

Claiming the
CHESS MISTRESS

Sex, Lies, & Forbidden Desires
← THE SERIES →

LOUISA CORNELL

AWARD-WINNING AUTHORS

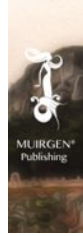
ANDREA K. STEIN

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BOOK IV

SEX, LIES, & FORBIDDEN DESIRES

ANDREA K. STEIN



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CLAIMING THE CHESS MISTRESS

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Thank you so much for choosing to read *Claiming the Chess Mistress*, 4th novella in the "Sex, Lies, & Forbidden Desires" series.

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CLAIMING THE CHESS MISTRESS

By night, she's a masked chess mistress who challenges and trounces all takers; by day, she's the ethereal white-blond beauty who volunteers at the children's refuge in Seven Dials — Charlotte Smythe lives a luxurious double life of ease as the mysterious chess genius at Goodrum's House of Pleasure..

After spending years as a gifted investigator extricating others from their peccadillos, Archer Colwyn, dedicated Bow Street runner, has landed in a suds of his own making. The light-hearted journal of sensual exploits he and his school chums kept while students at Cambridge has gone missing, and the secrets within his particular pages, if revealed, could set off deadly consequences.

The dangerous Captain El Goodrum, proprietress of the most infamous house of pleasure in London, holds the key to their retrieval. In exchange for her cooperation, she demands he fight his way through a gauntlet of secrets to deliver a master criminal to justice. His only path to the damning pages is the inscrutable chess mistress who not only resents his attempts to romance them away, but seems to relish his dread and panic at the prospect of the pages becoming public knowledge.

What Charlotte wants is a puzzle to everyone, including herself. She craves the kind of refuge she provides to the orphans she rescues from London's stews. The respite she seeks away from the world in her St. John's Wood villa with her two roommates is all that keeps her sane, but sometimes, late at night, she needs something more, something even she cannot name.

PROLOGUE

April 1, 1826

Goodrum's House of Pleasure

Eleanor Goodrum turned a jade chess piece over and over in the palm of her hand and stared silently across her desk at Bow Street runner Archer Colwyn. She absently smoothed her thumb over the queen's blatantly sensual curves. She loved her chess pieces carved anatomically true to life.

The man whom she'd been told was the terror of Bow Street runners seemed ill at ease. He pulled at his starched collar as if he were having difficulty breathing in enough air. She smiled a cat-like smile, certain she had her prey exactly where she wanted him.

And more the pity he was prey because at a height of what she estimated as nearly six feet, he was the kind of man she thoroughly enjoyed. His ginger hair was the shade of dark russet that always caught her eye. And those shoulders - they would crush the woman lucky enough to be the object of desire in his arms. The dark shadow of a stubborn beard refusing to be tamed at this hour of the day finished his slightly dangerous looks.

When he suddenly leaned across the desk, closing the distance between them, she inhaled a deep breath of bergamot and sandalwood. The stab of uncertainty following close behind surprised her. No one had made her feel that way in years.

“Ummm, Mr. Colwyn, you do surprise me. I would never have guessed the raw audacity that simmers beneath your calm exterior.”

“Madame Goodrum, there is a good deal about me of which you are unaware. Many others have underestimated me...” He paused a long, silent moment before finally uttering, “At their own peril.”

“Ah, but there you are wrong. I don’t know whom you’ve dealt with in the past, but I see no peril in front of me now.”

“What do you see?” He leaned close again, his voice tense.

“I see a man desperate to reclaim something which could harm someone very close and dear to him.”

He jerked back as if seared by flames.

“Ah, yes. Now you see - I understand fully what is at stake here.” She kept her voice low and soothing, but she was sure he hadn’t missed the meaning of her words. His eyes had widened and he’d sucked in a sharp breath.

Even though she was certain she’d shattered his nerve, he straightened and demanded, “Stop baiting me. Just tell me. What is it you want?”

She slid a leather portfolio across the desk. “Read the papers inside and then bring me proof of the elimination of the man they concern.” She then placed an expensive vellum card into his hand. “This woman is the key to the return of your journal pages. She’s unlike any other woman you’ve ever

encountered, so do not think to deal with her the same way you'd deal with the simpering females of your acquaintance. Before she came to work for me, she was like a wounded bird with a broken wing. Tread carefully there, or you will have to answer to me.”

He took the card and studied the expensive, gilded printing.

She knew by heart what was on the carefully crafted card: “Madame Domino, Chess Mistress Extraordinaire” Beneath the name were gold edged letters for four nights of the week - Tuesday through Friday. The bottom line was stamped with the symbol of Goodrum's House of Pleasure - a ship under full sail, flying a pennant etched with a tiny skull and crossbones. The card was the face of the lucrative worldwide business El had built with her own blood and sweat. The hard-won empire was hers to use as she pleased.

When he made to pluck the card from her grasp, she tightened her hold. “If you take this card, you are bound by your word to deliver this man to justice.” She gave the leather bag between them an ominous tap.

He snatched the card from her grasp and shouldered the bag before heading back out through her office door. He said nothing further. He didn't have to.

She'd successfully leveraged the deeply held secret that could destroy not only him, but his sole reason for continuing to walk among the living. This particular form of blackmail gave her no pleasure, but she needed this gifted investigator to do her bidding in the battle against the lowest form of scum to roam London's streets, a child torturer and molester.



April 4, 1826

Covent Garden, London

The familiar smell of a horse manure barge being loaded quayside wafted across the close April night air. Col slipped down a darkened alley off Russell Street and reflected on his marginally good luck that evening. Although London streets had been ungodly wet that year, the elements had taken pity on London for one glorious night, and Col had managed to stay dry for a change. He caught an occasional wink of stars between the fast moving clouds following the snake-like outline of the Thames below.

Two rats squealing broke the silence of the heavy darkness in the alley. The loser hurried away, thoroughly thrashed and bested after a heated battle over a crust of bread. The victor waddled off with his prize bakery cast-off reflecting a bit of light from the street lamp out on Russell.

When Col turned to make sure no one had followed him into the alley behind one of the theater coffee houses, the toe

of his boot caught on something heavy, and he sprawled into the alley muck.

He swore an oath and jerked his hands back. His fingers were covered with the still warm blood of the man whose body had cushioned his fall. *Damnation and hellfire.*

Col stayed utterly still, listening for some evidence of whether he'd missed his chance once again to find the murderer. At the sound of nearby rapid, pounding steps heading toward the river, he stooped and retrieved the bloody chess piece he'd suspected would be lying on the body. After alerting a nearby street constable to the location of the body, he raced toward the river in pursuit of the mysterious killer of chess players.

Thank Zeus he had a few traits that endeared him to his handlers on Bow Street. He'd had extremely acute hearing since a lad, and lately, he'd discovered a knack for night vision. The longer he combed the London stews in the dark of the night, the better his vision became.

Although his own heart seemed to have climbed into his mouth and sucked up all the spit, this assignment was much preferable to the previous months he'd spent helping gather evidence needed to shut down one of the city's most notorious, deadly baby farms. That investigation had been much harder on him for reasons he chose not to examine too closely.

He pumped his arms and legs in a blur of motion and pushed his lungs to the limit. He was rewarded with a quick glimpse of a running man slipping down a set of stone steps cut into a dark opening near the embankment.

Col threw back his head before leaning over to catch his breath. The bastard had slithered away into the vast underground beneath the city. After only a few seconds, he

came to a decision. He dived and slid down the steps while gripping the iron rail. The bastard would *not* get away *this* time.



APRIL 4, 1826

Goodrum's House of Pleasure

Charlotte Smythe's eyes glittered behind her domino costume mask. Sleek black and white opaque silk stockings caressed her legs and stretched comfortably with her frequent leaning over multiple chess games in progress. A frothy layer of black-and-white, diamond-patterned skirts slashed open in the front made her swift movements among the ten boards much easier. Seven of her opponents had already admitted defeat. The remaining three hung on only through stubborn determination.

By silent agreement with club owner Captain Eleanor Goodrum, she always allowed the games to slow toward the end. The expensive show of chess mastery she provided at the exclusive Goodrum's House of Pleasure four nights a week had to last at least an hour. Otherwise, the eager male patrons would believe they hadn't received sufficient return on their investments. At fifteen quid per game, hers was one of the most expensive gaming ventures in London.

Her loudest detractor, the elderly Marquess of Wisenberry, still paid the outrageous fee to play in these exclusive matches every week, certain he'd best her eventually. There were wagers on the books at White's on when, and if, he would ever defeat the beautiful domino-attired chess mistress.

He was so corpulent from self-indulgence that he had one of his footmen deliver him each Wednesday to the multiple-board game in his specially made wooden wheelchair. The marquess had probably been a handsome gentleman in his youth, but years of excessive food and drink had laid him low. He wore a curled blonde wig, but his silver brows gave away his true age. The bright blue eyes beneath the brows, however, spoke of a possibly happier time in his youth.

She moved closer to his board and was rewarded with a wary, uncertain glance. She had him, which she'd known for the last two moves, but she'd let him blunder a bit longer. Her queen was one elegant glide away from claiming his king. The marquess had pieces protecting his king everywhere but the one space where they needed to be. She'd been taking his pawns and one of his protective knights - one by one. No matter how many games the silly man played, he never seemed to comprehend how dangerous the queen could be.



APRIL 4, 1826

Covent Garden, London

Col was nearly winded when he skidded to a halt at the sound of raised voices in what appeared to be a huge open area at the end of the long tunnel. He'd been chasing his quarry for what seemed like an hour. Of course, it couldn't have been that long. He only hoped he'd be able to find his way back out through the black maw of the underground passageways.

The man he'd chased had stopped at each intersection and lit a small candle lantern he'd probably stashed at the entrance

to the tunnel. He'd study a piece of paper before snuffing the light and continuing deeper into the labyrinth.

Col in turn had taken out the stub of a pencil he always carried and a bit of paper covered with many scrawled notes. Whenever the man stopped before deciding which way to turn, Col made a notation of the direction. Although he realized he'd never be able to read his writing in the impenetrable curtain of darkness in the tunnel, writing down the directions helped him remember the sequence of complex turns.

When the tunnel widened and dim light exploded into his vision, he edged back into the darkness, but not before he'd singled out his prey. The man was easy to spot in the crowd inside the cave-like room. He was the one holding aloft a corked glass tube of dark liquid - probably cached from the considerable pool of blood surrounding the dead, mutilated man in the alley.

Fascinated, Col watched him approach a woman near one of the room's walls. The woman was completely nude with her body painted in black, which matched the crown on her head and the scepter in her hands. She lifted the slender container of the victim's blood above her head and turned in a slow circle before motioning to a man leaning against the wall. He advanced toward her, took the jar, and poured the contents over her head before whispering something into her ear. She smiled and turned, walking regally toward the other side of the room along a series of white squares, squares formed from marble inlaid into the stone floor of the room.

Bile rose in Col's throat. The floor of the room was laid out like a chess board. No, it *was* a chess board, and all the pieces were human, nude humans painted black or white to represent their sides of the board.

The bloody chess piece he'd wrapped inside a handkerchief and stashed in a hidden slit inside his coat now had his hand itching to find out which one had been left with the body this time. He'd have to wait until later. For now, he'd have to make his way back through the maze of tunnels before the strange crowd of human chess pieces and voyeurs discovered his presence.



APRIL 4, 1826

Goodrum's House of Pleasure

Charlotte had her way with two of her three remaining challengers before advancing to stand reflectively in front of the Marquess of Wisenberry.

He'd been deep in thought and staring at his board before looking back defiantly. "I have you this time," he insisted.

She favored the ancient nobleman with a wide smile. "You won't have me *tonight*, milord."

He gave her a thunderous look which no doubt terrified his footman standing nearby. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

She pointed a long, rose-tinted nail toward his side of the board. His black king was nearly surrounded by pawns, but one tiny square opened up a direct diagonal for her queen to strike precipitously. "Check," she said, with a soft purr to her voice.

He raised himself out of his wheelchair and leaned heavily over the board. "Damn you. Damn you to hell, Madame Domino." At that he swung his cane and upended the entire

board, spilling all the pieces onto the expensive Aubusson-carpeted floor.

One of the many burly footmen Captain El stationed at all times in the many rooms in her House of Pleasure moved quickly to stand between the marquess and Charlotte.

Beneath her domino half-mask, she struggled to keep a smile from quirking across her lips. That would do nothing but accelerate the heat of the current situation. Instead, at the snap of the fingers of one of the guards near the old man, an entire circle of footmen marched into place around Charlotte and moved as one to escort her safely out of the chess room.

Once she was back in her rooms on the top floor of Goodrum's and had poured a large globe of robust, dark red claret, there was a light tap at the door. "Come," she said, confident that no harm would ever come to her there.

When the door opened, the woman she'd come to love and respect like a mother glided in quietly and stood with her head cocked to the side, watching Charlotte silently.

"What?"

Captain Eleanor Goodrum's ready smile told her more than words would have. "You did well this evening. The marquess cannot always have his way."

"But?"

"He is one of my more generous customers." She paused a moment as if searching for a delicate way to explain what Charlotte already knew. Captain El's full-skirted, dark red spangled gown glittered in the lumination of a gaslit wall sconce. The bodice above was of a nude-like sheer fabric with elaborate, strategically placed light-reflecting scarlet and gold embroidery.

Charlotte laughed. “Yes, of course, I’ll let the marquess win next week.”

APRIL 4, 1826

THAMES RIVER POLICE OFFICE

Col stretched out his boot-clad feet toward the fire in the coal grate in the office of the Thames River Police magistrate. Although the rain had mercifully held off, his race through the dank depths of the tunnel beneath the Thames had chilled him to his very innards.

Justice of the Peace Joseph Miller shook his head slowly in disgust and stared at the bloody queen holding court on Col's handkerchief in the middle of his desk. Col had unfurled the chess piece he'd found with the body near Covent Garden.

The office of the river police had been investigating the two previous murders for months and had borrowed Col's services from Bow Street after the discovery of the second body.

They'd tried to keep the gruesome details from the Fleet Street hounds, but it was only a matter of time before the whole city would be afire with rumors. However, the sad, ugly truth was that someone was picking off chess players when they left the coffee houses where the game was most popular, and dumping their bodies in and around the Thames.

Col had been prowling the neighborhood for weeks, looking for some bit of evidence to pick up the trail of the

repeat murderer. This was the third attack where the body had been viciously slashed and a chess piece left as calling card.

An uneasy frisson niggled at the sensitive spot between his shoulder blades. The fact that the current holder of his missing journal pages was a chess mistress at Goodrum's seemed an unlikely coincidence, considering his current case assignment. And he didn't believe in coincidences. Fate was an unforgiving harpy you ignored at your own peril.

In exchange for the name Captain El Goodrum had given him she required a favor in return. That investigative favor also had a connection to the world of coffeehouse chess. Too many coincidences.

He hated to contemplate another visit to the formidable owner of Goodrum's, but he was going to have to question her about the murders.

Magistrate Miller finally spoke. "We sent a squad of men to break up that disgusting cult in the tunnel, but everything had been cleared out before we got there." He leaned closer to Col, and his red-rimmed gray eyes showed signs of sleep deprivation. "You know as well as I do, they'll just move their little, um, game to another rat-hole."

Col steepled his hands in front of his face and stared back at Miller. "We have to start thinking like chess players and anticipate their moves."

The magistrate didn't answer, but simply tipped back in his chair and gave him a long, assessing look. Finally, he thudded back to the floor and said, "I trust your instincts, Officer Colwyn. But make damned sure you know what you're doing."

Col picked up his hat and made to leave. “I’m no expert on the subject, sir, but I know someone who is.”

After he excused himself and headed back to his lodgings on Great Queen Street, he made a mental note to stop delaying the inevitable and purchase a chess board position for the next night at Goodrum’s.



APRIL 5, 1826

Goodrum’s House of Pleasure, London

Charlotte surveyed the hopefuls ensconced at the ten chess boards around the room, but her startled gaze stopped abruptly at the new challenger.

Most of the other players were her regulars. This one was new, and his manner set him apart drastically. Instead of intently contemplating his first move, he’d struck a lazy, careless pose. Broad shoulders strained his fine woolen serge jacket to the limits, and he’d shoved his long legs to one side of the game table. He slouched elegantly, staring relentlessly at her. His wind-tousled ginger hair feathered slightly at his neck, a thick, strong neck suggesting he might be a boxer.

But his eyes were what discomposed her the most. They were an odd shade of hazel, almost tortoise-like, depending on which way the light struck them. She had plenty of time to contemplate them because his gaze never left hers. Most men would have looked away by now, but he continued to stare - boldly, blatantly. What in the name of Circe was he about? She was determined to find out.

Charlotte glided quickly to his side and leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Why are you being so rude? What do you want?”

He turned his head and smiled up at her, spreading his arms wide. “I want to unsettle you, Madame Domino. I’m a complete amateur at the game, and my only chance is to charm you witless.”

She jerked back as if singed by fire. “Be careful.” She leaned down again and murmured low. “If Captain Goodrum’s guards hear you talking that way, they’ll pitch you out on your, um, elegant arse.”

Charlotte punctuated that warning with a long, leisurely look at said arse. And it was lovely, filling out the fine woolen serge of his trousers in all the right places. Who the hell was this man? She usually knew in advance all about her challengers.

How had he managed to buy a coveted place in that night’s chess tournament without her knowledge? The vision of her boss, Captain Eleanor Goodrum, leapt to mind.

Why was he here, and what had he promised the forbidding owner of Goodrum’s in exchange for access to her exclusive games? Since he’d admitted he was a complete amateur, what did he really want?

The object of her thoughts broke into them. “I can tell the wheels of your mind are spinning at the thought of rolling over me in a game of chess. And, by the way, I also think I detected some interest in my, um, person. Let me save you some time. You have something I want, and I’m prepared to pay any reasonable sum you request. Or perhaps you’d like something else?”

The glint in his confounding eyes told her he thought he could romance away whatever it was she had that he wanted. He had no idea with whom he was dealing.

“*Monsieur*, I must confess I’m confused. What is it of yours you think I have?”

“My journal pages.”



COL RECONSIDERED his wardrobe choices for the evening. He was way too warm under the intensity of the chess mistress’s regard, but resisted the urge to tug at his carefully and intricately tied neckcloth. George would kill him. His valet had labored most of the day to make sure Col would be as well dressed as any of the others at the exclusive club, since they both knew he was going to fall flat on his face in the chess challenge.

The reaction of the chess mistress to his pronouncement had been interesting. She’d remained cool and unfazed, but he could tell the cogs were turning rapidly behind her emotionless mask. The mask and costume were nice touches. He wished he had something of the sort to wear when he visited the card tables at his friends’ gaming hell. He’d become fast friends of Julian, Duke of Montfort, and Hugh, Earl of Westfalia, when he’d taken care of a little matter for them. He’d discreetly discovered the source of huge losses in their card operation that had baffled the two of them for months.

In spite of her clever disguise, he knew her real identity. She was Charlotte Smythe, protege of the dangerous Captain Eleanor Goodrum. He’d checked with all his usual sources but had been stymied in discovering any information on Miss

Smythe's background. It seemed as though she'd walked into Goodrum's ten years earlier, a mysterious orphan with no known familial ties.

