scooping up the pug, she rushed toward the trail leading back to the manse.

“Lady Jessica!”

The calling of her name as Jess returned to the relative safety of the rear garden caused her to stumble. Her heart raced anew at being caught. She spun in a flurry of pale blue
satin skirts, searching for the caller and mortified at the thought it might be Alistair Caulfield with a plea for discretion. Or worse, her father.

“Jessica. By God, I’ve been searching all over for you.”

She was relieved to see Benedict approaching from the direction of the house, but relief bled into wariness. He maneuvered through the yew-lined garden paths with such a brisk, determined stride. A shiver moved through her. Was he angry?

“Is something amiss?” she queried carefully as he neared, knowing it must be to cause him to seek her out at this hour.

“You have been gone at length. Half an hour ago, your abigail said you’d left to walk Temperance, and you had already been absent for a quarter hour when I inquired.”

Her gaze lowered to avoid any appearance of challenge.

“I apologize for causing you concern.”

“No need for apologies,” he said in a clipped tone. “I simply wished to have a word with you. We are to be wed today, and I wanted to allay any nerves that might plague you before the event.”

Jess blinked and looked up, startled by his consideration.

“My lord—”

“Benedict,” he corrected, catching up her hand. “You are chilled to the bone. Where have you been?”

The concern in his tone was unmistakable. She wasn’t certain at first how to respond. His reaction was so different from the one her father would have had.

Thrown off guard by her own confusion, she began to reply almost without thinking. As she relayed the tale of Temperance leading her on a merry chase after a squirrel, Jess studied her future spouse with more care than she’d invested in a very long time. He had become a staple in her life, an obligation she accepted without need for deep contemplation. Inasmuch as she was able, she had grown comfortable with the inevitability of sharing a life with him. But
she did not feel comfortable now. She remained flushed and agitated by the way Caulfield had used her to further his own pleasure.

“I would have walked with you, if you had asked,” Benedict said when she finished. He gave her hand a squeeze. “In the future, I pray you do so.”

Emboldened by his gentle manner and the lingering effects of the wine she’d drunk too liberally of at supper, Jess pressed on recklessly. “Temperance and I found something else in the woods.”

“Oh?”

She told him about the couple in the gazebo, her voice low and faltering, her words tumbling over themselves because she lacked the vocabulary and confidence. She did not speak of the coin exchanged between the countess and Caulfield, nor did she divulge their identities.

Benedict didn’t move the entirety of the short time she spoke. When she finished, he cleared his throat and said, “Damnation, I am horrified that you were exposed to such unpleasantness on the eve of our wedding.”

“They did not seem to find the encounter unpleasant at all.”

He flushed. “Jessica—”

“You spoke of allaying my nerves,” she said quickly, before losing her courage. “I should like to be honest with you, but I fear overstepping the limits of your forbearance.”

“I will advise you if that limit is reached.”

“In what manner?”

“Beg your pardon?” Benedict frowned.

Jess swallowed. “In what manner will you advise me? With a word? A loss of privilege? S-something more... definitive?”

He stiffened. “I would never lay a hand to you or any woman; I would certainly never fault you for honesty. I expect I will be far more lenient with you than with anyone
else of my acquaintance. You are a great prize to me, Jessica. I have waited impatiently for the day when you would be mine.”

“Why?”

“You are a beautiful woman,” he said gruffly.

Astonishment swept through her, followed by a rush of unexpected hope. “My lord, would you be displeased to know that I find myself praying for the physical aspect of our marriage to be . . . pleasurable? For both of us.”

God knew she would not be able to dally as Lady Trent did. Such behavior was not in her nature.

He displayed his unease with the topic by pulling at the elegant knot of his cravat. “I have always intended to make it so. I will make it so, if you trust me.”

“Benedict.” She inhaled the scent clinging to him—spice, tobacco, and a fine port. Despite wading through a discussion he would certainly never expect to have with his lady wife, his responses were as direct as his gaze. She liked him more each moment that passed. “You are taking this conversation so well. I cannot help wondering how far I can press you.”

“Please, speak freely,” he urged. “I want you to come to the altar with no doubts or reservations.”

Jess spoke in a rush. “I should like to retire with you to the summerhouse by the lake. This moment.”

His exhale was harsh, as were his features. His grip on her hand tightened almost painfully. “Why?”

“I have angered you.” Averting her gaze, she backed away. “Forgive me. And pray, do not doubt my innocence. The hour is late and I am not myself.”

Benedict pulled her hand to his chest, bringing her close again. “Look at me, Jessica.”

