The Undoing of de Luca

Kate Hewitt

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The undressing of an innocent…In theory, Ellery Dunant is the last woman you'd expect to find on world-renowned playboy Larenz de Luca's 'To Bed' list. Ellery has met Larenz's type before. There's no way a stallion like him would be interested in a plain-Jane housekeeper like her…So why does Larenz find himself risking his cool and dropping his guard to spend the night with her? The undoing of the playboy… Just one night…but for Larenz it turns out to be not enough. Is his unworldly housekeeper going to be his undoing?

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Larenz let out a sigh. Yet even as his body tingled and remembered and longed for more, his mind was listing reasons to walk away from Ellery Dunant right now.

Tonight had been a mistake. He chose his bed partners carefully, made sure they knew exactly what to expect from him: nothing. Yet Ellery had given herself—her innocence—to him. Larenz turned away from the window, unable to deal with the scalding sense of shame that poured through him. He didn't bed virgins. He didn't break their hearts.

Larenz had no intention of sticking around for Ellery Dunant to fall in love with him. Larenz knew that happy endings like the one Ellery was undoubtedly envisaging didn't exist. He knew it from the hard reality of his own life, his own disappointments…and he had no intention of experiencing that kind of rejection again.

Yet even as he made those resolutions Larenz couldn't quite keep his mind from picturing Ellery's violet eyes, his body from remembering how soft and silken she'd felt in his arms. And he couldn't keep both his mind and body from wanting more.

The Undoing of de Luca

BY

Kate Hewitt

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KATE HEWITT discovered her first Mills & Boon® romance on a trip to England when she was thirteen, and she's continued to read them ever since. She wrote her first story at the age of five, simply because her older brother had written one and she thought she could do it too. That story was one sentence long—fortunately they've become a bit more detailed as she's grown older. She has written plays, short stories, and magazine serials for many years, but writing romance remains her first love. Besides writing, she enjoys reading, travelling, and learning to knit.

After marrying the man of her dreams—her older brother's childhood friend—she lived in England for six years, and now resides in Connecticut with her husband, her three young children, and the possibility of one day getting a dog. Kate loves to hear from readers—you can contact her through her website: www.kate-hewitt.com

Chapter One

HER eyes, he decided, were the most amazing shade of lavender. The colour of a bruise.

'Larenz, did you hear a word I was saying?'

Reluctantly, Larenz de Luca pulled his fascinated gaze from the face of the waitress and turned back to his dining partner. Despite his growing interest in the lovely young woman who had served him his soup, he couldn't fathom why his head of PR had brought him to this manor house. The place was a wreck.

Amelie Weyton drummed her glossy French-manicured nails on the polished surface of the antique dining table, which looked as if it could serve at least twenty, although there were only the two of them seated there now. 'Really, I think this place is perfect.'

Amused, Larenz let his gaze slide back to the waitress. 'Yes,' he murmured, 'I quite agree.' He glanced down at the bowl of soup she had placed in front of him. It was the colour of fresh cream with just a hint of gold and a faint scent of rosemary. He dipped in his spoon. Cream of parsnip. Delicious.

Amelie drummed her fingernails again; Larenz saw a tiny crescent-shaped divot appear on the glossy surface of the table. From the corner of his eye, he saw the waitress flinch but when he looked up her face was carefully expressionless, just as it had been since he'd arrived at Maddock Manor an hour ago. Larenz could tell she didn't like him.

He'd seen it the moment he had crossed the threshold. Lady Maddock's eyes had narrowed and her nostrils had flared even as she'd smiled in welcome. Now her violet gaze swept over him in one quick and quelling glance, and Larenz could tell she was not impressed. The thought amused him.

He was used to assessing people, sizing them up and deciding whether they were useful or not. It was how he'd fought his way up to run his own highly successful business; it was how he stayed on top. And while Lady Maddock may have decided he was an untitled, moneyed nobody, he was beginning to think she was very interesting indeed. And possibly very…useful…as well.

In bed.

'You haven't even seen the grounds yet,' Amelie continued. She took a tiny sip of soup; Larenz knew she wouldn't eat more than a bite or two of the three-course meal Lady Maddock had prepared for them. Ellery Dunant was cook, waitress *and* chatelaine of Maddock Manor. It must gall her terribly to wait on them, Larenz thought with cynical amusement. Or, perhaps, on anyone. Both he and Amelie had acquired plenty of polish but they were still untitled, the dreaded nouveau riche, and, no matter how much money you had, nothing could quite clean the stink of the slum from you. He knew it well.

'The grounds?' he repeated, arching an eyebrow. 'Are they really so spectacular?' He heard the mocking incredulity in his own voice and, from the way he saw Ellery flinch out of the corner of his eye, he knew she had heard it, too.

Amelie gave a sharp little laugh. 'I don't know if *spectacular* is really the word. But it will be perfect—' Her soup forgotten, she'd propped her elbows on the table—Amelie had never quite learned her manners—and now gestured wildly with her hands, knocking her wine glass onto the ancient and rather threadbare Oriental carpet.

Larenz gazed down impassively at the fallen glass—at least it hadn't broken—and the spreading, scarlet stain. He heard Ellery's sharply sucked-in breath and she dropped to her knees in front of him, reaching for the tea towel she'd kept tucked into her waist to blot rather hopelessly at the stain.

He gazed at her bent head, her white-blonde hair scraped up into a sorry little bun. It was an unflattering hairstyle, although at this angle it revealed the pale tender skin at the back of her neck; Larenz had a sudden impulse to press his fingers there and see if her fresh and creamy skin was as soft as it looked. 'I believe a little diluted vinegar gets red wine out of fabric,' he commented politely.

Ellery glanced up swiftly, her eyes narrowing. They were no longer lavender, Larenz observed, but dark violet. The colour of storm clouds, which was rather appropriate as she was obviously furious.

'Thank you,' she said in a voice of arctic politeness. She had the cut-glass tones of the English upper crust; you couldn't fake that accent. God knew, Larenz had once tried, briefly, when he'd been sent to Eton for one hellish year. He'd been scorned and laughed at, easily labelled as a pretender, a poser. He'd walked out before he'd sat his exams—before they could expel him. He'd never gone back to another school of any kind. Life had provided the best education.

Ellery rose from the floor and, as she did so, Larenz caught a faint whiff of her perfume—except it wasn't perfume, he decided, but rather the scent of the kitchen. A kitchen garden, perhaps, for she smelled like wild herbs: rosemary and a faint hint of something else, maybe thyme.

Delicious.

'And, while you're at it,' Amelie drawled in a bored voice, 'perhaps you could bring me another glass of wine?' She arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow, her generous collagen-inflated lips curving in a smile that did not bother to disguise her malice. Larenz suppressed a sigh. Sometimes Amelie could be rather…obvious. He'd known her since his first days starting out in London, sixteen years old and an errand boy at a department store. She'd been working in the shop where Larenz bought sandwiches for the businessmen to eat at their board meetings. She'd cleaned up quite nicely, but she hadn't really changed. Larenz doubted if anyone ever did.

'You don't,' he commented after Ellery had walked swiftly out of the dining room, the green baize-covered door swinging shut behind her, 'have to be quite so rude.'

Amelie shrugged. 'She's been arsey with me since I arrived. Looking down that prim little nose at me. Lady Muck thinks she's better than anyone, but look at this hovel.' She glanced contemptuously around the dining room with its tattered curtains and discoloured patches on the wall where there had surely once been original paintings. 'Her father may have been a baron, but this place is a wreck.'

'And yet you said it was spectacular,' Larenz commented dryly. He took a sip of wine; despite the wreck of a house this manor appeared to be, the wine was a decidedly good vintage. 'Why did you bring me here, Amelie?'

'Spectacular was your word, not mine,' Amelie returned swiftly. 'It's a mouldering wreck, there's no denying it.' She leaned forward. 'That's the point, Larenz. The *contrast.* It will be perfect for the launch of Marina.'

