

# Chapter One

*It is sadly necessary to keep the relationship between Master and slave a secret. The laws of our country do not recognise this oldest and most fulfilling of relationships. No matter what the temptation, keep your slave safely at home. No good can come of parading her in public.*

*On The Art of Slavery, by An English Gentleman*



Faith was no more than five miles away from Ruttingdon Hall when she realised that she was making the biggest mistake of her life. It was bigger than leaving her father's cold vicarage to take that fated governess' job in London, bigger even than allowing herself to fall foul of Peter Bateman's practiced seductions. Leaving the Duke of Buckingham, the man she had begun to think of as her master, was by far the most foolish thing she had ever done.

The carriage rocked from side to side as it bumped over the uneven country road. She held her small handbag in her lap, the old material stretched to its limits around the obscenely large roll of banknotes stuffed rudely inside it. She had taken the money that she had earned, money that was rightfully hers according to the generous contract that the duke had offered her a week before. It was no different to the severance pay that Sir Harold Bateman had thrust at her distastefully when he removed her from his family home. She traced the outline of the roll of money with a soft forefinger, an echo of the way that she used to trace the outline of the duke's hard member through the expensive material of his clothing.

She had panicked, she realised glumly. She had been scared of the duke's actions the previous evening, of the ferocity with which he had taken her and the pain that he had caused her. She winced in her seat as the carriage rocked again. Despite the plush interior of the luxurious conveyance, her backside was still sore.

Everything that she had ever been taught, as the daughter of a vicar and as a respectable young woman in general, told her that her deal with the duke was wrong. Taking money in

exchange for physical intimacy? That was the action of a whore. Being paraded naked, allowing herself to be beaten, and enjoying the sensation of wearing the duke's bonds? Surely no sane woman would ever allow such a thing to happen to her, and no decent woman would like it, take pleasure from it, or come to crave it?

She could only conclude that she was no sane woman, and no respectable young lady, either. Now that she had made her decision, now that she had left him and was heading back towards the normal, respectable world, all she felt was despair. Every mile between them drew her closer to tears, not joy.

She had been scared of his animalistic behaviour. She had screamed and begged him to stop, but he had ignored her, because that was what she had agreed to. Back in the duke's study in Stafford House, he had agreed that if she were to utter a certain word, he would stop whatever it was he was doing to her.

She knew in her heart that he would honour that. He had honoured every other aspect of the contract. She had not told him to stop. She had not used her word.

She was angry with both herself and the duke, and could not decide which of them best deserved her ire. She knew her word. She knew that the duke would have stopped if she had uttered it. Why had she not said it? She had been able to scream and plead for him to stop - why had she not remembered her word? No wonder he had not stopped. Bearing pain was part of the contract. He had warned her of that.

However, the duke was not free of blame either. He knew that she was new to this dark, dangerous world of his, that she was practically still a virgin when they had met. She had been overwhelmed, the room poorly lit. He'd tied her face down to the bed. He hadn't stopped to see why she was screaming so much. Her voice was still hoarse today.

She might not have said her word, she thought decisively, but he had not asked her if she wanted to use it, either. They were both at fault, the duke perhaps slightly more so, given his superior experience in such matters.

She was running away from a man she was drawn to, a man who had awoken her body to pleasures impossible to imagine, because she had been scared. She'd made her decision rashly that morning, blaming her growing feelings of love for the duke rather than the real reasons. She'd been hurt because of her own inaction. His ferocity had surprised her, but the duke had taken her

as roughly every other night of their shared week. He demanded much of her body. That was not a surprise.

Some of her reasoning was sound, she allowed. She was falling in love with him, which she knew would not end well. This was no fairy tale, not even one of the dirty ones in the nursery playroom books. There would be no romantic happy ending for her with the duke. However, if she were brave, she could have three more weeks with him, three more weeks of the intensely painful pleasure he inflicted on her, three more weeks of memories to keep her warm during the long, lonely years that stretched ahead of her.

No normal man of insipid tastes would do for her now, she knew. It would be the duke's way, or nothing, and she did not imagine that she would find some curate or local doctor who enjoyed such particular pleasures.

She was already a fallen woman. There were no degrees to define her fall. In the eyes of her father and all like him, she had been ruined the first time that she allowed Peter to come to her bed. What harm could there be in falling further, then, into the arms of the duke?

