

It's Christmas eve and Lady Rosaline Marsh has snuck to the Earl of Hascombe's estate to *take* back her colt, Lord Apollo. The stallion was a gift from her grandfather and her father had no right to sell him. With her Grandfather dead she has no proof the horse belongs to her, and with her father's incessant need for money... he's already taken her late mother's jewellery so she can no longer ask his lordship if she can simply buy her stallion back. Besides, the colt is highly prized, and she doubts the Earl would sell the colt back to her even if she begged.

Unfortunatley for Rosaline, Daniel Kerrick, Baron de Winter, would rather spend time in the stables than in his brother-in-law's drawing room. Daniel's sister, Lady Hascombe, keeps trying to marry him off, and at three and twenty he is too young. He wants to concentrate on building up his cavalry horse stud. At the stables Daniel catches Rosaline trying to take the fiery stallion and thwartes her well laid plan. To her surprise, instead of handing her over to the magistrate, he suggests they talk to Lord Hascombe about this mess. Daniel owns a horse stud and is just as passionate about horses as Rosaline. He recognises a kindred spirit—Rosaline has the touch. Horses respond to her.

However, Rosaline can't risk his suggestion. What if his lordship says no—or worse still, tells her father what she's been up to....

First Kiss Scene

Daniel stuck out one leg and sent Rosaline tumbling face first into the hay. He was on top of her in a moment. "You may be a lady but your manners are appalling. Where is my thank you?"

She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. “And if he hadn’t called you lord, I’d never have known you were a gentleman. This is no way to treat a lady.”

Daniel snorted. “Ladies don’t steal high spirited colts,” he whispered in her ear.

“You know who I am, however I have no idea who you are. What is your name?” He couldn’t help a smug smile. She was interested in him, but then to his regret she added, “So I know to avoid you in the future.”

“Daniel Kerrich, Baron de Winter, at your service, my lady.”

She frowned and said. “Blast. I’ve been caught by the Earl’s brother-in-law. Are you going to tell him what I tried to do?”

She knew who he was, that was interesting. He’d never been to London in his life, but he supposed people had gossiped about his sister, Rheda and her background. “Perhaps you could persuade me to simply let you go,” he suggested nuzzling her neck. That got him an elbow in his stomach. He laughed as he rolled off her. “I was teasing.” He leapt to his feet. “Come on,” and he held out his hand to help her to her feet. “I’ll introduce you to Rufus. Let’s see what we can sort out.”

She took his hand and he marveled at how finely boned she was. His fist swallowed her tiny hand. How on earth had she the strength to control Lord Apollo? She must have the touch. Some people could talk to a horse and get them to do anything. He was one of those people. Maybe she had the gift too. He pulled her to her feet with little effort.

“Why are you doing this for me?” she asked quietly.

When she turned into the lantern light, he finally got a look at her face and he almost stopped breathing. Her hair was a mess, and her face was covered in dust and

dirt, yet she was still the most arresting woman he'd ever seen. Strands had come loose from her plait and wisps of hair fell about her face as if it too wanted to stroke the perfect unblemished skin. He would have known she was highborn at a glance; her breeding was evident in her fine features. Her nose, eyes, and lips were in perfect symmetry to the size of her face. Vivid blue iris's surrounded dark pinpoints that flared as the light flickered. Her eyelashes were so long he wondered if she had to detangle them every morning when she woke. Her nose was cute to the point of being childlike, but her lips—they were definitely all woman. Pouty and luscious, and he wanted a taste so badly he had to pinch his thigh to remember who she was.

“I'm the only man who could understand why you'd get worked up about a horse. Once you bond with a special steed it's difficult to part with them.” She opened and then closed her mouth obviously surprised at his understanding. He bowed and with one hand indicated she should precede him from the stall. “Let's just say I admire a woman who is passionate about horses.” Under his breath he added, “A passionate nature usually means passionate in other areas too.”

They reached the entrance to the large stable block and Daniel's body hummed when he saw the mistletoe hanging above the large barn door. He slowed his step and pulled her to face him, pointing upwards as he did.