Larenz merely arched an eyebrow. He couldn't quite see how a decrepit manor house was the appropriate place to launch the new line of haute couture that De Luca's, his upmarket department store, had commissioned. But then perhaps this was why Amelie was his head of PR; she had vision.

He simply had determination.

'Imagine it, Larenz, gorgeous gowns in jewel tones—they'll stand out amazingly against all the musty gloom—a perfect backdrop, the juxtaposition of old and new, past and future, where fashion has *been* and where it's going—'

'It all sounds rather artistic,' Larenz murmured. He had no real interest in the artistry of a photo shoot; he simply wanted the line to succeed. And, since he was backing it, it would.

'It'll be amazing,' Amelie promised, her Botoxed face actually showing signs of animation. 'Trust me.'

'I suppose I'll have to,' Larenz replied lightly. 'But did we have to *sleep* here?'

Amelie laughed lightly. 'Poor Larenz, having to rough it for a night.' She clucked. 'How will you manage?' Her smile turned coy. 'Of course, I know a way we could both be more comfortable—'

'Not a chance, Amelie,' he replied dryly. Every once in a while, Amelie attempted to get him into bed. Larenz knew better than to ever mix business and pleasure, and he could tell Amelie's attempt was half-hearted at best. Amelie was one of the few people who had known him when he was a young nobody; it was one of the reasons he allowed her so much licence. Yet even she knew

not to get too close, not to push too hard. No one—and in particular no woman—was allowed those kinds of privileges. Ever. A night, a week, sometimes a little more, was all he allowed his lovers.

Yet, Larenz acknowledged with some amusement, here was Amelie thinking they might get up to something amidst all this mould and rot. The thought was appalling, although…

Larenz's glance slid back to Lady Maddock. She'd returned to the dining room, her lovely face devoid of any make-up or expression, a glass of wine in one hand and a litre of vinegar in the other. She carefully placed the glass in front of Amelie and then, with a murmur of apology, knelt on the floor again and began to dab at the stain. The stinging smell of vinegar wafted up towards Larenz, destroying any possible enjoyment of the remainder of his soup.

Amelie hissed in annoyance. 'Can't you do that a bit later?' she asked, making a big show of having to move her legs out of the way while Ellery scrubbed at the stain. 'We're trying to eat.'

Ellery looked up; the vigorous scrubbing had pinkened her cheeks and her eyes now had a definite steely glint.

'I'm sorry, Miss Weyton,' she said evenly, not sounding apologetic at all, 'but if the stain sets in I'll never get it out.'

Amelie made a show of inspecting the worn carpet. 'I hardly think this old thing is worth saving,' she commented dryly. 'It's practically rags already.'

Ellery's flush deepened. 'This carpet,' she returned with icy politeness, 'is a nearly three-hundred-year-old original Aubusson. I have to disagree with you. It's most certainly worth saving.'

'Not like some of the other things in this place, I suppose?' Amelie returned, her gaze moving rather pointedly to the empty patches on the wall, the wallpaper several shades darker there than anywhere else.

If it was possible, Ellery's flush deepened even more. She looked, Larenz thought, magnificent. He'd first thought her a timid little mouse but now he saw she had courage and pride. His lips curved. Not that she had much to be proud about, but she certainly was beautiful.

She rose from her place at their feet in one graceful movement, retrieving the bottle of vinegar and tucking the dirty cloth back into the pocket of her apron.

'Excuse me,' she said stiffly and walked quickly from the room.

'Bitch,' Amelie said, almost idly, and Larenz felt a little flash of disappointment that she had gone.

Ellery's hands shook as she rinsed out the rag and returned the vinegar to the larder. Rage coursed through her, and she clenched her hands into fists at her sides, pacing the huge kitchen several times as she took in great cleansing breaths in an attempt to calm her fury.

She'd handled that badly; those two were her *guests.* It was so hard to remember that, to accept their snide jibes and careless remarks. They thought paying a few hundred pounds gave them the right, yet Ellery knew it did not. They gave mere money while she gave her life, her very blood, to this place. And she couldn't bear to have it talked about the way that callous crane of a woman had, wrinkling her nose at the carpets and curtains; Ellery knew they were threadbare but that didn't make them any less precious to her.

She'd disliked Amelie Weyton from the moment she'd driven up the Manor's long sweeping drive that afternoon. She'd been at the wheel of a tiny toy of a convertible and had gone too fast so the gravel had sprayed all over the grass and deep ruts had been left in the soft rain-dampened ground. Ellery had said nothing, knowing she couldn't risk losing Amelie as her customer; she'd rented out the manor house for the weekend and the five hundred pounds was desperately needed.

Only that morning the repair man had told her the kitchen boiler was on its very last legs and a new one would cost three thousand pounds.

Ellery had swayed in horror. Three *thousand* pounds? She hadn't earned that kind of money, even with several months at her part-time teaching job in the nearby village. Yet the news should hardly surprise her for, from the moment she'd taken over the running of her ancestral home six

months ago, there had been one calamity after another. Maddock Manor was no more than a wreck on its way to near certain ruin.

The best Ellery could do was slow its inevitable decline. Yet she didn't like thinking like this, couldn't think like this, not when holding on to the Manor sometimes felt akin to holding on to herself, the only way she could, even if only for a little while.

Most of the time she was able to push such fears away. She focused on the pressing practical concerns, which were certainly enough to keep both her mind and body occupied.

And so Ellery had kept her focus on that much-needed boiler as Amelie had strolled through the house as if she owned the place.

'This place really is a disaster,' she'd said, dropping her expensive faux-fur coat on one chair; it slithered to the floor and she glanced pointedly at Ellery to pick it up. Biting down hard on the inside of her cheek, Ellery had done so. 'Larenz is going to have a *fit*,' Amelie added, half to herself. Ellery didn't miss the way the woman's mouth caressed the single word: Larenz. An Italian toy boy, she surmised with disgust. 'This is a step—or ten—down for him.' Her eyes glinted with malicious humour as she glanced at Ellery. 'However, I suppose we can rough it for a night or two. It's not like there's anything else around here, is it?'

Ellery forced a polite smile. 'Is your companion arriving soon?' she asked, still holding the wretched woman's coat. When Amelie had emailed the reservation, she'd simply said 'and guest'. Ellery presumed this guest was the aforementioned Larenz.

'Yes, he'll be here for dinner,' Amelie informed her idly. She turned around in a slow circle, taking in the drawing room in all of its shabbiness. 'Good heavens, it's even worse than the photos on the website, isn't it?' she drawled, and Ellery forced herself not to say anything.

She'd chosen photographs of the best rooms for her website, Maddock Holiday Lettings. The conservatory, with throw pillows carefully covering the threadbare patches on the sofa and the sunlight pouring in, bathing the room in mellow gold; the best bedroom, which she'd had redecorated with new linens and curtains.

It had set her back a thousand pounds but she'd been realistic. You couldn't charge people to sleep on tattered sheets.

Still, Amelie's contempt of her home rankled. This venture, letting the Manor out to holidaymakers, was new, and Amelie, in fact, was only the second guest to actually come and stay. The other had been a kindly elderly couple who had been endearingly delighted with everything. They'd appreciated the beauty and history of a house that had stayed in the same family for nearly five hundred years.

Amelie and her Italian lover just saw the stains and the tears.

'And they're making a few more while they're at it,' Ellery muttered under her breath now. She pictured the scarlet splash of red wine on the Aubusson once more and she groaned aloud.

'Are you quite all right?'

Ellery whirled around; she'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't heard the man—Larenz—enter the kitchen. He'd arrived only a few minutes before dinner had been served and Ellery hadn't really had time to greet or even look at him properly. Yet she'd seen enough to form an opinion: Larenz de Luca was not the toy boy she'd expected. He was much worse.

From the moment he'd arrived, Amelie had flirted and fawned over him, yet Larenz had been impervious and even indifferent to the attentions of the gorgeous, if rather emaciated, Amelie, and every careless or callous remark or look had grated on Ellery's nerves, which was ridiculous because she didn't even like Amelie.