He wished to hell he were there playing cards that night instead of trading ugly looks with the woman who held his portion of the infamous journal pages. He'd love to pummel the younger version of himself for being such an unthinking dunce at Cambridge. The youthful escapades he'd penned without a thought except to one-up his old school pals with whom he'd shared rooms had turned into a deadly liability. A liability not only for him, but for someone dangerously near and precious to him.



CHARLOTTE RESISTED the urge to smirk at the strange gentleman's clumsy attempts at chess. For every move she made to the middle, he mirrored her strategy, until he had four of his pawns facing her...and leaving his side of the board open for her queen to play on as she pleased. With his king exposed and no guards against her queen, she ended his misery after about twenty minutes of play. At her quiet utterance of "Check," he stared up at her, puzzlement in his eyes.

"I've put your king in check, sir."

He stared a bit longer, making her wonder just what was going on behind those otherworldly hazel eyes. And then he carefully laid his king piece on its side before standing and bowing. "Thank you for tolerating my ignorance, milady." With that, he turned as if to leave the club, but then turned back at the last minute. "I wonder if you could give me a moment of your time soon...away from here. And we might

come to an agreement on how I could regain possession of my journal pages?"

"So, if you're unable to romance them away from me, you'll offer me money for them?" She tilted her head like an elegant cat considering whether or not to tear apart her mouse-like prey.

"Yes, I believe that's the essence of my plan."

"Perhaps, just perhaps if you can do a little better the next time, I might consider an, um, arrangement." At her words, there was an audible gasp from the other players at the surrounding tables.

"Of course, milady. I will endeavor to find a suitable teacher so that I do not embarrass myself the next time." He favored her with a mock salute and walked away toward the door to the game room and presumably on out of Goodrum's into the foggy London night.

Once he'd left, the players at the various boards murmured low until she snapped her fingers. "I'm not done with the lot of you." And then she proceeded to destroy each one's carefully constructed defense.

APRIL 5, 1826

OUTSIDE GOODRUM'S, LONDON

Col cursed aloud at his own stupidity. What in the name of St. James' bones did he think he'd accomplish by marching into her game room and challenging her to a bout of chess?

He should have remembered all the times Maria had tried to get him to play the dratted game with her. No matter how often she'd patiently explained all the rules and moves of the various chess pieces, his eyes had glazed over once they actually were at play. The strategy and tactics of the game had escaped him all those years ago when he was a very young man so much in love with an older woman that he'd have done anything to please her.

He had trouble remembering the lines of the patrician face he'd loved so well back then, but the wide blue eyes always so full of laughter, albeit mocking laughter - he'd never be able to forget. They would haunt him as long as he had life and breath to protect the current bearer of those eyes.

He ignored the stinging memories and moved out into the foggy London night outside Goodrum's. Since pleasure seekers were still out in full force, ignoring the foul weather, he pulled his pocket watch out of his serviceable dark navy waistcoat and nearly laughed out loud at the time. It had taken barely half an hour for the chess mistress to crush him in

defeat, not to mention all the tense moments of begging like a besotted fool before she denied him his lost journal pages.

Since this was one of his rare nights off from the service, he decided to find a chess teacher at one of the coffee shops in Covent Garden which were open all hours of the night and day. There were always games in progress somewhere in the dark corners of the city that crouched on the shore of the Thames like a great hulking prison ship. And like it or not, he was more like one of the prisoners than a gaoler.



AFTER SHE FINALLY FLED THE chess room for the evening, Charlotte dipped a linen kerchief into the cool water sitting in a basin behind a brocade screen in a corner of her room. She wrung out the delicate square before throwing herself across the Empire daybed she rarely used in her quarters at Goodrum's. She covered her eyes with the damp kerchief and sank into the quilted plump cushions without bothering to have her maid turn back the neatly made bed.

In the cool dark, she tried to make sense of what was so important in the journal pages, which were now hers. What would make a well-known Bow Street runner lower himself to play a game about which he knew next to nothing and then beg for her help in such a public place?

Once she'd recovered sufficiently, she rose and tossed the domino costume across the back of a chair behind the screen. She drew on the voluminous black silk robe she kept on a hook on the wall, and shivered with the sheer luxury of the fabric sliding against her skin.

She walked across the room to her dressing table and added a dab of scent from an elegant stoppered bottle - a fusion of new green grass, lavender, and a touch of tangerine. She'd recently ordered another bottle of the specially made scent from Floris. Charlotte liked to surround herself with the expensive perfume, including having her maid pour generous amounts into her bath water along with the other oils and soaps.

Sometimes late at night, though, she could still smell the stench of the London streets and stews, not to mention that of her torturers, from which El had rescued her ten years earlier.

Back then, her handler had made a fine profit off selling her for the night to the men she bested at chess in coffee houses. The mere memory had her squinting her eyes tightly against the unbidden scenes that flitted through her mind.

If not for Captain Goodrum's protection, she knew the men she brutalized each night at Goodrum's chess boards would have debased her by now to ease their own pride. She had no idea how she'd come by the knack of knowing the tactics of chess as well as her own mind. She didn't think about her moves. She merely dominated the critical center of the board each night and let the tingling in her hands take care of the rest.

But for now, her curiosity got the best of her. She needed to read the powerful Bow Street runner's pages of sensual conquest again. What, she wondered, was so damning in them that he'd go to such lengths to retrieve them?

So far, she'd only read them whilst in the midst of pleasuring herself. She needed another set of eyes...or two to figure out what secrets lurked there.

She pulled the bell rope beside her bed and waited for her maid to help her dress for a carriage ride. She needed to return to her villa tucked away in a cozy corner of St. John's Wood. Her house companions were experts at unraveling puzzles.



APRIL 5, 1826

Covent Garden Coffee House, London

Col adjusted his long legs to accommodate the low stool across from the chess master who'd been recommended by one of the officers at the river police station. He had no way of judging whether the man knew what he was about, or was just stringing along a "nob" haunting the back streets of Covent Garden.

He reflected, too late, that he might have had better luck in his oldest, worn jacket and scuffed boots. In the finery he'd worn to fit in at Goodrum's, he now stood out like a shiny pence dropped in the midst of gutter refuse at the side of the street.

However, he conceded that inside the coffee house, the patrons were mostly of the genteel, if drab, sort. They seemed to be intellectually bright men whose professions - no doubt bakers, typesetters, shop-keepers and the like - were what they toiled at by day but kept their wits alive by playing chess against each other by night.

"Wake up, sirrah. I'm not about to sit here all night awaiting your attention for three pence." The garrulous old man across from him brought Col roughly back to reality. The man wore a gray-tinged shirt with patches sewn at the elbows. His threadbare woolen waistcoat was in similar disrepair,

probably purchased or sewn sometime in the previous century by someone who had once been at the old bastard's beck and call. His wiry silver hair was tamped down beneath a gray knit hat, and his wire-rimmed spectacles sat precariously close to the end of his nose.

He squinted up at Col and demanded, "Tell me again why you need to learn to play chess? You obviously have no aptitude for the game."

"Another chess player has something I need, and this, um, player demands the satisfaction of my winning a game to have my property returned."

The rheumy look the elderly gentleman leveled at him across the top of his spectacles spoke volumes. He no doubt found Col's explanation as preposterous as it sounded to him the minute he'd uttered the words.

"What kind of man would use chess to keep your property from you?"

Heat flamed across Col's face. "This is not exactly a normal situation."

The man relented and lowered his gaze. "Show me the opening moves this player made...and the moves with which you countered."

"How will that help?"

"Since you seem reluctant to reveal the whole story, we have to start somewhere."

Col moved the white pawns exactly as Miss Smythe had moved them, and then advanced the black opposing pawns, mimicking his own moves.

The old man gave a low whistle and leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “You weren’t interested in winning, were you?”

Col hung his head. “I had no idea what I was doing.”

“Had you ever played before?”

“Years ago, I played every night.”

“And you never got better?”

“No. I couldn’t keep my mind on learning chess.” He raised his eyes to meet those of the old chess master. “I was more interested in what came after the game.”

APRIL 6, 1826

ST. JOHN'S WOOD VILLA, LONDON

Charlotte spread out Mr. Colwyn's journal pages on the counterpane of her large, comfortable bed on the top floor of her St. John's Wood villa. Her house companions, who'd spent the night curled next to her, sat on the comfortable stuffed settee near the large window overlooking the thickly wooded street. They sipped slowly at their tea and read pages from the journal. Both of their faces were still flushed from the warmth of the night they'd spent with her, sprawled in each other's arms. Both still had sleep-tousled hair.

The two of them served officially as Charlotte's lady's maids, offering the outside world an explanation for why three single women lived together without benefit of family or husbands. Actually, her two friends were the only tethers that held together Charlotte's sanity.

Her only other servants, the butler, footman, and cook, owed their allegiance to Captain Goodrum. They served Charlotte faithfully and never engaged in frivolous gossip with neighboring servants, or at the Abbey Tavern.

Margot, cross-legged on the settee, spoke first. "All of these pages are filled with words of love written by a man so smitten, he appears to be unable to see what this woman is

doing to him.” She shoved her unfettered mahogany curls back behind her ears.

Gabrielle rose to her knees next to Margot, leaned in, and peered over the other woman’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t call him a man. Why, this poor child couldn’t have been much more than fifteen or sixteen when he penned this nonsense.” She rucked up her sensible fine linen night shift to lean closer, revealing long, slender arches and toes as well as the dimpled backside of a knee. She snatched one of the pages out of her friend’s hand and joined Charlotte on the bed.

“Why do you always do that?” Gabrielle grumbled half-heartedly.

The room became silent for a few moments while they pored over Col’s journal pages.

Charlotte spoke first. “He was trying to learn to play chess while this horrible woman seduced him. Poor baby.”

“I don’t think he suffered that mightily.” Margot adjusted her half reading spectacles and peered warily above them.

“No,” Gabrielle added. “Did you read the description of how she...?”

Charlotte interrupted what she was about to say by holding out her hand. “Why did I bring you two into this puzzle? I might have known better...” She trailed off after reading a few more lines on the pages she held up to the morning light streaming through the window of her tree shaded aerie. “Oh, my God.”

“What?” Her friends nearly shouted in unison.

“Listen to this...” Charlotte began to read aloud from one of her pages.

“Tonight, my life changed forever. Maria is mine now. I don’t know how this will end, but I must find a way to support us so that she can leave her husband. My father left me a bit of money, but it’s not enough, and I don’t come into my inheritance until I’m twenty-one. Maria remains childless after many years. Surely he’ll grant her freedom so that he can get an heir on another.

“From the beginning, we’ve shared pleasurable love play, but I’ve always had to be careful not to spend inside her. Until tonight, I never thought she’d allow me to claim her.

“The first time I saw her, it was autumn at Cambridge. The day was crisp with promise of golden days to come, but underlaid with a whiff of death in the dried leaves bowling along with the wind across the triangle. We’d played a rough game against Oxford and I’d gotten a fearsome knock to my right knee. I couldn’t keep up with the other lads, so I’d told them to go ahead to the inn, and I’d limp along to catch up later.

“She walked directly toward me along the path, and at first I thought she was looking for someone especially, the way her head tilted this way and that, with an occasional furtive glance behind. She wore a long, dark crimson redingote and a jaunty matching hat with a feather, all in the same deep color of blood when it rushes from the body. Her cheeks flushed a similar shade from the cold, lashing wind.

“When I asked her whom she sought, she said she sought me. She led me back to her rooms at the very inn where my friends were celebrating noisily in the tavern beneath our room. When I offered to bathe so as not to offend, she laughed, the sly little laugh I would come to know better than

my own. She said she wanted me off the field, still sweaty and fresh from the fierce game I'd just played.

“When I tried to take her as I would any of the willing women in the village, she shook her head and smiled. For the rest of that afternoon, and long into the night, until late the next morning, she kept me in that tiny room, teaching me all the ways to please a woman without getting her with child. She was married, she said, to a jealous nobleman who would have both of us killed if he knew of the pleasures we'd shared that day.

“She said we could never meet again, but over the next two years she came for me anyway, many times. On some occasions we'd walk into town. She brought me footman's livery to wear, and I'd carry her packages, pretending to be her servant. One day I saw Sythe, who was in town with his mother. He recognized me, but said nothing. The next time we were in our rooms, he and the rest of my friends tried to make me see reason.

“CB's Aunt Camilla knew Maria's husband. She'd urged my friends to warn me of the man's capacity for vicious cruelty. And then CB told me his aunt had said Maria had played the same dangerous game many times, the game she now played with me. And each time, her 'secret lover' had ended up dead, one of many anonymous bodies found floating in the Thames in London. No one could ever prove the earl's involvement, but everyone was well aware of the penalty for dallying with Maria.

“I still wasn't afraid, but then Maria began arranging for me to offer my services to several of her friends. They were all wealthy, bored, married women who would pay me well. At first I recoiled, hurt and confused. But then I realized what I

was. I'd been accepting money as well as sexual favors from Maria. I'd believed she'd loved me, but I was nothing to her but a boy-satyr for hire."



APRIL 6, 1826

Covent Garden Coffee House, London

Col started and nearly fell off his chair when the old chess player across from him rapped his knuckles with the battered cane he kept beneath the table. "Pay attention—. I don't have all night to wait for you to make up your mind."

He shook his head hard and re-focused on the board. He'd been going over in his mind the events of the night earlier that week when he'd chased the chess murder suspect into an unfinished tunnel beneath the Thames.

"I know exactly what you've been saying."

"Then tell me what you've learned, if anything."

"The pawns - they're best for advancing attacks where one can be sacrificed while another takes the opponent's piece." Col paused for affirmation, and the old man gave him a grudging nod. "And then there are the knights. Good for sneak attacks when your opponent is busy worrying about other pieces on the board. It's hard to predict where they'll land."

"Not bad for your first lesson." The old man pulled a clay pipe from one of his pockets and a flint. He filled the bowl from a bag of tobacco he kept next to the board, scratched the flint against the sole of his boot, and coaxed an ember of a flame. Leaning back, he took a deep suck on the stem and gave Col a long, critical look. "If you've no choice but to fling

yourself at this chess chit again this week, perhaps you've learned enough not to embarrass yourself as much as the last time."

Col pressed an extra pence into the man's free hand and rose quickly. He pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat and clapped his hat back onto his head. "I have to attend to some more business tonight, but will you be here two nights from now?" Col looked around the nearly deserted coffee shop. Fear of the chess murderer seemed to have taken its toll on the denizens of the neighborhood.

"I'm here every night." He blew several rings of smoke towards Col and added, "If you've got the blunt, I'm at your service."

"You're not afraid, like the rest?" Col swept his arm around the near empty room.

"Mebbe I know something those blokes don't."

"Like what?"

"Like who disappears the night the murders occur."

"You mean there's someone whose movements coincide with the nights the murderer strikes?"

"Could be just a coincidence."

"Who? Whose movements coincide with the murders?"

"Not ready to say yet. Mebbe I'll have more for you at your next lesson."

Col looked around, uneasy their conversation might have been overheard. "Be careful what you say. If I were you, I wouldn't rattle word around that you're marking the movements of a possible murderer.

The old man looked up, his rheumy eyes watery from the smoky coffeehouse. “I’m not afraid. He knows better than to tangle with me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“If anything were to happen to me, he knows I’ve made sure his dark secrets will spill out like rats from a burning house.”

APRIL 6, 1826

CHESS NIGHT AT GOODRUM'S

Charlotte stared down at the stubborn Bow Street runner bent over one of Goodrum's chess boards. He could not win, and she'd even given him an out earlier. The infuriating man had stared intently back when she'd said "Check," and then had refused to acknowledge her outstretched hand. Instead, he'd found an impossible move behind a pawn. She'd made short work of the protective pawn with her queen and then had uttered the word of chess finality again.

However, he'd given her a momentary bad moment earlier when he'd unexpectedly taken out one of her rooks with his knight. The man was definitely getting better at the game.

He finally raised his head and gave her a lopsided smile. "You win."

When she extended her hand, instead of a solemn shake, he pulled her hand close to his mouth, turned over her palm, and placed a warm kiss there in the sensitive dip that she felt all the way down to her quim.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the club's footmen forming into a line to come to her defense. She shook her head in a vigorous "no," and they stood down.

She wanted to linger over the way his eyes looked in the low light, the way they changed from a light amber to dark brown, depending on how hard he concentrated. He wasn't concentrating on the game now. He was focused entirely on her.

Instead of saying what she wanted to say, she complained. "I suppose you think you're going to charm me out of the journal pages now."

"Am I?"

"No. This game was not nearly close enough." She ran her tongue over her lower lip before adding, "You're going to have to try harder. I'm enjoying your...adventures...entirely too much."

"How well do I have to play to satisfy you?"

"Enough so I'll never forget you...or your journal pages."



COL HARDENED PAINFULLY against his already too-tight trousers. Ever since Maria he'd managed to compartmentalize his life. He'd vowed never again to fall under the spell of a deceitful woman. He and one of the actresses who lived on a lower floor of his boarding house managed to assuage their mutual needs from time to time, but out-of-control lust hadn't overcome him in many years.

He had to move carefully here. When he'd promised himself never again, he'd meant it. If he'd meant it, though, why was his cock fantasizing about the woman before him? Open to him on silken sheets, her pale legs spread wide, her

ethereal white-blond hair splayed across a red satin-covered pillow?

Perhaps he'd take her wearing nothing but the harlequin mask, to taunt and remind him of his futile attempts to master her at the chess board. But he knew in that moment she was the sort of woman who would not willingly submit in his bed, or any other man's bed for that matter. The touch of flint in her violet-tinged eyes made that truth abundantly clear.

He allowed himself to wonder for one jagged second whether all the men she trounced in the gaming room had the same thoughts. When he spared a furtive glance at the five other gentlemen playing that night, he realized he was not the only one who would be seeking release later in his lonely bed.

In one swift move he stood and swept from the chess room, refusing to look back toward his slim, exotic tormentor.



CHARLOTTE'S CORE pulsed and ached where she needed the strange Mr. Colwyn most. The unexpected attraction left her confused. She'd never depended on a man to fill any of her needs since the night long ago when Captain El had marched into the shabby coffee house near the docks where Charlotte had been deep into defeating a group of more than eight chess players.

The sight of Eleanor when she was quiet and unassuming was frightening enough. Her unusual height for a woman coupled with the scar slashing one side of her face always gave strangers pause. However, the sight of Eleanor enraged could strike fear into the hearts of grown men.

Charlotte's old handler, Bernard, was collecting wagers from the other patrons and onlookers when the fearsome Captain El stormed in through the front door. An icy wind had blown in behind her, magnifying the effect of her height in a full, swirling black woolen cape. The sound of her boots pounding against the aged wooden boards had been the only warning he'd gotten before she'd grabbed him by the shoulders of his shabby coat and thrown him onto the floor.

The coins he'd collected flew to all corners of the room. The mysterious Amazon of a woman had stood over Charlotte's former torturer and forced him to crawl across the coffee shop picking up the stray pence and depositing them into the upturned top hat she'd worn that night. Two burly men who'd accompanied her into the room had lifted up the old bastard Bernard by his armpits and pushed him toward the rear of the coffee shop.

Patrons had spilled out into the cold night, desperate to flee the sight of whatever would happen next. Without a further word, the tall woman had held her hand out to Charlotte, and they'd exited the coffee house door immediately. When Charlotte had turned at the sound of screams emanating from inside the coffee house, Eleanor had gently turned her away. Away toward the interior of a luxurious carriage, away toward a new life.



