



*Tutoring the*  
BOOKSELLER

*Sex, Lies, & Forbidden Desires*  
← THE SERIES →

LOUISA CORNELL

AWARD-WINNING AUTHORS

ANDREA K. STEIN

# TUTORING THE BOOKSELLER

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SEX, LIES, & FORBIDDEN DESIRES

BOOK 5

LOUISA CORNELL &  
ANDREA K. STEIN ©2023



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## **SYNOPSIS**

### **Bookish Lord Whitcombe makes a bold request of ‘The Insatiable Lady’**

Lord Daedalus Whitcombe, owner of the most wicked bookshop in London, is on a quest to find “The Insatiable Lady,” author of his shop’s most in-demand naughty book. He has a very personal favor to ask .

### **Miss Perriton never expected a bookseller to look like Lord Whitcombe**

Miss Cordelia Perriton, the very pattern-card of a genteel young lady, has a reputation for her charitable works, including those on behalf of the fallen women of Seven Dials. If only society knew she’s “The Insatiable Lady,” and those fallen women provide the erotic tales in her sensational book. When Lord Whitcombe demands she submit her next book in person, she’s irritated, but their connection is immediate and incendiary. Her response to his bold request stuns him to his core.

**But when her friends begin to disappear, the couple’s erotic adventure turns deadly.**

## TUTORING THE BOOKSELLER

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by Louisa Cornell and Andrea K. Stein

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**L**ate May, 1826

**London**

If there was one thing Daedalus Whitcombe disliked immensely, a failed plan was at the top of the list. His plans always worked. His infallible plans had made him the most successful purveyor of lewd and lascivious reading material in London. Of course, his latest plan involved a woman, which likely accounted for its failure.

*As if you would know anything about making plans with a woman.*

He ran his hands through his hair and slumped into the comfort of his well-worn leather chair. The list of things he disliked was fortunately brief. The list of things he loved was far longer. His chair, tucked behind the battered oak desk from which he ran his scandalous literary kingdom, ranked high on that list. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the soft headrest. With a deep breath, Daedalus savored the air around him, air to him like the sweetest wine.

How he loved the scents of walnut oil, turpentine, briny black, and the distinct perfume only burnt soot, roots, and bone produced. Could Floris brew such a combination into a

cologne, he might well add some to his bath water on a regular basis. He doubted most men, and very few women of his acquaintance would be so enthused by the aroma of fresh printing press ink. Then again, none of them had made the substantial fortune he had on that concoction's use.

The case clock across from his desk chimed the hour, a faraway sound when accompanied by the mechanical thump, whirr, and hiss of the printing presses on the floor above his office at *Forbidden Pleasures – Wicked Books and Naughty Novels*. He loved the music of his new steam presses at work almost as much as he loved the scent of ink and paper. After three attempts to read the time on the clock Daedalus pinched the bridge of his nose and donned his spectacles.

Yes, he loved the smell of ink and paper, the sound of his presses, and even, grudgingly, his spectacles as they enabled him to see and gave him a more serious appearance. A necessity in the cutthroat and sometimes barely legal publishing business in London. At the staid age of thirty he did not love his eternally youthful face, which made his not being taken seriously a damned nuisance. The spectacles helped. His success helped even more.

Surrounded by the sights and sounds and scents necessary to the creation of the books and other written works sold in the shop housed in the floors beneath his feet, he should be content. He was for the most part. There was little he loved more than the signs of his independence. He reveled in the reminders that assured him of his escape from the useless existence he'd been allowed to live for the first twenty-five years of his life.

Now, with his thirtieth birthday only a few months away, he had but one more small independence to win. Perhaps not



quite so small. He had no idea nor experience of this elusive freedom yet. He checked the clock once more, checked his appointment diary, and sighed.

“Women,” he muttered. “Is there even a single one who can keep an appointment on time?” Lady Honoria Atherton had demanded this meeting. Where the devil was she?

He turned the key to open the desk drawer to his left and rested his hand on the two leather-bound volumes within. He was not in the habit of publishing a great many books bound in this way. Discretion was wanted for books like those provided by *Forbidden Pleasures*. The sort of discretion provided by binding them in marbled book boards without titles or author names on the covers. Not that the authors’ names were often true names at all. Most of the works in his shop bore names like Anonymous or A Gentleman of Pleasure or...

The books in the locked drawer were his personal copies of the shop’s two current bestselling tomes—*A Feast of Fantasies* and the newest by the author, *A Banquet of Base Desires*. His obsession with them was fast becoming a problem. Like a lusty schoolboy, he made use of the stories on their pages every day in his chambers next to his office. In his bath. In his carriage. The words penned by *An Insatiable Lady* consumed him. Until the identity of the lady herself had become an indelible quest in his mind. Hence his most recent plan—his failed plan to meet the author of his financial security, his sleepless nights, and his fevered daydreams.

There was only one thing he despised more than a failed plan and that was—

“Yer brother’s ’ere ta see yer.”

Daedalus leapt to his feet. His cup of tea upended and splattered all over his breeches. “Beelzebub’s bollocks!

Dammit, Ox, can you not knock?”

“Door weren’t closed were it?” Ox, former bare-knuckle boxer and the shop’s usher and enforcer, lumbered into the office. “Do yer want to see ’im?”

“Of course, he will see me.” The Duke of Chelmsford strolled into the room as if he owned the place. “I gave you my card. There is no need to announce me like the butcher delivering a haunch of pork.”

Ox stared at the elegant card now crumpled in his massive fist. “Reckon ’e knows yer name.”

Daedalus snatched a cloth from the shelf behind him and busied himself swiping at the tea stains all over the falls of his buckskin breeches. “Did we have an appointment?” He slipped his spectacles off and continued to blot and rub even once he realized there was no help for his clothes. The cloth gripped tightly in his fingers, he drew in a steady, silent breath. Finally, he raised his head to look at the bane of his current existence.

“Do I require an appointment to speak with my brother?” Chelmsford turned his gaze around the office, his expression a combination of disdain and disbelief.

“A bit of warning wouldn’t go amiss,” Daedalus muttered as he tossed the cloth aside and dropped back into his chair, sliding his spectacles into the open drawer before he pushed it closed. *Say six months warning or so.*

“Want me to throw ’im out on ’is *arse*, guv’ner?” Ox offered. The duke’s raised eyebrow, tantamount to a gasp of shock in mere mortals, forced Daedalus to swallow a laugh. The former boxer’s unimpressed attitude served as a reminder. The Duke of Chelmsford was just a man. A man long removed from the wild, happy boy with whom he’d explored the fields

and forests of their family's country estate from morning until dark.

Daedalus shook his head. "As much as I would enjoy that, I'd rather not see you in Newgate for manhandling a peer of the realm. Not to mention the scolding I'd receive from your Maggie if you didn't show up for supper tonight."

"Too right, guv'. More tea?" Ox picked up the spilled cup and retrieved the saucer from Daedalus's desk.

"That won't be necessary," Chelmsford snapped. "I will not be staying long."

"There is a God," Daedalus replied with an insincere smile.

"Weren't asking yer, were I?" Ox pinned the duke with his most menacing glare.

Daedalus was seized by a sudden coughing fit.

"If yer don't need me I'm for downstairs then." Ox gave the duke another up-and-down perusal and flexed one meaty hand.

"On with you then. And keep a sharp eye out for the person who *does* have an appointment with me this morning," Daedalus said with a pointed glance at the duke.

"Right, guv'." Ox tapped two fingers to his cap and left, closing the door behind him. Suddenly the din from the presses faded to a low hum. Or perhaps the lack of air and noise in his office had more to do with the presence of his brother, a man with whom he'd spoken less than a dozen times in the five years since he'd left the homes and fortune of his ducal ancestors.

"Would it kill your servants to address you as my lord?"

“Probably.” Daedalus indicated the chair across the desk from his own. “Sit if you must but be quick about it. I have a business to run.” He flipped open a ledger and pulled a stack of bills across the scarred and pitted surface of his desk.

“I see your manners have gone even more lacking,” Chelmsford observed in that dry, bored tone of his. He drew his handkerchief from his pocket and dusted off the chair before he sat. Daedalus rolled his eyes.

“As has your ability to cut line and arrive at the point of this unannounced visit. I’ll ask again in case your hearing has also gone lacking. Why are you here?” He picked up a quill, dotted the nib into his ink pot, and began to write in the ledger. He’d be damned if he could read what he scribbled as without his spectacles he couldn’t see a bloody thing. Chelmsford heaved a dramatic sigh. Daedalus continued to write, not bothering to raise his attention from the ledger.

“Breadmore is throwing a ball next week to introduce our niece to society. Your attendance is expected. One would hope you will be there for our sister’s sake.”

Daedalus blinked several times. He stopped writing mid-word. His entire body went cold as he placed the quill back onto his inkstand. Slowly he raised his head and met his brother’s steely gaze.

“She’s barely out of the schoolroom, for God’s sake. He’s already trying to marry her off?”

“She’s sixteen.”

“Exactly. A child.” For the first time since the duke had entered the room Daedalus truly studied his brother. “You cannot in good conscience allow this.” He fought the sudden

flood of memories rushing toward him, an undammed river of sadness, horror, and rage.

“He is her father.”

“Unfortunately.”

“I will not debate this subject with you again.”

“Of course, you won’t. The earl is your closest friend. Tell me, Your Grace, do you think Breadmore’s bitch of a mother has explained what goes on between a man and a woman to our niece? Do you think she has been prepared for what happens after her father marries her off to the highest bidder?”

“That is her husband’s duty.”

“Really? Worked out well for our sister, didn’t it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Our sister died of childbed fever. Breadmore was a devoted husband. I suppose you wish to gift our sixteen-year-old niece with some of the filth you publish here.” Chelmsford’s voice evinced disgust, though his face remained impassive as always.

“Absolutely. Anything to help her avoid the rakes and debauchers she’s going to encounter once Breadmore puts her on the auction block. Anything to help her realize she deserves a man who will give her pleasure in the bedchamber rather than climbing atop her and breeding her like a damned cow.”

“Five years of peddling this Bacchanalian lechery you call literature has rotted your brain, Daedalus.”

“If that’s how you see what I sell, I have a great deal of pity for your mistress.”

“Crude, brother,” the duke replied. “And beneath you.” Something flickered in the man’s eyes. For the first time in all

the years since their father died Chelmsford's ducal hauteur faltered. Interesting. And somehow...frightening.

“According to you nothing is beneath me. But I will find a way to keep Alice safe. I owe Diana that much.” The mere mention of their sister's name conjured an ache in his chest he dared not try to rub away. Not in his brother's presence. “We both owe her that much.”

Chelmsford shifted forward in his chair. “If you want to help Alice, allow me to buy you out of this business and close it down. How well will she fair on the Marriage Mart with a purveyor of disgusting books as her uncle?”

Daedalus allowed a slow smile to crease his lips. “At last we discover the real reason for your visit. Go away, Your Grace. My business is not for sale.”

“Who paid for your steam presses? I know you did not pay for them. This...venture is doing well, but not that well.” Chelmsford made a study of his fingernails so as not to look directly at Daedalus. A tactic which worked ten years ago and perhaps even five years ago, but not now.

“You arrogant bastard. Keep that ferret of a man of business of yours out of my affairs.”

“I'm no bastard. And any resemblance Aikers bears to a ferret is strictly coincidence. You have a partner. A partner who has invested a great deal of money in your business. Should I succeed in shutting you down, and I will succeed, this partner will lose his investment. You can tell me his name or I can set Aikers to finding him and denouncing his participation in this business to the world. Your choice, Daedalus.”

“Not much of a choice, but I would expect nothing less of you.”

“I am determined to save you from yourself.”

“Fuck you, Your Grace.” The appeal of the idea had grown throughout their conversation. Now the thought of his brother meeting his business partner shone like a beacon in the darkest night.

“Don’t worry about me. If you want to save someone, save our niece from her father and that harridan of a mother of his. You’re a bloody duke. You could have...”

“He is her father. The point is moot. I could not remove her from his care if I wanted to do so, which I do not. You have yet to tell me the source of your animus toward our brother-in-law.”

How could he? He’d sworn an oath. Even after all these years the promise made over his sister’s lifeless body silenced him. Or perhaps it was that telling her secrets meant revealing his own. “I’ll tell you my reasons for despising Breadmore when you tell me why you insist on defending him.”

“The name, Daedalus. I mean to have you out of this business one way or another. I would prefer not to do so by naming your partner in a public forum like *The Times* or perhaps *The Guardian* or both, but I will if that is what it takes to bring you to heel and return you to your position as my heir.”

The duke thought he had him there. Poor sod. Daedalus’s partner did demand a certain amount of anonymity, but unfortunately for His Grace was not the sort to ever give in to any man’s demands, duke or not. That much was certain. And the idea of his brother crossing swords with this person suddenly held a great deal of appeal. Evil, diabolical, delicious appeal.

“If you wanted my partner’s name you had but to ask. No need to set your ducal scent hound loose on my employees.”

His brother blinked. Very slowly, but he blinked. His Grace’s clumsiness and lack of speed in the motion was due, no doubt, to his distinct lack of practice. The Duke of Chelmsford never blinked. Simply one of the many unnerving aspects of the man’s character. Daedalus reveled in having made him do so, even if only the once.

“You don’t mind my knowing your partner’s name?” His Grace was obviously dumbfounded. Daedalus was enjoying a very good day indeed.

He reached into his desk and withdrew a calling card which he handed to his brother, relaxing his face into an expression of bland ennui.

“No need for your Whitehall minions. You had only to ask.” Daedalus took in his brother’s face as the man stood and perused the card. 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. Centered across the top was the name, *Captain E. Goodrum, Proprietor*. His expression betrayed no recognition of either the name or the image. Better and better. “I wish you good fortune, Your Grace. You’re going to need it.” The duke inclined his head ever so slightly and strode to the door.

“We cannot continue to visit the past and have any sort of life in the here and now,” his brother said without turning around. “I know you don’t believe it, but I mourn our sister too.” Then he did look back, his face suddenly that of the brother he remembered from his childhood. “It is good to see you.” He left the office before Daedalus could reply.



*Dammit why did he do that? Why did Chelmsford suddenly turn human?*

Little did the high and mighty Duke of Chelmsford know he was about to visit the past with a vengeance. And this particular past would hand His Grace his head and smile whilst doing so.

Much as Daedalus wished to witness this momentous event, he had more pressing matters to attend, the first being his meeting with Lady Honoria. For whilst he had one request to make of the elusive authoress of his favorite books, he suddenly had another request to make. When the question was the education of Daedalus's beloved niece, Captain Leo Atherton's new bride was the perfect answer. And the lady owed him a favor of sorts.

"Not if you look as if you've pissed yourself." Daedalus pushed to his feet so quickly his chair fell over backwards and sent a stack of penny novels careening across the floor. He bent to pick them up. *Thunk!* "Bugger it to hell." He touched the spot where his forehead caught the edge of his desk. Muttering the most vile language in his arsenal he scrambled in the open drawer until he found his spectacles, donned them, and staggered across his office to the privacy screen in the far corner.

He toed off his Hessians and stripped out of his tea-stained breeches. He tossed them and then his linen shirt across the top of the screen and began to wiggle into the clean nankeen breeches and shirt he always kept to hand in his office. Printing was a messy business. Not to mention Daedalus tended to find new and more inventive ways to muss his clothes with every passing day. A change of clothes close by was a necessary concession.

Ox's heavy footsteps announced his arrival in the room. "Changing clothes already, guv'? 'er ladyship's 'ere ter see yer. Spilled 'is tea when—"

"That will be all, Ox. Please have a seat, my lady, whilst I make myself presentable." Daedalus wrestled to put on his boots and bumped into the privacy screen. Fortunately, he caught the brocade and ebony shield before it crashed to the floor.

Ox muttered something under his breath to which Lady Honoria laughed in delight.

"If you continue to flirt with the lady I shall be forced to speak with your wife," Daedalus warned as he fought to poke his arms into his shirt.

"Yer a right cruel one ye are, guv'. I'm off then. Try not to spill anything on the lady."

"Don't get dressed for my sake, Lord Daedalus," Lady Honoria called to him once Ox's footsteps faded down the corridor. "If I were a man and as beautiful as you I'd never wear clothes at all. Rumor has it you have the finest *arse* in England."

Daedalus's entire body flushed with heat. "I thought that was you, my lady."

"Leo could always paint you and me nude side by side and allow the Royal Academy to decide."

"Number one on the list of things never to happen," Daedalus said as he came around the screen and straightened his jacket and hastily tied neckcloth. "Your husband would shoot me if he caught my naked *arse* anywhere near yours, and the captain is a crack shot."

Lady Honoria, as always, was dressed in understated elegance. Her blue walking dress flattered her figure and suited her golden-haired, blue-eyed beauty to perfection. The former cavalry officer and talented artist she'd recently married, said marriage being a cause of great gossip and scandal, was a most fortunate man. Daedalus bowed over her hand and then settled into his chair.

“By the way, was that your brother I saw ducking into his carriage like a man leaving his mistress’s house as I came in?” Lady Honoria had to be the most direct woman of his acquaintance. They’d known each other since they were children, which could be a pleasure and at times could prove a proper pain in the *arse*.

“Yes.” Short answers gave the lady less to speculate upon.

“Might I ask why—”

“No.”

“Ah. So, the two of you still aren’t speaking.”

“Oh, he speaks. I, however, do not feel the need to listen.” He leaned back in his chair. “Now that we have the polite conversation of the morning done, what can I do for you, Lady Honoria?”

“Fine. I am here at the behest of Lady Camilla.” Her sweet smile was that of a cat well and truly in the cream.

“Oh, God.” This did not bode well.

“Well, near enough.”

“Do go on. What can I do for Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby?”

“To be truthful I am here on behalf of Lady Camilla’s entire literary society, and we would like to know why there is

a page missing at the end of *An Insatiable Lady's* latest book, and what you intend to do about it.”

“Is there a page missing?” Daniel’s heartbeat doubled. Most men might have been shocked to discover what Lady Camilla and her friends considered *literary*. Knowing the lady herself he was not surprised in the least.

“A very important page, you fiend, in every single copy, and you know it. Why?” Lady Honoria leaned forward and tapped her finger on his desk.

“Has any lady in particular inquired after the missing page?” Daedalus tried to appear nonchalant, even bored. Tried and failed. Lady Honoria narrowed her eyes and pounced like a frantic foxhound.

“Cut line, Daedalus. What are you up to with this missing page ruse?” She pursed her lips and regarded him with a governess’s steely stare. “You deliberately failed to print a page that contains the...crisis of the most delicious part of the book. You did so in every single copy unless I miss my mark. You are nothing if not meticulous. Tell me what you are about or I shall recommend Lady Camilla herself come and winkle the truth out of you.”

Daedalus’s blood ran cold. There wasn’t a man in London brave enough to take on the Maven of St. James Square. *Think quickly, man!* He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a stack of neatly printed pages. “A clerical error of sorts.” He placed the pages on the desk directly in front of her. “Please distribute these to the ladies of your literary society.” He gave her his most boyish smile, the one that had charmed maids, governesses, housekeepers, and his devoted nanny when he was only a little younger than he was now.

“Bollocks,” Lady Honoria said vehemently. “Your people don’t make clerical errors. What could you possibly gain by...” Her eyes lit up. She slapped her hand on his desk. “You don’t know who she is. You were hoping she’d show up to complain about the missing page herself. The lady wishes to remain anonymous. So long as she continues to have her books delivered to you, what more do you want from her?”

*Delivered to you. Shite! Of course!* Daedalus bit his lip to hide the sudden brilliant notion Lady Honoria had so unwittingly given him.

“That is between me and the lady. But in return for my giving you the missing page, I would like to ask a favor.”

She reached across his desk and captured the copies of the missing page in her kid-gloved hands. “I cannot wait to hear this. What might I do for you?”

Now the time had come, Daedalus had to work quite hard to come up with an explanation for his request of Honoria that did not reveal secrets that were never his to tell. No sense in beating about the bush. “Breadmore has brought my niece, Lady Alice, to London in the hope of finding her a husband.”

“Diana’s daughter?” Honoria’s voice, in truth her entire demeanor evinced surprise. “Surely she is not old enough—”

“I have had this very conversation with Chelmsford, who informed me that she is Breadmore’s child and therefore matters are completely out of my hands.”

“Does your favor involve me taking some part of those *matters* into my hands?”

“Alice has been raised by Breadmore’s mother, a prudish harridan of the highest order. Which means Alice has no idea

how to deal with men, and will most certainly not have any idea what a wedding night entails.”

“You want me to...” Honoria knew what he was asking, he could tell that much. She, however, was going to make him say the words. *Damn her.*

“I want you to tell her every evil trick and licentious move the gentlemen she is going to meet might try to steal her virtue without a backwards glance when the deed is done. And you will explain everything that goes on in the marriage bed, in detail, and emphasize to her that she has the right to expect and demand pleasure from her husband.” By the time he finished his little speech Honoria’s eyes looked as if they might pop out of her head. They sat across from each other in silence for several minutes. Silence, save for the rush of his own breath in his ears and the thudding of his heart against his chest.

“Daedalus?” She spoke one level above a whisper. Her expression had softened. He steeled himself against the temptation to slump under the weight of his family’s secrets, secrets he longed to share but could not. Not now, perhaps not ever.

“You remember Mama died when we were all so young. Governesses don’t talk to young ladies about such things. Papa certainly wasn’t capable. It was left to Breadmore’s mother to explain and...” He shook his head. Speaking of the dowager countess, a woman he despised, did no one any good. Least of all Daedalus.

“I take it Breadmore’s mother is of the lie-back-and-do-your-duty school.”

“Diana’s marriage was not a happy one. I want something more for Alice. I owe my sister that much.” He bit the inside

of his cheek to keep from saying more.

She studied him carefully before she finally spoke. “Very well. I will do all I can to educate Lady Alice against the wiles of men.”

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“And once she is betrothed I will explain the particulars of sexual congress to her in detail. Will that do?”

“Yes.” Relief washed over him like summer rain.

“But first,” she said as she leaned forward in her chair, tapped his desk with her blue kidskin gloved hand, and smiled in a way that made him shudder. “In regards to *An Insatiable Lady*, I know you well enough to know you are not one to give up so easily. You’re concocting another scheme to meet her. I’d wager my new racing curricule on it. Tell me what you intend to do. Only then I will grant your favor.”

“Why do you want to know?” Daedalus had heard of Lady Honoria’s schemes. He was a mere amateur next to her.

“So I might crow with delight when she fails to succumb to your ruse, of course.” She fell back in her chair and laughed with evil delight.

“Does your husband know about your mercenary side, Lady Honoria?”

“Of course, he does. He bargains for my sexual favors quite regularly.”

Daedalus laughed and shook his head. “Very well.” He’d explain his newest idea to Lady Honoria, ask his favor, and then set his plan in motion to finally discover the identity of *An Insatiable Lady*. And this time he would not fail.

