

CECILIA GRANT

Author of
A Lady Awakened

*"Luscious, erotic,
and emotionally intense."*

—New York Times bestselling author
MADLINE HUNTER

A Gentleman Undone

Praise for Cecilia Grant and
A Lady Awakened

“Elegantly written, emotionally powerful ... with a compelling combination of exquisitely nuanced characters and lusciously sensual romance. Sweet, poignant, and completely satisfying, *A Lady Awakened* is a romance to treasure.”

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“Grant details Regency country life beautifully, with a firm and respectful hand, and the subtle yet engrossing courtship is enchanting and gratifying as it transforms these two strong-minded and very unlikely lovers.”

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—*New York Times* bestselling author MARY BALOGH

“If you only read one debut this year, this is the one to read. Incredibly sexy, surprising, sweet. I loved *A Lady Awakened*!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author ELOISA JAMES

*A Gentleman
Undone*

CECILIA GRANT



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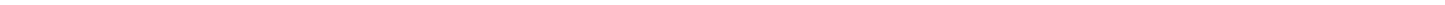
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Prologue



JUNE 1815

“WHAT THE devil were you thinking, to move him?” The surgeon stank of blood. In the meagre candlelight allotted to this section of the makeshift hospital, he was all crags and shadows and slick to the elbows with the life of other men.

“None of the litter-bearers would stop for him. I waited hours.” His voice bled raw at the edges, rasped to almost nothing by a day of shouting over gunfire, shouting over cannon, shouting over the thunder of two nations’ cavalry.

Just as well he couldn’t speak up. This was a church, or had been before its conscription into such gruesome service. Presumably it would be a church again, once all these men could be transported on to Brussels. Bruges. One of the proper hospitals, with proper beds instead of narrow benches and a cold stone floor. At all events a man ought to show respect.

“You know they have their orders.” The doctor crouched by the bench on which Talbot lay, prodding at his lifeless limbs. Or not lifeless, strictly, because he was not dead. His chest heaved in a weird rhythm that seemed to bear little relation to breath. “They must take the officers first, and then they look for the men we have the best hope of repairing. Lord knows we’ve got enough of those to keep us busy. We don’t need to go foraging for desperate cases.”

Surely a doctor didn’t do any good to a patient by speaking that way in his hearing. Why did he open his mouth to say something to that effect, and close it again. The man’s demeanour must be the least of his concerns. The essential matter, it seemed, was the state of Talbot’s arms and legs. Broken as he was, he’d still been able to move fingers and toes when he lay on the field. So to transport him had perhaps been a mistake after all.

No, not perhaps. Of a certainty, but a certainty barely glimpsed through the haze of three days’ exhaustion. Like some monstrous shape at some great distance, lurching to its feet to begin its shambling, implacable approach.

Time enough to deal with that later. “Well, he’s here now.” Command came without conscious thought, after enough practice. Brush aside what was inessential, clear a path, and set the man on it. “There’s no foraging involved. All I ask is that you take a look and see what can be done for him, same as you’ve been doing all night.”

“Did you not understand me?” The surgeon sat back on his heels, his face lost in shadow. “He’s had an injury to the spine. He’s got no movement or even feeling in his legs. There’s nothing we can do for him.”

He swallowed. It felt like downing a handful of grape-shot. “How can you know that? You’ve barely looked at him. The light in here is too poor for you to properly see. What if it’s simply pain and prostration that’s left him unable to move?” Even through the shroud of fatigue he could hear the senseless, flailing nature of these arguments. Abruptly he clamped his jaws together, and took a step back.

Something impeded his progress—someone, rather—some infantryman who’d not had the

benefit of a lieutenant to find him a place on one of the pews. He lay crumpled on the stone, his wide, unbelieving eyes connecting with Will's for a second or two before his gaze veered off to the darkness overhead.

He wasn't making a sound, this one. But others were. Sounds such as one heard in the aftermath of battle, made worse by their concentration in a small space, by the echoing effect of the stone walls, by the awful irony of the setting.

Will breathed in slowly, and breathed out again. Two days ago he'd knelt in the crossroads at Quatre Bras, scrambling to reload his musket—powder, ball, paper, *quickly*—as the cuirassiers in their formidable gleaming breastplates charged in, and he'd thought, *Now I know what Hell will be like*. Some thirty hours later he'd revised the thought: Hell was a sleepless night in frigid rain with one battle behind you and another ahead, sodden uniform squishing comically as you lifted a hand and set it on the shoulder of some frightened young man you couldn't find the words to console.

Then Hell had been battle again, the noise and the stench and the comrades struck down, and Hell had been the search for survivors, and Hell had been the long wait with Talbot, the bone-weariness, the dwindling hope of aid, the desperation that had finally compelled him to pick up the man and carry him here. With his faculties intact he would not have made the mistake.

Nor would he have made the mistake of believing he'd already seen Hell. Hell, clearly, was the hopeless section of the church-turned-hospital, broken soldiers discarded like so much human rubbish on the stones, crying to God or the doctor or their mothers for mercy that would not come.

No. A man could drown in such thoughts, and he had better things to do this minute than drown. "Please." The surgeon was rising to his feet; this was his last chance to find the approach that would compel him to *do something* for the man he'd carried into this hell. "He's one of mine. I'm responsible for him. He has a wife and child."

