

*Delphyne DeRouge*

*The Women of  
Maison d'Estelle*  
Mollie

## THE WOMEN OF MAISON D'ESTELLE: MOLLIE

...Mollie studied Cassidy's chiseled face in the wavering light, suspecting he might be one of the few decent men she'd ever met. Not at all like his brother. His muscled frame seemed relaxed. But Mollie knew he was alert for danger, and he would protect her at all costs.

She placed a hand on his chest, feeling the line of muscles beneath the linen shirt. "Nothing about this situation makes sense, Cassidy. Perhaps we should dispense with logic and make the most of this time together. Without logic."

Her eyes drank in the sight of him. Dancing firelight waltzed across his ebony hair, caressed his aquiline nose and defined cheekbones. Shadows sent eye sockets deep into his face, but Mollie knew dark sapphire orbs sparkled in those depths, watching her. Just as she had felt his warm regard all day.

She smiled to herself. Experience as a Daughter of Pleasure told her this man desired her as much as she did him. But, he was a gentleman and would not take advantage of the unorthodox situation. Not, that was, without encouragement.

For the moment, she thrust aside lingering doubts about him as intense need swept over her. Never had she wanted anything more than the feel of his body against her, inside her. If only for this one night...

ALSO BY DELPHYNE DEROUGE

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***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 III: MOLLIE

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BY

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*To M.—the only man who makes my heart sing.*

*Acknowledgment:*

*To Trace—the best friend and Editor  
a writer could ever have.*

## CHAPTER 1

Mollie stood at the top of the stairs, watching Connor McGee descend. He raised a graceful hand in farewell as he looked back at her from the landing. His jet-black hair shining in the gaslight, twinkling eyes, and smoldering smile sent a thrill through her. His broad shoulders and trim waist encased in a perfectly tailored frock coat sparked a shimmering heat in the pit of her stomach.

She leaned against the hallway's ruby silk wallpaper and watched him disappear, then crossed the Savonnerie carpet to her room, drawing her black silk dressing gown across tingling flesh. Smiling at the sensory reminder of a thoroughly satisfying afternoon of sex, she sank onto an emerald chintz boudoir chair and began brushing out her mass of auburn curls, electricity snapping with each stroke.

Mollie giggled at the snarls, remembering the intense activity that had put them there. Time in bed with Connor meant wild abandon she didn't experience with any other man—clients or lovers. Indeed, never had she given herself to anyone as she did to McGee, even if her every

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instinct warned her to tread carefully, to protect herself from him.

His rakish Irish good looks radiated danger, the devilish twinkle in his pale green eyes promised forbidden fruit. She paused, hair brush in mid-stroke, reflecting on how those eyes grabbed a woman's heart and held it hostage.

No matter how many times she warned herself about the man, she still felt an undeniable attraction. And the behavior was unlike her. Always, she'd been careful with the opposite sex, avoiding entanglements. Her profession required this attitude. After all, she was a seasoned Fancy Lady, working for Washington D. C.'s most elegant brothel, Maison D'Estelle. She knew the rules. Not that Madam Estelle wasn't one of the most understanding bosses she'd ever had. Still, Estelle would likely disapprove of the emotions Mollie couldn't help but invest in Connor McGee.

Mollie sought to rationalize her behavior. Perhaps his attractiveness lay in the fact he wasn't one of the hordes of soldiers invading Maison D'Estelle, looking for respite from the Civil War. Of course, such men were good clients, especially the officers who tipped well for a night of pleasure. But, it was a welcome change to spend time with a gentleman who had no horror stories about the Battle of Gettysburg, which had occurred the month before.

She placed her sterling silver hairbrush on the rosewood dressing table and stretched her arms above her head, sore and tired muscles reminding her how strenuous the afternoon had been. Heat spread across her cheeks, followed by shock that a Daughter Of Pleasure could actually find something about which to blush. Throwing herself on the crumpled jade blankets and sheets covering her bed, she chuckled, knowing she was being foolish, and not really caring.

Mollie ran her hands across her breasts and stomach, the movement sparking a faint aroma of Connor's sweat and musky maleness still lingering on her body. She paused at the junction between her legs, remembering how Connor's mouth had worshipped at her center of



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bliss. The tickle of his moustache and close-clipped beard had only intensified the heat as his tongue had lapped at her delicate tissue, teeth had nipped silky skin, lips had sucked at her button.

Her fingers brushed down her inner thighs, massaging skin that had been slick with juices running from her slit during the afternoon of sex. A few minutes before, that flesh had been dry. Now, it grew moist once again. Mollie extended a middle finger and tucked it inside her, pushing as deep as her hand would allow, remembering the much larger linear member that had driven inside her.

Connor's penis had filled her and pleased her until she'd screamed with joy. His rhythm steady and sure, he'd brought her to climax again and again.

Mollie felt the rumblings in her stomach as muscles tightened around her finger. Perhaps a dull echo of the sharp ecstasy she'd enjoyed lying beneath Connor, but enough to make her yearn for more.

A second finger slipped into her slick passageway, and she remembered Connor grasping her legs and lifting them until they rested on his shoulders. His hands had cupped her buttocks, lifting her entrance still higher until his dick wedged so deep inside, she'd marveled he hadn't split her in two.

Mollie pumped her fingers in and out, heat building in the pit of her stomach, remembering how he'd pounded inside her, thick, deep strokes she'd surrounded and savored. After a flick of her thumb across her clit, an orgasm quivered through her. She raised her knees and spread her legs as far as she could, open to her passion and fired memories.

Pulsing faded and she settled back on the bed, wondering if she could convince Hattie or one of the other maids to draw her a hot bath on short notice without alerting Salida. Madam Estelle's housekeeper ran a tight ship, and the free woman didn't approve of her staff acquiescing to every whim of Estelle's girls.

Rolling over, Mollie decided she felt too languid to move. A bath

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could wait until later, before her secret liaison with Connor that night.

Drowsy musings swirled around the proposed late-night supper at Connor's townhouse across from Lafayette Square. They would dine *a deux*. Connor had excused the servants for the evening.

She settled on her stomach, her hands massaging her crotch, imagining what delights the tryst would hold for her. Arousal crept up her inner thighs again, sizzling her sopping clit.

Mollie imagined Connor sweeping aside heavy sterling, crystal, and china. Bending her over the dining room table and taking her from behind, his thick meat cramming her until every space was filled with him, fevered flesh strafing delicate folds.

Stroking her sensitive button, Mollie orgasmed fast and hard, taking her breath away. She lay in place for several minutes, allowing her body to descend from the sensual high. Grabbing a teal floral quilt, she flung it over her cooling skin. Washington's summer had been unusually hot, but a spell of cool showers had blanketed them the last week. Even for late August, the afternoon held chill air.

Mollie's thoughts returned to the night before her. She couldn't tell Estelle about her tryst. The madam had always been quite clear about such things. If one of her girls was to be taken out of the 6<sup>th</sup> Street mansion, Estelle was to be told. Mollie knew the rule was designed to protect them. But it was her unusual attraction to danger that made her flirtation with Connor so damned irresistible.

Mollie would keep her date a secret and risk Estelle's disapproval the next morning.

A twinge of regret pricked Mollie's conscience at the subterfuge. Estelle had been good to her, rescuing her from Tin Cup Alley and Ida Sloans' Parlor when Mollie had been only thirteen years of age.

Orphaned one year before, Mollie had struggled to survive on the rough streets of Washington. Her natural beauty had attracted attention. Even at twelve, her figure had matured, revealing a tiny waist, large firm breasts, and long, slender legs. Add to that even facial features, a

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riotous mass of russet curls, and flashing green eyes, and Mollie was bound to be noticed by men of all types.

Her only means of survival had been Ida, who'd taken her in. Some clients enjoyed young girls, and Ida had earned an infamous reputation for providing choice, nubile youngsters. Her offerings had just grown by one.

Twelve-year-old Mollie had endured the wretched conditions at Ida Sloans' Parlor for long months before she'd hit the streets running, desperate to escape the demands of men old enough to be her grandfather. Memories still haunted her, of shriveled fingers grasping her adolescent body, of gray heads disappearing between her coltish thighs as phlegm-filled coughs sprayed her delicate flesh, of gout-ridden legs forcing apart her reluctant limbs.

Estelle had brought Mollie to her home, the Maison D'Estelle, a wisteria-draped mansion in Murder Bay. For the next four years, Mollie had been assigned light housework after morning tutoring sessions. She'd thrived in an environment that brought together the finest of well-bred young women, trained maids, and vetted chefs. Mollie had watched Estelle's women go about their nightly work, noted their secure world in which they were healthy, happy, well-fed, and provided wardrobes that made high-society women jealous.

By the age of seventeen, Mollie had asked Estelle for a place in their ranks. The madam had agreed, and thus, Mollie's life course had been set. But a feeling that her year at Ida Sloan's had tainted her, made her unclean and not worthy to be with Estelle, nagged her. Those fears had caused her to be fiercely loyal to the young madam, and willing to prove herself worthy of Estelle's generosity. Which is why her behavior over Connor McGee felt odd and unsettling.

Often, she had pondered the reason behind it. Certainly, Connor possessed a quality demanding her full attention. She smiled slightly. *All right, obsession.* More than just his slick good looks consumed her daydreams, although she could find plenty about his appearance upon

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which to woolgather. Power radiated from his eyes, as if he expected all who looked upon him to obey. Mollie noticed that the expectation was often realized. God knows, she jumped to do his bidding. In short, she felt possessed when she was around him.

Mollie's better judgment chastised her actions. Her compulsion to please the man snuffed out these whispers of conscience.

Besides, she rationalized, he was obviously a fine, upstanding citizen with an impeccable reputation. As for her upcoming tryst, she planned to return to Maison D'Estelle so early the next morning, Estelle would never even know she'd left.

With these reassuring thoughts, Mollie rolled onto her side and snuggled into the lavender-scented linen bedclothes. A sigh of total joy escaped her lips as she sank into fantasies promised by the thrilling night ahead.

## CHAPTER 2

Salida knocked at Mollie's door again. Still no answer. The woman frowned, her thoughts punctuated by annoyance and a twinge of concern. She glanced at the pocket watch dangling from an ornate chain at her waist. Ten-thirty. Mollie had promised to help the housekeeper sort through old linens that morning. It was not like her to forget a commitment.

After one more rap on the mahogany, the housekeeper reached for a key ring and unlocked the door. A quick glance told her the chamber was empty. Jade and emerald bed linens lay crumpled in a heap in the center of the bed. Mollie's beloved quilt draped over a green chintz armchair. Piles of gowns littered the floor in a confusion of magenta satin, sapphire velvet, violet silk.

The sight of the chaos sent a stab of concern shooting through Salida. Not because the room was a mess, but because the mess hadn't changed in one detail since the evening before, when Salida had stopped by to tell Mollie her bath was ready.

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The young woman had opened the door, a mischievous gleam in her eye. Salida immediately knew Mollie had a story she was bursting to tell. The housekeeper settled on a boudoir chair and asked the girl what she was up to.

Such familiarity was not unusual between the two. Salida had always felt a bond with Mollie, perhaps because of their troubled pasts and their loyalty to Estelle for rescuing them. While Mollie contended with nightmares from Ida Sloan's, Salida was haunted by memories of slavery on a plantation outside Savannah, Georgia.

The plucky black woman had managed to escape via the Underground Railroad, and eluded slave catchers as she buried herself in the community of free blacks near Murder Bay in Washington, D.C. The fact that Estelle had been willing to provide her employment at the newly established brothel had been nothing short of a miracle for Salida. She'd never forgotten it, and her undying devotion to the ravishing woman she called friend and employer reflected her appreciation. That devotion extended to Estelle's girls.

Among the many services Salida performed, above and beyond her housekeeping duties, was to provide a sympathetic, receptive ear. It was in that capacity that Salida had listened as Mollie told her about the planned tryst with Connor McGee, all the while trying on one gown after the next. Mollie had made Salida swear on her mother's grave she'd keep the secret. Salida had reluctantly agreed, vowing to check on Mollie the next morning to make certain she'd safely made it back to the mansion.

Mollie had smiled, suggesting that not only could Salida check on her, but if she wanted to toss some linens her way, she'd be happy to assist the housekeeper organize them for the donation Maison D'Estelle was making to the Washington City Orphan Asylum.

Now, as Salida stood at the threshold, she looked around the room one last time. A chill crept up her spine. The air was too still. It seemed stale, as if echoes of its vibrant occupant had stalled in place, frozen in

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ominous limbo.

