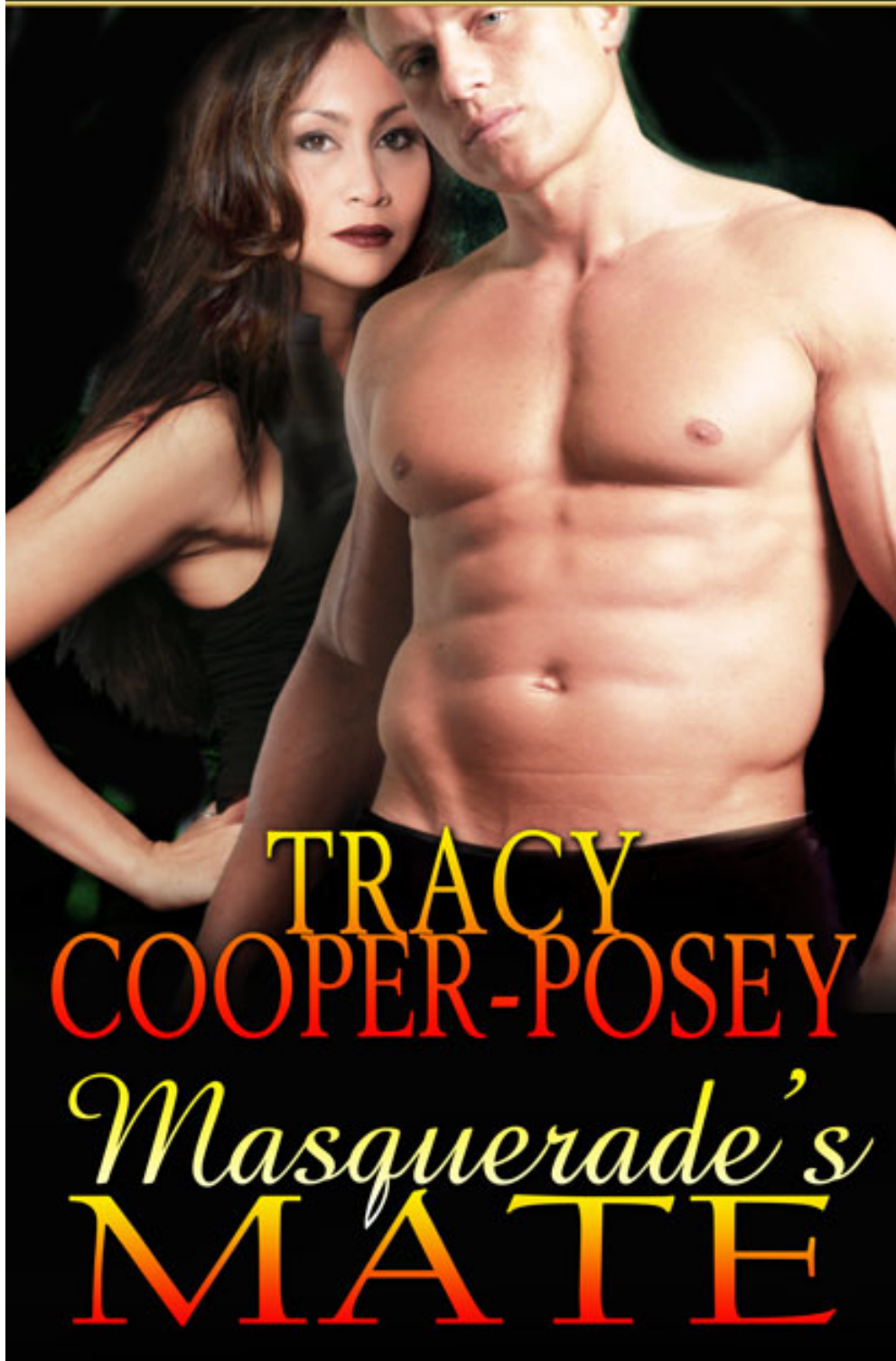


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Masquerade's Mate

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MASQUERADE'S MATE

Tracy Cooper-Posey

Dedication:

To Julie: It was all your idea, anyway.

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Chapter One

England, Autumn, 1884

Stuart accepted the Earl of Northbrook's invitation to afternoon tea only because of the unspoken command that accompanied it. Thomas Baring was the First Lord of the Admiralty and ruled the Queen's navy—the most powerful force upon the open seas. The invitation to tea was Baring's way of saying he wanted to interview Stuart and discover everything Stuart had learned while he was in the Orient. As Baring controlled the navy and Stuart was a member of the diplomatic corps, Baring could not give a direct order but only an imbecile would have refused the invitation to tea.

Stuart was met at the door by Baring's secretary. He was a young man with a keen gaze and a firm handshake.

"Patrick Kirkham," the secretary introduced himself. He looked Stuart in the eye, which was unusual. At just over six feet, Stuart was used to looking down.

"Kirkham?" Stuart repeated. "Are you related to Nathaniel Kirkham, the Duke of Pemberton?"

"My father," Kirkham replied, with an easy smile.

Stuart shook his head with genuine disbelief. "Your father is an undeclared hero, Kirkham. I was in China for two years before their war with France grew too intense and the diplomatic corps was ordered to leave. I got to see some of the work he has done at firsthand. He is a genius, a gifted diplomat. When he chose to stay in Peking despite the hostilities, my awe of him only grew."

"Yes, well..." Kirkham grew pink in the cheeks. "Shall we go in?" He waved toward the open double doors that revealed a library beyond.

Baring was waiting for him and his welcome was warm and cordial. "You'll have to forgive the informality of this meeting," Baring said, sitting down behind a pair of large

silver trays laid out with an elegant silver service and bearing cakes and pastries. "I'm shipping off to Egypt on a special commission in a few days. I'm very glad we will have this chance to speak before I leave." He glanced up, over Stuart's shoulder, then stood up. "Ah," he said, as he held out his hand.

Stuart glanced around, then found himself out of his seat quite without trying.

The woman walking toward them was stunning. His heart stuttered and began to hammer. *Beautiful*, his mind whispered with a sighing echo.

Until this moment, Stuart had never considered the beauty of a woman. Like most men, he first assessed her shape. Was it pleasing? Or would it be, once the layers of corsetry, bustle and petticoats were removed? Next, he would quickly judge appeal—not beauty. Was she well-scrubbed? Did she have all her teeth? Did her hair shine?

Unlike other men, Stuart usually took his appraisal one step further. This was always the most interesting of the tests. Did she have the nerve to look him directly in the eye when she caught him studying her? Or would she blush and look away? Worse...would she giggle and hide her face against the shoulder of a friend?

On rare occasions he'd had the great good fortune to find a woman with enough character to stare right back at him. In those moments, his heart skipped a beat at the promise of what may lie ahead.

But this one...this one made him look a second time. His second glance became a long, lingering stare that was far from one of assessment. It was a stare of wonder.

Not just beautiful but beauty itself. The thought was echoed by a mental sigh, for he could not fathom why she was so beautiful. He simply knew it, as surely as he knew he was left-handed.

She was small in stature. Barely up to his shoulder, he judged. Her black hair glowed like raven wings and her skin was flawless, as if it had been painted. It had a soft, tanned glow. Not the pale tissue that was so fashionable these days. Her lips were naturally red and full, unlike other ladies who bit theirs to achieve a plump, rosy look but were instead left with colorless teeth marks embedded in swollen flesh.

Her eyes were midnight black and seemed to grow larger as he stared into them. It was then he realized she was staring right back at him. No blushing. No giggling. Startled, he found that he was the one looking away.

Neither Baring or Kirkham had noticed his distraction, thank God. Baring handed the lady to one of the gilded women's seats pulled up to the low table. "My dear, let me introduce to you Lord Stuart Sutherland-Bruce, the eldest son of the Earl of Salisbury, Viscount of Annan."

"My lord." The woman gave a shortened curtsy, more of a bob of the head and when she looked up at him again, it was as if the smile she withheld from her lips was dancing in her eyes.

His chest seemed to creak with the impact of her and his breath was actually shortened. She was the most exotic creature he had seen this side of Cairo and to find her in Lord Baring's library was disconcerting.

"Lord Sutherland-Bruce," Baring continued. "Let me introduce you to Bian, a very special lady."

Yes, his mind whispered. He picked up her offered hand and bowed over it. The faint whisper of scent came from her sleeve. It was light, discreet but still seemed to wreath around his head and steal his senses. She wore a delicate filigree charm bracelet around that wrist. It was the only jewelry he could see. One of the little figures was swinging almost hypnotically, drawing his gaze. But it helped him focus. He dared look at her face again. With a jolt, he realized that she had a hint of epicanthic folds about her eyes. After his time in the East he was used to seeing them and it had taken these few moments to notice hers.

She withdrew her hand from his with a little tug and he realized that he had been holding on to it far longer than was polite. He dropped his hand, feeling foolish. But the other two men seemed unconcerned.

Bian lowered herself into her chair and Stuart again felt his heart thud. She wore no corset...he was certain of it. She had a straight back, yes but she was much too limber.

For a moment he could imagine the feel of the satin of her gown under his hands. The fabric would be hot from her skin just beneath. He would be able to feel soft, pliable flesh and if he slid his hands up just a little...

She was looking up at him expectantly and he glanced around. Baring and Kirkham had already seated themselves.

Sweat gathered at Stuart's temples. He took a deep breath, controlling and hiding his reaction to her. Baring was a politician, a statesman. This was not the time or place for Stuart to pursue his favorite prey. He would be expected to provide the information that Baring needed for his naval affairs.

Stuart took his seat, trying to shake off the moment of disorientation this Bian had delivered. He was conscious of her watching him as he seated himself.

"May I pour you a cup of tea, Lord Baring?" she asked Baring, which was perfectly correct. Baring was the ranking peer in the room while both Kirkham and he were the sons of peers and yet to inherit their titles.

"Yes, thank you, Bian," Baring told her. "That would be lovely." He turned to Stuart. "You've recently returned from China, I believe. Diplomatic posting."

"I have been traveling all around the East, my lord. Peking was my last short assignment before returning home."

Bian had neatly poured tea for all of them and passed around the cups. Stuart felt his heart jump as his fingers touched hers. He clutched the cup with unusual firmness and lowered it to the table in front him. He would drink it later. Perhaps.

He saw that she was watching him. Her lips curved upward at the corners, as if she knew she was causing this strange reaction in him.

"You were stationed in Canton?" Baring asked, dragging Stuart's attention away from her.

"Yes but my time there was very short. I was there when the trouble started in Vietnam and hostilities broke out. We were given the option to return home but Lord

Kirkham had resettled in Peking after his eastern tour, so..." Stuart shrugged. "It was an easy choice for me."

Baring nodded his head. "Kirkham is a good diplomat. He does well for England."

"I don't believe that's putting it quite high enough," Stuart returned. "He was instrumental in settling the Second Opium Wars, although the history books will omit mentioning his name."

Baring's brow lifted. Kirkham grew still. Even Bian seemed to pause at his statement.

"That's a rather extraordinary thing to say," Baring responded at last.

Stuart took a breath and pushed his hand through his hair, suddenly feeling awkward. He glanced at the younger Kirkham and realized he owed the lord's son the truth, at least. "You must understand that a lot of what most people consider to be diplomacy actually consists of backroom negotiations. Deals. Trade-offs. The results of those deals is what the rest of the world sees. The strength of a single man's will in those negotiations can change the outcome of a war. Or end it altogether."

Baring nodded again. "A fact rarely appreciated by one so young."

"Are you suggesting, my lord," Bian interjected, looking at him over her teacup, "that the Duke of Pemberton is a spy?"

"That's ridiculous," the younger Kirkham said with a snort.

"If he was a spy," Stuart said carefully, "he would not share that fact with me."

Baring lowered his cup, staring at him.

"But you think he is," Bian pressed.

"You misunderstand me."

"Not for a moment," she assured him with a smile. "You know he is a gifted diplomat. You refer to his involvement in the ending of the Opium war and that the more useful sort of diplomacy takes place behind closed doors and requires strength of personality to reign supreme. Did I misunderstand any of that?"

Stuart found himself staring at her, her beauty forgotten. "No but —"

"I was not finished," she added. "Something that takes place behind closed doors is hidden, yes?"

"Yes," he was forced to admit.

"And is not espionage the act of collecting information about another country to benefit your own?"

"Yes."

"The collection of that information is secretive?"

"Yes." He could feel his frustration rising.

"Behind closed doors, you might say."

He tried to smile. "Negotiating a deal and gathering information are two entirely different activities."

"Are they?" She tilted her head a little as she looked at him. "In order to negotiate, one must understand the people with whom one is negotiating. And you implied that the Duke is exceptional at negotiating. That means he must also be exceptional at gathering information about his opponents."

Stuart sat back, astonished. "That's a very tenuous assumption to make."

"It might have been," she agreed. "But you confirmed it."

"I did not." His astonishment stepped up a notch.

"Not in so many words. But when I asked you if you thought that the Duke of Pemberton was a spy, you very carefully did not deny it. You said, 'he would not tell me if he was.' And I'm quite sure he would not tell you such a thing. But you believe him to be, in fact, a spy. Or, as Patrick did, you would have simply answered such an outrageous statement with an observation about how ridiculous it was."

Stuart's heart was thundering now. Who was this woman? He picked up his teacup to give his hands something to do and to give himself time to think. How had she

managed to bring him to such a position...and so quickly? His tea had not even begun to cool.

"There is a rumor," Bian continued, "of a spy in the East, called the Royal Talisman. They say this Talisman is Queen Victoria's lucky charm—that he kept Britain out of the war with France over Vietnam."

The cup seemed to leap from Stuart's hands. He made a desperate grab for the fragile china but merely managed to swat it directly at the floor.

Bian's hand shot out and down. Her fingers snatched at the tiny handle and arrested the cup's fall. For the space of several heartbeats, total silence gripped the room, broken only by the sound of tea dripping onto the floorboards. The teacup swung from the tips of her fingers, for she held it as she had caught it, with her arm extended out to her side.

Then Bian sat up, shook the drips from the cup and placed it back on Stuart's saucer, as if nothing unusual had happened at all.

It was Kirkham who spoke this time. "You believe my father is this Royal Talisman?"

Stuart managed to look him in the eye. "No," he said, as flatly as he could.

Bian laughed. It was a light, lovely sound. "That means yes, Patrick."

Stuart's heart was thundering. How had she known of his suspicions about Pemberton? It was as if she had reached in and plucked the thought from his mind, for he had certainly not spoken of this to a living soul. "If I deny it," he told Bian, "you will skewer me yet again with your strange logic and insist I am saying yes. I would be prudent to remain silent."

"Perhaps, yes, you might be," Baring said. He seemed to be trying to hold back a smile. "Many men have learned by their peril not to underestimate Miss Bian."

Stuart focused on the honorific. Miss. He had noticed the bare finger on her left hand but the confirmation of her matrimonial state seemed a good thing to have. Clearly, there was nothing about this woman he should take for granted.

Oh, what a marvelous bed companion she would be!

Suddenly his chest and loins were tight with need. He had not felt such an urgency in quite a long while.

He managed to ride out the first shock wave of explosive desire and keep his gaze from searing her from head to foot by focusing instead upon his fingers, curled and resting on his knee. Then he lifted his head and looked squarely at Baring. "I appreciate the warning, my lord," he said. "Is it Lord Kirkham's activities that you wished to speak about, when you offered tea?"

It was a direct thrust but Stuart had abruptly run out of patience for the minuet that diplomats and power mongers everywhere seemed to prefer.

Normally, he enjoyed the verbal fencing. Now, he was more interested in ending the conversation as quickly as possible. All of them were bound by etiquette to remain seated at the table until Baring decided the interview was over. While he was seated, Stuart could not begin his pursuit of Bian.

Baring must have sensed his seething restlessness, for he proceeded to expertly debrief Stuart on what he had seen and heard while he was in China. Kirkham listened with equal care and even asked a provoking question or two. It was a thoroughly professional interview. Throughout the examination, Stuart was mortally aware of Bian on his left, sipping her tea. She was not indifferent to the conversation. On the contrary, she was soaking up every word he spoke. It would not have surprised Stuart to learn she was analyzing it with the same efficiency Kirkham and Baring applied, even though she remained ladylike and silent throughout.

Finally, Bian and Baring rose to their feet. The interview was over. Bian returned their cups to the silver trays as Kirkham and Baring shook Stuart's hand again. He wished Baring a fast, safe journey to Cairo, all the while conscious of Bian right next to

him. His heart was racing again, for he was mentally crouched waiting for the moment he needed.

Finally, Kirkham moved toward the doors of the library, preparing to show Stuart to the front door and Baring returned to his big oak desk in the sunny corner under the high windows.

Stuart took Bian's hand and was appalled to see that his own trembled. He bowed over her hand and looked into her eyes. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Bian."

She was smiling properly at him, now. He was absurdly pleased to see she had dimples. "Was it really such a pleasure, Lord Sutherland-Bruce?"

"Actually, yes." He glanced over his shoulder. Both men were out of range of a well-directed whisper. He leaned closer to her ear. "Make your excuses and meet me at the corner of the street in ten minutes."

"I don't think so," she returned.

He stared at her. He would have wagered his inheritance that she would cooperate and find a way to slip out to speak to him freely.

"A lady doesn't do such things," she said gently and withdrew her hand—again—from his stunned grip. "Good afternoon, Lord Sutherland-Bruce."

* * * * *

Patrick came back to the library once he had shut the front door on Sutherland-Bruce. He dropped onto the cushions of the window seat next to Bian. For several long minutes, he stared at the worn tapestry on the cushion.

"Are you sure about this, Bian?" he said.

"Yes," she said, as gently as she could.

Baring came back to the table and lowered himself onto the chair Bian had occupied. "You played him beautifully, child. He was staggering by the time you were done with him."

"I needed him disoriented. The last thing I can afford is for him to see me as an ordinary woman. I don't have time for that."

"Well, you succeeded," Patrick added. There was a sour note in his voice and she thought she knew what it meant.

"I tried not to have you involved, Patrick."

"Yes, I know. It was my choice to help. But Bian...why on earth do you think that he would see you as an ordinary woman?"

Baring gave a small laugh and Bian smiled at his reaction. He knew her answer already.

"Because to that man, Patrick, every woman is an ordinary woman and an ordinary woman is a commodity he can move around as he pleases and discard when the novelty has worn away. I needed to find a way to ensure he won't discard me until I'm ready to leave."

Patrick turned pink. "You've heard some of the rumors about his ways, then?"

"I didn't have to," she countered. "I could see it in his eyes as soon as we met." She gave a small laugh. "I've met the type before. More than once."

Patrick turned a deeper shade of pink but managed to speak firmly. "You should have asked him to tea, or something."

"A lady isn't that forward," Bian countered.

Baring pursed his lips thoughtfully. "All in all, I'm surprised he didn't try to find a way to speak to you alone."

"He did."

Baring's brow lifted. "He did, did he? And yet you refused him?"

"If a lady is considered forward if she is the one to invite a single man to tea, how much more forward would she be if she was seen meeting him alone on a busy street corner?"

Baring shook his head. "The nerve of him!"

"Yes, he is daring, isn't he?" Bian said thoughtfully.

Patrick was frowning. "But...if you refused to meet him and can't invite him to tea...then...you've lost him."

Bian smiled. "Oh, he'll be back."

It took the swaying of the carriage for Stuart to finally notice the tiny tug on his waistcoat pocket. He opened his coat and jacket and looked down at the delicate gold filigree charm bracelet snagged in the flap of his fob pocket.

Carefully, he broke the little figure free of the loose thread that had caught it. Then he pooled the golden jewelry in his palm and felt the surprisingly heavy weight of it. It was, without doubt, a unique piece. Clearly eastern in origin and probably of high value in gold and gems alone. It was possible the bracelet had sentimental value too.

