

*Delphayne DeRouge*



*The Women of  
Maison d'Estelle*

**Book I: Lacie**

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## THE WOMEN OF MAISON D'ESTELLE

### BOOK I: LACIE

by

DELPHYNE DEROUGE

Amber Quill Press, LLC  
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The Women Of Maison D'Estelle  
Book I: Lacie

An Amber Quill Press Book

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**Also by Delphyne DeRouge**

*The Women of Maison d'Estelle*  
*Book I: Lacie*  
*Book II: Selia*

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### **Dedication**

*To Blanche Arneau.*  
*You may have existed more than a hundred years ago,*  
*but your spirit and fire live on in my soul.*  
*Without you, this story never would have awakened,*  
*demanding to be told.*

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# Chapter 1

His fingertips traced her breast, circling her nipple until it hardened into a rosy point. Lips replaced fingertips, gently sucking.

Estelle groaned with pleasure. "James, my God. Your mouth is magic. Where did you learn to do that?"

Colonel James Goodwin raised his head until his mouth hovered over her pearly globe. "Honey, didn't you know all us Bluecoats hone our skills on the battlefield?"

Her tinkling laughter joined his husky chuckle. "Somehow, I don't think the Peninsula Campaign had anything to do with it. McClellan might be famous for getting you boys ready for war...but this is above and beyond the call of duty."

He whispered over her breast, "Perhaps we should include it in the army training manual."

His mouth drifted down her stomach, pausing over her navel. A quick tongue lashing in that delicate spot sent Estelle writhing under him. Her nails raked his shoulders, and then his thick, prematurely gray hair as James' tongue trailed to her pubic mound. His teeth playfully pulled the hair before he continued his descent to her inner thighs.

As his tongue stroked her slit, Estelle sank into waves of pleasure undulating from her core. Tension built, and just as she was about to climax, James moved away from her tender spot and began a slow journey down her inner thighs. His tongue skimmed her skin, barely making contact. So subtle the touch, so exciting. Estelle couldn't hold still as James' tongue roamed to the inside of her knee and paused at the firm muscles of her calf.

When he reached one foot and lashed her arch, she cooed in delight, her eyes closed so she could concentrate on the sensations battering her. Every nerve ending flamed with desire. Estelle had never felt so alive. And so frustrated.

Suddenly, his tongue disappeared. She groaned in disappointment and was about to open her eyes when his manhood rammed into her with the force of a cannon.

To the very core of her stomach, he filled her. Estelle's shattering orgasm crashed through her body. Then, he disappeared again.

This time, she did open her eyes to see him poised at her vagina, grinning from ear to ear, his erection bobbing an inch away from her drenched opening.

"We soldiers also learn discipline..." James' hoarse whisper disappeared in his panting breath.

"They teach you about torture, too? Because if your enlisted man is just going to salute me the rest of the night, I'll go out of my mind. I have plans to capture him and hold him a long time."

He threw back his head, his hearty laugh filling the velvet-draped room, his cock vibrating in time to his laughter. "Honey, solitary confinement in your prison sounds like heaven on earth."

Still, he didn't move.

Just as irritation crept through her, he looked down at her with an evil leer and said sweetly, "Patience is a virtue." He slammed into her with greater force than she'd ever experienced.

Estelle knew she'd split in two, certain she'd love every minute of it.

When they'd dissolved into sweat and spent passion, and dropped into each others' arms, she proclaimed him the best lover in the whole damned army—Union or Confederate.

"So, Colonel Goodwin, you never told me what brought you to my door this fine June night. Perhaps General Fry sent you to investigate my brothel?" Smiling, she nuzzled his chest, savoring his male scent of soap, tobacco and sweat, then leaned back to lie on her side in the carved rosewood bed. She faced James, her head propped on a hand supported by her crooked elbow, loving the sight of his powerful, muscular body lounging between her beige silk sheets.

Estelle and James had been lovers for more than a year. And best friends. The fact that the love of her life happened to work for the Provost Marshall General of Washington, D.C. while she was madam of prostitutes, served as an ironic touch both appreciated and neither allowed to cramp their style.

James smiled, flicking one of her nipples with a finger. "Can't a man desire the pleasure of a beautiful woman's company without explanation? As for an investigation, this is my personal endeavor and I don't ever want to finish it." He sobered. "Blast my bad luck to be assigned to General Fry."

She captured the hand that nestled her breast and raised it to her lips. "How could you have fallen in love with the madam of a seedy bawdy house, anyway?" Her mouth caressed the top of his hand.

"Seedy bawdy house?" He chuckled.

Maison d'Estelle had earned the reputation as the most elegant brothel in Washington, D.C. Union officers saved their meager salary for weeks to afford one night of pleasure behind its luxurious doors. Both its girls and clients were hand-picked. Antique furnishings, hand-woven silk tapestries and bed linens, and imported oil paintings worthy of the finest galleries exuded wealth and refinement. Only the best for Estelle.

James continued, "It's safe to assume your establishment will never be investigated by Fry."

"Considering half his staff are customers, I'd say so."

Goodwin stretched and sat up. "Speaking of Fry, I need to head back to the office."

"At this hour?" Estelle glanced at the china clock on the black marble mantel. "Why return this evening?"

"Special report's due the first of July...that's tomorrow morning." He shrugged into his uniform, yawning. "Your girls all booked for tonight?"

"Actually not. It's a light evening for everyone. Especially Lacie. I've given all her clients to Emmaline and Selia." Estelle frowned. "I'm worried about her, James. You know I allow them their brandy and such, but Lacie's drinking is out of control. She got up for work this afternoon and almost killed herself on the stairs. So drunk, she could barely stand."

"I thought that new boyfriend helped her."

Estelle sighed. "Bill Masters? For a time, he seemed to. But recently, she's returned to the bottle. And it seems to be worse than ever."

"May have to get rid of her. Plenty of other houses would love to have one of yours...drunk or no." He paused by the bedroom door and turned back to her. Standing at attention, he barked in mock military style, "As you were, ma'am. Till tomorrow night." With a rakish salute and a broad smile, he swept out of Estelle's private suite.

Giggling, Estelle pulled on a silk robe and crossed the thick Persian rug to her rosewood dressing table. She passed a brush through her tangled raven curls, staring into the gilt-framed mirror, luxuriating in the afterglow of another delightful time with James Goodwin.

From the first moment Estelle had laid eyes on him, she'd known this man would play an important role in her life.

## Chapter 2

They met by accident in the first year of the war. Estelle had slid in mud on Pennsylvania Avenue, wrenching her ankle. Lieutenant James Goodwin of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry, had been riding by and jumped off his horse to rescue her.

The moment she felt his arms around her, Estelle suspected she'd found the man of her dreams. As he'd carried her to the lush, wisteria-draped Sixth Street mansion and hovered over her, making certain servants tended her injury, she *knew* he was the man of her dreams. But running a posh brothel did not allow her opportunity for personal relationships, and she'd tried to put him out of her mind.

Estelle had almost succeeded forgetting him as the months passed—at least, during the day. At night, however, the strapping officer with the laughing blue eyes, with the shock of white hair framing a strong, tanned face, dominated her fantasies. She would writhe in bed, imagining his hands caressing her hot flesh, touching every inch of her. And when his hands had completed their route, his mouth took over the exploration.

The most extreme orgasms she'd ever experienced wracked her body. And all she had to do was lie in bed, wrapped in her silk and cashmere linens and *imagine* him. The intensity of sensation she would experience if he *really* touched her boggled her mind.

One hot September day in 1862—nearly one year after she'd first laid eyes on Goodwin—Estelle had the opportunity to turn dreams into reality. Colonel James Patrick Goodwin appeared at her door with the easy grace of a cavalry officer who'd won his tests of bravery, and the knowing grin of a man envisioning an afternoon of pleasure.

Estelle never considered turning him over to one of her girls. Within a few minutes, he'd entered her burgundy velvet-swathed suite and dropped onto her chaise lounge, still grinning. What followed would always remain one of Estelle's fondest memories, and most effective aphrodisiac.

She had returned his smile, delighting in the tantalizing picture of the virile hulk of a man seated on her pale rose-and-cream-striped chintz.

"You remember me?" he asked.

She perched on a satin boudoir chair near him, traffic noises from Sixth St. muffled by velvet draperies swathing the towering arched windows. "How could I forget the dashing officer who rescued me in my time of need?"

Odd that she hadn't joined him on the chaise. After all, pleasuring male clients *was* her business. But, he seemed different. Special. A man to savor and takes one's time enjoying. Estelle made no move toward him, instead content to devour his sinewy form from a distance.

Wincing, he shifted, stretching one leg in front of him.

"Your leg bothers you?"

He grimaced. "Recovering from being shot in the thigh. I suppose I should be grateful I still have a leg, but I'll admit there are times I'd love to cut it off."

Estelle rose and slowly approached him. "Perhaps I can ease your discomfort."

Goodwin's grin returned. "Now, that is hospitable of you, ma'am."

"You'd be more comfortable without your boots." Estelle grabbed a boot jack before she sank onto the

oriental rug, her sky blue satin dressing robe cascading around her in gentle waves. After she'd removed the gleaming black riding boots, Goodwin sighed and settled back onto the chaise lounge.

She could feel the heat from him before she even touched the fine wool trouser legs.

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His manhood responded to her immediately. And she hadn't laid a hand on him. What was it about this woman that obsessed him? Not her beauty, though her raven hair, deep blue eyes and fine features occupied his dreams. Nor her willowy body or full breasts, even if they had filled his waking hours with lust-driven fantasies. No, not the lilting voice he'd heard ringing in his ears every day since he'd first seen her on Pennsylvania Avenue.

He'd tried to forget her. Daydreams got you killed on the battlefield. Not that he would go so far as to blame her for the bullet slamming into his leg at Malvern Hill. He'd known the first days of July 1862 would prove to be rough, knew it when Colonel Averell ordered James and his men to guard the rear of General Porter's Fifth Corps from the enemy. The entire left wing of the Army of the Potomac hung in the balance, and Goodwin had risen to the challenge.

Just as it appeared he and his fellow 3<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalrymen had effectively screened the army's movement, James had felt a searing pain in his left leg. His last memories focused on his gray gelding dropping beneath him. James had awakened in a field hospital, surrounded by the groaning wounded.

Recuperation had been blessedly swift. And then, for God knows what reason (he suspected his lawyer-father had pulled political strings), James found himself in Washington, D.C., assigned to the Provost Marshall General's office. The notion of being sidelined from battle action did not sit well with him. He'd fought the assignment to no avail.

On a steamy September day as he stared out his office window and watched fierce rain turn Washington streets into muddy streams, he remembered the black-haired beauty he'd met by accident on Pennsylvania Avenue months earlier. Suddenly, his Washington post became one of joy. The next thing he knew, he'd entered her suite and waited for her to administer to his leg...and whatever else she cared to tend.

Gentle hands probed the flesh around his thigh, never moving too close to the wound to cause discomfort. They slowly circled, her thumb beginning the movement, her fingers following. Deeply into his flesh her digits swirled, massaging around to the inside of his leg. Traveling ever closer to his manhood.

He inhaled, relishing her delicate lavender fragrance mixed with the spicy scent of her arousal. The fabric around his crotch stretched to its limits. James would have given anything to remove his trousers and allow his engorged flesh freedom. As if Estelle read his thoughts, her hands moved up to his waist. Skillfully, she opened his trousers, releasing his phallus.

Leaning back, she studied him, eyes sparkling. "Perhaps I can divert your thoughts away from your war injury."

"Whatever you can do would be most appreciated, ma'am," he whispered. Then groaned as he felt her lips brush the tip of his organ.

"I'd be honored to help one of our brave boys in blue," she muttered, poised above him.

Her tongue swirled around him, licking away the few glistening drops from the tip, before it began a sweet dance, darting around the shaft as if it had a mind of its own.