**O**ne of the things Miss Cordelia Perriton failed to consider once she had decided to write under a colorfully invented name was the number of times she would be forced to bite her tongue and mask her features so as not to reveal her true feelings. In the past hour, she'd been forced to do so with such frequency she feared she might turn into a faceless mute and never be capable of speech again. A state which would please her brothers immensely. Then again, she'd never dreamed her weekly attendance at Lady Camilla's literary society would reveal her publisher to be a duplicitous, devious —

“Scoundrel,” Lady Camilla said. “I would never have thought he had it in him to be so ruthless. She'll never accede to his wishes.” She held up her obviously well-read copy of *A Banquet of Base Desires*, Cordelia's newest book. “The woman who wrote this is not the sort to bend to the will of any man.”

“Here, here,” the widowed Julia Amherst declared. “Tell us, Honoria. How does he expect to lure our favorite authoress into revealing her identity to him?”

Cordelia savored a rush of pride at Mrs. Amherst's praise. Even as her entire being hummed with curiosity to know what



the arrogant Mr. Whitcombe intended. Lady Honoria's announcement after providing them all with a copy of the notorious missing page from *Banquet* had caused Cordelia to choke on her tea and nearly drop Lady Camilla's expensive Sevres china teacup onto the drawing room's ivory and pale blue Aubusson.

*"The missing page was all a plot to draw An Insatiable Lady out to reveal her identity to him. Can you believe it? And now he has come up with another ridiculous plan."*

"He didn't tell you why he wishes to meet the lady?" Cordelia asked as she returned her teacup to the tall marquetry table to the side of her chair. She leaned over the low-set tea table in front of her and plucked a macaron from the exquisite display of pastries. With great effort she managed not to turn her complete attention to Lady Honoria. At the moment casual behavior served her best. A moment from which her worst nightmares sprang. In the last year-and-a-half, she had dreaded the day when someone grew curious enough about her identity to try and unmask her. The last person she expected was the man who stood to profit the most from her continued anonymity.

"He said the matter was between him and the lady," Lady Honoria said with an arch lift to her tone.

"Do tell."

"How intriguing."

"Whitcombe *is* a typical man after all."

The other ladies in Lady Camilla's drawing room might be amused, but Cordelia moved between fury and fear in rapid succession. Her writing had a purpose, dammit. The revelation of her identity threatened to destroy that purpose. She cared

not a whit for her reputation save for the necessity of said reputation in her work for others, for women in desperate need of her help. In fact, the money her trusted footman was to pick up that very afternoon promised to bring her closer than she had ever been to offering some of those women real, permanent help.

She only just managed to retain her seat perched on one of Lady Camilla's opulent ivory and blue silk chairs. This latest news portended disaster. Cordelia fought not to squirm on the edge of her seat. She tapped her foot beneath the skirts of her green and black silk walking dress.

"I am on tenterhooks, Honoria. What is Lord Daedalus's devious plan?" Lady Jane Forsythe, widow of Baron Trevellyn and now wife of the formidable barrister Stephen Forsythe, had only recently joined their literary society, but Cordelia admired her greatly for her knowledge of the erotic literature of India and for her open and inquisitive disposition.

"It truly is a devious and low plan," Lady Honoria announced as she refilled her plate with a selection of the little tarts and cream-filled pastries from the tea table. "Lady Camilla, if you continue to allow Nathaniel to prepare the refreshments for our gatherings I shall need an entirely new wardrobe to accommodate my girth."

"Yes, it truly is too bad of you and your nephew to enjoy Mister Charpentier's culinary skills every day when the rest of us must make an appointment and pay a king's ransom to do so." Mrs. Amherst popped a macaron into her mouth and sighed, eyes closed as she savored the light and airy delicacy.

Cordelia wanted to scream. She needed information about Whitcombe's plan. Not that she wouldn't mind interviewing Nathaniel Charpentier, whose erotic food creations made the

notorious Club Ambrosios such a huge success. If her brothers discovered she knew anything about the scandalous club they'd pack her off to their parents in the country in an instant. She startled at the sudden series of gasps and exclamations from the other ladies in attendance.

"He is going to what?" she asked, certain she had misheard.

Every eye turned to her in an instant. *Damn!* She didn't dare let her guard down around these women. They were too clever and insightful by half each having come from backgrounds in which keeping their wits about them accounted for their current success in life and in most cases in love.

"She must deliver her next book in person," Lady Camilla said quietly. Her unflinching gaze sent a tiny fissure of fear into the pit of Cordelia's belly. "And he intends to withhold her latest payment until she does."

"That is what he told me," Lady Honoria confirmed.

"I wish I knew who she was," Charlotte Smythe declared. "I'd have Col go to fetch her money. Lord Daedalus be damned." The famous chess mistress was affianced to Bow Street's most successful Runner, Archer Colwyn. Cordelia wouldn't mind having his assistance if—*Wait! Lord Daedalus?* Two of the ladies had referred to her publisher as *Lord Daedalus*. Her head began to spin.

"Lord Daedalus?" Her voice cracked a bit. "The owner of Forbidden Pleasures bookshop, the shop on Holywell Street, is a member of the *ton*?" Cordelia gave up all hope of sounding disinterested. Perhaps they would believe she was eager for more gossip. At this point she'd rather be known as a gossip than as *An Insatiable Lady*.

“Oh yes,” Julia Amherst said. “Lord Daedalus Whitcombe, brother and heir to the Duke of Chelmsford. Didn’t you know?”

“No. I didn’t know.” She stuffed the macaron from her plate into her mouth and chewed vigorously to keep the series of vulgar, unladylike words going through her mind from spilling from her lips.

“Cordelia has only recently returned to Town,” Lady Honoria explained. “She’s been away for several years. Your father was ill, was he not?”

She swallowed hard and smiled. “Five years, yes. We’ve been rustivating in Surrey whilst Father recovered his health. My brothers and I have only lately come up to Town for the Season.” A duke’s brother. Her publisher was a bloody duke’s brother who intended to force her to reveal her identity by withholding money she’d rightfully earned. Her temper went from simmer to boil. The assistance of the Bow Street runner looked better and better the more she fumed, though she didn’t have any notion of following through. Her publisher might need the man’s help before this latest hurdle in her life was crossed.

The conversation turned to the missing page from her book. The other ladies made quick work of reading the conclusion of *An Insatiable Lady’s* latest bedchamber adventures. They were eager to discuss her work. Even more eager to speculate on the contents of her next book. She allowed their conversation to flow around her whilst she contemplated her publisher’s demise by increasingly gruesome means. By the time she had beaten him unconscious with a copy of Fordyce’s sermons and tossed him into the Thames the other ladies were making ready to leave. Cordelia gathered her

book and reticule and hurried toward the entrance hall of Lady Camilla's townhouse. She'd already begun a list of things she must do in the next few hours to secure her identity and deal with her scheming publisher.

"Are you quite well, my dear?" Lady Camilla placed a stilling hand on Cordelia's arm. The other ladies had made their farewells and were bustling out the front door still discussing naughty novels, Charpentier's macarons, and men who were slow to learn the futility of backing an independent woman into a corner.

"Yes, of course," Cordelia said too quickly. "Do I appear unwell?"

"Somewhat. Yes, you do. Is there something amiss with your charity work?" Lady Camilla's expression was nearly impossible to discern. Her questions were innocent enough, but sounded almost as if her intent was to ask something far more personal.

"My charity work?" Her mind raced. What did this deceptively harmless maven of society know, worse what did she wish to know? Lady Camilla's access to the secrets of the *ton* and how she acquired them was legend.

"I know about the Seven Dials women you are aiding. Such work cannot be easy for an unmarried gentlewoman."

Cordelia slowly, ever so slowly released the breath she'd been holding. "Mister Carrington-Bowles told you."

"That you brought one of your Seven Dials girls to his infirmary after the cock-bawd she left found her and had some bully boys beat her senseless? Yes, Lionel told me. He is most impressed with your efforts."

“I am more impressed with his, my lady. The time he spends in The Dials already means a great deal to the people who live there.” Cordelia had discovered his efforts only a few weeks before and already his reputation amongst London’s least favored citizens was whispered of in the streets and alleys. She had been fortunate to find his infirmary the day she’d discovered Polly O’Hara in a crumpled heap behind The Bucket of Blood on Rose Street. Carrington-Bowles was one of the wealthiest gentlemen in London, but he chose to provide an infirmary and medical care in one of the most dangerous parts of the City. Cordelia counted her work as little next to his efforts.

“Do not allow her to start on our Lionel’s virtues, miss, or you will be here until supper if not beyond.” A dark-haired slender young man sauntered up the corridor to kiss Lady Camilla’s cheek. She swatted at his arm, but gazed at him with such fondness Cordelia felt a pang of longing for her own Mama.

“Miss Cordelia Perriton, may I make known to you Mister Nathaniel Charpentier, scoundrel and chef extraordinaire. Nathaniel this is Miss Perriton, a member of my literary society and the brave young woman who is working to help some of the unfortunate ladies of Seven Dials.”

Lady Camilla’s introduction brought a heated flush to Cordelia’s face. She’d never sought to hide her efforts. Her brothers had tried. If Lady Camilla knew, who else in society did? Her work as a writer and her work in Seven Dials were entangled far too closely for too many people to learn all the details. She offered Mister Charpentier her hand.

“CB spoke of your work in Seven Dials only yesterday,” he said as he bent over her hand. As he straightened he gave

Cordelia a wink. “He did not mention, however, your membership in her ladyship’s literary society.” He tapped the copy of *A Banquet of Base Desires* under Cordelia’s arm. “May I compliment you on your taste in books? This one is already a favorite of mine. CB favors it as well, even with the missing final page.”

“Atherton’s bride has brought us the final page,” Lady Camilla said. “She managed to have it from Whitcombe’s own hands.”

“Well done, Lady Honoria.” A baby’s cry from one of the floors above drew the chef’s immediate attention. “One of my mistresses calls, and I obey. Miss Perriton, it has been a pleasure.”

“The pleasure was feasting on your brilliant pastries whilst we ladies read and conversed,” Cordelia replied.

He executed a sharp bow, kissed Lady Camilla once more, and bounded up the stairs.

“The infant girls he and Mister Carrington-Bowles have taken as their wards?” Cordelia asked as she followed his progress toward the sound of the crying babe.

“Yes,” Lady Camilla said, her expression suddenly deep in earnest. “They have taken the girls on together, as their children.” There was an unspoken truth in those words. A truth Cordelia understood at once.

“Then they are fortunate girls indeed to have two such loving and devoted papas.”

“The moment Honoria introduced us I knew I liked you, Miss Perriton.” Lady Camilla looped her arm through Cordelia’s and led her to the front door which a footman

quickly opened. “Are you certain you will not tell me what has you so discomfited?”

Cordelia smiled, though she feared her expression was more of a grimace. She wanted to tell someone. Secrets, those as monumental as the one she kept, or perhaps the secret that kept her, grew heavier the longer one carried them about like a packed portmanteau. No, there was already one person too many interested in her secret. She’d have to take care of him first, before sharing her hidden identity with anyone else.

“I am perfectly fine, Lady Camilla, I assure you. Only a little concerned about Polly O’Hara, the girl your nephew helped, but I am certain to set everything to rights soon.”

“Of course,” Lady Camilla replied. “Our worries are nothing compared to what awaits Lord Daedalus when he meets *An Insatiable Lady* face to face. How I would love to be a mouse in the corner when that happens. Wouldn’t you?” The wily old woman waved her off with an enigmatic smile. Cordelia made no reply, but hurried across St. James Square to her family’s townhouse which she currently shared with her three brothers. Time enough to fret over what Lady Camilla knew or did not know later. How had her life suddenly grown so complicated?



“MISTER PERRITON WOULD LIKE to see you.” Danders, the Perriton’s butler announced as he took Cordelia’s bonnet and gloves. “In his study at your earliest convenience, miss.”

Cordelia huffed and patted the butler’s arm. “We both know Frederick cares for no one’s convenience but his own.”



“As you say, miss.” Danders, having delivered her eldest brother’s message bowed and walked in serene silence down the corridor that led to the conservatory. No doubt to ascertain whether her middle brother, Sinjin, had eaten at all since supper last night.

If not for Danders her botany mad sibling might never eat, sleep, or do anything save commune with the plants he so carefully cultivated. Cordelia understood that sort of obsession all too well. Her writing consumed her to the point she often went without meals or rest when her stories refused to relinquish their hold on her.

“Convenient or not, you’d best attend our lord and master,” her youngest brother, Reginald, drawled as he sauntered halfway down the front staircase only to rest a hip on the banister and slide the rest of the way down.

Cordelia rolled her eyes as he landed on the marble floor with a violent thud of his booted feet which guaranteed scuffs to the foyer sure to set their housekeeper, Mrs. Shaw, into a fit of the vapors.

“Your lord and master, Reggie,” she said as the footman at the top of the stairs caught her eye. “I have no master.”

The footman, Andrew, tapped two sealed messages against the waistcoat of his simple green and gold livery. She nodded her acknowledgement as she punched her brother’s arm and started up the wide Persian carpeted staircase.

“Don’t I know it,” Reggie replied. “Enjoy your tête-à-tête with our keeper.”

“Enjoy your tête-à-tête with that opera dancer,” she called over her shoulder.

“Harridan,” he said, as he took his hat and gloves from the footman at the door.

“Reprobate.” Cordelia absently waved him out the door as she reached the top of the stairs and took the messages from Andrew. “When did these arrive?” She kept her voice low and glanced around the first-floor landing and the wide corridor that led to her father’s study which Frederick had taken as his own.

“The one came not long after you left this morning, miss.” Cordelia recognized the seal of her publisher at once. *Arrogant damned* — “A boy brought the other not quarter of an hour past.”

She opened the second message first. The paper was wrinkled and torn and the seal was but a drop of tallow, barely a seal at all. The penmanship, however, presented a neat, brief, and disturbing message.

*Polly has gone missing.*

*Tall Mary*

“There you are. Could you step in here please, Cordelia?” Frederick’s imperious voice startled her. She shoved both the opened and unopened messages into the bodice of her dress. The footman snorted and tilted his nose up in perfect imitation of her brother, which forced her to choke back a laugh.

“Don’t go far,” she told Andrew quietly so as Frederick might not hear. “I’ll be going to the bookshop with you today.”

“Trouble?” the footman asked as Cordelia straightened her bodice and shook out her skirts.

“For someone. Give me quarter of an hour and then invent some household catastrophe to rescue me. That is all the time I can bear with Lord Frederick of the Fastidious Habits.”

“Will do, miss. Good luck.”

“Thank you, but I shan’t need it,” she said as she strode to the study.

“Wasn’t intended for you, miss,” Andrew said with a grin as he turned and hurried down the stairs.

“What can I do for you, Frederick?” With her eldest brother Cordelia found her best approach to be one of bored confidence. Poor man never knew what to make of her, her preference to be sure.

“Good day to you as well, sister. Please sit.” Frederick indicated the hard uncomfortable chair before his desk.

“I’d rather not, thank you. I have several appointments to keep.” She strolled about the room and picked up a book here, adjusted a statue there.

Frederick cleared his throat. “We have been in Town nearly a year and save for your literary society and your *charity* work you have made no effort at all to go out into society. Mother and Father are concerned.” He held up an opened letter. “You really must make an effort to meet people before you are labeled an eccentric and relegated to spinsterhood.”

“A fate worse than death,” she said, hand to her heart in mock horror. “Tell me, Freddie, how would Mama and Papa know of my social schedule enough to be worried? I have not mentioned my comings and goings in my letters to them.”

He had the good grace to appear a little contrite. Very little. “I felt it my duty to—”

“Bollocks, brother.”

“Cordelia, really.” He slumped into the overstuffed leather chair behind the desk and gave her his most condescending glare, the one Andrew so perfectly imitated at a moment’s notice.

“Yes, really. You have no business spying on me and reporting to our parents like some toady governess. Shall I write to them about you and Reggie nearly coming to blows at breakfast over some opera dancer?”

“You wouldn’t.” He sat up so quickly he banged his knee into the desk. “Shite!” Rubbing his leg, he blew out a long breath and dropped the letter to pick up what appeared to be an invitation.

“I would and I would include both your and Reggie’s descriptions of the lady’s assets. If that is all, I’ll thank you to confine your letters to our parents to your own comings and goings and the weather.” She’d had enough of interfering men for one day.

“That is not all. The Earl of Breadmore has invited us to a ball, his daughter’s introduction into society or some such occasion. I’ve accepted on your behalf. Please, Cordelia,” he went on when she opened her mouth to refuse. “If I write to Mother and Father that you have attended at least one ball they will leave us both alone, for a few months at least.”

He had a point. One ball would not kill her. She hoped. “Very well. May I go now? I have appointments and things I must do.” *And a publisher to put in his place.*

“Where are you off to so eagerly? Another literary society?”

“To visit a sick friend.” A ridiculous lie, but she had not the time to invent another.

“Your friends must be the most sickly lot of women in Christendom. They fall ill more often than Prinny borrows money. Shall I hire a footman to run ahead of you ringing a bell to warn the public away lest they succumb?” He laughed at his own cleverness.

“Not if you wish your meals to be served hot and your baths to be drawn by anyone save yourself. You forget, the servants like me far better than they like you, and I remember to pay their wages on time.” She smiled at him sweetly.

“Very well, but do stay away from my friends. I’d rather they not fall prey to the mysterious illness following you about London.”

“As I don’t keep company with opera dancers and useless young gentlemen with entirely too much time and money on their hands your friends should be perfectly safe.” She went to the study door.

“Of course, you don’t. My friends are all terrified of you.”

She skipped back to him and kissed him on the cheek. “Good day, Freddie. Don’t fret. I am certain there are other opera dancers out there eager for your attentions.”

“The ball, Cordelia. Your word on it.”

“My word on it is *deadly dull*, but I shall force myself to attend.”

As she climbed yet another flight of stairs and hurried to her bedchamber she drew the messages from her bodice. The moment she entered her private sitting room she saw her lady’s maid Gilly seated by the fire stitching a torn hem in one of Cordelia’s ball gowns.

“I see my brother has informed you of my commanded attention at the Breadmore ball.” Cordelia broke the embossed

seal of the second message. “Of all the insufferable, overbearing, dunderpated...”

At the light rap on the door Gilly put down her sewing and let the footman, Andrew, in long enough to inquire when they were to leave.

“Give me half an hour, Andrew, and change out of your livery. We’ll take a hackney.”

“I’ll take care of everything, miss. Not to worry.” He ducked back out of the sitting room.

“Going somewhere?” Gilly asked dryly as she followed Cordelia into her bedchamber.

“I need to change. Quickly.” She began to strip off her silk walking dress. “I’m going to kill Mister Whitcombe.”

“Your publisher?” Gilly and Andrew were the only two people who knew of Cordelia’s secret identity. She’d known them both nearly her entire twenty-five years and trusted them implicitly.

“That’s the one. And apparently he isn’t *Mister* Whitcombe, he is *Lord* Daedalus Whitcombe.” Cordelia plopped onto the bed in her chemise, stockings, and stays and began to unlace her simple walking boots. “The lying, thieving...” She caught the black satin carriage dress Gilly tossed over her head.

“Right. If he’s a lord, and you’re going to kill him you’d best wear this gown. Elegant enough for a peer, and blood won’t show on the black. Do you want a bonnet?”

**B**y two o' clock in the afternoon Daedalus had sent one of the shop boys to Goodrum's with no less than three soiled shirts and two stained pairs of breeches for the laundress there to put in order. The boy had mumbled something about a record for the year and losing a wager as he stuffed the clothes into a cotton bag and hurried down the back staircase and along the alley behind the bookshop which eventually came out close to Goodrum's Mayfair location.

People might question a successful man like himself, brother to a duke, sending his laundry to one of England's most exclusive pleasure houses. However, when the best laundress in London takes her clothing restoration skills to said pleasure house, needs must. He didn't care much for the opinion of others, but a man who changed clothes as frequently as he did cared a great deal that they were returned to him not simply clean, but repaired of any damage, and soft to the touch. Daedalus eschewed most of the privileges of his ducal heritage, but he drew the line at foregoing his creature comforts.

He poured the now cold wash water from the large pitcher into the bowl on his washstand behind the screen in his office. His last clean shirt and pair of buckskins lay draped across his

desk chair. With a bath towel wrapped around him and tucked in at the waist, he splashed the chilly water over his chest and arms, gave himself a quick scrub with a bar of Floris's sandalwood soap, and used a soft wet flannel to wipe himself clean. For the last time this day or at least he hoped.

His office door creaked open. "Visitor, for yer, guv'."

"Dammit, Ox, I told you no more surprise guests today. Neither my temper nor my wardrobe can take even a single interruption. One more incident and I'll have to conduct business naked as the day I was born." Daedalus stripped off the bath sheet and dried himself in several quick, rough motions.

"Yer said no more unless it were 'er."

Daedalus whipped the bath towel around his hips and held it together with one clenched hand whilst he pulled the screen aside with the other. "Her who?" He stopped in his tracks. His shock was so great he nearly let go of the bath sheet. Ox, the great lumbering devil, tugged his forelock, bowed to the lady, and left the office at a deceptively swift pace for such a large man.

In the middle of his office, a diminutive lady, at least a foot shorter than he, stood with one hand fisted on her hip and the other tightly clutched around the ribbons of a somewhat large black velvet reticule. Indeed, her entire ensemble was black, including the small veiled bonnet she'd removed and deposited on his desk. The dress hugged her Venus-like figure in a lover's embrace—every curve draped in shape-defining black satin.

Her hair, a deep brown so rich as to shine burnt umber in places, had been piled onto her head in thick artful curls and braids. Curls and braids that made his hands itch to take them



down for the simple privilege of seeing how far along her body her hair might fall. She had the biggest dark brown eyes set in a face that was the perfect mix of graceful curves and sharp angles with lips plump and deep rose in color without the aid of paint of any kind.

“*You’re* Lord Whitcombe?” She stared at him as if were some particularly odd specimen of insect. Her incredulity would be amusing if she didn’t keep moving her gaze over his body so hotly he imagined her hands on his flesh. Her expression flitted from fascinated to incendiary fury in rapid succession which caused her fine brown eyes to spark with flecks of gold.

“Mister Whitcombe. You are...*An Insatiable Lady*? I mean the authoress of—”

“I am the authoress who has made you a fortune, a fortune which you have deigned to hold for the ransom of learning my identity, *Lord* Whitcombe. And...” She gave an exaggerated huff and threw up her hands. “Oh, for pity’s sake *will* you put on some clothes? You may be in the habit of conducting business in the nude, but I am not.” She dropped her reticule onto his desk next to her bonnet, seized his clothes from the back of his chair and tossed them at him.

Which would not have ended so badly had he not let go of the bath sheet in order to catch the flying garments. After which he turned, presenting his bare buttocks to the lady, stumbled into the screen, scrambled to set it aright whilst clasping his clothes over his suddenly hardening cock, and finally managed to organize himself and his makeshift dressing room so as not to offend her further. An utter waste of time as he vowed he heard her snorting and snickering at him from the moment the entire debacle ensued.