She would wait a while longer for Mollie's return. If the girl still hadn't shown up by noon, Salida would speak with Estelle.

Instinct told her she would be having that conversation with the madam. Something felt very wrong. Salida was convinced Mollie had encountered trouble in the dashing form of Connor McGee.

\* \* \*

She pushed back the weighted air, struggling to move. Her body refused to obey and Mollie continued to drift in a dark mist. In the distance, she heard the hint of a voice, but couldn't distinguish the words, nor even if the speaker was a man or woman.

Panic swept over her and she started flailing in the void. Something forced her still, and the panic turned to terror. Screaming drowned out the voice. With a shock, she realized it was coming from her own throat.

The voice grew louder and Mollie recognized it as male. "Easy, honey. Please be still before you hurt yourself."

Mollie felt hands upon her and attempted to open her eyes, wanting to see who held her. But her eyelids felt as if weighted by bricks. In fact, now that she'd ceased thrashing, her whole body felt heavy and limp. And cold, so very cold. Shivering convulsed her.

"It's the effects of the Mickey Finn. Let me tuck this blanket around you and you'll warm up in a minute. Please, my dear. Relax and give yourself time to wake up."

*Mickey Finn? Whatever was the person talking about? And who was he, anyway?*

Finally forcing open her eyes, she blinked in dim light and sought to identify the speaker and her surroundings. She tried to sit up and a wave of nausea hit her. A groan escaped, and although Mollie knew it had emanated from her own throat, it sounded miles away.

She struggled to focus, and found herself looking into Connor's face. Or was it?

## *MOLLIE*

"I'm his younger brother," the owner of the face said in gentle tones, as if he knew her thoughts. "My name is Cassidy."

Mollie clutched the blanket as another wave of shivers set in. She clamped down on her teeth to stop them from chattering.

"You're having a particularly nasty reaction to the chloral hydrate. I'm so sorry. Here, try drinking this." Cassidy held a steaming mug to her lips with one hand, cupping the back of her head with the other.

She sipped the hot tea, and immediately a surge of warmth coursed through her. One more sip and she lay down again. "Where—" came a raspy whisper that used to be her voice. She cleared her throat and managed a quivering tone. "Where am I? What happened?"

A look of concern flashed across Cassidy's sapphire eyes. "What do you remember, Miss Mollie?"

*He knows my name.* "I...I was having dinner with Connor."

"Did he serve you alcohol?"

She nodded, remembering that Connor had handed her a glass of champagne and she'd sipped it. That was her last clear memory.

Cassidy's face took on a grim expression. "He drugged you. Chloral hydrate and alcohol. Commonly known as a 'Mickey Finn.'"

"But why—" She shook her head and groaned as a sharp pain shot across her forehead.

"Long story. Right now, I need to get you out of here. As soon as you feel up to it."

"Where's 'here'?"

"You're in an abandoned farmhouse at White Stone Point."

"White Stone Point?"

"Sorry...near the Potomac River and Accotink Run. You're in Virginia. Connor brought you here last night."

"How long—"

"It's just after noon."

"Noon!" Mollie sat up. "Ouch!" She rubbed her forehead and swallowed back another surge of nausea.



## MOLLIE

He said under his breath, "Damn. I bet Connor gave you another dose just before you arrived here." He propped pillows behind her so she could remain seated upright, and handed her a steaming mug. "Have some more tea. It'll help settle your stomach."

Mollie murmured her thanks.

As she settled against the puffy back support, she sipped and studied Cassidy McGee. He appeared so like his older brother, but without the dangerous edge. Every bit as good looking, though. In fact, better looking. Broad shoulders, perhaps a bit broader than Connor's. And eyes...dear God...Cassidy's blue eyes were glorious. This man also had a kindness Mollie found particularly attractive when mixed with his Irish dark looks. Not that he seemed soft. Far from it, Mollie noted, taking in the evidence of rippling muscles against the sleek lines of his perfectly cut riding coat. A sense of restrained power surrounded him like a cloak. And tightly controlled anger. In fact, as Mollie continued to watch Cassidy, she recognized fury in the man. Not directed at her, though. Something or someone else. Connor, perhaps?

"Have I passed inspection?"

Mollie looked up to see humor glinting in storm sea blue. She felt her face grow hot and knew she must be blushing. "I'm sorry. It's just that you look so much like your brother, and yet—"

"Act very different? God, I hope so!" He felt her forehead. "You're not feverish. That's good. Are you feeling better?"

"A bit."

"Do you think you can stand? The drug should be wearing off now."

"I'll try." Mollie swung her legs over what appeared to be a cot. A wave of dizziness assailed her.

Cassidy eased her back against the pillows. "Not yet. A few more minutes. Finish your tea." He crossed to a window and peered out, looking in all directions with careful attention.

*Not just gorgeous above the waist.* Mollie resumed her scrutiny of

## **MOLLIE**

Cassidy, observing finely toned legs straining against tailored riding breeches. Suddenly, she realized the overall man was as appealing as his body parts. An aristocratic bearing was evident in his every movement. He didn't have the languid grace of his older brother. Cassidy's style was more self-contained and disciplined. *A soldier.* That was it. He had a soldier's air of authority, a man accustomed to being obeyed.

Finally, he turned back to her. "I'm sorry to rush you, but we must leave this place. I'll carry you to the wagon if you haven't found your sea legs."

"I can walk." This time, Mollie inched forward on the cot, testing each body position before moving to the next. "I don't understand any of this, you know. Why I'm here, why Connor would drug me." She stopped and looked up at him, noting the concern and compassion tucked into eyes now indigo.

"I promise I'll answer all your questions once we're on our way."

"Where are we going?"

"I need to get us to Washington as soon as possible. By way of Alexandria." He paused. "I realize you don't know me at all, but please don't judge me by my brother's actions. You can trust me, Miss Mollie."

Her instincts confirmed his words. There was no doubt she felt secure with him, and was astonished by that, considering her obvious misjudgment of Connor. "I believe you, Mr. McGee. Lead on. I'll follow."

He had the grace to look embarrassed, attempting to conceal his emotion by sketching a bow. "I'll take that as a testament to my honest face."

"So you should." Mollie couldn't help but smile at his discomfort. So sure of himself, yet so easily rattled by a lady's attention. She liked that about him. In fact, she liked everything about him. Even in her muddled state, she couldn't resist teasing him. "Besides, it appears I

## ***MOLLIE***

have little choice but to trust you, since I'm hardly in a condition to argue."

He wrapped an arm around her waist. "Can you stand, now?"

Mollie gingerly rose to her feet, sensing Cassidy's commanding presence as he supported her every move. When another wave of dizziness attacked, he lifted her into his arms and marched from the room as if she weighed nothing more than one of the pillows left on the cot. It didn't occur to her to protest. Being in his arms seemed as natural as breathing.

Vaguely, Mollie noticed her surroundings as Cassidy strode forward. Doors lined a dingy long hallway, dimly lit. It ended at a large room furnished with packing crates, liquor bottles and rotting food. Once outside, Mollie glimpsed a wide porch, then spied a pair of horses and a standard-issue Federal supply wagon waiting in the yard.

"Can you ride beside me, or shall I make a bed for you in the back?" Cassidy's rumbling voice soothed her, excited her, as he headed for the wagon. Despite her weakened condition, she felt a flicker of desire, and wondered what it would be like to lie beneath him, open to him, inviting him.

"Miss Mollie?"

Heat rose in her cheeks again as she realized he'd watched her face while her mind had filled with the fantasy of him. "I'll be fine beside you, Mr. McGee. " Heat intensified as she realized what she'd said. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean." He grinned as he settled her on the wagon bench. "Oh, and please stop calling me, 'Mr. McGee.' My name is Cassidy."

She smiled. "And I'm Mollie."

"Fair enough." He nodded and started heading back to the house.

"Where are you going?" She suddenly felt lost and alone without his reassuring presence.

His grin turned into a brilliant smile that nearly stopped her heart.

### ***MOLLIE***

“Miss me already? Just getting the rest of our supplies. I’ll be back directly.”

A catbird flew past Mollie to land in a nearby tree, its monotonous, grating cry filling the tropical summer air. She took a deep breath. Her chills had passed and the moist heat felt heavenly as she studied the ramshackle abode before her. Gray clapboard surrounded patches of boards where windows had resided. The front porch listed at a precarious angle. Indeed, the entire two-story structure pitched to one side.

And scores of bullet holes blanketed every surface. She shivered, her renewed chill having nothing to do with drugs. Mollie supposed the bullet marks could have resulted from war-sparked skirmishes. Every inch of Virginia had been fought over at least once. But, somehow, as she gazed at the scarred farmhouse, she felt certain the condition of the building had more to do with Connor McGee.

Something ominous was afoot. And Mollie knew it coiled around her like a venomous snake.

## CHAPTER 3

Estelle Racine snuggled against the rock-hard torso of Colonel James Goodwin and sighed in contentment. She cocked her head as his questing lips moved from her mouth to her neck.

If she could spend her entire life nestled with this magnificent, powerful man, she'd be perfectly happy. How she treasured the deep love she shared with him—a love seasoned with genuine friendship, great sex, and a delightful sense of humor. The source of much laughter stemmed from the improbability that a military investigator attached to the Provost Marshall General's office could engage in a long-term relationship with a madam of prostitutes.

James often called her his “ravishing raven-haired beauty” with whom he'd fallen in love the first time he gazed into her violet eyes. For her part, Estelle could attest to the fact that the dashing gray-haired officer with the twinkling baby blues and the muscled physique had invaded her heart the moment he'd rescued her from a nasty fall on Pennsylvania Avenue the year before. Estelle's wrenched ankle had

## ***MOLLIE***

provided James entrée to her world. He quickly became a regular visitor to the elegant mansion at 500 6<sup>th</sup> Street.

Time had tested their commitment. They had won hands down. When the war was finally over and James' stint as military inspector ended, they looked forward to marital bliss. Until then, they savored their liaison as a true gift to body and spirit.

A tiny nip on her earlobe pulled Estelle's attention from the fantasy James Goodwin to the flesh-and-blood man. "Where are your thoughts, love?" he whispered.

Estelle brushed her lips across his. "With you, my darling. Where they always are."

He chuckled before possessing her mouth. His tongue waltzed across the surface of hers, the two beginning a duel of heat and moisture and sensitized membrane. She shivered with the contact, passion growing in the pit of her stomach.

James pulled away to hover over her mouth. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

Estelle smiled against his lips. "Not in the last thirty seconds. You're overdue."

With a growl, he gently clasped her upper arms and pushed her down until she lay across the velvet settee. He knelt on the floor by her side. "Now I can properly worship you."

His fingers danced across her silk-encased breasts, pausing at each nipple to run his fingernails lightly across it. She trembled as her enlivened skin fought its fabric constraints.

"Time to get you out of this gown, gorgeous as it is," James whispered. "I know of greater beauty waiting to be revealed."

With nimble fingers, he began the daunting process of undressing Estelle. Notorious for elaborate layers, au courant garb did not easily relinquish the body beneath.

Tiny fabric buttons surrendered to his expertise. Each felt the brush of his lips as it moved aside to reveal a delicate chemise beneath, a waft

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of lavender floating in its wake. Planting firm kisses onto the embroidered cotton of the undergarment, James continued his patient journey until he completely revealed the pale yellow piece of lingerie.

As the golden day gown slipped to the floor in a silken mound of ruffles and ribbons, James smiled at her. "I've always thought you exercise such good sense, not bothering with crinolines and corsets."

Estelle giggled. "You know my girls and I never wear corsets. It's one of many societal dictates we resolutely ignore. As for crinolines—" She brushed her fingers across his full lips. "Well, let's just say the women of Maison D'Estelle know how to make themselves available to their men."

Hands cupping her breasts through the chemise, he looked down at her with a twinkle in his lightning-blue eyes. A thrill shot through Estelle.

James' soft voice caressed her. "Your lovely body should never be imprisoned in whalebone and cages, my dear." Fingers tweaked her nipples. Thumbs rubbed across the hardening buds and Estelle arched her back, groaning with pleasure, luxuriating in the desire building in her belly.

James quickly divested Estelle of her embroidered kid slippers and silk stockings. He grasped her layers of tufted white petticoats with their trim of fluted frills. A waft of rose and lavender drifted through the air as he jostled the tiny sachets pinned to the filmy fabric before he pulled off the undergarments.

