

# THE BARON'S SECRET BABY

DECEIT AND DESIRE BOOK ONE



VIOLA MORNE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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## CHAPTER 1



ANNAN, SCOTLAND, 1808

Julia smiled as the dim light of dawn crept through the window of the small cottage. Gideon's lovemaking had left her rosy and satisfied, the tenderness between her legs a reminder of his expertise. He slept peacefully beside her now, his arm circling her waist, face quiet in repose. It was rare to see him in so tranquil a state. Gideon had a presence, always in restless motion, passionate and aware. His aura of authority had attracted her from the first. Well, that and his large, muscular build, his wavy, dark hair and even darker eyes, now veiled with long lashes that softened his angular features. Julia ran a finger down the bold slope of his nose that rose between high cheekbones. His mouth, the lower lip a trifle fuller than the top, curved in a smile.

"What's this?" Gideon rumbled, his arm tightening. "A woman in my bed?"

Julia snuggled in closer, pressing a kiss to his bare chest. "Your woman."

"Hmm, I like the sound of that." He moved suddenly, lithe as a

wildcat, to grab her wrists and pin them above her head. “Now, what shall I do with my pretty possession?” Gideon bent his head to nibble on her collar bone, before he slid his mouth to her breast, pulling one firm nipple into his mouth. He suckled her hard. A lightening current sizzled from her bud to her womb. Julia moaned, her legs parting to close around his waist, straining towards his hardness.

“None of that, my sweet. You’ll get what you want—when I say so.”

She released him, and Gideon’s mouth trailed lower. He licked the soft skin of her belly and nipped her hip bone. The sensation of his teeth on her skin made her wet. He pressed her legs open wider, his fingers hard on the soft skin of her thighs. Her whimpered protest trailed away as he licked the seam between her legs.

“You like this, sweetheart,” he murmured, “my mouth on you.”

Lord, she loved it, no matter how wicked it seemed.

He turned her over, tracing the marks he had left on her bottom. “Still sore?”

“A little.”

His fingers soothed where they had punished. “My willful darling, it will be a pleasure teaching you to obey me.” One long finger slid down her crease.

Julia’s pulse sped up, wildfire arcing through her veins. What was he planning to do to her now? The anticipation was delicious.

*Boom! Boom!*

Gideon jerked back. “What the devil was that?” He leaped from the bed, headed to the window, and peered through the glass. “There is a large red-headed man banging on the front door for admittance. He appears rather upset.”

Julia scrambled off the bed. “Oh my God, it’s my father!” She looked up at Gideon, the man she loved with all her heart. “You have to run.”

Gideon’s arm closed around her waist, pulling her close. He kissed the side of her neck. “Why would I do that?”

Julia pulled free. "You don't understand. He's going to kill you!"

The door below yielded with a crack of Sundered lumber, followed by the clattering of feet on the narrow stairs. Papa hadn't come alone. Julia scarcely had time to throw on the robe Gideon tossed at her, before a group of men crashed through the bedroom door.

Papa was the first into the room, his face creased and crimson with anger. Her three brothers followed. They grabbed Gideon, holding him fast, while Papa punched him in the belly. Julia flew at him, holding onto his massive arm with both hands. "Papa, stop! I love him."

He backhanded her so hard that Julia fell against the bed. "You will never see him again."

Gideon howled and lunged forward, almost breaking free. "Hold him," Papa ordered. Julia stumbled to her feet. Papa snarled over his shoulder. "Keep her out of this." Her younger brother, Colin, grabbed her arms, holding her back. She fought to free herself, scratching and kicking. Colin's hand tightened around her throat. The last thing she saw was Papa's knife flashing towards Gideon, and then everything went black.



*LONDON, six years later*

THE COUNTRY HAD GONE mad for victory celebrations. Napoleon was banished to the island of Elba, and England was jubilant, free of the years of hardship and war.

"A masquerade?" Julia laughed. "Tonight? How very daring. What would your husband say?"

Sarah, Lady Manston, shrugged at her reflection in the dressing room mirror. "Manston has nothing to say, either way. He has his own amusements. Besides, this is no mere masquerade. *White's Club*

is holding a dinner in honor of the Duke of Wellington at Burlington House tonight to celebrate his triumphs, followed by a masked ball. It's sure to be a sad crush, but with so many in attendance, there are bound to be moments when we might find our pleasure."

"What pleasure would that be?"

