

Delphyne DeRouge

*The Women of
Maison d'Estelle*

Book II: Selia

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

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She ran to the leather trunk at the foot of the bed and threw on her dress. Through ruffled petticoats and silk skirts she heard William ask, "You know that person down there, Selia?"

"Help me with the buttons. And hurry please. That's one of our girls. I need to help her."

PRAISE FOR SELIA

“It’s rare I run across an author who writes not only within the same general historical time period as myself, but who has a flare for penning lyrical prose, both steamy and seductive, and who sprinkles the work with just the appropriate amount of historical tinsel. Ms. DeRouge is one such author. Not only was I treated to a splendid tale of mystery in *Selia*, but a sizzling one at that. A delicate balance between ‘erotica’ and ‘story’ is not always easy to achieve, but Ms. DeRouge has done so, seemingly with ease. This latest entry in the Maison d’Estelle series, as did the previous entry, *Lacie*, kept me happily enthralled from start to finish. I look forward to reading more stories by this highly talented author. My only gripe is that Ms. DeRouge’s focus seems to be on Northern characters, whereas my study of focus has always been on the South and its people...thankfully in this day and age I can easily overlook Ms. DeRouge’s ‘Yankee leanings’ and simply enjoy her marvelous, historically accurate tales!”

—Paris Dixon
Author of *Lechery For The Devil*
and *Morning Ritual*

“During the fighting and brutality of the Civil War, there is an oasis of pleasure and passion at the Maison d’Estelle, where comfort is offered to battle-weary men by willing, experienced women. Delphyne DeRouge’s erotica novellas present the stories of these women. In Book Two, *Selia*, the story” namesake finds herself thrown into intrigue surrounding a mysterious infant, the death of a fellow fancy

lady, and the fiery passion that has bloomed between her and the wealthy client, William Thorne. Delphyne DeRouge has woven a fabulous historical erotica filled with passion and sex games played between people who trust one another completely. Don't be surprised if more than your imagination is piqued by this sexy tale of passion, danger and redemption."

—Lexi Moore
Author of *Without Reserve*
and *Naked Eyes*

ALSO BY DELPHYNE DEROUGE

Call To Loving Arms

The Women of Maison d'Estelle

Book I: Lacie

Book II: Selia

Book III: Mollie

Book IV: Lacie's Puzzle

Book V: Selia's Mystery Man

THE WOMEN OF
MAISON D'ESTELLE
BOOK II: SELIA

BY

DELPHYNE DEROUGE

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SELIA
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*To Marc,
who stirs my passion for life and love
with every breath he takes.*

*To Trace,
dear friend and gifted editor.*

CHAPTER 1

“Where is your head at, girl?”

Blythe rolled over to face the client and stifled a sigh in the July heat. 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. “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 grunting in time to his steady thrusts.

After brushing a stray lock of brown hair from her face, Blythe grasped the sheets for stability. She turned her head to one side in a vain attempt to minimize the stench of stale beer, garlic and body odor pouring from the man. Absent-mindedly, she stared at the wooden straight-backed chair and the pile of clothing stacked on its seat.

SELIA

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 when selecting employees and staff. It boasted a moneyed clientele clamoring for relief from the third year of the Civil War.

But working in a brothel, regardless of its class, hadn't been what Blythe had 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 a 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, her rebellious nature assuming control, she'd chosen to be disowned. She'd even written to the *L'école Des Beaux-Arts*, requesting admission. Waiting for a response, she'd spent long hours imagining life on Paris' Left Bank. The institution's response shut down that fantasy. In barely polite language, its staff informed her that women were not welcome behind its hallowed doors.

Soon, enrollment in fancy schools lost importance as the harsh reality of her situation assumed control of her life. Paying for food and shelter in the midst of a turbulent country gripped by war had become a burden that turned into a crisis she'd never expected. Pride forced her down a perilous path without a thought about going back to her family.

Blythe found herself seeking fast money, and lowering her standards about the way in which she earned it. Her downward spiral had deepened quickly, and with it, her dream 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 available to her in weeks.

Blythe shifted, seeking a more comfortable position as the client

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continued to push into her, panting around her head until a stench-filled cloud surrounded her.

Her latest connivance was 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. Blythe hurried to dress. She had no other clients the rest of the afternoon.

But she did have a wrong to right.

She rushed from the elegant mansion on Sixth Street, intent upon taking the first step in recovering a shred of her conscience. And saving a life.

* * *

When Selia opened her legs to him, William accepted the invitation. His hands stroked her inner thighs as he trailed kisses down her stomach. She smiled, loving his gentle touch. If only all clients were like this. Then again, William Thorne was far more than a regular at Maison d'Estelle. He was one of her best friends, and the only customer with whom she allowed herself to experience sexual gratification.

His mustache tickled her sensitive tissue as his tongue lapped at her thick essence. She wriggled, thrusting her hips forward.

He smiled up at her, his facial hair glistening with her moisture. "Want more?" he whispered.

Selia groaned. "I'm supposed to be pleasuring you, love. Not the other way around."

His smile widened. "The women of Maison d'Estelle aren't in the business of doing what the paying gent wants?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then humor me. I'm having a wonderful time. Unless you'd like me to stop."

SELIA

“You know me too well. Ah—” She slid down in the bed, allowing William to raise her hips until she could place her legs on his shoulders, framing his face.

Through slitted eyes, Selia watched him burrow between her legs, his blond hair fanning across his back. Sensations rippled through her as his tongue simulated the action of his sex organ, penetrating her vagina in quick pulses. She felt the rumble of climax begin in the pit of her stomach. William seemed to sense her excitement because his movement grew faster, sending her over the edge to fulfillment.

He stilled for a long moment, allowing her to fully experience the quickening of her body, then grasped her legs and rose to his knees.

Selia opened her eyes to see his erection inches from her opening, a twinkle in his bronze eyes joining his grin. She shook her head. “You keep this up and I will be paying you.”

“Honey, you bring more joy into my life than any man should have. And you see, just now, I am about to get mine, so we can call us even!” He turned his head to kiss one calf, then lapped at her skin with his tongue.

Selia sighed. “You are too good to me. Find your release, dearest, before I tackle you and take things into my own hands.”

“Mmm. You can take me in your hands anytime you wish.” William moved closer to her opening, and she could feel his tip nudge her. “But just now, I have other items on the agenda.”

He thrust inside her willing body to the hilt.

Selia took a deep breath, inhaling the male scent of him mixed with the freshness of his soap. There were times when she loved her job. Especially when she could use her body to entertain such a delightful man as William Thorne.

Grinding her hips against him, Selia lost herself in the rich sensation of his silk-encased steel pumping inside her. She arched up to meet him thrust for thrust, knowing he would take his time with her, drawing out each movement until they both experienced every nuance

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of the sex act.

Selia was not disappointed. Long moments passed, and just as she was certain the orgasm building inside would overwhelm her before William climaxed, he paused at her threshold for a beat, then slammed his full length down her velvety tunnel. Shuddering, he whispered her name as they came together, then collapsed in each other's arms, limp and satiated.

An hour went by, during which time they dozed in the rosewood bed. Selia awakened to find the place next to her empty. Brushing her black hair off her shoulders, she looked over to see William standing by the window, gazing down at the July afternoon on Sixth Street. She joined him, sweeping aside the emerald chintz drapes and lace curtains to snuggle by him.

William drew her around to stand in front of him and began massaging her neck. His hands dropped to her breasts. He cupped them, stroking their sides with his thumbs.

She melted into him, whispering over her shoulder, "What did I do to deserve you, love?" Her eyes closed and a dreamy contentment wafted over her. His burgeoning erection pressed into the small of her back and she wiggled her buttocks against him, teasing.

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"Help me with the buttons. And hurry please. That's one of our

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girls. I need to help her.”

William’s puzzled expression barely registered as Selia’s thoughts swirled. Instinct propelled her down the stairs and out to the sun-streaked street. She felt compelled to be by Blythe’s side.

A crowd had gathered around her friend. Selia pushed her way to the front. Kneeling next to Blythe in the beating sun, she cradled the girl in her arms, shading her from the brutal heat. She looked up. “Is there a doctor here? Can someone get a doctor? Please!” Her words ended in a sob as she watched a thin stream of blood trickle from the corner of Blythe’s mouth. A coppery smell drifted to her nostrils, mingling with the stench from horse manure and the Washington Canal.

“She came out of nowhere,” a gruff voice issued from behind her. “I—didn’t see her until it was too late. Just couldn’t stop old Pete in time.”

Selia ignored him, realizing that her friend was trying to form words. “Hush now, Blythe. We’ll get a doctor to take a look. You’ll be just fine—”

“No!” Blythe grabbed Selia’s arm, looking up at her with glazed eyes. Suddenly, they focused. “Selia?”

“Yes, dear. I’m right here.”

“...have to listen...important...”

“Save your strength, now. Don’t try to talk.”

“No. Must...tell you...”

“What, Blythe? What is it?”

“...baby...girl...have to do right...”

“I don’t understand, honey. What baby?”

Blythe clawed at her sleeve, a frantic look in her eyes. “My room...a box under the bed...” She drew a shaky breath, a flash of pain crossing her pale face. “...nanny’s address is in there...I was going...danger’s all around...” She shuddered. “The baby...get her away from there. Keep her safe. Promise...”

SELIA

“I promise, Blythe.”

The woman dropped away from Selia’s grasp.

She was dead.

CHAPTER 2

William whistled softly. “Sure enough. Just like she said. Here it is.” He sat back on his heels beside Blythe’s brass bed, a carved mahogany box in his hands.

“I had no idea Blythe had a child, William. Then again, I knew very little about her. I doubt I even know what her real last name was.”

William looked at Selia. “Her last name?”

“Mmm. She said it was Connelly. But most girls never offer their true name in this business.” Selia knelt next to her friend and opened the box. Lavender fragrance hovered around a small sheet of paper sitting atop a pile of larger sheets. Blythe’s elaborate handwriting scrolled across its surface: *Hester Magnus, 484 10th Street*. She looked at William. “Do you suppose this is the nanny?”

“One way to find out.”

Selia nodded. “You’re right. I’ll leave directly.”

“Not alone, you won’t.”

“You have to return to work.”

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He sighed. "I'm afraid the War Department isn't particularly lenient about its hours, that's for certain. Especially with all the work we have ahead of us. The aftermath of Gettysburg is keeping us hopping. Why don't you see if Estelle is available. Or Stepan." William referred to the towering blond hulk who worked as porter and guard for the Maison d'Estelle.

Selia smiled at his concern and kissed him lightly on the nose. "I'll be fine, love. Been looking after myself for a while now." Actually, she'd been looking after herself all her life. Born of a prostitute-mother and anonymous father, Selia had learned to live independently from the time she could walk. Not that her mother hadn't been loving in an absent-minded sort of way, but she'd been too preoccupied earning money to eke out a bare existence to have the energy or time to care for a little girl.

With the exception of a short time when she'd allowed a man to dictate her lifestyle, Selia had never considered any other life than that of soiled dove. It was all she really knew. But she had been determined to work at the fanciest house she could. She'd joined Estelle's establishment just as the ambitious madam was organizing her new enterprise. And Selia had been a member of Maison d'Estelle ever since.

Briefly, she thought of her mother, old before her time, enduring a long, painful death from venereal disease. Selia had always been grateful she'd earned sufficient money to make the woman's last days as comfortable as possible. She'd bought the finest gravestone money could buy. But her real tribute to her mother manifested itself in not making the same mistakes she'd witnessed her elder make. In that, Selia had definitely succeeded.

She turned her thoughts back to the dilemma at hand. "I expect this is going to be a difficult time for all of us. Estelle will have her hands full, finding Blythe's family, possibly making funeral arrangements." She gazed at the box. "Perhaps we'll find out something about Blythe's

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relatives in there.”

William rose to his feet. “You’ll be all right?”

Selia nodded through her sadness. “I’ll miss her. Didn’t know her well. Really, Blythe hadn’t worked here that long. But I had the feeling we could have been good friends. Well, no time to think about that now. I’m going to look through her papers, then take your advice and talk to Estelle.”

* * *

Selia hovered outside Estelle’s elegant suite. Through the open doorway, she saw her beautiful, raven-haired boss in deep conversation with Colonel James Goodwin from the Military Provost General’s office, the pair huddled on a burgundy velvet settee. Goodwin was Estelle’s lover and close friend. The irony of the madam of prostitutes engaged in a close, personal relationship with one of General Fry’s top aides was an irony Estelle’s girls enjoyed. Now, Selia was thankful for Goodwin’s familiar presence. If anyone could uncover the particulars about Blythe’s background, the colonel could.

Estelle looked up to see Selia in the hallway and gestured for her to enter. “James was just giving me the details of Blythe’s accident. Join us.”

Selia noticed a puzzled look cross Goodwin’s face.