James leaned back on the chaise lounge and surrendered to the delicious sensation as her mouth closed

around him and began sucking. How much of him could she possibly hold? He was about to find out as he felt his hot flesh skim past her teeth and into the back of her mouth.

The pulsing brought him close to climax. Never before had he felt such sensory waves work at his core. He caught his breath, sinking into her rhythm as she released, then drew him back in. She paused to dart her tongue around his tip, lashing it with quick jabs before consuming him again and again.

Vaguely, James wondered how long she could do this before he exploded and she dissolved into exhaustion, then dismissed the quick thought as her hands fondled his testicles and she drew more of him between her lips. When she began mimicking the beat of copulation, he knew he'd lost himself to her. The cadence quickened. His hips responded to her mouth, pushing his manhood deeper. Faster and faster.

He burst into her with a fury, shooting his seed down her throat. She stilled, accepting his fluid, licking him clean before releasing him.

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Estelle slowly ran her tongue over her lips, then grinned up at him. He half-lay across her chaise lounge, eyes closed, legs spread. A tiny smile flirted with his mouth.

Now *that* was a happy man.

She opened her robe and let it slip off her shoulders onto the floor. Fingering the lace trim of her chemise neckline, she sat back onto one hip, her legs curling behind her. She hooked a finger inside the linen and pulled down the chemise until it bared one shoulder. Aware of James' eyes now focused upon her, she bared the other shoulder and swept her fingers across from one shoulder to the other, then dipped one hand down and slowly brushed her cleavage.

Estelle lowered the chemise, exposing the tops of her breasts, then the swelling above her nipples. She reached up and pulled the pins from her hair. Raven curls tumbled around her shoulders and streamed down her back. Fingers returning to her breasts, she stroked the soft mounds, allowing the sensual fire to burn in her belly. Moaning softly, Estelle pulled her chemise down to her waist. Her fingers cupped her breasts, then slowly massaged them.

Tossing her hair to one side, she stole a glance at Goodwin, watching his renewed erection sway. She placed her index finger into her mouth and sucked on the end of it as she watched his organ respond to her. Removing her finger, now slick with saliva, she drew it across and around one nipple until the rose skin glistened. Repeating the action, she fondled the other nipple.

Estelle gently sucked her index and middle fingers, then plunged her hand inside her embroidered drawers. Opening her legs wider, she fingered her vulva. Hips moving slightly to an ancient rhythm, she allowed herself to ride the wave of sensations. Panting, she raised her sopping fingers to her mouth and licked the musky sweet juices coating them.

James began to move off the chaise lounge toward her. She shook her head and raised a hand to indicate he should remain in place.

Rising to her feet, Estelle pulled down her chemise and drawers, then stepped away from the pile of linen to stand naked before James. Her hands returned to her breasts, cupping them as her hips thrust forward and back. Then her hands traveled her stomach, caressing as she continued lowering them to her crotch.

Spreading her legs, she rubbed her hands along the sensitive skin inside her thighs. Very slowly, her fingers traveled to her opening. Again, she inserted two fingers inside herself, this time in full view of James' fiery eyes. Estelle moved the digits in and out to a steady rhythm. Allowing herself to be swept



up in the sensual fire building inside, she increased the tempo until she carried herself over the brink to orgasm.

Gasping, she sank to her knees as she rode out the pulsing waves.

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He burned from the heat Estelle radiated. The desire to bury himself deep inside her consumed his lust-ravaged mind.

Keeping his eyes pinned on the raven-haired beauty convulsing in self-induced climax, he rose and divested himself of his uniform. He walked behind her and grasped her around the waist. As he lifted her to her feet, she moaned and leaned against him. His engorged organ pressed into the small of her back and she wrapped her arms behind him, rubbing against him.

James swept her off her feet, carrying her to the bed and settling her on the satin coverlet. He joined her immediately, hovering over her, his manhood digging into her stomach.

Estelle opened her eyes and smiled at him. He caught his breath, swept away by her beauty. Never had he seen such a brilliant blue radiate from anyone's eyes. She started to grasp him, but he took her wrists and pinned them above her head.

"You've played enough, lovely lady," he whispered, kissing the hollow of her neck. Releasing her wrists, he positioned himself between her legs.

She moaned and reached up to caress his face. "I am completely at your mercy, sir."

Her words set him on fire. Without warning, he entered her with full force. She arched her back and screamed.

He remained deep inside her, not moving, focusing on her nerve endings twitching around his organ. Then, he began a slow rhythm, deeply thrusting, withdrawing to her threshold, then plunging again, deep and sure.

Estelle's hips rose to meet him, perfectly in sync with the pattern he'd created. Her fingernails dug into his buttocks, their sharp jabs inciting him. James increased his rhythm, thrusting faster, now, building until a frenzy swirled around their sweating bodies. A blur of flesh and heat wrapped them together; their matched movements urged them ever closer to the brink.

James opened his eyes a slit to watch Estelle's face. Her features had twisted into an expression of raw animal arousal; heat radiated from her soaked skin.

Never had he felt so alive, nor so close to the wonderful death only orgasm can bring. Passion-invoked tension threatened to rip him apart if he didn't seek his pleasure now.

With a roar, he burst inside her. Vaguely, he heard Estelle's answering shriek, and felt her pulsing as she climaxed beneath him.

## Chapter 3

Estelle smiled at herself in the mirror and continued brushing her hair. That first time with James had been only the beginning of the most satisfying physical relationship she'd ever experienced. But her times with Goodwin encompassed far more than sex. She chuckled, thinking about the irony of a madam having that last thought.

Just as she'd never considered charging him for that first afternoon dalliance, she knew he considered her far more than a professional lover. A deep friendship had grown between them, spiced by great sex. If she allowed herself, Estelle would admit she'd fallen in love with the dashing cavalry officer turned military investigator. In her weakest moments, she contemplated what it would be like to be his wife, to openly enjoy their relationship rather than keeping to society's shadows.

Estelle shook her head, irritated with herself. Such admissions distracted her from professional duties and responsibilities. A friendship proved far more convenient. And safer.

Raised voices and a loud, dull thud outside her door propelled her thoughts into the present. Tightly wrapping her silk robe about her naked body, she strode to the door, opened it and stepped into the hallway.

A male figure sprawled at her feet. She looked up to see her porter, Stepan, hovering over the groaning man with two of her girls exchanging smiles behind him.

"What happened?" she asked Emmaline and Selia.

Emmaline shrugged. "Should have known he meant trouble the moment Lacie brought him into my room."

"Lacie?"

"Yes, ma'am. He'd been with her first, apparently."

"But she isn't supposed to be working."

"I know, Estelle. She acted in a bad way, I can tell you. Really in her cups."

Estelle glanced at the man. "Who allowed him in? I didn't set up an appointment for him."

"Lucille attended the door tonight. It must have been her."

Estelle frowned. No one should have allowed a strange man into her establishment. All appointments were set up in advance. By her. "I'll have to speak with Lucille. She knows better." She paused, looking at her three employees. "So—?"

Emmaline took a deep breath. "Lacie left him with me. And he told me he wanted two of us. So I fetched Selia."

"You left him alone in your room?" Estelle shook her head in disapproval. House rule—never leave a client unattended. Especially in one's room.

Emmaline's pale green eyes dropped to the Savonnerie carpet. "I know, Estelle. I know. But he offered us a bonus I couldn't afford to turn down, and I had to get Selia. Anyway, we began to do as he asked." She exchanged a quick glance with the other girl.

"Go on," Estelle encouraged.

"Well, ma'am, he acted a bit rough. Nothing we hadn't had before, of course. But—"

Selia chimed in. "But he grew nasty about it, you know? Downright nasty. When...when he finally finished with us, we...encouraged him to leave. He became angry. Started tearing apart the place, and pushing us around."

"I called to Stepan." Emmaline looked at the hulking young man who'd worked at the brothel for years. "Praise be, he was right outside the room. The guy wouldn't leave and Stepan...really encouraged him."

Stepan smiled grimly. "Sorry, Estelle. Didn't mean to disturb you, but couldn't be helped."

Estelle glanced down the long hallway, heavy with the scent of perfume and incense. Mahogany doors lined its length, framed by ruby silk wallpaper and brass sconces. "I'm not the one you should be concerned with disturbing. We have paying clients who expect to receive their services without disruption."

She knelt by the moaning man, stifling a shudder as she caught a potent whiff of stale sweat and whiskey. "You'll be wanting to send this gentleman on his way, now." She paused, looking closer at the client. Something about him seemed familiar, but she couldn't place him.

Just then, he turned his face and looked up at her. Shock coursed through Estelle as she suddenly recognized him.

His eyes slid open and he looked at Estelle for a long moment. She watched as his unfocused stare shifted. When his eyes widened, she realized he'd seen her. And knew her.

He raised a hand in her direction. "You...it can't be...Janie? Janie Post?"

She froze.

"Are you all right, Estelle?" Emmaline asked. "You've gone all pale."

Before anyone could move, the man went on. "My God! I don't believe it. Wait'll the folks back home hear about this! Little Janie Post...in a brothel."

Estelle had to get him away from the others. Had to silence him somehow. She looked at Stepan. "Could you—"

The man started struggling to his feet. "We may just have us some business together, Janie."

She nodded briskly to Stepan. "Get him in my room, if you wouldn't mind." She rose and extended a hand to the doorway leading to her suite.

The porter braced the man and guided him through the door, then stepped back into the hall, closing the door behind him.

He sat on the bed, rubbing his head. "That really is you, isn't it, Janie?"

*No sense to deny it.* She'd been caught red-handed. "It's me, Adam."

"You *work* here?"

"I own this establishment, actually." Estelle made a show of sauntering over to her dressing table and fingering the satiny finish of her tortoise-shell brushes. She sank onto the tiny boudoir chair and faced him. Shivers ran down her back as she watched a leer spread across his face.

He licked his lips as he ogled her. "Well, well, well. Little Janie Post. A madam. And here I just wanted a night of fun before going back to the war. Certainly didn't expect to walk into this."

She'd always disliked him. Having grown up on an Indiana farm next to one owned by his family, Estelle had had ample opportunity to see the evil in Adam Swanson. The whole Swanson family had been evil, truth be told. But Adam—Adam had a special vileness about him that had made Estelle's

skin crawl. She'd spent her childhood avoiding the older boy.

"What *are* you doing in Washington, Adam?"

"Recovering from a war wound. Until this morning, when the hospital released me. Thought I deserved a night of pleasure before I go back to the fight. I certainly didn't expect...this. The important question is, what are *you* doing here? Tsk, tsk, my dear. What will the folks back home think?"

"If you know what's good for you, they'll think nothing because you'll say nothing."

"Oh, now, Janie. No...that's not right. *Estelle*, isn't it? The Maison d'Estelle, this is." He howled with fiendish laughter. "And they think you're a school marm. Everyone in town is so impressed that you send your hard-earned money to those good-for-nothings you call parents. I'll say, hard-earned."

"Why you—"

"Oh, don't defend them to me, my dear. I know better than anyone what they're capable of. Yes, such a saint, everyone thinks you are. If only they knew. Isn't this just rich? Ow." He rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I'll say one thing, *Estelle*—you certainly hired strong arms to defend your girls."

She forced herself to breathe, trying to calm the adrenalin rush that urged her to either run from this man or kill him. "I'd say Stepan taught you some manners, Adam. Now, why don't you go before I forget *my* manners. You're not welcome here."

"Like I said in the hall, we have business to discuss."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Yes, business, indeed. Unless you want your entire hometown to know about your true profession. What a shock." In a melodramatic gesture, he clasped a hand to his chest. "Of course, any semblance of respectability your family still has will be gone. Yes, my dear. So sad to think about how your gray-haired parents will be shunned when word gets out."

"I told you to say nothing," Estelle said through gritted teeth.

"I'd be happy to say nothing. For a price."

"You're threatening me with blackmail?"

