



The Worst Spy in London (The Luckiest With Love #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: A love that breaks all barriers

Damaris Dunham doesn't understand what all the fuss about love and marriage is all about. Her modiste, Annette de Morand, is aching for a chance to show her love for Damaris, but fears it can never be.

When the two young women discover a secret plot to deepen the war between England and Napoleon, they band together to defeat the threat. As the conspiracy grows more dangerous, they both realize it's not the only threat; their hearts are on the line, too.

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Damaris Dunham stared at her pink shawl, splattered in dried mud, and distantly wondered why she'd been jilted. And what her poor shawl had to do with it.

"I'm sorry, love," the innkeeper's wife was saying. "Mr. Littleton left this here with me and asked it be returned to you, with his apologies. He said you're a lovely girl but he thinks you both deserve better than a marriage forced into being by your fathers."

Numb, Damaris blinked, finally looking up from the delicate weave of her shawl into the sympathetic brown eyes of the woman behind the counter.

"Thank you." Her thumb stroked the silky tassels at the end of the shawl.

The last she'd seen of Mr. Littleton was when he strode away from the picnic and back to the house to grab her shawl for her, despite his mother suggesting a footman get it. "Can you tell me why it's so dirty?"

The woman's eyes shifted away, as if she was embarrassed, though Damaris doubted she had anything to do with it. "He didn't say. I think there may have been a gig accident in the mud or some such thing. Can I offer you a cup of tea, dear?"

Damaris glanced to the front of the inn, where her mother sat rigidly in a chair, staring a hole in the wall, and where her father paced angrily back and forth while waiting for their hired carriage.

"No, thank you. I...I think we shall be departing shortly." The words came rote and unemotional. Why am I so unemotional?

The innkeeper nodded, brow furrowed in concern. “Chin up, love. He wasn’t the boy for you. I’m sure you’ll find your man back in London.”

Damaris took the shawl, which she hadn’t seen in over a day, and went to sit beside her mother. The chair creaked, drawing her mother’s attention.

Mrs. Dunham pursed her already thin lips, her pale face paler still from the shock of the morning.

“Damaris,” she said in her reedy voice. Her long, bony fingers clenched a handkerchief over and over until it was a crumpled ball of linen.

“What were you doing over there? Did I not tell you to stay near while in this seedy place?”

Damaris sneaked a look back at the counter, where the innkeeper’s wife was wiping down the counter.

“She had something for me.” Damaris looked down again at the shawl in her lap.

It had been brand new. Her mother had ordered it from a fashionable, authentically French modiste only a month ago so Damaris could impress the Littletons during their visit.

Now it was only a reminder of failure: the trip, her father’s plans, her betrothal, even herself. All failures.

Her father paced back and forth, his face and balding head bright red. He turned his hat in his hands, his shoes clipping on the wooden floorboards. “Where is that carriage?” he seethed. “I must’ve told them twenty minutes ago we’re returning to London! What are they waiting for? Christmas?”

A strange sort of numbness had fallen over Damaris ever since she'd received word that her missing almost-betrothed was not, in fact, missing, but likely eloping to Gretna Green with another girl in the neighborhood.

Her parents had grown silently furious, but Damaris felt like she'd watched the whole display take place on stage, and she was merely part of the audience.

Her parents were too angry to consider her feelings yet, but she knew they expected her to be heartbroken.

At the very least, betrayed and embarrassed.

But the truth of the matter was Damaris didn't know Mr. Littleton at all.

They'd only conversed three, perhaps four times.

Her father was the owner of Dunham Solicitors, and he managed several great families' finances and legal matters.

One of the more prestigious was Sir Stanley, baronet of Littleton Hall.

It had been her father's idea to climb the social ladder another few rungs by marrying his only child, Damaris, to the baronet's youngest son.

It had been her mother's idea to arrange a visit to the family's estate so young Mr. Littleton could propose.

"The nerve of that family," her mother hissed. "They ruined my cup of coffee. How was I supposed to take my breakfast after news like that ? One does not simply announce tragic news over the breakfast table!"

Damaris awkwardly reached over and patted her mother's shoulder. "Of course, Mother." Damaris herself had eaten a full breakfast of toast with marmalade, eggs, and tea while the adults fumed and carefully picked their words over their coffee.

"And the visit had been going so well!" Mother wrung her handkerchief again.

Damaris nodded. Had it been going well? Damaris had no way of knowing.

She'd never been courted before. Never had a marriage arranged before, so she had little to compare it to.

Judging by how Benjamin Littleton had never returned with her shawl, she could now safely assume it hadn't been going well at all.

Most almost-betrotheds didn't run away with another girl and drop the shawl off at the local coaching inn.

"Sir Stanley swore he would make his son do the honorable thing and follow through with the arrangement," Father growled, spinning on his heel and tracking back toward them. "I do business with the man. This is an insult that cannot be borne!"

Damaris looked up at him in alarm, the first real emotion she'd felt since...well, since the carriage ride out to this Surrey village. "Father? You will not ask him to move his accounts to another firm, will you?"

He shot her a look of rage. "I haven't decided yet!"

Damaris leaned back in her chair, relieved.

That likely meant that despite his injured pride, her father knew it would be disastrous to ask such a wealthy client to leave his business.

Eventually, he would calm down and remember that he didn't want to lose a source of income as well as a potential son-in-law.

"Oh, Damaris," her mother exclaimed. "I had already told that French modiste we would be ordering your trousseau."

Damaris picked at the dried mud. "We shall simply have to explain to Madame Morand the wedding is off."

"How humiliating! Benjamin Littleton has no sense of honor. How could he do this to us?"

Damaris sighed. "If he truly is eloping, as his father informed us over breakfast, then I suppose he loves the girl and couldn't bear to be parted from her." Mud flakes drifted from the shawl onto the floor.

"My poor, brave girl," Mother said, finally taking notice of Damaris. "How calm you are in the face of this insult."

Damaris didn't know how to respond. Was she being unusually calm? Brave? She thought back to her few conversations with Mr. Littleton, back to the embarrassing announcement a few hours ago at breakfast, and couldn't dredge up any emotion beyond exhaustion. Did that count as an emotion?

Everyone assumed she was heartbroken, even the innkeeper.

Damaris chewed on the inside of her cheek, thinking.

Was something wrong with her, that she wasn't heartbroken?

She hardly knew the man. Besides, marriage was just something one did as a course

of life, not something one truly looked forward to. Wasn't it?

The door to the inn burst open, letting in a shaft of spring sunlight.

"Sir, the carriage is ready." A burly coachman stood in silhouette, a tricorn hat perched atop his head.

"Finally!" Her father slammed his beaver hat on his head and stalked out the door, barely allowing the coachman time to get out of the doorway.

Mother stood, snapping her handkerchief. Her severe brown skirts swayed as she stepped quickly and precisely toward escape. "Come along, Damaris."

Damaris sighed and stood, touching the back of her bonnet to make sure it was still on.

She hated that bonnet. It was straw with a dull brown ribbon that her mother swore looked excellent on her.

Damaris fingered the pink shawl, the most colorful article of clothing she owned, and followed her parents.

She'd liked the dratted shawl until now.

Is that why he didn't propose to me? Do I look ugly in these colors?

Damaris knew she wasn't a beauty. She looked too much like her mother: wan face, thin brown hair, pointed chin, and slight curves.

But Damaris had never cared about catching men's attention, so she'd never worried about her looks or her fashion. Maybe that was the problem?

The coachman helped Damaris board the rented carriage as she mulled over her problem.

“Sit beside me,” Mother said sharply, pointing to a worn spot on the leather squabs. “It’ll be hours until we’re back in London.”

Father huffed and snorted, glaring out the window at the bucolic countryside. Not even the sunshine after days of rain could lighten his mood.

Her charcoal and sketch pad were packed away, so Damaris removed her bonnet and rested her head against the back of the seats. A bubble formed in her chest, growing larger and larger the farther the carriage traveled down the road. It grew until her ribcage ached with the feeling.

Mother kept up a steady stream of complaints about the countryside, the Littletons, betrothals in general, and the dismal future awaiting Damaris back in London.

The bubble popped, and emotion spilled out.

A little smile slipped out one corner of Damaris’s mouth.

Damaris stroked the shawl lying across her lap. Relief . Finally, she felt something as the carriage left Surrey and traveled back to her home, back to her dull life, and away from all the Littletons. She felt relief.

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M arie-Jeanne Annette Louise de Morand, daughter of the deceased Baron de Beauvilliers, groaned as she peeked through the heavy velvet curtain separating the back workspace from her mother's staging front room.

So many customers today. And they were all so needy . An exclusive ball was approaching, and suddenly every woman and her daughter needed a new gown. The ball was in three days, and many of the women were here for final fittings.

Maman's hired seamstresses had stayed in the shop late, stitching for hours, to get everything done on time. Annette had nearly gone cross-eyed from the lace she'd basted onto a bodice, and even Maman was trying not to yawn.

Sometimes the popularity of the shop being authentically French seemed like a curse. A Bond Street shop was the pinnacle of any business owner's dreams, and while it kept Annette and Maman not only secure but also wealthy, it also caused a lot of stress.

Ladies fluttered around the front room, gossiping with one another, leafing through fashion plates and comparing their latest fripperies. Annette noted two countesses, the daughter of a marquess, and the wives of several extremely wealthy bankers.

"I heard the Russian ambassador and his wife are coming to the ball," one woman told another as she held up different bolts of sheer fawn brown chiffon to the sunlight streaming through the wide window.

"My husband, Lord Eldridge," another woman replied, "knows the ambassador from their school days. I expect there will be several ambassadors there—Spanish and

Portuguese as well.”

Several women cooed over new knotted lace that Annette had placed on display that morning. “Since the Duchess of Westbrook is hosting the ball, it will be a crush. Lilian, do you really wish to be seen in that jonquil trim? It makes you look sallow.”

“Pardon me, miss.”

Annette moved away from the curtain, letting the seamstress through with a box of prepared frocks.

She watched the girl pass through the curtain and sighed with relief that she was free to take a break because Maman had hired several young women for the Season.

Years ago, when Maman had first opened her shop in Cheapside, it was only the two of them able to sew and fulfill orders. How times had changed.

Annette yawned, then peeked through the curtain again.

One of the countesses looked down her nose at the seamstress. “Take those boxes outside to my footman. Why would I hold them?”

“Lady Cecelia,” another woman said to a girl barely out of the schoolroom. “What luck this shall be your first ball! The Duchess always hosts the most glorious events, and if ambassadors attend, it shall be quite the multicultural event.”

The bell above the door jingled, and two women—a mother and a daughter—stepped inside. The wide brims on their bonnets shielded their faces until the young woman glanced at the fashion plates strewn across the front counter.

Annette’s heart thudded in her chest, and it seemed like all the air was sucked out of

the room.

It was her.

It had been nearly three weeks since Annette had seen her, and finally she'd returned.

Annette forced herself to breathe again as she soaked up every detail she could of Miss Damaris Dunham.

The young woman was tall and slender. So slender Annette could make out the points of her collarbone and wrists. Annette's eyes narrowed. Had Damaris lost weight? She scarcely had any to lose. Had she been ill?

Annette worried her bottom lip, unable to bear the thought of Damaris in a sickbed.

Damaris wore a pale yellow frock that did nothing to help her complexion. Her bonnet, trimmed with ribbon-lace and a deep purple bow, framed light brown hair, large, expressive gray eyes, and the cutest nose Annette had ever seen.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Dunham called, raising a hand to get one of the seamstress's attention. "We're here for our order. For the final fitting. We're attending the Westbrook ball, you see." She glanced around the room, as if waiting to see the reaction.

Annette hid a smile. The Dunhams had been customers with her Maman since they'd moved their shop to Bond Street.

She knew the Dunhams were well off, but Mr. Dunham was a solicitor.

He was in trade, just like Annette's mother.

This was the most prestigious event the Dunhams had likely ever been invited to.

“Yes, madam.” The seamstress at the counter moved toward the curtain, and when her back was turned she sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“I’ll help this one,” Annette jumped in. “Why don’t you take five minutes?”

The young woman hesitated. “Are you certain?”

“Of course.” Annette smiled. “Take a few minutes. Hide in the back, behind the new shipment of Egyptian cotton. I’ll get their order.”

The seamstress’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you. I think I got four hours of sleep last night and the night before that.” Then her eyes widened. “I’m not complaining though! I’m very grateful to Madame Morand for this position.”

Annette set a hand on the girl’s arm. “You’re not complaining.

It’s just a very busy week. I don’t carry tales to my mother, anyway.

” She nudged her. “After a few minutes, you can fit Mrs. Dunham. I’ll take Miss Dunham at the farthest station.

” She turned and grabbed Damaris Dunham’s ballgown off the rack.

The off-white silk taffeta caught on her damp hands.

Draping it over her shoulder, she poked her head out and pasted on a cool, professional smile that hid the wild beating of her heart.

“Miss Dunham? Would you come with me?”

The young woman stood, her face serious.

Annette always wondered why it was so serious. Well, her mother had canceled a trousseau for her early this year. Maybe she was heartbroken over the failed betrothal.

Annette gritted her teeth at the hook of jealousy tugging at her innards. The betrothal is over, she reminded herself. Until the next one.

Damaris, unaware of the unsettling feelings making Annette's life a misery, glided through the curtain that Annette held back for her, then made for one of the alcoves with stools and heavy curtains.

"The back one," Annette murmured, watching the graceful line of Damaris's dress flow as she walked.

Once Damaris stood on the stool and Annette pulled the curtain shut, Annette realized her mistake.

She was going to have to help Damaris dress and undress.

She gulped. She didn't know if she could handle it.

Although Annette had preferred the female form and the female mind since...

forever, really, she could do her job without any sort of prurient interest in her clients.

Besides, most clients only stripped to their chemise and corset. But this was Damaris Dunham.

Annette couldn't back out now. Everyone was too busy.

I can be proper, she told herself. I will only look where I'm supposed to. She hung the gown on a rack and went to undo the tapes and buttons that made up Damaris's walking skirt.

Damaris sighed, facing the looking glass on the wall, and rolled her neck.

"Fatigued?" Annette asked, breaking the horribly tense silence. Her eyes met Damaris's in the reflection.

Damaris smiled. "Is it so apparent?"

Annette shook her head, looking back at the tape she untied. "I suppose you're busy with the Season going."

Damaris huffed a laugh. "We're both the daughters of tradesmen.

Do you want to know the true reason we were invited to a duchess's ball?

My father began a contract with the duke to be his solicitor.

And the duchess wants this ball to be a crush.

My role is to be a wallflower. My mother's too, though she pretends it is not so. "

You could never be a wallflower. Annette slipped the gown and petticoat off Damaris, who stepped out carefully. She ignored the smoothness of Damaris's skin and the mole just above her elbow. She certainly didn't notice the dimple behind Damaris's left knee.

"You wouldn't be a wallflower if you ever went to a private ball like that," Damaris said, as if reading Annette's mind.

Startled, Annette looked up.

Damris stood in just her corset, chemise, and stockings.

Her slight curves made Annette think of a swan, and those thin ankles were shapely enough to get anyone's attention.

She flushed, a rosy hue spreading across her delicate bosom and up her long neck.

Her eyelashes fluttered. "I—I'm sorry, that was likely improper, wasn't it?"

"It's just—" Her hand waved in the air, as if trying to conjure the words.

"With a bosom and figure like yours, you'd never lack for dance partners."

Now Annette was the one blushing. She snatched up the silk ballgown to hide her nerves. She had an ample figure. Her body type was the exact opposite of Damaris's, actually. Damaris had noticed her bosom? In a friendly, fellow girl way? Or in a romantic way?

"Here you go," she said, holding the gown open for Damaris to step into.

They fell silent, the rasp of silk against cotton and whalebone filling the small changing room. The air was hot. Annette tried not to watch Damaris's graceful hands as she slid the gown over her. Annette tried not to be disappointed when Damaris's skin disappeared from view.

Someone coughed on the other side of the curtain.

"Yes?" Annette called, beginning to fasten the tapes.

“Excuse me, Miss Morand, but there’s someone out back. Says he needs to speak with you urgently.” One of the seamstress’s breathy voice slipped through the crack.

Damaris’s eyes flew to Annette’s in the mirror.

Annette frowned. “Did he say who it was?” she called back.

“Just that he’s family.”

Family? Annette didn’t have any family. Only she and Maman left France in a smuggler’s boat under the cover of night during the Reign of Terror. She’d been five, and Maman had held her tight the entire crossing. Everyone else had died, including Annette’s father.

“Tell him it’s not a good time,” Annette called back. “I’m with a customer.”

“Yes, miss.” Her footsteps faded.

Annette focused again on Damaris’s ballgown.

With any luck, this gown would help Damaris catch some suitors.

She hated the idea, but she drew back and picked up pins and draped one of her measuring tapes around her neck.

“Very good,” she said. “Turn and I’ll start with the cuffs.

” She pushed all thoughts of Damaris’s warm skin and the strange message aside and honed in on her sewing.

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Damaris wiggled her bare toes on the stool, feeling restless. Miss Morand—Annette, as the young woman told her a few months ago—bent over and carefully pinned excess fabric in place. She'd do the hemming last.

She always had mixed feelings about this shop.

On one hand, she enjoyed seeing Annette.

They didn't talk much, but Damaris was certain that they'd be excellent friends if given the chance.

On the other hand, this was just another place for Mother to make decisions for Damaris and stick her in uncomfortable clothing just like she stuck her into an uncomfortable betrothal in the spring.

She always felt odd when it was Annette who helped her.

She grew restless and itchy, even though Annette's hands were cool, comforting, and professional.

Her mind wouldn't stop racing, though, even as Annette folded the cuffs and stuck pins into the fabric.

She glanced down to see the curve of Annette's profile, her forehead and nose down to her cheeks and chin.

Below was a very impressive bosom. It would be a lovely thing to sketch.

“Have you read the latest about the war?” Damaris picked the first topic that came to mind. It was distracting how pretty Annette was.

Annette hummed, pins pressed between full, pink lips.

“They say Napoleon’s alliance with Russia is strong. But I heard my father say that Napoleon will likely one day invade Russia just like everyone else, even if he does get along with the czar.”

Annette made another noise.

Damaris sighed. “We’ve been at war or expecting to go to war with Napoleon since I was four—no, fifteen years old. 1803, yes?”

Annette nodded as she moved, gesturing to Damaris extend her other arm.

“I suppose we’ll see what happens.” The war was mostly abstract for Damaris, except for when soldiers came to her father’s office to have legal documents drawn up or widows dropped by to request help receiving benefits. Those were heartbreaking cases, and Damaris prayed the war would end soon.

The rest of the fitting continued in the same fashion.

Damaris shifted her weight from one foot to the other, wishing the awkwardness would end.

She didn’t quite know why it was so awkward.

She liked Annette, and she thought Annette liked her, too.

Perhaps because Damaris felt this draw to be friends with her, even though she was a

client.

When Annette was done basting a quick hem, she stood and carefully took the gown off Damaris, moving slowly due to the sharp pins.

She helped Damaris off the stool. Her hand was strong and capable beneath Damaris's, and Damaris wondered what else Annette did when she wasn't sewing. How else she used her hand.

Damaris flushed while she put her petticoats back on, though she wasn't quite sure why.

"I think we can get this done tonight." The plump young woman of medium height smiled, revealing a tiny little gap between her front teeth.