Obviously, Estelle had seen it also. “Selia’s really the only one of us who got to know the girl at all. Blythe was very quiet. Kept to herself, never revealed private details about her life.” The madam sighed. “Not that that’s unusual, of course. But, there was always something about Blythe. As if she was troubled, but didn’t want to talk about her problems. Selia, do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, ma’am. I know exactly what you mean. In fact, I may know about part of her secret life.” She sank into a chintz-upholstered armchair in response to Estelle’s silent invitation.

“What have you learned?” asked Goodwin, running a hand through his thick gray hair.

SELIA

Selia informed the pair about Blythe's mysterious, dying words and the slip of paper she'd found. She handed the sheet to Goodwin, a trail of lavender following in its wake. The colonel scanned the words before passing the note to Estelle.

"I promised Blythe I'd keep the baby safe," Selia continued. "I...I thought the best way to do that would be to track down any relatives Blythe had. The child should be with family, after all." She tapped the mahogany box. "I figured there might be a clue to her background in here. But all I found were receipts and several old theater playbills. Oh, and a schedule of painting classes at an art academy."

"Art academy?" asked Estelle.

"*L'école Des Beaux-Arts* in Paris."

Estelle and James exchange surprised looks.

Selia held up the letter. "She applied for admission, requesting a specialty in watercolors. The response was less than kind."

"I never knew she was an artist," the madam murmured.

"Neither did I." Selia sighed. "Anyway, there's really nothing in here that gives us a clue about her."

Goodwin whistled. "That's odd."

"Why, James?" Estelle asked.

"Normally, in a collection like that, you'd find a letter from a parent or sibling, perhaps a friend. When you don't, the omission is significant."

"Meaning—?"

"I'm just guessing, mind you. But it appears as if Blythe carefully erased all hints of her past. Divorced herself from family and friends."

"Again, I ask why."

Goodwin shrugged. "Always a good reason." To Selia, he said, "I'll look into it, dear. See what I can find out about Blythe's background. I must admit this intrigues me. Could I borrow the box?"

"Of course." Selia rose and walked across the Persian rug. Relief swept over her as she handed the box to Goodwin, knowing the colonel

SELIA

would be thorough and discreet in his inquiries. She braced herself against a white marble-top table in the center of the drawing room before returning to her chair.

James went on, "Estelle was telling me Blythe claimed her last name was 'Connelly.' Do you happen to know if that's her real name, Selia?"

"I'd guess it's made up. But I have no facts to prove it, Colonel." Selia paused. "There is one more thing, Estelle."

"Yes?"

"Back to my promise to Blythe about the baby...I was wondering if we could care for it here. Just until we identify Blythe's family."

"Why can't the child remain with her nanny?" asked James.

"Something Blythe said, about getting the baby away from the nanny. A problem exists with the current arrangement, that seems obvious." Selia's tense fingers dug into the satiny finish of the chintz-covered chair arm. "I'd just feel better having the child with us." She looked at Estelle. "If that's acceptable to you."

Estelle nodded. "Of course."

"Good. I'll leave directly. If Blythe is to be believed, that infant needs rescuing!"

* * *

Selia approached the hovel on 10th Street as it shimmered in the July heat, expecting her uneasiness to grow with each step. Instead, as she got her first look at the splintered clapboard shack leaning against a giant hickory tree, she found herself surprised at the sight. An air of neglect clinging to unpainted wood was contradicted by window glass glowing in the late afternoon light, a spotless porch, a lovingly tended yard. In this household, inhabitants struggled to maintain respectability in the light of crushing poverty. Selia felt no threat or danger here, and found herself wondering at Blythe's words of warning.

She knocked on the door. The hue and cry of a baby's wail rose from inside, accompanied by a soothing voice. The voice grew louder

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as the door opened to reveal a careworn, elderly woman, cradling an infant in her arms. Selia guessed the baby was somewhere around six or seven-months-old.

“Yes?” The woman turned her attention to the baby. “Hush, now, honey. That’s a girl.”

Selia introduced herself as a friend of Blythe’s, and confirmed that she was, indeed, speaking to Hester Magnus, the nanny to whom Blythe had referred. As if sensing trouble, the nanny’s piercing gray eyes clouded over as she gestured Selia inside the humble abode.

Similar to its exterior, the tiny cottage revealed a shabby, but sparkling set of rooms—parlor, bedroom, back room that probably served as a kitchen—filled with the aroma of freshly baked cookies. Through a small window, Selia discerned an outbuilding crouching in the back yard. After surveying the ancient, pristine wood and chintz furnishings, Selia settled on a faded sofa and watched the old woman sink into a creaking armchair, soothing the infant in her arms.

Hester looked up, her ancient eyes blazing. She studied Selia for a long moment. “What’s happened to Miss Blythe?”

Startled by the abrupt question, Selia took a deep breath, trying to decide how best to relay the tragic news. After she’d finished, she sat back and waited for a response.

Hester shook her head in a sad gesture. “God forgive me, but her fate doesn’t surprise me. What a troubled young woman Miss Blythe was. Always so unsettled. As if she were headed for a cruel end.” She sighed. “Ah, I hate to know I suspected correctly. And the poor babe without her mother.” She hugged the baby close to her sagging bosom, then rose and settled the infant in a rough-hewn oak cradle. Heading for the back room, she smoothed her gray bun at the nape of her neck and spoke over her shoulder. “I’ll get us some tea. Then we can talk.”

Selia walked to the cradle and looked down. Arms and legs waved in the air in vigorous jerks. At the sight of the face looming over her, the blonde baby chortled and reached up to Selia, who tickled her

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tummy. Giggling and laughter rewarded Selia's action. She found herself picking up the wriggling bundle of warmth and softness, holding the child to her chest. She bent her head and inhaled the sweet baby smell of milk and soap.

"The best little girl I've ever tended," said Hester behind her.

"I couldn't resist holding her. She is such a love."

"You're taking her away, aren't you?"

Selia nodded, carefully returning the baby to her bed. "I promised her mother I would." She resumed her seat, aware of the crone's scrutiny. "I have the resources to look for Blythe's family. Once her relatives are found, the baby will have a new home."

"Annie."

"Excuse me?"

"The baby's name is Annie."

Guilt washed over Selia. She'd never had much to do with children. Her lack of experience showed. Not to mention insensitivity. "I'm sorry. Of course. Her name is Annie."

"Now that we have that established, what haven't you told me?"

Selia looked up in surprise, and saw the gray eyes piercing her.

Hester smiled slightly. "My dear, I can tell there's trouble surrounding this child just as I sensed problems with Miss Blythe. You can talk to me."

Selia stared at the cradle for a long moment, struggling with her thoughts. Blythe had specifically told her to get the child away from this gentle lady, that Annie was in danger and Selia had to keep her safe. But nothing about the elderly woman, nor the setting in which Annie was being tended, spelled any risk to Selia. She decided to trust the nanny, and told her about Blythe's dying words.

"Danger? Here?" Hester shook her head as she hurried to the back room to retrieve the boiling teakettle. A moment later, she returned with a tea set and a platter of sugar cookies. "I can't imagine what Miss Blythe was talking about." Hester handed Selia a steaming cup of tea.

SELIA

“I sensed trouble, all right. But it wasn’t here. It rested on her shoulders.” She settled into her chair with a sigh that mingled with the sound of complaining ancient wood. “It was odd, you know.”

“What was odd?”

“I hate to speak ill of the dead, but I almost wondered if Blythe *was* the child’s mother.”

Selia reached for a cookie, her eyes on the woman. As the delicate sweetness of the confectionery filled her mouth, questions raged through her head. She verbalized one of them. “Why do you wonder about Blythe’s claim to be Annie’s mother, Hester?”

The woman shrugged. “Poor wee one has almost no clothing nor toys. No belongings at all. ’Course Miss Blythe didn’t have much money, so that could explain the lack. But, it was more than that. Blythe just didn’t seem attached to Annie. There was no bond between them. It was almost as if Annie didn’t know her.”

* * *

Selia cuddled Annie as the hack drove toward Maison d’Estelle. She hadn’t wanted to remove the child from Hester’s loving care, but something told her to do it, as if the child could, indeed, be in danger if she remained there. Selia grimaced, thinking she was losing her common sense to the influence of Blythe’s dying words.

Hester had made her promise to give her news about Annie as soon as Selia and Estelle had settled the baby in her temporary home. Selia had gladly agreed. Hester proceeded to brief Selia about Annie’s likes and dislikes, needs, diet, then bundled together the baby’s few belongings.

Selia had left the cottage, the image of Hester’s sad eyes burned into her memory. Now, clutching Annie to her chest, Selia became thankful for the support of Estelle and the girls at the mansion. She’d need help caring for the wee one.

CHAPTER 3

“I’m sorry, sir, but Miss Blythe is no longer with us.”

Mollie stood at the threshold of Maison d’Estelle and barely suppressed a shudder. The burly man glared at her with cruel eyes of dark blue. He shoved his way into the mansion, brushing her aside as if she were no more than a gnat buzzing in his face.

“Sir! You can’t just come in here without an invitation.”

“Problem Miss Mollie?” Stepan approached from a back hall, the porter scrutinizing the man. Behind him in the music room, the Nunns and Clark pianoforte sang under the talented fingers of Jaxon, Estelle’s resident musician.

“No problem here,” the intruder said. His thin lips tried to smile, but the expression turned into a sneer surrounded by an ill-kempt black beard. “I had an appointment with Miss Blythe, is all.”

“Your name, sir?” Mollie asked.

“Bushman.”

She looked at the schedule. “I’m sorry, but you’re not in the book.”

SELIA

She frowned, knowing Estelle wouldn't approve of this man as a client in her elegant establishment.

"Don't need a book to confirm it. Me and Blythe go way back, we do. My girl made sure we'd continue our...relationship...after she started working here." He paused. "You say she's no longer in residence? She'd never leave without telling me. Wouldn't be...healthy for her...if you get my meaning."

Stepan advanced toward the man. "No appointment in the book, no reason for you to be here."

Bushman raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Look, I'm not lying."

Mollie hesitated. Even during her brief sojourn at Maison d'Estelle, Blythe's lack of organization and discrimination in her choice of clients had been the bane of Estelle's existence. It wouldn't have been unusual for her to schedule this unsavory man and neglect noting it in the appointment book. "Perhaps we should go into the parlor and talk, Mr. Bushman."

"Sure do want to know where Blythe got herself to. Mighty important I find her." He leered at Mollie. "Still and all, I didn't come here just to have a conversation, if you understand my meaning. If Blythe ain't available, how 'bout you?"

"Now just a minute—" Stepan started forward, but stopped at Mollie's gesture.

"It's fine, Stepan. Estelle asked us to help with Blythe's clients." To Bushman, she added, "*In keeping with our reputation for fine service.*" She didn't want anything to do with this man, but felt she had little choice if Estelle's orders were to be carried out. She was available, and a client waited for service.

"Miss Mollie, are you sure?"

Bushman turned on the husky blond man. "You heard the lady. I'll take over from here." He gripped Mollie by her elbow. "Lead on, my dear."

SELIA

Mollie took a deep breath and began leading the man upstairs. Hattie, one of Estelle's maids, bobbed a curtsy, hurrying past them with an armful of clean bed linens.

Once inside her room, Mollie closed the door behind her and faced Bushman. "You wanted to know about Blythe—"

He placed his hands around her neck and pulled her to him. Taking the pins from her hair, he settled Mollie's abundant auburn curls around her shoulders. With his lips hovering over hers, he whispered, "Fun now. Talk later."

Mollie turned her face aside so he kissed her cheek.

Rough fingers tangled in her red hair, jerking her head around. "Don't turn away from me, girl." He pushed her backward until she fell on the brass bed. He stripped off his shirt and dove after her, hands fumbling with the buttons of her bodice.

She forced herself to relax and smile. "Here, love. Let me help you with those." She quickly opened her blouse and struggled to suppress a grimace as he grabbed her breasts through the filmy embroidered cotton of her chemise.

With one yank, he removed the thin barrier and leaned back to stare at her bosom. "Well, now. Ain't that a pretty thing?" His mouth descended upon her delicate flesh.

Mollie murmured, "All for you, love. What you see is all for you!"

Lips pulled at each nipple. His tongue circled the rosy tips, lashing across them as his hands kneaded the orbs. The coarse beard scratched her skin. He looked up at her, licking his lips and grinning. "Sweet and firm. Just like tits should be."

Mollie returned his smile, running her fingers along his hairy shoulders. "You are a strong one, aren't you?"

"You know it." Chapped hands descended each side of her torso, brushing across her firm skin, detouring from their journey to blanket her stomach. His mouth abandoned her breasts to follow his hands. Soon, his tongue jabbed her belly button and she writhed under him.

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“Mmm. Firm here, too,” he whispered. He flayed the sensitive spot and continued his descent.

He separated her legs, and Mollie obliged him. His fingers stroked her delicate folds as his lips brushed across the thatch of curly hair. One finger entered her and Mollie moaned.

He looked up. “Like that? I’ll just bet you do. How about this?” A second finger slithered up her passage. Mollie rotated her hips, and began riding the invading hand.