COL WALKED RAPIDLY AWAY from Goodrum's, eager to get as much distance as possible between him and the confounded chess mistress. Her cryptic answer as to how well he had to play to get his damned journal pages back had left him more confused than he'd been at the very beginning. Who was this

woman for whom money meant nothing? Why couldn't she just take his coin and leave him in peace with his pages, his reputation, and his secrets intact? And then there was the matter of the unbidden memories that had surfaced when he'd tried to recall just how damning the pages might be.

She was toying with him, like a tom with a rat. If she wanted to destroy him, why not just get it over with instead of torturing him night after night at a damnable chess board?

He supposed CB could temporarily cover the costs of another expensive night in Goodrum's chess room for him, but what if the damnable woman was still not satisfied with his performance? What then? He'd pay CB back when his pay from the river police came through, but he'd decided three games would be his limit. If she didn't let him have his pages after that, he might have to explain to the infernal woman exactly what the stakes were if the contents of the pages were ever revealed publicly. Surely she could see reason. He had to find a way to *make* her see reason.

After a quick glance at his pocket watch, he headed briskly back toward Great Queen Street. He had a standing appointment with a beautiful, spoiled woman who would be annoyed if he were late again for her bedtime tale.



DAMN THE NEED TO slow down moves toward the end. Charlotte felt as though she might burst from frustration if she didn't get away from the chess room and back to her hideaway villa in St. John's Wood. She needed to read more of Mr. Colwyn's journal pages. She desperately yearned for more clues to how that lonely, used boy had turned into the hard,

stubborn man she'd confronted across a chess board that evening.

In his early writing, he'd been eager and open for affection. But then he'd been betrayed in the worst possible way by the woman he'd thought had been as much in love with him as he was in love with her. Where had he gone, what had he become after she'd turned him into nothing more than a sexual plaything for her friends?

Had he run away? Or had he suffered through the shame of taking money for his services so that he could survive and stay at university?

As soon as she was back in her rooms on the top floor of Goodrum's, she ordered a carriage from the mews.

She startled Margot and Gabrielle who were curled up side by side on the sitting room settee poring over Mary Shelley's latest novel, *The Last Man*.

"What's wrong? You're home early." Margot pulled off her spectacles and rubbed at her eyes.

"There *is* something wrong," Gabrielle insisted. "It's that Bow Street runner again, isn't it?"

Charlotte hung her head. She was terrible at keeping emotions off her face. She'd make a pitifully incompetent investigator...damn...why had that thought popped into her head?

Margot came and put her arm around her. "It *is* him. You poor thing. What can we do to help?"

Charlotte faced both of her house companions squarely. "I must read the rest of those journal pages tonight. Will you help me?"

Instead of answering, her friends fell in behind her as she climbed the stairs to their second-floor bed chamber aerie where the journal pages were still spread out on the massive bed where they'd left them.

Charlotte separated the pages they had yet to read and spread them out on the floor so that she and her house companions could see them all at once.

Gabrielle volunteered to read one of the early seductions.

“Tonight Marie showed me something truly magical. When I pulled her atop my hardness, she laughed and pushed me away.

“When I frowned like a pup who’s been slapped away from the table, she pulled me close and spoke low near my ear. ‘Let me guide your hand,’ she insisted. I stiffened when she pulled my hand away from her breast, but stilled, intrigued, as she slowly lowered my palm to the hot, moist place where the tops of her long legs began. She stayed my hand there a while, slowly pressing the heel of my hand to her mound and moving me in a slow rubbing motion while she writhed and moaned with each new move.

“Suddenly, she pulled my index and middle fingers lower and pushed a slow dance of my fingers at the entrance to her quim. When I shoved inside in my eagerness, she withdrew the fingers, carefully kissing and licking each one.

“You have to be patient, my beautiful boy,” she said, and placed the very tips of my fingers inside the front edge of her slit and rotated them slowly and carefully until I could feel a throbbing sort of small button beneath them. The heat and throbbing burned down to my soul while I nearly forgot my own need. Hell, I nearly forgot my own name.

“She moved against me, slowly at first, warning me not to move my fingertips from the nubbin that seemed to be the center of a whirlwind of pleasure. Her cheeks pinkened, her eyes closed, and she threw back her head in a keening of pleasure.

“After a few minutes, she opened her eyes and in one swift movement, pushed me to my back, knelt over me, and took my hardened cock inside her. My heart pounded in time to her careful thrusts, and just when I thought she’d let me release inside her, she rolled over suddenly and took my cock slickened from her juices into her mouth.

“I tried mightily not to pulse my seed down her throat, but when she sucked hard at the tip of my cock while sliding her hand up and down my shaft, I had no choice. When I came with a shudder, she took some into her mouth and then pulsed the rest onto my belly with her hand. Her lips glistened with my seed, and she laughed her fey laugh before kissing me and blending the tastes of both of us inside our mouths.”

When Gabrielle finished reading the last page, the quiet in the room was broken only by the swish of branches against the dormer window. She took off her glasses and polished hard with the hem of her nightdress.

Margot finally spoke. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I need to get under those sheets, and one or both of you are

going to have to pleasure me till I get the vision of what she did to him out of my head.”

Charlotte’s stomach fell with a sickening plunge. The vision that Gabrielle’s reading of the pages had evoked in her mind was that of Mr. Colwyn, pleasuring her throughout the night until she begged him to stop. However, lacking access to the Bow Street runner’s tantalizing body, she decided the idea of pleasuring herself with her companions was not such a bad idea, either.



COL STARED up at the soft light spilling out from the villa’s high dormer window onto the leaves of the plane tree above him. He pulled a battered cap low over his eyes and leaned back against the lamp post out on Blenheim Road near the corner of Loudoun.

He’d used his influence at Bow Street to find out where the infamous chess mistress from Goodrum’s kept her private hideaway. The long walk to the villa - more than an hour - had been worth it. He now had a better idea of what he was up against if he were to entertain any hope of stealing back his journal pages.

What could she do when she found they were gone? Report them stolen? He didn’t think so, but still he felt guilty about planning the theft. He’d play a third chess game with the maddening woman, but that was it. After a final game, all would be fair in theft and chess. He didn’t even consider he might win. He knew better.

He still smarted from the soulful look he’d gotten from Dee when he’d read her chosen story that night with as much

speed as she'd tolerate.

“You hafta work again,” she'd accused in a small voice when he'd taken a deep breath and pronounced, ‘the end.’ She hadn't spoken the words as a question, but a sad statement. He'd apologized and offered to read another story, but she'd laid her head down on her little pillow and turned to the wall, refusing to answer. The dark golden curls spilling across her pillow reminded him so much of her mother that an ache started deep in his chest and threatened to carve out his ribs from the inside.

After she'd fallen asleep and he'd donned his disguise for the evening, even his valet had given him a baleful look as he'd slipped out the door to their rooms and headed for the street below. He knew George would get over it, especially when their widowed landlady crept downstairs later to commiserate with him over their nightly cup of tea.

The light streaming from the villa's top floor bedchamber suddenly darkened, and Col pulled out his pocket watch. He'd give them twenty minutes, and then he'd go to work.

When the time was up, he waited a little longer before slipping from the shadows of one tree to another. He stood for long moments, using his acute sense of hearing to assure himself the entire house, including servants were well asleep. When he finally squatted in front of the rear entrance to the villa and went to work with tools out of his slim leather bag, he shook his head sadly. This woman with so many secrets and precious belongings had nothing more than a simple lock on her door. Any minor thief could work his way in with a few twists of a wire.

Once she bested him in chess the next time, he'd have to show up some night and give the haughty beauty a lesson in

the way of thieves. In the meantime, he'd have one of the lads at Bow Street keep watch on the small villa with its high-walled garden.

Not only were her flimsy locks putting her in danger of being at the mercy of London's society of thieves, but he'd begun to worry someone meant her harm. Perhaps that same shadowy person was the one planting clues to lead the river police to believe she was the chess murderer.

He was certain she wasn't guilty, but if Bow Street's best were to interrogate him, he'd be damned if he'd be able to explain why.

And then there was the name of the man Captain El had insisted he promise to expose and bring to justice in exchange for giving him the identity of the current holder of his pages. Bernard Deauville was a chess master who had dodged incarceration at Old Bailey for years due to buying off the many victims of his coffee house betting fraud schemes.



APRIL 7, 1826

Goodrum's House of Pleasure

Charlotte carefully applied her domino disguise makeup in front of the full-length mirror in her changing and retiring rooms at Goodrum's. She felt a frisson of anticipation, wondering if the mysterious Bow Street runner would try again to best her at chess that final game night of the week, or if he'd wait until the next week.

The light tap at her door signaled the footmen were ready to escort her to the game room for the evening. She took one

last look in the mirror, smoothed her skirts over her diamond-printed black and white silk stockings, and opened the door to join them.

The sight appearing in the doorway was not what she expected, and she had to stifle an un-ladylike scream. She never screamed, and she resented the man causing the commotion. He wore the same suit straining at the seams with not enough room for his impossibly wide shoulders.

“What is wrong with you?” She let out a long, hissing shush. “Do you want to be the next body found floating in the Thames, you ninnyhammer?”

His amber eyes glowed in the low light of her hallway. “All I wanted was to wish you luck tonight.”

She threw her head back and gave a disgusted huff. “You do know you could be killed for sneaking in this way.”

“Who would want to kill me?” He managed to maintain an innocent look.

At the sound of feet pounding up the stairway, she grabbed his arm and jerked him inside her room. She slammed the door shut and turned to point an angry finger his way and then in the general direction of the large wardrobe pushed against one wall.

Instead of doing as he was told, he advanced so close his warm breath scorched her cheeks. She stood motionless, mesmerized, while he took her into his arms and stole a quick, heated kiss. “I’ve been wanting to do that for the last two nights,” he whispered, before diving into the wardrobe and pulling the doors shut behind him.

Still smarting from the burn of his lips, she tentatively licked her lower lip before the firm knock she’d been

expecting came at the door.

When she opened the door after a deep breath, Obadiah, her head footman, stood there, fury written in the frown lines on his face. “We chased an intruder as far as this level of the club.” He angled his head around the side of the door, as if he suspected a menace crouched in the corner. He turned his attention back to her. “You’re not harmed in any way?”

Charlotte nearly smiled. The only dangerous rat in the room was folded inside her wardrobe, waiting for the footmen to leave. “I’m fine, Obadiah. Let me get my mask before we head downstairs.”

She closed the door to her dressing room partway before abruptly winging open the wardrobe door to retrieve her domino mask hanging from a hook inside. She stared down for a brief moment at the man painfully jammed inside before slamming the door shut again and joining the band of waiting footmen in her hallway.

Col watched the clock at his chess table slowly tick away the minutes of his allotted time. He knew he didn't have a prayer this time any more than the last two games at which he'd been thoroughly drubbed.

And he was having a hard time concentrating, considering the stares of malevolence being directed his way by an aristocratic old bugger dressed in finery of the last century. Charlotte, however, was pointedly ignoring his discomfort. She wove her way amongst tables, making rapid moves here and there, her icy smile unchanging beneath her mask.

The Goodrum's Friday night crowd was more extensive than those on the other week nights he'd been there. This time there was a crowd of onlookers in addition to the poor bastards paying for the privilege of being humiliated by the most sensual woman he'd ever encountered. And that was saying something, considering all the women he'd serviced throughout the years.

"Service" was a word that left a rancid taste in his mouth even though he'd not uttered it aloud. But it was true. He'd spent time performing sex for coin, just like the poor, unfortunate women who haunted the area outside the theaters each evening.

The only difference in his case was he'd been well taken care of and cosseted by his, um, customers. No, on second thought, those women had been more like wealthy gaolers than customers. They'd wanted more than just his body. Most of them had also demanded a piece of his soul.

He stared again at his pawns lined up against Charlotte's poor white bastards. He could easily knock off one of them, and she wouldn't care. She didn't need them. They were dispensable, like him. However, the minute he took one of her pawns, she'd take one of his and clear a path for that bitch of a queen of hers to glide somewhere and slaughter something he'd need later, like his queen, or a knight, or even his king.

Christ, there was no end of mayhem she could wreak after only one wrong move on his part. He nearly gave a self-deprecating laugh. That was the story of his life, especially since his path had intersected that of Charlotte Smythe.

He finally took her white pawn diagonally across from his black one. There. Now maybe she'd finish him off, and the old bastard at the table in the corner would stop looking at him like he wanted to use a sword to disembowel him.



CHARLOTTE LEANED over Mr. Colwyn's board and couldn't avoid an involuntary inhale of clean man, bergamot, and sandalwood.

She spoke in low tones so that none of the surrounding players could hear. "I thought you were more serious about wanting your journal pages back."

He grasped her wrist beneath the table and applied slight pressure. "I thought you were done spying on my sex life."

“No. Actually, your descriptions were the prelude last night to a very enjoyable evening.”

He increased the pressure on her wrist. “You and your little friends are lucky you weren’t murdered in your bed.”

Her eyes widened. “You were there?”

“Yes, and I could have joined you at any time, thanks to a thoroughly worthless lock on your rear door.”

Her stomach dropped, and she was unable to summon any spit in her mouth. “Why are you spying on me and my companions?”

“Let’s just say I have a burning interest in how secure you keep my journal pages.”

She didn’t reply, but used her queen to make him suffer for his impertinence. “Check,” she said, and glided away to her next victim.



STRICKEN, Col looked down at the board. His king had to make a move, but no matter what he did, she’d eventually have him. Why delay the inevitable? He grasped his elaborately carved black king and laid the poor bugger flat before leaning back in the cushioned chair and crossing his booted feet at the ankles.

The smirk from the obnoxious aristo in the corner evinced a glower from Col. He’d gone down in Charlotte-wrought ignominy several moves before Col had. He motioned with a nod of his head in the direction of an area of comfortable chairs away from the knot of chess players.

What the hell, Col reflected, and moved to join him.

After they'd ordered glasses of Goodrum's finest brandy, both downed their drinks in one long draught.

The old man had been wheeled over by his long-suffering footman and rudely stared for a few moments before introducing himself. "I'm John Rutger, Marquess of Wisenberry, and I find your frequent presence here damned annoying and contemptible."

"Archer Colwyn, Bow Street investigator, at your service. You bring up an interesting question I've been meaning to ask you all evening. Why all the vitriol toward someone you've never met before?"

"Because you're entirely too familiar with Miss Smythe. She doesn't need you interrupting her concentration."

"I wasn't aware I was interrupting anything. If I'm interfering with her concentration, then how does she beat the stuffing out of me night after night over a chess board?" Col nodded to a nearby footman and then to their empty glasses.

"You know nothing about women."

"Who does?" Col shrugged and spread his arms wide.

The older man preened and leaned closer to Col from his chair. "I like to think I know a bit about the fickle creatures." He saluted him with his refreshed glass of brandy. The footman had brought a full decanter to fill their glasses and then left the remainder on a low table between them.

As the brandy began to loosen his tongue, Wisenberry accused, "You're old Colwyn's Jamaican heir..."

Since Col assumed the statement was not a direct question, he ignored the old man.

“Demned shame he couldn’t have settled the land on you. His true sons are a couple of nitwits.”

Col had just enough brandy in him to relax so that he didn’t reach over and throttle the old rotter. “What makes you think I wouldn’t have made a cake out myself as well? We all came from the same loins.”

Wisemberry took a long sip and then pointed a weathered finger at Col. “You have a good head on you. I’ve heard things about you, Colwyn. You’re well thought of at the Home Office.”

Col stiffened and set his brandy glass back down. No one was supposed to have known about the many favors he’d done for the well-known barrister Stephen Forsythe when his old friend from Cambridge had been assisting at the Congress of Vienna. Intrigue had boiled at every turn, and Col had been there to make sure Sythe and his superiors had known when and where to throw cold water on the lot of the blighters trying to interfere with peace talks.

Both men were well into their cups when suddenly Charlotte appeared in front of them, her hands on her hips. “What made the two of you think I’d given you leave to abandon your boards?”

Col turned his face up toward hers in drunken impudence. “Who gave you leave to beat us senseless every night?”

She dismissed Col with a toss of her silvery blonde hair and turned toward Wisemberry. “I would have thought better of *you*, milord, such a fine student of chess.”

The elderly marquess saluted her with his empty glass. “I would have lingered if for nothing more than to see your beautiful face again, but I needed to talk to this young man.

I'm worried about his immortal soul. He knows nothing about women."

Charlotte tilted her head. "Ah, but that, I'm afraid you have wrong. This man knows a great deal about women, but alas, nothing about chess. I'm afraid he's wasted three expensive nights on a hopeless quest to retrieve something I have which he desperately desires."



CHARLOTTE BENT over and held a candle lantern from the garden to inspect the lock on her back door. Nothing looked amiss. Not even a sign that Mr. Colwyn had ever been there. What was he talking about?

When she walked back to front entrance, Sam opened the door before she had a chance to insert her key. "I saw the club's carriage lights outside, and when I came to check, I was worried you hadn't alighted yet." Her butler was a young man Captain El had found for her, one of the many loyal servants she seemed to have tucked throughout England.

He was in his mid-twenties, very muscular and athletic. She suspected he might participate in boxing matches on his day off. Samuel Porter had quarters at the villa, along with her cook and housekeeper. Mrs. Bertram kept a tight rein on maintenance of the villa while her cook, Lilith Alden, served up some of the most mouth-watering concoctions she'd ever tasted.

At least once a week Captain El would bring a young person to study under Lilith. Some of them spoke halting English, and many seemed to come from Mediterranean countries.

Charlotte never asked questions, because she trusted her employer implicitly. In fact, she trusted her employer with her very life. She suspected the young culinary apprentices may have escaped dark pasts similar to her own, but she didn't want to pry. The less talk about what went on in Captain Eleanor Goodrum's many properties and mysterious ventures, the better.

Col looked at the pale blue, folded letter that had just been delivered by a liveried footman from Goodrum's. The only writing on the front said simply "Mr. Colwyn," in a feminine, looping script. When he lifted the letter to his nose, the familiar scent of lavender, tangerine, and something else he couldn't quite place filled his senses.

He'd had a long night of wandering the coffee house neighborhood between Whitechapel and Limehouse. There had been no further murders, but he was exhausted from hiding in the shadows until early that morning. He hadn't even been to bed yet.

Collapsing onto one of his rickety, oft-painted kitchen chairs, he leaned back and let the scent emanating from the letter fill his nostrils again while he used his fingernail to loosen the dark blue wax that sealed shut the missive.

He already knew the sender without reading the contents. Charlotte Smythe was the only creature of his experience who could produce a scent like this one. He closed his eyes and conjured the vision of violet-tinged eyes and cornsilk-fine nearly white-blond hair.

The chess costume she wore to torment amateurs like him was full of flounces and details that hid her mysterious body

beneath. However, the split skirt betrayed the finest set of long, shapely legs he'd ever seen, clad in silky black and white patterned stockings. He wondered idly how she held them up. Fine lacy black garters? Or...?

His pleasant reverie was interrupted by George rising early to prepare Dee's breakfast. "Where have you been all night? You smell like dead fish...the docks?" He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "As soon as I've fed Dee, I'll fill a tub with hot water."

"You don't need to fuss on my account. I'll haul some water myself." He gave his valet a long look. "How is the widow?" He got a perverse pleasure from the flush the mention of the widow brought to the man's cheeks. At least someone was enjoying the pleasures of a woman in his bed.