She had sparkling brown eyes, wavy black hair that always tried to escape her bun, and one perfect dimple on the right side of her mouth.

Damaris envied her smooth complexion, overflowing bosom, and graceful walk.

It's because she's French, Damaris consoled herself, wiggling back into her walking dress.

One really couldn't compare a person to a Frenchwoman.

They weren't fully human, it seemed, but something more.

Then she gasped, putting a hand to her mouth.

"Miss Morand, I went on and on about the war and forgot that you're from France."

Annette shook her head. “I’m from France, yes,” she agreed in a perfectly British accent. “But I was five when we left. I don’t have ties to my homeland.”

Damaris had overheard gossip that Madame Morand was the widow of a baron or a chevalier who had fled, like many other aristocrats, to London and suddenly had to find work. She’d found success in being authentically French in a business that prized French fashion.

“So...I didn’t offend you by speaking ill of Napoleon?” she asked with a nervous smile.

Annette gave a delicate, Gallic snort. “I support the British Crown, same as you. Besides, it was Napoleon’s ilk who took away my family home and fortune, as my mother says.”

Damaris smiled with relief this time. “Oh, good.” She would’ve hated ruining this tenuous relationship.

Annette’s eyes darkened for a heartbeat, then she cleared her throat and stepped back. “This will be delivered to your home tomorrow. Is that acceptable?”

Damaris nodded. “I believe so. You’ll have to check with my mother, however. She tends to be rather picky.”

Annette grinned, displaying her white teeth and that little gap again. Damaris wondered what it felt like, to have a gap in her smile. “Yes, she has been rather demanding in the past.”

Damaris sighed, putting a hand to her temple. “She wasn’t too dreadful when we cancelled the trousseau, was she?”

Annette shrugged, not really answering. Which was an answer in and of itself. Her eyes turned serious. “I hope you’re recovering from the heartbreak. I’d hate to see you in pain.”

“Oh, well,” Damaris fumbled, glancing down and smoothing her skirt. “I wasn’t exactly in love. The betrothal was primarily my father’s idea, I think. I didn’t know him well, and apparently he preferred someone else.” She sighed and pasted on a smile. “Last I heard, they eloped to Gretna Green.”

Annette’s jaw dropped. “How on earth could he pick someone else? When you were right there?”

Damaris laughed, flattered. “That’s kind of you to say, but, well...” She gestured to herself.

Annette squinted. “What does that signify?”

Damaris gave a little one-shouldered shrug. “You’re a modiste. You see many women. You know that I’m no great beauty.” And she’d never done a single exciting thing, she’d never voiced her opinion loudly or had a big, bold personality.

Annette’s eyes narrowed and her mouth turned downward. “You’re marvelous, Miss Dunham. Willowy with silky hair and large, expressive eyes. He would’ve been lucky to have you.”

Damaris laughed again, her cheeks heating. “You’re saying that because I’m your customer. Thank you,” she added when Annette opened her mouth to protest.

Annette pursed her lips. “Your mother puts you in the worst colors for your complexion. I think you’d be shocked at how lovely you’d look when you wear something that fits your body.”

A spark of interest flared in Damaris's chest. She tamped it down. "Maybe one day, when I'm married and the mistress of my own home."

Annette's eyes went flat, but she nodded. "The pale tones," she said, fingering the peach gown, "do you no good. You need jewel tones, something dark and brilliant and bold."

Damaris couldn't even imagine wearing something dark and bold, but she liked the way Annette seemed to think so. "One day," she said with a closed-lip smile.

"Damaris?" Her mother's shrill voice cut through the velvet curtain somehow. "Where are you? Are you finished yet?"

Damaris sighed and glanced at Annette, who seemed to be smiling with her eyes. "Coming, Mother." She reached for the edge of the curtain, pulling it back just as Annette reached at the same time. Their fingers tangled. Damaris's heart skipped a beat and her hand tingled.

Annette blushed. "Forgive me." She whipped her hand away.

"Oh, no, do not apologize." Damaris stepped out into the short corridor, Annette on her heels.

Mother stood at the curtain separating the fitting rooms from the front room, bonnet tied tightly under her chin. She clutched her reticule tightly to her skirts. "Come, now. We have much to do. We're running out of time before the ball."

Damaris waved goodbye to Annette, wishing she could stay just a little longer.

She always enjoyed spending time at the modiste's shop.

It had surprised her at first, because she expected to be confronted with her flaws every time she entered a shop catered to enhancing feminine beauty.

But Annette never made her feel that way.

She was an excellent modiste. Damaris bet all Annette's clients felt that way.

Once inside the coach, Mother leaned back into the squab and sighed. "Madame Morand certainly knows her way around lace and silk. How did your dress look?"

Damaris stumbled for words. "Ah, it's lovely.

The champagne is fashionable for young women.

"The yellow also made her look like she was dying, but she didn't say that.

Her mother had strict opinions on Damaris's wardrobe.

Light pastels whenever at society events, so they could emphasize Damaris's youth—she was twenty-two, nearly four years older than true ton debutantes—and plain browns and grays for casual walking frocks and dresses for home.

"Good." Mother nodded firmly. "We need to find you a husband. Even if that Littleton lad didn't work out, your father has plenty of clients with younger sons.

We can't aim as high as a duke's son, of course, since your father is in trade, but another baronet, perhaps.

Maybe even an industrialist, though I'd prefer gentry for you. "

Damaris sighed as her mother prattled on about the future.

She rested her elbow on the edge of the coach window and set her chin in her hand, watching as the streets of London moved past. She'd rather not think of her future: an advantageous match with a young man, plenty of babies, raising her family's social class, and whatever else her mother had in mind.

Damaris wasn't quite sure what she wanted, but she knew it wasn't that.

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Annette sighed and rolled her neck, massaging her temples as she did so. The alley behind her mother's shop was clean, but the scent of old rubbish and even a bit of piss—at the entry of the alley, near the haberdashery of course—filled her nostrils.

It had been a long, long day. Thankfully it was the fashionable hour now, around five o'clock in the afternoon, and most of their customers were now promenading down Rotten Row.

The front room girl was closing up, rewinding spools of ribbons and lace that had spilled everywhere and straightening the fashion plates back into their proper baskets.

The seamstresses gathered in the workroom, bent over their laps with a needle and thread.

Annette's mother allowed them to use nearly double the number of candles that many other seamstresses limited, and Annette was grateful for it.

Although she hadn't stayed late to stitch last minute orders in a very long time—it was wonderful to be the daughter of a wildly successful modiste rather than an employee—there had been days in the far past that she'd worked beside her mother, nearly going cross-eyed while stitching lace onto a cuff or hem.

A noise came from the entrance of the alley, like a boot scraped against stone.

Annette's eyes snapped open and she peered into the shadowed alley. "Hello?" It wasn't one of the shopboys at the haberdashery or the cigar shop. The millinery, too, had no one outside its faded green door.

Out of the shade, a tall, lean figure emerged.

His shoulders were narrow, and he strolled toward her with his hands in his trouser pockets.

A cap slouched over his forehead. Annette squinted, trying to make out the man's features.

He seemed young-ish. His lengthy strides ate up the distance until he paused only a few feet from her.

Annette tensed, reaching behind her to grab the latch on the modiste back door. "What do you want?"

The young man snorted, then replied in French. "Is that any way to speak to your cousin?"

Annette gaped at him, her hand falling off the latch in her shock. "Excuse me?"

He frowned at her. "Do you not speak French?"

Indignant at the scolding tone, Annette switched to French, though she lowered her voice and glanced around to make sure they were alone. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The young man stroked his budding mustache. "I am Philippe Gerard de Morand. Our fathers were brothers."

Annette's eyes widened. "No, everyone died."

Philippe pursed his lips. "Almost everyone. Our fathers were executed, but a servant

saved me and my older sister. We've survived by hiding from the citizens and watching as Napoleon grows to power."

Annette was not convinced, but she nodded all the same.

"I don't know what you're doing in London now, especially with a war between our two countries.

But I can call my mother to meet you. She will want to know that some family survived.

Are you moving to England?" She paused. "Or...are you fighting for Bonaparte?"

Disgust rippled across his shadowed face, making his lips curl into a sneer. "That Corsican bastard? Never." He straightened. "We are related to the Bourbons, cousin, and we will never bow to that peasant."

I see. Annette blinked at the force of his reaction.

Her mother hated Bonaparte and anyone who represented the New Regime. But when Bonaparte had declared himself the emperor? Annette had never seen such rage and disgust cross her mother's face. It was six years ago, and Annette would never forget it.

"That hypocrite!" she'd seethed as she read the broadsheet. "That bastard. Capitalizing on the revolution, just to become a general and then declare himself the emperor? He is not a Bourbon. He will never be my king."

It seemed like Cousin Philippe felt the same way. If he was actually her cousin.

"I slipped across the Channel in a smuggler's boat." He grimaced. "The trip from the

coast to London was even worse. These English.”

Irritation flared. “Why are you here, in a back alley, in the middle of a war, talking to a cousin you’ve never met?”

He wants something from me. Annette didn’t trust it.

No one just took a jaunt across the Channel in the middle of war for an amusing diversion.

She eyed him. She didn’t know if he really was her cousin.

And that impassioned little speech about Bonaparte, though it would endear him to the British side of the fight, felt a little too radical, too political for just a family reunion.

“Listen.” He took a step closer, dropping his voice.

Nearly colorless blue eyes peered at her, and a narrow, sharp chin bobbed above his cravat.

“You’re a modiste. I’ve seen wealthy ladies streaming in and out of the shop all day long, talking about a ball.

It is to be a grand occasion, oui? With many ambassadors and foreign diplomats. ”

“Maybe,” Annette hedged. Was he speaking of the Duchess of Westbrook’s ball?

His eyes gleamed. “The broadsheets say that the Russian diplomat and his entourage will attend the ball. Do you know if it is so?”

“I am unsure,” Annette said honestly.

He huffed. “Can you find out? Surely you hear all sorts of things from the ladies who frequent your shop. Not only lords’ wives, but other women who are from politically active families.”

Annette stared at him. “I don’t know you. I’m not even sure if you truly are my cousin.”

He flashed a very charming smile. “Come now, cuz. Surely you see a family resemblance? Our noses and our hair?”

“What do you want exactly?” Annette asked, growing impatient.

“The Corsican dog’s alliance with Russia is growing thin. It needs to be snapped completely.”

Annette frowned. “So you can weaken Napoleon?”

He nodded triumphantly.

“So you can, what, put a Bourbon back on the throne?”

He nodded again, so certain he was speaking with family and an ally.

Annette sighed. “Is this some clandestine military operation, or did you just decide you needed to act for the glory of France?”

He glared at her. “I do need to act for the glory of France. Many of us feel this way, and I have the support of many back home.”

Annette looked at him for a moment, weighing him. “I cannot help you,” she finally said. “I am a seamstress. I only sew lace on gowns, and our customers do not gossip about politics.” She turned to go.

“I’ll meet your mother for supper,” he said smoothly, stepping so close he loomed over her as best he could. “Tell me your direction and I will be there at eight tonight to meet your mother and prove myself.”

“I’ll speak with my mother first,” she said. “Good day.” Then she opened the door and slipped through before he could stop her.

She locked the door behind her and listened as Philippe pounded on the other side.

“Let me in! We’re not finished talking.” His voice was muffled by the door, but Annette could hear his frustration.

“Yes, we are.” Annette turned and walked away.

That evening, Annette watched her mother across their small dining room table. Their butler placed the next dish on the table and stepped back against the wall. He was their only manservant, but Annette’s mother enjoyed the formality that came with wealth and higher status.

It was a far cry from Annette’s first memories in Cheapside, where her mother had pawned her jewelry to pay for a weekly laundress and charwoman.

Now, with a shop on Bond Street that catered to the wealthiest members of the ton, the Morands could afford a large townhouse in Soho.

It wasn’t as fashionable a district as it used to be, with music halls and theaters creeping in at the edges, but it was still near Mayfair, and there was still a strong

French presence among the neighborhood.

Annette took a spoonful of soup, then broached the topic. “Maman.”

Maman looked up. “Oui?”

“I met a man in the alley today.”

Maman’s brow creased in confusion. Annette stifled a laugh.

Her mother knew that Annette had never been interested in boys and likely never would marry.

Maman hadn’t pried more than that, but she’d also encouraged Annette to remain single so she could be a wealthy and independent woman once Maman passed on her inheritance.

Marrying would tie her inheritance back to the whims of a man.

“He says he is Philippe de Morand,” Annette added.

Maman’s eyebrows smoothed and her mouth opened in surprise. “Interesting.”

“He claimed to be my first cousin. Is that true, Maman? I thought you said everyone perished under the guillotine.”

Maman nodded thoughtfully, taking a sip of wine. “I had thought so. If Michel’s children survived, I didn’t hear of it.”

Annette shrugged. “He said a servant saved him.”

“The boy’s name was Philippe,” Maman agreed slowly. “But why is he here? Is he defecting from Bonaparte? I do not understand.”

“I don’t understand, either,” Annette admitted. “He wanted to come to our home tonight and have supper with us. But I wanted to speak with you first.”

Maman’s eyes narrowed. “What did the boy say?”

“Something about he’d always support the Bourbons’ right to the throne?” Annette swirled her spoon in her soup.

Maman nodded in approval. “That’s right. A true Morand, then.”

Annette tried to remember the rest. “He wanted to know gossip about our clients. What they say to each other during fittings, especially information about the Westbrook ball.”

“That I do not like,” Maman stated firmly. “Modistes keep their customers’ secrets. It is how we stay in business, by garnering their trust. Running our tongues for no good reason will hurt the business.”

Annette fidgeted in her seat. “I didn’t agree to it. He didn’t tell me where he’s staying though, so if he wants to speak with us he must be the one who finds us.”

Maman sighed. “Boys.” She cleared her throat and gestured delicately to the butler to remove their dishes. “The girls are sewing until midnight to get some of the dresses fitted for tomorrow. I expected Mr. Hughes at the millinery to drop off his display today but it never arrived.”

Annette rolled her eyes. Mr. Hughes owned and operated the millinery nearby, and he and her mother had set up a system of displaying samples of their products in one

another's shops to drum up more business.

It was an effective method—when Mr. Hughes remembered to send his ribbons and bonnets.

“Do you need me to go tomorrow and pick up his hatboxes?”

“Yes, my little cabbage, that would be lovely. Thank you.” Maman yawned, her long, slender fingers covering her mouth. “I’ll be relieved when this ball is over.” She eased her chair back and rose.

Annette chuckled as she stood from the table. “You’re just excited about the prospect of a duchess noticing your gowns. You want this ball to send a flood of new customers to our front door.”

Maman’s lips quirked, for she was too proper to grin. “Perhaps, my little cabbage. Perhaps.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:56 am

Damaris couldn't hold back a smile as she stepped inside Hughes' Millinery.

She wasn't supposed to be out shopping without some sort of chaperone—whether it was the footman her father had hired recently or the upstairs chamber maid.

But James was moving the shelves in the pantry to Cook's height so Cook would stop asking him to reach ingredients for her, and Fanny was taking her half day.

She'd convinced their coachman to take her to Bond Street for a couple of hours anyway.

She so rarely got out without her mother, and it was just so nice not to listen to her mother's expectations for her.

She'd hoped to do some sketching by the Serpentine, but the weather was not fine enough for it and she didn't have the time.

The bell above the shop dinged as she stepped inside, adjusting the infernal pink shawl she'd had in Surrey.

Rows of bonnets, turbans, and ribbons lined the shelves of the small shop.

A display table had feathers, silk flowers, and all sorts of adornments clustered in glass vases.

It was too early to be the fashionable hour for shopping, so the space wasn't crowded.

The shop clerk, a young man with an unfortunate amount of pimples scattered across his pale face, was ringing up a patron with three other women crowded around a back shelf, murmuring to one another about the products.

Damaris spied some lovely lace gloves and wandered over to the small table laden with women's pairs.

She stroked the delicate white lace, wishing she could buy something like that.

Her mother would say it was too fast, too bold, for someone like Damaris, and that would be the end of that conversation.

She examined more sedate gloves made of brown wool for several moments, then turned to see the ribbons.

She bumped into someone. "I beg your pardon," she said, steadying herself and looking up at—Annette de Morand.

Her heart gave a little leap. "Oh, hello!" Her hand fluttered at her side as she resisted the urge to straighten her skirts, smooth her hair, do something to make herself appear more enticing.

Annette turned, her eyes widening as she clearly realized who she'd run into. "Miss Dunham. Good day. What are you doing here?" She smiled, revealing that little gap between her teeth and the dimple to the side.

Damaris shrugged. "Looking at bonnets." Really, she'd had to get out of the house and away from her mother's matchmaking ideas and her father's silent frustration that still lingered from her jilting earlier this year.

Damaris had gotten over the insult almost immediately, but her father never let

anything go. “And you?”

Annette glanced down at a large, white box in her hand. “Picking up sample products from Mr. Hughes. We sometimes display them, paired with our own work.”

“That’s clever.” Damaris inwardly winced. What an inane thing to say.

A beat of silence passed between them. Annette turned to go, but Damaris wasn’t ready to say goodbye yet.

“How’s your work? Is it terribly busy right now?” Another silly question. She bit the inside of her cheek. Why couldn’t she be interesting and pretty and oh lord , she would do anything to have a friend as special as Annette.

Annette turned back to her with a little laugh. “It is. We’re always quite busy throughout the Season, of course. But my mother is happy, and I enjoy seeing the creations we all sew together.”

Damaris didn’t understand fashion at all, but she could appreciate a pretty frock when she saw one. “I’d love to learn more about the process. If—if you don’t mind, I mean. When the Season calms down.”

Annette’s eyes sparkled, and Damaris felt an odd tug in her chest. She hadn’t thought she was envious of Annette’s beauty. But what else could this sensation be?

“Of course. I’d love to show you,” the young woman gushed. She glanced down. “Oh, you’re wearing your shawl.”

Damaris tried to hold back a grimace. “Yes.”

Annette stilled. “What’s the matter with it?”

She huffed a self conscious laugh. “Nothing. It’s just...

I took it with me to Surrey, to meet with the man who was supposed to become my betrothed.

I’m still not exactly sure how, but it went missing for a while and then the village publican’s wife gave it back to me.

It just brings back awkward memories I’d rather forget.

My mother picked this out for me today, otherwise I wouldn’t have worn it. ”

A strange look passed across Annette’s face. “I sewed that for you. One of the seamstresses was out ill, so I was the one who finished adding the fringe and then sewed the embroidery along the hem.”

“Oh!” Damaris’s body went hot, then cold. She flushed. “It’s beautiful craftsmanship. Forgive me.”

Annette shook her head. “Never mind. I understand how clothing can soak up memories.”

“Well,” Damaris said after a pause as she hunted for the right words. “I’m glad you told me. For now I will think of you when I see this shawl, and that changes everything.”

Annette smiled.

They spoke for several more minutes. Damaris relaxed and enjoyed the conversation, finding herself captivated by Annette’s intelligence and unique perspective.

Annette finally looked out the mullioned window. “I...I should be going.” She gestured to the box in her arms. “I should set these out.”

“Oh.” Damaris fought a blush. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to keep you for so long.” Foolish chit.

But Annette shook her head, her dark curls bouncing around her face. “I enjoyed our time.” She paused, biting her lower lip, then said, “I always enjoy our conversations. You should come by the shop more often. Or...perhaps we could meet at Gunther’s for ices sometime?”

