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*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ASHLEY

The Price of Lemon Cake

┌ A BELOW STAIRS MYSTERY NOVELLA ┐





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# THE PRICE OF LEMON CAKE

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BELOW STAIRS MYSTERIES



JENNIFER ASHLEY

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## THE PRICE OF LEMON CAKE

When Kat Holloway approaches Lady Bobby Perry and Judith Townsend to help her discover what a young aristo is getting up to in a gentleman's club, Bobby quickly accepts, coaxing a promise of Mrs. Holloway's stupendous lemon cake in return. But the investigation turns into more than a simple spy mission, forcing Judith to confront a painful episode in her past. Both Judith and Bobby must bring their own unique skills to the tricky and dangerous problem.

## CHAPTER 1



*October 1882*

“That’s a fine one,” Bobby Perry said as she lounged in the studio at the top of Miss Judith Townsend’s London townhouse. She regarded the painting taking shape under Judith’s capable hands with admiration.

Judith added highlights—or whatever it was she was doing—to the golden hair of the lady in the portrait. Said lady was draped across a chaise, lavender skirts billowing, the painted bodice shimmering as the real one would when a beam of sunlight danced upon it.

“I am pleased with it,” Judith said in her modest way.

Bobby kicked her legs over her chair’s cushioned arm and suppressed her longing for a cheroot. No smoking, not in the studio. Judith’s rule. *Too many paint fumes, darling*, Judith had explained the first time Bobby had been ushered into this sanctum. *You’ll blow us all up*.

The deprivation was worth it. Bobby would give up tobacco altogether to bask in the dark-haired Judith’s aerie.

“Surprised you persuaded good old Cyn to sit still that long.” Bobby sipped the fine brandy Judith always stocked. There were compensations for not being able to smoke.

“A large slice of Mrs. Holloway’s lemon cake and a bottle of Beaujolais.”

Judith's lips quirked into her gentle smile. "It helps that I can make a sketch very quickly."

The subject and their mutual friend, Lady Cynthia Squires, was a restless soul, more at home, like Bobby, in trousers and suit coat than skirts.

"For her family, is it? This portrait?" Bobby waved her glass at the painting.

"Indeed. Something nice to hang in the hall, said her aunt." Judith's brush halted in midair as she tilted her head to decide her next stroke.

"Her aunt means something that won't embarrass them." Cynthia's aunt was horrified that her niece put on men's clothing and went about with Bobby, though she'd already realized she couldn't stop Cynthia doing exactly as she pleased.

"I believe that is the intent." Judith's eyes narrowed as she made a precise dab.

Bobby lifted the brandy to her lips once more, then froze in dismay. "Hang about. You won't let my family bribe you into painting *me* like that, will you? In a frock and all?"

Judith's silvery laughter rang out. "Never, darling. You are much different from Cynthia."

"I don't wish to placate my family, you mean?"

"Cyn is in love with her mathematician," Judith said. "The fact that he might gaze upon this painting of her allowed me to coax her into sitting. Not that either of us admitted such a thing."

"I wish them happy," Bobby said with sincerity. "The pair of them would be good for each other. I hope they produce twenty-seven bouncing babies for Uncle Bobby to spoil rotten. Then I'll hand them back when they need changing and bathing and whatnot."

Judith sent her an assessing glance. "You are fond of children, aren't you?"

Bobby shrugged, trying to hide her embarrassment. She often referred to

her brother's children as squalling brats, but in truth they were charming little lads. "They're all right."

"Hmm." Judith returned to the painting, leaving Bobby nonplussed. Judith's *hmms* always held a world of meaning.

"Ever think about having babies yourself?" Bobby asked in curiosity.

Judith hesitated. "I doubt I'll have time for that sort of thing," was her light response. "Too much I want to paint first."

A nice, vague answer. Of course, Judith bearing children required a man to touch her. Said man would likely end up in three pieces at her feet if he tried.

Judith could use an actual sword. Learned it in a foreign land for some reason or other, she'd told Bobby, rather evasively. Judith's life had been far more exciting than Bobby's thus far.

Any further speculation on children or life and its profundity was interrupted by a blast on the speaking tube Judith had installed. No old-fashioned, clanging bells for Miss Townsend's grand Mayfair home.

Judith set her brush on the lip of the easel, lifted the ear horn from its wooden box, and spoke into it. "Yes, Hubbard?"

The muffled tones of Hubbard, Judith's creaky butler, came though the tube, his words too garbled for Bobby to discern from across the room.

"Is she?" Judith asked in delight. "Do please send her up. Or, if she doesn't wish to climb so many stairs, we can come down."

There was a pause, followed by Hubbard's indistinct response.

"Excellent," Judith replied. "We shall await her." She laid the horn back into its box and turned to Bobby, her eyes alight. "It is Mrs. Holloway, come to visit us."

Judith adored Mrs. Holloway, who was the cook for Cynthia's family. Maybe *adored* was the wrong verb—Judith admired and respected her, which was saying a lot. Judith didn't have much use for many people.

Bobby swung her legs down, brightening as well. "What a treat. Do you



suppose she's brought any cake?"

"She doesn't exist to bake for us," Judith admonished, then her eyes glowed. "Though what fun if she did."

"Now, there's a thought." Bobby sprang to her feet. "You could hire her away from Cyn's awful relations and set her up here as your cook."

"An intriguing possibility." Judith lifted the brush and touched another stroke to the canvas then wiped the bristles and dropped the brush into a jar filled with oil of turpentine. "But I am afraid I'd be a sore disappointment to her. I eat only simple fare. Mrs. Holloway is far too talented to waste on me."

"I could eat your share." Bobby patted her already ample stomach. "I don't mind."

Judith chuckled, but they could say no more because Hubbard opened the door and stated in his lugubrious tones: "Mrs. Holloway."

He might have been announcing the queen. But instead of the mourning-clad monarch who occupied Britain's throne, a much younger lady entered, one with dark hair, blue eyes, and flushed cheeks. She wore a frock of rich brown that was several years out of date, matched by a modest brown straw hat that sported a few black-dyed feathers.

Her best frock, Bobby knew. Today must be Mrs. Holloway's day out, which meant she was on her way to see her daughter. Nothing would keep her from that, Cynthia had told them, which indicated that what she'd come to say was important.

Hubbard withdrew like a ghost, leaving Mrs. Holloway standing awkwardly in the doorway.

Judith, who'd risen at her entrance, quickly drew a chair forward. "Do sit down, Mrs. Holloway. How lovely to see you."

Mrs. Holloway accepted the chair but perched on it uncomfortably. She was very conscious of her place in life—a highly talented cook in a wealthy household in Mayfair, which put her a cut above most people in service.

However, she held with the nonsense that Judith and Bobby were her

“betters.” Bobby was in truth Lady Roberta Perry, daughter of an earl. Judith came from a prominent and blue-blooded old family—one half of them practically ran the Foreign Office, the other half, the Home Office. Bobby and Judith might have been born into these privileged households, but Bobby did not see how it made them better than anyone else planted on this earth.

Mrs. Holloway was perhaps a year or two younger than Bobby, but she gazed at them both with the deference of a schoolgirl in the presence of two headmistresses. She planted a dark leather handbag on her lap, enclosing it in her black-gloved hands. The bag was far too small to hold a cake—*bad luck, that*, Bobby mused. Though perhaps she’d left one downstairs.

“I hesitated to approach you,” Mrs. Holloway began in her smooth tones. “But I’m at a bit of a loss.”

“Not at all.” Judith returned to her painting stool and leaned to Mrs. Holloway encouragingly. “We are always happy to help, for dear Cynthia’s sake if nothing else.”

Bobby hid a snort. Judith might claim they’d assisted Mrs. Holloway in the past in gratitude for her looking after Cyn so well, but Bobby knew better. Judith liked playing detective for the fun of it. She’d had some exploits on the Continent a few years ago that Bobby was just learning about, such as hunting assassins and other exciting adventures. Judith was always up for intrigue.

“Why don’t you tell us the problem, Mrs. H?” Bobby paced to the skylight and rubbed a clear spot on the steamy pane. Judith’s house lay on Upper Brook Street, and the studio gave a view over the roofs of Park Lane to Hyde Park in the distance.

Mrs. Holloway seemed both reluctant to begin and impatient to have this errand behind her, but she softened under Judith’s kind interest.

“I am looking into a matter for the Countess of Coulson,” Mrs. Holloway said. “She approached Lady Cynthia for help—she is worried about her son.”

“As she’s right to be,” Bobby said, turning from the window.

Lady Coulson was the wife of the Earl of Coulson and much despised by Bobby's mother. *A vapid, vacant woman*, Lady Lockwood—Bobby's mother—always snapped. *Lovely to look at but hasn't got the brains of a mouse*.

Bobby's sister-in-law, Eliza, had snidely confided to Bobby that Bobby's mum had once held a grand passion for Lord Coulson. Handsome and athletic, he'd apparently broken many a lady's heart in his day. When Coulson had married the very blonde, very comely chit who'd become Lady Coulson, Bobby's mum had never forgiven her. Still hadn't, though thirty and more years had passed.

Lady Coulson's second son, Terrance, was a wild and untamable rogue of twenty who routinely ran through his allowance and begged for more. His indulgent mother often convinced his father to give it to him.

"I take it you're speaking of the Honorable Terrance Makepeace, black sheep of the family," Bobby said.

"No, the older son, the Honorable William." Mrs. Holloway adjusted her bag minutely on her lap. "Lady Coulson is worried that Terrance has pulled William into trouble, but she is not certain. She fears the wrath of their father, if this is the case."

Bobby stuck her thumbs into her waistcoat pockets. "Coulson might come down hard on her beloved Terrance if he's led William, the heir and apple of his father's eye, astray," she concluded.

"You know the family?" Mrs. Holloway asked her.

"I know *of* them," Bobby said. "Both sons a bit of a loss, in my opinion. Even my insipid brother doesn't like them. Any reason you're keen to aid these rather wet Coulsons?"

"Is that any of our business, Bobby?" Judith asked quickly, probably afraid Mrs. H. would grow incensed at Bobby's impertinence and depart.

Bobby shrugged. "Merely curious."

"Lady Cynthia indicated to me that Mr. William has attended a few of Mr. Thanos's lectures at the Polytechnic," Mrs. Holloway explained in her

patient way. “Mr. Thanos believes that Mr. William has great cleverness and much potential, but he is being dragged into the muck by his brother.”

“Ah,” Bobby said. She leaned back against the windowsill, ignoring the cold of the glass. “Thanos hopes you can save young William—and his brother in the process—in case William proves to be a scientific prodigy. Thanos is too good to his fellow men, if you ask me.”

Elgin Thanos, the man Cynthia was mad sweet on, though she’d never say so even if her toenails were pulled out, had an immensely clever brain. He was a bloody genius, able to carry long and complex mathematical equations in his head. He knew a damned sight more about everything than anyone Bobby had ever met. He was also a gentle soul and headlong in love with Cynthia—likewise, torture would never make him admit it.