He had to ensure it was returned to her.

Chapter Two

It took two days of letter exchanges to Baring's secretary before Stuart managed to learn that Bian did not live at Baring's townhouse and to acquire her address. There was no easy way to ask after a lady's address and not betray one's attentions but Stuart knew a few indirect but effective paths to such information. He used them all to coax the information from Baring.

On the third morning he presented himself at the red brick townhouse in a little mews off Adam's Row in Mayfair, while his cab waited obediently at the curb. It was old but well maintained and in summer would be shaded by two magnificent oaks that stood in front of it. Many leaves of the oaks were golden now and some were already drifting to the footpath.

It was a respectable address and a well-presented house. Just as everything about Miss Bian appeared to be reputable and elegant.

For the last three days Stuart had been replaying the moments he had sat next to her and reexamining every word. Bian had been a model of deportment, he had reluctantly concluded. Her swift verbal parries had been no more than a hostess might exchange over a dinner table if she wished to provoke the conversation among her guests. As he had been the only guest, he had chafed under the stimulus.

In no way had she given word or signal that she was anything other than a well-bred and well-behaved lady.

Regardless, Stuart had tossed in his empty bed for two nights, unable to dismiss her from his mind. She had a hidden quality that drew his attention like filings to a magnet...or else he was simply going out of his mind. And because he could not locate even a hint of this hidden quality in anything she had said or done, Stuart had truly begun to wonder if he *was* imagining things.

For that reason he was delivering the bracelet in person. He needed to see her again. He needed to find even a hint of that hidden quality. He would sit in her drawing room and play the perfect gentleman all day, if necessary, until he saw the element in her that would not leave him in peace.

That was, if she forgave him for not calling ahead in the first place.

He rang the bell and prepared to wait but was surprised when it was answered almost immediately. The maid took his card, showed him in and hurried over to the big, closed doors on the other side of the foyer, where she knocked gently on the door and waited.

Stuart watched, puzzled, as the door was opened a few inches and the maid pushed the card through the crack. The door was shut on her again. She smiled reassuringly at him before moving down the hallway to the back of the house, which left him alone in the foyer, cooling his heels.

He looked around the empty hall. This was not what a woman like Bian would consider proper, surely?

The recently closed door was suddenly flung open. Bian herself stepped through. And Stuart could feel his heart literally stammer to a stop, before it managed to recover and hurry on, hurting with each beat.

She wore...what *was* she wearing? It took him a moment to identify the garment simply because he would not have equated a silk dressing robe with the middle of a Wednesday afternoon. The robe was too large for her tiny frame. As she hurried toward him, the wide neck slid down one shoulder and dropped off altogether, revealing a creamy shoulder and the smooth, flawless skin of her upper breast and neck.

Is she naked beneath that robe? he found himself wondering, with genuine bewilderment touched by a swiftly-evoked craving. There was too much flesh on display for her to be wearing any undergarments and the curves the robe outlined were too soft to be the product of corsetry.

Not only did the robe hang from one shoulder but it was so ridiculously long that it trailed behind her like a ball gown, which pulled the fronts of the robe open as she walked.

Bare feet...bare ankles...bare calves... Stuart found himself clutching the top of his cane as he focused on her shapely limbs as they flashed beneath the opening of the robe, until she came to a stop before him, her hand out to greet him and a warm smile on her face.

For a moment he was genuinely unable to form a coherent thought. Her appearance was quite simply shocking.

He lifted her hand to bow over it but a puppet would have executed the movement more smoothly.

She did not seem to mind. "Lord Sutherland-Bruce," she acknowledged. "How kind of you to call on me."

"I...I seem to have arrived at an awkward moment." It was stilted, proper and not at all what he wanted to say. Or do. He could barely tear his gaze away from the soft mound outlined by the silk clinging to her chest. He forced himself to look her in the eye.

"An awkward moment? Not at all. Why do you say that?" She looked puzzled.

He lifted a hand and gestured helplessly at her robe.

She actually lifted the robe with her hand, which opened the panels again and allowed him to glimpse a knee. "In my own home, I prefer to be comfortable. Please, come in, won't you?"

She tucked her small hand under his elbow and turned to face the door she had emerged from. "I have a friend visiting—George—but you mustn't mind him. He comes here for the solitude rather than the company."

Stuart allowed himself to be walked through the doorway. The room beyond was large and filled with comfortable seats and lined with books. It was a thinker's room—

medieval maps behind glass hung on the walls and a writing desk stood under one of the tall arched windows.

There was a man with a salt and pepper beard sitting cross-legged almost perfectly in the centre of the big Persian rug covering the middle of the floor. He was quite naked.

Stuart could not help but stare.

"That's George," she explained unnecessarily. "But he's probably not even aware you're there, so don't worry about introductions."

He glanced at the pipe, hose and bowl next to the man called George. "Opium?" he asked, astounded.

"Yes, of course, you would be familiar with it after your time in China." She did not seem perturbed.

On the contrary, Stuart could feel his heart creak. There had been just too many surprises since he had knocked on her door. "You allow opium to be smoked in your house?"

"Good lord, no. But George...well, George is a special case. He was posted to the East, much like you and he found himself unable to halt the habit, even when he returned to London. But he is a very efficient Member of Parliament...should the people of Britain lose a valuable representative because of a personal weakness?"

He swallowed. "You have a slippery way of stating affairs," he said.

"He asks only for discretion and understanding and a small piece of carpet. I will not judge him. Not when he is a friend."

Stuart glanced at George again. Wherever his enslaved mind wandered, it was clearly a pleasant world. George's spindly cock stood sharply at attention.

Stuart glanced at Bian's bare shoulder. "How good a friend is he?" he asked and was astonished at the degree of anger that emerged in his voice.

At his sharp tone, George stirred. His eyes opened to a thin crescent. "Good enough, my dear fellow." His voice was strong and well rounded by years of shouting across the House. "But never that good."

Bian smiled openly. Stuart was unsure whether the man had insulted her or not. There was very little about the last few minutes that made complete sense to him and the pounding of his heart was proof of it.

He realized that George was getting slowly to his feet and more unpleasant surprise spurted through him.

"George, you really shouldn't get up, you know," Bian chided him.

"When there's a gentleman caller in the house? Now, Bian..." He walked over to them, taking a staggering, rounded route across the beautiful Persian rug. Stuart realized that George was looking directly at him. A shiver slithered through him but he held his ground.

George smiled at Stuart, showing a complete disregard for his lack of attire. "You're a handsome one, then."

"George..." Bian said softly. Warningly.

George smiled at Stuart. "Bian is such a lovely child, is she not? I can well imagine your jealousy, old chap but really, it's all for naught." And despite his opium-induced stupor, George threaded his hand smoothly into the openings of both Stuart's overcoat and jacket and cupped his testicles through his trousers. The long fingers stroked gently, before Stuart's stunned mind and muscles could react. He staggered backward, gripping George's wrist and wrenching it up and out of the way.

"I've shot men at dawn for less," Stuart grated. His voice was hoarse.

George was not resisting the cruel twist on his forearm. He stared passively at Stuart, a small smile on his face. "You were about to make a mistake," he said softly. "I merely wanted to disabuse you of the notion."

"Enough," Bian said, with surprising firmness. She put her tiny hands on both George and Stuart's forearms. "Lord Sutherland-Bruce, I suggest you let him go. George, don't say another word or I'll let him strangle you and save me the bother. Are you listening, George?"

She was familiar with the patchy daze opium users could fall into, Stuart realized, or she would not have made sure she was being heard.

George blinked took a slow breath. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, I hear. Alas." An immense, profound sadness etched itself on his face and all animation drained from it.

Stuart let George's arm loose as he watched the transformation.

Bian pushed at George's shoulders. "Go back to your pipe," she said gently. "Go and forget."

"Yes," he murmured, letting himself be turned away. He wended his way back to the long pipe and collapsed in a heap of long, pale white limbs, his head hanging.

"What happened to him?" Stuart breathed. "Why does he seek the pipe still?"

Bian glanced at George, then shook her head to indicate Stuart should keep his voice down. She tucked her hand into his elbow. "Thank you so much for returning my bracelet, by the way."

"Ah, yes." He pulled the jewelry from his fob pocket and handed it to her. Then he realized that she was leading him to the door he had just stepped through. The door that led to the front hall. "Where are you taking me?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to show you out, Lord Sutherland-Bruce. Now is not the most convenient time for me."

The words spilled from him before he could prevent them. "Why, do you have another man in your bedroom?" Then he braced himself for the face-slapping that was the very minimum he deserved for such an outrageous accusation. But she had provoked him into it, damn it! The robe that she barely wore, the naked man in her

lounge room... The woman clearly lived a life of extreme Bohemianism. She was the complete opposite of what he had thought her to be.

For the second time his mind had tottered, unable to cope with the sheer weight of sensational shock. The jealousy, petty though it was, was the one almost normal emotion he could clutch at and use to anchor himself.

But Bian did not slap him. Instead her mouth curved up into a delicious smile that made her dimples dance. "Why on earth would I bother with taking a man upstairs? My sofa is wide and very comfortable."

He could actually feel his jaw start to unhinge but before he could begin to even attempt to formulate a response, she squeezed his forearm. "Besides," she said, stepping out into the foyer. "I am attending the opening night at the Opera House. They're such grand affairs. A lady must have time to properly prepare."

The maid already had the front door open and pushed his hat and cane into his nerveless fingers.

"Good morning, Lord Sutherland-Bruce. Thank you so much for dropping by," Bian said with all the formal politeness of any upper-class lady.

Suddenly Stuart was back upon the footpath, the front door shut behind him and with no clear idea of how he had reached the spot. He climbed back into his cab, trying to piece together what had just happened.

Where had the so very proper lady disappeared to? Yet...and yet...if he had not been utterly convinced of her respectability, the last ten minutes would have him thinking she was a lady of easy virtue...except that she drank tea with future dukes and lords and socialized with the upper crust of London society...but she had no title that she had shared with him...

Stuart shook his head as he watched Hyde Park roll by the cab windows. The conflicting sides of Bian's nature made her completely unpredictable. If he couldn't predict how she would act, how could he understand her?

* * * * *

When he reached home, he strode into the smoking parlor and almost tripped over a crumpled pile of cast-aside newspapers on the polished floorboards. Aidan was hidden behind yet another broadsheet.

"Can't you at least call for the maid to pick these up?" Stuart railed at his brother.

Aidan lowered the newspaper. "I have too much to catch up on to take the time."

"I wouldn't mind if you were reading editorials...but the social columns?" Stuart turned to Peggoty as she entered the room. "I need my afternoon waistcoat and jacket. Could you bring them down for me?"

She dropped into an abbreviated curtsy and hurried away. Stuart stripped off his jacket and tackled his cravat and collar pins.

Aidan was still staring at him. "And to whence do you scurry, looking so hot and bothered?"

"Lady Charlotte Lindholme Grey."

"That old battle-axe." Aidan threw the newspaper aside and sat up from his sprawl on the sofa. "Why her?"

Stuart shrugged and made it sound as casual as possible. "She has a box at tonight's opera."

"I see."

Stuart glanced at his brother, then away. Aidan's sharp gaze would miss nothing and he would prefer not to have to explain anything else.

"What's her name?" Aidan asked, which told Stuart he'd hidden nothing at all. Well, Aidan was the canny one that could see through people, after all.

"Who is the latest wonderful obsession?" Aidan insisted.

Stuart didn't bother evading the truth this time. "I don't know." It sounded idiotic even to him, so he tried again. "I just don't know her."

* * * * *

Lady Grey's box was on the left side of the Grand Tier, which gave Stuart a somewhat strained view of the stage but a perfect vantage point from which to examine everyone else in every other box along the tier except those right beside him. He could also see into the boxes on the balcony level across the way. In the last few minutes of the interval Stuart managed to step into a bare acquaintance's box on the other side of the auditorium. Just before the lights went down, he studied each face in the boxes next to his own. Both levels. Then, frustration curling through him, he ran his gaze over the lower and upper slips, right up by the roof.

Troubled, he made his way back around to Lady Grey's box and his waiting seat. Where was Bian? Had something happened to her?

He could barely concentrate on the drama playing out below him after that. Opera tended to drain his patience at the best of times. He was considering making his excuses and leaving, when Lady Grey beckoned to him with a lift of her chin and a tiny motion with her fan. Stuart dutifully sat on the seat beside her and she leaned closer to him.

"I presume, young Stuart, that you are attending Lord Dumfrey's post-opera gathering? That *was* the reason you were suddenly driven to call upon me this afternoon, was it not?"

The after-opera party. Relief flooded through him. He had been in the East far too long, it seemed. He had forgotten this annual, eagerly anticipated event in the calendar of London society. In truth, he had rarely participated even before his posting to Canton. He looked down at Lady Grey's haughty face and lied without a quiver. "I'm afraid you've seen right through me, Lady Grey. You will forgive me?"

"If you will help this old lady into and out of her carriage and up Dumfrey's formidable front steps, I will."

Dumfrey's house was already filled with guests by the time Stuart had Lady Grey safely inside the grand front foyer. After finally being able to make his excuses and

leaving her in the company of a friend, Stuart made a strategic round of the public rooms, looking for Bian.

He could not even enquire after her. He didn't know any of her acquaintances at this affair and he knew no facts about her other than her address and her first name. In order to find her, he would have to keep circling through these rooms until he happened to spot her. There were new guests arriving all the time, filling the rooms with more faces to check...

After three rounds, Stuart began to feel the depth of his foolishness. He headed for the punch table by the conservatory. He'd heard in passing that the punch at this table was the one laced with a fifty-year-old brandy. Fortification would help him face the truth—that he had no proof she had even attended the opera, let alone this gathering of the elite of London.

Bian was standing by the punchbowl, a crystal cup in her hands.

Stuart found himself brought up short by her appearance. She was staring at him, her eyes wide and her breasts rising and falling, as if he had startled her as much as she had startled him. Her gown was fashionably low in the neck, showing off the beauty of her flesh, the lush richness of her breasts. The dark purple satin of her dress was the perfect frame.

His groin tightened with a high, sweet ache he knew all too well. But over it, drowning it, was a rich delight at seeing her again.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. He wanted to spend time with her. Actually *with* her, not merely seducing her.

He took a step toward her and was saved from embarrassing himself by Thorsby's arrival. Thorsby thumped him on the shoulder, giving him a reason for looking away. With something close to relief, Stuart turned to face the man. *Relief?* He tucked that startling reaction away to consider later, as he shook Thorsby's hand.

Thorsby was a bore of the first water and a hypocrite besides. Stuart had arrived at that conclusion through hard experience—he and Thorsby had attended Cambridge at the same time. But Stuart forced himself to smile, anyway.

“Sutherland-Bruce, you old dog,” Thorsby said. “Back from China, eh? What’s it been? Three years you’ve been rattling about the halls of diplomacy in that wilderness?”

Stuart glanced at the punchbowl. She had gone. A sharp sensation, almost one of pain, speared his chest. *Just disappointment*, he assured himself quickly. He took a deep breath. “I was sorry to hear about your father...my lord,” he added.

Thorsby waved away the acknowledgment with a languid movement. “It was past his time. Although I hear you two chaps haven’t sorted out your inheritance yet.”

Pure annoyance grabbed at Stuart’s gut. It was this sort of callousness that had always made him wary of Thorsby, even before he’d had direct proof of the man’s lack of character. He smiled at Thorsby sourly. “No, my father hasn’t yet managed to shuffle off this mortal coil,” he replied.

Thorsby’s eyes widened a little in response, then they cut away to Stuart’s left and widened even more.

“There you are, Stuart. You promised me a tour of the conservatory, remember?” Bian’s voice was deliciously low and controlled and with beautiful diction. He didn’t need the glimpse of purple from the corner of his eye to know it was her. His gut, his heart, his whole body, seemed to leap in response.

He swiveled to face her. “Please forgive me. I was...delayed.”

She smiled at him. Her eyes danced. “I haven’t yet had the pleasure of meeting the reason for your delay,” she told him. She looked up at Thorsby, who was still staring.

“Shut your mouth, Thorsby,” Stuart said.

Thorsby shut it with an audible snap.

Stuart held his hand out toward Bian, intending to introduce her and his mind came to a jumbled halt. He had no idea who she was, yet he must introduce her to Thorsby first, despite his rank, as she was the lady. "This is Lady—" he began, desperately.

Bian didn't even glance at him. She held her hand out to Thorsby. "I am Bian," she said.

Even Thorsby did not fail to notice the absence of the usual "Lady" before her name, for his brows lifted and he hesitated a slight fraction of a heartbeat before reaching out for her hand and nodding shortly over it.

While Thorsby was offended by her lack of status, Stuart was merely intrigued. She had every hallmark of a great lady. Her upright carriage and grace made her more of a lady than many women in the hall and her diction and manners bespoke gentry. But Thorsby would not see that.

Stuart completed the introduction. "Bian, please meet the Most Honorable Andrew Thorsby, the new Marquess of Thorsby, Baron of Ipswich...did I miss any, my lord?"

Thorsby nodded again to Bian, then glanced at Stuart. "A couple but they're not worth mentioning, anyway." He turned back to Bian. Confirming Stuart's prediction, he drew himself upright. "I'm not familiar with your antecedents, Bian," he said stiffly.

"I would be extremely surprised if you were," Bian shot back. She merely smiled at Thorsby as the snob blinked away his surprise.

Stuart hid his own smile. Oh, what a delight she was! It was rare to see Thorsby's ignorance pierced deep enough to make him uncomfortable.

Thorsby came at it another way. "Then you are an invited guest of Lord Dumfrey...?" He let the question trail off with an upward note, making it as clear as he could that he wanted to know what on earth a commoner was doing mingling with Dumfrey's guests.

"Actually, I just met Lord Dumfrey. Lovely fellow, isn't he?"

Thorsby sharply inhaled his brandy and then spluttered most of it back onto his stiff white cuff. He coughed and thumped at his chest, turning red in the face.

Stuart held back his own laugh with effort. Thorsby would find her describing a high-ranking member of the peerage a “lovely fellow” outrageous.

Thorsby stared at her, the red of his face deepening and Stuart felt a touch of alarm. He rested his fingers against her elbow, trying to make it look casual, then squeezed a little. It was all the warning he could manage.

Bian did not even glance at him. Her smile stayed fixed in place as she spoke again. “I accompanied the Marquess of Harrington and Lady Beaugard. We met at Windsor.”

“Town?” Thorsby said sharply.

“Castle,” Bian returned.

Even Stuart blinked at that one. Since the Queen had virtually retired to Windsor after the death of her husband, only the most important and influential lords found themselves in audience with her. Stuart had yet to meet her and he knew that Thorsby had only met her once, during his formal investiture as the Marquess.

“Indeed,” Thorsby said at last. He had been neatly outmaneuvered by Bian’s references. “I didn’t realize that Lord Harrington was here tonight. I must pay my respects. Do you know where I might find him?”

It was a poor attempt at bluffing her. Thorsby had been outclassed by the lady he towered over and all three of them knew it.

“Richard is in the smoking salon, with Lord Dumfrey, I believe.” Bian bowed her head. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Lord Thorsby.”

Thorsby grunted and hurried away.

Stuart let loose his laughter as he turned to face Bian. “That was perfect,” he told her. His mirth faded. She really was the most lovely woman he’d ever met. “Thank you for saving me.”

“My pleasure.”

"How did you know?"

"Your face is very expressive." She smiled and it seemed to light the room. "You were not the only one observing tonight." Her cheeks dimpled with mischief and her eyes twinkled. "I, at least, pretended to be serving myself a glass of punch."