“That would be lovely!” Damaris exclaimed, then glanced around the room, cheeks heating from the volume of her voice.

No one was glaring at her, so perhaps no one noticed.

“I would love that,” she continued in a much softer voice.

“Yes. I could probably get away on Thursdays most easily. And I can go early in the afternoon to avoid the crowds.”

Annette nodded as she backed toward the door. “After the ball, let’s set a time to do so.”

Damaris’s parents would not be pleased with this developing friendship.

They wanted Damaris to attend balls and meet young women in the aristocracy, or at least wealthy bankers and industrialists.

Heiresses, ideally. Annette was very well off—just like Damaris, actually—but she served the ton, just like Damaris’s father did. This connection would not be useful.

I shan't tell them. Damaris clenched her jaw with the thought, then relaxed because Annette was still there, still in front of her, still smiling. "Let me get the door for you."

They stepped outside together, and Damaris walked beside Annette the short distance to her mother's shop. More of the ton was out now, beginning to stroll the streets and peer at window displays.

Damaris was attuned to Annette's movement, even her breathing, at this moment in ways she'd never been with anyone else.

She'd heard other girls sigh over their beaux, but Damaris had never had even the barest flicker of interest in a man.

She'd originally thought the other girls were being dramatic in their adolescence, but strangely, the sentiment seemed to only grow stronger with age.

But now...all she could think about was the rise and fall of Annette's bosom and the way her skirt shifted against her legs. What did her skin look like, under all that clothing? That...that wasn't something one felt for a friend, was it?

A footman carrying a mound of packages walked past, jostling Damaris's arm.

"Oof!" She frowned at the man's retreating back. Then someone caught her attention. A man dressed in a nondescript brown coat and cream linen shirt and stockings followed them, only a step or two behind. Her heart rate sped up.

Bond Street was supposed to be very safe, but ruffians could be anywhere. His hair was tousled and the growing mustache made him look like a pirate.

"Cousin," he called, reaching out for Annette.

Damaris glared at him, ready to bat his hand away with her reticule.

Annette halted so quickly that Damaris tripped on her own skirt trying to match the pause. “Philippe?” She turned, a wary look in her brown eyes. “What do you want?”

He smiled, closing the distance until he practically loomed over the women. “To continue our conversation. You asked your mother, did you not?” He had the faintest accent, so slight that Damaris couldn’t quite place it. He smelled...odd.

She glanced down and saw a smudge of something dark along his cuffs.

Beside her, Annette sighed. “This is not the time. Please go away.”

He clapped a hand to his heart. “You wound me, cousin.”

Cousin? Damaris finally put the pieces together. He was French. What on earth was a Frenchman doing here? It didn’t seem like he had immigrated long ago, either. That sharp, smoky scent on him made her nose wrinkle. Over the smoky scent wafted...rotten eggs?

Annette kept walking, and Damaris followed her. Suddenly they reached the cheerful sunshine door of the Morand modiste shop.

Damaris glanced back and forth between the cousin and Annette, not sure what was happening. It was distinctly uncomfortable to find oneself in the middle of a family spat. And he was still following them.

“Well this has been lovely,” Annette chirped, pointedly ignoring her cousin. Her eyes latched onto Damaris’s, and they softened. “I mean what I said about Gunther’s.”

Damaris’s chest expanded, and her smile took over her whole face.

“And I as well.” She could just envision it now: ice rendezvous turning to deep friendship, Damaris letting Annette experiment with new frocks, using Damaris as a model, perhaps attending a few public musicales together, if Damaris could convince her parents to allow it.

She’d not had a bosom friend in years. Not since finishing school in Bath five years ago, and that girl had already married—a baron’s fifth son, no less!

—with two children. So they weren’t as close as they used to be.

Hopefully Annette would be in her life for a long, long time.

Annette shut the door in Philippe’s face.

Disgruntled, he turned.

Damaris was already heading toward where her coach should be waiting on her.

“Pardon me, miss.” His English was very good.

But what is he doing in London? Her mind conjured up all sorts of nefarious ideas. Is he a spy?

Philippe leaned closer to Damaris—too close—and the stench of rotten eggs washed over her.

Damaris discreetly placed her fingers below her nose to filter the smell. It was like he’d rolled in them.

“You’re my cousin’s friend?”

Damaris nodded warily.

“Can you pass a message along for me?” His wide, pale blue eyes turned soft and beseeching. “Please, miss? She is my only living cousin. My family has been searching for her for years. But she is suspicious, and all I want is a chance to have a meal with her and my aunt.”

Damaris did not want to wade into family drama.

“Just a message, that’s all,” he pleaded.

Damaris sighed. “Oh, very well. But that is all I shall do for you,” she warned. It would give the perfect excuse to see Annette again instead of waiting until a new dress fitting.

“Tell her to please meet with me. I’m renting a room above the bookshop Monosyllable on Holywell Street. I’ll be there all day tomorrow, but I’m running out of time. It’s urgent that I speak with her. Do you understand?”

Damaris blushed at the mention of Holywell street.

She didn’t know for sure what was so scandalous, but she was reasonably certain men went there for vulgar drawings.

And she’d never heard of a bookshop called Monosyllable.

It was clever, though. “Yes.” She nodded.

“I will endeavor to pass along your message.” It gave her a perfect excuse to see Annette again.

He relaxed. “Thank you. Tell her it’s very important. I’m trying to get a job and I need her information to know where to look.” He doffed his cap. “Good day, miss.”

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:56 am

Damaris stared out the parlor window, thinking.

The early afternoon sun had finally cut through the morning clouds and now drenched the Dunhams' Bloomsbury street.

Two businessmen walked past, likely coming home for luncheon before hurrying back to their offices.

A young man raced down the street, one hand holding a flapping white barrister wig on his head as he headed toward the Inn of Courts.

Mother was taking a long nap in preparation for the ball tonight.

It was tonight.

Damaris couldn't decide if she was excited or nervous.

She'd spent the morning sketching still life, then figures of female dancers, and then finally the curls of Annette's hair.

She loved drawing more than any other activity, for it gave her a chance to understand the world on her own terms with little pressure.

She studied her latest sketch. It was supposed to be a generic milkmaid, but somehow she'd ended up with dark curls, laughing brown eyes, and the most darling gap between her front two teeth. Annette .

Her heart panged in her chest, and she wondered if she was falling ill.

Lately she'd felt jittery and out of sorts, like her heart was malfunctioning or she was going to crawl right out of her skin or she was running a fever and her hands were clammy and she didn't know what was wrong with her, but she didn't want to fall ill because then she'd miss the ball and she wanted to wear Annette's gown for her because it was special and beautiful and Damaris just needed to feel closer to her though she didn't know why, and perhaps she was developing some feverish obsession, so maybe she really was sick because sometimes she felt like she couldn't breathe, especially right now while looking at her sketch, but she didn't know what the symptoms meant, and?—

She took a shaky breath.

Madame Morand had delivered the ballgowns this morning through an errand boy.

Damaris had opened her box and pulled apart the thin paper to see her gown.

It was just as she expected: a high waistline in pale yellow with a fussy collar.

But someone had added something else to the dress, and she'd stared with an open mouth, taking in the sight.

Deep purple now edged the dress, drawing the eye through dyed lace and velvet ribbons.

It sharpened the waistline and ribbons trailed behind her, drawing the eye away from the collar and accentuating Damaris's slender height.

A little bow now marked the collar in the center, making it appear more youthful fashion.

It was striking and elegant and everything Damaris always wished she was.

Damaris couldn't wait to wear it, even if her mother would complain about the last-minute changes.

It had to have been Annette. That was the only explanation.

Damaris would have to thank her. She'd dreamed of Annette last night.

It was an odd dream, where Annette was the client and Damaris was the modiste's assistant, helping her up on the stool, unbuttoning Annette's gown, and revealing curved shoulders, the length of her neck, those flaring hips hidden still by her chemise.

Damaris had knelt, unlacing Annette's shoes. Then she'd wrapped her fingers around Annette's shapely ankles and gently placed her stockinged feet back on the stool.

It was a strange, sensuous dream. Damaris could practically feel the silk stockings under her fingertips and hear the slide of fabric as more and more of Annette's skin was revealed to her gaze. Even now, hours after she'd woken, the dream was vivid in her mind.

She picked up the embroidery project she'd been trying to work on all morning, completed one stitch, then tossed it on the settee with a frustrated sigh. Damaris crossed her legs this way, then that.

I could go see her. The thought pricked her like a needle. I could claim my gown tore, and it was an emergency. Her mind drifted to yesterday, when she'd last seen her. I did tell her cousin I'd deliver his message.

Before she could overthink it, Damaris stood and put on her spencer and bonnet, then

asked the coachman to take her to Bond Street. Her mother would likely strangle her, but Damaris so rarely disobeyed she thought she could risk it this once.

The man closed his eyes for a moment, likely praying for patience because he knew how terrible the traffic was in that district, then agreed.

Nearly an hour later, Damaris exited the family coach just under the hanging sign that declared Madame Morand — Modiste .

Damaris balanced the box holding her gown in one hand and reached for the doorknob with the other, then faltered.

What if this was a bad idea? No, actually, this definitely was a bad idea.

She was playing the fool. Annette would be annoyed.

She'd probably already spoken to her odd-smelling cousin anyway.

Before she could turn away, however, Annette's face popped into the nearby window. She smiled and beckoned Damaris to enter.

Sighing and already regretting her impetuous decision, Damaris slipped inside.

"Good afternoon." Annette's forehead creased as she took in the box Damaris held. "Is something wrong with your gown?"

Damaris glanced around the front room, grateful to see it wasn't busy.

One seamstress was straightening wares, and the curtain was pulled back so she could see straight through the fitting rooms and into the back where the girls sewed.

“No,” she admitted. “I, uh, I just brought this with me because I needed a reason to visit you.” Damaris cringed.

“I mean, I do have a reason to visit you, but to make it more official, I brought this just in case.” Oh, this was ridiculous.

“My mother is napping,” she trailed off miserably. “That’s how I came alone.”

Annette chuckled at the end of Damaris’s speech. “Well, then.” She took the box from Damaris and opened it. “Must keep up appearances.” She pretended to look through the thin wrapping paper. “Tell me why you truly came.”

Annette had been so surprised to see Damaris Dunham outside the shop that she’d frozen for a heartbeat before inviting the customer inside.

Because that’s what Damaris was. A customer.

Even if Annette spent time sketching new dresses that would pair well with her body and her coloring.

Even if Annette wanted to press her finger right against Damaris’s philtrum.

That’s what that divot of the upper lip was called—a philtrum.

Annette could write a poem about Damaris’s deep philtrum and how it made her swoon.

She’d spent so much time thinking about it that she’d had to find an anatomy book to teach her the word philtrum.

Now with Damaris leaning toward her, their heads pressed close over the gown and

Damaris's quiet words, Annette's heart began to pound again. She was so pretty.

"Your cousin left a direction with me. Asked me to encourage you to visit, if you will not invite him to your home. It's...it's on Holywell Street."

Annette's eyes jerked up to meet Damaris's, surprise running through her body. Not so much at the name of the street, but at Damaris's obvious embarrassment in saying it. She hadn't expected Damaris to know that it was where most of the pornography and political pamphlets in London were sold.

Damaris's cheeks pinkened as she met Annette's gaze. After a pause, she said, "He...he said it was urgent. You had to see him before the Westbrook ball."

"That's tonight. It begins at eight o'clock in the evening."

Damaris nodded. "He smelled...odd." She blushed again. "I do not mean to be rude. Rather, I mean that he had a distinct smell of rotten eggs. The only other time I've smelled that on a gentleman is when my father pulls down the dueling pistols he purchased years ago."

Annette blinked, trying to make the connection.

"You know," Damaris whispered, glancing around the front room. "Gunpowder."

Gunpowder. Bourbon fanaticism. Wanting to learn about the guests at the Westbrook ball. Brought to London in a smuggling ship. The pieces were fitting together.

"No," Annette breathed. "Surely not." It was too fantastical to even suggest.

But Damaris's eyes sharpened. "What?"

“I think...” Annette took a deep breath. “I think I need to see what my cousin is up to.”

Damaris straightened. “Very well. Let me call the carriage.”

Annette blinked.

“I, uh, I mean...” she trailed off.

“Damaris,” Annette said softly and slowly, though her heart kicked high.

“Mmmm?” Damaris busied herself with folding the tissue paper back over her gown.

“Would you like to accompany me to Holywell?” Annette held her breath.

Damaris’s gray eyes sparkled. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Annette’s mouth. “Do you need to get ready for the ball tonight?”

Damaris brushed aside the concern. “It’s scarcely two hours past noon. My family will attend the ball at eight in the evening, when it begins.”

Annette took a breath, hoping to clear the dizziness in her head at the prospect of spending so much time with Damaris. “Very well.” She had permission from her mother to take a long nuncheon already.

A few moments later, the young women climbed into the Dunham’s coach.

The coachman raised his brows when Damaris brought Annette along, but didn’t say anything.

But when Damaris leaned her head out the window and called out their destination, Annette could hear the pained silence coming from his perch above.

“Miss Dunham,” he finally said. “Far be it from me to advise you. However, must I remind you that your mother would vehemently disapprove of this outing? Especially without a chaperone?”

“I have Miss Morand,” Damaris replied happily.

Annette’s toes scrunched in her shoes and heat spread through her body at those words.

“Miss Dunham,” the middle-aged man tried again.

“Oh, Beecham,” Damaris said. “If you take us, I will personally make sure Cook doesn’t bake that horrible concoction she calls bread pudding again for the next six months.”

An expectant air fell over the coach.

“And,” Damaris added, “I’m sure you’ll find plenty of window shopping for yourself at the booksellers while we tend to our business.”

Beecham choked so loudly Annette could hear it inside the carriage.

Annette’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped.

After a moment of grumbling, the carriage began to roll forward.

Damaris sighed happily and slid her upper half back into the carriage. She had a wild look in her eyes and the grin that lit up her face was a bit mad, if Annette was honest.

“I can’t believe I said that.” Her gloved fingers flew to her lips. “That was inappropriate, wasn’t it?”

Annette bobbed her head for yes, actually that was shocking .

“I should apologize to Beecham for alluding to, ahem, his masculine, er...the engravings for sale...” she trailed off. “I’ll do it once I can look him in the eye again.”

Annette burst into laughter, tears coming to her eyes and stomach clenching painfully. “Damaris, I had no idea you were such an imp!”

Damaris giggled, hands covering her mouth. “I didn’t either, to be honest.”

When the carriage pulled off the Strand and onto Holywell, it slowed and rattled along.

Damaris drew the window open to peer at the shops lining the lane.

Booksellers, printshops, a public house called The Radical, and plastered signs for political meetings lined the street.

One shop was for staymakers, with a corset sitting in the window as advertisement.

Another shop wasn’t marked at all, and Annette uneasily remembered that all sorts of unsavory printed material happened on this street—not just pornography and radical politics, but forgers and other criminals, too.

The coach halted halfway down the street, drawing some attention from passersby, who were more used to coaches staying on the Strand, which ran parallel.

Mostly men walked up and down the street, but there were a few working class women either going to work a shift in the shops or perusing the windows for new reading material.

Annette watched as Damaris stepped out of the carriage, independent and confident as you please.

She'd never shown this side of herself before, when her parents were around.

Annette found herself more attracted to Damaris than ever.

She scrambled to catch up to Damaris, who would likely not see her as anything other than her modiste or friend.

"Now," Damaris said, studying the signs along the lane. "We're looking for a shop called the Monosyllable."

Beecham erupted in a coughing fit, bending over. He gasped for air. "M-mono?" He didn't complete the word. "Miss Dunham," he said after standing upright again. "I must insist on bringing you home immediately. Your father will have my head on a platter."

Annette hid a smile. She frequently thanked the heavens for her social status: wealthy, but not so wealthy she needed chaperones or debuts before the Queen. It made times like this possible—as long as her mother didn't hear of it.

"I promise not to tell a soul," Damaris soothed. "And we shan't be long. Why don't you go, uh, look at some books? Far over there. The other side of the street."

Beecham straightened his hat and frowned, then walked away muttering about impossible minxes.

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Annette wondered exactly how much Damaris knew about Holywell.

She knew it primarily sold pornography and political pamphlets, but did she understand exactly what that meant?

Annette herself had never been here, though the seamstresses passed around tattered copies of Justine and Fanny Hill , whispering this was where they came from.

Annette had also come across some illustrations someone left behind in the front room that must've come from here.

It was of two women kissing, their skirts hiked high as hands delved in places not even the illustrator detailed.

“Damaris,” she said quietly. “Do you know what a monosyllable is?”

Damaris looked at her, her eyes so innocent and sweet. “A word with one syllable?”

Annette bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. “Yes, but, um, the vulgar definition is a woman’s...sheath.”

It was remarkable how realization dawned slowly over her face. Damaris’s eyes widened first, then her mouth dropped open. Crimson blotches appeared on her neck, then traveled up to her face until she was as red as an apple. “Oh,” she whispered. “That’s why Beecham...”

Annette nodded. She watched as Damaris marshaled herself. The blush took the

longest to disappear, as Damaris was pale. She barely held back a smile, watching the young woman grapple with her education.

“There it is.” Annette pointed three shops down, the only way she could stay calm.

Damaris marched forward, all prim and proper again. Annette had to hasten her stride to keep up with those long legs.

The shop’s two small windows had broadsheets plastered up to the glass, illustrations of the Prince Regent and his latest mistress in an intimate position. Another broadsheet was a popular ballad for sale, and a third was the front cover of a catalogue for what Annette thought might be brothels.

The door opened inward. An old, worn mark the size of a mezuzah pressed into the doorframe, a remnant of when Holywell was filled with Jewish businesses decades ago.

Annette shut the door behind them, allowing her eyes to adjust. A thin, older man stood at a counter, flipping through broadsheets. He glanced at them over the rims of his spectacles, which balanced on the very tip of his nose.

“How can I help you?” he inquired, still thumbing through broadsheets.

Annette opened her mouth, but Damaris’s gasp made her look sharply at her companion.

“Oh my goodness. This is interesting .” Damaris surged forward, reaching for a rough painting tucked halfway behind a bookshelf. Even Annette could tell it was done with hasty brushstrokes, likely made not for high art, but to titill?—

Damaris pulled the canvas out and held it up. “Oh my goodness,” she said in an

entirely different tone.

Annette crept closer to peer over Damaris's shoulder.

The painting was done in the classical style of curvy, naked women reclining with breasts bared and a Mediterranean background, very similar to what Annette had seen in the Montagu House Museum. What wasn't similar, however, were the acts the women were engaging in.

The two women in the foreground were fondling one another's breasts, while the couples in the background frolicked together with embraces and kisses.

Annette blushed despite herself. Seeing something so...

so explicit while in Damaris's company made her body run hot.

It was all too easy to imagine them together, draped in nothing but diaphanous gauze, pleasuring one another under the lazy afternoon sun.

She stepped to Damaris's side and chanced a quick look at Damaris's face.

She was frowning in concentration, turning the canvas this way and that. "Women...some women do these things with their friends?"

Annette choked. "I think some women prefer intimacy with other women rather than men." Images of Damaris's pale, slender limbs tangled around Annette's body filled her mind. What she wouldn't give....