"We may have had a few glasses of brandy after Dee finally fell asleep last night."

Col's eyes widened approvingly. "Good job, George."

"Why, nothing untoward happened while you were gone, sir...I can assure you."

Col waved a dismissive hand in his direction while opening the letter. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. The brandy was an unexpected perquisite from my last case. That West India merchant was particularly grateful I found out who was lightening his casks in the warehouse."

The sounds of George puttering about in the kitchen, rattling pans, measuring out porridge, fetching bottles of milk from the second-floor landing, all faded away when he read the words.

Dear Mr. Colwyn,

You seem to be in dire need of a higher quality of instruction in the art of chess play. Please present yourself at eighty-five Loudoun Road this evening promptly at seven o'clock for a proper class followed by supper.

Yours, &C

Miss Charlotte Smythe

Regrets Only

He sucked in a deep breath. That settled it. He'd be drawing his own bath and tending to himself. His current cockstand would embarrass poor George.



CHARLOTTE SHOED both of her companions toward the villa entrance where one of Goodrum's carriages awaited them. They were attending an "evening" at an artist's studio on Lison Grove Road. Margot and Gabrielle's idea of an "evening" meant nothing less than an orgy of willing women and men, copious amounts of wine, sensual musicians, artists, and writers, not to mention lots of sybaritic food and plenty of hidden alcoves for trysts.

Gabrielle was so excited, she fairly vibrated. "Oh, Charlotte, do you think Mr. Santeer will be there? I so admired his last exhibit at the Royal Academy. All of those huge canvases with big, muscular men and horses...all that masculinity gets my juices flowing.

Margot sniffed. "The last time your "juices" set to flowing, we had to burn your underclothing."

Gabrielle frowned and gave her a nasty bump on her way out to the carriage.

“Do you think she really meant that?” Margot threw a peevish look toward Gabrielle’s receding backside. “Or is it because she’s so vain, she’s leaving her spectacles here?”

“Um, I’m fairly sure she’s excited about tonight.” Charlotte kept her fidgeting hands behind her to hide her anxious need to get the two of them out the door before her guest arrived at seven.

“I think you want to get rid of us,” Margot accused suddenly. “You didn’t even hear what I said.”

“Why? Um, no, of course not. What made you think that?” Charlotte’s cheeks burned at being caught out.

“Maybe it’s the endless dishes Lilith’s been preparing all day. She never cooks like that for just the three of us.”

Charlotte nearly cried in relief when Margot finally shook her head and strode out the door. Just when she thought she was gone, Margot turned back and leaned her head inside. “Please be sure to have the linens changed after you’ve had your way with whoever you’re planning to seduce tonight.” She turned and scampered down the steps to the waiting carriage before Charlotte could protest her innocence.

Turning away from the door, she wondered whether she dared invade Lilith’s kitchen one last time to make sure everything was perfect for her supper that night with Mr. Colwyn.



COL’A FIRST SUSPICION that he was in deep trouble was when the hackney dropped him off a few streets away from Charlotte’s villa. Vanity was something he thought he’d

abandoned long ago, along with the other shame of his youth, but apparently not. At the last minute he realized he couldn't bear for her to see him arrive in a shabby rented carriage.

As he walked toward her home, an odd glow came from her tiny jewel of villa. The closer he got, the more his nerves jangled. The front garden was filled with lighted candles. Even the small pond was illuminated with lighted, floating discs of wax. Each step up to the front entrance had massed, lighted candles to either side.

He knew from his previous surveillance that she had expensive gas lighting within the villa, but tonight the inner wall sconces appeared to be extinguished. Nothing remained but the glow of what had to be hundreds of candles. Christ, the woman must have spent a king's ransom on candles.

A creeping, spider-like sense crawled up his back. She was re-creating a scene from one of his sexual adventures detailed in the accursed journal pages.

“Good evening, sir. I trust your trip out from the city was not overly tiring.”

Her butler was a mountain of a man. In fact, Col was certain his face was familiar from the London boxing milieu. He knew Charlotte's servant was making a subtle reference to the fact that Col was approaching the villa as if he'd walked all the way from his humble lodgings on Great Queen Street.

He refused to take the bait and gave the man a civilized reply. “Not at all. As you can see, it's a beautiful April evening.” Col turned in a half-circle, lifting an arm toward the nearly cloudless sky where a few early stars were shining nearly as brightly as the candles surrounding the two men. “Nothing like a brisk stretch of the legs.”

“Come in. Miss Smythe awaits you at the chess board.”



CHARLOTTE CLASPED her hands to hide the jittery shaking she couldn't seem to quell. She would *not* show fear in front of this man. But she had to know. She had to know if what Mr. Colwyn elicited in the lower depths of her body was real. She had to know if this was a man with whom she could share a bed.

She'd lined up all the chess pieces on her personal board in the front drawing room. Sitting at her usual white side, she waited for the Bow Street runner to assume the black side.

After Sam showed him in and indicated he should take a seat opposite her, she had a sudden inspiration. “No. Let's see what Mr. Colwyn can do if I let him dominate the game from the white side.” When she stood to switch sides, she took off her shawl and could hear Mr. Colwyn's sharp intake of breath. The deep rose satin dress she'd chosen for the evening had a décolletage so low, a glimpse of the tops of the dusky aureoles of her nipples showed above the fabric.

“I've never played white before” was all he managed to croak before quickly taking a seat.

“There's nothing magic about playing white, except you get to be the aggressor and lead the game.” She assumed a seat on the black side but didn't cover up again with her thin wool shawl. Instead, she let the luxurious length of fine wine-colored paisley-patterned wool drop to the floor.

The man across from her studied the board so long without lifting his head that she wondered if perhaps he'd fallen

asleep. And then suddenly, he spoke so low, she thought she might be imagining his words.

“Miss Smythe...”

“Oh, no. Charlotte, please.”

“Charlotte...,” he started and then sank into silence. After a long while, he continued, “I cannot give you what you want.”

“How do you know what I want?”

He lifted his head so suddenly, she nearly pushed back her chair in fright. “I *know* what you want. The scent of aroused woman is filling my nostrils all the way over here.”

“You, Mr. Colwyn, are a swine of the lowest order. What right have you to assume you know my needs?”

“Col,” he said. “Just Col is fine.”

“Oh—and now, now I suppose you’re going to pretend there’s something strange about a woman standing in front of you, practically begging for what you are obviously well known for in, um, certain circles.”

Suddenly, her eyes widened. “Money? That’s it, isn’t it? Is that what you require? Of course. What was I thinking? You’re a paramour for hire. Your services go only to the highest bidder. Never fear. Of that I have in plenteous supply.”

He stood so suddenly, he nearly upended the chess board. He stared so intensely at Charlotte, she feared he might do her bodily damage. Instead, he knocked the white king flat, never breaking his engagement with the burning intensity in her violet eyes.

The crash of the heavily carved wooden king slamming against the board was the sound of finality, a sound that spoke

of endless lonely days and nights, something she couldn't bear to hear.

When he turned to leave, she leapt to his side and grasped one of his wrists. "Stay? Please stay. I promise I require nothing from you but your good company." When he remained stoically silent, she released him, opened her hands wide, and continued, "I'm lonely, and I think you are too."

"Charlotte, I know that you've been reading my journal pages, and I know you're trying to re-create one of the scenes where the woman who was paying for my services staged a seduction with hundreds of candles placed everywhere."

She hung her head. "I suppose I don't meet your standards for a seduction like that."

"No, you don't. I would never put you through a seduction like that. That woman insisted on rough coupling, along with debasement. You are much too fine a human being to allow yourself to be treated that way."

"How do you know what kind of human being I am?"

"You said you'd trust me, and you have to trust me when I say I know what kind of woman you are. You are the kind of woman who deserves to be loved."

When Col disengaged from her hold and moved to sit on a plump, stuffed, velvet-covered chaise, she paced away, her nerves at a ragged edge. *Pah. A woman who deserves to be loved, but kept like a doll in a cabinet instead.* At length, she came to a momentous decision. If Col wouldn't let her seduce him, the least she could do would be to feed him.

She moved to a bell cord in a far corner of the room, and, at the first pull, her butler, Samuel, tapped at the door immediately, pushing a cart loaded with a tureen of creamy, buttery oyster soup; a whole salmon baked in a pastry crust designed to look like a swimming fish; a roast saddle of mutton; a molded cabbage and spinach cake; asparagus with butter; a potato pudding; and a small pot of port wine sauce.

For the first time in memory, Charlotte was grateful for the kitchen and the hot house gardens Lilith watched over like much-loved, cosseted children.

Her butler proceeded to lay out the first course of her carefully chosen feast on a nearby sideboard, using ice delivered that morning and packed in moss to keep the cold dishes cold. The hot dishes were displayed on silver platters elevated on elaborately carved legs above small burning candles in pottery saucers.

He placed a large decanter of dark red claret in the middle of the small, intimate dining table. After carefully pouring wine into the two crystal glasses at the table settings, he sent a dark glance Col's way, before he finally left them alone and snicked shut the heavy sitting room door.

After his departure Col looked all around the room before slanting her a quizzical look. "Where are all the other guests?"

"You are the only guest, you silly man. I was going to seduce you with food, but now I suppose we'll just have to enjoy Lilith's feast." She paused a moment after lifting a lid from the steamed asparagus to take a deep, sensual sniff accompanied by a small moan of pleasure. "If we don't at least try everything, Lilith may leave me for the marquess. He's always trying to interfere in my domestic arrangements."

Charlotte took idle pleasure from the bristling look that bit of news evoked on the face of her guest. She stood and took his bowl to the sideboard to serve him some of the oyster soup she'd especially requested for the purpose of seduction.



COL PRAYED the second course would be a shortened version of the first. All he'd be good for would be to go lie in a corner and moan if he ate much more.

To begin with, he'd tucked into the first course of the feast because he'd been working and moving on nothing but nervous energy for more than a day.

When Charlotte rang for the second course and her butler wheeled in the final dishes, he breathed a sigh of relief. The final half of the repast consisted of nothing more than a platter of cold salmagundi piled high in the center with prawns boiled

in butter and then chilled; braised beefsteaks; tiny raspberry cakes; cheese biscuits; and scoops of ices from Gunther's in a silver bowl balanced on top of more moss-covered ice.

By the time he'd finished sampling the second course, he wouldn't be in any position to threaten anyone's virtue. And then there was the excellent red claret in the decanter that her butler was filling again.



CHARLOTTE LICKED the last of the crumbs from one of Lilith's airy cheese biscuits from her lips and finished a tiny cup of Lilith's incomparable whipped cocoa drink. When she set the cup down and looked back across the table at Col, he still held his half-drunk cup and there was a speculative look on his face.

“Do your servants respect a closed door?”

“Of course.”

“Then there's something I would like to try, with your permission of course.”

She was suspicious immediately and had to restrain herself from calling for Sam. Her body, however, had other ideas. She'd ached from merely looking at him all evening while they'd consumed all the dishes designed to seduce. She'd been a mindless ninnyhammer to think she could have pulled off a seduction of this strange man and remain calmly in control herself.

“What do you have in mind? Wouldn't I seem baffle-headed to agree to something about which I'm kept in the dark?”

He came out of chair and stood behind hers, his hands lightly on her shoulders. “Do you trust me?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a reasonable one, I think, since it is *you* who invited *me* into your home.”

“I don’t have to trust you.” She motioned toward the closed door. “All I have to do is summon Sam.”

“Ah, but once you summon Sam, you’ll never see me again.”

She sucked in a deep breath and for a minute thought she might explode from trying to outwit the exasperating man who was quietly massaging her shoulders and towering over her from behind. How could someone who looked that powerful have such a gentle touch?

Finally she spoke and her voice sounded so small, she was disappointed in herself. “What do you intend to do to me?”

He was silent for so long, she thought he might have given up on her. But his tender kneading of her shoulders had not stopped. *Thank Hera.*

“I’m going to make long, leisurely love to all of you, starting with your ears.”

She jerked out of his grasp, alarmed. “My ears?”

He walked around to the front of her chair and trapped her in the seat by leaning on the side rests with his muscular arms. “You have nothing to fear, if you truly trust me.” He pointed toward the plump chaise in the corner of her small drawing room. “I’m going to walk over there and get comfortable. If you still trust me, I want you to join me.” When she gave him a doubtful look, he added, “I’m going to tell you a story.”



COL SHIFTED to the side when Charlotte joined him after a hesitation so long, he began to think he'd lost her. She held herself stiffly away from his touch for a few moments before he positioned her carefully to sit within the curve of his arm.

When she relaxed a tiny bit, he leaned over and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head. The scent of lavender and tangerine swelled up from her hair piled in loose curls atop her head and nearly undid his resolve to go slowly. His earlier notion of placing her on his lap seemed like a really bad idea now.

“What kind of story are you going to tell me?” she demanded, a childish lilt of curiosity in her voice.

“You’ve heard of Scheherazade?”

“Of course.” She nodded her head and smiled. “You’re going to tell me that kind of story?”

“Sort of...”

“But what...?”

He cut her off. “No more questions. All you have to do is listen...and lean your head back here.” He pointed to his shoulder and then began the tale.

Once, long ago in the farmlands along the River Wey outside of London there was a poor peasant, Jacob, who loved Lissy, a milkmaid, from afar. He had a few sheep and cows, some pigs, chickens, and geese with whom he spent his winters in a small cottage and adjoining shed. His cows he took to the estate dairy

each day where he watched Lissy take care of all the milking and storing of milk in pails to be sold in the village marketplace.

After leaving the dairy, he'd hurry to return his cows to his small cottage plot and then run all the way back the path past the dairy and on down toward the market town. He'd always manage to catch up to Lissy just before she reached the stream where she had to climb down and coax her stubborn donkey to pull the cart and its precious load across the stream before she got to the village.

At first she refused his help, and he had to be satisfied with waiting on the bank of the stream just in case his secret love needed help. Waiting on the bank was harder than he'd expected. He had to watch Lissy push at the cart from the back while the donkey balked and dawdled. He had to watch her tie up her skirts and bare her strong muscled calves so that she could push the cart from behind to keep her stubborn beast going across the water.

Sometimes, when the stream rose up after a heavy rain, the waters would wet her skirts all the way to her waist so that he could see her shapely bottom through her soaked skirt and petticoats. Once, when the stream ran very hard, she lost her grip on the cart and fell into the rushing waters. Jacob told himself he had no choice but to rescue the milkmaid who (truth to tell) was as stubborn as her donkey. She protested that she could help herself and batted his hands away but soon gentled into his arms while he carried her to the opposite bank. He returned to pull her silly donkey and cart loaded with milk jugs to safety as well.

He'd never forget that first feel of Lissy through her heavily soaked skirts and bodice, the warmth of her breasts, and the rapid beating of her heart. He thought she was ignorant of his feelings for her, but when his cock pressed against his breeches and she felt his hardness against her backside, she reached back and gently squeezed him.

He took her along the bank of the stream while her donkey grazed contentedly nearby, grateful to be free of pulling the cart for a while. He smothered her cries with kisses while he filled her with his cock. He suckled her breasts with his lips, as his son would nine months hence.

The banns were read for Jacob and Lissy in the village kirk for a respectable three weeks before they were wed a month later.

Jacob immediately expanded the shed next to his cottage so that he would have to share his quarters only with Lissy and their growing family. The chickens, geese, pigs, cows, and sheep would have to inhabit the new shed.

And now when Jacob marched his cows to the dairy, Lissy was by his side. Every night he'd take her to bed in his tiny cottage and explore every warm nook and cranny of her body until morning light.

Eventually, they had to slow down so that they had enough strength left over for farm work. The End.

Charlotte stirred in the crook of his arm and looked up, her violet eyes a hazy shade of plum. After a quiet moment she

gave him a solid punch in his side. “You made that up,” she accused.

“Of course I made it up. Isn’t that what all great storytellers do?”

“Are you going to fill me up with *your* cock tonight?”

Col stared down at the woman in his arms, a serious look of consideration in his eyes. “No, not tonight, my greedy puss.”

She frowned and wrinkled her nose. “Why not? What’s wrong with me?”

He tapped his forefinger against her upturned nose. “Nothing at all. However, I’ve had my way with only one of your senses tonight, and there are so many to go.”

“Which one is next?”

He tapped her nose again. “This one.”

She gave him another playful jab in his ribs. “How can you make love to my nose?”

“Show me the way to your kitchen and give your cook the night off.”

Charlotte chafed at the sensual anticipation Col had set off in her nether regions. However, she'd lost the niggling fear she'd felt earlier in the evening. Maybe she was starting to trust him.

Then again, maybe she shouldn't, she thought as she followed his swaggering form through the narrow hallway to her kitchen set into the rear quarter of the house. The tiny villa did not have a lower level, which was just fine as far as she was concerned.

When they both entered the kitchen, Lilith raised her head from the cookbook she'd been poring over and gave Charlotte a quizzical look.

Charlotte was in a strange mood, perhaps because of the last bottle of wine they'd consumed. She hooked a finger toward Col who was busy checking out all the items in the open pantry, opening huge sacks and tiny boxes, sniffing each one as he went, sometimes staring at the ceiling and muttering to himself. "He claims he's going to make love to my nose, and I need to give you the rest of the night off."

Lilith said nothing but stared appreciatively at Col's backside when he reached for some items on higher shelves. She looked back at Charlotte and shook her head. "If I were

you, I'd keep this one. And, yes, I would love to take the rest of the night off." She shouldered the hefty cookbook and headed back toward the far end of garden where her quarters had been carved out of the upper level of an old mews.

The cook threw one last piece of advice over her shoulder. "If you should need my services...for, um, anything, please send Sam for me." With that, she disappeared into the dark, shadowed garden.

When Charlotte turned back toward Col to see what he was plotting now, he was right there, bare inches from her face, holding up something green and leafy in one hand, and an ominous-looking black silk scarf in the other.

He quickly hid his hand with the greenery behind him while pointing to a high chair at the stone slab counter where most of the daily work of the kitchen took place. "Sit, milady."

She gave him a mulish look but did as she was told, giving an involuntary jerk when he slipped behind her and wrapped the silky scarf around her head. He tied the ends firmly and tested the tightness with one of his fingers.

"Can you see anything?"

"Of course not," she snapped peevishly.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

"If this is what it takes to keep you here without you leaving in a bad skin, then I must remain yours to torture at will with your nonsensical fancies."

He whistled at her fervent speech. "Let me ask that question again in a different way."

She wrinkled her nose beneath the opaque, silky blindfold and tried to see beneath the lower edge of the fabric.

“Would you lie to me?”

“Of course not. What would I have to gain by lying?”

“You could cheat and look at something you’re only meant to smell.”

“I never cheat.” Her reply sounded a little too emphatic, even to her own ears.

She frowned and was beginning to regret submitting to this childish game when his warm hands clasped her upper arms and his lips placed another soft kiss on top of her head.

In that moment, she began to believe she could trust this man. This man only.



THE VERY SECOND Col kissed the top of Charlotte’s head, something broke inside him. He had a hard time drawing in a full breath before he finally allowed himself to accept a simple truth: He wasn’t worthy of this woman, but she was the only woman he could ever love. They were meant to be together.

Now all he had to do was convince her of the same simple truth.

“Are you ready for your first adventure?” He gave her arms a gentle squeeze before reaching for a plate he’d prepared with a ground golden substance.