"For God's sake, Lieutenant, look about you. Every one of these men will be mourned by someone. Every one of them will weigh on the conscience of some lieutenant, or sergeant, or colonel who can point to something he might have done different." A hand came through the darkness to graze against his sleeve: that was meant to be comfort. "In truth, even the litter-bearers should have had a hard time moving him safely. The outcome might very well have been the same." That, too, was intended as comfort. Dimly he perceived the fact. "You did what you could. Now I suggest you get some sleep."

That was that, then. Talbot would be left to die. The litter-bearers might have brought him to the same end, but Will had done it, decisively, before they had a chance to try. "Wait." Now it was his hand, lunging out to arrest the doctor as he turned away. He forced his paltry shredded voice lower yet. "Can you at least give him something? Opium? He suffered terribly."

But God, he knew the answer even as he rasped out those words. Every damned man straggling and breathing here suffered terribly, and opium must be saved for the surgeries. "I'm sorry," said the doctor, and Will could only let his hand fall, and watch the man's form recede.

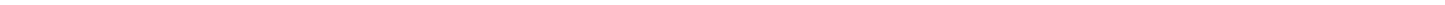
On his left periphery, Talbot's chest was still going like an amplification of his laborer's heartbeat. When would it stop? He ought to have asked. He raised a hand to his own face, dragging it from his hairline down over his eyes, his too-long-unshaven cheeks, his slack

mouth, his chin. He turned, and knelt where the doctor had been.

“I’m going to take you out of here.” The man’s eyes were closed, but his mouth tightened and he managed a sort of nod. “The wounded are too many and they can’t spare a surgeon or even opium. There’s no purpose in your staying.” *There’s no hope.* What good would he do the man by saying that aloud? “Another of the hospitals might be better appointed, and we might find you some gin, at the least.”

Gin. Not likely. Unless he proposed to start pillaging corpses in search of a flask. Of course that might come to sound reasonable, between now and when Talbot’s last breath left him.

Will gathered his dreadful limp form from the pew and nearly staggered, not under the weight of the man but under the weight of the man’s misguided trust. He picked his way past dead and living bodies to the door, shadowed every step by a growing presentiment: there might after all be worse visions of Hell awaiting than anything he’d yet seen.



Chapter One



MARCH 1816

THREE OF the courtesans were beautiful. His eye lingered, naturally, on the fourth. Old habits would persist in spite of anything life could devise.

Will leaned on one elbow and rested his cheek on his palm, a careless posture that suggested supreme confidence in his play while also allowing him to peer round the fellow opposite and get a better view of the ladies. Not to any purpose, of course. He'd come into this establishment on a solemn errand, and courtesans had no part in his plan.

Still, a man could look. A bit of craning here, a timely turn by one of the ladies there, and he could assemble a fair piecemeal picture of the four. So he'd been doing all evening as they'd sat down in different combinations at their card table, some fifteen feet removed from the great tables where the gentlemen played. And while every one of them—from dark temptress to flame-haired sylph to crystalline-delicate blonde—gratified his eye, only one thus far had managed to trifle with his concentration.

He watched her now, her eyelids lowered and her fingers precise as she fanned out her freshly dealt hand. Not beautiful, no. Pretty, perhaps. Or rather handsome: a young man could have worn that aquiline nose to advantage, and that fiercely etched brow.

She studied her cards without moving any of them—though the game was whist and a three of her companions were rearranging their cards by suit—and glanced across at her partner. Gray-blue eyes, expressive of nothing. She could hold all trumps and you'd never know.

“No sport to be had there, Blackshear.” The words rode in on a wash of tobacco smoke from his right, barely audible under the clamor of a dozen surrounding conversations. “Those ones are all spoken for.” Lord Cathcart switched his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other while inspecting his hand. A queen and a ten winked into view and out. Luck did like to throw itself away on the wealthy.

“There'd be no sport even if they were at liberty. A youngest son with no fortune doesn't get far with their kind.” Will replied at the same low pitch and lifted a corner of his own card, a seven of clubs to go with his seven of spades.

“Oh, I don't know.” The viscount's fine-boned profile angled itself two or three degrees his way. “A youngest son who's just sold his commission might set his sights beyond the occasional adventurous widow.”

“Widows suit me. No taint of commerce; no worries over whether you've seduced a lady into something she'll regret.” The words felt flabby and false on his tongue, a stale utterance left over from the life that used to be his. He nodded toward the courtesans' table. “In any case your birds of paradise are a bit too rich for my blood.”

“Ha. I'll wager your blood has its own ideas. Particularly concerning the sharp-faced wench with the Grecian knot. Stick,” he added to the table at large as his turn came.

“Split,” said Will, and turned up his sevens. His pulse leapt into a hasty rhythm that had nothing to do with any sharp-faced wench. He pushed a second bid forward, and gave all his attention to the two new cards.

An eight brought one hand to fifteen. Good chance of going bust on a third card and no much chance of besting the banker if he stuck. The second hand was better: an ace gave him the option to stick at eighteen, and also tempted him with the possibility of a five-card trick if he counted the card for one instead of eleven and if the next three cards fell out in his favor.

Were the odds decent? Twenty-one less eight left thirteen. How many combinations of three cards came to thirteen or less? With one hundred and four cards in play ... eight aces, eight twos, et cetera, and eleven other men at the table who must already have some of those cards in their possession ... hang it, he ought to have paid better attention in mathematics classes. Fine return he'd brought his father on a Cambridge education, God rest the man's soul.