"Well I can't blame them there," Damaris muttered, squinting. "Marriage to a man sounds unpleasant indeed."

Annette choked again. “I heartily agree,” she got out once she could breathe.

“Is she...is she using her mouth on that other woman’s... cunny ?” Damaris whispered.

Based on how sheltered the Dunhams had kept their daughter, Annette was shocked Damaris knew the word.

“Er, yes. It’s a most enjoyable— I’ve heard it’s a most enjoyable experience.

” Annette had had two torrid romantic friendships with fellow schoolgirls that all ended dramatically with weeping and adolescent vows against one another.

A couple of years ago she’d grown close to one of her mother’s seamstresses, but the girl had moved on to another position.

Annette hadn’t been with anyone since meeting Damaris, and oh how she burned.

“Hmmm.” Damaris reluctantly set the painting back on the floor.

“If you’re looking for that sort of material,” the proprietor said, slipping from behind his counter. “I have a book of limericks, like the Two Kissing Girls of Spitalfields , as well as selected portions of Fanny Hill for a few pennies.”

“Thank you, but no.” Annette held up a hand. “We’re here to find someone. Philippe de Morand said he’s renting a room above this shop. Is he here?”

The man gave her a disappointed look, then glanced around the small shop at his wares.

Annette sighed. She could read his face. He didn’t want to tell them anything until

they'd purchased something from him. She opened her reticule to withdraw a penny or two.

"Oh, my," Damaris gasped loudly, darting to a shelf that displayed printed illustrations of all sorts of people entangled with one another. She plucked one pamphlet up and opened it, then made a face. "This is terrible."

Annette's heart sank. She didn't even realize she'd been hoping for anything.

Damaris turned the pamphlet to show Annette.

"Do you see how wrong the dimensions are? I've never seen naked women together, but I'm quite sure no one's arms are that long.

And for goodness sake, does that poor woman even have a spine?

How can she even—" She whipped it back around and pulled the page up to her nose.

"How can she even reach the other woman's, um, bits, if she's twisted around the chair?" Her voice was muffled by the paper.

Annette had the sudden, hysterical urge to laugh. She fought for composure. "We'll take that one," she said, handing over one copper penny.

Damaris whipped the page down and stared at Annette. "You cannot be serious. The inferior quality of this alone!"

The shop owner straightened, smoothing his waistcoat and glaring at her. "It is perfectly adequate for people's uses. I don't suppose you could do better?"

"I could indeed," Damaris shot back, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright. "My art

instructor said I'm the best he ever had."

Annette adored Damaris, but even she didn't think that was resounding praise. "Damaris, did you draw erotic material?"

"Of course not. But I know I could do better than this ." She rolled the pamphlet up and stuffed it in her reticule.

Annette blinked. "You're...taking that home? To your parents' house?"

Damaris grimaced. "Maybe you should take it. Your mother's French."

"My...mother?" Annette was so confused and amused by the twists in the conversation she couldn't keep up with it anymore. This was something she could remember at night in her bed. Annette turned her attention to the shopkeeper, trying with all her might to focus. "Is Philippe staying here?"

He nodded. "Stairs to the room are behind the curtain there. But he's not here at present." Then he scowled. "Are you family? Friends? Tell him when you see him that I'm ousting him in two days. I don't like his friends and I don't like the odd hours he keeps."

Annette nodded. "We'll go upstairs just in case." She tucked her hand through Damaris's curled arm and dragged her away from the inferior artwork.

They climbed the rickety stairs together, the air thick and warm. Annette knocked on the door at the top of the stairs. She held her breath, watching dust motes gather at the bottom of the rickety steps, where the sunlight ended.

Damaris was silent again, and Annette was too nervous to ask what she was thinking.

No one answered the door.

She sighed. “Well, it was worth a try.” He’s not a spy. That was a ridiculous notion.

The door creaked open.

Annette and Damaris looked at one another.

“Did...did you push it open with your foot?” Annette asked.

Damaris’s face went suspiciously blank. “No. Why would I do that?”

Annette stared at her.

“And if I did—which I didn’t—that means the latch wasn’t closed properly.” Damaris began to straighten the fingers on her gloves. “But of course he’s your cousin.”

Annette rolled her eyes. Who was this woman? She’d always known Damaris had something bold and bright hidden beneath all that wool and unfashionable bonnets, but this was more than she had expected. And heaven help her, she liked it very much.

Damaris made a little movement with her hands that Annette took as encouragement. She stepped into the room, pushing the door open.

“Hello?”

Silence greeted them.

The room looked exactly like Annette expected it to: a single transient man renting a

single room from another man above a shop that sold pornography involving all genders. Not clean.

The looking glass above the stand with a wash basin had a crack running through it, and the one lone window, bare of any curtains, faced the wall of the next building.

An old bed with mussed, dirty sheets sat in one corner and a low table filled the center of the room.

An oval rug lay beneath it, one end curled up as if Philippe had kicked it and never smoothed it back down.

Annette resisted the urge to tidy the place. She could not abide such disarray.

“Look at that.” Damaris tiptoed inside and pointed at the table.

Following, Annette peered at the crumpled papers, bowl, and fine black powder scattered across the flat surface.

Damaris swiped a trail of glistening black powder with one gloved finger, then brought it to her wrinkled nose. “It’s gunpowder. I can tell by the smell. I was right.”

Her French cousin. With gunpowder. Asking for details about a ball where foreign diplomats were supposed to attend.

“Damaris,” she said quietly. “I’m going to say something that sounds like I belong in Bedlam. Please... let me speak.”

Damaris nodded, eyes fixed on Annette.

She sighed. “I think...I think my cousin is a scoundrel and is planning to do

something horrible. With this gunpowder.”

“Why do you think he would do such a thing? Does he support Napoleon?” Damaris whispered.

Annette put a hand to her forehead. “I don’t think so. He’s from the Ancien Regime, like my mother. He supports the Bourbons’ right to the throne. No one in my family would lie about that—it’s a matter of honor, from what I understand.”

Damaris blinked in confusion.

“Back in France, before the Reign of Terror, my father was a chevalier and a baron.” Annette held her breath. She rarely brought up this history. Her mother wouldn’t speak of it except on the anniversary of when they fled.

Damaris’s mouth opened in a perfect, pink O . “You’re French aristocracy?” She laughed in disbelief. “My mother keeps talking about meeting nobility and moving in ton circles. And our modiste is a baroness?”

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Annette sighed. “It is a common enough story. We all did whatever we had to for survival. My mother came here with her wedding ring, one necklace, me, and the clothes on our backs.” Her mother refused to talk about the causes of the Revolution, nor how the baron had been targeted by his tenants.

After years of thinking it over, Annette decided she didn’t want to know her family’s history.

It had been wiped away by blood, and now she was an English girl with a job in London.

As the Reign of Terror had reached every corner of France, so did the spread of violence. While it had started with executing the aristocracy, it soon spread to every layer of society until the butcher feared the baker, and even Robespierre himself was guillotined by his former compatriots.

Damaris shook her head. “I’m sorry, I know that. I heard the Duchess of Westbrook’s cook was a chevalier with his own demesne over a score years ago.” She hesitated. “I’m so sorry you went through that at such a young age. If...if you ever wish to speak on it, I am willing to listen.”

Annette managed a wan smile of appreciation.

“Back to the matter of import. My family is aristocratic, and they all hate Napoleon for declaring himself the Emperor when we all know who is the rightful king of France. So if my cousin is stirring up trouble, it would be in the name of the Bourbons, not Napoleon.”

Damaris's gloved fingers skated over the loose papers.

"Annette." Her voice came sharper than she'd ever heard.

"I think he's building a hand grenade." She picked up two letters written in French.

"Those are instructions for a grenade, correct?" Hand grenades had once been popular on the battlefield, and both women had seen paintings of them at a museum.

Annette took the page with a shaking hand. "It is," she confirmed. "He must be corresponding with someone. Surely he's not spying alone." She held up another piece of paper, which had Napoleonic propaganda scrawled across it with watery ink.

Damaris glanced around the room. "Your cousin is the worst spy in London," she remarked. "Look how easily we discovered this."

"A grenade...at the ball tonight?" Annette glanced over the other letter.

"Right here is the direction for the Westbrook townhouse in Mayfair. As well as notes on the servant livery and people who might attend." She glanced up at Damaris.

"But England is fighting against Napoleon. Why would he threaten his allies?"

Damaris leaned in, their foreheads touching as she glanced over the list. Then she pointed. "The diplomat from Russia. Napoleon and Russia currently share an alliance. Perhaps he wishes to target any Russians attending the ball?"

"To destabilize the alliance? Blame Napoleon for the attack, so it seems like the French have betrayed them?" Annette rubbed a temple, thinking it through. "I suppose it makes sense."

“We need to tell someone.” Damaris took the letters out of Annette’s hands and set them back exactly how she’d found them. “Perhaps the duke?”

Annette laughed. “We’d never see him. We’d be lucky if we spoke with the butler.”

“A grenade going off at a ball means we have to try,” Damaris said.

Annette nodded. “Let’s go, then. We only have a few hours.”

Once back in the coach, Damaris glanced at Annette sitting across from her. The rolled-up pamphlet of erotic imagery filled her reticule, poking at her hip through all the fabric. The terribly drawn images sprung to her mind. She’d be thinking about those for weeks.

Curiosity dug its claws in Damaris, and she opened her mouth. Then shut it. Too inappropriate. Keep your questions to yourself. But perhaps if I ask it in a delicate way... She opened her mouth again, then shook her head and snapped her mouth shut and glanced at the floor.

“What?” The amusement lacing Annette’s tone made Damaris glance at her. “Do you have something to say?”

Damaris hesitated, then it all came out in a rush. “The women—in the pamphlet. And the bad painting. I—I’d never thought, never imagined women could do those things.” She blushed. “I know I’m sheltered. I just...you did not look surprised.”

Annette’s expression grew serious, though Damaris thought she could spy a smile lurking in one corner of her red mouth. “No, I was not surprised.”

“Because you’ve seen these images before,” Damaris hazarded.

Annette nodded slowly. “Partially.”

Damaris blew out a breath through her teeth, wondering how far she could push before she offended her new friend. “Because...of other reasons?” Her heartbeat pounded in her ears.

Laughter danced in Annette’s eyes. “Perhaps. What are you asking?”

No, Damaris couldn’t outright ask that question. She tried another method, her hands close to trembling for some strange reason. “How...how common do you think these thoughts and feelings are in women?”

Annette shrugged. “I know not. I can say I’ve known several women who preferred the company of their own sex rather than men.”

Damaris nodded, mind reeling. The thought of kissing a woman didn’t seem distasteful. Life with a woman, rather than marriage with a man, didn’t make her cringe. Maybe...maybe that explained all the odd feelings in her body when she was at the finishing school and saw a pretty girl.

“Ask,” Annette dared.

Damaris flinched. “Hmm?”

“Ask me. I can see it on your face—you’ll die of curiosity if you do not.”

Damaris wetted her lips with her tongue, using it as an extra beat to form the question. She took a breath. Ignored the slippery feeling twisting through her stomach. “Are you... have you...ever, erm, acted in ways like the women in the drawings?”

Annette wasn't even trying to hide her amusement now. She grinned. "Yes, yes I have."

Damaris gawked at her. "Is it...pleasurable?"

Annette chuckled. "I certainly think so. I don't tell many people, for obvious reasons, but yes, there are plenty of women like myself, who enjoy the intimate embrace of another woman."

Damaris's cheeks heated for some reason. "Oh...that's lovely. Well done, you."

Annette was laughing at her now. Drat, why did she always have to be so awkward? "Thank you," Annette said seriously, though mirth shone from her eyes.

Drat, she was making a hash of it.

"If my parents—" The words came out before she could finish even thinking the thought.

"Yes?"

"If my parents weren't so set upon using my marriage to raise their social standing, perhaps I'd have time to explore that, too."

Annette sighed. "They are quite serious about it, aren't they?"

Damaris grimaced and nodded as the coach rolled through the bumpy London streets.

"I don't understand why, though. My father is a well-respected solicitor.

Perhaps the most prestigious solicitor in London.

We traveled to Bath and Brighton last year on holidays, so I know his financial situation is strong.

” She blushed, realizing she was talking about money matters with someone outside the family.

“Being a solicitor is a trade. He can’t become a barrister—that’s a vocation for gentlemen, and he’s too old to begin a new career anyway.

But my parents always aim high, seeking greater acclaim and reputation.

“We’ll never be part of the ton . Not while my father prepares their legal documents.

” Damaris shrugged to hide her frustration.

“My mother almost bagged a baronet’s third son for me, but that failed.

I know I’m lucky to be invited to these private balls, but they’re never enjoyable to me.

Perhaps if I could focus on the dancing rather than looking for a man, I’d relax and like them much more.

I wasn’t heartbroken when I was jilted,” she added suddenly, as if that was important for Annette to know. For some reason.

Annette’s eyes flickered with emotion.

“What about you?” Damaris asked, embarrassed she’d shared this much.

Annette cleared her throat delicately. “My mother said she doesn’t expect me to

marry.

She can be very strict, sometimes harsh.

But I know that's because she went through some difficult experiences.

She was the daughter of a chevalier, used to living a life of luxury.

The only thing she was expected to do was have babies.

Then everything happened, and she had to rebuild our lives.

She sewed all hours for years to keep us from starving.

And I'm grateful to her for it." Annette paused, thinking.

"She's not a warm, demonstrative mother by any measure.

But she knows I prefer women, and she has never castigated me over it.

In fact, she said it was better that way because she didn't create this modiste shop to hand over to my future husband.

She wants it to be my inheritance, so if I never marry, all the better. "

Damaris nodded. "You and your mother have led fascinating lives."

Annette blushed. "Oh, I'm not sure about that."

Before Damaris could ask another question, the coach ground to a halt. This time she waited for Beecham to climb down and open the door.

“Miss Dunham,” he began. “It’s nearly the fashionable hour. Your mother is almost certainly awake and wondering where you went.”

“I promise we’ll be quick,” Damaris said, slipping out of the coach and past the man. “We’re just delivering this message and then we’ll be done.” She stepped out of the way so Annette could follow her.

“Perhaps I could deliver the message,” the poor coachman offered. “You two can wait here in the coach and I’ll speak with the butler.”

Damaris shook her head. “We’re out now,” she pointed. Then she linked arms with Annette. “Come, let’s hasten.”

But it did not go well. Damaris hadn’t been able to argue her way past a very tall, very supercilious footman, and they had eventually returned to the coach, dejected.

“May I return Miss Morand back to her shop and you home?” Beecham asked eagerly.

Damaris glanced at Annette for answers.

“Should we try Bow Street Runners?” Annette asked.

She brightened. “Excellent suggestion.”

“You should do the talking,” Annette prodded, unusually quiet. At Damaris’s questioning glance, she added, “I’m French. I’d rather not be dragged into this more than I already am.”

Damaris nodded briskly, pretending confidence she didn’t feel.

Now that they'd left the upstairs room and the scent of gunpowder had faded, she began to feel a bit silly about the whole thing.

Did they really believe Annette's cousin was a provocateur and spy, sent to drive a wedge between Napoleon and his Russian allies?

It made the most sense out of everything, unfortunately. Damaris had heard her own father say that the alliance between Napoleon and the Russians could end the war in Napoleon's favor. But at the same time, Napoleon didn't share power well, and it could all come crashing down around his ears.

Damaris relayed the new instructions to Beecham, who merely sighed, shut the carriage door, and climbed back into the box.

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N either of the young women had been to Bow Street before, let alone the Runner offices.

When the coach rolled to a halt in front of the stately home on Bow Street, Beecham offered to walk with them inside.

But even in front of Bow Street it wasn't a good idea to leave a carriage unattended, so the young women went in alone.

The hustle and bustle of Runners and the general London public filled the room. Noise echoed off the walls, a distracting cacophony. A counter at the back of the room had several clerks waiting to take statements from people.

Almost everyone in the office was a man—both the clerks and the people reporting crimes or seeking assistance.

Annette and Damaris stayed close together, lifting their chins against any scrutiny they received.

“I don't suppose as a daughter of a baron you've done this sort of thing before,” Damaris murmured in Annette's ear.

Annette laughed. “No. And you, as the daughter of a solicitor, are you any more familiar with the justice system?”

They giggled while they waited in line. Once they stood before a clerk, Damaris took charge.

“Mr. Foster,” she greeted, reading the man’s name on the badge. “I must report a crime—or, rather, a crime about to happen.”

The man, in his late twenties, just picked up his fountain pen and waited for her to continue.

“There is a young Frenchman who recently arrived, and he’s been hovering nearby her—our—shop and asking questions about our customers.” She cleared her throat. “He intimated that he’d arrived via a smuggling vessel.”

“Miss,” the man cut in. “We’re the Runners. We’re not the excisemen.”

“I am aware,” Damaris said, refusing for once to be cowed. “Please allow me to continue.”

The man gestured for her to keep speaking.

“He asked many questions about a ball hosted by the duke and duchess of Westbrook. And when I visited his rooms today, to see why he wanted this information, I saw gunpowder and a letter with instructions on how to create a small explosive, like a hand grenade.”

The man pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, and looked up at them. “Miss, are you aware of how old-fashioned hand grenades are? Now we have proper cannons; few armies carry them.”

“Yes, sir,” Damaris said, frustration squeezing her chest. “I understand that. But what we saw was a much smaller mortar that could be made by one person and deposited somewhere, close enough to a group of people that some would die if it went off.”

He frowned at her. “This seems highly unlikely. Why would this happen?”

“He’s a Frenchman who despises Napoleon,” Damaris said.

“I believe he wants to plant an explosive device that will harm both English and Russian members of Society. I believe the explosion will appear to be caused by agents of Napoleon to harm the British nobility present at the ball tonight. But when it also hurts the Russian diplomatic party, it could break the alliance between them.”

The clerk set his pen down. “That seems overly complicated.”

Annette stirred beside Damaris, then clasped her hand and squeezed.

Damaris, fortified by the touch, pushed back. “But it is possible. A Frenchman with access to gunpowder should be investigated, do you not think, sir?”

“The Duke of Westbrook will never allow Runners in his home, especially on the night of a ball. Do you know what those types are like? Awfully high on the instep.”

Damaris grimaced and nodded, seeing from the corner of her eyes Annette also agree with sympathy.

“I understand sir, but I am genuinely frightened for the safety of the most powerful and noble people in our country. Would it not look terrible if there was an attack and people were wounded—or worse, died—and it came out later that this statement did not merit at least an inquiry from Bow Street?”

He frowned at her, as if wanting her to know he was being maneuvered. “Very well. I’ll include this in the day’s reports. Give me the address of the room he’s let, as well as the man’s name, and someone will investigate tomorrow morning.”

“But that will be too late!” Annette burst out.

Damaris subtly pressed her foot against Annette's, reminding her to stay quiet. Although she had no discernible accent, Annette was right to stay in the background and not draw anyone's attention. Damaris didn't want any of Cousin Philippe's trouble to envelop Annette and her mother.

"It's already nearly five of the clock in the afternoon," the man pointed out. "You should have come to us sooner if you wished us to act. Look, I'll place this at the top of my pile. But I make no promises."

Damaris and Annette sighed as one.

"Very well," Damaris said reluctantly. "We understand. Thank you, sir."

The man wrote down all relevant information, including Damaris's name and direction. She hoped and prayed that her parents would never find out about this report or the afternoon jaunt before it.

