



The Assassin's Guide to Falling in Love (The Ladies League #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: An assassin and her mark might find love amidst the turmoil of a technology war between steam and electricity if they can learn to trust each other

Louisa Stanton, madame and assassin, has another assignment to eliminate an enemy of the Crown. Normally she does her duty without asking too many questions, but something about this assignment has her hesitating. And it's not just the blue-grey gaze of the handsome lord she was sent to kill.

John Griffin, the Earl of Melton, can imagine more than one reason an assassin is standing in his house with a blade pressed to his neck. Too bad he has no intention of dying. Not even at the hands of the darkly sensual assassin sent to kill him.

When he convinces her to help him find who ordered his death, nothing about their alliance goes as planned. Not when his mother mistakes his would-be-killer for his fiancé, and not when they steam up the sheets. The question is, can they discover who is behind his kill order before everything falls apart in a tangle of secrets and lies?

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London, June 1848, Victorian Era

The actual act of killing someone had long ago ceased to bother Miss Louisa Stanton, or Lou to her friends.

But something about the man stalking through the grand entry hall of The Market, who she knew instinctively was there to deliver a kill order, caused a chill to slither across her skin. Though he was perfectly turned out, there was a hardness in his eyes and a grim set to his mouth which said he would kill you as soon as look at you.

One word came to mind. Ominous.

Lou shivered, yet despite her discomfort, she had been duly informed of his arrival when he had presented his coin at the door.

Now she had a role to play and a brothel full of guests as her audience.

After all, as 'Madame LaRoux', the owner of one of the most exclusive houses of pleasure in all of London, Lou could never let them see her perspire, no matter how much fate turned the steam up.

No sweating, and no crying. The last time she'd shed tears had been when her parents' died...

Lou tracked the incongruous gentleman from beneath lowered lashes and found herself grateful that she always wore a mask when at The Market. It made it easier to retain her composure in moments such as these.

Her Crown-sponsored customers were not typically challenging to spot, especially for someone of her specific skill set, though they at least blended in with her customers—mostly. Her current guest moved with intention, whereas most of her patrons ambled about with an insouciance born of both their privilege and their wealth, as evidenced by their butter-soft leather and gold telescoping monocles and goggles. But this man stuck out like a cog without a wheel with his simple attire and grim countenance.

Regardless, his presence made it clear she would be required to kill again. And soon.

The Market had long provided guest coins to trusted members; in part to allow potential new members to sample their offerings, and in part as a cover for her communications with her government handler. When her services were required, he did not bother with the modern clacks or even a written note—he sent an unsuspecting messenger with a specially designed coin. It was a safer, low-tech solution in their high-tech world full of steam powered vehicles, vocal amplifiers, and automatons. Queen Victoria had inherited a country divided between the Free Steam Consortium of Tinkers and the Steam Control Movement, often called the Voltacrats—steam and electricity supporters, respectively. In a world of two sides, Lou had learned to survive in the grey areas between Tinkers and Voltacrats.

One day at a time.

Taking a deep breath in fortification, Lou glided down the steps to welcome her newest customer. He glanced up at the first rustle of her dress and waited for her to descend.

Early in her career, she had learned an entrance was a calculated study in sensuality, every movement to be practiced with the express purpose of stoking a man's desires. The short fringe of ruffles guarded the apex of her thighs but left every tantalizing inch of her silk clad legs exposed until they disappeared into her brass buttoned calf

boots. A purposeful—and practical—display that by all accounts left the man's frigid stare unmoved.

Not a flicker of desire. Interesting.

She suspected the differences between this man and the usual oblivious messengers would only continue from there. Normally they stood there waiting for her, nervous and a little twitchy with excitement. She would arrive in front of them and they would stammer and stare as they presented her the token. Hands warm and clammy, the metal disc would transfer from their palm to hers.

Should she expect this cold man's hands to be warm and clammy as he handed over the disc? Would the aura of excitement be palpable when he came into proximity?

No, not this man.

This time they had sent her someone who knew what he was doing; knew he was initiating a chain reaction which would result in a life being snuffed out—and he could not have been more indifferent to the whole situation.

Arriving in the foyer, Lou strode across the half-filled space, allowing her confidence to outshine the flickering gas lamps. Conversations ceased as men turned to watch her progress. She would not allow him—any of the men, really—to sense her fear of him...or more correctly, her fear of his indifference.

“Good evening, monsieur. I understand you wished to speak with me?” Her fake French accent laced her words.

“Madame LaRoux, it is a pleasure to meet you. I was told upon presentation of this token I would be treated as a member of The Market for the evening.” His voice sounded like it barely scraped free of his throat. He extended a long slim arm and

presented the coin pinched between two talon-like fingers.

A shiver skittered along her spine.

Lou extended her palm, letting the metal disc drop into her hand while avoiding touching him in any way. Despite his frozen mien, the coin was warm, which startled her.

Now she would have to determine which of her girls could handle this man. Indifference was dangerous in a man seeking the company of a woman; she should choose a girl strong enough to manage him without getting herself into trouble.

There was only one available girl she could trust: Katerina. Accomplished in both the sexual arts of a courtesan, and the more lethal arts of an assassin, Kat could deal with this man and extricate herself if required.

“I believe I have the perfect lady for you, monsieur . Please follow me.” Lou allowed her long lashes to dip and shield her masked eyes from his probing gaze.

“Of course, I defer to your expertise, madame.” The man bowed and held out his arm for her to take.

Placing her hand in the crook of his elbow, Lou suppressed the urge to shudder as she led him into the main salon. “La, monsieur, you must tell me your name.”

“You may call me Mr. Xavier.”

She nodded, easily accepting what she knew was likely a false name. Reading people was part of her daily business life, whether working as an assassin or arranging a client for one of her girls. “The ladies of The Market are some of the most beautiful in London, in Paris—maybe even all of Europe.” The man made no response, merely

continued walking, so she pressed on. “Though that may be my overweening pride.”

The gas lights sprinkled about the main salon cast a soft glow around the room, illuminating the ladies in the most artful way. Katerina sat near the fire, allowing the orange flames to catch the golden flecks of her blonde hair and highlighting the flattering fall of silk over one shoulder. Her blue eyes slanted up at the corners, not unlike Lou’s own, and were framed by kohl smudged lashes that were the envy of every woman in London. Even with a black mask obscuring her face, she was a beautiful woman.

Lou led Mr. Xavier over to Katerina and made the introductions. Casually fluttering her fingers at her neck as she spoke, Lou indicated to Katerina, using their private signal, that this one was to be treated carefully. He was a wild card and not to be trusted.

The gentleman joined the blonde on the couch where they began to converse intimately. Lou departed quietly, letting the pair go about their business. With the heavy token searing her palm like a brand, she made her way upstairs to change her clothes for her emergent meeting.

Her services were required by Queen and country.

Lou divested herself of her mask, dress, corset, and dainty boots. The tweed trousers she preferred for riding encased her legs and she topped them with a simple black cotton blouse, a leather holster that strapped over her shoulders and under her bust to cover her midriff with slots for her assortment of knives, and a dark brown leather skirted coat. Cordelia, her longtime maid, unpinned her hair from the fancy coiffeur and braided it back into a neat braid that was then folded up and tied off with two lengths of brown velvet ribbon. She completed her ensemble with her knee-high buckled boots and a newsboy’s cap. She much preferred the freedom of trousers to corsets and silk skirts, but she must look the part of the brothel owner when

entertaining.

“Cordelia, please tell Walter I shall be going out on business tonight and require my steam cycle prepared for me by the rear entrance.”

“It’s too much, the way you gad about dressed as a boy and doing dangerous things. I should lock you in this room and keep you out of trouble,” Cordelia strode over to the door with a harrumph of worry, her face pinched.

Lou waved off her fretting maid, sending her downstairs. Cordelia had a tendency to fuss and fidget in ways that often exasperated Lou, but she was the best—and most discreet—hairdresser and lady's maid in London—had been for nearly three decades, the last half of which had been spent in her employ. Afterall, a woman of Lou’s chameleon nature needed the best to ensure she was turned out expertly, no matter how eccentric her attire.

Once Cordelia had disappeared, Lou loaded her two favorite Kukri knives into her holster along with a series of smaller throwing knives. The Kukri was the weapon of choice of the Gurkhas—soldiers from the Gorkha Kingdom who fought in the British military—and sported a wicked seventeen-inch blade which hooked about midway along with two little notches at the base near the handle which allowed blood to drip off before reaching the rosewood handle. It was heralded for its all-around utility, most notably as a hunting weapon good for chopping and slicing...which made the blades the perfect weapons for Lou’s needs.

This might be just a meeting to discuss her target, but when you killed for a living, you learned to be prepared for any and all eventualities. Lou did not leave home unarmed, not even when attending a ball, and certainly not when meeting her handler.

Everything in place, she slipped down the back stairs. It would be a disaster to run into any of her patrons dressed as she was. Having reached the rear of the house

without any issues, she was pleased to see her steam cycle waited at the backdoor with Walter beside it. While she still enjoyed a thunderous ride across a park on horseback, the sleek power of her steam cycle spoke to another side of her. A tinker side of her.

“Good evening, Walter.” She nodded to her mechanic-cum-stablemaster. The man was a miracle worker with both her steam cycle and her horses.

“Good evening, ma’am. I checked on the coughing noise you reported after you last took her out. I’ve increased the mix of steam-vapor in the engine.” He pulled a rag out of his pocket and wiped down the beast of the engine between them. The steam cycle was a maze of black metal and brass elements, with a condensed steam engine powering the two-wheeled contraption. The cog-like inner wheels had a rubber coating on the edges that allowed it to roll smoothly over the cobbled streets of London. A black cut down saddle, less the stirrups, perched atop the tangled beauty. “And I polished the saddle.”

“Thank you, Walter. I’ll report back on how she runs tonight.” Sliding her goggles into place over her cap and tugging the brim low on her brow, Lou straddled the machine and revved its engine with relish. Steam shot out the tailpipe as it reached full capacity. A gentle shift of gears and hiss of the pneumatic steam-brakes had her shooting forward into the beckoning night.

The wind rushed past her billowing the skirt of her coat out where it was not secured under her bottom on the saddle. She pressed on the accelerator and shifted gears, causing steam to shoot out the back in response to her demand for more power. The cycle jolted forward, barreling down the half-empty streets as she resisted the urge to yell out with the thrill of the speed.

Despite the lateness of the hour, London’s streets still trickled with foot traffic. Prostitutes hocking their wares, men and women alike seeking to drown the drudgery

of daily life in spirits or vice. Steam tech had offered many improvements to London life, but some things remained the same. The city's cobblestone streets glistened with moisture as people came and went, heads down. With the growing tension between Tinkers and Voltacrats, most inhabitants of the more fashionable areas would not be caught dead utilizing steam technology, but despite the snubbing of steam tech, most folks minded their business and ignored her as she flew past.

Outside of a dockside warehouse, she tucked her machine into a dark alley next to the building and donned her ever-present, yet simple, black mask. The heavy fog and constant lapping of the water against the wharf muffled almost all sounds, even the rumble of her steam cycle as she'd pulled up.

The side door off the alley sat ajar, revealing a sliver of light. She eased up to it and slipped inside to hide in the darkest clump of shadows she could find. Two men stood in the middle of the open loading area under a gas light which dangled from the twenty-foot high warehouse ceiling.

The two men, dressed in well-worn but once nice clothing, seemed to be concerned that she wasn't coming.

"How much longer must we wait?" The tall, skinny one looked at his pocket watch.

"Until they come. We were told to wait until the Clockwork Cecaelia came." The shorter, stocky man paced back and forth, careful to stay within the circle of light.

Clockwork Cecaelia, indeed. These government types liked their fancy codenames and shadow games. If Lou could find a way out of government service, she would take it in two ticks of a clock. But fifteen years ago, when she'd signed on for this, it seemed a better alternative to her uncle's way of life—assassin for hire by the highest bidder. Now? The desire to retire some place peaceful—maybe a cottage by the sea—grew with every moment she remained under the boulder of her job. However,

one did not tell the Queen—or more aptly, the Under-Secretary of Enforcement for the Bureau of Modern Technology—that one’s services were no longer available. Not without good cause.

And what happened to her usual contact, Holt? These two were new, and that was never a good sign in her line of business.

Holt’s absence raised her suspicions of the situation, so Lou hugged the dark depths of the stacks of goods and worked her way around the perimeter.

Normally she would stride across the space to meet Holt, but wary of the two strangers, she stuck to the shadows until she was forced to make a choice. Stay hidden and see if anyone else appeared—it could be a trap of some kind. Step from the shadows and discover what the pair had to say. Or ease back through the shadows and leave altogether.

“Do you think she’ll really come?” the shorter of the two asked his companion.

“They said she’d come once the token was delivered.” The taller one shrugged, and for a moment Lou thought the seam of his worn leather coat might pull apart with the movement. “I hope she does. I wonder if she’s as terrifying in person as she’s rumored to be?”

Assured the pair were not a real threat, she found an opening in the stacks of goods and stepped up to the edge of the circle of light.

“Did yer mams not teach ye’ tis bad manners to discuss someone in their absence?” Lou strove for more guttersnipe and less cultured lady since she had an unknown quantity in the mix. It certainly wouldn’t do to speak in her natural, dulcet tones.

The two men jumped, startled by her sudden appearance. After a moment of awkward

throat clearing, the short one stammered, “Y-Y-You’re the Clockwork Cecaelia?”

Still hovering in the shadows, Lou grinned. “I’m here, ain’t I?”

The tall, skinny one edged forward and held out a leather portfolio with brass fittings and a lock. She allowed her gloved hand to appear in the light long enough to take the case but without another word, she slipped back into the shadows and exited the building. The last thing Lou needed was two cog-grinders getting a look at her face—even with the mask.

And where the devil was Holt? Holton Walker was her handler, the man who perennially showed with the details. To be sure, he’d continually told her it wouldn’t always be him dropping off the file, but then it had always been him. So why was this time different? Between Holt being missing and the disturbingly sinister Mr. Xavier activating her, something was decidedly off.

Safely in the alley again, Lou tucked the case into the back of her trousers under her jacket and removed her mask. Clearly her assignment was important, or perhaps just unique? She would sort it out later as she reviewed the details she’d been given. For now, she needed to disappear.

Finding her cycle still tucked away where she left it, she hopped on and cranked the engine. With a gush of steam and a soft chugging sound, she pulled out of the shadows and into the night before the engine fully roared to life.

Two streets over from The Market, Lou caught the flash of a light in her rear-view looking glasses and heard the chug-chug of an old steam carriage. Bloody hell! She needed to get back and look at the information on her mark, but first she had to lose her tail. There was no telling how soon The Crown wanted her to take action. Some orders came with more urgency than others.

Hooking a right at the next lane, she circled back around a few streets over and dropped in behind her unwanted company. Keeping a suitable distance between herself and their rather unsubtle conveyance—who followed an assassin in an old, and very loud, steam-coach?—she watched them drive past her business slowly, as though looking for someone, then speed up to disappear into the night.

With a shrug, Lou drove past the brothel's front entrance, circled around through some of the side streets to be safe, and finally pulled up through the back mews that housed her horses and carriage, as well as her steam cycle. Keeping in favor with the aristocracy—the Voltacrats, who favored electricity and more antiquated conveyances—meant she still kept a fine stallion for leisure rides and used the horse and carriage as Madame LaRoux. It wouldn't be good for business to appear to take sides in the war between steam and electricity. But as an assassin she used her steam cycle—she knew the value of the speed and reliability that came with well-maintained technology.

Wheeling her cycle into its parking space, Lou wiped the leather saddle down and checked all the fluids before retiring for the night. Once again she crept up the back stairs, looking to avoid any wandering patrons. It was rather ridiculous that she must sneak about in her own establishment, but secrets were secrets, and while Society had come to accept prostitution as a legitimate industry with regulations and oversight, they hadn't gone quite so far as to make her true profession acceptable.

Nor should they.

There were days she hated what she had become. Like most girls, Lou had dreamed of her wedding, of the man she would marry, and of the children they would have together. She had wanted all of those things and more...until the night her parents had been killed.

Being an assassin was an honest line of work, in truth. Governments were going to

kill people, other people were going to kill people. Why shouldn't she provide that service for the government and get rich while doing her patriotic duty? It was capitalism at its finest—and in the middle of the Industrial Revolution turned technology war, well...there were plenty of people who the government wanted eliminated. Business had been brisk.

Locking her chamber door behind her, Lou breathed a sigh of relief as she slipped off her leather riding coat and draped it over a chair. Curiosity about her assignment propelled her over to her bed, where she pulled the case out of the waist of her trousers and sank onto the mattress. Behind the headboard, she pressed a small lever that released a panel covering a secret compartment. In the small hidey-hole lay a chain with a key attached. It looked like a traditional key, but the top of the key actually snapped into the lock of the case to open it. She and Holt were the only two people with these keys...which meant the men had presumably been sent by him.

It was the first bit of good news so far. Or at least, she hoped it was. If he hadn't sent them, then who else had a copy of their supposedly unique key?

Besides the key, the only objects inside the alcove were a scrap of fabric and a hair comb which had belonged to her mother, and a coin she'd found with her father the day before he'd been killed. Refusing to look too closely at the mementos, she closed the door by pressing the lever again and turned to unlock the case—but a knock at her door interrupted her. She slipped the case under the mattress and the key around her neck, then unbolted her door.

Cordelia bustled in carrying a tray laden with a cold supper and a pot of tea. "I heard you come in and had Cook put some food together. You need to eat more than you do," she said as she set the tray on a small table near the window.

"Thank you. I could use a bite." Lou followed her maid over to the food and sat as a cup of tea was prepared.

“I do not understand why some women have this fascination with men’s clothing.” Cordelia looked pointedly at Lou’s trousers, her green gaze snapping with disapproval, then turned and left the room as Lou snorted.

Her maid might tolerate some of her quirks, but she had always drawn the line at menswear. It put her off her chump every time Lou donned trousers. Maybe it was because when she wore the men’s clothes, Cordelia knew she was going out to work as an assassin? That fact about herself obviously wasn’t something she had been able to hide from the woman after the first time she came home wounded. Perhaps her long-time maid cared more than either of them wanted to admit? Lou smiled softly, but pushed the sentiment aside for now. She had more important things to think about.

Alone again, she jumped up and grabbed the case from its hiding place then sat down with her tea at the table. She slipped the metal shard into place and turned it in the lock. The latch released with a soft click and a hiss of steam which would have brought joy to any tinker’s heart. She smiled and reached in to slide out the papers held within. As odd as the entire night had been—with Mr. Xavier’s unsettling presence, Holt’s absence, and then possibly being followed—she should not have found it unusual that the file on her mark was thinner than normal, yet she did.

The first page was a daguerreosteam—a newer invention that leveraged steam to quickly develop a lifelike image—of a group of three men, with one individual circled. They looked pleased with themselves, arms slung over each other’s shoulders. Lou’s curiosity had her peeking past the daguerreosteam to learn the mark’s name.

Lord John Griffin, Earl of Melton.

He was the one who was circled: a handsome man, devastatingly handsome in person, she would guess. His sculpted cheekbones and pale-colored hair caused her

body to flush warm as she stared at the silvery black and white image. She couldn't help but wonder what color his eyes were. It seemed wrong somehow to snuff out the life of such a fine specimen of manhood, but it would suggest he was not such a fine specimen if he was in a case that had been handed to her.

The next page documented his physical specifics. Hair: blond. Eyes: blue-grey. Height: approximately six feet. Then came a list of places he could be found, his home, club, boxing saloon, and his favorite spot to ride. The following page lightly sketched his daily movements—and this section would normally be pages long. That was odd. Holt normally took such care with the details she required to do her job. Without a comprehensive view of the target, this job might prove challenging. Unease skittered over her skin like a thousand little pricks of warning.

The last page held her instructions. The Crown wanted him dead, and they didn't care how it looked. Murder, suicide, accident, whatever expedient method presented itself was acceptable, as long as he was eliminated.

In the margin of this page, she noticed a bit of stray text. She inspected the two words: to Inverkeithing . That was strange, not to mention very sloppy on the part of whoever had drafted the document. Was it pertinent to the dossier? Or perhaps a stray bit of another document, wholly unrelated? She sighed as annoyance reared its head.

She couldn't possibly know and had no one she could ask. It wasn't as though she could easily send Holt a message. The man was always elusive, but never more so than when he'd just delivered a new dossier to her. Lou's frustration and unease mounted. Holt worked very hard to keep her identity a secret, which meant that once an order had been delivered, all contact was cut off until after the job was done.

Normally she would have quickly reviewed the details with him and asked any questions at their meeting, but since he had sent two cog-grinders with the information, she hadn't wanted to stay and chat.

With a sigh, Lou moved on to the remainder of the document for specifics she knew pertained to the assignment. She was given until the twenty-fourth of March to complete the job. Less than a week, a brief window to allow her to track him and find a suitable opportunity...almost too short. She'd accomplished such assignments in two weeks before, but she normally had more information in those situations.

Lou stuffed the pages back into the briefcase and locked it with the key which still hung around her neck. Sipping her lukewarm tea, she picked up a slice of bread and butter to nibble. She considered her options for getting close to him, and how publicly she wished to make the kill. He was unmarried, according to his dossier, with apparently no mistress or current lover. That meant there would be no opportunity while he was...indisposed. Perhaps she could manage to infiltrate his club? No one but herself and whoever sent her orders—she had her doubts about Holt's knowledge of the situation—would know a woman had not only entered a bastion of male superiority, but killed one of its occupants.

She would enjoy having that knowledge. It was worth considering.

Lou ate a few more bites of bread, a slice of cheese, and some cold chicken before deciding she'd had enough. Abandoning the fare, she took the briefcase over to her dressing room. Inside, she crouched down to push the long gowns to the side, exposing her safe. Three quick spins in alternating directions and a twist of the handle released the door. The briefcase safely stowed inside, she closed then locked the heavy steel door and straightened up. Dresses once again hanging to the floor, she stripped off her shirt and trousers.

Naked, except for the key that dangled between her breasts, Lou walked back into the bedchamber and poured some water into the basin. Many buildings had running water now, even hers, but she hadn't been willing to give up all the old ways. She'd never considered the question of why too closely. Perhaps they helped her stay connected to her past in the least emotional way possible? But keeping an ewer of water and a

basin in her room—her mother had always had one—was a comfortable habit of a lifetime at the ripe old age of five and thirty, despite having installed a water closet only steps away.

Taking a cloth and dipping it into the water, she cleaned herself luxuriously, then headed over to the bed. Lou had long ago given up trying to sleep in a nightgown. They always twisted around her legs, making her feel vulnerable and restricted...not really an acceptable situation for an assassin. She slid between the cool sheets, enjoying the soothing scent of lavender which wafted up from the fabric. Then she turned and tripped the lever again, exposing the compartment. She placed the key back inside and closed the panel.

Reaching over, Lou doused the gas lamp that sat on her nightstand and tried to sleep. A muted burst of laughter carried up the three stories to her chamber. She rolled over, drawing in a deep breath and releasing it slowly. As the darkness swept over her, she saw flashes of a pair of intriguing blue-grey eyes.

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Griff relaxed in one of his favorite chairs in his home as his best friends—they'd been chums since their school days—battled it out at billiards, the balls clacking merrily with each man's shot.

Captain Colechester Chapman, Cole to his friends, straightened up from the table and looked at Lawrence Dellinger. "That, my good man, is the third game in a row. Double or nothing on a fourth game, Dell?"

A smile stretched Cole's lips as he paused. His Indian heritage had gifted him with dark eyes which Griff found often sparkled with merriment. It was one of the things that had drawn him to befriend the scrawny boy in school. It had been a boon fulfilled when the diminutive boy sprouted one summer and filled out.

"No, I believe it is time for Griff to be trounced by our illustrious air-ship captain. I have served my time." Dell pulled out the four pence he owed Cole and dropped them soundlessly on the maroon felt of the table.

They never gambled for real stakes, mostly pride and bragging rights. Neither Griff nor Cole needed the coin, though he imagined Dell could have used a little extra pocket change. The government was notoriously tight-fisted when it came to salaries.

"Guess you're out of luck, Cole," Griff said lazily. "I don't fancy a trouncing at your hands just now. I'm not the foolish boy you knew at school who believed he could eventually best you. I'm a grown man of nine and thirty now and I know better—unlike some fools who still seem determined to beat you." Griff sipped his brandy as his friends replaced the cue sticks and balls on the wall and poured themselves a drink.

Dell snorted, his green-grey eyes sparkling with a warmth Griff hadn't seen from his friend in quite some time. "I'm still trying to recoup all the coins Cole bamboozled me for in school."

Cole laughed. "Those were wonderful times, back when you both still believed it was luck and not skill that allowed me to beat you every time."

The pair sat down with Griff, stretching their legs out before them in a comfortable slouch despite their elegant evening attire.

Dell picked up the paper that sat on the small table to his right and snorted. "The Lord of Cogs strikes again," he groused aloud, his light brown skin stretched over his knuckles causing them to go pale as his hand fisted the newsprint. "You'd think the authorities could put an end to this rebellious display of illegal steam tech. This Lord of Cogs, as he calls himself, installed a steam powered moving sidewalk on part of Bond Street under the cover of darkness two nights ago. The next day Lady Chesterham got her boot heel caught in the contraption and twisted her ankle, causing a pile-up of people who were behind her. Bloody Lord of Cogs! It boggles my mind that one man can provoke such enthusiasm and loyalty from the lower classes. Why, not even Trevithick himself, the father of steam technology, engenders such zealousness."

"I'd guess that they see him as a symbol of hope." Cole shrugged. "Steam tech is far more affordable and accessible than electricity, it makes sense it would be more broadly embraced across the population."

Griff listened to his two friends discuss the mysterious Lord of Cogs, cautiously remaining silent for the moment. He'd always known Dell was less supportive of steam tech, and add to that his penchant for arguing his point until you threw in the towel, and it was easy to surmise why he had been appointed as the Under-Secretary of Steam at the Bureau of Modern Technology. His responsibility was to regulate

steam tech. What better choice than someone who wasn't particularly fond of steam?

Or at least that is what the Crown had surmised. Griff knew better.

“Well, it is still vandalism—these steam tech displays he sets up around town under the cover of darkness, what nonsense. Mark my words, the man is going to get someone killed one of these days.” Dell's attractive face—well, the combination of his light brown skin and green eyes seemed to have the women of the Ton swooning regularly—creased as he frowned.

But Griff had seen Dell after the accident which had left him scarred, seen the damage left over half Dell's torso when a steam engine he had been working on with a friend exploded. Some wounds never healed. Some scars never faded.

Griff chuckled. “What makes you sure this ‘Lord of Cogs’ is a man? Women do plenty of jobs and activities once considered the domain of men.”

Dell snorted again. “Did you see the size of the automaton the Lord of Cogs built last month in Grosvenor Square? Had to be a man. Besides, if it was a woman wouldn't she be Lady of Cogs?”

“Leave off, Dell. Steam is cheap tech, that is why it is so popular. The Lord of Cogs is merely a figurehead.” Cole sipped his drink and eyed their friend warily.

Griff felt the chasm between himself and Dell growing more and more each day. Dell and others of the Ton like him—including Griff's own father—were exactly the reason he kept his affinity for steam a private matter. It was terrible that something as utilitarian as a type of technology might be the wedge that parted him from someone he had always considered a close friend.

“Do not be fooled, my friend.” Dell set the paper and his drink aside so he could lean

forward. “The Lord of Cogs is more than a symbol. He is truly the organizer behind the Free Steam Consortium, this Tinker nonsense. Mark my words, the steam rabble isn't intelligent enough to organize without help.”

Griff knew Dell would never give on this topic—or any other, really. It wasn't in his nature.

Cole looked at the ceiling as though in search of guidance from above. “None of that makes them or steam dangerous—despite Griff avoiding that ride on my Sweet Annie that I keep offering. You really must address your fear of air travel.” Cole flashed a teasing smile at him, clearly trying to lighten the moment a bit with Dell.

Griff smirked at Cole. “Please, do carry on.”

“Despite our good friend's fear, my fleet of steam powered airships have never had an incident because I take excellent care of both my people and my equipment. And the Lord of Cogs is responsible for many of the safety features we have installed on our steam engines, such as the pressure release vent which prevents steam engines from exceeding pressure regulations that formerly caused them to explode. Steam is certainly no more deadly than electricity, which we barely know how to harness.”

Dell frowned. “Bollocks! Just last month there was a terrible steam-ship crash. All passengers aboard were killed!”

Cole glared back. “The investigation just finished, and I understand there were two causes. Negligent maintenance by an unfit Captain and crew created conditions that allowed the sabotaged safety valve to rapidly move from inconvenient to deadly.”

Griff sat up and held up a hand. “I dare say you are both right. Someone is most certainly organizing the Tinkers, and that horrible crash will prove to be a nasty business either way. The reality is we need real regulation of all kinds of technology,

not just veiled attempts by Voltacrat elite to line their pockets.”

Cole and Dell grumbled a bit, but both agreed.

Griff winked at Cole, knowing it was time to change the topic before things took a turn. “Now tell me, Dell, are you hoping to see Lady Faye tonight?”

Dell turned a mottled red. “I am not! That woman fancies herself in love with me. We danced one-time last Season, and she has dogged my every step since then.”

Cole guffawed along with Griff. Lady Faye Thornby had proven to be quite the nuisance for Dell. The moment brought the three back into an accord, as Griff had intended.

“We should probably head out for the evening’s festivities.” Cole slugged the last bit of brandy in his previously forgotten snifter and stood. “Are you ready to go, Dell? The ladies at Lord and Lady Pennington’s masked ball aren’t going to whirl themselves around the dance floor, now are they?”

“Sadly no. We must do our chivalrous duty and court the fair maidens of the land.” Dell set his own glass down and joined Cole in heading for the door to the hallway.

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind, Griff? We could wait a bit for you to change clothes.” Cole asked for the fourth time since they’d arrived an hour earlier.

“I have too much paperwork that has been neglected with my annual visit to my properties.” Griff waved them off, eager for his friends to be on their way. The sooner they left, the sooner he could retreat to his laboratory and get back to work. A pang of regret that he had to hide this part of himself was quickly pushed away. One should not pine for things that cannot be.

Besides, Society held no allure for him. He'd never had the same success with the ladies that his friends experienced. Too much of an odd duck, he supposed.

“Very well, though your paperwork won't keep you as warm as a willing wench, I'd wager.” Cole saluted him with two fingers to his brow and departed the room.

“Night, Griff.” Dell followed in his friend's wake.

Alone at last . Griff took a long deep breath and unfolded his legs from the low lounging couch. He meandered to his library in the room next door as he shed his cravat, coat, and waistcoat. He dropped the unwelcome garments on a chair as he walked over to the fireplace and stood for a moment watching the flames dance.

Thoughts of his laboratory beckoned him, made him yearn to set his hands to work tinkering with machinery which would ultimately be powered by steam. But he had not been speaking false when he told his friends he had paperwork to see to. Tinkering would have to wait.

Turning back to his desk, he'd just sat down when Higgins, his butler, appeared bearing a silver salver. “A missive has arrived, my lord.” The steel gray haired man wore mutton chop sideburns that lent him a distinguished air and impassive expression.

Griff took the correspondence and cracked the familiar seal, bearing an imprint of the three overlapping cogs and wheels. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end—a sign he had learned to ignore at his peril during his military service—as he unfolded the page. The few scrawled lines relayed a terse warning.

Lord Melton,

There is to be a midnight second reading of the Steam Technology Regulation bill.

The Voltacrats labeled the bill as an emergency in an effort to kill the new legislation fresh out of the lower house. We need your vote to help carry the day in the House of Lords.

Your humble servant,

David Sterling, MP

Director of the Free Steam Consortium of Tinkers

Griff crossed the room and tossed the letter into the fire before addressing Higgins with a weary sigh. "I'll have need of my horses and carriage. I'm off to Parliament."

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

After a long night of debate—and ultimately a victory in killing the Steam Technology Regulation bill—Lord Melton had slept much later than normal, waking well after luncheon to Lou's dismay. She'd risen early to be sure she could follow him when he went about his day, which meant she was left cooling her heels for hours while she waited for him to appear. When he finally did, she was able to follow him quite easily with all of the normal London bustle to meld into.

When Lord Melton stopped in front of a refined home on Cavendish Square, she cursed as he disappeared inside. She pulled around to the mews and tied off her horses and phaeton so she could sneak about the back of the house. She could not lose him.

As luck would have it, by the time she made her way into the backyard of the house, Lord Melton had reappeared in what was a stunningly beautiful garden. A woman knelt on the ground near a rose bush despite her obviously expensive gown. Her graying blonde hair was swept up under a straw hat which had a wide protective brim. The lady of the house, she suspected. But who was she?

Spying a tall-ish hedge that ran behind the roses, she crept closer, using the greenery as a shield to see if she could hear anything that might be of use. Hopefully my navy driving dress will blend in with the dark green hedge enough to obscure my presence. Thank goodness she hadn't worn her red gown...

"Good afternoon, Mother." Lord Melton spoke before he arrived at the woman's side.

"Griff! There you are. I had begun to worry about you," she grumbled as one fair brow drifted up in what Lou imagined was meant as a rebuke.

With an excellent view through the hedge, she could see that he got his fair hair and blue-grey eyes from his mother. Perhaps he had gained his square jaw and strong cheekbones from his father?

Griff. She let the nickname roll through her head. She liked it.

“Apologies, Mother. I did not intend to worry you.” The man bent over to buss her cheek and then straightened up. “It was a late night in parliament.”

“Well, I’m glad you came. I need you to come to dinner tomorrow night.” She cut right to the chase—Lou respected that in a woman. So many of the fairer sex simpered and wheedled to get their way.

Lord Melton, however, did not appear to appreciate this. He groaned loud enough for Lou to hear him from where she hid. “Mother, I cannot. I have work to do.” He closed his eyes for a moment as if a pang of guilt ricocheted through him like a bullet fragment. Oh, he is going to lie to his mother! Lou bit her lip in anticipation. “Parliament is in session and there is more legislation to review than I can possibly accomplish.”

“Griff, I refuse to believe such nonsense. You must eat to live, and if you are going to eat, you can simply do so here with me.” Her chiding tone had an edge to it.

Well done, my lady! Lou silently cheered.

Lord Melton’s gaze narrowed at his mother. “Why is it so important to you that I come here to have dinner?”

His mother looked up at him innocently. “Can a mother not wish to share a meal with her beloved son?”

Lou had to suppress a laugh. His mother was wily, she was changing tactics now that he'd lied to her. Brava!

“Will Piers be there?”

Oh my . Who was Piers? A brother? A cousin?

“No. Your brother”— Aha! —“is too busy galivanting around the Ton's social scene to be bothered with an old woman like me.” The slightly dejected note in her voice was well cultivated.

Lou grinned.

“Mother.” Lord Melton growled the word in warning.

Oh, Lord Melton did not like that. Not at all. Not that Lou blamed him. The older woman was hiding something...but what?

The woman stabbed the small shovel in her hand into the ground. “Help me up.” She held her hand up to her son.

Dutifully, Lord Melton assisted his mother to her feet and eyed her carefully. “Who is the girl, mother?”

Plot twist! Lou nearly gasped at the revelation. A woman? Did his mother thrust women at him often?

Lady Melton huffed. “ Fine . She's the niece to one of my good friends. She's just come to London to have her come out and I thought it would be lovely if she knew someone among our set before she was announced, poor thing.”

Lord Melton looked pained as he crossed his arms in front of him. A defensive gesture, Lou noted. “No, Mother. I am not available. I have no interest in a wife at the moment. I am far too busy with parliamentary business. With all the tension between the Tinkers and the Voltacrats, the political maneuvering is infinite.”

Lou shifted as one of her feet began to go numb. She was not dressed for spying today. Her movement behind the hedge drew his eye, but then a bird chirped happily and Lord Melton shook his head before refocusing on his mother. Steaming hells! That was close. Damn it, she’d become far too interested in this conversation and was not being careful. She was here to gather information she could use to kill the man, not become acquainted with him. Lou gritted her teeth and tried to shut down her curiosity.

“Please, Griff.” His mother laid her gloved hand on his arm.

The pleading in her two words seemed to affect him greatly. Lord Melton drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Then he paused for a moment, as though gathering his patience, perhaps? “I need no introductions to country chits. I...I met a woman recently who has caught my eye.”

Oh, well that is a disa —What the bloody hell was wrong with her?

His mother perked up immediately. “Have you?”

Lord Melton shifted uncomfortably. Another lie . Lou steadfastly ignored the leap of her heart at that realization. My, the lies were rolling off his tongue this afternoon. “Leave it at that. Once I know if she returns my interest, I shall tell you more.”

Lou suppressed a snort. No doubt in a few days he’d inform his mother that the woman had rejected his attention. How very convenient.

“Very well. But you are not getting any younger, my boy. It’s time to settle down and do your duty.” Her tone was solemn and redolent with warning.

“There is always Piers if I keel over unexpectedly, Mother.” He grinned unrepentantly.

His mother gasped in horror. “Do not make such jests! You are not much younger than your dear father was when he passed.”

Lou’s heart sank. The pang of sympathy that she felt for what this woman would suffer nearly had her doubled over.

“My apologies. I didn’t consider that when I made the remark.” Lord Melton kissed his mother’s cheek. “Now I should go, I have more errands to run.”

“Very well, I shall just have to disappoint my friend. We had so hoped to become family.” His mother sighed dramatically.

Lord Melton chuckled. “Do pass on my abject apologies.” With that he bowed and headed out of the garden.

Lou quietly gathered her navy blue skirts and crept back the way she’d entered, all the while ignoring the hollowness in her chest. This is why you don’t humanize a mark . Climbing back into her phaeton she shook out the reins and went to pick up the trail of her mark.

And that’s all he was. A mark. It’s all he could be.

A short while later Griff decided that, having run his errands on Bond Street, a walk to the Athenaeum Club would give him some much needed exercise. Of course, that was despite the prickling sensation on the back of his neck which had started in his

mother's garden when she'd tried to trick him into dinner with a debutante. He'd felt bad lying to her about working on legislation, and having met a woman of his own, but he refused to be manipulated by anyone.

Not even his own mother.

Leaving Bond Street, Griff headed down St. James's Street on his way to Pall Mall. With each step, he grew more certain someone watched him. And he had learned long ago as a member of the 7th Queen's Own Hussars to trust his instincts—they had served him well as a soldier. But with his certainty came the nagging worry that his secret had been revealed.

Once again, Griff stopped and drew a deep breath. He was a member of parliament. He made decisions every day which could cause a man to want to follow him, to possibly confront him. It was far more likely to be related to that than the notion that someone had discovered his most closely guarded secret.

Pushing aside his paranoia, Griff stopped at the door of Boodle's to see if he could catch a glimpse of his would-be tail. Unfortunately, between the overabundance of delivery carts and the hordes of people walking one place or another—some shouting rather loudly about the delivery carts blocking their way—it was difficult to tell who his shadow had been for most of the day.

What he did notice was a stunning brunette—one who'd dared invade the male bastion of St. James's Street—as she drove past in her phaeton wearing a charming navy driving gown. The brazen woman caught his attention, causing his heart to race and his cock to stir with an interest he'd rarely experienced since the dalliance with his last mistress nearly a year earlier. It wasn't until the distracting beauty passed that he realized he'd missed the opportunity to identify his spy. Well, damn and blast.

With a sigh of resignation, Griff pressed on down St. James's and turned onto Pall

Mall. The sensation of being watched had disappeared until just before he arrived at the Athenaeum Club. Looking about for who might be watching him, he thought he caught another glimpse of the brunette, but then a dray cart rolled past and she—if she'd even been there—was gone. He entered the club and tried to shake off the odd sensation.

“Good afternoon, my lord.” The club ma?tre’d was waiting for him with his hand outstretched.

“Good afternoon, Helmsford. Have you seen Dellinger or Chapman today?” Griff handed over his coat and hat.

“Mr. Dellinger is in the reading room, my lord.” Helmsford bowed and disappeared with Griff’s accoutrements in tow.

Griff headed down the hall and made a right into the cozy little reading room with a fireplace. There he spied Dell sitting in the large bay window and reading the London Steamer’s daily edition. The Times had latched onto Society’s fixation with all things steam and changed its name nearly ten years earlier. It annoyed members of the Voltacrats, but enough of London was so taken with steam that it kept the paper in step with public sentiment. That woman and the sensation of being watched had truly distracted him if he’d missed Dell sitting in the bay window as he walked in.

“Hello, Dell, how are you this fine afternoon?” Griff settled into a nearby empty chair.

“Good afternoon, Griff. Did you get through all that paperwork you had last night?”

“An unexpected vote in Lords pulled me away. Did you and Cole have any success at the masked ball?” Griff waved over a waiter. “Brandy please, and a copy of today’s paper. Anything for you, Dell?”

“No, thank you,” his friend declined as he set his paper aside. The waiter disappeared. “Drinking this early in the day?”

“Medicinal purposes, I assure you.” Griff flashed a smile at his friend, who seemed to want to return it, but held back. “I have had the distinct impression that I was followed around town today.” Griff rubbed his eyes. “It must be that I stayed up too late. I am sure I am imagining things.”

“Staying up late will do that to you, old man.” Dell nodded in agreement.

“Yes, on the upside, I did see the most beautiful woman because of my paranoia.” Griff grinned wolfishly. “Wouldn’t mind tossing up her skirts if I could ever find her again.”

“Have you ever met a woman whose skirts you wouldn’t mind tossing up?” His friend feigned shock at his own words.

“Of course I have. The Gorgon Twins for two, and that cog peddler down on Church Street.” Griff raised an eyebrow at his friend, who was now bent over laughing.

He’d kept his lack of sexual interest since the departure of his last mistress to himself, certain that things would right themselves in time. The harridan had left a foul taste in his mouth. Imagine, a woman of her temperament trying to trap him into marriage? It was ludicrous! Fortunately for him, his mistress had proven to be akin to his onetime fiancée who, upon learning of his predilection for tinkering, had also departed the field of battle almost immediately. Just a whiff of anything so lowly as working with one’s hands, and both women had fled. Yet one more reason he had ceased to share the same values as his peers. Honestly, he could be done with Society altogether...were it not for his role in Parliament.

“Gad! Nobody would want to dance with the Gorgon Twins let alone bed them, and

the cog peddler might not be half bad if she bathed once a month. Well, perhaps twice.” Dell winked at Griff.

The waiter returned with Griff’s snifter of brandy and the latest edition of the newspaper.

Holding the glass, Griff swirled the amber liquid and sniffed, letting it lightly singe his nostrils. “You never said how the masked ball went?”

“Excellent, as always. I ran into a sweet little dove who later became very accommodating. Her husband was less so when he came looking for her in the dark paths of Covent Garden.” Dell flashed a toothy grin.

“Still dallying with the married ladies.” Griff shook his head, befuddled by his friend’s behavior.

“They always seem to find me.” He winked and picked his paper back up.

The pair fell silent as Dell perused his newspaper and Griff mulled over the very attractive brunette. How could he find her? It seemed reasonable that only a very few women would own a phaeton. Perhaps he could ask around his set.

The pleasant silence was broken by a curse from Dell. “Bloody cog suckers! Another riot yesterday in the East End.”

The irate Dell picked up his brandy and slugged the last swallow as Griff cringed inside. “Oh. What about?” He worked to keep his voice neutral.

“The legislation restricting Tinkers from creating things willy-nilly. The piece that failed last night in the midnight reading. Without those much needed regulations, accidents like that steam ship crash that killed one hundred people will continue to

wipe out our population.”

“That seems a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” Griff paused and looked at his friend askance. Wipe out the population, indeed.

Dell huffed a breath. “It’s a dangerous situation, Griff. Between the inherent dangers of steam—dangers I am personally acquainted with, I’ll remind you—and the wild risks the idiotic Lord of Cogs takes, it’s a wonder more people haven’t died.”

“Good regulations would certainly be useful.” Griff agreed without agreeing. He had guessed long ago that Dell had Voltacrat leanings, and as a result often gauged his words carefully.

“Good regulations? It’s middle of the road politicians like you, Griff, that allow Tinkers to maim and kill innocent people every day with their crazed inventions.” Dell’s voice hardened to a sharp edge. “Not to mention sinking the stock market,” he muttered, almost to himself.

Increasingly frustrated with his friend’s politics, Griff gritted his teeth. “I daresay regulating safety standards would better serve our working class than replacing steam with an expensive solution such as electricity. If electricity wins the day, half our population would be toppled into darkness.”

Dell grunted. “Electricity is safer than steam and it is certainly cleaner. All around it is the superior power source.”

Griff repressed his instinctive rebuttal, afraid of saying anything further against the Voltacrats. His friend’s ferocious anger was something of a surprise. Was Dell being radicalized? It posed a particular dilemma for Griff, as his friend. What would Dell do if he discovered Griff’s secret? If he knew Griff not only tinkered, but he was responsible for the engine that powered the newest steam-carriages? It was strangely

satisfying to randomly see a steam-car pass him on the street.

Previously, he'd worried about simply losing a friend. Now he had to consider potentially far more serious repercussions.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Some days, Lou's job left much to be desired. To be sure, she had flexible working hours, privacy, excellent pay, and a level of job security that most people would kill for. But there were certainly days that being an assassin didn't live up to all the hullabaloo.

Today was certainly turning out to be one of those days.

Her quarry had proved elusive for the latter half of the day, so she had reluctantly resorted to tracking him to his home after losing him on St. James's Street. She mentally winced. One might think a killer would find the victim's home convenient. But Lou knew better than to fall into that trap under normal circumstances. Killing a mark in their home? It humanized them. It took them from being the enemy she had been sent to eliminate to being a person. Someone who had family and people who depended on him or her. Someone who enjoyed a good book, or galloped about with children on their backs.

A victim.

All around her, the scent of jasmine wafted in the air. The scent teased her with bits and pieces of memories of her mother. Nothing whole, just the impression of a smile, the tinkle of her laughter, and of course, the comforting smell of the jasmine perfume her mother had always worn. Lou pushed the normally welcomed memories aside. Emotions were a liability when conducting business.

And this was business.

Still shrouded in the shadows of the garden, Lou drew a deep breath and exhaled

slowly to still her wandering thoughts. Focus . Her assignment was simple: kill Lord John Griffin, the Earl of Melton. He was an enemy of The Crown and needed to be eliminated. For Queen and Country.

To move her one step closer to her eventual retirement. A cottage by the sea.

The problem was, despite following her normal routine, Lord Melton had somehow become human, not just a mark. She'd somehow broken rule number three. He was a man who attended a midnight session of Parliament, visited his mother, laughed with a friend at his club, and had ultimately settled in his library with a book and what she imagined was a very fine scotch.

With a shake of her head, Lou studied the man through the window, trying to sort out what it was that seemed to prick her conscience. Was it the warm, homey setting of the room? Perhaps it was his thick blond hair? Or his stormy blue-gray eyes? Frustrated, she pushed the distracting ideas away and focused on her target. The enemy .

Easing deeper into the darkness, Lou reached up and pulled herself over the balustrade. On the terrace, she crept forward toward the open doors, using the drapes billowing in the evening breeze as cover. Each step brought her closer until she loomed over the now dozing man. Her Kukri knife slid silently from its sheath, perfectly balanced in her palm to become an extension of her arm. The room seemed to settle into simple lines and sharp colors as she reached around the man to slit his throat and end the threat he posed. Doubt assailed her once more, caused her to hesitate as an image of the Dowager Countess of Melton's face from that afternoon flashed in her mind. In vivid detail. The pain. The horror at the notion of her son dying.