“I'll buy another on both hands.” Twenty more pounds in. Best to cultivate the appearance of recklessness early in the evening, when wagers were small. Prudence could wait until several hours hence, when most of these men would be drunk—make that drunker—and inclined to put up sums they'd regret the next morning.

The new cards dropped in and he lifted their corners. Five and three. Twenty and twenty-one. Or twenty and eleven, with two cards and ten pips between him and the double payoff of the five-card trick.

He flicked idly with a gloved fingertip at the corner of one card. Was he really considering it? Buying another card when he might stick on a total of twenty-one? His first night in the place, not two hours yet at the table, and already he was goading Fortune to do its worst.

Well, there'd be no novelty in that, would there? He had a fair acquaintance with the things Fortune could do. A loss of thirty pounds would barely merit mention.

“One more here.” He pushed another note out in front of his second hand.

A knave of hearts grinned up at him when he lifted the new card, and quiet relief poured through him, loosening places that had wound themselves tight. No five-card trick, but neither would he be dunned for his recklessness. Unless the banker beat him with a twenty-one of his own, he'd have at least one winning hand. Maybe two.

“Stick,” he said, and leaned his cheek on his palm again as the play passed to his left. The ladies played two straight tricks of clubs while he watched, the sharp-faced one producing her cards with smooth efficiency from their disparate places in her hand.

Cathcart could needle him all he liked. She gave a man's mind places to go, did such a girl. Let beautiful women air their attractions like laundry on a line, flapping for all the world to see. The woman who kept something back—who wore her graces like silk underthings against the skin, and dared a man to find them out—would always be the one to set his imagination racing.

Even if he couldn't afford to let any other part of him race along. He heaved a quick sigh. “What's a Grecian knot?” he said, sinking his voice again. “Do you mean the way she's got her hair?”

“Hopeless,” the viscount hissed round the stem of his pipe. “Must not be a particular lover of those widows you favor. Mind you, I don't suppose your hawkish Aphrodite is any to

discriminating herself, judging by the company she keeps.” With a jerk of his chin he indicated a fellow down the table, a square-jawed, blandly handsome type who’d assured himself the next deal by reaching twenty-one on his first two cards.

Curiosity buzzed wasplike about Will’s temples. He brushed it away. He hadn’t come here to gossip. The lady’s choice of protector was her own concern. “Hawkish, truly?” He leaned back and stretched his arms out before him. “Try to be civil.”

Though admittedly this wasn’t much of a place for that. Bottles at the table. More men than Cathcart smoking, despite the presence of ladies, or at least women, in the room. Granted, true gaming hell was probably worse. Gillray, the artilleryman, had claimed you could actually smell the desperation by four or five o’clock of the morning. Rolling off the pigeon in waves, he’d said, a stinking sweat more acrid than the sweat of healthy exertion. And why not? Fear had a scent, reportedly—you’d think battle would be the place to find that out, but amid the perpetual cacophony of scents, no one had ever risen up and proclaimed itself a fear—so why not desperation as well?

Enough pondering in that direction. He rotated his wrists, flexing the tendons, as a corpulent fellow went bust and the next began his turn. At the ladies’ table, the strong-featured girl took her third straight trick and calmly marked the point on a paper at her right hand.

Hawkish. Really. He folded his arms behind his head. And yet there was something undeniably birdlike about her nose, her blank eyes, her wren-colored hair. Cold little creatures, birds, for all their soft feathers and pretty songs. Eat your brains for breakfast as soon as look at you. The odd bits of knowledge one picked up in war.

The banker stuck on a total of nineteen, and Will was fifty pounds richer. One more small step up the mountain. He raked in his winnings and pushed his cards toward the hawkish girl’s square-jawed protector.

Near his own age, the man looked. Five and twenty or thereabout, and bearing himself with fresh consequence now he had the deal. Making some minor adjustment to his cravat before tending to the cards. Tilting his head with an air of practiced condescension to grant an audience to his right-hand neighbor, who was, it happened, speaking on the subject of the girl herself. “I declare, Roanoke,” the neighbor said in an audible undertone, “I should never have bet on you keeping her this long. Not half so comely as the one you were squiring about last summer. Pretty winsome thing, she was.”

A small compression of Square-jaw’s mouth was the only sign he took offense at the questioning of his choice. “That one gifted me with a bastard child.” Green-jeweled cuff-studs glinted in the candlelight as he reached out to gather in the cards. “This one can’t.”

“Or so she tells you, I’m sure,” was the first gentleman’s rejoinder, his undertone abandoned to more generally air his wit.

“She can’t.” With the patience of a crown prince accustomed to dull-witted minions he made this correction. “Something’s gone wrong with her insides. No monthly courses.”

Charming. And quite a bit more information than any man at the table could desire to know, surely. Will threw a look to the viscount, who only lifted a shoulder in reply. Evidently this sort of discussion was usual.

And it quickly got worse. “I shouldn’t mind one like that myself.” A coarse-featured bouncer in a bottle-green coat offered this opinion. “Available all days of the month, isn’t it?”

she? Can't ever claim indisposition and turn you away. Where did you come by her?"

"Plucked her out of Mrs. Parrish's establishment." Roanoke took his time squaring the edges of all the used cards before putting the stack faceup at the bottom of the deck. "And you may believe they trained her up proper. If there's a thing she won't do in bed, I have yet to discover it."