Yet she *hated* men who treated women like playthings just to be enjoyed and then discarded. Men like her father.

Ellery forced such negative thoughts away and nodded stiffly at Larenz. He lounged in the doorway of the kitchen, one shoulder propped against the frame, his deep blue eyes alight with amusement.

He was laughing at her. Ellery had sensed it before, when she'd been scrubbing at the stain. He'd enjoyed seeing her on her knees, working like a skivvy in front of him. She'd seen the smile curl the corner of his mouth—his lips were as perfectly sculpted as a Renaissance statue's—and the same smile was quirking them now as he watched her pace the kitchen.

'I'm perfectly fine, thank you,' she said. 'May I help?'

'Yes, you may, actually,' he returned, his voice a drawl with only a hint of an Italian accent. 'We've finished the soup and we're waiting for the next course.'

'Of course.' She felt colour flare in her face. How long had she been wool-gathering in the kitchen while they waited for their meal? 'I'll be right out.'

Larenz nodded but he didn't move, his eyes lazily sweeping over her, assessing and dismissing all in one bored glance. Ellery could hardly blame him for it; she was dressed in a serviceable black skirt and a white blouse with a sauce stain on the shoulder, and the heat from the kitchen was making her sweaty. Still, his obvious contempt aggravated her, and was so typical of a man like him.

'Good,' he finally said and pushed off from the doorframe, disappearing back into the dining room without another word.

Ellery hurried to check on the chicken simmering on the stove. Fortunately, the tarragon cream sauce hadn't curdled.

Back in the dining room, Amelie and Larenz sat unspeaking. Larenz looked relaxed, sprawled in his seat, while Amelie seemed tense, drumming her nails once more, the little clicks seeming to echo through the silent room. She had, Ellery saw, caused another divot in the ancient tabletop.

Amelie had barely touched her soup but Ellery saw, to her satisfaction, that Larenz had completely cleaned his bowl. As she reached for the empty dish, he laid a hand on her wrist, shocking her with the unexpected touch. His skin was warm and dry and it sent a strange, not unpleasant, jolt right down to her plimsoll-encased toes.

'The soup was delicious,' he murmured, and Ellery jerked her head in the semblance of a nod.

'Thank you. Your main course will be out shortly.' Nerves caused her hands to tremble and the bowl clanked against his wine glass as she took it, making her flush and Larenz smile lazily.

'Careful. You don't want to spill another glass of wine.'

'Your glass is empty,' Ellery returned tartly. She hated that he'd seen how he affected her—and why should he affect her? He was incredibly attractive, yes, but he was also an arrogant ass. 'I'll refill it in a moment,' she added, and turned back to the kitchen.

Dumping the dishes in the sink, Ellery hurried to serve the plates of chicken, sauce and the roasted new potatoes she'd left crisping in the oven. Quite suddenly, she felt utterly exhausted. She had an entire weekend of catering meals—and enduring Amelie's snide remarks and Larenz's speculative looks—ahead of her, yet all she wanted was to go upstairs and hide under the covers.

Behind her, the boiler clanked mournfully and Ellery gritted her teeth. She had to bear it. The only other option was to sell Maddock Manor, and that was no option at all. Not yet, at least. The Manor was the only thing she had left of her family, her father. Sometimes, as impossible and irrational as she knew it was, the Manor felt like the only thing that validated who she was and where she had come from.

She was keeping it.

Two hours later, Larenz and Amelie had finally retired upstairs. Ellery scraped the remains of their meal—Larenz had finished both his main course and a generous slice of chocolate gâteau, while Amelie had barely touched any of it—into the bin and tried to ease the persistent ache in her lower back. What she really wanted was a long soak in a very hot bath, but the repair man had already told her that such a venture would push the boiler past its limited endurance. She'd have to settle for a

hot-water bottle instead, which had been her companion most nights anyway. Now that it was late October, the cold stole into the Manor and crouched in corners, especially in the draughty, unheated room where Ellery slept.

Sighing, she stacked the rinsed plates in the dishwasher and mentally ran through her to-do list for breakfast. Part of the weekend package was a full English fry-up, yet she was quite sure Amelie Weyton ran only to black coffee in the mornings.

Larenz, on the other hand, probably required a hearty breakfast that he'd tuck into with relish while never putting on an ounce. Quite suddenly, Ellery found her mind wandering upstairs, to the best bedroom with its antique four-poster—the new silk hangings had eaten up most of her budget for the room's redecoration—and the birch logs she'd laid in the hearth that morning. Would Larenz light a fire so he and Amelie could be cosy in bed together, the flames casting dancing shadows over the bed and their entangled bodies?

Or perhaps they would have another source of heat—she imagined them there, among the pillows and blankets, Amelie's limbs twined around Larenz, and felt a sudden dart of completely unreasonable jealousy.

She could not possibly be jealous. What was there to be jealous of? She despised the pair of them. Yet even as she asked herself this, Ellery already knew the answer. She was jealous of Amelie having someone—anyone—but especially someone as attractive and, face it, as sexy as Larenz de Luca. She was jealous of them both, and the fact that neither of them would be alone tonight. Like she would.

Ellery sighed. She'd been living at Maddock Manor, attempting to make ends if not meet, at least glimpse each other, for six long, lonely months. She'd made a few friends in the village, but nothing like the life she'd once had. Nothing like the life she wanted.

Her university friends were all in London, living the young urban lifestyle that she'd once, ridiculously, enjoyed. Even after only half a year it seemed as faded and foggy as a dream, the kind where you could only remember hazy fragments and surreal snatches. Her best friend, Lil, was constantly urging her to come back to London, even if just for a visit, and Ellery had managed it once.

Yet one weekend in the city didn't completely combat the loneliness of living alone in an abandoned manor house, day after day after day. Ellery shook her head in an attempt to rid herself of such useless thoughts. She was acting maudlin and pathetic and it annoyed her. She couldn't visit London right now, but she could at least ring her friend. She imagined telling Lil all about the horrible Amelie and Larenz and knew her friend would relish the gossip.

Smiling at the thought, Ellery resumed stacking the dishwasher and wiping the worktops. She had just finished and was about to switch off the lights when a voice made her jump nearly a foot in the air.

'Excuse me—'

Ellery whirled around, one hand to her chest. Larenz de Luca stood in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the door. How had she not heard him come in again? He must, she thought resentfully, be as quiet as a cat. He smiled sleepily, and Ellery noticed how deliciously rumpled he looked. His hair, glinting darkly in the light, curled over his forehead and was just a little ruffled. He'd shed his suit jacket and tie from earlier and had unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt; Ellery could glimpse a stretch of golden skin there, at the base of his throat, that made her suddenly swallow rather dryly.

'Did I frighten you?' he asked, and she thought his accent sounded more pronounced. It was probably intentional, Ellery thought with a twinge of cynical amusement. He did the sexy Italian thing rather well, and he knew it.

'You startled me,' she corrected, sounding as crisp and buttoned-up as the spinster schoolteacher she was for the children in the village. She gave him her best teacher's glare and was satisfied to see him inadvertently straighten. 'Is there something you need, Mr de Luca?'

Larenz cocked his head, his heavy-lidded gaze sweeping over her as it had earlier that night. 'Yes, there is,' he finally said, still in that sleepy yet speculative voice. 'I wondered if I could have a glass of water.'

'There are glasses and a pitcher in your room,' Ellery replied, and heard the implied rebuke in her voice. Larenz heard it too, for he arched his eyebrows, his mouth quirking—Ellery couldn't tear her gaze away from those amazing lips—and said, 'Perhaps, but I prefer ice.'

Somehow she managed to drag her gaze upwards, to those blue, blue eyes that were so clearly laughing at her. She managed a stiff nod. 'Of course. Just a moment.'

She felt Larenz's eyes on her as she went to the chest freezer and rifled through the economy-sized bags of peas and chicken cutlets.

'Do you live here alone?' he asked, his tone now one of scrupulous politeness.