"So prim, milady," Sarah scoffed. "The old Julia would have leaped in with both feet."

"The old Julia was not a widow with a young child to raise," Julia reminded her.

"Nonsense. You have become both staid and dull."

That stung. Sarah excelled at delivering the truth in a way that got beneath one's skin. Julia *had* changed, but surely it was for the better. As a girl, she had been careless and daring, a hellion, the despair of her old-fashioned parents. Julia's past had come with a price, and she had surely paid it.

In the end, despite her objections, Sarah convinced Julia to attend the masquerade, deciding the dinner itself would be too dull. Julia agreed, despite her forebodings. She knew Sarah's high spirits masked an unhappiness with her husband. Saddled with an arranged marriage, Sarah had wed a man with whom she scarcely shared a thought. The birth of her second son ensured that her husband wouldn't question her activities, as long as she remained reasonably discreet. Sarah had made the decision to pursue her pleasures outside of her vows, as did many other society ladies. Sarah's melancholy situation was uncomfortably close to what Julia's own marriage had been like, and she grieved for her friend.

"I had the most wonderful ideas for our costumes." Sarah rummaged in a trunk, pulling out a length of gold silk. "Egyptian queens!" She held up the fabric in front of Julia. "Yes, this shade brings out the red in your hair. What do you think?"

Julia fingered the fabric. It had been so long since she had gone out in society. Barely eighteen, she had been married off to Sir Hugh Sedlow, borne a daughter, and then faced the bankruptcy of

her husband. Penniless and estranged from her family, Lord Ashby, an old friend of her grandmother, had given her refuge at his estate in Hampshire, and she'd been there ever since. Responsibility and duty had become her guiding lights. She could not regret her daughter, whose very existence was the best thing in Julia's life, but there were definitely things she missed—the passion of a man's touch, possessing her... loving her.

Julia smiled at her friend. "I think it's perfect."



THE VAST STONE front of Burlington House, accented by a colonnade, was imposing, Julia decided as she and Sarah joined the steady flow of guests passing through the entrance. Sarah was in her element, her pretty face flushed with excitement. A gold and sapphire tiara playing the part of an Egyptian crown complemented her blue eyes, just as Julia's headdress studded with tourmalines echoed her unusual yellow-green eyes beneath her half mask.

"They had more than a thousand guests for dinner!" Sarah grabbed Julia's elbow and hurried her through the door and up the stairs to the ball. "Can you imagine? I wonder how many are here for the masquerade?"

A kaleidoscope of moving color filled Julia's vision as they entered the grand salon. Jewels glittered, and candlelight gleamed over costumes of every kind, from mad monks to saucy shepherdesses. The subdued roar of conversation floated above the stately music of a polonaise.

"Utter madness!" Sarah crowed with delight. They threaded their way through the crowd, Sarah managing to procure a couple of glasses of champagne from a passing footman. Julia tasted her glass, watching the scintillating crowd with wide eyes. She had never seen anything so grand.

Sarah caught her arm. "There he is," she hissed.

Julia looked over her shoulder. "Who?"

"My new lover. Don't look now." Sarah fanned herself. "He's headed this way." A tall man in a blue domino reached their side, bowing very correctly. Sarah had found herself a soldier to dally with. She threw him a sultry smile and took his outstretched hand. "Enjoy yourself, my dear," Sarah whispered. And then she was gone.

Julia took another sip of champagne. She hadn't realized Sarah meant to desert her, and so soon. Perhaps Sarah was right. It was time Julia regained her place in society and found her pleasure, as her friend had suggested.

A dark-haired gentleman dressed as a pirate caught her eye. There was something in the way he moved, purposeful yet with a kind of animal grace. He was tall, with wide shoulders and slim hips, admirably displayed by his choice of costume. The pirate must have noticed her as well, because only a few minutes later, he claimed her hand for a cotillion. His dark eyes gleamed in the candlelight thrown by the chandeliers overhead as they moved through the dance. Even when they switched partners, Julia could feel the intensity of his attention. Once the music stopped, the pirate's hold tightened.

"Come with me," he murmured in her ear, his breath warm against her skin.

Julia followed, intrigued and a little shocked, her senses swimming with the noise and heat of the crowd, and the exciting presence of her pirate, his grasp firm on her gloved fingers as he drew her away from the crowd. He led her into a curtained alcove, where the noise of the ball was muffled, illuminated only by the moon filtering through a small window. The pirate pushed her against the wall, not roughly, but with determination, as if the outcome of this encounter had already been decided—by him.