Bushman pumped into her. She met the action, thrust for thrust. He pulled out his fingers and licked them, then leered at her. “You are sweet as honey.”

His mouth descended upon her. Soon his tongue lapped across her opening as his fingers spread her labial lips. He sucked at her clit, nipping it, then slurping across her. A thumb worked the tiny bud as his mouth plunged toward her anus.

Mollie stirred, whispering, “Want me to return the favor?”

He snickered. “Just getting the lay of the land, don’t you know.” One hand clamped the expanse between her legs as he sat up. “Claiming what’s mine down here.” Bushman inserted a finger into her opening once again. “Making sure there’s room.” He wiggled his digit, tickling the walls of her vagina. “I think you’ll do just fine, sweetheart.”

Mollie eyed his bulging trousers and reached for him. “It’s time we do something about this. Let’s release your friend. He’ll want attention right about now, I suspect.”

“Honey, you read my mind.” Bushman removed his finger with a pop, then rolled over and settled on his back, idly flicking one of her nipples with a thumb.

Mollie turned onto her side to face him, noticing the thick mat of black hair blanketing the top of his grimy hands. She reached out and cradled his straining erection. “My, my. What a big boy!” She unfastened his trousers, removing layers of clothing until she reached

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the blood-engorged organ.

Bushman groaned as her hand trailed down the large vein running the length of it, her tongue following. She flicked the tip with one finger, smiling as it stirred in response. Teasing, Mollie took him in her mouth, running her lips down the shaft until it bumped against the back of her palate, then racing back up to the tip and releasing him.

“Honey, you’re going to be the death of me.”

“Oh, now,” she crooned, tickling his balls, rolling them between her fingers. “You wouldn’t want everything all at once, would you?” Again, she descended upon him, her lips caressing the engorged flesh, her tongue swirling around the base.

“Suck it,” he rasped.

“Of course, sir,” Mollie whispered over him. This time, her mouth cupped him, sliding down as she took him completely inside. Gripping the fleshy shroud with her lips, she suctioned firmly and began pumping the organ. She continued to draw him deep, then ran her mouth up to the bulbous tip.

At first, she moved at a leisurely pace. As the crescendo of his groans increased, so did her speed. Soon, her head snapped up and down until she was afraid she’d hurt her neck.

Without warning, he grabbed her hair and yanked her mouth away from him. “On your back,” he growled. “Hurry, by God, before I soil your sheets.”

Mollie obeyed, bemused by his concern over the condition of her bed linen.

He’d barely entered her velvet tunnel when he released his semen with a series of strained grunts. Mollie just had time to move to one side before he collapsed onto the bed and began snoring.

Grinning, she left him sprawled on the pristine sheets and wrapped herself in an apricot silk dressing gown. She’d allow him a bit of sleep before rousing him and telling him about Blythe’s demise.

* * *

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He didn't take it well, the news about Blythe's death. Bushman sat on the edge of the bed, socks in hand, snarling at Mollie. "You're pulling a double cross!"

Mollie swallowed her anger and shock at the accusation. "Excuse me, sir? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"All you girls stick together. Lie for each other."

"I assure you, I'd never lie about something like that!"

"Poppycock! You're protecting her."

"From what?"

"Where is she?"

Mollie had just about enough of Bushman. She began moving toward the door to summon Stepan when a rough hand grabbed her arm and spun her around. She looked into his glittering dark eyes.

"I know you're hiding her," he hissed.

"Check the morgue, if you don't believe me! Now, if you'd be so kind as to release me."

Narrowed eyes bore into her, as if trying to scan her mind, determine the truth. After a long moment, he dropped her arm and headed for the door.

"Stepan will collect payment, sir!" She smiled as he slammed the door behind him.

Mollie's smile faded as a wave of sadness eased over her. She'd never known Blythe well, but the woman had seemed a tragic figure with an air of melancholy surrounding her. After meeting one of her associates, Mollie wondered if Blythe hadn't been caught up in a nasty crowd.

Perhaps there was more to the dead woman's story than met the eye.

CHAPTER 4

Selia and Estelle stared at Colonel James Goodwin in disbelief.

“Dead? Are you certain?” Selia whispered, trembling fingers brushing across her teal blue gown.

Goodwin placed a bracing hand on her shoulder, his gray eyes reflecting his concern for her. “I’m sorry, my dear. I know you just visited the lady yesterday. This must be a terrible shock.”

“I was about to deliver a note to her, telling her little Annie was doing fine.”

As if she understood Selia’s words, Annie began babbling in happy baby prattle from the safety of Estelle’s lap. Estelle gently disentangled Annie’s chubby fingers from her ringlet drooping over one shoulder. “How did Hester Magnus die, James?”

Goodwin didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he sank onto the burgundy velvet settee in Estelle’s drawing room. He smoothed a crease in his uniform, then sighed and looked up at them. “She was strangled. A violent death for an apparently harmless old woman. The

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cottage was ransacked, also.”

“Someone was looking for something,” Selia murmured, her violet eyes clouding over. “But what? What could a sweet little old lady own that someone would want so badly?”

“Both good questions,” James said in grim tones. “I’ve been granted permission by the Provost Marshall General to investigate this homicide. Hopefully I’ll have answers for you soon. I will say, something about it just doesn’t feel right.”

“You don’t think it’s related to Blythe’s death, do you, Colonel?” asked Selia.

“I’m certainly going to consider the possibility.”

“But what happened to Blythe was clearly an accident!” said Estelle.

“True. It certainly looks that way on the surface, but the coincidence is too much to ignore.”

“Do you think this little imp’s at risk?” Estelle rested her head on Annie’s feathery, blonde, curly top, loving its silky softness.

James smiled as he leaned forward to smooth the baby’s hair. Annie grabbed his little finger and hung on for dear life. “Strong little thing, isn’t she? Here, what’s this?” He turned over the tiny hand to look at a mark on Annie’s wrist.

“I noticed that, too,” Estelle said. “It must be a birthmark of some kind.”

“Looks like a miniature star.” Goodwin chuckled. “I guess that’s appropriate. She has turned into the star of Maison d’Estelle, after all!” He planted a light kiss on the tiny blemish and settled back on the settee. “I’m a bit worried about her, I’ll admit.”

“Because of what happened to Hester Magnus?” asked Selia.

James nodded. “Normally, I’d never suggest this child’s life is in danger. But, the events at the old woman’s cottage cast a shadow over everything she came in contact with. And that most certainly includes Annie. Just be alert for anything unusual. Anyone visiting other than

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regular clients should be scrutinized.”

“I’ll alert the girls and Stepan.”

“Mollie told me about a strange man showing up yesterday, looking for Blythe,” said Selia.

Estelle frowned. “No one told me. I need to know when things like that happen. What did Mollie say?”

Selia summarized Mollie’s liaison with the bullish client, then fell silent.

“I find it curious that this Bushman assumed Mollie was lying about the carriage accident.” Estelle rose and began pacing the Persian rug, Annie cradled in her arms. “He obviously believed we were hiding her. Why would he do that? Certainly not the normal reaction to finding out a friend, or associate, or whatever he was to her, had been killed in an accident.”

James nodded. “Good point, dear. Very curious reaction, indeed. Perhaps I’ll include Bushman in my investigation. Just so we don’t leave loose ends dangling.”

“Colonel, speaking of the investigation, have you learned anything about Blythe’s family?”

“Not yet, Selia. She’s still a complete mystery to us. It will take some time to uncover information like that. And now with the Magnus investigation...” James paused, watching Annie yank on Estelle’s hair once again. “Tending a baby is more of a painful proposition than you first thought, isn’t it?”

Estelle smiled. “Painful but magical at the same time. I must admit, this wee one has captured my heart.”

“All our hearts,” Selia said. “I have a client soon, and I know you two would like some time alone. Shall I take her to Cook now, ma’am?”

Estelle handed over the baby, then watched the pair leave, her thoughts spinning.

“I hate to see those ravishing dark blue eyes of yours troubled.

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What is it, Estelle?” James opened his arms to her, and she joined him on the settee, snuggling against him.

“I feel trouble’s brewing. Something’s not right about this whole Blythe affair. And to have an innocent child at the center of it...” Her voice cracked with suppressed emotion.

“And something’s not right about the way you’re feeling now.” James cupped her chin in a gentle hand. “You’re thinking about your own baby, aren’t you?”

Estelle tried to smile with quivering lips. “I can’t help myself. She would be ten years of age. If she’d lived...”

“Honey, as harsh as this may sound, in many ways it’s a blessing she didn’t survive her birth. You were only sixteen, trying to recover from...what your father did to you.”

“A child of incest, James. That’s what she was. I’ve learned to live with that painful fact...”

But had she, really?

More than once, Estelle had wondered if she’d ever be able to reconcile with her painful childhood years. Her parents’ harsh bullying she could have lived with, but the trauma of life in their household ran far deeper than that. The nights her father forced himself into her bed and her body had driven her away when she was still a child. Pregnant, alone and destitute, her first year in Washington, D.C. had almost been the last year of her life. Through sheer will, courage, and street smarts, Estelle had survived by joining the Trade. Eventually, she’d worked her way from a bare subsistence to thriving vis-à-vis her creation, Maison d’Estelle.

Now, she thought of her parents only when sending them their monthly check. Occasionally, she considered disabusing them of the notion the money came from her teaching position at a fancy finishing school. Always, she decided against it. They weren’t worth the time it would take to explain her situation, nor deal with their hypocritical recriminations. But while she’d been able to push her parents to the

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background of her thoughts, forgetting the little girl she'd borne had been impossible.

Estelle drew a shaky breath, aware that James was waiting for her to continue. "All right, I confess. I still have nightmares about my early years on that farm. And Annie struck a chord that brought it all back. It's not even as if the baby will be part of my life for long."

"I can see that she's touched you. Deeply, if I can trust my eyes."

"Your eyes are not failing you."

He ran a hand over her locks. "My sweet, raven-haired beauty. No one would be a better mother than you." He kissed her forehead. "You'll have another baby some day, darling. And that one will be mine."

She looked into glittering blue-gray eyes. "One day. When the war is over and we're married." Nimble fingers began massaging the back of his neck. "Curse my luck for falling in love with the Provost Marshall General's top investigator."

"And me for falling in love with the most high-profile madam this town has ever known." He grinned. "It would be politically...impossible...for us to marry now. As it is, we're the worst-kept secret in Washington."

"You mean, aside from General Meade's battle plans." Estelle chuckled.

His grin widened. "Yes. Except for them."

James Goodwin's wealthy family had arranged for his post in the Provost Marshall's office after he had been critically wounded in action at the beginning of the war. James had always picked his battles with his powerful, politically connected father. He'd often told Estelle how railing against the assignment would have been useless. Instead, he'd turned his resources toward bringing justice to the criminal element running rampant in the Capital, and honoring his love for her, with the promise that she would be his wife when the war was over.

"I've always been grateful half of General Fry's men are regular

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clients here,” Estelle said. “Makes it hard to shut down one of the most famous brothels in Washington.”

“Especially when any raid would require the policemen to first jump out of your girls’ beds before arresting any of you!”

James rose and swept her into his arms. They laughed together, appreciating the irony swirling around Maison d’Estelle as he carried her to the rosewood bed and carefully deposited her atop beige silk sheets.

Estelle playfully pulled him onto the bed. Her hands caressed his face and neck as she planted kisses across the bridge of his nose, then her attention focused on the front of his uniform. Nimble fingers crept inside his officer’s frock coat and began unfastening buttons. Soon layers of garments had been pushed away to reveal his finely chiseled chest.

She buried her face in the thick mat of hair covering firm pectorals. She inhaled, her senses absorbing his male scent. Her hands wandered to his trim waist, delighting in the tight muscles of his abdomen and upper back.

James’ fingers traced the outline of her breasts through layers of silk and satin. Her nipples immediately responded, the erect tips fighting the constraints of her elaborate garb.

“Perhaps we should make ourselves more comfortable,” he murmured into her hair.

“General Fry doesn’t require your presence in the office?”

“General—who?”

Estelle giggled. “You know. The man who serves as your commanding officer.”

His fingers began making short work of the myriad of tiny fabric buttons running down her gown. “Oh...him.”

As the top of Estelle’s dress drifted down to her waist, her mind flashed on the wonder of his huge hands, so powerful and deadly, so deft and nimble when properly motivated. Then, her mind lost track of

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all thoughts as it focused on pure sensation. James slipped her silk chemise off her shoulders, his mouth dropping to one breast. Lips suckled her. But nothing he did could be confused with an infant's desire for sustenance. His action left no doubt that a full-fledged man hungered for all of her, everything from the surface of her skin to the core of her soul.

She rubbed her hands across his sinewy chest and began the process of removing his trousers. James growled and left the bed long enough to quickly strip off the remaining garments clinging to his body. He stood by the bed and looked down at her.

Estelle smiled at him, delighting in the vision of male perfection before her. Sparkling bluish-gray eyes lit up regular, strong features, the most prominent being finely shaped lips with the power to enliven every nerve-ending they touched. Broad shoulders crowned a rock-hard torso with a surface of muscles rippling in well-defined splendor down to a trim waist and graceful hips. Strong legs, shapely and toned, carried James with grace and style. And then there was the rest of him...