And then her target no longer slept.

A strong, masculine hand gripped her wrist and stopped her progress toward his exposed jugular. Lord Melton squeezed, his fingers tightening around her limb as though he could snap it like a dry twig.

But Lou was made of sterner stuff. A product of her childhood full of long days spent training, toughening her up, making her faster, stronger, able to endure more pain than any girl should need to suffer through. Of course, none of it hurt as bad as the lance to her heart the night her parents had been killed. That was a pain she had never recovered from.

It was that pain that had driven her into the business of killing. For revenge .

With a grunt, Lou jerked against her target's hold—but despite appearances, he was no soft peer of the realm. This was a man who worked with his hands. A man who had known labor and had the strength to prove it. Not many of those about, in her experience. More often than not, she found the pompous peacocks of the Ton were packed into girdles and other aids to help them wear the leanly cut waistcoats and trousers their rank demanded.

Then she was flipping through the air over her target's shoulder only to slam down on a spindle legged coffee table that shattered, letting her crash to the floor. Her lungs scrabbled for air even as she rolled over and came up in a crouch to guard against a fresh attack. She glanced around, looking for her lost weapon, when the man interrupted her search.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” The very large, very furious male growled as he stalked toward her.

It was better to remain silent, and admittedly necessary as she tried to recover her breath. But Lou had no time to lose; with all the noise someone would have heard and would likely come soon.

She needed to kill him and get it done or flee and try again later.

She feinted right and moved left, hoping to catch him off guard. Lord Melton did not fall for her tactic, but instead spun to face her and lunged.

She whipped out of his way, but he cut off her best avenue of escape.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his eyes cold and steely in the dim light.

With a grunt, Lou palmed another blade, a long and thin stiletto, and shifted left—only to sweep right when he followed. Slashing her knife down in a deadly arc, she aimed for the vulnerable spot between neck and shoulder but he blocked her thrust and wrapped his meaty fist around her forearm, jerking her forward into his body, causing her arm to move up and away from her target. Her breasts pressed against the muscled wall of his chest and her breath hitched. The very masculine scent of sandalwood and engine oil teased her nostrils. Beneath her touch Lord Melton hardened—everywhere—and then he inhaled sharply, as though his mind figured out what his body instinctively understood. Spotting the moment of distraction, Lou jerked her knee straight up, but only struck his thigh.

“Damn you,” she snarled as anger surged through her frustration. This man was no normal mark. He was trained in hand-to-hand combat, something that had been inconveniently left out of his dossier. What the steaming hells was Holt doing with this job? Sleeping?

Thwarted, she pushed off of him and turned to break away.

Instead, Lord Melton reached out and grabbed the trailing end of her rope of hair. He reeled her in like a fish on a line. As he pulled her back to his chest, Lou knew she was in trouble.

“Who are you and why are you trying to kill me?” His question was really more of a demand, but again she held her tongue. “Answer me, damn you!”

Knife still in hand, Lou jammed it back into his thigh with a quick, shallow thrust. His grip on her hair loosened as he reached instinctively for his injured leg. With a growl, she broke free and dived toward the balcony and escape—but once more, she found herself prostrate with the exception that this time damn near fourteen stones of a man landed on top of her. Despite the blade protruding from his thigh, he rolled her over and pinned her hands to the floor while he straddled her hips.

“It’s you!” Lord Melton’s eyes grew wide with surprise. “The lady in the phaeton.”

She refused to answer him. Surely he was guessing. But his revelation gave her pause.

“The one in the navy dress.” He continued, relentlessly.

Damn and blast. He spotted me! Lou wanted to howl in frustration. She had been certain that as busy as St. James’s was, he would not remark a woman out for a drive. Who the steaming hell was John Griffin, the Earl of Melton?

“Why are you trying to kill me? Did the Voltacrats send you?” He squeezed her wrists tighter as he grew more agitated.

Odd. Why would he think I work for that sad lot of fools?

“This is clearly about the vote last night. Who sent you to kill me?”

Lou wouldn’t say, really couldn’t—and she normally liked it that way. If she didn’t know, she couldn’t reveal anything...but this time the whole situation made her sixth sense itch, and that was a warning sign she failed to heed at her own peril. That had to

be why she said, “I don’t know.”

Surprise had the man’s eyes flashing wide as incredulity had his mouth hanging agape. “You’ve come to kill a man and you have no idea who sent you?”

She eyed Lord Melton warily then stared at her wrists where his hands had her locked in place.

“Oh no. I’m not letting you go until I have some answers,” he all but snarled.

Interestingly, she found his animalistic response exciting, along with his ability to go toe to toe with her. Where had he learned to fight close in with such effectiveness? That wasn’t a skill the average peer of the realm possessed.

“Do you even know why I am supposed to die?” A bleak weariness etched his words and caused a pang to grow in her chest right where her heart had once beat.

Steaming hell, he’s getting to me . Had become a damn victim instead of her target. “You’re an enemy of The Crown.” Lou pushed the truth she told herself past clenched teeth.

“Damnation.” Lord Melton relaxed his grip a bit, but then tensed again. “If I let you up, will you try to kill me again?”

Lou considered the situation and knew with a sinking feeling that she wasn’t capable of killing him. Not now. Not only had he ceased to be a target, but now she found herself attracted to the blasted man. How could she consider killing him?

She sighed in defeat. “I won’t kill you.”

Lord Melton hesitated, staring with his blue-grey eyes that so easily mesmerized.

“Why won’t you try again? What’s changed?”

Exhaustion pulled at her. She wouldn’t admit to being at her physical limit for the moment. “Something about this whole situation is off, and I don’t kill innocents.”

“Very well.” Lord Melton leaned back, releasing her wrists, but he seemed to wait a moment longer than necessary to crawl off her hips. “And you truly don’t know who hired you?”

“I work for the government.” Lou sat up and rubbed her forehead as she tried to catch her breath. How much should I tell him? What if she were wrong about him? Was she letting a handsome face cloud her judgment? “But the packet I received with all your information wasn’t delivered by my usual contact.”

“Well, this just gets better and better.” Lord Melton got to his feet and offered her a hand up.

“Thanks, but I can get to my feet just fine on my own.” Lou climbed to her full height, which left her still nearly half a foot shorter than him.

“May I offer you a drink?” Lord Melton walked over to the decanter of scotch. A noticeable limp reminding her he still had her knife jammed in his thigh.

Lou nodded, still panting slightly. Fighting with him had been...challenging. Her body ached from the wasted effort. Possibly more than her pride at being thwarted. Not that she really wanted to kill the man—oh, that was an unexpected realization. “I’d say a stiff drink is in order, under the circumstances.”

“Indeed.” Lord Melton poured her a finger of scotch then freshened up his own forgotten drink. “I daresay I can’t remember ever having had a drink with the person sent to kill me. Then again, I don’t believe I’ve ever had anyone try to assassinate me

before.” He lifted his glass in salute and then tipped the contents back.

Lou stood there holding her own drink aloft as she watched the muscles of his throat work in a sensual undulation, a movement which had her thinking of the man undulating in a very different manner with significantly less clothing involved.

Griff caught the unexpectedly arousing killer in his study staring at him, as though she had a rather radical change of heart. He moved to pour another glass for himself, a distraction and some much needed fortification when his thigh twanged and commenced throbbing, almost as though a knife were lodged in it.

He glanced down at his leg and saw the hilt sticking out.

Ah. Double damn . In the heat of the moment, he’d clearly ignored the wound, but he could no longer deny the sharp throb pulsing in his thigh. He stumbled, and the vixen lurched toward him, only this time she slipped under his arm to brace him.

“Sorry about that.” She glanced at the wound.

“Well, if that’s the least of my injuries for the night I shall count myself lucky. After all, if you had succeeded, I wouldn’t be standing let alone discussing the matter.”

The minx helped him over to the chair he’d originally been sitting in. “Is there someone I can fetch for you?”

“On my desk, you can hit the button on the box. Ask Higgins to come with my emergency kit.” He’d prefer to call the doctor, but under the circumstances he assumed she would bolt if he tried and frankly, the fewer people who knew he had been injured, the better.

She followed his directions, and after speaking with his butler, turned to face him.

“That is quite an ingenious voice amplifier you have there.”

“Despite what some of my fellow Lords think, I see the value in expanding steam technology.” He watched her for a moment. “What with all the commotion tonight, I failed to get your name.”

The woman laughed. A full belly laugh. “I didn’t offer it to you. Tell me, where did you learn to fight like that?”

“The Royal Hussars, though I am surprised you are not aware of this.” Griff eyed her warily, still unsure if he trusted their truce.

Higgins bustled in with the black medical bag. “My lord—” he pulled up short when he spotted their guest. Their previously unannounced guest. “I retrieved the items requested—” he looked at the woman again, obviously nonplussed “—by your guest.”

Despite the relentless pain radiating up and down his leg, Griff took in the mysterious woman’s appearance as Higgins must be seeing it. She wore black leather trousers designed to hug every curve of her thighs and derriere, a black shirt, and knee-high black boots with buckles all along the side. The ensemble was completed by a black leather harness strapped across her chest, holding a myriad of knives.

“Yes, she dropped by rather unexpectedly,” said Griff wryly. “And while she was visiting I had a bit of an accident and dropped my letter opener. It seems to have landed in the meat of my leg. I believe a few stitches will be required if you could sew me up as you normally do when I...injure myself.”

Higgins looked at the woman with a haughty suspicion that rolled off him in waves. While Griff appreciated his butler’s loyalty, he did not need further complications before he got a few more answers out of his guest.

“If you would, man?”

“Of course, my lord.” Higgins quickly set to work.

As Griff’s leg was bandaged up, he watched as the sensual dark-haired woman roamed about his library. She pulled random books from his shelves, perused the title and sometimes the first page or two before closing it and replacing it where she’d found it. She meandered around his desk and picked up a giant brass cog that sat there. It was a part he was going to have recast soon, but hadn’t visited the machinist yet to make the request.

What was she looking for? More information to aid her original goal...or something else? He hoped it was the latter and not the former. “Could you possibly sit down? You’re making me nervous as you roam about the room.” He knew he sounded snarly, but the throbbing in his leg was not improving as Higgins continued to work. Add to that, he was angry that this woman had just tried to kill him and he did not have a clue as to who had ordered it.

The assassin pulled up stiffly and stared at him for a long, drawn-out moment. Then she nodded. “Fine.” She went to the decanter and poured herself another drink—though she did top his glass up as well—and sat down.

Griff’s leg was finally bandaged and his trousers ruined beyond repair as the material of one leg hung in tatters around his wounded thigh. All, of course, to maintain everyone’s modesty, he mentally snorted. There was nothing modest about the woman who’d tried to kill him. Sadly, there was nothing modest about the thoughts he was having about her now the battle was over.

Some soldiers had struggled with battle-lust when he’d been in the military, but he had always grappled with the need to fuck after a battle, the need to reaffirm that he lived and functioned normally. Apparently not much had changed. That need mixed

with his anger in a heady cocktail which had him needing to take a deep, calming breath.

With Higgins' departure, Griff turned his focus on the woman who was meant to kill him. "I do hope you won't mind answering a few more questions for me."

Her dark brown eyes narrowed in speculation. "Perhaps. I suppose it depends on what you ask."

"Fair enough." Griff shrugged and took a swallow of amber liquor which burned almost as much as his leg. "You mentioned that your usual contact was not the drop off person. May I ask who your usual contact is?"

"You may ask. Though I'll not answer." She leaned back in her chair, legs akimbo as her arms draped over the arms of the chair, her glass dangling from the fingers of her right hand.

"I see. What about the person who did make the drop bothered you?"

She seemed to pause and consider his question. "They were cog-grinders. Real low-level types—lackeys, but they were dressed like dandies. My usual contact is much higher placed, more informed. Frankly, I was surprised these two could find the bloody drop off."

Griff stood, the need to move like an itch that had to be scratched. He took a step and winced with the pain. The next step was less painful, as was the next until his body adjusted. "Was the dossier on me typical of what you receive?"

The woman's answer was instant. "No. Far less detail and precision than normal. I was annoyed initially, but I also typically have more time to assess and make the kill."

He hesitated at her casual mention of killing someone, particularly him. His anger surged and he bit out his next question. “Could someone have co-opted your services outside of the normal channels?”

“No, I wouldn’t think so.” The vixen sighed. “Someone in the usual chain seems to be involved. The signal for the meet came as normal, except the man who made contact was more...sinister. Typically the messenger is unaware of the true purpose of their visit to me.” She paused as if turning over information in her head. “If nobody in the normal chain is involved, then the process is compromised. I am compromised. That is a dangerous situation for myself and many others.”

“Who the bloody hell are you?” Griff snapped, his tenuous composure slipping.

“It’s better for you if you don’t know.” Her lush, full lips pressed together in an obvious refusal to say more.

Griff was certain she was hiding additional information behind her darkly sultry beauty, and resented the fact she refused to share more. “If you won’t tell me who you are, this won’t work. I have to trust you when you say you won’t try and kill me.”

“I don’t see how knowing my name will make me less likely to kill you. Besides, I could simply lie.” She snorted from her lazy sprawl on the chair by his desk.

Griff stopped and faced her, determination filtering through every fiber of his being. He would call her bluff if required. “Your name, or I call the authorities and this ends here.”

Her gaze locked with his. Dark undercurrents of annoyance and respect swirled through her chocolate eyes. “Why are men always so difficult? This is why I normally refuse to work with your gender.” She huffed and rose to her full height.

“Mary Lamb, at your service.” She swept a gallant, if mocking, bow.

He choked on a half laugh and shook his head in disbelief. “Mary Lamb? As in Mary had a Little Lamb? Your name, your true name, or I shall ring the Yard.”

She glared. “Lou. You may call me Lou. But that is the last of it. I shall not be compelled to make myself more vulnerable than I have.”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” He bowed to her, ignoring the pleasure of now having her name. Or maybe a name . Lou felt wrong to him when he looked at her. She was a beautiful woman, and he couldn’t help but expect she would have a name to match. “I believe you are aware of my name and title. Now we must sort through how to untangle this Gordian Knot in which we find ourselves.” He moved behind his desk and sat in the leather chair.

“Why would I work with you? I’ll just be on my way.” The sultry woman rose and moved toward the door.

Bloody hell! He needed her help to solve this. “Aren’t you the least bit curious to know who sent you to kill me?”

She stopped and turned to face him, dark eyes glittering with determination. “I don’t need you to discover that.”

“Perhaps not, though I should think it would be easier with my assistance.” Griff paused for a long moment, letting her take in his words. “Not to mention if your dossier on me is as incomplete as you seem to believe, it would be far faster to have me help fill in the gaps as opposed to you having to do all the research yourself.”

His heart thundered in his chest as he awaited her decision, watching the cogs and wheels whirl as she considered the truth of his statement. Could she figure everything

out on her own? He had no doubt. But it would cost her time; time she may not have in this scenario.

Certainly time I do not have.

And then he saw it. The moment her decision was made. ‘Lou’ crossed her arms and took two steps toward him. He wanted to pump his fist in the air, much as he did when one of his inventions came to life.

“You’re right. It would be faster if I worked with you instead of separately...but that is not an insurmountable obstacle. Give me another reason I should work with you. Why should I trust you?”

“Why should you trust me? I’m the bloody victim here. Great Trevithick, woman!” Griff bit down the ream of curses he wanted to fire off into the air. “I was nearly killed by you tonight. I feel as though you owe it to me to help me figure out who sent you—to help me stop any further attempts on my life.” He stared at her for a moment. “Besides, assuming you are right and your order did not come from normal channels, will there not be...consequences, for your failure tonight?”

She stood there arms crossed and stared blankly.

Doubt assailed him. He’d thought he had her, but she turned the moment around on him quite neatly.

“Consequences? Perhaps.” Lou seemed disconnected, remote. Was she worried? Or was she merely trying to parse through everything? Her gaze refocused on him. “You say you are innocent of crimes against the Crown, that you don’t deserve to die. Why is it my job to keep you alive?”

Steaming hell! It wasn’t her job , but he was desperate. Someone had made a very

earnest effort to kill him. He needed to know who it was, and why. “Because I need you. Because I...I can’t do this alone.” The words rasped free from him as though they were a painful extraction. Asking for help was not something he did often. In fact, he was quite bad at it most of the time.

Silence stretched. Griff nearly gave up, his shoulders slumping as he shifted to turn and let her go. He’d figure this out another way. It was foolish to think she might help him. She was a killer, not a soft-hearted woman.

“I’ll be in touch.” Her words were gritted out, harsh and clearly forced. Then she brushed past him and slipped out the door she’d entered and over the balustrade into the pink light of dawn.

Griff stood there, unsettled, and stared after the enigmatic woman he now knew simply as Lou.

Who was she? Where did a woman like that hide in society? And was she going to help him?

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Lou rose earlier than normal, after four or five hours of sleep. The majority of her life was spent living in the dark, so mornings—even late ones—were as foreign to her as failure. Any way she assessed things, she had failed to execute her task. Of course, in this unique situation, her failure was a boon. Or she hoped it was.

The moment when Lord Melton had pleaded with her—begging her for help staying alive—had nearly broken her right there in his library. She could finally help someone in the way she wished someone had helped her parents. That had been the turning point for her.

But she was no fool. First she needed to know what kind of man he was. To figure that out quickly, she had one place to go.

Cordelia helped her don her bronze walking dress, brown calf boots, and a fetching little beribboned miniature bowler hat. She added her plain glass filled spectacles that lent her a more studious air and departed for the Parliamentary Archives. She needed to get a better sense of the man than the limited dossier she held offered. His voting record for Parliament should offer some insight into his thinking, and possibly a clue or two as to who might wish him dead.

The Victoria Tower was an impressive edifice, by any measure. With fourteen floors of records storage, it housed both the Parliamentary Archives and the newer Public Record Office. She entered the tower and was greeted by the current Clerk of the Records, a Mr. Josiah Tugbottom.

The slightly balding man, with a growing paunch that suggested good living in an era when that was not always a given, greeted her with a jovial smile. “Miss Lamb, so

good to see you again.”

“Always a pleasure, Mr. Tugbottom. You know, I still can’t help but marvel at the edifice of the tower when I come here.”

“I have the same awe each time I come to work. Did you know it only took two years from the laying of the first stone in 1843? A true testament to the power of steam.” He clearly loved both his work, and the building where he did it.

“I did not know that. How fascinating. I wonder who developed the technology that was used?” Lou wondered absently as she took in the space with a new respect.

“I heard that it was the so-called Lord of Cogs who originally developed the steam-lift that was used to raise the blocks.” He nodded importantly.

“He does seem to be a prolific inventor,” she murmured, and thought about her treasured little automaton which was supposedly built by the man himself. Shaking her mind free of other things, she tried to refocus her attention on the present moment. “Are you enjoying our unusual sunshine?”

The man chortled. “Indeed. Though I mostly see it from between the shelves in the tower.”

Lou smiled fondly at the older man. “A scholarly man such as yourself wouldn’t have it any other way, I’m sure.”

“Ho! Ho! You are right, miss. Now, how may I be of service to you this fine day?” Mr. Tugbottom opened the door to the public records’ room.

“I am interested in the Parliamentary voting records for the last ten years. Particularly for the House of Lords.” She pulled off her gloves as she preceded him inside.

Mr. Tugbottom led her to a private room off the main research space. The public room was a cavernous space filled with tables and chairs for parliamentary aides to do research and the like, but off to one side sat a massive door that led to the actual archives, though only Mr. Tugbottom was permitted to pass through that door.

In the smaller, private alcove, he pulled out a chair for her at the large table that dominated the space. “Would you like to start with the most recent records?”

“Yes, that should do nicely.” Lou pulled a notebook and pencil from her reticule and carefully placed them on the table before taking the offered seat. She preferred her portable fountain pen for writing, but such implements were strictly banned from archival spaces such as the Victoria Tower, and rightly so.

Mr. Tugbottom nodded then retreated. Before long, he returned with a stack of large tomes in his arms. “These are the most recent records from the last five years.”

He set the stack on the table and disappeared once more.

Lou rose and opened the book on the very top, and found it was the previous year's records. She lifted the heavy tome and set it gently down on the table before she began methodically going through the pages looking for the voting records on each bill brought before the Lords. Another stack of records appeared on her table as Mr. Tugbottom arrived once more and dropped the other five years she'd requested.

Allowing her focus to sharpen on the matter at hand, she got to work. As she scribbled in her notebook and compiled the information, a clearer picture of Lord Melton took shape.

The man supported women's rights, having helped pass the Married Women's Property Act of 1840, a radical idea, even in Victoria. He also trended toward voting in support of steam technology, though there he would be considered a

moderate...and yet he clearly supported the key bills to advance their efforts. If one looked closely, and she was, the pattern was quite clear. He voted against the bills that were inconsequential to steam technology's success, but any legislation that was critical he had voted for.

Interesting . Lou continued to scribble her notes.

It was odd that he appeared to work so hard at looking like a moderate when she was fairly certain he was, in fact, an ardent steam supporter. Possibly even a member of the Tinkers. As she skimmed the records for each vote, she could see there were two or three Lords who voted in favor of every steam related piece of legislation. They had much more obvious voting records, but she would wager if she looked deeper, they were all investors in steam technology.

Lord Melton also supported bills which sought to make the common man's lot in life better. A rather uncommon perspective from a peer, in her experience. Typically those from such an elevated rank were focused on the betterment of their own lot. That, when paired with his steam voting record, pointed to his likely connection to the Tinkers—at least in her mind.

“But what would a lord be doing with the Tinkers?” Lou murmured to herself.

After spending most of the day gathering her research, she returned to The Market with a better sense of the man and a simmering fury that she had been sent to kill what was, to all intents and purposes, a decent human being. Lord Melton was a vigorous supporter of the military, yet he also believed in giving everyone a chance at a better life. He apparently saw steam as a way to do that, but trod carefully in murky political waters. Clearly, he worked hard to keep alliances on both sides of the aisle.

While her day had been spent on this new mystery she had to solve, Lou's business still required her attention despite the fact her body ached from sitting on a hard chair

all day. She may need to turn over some of her normal duties to Beatrix for a while, the woman she was grooming to take over The Market one day, just as she herself had been groomed.

As she settled in to review The Market's accounts, new contracts between members, and any other outstanding business, she mulled over the man's situation. Someone wanted Lord Melton dead: but the question remained, why? That was something she couldn't let go under the current circumstances.

Someone had tried to use her to kill a seemingly innocent man, and she needed to understand why. The ramifications, if this came from the normal channels, was life altering. It would call into question everything she believed she was doing for the greater good.

Yes, she was a killer.

But it was a burden she took on for the crown, so others didn't have to.

If she was mistaken in her belief that she was acting in her country's benefit...why, it called in to question everything she thought she'd stood for. The very principles by which she lived her life. Anger and fear churned in her gut like a tempest. What if it is all a lie? What if I am just a monster who kills people? Her mind began to whirl like the wheels of a runaway locomotive as her breaths came in short, sharp panting bursts. Her heart beat in her chest like the wings of an automaton moth.

Lou pressed her hands to her desk and closed her eyes for a moment, slowing her breathing as she had been taught to do: drawing one long, slow breath in, holding it, and then slowly releasing it. She did that two more times before her body responded. Her racing heart slowed and her breathing eased. Her mind came back to a state of clarity.

In order to figure all this out, she had to trust Lord Melton—Griff. At least—to some degree. While she'd been reluctant to give him her name, she knew she could only hide her identity from him for so long. The reality was, she was already exposed if someone knew to come to The Market to initiate the order. There was no reason not to reveal who she was. At least, the version of her most of the Ton knew.

She pulled out a standard contract for The Market and began filling in their names. She would send the document with a membership coin by messenger. Lord Melton and herself could work from her place of business using a fake affair as cover. If they were lucky, their connection would go unremarked. If they were unlucky, at least she had her girls in residence to help protect both of them.

The thing she most feared—aside from someone killing Lord Melton or herself—were the emotions the man stirred inside her. She would keep her feelings out of the mix as they worked to uncover who wanted him dead.

She had no other choice.

Griff stared down at the contract and coin sitting on his desk. He'd reviewed the specifics, all of which seemed reasonable, yet he had doubts. He re-read the note that came with the coin and contract.

Lord Melton,

I am going to help you. We shall have to work together, and I believe that doing so under the guise of an affair will allow us the freedom to move about with less scrutiny. I have included a standard contract for The Market. Please review it and send the signed copy back with my messenger unless you need time to make edits.

—Lou

All he had known about the woman when she left last night was that her name was Lou. Now it seemed that not only was she an assassin for the government, who had been sent to kill him, but she was also the infamous owner and operator of The Market, Madame LaRoux.

Griff took another look at the contract with her name on it. While she seemed disposed to help him solve the mystery of who might have sent her, he still wondered why. Why was she willing to help him? Could he trust her? Could he trust anyone?

Looking at the broad strokes of her name on the page, he found himself inclined to believe her when she said she would help. But he also worried that he was allowing his physical attraction to cloud his judgement.

Because there was no question he found her appealing. More than appealing.

Griff looked at the coin for The Market once more and considered the raised design on the metal disc. An elegant woman wearing a jaunty top hat shown in profile on one side with the word 'Member' around the outer edge. On the other side were the words 'The Market' and the address, '140 George Street'. A well-to-do address, especially for a brothel.

The contract, apparently the standard one for The Market—which he found a bit disappointing that he didn't rate a special one—stipulated the boundaries of their relationship.

Or was it a pseudo-relationship? A spy-relationship? He snorted.

Neither individual would engage in sexual relations with other partners unless previously agreed upon. All sexual activities were open for discussion prior to each engagement. Such attention to detail, for someone who had struck Griff as fiery and temperamental. He liked that she was that way.

His cock twitched in his trousers, but he ignored it and read on. Their connection was not to be discussed with others, except in the vaguest of terms. If he had any requests, he was to bring them that evening to discuss and add to the contract.

He had none...beyond touching her. Making love to her.

Flashes of his hands on naked skin, his lips wrapped around a puckered nipple, the slippery feel of his fingers sliding in and out of Lou's warm heat all danced through his mind. Griff groaned as his inexplicable desire for a clearly dangerous woman flared to life and caused his cock to ache. Inexplicable need had him tied in knots.

Something about her drew him, intrigued him. Perhaps it was the dichotomy of the feminine and lethal sides of the woman? Or maybe just the mystery she represented? Like all mechanisms, he had a desire to pick her apart and see what made her tick.

It was a dangerous desire.

Pushing aside his hazardous thoughts of Lou, Griff focused on signing the contract. Focused on the genuine issue at hand. Who was trying to kill him?

Tempting the dangerous woman into his bed could come later.

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U nsure of what to expect of Lord Melton's first visit to the Market, Lou willed her stomach to cease its useless flopping about and steadied her hands with a few slow, controlled breaths. Glancing at the clock on the wall of her office at The Market, she watched the third hand progress silently forward, ticking off each second. Then her gaze slid down to the signed contract between herself and Lord Melton...though perhaps she should call him by a different name since they were to appear to be lovers. Surprisingly, the man had signed and returned the contract with her messenger without any edits to the language.

She thought about his long string of names. John Richard Griffin, the Earl of Melton, Viscount Childreth, Baron Waldren. There were far too many for one man, if anyone had bothered to ask her. During her surveillance of the man she had learned that his mother and closest friends called him Griff. She had liked it when she'd heard it in the garden, and she let the name roll around in her head and decided she liked it. It had a roughness to it that reminded her of the man.

Lou stole another look at the signed document. For the next six months, barring one of them dissolving the agreement, her body would belong to him. For the sake of fooling anyone who looked too closely, she'd used one of her standard house contracts. The man could do anything with her body he wished while they were together. The question that had her nerves on edge was...would he?

Would he take advantage of the agreement and touch her? And if he did, would she welcome it?

The shiver of anticipation that slid down her spine scared Lou more than the possibility he might wish to caress her. It had been a very long time since she wished

for a man—any man—to lay hands upon her. To share pleasure with her.

The vulnerability of desire made her skin itch and her stomach twist.

What if Lord Melton—Griff—didn't want her? What if he looked at her and saw only a whore, or worse, a cold-hearted killer?

Lou's heart squeezed tight, and she quickly shut down that dangerous line of thinking. It didn't matter what he saw. It didn't matter if he touched her. She was doing this to understand who had ordered an innocent man to be killed. To learn how her system had been compromised so it would never happen again. To learn if all she believed she stood for was a lie.

Desire. Pleasure. Wanting. Those needs had no place in the equation.

Besides, anyone who had ever been important to her in her private life had either abandoned or betrayed her. Some were guilty of both, starting with her parents and ending with her uncle—a killer and a thief. After that, she had determined life was simpler when she kept it professional. She needed to remember this was business; it was not personal. It couldn't be.

With that firm reminder to herself, Lou dabbed a bit of color on her lips, slipped her mask into place, and descended to the sitting rooms of The Market. She stepped into an already partially filled front salon, pleased to see her girls entertaining their guests. Katerina, with her long blonde hair and clear blue eyes, sat pressed against a masked man who could only be the Duke of Norfolk. Near the fireplace Mary Margaret, with her golden-brown hair and apple green eyes, entertained the Marquess of Worthington, a young, newly elevated peer. Across the room Elena, with her raven hair and mahogany eyes, entertained a trio of young bucks who had clearly started their night of revelry off a bit early.

Lou laughed quietly as one of the young men grew too forward and earned himself a stern rap on the hand with Elena's fan. Little did he know just what kind of damage the beauty could do with that seemingly innocent item. With a reinforced steel frame and paper thin steel webbing underneath the decorative paper, she could slice a man's throat or slide a spoke through the ribs before he knew what hit him.

Phillipe, her house manager, stepped up beside her. "Madame LaRoux, you do look enchanting this evening."

"Mon Phillipe..." Lou cooed in her best fake French accent, "such trifling compliments do not become you." She cut a playful glare at her longtime friend and employee. "Knock it off," she said sotto voce .

He chuckled. "As you wish, Madame. Business seems promising tonight. In fact, you even have a Lord Melton at the bar requesting your attendance."

"Do I, indeed?" She ignored the flutter in her breast.

"Indeed. He presented his membership coin and indicated you two had come to an agreement." Phillipe raised a brow in question. "Not one I have been informed of."

"Yes. A rather diverting fellow I came across recently." Lou raised her own fan, a much less lethal cousin to the one Elena held, and wafted it in front of her face in hopes it would cool the sudden warmth in her cheeks.

"Well then, I assume you've already made whatever arrangements you may need for the evening. I shall be about if I am required."

"Excellent. I should see to my guest." Lou glided away from Phillipe and went in search of Griff, spying him in the corner of the card room, observing a fierce game of Vingt-et-un. With a sweep of her hi-low skirts, she sailed over to him.

As soon as she entered the room his gaze brushed over her, working from her masked face, down to her daring neckline, and then lower to the upper hemline of her skirts. The feminine layer of ruffles brushed the tops of her thighs, exposing her garters and stockings in the most erotic fashion. The ruffles plunged down the sides of her long legs, creating a rather dramatic frame, before brushing the floor behind her. The weight of his gaze felt heavy, nearly a physical caress as he watched her legs, just there at the apex of her thighs as she walked toward him. Lou cleared her throat lightly as she neared him.

His gaze snapped back up to her masked face, allowing her to catch a flash of desire before he snuffed it out and replaced it with a questioning smile of welcome. “Madame LaRoux?”

Lou smiled brightly. Was he...angry? Pitching her voice low and soft, she leaned toward him as she flipped the fan up to protect their conversation from prying eyes. “My lord.” She dipped her head. “I apologize for the hesitation. Trusting others is not something that comes easily to a woman of my background. It was important I have a bit of time to confirm some of what you claimed before I fully revealed myself to you.”

He stared for a moment as though rolling her name around in his head. Perhaps on his tongue. “I wish I could say I understood, but it is already done. I assume with the arrival of the contract and coin, you found whatever it was you needed to allay your concerns?” He matched her low volume and stayed behind her fan.

Lou shook her head slightly. “Not everything I needed, but enough to know that you seem to be a decent man. Someone who I suspect I should not have been sent to kill. You are a rare peer of the realm who seems to be looking to help those who are less fortunate through meaningful legislation, not apathetic charity.”

“I suppose I should be grateful.” Griff leaned back and offered a half smile.

“Gratefulness is less desirable than you might think.” She spoke at normal volume and dropped the fan as she shrugged a nonchalant shoulder.

“I see, perhaps appreciation is more appealing. You look lovely this evening.”

To her great amusement, the man dared another glance down her body, as though his eyeballs had ceased to answer to his directions.

Lou did not need to look to know he filled out his evening clothes in such a way as to highlight his broad chest and long legs. “Why thank you, my lord. You certainly cut a dashing figure.”

She placed a hand lightly on his muscular shoulder and studiously ignored the sturdy composition of his frame and the firm musculature that seemed to be strapped...everywhere. She remembered what it felt like to have all that hard muscle pressed against her when they’d fought, but she told herself firmly that it was her imagination—and perhaps her pride that had endowed him with such a fine physique.

That all turned to wisps of steam as soon as she laid a hand on his person.

Lou snatched her hand back, as though he were on fire, and pointedly ignored his startled look at her abrupt movement. Together they stood there, the silence growing awkward, even as the game they ostensibly watched grew more heated—and then a man at the table who had just lost a rather sizeable sum of money pulled out a knife and brandished it at the winner. Lou took only a moment to move forward, and though she felt Griff’s hand on her arm as though to restrain her, she shrugged it off and pressed into the fray.

“Gentlemen,” Lou looked down at the knife and back up to the face of the man holding the weapon, and then at his companions. “Is there an issue?”

The knife wielder held the blade up and pointed at the winner. “He cheated.”

Lou calmly reached up and placed her fingertips on the hand holding the blade and pressed down firmly, guiding the knife to the man’s side. “I watched the last few hands of your game, monsieur, and I am certain no such thing happened. Now, I understand losing such a sum can be rather upsetting. Perhaps I can help soften the blow a bit.” Lou looked up and waved Phillipe over. “Phillipe shall take you over to one of my lovelies, and will arrange a bit of solace for you. On the house.”

Phillipe moved up and led the flustered gentleman away as the others slumped back into their chairs.

“I am sorry for the disturbance—and Mr. Quigly, do see that the house receives its cut before you leave for the evening.” Lou quirked a single brow up and then turned to sashay—it was an art form she had studied for hours to perfect—back to Griff.

“Woman, do you have no sense of self-preservation? That man could have stabbed you,” Griff growled as she slipped back to his side.

Lou slanted him a scowl. “I was in no such danger. Besides, this is my place of business. I am certainly not going to allow someone to stab a guest unless I or one of my girls is being paid to do so,” she whispered dangerously.

“Do you not have security to deal with such issues?” Griff’s brows had drawn down into a fierce scowl as he grilled her about topics that were not within his purview.

She turned and leaned in to him, snuggling as though they were lovers, and said in not quite a whisper, “I am an assassin. I have others among my staff who have similar skills, many of them in corsets like myself. I retain a minimal amount of security, typically located on the upper floors to protect my less lethal girls. It would not be conducive to the convivial atmosphere I cultivate at The Market to have a large

number of over-sized thugs looming over the guests.” She saw his eyes widen, and she suppressed a smile. “Additionally, I cannot go about throwing members out like tomorrow’s leftovers. It would be bad for business. Please understand, I tell you this so we may move on, not because I owe you an explanation. Now, if you will turn your rather inquisitive nature to the actual issue at hand, let’s see if we can decipher who exactly is trying to kill you—though I am beginning to suspect, based on your rather overbearing nature, there may be a longer list than you might have originally considered.”

Lou pulled back and cocked her head to the side in a meaningful look, annoyed that he had pushed into her affairs, even as her feminine half responded to such male dominance—however misplaced it may have been.

Embracing the desire thrumming through her veins, she placed a delicate kiss to his jawline and peeled away from him. Sauntering across the card room, she willed her heart to cease fluttering in her chest as she stopped in the doorway to signal for him to follow. She staunchly ignored the way her nipples rasped against the linen of her chemise beneath her corset as she watch Griff—Lord Melton—prowl toward her. Her unwarranted attraction to the man was rather like being trapped on a runaway locomotive: the engine was barreling ahead sans caution or breaks. Whatever this was between them was most certainly going to be a problem, and she supposed the sooner she gave in to it the sooner she might get past her fascination with him.

Satisfied, Lou turned and led him through the salon and up the stairs.

Griff trailed behind the infuriating woman, all the while wishing he could stop the aggravating woman and shake some sense into her fool head. Certainly Lou could handle herself, but something deep inside him revolted at the notion that she might put herself in harm’s way.

Which, when one considered both her occupation and her cover, was a rather

ridiculous notion. And yet it persisted.

Lou climbed the stairs ahead of him, the slow sway of her hips an entrancing view as he took one step at a time. Bits and pieces of the contract he had signed that afternoon flitted in and out of his head. Per their agreement, he had the right to bed her. While on the surface that seemed a most desirable outcome, deep inside he was certain disaster lay down that path. He was already far too enamored of the woman. Even as he had signed the agreement, Griff had sworn he would not avail himself of the many benefits outlined in the document.

But then Lou had walked into the card room mask creating a mystery, and his resolve had weakened. Was she as stunning as he remembered?

Then he'd looked at her attire with her long, luscious legs on display below that tantalizing bit of fabric shielding her pussy from prying eyes, and that was when Griff's resolve had collapsed. As she'd approached him, all he could think about was depositing her on the bar so he could spread her firm thighs and taste her cunny. It were as if she had dosed him with some strong aphrodisiac, yet he almost certain that was not true.

Even now—as they retreated to some room within the house—the sensual atmosphere, cunningly crafted to tantalize and tease, wore at his defenses. As did the eternal sway of her lush bum and the fall of long, dark hair that danced just above it. Did she even need to wear a bustle?

Griff's cock grew harder with each step, each wayward thought.

They reached the upper landing and continued up the next level of stairs, climbing to the third floor and what could only be her private rooms. Griff fixated on the notion that he would likely see her inner sanctum, and a dangerous burble of pleasure danced in his chest. He couldn't help but wonder how many men had been permitted

into her private rooms. Based on how secretive she'd been up to then, he had to assume a very few privileged men had been allowed to enter the sacred space.

Good.

The sitting room they entered was small, cozy, but for all that, lushly appointed. The room was draped in silks and velvets, a riot of color mixing blues and reds, with touches of greens and yellows. There were pieces from the Ming dynasty squished in with bits of modern cog-work art, and furniture from the Elizabethan period alongside more modern Chippendale pieces. A veritable hodgepodge of things that one would think could never work together, yet somehow it felt right for her. It seemed to reflect the contradiction that was Lou. If that was her true name.

She removed her mask, glanced back over her shoulder, and pointed to a table bearing a decanter. "Pour us drinks while I fetch the dossier."

His breath had caught in his chest at her casual reveal. Her dark, sensual looks fitted back together in his mind like pieces of a mechanism, each cog and wheel settling exactly where it belonged. She was every bit as beautiful as he'd remembered and more—especially as she wasn't actively trying to kill him.

Lou disappeared through a door and pushed it closed until it sat slightly ajar.

In desperate need of a little fortification, Griff poured a short drink and tossed it back before pouring two drinks and bringing them over to the settee and the coffee table that dominated the space. He sat and waited for her return, choosing to continue to peruse the interestingly decorated space. An all too familiar little gadget caught his eye, and he stood for a closer inspection. On a low buffet sat a whimsical bit of cog and wheel sculpture that had been one of his earliest tinkering. It had served little purpose but to amuse the viewer with its perpetual motion of cog and wheel to ultimately make a bird arc over the contraption as though in flight. He was rather

shocked to see it had landed in the hands of a woman who worked for a government whose primary agenda seemed to be squashing the steam revolution through vicious assassination.

Worry gripped him for a moment. Am I a fool to trust her? No, she seemed as determined to solve this mystery as he was. Tinkers versus Voltacrats, aside, he liked her. More importantly, Griff found himself wanting to trust her. Perhaps she was affiliated with a faction of the government that supported steam tech? Or was at least neutral?

A sound came from the room beyond and he glanced up to find himself perfectly positioned to see every luscious curve of Lou's derriere as she bent over to pull on trousers. Simultaneously turned on by the flash of skin, and disappointed her legs would be covered for their discussion, Griff snapped back around to the moving sculpture as she moved toward the door.

"Ah, I see you have noticed a bit of my rebellion." She grinned and walked into the room, crossing to where he stood, her drink ignored on the table where he'd left it. She pressed up against him as she leaned in to look at her automaton. Well, his , really. The press of her breast against his arm paired with the warmth of her breath on his neck as she spoke nearly undid him. "Supposedly, the trinket was made by the Lord of Cogs himself."

"Indeed, it is quite entertaining." Griff offered a bland smile and willed his cock to cease being so noticeable. Did she feel the heat that burned between them?

He stood there stunned for a moment as his pulse raced and she glided away, like a figment of his over-steamed imagination. Oh, she is a temptress . She must know what she was doing to him. Was she doing it because of this searing attraction between them...or was she cultivating the attraction for other reasons?

Either way, it was growing harder to ignore.

Sitting down on the settee, Lou took a sip and sighed. “I do love a good scotch.” Setting her glass back down, she patted the couch beside her. “Come, let us have a look at the shoddy dossier I was provided on you. Perhaps you can help me fill in the holes that might lead us to who is behind all of this. I can’t imagine it contains anything you don’t already know about yourself.”

Together they poured over the documents she had which outlined all manner of information about him, from his daily schedule to his preferences for meals and even his penchant for working late into the night.

“Well, I see you have quite a bit of information about me. I feel somewhat at a disadvantage in this partnership, as I know almost nothing about you.”

“That is an unfortunate byproduct of being a mark,” Lou said lightly, as though she discussed killing every day. Which, Griff had to admit, she probably did. “It’s funny, but as sparse as this package is compared to my normal dossiers, I bet I could sell this to the highest bidder amongst the debutantes this coming Season and make a pretty penny. Why, everything a girl should need to know to capture your heart, or at the very least trap you into marriage, is right here.” She shot him a saucy grin.

“You wouldn’t dare!” True panic seized him as he considered the onslaught that would come with such a violation.

“If I didn’t appreciate the unmarried state as much as any bachelor, I might consider it. But I wouldn’t do such a thing to my worst enemy. I might slit their throat, but no—I wouldn’t throw them to the wolves-cum-debutants.” She laughed at the utter fear Griff knew was etched on his features.

For a moment, his heart had skipped a beat, and not in the good way.

“You are a cruel woman.” Griff shook his head and returned to perusing the pages he held. “Does the handwriting look different than normal to you? Perhaps whoever compiled the dossier might be able to offer us a clue.”

Lou looked at the lettering on the page. “I’m afraid the handwriting is different every time. Typically it is all legible, neatly written, but by a different hand. I suspect they use a different secretary each time or possibly one of those new mimic-o-graphs. Have you heard of them?”

Griff repressed a wince. Of course he’d heard of the bloody machine; he invented the small steam engine that the inventor used to power the thing. “Of course, it allows for the reproduction of handwriting. Apparently, it is quite difficult to tell the difference between what it produces and the genuine article.”

Lou shrugged. “So I’ve heard.” She continued to look over the various pages in silence, as did he.

Finally, something caught his eye on one of the longer sheets. Toward the end of the page, there seemed to be a partial sentence that made little sense in the context of the rest of the notations, and were found in the margin, too. The words read...to Inverkeithing. “Do you see this? I wonder where the rest of the sentence is.”

She picked up the page, looked at the alignment of the lettering, angled the page this way and that before looking at him with a shrug. “I had noticed that when I originally reviewed the documents. But honestly, I couldn’t make sense of its meaning in the context of my assignment to kill you.” She stopped and eyed him cautiously. “Is there something you have not told me that might be of importance in this inquiry?”

Fear slipped into his veins and had his heart racing like a stallion on the open moors. “No. Nothing I believe you need to be aware of.” Good God, she couldn’t know he was the Lord of Cogs. It would make him more vulnerable than he already was, a

conduit to breaking the will of the Tinkers. Not to mention the damage to the morale of the party if they learned he was not of the working class, not one of them.

No, it was far too risky to expose himself in such a manner. But even that secret had no connection to Inverkeithing as far as he knew.

She eyed him suspiciously. “And you’re sure you have no connection to Inverkeithing? Maybe anywhere else in Scotland?”

“None. I cannot imagine what it might reference. We could look at a map, but I’m not sure what good it might do.” Confusion warred with worry. To his knowledge, there was no connection between himself and Scotland. None between The Lord of Cogs and Scotland. Damn it, he’d never been to Scotland!

“Perhaps we should.” Lou rose and pulled out an atlas and flipped to the pages with a close up view of Inverkeithing on the map. “Do you see anything?”

“Not at all. The...the only person I know with a connection to Inverkeithing is one of my friends. He has an uncle—rich as Croesus—with an estate near there. But I’ve never been there.” Griff sighed. “What if this was made using the machine you mentioned, and it produced a wet page that was somehow transferred on to this margin?”

“That does seem more likely than anything else, at the moment.” She paused as if considering her words. “Very well, then. If I find you are lying to me, it will not go well for you. Lies and betrayal are hard lines for me.” Her shoulders relaxed a bit as if those words had cost her something to share.

Griff couldn’t help but wonder about the story or stories behind her last comment. Lies...and betrayal?

He nodded stiffly, despite her more relaxed state. Her threat was certainly real; so she could never know the truth. “I don’t see us discovering anything else. I should go.”

“You cannot leave this early. It would destroy my reputation.” Lou rose to stop him as he tried to leave.

“Why in the world would it destroy your reputation?” he asked, surprised.

“Madame LaRoux is notorious for keeping her lovers entertained until the early hours of the morning—when she deigns to take one. Leaving now, seemingly unsatisfied, it is not to be considered...especially when things are so new.”

Griff sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “So are you suggesting I must stay here for,” he glanced at his pocket watch, “another four hours before I can depart?”

“Precisely.” Lou nodded.

“And how do you propose to entertain me?” He lifted a sardonic brow even as dread swelled within. He suspected—no, hoped—he knew what she was going to suggest. Wanted everything she would offer and more, yet he feared what would happen if he indulged.

Feared he would not be capable of keeping his attraction to her at bay.

“You know the terms of the contract. You seem a very thorough sort. We can simply sit and talk, or both of us being adults, we could consider other more lascivious pursuits.” The woman seemed strung as taut as he felt as he considered her proposal.

Damn how he wanted to taste her, but Griff’s mind warred with his body and heart. What if she decided she still needed to kill him after their investigation? What if he discovered this was all a ruse, and she was somehow complicit in not killing, but

discrediting him?

Bloody hell, what if she discovers the truth about me and rejects me for it?

And then he glanced over and noticed she was fidgeting. Could she be as nervous as he at the notion of becoming intimate? That was a curious thing, considering all the facts.

“Very well, I suppose I wouldn’t want to cause undue harm to your reputation.” Griff took his empty glass and moved to the decanter, and poured another drink. He held the container up in silent question, and she nodded. After he poured her another drink, he returned the decanter to its rightful place and sat next to her as she set all the pages aside. “So, tell me. How did you come to acquire The Market?”