"I have to know if your lips taste as sweet as they look." His low voice was a thrilling rumble in her ear as his thumb rubbed along the line of her jaw.

She should push his hand away—such impertinence. But his



touch filled Julia with an aching hunger. It had been too long since she had known a man's touch. Her lips parted in longing. His thumb moved across her lower lip and pushed inside, past her teeth, to rub gently along her tongue. Her lips closed around him, her tongue flicking the tip of his thumb.

"You're a hot little puss, aren't you?"

Julia wanted to protest, but his words gave her such a dark and delicious thrill that she leaned into him.

The pirate removed his thumb, tilting her jaw, as his mouth claimed hers with sweet urgency. Her lips opened to the insistence of his tongue, sliding inside to tangle with hers. Julia moaned into his mouth. He drew away, his lips scorching a path down her neck to the low bodice of her dress. Her pulse fluttered as he licked along the edge of her dress, dipping his tongue into the shadowy space between her breasts. His arm closed around her waist, bringing her in tight against his hard chest, his cock pressing against her belly. She imagined she could feel it pulsing, his need as great as her own.

His breath quickened and then, suddenly, he shoved her bodice down. Julia gasped at the sound of fabric tearing. She should say something, protest his rough handling. But her blood sang in her veins, clamoring for a long-denied completion. The pirate made short work of stays, unlacing them to reveal her bare breasts. He made a sound, low in his throat, as close to a growl as a human voice could make. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them, plucking at her nipples, and Julia thought she would die of longing. His mouth claimed her breast, licking and sucking, until her nipple felt swollen and distended. God, she was going to climax just from this. A soft cry escaped her.

The pirate froze, releasing her breast. Her skin felt cold after the wet warmth of his mouth. Why in heaven's name was he stopping? His hand moved, a blur of motion, as he ripped away her mask, the ribbons tangling in her curls.

"Julia."

Her heart stuttered. His low voice, rough with desire, was so familiar. No. Impossible. He wrenched off his own mask, his dark eyes intense as he studied her. It *was* Gideon. Six years older and just as handsome, with a scar, a thin white line that curved from the edge of his eye across his cheek and down to the hard line of his jaw. Julia reached out to touch it, and his features hardened, heat and desire banked beneath a stony glare. He grabbed her arm, dragging her across the alcove to the bench below the window. Gideon sat down, pulling her over his lap. Julia protested in vain, kicking wildly as she tried to scramble away. He took her wrists in a brutal hold and held them behind her back.

“Let me go at once. What are you doing?”

Gideon's voice was raw with anger. “I'm going to give you the spanking you so desperately need.”



“STOP IT!” Julia writhed on Gideon's firm lap, trying to break free.

“No. I advise you to hold still, while I administer the proper punishment for endangering yourself so rashly. If you keep squirming in such a wanton manner, you will receive much more than a mere spanking.” Gideon gave her bottom a hard smack, that made Julia wince, despite her skirt and petticoat. “What do you think? Twenty strokes?”

“Twenty? Get off me, you... you... barbarian!”

“Twenty-five it is. But your skirts are hampering my hand.” He pulled them up briskly, baring her bottom. She thought she heard his quick intake of breath.

“Don't you dare touch me,” Julia muttered between clenched teeth.

*Smack!* Gideon's hand fell across both buttocks in a blistering stroke that made her gasp. “Oh, madam,” he said coolly, “I do dare.”

Another spank, so hard her breath stuttered in her throat. “Please, stop.”

"Again, no. How could you be so foolish?" he scolded her. "To appear alone at an affair like this and go off with the first man who crooks a finger at you. You could have been assaulted."

Julia forbore to mention his present occupation. Gideon in a temper was a force to be reckoned with. "Other ladies are present," she protested.

"Those ladies are accompanied by their husband, brother or father. Only the light-skirts and Cyprians would come to a crush like this by themselves. It's no wonder I thought you were one of them." *Smack!*

"Stop it!" Julia struggled to free herself. "You have no right to touch me."

"I hardly think you are in a position to protest." His hand came down in a hard stroke that bowed her back.

"Gideon! You are hurting me."

"I certainly hope so. Perhaps the next time you are tempted to act with such disregard for your safety, you may have second thoughts." *Smack!* "Actions have consequences."

"No one knows that better than I," Julia said bitterly.

Gideon's hand hovered above her bottom. "What does that mean?"