"What were you observing?" Stuart pressed. He would learn more about her if it killed him.

"You."

"You have been watching me search for you?" he asked. "You let me make a fool of myself circling around this mausoleum, while you watched?"

"I did not see you until you came into this room." She tilted her head a little, looking up at him as if she were measuring him. "You were searching for me?"

He realized he had exposed himself. "You make a habit of observing, Bian?" he returned stiffly.

"Sometimes watching can be very profitable, especially among these people." She waved her gloved hand back over her shoulder, toward the rest of the household. "Her Highness urged me to do so whenever —"

"My God, you really have met with the Queen!" The words shot from him as he properly interpreted what she was saying.

She did not seem to mind his interruption. Again, she tilted her head to study him curiously. "Did you think I was lying?"

"I think...you're capable of it. You let Thorsby think we were close friends."

"You played along with it. Doesn't that make you as much a liar as me?" She put her hands behind her back, like a small schoolgirl reporting to her headmistress. "Do I not get my tour of the conservatory now?"

The linking of her hands behind her back had a remarkable effect on her *décolletage*. Stuart found his gaze drawn there, yanked there and held with invisible pincers, despite the fact that as a gentleman, he never looked directly at a lady's chest in public.

He could feel his heart begin to beat with the old excitement that came from the type of hunt he preferred. Was she doing it deliberately? Her breasts were pushed toward him, lifted up by the heavy boning of her corset and almost offered to him. She was petite but her breasts were lush, coffee-cream globes.

He wrenched his gaze away and looked into her eyes. The same amusement was sparkling there and he knew she had done it deliberately.

She was testing him.

Had she been testing him all along?

But now she had moved the game onto pleasurable territory he considered his own. He relaxed and smiled at her, feeling more sure of himself. "I would be honored to guide you through Lord Dumfrey's famed conservatory," he said, holding out his arm.

Chapter Three

Bian slipped her hand under Stuart's arm and realized that she was trembling.

From the safety of Windsor Castle, becoming intimate with Stuart Sutherland-Bruce had seemed to be no great challenge. Certainly not something she hadn't already accomplished at least once before.

He was quite tall. And he had very blond hair, almost white—also unusual to her. But it was his eyes that were the most remarkable. They were quite blue and had a way of looking right through you...

She wrenched her mind back to the duties Richard had assigned her and took another deep breath. So far, she had been successful. She knew she had managed to jolt Stuart Sutherland-Bruce's complacency. She had shocked him.

Now she needed to keep him off-balance. It would be a challenge but not one she hadn't accepted before. This man would prove to be no different from others, she told herself firmly.

She smiled up at him as he pushed open the glass doors that swung onto the famed conservatory. All the gas lights were lit around the edges of the large glass building and there were lamps dotting the major pathways among the greenery. It was a delightful room...and a perfect location for lovers.

Pleased, Bian allowed Stuart to lead her along the primary stone pathway, holding aside large fern leaves and branches for her, until they reached the centre. Here, the path widened into a small paved circle. In the middle stood a tall lamp. Beneath it was a cast-iron bench adorned with tapestry cushions for pampered bottoms.

They came to a mutual halt beside the bench. Stuart looked at her, his eyes narrowed speculatively.

Bian was familiar with that expression upon other male faces, so she glanced to her left and gave a delighted cry. "Why, a Dau Cat!"

She dropped his arm, stepped around the bench and moved over to the opposite edge of the clearing. There was a man-high bush there with vivid pink colored flowers with elongated stamens and she touched them gently.

"A...what?" Stuart asked, coming up behind her. She could feel the warm of his body radiating against her shoulder.

"Dau Cat," she repeated. "I think it has another name here." She frowned. "Is it Fuchsia?"

"I have no idea," he replied easily. "I don't spend my time inside conservatories studying the flowers."

She laughed lightly. "This is only the second conservatory I've ever stepped into, so I suppose you could say that I do study the flowers. The first time I was picking roses for Queen Victoria, who wanted a particular yellow one."

"You haven't been in England long, have you?" It was an unexpected question, a complete departure from the conversational directional she had been trying to lead it.

She turned to face him. "On the contrary. I grew up here."

"Yet you've only been in two conservatories. Did you grow up poor?"

She laughed to hide her true reaction. This man was *clever*. And she had to watch herself more carefully. "I don't think we were considered poor. I was educated at Cambridge University."

He was visibly surprised by this. "Which college?" he said sharply.

"Oh, Girton, of course. Newnham is just a little bit too new, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," he said slowly. "I studied at Cambridge, you know."

"Yes." She smiled at him again, enjoying the secondary wave of shock on his face.

"What are you doing?" he murmured, studying her.

"I thought we were talking."

He shook his head. "Are you trying to confuse me deliberately? You say you grew up here, yet you name plants with foreign names. 'I think it has another name here' is what you said. That's something people would say if they've only recently arrived here."

Damn. She stared at him, her pulse racing. Oh, she had been far too lax with this one. "People who have just arrived in England would say something like 'we call this Dau Cat. I don't know what *they* call it here.' I didn't say that."

"But you did imply that you know what it is called somewhere else better than what you know it to be called here in England. That means you've lived elsewhere...and for long enough to be more familiar with that foreign name."

She nodded. "Vietnamese. *Dau Cat* is Vietnamese. I was born there and lived the first eight years of my life there, until I came to live in England where I grew up. And since finishing my studies at Cambridge, I have spent most of my time overseas."

He took a deep breath. She watched his chest lift and fall. Relief? Fury? It was hard to tell and that was a frightening thought. She *always* could tell what a man was thinking. Richard had called it mind-reading and used her gift as he needed to.

Stuart brought his hand up to her face and for the first time she really appreciated how much bigger than her he really was. His hand felt so large against her face. His thumb touched the corner of her eye. It was a simple brush that left a sweep of tingling, sparkling flesh behind and made her shudder.

"You are not fully Vietnamese," he said softly.

Her heart beat hard, for the question that naturally followed such an observation was one she would not answer.

But instead he wrapped his hands around her waist and smiled as the tips of his fingers and thumbs met. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he told her. He brought her toward him with his hands and lowered his head. She thought, perhaps, he would kiss her but his lips instead pressed gently against the flesh of her upper breast. "I don't care who you are. You are a princess to me."

"And to many others too," she said lightly, trying to keep her voice steady as his warm lips trailed across her breasts.

"I don't care," he muttered and his hands slid around her waist more firmly, holding her steady. She could not help the little hitch of breath that escaped her as the tip of his tongue swept across the sensitive flesh of her breast, just above the line of her dress.

His head lifted at the sound and his eyes narrowed. "At last," he said and his voice was hoarse.

She swallowed. "You believed I was indifferent to you, Lord Sutherland-Bruce?"

"After so many others have had the privilege of calling you 'Princess'?" The corner of his mouth quirked upward. "Yes, I believed you were."

She did not correct his assumption. She could not afford to. Instead, she gave a small laugh. "You would have me play the hunter? Is that not an unusual role for you? The hunted?"

He didn't laugh but his smile traveled to his eyes and lit them up. "Perhaps I just want you to believe you are the hunter. You've heard of the fox lying as if he were dead until his prey is close enough to leap upon?" And his hands gave her waist a squeeze, drawing her closer to him.

"You don't like being hunted, do you, my lord?"

"My father is the lord," he said, suddenly irritable. "I am Stuart."

"You would avoid my question with such a miserable change of subject?"

He took a deep breath. She could see him reaching for calmness and that more than any word he had spoken told her that she had jolted him badly.

And suddenly, she felt a sadness she could barely explain. Why should she feel sad when she was succeeding?

"Why do you insist on hunting me?" Stuart whispered.

"I thought you could use a change in roles," she said truthfully.

"Is that what you're doing?" He shook his head, as if to clear his thoughts. "Who are you? I don't know you at all!"

"When you are the hunter, do you take time to make sure your quarry knows you?"

"For love, I would take that time."

And his eyes widened...as if what he had said shocked him too.

Bian could feel her heart thundering in her chest. He was too big, too close, all she could think of was the need to have his lips on her breast one more time but this...this...this was not part of the game.

She trembled, for she knew they had both strayed onto territory neither of them could afford to travel. She had to find the exit for both of them. The security of the country she loved would be in danger if she did not.

With reluctance tugging at every syllable, she made herself speak lightly. "A love match? Stuart, you're too much the cynic to believe in love."

"A cynic?" Suddenly, he had turned her loose and swung away from her. "I suppose you could call me that. The type of hunting I prefer usually is the sport of cynics."

"Can it be the sport of anyone but a cynic?" she asked.

"If it is purely a sport, no."

She could see his sigh even standing behind him, for his wide shoulders lifted and fell with it.

"And if it was not purely a sport, what else might it be?" she prompted him.

"A distraction." His answer was soft but without hesitation.

"A distraction from what?" She did not move toward him, or dare breathe unless it broke the moment and his answer would be lost.

His hand curled into a tight fist. "Duty...duty without love." He looked over his shoulder at her. "I don't know who you really are but I already know that you are more free than any other person here this evening. All but you are bound to marry and

multiply in the appropriate manner.” His smile was sour. “Is that not a wonderful irony?”

She grasped his arm and turned him to face her again. “Stuart, no. That isn’t true, even of you. There is always a way...” She bit her lip, for to explain further would bring them both back to more forbidden territory. So instead, she reached up to hold his face in her hands and draw him to her.

His lips were gentle but there was strength there and a warmth that gave lie to the cold, cynical hunter he professed to be. Even though he allowed her to control the kiss, his arm curled around her waist and lifted her to him.

“Perfect,” his lips whispered against hers. “My perfect princess.”

The whispered words seemed to unlock a deep well of hidden need. It exploded through her, in a scalding rush that left her trembling. “More,” she demanded of him. “Please...more.”

All she could think of was the need for ultimate pleasure. The tips of her breasts were sensitive to the point where she could feel them chaffing against the linen of her underdress. The folds of flesh between her legs were throbbing with it.

She coaxed his head to her breasts, where they swelled against the low-cut bodice. Why had she worn a corset this evening? She could give him no easy access and she longed for his hands and lips to scald their imprint upon them.

As his tongue seared across the flesh of her upper breasts, she almost wept with the small frustration.

He grew still against her. “Shhh...” he warned.

She heard the sound of people moving through the conservatory, somewhere behind them. “They are far away,” she dismissed and turned so her back was to the central path. Her skirts pushed up against the iron bench and a solution flared in her imagination. She lifted her foot and rested her shoe on the curving iron of the bench, carefully keeping her knee thrusting forward.

"Are you proposing what I think?" Stuart whispered.

"Come here," she insisted, reached for him.

Puzzled, he stepped closer to her, so that his leg was pushing against her inner thigh, trapping the layers of gown and petticoats between their limbs. She pushed the layers aside impatiently and drew his hand beneath. She rested the long fingers over her bare thigh, just above the garter of her stocking. The touch of his flesh against hers was almost shocking and she caught her breath.

"How brazen is your hunting, my lord?" she breathed. "You were not above proposing an unmarried lady meet you alone, on the corner of a public street."

"Challenge me and you will lose," he breathed and his thumb stroked in a maddening little circle across her inner thigh. His eyes looked directly into hers and appeared more intensely blue than ever she had seen them.

"Oh, I hope to lose most handsomely," she said and caught her breath again as his hand slid higher under her skirts. She was acutely aware of his thumb's proximity to her privates. The little nub of flesh at the very centre gave a pulse of anticipation.

"We are merely conversing," she told him, her voice unsteady and her words hurried. "My back is to the path and they will see that your hands are not on my waist."

"You have courage, my lady. I give you that." His own breath was as uneven as hers. His gaze remained locked on hers as his hand stroked its hot way to the centre of her. As his fingers slid into the core, the shudder of pleasure she could not voice made her clamp down on him. As his fingers worked inside her, his thumb slipped through the heated moisture to her nub and stroked it.

She could not look away from his steady gaze, even as she clamped her jaw against the groan that pushed at her lips. "More...please," she whispered, when it had passed.

"At once, my lady," he breathed.

The others were nearly there. She could hear their voices, even individual words. There were at least three of them and two were women. But she could not spare

attention to learn what they spoke of, or even care that they drew nearer. For the wonderful peak of pleasure was building in her. She recognized from her own solitary adventures of the flesh that she had reached a point of no return. In a few seconds it would be upon her.

She gripped Stuart's jacket, holding herself upright, as her legs trembled. Her eyes wanted to close, yet she struggled to focus on his gaze.

"Yes, close them. Let me see the pleasure take you," he whispered and his voice was hoarse and thick with excitement. Hearing it evoked a thrill that swept through her and brought her pleasure to a swift, hard climax. She fought to hide the spasms as his fingers refused to spare her. With each stroke, he delivered another jolting, searing peak.

The others were directly behind her but she hardly cared. She was a slave to her own exhilaration and could barely control the external signs of it. Her breathing was shallow and jagged.

Not until the others had turned the bend in the pathway and were out of sight did Stuart spare her. He withdrew his hand and held her upright as she recovered. Her trembling was so severe that she could barely manage to return her skirts to proper order. She let herself lean against him and closed her eyes. His heartbeat was no less frantic than hers.

He simply held her, remaining silent.

In that warm, mutual silence, Bian realized what she had done and because of it, what she must do now.

She took a deep breath and pushed herself away from him. She gave herself the necessary seconds she needed to gather her courage, by fussing with the lace at her shoulder. Then she managed to look him in the eye without flinching. "Good evening, my lord."

As she turned away, she caught the surprise in his face but she made herself walk away.

And not look back.

* * * * *

It took long minutes of ringing the bell and knocking on the door before her summons was answered. Finally, the fluttering glow of a candle showed in the glass panel beside the door and the door itself opened a crack and the candle thrust through.

"Bian, my God!" Patrick himself had answered the door.

Thankfully, Bian allowed her polite mask to slip. "Patrick, I'm so sorry...but I could not return home. He would find me there."

The door thrust open and Patrick wrapped his gown more firmly around him and reached for her arm. "For the love of..." He helped her inside but she could make it no further. Finally, the trembling she had been holding back leapt to its full strength and she let herself fall back against the wall to prop herself up. But it wasn't enough. Slowly, she sank down to the floor.

Patrick sat upon the lower steps of the stairs and rested the candlestick beside him. "Would you like some brandy?"

She shook her head and tried to remove her gloves. It was impossible. She gave up and wrapped her arms around her. "I just need...to rest a little."

Patrick gripped his hands together. Twisted them. In the flickering candlelight his face was full of shadows and concern. "It was him, wasn't it?"

She barely had the strength to nod.

"What happened? Did he hurt you...?"

"Not physically," she whispered. Her answer set her trembling again.

Patrick's hands grew still as he studied her. "You're becoming personally involved with him, aren't you?"

She couldn't bear to answer. To answer would be to confirm that she had become weak.

"Bian," Patrick said chidingly, "It's not like you to confuse business with pleasure."

"Is that what it is?" she shot back. "Pleasure? If it's such a pleasure, then why is it that all I can feel is pain?" She unwrapped her arms and grabbed at her chest, over her heart. "Here." She squeezed her temples. "And here."

Patrick was like a statue. "He betrayed his country, Bian. *Your* country."

Hot tears squeezed from her eyes and scalded their way down her chest. They were not a release, the ache that accompanied them made her believe her heart might seize from the pain of it. "I know," she told him.

Patrick gave a little helpless gesture with his shoulders and hands. "What are you going to do, then?" he asked. After all, she had always known what she was going to do. It was strange for him to even be in a position where he doubted she knew her way forward.

"I don't know," she told him truthfully.

Chapter Four

Bian avoided her townhouse for the next three days. It was an easy enough matter—she spent most of her time in the bed she had borrowed from Patrick and slept whenever her mind would quiet enough for her to do so.

Patrick's staff were all blessed with a very English lack of curiosity and left her alone.

By the third day both her body and her mind were screaming in protest at the lack of activity. She wrapped Patrick's oversized robe around her and joined him at the breakfast table. As he read the *Times*, she buttered a crumpet and poured herself a cup of tea. When she bit into her crumpet, she saw that Patrick was studying her over the top of the broadsheet.

"And does Britannia still rule the waves, or did the world as we know it disintegrate while I slept?" she asked.

He folded the newspaper and put it aside. "Have you decided what to do next, Bian?"

"There is no decision to be made. Richard charged me with certain duties." She glanced at the maid standing at the door. "We both know what those duties are," she said carefully. "I must go back."

"To him," he said flatly.

"I've spent three days wrestling with it, Patrick. Please don't make me go through it again. I must do this. It is my duty."

Patrick pursed his lips, considering the matter. "And this is the life you chose," he muttered. "Does it always tear you apart so, Bian?"

"Never," she declared.

"You forget. I saw you three nights ago."

She dropped her gaze to the Wedgwood plate. "Until now," she amended. "But it makes no difference. I must go back."

"And how are you going to reinsert yourself into Sutherland-Bruce's life, now you have disappeared for three days?"

That was the only pleasing fact she had. "I took the trouble to make sure he thought me unpredictable. So..." She shrugged. "I just had to go shopping. I was so bored with my winter wardrobe and besides, it is from last season. And Worth had a showing in London these two days past..."

"He did?" Patrick said blankly. "How on earth do you know that? You're one of the last women I know to be interested in fashion and you've been buried beneath my quilt, besides."

"It's on the back of the paper you were reading," Bian told him. "Tight sleeves are *de rigueur* again." She rose from the table. "Can your man collect some things from my townhouse for me? I'll write a note for my maid."

Patrick smiled. "If you insist on such an absurd story, then you're going to have to go shopping, you realize? It's simply unheard of for a woman to come home from a two-day shopping venture without a single hatbox or dress box to show for it."

Bian stiffened, staring at him, feeling a genuine horror curl through her. "Perhaps I could say I was lost at sea, instead?" she suggested.

Patrick threw his head back and laughed.

* * * * *

Patrick's butler returned with a morning gown and other essentials, which allowed Bian to appear in public once more. Dressed in a dark purple velvet suit, which offered some protection against the damp wind gusting along the streets, Bian climbed into her carriage and snuggled under the lap robe. She gave directions for Madame Evamy's on

Bond Street, with a sigh. It was the only establishment she knew. Madam Evamy would have to provide the props she needed to verify her sudden urge to replenish her wardrobe.

Bond Street was as busy as usual. The damp air rising from the Thames and whistling down the street had not discouraged business in the slightest.

Bian's driver dropped the steps for her and handed her out, along with a caution in his rough accent, "Wotch it, Miss Bian. I couldn't get no closer and the gutters are a right mess."

She took a long step on to the footpath and looked up.

Stuart was there.

Bian smothered her gasp of shock with her gloved hand, staring up at him. He towered over her, large in his dark overcoat. His hair was ruffled and his chin unshaved. He looked like he had gone for a month without sleep.

"Dear lord! Stuart! Where did you come from? You startled me."

His hands were pushed deep into his pockets. "Who are you?" he asked. His voice was as rough as his chin. "Why can I not stop thinking of you?"

She looked around for observers. Her driver stood with the carriage door open, watching with a wary eye. "It's all right," she assured him, for he looked like he wanted to leap to her defense. It wouldn't be the first time he had wielded his blackjack for her and she knew the damage he could inflict. "I know this man."

"Ye sure, miss? 'e don't look all that good t'me."

"I'm sure. But wait a moment." She turned back to Stuart. "Where have you been, to look as you do?" Genuine concern pushed the question from her. He looked like he had been to hell and back.

"Following you," he rasped. "I needed to know...needed to..." He stepped closer to her and cupped her cheek with a hand that trembled. "God, who are you? I've not slept since that night—"

It was more than she wanted her driver to hear. She glanced over her shoulder but the driver was staring at the passing traffic, apparently stone deaf.

