

CHAPTER ONE

Larkspur Hall, near Canterbury, Kent, 1823

They forgot to lock the gate. Isabelle's heart tripped. For two years, she had prowled the perimeters of her prison. She had traced every brick of the walled garden, examined each crumbling joint. She had even tried digging under the wall with a tablespoon. Nothing. For two years. But this morning, when Isabelle grasped the top of the gate and pulled herself up to peer over it, the gate swung open.

Beyond the gate, the park sloped up to meet the woods. Isabelle hopped down and looked back at the house. It was too early for the maid with her hot water and breakfast. A skylark trilled a greeting high above the trees. Isabelle took a step towards the woods, stopped and looked around, like an errant child. The early morning sun was warm on her face as she ran towards the light.

The sweet scents of the forest teased her nostrils as Isabelle hurried along the path. She and John had spent hours playing here as children. His adult self was not so amiable.

"The scandal is too great, sister. I will take you into my household, but you must live in seclusion," her brother, chest puffed out like a pigeon, so pompous and righteous, had said as he had decided her future for her.

She snatched up a branch to slash at the tall grasses which grew along the verge. John's wife had been even worse.

"You must count yourself fortunate your dear brother is so forbearing," said the saintly Cordelia, lips thinned with disapproval, as she looked Isabelle over. The woman's face could curdle milk.

Isabelle beheaded a tall weed with relish.

While Isabelle recovered from the fever which nearly claimed her life, her rooms in the disused east wing at Larkspur Hall had seemed a safe haven. Six months on, she had realized the truth of her situation. They meant to keep her here forever, fed and cared for, but never to reclaim a position either in her family or society. Isabelle, numbed by shock and grief, hadn't cared, not at first.

But this morning, her unexpected freedom gave her hope. If she walked to the village, perhaps she could find refuge with her old schoolmistress. If she made it to London, her husband's lawyers would surely assist her. There must be some money left. She'd live on bread and water if only she could be free.

A squirrel scolded her from a branch. Isabelle smiled at its spirited defense. Life still had sweetness to offer, if she could but...a branch cracked on the path ahead. Isabelle stood, frozen, as a tall man, dark-haired and hatless, strode through the trees. He stopped dead at the sight of her, staring. Who was he? God, what if he was her brother's guest? Her stomach clenched. He took a cautious step towards her. Isabelle bolted.

"Halt!" His deep-voiced command almost ended her flight, but she shook off an unwarranted compulsion to obey him. Isabelle raced back towards the house, her thin soles slipping on the wet grass. Footsteps thundered behind her but she didn't, she couldn't, falter. A large hand seized her elbow, and she stumbled to a stop. The stranger swung her around to face him. Isabelle struggled to free herself, wrenching her arm. She cried out at the pain.

His grip gentled immediately. "I'm sorry. I wanted to make sure you were real."

"Of course I'm real. I just shouldn't be here. I must go."

"Go? Where have you wandered from? Fairyland?" His stern features softened.

"Please sir, I must go!"

His fingers tightened again. "I like to hear you beg." A wicked smile slashed a groove down one bronzed cheek.

"Your conversation, sir, is most improper." Isabelle tried again to pull her arm away. This time he let her go, but once free, she could still feel the imprint of his hand.

"My behavior is even worse." One hard hand lifted her chin, and then his thumb brushed along her lips. Isabelle tried to turn her face, but his grip was like iron. His thumb became more insistent, breaching her lips. She closed her teeth over his skin.

"Naughty girl," he murmured.

The stranger pressed her lip down to free his thumb, and claimed her mouth with his. It was no gentle first kiss, but held the hot demand of a man's passion. Isabelle's mouth throbbed under the fierce pressure. A moan escaped her, and his hold tightened. The stranger's mouth left hers to brush across her jaw and down her neck. His hand closed on her breast, squeezing to the point of pain. Isabelle cried out, and he pressed her closer against him, to where his hardness pulsed against her stomach. She reared back and struck him with all the panicked strength of her arm. Abruptly, she was free. An ugly patch of red now marred his face, and his eyes glittered.

"You are offensive, sir. I live here, under my brother's protection."

The stranger stepped back. "You are Hill's sister?"

Isabelle nodded. One shaking hand clutched the neck of her frock tightly to her throat.

"I thought she was dead."

"Dead to the world perhaps, but I still breathe. Now, let me pass."

"The scandalous Lady Croucher, hidden away at the family estate--how deliciously Gothic." His mouth quirked. "I'd heard you were quite a handful."

Her hand fell to her breast, and he laughed softly.

"Exactly. How I'd love to have the taming of you, my angry little kitten."

Isabelle inhaled sharply. His gaze fixed on her bosom, where her nipples jutted against the thin cloth.

"I repeat, sir, you are offensive. I must return, else I'll be missed."