Lou sat back and crossed her legs so that her toes brushed his trouser leg, sending little jolts of excitement along his limb. “I bought it from the previous Madame, who I worked for as part of my cover. She was aware I had other priorities, but she took a liking to me and when she was ready to retire, she offered me the opportunity as had her Madame before her and so on. The Market has been in business for nearly a hundred years and has passed from madame to prostitute along the way.”

“And I suppose since the assassin business was good, you could afford to pay her.”

She offered a nonchalant lift of the shoulder that neither confirmed his assumption nor denied it. “And how did you become the Earl of Melton?”

Griff tried not to smile. “I did it in the way one normally does. The previous earl, my father, died and I inherited the title and all it entailed—though I suppose there are new-fangled ways of becoming a peer these days. I heard recently that one man paid an aging peer to become his heir. There was quite a bit of legal finagling to make that happen I imagine.” He shrugged.

She smiled sadly. “In my circles it is not uncommon for heirs once or twice removed to fund the killing of those who stand in their path.”

Horror swept through Griff at such a notion. “I-I can’t imagine doing such a thing. My father and I had not been on the best of terms, but I would never have offed the man.” He swallowed, his throat dry. “Is that what you think of me?”

She watched him intently. “Based on your honest reaction...no, I don’t. But I needed to see how the notion struck you.”

Griff pressed his lips together, momentarily non-plussed that she still seemed to harbor some question of his moral character. But he was keeping secrets from her, wasn’t he? “I am trying my best to honor his legacy, while keeping in mind that times have changed and so has society.”

“And what of your own heir? Your dossier makes no mention of a wife or even fiancée.” Lou lazed casually against the back of the settee, but something crackled between them as she waited for his answer.

“My brother, or his future son, will be the next earl. I have no need of a wife.” He took a sip of his scotch and tried to remember his own warnings to himself.

But then her tongue peeped out from between her reddish lips to slick along her lower one. Griff couldn’t help but track the movement and wish it was his own tongue tasting her flesh.

“That sounds rather lonely.” She leaned forward and into him as she took his drink and set it on the table next to her glass. “And by all accounts, unhealthy. They do say that men need to exercise their sexual desires regularly to keep sharp of mind and focus.” Lou pressed up onto her knees on the couch and hovered over him until their faces were so close, their breath mingled. “I can’t have you unfocused for what lies

ahead.”

And then her lips captured his in a searing kiss which shattered any hesitation his feeble mind offered in protest. In a swift move of dominance and need, he pushed her backward until she lay on the couch beneath him as he took control of the kiss and possessed her mouth.

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Lou would have gasped if the man above her hadn't completely robbed her of breath.

Somewhere in the course of their evening, she had decided that waiting for him to make the first move was going to turn her into a lust-driven madwoman—and the last thing she needed was to be distracted by the desire pulsing thickly through her veins. So she'd made the leap, and the man had responded like a hound who'd snapped his leash.

And she loved it. Reveled in it.

He finally ended the heart-stopping kiss, giving her a chance to breathe as well as speak.

"Let's go into the bedchamber, my mattress will be far more comfortable than this small couch."

Griff eased back and helped her up, playing the role of the solicitous gentleman. It tickled Lou he would be so polite with her, as though she were a lady of his social set.

He cleared his throat and straightened his clothes as they stepped into her bedroom. "Mada—Lou. I—"

She stopped and faced him. "First things first—you had best stick to Lou. We are about to become much more closely acquainted than the formality of titles dictates. I shall call you Griff, because it suits you and I prefer to forget you are a peer of the realm. Not my usual taste in lovers." Lou decadently unbuttoned her trousers, letting them slip to the floor and leaving her legs fully exposed. "Second, you will not make

any objections that might damage my delicate sensibilities. We are both adults. We find each other extremely attractive, if the chemistry between us is to be trusted, and I refuse to ignore the connection. It is a rare and precious thing in both my lines of work. Any other concerns I need to address?"

Her heart pounded in her chest, because she couldn't take the humiliation of him rejecting her now. It would be too much to bear.

"As you wish, Lou. I won't deny I want you. But are you sure this is wise, under the circumstances?" Griff posed the question as he let his evening jacket slide off his shoulders.

Her gut seized up like a cog and wheel with a pipe jammed in it. She needed to get this man out of her system. Needed to remind herself why remaining as she was had always been the best course of action. But steaming hells, every fiber of her being screamed out that this time would be different. He would be different. She couldn't explain why she felt that way, so she ignored all of the doubts and worries.

Stepping into his embrace, Lou worked the buttons of his waistcoat and then his shirt free. "I dare say I don't really give a damn for once in my life. Now, hush up and kiss me."

Much to her relief, Griff did as she demanded and plunged his tongue into her mouth. They dueled briefly before she gave up and let him lead, explore, ravage her. His powerful arms banded her waist as he hauled her closer and she let her fingertips explore the warm flesh of his chest as she worked his clothes off his shoulders. But with his arms wrapped around her, she could only get so far.

Then his clever fingers were working the back of her bodice loose and soon the laces of her corset. As he freed her breasts, Griff leaned down and trailed kisses over the tops of the mounds until need had Lou gripping his hair in her fists to pull his head

from her breasts.

“God, yes.” The words erupted from her like steam from a whistle, full of power and a little higher pitched than expected.

He growled and lifted her up, only to take a few steps and drop her on the bed. A wild giggle escaped Lou as she bounced on the well-sprung bed. Steaming hells, the man is fun! She couldn’t remember the last time she had been with such a playful lover. There was no suppressing the grin that stretched her lips. She looked up at him and found the gleam of desire burning bright in his eyes and so, without further ado, she reached up and pulled her shirt off, leaving herself fully exposed.

His gaze roved down over her body and snagged just below her breasts—where the tentacle of her clockwork octopus tattoo reached around her body to wrap around a cog.

Griff’s eyes widened as he took it in. “Is that...a tentacle?”

She smiled and rolled so he could see the rest of the artwork. “It is. I had an artist do this for me a couple years ago. I’ve been fascinated by the creatures since I first read about them, and I know the Tinkers also uses them in their imagery. I believe they picked it up from the railroads which have been likened to an octopus.”

He smiled softly. “I love how it seems to be ripping through your skin. It’s amazing artwork.”

“Thank you, but please continue with what you were doing.” She gave him a sultry smile. “I believe we were just about to get to the good part.”

Griff laughed and shed his own upper layers. “We were just getting to the best parts—plural.” Then he pounced on her and spread her across the bed in a wanton

display.

Pushing up one breast, he licked and sucked the hard peak until it swelled and throbbed with need. Dragging his tongue over her sensitive flesh, he switched to the other breast and repeated his efforts. Her body arched up pressing her nipple into his mouth, desperate for more yet taught as a bowstring about to snap.

“So much better than I pictured after feeling all these curves pressed against me in my study,” Griff groaned as he slid lower, leaving her damp breasts to pucker in the cool air. “And then you strolled in tonight wearing only that bit of fabric to hide your pussy and all I could think about was flipping it up and tasting you.”

Lou’s body heated more at his sensual words. “If you don’t put action to those words soon, I may have to flip you over and sit on your face to get what I need—what you have made me need.”

Men were such self-serving creatures when it came to sex, she often had to manage them in the bedchamber to ensure any personal satisfaction. With a flex of her muscles, Lou prepared to do just that—when he slipped between her thighs and spread them wide. Slowly, slowly, he drew his fingertip through her dampness, gathered it up, and sucked it between his lips. Her hips bucked involuntarily as she ached to be filled up.

Does the man intend to torture me so sweetly?

Griff moaned and ripped his finger from his mouth before he pushed his face between her thighs. With a harsh cry of pleasure, Lou dug her fingers into his hair as he lapped at her pussy, driving her insane with broad flat strokes followed by little nibbles here and there. When he drove his tongue deep within her, she couldn’t help her body’s need to thrust, greedily demanding more. He withdrew his eager tongue, only to slip his fingers inside as he returned to licking and sucking her aching clit.

Lou had not felt desire like this before, such intense pleasure, and at one point it flittered fear through her. But her body was flying so close to the edge that all she could do was surrender to it as he pulled his fingers free and suckled her core, plunging deep with his tongue until she came apart for him.

“Griff!” was the word that flew from her lips as she held on to his head and rode his tongue. She swore she would dissolve into wisps of steam as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her, seared her very senses. “Yes! Don’t stop, please...”

Her words dissolved into muttered curses and incoherent phrases.

As she came down from her climax, Griff gently placed kisses over her swollen and heated flesh until her breathing regulated. Then he climbed up her body to lie next to her while she recovered, all the while stroking her skin, her breasts, her hair, letting her know he was there.

As her haze faded, Lou arched into his strokes, enjoying the fresh stirrings of pleasure. Then she curled up to sitting and angled to face him where he lay next to her. “You, sir, have hidden talents.”

“You may be right.” He winked, a wicked smile on his still wet lips.

“Cheeky blighter. I’ll show you who has talent around here.” And with renewed determination, Lou opened the flap of his trousers and freed his cock.

With single-minded purpose, she flicked her tongue out and lapped at the dewy tip as a shudder rippled through him. Enjoying her power over such a strong-willed man, she swallowed the head of his shaft and worked her way down his length, Griff groaning as she took inch after inch of his length deep in her throat.

“Bloody hell! That—that feels amazing,” he gasped as she continued working him

into her mouth, retreating a bit, then sinking further down until his entire length was encased in her mouth and throat.

Then Lou swallowed and his whole torso jackknifed partway up, her head clenched in his hands.

Pulling her off his throbbing erection, Griff set her face away from his groin with a rueful smile. "I have other plans for where I intend to come, and it's not in your unexpectedly sweet mouth. Not tonight."

Lou couldn't help but grin as he pulled her up toward him and rolled over her, landing her on her back again. She loved how unapologetically physical he was. He treated her like a desirable woman, despite knowing the truth about her. It was a novel experience.

"Now," he growled, "I want those delectable thighs wrapped around me as I sink into your hot cunny."

"No arguments here. If you need one, there are some French letters on the nightstand." She waved over towards the steam-lamp on her bed-side table and lay back, almost quivering with anticipation. Now she knew what he could do with that tongue...what could he possibly do with his cock?

A few moments later, Griff was back between her legs and his long, thick cock pushed into her pussy. With a sigh of contentment, she lifted her legs and wrapped them around him as he sank deeper within her body. Then she tangled her fingers in the hair at his nape and let him have full access to her body.

He trembled as he hovered over her for a moment, but then he gritted his teeth and slid slowly out of her heat. Lou threw her head back and moaned as he scraped over every raw nerve inside her quim, savoring the way he filled her, stretched her. Griff

huffed as he pistoned in and out of her body in earnest, pumping his hips, driving her across the bed as he filled her up with each stroke. Lou's heart raced and her body quivered with pleasure and excitement as he dragged her back up to the edge of bliss once more. As she hovered there on the precipice, she looked at the face of the man who was supposed to be just another mark...realized she was doomed.

Just as she had suspected.

And then her world exploded in a burst of pleasure that pushed all other thoughts aside and made her limbs quiver like jelly as she cried out his name over and over again. A few more pounding strokes, and Griff shouted her name as he pumped his hips, driving into her as deep as he could go. At the end, he strained over her and collapsed, blanketing her with his body.

The post-orgasmic wave of bliss wrapped her in an unusual cocoon of euphoria. Normally she was quick to disengage from her clients, separating herself physically and emotionally. But as Griff rolled to the side a chill swept in, replacing his body heat and stealing her moment of contentment.

"That was...incredible. I can't even remember sex ever being so good." He looked over at her and grinned. "You were right. We have amazing chemistry."

Lou smiled back, but deep inside she worried what their chemistry would cost her in the end. In her experience, everything came at a cost.

Griff lay next to the woman who had tried to kill him, first with a knife, and then with pleasure. He much preferred the latter method.

He promised himself that despite giving in to the physical desire simmering between them; it didn't mean there was something more. Certainly he liked her, but he had far too much on his plate—what with someone trying to kill him and such—and one too

many secrets to allow himself to feel anything for any woman, let alone Lou.

He leaned up on one arm and looked down at her face as she appeared to be resting.

One dark eye popped open and focused on him with a penetrating gaze. “Why are you staring at me?”

He laughed. “Just considering our next move.”

“Well, unless you decide to ravish me once more—which I’m not opposed to, mind you—my next move is to track down my handler.” Lou sat up, completely at ease with her nudity.

Dazzled by her delectable curves, it took Griff a moment to catch up with her words. “Your next move? Don’t you mean our?”

“No, I don’t. Any meeting with my handler is a strictly one-on-one scenario.” She swept her silky long hair up into a twist and jabbed two lethal looking pins into the mass.

His gut rejected the idea instantly, but his head had questions. He decided to ask those questions before starting an argument—and any objection on his part would cause an argument, he was sure. “Why one-on-one?”

“Because I always meet with him alone.” Lou frowned, as though the question were immaterial and confusing.

“What is his name?” Griff was feeling a little lost in the wake of her less than transparent thought process. Is she hiding something from me?

“I cannot tell you that.” Lou sighed. “It’s enough you know he’s my handler. The one

I usually get my assignments from. He's a government agent, but despite that, I trust him implicitly. If you are supposed to be dead by my hand—within the week, I might add—and we show up together he will ask questions I am not ready to answer, not yet. It will already be bad enough that you are still alive, particularly if he's heard you are a new client. I need to speak with him alone to get the answers I need." She hesitated as if weighing her next words. "I...I don't know what his reaction will be when he learns you are alive. What the consequences might be. Let me manage this situation for now."

Griff hated the suggestion, but he could see the logic behind her plan. Of course, if he could stay in the loop, then he could follow her and be there in case she needed help... "What if I stayed back in the shadows? Kept out of sight as a precaution. In case something goes wrong, like your handler doesn't show up but someone else does? Or if he turns out not to be as trustworthy as you think?"

She considered it for a moment. Then she gave him a sidelong look. "I'm accustomed to working alone. I've always managed whatever scrape I've gotten into. I can manage this one as well. Besides, I've known this man since I was a girl."

Griff climbed off the bed, feeling at a disadvantage lying about like a harem boy. "I thought we were working together?"

She turned to face him after pulling on a silk robe. "We are, but some jobs are single person tasks. My handler can be a bit...let's say, territorial. I think any meeting with him will go smoother alone. I promise to update you on all that happens."

"I don't like it." Griff paused. He wasn't prepared to give in entirely; he'd simply have to follow her to the meeting. "When will you meet him?"

"The day after tomorrow, most likely. I'll need to let him know I wish to see him. Once it's done I shall send you a note to join me here." Lou offered him a pleasant

smile, but he was sure she was keeping something from him. “Now, it’s late. Are you hungry? I can have Cordelia fetch a tray for us from the kitchen.”

Griff glanced at the clock on the wall and shook his head. “It grows late—or rather, early. I should find my own bed or else Higgins will be distressed. I rarely go out, let alone stay out all night, even if Parliament runs late.”

Lou offered him an oddly wistful smile. Did she want me to stay? “I understand. It’s probably best that you are seen leaving here anyway. I shall send for you to meet me here tomorrow evening to update you, once I’ve made contact.” She handed him a stack of four coins. “Here are some guest tokens—every member is granted a few to share with prospective new members and friends. You may use yours as you see fit, including to send me a message in a discrete but trusted fashion.” Then she winked and went about helping him get dressed.

All the while, Griff wanted to renege on his intent to leave. Would it be so bad if he stayed? But before he knew it, he was dressed and heading downstairs with a robed Lou by his side. At the front door she kissed him again, long and lingering as though she too hated sending him away...before she let him slip out into the pre-dawn dark to head home.

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The next evening as Griff, Cole, and Dell brought their game of Hazard to a close in the Athenaeum Club, he looked at his friends and stretched. "I think I'll head over to The Market now. If anyone would be interested in joining me, I have guest tokens."

Lou had sent a note suggesting he stop by, though she had been clear her meeting had not taken place yet. Griff was curious about what she wanted if the meeting had not occurred.

As for his friends...well, she had given him guest tokens, and for once they were having an amiable night with Dell. It was reminiscent of days gone by.

Both men grinned.

"Bloody hell, I have heard that members can invite friends, but it seemed you'd never ask." Cole stood with alacrity as Dell followed suit.

"Always wanted to see the inside of those hallowed halls." Dell grinned wolfishly.

"Heading off somewhere?" Sir Francis Hathaway, a vague acquaintance of theirs, walked into the game room as they were leaving.

"Yes, off to our next stop." Griff offered a strained smile to the known Voltacrat.

"Apologies, Sir Francis, but we are off," chimed in Dell, smiling jovially. "I had hoped to have a word with you about locomotive steam engine development. Perhaps we can have a drink here at the club tomorrow?"

Griff couldn't help but wonder what that was about. Sir Francis was one of those members who he would argue didn't belong in the Athenaeum Club, but then he was a member, and a supporter rather than an actual contributor to modern technology.

"I'll be here any time after five o'clock tomorrow afternoon." Sir Francis nodded. "By the by, how is your uncle? I haven't seen him about lately."

Dell clapped Sir Francis' arm. "Still holed up in his Scottish estate. Claims he hates London and all the congestion. I shall tell him you asked after him when I write to him next."

"You do that," Sir Francis replied and moved past them as they continued their progress through the club.

Griff's brows drew together at the notion that Dell and his uncle corresponded so regularly. Last he knew the man sent Dell an annual note at most. At least, that had been true when they were boys. But then his thoughts returned to their next destination, and a new concern wafted up. "Listen you two, you had best behave yourselves. No making a fool of me at The Market, if you please."

The pair laughed and slapped him on the back as they all headed out of the club.

"I can't imagine either of us doing such a thing." Cole smiled wickedly, and Griff was suddenly regretting the invitation.

"When did you become a member of The Market? I heard a rumor about you and the place, but dismissed it as mere innuendo," Dell said as they piled into Griff's carriage.

Odd—where would Dell have heard that rumor? Griff swallowed and tried to dig up the nonchalance he knew he should feel at such a question. He and Lou had discussed

how he might answer this question if he was asked. “I met an intriguing lady quite by accident, and she happens to be Madame LaRoux. I managed to arrange a contract with her.”

“Met? Where did you two meet?” Cole asked with a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

Dell leaped on the question. “Yes, where on earth would someone as boring as you meet such a notorious madam?”

“You could say we bumped into each other under unusual circumstances. We became thick as thieves right away.” Griff silently pleaded that his friend would accept that at face value. This version at least, technically, wasn’t a lie.

“Now that sounds like a good story. Do tell,” Dell urged with a salacious grin.

The carriage pulled to a stop, rocking slightly. “We have arrived, most unfortunately for you—I suppose I shall have to tell the tale of our meeting another time.” Griff shrugged and hopped out of the carriage before Dell could make further inquiries.

Moments later, they walked into The Market and were greeted by Philippe. “Good evening, my lord, gentlemen. Masks for anyone?”

The man seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of who was who and how to greet them. Of course, Griff had been there before, so he was at least familiar—but Cole and Dell had never been. He’d have to ask Lou how the man did that. It was quite the skill.

“Anyone require a mask?” Griff tossed the question over his shoulder to his friends.

“Not for me,” Cole chirped happily.

“I’ll take one,” Dell said.

Phillipe handed him a simple black mask that his friend donned, though Griff found it laughable since they were all together as usual. It’s not as if anyone wouldn’t know who their companion was. But he supposed if it made Dell more comfortable it was nothing to remark on. “Is Madame around this evening?”

“Of course, my lord. You will find her in the main salon.” Philippe motioned toward the large, open archway across the entry hall from where they stood.

The trio pressed forward, bypassing a few people Griff was fairly certain he knew, but who wore masks. While the masks at The Market had always been the patron’s choice, in the last ten years as England had become more sexually open, the need to hide one’s identity had fallen away for most. He had not bothered to don one himself. He and Lou had determined it was best if it was clear he had an arrangement with her.

As they entered the main salon, Griff spotted Lou sitting comfortably, an elaborate filigreed mask in place that matched her ensemble— so that hadn’t been just for me—in a chair surrounded by young and old men alike. She was truly enchanting when she chose to be charming, and based on her bevy of admirers, she’d been turning on the charm this evening.

Griff approached his current lover with his friends in tow as a very unexpected green-eyed monster reared its head. “Here you are, Madame LaRoux, tempting all these poor devils despite the fact you’ll be spending your evening with me.” He grinned in a parody of a smile, still reeling from the realization that he was, in fact, a jealous man.

She trilled a fake laugh that had him cringing inside. “Lord Melton, you of all men should know you can’t keep a lady , such as myself, waiting.” She let one brow rise in silent rebuke.

Griff chuckled. “Touché, Madame. Touché.” He drew in a breath. “Now, perhaps you would be kind enough to extricate yourself from so many admirers and come meet my friends.”

She nodded. “Very well, my lord.” Turning to her collection of men, she smiled. “Thank you all for keeping me company while I waited for Lord Melton. You turned this into a diverting evening.” The soft lilt of her fake French accent made her words sound even more gracious.

To a man they bowed as she stood and approached him. Griff wanted to whisk her away to her private rooms and ravish her, remind her who she belonged to, if only for the next six months. He mentally sighed. This is quickly becoming a problem . He’d just been with her the night prior. How could he possibly be so in need of a woman he’d just had? He’d gone months without a woman before with no issue.

It was her. She was the problem. There was something about Madame LaRoux— no, Lou —that was utterly intoxicating.

Bowing to the lovely lady as she joined them, Griff took in her gown of red and black satin that once again bared her long, luscious legs to every man’s view. Though this time they were encased in black stockings that looked more like thin black wires encasing her legs than hosiery, the effect was still devastating when paired with her little ankle high button side boots.

“Madame LaRoux, may I present my companions Captain Colechester Chapman and Mr. Lawrence Dellinger?” He left off that Dell was the Under-Secretary of Steam for the Bureau of Modern Technology, since he’d opted for a mask. He seemed to desire some level of privacy this evening.

Lou smiled widely in welcome. “Gentlemen, The Market is pleased to have you join us this evening.”

Cole took her hand in his and bowed over it. He then flipped her hand over and pressed a wholly inappropriate kiss to her palm. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Madame."

Griff wanted to throttle his overly flirtatious friend.

Next, Dell bowed to her and placed a slightly more appropriate kiss on the back of her hand. "Enchanted, Madame. I can see now why Griff is so be-spelled by you."

The person in question sputtered and coughed as heat crept up his face.

Lou laughed, low and throaty, sending shivers down Griff's spine while causing half the men in the room to turn and look toward them. "Griff, where have you been keeping these two charmers?"

Annoyed with his friends, who he had specifically told to behave on their way here, he straightened up stiffly. "In a dungeon to which I should promptly return the pair."

Lou laughed again and cast a small look of surprise his way. "Oh, don't be jealous. They are adorable!"

Cole winked. "See Griff, best behavior."

The charming woman in their midst smiled and stepped between the two men. "Now, Captain Chapman, Mr. Dellinger, please tell me what you look for in a companion." She began to steer them further into the room leaving Griff to trail sullenly behind.

"I prefer a woman with a sweet and responsive demeanor. I bark enough orders at the crew of the Air Nymph, I prefer a woman who can follow direction and maybe take the lead when needed, but is still soft and womanly. And please, call me Cole," said Griff's terribly charming friend.

“Perfect! I have just the companion for you this evening.” They stopped before a masked woman who sat pleasantly chatting with two men who looked very disappointed when Madame stopped near them. “La, Mary Margaret, I should like to introduce you to Captain Colechester Chapman.”

The woman, Mary Margaret, stood up and curtsied to the men she’d been sitting with. “Gentlemen it was a pleasure chatting with you.” Then she turned to them—or more aptly, Cole—and curtsied again. “Why Captain, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” She looked up at Griff’s friend with big green eyes framed by a cascade of golden brown hair that was pulled back from her face in some kind of half-up style that suited her even with her mask obscuring the upper half of her face.

Cole bowed, taking her hand and used the same palm up kiss on the woman that he had on Lou. It settled the green-eyed monster riding Griff, but only a bit. “The pleasure is all mine, I’m sure.”

Mary Margaret smiled sweetly up at Cole, the woman barely coming up to his chest.

“If you will see to entertaining Cole this evening, I would appreciate it.” Lou nodded in satisfaction as she handed Cole’s hand over to Mary Margaret.

“Of course, Madame.” She smiled and winked at Cole. “He’ll be in the best of hands with me.”

“Excellent.” Lou turned to Dell and led him further into the room. “Now for you, Mr. Dellinger?”

“Please, Dell will do fine,” he winked. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to throw old Griff over and take up with me this evening?”

Griff couldn’t help but growl at Dell’s suggestion, which of course only made Lou

laugh harder. “Oh dear, I don’t think he liked that suggestion.”

His idiotic friend grinned. “I didn’t think he would. Well, if you are not available, perhaps a woman with dark hair and eyes who might have an air of mystery about her? Someone unusual?”

“Hmmm.” Lou paused their step a moment and then angled them to the very back of the room where a lone woman—also wearing a mask—stood leaning against the wall. “Elena, I would like to introduce a dear friend of Lord Melton’s. This is Mr. Lawrence Dellinger.”

Elena pushed up from the wall, crossed her arms, and eyed the man as though doing a thorough assessment of him. If Griff wasn’t mistaken, she seemed to find Dell—lacking. But then her lips curled up on one side in a half smile. “He’ll do,” she said, standing still and not offering her hand or any pleasantry.

Dell coughed. “Will I, indeed? How gracious of you to allow me your esteemed company. Precisely how will I do?”

Griff groaned silently. This was not going well.

Elena smiled like the cat that got the cream. “You look fit and hale enough to keep up with me.” Her light Spanish accent slipped out as she threw down the gauntlet. “Assuming you haven’t spent too much time stuck behind a desk or a card table.”

Her words purred from her mouth in a sultry sound that confused Griff. He could only imagine how Dell was taking such challenge.

Dell straightened up, clearly willing to meet said challenge. “I am more than capable of keeping up with a woman.” He paused. “Any woman.” He then looked at Lou and bared his teeth. “She’ll do.”

Lou nodded and slipped away, leaving the pair to move forward as they wished. When she finally tucked her hand into the crook of Griff's arm, he looked at her confused.

“Why the devil—”

She leaned over and patted his chest as she cut him off. “Not here, wait until we get to my room and I shall explain.”

Curious as the devil, but realizing there was something at play here which he did not understand, Griff nodded and escorted her from the main salon and up the stairs. Neither spoke as they made their way to her rooms. He was content to just be near her and alone...or as alone as one could be in the hallways of The Market. Once inside her chambers, Lou locked the door, removed her mask, and led him back to the settee.

“Thank you for holding your questions until we were alone. I'm sure that was...challenging,” she added with a smile.

“Why on earth did you leave Dell with that woman? They seemed terribly unsuited.” He asked the question that was burning to get free.

“But were they unsuited?” His paramour waited, her head cocked to one side slightly. “Stop and consider the body language between them, as well as what was said.”

Griff considered what he saw, or perhaps what he thought he saw, once more. The woman had held herself straight and tall, arms crossed, and posture perfect. She'd felt closed off, to him. As though she did not find Dell appealing. But then she had smiled at his friend, though again, it could have been one that suggested future torment rather than pleasure. Dell seemed equally rigid and spoiling for a fight from what he could see behind him. He thought about the words exchanged and still couldn't see

the attraction. “I feel as though I was in a very different room than you.”

Lou laughed that same low, sexy laugh she’d uttered downstairs. Not one she put on for show, then. “Let me tell you what I saw. I saw a woman who took notice of a man as soon as he approached causing her to push up from the wall. I saw a woman who crossed her arms and pushed her breasts up on display. And I saw a woman—who is aggressive on a good day—challenge a man in a way she knew he was unlikely to backdown from. Even had I missed all of that, her eyes said it all. She found him attractive. When he responded in kind, whether he would acknowledge it or not, he found her equally alluring.”

Griff huffed out a breath of surprise. “How did I miss all of that?”

Lou laid a hand on his arm an expression that came just shy of sympathy. “Because you have not been trained to read all the nuances. You were taught to read basic body language and social cues, not the deeper subtext that I as both an assassin and a madame would need to understand. That subtext, and my or one of my girls’ ability to read that subtext, can mean the difference between staying whole and healthy...and being seriously injured. Possibly even killed.”

His gut curdled.

“To be honest, that is true for all women. It’s a survival skill we all develop from a young age as the fairer sex. It helps most of us to avoid the kinds of situations that might put us in harm’s way on a day to day basis,” Lou said, sadness pulling at her face.

A wave of nausea rolled through him at the realization that a woman must think about common interactions in such a manner. Did his mother feel so eternally threatened? Certainly as a man he always sought to protect the fairer sex, and he knew other men were not of his ilk. But to feel so unsafe every day? “How have I been so...so

oblivious?”

“Because you are a man. You’ve never had to walk into a room full of strange men and worry about which one might be a predator. Which one might make unwanted advances or otherwise put your reputation at risk.” Lou paused. “But I digress. The important thing you need to know is that both Mary Margaret and Elena work for me, and they are well trained.”

Confusion swirled with the disquiet that roiled inside him. “Of course they work for you, they are here, at The Market.”

Lou smiled indulgently, and Griff once again felt like a lost little boy. “I mean they are trained assassins, as I am. I trained them myself. They are able to keep your friends safe, satisfy them in bed, and ferret out any information which may help us solve the mystery before us.”

“What?” Griff had thought he’d brought his friends for a pleasant evening at The Market, not an interrogation. Not even Dell, who he worried was headed down a separate path from he and Cole, deserved that. “I didn’t bring them here to be questioned—I have no suspicions of either of them in relation to this matter. I’ve known both since we were school boys.”

Lou sighed softly. “I find threats often come from the most unlikely of sources. Spouses, lovers, friends, even family. Fear not, however, they will not be tied up and questioned—unless of course they prefer that.” She winked cheekily. “In the course of their evening entertainments, Mary Margaret and Elena will tease out any information in very subtle but effective ways. They likely won’t even notice what they do or don’t say. As far as they are concerned they are about to have the night of their lives. I promise you.”

Griff looked at her, worry and doubt drawing his brows into a furrow. “I don’t like it.

They are my friends.”

Lou stood up. “Which is why I didn’t tell you until we were up here. If all is as you say, then no harm will come of this evening. If there is anything to be concerned about from either quarter, we shall be aware of it by tomorrow.” She shrugged one shoulder with an insouciance Griff did not feel.

Lou walked over to where the decanters sat and poured him a drink before returning to the settee and handing it to him. “Here. It will settle your nerves. I promise all they will experience is the pleasurable evening you promised in bringing them here.”

Griff looked at her as he took the glass and a fresh worry surged to the fore. He froze for a moment. What if she put something in my drink? To drug me, or worse poison me?

No. They had already been intimate—she’d had plenty of opportunity to kill him again or worse. But what if she used the same tactics on him? Would he tell her his secret?

Griff tossed the drink down his throat and resolved to not worry about such things. The truth was so deeply buried, his own friends didn’t suspect who he really was.

How could Lou possibly discover it?

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Lou looked at the furrow that still creased Griff's brow and wondered if she'd said too much. He wasn't trained for this. But he needed to be prepared, should either Mary Margaret or Elena discover something unseemly about either of his friends.

There was another undercurrent that bothered her as well. Was he worried she might attempt to use the same techniques—that perhaps the trust built between them was as insubstantial as steam in the wind?

But what secret might he have? He had assured her there was nothing she needed to know.

Lou's shoulders seized like a poorly lubricated engine. She had believed him, hadn't she? Or had she gotten so caught up in their unexpected attraction that she had...missed something?

Heat flooded into her cheeks until she swore steam seeped from her face as she considered her actions—or lack thereof.

Well, she'd have to do a little more digging on the man to ensure she knew everything. All of his dark, sordid secrets. Of course, that didn't mean she couldn't continue to enjoy their current arrangement.

But first, she owed him an update. "I also need to tell you that my meeting with my handler was delayed. We will meet the day after tomorrow."

Griff grunted. "Any idea why they were delayed?"

“No. So, we shall simply have to entertain ourselves in the meantime. I’ll let you know once we meet.” Lou turned and presented her back to him. “Now, would you mind assisting me with my laces? Cordelia seems a bit superfluous at the moment.”

Griff stepped into her and placed a kiss on her bare shoulder. “I’d be more than happy to play the role of your lady’s maid.”

He began unlacing her bodice. Next, he worked the laces of her corset free. Lou hated the damned things, but they were a necessary evil in her line of work. Then he untied her skirt and let that drop to the floor. She tended to skip many of the fashionable supports that went under a lady’s skirts for two reasons. One, as a Madame, men wanted to see her form—to be tempted. And two, because should she need to take action, all of that busyness around her legs would be a nightmare. A corset was manageable, it even offered a bit of protection, but crinolines of any kind were a death trap.

Griff’s hands were skating up her ribs, teasing her flesh with a gentleness contrasted by the roughness of his hands. Lou shivered and exhaled softly as her chemise was whisked over her head, only to join the rest of her clothing in the pile on the floor. Cordelia would be displeased come morning, she could not help but think—but then Griff slid his hands to Lou’s breasts and kneaded them gently, and all thoughts of anyone’s displeasure—well, really, just all thoughts—fled from her mind. She sank back against his chest and let her head loll on his shoulder as he moved on from the wonderful massage to gently rolling and tugging on her rapidly stiffening nipples. Jolts of pleasure rippled the length of her body as her muscles softened at his ministrations.

“Go sit on the bed and wait for me,” Griff demanded in a low, rough tone that had her obeying his command. Anything, so long as he put his hands back on her body.

Lou climbed on the edge of the bed and sat there, eager to see what he would do next,

which was to quickly strip off his clothes. Bared, she could see his hard cock bob as he strode toward her. He reached down and stroked his length once and then twice as she watched before pinching the head of his cock roughly. Lou licked her lips, wanting very much to wrap her lips around that particular appendage, but it seemed Griff had other plans in mind. He came to where she sat on the edge of the bed and dropped to his knees.

Parting her thighs, he looked up at her. “No, lie back and let me feast on this pussy. I’ve thought of little else since I left your bed yesterday.”

She gasped, both thrilled and surprised at his words. Doing as she was told, Lou leaned back onto her elbows so she could watch as he licked her quim. He pressed his hands to her inner thighs and spread her legs wide as he dragged his tongue up her wet entrance, up over her clit in a single long swipe. The pleasure which had been flickering over her body since this had begun darted to her core like metal pulled to a magnet.

He continued to work his tongue over her clit and then around and down to drive into her soaked channel. She moaned and her hips moved, seeking more. More fullness. More pleasure. She wanted it all.

As Griff continued to lick and nibble at her pussy, he slid two fingers inside her...and that was when her elbows gave out. When her body became so consumed by his efforts that watching was no longer needed; feeling was all she could focus on. The stretch of his fingers inside her. The aching need for more. The jolts of pleasure as he stroked over that sensitive spot deep inside.

“That’s it, Lou. Come for me. Come on my fingers and tongue.” His growly command came out as he sank a third finger inside her.

“Please,” she begged. She was not a woman who begged, but she needed this, needed

to release the pressure that had built or she would explode like a wayward steam engine which had a closed release valve. And to her own surprise, she enjoyed surrendering to his will. Begging him for what she needed.

Then Griff curled his fingers inside her as he sucked hard on her clit and her orgasm slammed into her like a locomotive going at full speed. She cried out as her hands fisted in his short hair and she ground her core mercilessly against his face. Her release undulated through her in long punishing waves that stole all thought from her mind and power from her limbs.

Eventually she lay there, replete and exhausted, as he continued to lap at her pussy, gently bringing her down from that explosive orgasm.

Griff rose and crawled over her, his knees perched on the bed, and kissed her gently. She could taste herself on his lips and relished how he smelled and tasted of her. It moved something primal in her, a need to claim him as hers that shocked her to her core. But he gave her no time to dwell on her shocking thoughts. Instead, he flipped her over and lifted her hips, and in a single, claiming thrust, he sank into her from behind.

Griff nearly exploded as Lou's heat eagerly gripped his cock. The way she'd come undone for him had aroused him in a way he'd never experienced before. Her unabashed sensuality stirred something deep within him he had not known he possessed.

He pulled out to his tip then sank deep inside her. She was so strong and independent—and he adored that about her—except in this one way; he needed her to need him. To want him.

So when she tried to take over and drive backward on to him, he reacted instinctively. He sank his fist into her luscious hair and held her still as he continued to work his

cock in and out of her lush body.

She moaned harshly as he tugged at her hair, seeming to love his command even as she pulled against it. “Yes, Griff! Take—take me.” The need in her voice spurred him on.

“That’s it Lou. Take my cock.” He thrust into her over and over, still using her hair as a tether. He wouldn’t last long. “Fuck!”

That was the moment he realized he’d forgotten to don a French letter. He was inside her, skin on skin, no barriers between them. Perhaps that was why this had felt so primal. The way her heat engulfed him had him going up in flames and he knew he was close—but he wasn’t going to allow himself release until...

Griff reached down with his free hand and stroked over Lou’s clit. Once, twice, and then on the third pass, she cried out as she arched into his grip on her hair with a cry that he was certain they heard in the kitchens below. With that, he pulled from her glorious heat and stroked himself with the hand that had been tangled in her hair. A mere three strokes of his cock and he came hard all over her back and quivering arse until he collapsed forward on one hand.

Breathing heavily, Griff straightened up on his knees. With both of his hands, he began massaging the globes of her backside as he imagined sinking between them one day. Would she let me do that to her?

Lou crumpled forward on the bed onto her stomach and lay there for a moment. He realized he was best situated to contend with his seed all over her back, so he grabbed something quickly from the floor and wiped her up. Only then did he realize it was his shirt he was using. “Cog it all!”

Lou rolled over. “What is it?”

“I just used my shirt to clean you off. I’ll have to walk out of here without a shirt.” Griff looked at the cum covered mess in his hand in chagrin. “Clearly my brains were addled from such a fine fucking.” The pleasure that wafted through him like steam from a boiler felt akin to how he felt when a new invention worked as designed. The realization caught him off-guard as he looked down at his cum-soaked shirt.

Lou laughed long and hard as he dropped the shirt to the floor and crawled onto the bed next to her.

“You find that amusing do you?” he demanded as he poked at her ribs.

She howled with laughter as he found her ticklish spots and focused on them. Gasping for air, she begged, “Cease! I promise not to laugh anymore.”

He grinned. “Good. That will teach you.”

She winked. “You could spank me for being such a naughty girl.”

Griff barked a laugh. “Why do I think you would enjoy that far too much?”

Feigning affront, Lou rolled off the bed, her lips parted in a wide smile. “I’m offended by your suggestion.” Then she reached into her wardrobe and tossed a man’s shirt at him. “You’d be surprised how often our guests’ shirts become damaged while at The Market. We tend to keep a good stock of the basic sizes on hand for just such occasions.”

A little unsettled at the reminder of her other profession, Griff took the shirt and tugged it over his head. “Well, I thank you for not sending me home looking as if I was robbed.”

Lou tugged on a silk robe, shielding her lovely body from his gaze. “Well, that

wouldn't do. Can't have men thinking they'd be robbed every time they disrobed at The Market. It would be terrible for business."

He grunted. "Undoubtedly."

For the first time, he stopped to consider what was happening between them. Where was this...going? Certainly, he hoped to discover who hired her to kill him. But what of them? Was there a 'them'?

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Here Lou was—awake, of all things—at the totally unreasonable hour of eight o'clock in the morning to get to Hampstead Heath, the famous dueling grounds, at the agreed upon time to meet with Holt. Despite the ungodly hour of the morning, she was respectfully turned out in a brown tweed riding dress which had left Cordelia in high spirits, since it meant she was permitted to allow her skills as a lady's maid to shine.

In short order, Lou reined her mount to a stop and found a low-hanging branch to tether the horse. She hated that she'd had to leave her steam-cycle at home, but the conveyance wasn't conducive to an incognito meeting; it was far too memorable to use in daylight hours without good reason. She walked a short distance into the trees before the high whistle of a bullfinch could be heard. A moment later, Holt stepped from the shadows of the trees and joined her on the path.

"It is good to see you alive and well," she said, allowing an acerbic tone to coat her words.

Her handler wore a top hat and brown leather skirted coat. The harness she knew he usually wore beneath the open coat would hold his steam-pistol and a blade of some kind. Not unlike herself, Holt was typically well armed.

He nodded. "I apologize for putting you off, but when I learned someone had activated our assignment protocol and sent you a coin without my consent, I needed to retreat and watch. I was curious to see just how compromised our communication channels are. Since no one appeared here yesterday morning at the appointed hour, I can assume this channel is still safe."

“So you are aware that I was activated under false pretenses?” Anger surged through her.

“I am. I’m afraid I could not interfere since I am still trying to sort out who instigated the communication and how. Letting things play out was the best means of uncovering who contacted you.”

“So you let me try and kill an innocent man?” Lou couldn’t hide her upset at that shocking bit of news. How could he?

“I was counting on you to figure it out before things went too far. I’d say that since he was seen leaving The Market late last night—or early this morning, however you prefer to think of it—that you figured out something wasn’t right.” Holt grinned darkly.

“Holton Benjamin Walker I damn near killed the man. It’s a miracle he managed to convince me to stop before it was too late.” She glared at her friend and handler.

“Now that sounds like an interesting story for another time.” He took her hand in his and pulled her into a slow stroll. “But for now, you need to know our assignment protocols are compromised. We shouldn’t meet again for a while, not unless it is an urgent need. Until I figure out how deep the issue goes nobody can be trusted.”

Lou nodded, her pulse thudding a steady, yet inexorable beat. “Agreed. Did you determine who activated me?”

Holt shook his head. “No. They have kept a very low profile since then. I was hoping they knew of the red plumes and would come yesterday morning. But no such luck.”

“I am not surprised. Whoever it was did not come themselves to the warehouse for the dossier drop. They sent to men—real cog-grinder types—with the sparse

documents. So they obviously are not aware of the level of detail you normally provide me.” She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “I am still concerned about the men from the warehouse, particularly the man who called himself Mr. Xavier. They all now obviously know who I am.”

“Mr. Xavier?” Holt asked, his head tilting to one side in confusion.

“Yes. The man who delivered the coin. He was disturbing, to say the least.” She repressed the urge to shiver once again at the mere thought of him.

“How so? Did he try to harm you?” Holt asked, suddenly concerned in a fashion she had never seen from him.

Lou slanted him a look of disbelief. “If he had tried to harm me, he would be dead. I am a trained killer, if you will recall.”

Holt rolled his eyes at her. The nerve of the man! “Yes, yes. That doesn’t make you invincible or incapable of being surprised.”

“I shall remind you that I am quite good at my job—or do I need to provide a demonstration?”

“Not at all, Lou, not at all. I am well aware of your prowess. I shall continue to work on sorting out the entire network. Do you or this Lord Melton have any clues who might want him dead?”

“None. I was hoping you might have some ideas.” The dead-end nature of their discussion still weighed heavily on her shoulders.

“I’ll keep poking about and see what I can learn.” He gave her a queer look, as though he knew something and wasn’t saying it, but then continued, “In the

meantime, you two need to be careful. Possibly consider retreating from normal activities?” Holt didn’t bother to mask the concern in his voice, nor the question. He was well aware a command would have been pointless.

“We shall be careful. But I doubt I shall be able to keep him from his own investigation, let alone convince him to retreat.” She hated admitting it, but Griff was a determined man. And frankly, she wanted to solve the mystery too.

“Do what you can. And please, keep him alive.” Holt’s serious gaze bore into her as if to emphasize his point.

Surprise pinged around inside her like a thrown rod in an engine. She’d already intended to do exactly that, but to have Holt specifically order her to do so was so extraordinary. But then, what about this whole job had been ordinary? “Not that I was planning to do otherwise, but what precisely makes you order that?”

Holt hesitated. “He is a peer of the realm. Queen Victoria generally frowns upon her peers being killed willy-nilly.” He started to leave but stopped to face her. “And whatever you do, don’t get your heart broken.”

Lou eyed her friend suspiciously. “What do you know?”

“Just that he was seen leaving The Market the other morning, as I said. I assumed you were using your cover as it was designed, since that also allows you to stay close to him.” He half smiled. “But now I can see the soft glow in your eyes when you talk about him. I’ve not seen that before. Not even for that boy you were sweet on as a girl.”

She stiffened at his words, at the subtle reminder of who she’d perhaps once been. “He’s a former mark who I’ve agreed to help in exchange for his information. I am not falling for anyone, not when I’ve only known him for a few days.” Lou pushed

the niggling voice of dissent aside.

“You know him far better than you think, if you’ve studied his dossier—even the half-arsed one you were likely given. Just be careful. I’m not sure even in these modern times that a lord can look beyond your history to see the woman worth claiming.”

She hated when Holt flustered her like that. Oh, he sometimes did it simply because he knew it bothered her. But this time his voice held a ring of truth, of genuine concern that rankled far more than his playful reminders that she was more than her job. “You know I have a plan. One plan. Survive and retire by the shore somewhere in a small cottage where I don’t have to be bothered—by anyone.”

“I’ve always pictured you retiring to become an air-ship pirate.” Holt quipped at her, dredging up the old joke between them that started the first time they flew together.

“You know I hate flying, Holt. It doesn’t agree with me.” Lou drew in a deep breath then released it. “I know what I want, and eventually I am going to follow through on my plan. This was never meant to be my life.”

On a soft sigh, he said, “I know what you think you want.” Then he reached up and traced the curve of her cheek. “I just hope you find what you need before it is too late.”

With that, Holt turned and faded into the elm trees, leaving her alone on the secluded path, wondering if she had missed something about her longtime friend.

Could he have a *tendre* for her?

Holt was an attractive man who, had they met under different circumstances, she might have considered a love interest. But he’d been there when she’d thought she

was in love as a young woman—just after the first job he’d hired her and her uncle for. Holt had been the one to ferret out the cruel trick a neighbor boy had been playing on her with his friends, making her think he was smitten with her so he could take her to the spring dance the nearby village held every year. Holt was the big brother she’d never had. It could never be.

She hoped for his sake she was mistaking the signals.

With that thought chilling her, Lou hurried back to her horse. She wanted to see where Holt headed next, then she would speak with Griff. She circled back around and glimpsed who she believed was Holt leaving the heath. Keeping a discreet distance, she tailed him to a house on Portman Square. It was a quaint little affair midway down the street, obviously well kept. Taking note of the address, she barreled past just as a delivery wagon blocked her view.

It was an unusual circumstance that had her following Holt, but she felt compelled to confirm that all was as it should be with him. Something felt off, and her instincts demanded she have answers. Holt’s absence for much of this situation, paired with his guidance at their meeting, worried her. She would need to come back later and look around his home when he was certain to not be here.

With that decided, she departed. She should send for Griff to share her news, though it would be a long wait until this evening, and parts of her ached for him which absolutely should not.

A thought flickered through Lou’s mind. If they had been seen at The Market, there was no reason she couldn’t visit him during the day. After all, mistresses were common visitors to their single patrons’ homes in the Victorian era.

With that notion set in her mind, she headed toward his home on Curzon Street. What harm could come from a late morning visit of his known mistress?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Griff had retreated to his laboratory hours ago to recalibrate himself. Having sex with Lou—twice, no less!—had proven unexpectedly dangerous to his peace of mind.