Mrs. Parrish's. Even a man who'd never set foot in such a place knew a thing or two of its character. One heard certain reports. Accounts, for example, of a contraption that positioned a man to be serviced by one woman while another administered a holly-branch whipping. Rumors of women who'd submit to a whipping themselves, or to any foul debauchery a man could conceive. Through what perverse acts had Square-jaw made his mistress an acquaintance?

Devil take it. This was none of his concern, and to speculate so on a lady's private business ill became him. Indeed it ill became the men at the table who were now pelting Roanoke with crude questions—Would she do this? Did she allow him that?—while the lout deigned to answer only in monosyllables, vague in proportion to the heightened interest, as he dealt out the cards.

Temper sent its warning prickle down Will's spine. She must be hearing this. She must see first one head and then another swiveling to reappraise her. He could mark no change in her countenance, her posture, or the speed at which she played her cards, but with what effort did she keep that composure while hearing herself reduced to an object for the common gratification of a lot of jackals?

"Has she got a name?" That was his own voice, rising above the others. What the devil was he doing? Did he want to invite the suspicion of the entire company? A slight straightening of Cathcart's posture spoke of sharpened interest, though the viscount didn't turn.

Roanoke did. His patrician brows crept a fraction of an inch closer together, then relaxed. "Lydia is her name," he said, and spun out the next card.

Leave it alone, Blackshear. But temper asserted itself again, the cautionary prickle swelling to a ham-fisted *glissando* played on his vertebrae. "I mean a name by which it would be proper to address her." Damnation. He would never learn, would he, what was and wasn't his responsibility?

"Have you something particular to say to her?" The man looked at him with full attention, as did most of the men at the table now. A charge like incipient lightning thickened the room's air. Choose the right words, and he'd be addressing Prince Square-jaw at twenty paces.

Wouldn't *that* be a suitably ridiculous end. Called out over excessive propriety. Killed on account of a woman he hadn't even got to enjoy.

Ongoing chatter from the room's other tables shrank to something distant and obscure as the prospect took shape before him. A few insults, none too subtle, were all that was wanted. Easily enough he could probably provoke the fellow into aiming for his head while he set his own shot ten feet wide.

How badly would such a caper besmirch the family name? Andrew wouldn't like it, of course. But Andrew's respectability could surely transcend any number of family scandals. Kitty and Martha were both already married, quite well. He couldn't blight their futures on that regard.

Nick, though. His second-eldest brother harbored political ambitions and depended on good name even now to keep up his practice. He'd do Nick no favors with reckless nonsense

Besides, he had a deal of money yet to win. "I've nothing whatsoever to say." He made his consonants crisp, and held Roanoke's eyes. No need to back down altogether. "I'm unused to hearing a lady spoken of in this way, and called openly by her Christian name. But I've been out of society for some time. Perhaps the mores have changed."

"Were you in the Peninsula, do you mean?" A bright-eyed fellow who barely looked old enough to be out past bedtime piped up with this. "Or perhaps in the final battle of Waterloo?"

One encountered this sort with disconcerting frequency. Men who'd swallowed the bitter pill of staying home—heirs who couldn't be risked, unfortunates who couldn't scrape together the blunt to buy a commission—and now wanted to hear every detail of what they'd missed.

"Lieutenant with the Thirtieth Foot." Will nodded once. "In the actions at Quatre Bras and Waterloo." If the nickniny wanted to know more than that he'd have to drag it out of him with a grappling hook.

Fortunately a gentleman three seats down had some opinion to air about Wellington, which someone else countered with an insight into Blucher's actions, and from there the usual derision was heaped upon the Prince of Orange and the usual agreement ensued as to what that bright day in England's history had been June eighteenth of the previous year. The table mood shifted; the tension between himself and Roanoke guttered like a spent candle and was gone.

Will sat back, drawing in quiet, even breaths. He could listen to such discussions, at least. Some soldiers couldn't. One heard of men who grew light-headed and must leave a room when the subject was broached. Or who flew into a rage at hearing the perdition of battle recast as some grand glorious sport, like a thousand simultaneous boxing matches improved with the addition of strategy, and flashy uniforms, and weapons that made a good loud noise.

"Slaughter," Cathcart murmured under a mouthful of smoke as he took out his pipe.

And there was that. Those men who didn't care to romanticize the event must remark upon how "near run" the whole business had been, with the best soldiers in far-off Spain or Portugal and only hapless youngsters and second-rate officers to fumble their way across the Hougoumont fields.

He'd heard it before. From a friend, it still stung. "A tremendous loss of life indeed." He steadied his voice, made it low and careless. "Slaughter on both sides, I can assure you."

The viscount shook his head. "Her name. Your barren nymph is Miss Slaughter." A card dropped before him and he lifted a corner to look. "Not the most original gambit, defending Cyprian's honor, but usually effective for all of that."

Ah. The mistress. Yes, that made more sense. Seven years he'd known Cathcart and the man had always taken life as a string of great larks; why would he begin pronouncing opinions on military strategy now? "I tell you there's no gambit." The words tumbled out with a vehemence born of relief: he felt enough of a stranger already to old friends without introducing such rifts, and he would a hundred times rather argue over a lady than a battle. "Truly, am I the only man in this room with sisters? With any grasp of simple decency? No woman deserves to hear those things said of her." He couldn't help stealing another glance, but if Miss Slaughter had heard any part of his ill-advised gallantry, she showed no sign

Deftly she marked another point on her paper and sat back, her shoulders square, her head erect, her gaze, stark and pitiless as a falcon's, never once turning his way.

