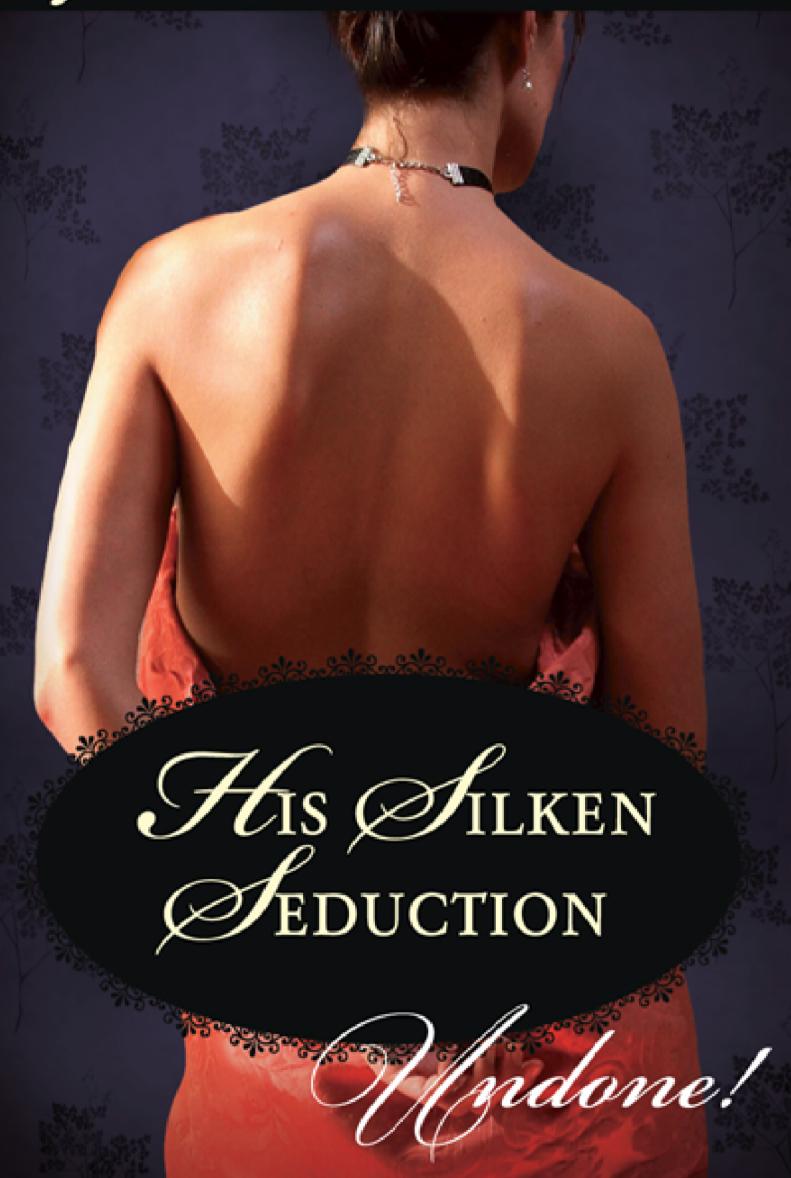
Joanna Maitland



His Silken Seduction

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Chapter One

Lyons, France March 1815

Ben closed his unbandaged eye and relaxed into the feather pillows to enjoy the sensation of Suzanne's hands on his body. As always, she was precise and careful in removing the dressings from his wounds. With his eyes shut, the touch of her fingers on his naked torso was utterly delightful, as if she had laid one of her sumptuous silken velvets on his chest and swept it slowly across his skin. He floated, half awake, half dreaming.

"Mmm." The sigh of pleasure escaped before he was aware of it. His body might be weak as water, but every square inch of it trembled at the mere prospect of Suzanne's touch. He sank deeper into the pillows. His bones were melting.

"Ouch!" The dressing had caught. A stab of pain

shattered the fragile fantasy that had been cradling him.

"Oh, forgive me, Herr Benn," Suzanne gasped. Her fingers stilled for a moment, but it was too late. His shoulder wound had begun to bleed again.

She had been nursing him for a week now, and had even learned that he was an English spy, but she had never asked to know his real name. She seemed content to keep using his nom de guerre, Herr Christian Benn. It was probably for the best. If she were to discover that he was actually an English aristocrat, their comfortable understanding might cease. That would hurt unbearably.

Ben slid his good hand over hers and held it. She did not try to pull away. Ben absorbed the heat of her body through his fingers, like a reptile basking in the sun.

Was that a tiny shiver?

She was refusing to look at him.

In the blink of an eye, the sun-filled warmth evaporated. His fingers felt as if they had been doused with icy water, as if his flesh were shrinking away from hers, even though neither of them had moved.

What on earth was he about? He was behaving towards this amazingly courageous girl as if she were some kind of loose woman. She was his nurse and his rescuer. She deserved better than to be turned into an object of his lust.

He lifted his hand away. "Your pardon, Suzanne," he began in a low voice. "I did not intend to alarm

you."

Her glance flickered to his face and away again. Her cheek was flushed. The delicate rose became her much too well, reminding him yet again of why his body's desires were threatening to overcome his sense of honor.

It must not happen. They had become close by force of circumstances as she dressed and redressed his wounds: the shoulder where the bullet had been so roughly dug out, and the head wound he had inflicted on himself, by staggering from his bed and collapsing on the floor. No matter what he felt for Suzanne—and he was ashamed to admit it was lust—he must not allow her to feel anything for him.

She was a gentle, shy and hardworking girl, with little experience of men. She might too easily come to feel more for Ben than she should. And then what would happen? As soon as he was well enough, he would have to abandon her to continue with his mission. That was his duty. He must make sure she was able to forget him. That was his duty, too.

It was different back home in England. The girls he met there were of his own class. If they chose to flirt, or to swoon over his cursed good looks and the viscount's title he would one day inherit, that was their choice. They knew the rules of the game.

But Suzanne did not know those rules. She was no aristocrat, merely a French silk-weaver's daughter. The game she played was a game of life and death, for she was a royalist in a country cheering the return of

its beloved Emperor Napoléon. Worse, she was hiding and nursing an English spy. She must not be allowed to develop tender feelings for such a dangerous guest.

Soon they would part for good, and Ben must leave her with a whole heart. His honor demanded nothing less.

It was the first time Benn had willingly touched her for two days. And it was something as simple as laying his fingers over hers. Was it a lover's caress? Suzanne could not be sure, but she felt as if her whole being was aglow. Her hand was certainly burning. Her throat was suddenly so tight and dry that she wondered if she would ever be able to speak again. The man she loved was caressing her fingers. The glory of it shivered through her.