She wasn't supposed to be so beautiful. Nor so young. She couldn't be more than five and twenty. He'd never seen her before, but that was not surprising as he had not been out in society much even before he'd escaped his brother and gone into the naughty books business. London society made his skin crawl. From the age of sixteen he'd been fondled and fawned over by women of all ages because of his appearance. Some of them old enough to be his mother.

Daedalus shuddered and attempted to pull on his breeches and step into his top boots at the same time. "I do apologize for greeting you in such a stage of undress, but I wasn't expecting you to respond to my request so soon. Shite!" He collapsed into a chair and struggled to wrestle into his buckskins. The screen teetered, but remained upright.

"I wasn't expecting to respond to your summons at all, Lord Whitcombe. I am neither your servant nor one of your shop workers to come and go at your command."

"Of course, you aren't," he said as he stepped around the screen and adjusted his shirt and loosely tied neckcloth. "I assure you, Miss...My apologies, what is your name?" She had settled into the chair across from his so he took his seat and donned his spectacles. She was even more lovely now that he saw her clearly.

"I don't see the necessity of your knowing my name, my lord. I am here to collect my money and to discuss when you might expect my next book. Our business dealings have progressed quite nicely without my name being brought into the discussion. I see no reason to alter our arrangement, do you?" She did not flinch. Her hard brown-eyed gaze did not falter. She might look the demure miss, but the woman who had penned two erotic and provocative accounts of her

amorous adventures sat across from him a veritable queen. Not to be trifled with nor ignored by any man. Least of all himself.

“That depends on the nature of our arrangement.” He pushed his spectacles up on his nose. “I have a...most unusual request to make of you. That is the reason I have gone to such lengths to meet you.” His heart hammered so hard against his ribs he decided the damned thing might burst out of his chest at any moment. He’d lost his wits. Nothing else could account for what he was about to ask.

“The nature of our arrangement?” For the first time since he’d set eyes on her she appeared uncertain. The presses pounded over their heads. The scent of ink still stirred the air but something more sweet and delicate came to Daedalus from across the desk, a heady mixture of orange blossom and woman. “What precisely is your request?” She sat up straight, perched on the edge of the serviceable wooden chair, her hands folded together tightly in her lap.

He leaned back in his chair, his elbows rested on the arms and his fingers steepled against his chest. “I wish you to tutor me in the art of pleasuring a woman.” Daedalus smiled ever so slightly. He’d actually managed to say the words without stammering. His voice hadn’t cracked once. He sat as still as possible and watched as every sort of thought and emotion possible traveled across her face.

“You want me to tutor you?” Her voice did crack. And rose half an octave.

“I want you to tutor me in the art of pleasuring a woman. I have read your books again and again. I want to learn from you so no woman will ever regret taking me to her bed.” Somehow he’d leaned forward and his hands were pressed into the top of his desk so firmly as to turn them white.

She grew so still he was uncertain if she even breathed. But her eyes, those fathomless dark brown orbs glimmered with outrage, yes, but also with the sort of understand that marked something she'd heard, but wanted to understand. He did not want her to understand.

“I realize this is an unusual request and—”

“Unusual?” She leapt from her chair her entire body aquiver with rage. “This is perhaps the most libertine, insulting request I have ever heard. Of all the...”

“I have my answer then.” Daedalus rose. His chair slammed into the bookcase behind him. He was mortified. After reading her work he believed he knew the lady. He opened his desk drawer and drew out a hefty leather money bag. “I meant no insult, madam. I admire your spirit and your ability to tell men what you want without bowing to society’s ridiculous ideas about women’s desires and pleasures when it comes to bedsport.” He tucked the bag into her reticule. “If it were up to me every unmarried miss upon leaving the schoolroom would receive a copy of your books so they might understand what goes on in the bedchamber and what they have every right to expect from a man.”

He came around the desk and offered her his hand. “I will not bother you again. Send your next book by your servant as before, and I look forward to reading it.” The words spilled from his lips like print blocks falling off a shelf. His stomach roiled, and he'd broken into a sweat. Yet another failed plan. What now?

She took his hand in hers. “I don’t understand,” she said softly.

He laughed. “That makes two of us.” She had to leave before he made a complete fool of himself. *Too late.*

“I mean, have you never...pleased a woman in bed?” She blinked up at him, those beautiful eyes suddenly full of such compassion she nearly broke him. He made her no answer, merely waited. After a moment or two her eyes widened. Her mouth formed a wordless oh of understanding. “Why have you not...How...How old are you?” She whispered her questions as if someone might be listening and he would be embarrassed. He would if anyone knew. It occurred to him she was the only person on earth who knew he’d never tugged a woman. The knowledge gave her power over him, but she did not strike him as the sort of lady to use that power.

“I will be thirty in September.” He held her delicate hand in his. Something passed between them, between the press of their palms and the flow of the blood in their veins, warm and slow.

“May I ask why you have never...”

“You may ask,” he replied in a tone he hoped indicated he had no intention of answering. He’d never spoken of that particular grief to anyone, let alone a lady he’d just met. She smiled. He picked up her bonnet and reticule and handed them to her. “You came in a carriage?”

“In a hackney. My footman is waiting with the driver at the back entrance to this establishment.”

“There is a staircase to the left of my office that leads to the mews. Do you know the way?”

“Yes. Thank you.” With her bonnet and reticule in her free hand she slowly withdrew her other hand from his grasp. “Good day, Lord Whitcombe.”

“Good day, miss.” He returned to his desk, waited until she was out of sight, and subsided onto the worn leather with a

groan. He propped his head in his hands. “Thirty years old and a virgin.” He groaned again. “I wouldn’t touch me either.”

His office door slammed open. The lady in black marched across the room and threw her things on his desk. She came toward him with such a fiery look in her eyes Daedalus leaned back and nearly fell from his chair. She clasped his face in her hands and pressed her lips to his with such force he forgot to breathe. Her kiss was fierce and hot and seeking. She ravished his mouth until he opened to her and then the real ravishing began. Her tongue curled around his. She sucked long and hard and then slowly slid out to lick his lips, then nip and bite and kiss until Daedalus feared he might burst into flames. His cock roared to life so hard and fast he gasped. His vision blurred and tiny stars of light burst before his eyes. Somewhere in the middle of her kiss his spectacles had abandoned him. His chest heaved in an effort to draw in some air that was not aflame with her passion. He grasped her elbows to keep from falling backwards.

She finally drew back, her lips clinging to his as if loathe to let him go. Daedalus lay back in his chair gasping for breath. She ran her hands over his shoulders and pushed herself upright. “Well,” she said as she shook out her skirts and smoothed her hair. “This might prove interesting. I must give your proposal some thought. I will send along a note with my decision.” She dipped into a brief curtsy. “Good day, Lord Whitcombe.”

“I...” He closed his eyes, blinked a few times and when he looked up she was gone. His chair slid from under him. He flailed his arms and swept the books off the shelves behind him as he fell. He glanced down at the hard bulge behind the falls of his breeches just before a stack of heavy ledgers crashed onto his groin. “Bloody bugging hell!” He subsided

flat of his back, his entire body shaking. Heavy footsteps clumped down the corridor and stopped at his office door.

“Awright, guv’?” Ox bent over him and pushed some of the books aside.

“No.”

“Want to get up now?” The big man offered Daedalus his hand.

“No.”

Ox glanced about the room. “What ’appened, guv’?”

“I...She...” His ears were ringing. He managed to pull himself into a seated position and touched his mouth. “She kissed me.”

“Aye,” Ox said as he helped Daedalus to his feet. “That’ll do it.”

“Do what?”

“That’s the question, ain’t it?” And Ox began to laugh.

**T**he hackney had rattled halfway to Gracechurch Street before Cordelia's legs ceased to shake. In some sort of dream state, she had stumbled down the backstairs at Whitcombe's and allowed Andrew to hand her into the hired carriage. Thank goodness Andrew had insisted on riding on the box with the driver. She was in desperate need of the time it took to cross London to compose herself. Recover? What on earth had she done?

*You kissed him, you silly chit!*

Kissed him? That was perhaps the understatement of the year, more likely that of the last five years. She'd practically ravished him into the floor. Her lips still hummed with the taste of him. The clasp of his powerful hands on her arms had seared through her clothes. He had no right, damn him. She pounded against the threadbare squabs with her fists.

She'd gone by the shop on several occasions in the last year, not to deliver any of her manuscripts, but only to look. The shop itself was fascinating with its maze of shelves and little alcoves where people sat in mismatched chairs next to plain rather indifferent little tables and perused a stack of books at their leisure. Upstairs there was a warren of private rooms surrounded by bookcases where one might fill an entire



table with books and invite a few friends to sit around and go through their literary choices in deep discussion.

All this time she'd assumed the rather distinguished white-haired gentleman in the office toward the front of the shop to be *Mister* Whitcombe, the owner. No, he was the head of the printers and printers' apprentices who worked on the upper floors. *Lord Whitcombe. Lord Whitcombe, despicable man, was the owner!*

He had no right whatsoever to be...to be...

"Ooooh!" Cordelia kicked her booted feet against the bottom of the seat as the hackney rocked to one side and then the other in a sharp turn. "No man has the right to be that pretty."

Lord Daedalus Whitcombe was not simply handsome, he was beautiful. His features put her in mind of the drawings of DaVinci, the curve of his cheekbones both soft and sharp at the same time. The perfect symmetry of his face, the set of his jaw and the hard line of his chin, gentled by the slight dimple at the center, made one wonder what rare combination of parents created such a man. His hair contained every shade of gold imaginable and had slid over her fingers like the finest silk. His eyes were blue-green framed by lashes entirely too long by half.

She should not have looked when he stood there in naught but a bath sheet. She most definitely should have turned away when the bath sheet fell to the floor. When had she ever done what she was supposed to do? His body more than matched his face. She'd wanted to run her hands over every taut muscle, every drawn sinew. The man had an *arse* more magnificent than any statue in the British Museum. She shivered and

shifted in her seat to settle the pressure building between her legs simply at the thought of all that gorgeous golden flesh.

*“I want you to tutor me in the art of pleasuring a woman. I have read your books again and again. I want to learn from you so no woman will ever regret taking me to her bed.”*

Of all the things he might have said, once she recovered from the alarming reality of his appearance, those words were the last she ever expected. He, the owner of the largest purveyor of erotic materials in London—books explicit in their presentation of every titillating physical profession of love, passion, and arousal between two people, and, dare she say, sometimes more than two people—*he* required *her* instruction? There was something in his request, something within the words of his plea, that drew her. More than his divinely sinful face, more than his tempting-as-original-sin body Daedalus Whitcombe needed her. And as certainly as the events that set her on the road to writing her first scandalous novel, Cordelia knew she was going to fulfill that need.

All she had to do was discover precisely how.

“Gracechurch Street, miss,” Andrew called down to her from his perch next to the hackney driver. In a trice he had the door open and the steps down, his hand extended to help her out onto the pavement before the house she had rented upon her return to London a year ago. As her booted foot touched the pavement and she glanced up at the parlor window where one of the house’s residents sat reading she gasped as a notion, *the* notion, struck her like a bolt of lightning.

“Of course!” she nearly shouted and hurried up the steps to the door of the house.

“Miss?” Andrew inquired as he paid the hackney driver from the small leather purse Frederick gave him every

morning to take care of Cordelia's expenses.

"Nothing, Andrew." She knocked on the door and gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll send someone to fetch you from the Half Moon when I'm ready to return home. Give your sister and her husband my best." She waved him off to the tavern his brother-in-law and sister ran only a little further down Gracechurch Street.

"Have you heard from our Polly?" Tall Mary snatched the door open and started the conversation without preamble or pretense at civility. Cordelia admired her greatly. Mary had been on the game since she was twelve. During the last year she'd left the streets, learned to read, and kept a nice flock of chickens in the back garden of the house which provided her and her fellow ladies with eggs for their own use and a considerable number to sell at market.

"I came to ask you if you had heard anything." Cordelia removed her bonnet and gloves and placed them on the hall table in the foyer of the simple, but clean and decent house. "Parlor?" she indicated the door to the right.

"Aye. Our Sal is fetching the tea. The others are waiting for you."

Cordelia noticed at once the small fire in the hearth. Nearly June, summer was upon them, yet the older houses in this part of London were known to carry a chill even in the warmest weather. She did not doubt these ladies, who had spent a great deal of their lives from earliest childhood living and working on the streets of The Dials, carried the cold in their very bones. She took the chair farthest from the fireplace.

"In good looks this morning, miss," Short Mary said as she made room for Tall Mary next to her on the serviceable brocade settee. The room was well-furnished with mismatched

upholstered chairs, two settees, various tables, and even a pair of oak commodes on either side of the front windows. Even the carpets, though a bit worn, were decent Aubusson. Most of the pieces, upstairs and down, had come from the attic at Cordelia's family's townhouse. What Frederick didn't know would not hurt him and the things in the attic had not been used in years.

"Who died?" Bess asked as she moved a table into the middle of the group for Sally Mills to place the heavy tray she carried into the room.

"What?" Cordelia glanced down at her clothes. "Oh, the black. I went somewhere I didn't care to be seen. Now, how long has Polly been missing?"

"She ain't missing, miss. She sent a note round." Sally handed Cordelia a cup of tea. Cordelia took a long sip. For a woman who had not had tea leaves to brew until she moved in to the Gracechurch Street house, Sally brewed a divine cup and no mistakes about it. Then again, after her encounter with Lord Whitcombe, perhaps tea was just what Cordelia needed to steady her nerves and clear her mind.

"What note?" she asked. "When did she send a note?"

Sally pulled a piece of expensive parchment from her bodice. Cordelia took the note and perused the words and the writing with care. The handwriting, scrawled and uneven, appeared to be that of Polly O'Hara.

*Off to seaside with me gentleman friend.*

*Back next week.*

*Polly*

"I didn't know Polly had a gentleman friend." Cordelia folded the note and tucked it into the pocket of her dress.

“Who is he? Have any of you met him?” She waited for the others to sip their tea and stare at each other for several minutes. “Well?” Silence. She sighed. “I don’t care if you have gentleman callers so long as they don’t stay the night and there’s no money involved. That’s why you are here, to make certain the men in your lives know you are worth more than money.”

“She said he were a friend of that toff doctor what took care of her,” Short Mary said.

“Did she tell you his name?” Cordelia tried to shake off the prickling sensation at the back of her neck.

“No,” they all murmured.

“He come for her in his carriage five nights past,” Tall Mary said. “He come in the dark of night, miss. Bit strange if you ask me.”

“I agree,” Cordelia said softly. She took another sip of her tea and returned her cup to the table in their midst. “Is young Abel still with you?”

“Oh, aye, miss,” Bess said. “He’s never had a place so good as our kitchen. He’s a good lad. Runs errands. Builds up the fires.” Abel, far too mature for his nine years, had attached himself to Bess at some point and when she came to live with the others he had taken up a position as their pot boy and lad of all work.

“Very good. I want all of you to come up with a list of people Polly might have seen or spoken with about this gentleman and this trip to the seaside. Send Abel out and about to ask these people for any information they have. They’ll be more likely to speak to him than they will to you since you’ve left the game.”

“You’re a clever one, ain’t you miss?” Tall Mary declared.

“I try. We will give him a few days to gather information. By then Polly should be back from her trip. If she is not, we’ll take further steps. Agreed?”

Each of the ladies nodded or voiced their consent. Cordelia sat quietly, her hands in her lap. The idea that had come to her as she’d entered the house suddenly seemed more daring than she’d ever dreamed. Lord Whitcombe would expect an answer. She’d formed her reply in an instant. Then she’d kissed him.

“Miss?” Short Mary leaned over and waved a hand before her face. ‘You’ve got a man on your mind and no mistake. Best tell us before Sally sends Abel out to ask where you went this morning that you don’t want naught to know.’”

“You are an evil woman, Sally Mills.” Bess put down her teacup, dusted her hands together and fixed Cordelia with a gaze known to make grown men put down their ale and flee a tavern in a thrice. “Out with it, miss.”

Cordelia took a breath and shook her head. All of London believed *An Insatiable Lady* to be a woman of vast experience, passionate appetites, and in complete command of the men who pleased her and took care of her every erotic need. Little did her avid readers know that the women in this room with her were the source of every story, every detail, and every adventure. She had taken the stories of their years on the streets and in the brothels of Seven Dials and spun them, Scheherazade-like into the sensuous fantasies of a woman who did not exist.

Cordelia had not been a virgin for over five years. The loss of that sacred virtue was not a tale for any book, not even her own. She’d been pleasuring herself long before that. Her

grandfather's collection of provocatively explicit books had fallen into her hands quite by accident when, by the age of twelve, she'd read everything in the vast library at Perriton Park, her family's country home. Never make vague reference to a hidden reading room to a young bibliophile in search of something to read.

However, as her actual experience was limited to one man, a man who had turned out to be unworthy of the "gift" she'd given him, she suspected she needed the sort of instruction her books provided. Instruction the ladies in her Gracechurch Street house had given her first in late night conversations over too much wine and brandy, and then in tales she'd woven into two, nearly three now, very successful, deliciously wicked, and profitable books.

And now she needed their help. For, by all the lusty gods of the Pantheon, she intended to take Lord Daedalus Whitcombe up on his request. "I went to see my publisher," she began. "And he has asked me for a favor." She made a point of meeting each of their gazes, one at the time. "A favor for which I need your advice." She then began to explain the entire story to them. She left out the part about her kissing the man senseless. She told them about his tricks to try and meet her, his arrogant demand she come to him in person for the money and to deliver her next book. She finished by repeating his request word for word.

*"I want you to tutor me in the art of pleasuring a woman. I have read your books again and again. I want to learn from you so no woman will ever regret taking me to her bed."*

"He's a toff? A lord?" Tall Mary asked.

"Yes."

"He's rich," Bess stated more than asked.

“Quite.”

“And he’s never...fucked a woman?” Sally’s horror was almost comical.

“So he says.”

“And he wants *you* to teach *him* how to please a woman?” Short Mary stood and went to the escritoire in the far corner of the room. She began to rummage through the drawers and pulled out a few sheets of parchment.

“He wants me to teach him how to pleasure a woman completely,” Cordelia said slowly. “What are you doing, Mary?” The petite young woman returned to the sitting area with the parchment, an inkwell, and a quill in hand.

“We’re going to need more parchment and quills than that,” Tall Mary said. “Run up to my room and fetch ’em, Sal. Be quick about it.”

“What do you mean?” Cordelia didn’t know if the fluttering in her belly was excitement at her own daring or fear for poor Lord Whitcombe. She squeaked in surprise when Bess pulled her from the chair and ran an insistent hand all over her body before taking her face between her thumb and forefinger and turning her head from side to side.

“Ye’ve a pretty face, good legs, and a nice pair of tits,” Bess announced. “That’s a good start.”

“With what she’s got and what we teach her?” Sally snorted. “A rich, handsome lord who wants to learn how to pleasure a woman ’til her legs shake like a jelly and he or the wench goes blind from it? When we’re finished with him he won’t know his own name, and they’ll be lining up in the streets of Mayfair to taste his wares.” Sally threw her head back and howled with laughter. The others joined her. Cordelia



began to imagine exactly what tutoring Lord Whitcombe meant and her heart took off at the gallop.

**S** he was here. As if attending a ball given by the man he despised most in the world was not bad enough, the lady who had kissed Daedalus nearly unconscious now stood across the ballroom talking to Lady Honoria and Captain Leonidas Atherton, bold as brass and more exquisite than any woman had a right to be. His mouth went dry. What malicious deity had he offended to be caught between his brother-in-law, his brother, and the woman who had haunted his dreams for the past week? Well...not haunted precisely. His body flushed with searing heat at the thought of *how* this unnamed woman had featured in his dreams.

The ballroom of the Earl of Breadmore's town mansion, festooned with monstrous arrangements of white flowers and lit by the glow of hundreds of white candles in chandeliers the length of the room all but screamed *On the block tonight, gentlemen, my virgin daughter*. Daedalus's clothes, little used in the past five years or more, fit too snugly and threatened to strangle him at any moment.

Yet the beauty who gave him a painful cockstand at the mere thought of her, stood across the room looking as cool and serene as the ocean after a summer without storms. He needed to leave. He wanted to stay. Honoria spotted him from her

position just inside the French windows that led to the terrace, if memory served. Along with *An Insatiable Lady* and several other ladies of his acquaintance. Sweat began to pop out all over his body. Suddenly, in addition to strangling clothing, he had to worry himself with spectacles determined to slide off his nose.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

“Drink?” Lionel Carrington-Bowles appeared at his elbow, silver flask in hand and an unnervingly curious expression on his face.

Daedalus snatched the proffered vessel, unscrewed the cap, and swallowed over half the contents in one long draft.

“Not fond of balls?” Carrington-Bowles shook the nearly empty container, raised an eyebrow, and tucked the flask into the pocket of the tail of his black evening coat.

“Not fond of the host.” He gave the simplest answer so as not to rouse the gentleman’s suspicions. This was the man who had paid Daedalus a ridiculous amount of money not to publish the journal that had accidentally landed in his hands a few months past. A journal in which Carrington-Bowles and three of his friends had recorded their amorous exploits for years. The man knew something about wicked secrets and how a man might appear when keeping one or more.

“Breadmore? Wasn’t he married to your sister?”

“My late sister. Diana. Yes. This ball is to introduce their daughter, Alice, to society.” Daedalus continued to steal glances at his mystery authoress. Gowned in a dress of shimmering blue silk, she appeared a Venus rising from the sea. The bodice cradled her breasts, emphasizing their luscious

top curves and the gloriously ivory shade of her shoulders bared by the cut of the dress.

“Yes, Honoria introduced me to her. She’s charming.”

“She’s a child.”

“So I have been informed.”

The orchestra struck up a country dance, the first of the evening. Chelmsford led their niece onto the dance floor. Alice looked nothing like her mother. More than anything she appeared very young and very nervous. Carrington-Bowles words penetrated the miasma of Daedalus’s brain.

“Informed?” He turned away from the dance floor to face the other man.

“Lady Honoria has given us strict instructions.” Carrington-Bowles nodded in the lady’s direction. “We are all to dance with Lady Alice and to ensure no fortune hunters, scoundrels or other undesirables so much as beg an introduction.”

“Fortune hunters?”

“Breadmore has settled a considerable dowry on the young lady. Word has it he is anxious for her to marry so he might take a bride himself.”

“Blackguard.” Daedalus did a visual search of the ballroom and spotted his brother-in-law speaking to two well-turned-out young men he did not know.

“Word has it he has already chosen his bride.”

“Who is the unfortunate victim?”

“Miss Cordelia Perriton. She is the beauty standing next to Honoria, the lady in blue. In fact, Breadmore is speaking to

her brothers now.”

The dancing feet thundered across the floor. The orchestra only added to the din. Daedalus switched his gaze from the lady in blue to her brothers and back again. His heart slammed against his ribs in time to the throbbing music. And every ounce of warmth fled his body as an icy tide swept through his veins. He took Carrington-Bowles by the elbow and began to drag him around the edges of the ballroom.