To say James was well-endowed was such a disservice, Estelle thought with a knowing, inner smile. She'd received the attentions of many men over the years, and never had she enjoyed the pure pleasure his rod provided her. The blade of silk-sheathed iron, nestled in a bed of coiled graying hair and perfectly hung testicles, provided an altar at which she'd gladly worship for the rest of her life. The manner in which James used his attributes—well, the man knew what he was doing.

As if he'd read her thoughts, the colonel settled between her legs. He'd managed to divest her of her clothing without her even being aware of it. She laughed, thrilled at his ability to captivate her.

He stretched out over her body, supporting his weight on one arm. Nuzzling her ear, he whispered, "What's so funny?"

"Me. I'm so smitten by you, I might as well be lost to all else."

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“You did have a dreamy look in your eyes as I undressed you, just now. I was about to get jealous.”

“In that case, my love”—she strung a series of kisses across his forehead—“you’ll have to take issue with yourself.”

James leaned back to smile into her face. “Sounds like no fun at all. Think I’ll just focus on the luscious sight I have before me right now.” He dipped down to a breast, playfully taking her nipple between his teeth and slightly pulling.

“You rogue!”

Estelle groaned as the nip turned into a caress from a talented mouth. She closed her eyes, allowing the sensory warmth to flow through her. Points of sensitivity mapped the surface of her body as James followed a route to her core. Waves of pleasure carried her down a lust-strewn path as his lush lips brushed across her, lapping and fondling. Her nipples erect to bursting, stomach quivering, thighs alive with desire—all parts of her pulsed in the wake of his mouth’s attention.

His tongue flicked and tickled her navel, dropped to lick the inside of her thighs. Hot breath on her clitoris bathed her in need. Throbbing tormented her.

She knew her need would only intensify as she felt him dip a finger into her, then two. When he pushed a third finger inside her vagina and tickled her clitoris with his thumb, the orgasm rumbled through her stomach and built gradually, allowing her to experience each bit of it fully, each twitch of pleasure, the shredding of each nerve-ending one by one, breaking her into tiny pieces with its exquisite torture.

Estelle bucked against his hand. James began pumping into her, giving her no time to recover. Hard and fast he stroked. Harder. Faster. She gasped, struggling for air in the heat of her passion. Riding him, grinding onto his digits, her juices flooding his hand, she burst into another climax, fierce and sudden.

She tried to pull back, her hypersensitive tissue screaming for

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respite. James held her fast, thumbing her quivering knob, unrelenting.

The pressure spiced her carnal desire, propelled her over a threshold to a place she'd never visited. Overloaded nerve fibers craved more.

Somewhere in a distant corner of her frenzy, Estelle knew the explosion about to tear through her was more than she'd ever handled before. Addicted to the soaring high, hungering for an extreme she'd never known, she opened herself still wider.

He held all of her in his hand and she could not resist him. Nothing was left to her. Everything was at the mercy of his thrusting hand. The helplessness excited her beyond all reason.

The glorious agony of orgasm blasted through her.

She began to absorb it. And still wanted more. More than she'd ever known.

Give me more.

* * *

She looked into James' worried face.

"Honey? Talk to me, dearest." His soothing whispers floated over her.

Shifting in the bed, Estelle felt the swollen tissue between her legs protest at the movement. The discomfort was curiously arousing. Intoxicating. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her.

"Are you all right, Estelle?" James brushed her hair with gentle fingers. She smiled, thinking of the contrast in the way the fingers had been used minutes before. "You passed out for a short time, dearest. Do you remember anything?"

Her smile widened. "I remember we weren't finished." She grasped his flaccid shaft. It immediately responded, bursting with blood at her touch. His unsure smile touched her heart. "I'm fine, James. Truly. But this time, I want another part of your anatomy inside me." She pressed his shaft against her stomach, pumping it with long, deep strokes. "Fill me with this magnificent beast, James. Fill all of me. Ride me and

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stroke into me until we lose our mind with it.”

“My God, woman!” He groaned, moving her hand away from his penis.

James rolled onto her, and sank his organ deep into her sopping folds in one, fluid motion. He drove all the way to the hilt, to the depths of her stomach. Estelle’s sensitive folds seemed to shriek in glorious agony. Never had she felt anything so magnificent, and she couldn’t get enough of it.

Her fingers dug into the firm flesh of his buttocks, scratching and pressing. James responded by plunging deeper. She released her hold on him, and he grabbed her legs, placing them onto his shoulders.

Estelle raised her hips, giving him greater access to her depths, feeling the sharp angle of his thrusts reaching parts never before touched.

He withdrew for a heartbeat, and she squirmed to capture him once again. James teased her opening with his bulbous tip, tickling and stroking the straining flesh.

“Please, James. Please...” Her words ended in a sob.

His answer was a bone-crushing thrust that nearly sent her over the edge. Braced by his hands on her hips, she gave herself up to him. He ground into her, his member strafing delicate layers.

Estelle’s body melted into a boneless receptacle. She lost herself in him, vaguely aware of a timeless tempo increasing to a frenzied blur of heat and desire and lust. She spun from one orgasm to the next, fiery and fierce. Again and again until darkness beckoned once more.

Vaguely, she heard James’ roar as the final stab gored her core. Her voice echoed his.

A calming warmth blanketed her. Estelle sank into it, secure and satiated. James’ hands feathered her cheeks, his lips brushed her eyelids, his arms cradled her. She smiled and slipped into peaceful sleep.

Suddenly, a baby’s cry pierced the afternoon air from the depths of

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the house.

James chuckled. "Talk about reveille."

Estelle blinked, taking a moment to get her bearings. Slowly sitting up, she murmured, "No rest for the wicked." She dropped a kiss on James' nose, then swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Do you have to go? Isn't Emily tending Annie?"

Estelle glanced at the mantel clock. "Emily will have dinner to prepare, soon." She flung a blue silk dressing gown around her.

"One of the maids? Hattie or Bess? Liz could care for her."

"James." She leaned over the bed to kiss him deeply, then whispered, "I want to go to her. Certainly her sense of timing leaves much to be desired, but I need to spend these moments with her until she leaves us for her family."

"I understand, honey. Assuming, of course, we can find relatives." He propped himself against goose-down pillows, watching Estelle adjust her dressing gown. "There's a mystery surrounding the little one. I can feel it. And something tells me we'd best get to the bottom of it soon, if Annie's going to stay safe."

CHAPTER 5

Selia flung open her door, silently cursing the person interrupting her nap. She'd had a long afternoon and wanted to rest before her evening's engagement with William.

Stepan smiled in apology. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Selia, but there's a gentleman downstairs asking for you."

"I don't have an appointment before Mr. William, Stepan."

"I know miss, but he says he needs to talk to you about Miss Blythe. I—I don't know as I like him, miss. Something about him doesn't seem square. Do you want me to send him away?"

"No, Stepan. I might lose an opportunity to learn something about Blythe. Just stay close in case he tries something."

"Of course."

"I'll be down directly."

Selia's fingers did not want to cooperate with the fabric buttons of her pink silk gown. Nerves. This wasn't like her, yet she couldn't help herself. After several fumbling tries, she finally managed to fasten her

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day dress, then made her way to the parlor.

As she walked into the room, Hattie was just leaving, feather duster in hand. The maid flashed her an uneasy smile as she passed. Selia paused on the threshold, wondering why the easygoing girl had seemed disturbed, then turned her attention to her visitor.

The moment she saw the tall, gangling man she didn't like him. He unnerved her—the way his reptilian eyes darted around the room and wouldn't focus on her, the manner in which he shifted from foot to foot, then sat in a stiff pose on the edge of the velvet-covered rosewood settee. She didn't care for his lack of hygiene, either. The odor of rancid sweat seemed to ooze from every pore.

He introduced himself as Harry Bettencourt, flashing a smile that seemed more of a grimace. "I'm so sorry to bother you, miss, but when I heard about Blythe, I had to find out the details for myself."

Nothing about him seemed genuine, and that fact repelled as much as intrigued Selia. Could this mysterious man provide a key to the truth behind Blythe and her baby?

She composed her face in a calm expression as she decided how to deal with him. Faintly, the sound of laughter and clinking glass drifted to her from Estelle's public room across the hall. "What exactly is your relationship with Blythe?"

"Didn't I say? How rude of me. My apologies, Miss Selia. Blythe is my sister. I...I came as soon as I heard about the accident."

"And when was that?"

"Miss?"

"When were you notified of Blythe's death?"

Bettencourt paused, a near-frantic expression flitting across his face. He ran a hand through wavy blond hair—dirty hair, Selia noted. "Why, it was Monday, I believe. The day after the tragedy."

Selia remained silent for a moment as her thoughts churned. It had been midday Tuesday—two days ago—when Colonel Goodwin had told her and Estelle that the authorities still knew nothing about

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Blythe's family.

Harry Bettencourt lied. Why?

She forced herself to focus on him again, noticing the sheen of perspiration blanketing his face. He seemed more nervous than grieved.

Selia decided to play along with...whomever he was. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Bettencourt."

"Thank...thank you, Miss Selia. That's most kind. Actually, my reason for coming here is to take my niece home with me. Little tyke should be cared for by family now that her mother's gone."

"Little tyke?"

"Yes, miss. Annie's her name. Let's see, she's probably close to seven-months-old by now, I'd say." One oily strand of hair slipped to his forehead and stuck to his moist skin.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, sir."

"I don't understand. You don't have the child here?"

"At a brothel? Hardly, sir."

The sheen of perspiration became dripping sweat. Selia glanced across the room to the gilt-framed mirror, positioned above a white marble-topped rosewood table attached to the wall. She could see Harry's reflection as he pulled a soiled handkerchief from a coat pocket and wiped it across his face. She shifted her focus to look directly at him. Now, the coil of hair plastered across the edge of one eye.

He sputtered. "Yes...yes, of course, a baby wouldn't be in an establishment like this. The family was so disappointed when Blythe chose this way of life." A stricken look crossed his face. "No offense, miss."

Selia restrained a smile. "None taken. I'm guessing your family would have wanted her to pursue her art."

"What? Oh...yes, her art."

"Indeed, sir. Sculptors like Blythe come along so rarely."

"So true, Miss Selia. We...we will always display her statues with pride."

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Selia sat back in the Belter chair, running her fingers along the cool chintz upholstery, satisfied she'd proven him false beyond all doubt. Documents in Blythe's wooden box had specifically mentioned the woman's talent in watercolors.

"As to Annie, Miss Selia. Perhaps you know of her whereabouts." He swept an arm through the air, knocking a brass candlestick off the doily-covered table next to him.

Selia watched him reach down to replace the candlestick, toppling its twin in the process. Now, the decorative table scarf threatened to slide off one end of the oblong surface, taking the crowded display of objets d'art with it. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bettencourt. I had no idea Blythe was a mother. She never mentioned...what is her name?"

"Annie."

"And here you've come all this way. From where, did you say?"

"Oh, uh, Annapolis."

"Did Blythe grow up in Annapolis?"

"Yes. Yes she did."

"And probably got lost in that big family of hers. Being the youngest and all. How many siblings were there, exactly?" Selia continued to lead Harry Bettencourt down a path of pure fiction, hoping she could sufficiently unnerve the man for him to slip and provide a kernel of truth in the midst of his ramblings.

"How many? Six of us, there are. Well, five now." He dapped his handkerchief at sweat dripping from his nose. "So you have no idea where Annie is, Miss Selia?"

"None at all, sir. But, I'd be happy to ask the other girls. If I learn something, where can I reach you?"

"Oh, reach me. Oh, well. Let me check back with you. I'm difficult to...reach."

Damn. So much for that tactic.

Bettencourt stuffed the sopping handkerchief in a pocket and jerked to his feet. "I've taken up too much of your time. If you know nothing

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about...my niece...I must move on and continue my search.”

Selia rose, murmuring, “Of course.”

They entered the hallway, Stepan hovering over them as they approached the front door. Selia opened it for Bettencourt, who was in the process of bowing to her when Annie let out a wail from the back of the mansion.

Harry jerked upright. “What’s that? It sounded like a baby!”

Selia froze. The last thing she wanted to do was let this mysterious man know about Annie.

She exchanged a quick glance with Stepan, who approached Harry. Towering over him, the porter growled, “This certainly isn’t the place for a child, I think you’d agree. You heard the cook’s cat. Vocal thing. Cries just like a baby, he does.”

Harry tried to look around the hulking man. Stepan blocked his view and began advancing on Bettencourt, forcing him to back through the door.

Once on the front stoop, Stepan smiled and snarled, “Have yourself a real nice day, sir.” He slammed the door on him.

Selia realized she’d been holding her breath, and gasped for air. “That was too close. Thank you so much, Stepan.”

“My pleasure, Miss Selia. Didn’t like the looks of him the moment I laid eyes on him. He’s no brother to Miss Blythe, I’m guessing.”

