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An Excerpt From: RETREAT FROM LOVE

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Ashton Park, Derbyshire

“Hello.”

Anne spun around in the tepid water of the pond, her arms instantly flying up to cover her bare breasts. Her gasp was genuine. She hadn't expected to be interrupted this afternoon. No one ever came to the pond anymore. Just her and her memories.

The stranger smiled slowly from the middle of the small wooden bridge where he sat atop his horse. He leaned forward in his saddle. “I can see that I'm interrupting. Shall I go?”

Anne quickly got over her initial shock. It wasn't as if a man hadn't seen her naked breasts before. And this one was handsome. No doubt he'd seen many naked women in his time. Dark brown hair with a shimmer of fire in the sunlight, broad shoulders, and a devastating smile—oh yes, he was irresistible and he knew it. Alarms rang in her head, but, as usual, she ignored them and smiled back.

“I don't know, sir,” she replied with a saucy lilt in her voice, “do you have somewhere to go?” She enjoyed his surprised expression. He'd probably expected her to simper and blush. Honestly, did men think they were the only ones who got lonely? They always approached cautiously, as a hunter with prey. Anne was not interested in being chased. She was interested in being caught. It had been so long since she'd let herself get caught.

The stranger cleared his throat, and Anne heard the amusement he was trying to cover up. “Well, no, actually. I haven't anything to do today. Except, of course, help you figure out how you're going to get out of that pond without any clothes on.”

Anne idly wondered if he was a friend of Freddy's. She mentally shook her head. No, not plain Freddy anymore. Now he was the Duke of Ashland. She'd heard he was returning to Ashton Park. The pond was on Park grounds, though far removed from the house itself. It was a logical assumption that the stranger was a guest there.

“Miss?”

The stranger's concerned voice penetrated Anne's musings. She laughed to cover her distraction. “Clearly I cannot think of a single thing. I am at your mercy, sir. Have you the key to my warm, wet prison?”

She heard the sharp intake of his breath. He was obviously taken aback that he wasn't going to

have to seduce her. She couldn't have made it any clearer that she was his for the taking. And it felt good, really good, to indulge in the suggestive banter of delicate sexual negotiations again.

He sat up straight in the saddle, and Anne was struck again by the breadth of his shoulders. He looked incredibly strong and virile. Please don't let it be padding, she thought ruefully. Then he twisted to look around him and Anne saw the play of muscle and bone under his fashionable, tight jacket and she nearly sighed with anticipation. When he turned back his face had taken on the hard edges of desire, and his gaze was definitely predatory. "If I were a gentleman, I'd offer you my coat."

Anne felt a little shiver race down her spine at the rough timber of his voice, at the insinuation that he would not be a gentleman with her. She nodded seriously. "Yes, if you were a gentleman you'd bring me your coat."

His smile this time was laced with the same anticipation that fired Anne's blood. "Then by all means I will play the gentleman."

He casually walked his horse across the bridge and over to a flat patch of ground. She got a better look at him then. Strong cheekbones, a long, wide, no-nonsense nose, a generous mouth with sharply defined lips—he truly was handsome. The deep dimple in his chin was the one frivolous feature he possessed but it made him appear more masculine, not less. Anne was watching him so closely that she immediately noticed the awkwardness with which he dismounted. He dropped the reins and turned to Anne, and she noticed he was favoring his left leg. Had he recently been injured? She was about to ask when he began to unbutton his jacket and Anne's mouth dried up. Was she really going to do this? She'd been with men before, but never a stranger whose name was unknown to her, never outside in the middle of the day. Before pulling the jacket off he paused as if sensing her indecision. He was giving her the chance to end their interlude before it began, and that pushed her onward.

"I'm getting rather cold," she told him, her voice pitched low and inviting.

"We can't have that." His tone was light, but his movements rough as he pulled the jacket off his arms. He moved toward the water and his limp was quite pronounced.

Suddenly Anne's vision darkened as she put the clues together. She saw the stranger walking towards her, his fine boots splashing in the water, as if through a tunnel. Dark hair, wicked smile, Ashton Park, the limp, God, the limp. It was him. Brett Haversham. And he had no idea who she was. He didn't even care. She felt the blood drain from her face and her hands began to shake.

Her own promiscuity was forgotten as her anger mounted. The cur. He was going to tup some strange woman here, here, where she lived. Where he knew she lived. And he was fine, damn it, fine! He wasn't horribly disfigured, or an invalid. He had a limp, a stupid limp. All these years and she'd imagined him weak and bedridden. And he was fine. Her grief, her relief, her anger, all coalesced into a white-hot rage. She saw him freeze and look at her oddly as she lowered her arms and marched toward him. She could no more stop her advance than Napoleon could stop Wellington. He held his coat out to her and she grabbed it, but she didn't stop. She marched right up to him and slapped him as hard across the face as she could.