Adam chuckled. "Never could put anything past you, my dear." He sobered and snarled. "Of course, blackmail. And you will pay it, if you care anything for your family."

"Why you—"

"I'll be reasonable, of course. I certainly wouldn't want to take advantage of your...precarious situation. Perhaps just a few thousand."

"I'll pay you nothing."

As if speaking to himself, he said, "This little visit has turned out to be quite profitable. Quite profitable, indeed."

"You will leave my premises now. And not return."

"Ah, Janie. Always so damned sure of yourself. And haughty. No wonder your pa used to beat you."

Estelle lashed out in fury, approaching him with a fist.

He rose from the bed, catching her hand and easily holding it. "Now that's not very neighborly, Janie. Then again, you never did like the boys, did you? Always made me wonder if you preferred girls."

"Let go of me," she spat at him, rage coursing through her until Adam seemed to be surrounded by a

veil of red.

"I don't think so." He grabbed her by the arms and flung her onto the bed. Her robe flew open. He froze, looking at her naked body. "Well, now," he whispered. "What have we here?"

He scrambled atop her in a second, forcing her legs apart with his knees, hands holding her wrists over her head. She tried to jerk her arms free, but he only held her tighter.

He lashed her with his eyes, examining every inch of her. "Stop your struggling, bitch. As if you girls don't like to be looked at. That *is* why you're in the business, isn't it?"

"I'm in the business to survive," Estelle hissed, continuing to writhe under him, inhaling the boozy, lust-filled stench of him.

He transferred her wrists to one hand, allowing his other hand with its coarse fingers to stroke her face, then fondle a breast. He cupped the other breast, then tweaked her nipple with a cruel twist. Estelle cried out in pain.

Adam grinned, muttering to himself, "All these girls like to be hurt."

He reached down and bit her other nipple, causing Estelle to cry out again. His grin widened as his hand traveled down her body.

Trying to control her breathing, Estelle eyed his bulging crotch. He had succumbed to his lust—the dreamy look in his eyes told her that. He slightly loosened his grip on her wrists as fingers began probing her.

She stifled a shudder. Summoning all her strength, Estelle jerked her wrists free. In a flash, she'd grabbed a small marble statuette from the rosewood bedside table and crashed it across his head.

He groaned and slumped on top of her, unconscious.

"Thank God," she whispered.

Estelle began the difficult task of sliding out from beneath his dead weight. Eventually, she rolled off the bed and breathed a sigh of relief. She looked at Adam's inert body, then sighed again and checked for a pulse. Strong and steady. She'd only knocked him out.

Estelle pulled a satin rope by the bed to summon Stepan. Time for her porter to take out the trash.

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# Chapter 4

Estelle spent the rest of the evening trying to forget the distasteful scene with Adam. A faint voice inside questioned her decision to throw him out. Should she have paid him for his silence?

Shuddering, she prowled her suite, flinging herself into a velvet-upholstered Louis Quatorze chair, then bouncing up again to continue pacing her elegant drawing room. No, she decided. Once you start to pay a blackmailer, you're never free of his threats. And the dollar amount would increase with each demand, she suspected.

She toyed with the notion of sending her parents a letter, warning them about Adam, telling them the truth before he could. Then dismissed the idea.

The contemptible bastard had made one good point. Her parents specialized in abuse, especially her father. She'd grown up with his lashings—both by his tongue and his belt. Worse were the midnight visits to her room. They'd begun when Estelle reached the age of ten. And continued until she ran away at sixteen. By that point, the awkward fumbling she'd endured as a little girl had become...rape.

Suddenly cold, she shivered and wrapped a pink cashmere shawl around her shoulders, remembering the day she'd discovered her pregnancy, the day she'd left home never to return. How could she have possibly explained the child? The best outcome would have been the social stigma of bearing a child out of wedlock. The worst...the worst was what happened next.

No, she would not dwell on the past. It had been a tragic blessing the child had died at birth.

She stopped pacing and grimaced at her reflection in the intricate, gold leaf-framed chimney glass. The wavery antique mirror revealed dark circles under her eyes, and a haunted look reminding Estelle that she'd left part of her heart in a tiny grave at Oak Hill Cemetery.

As for her parents...they'd undoubtedly take perverse pleasure in the truth of her profession. The envy she knew they felt because of her supposed aristocratic job would melt into a frenzy of retribution. Estelle could hear the "I-told-you-so's" reverberate throughout the household. Still, she'd be willing to bet they'd continue accepting her money.

So be it. Let Adam talk. Let them all have their fun. She had a full house of clients, and healthy, happy girls to service them. Time to get on with those things she could control, and forget those things she couldn't.

\* \* \*

Estelle's cook, Emily, found the body early the next morning. She'd almost tripped over it on her way to buy groceries at Center Market.

Adam Swanson lay sprawled, dead, just inside the side yard gate. A knife had gutted him like a trout.

\* \* \*

Estelle awakened to pounding on her door. Throwing on a robe, she opened it to the sight of an officer from the Provost Marshall General's staff preparing to kick it in.

"What the—?"

The burly man barged into her suite without a word, strode to her Renaissance Revival writing desk, and began emptying drawers. "Murder investigation." He turned back to her with a leering gaze that stripped off her robe. "As if you didn't know."

"Murder. What? Who?"

"We found a man dead by your gate, Miss Racine," said the calm, low voice of her beloved.

Estelle turned to see James standing on the threshold, a frown on his face as he watched the officer rifle through Estelle's papers.

"Ah, thank you, Lieutenant," the colonel said to him in a voice that demanded respect and obedience. "I'll take over from here."

The man glared at James and stomped from Estelle's rooms, muttering, "Not for long, you won't."

She flung herself into James' arms. "What man? What's happened?"

He lightly stroked her shoulders, whispering into her hair. "We don't know who he is. All identification had been removed, along with his valuables, of course." He stepped back from her, his hands on her upper arms. "I need you to get dressed and come downstairs immediately. See if you can put a name to the body. And...control your girls. They're spitting mad at the police intrusion." He offered a lame smile. "I'm afraid I had to come in force."

Estelle sighed. "We had a number of clients spending the night—"

"They've been taken into custody."

She groaned.

"I'm sorry, my love. You know I didn't have a choice. I can help you to a certain extent, but..."

"I understand, James. Let's get on with it."

Without even seeing the body, Estelle suspected she knew its identity. Buttoning her bodice, she fought to control fingers trembling from anger. If Adam Swanson couldn't destroy her in one fashion, he had chosen another way.

Briefly, she wondered who had accepted the privilege of killing him. He certainly hadn't been felled by her blow to his head.

A few minutes later, she stood over the body, nodding to James. "Yes, Colonel Goodwin, I know him." She provided James and his men with Swanson's name and the little she knew about the time he spent in Washington, D.C.

Leaving them to reenter her house, Estelle shuddered, realizing she'd have to tell James the whole story about Swanson. She didn't welcome the notion of describing her secret past and Swanson's blackmail attempt. But it was inevitable that the authorities would learn about his words to her in the hall. The girls would be honor-bound to relay the event. The result was also inevitable. She had the motive, means, and opportunity to commit murder. She would become the prime suspect.

Serious trouble loomed over Estelle.

"Miss Racine," one of James' men called her back.

She turned.

"We'll need to talk to you further."

She nodded. As she closed the front door, she heard him say, "Haughty piece, isn't she? The money that bitch makes off the men in this town...her and her girls screwing everything in sight."

"That'll be enough, Becker," James snapped.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Estelle received more bad news. James had been removed from the case because of his personal relationship with her.

"I'm sorry, my love," Goodwin said to her in the privacy of her suite. "Couldn't be helped, I suppose. Our affair is one of the poorest kept secrets in town. Colonel Witherspoon has assumed responsibility for the investigation. His men will conduct the interrogations."

"James, I really need to talk to you. There...are things about Swanson you should know. I'd rather tell you than...those other men."

He frowned. "You really should share all you know with them. It won't look good for you to withhold information."

"I know. But, I...it's sensitive, James. I need your advice on how to handle it."

"I have no time now, Estelle. I've been ordered back to the office immediately. But I can return later this afternoon. Can it wait until then?"

Estelle wondered if they'd arrest her before she had a chance to speak with James. But she wouldn't stand in the way of his orders. "Absolutely. We'll talk later."

The day passed in a blur for Estelle. Scouting a sensational story, newspaper reporters milled around the mansion. Witherspoon's men roamed from room to room, interrogating everyone in sight. Estelle supported her girls as much as she could, and said as little as possible, herself.

Estelle remembered James complaining about the quality of the staff General Fry had recruited. Now, she could see the truth behind the criticism. Fry's officers handled the situation in a manner most unimpressive. It didn't take her long to realize that she'd have to launch her own investigation to uncover the truth, prove her innocence and save the business. Throughout the morning and early afternoon, Estelle met with each girl and staff member who'd had contact with Swanson.

Selia and Emmaline grabbed her attention because of their loud altercation with him. Emmie's account, in particular, gave Estelle the best sense of what had really happened with Swanson the night before.

\* \* \*

"Oh, Estelle. Don't make me go through it again." Emmaline shuddered, stroking the Utrecht velvet of the parlor sofa. "The colonel's men forced me to describe every detail of last night, leering at me the whole time." She hated talking about her professional activities. Not that she felt shame, but she'd learned to draw a line between performing the necessities of her job and talking about them. No one had the right to that information, unless the services for which they'd paid included her relaying such stories.

Indeed, some men did like to hear lurid descriptions of sexual antics rather than engage in the acts, themselves. But the beady-eyed officer who'd just left her had been different. He had asked for descriptions not necessary to his investigation. Instincts told her he had done so to embarrass her.

"I understand, dear. This is difficult for all of us." Estelle placed a bracing hand on her arm before she sank into a rosewood Belter chair. "But I'm no voyeur. I really need to know everything you can tell me."

Emmaline nodded. "Anything I can do to help you, Estelle. You know that." She took a deep, shaky breath and thought back to the moment Lacie had escorted Adam Swanson to her room the night before...

—

"He wants you," Lacie had snapped behind Swanson's back as they entered Emmaline's room.



The man grinned and grabbed the low-cut neckline of Lacie's chemise, yanking her to him. The drunken woman had almost fallen. "Well, darlin', you're done for the night. I got what I wanted from you." He pushed her away. "Go on, now. Sleep it off like a good girl."

"Damn your hide," Lacie mumbled, grabbing the doorjamb to keep her balance. Over her head, she snarled, "Watch him close, Emmie. He's a son of a bitch." She stumbled into the hall. "A real son—"

Swanson slammed the door on her. "Stupid whore." He turned to Emmaline, a grin spreading across his face. "Well, well. You are a pretty thing, aren't you? Saw you downstairs earlier and just couldn't get you out of my mind."

Confusion coursed through Emmaline. "I'm sorry sir, but you're not scheduled with me tonight." *Who was he?* And how could she get rid of him without causing a scene?

Swanson mumbled, "That trollop at the door—"

"Lucille?"

"Yeah...that's her. She said some of you girls were available." He looked around the empty room and shrugged. "Don't see anyone else in here. You want to make money tonight, or not?"

Emmaline hesitated. He'd guessed correctly. She had no bookings at the moment, and could use extra money.

He fingered her pale blonde hair, letting the curls slip through his fingers. Grabbing a handful of locks, he yanked her head as he pulled the hair toward his nose. "Mmmm. Lavender. You girls take real good care of yourselves, don't you?"

Deciding to be cooperative, Emmaline plastered a smile on her face. "Nothing's too good for our clients, sir." She wrapped her arms around his neck as he lowered his hands to cup her buttocks through her silk robe. "What can I do for you tonight?" she murmured, nibbling his ear.

His hands slipped inside her robe to dig into her naked flesh, traveling around to the inside of her thighs. "Spread your legs for me." His harsh voice assaulted her; his breath came in quick bursts.

She complied, groaning as if pleased by his fingers digging deep inside her.