And in that same moment he broke the contact with a murmured apology. As if it had been a mistake! No!

She wanted to scream at him, but she was quite unable to make a sound. She could not move, either. She risked a glance at his face. Before, his expression had been open and even gentle, but now there was a shadow of concern. He was troubled. And something more. He wore a puzzled frown, as if he had been presented with a conundrum he could not solve.

Was that how he viewed her? As a puzzle?

He swallowed a sound that could have been a groan. He was in pain! His shoulder was bleeding. Suzanne pushed her doubts to the back of her mind. What mattered now was her role as Benn's nurse.

Love must wait for another day.

Deftly, she eased the rest of the dressing from his shoulder wound. The fresh bleeding had loosened it. She bit her lip as she worked, for it had been her fault. She had been so full of the joy of his touch that she had not paid enough attention to the mundane business of removing his bandages. And so she had hurt him and possibly set back his recovery.

A little voice whispered that she should be glad, for as soon as he was recovered, he would leave. He was a spy, after all, with a mission to fulfill. In her heart, she was betraying her family's royalist cause by wishing to keep him hidden here and under her own care. For a moment, she felt truly guilty, but then her logical mind began to fight back. There was no real urgency. The previous day, Herr Benn's companion, Monsieur Jacques, had left for Paris with Suzanne's elder sister, Marguerite. The intelligence that Benn and Jacques had gathered would presumably be sent to England with all speed, via their embassy in the capital.

What purpose would it serve for Benn to rise from his sickbed to follow them? Nothing of note had happened since they left. Bonaparte was still here in Lyons, basking in the adulation of the crowds, and issuing imperial proclamations, right and left. No doubt he would leave for Paris soon, but Marguerite and Jacques were days ahead of him. They would be safe.

Suzanne eased Benn up from the pillows to pass the bandage behind his back. The tips of her fingers slid

across smooth skin and leashed muscle. Benn was beautiful to look at, with his thick blond hair and his finely sculpted features, but his body was all male—lithe, powerful and hard.

She shivered again.

"Tickling an invalid is unfair, you know." He was grinning up at her. The fine skin at the corner of his unbandaged eye was crinkled with good humor. Was he deliberately teasing her? Could he feel her tension?

She attempted to respond in kind. "An invalid must be kept in his place, sir. Which is under the thumb of his nurse."

Oh dear. Had she gone too far? She quickly secured the bandage round his torso. The bleeding had stopped, thank goodness. "And now for your head," she said, briskly efficient. "I imagine it should be possible to leave off the bandage now. Your wound will heal more quickly if it is open to the air."

"I should certainly prefer to have the use of both my eyes." His French was correct and colloquial, though the foreign accent was unmistakable. He could never pass for a Frenchman. "With two eyes, I am better able to appreciate the view." He grinned at his own wit.

Suzanne ignored it. "It was your own fault for trying to leave your bed." She was trying to sound stern. "And head wounds are extremely difficult to bandage. If I hadn't taken it across your eye, it would have slipped off. All that hair of yours gets in the way, you know. Perhaps I should shave it off?"

"Spare me, lady!"

Their normal, comfortable rapport was back. It was a huge relief. Suzanne smiled primly down at him. "Your trouble, Benn, is that you set much too much store by your looks. It would teach you a well-earned lesson if I did shave your head. Some of it will have to be cut," she added, more seriously. "I dare not wash out the matted blood, for your wound must be kept dry."

"You will do only what is necessary, I know. Teasing aside, Suzanne, I do trust you. Without your care, I could well be dead." He raised his good hand as if to touch her again. It hung suspended for a moment. Then he let it fall back on to his chest. He smiled, but it looked forced. "Do as you will with me, ma'am. I am far too feeble to resist you."

With an effort, Suzanne shook her head at him. They would be together for some weeks more, while he recovered. And resistance was a quality that she had still to learn.

Chapter Two

Two more weeks of caring for Benn had taken their toll on Suzanne. This time, she managed to retain her composure until she reached her own bedchamber, but it was a close-run thing. She locked her door and almost collapsed against it.

What on earth was happening to her? Oh, she loved Herr Benn. She had known that from the first time she set eyes on him. But did love have to bring such weakness of mind and body?

She had simply taken him coffee. It was part of their early morning ritual, but it had never been anything other than very proper. This morning, their fingers had brushed together when she retrieved his cup. It had not been intentional on her side. And on his? He had deliberately touched her hand once before, but she knew he regretted it, for the gesture had never been repeated. She had been so naive at first, so sure that he would return her love. Three weeks of nursing him had proved her wrong. He was polite, friendly and extremely grateful to her, but he had done nothing to suggest that he might one day come to love her.

One day? What was she thinking of? Thanks to her

care, he would soon be healed. In another week, or two at most, he would be gone, traveling alone through enemy France, ready to risk his life for his country and his cause. It was her cause, too, but she was increasingly torn between her devotion to King Louis and her longing to keep Benn by her side. If she had to choose, where would her loyalties lie?

Suzanne clutched her hands together and began to walk back and forth across the threadbare rug, forcing her wobbly limbs to move. She was not a weakling. She was a grown woman. She was capable of taking charge of her family's entire weaving business. So why could she not take charge of her own emotions, her own heart?

Because it is given. It is no longer yours to control.

She gulped, shook her head against that traitorous thought, and dug her fingernails into her palms, in hopes that pain might force her back to reality.

It did not. The pain was real enough, but the siren voice in the back of her mind refused to be silenced.

You have a few days, a week at most, to discover the truth of what he feels for you. Once he leaves Lyons, leaves you, he will not return, unless you prove to him that he has no choice. Now is not the time for missish airs and ladylike flirtations. You can no longer claim the title of lady, in any case. If you want him to love you, as you love him, you have only days to make it so.

Suzanne could have sworn that her inner voice laughed. It was a low, sensuous sound. And it was

followed by soft, seductive words, stealing into her mind and settling like a contented cat.

If you would win all, Suzanne, you must dare to risk all.

She stopped dead and clapped her hands to her ears, trying to shut out the sound. It was useless. The words, the thought, the subtle laughter, all were imprisoned inside her and echoing around the walls of her mind. Such a thought, once confronted, could not be banished, no matter how wicked it might be. Was she really, truly thinking of giving herself to a man she barely knew? Was she ready to forfeit her honor, solely in order to tempt an English spy to love her?

She sank down on to her bed and covered her eyes. She was mad. She must be. It was wrong, wicked, foolish. She sighed deeply. It was all of those things, and yet she still wanted him. For she loved him, beyond reason, even if he could not love her in return.

Heaven help her. She was lost!

There was a soft tap on the door. "Yes? Who is there?" Her voice sounded hoarse and strained.