Neither did Fortune find him worthy of notice, this time. He enriched Mr. Roanoke by twenty pounds in one hand and thirty in the next, erasing over a third of the evening's gain. Let that teach him to get caught up in petty intrigues. He pushed away from the table in disgust.

* * *

*T*_{HIS HAD} been someone's house, before it became a club of most lax membership. Walls had been knocked out here and there to create the necessary large salons and supper room, but some traces of the residential scale remained. A drawing room at the back of the second story, for example, currently occupied by ladies who did not care for cards. Will turned away from the brightness and chatter and, on the street side of the same floor, found a modest library, intact even to books. No candles lit, or fire in the grate, but that only increased the likelihood he'd have the room to himself.

A bookshelf jutted out at right angles to the single bay window, and on the shadow side loomed a shape that proved, on approach, to be an armchair. Perfect. He sank into it and closed his eyes. Through the open door he could hear the house's sounds, all remote and indistinct. Conversation. Laughter. A faint strain of music—violin?—from the ballroom on the story below. No doubt there would be dancing later. Just one of those artful amenities that proclaimed this house to be no seedy Smith and Pope's, but a place of gentlemanly sport. Where a gentleman could waltz with courtesans, and drink himself into a stupor, and ruin himself to the benefit of his fellows instead of some impersonal proprietor.

And who are you to condemn them for it? He slouched deeper into the chair, folding his arms. It seemed sometimes he'd lost all ability to ... enjoy himself, carelessly. As a man ought to do, indeed as he had used to do. Nearly eight months he'd been back in England, turning aside invitations and ducking from acquaintances, schoolfellows, with whom he couldn't seem to remember how to converse. Only thick-skinned, cheerful Cathcart had persisted, and the viscount had finally prevailed not through the power of friendship but because he'd dangled the lure of a gaming club just when Will discovered a need for several thousand pounds.

Some hard edge was imposing itself against his forearm. Some square shape in his breast pocket that he hadn't any recollection of—

Oh, Christ. The snuffbox. This was the coat he'd worn when he'd first called on Mr. Talbot.

He felt inside his pocket and drew out the box, then stood and reached round the bookshelf until moonlight through the window bathed his open palm.

Such a pretty thing for a man of modest means to have owned. Gold clasp, gold hinges, the lid all enameled with a scene of horse and hounds. Probably it was worth a bit of money. That was why it had stayed in his pocket, once he'd seen the Talbot relations pawing over the other small items he'd returned. When Mrs. Talbot was able to be independent of those people he would put it into her hands that she might keep it for the child. She wouldn't want for money, so there'd be no temptation to sell it.

His fist closed over the box, and opened again. He tilted his hand and the enamel gleamed as the moonlight caught it just so.

Altogether too much thinking he'd done tonight. He'd be useless at cards if he couldn't quiet the rest of his brain. He closed his hand on the box again, and brought it back.

He was just stowing it in a pocket when footsteps sounded in the corridor. For no good reason he withdrew to the armchair with its shadows, whisking his legs back to keep his Hessians away from the spill of moonlight. Unaccountable reflexes a man brought back from war. It wasn't as though the French had made a practice of sneaking up on one soldier at a time. Nor, of course, was it likely that the footsteps, if indeed they were bound for this room, could represent any threat.

Two sets of footsteps there were, one lighter than the other, and unmistakably bound for his way. A man and woman. Yes, he ought to have anticipated this. Often enough he'd made liberal use of a darkened room at some gathering in his carefree days.

Something stopped him immediately rising. The awkwardness, perhaps, of having to explain just why he'd been in here, alone, in the dark. The stubborn assertion that he'd been here first, and why should he have to give way to their sordid purpose? At all events he was still seated, all the way in shadow, when two shapes filled the doorway and came in. The taller shape swung the door gently to behind them, and as the swath of illumination from the hall grew narrower, a green-jeweled cuff-stud glinted faintly.

Roanoke and his mistress. Or perhaps Roanoke and some other woman—indeed that was the likelier case, given Prince Square-jaw could entertain his mistress at home, at his leisure without need for skulking about. The door clicked shut and Will abandoned the idea of a prompt exit. They could get on with their business and he'd slip out while their attention was engaged. Perhaps he'd make some attempt to ascertain the lady's identity—for what purpose, though? If the man betrayed Miss Slaughter, that was nothing to do with him. Did he propose to finagle a seat next to her at supper, and drop vague dire hints of what he'd seen?

The question was moot. The pair made straight for the bay window and he knew her by her posture alone. Erect and somehow remote, as though holding herself apart from the very air through which she moved. They passed into the bay—he could almost have put out a hand and touched her skirts as she went by; thank goodness their eyes were not so well adjusted to the dark as his—and the draperies creaked along their rod; the thin gruel of moonlight grew thinner. Then, silence, save for a few vague rustles. Whatever their next order of business, apparently required no preamble of conversation.

Doubtless there were men who would enjoy sitting here, clandestine witness to such goings-on. A pity one of them couldn't take his place. All he'd wanted was a quarter-hour of darkness and silence; now he must tax his weary brain by calculating how best to retreat undetected from this room which he, by any measure, had the better right to occupy.

He'd make his try in thirty seconds. Any sooner, and they might not be sufficient; any later, oblivious. Much later, and he'd be more visible to their dark-acclimated eyes.