“He most certainly is not.”

At the sound of the knocker, Stepan yanked open the door as if expecting Bettencourt.

Instead, William faced him, taking a step back to create some distance from the porter’s ominous stance. William held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Whoa, man. It’s just me.”

Stepan relaxed his posture and moved back to allow Selia’s client admittance. “Sorry, sir. I was expecting someone else.”

“That’s obvious.” William noticed Selia in the shadowy hallway behind a giant palm, sitting atop a mahogany plant stand. “What’s

SELIA

going on, love?"

She sighed in relief and slumped against him. "I wish I knew." She looked into his worried face. "Actually, almost too much has been going on. Could we postpone our evening for a few minutes? I'd like you to hear the latest. And Estelle should know about it, too."

"Allow me to escort you to Miss Estelle's suite, my love. My curiosity is getting the better of me."

* * *

"No question he was lying," Estelle murmured after Selia had given her and William an account of the mysterious caller. "Blythe's brother, my foot!"

"I wonder if he's in league with this Bushman fellow who showed up for her a few days ago," William said, shifting in the Louis Quatorze chair in Estelle's drawing room.

At Estelle's puzzled glance, Selia explained, "I told William about Mollie's strange encounter with him." She exchanged an affectionate look with William. "Just needed support from a friend."

Estelle smiled slightly. "Ah, the client who's become more than a regular."

Selia felt the heat rise in her face, which only worsened when Estelle's smile widened.

Her blue eyes twinkling, Estelle said, "It's all right, dear. I quite understand."

William chuckled.

"Back to your news, it does seem coincidental that two men of questionable ilk would show up here, clearly trying to obtain information about Blythe and her baby."

"There's one more thing, ma'am," Selia said. "Just as Bettencourt was leaving, Annie wailed. I know she was in Liz's room in the back, but you could hear her clearly at the front door."

"And you think he heard?"

"I know he did. He even commented on her."

SELIA

“What did you say?”

“Stepan dealt with it, actually. He told Bettencourt he’d heard Emily’s cat.”

“But you don’t think he believed Stepan.”

Selia dropped her eyes. “No, Estelle. I’m almost certain he didn’t.”

“So he knows the baby’s here.” Estelle paused. “I don’t like this at all. The whole affair is taking a nasty turn. I’m going to send word to James. He’ll need to know about this latest development, and frankly, I could use his advice.” She gave the pair a swift glance. “That’s enough talk for the moment. Selia, I believe you have an evening planned, do you not?” She winked at William. “Best not to keep the gentleman waiting.”

CHAPTER 6

William caught Selia's hand as they left Estelle's suite. He looked down at the dark-haired pixie and felt appreciation for her surge through him. When had their business relationship turned to close friendship? Silly question, really. The moment he'd laid eyes on her, William knew he would care for her. Everything about her appealed to him, and was as different from his estranged wife as could be—her beauty, her humor and wit. Her slim, gorgeous body.

Some would call Selia's figure boyish, but he knew better. While not voluptuous, she possessed gentle curves and had breasts he considered the perfect handful. He chuckled to himself, remembering his grandfather once telling him anything more than a handful was wasted.

And then there were her eyes—violet orbs in which a man could lose himself forever.

The timing of their meeting had been perfect—just after his wife had left him for another man. Divorce was difficult for them, given

SELIA

their families' upper-crust reputations. They both knew it, and had agreed to go their separate ways, leaving a fragile truce between them.

William's thoughts returned to Selia. The fact that he wanted her in his life never left his mind. He'd even tackle the nightmare of divorce if it meant he could have her. And he'd accept her in whatever way she'd elect to come to him—mistress, wife, or friend.

“—don't you?”

With a start, he realized she'd been talking. “Sorry. What did you say?”

She grinned. “I'm going to assume you were so wrapped up in thinking about me that you didn't hear my words.”

William executed a quick bow before her. “That is exactly right, my love. Now, you were saying?”

“Merely that it was a gorgeous night and didn't you think a walk would be fun. We have the entire evening together...”

“Actually, I had the night planned. But, instead of a walk, what would you think about a carriage ride and a midnight picnic under the stars?”

“As heavenly as that sounds, I can't think of a place in this city where it's safe to have a midnight picnic.”

“I can. Come with me, lovely lady. Join me in my world.”

* * *

By the time the carriage halted on the Georgetown street, Selia was ready to attack William and force him to have his way with her right there and then. He'd nuzzled, caressed, kissed every inch of her through her dinner gown. Her skin sizzled with his lust, her innards twitched with the hint of an orgasm. One more touch would send her over the edge. When William stepped outside and turned to take her hand, Selia almost came on the spot.

He grinned, obviously aware of her condition. “Just a few minutes, my love. Then we'll own the night.”

Selia glided from the conveyance, looking at him. Always

SELIA

arrestingly handsome, he was particularly magnificent tonight. His muscular build with its broad, square shoulders filled out formal evening clothes to perfection. Smiling sensuous lips below a trimmed moustache and glittering bronze eyes promised an evening of joy and passion.

William gestured behind him. Her eyes followed the sweep of his hand and she looked past him. And froze. The full moon cast silvery light upon a neoclassical white mansion with a sweeping, circular, domed portico. Expansive grounds stretched into the night, formal landscaping evident even in the argent glow.

“Where are we?”

“On the crest of Georgetown Heights.”

“No. No, I meant what is this place?”

His eyes caught hers and held them. “My home. That is, my family’s estate. Mine, now.”

“I had no idea you were—”

“Wealthy? I don’t advertise my economic status.”

He held out his hand to her and they followed a meandering brick path toward the grand center doors of the vestibule.

“My parents died last year...within a few months of each other. I was their only child, sole heir to a shipping dynasty I already knew like the back of my hand.”

“Then why—?”

“Why am I an officer in the War Department when I could have bought my way out of service?”

Selia nodded.

“Honey, I wanted to contribute to the war effort. My expertise is shipping. My family’s contacts and my experience expedite the transporting of supplies to our troops every day. How could I have turned my back on that calling?”

She kissed his cheek. “I understand. How proud your parents would have been!”

SELIA

They'd arrived at the doors, and Selia stopped just inside, inhaling cool air scented with roses. Behind her towered floor-to-ceiling bowed windows. Ahead of her stretched a wide salon; facing her was another grand doorway leading to the gardens beyond. Next to it stood a giant vase of long-stemmed roses on a mahogany plant stand with a swirling base.

She whirled to face William, and found herself encircled in his arms.

He whispered in her hair, "Disappointed?"

She tried to back away, but he held her fast. "I don't understand. Why would I be disappointed?"

"Because I kept this from you." He nuzzled her neck, his hands brushing lightly across her back.

This time when she pulled away, he let her go. Looking up into his copper eyes, Selia murmured, "You don't owe me explanations."

William's thumbs flicked across her nipples. "You sure?" His mouth closed over hers and drew a long kiss as he reached to the top of her bodice and began undressing her.

Selia looked around, noticing a parlor to one side of the salon, and a drawing room to the other. Even in the dim light, she could detect elegant furnishings. "The staff?" she whispered against his lips.

"None here tonight." His smile became a delightfully wicked leer. "Sent them away so we could have complete privacy."

Her dinner gown landed in a ruby silk puddle on the intricately designed wood floor.

* * *

William's mouth went to work, his moustache caressing the soft skin behind her ear while his hands divested her of the remaining garments. Soon, she stood before him, her nude body bathed in moonshine. He caught his breath, looking at her. The tips of her firm breasts glowed silver, graceful curves of hips and stomach undulated at the threshold of shadow and light. The triangle of black hair at the

SELIA

juncture of her legs, swathed in darkness, beckoned to him, promising rich pleasure beyond all experience.

He growled and pulled her to him, grinding his erection against the soft firmness of her stomach. Selia moaned and pressed against him.

Cupping her buttocks, he raised her until his bulge edged her pubic mound. She rotated her hips into him. For several moments they remained in place, simulating the sex act, her naked flesh against his evening garb, then William lowered her to the parquet floor.

He stripped off his clothes and knelt by her side. His fingers drifting across her cheeks and neck, he absorbed the sight of her glowing alabaster skin. "You have never been more beautiful."

She arched her back as his fingers crossed her breasts in a delicate sweep.

William leaned down and gently laved one nipple with his tongue, his hand tweaking the other. The rosy buds immediately responded, stiffening, stabbing the balmy night air. Moaning, Selia ran her hands across his chest, mirroring his actions with her hands on his nipples.

"Minx!" He gently grabbed one of her buds with his teeth and pulled, then teased the puckered surface around it with his tongue. His fingers caressed her stomach, flirting with the delicate zone around her belly button.

Selia writhed under his hands.

Chuckling, William returned to her lips, and allowed his hand to drift to her inner thighs. When she started to spread her legs for him, he stopped her. "Let's play a game. On your knees, love."

"You are evil!"

"Why, thank you, ma'am. Now then, your knees?"

Obliging him, Selia faced the portico.

"Open them for me."

William knelt behind her, wrapping his hands around the silk of each upper thigh. Caressing the sleek skin, his thumbs brushed across her slit. "Mmm. Wet and welcoming." He nuzzled her back. "Just as I

SELIA

like it.”

Selia sighed. “God, I’m in heaven!”

“As am I. Now...for the game.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, a seductive twinkle in her violet eyes. “Ready when you are.”

“Right then. I want you to guess what I’m going to do to you next.”

“What do I get if I’m right?”

“You win the pleasure of the act.”

Selia giggled. “And if I’m wrong?”

“I’ll do what you’ve guessed, then make you guess again.”

“Sounds like a win-win situation.”

“There’s nothing about us that could ever lose.”

Their laughter mingled, only to be smothered in a deep kiss.

William whispered over her mouth. “What am I going to do next?”

“Kiss me again.”

His lips crushed against hers, his tongue demanding entrance. Selia opened her mouth and lashed him with her tongue. They engaged in light-hearted dueling before the kiss deepened. William plundered her mouth, exploring every corner, flicking his tongue against each sensitive surface.

He finally withdrew, smiling as Selia panted slightly. “And now what am I going to do?”

She nestled against him and whispered, “You’re going to fondle my box.”

One finger swept down her stomach and rubbed her erect clitoris.

“Oh, my God!” She opened her legs wider.

He pressed against her back, his engorged organ digging into her. A second finger joined the one as they swept across her slick opening. He dipped inside, then withdrew to lick her essence from his hand. “You’re gushing, my love.”

“How can I not?” Selia ground out between quick breaths. “When you do that to me.”

SELIA

“Do what?” he said at her ear. “Say it.” He inserted two fingers, scraping the inflamed walls of her opening. “Say it.”

“When you fuck me with your fingers.”

William rumbled, “Oh, yes!” and pumped his digits inside her, feeling the delicate flesh quiver and pulse around them. “What am I going to do next?”

“You’re going to make me come.” Selia’s words ended in a groan as the rhythm of his fingers increased tempo.

“You win the prize.”

Thumbing the rigid bud with his other hand, William’s digits flew in and out of Selia, a frenzied blur carrying her arousal to the brink. His tool, engorged with blood, stabbed her back, responding to her burgeoning passion.

“Come for me, Selia. Let me feel you come.”

His thumb circled her clit, then flicked across the hyper-sensitive tissue. Selia writhed before him, her buttocks twitching below his penis, tickling his testicles.

He plunged his fingers deep, deeper than ever before, until they completely disappeared inside her velvet passageway. Holding still for a moment, he focused on her muscles trembling around them. One more rub of her button and William felt her cross the threshold to orgasm.

She flung back her head, crying out her ecstasy, her tissue rippling and sucking at his fingers.

William waited until the final throes faded for her. “And now? What am I going to do?”

“Fuck me!” Selia screamed.

“Damn right.”

William gently pushed her forward until she leaned on bent elbows, her ass in the air. He stroked his shaft as he looked down at the sight. Marblesque rounded buttocks glowed in pearly light. Thighs creamy smooth, spread wide. And between them, a rich opening, glistening,

SELIA

overflowing with juices.

He rubbed the clear fluid of his pre-come down the rod, its skin expanding in his hand as blood pumped heavy and fast.

When he could wait no longer, he leaned forward and plunged into her, spearing her to the hilt. Selia threw back her head, flowing black hair tossing as she howled her pleasure, her hips swaying in response.

William held himself deep inside her, playfully grating from side to side in her passageway. He couldn't imagine any activity more blissful than this. Rotating his hips, he pulled out, then speared her on his rod once more, and continued stroking fast and sure.

Selia dropped her head until it rested on her forearms, her ass thrusting ever higher.

He grasped her hips firmly, his thumbs brushing across her silky flesh as he continued to plunder her hole. Mounting her like this made him hotter than did any other position. Selia's complete surrender to him, his power over her, incited him to give more. His piston strokes came fast and hard. Faster. Harder.

She sobbed beneath him, then screamed his name as yet another orgasm overwhelmed her. William thrilled to the sensation of her muscles suctioning his rod, aware that his own path toward release beckoned.