"It is I, mistress," said the voice of Guillaume, their elderly manservant. He had been with the Grolier family since before Suzanne was born. He knew all their secrets, but he betrayed none of them. "I have something you should see."

Suzanne wiped her dry eyes and smoothed her skirts. A quick glance in the mirror showed her an unusually pale face, but no signs of distress. She took a sip of water from the glass on the night table and

moved softly to unlock the door.

Guillaume's hands were empty. He looked rather furtive. He glanced sideways towards Marguerite's bedchamber, divided from Suzanne's by the locked store of precious silks and velvets. He appeared to be listening for something.

"What do you want, Guillaume?" Suzanne asked impatiently.

He put a finger to his lips and pushed past her into the room, motioning to her to close the door.

Mystified, she obeyed, but she was beginning to be annoyed by his behaviour. "What is it? You—"

"Hush. Not so loud, mistress. He—" Guillaume jerked a thumb in the direction of the connecting door to the silk store "—he must not hear."

Suzanne ignored the implications of that, but she did lower her voice. "What is it that I should see, Guillaume?"

He slid his fingers inside his leather jerkin and pulled out a small packet.

Suzanne's breath caught. It looked like a letter. From her sister? Eagerly, she snatched it from the servant's fingers.

"Slowly, mistress. Look carefully at what you have there."

"What?" Then she saw. It was indeed a letter. The handwriting was Marguerite's. And the seal had already been broken.

Ben frowned, considering. This morning, something

was wrong with Suzanne. She was far from her usual positive self. What could be worrying her? There was a multitude of possibilities. It might be the weaving business, which she had been left to run all on her own since her sister's departure; it might be the antics of the so-called Emperor Napoléon on his triumphal progress towards Paris; or it might be something else altogether. What worried Ben was the fact that Suzanne was refusing to share her concerns. When she returned with his shaving water, he would ask her outright.

Ben shifted on his pillows and winced when pain lanced through his shoulder. His confounded wound was taking far too long to heal. He should have been back on his feet by now and on his way home to England.

That thought gave him pause. There had been no news fi-om Jack and Marguerite. Bonaparte himself must surely be in Paris by now. That could mean real danger for Jack. Oh, if only this cursed wound would heal! If only—

The door opened. Ben looked up eagerly, smiling automatically at the prospect of seeing Suzanne again, even though it was less than half an hour since she had left him. Her presence had come to mean more to him that he dared to admit, even to himself.

But this time it was not Suzanne. It was Guillaume, the old manservant. He was carrying a jug of steaming water and, as usual, his face was inscrutable.

He began to lay out Ben's shaving tackle. "Shall I

do it for you, sir?"

Ben shook his head. "Thank you, Guillaume, but as I am left-handed, I can manage pretty well now. Perhaps you would hold the mirror?"

Guillaume nodded.

Ben began to lather his face. Did the household assume that Suzanne had shaved Ben until now, that she was happy to provide him with such intimate services? Perhaps. There was always gossip, even in a tiny household such as this one, though it now consisted only of Suzanne, her mother and the female servant who nursed her, and Guillaume.

He was doing Suzanne an injustice. She might be only a bourgeoise but she would not allow her servants to comment on her conduct. Only her mother had the right to do that, but Madame Grolier was an invalid who seemed to live in a fantasy world of her own making. She probably did not even know Ben was in the house.

"A little higher," Ben said, picking up his razor.

The servant would not volunteer any information, but now that he was captive, holding the mirror, he might be pressed a little about Suzanne's troubles.

Ben completed a few strokes and made a great play of cleaning the soap from his razor, leaving himself free to speak. "Have you any more news of Bonaparte?" That was a relatively safe question in this royalist household.

"Not yet, sir. He left Lyons the day after you moved in here. There have been rumors aplenty, but

we've heard nothing definite."

Ben muttered something incomprehensible and continued to ply the sharp blade. When he first arrived in Lyons, he had been given a bed in a tiny side-room, opposite Suzanne's bedchamber, so that she could easily tend to his wounds. But after Jack and Marguerite had left for Paris, nearly two weeks ago now, he had been moved into Marguerite's larger bedchamber. Suzanne had made him extremely comfortable and had ensured he wanted for nothing. Except, of course, to hold her in his arms, which was becoming almost an obsession with every hour he spent in her company.

"I'd say Bonaparte must have reached Paris by now." Guillaume paused and grimaced. "Unless he met with some opposition on the way which, I have to tell you, sir, I very much doubt. A turncoat army. Every last man of them."

Ben wiped the razor once more. "Mademoiselle Suzanne must be worrying about her sister. Having no news must—" Ben caught a flicker of something in the servant's face, quickly masked. So that was the way of it. "Having no news," he repeated, "is bound to be unsettling. But pray assure Mademoiselle Suzanne, and Madame Grolier, too, that Jacques is a most resourceful man. He will never allow any harm to come to Mademoiselle Marguerite."

Guillaume frowned over the top of the mirror but said nothing.

Ben carefully scraped the last bristles from his chin.

Soon Guillaume was making ready to leave. "Guillaume, be so good as to ask Mademoiselle Suzanne to step up to see me when she has a moment to spare."

Guillaume turned back from the door and glared at Ben. He clearly thought such a request was inappropriate. Ben's conscience agreed, but that would not stop him. "Tell her, if you will," he added quietly, "that I have remembered some information she will wish to be aware of."

Guillaume looked surprised, but after a moment, he nodded and left.

Ben lay back on his pillows and stroked his newly-shaven jaw with his free hand. He hadn't made a very good job of it, but at least he looked less of a fright than he had when his head had been swathed in bandages and his hair had been matted with blood.

He closed his eyes and tried not to think about Suzanne, but he failed. His body was definitely recovering now, for the very thought of her delectable person was having a marked effect. He swore.

The door opened before he was fully back in control of his body. It was Suzanne. He quickly raised his knees and rearranged the bedclothes. Then he swallowed hard and forced himself to concentrate on his need for information.

"Guillaume thinks that Bonaparte must be in Paris by now. He clearly holds out no hope that the king's army will have remained loyal."

She was standing by the open door. Her eyes were

cast down.

"I know that you are troubled. You are bound to be worrying about your sister, but I can assure you that Jacques will defend her. With his life, if needs be." He paused before continuing in a gentler voice, "Has the news from her given you cause for concern?"

Suzanne started back, shocked. "Guillaume should not have spoken of that. He had no right." Spots of high color flared on her cheeks. She looked as though she were about to rush out of the room, probably to berate Guillaume.