Mind you, he was no monk. He tumbled a willing woman when the desire moved him, and he'd even kept a mistress or two along the way. But never had he experienced such pleasure between the sheets; a pleasure that rivaled the thrill of a new idea or having solved a design problem in one of his inventions. He still found the similarity deeply disturbing. After he had grabbed a few hours of sleep after their early morning parting at The Market, he had slipped into his sanctuary to ground himself in his one true love—tinkering.

He'd just tightened a bolt on the improved steam-loom he'd been working to perfect off and on for months, and was about to fire the thing up for the first time to see how much faster it was than current looms, but froze with his stopwatch in hand when the steam whistle sounded. That was Higgins' signal that Griff's presence was required upstairs. Blast it.

With a frustrated sigh, Griff slipped off his leather apron, rolled down his sleeves, and donned his suit coat as he made his way back up to his library.

The fireplace had just slid back into place as Higgins knocked then announced his visitor. "Madame LaRoux to see you, my lord."

Great Trevithick! What is she doing in my home in broad daylight?

"Lord Melton, I do apologize for dropping in unannounced." Lou swept into his library, looking every inch the elegant lady, from her dazzling brown tweed riding

gown trimmed with leather and brass toggles down the front, to her matching brown velvet top hat set at a jaunty angle.

She was simply stunning, and to his surprise, respectably clothed in a dress—not trousers. Perhaps it was less surprise, and more disappointment? In either case, she was in his library and looking ravishing.

Right. Words. “Madame, what an unexpected pleasure. Higgins, please send tea in for myself and my lovely guest.”

“Very good, my lord.”

As soon as he was alone with Lou, Griff asked the question burning on his tongue. “What the devil are you doing here in the middle of the day?”

“I am aware we discussed the need to be more circumspect regarding our acquaintance. However, it was brought to my attention this morning that the powers on high are already aware of our association.” She lifted both brows to emphasize her point, which struck him as odd that she wouldn’t simply say the words.

“Please, don’t be delicate on my account. What precisely do they know?”

She huffed in annoyance. “They are aware that you have engaged me as your mistress. There is little point in hiding our association. As it is not uncommon for known mistresses to visit their patrons in this day and age, I saw no reason not to come and share with you some information.”

Information? Now she had his utter attention. “Do go on.”

“As you know, I sent word that I required a meeting with my handler and our meeting was delayed. I finally met with him this morning.”

“And what did he tell you?” Griff’s frustration grew by the second as he waited for her to reveal something important.

“First, that he did not order your death—which we had already surmised—and he requested that we retreat from our normal activities while he attempts to discover who initiated our protocol.” She shared the request with an admirable calm, which was the absolute opposite of the anger he felt surging through his system.

“Retreat from our normal activities? He can’t be serious! Parliament is in session, I cannot possibly miss every vote.” Griff turned and stalked across the room, leaving Lou where she stood. Carding his hand through one side of his hair, he spun around and stalked back towards her. “Minor votes, certainly, fine—but there will be critical legislation I must vote on. And how could he reasonably expect me not to investigate who is trying to kill me?”

“Well, I dare say I understand his request, even if I have no intention of fulfilling it.” Lou shrugged one shoulder and walked over to take a seat on the settee near the fire without invitation. “Barring our retreat, he did ask that we be careful. He was also the one to point out that word was already traveling of our relationship.”

“I see. Well, I suppose it matters little if everyone knows I am alive and engaging in an affair with you.” Griff waved a hand to indicate that was of little concern, though was still upset over the request to stay out of the search for his would-be killer. “However, as you have indicated I shall do no such thing. Lie low indeed!” He paced about again, trying to sort through the little they did know. “By the by, what did your ladies glean from their time with my friends?”

Lou smiled. “Captain Colechester appears to have some questionable activities outside of his claimed profession of importer-exporter, but nothing that seems to indicate he might be connected to this plot in any way.”

“Excellent news.” Griff couldn’t ignore the relief that swept through him at the news. Cole, at times, felt like his last bastion of friendship—pirate or not. “And Dell?”

Her soft smile slipped from her face at his question. “Elena did not identify anything that... specifically suggests Dell is responsible, or even connected to this issue. But she did note he holds some concerning views on steam when compared to your voting record in Lords—and particularly when he is the Under-Secretary of Steam at the Bureau of Modern Technology, which you failed to mention last night, I may add.”

He sighed. “He chose to wear a mask, so I assumed he was looking for some level of distance from his official title, hence my leaving it off. As for the rest, I am well aware of Dell’s stance on steam technology. I suppose that is why they made him Under Secretary, to ensure that the person holding the position wasn’t such a supporter that they ignored any alarming activities.”

“Yes, well, I dare say I wouldn’t trust the man until more can be learned about his connections and associations,” Lou said quietly. “I might even discourage you from associating with him.”

Griff continued his pacing, struggling with the desire to be loyal to his friend in the knowledge that Lou spoke the truth. He shoved his fingers through his hair again and growled in frustration.

Fabulous. What else could go wrong?

The door to the library flew open as his mother sailed through the entrance in a bronze day dress with white ribbon trailing from her sleeves, and Higgins floating in her wake.

“Griffin darling, we must speak—I’m afraid Higgins must be getting a bit slapdash, the man tried to bar me from the house as though I were some ordinary visitor!

Nonetheless, I need to speak to you about the Garden Association's...Charity...Auction." She stopped halfway across the room as Lou shifted on the settee in a futile attempt to be less noticeable.

"Mother." Griff pinched the bridge of his nose and begged Trevithick for patience. Cog it all!

"Oh, I see you have a guest." His mother turned to take in the sight of Lou on the settee, who was looking a bit pale. "Well, Griffin, aren't you going to introduce me?"

Lou leapt up and curtsied. "Excuse me, my lady. I was just on my way out."

The door to the library opened again and in walked his brother, grasping in his hand the latest gossip rag. "Bloody hell Griff, why must I read in the papers about your new bit o'—"

Griff cleared his throat loudly to stop his brother from saying anything further. Luckily, the fool looked up before he ran into their mother—but it was a close call.

"Oh, hello, Mother. Did you see the bit about Griff as well?" Piers kissed their mother's cheek and plodded across the room to where Griff stood in shock.

"Bit about what?" she asked before turning to Lou with a smile. "I never read those gossip rags." Then her head whipped back around to Griff as something seemed to occur to her. "Oh my! Could it be true?" The Dowager Countess turned toward Lou, clapped her hands, and rushed to where she still stood looking like a deer about to bolt. "You are a darling girl! Of course it must be true. You've caught my Griffin's eye, haven't you?" His mother turned to face him. "She's the one you mentioned in the garden the other day!"

Griff winced, instantly regretting his small fib. Lou might have turned even paler at

that point, but at that point, he was too focused on shutting his brother up to notice. “Piers, for the love of Trevithick, shut your trap.”

His brother complied, but by then it was too late. His mother had Lou wrapped in a warm embrace. “You young modern couples, did he even bother to ask your father for your hand? I should be furious that I am just meeting you, but I had given up hope of his marrying so I shall simply resolve to be thrilled by this turn of events, and not furious for you two hiding it from me.”

His mother let Lou go and stood back, beaming from ear to ear. Lou looked as if she’d just been run down by a steam locomotive, which the Dowager Countess of Melton had oft been compared to.

Lou blinked, her face a rictus of confusion. “I...I beg your pardon?”

“No need, dearest—oh.” His mother stopped for a moment. “I’m embarrassed to say I don’t know your name. Who are your people?”

Griff wanted to curse a blue streak, but there was little he could do, short of telling his mother this was his mistress; and for reasons he could neither explain nor did he wish to examine too closely, the truth might as well be steam vapor on his tongue. “Mother, please allow me to introduce Miss Louisa—” His gaze dashed wildly about the room for inspiration, which he found by the fireplace. “Bellows.”

His mother smiled through her confusion. “Miss Bellows?”

Griff moved across the room and took up reluctant residence at Lou’s side, banking on his mother’s manners, overriding her shock that Lou was not of the peerage. “Yes. She snuck in and stole my heart as we worked on legislation to help better the plight of women everywhere. She’s a truly progressive woman, though I am pleased she still agreed to marry me.”

The weight of Lou's startled gaze had him reaching to tug at his collar and cravat. Steaming Hells! He should just tell his mother the truth right now. This was not going to end well.

It occurred to him in that moment that one or the other of the two women involved may at some point in the very near future throttle him over this. Oh, well. They'd have to argue it between them...

His mother looked flustered as she absorbed the implication that her eldest son's fiancée was not of their social set. But, being the gracious woman he'd always loved, she pushed past the news quickly. "Well, I dare say my Griffin has always been unconventional." She clapped her hands and beamed. "You both simply must come to dinner tonight. We can discuss the auction and I shall have a chance to become better acquainted with your betrothed. Poor woman, I hardly know you! We must correct that oversight immediately."

Panic tightened the invisible noose about his neck until Griff could barely squeeze the words out. "I'm afraid—"

His mother put her hand up as though to stop the words he would speak. "I shall not take no for an answer, John Englebert Griffin. I shall expect you promptly at eight tonight. And you of course, my dear." His mother strode over to the still frozen Lou, engulfed her in another hug, and then sailed from the room, leaving the three of them standing in stunned silence.

Piers broke the silence first. "Well, that is rather annoying. Apparently, I was not included in that invitation." He sniffed in affront before stepping over to the scotch decanter and helping himself a drink.

Lou was gazing at Griff in utter horror. "What just happened?"

He sighed and dropped into his desk chair. “My mother happened.”

His new fiancée drew a breath then stormed over to his desk, where she leaned over it and glared at him. “I believe you just told your mother you were engaged to your mistress. To me .”

She all but yelled the last part as Piers sputtered and coughed on his drink. “You did what?”

Ignoring his little brother, she carried on, having finally gotten the steam flowing again. “And now we shall have to dine with her and continue to lie to her, because you failed to come up with some other contrivance to allay the confusion without telling her I warm your bed . This is an utter disaster!”

Griff rather agreed, and he’d like to blame his mother for jumping to conclusions and his brother for adding to the confusion by his absorption with the latest gossip...but in truth, the fault lay with him. He could have calmly told his mother Lou was a political acquaintance or some such, a wife of another lord, something, anything—and let her slip away. But when his mother had latched on to the notion of their engagement, despite the flare of panic, something deep and unexpected had warmed him to the notion.

Even as the intriguing woman stood over him, fuming with indignation and outrage snapping in her big dark brown eyes, he found her both beautiful and alluring in the most intense fashion. He found it quite startling to realize that he liked it: he liked the idea of possibly marrying her.

It was rather unfortunate that she was not as welcoming of the notion.

But perhaps with the need to keep up their little ruse for his mother, he could convince her otherwise? All the while, they could sort out who was trying to kill him.

It would certainly permit them more time together in Society.

A capital idea . “Now, Lou. I know this is not what we had originally planned, but I believe it will work.”

Her brows flew up toward her hairline as her face turned a bright pink. “How—how could you think this is a good idea? I cannot be your fiancé! I am a Madame!” Her hand slammed down on the cherry-wood desk in punctuation of her declaration.

Not unlike a steam engine where the steam fueled the mechanism causing the pistons to fire, something else seemed to generate Lou’s visceral reaction. “It’s not as though we’ll actually get married,” Griff said bracingly. He’d never cared much about Society, or his title, or his position within the Ton, so being ostracized for a connection to a woman of Lou’s known profession wasn’t much of a concern for him.

If they learned he was The Lord of Cogs...well, that would go far worse for him than merely being engaged to a Madame.

“You won’t be getting married?” Piers looked wholly confused.

His question had both Griff and Lou turning to the interloper and yelling in unison, “Stay out of this!”

The man put up his hands as if to ward off their mutual verbal assault.

Griff drew a calming breath and reiterated his statement. “We need only bring my mother along for the ruse long enough to solve the mystery. Then we can break off this false engagement, call it irreconcilable differences, or you can blame me, whatever. Either way, we can spend all the time we need together and address the issue at hand.”

Lou stared at him for a moment then spun away, stalking over to the fireplace where she picked up the poker and viciously stabbed at the logs.

Piers leaned into Griff and once again spoke out of turn. “You sure you want to marry that one? She’s got quite a temper.”

Lou jabbed the poker repeatedly into a log.

“Seems a little violent, even.” Piers’ eyebrows rose.

Of course, his brother couldn’t do subtle, so Lou heard every word.

Griff took a long, deep, exhausted breath. “As I said, we shall not actually marry in the long run. But if I were to do so, I would consider Miss Bellows an admirably suitable candidate. Now Piers, please remove yourself from this discussion and my library. You’ve already heard too much.”

A touch of hurt softened his brother's familiar blue-gray eyes before he smartly bowed and departed the room.

Griff cursed and pinched the bridge of his nose again. “Why is it that nothing goes as planned in my life?”

“Perhaps it is poor planning on your part?” Lou suggested tartly as she returned to her seat on the settee.

A knock on the library door announced the arrival of Higgins with the tea cart.

Griff’s shoulders loosened. “Come, Lou. Let us take tea and see if we can sort this mess out.”

She nodded with what could have been resignation in her eyes. “Indeed, we need to discuss your cover story, now that you’ve created the most ridiculous story to tell your mother. I have learned sticking to the truth—or as close as you can, under the circumstances—is the best course. Far easier to remember.”

Griff hoped that was true, for he had a pit in his stomach that had nothing to do with the constant need that burned for her in his belly and everything to do with her discovering the truth.

Perhaps I should come clean? Tell her who I am?

He dismissed the idea as quickly as it came. If anyone discovered who he was, he would have far greater things to worry about than to whom he was engaged. He would likely lose his ability to function in Parliament—no one would negotiate with him—if he wasn’t forced to resign his seat entirely. As long as nobody knew he was the Lord of Cogs, that wouldn’t happen—and it surely couldn’t be related to the assassination attempt. Just in case, he would send a note around to his point of contact at the Tinkers, see if they had heard anything.

But first, he needed to convince Lou this would work. “Very well. We will stick to the story that we were working on legislation. How likely do you believe it that anyone might recognize you as Madame LaRoux?”

“I should think very few men would since, despite being a prominent figure in the house, I always wear a mask. For those that might, the question is, how likely are they to mention it? That I don’t know. Men wear masks at The Market far less than they once did. The sexual freedom of the steam age is real and has been good for business.” Lou shrugged.

“Assuming our ruse progresses far enough to force you into Society, I believe we brazen through it. Many will cut me out, but the truth is I haven’t moved around

Society much at all in the last few years. I'd likely lose my membership at Boodle's, but I think I'd be safe at the Athenaeum. They have suspended any morality clauses outside of working for the public good." Griff watched her as she took in what he said. Would she agree?

She shook her head. "If we are to play this out and then break, I must insist you are the one to break it off. You will spurn me for taking another lover. I have no reputation to protect, whereas if I break with you, you and your family would be ruined in Society."

"I've told you I have no care for Society. I never attend balls and I had—ahem, have—no intention of marrying. I plan to pass the title to my brother who will no doubt be captured by some debutante in the near future." Griff's gut tightened. It wasn't totally a lie. He hadn't planned to marry until he'd made up this fake engagement. "My family's reputation will be maintained through Piers."

Lou seemed to consider his earnestness for a long moment with a glare. "Do you want my cooperation or not, Griff?"

"Fine, I will break with you when the time comes." He had to work hard to keep the grin from his face. Her demand worked in his favor, since he wanted very much to convince her to make this real. Now he had time to do just that.

"Good. Now, we should strive to keep this as private a matter as is possible. We need your mother to stay quiet about it long enough to go unremarked when we split." She looked...well, satisfied, if not pleased.

"Agreed." Although he highly doubted such a thing would be possible.

"Very well, I should return to The Market to change for dinner. To avoid you being seen with me there, I shall meet you here for dinner. We can take your carriage from

here.”

“Oh course, dear.” He winked at her as she scowled at his endearment. Oh, this was going to be great fun wooing this woman.

Lou couldn’t believe she’d agreed to play his fiancée for Griff’s mother!

But somehow, by the end of tea, he had talked her around to the charade. It would at least keep her close to him, should another assassin be sent in her stead, something she could not yet discount.

And now she had to dress for dinner, and she had very few gowns that were suitable for supping with a dowager countess, let alone one’s faux future mother-in-law. Lou eyed the turquoise gown with a critical eye while Cordelia bustled around her laying out undergarments and other necessary items.

“It will do, as long as you tuck a bit of lace in the neckline,” her maid had nodded confidently. “Besides, the blue makes your eyes sparkle.”

Lou had still felt dubious about any of her evening gowns being appropriate for a countess, but Griff approved the choice heartily when she arrived to collect him for dinner. As they entered his mother’s townhouse, Lou’s trepidation increased.

That was, until Griff’s mother swept into the foyer to greet them with a huge smile and hugs all around. “I am very pleased that you came to dinner.”

Lou smiled, and it was genuine. “It was a gracious invitation in light of the afternoon’s surprises.”

“Mother has always been a beacon of kindness,” Griff offered as he swept Lou’s arm into the crook of his. “Are we starting in the salon or straight for the dining room?”

“The salon, please,” trilled Lady Melton. “I have plans to rake you both over the coals this evening. I simply must learn everything about our dear Miss Bellows.”

Lou’s face heated at the idea she would be the focus of the evening. She had never been one to seek attention, always happier hiding in the shadows unobserved.

“Now, Mother, don’t terrify her.”

Now that suggestion made Lou snort softly. Terrify her? A woman who had killed more people than Griff had ever—

“We shall answer your questions as best we can,” Griff recovered neatly. “But she is still to be permitted some privacy.”

“Of course, dear. I am simply beside myself with curiosity about the woman who could catch your eye after all these years.” His mother beamed as she settled onto a chair and indicated they should join her in the adjacent seats.

Lou did as bid and settled in for a long, painful visit. Honestly, she’d rather be visiting the blacksmith to have a tooth extracted than talking about herself to anyone.

Griff shot a worried glance her way, but she retained her calm exterior in hopes it would settle him. One of them had to retain control.

“Now, tell me where you are from?” the Dowager Countess started, going right to the heart of the matter.

Lou cringed inwardly and hoped for the best. Mothers were far more discerning than most marks. Particularly this one. Lady Melton was a force to be reckoned with in society—even Lou had heard of her. “I hail from London.”

“Truly? And we’ve never met before now? What part?” Lady Melton drilled in for the details.

“Mayfair, but I lost my parents as a child and moved to the country.” Her uncle had been rich enough from his work to own a lovely estate in Bedfordshire. Her stomach churned like a tempest at speaking of her parents, though she had not said their names. She had not spoken their names in years.

Sir Charlton and Lady Esmerelda Stanton.

“How sad. Was it a family member who took you in?”

“Indeed,” Lou offered, sticking as close to the truth as she could without revealing too much. If Lady Melton dug too deep, she would quickly discern where the lies began.

She did not wish to share her uncle’s name, under the circumstances. The last thing she needed was Lady Melton looking her uncle up and inviting him to dinner. The man would revel in revealing the truth of who and what Lou was to the society matron.

Her dishonorable killer of an uncle who had turned his back on her when she chose to work for the Crown putting her skills to good use instead of killing on behalf of the highest bidder, would downplay his role in her life. Nor would he explain how he had stolen her inheritance—with the exception of her childhood home—leaving her without two pence to rub together unless she chose to sell it. That betrayal had been gut wrenching.

Not elegant pre-dinner conversation.

“As should any good family member,” nodded Lady Melton approvingly. “It just

breaks my heart when I hear of families turning children out.”

“Yes, it is a sad state of affairs.” Lou nodded and prayed for the dinner chimes to ring.

“Now Griff, how is it that Miss Bellows stole your heart?” His mother turned her focus on her son, much to Lou’s relief.

“Please, Mother.” Griff sounded as uncomfortable as Lou felt with what surely would have to be a purely fabricated story.

“Tell me the tale and I shall cease pestering you.” His mother’s firm gaze and earnestness seemed to sway him.

“Very well. We met when she came to call to discuss parliamentary issues of some mutual concern. She practically stole my breath when I saw her.” Griff stopped to offer Lou a conspiratorial grin. “Once we spoke for a few moments, I was quite taken with her and asked if I might call upon her to...to collaborate on the issue which was important to us both. She agreed, albeit reluctantly, one thing led to another...and here we are.”

Lou was impressed by his version of events. He’d stuck as close to the truth as he could with a few embellishments, but many, many omissions. It was really quite impressive.

“Well, it all sounds rather sudden,” Lady Melton said, arching an eyebrow. “Have you even properly courted the woman, Griffin?”

Lou coughed and tried to hide her smile behind her hand but was rescued by Lady Melton’s butler stepping into the room to ring the dinner gong. It was a small reprieve but one she, and she assumed Griff, was grateful for.

And as promised, the Dowager Countess stuck to discussing the charity auction she was co-chairing through the rest of the meal—at least, until she started telling tales of Griff’s wayward childhood.

“He was always getting into trouble,” his mother laughed, clearly relishing the memory of her son as a boy. “There was the time he was punished for a month because he lost the pantry key. It took us days to finally find the key. I was quite put out with him.”

Lou looked at a ruddy cheeked Griff who grunted at his mother’s story.

“Then there was the time he decided to run away when he was eight. He was very upset after his father punished him for taking apart the mule cart so he could see how it worked.” Lady Melton grinned at Griff, and Lou’s heart squeezed a little in her chest. “He was so inquisitive as a boy. Well, he packed a knapsack with his most prized possessions and left Melton House. He hadn’t even gotten off the estate when he realized Piers, who was only five then, had followed him down the very long lane that served as our driveway. Apparently he tried to send him back, but Piers refused to leave his side.” She took a sip of her wine. “By the time I found them, Piers was having a full on tantrum in the lane and Griff was attempting to calm him down.” Griff groaned, much to Lou’s delight. “The utter panic in Griff’s eyes as Piers lay there flailing his little arms and legs was so amusing, I laughed for days after...”

By the time Lou and Griff escaped back into his carriage, she was tired but in possession of far more insight into the man than was likely comfortable for anyone. She couldn’t help but see Griff through a different lens after hearing all of the stories of his childhood.

“Tell me Griff, where precisely did you hide the pantry key?” Lou asked, returning with a grin to one of the Countess’s stories about her son.

“I did in fact genuinely lose the thing, it’s just that it happened in a storm while I was flying a kite.” He stared at the floor of the carriage as his cheeks reddened enough to be visible in the passing steam-lights.

Lou snorted as it occurred to her what he’d been doing. “A disciple of Benjamin Franklin, are you?”

Griff glanced at her, clearly startled. “No, not a disciple. Just a curious boy who heard about an experiment and wanted to try it. The problem came when the wind ripped it from my hands.” He offered a lopsided smile that was handsome, even as it offered her a glimpse of the boy he’d once been.

“Oh, poor little Griff. And I assume you lied to your mother for fear of giving her an apoplexy?” Lou couldn’t control the ridiculous feeling of sympathy for the boy who’d lost the pantry key as her heart swelled with—no, she refused to acknowledge any such thing.

“More out of a strongly developed sense of self-preservation. My father was not one to tolerate my scientific interests, as you heard. He took every opportunity to remind me that I was the son of a peer and did not need to soil my hands with work .” Griff stopped talking, a sudden tension filling the cabin of the carriage.

“So...if the key was lost, how was it later found?” Lou asked, curious how he replaced the key.

“That was Piers’ doing. He acquired a skeleton key from somewhere—I’ve no clue where—and planted it where mother was looking. He’s always been a resourceful one. I suspect he sweet-talked one of the housemaids into providing the replacement. I was twelve then and about to leave for school for the first time, so Piers was nine and already a charmer.”

“You were twelve when you went to school for the first time?” Lou found she enjoyed hearing about young Griff far too much.

“Yes, my mother refused to let me leave at ten. My father always insisted she coddled me too much.” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but Lou could see the tightness around his eyes when he spoke of his father. He had not had a good relationship with the man.

That realization made her heart ache for the boy he had been. While part of her wanted to comfort him, the greater urge was to take him to bed and make the past retreat back into the shadows.

But then the vehicle drew to a stop and the door opened at the rear of The Market, so Lou embraced her last impulse to make him forget. “Perhaps you’d like to come inside and soil your hands another way?”

Lou couldn’t explain the need to be near him, to comfort him—but it drove her to make the offer and sit there quietly, waiting for his answer as though waiting for a bullet to fly from a steam-pistol.

He nodded and followed her from the vehicle as he ordered the carriage home for the evening.

What am I doing? While their contract was still in place, she was no longer required to play the role of mistress, now she had the new one of fiancé. And yet, despite only two nights in Griff’s arms, she was curious to see if a third night would feel as magical. Or had she made it all up in her own mind?

Holt’s words surfaced in her mind: they were supposed to be lying low.

But she could slip him up the back stairs and— this is a terrible idea . But he was

following her inside, and she knew she wouldn't send him away now.

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When they reached her private rooms, Lou took Griff by the hand and led him to the small settee. With a gentle concern that she could not have explained, never having possessed much of a nurturing aspect, she urged him to sit as she poured him a drink. Once he was settled, she slipped into her bedchamber to change into something more...enticing.

Fortunately, Cordelia sat dozing on the chaise by the window. With a quick nudge of her maid, they set to work morphing Lou from sweet fiancée into a wanton temptress in a matter of minutes. After all, the latter was a role she was far more comfortable playing. Dressed in a deep red silk nightgown with small ribbons at her shoulders and on each side to keep the scrap of fabric in place, plunging into a daring vee between her breasts and down her back, the two side ties created side slits that exposed her long legs and, with a few strategic tugs, would bare her for Griff's delectation. Coiffure unpinned and smoothed into a soft brown wave of hair, Lou dabbed a bit of carmine on her lips and nodded as Cordelia made her exit.

Lou took a deep breath, confident she was ready for the man who awaited her in the next room.

The moment she stepped into the sitting room, Griff turned his gaze on her and time seemed to stop. Starting at the tips of her toes, he drew his gaze up her body, slowly absorbing the full effect of her efforts. In what she guessed was a largely unconscious gesture, he licked his lips which had her trembling with need in the blink of an eye. He continued his way north, skimming over the display of creamy flesh as her nipples pebbled against the soft material in an obvious display of her desire. When he reached her face and their gazes collided, Lou's breath caught in her lungs at the sheer need splashed across his face. Eyes dilated, jaw clenched, and a tiny pulse of a

vein at his temple told her all she needed to know.

“Come here, woman.” Griff held his hand out in invitation.

There was no question she would cross over to him, but she chose to draw the moment out, one slow step at a time, letting anticipation build between them. Each leisurely step designed to seduce, to tantalize, she made her way toward him while his gaze dipped down to where her leg peeked from the red silk and then back to her face. “While I enjoyed dinner—much to my surprise—I still found myself waiting hungrily for this moment all evening.”

A low growl rumbled from his chest. “As have I.”

Her hand touched his, and without a further word, Griff hauled her into his arms and proceeded to devour her mouth with his, a sensual melding of lips, and teeth, and tongues. He tasted and teased her until her head spun from lack of air. Finally Griff eased to the right, dropping kisses over her cheek and down her neck. A shudder of desire ripped along Lou’s spine as his hard cock pressed against her belly, reminding her of the pleasure to come. His kisses turned to nibbles and bites which had her hips grinding against him. The room, or perhaps her body, had grown heated with their passion, the friction of the silk almost too much against her skin and she felt the tug of a ribbon at her shoulder even as both his hands gripped her bottom.

A moan ripped free from her throat as cool air brushed her skin, followed by the molten heat of his mouth on her breast. Her fake fiancé kissed his way further south, following the material until he found the plump tip of her nipple. Like the silk of her negligee, she drooped against him as he sucked on the sensitive tip.

“Griff.” Lou clutched at his head, her fingers digging into his hair as though she clung to a bulkhead to survive a storm-tossed air-ship.

The relentless man moved to her other breast, latching on through the silk as his hands reached down to gather the material below. When the cooler air hit her legs she shivered, but Griff was undeterred as he reached between her thighs to stroke and caress her slit. Gentle at first, he swept the pad of his finger over her clit once, twice, three times. A tide of desire rose from where he touched her, growing into a tight ball of needy hunger, her toes curl into the Aubusson carpet as he sucked harder on her tip while sliding two fingers deep inside her cunny.

With a steady curl of his fingers, he sent pleasure spiking through her like a steam valve exploding from the buildup of pressure.

“Griff!” Lou clung to him as her world vaporized into a steamy mist of bliss and he continued to cradle her, lapping at her breast as she gently floated back to reality and the powerful circle of his arms.

Only then did Griff lifted his mouth from her person and offer her a rakish grin, full of satisfaction at having obviously turned her world inside out.

Determined to undo him as thoroughly as he had her, Lou withdrew from his arms and peeled his coat and waistcoat from his shoulders without saying a word. Next she worked his cravat loose and plucked at his buttons until his shirt opened, exposing his flesh to her touch. She paused to rub her hands over his well-honed torso. Truly she thought the Greek God of War, Mars, would be pea green with envy of Griff’s fine physical form. Dropping his shirt along with his other clothes, Lou sank to her knees before him and opened his trousers.

And there it was. His erection pushed toward her, hard and long and seemingly in want of her touch—and she was happy to oblige. Like Venus, often portrayed with one breast exposed, she left her nightgown exactly as he’d left it—in partial disarray—as she focused on pleasuring her man.

With warm, steady hands, she stroked Griff's shaft from tip to root and then slipped his head into her eager mouth. The saltiness of his essence struck Lou's palate, making her body ache for him. As she swallowed him deeper he half groaned, half growled as he sank his fingers into her hair. She moaned around him, wanting, needing more. As though he knew what she desired, he held her head and pushed himself forward, plunging deeper into her mouth. With her hands on his hips, her fingers dug into his flesh as he thrust shallowly again and again, giving her as much pleasure as he was taking.

That was, until suddenly he had slipped from between her lips and pulled her to her feet. "I need to be inside you."

Scooping her up, he carried Lou into the bedchamber where he laid her on the bed. She pushed to sitting, but he stopped her with a shake of his head. "No, lay back."

Sinking back down to the mattress, she watched in admiration as he finished stripping. Naked, Griff crawled on the bed and loomed over her, desire drawing his features taut. Hands trembling, he reached up and, with the tug of a few ribbons, drew her negligee aside to stare reverently at her body.

For the first time in her life, Lou felt...beautiful. Honored. It was so foreign a feeling that it felt like wearing an ill-fitting gown. It made her want to shift about restlessly.

With the tip of his finger, Griff traced a line from collar bone to collar bone and then down between her breasts, causing her nipples to pucker with need which thankfully distracted her from her mental wanderings. He continued his path down over her mons and along her slit then spread her legs with a nudge of his hands. He reached over to her bedside table where a French letter lay waiting and quickly donned the covering before shifting until he was between her knees. Taking a long slow breath then releasing it, he pressed his cock to her opening and pushed deep inside her. As he sank to the base of his shaft, Lou reveled in the sensation of him filling her up,

deeper and deeper—and then he shifted direction, withdrawing to his tip before plunging back in.

Oh God, yes. She cried out unintelligibly with an ecstatic joy that both overwhelmed and comforted.

Griff set a pace, sure to carry them both over the edge, and Lou surrendered to the pleasure as he pulled her over. With a shout of bliss, her body convulsed and splintered into a thousand pieces but her ecstasy proved no distraction. He continued to thrust into her, pushing her into a second climax before he found his own. He groaned her name, a rough benediction as he collapsed on top of her.

Lou lay there, the weight of him on top of her, and instead of feeling smothered or trapped, a sense of peace invaded her body—and, if she dared consider it, her soul. The utter contentment of being touched, the connection to another human being, was the very thing she had always believed she could find in a cottage by the sea...alone. It had never occurred to her such a feeling could come from spending time with another person. People had always eventually disappointed or abandoned her.

Until...now.

A wave of heat rolled through her, stealing Lou's breath until she found herself in need of some space. Just a breath of cool air to bring order to her scattered thoughts and disjointed emotions. Surely she was being beyond foolish, thinking that anyone could be relied upon to give her that long-sought feeling of peace? No, her cottage by the sea was the place she would find such a thing; certainly not in the arms of a man she had only recently tried to kill.

With a press of her hand to his shoulder, she silently urged Griff off her and quickly rolled off the mattress. Not bothering with a robe and ignoring the ewer and water by her bed, she strode to her water closet. It was one of her least-favorite upgrades to

The Market; that was until now, when it allowed her a moment of seclusion.

She drew a deep breath and calmed the chaotic confusion of emotions raging through her. Forehead pressed to the door, she absorbed the cool air and the cooler wood, letting it chill her until gooseflesh rose over her arms and chest. Certain she was once again herself, she pulled the chain flushing the loo and re-entered her chamber.

Griff sat on the edge of the bed, half-dressed and looking almost as uncomfortable as she had felt only moments before. “I—I should go. It wouldn’t do for me to be seen leaving here in the morning light, now my mother is involved.”

“Agreed.” Lou tipped her head to the side, considering his words. “Could your mother possibly discover who I really am?”

He paused as if the notion had only just occurred to him. “I shouldn’t think so. I assume you always wear a mask at The Market?”

She nodded. Was the man headed for Bedlam? “Unquestionably! It wouldn’t do for me to be so recognizable as an assassin. Anonymity would be difficult if every man in London who came through these doors recognized me on the street.”

“Good, I think she is unlikely to recognize you, though if we are seen coming and going from here then it might be a cause for concern. One I should have considered before now.” Griff paused as he tied his cravat from memory. “I don’t suppose you have another residence at hand that you could use in lieu of The Market for a few weeks while we sort this out?”

Lou did, but it was the house she grew up in, bequeathed to her on her parents’ death. She hadn’t set foot inside in over two decades, though she paid an older couple to live there and keep things in working order. It was strange, but she found she could neither part with the house nor occupy it, and letting it to rent was out of the question.

She supposed she had turned it into some strange sort of shrine. But other than the caretakers, she simply could not come to terms with anyone else living there. She reached up to push a lock of hair aside and found her hand trembled as she considered occupying that house again.

Can I do it? Live in the house my parents were murdered in? “I do, but...”

“Wonderful. Is it close to—” Griff stopped and looked at her, curiosity and concern warring in his expressive gaze. “I say, is this an issue for you?”

Lou shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and then back again, unable to find a comfortable stance. Considering they were discussing her imminent return to the home she had last occupied when her family was whole and she was still an innocent child, one might understand her discomfiture. Not that she was about to explain all that. “Not an issue per se . It’s simply...I have not entered the house since my parent’s passing.”

“Great Trevithick! How long has it been?” He crossed the space to stop in front of her, hovering an arm’s length away as though he wished to hold her, to comfort her in some way, but was unsure if it would be welcome.

Emotion—unexpected and unwanted—choked her as her tenuous grip on her control slipped just a bit. She shook her head, unable to speak.

Stepping into her body, Griff wrapped her in his arms as he gently repeated, “How long?”

Lou drew a shuddering breath, willing her sadness to stay buried deep down where she had tucked it all those years ago. “Five...five and twenty years.”

As though saying the words had cracked open Louisa’s Box of Unwanted

Emotions— Pandora has nothing on me —Lou found herself overcome. To her horror, she pressed her face into Griff's chest and cried big, ugly tears. For so many years, she had stuffed her grief and sorrow at the loss of her parents into a box deep within, refusing to open it for fear she might never recover once the lid was off.

Once again Lou found herself being scooped up and carried to the bed, but for decidedly less amorous reasons this time...though perhaps, for far more intimate ones. Too intimate, in truth, though she was helpless at the moment to stop what was happening. Griff sat down and settled her onto his lap, holding and petting her as she sobbed uncontrollably. He stroked her hair and her back, letting her mourn all that she had lost in her life.

That was when Lou realized that she cried for more than just her parents. She cried for the little girl she'd been, the woman she'd become, and for the lives she had irrevocably altered. Not always the people she had killed—some of them had needed killing—but for those around them who had been affected by the loss. Women whose only source of support had lain within the men Lou had ended, their children, their parents, the lovers who had been ignorant of their partner's nefarious activities. She mourned all of these for the first, and—she quickly decided—the last moment in her life.

Time stopped, as though someone had invented a way to pause life, while she gathered her grief-stricken senses. All the while, the powerful man beneath her comforted and soothed her until she could draw a few gulping breaths of air and slowly calm herself yet again.

As Lou pulled herself together, she stilled and felt her face with her fingertips. The heat and damp of her cheeks suggested she was likely the most unbecoming sight a man had ever seen. In a belated attempt to hide such a hideous display from Griff, she turned her face away and tried to slip from his lap. His arms halted her progress as he used one hand to grip her chin and tilt her face up so he could see all her swollen,

tear-stained glory.

“Feeling better?” he asked gently.

Lou sighed but realized...she did feel better. “Actually, yes. But I must apologize for my unseemly display.” What was it about this man that seemed to cause her to unravel so easily—and frequently?

He tutted like a disappointed school ma’am. “ Human display. An utterly human reaction to a substantial loss which had gone ignored for far too long, I’d say.”

She opted not to enlighten him on the full extent of what she had mourned. It was already too much for him to know she cried for her long dead parents. What would he think of her if he thought she cried for the victims of her livelihood? Her victims! What assassin cried at all—let alone for people they killed—or, more aptly, the families and friends of their marks? Utter folderol . “Well, either way, I appreciate your patience.”

“No one should have to cry alone.” Griff gently pushed her hair from her face and dropped a kiss on each tear-streaked cheek. “Now, I dare say you shouldn’t open your house on your own. Would you like some company later today to breach the past?”

Lou considered his offer of support, but knew she needed to face her past alone. Perhaps it was too personal a moment to share, or maybe simple self-preservation, but relying on him for support scared her. She’d always been her own rock. She couldn’t need someone else. That way lay disaster. “Thank you, but no. I have a housekeeper who lives there with her husband to maintain the house. I even had everything updated for them with the latest in steam technology a few years ago to make it easier as they’ve grown older.”

He looked at her oddly, a touch of doubt laced with hurt. “If you’re sure.”

“I am. But thank you for the kind offer.” Lou strove for graciousness, though she couldn’t imagine surviving opening her parents’ former home with him by her side. The man seemed to have a disturbing knack for drilling past all her defenses and dragging out all those unwanted—and terribly inconvenient—emotions she stuffed away. Everything would be far too near the surface as she opened her home.

“Very well, then. You will have to provide your direction there so I may visit you.” He allowed a smile to curve his kissable lips up at the corners, turning his face from concerned to hopeful.

Lou pushed aside her own turmoil and latched on to a levity she did not fully feel. “You had most certainly better come visit me there or I shall be desperately blue that my fiancé has jilted me.”

Griff chuckled. “Very well, send word when you are ready to receive visitors. Now, I really should go. Will you fare well without me?”

“Oh, you know me. I shall endeavor to muddle through.” She gave him a cheeky wink and slipped off his lap. By the time she’d seen him to the door and settled back into her bed, she was feeling rather cleansed from the entire episode. Having Griff witness her...well, breakdown left her feeling a bit vulnerable and off kilter, but she still had hope that opening the house would go smoothly.

Griff had thought to grab a hackney cab but had found none nearby. It was two in the morning and most of London was likely making their way home and to bed, which would explain the dearth of available transportation. Resigning himself to a bit of a walk, he headed toward Curzon Street. A group of men passed him, apparently all rather into their cups as they sang a bawdy ditty about a milkmaid turned air-ship captain who had a man in every port.

He strolled on, concern for Lou bubbling up through his thoughts. The woman had

depths to her he had previously presumed did not exist. It was a shocking revelation, considering her current profession—both of them.

On the street, a familiar carriage rolled past, and before he knew what he was doing— “Colechester?”

The vehicle stopped and the door swung open as Cole poked his head out. “Griff! Why in steaming hell are you walking about at this hour? Come inside.”

He did as his friend bid and hopped into the carriage as Cole ordered the driver to Curzon Street.

Griff settled into the squabs and answered the previous query. “Everyone seems to have taken all the hackneys and I sent my driver home hours ago.”

Cole grunted. “It’s amusing, really—before I learned of your liaison with Madame LaRoux, I was certain you had secretly joined some chaste monastic following.”

“A gentleman does not kiss and tell, nor would he ask such a question.” Griff suddenly felt very protective of his time with Lou. She was no common floozy to be bandied about in casual conversation.

His friend’s brows shot up to the brim of his stylish bowler hat and the goggles perched on the brim. “What tripe is this? I am no gentleman—as I am frequently reminded by some of our so-called friends, and despite the Athenaeum deigning to admit me. It’s a lucky thing they have opened their minds in this age of new technology. Besides, I thought we were as close as two cogs? You waited to tell me of her existence at the same time as you told Dell ? I thought we were better friends than that. Cog it all, what other secrets do you harbor?”

Griff sighed. Damn, things had grown complicated . Revealing he was the Lord of

Cogs still felt like a far greater risk than it had been to share his connection to Lou with either of his mates. Did he trust Cole? Could he afford to trust his longtime friend? Lou had said he appeared to be in the clear.

And he needed help. Cole always seemed to have reliable information before things happened. He clearly had a network of some kind that provided that intelligence. He could use that kind of help, since the Tinkers network seemed to be turning nothing up.

There was a time he wouldn't have hesitated to share anything with either Cole or Dell. But despite their abiding friendship, he wondered who among his friends he could truly trust. Of course, Cole owned multiple airships; his friend even captained one when the mood struck him to take off. Strange, though, that the man did not drive a steam-car. Griff would have to ask about that one day. Perhaps Cole, out of all of his friends, would understand his particular leanings? But what if he trusted his friend and Cole turned against him? Sold him out to the Bureau—or, worse, the Voltacrats?

Griff stared at his friend and decided to take a leap of faith. All these secrets, paired with the attempt on his life, were surely making him paranoid. “I dare say you may prove helpful in this matter. I could use some help with both my mother and—frankly—understanding women, more specifically Madame LaRoux. Things have grown...complicated, which is where your assistance may come in.”

“I can't imagine how an association with Madame LaRoux could be complicated. Doesn't she have contracts for all of her girls who have regular callers? I should think that she would do the same for herself, thereby keeping things quite orderly.” Cole grinned.

“As you are already aware,” Griff drawled, calling on his patience for his friend's abundant enthusiasm about his pseudo-relationship with Lou, “I am in just such a contract with Madame LaRoux.” He half-laughed, half-grunted. “And it would have

remained tidy if...if only I hadn't introduced her to my mother as my fiancée."

Cole choked at that announcement. "Excuse me, you did what?"

"Yes, yes. An unusual circumstance landed Lou in my library at the same calamitous moment my mother and Piers chose to visit unannounced. Needless to say, she assumed—somewhat aided by my mutton-headed brother—that Lou was my fiancée whom I met through my Parliamentary work." Griff let his head drop forward as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"And how, exactly, did you meet Madame LaRoux, since—to my knowledge—you never did share that story with Dell and I?" Cole's eyes gleamed in anticipation of the story to come. Having been friends since childhood, he knew there had to be some tale behind the odd occurrence.

"Yes, well that is a rather long story and it seems we have arrived at my address." Griff let the sense of relief wash through him. On the one hand, he wanted to share the truth with someone who might help him sort through everything, but on the other he was loath to make things more complicated than they already were.

"Balderdash! No way you can be thinking I'll let you escape that easily." Cole leaned out of the carriage and called up to his driver. "Stevens, take the rig around back for a bit. I'm having a nightcap with Lord Melton, I'll have some brandy sent out for you."

"Very good, sir." The driver waited for the men to depart the vehicle before he drove the team around the back to the mews.

Well, there was nothing for it. When they entered his library, Griff pulled his gumption together while he poured himself and his friend a drink—making sure to send some to Cole's driver via a footman. When the door closed, he took a deep breath. "Well, I met Madame LaRoux when she tried to kill me."

“The sex couldn’t be that bloody good,” Cole snorted.

Griff pulled up short at an irrational wave of anger, and opted for snorting in disagreement as opposed to throttling his long-time friend. It was a close run thing. “You’d be wrong. The sex damn well is that bloody good—but that’s not what I was saying. I meant, she literally tried to kill me. Right here in this very room. Slipped in through the open window using the shadows and tried to slit my throat with a Kukri knife.”

“Never!” Cole stared at him as shocked as Griff had been that first night.

“Oh, it’s quite true. I managed to evade her and after no brief struggle managed to get her to listen, then talk to me. Though not before she managed to stab me in the leg.” He patted the spot that was mending quickly thanks to the medical gel he’d devised through a steam-distillation process that combined certain herbs with a gelatin compound. It sped up healing with a remarkable efficacy. For this wound, days instead of weeks—thank God. “I even convinced her to help me figure out who was behind the attempt. She was here reporting on some of her investigatory efforts when my mother and brother popped by. Mark my words, do not establish an open-door policy with your family. There is no good end to such a thing.”

Cole took a swallow of his drink. “No doubt, I long ago barred my mother from dropping by unexpectedly. Too many lovelies traipsing through my townhouse at any given time. But hang on—the woman tried to kill you? And yet now you two are playing the blanket hornpipe?”

“If you must phrase it that way, yes.” Griff closed his eyes and sought patience. Had this been a mistake?

“And why in the world would anyone want you dead?” Cole finally asked the question rolling around in Griff’s head—though if he were honest, there were any

number of possible answers. “No offence, but you’re hardly the type to attract assassins.”

He drew in a bracing breath. In for a penny, in for a pound. “Well, I have a few ideas.” Griff cast a glance at his friend to gauge his reaction. “It may have something to do with my little hobby.”

“What hobby? When do you have time for a hobby? Aren’t you always attending those eternally dreadful sessions in the Lords?” Cole rolled his eyes.

“Well yes, but I also like to...” Griff drew a breath and decided to go for it. “Tinker.”

“Tinker with what?” Cole wasn’t following his explanation, or his friend had imbibed one too many drinks? Possibly both. “The ladies? Never had you down as a—”

“Steam,” Griff said softly, almost as though if he whispered it Cole might not hear it and then their friendship might not be in jeopardy.

To Griff’s everlasting dismay, his friend smacked his hand down on the arm of the chair and laughed. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?” Great Trevithick, am I so terrible at hiding my secrets?

“I just knew you were a tinker, you were always fascinated by mechanics when we were boys. To be sure, you tried to hide it, but we practically lived together during summers. And since you’ve taken the title and your seat in the Lords, I’ve noticed a particular voting pattern. Not to mention nobody could find official paperwork as engrossing as you pretend to.”

Still flummoxed by Cole’s initial response, it took Griff a moment to catch up to the comment about voting. Voting? “Hold on, since when do you pay attention to voting

patterns in Parliament?”

Cole’s amused but exasperated gaze made Griff want to fidget. “Cog’s sake, man, I own a fleet of steam-powered airships! Of course I’m interested in how Parliament is voting on steam legislation. Not to mention how the Bureau is cracking down on new tech.”

Griff stared at his friend bemused at how little he’d been paying attention. “And what pattern have you remarked?”

His friend took a deep breath, after taking a deep drink of Griff’s scotch. “Well, you are certainly more liberal than your father before you, but you seem to vote against steam on small things—the almost inconsequential issues that matter little to the grander picture of the future of steam tech. But on key issues, you tend to vote for steam. Do you remember that recent vote to allow air-ship companies to maintain and update their steam tech, without requiring expensive and time-consuming writs from the Bureau? That was a big vote for us. Without the freedom to maintain and update our ships as needed, they would eventually start falling out of the sky if equipment failed and replacement parts weren’t available. The tech is already bloody expensive.”