She did as he asked and was made dizzy by his regard. He no longer looked at her with discomfort or concern.

“We are mere hours away from the marriage bed,” he re-
minded her in a voice hoarser than she’d ever heard it. “I collect that the events you witnessed in the woods stirred re-
actions you do not yet understand, and I cannot tell you
how it affects me to learn you are fascinated by your re-
sponse and not repulsed, as some women might be. But you
are to be my wife and you deserve the respect of that sta-
tion.”

“You would not respect me in the summerhouse?”

For the length of a heartbeat, he looked taken aback.
Then, he threw his head back and laughed. The rich, deep
sound carried over the garden. Jess was smitten by how mer-
riment transformed him, making him more approachable
and—if possible—more handsome.

Pulling her even closer, Benedict pressed his lips to her
temple. “You are a treasure.”

“From what I understand,” she whispered, leaning into
his warmth, “duty lies in the marital bed, while pleasure ex-
ists outside of it with paramours. Do I reveal a defect in my
character by confessing that I should prefer you to want me
in the manner of a mistress rather than a wife, insofar as the
bedroom is concerned?”

“You have no defects. You are as perfect a woman as I
have ever seen or become acquainted with.”

She was far from perfect, as the remembered lash of a
switch to the backs of her thighs attested. Learning to dis-
guise her shortcomings had been a necessity.

How had Caulfield sensed that she would be open to his
request to watch him? How had he somehow recognized an
aspect of her character of which even she was unaware?

However he’d managed it, Jess was dizzily relieved to
know that Benedict did not find her sudden self-awareness
threatening or undesirable. Her betrothed’s acceptance gave
her unusual courage. “Is it possible you might find such an
interest in me?”

“More than possible.” Benedict’s mouth sealed over hers,
swallowing the words of relief and gratitude she meant to speak. It was a questing kiss, tender and cautious, yet assured. She caught at his lapels, her chest heaving from the effort to find the breath he was stealing from her.

His tongue slid along the seam of her lips, then teased them apart. When he entered her mouth with a quick thrust, her knees weakened. He pulled her tighter against him, exposing his need in the hard ridge of arousal pressing into her hip. His fingers kneaded her skin, betraying a growing agitation. When he broke away and pressed his temple to hers, his breathing was labored.

“God help me,” he said roughly. “As innocent as you are, you have nevertheless seduced me with consummate skill.”

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her swiftly to the summerhouse.

Sensitive to the highly charged situation, Temperance walked silently beside them. Then, she waited on the porch with unusual meekness and watched the sun rise.
Chapter 1

Seven years later . . .

“I beg you to reconsider.” Jessica, Lady Tarley, reached over the small tea table in the Regmont family parlor and gave her sister’s hand a brief squeeze. “I feel I should go.”

“Why?” The corners of Hester’s mouth turned downward. “I would understand if Tarley was with you, but now that he has passed . . . Is it safe for you to travel such a distance alone?”

It was a question Jess had asked herself many times, yet the answer was moot. She was determined to go. She had been given a brief window of time in which she could do something extraordinary. It was highly doubtful she would ever be presented with the opportunity again.

“Of course it’s safe,” she said, straightening. “Tarley’s brother, Michael—I should become accustomed to referring to him as Tarley now—made the arrangements for the voyage, and I will be met at the dock by someone from the household. All will be well.”

“I am not reassured.” Toying with the handle of her floral-patterned teacup, Hester looked pensive and unhappy.
“You once wanted to travel to faraway places,” Jess re-
minded, hating to see her sister so distressed. “Have you lost
that wanderlust?”

Hester sighed and looked out the window beside her.
Through the sheers that afforded some privacy, one could
see the steady flow of Mayfair traffic in front of the town
house, but Jess’s attention was focused solely on her sister.
Hester had matured into a beautiful young woman, lauded
for her golden glamour and stunning verdant eyes framed by
thick, dark lashes. She’d once been curvier than Jess and
more vivacious, but the years had tempered both traits,
forging a woman who was slender as a reed and serenely el-
egant. The Countess of Regmont had acquired a reputation
for notable reserve, which surprised Jess considering how
charming and outgoing Lord Regmont was. She blamed the
change on their father, and his blasted pride and misogyny.

“You look pale and thin,” Jess observed. “Are you un-
well?”

“I grieve for your loss. And I must confess, I have not
slept well since you first announced your intent to travel.”
Hester looked back at her. “I simply cannot comprehend
your motivation.”