"Come," she told Stuart, tugging at his sleeve. "Come with me." She climbed back into her carriage and gestured for him to board too. She knew there was a risk she would be seen in a carriage alone with a man but didn't care. The raw emotion pouring from him was making her own heart sing with joy and her insides roil with need. It didn't matter that this man had betrayed his country. That she was here in London to find proof of his deeds that would survive cross-examination in court became a distant fact she could barely bother acknowledging, when before it had driven her every action.

She could only feel the pleasure of being with him, even as disheveled as he was. His ragged, exhausted, driven state sent a shiver of excitement through her. She had brought him to this.

She settled back into her corner of the bench and spoke quietly to her driver, who stood patiently at the door. "The townhouse."

"No," Stuart said sharply, as he sat beside her. He gave the driver an address that she recognized.

"Your house?" she said. "My reputation would not withstand the impact if I were seen entering it without a chaperone."

"I suspect your reputation has survived far more than a peccadillo of this magnitude," Stuart said, with a piercing glance at her.

She bit her lip, then nodded to her driver, who tugged at his hat brim and shut the door.

As the carriage jogged into motion, Stuart swiveled so that he was facing her, his long legs taking up most of the bench. "Who are you?" he said.

"I am Bian," she said honestly.

"A mystery princess with the highest connections in the land," he said. He laid his arm to rest along the back of the seat. It was a casual movement but the fingers curled

into a tight fist. "You haven't been home for three days." His blue gaze pinned her to the seat, giving her no quarter. "When your carriage turned up this morning, I followed it. You know where it led me."

The tension emanating from him was so harsh the air between them seemed to vibrate with it. "Patrick's townhouse," she answered. His tension was affecting her. She could feel a tightening in her own gut and the hurried beat of her heart. Longing swept through her. He was so close...all she wanted was for him to take her in his arms. To take her, utterly and completely. She was moist in her woman's place, ready for him.

He nodded at her answer. "Patrick is another good friend, then?"

"Of a sort," she agreed. "We do not share a bed," she added.

"Or a sofa?" he returned swiftly.

"Patrick does not own a sofa."

His gaze drilled into her. "And how did you know that the address I just gave your driver was mine, just now?"

She held her face steady and managed not to give a guilty start. "You gave my maid your card, when you called." Her heart was really hammering now.

He stared at her for a very long moment. Did he weigh up her answer? Finally, he released her and turned his gaze to a loose stitch in the upholstery of the bench, which he picked at with his fingers. Again, it was meant to be a casual movement but the coiled, tightly contained energy in him made his hand shake, even as it kept the rest of his body as poised and still as a snake ready to strike.

She swallowed and her throat clicked with dryness. "You've grown tired of being the hunted already, Stuart?"

He made an impatient movement and pushed his hand through his pale blond hair. Now she understood why it looked so ruffled.

"This is no *hunt*, Bian. You must surely know that. In five days you have..." He looked out the window, as if he was suddenly unsure of the wisdom of what he was

about to say. Then he turned back to face her and the blue eyes blazed with an emotion she could barely name. "You have carved your way into here," he said as he pressed his fist against his chest. "And here." This time, he pressed the tips of his fingers against his temples. "And the pain is unlike anything I have ever suffered before. You are my doom, Bian."

Understanding flared in Bian, as she recognized the same pain as that in herself. It was the agony of knowing she was completely at the mercy of the most unexpected, overwhelming...the most *dangerous* emotion in the world.

"Love," Stuart whispered and looked back out the window, as if it were too difficult for him to look at her directly.

Her sigh blurred as tears filled her eyes. They were the same hot and achingly hard tears that she had shed while sitting on Patrick's parquet floor three nights before. At that time, she had not recognized them for what they were.

But recognizing them did not relieve them. Her chest locked with the anguish building in her. Her tears slid down her face and her vision cleared.

Stuart still gazed out the window, as if he were afraid to see her reaction to his confession. "Why can I not stop thinking about you?"

"Because I made sure you could not," she told him.

He looked at her then, hope in his gaze. "You really were the hunter, then," he said, with growing wonder.

I still am. I must be. But she could not speak the words aloud, so instead she indulged in her rabid need and reached for him.

It was all the encouragement he needed. He gathered her into his arms and pressed her back against the seat as he kissed her with a thoroughness that left her breathless and lightheaded. His lips were warm and commanding and he was so large that she felt small and weak and deliciously feminine.

"No corset," he whispered and groaned as his hands circled her waist and gently pressed inward, to feel only flesh beneath her clothing.

She shed her gloves and nimbly unfastened the buttons on her jacket.

As he realized what she was doing, his breath caught in a tiny hitch that was deeply exciting. He reached up to pull the curtains over the windows with sharp single tugs of each hand, as she pushed aside her velvet jacket.

She realized her hands trembled as badly as his. "No corset," she confirmed.

He slid his big hand inside her jacket, to rest it against her torso. His thumb brushed against the cotton camisole she wore beneath the jacket and the weight of his hand pulled the fabric taut over her breast. The cotton was fine enough that the dark areolas were visible, circling the nub of her nipple.

"I have dreamed of this," Stuart said, with a groan. He lowered himself to his knees in front of her. "I have thought of little else but this for... It seems like an age has passed while I sweated over not having you."

She lifted his hand higher and placed it on her breast. "I wanted this, three nights ago," she assured him. "What I took was a compromise." She tugged at the ribbon holding the camisole closed and it snagged in a tight little knot. She sighed but it emerged as a frustrated whimper. "Tear it," she told him. "Rip it."

Stuart's eyes seemed to grow even more blue, piercing her with their intensity. He snagged the neck of her camisole in both hands and tore the garment open down to the waist. Cooler air bathed her heated breasts and she took a sharp, excited breath.

"Beautiful," Stuart murmured, his voice thick and heavy with excitement. His hands delved inside and came to rest against her torso, again. The thumbs stroked the flesh there and sent ripples of delight through her. Without intention, she arched, aware that the movement thrust her breasts at him. Offering them.

"Please...more," she murmured, deliberately repeating the plea she had made in the conservatory. Her nipples were almost painfully erect and hard, ready for his touch.

His breath escape him in a rush. "God...!" His hands slid upward and she held her breath, anticipating his direction. But it did not come.

Instead, she felt the lightest stroking just beneath the swell of her breasts. So close...so close. She groaned her disappointment but the stroking fluttered up against the globes of flesh, teasing in little, irregular touches.

He pushed her jacket off her shoulders and down her arms, so it effectively pinned them to her side. With a delicate movement, he picked up the straps of her ruined camisole and pushed them down her arms, as well. Now she was fully exposed to him. His fingers tickled and caressed her flesh over her shoulders, gradually moving down the slope of her breasts. He slipped his fingers into the valley between her breasts and brushed them along the side.

"Your teasing will kill me," she groaned.

"You will beg for mercy before the end," he promised her. He was watching her every reaction. Reveling in it, she realized.

He swayed toward her and she caught her breath. But again, it was misdirection. His hot tongue slid between her breasts, leaving a path of moisture, before his lips pressed against her cleavage.

Finally, his hands tightened around her waist and he brought her to him. She went willingly, arching hard to give him access. And this time his lips circled her nipple. She felt moist heat before all thought was interrupted by the sizzling pleasure that speared through her as his tongue nudged the nipple. She cried aloud and clutched at him to both hold herself up and to keep him bending over her so that he would continue to suckle at her breast.

Then his teeth nipped the bud and her head rolled back, her eyes closing. The pure, primordial excitement coursing through her was stealing coherent thought. She was left with ravening need, instead. It clawed through her, demanding satisfaction. Her body throbbed with it.

She writhed on the bench as Stuart transferred his attention to the other breast. The nipping, the stroking, it was driving her crazy with need. She realized that she was pummeling him with her fists, when she did not clutch at him with a desperate grip. But he remained bent over her, alternatively attacking each breast, until she not only writhed but panted and moaned her need to be fulfilled. She was reduced to a wanton who could think of nothing but the need to have him inside her.

"Please...!" she gasped, tugging at him, unable to form the words needed to explain her desperation.

He smiled a slow smile. His eyes were hooded and the big chest rose and fell rapidly. "What is it you want, hmmm?"

He shrugged off his overcoat, which left him, shockingly, in only a shirt and trousers. The shirt had no collar or cuffs.

And the trousers were straining over the magnificent bulge at the junction of his thighs.

But before she could consider the view at length, his hands slipped beneath the hem of her skirt and found their way to her calves, where they emerged from the top of her boots. She wore silk stockings. Stuart's fingers sliding over the delicate silk felt deliciously decadent and thrilling.

"Mmm..." he whispered. He flipped up the skirt and petticoats in one movement, so that they folded back over Bian's thighs, exposing her knees and calves to his gaze. And again, she found herself holding her breath as his fingers slid up the length of her calves. Then back down again, to circle around the top of her boots. Then back up again. First, at the outer side of her knees, then the front. Then, finally, the inner knee.

Her breath hitched and her whole body shivered as his fingertips circled around her inner knees. She had not known such a mundane location could possibly be that sensitive.

But when Stuart pushed his shoulders between her knees, spreading her wide open, then slid his tongue against the flesh there, she knew she had judged too soon. The

shivery, silvery explosion sweeping through her was a different sort of delight. Even through the stocking, she could feel the heat of his tongue and the sweep of it across her flesh.

In reaction, she tried to sit up but Stuart pushed gently on her shoulder so that she was slouched back against the seat once more. "Stay there," he said. "I like the view."

As he spoke, his hands spread out over her knees and pushed her skirts high, right up against her abdomen and hips.

She was fully exposed to his gaze, now. Never had she felt so wicked. So terribly aroused. She tried to reach for him, to bring him to her but he resisted her feeble tug on his jacket. "I won't be hurried," he murmured to her.

"I'll die!" she warned.

He smiled. "I'll do my best to make sure you think you have," he assured her.

The shiver of anticipation that rippled through her in response was more of a shudder.

His thumbs were still doing their maddening little circles on the insides of her knees and her legs fell open even more. "Please...!" was all she could manage and her voice was distorted by the power of her arousal.

Stuart bent once more to nibble at her inner thigh. The mussed blond hair tickled the other limb. She found her hands on his shoulders, squeezing, encouraging him. She knew what Stuart intended and wanted it with a power that shocked her. No man had ever kissed her in such an intimate place. She had never allowed it. It would take too much trust for her to ever willingly agree to such a profound act of submission.

His lips and tongue and teeth played a medley, as they worked their way higher. It seemed to take a small ice age plus a week before finally, *finally*, his lips touched her folds. He did not linger there. He nuzzled her, opening her up, until finally his tongue stroked her very centre.

The explosion of pleasure threw her head back, thrust her hips forehead. She was aware that she was digging her fingers into Stuart's shoulders. She could feel the warmth of flexed muscles beneath the rumpled fabric. But the thought was a distant one. Overriding any conscious thought was the need for *more*. It battered at her in silent voice. Very close was the nirvana of pleasure that she had learned to enjoy from her own experimentation.

But then he stopped and pulled away from her.

She gripped the shirt with a desperation that surprised even her. "No! Don't stop, please."

He was fumbling at her jacket, drawing it over the ruined camisole. "We must," he said in a very low voice. "The carriage has halted."

She looked through the windowpane. It looked very bright out there, much brighter than the blustery autumn day had begun. The carriage had, indeed, halted.

Stuart dropped her skirt back over her knees and she sat back up into the iron-stiff posture of a lady wearing a corset. It was such an automatic thing, that posture. But with it came a return of her senses.

She could barely look at Stuart as he slipped into his coat and sat upon the bench beside her, just as the driver's head appeared in the window and he opened the door.

Stuart helped her onto the footpath and his hand against her ungloved fingers sent a small quiver rippling through her. Her body was still perched close to the apex of pleasure. Only a little more encouragement would be needed to reach the pinnacle. She was mortally aware of every tingling inch of flesh, of the rub of frayed cotton against her breasts beneath the jacket, of the bareness of her body beneath her skirt and the swish of her petticoats against her bare thighs as she moved.

She blinked quickly, making her eyes adjust to the change in light. She looked around as Stuart took her arm. "Dismiss your driver," he told her in an undertone.

Bian could feel her eyes widen as full sense returned to her. She glanced at her driver. He had been a comforting presence almost everywhere she went in

London...how could she send him away when she stood with her arm held by a man who had betrayed his country? The man who, once she discovered the proof she had been sent to find, would be executed for all the lives his crimes had destroyed.

Bian, what do you think you're doing? She stared at Stuart, dismay circling her. How could she go with him? She knew what awaited her inside the elegant house before them.

He could see her alarm, for he instantly swung to face her. With a quick glance up and down the quiet street for nosy observers, he took her face in his hand. The blue eyes would not let her go. "Do you trust me, Bian?" he said quietly. "Speak the truth in your heart, not the requirements of a modest lady."

"The truth?" She took a deep breath that shook. "Yes, I trust you." And it *was* the truth. "I trust you with my life." *Yet how can that be?* She could not reconcile this truth with his real identity and the conflict made her tremble anew.

"I would sooner carve out my own heart and lay it at your feet, than cause you any harm, Bian. *Any* harm," he repeated, with a force behind it that told her he spoke not only of the physical. "I give you my word."

She was drowning in the sky blue of his eyes, swimming in their power. So she deliberately pulled her gaze away. It dropped to his lips. They were full, warm...and she remembered what they had been doing to her only minutes before. This time the shudder that rocked her began the throbbing between her legs. And she was back to wanting him with a potency that almost robbed her of coherent thought.

"Dismiss the driver," she whispered.

Chapter Five

It took Bian's assurances before the suspicious driver curtly nodded and climbed back up to his seat. Stuart had seen the outline of the blackjack in his pocket and knew the driver was ready to physically protect her. He was impressed with the man's loyalty.

So as the carriage pulled away and he led Bian toward the house, Stuart felt absurdly like letting out a whoop of joy, right here on the street. Perhaps even jumping with it.

For Bian trusted him. More, perhaps. This wonderful creature of such startling contrasts and mysteries consented to being with him. Had the Queen herself pinned a medal to his chest, he would not have been more euphoric. Certainly, he would not have been aroused like he was now.

His body with thick with it. The need to possess her completely and thoroughly had been driving him for the last three days, to the point where eating and sleeping had held little interest. Now...in the next few moments, he would achieve the vision that had haunted him.

He could have taken her in the carriage. He was utterly sure of it. Bian's surrender had been complete and he could have done anything he wanted with her. But instead he had found himself pleasuring her to the exclusion of anything else. And he had stepped out of the carriage with a deeper state of excitement than any he had ever experienced.

He opened the door with his key and at Bian's lifted brow, explained, "I sent the servants home for the day. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts." He could not help the smile that formed. "I had no idea it would prove to be such a benefit."

But she did not smile in return. Her black eyes held no mirth at all. Instead, she brushed his hand from the door handle, shut the door behind them and threw the latch. Then she grabbed the lapels of his coat and drew him to the middle of the oriental carpet in the front hallway.

He let himself be drawn, curious to see where she would take this. Then, as she drew his coat from his shoulders, he realized that this was the spot where she intended to lead him. Right here in the hall.

"There is no sofa here," he pointed out. His voice was thick with the almost overwhelming need surging through him.

"But there is a warm rug." She dropped the coat over the newel post at the bottom of the stairs and stopped in front of him again. This time she tackled his shirt buttons with her small, swift fingers and pulled it from him. Instead of draping it over the post, she tossed it in the general direction of his coat. It fluttered to land on the stairs.

She was already tackling his trousers, with an effectiveness that told him she was familiar with the workings of a man's pants.

"You are not a maiden for true," he said.

"You already guessed that truth, days ago," she chided, working at the last of the buttons on his trousers. "Besides, you are no gentleman, either. Not if we are to judge by what you have done to me these last few days, or by what will happen in the next little while."

"I'm glad you are not a maiden," he said swiftly. "Virgins hold few attractions. Their minds are too narrow and they are too swift to judge."

She smiled up at him, as she slid the last button on his trousers free. The smile did not reach her eyes but the little flash of concern it raised in him was wiped clear as she dropped his trousers to his ankles and exposed him to her gaze.

"Wonderful," she breathed, staring right at his stiff and throbbing member.

He tried to hide his smile. He had not known that female appreciation of his cock would please him so.

"Remove the rest of your clothes," she commanded.

He stripped himself of shoes and stockings and the puddle of trousers and threw them in the same general direction as his shirt. There were no other garments to remove.

When he stood still once more, she circled him slowly. The velvet of her gown swished over the floorboards, until she came to a standstill in front of him. Then she laid her small hands on his chest. "In one act I was a maiden," she said. "I have never allowed another man the liberty you enjoyed in the carriage."

"I appreciate the honor." Her fingers were stroking his chest and although he had considered that to be one of his least receptive areas, her movements were sending small ripples of pleasure through him. He tried to ignore it so he could finish his thought. "Yet you have surprised me once more," he accused her. "So often, you seem to me to be as old as God...and as wise. How can any act of man be new to you?"

She smiled again. "This is another act from which I have held myself aloof," she told him. And she leaned forward the few inches necessary to plant her lips upon his abdomen. They swiftly trailed downwards and his cock pulsed hard as he realized her intentions, sending a thrill through him. He sucked in his breath as her hot hands cupped his testicles and her breath blew on his cock. She examined it closely, then carefully wrapped one hand around its girth. Watching her do it was more arousing than his imagination had ever painted it.

Her mouth slid over the head and he was bombarded with impressions, the heat of her mouth, the thrill as her lips slipped over the ridge of flesh, moisture, the touch of her teeth on his vulnerable flesh. It melded into such an incredible rush of bliss that he groaned and his knees weakened. He reached for the newel post but it was too far away, so he fisted his hands and squeezed tight.

Her mouth moved upon him, sending another bolt fizzing through him. And again. He closed his eyes and heard himself panting and groaning. She was orchestrating the most intense pleasure he had ever experienced. He knew he would never forget this moment. Ever.

"Stop. Stop, if you care at all, Bian," he ground out, as the point of no return threatened to spill through him.

She stopped immediately and he sank to his knees, recovering. Bian simply smiled, her dimples dancing. Her lips were moist and red. "Did I attend the matter correctly?" she asked.

"I have no basis for comparison," he confessed, his voice hoarse with the strain his excitement was putting upon him.

She looked startled—perhaps for the first time since he had known her. "Truly?" she whispered.

"Truly. But if I am to judge by effectiveness alone, then I judge you a master of the art." He cleared his throat. "Undress for me. This time, you take them off."

He rested, feeling his runaway heart begin to beat more evenly, as Bian swiftly removed her jacket and the shredded camisole, baring the small, round, full breasts that had filled him with such delight when he had first seen them. They still moved him and his hands twitched to touch them. But he forced himself to immobility and watched instead. The skirt was next and she removed it over her head, which dislodged her hairclips and combs. When she emerged from the velvet, she swiftly discarded them and her hair tumbled down to her waist and swung in a heavy black waterfall. She tossed the velvet aside and tugged at the drawstring on her petticoat, pulled the waist open enough to push it down her legs. He already knew she wore no underclothes beyond the petticoat but it still thrilled him to see her nakedness as she stepped out of the petticoat and threw that aside too.

She bent to reach for the laces of her high-heeled shoes and he held out a hand. "No, enough," he said quickly. "The hose, the shoes—leave them on."

She straightened, then and stood with her hands at her side, not at all embarrassed by his study.

She was petite and utterly feminine, with full breasts and the waist that he had proved he could reach his hands around. Her hips flared out beneath and her abdominal muscles were unusually well-defined for a woman. Stuart had only ever seen such muscles on women who spent a great deal of their time doing hard physical work. It was strangely arousing to see such signs of strength in such a womanly shape.