“Am I so transparent?” Griff downed his scotch in a gulp, not sure he could stand to hear the truth from his friend.

“Only to someone who knows you as I do,” Cole shrugged. “I doubt Dell even suspects, he has been more and more distant of late. Very absorbed in politic—likely a good thing since I am fairly certain he is a Voltacrat sympathizer if not an active party member. Which, if you ask me, should be illegal since he is the Under-Secretary of Steam for the Bureau. Do you know, other than the Penningtons’ ball, the man hasn’t been out with me to carouse for women in months?”

“Truly?” Griff was shocked by that news. He’d assumed that Cole and Dell were palling around without him while he’d been so busy with Parliament and tinkering. He was clearly wrong. “You may be right that it’s a good thing. His leanings have been of some concern to me, but as his friend I want to believe he can do his job without allowing his personal feelings about steam to cloud his judgement.” He cringed as he said the words aloud. Did they sound as idiotic to Cole as they did to him?

His friend shrugged as he sat sprawled in his chair. “Don’t let your friendship cloud your judgment. I love Dell like a brother, but he’s changed over the last few years—and not for the better.” Cole tipped his glass up and drank the last dregs of his drink. “But how can I help you?”

“If you hear of anything in your business transactions that might suggest who is looking to kill me, it would be quite helpful,” Griff said as exhaustion crept in causing him to yawn. Hell’s bells, what was the time?

“That I can most certainly aid you with. And if you need anything, anything at all—my airships, my men, whatever. You have only to ask it of me.”

“I don’t suppose you can help with my mother and my now fiancée?” Griff asked wryly.

“Oh, I fear the hour is late. Your secrets are safe with me Griff, and I wish you all the best with your mother and your...woman. But no, I have absolutely no experience when it comes to women and marriage, or even pretending to be engaged.” Cole shuddered and waved his hands about as though he were at a loss for words.

“You’re a real bolt, Cole.” Griff stood up and clapped his friend on the back as they walked into the foyer. His butler was just where he was needed, as always. “Higgins, please have Captain Colechester’s carriage brought around.”

Higgins nodded and disappeared into the bowls of the house.

Griff paused and turned back to Cole. “Tell me, why do you use a horse and carriage? It seems odd for an air-ship magnate not to have the latest and greatest steam-car.”

Cole shrugged. “It seems counter-productive to my cause to flaunt my love of steam tech.”

“Your cause?” Was it the late hour or the drink muddling his head that meant Griff didn’t understand?

“Well, how can I debauch all of London’s elite debutants if I can’t gain entrance to their drawing rooms?” Cole winked. “A flashy display of tech would brand me a radical and all the doors would be shut in my face. Then how would I entertain myself?”

Griff laughed. “Still a Casanova I see. You know, one day very soon you will meet a woman who will make you want to reform, and then where will you be? I’ll tell you where you’ll be. Without a steam-car to squire her about in, that’s where.”

Something painful flashed through his friend’s eyes, but Higgins appeared at that moment to hand Cole his overcoat.

“That’s where you’re wrong my friend. I’ll most likely be dead,” Cole quipped and then departed.

Griff retired for the night with more than a few things to mull over. The woman he was pretending to marry contained depths he’d never imagined, as did his longtime friend. Did he know anyone anymore?

Did he even know himself?

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Lou sat in her office waiting for Beatrix to join her. She'd met with Katerina, Elena, and Mary Margaret that morning to share the news of her temporary departure for her childhood home, much to their surprise. Elena had agreed to handle anything to do with security at The Market and any jobs which came in, though she doubted Holt would be passing anything to them at the moment. Until they sorted out how someone infiltrated their protocol, it was far too dangerous.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Looking around the space, pleasure welled as Lou noted all the changes she'd made to make it her own. The delicate cherry wood desk with scrolled legs where she conducted all of her business. The framed pressings of purple mums, her mother's favorite flowers. The aubergine and sage green Aubusson carpet that cushioned her steps and warmed the room. The matching chairs and settee in eggplant with sage green accent pillows. She loved this room, and it felt like she was giving up her home, even if it was only meant to be a temporary absence. A pang of sadness rippled through her pleasure like a stone tossed in a placid lake.

Lou dragged her hands down her face and fought the urge to send a note to Griff that it wasn't possible to follow through on their agreement. She couldn't go back there, she just couldn't.

Just then, a knock sounded on her door.

"Enter," she called out, though she was well aware of who it would be.

Yet it was not Beatrix, but Phillippe who entered, bearing a silver salver. "A message

arrived for you, Madame.”

He presented the message to her then left as quickly as he’d come.

Odd . She wasn’t expecting any one to contact her. Lou opened the message, breaking the unfamiliar wax seal and read the scrawled words on the page.

He still lives. Finish the job or suffer the consequences.

Lou growled at the threat. It was vague, but she could only imagine that any ‘consequences’ would be unpleasant. Griff had been spot on with his suggestion that she might be in danger too for not killing him.

Another knock on the door sounded, and she suspected it would finally be the person she had been expecting. Folding the note up she shoved it into her pocket. “Come in.”

Beatrix entered with a smile. “You are up early this morning, Madame.”

Lou huffed and motioned for her protégé to sit down across from her. “You’ll understand why shortly, Trix.”

“I’m intrigued,” Trix said silkily as she perched on the edge of the proffered chair.

Lou drew in a deep, fortifying breath. Beatrix was one of the few people who worked at The Market and knew this place was a cover for Lou and the other three assassins. She could be trusted. I must learn to trust. “You may have heard that I am under contract with Lord Melton.”

Trix tutted. “Surely you didn’t bring me here at this hour to discuss week-old gossip.” She casually flipped her red curls back over her shoulder.

“Of course not. There has been a...a complication with Lord Melton which requires me to move out of The Market temporarily. Since I cannot live elsewhere and properly run day-to-day operations here, I am asking you to take over. We had previously discussed you taking over The Market one day, so I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to begin working toward that eventuality.”

“I...I see. And may I ask what the complication was?” Trix was all business now, straightening up as her gaze focused. This was precisely why Lou had identified her as the best candidate to take over The Market one day. The woman knew when to be easy and when to get down to business. She read people almost as well as Lou herself.

“No. I am not prepared to discuss it with you, or anyone.” Lou was decisive and would brook no argument on this point. The fewer people who knew what was happening the better. “I am sure you understand.”

“And is there anything related to this complication that might land on my doorstep while I am in control of The Market?”

Lou could see the gears turning behind Trix’s grey eyes. “No—not at present. If that should change, I shall alert you and make you aware of what you need to know. For now, all should remain separate.” She picked up a sheaf of papers on her desk and tapped the bottom edges against the surface. “I would like to go through everything you do need to know about the running of the house in my absence. I have a number of repairs scheduled, there are two new members being vetted, and I have a few contracts in negotiations that you will need to finish out.”

Trix nodded, excitement glittering in her eyes. “Then we should get to work. I am sure you have much to attend to with a temporary move.”

Lou repressed her sigh of discontent. There was much to do, and she looked forward

to none of it. Ignoring the disquiet that stabbed through her soul like a steam whistle piercing the silence, she got to work turning over The Market to Trix.

Temporarily.

After being sequestered with Trix for most of the morning, Lou somehow found herself standing on the front stoop of her childhood home. The door was painted a hunter green, different from the simple black it had been painted when...when her parents had been alive.

Should I knock on the door? Or simply turn the knob and enter? It was her home. Why shouldn't she just walk inside?

Of course she knew the Moores, the couple she had hired to take care of the house sixteen years ago. Even then, she hadn't been able to give the kindly couple a tour, but had sent them in alone while she waited outside. They kept things tidy and ensured any maintenance issues were managed. They sent her a monthly written report of the house via her solicitor and, when required, she met with Mr. Moore at her solicitor's office. She had never come to the house, and he had never set foot in The Market. Their arrangement had worked well for many years.

At least, until now.

Lou sighed and stepped forward before turning the knob on the door. It turned easily in her hand, obviously well-oiled and cared for. That was a good sign. She pushed the door open and came face to face with Mrs. Moore. She was older than the last time Lou saw her, with streaks of grey slashing through her golden-brown hair.

The woman smiled at Lou. "Well, I was beginning to wonder how long you were going to stand outside your own door before coming inside." She clapped her hands delightedly. "You look just the same as I remember you."

Lou's heart squeezed. She remembered the woman being cheerful and outspoken. Clearly, my memory did not embellish reality . "Well, I'm not sure I am just the same, but thank you. I'm afraid I wasn't quite sure what the proper thing to do was under the circumstances. I finally decided that if I was paying the bills, I could simply walk in."

Though taking that first step was currently proving rather difficult, and not just because the older woman was standing in the entryway.

"Well, you've made your choice, don't stop now." Mrs. Moore smiled brightly and moved out of the way.

Lou coughed back a laugh and nodded. "Yes. Right."

She stepped into the immaculately kept house, all the furniture under holland covers. Nevertheless, she couldn't see a speck of dust anywhere. Lou was sure it would cower in the face of Mrs. Moore's duster and sunshine countenance.

"I'm afraid we aren't really prepared for you to visit us today. If you'll give me a moment I can at least uncover the furniture in the front salon for you." Mrs. Moore stepped briskly over to a door just off the main entry.

"My apologies, I didn't think about the state the house would be in after all these years. Though I must say you and Mr. Moore have lived up to your reports." Lou stopped her as she swept the door of the salon open. "But please, could we simply sit in the kitchen and chat? And if your husband could join us, that would be best. What I have to say affects you both."

Surprise had Mrs. Moore's eyebrows winging up to nearly her hairline. "Very well, ma'am. Follow me and I shall get you settled with a spot of tea before I go find my husband."

“Thank you.” Lou smiled and trailed after the indomitable woman. She envied her such confidence and comfort in this space, but then she supposed Mrs. Moore hadn’t lost her own parents in this very house.

Taking a deep, bracing breath, Lou stepped into the kitchen. Memories assailed her as she walked into the neatly kept, if slightly more modern, space than she remembered. Flashes of memories overwhelmed her; standing with her mother as she baked bread, Cook preparing dinner, the mingled scents in the air...

Her mother had loved to bake. She always said she found it relaxing. Lou often conjured images of her mother when she smelled freshly baked bread.

Another woman’s voice cut through her memories. “Sit here at our little table and I’ll just get the tea poured. I had just put a pot on when I went to check on something in the house and spotted you outside.” Mrs. Moore waved Lou toward the table as she bustled around the kitchen.

A few moments later and the kettle whistled with a piercing scream that caused Lou to jump. Being in this house unnerved her to a surprising degree. She supposed that was why she had stayed away...but now there was nothing for it. She needed a proper residence to maintain the facade she and Griff were creating.

Mrs. Moore set a pot of tea on the table—Lou’s preferred blend, she noted as the scents of bergamot and jasmine wafted to her nose—quickly followed by one scone for each of them and teacups. She’d had tea only the once with Mrs. Moore, when they’d first met. Had the woman remembered from all that time ago, or was it merely coincidence? Either way, Lou found it comforting.

“Let me fetch Mr. Moore. I’ll be right back, ma’am.” Mrs. Moore curtsied and bustled briskly through the door they had entered.

Lou sat there alone and shivered. I can do this. She could live in this house for a short while. She would occupy one of the guest rooms—certainly not the master chamber where...no, she would not think about that horrible night.

Pushing the grisly images aside, she focused on the happy memories she held of the house. She remembered chasing one of the stableboys through the house while playing hide and seek, and the wonderful festive seasons they had spent together as a family. Christmas had been her favorite, of course.

Shaking her head, she reached for the pot of tea and poured just as Mr. and Mrs. Moore appeared.

Mr. Moore bowed low. “Ma’am, it is good to see you again.”

“Please, sit. Both of you.” She gestured toward the chairs. “Tea?”

“Please, ma’am—oh, let me.” Mrs. Moore sat down and made to reach for the pot.

“I am quite capable of pouring tea.” Lou continued pouring as she spoke. “I am here because I shall be moving into the house immediately. We shall need to hire some additional staff, though I should like to keep it to a minimum. I have a lady’s maid who will be coming with all of my trunks shortly and can help set my rooms to rights. Mrs. Moore, would you prefer to remain as housekeeper or cook? I should think one or the other role will fill your days with my being here.”

Mrs. Moore considered. “Housekeeper. I’ve been running this house for nearly twenty years. I’m not about to turn over the running of it to a stranger now,” she chirped merrily. “I think we can make do with two maids and one footman who can act as under butler as well.”

Mr. Moore nodded, remaining silent unless prodded to speak. It seemed Mrs. Moore

was the one in charge in this house, which suited Lou just fine.

“Excellent. Then we’ll also need a cook and possibly one additional helper in the kitchen. I appreciate you two being so flexible about this sudden shift in your roles.” Lou smiled as she sipped her tea, ignoring her frantically racing heart.

“Nonsense, it will be a delightful change to have people in this house.” Mrs. Moore nodded decisively, as though she had the last word on the subject.

Lou smiled as she set her tea down and reached for a scone. As she picked up the baked good, her hand shook and her mouth went dry. Her mother had made the best scones. She was always sneaking into the kitchen and stealing them as a girl.

With that unwelcome intrusion from her past, she set the pastry down and stood. “Thank you for the tea, it was delightful. I think I shall head upstairs and begin preparing my rooms for my maid, Cord- um, Davies’ arrival.”

Mrs. Moore stood. “Let me help you with that.”

Lou raised a hand up, holding it palm out. “No, please. If you can send word around to the employment agency about the staff that would be immensely helpful.”

“Very well, ma’am.” Mrs. Moore conceded, though it seemed she truly wanted to help Lou upstairs first.

Lou left her servants and headed upstairs, each step a test of her will to remain in the shadow filled home. On the second floor, she knew if she continued upstairs, she would find her old nursery. If she went left, she would come to her parents’ chambers. Her gut clenched and her breath squeezed in her chest.

Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

Walking straight forward from the stairs without looking left or right, Lou approached the guest chamber, refusing to look at the door to her parent's room. She stepped into the space and her breath stalled. It was done in different shades than her mother's rose colored room, but the layout was a mirror image to what she remembered. Done up in a cheery yellow and blue motif—despite the holland covers draped over the furniture—she tried to see past the images clouding her brain. The visual of her mother sprawled across her canopy bed, blood soaking into the comforter beneath her as her unseeing eyes stared up at the ceiling. The horror on her face seemed to be permanently etched there for Lou to relive when these memories surfaced.

Turning to the connecting door, in her mind Lou saw her father laying there face down with his arm outstretched toward her mother. Again, blood pooled beneath him, but when she looked beyond him, she could see the trail from where he had dragged himself toward her mother, to no avail.

A shudder ripped through Lou as the first tear slipped free. She stood there gasping for breath as the deluge unleashed.

Her knees gave out as a sob broke free from her chest. She sank to the floor and once again mourned her parents, mourned for the young girl she'd been that night when she'd discovered them, mourned for the childhood she lost in her pursuit of revenge. While she had achieved her goal and taken the life of the man who took her parents from her, as well as the man who had ordered their deaths, she could never gain those years of her youth back. Years which were stolen from her in so many ways.

Strong, feminine arms wrapped around her and began rocking her in a soothing manner. She could just make out Cordelia handing her a handkerchief as she crooned, "That's it, let it all out. All that pent-up grief."

Lou sniffed and used the square of fabric as she slowly brought her tears under

control. By the time she had ceased the flow of water, she was able to draw a full breath as well. “Th-Thank you, Cordelia.”

“I always wondered when this might come. You never seemed to properly mourn your loss, and for the longest time it worried me.”

Lou patted her hand where it wrapped around her arm. “I-I had thought I’d gotten this out last night.” She sniffed softly. “I knew coming to this house would stir up old memories. It seems knowing a thing and experiencing it are two very different things.” She sighed heavily. “I suppose we should get off this floor and see about setting this room to rights.”

“If you’re up to such activity, madam.” Cordelia clambered to her feet first then reached down to help Lou to hers.

“I must press on.” Lou dabbed at her eyes and nose once more. In order to protect Griff from seemingly certain death, she needed to uphold the charade of their engagement. Her grief simply didn’t factor into the situation. Hopefully, she could keep her heart as well—because the more time she spent with him, the more she liked him. “Let’s get to work. I should send a note to Lord Melton as I promised.”

“Very good, madam.” Cordelia set to coordinating the delivery of her trunks and together they unpacked them. All the while, Lou thought not only of her parents, but how her feelings were complicating the situation with Griff.

How many of the assassin’s rules she’d always lived by would she break?

The next morning, Griff replied to the note Lou had sent.

Dearest Lou,

I am pleased to hear you are settled in your new abode. If you are available tonight, perhaps I can enjoy a tour before I collect you for a masquerade ball at nine o'clock? Elaborate costumes are not required, a simple domino mask should suffice. I do hope you'll agree to attend, despite the short notice. I believe it will be worth our while to attend, I'll explain more when I see you.

Ever yours,

Griff

Lou bit her lip and considered. Worth their while? Had he learned something? There surely could be no other reason for breaking both their decision to lie low, and their agreement to keep her role as his 'fiancée' out of Society's sights.

She, of course, had a costume. She had many after all, since The Market regularly held themed nights...but would any of them be appropriate for the event he is taking her to?

Dearest Griff,

I would be happy to give you a tour of my home as well as attend the masquerade with you. I shall be dressed and ready at nine o'clock. I shall see you then.

Yours truly,

Lou

She turned to go in search of Cordelia. They had much to do to select an appropriate costume and be ready for a masquerade that very night.

And that little flip of her stomach at the idea of attending a ball with Griff? Well, she

was simply going to ignore that. It couldn't mean a thing. Could it?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Griff arrived at Lou's new address and looked up at the imposing home in the exclusive Park Lane area just off Piccadilly. Well, this certainly begged the question of who her parents had been. Of course, he could do a bit of digging, but that felt like a violation of her privacy. Who her parents were was not connected to the threats they faced. She'd tell him when she was ready.

He stepped up to the dark green front door and lifted his hand to knock, only to have the wood panel swing open.

"Good evening, my lord."

Griff started a little, but realized Lou likely would not have random visitors at this address, so her staff had surely been told that he would be arriving. "Good evening. I am here to collect..." He hesitated, unsure if Lou would have informed her staff of the name he'd given her, what status she actually held...anything about her, really.

Cog it all, this whole deception game was getting dashed complicated.

"Miss Bellows will be down momentarily. If you will follow me to the library?" The man dressed in simple black and white livery with no adornments held the door wide and allowed him to enter.

Griff handed his black domino and mask to the man and followed him into the appointed room. Well, not only had Lou remembered what he'd named her, but she had informed her staff. Her attention to detail was impressive.

He was alone only a few moments when a vision arrived. The air whooshed from his

lungs as he took in the sight of Lou in costume. She was dressed in a crystal studded gown which had a more modest high-low hem than he'd ever seen her wear at The Market—yet it still exposed a considerable amount of flesh. Her neckline plunged in a deep vee that he wasn't certain would contain her breasts for the evening. Behind her, a dainty set of wings sprouted from her back in a silver finish that shone in the gaslight. Her hair was tucked up under a blonde wig with curls cascading over one shoulder in an artful drape and atop that she wore a crown befitting a fairy queen. In her hand, she held a wand that matched her wings and crown. The matching silver mask she wore finished off the stunning ensemble.

Steam save him.

“Magnificent.” The words finally squeezed past Griff's oxygen starved lungs.

Her cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink. “Why thank you, my lord. I wasn't certain if this would be too scandalous for the masquerade. I do have a domino I can throw over the dress after I remove the wings. It wouldn't take a moment to affect the switch.”

“Never. It would be a crime to cover such loveliness with a drab black sack of a domino.” Griff stepped closer to her and reached up to trace the edge of her silver mask. “Besides, it is a public masquerade so no one should know us there. It was why I suggested it when Cole said he had information to pass on.”

Lou slipped her mask off, her gaze drilling into him. “I had anticipated we were going to such a public place for a good reason. How is it that Cole has information for you?”

Griff suddenly felt like a pinned moth. The woman before him did not look pleased. “Well...as you know he is an air-ship captain. Once you cleared him of any likely involvement, I asked him to keep an ear out for anything that might help us solve our

mystery.”

“I see. And how much, exactly, did you share with him?” Her voice was tight, as though she was repressing a strong—and possibly violent—emotion.

Griff decided it was best to be direct. If she was angry, there would be no avoiding it now. “I told him the truth of how we met.”

“Steaming hells! Who else have you told, Griff?” she demanded, hands fisting, one nearly crushing her mask.

“I believe we need his help—he will be of service in furthering our engagement cover if we are forced into Society, and with his information network built around his shipping empire he is likely to hear of things we may not. As such, he let me know he has something to share.” Griff took a deep breath and released it as Lou seemed to settle down. “He is the only person I have taken into my confidence.”

“Well...I am not pleased about this, but I understand needing someone to confide in. Though I do wish you had spoken to me first.” Lou seemed to take a moment to gather her composure. “We will meet with him at this masquerade. Mind you, the first sign of something being off, and we shall leave.” She nodded as though that was the last of the matter. “Now, let me give you the tour before we go.”

Lou took him into the hall and showed him the morning room, decorated in a placid celadon green motif. She smiled shyly at him, and the urge to kiss her nearly had Griff taking her in his arms. The dining room, in cream and gold, boasted a fireplace encased in black walnut that matched the half paneling that circled the room. As he followed her up the stairs, Griff’s gaze locked on to the sway of her arse. Don’t get distracted, man. Upstairs, Lou led him through the drawing room and then her boudoir, where she would spend evening hours. He imagined her sitting there in her robe as she read a book or perhaps reviewed documents sent by her handler. His lips

tingled with the need to taste her.

As they returned to the stairs, Lou waved a hand upward. “There are bedchambers on the upper floors. I’d show you those, but I fear based on our history we may not make it to the masquerade if I were to lead you upstairs.”

He grunted in half laughter, half agreement. “You are a wise woman, Lou.” He took her deceptively delicate hand in his and led her back downstairs and into the morning room, where he pressed her against the wall and captured her lips with his.

His woman sighed into his kiss, melting into his arms as he tasted her. The faint spice of bergamot lingered on her lips, and seemed to mingle with an essence of sweetness that was all Lou.

Needing to withdraw for fear of their not leaving the house, Griff pulled back slowly. She moaned softly as their lips parted.

She cleared her throat. “We’d better be on our way. I must say, I’m excited to attend my first public masquerade.”

As if to validate her words, the clock in the hallway chimed ten times. It was getting late. Or perhaps, more accurately, it was exactly the right time to leave for the ball.

Lou had been intrigued by the notion of attending a public masquerade. As she walked into the vestibule of the Pantheon, intrigue was quickly replaced with wariness. There was a wildness in the air that tingled over her skin and had the hairs at her nape standing on end. Perhaps it was because there were so many strangers packed into the space, or perhaps it was that everyone’s identity was obscured? Many of her patrons at The Market wore masks when they attended, but she knew who they were as real names were always used on their contracts. Besides, there was always room to move freely about the place at The Market. She would never allow the space

to be so full that movement was impeded.

Griff held her hand as they weaved through the crowd, passing a card room and then a second. Once they entered the rotunda where the masquerade was taking place, the crowd spread out and her breathing came easier. Here the music swelled and without missing a beat, Griff swept her into his arms and they whirled into the waltz already in progress.

Griff wore a simple black domino with a white mask, adventure and mystery personified tonight. He smiled as they twirled around the dance floor. “What do you think of your first public masquerade?”

“I am fascinated by the abandon I sense, the amount of skin on display, and yet nothing scandalous is occurring.” She glanced around the room. “I might be wearing one of the more circumspect costumes in the room. I had not expected to see costumes that would not be out of place in The Market.”

He appeared to be excited to expose her to something new. And she couldn’t deny it was exciting to share it with him.

“It is interesting to see the dichotomy of inhibition and unfettered liberation in one place.” Despite his words, Griff’s gaze never strayed from her face.

Her lips tingled as she remembered the pressure of his own on hers in her morning room just minutes ago. The kiss had been breath-stealing. She couldn’t help but wonder if her response was due to the novelty of being in her home and feeling like any other woman in London, or if it was more to do with the very man who held her in his arms at the moment.

The music ended, and Griff escorted her from the dance floor. Where the crowd stood watching the dancers, they literally ran into—

“Griff! What on earth are you doing at a public masquerade, you sly thing?” An all too familiar voice cut through the noise of the crowd.

What the steaming hell is Piers doing here?

Griff looked askance at his brother. “Do hush up, Piers.” He led them, Piers in tow, toward a potted plant that seemed to offer a respite from the crowd.

“Well, what do you expect? This is not your normal sort of affair. I’m rather surprised to see you here.” His brother had removed his mask once they reached their little nook.

“It is not, which is why I am here. I wanted to take Lou out but without the usual scrutiny of attending a Ton event.” Griff still held her hand in his as he spoke to his brother.

Lou tried to ignore the little flutter in her chest that his touch, paired with his words, had caused. She was a grown woman of the world, not a young debutante at her first ball.

“Probably best, though Mother would be scandalized if she knew you were attending such a lowbrow event. She expects such behavior from me, but you have always been her dutiful son.” Piers chuckled amiably, but Lou heard the pain laced in the words.

“Yes, well I am hopeful you can keep our attendance here private. Speaking of which, I am sorry about how I threw you out of my library the other day.” Griff cast a glance her way. “There was quite a bit going on at the moment, and I needed to speak with Lou privately, though that was no cause to be rude to you.”

Piers looked abashed. “I am certain I was only adding to the chaos of the moment. It was probably best you sent me on my way. That way I couldn’t reveal anything you

didn't want mother knowing about your situation—such as the fact Lou was your mistress before she was your fiancée.” He waved an admonishing finger at them with a sly grin.

“Well, my apologies, nonetheless. We are family, and I shouldn't have been so harsh.” Griff appeared earnest as he spoke to his brother.

Lou glanced away to hide her amusement at the pair of them. As she did so, something caught her eye and caused her to look closer. That was when she spotted a man in a black domino with a gold mask. He lowered the mask for a moment and she realized she was staring at someone altogether too familiar, even underneath the mask. What the cogging hell? “Excuse me a moment.”

Leaving Griff standing there with Piers, Lou followed the man she'd spotted through an archway and up the grand staircase. On the second floor, she wove through the thinner crowds that strolled the gallery overlooking the rotunda with a flurry of irritation. She'd lost her quarry—but a hand reached out and grabbed her arm, drawing her into a curtained nook.

She whipped out the stiletto blade she had tucked in her thigh garter and pressed the sharp point to the throat of the man holding her. “Show your face if you wish to continue breathing.”

The man behind the mask muttered darkly as she pressed hard enough to draw just a drop of blood. “Bloody hell, Lou!” Holt's familiar voice had her lowering her knife as her breath whooshed out of her lungs.

“Holt! What are you doing here?” she hissed at her handler.

“I have the same question for you,” he glared. “Did I not tell you to lie low?”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I am, if you haven’t noticed, wearing a mask and a wig.”

“Yes, and what of your escort? The one who someone wants dead?” He looked annoyed—which was fine with her, because she was annoyed with him as well.

“My escort, who is dressed like every other bloody man in this place, is just fine.” Lou glared. “And circumstances have changed with us, which you would have known if you had bothered to stay in contact with me.”

Holt growled, “I was trying to follow the trail of who is trying to kill the—Lord Melton.” What was that slip up? Holt was about to call Griff something else—the? The what? He continued, distracting her from the question. “Your job is to keep him alive—and what circumstances have changed? Tell me you haven’t fallen in love with the bloody man in the two days since we last met.” He pinched the bridge of his nose as though the weight of the world sat on his shoulders.

Lou clamped her teeth together for a moment as she reined in her temper, though she wasn’t sure if she was actually angry at Holt for saying such a thing out loud, or at herself for possibly feeling that way. For feeling anything for Griff, really. “No, I am not in love with him.” If I keep saying it out loud, it will be true, right? “Unfortunately I did meet his mother and she has assumed I am his fiancée. So we are now parading about as a betrothed couple because Gri—” she cleared her throat. Hopefully Holt didn’t notice my over familiarity — “Lord Melton couldn’t find the bloody bollocks to tell her otherwise.” And she would deny to her dying breath how sweet she found that.

Holt huffed a breath. “Steaming hell! This is a bloody disaster. Why didn’t you set the Mother straight? Oh, never mind. Considering there is a known assassin at this event, whom I believe has been tasked with eliminating Melton, I suggest you stop bickering with me and see to your fiancé.”

“Who is it? Do I know the assassin?” Silently Lou cursed herself for leaving Griff unprotected, though he was at least with his brother—not that he would be of any assistance in the face of an assassin.

“A freelancer from Seven Dials. Rodgers is his name. Blonde hair, grey eyes. Though if he’s dressed like the rest of us, I’m not sure any of that will help you,” Holt shrugged.

Lou nodded, panic and the need to get to Griff driving her as she peeled away without another word. She could deal with Holt later. Rushing back along the gallery and then down the stairs, she found Griff standing right where she’d left him with his brother, his arms crossed and his mask in his hand.

She rushed over to him. “Mask on,” she hissed at Griff. “Apologies Piers, but we must leave immediately.”

The urgency in her voice appeared to snap Griff out of his stance and he obeyed without a word. They were near the Oxford Street entrance where they’d come in, but she felt it would be prudent to leave through the Poland Street entrance. It would likely be just as busy, though not where they may have been seen previously.

Without waiting for a response from Piers, she took hold of Griff’s hand and forged ahead into the crowd forming around the edges of the dancing.

“Lou! What is going on?” Griff asked as he followed in her wake. Not that he had much choice; she kept him close with her hand manacled around his wrist. “We haven’t met Cole yet.”

Yelling an answer to him in this crowd was out of the question. Lou glared at him, willing him to save his questions. That was when she noticed Piers following closely on their heels, until he suddenly halted and jammed an elbow backwards into the face

of another man who had also been following them. The crowd melted around them and they disappeared.

Why had Piers followed them? He appeared to have helped their escape, but was that real? Or a calculated move on his part? Did he want Griff dead? Perhaps so he could claim the title? She should have considered that option sooner. Damn it!

Lou pressed forward, knowing they needed to escape. She could sort out the answers to those questions later. As for Cole? They'd have to make other arrangements; attending the masquerade had been a foolish decision. She knew better, but she'd let her heart take the lead and this was where it had gotten them.

She pressed ahead until she spotted the hallway to the entrance. There will be plenty of time to berate myself later . It was quite crowded as she expected, so she dove in with her man in tow. It was a challenge as most of the crowd was flowing into the building while they were trying to leave, but she finally carved a path for them and they inhaled refreshing night air within moments.

Of course Griff's carriage was gone, not expecting to return for hours. Lou spotted a hack passing by and waved a hand. The driver turned the horse and carriage around to collect them.

As the cab stopped, Griff called out to someone she couldn't see through the crowds. "Cole! Over here!"

Lou wanted to snap at him for drawing attention to them, but wasn't Cole the one person they had actually intended to meet at the event? As Cole hustled over to where they were, she called her direction up to the driver. Inside the vehicle, Griff settled next to her and Cole across from them as they rumbled off down the street.

Well, that wasn't a complete disaster.

Ignoring their new companion, Griff peered at Lou through the gloom as he caught his breath from their mad dash out of the Pantheon. “What the bloody hell happened?”

“I saw my handler and went to speak with him. He told me there was an assassin there to kill you. I don’t know how anyone would have known we were going to be there, but you were in jeopardy.” She looked over at Cole and let one brow rise in part question and part accusation.

Cole snorted. “Don’t look at me, Madame LaRoux. I told no one where I would be this evening, and any correspondence between myself and Griff was protected by a cipher—one we devised when we were boys.”

She nodded, though privately wondered if the man warranted a deeper look after all. “Very well, what was it you wished to impart to us?”

To her very great annoyance, Cole looked to Griff before speaking, who nodded at him. “Whatever you have to say can be said in front of Lou.”

Cole shot him a look that Lou wasn’t certain she could fully interpret. It seemed to ask Griff if he was sure, which raised the hairs on the back of her neck. What was Griff hiding from her that Cole seemed to know?

She wasn’t going to put up with this. “Stop right there. What are you two not telling me? I will not be left on the outside of whatever this is.” She waved a hand at them.

“Nothing,” Griff assured her.

“No. I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you. You’ve been hiding something from the beginning and I’m done with not knowing. Even if you believe it to be inconsequential, it may not be. Your very life is in jeopardy!” Lou stared at Griff and

waited.

A sense of panic wafted off Griff in thick cloying waves, until he sighed as if giving in. “I...tinker.”

Lou inhaled sharply. “You’re a bloody Tinker? And you are just now telling me?” She hadn’t intended to yell, but fury coursed through her as she considered the ramifications of what he’d said.

“What I said was, I tinker. I like to play with steam technology. I revealed this to Cole recently, and I was trying to figure out how to tell you about it.” His voice was soft in the silence after her outburst.

“That seems to be a fairly fine line your drawing in the sand, Lord Melton,” she replied stiffly. He was splitting hairs and he knew it. She knew it. A bloody two year-old would know it. “Who else knows this about you?”

“My family is...aware. Vaguely. It was hard to hide my mechanical inclinations as a child, it was why my father and I were always at odds.” His words held the ring of truth, which went a long way to settling her anger.

If it wasn’t widely known, then it was doubtful that the information was behind the attempt on his life. But time had obviously run out on their ability to solve the mystery while the person who ordered him killed waited for her to take action. That message had been sent loud and clear tonight, with another assassin being put into play. “So, why did we come here tonight? What was so important as to draw us out?”

Cole inhaled slowly. “As you both know, I spend a great deal of time around the airport warehouses and of course the people who man them. I have heard more than one laborer relay a tale of being approached by a mysterious group to do some questionable work for them. Deliveries in the middle of the night, unloading cargo,

and in one case roughing up an air-port official. It seems something is in the works, and I suspect it is the Voltacrats behind it. They have been far too quiet for far too long.”

“How exactly does this relate to Griff?” Lou huffed a sardonic laugh. “So far I haven’t heard anything that was worthy of putting his life in jeopardy.”

“Griff is a steam supporter. A strong one in the Lords. I don’t know what the Voltacrats are up to, but I know what it looks like when something nefarious is in the works. Perhaps they are planning an attack on Parliament, or something more targeted like eliminating another of the voting block who support steam in Lords?”

“Lou, he’s not wrong. Even you made note of my voting record. I am one of three or four in the Lords who, if we were removed, the support for steam would falter. They failed with me, perhaps they are moving on to another target?” Griff laid his hand on her knee to both reassure her and to still her tongue, she was certain.

He was unsuccessful. “And yet there was an assassin there tonight still targeting you,” she pointed out sternly as she crossed her arms.

“I wish I had more to offer, especially after your obvious mad dash from the masquerade.” Cole sounded earnest, even if Lou didn’t like what he had to say. “I was certain I was being followed after I learned what little I had, so I thought a public masquerade was better than leading more trouble to Griff’s doorstep. Obviously, I was mistaken.”

Griff grunted, his face screwing up in frustration. “Bloody hell! We ran out of there so fast I left Piers there to fend for himself.”

Cole snorted. “Piers is more than capable of taking care of himself. I doubt he is in any danger that he can’t handle.”

“What in steaming hells does that mean?” Griff sounded as confused by Cole’s statement as Lou would have felt—had she not seen what happened with the man chasing them. By all outward appearances, Piers was a lackadaisical fop who barely had a brain in his head. Yet she’d seen the efficiency with which Griff’s brother had neutralized their pursuer. Interesting.

“Nothing—I just meant your brother is so affable that everyone thinks he’s a bolt.” Cole seemed to back-peddle, which calmed Griff, but only piqued Lou’s interest. Another point of interest to be delved into with a keener eye.

Griff nodded with a sigh. “I suppose you’re right. I felt sure a masquerade would be safe. Anonymous.”

“As did I which was why I agreed.” Well, it was the only reason Lou was willing to consider. It certainly wasn’t because she wanted to dance with him and feel like a normal courting couple for a little while.

They weren’t normal. They weren’t even a couple, really. Just two people thrust together by violent circumstance, and it was best she remembered that.

In the meantime, she needed to figure out what was going on with Holt. Had he been compromised? Or was he truly on their side? It seemed like he was, but words and even actions could sometimes be deceiving. It was time she got to her own investigation. Enough with the distractions that came with her attraction to the man.

Who was trying to kill Griff and why?

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For once, Cordelia had approved of something Lou had done when she'd moved back into her childhood home. It was a rare accomplishment, but all momentum was quickly dashed the day after the masquerade when Lou donned her trousers and coat to head out for a little reconnaissance. The weight of her past weighed far heavier than even she had expected, and escape seemed a prudent choice.

The truth was, she loved Holt—like a brother—but something in her gut told her he was hiding something from her and she needed to know what. He'd nearly slipped up the night before at the Pantheon, but had covered up his error at the last moment. The question was, what was he hiding about Griff?

Her archival research had shown Griff to be a moderate at a glance, and a steam supporter if one took a closer look. But it wasn't enough to demand his death. There had to be more, and clearly Griff wasn't telling her what it was. The reality was, Holt had to know because his insistence that she protected Griff simply did not align with the available facts.

Someone was lying to her.

So, ignoring Cordelia's frown, Lou headed out on her steam cycle, letting the late afternoon sun warm her slightly despite the cool air that came as the sun began its descent. She stopped first at Holt's home. She returned to the small house on Portman Square, pulling into the rear mews so she wouldn't draw as much attention. Slipping into the rear yard of the neat-as-a-pin house, she looked around to ensure no one had remarked her arrival.

It took little effort to pick the lock and slip inside. I really must talk to him about his

personal security . He should know better. Only then did Lou realize that if his home was so easy to enter, there wasn't likely to be much of interest there.

True to expectation, she found little more than a few tailor's bills—really a paltry sum compared to many other such invoices she'd seen over the years—and a few daguerreosteamers of what she assumed were his family. In fact, there were very few personal effects at all. And she certainly didn't find any paperwork related to their work. Nothing that even hinted at his employment. She stopped to consider what she was and was not seeing.

Blast him. This wasn't his home!

This was a decoy address. Oh, now she approved, whole-heartedly. A cunning move for certain. Clearly she'd have to dig a bit harder to find his real residence.

Lou slipped out of the home and back to her steam cycle. The engine turned over with a sputter-cough common in steam-engines and she headed on to her next stop: Holt's office in the Bureau building. She'd have to be more cautious stealing in there.

She'd visited him there once, seventeen years ago when she was originally being recruited, and since then she periodically kept an eye on his routines. He hadn't even moved office.

Around the corner from the building, Lou parked her cycle next to another. Walking toward the side entrance of the Bureau offices, she flipped her messenger bag from her backside to her front and pulled her cap low on her brow to hide her feminine features. Most people would assume she was a boy running errands, as they should. Only on closer inspection would her rounder hips and flattened breasts be noticeable.

The building was bustling with men and even a few women as they all went about their business. It was time for high tea, and she hoped Holt had stuck to his usual

schedule—one she had long ago taken care to detail and monitored every few weeks. He normally stepped out for a long early dinner, since he tended to work late into the night. Today it would prove entirely convenient for her.

In the building's basement, down a long, virtually deserted hallway, Lou found his office door, right where she left it, name plate and all. A quick turn of the handle proved it was locked. Steaming hell, of course it was locked. She inspected the lockset and realized it was not a simple keyed lock. A-ha! Satisfaction mixed with a dash of dread since his precaution seemed to indicate something of value—information, in Holt's case—was likely stored within.

Was it possible that the key she used to lock her private hidey-hole, the very one given to her by Holt, matched the first lock on the door? She pulled the cord from around her neck and placed the bow of the key into the recessed space, just as she did on her hidey-hole. Then, with a gentle turn, a brass plate slid open, revealing a keyed lockset. She slipped the bit into the hole and felt it slip into place.

A quick glance over her shoulder assured her she was still alone, then Lou had the office door open and was inside. Ignoring the nerves that nearly had her hands shaking—she hadn't been nervous since she was a young woman following her uncle on their first assassination—and pushing aside other such useless emotions, she went to his desk and started sorting through the open drawers.

Of course, there was nothing of interest there.

But then she took everything out of the bottom drawer and pressed along the bottom, feeling rather than hearing a faint click as the bottom panel slid back, revealing a hidden space. What is Holt hiding?

Inside she found multiple letters of introduction from Holt for various other persons, all of whom were no doubt personas he could assume. Lou snorted softly. No

surprises there . False letters of introduction were a tool of the trade.

She replaced everything as it was and moved on to the wall of drawers behind his desk. There had to be something...

Lou doubted opening any of them would lead to anything of interest, so she looked over each drawer handle for indicators of a hidden mechanism. Got you. The last handle on the bottom right lifted and twisted left—and the entire wall slid up silently, revealing a shelf filled with books.

Finally, she was getting somewhere. Lou pulled one off the shelf and opened it to find handwritten notes and details on page after page. Holt's handwriting. The hairs on the back of her nape stood on end as if warning her to set the book down and walk away—and normally she would heed such a warning, but she needed to know what Holt was up to...even if he seemed to think she didn't. Men were such over-protective idiots at times .

Each page appeared to cover a different politician or key figure in the British landscape, be it political, technological, or cultural. She pulled another book from the shelf at random and opened it to find her own dossier inside. Lou's stomach nearly dropped to her ankles before rebounding to where it had started. She flipped through reading bits about her life she had always thought to be private, from details of her orphaned state to her early time training under her uncle. No detail had been left alone.

A sense of betrayal wafted through her like wisps of steam. Faint, but present, nonetheless. How could he?

She should have known he would have something like this on her, but for some reason the knowledge of its existence wounded her emotionally. She found similar dossiers on her girls, Elena, Katerina, and Mary Margaret. She didn't bother to look,

as she had similar information she had compiled on them—which made her reaction to Holt’s dossier all the more irrational.

In another book she found the first page of Griff’s profile. Her gut tightened as the hairs on her nape practically vibrated. She hadn’t come here for this; to investigate Griff. She’d come to see if there was anything that might indicate why Holt was behaving so strangely.

But here she was.

Curiosity won out and Lou began to read. A few pages in, she cursed under her breath as she came across seven little words which upended her world.

John Richard Griffin, the Earl of Melton, Viscount Childreth, Baron Waldren. Also known as The Lord of Cogs.

The man she was protecting—the man she was falling for—had lied to her from the start.

A tremor coursed through her body as her breath whooshed from her body as though she’d been punched in her stomach. Betrayal . Such betrayal. Pain lanced through Lou’s chest as she drew a breath and forced herself past the initial pain. Later, she could grapple with the news. Figure out how to put the pieces of her world back together. But not here. Not now.

Furious at both him and herself for having believed he might be different, Lou snapped the book shut as the clear ring of footsteps sounded down the hallway. She must not be discovered. Placing the book back where she found it, Lou slid the wall of drawers back in place and crept to the door. She cracked it open and looked to the right where she spied not only Holt, but another man she quickly recognized as Dell, Griff’s friend she’d met at The Market with Cole. Steaming hells!

Dell's neatly trimmed brown hair and tailored suit reinforced that he was a man of means but, Holt's deference—or the appearance of it—reinforced Dell's leadership position at the Bureau. What she had not considered was that Holt would know the man. Interestingly, Dell did not seem to be someone Holt particularly cared for, based on how he maintained more than a few feet of distance between them and seemed to be eager to walk away from the conversation.

Glancing to the left, Lou saw no escape. Nothing for it. She would have to brazen her way past the two men.

Fortunately, she didn't think either noticed her as they were in a somewhat heated discussion. With time running out, Lou swallowed her fear and slipped out of the door, letting it lock behind her as it closed silently. She headed down the hall toward the men, her head down and brim pulled low, hands jammed into her trousers. As she passed, neither man seemed to take note of her—but just as she was about to make the stairs, Dell called out to her.

“Boy, hold on. I have a message for you to take to room forty two.” The extremely handsome man—who could forget his rich ocher toned skin and light green eyes—drew closer, even as she could hear a second set of footsteps retreating down the hall.

She paused at the steps and turned toward Dell just enough to not seem rude or insolent, but enough to hide her face. Or so she hoped.

He shoved a folded up piece of paper at her. “Here, and be quick about it.”

“Yes, sir,” Lou mumbled as she tried to deepen her voice.

Note in hand, she dashed up the stairs, following his orders to be quick, and found her way to the main floor. She glanced at the mundane note about a meeting that

afternoon, then dumped it in a bin and fled the building. She had just turned her engine over on her cycle when she felt the weight of someone's stare on her. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw Holt hovering at the corner of the building she'd parked in front of.

He did not look pleased.

Lou shrugged her shoulders and opted not to dwell on his displeasure as she took off, nearly running down two men who may or may not have been peers of the realm.

Griff was ready for some much needed time spent lost in his laboratory—an escape from the reality of his world. And what was that reality? For a start, he was trapped in his home and unable to leave since someone wanted him dead. He and Lou had made little progress beyond realizing that he truly was not safe after their trip to the masquerade. Her usual contact had, of course, not authorized her orders, and her handler was apparently as concerned about the communications breach as Lou was. He needed a break from the insanity that now consumed his life.

For a heartbeat, Griff considered sending for Lou and confessing the truth he'd brushed up against the night before, but he hesitated. I am the Lord of Cogs. No, he couldn't just come out with it. Guilt writhed in his gut, however, and he knew he had to resolve this. Sitting at his desk in his library, he penned a confession using his steam activated invisible ink to the woman who had stolen his heart.

My dearest Lou,

I need to tell you something that will both be difficult for me to say and difficult for you to learn.

I am the Lord of Cogs. The figurehead of the Tinker movement.

That first night, I didn't trust you. This is a secret that I have held close for so long that it is now ingrained in me to protect it. By the time I knew I could trust you, that I knew you were someone I could unquestionably trust with this secret, it had become an awkward truth to reveal.

I cannot tell you how deeply I regret not telling you the truth in the carriage. The moment came and I simply could not say it—could not bring myself to destroy this rare and delicate thing which has blossomed between us. And yet I can only imagine upon your reading of this I shall wind up with the very same result.

I hope you may find it in your heart to forgive my weakness. To forgive my fear driven decisions. To forgive me.

Yours forever,

Griff

He blotted the page and then folded it and sealed the missive. He would hand it to Higgins for delivery later.

In need of distraction—and perhaps a bit of solace—Griff went to the fireplace and twisted the stone carving that allowed him to access the entrance to the lab. After he made his way down the short flight of stairs, he glanced around at the space cluttered with gadgets in all states of completion. Some were finished, waiting to be implemented, and others were partially completed—and of course, there were those that were mere drawings on his workbench and had yet to be brought to life.

Those were the ones that called to him in the moment. The ones that would soothe his frustrations and give him something to focus on.

Except...he was quite certain he hadn't left his desk drawer open. Griff looked at the

room more closely. As he inspected his desk and then his cabinets, he found all the locks had been pried open and his papers riffled through.

With a curse, he ran back upstairs to his library and hit the voice amplifier switch.

“Yes, my lord?” Higgins’ calm tones answered his call.

“I need a detective immediately. My laboratory has been broken into.” He cursed under his breath, worried about what may have been discovered. How had this happened?

“Lucas will be ready as soon as your message is,” Higgins replied.

Lucas was his errand boy for the Tinkers. Griff couldn’t ring the Victorian Police directly, since he didn’t wish to expose his secret workspace, but the Tinkers would send someone they could trust to be discreet and keep his private business just that—private.