Abruptly, he released her. "This won't do."

"Sir?"

"Two of you. I want another girl in here with you."

Emmaline hesitated a beat.

He grabbed her robe, pulling her to him. "Which of those words didn't you understand, pretty girl?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Whatever you say."

Within a few minutes, Emmaline had returned to her room with Selia. They paused on the threshold, watching Swanson, who lay on Emmie's bed, naked, stroking his organ with both hands.

"Well? You two going to stand there all night? One of you better take this over for me. Now." He wagged his erect member at them.

The girls exchanged quick looks. Selia walked to the bed and began stroking him.

Swanson grinned, propping his head in cupped hands as he watched her, then said to Emmaline, "Lie down next to me."

When she curled up beside him, he released his head to grab her breasts with both hands. Kneading her

soft flesh, he raised his hips, forcing more of his organ into Selia's hands. To her, he said, "Your mouth, honey. Take it in your mouth."

He groaned with pleasure. "Oh, yes. That does feel good." Hands tightening on Emmie's breasts, he looked down at Selia. "Teeth. Rake it."

Emmaline knew the minute her friend complied, because Swanson's body tensed and his hands squeezed her delicate skin. Rough fingers tweaked her nipples and she gritted her teeth against the discomfort. She'd endured harsher treatment, but that didn't mean she had to enjoy it.

He pulled her by her nipples until she pressed against his side, surrounded by thick air stuffed with rank liquor and body odor. Releasing her sore rosy nubs, Swanson moaned as Selia continued to draw her teeth across the skin of his shaft.

"On top of me," he muttered to Emmaline.

She rose to her knees and straddled his chest.

"No, no, that's not it," he said breathlessly. "On my face."

She complied, squatting over him, lowering herself until his mouth could reach her upper thighs and the pouting flesh inside them. Bracing herself by holding tight to the bed's headboard, she breathed deeply as his lips sucked at her skin. She threw back her head and groaned as his tongue lashed the soft tissue around her opening.

Behind her, Emmaline could hear Selia sucking his organ, aware that his tongue darted across her skin in rhythm with Selia's movements. She moaned as if in ecstasy, performing the show each client expected.

When he thrust fingers inside her, she gritted her teeth again and released a small scream. His stubby digits filled her, scraped her passageway. Annoyed her.

Emmie allowed her thoughts to wander as she waited for him to spew forth into her friend's mouth, wondering at the cause for his cruel edge. Instincts told her to say alert, to not trust him. Thus far, he hadn't revealed the full extent of a brutish nature she suspected simmered beneath the surface.

Swanson's fingers pumped faster. He gasped and grunted, removing his fingers to caress her with his lips. Then his entire mouth spanned her, sucking and nipping.

Emmaline bit her lip in an effort not to cry out in pain, then realized that's what he wanted.

*All right. Let him have what he wants.*

She tossed back her head and shrieked, giving full voice to her annoyance and discomfort. He joined her chorus, the squeals muffled by her pubic hair.

Abruptly, his mouth disappeared and he let her go. Emmie almost tumbled off him. As she steadied herself, she looked back to see him withdraw from Selia and spray her with his essence.

Selia rubbed the fluid across her breasts and stomach, moaning as she did so.

Emmaline stepped away from the bed, watching Swanson as he lay limp on the bed. She started to reach for her robe.

"No. Not yet."

Glancing at Selia, she saw her disgust mirrored in the girl's eyes. Plastering a smile on her face, Emmaline faced him.

"Don't cover up now, love. I'm far from finished with you." He smirked and went on in a stronger

voice, "Let me see the two of you, together. Go on...don't just stand there and gawk at me. Let me see you play with one another." He grabbed the satin sheet and pulled it over him as he sat up and crossed his legs. Patting the expanse of bed before him, he said, "Right here."

The girls didn't hesitate. Selia's arm wrapped around Emmie's waist, her lips nuzzling Emmie's neck underneath her hair. Emmaline ran her hands down the girl's sides, slowly, sensuously. Their lips met and opened. For a moment, they separated, their tongues dueling in open air, then they rejoined and Emmie's tongue flayed the inside of Selia's mouth.

Bodies pressed together, the girls dropped onto the bed in one graceful movement.

Selia turned onto her back, while Emmaline lay on her side, facing the girl. Beyond Selia, she could see rhythmic movement over Swanson's lap as he masturbated, watching them.

She dipped her mouth to the girl's breasts and ran her tongue over the milky skin, taking one nipple into her mouth, and then the other as one hand trailed down Selia's stomach. With feather-like sweeps, her fingers brushed across the fluff of pubic hair. Selia opened her legs to her, and Emmie stroked her mound.

Groaning, Selia raised her legs, and Emmie's mouth descended upon the soft tissue between them. As Emmie laved Selia's delicate tissue with a lashing tongue, her friend's moans joined with Swanson's grunts.

Emmaline moved away and Selia rolled over, raising onto her hands and knees. Spreading her legs and lifting her buttock inches away from Swanson, she offered the client a clear view of her private parts. Wiggling at him, Selia turned her attention to Emmie, who knelt in front of her.

Selia opened her legs farther apart for Swanson's benefit and clasped Emmie around her buttocks. She buried her face in Emmie's softness.

Running her fingers through Selia's thick black curls, Emmaline stole a glance at Swanson. The pumping action under the sheet had increased as he neared climax. She knew just how to make certain that happened again. And soon. Time to get rid of this client.

Carefully, she leaned back, taking Selia with her until the girl lay on top of her. As if knowing Emmie's mind, Selia turned around, opening her legs, positioning them on either side of Emmie's head. Her crotch hovered over Emmie's face, her mouth poised over Emmie's vulva. The girls ran their tongues over each other's private parts.

The heat from Selia's vagina and anus bathed Emmaline's face. She closed her eyes, loving the lapping sensation blanketing her crotch from Selia's tongue. For the first time that night, Emmie felt the catch of desire tighten in her gut.

Waves of heat covered her as her tongue kept rhythm to the pulsing in her stomach. She felt the opening rolls of climax. Selia sucked her juices and Emmie dropped into the bottom of a rich orgasm.

As waves of sensation faded, Emmie felt Selia shudder and roll away from her. The girls lay side by side, listening to Swanson's shouts. Emmie felt the spray of his release across her legs.

The three lay quietly for several moments. As her breathing returned to normal, Emmaline looked at Selia and nudged her. The girl's eyes flew open. They smiled at each other. Emmaline jerked her head slightly in Swanson's direction and Selia nodded.

They rose from the bed, reaching for their robes. Swanson had begun snoring.

"We have to get him out of here," Selia whispered. "He's not the type Estelle would want to spend the night."

"Not only that, but I'm sure he didn't pay for a prolonged stay. Lacie would have said something if he had."

The girls tried to be civil about rousing the man and asking him to dress and leave. Adam Swanson, however, had no intention of being civil in return.

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...Emmaline paused in her recounting of the episode, only to be prompted by Estelle in a gentle voice. She continued relaying the story, detailing Swanson's rage at being asked to leave, and how she'd called to Stepan for help.

"He stumbled out of my room and into the hall, straight into Stepan's clutches. Stepan subdued him, and that's when you came out and saw us," she concluded in a firm voice. "I have no idea what happened to him after that."

Estelle frowned. "I wonder what occurred during his time with Lacie."

"I don't know, ma'am. You'll have to ask her...assuming she's conscious, now, of course." Emmaline remembered that the police had had no success questioning the girl earlier in the day, receiving little more than incoherent mumbling. Disgusted, they'd left her alone to sleep off her hangover.

She looked at Estelle, who seemed lost in thought. "If there's nothing else...?"

"Oh, you can go, Emmie. And, thank you for reliving that unpleasant experience yet again."

Emmaline left the parlor, heading for her room. Rounding the corner of the second floor landing, she almost tripped over a body sprawled before her in the hall.

Lacie.

Emmie dropped beside her, alarm giving way to irritation as she heard drunken mumbling. "Come on, Lacie." She placed bracing hands on the girl's upper arms. "Let's get you back to your room." Emmie added under her breath, "Why Estelle allows this, is beyond me."

Half-dragging, half-carrying the drunken girl, Emmie finally succeeded in dumping her onto her bed. Lacie immediately curled into a tight ball and began snoring.

Shaking her head in disgust, Emmaline turned to leave the room. She noticed a piece of paper on the floor and stooped to pick it up, muttering about Lacie's slovenly nature. Emmie started to place the paper on the bedstand when printing on the sheet caught her attention. "\$1,000 OWED..."

Emmaline unfolded the sheet and scanned its contents. It was a voucher from Pierre Marie, one of the most notorious moneylenders in Washington, D.C.

Lacie had accumulated serious debt.

Madam Estelle would need to know about this.

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# Chapter 5

"Stepan."

The porter turned from the supply wagon at the sound of Estelle's voice. "Ma'am?"

"Could we talk for just a minute before you leave for the market?"

"Of course, ma'am."

Estelle flashed him an apologetic smile as they settled on a wrought iron bench in the heart of her rose garden. The warm, moist July air hung heavy with the sweet fragrance of the last tea roses of the season.

"I know you're busy, but I have a few questions for you about that man Swanson."

"The police already talked to me, ma'am."

"I thought it would prove valuable if I conducted my own investigation. Perhaps I can learn something they missed."

He returned her smile. "Not very thorough, are they?"

"That's putting it mildly. Stepan, after you...escorted...Swanson from my room last night, where did you leave him to recover from his unconscious state?"

"Not too far from where they found his body this morning. I propped him against the gate, figuring he'd wake up in a few hours and stumble off home."

"Is that the last time you saw him? Until this morning, of course."

Stepan hesitated. "Actually, it isn't. I didn't tell the police this. Well, frankly, ma'am, they didn't ask and I didn't volunteer, but Lacie confronted him down here later. After he'd awakened."

A jolt of surprise hit Estelle. "Really? Where?"

"By the gate."

"But Lacie could barely stand up last night after all she'd drunk."

"I'm not saying she wasn't making a mess of walking, but nevertheless, she stood there with him, toe-to-toe, arguing." Stepan drew a shaky breath. "A real nasty fight, too, if you ask me. I thought perhaps she needed help, but when I approached them, Lacie called me off. Quite mean about it, she was."

"So...you left them?"

"Well—not exactly. I didn't say anything more to them, but I did stay in the shadows, watching for a short time."

"What happened?"

"Miss Lacie saw me and ordered me away. She...threatened me so I wouldn't say anything about it, Estelle."

"Threatened you. How?"

"Just told me she knew people who could make my life miserable if I spoke of what I saw." He shook his head in obvious disgust. "I didn't take her seriously, of course. She's always saying crazy things like that."

"Before you went away, could you hear what they said?"

"Not much. Something about money...and stealing...I think he'd taken something of hers and she tried to get it back." Stepan shrugged. "But, I'm not certain. I could pick up only a word here and there. And then I left them, of course."

Estelle's thoughts reeled. What business did Lacie have with Swanson? She had to find out. Perhaps it would lead to the truth behind the man's murder.

Hastily, she thanked the porter and headed for Lacie's room. On the way, James waylaid her. He'd returned as promised, concern and worry etched deeply into his face.

They had just settled in her suite, when a knock sounded at the door.

Estelle called for the person to enter, and in walked Emmaline.

"I—I'm sorry to interrupt you, Estelle, but I have something to tell you about Lacie. Thought you'd want to know."

"Of course, dear." Estelle gestured for the girl to join them. Emmaline settled in a rosewood armchair and began her story.

Estelle and James listened with rapt attention, then exchanged quick glances as the girl fell silent. "Can I see the voucher?" Estelle asked.

James rose and walked to the window, where he swept aside the velvet drapes and lace curtains to gaze outside. "That's a significant sum of money to borrow."

"And look at the interest rate Marie is charging her. Lacie must be desperate," Estelle murmured, staring at the paper. "Do you have any idea what this is about, Emmie?"