But then, everything about Bian was arousing. Or provoking.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said simply. Truthfully. He reached for her, brought her down so that she was on her knees just as he was, then tugged on her hands until she was on her hands and knees, facing him.

"Roman style, hmmm?" she murmured.

"This time," he promised her.

In reaction, her eyes seemed to darken even more and the lids slid lazily half-closed. She swallowed. "You ensured I was more than ready in the carriage. Why do you linger?"

"To look and appreciate," he assured her, as he moved behind her. She was spread open to his gaze and glistening with moisture. He grasped her hips and slipped the tip of his cock into her folds. The heat radiating from her cleft was surprising. As he marveled over it, she opened up to receive him and his cock slid a little inside her. At once, firm muscles closed around him, rippling with their own pleasure. It was more than he could stand. Quite without planning it, he thrust into her as deeply as he could reach and was enclosed by her. She gave a deep groan in response and thrust back.

For a moment he grew still, savoring the delight.

Her muscles tightened around him, with the same rippling stroke and it encouraged him to thrust into her again. He grew aware of the swiftly building explosion in him and knew that the climax was mere heartbeats away.

Prompted by the pleasure his unselfish service in the carriage had produced, he summoned enough discipline to halt his movements. It left him quivering and Bian glanced at him, puzzled.

"Trust me," he assured her, renewing his grip on her hips. He brought her back with him as he tucked his feet under him and sat upon his calves, with Bian's bottom against him. He was still buried within her but now she was spread across his thighs, her knees against them. She gasped as he nudged even deeper inside her.

She was such a small thing, that her head was even with his despite her elevated seat. It pleased him and he pushed aside the curtain of her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. It sent a shiver through her and she smiled at him, her eyes sleepy with arousal.

"And now what, my lord?" she teased. "I am to ride you like a jockey?"

"It would be the end of me if you did," he murmured and nibbled at the soft, warm skin that dipped down to her clavicle. As he plundered her flesh, he skimmed his hand over her thigh, to dip between them and cup the heart of her and was pleased at the deep shudder that went through her in response. She was slick with juices and her womanly nub was rigid and exposed to his fingers. He gently stroked it and was rewarded with her sharp, hard arch back against his chest, as her hips thrust forward.

"Oooh!" Her gasp had a helpless quality. She was at the mercy of her body, now.

Her out thrust chest gave him another idea and he reached with his other hand to cup her breast and tease the nipple, tweaking and stroking it, in time to the rhythm of his right hand.

Her small hand gripped his wrist, clutching as her excitement built. From her hand, her labored breathing and the stroking massage of her inner muscles around his cock, Stuart was able to tell when her climax approached.

Finally, she threw her head back against his shoulder and bucked hard, as the waves of the orgasm washed through her. Her muscles clenched him and he gave a hard groan as, astonishingly, the ripples and clenching drew from him his own long-

delayed climax. It thundered through him and for a moment the world seemed to grey out, sound ebbing in his ears, muffled by the pounding of his heart.

He propped himself up as she fell against him weakly.

"You...you are accomplished," she said at last.

"A virtuoso is only as good as the instrument he plays." It was utter truth. "You are my inspiration, Bian."

He carried her to the big, silk-covered lounge with the unfashionably high back and laid her upon the cushions. A delicious, sleepy, satiation had her in its grip and she was in no hurry to disperse it, for to do so would bring her to face the ugly dilemma she had made for herself.

"Very wide," she judged, measuring with her hands. "But not long enough for you to lie with any sort of comfort." She lifted her brow at him. "Or are you about to tell me you have never seduced a lady upon it before this day?"

"That would be an easy boast, as I have never allowed a lady inside this house before today."

She frowned. "For a hunter, Stuart, you have surprising..."

"Limitations?" he suggested.

"Qualms," she finished. "You abhor your prey impinging upon your real life so much?"

He sat on the edge of the cushions next to where her ankles lay crossed. "You misunderstand," he said, gripping his hands together. "My prey *are* a part of my so-called real life. I refuse to allow them in here, where the life-that-might-have-been still lingers." He looked at her sharply, the blue eyes raking over her face, looking for judgment. "You're a part of that life. You gave it breath again."

Abruptly, he stood to dispel his awkwardness at the confession. The muscles and tendons of his body flexed with the vigor of a healthy, strong man and as her heart and

mind staggered under the impact of his announcement, she found herself studying with pure feminine appreciation. He was broad across the shoulders, large in every department.

He was hers, to do with as she pleased. He had just told her so. She had him exactly where Richard had wanted him to be, vulnerable and completely at her disposal.

Suddenly she hated her life and all the values and principles that shaped it. She hated Richard. Her duty. She hated it all with a passion that made her bite her lip to prevent the moan from escaping.

The one straw of comfort she could find, the one truth that gave her life meaning, was that this man was a traitor to his country. No matter what he said, or how vulnerable he might be to her, he had betrayed everyone else with his actions. She sat up and hugged her knees, suddenly cold. It was becoming more difficult to remember that Stuart was a master dissembler. He had fooled prime ministers and heads of state. He had a knack for...well, for doing exactly what she was doing, finding the vulnerability in others and exploiting it. While she did it for the sake of duty, he did it for personal gain.

And she would see his true colors revealed.

She watched as his shoulders lifted in the way that told her he was drawing a deep breath. Then he turned back to her. "Are you hungry, Bian?"

"A little."

"I have three day fast to break." He hesitated, then asked, "Do you know how to cook?"

The servants were all dismissed for the day. Of course. She grimaced. "Do you like your charcoal well done or disintegrated?"

"Ah. The flambé style. I hear it is popular on the continent. We'll have to put up with my cooking, then. I have a spare robe you could wear. I remember you like them overlarge."

She stood up. "I can see you really haven't shared domestic experiences with a woman."

He looked at her, puzzled.

"Do you have a clean shirt?" she asked.

It took a little negotiation before Stuart could disengage from his upbringing enough to allow her to have her way. But the sheer novelty of the idea won the day. Finally, he took her upstairs, showed her his bedroom and the drawer with the stacks of clean, old shirts that would no longer hold starch properly. He belted himself into a robe and finally, with some reluctance, left her to fend for herself, without a maid, while he went to the kitchen to prepare a meal.

Bian was thankful to be alone. She needed time to gather her courage and her wits. To remind herself of what Stuart really was before this matter was too far out of hand for her to reverse it.

She thankfully stripped her garters and stockings and bathed herself using the room-temperature water in the jug beside the basin. After his time in the southern parts of Asia, Stuart was clearly more comfortable with heat, for the morning's fire in the fireplace was radiating with a good supply of glowing coals and the room was still quite warm.

She selected the oldest and softest shirt she could find. It was nearly transparent with age and without the cuffs, it rolled up to her wrist without trouble. The front of the shirt came down almost to her knees. She looked in the cheval mirror quickly, to check. With her hair down and the abbreviated garment revealing her legs, she might have been back in Vietnam as a girl among women, soaking up feminine gossip along with political strategy, unnoticed and unwanted by all except her mother.

But the man waiting for her downstairs did want her. And he did not underestimate her.

She unfastened the next button on the shirt, so that the open neck lay against her breasts, showing the valley between and a casual movement would pull the shirt aside to show the swell of flesh and draw the eye.

As she went down the stairs to find the kitchen, she wondered if she had slipped the button undone to distract Stuart as her duty demanded, or to help herself to more of his wonderful attention.

She carefully avoided considering why she had not searched his room while she had been alone.

It was easy to find the kitchen. The smell of burned toast was an unerring guide and closer, she could hear low curses – mild ones – that told her she had found the kitchen. The rest of the house was utterly still and silent.

She stepped into the kitchen and saw Stuart at the woodstove, blackened toast in one hand, a piece of wood in the other. He was peering into the stove, trying to find a way to push the small log into the fire he had lit beneath a big, black kettle.

“I may not be able to cook but I do know you should have waited to toast your bread until you had coals,” she said.

He looked up and grinned. “Too hungry,” he confessed. “And I craved toast and marmalade.”

“Very English of you,” she said approvingly and sat upon the big wooden table in the middle of the room. It was scoured clean and white with age and use.

He thrust the log into the fire and shut the door on it with a sigh. “After four years in China, I find that three months back in England still isn’t long enough to catch up on those foods I craved.” And he bit the soggy bread with relish.

“Did you not eat as you do at home, in Peking? I have known many diplomats at their postings and I did not see them stint themselves of the pleasures of home. They

would have them shipped as they needed them. Certainly marmalade would have survived the length of the voyage."

"Ah but at a price. And such a price." He frowned. "Yes, there were colleagues who ordered freely and without thought. It was because of them that I did not. And I confess I did not enjoy the delights of their table when asked to join them. Food does not transport well over such distances."

He was opening cupboards as he spoke, searching for and placing items on the table by her, his attention not fully on her. It allowed her to hide her surprise. "So you ate as the Chinese eat?" she said carefully.

He opened the big pantry in the corner and studied the shelves. "I did not eat as the Chinaman in the streets ate. I had resources enough that I could maintain the diet of a high official. In fact, I had a Cantonese cook and he spent three years trying to find a recipe I would refuse to eat." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "He failed." He went back to digging through the cupboard. "Ah, yes! Pork pie. I knew there must be some left." He pounced on it and put the deep, round dish covered in linen on the table with the plates and cutlery he had already chosen.

"Did your colleagues accuse you of lack of patriotism?" she asked. "For eating Chinese and letting down the side?"

He was staring at her, the food abruptly forgotten. She grew conscious of her bare limbs, her heels swinging as she sat. The shirt preserved her modesty but the buttons she had loosened were revealing nearly all of one breast. From Stuart's angle, he could probably see all of the breast through the billowing opening.

"Stuart?" she prompted.

"You really are the most beautiful woman I have ever met."

She smiled a little. "The names your colleagues called you must have been terrible indeed for you to try to distract me so."

He stepped closer to her, a tiny furrow between his brows. "But when you smile, it doesn't reach your eyes anymore." His big hand cupped her jaw and the thumb caressed her brow. "Why is that?"

Her heart began to flutter. "Perhaps I have recovered some of my maidenly sensibilities and regret the position in which I find myself."

He shook his head absently, his thumb following her cheek. "No, it disappeared before today. I noticed it in the conservatory."

She tried hard to control her uneasiness and not let any of it appear on her face. He was watching too closely for her control to slip even a little. Instead, she gripped the ties of his robe and tugged on them. "Really, Stuart, did they think you unpatriotic? I know what diplomats can be like. Such a habit would mark you as slightly peculiar in their eyes and they would pressure you with such names in order to bring you back into line."

He refocused on her eyes, his mind drawing away from whatever distant thoughts possessed it. And he gave a small laugh. "If they called me names at all, it would have been for my zealousness." The smile that came with his laugh faded. "There are too many men in the service who think loyalty is only a word and a faded, sentimental one at that."

"And you do not?"

"No, I do not," he said stiffly. He straightened, his hand falling away from her. "I know it's fashionable to be world-weary and cynical but there's too much of that. The Empire is tottering toward ruin because of it."

How can this man be a traitor to England? She stared at him, unable to spot any sign that he was merely play-acting. He seemed more genuine than any other man of her acquaintance.

Her heart was thundering now. How did Stuart live with such a strong belief and manage to betray his country at the same time? Why did it not break his soul in two?

For the first time in her life, Bian could not see her way forward. She knew her duty, knew what she had to do next. The proof against Stuart was circumstantial but beyond dispute of all but the highest court in the land. Before he left China, Stuart had been selling England's military and intelligence secrets to the highest bidders among Chinese and international officials in the diplomatic circles within which he moved. The trail of meetings and documents had led right to him.

Bian's brief had only been to collect the sort of proof that would hold up in a court. His guilt was already established.

She stared at him, recalling Richard's voice giving her the outline of her assignment. Now she had met Stuart and with each crumb of knowledge she gathered about him, she grew increasingly confused and doubtful. Yet Richard had never been wrong before.

Stuart was staring at her hands as they hung from the ties of his gown and she knew his mind had turned to the carnal, to lust. Her body seemed to shiver and grow warmer. Her doubts fell away. She would take what she could and enjoy it, before doing her duty. And she would not stop to consider what that made her.

She tugged the ties so they loosened and fell apart. Stuart's eyes narrowed but he did not protest, despite his hunger.

She pushed the robe aside, revealing his naked body beneath and a shiver of delight ran through her. "Shrug it off," she commanded, her voice rough with abrupt lust.

He shrugged and the gown dropped down around his ankles. He was already ramrod straight and hard and she shivered again and leaned back on the table and spread her legs. "Come here."

He stepped between her knees and his thighs bumped against the edge of the table. "You must come forward," he said, his own voice a rough burr.

She reached for him but he grabbed her hands. "Not yet," he said. "Pass me the jar of marmalade, there. And open your shirt."

She gave him the jar, her own hand trembling and slipped the last of the buttons on the shirt undone and pushed the shirt fronts aside. The tips of her breasts were sharp, hard peaks.

He dipped two fingers into the marmalade and let dollops of it drop onto her breasts. She hissed in a breath. "Cold," she murmured.

"Good." He held out his smeared fingers. "Suck them."

She let him slide his fingers into her mouth and licked them clean. She did a thorough job, working her tongue between them to get it all. Stuart was watching, his eyes narrowed. And his breath was shortening.

"You like that," she judged.

"Your tongue, on the inside of my fingers..." He slid his hands beneath her bottom and brought her closer to the edge of the table. "Put your legs around me."

She wrapped her legs around him, leaning back so that the marmalade did not dislodge from her breasts. The juice was trickling down the slope and circling her nipples and she shivered again at the cold touch.

Stuart leaned over her and licked at the small drops of marmalade, lapping them up. It seemed like an odd sensation. But only for a moment. Then the heat of his soft tongue and the continual stroking across her breasts began to register on her nerves. He moved from one to the other, gathering up all of the marmalade, leaving the juice until last.

His hands were still under her bottom and she could feel his penis nudging at her open folds as he moved.

She slipped her hand between her legs and by feel alone, curled her fingers around the sac beneath. It too, was hot to the touch and at her contact, Stuart murmured against her breast. "Higher," he muttered.

"Not unless you go lower," she returned.

His lips immediately began to follow the rivulets of juice to her nipples. She slipped her hand higher, gripping his shaft. He throbbed under her hand with a potent beat. As his mouth fastened onto her nipple, she could not help squeezing her hand.

She was rewarded with a nip of his teeth and it electrified her. She let her head roll backward, her eyes closing. The ascent of pleasure was building swiftly now. She could not wait.

With a deft movement, she impaled herself upon him and by pulling with her legs, made him thrust deep within her. His fingers pressed in upon her buttocks and he lifted his head to look at her. "That was devious," he protested.

"You could have stopped me," she pointed out.

He gave a tiny thrust within her, to show that he actually did have control. "True," he agree, with a smile. "But I won't touch your other breast until you bring your own hand between your legs."

"W-what?"

"You know of what I speak."

She licked her lips, her heart thundering. She did know. But this too, was something she held away from the world.

"Bian, do you not know how arousing it is for a man to see it? To feel you climax around him?"

"I...I did not." She could feel her cheeks flaming and that made her embarrassment complete. She stared up at him, unable to find an answer.

"Very well," he said, relenting. "A small compromise. I will begin first."

"Begin what?" she asked quickly.

He lowered his head to take her other breast into his mouth, drawing it deep, while his tongue lashed against it, stroking the nipple with relentless, delicious caresses. She let her eyes close and the waves of intense passion ripple over her and take her thoughts.

Then he lifted her hand to her pelvis. His intent was clear. She let her fingers slide into the moist channel. She was slick with it and when she found it, her nub was thick, swollen and throbbing with its own heat. Her first stroke against it made her buck and she knew she would not last. "Oh, Stuart...quickly," she warned.

"I know," he said against her breast. "Keep going."

"I won't last!" she warned again.

"Come," he encouraged. "Come with me inside you. Let me feel it."

She kept up the familiar stroking with her fingers, feeling the orgasm build in her. She did not try to halt it. Instead she immersed herself in the quickening sensations, enriched by having him inside her. Consciousness, the world itself, fell away. All that remained was her pleasure. And Stuart. She was conscious of him watching her face, watching her excitement.

She climaxed with a gasping cry that tore at her throat and her body bucked. The orgasm had not nearly ebbed when she felt Stuart's fingers on her hips, as he thrust hard into her. She forced her gaze to focus and saw what looked like both pain and pleasure twisting Stuart's features. His gaze was locked on her, the hooded blue eyes glittering with intensity.

"Yes, come for me," she whispered.

It was all he needed. He came with a roar, the tendons on either side of his neck straining against the flesh. And with every nerve in her own body still twitching and sensitive, she could feel his hot seed spill into her.

He propped himself up against the table, breathing hard, still watching her. Still buried in her. "And yet I want more," he said hoarsely.

She caressed his cheek. "I would not have these moments end," she said honestly. But she did not voice the other half of the thought—that once these few precious moments with Stuart were over, she must return to her duty and find the evidence Richard needed to pronounce Stuart guilty of treason.

Chapter Six

Once the pie was warmed, the tea made and more toast browned against proper coals, Stuart insisted they go back to the high-backed sofa. "It's warmer in the parlor. It gets the morning sun."

So they carried the meal between them and spread it upon two footstools in front of the sofa.

At the sight of the food, Bian was abruptly ravenous. "Is your cook any good?" she asked.

"I have borrowed her from my mother's household for the duration of my stay in England," he told her. "I grew up with Mrs. Greenaway's cooking. I could not bear to suffer anyone else's now I'm home."

Her heart jumped. "You're leaving?"

"Inevitably, the Home Office will find me another posting. I have asked for somewhere in the Orient. I was surprised they didn't send me directly there and save the long journey back to England."

She knew why they had not but held her tongue. They had wanted Stuart to be in a place where he would feel comfortable and would let down his guard, so that Bian could find her way past his defenses.

She reached for the teapot instead, busying herself. "You sound annoyed about it." She spoke as nonchalantly as she could manage.

"Do I?" He reached for the knife to cut the pie and gave a small, self-conscious laugh. "There's a reason my colleagues in Peking did not call me disloyal for the diet I maintained there. They would taunt me, instead, for my zealousness for work. For duty." He glanced at her and she realized that there was a touch of pink in his flesh and that he was measuring her own response to the confession.

"I suppose some might ridicule a strong sense of duty," she said carefully. "Loyalty is almost unfashionable these days."

"And that fashion will be the end of the empire," Stuart said. He cut into the pie with a sharp downward stroke that made the knife grate against the lip of the pie dish.

"You believe that?" She spoke softly, so great was the tension in him.

"Yes." Again he looked at her sideways. Measuring her. It was almost the same as when he had been speaking of his feelings for her and the duplication told her that this was very important to him. "England stands upon a threshold," he said as he slipped a small piece of the pie onto a plate and handed it to her. He held the knife, preparing to cut his own slice but looked past the blade toward a vision only he could see. "The British Empire is the greatest it has ever been, reaching all the way around the globe. The Romans were once the mightiest in the land, stretching across Europe, down into Africa and up into Asia. And when they were at their mightiest, do you know what happened?"

She shook her head, although she knew very well what had happened. She had studied history at Cambridge just as Stuart had.

"They were lulled into a sense of superiority and rested on their laurels. They forgot to be diligent and attend to their duties and slowly the greatest empire the world had ever seen was chipped and shattered away. It wasn't conquered, Bian. It imploded through its own lack of duty." And again, the knife chopped down viciously.

"I see it everywhere, these days," he said, when the pie was safely upon his plate and he had drawn a long breath or two. "Most especially since I have returned home. People no longer care."

"I care," Bian returned swiftly. "I care very much."