She worried at her lip, considering her decision until she could bear the sick tension in her stomach no longer. She banged her fist on the ceiling of the carriage until the driver heard her and hauled on the reins, bringing the carriage to a halt. She pulled the window down and thrust her head out into the warm morning air.

"Turn around!" she commanded, not caring that the urgency in her voice made her sound desperate.

"Back to the Hall, miss?" the driver asked, puzzled. "The duke said to take you straight to Northampton station."

"Back to the Hall," Faith repeated. "Please," she amended.

"Very well, miss. Going to have to go down the road a ways to find a turning spot, but then we'll go back."

The driver flicked his whip over the heads of the horses, and Faith settled back into her seat, the tension in her stomach now replaced by a sick nervousness instead.

Would the duke let her back into the house? Would he let her explain? Could he bring himself to take her back?

She could only wait and see.

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Ruttingdon Hall, for all its size and indecent luxury, was much smaller than Michael's primary residence of Stafford House. At Stafford, he never knew when Darby opened the front door as his suite of rooms was so far away from the entrance to the house. Here, at Ruttingdon, he could hear the jangle of the bell in the entrance hall from his study.

He had retreated back there to deal with the paperwork that had arrived early that morning by courier from Stafford House, although all he had done was stare blindly at the papers in front of him. Every time he tried to apply himself to reading the neat writing of one of his men of business, his eyes returned to the same line again and again.

He had just thrown down the letter in disgust when the bell rang. That was odd; any deliveries ordered to the house would know to go immediately around to the back of the house. No members of the Club were expected for another three weeks. The Hall was isolated enough that there were very few people travelling past, and none who could claim friendship with him.

Who on earth was ringing his bell?

Darby would handle the matter, he assured himself. Whatever poor traveller was lost in the back roads of England's countryside would soon be sent on in the right direction.

He picked up the letter again, determined to concentrate. Faith had left him at the end of her term of service, as they had agreed she might. She had committed no crime against him. He had parted company with other women in just such a way, and he had forgotten them as soon as the door to the carriage had shut.

Soon, he was sure, he would forget about Faith, too.

A cruel voice in his mind mocked him for a fool: Faith was no ordinary courtesan, and he knew it.

He was so intent on drowning out all thoughts of Faith that he did not notice when the door to his study was pushed timidly open, and quiet footsteps passed over his expensive rugs. It was only when the soft rustle of clothing being removed occurred that he looked up from his letter.

He honestly thought that he was going mad for a moment. There, in front of him, unlacing a tired old corset was Faith! She glanced up at him nervously for a moment, swallowed heavily and continued to tug on her corset strings. He watched, stunned, as she shed that garment, followed by her simple chemise. She untied the laces of her drawers and stepped out of them. Her garters and stockings were removed last, leaving her standing in front of him completely naked.

Before he could speak, before he could demand to know what the hell she was doing back after she had left him earlier that morning, she slid gracefully down onto her knees and assumed the first Ruttingdon position. Her form was excellent: her arms were stretched out in front of her, her forehead was close to the carpet and her backside was tucked in neatly. It was exactly how a slave should appear before her master, but the reality of seeing her there left him completely shocked.

He was grateful that the first position had her head facing downwards. He needed the time it allowed to compose himself.

“Second position,” he said eventually, once he could trust himself to speak as he should.

Immediately she moved up into the kneeling position, her hands laced behind her head, her eyes respectfully cast downwards.

“I take it that there is a reason that I find you here in my study?” he asked, his voice deceptively mild.

“I come to beg your forgiveness, Master, for my decision this morning,” she said, her voice trembling a little. “I should not have terminated our contract. I made a mistake.”

Her words were a balm to his angry soul. Yes, she had made a mistake. She should not have terminated the contract. She should have been in bed with him at this very moment, underneath him. Her rightful place.

“Why?” he asked, trying to keep all emotion from his voice. He did not want her to know how badly her desertion of the Hall and himself had affected him.

“I—I was scared,” she said quietly.

“Of me?”

“Yes! I mean, no. I mean—not of you, Master, but of last night. Of how you took me.”

Her eyes were still fixed to the floor, but her cheeks were bright red.