“In other words, you’re not doing this so much for the lofty Lady Coulson, but as a favor for Cyn,” Bobby said. “And by extension, Mr. Thanos. Or the other way about.”

“Indeed,” Mrs. Holloway said primly.

“I commend you,” Judith said. “But how can we help?”

Mrs. Holloway lost her assurance and looked embarrassed. “Well, it’s a bit of a cheek, actually. Daniel—Mr. McAdam—has gone to Ireland, so I cannot ask him.”

The blush when she slipped and called McAdam by his first name tickled Bobby. Mrs. Holloway was as gone on him as Cyn was on Thanos. So much romance in the air.

“Ask him what, Mrs. H.?” Bobby prompted when Mrs. Holloway seemed reluctant to continue.

“Mr. Terrance has been taking Mr. William to a gambling club,” Mrs. Holloway said. “A rather rough one, on the Strand. Called the Adam since it’s near a street by that name. Gentlemen only, of course.” Mrs. Holloway’s mouth tightened, she clearly having second thoughts about her errand.

Bobby saw Judith realize Mrs. Holloway’s intent at the same time she

did.

“The penny drops,” Bobby declared, her anticipation heightening. “You want me to infiltrate said gentleman’s club and see what Terrance and William get up to. And then what? Simply report? Or drag them out by their heels?”

Judith’s lovely eyes filled with alarm as she pictured Bobby doing the latter. “Mrs. Holloway, I am not certain that we are the best to ask—” she began.

Bobby cut her off. “Nonsense. Of course, I’ll do it. Happy to. Only one thing to ask in return, Mrs. H. If I carry out this mission, will you bring us one of your stupendous lemon cakes?”

## CHAPTER 2



Bobby guessed there'd be a row as soon as Mrs. Holloway thanked them and departed, and she wasn't wrong. When Judith returned to the studio from seeing Mrs. Holloway downstairs, her face held a dark scowl.

"Mrs. Holloway is already remorseful about coming here," Judith began before Bobby could say a word. "She asked me to tell you never mind. She will wait for Mr. McAdam to return and have him assist her."

"Rot that." Bobby flung herself once more onto her favorite chair, a wooden structure with soft cushions designed by William Morris. She retrieved a cheroot from the depths of her pocket, remembered she shouldn't light up, and stuffed it back inside. "Mrs. H. needs a spy, and I'm happy to be one. She did agree to the lemon cake." Bobby rubbed her hands. "I can taste it now."

"Bobby."

Judith's admonishing tone made Bobby's ire rise. "Lord, Judes, you sound like my mother. Only you have to say *Roberta*, with your nose turned up so high it's a wonder you can breathe."

"Please be serious." Judith sank to her stool but kept her steady gaze on Bobby. "This idea is highly risky. What if you're caught and arrested? Even if your father could get you off any charge, you'd be humiliated in every newspaper in Britain and beyond. Your father might lock you in his cellar for



embarrassing him.”

“What should I do instead?” Bobby clenched her tailored cashmere lapels with stiff fingers. “Stuff myself into corset and frock and behave like the insipid society daughter I’m supposed to be? Or wear drab gowns and throw myself into charity work, like the spinster rather long in the tooth that I am? I’m thirty and unmarried—I might as well be dead.”

“Do not twist my words, please.” Judith folded her arms over her curved waist, her sign that she was uneasy. “I am worried about you. I know you easily blend in with gentlemen in their gaming houses all the time, but this family knows you. Won’t Terrance and William be surprised to find Lady Roberta in their midst in a gentleman’s suit?”

“Not at all. Their mother and mine made their society debut in the same year. That is the extent of the acquaintance, in the same manner as all titled idiots who went to the same schools know each other. I barely saw Terrance and William growing up, but I heard all about them, mostly from my spiteful mother. They’ll have no idea who I am, no fear.” And a taste of adventure wouldn’t go amiss, Bobby thought, but did not say. Why should Judith have had all the fun?

“But this is a club you’ve never gone to.” Judith rocked a little on her stool, her anger softening to pure anxiousness. “If all titled idiots know each other, as you put it, couldn’t someone else recognize you? Friends of your brother’s, perhaps? Or one of your childhood acquaintances?”

“My childhood friends either know all about me and wouldn’t betray me, or they wouldn’t recognize me if I danced naked in front of them,” Bobby said with assurance. “You’d be astounded how much people see only what they wish to see. And anyway, I look so much like a bloke, no one has ever tumbled to me no matter where I go. That is why Mrs. Holloway didn’t ask Cynthia to run this errand. Cyn can dress in a man’s clothes all she likes, but she’s very obviously a woman. If she’d cut off her hair, she might fare better, but she refuses.”

Bobby rubbed her very short hair, cropped by a barber in the way she liked. So much more comfortable than having all that hair wrapped around her head in styles so complicated it took two lady's maids to dress it. Best thing she ever did was to have the whole mess chopped off.

Judith, whose luxurious hair was a dream to stroke, deepened her frown.

"It is still a risk. What if it's a club where you must have someone vouch for you simply to get inside the door?"

Bobby shrugged. "Then I, like any other disappointed chap, will walk away, hail a cab, and come home. If I don't drown my sorrows at a pub that will let me in its taproom."

"That is another point—what if you get drunk and babble things you should not?"

"Now you are inventing things," Bobby scoffed. "Point the first, I never drink to excess—well, not when I'm trying to be careful. Point the second, what the devil could I babble? I'm unlikely to press my hand to my forehead and say *Alas and alack, I have the body of a woman under all this kit*. And I have no deep dark secrets. I mostly read books, enjoy my cheroots, watch you paint, and get on with my life. The most I'd admit in a drunken fit is that I didn't fancy the latest book by Wilkie Collins." *And that I'm potty about you, dear Judith*, she added to herself.

"It is still too dangerous." Judith crossed her legs, her skirt swinging freely.

Look at her, all tightly wrapped around herself, Bobby mused. She longed to untwist those shapely limbs and end this silly argument with something much more pleasurable.

"I'll be doing nothing more than what I would on a leisurely night out with Cyn," Bobby said. "If you're so worried, come with me."

Bobby only half joked. Judith never had any inclination to dress as a man. She wore frocks designed to her specifications that allowed her less restriction than most ladies' attire and saw no reason to don anything else.

Judith sent Bobby a look that boded no good. "I just might."

She turned her back, took up her brush, and returned to the painting, a signal that the conversation was over.

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IN SPITE OF JUDITH'S DECLARATION, SHE WAS NOWHERE IN SIGHT BY THE TIME Bobby was ready to depart that evening.

"She's gone out, your ladyship," Hubbard told Bobby when she inquired.

Hubbard insisted on using the honorific with Bobby and had gone stiff with horror when Bobby suggested he not bother. She didn't press him, however, because Hubbard was a good soul, who put up with Judith's way of life without a word of admonishment or even of judgement.

"Do you know *where* she's gone out?" Bobby asked somewhat impatiently.

"I could not say, your ladyship."

Which meant he might or might not know. Bobby sighed, wrapped a scarf around her neck, and settled her hat. "Never mind. I'll try not to be too late."

Hubbard liked to bolt all the doors at midnight on the evenings Judith didn't have guests. If Bobby didn't make it by then, she'd be sleeping in the garden or trudging home to her old flat on Duchess Street.

She ought to give up that flat, but she didn't want to presume that her newfound understanding with Judith would last forever. Or that they even had an understanding. Bobby was reluctant to broach the subject.

She said her farewells to Hubbard then stepped into Upper Brook Street, turning toward Grosvenor Square in search of a hansom cab. She soon found one and directed the driver to take her to the Strand.

The Adam Club, which Mrs. Holloway had given them the address of, lay not far beyond Charing Cross railway station. The club was situated in an unprepossessing building of dark brown brick with one small sign on the

doorpost to tell passersby what lay within. Bobby alighted from the cab, noting that the club's windows were either shuttered or too grimy to allow her a look inside. The whole place was unnervingly dark.

The hansom rattled away into traffic that was still heavy, even at this hour, the Strand always full of life. Despite the bustle behind her, Bobby suddenly felt very much alone.

She approached the front door as though she had no qualms and rapped upon it.

The portal was opened by the sort of man Bobby expected to see—well-dressed but large and beefy. Portraying respectability but with the obvious strength to throw out any riotous patron.

“Evening,” Bobby greeted him cheerfully. “Anyone welcome here? Or do I need to answer the secret questions?”

In some gaming establishments, if one had to ask such things, then one didn't belong there. Bobby had learned to act the rather dim-witted upper-class twit trying to slum, a ruse that worked like a charm. She might not always be admitted to a place, but she wouldn't be bodily tossed to the pavement either.

It also helped that she had a naturally low-timbered voice and didn't have to take on a false baritone. She bounced on her toes and beamed at the bloke while he scowled down at her.

Bobby knew what he saw—a shortish, plump young man who'd grow stout as he aged, with a square face, brown eyes, and clothes tailor-made for him. Probably had money to burn and not enough sense to hang on to it.

The man abruptly stepped aside and gestured for Bobby enter. Bobby relinquished her coat and hat to a thinner chap who came forward at the snap of the larger man's fingers. The footman, or whoever he was, tucked the coat into the cloakroom and set the hat carefully on a shelf. She wasn't given a ticket—presumably they'd remember whose clobber went with whom.

Bobby gave both men a salute and dove into the bowels of the club.

The door to the gaming room was obvious, as noise boomed from behind it. Bobby pried open the portal and walked into a wall of smoke. Cheroots, cigarillos, and Turkish cigarettes were in every hand or hung from every mouth. The only things absent were pipes, as those would be leisurely enjoyed in a quieter room, not furiously sucked on over games.

Bobby didn't mind the miasma, as she'd have her own cheroot out soon, but Judith wouldn't let Bobby near her reeking like a smokehouse.

The tables were packed with men from the upper and middle classes who thought they had money to spare for this insalubrious hell. No women present, which was interesting. Often seductively dressed ladies, called butterflies, circulated in clubs like this one to distract a man from playing his best.

Possibly no need for that here. These gents were frenziedly throwing money to the tables as though they never needed to eat again.

Bobby found an empty chair and squeezed onto it. If the table's entering stake proved too high, she'd shrug and wriggle back out, but if not, she'd place a bet and blend in.

The game was *vingt-un*. Bobby studied her cards, laid down a few crowns—which seemed to be an acceptable wager—and waited for the dealer to toss her another card. A ridiculous game, she thought darkly as her hand's total passed the required amount, more luck than skill. Bobby's coins disappeared, and she dug into her pocket for more.

As she played, she glanced about for her quarry but did not see them. Annoying waste of time if they didn't turn up. She'd learned, though, from Cynthia's stories of Mrs. Holloway's undertakings, that investigating was often more about patience than exciting breakthroughs.

The night rolled on, Bobby's coin purse grew lighter, and she never saw Lady Coulson's brats. She recognized gents from other clubs and a few friends of her brother, as Judith had feared. However, those lads had never paid much attention to Wilfred Perry's awkward little sister, and they didn't

have any idea who she was now.