She shivered against his touch and wriggled a bit on the high chair her cook used to rule the kitchen. When he placed the plate beneath her nose and gave her chin a gentle tap, she took a tentative sniff.

“I can’t smell anything.”

“Stop thinking so hard, Charlotte. Relax and take a few more whiffs.” When she stiffened, he realized he’d forgotten how vulnerable she must feel. “I’m right here by your side. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She slumped a little and settled back into the chair, drawing her shawl closer around her shoulders. After a longer sniff, she ventured, “It’s kind of like a spicy bit of leather soaked in honey. It’s also like a day in spring, fresh hay and grass. Is that possible?” And then she laughed, and something else cracked deep inside him.

“Yes, you silly poppet. It’s a spice used in Indian food and curries - saffron.” He took the dish away and replaced it with another. “What does this one smell like?”

She was silent for a long time while she took several deep inhales over the substance. Finally, a beguiling smile shaped her beautiful mouth. “It’s warm, spicy, a little sweet, but at the same time, there’s a bit of mint and woodiness. Whatever this is, it’s banishing my sleepiness.”

He put a bit of the powder on his finger. “Open your mouth,” he commanded. She stiffened again.

“Remember,” he said softly. “You said you trust me.”

When she opened her mouth and stuck out her curious pink tongue, he sent up a prayer to the gods that he could make it through the night while remaining a celibate gentleman.

He dotted a bit of the powder on the end of her tongue. “There, take that in and swirl it around in your mouth.”

Even though she was still blindfolded, she tilted her head in thought. After a while, she spoke slowly. “It’s definitely peppery, almost like camphor. But there when I move the

powder around to the sides of my mouth and tongue, there's more of a flowery...or maybe a lemony flavor?"

"Cardamom," he said. "The same spice your cook puts in holiday sweets." He was rewarded with another one of Charlotte's wide smiles that nearly gutted him.

She clapped her hands and demanded, "Now...now, will you take me to bed?"

"Yes, my girl, you've earned a night of pleasure with the famous Bow Street investigator, Mr. Colwyn." He gave her a grin to go with his shameless self-aggrandizement.



CHARLOTTE SUDDENLY FROZE at the thought of sharing a bed with the man she'd been lusting after for what seemed an eternity. When she counted mentally, she realized that actually, she'd known him for barely a week.

He took both of her hands inside his large palms and warmed her. When he stooped down to her level, it was to reassure her. "Spending the night in your bed does not mean I'll be spending the night inside your body."

She was somewhat taken aback at his directness, but by now she should have expected nothing less from the gentle man he'd turned out to be.

"Nothing will happen that you don't choose in that big bed of yours up beneath the trees."

She pulled away from his grasp and pulled him behind her by one of his hands before heading for the front staircase to the top floor.

When they finally reached the bed chamber that had been her escape from the world outside for so many years, she took a deep breath and wondered how her world would change before the dawn's light poured through the window the following morning.

She was terrified at the thought of spending the night in his arms, but the pain of opening her heart and body to this man was the price of the closeness she craved and perhaps some day...something more.



COL REMOVED HIS BOOTS, taking care to keep from clattering them against the floor. His jacket, trousers, and waistcoat he draped over a settee in the corner. His shirt, which also served as his small clothes, he kept on. Since his cock seemed not to be as high-minded as his brain, perhaps that bit of barrier would help him to keep his word as a gentleman.

When he turned, he found Charlotte standing in the middle of the room, with doubt and tinge of fear written on her face.

Without a word, he strode close and helped her unbutton and unpin the deep rose satin dress he'd been mentally relieving her of the entire evening.

After he helped her remove her stays, she reached down to the hem of her thin muslin shift to pull it over her head. He covered her hand and whispered, "Not now."

At the quizzical look on her face, he lifted her onto the wide bed and began blowing out the masses of candles glowing around the corners of the room.

She sat up and watched him warily. “How are you going to make love to me now?” There was childish quiver in her voice.

“With all I have and all I am.” He smiled to himself in the now darkened room. “I think it’s time I made love to your sense of touch.”



CHARLOTTE REALIZED his words might have terrified her earlier in the evening, but now she knew he’d never hurt her. She lazed back onto the plump pillows and waited to see what games he’d play next with her senses.

When he finally joined her beneath the counterpane and cradled her in his arms, she curled into his warmth and fell immediately into a deep sleep, despite her anxious curiosity about what he meant by making love to her sense of touch.

When her deep breathing finally conveyed she’d surrendered to exhaustion, Col joined her. He’d been awake for well over twenty-four hours and had to trust in her butler Sam’s ability to protect all of them.

Col's flare of anger left a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth. The crushed look on Charlotte's pale, pinched face gutted him. He hated to have lashed out at her, but the contents of the damned pages she still insisted on withholding could put his precious child in danger.

The trust they'd built the night before had vanished in the morning sun when he'd asked if he could take his journal pages with him. Charlotte had reacted in a way that frankly puzzled him. What the hell use were the pages to her now anyway? Was she going to sell them? Even the thought that she might was like having a cold fist tighten around his heart. The odd excuse of wanting to keep part of him with her had made no sense. By the gods—she must have memorized the damned things by now.

When he'd hinted there was something contained in the pages that could destroy someone dear to him, she'd given him a blank look. Hadn't she seen the damage his idiot baring of his soul could do when he'd inked the truth of Dee's existence? She'd denied anything of that nature was contained in the pages. But dare he trust her when the stakes couldn't be higher?

Dee had been literally living on borrowed time ever since her birth. The lie he and the midwife had concocted was flimsy at best, and he feared the day Maria's husband, the old earl, might discover the child still lived whom he'd assumed had died at birth. Col determined he'd find the woman that very day to make sure his secret was still safe. She'd been living in rooms off Ampton Place in Clerkenwell when she'd assisted at Maria's lying-in.



CHARLOTTE REFUSED to weep in front of the impossible Bow Street investigator who'd invaded her life, made her believe perhaps she could find love, and then had stomped on the bit of hope she'd let grow in her heart.

If she'd known how painful loving a man would be, she'd never have embarked on such a stupid course of so-called "seduction."

And now, now Col, er, Mr. Colwyn, wanted to rip away the only thing she had left of him. She knew she was being unreasonable, but she couldn't bear the thought of no longer being able to pull his journal pages from the chest at the foot of her bed each night to comfort herself until she fell asleep. She knew the contents of the pages nearly by heart, but she couldn't figure out his concerns about danger to someone dear to him - was he still in love with one of the women in the pages?

And the worst part? She didn't even know his first name. However, because she had no idea how love worked, she didn't take his hand and ask him. She fretted that if she had, he might have told her, might have taken her in his arms and told her everything. But instead, she stayed silent, and so he turned

and walked out of her life, his booted footsteps echoing down Loudoun Road.



COL alighted from the ancient hack he'd hailed back on Great Queen Street and took a look around the green on Finsbury Square near the center of Clerkenwell. If memory served him, the midwife's rooms were a few streets north of there. The old well from which the town took its name stood abandoned and ignored in the midst of the bustling square.

He doubted anyone still used the water, considering the area's refuse, like that of London, usually ended up along the sides of the streets, with everything soaking into the ground every time the village was inundated with heavy rains. And, as in London, no doubt heavy rains were a frequent occurrence.

He was almost afraid of what the woman would tell him. Perhaps she'd already sold the information about Maria's illegitimate daughter to the highest bidder, or maybe Maria's husband had forced the truth out of her. He prayed that was not the case.

Striding purposefully across the cobblestones and green, Col dodged the Sunday morning crowd of Clerkenwell's upright citizens, all of them dressed in their finery, spilling out of the church at the north end of the square. The vicar stood at the entrance, giving each of them a bit of encouragement for the week when they passed through the stone portal out into the weak morning sun.

Col had never been inside a church, which was fine with him, but a bit of guilt pricked at his conscience. He owed Dee a proper upbringing. Maybe he should find a church for his

bright, inquisitive daughter. She could make up her own mind later in life about what she truly believed.

Deep into his thoughts and hurrying along to get the unpleasant meeting over, he nearly missed the street. He'd never forget the night he'd run all the way there from the house nearly a mile away where he'd been staying with Maria while she waited to give birth to their unwanted child. When she'd first begun increasing, her husband had banished her from their exclusive Mayfair townhome in Grosvenor Square. He'd told their acquaintances she was visiting family in Edinburgh.

While awaiting Dee's birth, he'd been nothing more than a boy, wracked with guilt at having put the woman he thought he loved in such a predicament. In the midst of grieving Maria after her death, though, the midwife had put Dee into his arms and just like that, his life had changed forever. He'd carefully trailed his fingers over the silky gold strands of fine hair atop her tiny head, almost like a duckling. He'd breathed in the baby smell that was Dee's alone, and then he'd forced himself to take her to the foster family Mrs. Bertram had arranged for him. She'd said it was important that he not take her to anyone else claiming to care for babies.

Two years before, he'd worked with another Bow Street investigator on one of the most hideous crimes imaginable. Baby farms. Several women and one man had built a business of taking money to shelter babies...and then murdering them.

After that case, nightmares had haunted him nightly. When he'd finally found his daughter, he'd crouched down to see her better and Dee had toddled right into his arms, as if she knew what he'd known all along. They belonged together. Although he hadn't warned his valet in advance, when Col had walked

into their modest two-room quarters with Dee's arms around his neck, George had taken one look at Dee and said, "We're going to need more room."

Re-tracing his steps, Col finally found the number - Fifty-Five Prince Street. When he dropped the brass door knocker with a loud bang, a woman leaned out of a second-floor window. "Who be you and wot be your business?" she demanded.

"I'm looking for the midwife, Mrs. Bertram."

"Got your girl in the family way, eh?"

"No. I need to discuss some private business with her."

"Well, that'll be harder than you think."

"Where is she?"

"In the graveyard, over at St. Michael's on the square."

Col's stomach dropped, and he struggled to breathe for a moment. "What happened?"

"Dunno. They found 'er floatin' in the river." With that macabre pronouncement, she threw a pail of slop into the street gutter below, narrowly missing Col's head, before slamming shut the window shutters.

He swore a colorful oath and left in search of another hack to take him to the nearest magistrate.



CHARLOTTE'S MOOD reflected the fast-moving clouds outside: gray and dirty and looking for a wallop bout.

Margot had collapsed onto the retiring chaise in the sitting room, a wet cloth pressed to her eyes. Gabrielle alone seemed

alert to Charlotte's woes. She sat at the edge of a cheerful chintz rose-covered chair, her spectacles perched atop her head.

"What happened? I assume the seduction did not go as well as you might have expected?" Her soft brown eyes brimmed with sympathy, and her lush mouth was puckered into moue.

"Men," Margot intoned from the chaise. Charlotte was relieved to finally hear her other house companion speak. For the last hour she'd barely moved. Absinthe, her friend's favored instrument of destruction, had been known to kill those addicted to the green-tinged drink. "I don't know why any woman would want one. They're none of them worth two fiddles."

Gabrielle fluttered her eyes a bit, and Charlotte could never figure out whether it was because of her sight impairment, or merely affectation. "But Margot, some men can be infinitely delicious, like Prince Jarowski last night. You remember him. Perfect body, very agile...and oh so generous."

"Yes, yes, the man is beyond decadently rich." Margot raised her head slightly from a pillow she'd taken from their bedchamber but then sank back down with a pitiful moan.

Charlotte suddenly laughed, a deep, throaty laugh, at her companions' nonsensical exchanges. At least the two of them had cheered her considerably. She'd ceased considering the possibility of becoming a nun after the complete debacle of her attempted seduction of Col the night before.

Gabrielle placed her glasses on her face again and peered closely at Charlotte. "Do you think she's perhaps hysterical? Should we have Lilith prepare a tisane?"

“No. Charlotte has simply come to realize men are too abominably difficult to be worth crying over.” Margot moaned again and turned her head toward the wall. “There’s too damned much light in here,” she muttered, and sank back into silence.

Col headed back toward the office of the river police after a short, unenlightening talk with Clerkenwell's magistrate. Why in the name of St. James's bones he'd thought anyone would care about a widowed, middle-aged midwife, he couldn't say.

The Honorable Richard Bromwell had stared at him as if he were dealing with an escapee from an asylum and then carefully read every word on the card that identified Col as a Bow Street investigator. He looked up every few seconds as if he found it hard to believe the incensed man in front of him could indeed be employed at Bow Street.

Bromwell had confided he'd assumed the woman had probably jumped into the river because her mental constitution was impaired from living alone for so long. He'd also assumed that she'd died from drowning and had not thought it necessary to have a surgeon examine the body.

Col had finally given up trying to talk to the man and had hailed a hack for the ride back to the office of the river police. Since the body had been found floating in the Thames, maybe they knew something more about the circumstances surrounding the woman's death.

The commotion at the river police station nearly made him forget the dead midwife. Overnight, there had been a fourth chess murder victim. When Col went to the surgeon to discover the details of the death, he received a rude shock. The body on the stone slab was that of the older gentleman who had given him a chess lesson a few nights earlier.

There was the expected bloody chess queen piece and the usual gory circumstances, but this time the man's ears had been cut off. Col was headed for the door in stunned silence when the surgeon called him back.

"I almost forgot something." He held out a small mangled piece of paper. "I found this in his mouth."

Col took the ink-and-blood-smearred missive and walked to one of the high windows in the surgery. In the low light he could make out only a few words. The hurried scrawl said simply, "Madame Domino." He knew as well as his own heart she'd had nothing to do with the murder, but at the same time he realized the smeared bit of foolscap meant someone was trying to destroy Charlotte. Someone wanted to make the police think she was behind the grisly chess murders.

And there she sat in her perfect little villa in St. John's Wood, with the most worthless locks on her doors he'd ever seen in his career as an investigator. He'd have to remedy that failing as soon as possible. But not that night. For now, he'd have to strike while the trail was still hot to find the bastard who'd committed the latest murder, while trying to shift the blame to Charlotte.



CHARLOTTE SAT HUDDLED in her rooms at Goodrum's with Captain El at her side. She'd been ordered to appear in front of the river police magistrate that afternoon to answer for her whereabouts the night before. She had the perfect alibi, but she had no idea where in Hades he was.

She was fairly certain he'd speak up on her behalf, but no one knew where he was. When she'd uttered Col's name, a flicker of recognition had passed across the magistrate's face, but he'd said nothing. He'd demanded to know why her Goodrum's chess title would be written on a paper stuffed into a dead man's mouth.

She wished she knew. Charlotte vaguely recalled reading about the sensational murders over the last few months in one of the gossip sheets. The fact that the victims were all chess experts playing at coffee houses made her back feel as if snakes were crawling beneath her clothing. She wondered if the magistrate knew that bit of her personal story, the years she'd been used as a child chess prodigy to engage in fraud in coffee houses all over London.

When Eleanor Goodrum opened her arms to Charlotte, she fell into them as she had as a child. El patted her back and murmured reassurances into her ear.

Charlotte turned her tear-streaked face to her and asked, "Why has he abandoned me?"

"That's the same thing I want to know, so I sent Obadiah to look for Mr. Colwyn. We'll have him here within the hour to vouch for you, or by damn, I'll know the reason why."

Charlotte sniffed and had the strangest urge to suck her thumb as she had as a child learning to trust under El's care. That she refrained was good, because at that moment there

was heavy knock at her door, and when she urged “Come,” Obadiah walked in, pushing Col ahead of him.

“Where have you been?” she sobbed, and an embarrassing bout of hiccups ensued.

Col gave Obadiah’s menacing hulk a scathing look before explaining. “I wanted to find the true murderer before the trail goes cold. But no, I had to come here instead for a command audience with the queen of London’s underground.”

The look El threw Col in that moment made Charlotte wonder if her mentor were indeed guilty of all the dark happenings she’d heard about.



COL HAD SPENT most of the morning at the river police magistrate’s office clearing Charlotte’s name of any wrongdoing on Sunday night when she’d been otherwise, um, engaged in his arms.

At one point in his conversation with the magistrate JP Joseph Miller, he barely managed to stifle a yawn.

“Colwyn-,” Miller interrupted at one point. “Do you ever sleep? How one man can spend his days managing family responsibilities, part of his nights investigating murders for this office, and the rest of the night, um, entertaining mysterious, exotic women, is beyond me.”

Col had the good grace to choose that moment to study his boots as if deciding whether or not they needed a fresh polish.

“You do agree, however, that the chess themed nature of these killings would make a reasonable investigator wonder about Miss Smythe?”

Col looked up and gazed directly into JP Miller's eyes. "Sir, I believe someone is trying to make us believe Miss Smythe is responsible, or somehow involved in these murders."

"And I'm supposed to follow that line of reasoning why?"

Col placed the leather portfolio Captain Goodrum had given him onto the magistrate's desk top. He pulled out various documents and newspaper clippings and pointed to a caricaturist's sketch of a man managing multiple chess games in a coffee shop. "Because this man is a fraudster. He used Miss Smythe in his schemes when she was a child, and now that she's an adult, what she knows about him could cause him to swing from the gallows at Newgate."



CHARLOTTE LAY on the bed in her rooms at Goodrum's with a cool, damp cloth over her eyes and had not yet changed into her domino costume for the evening's chess play.

At a light tap at the door, she said, "Come."

El glided in and sat at the edge of the bed without speaking. Charlotte recognized her special scent. She couldn't for the life of her figure out how her employer's signature scent was composited, but she could catch a faint scent of bergamot, amongst others. The exclusive perfumer, Floris, never revealed the nature of their wealthy clients' scents, so El's scent would remain hers alone.

The captain silently took the cloth from Charlotte's eyes and walked to the basin in the corner of the room to wring out the cloth and replenish the soothing rosewater.

When she'd returned and reapplied the eye mask, she took one of Charlotte's limp hands in hers. "I'm going to tell you something," she began, "that is for your ears only. I once loved a boy with all my heart..."

Charlotte could not believe what she was hearing. Never in all the years she'd known Eleanor had she observed that her mentor had even a tiny, vulnerable place in her body. She was used to a strong, ruthless woman who did what was necessary to build and protect her empire.

Eleanor continued. "When I was still not much more than an exploited child, he and his father tried to help me. They put me on a ship to America where friends of theirs would have helped me."

Charlotte sat up and took off the wet cloth. "What happened?"

"I never arrived in America. The ship was seized by a privateer in waters off the coast of Massachusetts."

"How did you survive such a horrible fate?"

"I became one of them." She pointed to the scar slashed across the left side of her face. "I proved I could fight the best of them...and win." She was silent for a long moment. "The reason I'm telling you this story is because I lost what I had with that boy long ago. I lost any chance for the happiness that comes from loving and being loved in return."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Eleanor patted her hand again. "I don't want you to miss your chance for happiness because the outside world is trying to pull you and Mr. Colwyn apart."

Charlotte sighed. "It's too late. I've made a bull of the whole thing."

“It’s never too late.” Eleanor’s voice turned urgent. “I’ve arranged to cancel the chess games for tonight. You need time to rest and heal from all that’s happened. Take some time to think and consider what I’ve shared with you.”

With that, her employer, who had never, ever shown any weakness in Charlotte’s memory, left her alone to mull over what she’d revealed.



COL RUEFULLY RECALLED the magistrate’s words that morning about how his life lately had allowed little time for sleep. He’d returned to Charlotte’s rear garden gate which he cleared with ease. When he reached the rear door of the house, he trod carefully, because even though Tuesday night was chess night at Goodrum’s, he had to be careful not to rouse one of her servants.