Within the hour, a Detective Lancaster arrived and inspected the library entrance and the lab itself. They were just coming through the secret door behind the fireplace when Lou appeared from the evening shadows of his balcony. “Well, well, well. I see you harbor even more secrets than I believed.”

“My lord, back into the lab for safety—I shall deal with this, female.” Detective Lancaster nudged him back and drew his weapon.

“Griff, do call off your over-eager puppy. We really don’t have time for this.” Lou dropped into his desk chair, keeping the wood surface between them.

Of course, she was right. They did not, in fact, have time...especially with his letter to her sitting there on the desk. The one he hadn’t decided if he would give her yet.

“Lancaster, I know this woman. You may go on about your business.”

The detective looked at him, gaze filled with concern, but soon nodded and departed the library.

Lou remained seated, and once they were alone, reclined and propped her booted feet up on his desk.

What the bloody hell is she doing? Ignoring the warning bell in his head, he looked at her pointedly. “Lou, do take your boots off the furniture.”

She ignored his request; didn’t even flutter an eyelash. “Tell me, Griff. The night I crept in here and held a knife to your throat, did I scare you?”

“What are you going on about? Of course you bloody scared me. I thought I was going to die.” Distractedly, Griff pulled the entrance to his lab closed as he waited for her to get to her point.

She dropped her feet to the floor and stood. “So you did fear for your life that night?”

“I just said as much. You damn near slit my throat! Lou, I’m a bit distracted now—I told you I like to tinker and someone has burgled my lab today. Is this something we could revisit later?” Griff growled as fear and frustration exploded inside. His lab—his sanctuary—had been violated, and now Lou was acting strangely. Asking odd questions.

Did...did she know? But how could she?

She nodded and made a snort of disbelief. “Odd, because I distinctly remember asking you if there was anything else you needed to tell me, about who might be trying to kill you—you know, after I didn’t slit your throat. And you indicated you

had no idea who might want you dead. But then last night...last night you informed me you like to 'tinker'."

Griff stilled. He felt his face drain of blood as a coolness set in. Oh, steaming hells. Her tone and the line of questioning had a pit forming in his stomach. Now that he had stopped and was paying attention, she seemed...displeased. More than displeased. Quietly seething. "Yes," he answered carefully. "What is this about, Lou?"

"This is about you being a steam-damned liar." She eased out from behind the desk, moving closer to him and further away from his note, but it seemed futile at this moment. A Pyrrhic victory of a sort. "No, Lou. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to kill me'," she mimicked in a deep voice and took a few more steps toward him. "No Lou, I'm not hiding anything'," she said again in that same almost mocking alto. "I just like to tinker a bit'."

A rather powerful sense of crushing defeat rushed up from the darkest parts of his soul. She had discovered his secret. And she was bloody pissed.

Griff was losing her, could see her slipping away with each syllable that passed her lips. And this was a disaster of his own making.

She stomped the last few steps into his personal space and then reached up. It was all he could do to control the urge to flinch away as he fisted his hands at his side to keep from reaching for her, but he refused to cower.

Yes, he'd deceived her. Yes, he knew why someone might want him dead, or at least he potentially knew why—but either way, he had no idea who it was. He was more surprised than anything when all the assassin before him did was poke him with her finger.

“You’re the bloody Lord of Cogs!” she shouted, emphasizing each word with a firm poke to the chest that he was certain would leave a mark.

A deflated little sigh escaped him. Well, the truth was out . Griff’s gut curdled. “I am. But I can explain everything—I did explain everything. In a letter. It’s sitting on my desk.”

No more hiding the truth from her. At first, it had been about safety. Would she turn on him? But then, once he’d found so much pleasure in her arms, it became about not having her look at him with revulsion...like the last woman he had courted and who had discovered his love of tinkering...

“Jane, I have a gift for you,” Griff had said as he shyly presented her the small, wrapped box.

Delighted, she’d taken it from his hands and squealed in delight. “A gift? Whatever for?”

“Open it,” he’d urged. She’d been fascinated by an automation they’d seen at the market one afternoon. It had made him believe she might accept this part of him. Given him courage.

Jane pulled the ribbon and quickly opened the box. “What is it?” she asked as she pulled the little dancing girl out of the box and set it on a table.

“It’s an automaton. A dancer twirling about.” Griff gathered a breath as she stared at it giving no hint of her reaction. He flipped the switch to turn it on. “You seemed to enjoy the one we saw at the market a few weeks ago. I...I thought you’d like one of your own.”

“Oh.” It was one word, but held a depth of disappointment. “It’s very nice.” Jane

started to turn toward him, ignoring the dancing mechanism.

“I made it for you.” The words had gushed out in an attempt to win a smile from her—something. He wanted her to know it was a deeply personal gift, not a trinket he’d tossed a few coins at.

Jane’s face pinched as she gasped and stepped away from him. “You did what?”

“I made it...I tinker a bit.” Griff had nearly stumbled over the inadequate words.

“No! What are you saying? Griff, this cannot be true. You cannot be one of them!” The horror on her face said it all.

“One of them?” He was so hurt, he was having a hard time processing what the woman he had thought he loved was saying.

“One of those people...who build things. A Tinker!” Jane started pacing the drawing room, the words pouring from her mouth in an unfiltered stream. “This is an unmitigated disaster. I shall be ruined!” She stopped and faced him. “The engagement is off—we cannot marry. I cannot marry, you. Not someone who...labors. Who does things with his hands? Who supports steam!”

And she had run from the room leaving him alone in the silence, as the little dancer clacked away on the table.

That moment had confirmed everything Griff’s father had ever said to him about his ungentlemanly pursuits. Jane’s response, the breaking of their secret engagement...it had made it clear his secret needed to remain a secret, at all costs.

It would seem that no woman, not even one so unconventional as an assassin, could look past his love of technology.

“I wanted to tell you, Lou,” Griff said desperately, “but I didn’t trust you at first. You’d tried to bloody kill me! And then I found myself liking you, wanting you, caring for you—and I knew this truth would come between us. Whether it was because I had withheld it in the beginning or you would find my passion as abhorrent as every other woman I’ve ever told, it didn’t matter. I didn’t want to lose you from my life.”

Lou pulled up short at his admission, but after a moment of hesitation, charged ahead. “I won’t deal with a liar. I’m sorry Griff, but this is over. You’ll have to tell your mother we broke it off. I shall continue with my efforts to find who tried to kill you, but I shall not be doing so with your assistance. I’ve always worked alone in the past, and this—this is why. I cannot work with someone I can’t trust.”

Was that the tiniest waver he heard in her voice? Perhaps a kernel of doubt? “Lou wait—please let’s talk, I want to explain—”

“Goodbye.” And just like that, she was gone.

Griff sank into the nearest chair, utterly stunned. The most amazing woman he’d ever met had just walked away from him. Of course, his unruly heart took that opportunity to proclaim itself firmly in Lou’s corner.

Great Trevithick, could I be in love with her?

Griff sat there staring at nothing for a long time as he grappled with his realization. Then, as his eyes focused back in the library, he spotted a letter sitting on the mantel he had not noticed earlier.

What the steaming hell is that?

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Lou retreated to her home, her childhood home, and tried to set aside her anger—and more importantly, the overwhelming feeling of betrayal.

She was tangled up with the Lord of Cogs, the infamous leader of the Free Steam movement. A figurehead, mainly, since he was so reclusive as to never be seen. A mystery man. She snorted.

Griff's treachery searing through her heart somehow rivaled the outsized sense of betrayal she had always associated with her parent's death. Certainly it was not their fault they were killed, but she couldn't help but feel her life would have been different had they made different choices. Had they lived. She might have met Griff as a debutante...perhaps fallen in love. Without a doubt, she would not have become an assassin and Madame; would not have sought the revenge that led her down the dark path that changed the course of her life.

While she had come to accept her life, such as it was, moving back into her childhood home—even under protest—was a painful reminder of all that she had lost.

Sitting alone in her bedchamber, too upset to do much more than brood, Lou picked at the dinner tray Mrs. Moore had brought up for her. It was after midnight before she bothered to get up and carry the still mostly full tray back downstairs using the candle Mrs. Moore had thoughtfully included. As Lou carefully put the uneaten food back into cupboards, a soft knock sounded against the back door.

Lou approached the door cautiously; she was not expecting any visitors, but the mystery guest on the other side proceeded to knock twice, pause, three times, pause, and then once.

It's Holt. Anger speared through her in an unexpected blast.

Lou opened the door and found her friend-cum-handler huddled in the shadows. She quickly ushered him into the kitchen. "Holt, what are you doing here?"

If she hadn't seen his book of profiles, she might have wondered how he knew where to find her, but clearly her friend and handler knew far more than anyone would want him to.

Bloody keeper of secrets.

"You came to visit my office today." He eyed her with a wariness she hadn't seen from him in many years, the same sense of estrangement and caution roaring through her veins followed quickly by exhaustion.

"I did. That's an interesting little treasure trove of information you have there." She waited for his reaction. He nodded in acknowledgement, but said nothing more. After all these years that's all he has to offer? A nod. The silence stretched between them as she wrestled with the twin tentacles of anger and disappointment until she broke it. "Tea?"

"Please." Holt followed her inside and took a seat at the kitchen table, where he sat perfectly still and waited while she set the kettle on the stove.

Lou couldn't look at him as she spoke. She feared dissolving into tears for the third time in as many days. "I learned a few interesting things today. In particular, you know who the Lord of Cogs is, but have done nothing about it despite the Crown's—or more aptly the Bureau's, stance on him and his Tinker compatriots."

He sighed. "You...are correct. I find I disagree with the aggressive stance—detainment, persecution, and in some cases eradication—that the current

Bureau leadership is taking. Since they do not know who he is, they cannot do anything about him or the Tinkers. The Lord of Cogs may be a symbol, but he is also the true leader of that group. Without him, the Tinkers would be directionless, leaving electricity to take over as the predominate energy source—plunging our poorest and most vulnerable into darkness.”

Lou considered his words for a moment. “I take it you have concerns about such a turn of events.” Confusion seared through her disappointment and anger.

Does he not trust me?

A sick churning took up in her gut at the thought, because he’d been the one and only person she trusted—well, mostly trusted. As much as she trusted anyone.

Holt nodded. “I do. Electricity will benefit the wealthy, the entitled. It will widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots in a way that I believe may permanently damage our society. What happens when the have-nots are left with no hope of rising from poverty? When there ceases to be a working class because the have-nots are left no means by which to survive? When the have-nots can barely afford a roof and a meal? Anarchy happens. The very fabric of society will crumble—unless the foundation is solid. Those who make up the lower classes are that foundation.” His words resonated in both the silence and in her own heart.

“So, now the question of who tried to kill Griff is even more concerning,” Lou said darkly, trying not to notice the twist of her heart as she said his name. “If it is the Bureau, then someone in leadership knows the truth. If it is not, then the situation could be even more dire...or completely ridiculous.” The kettle whistled, and she automatically rose to pour the water into the teapot, relishing the instinctive motion. Thinking, feeling hurts. Silence ruled as the tea steeped until it was ready to pour. She did the honors, still processing everything she had learned so far.

“I take it he had not told you who he was.” Holt took the hot porcelain cup from her and added milk and liberal sugar to his tea.

“No, he neglected to mention that detail, even after I specifically asked if there was anything else I needed to know. I am displeased, to put it lightly.” Displeased? Such a mild term for how she felt at the moment. A superheated steam engine on the verge of exploding under the pressure of rage and pain from a dual betrayal. Yet Lou sipped her own brew, hot and black, and kept her gaze away from her handler. Her friend. One of her betrayers?

“But he remains alive, I assume.”

“For the moment. How long that state lasts remains to be seen since I believe I am done with him.” Her hand trembled when she set her cup down as an insidious doubt took up residence in her heart. Her battered, bruised, and bloodied heart. Will I walk away and let him die?

“Do not be so hard on the man. He has kept his secret for a long time. It cannot be a simple thing to trust someone who only recently tried to kill you.” Holt let one brow quirk up, a movement she could not ignore.

Lou sighed. He is right, of course . Damn him. “Under ordinary circumstances I would agree, but someone is trying to kill him. How can I be expected to keep him alive if I don’t know where the threat is coming from? This was a key piece of information.” She huffed out a breath of annoyance, though whether it was for herself or Griff she wasn’t sure. “We also became...intimate. It was under the guise of our cover, and yet I think I may have allowed things to get more....” She hesitated. “More personal than they should have. So his silence, his secret feels like a deep betrayal.” The last part was nearly whispered, but Holt clearly heard her.

He closed his eyes a moment then looked at her solemnly. “I withheld it as well. Does

this mean you are severing our arrangement?" Holt sipped his tea.

She wanted to jump up and pace, wanted to rail against liars—especially those who lied to her for their own ends. Instead, Lou drew in a deep cleansing breath and tried to push back the vortex of volatile emotions so she could listen. "Yes, you did. Why was that, precisely? When exactly did you stop trusting me?"

"Oh Lou, it was never a lack of trust." He reached for his cup of tea but nearly knocked it over causing a clatter of dishes that made her jump. He set everything to rights and reached for her hand, but she jerked away from him, unable to bear the sympathy she saw gleaming in his eyes.

He pulled his hands back and sighed once more. "So few people know the truth. I had assumed he would tell you himself, and when I realized he hadn't, when we spoke at the masquerade...I nearly told you. But knowing how poorly you react to things you see as betrayal—and I knew you would see this as a betrayal after what your Uncle did—I opted not to say anything to ensure you got him to safety. When I saw you leaving my office, I knew it was too late to tell you. I'm sorry Lou, I should have told you sooner."

She listened to his explanation as anger flashed through her, hot and scalding, but not so heated she couldn't hear all that he said and some of what he didn't. Holt was different. She'd known him longer, worked with him during some of the darkest hours England had ever faced, and Holt had never been a mark. He'd also never lied to her in the eighteen years she'd known him.

Not to mention, they'd never slept together.

"You know our relationship is...different," Lou said, a little awkwardly. "I've known you longer, worked with you in ways that build trust. I don't yet have that with Griff—may never have that." Her stomach twisted in a knot.

Her friend looked at her for a moment, letting the silence stretch between them before breaking it again. “I see. It is worse than I imagined.”

“It was too late by the time we spoke. The damage had been done.” Lou stood, giving in to her urge to move. “Are you telling me I have to protect him?”

Holt’s dark, fathomless eyes softened. “I shall remind you that he is an innocent man—”

She whipped around, a burst of fury blasting out of her. “The Lord of Cogs is not innocent. Nobody is, Holt. Don’t be so naive, I expect more from a seasoned intelligence officer,” she said all but sneering the final words.

Her friend remained calm in the face of her anger. “Very well—he is not guilty of anything that warrants his death. He is the titular head of a non-violent segment of our population. In a democracy, that means he has the right to stand in opposition to the government, and to do so in relative safety.”

Lou hated the truth of Holt’s words. Wanted to rail at him, but instead she listened when he continued.

“I believe the person behind this has less than pure motives. In fact, I am almost certain greed is at the center of this. Which makes it all the more distasteful.” Holt suddenly looked tired.

But Lou was beyond caring at the moment. “Do tell, because you seem to know far more than I do.” There was no hiding her bitterness in that statement. Her tea forgotten, Lou continued to walk the short width of the kitchen. If I keep moving, maybe the sadness will remain at bay...

“I don’t honestly know, but I have a hunch. Normally I would go and investigate this

for you, but I have other pressing matters that may be related to this. I need you to follow the money trail and figure out if my instinct is right.” Holt sipped his tea and waited.

“I suppose you are right.” Lou hated feeling like a recalcitrant child. I am an assassin! She stopped pacing and faced Holt as she tried to firm up her resolve to do the right thing. “What should I be looking for? Cash? Ledgers?”

“I often am.” He winked. “Go to the Voltacrats’ headquarters and see what you can find. They are able to exist, to be active, because they are well funded. There must be records of some kind.” Holt didn’t smile, but he exuded a sense of calm certainty that had Lou wanting to act.

Her hands twitched with the need to move. Anything to escape the tumult of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. “I can go tonight, there’s still time—”

“No. You need to ensure Lord Melton is safe first.” For some reason, Holt hesitated. “Make things right with him so you have someone to watch your back. You need a clear head if you are going to dig into this.”

Lou nodded slowly. Her sense of justice, though slightly warped, was still mostly intact and, as Holt said, having someone at her back could only be a boon. Even if she did not wish to see him. “Very well. I shall go see Griff in the morning. Perhaps he can join me in the search and shed some light on what we find at the Voltacrats office. After all, as the Lord of Cogs I would imagine he has access to his own intelligence network.” She offered a wry smile, though it hurt to do it.

“Just remember, knowledge can be dangerous. Whether the people in charge see you as a defender of the man they want dead or merely a pawn to be used against him, you are without a doubt in the line of fire.”

“I shall keep that in mind as I press on. You should be careful as well. I shall be very displeased if you get yourself killed.”

Much to Lou’s annoyance, Holt snorted.

“Snort all you like. If you die it will lead to a very bloody mess.” And that was as close to telling him how she felt about him as she was comfortable getting for the moment.

His gleaming teeth made a slash in the shadows that shrouded his face and then he rose from the kitchen table. “I wonder if you’d tell Lord Melton the same thing?” Without another word, he departed her kitchen.

Alone again, she considered Holt’s parting words. Lord Melton was nothing like Holt; Griff was not a man she’d known for nearly a decade. He was ...she hesitated. He was many things, but would she kill over him? To protect him? Certainly. But if he was expired unexpectedly, would she hunt down the ones responsible and render her own brand of justice? Lou’s gut reaction scared her sufficiently that she decided to push the unwelcome thought aside.

Better that she focus on how she would handle the man in question.

As Lou retreated upstairs to her bedchamber, she considered her visceral reaction that afternoon, blasting him for his secret.

“I’ve always worked alone in the past, and this—this is why. I cannot work with someone I can’t trust.”

Something that she suspected might be regret settled into her bones and made her stomach feel queer. She had shot into the brown and now she had to recover. How exactly did one apologize for an anger born of her past experience? Of a betrayal by

her uncle that cut so deep she had yet to fully recover?

Perhaps the best apology would be to ensure his safety. She could watch over him as he slept and then untangle how to apologize in the light of day.

Lou arrived outside Griff's home and stashed her steam cycle in the shadows behind the mews, tiredness tugging at her eyes. As she crept up to the back of the house, she spotted a movement in the shadows. Another person, lurking.

Abandoning her plan to slip in and head to Griff's room to check on him, she followed the shadow. Not surprisingly, they used the same entry point she had used not so long ago—surprising. After her second visit via his library window, he had done nothing to secure that entry. Tsk. Tsk . She would have to speak to Griff about that.

She followed the intruder up the trellis, over the balcony, and into the library. Fortunately, Griff was not there...but then, neither was the intruder. Damn it . They were moving quickly. As if they knew where he would be.

Lou headed straight for the stairs and caught the person—who had remained blissfully unaware of her presence—just cutting to the right. She charged ahead, trying to catch up with the shadow before they made Griff's chamber, or what she assumed was his chamber, since that was where they were most likely headed.

Suddenly there was a thump and a grunt from the room the shadow had slipped into. Lou didn't bother to slow down as she barreled through the door and aimed at the dark shape that had Griff pinned to the floor, his voice echoing round the room with colorful curses.

“You steamed-damned bastard! Get off me!” Griff's low rumble was muffled as he struggled with his attacker.

Lou smacked into the shadow, causing the trio to roll and collide with the bed. A grunt escaped her, but she quickly separated the struggling men and clung to the intruder's hips and wrists with her knees and hands until she had them underneath her. Griff had scrambled to his feet and out of the way leaving Lou to focus on one thing: his assassin.

The attacker had a knife in their hand and a black half-mask on his face. The rest of him was covered in head to toe black, including a hood that covered his head. With a snarl, he—and it was most definitely a man—jerked an arm free of her grasp. He jabbed at her with his knife, but she blocked the strike with her free arm and grabbed her own blade from the sheath strapped to her chest. Without hesitation, she blocked a second strike and then jammed her Kukri knife into his throat.

A clean kill. Chalk up another one.

The gurgling noise the brute made as she withdrew her blade assured her of two things. His jugular had been nicked, if not severed, and his airway was fully compromised. She wiped her blade on the man's shirt and stood up, turning to face Griff who stood looking on in shock.

He had just watched her kill a man, and she had no regrets since it saved Griff's life. Still, Lou repressed a sigh. This would likely change things, more so than her earlier display had. "Come with me."

Griff followed obediently, eyes still wide, until they were in the hallway and away from the body. Then he stepped in front of her and took her by the shoulders. "Are you unharmed?"

A small smile threatened to stretch her lips. He cared. But she needed to stay focused now. She couldn't entertain the joy that he was alive right now. "I'm fine. Were you injured?" She ran her hands down his arms and stepped back to inspect him further.

Griff shook his head. “Thank you for coming to my rescue, though I was fairly certain I was about to get the upper-hand.”

Lou snorted. “You’re welcome.” She hesitated a moment. “I...I’m sorry for earlier.”

“You had every right to be angry. I just wish you would have let me explain.” Griff hauled her into his arms and held her for a long moment. She didn’t fight him, just savored the feel of him pressed against her, healthy and whole.

Ignoring the pressure in her chest that spoke of big emotions she couldn’t face, Lou stepped back from his embrace and tried to pull her professional mantle back in place. “Explanations can wait. For now, I need to contact Elena, Katerina, and Mary Margaret so we can clean up your bedchamber. We know a place they can bury the body. Do you have a maid you trust implicitly? Mary Margaret can help her clean up the mess in your room. The blood will stain if we do not clean it quickly.”

“Let me rouse Higgins. He can send a houseboy with your message while we begin sorting things out here.” Griff took her hand and led her downstairs.

By the pre-dawn hours, the body had been removed, the floor of his bedchamber scrubbed with bicarbonate of soda—a new but very useful discovery—and his home was nearly back to rights. Higgins worked with Lou’s team seamlessly, and when the girls had returned to The Market, Lou sat down with Griff on the sofa in his library and drew a breath.

This was not going to be easy—so business first. “First, and most important, you must address the security of your home. If you are going to continue in your role as Lord of Cogs you cannot have your library acting as the Nine Elms train station with people coming and going at will.”

Griff snorted lightly, but nodded his agreement.

“Second, I should state that for our cover purposes, our betrothal is not broken. I...I hope you haven’t told your mother otherwise.”

He shook his head. “No, I had hoped to speak to you in the morning and convince you to hear me out.” His smile was sheepish. “But I also knew you needed time to digest the truth and possibly calm that fiery temper of yours. I did not wish to end up at the wrong end of your Kukri knife.”

Steaming hells! Was she such a tyrant? Her face heated as she sucked in a breath and braced herself to utter the words she’d come there to say. “Very good, we are agreed. Finally, I...I need to apologize properly. I reacted poorly to the revelation of who you really are. I don’t trust easily after my...my uncle’s betrayal.” She drew a breath and willed her hands not to shake. “He is the man who raised me after my parents’ death. He trained me. Taught me everything I know and helped me exact my revenge on the men who took my parents’ lives.”

Griff reached over and engulfed her hand in his, squeezing it in a gentle reassurance that felt foreign to her, made her itch with the need to pull away and pretend indifference.

Instead, she chose to be honest with him. Perhaps even a bit vulnerable. “But then I discovered that despite my having explained to him that I would only kill those who deserved such an outcome, those who had killed, maimed, or stolen from those who could not defend themselves, I learned he was not vetting our contracts. He just wanted the money and I...I began to venture out on my own.” The all too familiar fury her uncle’s actions caused flared to life. “He took the details we needed and the payment. He did nothing to validate why we were killing people.”

She drew in a long breath and let it out. “Just before I discovered this, Holt had approached me about working for him. For the Crown. I first met him when he hired my uncle and I to do a job for the Crown.” She huffed out a breath. “I was practically

still a girl, barely of age to come out. I'd only killed two men at that point, but I was perfect for the job."

She gathered her thoughts. Remembered how Holt had treated her like an older brother even then. "Later he hired me for a job my uncle was unaware of. It felt right to use my skills for the greater good. So I went to my uncle and laid out my concerns, which he dismissed as being economically shortsighted. That was when I quit. I told him I was going to work for the government. He swore then and there that if he was ever hired to kill me...well, that he would take the contract."

She drew a deep breath. He needed to understand how deep the betrayal went.

"Soon after I discovered that he had also cleared out my account while acting as my guardian. I was left with nothing from my parents or from the contracts I fulfilled with my uncle. I was destitute except for the home my parents had bequeathed me. Suddenly, I had to work for the Crown in order to survive."

"Cogging hell. I'm so sorry, Lou." Griff shoved his hand through his hair, making it stand out from his head in a wild tangle.

"So you see, the issue is I wanted very much to trust you. I still do. Discovering you were the Lord of Cogs felt like a betrayal, and it cut me deeply." A bitter smile crept across her lips as her head tilted.

He squeezed her hand again as they sat together on the sofa. "I hope you will accept my sincere apologies. I never meant to hurt you. That first night I was still feeling wary about trusting you, feeling vulnerable from the unexpected attack. And then as I got to know you, understood where your thoughts fell on the question of steam, and we became intimate...as I told you last night, I wrote a confession to you." He stood up and went to his desk, returning with a folded note that he handed to her.

Steaming hell, we made a mess of things . Lou's gut twisted as she read what he'd written. She looked up at him, her heart in her throat, but still felt too raw to say the words which floated in her head. The betrayal was still too fresh.

Griff cleared his throat and sat down again. "Just as you let your past experiences color your perspectives, I did the same. After having been rejected for my interest in tinkering, let alone my political leanings, I feared that same response from you—feared how you would react to my deception."

The heft of her poor decisions weighed on her like an air-ship anchor. Lou smiled sadly. "An excellent friend recently reminded me that you had as many reasons not to trust me as I had not to trust you in that scenario."

"Well, I promise you I have no more secrets." He hesitated. "Errr... Well, I won't after I show you my workshop and a note I discovered after you left last night."

Lou nodded, feeling a warmth in her chest that was suspiciously like hope, though it was tangled with trepidation. "I'd very much like to see both."

They stood with her hand tucked securely in his and started toward the fireplace. He reached up and pulled a piece of the decorative carvings on the mantle, and to Lou's astonishment, the whole thing swung inward.

Her gasp was followed by, "I swore I had seen you coming out of a tunnel with that investigator, but I assumed I was so upset I had remembered things incorrectly."

Griff chuckled. "No, I had this constructed before I moved in. I used free steam supporters to ensure it would remain secret."

"Well done, my lord." Lou ducked her head and followed him into the heart of who he was.

This was a huge thing for him to share; if his identity was already compromised—and it was—this was the evidence his enemies needed to expose him or justify his death. That he was showing this to her made her chest squeeze. She felt raw, as though her very skin had been peeled back. The need to guard her heart remained strong even as she yearned for his touch.

In his workshop, Griff allowed her to investigate on her own, the dankness of the room reminding her they were below ground. She looked at the various projects that were in progress and a few finished items he had left on a workbench at the rear of the space. The walls were brick, clearly part of the home's cellar. Gas piping lined the walls allowing the gas lamps around the room to flicker as they shed light on everything. The rough wood workbenches were spread out, but she wasn't sure what the logic was behind their arrangement, though she was certain it made some sense to Griff. She wanted to gush over his various inventions, but refused to open herself up so readily just yet. He had hurt her with his deception.

“Here is the letter I spoke of.” He handed her the folded sheet of stationery.

Lou could see where he had broken the wax seal that bore a V surrounded by a laurel wreath on it when he opened the letter. The handwriting scrawled across the page was elegant yet masculine. Nothing else of particular interest stood out until she read the words.

Lord of Cogs,

We know your identity and we have proof of who you are. If you wish to protect the good name of your family and possibly their lives, you will do as we demand. Leave England forever, within the fortnight. If you do not comply, you will risk not only your family's good name, but your own life—and possibly theirs.

Do not test our resolve on this matter.

“Bloody hell!” Lou glared at him, fierce in her protective anger. “Why didn’t you bring this to me as soon as you read it? I could have been here to prevent what happened in the night.”

“You were so furious when you left, I decided to manage the situation as best I could on my own. At least until I could convince you to speak with me...hear me out.” Griff shrugged.

She couldn’t deny she had been furious—and had he appeared on her doorstep moments after she’d left him, she would have closed the door in his face. Lou sighed. “We need to solve this mystery immediately. It has lingered too long. We shall go to the Voltacrats’ offices tonight to investigate. See if we can find any clues to help us end this threat to you and your family.”

Fear of losing him warred with her sense of betrayal. She may not fully trust him, but she cared for him, and she needed to end this threat.

But could she do that and still protect her heart from further damage?

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Griff's foot slipped on a wet cobblestone. Cog it all! He nearly went down, but managed to keep his feet without making more sound than a scraping of leather on stone.

The Voltacrats' offices were tucked away in a small alley just off St. James's Street, which made sense if one thought about it. The central location was perfect; after all, the individuals truly running the place wouldn't want to be too far away from their movement while attending their clubs. And honestly, Brooks was likely the true headquarters of the Voltacrats when it came to the deals that were being made to support electricity.

Griff followed Lou closely as she crept down a dark back alley behind the Voltacrats' offices, despite it being one o'clock in the morning, and all because she had convinced him they needed to look for the movement's financial documents. 'Follow the money', she'd said. And while he understood the logic behind it all, he was operating on little to no sleep after someone had once again tried to kill him.

Though he supposed that made this trip all the more urgent, not less.

And then there was the question of them . Was there a 'them'? They both appeared to have indirectly admitted to feelings for each other, but nothing beyond that. No actual declarations. He was fairly certain he was falling in love with the determined woman. After the way he'd been devastated when she'd walked out, only to have her sweep in and rescue him later—not that he'd needed rescuing— and the way his heart was filled to bursting when she was near him, Griff wasn't sure he wanted to say it until he was certain about how he felt. About how she felt.

Why was everything with Lou so bloody complicated? Or maybe that was just how love was?

“Stop.” Lou’s whispered command broke into his rambling thoughts. “It was just a rat. Let’s go.”

Griff followed her farther down the alley then up a rickety set of back stairs. He’d follow her anywhere . Do anything for her. Hunt a mark. Take out a mark. Anything .

Did that make him a lovesick fool?

He pushed the thought aside as he waited for Lou to silently pick the lock on the back door. They were in a genteel neighborhood, so locking the door was a surprising bit of awareness for what he suspected were a bunch of self-important nabobs. But then, he doubted they were actually there in person running the office. No, that was being done by a far more practical set who knew that theft and snooping were a concern.

Inside the rear hall of the office, Lou led him forward and with caution and care, checked each of the three doors they found in the hall. The first one on the left—to Griff’s surprise—was the water closet. A very modern touch. The next door on the right was a large office, which they peered into after Lou picked that lock as well. The last one on the right was a smaller office, left unlocked, so not likely to hold anything terribly important. Five feet farther and the hall ended, opening out into an office space littered with desks and a printing press. It was quite the well-equipped set-up. Indeed, they had to be very well funded.

Lou looked around the darkened office space then turned to face him. “No one is here, and they have heavy drapes in the front windows so light a lamp and have a look about. Start with that first office we found, back down the hallway. It seemed to be the largest and probably the most important.”

Griff nodded. “Right. I’ll have a look.”

“Remember,” she warned. “We’re seeking anything that ties this organization to a financial supporter. I’ll be along after I check out things here, in the front, though I don’t expect to find much.”

“Got it.” Griff turned and made his way back to that first door that had been on their right when they came in.

Inside the larger office, he found a light switch and found the place was lit by electricity. While that seemed extravagant, it also made some sense. How could you propose steam is not the way to go, but then operate by gas or steam powered lights? One had to lead by example. That had always been what he was taught.

Griff crossed to the desk and started with the surface. He worked from left to right, top to bottom, picking up papers and random things left on the desk, he examined each item carefully for clues. There was a letter to the Head of the Bureau, a Sir George Farrington, from some backwater MP. Running the Voltacrats was certainly a questionable sideline for a MP, let alone the head of the Bureau . It wasn’t that MPs couldn’t align with various beliefs or political movements...but to lead one, and it seemed that was the case, that was a different story altogether. Griff moved quickly, continuing to search, and found other pieces of correspondence to Sir George, as well as partial replies from him.

He moved to the drawers of the desk after finding nothing of merit. Again, starting on the left side and working his way down, Griff found little of interest. He glanced at the door of the office nervously then refocused on the task at hand. I must find something. His pulse pounded relentlessly, though he wouldn’t call it fast. It was simply more noticeable for all the silence around them.

Griff checked the middle drawer quickly passing over it as he found mostly odds and

ends, a new refillable fountain pen, and other flotsam. On the right side, in a drawer he found a box of cash and a ledger clearly used for day-to-day incidentals. Setting that ledger aside, he continued to rifle through the desk. In the next drawer, nothing but blank stationery. In the last drawer he found files, but upon closer inspection, they held little of interest.

But then the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. The drawer did not seem to be as deep inside as it appeared to be based on its outer dimensions.

That was when Lou appeared in the doorway. “Did you find anything?”

“Possibly. I found a ledger of the day-to-day expenses, and I just found what I believe is a false bottomed drawer. Come see.” Griff beckoned her over with a wave of his hand, not bothering to look up as he began emptying the drawer.

“Can you get it open? I have some experience with these matters.”

He could hear the smile in her voice as she looked down at the drawer at his side.

He pressed down on the bottom and heard a click as the front half of the surface popped up and out just enough so that he could lift it out of the way. “Got it.”

Griff looked up and their gazes collided. He could see all the heat and desire he felt roiling inside him at Lou’s nearness reflected back at him. The moment stretched between them, charged with pent up need until he broke the connection and looked down to remove the half bottom so he could peer inside.

“Well, well, well. What have we here?” He reached in and lifted out a ledger, the tension between them set aside for now in exchange for quite a different tension. Could it be what we’re looking for?

“Perfect.” Lou reached for it, but Griff couldn’t resist pulling it away from her at the last moment. “Griff, what on earth are you about?”

He grinned. “I don’t know if you are truly qualified to assess the book’s usefulness. That is why I had to come along isn’t it?”

He could see the doubt lingering in her wary gaze as she hesitated a moment. But then, she chuckled. “Fair enough, I did make that claim. You look at it and I’ll go search these shelves for anything else, including any hidey-holes that might be hidden there.”

Griff reached out and grabbed her hand as she shifted to move away, pulling her in to take the kiss he’d been dying for since the night before.

Until this moment, he hadn’t been sure she would ever let him kiss her again.

Their lips met and his cock jerked in his trousers as their tongues met and twined. She tasted like bergamot and jasmine tea with a faint hint of sweetness that lingered from the bread pudding that had been the finale to their dinner. Lou’s new cook had gone all out on their meal. The kiss lingered until Lou pulled back, a little breathless, her cheeks flushed. Griff grinned. He liked that he wreaked such havoc on a woman who always seemed composed, was always ready for whatever was thrown at her. Except him.

“I’ll just look over there by the bookshelves while you review the ledger.” Her words sounded harsh as they dropped into the silence like hapennies hitting a tile floor.

“Very well.” Griff nodded and sat down at the desk, opening the book and began scanning the entries to see many familiar names. Most of them were MPs either in the House of Lords with him, or a few from Commons.

But what he noted most was a name that popped up over and over with sums that increased over time until the last entry...where the man donated sixty thousand pounds! All in all, Sir Francis Hathaway had donated a literal fortune, nearly two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Under no circumstances could one person come by that amount on their own. The sum was mind-bogglingly large. “Lou—I think I found our money trail.”

“Aha!” she cried out at the same time he spoke. She had a book pulled out of place and a panel in the wall was hanging open.

Intrigued, Griff stood up to see what she had found. “Careful.” His word of caution fell on deaf ears. Lou had already leaned into the space, though he could still see her legs as he came around the desk. “What did you find?”

She straightened up and held a box in her hands. It wasn’t large. It would likely fit into a large coat pocket. But it was intricately designed with some kind of inlay and there was no obvious lock for a key or even a hinge for the lid to open.

Just then, a sound came from somewhere outside. They looked at each other and nodded in unspoken agreement. Time to go.

Griff went back to the drawer and placed the false bottom back in the drawer before he piled the papers back on top of it, much as he had found them. Then he slipped the day-to-day cash ledger back into its place, heart racing. We must not be found here. He tucked the donor ledger under his arm, much as Lou had tucked the box she’d found under hers. She’d closed the hidden storage spot and set the shelf back in order to conceal their late-night visit as much as possible—though with the ledger and box they were taking, there was no doubt their presence would be discovered, eventually.

With their prizes in tow, they turned off all the lights and crept down the same stairs they’d entered, seeing no one and managing to slide the door shut and lock it as the

evening air teased at their fingers. Half an hour later, they were ensconced in Lou's study at her childhood home and were examining their finds more closely against the other evidence they had previously collected.

Griff showed her the ledger entries for Sir Francis Hathaway. "We need to look into him."

"I've heard of him," Lou said. "But I can't say that I know much more than surface details. He's a businessman who has invested in both electricity and the railroads, is he not? If I remember correctly, he earned his knighthood through some business dealing with the Crown. I'll have to refresh my memory on his background." She studied the entries. "But I agree with your thoughts that he could not have raised this kind of money on his own—not without something nefarious being involved."

"My thought as well." Griff nodded. "Should we take a look at your box?"

She pulled it closer to them as he moved the ledger out of the way. "I don't see a recognizable lock, but I know there are all kinds of puzzle boxes out there. One merely needs to be creative enough to design something. Or unlock it in this case."

"I've designed a few myself." Griff tipped it on its side, fingers tingling at the excitement of a puzzle. "Let me have a look." The box was covered in some form of inlay, as he had initially noted, but he suspected the designs were not stationary, at least not all of them. The hard part was determining which parts moved, and in what order. "This reminds me of a Japanese puzzle box I came across recently. It had fifteen steps to unlocking it. This one seems a similar size."

"How does it work? I haven't seen one of these before." Lou peered at it, leaning against his shoulder.

"Look closely." He handed her the box. "What do you see?"

“I can see...fine lines that cut off the design in odd places.” She pointed to one.

“Exactly. Shall we try and open it?”

Lou nodded as she handed the box back to him, and Griff pushed on areas of the inlay which appeared to have the odd lines. After a few moments, one piece of the box shifted a bit.

“Aha!” His exclamation melded with Lou’s and they peered closer at the box. These were such fascinating creations, but his stomach tensed with each slide of a piece. Soon they found another piece that moved, and so on. They continued for nearly an hour, working one piece and then another, sometimes having to go back and close up a piece to make another part work properly.

By the time they finally got the box open, it had taken seventeen steps, and Griff had loved every moment they’d spent. They shared a conspiratorial grin as they finally slid the top of the box open. Inside sat another box.

Lou groaned. “Please not another puzzle box, I don’t have the patience! I swear I’ll just smash it.” She glared at the smaller box.

Griff bit his lip to keep from smiling as he quickly pulled out the smaller box and found it to be a simple leather ring box with a latch. He rotated the latch and pulled the lid open. Inside sat a signet ring he did not recognize. It was a ruby carved with a laurel wreath around the letter V with a plus above the letter and a dash below it. Interesting. “Not a puzzle, but not a straightforward answer either. It is very similar to the seal on the threatening letter I received. Perhaps identical.”

Lou took the ring and examined it. “It is. Perhaps the plus and minus symbols just didn’t make a strong impression? In either case, it certainly seems to be connected to the attempts on your life. Any clues as to its meaning?”

“At face value, I believe I have seen the V with those symbols on electrical drawings. It represents volts. As to the laurel wreath, that typically means victory I believe. The Greeks often crowned victors of their sporting events with laurel.” Griff sat back in his chair and considered what they knew. “The ring is obviously important to someone high up in the Voltacrats or possibly of even higher rank. A signet ring is not something just anyone would have. And this one is clearly indicative of the push for electricity and a specific desired outcome.”

“Indeed. We should hold on to the ring for now. But I think it is better to focus our attention on this Sir Francis Hathaway.” Lou placed the ring back in its box.

“Very well. Where do we start?” Was it possible that Lou had resources beyond her handler to tap in to?

“I believe we both have our own set of connections. Why don’t we consult our respective networks and see what we can come up with collectively?” She tilted her head toward him as if daring him to deny he had a network.

He was not going to deny it. “Very well. I can send a note round to Cole and some of my other contacts in the morning. Then we can regroup in the afternoon?” Griff let one brow rise in question.

“Excellent! We should get some sleep now.” Lou stood and collected the ledger and the two boxes, placing them carefully in a safe hidden by a painting which Griff could never have suspected was there.

He followed her out of the room and up the stairs. “Yes. Sleep should definitely be on the agenda. Eventually.”

And it was, he suspected, much closer to day break than Lou had intended when she finally suggested they actually sleep.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

The next afternoon, Griff sat in Lou's library waiting for her. Mrs. Moore had seen that afternoon tea was brought in, since he had missed luncheon following up on their investigation. He appreciated that she had the cook make the sandwiches quite a bit larger and heartier than what was normally served with tea—he was absolutely famished.

He bit into a roast beef sandwich, made from the leftovers from the dinner they had shared the night before, prior to their late night prowling. It had been an excellent meal and now made a wonderful late lunch.

A few moments later, Lou whipped into the room, still removing her bonnet. She had clearly been out and about since she was wearing the tweed driving dress she had worn when she had first met his mother. “Good afternoon, Griff.”

“Good afternoon, Lou. Was your fact-finding effort fruitful?” he asked as he sipped his tea.

Mrs. Moore really was an outstanding housekeeper. She had provided two pots of tea: one held Lou's preferred tea blend and one was a simple black tea for himself, just as he liked it. Strong and dark.

Lou sat down, leaned toward the tea tray and sniffed. She then quickly poured herself a cup of tea—her bergamot and jasmine tea—and grabbed a sandwich. It seemed she had missed luncheon as well. She took a bite and chewed, nodding. Once she swallowed, she smiled. “Delicious! And yes, I did find a nugget or two. How about you?”

“The same. But, please ladies first.” He gestured toward her.

“Pish. I’m starving. You go first, since you’ve already had a chance to eat, if your empty plate is any evidence.” She took another bite and looked at him expectantly.

Griff smiled. He loved the fact she had a healthy appetite and did not hide it. “Very well, though nothing I discovered will come as a shock. I discovered that Sir Francis’ investments in locomotives are all around the conversion of trains from steam power to electricity.” A sardonic laugh escaped him. “Now the meeting Dell had requested last week when we bumped into Sir Francis at the club makes sense. I had thought it odd at the time, but dismissed it.”

He paused and let Lou absorb his ramblings while he took another bite of the delicious food and chewed. Once he’d swallowed and took a sip of his tea, he continued. “At any rate, it turns out that some portion of his monies do go toward the current running of the trains, but a larger portion has been earmarked for research and development of electricity for trains. Which, knowing what we now know, makes a great deal more sense. His other electric investments are more diversified. He has invested in the technology to use electricity for street lamps as well as electric cars, though he has some investments in gas powered vehicles as well since they at least require an electric start. It seems he feels it may be a closer step than full electric vehicles.”

Lou nodded as she finished off her sandwich. “Well, as you said, nothing particularly surprising there.” She took a scone and refreshed her tea. “I found a few more details myself, but again, he has not particularly hidden his leanings, so nothing shocking really. Sir Francis has a pleasant home on Grosvenor Square. He may only be recently elevated gentry—those who hold the highest of standards do not accept him—but he has the coffers to command his place in Society, despite any grumblings.”

Griff snorted. “No doubt that as soon as one of the impoverished nobles has a daughter available, we shall see his full acceptance by marriage. They’re just keeping him in their pockets until they need him, or more aptly his funds.”

Lou nodded her agreement and pressed on. “Nevertheless, he does live amongst them and is deeply aligned with their causes, hence his involvement with electricity and the Voltacrats. He has been coordinating the collection of funds for donation to the Voltacrats through quiet conversations at Brooks and the Travelers Club.”

He tilted his head as he looked at Lou, who had stopped to sip her tea. “Doesn’t one have to travel five hundred miles outside of the British Isles or some such in order to be a member of Travelers?”

“Apparently Sir Francis served in His Majesty’s Royal Navy and was at the Battle of Navarino in the Greek War of Independence, thereby gaining him entrance.” She paused and took another sip of tea, then took a bite of her scone with clotted cream.

Griff watched in rapt attention as she licked some of the cream from her upper lip, his cock jerking to life in his trousers as it often did when he was around Lou. He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat.

Lou cast him a knowing smile as she set her tea down. “So, not much we didn’t suspect about the man. But I do know his direction now and plan to pay him a visit tonight to ask about his ties to the Voltacrats. He may at least know who is the head of the organization.” She smiled tightly, as though relishing the prospect.

“I’ll go with you.” Griff set his napkin on his plate, knowing full well what she was going to say.

“This is best left to me,” Lou said firmly. “I’d prefer it if you stayed holed up here where I have had certain precautions put in place to secure the house. Reinforced

steel bars in the doors, Mr. Moore is armed, and the windows all have heavy duty locks in place. Besides, I simply plan to look about and...perhaps ask a few questions if the opportunity presents itself.” She finished her scone.

“Absolutely not. You should have someone to watch your back,” Griff insisted. He refused to let her continue on in the lone-wolf manner that she had previously operated. Is she mad?

Lou sighed, clearly frustrated by his demand she take him along. “Fine. Be prepared to leave by midnight.”

Griff sipped the after-dinner apéritif Lou had given him; not his usual brandy or whiskey, but he needed to have his wits about him if they were going to search Sir Francis’ home. Lou was outlining her plan in painful detail, and that struck him as strange.

He yawned, trying to prevent himself from being so rude. He was a dyed-in-the-wool night owl, so that was downright bizarre. He looked at her for a moment as her face warbled in his vision. “Lou, are...are you feeling all right?”

She offered a small smile to him. “Of course. Are you not?”

He watched her image wobble again, almost as if a steam engine was letting off heat in front of her. And then the tiredness truly set in...and with it the realization of what she’d done. “Damn you, Lou.”

She’d dropped all pretense then, clearly knowing the jig was over. “I am sorry, Griff, but this is a one woman job, and you simply wouldn’t see reason. Now let me help you get to bed before the draught truly takes hold.”

Lou helped him rise from the sofa, pressing her curves against his harder body, and

aimed them at the door of the library.

“You bloody well know this will not be the end of this matter.” Griff could hear his words slur as they stumbled toward the stairs but seemed unable to do anything about it. Damn her.

“I am certain you will tell me all about it,” her murmured response sounded so far away.

Damn, he was sleepy. “I swear I shall paddle your bottom when I wake up tomorrow.”

She grinned at him then—not the response he had hoped to elicit with his threat. Of course, she was a madame by day—what else should he have expected? “I mean it Lou. There shall be repurcus—repercush. You know what I’m thaying.”

She nodded. “Yes, Griff. There shall be repercussions for my actions.” She was at least acknowledging his thoughts, even if she didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned. And then she hefted him on to his bed—no wait. What was his bed doing here? It was her bed, perhaps? She hefted him on a bed and then stripped him down, and darkness was creeping in and he was sinking, sinking into softness...

*

Lou crept into the bedchamber of Sir Francis Hathaway alone to find him sound asleep...not unlike she’d left Griff after slipping him a sleeping draught after dinner. Though he hadn’t been able to fight off the draught, the man she loved had been coherent enough to know she’d given it to him. The sleepy tongue lashing he’d given her was admirable, though not particularly fear inducing, and just as he drifted off, he’d mumbled one final curse at her.