Nearly a year had passed since Benedict had gone on to
his reward, and he had been severely ill for three months
prior to that. There had been time enough for Jess to reach a
state of resigned acceptance to life without him. Still, be-
reavement clung to her like fog over water. Family and
friends looked to her for the cue to leave the past behind,
and she had no notion of how to give it to them. “I require
distance from the past in order to grasp the future.”

“Surely retiring to the country would suffice?”

“It did not suffice last winter. Now another Season is
upon us, and we are all still trapped beneath this cloud hov-
ering over me. It is necessary for me to break away from the routine into which I have fallen, so everyone can move forward with life as we now face it.”

“Dear God, Jess,” Hester breathed, looking pale. “You cannot mean to say that you must leave us as Tarley did for all to heal. You are still young and marriageable. Your life is far from over.”

“Agreed. Pray do not worry over me.” Jess refilled Hester’s teacup and dropped two lumps of sugar into it. “I will be gone only long enough to make arrangements for the sale of the plantation. I shall return refreshed and revitalized, which, in turn, will reinvigorate all who love and worry over me.”

“I still cannot believe he bequeathed that place to you. What was he thinking?”

Jessica smiled fondly, her gaze moving around the cheery parlor with its yellow silk drapes and blue floral accents. Hester had redesigned the space shortly after her marriage, and its style reflected the optimism so innate to her. “He wanted me to be entirely self-sufficient, and it was a sentimental gesture. Tarley knew how much I loved our trip to Calypso.”

“Sentimentality is all well and good, until it sends you on a journey halfway around the world,” Hester muttered.

“As I’ve said, I want to go. I will go so far as to say I need to go. It is somewhat of a farewell for me.”

Groaning, Hester finally capitulated. “You promise to write and return as soon as you are able?”

“Of course. And you promise to write back.”

Hester nodded, then picked up her cup and saucer. She downed her hot tea in one unladylike swallow. A fortifying drink.

Jess understood. She’d needed a few of those herself as the anniversary of Tarley’s death loomed. “I will bring you
gifts,” she promised in a deliberately light tone, hoping to elicit a smile.

“Just bring yourself back,” Hester admonished with a wag of her finger.

The gesture was so reminiscent of their childhood. Jess couldn’t resist asking, “Will you come after me if I tarry overlong?”

“Regmont would never allow it. However, I could likely convince someone to go after you. Perhaps some of the matrons who are so concerned over your welfare . . . ?”

Jess gave a mock shudder. “Point taken, my ruthless sister. I shall return posthaste.”

Alistair Caulfield’s back was to the door of his warehouse shipping office when it opened. A salt-tinged gust blew through the space, snatching the manifest he was about to file right out of his hand.

He caught it deftly, then looked over his shoulder. Startled recognition moved through him. “Michael.”

The new Lord Tarley’s eyes widened with equal surprise, then a weary half-smile curved his mouth. “Alistair, you scoundrel. You didn’t tell me you were in Town.”

“I’ve only just returned.” He slid the parchment into the appropriate folder and pushed the drawer closed. “How are you, my lord?”

Michael removed his hat and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. The assumption of the Tarley title appeared to weigh heavily on his broad shoulders, grounding him in a way Alistair had never seen before. He was dressed somberly in shades of brown, and he flexed his left hand, which bore the Tarley signet ring, as if he could not accustom himself to having it there. “As well as can be expected under the circumstances.”
“My condolences to you and your family. Did you receive my letter?”
“I did. Thank you. I meant to reply, but time is stretched so thin. The last year has raced by so quickly; I’ve yet to catch my breath.”
“I understand.”
Michael nodded. “I’m pleased to see you again, my friend. You have been gone far too long.”
“The life of a merchant.” He could have delegated more, but staying in England meant crossing paths with both his father and Jessica. His father complained about Alistair’s success as a tradesman with as much virulence as he’d once complained about Alistair’s lack of purpose. It was a great stressor for his mother, which he was only able to alleviate by being absent as much as possible.
As for Jessica, she’d been careful to avoid him whenever they were in proximity. He had learned to reciprocate when he saw how marriage to Tarley had changed her. While she remained as cool in deportment as ever, he’d seen the blossoming of her sensual nature in the languid way she moved and the knowledge in those big, gray eyes. Other men coveted the mystery of her, but Alistair had seen behind the veil, and that was the woman he lusted for. Forever beyond his reach in reality, but a fixture in his mind. She was burned into his memory by the raging hungers and the impressions of youth, and the years hadn’t lessened the vivid recollection one whit.
“I find myself grateful for your enterprising sensibilities,” Michael said. “Your captains are the only ones I would entrust with the safe passage of my sister-in-law to Jamaica.”
Alistair kept his face impassive thanks to considerable practice, but the sudden awareness gripping him tensed his frame. “Lady Tarley intends to travel to Calypso?”
“Yes. This very morning, which is why I’m here. I intend
to speak to the captain myself and see he looks after her until they arrive.”