Blood continued to course through his shaft. His balls banged against her, while his hands tightened on her hips as he steadied himself for the final thrusts. Ecstasy built inside him, coiling from his meaty tip, pounding through the thick blue veins, rolling around his testicles.

The scent of their arousal wreathed their bodies. Sweat flowed onto sweat, and the meeting of their flesh grew slick.

He arrived at the edge. With one final stroke, he sank into the harsh blasts of his release.

His cry joined Selia's screams. She convulsed beneath him.

William collapsed next to her. Side by side, they sprawled on the parquet floor, moonshine cavorting across their drenched skin.

SELIA

* * *

Gradually, Selia's breathing slowed to normal. In a languid motion, she stretched, loving the warm afterglow of passion sated, sensory heights reached. She turned her head to look at William, who lay still, a smile stretched across his face.

Rolling onto her side, she propped her head with a cupped hand above her crooked elbow, studying the gorgeous male before her. His muscular, solid body rippled with strength and control. Flowing dark blond hair, normally confined in a tail down his back, fanned around a charismatic face with fiery copper eyes and finely honed features. Except for his nose. It was a boxer's nose, broken more than once in hot-tempered fights. "Part of my intemperate youth," William would say with a crooked smile on his full, sensual lips.

Selia traced his sinewy chest with a finger, loving the silky skin sheathing rock-hard muscles. She leaned forward and ran her tongue across one of his nipples, savoring the tangy taste of sweat.

His eyes crackled and his smile widened. "Don't you ever rest?"

"You wanted your money's worth, didn't you?"

William's smile disappeared. "Selia, we need to talk about that."

She rested a finger across his lips. "Sssh. Don't destroy a beautiful moment."

He kissed her finger and gently moved aside her hand. "Exactly the opposite, my love. I want to talk about who we really are when we're together."

"I don't understand."

William stood, then pulled her to her feet. Kissing her lightly on the nose, he whispered, "I think we ceased being merely client and fancy lady a long time ago. It's time we talked about our future."

"Now I *really* don't understand."

He kissed her again. "You will, my love. You will."

He walked into the nearby salon, returning with two silk robes draped over his arm, two pairs of slippers in one hand.

SELIA

Handing her a robe and slippers, he said with a lopsided grin, "Can't accuse me of not being prepared. Here. Put these on. I want to take you outside."

"You certainly do think of everything," she murmured, slipping on the pale peach garment and satin footwear.

"Yes, indeed." He wrapped his arm around her waist and began walking her toward the French doors leading to the garden's boxwood ellipse. "Just come with me, and all will be made clear."

CHAPTER 7

Selia allowed William to lead her out of the mansion, past a magnificent stand of boxwood winding its way around a giant tulip poplar tree. Reaching the other side of the evergreens, she caught her breath at the sight before her. An alley of holly opened onto a vast garden. Dense clumps of rose bushes, honeysuckle, rhododendron, lobelia, violets, azaleas curled around each other in linking clusters...and those were just the plants she could identify in the glimmering white moonlight. Hundreds of other flowering plants followed twisting, interlaced lines until swallowed by darkness. Underfoot on the paths, Virginia thyme sent a burst of piquance into the air with each step, a striking contrast to the heavy sweet odor listing through the steamy air from the multitude of blossoming flowers.

She turned to William. "What is this garden of Eden?"

"We call it the 'flower knot,' for obvious reasons."

"It's a paradise."

"Come."

SELIA

He led her to an arbor flanked by white lilies to one side of the formal garden. Stepping under the elaborate latticework, Selia smelled the roses and honeysuckle before she spotted lush flowering vines interweaving overhead and around her. A white linen cloth spread across close-clipped grass before her. In its center sat an ornate silver service, flanked by two place settings. In a daze, Selia vaguely noted the fine china, silver, and cut crystal. A champagne bottle nestled in a silver bucket half-filled with melting ice.

William checked the bucket. "Good. Jesse must have replenished this just before we arrived." He looked at Selia, grinning. "Ice is disappearing. We'll need to drink our champagne soon. Think you can manage that?"

She shook her head, too stunned to speak.

"Cat got your tongue," he teased.

"This...this is...amazing. It couldn't be any better."

He laughed, his deep voice rumbling through the humid night. "Oh, now, honey. The night is young. Give me a chance."

Selia sank onto the linen cloth and stared into his flaming eyes, suddenly in awe of this man she'd known as a client for months.

They enjoyed a sumptuous repast of Aspic of Torgul, iced squab under glass, lobster salad and Crème Neapolitano. After they'd consumed the meal, William settled her against him, laying a string of gentle kisses around her neck and behind her ear as one hand slipped inside her robe and cupped her breast.

Selia shivered.

"Those aren't quivers of revulsion, I assume," he said.

"You assume correctly." She set down her champagne glass and flung her arms around William's neck. "This is just too perfect!"

His hands pushed her back until he could cup her face. "I have a way to settle our supper. Interested?" Not giving her time to answer, he searched for her mouth.

William's deep kiss sent tingles through Selia's body. His hands

SELIA

crept inside her robe, each reaching for a breast.

She leaned into him, increasing the pressure on her breasts. He continued to ravage her mouth as he removed her wrapper.

Reaching down, Selia untied the belt around his robe and opened the garment. Her fingers coiled in his dark blond chest hair, loving the curly wire texture and the hard muscles beneath. William groaned under her ministrations. Playfully, she pulled the hair, then brought her hands to his nipples. She lightly circled and tickled them, until they poked her fingers, erect and hard.

Selia disengaged her mouth and pushed down until William lay before her, his robe spread around him, his member fully erect, saluting the air. Smiling, she flicked his nipples with her thumbs, then danced her fingers to his belly button. Her mouth replaced them and her tongue lapped at the sensitive spot while her fingers tiptoed down to his shaft.

As William moaned, Selia's mouth abandoned his stomach to join her hand at his rod. Her other hand pushed apart his thighs and reached to his testicles. As she rolled his balls between her fingers, her tongue lapped at the clear fluid dripping down his penis, while her free hand began pumping the organ.

She drew his tip into her mouth, savoring its musky flavor. Deeper, she pulled him inside, her lips meeting her hand's upward strokes. Selia lightly raked his member with her teeth, then sucked at the tip once more, pausing to lap the clear liquid issuing forth from the raging hard-on.

Selia's tongue bathed him with long, leisurely strokes. Affectionately nuzzling the underside of him with her nose, she laid firm kisses up and down his length before drawing him into her mouth once again. This time, his tip threatened to choke her as satin-sheathed steel pulsed against her palate. She responded by sucking harder on his length.

After giving his balls a tiny squeeze, she released him, smiling as she watched his twitching organ sway in the steamy night air. Pursing

SELIA

her lips, she blew tiny puffs of air along the shaft and saw William's grin of pure enjoyment.

"Think I'll get serious about this," Selia murmured. Placing a steadying hand around the base of his penis, she enveloped him in her mouth and began stroking motions. In and out, again and again she drew the shaft deep inside, only to run sucking lips back up to the tip.

William cupped his hands behind her head, forcing her down onto him, deeper, faster. His hips bucked to meet the rhythmic action of her hand and mouth.

Selia needed no urging as she accepted more of him into her mouth than ever before. A blur of flesh and sweat and passion-soaked air coiled around her head. The rest of the world faded away and there remained only this organ and the blinding lust it provoked. Selia's hand moved quicker. In a frenzy, her lips sucked and skimmed over the silk-encased rod, while sweat dripped from her forehead.

A howl filled the steamy air. William's hands forced Selia to the root of him, clamping her head against him, then held her still. His seed pumped into her mouth and he freed her to imbibe his liquid banquet.

She greedily drank the salty concoction, and still he pumped his semen. Thick and white, it trickled from her mouth. Selia swiped it with one finger, drawing it around one breast at a time. She released him, and still the cream spurted from him. She scooped it up, then cupped her hand around a breast tip, then the other, until his essence dribbled from her nipples. William watched her through slitted eyes, a leer on his face.

In slow, sensuous strokes, she continued coating her breasts, massaging the fluid into her skin, circling her nipples with it. Once more she rubbed her hand along him, wiping his penis clean of the remaining semen, then dipped dripping fingers between her legs and placed them inside her.

Her fingers reappeared, and she brought them to her lips and began licking them. Her tongue flirted with the moisture oozing down her

SELIA

hand before she plunged her fingers inside her once again. For several minutes, she repeated the action, feeling her need grow as her juices mingled with the remnants of his, the spicy brew sparking her appetite for more.

"Mount me," William ordered.

Selia was only too happy to oblige. She rose and straddled him, rubbing his renewed erection against the dripping folds of her opening. Teasing him, she grasped his member and swiped it against her inner thighs. Then, without warning, she sank onto him with a moan.

"You are a seductress. And you've teased me enough for one night." William grasped her hips, forcing her down as he thrust upward.

Closing her eyes, Selia reveled in the sensations. The rock-hard rod raked across the sides of her slick tunnel, its tip jabbing deep into far corners.

Her rhythm joined his, the tempo increasing until Selia exploded into a rumbling orgasm, sparking pulse after pulse of teeth-chattering ecstasy.

Vaguely, she grew aware of William's release before she collapsed on top of him.

In the heart of the balmy night, they lay together, their sweat and heavy breathing mingling, filling the sultry air with passion's after-glow.

* * *

The dreamy evening of joy and fire turned into mind-numbing surprise with William's proposal.

"I don't believe this!" Selia struggled for air in the tropical night. "You're asking me to become *your mistress*?" She took a deep breath, attempting to calm her roiling emotions. As if the moonlit champagne picnic weren't enough...

She wrapped the robe about her body and clutched her crystal glass. Slowly sipping the champagne, she allowed the bubbles to cavort up her nose and down her throat, ignoring the confused expression on

SELIA

William's face. Suddenly, what had tasted like nectar seemed bitter. She set down the glass.

"I can turn it into a proposal of marriage in a heartbeat, with the understanding there'd be a delay," he murmured. "I'm afraid I'm already married—an arrangement of convenience and economics I've tried to ignore. I'll gladly face any hurdle thrown my way to free myself and marry you. If you're insulted I didn't mention that first and never want to see me again, I'll understand. I was a bit uncertain how to broach the topic...it's complicated."

"Oh, God, William! Insulted? I'm thrilled to even consider being your mistress. But it's not possible for me—"

"It's perfect for us, Selia. Don't you see? You'd no longer depend upon Estelle's pay. Indeed, you'd never need to sleep with clients again. I'd give you everything...the stars, the moon...anything your heart desired."

She shook her head and moaned. "No, William. That's not the problem. You don't understand..." Taking a deep breath, she forced her voice to remain calm. "William, you know how fond I am of you, but—"

"Fond? What just happened between us was fondness?"

"That was different. Carnal pleasure—"

William stood and threw his robe around him, his eyes flashing angry sienna. "It was a damned sight more than carnal pleasure and you know it."

She dropped her eyes, unable to look at the pain and fury in his. She couldn't lie to him. "You're right, of course. I care greatly for you, William."

"At least we've moved past 'fond.'"

She went to him. Cupping his face in her hands, she looked at him and whispered, "I'm not free to...be with you."

Gently grasping her hands in his, he brought them to his heart. "Is it Estelle's reaction you're worried about? I've already talked to her—"

SELIA

Selia broke away from him. “You’ve what?”

“She was thrilled for you.” He pulled her to him, pressing her body against his. “I’ll bring the world to you on a silver platter, Selia. Tonight is just a hint of what I have to offer you.”

Tears pricked the corner of her eyes. What she would give to be with this wonderful man.

“What is it, Selia?”

She’d never felt more alone in her life. The sinking sensation in her heart threatened to bury her. “I’m so sorry. I was determined to keep our relationship strictly business. And then it became a friendship...and I thought that was wonderful. I certainly never meant for you to...want an agreement between us.” She closed her eyes. “It...we...just got away from me.”

“Start from the beginning, honey. What about my proposal is troubling you so?”

“I’m married.”

William stared at her for a long moment. “You have a husband, yet you’re working for Estelle? Surely, whoever this man is, he’s released you to live your life independent of him.”

“Abandoned me, is more like it.” Selia stumbled on. “He’s a mistake of my youth. A serious mistake.”

“So he’s not part of your life—”

“Except when he wants something.” Rage and fear mingled, coursed through Selia, just as they always did when she thought of Pierce. “Then he finds me. Pressures and threatens me until I give him what he wants.”

“You’re scared of him.” Loving concern radiated from William’s bronze eyes.

“He’s a bully. He doesn’t want me. And he doesn’t want anyone else to want me, either.”

“But you work for Estelle. How can he feel that way about you and...”

SELIA

“Allow me to sell myself?” Selia laughed bitterly.

“That isn’t what I was going to say.”

She stroked his face. “It’s all right, love. I have no illusions about who and what I am. Pierce hates what I do, but loves the money.”

“You’re supporting him?”

“Yes. And if I accepted your wonderful offer, you’d end up supporting him, too. In fact, he’d do his best to drain you of your wealth.”