Bobby was simply a ne'er-do-well the chaps at the clubs had come to accept. There were enough nouveau-riche young men roaming London these days that who was who had become rather blurred. As long as Bobby didn't try to marry anyone's sister, all would be well.

She lingered for hours, playing cards—losing and winning—enjoying a cheroot and some fairly decent brandy, listening to tittle-tattle, and contributing opinions when asked. Gentlemen often derided ladies for nattering on about other people, but in Bobby's opinion, gentlemen could out-gossip ladies any day.

She saw no sign of Terrance or William Makepeace. There were plenty of young men here wagering out of their depth and losing too much, but none were the two sons of Lord and Lady Coulson.

Discouraged, Bobby at last retrieved her coat and hat and stepped into the night, heading for a hansom cab stand.

She reflected as she walked that a great advantage of assuming man's dress was that no one thought a thing about her being on the street alone, even stumbling along to find a hansom.

If she were in skirts, striding by herself in the Strand at half past eleven, she'd be roundly condemned, by those who didn't try to assail her, that is. Even if she'd been out here through no doing of her own—perhaps she'd been abducted and dropped in this street—she'd be ruined and shunned, as though said abduction was all her fault.

In her greatcoat and hat, however, a scarf around her neck against the new-falling rain, no one looked at Bobby twice.

A hansom waited at the closest stand, the cabbie on top half asleep. He came awake as soon as Bobby stepped into the cab and called her direction, and they clopped off.

Bobby made it to the house in Upper Brook Street as the nearby church clocks began to strike twelve.



“Let me in, Hubbard. I’m just in time.” Bobby gave the butler a grin as he opened the door he’d been about to bolt.

“Did you have a pleasant evening, your ladyship?”

“Tolerable.” Bobby handed over hat, coat, scarf, and gloves as Hubbard reached for them. “But happy to be home.”

“Very good, your ladyship. Miss Townsend has already retired.”

It was early, by Bobby’s standards, but Judith was unpredictable. Some nights she’d stay up until dawn, painting like mad. On other nights, she’d toddle off to bed at eight.

“Then I shall retire myself,” Bobby said. “Good night, Hubbard.”

“Good night, your ladyship.”

Having carefully hung up Bobby’s things, Hubbard returned to bolting the doors, and Bobby headed up the stairs.

A light shone under Judith’s bedchamber door on the second floor. Bobby took the chance and pushed it open. She had her own bedchamber in this vast house, though most nights she and Judith shared.

Judith was indeed awake, propped up against pillows, reading a book. Nothing unusual in this, but Bobby noted that Judith was slightly out of breath and the book was upside down.

“All’s well?” Bobby asked her.

“Oh, there you are, darling.” Judith set the book aside and yawned with pretended fatigue. “I wasn’t certain whether you’d return tonight.”

“Better company here,” Bobby said with honesty. “No luck at the hell. Plenty of gentlemen losing their shirts, but the oiks in question never turned up.”

Judith sent her a gentle smile. “Ah, well. Never mind. Are you coming to bed?”

Bobby’s heartbeat quickened. Judith in her fine lawn nightgown was a beautiful thing to behold.

Bobby regretfully jerked her thumb at the door. “I should kip down the

hall. I reek like a chimney sweep.”

Judith beamed her warm smile. “Leave your clothes over there, and all will be well.”

Bobby’s heart banged even harder. “What an excellent idea.”

She disrobed with all speed and soon was burrowing into the comfortable nest Judith had made. Judith turned down the lamp, softening the room with delicious darkness. All as it should be.

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BOBBY RETURNED TO THE ADAM FOR THREE MORE NIGHTS, DETERMINED TO not let Mrs. Holloway down. She gambled sparingly, making herself walk away from a losing game, and each night she returned home perhaps five guineas poorer than when she’d left.

Judith was always in bed when Bobby returned, ostensibly reading the same book. She never seemed to make any headway with it, marking the same spot every night before she closed it to welcome Bobby home.

Bobby didn’t question her. If Judith wanted to pretend she was nonchalantly absorbed in reading whenever Bobby wasn’t there, she could do so.

On the fourth night at the Adam, Bobby’s vigil was rewarded. Lady Coulson’s offspring, William and Terrance Makepeace, swaggered into the Adam Club and eventually joined the card game at Bobby’s table.

## CHAPTER 3



The Honorable Terrance, in fact, did all the swaggering. His older brother simply looked worried and out of place.

Another man had come in with the brothers and now hovered at Terrance's shoulder as the lads seated themselves at Bobby's table. This gentleman—Bobby gave him the label with reservations—was about double the age of the brothers, wore a well-made suit complete with gold fob-watch, and observed the two with an eagle-like stare.

Bobby had no idea who he was. She recognized nearly half the gents in this place, most of them sons of peers and wealthy nabobs. Many had either gone to school with her brother or now rubbed elbows with him at the grand palaces of White's and Brooks's.

The other half were the up-and-comers who'd made their fortunes in trade and wanted to hobnob with the peers. They might not be admitted to the closed clubs of St. James's, but they could consort with sons of dukes and earls at the Adam Club without restriction.

This man appeared out of place even here. He had a soft face and a full but well-trimmed beard, and his shoulders spoke of much exercise. His eyes, on the other hand, were like steel ball bearings, devoid of any sort of warmth.

He watched Terrance with an intense gaze, though he did nothing to interfere with Terrance's choices of cards or wagers. If the man was helping

Terrance cheat—perhaps signaling what others held in their hands—he was damned subtle. Bobby caught no twitch of fingers or brows that might be guiding Terrance, and in fact, Terrance lost a good deal more than he won.

Now that Bobby had located the lads, she wasn't certain what to do. Note all she observed, she supposed, to relate to Mrs. Holloway.

Her focus on the pair was so avid she lost a hand she could have won if she'd been paying attention. As Bobby slid her markers over, she realized she was twenty guineas down. That was her signal to leave the table. Instead, Bobby took a hefty pull on her cheroot and accepted another round of cards.

Not long into that hand, she found the hard-eyed chap's gaze upon her. Maybe she'd been too obviously staring at Terrance and William. Or perhaps he thought he'd found another mark to fleece.

Bobby drained her glass of whisky in a practiced way and let out an expletive when her hand was beaten. The man's contemplation of her sharpened.

Dash it, Bobby was nowhere near as good at this investigation business as Daniel McAdam. He'd know how to discover information without giving himself away.

Bobby held on to her courage and continued playing.

Neither Terrance nor William ever glanced her way, or at anyone else at the table, for that matter. Terrance was fixed on the game, his eyes glittering. William kept his attention on Terrance, except for fearful glances at the hard-eyed man.

*William's spying on him too, Bobby realized. Trying to decide how to save his brother from this chap's influence.*

The game was not going well for either brother. Terrance was playing very deep, and Bobby doubted William could stop Terrance racing to his ruin.

The hard-eyed man gave Bobby another assessing glance, then he removed a folded paper from his coat pocket and handed it to the nearest

gentleman at the table.

This gent flicked through the cards inside the paper, grinned, and passed them to the next man in line. Bobby's curiosity grew as the pack moved from hand to hand around the table.

She opened the paper when it reached her, revealing flat pictures in gray monochrome colors. *Ah*. Naughty photographs. Gentlemen often shared such things at the clubs—some of them had whole books of ladies in various stages of undress.

Bobby never minded gazing upon a lovely woman and studied the photographs with interest. Judith was Bobby's only love, of course, but no harm in having a look.

The hard-eyed man had riveted his stare to Bobby while she leafed through the pictures. She felt his gaze skewering her, trying to penetrate her disguise.

Bobby's heart beat faster. She'd told Judith she didn't much worry that she'd be revealed as having the body of a woman, but now she wondered if the blasted man would expose her.

What would these chaps do to her if he did? Bobby had learned some boxing in her day, but nothing that would help her fight her way free of a gang of men and run for home.

She kept her head bent over the pictures, as though examining them thoroughly. One lady was quite pretty, with either blonde or red hair—hard to tell on a photograph that hadn't been tinted. Shapley lass, wearing only knickers, her long legs crossed. She stared with good humor at the photographer, as though having her picture taken without her clothes on was good fun. Bobby smiled back at her.

She felt the man's attention on her lessen, and when she dared look up again, she saw that he'd redirected his scrutiny to William.

Bobby exhaled in relief, then that breath caught. Beneath the picture of the blonde lady, Bobby found a photograph of a comely woman with long,

sleek hair and features she knew very well.

She stared, frozen, at the image, her mission forgotten. The woman's dark hair twined about her bare torso. Like the lady in the previous photo, she wore only the bottom half of combinations, her lower legs and elegant feet exposed. The woman peeped at the camera through a lock of her hair, far more seductively than had the blonde.

When the devil had Judith Townsend decided to pose for bawdy photographs?

She looked younger in the picture, so likely years before she'd met Bobby, but still, Bobby thought Judith would have mentioned it by now. She'd always known Judith had lived a colorful life on the Continent, but she hadn't realized how colorful.

Bobby brought the picture closer to her face. Yes, it was Judith's right shoulder peeking at her, and her slim cheek, those eyes that made Bobby melt into a puddle. On her other shoulder ...

She peered harder, wishing the lighting in the room was better. Instead of gaslight, the club had candles and kerosene lamps, probably to keep the high-wagering gentlemen from better seeing their cards.

Bobby realized abruptly that the woman in the picture wasn't Judith at all. But a dashed good resemblance. So good, that there was only one thing for it.

She shuffled to the next photograph, barely noting that this young woman was completely nude, her back to the photographer, peering saucily behind her.

Bobby went through the rest of the dozen before she managed to drop the pictures all over the floor.

"Damn," she said loudly, then dove for them.

A waiter hurried to help, and together they picked up the photographs. Bobby palmed the one of Judith's double and slid it into her pocket.

She grinned as she restored the photographs to the paper and slid it to the next man in line. "Bit of flesh always makes me tremble," she said heartily,



and the gents on either side of her laughed.

The hard-eyed man would know the photo was missing. But with luck, he might think that it was still stuck under the table or that the waiter had absconded with it.

To her relief, the man seemed to have lost all interest in the photographs. The packet made it to the last player, who laid the pictures aside after he'd had his ogle, but the hard-eyed bloke made no move to retrieve them. Terrance glanced at them longingly, and Bobby saw his hand edge toward them.

Had the hard-eyed man been testing Bobby? Suspecting she was not what she seemed? Unnerving.

She must have passed his little stratagem, because he ignored her for the rest of the game.

Bobby decided this would be her last hand. She threw down her cards and her coins in disgust when she lost and slid from her seat. She moved slowly toward the card room's exit, glancing at other games as though tempted to join them, then shook her head and meandered into the corridor.

As much as she itched to hurry, she knew that running out of the club like the hounds of hell chased her would only draw more notice. She made herself pause in the hallway for several more puffs on her cheroot before depositing the end into a bowl set out for that purpose. Only then did she stride to the foyer, calling for her hat and coat.