An indistinct utterance added itself to the rustles. His hands settled carefully on the chair arms and gripped there. Twenty seconds. No more.

Confound these rutting fools, both of them. Confound her especially, for letting Prince Square-jaw make this use of her not forty minutes after he'd bandied her name about so despicably. Did she have no care at all for her dignity? Then henceforth neither would he. No more misguided gallantry for Cathcart to twit him with.

Nineteen, twenty. They sounded absorbed enough. Slowly he eased up from the chair

angling round the bookshelf for a furtive glance to assure himself they wouldn't notice him.

He stopped, half-risen.

He'd been prepared for something sordid, a brute coupling between an importunate boy and a harlot who'd learned her trade at Mrs. Parrish's. And of course it *was* sordid by its very nature, this retreat to the library, and Square-jaw himself was everything sordid, with his mouth at the juncture of her neck and shoulder and his hands groping here and there.

She, though. She was ... Confound him if he could even begin to find the right word. He only knew *sordid* wasn't anywhere close.

She stood with her back to the drapery, eyes closed, chin lifted, whole person swaying with pleasure. While he watched she sent her arms—ungloved, he could now see—up the wall behind her where they twisted overhead, wrists crossing with serpentine grace. Like one of those dancers in a story who bewitched men into cutting off other men's heads. Her naked fingers closed over a fold of the velvet drapery and he knew how that velvet would feel in her, thick and lush-grained, a cat's purr made tactile. Knew, too, how it would feel to be the velvet, trapped unprotesting in her hand. He found a grip on the bookshelf and held on tight.

Down her arm he dragged his attention, down the sinuous curve until his eyes rested again on her uptilted face. Had he thought her less than beautiful? In moonlight, even in such scant moonlight, he could see the truth. Her bold features carved up the shadows and threw them helter-skelter, light and darkness dancing giddily over her nose and cheeks and chin. Her skin was pale as the moon itself, pale and tantalizing as an opal at the bottom of a clear still lake. Pale throat. Pale shoulder. Pale bosom, magnificently formed and half spilling out from the disarranged bodice. But he would not let his gaze linger there. Indeed he ought to be removing himself altogether, as he'd meant to do.

One last look at her face. Her head tipped a few degrees left and then a few degrees right as though to stretch the muscles of her neck. Her chin came down, rearranging the composition of shadows and light. And her eyes opened and looked directly into his.

She said nothing. She didn't jump away from her lover, or yank up the bodice he'd tugged down, or cross her arms modestly before her. Only her eyes, widened and showing an excess of white, betrayed her consciousness of exposure. And that, for only a second or two, though the interval was sufficient to make him feel like a thoroughgoing cad.

The bookshelf's edge bit hard into his hand. He couldn't seem to look away, let alone make an apologetic bow and hasten from the room. He stood, frozen, as she regained her composure and her face hardened into the unmistakable lines of defiance: *Judge me if you dare*. Then that expression too subsided and only her falcon-like blankness remained. She looked through him, and past him, and altogether away.

He'd ceased to merit her notice. Whether he watched, or not, was a matter of supreme indifference to her. Her hands came down from their place on the curtain—even now, with a dancer's lissome grace—and settled on the oblivious biceps of Mr. Roanoke, who had continued at her shoulder and neck through the brief drama but was now commencing to haul up her skirts.

And finally Will let go his grip on the bookshelf. He didn't want to see what followed. He probably see it in his dreams, and that would be torment enough.

Some impulse of obstinacy made him bow. She didn't look his way, and neither did she. Prince Square-jaw glance up as he stole light-footed to the door, opened it just enough

accommodate his long-overdue exit, and soundlessly closed it behind him.

THEY DID not appear at supper. Will soldiered through three courses that did nothing to appease the foolhardy hunger scraping at his insides.

Nothing to the purpose. She wasn't for him. She pleased his eye and engaged his imagination, yes, but that hardly made her unique among women. When the time came to share himself with a lady again, he would look for a few qualities more. He'd yet to even hear Miss Slaughter speak; for all he knew she might open her mouth and prove an empty-headed shrew.

Indeed he rather hoped she would. She'd be less of a distraction then.

Whatever had kept them so occupied as to forgo supper, they'd apparently had their fill of it by the time card play resumed. Roanoke took his seat at the vingt-et-un table and this time his mistress sat on his knee. Gone was the attentive poise with which she'd conducted herself at whist. She leaned back and rested her head on the man's shoulder, watching the play idly from under half-lowered lashes, her entire aspect suggesting a lioness who'd just gorged herself on a kill and needn't think of eating, or think of anything at all, for at least a week.

Will fixed his eyes elsewhere. He had a purpose here, a mission. He had a plan that required three thousand pounds and God knows the odds were enough against him with his wits entirely engaged.

Three o'clock came, and then four—he knew this from Cathcart's jeweled pocket watch set down between them, the room being provided with no clocks—and he was nearly two hundred pounds to the good. Men were betting with sluggish brains; some men falling asleep outright and having to be prodded awake by a neighbor when their turns came. A fellow who kept his head might do quite well here, over time.

The viscount poked him with an elbow and, when he glanced up, nodded in the direction from which he'd rigorously kept his gaze. Roanoke's head lolled on his left shoulder. His chest rose and fell with slumberous breaths. Still against his right shoulder was Miss Slaughter, who'd helped herself to his cards and was considering them with languid attention. Her hands, he could not help noticing, were still bare. Perhaps her gloves lay even now on that library floor. His skin prickled unhelpfully at the thought.