And she'd absolutely do it again to protect his stubborn hide.

As Lou stood listening to the deep even breaths of Sir Francis, the man who had likely funded the attempt on Griff's life—even if he didn't actually order it—the urge to take permanent action had her fingers curling into her palms. But then she reminded herself why she was there.

I have questions. He hopefully has answers.

Two steps had her out of the shadows and moving across his room. Two more landed her close enough to place a hand over the man's mouth and a blade to his neck. Whether it was the press of her hand cutting off his air or the chill of the blade didn't matter: the result was the same.

Sir Francis jerked awake, eyes wide and fear shining like a beacon in the darkness.

"Shhhh..." The sound should have been soothing, but the sibilance sounded menacing in the dark, even to her own ears. And that was her intent. "Now, love, I have a few questions for you. If you yell out I shall slit your throat, answers be damned." She likely wouldn't, but he didn't need to know that. Her threat was far more effective if he believed her capable of killing him,

The man nodded once, very slowly.

"Excellent. You recently gave the Voltacrats a large sum of money to fund an assassination. Who, specifically, did you give that money to?" Lou lifted her hand from his mouth but left the blade poised against his flesh—a warning.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sir Francis denied, a desperate pleading note creeping into his voice.

She shrugged, though it was highly unlikely he saw the movement. “I highly doubt that, since you donated nearly fifty thousand pounds. Regardless, I’d like an answer, and no isn’t an option.”

He stilled for a moment, seeming to pull himself together. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. You obviously know who I gave the money to.” His eyes darted around the room as though searching for something...or someone.

Lou rolled her eyes. Steam save her from fools. “If I knew for certain, would I be here holding a knife to your throat?” She pressed the blade a hair harder, actually drawing a thin trickle of blood. “Talk.”

“I-I-I gave it to the Voltacrats.” Sir Francis tensed up, causing the blade to sink deeper, drawing a larger drop of blood as he whimpered in fear and pain.

“Who?” Lou glanced nervously at the door. This is taking too long . Any moment someone could come through—his valet or a guard if he had one.

“Farrington—I gave the donation to Farrington, the head of the Bureau of Modern Technology. He has been my contact from the beginning.” He sounded convincing, and yet Lou trusted her instincts.

He was absolutely lying. She just wasn’t sure about which part.

“If you’re lying to me, I shall find out and I shall return to finish what we started here,” Lou hissed in frustration.

The sound of a door closing down the hall told her time was up; even if they weren’t likely to enter his chamber, he might decide to take the risk and yell out for help. Damn it . She should have searched his library and study first, but the need to ask questions had driven her straight to his bedchamber. This was why you didn’t get too

close to a mark—or the person you were protecting. It clouded one's judgement.

Slipping back into the shadows, Lou quickly slipped over the balcony where she'd entered his bedchamber and shimmied down the rope she'd used to ascend. As she'd hit the ground, Sir Francis bellowed from his bedchamber about being attacked. There was no retrieving her hook and rope, so she left it and melted into the night. Finding her steam cycle, Lou took it around a corner where she could watch and wait.

All the lights in the house came on—of course the man's home was wired for electricity. She watched as people moved about behind the curtains and then eventually all the lights were doused. She was just about to leave when a carriage pulled out of the mews and stopped in front of the house. Sir Francis stormed through the front door fully dressed and in a complete rage, yelling at the men manning his carriage. Dressed in plain drab clothes, they were clearly not liveried servants. So he had guards. Guards who had failed in keeping him safe.

Lou smiled to herself.

The carriage took off, and she decided it was prudent to follow behind. She did so at a great distance and with her lights turned off to remain as discreet as possible in the early morning hours, driving for nearly an hour before they turned into the air-port, a gaggle of buildings comprised of a main one where passengers checked in, and a series of outer buildings that served as warehouses and offices for the air-ship companies who hauled both goods and people.

Lou turned off on an earlier side road and utilized a different entrance to the grounds, one that would take her closer to where passengers would board a ferry up to their airship, not the terminal where they checked in.

Powering down her cycle, she crept through the hangars and crates of goods to be transported. The air-port was a hive of activity at any time of day, but seemed

especially busy this pre-dawn morning.

Sir Francis stormed out to a ferry and yelled at several people, his voice carrying on the thin morning air. “You will damned well take me to the Sky Chaser this minute. Do you know who I am?”

Lou snorted to herself. If you had to ask that question, you weren’t nearly as important as you thought you were.

The ferryman held up his hands. “The Sky Chaser is about to launch, sir. I can’t take you up there, it isn’t safe. Besides, the captain will have my hide if I do.”

“And I say I shall have it if you don’t! I suggest you call up there and delay their departure. I must speak with one of the passengers on that ship.”

The ferryman gave in and used a voice amplifying tube to call up to the air-ship. A few moments later, he looked sullenly at Sir Francis. “You’re to wait here, sir. Someone will be right down.”

“They’d better be...”

Someone on the ship—who was it? Could it be—

Two sets of hands snaked out of the darkness and clamped down on her arms. Lou jerked her Kukuri knife free of its holster and jabbed back toward the body on her right, but the goon blocked her strike. She heard the clatter of the blade striking the ground after it was stripped from her hand and before she could reach for her blade, darkness dropped over her vision, leaving her blind. She continued to struggle until someone whacked her in the head and it all faded to pain and darkness.

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Griff woke to the sun glaring into his eyes through a slit in the drapes. His head felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. I must really need a stiff cup of tea .

He dragged his hands down his face and paused. Wasn't I supposed to go search Sir Francis' house with Lou? He sat with the sheets pooled around his hips and tried to remember the previous night. He remembered insisting at dinner that he would accompany her and he distinctly remembered her giving in—though admittedly not with much grace. After dinner they had a light digestif, and then he got very sleepy...

She bloody drugged me!

Anger blossomed in his chest as Griff looked down at himself, then around the room. Well, he wasn't naked in her bed as he'd thought, she'd just made him more comfortable by removing his shoes, coat, and waistcoat. It soothed his ego only a very little that she had chosen to install him in her chamber. It also eliminated him running about the house with his head a mess from the drug, whatever it was. Blast .

By the time he'd dressed and put some food in his stomach to quell the aftereffects of the drug, it was mid-morning and Lou had not returned. Now Griff was worried. Beyond worried. At first, he'd assumed she was avoiding him, and rightly so. He was furious with her. But now a pervading sense of dread pushed him to take action.

He could search her study and see if she had left any clues there. Yes, that is a start.

Griff was heading there when he bumped into Mrs. Moore, who he hadn't seen all morning. "Good morning. I assume your mistress—um, Miss. Bellows, has not returned home?" He realized how fuzzy his thoughts were as he struggled to pull up

information he knew. Perhaps it was the after-effects of the draught she'd given him?

"She has not." The housekeeper's voice carried a note of worry that he found hard to ignore.

Griff stifled his sigh and forged ahead. "Mrs. Moore, I am worried something has happened to her."

The woman looked more worried at his expression of concern. She looked him up and down again, seemed to size up his reliability. Finally, as though deciding that he might be trustworthy, she nodded. "As am I. She slipped out the back of the house late last night. I haven't seen her since, though her bed has been slept in. I was a bit worried, but hoped she'd gone over to The Market, but she would have been back for luncheon—"

"I'm afraid I rumpled those sheets, and alone, last night." Griff's gut clenched. Lou is in danger. He could feel it in every writhing twist of his stomach.

Mrs. Moore lifted a worn, wrinkled hand to her forehead and rubbed the crease between her pinched brows. "Now I'm worried something happened to her."

Griff grunted his agreement because he couldn't push a single syllable past the lump currently wedged in his throat. He took a deep breath and nodded. "We are agreed. Would you mind if I searched her library for possible clues?"

"Please help yourself, my lord. If you can locate her with something you find in there, I'd be grateful." Mrs. Moore clenched her hands together, clearly agitated by Lou's absence.

"Thank you. I shall keep you informed." Griff nodded and turned to search the library, but it took him all of ten minutes to realize she had nothing of merit in her

desk. It was clearly not a space she'd used to any extent since returning to her childhood home. He informed Mrs. Moore before he departed the residence and headed to his next stop in search of answers. In search of Lou.

In search of the woman he loved.

Without hesitation he went straight to The Market; it was the seat of her power base, the place where she controlled everything around her, and so in the face of her absence it should be a place of resources, if not information.

Elena answered the door, all sultry disheveled elegance in her robe, with her sable brown hair mussed as though she had just come from the bed. He felt certain artifice was at play, though he'd be hard pressed to pick any one indicator.

"What can I do for you, Lord Melton?" Her thick Spanish accent made the question sound more like a purr and only heightened her sensual appeal, except for the fact that he was entirely occupied by thoughts of her employer.

"I am looking for Madame LaRoux. Is she at home?" Griff tried not to allow his anxiety to bubble up from the deep pit he'd shoved it in—but with every moment that ticked by, he found it more and more difficult to keep the dark worry at bay.

Elena made a moue and shook her head. "She is not. As you know, she moved out of The Market temporarily. There was no reason to expect her back here last night."

Griff couldn't help the worry that sliced through him. "Does she go missing often?"

"No, senor. She is usually home at some point. This absence from The Market is unusual to say the least, but then you seem to have become something of a special case with her. But she is not at her other residence, you say? That is most concerning." Elena straightened and the facade of lazy sexuality slipped away like a

mask removed at a midnight masquerade.

The notion that Lou might see him as special struck him like a knife to the heart under the circumstances. His woman was missing, and even if he found her he had to convince her to give him a real chance, to be partners when that was clearly not how she was accustomed to operating—as last night had highlighted so very clearly. “Very well. I shall send word if I locate her.”

“As will I, my lord.” The woman nodded and promptly shut the door in his face.

He’d be offended at both being left on the stoop and the door slam, but with his warning bells ringing that something was off, he was grateful to be able to make a hasty departure—but halted on the front stoop of The Market. Where exactly should his next stop be? Should he go back to Lou’s home or to his own? Perhaps he should visit Sir Francis’ home?

After debating for a moment, he decided it was best to head home—via Sir Francis’ house.

The hansom cab Griff had hired drove him past Sir Francis’ house, but there was nothing that appeared out of the ordinary. He even stopped and searched the mews behind the house only to find nothing; Lou’s steam cycle was nowhere to be seen.

He considered knocking on the door to see if Sir Francis was home, but hesitated. What if his staff were involved? And just because Sir Francis was or was not home did not prove anything about Lou’s whereabouts. No, better to remain circumspect for now. It wouldn’t help Lou at all if he got himself nabbed. Cog it all! With that in mind, he decided to head home and send word to Cole. Perhaps he could offer some assistance.

Upon arriving home he took refuge in his library, far too distracted to tinker with

anything at the moment. He considered working on his steam loom design, but found the notion objectionable in the absence of Lou. Not knowing where she was or what happened to her made him...restless.

Pouring a drink seemed as good an option as any, so he reached for the decanter, but a knock interrupted him. He bade the person to enter and found Higgins bearing a piece of correspondence. "You may leave the note on my desk."

Invitations were the least important thing on his list of things to do on a good day. Today was a decidedly bad one.

"The messenger said the missive was of the utmost importance." Higgins hesitated, not precisely countermanding his order, but not following it through either.

"Very well, I'll take it." Griff was more annoyed by the inconvenience than anything, but a quick look would allow him to dismiss the note with a clear conscience.

He took the parchment and broke the unfamiliar seal. The wax was imprinted with what appeared to be a lightning bolt and the words *ipsa scientia potestas est*. He translated the phrase easily, relying on the Latin he learned in school: knowledge itself is power, before he unfolded the page to find a barely legible scrawl.

Meet me on Hampstead Heath, near the elms, at half-past one.

—Lou's H

Griff glanced at the clock on the mantle. He had just enough time to make the meeting. Abandoning the decanter and the parchment, he bolted to the mews. Within ten minutes he was thundering down the lane on the back of Cimmerian, his black Arabian. As he neared the heath, he slowed his mount before sliding off his back and walking the rest of the way. He approached through the back side of the elms, using

the leaf strewn ground to muffle both his and the horse's steps. It was easy to assume that 'Lou's H' was her handler—possibly too easy.

Is it a trap? I must risk it.

He'd arrived first, since it appeared no one else was there, but only a moment later a soft rustle of leaves—it could have been the wind, but the prickling on the back of his neck said otherwise—alerted him to the presence of another.

Griff spun around and crouched in readiness for an attack, only to find a tall man with dark auburn hair grinning at him. For a moment, he feared he had fallen into a trap, but then the man laughed.

“Either Lou has taught you well, or fear has made you a cautious man.”

Griff knew it was a little of both, so he simply shrugged a shoulder. “One can never be too careful where spies and assassins are concerned. I assume you're her handler?”

The stranger nodded as his smile broadened. “A wise man. I assume she has not shared my name, so you can call me H.” They shook hands. “We should press on to business. I believe you have noticed the absence of a particular lady?”

“Indeed. She seems to have vanished like steam vapor.”

The man nodded. “I know who has her, or at least who took her.” He stepped in closer. “Sir Francis.”

Griff reared back. “Taken? Damnit! I told her I should go with her to search the bastard's home.” He cursed himself as a fool for not securing her promise to not go without him when they'd argued. “And Sir Francis? The financier? He's the one who took her?”

“Yes. He has taken her in an air-ship headed for the Isle of Wight.” H dug into a satchel he carried. “I do not know what his plans may be or who he is meeting, but if he has left London, it can only mean danger. I also found this at the air-field where I tracked her to—it was on the ground behind some crates where I also found her steam-cycle.”

Griff’s hands shook as he took the cloth wrapped item. When he opened it, his gut twisted as though the knife he held had been thrust into it. Her knife. If she had been parted with her weapon, then there was no doubt she’d been taken and was in danger. Damn . Griff disliked air travel; but for Lou, he’d endure anything. “I have access to a ship. When did they leave?”

“If my sources are right? A few hours ago. Remember, we don’t know who Sir Francis is meeting, it could be anyone.”

Griff shook his head. “No, it has to be whoever hired her to kill me. She went to Sir Francis’ house to investigate and never returned home.” He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “I can’t let her suffer as a result of her connection to me. I shall go after her—can you keep working to discover who the leader is?”

The spy nodded. “Of course. Be safe, my lord.”

“Wait!” Griff stopped him. “Tell me one thing. What is her real last name? I’ve refrained from snooping up to now, but I’d like to know.”

“If she hasn’t told you...”

“I love her, and right now I don’t know if I’ll ever see her again. Please?” Griff’s heart ached for all he feared losing. Nothing mattered anymore . Not his love of tinkering, his secrets, her past, or even the fact she’d drugged him. He loved her, and as soon as he rescued Lou, he intended to tell her. Her name, her real name, was the

last little piece of her, and knowing it made him feel closer to her even as he searched for her.

The man examined him for a moment and then nodded; a short, curt movement. “Stanton.” He was gone as silently as he had appeared.

Steaming hell, I really want to learn how to do that . To simply appear wherever he wanted, silent as a wisp of air.

Without further delay he mounted Cimmerian and took off in the opposite direction of his home. Twenty minutes later and a few new colorful curse words under his belt courtesy of a fishmonger’s wife and a baker, he arrived at Cole’s front door.

With a few perfunctory taps, the portal opened and he entered. “Good afternoon, Brewton. Is your master at home? It is imperative I speak with him at once.”

The butler nodded. “If you will come with me, my lord.”

He dutifully followed Cole’s longtime, and very proper, retainer, wishing the old man walked faster—yet it was within moments that Griff was led into Cole’s study.

“Thank the steaming heavens you are at home!” Griff barreled past his unnecessary guide and hurtled across the room to where Cole stood, somewhat surprised by the sudden interruption.

“What’s the matter, Griff?” Cole set the book in his hand down and turned, astonished, to his friend.

“Lou has been taken—I need you to fly me to the Isle of Wight. And, well—” Griff hesitated, worried his friend might not be game for the whole adventure. “We shall likely need to board another ship. I know it legally falls under the description of

piracy, but I cannot let them hurt her.”

Cole merely offered a wide, toothy grin before he turned to Brewton and snapped orders for his horse to be brought around. The butler bowed then departed the study, leaving the two men alone.

“How the devil did you know I arrived by horse?”

His friend laughed. “Besides the clatter you made barreling up to my home? If you hadn’t been on horseback, Brewton would have simply had two mounts saddled.”

Griff grunted. “Pays to have good help. How long will it take to launch once we are aboard your ship?”

His friend frowned. “She has a name.”

Griff’s brows drew together, confused. “Who has a name?”

“My ship. Do you not listen to anything I say? Her name is the Sweet Annie.” Cole seemed truly miffed at him for not remembering the name of the ship.

The response baffled Griff. “I feel as though I should apologize, but I am not quite certain about what—or to whom.”

Cole rolled his eyes and slapped his friend on the shoulder. “I’m probably a bit touchy. Sweet Annie is the only woman I’ve ever been faithful to. I’d sooner cut off my arm than sail another ship.”

His friend truly was an idiot. “I’m not sure how that compares with not sleeping with anything that has breasts and moves.”

“It proves I have restraint. I simply choose not to employ it very often.” His friend winked, and then they headed out to find their mounts.

Griff had an assassin to save.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Ouch! Lou's head felt like it had blown a gasket.

The throbbing was bad enough, but the nausea had her on her knees and panting like an animal. It was horrible to experience, let alone in front of two men who stood snickering the whole time.

She drew a slow deep breath and her stomach calmed, but then the floor tilted and swayed—or was that her? Lou struggled to look around; everything appeared to be where it had been. She was fairly certain it wasn't her vision.

Should she question the men? The need to be sure forced her hand. "Are we on an air-ship?"

"Aye," one of the men said just as the air-ship hit an air pocket and dropped a foot or two in altitude.

She groaned. Had Sir Francis captured her and dragged her onboard that ship he was trying to board? What was it? The Sky Chaser? Ugh!

She and airships did not get along, not in the least. Air pockets, like the one they just experienced, were among the many reasons she disliked flying—but the biggest reason she hated it? Simple. God hadn't deemed it appropriate to give her wings. Lou took that as a sure sign humans were not made to soar through the sky, especially not in something that resembled a flying metal sloop less its sails. Give her two wheels and a powerful steam engine to speed her along, and she would get where she needed to go just fine.

Most unfortunately, it seemed the men who had abducted her did not see fit to confer with her on her preferences for travel. Most fortunately, they hadn't bothered to tie her up. That would make it easier for her to slip away at some point. Eventually they would have to land at an air-field or, worst case, dock at an air-port, would they not? So as her stomach calmed down—at least, as much as it would so long as she was flying—and the throb in her head eased, Lou sized up the two men left to watch her.

On the one hand, she found it insulting that once again, men had underestimated her skills. On the other hand, she frequently found it very useful that they did so. Not even tying her up? The fools. This would prove to be in her favor once again.

With as little warning as she could muster under the circumstances, Lou lunged from her position on all fours and leapt at the two men. Catching them both by surprise, she managed to get in a good wallop to the one who'd offered the one-word answer—she named him One-word in her head—and turned to face his companion.

“I don't think so, lassie.” The man's thick Scottish burr made it hard to decipher each word precisely, but she got the gist of what he meant...mostly because he pulled a knife from his sock and waved it at her as though it were somehow menacing.

With a wicked grin Lou lunged forward, ducking low and to the side to avoid his sloppy thrust. Granted, it took skill to fight with a knife, but even lumbering fools could get lucky and kill you. With a few well timed moves, she continued to avoid his wildly thrusting knife while maneuvering to a good angle to disarm him. By then, the idiot was panting heavily with all the efforts of trying to keep up with her. When he was good and tired, Lou kicked the wrist of his knife hand and forced the blade free. With a low sweep to the ground that took out his legs, she scooped the weapon up and had it poised at the man's throat as he tried to right himself.

That was about the time his friend had gathered his wits and realized the situation had gotten well and truly out of hand. In a comical gesture, One-word's shoulders

slumped as he took in the situation.

“Since we find ourselves in this position,” Lou panted darkly, “I think we can work together to get out of it. I am sure you both, particularly you, Scotty, would like to continue to breathe beyond today. Since I want very much to get off this flying deathtrap, I think we can come to an arrangement. I am going to tie you two up, or if you prefer, knock you out, and I shall solemnly swear not to kill you. In exchange, you will tell me how to get to one of the escape hatches so that I might depart your esteemed company. How does that sound, gentlemen?” They both nodded, though Scotty did so far more carefully than One-word.

“Now, about those directions?” Lou waited until One-word found a few more.

“Ye need only head toward the mizzen mast, aft of the ship. Just before the engines ye’ll find the escape hatches and the crew air-chutes.”

Lou wanted to groan. Chutes? “So I simply strap on the chute and jump?”

“No’ exactly, lass. It would be more that ye would climb into yon basket and drop.” Scotty trembled beneath her blade for a moment.

Her stomach rolled at the idea.

Still, she had subdued the fools, and pleased with their rather affable natures, Lou looked around the room they were currently in. There was not any available rope, nor anything similarly suited with which to bind the men. As unfortunate as it would be for them later, she knocked Scotty alongside his head just hard enough to put him out.

When One-word’s eyes grew huge, she shrugged. “Apologies, but there isn’t any rope around. I’m sure you can understand my dilemma.”

The man shook his head and took one step back—but Lou was far fleet of foot than One-word and quickly had him lying next to his friend.

With her guards out of the way, she crept to the door and peeked out. Her heart raced, blood pumping so violently through her body that she felt almost giddy. It was a strange sensation, and not one she'd felt in years.

The hallway was empty for the moment, so she dashed out of the relative safety of the room and on toward freedom. Lou had to admit there was something exciting about making an escape—even if it was necessitated because she'd actually let someone get the slip on her. She mentally growled at herself. So bloody focused on saving Giff that I missed some clod creeping up behind me. This is why you don't break the bloody rules! She took a deep breath and focused. She had to get off this flying contraption and back to Griff.

It was straightforward to sort out where she was on the air-ship. The perpetual pump-hiss of the steam engines could be heard faintly in the distance, suggesting the ship had a steam-thrust engine configuration. Balancing the urge to run with the need for stealth, she made her way carefully down the hall, about to round a corner when she heard voices approaching. With a silent curse, Lou retreated to the last door she'd passed and tried it. The handle turned, and she found a dark little closet to tuck herself in while the coming voices came closer.

As the men passed her door, she could hear their voices grow louder then fade away. Once it sounded safe, she cracked her door open and scooted out along the passageway. Twice more Lou had to find quick hidey-holes, but eventually she made her way to the mizzenmast and found the airlock with the escape chutes.

She grabbed one of the giant baskets which had a canopy attached and dragged it toward the emergency launch mechanism which sat next to an exterior door that could be used when the air-ship was on the ground. Too bad she couldn't just slip out

that way now. But alas, she had plans after leaving this air-ship, and plummeting to her death wasn't one of them.

Lou was about to climb in and hit the release button when the passageway door popped open and an all-too familiar and rather stunningly beautiful man appeared, along with another man who faded into obscurity in comparison. His sharp, assessing gaze made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end—but it wasn't the first time she'd seen him. It wasn't even the second, though it was doubtful he would recognize her from their interlude at the Bureau, since she no longer resembled a boy.

“Leaving so soon, Madame LaRoux? Were your accommodations and companions not up to your standards?” Dell asked, a slight sneer in his voice.

Lou crouched down, setting herself closer to the acquired blade she'd tucked in her boot. “Do spare me the whole villainous confession, Dell, this is no Shakespearean tragedy. I plan to live well past this day.” She darted a wary glance at the second man, who was edging out and to her right as Dell moved to her left.

“You know I can't let you leave here and tell Griff the truth. But, as you wish. To business.” Dell nodded and together, the two men lunged toward her.

Lou squatted lower, grabbed the knife, and whipped up into Dell's attack. As he jammed her back against the wall, she drove the knife into his right shoulder. Determined not to lose the weapon to his flesh and bones, she lifted a knee up into his thigh as she placed her hand on his chest and shoved him back, freeing her blade as he went. He tumbled to the floor with a cry of pain as the blade slid back out the way it had gone in.

The goon who had joined him grabbed the wrist of her hand which held the blade, but not at all opposed to fighting dirty, she spun and kicked the man in his family jewels. Resolved to get the steaming hell off the ship, Lou lunged for the open passageway

door and slammed it shut, cutting off any potential reinforcements coming to their aid. The goon crumpled in pain as she turned the lock.

Exhaustion was quickly tugging at her eyes, and she certainly couldn't allow more men to come to Dell's aid or she would be caught—if not killed.

Injured, but persistent, Dell grabbed her boot and tried to pull her away from the door. She had just gotten the lock turned when she was hauled away and stumbled to her knees. Cogit all! Would he not just lay down and be injured?

Dell lurched, one arm useless and bloody, and tried to ram her into the wall again. Her opponent pushed against her shoulders—though not as hard as the first time—pinning her to the bulkhead and heaving a breath as they both struggled for air. Steaming Hells! Was she going to die here from lack of air to breathe?

She knew it would get worse once she hit the depressurization button but it currently taunted her from across the room. I'll get there. I must. It was her way back to Griff. She had to ensure his safety—

The goon crawled to his feet and snarled, "Let me take care of this. The bitch needs a lesson in manners."

Dell still had her pinned, but he shifted to one side and the goon slammed his meaty fist into Lou's belly. Steaming hells! Did the man have bricks in his hands? Pain flared across her body as she tried to catch her breath. Fighting through it, blade still in hand, she lifted her arm around the outside of the goon's and sliced downward across his upper arm. He grunted as he pulled back and she returned for a more lethal approach. Picking up her right foot, she kicked Dell's knee out, causing him to drop like a stone. Barely able to breathe, Lou knew she needed to end the fight soon or she wouldn't survive this two-on-one. The goon had more mass than she did, so now she'd put Dell down, her only advantage was her conditioning and experience.

She'd have to hope they'd be enough.

The goon lunged forward and wrapped his hands around her throat. With a little grunt, Lou reached around his side and jabbed the blade between two of his ribs. If she were lucky, it would hit a vital organ, or at the very least deflate a lung. Either scenario worked for her. The brute growled, but drew up short as he tried to maneuver away from the sharp object currently sticking in his side. Lou jerked backwards, but the damn thing seemed stuck in his flesh.

There was only one thing for it. Letting go of the hilt, she pushed all thirteen stone of the man aside—she'd be damned if he weighed any less. With a much less graceful move thanks to her aching lungs and exhausted muscles, Lou bashed the depressurization button on the wall that would allow the escape hatch of the airlock to open once she was ready—but unexpectedly, the exterior door she'd noticed earlier opened, letting the wind whip through the compartment.

She blinked in confusion. Had she done that when she'd depressurized? But as the air swirled around her with a vicious force, a hand reached out and snatched her back from the open hatch, where brilliant daylight currently poured in. How is the blighter still conscious? Does it matter now that his hands are on my throat again?

And then seemingly out of thin air, Griff appeared.

Griff felt several emotions ripple through him as he stepped off the steam-powered dingy and inside the airlock of the Sky Chaser. His first realization was that a man currently had both hands wrapped around Lou's throat, choking the life out of her even as she punched him next to the blade jammed in his side while a second man lying on the floor, clutched his knee.

Clearly this had not been a fair fight, though why he should ever think it would have been could only be chalked up to his upbringing.

His second realization, and the more shocking of the two, was that the man on the floor was one of his best friends—Dell.

But that had to wait. With a growl born of a rage he did not know he could possess, Griff charged the brute choking Lou and landed a ferocious punch to the side of his head. It didn't knock him out—that was the stuff of fairytales—but the blow caused the blaggard to release Lou. She stumbled back against the bulkhead, hands clutched at her throat as she gasped for air. The thug tripped to his left, but turned to face Griff, taking a protective stance in front of Dell who appeared to be sitting up now. Griff got a good look at the mess his friend seemed to be, and wondered how long the three had been fighting.

Before he could say anything, Dell snarled, “ You . Always you stepping in and ruining things. Why could you not follow your father's lead?”

Nonplussed for a moment, Griff wasn't sure how to reply, then decided to save the chit chat for later. He whipped out the billy-club Cole had happily armed him with and swung at the goon's head. He caught him hard enough that the man fluttered to the ground like a deflated steam-powered bellows.

Then Griff looked at Dell and shook his head. “Why, Dell? Why would you do all of this? And to me, of all people?”

Dell seemed shocked by his questions. “You know what happened to me—and despite that you continued to dabble in steam. You tossed me aside as a friend long before this. You made that choice when you became the Lord of Cogs!”

His former friend lurched forward, leaving Griff no choice—though it pained him to crack his friend on the head and watch him slide to the floor.

The need to see Lou to safety had him turning to find her still leaning against the

wall. The wind whipped wildly, making it hard to talk without shouting, and he guessed her throat wouldn't appreciate a chat at the moment. Opting for the most expedient exit, he simply scooped her up and proceeded to whence he'd come. At the opening of the escape hatch of the Sky Chaser, he found the steam-dingy he'd used to sneak over, still waiting for him with one of Cole's crew manning the small air-ship.

Once he had Lou on board the open-air single propeller craft, Griff jumped in and the three of them headed for the relative safety of Cole's airship...the Sweet Annie. He finally remembered the name of Cole's ship, but of course the man wasn't here.

As they reached their ship, the Sky Chaser commenced firing on them with her mounted guns. Great Trevithick! Cole must be furious that they're firing on his ship. He certainly was angry, but more because they'd snatched Lou and were now threatening her life.

They hurried to board the Sweet Annie, stowing the dingy before they peeled away from the ship now firing at them. With a gush of steam that sounded like a trainyard of locomotives, they accelerated at a speed that had them all grabbing something to hang on to while they adjusted and clouds raced past. When they'd been in pursuit, Cole had gleefully explained the engine modifications he'd made to allow the Sweet Annie to outrun—in this case, catch up to—even the fastest known air-ship. The Sky Chaser never had a chance to turn and give chase.

While Griff would have dearly loved to go and inspect the engines that powered the Sweet Annie, he was more concerned about Lou at the moment. He had to take care of her—as she had prevented him from doing before. With little fuss and brooking no arguments, he had Lou installed in his rooms and after depositing her, he went and rustled up hot water so he could provide her with a honey and whiskey tea while she recovered. Mostly, he sought a moment alone so he could command his racing heart to calm. Having damn near lost her, he was having a hard time not lashing her to the bed in an effort to protect her. He returned to his room to find the injured woman

trying to rise from the bed where he'd laid her.

"Griff, this is ridiculous. Let me up so I may bathe." Lou tried to rise for the fifth time since they'd returned but her voice sounded like she had gravel clogging it instead of the melodious tone she normally spoke with.

"Louisa . You will stay in that bed until such time as I deem you sufficiently recovered." Or perhaps until he deemed his nerves sufficiently recovered. It was possible he was being a bit overbearing, but honestly, who could blame him?

"Bloody men. I was doing quite well escaping until you distracted me." Lou set her tea down and crossed her arms, letting out an annoyed huff.

"Yes, my dear. I could see how well you were managing things...what with that thug's hands wrapped around your throat." Griff wanted to toss the woman over his knee and paddle her backside, but for the moment, he restrained himself. That would be something to enjoy, at leisure, on another occasion...

"I had escaped the room I was held in, navigated my way to the escape hatch and was doing a bang up job of non-fatally debilitating that fiend after doing the same to—"

Griff sighed wearily and sat on the edge of the bed. "One of my best friends."

"I know." Her stricken expression mirrored his own inner turmoil. "I can't say for sure, but I believe he was the one who Sir Francis gave the money to."

"It would make sense. He is the Under-Secretary of Steam and decidedly not a supporter of steam technology. I imagine if he is this involved in things, he's likely more than a mere supporter of electricity." It was hard to imagine, but Dell had been drifting away from both him and Cole since they graduated university all those years ago. A lifetime ago.

“I’m sorry.” Lou looked adorably contrite, though she had nothing to apologize for. “How did you find me in the end?”

He shrugged, as if this little adventure were the norm, and told her of his journey to find her.

She stared and he could see the wheels spinning as she turned over all that she knew and had seen. “And how is it you happen to have an air-ship at your disposal? I can’t imagine Holt allowed you to take one of the Crown’s ships on such an endeavor.” Her voice grew raspier with every exchange.

Holt—H. It had been an annoying question since the beginning, but now that he knew, it changed nothing. How strange. But Lou had asked him a question...

He considered not telling her, but keeping secrets had proven rather detrimental to both their relationship and their health. No more secrets. No more lies. “Cole had offered his air-ship and I took him up on it once I learned where you were. Some of what I have seen on board the Sweet Annie confirms what we suspected, he too has some of his own secrets.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Well, I dare say we have enough of our own issues at hand that we should likely ignore whatever it is you suspect.” She paused, chewing her lower lip. “Unless you think he is involved with Dell’s plot?”

Griff’s gut revolted at the notion. “Oh no, I merely suspect my friend is more pirate and less above board importer-exporter.”

“Ah, well then. Perhaps we should leave that topic well enough alone. For now, we should determine our next maneuver.” Lou reached for her tea and took another sip.

Her voice was near to giving out, or so he suspected. “You need to rest, at least for a

bit. We have hours until we are safely back in London. Rest, my...rest, Lou. You are safe now.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Griff looked out his bedchamber window at the night-drenched sky over London. It was a few hours to morning yet, but Lou was already awake and clad in his robe as she plaited her hair. He figured she would soon attempt to slip away from him and track down Dell. There was little point; his friend would come to him when he was ready. Besides, Cole was helping to run down who owned the Sky Chaser.

The question was, how did he distract her in the meantime?

He knew what he wanted to do. Or more precisely, what he'd wanted to do since he'd gotten her away from Dell.

But with how things had played out between them—her drugging him—Griff hesitated, his greatest successes both in Parliament and in his workshop whirling through his mind. They'd all come when he'd been fearless and determined. Perhaps the same would be true of love? Would Lou accept his heart if he gave it to her?

Resolved to find out, he turned and stalked across his bedchamber. If she were his wife, it would be her room as well—at least for sleeping. Would she object to that? He was not of the mind to sleep alone.

Lou looked up from the vanity where she sat, eyes wide.

Gut clenched with nerves, Griff stopped at her side and held out a hand. "Come. I wish a word with you."

Lou huffed, but rose. "Please, Griff, no more lectures on chasing villains alone. I wouldn't do anything different—well, perhaps not anything. I wouldn't drug you

again, but I would ask you to see reason next time. I know I owe you an explanation, but going alone was the best way I knew how to execute the mission. You know I've done things alone since I left my uncle's home."

He nodded and drew her close. "I understand. No more lectures, and I do promise to see reason, when appropriate. But I also expect you to talk these things out in the future." They stopped in front of the very window he'd been brooding in front of moments before. "And I do have more to say to you."

The poised confident woman he knew looked as nervous as he felt.

Griff took a deep breath. "In the short time we've been acquainted, I have come to cherish the moments I spend with you."

She smiled indulgently. "Most men enjoy slipping between the sheets."

He frowned. "Do not deflect. I am speaking in all earnestness, and I am referring to all moments with you. Our little chats, to uncovering secrets, to fighting off villains, to the quiet moments when I hold you in my arms in the dark of night. And yes, those moments where you let me touch you and love you until you come apart in my arms." He stopped again and drew a deep breath. "Louisa Stanton—" she gasped as he revealed her last name "—I love you with every beat of my heart."

She stood there for a moment, stunned, he'd wager. All the while, his own heart raced as he waited for her response, for some glimmer of hope that she might feel the same. But she stood there, not speaking. Not moving. Griff couldn't hold back any longer; he stepped into her body and swept her into his arms, snaring her lips with his own and plunging his tongue past her defenses. She tasted of black tea, honey, and a hint of whiskey that melded into a bitter sweetness appropriate for the moment.

She met his demanding kiss, her arms wrapping around him as her fingers dug in as

though he were all she had left to cling to. Time slipped by, neither willing to let the other go as they expressed all that was between them with their lips and tongues, not words. Words were too hard as Griff grappled with the uncomfortable feeling of having stripped emotionally bare.

Lou drew back, slowly parting from him with nibbled kiss after nibbled kiss. Foreheads pressed together, she whispered the words he had hardly dared to hope for. “I love you, too.”

He couldn’t repress the bubble of relieved laughter as her words set in. She loved him.

Lou was still amazed by Griff’s declaration. The shock had frozen her, leaving her unsure of what to say. But as he kissed her and wrapped her in his arms, his love flowed over her and she knew what she needed to say. Knew she needed to tell him what she’d realized was true the moment she walked out on him. The reason she’d drugged him, to keep him safe. What was in her heart: she was madly, deeply in love with him.

It was why she had been so hurt by his secret. That he had somehow—though she was sure Holt had something to do with it—discovered her last name reinforced how much he cared for her. She mattered to him in a way she hadn’t mattered to anyone in a very long time...and though she had visions of a cottage by the sea, she knew it would be an empty husk without Griff. It would never be a home if her heart were not there.

When his lips once again crashed against hers, Griff scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed. The softness of the mattress welcomed them as he settled her in place. Clad in nothing but his dressing robe, she waited as anticipation raced over her nerves like an electric current. The man she loved dropped one last kiss on her lips, straightened, then commenced removing his garments. Since he had forgone a

coat, he started with his waistcoat which hit the floor with a whisper of sound.

The need to touch him, to help him, drove Lou up on her knees, but he rebuffed her assistance.

“You are to be resting, not exhausting yourself,” he said, chiding her like a babe.

Hands on hips, she tsked. “Don’t be ridiculous, Griff. What is about to occur does not remotely resemble resting.”

He shook his head. “I plan on making slow, sweet love to you. Nothing over-taxing.”

Lou snorted. “When have you ever done anything slow and sweet? You are nothing if not a passionate lover who enjoys a good romp—and, as it happens, I am of a similar mindset. So save the slow and sweet for when I’m eighty and have the stamina for little else.”

He offered her a Machiavellian smile. “Oh, my dear Miss Stanton, you have no idea what I am capable of.” He untied his cravat and lunged at her in the most unexpected of moves.

Lou shrieked in surprise as she tried to fend him off, but he was ready for her every attack. It took him a solid five minutes to subdue her—though truth be told, she didn’t fight too hard. Curiosity led her to give in and see what her lover had in store. As he looped the end of the necktie around her wrists, Griff stroked her skin with his fingertips and murmured sweet nonsense as though soothing a savage beast. He tied the trailing end off around the spindle of the headboard and propped a pillow beneath her head. Once he was certain she was comfortable, or as much as she could be, tied to his bed, he stepped back to admire his handiwork.

He shook his head. “No, something’s off.”

Griff reached over her and lifted her head to release the ribbon holding her hair back. He proceeded to arrange her midnight locks so they fanned out over the pillow before stepping back again to observe. To Lou's dismay and frustration, he once again shook his head. "Still not right." Then his gaze skimmed down over her body and back up. "Ah, yes..."

Again he drew closer, but this time he released the belt of the robe and spread the panels open. The cooler air caressed her flesh, raising a swath of goosebumps. Her nipples pebbled, though more from her own excitement than the cool air. His gaze caromed down her skin, taking in each rise and hollow, almost mapping her in a thorough inspection. By the time he reached her knees, her toes were curling and her torso arching up with need. Just a touch . One simple touch and she was certain she would shatter into a million pieces.

Instead, Griff returned to disrobing and talking. "Now you are properly arranged, I am going to slowly undress. Then I am going to do as I said before and slowly, torturously, make love to you."

Not for one moment did Lou believe he would follow through on his threat.

Had a woman ever been so wrong?

Griff crawled on the bed near her feet, knelt over her lower half with one hand planted for leverage, then he gently kissed the top of her foot. With the other hand, he stroked the opposite foot as he commenced his leisurely ascent. His next kiss landed in the vicinity of her ankle, right in the inner hollow by the small bone, to be precise. The combination of his touch mixed with the feathery brush of his breath set off a series of sensations that had her writhing beneath him.

"Griff," Lou breathed.

He eased up her legs, switching to the other as he reached her knees. There he reared back and lifted the entire leg, running his hands over the length of flesh and bone until he found what he sought. Unfortunately, that meant he did not touch her any place on her body currently clamoring for his attention.

Steaming hells why didn't he—

He stroked the hollow behind the knee with a delicate touch that set her nerve endings off as though she were a tuning fork he'd struck against a stone.

“Griff...” She all but moaned with the need he'd stoked inside her.

“I'm afraid this is all quite out of your hands,” he teased with a flash of a smile.

He's trying to kill me with pleasure, isn't he?

Focused on wringing every ounce of pleasure from her body, Griff lowered her leg and continued his way north. To her utter delight he stopped, wedging himself between her thighs, and planted a kiss on her mound. Desperate for more, she pressed up into his touch, but to no avail. He immediately moved on to the sensitive skin that lay between her mons and her belly button. There he leisurely dragged his hot, wet tongue over the taut skin, causing her to gasp as pleasure stole her breath. The shaking set in as he dipped into her belly button only to swirl around it and push up her torso, an inexorable assault on her sanity, for Lou was certain she would soon be a lunatic.

Ignoring her growing desperation and need, Griff traced over her sternum, licking through the valley between her breasts and then to the right along her collarbone. When he returned the way he'd come, and then over the left collarbone, Lou came close to begging him to fill her. Please, do something before I die from needing you! But she held strong, refusing to give in to his lingering seduction.

Of course, as much as she desired it, Lou was not prepared for the moment when his lips wrapped around one nipple—and sucked. With a cry, she arched up into Griff's mouth, arms bowed back over her head as her mouth gaped open. Relentless in his attentions, she wondered—as he let go and shifted to the other nipple—how she would survive the night. As he repeated the action on her other breast, Lou lost all thought and gave in to the swell of need wrapped in pure pleasure.

When he pushed up to hover over her, she only registered the sudden absence of his heat and the welcome weight of him. “Don’t leave me.” The words flew from her mouth before she could even register their meaning, let alone the note of panic that laced her plea.

Griff returned to where he’d been and kissed each cheek. “I shall never abandon you.” His words were a rough benediction, full of possessive intent that made her toes curl in pleasure.

The simple, yet fierce, declaration soothed Lou’s fears and pushed her back toward the edge of sanity where she’d been dancing along since he first wound his cravat around her wrists. Once more eager to dance until she tumbled, she all but purred beneath him as he returned to his stroking and caressing, punctuated by the occasional kiss or nip. Time spun out, as though he were a magician who could manipulate it, bend it to his will as he did her body.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Griff slid back down between her legs and parted them. Yes. The warmth of his breath super-heated her body, made her ache with want as she waited for him to taste her pleasure. A wriggling mass of nerves, even the slightest touch from him set off a round of shaking as she teetered on the precipice.

“Please,” Lou begged. A thousand words—some promises of dark retribution, others laced with declarations of love—tumbled through her brain. But that please was the

only one she could manage to speak in the moment.

And to her everlasting joy, it was the only one she needed.

The heat of Griff's tongue seared her like a firebrand as he traced along her slit. The pleasure-pain of the moment made her groan as her body lit up like a steam engine come to life. When he licked her slowly up to her clit, all cylinders fired, launching her off the cliff and into the oncoming wave of bliss. She exploded as Griff drove his tongue deep inside her channel and lapped at her juices while he flicked her clit relentlessly with his thumb. Like an air-ship caught in a storm, she climbed each wave of her climax until she plunged off the crest and into the valley, only to do it again a moment later.

Painstakingly, Griff eased her down from her sexual high until she merely floated gently in a tingly limbo.

At some point, she'd be hard-pressed to say when precisely, he released her wrists. As she came back to the moment, the man she loved held one hand as he stroked the chafed skin where the cravat had bound her for his pleasure.

Then she felt his thumb rub over her damp cheek. She opened her eyes and found concern etched on his face.

"Lou, I am so sorry."

"Whatever for?" She glanced down at her reddened wrists and back up at him.

"You're crying." Griff looked down at her hand ruefully. "Your wrists."

She laughed a little. "Don't be silly. I've suffered far worse injuries, this is nothing." She had no interest in discussing her surfeit of emotions. She felt far too close to him,

as though he'd crawled inside her somehow and taken up residence. It was unsettling. When her dismissal of his concern seemed to calm him, she decided to wrestle control from him. With a surprise shift of her weight, she levered over him and settled on his stomach as she shed the cumbersome robe. "I believe it is my turn to do as I wish with you."

Trepidation shimmered in his gaze for a moment as Griff clearly considered all he had done to her. Then he smirked. "Do your worst."

"Have no fear." Lou pressed a kiss to his bare chest, just over his heart. "I shall torture you with as much passion and fervor as you so recently showed me." Slowly, and with great care, she nibbled her way down his body, tasting, teasing, and nipping him until she was able to wiggle between his legs.

His cock had long since risen to attention, swollen to a pinkish purple color that begged for her regard. The sight of him drove her to pause and appreciate his manly endowments. Using only a fingertip, she lifted his erection out of her way and explored the underside, especially the thick ropy vein running along his length. Curious, she reached out with her tongue to trace the ridge and reveled in his gasp of surprise. Satisfied with her discoveries, she shifted lower down to cradle his sac with her free hand. The soft, delicate skin intrigued her, drew her. It was such a vulnerable place on a man's otherwise hard body.

Again Lou ventured closer, eager to learn every inch of him in the most intimate way. She popped one ball into her mouth and swirled it around with her tongue. Griff's hips rose off the bed as a low moan escaped him. Excellent. Just because she could, she slipped her hand down lower as she continued to suck on his ball, and stroked the flesh between his sac and his arsehole. Again, Griff groaned and strained not to buck her mouth free.

And then she achieved her ultimate goal.

“Please, for the love of Trevithick, woman, I beg you to stop torturing me.” The low growl Griff let loose at the end of his plea—because obviously she’d ignored him—drove her onward.

Ready to turn up the steam, Lou released his sac and shifted up toward his rod, where she firmly grasped him at the base and positioned her mouth over him. Once again teasing him, she pulled up along his length while swirling her tongue around the tip of his cock, scooping up the clear fluid that had seeped out.

“Please...” Oh, how he begged, and how she adored the masculine plea that assured her she held him in her thrall as much as he held her.

Lou pulled her hand back and swallowed his cock in a slow slide, taking him little by little until he was lodged deep in her throat. His hands sank into her hair as he cursed in three languages—and she’d had no clue he spoke anything but English.

She worked him with her mouth and throat, tempted to let him find release, but in the end her desire to feel him deep inside her grew greater than the need to taste his seed. After waiting for him to climb closer to the edge, she pulled up short, releasing him.

The growl of desire should have warned her—not that she would have cared or stopped him, and besides, she reveled in this aggressive, rough side of Griff. In a flurry of motion, he flipped her onto her back and drove into her in a sharp, deep thrust.

Pinned beneath his weight, Lou wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust upward to meet him. Yes! More! Deeper!

Griff laughed at her impatience and slapped her on her hip. “Cease trying to take control or I shall resort to restraints once more.”

Determined to push the boundaries of his control, Lou offered him a winsome smile. “Faster, please.”

To her dismay, he paused mid-thrust and unwrapped her legs. He then lifted them up over his shoulders so her feet and ankles were near his head. With a slow, simmering smile that promised more pleasure to come, he answered her plea as his jaw tightened with the effort of maintaining control. “Slower. Every time you ask, I shall reduce speed.”