“Introduce us.”

“What? Whitcombe, what the devil are you about? Whitcombe!” Carrington-Bowles dug in his heels as they rounded the corner at the top of the ballroom, closest to the orchestra.

“The Earl of Breadmore is the last person she needs to marry. I must tell her.” He was rambling, but could not stop.

“You must? Dear God, man, what has he done to deserve such malice from you?”

“He killed my sister.” Daedalus wanted the words back at once. He’d never said such a thing before, not in the nearly sixteen years since Diana’s death. He waited, chest rising and falling in silent breaths, for the other man to speak.

“Then I’d best introduce you to Miss Perriton.” Without another word Carrington-Bowles strolled past the orchestra and Daedalus followed on his heels. Honoria spotted them and waved.

And then Miss Cordelia Perriton saw him. Her face revealed nothing. Her eyes spoke entire epistles, epistles laced with language few ladies used, no doubt. He imagined she had called him everything save a Christian in her mind by the time he and Carrington-Bowles joined their little group. What had

seemed like a good idea on the other side of the ballroom suddenly struck him as...presumptuous? Dangerous? A good reason to ship him off to Bedlam?

“Whitcombe,” Captain Atherton said in greeting. “What inducement did Chelmsford use to force your attendance tonight?”

“Leo, really.” Honoria smacked her husband on the arm.

“A promise to leave me be for the *next* five years,” Daedalus said, his eyes never leaving Miss Perriton’s face.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Honoria said. “You would not miss your niece’s introduction to society. You *will* do your duty and dance with her, of course.”

“Of course. Though I understand most of her dances have been taken throughout the evening.” He and Honoria exchanged a quick glance of understanding. “Thank you,” he mouthed.

“Miss Perriton,” Carrington-Bowles announced as the first dance ended and some of the dancers left the floor whilst others formed the next set. “Please allow me to make known to you Lord Daedalus Whitcombe. Whitcombe, may I present to you Miss Cordelia Perriton, a member of my aunt’s literary society and the newest member of our circle of friends?”

“*Lord* Whitcombe.” she said as she offered him her hand. “The proprietor of the bookshop in Holywell Street?”

“Indeed, Miss Perriton.” He took her hand and flinched as she squeezed his fingers tightly enough to crack bone. “Have we had the privilege of your custom?” He brushed his lips across her gloved knuckles and slid his hand free, flexing his fingers against the black silk of his evening breeches.

“Perhaps. However, I send my footman to make such purchases. Perhaps you have seen him there?” The gaze she turned on him fairly smoked with pique. He had to admit the degree of arousal she provoked threatened to unman him on the spot. “My brothers would never countenance my visiting such an establishment.” She turned her head toward where the two young gentlemen still spoke with Breadmore.

“I understand.” All the while the rest of the group of friends merely watched, not unlike spectators at a shuttlecock match, with him as the shuttlecock and the lady batting him from either side.

“Good to see you out and about, Whitcombe.” Lady Camilla joined them, black ostrich fan waving like a sail in a high wind. “Chelmsford is heading this way. Might I suggest you do your duty by your niece before he arrives?” She smiled sweetly, putting him in mind of a crocodile he’d seen at the Exeter ’Change last year. He kissed the older lady’s cheek.

“Done and done, my lady. Thank you.” He stopped in front of Miss Perriton. “Might I have the dance after this one?”

“Perhaps.”

“I will refrain from breathing until I gain your assent.” He executed a crisp, deep bow.

“Promise?” Her smile was nearly as ferocious as Lady Camilla’s.

He bit back a laugh as everyone else gasped. Threading his way through those dancers forming the next set he found Alice and made a great show of requesting her dance. Chelmsford, nearly halfway across the dance floor, frowned and retreated to the corner where the other high-in-the-instep lords milled

about solving the nation's problems, or causing them as the case might be.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked Alice as they went through the steps of the allemande.

"I am still nervous, but Grandmama says I am doing very well." Her tentative smile, very like her mother's, tugged at his heart.

Daedalus shot a brief look toward the wall where the chaperones were gathered. Breadmore's mother, her face twisted into a sour grimace stared back at him. *Bitch*. "Of course, you are doing well, you are my niece," he said with a grin.

She laughed, which lit up her entire face. Her youth and innocence shone like a lamp on the darkest night. "You will never guess who has asked me to tea *and* to join her literary society."

"Who?"

"Lady Honoria Atherton. Can you believe it? Grandmama was reluctant to allow it, but once she received a note from Lady Honoria's friend, Lady Camilla, she agreed I might go with my chaperone."

"I am certain Lady Camilla's reputation and Lady Honoria being a duke's daughter made quite an impression on the Dowager Countess."

"Uncle," Alice chided. "I do wish you and Grandmama might learn to tolerate one another. Then perhaps you would visit more often." She was quite an accomplished dancer, for which Daedalus was grateful. Her lack of artifice and rather plain looks would make her the subject of scorn amongst the Season's crop of brides on the hunt.



“There are any number of *ton* ladies I find barely tolerable, Alice, dear. Unfortunately, Breadmore’s mother is not one of them. You have been receiving my letters, have you not?”

“Every week. They are the very best part of...” They were separated by the dance and when they came together again she merely shook her head

“Perhaps I can arrange for us to ride together in the mornings whilst you are here in Town. Would you like that, poppet?”

Her face alit with joy. “Above all things, Uncle.”

“Consider it done.” The dance ended. Once the bows and curtsies were accomplished, he drew Alice’s arm through his and they took a turn about the outskirts of the dance floor. “I shall not keep you long as I suspect you shall have men clamoring for your dances, Lady Alice.”

She squeezed his arm. “We both know if it were not for my dowry very few eligible bachelors would even speak to me, let alone ask me to dance.”

“Alice,” he started.

“Hush, Uncle. I already have dances promised to Mr. Carrington-Bowles, Captain Atherton, a Mister Stephen Forsythe, and several other very respectable gentlemen.”

“Which is as it should be for my lovely niece.”

“Respectable *married* gentlemen who are friends of Lady Honoria. I have, however, had one eligible gentleman call on me twice since we arrived in Town.”

“Do tell.” Miss Perriton caught his eye from across the room.

“Viscount Ravenwood is from a very good family. His title is not a high one, but it is very old, and Papa says he is in possession of a considerable fortune.”

“How nice for Papa.” Daedalus did not even try to keep the bitter edge from his tone. “What do *you* think of this Viscount Ravenwood?”

“He is very kind, polite, and compliments me quite nicely. He has a scar on his cheek from a riding accident, but I think the scar makes him look rather dashing.”

“Rather dashing, eh?” he teased. “Alice, promise me something,” he said as they drew closer to the spot where her grandmother was seated with the other dowagers.

“Anything,” she replied.

“Pay heed to Lady Honoria. Trust her judgment in all things, above anyone’s. She is a very wise lady and will see you come to no harm. I suspect you can ask her anything, and she will answer you honestly.” He kept his tone as even and calm as possible. The noise and heat and press of the crowded ballroom had already begun to work on his sense of well-being. He had come with one commission in mind—to keep Alice safe. With Breadmore’s interest in Miss Perriton he had another commission to complete before he could make his polite, but swift withdrawal from the whirl of societal life.

“How odd. Lady Honoria said almost that very thing to me when she attended my last dress fitting. Had she not been there I would have looked like a frigate in full sail.” She indicated the simple but elegant gown she wore, which he had to admit flattered the girl greatly.

“Ruffles and bows?” he whispered in her ear as the dowager countess rose to her feet to greet them.

“A veritable shopful.”

Daedalus laughed out loud.

“Really, Whitcombe,” the Dowager Countess of Breadmore drawled, nose in the air.

“Yes, really, Countess.” He inclined his head, kissed his niece, and headed to the spot where he’d last seen Miss Perriton. By the time he arrived the group consisted of Lady Honoria, Captain Atherton, Carrington-Bowles, Julia Amherst, the barrister Stephen Forsythe and his wife, Lady Jane Forsythe, who had been the widow of Baron Trevellyn. He had not intended to have a conversation with Miss Perriton in the midst of so many of her friends. And he assumed they were all friends as they were laughing together quite merrily. From their expressions as he drew near, the subject of their laughter was him.

“Lady Honoria, please tell me you are not sharing tales of our childhood with Miss Perriton,” Daedalus said in the pause whilst the orchestra prepared for the next dance.

“Perish the thought,” Honoria said. “Miss Perriton was explaining her aversion to beautifully handsome men. The sort who cause women to take leave of their senses.”

“How fortunate for me I do not fall into that category of men.” Silence fell so swiftly and so hard he wondered if the entire ballroom had not heard him. Perhaps not, but the faces of his companions could not have been more shocked had he stripped naked and danced a gavotte. “What?”

Miss Perriton reached up and plucked his spectacles off his nose. Three young ladies dressed in virginal white chose that moment to walk by and turn their heads in his direction. They immediately plowed into a hapless footman carrying a tray of

glasses. Once the noise of breaking glass and shrieking women subsided his spectacles were shoved unceremoniously back onto his face. Whilst two footmen scurried to clean up the mess the three ladies continued to stare at him as they crossed the ballroom.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” he said, rather indignant at their inference. “I do things like that all the time.

“That is because without those spectacles, according to my lady wife,” Captain Atherton said with a grin. “Your ability to see is that of an octogenarian dowager after half a bottle of brandy.”

“Which accounts for my appreciation of your paintings,” Daedalus shot back. “Miss Perriton, I am given to understand that the Earl of Breadmore has expressed an interest in courting you.” Well that certainly threw a damper on the laughter.

“How nice for him,” was Miss Perriton’s reply.

“I like her,” Forsythe said.

“Told you you would,” Atherton said.

Daedalus had had enough, of everything he suspected. The orchestra began the strains of the next dance. “Shall we, Miss Perriton?” She obviously didn’t need his protection from Breadmore, but he most definitely needed an answer of some sort to his request, among other questions. “I believe this is our dance.”

“Is it?” She threaded her arm through the elbow he winged at her. “I don’t remember giving my assent.”

Carrington-Bowles chuckled and whispered something about Daedalus being in some sort of trouble.

“Am I?” Daedalus asked as he and Miss Perriton walked not toward the dance floor, but toward the terrace outside the open French windows.

“Are you what, Lord Whitcombe?” She steered him across the terrace and down the steps into Breadmore’s torch-lit gardens.

“In trouble.” Their feet crunched as they rambled down one of the graveled paths toward a small folly at the far end of the gardens.

“Do you want to be?”

He had no answer for that, at least none he’d thought through completely. Not that he had formed a complete thought from the moment she’d taken his arm. Something about this woman turned him into a blithering idiot. He drew in a deep breath, a breath redolent with the scent of roses.

“Lord Breadmore’s gardens are lovely, are they not?” she asked as they climbed the steps into the folly, hidden almost in its entirety by the profusion of climbing rose vines wrapped around the columns and walls of the Grecian-themed structure.

“Breadmore has nothing to do with the beauty of these gardens.” She stilled next to him, no doubt at the venom in his words.

“The Dowager Countess then.” Miss Perriton withdrew her arm and wandered to the other side of the folly. In the dim light of several lanterns scattered about the small room, her face and the skin bared by the cut of her gown glowed golden ivory. She settled onto a stone bench, carved in the form of a *klinai*, a Greek bed, and spread her skirts about her.

“The Dowager Countess is as hard as that bench. I doubt she could persuade a weed to grow. I still find the idea of her

growing her son in her own body impossible. Perhaps she farmed the process out to a willing servant girl.”

“You certainly make no effort to tender your opinion of your in-laws with even an ounce of civility, Lord Whitcombe. Why is that, I wonder?” She gazed up at him, head tilted slightly to one side.

“If we are to become intimate, Miss Perriton, I would suggest two things,” he said pouncing on the opening she unintentionally gave him. If this woman ever did anything without intention. “First, I will endeavor to always offer you my unvarnished opinion, and I will expect the same of you.” He stepped closer until his evening shoes brushed the outer edge of her skirts.

“Are we going to become intimate?” She did not look at him, but rather made a little show of sliding her gloves down her arms, off her fingertips and dropping them at her feet.

“Second, you must cease calling me Lord Whitcombe in that tone of yours and from henceforth call me Daedalus. And I shall call you Cordelia, at least in private.”

She angled her head back enough to meet his gaze. “Very well.” She patted the spot next to her. Now sit down, Daedalus, and kiss me.”

His entire body head to toe heated so quickly he grew dizzy. He stumbled forward and dropped onto the bench so hard and fast he landed sprawled on top of her. She plucked off his spectacles and placed them carefully on the floor well away from where they sat.

“Can you see me without those?”

“This close? Absolutely.”

“Oh good. Now, where were we?” She ran her hands slowly on either side of his neck and untied his neckcloth, which she pulled away and tossed in the direction of his spectacles. Daedalus had decided his heart would stop beating at any minute, but he was resigned to die doing anything Cordelia Perriton asked of him. Anything. “I remember. You were going to kiss me,” she whispered across his lips.

“Yes,” he managed right before he brushed his open mouth across hers. He cradled the back of her head in one hand as she lay back against the stone bolster at the end of the bench. Her tongue darted out to tease and tempt his. All the encouragement he needed, Daedalus sank his kiss into her mouth, his tongue curling and thrusting around hers. His every sense was attuned to her response. She sighed and sucked his tongue. Her breasts moved against his chest as a tiny moan vibrated from her body to his. She threaded her hands through his hair and angled his head to seal their lips more tightly. He had never kissed, never been kissed as he was now. His body shook with the force of the simple, passionate joining of their mouths.

She nipped at his bottom lip. He growled, shocked at his own response. Cordelia tasted of tea, sugar, and some exotic dark spice. When they finally broke apart to breathe he rested his forehead against hers, gasping for air, and stared into her face. Her expression was soft and alive and alluring beyond his wildest imaginings. She traced one delicate fingertip down his cheek and across his lips.

“That was quite good.” Her voice held a rasp he found oddly pleasing. “But if a gentleman wishes to truly pleasure a woman he will kiss her...everywhere.” She blinked up at him.

“I am at your command, my lady. Where...”

Somehow she'd managed to drag the bodice of her gown down to reveal two of the most exquisite breasts topped by small dark nipples it had ever been his privilege to see. She cupped his cheek and drew his head down. "You've read my books?"

"Thoroughly," he said darkly and licked his lips.

She leaned up so that his lips rested next to one tight nipple and whispered in his ear. "What did you learn? Show me."

He didn't even try to hold back the eager grin that creased his lips. He curled his tongue around her nipple in one long slow motion. He raised his hand to cup her other breast and then stroked his fingers in painstaking increments around and across every velvet soft inch of that tempting flesh. He alternated strokes with gently squeezes, but avoided this nipple utterly. He pressed soft kisses around the edges of her areola and brushed his nose against the taut tip with each kiss before he suddenly took the entire tip of her breast into his mouth and began to suckle.

All the while he forced his eyes open, desperate to watch her reactions to his every move. She threw her head back, her lips pursed and moaned softly. Her mouth fell open in a long *Ahhhh* of pleasure. His hardened cock throbbed against the confines of his silk evening breeches. He raised his head enough to free her breast from his eager mouth and dragged his hair across her skin, pebbled with goose flesh. She gasped and guided him to her other breast, still cupped in his hand. He used to tip of his tongue to thrum the tightened tip, licking and then flicking over and over whilst her legs moved beneath him and she murmured, begging him to do more. He grasped the nipple in his teeth and tugged.



“Yes,” she hissed. “So good. More. More.”

He set himself to the task with fervent dedication. The sound of her voice, the passionate joy in her face urged him to try everything he’d read, everything his fevered dreams had conjured. She smelled of violets and gardenias. Her skin was hot and sweet and like satin under his tongue. He nipped the under side of her breast, ran his tongue across the top curve and then sucked as much of her into his mouth as he could and sucked long and hard.

When he raised his hand to cover the breast on which he’d started she took his hand and slid it down her body. She’d somehow raised her skirts and when she shifted slightly she slid his fingers between her legs. Daedalus forced himself not to start as he encountered the sweet, wet spot she’d described so well in her books. He continued to roam over her breasts with his mouth—kissing, nipping, suckling, and listening to the commands of her sighs, gasps, and moans.

He raised his eyes to watch as he slid his fingers up and down the cleft of her sex in slow long strokes. She began to pulse her hips in tiny lifts against his hand as he quickened his pace ever so slightly. She bit her bottom lip and *hmm’ed* her pleasure as he teased at the opening of her cunny with the tip of one finger. Then he dragged that fingertip up in search of the place she’d written of, the seat of her pleasure. He knew he’d found the spot when she gasped and wrapped her hand around his wrist to keep him there, rubbing and circling with the aid of the increasing wetness he’d wrung from her body. She took over for a moment, showing him what she wanted. Once he caught the rhythm he lifted his face from her breasts and kept his eyes on her as he rubbed faster and faster and plunged two fingers into her quim every few strokes.

Her voice rose higher and higher. She stuffed the side of her free hand into her mouth. Her head, thrown back, tossed from side to side and her entire body rose longer and faster against his hand until she suddenly arched her back, froze in place for several continuous shudders and then collapse onto the bench with an ecstatic cry.

Daedalus caressed her cunny a few last times and marveled at the shivers that ran through her. His blood thundered in his ears. He suddenly realized his chest was heaving as if he'd run from London to Hampstead Heath. Not that he cared. Not when Cordelia sat up, tucked herself back into her bodice, and lowered her skirts. Especially not when she clasped the back of his head and dragged him to her for a kiss that had him one breath from spending in his breeches like some speckle-faced greenling. Her face, aglow with pleasure and satisfaction stunned him.

“I think you shall be trainable after all, Daedalus,” she said as she retrieved her gloves, wiggled from beneath him, and pulled those silvery scraps of silk up over her arms. “I suggest we meet again in a week and continue your education if that is satisfactory to you.”

“A week?” His head rang as if he'd taken a blow from Gentleman Jackson. “I mean—”

“Very well,” she said. She stood and shook out her skirts. With a few pats to her hair, she fairly glided to the folly's entrance. She glided, whilst he doubted his ability to stand. “In a few days then. Send a note along with the particulars. I will allow you to choose the place, somewhere discreet, of course.”

“Of course. Wait. Cordelia.” He gathered himself enough to grab his spectacles and stumble down the steps after her.

She turned and waited for him to catch up to her. “Yes?”

In that split second he imagined he saw something more than the composed sangfroid she always wrapped around her. Her eyes still burned with passion. Her breathing pushed those glorious breasts against the top of her bodice fast and hard. He even detected a slight sway in her stance, as if her legs were as shaky as his own.

“I...That is...” He shoved his spectacles onto his nose. “You do not want Breadmore. He will not make you a good husband.” Not what he intended to say at all, but his brain still had not come out of the bliss of those moments in the folly.

“I would ask you why if I was in the market for a husband, but I assure you I am not. A husband is the last thing I need.”

“Good.” Her words stung, but he didn’t want to ponder why.

“May I offer you some advice in kind?” The last of the glow in her eyes and skin faded. She was the prim and proper Miss Perriton now, no longer his siren authoress.

“Viscount Ravenwood is the last man your niece should marry.” She rose on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Good night, Daedalus. Thank you for a most *pleasurable* evening.” She ran her palm up the hardened cock behind his falls and sauntered into the darkness, not toward Breadmore’s ballroom, but toward the mews at the back of the house. He hurried in that direction and arrived just in time to see a rather plain carriage disappear down the narrow lane behind the garden walls.

Where the hell was she going at this time of night, alone? The possibilities that came to mind soured his stomach. And what did she mean about Ravenwood? These lessons in pleasure were going to cost him far more than he’d ever bargained for, that much was certain.

**F**our days had passed since her encounter with **Daedalus Whitcombe**. Four days, and Cordelia had neither seen nor heard from the man. Encounter? What a terribly plain word for an experience that had opened her eyes to an entirely new world of possibilities. How she had managed to walk away from him and step into her carriage as if nothing had happened she would never understand. The moment she had settled onto the squabs of the family conveyance her legs had commenced to shake as if every hint of bone had been removed. Only yesterday she had finally gone most of the daylight hours without daydreaming about his hands and his lips on her body. He had taken over her nights, however, like a conquering medieval overlord. All her years of pleasuring herself to the idea of some nameless, faceless lover counted as naught against the fantasies she played out in her mind featuring the gentle, passionate lover her inexperienced pupil had proved himself to be.

“Ridiculous,” she muttered under her breath. She was no innocent miss exhibiting her wares in a white dress in the ballrooms of Mayfair. She likely knew as much or more about physical passion between a man and a woman than any lady of her acquaintance, save the women of Seven Dials for whom she worked to—

“Are you well, Miss Perriton?”

She raised her head to meet the steady gaze of Captain Atherton. He and Mister Archer Colwyn, Bow Street Runner and betrothed of London’s most skilled chess mistress, sat on the rear-facing seat of the sumptuous carriage in which they traveled. They had agreed to accompany her to have handbills printed inquiring for information about the whereabouts of Polly O’Hara and now Tall Mary, who had gone missing yesterday.

“Of course, Captain Atherton.” *Do calm yourself, Cordelia.* “I was merely observing that my fears are likely the result of a ridiculously overwrought imagination. These two ladies are playing least in sight for, I’m certain, a very good reason.”

“You don’t strike me as a ridiculous sort of female,” Mister Colwyn observed. “One missing lady from a household may be explained away. Two in the space of a week?” He shook his head. “I think not.”

“My wife declares you to be one of the most sensible ladies of her acquaintance,” Captain Atherton said. “Not to mention CB is quite disturbed his patient has disappeared when she promised to return for him to ensure her injuries are on the mend. I ignore my wife’s opinion and CB’s concerns at my peril, believe me.”

“I am most grateful to both of you for your assistance. My brothers are useless in these situations, not to mention they do not approve of my work with the Seven Dials ladies.”

“Few brothers would,” Mister Colwyn said. “But your work and our friend, CB’s, work is greatly appreciated by those you help, believe me. Damned nuisance, brothers.” The man was deadly handsome when he smiled. No wonder

Charlotte Smythe spoke of him with the expression of a woman well loved.

“I daresay the man we are about to ask for help with these handbills would agree with you, Col. His ducal brother is a nightmare from what Honoria tells me.” Captain Atherton leaned forward to peer out the carriage window.

“She would know,” Mister Colwyn agreed. “She grew up with Chelmsford and his brother, did she not?”

*Chelmsford? They were going to see the Duke of Chelmsford’s brother?* Cordelia swallowed against the sudden sinking in her stomach.

“Indeed. And apparently Chelmsford is doing all in his power to drag Whitcombe out of the naughty book business.”

“Whitcombe?” She tried to even out her tone. “We are going to see Lord Whitcombe? At his place of business?”

“You didn’t tell her?” Mister Colwyn shook his head.

“I thought you did or Honoria did.”