His mouth found her breasts. His tongue lapped at the chemise, soaking it. As he laved her nipples through the sodden folds, his fingers trailed to her inner thighs, covered only in lacy drawers.

Estelle gasped as talented fingertips lightly stroked the delicate folds of flesh around her slit through cloth rapidly becoming soaked from her juices of arousal. Estelle opened herself to him, spreading her legs as far as she could within the limitations of the material.

"No. This won't do at all," James growled. "I've waited long

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enough to view your glory this day.”

Estelle watched him seize her drawers at the waistline and pull the delicate fabric from her flesh. Fingers grasped the chemise. The dainty cloth offered no resistance as it drifted over her head and landed in a pale puddle on the oriental rug.

She thrilled to the expression in James’ eyes as they feasted on her naked body. He was deliberate in his visual inspection, scanning her face, her neck, her breasts. Here, his gaze lingered, taking in each detail of her firm mounds and rosy tips. He leered at her tiny waist and the gentle swell of her hips. When he reached her cupid’s box, he gently grasped her upper thighs and pulled her legs farther apart.

“So wet, my love,” he murmured. “I can see you glistening. Waiting for me.” He tore away his glance and met her eyes. She could see his lust and heat, lighting his Nordic blue eyes to azure. “Are you, Estelle? Are you waiting for me?”

Her arousal had grown throughout his lecherous scrutiny. Now, James’ deep voice, husky with passion, nearly sent her over the edge. “I await you, my love.”

He flicked a finger up her drenched slit. “And what would you have me do to you, Estelle?”

“I want you to enter me. I want you to drive deep into me.” She drew a shaky breath, the verbalizing of her desires making her even hotter.

With no warning, James thrust a finger inside her. She came in a flash, a deep, lightning-quick orgasm that rumbled in her core, leaving her breathless.

He smiled. “So ready. Damn, you’re always so ready. Tell me, love, tell me what you want now.”

Estelle fought for air and clarity. His finger strumming her button did not help her reach this goal. She closed her eyes and sank into the sensations. Her clitoris, already sensitized, throbbed in the balmy August air. As if it had a life of its own, it embraced the rough stroking,



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driving her ever closer to yet another brink.

“Please,” she cried. “Come inside me. Fill me, James.”

“Damn straight, I will.” He swept her into his arms and strode across the drawing room. Entering her bedroom, he flung her onto the oxblood satin-swathed bed.

He quickly divested himself of his garments. In another moment, he was atop her, his silky steel driving into her passage to the hilt. He paused, his penis filling every inch of her, his breath coming in hard bursts.

Suddenly, he withdrew, leaving her empty. *How barren it is without him inside me.*

His lips brushed across hers before he spoke through gritted teeth. “I’m going to fuck you till you scream for mercy.”

His rod nudged her thighs, teased her clit, tickled her hole. Charges of blistering lust shot through Estelle. “Oh God, James,” she sobbed. “Please—”

One fierce stroke and he impaled her on his rock-hard member. She screamed her surprise and pleasure, then clung to the bed as his strokes became a blur of motion. Faster he rode her, pounding her with his meaty member, deep and sure, from the threshold of her slit to the core of her abdomen.

Estelle raised her hips to meet his, bone to bone, inflamed flesh hammering flesh. Her blood seared her, electrified her; she’d never felt so alive as she rose to meet him, thrust for thrust.

She lost track of time. Her only reality was his penis filling her to the core, then withdrawing. Waves of heat cradled her and a glaze of lust-driven madness consumed her. She neared the edge of orgasm.

Estelle heard James growl, the throaty sound matching the rumbling growing in her belly. To the edge he carried her, his strokes quick and deep. Together, they hit the peak, their passion melding their bodies and souls into one, heart-stopping moment.

They remained curled into each other’s bodies for a long time,

## *MOLLIE*

allowing their hearts to return to normal rhythm, their sweat-soaked skin to dry, gentleness to replace sex-filled fire.

Eventually, Estelle stretched in a long, luxurious movement. James chuckled and ran a hand across her bare breasts. “Ready for more?” he murmured, brushing her riotous raven curls off her shoulders.

She nuzzled his chest, inhaling his unique male scent mingled with the sweet odor of mild sweat. “I declare, sir, you are insatiable. Have you forgotten you have an office to which you must return? And I have a business to run.”

In fact, the madam of Maison D’Estelle had a well-deserved reputation for managing one of the most professional brothels in the country. The elegant establishment ran like clockwork, giving Estelle the opportunity to enjoy an active personal life. A personal life revolving around one very desirable military inspector.

James began the process of retrieving his clothes. Estelle watched him for a moment, his muscled chest and back rippling with each movement. She studied the magnificent sweep of his broad shoulders, his narrow waist, and slender hips. As he turned toward her, Estelle stared with appreciation at the awesome sight of his penis, generously proportioned even in repose.

As sinewy legs disappeared inside uniform trousers, she untangled a knot of silk covers and smoothed the rumpled satin sheets beneath. At her touch, the bedclothes emitted fragrances of rose and lavender and musky juices of arousal.

With great reluctance, Estelle left the bed and began to dress. Just as she fastened the last button of a pale pink silk afternoon gown and James had donned his uniform frock coat, the door to her suite resounded with a knock. Smoothing her hair, Estelle called for the person to enter, and saw her housekeeper pause on the threshold.

\* \* \*

Salida looked from Estelle to James, feeling vaguely foolish about sharing her worry over Mollie. Not that the madam of Maison

## **MOLLIE**

D'Estelle wasn't an understanding soul. While she ran her posh establishment with a firm hand, Estelle bent over backward for her girls. Perhaps it was Goodwin's presence that bothered her.

No, Estelle's lover was famous for helping the girls when they were in trouble, at times, throwing his career into jeopardy when doing so. Consorting with an establishment like Maison D'Estelle was risky for a military inspector, even if half his men were regular customers. Of course, his personal relationship with the infamous Estelle Racine placed him even farther out on the limb of respectability, though that precarious position never seemed to bother him.

And it wasn't unusual for Goodwin to use the resources of his office for them, either. Just a few weeks before, one of the girls had inadvertently become enmeshed in a kidnapping ring. The colonel had rushed to her aid, almost getting killed in the process.

Now, he lounged on one of the burgundy upholstered chairs in Estelle's private drawing room, a thoughtful look on his face as he listened to her story. When she had finished, he said, "You're sure Mollie didn't sleep in her bed last night?"

Salida grasped the rose-and-cream-striped chintz arm of her chair. "Yes, sir."

Estelle shook her head slightly, a small smile on her face. "Salida, dear. It's not *that* unusual for the girls to remain with a client through the night."

"But you forbid it."

"Yes. But I also tell everyone not to spoil the moment. I do allow some latitude, you know."

"Of course, Miss Estelle. I understand. It's just that..."

"What?"

How could she put her fear into words without sounding like a fool? "I don't like that man. That Connor McGee."

"The client with whom Mollie had the engagement?"

Salida nodded.

## *MOLLIE*

Estelle frowned. "You're not taken to idle fancy, that I know."

Goodwin murmured to Estelle, "I assume you vetted him before you allowed him to become a client."

"Of course," Estelle answered, then addressed Salida. "Can you tell us what it is about the man you distrust?"

Salida smoothed the folds of her black wool skirt and cleared her throat. "His eyes, Miss Estelle. It's all in his eyes." She searched for words. "He seems nice enough on the surface. I know he has money and is quite the cultured gent. But there's something in those eyes. An anger." She stopped abruptly and shook her head. "No. No, anger isn't right. It's a meanness, miss. Right down to his core, that man is evil. My instincts tell me so."

"Salida, has he ever done anything to—" Goodwin broke off at a look from Estelle.

"I'd trust Salida's instincts any day, James," the madam said quietly, glancing at the china clock on the black marble mantel. "It's just after noon. I'll send Stefan to McGee's home and inquire," she added, referring to the burly blond man who served as her porter and bodyguard.

Salida felt a burden lift off her shoulders. "Thank you, Miss Estelle. Thank you."

Estelle turned to Goodwin. "Could you check into McGee? Just to see if he's ever had a problem with the authorities?"

"You ran a background check, you said."

"I check to make certain prospective clients are what they say they are, of course. But I don't have the resources to delve into their past, not like your office has."

"You're really worried about Mollie, aren't you?"

She exchanged a quick glance with Salida, and the free woman saw concern radiating in her violent orbs before she turned back to Goodwin. "You wouldn't mind humoring me, would you? And, James...if Mollie's not at McGee's—"

## ***MOLLIE***

The colonel rose, planted a quick kiss on her cheek, and headed for the door. “I’ll help any way I can. We’ll find her, darling. Rest assured, we’ll find her.”

\* \* \*

By the end of the afternoon, Estelle and Salida struggled not to panic over Mollie’s fate. Stefan had returned from his visit to McGee’s mansion. He’d talked to the housekeeper, who had told him no one was in residence at the present time. Mr. Connor had left town on business and wasn’t expected to return for several days.

Now, the pair waited for James’ arrival. Estelle could only pray his investigation had uncovered information about McGee that would, in turn, give them a clue about Mollie.

As if he’d heard her thoughts, James swept with powerful strides into the room.

Estelle took one look at his grim face and her heart fell. “What?” she whispered.

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and nodded to Salida. “Nothing yet. But I have my best men on the case.” He paused, his blue eyes dark with worry. “Looks like Salida’s instincts were on the mark. As much as I hate to say it, Connor McGee concerns me. We’ve learned very little about him, and that is troubling.”

“I don’t understand,” said Salida.

“Honest men live openly. It’s never difficult to unearth all sorts of items about them—their lifestyle, daily habits, loved ones. They’re careless about such details. But when I learn nothing about a man—well, let’s just say I strongly suspect Connor McGee has something to hide. And whatever it is, I’m guessing it’s not honorable.”

## CHAPTER 4

They'd been traveling forever. At least, that's how it seemed to Mollie.

While the worst of the side effects from the Mickey Finn had worn off, she still felt achy and chilled. Every jostle of the wagon on the stone-ridden, rut-filled back lane leading away from White Stone Point bothered her. Then again, the story Cassidy McGee was relating, didn't improve her condition, either.

Mollie kept her eyes pinned on his aristocratic profile as he spoke. The firm chin, proud nose, and defined cheek line were the only constants in a world suddenly turned upside down. How could she have been so wrong about Connor?

Cassidy had begun describing the background behind their precarious circumstances the minute he'd driven out of the farmhouse yard. Keeping a firm hand on the reins, he'd shaken his head in a mixture of anger and sadness, saying in low tones, "I'd suspected Connor was involved in something illicit the moment I arrived at his

## **MOLLIE**

home.” Indigo eyes flickered over to her before he returned his attention to the lane. “I’ve been on leave from the 6<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry. Took a bullet during a ...special scouting assignment not too far from here. It was a clean hit. Unfortunately, the bloody thing became infected and complications set in. My convalescence stretched on and I left the hospital to regain my strength at Connor’s home.”

“You have no wife to tend you?” Mollie immediately blushed at the small smile flashing across his face. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He gave her a long look, and she felt her heart race.

“I’m quite complimented by your interest.” His eyes swept over her in a fashion Mollie thought almost adoring. His gaze returned to her lips and there it lingered as his soft voice drifted through the balmy Virginia afternoon. “No wife, lovely lady. Not even a sweetheart.”

He went on. “Also, no other family member to help me. I was a bit surprised Connor took me in. Actually, he and I have never been close. I think he resented our humble childhood. My father was a Maryland farmer in Cecil County. Barely made enough to keep food on the table. Connor was always agitating for more. He dreamed of living in the grand style. By sixteen, he’d left us to make his fortune in Washington City.” Cassidy stopped abruptly, then whispered, “My parents never saw him again. He never even returned for their funerals when they succumbed to influenza.”

Mollie laid a hand on his forearm. “I’m so sorry.”

He nodded briskly. “Can’t mourn something you can’t do anything about. I made my own way in life, and kept him at arm’s length. But I couldn’t help learning of his...escapades.”

“Escapades?”

“One shady scheme after another. And none of them legal.”

Mollie recalled Connor’s lavish mansion. Each room boasted silks and satin. Fine imported rugs and artwork. Delicate crystal and heavy silver. “It appears his activities provided the wealth he yearned for.”