The cloudless night coinciding with a full moon was not at all helpful for undetected surveillance, but on the plus side, did give him plenty of light for installing a more secure lock on the rear door of Charlotte’s villa.

He for damned sure didn’t want to have to take on Sam that night. After all he’d been through over the last few days, he’d likely not survive an encounter with the mountain of a man who served as Charlotte’s butler.

After a full ten minutes of silence inside the house and no light streaming from any of the windows, he began selecting tools from the heavy bag he’d carried for over a mile.

Replacing the lock went off without a hiccup, and he was feeling pleased with himself when suddenly, he realized he’d need to make sure Charlotte had possession of the new key. He

nearly slapped himself on the side of the head. How had that salient detail escaped his careful plans to ensure her safety? Thank St. James this was chess night. He crept inside, locked the door behind him, and began a quiet slink through the dark villa.

When he passed the servant part of the small house, the rooms were darkened, but the doors were open. The rooms were empty. And then a connection clicked into place in his mind. Sam and Lilith? He back-tracked to the garden entrance and looked toward the old mews where Lilith had a small apartment on the top floor. Light cascaded out a tiny window there. One mystery solved.

He smiled to himself and slipped back into the villa. Now, all he had to do was put the key somewhere in Charlotte's room where she'd be sure to find it the next morning, after her night of chess at Goodrum's.

Charlotte's heart felt like a huge lead ball had lodged there, refusing to budge. When Captain El's carriage deposited her at her door, the driver waited until she'd safely unlocked the front entrance and closed the door behind her. She knew Sam and Lilith would be tangled in each other's arms by that hour and so didn't slam the heavy brass knocker to wake them. And besides, they wouldn't be expecting her to arrive home at this early hour on a chess night.

When she finally climbed the staircase to her tree-top aerie, the heaviness seemed to lift a bit with each step. Although she'd been going over in her mind everything Eleanor had told her, somehow she still felt as though her situation was different. It truly was too late to take back all the silly things she'd said to Col, and he probably hated her for still refusing to give back his pages.

No one could possibly understand how important it was to have something with which she could experience passion without having to face the reality of letting a man hurt her physically again. And to her everlasting mortification, she was too ashamed to tell Col the truth of why she couldn't let go of the pages.



COL'S STOMACH gave a flip as if falling from a great height at the distinct sound of the front door snicking shut and footsteps slowly climbing the front staircase. Since the sound indicated a single set of footsteps, he ruled out Charlotte's house companions.

He could have exited out her window and slid down the tree, but he was paralyzed with indecision. Should he do the right thing and leave the poor woman in peace. Or...should he do what he wanted to do? His baser side won out.

Charlotte's bedchamber was bathed in shadows, but a large square of intense moonlight carved out a glowing rectangle on the floor in the center of the room.

Col sat in a chair tucked back in a darkened corner. Once she opened the door and tossed her shawl on the bed, he broke his silence. "Stay right where you are, there in the moonlight," he said.

She didn't start in fright, but calmly asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Remember that worthless lock on your back door?"

She sighed. "Of course. You've fixed it."

"No," he intoned. "I've replaced the worthless bit of tin."

She lifted her chin in a proud gesture and reached for her reticule. "I'll reimburse you, of course."

"No need," he assured her quietly after a few seconds heavy with meaning.

They were both quiet for long seconds before Col broke the silence. “Take it off for me?”

“What?”

“I said, take it off for me.”



CHARLOTTE LOOKED DOWN at the simple dress she'd worn home from Goodrum's before gazing back toward the source of the disembodied voice in the corner. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I'm asking you to...” After a few seconds Col added, “I promise not to touch you.”

“How do I know I can trust you to keep your word?”

“You've already spent one night in my arms. If I were going to ravish you, I'd have done so then.”

She silently began to unbutton the dozens of tiny shell-like buttons that lined the front of her simple white gauzy dress.

After a few moments, he intoned. “A little faster, if you please.”

She smiled to herself in the darkened room because she was pretty sure he couldn't see the expression on her face.

Once she'd taken off her stays and stockings, she paused before dispensing with her linen shift. “Why am I the only one disrobing?”

“Because you've been a bad girl.”

She placed her hands on her hips, fully aware he could see her nipples through the sheer shift. “No more until you take off something.”

His boots clattered out of the shadows and into a corner. “That’s something...now off with the shift, Miss Smythe.”

Charlotte shivered in the night breeze flowing through her slightly opened window. Suddenly Col appeared out of the darkness and joined her in the patch of moonlight in his bare feet and with nothing but his shirt covering the rest of him. He handed her two silk scarves.

“What are these for?” Her voice quavered with uncertainty.

“After I rid myself of this shirt, you’re going to tie me to that bed and then have your way with me.”

She shivered even more and couldn’t blame the night breeze.

He slowly and deliberately pulled off his shirt before standing before her, his arms wide. “See? Still not touching you.”

When he moved to climb onto her wide bed, he lay on his back with his arms extended for her to tie him to the bed posts. When she leaned over him, still in her shift, her nipples hardened when she had to lie against the scratchy hairs on his chest while tying each of his wrists.



COL’S HEART gave a terrified stutter before he settled in to enjoy the woman above him. The idea of being tied and unable to protect them if need be filled him with momentary doubts. However, his cock was all in favor of this new experience.

Charlotte, ever cautious, kept her shift on but experimented with straddling his legs while carefully touching his cockstand. Col squirmed but then relaxed, deciding if he

were to die from this sort of torture, he'd gladly meet old Nick at the door to the big sinners' bonfire below.

Charlotte leaned back on her knees on the bed next to him and looked her fill for what seemed a long while. The time passed excruciatingly slowly, but he knew her perusal could not have lasted more than a minute or two. Finally, she bent over and tentatively licked at the beads of moisture already forming on the head of his cock. He jerked in pleasure and feared he'd rip the scarves from the bed posts.

Her next stop was his lips. He had no idea a woman could kiss a man that many ways for that long. After she plunged her tongue, sucked, and licked her fill of his mouth, face, and ears, she straddled him again and carefully rubbed against his member, thoroughly wetting the two of them. Finally, she took off the shift, and he was afraid he might actually die right then and there.

She repeated the kissing of his lips and cock for what seemed like hours before finally straddling him and taking the head of his penis in her hands. She licked him profusely before seating the tip at the entrance to her quim. The rubbing continued until she finally took him inside. She rode his cock, surging up and down, until he could feel the spasms of her pleasure. He silently thanked St. James when she quickly lifted herself away before he could spend inside her. It had taken a Herculean effort as it was to wait as long as he did.

She quickly untied his hands and pulled the counterpane over both of them. She rolled to her side without a word, facing away from him. The moon was at a different angle now, but still provided enough light to reveal the silent tears on the side of her face that she'd shed and what giving herself to him must have cost.

No matter how long he lived, he would never forget this woman, or this night, and protecting her would be his life's work.



TAKING her pleasure from this man had been bittersweet. Now Charlotte knew she could love and feel pleasure without fear. She still didn't fully trust Col, but he felt so good with his arm wrapped loosely around her, their bare skin touching and still moist from the love she'd made to him. The act had been her choice, not one foisted upon her by the rough hands of men who had paid for access to her body for the night.

She had to enjoy this one last night with Col, because he was not going to like what she'd have to say in the morning. She still couldn't bring herself to give up the journal pages. Now, she needed them even more, because tonight was all she'd ever have of tasting and possessing his beloved body.



THE HEADACHE BUILDING at the base of Col's skull had begun to inch its way to the top of his head. The rare London environs sunshine streaming through Charlotte's bedchamber window was not helping.

He could not believe what he'd just heard. After a night of the most incredible love-making he'd ever experienced, Charlotte still insisted on clinging to his damned journal pages. Anger filled his soul and engulfed his voice. "How dare you keep my personal writings and possibly endanger someone who is so dear to me?" He could tell by the frightened look on Charlotte's face that he'd lost control.

She laid a gentle hand on his arm. “All right. Why don’t we lay all the pages out on top of the bed and if you can show me where the dangerous pages lie, we’ll take them out and burn them...over there.” She pointed to her bedchamber fireplace.

An hour later, they’d pored over every page in Charlotte’s possession...and he could find no trace of the entries where he’d bared his most private emotions about the birth of Dee and the death of Maria. Who the hell had them now?

Col set down his purchases and flowers before bending over at the doorway to his rooms in the Great Queen Street boarding house to retrieve a vellum square sealed with a dark red blob of wax. The mystery of the symbol stamped into the wax soon was revealed when he noticed the stamp consisted of an ornate, curling “W,” no doubt the damned, interfering Marquess of Wisenberry.

Col had stopped by the food stalls at Covent Garden Market on the way home after his exhausting night and morning with Charlotte. He’d bought some early cherries, cheeses and a crusty loaf of bread. Col’s secret pleasure was flowers, and he’d splurged on a bundle of cheerful daisies from a tiny flower cart where a woman and her daughter sold fresh blooms.

After turning the key in his own *secure* lock, the silence beyond could mean only one thing. George and Madame Nouvelle were out on their daily walk to a nearby park with Dee.

After putting away his purchases, he built up the fire in their cookstove and put on a kettle for tea. George and their landlady would sorely need a cuppa after a challenging walk with Dee, who managed to pepper anyone within hearing

distance with endless questions, even strangers she encountered in the park. The child required constant surveillance.

When he opened the missive from the dratted marquess, the message was simple.

Meet me at Goodrum's in the chess room tomorrow night. Your entrance fee is taken care of. I have something you'll want to hear about your recent encounter with a secret, underground chess game. Please join me and do not disappoint our mutual friend. She needs you.

Just as the kettle whistled, the sounds of Dee's mad chattering and George's patient answers drifted up from the staircase. He stuffed the message into an inside pocket in his waistcoat before quickly setting out cups and plates for their tea on his battered kitchen table.



CHARLOTTE BLEW a small puff of air across the surface of the hot tea in her cup and took the chance to furtively study the Marquess of Wisenberry. She did not trust him one bit, but he'd gone through Captain El to get himself invited to tea at her villa. She'd give anything to know what was going on behind those sharp, mischievous blue eyes of his.

“You probably wonder why I invited myself here today,” he offered precipitously before snatching two more lavender biscuits from the generous pile Lilith had provided.

“I didn't want to seem rude and ask, but yes...what are you up to?”

“I wanted to make sure you comprehend who Archer Colwyn, the man, truly is.”

Her blood ran cold, and she set down her fragile china cup hard, clattering it against the saucer. “What makes you think I have any interest in who this man might be? Do I know him?”

“Yes. He’s wasted three nights of chess play at Goodrum’s trying to win something you have that apparently he desperately wants back.”

“Oh, you mean Mr. Colwyn?” She reclaimed her calm and retrieved her cup of tea. “Of course. I didn’t know his first name, so I was a bit confused at first.”

“I don’t know what you have that he wants so badly, but I think you need to know a bit more about the man.”

“Go on,” she encouraged and tried to seem disinterested in what he might have to say.

“I knew his father quite well. Although the man’s ancestral seat was outside Edinburgh and he spent a lot of time in Jamaica managing the family plantations, we did manage to kick up our heels a bit in the St. James clubs back in the day.”

“And what does that have to do with Col, er, Mr. Colwyn?”

The marquess flashed her a smile that clearly said he suspected how close she really was to Col. “He is the middle son of Charles Colwyn, although by far the most intelligent of all of the man’s offspring.”

“His mother was the housekeeper at the main Jamaican plantation house. She was mulatto, and so Col is more of a quadroon. He showed so much promise as a child that his father brought him back to Scotland to be educated alongside his other sons. Unfortunately, Mr. Colwyn died shortly after

his return, of island fever, and Col's brothers kicked him out of their rooms at Cambridge and cut off his funds. He was taken in by friends, but had to, um, work to earn the blunt to finish his education."

"I know all about Col's Cambridge days," Charlotte admitted softly.

"Then you know he's a good man, and I'm certain he's in love with you. Whatever's happened, perhaps you could find it in your heart to compromise with him." He motioned to his footman he needed assistance with his chair. "Now, with your permission, I'm going to present myself to your cook to let her know her lavender biscuits are so extraordinary, I've a mind to set her up in a proper baking business of her own."

Charlotte stood and moved out of the way so that he could be wheeled to the kitchen. Before they disappeared down the hallway, she warned, "Do not even think to ask Lilith to leave again, or I can't be responsible for how my butler, Samuel, might react."



APRIL 12, 1826

Goodrum's House of Pleasure, London

Col once again walked into Goodrum's chess room, for the last time, he hoped, searching the dark corners for the old marquess lurking somewhere in his wheeled chair. A handful of players, who had somehow managed to stave off destruction by Charlotte's terrible queen, still remained at the board tables.

When he found the corner with comfortable chairs where the marquess liked to retreat to succor his wounded pride with brandy, he walked directly there. He didn't care that the man had wasted good money to provide him a place for ignominious defeat. He preferred to watch her toy with the other players, like a vicious cat with doomed mice.

"You're late," the old man complained, when Col took the seat next to him and motioned to one of the club footmen. "Why didn't you arrive earlier and play at one of the boards?"

"Miss Smythe is a devilishly dangerous woman. I've decided I need to give my mind and body a rest from her mental assaults for a while."

"Mental assaults?" The old marquess commenced laughing so hard, he began to choke and had the footman who arrived with Col's brandy bring him another.

Once they were in relative privacy again and the marquess had staved off a coughing fit with copious sips of brandy, Col demanded, "What was your cryptic message all about? Was that just a ruse to get me here again?"

"Amongst other things, I wanted to let you know of an *on dit* I heard at my club, strictly in confidence. There is a secret chess club of decadent players who apparently have been convinced by their leader, a fraudster no doubt, that they can become consummate players by drinking the blood of master players. "And he's..."

Their quiet conversation was interrupted just then by shouts from the middle of the chess room. Col looked up to see a tall scarecrow of a man jerking Charlotte by her arm and making loud threats that he'd caught her cheating and meant to see her in Old Bailey.

Some part of his mind also registered El's small army of guards working their way through the crowd, but he ignored them.

All of Col's senses slowed and his vision narrowed to the man with the pinched face and receding hairline who was shaking Charlotte like a terrier with a rat. Col stood, a red blaze seething behind his eyes, and was immediately at the man's side, having no idea how he got there. Although the strange man was a bit taller, he was no match for the blind rage surging within Col. The next thing he knew, Obadiah, El's head guard, had pulled him off the chess player who'd fallen to the floor after the guard had pried Col's hands loose from the man's neck.

He knew he was being marched in the direction of Eleanor Goodrum's office on the top floor, but he didn't care. He'd fling himself on top of St. James bones and pull the dirt in after him before he'd let anyone hurt Charlotte ever again.



EL PINNED Col with a piercing stare which usually intimidated normal people. Col was different. Tonight he'd become a raging animal in her chess room, of all places, trying to defend Charlotte from the wrath of an irate customer.

Personally, El was grateful he'd stepped in before her guards had a chance to remove the bully from the premises. However, she couldn't have her guests launching into brawls. She had a reputation to maintain for keeping stern order at the club. It wouldn't do to allow Col to behave like an out-of-control beast, no matter how righteous his cause.

The gossip sheets would have a record-selling day with this story. She always kept a few caricaturists on hand in dark corners for sketching proof of, um, compromising situations for her own purposes. She had no doubt, though, that the lot of them would not hesitate to sell their versions of what had just happened: A Bow Street runner brawling with one of her clients? She'd need months for the uproar to calm down, and there was always the risk of losing her more staid chess club players.

She ordered Obadiah and his guards out of the room before leaning back and crossing her long, booted legs on the top of her desk, allowing her elegant midnight blue satin dress to cascade around them.

She opened a silver box from a side table and offered Col one of the cheroots inside as well as a sulfured stick. When they'd fiddled their smokes to where they wanted them, she finally spoke. "I don't know what's going on between you and Charlotte. Furthermore, I don't care. I warned you about her fragility, and I trust you, since she seems to trust you as well. But I can't have an overprotective lover wreaking havoc in my club.

"Furthermore, and more to the point, where the devil are you with the investigation you promised me in exchange for an introduction to Charlotte?"

"I think your files and the investigation I've been working on for the river police all lead to the same place - her former handler, Bernard Deauville. I've turned over all the details you had on him to the JP overseeing the case. We have sketches of him being circulated around the docks. It's only a matter of time before he makes a mistake and we have him.

“However, he’s made a lot of enemies over the years with all of his fraud schemes. With any luck, someone else may get to him first and save us all a lot of work.” Col leaned back, closed his eyes, and drew in a deep puff of the decadent tobacco in the expensive cheroot she’d given him. He blew a series of perfect rings of smoke toward the ornate ceiling of the fierce pirate’s feminine office.

“D ee—. Why are you wandering around in your nightdress and bare feet?” Col had been reading a book of fairytales, looking for ideas for their next story time when she’d skipped into view. He’d built a small fire in the grate that night to take the dampness out of their rooms.

George sat across from him on a threadbare settee working his way through a pile of mending and whistling a hornpipe tune from his naval days.

When he half-rose to shoo Dee back to her room, Col shook his head. “Maybe one short story, Poppet, before you have to climb back into bed.”

She gave him a tooth-gapped grin and scrambled up onto his lap. She grabbed at the book he’d been reading, but he settled it on the side table, out of her grasp. Neither he nor George were ready for Dee to read on her own. Not yet, saints willing.

“Once long ago,” he began, “in a lost country far, far away where there were mangoes on the trees, and monkeys would snatch food off of bad little girls’ plates...”

There was a light tap at the door, and they turned to watch George leave the room to see who was there, probably Madame Louvelle. They lost interest after a long pause, and Col continued the story while Dee curled into a comfortable ball beneath the blanket he'd thrown over them.

“But they wouldn't steal my food, because I'm a good girl...right, Papa?”

He simply smiled, ignoring her question, because one would lead to another five or six, and the bedtime story would stretch out for the whole of the night. “One sunny day, the princess of the kingdom, who was a very good little girl, went to her father to see if anything could be done about the monkeys...”

At a sound from the doorway, Col looked up at the intruding visitor. Charlotte stood in the doorway watching them, a mixture of hurt and wonder in her eyes.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Would your knowing my secret have made a difference?”

“Is she the one you're trying to protect?” Charlotte kept her voice to barely a whisper.

At that moment, Dee squirmed in Col's lap and demanded, “Who's this?” She then turned toward Charlotte and said, “You know, I can hear you. Are you going to be my mother?”

Col sighed, resigned to answering Dee's torrent of questions. “Miss Smythe, this is Miss Deidre Louise Colwyn, expert listener of stories.” He looked back down at his daughter and continued, “Miss Colwyn, this is Miss Charlotte Smythe, chess mistress extraordinaire.”

“What's a chess mistress?”

Without so much as a blink, Charlotte replied, “I’m the keeper of all the King’s chests.”

“No, you’re not. You’re making that up. My Papa makes things up, too.”



COL carefully and deliberately finished Dee’s story while Charlotte curled up on the settee George had abandoned for his bed. Col suspected he wanted to give them some privacy if Dee ever went to sleep entirely for the night.