He stood between her and escape. Isabelle turned to go back to the house, stopped and spun around.

"Are you staying here, at Larkspur?"

"Your brother wants to sell me a horse."

For one brief, crazed moment, Isabelle considered telling the stranger of her plight and asking for his help. A glance at his face cured her of that idea. His gaze roamed over her possessively, like she was a filly he was considering for his stable.

"Please don't tell John you saw me."

The stranger raised a brow.

"It would be awkward for me if John learned I was out walking, alone with you."

The stranger sketched a bow, a mocking smile on his beautiful mouth. She turned and walked back to the house. A glance over her shoulder confirmed he stared after her. Isabelle slammed the gate shut behind her.

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Lord Snow stretched out his long legs towards the meager fire smoldering on the hearth. Lady Isabelle Croucher, the widow whose husband died under mysterious circumstances, here at her brother's home. How delicious. Snow smiled with anticipation. So much passion, so much fire. She'd actually slapped him. Oh, the lady needed taming, not to mention some well-earned discipline. Perhaps he would begin with his hand. He'd enjoy seeing her lovely form spread over his lap, his hand warming the luscious bottom her gown only hinted at.

But how could he gain access to her undeniably exquisite form? Sir John, the proper brother, denied her very existence. He bent his mind to a solution, for he meant to have the wench, come hell or high water.

The earl checked his pocket watch. Breakfast would be served. He could speak to Sir John then. Snow laughed softly. He was always open to a little diversion.

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"Lord Snow, good morning. I trust you slept well?" Lady Hill smiled at him from the foot of the breakfast parlor table. It was not an improvement. Her dowry must have been substantial indeed to attract Sir John. The baronet, tucking into eggs and buttered toast, nodded cordially.

"Tolerably, Lady Hill, tolerably. I find myself with quite an appetite this morning."

"Do help yourself, my lord. I fancy my cook has quite a hand with pastry."

Snow accepted a piece of seed cake. The house was cold, the decoration deplorable, and the company worse, but the food was almost worth the trip from London. All this for a horse. Sir John, though a sanctimonious bore, bred the finest horses in Kent.

Sir John looked up from his plate. "I thought we might visit the stables this morning, my lord. White Star foaled last night. A little filly, the groom tells me."

"A filly? I am most interested." Snow reached for a piece of toast. "I understand your sister is staying with you. I would be pleased to pay my respects."

Sir John's fork clattered on the plate, and his wife dropped her teacup, which shattered on the floor. Snow glanced at his host, who sat mute, his mouth opening and closing like a large and rather stupid fish.

"My sister Lucy was at school with Isabelle, or rather, Lady Croucher." A small lie, but a useful one. "Will we see her at dinner tonight?"

Lady Hill wiped her mouth with a trembling hand. "I fear my sister-in-law is not well."

Her husband finally found his voice. "Actually, my love, Isabelle is feeling much better today." He stared at his guest appraisingly. "I'm quite sure she would enjoy a visit with her old school friend's brother."

Snow sipped his coffee. "That will be delightful. I look forward to it."

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The key scraped softly in the well-oiled lock. Isabelle set down her book with a sigh. The one thing her brother indulged her in was her library. She would prefer to read rather than endure a visit from her family.

John stood in the open doorway.

Isabelle's heart beat a little faster. Had the stranger betrayed her? John didn't seem angry, though, merely uncomfortable.

"I can't stay, Isabelle; I merely came to tell you that your presence is required at dinner this evening."

"Why?" She'd learned to be cynical.

John flushed. "I have a guest, Earl Snow. Apparently, you are an old schoolfellow of his sister Lucy. He asked to see you. Though how he knew you were here..."

His suspicious glare made her stomach drop.

"I'm sure I don't know, brother. It's not as if I could communicate with him, or anyone else for that matter."

"No, I suppose not. In any case, Cordelia will come by later with an, um, appropriate gown."

Isabelle looked down at her drab brown frock. She spread her hands and met John's gaze. He flushed even redder, fingering the key in his hand. John hated to be in the wrong, but she couldn't help herself. He had refused to listen when she pleaded with him to be released. Her attempted flight had ended in failure. All that was left to her was spite.

"So I'm to be trotted out for public inspection? Greet the earl, choke down a cutlet, and then back to the dungeon?"

"Hardly a dungeon," John muttered, but he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Very well, John, I agree to perform for your illustrious guest. What's more, I vow to be on my best behavior." Isabelle picked up her book again. "Was there anything else?" She bent her head and pretended to read.

The only reply was the door slamming.

Isabelle set her book down and walked to the window. The view of her secluded garden afforded by the small window was a pleasant one. But no matter how pretty, it was still a prison. She knew, at some level, that she deserved to be locked up. What she had done could not be forgiven. But, oh, it was hard when the sun was shining and the world beckoned.