A cold sweat swept over her body. “Gentlemen, Lord Whitcombe seems a worthy gentleman,” An image of Daedalus, his lips on her breast, flashed through her mind. “And whilst I approve heartily of the existence of Whitcombe’s bookshop, I cannot be seen entering said establishment.” She rattled on, her words picking up speed like a child’s toy sent down a hill. “Especially not in the company of two gentlemen. I despise the notion, but my ability to help the women I sponsor depends on my spotless reputation to garner support and to find positions for them in—”

“Miss Perriton,” Captain Atherton said as he waved his hand before her face. “We will be coming and going from the mews and alley behind the bookshop.” Mister Colwyn drew a

bundle from beneath their seat. “And Honoria sent these for you to wear to and from the carriage.”

“No harm will come to your reputation,” Mister Colwyn said. “I just hope you can see to walk up and down the stairs in all of that.” He gestured at the full-length black cape and the monstrous heavily veiled bonnet Cordelia struggled to don.

Cordelia cared not a wit for navigating the stairs. She simply did not want anyone to connect her with Daedalus Whitcombe. Of all the places to come about the handbills of the missing women...

“Is there a reason we are coming to this particular shop to have the handbills printed?” she asked as the carriage slowed and turned down a narrow mews lane. The vehicle rocked to a stop and a footman in rather austere livery opened the door and lowered the steps.

“Whitcombe owes us a favor,’ Captain Atherton said as he handed her down.

“Whitcombe owes a great many favors,” Mister Colwyn said as he took her arm and led her toward the wooden staircase at the back of the building.

“Too bloody right,’ Captain Atherton agreed and followed them up the stairs. “Not to mention he has the latest in steam presses and can print these in a thrice.” He held in his hand the handbill he and Cordelia had put together. The images of Polly and Tall Mary were uncanny, but they would be. Captain Atherton had drawn them.

“What favors does he owe you?” she asked as she entered the back of the bookshop and waited for one of them to direct her to Daedalus’s office. No need to give them even a hint she already knew the way. The only men more troublesome than

beautiful men were clever men. With what she knew of Lady Honoria, Charlotte Smythe, and Lady Jane Cordelia had already surmised they would not align themselves with unintelligent men.

“That, Miss Perriton, is a story for another time.” Mister Colwyn directed a meaningful glance at Captain Atherton. “What the devil is Whitcombe about now?”

Even through the black veil over her bonnet Cordelia saw several young men in the garb of apprentices moving in and out of Daedalus’s office with various bundles of linens, a few shabby pieces of furniture and boxes of books and other bits and bobs she dared not identify. She and her two escorts flattened themselves against the wall as the workers brushed past them on the way to a narrow set of steps at the end of the open corridor. She peered over the railing of the open side of the passageway and saw all the way down to the ground floor of the bookshop, alive with customers. Once she ducked back from the view Captain Atherton took her arm and escorted her into the milling activity of her publisher’s lair.

“Where the hell is Whitcombe?” Mister Colwyn raised his voice to ask.

“All I know is ’twill take more than new drapes, bed linens, and rugs to make these chambers presentable enough fer a lady to give yer more than a kiss, guv’. If yer ask me—” Ox, the great hulk of a man who guarded Daedalus’s door and privacy stopped mid-sentence as he backed out of the doorway in the corner and caught sight of Cordelia, Captain Atherton, and Mister Colwyn.

“Shite.” Ox shoved a box into the arms of the nearest apprentice. “Out. All of yer. Out. Now.”



Cordelia stepped back as the young men scurried out of the office and down the corridor as if the devil himself were after them. Once they were gone she drew off the cumbersome bonnet and shrugged out of the cape, far too warm for London in June.

“In point of fact, Ox, I did not ask you. So I’ll thank you to...Shite” Daedalus came out of the doorway his Seven Dials major duomo had just vacated and froze. His hair disheveled and dusted with cobwebs, he still looked more delicious than any man had a right to, virgin or not. His spectacles had smudges on both lenses and sat perched at the very end of his nose, like a bird ready to take flight. His white shirt and fawn-colored breeches had ink and dirt stains on them. Cordelia bit back a snort of laughter.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Miss Perriton.” He dropped the rolled-up rug he carried, caught the toe of his boot, and careened into his desk on the way to greet them. Papers flew everywhere whilst Captain Atherton and Mister Colwyn exchanged grins. “Apologies,” Daedalus continued. “But did we have an appointment?” Head bent down, he moved about the room gathering the papers. Unfortunately, when he raised his head, he stood directly in front of Cordelia who was struggling to maintain her solemn, disinterested expression.

“Honorias sent round a note, I believe, requesting your assistance?” Captain Atherton retrieved the last few pieces of parchment from the floor and handed them to Daedalus.

“She did?” He went behind his desk, indicated the chairs Ox quickly arranged for them, and waited for Cordelia, the captain, and the Runner to sit. His attempt to brush the cobwebs and dirt from his person were not successful and

resulted in several quills being flipped onto the floor behind him.

“Sent round yesterday, she did.” Ox fished around on the worn oak surface of the desk and drew out an expensive unsealed piece of parchment. “Yer read the note, remember?” Poor Daedalus blinked in confusion, then read the note he’d been handed. “Course yer don’t remember. ’E’s been useless as teats on a bull for days now, ’e ’as. Told ’im going to that ball would do ’im in. Bloody brother of ’is. Beg pardon, miss.”

Cordelia waved dismissively. “Not at all.” Her voice barely squeezed out the words as she struggled not to guffaw like a Limehouse dock worker. And Daedalus knew it. The looks he threw her like quick little darts, she was certain the others in the room had to see.

“The missing women, of course. That will be all, Ox.” Daedalus nodded pointedly at the office door. “Please see that the boys in the print room have a machine set to print Mister Colwyn’s handbills.”

“Right guv’. And I’ll be taking some of those ’andbills down ta the White Lion for the missus ta pass round, if yer don’t mind, miss?”

“That is very kind of you,” Cordelia replied. Her heart stuttered at the realization she had been concentrating so much on Daedalus she had momentarily forgotten the reason for this visit to his offices today. Two of her friends were missing and the other three were huddled in the Gracechurch Street house wondering who was next. “Please thank your wife for me.”

Captain Atherton pulled a large piece of drawing paper from the thin leather portfolio he’d brought from the carriage. He handed the paper across the desk to Daedalus, who studied

the words Cordelia had composed and the drawings of Polly and Tall Mary the captain had done.

“Are these fair likenesses, Miss Perriton?” Daedalus asked, keeping his eyes on the drawings rather than looking at her.

“They are perfect, Lord Whitcombe. Fortunately, both ladies had modeled for him before so he knows their features with an artist’s eye.” Cordelia had not resorted to flattery. The former cavalry officer’s talent as a portraitist was well-known throughout London.

“I daresay most of the ladies working the game in Seven Dials have modeled for Ath at some point,” Daedalus replied. “Before he married, of course.”

“Don’t be an *arse*, Whitcombe. There is a lady present.” Captain Atherton’s amiable smile turned feral in an instant.

Daedalus met Cordelia’s gaze head on and said “I meant no insult, Miss Perriton. At least when they modeled for Atherton they were paid a fair wage, fed a meal, and had to do nothing save sit still and appear lovely. Much better than what they usually had to do to earn their daily bread.”

“Indeed,” Cordelia replied. Something in the vehemence of his speech reminded her of his ideas on the education of young women. These thoughts were no passing fancy. They were born of some experience, some profound event in his life. A connection between that and his lack of experience with women began to form in her mind.

“Does that make me a saint, perhaps?” Captain Atherton, his usual grin returning. “Saint Leo of the Seven Dials Ladies. I rather like it.”

“Hardly,” the Runner and Daedalus said together. This time Cordelia did laugh.

“The drawings were the least I could do,” Captain Atherton said quietly. “If not for Miss Perriton I doubt anyone would be looking for Polly and Mary. No one sees them as anything other than two more of London’s *unfortunate* women.”

“Unfortunate women?” Cordelia declared far more sharply than she intended. “Yes, women kept unfortunate by a lack of education, means, or consideration of anything else that might elevate them above the *unfortunate* position of being nothing more than a place for a man to stick his cock for a few coins.” Somehow she’d leapt to her feet and begun to pace the room. The three gentlemen had stood in deference and their expressions were...quite frankly those of astonishment and perhaps a touch of chagrin.

“My apologies, Miss Perriton,” Captain Atherton began. “I meant—”

“Of course, you didn’t, Captain.” She shook her head. “You were showing society’s denizens for what they are by using their dismissive terms. I am trying in my small way to help these women prove society wrong.”

“A worthy endeavor for which I admire you greatly,” Daedalus said quietly. Cordelia turned to him, his words a balm like no other. Powerful, as if he truly saw her, all parts of her, with no judgment nor question. Only acceptance.

“And on that note,” Mister Colwyn said. “We should be off to speak with the other ladies, Miss Perriton. Where can we set you down, Ath?”

At Daedalus’s questioning expression Cordelia explained. “I prefer that only Mister Colwyn know where the house I have taken for the ladies under my care is located. Not even

Mister Carrington-Bowles knows the address and he is Polly's physician."

"Carrington-Bowles is a physician? Good to know."

"You can set me down at St. James Square. I have been summoned by Lady Camilla." Captain Atherton strolled to the door from which Ox and Daedalus had entered the room. "But before we go, I should like to know what lady is so unfortunate as to be invited to your..." He leaned in the doorway, coughed, and turned back to them, his expression one of disgust and disdain. "Private chambers."

"Ath," Mister Colwyn warned. "As Whitcombe said, there *is* a lady present."

"Miss Perriton, I meant no insult, but as you are a member of Lady Camilla's literary society, I suspect you have an opinion on what a lady might find conducive to seduction?"

Daedalus opened his mouth to speak. Cordelia shushed him with a raised hand. "I am no shrinking violet, Captain, in that you are correct. However, Lord Whitcombe does not know me very well. At least not well enough to ask my opinion of his choice of bedchamber furnishings style."

"Style?" the artist said with a snort. "What style?"

"Is he always like this?" Daedalus asked Mister Colwyn.

"Worse," the Runner replied. "If it is that bad, perhaps Lady Camilla can lend you her decorator, Whitcombe. He is supposed to be the best in London."

"Can't have him at the moment," the captain said. "He's decorating the townhouse of one of the Earl of Framlingwood's mistresses or so Honoria says."

“One of his mistresses? How many does he have?” Cordelia could not remember when she had enjoyed a conversation more, to be treated as an equal by brilliant men. Or perhaps Daedalus’s glances her way and the charming way he actually blushed at some of the other gentlemen’s remarks accounted for her sense of freedom and well-being.

“Five at last count,” Daedalus said.

“Five? Good heavens.” Cordelia tucked that bit of information back for another day. There was a story there, and she was just the authoress to write that story. Whilst they had been conversing she had slowly made her way around the room until she stood in the doorway into the chamber that had provoked Captain Atherton’s poor assessment. The captain raised an eyebrow and swept one hand into the room. She did not move closer but leaned forward to give the chamber a sweeping perusal. “Hmmm. Shall we go, Mister Colwyn?” She retrieved her bonnet and cape on her way to the door out of the office.

“Miss Perriton?”

She turned at Daedalus’s inquiring tone. “Yes, my lord?” She knew what he wanted, but she had a wicked desire to make him ask. His face fell and she nearly felt sorry for him.

“I will have Ox bring the handbills around when they are ready.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she said as Mister Colwyn stepped past her to go down and summon the carriage to the back door. “Captain Atherton, are you coming?” The artist had settled a hip on Daedalus’s desk as if he intended to stay. Daedalus, who had been rummaging through some papers stopped and eyed the man with a murderous expression. Cordelia bit her lower lip.

“I’ll have Ox fetch me a hackney,” he replied and crossed his arms over his chest. “I think our Lord Whitcombe is in need of my advice in the arena of seducing women.”

“I think I shall have Ox fetch you and your advice a swim in the Thames,” Daedalus muttered. He crossed the room and pressed a small slip of parchment into her ungloved hand. Her eyes met his as he closed her fingers around the paper and slowly dragged his fingertips across her knuckles before he stepped back. “You dropped this,” he said softly. “My bedchamber...I...”

“The copper bathing tub appears quite luxurious,” she whispered. “And large enough for two?” His eyes blazed, more blue than grey today. He managed a slow half-smile and tapped her hand.

Cordelia tightened her fist. She forced herself to bob him a curtsy, nod at Captain Atherton, put on the bonnet and cape, and join Mister Colwyn in the carriage.

“Now,” the Bow Street Runner said once she had removed the bonnet yet again and they were on their way to Gracechurch Street. “I want you to tell me everything that led up to Polly O’Hara’s disappearance and then this Tall Mary’s disappearance.”

She nodded and opened her mouth to speak.

“Then perhaps, if you would like to, you can tell me what is going on between you and Lord Whitcombe.” He sat back against the squabs and smiled.

**C**ordelia peered out the carriage window and watched the rain-washed streets of London pass slowly by as the unmarked but plush carriage traveled from Covent Garden toward Mayfair. She had made her excuses to her brothers at the *entr'acte*, pleading a headache, and was now on her way to tutor Daedalus Whitcombe in the art of pleasuring a woman. In her opinion, he needed little instruction and only some pointed encouragement, which made him the ideal lover. A lover with secrets she had an insatiable desire to discover, first and foremost amongst them—where precisely tonight's lesson was to take place.

*Send word of your whereabouts for tomorrow night.*

*An unmarked carriage will come for you at eight o' clock.*

THE CONTENTS of the note he'd tucked into her hand had thrilled her far more than she wanted to admit. Unfortunately, she'd not been able to mask her reaction completely. Archer Colwyn was a dangerous man. He missed nothing, not the passing of a note, nor the slight flush of color to a lady's face, nor even the quickening of her pulse at a point on her neck. She had refused his inquiries at first. When he'd explained that his knowledge of her comings and goings and the people,



especially the men, in her life would help him to discover what had happened to her friends, she had no choice. Which, of course, was the Runner's plan all along.

She had told him nearly everything. When she revealed her secret identity he had congratulated her. When she explained the women at the Gracechurch Street house were the source of most of her story ideas he had pronounced her brilliant. When she told him Daedalus knew her identity, but not the source of her stories, and their relationship was strictly that of publisher and authoress, Archer Colwyn had laughed, darkly, but had said no more. Too bloody clever by half, but a gentleman. A gentleman, oddly enough, she trusted to keep her secrets and to do his utmost to find Polly and Tall Mary. Despite her guilt about seeking pleasure with Daedalus, she was forced to leave the safety of her friends in the Runner's hands. Looking for two missing women in the teeming population of London's seedier streets was beyond her understanding no matter how much time she'd spent in the warrens of Seven Dials.

So deeply she had been in thought, she failed to notice the carriage had turned onto a well-kept mews lane behind some impressive Mayfair town homes. Once the coachman pulled the horses to a stop, a footman she had seen before opened the door and let down the steps. She took the hand he offered and stepped onto a cobblestone path that led through a small formal garden to the back of an imposing townhouse. She glanced about and found the location familiar, but not enough to decide where precisely she was.

“I don't suppose you are permitted to tell me where I am.”

The footman nodded, though a slight smile tilted his lips up. “No, miss. I was told to ensure you safely entered the

house and to bring the carriage back when sent for to put you down wherever you wish to go.”

“I see.” She took a few steps toward the elegant door at the back of the house. She peered over her shoulder at the footman who watched her without moving. “Might I ask, for whom you work and whose lovely carriage that is?”

“Mister Carrington-Bowles, miss, and Mister Charpentier. The path is wet from the rain. Please do be careful.”

“Thank you.” She pulled the thin silk evening cape around her and hurried into the house where she was met by another footman, far more outlandishly dressed than Carrington-Bowles’s austere garbed man. This young man looked like a harem guard in some Middle Eastern seraglio. She suddenly had an inkling of where she was.

“This way, Miss Perriton.” The young man picked up a lantern and started down a corridor. They reached a rather imposing medieval-looking door and then went down a flight of stone steps to a wider, well-lit corridor with a single heavy door set into the wall on the left and farther down another equally imposing door on the right. The footman led her to the door on the right, knocked twice, and raised the door latch for her. He bowed and made his way back up the corridor and out of sight. The door opened without a whisper of sound and just inside stood Daedalus, his golden hair glittering in the light of what appeared to be dozens upon dozens of candles.

He took her hand and pulled her into the room so he might close and lock the door behind her. She ran her hand down the front of the blue silk banyan he wore. Her heart raced at the shudder that ran through his body at her touch.

“No spectacles?” She touched the bridge of his nose.

“There.” He nodded toward a bedside table across the room. “Though I hope we shall be close enough all evening I shan’t need them.”

“I daresay I can arrange that.” Was this serene, confident seductress really her? Something about him made being this woman easy. Right.

“May I?” Daedalus took the ties of her cape in his long, strong fingers.

“Yes.” The word came out a hoarse whisper. He untied the cape and stepped behind her to remove the garment and hang it on a hook by the door. “Is there anything else you’d like to remove?” She turned her head to peer up at him. His eyes, a fiery shade of blue, widened, and he licked his lips.

“Everything?” He pressed a tenses kiss to the nape of her neck and ran his tongue up the ridges of her spine from the top of her dress to the place where her coiffure of braids and curls started. Cordelia shivered.

“Please do,” she replied. She tried to concentrate on taking in the room. His slow careful hands made breathing difficult. He unlaced, unhooked, and unpinned in fits and starts, as if he were trying to decipher the mystery of how her evening gown and then her undergarments worked. Each time his fingertips brushed her naked skin she tried to suppress the involuntary tremors of her body and the damp heat that pooled at the apex of her thighs. He smelled of sandalwood and soap. His breath blew hot and shakily across her flesh, raising gooseflesh in impossible places.

The room was round and the walls were paneled in floor to ceiling gilt-framed mirrors. She tilted her back and saw that the ceiling was mirrored as well. In the center of the room was a huge mahogany four-poster bed. The counterpane was

embossed red velvet and a dozen or more silk-covered pillows in various shapes and various shades of gold had been artfully arranged against the headboard.

Around the room, placed strategically before the walls of mirrors, a selection of chaise longues and high-backed chairs wide enough to seat two, upholstered in plush red and gold velvet, brought several wicked ideas to her mind. And the candles. There were candelabras on every flat surface so that the room was as light as a glass house on a summer's day. The glittering reflection, however put her in mind of starlight on the sea at night.

“My God, you are exquisite, Cordelia.” He said the words with such hushed awe, such raw feeling, she had to steady her breath and slow her heart before she raised her eyes to see his face in the mirror before which they stood.

Daedalus, in all his glorious golden masculine beauty, was behind her, her gown, petticoats, and stays pooled at their feet. She wore only her thin shift and stockings, tied with red silk garters above her knees, and her red evening slippers. She turned and raised her arms over her head. He did not hesitate, but took the hem of her shift in both hands and raised the garment gently up her body and over her head. With one hand he dropped the shift to the floor whilst with the other he reached for one of her garters.

“Leave the stockings,” she murmured. “And the shoes, for now.”

“Yes, miss.” His mock meekness made her snort.

“You truly are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” He raised his hand to hover over her breast. She met his gaze and nodded.

He stroked his fingertips down her breast to pluck lightly at her taut nipple before he caressed the underside and sighed. “Your skin is so soft, Cordelia. I could spend hours simply touching you.”

“We shall try that in a future lesson.” Her voice barely shook though inside she quaked at the sharp bolts of sensation his caresses sent through her body from her breast to her quim and all the way down to her toes. “How many beautiful naked women have you seen? I should like to measure the sincerity of your compliments.”

He leaned forward to whisper in her ear and the silk of his banyan dragged across her sensitive nipple which made her gasp. He laughed, a rich dark baritone sound. “Dozens. It has not been for lack of opportunity that I have saved myself for a truly talented teacher.”

“You *have* been reading my books. Your compliments are excellent.” She clutched his banyan’s lapel with one hand and the belt with the other.

“My compliments are sincere, though their use is due to your instruction. I hope to earn a First in the art of giving you pleasure.”

“I have never awarded a First before, Lord Whitcombe,” she said as she untied the belt of his banyan. “My standards for such are quite high.” As the robe parted she flattened her palm against his bare belly—his skin was hot and soft, but the body underneath was hard and fairly hummed with strength.

“Then I have my work cut out for me, but I am a most eager student, I assure you.”

“I see how eager you are.” She indicated a tall marble pedestal next to the oversized chair where they stood. In an

elegant round glass fishbowl, a dozen or more packets waited. Next to the fishbowl a French letter soaked in a smaller bowl of water. A shorter pedestal held a tray with a selection of jade, ivory, and horn forms of a man's cock. She recognized them at once as she had one secreted away in a hidden drawer in her wardrobe.

He had the good grace to don a sheepish expression and she sucked in a breath at how erotic he was with his innocent face and eyes ablaze with burgeoning desire. "I did not...make the arrangements. After your reaction to my chambers, I consulted Mister Charpentier at Captain Atherton's suggestion. Charpentier put all this together." He grunted inarticulately as she rubbed her palm across his abdomen and up his chest to pinch one nipple and then the other.

"I see. I thought perhaps you wanted to let me know your desires."

"My desires?" He closed his eyes as she pushed the banyan from his shoulders and used both her hands to explore his naked body.

"Because I left you wanting after our first...lesson." She pressed her lips to the middle of his chest then dragged her tongue across to circle a nipple before she gave the tightened flesh a nip. He flinched. A small groan rattled in his throat.

"After our first lesson? You left me wanting *everything* after our first kiss."

Cordelia had a sudden urge to surround herself with the comfort of this singular man's power, the unnamed force he exuded, she suspected, without knowing he did so at all. She slid her arms around him and rested her cheek against his sculpted chest.

“Tell me something, Daedalus,” she said quietly as she drew his heat into her suddenly chilled body.

“Anything.” Then he laughed and the sound tickled her cheek. “Well, very nearly anything.”

“I’ve kissed you. I’ve allowed you to pleasure me, and I have not hidden my enjoyment of every erotic act we have performed.” She raised her head and tilted back enough to meet his gaze. “Do you think me wanton? Unseemly? Does my desire give you a low opinion, a disgust of me?” Oh how she wished her questions back. She’d never intended to ask him for she never really wanted to contemplate his answers. She had not sorted out the why’s of his request nor the complete madness of her response. He studied her face as if seeing her for the very first time. A shiver of regret coursed through her.

“Who has said such things to you?” he demanded in an unrecognizable growl of a voice. “Why would you even ask?” He wrapped one arm around her and pulled her flush against him. “I am in utter awe of you, Cordelia Perriton. You *live* what you have written. You are magnificent in your desires. You and you alone are the master of your pleasure and your passion. You are well and truly free in every aspect of your humanity. Other women would kill to be who you are. Why do you think I asked you of all women to show me how to be free enough to share what can be the most destructive act between two people or what can be two people’s greatest joy?”

His chest rose and fell in rapid succession. His visage was alight with the truth of what he’d said. Tears stung her eyes. Her heart ached as if squeezed by an unseen hand. And something beaten down in her suddenly broke the last of her chains. She cupped his face in her hands and drew him down

for a long, soul-searing kiss. They were both shaking when she finally drew her lips from his.