“Don't be ridiculous. I am not going to kiss you, I hardly know you. Besides, because of you my plan is ruined.”

“I can't help the fact your plan was a terrible one. For all you knew, Rufus might have wanted to show Lord Apollo off to his visitors. The estate is large. Did you really think you'd be able to slink in and out unaided?” He pulled her closer. “As to a kiss, a chaste peck is often the norm, but a more passionate kiss would be appropriate considering I'm saving you from facing His Lordships's wrath.”

She raised a face filled with alarm but also desire. He could read it easily in her expressive eyes. “Now then,” he said smiling, “a kiss is a thing to be shared, not given nor rushed.” Tipping her chin up, he gazed into those wide, luminous eyes and more than simple desire began to unfold—possessiveness—a sensation foreign to him where a woman was concerned. Would he be her first kiss? For a moment he felt as if he was gazing into the eyes of an angel, and he touched her smooth cheek with reverence.

“Have you any idea,” he murmured softly, “how enchanting you are? Tell me your name.”

The way he spoke those words, combined with his touch and the kindness he’d done her this evening, had the seductive impact Rosaline had dreaded from the moment she’d looked into his handsome face. When he’d lain atop her, all hard muscle and withheld strength, she felt as if she were beginning to melt and float inside. As his head bent and his lips drew near, she couldn’t pull her gaze from his hypnotic green eyes, and worse still, she didn’t want to try.

“Rosaline,” she answered breathlessly as he drew closer.

When his lips took hers in a kiss, she knew the kiss was going to be nothing at all like the chaste kisses she’d experienced hidden behind the potted plants at countless balls. At one and twenty she’d experienced her fair share of innocent kisses. His mouth slanted over hers with fierce tenderness, while his hand curved around her nape, his fingers stroking her sensitive skin along the collar of her shirt, and his other arm encircled her waist pulling her tightly against his hard, hot body. No—this kiss was not innocent and not chaste.

Lost in a sea of pure sensation, Rosaline slid her hands up his muscular chest and wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him as if her world depended on her staying as close to him as she could. Desire unfurled deep within her at the feel of his erection and she clung tighter to him, sliding her hands down his back to his firm buttocks.

He kissed her long and lingeringly, both gentle and persuasive. So when he touched his tongue to her trembling lips, this time coaxing them to part, insisting actually, she eagerly admitted him. His tongue slid between her open lips filling her mouth. His hand shifted from her waist sliding upward toward her breasts.

He tasted of everything forbidden and everything she wanted.

She barely noted the moan of encouragement that escaped her above the pounding of her heart. Never had she let a man take such liberties and never had she wanted to let him. She hoped the kiss would never end.

Just as she silently made her wish, Daniel's hands left her body and he fell sideways, out cold on the cobblestones.

"You were right, Baron. She wasn't unaided, however, I didn't expect to have to save her from a kiss. A kiss she looked as if she was enjoying."

Rosaline chose to ignore Billy's chastisement. She peered down at Daniel's prone form. "He will be all right won't he?"

"Aye, he'll have a sore head when he wakes so best we take our leave before he rouses. No chance of getting the colt then?"

She bent down to touch Daniel's face. He looked so young and less sure of himself as he lay on the ground. She hoped he wouldn't hate her. He was the first man she'd ever felt an ounce of grudging respect for.

“No,” she answered sadly. “We will have to find another way to retrieve the colt. He knows who I am and why I’m here.”

As Rosaline and her groom, slipped quietly away through the outbuildings to find the horses they had tethered several miles east of the Earl of Hascombe’s estate, she thought over how her plan had gone so badly wrong. As she mounted Black Devil for the ride back to her father’s estate, another cunning plan formed in her head.

She would get Lord Apollo back, and now that she’d met Baron de Winter she realized he was the perfect foil in her new plan.

She prayed this new plan wouldn’t go horribly wrong as she would pay a much higher price than a kiss. A kiss that made her dream of passion, heat, and sandalwood spice—all things wanton and terribly nice.