"Does she play?" No other lady had sat down to the table all evening.

"I've never seen it." Cathcart had been coming here a good deal longer and would know. "But she looks as though she has it in mind, doesn't she?"

And indeed, when the play passed to Roanoke she made no attempt to wake him. Without the smallest sign of unease she took fifty pounds from his stake and added it to his before eyeing the banker expectantly.

The card sailed in and she lifted its corner. "Stick," she said. And Will's whole body vibrated to the tone of her voice.

Even on an austere syllable with more than its share of clicking consonants, she put a soft texture, and rounded the corners somehow. A man could savor that sampling, a sweet small dose like a cordial in a dainty glass. A man could very well get drunk on a larger amount, and bathe in an abundance. She'd reserved a place already in his dreams; now he knew she would speak, unceasingly, while she was there.

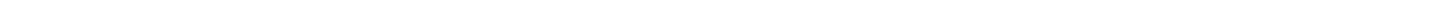
She would not, however, play vingt-et-un. Sadly she proved to be no proficient. She chewed at her lower lip while studying her cards, and wagered erratically, and went bust three of the five hands she played before fortune finally took pity on her with an ace and ten, and the deal. Meticulously she gathered in the cards, staggering them together to break apart the turned-up hands even before shuffling, as though by thorough discharge of this new duty she could somehow compensate for her lack of tactical skill. She shuffled, had her neighbor cut the deck, and dealt.

And Will began to lose. He drew on a hand of twelve, and a king put him over. He stuck nineteen, and she proved to have twenty. Even when he worked his pulse-pounding way to twenty-one, eight-seven-two-four, she turned up an ace and two fives to tie—to win, rather than the banker always having that advantage. Five straight times she dealt, beating him every time, until a grizzled-looking fellow hit twenty-one in two cards and mercifully took over the deal.

Ruin tasted like this. Like a mouthful of ashes, or the sweepings from a carpenter's floor. In less than half an hour his winnings had shrunk from two hundred pounds to twenty. "Bad luck, Blackshear," muttered the viscount, who had lost a mere fifty. Will didn't bother to reply.

Miss Slaughter was looking at him. Without any particular expression, to be sure, but her eyes rested steady on his. She picked up Roanoke's winnings and averted her attention to count out some bills before looking up again. Without counting along he knew—in his bones he knew—that she'd peeled off one hundred eighty pounds, precisely.

She dropped the large remainder in with the rest of Roanoke's stake. Still watching him she folded the amount of his losses, and folded it again, and tucked it calmly into the bodice of her gown. Then she turned to the more compelling business of examining her new hand.



Chapter Two



*E*_{DDWARD} WAS disposed to talk. Curse him to Hades. Why couldn't he roll over and drop off to sleep, as men were supposed to do? But of course he'd slept abundantly at the card table. She might have skimmed double from his winnings, and he would probably never have noticed.

"What do you think of a house party at Chiswell?" He lay on his back, one hand lifted above him that he might study his fingernails in the candlelight.

"In March?" The bed smelled of carnal abandon. Every inhalation brought a forceful reminder of her senseless appetites, her want of restraint. Five minutes ago she'd been ravenous for him, half out of her mind with need. Now she felt glugged and vaguely regretful as though she'd shoveled down a pound or two of sugary blancmange. She would remember this disagreeable sensation, and next time she would know better.

No, she wouldn't. She'd had six months to know better, and she hadn't managed it yet.

"Next month, I thought. At the Easter holiday. Parliament will be out, and people in need of some amusement. Suitable weather, too, in April, or at least I should hope it will be. Deuced cold winter it's been. Long winter too. Damnably long. And cold."

If only he would not speak! When she looked at him, at his clear hazel eyes and the elegant geometry of his cheeks and chin, she could easily imagine him to be a man of information. Thoughtful, inquisitive, a sparkling conversationalist, his brain always churning away beneath that modish Caesar haircut.

When he spoke, he was like the leftover dregs of her blancmange orgy, a shameful, ravaged souvenir that she wished to her soul some servant would come and clear away.

"I'm sure your party will be everything delightful." Lydia covered a yawn. Perhaps she could make him yawn too, and hasten his progress toward sleep.

"I expect it will." The first set of nails apparently having passed muster, he was now examining those on his other hand. "Only I suppose I shall have to be ready with some indoor amusements if this weather keeps on."

"Indeed. Shall I put out the candle?"

"No need. I'll do it presently." He would not take a hint. She had no hope of sleep until he was gone from her bed, hours and minutes hence. No hope of rest, even, until he closed his eyes and went unconscious. "What provisions do you think I ought to make for the ladies?" He lowered his hand and turned his face toward her. "As to amusements, I mean? What things are fashionable now?"

How the devil would I know? My last house party was a lifetime ago. She swallowed and the words went down. "I think a play is always popular. Archery, if the weather turns fair. Perhaps some of those games with blindfolds and kissing and so forth." How novel, how thrilling such games had seemed to her once. She'd first let Arthur touch her in the darkness of his father's orangery, every breath heady with the scents of citrus and damp potted earth, every delicate negotiation of hands and lips and clothing conducted in silence, that they might not betray their location in a game of hide-and-seek.

She could probably fix the beginning of her fall to that exact occasion, if she cared to squander one minute contemplating the trajectory of her fall, and if she cared to spare a single thought for Arthur.