“Let us see how much of Mister Charpentier’s preparations we can make use of tonight.”

He blinked and loosened his hold on her. She dragged her fingers down the center of his chest until she reached his thick, hard cock—erect and resting against his belly. She wrapped her hand around him and stroked very slowly. He groaned and dropped his head to rest his forehead on top of the pile of curls and braids Gilly had so artfully arranged. Cordelia let go of his cock and took his hand. She led him to the plush red velvet high-backed chair designed to seat two. It had been arranged perfectly before the floor to ceiling mirrors. She pushed Daedalus so he sat down in the middle of the chair, all the way back so that his bare feet were flat on the floor and his back rested against the tufted comfort of the back of the seat.

He watched her every move as she moved the two pedestals closer within reach. “You like to see my face, don’t you Daedalus? When you touch me, when you stroke my quim, and fondle my breasts? You want to see how you make me feel?”

“Yes,” came his hoarse reply. “Please.”

She stood over him and leaned down slowly to touch her nipple to his lips, her hands braced on his shoulders. He covered her entire areola with his mouth and drew the fullness into his mouth to suckle eagerly. She dug her nails into his bare shoulders and exhaled in one long moan. At the point she thought she could bear no more he dragged his lips away until only his teeth held her in place.

“Yes,” she hissed. “So good, Daedalus. So. Good.”



He grabbed her hips, but she spun out of his grip and settled slowly onto his lap so they both faced the wall of mirrors. She angled her head back and to the side for his kiss, a fast hard meeting of lips and tongues which she broke off to take his hands in her own and lift them to her breasts. She used both of their hands to mold and squeeze and tease the globes of flesh grown heavy with wanton desire. Once he learned what pleased her she removed her hands. She braced one on his thigh, humming her pleasure as he played with her breasts and watched her in the mirror with the intensity of a hawk in search of prey.

When she ran her other hand down her body and began to tease her wet quim his wordless grunt of approval thrilled her. He bumped his cock against her *arse* in time with the strokes of her fingers as she parted her nether lips and gave voice to the pleasure she gave herself, sliding and stroking and teasing her entrance with her fingertips. Her hips thrust forward and back in search of just the right rhythm. She moved her hand from his thigh to draw one of his hands from her breast down to join her fingers playing over her cunny, sensitive to the point her body jolted at every touch. She captured one of his blunt fingertips and moved it until he found her most responsive spot.

“Don’t stop,” she moaned as he rubbed in slow, light circles whilst still working her breast with his other hand. Still his gaze was fixed on her face. Somehow his watching her every move aroused her to the point her vision hazed with a ferocity that terrified and tantalized her. “Don’t stop, Daedalus.” She reached for the ivory phallus.

“I cannot,” he rasped. “Show me, Cordelia. Show me.”

She rubbed the phallus up and down in the wet heat coating her pussy. His fingertip continued to excite her clitoris to the point she gasped and gave a short sharp scream as she slid the ivory phallus into her quim. Daedalus was panting now, hard and heavy as he watched her work the imitation cock faster and faster in and out of her eager pussy. She arched her body and cried out over and over as quaking shudders exploded from between her legs through every part of her as Daedalus and she continued to work together.

“More,” she cried. “Yes... Yes... Yes!”

She collapsed into his lap gasping, muttering. He squeezed her breast and continued to press the seat of her pleasure, eliciting tiny shivers and quakes even after she withdrew the phallus and dropped it onto the tray. Nothing she had written, nothing she had fantasized compared to what she had just experienced. She was wanton, for when she saw Daedalus’s face in the mirror, burning with hot desire, she wanted more. She pushed herself up out of his hands and turned to face him. She reached for the soaked French letter.

“I want you, Daedalus. Are you ready to learn more? We can wait until you have had more—”

“I’m a virgin, Cordelia,” he gasped. “Not a saint. Please.”

She struggled to fit the French letter over his cock. If he only knew this was only the second one she’d ever seen and his was far more impressive than the other. The thick length, roped with veins was definitely marked for further...closer study. Later. “Help me,” she murmured as she straddled his legs and rose on her knees to position him where she pulsed in need.

“Anything,” he muttered as he took himself in hand and rubbed the blunt head against her damp quim. Cordelia braced

her hands on the tufted back of the chair and slid down in small increments, her mouth open in a wordless *oh* as he filled her. Her knuckles whitened as she clasped the velvet chair back and rose to the point only the head of his cock was inside her. Daedalus grasped her hips and thrust up to sheath her to the hilt. For a few strokes his rhythm broke and jerked. He groaned in frustration, his forehead pressed between her breasts.

“Tell me, Daedalus. Tell me what you want.” Cordelia’s control teetered on the edge. She wanted him to watch. She knew instinctively he needed to see her face. He needed to lose the simmering passion she sensed in him. Whatever his reasons, lack of desire or passion were not the reasons he’d never done this until now.

“Fuck me,” he growled. “Take what you want, Cordelia. All of it. Fuck me. Now!”

She braced her knees as she rose and clutched the back of the chair with all her might. The deep heartfelt groan she elicited from him as she set a rhythm—up until only the tip of his cock was inside her only to thrust down to take him in completely. He caught the pace she set and used his big hands clasped to her hips to raise and lower her faster and faster. He deciphered quickly how to thrust with his own hips to increase the speed and force of their joining.

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes! That’s it. More. More. Daedalus, harder. Harder!”

“Cordelia,” he groaned his voice a dark rasp. “God. Cordelia. I can’t...I can’t...Fuck...How...Cordelia!” He thrust up and his body locked. He pressed her down on his cock to the point their bodies fused together, shivering powerfully enough to shake the heavy chair on which they sat.

Her vision blurred to white. She dropped her head forward to rest on his sternum. He stroked her hair scattering pins all around them. With a finger under her chin he raised her lips to meet his in a kiss so gentle and sweet her chest squeezed and the burn of tears pressed against her closed eyelids. She listened to his labored breathing, felt his heartbeat against her own. Her arms around his neck, she molded her hot naked flesh against him, the hard marble of his muscles wet with a sheen of sweat. The air thickened with the scents of beeswax candles, wood burning in the fireplace and the erotic aroma of their most intimate scents mixed together.

Daedalus dotted kisses all over her face, her shoulders, her breasts. He murmured her name and other words she barely understood.

“Are you praying, Lord Whitcombe?” she asked followed by a huff of laughter.

“Yes, Miss Perriton. I am praying for God to take me now because if there is any bliss better than what I just experienced I do not think I shall know it on this earth.”

She laughed again to keep from weeping. “We can always try,” she teased.

“My God,” he said, his blue eyes ablaze. “What manner of magnificent woman are you? How has no man discovered your secrets and locked you away for fear of losing your siren’s body and goddess’s amorous mind?”

She snorted. “Take me to bed, and I’ll tell you the sort of woman I am.” What was she thinking? Something about him made her want someone, him, to understand. He lurched to his feet with her in his arms and strode to the bed in the middle of the room. When he ran into the pedestal bearing the tray of phalluses, they froze and then burst into gales of laughter. He

deposited her on the bed, made quick work of removing her shoes, but did not lay on top of her as she would have liked. Instead, he sat on the side of the bed, trailing his fingertips over her sensitive skin.

“Tell me, Cordelia,” He did not command though anyone else who heard him might think so. He requested and in his request there was an assurance of understanding. Understanding she had sought all her life.

She lay back, arms stretched over her head. “I have been reading erotic books since I was fourteen. My grandfather had an excellent collection and they were easily hidden inside the covers of books of sermons and instructions for pious women, once I ripped their pages out.”

He chuckled, a sinfully delicious sound.

“Five years ago, I came to Town in search of a husband. Or at least Mama and Papa were in search of a husband for me. I was courted by a handsome young man who flattered me, danced attendance on me, and made me sincerely believe he loved me, whatever that means. He proposed, and I accepted. My parents and his mother agreed to wait to make the announcement at a grand engagement ball. Because we were to marry and I truly thought myself in love I seduced my handsome swain. Very enthusiastically. Well, at least I was enthusiastic. He was clumsy, shocked, and quick. Very quick.”

“I am not going to like the end of this particular story, am I?”

She turned her head to him and gave him a bitter smile. “He pronounced me too experienced to wed, but he thought I would make an excellent mistress. He instructed me to break the engagement and he would set me up in a nice house on

Bruton Street whilst he looked for a bride worthy to be the mother of his children.”

“I’ll kill him.” He stilled and the hardness of his visage told her he meant every word.

“My brothers nearly did. Especially when he insisted I agree to his arrangement or he would break the engagement and denounce me to all society as a whore. He was disavowed of the notion with a beating that left him with a broken nose, two blackened eyes, a broken arm, and a long gash down his face to remind him. I broke the engagement saying we would not suit and returned to the country until just this year. Now you tell me, what sort of woman does that make me?”

He crawled onto the bed, lay on his side, and took her into his arms. “The sort of woman Ravenwood has proved himself completely unworthy to touch let alone marry. He is not fit to clean horse shite from your boots.”

“I suspected you would discern his name. In addition to being a beautiful man you are a clever one, the very worst sort.” She laughed, but then a horrible thought struck her. “And what of Lady Alice?”

“I will not allow my niece to be shackled to a life you narrowly escaped.”

“I agree, but how? Her father seems determined to make the match.”

“I don’t know. But for a little while, might I at least enjoy the gift you have given me and dream of the lessons to come?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“About which, my niece or my future lessons?”

“Both.” She pressed her palm against his chest and pushed him down to climb on top of him. “So lie back and pay attention.”

**O** f all the forms of torture afforded him in the last few weeks, Daedalus had decided his presence in Hyde Park at the fashionable hour had to be one of the most excruciating. Not that he minded riding out with his niece of a morning or lately of an evening. She was an accomplished rider with a wicked sense of humor.

On several occasions, such as today, Cordelia joined them, which made the activity more pleasant and more tortuous at the same time. Riding alongside her as she conversed with Alice delighted him. Being that close to her and not being able to touch her or even speak to her in the erotic tones of only a week or so ago at Club Ambrosios? Sheer agony, and she knew it, the minx. She took every opportunity to brush her leg against his, to touch his arm or to run the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip. All actions certain to turn his cock stone hard in an instant.

He sat his horse and watched as she and Alice rode toward the Serpentine where Lady Honoria and Captain Atherton sat in an open barouche with Lady Camilla. Daedalus tried to draw as little attention to his connection with Cordelia as possible. Her charity work precluded her open attachment to anyone even remotely associated with the book trade on



Holywell Street. Her secret comings and goings to and from his office were ample evidence of that. The Runner, Archer Colwyn, had taken to meeting her there to report his work in searching for her missing friends. To Daedlaus's shock, Cordelia had told Col about her secret identity.

He had asked her about the circumstances of her confession to the Runner when she came to his office with her newest book. Her reasons made sense when one considered her concern for her friends. Sitting next to her at his desk as they went over her manuscript was torture of a different sort. Because of the constant flow of his printing crew and the ever-present Ox, she and Daedalus had had to behave strictly as publisher and author. Now that he considered those hours, he found himself smiling. She stood up to him, argued with him, and only acquiesced to changes in her work if they made sense to her. Cordelia wanted her stories to be perfect in every way. However, she also wanted those stories to be hers. He had learned a great deal about her as a writer and a woman in those hours. She was beginning to haunt his dreams not only as a teacher and bed partner, but as a companion with whom he might be as honest and as much himself as he had ever dared to be. What that meant, he had yet to—

“She’s a handsome woman, is she not Whitcombe?”

*Shite!* Daedalus looked over his shoulder to find his brother-in-law, the Earl of Breadmore, and two of Cordelia’s brothers riding up the lane just past Rotten Row to join him. He glanced back at where his niece and Cordelia had stopped their horses to chat only to find they had ridden on and been met by Viscount Ravenwood, of all people. His fucking worst nightmare was now complete.

“Lady Alice is always in good looks,” he managed to say as he turned his horse around to face his brother-in-law and the other two men.

Breadmore snorted derisively. “Alice? You cannot be serious. I was speaking of Miss Perriton. Your sister is quite the loveliest creature I have beheld in years, gentlemen.”

“You’re an *arse*, Breadmore,” Daedalus said as he removed his hat and dusted it against his leg. “An utter *arse*.”

“Your sister did not think me so, God rest her soul.” Breadmore’s amiable smile and easy manner belied the flat empty surface of his dark hate-filled eyes.

“You might be surprised,” Daedalus replied. Cordelia’s brothers mumbled something about seeing someone they knew and rode out of earshot. Both wisdom and discretion ran in the family, apparently. “She is not for you, Breadmore. No matter what her brothers might have told you, Miss Perriton is not in the market for a husband, or so I have been told.” He wanted to kick himself. He’d spoken out of turn. Then again, the earl was not the cleverest of men. Perhaps he would not draw conclusions. Especially as Daedalus’s animosity toward him had been in clear evidence since Diana’s death if not before.

“Surprised? Where you are concerned?” Breadmore flicked a disdainful hand at him. “All of your secrets are on display in that hovel you call a bookshop.” He gazed across the park where Cordelia’s brothers had joined their sister and Lady Alice and a decidedly nervous looking Viscount Ravenwood. “As for the lady’s secrets, I look forward to discovering them for myself. No matter what she may have told you her parents are eager for her to marry. Her charity work with whores and the other vermin of Seven Dials worries them. Of course, now that her *friends* keep disappearing

perhaps the right man can persuade her to give all that nonsense up. She will make an excellent countess with a bit of instruction, that it.”

“The same instruction you and your mother gave my sister.” Daedalus burned down to his very bones. He needed to end this conversation, ignore Breadmore and trust that Cordelia would put the arrogant bastard in his place.

“The lady’s mother has produced three healthy sons, always a good thing in a bloodline. And from what I understand from Lord Ravenwood, Miss Perriton will need no instruction in matters of the flesh. In fact, it will be my pleasure to tame her enthusiasm for bedsport into something more seemly and—”

*Whoosh! Thud!*

For a moment Daedalus considered he had gone deaf. The noises of the park at this hour—the crunch of carriage wheels, the high-pitched voices of dowagers gossiping, the wind in the leaves, horses nickering, greetings being called, all had ceased. For a few slow beats of his heart he did not even hear Breadmore spluttering on the ground where Daedalus had dragged him from his horse and dropped him. His own horse shifted beneath him, and the din rushed around him like an undammed river.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Breadmore shouted as he scrambled to his feet and retrieved his somewhat squashed hat. “I’ll have you up on charges you filthy reprobate.”

“Bollocks, Breadmore.” Daedalus looked down at his brother-in-law, covered in the dirt of the riding path. “I am heir to the fucking Duke of Chelmsford. A position which is normally as useful to me as all the flaccid pillocks in the

House of Lords, but which I will use against you at every opportunity. You cannot touch me, and I suggest you afford Miss Perriton the same courtesy if you wish to remain in good health.” He flexed his gloved hand, the one with which he’d hauled Breadmore from his horse as if he weighed no more than a loaf of bread.

“As if she would ever think of a man like you, a man who sells disgusting books and consorts with lowest scum in London?” Breadmore scrambled back onto his horse. “She will be mine, Whitcombe. I have the means to ruin her and her charity work will be the least of her concerns should she refuse me.”

Daedalus brought his horse alongside his brother-in-law’s so tightly the man’s leg was trapped. He reached across to tighten the earl’s neckcloth in his fist. “Consorting with scum,” he said softly, his face mere inches from Breadmore’s now white as chalk. “Allows me access to those who will make you disappear for but a few pennies.” He leaned in closer still. Breadmore’s eyes widened as several inarticulate noises escaped his throat. “I know how my sister died, you whoreson. Dare to harm Miss Perriton or any other woman ever again, and all of London will know.” He released the earl’s neckcloth with such force the man nearly fell from his horse. Again. The man snatched his horse’s head toward the nearest park gate and fled.

*Shite! Shite, shite, shite!*

He’d given away too much. Breadmore could be in no doubt of Daedalus’s affection for Cordelia. Ironic, as Daedalus had only discovered the extent of that affection himself. The idea of her married to Breadmore, even touched by

Breadmore, had blazed a single word across his brain, red with rage.

*Mine!*

He could just imagine her thoughts on that particular sentiment. He guided his horse around to go in search of her and Alice and found himself blocked by Lady Camilla's barouche.

"I'm quite certain I am mistaken," Lady Camilla said as Daedalus bent from his horse to bow over her offered hand. "But did I see you drag the Earl of Breadmore from his horse and drop him to the ground like a sack of oats?"

"You are never mistaken, Lady Camilla," he replied. "The earl insulted a lady of my acquaintance, and I lost my temper on him. I would apologize, but I cannot lie to so respected a lady as yourself."

He was so intent on searching the park for Cordelia and Alice he nearly missed the knowing looks exchanged by Atherton, Honoria, and Lady Camilla. Before he'd met his dark-haired authoress he'd never had difficulty hiding his feelings. He played the studious bookseller to the hilt, because for the most part that was who he was. She'd freed something in him, and he had not decided if he liked the freedom or not.

"I do not mean to be rude, but have you seen Miss Perriton and Lady Alice? I came to the park with them." He rose in the stirrups and concentrated on the horses and riders along Rotten Row.

"Lady Alice was conversing with Viscount Ravenwood. Unfortunately when Cordelia's brothers arrived the viscount remembered urgent business elsewhere," Honoria said.

"I'll wager he did." Daedalus could not help but grin.

“Yes, well after he left, Miss Perriton’s footman arrived with what I took to be an urgent message,” Atherton said. “She arranged for her brothers to escort Lady Alice home and rode off on what she termed a *personal* matter. Seemed quite upset in point of fact. Whitcombe, wait. Where are you going? Whitcombe!”

Daedalus spurred his horse into a gallop, dodging shouting riders and carriage drivers all the way to the Cumberland Gate. He did hesitate but headed in the direction of Gracechurch Street. Every fiber of his being said something had to be terribly wrong.



DAEDALUS ARRIVED at Cordelia’s Gracechurch Street house to find her seated on the front steps in her dark blue riding habit with her arms around a young blond-haired girl dressed in the simple gown and pinafore of a servant or perhaps a shopgirl. Both of their faces were streaked with tears. Archer Colwyn stood next to an open carriage where a door had been arranged as a makeshift bed. On the narrow space next to the door sat a young boy, sobbing quietly. The form lying on the door was a woman of middling years, hair slightly grey, lying deathly still with a blood-stained bandage wrapped around her head.

“Colwyn,” Daedalus shouted as he leapt from his horse. “What has happened? Cordelia, are you hurt?” He ran to her, but managed to restrain himself from dragging her into his arms.

“I am perfectly fine,” she said softly as she helped the young woman up and guided her to the carriage. The Runner helped the young girl into the carriage and the young boy climbed onto her lap. “All will be well, Mary. Mr. Colwyn will

see to it, and Mister Carrington-Bowles will meet you at Lady Camilla's." She patted the unconscious woman's hand and Daedalus noticed her own hand shook.

Colwyn said a few words to the driver and the carriage pulled away from the house. All around them people and carriages milled about, doing business as if nothing untoward had happened. Gracechurch Street was a moderately respectable address, but the business being done around it made the area seem blithely busy and unconcerned with the comings and goings of others.

"What the devil has happened, Colwyn?" Daedalus demanded.

"I have a better question," Cordelia said, poking him in the chest. "What are *you* doing here, Lord Whitcombe?" She lowered her voice in deference to the passersby all around them. "How did you find this place?" She tossed Archer Colwyn a fulminating glare. He, in turn, raised his hands in surrender.

"He did not learn this location from me, Miss Perriton."

"I followed you here," Daedalus confessed. "A few days ago, when you left my office so late." She threw up her hands and began to pace in a circle. "I wanted to make certain you were safe."

She stopped, marched toward him, and only stopped when they were toe to toe. "I am not the one in danger, my girls are. He took Sally Mills." Her voice broke and she turned away.

"A carriage came along the alley behind the house," Colwyn explained. "Miss Mills was bringing the laundry. Someone in the carriage called her over. She was chatting with this person when Miss Ludbrook came out and recognized the

carriage. She ran over to drag the girl away. The driver hit her with a cudgel and the man in the carriage dragged Miss Mills in as they drove away.”

“Good God. What sort of man does this in daylight on a busy street?” Daedalus ached to comfort Cordelia who no doubt blamed herself for everything.

“A man grown desperate,’ the Runner mused. “Whatever his reason for taking these particular women, something has happened to make him act rashly. And if Bess Ludbrook got a good look at his face, we *will* find him and your friends, Miss Perriton. I have some things to do here, some people to question. Can you escort Miss Perriton home, Whitcombe?”

“Certainly.”

“I don’t need an escort. I am perfectly capable of making my way from Gracechurch Street to Mayfair unassisted, though apparently I need to pay more attention to who is following me from now on.”

“Miss Perriton—”

“Cordelia, these women are missing because of their connection to you.” Daedalus despised himself, gazing at her pale tear-streaked face, but her safety meant everything to him, even if he hurt her for him to make her situation clear. “We don’t know why or what ends this person hopes to meet, but I daresay whatever it is, it will not bode well for you. Please allow that Col here knows his business.”

“You think I don’t know this is all my fault?”

“Not your fault,” he replied. “But you are the ultimate prize in some way, even if the cause is only to be cruel to you. Please allow me to escort you home.”



Her only response was a curt nod as she went to her horse, tied to a wrought-iron fence rail and let the Runner help her into the saddle. Daedalus mounted his horse and moved close to Col, a man who had become his friend through an odd series of events.

“You will inform us if you discover anything of importance, yes?”

“Of course. Take care of her.”

“I will in so much as she will allow me.” The Runner laughed and turned to go back into the house where the day’s events had started.

Cordelia had already started her horse toward Mayfair. Daedalus urged his horse forward to catch up to her. They rode in silence. Daedalus watched, fascinated, as Cordelia dried her tears, steadied her hands and drew that invisible armor around herself that kept her so calm and serene save when she was in the throes of passion. In fact, he studied her so assiduously he only realized at the last moment where they were headed. He held his tongue even when they rode into the mews lane behind his bookshop. Night was falling and there was not a soul in sight. She dismounted her horse, handed him the reins, and climbed the stairs at the back of the building.

Daedalus made quick work of handing their horses off to the stableboy who lived above the small stable behind *Wicked Books and Naughty Novels*. By the time he reached his office, the silence overhead reminded him that the day’s work had ended and his workers, including Ox, had likely already left for their homes and suppers. He found Cordelia seated before his office fireplace, her stockinged feet stretched toward the low burning fire in the hearth. Her boots, along with her hat and jacket, lay next to the overstuffed horsehair chair in which

she sat. "I sent word by my footman that I would be staying the night with Lady Camilla," she said in an oddly dispassionate voice. "Why is this happening, Daedalus?" She finally turned to meet his gaze. Tears shone in her eyes. Her bottom lip trembled. "I sought to help them, and now...Where are they? What has happened to them?"