Ben stretched out his left hand to stay her and draw her nearer. "Pray do not blame Guillaume, Suzanne. He did not say anything about a message from your sister. I read the truth in his face. Come, sit down. Tell me. I may be useless as far as physical defenses are concerned—" he nodded down at his bandages "—but there is nothing wrong with my brain. If there is a problem, and if there is anything that can be done from here in Lyons, we will find a way to do it, I promise you."

Chapter Three

Suzanne took a deep breath and stepped fully into the room, pushing the door behind her. How could she resist that outstretched hand? She longed to take it, to clasp it to her heart, but she did not dare. She might love Benn—and her heart would surely break when he left her—but she would not indulge in a missish gesture that Benn would scorn. Or, worse, that he would pity.

At least he had not blamed her troubled mood on that tiny, betraying touch of their hands. Let him continue to think she was simply worrying about her sister.

She raised her chin and looked him in the eye. "Guillaume said you had some information for me?"

Benn dropped his gaze for a second. Suzanne fancied that his color had heightened a fraction, too. What was going on?

"I have to admit, Suzanne, that I, er, misled you a little. I have no new information. How could I have, lying here?" He tried to shrug his shoulders. A mistake. A shadow of pain crossed his face.

Suzanne's heart contracted. She had taken an

involuntary step towards him before she managed to stop. She clasped her hands firmly together. She would not allow herself to touch him, even if he was in pain.

"Suzanne, we need to talk. You cannot continue to bear your burdens alone. Now that your sister has gone to Paris, you have no one to confide in. I know you would not stoop to share your concerns with mere servants."

Suzanne drew herself up a little more and looked down her nose at him. She doubted that Benn had ever faced the sort of hardships that the Grolier family had endured. Benn might be too haughty to trust a "mere servant," but Suzanne and her sister were not. Guillaume had been a rock for their family when more exalted people had deserted them. The Groliers had remained true to their king, at the cost of their family's fortune and status. Benn, as an Englishman, could never understand what the French had suffered through the Reign of Terror and the years of Bonaparte's despotism.

Benn stretched out his hand once more. Then he smiled up at her in a way that touched her heart. She felt a sudden urge to throw herself on his chest and pour out all her troubles. That beguiling smile. Was he really offering to share her burdens?

"You smile, sir. I fancy you do not understand the threats we face. This is France, not England. Traitors, and the innocent as well, are sent to the guillotine in this country. We have had years to learn that trust is not a matter of rank or status. I have trusted my

servants with my life. And with your life, too."

This time, his blush was unmistakable. It made him look very young and vulnerable. The white bandages contrasted starkly with his high color. 'I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle Suzanne," he said formally, bowing his head a little. "I meant no insult, I promise you. But my words were worse than thoughtless." He gazed up at her, his blue eyes wide and apologetic. "Can you forgive me, my dear?"

Suzanne's heart lurched. How was she to resist when he used such words?

She tried to clear her throat. "Let us forget it," she said a little gruffly, fixing her gaze on the wall above his head. Benn was, without doubt, the handsomest man she had ever seen. His spare masculine beauty made her pulses race and her thoughts tumble whenever she looked at him. How was she supposed to keep her wits about her when she was near him? No woman could do it.

Wrong. Marguerite did it.

That rebellious little voice was back inside Suzanne's head, reminding her of her strong-minded sister, who was now far away and in great danger. Suzanne swallowed the fear that clutched at her throat.

With an obvious effort, Benn forced himself up from his pillows and thrust himself forward to grab Suzanne's hand. He fell back again at once, his weight pulling her with him.

"Ouf!" She landed on the edge of the bed in a rather undignified heap. She opened her mouth to rail at him.

He was too quick for her. He gave her fingers a tiny squeeze, which silenced her completely. She felt as if a torrent of steaming water was enveloping her body, starting with the fingers he held in his.

Oh, Benn. Do you have to inflict this torture on me? She wished she had the courage to speak her thoughts aloud. It was impossible, of course. She clamped her lips tight together to prevent any rebellious sounds from escaping.

"You are angry with me," he said softly. "And I admit I have given you cause. But my motives are of the best. I beg you to believe that." He squeezed her hand again. When she did not object—for she still could not speak—Benn's smile returned, then widened. "You may think me only a dunderheaded Englishman who understands nothing of French hardships. And you would be right, at least in part. But what I do understand, Suzanne, is you. You have nursed me for long enough now that I know your ways, your gentleness, your healing touch. I see the kindness in your face when you come to tend me. I see other emotions, too."

Suzanne closed her eyes against his words. What had he seen?

"This morning," he continued, almost without a pause, "I could see how troubled you were. Why, you almost fled from this room. What happened to our companionable conversations over morning coffee?" He grinned teasingly at her. "Why, you did not even remember to take away the empty cups. Guillaume had

to do it later. As if he did not already have enough chores," he added, in a voice of mock reproof. "Shame on you, mademoiselle."

She raised her head, slowly, to look at him. Ben saw that her eyes were huge and sheened with tears. That hurt. He felt as if he had been struck a blow. This remarkable girl was bearing the burdens of her whole family. No wonder she could not respond to his silly teasing. He should be taking her in his arms, stroking her hair and soothing her with sympathetic words. She needed comfort and gentle caresses. But he did not even have two good arms to offer her. He—

Without conscious thought, Ben did something totally foreign to him. Keeping his gaze locked with hers, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Her eyes widened even more. He heard her sharp intake of breath, impossibly loud in the stunned silence. She sat motionless, like a radiant statue wrought from glowing, pink-tinged marble. She was so beautiful that it almost pained him to look on her, knowing that they had only a few more days together and that he would never set eyes on her again once he left this place.

Slowly and very deliberately, Ben turned her hand in his and put his lips to her tender palm.

It was as if the marble had been touched by the finger of some ancient god and brought instantly to life. Her whole body shuddered. She moaned deep in her throat. And her glorious eyes, darkening to almost black, closed against his gaze.

What was he doing to this poor girl? Ben knew he should have been feeling compassion, and remorse for treating Suzanne in such a cavalier fashion. He felt neither. His whole body was exultant that she should respond to him so. Hard, masculine pride surged through him. What he was feeling for Suzanne Grolier was pure, unquenchable desire. And he was beginning to suspect that she might be feeling it, too.

For long minutes, neither of them moved. Ben feasted his gaze on her, seeing for the first time how the tiny tendrils of fine fair hair escaped to curl at her temples and caress her porcelain skin. Her eyelashes were thick and surprisingly dark. They rested on her blushing cheeks like downy feathers, waiting to be blown away by the whim of the breeze-or by the breath of a lover's kiss. Ben raised his lips from her palm and strained forward, as if drawn by an invisible thread. He was going to kiss—

Her eyes flew open. She was shocked. Her lips worked as if she were saying his name, but there was no sound. And then she turned her head away.