Michael let out a sigh. Of course. That was it. She responded so well to his commands that he sometimes forgot how new she was to his world. Her background would not have prepared her, either; she was no common whore, used to the unsavoury whims of men. He had taken the last of her virginities and ploughed her too fiercely. No wonder she had bolted that morning.

“Second position variant,” he commanded, and she moved into the more comfortable version of the slave pose, where she could lay her hands on her open thighs and not maintain the

aching stretch in her arms and shoulders that the more formal position required. She still did not move her eyes from the floor.

It would not do to admit fault in front of his slave. As her master, he should have complete authority at all times.

“Nothing that occurred last night was prohibited by the terms of the contract that you signed,” he said at last. “You know that I expect you to bear the pain I give you.”

“Yes, Master,” she said hurriedly. “I know that. It was so new to me. I was scared and I panicked when I woke up this morning. I’m sorry. If you take me back, I promise I won’t do that again!”

She sounded earnest, but her voice was a little strained. It could be fear, he supposed. She had marched into the private study of a man she knew was handy with a cane and stripped naked before him without knowing how she would be received.

He narrowed his eyes. She was still holding something back from him, he was sure, but the relief he felt at having her turn the carriage around and come back was so great that he didn’t want to press her too harshly. There would be time for that in the next three weeks.

Taking her back now that she had received some training was a far more practical decision than procuring another companion, he told himself, tamping down his feelings of elation that she was back kneeling before him.

“If you are to return and complete the full terms of the contract, there will be no leaving again,” he warned her. “If you stay, you will stay to the end of the house party, no matter what I demand of you.”

“I understand,” she said quietly, but with determination. “This is where I want to be, Master.”

“Very well then,” he said, swallowing down the cheer he knew was fighting to be let loose in his tone. “Go up to my bedroom and wait there. If you are to stay for the house party, then we will need to travel to London to prepare for it. I will send Darby to fetch some suitable travelling clothes for you.”

It was a credit to her that she did not move her head to glance at her serviceable but ugly gown, which was now discarded on the floor of his study. Instead, she nodded her head and moved gracefully back to her feet and headed for the door, shutting it quietly behind her. He yanked the bell pull that summoned Darby, and within minutes the butler appeared at the door.

“Miss Halstead has returned to fulfil her contract,” he told the butler, trying to sound unmoved by the event.

“Very good, your grace,” Darby replied, picking up the discarded garments and folding them over his arm.

“We’re going to London to see Mrs Pickering, now that I know she’s staying. I’ll also be restocking some of the playrooms. Send ahead to the railway station and tell them to get my carriage ready,” Michael instructed. “If we leave here in an hour, we can join any train to London after twelve noon. Telegraph ahead to the Langham; I’ll take a suite of rooms. Tell them I want roaring fires in all of them. I’ll take Totness with me, but you stay here and oversee the landscapers. There will be deliveries, also, and I will need you to handle them.”

“For how long will you need the hotel suite, your grace?” the butler enquired.

Michael frowned.

“I don’t know. Tell them a week. I doubt we’ll stay longer.”

The butler coughed delicately.

“There is the London townhouse, your grace. It will be more private than a public hotel.”

“If news gets about that I’ve opened up the house, I’ll have half of London turning up there to get a look at the Hermit Duke,” Michael complained, exasperated. “I always do. No, the hotel will do nicely. My slave will need travelling clothes,” Michael told Darby. “Leave her bags on the carriage, but see what you can find amongst the clothes we found up in the attics. A long mourning veil would be ideal. I think I can remember some lengths of black lace up there. Also, send a telegraph ahead to Mrs Pickering. My regards and so forth, and an appointment with her as soon as can be arranged.”

“Yes, your grace,” Darby said, making a last notation in a small notebook.

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Faith inspected herself in the long mirror in the duke’s dressing room. The black dress that had been found for her was hardly in the first flush of style, but then nothing she had ever worn could have been described in such a way. It was respectable, at least, with a high, square collar and wrist-length sleeves. The gown’s unfashionably full skirts were maintained by the use of both petticoats and a small bustle. It was not the sort of mourning dress that she would ever have worn, herself. Instead of its being fashioned from the traditional crepe or a hardy bombazine, this was made from expensive black velvet and was trimmed with both silk and edgings of jet beads. It was

without doubt the most expensive item of clothing she would ever wear and she decided to enjoy the experience, no matter how old and odd it was. She was lucky to be there to wear it all, she knew. The duke did not have to take her back.