With drooping shoulders drooping and stifled sighs, the young women turned and left.

"What are we going to do?" Damaris whispered, clutching her reticule tightly to her chest. "That wasn't a promising response."

Annette blew out a breath between pursed lips and shook her head, her bonnet swaying with the movement.

Damaris suppressed the urge to touch those pursed lips and smooth them back into their perfect rosebud shape. "I'm sorry it's so difficult."

As they left, Damaris asked Beecham to return Annette back to the modiste shop.

He grunted as if to say, finally she shows some sense , and helped them into the carriage.

Once inside, Annette untied her bonnet and flung it aside, sighing heavily. “It’s useless. Perhaps Philippe isn’t doing anything anyway.”

Damaris sat beside Annette this time rather than across, hoping she could provide emotional support. She thought carefully. “Do you truly think so?”

Anette frowned and looked out the window. “I know not.”

“I think it’s still worth pursuing. What if he succeeds? What if innocent people die in an explosion tonight? I’m supposed to attend that ball. And if Bow Street or the War Office track him down, what happens to you? You’re French and you’re his cousin. Would you be imprisoned, too?”

Annette blanched and looked at Damaris. “I hadn’t thought that far.”

Damaris leaned back against the squab. “I’m attending the ball in just a few hours. Perhaps I can track him down?”

“What about anyone he’s working with? What if he’s just handing the device off to them?”

Damaris took a breath. “I think you should come with me.”

Annette blinked. “What? How?”

The coach swayed as the Beecham drove them around a corner.

“I can get you in as my lady’s maid, perhaps.

” Damaris shrugged. “We’re not there as honored guests.

We’re just there to make the ball into a crush.

So the duchess can crow about how many people attended.

You can talk him out of his terrible idea, and then we can have a lovely evening in the retiring room.

I’ll sneak in some champagne and pastries. ”

Annette smiled, revealing the lovely gap between her teeth. “I love pastries.”

“I thought so,” Damaris returned with a smug smile, leaning toward her friend.

Annette reached out and took Damaris’s hand in hers, squeezing gently. “Thank you,” she said softly. “For today. For helping.”

“Of course,” Damaris said, suddenly unable to breathe. She looked at their gloved fingers and wished she could remove the fabric between their skin. The images of the women in the pamphlet rushed back to her, as well as Annette’s admission of her own experience.

Would kissing Annette be as good as Annette claimed it could be? Damaris was curious. She’d never even been curious about kissing a man. Nothing about it appealed to her, just like kidney pie.

But Annette was like meringue—light and sweet and drenched over something sharp with flavor that made you sit up and take notice. Damaris loved meringue. Maybe...maybe she should try kissing Annette. Maybe she’d hate it. But maybe she’d love it.

Annette's thumb stroked the back of Damaris's hand. "You're a good friend," she was saying, turning toward Damaris.

It was now or never.

Damaris had to know. She'd lose her nerve if she waited any longer. She grabbed the back of Annette's neck and leaned in, pressing her lips to Annette's.

It was...amazing. It was outrageous. It was sharp and soft and everything under the sun—Damaris couldn't begin to describe it.

Her bonnet was shoved back by the impact.

She'd smashed into Annette so hard her lip had cut against one of Annette's teeth.

But her lips were just as plump as Damaris had imagined.

"Umph," Annette got out.

Damaris jerked away, grabbing her bonnet and putting it firmly back in place.

"I—I do apologize," she said. "I beg your pardon." Her cheeks heated.

"I should have asked. Or warned you. Or something. I...I do not know how it is done. I've never received a kiss from a man, let alone initiated anything myself. "

Annette stared at her, eyes wide and mouth open in shock.

"Oh, I haven't ruined our friendship, have I?" Damaris wrung her hands. "Am I a bad kisser? Or do friends not kiss each other? Which part have I failed in? And can you ever forgive me?"

Then Annette's expression began to change. Delight slowly spread across her face, and her lips curved into a knowing smile. "You kissed me."

Somehow Damaris's cheeks grew hotter. Her hands flew to cover the blush she knew was spreading there. "I apologized!"

"Would you like to learn? How to initiate a kiss with a woman?" Annette practically purred.

Damaris suddenly felt as if the carriage had turned on its side.

Everything seemed upside down, especially her stomach.

And the heat in her cheeks was worsening—and spreading down her body, making her breasts ache and something twist deep inside her.

This was—this was—this might be too much.

But it was her chance, her one chance, before they parted and Annette remembered she was just Damaris Dunham, solicitor's daughter, with nothing very interesting or appealing about her.

She bit her lower lip and nodded.

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Annette's smile grew. "Well, then." She slid her hands off Damaris's lap and pulled her gloves off, one finger at a time.

Damaris's heart thrummed in her breast, and she felt rather lightheaded.

"You start like this." Annette draped the gloves over her knee, then turned back to Damaris. First she untied Damaris's bonnet, never breaking eye contact.

Damaris was frozen under her gaze. She stayed motionless, letting Annette gently tip back the bonnet.

Then Annette framed Damaris's face with both warm, dry hands.

Damaris nearly shuddered at the touch of Annette's fingers. Was this why she'd felt so odd when Annette measured her for dresses? Is this what she'd been craving, and hadn't even known it?

Annette's eyes flickered between Damaris's mouth and her eyes.

And then she smirked, eyes gleaming, as if to say, get ready for our adventure, and gently brushed her lips across Damaris's.

One, twice, thrice. It was so achingly soft, just the barest brush of skin, that Damaris's heart seized.

It was agony, knowing she was being kissed, but only just.

A little moan slipped from Damaris's lips. Before she could be embarrassed, though, Annette kissed her fully.

It was everything Damaris had wished kisses could be—warm, soft skin, gentle breath, but hard pressure. She kissed back hesitantly, molding her lips to Annette's and closing her eyes.

Annette firmed her lips, slanting them across Damaris's, and then kissed harder, deeper.

Damaris's heart leapt and resumed beating now, speeding up as Annette's fingernails dug into Damaris's cheeks.

Annette parted her lips and stroked the seam of Damaris's mouth, adding just a slip of wetness to the passion that made Damaris's core respond with similar wet heat.

The kiss went on, awakening Damaris's body.

Arousal spread through her, starting in her chest and blossoming outward.

She sensed everything—the rumble of the wheels over cobbles outside, the swaying of the coach and firmness of the squab beneath her.

The rasp of their skirts brushing against one another, Annette's sweet, floral scent Damaris hadn't smelled before getting this close, and the faint calluses on her fingers from years of needlework.

The wet, smooth texture of her tongue as she slipped it between Damaris's lips and coaxed them open. She tasted glorious.

Damaris's legs tightened, creating pressure in response to the ache growing between

them. And still the kiss continued.

Their tongues tangled—something Damaris had never imagined enjoying—and her hands fluttered in the air between them, shaking with nerves and desire.

Annette released Damaris's cheeks without pause, caught her hands, and placed them on her own shoulders.

Damaris gripped Annette's shoulders through the muslin, relishing the warm muscles and the intimacy it created. She opened her eyes to see Annette's closed, black lashes against her cheeks. Enraptured—for her , for Damaris Dunham.

The carriage halted with such a sudden jerk the two women nearly slid right off the leather squabs.

Damaris grabbed her bonnet before it hit the floor, then laughed awkwardly. She smoothed her hair, looking everywhere but Annette.

Annette chuckled too, placing her bonnet back on and knotting the ribbon quickly. "Well?"

Damaris could feel herself blushing, drat it. "That was, um, lovely. Thank you for the education. It was most...educational."

Annette chuckled again, her nose wrinkling. "If you want an education again, let me know." She reached for the latch.

"Wait!" Damaris set a hand on Annette's bare arm.

Annette glanced back at her.

“Are you...attending tonight? To stop your cousin?”

Annette sobered, nodded. “I’ll show up as a lady’s maid for the retiring room, like you suggested. As long as you can make sure I get in. Around half eight?”

Damaris nodded. “I’ll look for you.” She smiled.

“See you shortly.” Did Annette, too, feel like the world had tipped over and resumed its axis in a new position?

Did she do this sort of thing with girls all the time?

Was Damaris the only one who felt like her heart would beat out of her chest, that she was simultaneously tipsy and flying and frightened and—maybe that was too many descriptions.

Damaris had just never had so many emotions bubbling inside her that it felt like her skin would burst. But she couldn’t show it.

She couldn’t show her infatuation or fear or delight—because this was probably just a favor Annette offered since Damaris was her new friend.

No, Annette couldn’t feel the same way about Damaris.

She was French and cultured and sophisticated and very, very experienced with other women.

Annette grinned, her bonnet somehow already crooked. “Au revoir.”

Annette kept her composure until she stepped back inside the shop, floated across the front room, slipped into a fitting room, and pulled the drapes shut. Then she looked in

the mirror and squealed, hands on her cheeks. “I just kissed Damaris Dunham!”

She hoped she’d been a good teacher. She hoped Damaris would want to do this again.

Damaris was always so cool and self-assured.

Annette shouldn’t let on she’d been wanting to do this for months.

Maybe she could suggest another learning opportunity?

But no, not right now. She needed to focus on the danger ahead: her cousin’s threat of violence tonight.

It felt like every experience she’d had, every seam she’d sewn, had been drawing her closer and closer to Damaris Dunham until her dreams and her hopes were basted together and maybe, just maybe, there’d be a lot more kissing in her future.

Annette sighed and rested her forehead against the looking glass. “Kissing later,” she told herself. But a smile showed up in the mirror anyway.

Four hours later

“I am still quite cross with you.” Mother’s voice filtered through the haze of Damaris’s thoughts.

Damaris blinked, taking in the majestic sight of the Westbrook’s Mayfair townhouse—all six stories.

It took up half its side of the square, for goodness’ sake.

A line of torches showed the way for carriages to drop off passengers in front of the entrance.

Red brick, dark in the declining light, was covered tastefully with ivy and vines that had likely been growing for fifty years.

It was beautiful—a place Damaris couldn't quite believe they'd received an invitation for, rather than paying a shilling tour in the London off-season when the aristocrats were away.

"Damaris!" Mother's voice was shrill.

"Hmm?" Damaris replied faintly, counting the number of carriages between them and the front door.

"Listen to your mother," her father's gruff voice broke in.

Damaris blinked. "I beg your pardon, Mother?"

"You should never go anywhere without a chaperone!"

Damaris barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes in time. What had gotten into her? One kiss with the modiste's daughter, and suddenly she'd turned into a rebel.

"Mother," she said respectfully, "I'm sorry I worried you.

I went to Madame Morand's modiste shop because I was concerned about a piece of my gown.

" She glanced down and smoothed the skirt, secretly admiring the velvet ribbon Annette had sewed on.

The rich, royal purple was absolutely her color.

She'd put the dress on and gasped in the mirror, wanting to kiss Annette all over again.

Somehow this extra bit of ribbon brought the color out in her cheeks and made her eyes sparkle.

Instead of the sallow, bland look that most of her dresses drew out from her, this was actually... attractive.

Mother pursed her lips. "Still. You should've brought a maid."

"Clara was beating the carpets!" Damaris protested. "And I certainly couldn't pull Cook away from a hot oven, could I?"

"We need more footmen," Mother grouched. "Just having a contract with the agency for a few manservants whenever we host dinner parties isn't enough."

"Yes, my dear," Father said tiredly, looking out his window now.

Damaris sighed. They weren't nobility. They weren't even gentry.

She couldn't even claim a noble bloodline, like Annette could.

The daughter of a baron! Damaris still couldn't get over it.

The Dunhams' blood was as common as a streetsweeper's, even though her father had obviously built upon his father's business and made a small fortune.

She didn't need a chaperone: she wasn't an heiress, she didn't need to prove her

virginity beyond all doubt, no scandal sheets knew she existed. It was preposterous.

When they finally entered the home of the duke and duchess and after they'd shown the footmen their invitation, Damaris tried not to gawk at the marble, gold-gilt, and luxurious trappings.

The stairs up to the first floor were lined with deep red carpeting, and the wallpaper was all extravagantly colored peacocks.

Large mirrors were displayed artfully to capture and reflect as much light as possible, keeping the foyer and first flight of stairs well-lit but without too much heat.

The ballroom was on the first floor, down a wide corridor, and was really several connecting drawing rooms that had been cleared and the walls pulled back to make space for dancing.

Mother gripped Damaris's hand, her body vibrating with excitement. Father had been to the duke's home a few times for business, but never Damaris or Mother.

Candlelight mixed with expensive gaslight glinted off the pine floors. Landscape paintings dotted the walls. The exterior wall was primarily floor-to-ceiling windows with several open doors to let in fresh air.

The Dunhams glanced around. Father strode immediately back into the corridor to look for the card room. Mother spied the punch bowl in the corner, being arranged by footmen in green livery with blue trim and silk white stockings.

In one corner sat half a dozen chairs in a semicircle with music stands and instrument cases scattered around. Only two men sat there, dressed in formal black with silver buckles on their shoes, playing a slow, sweet tune on their violins.

As the room filled up, Damaris remembered she would play the wallflower tonight. As fine as her gown was, it would be no match for the women of rank. She went to finishing school in Bath: her roots were in trade, and it would be obvious.

But Annette would be here soon.

The grenades. A thrill of fear skittered down her spine at the thought of an explosion here, around this many people. Damaris sidled around the room, looking in every nook and cranny, and found nothing.

She glanced at the clock. Half eight.

Damaris slipped away from her mother, back toward the main entrance. She had to slide between more and more people, as the home became crowded. Damaris paused to check behind curtains, in decorative vases, and on shelves by every place she walked. And found nothing.

Perhaps we misunderstood. Damaris breathed a sigh of—hope? Relief? Embarrassment? She didn't know. Or perhaps he's changed his mind, because it is indeed a foolish plan.

Regardless, Annette was coming. Her heart beat faster as she neared the entrance, where she'd stand near the door to watch for Annette's arrival.

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The kiss was front and center in Damaris's mind now, and she couldn't stop thinking about Annette's warm, sweet breath or the slight calluses that had slid against Damaris's cheeks.

She passed a group of four gentlemen and two ladies speaking another language—French but with a Russian accent, perhaps.

The oldest and most prominent was a middle-aged man with a large nose, short neck, and thick, white hair on his head and a pale blue sash across his chest. His wife walked behind, wearing a fashionable dress that appeared far more elaborate and with unusual trim to Damaris's eyes.

She also wore the pale blue sash. The young men were all smartly dressed, though one or two had the beginnings of a mustache.

They wore fitted navy military-esque coats with gold epaulets and fringe on their shoulders.

The last, a young woman, wore a typical ballgown of short sleeves, high waist, and gauzy skirt, but with a sort of red head-covering that framed her forehead.

You're not safe, Damaris thought, watching them pass. Not one glanced at her. She looked over her shoulder, hoping to see Annette's cousin, but didn't spot him or anyone else that might be suspicious.

Damaris put a hand to her stomach, forcing herself to take a slow and steady breath.

She took up a post between two tall, potted ferns, ignoring the footman at the entrance who gave her odd looks.

The fringe of her pink shawl, the lovely one that now reminded her of Annette, brushed against the skin of her arm between the gloves and the sleeves.

She stroked it, dreaming of the way Annette's breath had mingled with her during their kiss.

The clock ticked, and Damaris grew more nervous with every passing second. She rubbed her gloved hands against her skirt, hoping she wasn't sweating in the gloves too much.

Finally, just when she began to wonder if Annette wasn't coming, she spied her just inside the glow of the torchlight. Damaris took a breath and stepped forward.

Annette wore a cloak of rich, deep green trimmed in cream lace.

She always looked so sophisticated. Damaris had always thought the sharp pang in her chest at the sight of Annette was because she was jealous—Annette was far prettier, curvier, and more fashionable than Damaris would ever be.

But...now she realized it wasn't jealousy.

Instead, it was admiration and more than a little yearning.

Besides, Damaris had her gown trimmed in the purple velvet ribbons, and that made it beautiful. Several women's gazes snagged on the gown in appreciation—an entirely new experience for Damaris.

Annette pulled the hood of her cloak down, revealing curled hair shining in the light.

She smiled and said something to the footmen.

One footman stepped in Annette's way, holding up a gloved hand. His white powdered wig shone brightly in the night. The two began speaking, and Damaris realized it was time to step in.

She cleared her throat. "Miss Morand is here to assist me. She's been hired as a lady's maid for the evening."

The footman turned, taking a more deferential stance. "Miss, I was asking for her invitation."

"I am here to serve at the event," Annette told him, smiling but insistent.

Damaris doubted Annette had ever served at a ball. Nor would she. The lords and ladies in the next room might see her as a skilled tradesperson—which she was—but she was going to inherit one of the most successful businesses on Bond Street, the most prestigious shopping street in the country.

The footman reluctantly stepped out of the way, letting Annette up the last of the stairs and into the house.

Damaris's cheeks ached, and only then did she realize she was grinning from ear to ear. "Come." She resisted the urge to hold out her hand.

Annette dipped into a quick curtsy, taking off her cloak and handing it off to the other footman, then followed Damaris.

"Oh, thank goodness you've come!" Damaris kept her voice low as they went up the stairs to the first floor. She tried not to ogle Annette's full bosom now that she could see how her bodice framed it so prettily, the two mounds rising above the lace

neckline in a tantalizing fashion.

“Have you seen anything suspicious?” Annette asked, unaware of Damaris’s amorous thoughts.

Damaris shook her head. “I’ve only looked everywhere save for the card room and the last room in the corridor. There was no place to hide a hand grenade. I think...I think it may be a false alarm, Annette.”

“I suppose we’ll have to search those rooms to make certain,” Annette said with a sigh.

“If we find Philippe, everything should sort itself out,” Damaris said hopefully. “But perhaps there is no cause for dismay.”

Annette let out a shaky breath. “Have we become an espionage ring of our own? Gathering intelligence and attempting to stop an attack on British soil?”

Damaris rubbed her forehead and laughed. “Or we’re both mad and it’s all in our heads.”

The main corridor of the house had largely cleared of guests, and the strains of a waltz drifted from the open double doors of the ballroom. A footman hurried past with empty glasses on a tray, hardly sparing them a look.

Annette and Damaris scanned the corridor for Philippe or anyone that looked out of place.

“Look for a footman whose livery doesn’t fit,” Annette murmured. “If my cousin has an accomplice here, he probably wasn’t hired legitimately, and is using someone else’s livery tonight.”

Damaris nodded. She peered behind flower arrangements, then walked down the hall toward the other rooms that had been prepared for guests to rest away from the bustle of the ballroom.

Annette opened the door at the very end as it was as good a place to start as any, poked her head in, then motioned for Damaris to join her. “No one’s here, but it’s worth searching.” She smiled. “But if this is empty...then perhaps my cousin went home with his grenades.”

Damaris followed, hope lightening her body, then shutting the oak-paneled door behind them.

Annette had struggled to keep her eyes off Damaris’s lovely sylvan form since she stepped into the townhouse.

It made her nearly— nearly , mind—regret their kiss that afternoon.

Right now she needed to focus on finding a grenade, stopping Philippe, and saving her mother’s business.

She did not need to be thinking of Damaris’s soft moans, her long fingers, or her sparkling eyes.

She did not need to be wondering if Damaris wanted to kiss again, or if she considered her curiosity settled.