"I know," he assured her, with a smile. "I recognized that in you the moment we met. I think that is partly the reason I—" He looked down at his pie. "The reason I want you to stay in my life."

There was a thundering noise in her mind and her heart actually *ached* with hot, hard pressure. She could not have spoken even if her life depended upon it. She sat motionless, staring at him as she tried to process his remarkable statement. One thought whispered over and over. *Why would a spy, a traitor, ask the enemy to stay with him?*

Stuart cleared his throat. "We need mustard," he declared and put the plate down. "I'll get some."

As soon as he left the room, Bian put her plate carefully upon the footstool but she was shaking so badly, the china still rattled against the tray and sent cutlery dancing. She used the other hand to stabilize the tray and returned her hands to her lap. She tried to breathe but could manage only a shallow panting.

She was upon territory she did not know and she was badly frightened. In the last few moments, things had changed irrevocably.

What am I to do? She clenched her hands together and tried to dispense with the slippery emotions that were fouling the issue. For a moment she pushed aside her confusion over loving a man who was a traitor and a spy, yet acted with such devotion to his country and its people. She would have to deal with that later but for now she acknowledged the truth. She loved him. That was the fact.

From there, the alternatives laid themselves out in logical, indisputable order. If she told Stuart who she really was, he would leave and she would lose the man who was now dearest to her.

If she didn't tell him who she was, if she didn't tell him why she was here and completed the duties she had been charged with—the very duties that Stuart himself would insist she fulfill—then he would hang.

And the question whispered itself again. What on earth was she supposed to do now?

The lock at the front door rattled, then there was the distinct click of tumblers rolling. Someone with a key had unlocked the door and was entering the house.

Bian gripped the back of the high sofa and peered over it, her already stressed heart laboring under the shock. She was mortally aware of the state of her dress and hoped that Stuart would hurry to meet the newcomer and save her from revealing herself. But Stuart was in the kitchen and further from the front door than she.

There was a dark movement at the corner by the stairs and she realized that whoever it was who had entered was standing at the hallway table, flipping through mail. That was not the action of a servant.

The dark figure, blurred by the bright afternoon sun pouring through the transom over the front doors and windows, stepped past the table and turned into the hallway proper, where the stairs began. The carpet upon which Stuart had first taken her lay across the boards there.

It was Stuart himself.

In her shock, she lifted herself up above the back of the sofa, to see him properly. He was in street clothes. How on earth had he...?

He spotted her then and his eyes narrowed with a speculative, puzzled gleam. Then he smiled and the moment passed. "Well, hello there, my little beauty. Where did you come from?"

As her brain tried to assemble meaning from his unexpected words, there were footsteps and the creak of floorboards from the back passage.

And Stuart—the real Stuart she had seen head for the kitchen for mustard—appeared next to this unexpected mirror image.

"Aiden," he said. "I wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow." He had inserted himself between his double and Bian, so that his back was toward her. He was protecting her, even though it was the most subtle of blocks.

She saw the man called Aiden shift his gaze away from her, to Stuart's face. "Clearly, you were not, brother."

She almost slithered down the back of the silk lining the sofa, clutching at her chest as her heart banged against her chest with painful strikes. Her breath wouldn't come.

Twins. They were most surely twins! But...what did this mean? Somewhere, she knew, there was hope for her. There was a key to unraveling all this, if only she could force her mind to *think!* But shock was stealing her abilities from her.

The thought that gripped her with an iron hand was rooted in that hope. *Perhaps Aiden is the one. Perhaps Stuart is innocent, after all.*

But even in the grip of this terrible panic, she knew that was impossible. Richard would not have made such a fundamental error. The circumstantial evidence against Stuart had been complete enough for Richard to send her all the way from China to complete her assignment.

She could hear Stuart and his brother speaking softly in the hallway. A low laugh. Then footsteps—booted feet, this time—and the distant sound of a closing door. The front door, she hoped.

Stuart's hands were on her shoulders, helping her to sit up. But still her breath would not come easily. She was dizzy with the lack of air and the ache of her heart and that was frightening all on its own. She had been caught by surprise more than once in the past and it had never left her so confused and unable to think.

His hand was on her face, lifting her chin so that she would look at him. "Do not be concerned, Bian. My brother is as liberal a thinker as you and I. He departed only to give you a chance to collect yourself."

"He is returning?"

"As soon as you are ready. I want you to meet him, Bian. You will be meeting all my family, soon enough."

"He...you...are twins."

"Identical, yes. And we've pulled our share of pranks over the years but this was truly unintended, Bian. You have my apologies. I would not dream of deliberately

placing you in such an embarrassing position.” He kissed her forehead, his lips warm and reassuring. “I think it best if we dressed. I will give you the use of the room first.”

She nodded, unable to speak any more. Above all, she need time to think. Breathing space. Peace.

Moving as stiffly as if she were an old woman, Bian let Stuart help her from the sofa.

* * * * *

Stuart watched Bian slowly climb the stairs, trying not to focus on her bare thighs. He sensed she would not appreciate the carnal thoughts right at this moment and pulled his gaze away.

He wanted to curse Aiden’s ill-timed return but did not. He and Bian had managed to steal a small pocket of time and freedom from a world that normally would have them locked into a schedule not of their choosing. He would try to be content with what they had been given.

He realized that he was still holding the mustard pot. Feeling somewhat foolish, he returned the pot to the kitchen pantry. He would clear the dishes before Mrs. Greenaway’s sharp eyes had a chance to spot the intimate meal for two in his parlor.

He pottered about the kitchen, cleaning and tidying and recalling what had happened upon the table only a small while ago. He realized that he was straining to hear signs of Bain’s return. He wanted her with him. It was that simple.

When he heard the creak of the stairs overhead, his heart jumped a little and he realized he was grinning foolishly and shrugged it off. No one was there to see him. He dropped the tea towel and headed for the passage that led to the front of the house.

He was halfway down the passage when he heard the distinctive sound of the front door opening and closing and frowned. Aiden had agreed to give them one hour. It was like him to renege just to gain some sort of advantage.

But when he arrived in the hallway, it was empty of both Aiden and Bian.

Outside the front door, he heard the call of a hansom driver and the crack of a whip and the unmistakable sounds of a hansom cab pulling away from the footpath and crunching all the dry autumn leaves in the gutter.

He threw open the front door and saw the cab bouncing about as it hurried down the street at an almost reckless pace. He knew then that Bian was in the cab but still he raced up the stairs three at a time and pushed open the bedroom door.

The shirt she had worn hung upon the bedpost. And the room was rich with her scent. But it was quite empty.

* * * * *

Patrick ladled out the hot soup and pushed the bowl in front of Bian. "He's not a fool," he warned her. "He'll look for you here as soon as he cannot find you at your townhouse."

"But you will stand between me and him for as long as I need," she said, digging into the bowl. She looked up at him, her spoon halfway to her mouth as the horrible thought occurred to her. "You will, won't you?"

"Of course," he said sharply. "But tell me again what it is you need, now?"

"A telegraph to Richard in Peking. We need to check on Stuart's brother, Aiden. Where was he posted?"

"How do you know he was even in the service?" Patrick asked.

"He must be," she said, although she had nothing but hope to back up her claim. "Stuart said the house had been empty while he was away, so his brother has been away too." She did not add the final tiny crumb of evidence, the greeting Aiden had given her. It was not the reserved, prejudiced stare of a man who had never or rarely seen oriental features. Aiden was used to seeing Asians and had even called her a beauty. He had spent time in the Orient. Enough time to assimilate the different features of an Asian face.

Patrick was writing down his instructions with a pencil. "That's all? Where he was posted?"

"Also, where was he the night the papers were stolen from Richard's portmanteau...but that will take time to establish. For now, I will be content with simply knowing where he was posted."

Patrick bit his lip. "You're implying Richard and the others got it wrong."

She took a breath. "Yes."

"You think his brother is the one?"

"Yes. Maybe. I need the information that telegraph will get me. Please, Patrick...will you hurry and send it now?"

He glanced at her. "At once, madam," he murmured and hurried away.

* * * * *

Backman dripped upon the priceless Persian rug both rain and unspoken repugnance for his task. "The lady in question was not at home," he said with a deep, sonorous voice that had once announced dinner to six hundred chatting guests and been easily heard.

"Did you ask when she would be at home?" Stuart pressed.

"I did, my lord...but it was also made clear to me that the proper channels for such an enquiry was by letter." His distaste seemed to drip from his nose, although his facial expression did not change.

Aiden gave a small cough. He was sprawled upon the sofa Bian had just recently been perched upon. When Stuart looked at him, Aiden shook his head.

Stuart ignored the advice. "Did you ask where the lady was, then?" he asked Backman. The grey-haired man was once Stuart's father's butler. He had consented to emerge from retirement for the time Stuart and Aiden were in England and his standards were from another era. His dignity was un-dentable. He looked Stuart in the

eye. "As m'lord did ask for this information, I managed to bring the matter into discussion. I was informed that the lady's location was not a fact I was privy to."

"Backman, you've been handling jumped-up Johnny-come-latelys for nearly fifty years. You know how to get around them."

"Sir?" Backman asked, looking puzzled.

Stuart pushed his hand through his hair. "Dammit, did you bribe him?"

Aiden sat up, then. Stuart could feel his uneasiness.

Backman permitted himself the smallest of smiles. "M'lord, I was informed that the lady's location would remain out of my reach, no matter how long a reach I developed."

Stuart sighed. "Thank you, Backman. I appreciate everything you have done and I regret you have been soaked into the bargain. Please help yourself to a large snifter of brandy. It will help you warm up."

"Thank you, my lord." Backman inclined his head and left with his nose in the air. The effect was diminished somewhat when he gave an enormous sneeze at the door and staggered a little.

"The brandy will help him," Aiden assured Stuart. He linked his hands around one knee. "Do you care to share with me what on earth is going on?"

Stuart thought about it, then shook his head. "I already feel like a big enough fool," he said.

"And the lass has vanished, if I follow your conversation with Backman closely enough." He grinned. "You've lost your edge, brother."

"Not entirely. There's one place left for me to look."

"And if you find the girl? Then what?" Aiden spread his hands. "She ran out on you. Hardly an indication that you've swept her off her feet and overwhelmed her with maidenly desire."

Hot protest bubbled at Stuart's lips. He saw in his mind the memory of Bian perched upon the kitchen table, a tiny crease between her brows as she strove for the peak of pleasure. The memory instantly stirred his nether regions.

She could not possibly have been deceiving him. But why else would she run away? There had been no reason to avoid Aiden—not after he had assured her that Aiden was broad-minded.

"I will know when I see her," he said at last, aware of the silence lingering in the parlor.

Aiden grinned. "Brother, you sound less like a man who knows where he is than a man hopelessly lost and confused."

"I'll know when I see her," Stuart snapped.

She could not rid herself of wicked thoughts of Stuart, of their activities in the big, silent house and the eventful carriage journey. The thoughts stole into her mind every time she let it idle.

And there was time to idle, while waiting for a response to her telegram. Although the telegraph was a miracle of modern science, it still took several hours for a wire to be transmitted, received, confirmed and then hand-delivered to the recipient. As Richard was based in Peking and might be anywhere in China, it could take up to several days before he received the telegram. Then the whole process would begin again, as he composed his response and sent it.

So she let her mind idle and contemplated the few short hours she had spent with Stuart. The taste of his flesh and his unique scent. The size of him and how weak and feminine he made her feel when he was close to her.

If she did not allow these distracting thoughts to dance through her mind, she would have to consider, instead, the darker side of Stuart's nature—the side she had yet to glimpse and that Richard swore existed. She did not know what was worse, that

Richard might be wrong for the first time in his life, or that Stuart was an undeclared monster.

Please let it be Aiden. She picked up her pen once more and bent to the letter she was writing. The Vietnamese script came slowly, she was not as fluent in written Vietnamese as she was in the speaking of it. But her old teacher would be touched that she would write to him in his own language. And the intellectual challenge was another distraction.

Until Patrick's hand squeezed her elbow and she jumped with a startled shriek. The inkpot wobbled and he steadied it.

"I'm sorry. I did call your name," he said, sitting on the hard chair on the other side of the small desk she was using.

She put the pen down. "Did I miss the call to lunch?"

"Yes but that was two hours ago." He grinned. "I've asked the cook to make you a round of sandwiches. Sardines and lettuce, yes?"

"Mmm, yes. I love them." She looked at him, waiting.

"Lord Baring's houseboy just dropped off a note from Baring himself. I asked him to approach the home office."

"Patrick, you shouldn't have. Not for me."

"When you float about the house looking so pale and distracted? Baring could get the answer almost immediately. Your wire will take at least twelve hours."

She licked her lips. Her mouth was suddenly dry. "What did he learn?"

"Aiden Sutherland-Bruce was also posted to the Orient. Taiwan...although he spent almost as much time in Canton, until the war broke out. He returned home just over a week ago—about a month behind his brother."

Bian's heart thudded hard, hurting her and she realized she was clutching at her chest.

Patrick carefully removed the *pince nez* he wore and polished the lenses on a fold of his jacket. "I have learned a little more about the pair of them."

"Then you are doing a better job of this than I am," Bian said, sitting back. "Richard sent me flying for England so fast, I barely had time to learn Stuart's name before I arrived. It was a shock to see he had a brother — and a twin brother, at that."

"Aiden is the younger," Patrick said. "Stuart stands to inherit all the titles, although I believe his father has agreed to provide Aiden a living, at least. That must gall a man who is the younger by only a matter of minutes."

"Then you believe my theory, that it is Aiden we should be watching?"

"You've never been wrong before now, Bian. Why would I doubt you now?"

Because I doubt myself. She bit her lip, unable to speak of her doubt aloud. "This task is not like any other Richard has ever set me."

"So I have gathered." Patrick grinned and got to his feet. "Come and eat."

She allowed him to chivvy her along to the dining room, where the perfectly-made sandwich sat waiting for her. He poured her a glass of Madeira and sat beside her, keeping her company as she ate and she was grateful for his thoughtfulness. She knew he hovered because he was worried. She was not behaving like herself.

Heavy thumping on the front door made her jump in her seat and Patrick laid a calming hand on her forearm. "Peace. The butler will see to it."

She nodded and emptied her glass of Madeira and pushed it toward Patrick, mutely asking for a second. He filled it slowly, with his head cocked. He was listening for who was at the door, just as she was.

The murmuring became clearer. "Somewhere here. Either you produce her, or I go find her myself."

It was Stuart. She looked at Patrick, suddenly terrified. She wasn't ready for this. She could not go to Stuart while his innocence was still in question. Not now that there was hope. Her hope would blunt her reactions, make her vulnerable.

But his voice was getting closer. Louder.

He was coming to her.

Chapter Seven

The butler hovered in front of a closed door, clearly trying to protect it and hide that fact as well but he was not the poker player that Backman was.

Stuart stepped around him, knowing that the butler would not dream of touching him unless he had specific orders from his master. The door was not locked and he stepped inside, hardly surprised to find Bian sitting at the dining table there. Baring's secretary, Kirkham, shot to his feet as Stuart entered and with a neat half-step, put himself between Stuart and Bian.

Bian also rose to her feet. It bothered him that she stayed behind Kirkham.

"Your home away from home," he told her, not attempting to hide the contempt in his voice. "I might have saved myself the trouble of enquiring after you at your own residence."

"It isn't what you think, Stuart." Her voice was quiet but without weakness. He had not frightened her in the least. "Patrick is —"

"Bian, no," Kirkham snapped. He looked Stuart in the eye. "What do you want? And how dare you barge in here like this?"

Stuart looked at the two of them, puzzled. "Another secret, Bian? Is that all there is to you? What lies between you and Kirkham that I cannot know?"

She stepped out around Kirkham took another step toward him and stopped. "Nothing that Patrick will care for me to admit aloud. For his sake I will not speak of it. But it is nothing I am ashamed of, or that you need to fear."

"And I am to take your word for it?" He pushed his hand through his hair. "What am I to do with you, Bian? I cannot bind you to me—you run away as soon as I try. But I will not let you slip out of my life as easily as you arrived. I refuse."

He saw her swallow and the sudden glistening of tears in her eyes. "Sometimes the world has a way of deciding for you, have you noticed?" she said and the tears slid down her cheeks. She did not move to wipe them and Stuart fisted his hand against the need to take her in his arms and remove them for her.

As suddenly as the fury had arrived, it departed. He took a deep breath. "What must I do, Bian? Tell me. I am upon your territory now and the game is unknown to me. But I would play your game if that is the way to keep you with me."

She shook her head. "I can't do this. Not now. Please, you must give me time."

"Time for what?" he demanded, trying to keep the sharpness out of his voice.

There was a cough behind him and he whirled, caught by surprise. The butler stood there with a silver tray and a white letter upon it. Stuart hadn't heard the door open, or the butler approach. He had been focused completely upon the dismay in Bian's face.

Bian gave a small gasp. "The response! Already!" And she stepped around Stuart and reached for the letter.

"Begging your pardon, Miss. The telegram is for Master Kirkham." He held the tray out to Kirkham.

"A telegram for me?" Kirkham's brow lifted as he unfolded the letter. He walked over to the tall window for better light, adjusted his glasses and read. Stuart clenched his fist, fighting impatience. A telegram meant urgent news. He could hardly intrude on Kirkham's attention until it had been dealt with. He glanced at Bian. She was watching Kirkham with peculiar intensity.

He recalled her words when he had first entered the room. *It isn't what you think*. If they were not lovers, then what were they, precisely? There *was* something between them, something that included shared secrets.

Kirkham made a small noise, almost a gurgling in the throat and reached for the window frame, which he leaned against weakly. His face had turned very white.

"Patrick!" Bian hurried to his side. "What is it?"

He visibly swallowed and pulled himself together. He curled his hand around her elbow and his hand trembled. "I have bad news, Bian. It would be best if you seated yourself."

"Just read it!" Bian said shortly, pulling her elbow from his grip. "Just tell me. Don't leave me waiting like this."

He stared at her and Stuart guessed that he could not find the words. Finally, he held the telegram out to her and turned away.

Stuart watched her read the telegram, feeling a strange helplessness. He knew that grave events were upon them but could not guess their shape. Instead he was filled with a shapeless sense of doom, which gave him no course of action. So he stood and watched Bian grow as pale as Kirkham. She reached for the nearest chair and lowered herself into it, still reading. Until, finally, she let the telegram slip from her fingers and flutter to the floor.

"Dear God," she whispered. "He is dead!" And she buried her head in her hands. Kirkham squeezed her shoulder, even as he stood staring sightlessly out of the window.

Unable to simply stand by while disaster afflicted her so, Stuart strode forward and scooped up the sheet that had brought such despair and put it on the table beside Bian. "What is it? Tell me," he pressed Bian, picking up her cold hand.

"You'd better read the telegram yourself," Kirkham said. "It says everything."

Bian picked up the telegram and handed it back to him and her big eyes were limpid with unshed tears. "I know you respected him too," she whispered.

His heart already racing, Stuart read the telegram.

Regret to inform that Nathaniel Richard Kirkham II, Duke of Pemberton, Baron Kirkham, was arrested by Chinese authorities last Thursday and charged with acts of espionage against the empire. Documents found in sea chest. After short trial, he was executed by beheading yesterday morning. Regrets. Piggott-Smythe.

Stuart read the telegram twice, trying to absorb the wealth of information it conveyed. "Who is Piggott-Smythe?" he asked.

"My father's secretary," Kirkham said, his voice thick with unexpressed emotion.

Stuart absorbed the fact. "So...he *was* the Royal Talisman." The fact filled him with immense sadness. "I cannot believe that he is dead. But this...must have been a price he was willing to pay for his country, Kirkham. He was an honorable man."

Bian lowered her hands to her lap. "I don't believe it. He was no more a spy than the Queen of England."