## MOLLIE

“Indeed. No question, Connor has fulfilled his dream. Bought his way out of soldiering, and he’s continued to amass his fortune, much of it exploiting the men and civilians caught up in the very conflict he so carefully avoids.” Cassidy sighed and steadied the horses as they navigated a heavily furrowed section of road. “I began to suspect he was immersed in another scheme when I was strong enough to begin moving around the house. Caught snippets of conversations. The topic always changed when I entered the room, of course. I noticed his odd hours, and the ne’er-do-wells he’s associating with.” Cassidy paused and Mollie watched his eyes cloud over. “Damn—beg pardon—but I wanted to believe I was wrong about him. Just this once.”

Mollie struggled with the picture Cassidy painted of his older brother—the charming, witty, flashy Irishman she’d so loved. No, she corrected herself. Not loved. But definitely a man with whom she’d been infatuated.

“He paints a fine picture, doesn’t he?” came Cassidy’s gentle voice.

She glanced at him and felt her insides turn to mush at his look of concern. *He really cares about my feelings.* And with the thought came the realization that Connor never had shown such sensitivity. Not once. How had she not noticed?

“Looks like he reeled you in pretty good.” Cassidy’s hand brushed the ruffled sleeve of her maroon evening gown. “Nothing to be ashamed of, Mollie. Connor has his act perfected to a fine point. He’s had years to do it. You certainly aren’t the first woman to be taken in by him.”

“Men like the Connor you describe always want something, Cassidy. What could he have possibly wanted from me?”

He groaned softly. “I knew we’d come ’round to that soon. Else why were you in that Godforsaken place, from which I dragged you? Correct?”

“Exactly.”

Cassidy took a deep breath and muttered, “I know of no better way



## *MOLLIE*

to say it than to come out with it plain.” He reined the team to a halt and turned to face her. “Connor’s been dealing in women.”

“What? What are you saying?” Mollie’s throat constricted and she struggled to breathe.

“Have you heard of ‘white slavery’?”

She nodded. What prostitute hadn’t? It was a scourge on her profession, and a frightening threat since Fancy Ladies—especially young, inexperienced girls—were always prime candidates for the trade. Suddenly, the import of Cassidy’s question hit her. “You think—?”

“Actually, I know so. I’d suspected Connor was involved in a ring of some kind. The gambling and vice I overlooked. But, when I realized he was shipping women, against their will, to the front line for soldiers’...er...entertainment, I knew I couldn’t look the other way. So I convinced him to let me help him.”

“*You what?*”

Cassidy smiled, a grim expression. “It’s not what you think, Mollie. I decided the best way to shut him down was to act like I wanted a piece of the action. I figured he’d start to trust me. The more involved I became in his operations, the more opportunity I’d have to collect evidence I’d need to take to the authorities. You see, I knew I’d have to prove Connor’s activities before they’d arrest him and his cohorts.”

“You sound just like Colonel Goodwin.”

“James Goodwin? How do you know him?”

“He’s...ah...a regular at the house where I work.”

Cassidy chuckled. “I’ll just bet he is. You’re talking about the Maison D’Estelle, and Goodwin is quite seriously involved with a woman whom I suspect is your madam. Not so?”

Mollie grinned in spite of her spinning head and confused thoughts. “That is so, sir.”

He sobered. “These past few weeks, I’ve worked to ingratiate myself with Connor and his men. It took some doing, I can tell you.

## *MOLLIE*

But, finally, they trusted me enough to actually involve me in one of their shipments.”

“By ‘shipments,’ you mean me.”

“Just so.” Cassidy flicked the reins and the horses moved on. “You are my proof, Mollie. When the police hear how Connor tricked you, and drugged you...not to mention all the evidence I’ve collected from that house we just left...”

“He brought other women there, didn’t he?”

“Indeed he did. Connor’s boys have the operation down to a science. They pay off the patrols and pickets—Union and Confederate—so they can function unhindered by war action. Drugged women are transported down the Potomac to White Stone Point. By the way, that’s why we’re taking this miserable back lane instead of the river. Connor’s organization controls the waterways between here and Washington. We wouldn’t stand a chance of getting away undetected by boat.

“Anyway, Connor holds the women in that crumbling shack we just left. He doesn’t keep them there long, though. Just until he can move them to our brave boys at wherever the front happens to be at the time, again consorting with both sides. In your case, they were planning a quick trip down Acquia Creek to Meade’s Union forces stationed along the Rappahanock.”

“That’s awful,” Mollie whispered, choking down the bile rising in her throat.

Cassidy’s arm wrapped around her shoulders and he gave her a quick hug. Leaning into her, he said in her ear, “But that won’t happen to you. I will see you home safely, to the Maison D’Estelle. I want you to know that.”

She yearned to believe him. She had earlier, but now that her head was clearing, sobering skepticism besieged her. After all, she’d trusted Connor, too.

Mollie glanced at the war-torn forest around her, realizing her best

## MOLLIE

option at the moment was to stay with Cassidy. At least until they reached Alexandria. Once there, she could find a way to separate from him and travel to Washington alone, *if* he showed signs of being less than completely trustworthy.

Damn, she hoped that wouldn't happen. Because he was one gorgeous male, and she was honest enough to realize that she wanted him, wanted his body to possess hers, absolutely. Also, she realized there was far more to the man than a stunning physique. If he were genuine, she desired a chance to get to know everything about him.

But, would *he* want to get to know *her*? Considering her career, she'd never entertained the notion of a respectable gent desiring more than a professional liaison with her.

Mollie straightened and he released her. In a stilted tone, she said, "I suppose you think my reaction to Connor's scheme is silly...my being a professional and all."

He threw her a surprised look. "Not at all. Choosing your life's path—whatever it may be—is far, far different from being forced into a situation. Especially one as brutal as what confronted you." He paused. "Mollie, let me give you a bit of insight about me. I don't hold your job against you. It's honest work, to my mind. And one of the few ways a woman can make her own way in this life." He flashed her a quick smile. In spite of her caution, her stomach fluttered in a most appealing way. "Actually, I applaud your spirit and independence."

Mollie glanced away, her heart pounding. She forced her attention to the tattered landscape through which they were passing.

The war had been unkind to this stretch of Virginia, and for Mollie, who had spent the last few years safely tucked in Washington City, the vista shocked her. Tree trunks bore heavy scars from bullets. Branches had been ripped from trees and littered the ground. Mollie could only suppose they'd been felled by gunfire. Mounds of earth marked what looked to be mass graves, with portions of the ground disturbed, probably by animals roaming the countryside. In these spots, Mollie

## ***MOLLIE***

caught glimpses of mangled body parts.

Everywhere she looked, the debris of battle lay scattered—pieces of clothing, canteens battered and bruised by bullets, torn haversacks, broken muskets and sabers, horse carcasses. Mollie supposed the deeply furrowed lane on which they traveled had been marred by wheels from artillery pieces and limbers.

Even the birds seemed to have disappeared. The tattered woods around them shrieked a deathly quiet.

She realized Cassidy had been watching her. A sad smile crossed his face. “Ugly business, war,” he murmured as he guided the faltering horses through the ruts.

Instinctively, she huddled against him, reveling in the uncompromising potency that surrounded the man like a finely tailored suit. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to be by his side. Muscles she’d observed from her cot in the farmhouse were now confirmed. Rippled masses of them braced her.

She inhaled his scent, finding the mix of soap, leather, and tobacco arousing. In fact, everything about the man jolted her like a lightning flash. Her eyes swept over his muscled thighs to the sizeable bulge of his crotch, obvious in the tight riding breeches. Cassidy McGee showed every sign of being a most impressive specimen.

The brutality of Connor and battle’s aftermath dimmed as fantasies of the man by her side assailed her. She felt herself moisten.

In her mind’s eye, she grasped his rigid penis, its velvety surface rippling between her fingers. Dark, coiled hair nuzzled her hand as she slowly pumped the vital manhood. A slow, lazy smile spread across his aristocratic face as he whispered, “Enough,” and gently rolled her onto her back.

Cassidy’s smile widened as callused hands palmed her full breasts, feathered erect nipples, drifted down to stroke her labial lips. Mollie caught her breath, overwhelmed by the symphony of sensations, struggling to process the richness of it all. She opened her legs to him,

## MOLLIE

and he rubbed his steely erection against her delicate flesh, pressing against the opening, teasing her.

His rock-hard member drove into her with an aggressive rhythm that swept her away. He thrust into her again and again. His sensuous lips rained down gentle kisses across her face, his power and sweetness thrilling her, making her hot beyond all reckoning.

Cassidy pulled out to her threshold and his eyes kissed her with their heat and passion. He whispered, "I love you, precious one," and drove into her once again. To the hilt, his rod speared her and Mollie felt yet another orgasm roll through her as his finger brushed her clit. Without pausing a beat he—

"—don't you think?"

With a start, Mollie realized Cassidy had been speaking, and that she had nearly climaxed from the fantasy. God, she was wet! And hungry for a man she barely knew. What was happening to her?

"I—I'm sorry, Cassidy. What were you saying?"

She glanced at him and immediately flushed at the look in his eyes—as if he'd read her thoughts.

"Whatever were you thinking about?" Amusement rippled through his words.

"Um, nothing..."

"Well, I doubt that. And it must have been wonderful."

Her face grew hotter. "Why do you say that, Cassidy?"

He chuckled. "Because you had the dreamiest look on your face." He leaned toward her and whispered playfully, "He must be some guy."

She smiled in spite of her discomfort. "Oh, yes. He definitely is."

Mollie met his eyes and he winked at her. She studied his face, amazed at how comfortable she felt in this virtual stranger's company. Safe, protected. Secure.

Secure. That was a word Mollie seldom ascribed to her life, for all that Estelle offered her a good, steady living. What was it about this black-haired, sapphire-eyed gentleman—and she was certain he *was* a

## *MOLLIE*

gentleman—that infused her with such confidence and sense of well-being? It was as if they were meant to be together.

She stole another glance at him and noticed his worried expression. Mollie followed his gaze to the side of the road and saw ahead of them a small party of riders gathered under the low-hanging bows of a hickory tree. A shiver crawled up her back as she studied them.

They didn't move, nor say a word. Their quiet speculation of the travelers seemed somehow ominous.

"Don't look at them," Cassidy said in a low voice as the wagon drew abreast of the motley group. "I don't know what business they have out here in the middle of nowhere, and I'd rather not find out."

Mollie resolutely studied the deep cuts in the road ahead of the team. "They certainly seem interested in us," she murmured.

"Aye. That's what bothers me. Even though this has been Union-held ground since virtually the beginning of the war, these woods see all types of travelers. Many of them up to no good. The countryside is filled with raiding parties, bands of freedmen, deserters, army stragglers...you name it, they're out here."

"Which group do you suppose they belong to?"

"They're not in uniform, though that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I don't know, Mollie, but I'm not crazy about their interest in us, I can tell you."

"Are they following us?"

"Don't appear to be. But they gave us a good look-over, that's for certain."

"Do you think they're connected to Connor's organization? You said his men controlled this part of Virginia."

"The waterways, yes. I understood that he hadn't established a network this far inland. And those men were not familiar to me. Of course, I haven't seen everyone working for my brother." Cassidy sighed. "Let's just move on as if nothing were wrong."

"Where are we, precisely?"

## *MOLLIE*

"If we continue this circuitous route, probably an hour from Alexandria."

They drove on in companionable silence. Mollie had been dozing against Cassidy's shoulder when she was awakened by an angry, "Damn."

She looked around and immediately found the source of Cassidy's frustration. A meandering stream crossed the road ahead. Without a bridge. Jagged pieces of timber littered the banks.

"Damn war," Cassidy muttered, adding quickly, "Beg pardon, Mollie. Looks like some brave force of men decided to destroy the bridge."

"Can we cross anyway?" But as soon as Mollie uttered the words, she saw how heavy summer rains had swollen the waterway. Steep banks prohibited a wagon's passage even if the water level had been low. She turned to him. "What do we do now?"

Cassidy glanced up at a clear cerulean sky. "The afternoon is wearing on. I was sure we'd reach Alexandria and easily make our way to Washington before sundown. But now—"

His cobalt eyes swept over her and she shivered. What was it about this man that set her heart racing and her blood boiling? The compassion radiating from him made her reaction all the more intense. Indeed, he had been nothing but sweet and sensitive.

*God! She wanted him.*

Once again, she reminded herself what a bad judge of character she'd been where Connor was concerned. How could she be sure she wasn't being misdirected by Cassidy's charm? They were brothers, after all. And blood will tell...