Ellery finally located a bag of ice and pulled it out, slamming the lid of the freezer down with a bit more force than necessary. 'Yes.'

She saw his glance move around the huge empty kitchen. 'You don't have any help?'

Surely that was obvious, considering how she'd cooked and waited on them tonight. 'A boy from the village mows the lawns every now and then.' She didn't want to admit just how alone she really was, how sometimes the house seemed to stretch in endless emptiness all around her so she felt as tiny and insignificant as one of the many dust motes filtering through the stale air. She *really* needed to ring Lil and get some perspective.

Larenz raised his brows again and Ellery knew what he was thinking. The lawns were bedraggled and rather overgrown; she hadn't had the money to pay Darren to mow recently. So what? she wanted to demand. It was nearly winter anyway. No one mowed their lawns in winter, did they?

She dumped the ice into two glasses and thrust them at Larenz, her chin lifted. 'Will that be all?'

His mouth quirked again as he glanced at the glasses—Ellery realized she'd assumed Amelie wanted ice too—and then he took the glasses, his fingers sliding across hers. The simple touch of skin on skin made Ellery jerk back as if she'd been scalded. She felt as if she had; she could still feel the warmth of his hand even though he was no longer touching her.

She hated that she reacted so obviously to his little touches—his intentional little touches, for there could be no doubting that he did it on purpose, just to see her jump. To enjoy how he affected her, for wasn't that the basic source of power of a man over a woman? And here she was, hating Larenz de Luca yet still in his thrall. The thought made Ellery's face flame with humiliated aggravation.

Larenz's mouth curled into a fully fledged smile, lighting his eyes, turning them to a gleaming sapphire. 'Goodnight, Lady Maddock.'

Ellery stiffened. She didn't use her title—worthless as it was—and it sounded faintly mocking on Larenz's lips. Her father had been a baron and the title had died out with him. Her own was no more than a courtesy, an affectation.

Still, she had no desire to continue the conversation so she merely jerked her head in acceptance and, with another sleepy smile, Larenz turned around and left.

Suddenly, in spite of her best intentions to have him walk away without another word, Ellery heard herself calling out, 'What time do you eat breakfast?'

Larenz paused, glancing at her over his shoulder. 'I usually like to eat early, although, since it is the weekend…would nine o'clock be all right?' His lips twitched. 'I'd like to give you a bit of a lie-in.'

Ellery glared at him. The man could make anything sound suggestive and even sensual, and she certainly didn't need his consideration. 'Thank you, but that's really not necessary. I'm an early riser.'

'Then perhaps we'll watch the dawn together,' Larenz murmured and, with a last wicked smile that let her know he knew just how much he was teasing—and even affecting—her, he left, the door swinging shut behind him with a breathy sigh.

Ellery counted to ten, and then on to twenty, and then she swore aloud. She waited until she heard Larenz's footsteps on the stairs—the third one always creaked—and then she reached for the telephone. It was late, but Lil was almost always ready for a chat.

She picked up on the second ring. 'Ellery? Tell me you've finally come to your senses.'

Ellery gave a little laugh as she brought the telephone into the larder, where there was less chance of being overheard in case Larenz or Amelie ventured downstairs again.

'Just about, after tonight,' she said and Lil laughed, the pulsing beat of club music audible from her end.

'Thank heavens. I don't know why you shut yourself away up there—'

Ellery closed her eyes, a sudden shaft of pain, unexpected and sharp, slicing through her. 'You know why, Lil.'

Lil sighed. They'd had this conversation too many times already. No matter how many times Ellery tried to explain it, her friend couldn't understand why she'd thrown away a busy, full life in London for taking care of a mouldering manor. Ellery didn't blame Lil for not understanding; she barely understood it herself. Returning to Maddock Manor when her mother had been preparing to sell it had been a gut decision. Emotional and irrational. She accepted that, yet it didn't change how she felt, or how much she needed to stay. For now, at least.

'So what happened tonight?' Lil asked.

'Oh, I have these awful guests,' Ellery said lightly. Suddenly she didn't feel like regaling Lil with stories of Amelie and Larenz. 'Completely OTT and high maintenance.'

'Throw the tossers out, then,' Lil said robustly. 'Take a train—'

'Lil, I can't. I have to stay here until—' Ellery stopped, not wanting to finish the thought.

'Until the money runs out?' Lil filled in for her. 'When will that be? Another two weeks?'

Ellery managed a wobbly laugh. 'More like three.' She sighed, sliding to the floor, her forehead resting on her knees. 'I know I'm mad.'

'At least you admit it,' Lil replied cheerfully. 'Look, I know you can't come now, but you are due for a visit. That manor is bringing you down, Ellery, and you need someone to bring you *up*.' Her voice softened. 'Come back to the city, have fun, have a real relationship for starters—'

'Don't,' Ellery warned with a sigh, even though she knew her friend was right.

'Why not? It's not like you're going to meet a man in the bowels of Suffolk, and you don't want to die a virgin, do you?'

Ellery winced. Lil was her best friend, but sometimes she was just a bit too blunt. And she'd never really understood how—or why—Ellery had kept herself from the messy complications of sex and love for so long. 'I'm not looking for some kind of fling,' she said, even as an image—a tempting image—of Larenz flitted through her mind, his tie loosened and his hair tousled…

'Well, how about a girls' weekend, then?' Lil suggested.

'Now *that* sounds lovely—'

'But?' Lil interjected knowingly. 'What's your excuse this time, Ellery?'

'No excuses,' Ellery replied a bit more firmly than she felt. 'I know I need to get away, Lil. I nearly lost my temper with these idiot guests and it's just because I haven't been anywhere or done anything but try to keep things together here—'

'Then next weekend,' Lil cut her off kindly, for Ellery knew she sounded too emotional. Felt too emotional. She didn't like showing so much of herself, being so vulnerable, not even with Lil, and her friend knew it. 'You don't have any guests booked then?'

'Not hardly.' She injected a cheerful note into her voice. 'This lot's only my second. Thanks for chatting, Lil, but I can tell you're out on the town—'

A peal of raucous laughter sounded from Lil's end. 'It doesn't matter—'

‘And I’m exhausted,’ Ellery finished. ‘I’ll talk to you later.’ After she’d disconnected the call, Ellery sat there, the receiver pressed to her chest, the manor house quiet and dark all around her. She could hear the wind blowing outside, a lost, lonely sound.

The phone call had made her feel a bit better, and she was *definitely* going to go to London next weekend, but in the meantime this weekend—with its two guests—still yawned endlessly in front of her. Sighing, Ellery rose and replaced the telephone before heading to bed.

Upstairs, Larenz took his two glasses, the ice cubes clinking against each other, and walked past Amelie’s door. She’d taken the best bed for herself—of course—and Larenz knew the only way to enjoy such comfort was to share it. When they’d gone upstairs together, Amelie still chattering on about how perfect this wreck of a house would be for the launch of Marina, Larenz had known with a certain weariness that the moment was coming.

And so it had, with Amelie pausing in the doorway of the best bedroom, giving him a kittenish little smile that might have amused him once, but now just annoyed him.

‘It’s awfully cold in here, you know,’ she said in a husky murmur.

‘You could ask Lady Maddock for a hot-water bottle,’ he replied dryly, stepping back from Amelie’s open doorway just so she got the message.

She did, smiling easily. That was one good thing about Amelie; she caught on quickly. ‘I’m sure she’s using it for herself,’ she replied. ‘It’s probably the only thing that ever shares her bed,’ she added with that touch of malice Larenz had never really liked.

‘Well, at least you have lots of covers,’ he replied lightly. From her open doorway, he caught a glimpse of an ornate four-poster piled high with throw pillows and a satin duvet. It looked a good deal more comfortable than the spartan room he’d had to settle for.

Still, he wasn’t even tempted. Especially not when his mind—and other parts of his body—still recalled the way Ellery Dunant’s violet eyes had flashed at him, the way she’d jerked in response to his lightest touch. She wanted him. She didn’t want to want him, but she did.