The moment was over. The thread was broken. Ben gently returned her hand to her lap, resisting the temptation to allow himself a last caress. His body was now raging with desire. If Suzanne were aware of even half of what he was feeling, she would flee from him in horror. She was an innocent girl, after all, untutored in the base lusts of men.

"Tell me what happened today, Suzanne. Why are you upset?" When she said nothing, Ben knew it was

time to insist. "What has happened to your sister?"

Suzanne remained tense and still for several seconds. Then she crumpled. Her shoulders slumped, her hands went to cover her face, and soon her whole body was shaking with convulsive sobs.

Ben reached out his hand, but let it drop again before it could touch her shoulder. She needed his advice and counsel. Feeding his rampaging lust even further would be of no help at all.

Her weeping stopped almost at once. She was fumbling in her pocket. Ben reached under his pillow for his own clean handkerchief and pushed it into her fingers.

She raised her head, surprised. "Thank you." Her voice was barely a whisper. She wiped her reddened eyes and then blew her nose hard. She had begun to shake her head, in disbelief at her own weakness, Ben decided. Or was it in rejection of him?

She straightened her shoulders and looked at Ben. The handkerchief was a screwed-up ball in her clenched fingers. "There is nothing that you, or any of us, can do," she began in a lifeless voice. "Marguerite sent back the trunk of silks from Paris since she could not sell any there. The trunk was broken open on the way."

"The silks have been stolen?" Ben knew the damage such a loss would do. The family needed every sou that the sale of their wares could bring. Marguerite had been foolhardy to entrust her silks to a carrier in such dangerous times.

"No. Nothing is missing."

"I'm afraid I don't understand." He frowned a little and would have touched her if he dared, to show her the depth of his concern. But that was out of the question, for his body would go up in flames.

"No, how could you?" She sounded strange, as if she were talking to someone else, someone invisible. "The trunk has two keys. Marguerite carries one when she travels. The other is kept here. That way, if the trunk must be sent by carrier, we can be sure that its contents have not been tampered with."

This was all extremely odd. Had she not said, just a moment ago, that none of the precious fabrics had been stolen?

Before he could say a word, Suzanne continued in that same thready voice. "They broke open the trunk, but they took nothing. What they wanted was Marguerite's letter. They broke into that, too."

Ben's heart began to beat very fast. Now he *did* understand. What on earth had possessed Marguerite to enclose a letter? And what was Jack about, to allow her to do such a thing? One indiscreet word could be the death of them all. They would—

His logical mind reasserted itself. There was a strange mystery here. "How do you know there was a letter, Suzanne?"

Her hand went to the bosom of her plain muslin gown. "It was still in the trunk. But the seal was broken. I fear we are lost."

Ben smiled reassuringly. "How long is it since the

trunk arrived?"

"What? Oh, several hours, I suppose. It would have arrived at the coach office last night, but it was not delivered until first thing this morning. I don't see that the timing changes anything." She was fighting back now, and sounding much more like her normal self.

"It changes everything, my dear Suzanne," Ben said firmly. "If Bonaparte's agents were going to arrest us all, they would have done so by now. 'Strike while the iron is hot' as the proverb goes. And why would they have left you the letter, knowing that you would understand the danger as soon as you saw the broken seal? No, trust me when I tell you that they will not come."

Her eyes widened, and she clasped her hands together. Then her mouth opened just enough to allow the tip of her tongue to moisten her lower lip. Ben recognized it for an unconscious gesture, born of anxiety, but the effect on him was electrifying. It was the most sensuous move he had ever seen. Desire flooded through him, all over again.

Suzanne seemed to notice nothing. "But it must have been Bonaparte's agents," she protested. "Thieves would have stolen the silk and ignored the letter."

Ben forced himself to respond to her words and not to her distress. 'You are right about the thieves. And you are right to assume that Bonaparte's men broke into your trunk and read your sister's letter. Then they were arrogant enough to send you both trunk and letter. They want you to know what they have done." "So they *do* suspect us!"

"It is more likely that they simply want to display their power. They want you and all the people of Lyons to be afraid. They know there are royalists in this city, so they are sending a very clear message—everyone is a suspect, everyone's possessions can be searched at will, and no one is safe under Bonaparte's law." Suzanne's pale skin was turning ashen at his words. "But in this case, your sister's letter has passed their test. I am sure of that, Suzanne. Tell me, what did she say?" He had convinced himself, by his own hard logic. But could he convince poor Suzanne?

She began to speak, but she soon faltered. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and drew a folded paper out of her bodice. "I think it is best if you read it for yourself. I assumed we were all betrayed. Perhaps you can assure me that I am wrong? I hope so."

Ben took the letter and unfolded it carefully. The paper was still warm from its contact with Suzanne's body. There was just the faintest scent of the lavender in which she stored her clothes. It lingered in the back of Ben's throat like the perfume of the finest wine. And one mouthful was not nearly enough.

Ben tried to concentrate on the letter. It was short. And it was very cleverly crafted. Had Suzanne been so shocked by the broken seal that she had failed to notice that? Marguerite had given nothing away, not even her own name, but there were hidden messages here,

nevertheless. She was going to visit someone she referred to as "the curé." She mentioned the possibility of a visit to the coast. What did she mean by these tantalizing references? Was she planning to help Jack to escape to England? Ben could see no other explanation.

"Who is the curé your sister speaks of? Do you know where he lives? She says that is where she is going. She makes no mention at all of Jacques, but I assume that he will go with her."

Ben's factual questions seemed to restore Suzanne's normal poise. "I was not sure at first. Then Guillaume reminded me. There was a curé, Father Bertrand, who, er, who knew our family well in the old days. But he had to leave Lyons during the troubles. Guillaume says he went to Normandy. A village somewhere near Rouen, he thinks."

"Ah. I see." The tension began to leave Ben's shoulders. 'Your sister is a brave and resourceful woman, Suzanne. She is telling us, through this subtly coded letter, that she and Jacques are making for the coast so that he can take ship for England." He grinned at her, feeling more than a little smug at having deciphered Marguerite's code where Suzanne could not.

"But why on earth should he do that? Jacques's place is here, alongside his fellow royalists, fighting for our cause. You must return to England, Benn, but you are English. Jacques is a Frenchman."

Ben knew, in that instant, that his face had given

him away.

"Dear God!" Suzanne exclaimed. "You gulled us all. Your friend Jacques is another English spy!"

There was no point in denying it. "You are right, of course," he conceded, trying to keep his tone light. "The only difference between us is that he can pass for a Frenchman, and I cannot. Jacques's—Jack's mother is French, you see," he added, with a rueful smile.