Julia tensed. This was not the time for that discussion. "Nothing. Are you finished?"

"No. You are the same reckless girl I knew. Have the years taught you nothing?" Gideon's voice altered, softening. Was he remembering how it had been between them? Julia fought the traitorous emotions surging through her. Gideon wasn't going to break her heart again.

"We are not the same people we were back then. I've changed."

"This hasn't changed." Gideon traced the crease between her buttocks to her passage, teasing her folds, now liquid with desire. "You're still as wet as the sea whenever I touch you." Slowly, achingly, he pressed two fingers inside her. Julia stifled a moan. Her pussy was on fire.

“How many would you like?” He added another finger. “I believe three was your favorite.”

*Oh, God.*

Gideon flexed his fingers deep inside her, widening her passage, now slick with longing. “You’re so tight. Fuck. How long since you’ve had a man?”

Julia set her teeth as she fought her impulse to let go and allow him to claim her. But his fingers kept moving, unleashing a passion she had thought dead and gone to ash. She wanted this, wanted him. “Gideon!”

“You know the rules, Julia. You don’t come until I say so.” She clenched hard around his fingers. “Hungry little pussy. You want cock, don’t you? Too bad you’re not going to get it.”

Julia whined, the need to climax so insistent it hurt. He laughed softly. “Still sure how much you’ve changed?” His thrusts grew bolder, an unstoppable rhythm that she could no longer resist. “Come for me, Julia.”

She toppled over the edge, her climax surging from womb to pussy, like a sea of fire that surged and burn.

“Yes,” Gideon told her, “just like that.”



JULIA LEANED against the door of her bedchamber, her heart still racing with the memory of Gideon’s touch. He had finally released her, after wringing every possible response from her body, relacing her stays and pinning her torn bodice. His fingers were practiced, as if he had performed this service a hundred times before and, perhaps, he had. How could she know what had occurred during the long years of their separation?

Gideon had gruffly ordered her to wait for him and gone to procure a carriage to take her home. Julia waited until he departed and left the alcove, weaving through the dancers. She caught a glimpse of his tall form as she crept through the throng on the

stairs, watching as he turned to the left. Julia turned right and found Sarah's coach. She threw open the door before the startled footman could reach her and climbed inside. He closed the door behind her.

"Take me home, please."

"Yes, my lady."

Julia caught sight of Gideon again, head and shoulders above the crowd. She drew the curtain, shielding herself from his view. The coach turned onto Piccadilly Street and drove the short distance to Sarah's house on Hanover Square. She needed to get away, to think. Six years was a long time.

She hadn't seen Gideon since that dreadful night in Scotland, though his Great-Uncle Edmund had kept her apprised of his nephew's meteoric rise through the ranks of the British Army. Julia herself was no longer a wild and lovesick girl, who had risked everything to be with a handsome young captain, without a penny to his name.

Papa had been right, after all. Julia had never seen Gideon again. The letters she had smuggled out of the house after Papa dragged her back home had not been answered. Gideon returned to his company and never looked back. Her anger over his behavior had faded long ago. She could scarcely blame Gideon for his desertion, after the way her family had treated him. A man could go forward into the world, to forge an exciting new destiny. A woman could not. She was hemmed in, by circumstance and custom, to accept what others decided.

Edmund, Lord Ashby, had become her closest friend and support over the years. He was an old friend of her aunt Beatrice. Julia had often visited her aunt, who had no children of her own, and come to know the shy, reclusive man who one day would become her savior. She blessed the day his letter inviting her to Foxhill had reached her in the lodging she'd been forced to take once the town house was sold to pay her husband's creditors. Her husband's estate had not been entailed, and everything went under

the hammer. The jointure provided by her marriage settlement had already been spent. Hugh's fondness for gambling had ruined them both. Only a few hundred pounds remained after everything was sold.

Julia had made up her mind to seek employment, perhaps as a governess, when Edmund's letter had arrived. A visit to Foxhill would be a respite, before she had to plunge back into a cold, uncaring world. She ended up staying for three years. Tears filled her eyes as she remembered the last time she saw him.