So it was the Earl of Snow who had accosted her in the park. His shocking behavior bespoke a world of privilege where his desires were the only ones that mattered. Isabelle had not encountered him during the whirlwind of her first Season. Charlie Croucher had swept her off her feet, and she'd been married on her eighteenth birthday. What little she did know of Snow was not good, even before the evidence of his depravity this morning. He was rumored to be dissolute, even perverse, although his rank and family connections ensured he was received everywhere. Still, he hadn't betrayed her. John would have been outraged if he knew Snow had seen her running around free. And he'd lied to John. Isabelle had never met Lucy Beaufort. So why had he lied?

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The candles had been lit though it was scarcely five o'clock. Country hours, his hostess explained complacently. Snow rarely sat down before seven in town. But he said nothing, merely smiled at Lady Hill, and dipped his spoon into the broth set before him. His quarry sighted, he had only to play the game until its inevitable conclusion.

Lady Croucher, in shabby dress with unbound hair, had been pretty. When gowned in pale gray silk, her auburn hair curled and dressed, with gems sparkling around her throat, as became her station, she was a revelation. She sat at her brother's left hand and beside her, the local vicar. He must be in on the secret. Across from her and beside Snow was Miss Simpson, Lady Hill's younger sister. She was a thin girl, not ill-looking, but a mere candle beside the flame of Lady Croucher's beauty.

"And how did you find the new foal, Lord Snow?" Lady Hill broke the small silence of what was admittedly an awkward company.

"Most promising. Your husband and I will have to discuss terms."

Sir John beamed at him.

"There is nothing more rewarding," Snow continued, "than acquiring a new horse. Once she's of an age to be trained and... mounted, the results can be quite exhilarating." He let his gaze slide to Isabelle. As if feeling the weight of his stare, she looked up from her soup. He held her eyes for a moment before turning to his hostess. Isabelle's small pink tongue flicked out, licking along her bottom lip. He caught his breath. Was she flirting with him? The vicar addressed some remark to her in a low tone, and she smiled and shook her head.

"But, Lord Snow, are you never frightened of injury?" Miss Simpson asked. "A young horse, unused to the saddle, it sounds most dangerous."

"That, Miss Simpson, is precisely its attraction." Snow looked at Isabelle again, who bit her lip. No, she wasn't flirting, precisely, but the double entendres of his conversation were apparent to her. He smiled at her. He did love an intelligent woman.

"You are very brave, I think," Miss Simpson said.

"Come, come, Alice! We are speaking of training horses, not breaking wild Arabians! Lord Snow will you think you very silly," Sir John said.

Snow silently agreed, but aloud he demurred, saying a lady's opinion was always of interest to him. Then he brushed his middle finger around the top of his wine glass, letting it slide down the side to touch the wine. While the discussion of horse training continued, Snow lifted his finger to his mouth and sucked off the wine. Isabelle stared at him, her breasts rising and falling with quickened breath. Oh, she knew what he wanted, what he was determined to have. She looked away again, with an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

His smile deepened. He would not be denied. Snow wanted Isabelle as he hadn't wanted any other woman in quite some time. She was beautiful, spirited, and in need of a firm hand. And he was just the man to give it to her.

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He was insufferable. Isabelle could only be thankful when the dinner party finally wound to a close. Even John, not the most intuitive individual, could divine Snow's wicked intentions. The poor vicar did not know which way to look, while Cordelia was positively glowering over the tea tray.

Snow brought her a cup of tea and sat down beside her on the sofa. His hard, warm thigh pressed against hers. Isabelle could feel his heat right through the thin silk fabric. When she attempted to move away, he simply moved closer. Once he'd drunk his tea, his hand, under cover of her skirt, caressed her leg through the material.

"Lord Snow! I must insist that you remove your hand from my person, this instant."

"This very instant?" Snow's slow smile was an invitation to sin. "Just as I was finally beginning to enjoy this dreary evening. Do you not have any inclination to see to your guest's...comfort?"

"You are not my guest, but John's. And I don't want you pawing me."

Snow's fingers curled around the edge of her thigh, the pressure increasing until she gasped. He removed his hand and laced his fingers on his lap.

"I will accede to your wishes, this once, in view of the company present. But make no mistake, my wicked little kitten. In future I plan to touch you whenever, and however, I wish."

Isabelle dared a glance. Snow still smiled, but his eyes were hot. She swallowed.

"I fear you have not fully apprehended my position. I am here on sufferance only, through my brother's grace. Were he to discern any improper conduct on my part, I believe that even his home would be closed to me."

"And I fear you have not understood my position. I mean to have you, and I will."

"So this was why you lied to John about my acquaintance with your sister," she said. "A rather shabby ploy, sir."

"How fierce you are, my sweet. Dare I hope you are as passionate in the bedchamber?"