Her fierceness prompted Stuart to ask the question that had been pushing at him. "You knew him," he said. "You knew him very well."

She nodded. "He was my father."

As shock slammed through him, Bian fell back against the chair, biting her lip against tears as she stared up at Kirkham.

Stuart found himself on his feet again, backing away from the pair at the window.

Her father.

The fact unlocked a wealth of information – secrets – about Bian, that he might have seen for himself if he had watched just a little more closely instead of simply railing at her for her secrecy. *Of course she was surrounded by secrets!* Her whole life was a secret.

He looked from Bian with her Asian features, to Patrick Kirkham, a fine sample of British manhood. Nathaniel Kirkham sired them both but they had different mothers. Therefore, Bian was a bastard – a love child...and a secret one. Kirkham had seen to her raising and her education but her place in society was of necessity undeclared. Although, considering the company she kept and the lifestyle she enjoyed, Kirkham had championed her and made sure she was accepted by society despite her heritage, and despite never being able to claim his name.

I am Bian, she had introduced herself. No last name. She did not have one that she could use.

She and Kirkham were half-sister and brother. No wonder she had sheltered here whenever she needed a bolt-hole. Who could she trust more, with her father still posted in China?

Her father, the spy. Despite Bian's protest, Stuart knew his guess had been right all along. Nathaniel Kirkham was the Royal Talisman, the hero who had kept Britain out of the war with France, who had been building such a glowing reputation for his abilities to acquire information that served his country so well.

Bian rose to her feet and rang the bell for the butler. When he appeared, she held out the telegram. "You may read this, so you can grasp your master's situation. Then would you find him a large decanter of brandy? Thank you."

The bewildered butler took the telegram, staring at it as if it were a hissing snake. Bian turned to Stuart and took his hand. She looked up at him. "Will you come with me?"

"Anywhere," Stuart said truthfully.

She led him up the stairs to a small second bedroom, cozily appointed but bereft of personal details. Her room, when she sought sanctuary here.

He had no time to take in more detail, for Bian turned to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Please, just hold me," she murmured.

Willingly, he held her. He rested his cheek against her hair, which smelled faintly of lilies. The scent suited her perfectly. He could also smell her own special essence and it stirred him. He tried to push the desire away. Now was not the time, although it was curling through his body insistently.

Bian moved restlessly against him and looked up. She tried to smile. "Kiss me."

"Bian, you are not yourself..."

"Actually, I have never been clearer in my heart or my mind. My father died before his time. He had so many plans..." She swallowed. "So many things he did not do, that he held himself away from because of duty. I will not make his error." And she reached

up to slide her fingers into the longer hair on the back of his neck and pull him down to her level.

He let her have her way. Willingly. And he found his hands on her waist, sliding around to her back, to tug at the dress strings, as her lips pressed against his and her warm tongue swept against his.

They undressed each other as fast as the cumbersome clothing would allow, their fingers trembling, as they whispered reassurances and encouragements to each other. Finally he had her naked and picked her up to cradle her against his chest. She rested her hand against his chest. "The bed, yes." Her lips curled up into one of her smiles that made her eyes dance. "For the first time, the bed."

The reappearance of that smile made his heart sing. He laid her on the bed and covered her with kisses. He left her breasts until last and lavished attention upon them with his hands, teeth, lips and tongue. After a few minutes of the concentrated torture, she was writhing and moaning beneath him, her hips pressing against his thighs where he straddled her. The soft push of her hips was an erotic signal that seemed to surge straight to his cock. He had never been harder in his life. Everything he did to Bian seemed to build his own desire.

For the first time he understood that he was not simply about to have intercourse. He was going to make love—in the way the maidens' forbidden novels described.

Bian reached for him, curling her small hand around his shaft and pulling him down between her legs. He positioned himself above her and slid into her slick, waiting channel. The heat of her enveloped him and for a moment he thought he might orgasm purely from the delight of being inside her.

Her legs lifted up around him, settling him deeper inside her. He rocked against her, building the delightful rhythm of stroking and she encouraged him with little cries.

Her pleasure was the greatest goad. He watched the building of excitement in her face, in the little crease between her brows and the way her hips moved in little helpless thrusts beneath him. He knew a moment before she did when her orgasm was upon

her, for the tight sheath of muscles surrounding him spasmed and tightened in a hard ripple. Her eyes widened for a moment in surprise. "Ohh!" she gasped, her fingers flexing against his shoulder. Then she was caught in the peak, shuddering through it, her breath taken away.

Stuart bent his head to breathe in her scent and let his own climax take him. It was the sweetest pleasure he had ever experienced.

He did not want to withdraw from her, or for the moment to end. He settled his weight on his elbows to protect her and so that he could linger a while longer. With his face buried in her hair, the heat of her surrounding him and the echo of her heart in his ears, it was easier to speak the terrifying words that had haunted him for three days.

"I love you, Bian. God help me, I do."

She did not pull away from him, or gasp in shock or distaste. She caressed his neck but was otherwise silent.

"I would not have you leave me," he finished. "The other terms are yours to arrange to suit yourself but that one is mine and I will declare it to the world."

"The world will punish you for it." Her voice was thick with some emotion and he looked at her then, surprised into it. Tears glistened in her eyes but she blinked to rid herself of them. "I am a bastard, Stuart. You understand what that means to your peers, better than I do. If you associate yourself with me in any permanent way, they will ostracize you for it. They will hound you to the ends of the earth."

"Not if you married me," he said. "That is a union they cannot dispute."

She was very still. "You cannot marry me," she said at last.

"Are you married to another?"

"No."

"Then I can. I will."

Her tears escaped her, then. They slid from the corners of her eyes. He licked the salty pearls, kissed her temple.

"I can't say yes, Stuart. It would be the ruin of your reputation, your career. Your family –"

"Can all go hang," he finished. "I will not insist on having your agreement right now. I said I would take you on whatever terms you care to dictate and I mean it. But I will never stop asking. Not until you say yes."

"And if that day never comes?"

"Then I will have enjoyed my life with you in it, regardless."

She reached for him, pulling herself up on top of him so that she looked down and the ends of her hair tickled his chest. She was a featherweight and his cock stirred, still buried inside her. This way, he could see where he penetrated her and it was an erotic view. He gripped her slim hips, eager once more.

"You have a man's appetite," she said with one of her smiles, as her hips shifted to stroke his swollen member.

"You enhance it," he breathed.

Then there were no more words but the long slow climb to climax again. This time it was deeper, more satisfying. Moving.

Later, as the long afternoon shadows spilled across the counterpane, she curled up inside his arms, her body cupped by his and he learned of her childhood in Vietnam. He knew she lay that way because just like him, she could not speak the words while looking at him, because she feared his reaction to them. But what she spoke of seemed to be the stuff of legends and fairy tales...except that this was Bian's personal history.

"Thieu Triu, the second-last emperor of my birth country, had many sons, including Prince Nguyen Cong To. The Prince was a favorite of the emperor, so the emperor consulted with his mandarins and Nguyen Cong To was made king of a land in the south, near Cambodia. Cong To ruled wisely and listened to all who came to his

lands and eventually, he became a Christian and changed his name to Nguyen Christopher.

“Among the travelers to the king’s lands was an English diplomat, Lord Nathaniel Kirkham, who preached moderation lest the mandarins and kings of Vietnam stir the anger of their French masters with their excesses. The king listened and so did his favorite daughter, that he called Tuyet. Tuyet means ‘snow white’ in his language. Tuyet and Lord Kirkham fell in love but when he was posted to Peking, she could not go with him, for she was with child.”

“You.” Stuart whispered the word. He feared to halt her tale. He desperately wanted her to continue speaking, for these were the secrets that had shielded her from him.

“Yes. My mother was the king’s favorite and although he was a Christian, he had a Confucian upbringing. My mother was allowed to continue living in the palace with the rest of his children and women but I was never spoken of. I never met the king.” She took a breath. “I lived with the other children and was educated as they were. But my mother also taught me how to read and write English and made me read European history—in English. She kept contact with my father, through letters and sometimes, actual visits, when he would slip across the border from Cambodia. His last visit was when I was five. I remember it. He and my mother were very sad, which I did not understand. My father gave me many gifts and told me he loved me and then he went away again. Not long after that, my father married the English heiress he had been betrothed to when he was born and she had a son two years later.”

“Patrick,” Stuart breathed, as all the facts began to fit together.

“A year after Patrick was born, my mother died of consumption. I was there, holding her hand.” A tremor ran through Bian and Stuart shifted her so that she was closer to him, her back against his chest. Her hand pressed his. “My mother’s last words were of my father and she died whispering his name. So I wrote to him, using the address she had me memorize long ago and I told him of her passing and her last

words. Within a month he returned to the palace and negotiated with the king. He took me away with him and brought me to England.

"I was old enough then to understand that my relationship to the Duke of Pemberton had been kept a dark secret and must remain that way. Because I loved my father, I worked to ensure I did not ruin his reputation, because his reputation was what made him powerful and allowed him to achieve so much for Britain in the places he worked – China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam, Korea."

Stuart kissed her brow. "You were courageous, for one so young."

"I have always felt much, much older than I really am," she said quietly. "Which was just as well. I did not have friends my own age, growing up. I lived in a big cottage in the Cotswolds, with a nurse and a governess, Bridget. Bridget was a distressed noblewoman, who had besmirched her reputation. I learned that it had not been an unkind circumstance that led to her downfall. She was very intelligent, although she had not been educated beyond the necessary accomplishments of a lady. But her reading and correspondence with some of the most forward-looking people made her a liberal thinker of the most extreme kind. She taught me everything she knew and the necessity of being discreet, for women are not treated kindly in this world.

"So we lived quietly and I spent most of my time reading and asking impossible-to-answer questions of Bridget. And occasionally, very seldom, my father visited. Finally, when I was sixteen, I was permitted to study at Cambridge, with the proviso that I assured everyone there I was at least nineteen. And so I finished my education at the ladies' college there and on my twentieth birthday, I traveled to China to join my father. Most of the diplomatic corps in China assumed I was a secretary, or nurse, or perhaps even a secret lover parading as a secretary or a nurse. The Chinese, many of them, were able to see my resemblance to my father and understood the truth. But the Chinese are even more diplomatic than the English and it was never spoken aloud. And so, for several years, I have traveled with my father and served him as I could."

Stuart sensed there was more to her story but that the telling of it had ended. There were more secrets, then. But he was content—more than content—with what she had entrusted him with this day.

He held her to him. “Thank you,” he murmured.

She turned in his arms and buried her head against him. “I have never told anyone before today,” she said. She was trembling.

“Not even Patrick?”

“Not all of it. He loves his mother and loved and respected his father. I would not take any of that from him.”

“But he accepts you.” Stuart remembered how Kirkham had stepped between him and Bian.

“At first, he tolerated my presence. But we have had reason to work together since then. I believe he respects me, now.” Stuart could almost feel her smile.

“And who could not respect you? You are beautiful, intelligent and a most independent-minded woman. I have never met anyone like you.”

“I’ve learned to hide my true nature behind a mask, so that society will accept me within the limits they will tolerate one of my stature.” The smile faded from her face. “My father propelled most of that acceptance. Now I must find a way to force them to accept me on my own merits, if I am to continue my work. My father would have insisted I carry on.” Sadness flooded her features.

He quickly changed the subject, to bring back her smile. “Now I understand your name. ‘Bian’ means ‘secretive’, or ‘hidden’.”

“You know Vietnamese?”

“Just a little. Enough to be understood,” he said in Vietnamese. At her delighted smile, he added in English, “I was posted to Saigon for a year. It seemed to run counter to my assignment not to learn the language. How can you get to know a people you cannot speak to?”

She laughed and reached for him.

There was a soft knock on the door. Patrick's voice filtered through the oak. "There's another telegram, Bian. You must read it."

* * * * *

Bian blinked at the blazing sunset glaring through the tall windows, until the maid pulled the curtains.

Patrick held out the thick, folded document. "It's for you," he said simply. "From Piggot-Smythe." He glanced at Stuart. "Would you like privacy?" he asked her and she knew what he was thinking. The contents of this telegram would be about Stuart. It would be best to remove him until she had had time to absorb what it might say.

"No, please stay," she told them both as she unfolded it. "I would prefer the company."

Stuart rested his hand briefly on her shoulder, then pointedly moved to the furthest corner and pulled the curtain aside to study the view outside the window. Giving her both privacy and the comfort of his presence.

Patrick took the long taper from the maid, showed her the door and took over the lighting of the candles and lamps. They were alone in the room.

With her heart thudding hard, she read the long missive.

"Stuart S-B posted Canton. Aiden S-B posted Taiwan. Both undersecretaries to their ambassadors. S.S-B visited Kirkham week before Kirkham arrest. Trial was closed but insiders cite proof against Kirkham 1) constant travels about China conversing with high officials both favored and not, 2) Chinese security documents in hidden compartment of sea chest.

"Will be returning to England within the month. P-S."

Bian realized her hand was shaking and put the sheet down. There was a roaring in her ears, that echoed the thunder of her heartbeat. She felt ill.

"Bian?" Stuart said sharply, stepping toward her. She lifted her hand, to hold him back and she clutched the arm of the chair with the other. "I think...I think you must leave, Stuart. This concerns family business, which I must discuss with Patrick."

Patrick and Stuart exchanged glances. It was a mute, male assessment. Stuart must have found reassurance in Patrick's stare, for he nodded. "All right, I will go, then. But I will return tomorrow morning as soon as decency allows."

She was too sick to answer. Instead she nodded, the most she could achieve. Cold sweat was prickling hard along her neck.

But Stuart was next to her, crouching to bring his face level with hers. "Tell me you can bear this alone...whatever this is. Tell me you can, or I won't take another step away from you."

She summoned up the will to speak. "I can bear this," she lied and looked him straight in the eye. "It is a shock, that is all."

Finally, he stood and then slowly turned and walked away. He shut the door after him but not before she saw him look back, the blue eyes trying to look through her, to drag the truth from her that way.

Patrick sat on the chair beside hers. "What is it?" he asked.

She handed him the sheet and rested her forehead against the heel of her hand, finally allowing herself to feel the full impact of the telegram. "It was me," she croaked.

Patrick whistled as he finished reading, a long, low, hard note. "How was it you? How could anything you've done have created this... disaster?"

"The high officials. The dinners, the tours around northern China, visiting cities and officials and being so sociable. It was for *me*, Patrick. I was there with him for every single visit. He was just being a good diplomat and learning about his country. I'm the one who was making friends, gossiping with the wives, watching, putting two and two together and writing it all down for Richard."

Patrick tapped the edge of the sheet against his fingers. "Gathering intelligence is perfectly legal. You weren't stealing secrets."

"But put it together with the documents in his sea chest and it makes the proof against him utterly inarguable. Someone put those documents there, Patrick. I know the secret compartment Piggot-Smythe is talking about. He only kept one item in it...something that was dear to him. Not documents."

"The item. It was something of your mother's?" Patrick's cheeks flushed as he asked. For him, Bian's heritage was still a delicate thing.

"Yes, it was. A jade tiger with ruby eyes...she'd had it made especially for him, to bring him luck. He kept it with him. Always."

"Why hidden, though? It sounds like the sort of thing one would keep upon a mantle."

"It was inscribed with their names and mine, with descriptions of the depth of her love for him. And a call to God to reunite them in Heaven for all eternity."

"Ah... Yes, that would be something he'd need to keep hidden." Patrick cleared his throat and focused on furiously cleaning his glasses. "Then Sutherland-Bruce must have put the documents in the compartment. Father already suspected he was betraying English secrets—he sent you here to confirm it. So Sutherland-Bruce gathers up incriminating Chinese documents and puts them into the compartment before he obediently returns to England. And he must have hinted to the Chinese before he left. The arrest barely a week after he left is very suggestive."

Bian nodded. "Yes but who did it?"

He shrugged. "Stuart, of course. Piggot-Smythe says he was there the week before Father's arrest."

"But when you had Lord Baring ask the Home Office here in London, they said that Stuart had been here for nearly a month. It was Aiden who had been home only a few days."

Patrick blinked. "Good God," he said softly. "You think some sort of...masquerade has been going on?"

"I think that's exactly what has happened," she said. "Aiden visited my father, pretending to be Stuart. Stuart was posted to Canton, so he would rarely have called on my father. Piggot-Smythe would not have been able to tell the difference—these two are peas in a pod, Patrick. Even I was confused at first."

"What tipped you off, then?" Patrick asked curiously.

She felt her own cheeks bloom with heat. "He looked at me with the same lust as Stuart but in his eyes there was no..."

"Love?" Patrick suggested.

"None."

"So you can tell them apart but others who do not know them intimately would not."

"Exactly. So Aiden pretends he is Stuart and visits his ambassador. One last official visit before returning to England. While he is in the residence, he finds a way to place the documents in the compartment—"

"How would he know it was there?" Patrick asked.

"It was hidden but not impossible to find," she answered. "I found it, after all."

Patrick gave a low, almost silent laugh. "Of course you did. So Aiden found the compartment, placed the documents in it, lets the Chinese know where to find them. He hurries back to England and reverts to Aiden when he arrives, while the Chinese quickly do his work for him and remove the biggest threat to his role as a treasonous, lying, amoral son of a bitch."

"Patrick!" She was shocked at Patrick's curse and the vehemence of his anger.

He held up a hand. "Forgive me. This man, whichever man it was, was the man who arranged to have my father executed."

"It was Aiden," she said flatly.

He looked at her with a wise expression. "You would like it to be Aiden. But what if the reverse happened? What if Aiden was the first to return to England and Stuart actually did do this thing?"

"The Home Office said —"

"They reported that one of the brothers returned several weeks before the other. But you only have Stuart's word that he was the first one to arrive in England."

She squeezed her temples with her fingertips. "Why would he lie about it here, if he did not in Peking? If he had really been trying to avoid suspicion, he would have presented himself to my father and Piggot-Smythe as Aiden. But he did not."

Patrick's smile widened. "And here is another thought, darling sister. What if the man you have taken to your bed isn't Stuart at all? What if it has been Aiden all along?"

Chapter Eight

"For heaven's sake, Bian, you cannot go to him!" Patrick strode into the bedroom right behind her too intent on making sure she heard him to have registered where he actually was. "Until we can learn which of the two arrived in England first and the true identity of that man, you should not step within a mile of either of them!"

She fumbled at the ties of her house robe. "Have you never heard of baiting the tiger, Patrick? Sometimes it the only way to get him to come out of his lair."

His hand fell on her elbow, halting her. "I understand the principle," he said quietly. "But one of them is a killer. He cold-bloodedly arranged to have another man murdered to cover his crimes—crimes that will have him hanged if you find the proof you're looking for. You think he will hesitate to kill you for even a moment, if he realizes what your intentions are?"

She patted his hand. "I know. And one of them is the man I love. I can't wait around like a lady for some miracle to provide an answer. So if you do not want to see me naked, Patrick, I suggest you leave."

This time he flushed clear to his hairline and backed quickly out of the room, just as she had known he would. Patrick was a gentleman to his core and unworldly despite his post as Lord Baring's secretary.

She dressed quickly and hurried down the stairs to find him again. When he looked up from his plate of roast beef, his eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

"Yes, I know," she said, tucking her braided hair into the back of her jacket. "I did say I could not stay a lady for this."

"Those are a man's clothes!" He rose to his feet.

"Indeed they are. A gentleman's clothes, in fact. A very young, very short gentleman who perhaps hasn't reached his majority yet but still has the full force of

money and tradition behind him." She tugged down on the silk waistcoat and arranged the chain of her fob watch so it wouldn't hinder her draw. Then she checked the load on the pistol in her pocket a second time.