The girl shook her head. "Sorry, ma'am. Lacie and I aren't particularly close."

"Yes, well, no one's been close to Lacie for a long time." Estelle sighed. "I should have released her months ago. But she promised to stop drinking. I felt sorry for her...she's had a rough time in her short life."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm certain that money's covering gambling debts. I had no idea it had gotten so bad. I knew she visited the Sunset House occasionally. Perhaps I should talk to Josh about her." Estelle referred to an infamous gambling den on Pennsylvania Avenue and its owner. Then, she shook her head. "No. It would seem as if I'm checking up on her—"

"Which you are." James stood by the window, watching her.

"Yes, my love, you're quite right. As good a friend as Josh is, there's an unwritten rule among owners of establishments such as ours to stay out of each other's business. Lacie most certainly is my concern. Not his."

"You can't take this personally," James said. "You have no control over what your girls do outside this house."

"But, they are my responsibility, James. As long they're in my employ." Estelle turned to Emmie. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, dear. I'll look into it."

After the girl left the room, Estelle joined James at the window overlooking her back garden. They stood with arms wrapped around each other's waists, staring out at the steamy summer afternoon. A few radiant red and pink rose blossoms could be detected among the flowering laurel bushes and

brilliant green ivy lining meandering brick paths. The sweet scent of the last wisteria blooms from the ancient vines hugging the mansion mingled with the stench from the nearby Washington Canal.

"As if I don't have enough to deal with at the moment." Estelle dropped her head on her lover's shoulder.

"We need to talk about the investigation, dear."

"I so wish you were handling the case."

He sighed. "I'm planning to do all I can for you, Estelle. On my own time. But you're going to have to tell me everything."

Estelle nodded.

"You knew Swanson, didn't you?" he said in a gentle voice.

She sank into a nearby armchair. Taking a deep breath, she proceeded to tell him about her family farm, the neighbors from her childhood, and her recent encounter with Swanson.

He grimaced when she fell silent. "This is bad, Estelle. Really bad. You know I'm going to have to report this to Fry."

"I know." She tried to take a deep breath. "When will they arrest me, James?"

He stood behind her chair, massaging the back of her neck. "I'm afraid it will be soon. There's no question but that Fry will use your past with Swanson to pin the murder on you." He stepped away and began pacing her suite. "The girls noticed your odd behavior in the hallway. Heard Swanson's words to you. The last time they saw him alive, Swanson had entered your room. When you factor in his blackmail attempt—"

"I didn't kill him, James."

He walked to her and cupped her face in his hands. "Don't you think I know that? They won't convict you of this murder, Estelle. That I can promise you. If it's the last thing we do, we're going to prove you're innocent." He kissed her lightly on the nose and released her.

She pounded the upholstered arm in frustration. "Damn. I can't believe this is happening to me. It makes me so bloody angry. Swanson made my childhood a living hell. To have him waltz in here out of nowhere and then—"

"Do you think he tracked you down?"

She shook her head. "He was genuinely surprised to see me. Rotten luck brought him here. He wanted a night of fun and selected my house for it."

"You're a victim of your own success, my dear." James knelt by her side.

"Stepan can verify he was alive later, when he carried Swanson out of here."

"I know. But his veracity as a witness has been compromised. He's a suspect, too."

Estelle waved an impatient hand through the air. "That's silly. Stepan wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Not even to protect you?"

A heavy silence dropped between them.

James finally said, softly, "He knew Swanson distressed you. If nothing else, Stepan is loyal to you. He'd kill for you."

"I never asked him—"

He held up a hand to quiet her. "I'm not implying you did. But, if he *thought* Swanson threatened you \_\_\_"

Estelle stiffened, the import of his words hitting her full force.

"Honey, is there anything else you can tell me about this whole mess?" He began massaging her arm. "Something that could help me help you?"

"Actually, Stepan did tell me something you should know. I'd completely forgotten about it." Estelle briefed James about the argument her porter had witnessed. "Lacie seems to be at the middle of the affair. I just can't put the pieces together."

"Have you talked to her?"

"Not yet. She's been fairly incoherent most of the day. But I certainly plan to." Estelle looked past him to stare into space. "Lacie and money...Stepan heard them mention money as they argued. Now we learn that she borrowed a huge sum from Marie. I wonder if there's a connection?" She shook her head. "I don't know, James. My mind is racing with all sorts of jumbled bits. I can't seem to put the pieces into a recognizable picture." She dropped her head onto one hand.

He continued massaging her arm. "Perhaps you need to think about something else for a while. A respite, if you will." His hand dropped to one silken-clad leg. Slowly, he began caressing her through the silk, his fingers working in slow circles as his other hand gently stroked her neck and shoulders. "I think I can find a way to help you relax."

She returned his smile. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Here I am, embroiled in a murder investigation, my own freedom on the line, and you manage to make me want to forget the whole thing and focus entirely on you." She groaned as his hand dropped to the soft flesh at the top of her breasts. "And this."

"Just talented, I guess," he murmured as his other hand kneaded the flesh of her inner thighs through her drawers before he removed the soft garment.

Estelle could feel the trauma-induced tension give way to a far more pleasurable sensation as the heat of longing filled her. Rippling passion built as she opened her legs to him and his fingers worked their magic.

She shuddered as sensations assaulted her. One finger dipped into the pool of her slick essence, drawing the moisture in long, leisurely lines down one inner thigh. Again, the finger stroked her slit and spread her juices down the other thigh. Returning to her center, James began moving two fingers across her clitoris, circling her nub, pressing, then releasing.

The glorious pressure sent ripples of longing through her core. Estelle moaned, arching her hips to meet his hand. Suddenly, his other hand raised her voluminous skirts and he dove under them.

James knelt between her open legs; she could feel his hot breath on her crotch. His hands began caressing the delicate skin of her upper thighs, while his lips brushed across her pubic mound and dropped to her swollen nub. She bucked against his mouth when his tongue swiped across the hot flesh of her clitoris. Not pausing a moment, he dipped his tongue deep inside her, pulsing her opening with it, simulating the action of a sex organ.

Deeper, his tongue pushed inside her as she raised her hips toward his mouth, ripples of pleasure coursing through her. As if sensing her approaching climax, James withdrew his tongue, and plunged two fingers inside. With his fingers pumping, his tongue flicked across her inner thighs, keeping pace



with the action of his digits.

Estelle's hips ground down onto his fingers, drawing him deeper inside her. Her pulsing climax rumbled at a deliciously slow pace, shooting flames of sensation into her core, gradually building until its sharp explosion filled her. The muscles of her slick passage grabbed his fingers, sucking them, raking them with the rhythm of her orgasm.

Gasping, Estelle immersed herself in the heat of her fulfillment, her juices gushing onto James' hand.

With a feathery touch, his tongue covered her crotch, slowly lapping at the spot his fingers had filled only seconds before. The warm, moist stroking soothed Estelle's hypersensitive tissue. She groaned, sinking lower in the chair.

Through fevered lips, she murmured, "How can I feel so sublime when my life is falling apart?"

James sat up, his lips moist with her fluid. He brushed them across her mouth and she could taste the musky salt from her own body. "Your life will never fall apart as long as I'm with you."

She opened her mouth to him, feeling his tongue invade just as it had invaded her core a few minutes earlier. Her tongue responded, and they indulged in light-hearted dueling until James drew her deeper into his mouth.

Estelle felt the familiar quickening in her core as her arousal grew. She pulled back from the kiss to murmur against his lips, "I want to feel you inside me, James. I want to draw you so deep you'll never be able to leave me."

He groaned. "It would be my pleasure, ma'am." Chuckling, his hands pulled her bodice down to her waist, exposing her breasts. As his fingers gently tweaked her nipples, he murmured, "How quickly can we rid ourselves of these pesky clothes to make that happen?"

Estelle pressed against his hands, and he responded by kneading her breasts. "Never fast enough, my love."

They looked into each other's eyes and burst out laughing. James said, "Well at least I've *started* disrobing you. It's more than you can say."

"Really." Estelle's hands dropped to his lap. "I can do something about that." Her fingers expertly released his belt and opened his trousers, pulling away the cloth of his drawers and releasing his engorged flesh. The heat pulsing from his erection warmed her as she grasped the bulbous head, spreading the clear fluid nestled at its tip down the shaft.

He groaned. "Magic fingers. That's what you have."

She laughed, dropping onto her knees before him. "What about my mouth?"

"Even more magic. Ah..."

Estelle tongue-lashed his tip.

"Even more magic, indeed."

Her tongue began to stroke his silk-encased steel in long, leisurely licks. The organ twitched as she cupped its base with one hand and lightly circled his testicles with her other hand. She smiled to herself, loving how his shaft seemed to have a life of its own as it reacted to her ministrations.

Suddenly, the need to feel it inside her became overwhelming. She looked up to see James watching her, a tense smile on his face. "About all this cloth between us..."

With more speed than she thought possible, they divested themselves of all clothes and stood naked

together. Estelle pressed against his bare flesh, enjoying the feel of his rock-hard organ against her abdomen.

"Turn around," James whispered.

She complied, sighing as he pulled her to him. His hands massaged her breasts and belly as he lowered her to her knees. He knelt behind her, bending her over the chaise lounge.

Eagerly, she raised her buttocks to him and spread her legs. James' hands wrapped around her hips to steady her, as his erection pulsed between her thighs, teasing, tickling the delicate folds of her puckered flesh. His lips nuzzled the sensitive skin behind one of her ears. Then his lips disappeared and his penis no longer bobbed against her. Estelle held her breath, waiting, waiting for him to fill her.

He slammed into her with a force that seemed to shatter her core, then withdraw only to ram her passage to the hilt. The exquisite bulk throbbed against her tender tissue. Estelle felt sudden orgasm rip into her.

He paused before beginning a series of deep, slow strokes.

Estelle pulsed around his shaft, seeking to suck him into the depths of her. Her hips joined his rhythm, and she arched her buttocks higher as her hands gripped the edge of the chaise lounge.

Gradually, in a tantalizing slow progression, James began moving faster within her. Estelle dropped into the heart of the symphony composed by his heated length, every nerve ending humming to the ancient music. She lost herself in his melody, in his heat, in the primitive call of timeless syncopation.

James' pumping produced a blur of sensation, and just as Estelle knew she'd lose herself in his frenzy, her orgasm rolled through her core, connecting to him as he released his essence into the heart of her. He growled his triumph and ecstasy, pushing his organ deep inside her, and resting it there.

Estelle threw back her head and gasped, forcing her tissues around his shaft to clamp onto him. She felt his lips brush across her back, his hands massaging her buttocks.

He whispered in her ear, "I could stay here all day, but—"

Estelle groaned as his shaft slid away from her with a soft, sucking sound. Together, they rolled onto the Persian rug and lay side by side in companionable silence.

Finally, he sat up. "I need to go back to the office."

Estelle reached up to rest one hand on his back. "And I have my own investigation to continue. I so hate when the world interrupts our times together."

He stood up and walked to his clothes, then looked at her over his shoulder, a grin on his face. "We'll remember where we left off." James ducked as Estelle threw a pillow at him.

Defly tossing it back to her, he said, "Would you like me to talk to Lacie for you, Estelle? I can be back here in a few hours to do so."

She shook her head. "She's my responsibility. Besides, if she's going to open up and talk to anyone, it'll be me. Let's just hope she says something that will clear up this whole sad affair."

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# Chapter 6

Estelle made her way to Lacie's room and knocked on her door. Upon hearing no reply, she opened the door a crack and peeked in. Stale wine and perspiration hung heavy in the gloom.

"Lacie?"

Snoring answered her. Sighing heavily, Estelle entered the room and shook her head at the sight before her. Lacie sprawled on her bed, sound asleep.

"I have no time for this," Estelle muttered, grabbing the girl by an arm and giving her a hard shake.

"Mmm? What?" Lacie groaned and rolled away from her.