His hand rested on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Instantly, the image of his arms wrapped around her flashed through her mind. Mentally shaking her head, she focused on the dilemma at hand.

Cassidy reined the horses to a halt and sighed. "I know of only one

### ***MOLLIE***

other bridge in this vicinity, assuming *it's* still there. And it means we have to backtrack."

"You're saying we have to go back toward that awful house?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Surely there must be a place to ford the creek."

He sighed again. "Mollie, I've scouted this area for the army. Know it like the back of my hand. If it hadn't been for the heavy rainfall, you'd be right. But as it is..." Cassidy paused, then handed her the reins. "Hold these steady." He jumped down and began walking to the front of the horses.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to guide these fellows to that wide spot in the road up ahead. And pray it's large enough for us to turn around. I remember seeing a decent site for camping a while back. We'll stop there and set up for the night."

Mollie stared at the thin leather straps in her hands. She had never felt comfortable around horses. Thankfully, Cassidy seemed confident with them. She shivered. "We're actually going to spend the night out here?"

"Can't get to Alexandria now. Not enough daylight hours after we've detoured. It'd be best if we give ourselves time to get comfortable for the evening." He turned back and smiled tenderly at her. Mollie's stomach lurched with desire. "Besides, you look about done in. You could use some rest."

*Rest?* How could an obviously bright man be so wrong?



## CHAPTER 5

Mollie settled against the log, her face flushed from the sip of whisky Cassidy had given her, and the fine fire he'd built. The care and thoughtfulness he'd employed on this mission of mercy still amazed her. It seems he'd prepared for all contingencies, from the food he'd packed, to the blankets and pillows carefully stashed in the back of the wagon.

Fed and warm, Mollie fought off bone-deep weariness. The thought of falling asleep and missing the opportunity to get to know this marvelous man shocked her awake.

They spent a long time talking after finishing their meal. A myriad of topics drifted between them. She told him about Maison D'Estelle and her life there. He told her about his humble childhood, how he'd felt honor-bound to join the war, and how disappointed he'd been in his older brother for not only avoiding the fighting, but using considerable guile and strategy to exploit it into a significant fortune.

He lounged next to her on a blanket, whittling a piece of wood. She

### **MOLLIE**

watched his graceful fingers work. What had been a lump of timber was fast transforming into the shape of a wolf.

The blade flashed in the firelight and she noticed the bowie knife for the first time. Mollie reached out to it and Cassidy's decisive slashes across the wood surface ceased.

"That's quite a tool," she murmured.

He handed it to her. "A gift. From Connor, actually. The last thing he ever gave me."

Mollie admired the intricately carved scrolling running down the handle. "Is this mahogany?"

"Rosewood."

She handed back the knife. Within a few minutes, he completed the wolf. With a slight nod, he presented it to her. "For you, my dear."

Mollie turned the carving so she could view all its aspects. "Exquisite, Cassidy. This is truly beautiful. Thank you. I'll treasure it always."

His quick laugh seemed self-deprecating.

"Really. You have true talent."

"It's the least I can do for you." He stroked her cheek with one finger. "Mollie, when Connor carried you into that wretched farmhouse, you were so limp and pale in his arms. It took every ounce of self-control not to reveal my true intent and rescue you then and there. And as you lay on the cot, I studied every inch of your beautiful face, all the while telling myself I was just feeling protective over another poor unfortunate Connor was trying to victimize. But, deep inside, I knew there was more to the situation. More to *you*." He paused. "I suppose none of that makes sense to you. I'm not certain it makes sense to me."

She studied his chiseled face in the wavering light, suspecting he might be one of the few decent men she'd ever met. Not at all like his brother. His muscled frame seemed relaxed. But Mollie knew he was alert for danger, and he would protect her at all costs.

## ***MOLLIE***

She placed a hand on his chest, feeling the line of muscles beneath the linen shirt. “Nothing about this situation makes sense, Cassidy. Perhaps we should dispense with logic and make the most of this time together. Without logic.”

Her eyes drank in the sight of him. Dancing firelight waltzed across his ebony hair, caressed his aquiline nose and defined cheekbones. Shadows sent eye sockets deep into his face, but Mollie knew dark sapphire orbs sparkled in those depths, watching her. Just as she had felt his warm regard all day.

She smiled to herself. Experience as a Daughter of Pleasure told her this man desired her as much as she did him. But, he was a gentleman and would not take advantage of the unorthodox situation. Not, that was, without encouragement.

For the moment, she thrust aside lingering doubts about him as intense need swept over her. Never had she wanted anything more than the feel of his body against her, inside her. If only for this one night.

Mollie carefully set the wooden carving on the ground and swept fingers down his forearm. “Besides which, I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. And I know just how to do it.”

He frowned. “I meant what I said earlier, Mollie. I don’t hold your job against you. Nor do I hold expectations of you thanking me with professional services.”

She dropped her glance, flustered. That wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind, either. Damn! How was she going to make him forget she was a professional and start looking at her...just as a woman?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Mollie.” His fingers brushed through auburn curls tumbling around her shoulders. “You are a stunning woman. The most desirable I’ve ever seen.” He cupped her chin in his hand and gently drew her face toward his. “But I won’t take advantage of the moonlight and the fact that the fire flames your magnificent red hair. Did you know you look like a mysterious, intoxicating wood nymph? As if you were sent to earth just to bewitch me.”

### MOLLIE

“You are unlike any man I’ve ever met.”

A tiny smile tugged at his mouth. “Is that a good thing?”

Mollie grinned at the understatement. *You have no idea how good.* “Most men would have tumbled me before this, you see. And I would have hated—”

Cassidy removed his hand. “Can’t say that I’m proud of my gender, most times. Over the last few years, I’ve seen men do things I never thought I’d witness in a civilized society. Never in a million years. Then again, war does that to us mere mortals.” He flashed a look at her, and Mollie struggled to discern its meaning. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to wax philosophic.”

“You didn’t let me finish, Cassidy. I was saying, while I would hate for most men to take advantage of me and our rather...bizarre situation, I feel differently about you.” She caressed his cheek with one finger, the stubble tickling the skin of her fingertip. “I can’t seem to help myself.”

“God, I’d love to kiss you, just now.” Cassidy captured her wandering hand.

In a breathless tone, she said, “I wouldn’t mind.” She noted the silent question in his eyes. “You would *not* be taking advantage. Truly.”

“With the lady’s permission—” he murmured, cupping her face between his hands. His gentle mouth nuzzled her hairline. Across her brow he strung a series of sweet kisses like a wispy breeze on a summer afternoon. Lips drifted to each eyebrow, outlining them in quick flickers before reaching her lids. She closed her eyes, lost in a wave of sensation as he seemed to float from one lid to the other, gentling the delicate skin with infinite tenderness.

Several more kisses drifted onto the tip of her nose. Cassidy’s lips brushed the hollow on each side of her nose, whispering, “You are exquisite, Mollie. Exquisite—” He nibbled at her upper lip, then her lower lip, pausing at one corner of her mouth. There, the tip of his

## *MOLLIE*

tongue feathered the flesh until Mollie thought she'd lose her mind with desire.

The rest of the world disappeared. Nothing existed but this seductive man and his amazing mouth. Each nip stoked her desire. Every gossamer touch drove her wild, stirring a fire hotter than the campfire roaring beside them.

She moaned, wondering how such subtlety could arouse such bone-jarring lust.

Cassidy nipped at the other corner of her mouth, then skimmed across her lips with his. The tip of his tongue fondled the fleshy folds of tissue inside her mouth, articulating the passion between them as it swirled against the inside of her cheeks, explored the underside of her palate, drifted across the surface of her tongue—gentle, sweet in its seduction.

Mollie's tongue met his, warmth to warmth, moist membranes curled about each other in a dance of endless delicacy, unbearable craving.

He slowly withdrew until his mouth hovered over hers, leaving Mollie panting with hunger for him.

Cassidy whispered, "More of that and I won't be responsible for my actions."

"I couldn't bear it if you stopped now," she said, her voice trembling. "I want you Cassidy. More than I've ever wanted any man."

Her quivering fingers brushed his lips, stroked his cheeks, raked his thick black hair. Cupping the back of his head, she pulled his mouth onto hers once again.

He groaned against her mouth. This time, his kiss was deep and strong, his tongue assertive as it possessed her mouth. She opened herself to him, allowing him to plunder the corners so sensitized from his earlier exploration.

Abruptly, he pulled away, placing steady hands on either side of her face, sweeping a finger across her cheeks.

## *MOLLIE*

Mollie sensed the restrained power in those hands. With a bit of pressure, he could crush her to death. Instead, his feather-light touch fueled the fire burning in her belly to an uncontrollable blaze.

His sinewy arms swept under her and laid her on the blanket beside the fire. He loomed over her, firelight fondling his sculpted face. His voice was thick with restraint as he said, “I can’t get enough of you. I want to see you, Mollie. All of you. Every inch of skin, so I can adore it as it should be adored.”

Mollie began to unbutton her bodice, but his hands stopped her. “Let me.” With exquisite delicacy, he began removing the myriad of fabric layers encasing her flesh. Each piece was treated with the utmost care and attention, as was the body underneath. Never had Mollie been undressed in such a fashion. She’d had no idea how erotic it was, to be the object of such worship.

Intensifying desire sent sharp stabs to the pit of her stomach and she realized she was on the brink of climax. When Cassidy reached her drawers, she drifted over the sensory edge. As soon as his fingertips brushed the sopping cloth between her legs, she descended into the depths of a rich orgasm that rolled through her body for long seconds.

Closing her eyes, she lost herself in it until she felt the balmy night breeze brush across the exposed flesh of her thighs. She lay naked before him.

He no longer touched her with hands or mouth. Instead, his eyes drank in every detail of her. Mollie watched their inspection, mesmerized by the range of emotions they registered: appreciation, tenderness, desire. She struggled not to squirm, though her insides churned with need. Even without tactile contact, she was close to another orgasm.

“Do you have any idea how amazing you are?” his voice purred, thick with passion. “A treasure to cherish—both your body and your spirit.” He lowered his mouth to hers once again, then nuzzled the hollow of her neck as fingertips swept across her shoulder, down one

## ***MOLLIE***

arm, and brushed across her abdomen. He murmured, “Are you sure, Mollie?”

“I am sure.”

Mollie closed her eyes, basking in the warmth of the campfire, and heat surging through her that had nothing to do with flaming wood. She heard Cassidy move away from her, remove his clothes. When she opened her eyes, he hovered over her.

She looked into his indigo eyes, reveled in the mix of joy and affection she saw there. Her focus swept over his revealed body. Her eyes flew to a scar on his right shoulder. She kissed her fingertips, then caressed the damaged skin with them.

“I’m so sorry you were hurt,” she whispered.

Cassidy clasped her hand and drew it to his lips, then smiled. “It’s all better now.”

She returned his smile, her eyes moving past the evidence of his war wound to take in the rest of his body. Tan, muscled flesh rippled across his rib cage. Thick, sculpted arms reached for her. Below a trim waist, white flesh tapered to a nest of curly dark hair. And in the center of that nest, bobbed a fully erect, magnificent penis, engorged with blood vessels.

He lay beside her, his erection pressing against her hip. Mollie rolled to him, wrapping her arms around his neck, lightly massaging, then scratching his shoulders and back.

She buried her face in his chest, surrounding herself in his warmth, inhaling his musky male scent as it mixed with the perfume of wood smoke. Logs crackled next to them. Mollie turned her head to gaze at the fire just as a piece of flaming wood broke away and fell to the ground, releasing a spray of sparks.

She smiled. *Sparks, indeed.*

His staff pulsed against her abdomen, and she pressed into him.

Cassidy’s fingertips drifted across her back to her waist and down her hips, leaving a trail of sensory perfection. She closed her eyes and

## ***MOLLIE***

reveled in the joy of her body tingling and alive, of his body hard and virile.

He rolled her onto her back, fingertips moving toward her breasts in a slow, circular pattern. Around the fleshy mound they swirled, toward the areola. But just as they came close to the darkened flesh, they swept away to brush around the mounded base once more. Mollie caught her breath as his fingers traced their way toward her nipples again. Ever closer they came to the rock-hard buds, circling in smaller rings until they were almost there...almost...so close...

"Please, Cassidy, please—" Mollie closed her eyes and arched her back, swept away by his teasing, sinking into a world made up only of his hands on her flesh. Juices gushed from her hungry slit.