He turned back to Amelie, the friendliness in his voice now replaced with flat finality. ‘Goodnight, Amelie.’ He turned away and walked to his own bedroom without looking back.

Back in his own room now, Larenz grimaced at the faded wallpaper and worn coverlet. Clearly, Lady Maddock had not got around to redecorating the other bedrooms.

He put aside his glass with the precious ice—it had been no more than a pretext to see Ellery Dunant again—and pulled the covers down from the bed. A gust of wind rattled the windowpanes and Larenz felt the icy draught. He grimaced again. What on earth was Ellery Dunant doing in a place like this? Clearly her family had fallen on hard times, but Larenz couldn’t fathom why she didn’t sell up and move somewhere more congenial. She was young, pretty and obviously talented to some degree. Why was she wasting away in the far reaches of Suffolk taking care of a house that looked about to collapse around her ears?

Shrugging the thought aside, Larenz began to undress. He normally slept in just his boxers but it was so damned cold in this place he decided to leave his shirt and socks on, making him look, he suspected, rather ridiculous.

He doubted Ellery Dunant’s room was properly heated. He pictured her in a white cotton nightdress, the kind that buttoned right up to her neck, a pair of fuzzy slippers on her feet, clutching a hot-water bottle. The image made his lips twitch in amusement until he found his mind leaping ahead to the moment when he unbuttoned that starchy nightgown and discovered the delectable woman underneath.

She’d been affected by him; there could be no denying that. Larenz recalled the way her skin had felt, as soft as silk and faintly cool. Her fingernails, he’d noticed, had been bitten to the quick. She was undoubtedly worried about finances; why else would she be renting out this decrepit place?

He knew just how to take her mind off such matters.

He stretched out in bed, wincing at the icy sheets. Again, he found himself imagining Ellery there with him, warming the sheets, warming him.

And he could warm her…He would take great pleasure in thawing the ice princess, Larenz thought, folding his hands behind his head. Sleep seemed a long way off. From outside he heard a telltale creak of the floorboards and hoped it wasn't Amelie making a last-ditch effort. Surely she had more pride than that; their working relationship was too important to throw away on an ill-conceived fling.

His mind roved back to Ellery. He wondered whether she was pining away for some prince while she waited in her lonely manor. Was she hoping for some would-be knight to rescue her? Well, he was no knight or prince, not in the least. He was a bastard through and through and there was surely no way Lady Maddock would consider him as husband material for a second, which suited him fine.

But as a lover…? Larenz smiled and settled more deeply into the bed.

Then he heard the floorboard creak again, past his room, and the sound of a door closing somewhere at the other end of the hall. It must have been Ellery, on her way to bed.

Larenz stretched out, trying to make himself more comfortable despite the rather lumpy mattress and the coldness of the room. Had Ellery walked past his room on purpose? Was she curious? Longing?

He hoped so, because he had just decided that she most definitely needed to be seduced.

Chapter Two

ELLERY woke early, determined to fill the day with chores and errands. If she kept herself busy and productive, she'd have less time to think. Imagine.

It had been imagining that had kept her up last night, restless with a nameless longing that had suddenly risen up inside her, a tide of need. She'd replayed the moments with Larenz, the feel of his fingers on her skin, over and over again, hating herself for doing so. Hating him.

She needed to focus, she told herself as she tied an apron around her waist and reached for a dozen eggs from inside the fridge. Focus on getting work done now and then having a weekend away, as she'd promised Lil. She tried to imagine herself in London at some random club or bar, having *fun*, but the image remained both blurry and vaguely depressing.

'It *would* be fun,' Ellery insisted in a mutter as she cracked six eggs into a heavy china mixing bowl and began to whip them into a foamy froth. 'We'd talk and laugh and dance—' And Lil would try to convince her—again—to come back to London.

When Ellery had told her friend she was returning home in an attempt to make Maddock Manor a success, Lil had looked at her as if she'd gone completely mad.

'Why on earth would you want to go back *there*?'

Ellery hadn't been able to answer that question. She'd only visited her home once or twice a year since her father had died; her mother usually preferred to meet her in London. She had never even had much affection for the house, really; four years at boarding school and another three at university had made her a stranger to the place, and she still remembered the shock slicing through her at its decrepit state when she'd returned after her mother had announced she planned to sell it. When had the paintings been sold? When had the grounds gone to ruin? Had she never noticed, or had she simply not cared? Or, most frighteningly, had their family's slide into financial ruin happened a long time ago, her father hiding the truth from her, as he had with so many things?

Yet, despite the Manor's decrepit state, Ellery had been determined to keep it for as long as she could. Somehow the prospect of losing it—losing her childhood memories there—had forced some latent instinct to kick in and so she'd rushed into this unholy mess. Even now she couldn't regret it, couldn't shake the fear that if she lost the Manor, she lost her father. It was a stupid fear, absurd, because she'd lost her father long, long ago…if she'd ever really had him.

Grimacing, Ellery reached for a tomato from the windowsill and began to slice it with a bit too much vigour. She didn't like to dwell on memories; if she thought too much about the past she started wondering if anything was true…or trustworthy.

'Careful with that. You're liable to lose a finger.' Once again, Ellery jumped and whirled around, the chopping knife still brandished in one hand. Larenz stood in the doorway, looking even better than he had last night. Even in her pique, Ellery could not quite keep herself from gazing at him. He was dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a worn grey T-shirt. Simple clothes, Saturday slumming clothes, Ellery supposed, yet Larenz de Luca looked far too good in them, the soft cotton and faded denim lovingly hugging his powerful frame, emphasizing his trim hips and muscular thighs.

'I'm fine, thank you,' she said crisply. 'And, if you don't mind, I'd rather you knocked before coming into the kitchen.'

'Sorry,' Larenz murmured, sounding utterly unrepentant.

Ellery made herself smile and raised her chin a notch. 'May I help you with something, Mr de Luca? Breakfast should be ready in a few minutes.' She glanced pointedly at the old clock hanging above the stove. It was a quarter to nine.

'Why don't you call me Larenz?' he suggested with a smile.

Ellery's smile back was rather brittle. 'I'm afraid it's not the Manor's policy to address guests by their first names.' That was a complete fabrication and, from Larenz's little smile, she could tell he knew it. He was amused by it.

'The Manor?' he queried softly. 'Or Lady Maddock's?'

'I don't actually use the title,' Ellery said stiffly. She hated her title, hated its uselessness, its deceit. As if she was the only one who deserved it. 'You may simply call me Miss Dunant.' Listening to her crisp voice, she knew she sounded starchy and even absurd. She wished, for a fierce unguarded moment, that she could be someone else. Sound like someone else, light, amused, mocking even. She wished she could feel that way, as if things didn't matter. As if they didn't hurt. Instead, she just bristled and it made Larenz de Luca laugh at her.

'Miss Dunant,' Larenz repeated thoughtfully. 'I'm afraid I usually prefer to be a bit more informal. But if you insist…' He took a step closer, still giving her that lovely lazy smile, and Ellery's heart began to beat like a frightened rabbit's. She sucked in a quick, sharp breath.

'Will Miss Weyton be joining you for breakfast?'

'No, she won't.' Larenz's smile widened. 'As a matter of fact, Miss Weyton is leaving this morning.'

'What…?' Ellery couldn't keep the appalled shock from her voice. She realized she was disappointed, not simply to lose the money, but to lose the company. Larenz de Luca, the most intriguing and infuriating man she'd come across in a long time. She was actually disappointed that he might be leaving.

'Yes, she has to return to work,' Larenz continued, sounding anything but regretful. 'However, I'll be staying for the rest of the weekend.'

Ellery's breath came out in a slow hiss. 'You'll be staying?' she repeated, and heard how ridiculously breathy her voice sounded. Inwardly, she cringed. 'Alone?'

Larenz had been moving slowly towards her so now he was less than a foot away. Ellery could smell the clean citrusy tang of his aftershave, and she found her fascinated gaze resting on the steady pulse in his throat. The skin there looked so smooth and golden.