"Oh no, you don't. You will wake up and talk to me, darlin'." Estelle shook her again.

This time, Lacie opened her eyes and squinted up at her.

"That's right, Lacie. You've slept long enough." Estelle walked to a window and pulled up the cloth shades. As afternoon sunshine flooded the room, Lacie jerked upright, pulling her scarlet wrapper around her.

"What...what do you want, Estelle?"

The madam stood at the foot of Lacie's bed, arms folded in disgust. "Loaded question, my dear. But let me start with a suggestion that you drag your sorry ass out of bed. We'll talk as you get dressed."

"I...I don't feel well."

"What a surprise, considering how much wine you've consumed." Estelle grabbed an empty bottle from the oak dressing table and threw it into a wastebasket. Lacie winced as it shattered against other bottles already discarded. She turned away from Estelle and curled into a tight ball on the bed.

"Get up, Lacie." Estelle's command left no room for argument.

The girl inched toward her rack of clothes. "I'm telling you, I'm going to be sick."

"Nothing you don't deserve. You can clean up the mess after you're done."

Lacie glared at her, then quickly dropped her eyes as Estelle allowed her anger and disappointment to show on her face.

"How many times have we've talked about your drinking?" Estelle cleared away a crumpled pile of stocking and chemises from a straight-back chair and sat down.

"I...I've tried to stop, Estelle. Honest."

"And how many more chances do you think you deserve?"

Lacie froze, a chemise gathered around her neck. "You promised me you'd give me time to...straighten myself out."

"And I have. More time that you probably deserve. Can you think of a good reason why I shouldn't throw you out of my establishment right now?"

To Estelle's utter surprise, the girl crumpled to the floor and began to sob, the chemise clutched to her bosom. "You can't, Estelle. You just can't do that to me."

"I'm waiting for a reason."

"I need the money. It...it's a matter of life and death." Lacie half-crawled to Estelle and flung her arms around the older woman's legs. "I'm begging you. I can't go anywhere else. None of them pay like you do. He'd never survive if I didn't pay..."

"Who wouldn't survive?" Estelle disentangled herself from the girl's shaking hands. "Stop this nonsense right now. Calm yourself and talk to me."

The girl sat back on her heels, sniffing, rubbing her arm across her nose. "I—I can't tell you."

"Does it have something to do with the money you owe Pierre Marie?"

Her eyes grew wide in shock. "How—how did you—?"

"Doesn't matter how I know. Why did you borrow such a huge amount from that thief?"

Lacie groaned, dropping her head onto arms that wrapped around her knees. "It's not my debt. Honest."

"Whose debt is it?"

"I just can't say."

"It's tied up with all the time you spend in Sunset House, isn't it?" Estelle forced her voice to soften.

"What's going on?"

Through unintelligible warbling, Estelle thought she heard Lacie say, "...He's not worth it...just not..."

"Who's not worth it?"

The girl just shook her head in response.

"Where did you spend all the money, Lacie?"

"I...can't tell you that."

"Even if I promise to help you?"

"No, ma'am."

Estelle rose from the chair and walked to the door. Pausing at the threshold, she looked back at the girl, who still sat in a dejected heap on the floor. "Had you ever met John Swanson before last night?"

At the name, Lacie straightened, jerking up her head. "No, ma'am. I—I don't know 'im. Except for last night when he came looking for a girl and I serviced him." She pushed herself off the floor and sank onto her bed. "He's a vile man. A real no-good. He got what he deserved, I'll tell you."

"Why do you say that?"

She shrugged. "He made my skin crawl. Seemed like a snake ready to spring."

"Did he rough you up?"

"A bit. I gladly turned him over to Emmie and Selia, that's for certain."

"Is that the last time you saw him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Estelle stepped back into the room and slammed the door.

"Damn it. You have got to start telling me the truth."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"I *know* you argued with Swanson later. Stepan saw you. And despite the lame threats you flung at him, he had the good sense to tell me all about it."

Lacie shrugged. "So we argued."

"About what did you disagree?"

"Swanson...refused to pay the full amount due me. I caught up with him later and demanded it."

"And did you get it?"

Lacie dropped her eyes. "The cheat refused to give me more money."

"Lacie." Underlying purpose filled Estelle's quiet tones. Lacie must have heard it, because she snapped to attention. "Did you kill John Swanson?"

The girl's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, my God, ma'am. No. I—didn't. Truly."

"Do you have any idea who did?"

"No, ma'am."

Estelle studied her for a long moment. Something about her denials didn't ring true. But for all the troubles plaguing Lacie, Estelle couldn't imagine the girl being mixed up with murder.

Suddenly, Lacie jerked her head upright. "What time is it? Oh, my God, I'm late...I just know it." She craned her neck to see a small clock sitting on a nearby mantel. "Almost four." She jumped to her feet and groaned, grabbing a rumpled blue satin gown from the floor and flinging it over her head. "I have to get out of here."

"We're not finished with this conversation." Estelle watched as the girl struggled into the dress, her frantic fingers attacking the buttons with little success.

Shaking her head, Estelle left the room. She walked around the corner of the hallway and waited. In a few minutes, Lacie scrambled for the stairs, clutching a large reticule with both hands.

"Just what are you up to, my pathetic little friend?" Estelle whispered, following the girl. "I think I'll just see for myself." She paused at the foot of the stairs as Lacie raced out the door.

"Estelle? What's gotten into her?" Stepan stood at her elbow.

She looked up at the blond hulk of a man who served as her porter, and suddenly decided she needed the protection and security his presence provided her on the streets of Washington. "We're about to find out, Stepan. Come with me."

\* \* \*

The pair trailed Lacie as she hurried through the late-afternoon crowds on Pennsylvania Avenue. A cacophony of street sounds swirled around them in the muggy air—neighing horses, creaking wagons, street merchants hawking their wares.

Soon, Lacie turned up North Carolina Avenue. After several more blocks, she crossed the thoroughfare and plunged into the shady depths of Lincoln Square.

Estelle and Stepan paused at the outskirts of the park, watching as the girl hurried toward a young, dark-haired man. His scowl and broad gestures communicated his distress with Lacie. Indeed, the girl seemed to cower before him. With shaking hands, she dragged an envelope from her reticule and gave it to him. He snatched it from her and stomped off, leaving her to crumble onto a park bench, her head cradled in her hands.

Estelle exchanged a puzzled look with Stepan and murmured, "Shall we?"

Within seconds, they had turned back to North Carolina Avenue and retraced their steps, this time following Lacie's young man.

He moved much faster than Lacie had, and Estelle found herself panting in the steamy July heat as she struggled to keep up with him. Stepan firmly grasped her elbow and half-pulled her down the street. After several minutes, they watched the man turn onto Pennsylvania Avenue and bound up the steps to Sunset House. He disappeared through the front doors.

"A gambling den?" Stepan murmured in her ear. "Wonder what business he has in there at this early hour?"

"I can guess." Estelle motioned for Stepan to stop by the side of the building. "Let's wait a minute and see what happens."

A short time later, the man reappeared and left the house.

"Well, that little transaction didn't take long, did it?" Estelle looked at Stepan and smiled at the worried expression on his face. "And yes, I *am* going in there."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, dear. I can handle this on my own. It's time to have a little chat with my old friend, Josh. Wait here for me."

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# Chapter 7

Estelle found the front door ajar and she slipped into Sunset House without attracting any attention from either passersby on the street, or individuals inside the gambling establishment. Devoid of customers and most of the staff that time of day, the place echoed with a tranquil silence marred only by a subdued echo of the bustling street outside.

She headed down the main hall toward Josh's office. In the dim light, she picked her way carefully among ornately carved sideboards, bureaus and settees, enjoying the cooler air after the steamy heat blanketing the cityscape. Thick Axminster carpeting muffled her footsteps.

Vacant stares from anonymous subjects of oil portraits seemed to follow her movements. Navy velvet draperies shrouded doorways on either side of the hall, leading to the outer parlors. Savory fragrances of roasting goose and baking pies spilled into the air around Estelle as the kitchen staff prepared an undoubtedly sumptuous repast for the evening's patrons.

At the end of the passageway sat Josh's office. Harsh gas light splashed through its open door and onto the floral rug. As she neared the threshold, Estelle heard the owner talking to someone.

"—his account for now," Josh said.

Estelle heard rough laughter. "For now, perhaps. You and I both know it'll be only a day or so before he's back at the faro table, running up his losses."

"Yes, my friend. The fool is proving to be quite a windfall for us."

"Don't complain," came the unidentified voice, growing louder as the person neared the door. "It's the nature of the business, after all." A portly red-haired man appeared and nearly ran over Estelle. "I'm sorry, miss." He reached out to steady her. "Didn't see you there."

"Quite all right," murmured Estelle, smiling at Josh, who looked around the doorjamb at her.

"Estelle," he boomed, his huge bass voice belying a slight, wispy frame. "Come in, my dear. It's been too long." He turned to the other man. "Later, Frederick."

With ceremony worthy of royalty, he ushered Estelle into his office and seated her before his massive mahogany desk. She took a deep breath and almost choked in air heavy with cigar smoke. Despite the discomfort to her eyes and nose from the cigar, Estelle couldn't help but smile as she watched him puff on the thick cheroot. Josh might be unassuming in physical appearance, but everything else about him hinted at a dynamic man with bigger-than-life appetites. She waved off his offer of refreshment.

"What brings you to my humble establishment this fine day?" Brilliant gray eyes swept over her from head to toe.

She shifted in the leather wing chair. Though accustomed to being ogled by men, Estelle found Josh's uncanny ability to undress a woman with his eyes a bit uncomfortable. She noticed his attention lingered on her bosom and resisted the impulse to adjust her sea green day dress, instead smoothing the silky folds of her skirt. "In truth, Josh, I feel a trifle foolish. Not to mention nosy. But, I'm afraid one of my girls may be in trouble. I found a voucher stating that she owed considerable money to Marie."

He shook his head at her. "You always were a soft one with your girls, Estelle. 'Course no one can argue with your success in handling them. If your girl is in debt to Marie, she *is* in trouble."

"Quite. I'll get to the point, since I know you're a busy man. I just watched her pass an envelope to a young gentleman, who high-tailed it in here as if his life depended on it."



"Ah, you saw Bill Masters. Troubled youth, that he is." Josh sat back in his black leather armchair and stretched out his stubby legs. "And that must mean you're talking about Lacie, since the pair are inseparable whenever they're in here together. 'Course Lacie's work hours means she visits us only once a week. Masters makes up for it, though. Frequents our establishment just about every night."

"Losing?"

"Never seen anyone with such rotten luck."

"Couldn't be that your tables extend his run of bad luck just a bit?"

Josh smiled, his slate eyes twinkling. "Why, Estelle, love. You know better than that. I run a reputable business. All on the up and up. I will admit, though, he's made me quite a tidy sum over the last year. Been getting irregular about paying off his debts to me, though. Come to think of it"—Josh straightened and leaned toward Estelle—"I do remember an altercation between Masters and Marie a few months ago. Seems Marie just flat-out refused to lend him any more money because he never paid his debts on time."

"Which means Lacie's been covering them for him."

"Could be."

"And today? Could you tell me what happened today?"

Josh's smile disappeared. "He ran late with his payment. Supposed to have been delivered here last night. Never showed. Came in just now babbling about how something had happened to the money... misplaced or some such thing...couldn't be recovered until too late last night to bring it in" Josh shrugged. "Nonsense, of course. How you can 'misplace' one thousand dollars is beyond me. And what's 'too late'? We're open until dawn. Still, I'm in a generous mood, today. So I let it pass."

Estelle's thoughts raced. The money had been "misplaced" while still in Lacie's care.

What had happened last night to delay its delivery to Masters? Lacie had been so drunk, she might have forgotten to get the money to him on time. Still, Estelle had to consider the ramifications of the argument Lacie'd had with Swanson later. They'd fought about money, about Swanson stealing something.