It was colder outside tonight. The finer weather of early autumn had deserted London, and chill rain pattered to the cobbles. Bobby adjusted her scarf and resigned herself to trudging down the Strand in search of a cab.

A carriage rumbled to a halt in front of her before she reached Bedford Street. Bobby recognized the coach and the figure of Dunstan, Judith's coachman, at the reins.

Torn between annoyance and relief, Bobby yanked open the carriage's door and hauled herself inside.

“Following me about, are you?” she demanded as she landed on the seat next to Judith.

The carriage jerked as Dunstan started forward. Even this late, the Strand was full of vehicles conveying patrons to and from theatres, or revelers to soirees and such. The social Season was long over but that didn’t stop anyone still in Town from gadding about to every event they could find.

“I am, yes.” Judith sat calmly, her shoulder against Bobby’s warm and solid. “Concerned for you. And from your present agitation, I had right to be.”

Bobby pulled off her hat and tossed it to the opposite seat. Ruffling her short hair, she peered at Judith in sudden realization.

“You’ve been doing this every night, haven’t you? No wonder I find your chest heaving like you’ve been running and you reading books upside down. You’ve hurried home and leapt into bed, pretending you’ve been there all along. Hubbard is your partner in crime, damn the man.”

“I’m sorry, darling.” Judith sounded contrite but not entirely humble. “I have no wish for you to be harmed because you’re excited about helping Mrs. Holloway.”

“I don’t know how exciting it is.” Bobby jammed her arms over her chest, the photograph singeing her pocket. “Interesting, I should say instead. Lady Coulson’s sons came in tonight, by the bye. With their evil mentor.”

“I saw them,” Judith, who’d just accused Bobby of being too excited about the enterprise, came alight with curiosity. “But I couldn’t wait for you to come home before I knew what happened. Do tell.”

“Not much *to* tell,” Bobby said, hoping she didn’t dim the enthusiasm in Judith’s eyes. “Terrance seems to be heavily under the man’s influence, and William is pretending to be. Probably trying to keep the younger lad out of trouble. Don’t recognize the bloke playing nanny to them. He looked at me sharpish, probably wondering why I watched them, but thankfully he lost his fascination.”

“Oh, dear. Is that why you’re upset?”

Bobby reached into her coat pocket and withdrew the photograph. “Chap didn’t unnerve me as much as this did. I thought it was you, but then realized it wasn’t. You don’t have that.”

She pointed to a flower just visible on the woman’s shoulder. A tattoo, it was called. Sailors collected them up and down their arms, as did men who wanted to prove they were adventurers. Unconventional ladies occasionally had them done as well.

Judith went very still for several moments. Then she reached out her dark leather glove and took the photograph. “Where did you get this?”

“From the chappie with Terrance and William,” Bobby said. “He was handing around a stack of lewd photographs, probably to distract the other gents from their cards. There was a lot of losing, that round.”

“More to the point, where did *he* get it?” Judith’s voice was as steely as the man’s eyes had been. “I thought no more of these existed.”

Her cheeks burned red in the coach’s dim lamplight, and she pressed her lips tightly together.

Bobby regarded her in bewilderment touched with alarm. “If that ain’t you, Judes, then who the devil is it?”

“My sister,” Judith said. Sudden tears wet her eyes and spilled to her cheeks.

## CHAPTER 4



Bobby jerked herself out of her stunned motionlessness and gathered Judith into her arms. Judith rarely cried—almost never. Now she rested her face against Bobby’s shoulder, shaking with sobs.

It was difficult not to be flummoxed. Bobby had learned much about Judith’s family—their wealth, high standing, and connections to almost every peer in the land on both her mother’s and father’s side. Bobby’s father was an earl, but Judith’s parents could buy and sell him several times over, as well as cast him to the four winds ... socially, anyway.

Judith had an older brother, who, like Bobby’s, was busy filling his nursery with heirs and spares. All males, of course. Both families had ceased bothering about their eccentric and unmarried daughters, thanks to all the bonny boys springing up.

Nowhere in the narrative had Judith indicated she had a sister, especially one who resembled her so closely.

“What is it, love?” Bobby asked gently. “Did she die?”

Almost every family had lost at least one child, which was a reason the survivors were encouraged to produce as many as they could.

Judith disentangled herself from Bobby’s embrace, sat upright, and took a handkerchief from her pocket. Dabbing her eyes, she drew a long breath.

“Forgive me. It gave me a turn, seeing her picture. I thought all those

photographs had been destroyed.”

Judith still held hard to it, fingers squeezing the card as though she'd never let go.

“It's none of my business,” Bobby began. “If you don't want to tell me the tale, that's all right.” She was dashed curious, but she knew from experience how painful another's prying could be.

“No, I want you to know.” Judith's shoulder bumped Bobby's as the carriage jerked over a hole in the road. “You'd have liked Lucetta. She was a free spirit, determined to choose her own path. Still is, I hope. She is very much alive ... I think.”

“You *think*?” Bobby's eyes widened. “Good Lord, that sounds dire. What happened?”

“Nothing so awful as you are imagining. Lucetta lives somewhere on the Continent. At least, that was the last I heard from her, ten years ago. She blamed me and cut the tie, but I still worry about her.”

“I've changed my mind,” Bobby said abruptly. “You must tell me all.” She softened. “If I can help ...”

Judith shook her head. “It's not an uncommon story.” She gave her cheeks a final dab and returned the handkerchief to her pocket, but her eyes remained too bright.

“Lucetta was beautiful and bold.” Judith smiled shakily. “Like me, she declared early that she'd never marry a tedious boor and be under his thumb the rest of her life. My parents were incensed with her. They'd already resigned themselves to me being an artist and removing myself from the rules of society. They decided to give up on me, and so expected Lucetta to be the good and obedient daughter. She was to marry a respectable gentleman of the correct lineage and become a model wife and mother. They misjudged her terribly.”

“Bit hard on the poor gel,” Bobby said with feeling. “I'm no stranger to being pressed to follow that path. Luckily, dear Eliza and Wilfred are so

fruitful. Wilfred's children are far more valued than mine would be, in any case." A daughter, in Bobby's family's view, was an appendage, useful only for making a connection with another prominent family.

"As you can imagine, Lucetta rebelled," Judith went on. "She was always more audacious than me. Unfortunately, her adventuresome spirit landed her in the clutches of a bad man. I liked Mr. Arnott—Stephan—at first, and I encouraged my parents to leave her be."

"But?" Bobby reached for Judith's free hand and squeezed it. "There is a *but* lurking in that sentence."

"Arnott was an artist, a photographer. Lucetta met him at one of the parties I took her to. His work was very good, and he was personable enough. I saw no harm in him. He supplemented his income, as many photographers do, by selling racy pictures to publishers, collectors, and anyone else who would hand him the money. I didn't blame him for that—it is difficult to make one's way in the art world, unless one has a wealthy patron."

"Lucetta posed for him?" Bobby asked. "Of her own free will?"

"She was proud to do it. Lucetta said she was helping him. Artists must do what they can to eat, she told me. She was certain that the commission to make him rich would come along any day, and they'd be married."

"But it did not," Bobby supplied.

"No, which turned Stephan bitter and angry. He pressed Lucetta to do more and more pictures, and then he wanted to hire her out to undress in salon gatherings—you know the sort of thing."

Such parties had been all the rage at one time. Unclothed or barely draped young women turned up in the drawing rooms of the rich to pose as Greek statues. Rather silly, in Bobby's opinion, but people thought it showed they were both very modern and had good taste.

"She objected?" Bobby asked.

"Not at first. But Lucetta didn't like having to stand perfectly still, in a draft, while gentlemen walked around her and ogled her. It was one thing to

pose for a photograph alone in a studio with Stephan, another to share her body with strangers. She declared she wasn't a courtesan and refused to do any more. But Stephan had already promised her to several more soirees and ribald parties, and he stood to lose a bit of cash." Judith's mouth tightened into a grim line. "He took it out on her."

"The bounder," Bobby growled in rage. "Did you put your boot up his backside?"

"In a manner of speaking." Judith's tone told Bobby she'd not gone easy on Mr. Arnott. "I got Lucetta away from him, and I spoke to friends who made London too hot to hold the man. He fled his creditors to the wilds of Canada, I believe."

"Where there are many bears," Bobby finished with satisfaction.

"I imagine he tried his luck on the gold fields. He was that sort." Judith waved him away. "We've never heard from Stephan Arnott again, which is the best conclusion. I gathered up all the photographs and burned them. Lucetta helped me—she enjoyed it. But our family shut her out." Judith gazed down at the photograph in regret. "They disinherited her, cut her completely. Told me I wasn't allowed to have anything to do with her. Lucetta had ruined herself, and now she must live with the consequences."

"Very compassionate of them. I take it you ignored this command?"

"Of course, I did. I loved Lucetta. I decided I'd travel for a time on the Continent and took Lucetta with me, out of their reach. She deserved a life, happiness. But while she appreciated my assistance in getting her away, she also blamed me for the family shunning her. If I'd not rebelled first—if I'd taken up the mantel of the good daughter and made an advantageous marriage—Lucetta could have had her own life—*my* life—without censure. In her eyes, I stole that from her. Plus, she'd met Stephan through me and my art circles. Her resentment ran deep. I know she simply needed someone on whom to take out her disappointment, but it hurt."

"Poor Judes." Bobby rested her head on Judith's shoulder. "None of it

was your fault.”

“I knew that, logically, but my heart said otherwise.” Judith slid her hand over Bobby’s, her leather gloves soft. “It *was* my fault for striding out without a care for what anyone thought of me. I left Lucetta behind to struggle and then founder.”

“*Really* not your fault,” Bobby repeated. “Lucetta could have cut off the blackguard at any time instead of trusting him, could have asked for your help in leaving home before that.”

“I know you are right.” Judith’s voice was strained. “Yet, I can’t help what I feel. One night, Lucetta and I had a terrible row. We were in Paris, living in a hotel. She wanted nothing more to do with me, and I told her she’d be a fool to refuse my help. We said many more things, all of which I regret now. She stormed off.” Judith let out a shaking breath. “I’ve not seen her since.”

Bobby saw her pain, which awakened a hurting in her own heart. Judith had kept this locked inside her, trying to put it behind her and move on. But she’d never truly been able to, and no wonder.

“I imagine you didn’t leave it at that,” Bobby said quietly. “You must have tried to find her.”

“Of course, I did. I remained in Paris for a long time, searching, but Lucetta was gone. None of her acquaintance had seen her—or so they said. I began checking the city morgue, just in case. Thankfully, she never turned up there.” Judith’s grip tightened on Bobby’s hand, conveying the fear she’d gone through. “Eventually I accepted that if Lucetta wanted to contact me, she would. About that time, I met Miss Morisot, the artist, and started to paint with her. I was grateful to her for her instruction and decided to stay on in Paris for several years. I never ceased looking for Lucetta, but I also never found her.”

“You met McAdam there too.” That story Bobby had heard, how Judith had posed as McAdam’s wife and flushed out assassins bent on killing men



who knew how to make weapons.