He knelt beside her chair and took her hands in his.

"This is not your fault, Cordelia. We *will* find them. Though I might suggest a change of address for your ladies. My brother has been gracious enough to offer me the use of a very nice house in Hampstead Heath. Our grandmother actually left the house to me so I daresay I can lease it to whomever I please." He squeezed her hands.

"Your brother would be horrified to find a group of Seven Dials ladies living in your grandmother's house." She hiccuped and managed a smile.

"I know. Which makes the idea all the more delicious to me." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Come. I want to show you something. I think you deserve to be cared for yourself rather than running about seeing to the needs of virginal booksellers and not-so-virginal ladies in need." He led her into his bedchamber. She stopped dead a few feet into the room.

"You...tidied up." She strolled around the room admiring a chaise longue before one wall of bookcases, the Persian carpets that now covered the floor. Blue brocade drapes had been hung to match the upholstery of his new furnishings and the counterpane and bed curtains on the large four poster bed banked by more bookcases on either side between the bed and the long windows.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said rather sheepishly. “Lady Camilla’s decorator did. Carrington-Bowles came by to discuss handbills for his medical services. He took one look at my chambers and sent a message to Lady Camilla at once and...I think Captain Atherton and your Runner friend had something to do with it.” He shrugged. “I will admit finding the book I wish to read is much easier when they are arranged as they are rather than—”

“Scattered about on the floor and in baskets and boxes?” He had to laugh.

“Indeed.”

“What is behind this beautiful screen?” She pulled back the six-panel floor to ceiling screen with its depictions of nymphs and shepherds in various amorous poses. “Oh, my. Your beautiful bath and what are these pipes and levers for?” She turned one of the levers in question and water began to pour into the bath from a spigot shaped like a swan’s neck. Steam rose from the bath and the look she gave him, full of delight and wonder, nearly undid him.

“I had to install steam for my presses. Seemed only natural to install some for my own pleasure. What about it, Miss Perriton, shall I see to your bath?”

“Why, Lord Whitcombe?” She smiled sincerely now, relaxed and leaving her cares aside for a few moments at least. He was determined to aid her in any way possible. “What precisely do you have in mind?”

She turned her back to him and looked over her shoulder. He did not need to be told twice. Bloody riding habit was a damned nuisance to get off. He’d never seen so many tapes, buttons, and ribbons in his life. By the time he had her out of the skirt and petticoats his hands shook like some green

schoolboy's. He peeled the jacket away and unlaced her stays. He concentrated so hard he did not notice as she removed the pins from her hair, shook out her tresses and allowed the dark silk fall to tumble down below her hips. He clasped a handful and pressed the long curls to his nose. She smelled of roses, her hair and body, smelled more delicate and more lovely than any rose garden.

He knelt to untie her garters and roll down her stockings. She drew her shift over her head and draped it over the back of a nearby chair. Unable to resist, Daedalus pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, to her knee, and then to the thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs. He drew in her scent, the scent of arousal and sighed. He forced himself to stand and led her to the large copper bath. He turned off one lever, tested the water with his fingertips, and turned on the other lever. He dangled his hand in the water to continue to judge when it might reach the most calming and healing level of heat.

Cordelia rose on her toes and cupped the back of his head to drag him down for a deep seductive kiss. Their tongues glided over each other and elicited tiny groans of desire from each of them. Once the water was perfect, Daedalus swept Cordelia into his arms and settled her into the bath. She leaned against the high back of the tub and sighed. The sight of her long bare legs and full breasts settled in the water sent shards of lust to his groin. He'd never survive this, seeing to her needs without ravishing her.

He shrugged out of his coat and dragged his shirt over his head. On the shelf above the tub he found an ornately carved box and a thick soft flannel. He hung the flannel over the side of the tub and opened the box which contained bottles of various ground powders. With the silver spoon inside he scooped out a spoonful of three of the powders and dropped

them into the bath. The scent rose immediately and surrounded them. He put the box back and knelt beside the tub.

“What is that?” she asked softly. “The aroma is divine and my skin feels all prickly.” She opened her eyes. “Have you dosed me with a love potion, Daedalus?”

“Do I need to?”

She shook her head.

“One of my pressmen is from India. He is versed in the medicinal arts of his country. I’ve added winter cherry, turmeric, and saffron to your bath. They are used for healing and relaxation. I thought perhaps you might need them.” He plucked the bar of milled sandalwood soap from the dish at the side of the tub and began to bathe Cordelia. Something in the act of drawing the soaped flannel up and down her arms and then her legs stirred him in a way he did not understand. Oh, he was aroused. All she had to do was walk into the room for his unruly cock to poke against his falls in dedicated interest. This was more.

She lay back in the tub with her hair floating on the water, swirling around the peaks of her breast, eyes closed and the trust she afforded him was humbling and alluring all at once. He did not want to contemplate what her trust meant to him. Not yet. If only—

“Why have you never tugged a woman before me, Daedalus?” She did not open her eyes nor raise her voice. The question might have floated out on the steam of her bathwater. “Please tell me.”

For several minutes he continued to bathe her. He moved a stool over to the head of bath and ran water into a large pitcher on the washstand behind the tub. He wet her hair and began to

work the soap into the long, thick strands. A log shifted in the fireplace. Ox, no doubt, had built up the fire for Daedalus before he'd left for the day. The small French ormolu clock on the mantel ticked away the time. And with no thought as to why, he made a decision.

“My sister, Diana, was not much older than Alice when she married Breadmore. My mother died when we were young. Diana grew up in a household of men. Her governess was a useless old woman. Once Diana and the earl were engaged, Breadmore's mother took it upon herself to prepare my sister for marriage.” He snorted. “Prepare? She was worse than useless and only served to terrify poor Diana. They married at our estate and traveled a few miles to the hunting lodge for their honeymoon.

I was twelve years old and an idiot, but a curious idiot. My friends and I often went to the lodge to sneak drinks from my father's brandy and do the things that twelve-year-old boys do.” He drew in a long breath. “There is a hidden entrance to the first floor of the lodge and passageways run throughout to make things easier for servants when large hunting parties were in attendance. I crept into one of those passageways and came upon the room where Diana and her new husband were...were...”

“Fucking?” she offered, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“He was fucking. She was just lying there. From the place where I could peer into the room I could see her face. She was crying, not making a sound, whilst the tears rolled down her face. And all the while he was grunting on top of her like a rutting bull, calling her names, but not looking at her face.” His voice broke. Daedalus sat on the stool his hand in her hair

and shook at the memory burned into his vision forever. Cordelia reached back and took his hand.

“There was no pleasure, no joy. She was in misery, weeping, and he didn’t care. He climbed off her and left the room. I sat in that passageway listening to my sister weep and didn’t do a damned thing about it.”

“You were a child. What could you have done?”

“I could have said something—to her, to Breadmore, to my brother, our father, but I did not say a word.”

“Daedalus.”

“A year later they had come to visit us. Alice was only three or four months old. Chelmsford and I, and even our father, adored her. Breadmore ignored the child. Diana tried to care for Alice, but Breadmore’s mother insisted on a wet nurse. And Diana was so sad. I asked her to go out riding with me one morning. She seemed excited about our ride. The next morning, I went to her chambers to wake her.” He held Cordelia’s hand so tightly her flesh went white. “I found her lying in bed. There was an empty laudanum bottle on the floor. Her eyes were wide open and her hand was so cold.”

“Oh God no. Oh Daedalus.” Cordelia rose onto her knees and turned in the tub to face him whilst water splashed over the sides.

“There was a note clutched in her hand. I took the note and the laudanum bottle and ran to my room. No one has ever seen it or knows about it save me, and now you.”

“I won’t tell. I’ll never tell.” Her dark eyes glistened with tears.

“Breadmore had informed her the night before that he intended to resume intimate relations with her and would

continue to come to her until she produced a son. S-She could not bear it, Cordelia. She took her own life rather than lie with a man who cared nothing for her save as a receptacle for his seed. I have tried over and over to lie with a woman since then, but always the memory of her face came to me, and I simply couldn't..."

"Except with me."

"I read your books again and again. I wanted to believe a woman could take pleasure in tugging, but you, Cordelia, in your books you didn't simply take pleasure, you demanded it. I began to believe a woman like you could show me what none of the others could." He smiled weakly. "And you did, you do so long as I don't climb on top of you and..."

She pushed to her feet, a Venus rising from the water. Her arms around his neck she whispered against his lips "Take me to bed, Daedalus. Please." Her unwavering gaze shook him. Her wet body pressed to his aroused every fiber of his being. He did not want to think past these next moments, this next hour. But in the recesses of his mind, he began to wonder. How would he ever let her go?



**D**aedalus dragged a bath sheet off a rack before the fire. He hauled her out of the tub and knelt to rub her body dry. Cordelia leaned over him to press kisses to his hair. She had no words to comfort him, only her body and her affection, her desire for him to know how very much his confession meant to her. How much he meant to her. He wrapped the bath sheet around her and strode toward the bed. Only to stand on the bath sheet, stumble, and toss her onto the counterpane like a sack of potatoes.

She could not stop the peals of laughter as he struggled with the bath sheet.

“My spectacles were fogged by the steam,” he grouched when he finally threw the bath sheet away from him.

“Breeches and boots?” Cordelia said as she propped up on her elbows, well aware of the sight she posed as she lay naked on the dark blue counterpane. He hopped around on one leg as he shucked first one and then the other boot. With the second boot he managed to knock over the stool at the end of the bath. She heard the distinct *ping* of buttons as he struggled to open his falls.

“Is something burning?” she asked as she sniffed the air. Daedalus spun around. “Daedalus!” she shouted. “Your *arse* is

about to be on fire!”

“I know,” he said with a grin.

“No, you great looby,’ she cried. “Look!”

“*Shite!*” The bath sheet had hooked onto the back of his breeches. The other end had landed in the fire and was burning toward him at a rapid rate. He snatched the sheet end from his breeches and dragged the entire conflagration into the bath.

“What the bugging hell?” he said as he stood at the foot of the bed, barefoot, with one breeches leg on and one off.

Cordelia crooked a finger at him and scooted up to rest against the selection of soft pillows against the headboard. He shed the last of his clothes and crawled up the bed toward her. She noticed immediately that he picked a spot beside her and propped his head on his hand. He glanced down at his cock, which in the mayhem had dropped to half mast, so to speak. She pushed him onto his back.

“Tonight,” she said. “We are going to do this right and proper.”

“Oh,” he said as she kissed her way down his body. “What does that—Damnation!”

She took his cock into her mouth, licking and sucking as his legs moved back and forth and his hands fisted the counterpane. She cupped his bollocks, rolled and caressed them until his *arse* shot up off the bed. She was merciless. Even when he begged in incoherent pleas and muttered profanities, she continued to suck and then stroke until his cock was once more hard and throbbing. With one last lick she slid up next to him and pulled him on top of her.

He pushed up on his arms in an instant, as if scalded or struck by a whip. She braced her hands on his shoulders and

pushed him down toward her quim. “My turn,” she ordered with a smile. He grinned. His golden hair falling over his spectacles was so endearing to her. He removed the spectacles and handed them to her.

“I’ll need instruction,’ he murmured against her already damp flesh.

“I suspect you will figure it out. All you have to do is... Ahhhhh.”

From the first long stroke of his tongue Daedalus proved to be a quick study. Her hands in his hair she had but to move him a little either way for him to quicken or slow his licks and gentle sucks. He held her hips in his powerful hands as she wiggled and worked to press nether lips, her entrance, and the seat of her pleasure against his seeking mouth. He found that spot and began a rhythmic sucking which he paired with first one finger and then two in and out of her quim. Higher and higher he took her until her body shattered in spasms of exquisite, shuddering release. She clasped his hands and dragged him up her body. His eyes snapped open. She saw the doubt, the questions in his expression. She kissed him, a long slow melding of their mouths that mixed the taste of him and her together on her lips. When he finally raised his lips from hers, she placed his spectacles carefully on his face.

“Look at me, Daedalus. Keep your eyes on me. I trust you. I know you will give me pleasure. And I know how you feel about me,” she whispered.

“You have no idea how I feel about you, Cordelia, my love. But I will do my best to show you.”

With a few adjustments and false starts Daedalus sank his cock into her. He stared into her face. How she hoped he saw the wonder she felt at how perfect he felt, how right. She

arched her hips into his so their hipbones matched as if made for each other. His eyes never left hers as he slowly pulled out and then plunged in again. She gasped and clutched his shoulders.

“More,” she cried. “Don’t stop. More.”

His first strokes were tentative. Her heart broke for the strong, passionate man locked up for so long by the trauma of his childhood, a trauma that had colored every aspect of his life until now. She wrapped her legs around his hips and urged him onward.

“Faster, my love,” she cried. “Harder. I will not break.”

Propped on his powerful, unshaking arms he took up the rhythm she set and met her stroke for stroke. He bowed his head to kiss her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids. He brushed his hair across her breasts and chuckled darkly when she gasped at the touch. The bed rocked against the wall as they drove each other to the brink, gasping and shouting each other’s names.

“Oh God,” he gasped. “Cordelia, I can’t. I can’t.”

“Then don’t.” She wrapped her arms around him and held him as he spent himself in one long shudder and shouted her name. She reached completion a moment later and still they moved against each other, reluctant to stop what he been such an incredible experience for both of them.

He collapsed atop her and tried to move, but she held him tight. “Not yet,” she said. “Stay with me.” He rested his head between her breasts and sighed. “So long as you want me, Cordelia. So long as you want me.”



HE HAD no idea how tempting the notion was. Cordelia had contemplated his words all that night and throughout the next day, Sunday, which they had spent in bed together. Now, as they made their way to the St. James Square home of the Duke of Chelmsford the reality of her charity work against what Daedalus did for a living loomed so large in her mind as to render her silent, save for an occasional nod or smile. She gave herself a quick kick. They had come on more important business than her romantic ideas about the duke's brother. And the closer they drew to the duke's magnificent townhome, the more pale Daedalus grew.

"You are certain Breadmore has something to do with my missing friends?" she asked in an effort to distract him.

"I would wager my best printing press on it. I do not know why I did not catch the notion when we were at Hyde Park."

"Perhaps you were distracted by removing the man from his horse and dumping him on the bridle path like a sack of fish? Everyone is talking about the incident, you know."

"If you expect me to apologize..."

"I don't. He is a horrid man and all but killed your sister, but to kidnap three women simply to marry some gentry woman he hardly knows?"

"A gentry woman whose mother gave birth to three sons. He is not interested in you as a woman, Cordelia, only as a broodmare and an ornamental countess to trot out on special occasions."

"Bugger that," she muttered.

Daedalus let loose a bark of laughter. Then suddenly he leaned out the window to stare at a open barouche going the other way. "Damn! That's Alice and she appears to be in the

company of Ravenwood. I must stop them.” He banged on the roof of the carriage.

“No, wait,” Cordelia said. “I will go after them. You can walk to your brother’s from here. Go and do what you must do. He deserves to know the truth, Daedalus. I will meet you back at Lady Camilla’s *with* Lady Alice.”

The carriage had rocked to a stop and Cordelia’s footman peered in the door. “Are you certain, Cordelia? Ravenwood is not fond of you.”

“Yes, but he is even less fond of my brothers. He will not risk another visit from them. Go.” She shoved him toward the door. “We’ll be along shortly. Daedalus?” He turned to her and she pressed an impulsive kiss to his cheek. “Good luck with your brother.”

He climbed out of the carriage and shut the door. “Try not to murder Ravenwood. I am not certain Captain El is in Town at the moment and body disposal without her assistance is such a bother.”

“Do go on,” She waved him off as she and her footman, Andrew, rolled their eyes at him. “Can we catch Lord Ravenwood, Andrew?”

“Yes, miss. I saw which way he went and he is a rather cautious driver.” Andrew stepped up to join the driver on his box and off they went. To be honest, she had not given Ravenwood a great deal of thought after their broken betrothal. What she had felt for him as a young girl was nothing compared to what she felt for Daedalus. Perhaps Ravenwood was not a bad fellow, but she did not want Lady Alice to discover the sort of fellow he might be at such a young age. She was not the sort of girl she ever imagined might catch Ravenwood’s interest. Her dowry was certainly a

handsome one, but she had not heard that the viscount was in need of funds, at least not so much in need as to marry a girl just out of the schoolroom.

She shifted on her seat and watched the buildings and streets of London go by. Sitting had grown a bit difficult as parts of her body were quite tender from Saturday and Sunday's exertions. Sweet aches for sweet memories, especially the memory of Daedalus over her bringing her to exquisite ecstasy again and again. The nature of the road changed and when she glanced out the window she saw they were leaving Town and driving out toward the countryside, Kent perhaps?

"What on earth?" She stuck her head out the window and gazed up the road where she could barely make out the shape of Ravenwood's barouche. "Has he seen us?" she shouted up to Andrew who looked down at her from the coachman's bench.

"No, miss."

"See that he doesn't. Have you your pistol?"

"Aye, miss. You?"

"Yes. See where they go, drive past, and seek out a way to follow them unawares." Cordelia's blood began to chill.

"Aye, miss." Andrew turned to talk to the coachman.

A man only drove a lady out into the country for two reasons, two reasons sometimes linked—to compromise her into marriage or to have his way with her and toss her aside. Ravenwood had not changed at all, unless she missed her mark. He was capable of anything.

"Not today, you cur," she muttered as she dragged her case of matched Mantons out from under her seat. "Not bloody

likely.”



HIS BROTHER HAD STOPPED BREATHING. Daedalus had told him the awful truth about Diana’s life with Breadmore and her even more terrible death. He’d taken Cordelia’s advice and told the story in as calm and non-judgmental way as was possible for him. Eighteen years of held back anger and hurt made it difficult, but he had managed. Or so he thought.

Chelmsford stood behind the desk in his study, Diana’s note in his hand. His shaking hand. Impossible as it seemed, the Duke of Chelmsford could be moved to...some sort of feeling. Daedalus dared not guess what. When his brother finally met his gaze, Daedalus took a step back. Those blue eyes, so like his own, had never held such a host of emotions, at least not since they were children together.

“You have kept this secret for eighteen years?” Chelmsford finally asked, his voice a rough rasp. “You have borne this burden alone for all these years?”

Daedalus shrugged. “I was a child. I made a silly vow to keep our sister’s last secret. At first I said nothing from some sort of childish fervor. Knights of the Round Table and all that.”

A ghost of a smile creased his brother’s lips.

“After that...he was your best friend, Percy. You all believed she died of childbed fever. There was no reason for anyone to think otherwise.”

“You are my brother. Diana was my sister. That means more to me than any friendship.” He dropped the note onto his



desk and ran the tip of one finger over the signature. “She signed her name Diana Whitcombe.”

“She never saw herself as a wife. I suspect the dowager countess made certain she knew her place and her duty.”

“Fucking bitch,” his brother muttered.

“Well done, Your Grace,” Daedalus said with a grin.

“Really, Day. I do remember how to curse. Vaguely.”

Daedalus heart turned over on hearing his childhood nickname from his brother’s lips. Where had it all gone wrong for them? What part of society dictated the formality of familial relationships where titles and moneys were involved?

“Why now? Why bring this to me now?”

“A friend suggested you deserved the truth. And I need your help with Breadmore. I suspect he is involved in something nefarious and I am uncertain how to approach him without causing a scandal. My friend has a spotless reputation and as she does charity work she would prefer to avoid scandal if at all possible.”

“A friend? You told a friend before you told me?” Chelmsford studied him for a moment and then nodded. “I see. I should like to thank your *friend*, but first sit. Tell me what you think Breadmore is up to and I shall endeavor to assist you. Right before I put a bullet in the man for killing our sister.”

“Beelzebub’s bollocks! What part of *no scandal* did you fail to comprehend? Not to mention if you murder a belted earl they will hang you and then I shall have to be duke and no one in England wants a duke who sells filthy books.”

“You, as the voice of reason? I really must meet this *friend*.”

“She will be singularly unimpressed with you, I give fair warning.”

“Good. That will be a refreshing change. Now, tell me of your suspicions of my old friend. If I cannot shoot him perhaps I can make him pay in some other less quick and more painful fashion.”

“Oh, you and Cordelia are going to get along very well.”

Daedalus told his brother the story of Cordelia’s charitable work, the missing girls, Breadmore’s hopes to marry Cordelia, and the work of Archer Colwyn to try and discover what it all meant. Colwyn had more information about Cordelia’s connection to the girls than Daedalus did, of that he was certain. That knowledge made Colwyn believe the women were being kidnapped to force Cordelia to do something she did not want to do. Daedalus could not tell his brother all of that. Cordelia’s secret identity was her secret to tell or to keep as she chose.

All the time Daedalus spoke Chelmsford appeared to write a series of notes. Once Daedalus finished his tale, the duke rang the bell on his desk. Aikers, thin as a rail and pale as a ghost stepped into the room. He acknowledged Daedalus with a curt bend at the neck. Chelmsford, of course, got the full bow. Once the notes were sealed, the duke handed them to Aikers and dismissed the man with a nod.

“Lady Camilla is having a card party this evening,” Chelmsford said. “See that you attend. And bring Miss Perriton with you, if you please.”

“Miss... You know.”

“I know enough,” the duke replied. “I have sent notes around to all the important players in this little misadventure. I will likely receive a summons from Lady Camilla within the half hour.”

“She summons you?” Daedalus stood and prepared to leave.

“She summons whomever she pleases up to and including His Majesty. You disregard a summons from that lady at your peril. Daedalus?”

“Yes?”

“I owe you an apology. I should have asked you why you hated Breadmore instead of always dismissing your concerns as the actions of a child.” He came around the desk and extended his hand.

“I have not been a child for a very long time, Percy. Neither of us have, but we will always be brothers.” He took the duke’s hand and shook it slowly.

“Always,” the duke said softly. Their hands were still clasped when the study door burst open and one of Carrington-Bowles’s boys stumbled into the room. “What is the meaning of—”

The boy, Dickie was his name, held up a staying hand and leaned over, hands on his knees breathing hard. “Mister Colwyn sent me to fetch you, Mister Whitcombe. Over to Lady Camilla’s at once. That girl, Bess, woke up. She knows who took the other girls.”

“What?”

“Who?”

“The man with the scar on his face,” Dickie gasped.

“Ravenwood.” Daedalus’s heart dropped to his feet.

“Aye. That’s the one. Now move your *arses*. She wants the both of you. Now!”

**H**ad she known crawling about in the shrubbery of a run-down country cottage would be part of her day, Cordelia would have worn sturdier boots. Poor Andrew in his footman's slippers had the worst of the situation. She'd sent her elderly coachman back to the road to wait and go for help should she and Andrew not return to the road within the hour.

The cottage was in the middle of a rather unkempt piece of property. Though old, the doors and windows appeared quite secure. Too secure, in point of fact, as many of the doors were chained closed and the windows were boarded up. They had stayed close enough behind to find this place, but not close enough to see how Ravenwood had persuaded Alice to enter the building. Daedalus's niece was naïve, but she was no fool. At some point on this journey, she had to have realized her escort was up to nefarious purposes.