As she rolled the barrel to count the bullets and pushed it back in place, Patrick sank back onto his seat with a speed that suggested he had fallen onto it. She looked up and saw that he had turned quite pale. "And now you have some idea of the *real* work Richard demanded of me."

"But...but...you're a *woman*!" Patrick spluttered.

"Which has worked in my favor for ten years now. Would you ever suspect that the demure maid cleaning out the fireplace climbed three floors in the pre-dawn light and will read all the papers on your desk the minute you leave the room and write down the essentials using a shorthand system of writing? That she will spend a day touring your house and soaking up any household gossip about your bedroom activities, your vices and weaknesses, before leaving with the day staff at the end of the day?"

Patrick just stared at her.

"I thought not," she said, putting on the wide-brimmed hat and pulling it down around her ears to disguise as much of her face as she could. "Remember that the next time you sit down to tea with a lady, or speak of business in front of a maid."

He was staring down at his untouched roast beef as she shut the door, a bewildered look on his face.

She walked along the mostly deserted footpaths, using the strides of a lad with long legs, enjoying the freedom and ease of movement that trousers and flat shoes provided. As she passed the occasional stroller, she touched her hand to her hat brim, with a polite nod, which was all someone of her apparent rank would consider appropriate. The movement also covered her un-English eyes. It was quite dark, but if they were seen at all they would be noted and remembered.

When she was within a few hundred feet of Stuart's house, she slipped into the alley that ran behind the houses in this area, which gave access for service carts to the servants' entries.

It was close to midnight and the moon had not yet risen. A crisp frost lay over everything, making her footsteps crunch alarmingly. It was impossible to approach the house silently, so she walked openly instead. When she arrived at the gateway that gave access to the servants' entrance, she looked around for observers. But it was too cold a night for anyone to be lingering and she had not seen anyone since leaving the street.

The servants' entrance would be locked and barred by now. Any day staff would have left long ago. She looked up at the second floor. All the windows were dark. Along the side of the house, there was a window with a low glow that might be a single candle burning. That was Stuart's room. She would avoid that side of the house, for Aiden's rooms would most certainly be at the front and possibly on the other corner opposite Stuart's.

There was a very small window on the second floor, with marbled glass. It could be a large closet or a small room but unlikely to belong to one of the staff—not with impenetrable glass of that kind. There was a drain-pipe right next to it and the house was made of brick and mortar. Here at the back, there was no plaster overlay. It would be as easy as climbing stairs.

She eased through the gateway and over to the drainpipe and laid a hand against it. It was bitterly cold to touch but not slippery. Not yet. She dug into her jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of leather gloves so thin and light they were like a second skin. She slipped them on and gripped the back of the pipe with both hands and braced her feet flat against the wall. The heels of her shoes were held by the tiny lip created by the mortar sinking between the bricks. It was a fraction of an inch but enough to keep her feet from slipping. Moving hand over hand and one footstep at a time, she walked her

way up the wall, until she was parallel with the window, some twenty-five feet off the ground.

She tested the window. It moved a little, then stuck but not from a lock or bar. It was simple lack of use that made it reluctant to rise. She leaned her elbow on the window sill, worked her fingers under the tiny space beneath the frame and heaved, using the sill as leverage. It gave an almost soundless squeal of protest, then moved another inch. Taking a breath, she re-anchored herself and tried again. Her left arm was burning from taking all her weight as she hung off the pipe. She closed her mind to it.

Finally the window was opened the necessary inches she needed to wriggle through. At least with such a stiff window, she did not have to worry about the frame falling down on her, or slamming closed once she was inside and alerting the household.

She swung over to the sill and used her arms to pull herself through the window. The room was utterly dark and her eyes, already adjusted to the little light outside, could make out nothing. As soon as her hips were supporting her on the sill, she reached down, feeling for objects beneath the window. As her hands met nothing, she groped further, until her palms rested against the cold wooden floor. She could feel no objects within a couple of feet of the window, so pulled herself through until she was crouched on the floor.

The room was still and silent around her. There was no one else here, not even a sleeper.

She waited until her eyes had adjusted again and gradually made out dark shapes propped against the wall, hanging from pegs. Rotund objects on the floor beneath. They were cleaning items—brooms, buckets, washcloths. The cleaning staff's upstairs equipment. Any of it would make a clatter loud enough to wake the dead if she knocked into it.

She carefully stepped her way across the room to the door and eased it open. The corridor beyond had doors on the other side, as well but none of them was open. She

looked left and right and decided on left just because Stuart's room was on the right of the house, from where she stood.

The corridor had a good, thick runner along it, which helped quiet her footsteps as she moved down the centre of it and muffled the odd creak of floorboards. The corridor followed the outside of the house, turning to run toward the front, where the sweeping stairs led down to the ground floor. Somewhere down there was a study, a place where documents were kept that would give her the information she needed.

She maneuvered carefully along the edge of the corridor, her shoulder almost brushing the wall, as she came to the front half of the house. Against the wall was where the floorboards squeezed the least and now was when she must be most silent. When she made the top of the staircase without a soul stirring, she breathed a small sigh of relief.

The stairs were of much more solid construction and she hurried down them, knowing that none of them squeaked or squealed, for she had used them more than once in the light of day and had automatically taken note of their soundness.

On the ground floor, she avoided the rooms she already knew, the kitchen and family parlor and the front foyer. She turned instead to the other front rooms, suspecting she would find a formal lounge room of some sort and beyond it a study or library.

She stepped through a grand archway into a room where dark shadows of chairs hunched around occasional tables. It smelled dusty and ill-used. There was light coming from the windows for the street lamps were kept burning all night in this district and there was one just outside the window. She paused again, memorizing the layout of furniture in the room. If she had to hurry back this way, she needed to know the quickest route across the room.

There was a grand fireplace on the wall opposite the windows and a teak mantelshelf over it. She saw that the picture above the shelf was a framed mirror, not a

picture at all. There was very little on the shelf itself. Not even a box of tapers for lighting a fire, which confirmed in her mind that the room was seldom used.

But there was a little figurine on the end of it.

Her heart stuttered, came to a stop, then began again, this time slamming against her chest with every beat. The pain was excruciating. Clutching at her chest, she moved to the mantelshelf and reached for the jade tiger and lifted it down. Under her fingers, she could feel the Latin scripted message from her mother to her father, carved into the chest and haunches of the beast.

Whoever had placed the documents in her father's chest had also taken this from the same hiding place, stolen it and placed it upon the mantle in plain sight for all to see.

Which one was it?

"I've never had the pleasure of catching a thief red-handed," came the drawl from the doorway. "What am I to do with you?"

She looked over her shoulder, carefully avoiding showing more of her face than she had to. She had failed to remain alert when she had found the tiger and now she must pay the price for her lapse.

From the voice and the shape of the figure by the archway, she was facing either Aiden or Stuart. But he had his back to the light. She couldn't see his eyes.

"Nothing to say, lad?"

"Ye caught me, gov'," she said, deepening her voice and added a Cockney accent. "Right fair 'n square. Better get it over wiv. Call the coppers."

"As soon as you put whatever you have in your hand back where you found it."

He didn't know what it was. This one, then, wasn't the one who had placed the figurine on the mantle, or he would have called it that.

A flood of light from a strong, well-lit lamp came from around the archway. "What on Earth...?" came a second voice. Aiden or Stuart...again, she could not tell. There was not enough light. Yet.

The lamp was carried into the room by the other twin. This one wore the same robe Stuart had worn. Was this one Stuart? But the other had not known what she held in her hand. He lifted the lamp and placed it on the lamp stand just inside the door, then looked at her. His eyes widened. "You!"

Not "Bian".

She looked at the first, who now stood on her right. He was staring at her. He wore a similar robe but it was a dark green, rather than a dark red. "Take off your hat," he said, his voice low.

She had already been recognized, so she took the warm hat off gratefully. It would increase her range of vision to leave it off. And she would need that advantage, for a plan of action had occurred to her. She looked at them both. "Yes, it's me," she said in her normal voice. "I suppose you're surprised to see me."

"Bian, what on earth...and why are you wearing those clothes?" This was from the one on the left. She still could not see his face clearly. The lamp was behind him. But he called her Bian.

"You're an unusual lady, Bian. I suppose you must have an explanation," said the other.

Stalemate.

Mentally, she rolled up her sleeves. "I'm here tonight to learn which of you is a traitor."

This time both of their eyes widened.

"One of you has betrayed England, sold her secrets to the highest bidder and into the bargain, managed to shift blame to the Duke of Pemberton. He was executed six days ago, did you know?"

"You know I know that." From the left.

"Bian, for God's sake, what are you talking about?" From the right. "Treachery is a serious accusation. You can't simply fling it about like that."

"I'm not flinging," she assured them. "I have proof."

Then she shut her mouth, watching them closely. Both their eyes widened again.

"One of you is feigning innocence. Whichever one of you it is, you have been pretending to be the other, in order to shift blame again. To fool me and put me off your trail. But you've failed. I have my proof and need only give it to Lord Baring, who will see that you're tried and executed, just as you arranged for the Duke of Pemberton."

This time they glanced at each other.

Bian rubbed her thumb over her proof and braced herself. She looked up, beyond their shoulders and threw out her hand, pointing. "Watch out! Behind you!" she shouted in Vietnamese.

The one on the left whirled to face the danger she had warned him of. The other's brow wrinkled in puzzlement, a silent "what?" forming on his lips.

The first was already turning back to look at her when she lifted up the tiger and threw it as hard as she could at the other. It hit him square on the right shoulder, sending him staggering backward, flailing for balance. She ran at him and from five feet away launched herself at him. She landed against his chest and as he was already off balance, he fell to the floor with an impact that vibrated across the boards to jar the whole room.

"What in God's name...?" Stuart said.

Bian was ready for the fall and the impact and before Aiden could do more than shake dizziness from his head, she had her knee against his windpipe and her pistol an inch from his nose. He looked up into the barrel and grew very still.

"Bian, what are you doing?" Stuart asked, behind her.

"You know Vietnamese. He didn't. If he did, he would never have put this statue on the mantelshelf. Read it, Stuart." She picked up the tiger and tossed it to him. "It's Latin script. You will be able to read it enough to know what it says."

She turned back to look down at Aiden's face. "I'm not afraid to use this gun. It would not be the first time I have shot away a man's face and I would take great pleasure in doing it to you."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing and looked at his brother. "This woman is crazy, Stuart."

Stuart was absorbed in reading and translating the script on the tiger. "She is a great many things but crazy is not one of them. And I believe her when she says she can use the gun. I suggest you believe her too." He finished reading and looked at her.

Then, abruptly, he lunged at her and Bian flinched but his hands fell past her, to land on his brother's arm, down by her hip. She looked down as Stuart leaned on it. "What are you doing?" he asked Aiden. "What is it you search for in your pocket?" He dug into the robe's pocket and brought out a derringer pistol, holding the miniature firearm in his fingers. He looked at Aiden, pain etching his features. "Then it's all true," he said sadly. He hefted the tiger in his other hand. "There is only one way you could have come across such an intensely personal object belonging to the Duke of Pemberton and only one reason to be carrying such a gun around on your person, here in the heart of London."

Aiden swore. "Damn your eyes, little brother. That noble sense of duty of yours has always been your undoing and will be forevermore."

Stuart shook his head in pity. "You still persist in believing that childhood myth, even now?"

"I was *born first*, damn you!" Aiden cried. "Everything that you have, that you will have, it's mine and you know it!"

"You would have been taken care of. You know that. The viscountcy would have been yours."

"A viscount? While you parade around as the Earl of Salisbury?" Aiden spat. "This is all your fault, little brother. We both know I was born first but you made sure they mixed us up, so that you would inherit it all. I don't want your charity. I don't need it. I have more powerful allies now. Friends who know how to treat a true lord."

"You don't have any friends at all," Stuart told him. "And you'll have no need of them, where you're going."

He looked at Bian. "This is why you are in England, is it not? To find the man that caused your – the Duke of Pemberton's death?"

"It did not begin that way but yes, ultimately, that was my goal."

His eyes were drilling into her, giving her no room to maneuver, no escape. "You thought I was that man. That is why we met."

She could find no other answer than the truth that already hung between them. So she spoke it aloud. "Yes, that is why we met."

"And right up until you threw that statue, you were still not certain, were you? It could be me, right now, lying beneath your knee with your gun at my face."

She could not answer him. But her face spoke for her.

Silently, he turned away from her.

Chapter Nine

England, Winter, 1885

Patrick handed her cloak and his coat to the waiting footman and Bian looked around the grand house. "Have you ever been invited to Lady Grey's country luncheons before?" she asked Patrick.

"Never. But we are on a lot of invitation lists now that we once were not." He shrugged.

"Why is that, though? That is the question that plagues me. And I don't think it is simply that you are the new Duke, either, for our connection is not public, yet I am received in as many houses as you."

Lady Grey herself emerged from the drawing room and moved across the tiles toward them, her arms outstretched in welcome. "It's so good of you to come," she exclaimed and shepherded them back toward the room. "I have some special guests this year. I believe you may know most of them, including the new Earl of Salisbury."

Bian halted and Lady Grey's hand fell away from her arm. She turned back to face her, puzzled. Patrick's face showed surprise, giving way to pity.

Bian cleared her throat. "The new Earl of Salisbury is here?"

"Yes, dear, he is."

"Bian." Her name was called from the doorway. Stuart stood there, his hand on the handle, looking tall and dignified in a black jacket.

Lady Grey whispered something to Patrick, who nodded and walked her to the door, past Stuart and into the room behind, leaving Bian alone to face him.

"You knew I would be here," she accused him.

"I arranged it," he said flatly, coming toward her. "I had to see you. And since my brother's...disgrace, there are few places where I am welcome."

"Whereas I seem to have acquired a reputation that opens doors for me everywhere," she muttered. "It's almost as if someone had been speaking about me."

"Someone has, behind closed doors."

"Who?" she said sharply.

"Your brother. And me." Stuart reached for her arm, then thought the better of it and dropped his hand. "Would you... Could we speak alone?"

"You would deign to speak with me?"

"I would move mountains to do so. I *have* moved much to be here before you today." He took a breath. "Please, Bian?"

She nodded and when he indicated the door on the other side of the grand entrance to the drawing room where everyone else had gathered, she walked over and opened the door to the library and stepped through, not waiting for his assistance.

He followed her in and shut the door behind him.

She did not sit but stood in the middle of the library and waited.

He took another breath but did not seem to know how to begin.

"I was sorry to hear about your father," Bian said instead. "Was it connected with..."

"With Aiden? Yes. His heart was never very strong. The news... It was too much of a shock."

"At least he did not live to suffer through the trial and the...the..."

"Execution," Stuart finished flatly. "You do not have to fear speaking the words to me, Bian. Aiden was a traitor and faced the consequences of betraying his country. I miss the brother I had once thought a good companion but I won't flinch from acknowledging what he did."

"I'm sorry, Stuart. Sorry that I was the one who brought this upon you."

"You did not. Aiden did. I will never know for sure why he was so convinced that he was the elder, but he maintained it was so, right up until his last day." He shook his

head, sorrow creasing his brow. "Aiden always wanted power, and looked for the shortest path to reach it. This was just one of his many grievances against a world that would not give him what he wanted. He took a deep breath, and straightened his shoulders. He look directly at her. "I have been a fool, Bian. A blind, stupid fool."

Her heart skipped a beat. "You have?"

"For a while, yes I was. But I have been thinking rather hard, lately. It was more than overdue, I admit." He spread his hands a little, as if he was speaking the obvious. "You are the Royal Talisman, not your father. It was you all along."

She took a slow breath, controlling her surprise. "What makes you say that? Is that what you have been telling people? Is that the reason for my sudden acceptance and popularity?"

"You're a princess, a royal."

"For a court and a people who no longer exist," she added.

"But a princess, nevertheless. You were the one that gathered the intelligence that kept Britain out of the war with France and China. That is why you are welcome at Victoria's court, why you mingled with the lords of the land so easily. It wasn't simply your father's rank that opened the doors for you."

"I would sooner not be the Royal Talisman," she admitted. "It was because of me that the Chinese could find reason enough to execute Richard...my father."

"Richard?" he said sharply. Then he closed his eyes and said in growing wonder, "Nathanial *Richard* Kirkham." Then he opened them. "You came to England to find proof that I had been giving English secrets to the Chinese, didn't you?"

"You already know that. I didn't lie to you that night." She dropped her chin. "I couldn't."

"Your father—Richard—sent you here to root out a traitor. But you fell in love, instead."

She looked up at him, startled. His blue eyes were locked on her face again, just like the last time she had seen him. They gave her no quarter to lie or avoid the question. "I never told you that," she said carefully.

"Bian, did you think I had not recognized it, anyway? That I did not know? I love — loved — you as much as you loved me. That's what blinded me. I could feel nothing but betrayal, when I realized why you had come into my life. But that night when you confronted us both, you still did not know which of us was the traitor and you were testing us both. I know it, Bian. I have finally put it all together, so don't bother trying to hide it."

"Then yes, I did not know which of you was the traitor," she admitted.

"You loved me, yet you were prepared to send me to that same noose my brother met," he added softly.

Tears pricked her eyes. "Yes."

"Because it was your duty," he added, moving closer.

"Yes." She could barely force the word past the constriction in her throat. It was a hard mass of horror and hope, tangled together. "You do not know how I have suffered because of it," she added.

"Why?"

"*Why?*" She stared at him. "I was not truthful with you. I lied about who I was, what I wanted."

"You insisted on fulfilling your duty despite loving me, despite knowing it might end in my execution. Do you not know how much I admire you for that, Bian? How much my love has grown because of it?"

Her breath, her heart, her mind, seemed to seize. She could only stare at him, unable to speak.

He smiled and took another step. Now he was close enough, he slid his hand around her waist. "Would you...do you think you might be able to love me again, Bian?"

Because I have never stopped loving you. Even if you send me away, I will never stop loving you. You are everything that is great and admirable in this country, everything that will save Britain from crumbling into ruin and I have made sure that every peer, every noble, every Englishman with a speck of influence has been informed of that."

"You *did* tell them who I was!" she gasped.

"It may have slipped from me from time to time, when speaking with men I knew were discrete. And they have discreet friends of their own..." He shrugged. "No one will ever openly acknowledge what you have done, Bian, or your true heritage but they will all know of it."

She had no adequate response.

"Do you remember the question I promised I would continue to ask?"

She nodded.

"I must ask again, Bian. Will you marry me?"

"You leave me with little choice," she sighed. "Thanks to your whispers, I have no chance of returning to my old life." She wrapped her arms about his neck. "Yes, Stuart. I will marry you."

His lips were firm and warm on hers. It was as if he had only kissed her yesterday but she had missed his kisses, nevertheless. Her body responded with a fervor that she could give free rein and she pulled herself against him, as happiness bubbled through her veins.

He held her a little away from him. "There is one tiny part of your old life I would prefer you maintain," he said.

"Yes?"

"The men's clothing you wore that night. I have not been able to forget how you looked in trousers." He smiled. "And a shirt with buttons that can be undone, one button at a time..."

Tingling in the tips of her breasts and between her legs made her breath grow faster. She glanced behind her, confirming what she had noticed when she first entered the library. "There's a high-backed sofa there," she whispered.

"And...?"

"I never did get a chance to fully appreciate yours. Let's use this one. Now."

"At once, my princess."

About the Author

Tracy Cooper-Posey is a national award-winning writer. An Australian, she brought her family with her to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 1996 to marry. Tracy is a “net citizen” — she met and courted her husband on the Internet, and has coordinated discussion groups and teaching on-line. She also wrote and maintains her own web site. She teaches creative writing both on-line and at college, and entertains students and the public with anecdotes and insights into one the most antisocial professions in the world, and the peculiar industry it drives.

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