"Sometimes hope is all we have," Isabelle said sweetly, and upended her cup on Snow's lap. He jumped like a scalded cat but, fortunately for him, the tea had cooled. Isabelle stood and set down her cup. He grabbed her arm, but intervention arrived in the form of Lady Hill.

"Isabella! Have you taken leave of your senses? My lord, I pray you allow me to assist you." Cordelia fussed and bleated like a demented sheep, allowing Isabelle the opportunity to slip out the door.

The air in the hallway felt cool against her cheeks. Isabelle fanned herself, deliberating. Someone would be here in moments to bring her back to her rooms and lock her in—an unbearable thought. The hall ran the length of the house, ending in the conservatory. She fled there, through the scented plants, and out into the night beyond the glass doors.

The air was sweet with the fragrance of roses, and a full moon beckoned. Isabelle, confined in her stays and elegant gown, hemmed in by convention and propriety, answered its call. She hurried along the paving to the kitchen garden and through its tidy rows to the hedge gate, which opened onto the park. The lake glittered before her. Isabelle ran along its edge until she reached the stone bridge. The flags felt cold under her slippers. Once over the bridge, she turned left, to where the shore curved under the arch of a large willow. Here had been her favorite swimming spot, screened by the low-lying branches.

Did she dare? John would not suspect she come here. He was so sure her spirit was broken. But tonight, something was different. Was it Lord Snow? She hadn't encouraged his advances, but to give the devil his due, he'd made her feel more alive than she had in months. His face when she'd spilled the tea! Snow's expression had promised retribution. A sudden breeze shivered across her skin.

Isabelle kicked off her slippers, untied her garters and rolled down her stockings. The grass was cool on her bare feet. The wind teased her hair and she laughed suddenly. Sweet, blessed freedom. Isabelle pulled the pins from her hair until it hung around her shoulders in a sunset cloud. She lifted it, running the curls through her fingers. Then Isabelle raised her arms to the moon and danced, her feet flashing along the turf. She felt like a pagan of old, dancing before the shrine of the goddess. An owl hooted in the distance.

The cool scent of the water drew her down to the lake bank, thick with shadows. Isabelle undid the buttons at the top of her gown, pushing and pulling at the material until she could thrust it down her hips. She tore at her stays and flung them on the grass. Petticoat and chemise followed, until Isabelle stood naked in the night air. She splashed into the shallows and threw herself forward into the lake. The cold water closed over her head. She re-surfaced, flinging back her wet hair. Isabelle swam a few strokes and turned on her back, floating in the water while the stars wheeled overhead.

A small sound broke her reverie, like a shoe scraping against rock. She turned her head. A man stood on the bank watching her. She knew it was Snow, by his height and the breadth of the shoulders. His presence seemed inevitable, eternal, like the moon and the stars. She swam back to the shore, halting when her feet found the sandy bottom. She walked up the bank, water streaming from her naked body.

Snow waited for her. She could hear his breathing, harsh and quick, in the quiet night. "Artemis," he said, and reached for her.

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She was incandescent. Isabelle's body gleamed as white as the moon, her breasts full, her stomach rounded, her sex shadowed between her thighs. Snow wanted to worship her, to fall to his knees and suck her very essence. He closed his fingers around her arm, the skin cool and wet. Isabelle stared up at him, eyes dark, lips parted. What was she thinking? He bent his head to capture her mouth, sucking her tongue into his. A low moan, was it his or hers? His hands dropped to her buttocks, cupping the deliciously firm cheeks as he pulled her up against his erection. A sigh escaped her. His lips slid down the satin skin of her throat. He lifted her breasts to his eager mouth, first one, and then the other. He kissed and licked them, pulling the nipples until Isabelle ground against him.

Snow dropped to his knees. He pushed her legs open, parted her nether lips, dying to taste the salted honey of her quim. His tongue glided through the wetness which traced down her thighs. He lapped and sucked like a man dying of thirst, flicking her nub over and over, until she clutched his shoulders. His tongue speared her opening. Her fingers tightened.

Snow grasped her thighs, holding her in position as he fucked her with his tongue. She panted, fast and then faster, her thighs strained taut under his fingers. Her exhalations became cries, rising in intensity as she came, hard, her sweet fluid bathing his face. Isabelle's climax shuddered to a stop, and Snow rose, unbuttoning his breeches with desperate haste.

"Isabelle! Isabelle, where are you?"

Realization flooded her rapt expression. Damn Sir John. She staggered back.

"I have to go. I can't be seen...like this."

He let her go. She dipped down to retrieve her clothing and fled, clad in starlight, across

the lawn. Snow re-fastened his breeches and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his face. He'd best take himself off to bed, before Sir John caught him smelling of his sister and sex. He was surprised to find his fingers somewhat unsteady. Moonlight and Isabelle were a heady mixture.