"I've found a way inside, miss." Andrew said as he crept around the back corner of the cottage. "Rather dirty, I fear. Perhaps a coal chute?"

"Minerva, save us," Cordelia spit out. The footman nodded and went back the way he came with her close on his heels.

The door was narrow. Thank goodness both she and Andrew were slight. The footman handed her his pistol and

went down the narrow chute first. Cordelia tucked a pistol into each pocket of her dress and held the third in her lap. Once she reached the bottom, she handed Andrew his pistol and waved him off as he tried to sweep some of the coal from her person, an exercise in futility. They were in a cellar of some sort. She heard voices from somewhere on the far side of the cellar. Andrew nodded. He'd heard them as well.

“Andy, lad, is that you?” a distinctly Irish feminine voice called softly.

Cordelia hurried to where the footman stood trying to break the padlock on what looked to be some sort of animal stall. “Polly? Oh, Polly, where have you been?”

“Why 'ere, miss. Where else would I be? I don't mind telling you I am that proud to see you. Told the others you'd find us.” Cordelia reached through the bars and clasped her friends hand.

“Where are the others, Polly?”

The fiery-haired woman pointed across the way.

Cordelia went to where the other two women, Tall Mary and Sally Mills, stood reaching out through the bars to her.

“Is our Bess well, miss?” Sally asked. “He cracked her something fierce when he tried to stop her.”

“She is with Mister Carrington-Bowles. She and Short Mary as well. They will be so happy to see you. Why did he bring you here? He hasn't hurt you, has he?”

“He was asking about your writing, miss,” Tall Mary said. “He found out about you writing them books, and said he's going to tell everyone if you don't marry his friend.”

“We didn’t tell him nofink,” Sally Mills said, tears in her eyes. “Honest, miss. He threatened to ship us off to Botany Bay, he did. But we didn’t tell.”

“He’s a right rotter he is, miss. Left us here with no food, no water.” Polly took a swig from the flask Andrew offered her before handing it back.

“No one is going to Botany Bay,” Cordelia said, her entire body shaking with fury. “We’re all going home, and Lord Ravenwood can go to—”

“Lord Ravenwood is the one who ain’t going anywhere, except to St. George’s where he will marry the spotty faced lump of a girl he’s been forced to court because no one else will have him, thanks to your brothers.”

Andrew crept behind the stairs, out of sight.

“I suspect the Duke of Chelmsford will have something to say about a kidnapper marrying his niece,” Cordelia said as she slipped one hand into her pocket.

“Kidnapper? What kidnapper? The owner of this property has been dead for years. I will leave you and your *ladies* locked in here to rot. Breadmore will be unhappy, but there are other young girls who would kill to be a countess. You ruined my life, Cordelia. People would not do business with me. Gaming hells refused me. No decent family in Town would invite me anywhere until recently, and now it is too late. I need money, quite desperately, which accounts for the young lady dosed with laudanum upstairs. By the time she awakens she will be hopelessly compromised, and her father will hand her and her dowry over to me.”

Ravenwood had come down the stairs and now stood but a few feet from Cordelia. Andrew moved around behind the

staircase.

“I didn’t ruin your life, Ravenwood. All you had to do was allow me to break the betrothal and move on with your life. You knew I would never be any man’s mistress. Especially yours.”

“Indeed. But apparently you were merely waiting for a better offer. The brother of a duke is a much better catch for a whore who writes filthy books about her perverted amorous pursuits. Oh, and rest assured, I *will* make certain you are made known as *An Insatiable Lady*. Perhaps I will suggest you ran away with your footman and your lightskirt friends to the Continent to live a debauched life on your ill-gotten gains. That should do your weak-hearted father in *and* ensure no decent woman will ever marry your brothers. I rather like that story.” He glanced about and rubbed his hands together. “Did I forget anything?”

“You forgot that a spotty faced, dumpy young lady who drinks her father’s brandy nearly every day will require more than the pitiful dose of laudanum you gave her to render her insensible for long.”

The report of a pistol echoed around the cellar. Cordelia glanced up the stairs to see Lady Alice holding Andrew’s smoking pistol. Ravenwood lay writhing on the floor, screaming.

“She shot me,” he squealed. “The bitch shot me.”

“I should have waited until we were married and then I could have inherited your property at least.” Alice came down the steps and handed the pistol to Andrew. “Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you, miss. Good shot.”



Alice shrugged as Ravenwood continued to writhe around clutching his shattered knee. “I was aiming for his bollocks, but I have never been good at hitting small targets.” Cordelia went to her and wrapped her arms around the girl. “Can we go home now?” Alice whispered. “I should really like to go home.”

“I should think so,” a rich aristocratic voice said from the top of the stairs. “Is everyone well? Does anyone need assistance?”

“I do,” Ravenwood moaned.

“I wasn’t addressing you.”

“Your Grace,” Cordelia said, and dipped into an awkward curtsy.

“Miss Perriton.”

“Cordelia. I heard a shot.” Daedalus started down the stairs, missed a step and knocked his brother into the railing as he ran to take her and Alice into his arms. “Are you two hurt? Did he hurt you?”

Archer Colwyn came down the stairs, two sets of keys in his hand. “Who shot the viscount?”

“I did,” Lady Alice said. “Are you going to arrest me, Mister Colwyn?”

“Not at all. For two very good reasons. He needed to be shot. And my betrothed and the other ladies of the literary society would have my guts for garters if I pulled you before the JP.” He tossed a set of keys to Andrew. “Here, lad, let’s get these ladies out of this cellar and back to London.”

“Bloody good idea,” Tall Mary bellowed from her cell.

Daedalus laughed as his brother glanced in Tall Mary's direction and raised an eyebrow.

"I believe Lady Camilla is holding a late supper for all of us," the duke said. "We would do well not to leave the lady waiting. Alice, you will be coming home with me, my dear."

"Really, Uncle Percy?"

"Indeed." He held out his hand which Alice took after kissing both Daedalus and Cordelia on the cheek. The duke escorted his niece up the stairs as if they were entering a ball rather than leaving a filthy cellar.

Andrew ushered Cordelia's friends up the stairs. Archer Colwyn stood over Ravenwood and met Daedalus's fiery gaze. "I know you want to kill him, but Captain El has asked us not to dispose of any more peers for a while. Go. Take the lady home. I'll take care of this."

Daedalus helped her up the stairs and out of the cottage. A veritable army of carriages and men on horseback milled about in front of the house.

"Good heavens," Cordelia said, reveling in the strength of Daedalus's arm about her.

"My brother does nothing on a small scale," he said, and helped her into her carriage. When he joined her on the front facing seat, he confided, "But I believe Lady Camilla also had a hand in the assembling of this army." He tapped on the roof of the carriage and the coachmen turned the horses toward the road back to London.

"You told him," she said quietly, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I did."

“Good. There are two things I must tell you, Daedalus.” Already her heart ached, and a bone-chilling cold washed over her.

He shifted in the seat so he could gaze into her eyes. “You can tell me anything, love. You know that.”

She winced. “Ravenwood knows who I am, and he knows that the stories in my books are not the things that I have done, well at least not until lately.” She tried to smile. “The stories in my books are from the lives of the ladies at the Gracechurch Street house.”

“So, how many...” He shook his head vehemently. “That is not my concern.

“Two,” she replied. “You and Ravenwood, and he does not really count.” She shuddered. “I am sorry I lied to you about my experience and my ability to teach you—”

“You did teach me, Cordelia. You have set me free. It doesn’t matter where *you* learned your skills. It matters that you took the time to teach me, when you didn’t have to do so at all.”

“That brings me to the second thing I must tell you.” She took a deep breath. “I cannot risk even the hint of impropriety if I wish to continue helping my ladies. My most recent book will be my last, as *An Insatiable Lady*, at least. And that means,” she said, though her voice shook. “Our lessons are at an end. You have most definitely earned a first, and whatever lady ends up with you owes me a great deal though she will never know it. Everything that has happened was because of my friends trying to keep my secrets. The ladies could have died or been shipped off to God knows where. Alice could have been killed or worse. I must—”

“I’ll sell the bookshop. My partner will buy me out. There are several of Chelmsford estates I can manage. We could live on one of them and arrange for your ladies to live in cottages on the estate. I will—”

“I cannot allow you to do that, Daedalus. Your bookshop is your freedom. You have worked too hard and too long to give it up now.” Every word tore like a hook in her flesh. They’d never talked of love or marriage, and here he was ready to sell off his entire life to keep her.

“Marry me, Cordelia. I will do anything to have you as my wife.” He took her hand in both of his and raised it to his lips. “Anything.”

“I know,” she said. “Which is why I cannot ask that of you. We both have work that is a part of us. If we were to give it up, we would be offering each other only part of who we are. I won’t do that to you. And I cannot do that to myself.”

“I see.” He held her hand in his all the way to London. When they turned into the mews lane behind Lady Camilla’s, he handed her out of the carriage. “We have been commanded to attend Lady Camilla’s card party tomorrow evening. I suppose I shall see you there.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He dug his hands into his pockets and walked into the mews lane, headed in the direction of Holywell Street.

“What about supper?” she called after him, her eyes blurred with tears.

“I find I am not hungry,” he called back. “Good night, Miss Perriton.”

Cordelia stood there in the dark for a very long time. By the time she went into the house her supper was cold. As was

the bed in the chamber Lady Camilla's footman led her to, although a cozy fire burned in the grate. As she slept, she dreamed of the years stretching out before her of cold beds and an empty heart.



DAEDALUS STOOD in the corner of Lady Camilla's sumptuous green drawing room and sipped at the same drink he'd been holding for the last hour. The same hour during which he'd done nothing else save steal glances at Cordelia as she stood and talked with Lady Honoria and the other ladies of the literary society. She wore a beautiful gold gown that made her look as if she'd stepped out of a dream. His dream. He'd been a fool to ever think she might want to spend her life with him. Despite all they'd shared, there was something more important in her life than him. Which made him the same as any other *ton* gentleman who wanted a woman to give up her very self to be his wife and the mother of his children, nothing more.

"If you insist on standing here like some sort of recluse, the least you can do is smile every now and again. I am told ladies swoon at your smiles." Chelmsford stood next to him and perused the select guests who had been asked to arrive early to enjoy drinks before the card party started.

"Bugger you, Percy. Why is Breadmore here?" Daedalus glared at his brother-in-law who insisted on standing next to Cordelia and interrupting the ladies' conversation at every turn.

"You could say he is the guest of honor," Chelmsford mused. "Did you ask Miss Perriton to marry you?"

“Is it true that you have moved Alice into your home—foot, horse, and guns, not to mention an ungodly number of hats and very ugly frocks?”

“Yes. Now answer my question.”

“Yes. She turned me down, even when I offered to sell the shop. What did Breadmore say about you taking Alice under your wing?”

“He could care less, but when I’m finished with him, he may wish he had her back. “I’m sorry, but you need to ask Miss Perriton again. I will not be satisfied until I have her for a sister-in-law.”

“What? Why?”

“Breadmore is about to receive his comeuppance. And any woman for whom you would give up that damned shop must be worth having in our family. Ask her again. You *did* tell her you love her, didn’t you?”

Daedalus stared at him from behind his spectacles and frowned. “This is the longest conversation we’ve had in five years, and also the strangest. Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

“Ah!” Chelmsford nodded in the direction of the double doors where Lady Camilla had made her entrance on the arms of Carrington-Bowles and Nathaniel Charpentier. “The games are about to commence. It seems I must do everything in this family. Come along, Daedalus. Let me get you properly betrothed so I can stop worrying about you.”

Daedalus found himself being dragged by the sleeve of his elegant black evening jacket to the front of the room where Lady Camilla joined them. Oddly enough, footmen had been stationed at every closed door. He took a quick inventory of

the room. Breadmore and Alice were there, though Alice had moved to stand near Cordelia's three brothers, one of whom Daedalus had never seen before, a pale nervous fellow who seemed deep in conversation with Alice.

Captain Atherton and Lady Honoria were there, of course. As was Archer Colwyn and his betrothed Charlotte Smythe. The barrister, Stephen Forsythe, had also put in an appearance with his beautiful wife, Lady Jane. Oddly enough, no one else was there save for himself and Cordelia who glanced at him and smiled. She was gorgeous, of course, but she appeared a bit pale and nearly as unhappy as himself.

“As it appears we are all here, I suggest we begin,” Chelmsford announced.

Daedalus darted a look at Cordelia who seemed just as puzzled as he was, if her expression was any indication.

The duke pulled a letter from the inside pocket of his very expensive evening jacket. “I have a letter here which my brother graciously shared with me yesterday. My niece has read the contents, though my brother-in-law, the Earl of Breadmore has not. I ask that he read it now.”

Daedalus watched in horrified fascination as his sister's husband read her suicide note. He crumpled it up and strode to the hearth to cast it into the fire.

“What is this nonsense, Chelmsford? What are you about?” His face alternated between brilliant red and pale white.

“You have done nothing in destroying that copy. The original is locked safely away. But rest assured I can and will have that letter printed on handbills and send one to every

household in Mayfair if you do not stop your quest to blackmail Miss Perriton into marrying you.”

“He what?” Daedalus lunged toward the man only to be jerked back by Chelmsford.

“I’ll kill him.” Cordelia shoved a hand beneath her shawl, and Daedalus feared she might be reaching for a pistol hidden there.

“Not if I kill him first.” He shrugged off his brother’s restraining hand and moved closer to Cordelia.

Chelmsford lifted a commanding palm and silence fell. Breadmore had stepped to one of the sets of doors leading out of the room but was blocked by Lady Camilla’s footmen.

“The line of people who would like to kill Breadmore is a long one. My brother and I are at its head. However, if I were to kill you that would leave the dukedom to Lord Whitcombe and he is far too brave and wise to ever be a duke.

“It is my understanding that Breadmore was working with Ravenwood to gather evidence to prove that Miss Perriton, of all people, is the authoress of the *An Insatiable Lady Books*. I believe it was your intention to use this so-called proof to induce the lady to marry you.”

Cordelia moved in front of her brothers, talking furiously to each of them as they glared at the earl with murder in their eyes. Daedalus was beginning to enjoy this.

“I cannot kill you, Breadmore, but I *can* render you socially and financially dead with but a few words in the proper ears. Which I shall do should you dare to utter even one disparaging word about Miss Perriton in any fashion. You will find it especially difficult to spread your scurrilous lies as



I understand Lady Camilla intends to announce at tonight's gathering that *she* is *An Insatiable Lady*."

There were gasps all around, none louder than Cordelia's. "My hat is off to you, Lady Camilla. Your books are quite... scintillating."

Daedalus had never seen Lady Camilla so pleased with herself, and he struggled to keep from laughing. Breadmore looked ready to succumb to apoplexy.

"One last thing," Chelmsford said. "As we have now proven Miss Perriton to have an unblemished reputation, it is my intention to fund whatever charitable work she cares to take on, with one very simple caveat which it pains me to ask of her. I realize my brother's business may be a hindrance to her endeavors, but I'm certain everyone in this room, as well as myself, will do all we can to support her work if she will but marry him."

"Chelmsford!" Daedalus shouted.

"I understand he did propose." The room erupted into noisy conversation and Breadmore was finally allowed to slink out under the escort of two footmen. "But the fool forgot to tell you that he is madly in love with you and may well perish of a broken heart without you. Please put all of us out of our misery and agree to be his bride. I certainly don't want to take him in if he's going to mope about the place like some sort of Byronic hero."

Chelmsford shoved Daedalus in Cordelia's direction. Alice ran across the room, kissed Daedalus on the cheek, and went to stand with the duke and a beaming Lady Camilla. Cordelia stood with her hands pressed to her mouth, her dark eyes bright as stars in a night sky. The oldest of her brothers elbowed her forward.

“I’m sorry,” Daedalus said softly as he stood before her. “He had no right to embarrass you like that.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Are you?”

He frowned in confusion then realized what she was asking. “Of course, I love you. I’m mad about you. Ox has already started shopping for hair shirts for me. Cordelia, we *can* be who we are entirely and still be together. We have friends and family who love us. We have work we love that gives us purpose. We love each other, don’t we?” She nodded vigorously. “Then what else do we need? We’ll work it out. Chelmsford is richer than Croesus. He can build you an entire village of cottages for your ladies. You can write your books and make an old lady very happy to claim them, and perhaps one day you can claim them for yourself. If you would just—”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Whitcombe, do stop talking and let the lady answer.” Captain Atherton said. “The buffet’s getting cold.”

“And I have an appointment later with someone who demands I arrive on time,” Chelmsford said, with a quick look at his pocket watch.

“Well, Cordelia,” Daedalus said, his heart in his throat. “You *will* have to deal with Chelmsford as a brother-in-law, but—Umpf!” He staggered back as Cordelia threw herself into his arms and kissed him long, slow, and hard. She leaned back for a moment and gazed into his eyes. “You need some lessons in proposing, sir, but I will marry you. Now hush and kiss me.”

And he did.

THE END

# EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

## **H**awthorne Park Outside London

Cordelia awoke to the dulcet tones of her husband in the corridor outside their bedchambers cursing like a Covent Garden lady on a Sunday morning. Which could mean only one thing. She glanced at her bedside table and then his, where his spectacles lay atop a stack of books. A loud crash, followed by the solicitous tones of the upstairs maid, Flossie, indicated another vase or urn had just met its untimely demise.

She scooted into a seated position and propped several pillows at her back in preparation for the possible arrival of her breakfast. Possible, as the crash she heard might have been said breakfast hitting the floor. She truly had to find a way to dissuade Daedalus from bringing her breakfast tray up himself, a task he had taken on these last few months since the birth of their son. She peered over her side of the bed into the cradle where Perseus Alistair Lionel Whitcombe lay sleeping, completely oblivious to his father's noisy announcement that breakfast would soon be served. He had already availed himself of her breast, so his breakfast was a sweet memory to be dreamed upon until he next grew hungry.

The door to their bedchamber opened and Daedalus, laden tray in his hands, backed into the room as quietly as was

possible for him. He first glanced in the direction of the cradle. Cordelia smiled and shook her head. “Slept through the entire thing,” she said softly. “What did you break this time?”

His golden hair delightfully tousled and his banyan open to the waist, Daedalus sat on the side of the bed and placed the breakfast tray across her lap. “What makes you think I broke anything?”

“Your use of the words *whoreson* and *bollocks* and the noise as if Wellington’s cavalry was charging up the stairs? Ooh! Fresh bread. Whatever will we do when Lady Camilla’s visit ends and she takes Nathaniel back to London with her and Lionel?” Cordelia slathered a slice of bread with butter and jam from the jam pot.

“We may yet be saved from growing as large as Prinny?” Daedalus leaned forward to take a bite of the bread she offered. He licked the jam from her fingertips and kissed her tasting of jam and tea and toothpowder.

“How long have you been up crashing about the house without these?” She stretched to pluck his spectacles from the table and pushed them onto his nose.

“Long enough to discover Alice has decided never to venture into London society again.”

“That is the third time this week.”

“Indeed. Oh, and your brother, Sinjin, has brilliantly developed a new variety of rose.”

“So, he and Alice are still corresponding. Interesting.” She sipped her tea and tore off a piece of bacon which she popped into her mouth.

“Cordelia,” Daedalus warned. He buttered his own piece of bread and began to eat.

“I cannot help it, my love,” she replied. “I want everyone to be as happy and settled as we are.”

She was happy. Deliriously so. Their son had been born at Hawthorne Park, the home and estate the Duke of Chelmsford had gifted them on their wedding day. There were six lovely and large cottages on the estate, one of which was already occupied by the two Mary’s, Bess, Sally, and Polly. She and Daedalus spent half their time at Hawthorne and the other half in London where they had a small townhouse on Grosvenor Square, though they were known to spend nights in the offices of *Wicked Books and Naughty Novels* on occasion.

Cordelia wrote two types of books now. She continued her *An Insatiable Lady* books with Lady Camilla taking full credit to much acclaim. However, she also wrote guides for young women on all matters romantic and yes, marital intimacies as well. Some decried the books as scandalous and corrupting, but that did not stop increasing sales of the books every month. Daedalus had begun taking on women apprentices in the print shop. Everything she and her husband did was met with some derision and hauteur, but the support of the Duke of Chelmsford and Lady Camilla ensured their success and acceptance in society. Not that she cared a whit for such. But her projects demanded support and she had a son now to protect and nurture.

“What are you pondering so seriously, my love?” Daedalus licked a bit of jam from the corner of her mouth and settled his lips on hers for a long, sensuous kiss. She sank back into the pillows, her hands sifting through his silky hair. He groaned and slowly drew back. “We cannot, my love. Not for—”

“Six more weeks, at least.” Lionel Carrington-Bowles stuck his head in the door and gave them both a reproving

glare. “Having your first child make his appearance six months after the wedding has done nothing to make you two behave as proper aristocrats.”

“Thank God,” she and Daedalus said as Carrington-Bowles strode to the cradle and bent over to inspect their sleeping son.

“Amen,” he whispered. “He is looking well.” He straightened and perused Cordelia carefully. “As are you. No weakness? No bleeding? No dizziness or pain?”

“I am perfectly fine, CB, thanks to you.” She reached out to squeeze his hand. Her pregnancy had been difficult at the end. Lionel had tended her with her maid Gilly’s help whilst Lady Camilla and Nathaniel had done their best to keep Daedalus calm.

“We owe you everything,” Daedalus said solemnly.

“Nonsense. Aunt Camilla has suggested an al fresco luncheon this afternoon when Atherton and the others arrive. I see no reason for you not to attend, Cordelia. And you, Whitcombe, will allow your lady wife to walk down to the lake where said luncheon will be served. You will *not* carry her about like some invalid. Giving birth is not some crippling disease. Women in The Dials do it every day and go back to work the next morning.”

“Thank you,” Cordelia said as Daedalus muttered something about modern physicians.

“I’m off to see what Nathaniel is about in the kitchens.” Carrington-Bowles strolled to the bedchamber door, but turned as he raised the latch. “And as for the other, a selfless man might find ways to give his wife pleasure that do not involve

intercourse.” He shrugged. “Or so I’ve read in a recent book.” He winked and left, closing the door behind him.

Daedalus stood and removed the tray from across her lap. He managed to set it on the table before the hearth without dropping anything. With a quick check on their son, he shrugged out of his banyan and crawled naked under the covers.

“I don’t need to read a book,” he growled. “I have my own tutor right here. Tell me, my lady, what is your pleasure this morning?”

“Surprise me,” she sighed as he pulled her nightgown to her waist and kissed his way across her belly. “You are, after all, my star pupil.”

And he remained her star pupil for the rest of their lives. After all, one should never stop learning when it comes to love.

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# EXCERPT

**Sex, Lies, and Forbidden Desires**

**Book One**

**By Louisa Cornell & Andrea K. Stein**

©2022

**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 unstopped the bottle and took a long swig. "We're not buggered. We're dead."

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## LOUISA CORNELL BIO

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, Andrea 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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