His fingers trailed a slow, feathery line from her ankles up her calves to the backs of her knees. They began to drift up her inner thighs. Mollie spread her legs for him, juices smearing her skin as her vagina continued to spew forth, hungry for him, desperate for him. His hands moved away, and now Mollie could feel fingertips brushing across her pubic hair ever so slightly.

"My God, Cassidy," she panted. "You're driving me out of my mind!"

"What do you want, Mollie?" he whispered in her ear. "Tell me what you'd like me to do to you."

"Touch me. Touch me, please, Cassidy."

"I've been touching you."

"No, not there," she wailed.

"How about here?" He tweaked her nipples with no warning. Hard. The beautiful pain left her breathless. "Yes. God, yes."

"More here?" Rough thumbs grazed their erect surface again and again.

They moved away. Mollie sobbed at the loss.

"Where else would you like me to touch you, love?"

"You know where. Please, Cassidy."



### ***MOLLIE***

And he did. His fingers caressed her inner thighs once more, but this time, he continued his journey, slowly, gently, moving upward, stroking, fondling.

Fingertips grazed her labial lips, then squeezed them.

Mollie exploded. With a ferocity previously unknown to her, an orgasm swept her away. Her body writhing, she shrieked into the balmy night.

Two fingers pushed inside her and she convulsed around them.

"That's it, my love," he whispered. "Ride the wave of it. Let it take you higher, preparing you for more to come."

His fingers remained deep and still in her channel until the last ripple faded. He swept her into his arms, enfolded her body into his and held her. Soothing hands smoothed her tangled curls, calmed her trembling.

For long moments they lay together. Finally, Cassidy lowered his hands to her hips and pressed her pubic mound to his erection. "Ready now?" he murmured in her hair.

"Oh, yes," she breathed.

He rolled her onto her back once more and lowered his mouth to hers. A long, deep kiss sent renewed tingles through Mollie that intensified as his mouth dropped to her neck and continued its descent to her breasts. He suckled her nipples, then nipped the sensitized rosy buds until she cried out in pleasure and pain.

Cassidy's hands spread her thighs wide and he settled between her legs.

"Enter me, Cassidy," Mollie moaned. "I want to feel you inside me. Please."

His hands rested on her hips, steadying her as his manhood brushed through the drenched, coarse hairs of her slit.

Mollie held her breath.

With a long thrust, Cassidy took her, entering her to the core.

For the first time in her life, Mollie experienced the true joy of

## *MOLLIE*

possession.

He remained deep inside, not moving for a long moment. Raising his head to look into her face, he whispered, "All right?"

She groaned. "I can't...imagine...anything...better..."

A delighted smile stretched across his handsome face. "Oh, my dear. I can make it better."

And he did.

The ripple of silk-encased steel was a slow, torturous pleasure as Cassidy pulled out of her and paused at her threshold. "How would you like it, Mollie? Deep and slow? Fast and shallow? Perhaps more teasing might be fun." He gripped his member in one hand and began to taunt her with it. Gently brushing up one inner thigh to her slit, his member next traveled down the other thigh, only to return to her sodden opening where he rubbed his velvety flesh in the moisture.

Mollie wriggled her hips in a vain attempt to capture him, but he withheld the pleasure. "Cassidy!"

He lowered himself until his mouth hovered by her ear. "You never answered me, Mollie. How would you like it?"

She moaned. "Any way you wish. Please!"

She heard him chuckle. Then, nothing else registered except the rush of blood in her ears as his driving flesh overwhelmed her. Steady and deep, his thrusts set off a symphony of joy resounding throughout her body.

Mollie clamped her legs around his back, lifting her hips to take him deeper.

His blood-engorged rod strafed her delicate tissue, twitched and pulsed in every corner of her channel. Slow at first, his strokes gradually increased in tempo. Fast and faster. Deeper, until Mollie thought she'd break open.

Her arousal had gone past the point of reason. Insane with desire, she grasped his firm hips and wrapped her legs tighter about him. She couldn't get enough of him.

## *MOLLIE*

Vaguely, she grew aware of Cassidy's breathing as it quickened, and she knew he approached his own climax.

Mollie focused on him—his rocking hips, his straining arms propping up his muscled torso, his face a perfect picture of concentration.

She lost herself in rich explosion as Cassidy shot his release deep within her. Mollie convulsed around every creamy drop.

As if a million miles away, she heard the echo of their shouts of joy, joined as firmly as were their bodies.

Afterward, they clung to each other, bodies entwined, hearts pounding chest to chest, breathing as though from one set of lungs.

The stress of the day and night finally took its toll. Mollie lapsed into a blissful sleep with Cassidy's body wrapped around her.

\* \* \*

"He kidnaps women for the troops' sexual pleasures?" Estelle stared at James, shocked to her core as she sank into a Duncan Phyfe armchair. She'd struggled through layers of sleep when James had awakened her minutes earlier. A quick glance at the mantel clock told her it was nearly three o'clock in the morning. But James' words had snapped her to quick attention.

He stood before her, a grim expression on his face, his finely tailored uniform crisp and pressed, despite the hour. "I'm afraid so, my dear. Mollie never stood a chance with Connor. Apparently, he's quite good at what he does."

She ran a hand through riotous black curls, feeling muggy August air pressing down on her. "This source of yours...he's a drunk?"

"Working hard to stay sober, Estelle. I know what you're getting at, but my instincts tell me this man is truthful. And knows what he's talking about. He worked with Connor for the last two years. Had the system down to a science in his head."

"But, you said he was fired by McGee because of his drinking. How reliable could he be?"

## *MOLLIE*

“My men were able to corroborate enough of his story to make me a believer. He’s trying to turn around his life, Estelle. Make amends for what he’s done in the past. I think he legitimately wants to help us any way he can.” James paused. “I’ve decided to trust my gut, just as Salida does hers. And my gut tells me to act on this information.”

“How long has Connor McGee been engaged in this...racket?” Estelle wrapped her violet silk dressing gown tighter around her.

“Since the beginning of the war. Apparently, it’s a very slick, professional operation. He preys on Fancy Ladies because they’re vulnerable. Courts them, lures them to a secluded spot, where he plies them with drugged liquor. I’m betting that’s exactly what he did to Mollie. He will have taken her to an abandoned farmhouse not far from the Potomac shoreline. At a place called White Stony Point. My guess is, she’s still there. He usually holds a woman in the house while he makes arrangements with whatever military unit has offered him the best money for her...services.”

Estelle dropped her head in a cupped hand. If the chair arm hadn’t been propping up her arm, she’d have fallen over. That was how shocked and lifeless she felt. The idea of Mollie in the clutches of a man like McGee, sold to the troops against her will...organized rape. The horror of it took her breath away.

“I’m taking the rest of this night to organize my men and plan our operation. At first light, we’ll go after Mollie.” She sensed rather than saw James kneel before her. “Honey?” he spoke in a gentle voice. “My men and I will do all we can to bring her back safe and sound.”

“I know you will.” Estelle’s voice sounded a million miles away to her.

He leaned over and firmly kissed her on the lips. A minute later, he left, his clanking spurs echoing in the hall. She stared at the empty room, lost in thought. James had never failed her. There was nothing to be done but trust him.

And pray he and Mollie come out of the mess unscathed.

## CHAPTER 6

He kicked the door and it crashed against the wall. One hinge flew into the night.

Fury propelled him inside the crumbling farmhouse.

*Empty.* The bloody place was empty.

Connor flung himself onto a wooden chair and glared into the darkness of deep night. He'd been a fool to trust Cassidy. Instincts had warned him that his brother had not fully revealed his hand. Cassidy had never been interested in his operations in the past. Indeed, Connor had always thought the younger man disapproved of his businesses. Why would he change now?

Damn! He'd been double-crossed by his own flesh and blood.

Was the girl with Cassidy? Probably. The fool had undoubtedly decided to play hero and rescue the damsel in distress.

*Damsel?* Harlot, was more like it.

Connor lurched out of the chair, sending it careening across the refuse-covered wood planks. He kicked an empty Bininger's gin bottle

## **MOLLIE**

out of his way and began pacing. After several minutes, he stopped the agitated movement and focused his anger on a plan.

He was certain the pair hadn't traveled by water. Cassidy was familiar enough with his operations to realize Connor's men monitored the river and byways. But Connor had not made Cassidy privy to every trick up his sleeve. His younger brother didn't know that roadways were watched as carefully as the tangled network of creeks and rivers. That meant the pair had probably traveled by land. It wouldn't be difficult to track them with the information his men would undoubtedly be able to provide.

At first light, he'd ride out.

He'd find them. If it was the last act he'd perform on this earth, he'd find them.

After he got his hands on her, the Daughter of Pleasure would learn a lesson she'd never forget.

As for his brother...the man would live long enough to see Mollie's agony—the agony he'd caused. After guilt had bitten deep into his conscience, Cassidy would learn his own lesson at the hands of a master.

\* \* \*

Mollie awakened to a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Salida, I've told you not to bother me when I'm sleeping."

She heard a chuckle. Definitely not a sound Salida would make. Opening one eye, she saw a handsome, grinning male face with twinkling gentian eyes. She thought it was Connor. Then realized how very wrong that first reaction was.

"Good morning, lovely lady." Cassidy's voice caressed her, easing the memory of the previous day's horrific events that now crashed around her.

Then again, they hadn't *all* been horrific.

Although fuzzy with sleep, Mollie felt desire rise in her gut as she ran her gaze down Cassidy's crouching form. Her focus settled between

## *MOLLIE*

his legs. Even with the fine wool of his riding breeches drawn tight from thigh to thigh, she could make out the outline of his impressive genitalia.

Heat joined desire as she flashed on their steamy liaison the night before. She'd bedded many men in her relatively short lifetime. She'd had them professionally and personally. But the joy she'd experienced with this gorgeous male specimen smiling down on her had been a blissfully unique event.

As if knowing her thoughts, Cassidy said, softly, "I enjoyed it, too."

Unbidden, doubt extinguished Mollie's lust-filled thoughts. She'd trusted Cassidy last night—a risk that appeared to have yielded no negative repercussions. She'd be more careful, now. While her instincts told her Cassidy was the legitimate article, her better judgment told her to keep up her guard. Life wasn't always what it appeared.

Mollie sat up, her breasts escaping the thin woolen blanket wrapped around her. "Is it very early?"

"Not as early as I'd like it to be. We overslept. Sun's been up for more than an hour. Hated to disturb your beauty sleep, but we need to get back on the road."

Panic swelled in Mollie's gut as she acknowledged the significance behind his words. Connor could be pursuing them. In record time, Mollie dressed, consumed a few cold biscuits and hot coffee, and joined Cassidy on the wagon's driver perch. She tried to smooth the hopelessly wrinkled folds of what had been a stylish maroon silk evening gown, complete with lacy tunic overskirt, elaborate beribboned trim, and velvet bows on the shoulders.

Cassidy reined the horses to motion. For long minutes, they navigated the meandering trail in silence. Finally, Cassidy spoke in halting tones. "Mollie, I—I'm getting you to safety this morning. Just as fast as the team can haul us to Washington. Once there, once you're back at Maison D'Estelle, I'd like to see you again. If that's all right with you."

## MOLLIE

Mollie's heart leapt as her mind registered his words. Then, reality swept in, extinguishing her excitement. Pain swirled in her throat as she took a deep breath before responding. "Of course, Cassidy. You'll want to book an appointment with Madam Estelle. There'll always be time for you in my day."

She felt him shift on the wagon seat and one hand grasped her upper arm. Startled, she turned to see anger flicker through the dark sapphire of his eyes.

"Is that what you thought I meant? I wanted to see you as a *client*?"

"It seemed obvious to me—"

"Damn it, Mollie! Last night wasn't a test to see if I wanted to buy your services. I don't play those games. I thought you'd figured that out about me." With a fierce flick of the reins, Cassidy urged the team to a brisk walk.

Heavy silence filled the space between them. Mollie kept her focus away from him, her thoughts tumbling around his last words.

*Could he really be interested in me? Me. Not my services.*

Her surroundings faded as she considered the possibility. He'd been so sweet, so different from Connor. Suddenly, she could see falling in love with such a man. And maybe, just maybe, he could fall in love with—

Air exploded by her head. A bullet slammed into the trunk of a tulip tree next to the road.

"Get down!" Cassidy bellowed, a hand clapped on her back as he pushed her to the wagon floor.

Mollie heard the team whinnying in nervous protest, felt the wagon sway from side to side as Cassidy struggled to bring the horses under control.