Lou blinked once then nodded. “Slow it is then.” All she could do was settle in for the ride, because clearly Griff would not be rushed.

“Excellent.” He sank all the way into her body, his balls pressed against her ass. “You know, a beautiful woman is like a fine wine. She should be opened, allowed to breathe, then savored.” And he returned to the agonizing pace that had her wiggling to get the right pressure on that magical spot inside.

Griff continued the slow ride for what seemed an eternity, pushing her up the hill one excruciating moment at a time. How he managed the self-control it must have taken for him to hold back was beyond her comprehension, but manage it, he did—until in a moment of desperation, as the first shimmers of the pleasure to come danced off in the distance, Lou clenched around his cock.

With a curse, he fell forward over her and immediately struck up a bruising pace. To Lou’s everlasting delight, she had pulled her very last trick out of the bag, and it worked. He fucked her hard and fast, and she loved every jolting pump of his hips. With his own climax clearly chasing him, she held on and met him stroke for stroke as the long sought pleasure rushed to the fore.

“Great Trevithick! You—you’re mine, you shall always be mine! I love you, Lou!” The words reverberated off the walls and straight through her soul, carrying her with

him.

“Griff! Yes!” The tide of bliss swept over them, rolled them under, and shot them out of a steaming geyser.

Shattered once more, Lou was certain that this time there would be no putting the pieces back together. She was absolutely ruined for any other man, and the notion made her pleased as punch.

As they both lay there, still joined with the blissful shivers of orgasm rolling through them, she answered his earlier call in a soft whisper before she drifted off to sleep. “I love you too, Griff.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

By the time the sun had risen, Griff found himself hovering over Lou in his breakfast room as he waited anxiously for some clue as to whether this whole situation was over—or not. “Lou, let me pour you another cup of tea with honey.” He rose and walked to where Higgins had left the tea service.

“Griff, please. No more tea.” She pressed a hand to her throat as she spoke.

He stopped and looked at her, feeling the compulsion to do something. Anything. He pulled out his pocket watch and opened it. Lou had said Holt would be along this morning with an update. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember what time she’d said he’d come.

Lou smiled patiently. “The waiting is always the hardest part.” Her voice came out raspy, closer to a whisper than her normal speaking voice, the painful aftermath of her nearly being choked to death the day before.

Griff tilted his head slightly to one side. “What do you mean?”

“The waiting. The stillness of it, while you wait for a mark to show himself. Ninety percent of being an assassin is patience. For me it was a hard won lesson. In my early days I nearly managed to get myself killed by impatience on more than one occasion.”

He flinched. “I cannot imagine you ever being bad at what you do. Though come to think of it, I did have to rescue you yesterday.” He stood there his fingers twitching uncontrollably with the need to move. To take action. To do something.

Lou snorted. “I never said I wasn’t good at what I did—I said I was impatient. I was still quite effective, I simply drew more notice than a good assassin ought, or I wound up fighting the mark instead of making a clean kill. And I will again remind you that I had rescued myself—or near enough—when you showed up.”

Her obvious indignation had Griff stopping again. It was an odd thing to discuss killing people, as though he’d just told her she did a poor job of a waltz. “When did you say Holt would be by again?”

The clock in the hall struck ten just as a knock sounded at the door.

“That should be him.” Lou rose, a picture of serenity despite her recent adventures.

A moment later, Holt appeared, looking grim-faced. Griff’s stomach dropped.

“Oh, I dare say you haven’t good news.” Lou’s facade cracked ever so slightly.

“No. Sir Francis was collected at the Isle of Wight air-port, hauled down to the ground, and back to London. He should arrive in a few hours by steam-car.”

“Well, that’s something,” Griff said bracingly.

“Yes, but my network has lost Dell. We believe he might have moved to another air-ship before the authorities arrived.” He reached out and placed his hands on Lou’s upper arms. “How are you faring?”

“Fine, all things considered. You know I detest flying.” She made a little moue that Griff found entirely too enticing. “And I shall be forced into high-necked blouses while my neck heals—not to mention a certain over-protective chap is shoveling tea and honey at me as though that will miraculously heal me.” She looked at Griff with warmth and humor in her gaze, despite her complaint.

“I know you have a certain aversion to flying, hence my concern. The rest you shall have to take as your punishment for running off without help.” Holt released her and turned to Griff. “And you, my lord? Keeping it together, despite the revelation about your friend?”

Griff shrugged, but continued to tread the breakfast room rug. “We’d been headed in different philosophical directions for a while now. It is unfortunate that things have come to this, but I knew when I took up the persona of the Lord of Cogs that something of this nature might one day come about. Dell...was always stubborn when he took up a cause or topic. I’d say it was the one trait that perhaps kept the three of us from being better friends. Instead, Cole and I often had to team up against Dell when debating certain ideals. Not to mention there were occasions when he got an idea into his head that Cole or I were reluctant about, it became a point of contention for some while.”

Holt nodded. “I see. Well, I hope that sense of friendship will prompt him to reach out to you soon.”

“It may. The question is, will it be to warn me off or lure me in?”

At that moment, Higgins entered the breakfast room bearing a silver salver with a letter resting upon it. Griff took the correspondence and broke the non-descript seal. He read through the terse missive once then shared it with the rest of the room.

You’ll find me at the sign of the Electric Cock. Come alone. We have things to discuss. I cannot be responsible for what happens if you do not comply.

—D

They glanced back and forth, one to the other, as Griff sighed. “Well, it sounds rather dire. I guess I shall have to go.”

“Steaming hell you will.” Lou rose in a swift move that stole his breath even as it reminded him once more just who—or what—he’d gone and fallen in love with. “At the very least we shall take a moment and strategize about our options.”

In the blink of an eye, his woman had gone from all calm repose to steam locomotive at full throttle. Griff found it rather arousing. “I suppose it need only appear that I am alone, though I dare say Dell—while handsome enough—is not particularly stupid. He would recognize either of you in a moment.”

Determination drew her face taut as Lou stood there. Griff felt certain that if he listened closely, he would hear the gears grinding as her mind whirled through possible scenarios and options. Once she seemed to have landed on something she liked, she smiled at both men. If he were honest, Griff would acknowledge that a trickle of fear slithered through him in anticipation of what she might suggest. Here we go again...

“Most people will see only what you want them to see if given the opportunity. I shall enter first, disguised as an old woman. He’ll barely consider me once before I am dismissed out of hand.”

“Lou.” Griff growled, hating her plan instantly. The woman was still recovering from her abduction, and now she wanted to parade into another dangerous situation?

She ignored him and continued. “Holt will enter through the rear, lightly disguised—a heavy cloak and low cap should suffice. You of course will enter after me, dressed as you are. I shall position myself as close to Dell as I can, but depending on the crowd it may be difficult without raising suspicion.” She paused and played with the plan a moment more in silence.

Griff had to bite his lip from yelling an objection. How could she think I’d allow her anywhere near him again? Every protective instinct he possessed flared to life, an odd

sensation.

“Yes, that should work,” said Lou thoughtfully. “If I am not in earshot and things are going wrong, you will throw your drink at him and run. I am going to assume that he too will have men planted in the tavern to stop you. Be prepared for a fight. Holt will be additional help if we are stuck in a brawl. If we can make a clean break, great. If Dell truly just wishes to talk, he will be none the wiser that anyone else was there.”

Griff wasn't particularly pleased with the plan; specifically, the part where Lou was in danger. But arguing with her would be pointless and slow him down, so he nodded, as did Holt, not bothering to voice his agreement.

“Excellent. I need but an hour to return to my home and make the change to my attire and appearance, and then we may go. Though of course, we'll need to leave separately.” Lou was like a field marshal giving orders.

Having faced the window to avoid giving away his own plans, he simply replied, “We shall see you later.”

Lou flattened against his side and rose on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. “All will be well, my love.”

“Yes, it will.” And she would be safe . Spitting mad, no doubt, but safe for all that.

As soon as she departed, Griff turned around looked at Holt. A steamy swirl of emotions churned inside of him and had him tugging at his shirt and cravat as though they were choking him.

The other man held up one hand. “Before you say anything, I can see you have something planned that does not align with Lou.”

Griff nodded. "I do."

Holt sighed. "I don't suppose there is any chance I can talk you out of whatever it is you've got planned?"

"No," Griff said calmly. "I cannot watch her walk into danger on my behalf anymore. Finding her with a man's hands wrapped around her throat in the air lock...it nearly killed me."

His lover's handler pinned him where he stood with an implacable stare. "So it doesn't include Lou in any way?"

Griff shook his head. Not if I have any choice in the matter. "No, it doesn't. Is that a problem for you?"

"For me? Not necessarily. She will be furious that you have cut her out again. She will likely see it as a betrayal."

Griff considered the alternative, and determined quickly he would rather have her alive and angry than dead and happy. "It's a price I'm willing to pay to keep her alive."

"Very well, then. Tell me how you are going to keep Lou safe."

Satisfied that Holt was on board, or would be, Griff explained everything.

It took a mere twenty minutes to arrive at the tavern called the Electric Cock. As one would expect in a bustling business district like Cheapside, the tavern was full of patrons of all walks of life. There were laborers, side-by-side with women who sought respite from their shopping excursions, and shopworkers taking a break for luncheon.

Determined to have the meeting over and done with before Lou could realize where he and Holt had disappeared to, Griff strode into the tavern. His former friend sat with his back to the wall near the fireplace. It was a damp day, and the fire served to dry everyone out as well as to chase away the chill that came with the weather.

A scant five steps brought him over to his onetime friend. “Dell.”

The blaggard waved at the chair across from him and winced. “Sit, Griff. You’re drawing unwanted attention, looming over me in that fashion.”

Griff snorted and sat down. Dell had always resented being the shortest of the three of them. It wasn’t enough to have brains and good looks; the man seemed to need to be the best at everything. Always the one with the right answer, or so he’d argue until he and Cole gave up on more than one occasion. “Well, I’m here. Other than trying to kill me, what do you want?”

“I want you to go away.” Dell’s tone sounded pleasant enough, but Griff had known him for many years and could hear the hostile undercurrents.

“Simply pack up and leave London? Retire to the country?” He had to be honest, that was not what he’d expected from Dell. It didn’t seem enough of a win to satisfy the man he knew—and had once considered a friend.

Dell laughed and then sputtered as though in pain, the unpleasant sound giving Griff pause. “Don’t be obtuse. I want you to pack up and leave England—forever. You will never come back and never be known as the Earl of Melton again. For all intents and purposes, you will be dead, or that will be the declaration made in seven years. Long enough to leave your seat empty and to remove your steam-mad influence from parliament.”

Now this sounded more like the man he knew. Complete victory . So he’d be alive,

but dead to all who relied upon him, who needed him. “You cannot possibly think I am the only lord who is a supporter of steam technology in Parliament?”

His old friend sneered. “No, but you are the leader of the Tinker movement, even if no one else knows it. With you gone, I kill two birds with one stone. The titular head of the Tinkers will be gone, and I can start to rein in the other Tinker supporters in the Lords. None of them are so enamored of the technology that if given another means to meet their needs, they wouldn’t switch but you, though. You are one of them. One of those blasted tinkers who likes to build things and create machines that make it impossible for electricity to lead the way forward.”

Griff considered his former friend’s scrunched-up face and the vitriol that oozed off him. “And what occurs if I do not agree to leave?”

Dell looked him in the eyes, his gaze glassy in a way that one might associate with a bedlamite, but Griff suspected it was more about the pain the man was obviously in. “You die,” he groaned, on the heels of a shrugging motion that confirmed what he had suspected. Dell was in pain.

This required a moment of consideration. He was not in any way tempted to do as Dell demanded. That meant the situation had just become dire, because he also had no intention of dying today, either.

The time for action had come much sooner than he had anticipated. Is Holt in place? They had kept Lou’s suggested signal of trouble—he did not wish to harm Dell so he hoped it would serve as a distraction. And while Griff had not bothered to order a drink, Dell had a tankard sitting on the table. Griff grabbed the vessel and threw the contents of it into Dell’s face.

Unfortunately, it was empty.

In a moment of inspiration, Griff hurled the metal cup as a follow up and when he heard the thunk and a loud curse, he assumed he hit his target. He had not tarried long enough to take note, spinning and lunging toward the entrance, thankfully still a mere five steps away. Just as he was about to make the door, a large hand landed on his shoulder and stopped all forward progress. Spun back around, Griff came face to face with a brute of a man. He looked as if he had played with tree trunks in lieu of matchsticks as a child.

Just behind the behemoth hovered Dell, dancing about like an enraged rooster with a lame wing and a limp. “Kill him!”

Determined to be free, Griff punched the man in his midsection to little avail; his effort merely resulted in a throbbing hand and he was no nearer escape. Amid the hubbub they had caused, he could see Holt fighting with another man as he tried to make his way through the crowd from the rear of the tavern. Seeing that he was likely on his own, he reached down and yanked out the knife he’d tucked into his boot before leaving the house.

Lou walked into chaos. The Electric Cock was a sea of heaving bodies and screaming women, but for the moment there were only two people she cared about in the melee.

Why didn’t they wait for me?

Still furious with Griff and Holt for leaving her behind, Lou found Griff immediately as he was closest to the door. The colossus who had him in his grip looked rather amused at the whole spectacle. Lou was neither amused nor interested in dragging the display out.

This needed to end. Now.

Blades and steam-pistols were at the ready. She had gained more than a few looks as

she had raced down the road on her steam cycle—after all, it wasn't every day a woman tore through London harnessed with a dozen knives across her chest and two steam pistols strapped to her thighs.

Intent on ending things quickly, she drew her steam-pistols first. Griff was currently slicing away at his oversized assailant with a knife he'd at least had enough forethought to carry, the fool. He'd eventually cut him down to size.

Lou reined in her fury at Griff and cast her gaze around the room for the other person she wanted to throttle: Holt. She couldn't spot him in the crush.

Dell, the root of all their issues, stood by watching intently as though waiting for something. Lou decided to end his suspense. End this, once and for all.

She took aim and gently squeezed the trigger—

And unfortunately someone knocked her arm down, jarring the steam-pistol free from her grip just as she fired. Instead of hitting Dell between the eyes, she caught the left side of his chest, possibly his shoulder. He went down, disappearing from sight so she couldn't be sure.

Fury pulsating through her body, Lou turned and shot the man who'd knocked her arm with her other steam-pistol. He dropped the knife he'd been about to stab her with as he died at her feet.

One down. A whole tavern to go.

A quick glance to check on Griff revealed he was in trouble. The giant was wearing him down, but Lou still hadn't seen Holt and she needed to ensure Dell was down permanently. Moving forward, she crept close enough to the behemoth to jab a long wicked stiletto just between the lowest ribs on his back. The wound would weaken

him enough for Griff to finish the job and let her keep moving. After wiping her blade on her trousers, Lou shoved it back in its sheath and knelt to check on Dell.

Damn it—she'd winged his arm, and he lay passed out like the coward he was...or was he playing dead? There were multiple ways to find out. She lifted her steam-pistol and cocked it. In an instant, the man slapped the barrel away from his face and reared up to push her back.

He grunted as his weight hit her, but whatever pain he felt, from either his shoulder where she stabbed him on the air-ship or the more recent flesh wound to his other shoulder, didn't slow him down from attacking or talking.

"You are turning into a genuine pain in my arse," Dell spat.

Lou opted to conserve her strength and not waste her breath explaining to the fool that he was going to die and that his chatter was only going to expedite the process. They needed to either capture Dell or kill him—she'd prefer dead—but understood the value in his ability to possibly answer questions. Add to that Griff may still be more attached to the man than was healthy, and she knew she would likely try to avoid killing the man.

Regardless, they needed to end this episode. By now someone had likely contacted the peelers, so doing so before they arrived seemed prudent.

With that thought, she let Dell shove her backwards and used the momentum to keep rolling. Rotating right back onto her knees with such agility must have caught him off guard. His surprise at her dexterity made him hesitate, which Lou capitalized on. In the blink of an eye, she retrieved and threw a small knife that lodged in the meat of his upper thigh. With a growl, he yanked the blade from his flesh and stood up. Great. Now I've armed him.

Lou rose as well and met him in the middle of the tavern as they clashed, wrestling when a flash of movement by the back of the tavern caught her eye. Holt!

Her momentary distraction gave Dell the small window of opportunity he needed to slash her ribs then try for the other side.

Fortunately, she managed to block his second strike.

Unfortunately, with the momentum he had—increased by the drunk who stumbled into him from behind—Dell fell forward into her with his knife landing in her thigh. Lou cursed as pain radiated through her, slashing at his face with the blade in her hand causing Dell to howl as he jerked backwards, clutching his ruined cheek. She followed that up with a hard kick to his ribs, leaving the villain curled on the floor yelling in pain.

By the time she turned to look for Holt, there was no sign of him.

Griff materialized by her side. “Holt?”

“He was just here.” She strained to look over the heads of the melee. “Your giant?”

“Finally got the brute under control.”

They continued to look for any sign of their friend, but to no avail. The place remained a seething melee of bodies.

Annoyed, Lou turned to haul Dell off the ground and beat some answers out of him...but when she looked where she'd left him, he was gone.

Cogging hell.

She and Griff flew—well, he flew, she limped briskly—out of the door just in time to see Dell and two of his minions throwing an unconscious Holt into a steam-car. Dell snarled at them as he clambered into the vehicle, his words lost in the wind.

Lou found it ironic that the man who had fought so hard to suppress steam technology was currently availing himself of it to escape. With a curse, she turned to run back to where she'd left her steam cycle, but Griff stopped her.

“You need to have your wounds looked at before we go after him.”

She wanted to do a little snarling of her own, but managed to keep her retort to a crisp few words. “If we let him go, we won't know where to find Holt.”

Griff stood there a moment watching the fading tail lights of the car as Lou desperately tried to think. Where the steaming hell would Dell take an unconscious man?

Then Griff's eyes widened, as though a thought had popped into his head seemingly out of steam vapor. “Great Trevithick! Dell will head to Scotland. His uncle has a house there near bloody Inverkeithing ! I'm a steaming idiot.”

Lou felt the shock of the realization along with a puzzle piece clicking in place.

Griff smacked himself in the head. “I should have made the connection. The old goat is too old to be alive but too stubborn to die, and happens to be obscenely wealthy. He wouldn't notice if Dell showed up there with a platoon of men, let alone one unconscious man.”

“Then why waste time?” Lou grabbed the man's arm. “If Cole can give us a lift in his air-ship, we can be there waiting for Dell when he arrives. We just need to make one quick stop and pick up the girls—I can't imagine going to rescue Holt without them

by my side. Had I known you were going to give me the slip, I would have had them sit on you while I got ready for this meeting.”

Anger pulsed through her, along with anxiety for her friend, even as the adrenaline waned and her ribs and leg throbbed. Elena, Katerina, and Mary Margret would be critical to their success.

Griff seemed to consider her words, and then he offered a decisive nod. “So be it. Let’s go.”

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:26 am

Lou sat in the familiar chamber she and Griff had been assigned by Cole during their previous foray on the Sweet Annie, the ship's medic kneeling at her feet as he sewed her side up, one slow, painful stitch at a time.

The temptation rose once again to punch the man, but it wasn't exactly his fault she'd been stabbed. He just had the unfortunate duty of repairing things—mostly her.

The worst part of the complete process was that she knew she'd have to suffer a second round once he got a look at her leg wound. That one had plunged deep as well and without looking, she knew stitches would be required; the last thing she needed was to allow infection to take hold. Gangrene was a very real concern and she found it annoying that with all the steam-tech available to modern Victorian Society, nobody had come up with a better way to prevent infection or close a damn wound than piercing the flesh with a needle and thread over and over again. Something less painful.

Lou cursed again, loudly and with great color. "Bloody son of a tuppenny whore!" He must not have ever heard such curses—or so she gathered from the rather wide-eyed look the airman gave her. "Surely you have heard such curses before?"

He nodded. "Oh, I've heard them. Just never from a lady."

Lou leaned toward him. "I'll tell you a secret." She glanced about as though revealing some great mystery. "I'm no lady."

He chuckled. "But you must be, to mingle with the likes of Lord Melton and Captain Chapman. Those two are gentlemen through and through."

She winked at the older man. “Perhaps they’re slumming it with me. And while I am still getting to know your Captain, I suspect he would take exception to being called a gentleman. The man seems to pride himself on being a rogue.”

The airman chuckled. “Right you are, ma’am, but I’d have to say any woman who’s associating with those two must be a lady. Perhaps not in name, but in here.” He tapped his chest.

A little stunned by the comment, Lou fell quiet. Sometimes the truest words came from the most unlikely sources.

“All righty, ma’am. Is that the only hole I need to sew up?” he asked as he tied off the suture and spread a gel of some kind over the wound that Griff had given him. Almost immediately the wound started to numb, throbbing less.

Maybe someone had created some worthwhile medicine after all.

“I think you’d best take a look at my leg. I seem to have acquired a hole there as well.” Lou waved at her leg while she still processed the man’s words.

He laughed a little. “Right you are. Quite a lot of undesired holes for anyone, but especially for such a pretty lady.”

For possibly the first time outside of her time with Griff, she felt her cheeks heat at a simple, but sweet compliment. It was the kind of response Griff elicited from her, and why she suspected she was so drawn to him. In love with him. “Thank you...”

“Frederick, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Frederick. You make a spinster like myself swoon. I dare say Lord Melton best watch out for you.” She winked.

Fred, as she instantly called him in her head, smiled and ripped her trouser leg open before busying himself with disinfecting and repairing her damaged thigh.

Griff walked in just as the last stitch was being set. “Glad to see you didn’t maim anyone while they were trying to help you.”

“There’s still time.” Lou couldn’t help but smile a little, despite the bite in her words. She was still furious with him and Holt for going to the meeting without her—as a result of their foolishness, Holt was now a captive of the maniac who wanted Griff dead. “Are the ladies all settled?”

He nodded. “They are.”

Fred smoothed over some more medical gel and stood from his labors. “All set, ma’am. If you ever need anything else, don’t hesitate to ask for old Frederick.”

“I wouldn’t find anyone else with so deft a touch, but don’t tell my maid I said that.” Lou winked again at the gruff airman.

“A proper lady I tell you,” he muttered and shuffled out the door.

Griff glanced at her, back at Fred as he left, then back at her. “I see you’ve managed to gather another for your harem of men.”

Lou scoffed. “I believe the men of the near east would object to so small a collection being referred to as a harem. And do not think for one moment that we are not going to discuss you and Holt leaving me behind, but that can wait. How are we proceeding?”

“I could not imagine you not wanting to discuss that topic as much as I wish you wouldn’t,” returned Griff with a grin. “Cole has us on course for Scotland. We should

arrive within the hour. The trouble is, we don't know Dell's available modes of transport. He could be on the road, which would give us the advantage. Or he could be using an airship, though whether he could hire another on such short notice with the Sky Chaser confiscated, I can't imagine."

"I doubt Sir Francis was his only sponsor. It seems to me a man so determined to be rid of a technology would have more than one financier. Let's assume he has arrived at his uncle's home. What is the best approach?"

A knock at the door interrupted them. Griff opened it and welcomed Cole, Elena, Katerina, and Mary Margaret in.

"I hope I haven't missed all the good parts," Cole said as he offered her a jaunty grin along with a pile of clothing. "I believe these should be close to your size."

"We were just discussing our plan of attack." Lou eyed the dashing air-ship Captain and his offering, then reached out and took the pile. "And thank you for the clothes."

"Of course. All of this is terribly exciting, I haven't gotten into a good scrape in far too long. Success has its downside, primarily a lack of adventure."

Griff scowled. "Cole, I can't ask you to get any more involved—"

"Do shut up, Griff," his friend said cheerfully. "I am well and truly involved, and I shall come along on this little exploit. Consider it payment for my services."

Griff scowled again, but Lou decided to press on and accept the assistance. "Excellent. Another body in the fray will help immensely, particularly since we don't know how many men Dell has at his disposal just now. Based on that, I think we try to slip in, find Holt, and slip out. A frontal attack is not likely in our favor considering all we have is ourselves and the ladies." She waved a hand at the women who had

come in with Cole.

Cole chuckled. "My dear, Louisa." His endearment had Griff scowling even more. "I doubt I could stop my men from joining in a good fight. I am not the only one chafing under the shackles of success. You have a veritable army at your disposal. If a frontal assault is your desire, my men will be game."

Lou couldn't resist grinning at the charming rogue. He was terribly unprincipled, and she suspected he enjoyed every moment. How he and Griff were such good friends she could not fathom, but somehow it was true. "Well then, let's devise a strategy. The one thing we are short on is time. Ladies, thank you all for joining us as well, I appreciate your support."

Twenty minutes later, they had a plan. Cole left to organize his men, followed by the ladies, and Lou rose from the bed to change into the fresh garments. Griff stood there as though waiting for her to wobble or crumple. Despite the pain in her leg as she took a step, Lou grinned and kept moving toward the privacy screen in the room's corner.

Griff awkwardly cleared his throat. "You know, I have seen you naked a time or two."

"Indeed, but I was not angry with you then." She slipped behind the wood and fabric wall and worked her shirt free of her injured arm. Coggin hell, she was stiff.

"Lou, I did what I thought would keep you safe."

She could hear him shuffling around the room aimlessly, as though he didn't know what to do with himself. Good. "That may be, but you left me behind, Griff, and after we agreed there would be no further solo adventures." The embers of her anger flared as though someone had applied a steam-powered bellows to them.

The random shuffling sounds stopped and Griff replied, sounding rough and raw. “Well, not that it was my intention, but now you know how it feels to be so summarily cut out of what you believed was going to happen.”

His pointed comment landed a bullseye. She winced as the coals of fury were effectively doused in cold water. She went quiet as she considered his words, the silence stretching out between them.

Needing a distraction, Lou wrestled what was left of her trousers off and stood naked, both physically and emotionally. “I...I don’t question your motives. I considered slipping away to meet Dell and confront him myself. Perhaps just killing him and ending this... But then I thought about how angry you’d be if I did that, how you would feel as though I didn’t believe you were strong enough to be my partner, not just in this matter, but in life as well. How perhaps—” She couldn’t continue. To say the words, to admit the one nagging fear that made her unsure if loving him was the right choice.

Suddenly Griff was there, behind the screen, crowding her against the bulkhead of the ship. “I shall always need you—love you. I’ve told you I can’t imagine not having you in my life.”

He crushed his lips to her and invaded her mouth. Tongues tangled, Lou barely noticed the metal beam and rivets grinding against her spine as need took over. She needed the man in her arms. Needed him to love her, and needed to love him in return—her injuries be damned!

Griff’s cock ached with desire as he pressed against Lou’s curves. Yes. She was soft, as a woman should be, but beneath all of that lay honed muscles and a heart he wasn’t sure he was worthy enough to love: but love her, he did.

And so he kissed her, tasted her, reveled in the feel of her melded into him.

Then Lou pulled free of his mouth and panted heavily, “Need—you—inside me. Hurry! We haven’t any time to waste!”

“Your thigh,” he hesitated.

“Now, Griff. I can stand on my good leg.” Lou lifted the injured leg and partially wrapped it around his own.

Steaming hells, she was incredible. “Yes,” Griff growled his agreement and reached between them to release the placket of his trousers.

Pushing down his small clothes, he pulled his aching length free. The heat of her stomach scalded him as their flesh met, but it was the best kind of burn.

Should he carry her the ten feet over to the bed on the other side of the screen? Probably, but the need was too great, and the woman had made a valid point.

This had to be quick.

Hauling her into his arms allowed Griff to shift and press her up against the bulkhead, just to the right of the beam, and then he was pushing into her, sinking deep into her heat. He hesitated, his concern for her injuries winning out over his lust as he looked at her for signs of pain.

He saw only his own desire reflected back at him. The new numbing agent he’d added to the med-gel must be working.

“Griff.” Lou’s throaty moan snapped him back to the activities at hand and drove his desire higher, made him want to love her harder, deeper.

The drive to leave an indelible reminder of his love with her had him pulling back

and slamming into her, only to stop and grind himself against her pussy. Then he did it again, basking in the feel of her body clenching around his cock.

Always a vocal lover, this occasion was no different for Lou. “Faster, Griff. Please .”

It was the ragged please on the end of her demand that had him taking action. Griff withdrew then immediately shoved back inside her, ramping up his pace as they both shot straight to the precipice of climax and teetered there.

He grabbed her hair, pulling her head back against the wall and exposing her neck. “You are mine.” He thrust inside her. “Forever.” Again he thrust. “For always.” One last stroke and they both exploded in a muscle quaking, bone jarring orgasm that they did not bother to keep quiet. “For eternity.”

As the remnants of bliss pulsed through them, Griff let his head drop forward to press his forehead against hers. “I love you, Louisa Stanton. Just in case you forgot in the last thirty seconds.”

“I don’t know how I could forget when you made your point in the most delicious fashion.” The woman who’d stolen his heart squeezed herself around his softening cock, eliciting a groan from him.

“Cease woman, or you will leave me no stamina for the coming fight.” Griff eased back, letting her legs slide down to the floor to take her weight once more.

A knock at the door heralded its opening. “Hate to interrupt, but we’ve arrived.” Cole’s voice carried behind the partition where Griff stood with his buttocks exposed as he tried to cover Lou’s body.

She laughed. “Silly man. He can’t see behind the screen.” She called over to Cole, “We’ll be right with you.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help back there, my lady?” Once more, the mischievous nature of Griff’s best friend reared its head.

“Get out you meddling goat!” Griff grumbled a few more choice epithets as he tucked himself back into his trousers and helped Lou get dressed.

A few moments later, she was braiding her hair as they walked down the passageway to disembark.

Cole led the way. “We stopped about half a league out. You have your choice of exits, you can rappel down with the crew or take the dinky.”

There was no disguising the challenge in Cole’s offer, and Griff knew what Lou’s preference would be without asking. “I’m fairly certain the lady would be offended if I suggested she take the dinky, despite her recent injuries.”

She grinned. “See, you are already getting better at this. Show me to my rope, Captain.” She pulled a pair of leather gloves out of what seemed to be thin air.

At a bit of a loss, Griff stared, but then Cole handed him a pair. “I suspected you’d both feel that way.”

In no time they were on the ground and moving swiftly through the woods of Dell’s uncle’s Scottish estate on the opposite shore from Edinburgh near Inverkeithing. As they neared the edge of the sprawling Tudor affair, they fanned out, Griff’s heart racing.

This was it.

Griff went over the plan one more time in his mind. Lou, Griff, and Elena were going in to find Holt, while Katerina, Mary Margaret, and Cole stayed in reserve with his

troop of men. Their job was to hang back in case things got ugly or if Lou, Griff, and Elena hadn't returned within a half hour.

He'd tried to convince Lou to stay back, but Holt was her close friend and she had staunchly refused. There would be no repeats of the Electric Cock where he left her behind. She wanted to be there, so he agreed—not that he fancied his chances in a debate. At least she had the numbing gel he'd made to help with her injuries.

Griff had no idea where Holt would be kept, but it seemed reasonable that the cellar would be likely and that should be near the kitchen. With that in mind, he hoped for a quick in-and-out effort barring Dell or one of his underlings appearing unexpectedly.

With a nod to Cole, he, Lou, and Elena peeled off from the group and crept closer to the house, edging to the back of the building to find the rear terrace. Fear pulsed thick and sludge-like through his veins, though he ignored the sensation. He hated Lou being there, putting herself at risk. But he knew he would protect her with his life.

Most of the glass doors were thrown open along the stone area, allowing the unseasonably warm breezes to waft through the manor house. Griff led them through the closest entrance and then down a side staircase that was plainly a servant's stairs. As they left the wide open areas into better cover, his fear tamped down and allowed him to think more clearly. How does Lou cope with this when she's on an assignment?

The bustling kitchen was down one floor and just across from the stairs. Griff looked to the left and saw a dark hall, then to the right where the kitchen was alive with activity. They hesitated a moment before quietly slipping across the landing, down the next flight of stairs and into the darkness of the basement below. At the bottom of the steps, they found a hallway with multiple doors. They opened the first one and found storage for the kitchens; casks of oils, flour, and other dry goods. The next door across the hall revealed a number of cleaning supplies, including a few brooms.

They continued checking doors until they got to the last pair. Lou opened one and found...an empty cell.

Griff tipped his head toward the locked one he stood before he whispered to the women, "This is the one." Pressing an ear against the wood he heard movement. "Holt, if that's you, stand back." He called out loud enough to be heard, but hopefully not too loud. Then he kicked at the door by the lock.

The heavy oak door didn't budge.

Lou rolled her eyes at him and pulled a knife off of her array. "Move." She nudged him out of the way and within moments had the door opened.

Elena chuckled at his obvious dismay. Maybe he should have considered that Lou would know how to pick a lock.

Inside they saw Holt sat on the floor, his shirt untucked and filthy, shoeless, and sporting a rather ugly black eye.

Lou crouched down, "Thank God you're alive."

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "Can't kill the bait, now can you?"

She looked him over critically. "Well, it certainly didn't stop them from roughing it up a bit, now did it?"

Holt laughed, a huff really, before dissolving into a painful groan. "I think they broke a rib...or all of them."

Griff glanced back out in the hallway and, with no sign of anyone coming, turned back to the scene in the cell. Lou was helping Holt stand up, so he slid into the man's

other side and gave her a hand. “He may not be expecting us this soon, but I hate to bank on it. We’d best go before—”

A bit of a sinister chuckle sounded from the hallway, and Griff looked up with resignation to see Dell stepping in the cell's doorway.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.” The rogue stepped into the already tiny room, making it feel even smaller. “This worked out far better than planned. Now I have all three of you meddling nodcocks out of the way—and isn’t this brilliant? A three-penny-upright, to boot.”

Elena growled, her Spanish accent redolent with disdain. “You were such a foozler, the effort to lay down would have been wasted.”

Dell sneered at her. “Shut your mouth, church bell. I’m here to deal with this one.”

Griff considered how long they’d been down there looking around. He calculated that in another ten minutes, give or take, Katerina, Mary Margaret, and Cole, along with his men, would storm the proverbial castle. Or at least, he hoped that was the case. “I’ve told you. I am not so important that the Tinkers won’t continue without me. The Lord of Cogs is a symbol, whether I’m alive or dead.”

Dell rolled his eyes. “I agree, you aren’t so important—but you are a damned nuisance to our—my goals. I have to make electricity take off. All my money is tied up in electric research and testing. If it doesn’t win out over steam I shall be ruined. Everything I’ve built, all my money as well as my uncle’s will be lost. And how can I forget...I don’t think I’ll ever forget what steam has done to me.” Griff watched, pained, as his former friend rubbed at his chest where the scars lay under all his finery. “So you see, I don’t really have a choice here. I have to get rid of you, Griff. They’ve left me no choice.”

“But Dell—”

Their captor turned to Lou and sneered. “And you, well! You were supposed to just kill Griff, neat and tidy, but you couldn’t simply follow directions, could you? Do you know how difficult it was to intercept one of Holt’s dossiers and a coin for the Market? That took nearly a year of work. But I suppose all was not lost when you became his lover. After all, there were other ways to get rid of him.” Dell nodded toward Griff then returned his focus to Lou. “And I would have reaped the bonus of consoling you, the weeping lover right into my bed. But that obviously won’t be the case now.” He turned to present his right cheek, which had been shrouded in shadows. His face had been slashed and was now marred by a row of neatly placed black stitching. Griff had to assume that was Lou’s handiwork—the slice, not the stitches. “You’ll die right along with your lover as payback for ruining my face. It is your fault no woman will have me now.”

“My, you truly are a preening little peacock, aren’t you Dell?” Lou shook her head. “You just assume all women are as shallow as you.”

Dell sniffed. “Aren’t they?”

Elena let out an exasperated sigh. “Have we truly digressed to you whining about a little mar on your good looks? I knew you were impossible the night we met, but I had no idea you were outright unbearable.”

Dell shifted toward Elena with a growl. “I already told you to shut your gob, woman!”

Griff used Dell’s moment of distraction and shifted Holt so that he was taking more of his own weight during the idiot’s little rant, preparing to launch himself at the lunatic—but his former friend was too perceptive by half.

Dell pulled a standard pistol from his coat pocket, pointed it, and laid a finger on the trigger. “I’d hold still if I were you. It’s much harder to make your death quick and painless if you are moving. No telling where the bullet might land.”

The sounds of a scuffle breaking out from upstairs roared into the small room followed by a series of thumps, followed by a groan, then the clatter of boots on stone erupted, drawing Dell’s attention.

But before Griff could act Elena kicked out at Dell, knocking the pistol from his grip. Lou abandoned Holt to Griff’s care and launched herself at their mutual enemy, taking both of them to the floor.

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Lou had never experienced such a bloodthirsty desire to kill in all the years she'd worked as an assassin.

Killing had always been a job, never a pleasure. This kill would please her to no end.

As they hit the ground, she pulled a blade and, without a moment's hesitation, drove it towards Dell's throat—but before she could make contact, the man grabbed her hands and stopped her. Ignoring the pain he must be in, considering his multiple wounds from their encounters the last few days, his will to live was impressively strong.

Griff cried out, "Don't kill him!"

She didn't have the chance. Elena kicked Dell in the head to incapacitate him before pulling Lou off the man, helping her madame to stand as they stared down at the unconscious lump.

Lou spat on the man lying on the ground, unmoving. "Steam-damned blighter. You should have let me kill him, Griff."

Still supporting Holt's weight, the man she adored reached out and brushed Lou's arm. "I know it sounds bizarre, but I am not ready to give up on the man I once knew. Not just yet."

Lou all but growled at her lover. "He needs to die. He is a threat to you."

Griff seemed to hesitate. "Not yet. Please."

Annoyed to no end, Lou nodded in reluctant agreement. “If he comes at you again I shall kill him. Have no doubt about that.”

“Fair enough.” Griff said no more, but helped Holt step over the man he had once called a friend as they left the storeroom. They retraced their path, going up the first flight of stairs toward the now silent kitchen.

On the landing, they ran into Cole and Katerina.

Cole grinned at them. “Glad to see you all are still with us! Had me worried when you didn’t appear on time.”

“Yes, we were a bit worried there for a minute as well.” Lou glanced at Griff to see how he was fairing, considering everything that had just happened. For a moment, as she’d stood there, she worried that perhaps Griff was right not to give up on Dell just yet. But the man had threatened Griff and Holt, the two people she held most dear.

She gritted her teeth, hating that she had allowed such a threat to persist. But she could not go against Griff’s wishes.

“Dell shouldn’t be a bother for a while,” Griff was saying darkly. “The man’s gone off the deep end.” He shook his head, clearly mourning the apparent loss of a friend, or at least the memory of the friend he’d once had.

“Bloody hell, how did we miss his decline?” Cole looked as confused as Griff did.

“We can worry about that later—right now we need to go, before any of Dell’s henchmen or his uncle’s servants find us here.” Griff took a step toward the stairs, guiding Lou and Holt with him.

Clearly the goal was to leave, and she couldn’t say she wasn’t on board with that

notion. “He’s right, time to clear out—but Elena and Katerina, go back for Dell. Leaving him here leaves him as a continued threat. We should secure him and bring him with us.” The women nodded and ran back the way they had come down the hall.

Time to go. Lou took up Holt’s other side to help move him quicker, and they headed up the last flight of stairs to the main hall, but unfortunately, the path wasn’t so clear. As they topped the steps, they found the rear hall of the house immersed in battle. All around them, men were fighting. Cole fought a path through for Lou, Griff, and Holt, and if she wasn’t mistaken, the man had a huge grin on his face the entire time.

It was interesting to see someone enjoy violence in much the same way she did. Not that she needed it as a constant in her life, but there was a certain satisfaction in a job well done, even a violent one. Cole seemed to share that sentiment, perhaps even embraced it a bit more zealously than she did. But then, she had seen far more death and blood in her days than most men saw in a lifetime.

As they poured onto the terrace and found the rest of Cole’s men along with Mary Margaret, Elena and Katerina caught up with them.

“The no good bastardo was gone.” Elena announced as she and Katerina joined the fray.

“Steaming hell!” Lou swore as she slashed up with her long dagger to block a stray swipe. Katerina leaned over and calmly stabbed the man.

With the man’s dying cries, the rogues withdrew from the fight and flanked them as they retreated to the ship. Fortunately, Cole had left a skeleton crew aboard and they had moved the Sweet Annie right on top of the manor house once the fighting broke out. It made for a much quicker getaway. This time, the dingy came out and Lou, Holt, Griff, Elena, and Katerina rode it back up to the ship while the rest of the men, along with Cole and Mary Margaret—grinning ear to ear—shimmied up the ropes

they'd used earlier.

Griff and Holt were both safe, and finally Lou had the chance to try for some of that peace of mind.

But peace of mind merely brought more racing questions to the fore. Perhaps retirement was the way to go...but then again, Griff had yet to speak of their future beyond a few vague generalizations. Certainly he'd declared her his forever, but the truth was his mother—as with most mothers—remained a sticking point.

If he were to ask her to marry him, could his mother accept a former Madame and assassin as a daughter-in-law?

The trip back to London went as quickly as the trip north had. Fred checked in on Holt, under Lou's watchful eye, helping to bind up his ribs and treat the various cuts and bruises that came with his abduction. Most of his injuries required time to heal, and Lou was determined to be there to make sure he allowed himself that time.

At the air-port, she and Giff rode down to the ground with Cole and Holt. Katerina, Elena, and Mary Margaret followed behind them.

On terra firma once more, Lou smiled at the dashing captain. "Thank you for everything. You are always welcome at The Market for as long as I run the business."

Ever the perceptive one, Cole asked cheekily, "Thinking about retirement?"

"One never knows where their future lies."

Her evasion did not go unnoticed by Griff. "Woman, I've already told you where your future lies. With me." His growly tone told her more about his earnestness than the words themselves.

Lou's heart soared, though she tried to keep her face impassive. "I did not suggest otherwise. I suggested I was unsure if I would retain ownership of The Market, nothing more."

Holt and Cole both chuckled at their bickering, but it was Cole who offered advice. "You two had best head home and sort out the details before Griff gets too grumpy. In fact, I'll see Holt and the ladies safely to their destinations while you get a head start. I'm certain we would all prefer the quiet of the drive without you two."

"Absolutely—besides, I need to speak to Cole about his future plans. I'm hoping he and his crew might swing back to Scotland and collect our missing villain. You two go work out your squabbles." Holt's lips tilted up at one corner in a half-smile.

"We should talk. I'm intrigued by your suggestion." Cole slapped Holt on the back, causing him to wheeze.

"As am I." Elena said sternly. "That hijo de puta needs to be dealt with."

Lou stared as their two friends, Holt and Cole, along with her three assassins walked—one hobbled more than walked, really—away together.

Left alone, she turned to Griff. "Well, it seems they have left us with no choice, and no ride."

"Not entirely true. We at least have a ride, and I choose to discuss the future with you. It appears I have yet to make my intentions crystal clear to you, so I'd best do so now."

Lou's heart stilled. What does he mean?

To Lou's utter surprise, Griff knelt on one knee and took her trembling hand. "Louisa

Stanton, I have no ring to give you in this moment, but I do have my undying love and the deepest parts of my soul to offer. While you may not need me in the way most women might need a man in their lives, I hope that perhaps you might want me. Will you be my wife?"

Lou stood there, astounded he might actually ask her this question in the middle of an air-port terminal mere hours after she nearly killed one of his childhood friends.

It was certainly not the typical romance.

Only one answer welled up from within her as she stared down into his blue-grey eyes. "Yes. Yes, I need you and want you. Yes, I shall be your wife if you truly wish it."

"I do." Griff stood up and swept her into a twirling hug that fanned her legs out. "I've said it many times, and I shall say it as many more as you need to hear it. I love you!"

Lou laughed as he set her down—until the notion of his mother returned. "Griff, what will your mother say about our deception and who I really am?" She hesitated. "That I'm...a madame. An assassin."

The man she loved cocked his head to the side. "Are you truly concerned she might reject you? Once we tell her the truth, I believe she will eventually welcome your strength and character into the family bloodline, even if it takes her some time to adjust. And most importantly, you make me happy which should make her happy."

Lou wasn't as sure, but Griff seemed confident his mother would accept her—eventually. "I have my doubts about that, but I'm stubborn enough to not care if it means I have you." She looked into his eyes and smiled. "I trust you." And for the first time in her life, she knew deep down she trusted someone—no, not just someone, him—with everything, even her heart.

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Lou stood in the main salon of The Market and looked at her ladies. Her trainees. Her successors.

“Ladies, each of you have undergone rigorous training to hone your skills. As I am preparing to settle down and marry, Holt and I decided that we should separate the running of The Market and the services we provide to Queen and country.” There was no response to her words, so Lou continued. “As you all know, Lawrence Dellinger was not recovered and is still on the loose. The threat to the Lord of Cogs remains as long as that man is free. Additionally, we know that the Voltacrats are still working to subvert the rise of steam technology, and they will stop at nothing to do it. There is much work to be done, and I need you ladies strategically placed to see that work continues.”

Katerina, Elena, and Mary Margaret stared back at her in surprise, until the former managed to say, “Strategically placed—not at The Market?”

Lou drew herself up, as she prepared to completely change their lives. “All of you will depart this establishment and set up your own residence while integrating into Society. Katerina and Elena, each of you will establish yourselves as widows so you may move about more freely and socialize with the masculine set in a more relaxed environment. Mary Margaret, you shall be a distant cousin of mine, so I shall help launch you at court. There, you will work through the ranks of society as a debutante. The goal is to integrate into the upper echelons of the Ton and see what you can discover on the Voltacrats’ activities. We shall meet at least weekly to discuss our discoveries, but it will be under the guise of a social visit. A...Ladies League if you will.” Lou smiled at her girls.

“Lou, are there specific men we should target?” Elena asked as she glanced at the other girls.

If only it were that simple. “I am afraid that is still to be fully determined. For now, you will establish yourselves and await further guidance. You have much to do this week to prepare for your new adventures, as well as my wedding. Griff—Lord Melton and I shall use that occasion to introduce you all to some of his social set. Katerina and Elena, you two shall be longtime friends from my travels who have come to stay in London for a while, for a nice long visit.”

Katerina cleared her throat. “And what of our past customers who might recognize us?”

It is a fair question. Lou nodded. “If you have that situation arise, you are to deny being the same person. If the individual persists, you are to alert me and I shall...deal with them. Immediately. Since you all remained circumspect and dealt with specific clients, we are not anticipating a significant issue.”

Katerina nodded before Mary Margaret asked, “And what of The Market? Who will run the brothel?”

“Beatrix, please join us.” Lou waved to the woman she’d been grooming to take the reins. Not unlike when she had taken over The Market, she had just that morning sold the business to Trix—in a symbolic transaction—for one thruppenny bit. “Trix shall establish herself as Madame DuMornay, the new proprietress of The Market. It is not unusual that there is a turnover of ownership, since historically whenever a reigning madame retires she selects a woman from the house to replace her. I know she will do well—as will we all.”

“Hello, ladies.” Trix, as they called her, grinned at the girls.

“Congratulations!” the girls chimed in unison.

Ladies , Lou corrected herself. She must start thinking of them as her Ladies League.

The Ladies League was ready to take on the world—well, at least the Voltacrats.

Thank you for reading Lou and Griff's story—I hope you enjoyed reading it. If you did, please take a moment to leave a short review—a single line is all it takes!—wherever you buy your ebooks and/or on your favorite social media platform.