'Well, I won't be alone,' Larenz murmured. He reached out to tuck an errant tendril of hair behind her ear and Ellery jerked back in shock; her skin seemed to buzz and burn where his fingers had skimmed it. Her senses were too scattered to make a reply and, seeing this, Larenz clarified, 'I'll be with you.'

She took a step backwards, away from both danger and temptation. She didn't want to be tempted, not by a man she couldn't even like. Not by a man who looked poised to use her and discard her—and any other woman—just as her father had her mother.

Or perhaps Larenz de Luca wouldn't even get that far. Perhaps he was simply amusing himself with her, enjoying her obvious and inexperienced reactions. Perhaps he never intended to act on any of this. She didn't know which was more humiliating. 'I'm afraid I'll be busy with my duties most of the weekend,' she told him crisply, 'but I'm sure you'll enjoy the relaxing solitude of Maddock Manor…especially such a busy man as yourself.'

Larenz watched her stumbling retreat with a faint, mocking little smile. 'Am I so busy?' he murmured and Ellery shrugged, spreading her hands wide, forgetting she was still holding a rather wicked-looking knife.

'I'm sure—'

'Watch that,' Larenz murmured, his voice still lazy despite the fact that the knife's blade had swept scant inches from his abdomen.

'Oh—' Ellery returned the knife to the worktop with an inelegant clatter. Her breath came out in an agitated shudder. She hated that this man affected her so much, and she hated it even more that he knew it. 'It's probably better,' she managed, turning back to her bowl of eggs so she didn't have to face him, 'if you leave me to finish making breakfast.'

‘As you wish,’ Larenz replied. ‘But I’m going to hold you to showing me the grounds later today.’ He left before Ellery could make a response, but she already knew she had no intention of showing Larenz de Luca anything while he was here. She intended to stay completely out of his way.

The weekend seemed as if it were getting longer by the minute.

Larenz wandered through the empty reception rooms as he waited for Ellery to make his breakfast. The heavy velvet curtains were still drawn against the light, although pale autumn sunshine filtered through the cracks and highlighted the dust motes dancing in the air.

Larenz gazed around the drawing room, with its high ceiling and intricate cornices, a beautiful marble fireplace and long sash windows. It was a stately, elegant room, and if he tried he could almost see it as it had once been, grand and imposing, despite the faded carpets and moth-eaten upholstery, the peeling gilt and wide crack in the marble surround of the fireplace.

He thought he could hear Amelie upstairs rather forcefully throwing her things back into her suitcase. She had been less than pleased to be summarily dismissed from the manor.

Larenz had caught her coming out of her bedroom—she looked as if she’d had a better night’s sleep than he had—and said with a little smile, ‘I’ve been thinking about your idea of using the manor as the location for Marina’s fashion shoot. It’s a good one.’

Amelie’s lipsticked mouth curved into a satisfied smile. ‘I knew you would.’

‘And,’ Larenz added in an implacable tone, ‘I need you to head back to the office this morning to start the paperwork. I’ll deal with Ellery.’

‘Ellery, is it?’ Amelie noted, her eyes narrowing. She forced a smile. ‘Well, I for one will be glad to see the last of this hovel for a little while at least.’ Larenz felt only relief as he headed downstairs.

Now, wandering restlessly through the drawing room, Larenz thought of how Ellery had whirled around when he’d come into the kitchen that morning, surprised and jumpy and aware, and he smiled, all thoughts of Amelie wiped clean away. This weekend was going to be very interesting and, he had no doubt, very pleasurable, as well.

Ellery placed the scrambled eggs, fried mushrooms, bacon, stewed tomato and a heap of baked beans on a plate, grabbed the rack of toast and a bottle of ketchup with her free hand, and made her way into the dining room.

Somewhere in the distance a door slammed and Ellery winced at the sound of a car starting, along with the telltale spray of gravel. More ruts in the road.

‘That would be Amelie leaving,’ Larenz said pleasantly. He stepped from the shadows of the dining room where he’d been standing. Hiding, more like, Ellery thought. At least this time she didn’t jump.

‘In a hurry, is she?’ she asked dryly. She ignored the sudden pounding of her heart and the fact that her mind—and body—were very aware that she and Larenz de Luca were now alone. She placed the food on the table and turned around to fetch the coffee. ‘I’ll be right back.’

‘You are getting a plate for yourself, I hope?’ Larenz enquired. A frisson of feeling—could it possibly be hope—shivered through Ellery. She stiffened, her back to him. ‘I prefer not to eat alone,’ Larenz clarified, a hint of laughter in his voice.

‘I eat in the kitchen,’ she said without turning around.

‘Then allow me to join you.’

She heard Larenz reach for his plate, the clank of cutlery as he scooped up his dishes, quite prepared to follow her into the kitchen. Slowly Ellery turned around. ‘What exactly do you want from me, Mr de Luca?’

‘Is friendliness not part of the weekend special?’ he asked lightly. He didn’t answer her question.

‘I like to be friendly *and* professional,’ she replied curtly.

‘As a matter of fact, this is professional,’ Larenz returned. ‘I have a business proposition to put to you.’

Ellery didn't bother hiding her disbelief. The idea of this wealthy man having anything to do with her or Maddock Manor was utterly absurd. 'You can't be serious—'

Larenz gave her a playful, mocking smile. 'Is that your reaction to most business propositions?'

She gritted her teeth. She'd been doing that quite a bit since Larenz de Luca and his lover had arrived—although now she was gone, no doubt dismissed by Larenz. He'd discarded one woman—and why? To move on to another?

To move on to her?

Ellery pushed the alarming—and tempting—possibility away. Surely there had to be another reason for his continued presence. He was far too wealthy to enjoy staying in a place like Maddock Manor; he was clearly used to five-star hotels with matching service. Amelie had told her as much yesterday, and everything Ellery had noticed about Larenz de Luca confirmed this opinion, from the navy-blue Lexus he'd driven up in last night to the way he stood there, arrogantly relaxed in his supposed Saturday slumming clothes. He was, Ellery noticed, wearing buttery-soft loafers of Italian leather that had to have cost several hundred pounds at least. The man reeked of power and privilege.

Maddock Manor was way, way beneath him. *She* was way, way beneath him. And yet he stayed?

It made her nervous, anxious and even a little bit afraid.

'You're clearly a very wealthy, important person,' she finally said with frank honesty. 'I can't imagine any business proposition of yours that would involve me or Maddock—'

'Then you're wrong,' Larenz said softly. 'And my breakfast is getting cold.' He lifted the plate once more. 'Shall we?'

Ellery capitulated. She realized she had little choice, for Larenz was clearly the kind of man who was used to getting his own way. And she was tired of fighting; she was exhausted already. After breakfast she'd fob him off with the list of errands she had to do. She couldn't quite see him tagging along while she dug for the last potatoes or raked over the gravel that Amelie had sprayed everywhere.

'Fine,' she said curtly and then, because it was obvious he had no intention of being an ordinary guest, she threw over her shoulder, 'we can eat in the kitchen.'

Ellery fixed herself a plate of eggs and mushrooms while Larenz took a seat at the big scrubbed pine table. He popped a mushroom into his mouth and surveyed the huge room with its original fireplace big enough to roast an ox and the bank of windows letting in the pale morning sunshine.

'I'd say this was quite cosy,' he murmured, 'except this table could seat a round dozen. And I imagine it once did, in this house's heyday.' He smiled, raising his eyebrows. 'When was that?'

Ellery stiffened. 'The house's heyday?' she repeated and then, to her surprise and dismay, she sighed, the sound all too wistful and revealing. 'Probably some time in the seventeenth century. I think the Dunants were originally Puritans in good standing with Cromwell.'

'And did they lose it all in the Restoration?'

Ellery shrugged. 'I don't think so. They changed sides a dozen times or more.' She reached for two heavy china mugs and poured coffee. 'The Dunants aren't particularly known for being faithful.' Too late she heard the spite and bitterness in her voice and closed her eyes, hoping Larenz hadn't heard it, too. Yet, even without turning around, she knew he had; he was far too perceptive for his own good—or hers.