“Who travels with her?”

“Only her maid. I should like to accompany her, but I can’t leave now.”

“And she will not delay?”

“No.” Michael’s mouth curved wryly. “And I cannot dissuade her.”

“You cannot say no to her,” Alistair corrected, moving to the window through which he could view the West India docks. Ships entered the Northern Dock to unload their precious imports, then sailed around to the Southern Dock to reload with cargo for export. Around the perimeter, a high brick wall deterred the rampant theft plaguing the London wharves. The same wall increased his shipping company’s appeal to West Indian landowners requiring secure transportation of goods.

“Neither can Hester—forgive me, Lady Regmont.”

The last was said with difficulty. Alistair had long suspected his friend nursed deeper feelings for Jessica’s younger sister and had assumed Michael would pay his addresses. Instead, Hester had been presented at court, then immediately betrothed, breaking the hearts of many hopeful would-be swains. “Why is she so determined to go?”

“Benedict bequeathed the property to her. She claims she must see to its sale personally. I fear the loss of my brother has affected her deeply and she seeks a purpose. I’ve attempted to anchor her, but duty has me stretched to wit’s end.”

Alistair’s reply was carefully neutral. “I can assist her in that endeavor. I can make the necessary introductions, as well as provide information that would take her months to discover.”
“A generous offer.” Michael’s gaze was searching. “But you’ve just returned. I can’t ask you to depart again so soon.”

Turning, Alistair said, “My plantation borders Calypso, and I should like to expand. It’s my hope to position myself as the best purchaser of the property. I will pay her handsomely, of course.”

Relief swept over Michael’s expressive features. “That would ease my mind considerably. I’ll speak to her at once.”

“Perhaps you should leave that to me. If, as you say, she needs a purpose, then she’ll want to maintain control of the matter in all ways. She should be allowed to set the terms and pace of our association to suit her. I have all the time in the world, but you do not. See to your most pressing affairs, and entrust Lady Tarley to me.”

“You’ve always been a good friend,” Michael said. “I pray you return to England swiftly and settle for a time. I could use your ear and head for business. In the interim, please encourage Jessica to write often and keep me abreast of the situation. I should like to see her return before we retire to the country for the winter.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Alistair waited several minutes after Michael departed, then moved to the desk. He began a list of new provisions for the journey, determined to create the best possible environment. He also made some quick but costly adjustments to the passenger list, moving two additional travelers to another of his ships.

He, Jessica, and her maid would be the only non-crewmen aboard the Acheron.

She would be within close quarters for weeks—it was an extraordinary opportunity Alistair was determined not to waste.

* * *
From the familiar comfort of her town coach, Jessica stared at the sleek ship before her, her gaze following the proud line of its polished deck and the soaring height of its three masts. It was one of the most impressive vessels docked, which she should have expected considering how anxious Michael was about her making the journey. He would have taken great pains to secure her comfort and welfare. She suspected it helped him grieve to hover over his brother’s widow, but that was one of the aftereffects of losing Tarley that made her want to flee.

The scent of the ocean drew her attention back to the industriously noisy West India docks. Excitement made her heart race, or perhaps it was apprehension. Society on the lush Caribbean island—such as it was—had fewer preconceived notions about her, and the pace and structure of social interactions were more relaxed. She looked forward to enjoying moments of solitude after the past few months of well-intentioned suffocation.

Jess watched as in quick succession her footmen carried her trunks up the gangplank to the main deck. The bright blue of Pennington livery was conspicuous among the less colorful attire of the seamen around them. Soon enough, there was no reason for her to delay in the carriage any longer.

She alighted with the help of a footman, smoothed her pale lavender silk skirts, and then set off without looking back. As she gained the deck, she felt the rolling of the ship beneath her feet and took a moment to absorb the sensation.

“Lady Tarley.”

Jess turned her head and watched a portly, distinguished gentleman approach. Even before he spoke, his attire and bearing told her he was the captain.

“Captain Smith,” he introduced himself, accepting the
hand she offered him with a bow “A pleasure to ’ave you aboard, milady.”

“The pleasure is mine,” she demurred, returning the smile he offered from the depths of a coarse white beard. “You command an impressive ship, Captain.”

“Aye, that she is.” He tipped up his hat to get a better look at her. “I would be ’onored to ’ave you join me for the evenin’ meals.”