She wore a pair of her own black leather half boots that Totness had managed to brush until they shone. A full mourning veil that was clipped into the bun at the back of her hair covered not only her face but descended down to her waist. The lace was tightly woven, obscuring her features. A pair of black silk gloves completed her rather morbid ensemble.

She had asked him, when he had come to inspect her, why she was wearing the dark and gloomy garb of a widow in mourning. He'd told her that it was to disguise her identity while in London, and he was correct. There was no way that anybody of her acquaintance in London would recognise her when dressed in this. She would be completely anonymous.

The duke was dressed more elegantly than she, although as a nod to her own unusual outfit he wore a black mourning band on one of the arms of his coat. Men, while in mourning, were expected to carry on their lives much as before. Women were the ones who were expected to retire from public life and shroud themselves in swathes of black fabric. If she really were the widow her clothes proclaimed her to be, she would be expected to remain in her home for a year and a day after the death of her husband. She would attend no parties, concerts or other diversions and every single item of her clothing would be in funereal black. Her writing paper would be bordered in black and her Bible would have to be re-bound in black morocco leather.

She would certainly not be travelling incognito with a duke to a famous London hotel in order to purchase items of dubious morality. She would most definitely not be travelling while bound with chains, either, but the duke was holding two sets of manacles linked with thin silver chains, and he had an uncompromising look on his face.

“Lift your skirts,” he ordered, and she obeyed, displaying her old stockings and half boots.

He looked distinctly unimpressed with the state of her stockings, but said nothing and locked the manacles around the top of her half boots. The chain that linked them was long enough to let her take short steps, but it severely restricted her movement as they practiced walking about the room. It was necessary to take the duke's arm and depend upon him for her balance and security. She stumbled several times, but each time she was righted before she fell. The chain rested on the floor underneath her skirts and the noise it made as they walked across the floor worried her. When she voiced these worries, the duke dismissed them.



“You forget how noisy London is. Nobody will hear the chain.”

She was to wear an old-fashioned voluminous cloak over her dress. It buttoned up the front and had no sleeves, which meant that nobody was witness to how her hands were bound. A problem presented itself immediately; when her hands were bound, she was unable to take the duke’s arm to steady herself when walking. He was forced to concede that she would have to be bound only when in public, and for now he chose to hobble her. The chain-linked wrist cuffs disappeared into a leather bag that a footman was instructed to load into his carriage, however, so Faith expected them to fasten about her again before too long.

The duke’s carriage was waiting for them in front of the house. The steps that descended from it reached the ground fully and were not steep, making her entry into the vehicle easier than she had anticipated. She was not the first woman to manage those steps while bound, she realised, taking her place on one of the wide bench seats. She felt a quick, jealous pang bite at her, before she forced it away. The duke had been with other women before her, and there would be other women after her. She must accept this, even if she did not like it.

The duke sat on the other side of the carriage and it moved off immediately at a very quick clip. The duke was wasting no time in getting to the nearest railway station, it seemed. The window shades were open, letting in the bright sunshine of this happy September morning, but she soon wished that they were shut.

“Take off your cloak,” he instructed, pulling the manacles from the leather bag on the seat next to him.

Once she was free from her long cloak, he clipped the cuffs around her wrists, securing them behind her back.

“Get down on your knees,” he ordered, undoing the buttons of his fly. “I had thought of enjoying you like this when you first rode in this carriage, but you were untutored. Let us review what you have learned in your time with me.”

He helpfully spread his legs, allowing her to kneel between them. He lifted the veil and draped it back over her hair, revealing her face to the sun and air. Already she was beginning to hate wearing the concealing length of lace. Having her hands pinioned behind her back was going to provide a distinct challenge in pleasuring the duke, but she obediently opened her mouth, leaning forwards to slide her tongue along the duke’s rapidly hardening member.

After the events of earlier that morning, she was keen to show the duke her willingness to obey.