'Here.' She placed a mug of coffee in front of him on the table and then walked around to her own seat, all the way on the other end of the table. It looked a little ridiculous for them to be sitting so far apart but Ellery didn't care. She wasn't about to give Larenz any excuse to touch her.

Even if you want him to…

Ellery just barely kept from closing her eyes again. It was a good thing Larenz de Luca wasn't capable of mind reading—except when she looked at him and saw that faint knowing smile on his face she felt as if he was.

'Thank you,' he murmured and took a sip of coffee. Ellery began to eat her eggs with grim determination. She didn't want to talk to Larenz, didn't want him to flirt or tease or tempt her. Yet,

even as these thoughts flitted through her mind and her eggs turned rubbery and tasteless in her mouth, Ellery knew she was already tempted. Badly. She thought of how Larenz's flutter of fingers on her wrist, skin sliding on skin, had jolted her, an electric current wired directly to her soul.

Except, Ellery thought as she speared a mushroom, souls had nothing to do with it; the temptation she felt for Larenz de Luca was purely, utterly physical. It had to be, for he was exactly the kind of man she despised. The kind of man her father had been.

She glanced up from her breakfast to look at Larenz, to drink him in, for he really was the most amazingly beautiful man. Her gaze lingered on the straight line of his nose, the slashes of his dark brows, those full moulded lips—she imagined those lips touching her, even somewhere seemingly innocuous, like where his fingers had been, on her wrist—and she nearly shuddered aloud.

'Is something wrong?' Larenz asked. He lifted his mug to take a sip of coffee and his eyes danced over its rim.

'What do you mean?' Ellery asked sharply. She returned her fork to her plate with a clatter. She'd been caught staring, of course, and she pulled her lip between her teeth, nipping hard, at the realization.

Larenz lowered his mug. His eyes still danced. 'It's just you looked a bit—pained.'

'Pained?' Ellery repeated. She rose abruptly from the table and grabbed her plate, moving to scrape the remains of her mostly uneaten breakfast into the bin. 'I'm afraid I have rather a lot on my mind,' she explained tartly. Too much on her mind to be thinking about Larenz the way she had. Too many worries to add temptation to the mix, especially when she knew he could only be amusing himself with her. The thought stung.

'Breakfast was delicious, thank you,' Larenz said. He'd moved to the sink, where Ellery watched in surprise as he rinsed his plate and mug and placed them in the dishwasher.

'Thank you,' she half mumbled, touched by his little thoughtfulness. 'You don't have to clean up—'

'Amazingly, I am capable of putting a few dishes away,' Larenz said with a wry smile that reached right into Ellery and twisted her heart. Or maybe something else. She turned away again, busying herself with the mindless tasks of wiping the table down and turning off the coffeemaker. From the corner of her eye, she saw Larenz lean one shoulder against the door, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. 'So it looks to be a beautiful day out. How about you show me the grounds and we can discuss this business proposition?'

Ellery jerked around, the dripping dishcloth still in her hand. She'd completely forgotten about his business proposition—what kind of proposal could he possibly have?

'I'm really rather busy—' she began and Larenz just smiled.

'I promise you, it'll be worth your while.' He reached out almost lazily and took the dishcloth from her hand, tossing it easily into the sink where it landed with a wet thud. 'An hour of your time, no more. Surely you can spare that?'

Ellery hesitated. Larenz stood there, relaxed and waiting, a faint smile curving those amazing lips, and suddenly she had no more excuses. She didn't even *want* to have any more excuses. She wanted, for once, an hour to enjoy herself. To enjoy temptation instead of resist it. To see what might happen, even if it was dangerous. An hour couldn't hurt, surely? That was all she'd give Larenz—or herself.

She let her breath out slowly. 'All right. But we ought to wear wellies.' She glanced pointedly at his leather loafers. 'It rained last night and it's quite muddy out.'

'I'm afraid,' Larenz murmured, 'I didn't bring any—wellies—with me.'

Ellery pursed her lips. She could just imagine the kind of clothes in the case Larenz had brought inside last night, and it didn't run to rubber boots. 'It's a good job that we have plenty for guests,' she returned, and Larenz quirked one eyebrow in question.

'We?'

‘I mean I,’ Ellery clarified, flushing. ‘The boots are from when I was growing up—when we had house guests.’ Her throat suddenly felt tight. She tried not to think of those days, when she was little and Maddock Manor had been full of people and laughter, the rooms gleaming and smelling of fresh flowers and beeswax polish and everything had been happy.

Had seemed happy, she mentally corrected, and went to the utility room to fetch a pair of boots she thought might be in Larenz’s size.

Larenz followed Ellery out of the kitchen door to the walled garden adjacent to the Manor. He took in the remnants of a summer garden, now bedraggled and mostly dead, the grass no more than muddy patches. He wondered if the parsnips for last night’s soup had come from here. He imagined Ellery harvesting the garden by herself, a lonely, laborious task, and something unexpected pulled at his heart.

He felt a single stab of pity, which was most unlike him. He’d worked too hard for too long pulling himself up from the gutter to feel sorry for an aristocrat who’d fallen on hard times, no doubt in part due to her family’s extravagant living.

Yet, as he watched Ellery stride ahead of him, the boots enveloping her slender legs, her back stiff and straight, he realized he did feel a surprising twist of compassion for her.

She would be horrified if she knew. Ellery Dunant, Larenz thought with amusement, possessed a rather touching amount of pride. She seemed to love this heap of hers about as much as she disliked him, and was, he knew, most reluctant to spend time with him. She resented the attraction she felt for him, that much was obvious, but Larenz did not think she could resist its tug for long.

He certainly had no desire to. He wanted to release that platinum fall of hair from its sorry scraped little bun; he wanted to trail his fingers along her creamy skin and see if it was as soft as it looked—everywhere. He wanted to transform the disdain that pinched her face to a desire that would soften it. And he would. He always got what he wanted.

‘Did you plant a garden this summer?’ Larenz asked, nudging a row of withered runner beans. Ellery turned around, her hands deep in the pockets of her waxed jacket.

‘Yes—a small one.’ She glanced around the garden, remembering the vision she’d once had, the rows of hollyhocks, the cornucopia of vegetables, the neat little herb garden. She’d managed only a few potatoes and parsnips, things that were easy to grow, for she’d learned rather quickly that she did not have much of a green thumb. ‘It’s difficult to manage on my own,’ she explained stiffly. ‘But one day—’ She stopped, letting the thought fall to the ground, unnourished. One day what? Every day she stayed at Maddock Manor, Ellery was conscious of how futile her plans really were. She would never get ahead on her own, never have enough money to make the necessary repairs, much less the renovations, never be able to see Maddock Manor restored to the glory it had once known. She tried to avoid these damning realizations, and for the most part she did, simply living day by day. It was Larenz de Luca, with his knowing smile and pointed questions, who reminded her of the futility of her life here.

She turned away from the garden to lead Larenz out to the half-timbered barns that flanked the rear of the property. ‘So just what is this business proposition?’ she called over her shoulder.

‘Let me see the barns,’ Larenz returned equably, and Ellery suppressed a groan. She’d only agreed to show Larenz the grounds because she’d already discovered how persistent he could be, and in a moment of folly—weakness—she’d wanted to spend time with him. She’d wanted to feel that dangerous, desirable jolt again. Even—especially—if it went nowhere; there was nowhere for it to go.

Yet, now that they were actually outside, Larenz inspecting the overgrown gardens and crumbling brick walls, Ellery felt no enjoyment or excitement, only the ragged edge of desperation as a man who looked as if he’d never known a day of want or need strolled through the remnants of her own failure.

‘A lovely building,’ Larenz murmured as Ellery let him into the dim, dusty interior of the barn that had once stabled a dozen workhorses. She blinked in the gloom, the sunlight filtering through the cracks.

‘Once,’ she agreed, and Larenz just smiled.

‘Yours is hardly the first stately home to fall into disrepair.’