Judith's smile returned. "Assisting Mr. McAdam helped take my mind off my worries. I realized when hunting those men that there were far more things at stake in the world than my family troubles."

Bobby disagreed that Judith's worries were of less consequence than the fate of nations, but she kept that thought to herself.

"Is this one of the scoundrel's photographs?" Bobby asked, touching the picture still in Judith's hand. "Or a more recent one?"

"No, this is Stephan's work." Judith's brow puckered. "I swore we destroyed them all. I must discover how this man at the Adam Club got hold of it."

Judith's trembling had subsided, her voice returning to its usual determination. When Judith set her mind on something, woe betide any person, even an assassin, who got in her way.

Bobby's worry eased—Judith upset was not something she liked to see. She preferred that her strong-willed, quietly stubborn lady be free of difficulties.

"Well," Bobby said, trying to sound optimistic. "We'll find out exactly who this chap I saw at the club is, and ask him."

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JUDITH'S SOLUTION FOR RUNNING THE HARD-EYED MAN TO GROUND WAS TO interview Lady Coulson's sons.

She arranged to meet them, by methods unknown to Bobby, in Regent's Park the following afternoon. Likely Judith had used the network of servants she seemed to command, starting with Hubbard and her extremely loyal and discreet lady's maid, Evans.

However the word got passed, at three o'clock, Judith and Bobby descended from the coach and moved sedately to the entrance of the Royal

Botanical Gardens in the southern portion of Regent's Park.

At least, Judith strolled sedately—Bobby was bouncing with impatience. She was ready to shake Terrance until he told her all he knew, but she reined herself in and let Judith take the lead.

Terrance and William had actually obeyed Judith's summons. The brothers waited near the gate at the Inner Circle—the lane that bounded the botanical gardens.

William stood ramrod stiff in a fine suit, autumn coat, and tall hat. Terrance, on the other hand, was red-eyed and pasty skinned, with rumpled coat and cravat twisted as though he'd slept in it. From the looks of things, he probably had. William was dressed for an afternoon's ramble in a park, while Terrance still wore last night's evening dress.

Judith halted when she reached them, nodding with extreme politeness. William tipped his hat and gave her a courteous bow.

Terrance belatedly seized his headgear and lifted it the barest inch from his head, but he kept his back rigid. If he tried any sort of bow, he'd likely fall over.

“Bit heavy on the tipple last night, eh?” Bobby asked, letting her voice boom. “Feeling delicate, are we?”

Terrance winced and screwed his eyes shut for a painful moment.

William sent Bobby a startled look. “Hang on, you were at the Adam last night, weren't you? Do I know you?”

Bobby straightened the lapels of her coat, its cut as smart as William's, before she stuck out a gloved hand.

“Robert Perry, at your service.”

William clasped Bobby's hand, flinched slightly at her firm grip, and quickly let it drop. Terrance didn't bother offering to shake hands, but then, it probably hurt him to lift his arm. He'd already been well into his cups when he'd arrived last night, and he must have imbibed quite a bit more after Bobby's departure.

“Mr. Perry mentioned that you had a gentleman with you last evening,” Judith said in her even tones. “I would like his name and address, please.”

Terrance gaped. With his open mouth and red-rimmed, watery eyes, he resembled nothing more than a startled fish. “Why the devil should I tell you that?”

“Terrance.” William’s admonishment held shock. “Is that any way to speak to a lady? Apologize at once.”

Terrance curled his lip. William might be shadowing his brother, trying to keep him out of trouble, but Terrance was by no means docile.

“It’s none of her bloody business who he is,” Terrance snapped. “Why do you want to know, eh? It’s a fair question.”

William became more and more distressed at Terrance’s language. Judith, who could swear like a sailor when she had a mind to, withstood the onslaught without wavering.

“I have reason to believe he has something that belongs to me,” Judith said smoothly. “Or knowledge of it. I will not tell him from whom I obtained his direction, if you do not wish me to.”

When Judith began speaking like an instructor at a finishing school, most gentlemen became embarrassed and fell all over themselves trying to be on their best behavior. William certainly flushed and cleared his throat, but Terrance, who must have one hell of a hangover, only glared at her in defiance.

“Blackmailing you, is he?” Terrance chuckled, a sound like a boot on eggshells. “Maybe over some indiscretions with your gentleman friend?” He swept Bobby a knowing sneer that held some admiration. Bobby rolled her eyes.

“Certainly not.” Judith’s voice became ice cold. William’s flush deepened, and even Terrance’s sarcasm fled him. “This is of great importance. I am doing you the courtesy of asking you first, before I take up the issue with Lord Coulson.”

“You never would.” Terrance’s aghast answer floated out, his face losing what little color it had.

Bobby, standing a pace or two behind Judith, mouthed, *Oh, yes, she would.*

“It is no matter,” William said quickly. He seemed as adamant as his brother to keep his father far from their exploits. “His name is Joseph Moody, and he has a shop where he sells all sorts of things. Moody’s Emporium, he calls it. On the Commercial Road, in Shadwell.”

Terrance glared at William but realized it was too late to stop him. “A place no lady ought to go,” Terrance said with derision. “Have a care for your reputation, love.”

Bobby took a step forward. “Have a care for your tongue, lad, or you’ll get a punch in the nose.”

Terrance looked Bobby up and down. Bobby had no great height, but she was sturdy, and had rather enjoyed her boxing lessons.

“I’m only giving her a friendly warning,” Terrance faded next to William, becoming sullen. “Shadwell is a dangerous place.”

Judith jotted the name and direction into a small notebook she’d removed from her pocket. “Thank you,” she said to William. “Why are you with such a gentleman, in any case? From what Mr. Perry says, he is not the most honorable of men.”

“None of your affair,” Terrance said, trying to imitate Judith’s cool tones, and failing miserably.

“My brother likes to gamble,” William said. “I am trying to dissuade him of the habit.”

“I see.” Judith skewered Terrance with a shrewd gaze. “You owe Mr. Moody some winnings.”

“Quite a bit of them,” William answered while Terrance spluttered. “Mr. Moody bought up all Terrance’s gambling debts from the clubs and now wants to be paid. He follows us about—Terrance swears he’ll win the money

he owes, but of course he never does.”

“And if he cannot pay?” Judith asked.

“Our father is very wealthy.” William reddened again. “Mr. Moody threatens to take the money from *him* if need be. We truly do not want this coming to his attention.”

Bobby broke in, “You could always confess all to your dear papa. Let your brother face the music, and be right out of it.”

“Obviously, you do not know my father,” William said, with the first hint of humor Bobby had seen in him. “We both will bear the brunt. Best we solve this on our own.”

“Why are you spilling to them?” Terrance demanded. He focused a bleary gaze on Judith. “Who are you? William only dragged me here because he feared what you’d tell our pa about what we get up to. Friend of our mum’s, are you?”

“A friend of Mr. Thanos,” Judith said calmly. “He says you have much potential,” she added to William.

William started and then looked pleased behind his worry. “Yes, he’s a clever gentleman,” he said with admiration, while Terrance wrinkled his nose. “I hope to return to his lectures as soon as I can. If there is anything else we can do to assist you, you have but to say the word.”

“That will not be necessary.” Judith closed the notebook and returned it to her pocket. “Again, I thank you.”

“My brother is an ass, but he is right about one thing,” William said. “You should not go to Shadwell, not on your own. Perhaps I could ...”

He left the offer to escort her there hanging. Terrance let out a taunting snort, then put a hand to his head as though even that effort had pained it.

“Thank you for your concern, Mr. Makepeace,” Judith replied. “I never said I would go there myself. Good day, gentlemen.”

William tipped his hat, opened his mouth, probably to ask if he could guide her somewhere—anywhere—but then snapped it shut and gave her

another polite bow. “Good day,” he managed.

Terrance swayed and grabbed William’s arm to steady himself. “Tart,” he snarled.

Bobby raised one balled fist. Terrance’s alarm grew as Bobby came at him, and he hurriedly ducked behind his brother.

William held up wavering hands to halt Bobby’s onslaught. “I apologize, Mr. Perry. My brother is an idiot and had a late night. He has no idea what he is saying.”

Bobby stopped close enough that the brothers understood the threat was real, though she had no true intention of battling these pups. Scaring them would suffice.

Judith paid the encounter no attention at all. She was already walking along the road toward her waiting carriage, her elegance like a song.

Bobby held out her hand, her gaze on Terrance. “Hand them over, please.”

Terrance peered at her from behind William’s shoulder. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I saw you pinch those photographs from the table last night,” Bobby said with conviction. “Thought you’d ogle them at your leisure at home, did you? Let’s have them.”

Bobby had seen Terrance slid the pictures surreptitiously into his pocket as she’d left the table, and she’d taken a chance he still had them on him. It was obvious he hadn’t been home for a good grooming and change of clothes since the club—the stench of him was indication enough.

William, growing more the stern older brother by the moment, turned severely to him. “Give them to him, Terrance.”

With a growl deep in his throat, Terrance yanked the folded paper out of his coat pocket and thrust it at Bobby. She glanced inside to see that, indeed, all the photographs were there before she tucked them neatly into her own pocket.

Bobby tipped her hat to both of them. “Behave yourselves, gentlemen. Oh, just a friendly hint—I’d stay far from Mr. Moody were I you. I have the feeling things are going to become very bad for him. Up to you, of course.”

She slapped her hat back to her head and swung away, hurrying to catch up with Judith.

Judith, ahead of her, moved briskly, her skirt swaying with her smart, upright walk. Bobby knew she loved this gifted, clever, and generous woman who could put anyone in their place. Now and always Bobby blessed the day that Cynthia had introduced her to the wonderful Judith.

## CHAPTER 5



Judith, true to her word, never set foot in the Commercial Road. She sent a flurry of telegrams instead, one to a known associate of Daniel McAdam.

That associate was Mr. Fielding, who on the surface was a respectable vicar, but who'd at one time lived on the other side of the law. Mr. Fielding—or *his* associates—would know how to find Mr. Joseph Moody of Shadwell, and indeed, he did just that.

Two days after their meeting with Terrance and William, Bobby accompanied Judith to a vicarage in the heart of the East End. Mrs. Holloway, informed by Judith that they'd cornered the man causing Lady Coulson so much heartbreak, had insisted on joining them.

Mrs. Holloway carried a box that Bobby suspected held one of her feather-light cakes. Not for them, Bobby surmised, as the box on her lap remained firmly closed and tied with a string during the coach ride across London.

Mrs. H. had changed a bit since Bobby had first met her a few years ago. Instead of trying to hide her shock at Bobby's comfort in men's dress, she now accepted Bobby as she was. Mrs. Holloway was good at that, Bobby reflected. She saw the truth of a person and didn't require that person to change to suit her expectations.



Mrs. Holloway was much more disapproving of Mr. Fielding, who was a wolf in sheep's clothing. He was a slim man, handsome, some ladies would think, with a trim beard and lively blue eyes.

Mr. Fielding met them in the parlor of his vicarage as his long-suffering housekeeper hauled in a loaded tea tray. Bobby sprang up to take the tray, setting it on the tea table in front of Mrs. Holloway. The housekeeper had also brought in the cake, which Mrs. Holloway had handed her upon their arrival, now sliced on a plate.