Dee’s eyes began closing involuntarily as he neared the end of his fantastical story of omnivorous monkeys. Every time he chanced a look at Charlotte on the couch, her face was twisted into a grimace at the bloodthirsty tale he was spinning for his daughter. Once the small girl finally drifted off into a deep sleep, Col carried the child to her tiny bed in the room farthest from the windows fronting on Great Queen Street where carriages bound to and from the Covent Garden area clattered loudly across cobblestones during most of the night.

When he returned to Charlotte, her eyes looked as sleepy as Dee’s had earlier. She looked up at him with a happy smile. “Is it all right if I share your bed tonight? Turnabout is only fair.”

“My bed, Miss Smythe, you keeper of all the King’s chests, is much smaller than yours. Are you sure you want to share such a stingy space?”

She stretched her arms out toward him. “I’m sure,” she said just before he picked her up, like Dee, and carried her to bed with her head against his shoulder.



THE NEXT MORNING Charlotte was taken aback by her complete immersion, and comfort, in Col's havey-cavey household. His valet and man of all talents, George, prepared breakfast for all of them as if the appearance of a strange woman at their breakfast table were a common occurrence. Dee was so in awe that Charlotte was still there in the morning, she seemed temporarily to have run out of questions.

Charlotte had lain in bed earlier and watched Col shave. The simple act filled her with such a feeling of contentment, she could have remained there all day, happy to belong with him. When Dee had insisted on sitting next to Charlotte at the table, Charlotte's heart did a happy little flip. She'd never had a real family. Could it possibly be that easy to walk through a magic portal into a place ready made for her where she belonged? She wanted to believe but doubt gnawed at the back of her mind like an annoying rodent.



COL BUTTERED a piece of toast for Dee, and she insisted he butter one for Charlotte as well. Two weeks earlier, he never would have believed he'd be having a noisy breakfast with Dee and George in their shabby, but comfortable kitchen whilst a silver-blond-headed angel sat with them, the early morning sun casting a bright halo around her head.

He stood suddenly, looked at his pocket watch and apologized. "I have to leave. I have a meeting with Magistrate Miller this morning."

He pointed to Dee first. “You behave yourself and stay close to George and Madame Nouvelle in the park.”

Shifting his attention to Charlotte, he admonished, “Be here when I get back.”

She smiled at his fatherly order. “Is it all right if I join you at the park?” Her question was directed not at Col, but the small girl leaning close to her at the table, quivering with excitement.

“Can she, Papa? Can she?”

Col looked at George. “What do you think? Can you handle three women on a walk in the park?”

“If I can handle a sixty-five-gun ship with more than a hundred navy swabs, three women should be no problem at all.”



CHARLOTTE FEARED her heart might crack if the happiness of that day overflowed and had nowhere to go. Dee clung to her hand while George and Madame Louvelle walked a few paces behind. She'd been surprised after Col's references to his landlady that the woman was actually a beautiful older woman and she had a first name, Eugenie. When Dee suddenly began talking to Eugenie in French, Charlotte's mouth flew open in surprise.

Eugenie smiled and said, “That one needs watching. She can do anything, memorize anything like a little parrot.”

She noticed Col's valet seemed focused on the older woman's chatter while he held her arm securely in one of his, but the odd walking cane he carried he held close to his body

with the other arm. He had a slight limp which he explained came from an accident aboard ship many years ago when one of the cannons broke loose from the chains securing it, rolled across the deck, and pinned his leg against another of the heavy guns the ship carried.

Dee's constant questions were not as challenging as she'd feared once she got used to the child's curiosity about literally everything around her. Col was never anything but calm around Dee, answering each question as truthfully as possible and never once seeming annoyed with his daughter.

She hoped she could do as well.

Charlotte and Eugenie held Dee's hands and kept her between them. George stayed close ahead of them, surveying other walkers in the park. He looked back to check on them from time to time while swinging his cane. Charlotte had just begun to relax and enjoy the mild, sun-dappled day when suddenly, two men slammed into them from behind. Before she and Eugenie could regain their footing, they'd taken Dee.

With a look at Eugenie, she broke into a run, following George who was in hot pursuit of the two men. Dee was not making it easy, either, kicking, biting and screaming as they raced with her across the park green.

One of the men had let go of the little girl when George caught up to him and began using his cane like a sword to bash him from all directions. Charlotte and Col's French landlady held up their skirts in the wild chase that ensued. Eugenie was faster and jumped onto the back of the man clutching Dee.

When Dee wrenched away and ran toward Charlotte, she picked up the first branch she could find on the ground and slammed the wood over and over at the man's head until Eugenie jumped down from his back and pulled a dagger from

within one of her boots. When she slashed at his face, he staggered away with blood running down his forehead and screaming such horrible threats that Charlotte was tempted to cover Dee's ears.

The first man being thrashed by George shouted to the other and the two of them left the park on a run.

Dee's eyes were wide with excitement and fear. "My Papa is going to find those awful men and make them wish they'd never done that," she whispered to Charlotte when she knelt down to make sure the child hadn't suffered any injuries. Charlotte opened her arms wide, and Dee collapsed inside with tears running down her cheeks. As she cradled the child in her arms, she vowed that whoever those animals were, she'd personally ensure Captain Eleanor Goodrum would make them pay for terrifying Col's child.

Col sat in Captain El's office with Charlotte by his side. "We need your help," he said simply. "I'll do anything to protect Dee."

El tipped her head and gave him a long look. "You are in no position to beg favors, since you still haven't delivered what I demanded for introducing you to my chess mistress." She pointed to Charlotte, who sat pale and wide-eyed in the aftermath of nearly losing Col's daughter to the vicious hectors in the park.

"What did you promise her in return for meeting me?" Charlotte demanded, suddenly agitated.

El answered for him. "He promised to deliver your former handler and torturer for punishment."

Charlotte turned to Col and with a shaky voice said, "The two of you had no right planning revenge on my behalf behind my back." She hung her head for a moment. "That monster is my problem. If revenge is to be taken, it should be mine, not yours...or yours." She pointed to both El and Col in turn, and then remained silent.

"Someone is trying to hurt my daughter. I have my suspicions, but I can't be sure who is at the bottom of trying to

take her from the park this afternoon. Until I can discover who is responsible, I need to put Dee somewhere safe, out of harm's way."

"And what do you want from me?" El held out her hands. I am the last person who should be responsible for a child. Wait," El snapped at them. "If she's in so much danger, why have you left her alone to come here?"

Charlotte's face flushed a deep crimson and she spoke so low, El asked her to repeat herself. "I said she's with Obadiah and the other guards. I...I didn't think you'd mind, just for a few minutes, until we can make a plan to keep her safe."

El broke out into a throaty laugh. "And Obadiah agreed to watch over a babe? Just like that?"

She motioned to the two guards at her door. "Have him bring her in. I have to meet this child."

The minute Obadiah poked his head around the door to explain, Dee rushed in on her own. "Are you the pirate queen George told me about? Have you ever wheel-hauled anyone? George says they do that all the time in the Royal Navy."

El calmly looked down at Dee and gave Col and Charlotte a wicked smile before she proceeded to tick off answers to Dee's endless questions. "Yes, I suppose I am a pirate, but I've never been the queen of anything. I've never had to 'wheel-haul' anyone, but I've strongly considered 'keel-hauling' a few naughty sailors in my time."

And then the question Col had dreaded popped out of his daughter's mouth. "Were you in a sword fight? Did it hurt really bad? What happened to the person who did that to you?"

El threw back her head and laughed until she was breathless. "Yes, yes, and the other person is now in a prison

out in the middle of a desert where he has to cut and shape huge boulders every day under the boiling sun.”

Dee had the good sense to suck in a sharp breath and remain silent after that answer.

El turned toward Col. “Here is what I recommend. Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby and her nephew CB have a veritable pack of brats they shelter at her townhouse. I’ll lend you my carriage tonight so that you can smuggle Dee out of your rooms on Great Queen Street and deposit her at their havey cavey household of orphans. Even if someone suspects she might be there, they’d have a devil of a time separating her out from the rest of CB’s wards.

“Are you sure she and CB won’t mind taking on another child?” Col frowned at the whole idea which seemed a little wild to him.

“Leave it to me. Lady Camilla and I have been through a lot together.”

At Col’s quizzical look, she added. “Believe me, it’s better you don’t know any of the details. All you have to do is deliver Dee there around midnight tonight. I’ll have Obadiah and some of the other footmen bring the carriage around to the back alley behind your boarding house. Hide in the boot with Dee and have your valet ride inside with Charlotte and your landlady.”

She looked toward Charlotte. “You and Madame Nouvelle should wear heavy veils and accompany George, so he doesn’t arouse any suspicion by riding alone.”

Col was grateful but perplexed. “Thank you for offering to help protect Dee, but how do you know so much about us? My address...and my landlady?”

“Lady Camilla takes care of her nephew’s friends as if they were her own children. How do you suppose you found suitable lodgings so quickly when you decided to have your daughter come live with you?”



THE MARQUESS of Wisenberry had not entertained at his townhouse on Grosvenor Square in so long that his entire household staff was buzzing about the chess match to which he’d challenged his old nemesis. The Earl of Cleveden would be arriving at eight o’clock sharp that evening to take up the challenge and settle an old score between the two men.

Very few people in the *ton* realized that years before, both aristos had loved the same woman. Cleveden’s countess, the beautiful, elegant Maria, had agreed to marry the earl whom she didn’t love because of a lie he told her about Wisenberry’s wealth. He’d made her believe his rival had bankrupted himself at the card tables of the worst gambling hells in London.

Maria, of course, loved comfort and security more than anything. She and Cleveden had been married unhappily for ten years when she died mysteriously while supposedly visiting family in Edinburgh. Wisenberry had known Maria’s family, and, to his knowledge, none of them lived in Edinburgh.

The marquess’s cook was preparing an evening supper for the two men for after the match, but she was puzzled by a mysterious tin of lavender biscuits he’d brought home and had insisted should be served with coffee while he and the earl were engrossed in the match.

Wisensberry had never married, had never had to. He had a fine, healthy nephew to whom the title would go when he was no longer around. The young man would inherit the title and everything he owned...except for one small bequeath, which he'd already warned him to expect when the will was read.

He set up the chess pieces on the board, thinking he'd let Cleveden have the advantage with the white side. He could afford to be magnanimous this one time, he thought, and ran a finger over the lid on the tin containing Charlotte's cook's lavender biscuits.



COL HAD DRESSED Dee in her warmest clothes with woolen stockings and a heavy coat. He'd also brought along her favorite blanket for the carriage trip over to CB's townhouse. His heart was in his mouth when George carefully covered the two of them with the blanket and then locked the lid of the carriage boot over them.

Dee flinched when the lid shut out all the light and clung to Col like a kitten afraid of drowning. "How about a story?" he whispered in the dark, and could feel her head nod.

In a land filled with elephants, far across the sea, a princess lived in a palace where all of the walls and doors were made of spun sugar. If you couldn't unlock a door, you could eat your way through to the other side.

All the fountains ran with lemonade, and there were trees with chocolate biscuits on their branches, instead of fruit...



CHARLOTTE SAT STIFFLY, barely able to see inside El's carriage in spite of the candle lanterns to the side of each door. She and Eugenie might have overdone the black veils a bit.

George sat across from them, staring straight ahead and clutching his versatile cane. She'd noticed earlier back in Col's rooms when his valet was practicing his defensive moves with the cane, there was a sharp blade that could be flicked open at the bottom of the sturdy stick. For a retired navy man with a limp, George was much more lethal than he looked.

Eugenie reached over and touched her with her gloved hand. "Everything will work out. They'll be fine."

Charlotte agreed and made a similar, comforting gesture, but felt the words were more to convince each other than anything else. She wouldn't breathe easily until they were inside this Lady Camilla's house surrounded by Obadiah and his men, with Col and Dee safely out of the boot. She imagined improbable disasters where something hit the boot or they had a carriage accident and the two of them were trapped inside.

Rolling through London in the Covent Garden environs did not inspire a great feeling of confidence, either. She knew from her years of working the streets and coffee shops what evil lurked here.

The carriage suddenly picked up speed and began to hurtle through the sparsely inhabited streets. After having feared the worst for so long, now Charlotte frantically tried to conjure safe, sane reasons for why Obadiah was whipping El's team of

horses to such a frenzy. Then the sound of gunshots echoed in the street behind them.

George swooped across to their side of the carriage and pulled both Charlotte and Eugenie to the floor with him before flinging his body atop theirs. Charlotte refused to think about how frightened Dee would be, how angry Col would be at not being able to defend against whatever monster was out there trying to harm his child.

Col stopped the flow of the story he'd been making up for Dee...because once the carriage had speeded up, his mouth had turned so dry he couldn't summon up enough spit to speak. And then the gunshots started.

"Papa," Dee asked carefully, "is some bad person shooting at someone?"

Col turned his body entirely toward the rear of the carriage and curled around Dee, covering her as much as he possibly could with his own bulk.

"Yes, my sweet girl, some bad person is shooting their gun just to hear it go off."

Col felt a wet tear roll down Dee's cheek. He suspected she wanted to believe him, but was afraid. "Make them stop," she pleaded. "Make them quit making those 'pop' noises."

The carriage careened through a sudden set of turns and then slewed to an abrupt cessation of movement as if someone on the ground had taken control of the traces. Col had to brace his boots against the front side of the boot to keep from squashing Dee. He could hear Obadiah shouting at the team of horses before El's guard dropped his voice to a lower, cajoling octave to calm them.

The gunshots had stopped, and all he could hear was shouting from outside the boot. He'd never so wanted to jump into the fray but had to force himself to wait. He didn't want to expose Dee to whatever might await them outside the boot. Not yet.

Dee, cocooned in his arms, was not crying, but he could feel her small body quivering against his with fear. He squeezed her arms tightly and whispered encouragement in her ear. "We're here, Poppet. It's almost over."

At a soft tap on the side of the boot, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Shortly after, he heard CB's voice calling for footmen, and Obadiah's rough face appeared when the boot was cracked open.

"I've never been so glad to see your ugly face in my life," Col said as El's muscular guard reached in to pull out Dee and hand her to CB before giving Col a hand down as well.

Charlotte rushed to take the weary small girl inside Aunt Camilla's huge townhouse with George and Eugenie close behind.

"You're welcome," Obadiah boomed in his deep voice. "We had a near thing back there, and one of them tried to jump us behind Lady Camilla's mews."

"We've got him here," CB filled in, and toed over the body of a dark-haired, rough-looking man with a patch over one eye. "What do you want us to do with the remains? Report the death in the morning...or...El's river disposal?"

"If El's men dump him in the river, he'll just be another floater I'll have to explain to the river police. Put him in one of the stalls overnight, and I'll send one of Aunt Camilla's

footmen with a message to let the local JP know what happened in the morning.”



CHARLOTTE PICKED up Dee and carried her on her hip once they were inside Lady Camilla’s townhouse and followed the housekeeper to the nursery where they settled her in with a girl near her age with whom to share a bed for the night.

Another maid had shown George and Eugenie to their rooms. Charlotte supposed this “Aunt Camilla” must have a very large townhouse indeed with so many bedrooms.

Once Dee finally closed her eyes with a promise that her Papa would check on her first thing in the morning, Charlotte made her way back toward where the housekeeper awaited. “I am so sorry to keep you up at this unholy hour of the night,” she apologized.

“It’s my pleasure, Miss Smythe. One never knows what adventure to expect next in this house. And I love the children. There are always lots of lovely little ones being provided for here.” She held up a candle lantern and motioned for Charlotte to follow her.

When she finally was shown to her room for the night, she fell asleep on top of the counterpane, unable to keep her eyes open any longer.

Some hours later, Charlotte was vaguely aware of someone removing her shoes and stockings and covering her with bed linens. When the morning light poured in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, she realized with a start that Col was with her, sleeping on top of the counterpane, wrapped in the blanket he’d brought from home. Odd, after a few days with Col and

his little family, their simple rooms seemed more like “home” to her than her elegant villa.

When she leaned over and placed a kiss on his lips, he awoke immediately, sat up, and took both of her hands in his. “There’s something important we have to discuss.”

She stretched and curled back onto her pillow. “Do we have to discuss something right now? Can’t whatever it is wait?”

“No. Now is better.” And with that, he pulled her to him for a more thorough kiss which took in more than just her lips.

After she was completely “mussed,” her stays in shambles, and her cheeks rosy, he dropped to his knee on the floor next to the bed. “Miss Charlotte Smythe,” he began, “would you do me the highest honor of being my wife and Miss Deidre Louise’s mother?”

“Isn’t this a little sudden?”

“No. I’ve been waiting for you all of my life.”

“In that case, I believe I’ve run out of arguments. Yes, Mr. Archer Colwyn, I will be your wife.”

“In that case, we should fortify ourselves in Aunt Camilla’s breakfast room before breaking the news to Dee.”

Charlotte covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a giggle. “There will be questions.”

“Lots of questions,” Col agreed, and pulled her to her feet to help straighten her dress before they broke the news to his friends.



COL HAD to leave as soon as he'd calmed as many of Dee's fears as he could, to report in to JP Miller with the river police.

He stepped down from the hack close to the docks and made his way toward the office. Miller was waiting impatiently. "Come in," he urged. "We have lots to go over."

He pulled a box piled high with paper from a corner of the room. "The body count overnight with river 'floaters' was inordinately high, even for this neighborhood."

"Oh?" Col was intrigued now.

"The most baffling body was one that wasn't hard to identify, but we can't figure out how he died." He pulled a stack of pages from the box. "Seems he's John Harwood, the Earl of Cleveden. He was dumped sometime last night but we're not sure what he died of. The surgeon said he didn't drown." He pulled a final paper from the untidy stack. "And then there's Bernard Deauville, another mystery to solve. He's been running fraud set-ups for years. Never caught, though. Never could prove he'd done anything"

Col senses tingled. "That's the man I've been searching for in connection with the chess murders." He didn't mention what he knew about Cleveden, because there would be questions he had no intention of answering.

"Well that's Deauville, no doubt about it, based on sketches on wanted posters over the years, but he didn't drown either."

"What happened?"

"We're not sure, but the surgeon said there was hardly half a cup of blood left in his body."

"He did have a lot of enemies who hated him."

“Enough to drink the poor bastard’s blood dry? And then there’s that cult of weird chess players, blood drinkers disguised as human chess pieces without a bit of clothes on. We caught one of them at another, um, ritual the other night in the same abandoned tunnel. Can’t give you his name, but from his account in exchange for remaining uncharged, it seems a bunch of aristos were convinced they could become chess geniuses by drinking the blood of old chess masters that played in coffee houses around the city.”

Col shook his head and breathed a sigh of relief. Now he wouldn’t have to reveal too much of what he already knew about Charlotte’s old handler. He could only hope the Thames overnight toll of bodies would signal the end of the string of chess murders he’d been investigating, but who knew? Investigations didn’t always proceed in straight lines. Only time would tell.



WHEN COL RETURNED to the St. James Square area where Aunt Camilla had her townhouse, he noticed a carriage with a familiar coat of arms, minus its usual lone occupant, pulling out of a side street. Now what? What new way would the marquess try to interfere in their lives? Perhaps he’d try to dissuade Charlotte from marrying a poor investigator like him. If he did, Col would have to cut out his heart.

When Col knocked on the door, the butler immediately showed him into the front drawing room where Aunt Camilla, Charlotte, and Eugenie were deep in discussion with the marquess. Aunt Camilla was about to pour tea.

As soon as the old codger spotted Col, he indicated he should take the settee next to where his footman had placed his

wheeled chair.