Lacie claimed Swanson had cheated her. But, perhaps the amount of money Swanson had "stolen" was considerably more than Lacie's fee. Could Swanson have stolen the cash Lacie had obtained from Marie? Masters couldn't pay his debt to Josh in a timely fashion because the money had to be retrieved first. From Swanson's dead body.

Time to break through Lacie's drunken haze and force the girl to talk. She knew more about last night's events than she'd relayed thus far. Estelle was sure of it. And to make that happen, Estelle needed James' help. Only his grim, "official" demeanor could intimidate Lacie into revealing more than she'd already told her boss.

Estelle looked up to see that Josh now leaned against the edge of his desk before her. Reaching down, he placed a hand on her knee and smiled. "You know, Estelle. You are one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. How is it you and I have never gotten better acquainted?" He slowly ran his hand up her thigh, pressing against the thick layers of cloth sheathing her skin.

She made no attempt to move away from his touch. "You're always welcome at Maison d'Estelle, Josh. You know that."

"Ah, you wound me deeply. I hoped I would receive 'special' treatment, considering our friendship and all." Josh's fingers massaged her upper thigh.

Estelle forced herself to relax.

"Then again, you have a boyfriend, don't you? That means I could only hope to qualify as a client."

Pasting a brilliant smile on her face, Estelle rose and stood before him. "But what a special client you would be, Josh."

He returned her smile, his hand moving up to her breasts. Gently caressing her nipples, he whispered, "Perhaps I'll consider that an invitation."

She leaned toward him and brushed his cheek with her lips. "Please do." Estelle moved to the doorway, where she paused and turned back to him. "Thank you for your time and attention to my...*questions*, love."

Emerging from Sunset House, Estelle saw Stepan across the street, glowering in her direction. She suppressed a smile as she approached him.

"Getting worried about you, ma'am," he growled. "I nearly barged in there to see what had happened."

"Sorry, Stepan. But I spent the time well. I think. Do you have paper and pencil with you?"

The porter dug into an inner coat pocket and retrieved the items.

Estelle scribbled a brief note to James, asking him to meet her at Maison d'Estelle as soon as possible. She handed it to her porter. "Deliver this to Colonel Goodwin. And hurry. I think we're close to identifying Swanson's murderer."

"Swanson." Stepan's surprise rang through the single word. "I thought you went into Sunset House to talk about Lacie's debt."

"The matter's gone beyond the issue of money, I suspect."

The porter nodded. "I'll get the colonel for you, ma'am. After I walk you back home."

Estelle shook her head. "Time is of the essence. You go on, now. I'm only a few blocks from the mansion. I'll be fine alone."

He hesitated, a concerned expression on his face.

"Go, Stepan. Now." Her tone left little room for negotiation.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she watched him begin walking in the direction of the Provost Marshall General's office.

Estelle's relief proved short-lived as she approached her front door. A compliment of soldiers blocked her path. Colonel Tory Witherspoon, head of the Provost Marshall General's investigative unit, loomed on the threshold, watching her.

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## Chapter 8

James was walking out of his office when Stepan arrived. From the scowl blanketing the soldier's face, the porter could tell something amiss had occurred.

"Why are you here, Stepan?"

"Madam Estelle asked me to deliver this to you." He handed Goodwin the note.

The officer scanned it and headed outside. "Let's go, Stepan. We need to get to Estelle immediately."

After the two men climbed into a hack and Goodwin had given the driver directions to Maison d'Estelle, Stepan asked, "Begging your pardon, sir, but has something happened?"

"They're arresting her. As we speak."

"Arresting her, sir? I can't believe it."

Goodwin sighed. "I knew it would happen, given her history with Swanson. So, the note asking me to come to her aide was unnecessary. That's where I was heading when you arrived."

Stepan's thoughts reeled, trying to wrap his mind around Estelle's predicament.

"Has Estelle learned something useful about Swanson?" Goodwin asked. "Something I should know about?"

"She didn't confide in me, sir. But, *I* may know something that could help her."

"Estelle told me about the argument you witnessed between Swanson and Lacie."

"Yes, sir. But there's another detail about last night I'd completely forgotten about until just this minute."

"Well? Speak up, man. Estelle needs us now. If you have something to say—"

"Someone else witnessed their argument last night. I suspect he saw the whole thing. At least, he saw more than I did, because he remained out there after Miss Lacie ordered me back to the house."

"Who, Stepan?"

"The porter from the establishment across the street. Willis. He's a curious sort. Always spying on everyone in the neighborhood, bold as brass."

As the hack neared Maison d'Estelle, James said, "You may have just saved your boss."

\* \* \*

Colonel Tory Witherspoon had ordered her into the public room, informing his staff not to disturb him under any circumstance. He'd pushed her into one of the wooden chairs and began strutting before the carved cherry bar as if he owned the place. The huge, arched back bar, with its stained glass and rows of liquor bottles, contrasted sharply with the severe man in his tailored uniform. His polished boots clicked on the brown and white tiled floor.

He kept his focus upon her at all times. Estelle felt pinned to the wooden chair by his glaring eyes. Never had she experienced such intensity. Like a butterfly mounted on a display board, that's how she felt.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to steady her nerves as trembling fingers gripped the smooth cherry chair seat. She'd expected the arrest, but another layer of intent permeated this scenario. The moment

Witherspoon had locked the doors to the public room behind her and pocketed the key, she sensed an emotional overlay to the situation, beyond legalities and murder.

Witherspoon flicked his head toward the bottles behind the ornate bar. "You're not licensed to sell liquor, Madam Estelle. I should throw you in jail for that alone."

"And I would pay the fine and be gone from your presence in minutes, Colonel." With relief, she heard anger in her voice, knowing it cut through her alarm and helped strengthen her will. "Get down to business, Colonel. I'm a busy woman. What do you want with me?"

He stopped in front of her, legs spread, hands clasped behind a stiff back—the epitome of military bravado. "I believe you killed one Adam Swanson. Behind this very house, you stabbed him repeatedly with a knife and left him for dead by your side gate."

Estelle forced herself to appear calm. While she'd prepared for this moment throughout the day, hearing his words still disturbed her. "And you have proof of this, do you?"

"I know enough to haul you into my jail," he snarled. "Would have sent one of my privates to drag you in this morning, but Fry wouldn't let me. 'Have to be sure of my facts,' he said. 'Must do this by the book, according you all due respect,' he said." Witherspoon snorted and spun on his heel to resume pacing. "So high and mighty you are, with this fancy house. Think you're above the law, flaunting your boyfriend in our faces."

Did she hear jealousy in his voice? She wracked her brain for anything James had ever told her about Witherspoon. He'd never said much about his associate.

"Half of the officers in this town are regulars here, aren't they, Madame Estelle?" He marched to her side and grabbed her chin in one gloved hand. "You are quite the powerful woman, I'll give you that." A thumb caressed her cheek. "Such sin behind that beautiful face of yours. Sin to the bone."

Something in his voice sent a chill down her spine. An eerie echo of her father; that's what she heard in his words. Her father was pompous, too. And hypocritical. Cruel. Throughout her childhood, he'd come into her room after she'd been tucked into bed and stand at her side, loudly criticizing her for boisterous laughter, flirting with boys, being shameless.

Before he joined her under the blankets.

Shuddering, she thrust her father out of her mind and faced the danger now before her. Witherspoon reeked of it.

"I bet you pretended sweetness and innocence, didn't you?" he sneered. "You're the type. A harlot who uses her beauty to seduce and deceive. Even when they called you 'little Janie Post.'"

She tried to move her face away from his grasp, but his fingers tightened on her chin.

"Little Janie Post. I really enjoyed reading my men's reports about you. And Goodwin's, of course. I saw that name and I thought, how perfect. How modest. But modesty never became you, did it? You flung yourself at the boys. Always flirting, using your charms to lead the virtuous astray."

His fingers dropped to caress her neck, started to pull her thick hair from its pins.

"He knew about you, didn't he? Swanson recognized the tramp in you, living next to you, as he did. And he threatened to expose you. To blackmail you."

Estelle flinched. "I—I refused to pay him. I threw him out. Never wanted to see him again."

"Oh, you refused all right. Because you planned to kill him. Didn't you? Didn't you take a knife and stab him repeatedly?"

"No. I didn't. I swear it. I'm telling the truth."

"The truth? What do you know about truth?"

Desperate, Estelle tried to escape his relentless grasp.

"Oh, now, honey. You're in the business of pleasuring men, aren't you? You should be offering yourself to me, not pulling away."

"I thought you came to arrest me," she ground out. "If so, do your duty and take me into custody."

Witherspoon grabbed a handful of hair and yanked back her head.

She looked up into eyes glazed with lust.

"What a shameless hussy you are. So easy to fool Goodwin and Fry, isn't it? But you can't fool me. I know you live for carnal pleasures. Selling your body to the highest bidder."

He pulled her out of the chair by her hair and forced her to her knees before him.

"Show me your talents, little Janie Post. Show me what you do that earns you such money and respect."

Witherspoon pushed her face against his bulging crotch. In horror, Estelle realized what he wanted.

"Let it out, Janie. Release me so you can worship the only icon you understand."

She froze.

"Do it," he said between gritted teeth. "Or I swear you won't live long enough to see the inside of my cell."

With shaking fingers, Estelle reached up to his trousers.

"Bitch." Witherspoon pushed away her hands, stripped off his gloves, and began to work at the buttons.

Estelle backed away, seeking distance from this crazed man. Within seconds, his fully erect member bobbed before her face.

"Take it in your mouth, little Janie. Now." His cruel hands cupped the back of her head, forcing her face toward his engorged flesh.

She closed her eyes, a sense of helplessness sweeping over her. It was a haunting echo from her past.

Estelle opened her mouth to accept his edict when the door rattled behind her.

James' voice called to her.

"Help me, James."

Distracted, Witherspoon released her.

She scrambled away from him. "The door's locked. I can't get out."

Witherspoon lunged after her, fumbling to close his trousers. Just as he reached her, Goodwin unlocked and opened the door. Estelle tumbled into his arms.

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## Chapter 9

"I always thought Witherspoon odd." Goodwin hugged Estelle closer to him as they sat on the velvet settee in her suite.

She trembled, pressing herself against his side.

He kissed the top of her head. "It's over, my love. It's all over."

James glanced at the mantel clock. The evening was passing and he couldn't remember being more tired. The day's emotional turmoil had been beyond intense. But his weariness didn't concern him. It was the glassy-eyed beauty next to him who worried him.

After bursting from the public room in her frantic attempt to escape Witherspoon's clutches, Estelle had sobbed in his arms for several minutes. Then, she'd stopped crying and had grown calm and quiet. Too quiet.

Even as Fry's men had hauled away Witherspoon—the crazed man snarling and spitting at her like a wild dog—Estelle had not reacted. James, on the other hand, had been shocked to the bone, barely recognizing the officer with whom he'd worked daily for almost a year.

As Witherspoon's diatribe faded in the distance, General Fry had directed Estelle and James to join him in the parlor. There, Lacie, Stepan, and Willis—the porter from across the street—awaited her.

Estelle had been pale and silent as she settled in a Belter armchair, emotionless as Fry turned to Lacie and asked the girl to repeat her story for the benefit of her madam.

Lacie began in a halting voice, her eyes flickering around the room. "I...I'm so sorry, Estelle. I never meant for you to—"

"Just tell her what happened, Miss Lacie," Fry interrupted in crisp tones.

"Yes, sir." Lacie began twisting a handkerchief in her hands. "Got nothing to lose now, that's for certain." She glanced at Estelle, then looked down. "Well, I've already told them...I did it, Estelle. I murdered that bastard, and I'm glad for it. He'd stolen my money, you see. It must have been out in the open when I bedded the fool. I don't remember much from earlier last night. Too drunk, I guess. But, when I got back to my room after turning Swanson over to Emmie, I looked for it, 'cause I had to get it to Bill Masters and the hour had grown late. Bill gets real cross when I don't deliver what he expects when he expects it."