Mr. Moody was present, sullenly planted on a straight-backed chair. He did not rise when the ladies entered. Mr. Fielding leaned one shoulder against the wall next to Moody, seemingly nonchalant, but Bobby felt Mr. Fielding's tension crackle.

"Is this to be an interrogation by skirts?" Moody shifted his gaze over Mrs. Holloway and Judith, who'd seated herself next to Mrs. H., and let it come to rest on Bobby. "That one *should* be in skirts. Thinks no one knows."

Bobby hid her start. She'd sensed Moody's keen observation at the club but believed he'd dismissed her. Now his assessing gaze held avarice, as though he wondered how much he could blackmail Bobby for.

"Keep a civil tongue." Mr. Fielding's voice was deceptively mild.

Moody flinched, which made Bobby wonder what Mr. Fielding had done to get the man here and make him behave relatively tamely.

Mrs. Holloway, unasked, poured out tea, carefully adding milk and sugar to each cup. Judith handed the cups and pieces of the cake around, as though she served tea at the vicarage every day of her life.

Mr. Fielding took Moody's portion from Judith's hands and shoved it at the man, which kept Judith from having to go near him.

"Now then, Mr. Moody," Mrs. Holloway began. She was a woman in domestic service, yet she effortlessly commanded the room. "I am thankful to Mr. Fielding for inviting you here, so that I may speak with you. I would like you to cease your acquaintanceship with the Honorable Mr. Terrance and the

Honorable Mr. William Makepeace. Forgive Mr. Terrance's debts to you, break the association, and trouble them no more."

Moody's bearded face went slack with surprise, then his lips began to twitch. "Oh, yes? I should do that for you? Why?"

"Because it is the right thing," the unflappable Katherine Holloway returned. "The two young gentlemen do not need you dragging them to their ruin."

Moody's lip twitching became a full-blown smile. "To their ruin? I have that much power, do I? If I drop the lads, what do I get in return? They owe me nearly a thousand pounds. Eh, love? What'll you give me?"

His leer had Bobby coming to her feet. She hadn't actually punched Terrance's nose, but she saw no reason to hold back on this man.

Mr. Fielding swallowed a sip of tea. "A *civil* tongue, I said." The flint in his voice made Moody abruptly lose his smile, and Bobby plopped back into her seat.

"You will have nothing in return," Mrs. Holloway informed Moody. "But turn your attention to other tasks, please."

"Bloody hell." Moody glared up at Mr. Fielding. "You ain't police. I'll do what I choose, and it's no business of this woman with a teapot."

Mr. Fielding emitted a sound like a growl, and Moody snapped his mouth closed.

Realizing Mr. Fielding had things in hand, Bobby slouched back in her chair and had a nibble of the cake. Not Mrs. Holloway's coveted lemon cake but a lovely buttery one. Bobby took the time to enjoy it.

"You *will* leave them be," Judith stated. "But I have another matter to take up with you. Where did you obtain the photographs?"

Moody blinked at her, clearly baffled by the question. "Photographs?"

Bobby touched the packet of them safely in her pocket. They'd proved to be very interesting and not in the way most people would think.

"The photographs of young ladies you handed around at the club," Judith

said. Her back was straight, her dignity splendid. “Where did you get them?”

“Bought them, didn’t I?” Moody leaned forward to stare at Judith more intently. “Hang about. One of them was you, wasn’t it?” His leer returned.

“Hardly.” Judith’s crisp tone sent Moody into confusion again. Bobby took another large bite of cake, letting herself be entertained.

“Bought them from whom?” Mrs. Holloway asked.

“A shop, in Paris,” Moody said in irritation. “What of it?”

“Which shop?” Judith persisted.

“I don’t know, do I? On one of them boulevards somewhere.”

“I’ll wager you’ve never been to Paris,” Bobby said from the depths of her chair. “You had them from a secondhand shop here in London, whose proprietor told you they came from a studio in Paris. Didn’t you?”

“What does it matter?” Moody asked testily.

“It matters very much, indeed.” Judith’s tone remained neutral, but Bobby sensed her disappointment. “Never mind. I suggest that you release Mr. Makepeace from your clutches, shut down your ‘emporium’—I imagine the origins of some of your goods would not stand up to scrutiny?—and try your luck on shores far from here.”

Moody sprang up. “Shut your gob, missus. You don’t know nothing. I’m finished here.”

He swung to the doorway and found Mr. Fielding somehow in front of him. Moody was a few inches taller than Mr. Fielding, but Mr. Fielding was a solid pillar, and it was Moody who shrank back.

“I said, you ain’t police,” Moody snarled. “Who are you? Your gents only told me you knew something to my advantage. What is it?”

“That it would be to your advantage to not linger in London,” Mr. Fielding said without changing expression. “I suggest you cut your losses, leave here, and start anew.”

“Start anew? Why the devil should I?”

Judith answered him after she took a calm sip of tea. “Because your shop

has already been seized. I know many people who run things, Mr. Moody. As you say, none of us in this room are police, but I have connections to those who instruct the police in their duties. Quite a number of constables are now going over what sort of items you have on your premises. Others will be in wait to escort you to a magistrate, unless you take our advice and flee.”

Moody stared at her in stunned disbelief, then switched to Mrs. Holloway and Bobby, as though hoping they’d contradict Judith. “You’re lying. You’re nothing but a pack of females.”

“Packs of females can have extraordinary influence, Mr. Moody,” Judith said. “Are we not made to adorn and inspire?” The words held scorn. “I have inspired the Commissioner of Scotland Yard to take a great interest in you and your doings.”

Sweat beaded on Moody’s forehead. “Damnation. I’ll have you for this, the lot of you. I wouldn’t sleep soundly, were I you.” His hard eyes became even more stony, the look he shot Mrs. Holloway and Judith bordering on brutal.

Bobby set aside her cake with regret, in case she had to help Mr. Fielding throw the man to the pavement. But again, Mr. Fielding placed himself solidly in front of Moody.

“I wouldn’t suggest it.” Mr. Fielding didn’t raise his voice, but Moody studied him uncertainly. “Other gents like the ones who escorted you here are ready to guide you to the river and push you onto a boat. I have men on that boat to make certain you reach another destination. Or a magistrate can send you to Newgate. It is your choice.”

Moody glowered. “I don’t take orders from trumped-up vicars.”

“I’m a bishop now, did you know?” Mr. Fielding informed him. “But it isn’t my ecclesiastical associates who are assisting me. It is ...” He leaned forward and whispered something into Moody’s ear.

Bobby didn’t catch what Mr. Fielding said, but it had a profound effect on Moody. He drew a sharp breath, and his face went nearly green.

“You—” Moody regarded Mr. Fielding with stark fear, and then he charged for the door.

This time Mr. Fielding let him go, giving him a wave on the way.

Mrs. Holloway came to her feet. “He ought to be arrested,” she said, her disapproval sharp.

Mr. Fielding’s lighthearted expression faded as he turned to her. “This is best, Mrs. Holloway. That fellow is a slippery one. If Moody goes to a magistrate, he’ll lie like an innocent babe, and the evidence against him will somehow evaporate. He’s done it before, which is why he’s walking about free to pull young aristos into his power. Much better that he’s running for his life to some far corner of the earth.”

“If you say so, Mr. Fielding.” It was apparent Mrs. Holloway did not agree with him, but she ceased arguing. “I thank you for your assistance. We will take up no more of your time.”

“Nonsense.” Mr. Fielding’s good spirits returned. “Stay and enjoy tea. It isn’t every day I have the company of such great ladies.”

“Yes, indeed, let us remain,” Judith said. “Why let the likes of Mr. Moody ruin our day? This cake is excellent, Mrs. Holloway.”

Bobby plopped down and forked up another hunk of cake. Judith was right—it was jolly good stuff.

Judith was not as serene as she appeared, Bobby saw from the stiffness of her fingers as she ate a dainty bite of cake. Judith had hoped Moody would have more information about her sister, and her frustration at his lack was evident.

Bobby kept herself from blurting out her own news, which she’d saved to surprise Judith if Mr. Moody had no further information. She liked Fielding, but the man didn’t need to know all about Judith’s personal life. What Bobby had to say would keep.

She contented herself with sitting back for now and enjoying the devil out of Mrs. Holloway’s butter cake.

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AFTER THE TEA WAS DRUNK AND THE CAKE DEVoured, MR. FIELDING SAW the three of them to the gate of the churchyard, where he, ever the gentleman, handed Mrs. Holloway and then Judith into her coach. Bobby pulled herself into it after them. She was stuffed and growing sleepy—perhaps she and Judith could nap when they returned home.

Judith thanked Mr. Fielding graciously and he stepped back, waving them off, grinning like the rogue he was.

“Thank you both very much for your help,” Mrs. Holloway said as they rolled toward Whitechapel Road. “I will tell Lady Cynthia to inform Lady Coulson that her sons are safe from Mr. Moody’s clutches. Perhaps they will have learned their lesson.”

From her expression, Mrs. H. didn’t believe they would, and Bobby agreed with her. At least Terrance wouldn’t learn, but maybe William could keep him tamed after this.

Mrs. Holloway turned to Judith with keen perception. “You hoped to learn something about the photographs you mentioned. I know it is hardly my business, but if I can help?”

Judith, who would never dismiss an offer of Mrs. Holloway’s powers of reasoning, drew a breath to speak, but Bobby cut her off.

“Before you go into the entire, sad tale, I’ve been doing some sleuthing myself.” Bobby pulled out the folded paper that contained the photographs. “Sending telegrams like mad, hither and yon.”

Judith’s chest rose sharply, and Mrs. Holloway leaned forward, avidly curious. “What are those?” Mrs. H. asked.

“The photographs Terrance stole from Moody,” Bobby said.

“One was of my sister,” Judith began, morose. “She—”

“Hold on,” Bobby interrupted. “I’ve had a good squint at these photographs. At the backs of them, I mean. Peered hard at them through a

glass. The light in here is a bit dim, but perhaps we can see.”

She withdrew from her pocket a small mother-of-pearl handled magnifying glass, a surprisingly thoughtful gift from her sister-in-law. She opened the paper, the photos facedown, and trained the glass on the back of the top photograph.

“There’s a mark, just there.” Bobby pointed her gloved finger at it.

Judith took the glass and the photograph and raised both to her eyes. When Mrs. Holloway, across from her, caught sight of what was on the *front* of the picture, her brows went up, but she said nothing.

“LM,” Judith announced after a time. “That’s all I can make out.”

“I thought it was likely the name of the studio,” Bobby said. “One of the pictures also helpfully has the word *Paris* stamped on it. It’s quite smudged—these pictures have been passed about a great deal—but I could just discern it.”

“I saw nothing on my sister’s photograph,” Judith said, lowering the glass.