Another shot screamed above her, followed by a terse male voice. "You can't outrun me, Cassidy. Not in that rig. Stop the wagon. Now."

Chills rippled through Mollie. She knew that voice.

*Connor.*



## MOLLIE

She felt the wagon slow, then stop.

"And tell that whore to get off the floor. Been too long since I saw her gorgeous face."

"Leave her out of it," came Cassidy's deep, calm voice. "Your argument's with me. Not her."

"Why, how gallant of you, little brother! And how wrong. Actually, my argument is with both of you."

Mollie heard the venom in Connor's voice. Unwilling to make the situation worse, she forced herself to move. Muscle by muscle, she bullied each one until she found herself again seated next to Cassidy. Connor was on her other side, having pulled his horse next to the wagon.

"Well, well, well," he purred. "Miss Mollie as I live and breathe." A mocking smile snaked across his face. "You are a tough one to keep track of, I'll give you that." His smile vanished. "Thanks to a traitor for a brother. Or should I say, *ex-brother*." He leveled his gun at Cassidy.

Mollie gripped the wagon's roughhewn hickory sides, trying to find stability in the midst of a mind-numbing crisis. She felt Cassidy move next to her.

"Don't be stupid," Connor snarled. "You reach for that gun jammed into your boot-top and Miss Mollie is blown to kingdom come. I don't care how much money I lose on the deal. You will pay for your deception. If not with your death, then with hers. Now throw it to the ground."

Cassidy did so, saying, "Let her go, Connor."

"Not on your life." Connor started laughing. "Actually, that's not correct. Because it *will be* your life that is lost, after all." He sighed in mock sadness. "Such a tragic end to a pristine existence, Cass. But, you see, I'm unwilling to cut short my nice little scheme. Wouldn't make any sense at all to end it now, in fact. Too much money to be made. 'Course you never concerned yourself with such crass details as money, did you? Too busy being the war hero. Well, hero, let's see you get out

## MOLLIE

of this tight spot.”

“Just out of curiosity, how did you find us? I thought I’d covered our tracks fairly well.” Cassidy’s voice seemed casual, but steel ran through it. Mollie could only guess what it cost him to achieve such control.

Connor’s smile mocked them. “That’s right. You scouted this area for the army, didn’t you?” He bowed to Cassidy. “Well, brother, you did a fine job of keeping to the back roads. But you see, my men are everywhere. On the water *and* land. Yesterday afternoon, you passed a group of them. They watched you, saw which road you traveled. How you had to backtrack because of the destroyed bridge.”

“The bridge. Your men—?”

“Blew it up? Yep. A few weeks ago, actually. For another operation of mine.”

“Such strategy.”

“They do their jobs. Like this morning, when they reported to me. Told me exactly where you were. So you see, rescuing the fair Miss Mollie wasn’t in the cards for you. I own this part of Virginia.”

Cassidy shrugged. “You’ve caught us, Connor. Nothing we can do, now.” He encircled Mollie with one arm and pressed her to his side. “We are completely at your mercy.”

Connor’s eyes stared at the embrace. “Why, Cassidy! I do declare you’re fond of the whore.”

Mollie became aware of Cassidy’s other hand pulling at the sleeve of his riding coat, then moving to his side. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of reflected light from metal.

She glanced at Connor, his gaze still fixed on Cassidy’s arm around her shoulders. Now, he snarled, “Get down from that wagon. Both of you.”

Cassidy hesitated. A bullet sailed past his head.

The pair descended to the ground as Connor dismounted.

“Come to me, girl,” he ordered.

## MOLLIE

She started moving toward him. As soon as she was within arm's length, he grabbed her, spun her around, and jammed his gun to the side of her head. His free arm gripped her waist with the strength of a vise.

Mollie fought off shudders of revulsion. The slime *would not* see her scared. She'd remain strong for Cassidy's sake. And for her own.

"Stay by the wagon, brother." Mollie winced at the malice spewing past her ear from Connor. *How could I have ever found him attractive?* "Oh, and if you get any foolish notions of playing the martyr to save your newfound love, let me disabuse you of the notion."

He whistled two short blasts. Frozen in place by a gun barrel, Mollie could only discern a blur of activity from her peripheral vision. But she heard them rustling through the scraggly brush on either side of the road. Riders. A sizeable number, she suspected.

"You see, Cassidy? There's simply no role for your heroic instincts to play." Connor sighed. "Pity that. I'm sure you're capable of quite a show when you're riled like this."

Cold metal strafed Mollie's skin as Connor caressed her cheek with the gun barrel. "Now, I think it's time for some entertainment." He nuzzled her ear lobe. Mollie jerked away. A fierce hand held her in place. "Whatever is the matter, my dear? I remember a time when you couldn't get enough of my caresses. Don't tell me an audience bothers you?" He chuckled. "I know for a fact you girls have clients who pay for the bonus of spectators."

"This is low, brother," Cassidy snarled. "Even for you."

Connor sighed again. "Cassidy, you're beginning to annoy me. And you're destroying the mood." He turned to one side and his voice lashed through the muggy air. "Brady, straighten him out, will you? Oh...and Brady? Not too hard. I want him alive to watch what I'm about to do. As for you, dear brother, one move to defend yourself and a bullet blemishes the lovely right cheek of Miss Mollie."

In horror, Mollie saw a man dismount and saunter over to Cassidy.

## MOLLIE

Fists pummeled the younger McGee to the ground.

"That's enough, Brady. I think we've made our point."

Tears sprang into Mollie's eyes as she watched Cassidy struggle to his feet. Blood surged from his nose and mouth as he braced himself. He never made a sound. His searing eyes spoke for him.

"Half those guns are trained on you, my boy," sneered Connor. "Just in case you get any other ideas. But I don't think you will. Because the other half? They're on Mollie."

The gun barrel disappeared from the side of Mollie's head. When she turned to see the expression in Connor's eyes, she half-wished for the return of the gun. His sinister enjoyment, his vicious delight in the pain he was causing, chilled her to the core.

A hand ran down her arm, back up to her shoulder. He yanked her against his body.

Mollie's head snapped back as she found herself trapped in a constricting embrace. Hot fingers pulled at her bodice. She heard a ripping sound and a rush of warm air across her now-exposed back.

Connor pushed her away and grabbed the front of her gown.

*Damn the man!* White-hot anger consumed her. She'd vowed, once she left Tin Cup Alley, she'd never allow anyone to victimize her. No one. Never again.

Though death stared her in the face, she did not hesitate to make the point to the leering thug standing before her. She raised a hand and slapped him across the face.

Connor's answering blow slammed her to the ground.

He was on her in a second. Grinning, he howled in enjoyment. "Damn! I love your spirit. Humiliating you before these men will be *such* a pleasure. You watching, Cassidy? The fun's about to begin."

"I don't think so."

Connor's face jerked toward the strange voice.

Mollie looked up to see Colonel James Goodwin riding toward them, gun drawn and aimed at Connor. At the same time, riders

### ***MOLLIE***

appeared from the forest around the road. At a glance, Mollie could see they heavily outnumbered Connor's cadre.

Mesmerized by the lewd scene playing out before them, Connor's men appeared not to have heard the riders' approach. Not that there had been much to hear. Mollie hadn't been aware of them, and the surprised look on Cassidy's face told her he hadn't, either.

The gang of thugs did not resist the superior force.

Their leader responded differently. He raised his gun.

A bullet lodged in the ground by his side.

"Put down your gun and let her go, McGee," James ordered. "It's over."

Mollie looked past Goodwin and saw the colonel's men disarming Connor's riders.

"The hell it is," barked Connor. He'd risen to his feet. With lightning speed, he fired at Cassidy.

Just as suddenly, he dropped to the ground. A knife wedged in his throat. An anguished cry ended in a gurgling moan as Connor writhed in the dirt.

Mollie looked over in time to see Cassidy still crouched in a throwing stance. Her shocked eyes returned to Connor and trailed down his pain-crazed face to the embedded blade. And its handle.

Elegant carving scrolled across rosewood. The very gift his brother had given Cassidy years before.

Mollie struggled to rise. Strong hands helped her to her feet.

She entered Cassidy's embrace and shut out the rest of the world. With a tragic, ironic touch, the hell was over.

## CHAPTER 7

“I just know I’ll never see him again.” Mollie sighed heavily, slumping in the *Louis Quatorze* chair in Estelle’s drawing room.

“Nonsense, Miss Mollie,” Salida said, rising from her chair to stir the fire with a poker.

“No...no...he’s too good to be true. Men like that just don’t exist!”

Estelle looked over to where James stood by a burgundy velvet-draped window, her heart skipping a beat at the masculine splendor of him in his formal uniform. “Oh, I don’t know about that.” She winked at him. “You mark my words, Mollie. After he attends to family business, Cassidy will get back here as fast as he can.” Estelle smiled at the girl. “Remember, he’s only in Maryland. It’s not as if he has to travel clear across the country to get back to you.”

“Assuming he *comes* back to me,” Mollie grumbled.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that, my dear,” James said. “From what I saw this morning, he cares a great deal about you. And he’s a man of his word, that I *do* know.”

## ***MOLLIE***

“Cassidy needs time to mourn his brother, Miss Mollie. Connor might not have been the nicest man in the world, but he was Cassidy’s flesh and blood.” Salida’s voice held a hint of censure. “He has to make peace with who and what Connor was in his own way.”

Mollie had the grace to look ashamed. “And deal with the fact that he was the one to kill Connor. I know I sound like a spoiled child. And truly, I have no right to. The very quality in Cassidy that makes it important for him to honor his brother is what makes him so...special.”

Salida gave her a quick hug before she resumed her seat on the settee. “You hold to that, honey. It’s very wise of you to realize it.”

Mollie glanced around the room. “I can’t thank all of you enough for what you’ve done. Colonel Goodwin, especially you. If you hadn’t arrived when you did this morning—”

“We’ve been through this before, Mollie,” James said. “You’ve thanked me more times than I can count.”

“I’m still amazed at the whole affair,” Estelle said. “ ’Course, I’ve always been impressed with your sense of timing, James, but you’ve outdone yourself this time.” Estelle smiled at the twinkle in James’ azure eyes.

“I have a good group of men working for me. They know how to run to ground and set up a scouting screen in thick woods. And they know how to do it silently. Have to thank the training McClellan gave them for that.” James shrugged. “All I did was turn them loose to do their jobs. The rest of it fell into our laps.”

Estelle’s smile widened. “Modesty becomes you, my love.” From her peripheral vision, she saw Mollie and Salida exchange grins.

Salida rose and extended a hand toward Mollie. “You know, I haven’t heard all the details of your adventure. Why don’t we go back to your room, have a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me all about it. We have just enough time before dinner.”

Estelle watched the pair leave, then turned to James and grinned. “You’ve had quite a day! Perhaps you’d like to stay here for what’s left

## *MOLLIE*

of it? Have dinner with me?"

He walked behind the chintz armchair where she was seated and began rubbing her shoulders through the semi-Figaro jacket she wore over her cream violet silk gown. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear, "I thought you'd never ask."

Estelle closed her eyes, dreamy contentment wafting over her as James' powerful hands massaged away her tension. "So much to happen in one day. I just thank God Mollie is back to us, safe and sound." She looked back at James. "Is this Cassidy McGee good for her, do you think?"

"I can't claim to be a matchmaker, my dear. But I'd say he will be very good for her. Seems to be as different from Connor as two men can be. And you should see Mollie and Cassidy together. The sparks fly."

Estelle nestled against his fingers. "I know about sparks."

James laughed. "You do, do you? Why, ma'am! Whatever do you mean?" His hands traveled from her shoulders to her breasts. A light caress, and Estelle's nipples rose to fight the silky restraints of her gown.

"That's what I mean!" She giggled.

His lips caressed an earlobe, then he whispered, "Where there are sparks..." He nibbled the tender flesh. "Want to build a fire with me?"

Estelle grabbed his hands and kissed them in turn. "Absolutely."

He rounded the chair and scooped her into his arms. In a heartbeat, he'd gently laid her on the bed and leaned over her, grinning.

Yanking on the lapels of his frock coat, Estelle pulled James until his mouth was inches from hers. "Shall I light the kindling?"

"By all means, Madam Estelle."

"Then lie beside me, Colonel Goodwin, and I'll ignite the match."

James shrugged out of his uniform jacket and pulled off his boots, then joined her on the bed.