"And 'Jack' is his real name." It was not a question.

Ben did not reply, which was confirmation in itself. He had told Suzanne quite enough now. It would be dangerous for her to learn more.

Her next question surprised him. "But what about Marguerite? Her English spy—this two-faced Jack of yours—will abandon her and sail back to his own country. She will be left alone, and in danger. Oh, war is cruel to treat poor women so. And English spies are heartless." She rose and turned her back on him, hurrying for the door.

"Don't go. Please, Suzanne." The words were out before he knew it. He took a deep breath, fixing his gaze on her straight, tense back. "Jack is an honorable man, Suzanne. He knows how much he owes...how much we both owe to you and your sister. I know he will ensure that Marguerite is safe before he leaves. If not with the curé, then somewhere else. He would never abandon her. As I could never abandon you."

She spun on her heel to confront him. But it was no true confrontation. Her face was more flushed than he had ever seen it. Her eyes were sparkling with unshed tears. Ben fancied that her hands were shaking.

"Never?" Her voice was shaking, too.

For a heartbeat, their eyes locked. Then she turned and fled from the room.

Chapter Four

There was no going back now. He must continue with his mission—he had no choice there—but he was now bound to Suzanne Grolier by ties of honor. Somehow, he would have to find a way of ensuring her future safety and her comfort. That was not what he really wanted, of course. What he really wanted was to take her in his arms, to feel her lithe, strong body under his own, to show her what passion could be between a man and a woman.

It was out of the question. He knew that. She was no loose woman, but a solid bourgeoise, the daughter of an honest trader. She was not of Ben's class, but she was not of a class that he could trifle with, either. It would be dishonorable for Ben to seduce any girl of the bourgeoisie. With Suzanne, it would be even more unthinkable, for he had now pledged himself to protect her.

He should think of her as a sister.

That made him laugh out loud, so much so that a shaft of pain tore through his wounded shoulder, a telling reminder of the risks he ran by acting without careful thought. Before Jack left for Paris, he had been

rash enough to swear on the Grolier family bible that he would treat Marguerite as a sister. Ben wondered whether Jack would have been able to resist the temptation. Marguerite would make a luscious armful and, unlike Ben, Jack had two good arms to wrap around her.

Ben tried to push that sensuous image from his mind. Lying here, in Marguerite's room, injured and idle, was doing him no good at all. He needed something to do—to keep his mind busy and away from lustful imaginings.

He would make a start, right now, by getting back on to his feet.

Suzanne was refusing to think about what Benn had said. She told herself she had far too much to do, finishing her accounts and sorting out the precious fabrics fi-om Marguerite's trunk. She was glad she had asked for Guillaume's help with that. Although he said little, his company was comforting.

She piled the last of the parcels into his arms. "Take these upstairs, please, Guillaume, and stack them behind the door. I will lay them out properly when I have finished with the accounts."

"I shall need the storeroom key."

Suzanne picked up the bunch of keys from the office desk, removed the one for the little door on the landing and dropped it into Guillaume's pocket. "Try not to make too much noise, please. Remember there is only a thin partition between the silk store and

Marguerite's chamber. Our...guest may be trying to sleep."

"As you say, mistress." Guillaume left, carrying his load. Was he going to heed her instructions? There was no way of knowing.

Suzanne sat down behind the desk and tried to concentrate on the column of figures she had been adding up. Guillaume would be in the silk store by now, just a few feet from where Benn lay. If she had taken the silk upstairs herself, instead of sending the old manservant, she could have unlocked the connecting door between the silk store and Benn's room. She could have gazed at his beautiful sleeping body. If he were awake, she could even have spoken to him. She could have—

Spoken to him? What on earth could she have said? Pray, sir, what did you mean when you said you would never abandon me? And how long is "never"?

She threw down her pen. Whatever Benn had meant by those hasty words, it certainly would not include either love or marriage. Had he perhaps been thinking of the danger they were all in and of the debt he owed to the Grolier sisters for sheltering two English spies? Once Bonaparte was finally defeated—for that blessed day would surely come—there would no longer be any need for protection. The English spies would return to their comfortable life. And the Grolier sisters would return to their daily grind at the loom.

She stared down at her desk. Even the simple figures in her ledger seemed to be tinged with gloom,

as if a fine grey gauze had been thrown over everything. The future that stretched before her was far from appealing. She knew she would probably end her days as a worn-out old spinster who had never known the joys of marriage and children, a dried-up husk who had never been loved.

Your future is your own to decide, Suzanne.

Her inner voice was back. And at the most inconvenient time. She did not wish to be reminded of all that she had lost.

Marriage and children may not be for you to decide, but love can be sought and found in other ways. Your future lies in your own hands.

Suzanne jumped to her feet and began to pace. She allowed herself the indulgence of a few choice curses, though only under her breath. They helped to drown out the sound of that inner voice. It was tormenting her, sketching a tantalizing vision of things she could never have. Still, *one* thing was true. She was mistress of her own life. And although the Groliers had lost land and status in the Revolution, they had not lost everything. Unlike some, Suzanne had not been reduced to abject poverty. She knew she had much to be thankful for. She might have been forced into menial service-or worse.

She took a deep breath and smiled round at the silent room. It was functional, but comfortable. In Marguerite's absence, Suzanne ruled here. She could make her own decisions. She would choose to ignore Benn's strange promise. Since he would be with her

for only a few days more, she would live every second of the time they had left. To *the full*.

Once he was gone from her, she would have only memories. She was free to choose to make those memories the sweetest they could possibly be. And she would. She would show him a smiling face and a glad heart, and she would live for the moment, no matter what he said or what he did.

Still smiling, she sat down once more and picked up her pen. In her new and composed state of mind, even the columns of figures did not dare to rebel.

Days of hard, painful effort had made a great difference to Ben's physical state. Although his shoulder was still not fully healed, he was able to use his right arm quite a lot, but only with caution. Soon, the bandages would be removed for good and he would be almost back to normal. Unfortunately, that also meant that Suzanne would cease to visit him here in his bedchamber.

To be honest, she should have stopped doing so already, in fulfillment of a promise to her sister. She had agreed not to spend time alone in Ben's chamber once he was back on his feet. Which he now was. Ben was proud that Suzanne had shared that confidence with him, but he had not been equally frank with her. In fact, he had taken the greatest care to hide the truth. As far as Suzanne knew, he was mending remarkably slowly and was still much too weak to rise from his bed.

A minor deception, Ben assured himself. For a very good cause.