Damaris was wearing her pink shawl. The one Annette had spent hours bent over, making sure each leaf and rose in the embroidery was perfect. Did this mean Damaris truly did think of Annette while wearing it now, instead of that clodpole from Surrey?

Annette squeezed her eyes shut, shook her head, and put the matter from her mind.

When she opened her eyes, she surveyed the room they would search.

Be thorough, and then it might be over, she told herself.

The small drawing room was tastefully set up with a Grecian style in mind: a few classical busts of Greek women sat on the mantle, and the room had a bright, airy quality to it with soft draperies, pale green walls and ceiling, and mirrors that reflected the light from the fire across the room.

Two settees were positioned with one in front the fire, the second further back, nearly drenched in shadows.

“You take that side of the room,” Annette murmured. “I’ll take the other.”

Wordlessly, Damaris nodded and began to poke around the shelves on either side of the fireplace. After several minutes, she turned and sighed. “We’re looking for a needle in a haystack. Perhaps we should’ve tried harder to learn more about Philippe’s gunpowder and any friends of his before...this.”

Annette gestured helplessly. “We ran out of time.”

Damaris opened her mouth, but before she could speak, laughter sounded just outside the door. It sounded like two women.

“Shhh, stop, you!” one of the women exclaimed in something that was supposed to be a whisper but definitely wasn’t. “Wait until we get inside.”

The door knob jiggled.

“We’re not supposed to be here!” Damaris mouthed, pointing at Annette’s simple gown that signified her role as lady’s maid.

Annette's heart jumped in her chest. She stared at Damaris, eyes wide and face paling. Annette jumped behind the settee nearest her, dropping to the ground and letting the shadows cover her. She peered under the settee, between the legs.

Damaris snatched up her skirts and raced across the room, rounding the settee and dropping to her knees just in time. They both hid on their hands and knees, side by side.

The door opened and two sets of dainty footsteps stumbled into the room, punctuated by feminine giggles. The door shut and the lock clicked.

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“Now,” one of the women purred. “Where were we?”

Oh, god. Annette knew what that tone meant. She’d used it on her former paramours.

The other woman laughed. “Hurry up! Palmerston will leave the card room soon, and he’ll wonder where I went.”

Kissing noises filled the room. “Bother your old husband,” the first got out between what sounded like hot, drugging kisses. “I was promised a kitty to pet and I plan to pet it.”

“Oh, yes,” Lady Palmerston moaned.

Damaris and Annette met one another’s surprised glances.

“What do we do?” Damaris mouthed.

Annette shrugged. She knew Lady Palmerston. She’d visited the woman’s townhome for a fitting last year. Annette never would’ve guessed the lady was lusty enough to make those noises.

“I’ve missed that tongue of yours,” the lady gasped over the sound of hastily lifted skirts and dropped slippers.

A conflicted look crossed Damaris’s face. She made to rise.

Annette’s arm shot out, clamping down on her shoulder. Absolutely not .

Damaris gave her a frustrated look and gestured vaguely in the direction of the two lovers. “Privacy?” she mouthed. Her shawl slipped from her elbows and pooled on the floor behind her.

Annette grimly shook her head. Be silent.

If they popped out now, they’d surprise Lady Palmerston and her lover badly enough that Annette and Damaris would likely be tossed from the ball.

They’d just have to very quietly endure the experience, and Annette would pray that she’d never have to perform another fitting for Lady Palmerston again.

As the sounds and scents of sex filled the room, Annette tried not to think of how desperate she was for a lover’s embrace. Especially if it was Damaris’s. She glanced from the corner of her eyes at her companion.

Damaris squirmed beside her, clearly awkward and uncomfortable with the intimacy on the other side of the settee.

Annette felt badly for her. She’d gone through quite a journey in one day—learning sapphic passions existed, having her first kiss, and now exploring voyeurism, albeit against her will.

She reached over and put her hand over Damaris’s, partially to calm her emotions and partially as a reminder to be absolutely still and silent.

Damaris froze, eyes trained down on the edge of the Aubusson carpeting.

The paramours knew each other well and had missed one another very much, for both women found their crisis quite quickly. There was a lull, with sweet whispers and the sound of gentle kisses drifting across the room.

Annette fought back the envy rising in her chest as well as the desire twisting tighter in her belly.

She hadn't thought she'd be so affected—it seemed impolite, really.

But she'd vastly underestimated the suggestion of passion while hiding beside the object of her infatuation.

And Damaris's hand was still beneath hers.

She pressed her lips together to keep her breathing from growing heavy and loud.

The kissing grew faster, louder, more urgent. One woman gave a throaty chuckle. "You're never allowed to visit your sister in Hampshire again. I cannot live without you."

Instead of replying verbally, the other woman must've done something quite clever with her mouth, because the first woman gasped and moaned.

Annette's core throbbed, and she couldn't help but imagine a different scenario, where it was Damaris lying on the carpet in a private room, the firelight glinting off Damaris's loose tresses, gowns designed by Annette tossed and thrown across the room, and Annette's hands caressing the lithe, nubile body quivering beneath her.

Damaris eased back on her knees, settling into a kneeling position with her legs folded beneath her. Slowly, she looked at Annette.

And by god, was she a sight. Her eyes were dilated so wide Annette could scarcely see the color. Her cheeks were flushed, and her bosom rose in quick, shaky thrusts.

Annette blinked. Oh. Oh. Damaris wasn't scandalized. She was aroused. The idea of

her arousal made Annette's own smoldering desire flame to life, and she could feel the wetness in her drawers. "You liked this," she whispered.

Damaris nodded, somehow looking shy and nervous but very, very intent. In the background, the sounds of passion grew louder.

A wild, dangerous idea took hold in Annette's mind.

She raised her eyebrows and reached out, stroking Damaris's cheek with the back of her fingers.

"Shall we?" she mouthed, leaning in close enough that Damaris would feel the warmth of her breath and the women on the other side of the room would never hear them.

Perhaps Annette should be more worried about the grenade. But they were trapped, and she didn't want to lose this chance.

Damaris nodded eagerly, then glanced around, her gaze darting to Annette and then away.

Annette, realizing that Damaris didn't know how to begin or even ask for Annette to begin, smiled and took charge. She slid closer, closer, closer still, until their breath mingled. She rubbed soothing circles into Damaris's shoulder. Relax, she urged.

Damaris's shoulders relaxed, and she smiled. And then she kissed Annette—hard and fast and oh so eager.

It made Annette burn. She cupped Damaris's neck and pulled closer, reveling in the feeling of their bare skin against one another.

Their tongues met, touched, stroked, and caressed.

Slowly, Annette shifted her weight to gently nudge Damaris backward.

Her other hand slid along the hem of the pooled gown to find those silk stockings, then grazed her fingertips up to Damaris's calf, helping her straighten her legs.

A floorboard beneath her creaked, making the other occupants of the room pause.

"Did you hear something?"

Annette and Damaris froze, nervous energy and arousal pumping through both of them.

Another kiss. "No, darling. Probably someone in the corridor."

Annette didn't breathe until she was certain the women had resumed their lovemaking.

Soon Damaris lay on the ground, turning her head to the side to accommodate her hairstyle, and watched Annette.

The pink shawl drew the blush out in her cheeks.

Annette's heart thrummed with happiness at the sight of that shawl.

She stroked the fringe with her index finger, and Damaris's smile blossomed, as if she knew what Annette was thinking.

Annette's heart ached from the tender joy that smile caused.

One of the women moaned loudly, and the sound coupled with the look in Damaris's eyes made Annette go nearly wild with desire.

She braced herself on one elbow and leaned over Damaris, resuming their kisses and caresses.

She dipped a finger inside the neckline, skimming the tops of Damaris's breasts.

"I dreamed about this," she murmured against the pulse in Damaris's throat.

"As I stitched the gown, one night I dreamed I touched you, too." The pressure between her legs built as she became more aroused.

She slid her fingers below the edge of the corset and chemise, fitting them in only a way a modiste could slip past fashion, and stroked one of Damaris's nipples.

Damaris gasped, arching up against Annette, rubbing their bosoms together. "That's lovely," she whimpered.

Be quiet! Annette put a finger to her lips, giving Damaris a warning look. Damaris blushed and bit her lips in apology.

Annette glanced over, in the direction of the other women.

But they were too wrapped up in their own affair to hear Damaris.

She turned back to Damaris, heartily wishing they had time and a bed, and she could show her all sorts of wicked things to do with fingers and tongues.

"You are very lovely," she whispered in her ear.

She licked the tension from Damaris's neck, then pressed a kiss to the bare skin above her breasts.

She pulled back enough to reach Damaris's stockinged ankle.

Such a slim, pretty ankle. She stroked upward, smiling down at the desperate want in Damaris's eyes.

Damaris bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

Annette tried not to chuckle as she let the fabric of the gown gather around Damaris's waist as she reached the edge of the stockings and encountered a garter and then bare skin.

Damaris's eyes flew open and her hand jerked downward to grab Annette's wrist, freezing her in place.

Annette halted, staring at Damaris in surprise. What had gone wrong?

Damaris blushed, and this time it had nothing to do with the women finding their satisfaction over by the hearth. She looked...embarrassed. "Please don't...please don't think badly," she whispered.

Annette gave her a quizzical look.

"Just...promise not to look at my garters."

Annette didn't need to look; she'd already seen the undyed scraps of linen.

Mrs. Dunham had an appalling understanding of fashion, which usually wouldn't be much of an issue save for two things: She wanted to gallivant in high society and

marry her daughter off to the most fashionable people in London, and Damaris deserved to feel pretty in her clothes. Because she was pretty.

She cocked her head in a silent question. Why not?

“Because,” Damaris murmured. “You’re...a modiste and you’re French and you’re a French modiste. And beautiful,” she added, lifting her hands to embrace Annette.

Annette smiled into her lover’s hair. So are you.

Before Damaris could contradict her or get them off-track, Annette swirled her fingers high on Damaris’s exposed thigh, then ran them through Damaris’s maidenhair.

Annette slid her fingers down through the wet, plump folds of Damaris’s sex.

Already so wet. She stroked and patted, rubbed and glided her fingers, ignoring the way her own sex ached for attention.

Slowly she inserted one, then two fingers inside Damaris’s cunny. She was glad she’d recently trimmed her nails, since she’d been tatting delicate lacework that morning. Damaris’s sheathe sucked her fingers right in, tightening around them as she let her growing pleasure drive her.

“That’s it,” Annette whispered, stroking back a wisp of flyaway hair from Damaris’s forehead.

She pumped her fingers, then fluttered them, then curled them upward in a beckoning motion.

She carefully watched Damaris’s expression, learning what every twitch and sigh and

eye roll meant.

She would make this experience so damn wonderful Damaris would have to return to her for pleasure in the future. Again and again.

Damaris bit back a moan, drawing one leg up so her knee pointed to the ceiling and her foot was flat on the ground.

Annette added her thumb, stroking that darling little button hidden by the glistening blonde curls at the top of Damaris's cunny.

Damaris's responsive gasp filled the room, but they were both too far gone to care if the other women heard. Annette couldn't hold back her smile. She pressed again, adding slightly more pressure, and then dragging the pad of her thumb up and down.

Damaris gripped Annette's shoulder with one hand, clutching it so tight Annette thought she might pop a stitch in her shoulder seam. Those breathy gasps, so silent but so expressive, would be the death of Annette. And then Damaris's crisis overtook her.

Annette had never seen anything more beautiful in her entire life than Damaris's widened, dilated eyes, her flushed cheeks, the shocked smile on those pretty lips, nor the way she sagged back into the carpeting with a drowsy, half-lidded look of content and lazy happiness.

Annette swallowed, nearly unable to bear the sight.

She carefully withdrew her fingers, then brought them up to her lips. Slowly, without breaking eye contact, she licked Damaris's honey off them.

Damaris's eyes widened further.

Annette grinned around her fingers, delighting in surprising her lover. She clenched the walls of her own sheathe, wishing that they had time for her, too, to experience a little death.

The sounds on the other side of the settee were slowing, the women murmuring to one another between gentle kisses.

The clock on the mantle suddenly chimed a quarter after nine.

All four women jumped.

“I need to go,” Lady Palmerston said breathlessly.

The other woman groaned. “Are you quite serious?”

“Yes, my love. I told you that I don’t wish for Palmerston to note my absence on the same night that you’ve returned to town. He allows my dalliances, as he calls them, but he’s very concerned about keeping up appearances, you know.”

More grumbling echoed across the small room, followed by the sounds of clothing being adjusted and slippers put back on feet.

A loud smack of an affectionate kiss. “Come now. You promised a waltz to one of those military men anyway.”

Annette held her breath, her entire body tensed as the danger was nearly over. It felt like it took an eternity, but finally the couple left the room.

The soft click of the door echoed as loud as a gunshot across the room.

Annette sighed. “They’re gone.” She gingerly released Damaris’s hand.

Damaris smiled. “You did that? For me, as a friend?”

“Not as a friend, no,” Annette said, sharper than she intended. When Damaris flinched, she added in a gentler tone, “Because I like you and I received pleasure from this, too. I like the taste of you on my tongue,” she added.

Damaris somehow grew even more red at that.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position, and Annette had to back away to grant her the space.

“What about you?” Her shaky hands reached for the tapes of Annette’s plain servant dress.

“I would like to learn how to please you.” She licked her lips, and Annette nearly groaned with need at that little pink tongue darting out, as curious as Damaris herself was.

Her body ached and throbbed with unsatisfied passion.

She grabbed both of those hands, pressing them to her lips.

“Yes, please, yes. But we shouldn’t have taken the time we did for this.

To be thorough, we should look one last time for Philippe. ”

Damaris grimaced, smoothing back any stray hair from her face, and the world returned with all its pressing responsibilities. “Oh. Right. Him.”

Annette helped Damaris straighten her clothing, then they stood and left the room, albeit reluctantly. She could only hope that they’d have the opportunity soon, because

the thought of Damaris's slender fingers slipping inside Annette's hidden, soft places made her so needy she couldn't breathe.

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Damaris took a shaky breath as she peered into the smoky card room. She pressed a hand to her heart, willing it to stop racing. She was still affected by Annette's nearness.

"See anything?" Annette's hot breath on the nape of her neck made Damaris shiver.

God, what was she going to do with this woman? Damaris would never, ever forget the gleam in Annette's eyes and the shimmering wetness on her lips after she finished pleasuring her.

Damaris snatched up her thoughts, not so much scattered as all flying together in the wrong direction, and shoved them brusquely back into order. "No." She sighed and slipped back, away from the open door. "Though I do see a few of the Russians playing bridge at the farthest table."

"Perhaps we should try the ballroom?"

Damaris let Annette lead her back toward the crowded room. "Do you think perhaps we might've got it wrong?"

"Hmm?" Annette turned her head to glance back at Damaris, and ran straight into a footman. "Oof!"

Damaris looked up at the man in green and blue livery in surprise—and found the familiar sight of Philippe de Morand, Annette's cousin. She gasped.

Philippe, looking like he'd stepped out of an old fashion plate in his breeches,

stockings, and powdered wig, appeared as shocked as Damaris felt.

His jaw dropped, emphasizing his narrow chin, and his watery eyes looked as big as saucers.

“I beg your pardon,” he said quickly, his expression shuttering as he tried to regain composure.

Annette craned her neck to look up and her entire body stiffened as straight as a poker. “You!” She grabbed his wrist and held on tight. “You are coming with us right now. Have you planted the grenade yet?”

Philippe’s eyes narrowed and he scoffed. “What grenade?”

“Your gloves have black smudges at the tips,” Damaris pointed out, heart hammering in her chest. “You must’ve already handled it. How did you get in here? In livery, no less?”

He rose to his full height, puffing out his chest. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Damaris’s patience snapped. She stalked forward, grabbed Philippe’s other cuff, and propelled him into a nearby alcove.

The three of them crowded around a marble bust of Julius Caesar, and Damaris was grateful their skirts weren’t so full as to knock the delicate wooden stand over.

“You are worrying your cousin sick, do you hear me?” Damaris hissed.

“You arrive out of nowhere, spouting all sorts of political nonsense about the Bourbons and Napoleon and the Russians, then make secretive, suspicious comments

about a ball her clients will attend, and then we find out you have gunpowder and iron shells and descriptions on hand grenades, of all things. If you do something violent and idiotic, the government will find out, and they will discover your relationship with Annette and her mother. And then her business will be ruined. But.” She leaned in close. “I shall not let that happen.”

Philippe’s eyes grew big. So did Annette’s.

“So,” Damaris summed up, anger making her chest and her face hot, “you are going to tell us exactly what you plan to do with those hand grenades and I swear, if you harm any person here then you will face justice from the British Crown!”

Philippe looked down at Annette. “Who is she, exactly?”

Annette stared at Damaris with shining eyes, her mouth parted. “A dear friend,” she murmured, the look on her face making Damaris go hot for an entirely different reason. “A very wonderful, very dear friend.”

Damaris had never expected anyone to look at her like that.

She’d never realized how badly she’d hoped someone would look at her like that.

Quickly, before she melted on the floor like a pat of butter, she glared at Philippe.

“We saw instructions on your table. This plot to harm Russians while pretending to be Napoleon sympathizers will only backfire on you. What do you have to say for yourself?”

He seethed. “You went into my room?”

Annette rolled her eyes. “You left your direction with Damaris, you imbecile.”

“Yes, and a fat lot of help you turned out to be! We’re cousins. You’re the daughter of a baron. You should be patriotic for once and help the cause to defeat Napoleon.”

Annette’s jaw clenched. “By what, endangering the lives of a handful of Russian diplomats and everyone else around them at a ball hundreds of miles away from the war?”

“Sacrifices must be made,” he said loftily. Rather too loftily, Damaris thought, for someone with a crooked cravat and a coat so large he was drowning in it.

“You didn’t murder the footman this belongs to, did you?” Damaris asked suspiciously.

“Of course not. What do you take me for, a barbarian?”

“Forgive me if I doubt your morality, sir,” Damaris bit out, “since my understanding is that you plan to murder innocent people tonight.”

“Where are the hand grenades?” Annette demanded, patting down his coat. “They’re not in your pockets. Have you set them? Or are you tossing them into the ballroom? And who came up with this blasted plan? I’m quite sure you didn’t.”

Philippe’s expression changed suddenly, going from angry to smug.

The hair on the back of Damaris’s neck prickled. Before she could turn, a heavy hand landed on her shoulder.

Her heart jumped, and alarm flared inside her body. She tried to turn, but the arm was strong enough to hold her mostly in place.

“Trouble, Philippe?” The baritone voice, a perfect neutral London accent,

reverberated with an unspoken threat.

Damaris was able to turn enough to see the arm and black coat of...one of the musicians? She gazed upward and caught the large Adam's apple and the growing stubble of a thin young man.

"I have told Bow Street everything," Annette said sharply. "They will find you. If people are killed tonight...you must know you shan't survive this. Please." Damaris turned back to see Annette's expression turn pleading. "Please take away the hand grenades and anything else you have."

Philippe ignored his cousin, staring up at the man behind Damaris. "I've placed mine in the pots. Ready?"

"What are we doing with them?"

Damaris stiffened, and the hand clamped on her shoulder pressed down even harder.

"Toss them in a closet. And hurry. My break is almost over, and the violinist I'm sharing a stand with is a right prick."

Damaris tried to fight the man off, but he grabbed her wrists and held them tightly behind her back, then slapped one large hand over her mouth. He jerked her around and she tripped, trying to stay on her feet.