"You've left me no challenge," Estelle murmured, starting to



## MOLLIE

unbutton his linen shirt.

“Just trying to help.” He nibbled at her bottom lip.

She giggled. “Trying to complicate my mission is more like it.” She hooted as he blew into her ear. “You really are doing your best to slow me down.” She pulled away and looked up at him through a fringe of eyelashes. “And I *know* you don’t really want to do that. Especially”—she placed a hand over the rock-hard bulge in his officer’s trousers—“when I have such fun planned.”

With deft fingers, she removed his clothes, pausing only to admire his splendid, erect penis stabbing the air the moment it was released. She planted a quick kiss on its tip and resumed disrobing her beloved, then stripped off her own clothes.

Flesh to flesh, their naked skin pressed together as Estelle lounged atop him. She imprisoned his rod between her thighs and squeezed her legs together. “Mmm. Now what is wrong with *this* picture?” She nuzzled his neck. “Want more of my incomparable attention?”

James clasped the back of her head in his hands and pulled her mouth down to his. After kissing her thoroughly, he whispered, “We’d be mighty grateful for whatever attention you care to give us.”

Estelle ran her hands down his sides, rippling hard muscles and taut skin under her palms. She paused at his trim waist and began to trail kisses where her hands had been, rolling off him and lying by his side as she did so.

He groaned, and she smiled at the lust-filled sound. She glanced at his penis still piercing the air. The erect member bulged with blood-engorged veins. She trailed one vein with her finger, from the cleft-ridden crown glistening with pre-come, to the solid base shrouded in wiry, coarse hair. His staff twitched in response to her touch.

Estelle enveloped his penis with her mouth. Fully. Completely. In one, swift motion.

His moan told her she’d achieved the effect she wanted. She released him as suddenly, watching the sodden rod twitch in the balmy

## *MOLLIE*

air.

With gentle fingers, she cupped the base and again lowered her lips to him. This time, her tongue flicked and lashed the silk-encased steel. She closed her mouth around him, suctioning him, squeezing, pulling him until petal-soft skin extended to the breaking point.

James' hips bucked, and Estelle's mouth mirrored his rhythm. Together they danced, joined by a thick root of pulsing manhood. For several minutes, her lips continued to worship his cock, licking and sucking. His testicles strained, demanding to be relieved of their pent-up tension.

With a groan, he released his juices into her mouth, spraying the far corners with a torrent she lovingly accepted. She took her time consuming every drop of his essence. Then, she settled back onto the bed, stretching out next to him.

A contented smiled wreathed James' face. After he'd caught his breath, he said, "You are unbelievable. Have I told you that lately?" He wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her body against his. "Perhaps a reciprocal arrangement is in order." His fingers brushed across the tops of her breasts.

Estelle rolled onto her side facing James, moaning as he twirled one of her nipples between his fingers. Smiling at the sight of the pert, rosy bud, he dipped his head and took it between his teeth. He playfully nipped, while his fingers trailed to her other breast.

She flung back her head and arched her back, granting him greater access, which he gleefully accepted.

"My God," he murmured over her pearly globes. "You are a woman who can drive a man insane."

She skimmed a hand across his broad shoulders and chiseled chest, pausing to entwine chest hair among her fingers. Tugging gently, she whispered, "Then I want to see you out of your mind. Because I will never attend any other man."

Her hand continued its journey across his hips and down to a penis

### *MOLLIE*

once again throbbing with blood and desire. Cupping it gently, she brushed a thumb across the silky tip.

James responded by taking her breasts in both hands and squeezing them together. With nipples side by side, he flicked his tongue from one to the other, lashing them again and again. Back and forth his tongue darted until the twins were glistening and fully aroused. His tongue traveled across the fleshy mound surrounding her rosy buds, slowing to bathe the delicate skin in long, luxurious strokes.

Responding to his unspoken request, Estelle's hands replaced his, firmly pressing her breasts together as she fell back onto the bed, succumbing to the feast of sensory joy he had served to her.

He moved on top of her, placing his swollen member at the base of her breasts. He pushed into the sopping crevice between them, as if it were her passageway, and began thrusting into the small opening Estelle created for him. Strokes shallow and fast skimmed across her chest and she looked down to see his engorged tip jab up to her throat.

With playful intent, she extended her tongue, lapping at the bulbous head when it emerged from the cushion of her breasts. James groaned and rested in place.

Estelle took full advantage of his momentary repose. She circled the tip of his rod, sweeping across the top with lightning-quick precision.

Moving until her lips could draw him into her mouth, she began nipping the satin-sweet skin, worshipping at his altar with the fervor of a true believer. Pausing, she looked up into his face, smiling at the expression of pure bliss that had claimed him.

James renewed his strokes between her breasts as Estelle held herself in place for him. Then, he repositioned himself between her legs. "I owe you, love," he rasped. "And I know just how to pay my debt."

His lips nestled against her labial lips, his tongue beginning to lap at her juices.

Estelle settled back in the bed and widened her legs, loving the

## ***MOLLIE***

sensation of his hot mouth on her throbbing crevice. He flicked her clitoris with his tongue and she jerked against it, scalding desire curling through her core.

James gently blew on the erect bud. His tongue darted inside her, ran the length of her slit, then settled on her bud.

Estelle floated on waves of pure pleasure, wooing her burgeoning orgasm as it drifted on a gentle breeze just beyond reach.

It burst upon her like a gale-force wind, shattering her composure, ravaging her sensitive nerve-endings. Dimly, she heard a shriek and realized it came from her own mouth. It ended in sobs as rich sensations fluttered through her.

Just as she caught her breath, James' manhood slipped through her hot juices and entered her. To the hilt, he pressed into her, then withdrew, only to repeat the stroke.

The rhythm they knew so well encircled them in its ageless grace. Again and again, James immersed himself amidst her vaginal walls. Faster and stronger came his thrusts.

She met him stroke for stroke, opening herself to him, wrapping her legs around him as she urged him deeper and deeper.

James became a white-hot blur, his hipbones grinding into hers, his member buried in her core.

Another climax approached. Estelle sensed James neared his own ecstasy. He paused, then emitted the nectar of his passion deep inside her.

Estelle threw back her head, glorying in the creamy spray filling her.

As James rolled onto his back beside her, his satiated gasps joined hers, filling the quiet room.

\* \* \*

The knock on the door shook Mollie from her daydream. In her hands, she cradled the wolf figurine Cassidy had carved for her. She carefully placed it on a rosewood table by her armchair, calling out,

## MOLLIE

“Just a minute.”

Mollie adjusted her crimson silk dressing gown as she walked to the door and opened it.

Stefan stood in the hallway, a big grin on his face. “Visitor for you downstairs, Miss Mollie. It’s Mr. Cassidy.”

“Cassidy is—oh—Stefan!” She hugged the burly porter, then abruptly released him. “Thank God I don’t have any clients tonight. But...I have to get dressed. I’m a fright. Uh—” She took a deep breath. “I’m assuming Jaxon has begun his program for the evening?”

“Yes, miss. He’s performing with his usual magic.”

“Wonderful. Show Cassidy into the music room, and tell him I’ll be with him presently. Oh, and if any of the other girls so much as look at him, let them know I’m prepared to rip out their hearts.”

Stefan smiled broadly “Yes, miss!” He saluted and hurried down the hall.

Minutes later, Mollie stood outside the music parlor. Through the closed door floated the lilting strains of Bach’s “Prelude No. 1” from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Jaxon was in top form tonight at the Nunns and Clark piano.

She took a deep breath, adjusting her puff sleeves with their lace fall, and smoothed the elaborate satin folds of her violet-blue evening gown. Every lace-trimmed flounce was in order. Because she hadn’t wanted to wait for Bess to concoct one of her elaborate coiffures, she’d elected to comb out her red curls and allow them to flow down her back, held in place with sapphire combs.

*Easy, my dear. This could be the most important moment of your life.*

Mollie stepped into the elegant room. She barely noticed the oriental wall hangings and fine oil paintings. Her eyes riveted to the aristocratic man dressed in evening clothes seated in a mahogany Chippendale armchair. His coal black hair glistened; his muscular torso filled out the frock coat to perfection. Perfectly pressed trousers

## MOLLIE

sheathed crossed legs, shining low-cut evening boots evident beneath them.

But it was his eyes that sent shivers rippling through Mollie. Midnight blue twinkled in light cast by elaborate gasoliers hanging from the decorative plaster ceiling. As the orbs riveted on her, smoldering desire filled them.

He immediately rose from the armchair and walked across the oriental rug, his arms outstretched. "Mollie! How good it is—no, not good—how *wonderful* it is to see you again."

"Cassidy," she murmured, relieved her voice sounded steady.

He glanced at the room's occupants—twenty in all, listening to Jaxon's keyboard virtuosity. "Perhaps we could go somewhere quiet. To talk."

"Of course." She led the way to her room, ordering herself to calm down and *breathe* with every step she took on the Savonnerie carpet. Once upstairs, she opened the door to her apartment and gestured for Cassidy to sit on the emerald velvet settee by the fireplace. "Sherry?" She paused at a marble-topped drop-leaf table by the door, praying her hands were steady enough to handle the crystal decanter.

"No, thank you."

Mollie sank onto the settee beside Cassidy and studied him, almost overwhelmed by the robust maleness exuding him. His brawny frame dwarfed the delicate furniture upon which he sat.

He smiled at her, and a thrill of pure animal attraction swept over her. And something else. A warmer, gentler sensation she couldn't identify.

"You are such a marvelous sight," his deep voice rumbled as his gaze caressed every inch of her. "Even more beautiful than the last time I saw you."

Mollie returned his smile. "Kidnapping and camping hinder a girl from looking her best." She sobered. "Cassidy, I know I've said this before, but allow me to tell you again how sorry I am about all that

## MOLLIE

happened with Connor. What you went through because of me—”

“No, Mollie. That’s where you’re wrong. My brother’s demise was inevitable. If I hadn’t killed him, someone else would have. You can’t play games with people’s lives like he did and not expect repercussions.”

She dropped her gaze to her hands folded in her lap. “I know.” She paused for a long moment, then looked up again. “You saw to his burial and memorial?”

He nodded. “A bit of closure came from it. For that, I’m grateful.” He sat forward, broad shoulders straining against the black wool of his formal frock coat. “Mollie, I’ve done nothing but think about you the last two weeks I spent in Elkton. I may have been attending to my brother’s affairs, but it was *you* who filled my heart and mind.”

He reached for her hand and cradled it in his. “I know we met under...bizarre circumstances, and we haven’t had much of a chance to be together. But, I’d like the opportunity to get to know you. *Really* know you. Without bullets flying around our heads.” He smiled slightly. “May I have that opportunity, Mollie? I want to court you, my dear. Formally.”

Her tension shattered in a rush of joy. She struggled for air. “I...I...”

Cassidy’s smile disappeared. “I’ll understand if you say no, given what my brother did you. We are flesh and blood, after all.”

“No! I mean, yes. I—” Mollie took a deep breath. “I’d be honored to...see...you, Cassidy. More than words can ever express.”

He grasped her hand more firmly. “Do I need to ask permission from Madam Estelle? Or your family?”

She grinned. “That won’t be necessary.”

Cassidy raised her hand to his mouth. His lips caressed her skin and Mollie thought she’d climax on the spot. Memories of their night together returned to her. He with his mouth on her, his hands running down her body, his rock-hard member inside her—

*MOLLIE*

“—our reunion?”

With a start, Mollie realized he'd been speaking. “I'm sorry?”

Flecks of light sparkled in his bottomless gentian eyes. “You didn't hear a word I said. Should I be jealous?”

She shook her head. “The only man in my life is the glorious gent I'm looking at right now. I didn't hear your words because my thoughts were filled with you. “

He chuckled. “I won't complain about that.”

“What was it you said?”

“I asked how you wanted to celebrate our reunion.”

She was certain her wide smile reflected the euphoria streaming through her. “I can think of many ways.”

“Perhaps a reprise of our first night together?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed.

He rose from the settee, sweeping her into his arms as he did so.

He settled her on the lavender-scented bedclothes, then leaned down and kissed her. It was a long, leisurely exploration that left her breathless and aching for more. His hand smoothed her hair, then drifted down her body.

As fingertips caressed the mounded tops of her breasts above her gown, Cassidy murmured, “I was wrong. We have no need to replay the past. Starting now, we will create new, magical nights for ourselves.”

“And each one,” Mollie whispered, “will be better than the last...”



## DELPHYNE DEROUGE

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