It was at that point that the carriage jolted, sending her sprawling forwards into the duke's lap. Her mouth had been open; now the duke's member was pushed fully into her mouth and was nudging the back of her throat. The duke groaned in pleasure at the sudden sensation of being taken so fully and so deeply into the wet warmth of her mouth. Faith tried desperately to right herself, but without the use of her hands she was trapped between the knees of the duke, who had clamped his legs around her instinctively. Her flailing motions eventually caught the attention of the duke, who gripped her tightly by the hair and guided her mouth off his cock. Once she had caught her breath, however, he thrust back into her mouth again and again, causing her to choke in the way that he loved so much.

It was not her best effort at pleasing the duke with her mouth. It lacked any of the skills she had worked hard to acquire during the week, and mostly involved her flailing around and choking while he groaned, clutched her head and released into her mouth. He seemed pleased enough with her, however, and was happy to sit back in his seat and re-button his fly while she sat quietly at his feet.

After a few minutes trying to get comfortable, she hesitantly laid her head against the broad muscle of his thigh to help support herself. One of his large hands immediately fell to her head, pushing the veil to one side to stroke the hair beneath.

This was an unusual way to travel, but a strangely relaxing one. They did not speak much during the rapid ride to the railway station; every so often he asked if she was comfortable, and she told him that she was. She was almost asleep when the carriage entered the outskirts of Northampton, and had to be lifted back onto the other bench seat so the duke could reluctantly remove her wrist cuffs and button her cloak into place.

The carriage stopped outside the familiar frontage of the railway station she had last seen a week before. This time, however, there was no thunderous rain storm to greet her, but instead the station master and a host of porters and other station staff who had gathered to meet the duke, who owned the private railway carriage that was kept in a special siding at the station for whenever he travelled.

“You’ll be travelling on the twelve twenty-five to London, your grace,” the stationmaster said deferentially. “It’s an express, not stopping at any other station, so you should be in London within four and a half hours, five if the going’s a bit heavy.”

“My carriage has been attached?” the duke asked, extending a hand to help Faith navigate her way down the stairs.

“Yes, your grace, and it’s fully provisioned, of course,” the stationmaster replied.

Faith stepped carefully down onto the ground. Covered in her long veil and black clothing, the men around her immediately shuffled their feet a little and took off their caps as a mark of respect.

“My condolences, ma’am,” the stationmaster said, giving a stiff little bow. He had no idea of her rank in life, but she was travelling in the private carriage of the Duke of Buckingham. It was safer to show respect.

Faith nodded, but didn’t speak. She was so frightened that the noise of the chain linking her ankles together would be heard as she moved that she didn’t dare draw any attention to herself. However, this lack of courtesy seemed to please the stationmaster’s expectations of noble behaviour, and she and the duke were ushered through the ticket barrier and towards the busy platform where the express train to London sat waiting, smoke billowing from its chimney.

The duke’s carriage was obvious. It was coupled at the back of the train, after the third class carriages. It had been repainted to differentiate it from the usual rolling stock. It was cream with a gold trim, and had the Buckingham coat of arms painted on the only door. Maroon window shades had been pulled down, preventing the hoi polloi from looking in at the undoubted luxury within. Two porters, who were keeping a gaggle of interested onlookers from getting too close, were guarding it.

The noise of the station – people talking, the clatter of carriage doors, the whistle of the train – did hide the sound of the chain dragging on the floor from other people, although Faith was horribly conscious of the metallic slither it made as it dragged underneath her skirts. She gripped the duke’s arm nervously as they walked slowly across the platform, their progress limited by her restricted movement.

It seemed to take an age to cross the busy platform. Totness had already boarded the train and was directing the porters who carried the luggage onto the private carriage. The stationmaster

saw them to the door, and closed it behind them before signalling to the driver of the train that they could leave now that the most important passengers had been seen on board.

The train gave a loud whistle, there was a jerk forwards that almost wrenched Faith out of her seat, and they finally started to glide out of the station. As soon as the train started to move, the duke addressed Totness, who was standing at the far end of the carriage next to a wooden partition wall.

“Thank you, Totness, that will be all for now. I’ll ring if I need anything.”

“Very good, your grace,” he replied deferentially, and disappeared through a door in the wall. It closed behind him solidly.

“Now then,” the duke said, rubbing his hands happily. “Let’s get you naked, shall we?”