“Of course it must depend on the company. Kissing games might seem quaint to the ladies who were at Beecham’s tonight, for example. But perhaps you mean to invite more respectable ladies?”

“Gad, no.” He laughed as though she’d said something very rich. “I’m six and twenty, Lydia. I needn’t think of respectable ladies for years yet.”

Five years, perhaps. But he’d tire of her before that time came. And if she had not put aside money enough to secure her future, she must cast about for a new protector. Or perhaps go back to the brothel.

She could bear that, if she had to. Hadn’t she borne it for eighteen months, before Edward took a whim to keep her? Indeed she’d first gone there with a will, with a plan to extinguish herself from the inside out.

She had other plans now. “I played your hand for a bit tonight while you napped.” Better he should hear it from her than from someone else.

“Did you? Clever girl. Have any luck?”

Luck. Good Lord. Who could be so complacent as to leave these things to luck? “I think so. I think I may have won you some money.” Four hundred eighty pounds, all told. Three hundred of it in one of his coat-pockets even now.

“Well done.” He threaded his fingers together and stretched his arms straight up. “The other fellows may say what they like. I know your merits.”

So do they, now. You saw to that. With all the insolence she swallowed, it was a wonder her corsets still laced. Retort after rejoinder after sharp-edged remark: *Why do you address me? What can I possibly have to say to a man who would split a pair of fives? Be quiet. Go to sleep. Go away. Come back when you have another erection.*

Sleep finally did overcome him, and after four minutes of listening to his even breathing, Lydia slid from the bed. Silently—silent as that coxcomb of a lurker in the library—she took her dressing gown from a nearby chair, pulled it on, and padded across the carpet to the candle Edward had not, after all, put out. Sheltering the flame with her free hand, she took to the dressing room and closed the door behind her.

By the window were a chair and table. On the back of the chair was a shawl that had seen her through many such long chilly nights. And in a drawer, alongside the hundred eighty pounds she’d deftly extracted from her corset, sat four decks of playing cards, sans joker. She took out two decks and sat down with her candle.

He might be trouble, that coxcomb. She probably oughtn’t to have baited him. He played with the air of a man who didn’t lose lightly and he might, after all, prove smarter than he looked. Though men so seldom did.

One by one the cards flashed by, numbers combining and recombining in all the immaculate beauty. King. Three. Five. Seven. Ace, most beautiful of all. In stacks of rank she sorted them, low to high, left to right.

Hang him, anyway. Hang him and his Waterloo heroics. A man found himself in the right campaign and his life thereafter was one long parade all embellished with fireworks and illuminations, regardless how he actually performed on the day. A man found himself in the

wrong one and he perished of the ague, with no one but a desolate sister to remember that he ever lived at all.

She pulled her shawl closer against the chill. Somewhere beyond the ever-present fog, the stars were fading and the first pale traces of morning were streaking the sky. Jane would rise soon and light the fires. There would be coffee, too, to warm her and keep her brain awake.

Now then. Twelve players at the table, two decks in play, cards newly shuffled. Two cards to every player, face down. Player number five would turn up an immediate twenty-one, good for him but bad for the composition of the remaining deck. First player would buy two more cards, which meant he must hold at least three low ones. Second player would go bust. Six, six, and queen, let us say. Giving the deck a high-cards-to-low-cards ratio of approximately twenty-three to twenty-one, or one and ninety-five thousandths.

Methodically Lydia laid out the cards, tabulating as she went. Edward wouldn't wake for hours yet. She'd have time to count her way through both decks, and then to play a few hands, watching for those places where she could take advantage of her tally to wager boldly.

And night by night, through means fair or otherwise, with the help of Lieutenant Coxcomb and other men who made the mistake of estimating her lightly, she would tuck bills into her corset, and hide them away at home, and draw ever closer to the day she could buy her independence.

THE DISRESPECTABLE life was not without its consolations. A high style of living, of course. The central duty itself, where one had a skilled and agreeable partner. Entrée into places, exotic and fascinating places, that no respectable lady would ever see. And acquaintance with people who wouldn't half turn up in any sedate Lancashire supper party.

"I only mean to say I don't think you should allow him to speak of you that way." Maria crisply turned a page in her *Ackermann's Repository*. "Tell him he has a choice: to enjoy your favors, or to enjoy discussing them in public. He cannot do both."

Well might Maria issue that ultimatum to a gentleman, and expect to be heeded. Such a confection of femininity—willowy figure, ivory skin, eyes the color of a midday summer sky—was surely wasted in this world. She ought to be perched on the summit of a glass house somewhere, smiling sadly at the princes who lost their footing halfway up, or perhaps combing her spun-gold hair on some ocean-lashed rock. Not sitting in a Bond Street dressmaker's shop, deciding how best to spend the money with which she was kept.

They weren't at all what a sheltered country girl imagined, the mistresses of London men. She'd expected, when brought into Edward's social circle, to encounter better-dressed versions of the women she'd known at Mrs. Parrish's—coarse, uneducated, with a bovine resignation to the shabby hand life had dealt them.

Instead she'd found Maria and dark rakish Eliza, both of better birth than she, both with genteel education, and both generous enough to overlook her brothel background and address her as an equal.

Lydia shrugged, flipping a page in her own fashion-book. "I'd wager all the gentlemen speak so, when we're not about. I don't see what would be gained by asking him to preter otherwise."

"Civility would be gained." Maria turned two pages, reviewing and dismissing the

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