Ellery nodded rather glumly. It was a story being told all over England: estates crippled by rising costs and inheritance taxes, turned over to the National Trust or private enterprises, hotels or amusement parks or even, in the case of a manor nearby, a zoo.

Larenz stepped deeper into the dimness of the barn and ran his hand over a bulky shape shrouded in canvas tarpaulin that took over most of the interior. ‘Have you ever thought of turning the place into a park or museum?’

‘No.’ She’d resisted letting Maddock Manor become anything but the home it once had been—her home, her mother’s home, a place that had defined them—because she was afraid if she lost the Manor she’d have nothing left. Nothing that pointed to who she was—what she was. Her father’s daughter. ‘Letting rooms out for holidays is the first step, I suppose, but I couldn’t bear it if someone put a roller coaster up in the garden or something like that.’

Larenz turned to her, his eyes glinting with amusement even in the musty dimness of the barn. ‘Surely you wouldn’t have to do something so drastic.’

Ellery shrugged. ‘I don’t have the money to renovate it myself, not on a large scale, so the only choice would be to turn it over to developers.’

‘Have you had any offers?’

That was the galling bit, Ellery thought with a sigh. She hadn’t. Manor houses, it seemed, were all too available, and Maddock Manor was in enough disrepair to make developers turn away. At least they hadn’t been pestering her. ‘No, not really. We’re a bit off the beaten track.’

Larenz nodded slowly. ‘I’m amazed Amelie found this place, actually.’

Ellery bristled; she couldn’t help it. ‘I do have a website—’

‘Mmm.’ Larenz pulled at the canvas tarpaulin. ‘If I’m not mistaken, there’s a car under here, and probably a nice one.’

Ellery’s heart seemed to stop for a second before it started beating with hard, heavy thuds. ‘A Rolls-Royce,’ she confirmed as Larenz pulled the tarpaulin away to reveal the car. They gazed silently at the vintage vehicle, its silver body gleaming even in the dim light. Ellery wished she’d taken Larenz to another barn. She’d forgotten the car was kept in this one. Actually, she’d forgotten about the car completely, yet now she found the memories rushing back and she reached one hand out to touch the gleaming metal before she dropped it back to her side.

‘A Silver Dawn,’ Larenz murmured. He ran his hand over the engine hood. ‘From the nineteen-forties. It’s in remarkably good condition.’

‘It was my father’s,’ Ellery said quietly.

Larenz glanced at her. ‘Has he passed away?’

She nodded. ‘Five years ago.’

‘I’m sorry. You must have been quite young.’

‘Nineteen.’ She gave a little shrug; she didn’t want to talk about it, especially not with Larenz, a virtual stranger. She didn’t like talking about her father to her closest friend. She certainly wasn’t about to unburden herself to a man like Larenz.

‘You could sell the Rolls,’ Larenz commented as he covered the car back up; Ellery felt a sudden pang of loss. She’d ridden in that car as a child, stuck her head out of the window and laughed with joy as her father had motored down the narrow country lanes, waving at everyone who passed.

She’d also stood on the front steps and watched the Rolls disappear down the drive when her father had gone on his alleged business trips. She’d never known when he would be coming back.

‘Maybe I don’t want to sell it,’ she said, her voice coming out in something of a snap.

Larenz glanced at her, unperturbed. ‘It must be worth at least forty thousand pounds.’

Forty thousand pounds. Ellery had no idea the car could be worth that much. She felt foolish for not knowing and yet, even so she knew she would never sell it. Another emotional and irrational decision, but one she couldn’t keep from making. She turned away, walking stiffly out of the barn. ‘Some things aren’t for sale,’ she said quietly after Larenz had followed her out and she had closed the big wooden door, sliding the bar across.

‘Forty thousand pounds would make a big difference to a place like this,’ Larenz remarked mildly. ‘You could mow the lawn a bit more regularly, for starters.’

Ellery whirled on him, suddenly furious. ‘Why do you care?’ she demanded. ‘You’ve been here less than twenty-four hours. You already think my home is a wreck. And,’ she added, real bitterness now spiking her words, ‘I don’t recall ever asking you for advice.’ She turned on her heel—her boots splashing through a rather large puddle and, she noted with satisfaction, spraying mud onto Larenz’s jeans—and stormed back to the house without once looking back at her guest.

Chapter Three

BACK at the house, Ellery rinsed off her boots and lined them up on the stone step outside. Anger still pulsed through her, making her hands tremble as she opened the back door. She was angry with herself for being angry with Larenz; he wasn't worth the emotional energy she'd already wasted.

Not to mention her physical energy. It was late morning and she hadn't dealt with the breakfast dishes, or made the beds, or done any of the half-dozen demands that required her attention on any given day.

Stupid, arrogant Larenz de Luca had completely thrown off her day, she thought furiously. He'd thrown more than her day off; he'd unbalanced her whole self, making her see Maddock Manor in a way she tried not to. She kept herself so busy working and trying and *striving*—all for something she knew she could never gain or keep. And Larenz, with his expensive car and clothes, his smug little smile and knowing eyes, made her realize it afresh every second she spent in his presence.

What was even more aggravating was her body's treacherous reaction to a man she couldn't even like. She knew just what kind of man Larenz was, had known it from the moment he'd driven up the lane in his sleek Lexus and tossed the keys on the side table in the foyer as if he owned the place. She'd seen it in the careless way he treated his lover, Amelie, and the way she responded, with a distastefully desperate fawning. And, most damningly of all, she saw it in the way he treated her, with the sweeping, speculative glances and the lazy voice of amusement. He was toying with her and enjoying it. The fact that Ellery's body reacted at all—betrayed her—was both infuriating and shaming.

'I'm sorry.'

Ellery whirled around, her thoughts lending the movement a certain fury. Larenz stood in the doorway of the kitchen; he'd removed his boots and there was something almost endearing about seeing him in his socks. One of them sported a hole in the toe.

'You're sorry?' she repeated, as if the words didn't make sense. They didn't really, coming from Larenz. It was the last thing she'd expected him to say.

'Yes,' he replied quietly. 'You're right. I shouldn't be giving you advice. It's none of my business.'

Ellery stared at him; his eyes had darkened to navy and he looked both serious and contrite. The sudden about-face disconcerted her, made her wonder about her own assumptions. Now she was left speechless and uncertain, not sure if his words were sincere.

'Thank you,' she finally managed stiffly. 'I'm sorry, as well. It's not my usual practice to insult my guests.'

A smile quirked Larenz's mouth and his eyes glinted again, as sparkling and blue as sunlight on the sea. The transformation made Ellery's insides fizz, and she felt faint with a sudden intense longing that she could not, for the life of her, suppress. It rose up inside her in a consuming wave, taking all her self-righteous anger with it. 'I'm not really a usual guest, am I?' he teased softly.

'A bit more demanding,' Ellery agreed, and wondered if she was actually flirting.

'Then I must make up for my deficiencies,' he replied. 'How about I make us lunch?'

His suggestion caused another frisson of wary pleasure to shiver through her. Ellery arched her eyebrows. 'You can actually cook?'

'A few things.'

She hesitated. They were stepping into new territory now, first with the little flirtatious exchange and now with the idea of Larenz actually making lunch—cooking—for her. Dangerous ground.

Exciting ground. Ellery hadn't felt so alive in ages, not since she'd first buried herself here in the far reaches of Suffolk, and probably far before that, too. She sucked in a slow breath. 'All right,'

she finally said, and heard the mingled reluctance and anticipation in her voice. Larenz heard it, too, or she assumed as much from the wicked little smile he gave her.

'Fantastic. Where are your cooking pots?'

Smiling a little bit, a bubble of laughter threatening to rise up inside her and escape, Ellery showed him where everything was. Within a few minutes he was playing at executive chef, dicing a few tomatoes with surprising agility as a big pot of water bubbled on the stove. Ellery knew she should go upstairs and make the beds, but instead she found herself perched on the edge of the table, watching Larenz move around the kitchen with ease and grace. He was wonderful to watch.

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