“Because it was not from the same studio,” Bobby said. “The one of Lucetta was taken by her blackguard sweetheart in London, about ten years ago, you said. These others are more recent. You can tell from the clarity of the photographs—techniques have improved in the last decade. Also, the backdrops have more modern furnishings in them, and fashions in combinations and corsets have also changed.”

Mrs. Holloway nodded, as though approving of Bobby’s deductions.

“Ergo,” Bobby continued. “These were from a different studio. As I say, I cabled like mad to some chums in Paris, and they hunted down the business for me. The photographer in that Parisian studio informed my chums that she had sold the pictures to a gentleman from London last year—an aristo, not our Mr. Moody. The aristo must have tired of them, or didn’t want his wife to see them, so dropped them at a shop that sells such things. Probably got his valet to do it for him.” Bobby shrugged. “And Moody found them there,

taking them for his own amusement or to confound others with them.”

“*She* had sold the pictures.” Judith fixed on the pronoun, ignoring the rest of Bobby’s speculations. “The photographer is a woman?”

“Yes, indeed.” Bobby couldn’t suppress her triumph. “She owns the premises and takes portraits—likely dabbles in these off-color ones for the extra income. Calls it *LM Studio de Photographie*. Uses initials to hide her sex because so many want a business to be run by a man.”

Judith turned her intense stare on Bobby. Bobby couldn’t look away, though she felt Mrs. Holloway’s burning interest from across the carriage.

“What does LM stand for?” Judith asked. “Do you know?”

“Lucetta Mercier.” Bobby tightened, waiting for Judith’s reaction. Would she be excited or unhappy that Bobby had decided to pry? “That’s her married name.”

Judith stilled, lips parting. “Lucetta—” Her throat worked. “You found her.”

Bobby kept her voice gentle. “I appear to have.”

Judith continued to stare, round-eyed, then suddenly she launched herself at Bobby, wrapping her in a tight, desperate embrace. Judith’s mouth landed on Bobby’s face and neck, she exuberant in her shock and joy.

Bobby would love to explore how they could celebrate in this carriage, but dear Mrs. Holloway sat across from them. She’d edged her feet back as Judith’s sweeping boots nearly kicked hers.

“A trip to Paris might be wise.” Mrs. Holloway’s calm tones slid through Judith’s mad kisses. “If this lady is your sister, she will want to see you.”

Judith unwound herself from Bobby and fished out a handkerchief to wipe the tears from her face. A clean, neatly folded handkerchief, of course.

“She might not welcome me,” Judith said.

“Do not be so certain,” Mrs. Holloway said. “Am I correct that it has been many years since you’ve seen her? And that you lost touch?” Trust Mrs. H. to understand the full story from the bits and pieces she’d just heard.



“Yes.” Judith swiped at her cheeks again. “It was not an amicable parting. I have often wondered ...”

“Go.” Mrs. Holloway sent Judith a sage smile. “You must try to make amends. It is clear that you love her still. Now, we have reached Cheapside. If you will have your coachman stop here, I will continue on foot.”

She was off to visit her daughter, Bobby understood—the charming little girl who had the same dark hair and pretty eyes as her mother. Mrs. H. couldn’t admit she had the daughter, lest she be dismissed from her post, but Bobby and Judith could keep a secret.

“Of course.” Judith knocked on the roof and ordered Dunstan to halt. She opened the door for Mrs. Holloway herself, and Bobby leapt out to guide Mrs. H. safely to the ground.

“Do greet your girl for us,” Bobby told her. “Here.” She fished into her pocket and pulled out a farthing. Any larger sum, and Mrs. H. would be too proud to accept it. “Let her spend that on sweets, or a dolly, or some such.”

Mrs. Holloway flushed but took the coin. “Thank you kindly, Lady Roberta.” She shook out her skirts on the dusty road. “And thank you both for your assistance. The promised lemon cake will be forthcoming.”

“Excellent.” Bobby grinned at her. “I await it with lively anticipation.”

Mrs. Holloway ducked her head, always humble, then turned from the carriage. Her steps grew eager as she headed for the lane that must hold the house where her daughter lived, looked after by Mrs. H.’s oldest friend.

“I much admire her,” Judith said once Bobby was back inside, and Dunstan started the coach again. “A very clear-headed woman. We all should be as steady.”

“I agree.” Bobby edged next to Judith, hoping for a return to the enthusiastic kissing. “Shall we do as she says and go to Paris?”

“I’d like to,” Judith said with faint hope. “But what if Lucetta doesn’t want to see me?”

“I wager things have changed. Could be she doesn’t believe you want to

see *her*. But good for her for becoming a photographer herself. All artists in your family, eh?”

“I’d love to have a look at what sorts of things she’s done.” Judith’s tone turned more optimistic. “Yes, let us plan a journey. Scandalize our families by traveling alone together.”

“Hardly alone, with Evans dogging your steps,” Bobby said with a laugh. Judith would never leave her lady’s maid behind. “We can pretend to be man and wife. Mr. and Mrs. Perry. Such fun.” Bobby tried to push aside a qualm. “If you’ll have me?”

The smile Judith turned on Bobby transformed the gray London street outside into the brightest paradise.

“Of course, my darling Bobby. Do you even have to ask?”

Bobby’s throat tightened. “I do have to ask. You know how fond I am of you, Judes.” She drew a breath and then decided to shuck her reticence. “No, not fond. I mean—I love you. There, I said it.”

Bobby sat back, her heart banging. She’d never confessed her true feelings to Judith, fearing the response. Would Judith give her a kind smile and then explain that she didn’t share the sentiment? Judith had always seemed just out of reach, like a fine-plumed bird who flew off as one stretched out a hand toward it.

Judith turned in the seat with a rustle of fabric, the scent of tea and buttery cake clinging to her.

“Dearest Bobby.” Her voice was soft, taking on the note it did in the dark of night. “The anchor in my swirling world. I love *you*, my silly darling.”

Happiness welled in Bobby’s chest, displacing the sharp ache that had nestled there. Tears stung her eyes, but she swallowed them down. It would never do to become a blubbering fool.

Bobby hid her shakiness by tossing her already crushed hat to the seat Mrs. H. had vacated. “Well. That’s all right, then.”

Judith’s answering smile nearly undid her. She laid her head on Bobby’s

shoulder, and they continued home, bumping alone in the carriage together through the middle of teeming London.

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THANK YOU FOR READING! THE CHARACTERS OF BOBBY AND MISS TOWNSEND are from the *Below Stairs Mysteries*, a Victorian-set mystery series featuring Kat Holloway, a cook in a Mayfair home. Read on for an excerpt of Kat's next adventure.

Or start with the first story in the series, [A Soupçon of Poison](#), which introduces Kat Holloway and Daniel McAdam.

EXCERPT: SPECULATIONS IN SIN



## BELOW STAIRS MYSTERIES, BOOK 7

*January 1883*

*I* was finishing a pleasant visit on my day out with Joanna Millburn, the friend of my youthful days who looked after my daughter, when I detected that something was very wrong.

The windows of Joanna's cozy sitting room were already dark, the blustery winter day at an end. The time was nearing when I must reluctantly take my leave and return to Mount Street, where I was a cook in a fine Mayfair household.

Setting down my teacup, I sent Grace from the parlor with the excuse that I wanted a recipe for tea cakes from Joanna's hardworking cook. Grace eagerly dashed away, closing the door behind her, as she'd been taught, to keep out drafts.

Once we were alone—the four Millburn children were in their father's study, attending to their books—I turned a severe eye on Joanna. “Tell me quickly, before Grace returns. What is troubling you?”

Joanna started so forcefully that the dregs of her tea splashed from the cup. She wiped the droplets from her wrist with agitated fingers.

“Whatever do you mean?” She tried valiantly to sound surprised, but her voice trembled.

“My dear, I have been your friend since we were tykes in pigtails. I know when something is the matter. You had better tell me at once. Grace will only be a moment.”

Joanna continued to stare at me as though she could not imagine why I thought all was not well in her idyllic world. I continued with my persistent gaze, until at long last, she wilted.

“Kat, I don’t know what I am to do.” Joanna set down her cup and balled her hands in her lap. “Samuel’s firm has threatened to sack him. We eke out a living as it is—if he loses this post, we’ll be destitute.”

My own cup clattered to its saucer. “Oh, darling, no.” I reached for her tight hands and clasped them hard.

Such a situation would be dire. Sam and Joanna had four children of their own. The oldest, Matthew, was a bright boy, and they’d hoped to find a tutor for him so that he might have a chance to attend university in a few years. They also had to pay the rent on this modest home in a lane off Cheapside, an area so much better than the rookeries they’d likely inhabit without Sam’s clerk’s job at a private international bank.

There was another obvious consequence of Sam out of a job, one I knew Joanna did not want to voice. Without Sam’s income, they would no longer be able to take care of Grace.

I sent Joanna as much money as I could for her upkeep, but the Millburns paid quite a bit out of their own pocket. Five children to feed took a hefty toll, and if Sam was dismissed, gone would be the hopes for Matthew’s education. I would have to ease their burden and house Grace elsewhere, but at this moment, I had no idea where that would be.

“Why would they sack him?” I demanded. “I should think Samuel Millburn is a model clerk.”

“They have accused him of embezzling funds.” Tears filmed Joanna’s eyes. “They haven’t stated this outright as yet, but the hints are there. They are trying to shame him into confessing or leaving on his own. But Sam has

done nothing wrong. I know it.”

I knew it too. Samuel Millburn would no more embezzle than he would grow wings and fly. I’d known Sam since he’d the day he’d come to woo Joanna fifteen years ago, when she’d still lived in Bow Lane next door to me and my mum. He’d fallen madly in love with her and devoted himself to her, and nothing much had changed since. I’d been a bridesmaid at their wedding in Bow Bells church, so happy for my friend and yet lonely for losing her.

But I’d never found anything objectionable in Sam. Through the years, he’d proved to be a good friend to me as well. In his professional life, he was respectable, punctual, capable, and dogged, all the qualities any employer would wish.

I read stark fear in Joanna’s eyes. She loved her husband, believed in him, but I saw her flash of doubt, and the misery that engendered.

“Joanna, I will tell you right now that this is absurd,” I said firmly. “Samuel would never do such a dishonest deed. I know it, and so do you.”

“He has been working so hard, and with so little acknowledgment.” The words were faint, ones Joanna must have been repeating to herself, afraid to state them out loud.

“I assure you, it is nonsense. If Sam were annoyed, he’d simply take things up with his head clerk. It would never occur to him to sneak money from his accounts. There are few honest men in the world, but Sam Millburn is one of them.”

“I believe him.” Joanna sent me the look of someone begging to have their fears proved wrong. “I am his wife. Of course I do.”

“It has nothing to do with being his wife,” I said sternly. “Whether he is married to you or not, he would never steal from his employer.”

Joanna slid her hands from mine and rested them on her brown wool skirt. “You are right, Kat. I know you are. But that niggling voice inside me asks: What if I am wrong?”

“You are not. Samuel would never embezzle, and we both know it.”

“But what are we to do?” Joanna’s question held despair.