“Divorce him. We’ll go through the divorce of our respective spouses together.”

She faced him squarely. “I wish I could.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Like you just said—it’s complicated. Look...I’m happy with Estelle...” Her voice trailed off and she grabbed his hand. “And I’m happy with you. I just don’t think...we should change the arrangements. At least, right now.”

He settled one cheek atop her head. “Is there anything I can do to free you from him?”

She laughed without humor. “Not unless you want to kill him.”

“Things can change, Selia.”

Suddenly, she grew aware of the rich, white moonlight blanketing her in the lush garden, and a profound sense of loss swept over her. “Maybe for some. Not for me.” She wriggled free from his grasp to look up at him. “Promise me we’ll always have this night.”

He kissed her. “I’ll promise you that, if you promise to let me support you financially.” He raised a hand to silence her sputters. “Hear me out. Stay at Estelle’s. Nothing on the surface will change. You’ll be there solely for me. I’ll pay Estelle your rent and handle all your expenses.”

“But then I’d be like your—”

“Mistress. Yes. But your husband need not know what’s really going on.”

SELIA

“You’d still be supporting him, William. Because he’ll come to me for money—”

“I know. And I don’t care. I’d even be willing to pay him to get out of your life, if you think it would—”

Selia shook her head. “He’d never stop depleting your wealth. I couldn’t handle that. At least this way, we could be together and keep his greedy interference to a minimum.” She paused. “Are you sure you want to...”

“Yes.” He cupped her chin in his hand and drew her face to meet his. “Agreed?”

“You’re too good to me. I don’t—”

“Agreed?”

“Can I think about it?”

William groaned, then soundly kissed her. “Of course, you can.”

CHAPTER 8

Estelle finished telling James about Selia's encounter the previous day with Harry Bettencourt. He launched out of a chair and began pacing her suite. She knew he was trying to control his anxiety. The fact that the colonel rarely lost his emotional equilibrium intensified her own roiling emotions.

She smoothed a wrinkle in her pale yellow gown, then glanced at the china clock on the black-marble mantel. Barely 7:00 in the morning, and the day was already looking grim. Estelle glanced at Selia, huddled in the corner of a wing chair.

The girl had been unusually quiet, appearing to be lost in thought from the moment she'd returned from her liaison with William Thorne the night before. Briefly, Estelle thought back to William's recounting of their evening and his proposal to support Selia. Estelle had been surprised to learn about Selia's husband and had wondered about the man. Of course, she'd readily supported William's plan.

With a start, she returned her attention to her own lover.

SELIA

“—one bit!”

“I’m sorry, James. Could you repeat that?”

He dropped into a chintz-covered armchair and unbuttoned the frock coat of his uniform. “I was saying the pieces to Blythe’s puzzle are falling into place, and I don’t like the picture one bit. I located her family in Baltimore. An upper-crust set. Now I know why she left them! Disagreeable folks who weren’t at all interested in what happened to their daughter. Nor are they willing to acknowledge their granddaughter.”

“I don’t understand, Colonel Goodwin.” Selia had roused herself to focus on James.

“They disowned Blythe. A year ago. For pursuing a career in art, if you can believe that. Wanted nothing more to do with her. They were sorry she’d met such an unfortunate fate, mind you. Just weren’t surprised by it. Actually said in their wire they had feared something like this would happen to her and weren’t going to assume responsibility for the product of her wandering ways.”

“They called Annie ‘the product of Blythe’s wandering ways’?” Estelle shook her head in disbelief.

“I could feel their coldness through the telegraph lines, I swear. People like that don’t deserve to have children. Or grandchildren.”

Goodwin’s words dropped into a thick silence enveloping the room. Estelle stared at the wall facing her, barely aware of its rose-and-ribbon patterned silk paper. Her thoughts churned through her pity and sorrow for the girl she barely knew. Estelle understood what it was like to have family not care about its daughter. She faced the same callous disregard, and had every day of her life.

She shook off her self-pity and chastised herself for not thinking first of Blythe. “And Bettencourt? Considering her family’s attitude toward her, we can now safely assume he’s not her brother. True?”

“Blythe had two sisters. No brothers.”

“So, that begs the question, who is Bettencourt?” Selia asked. “And,

SELIA

for that matter, who is this Bushman fellow claiming to be one of Blythe's clients?"

"I can answer part of that," replied James. "My investigators uncovered information about Bushman. And it shouldn't come as a surprise. He's a two-bit thug. In Washington, D.C., alone, he has accumulated a string of arrests—robbery, gambling, disorderly conduct—and I could go on. Oh, and he was dishonorably discharged from the army last year."

"Sounds like a pillar of the community," Estelle said in dry tones. "Well, I just finished going through Blythe's client records. There was no Bushman anywhere on her lists. While she didn't maintain the best accounting, I'm thinking if he'd been a 'regular,' as he claimed, his name would have been somewhere. "

"Didn't Mollie say he claimed to be a long-time client?" James asked. "I assumed that meant from another establishment."

Estelle shook her head and brushed back an errant black curl from her shoulder. "This was the first brothel she'd ever worked in. And she wasn't experienced when I hired her."

"Why *did* you hire her?"

"A hunch she needed the job." Estelle shrugged. "Something about her told me she was desperate. I figured she'd be safer here than on the street."

James smiled at her. "The philanthropist at work."

"Tell that to the Superintendent of Police." Estelle laughed softly.

"Webb's a fool!" James referred to Washington's latest public figure to stake his reputation on ridding the city of crime and vice. His most recent scheme would require all prostitutes to register with the city and exclude them from public places.

"He may be a fool, but he could cost me dearly if allowed to continue."

"Ma'am?" Stepan stood in the open doorway, then entered at Estelle's welcoming gesture.

SELIA

“Good morning, Stepan. Colonel Goodwin was just telling us about Blythe’s family.” Estelle motioned for him to sit, then paused, noting the troubled look on her porter’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Something to report from last night, ma’am.” Stepan raised worried eyes to look at her.

“Go on, man,” urged James.

“You know the moon was bright and in a clear sky, so I got a decent look at them.”

“Look at who, Stepan? And where?” Estelle encouraged.

“Two men, lurking around the mansion. I was taking my usual route on the grounds...must have been three or four o’clock. Going to confront them, but then I got curious about what they were doing, so I hid behind a laurel bush and just watched. Figured I could chase them away whenever I wanted.”

Estelle hid a smile. Stepan’s brawn and knowledge of fighting techniques had established his reputation citywide as a lethal force. Few could best the blond giant and he knew it.

“Anyway, they didn’t make any moves to break in...just took their time walking around. As if they were casing the house.”

“Casing...?” Estelle looked over as James stood and resumed pacing.

“Did you get a look at them, Stepan?” he asked.

“I tried to, Colonel. But, like I said, I was keeping my distance.”

“I don’t want to alter your original perceptions, but, did they remind you of anyone you’ve seen at the mansion before?”

Stepan hesitated. “Well, sir. I have to say that the one reminded me of Miss Blythe’s brother, that Bettencourt fellow. The other one...” He paused, then nodded. “That other one was Bushman.” The porter looked at Estelle. “You know how I never forget the face of a client. I’m as sure as I can be, seeing in the dark like I was.”

Estelle exchanged looks with James and Selia. “Why am I not surprised?”

SELIA

“But, ma’am,” sputtered the porter, “what are they after? Why are they coming around here if Miss Blythe is dead?”

“It’s not Blythe they’re interested in,” replied James in quiet tones.

“What is it then, Colonel?”

“The baby. They want Annie.”

“But what would they want with a baby?”

“I don’t know—yet! But you can be sure I’ll find out.” James stood before them, the picture of military authority. “I don’t believe Annie is safe here any longer.”

“You think they’ll come for her?” Estelle whispered.

“I think we’d be foolish not to prepare for that possibility. I’d like to arrange for her to stay elsewhere, for the time being. Someplace safe. And I’m going to post guards here, to keep all of you safe.”

Estelle smiled in spite of her distress. “You mean, in addition to those of your men already here with my girls?” She sobered. “As much as I want to make certain we’re secure, I’d rather not have this place look like an armed camp.”

“I was thinking two men should be adequate. Is that agreeable?”

Estelle nodded. “In street clothes, please.”

“Absolutely. In the meantime, I’ll get to the bottom of whatever business those two thugs think they have with Annie.”

“There is something else about Annie.” Selia spoke in quivering tones. “What’s to become of her? We know Blythe’s family won’t take her. We can’t turn her over to one of those awful orphanages...” Selia’s words ended in a sob.

Estelle rose and placed a comforting arm around the girl. “We’ll make certain that doesn’t happen to her. Annie will be nurtured and loved for years to come, don’t you worry, dear. But first things first.” She looked at James. “Any idea where to keep her while we sort out this mess?”

“I do, actually. I’m betting General Fry’s wife would love to tend a baby for a time. She’s always talking about how empty her house has

SELIA

become now that her children are grown and living their own lives. Annie couldn't be safer than in the Provost Marshall General's home." He headed for the door, followed by Stepan. "I'll be back within the hour for her."

Estelle nodded. "She'll be ready."

* * *

Estelle stood at the open window of her suite, looking at the moon-washed garden below. A gentle, muggy breeze wafted up to her, carrying with it the aroma of violets and lilies. The blanket of white light cast a ghostly glow on blooming roses and lupines, but Estelle didn't really see nor smell nature's splendor. Her thoughts drifted toward a tiny grave in Oak Hill Cemetery, the final resting place of her stillborn daughter. She shook off her melancholy, as worry for Annie swept over her.

The infant was as safe as she could be, Estelle reminded herself. General Fry's wife had, indeed, welcomed Annie with open arms. The little one was ensconced in the Fry home, and earlier in the day, James had posted guards at Maison d'Estelle. Now, if James could just uncover the mystery lurking around the little girl...

As if he knew she was thinking about him, James entered her suite, walking up behind her, spurs jangling, sword at his side. She flung herself into his arms, seeking the sensory delight only he could offer.

"Here now, what's this?" he whispered into her hair. "Hug me any tighter and I'll not be able to breathe."

She responded by squeezing him harder, drawing comfort from the solid edges of his muscled body.

"It's all going to be fine, my darling. You'll see."

"Have you learned anything new, James?"

He shook his head and sighed. "Sorry, love. Nothing, yet. We'll sort out this mess. Count on it." He dipped his head and firmly kissed her. "Until then, Annie's being pampered and we're going to protect you."

Estelle stepped back and looked at him, noticing deeply etched lines

SELIA

of weariness on his handsome face. She ran her hand through his thick, gray hair. "It's been a long day and it's late. Why don't we find a way to relax?"

His sensuous lips stretched into a grin. "Now you're talking!"

"Can you spend the night?"

"I'd planned on it. Thought yet another officer would make this place even more secure. Actually, two officers. I ran into William just now, making his way to Selia's room."

Estelle laughed. "You two are quite the pair. And since when do you need a rationale to sleep with me?"

He nuzzled her neck. "Always looking for ways to strengthen my case."

"I know how to strengthen your case." She cupped his bulging manhood, feeling the immediate hardening through the uniform's trousers. "Getting a bit tight down there, don't you think, Colonel?"

Estelle dropped to her knees before him, her violet evening gown billowing around her. Expertly, she worked his trouser buttons, releasing his fully erect member. "Mmm. Nice." She lapped at the bulbous tip, cradling the base in one hand. Her tongue painted lines across the steely expanse as she sought out the sensitive spots.

Pausing again at the tip, Estelle sucked the oozing clear fluid and heard James groan. She drew the heated length of him completely into her mouth with one quick motion. His groan turned into a gasp.

Estelle suctioned him, released, suctioned again. She could feel his hands cup the back of her head, urging her to take more of him inside her. She happily complied.

A long, leisurely exploration commenced, during which Estelle examined every bit of his satin-encased steel and testicles. Her tongue outlined every vein, every vibrating inch, every quivering globe. When her tongue completed its task, her mouth took over, probing, sucking, kissing.

She paused in her activities to steal a glance at James, and smiled.

SELIA

His head was tilted back, his eyes closed. His face had assumed an expression combining dreamy contentment with tense concentration and pure bliss.

Finally, Estelle began a rhythmic worship at his altar. Her fingers pumped the base, while her mouth drew him in and out, again and again. Faster she moved as James' hips joined her pattern. His erect shaft quivered against her teeth, and Estelle replied by gently raking the delicate tissue.

Estelle sensed he was close to orgasm and abruptly released him, watching the engorged flesh vibrate before her mouth. She waited a beat, then grasped the base with both hands and pulled him into her mouth as far as she could.

He moaned and his seed spilled down her throat. She frantically swallowed to avoid choking. More and more pulsed into her. Estelle savored the milky fluid, tasting each wave as if it were fine champagne.

When the flow ceased, she gently backed away from him after one final kiss on the tip. James' hands caressed the top of her head, then he pulled her to her feet.

His tongue sought hers as he took her semen-rich saliva into his mouth. The kiss deepened and Estelle pressed herself against him, savoring the solid, secure feel of him.