*Edmund lay quietly in the carved four poster bed his ancestor had installed for a visit from Queen Elizabeth more than two hundred years ago. He smiled when he saw Julia and held out his hand. His fingers felt cool, as if the life had already begun to slip from them.*

*"My dear Julia, I wanted to thank you, for everything, over the years. Having you near has brought me such warmth and joy."*

*Julia managed to smile. "Foolish man!" she scolded gently. "It is you whom I have to thank. I don't know what Kitty and I would have done without your kindness and generosity."*

*The old man waved a thin hand. "Enough of that; I never did anything I didn't want to do. Never married, never had a family. But at least I have an heir. Julia, I've left everything to Gideon. He's the only member of my family I can trust with Foxhill."*

*"Yes, Edmund."*

*"He's a good man, my grand-nephew. I hope you know that, despite everything that happened between you."*

*Julia's heart clenched. "I have always known it." Strange, that after so many years, the thought of Gideon could still hurt so much--the heat of his mouth on hers, the slow glide of his flesh claiming her. Julia struggled to quell her wayward emotions. Alas, the heart had its own memory.*

*"The Dower House is still yours, for as long as you need it." Edmund coughed weakly and put his handkerchief to his mouth.*

*Julia released his hand. "I am tiring you, Edmund. I will leave you in peace."*

*"I am tired... I think I will sleep, for a little while. Goodbye, my dear, God bless you."*

*"Sweet dreams, my dear friend."*

*She bent to kiss him, then, smiling at him once more, left the room. Julia didn't allow herself to cry until her carriage door closed.*

She still missed Edmund. And, now, Julia was on her own again. Gideon, the new Lord Ashby, was the only thing standing between a comfortable home and living in a few cramped, rented rooms. If Gideon's goodwill didn't extend to his lost love, Julia and her daughter would be looking for a new place to live. She sank to the floor, her gold dress crumpling around her. Without Gideon, she would be poor and homeless. And with him, she was a slave to her feelings and to her desires. She closed her eyes and banged her head against the door. She would have to deal with him, one way or another.



GIDEON FROWNE<sup>d</sup> down at the street below. He had taken possession of Great-Uncle Edmund's townhouse in Brook Street shortly after returning from France, once peace was declared. The house needed a good cleaning, he decided, as well as new paint, wallpaper and modern furniture. The place felt like a tomb.

"Colonel Lord Ashby?" Rawlings, his aide-de-camp, was still with him, acting as a kind of major-domo for the present. "Major Pierce and Captain Grey have called."

Gideon spoke over his shoulder. "Send them in."

Major Alastair Pierce, a tall, rangy man with piercing blue eyes, was a natural leader and a valuable officer. Gideon also counted him as a friend. Captain Harry Grey was a brilliant soldier, with a reputation for audacity that was well-deserved. He was broader than Pierce, with a shock of ginger hair, which had at first reminded Gideon unpleasantly of Julia's father.

Alastair accepted a glass of brandy. "What are your plans now the war is over, sir?"

"I've decided to sell out. With Napoleon in exile and the war over, I must turn my attention to my inheritance. My great-uncle left me his estate in Hampshire, as well as this house." Gideon glanced at the peeling wallpaper. "There is much to be done, and I must honor that responsibility now. And, you, Alastair, do you mean to sell out as well?"

Alastair frowned as he swirled his glass and studied its contents. "I may, unless I can obtain an extended leave from my duties. I have some unfinished business in the north." He took a long sip, and when he spoke again, it was about a recent incident between two of their officers in a seedy Cheapside tavern. Clearly, whatever his business was, the major didn't want to discuss it. "What are your plans, Harry?"

Harry Grey tossed off his own glass and looked around for the brandy bottle. "Lord, I don't know. I never make plans in advance."

"True," Alastair said dryly, "your span of attention would never last that long."

"Gentlemen, no sparring today," Gideon interrupted.

Harry grinned. "Hard night, sir?"

"You have no idea."

His quarry sighted, Harry walked over to the sideboard and poured another drink. "Well, I, for one, haven't missed England at all," he declared. "Too confining by half. And too bloody damp. I'll probably follow the drum wherever it leads me."

"You should both visit me at Foxhill if you can," Gideon said, "the one thing I regret about this damn war ending will be the loss of our fellowship."

"Hampshire, eh? How's the hunting?" Alastair asked.

"Good, I believe. Uncle Edmund was a member of the Hampshire Hunt." Gideon smiled at the memory. "I remember how proud he was of his blue coat and silver buttons." He sipped his



brandy. "It has been some time since I rode out with the hounds myself."

Harry scoffed. "Never mind the hunting. What about the women? I might consider a trip home if you can summon up some pretty English girls."