Annette gasped. "You are not going to trap us in this townhouse right before you plan to light hand grenades, are you? Philippe, you are the worst cousin I have ev—" Her words cut off, though her muffled, outraged still slipped out despite Philippe's hand.

Rage tore through Damaris. She'd never been so manhandled in her entire life. Her parents were in the ballroom! So were dozens of innocent servants, society members,

and foreign dignitaries. And Damaris had just found Annette. Would they even survive the night?

No. She wouldn't stand for this.

Damaris had never considered herself a stubborn or brave person, but a woman had to have her limits, and apparently she'd found hers.

Damaris twisted in the man's arms, stomping on his shoes and biting at his hand.

The foot-stomping hurt her more than him, since he was in buckled shoes and she wore dancing slippers.

But it startled him enough that she was able to whirl and knee him in the groin as hard as she could.

The musician uttered a strangled curse and bent over, clutching at his male parts. He sagged against the wall with a whimper.

"You bitch!" Philippe jerked backward, shaking his hand in the air.

Annette turned and planted her hands on her cousin's chest and shoved. Philippe stumbled backward, and Julius Caesar wobbled on his perch. Annette glanced at Damaris, fear written across her face, and stretched out her hand.

Damaris grabbed at it and they ran down the corridor together like the devil was at their heels. They caught up their skirts with their free hands. Damaris lost a slipper along the way but didn't look over her shoulder. She just kept going.

Footsteps thundered behind them.

“You take the ballroom,” Annette panted. “I’ll take the card room.”

Damaris nodded as she paused at the door to the card room. Before Annette could dart away, Damaris brought their clasped hands to her mouth and pressed a fervent kiss to the back of Annette’s hand. “Be careful,” she demanded.

Heat flashed in Annette’s eyes. “And you also, my love.”

They parted, and it was all Damaris could do to force her feet to move again.

They haven’t lit the grenades yet, she told herself as she grabbed the door frame to the ballroom and propelled herself around the corner and into the room. We have time. Except she was quite sure Philippe and his accomplice were right behind her.

How long did it take grenade fuses to burn? What if the musician had several in his pockets or violin case with matches? And what did he mean, his weapons were in pots?

Damaris’s mind whirled. She refocused on the goal: keep everyone safe.

That should help her when her fears pulled at her mind like vicious birds ripping bread.

She stumbled past a group of people laughing and chattering, ignoring their surprised murmurs as she looked around wildly for any hiding spots.

The musician chairs and stands huddled in one corner of the room, mostly empty save for one man who was gulping water.

Still on break, then. The French doors to the terrace outside were still flung open, and most people were getting weak lemonade or chatting in small clusters by artfully

displayed potted trees and ferns.

Her eyes narrowed on the large decorative pots, which rose up to her thighs. She threw a frantic look over her shoulder, then skirted the chairs to her left and ran as inconspicuously as she could toward the first fern.

“Damaris?” Her mother’s voice cut through the air. “Where have you been?”

God, had it been less than an hour? Damaris felt like her life had turned over twice in the span of this time. She focused on the fern, a lively green thing with feathery leaves, and the Etruscan-styled ceramic pot with black painted figures dancing around the sides.

Her heart pounded. She brushed past two young women, both wearing the pale palette of girls in their first Season.

“My goodness, what was that?” one whispered to the other. “Did someone let in their governess?”

“Absolutely no manners,” the other one replied with a scolding, nearly mocking tone. “Who does she think she is?”

Damaris didn’t have time for their opinions. She just wanted everyone to leave the ball alive. She reached the edge of the large pot and plunged her gloved hands into the fronds, parting them and digging in the dirt a few inches below the rim.

“What on earth?” a man inquired as he passed by.

Damaris ignored him, too. Sweat gathered beneath her arms and on her forehead. She only had a moment, likely less, before Philippe’s accomplice, the musician, lit another hand grenade she wouldn’t be able to stop in time.

Her right hand knocked against something hard.

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She sighed with relief and pulled out an iron shell the size of two small bowls placed together. It was heavier than expected, and she could hear the rattle of sharp objects and loose powder inside as she withdrew it. A wet rag smelling of oil hung from a small hole in one end of the sphere.

As long as no one lit it, the hand grenade was practically harmless.

But if there was a lit match anywhere, the fumes from the oil alone could ignite trouble. She thought of the card room, full of cigars and smoke, where Annette was searching, and swallowed hard.

Damaris had to stay focused. She held the iron sphere in one hand, letting the folds of her skirt hide it as she raced to the next pot.

Fear tightened her throat. What am I supposed to do with these? The open doors caught her attention. Beyond the doors lay the terrace, and below the terrace was a town garden with a fountain surrounded by lovely candles. Water.

Damaris was digging the second grenade out from between the fronds when her mother found her.

“Damaris Dunham,” she whispered fiercely, fluttering a fan in front of her mouth to hide her scowl. “What are you doing?”

She didn’t bother to face her mother. “Something that must be done, Mother.” Damaris had no idea how her mother would react to the knowledge that hand grenades littered the ballroom.

“Get your hands out of the dirt,” Mother hissed. “You are acting like you are four years old. I don’t even want to see your soiled gloves.”

Damaris got her fingers around the second shell and yanked it free. The fern shivered at her rough treatment. She looked up and counted five more pots. Surely not all of them had a grenade, did they?

“Damaris! Damaris, look at me while I am speaking to you.”

She could feel the displeasure radiating off her mother’s body. “Yes, Mother. But you see, I need to take these outside.” She turned, still trying to hide the shells at her side, but they were made of dark iron and of course her mother spied them immediately.

“What are you doing?”

Over the murmur of voices, another sound snagged at Damaris’s attention. Heavy, thundering footsteps entered the ballroom and halted.

Damaris whirled and saw the large, tall man in the musician’s outfit standing in the doorway, face red and eyes bulging. He scanned the room and his eyes lit on Damaris.

You , the spark of recognition in his eyes accused. Rage filled his face.

Damaris’s knees knocked together.

His fists balled at his sides, and he stalked toward her, ignoring the looks of outrage on the guests or the hand waving from the musicians gathering in their spot to resume their music.

The closer he got, the more Damaris could see the murder in his eyes.

Fear clogged her throat, and she couldn't breathe. She whirled, cutting her mother off mid-sentence, and tore through the crowd toward the open door with two unlit hand grenades.

She cut through a group of mothers and their daughters, then clipped the side of an elderly gentleman, nearly sending him sprawling on the wooden floor.

"Stop right there!" The musician's voice boomed over the hum of the ball.

Damaris's shoulders tightened, and she could practically feel his eyes like daggers in the back of her skull. She ran as fast as her skirts would allow.

Gasps and exclamations of dismay rippled through the room, and Damaris knew he was gaining on her.

The warm, summer night air hit her face as she stumbled out onto the terrace, nearly hitting the stone floor. Damaris righted herself and tore down the steps. The rumble of the crowd was behind her now. The fountain loomed ahead, two basins tall and illuminated with flickering candlelight.

She threw both grenades as hard as she could at the fountain, and they landed with terrific splashes.

Damaris stared, chest heaving, as she realized what she'd accomplished. A smile stretched her cheeks wide. She turned and ran up the stairs, skirt in her hands. Black smudges covered her gloves and skirts, but she didn't care.

A handful of people stood near the door, their backs to her. Shouts and cries of alarm filled the room. Damaris cut through the first two layers of the gawking crowd, not bothering with manners anymore. She shoved past anyone in her way.

The center of the ballroom was bare of people—everyone had gathered at the edges of the room with shocked expressions. A few stared at Damaris with disgust, but most watched the middle of the room—where the musician stood with a grenade in one hand and a lit match in the other.

Most guests looked unable to believe their eyes.

A few probably still didn't know what he was holding—hand grenades were rather old fashioned pieces of warfare, never seen off the front lines.

Most of the people in the ballroom were young debutantes, older matrons, or elderly men resting their legs.

The ones brash enough to jump into the fray would be in the card room, Damaris realized, or servants carrying trays from the kitchen.

And Annette had just barged into the room, stumbling nearly on top of the spy-cum-musician. Damaris's heart stopped.

“Vive Napoleon!” the man shouted, both hands raised.

Damaris didn't wait to see if the fuse had been lit. She saw Annette struggling to find her balance just behind the man, and knew she had to act. She charged forward, ready to slam into the man.

Annette escaped from the card room, eager to find Damaris and get away from the pandemonium she'd caused.

Four gentlemen from a table of whist had taken control of the grenades Annette had found.

Another table had seized Philippe as he shouted and struggled to free himself or attack Annette—she wasn't sure which.

The Russians just watched with wide eyes, not realizing yet they were the primary targets.

Thankfully, no grenades had been lit in the card room.

Philippe still screamed in French, shouting obscenities toward her and the men who had tackled him.

Three footmen, faces reddened, poured into the room, trying to take stock of the issue and subdue the problem before anyone accused them of not doing their jobs.

Annette ran from the room, several men right on her heels as they realized, finally, that the ballroom and the rest of the guests might be in danger, too.

It took only a few seconds for Annette to run down the hall and turn into the ballroom, but she thought she might perish from worry. If she could not put her own two eyes on Damaris right now to ascertain she was well, she thought her heart would give out.

Annette flew into the ballroom, panting even though she'd not run far at all. She tripped on someone's shoe and stumbled, nearly knocking into the musician who held aloft both a match and a hand grenade.

Back up, back up! But she slid on the slick wooden floor, bare of chalk from the dancing. She didn't want to be beside that grenade if it blew. She caught herself and looked up just in time to see Damaris fly at Philippe's accomplice.

"Damaris!" Annette screamed, hands flying to her mouth.

Damaris, eyes determined and jaw set, struck the musician with her entire body, making him stumble.

His lit match flew from his hands and hit the ground, extinguished in an instant.

The iron shell dropped onto the floor and rolled toward a cluster of women, who screeched and backed away.

One woman swooned, and the unlit grenade slowed to a stop right against her waist.

She...she pushed him away from me. At great danger to herself. Annette stared in shock.

Footmen and the butler thundered in behind Annette, swarming both Damaris and the musician. For a moment, all Annette could see was a host of blue and green with moving arms and disheveled white wigs. She shoved against the crowd to get to Damaris.

Two footmen hauled the musician to his feet. Instead of screaming and spitting his anger, the man rose with his face pale and lips pressed tightly together. Hatred burned in his eyes.

The butler, a man of advanced years with a shock of white hair that now drooped over his forehead from his exertions, had pulled Damaris back onto her feet and supported her—or detained her—with his hands on her shoulders.

“Oh my god, Damaris!” Annette finally made it between the last barrier and skidded to a halt at the young woman’s side. “Are you hurt? Why would you do that?” The shouts and cries of the people around them didn’t matter. She only had ears for Damaris.

Damaris smiled faintly, her hair askew and pins slipping out with each movement. The lovely purple ribbon at her bodice had come undone, and her skirts had gunpowder splotches all over it. “I stopped him. I think I stopped him, Annette. He would’ve killed you.”

Annette scowled to hide the fear still coursing through her body. “Never again. He could’ve killed you .” A world without Damaris’s bright smile was not a world in which Annette wanted to live. The thought struck her like an arrow to the heart.

Damaris reached for Annette’s hand. “It happened so fast, I didn’t even think. But if I could do it all over again, I would.”

Why would you do that? Annette wanted to wail.

Annette and the butler ushered Damaris over to the side of the room, and Annette tried to shelter her from prying eyes.

“We need to get you to the retiring room.” She looked over her shoulder to see men taking control of the situation, both guests and servants, as if they’d known of the threat all along and subdued it all by themselves.

“Good heavens, Damaris!” Mrs. Dunham’s voice cut through the bustle and panicked clamor of the crowd. The angular woman somehow slipped into place and glared at the butler until he released Damaris. “What on earth have you done?”

The butler made his apologies and left them.

Annette blinked at the woman. “Your daughter is a heroine, madam. She saved us all.” She saved me, that glorious, wonderful woman.

“Oh, I’m not sure about that.” A blush rose to Damaris’s cheeks, and Annette had

never wanted to kiss Damaris more in that moment. “I was probably quite foolish, truth be told.”

“Don’t ever do that again, I beg of you.

” Annette crushed Damaris into an embrace, fear and anger and relief churning inside her.

The realization that she had come this close left Annette gasping for breath, even after the danger had passed.

“My nerves could not bear it. Especially because I am at fault for dragging you into this trouble.” Her hands still trembled from watching the scene unfold, and she knew she’d have nightmares about it.

“You foolish, lovely girl.” Her eyes burned with unshed tears.

Damaris’s eyes shone bright. “Annette,” she whispered, “I?—”

“And you are?” Mrs. Dunham’s voice was as sharp as a whip.

Before Annette or Damaris could respond, a deep cough sounded somewhere behind Annette.

“Pardon me.” The deep voice rang with authority and the expectation of deference.

Annette reluctantly let go of Damaris and stepped out of the way.

A man in his mid fifties with a head full of silver hair and a narrow, aquiline nose had approached. His superfine coat was a perfect black, and a ruby stickpin glinted in the exquisite folds of his snow-white cravat.

“Your Grace,” Mrs. Dunham gasped, dropping into an obsequious curtsy.

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Annette took an inadvertent step backward. This was the Duke of Westbrook. Host of the ball and owner of this townhouse. She and Damaris copied Mrs. Dunham, though not dropping so low as to make their knees ache.

“You are...” The man’s voice trailed off as he eyed Damaris, attempting to place her.

“Damaris Dunham, Your Grace,” Mrs. Dunham supplied helpfully. “And I am Mrs. Dunham. My husband assists you by providing legal advice.”

“Ah.” The duke’s eyes cleared. “My solicitor. Yes. My secretary mentioned he’d invited the family.”

Annette wondered if she should leave. She didn’t belong here—she hadn’t even been invited, unlike Damaris. But just as she took another step backward, Damaris shot her a frantic, pleading look. So Annette stayed.

“My butler tells me that these two men seem to have infiltrated my home in an attempt to...set off hand grenades around the room?”

Damaris nodded.

“And you stopped this one over there.” He glanced over his shoulder, at the musician who was being led away by several grim-faced footmen and a sweating butler.

“We did let Bow Street know, Your Grace,” Damaris said. Her mother sucked in a breath at that revelation. “They said they would begin their search, um, tomorrow.”

The duke didn't even blink at that. "That information is most helpful." He sighed. "My girl, I believe you—and your companion here"—at this, he cocked an eyebrow at Annette, who smiled beatifically at him—"have stopped what could've been a bloodbath."

Annette watched him carefully and realized the calm was just a facade—beneath it, this man was raging.

As well he should, she thought. French monarchists had infiltrated his ball and attempted to assassinate several Russian diplomats, uncaring of how many British civilians would be harmed in the process.

She would wager that not many in the political half of the ton even liked the Russians that much, considering they currently had an alliance with Napoleon.

An older man, huffing and puffing, bumped Annette out of the way to butt into the conversation. She reeled, mouth dropping open.

"Father," Damaris said quietly, glancing between him and Annette. "I'm sorry," she mouthed to Annette.

"I beg your forgiveness, Your Grace," Mr. Dunham began to bluster. "I have just come from dealing with the situation in the card room, and I?—"

"Your daughter did us a service tonight," the duke cut in smoothly. "I will tell my wife, who most assuredly will want to know the details of what happened. But with all the excitement, it's probably best for all of my guests to return home, hmm?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Yes, yes, of course, Your Grace." Mr. Dunham's face turned a mottled red.

“I suppose it was a good thing after all that I hired your firm,” the duke added.

He glanced at Annette, then at Damaris. “You should probably get your daughter home. Once the scandal sheets get hold of this, I’d hate to see what they’d do to a girl’s reputation.

” He grimaced. “Although she’s done admirable work tonight, notoriety never helps a woman. ”

Mrs. Dunham blanched, likely realizing that her hopes for an advantageous marriage might be going up in flames as they spoke. “Quite right, Your Grace.” Her hands fluttered at her husband, making shooing gestures. She curtsied again, dragging Damaris down with her.

Annette, vaguely amused, followed suit.

The duke swept into a perfunctory bow, then turned back into the crowd, likely to find his wife.

The Dunhams grabbed Damaris and began escorting her to the crowded door.

“Wait!” Damaris called, trying to dig in her heels.

Overwhelmed, Annette followed behind them.

The doorway was crowded, as was the corridor.

Half the guests were leaving at once and the other half wanted to pour into the ballroom and watch what remained of the spectacle.

It made for a mad crush. Annette had to fight to stay on Damaris’s tail, and she

doubted her parents even noticed her.

It took a good ten minutes to reach the ground floor.

“Stay here,” Mrs. Dunham ordered her daughter, setting her against the wall beside a life-size portrait of a hunting scene. “I’ll get my wrap.”

Mr. Dunham disappeared to order a footman to call their coach. At least a half a dozen other men were attempting to do the same thing.

In the mad dash, Damaris and Annette had a level of anonymity they wouldn’t have otherwise due to the rushing about.

“Are you well?” Damaris’s eyes roved Annette’s face. “Philippe didn’t harm you, did he?”

Annette shook her head, body still tingling with nervous energy.

“It was close, but as soon as the men knew what was happening, they were quite happy to grab him and hold him down.” She reached out and gently grasped Damaris’s elbow.

“And you? I was terrified when I saw you charge that man with his hand grenade. You could’ve been hurt!

He could’ve already had the grenade lit! ”

Damaris flashed a wan smile. “Perhaps I’m the worst spy in London, not Philippe. But we are both hale and unharmed, sweeting.”

Annette had already opened her mouth to argue when she recognized Damaris’s

words and her mind stuttered to a halt at the use of sweetening . “Damaris,” she whispered. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d lost you. Or seen you hurt.” She swallowed. “Do you know how precious you are to me?”

Emotion lit Damaris’s eyes. “Am I? Truly?”

Annette bit back a laugh. Or a sob. She didn’t know the difference anymore.

“I think I fell in love with you the day you walked into the shop and your mother ordered that hideous mint pelisse for you.” The way her eyes had sparked, even when her mother controlled everything, told Annette there was something hiding behind all of that drab drapery.

Damaris’s eyes turned watery, and she bit her lip. “You mean that?”

“Of course I mean it!” Annette exclaimed. “You think I count the days until the duchess’s next fitting? Or have to close my eyes while Lady Palmerston disrobes down her chemise? No, it’s only you, my love.”

“Annette,” Damaris whispered, putting so many emotions into the name that Annette couldn’t parse them out.

Annette took a deep breath. She never thought she’d have this opportunity.

She never thought that Damaris might be open to these feelings.

She’d certainly never thought she’d witness Damaris risk life and limb.

“Damaris,” she said hopefully, slipping her ungloved hand into Damaris’s hand, covered in a blackened and torn glove.

“You are everything to me. I’ve yearned for you.

” She squeezed Damaris’s hand, heartened by the fact that Damaris hadn’t pulled away.

Instead, she was staring at Annette with an intensity that stripped Annette bare.

“I know these feelings are much newer to you than me, and I cannot ask for more than a deep and intimate friendship, but please know that I adore you. I want a romantic friendship with more romance than friendship, and tonight I will go to sleep with the memory of you coming apart in my arms in that drawing room.” She wanted to say more.

She wanted to describe a future she saw, with Damaris and Annette living together, waking together, breakfasting together.