Suddenly, he swept her into his arms and carefully laid her on the bed. With great tenderness, he undressed her. Finally naked before him, Estelle thrilled to the love and lust she saw radiating in his eyes as he stood over her, looking at her. He examined her from the top of her head to the tip of her toes as if he'd never seen her before.

"What a magnificent woman you are, Madam Estelle," he whispered, running his fingertips across her mouth and chin, down to her neck and shoulders. After kneeling by her side, he took one of her nipples between his lips and suckled while brushing the other nipple with his fingers. Lifting his head, he murmured, "Magnificent and exciting. All rolled into one."

SELIA

Her rosy buds flamed under his ministrations; her body burned with need. She shifted to move closer to him.

James' other hand drifted along her inner thighs, pushing them apart. "Wider, my love. Give me all of you."

His words aroused her still more, and she opened to him, completely spreading her legs.

He moved away and stood by the bed, again examining her. A small smile played at his lips. "So open and ready for me." James swiped her drenched opening with his fingers and raised them to his nose. He inhaled deeply before licking her essence from his skin. "You smell and taste just right, dear heart. Just right for the taking."

He leaned over her, a teasing grin on his face.

"How do you want me to take you, Estelle? Lying on your stomach, your ass high in the air, every part of you exposed to me? Leaning against that wall over there, your legs gripping my waist as you fold yourself around my body?"

He bent down and lapped her opening with his tongue.

"How about on your back, as you are now, your legs wrapped around my neck? Or sitting on my lap, riding me like you do your white stallion? Mmm?"

Another tongue swipe lapped at the edge of her vaginal walls.

"I could leave you where you are and fuck you with my fingers all night. With an occasional taste, of course. What do you think about that?"

His tongue darted inside her once again.

His words had sent fiery barbs of need through her. She arched against his mouth, the low vibration of orgasm building.

"I could tie you to the bed and play with you until you scream for mercy."

A deep, slow climax rolled through Estelle at his last words. She raised her knees, opening herself still more to his seeking mouth, and screamed her release. Fiery tissue throbbed and pulsed around his

tongue.

Slowly, the heat receded, leaving Estelle weak, yet yearning for more. James released her and joined her on the bed. Cradling her in his arms, he soothed her until her breath slowed.

“You didn’t answer my question.” He brushed hair from her eyes.

Her breath caught. “I’m still thinking about it.” She squirmed against him until their bodies meshed, curve for curve. “Can’t decide.”

“In that case, we’ll have to do them all.”

Estelle closed her eyes, a dreamy sensation drifting over her. “Fine with me.”

The bed shook as he left it. He seemed to be rummaging for something, then the bed moved under his weight once again.

A silky material wrapped around one of her wrists. She jerked open her eyes in time to see James tie a sash to the decorative rosewood-pillared headboard. He immediately walked around the bed and tied her free wrist to the other side.

A tingle of arousal renewed itself in the pit of her stomach. James had never done this to her. And while the sash was not tied tightly—she knew she could slip out of the loose knots any time she wanted—excitement coursed through her.

He stood at the foot of the bed, surveying his handiwork. “Isn’t this a picture?” A lecherous grin crept over his face. He tweaked one of her nipples as he walked around the bed, studying her from all angles. “What I can do to you now!”

The passion in his eyes, the fact she lay completely exposed to him, at his mercy, flamed Estelle’s lust. “You going to stand there all night, just looking and talking? Or can you put some action behind your boasts?”

“Woman, you will be the death of me yet! Open those legs before I lose my head and do something crazy.”

She giggled. “Oooh. Crazy. I like the sound of that!”

“I’ll just bet you do.” In one quick movement, James knelt on the

SELIA

bed, grasped Estelle behind her buttocks, and lifted her to his mouth. "I've decided I need another taste."

She shrieked in surprise and pleasure, scooting forward as far as the ties would allow, wanting to give him all of her. He responded by placing her legs over his shoulders, his hands still cupping her bottom.

With lowered head, James mashed his mouth into her opening, his tongue seeking out all her tender spots. For a time, he alternated between strafing her delicate tissue and easing to a feathery caress. Back and forth his tongue worked, leaving Estelle breathless with anticipation. The contrast drove her to the brink of orgasm once more. One more light brush would do it...

And his mouth disappeared.

She looked down between her legs to see him licking his lips of her essence, a grin on his face. "Ready for more?"

Estelle groaned. "God, yes. Please don't stop now. Please..."

"That's what I love about you." He carefully released her legs and lowered her to the bed. "You always know what you want." Now, his mouth hovered over her nipples. He looked at her and winked. "How about this?" His teeth raked across one rosy nub, then the other.

Estelle approached the brink of climax once more.

"Then again, what do you think of this?" Without warning, he pushed his rock-hard shaft into her.

"My God!" Estelle threw back her head. "My God, James!" She pulled at the ties around her wrists, their limitation only adding fire to her steaming need. Her hips joined his in harmony, one motion, one body forged of two, perfection in every way.

He rode her steadily and at length, increasing his pace until their bodies blurred together, the suctioning of flesh and sex organs drenched with arousal and sweat. The end came in unison, each riding the crest until no boundary existed between them. Rich orgasm wrapped them together in their heat and hunger and love.

James untied her just before they collapsed in each other's arms,

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clinging together, their hearts pounding one against the other. As breathing returned to normal and sweat dried, they fell asleep, their dreams joined just as their bodies had meshed minutes earlier.

CHAPTER 9

Shattering glass and gunshots screamed through the night. James lunged to his feet and shouted over his shoulder to Estelle, “Stay here and stay down.”

Vaguely, he was aware of Estelle rolling off the bed and scurrying toward the gown and undergarments tossed across a boudoir chair.

“Remain still!”

“I’m bloody well not going to face a gun naked,” she snapped.

The pair flung on clothes, then crouched on the floor by the window. James readied his sidearm.

“What’s happening?” she whispered.

“Damn it, honey, get down.” He glanced at her, and saw that she held a pistol in one hand. Should have known she’d be prepared for trouble. Two more shots careened into the mansion, but now, answering gunfire resonated from inside the house.

James’ men had returned fire.

“I’m going out there. You will stay here! Promise me.”

SELIA

Estelle shook her head, eyes flashing. "Hear those screams in the hall? Those are my girls. And probably some frightened clients, too. My job is with them, just as yours is with your men."

Before he could respond, she crept toward the door and opened it.

Cursing under his breath, James followed, then passed her as she knelt with a cluster of terrified women.

The sounds from another round of fire led him to the back of the house. He found one of his guards sprawled across the back hall, just past the entrance to the kitchen, lying in a pool of blood. Quickly kneeling by the man's side, James searched for a pulse. He was dead.

Mentally saying a prayer for him, James stepped over the body and proceeded down the wide hall that doubled as a storage area. He reached the door to Hattie's room and paused. Rapping on it, he called to the maid. "Hattie, it's Colonel Goodwin. Are you all right?"

He heard a muffled, "Yes."

"Are Liz and Bess in there with you?"

Another muffled, "Yes."

"Where's Emily?"

"Don't know, Colonel."

"Damn," James said under his breath. Looking up, he saw a shadowy figure approaching. He darted behind a packing case.

Getting a closer look, he recognized William Thorne, gun up and ready. He seemed to be tracking the sound of gunfire, as was James. He signaled to William, briefly wondering about the location and fate of his second man and Stepan.

William pointed toward a semi-opened door leading to the cook's apartment and continued moving toward it. James nodded, approaching from the other direction. As he drew close to the apartment threshold, he heard Emily's trembling voice and two men speaking in threatening tones.

He hugged the wall at the edge of the door, with William stationed opposite him. Leaning forward, James peeked inside. Emily cowered in

SELIA

a chair, the two men standing over her.

One of them, a heavy, thick man with black hair and a ragged beard, slapped her. "You will tell us, by God, if you want to see another sunrise."

The other man, a tall, gangling blond, began pacing the room in nervous, jerky strides. "Bushman, if you scare her to death, she'll never tell us about the kid."

"You want to do this?"

The blond paused by the window, looking out.

"What? See anything?" Bushman asked.

"Thought something moved."

"You're always imagining things, Harry."

"Well, hell! We know they had at least one man with a gun guarding the place. We're just lucky we got him down before he shot us. One of those bullets came too damn close. Probably more armed men around. Ain't seen that nasty porter, either. Didn't like the looks of him one bit."

"Focus, Harry. Once we get her to talk, we'll be out of here." Bushman stuck his face in front of Emily's. "Now then, you old crone, where's the baby?"

"Please, sir. I truly have no idea."

He struck her across the face again. She whimpered.

"Let her be," snarled the blond man, turning from the window. "She obviously doesn't know anything."

"I'm betting she knows plenty...just needs encouragement to talk."

James saw shadowy movement through the window glass. His second man was in place outside. He looked over to William and held up three fingers. Seeing a nod of acknowledgment, he counted down. Three...two...

The pair rushed in. A second later, two figures burst into the room through the window.

Bushman wheeled and fired at James. The wild shot careened off a

SELIA

far wall as James hit the floor, shooting as he rolled.

His bullet found its mark.

Bushman dropped, blood gushing from his neck.

James saw William lying on the floor with Emily, his body protecting hers. His other man, Lt. Allen, and Stepan surrounded the blond intruder.

He rushed to Emily's side and helped her stand, looking from her to William. "You two all right?"

William nodded.

The cook grabbed James' hand and kissed it. "Bless you, Colonel. You and Mr. William saved my life."

It was over.

* * *

Selia exchanged glances with Estelle, then looked to where William stood by the fireplace in Estelle's suite. He caught her eye and winked. She tried to smile back, but found herself too stunned by James' words to do anything but whisper, "Annie had been kidnapped? All this time, her parents have been looking for her?"

James nodded. "Bettencourt told us all about it when we interrogated him this morning. The police report that came across my desk at virtually the same time confirmed it. Philadelphia officials had described the baby down to the star-shaped birthmark on her wrist. No question but that it was our Annie. Turns out that Bettencourt and Bushman had made a career—and quite a bit of money—stealing children from wealthy homes. They needed a woman working with them. Blythe had just joined them in time to kidnap Annie Zeller. Oh, and the two men also killed Hester Magnus. Bettencourt confirmed that, too."

"Why?" Selia asked.

"Poor Hester. She seemed to believe Blythe was Annie's mother, although she did voice some questions about the relationship, as you told us, Selia. Had no idea of the kidnapping, it would appear. Still, the

SELIA

men couldn't be certain Blythe hadn't said something to her about them. They couldn't risk letting the woman live. Besides, without Blythe, Hester was useless to them. Poor old lady was a loose end they had to tie up."

Selia shuttered. "How awful." Suddenly, Blythe's dying words came back to her. "Blythe was trying to get out of the ring."

"Why do you say that, dear?" Estelle asked.

"Remember I told you about her last words to me? Among the things she said, was to ask me to do right by the baby, and get the child to safety. No question but that she was on her way to rescue Annie when that carriage hit her."

Estelle turned to James. "Was the carriage driver involved in the ring?"

He shook his head. "That was just rotten luck on Blythe's part. But there *is* good luck in this affair. Annie is now home with her parents, safe and sound."

"I'll miss her," Estelle whispered.

A corresponding lump rose in Selia's throat and she blinked away tears. "Me, too." She felt William's hands on her shoulders, comforting her.

He leaned down. "Yes, but life has a way of leveling the playing field."

"What do you mean?"

"Now that one person has left your life, perhaps it's time for someone, already with you, to play a larger role."

Estelle smiled. "Sounds only fair, William. What do you think, Selia?"

Selia looked from William back to the older woman, then shook her head. "He told you about his revised proposal, didn't he?"

"Yes, my dear. And just for the record, I heartily agree with it. Now go away, you two, and talk it out."

* * *

SELIA

“Well, young lady?” William wrapped his arms around her. “What are you thinking?”

“That you are the most magnificent man on Earth.”

“I know that already. And...?”

Selia giggled. “And you’re incorrigible.”

He kissed her on the nose. “Coming from you, that’s a supreme compliment.” He hugged her tightly, whispering in her ear, “I know my existence complicates your life, Selia, but—”

“No, William! No!” She tried to pull away, but he held her fast.

“But I want you to know that I love you.”

She drooped against him. “And I love you.”

He smiled slightly. “You don’t have to sound so sad about it.”

“I just wish my situation could be different.”

“I know.” He nuzzled her neck. “I understand. So, what do you think? Want to be mine, alone?”

“William—”

“I understand about your husband. Truly I do. But, you must let me make your existence easier. Be mine in all ways that matter, Selia. Will you? Will you allow me to become part of your life?”

Selia looked up at him, a veil of tears blanketing her eyes. “Yes, William. I welcome you into my life.”

“Thank God!” He searched her face, obviously saw the love she felt for him glistening there. “Well, miss. Want to inaugurate our new arrangement?”

A smile broke through Selia’s tears like a rainbow christens a stormy sky. “I know just how to celebrate...”

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