Aunt Camilla had already brought out brandy for Wisenberry, so she probably was familiar with his habits.

When he motioned for Col to join him in a toast, Col shook his head. "A little early yet for me." When he slanted a look Charlotte's way, she gave him a knowing smile and he couldn't help grinning.

"I heard you've committed the unthinkable sin." The marquess took a healthy sip and nodded toward Charlotte who was across the room drinking tea with Aunt Camilla.

Col clapped the older man on the back and admitted, "Yes, she's going to be mine, all mine, as soon as we can get the banns read."

Wisenberry shook his head sadly. "If you're interested, I've provided the perfect wedding present."

Col started. "What would that be?"

"Are you familiar with the Earl of Cleveden?"

Col leaned close so that no one else could hear. "The river police found him dead in the river last night."

"But you do know him?"

"Yes, and I'm beginning to think you already knew I was familiar with him."

"He's the one who's been trying to carry off your daughter. Wanted to see if she looked like her mother, and if she did... he'd have been forced to get rid of her." the old marquess confided.

"What did you do?" Col demanded.

“I challenged him to a chess game. He lost, and apparently he’d eaten something that didn’t agree with him. He dropped over dead in my sitting room, so my footman disposed of him. I’m not up to answering too many questions at my age.”

“Did he have my journal pages?”

“Yes. He was quite proud of that. He admitted to eliminating the clerk who’d stolen them. Oh, and he also had the midwife murdered.”

Col was afraid if the old man told him much more, he might cast up his accounts. “Where are my pages now?”

“In my fireplace, in the cinder grate.”

Col rolled his eyes. He’d have to round up his family after tea and take them home. The war was over.

THE END

EPILOGUE

Carrington-Bowles Surrey Estate

May, 1831

Col settled Charlotte onto one of the comfortable lawn chaises set up beneath the trees for guests not interested in the wild lawn games the clouds of children were enjoying entirely too much. CB's Aunt Camilla, now slower and more delicate in her advanced years, had suggested Charlotte join her there. The older woman, as usual, was full of gossip of the eternally fascinating characters of the *ton*, and had assured his wife she had plenty of *on dits* to share.

The front lawn of CB's country estate had been transformed into a fairy woodland for a birthday party in honor of one of the young wards he and Nathaniel had taken into their family from Honoria Atherton's Seven Dials orphanage.

Ath and Honoria watched over their own brood who were in the mad crowd of young revelers. Sythe and Julia's son had brought a book to read, but soon tossed it aside to join the other young hellions in racing pell mell from the manor house terrace to the vast pond below and back.

Col tried to hide his concern for Charlotte. This was her third pregnancy, the first two having ended in miscarriages. They'd both braced themselves again for bitter disappointment, but this time, she'd been much healthier and had progressed well with only a few months to go.

He secretly feared her abuse as a child might have brought on the difficulties, but Charlotte refused to admit defeat. She yearned for a babe of her own.

He requested a blanket from a passing footman and tucked the soft woolen robe around her legs so that she could keep an eye on Dee while resting under the shade of an ancient oak tree. He took a seat nearby.

When he surveyed all the children romping through a three-legged race, he couldn't locate Dee. The old fear clutched at him. Her cloud of bright gold hair always stood out in a crowd, but he couldn't see her anywhere. When he stood and turned back toward the house, there she was surrounded by adults. He sighed, excused himself to Aunt Camilla and Charlotte, and headed for the group.

When Col reached his old friends on the terrace, Ath sang out, "Now what is it you do for a living, Mr. Colwyn?"

"It's a mystery, a deep government secret I can't reveal." Col pantomimed twisting his lips shut.

A smaller voice chimed in. "He's an investi... investigator."

Col clutched his chest and fell to the ground with a mock wound. "She found me out. Off with her head."

Dee ran over, her face flushed with excitement, and tried to help pull him up from the ground. "Come over here, Papa.

Uncle Nathaniel said I can spend a day with him in his kitchens if it's all right with you."

"You'll wear him out with questions. I don't think he's thought this through."

Nathaniel slanted her an indulgent smile.

"And he let me hold the new baby and..."

Col hoisted her onto his shoulders, mainly to calm her down a bit. She wasn't used to being around so many children, but loved the chaos.

Barrister Sythe held up his glass of lemonade and nodded toward Col. "I told her with a mind like hers, she doesn't belong in the kitchen. She should be reading law or translating ancient texts." He deftly put his arm around his Indian wife, an acknowledged expert on historic texts of her country.

Dee was still wound up with excitement. "And Uncle Ath made us sit still for hours down by the pond while he sketched a picture of all of us."

Ath joined the group on the terrace and poured himself a lemonade with a bit of something stronger added. "My dear, inventive Dee, it was a mere fifteen minutes. The sketches are the only way I have of capturing all of you for a painting before the lot of you grow up and take over Westminster."

Honorina had a toddler on one hip and was chasing after another. "I only hope they all grow up and leave us to a peaceful dotage."

Ath gave them a dramatic stage whisper: "She really doesn't mean that."

With Dee still on his shoulders, Col headed away from the terrace down the long lawn toward the wide, shallow pond

where a small contingent of children had decided to toss their clothes across bushes and go for a swim. Time for their parents to intervene, Col thought. When he carefully lowered Dee to the ground, he leaned down and gazed into her deep blue eyes. “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“Of course not, Papa,” she fibbed, and raced away, howling, toward her friends.

Later that day, in the carriage, on their way home...

Charlotte watched Col cajole and gentle their sleepy, grumpy daughter on the opposite seat while they rattled their way back to the villa in St. John’s Woods. They’d need more room soon and would move into the spacious townhouse in Mayfair on Hanover Square that the Marquess of Wisenberry had bequeathed them at his death the year before.

Dee was finally dozing fitfully when suddenly, she sat up straight and demanded, “Can’t we get a brother or sister for me? A sister would be better, but I’d take a brother...if I had to.”

Charlotte had to stifle a giggle. “I don’t know, Poppet. We’d have to make sure everyone in our family has a say about whether we add a sister or brother.”

Dee lunged forward in her seat, neatly escaping Col’s grasp. “I’d really rather have a sister. Wait—. Who else is there who’d have a say?”

Col alone managed to maintain a serious demeanor, probably a first for him. “Someone who will arrive about the same time your new governess comes to give you lessons this fall.”

Dee fidgeted restlessly on the seat. “Who?”

Charlotte reached over and patted her daughter's hand. "We don't know yet. You'll just have to wait and see like the rest of us.

"Oh, Mama...I want to know *now*."

Col snatched her back against him. "Put your head down on my shoulder, Poppet, and I'll tell you a story."

Charlotte rolled her eyes at the thought of listening to another one of Col's wild "stories" but gave both of them a fond smile before leaning back to wait and see what tale he'd tell this time.

EXCERPT

Want to read more from the “Sex, Lies and Forbidden Series”?



Dallying with the Diamond

Book I

By Louisa Cornell

&

Andrea K. Stein

© 2023

April 1826

Gentlemen's Private Apartments in Albany

London

“We’re buggered.” Leo Atherton tossed back the last of his breakfast brandy and turned from the sideboard to face his three oldest friends. “I mean no offense, CB.”

“And I take none,” his friend replied from his customary place in the horsehair chair before the fire. “However, perhaps you could elaborate on why and the precise nature of our... *buggerment?*” He raised his arms to allow Prinny, Leo’s portly orange tomcat to settle onto his lap.

“Good word,” Sythe said. He’d managed to take up over three-quarters of the settee, which left poor Col, the fourth member of their band of reprobates, sprawled precariously half on the settee and half on the threadbare three-legged ottoman.

“Thank you.” CB raised his own glass of brandy in salute before he took another measured sip of the second-best brandy on the battered sideboard. *When the devil had they all managed to raid his meager liquor stores?* They’d only arrived mere moments ago. In the blink of an eye, they’d burst into his rooms in full cry, raided his brandy decanter, and draped themselves over his sparse furnishings like last night’s evening clothes.

“You’re looking not quite the thing, Ath. Is something amiss?” Col pushed at Sythe to no avail. He dropped his now empty glass to the thick rag rug beneath his feet and tried to adjust his position across two pieces of furniture whilst working not to dislodge Nelson, the one-eyed tabby perched on the edge of the ottoman.

“Something had better be amiss.” Sythe rummaged around in the detritus on the tea table and came up with a lemon biscuit. “He’s summoned us here at eight in the morning, ungodly hour for a gentleman.” He shuddered dramatically and with no attempt at the subtlety with which he performed in the courtroom. Stephen Forsythe, Esquire, was one of London’s foremost barristers and wielded drama the way DaVinci wielded a paintbrush.

“Especially a gentleman who has spent most of the night *entertaining* a duke’s lonely widow.” CB’s comment was a rude reminder as to why Ath had called them together.

“Is that what we’re calling it now? *Entertaining?*” Col addressed his comment to CB, but his eyes never left Ath’s face. His life as a bloody Bow Street Runner made Archer Colwyn too clever by half when it came to reading another’s expression.

“Well,” CB said. “*Entertaining is more genteel than fucking like a pair of rabbits.*” Lionel Carrington-Bowles whom they all called CB because as Col so succinctly put it—*Being heir to a bloody fortune doesn’t mean I must take all day to call your name*—had a gift for the elegant use of the English language, most of it obscene and not fit for any but the lowest of company. In other words, the four of them.

I need more time, dammit. More time to slow the thundering beat of his heart. More time to calm the ever-increasing panic he’d been fighting since he’d realized precisely how much trouble they were in. Less than two hours past. He turned back to the decanter and sloshed another portion of brandy into his glass. After downing the amber elixir in one draught, he faced the room and leaned against the sideboard for support.

“Dammit, Ath, when are you going to obtain some decent furnishings for these rooms? You’re living in Albany, not a Seven Dials flophouse.” Col launched an attack on Sythe’s hip with his fist.

“Ouch! Prinny’s bollocks, Col. That’s my *arse* you’re punching.”

“Now children,” CB started. “Remember, we *are* gentlemen.”

“Bugger you,” Col said amiably.

“Sorry, love, but you’re not my type. And I know where that cock has been, thank you very much.” CB threw a leg over the arm of his chair and slouched to one side in order to dodge the lemon biscuit Col tossed at him. Prinny settled onto CB’s other leg like a sphinx, eyes closed against the mayhem that habitually accompanied the arrival of Leo’s friends.

“I wanted that biscuit.” Sythe said. “Not as much as I want Ath to purchase a decent settee, but—”

“Our journal is gone.”

Not the most deft handling of the announcement, but it had the virtue of ending all laughter and awarding him the room’s undivided attention. Silence was not their natural state, and it would not last, but the pause gave him time to restate the terrifying truth he’d learned only this morning. “Our journal. Is gone.”

His friends came to their feet as one and turned toward the other side of the room where the life-sized statue of Aphrodite stood behind an ornately carved mahogany music stand, an *empty* music stand. Disgruntled cats scattered as the three men crashed through his sitting room like a herd of young bulls and upended furniture on the way. He watched as CB rocked the

stand back and forth. Sythe lifted the stand and Col actually looked underneath. Had the situation not been so dire, he would have laughed. When the three of them began to rummage through his desk in the corner and ransack the bookcases along the wall he'd had enough.

“It *isn't* here,” he said over the din.

“Are you saying,” Sythe said as he dropped a book to the floor and prowled towards him. “The journal in which we have recorded our sexual adventures for over a dozen or more years —”

“Naming names—” Col continued.

“And writing out intimate details,” CB added. “Is gone? As in lost? Absconded with?”

“That is precisely what I am saying.” he ran his hand through his hair. “I sent Cheddars to Hatchards with the latest box of books from my mother.”

They all nodded in brief commiseration. His mother's proclivity for sending *improving* books every month from the library of the man he'd always believed to be his father had yet to *improve* him in the way she hoped, but their sale *had* improved his finances.

“What has that got to do with—” Sythe went white as a virgin's come out dress. He staggered around the settee and dropped like a rock onto one end whilst Col stumbled onto the other. CB appeared ready to swoon. He collapsed into the chair behind the desk and scattered papers, books, and sketches from the desk onto the floor.

“Dear God, man, you don't mean...” CB simply stared at him, speechless. A near impossibility until now.

“Our journal is in the hands of the most frequented bookshop in London?” Col dropped his head into his hands. “I’m going to be sick.”

“How the devil did *our* journal end up at Hatchards?” Sythe used his imperious barrister tone, the one that had other barristers shaking in their boots.

Ath simply rolled his eyes.

“I’ll tell you how,” Col said as he raised his head and stared daggers at him. “Cheddars. That doddering old fool—”

“Leave off, Cheddars. This isn’t his fault.” Ath massaged the back of his neck. Didn’t help. His head had begun to pound in rhythm with his heart. “The journal was on the floor next to the box of books. He assumed I intended it for the bookseller with the others.”

“That *book* has sat on that stand in that exact spot since you took these rooms after we finished at Cambridge. Cheddars has seen it there every damned day.” Sythe stood and began to pace the room.

“You’re assuming Cheddars can see. The man is three days older than God, for Christ’s sake.” CB, his color a bit better, leaned forward and ran his hands up and down his thighs.

“It isn’t Cheddars’s fault,” he almost shouted. Save for the three men in this room, Cheddars was the only person in the world who gave a damn for him. He’d been a part of his life since the day Ath was born and had served as his valet for more than half of the twenty-eight years since. Before that Cheddars had been his grandfather’s valet. *Grandfather*. Not a subject for today’s thoughts.

“Not his fault? Your ancient retainer has made a mistake set to land us all in every scandal rag in England. Whose fault

is it precisely?" CB asked.

"The scandal rags are the least of our worries. There is enough in that book to land us all in crim-con court for years." Sythe glanced at CB. "Or worse."

"This is a disaster," Col muttered. "A complete and utter disaster."

"More lives than ours will be ruined should that book land in the wrong hands." CB looked up at Ath. "How long has it been missing?"

"He visited Hatchards just before closing yesterday. I noticed the book was gone when I arrived home this morning. Cheddars went out to try and retrieve the book. I sent for you the moment Cheddars returned from Hatchards."

"He's already been to Hatchards at this time of day?" Col sat up and rested his head against the back of the settee.

"Not everyone lays abed until noon, Col." CB caught the cushion Col flung at him and tucked it behind him in the desk chair.

"Who gives a damn about the time? Did your valet fetch the book back?" Trust Sythe to cut to the heart of the matter.

He had let them carry on because in all their lives together bickering and accusing was how the four of them generally worked through whatever trouble their antics landed them in. Their current trouble would require far more than bickering and accusing.

Time to deliver the bad news. "Not exactly."

Once more he had their undivided attention.

"Which means?" CB gave him a look which indicated anticipation of the worst.

“Which means no.” Col slumped over the arm of the settee. Ath couldn’t blame him. The man had a stellar reputation as a Runner. The contents of their little journal might well end his career.

“Not exactly.”

“On my oath, Ath, if you say that one more time, I shall kick you in the bollocks, drown you in your own chamber pot, and wait until dark to drag you down the back staircase and throw your carcass in the Thames.” Sythe glared at him, unblinking.

There was nothing for it. He’d have to tell them everything and hope Col and CB did not join Sythe in enacting the retribution the barrister had just described.

“Where is Cheddars? Let’s have the explanation from—”

“No. You will not subject my valet to your inquisition, Barrister. He’s napping at the moment. He’s had an upsetting morning.”

“*He’s* had an upsetting morning?”

“Stop squawking like a fishmonger, Col. For God’s sake, Ath, get to the damned point.” CB appeared to be at the end of his tether. He wasn’t the only one.

He took a deep breath. “The journal is no longer there. The book buyer found the contents too filthy to be sold at Hatchards.” The four of them shared a brief and somewhat juvenile grin. Probably their last one once he told them the rest. “The pontificating old prude told Cheddars he sold the journal to a shop in Holywell Street. Cheddars traced the sale to Whitcombe’s.”

“Whitcombe’s? The Duke of Chelmsford’s brother, Whitcombe? He’s the leading purveyor of filth in London.”

Sythe subsided onto the end of the settee once more.

CB strolled to the sideboard and filled four glasses with brandy. He handed each of them a glass and lowered himself back into the horsehair chair. “Then the journal landed in the right place, didn’t it? Do continue, Ath. There’s more, isn’t there? And it’s worse, or you wouldn’t be standing there staring at your brandy instead of drinking it.”

Ath gazed at the libation a moment longer and then took a long sip. “According to Cheddars, Whitcombe divided the journal into four parts. Mine and CB’s parts of the journal have already been loaned out to subscribers. Yours, Sythe, and Col’s have been sold into the private library of a certain lady.”

“What?”

“Shite!”

“Bloody hell.”

Best to press on, especially as he had a plan, of sorts. “We have to fetch them back.”

“Fetch them back?” Col’s incredulity was unmistakable.

“CB and I will persuade Whitcombe to give us the names of the subscribers, and we will find a way to relieve them of our parts of the journal.”

“Steal,” CB said after he finished off his brandy. “By any means necessary.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Sythe said.

“I’ll tell you what I didn’t hear,” Col said once he’d unfolded himself from the arm of the settee. “I didn’t hear in which *certain lady’s* library our parts now reside.”

“Not your best parts, I hope.” CB apparently could not stop himself from digging at Col even in the face of imminent disaster. Just as Col could not resist hurling a stray book at their friend’s head.

“They are in the private library at Goodrum’s.” Ath rattled the words off so quickly he wasn’t sure they understood. Then he studied their faces. Oh yes, they understood. The fire in the hearth hissed and creaked. Somewhere on the floor below them a door slammed. Col kicked the glass he’d dropped earlier and watched it roll off the rug and across the bare polished floor.

“Goodrum’s on Duke Street,” Col finally said. “The private club. You expect us to invade the most exclusive *club* in London and steal—”

“To reacquire,” CB suggested.

Sythe downed his own brandy and then took a startled Col’s and made quick work of it as well. “Goodrum’s. As in Captain Eleanor Goodrum, the Pirate Queen of Algiers.” He stood, walked to the sideboard and picked up the bottle of Ath’s best brandy. “Gentlemen,” he said after which he unstoppered the bottle and took a long swig. “We’re not buggered. We’re dead.”

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After retiring from a European career as an opera singer, Louisa returned to her first love, writing Regency romance. A two-time Golden Heart finalist, three-time Daphne du Maurier winner, and four-time Royal Ascot winner—she is a member of RWA, Southern Magic RWA, and Regency Fiction Writers. She is both indie published and published by Scarsdale Publishing. Her first published work, the novella *A Perfectly Dreadful Christmas* from “Christmas Revels,” won the 2015 Holt Medallion. Her novel *A Study in Passion* won the historical romance mid-length category of RWA’s 2021 Vivian Award.

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The daughter of a trucker and an artist, she never knew it would take the hard-work ethic of her father to achieve the light-filled magic of her mother's art. She grew up a scribbler. The stories just spilled out. A newspaper and publishing professional for thirty years, she ran away to sea for three years, delivering yachts to the Caribbean, earning a USCG offshore captain's license. Now, she writes about love and high adventure from her writing room in Colorado. The first of the Men of the Squadron series, *Pride of Honor*, was a finalist in the RWA Beau Monde Chapter's coveted Royal Ascot Contest. *Secret Harbor*, a prequel to the Men of the Squadron, snagged First Place in Romance in the Colorado Pikes Peak Writers Fiction Contest

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