“I would enjoy that very much, thank you.”

“Excellent.” Smith gestured at a young seaman. “Miller ’ere will show you to yer cabin. If you ’ave any questions or concerns, ’e can see to them.”

“I’m very much obliged.” As the captain went about the business of preparing to set sail, Jess turned to Miller, who she guessed was no more than ten and seven.

“Milady.” He gestured ahead to an open companionway and stairs leading below deck. “This way.”

She followed him across the midship, fascinated by the courage of the men climbing the rigging like industrious little crabs. But as she descended the stairs, her admiration was redirected to the vessel’s impressive interior.

The paneled companion- and passageway gleamed with polish, as did the brass hardware that secured the doors and hung the flashlamps. She’d been uncertain of what to expect, but this attention to detail was a surprise and a delight. Miller paused before a door and knocked, which elicited a shouted permission to enter from Jess’s abigail, Beth.

The cabin Jess entered was small but well appointed; it held a narrow bed, a modestly sized rectangular window, and a wooden table with two chairs. On the sole by one of her trunks sat a crate of her favorite claret. Although it was the smallest space she’d ever occupied as a bedchamber, she found the limits of the cabin comforting. And she was deeply appreciative that, for the next few weeks at least, she
would not have to anticipate how to respond to others in a manner that made them feel better.

Reaching up, she withdrew the pin securing her hat and handed both to Beth.

Miller promised to return at six to take her to supper, then ducked back out to the passageway. After the door shut, Jess’s gaze met Beth’s.

The abigail bit her lower lip and spun in a quick circle. “This is a grand adventure, milady. I’ve missed Jamaica since we left.”

Jess exhaled to ease the knot in her stomach, then smiled. “And a certain young man.”

“Yes,” the maid agreed. “’Im, too.”

Beth had been a blessing the past few days, keeping Jess’s spirits high while everyone around her had been so disapproving of her plans.

“An adventure,” Jess repeated. “I think it will be.”

When the knock came at Jess’s cabin door shortly before six, she set aside the book she’d been reading and stood with some reluctance. Beth was mending a stocking on the opposite side of the small table, and the quiet companionship had been most welcome.

Setting her work down, Beth went to answer the door. As the panel swung open, Miller’s young face was revealed. He smiled shyly, showing slightly crooked teeth. Jess dismissed Beth to enjoy her own meal, then followed the young crewman to the captain’s great cabin. As they neared the wide door marking the end of the passageway, the plaintive notes of a violin grew in volume. The instrument was consummately played, the tune sweet yet haunting. Enamored with the music, she quickened her step. Miller knocked once, then opened the door without waiting for a reply. He ges-
tured her into the sizable cabin with a gallant sweep of his arm.

She entered with a practiced smile, her gaze locating Captain Smith as he pushed to his feet at a long dining table, along with two other gentlemen who were introduced to her as the Chief Mate and ship’s surgeon. She exchanged the expected pleasantries, then turned her attention to the violin player. He stood with his back to her before the large gallery windows wrapping the stern. He was sans tailcoat, which caused her to glance hastily away. But when the captain approached to escort her to the table, she risked another furtive glance at the scandalously semi-dressed gentleman. Without tails to block her gaze, she was afforded a prime view of the man’s derriere, which was quite noteworthy. It was not a part of the male anatomy she’d had cause to study before. She found she quite enjoyed the ogling when the buttocks on display were so firm and well-shaped.

As she conversed with the ship’s officers, Jess glanced frequently at the dark-haired musician who coaxed such beautiful notes from the violin. The fluid, practiced movement of his arm caused his back and shoulders to flex in a manner that had always fascinated her. The male body was so much larger and more powerful than a woman’s—capable of fierce aggression while also being sleek and graceful.

The tune ended. The player pivoted to return the violin and bow to their case waiting on the chair beside him. Jess caught a quick glimpse of his profile. A frisson of awareness swept over her skin. He collected his jacket from the chair where it was draped, then shrugged into it. She hadn’t thought it possible that the act of putting clothes on could be as arousing as watching them come off, but this man made it so. The graceful economy of his movements was inherently sensual, which suited his air of unwavering confidence and command.
“And this,” the captain said, turning slightly to gesture at the gentleman, “is Mr. Alistair Caulfield, owner of this fine vessel and brilliant violinist, as you ’eard.”

Jess swore her heart ceased beating for a moment. Certainly, she stopped breathing. Caulfield faced her and sketched a perfectly executed, elegant bow. Yet his head never lowered and his gaze never left hers.

Dear God . . .