Lacie drew a shaky breath. "It wasn't anywhere in that room, the money wasn't. I turned the place upside down, growing frantic. And then I knew. Swanson had taken it. Robbed me blind, he did." Her voice grew stronger. "So I waited for my chance to get it back from him. I heard the commotion in the hall and peeked out in time to see him go into your room, Estelle. Then I got real worried because he didn't come out for so long." She snickered. "Thought maybe you'd beat me to him and killed him first. But then I saw Stepan throw him out and I knew I'd have my chance. I waited a bit, then grabbed a knife I keep for protection. I went down after him, hoping he'd still be there. And he was, sure enough. Even awake, by then. We argued."

She shook her head. "He refused to give me back the bills. Started laughing at me. Taunting. I pulled out my knife and...."

Lacie took another breath. "Afterwards, I found the cash in his pocket. I knew I had to get it to Bill. But, I felt so done in...figured as long as I had the money back safe and sound, Bill could damn well

wait a few hours while I got some sleep. Thought I'd earned my rest." She paused. "Anyway, I managed to crawl out of bed early this morning and stayed awake long enough to send a message to Bill, saying I'd deliver the money later in the day. Then I collapsed until you woke me, Estelle."

Lacie cast a challenging glare around the room. "I'm glad I did him in. Glad, I tell you. He was no good. Even I could see that. I would've gotten away with it, too. If that one"—she pointed at Willis—"hadn't seen the whole thing." Lacie shifted her eyes back to Estelle. "'Course, I would have felt bad about you being blamed. You've always been real good to me, Estelle. And that's the truth."

Without saying a word, Estelle had left the room, James on her heels.

That had been more than an hour ago. The pair had settled on the burgundy settee in her suite, with Estelle silent as the grave, shuddering from time to time.

James talked to her, tried to soothe her. But he received no response for his efforts. Now, in desperation, he decided to try to reach her one more time.

Gently disentangling her from his side, he shifted on the cushion to look at her. Estelle's glassy-eyed stare frightened him.

"Honey, talk to me. Please, Estelle. Tell me what's wrong."

She focused on him, as if seeing him for the first time. "Just like Father," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't catch that."

"Witherspoon...just like Father." Estelle shook her head. "All this time, I've shoved them away. The memories. I never experienced the horror of what he did to me, like I did tonight. But it all came back. Because of Witherspoon."

"What are you talking about, honey?"

"Those years on the farm during my childhood. The nights Father came to me. Forced me...."

Shock crept over James as he realized the import of her words. "My God, Estelle. Your own father? I—I had no idea."

A sad smile slipped across her face. "Of course not. How could you? I never told you. Nor anyone else, for that matter." She sighed. "I suppose I should face my past. Not healthy to let something like that fester inside."

"Can you tell me?"

She brushed a hand over his stubbled chin. "If I can't talk to you about it, then who?"

For the next few minutes, James struggled to squelch the pain building in his gut as Estelle relayed the torture to which her father had subjected her, and told him about the infant whose grave she regularly visited.

Tears pooled in her eyes as she spoke of the baby. "I still don't understand how such a glorious innocent could come from such debauchery." Estelle wrapped her arms around herself. "I suppose I'm almost grateful she didn't live. What a horrific world to subject her to." Tears streamed down her face.

James gathered Estelle in his arms and rocked her, feeling her slender body wracked with gut-wrenching sobs. Long after she'd quieted, they remained locked in each other's arms.

Finally, she pulled away and gave him a tremulous smile. "Not running for the hills yet?"

He grasped her shoulders in his strong hands and squeezed. "Not on your life. I honor you more than ever, my love. Your strength and courage. The way in which you've survived and thrived." His eyes

bore into hers. "I'm blessed because you're in my life. Don't know what I did right to make it happen. But, whatever I did, I thank God for showing me the path to you."

Her eyes widened. "You really mean that?"

"More than I've ever meant anything in my life."

"I don't deserve such praise, James. I'm nothing special."

His hands slipped down to grip her arms. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

"Then accept my words. And start believing in yourself as I believe in you."

She sighed.

"Try, Estelle. For me."

The hint of a smile shadowed her features. "I'll try." She looked away, clearly deep in thought. After a few minutes, she walked to the dressing table and started brushing her long, rich locks.

He wanted to go to her, wrap his arms around her and never let her go. But something about her demeanor hinted that she needed a bit of distance. Perhaps to think about all he'd just said to her.

Her beauty radiated around her. He wanted to plunge his hands into that mass of thick hair and pull her body to him.

Instead, he remained on the settee and closed his eyes, seeking respite after the emotional intensity of the last few hours.

Suddenly, he felt her presence, caught a whiff of her lavender fragrance. Opening his eyes, James looked up into her tear-stained face. She knelt on the floor beside him, studying him.

He smiled at her. "Something on your mind, lovely lady?" He could see that her eyes were clear now, gleaming, as if she'd made a decision about something. James felt the stirring in his groin.

She returned his smile and laid her head on his thigh. "We should be celebrating."

He dug a hand into her hair. "I couldn't agree more. Isn't there something I can do to wipe away the pain? Let me help you forget the ugliness?" What he wouldn't give to make love to her right then and there.

As if she'd read his thoughts, Estelle raised her head to look at him. The hint of an impish twinkle glimmered in her eyes. "There is one thing you could do."

"You're incorrigible." He reached down and placed his hands on her arms, guiding her to the settee beside him. Cradling her against him, he brushed her lips with his, pulling back when he felt her tremble.

James stroked her hair. Suddenly, he knew that he had to tell her how he felt about her. About them. "I know you're not in a position to entertain the thought of marriage..."

She pulled back and stared at him.

"But, I want you to know I love you, Estelle. If you ever change your mind about marrying, I hope you'll consider me worthy to be your husband."

"My God, James."

He smiled at her look. "That shocking, eh?"



"No. No, it's just that...we've been casual about our relationship."

"Not good for the business to have a married madam, I know."

"That's not it. Well, when I first met you, perhaps. But, now—" She cupped his face in the palm of her hands. "*Now*, I feel differently. I can't imagine my life without you, James." Estelle stroked his stubble-covered cheeks. "My dear, you have no idea how I've dreamt of being married to you. But, for now I think it is a dream. How would we manage it?" She smiled broadly. "What would your fellow officers say?"

"Damn their opinions."

"Their opinions aren't important. But, your service to the country is. You've been assigned to the Provost Marshall's office. Unless you're willing to entertain military ruin for me—" She kissed him quickly, stifling his response. "We really must wait until after the war. Or, at the very least, until you've been reassigned."

"Estelle—"

"It's all right, James. Truly. I can wait. You've taken hold of my heart. It will always be yours." She grinned at him, the twinkle in her eyes growing. "And we'll have no shortage of entertainment until this war is over. Think of all the crimes and mysteries we can solve—the colonel of the Provost Marshall's Office and the madam of the infamous Maison d'Estelle."

"We can solve one crime right now," he declared, reaching out to unbutton her bodice.

"Really, Colonel? What wrongdoing should be rectified?"

He nuzzled her neck. "The injustice of denying me carnal pleasure."

She chuckled and placed a hand on his bulging crotch. "I think I know just how to see justice done..."

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**Amber Quill Press, LLC**

Is Proud To Present

**THE WOMEN OF MAISON D'ESTELLE  
BOOK II: SELIA**

by

DELPHYNE DEROUGE

Deception and sex weave a deadly web for Selia. As the woman from Maison d'Estelle holds her dying friend in her arms, Blythe's mysterious words send Selia on an odyssey that could prove to be her own undoing.

With her last breath, Blythe begs Selia to care for her infant girl. But, who is this child, really? Why does her presence in Estelle's mansion spell life-threatening risk for the girls, staff, and clients?

Before the story ends, Selia will have traveled from sex-filled beds to danger-filled back alleys in her quest to uncover the truth about the baby. And when she strips away the subterfuge and skullduggery, the decision Selia faces will set the course for the rest of her life.

### *Excerpt from Selia*

"Where is your head at, girl?"

Blythe rolled over to face the nameless client and stifled a sigh. Where indeed were her thoughts? Not with this beefy boor, that was certain.

Sweaty fingers tickled her breast and Blythe resisted the urge to slap him. Instead, she nuzzled his neck murmuring, "My head and the rest of me are with you, love. Whatever you want...I'm here to please."

Hands gripped her breasts and squeezed. Hard. "That's what I like to hear, darlin'." He flopped onto her, positioning his engorged member between her legs. Within seconds he entered her and began thrusting at a ferocious pace.

Grasping the sheets for stability, Blythe turned her head to one side, absent-mindedly staring at the wooden straight-backed chair and the pile of clothing stacked on its seat. How had her life taken this turn? Not that working for the Maison d'Estelle wasn't the best job a fancy lady could have. The elegant Washington, D.C. brothel had earned a reputation for its high standards—both in its employees and staff, and clientele.

But this wasn't what she'd envisioned for herself a year ago when she left finishing school to adopt the artistic life of a painter. At first, she managed to eke out an existence, depending upon the generous allowance from her family. When her parents learned she'd left school for an unseemly career, they'd demanded she relinquish her aspirations and return home. Or consider herself disowned.

Hell-bent on realizing her dream, Blythe had chosen to be disowned, her rebellious nature assuming control.

Paying for food and shelter while painting become a burden that turned into a crisis she'd never expected. Pride forced her down the perilous path without a thought about going back to her family.

She found herself seeking fast money, and lowering her standards about the way in which she made that money. Her downward spiral had deepened quickly, and with it, her dreams of painting. Her life became a never-ending struggle to survive as she hatched one money-making scheme after another.

She'd crossed the line from respectable to illegal months before. Estelle's job offer had been the most attractive scenario she'd accepted in months.

Blythe shifted, seeking a more comfortable position as the client rammed into her, moaning, panting around her head until the air she inhaled became a noxious cloud of garlic and sour wine.

The latest connivance had been the worst of them all. Somehow, she had to disentangle herself from the men who'd recruited her to assist them in their illegal dodge. She couldn't live with herself if she went through with their plan, much less become the artist of her dreams.

Finally, the client rolled away with a satisfied grunt. Minutes later, he left her alone and Blythe hurried to dress. She had no other clients the rest of the evening. But she did have a wrong to right.

Blythe hurried from the elegant mansion on Sixth Street, intent upon taking the first step in recovering a shred of her conscience.

And saving the life of a child...

*Available Summer 2003!*

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## **Delphyne DeRouge**

The steamy side of the American Civil War calls to Delphyne DeRouge. "Stories of sexual antics behind the battle scenes need to be told!" she exclaims. "My Lord, those boys were a randy bunch. With all the pain and tragedy of that conflict, who can blame them for seeking their pleasure where and when they could find it?"

Delphyne has committed herself to sharing the spicy underworld of war with her readers. Through her alter-ego, Madame Estelle—the madam of a Civil War-era brothel in Washington, D.C.—Delphyne delights in penning risqué tales of the temptresses who provided a lusty outlet for the soldiers in blue and gray.

Steeped in historical detail, Delphyne's writing seduces the reader, compelling her audience to join her in the racy past. Her insight into the sexual world of the nineteenth century is legendary. "I know those boys firsthand," she says. "One of my past-lives was as a madam of a bawdy house, just like Estelle. I know the desires and passions of her Daughters of Pleasure because I lived them. Now, I delight in sharing their intrigues and intimacies with a new audience."

Delphyne is an award-winning author of historical erotica. Her series of novellas about the Women of Maison d'Estelle is the latest entry in a distinguished literary life. Ms. DeRouge loves to hear from her readers. Feel free to email her at [delphyne@maisondestelle.com](mailto:delphyne@maisondestelle.com), and visit the amorous world of Maison d'Estelle at <http://maisondestelle.com>.

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