What indeed? I unfortunately had witnessed such situations a time or two in my life. An important person committed a crime, and the blame was shoved off onto someone deemed not so important. The insignificant man—or woman—was arrested and made to pay, thus preserving the reputations of the lofty. The scapegoat was inconsequential—except to his wife and children who would be destitute and share his shame and ruin.

I could not let that happen to Joanna and her sons and daughters.

“I will look into it,” I said with assurance. “Never worry, dear Joanna. I will find out who has truly done the embezzlement and clear Sam’s name.”

Did Joanna clasp her hands, gaze at me in adoration, and thank me profusely? No, indeed. Her face fixed in tired lines, fear exhausting her.

“How can you, Kat? I know you have helped the police before, but these are men of the City. Wealthy men, from prominent families. They have power, influence, and a long reach. They care nothing for the likes of Sam Millburn.” The tears in her brown eyes spilled to her cheeks.

I leaned to her and rested my hand on her knee. “I cannot tell lords and dukes what to do, no. But I know people who can—honest men and women who have influence. I promise you, my friend, I will leave no stone unturned until I prove that Sam is innocent.”

Again, Joanna did not hug me to her bosom and weep with relief. I saw a flicker of hope in her eyes, but it was quickly suppressed.

“It is kind of you, Kat.”

I held up my hand before she could try to tell me why I shouldn’t bother. “You leave it to me. I will be discreet—do not worry.”

Joanna opened her mouth to argue further, but the door swung open, and Grace danced inside, a folded paper in her hand. Joanna lifted her teacup again, while I took the recipe from Grace and praised her for writing it out so neatly.

The time had come when I must leave my daughter for the reality of my



drudgery. I pushed the thought aside and hugged Grace, memorizing the feeling of my daughter in my arms. That memory would have to sustain me until I could visit again.

I tried to give Joanna a reassuring smile as I departed, but I left a woman dejected. Grace began to tell Joanna of the sights she and I had seen on our walk today, and Joanna tried to brighten. She'd never let her troubles upset the children.

I stepped out of the house into the cold winter air, the lane that led to Cheapside already dark. I adjusted my hat and trudged toward the main street, in search of an omnibus to take me back to Mayfair.

The lack of light went with my mood. I had vowed to make everything right for Joanna, but she spoke the truth. The powerful and wealthy would throw Sam to the wolves to save themselves, and I, a woman and a domestic servant, had even less influence in the world than Sam did.

I pondered the problem as the crowded omnibus bumped across the Holborn Viaduct and along to Oxford Street. I descended at Duke Street to continue on foot south through Grosvenor Square to South Audley Street and so to Mount Street. A hansom could take me home faster, but Mrs. Bywater, the mistress of the house, would have much to say about a cook who got above herself being dropped off in a hansom at her doorstep.

As I walked through the cold, flakes of snow settling on my coat, I confessed to myself that I had little idea how to begin on Joanna's troubles. The few men I counted as my friends concerned themselves with science or police matters, not finance.

Mr. Bywater, nominally the head of the household that employed me, worked in the City, but I had no idea what he did. I'd never been much interested in his day besides knowing what he liked on his dinner table by the time he returned home.

I could not openly seek Mr. Bywater's help, because I'd have to explain who Joanna was. Such information might inadvertently reveal that I had a

daughter—a fatherless one, at that—whom I was supporting in secret.

Nothing for it, but I would have to turn to the one person I did not want to be obligated to, for reasons I did not quite understand. Daniel McAdam had been nothing but good to me, but I supposed I feared to be under the power of a man ever again. Grace's father had ensnared me, lied to me, and then left me destitute. I'd believed myself married to him, but that had turned out to be false.

Daniel would never do such things to me, I understood. He would help, for Grace's sake, if nothing else. He'd become quite fond of Grace, and Grace of him.

For Joanna, I decided, I'd seek Daniel's aid. Daniel was familiar with all sorts of crimes, from brutal murder to clever fraud to forgeries to treason. I wouldn't be surprised if he already knew, or knew something about, all parties involved in the embezzlement at Sam's bank.

I'd reached Mount Street by the time I finished my musing and descended the outside stairs to the warmth of the house. I had to pass through the scullery, and greeted Elsie, the scullery maid, who was elbow deep in water, scrubbing pots.

"Did ye have a nice day out, Mrs. Holloway?" she asked over the clanking in the sink.

"It was quite pleasant, thank you, Elsie," I replied absently as I moved past her to hang up my coat. I unpinned my hat but would carry that upstairs to put away safely when I changed my clothes. "Is all well here?"

"Think so. Mr. Davis has gone out and not come back, and isn't Mrs. Redfern annoyed about that?"

This information penetrated the haze of my thoughts. Mr. Davis, our butler, rarely took a day out. That he'd chosen to depart on a Thursday, which everyone knew was my full day off, was curious.

"I'm certain he will return in time for supper." I continued into the kitchen, where Tess, my assistant, bent over the work table, slicing potatoes

like a mad thing. “Good afternoon, Tess.”

Tess ceased banging her knife and glanced up at me without her usually cheery expression. “I’m that glad to see you, Mrs. H. Mrs. Redfern is in a right state.”

From the loudness of this proclamation, I gathered that Mrs. Redfern, the housekeeper, must be above stairs where she could not hear us.

“I’m certain everything will be well, Tess. Do carry on.”

Tess’s knife began thumping away again, so much so that I feared for the condition of the potatoes. Telling myself that Tess had things in hand, I slipped out and along the slate-tiled corridor to the back stairs.

The door to the butler’s pantry was shut, and no light flickered under the crack beneath it. On impulse, I tried the handle, but the door was locked.

I reasoned, as I mounted the stairs, that Mr. Davis’s affairs when he was not in the house were his own. His outing must have been important, and I had no doubt he’d soon return. He’d never let the footmen attend supper without his eagle-eyed supervision, especially when Mr. and Mrs. Bywater had guests, as they did this evening.

Upstairs, I swiftly changed into my gray work dress. I shook out and brushed my good brown frock, before hanging it in the wardrobe. The hat went into its box on the wardrobe’s top.

I’d been able to acquire a few more pieces of furniture for my small room, a bureau that held my washbasin and undergarments, and this wardrobe. I didn’t have many gowns—two besides my work frocks, but Lady Cynthia, the Bywaters’ niece, had insisted Mrs. Bywater put some cast-off pieces of furniture in my room. Mrs. Bywater, who didn’t want the bother of hiring someone to lug the unused furniture away, allowed Cynthia this indulgence.

I’d done perfectly well without all these furnishings, but Cynthia was trying to be kind. I admitted it was nice to have a place to keep my best and second-best gowns free of dust.

After washing the soot of London's coal smoke from my face and hands, I descended to the kitchen again. I needed to pay attention to the meal, I decided as I began to help Tess chop vegetables at the table—we'd have ten at dinner tonight—but my mind strayed back to Joanna and her troubles.

Poor Sam. He worked hard to provide for Joanna and his four children, and uncomplainingly had taken in my daughter when I'd turned up on their doorstep with her nearly thirteen years ago. I'd been a wretched and terrified woman, sobbing in their parlor, my babe in my arms. Grace, always sensitive to atmosphere, had been crying as well.

Joanna, my dearest friend since we'd been tiny girls, had pulled me into her embrace and promised she'd do anything in the world for me and Grace. Sam had sat down with us and assured me that we could devise a way to keep Grace safe while I sought a position in a kitchen.

Their compassion brought tears to my eyes now, blurring the leeks I was slicing for a soup à la julienne.

"Mrs. H.?" Tess's voice shook me from my thoughts. "How many slices of these potatoes do ye want? I've done about a thousand, I think."

She exaggerated, but she did have a heaping pile of creamy white potatoes on the cutting board.

I brought myself back to the present. I needed to cook, not woolgather.

"That should be sufficient," I said, trying to be my usual brisk self. "Now, I see you have some water simmering. Excellent." I had instructed her that a pot of hot water must always be available on the stove, as it took too long to heat the water every time one wished to cook a vegetable. "We will boil those and then put them in a pan with butter, parsley, and a bit of leftover velouté sauce. Then we'll heat that in the oven, season with lemon juice, and send it up with the roast."

"Mmm." Tess closed her eyes, savoring the dish in her mind. "What's that called, then?"

"Potatoes à la maître d'hôtel," I informed her. I'd also tear up winter

greens for a salad and finish the meal with both a gâteau with orange liqueur sauce and a lemon tart. It was the season for citrus, which both ripened in hothouses and was brought in by ship from the world over.

“That’s a funny name,” Tess said about the potatoes. “What’s it got to do with a hotel?”

Usually, I had a lecture prepared to explain the origin of dishes, but today I hadn’t the fortitude. My worry about Sam was increasing as the kitchen filled with the sounds and scents of our cooking. I could stoutly proclaim Sam would never dream of stooping to theft, but the lofty men who ran his bank could make him take the blame no matter what.

What happened to Sam if he was shut up in a prison? What happened to Joanna and her children? To Grace?

“You all right, Mrs. H.?” Tess once more jerked me from my doleful contemplation.

“Yes, I am perfectly fine,” I said. There was no use in giving way. I’d have a good night sleep and make a start on the problem in the morning.

“It’s just that you’ve torn that lettuce into teeny little bits. No one will be able to lift that on a fork, try as they might.”

I looked down and saw that yes, my hands had shredded the pieces of dark green and red lettuce until they were nearly minced. I gathered them up and dropped them into the bowl of carrots Tess had already cut into matchsticks, following those with the leeks I’d chopped.

“I’ll put all this into the soup. A bit of lettuce gives it body. Now, cease gawping at me and put those potatoes on. They won’t cook themselves.”

Tess sent me an aggrieved look, not happy being admonished when she’d done nothing wrong. I tamped down on my anxiousness and tried to get on with the meal.

We made good headway, though I had to fold my lips to keep from snapping when Tess dropped a potato slice and spilled the salt. Not her fault my dearest friend’s world was crumbling and possibly taking mine with it.

Finally, the meal was finished, the platters loaded onto the dumbwaiter, which Tess cranked upward to the footmen in the dining room. The dishes weren't much different from what I'd do for a family supper, though there was a larger quantity in each. Mrs. Bywater had invited several of her friends and their husbands to dine tonight. Lady Cynthia had been coerced into attending, which she'd promised to grit her teeth and bear.

Just before eight o'clock, when supper was to be served, Mrs. Redfern hastened into the kitchen, her heeled boots clicking in an agitated fashion.

"Mr. Davis still has not returned," she announced. "The footmen are milling about in disorder and the wine hasn't been opened or decanted. The master is not best pleased. Whatever are we to do, Mrs. Holloway?"

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Jennifer Ashley has more than 100 published novels and novellas in mystery, romance, historical fiction, and urban fantasy under the names Jennifer Ashley, Allyson James, and Ashley Gardner. Jennifer's books have been translated into more than a dozen languages and have earned starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist*. When she isn't writing, Jennifer enjoys playing music (guitar, piano, flute), reading, knitting, hiking, cooking, and building dollhouse miniatures.

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*The Price of Lemon Cake*

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