It was not that he was about to break his pledge to ensure Suzanne's future. He was determined not to fail her there. Nor did he plan to take advantage of her during their short times alone together. It was more that those times had become so very pleasant of late. He still revelled in the touch of her hands on his skin, but he had also learned to appreciate her sharp brain and her lively sense of fun. Scarcely a day passed without gales of laughter filling his bedchamber. That had helped him to forget the dangers surrounding them all. He knew he would treasure those moments once he had resumed his spying role, far from Lyons.

That would now be very soon.

"Mistress!" Guillaume burst into the office without bothering to knock. His face was full of alarm.

Suzanne rose quietly to her feet, doing her best to disguise her concern. She was in charge of this little household. It was her duty to remain calm and businesslike. "Goodness, Guillaume," she said, a little testily, "since when have you forgotten how to knock?"

He stopped short. His weather-beaten skin could not conceal the color that flooded into his face. It was a very long time since he had had to be reprimanded by anyone. Whatever his news, it must be important.

"What has happened?" she asked, rather more encouragingly.

"Mistress, I must warn you that the house is being watched."

Suzanne's breath caught in her throat, but she managed to keep silent.

"One of Bonaparte's agents is lurking on the other side of the street, two houses down."

"But how do you know he's an agent?"

Guillaume smiled grimly. "He's become very free with his opinions since we heard the news of Bonaparte's triumphant entry into Paris. I suspected him before, I may tell you, but now there's no doubt. He's watching our street. And he may be watching ow house. We can't be sure, but it's best to assume the worst."

Suzanne looked over her shoulder towards the window. "Can I see him from here? It would be best if I knew exactly what the enemy looks like."

Guillaume nodded. "I knew you would not be afraid to fight, mistress." Then, as Suzanne started for the window, he said, "You'd be best to look from Mademoiselle Marguerite's window, upstairs. If you look from here, he may see you and realize he's been rumbled. We don't want to risk that. They might replace him with someone we don't recognize."

Suzanne grinned at the servant. "You are a fine old schemer, Guillaume. I am glad that we are fighting on the same side."

He shrugged. 'I only wish we knew more of what the Bonapartists are plotting. That way, we might be able to forestall them.'' "Well..." Suzanne paused, thinking. To her surprise, she was not afraid. She felt as if her blood was all afire. If she had been a man, she would have been buckling on her sword for the coming battle. But she was only a woman, so she would have to find another way. "Tell me, Guillaume, do Bonaparte's agents know where your sympathies lie?"

"No, of course not."

"Forgive me for seeming to doubt you. I had to be sure. Now, are you prepared for a little spying on your own account?" When he nodded, she smiled broadly and told him exactly what she wanted him to do.

Suzanne was humming to herself as she raced up to Marguerite's room. Guillaume had provided her with the perfect excuse for visiting Benn, though she had no intention of telling him that the house was being watched. Such disturbing news would merely serve to frustrate him. Poor man. It was taking such a long time for his wounds to heal.

She reached the door and raised her hand to knock. What if he was asleep? She put her ear to the door. Nothing.

There was another way. Taking her keys from her pocket, she unlocked the door to the silk store that had been created in the gap between the walls of Marguerite's bedchamber and her own. There was no window inside, of course, and she had not thought to light a candle so early in the evening. So she unlocked the door that led from the store into her own

bedchamber and threw it wide. Light flooded in. A stray beam caught some fine red silk shot with silver, making it glitter like a spider's web hung with dew. She smiled with satisfaction. She had woven that silk with her own hands.

He had to do something. But what?

Ben continued to walk quietly up and down between the bed and the window. He was safe enough for the moment. He was sure he could not be seen from the street below, and he had taken care to step softly so that no one in the house would suspect what he was doing. Regular exercise had made his legs almost as strong as before, and his upper body was improving, too. He paused for a moment to swing his right arm, which still hurt him whenever he raised it above his shoulder. He was relieved to find that the pain was becoming bearable at last.

He could enlist Guillaume's help, though he doubted that even the two of them could deal with this danger. The watcher opposite might appear to be alone, but there were bound to be others, probably quite close. In a busy city street, a pistol shot would be worse than useless. They could try kidnapping the man, but that might bring even more of Bonaparte's agents down on them. They might start to search from house to house.

No, the solution was to watch and to wait. Ben had to ensure that nothing happened to draw the watcher's attention on to the Grolier house.

He risked one more glance into the street. The watcher was still there, but making no effort at concealment. Perhaps he was not a spy after all? Ben shook his head at his own naivety and continued with his furtive exercise program. It was safest to assume that the watcher was a spy unless there was proof that he was not.

A slight noise startled him, breaking his train of thought. Was someone there? He was safe enough, he knew, for he had locked his door before starting his exercises. He would tell his visitor to return later, by which time the door would be unlocked and he would be safely back in his bed, to all appearances still an invalid.

Suzanne was still smiling as she relocked the door to the landing and turned to unlock the door to Benn's bedchamber. First, she listened again. This time, she fancied she could hear some kind of movement, but it was strangely muffled. He must be awake after all, but what on earth could he be doing? If she opened the door, would she see something that would embarrass them both?

Taking care to make no noise, she inserted the key into the lock. She hesitated. Did she dare?

Of course she did. Their house was being watched by the enemy. They might all be arrested at any moment. She and Benn might never have another chance to be alone together. Compared with that, what was the risk of a little embarrassment? She turned the key, rapped a quick warning knock on the wood and opened the door a little way. "Forgive me, Benn, I—" She took one step into the room and stopped dead. "Why, you—!" She felt the blood rushing to her face. "You charlatan! You trickster! There is nothing wrong with you at all!"

Benn was not lying in his bed, weak and suffering, as she had expected. He was barefoot, wrapped only in a skimpy sheet, and walking very softly up and down his bedchamber. As he walked, he was stretching and flexing the muscles of his injured shoulder and arm. Suzanne's carefully applied bandages and the sling she had fashioned were hanging loose against his naked torso.

He had played her for a fool!

Chapter Five

Ben was shocked to see the locked door in the middle of the side wall swing open. Suzanne stepped into the room, and seemed to take in the situation at a glance. Her face became flushed with anger, overlaid with humiliation at the way she had been deceived. He could not blame her.

But when she started to rage at him, her voice rising with every accusation, he knew she had to be stopped before the suspicions of the watcher below were aroused. Since she had now given him the best possible excuse for yielding to his baser instincts, he simply pulled her against his body and kissed her, hard.

She squirmed against him, trying to free herself, but without success. Ben might not yet be fully fit, but he was still much stronger than Suzanne. He was certain that she was not afraid, however. She was much too angry for that.

He wrapped his arms more tightly around her body, ignoring the pain that nagged in his shoulder. It was worth a little pain to hold her. The warmth of her glorious body against his bare skin was sheer delight,

as was the subtle scent of lavender on her clothes and in her pale gold curls.