Gideon's brow rose. "Do you mistake me for a pander? I imagine there are as many girls in Foxhill as anywhere else in England."

"Surely, you must know one or two?" Harry insisted.

Gideon shrugged. "I haven't been back there in six years."



AN AWKWARD PAUSE followed this declaration. There must be a reason why the colonel hadn't gone home in so long, but Harry wouldn't be the man to ask him. Not when Major Pierce was frowning at him so ferociously. He wasn't stupid, Harry thought with resentment. Even he noticed that Colonel Lord Ashby's face held a shadow Harry had never seen there before. That kind of look usually meant one thing. It must be a woman.

Surprising really, as the colonel's connections had always been discreet. He had never married nor had a mistress in the years they'd known each other. Harry gathered, from things Pierce had let drop, that he and the colonel had been quite the rakes in the past. It was all before Harry's time, and he didn't really care about that. He did care about the colonel, who was the best officer he'd ever served under, saving Harry's life on more than one occasion. To see him now in this stuffy house, his face so prim, you'd never know what a demon the colonel was in battle.

The colonel turned back to the window, though what was so interesting about a boring street in Mayfair, he didn't know. Harry shrugged. It wasn't his fault. "It's damned dull in here. I think I'll find a cozy armful to while away the evening. There was a luscious little widow, who smiled at me at the opera last night. Maria, her

name was." Harry's brow wrinkled. "Or Martha. I forget. At any rate, if there's nothing else, sir, I'll go renew our acquaintance."

The colonel looked up and smiled. "Off you go, you young rattle. Don't get into too much trouble, will you?"

Harry grinned and sketched a salute. "I'll try, though I can't make any promises. She's devilishly pretty."

The door banged shut behind him. He hurried down the stairs, scarcely noticing the sun on his shoulders, already hot on this early day in July. Trouble lurked somewhere in this city, and Harry was bound and determined to find it.



HARRY LEFT them in his usual whirlwind fashion, brimming with high spirits. He met life with an exuberance that Gideon envied sometimes.

"Ah, to be young again," Alastair said, smiling.

"Rather hard to believe that I was ever that raw."

"You forget how long I've known you, sir. We had a few good years."

They had, until Gideon had fallen in love with Julia. She had been barely eighteen, on the cusp of womanhood, he nearly ten years older. He should have known better. He had, he just hadn't cared. Julia wasn't a stranger, visiting her aunt Beatrice at Foxhill on many occasions. But that evening, at an assembly in Winchester, he had taken one look at a grown-up Julia, with her red-gold curls and green eyes, and fallen under her spell. He had to have her, regardless of the consequences.

In just a few short months, Julia had become his entire world. And look how that ended—in disaster. After beating and subduing him that night at the cottage in Scotland, Julia's father and brothers had tied him up and brought him to the nearest military post, where they placed charges against him. He'd been locked up and tried. Fortunately, Great-Uncle Edmund's intervention as well as

Gideon's own spotless record had resulted in the charges being dropped, and Gideon being ordered back to Spain. He had never heard from Julia again. His letters went unanswered and, several months later, he had heard the news of her marriage. She hadn't waited very long before moving on. And that was the thing that hurt the worst. Gideon had thrown himself back into the war, careless of his survival. But he'd endured, unscathed except for a few minor wounds, gaining promotion after promotion. He couldn't lie to himself. His broken heart had never truly healed. Even now, years later, he still felt a dull ache when he thought of her.

The most beautiful girl Gideon had ever seen. And her laugh, as sweet as chimes. Julia had been a passionate, reckless girl. They had both flung themselves into a whirlwind romance, a fantasy that ended in the cottage in Scotland. Gideon had wondered over the years if Julia was happy, if she had a family. Once he'd dreamed of a life with her, but the life Gideon had now was all he knew and all he wanted. He was successful in his career, and now rich, with a title, of all things. He would miss Edmund, who had always been so kind to him. Life had a way of surprising one, Gideon thought, and a way of turning out in ways one never expected.

His hand clenched slowly as the memory of last night intruded. Damn her. Julia had been as beautiful and passionate as he remembered. The wasted years of longing for her, remembering her touch and the smell of her hair, the small cry she uttered, when lost to her climax. No other woman had ever replaced her in his heart. The loss of her had been too painful, and Gideon had armored himself against giving his heart away again.

Julia had seemed untouched by the years, by the way she had deserted him. Now, she was here, and he had tasted her passion. He would have her again, and he would have his revenge.