Leaning on one another as confidantes and intimate partners and life companions. But she held herself back, just barely.

Damaris blushed. “Annette, I am flattered. I...” she trailed off, searching for words.

Annette’s hope flagged. She knew she couldn’t expect Damaris to know her own mind yet. For goodness sake, they’d only kissed the first time earlier today. But to Annette it had been so much longer.

Her heart cracked. “If your sentiments are not the same, please do not force words that do not truthfully reflect what’s in your heart.”

Damaris looked startled. “No, Annette, please. I do , I just?—”

Mrs. Dunham appeared out of nowhere, slipping through the jumbled crowd before

Annette or Damaris could realize it.

“Come, Damaris.” She wrapped a hand around Damaris’s arm.

“Your father has the carriage. We must depart.” Her eyes slipped to Annette, as if only just seeing her now.

“Thank you, my dear, for your attentions to my daughter during this troubled time. She has a nervous disposition.”

Annette blinked. “Mrs. Dunham, I?—”

The older woman’s eyes sharpened. “I recognize you. Aren’t you the daughter of our modiste?”

Annette nodded.

“What are you doing here, child? Does your mother know where you are? Surely you do not need to supplement your income by playing lady’s maid at a ball.”

“I am three and twenty,” Annette told her. “And I am just leaving now. I will speak with my mother myself.” She watched Mrs. Dunham’s lips purse, then her gaze turned away, as if dismissing Annette as something not worth worrying over.

“We’re leaving, Damaris.” Mrs. Dunham’s voice turned sharp.

“But I haven’t finished speaking with Miss Morand,” Damaris protested, her eyes turning apologetic even as her mother propelled her away.

“We must leave before people recognize who you are,” Mrs. Dunham hissed, pushing through the crowd with her daughter in her wake.

Annette watched her love disappear. Her heart dropped, and she blinked back tears. Why had she ruined everything by speaking of her heart at a chaotic moment like this? Perhaps Damaris would've been more receptive if she'd taken her time.

Sighing, Annette retrieved her cloak and wrapped it around her, then began the short walk back to her mother's home just five blocks away.

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Annette stifled a sigh and shoved a bolt of Prussian blue satin silk back on the rack.

Her heart ached and her mind was fuzzy after the evening she'd had.

Last night, she slipped into bed without fanfare.

But this morning, after they'd opened the shop, she dutifully reported a very short version of events to her mother.

Maman took the news with three hard blinks and yanking on a spool of thread.

"Never," she said, her French accent resurfacing, "ever, put yourself in so much danger again. Especially without my knowledge. What if a grenade had gone off? What if the duke or Bow Street decided you were guilty because you're related to the imbecile?"

Annette hung her head, knowing she was right. She hadn't been a child in a long time, but she certainly felt like it in that moment. "Forgive me. It shan't happen again." She watched the late morning sun slip across their floor.

Maman's face softened. "You did all this because of her? The girl?"

Annette shook her head. "Philippe is my cousin, not hers. But...yes I let myself be carried away by our ideas."

Her mother put a hand on her shoulder. "Little cabbage, I hope she returns your affections. You deserve it."

“I hope so, too.” Annette turned away to reorganize the cut pieces into proper piles in the workroom, only to relive her declaration of love over and over, shame making her face hot and her body sweaty. Distraction wasn’t working.

“Psst, Miss Morand.” One of the shopgirls stuck her head through the velvet curtain that separated the workroom from the fitting area. “Someone’s here asking about you.”

Her entire body prickled with alarm. “Who? Is it a man? Men?” Had Bow Street come to arrest her after hearing Philippe’s side of things?

“No.” The young woman gave her a funny look. “A client. Can’t remember her name, but she’s been in here a few times with her mother.”

Annette’s body prickled with an entirely different feeling now.

Could it be Damaris? What if she’d come to tell Annette she never wanted to see her again?

What if she’d come to very nicely thank Annette for introducing her to the wiles of womanly love, then waltz out of her life forever?

Or what if she was going to tell Annette that she enjoyed their friendship and would overlook Annette’s lapse in judgment last night?

Her hands shook as she rubbed them on her skirts. “How does she look?” Annette asked through numb lips.

The shopgirl stared at her. “Like she’s well dressed? Not angry. I don’t think she’s going to complain about any of the pieces she’s bought from us. Are you—are you quite well, miss?”

Annette shook her head, brushing off the question. She shouldn't have asked the seamstress anyway. It was foolish. She'd just have to find her courage and go see what Damaris wanted.

She hardly noticed the walk through the fitting area. Her eyes were fixed on the parted velvet curtain that led to the front room. Vague murmurs drifted through the opening.

Annette's mind buzzed. She tried to suck in a breath to brace herself in case of further rejection, but her lungs wouldn't cooperate. She forced one foot through the doorway, then the other, and suddenly she was behind the white counter.

Damaris Dunham stood near the counter, bonnet framing her face, with the pink shawl folded neatly in her arms. She wore a deep, nearly russet brown frock with cream ribbon that looked quite fetching with her naturally pale features.

She was speaking quietly with Annette's maman, who stood off to the side with the newest fashion plates in her hand.

"Yes, the war does make it difficult to bring in some fabric," her maman was saying. "Lace from Brussels, for instance. But Spain has some lovely work of their own, so we're working with Spanish suppliers this summer."

Cheerful yellow roses sprouted from a glass vase on the counter, and Annette's hands immediately went to arrange and rearrange them. "Good morning. How can I assist you?" Her voice sounded even, didn't it?

Damaris glanced sharply at Annette. "Oh. Good morning." Her smile wobbled.

There was a long and awkward pause.

Damaris wanted to shrivel in her walking boots, but refused. She had something to tell Annette, and it deserved to be said. She clenched and unclenched one hand, her palms clammy.

“Annette, my darling, Damaris was telling me that her shawl has some frayed edges and she wondered if we could fix the issue.” Madame de Morand’s voice wasn’t encouraging, per se, but a small smile toyed at the corner of her mouth. She knew exactly who Damaris Dunham was, it seemed.

Damaris hoped that was a good sign.

Annette took a breath. “Very well. I sewed the embroidery along the hem.” She opened her palm, keeping her eyes on the material.

Damaris’s breath was audible as Annette carefully unfolded the piece. “Can you fix it? The piece is rather dear to me, you see.” Her tone came fretful, more so than she’d intended.

Annette looked up sharply. “I’ll do my best.”

Damaris loved that shawl, so she hoped Annette truly could repair the damage.

The shawl unfolded on the counter, and Annette looked along the edges to see what had happened. Her eyes immediately snagged on a portion with almost no fringe left.

Damaris held her breath as Annette peered closer. What little fringe remained from nearly a four inch section was not frayed or torn. It looked...cut. With scissors.

Because it had been.

“Umm.” Annette’s brow furrowed as she glanced up to look at Damaris.

Damaris's face turned hot. "I had to invent a reason to come down here. My mother is next door at the millinery."

"Why did you need to come?"

Damaris's heart pounded in her chest. She cleared her throat, then glanced across the room at Madame de Morand. "I, er," she whispered.

Annette looked at her mother beseechingly.

The aristocratic modiste rolled her eyes and sighed. "Annette, there's a curtain in the fitting area that has a torn hem. Why don't you go look at it, and take your friend while you're at it?"

Annette's lips twitched. "Yes, Maman." She sidestepped away from the counter and beckoned Damaris forward with one hand, the other holding onto the soft shawl.

Damaris shuffled forward. This was a good thing, yes? Her skin prickled with nervous energy.

"Come with me," Annette offered. "It's quiet back here."

"Ah." The vise around Damaris's chest eased slightly. She didn't breathe another word until Annette pulled her into a fitting area and tugged the curtain shut.

"What do you need to tell me?" Annette whispered, drawing close to Damaris so they wouldn't be overheard by any seamstresses walking past. The heavy curtain and the dim alcove created an intimate setting.

Damaris's breath echoed in her ears. "Well, first," Damaris told the shawl in Annette's hands, "I wanted to apologize." Blast, she should've had a better opening.

“For?”

“Butchering your work.” Damaris gestured at the delicate piece, utterly embarrassed.

“But I thought perhaps you could work some new fringe on the edge. I was desperate this morning.”

“Why were you desperate?” Annette clutched the shawl, as if it could save her from this emotionally fraught conversation.

“Because I kept repeating our conversation from last night over and over in my mind,” Damaris said. “And I never had a chance to tell you what I wanted. You told me everything in your heart, and then I left you there, unanswered.”

“Your mother was quite insistent,” Annette allowed.

Damaris nodded, feeling sick to her stomach.

“It took me a long time to come up with the words. Because I never really understood this and I never thought I’d want or need to say these things.

But. Annette: I love you.” Damaris’s heart thudded so hard against her ribs it burst. There. It’s out in the open.

“You do?”

Damaris nodded, encouraged by the light in Annette’s eyes.

“I know I probably seem like a silly, naive girl to you. But I’ve fallen for you, Annette.

I think I fell for you a long time ago, and I just didn’t understand my feelings.

I didn't know all the ways I could express them, until you gave me names and actions for them. ”

Annette grinned. “Truly?”

Damaris had never wanted to kiss someone so badly. “I think...I think I'm declaring myself. If I was a man, I would ask for your hand in marriage.”

Annette laughed, delight flooding her face. “You don't need to do that. We have time to know one another better before we sneak into a church and speak vows.”

Damaris was startled. “Women do that?” Then she flushed. “Of course some do. I'm just...pardon me, just ignore my foolishness.”

Annette stepped closer, until their bosoms touched.

She slowly untied Damaris's bonnet, grinning all the while.

“I shan't,” she promised, tossing the bonnet on the stool beside them.

“I'll never ignore you or your thoughtfulness or your resourcefulness or your curiosity.

And I'll certainly never ignore your foolishness.

” She leaned in and kissed Damaris's pretty mouth.

“That's one of my favorite parts about you, you know. ”

“Oh,” Damaris gasped, and her arms flew around Annette. She tilted her head down and deepened the kiss. She wrapped Annette tight and showed her exactly how much

she loved her.

Several minutes later, when they pulled back to breathe, Annette asked, “What about your parents?”

“They saw an image of myself in one of the broadsheets this morning. My mother plans to pause her mission to find me an eligible husband for now. Until my notoriety dies down.”

Annette giggled.

“That gives us several months,” Damaris pointed out, “to plan our next scheme in delaying her new matrimonial plan for me. And by that time, I might just convince her that I need a beautiful, sophisticated modiste to take me under her wing to show me how to be fashionable.”

Annette kissed Damaris again. “I think I might know someone.”

Damaris’s eyes gleamed. “Do you? How perfect.”

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“H old right there!” Damaris quickly sketched a few more lines on her parchment. “Don’t move a muscle.”

Annette groaned. “Darling, this pose is absolute murder on my back.”

“But your breasts have never looked more magnificent,” Damaris assured, leering at her beloved.

Annette snorted, which again did amazing things to her breasts.

“Are you almost finished?” She lay draped across a backless settee, roses placed artfully around her body.

Her long, dark hair streamed over her shoulders, just barely hiding one nipple while the other had perked noticeably in response to Damaris’s perusal.

Damaris tried to hurry. She really did. “If you can hold on for two more minutes, I promise to do that tongue thing you taught me.”

Annette’s eyes gleamed with arousal and laughter. “How I regret teaching you the carnal arts of Sappho.”

Damaris grinned over her sketchbook. “You love it.”

Annette sighed, raising a hand to scratch her nose. “I love it,” she agreed.

“Put your hand back!” Damaris snapped. “You know I struggle with hands.”

Sighing, Annette put her hand back into the correct pose. “I must love you,” she grumbled, “to put up with this nonsense.”

“Nonsense?” Damaris raised an eyebrow at her. “This nonsense is the reason we purchased this cottage last month.”

Annette smiled, revealing her pearly white teeth and adorable gap. “You’re right, I adore you, never stop selling your wicked pornography, my love.”

Nearly two years ago Damaris had come up with a rather dangerous and wicked idea: sketching women in erotic, naked poses and selling them to the shops on Holywell Street.

“Clearly,” she’d told Annette, “there’s a need.

Those last images you bought me for my birthday were artistically lacking. Although I enjoyed them very much.”

Annette had encouraged her lover to do so—safely and under a pseudonym, of course—and Damaris had begun creating a savings for herself that her parents knew nothing about and hopefully never would.

Annette’s mother had graciously allowed Damaris into her home and her life, and Damaris was grateful there was one home and one family they needn’t hide their true relationship from.

In fact, Damaris now got a fifteen percent discount on any orders she made at the shop, which Annette had told her was higher than anyone else received.

Damaris’s parents liked Annette well enough, though they were frustrated that Annette took up so much of Damaris’s time when she could be ingratiating herself back into Society.

Damaris sketched so fast her hand cramped, and she set down the pencil with a sigh. “Enough for now.” She reached for a cloth to wipe any lead staining her fingers.

Annette got up and sauntered toward Damaris in all her naked glory.

Heavy, rounded breasts with large, tight nipples the prettiest shade of pinkish brown Damaris had ever seen curved into a soft stomach, wide hips that begged to be held, and powerful legs that, when they moved, made her bottom sway seductively.

The short curls on her mound were barely long enough to cover the beginnings of her sex.

“Now.” She smiled. “What about this reward?”

Damaris forced herself to slowly put away her sketchbook rather than falling upon Annette like a starving beast. She had to breathe for a moment, or she’d rush the whole thing. And she didn’t want to rush today—it was their last day at the cottage before returning to the city and their work.

Then she turned back to her lover, who stood in front of her now, and grasped those wide, warm hips. Damaris leaned in and pressed a kiss to Annette’s navel, then tongued lower and lower. She nudged Annette’s thighs apart and dipped her head to taste Annette’s arousal.

“Oh!” Annette gasped, putting one hand on Damaris’s shoulder, the other on her head. “So good.”

Damaris smiled against the hot, wet flesh and continued to trace the folds of Annette’s skin, then delve inside her quim.

She loved making Annette wet for her, and she herself was already aroused from the sketching.

Damaris sucked and licked and hummed, darting upward now to ravish attention upon Annette's bud.

Soon Annette was panting and her thighs twitched and tightened. "Enough, enough."

Damaris didn't stop because she knew that tone of voice and she knew what it really meant. More, more in a new way.

Annette stroked Damaris's loose hair. "Love, you know I can't climax while standing. You're going to make me frustrated."

Damaris relented. She stood quickly, nipping the tip of Annette's nose. "Then lie with me on my lounge."

Annette's mouth quirked. "Only if you're naked first."

Damaris quickly set about divesting herself of her clothing.

Annette helped, pulling away the pink shawl to drape it elsewhere.

Damaris shimmied out of her frock, her loose hair falling around her face as she bent over.

She needed to touch Annette again. Immediately.

Her blood would boil and her skin would itch until she was touching her again.

Annette tsked suddenly, pausing to glance more closely at the shawl. "There's a worn spot. Damaris, remind me to take a better look at this in the carriage and I'll darn it up."

"I knew I loved you for a reason," Damaris teased, stripping off her petticoats now.

“You shouldn’t use it so often,” Annette scolded gently, setting the shawl aside and helping Damaris with her stays now.

“But I love it,” Damaris protested, setting both hands on Annette’s naked shoulders and allowing Annette to take over the undressing. She planted little kisses all along Annette’s smooth, round face. “It reminds me of you.”

Annette’s response was to let the stays drop on the ground beside them and jerk Damaris’s chemise up and over her shoulders.

Damaris wrapped Annette in her arms and tumbled back onto the chaise.

They kissed and touched and stroked, Damaris sharing Annette’s own arousal with her.

Their nipples rubbed against one another, and Damaris loved Annette’s softness, the warmth and curves of her body.

She couldn’t imagine liking this with anyone else.

Their legs tangled together until the wet heat of their bodies aligned.

Their hips rolled in tandem with one another as Damaris’s hands found Annette’s nipples.

She plucked and played with them until Annette was gasping beside her, her toes curling into Damaris’s shins.

Damaris suddenly had an idea, and she decided to surprise Annette with it. Quickly, she sat up and rotated so that her head was now near Annette’s quim and vice versa.

“You want to do that this time?” Annette asked. It was an enjoyable time for both of

them, but they hadn't done it in a while.

"You really like it," Damaris pointed out, running her fingers through Annette's black curls.

"You like it, too, yes?"

Damaris pressed an open mouthed kiss to Annette's bud. "You know I love everything we do."

They adjusted, and Annette hiked one of Damaris's legs up over her shoulder to better reach Damaris's core.

Damaris was already in a perfect position to reach Annette, and she couldn't wait any longer.

She slid her hands along Annette's soft inner thighs, framing her sex, and buried herself in Annette's scent, taste, moans, shivers, and feel. It was heavenly.

A heartbeat later, Damaris felt Annette's warm, flexible tongue on her own sex, and she tightened her core in anticipation.

They loved one another, moving toward a climax together, pushing higher and higher, their desire matching one another.

Damaris's heart beat wildly, and the surge of affection she felt for Annette was nearly indescribable.

Then Annette slid a finger inside Damaris, rubbing against that perfect spot.

It nearly made Damaris come on the spot.

Sometimes in this position they teased one another—sometimes trying to make the other one find their pleasure first and faster than the other, sometimes dragging it out slowly to see who would break first and beg for satisfaction.

But today it seemed like they would move together and in perfect harmony.

Damaris, too, slid a finger inside Annette and thrust quickly, the way Annette liked.

Annette responded with a beckoning motion, which was Damaris's favorite.

Pleasure spiraled through her, moving upward and onward.

Together they drove one another to greater heights, until Damaris was at the brink.

Her intimate muscles tightened around Annette's finger, spasming in an attempt to hold off her climax.

"I'm close, too," Annette gasped. "Don't hold back, darling."

Damaris let the pleasure unfurl around her, over her, through her.

She closed her eyes, basking in the delight of the first of many orgasms this afternoon.

Beneath her, Annette's thighs tightened and strained.

Damaris didn't let up, she thumbed Annette's bud and sucked gently at the same time, and Annette flew apart under her attention.

Several moments later, when both had regained their breath, Damaris kissed Annette's thighs.

Annette tensed beneath her, then wriggled out and turned, lying beside Damaris again so their faces aligned. She cupped Damaris's face in her hands and kissed her deeply, thoroughly, and beautifully.

Damaris moaned, tasting herself on Annette's tongue. Their essence mixed together in their mouths, a heady realization that made Damaris hungry for more. She stroked Annette's hair. "Perfection, sweetheart. You're perfection."

Annette hummed as she kissed Damaris again. "We are together. That's perfection."

Damaris wholeheartedly agreed. She smiled softly into her companion's eyes, stroking the hair curling behind Annette's ear. "I am exceedingly lucky to have captured your interest."

Annette stroked one finger down Damaris's forehead, nose, and trailed down her lips, pausing at her chin. "I think we know I'm the lucky one between us."

Damaris opened her mouth to protest, but Annette's other hand came between them, sliding down Damaris's belly and in between her legs. Annette rubbed Damaris's slick, swollen flesh expertly, arousing Damaris's lust once more.

"Again?" Damaris asked, eyebrows rising. "Already?"

"Again," Annette agreed, and kissed Damaris's mouth. "Again and again and again. For the rest of our lives."

THE END

I hope you enjoyed Annette and Damaris's story! If so, please consider leaving a review so other readers can find this book, too.