"Mmm." A groan of pleasure escaped him. It was the last thing he had intended.

That sound had a strange effect on Suzanne. First, she stopped trying to break free, and then she slid her arms around Ben's waist. What had been anger seemed to be turning into desire. Instead of fighting his kiss, she was returning it, and with more innocent passion than Ben would have dreamt possible.

He groaned again, as he gentled and then deepened the kiss. He had never known anything like this. It was as if he were drowning. Everything else was forgotten, everything except his driving need to taste her luscious mouth and to show her the pleasure that mutual passion could bring.

When he touched the tip of his tongue to the tender flesh inside her bottom lip, he felt a great shudder run through her whole body. She reached up to put her arms around his neck and pull his mouth closer to hers.

"Argh!" Ben's cry of pain was swallowed in Suzanne's kiss, but it broke the spell of their mindless desire. They pulled apart, both gasping for breath and beginning to gabble apologies.

"I hurt you. I'm sorry, I—"

"I'm sorry, I should not have—"

They stopped in the same moment. And then Suzanne began to laugh, a joyous sound that somehow reminded Ben of pealing bells under a pure blue sky. The picture was perfect. Just like Suzanne.

Ben touched a finger to her cheek. Her eyes widened. Her laughter died away, leaving her lips curved in a knowing smile.

"Forgive me," he said quietly. "I should not have done that. But you were starting to scream at me and I had to stop you. There is a man down below—"

"How did you find out?" she exclaimed sharply. Her smile had vanished.

Ben eased his left arm round her shoulders and began to stroke the top of her arm. She did not resist. She even leaned towards him, as the tension began to leave her. 'I am a spy," he said simply. "It's my business to keep watch."

"Even when you're supposed to be too ill to rise from your bed?"

"Even then." He dropped a gentle kiss on her forehead and let her go. Then he crossed to the window and glanced out. "He has gone. The danger is over. But I do apologize for having deceived you. I assure you I meant no harm."

"What you *meant*, sir, was to entice me into your lair, to get me into your power so that you could...you could..."

"So that I could...?" He grinned wickedly at her.

"Oh, you are a wretch, Benn. You know perfectly well what I mean. You simply wish to put me to the blush." She put her hands to her hot cheeks.

While what she said was perfectly true, she was completely ignoring the most obviously improper aspect of this strange tête-à-tête—that Ben was

wearing nothing but a thin folded sheet, tied around his middle. He ought to ask her to leave so that he could make himself decent, but after that mind-shattering kiss, he was quite incapable of letting her **go**. If she could treat a nearly naked man as if she were meeting him in a drawing room, who was he to object?

"I apologize, Suzanne. I shall now attempt to make amends by changing the subject. Tell me about your silk store. I presume that is where this door leads? I did try it several times, but it was always locked."

"Of course. It would have been improper to have it otherwise, since there is another door on the far side which leads straight into my bedchamber." She pulled the door wide. "See?"

The silk store was a dark, narrow room, little more than a wide corridor. Immediately opposite the door into Ben's room was another. It stood wide open, letting in the light fi-om the bedchamber beyond. Ben could see the end of a bed, and a delicate lace-edged nightgown lying across it. He tried not to imagine how Suzanne would look when she was wearing it, but it was all too real. The fabric was as thin as gauze.

Goaded, Ben marched smartly into the store and pulled Suzanne's door closed. He was suffering enough temptation already, with Suzanne standing beside him, fully clothed.

When he returned to his room, she was frowning at him. "I thought you were interested in our silk."

"I was. I am. But with my door open, there is more than enough light. Will you show me the wonders you have created? I would welcome a chance to admire your skill before I leave Lyons."

Her expression froze for a second, but then she smiled brightly at him. "It will be my pleasure," she said in a rather brittle voice. "Though some of the work is Marguerite's, not mine."

Ben stood back to let Suzanne precede him into the silk store. Her walk was unconsciously alluring. He found he could not take his eyes from the seductive sway of her hips. The folds of her light muslin skirt were opening and closing with a hypnotic rhythm, like an oyster responding to the ebb and flow of incoming waves. This oyster concealed a pearl, for she was a pearl of a girl. She should be gowned in silk and lace, not workaday muslin, he decided. Her lustrous beauty should shine against a backdrop of the finest fabrics.

He followed her into the depths of the silk store. In seconds, he found he was shivering.

She turned at that moment. "Oh, how stupid of me," she exclaimed. "It is cold in here and you have nothing to keep off the chill." She looked round the storeroom, but there were neither blankets nor shawls, only the finest silk and velvet. She allowed a tiny smile to tug at the corner of her mouth as she reached for a bolt of dark blue velvet. With a practiced flick of the wrist, she unrolled the sumptuous cloth. "That will do, I fancy. Light as a feather, and warm enough. Also delicate enough to ensure that no weight will fall on your poor wounded shoulder," she added, with a note of sarcasm in her voice.

Without giving Ben a chance to object, she slipped behind him and draped the velvet around his body like a cloak.

She was right. The velvet slithered across his skin like a caress, yet it weighed no more than gossamer. But it was much too beautiful for a man to wear, especially a man hung with coarse bandages.

Suzanne stepped round in front of Ben to assess the effect. "You should have a lighter blue, I think." She cocked her head to one side. "Something closer to the color of your eyes." She gazed round at the stored fabrics, but all the velvets were of rich, deep colors. She sighed. "A pity." Then her face lit up. "Perhaps a contrast is what we need," she said, with a distinct laugh in her voice. "I wonder..."

Ben watched, bemused, while she selected a deep red silk fi-om the shelf by the door. She whisked the velvet fi-om his shoulders. Then the useless bandages were plucked away and dropped on to the floor. "Raise your arms, if you please." She could have been a mantua-maker, giving a fitting to a lady customer.

Ben wanted to laugh. What on earth would this amazing girl do next?

She surprised him yet again. She began to wind the silk tightly around his body so that it covered him from chest to thigh. He was no longer at risk of shivering. He was now much, much too hot. The evidence of that was embarrassingly plain, in spite of the layers of sheet he still wore next to his skin. The outline of his erection was blatant, painted in the bright accents and

dark shadows of rippling red silk. Oh, the woman was a witch! But it was what she wanted. He could not deny her. He remained motionless, waiting.

Suzanne looked at her handiwork and laughed softly, deep in her throat. The temptation had been overwhelming. And the result was more than satisfying. Indeed, it was splendid.

She allowed her gaze to roam over her captive's body. The pale skin of his muscled shoulders was marred by the black and purple bruising around his wound. Apart from that, he was beautiful. The gleaming silk emphasized the strong lines of his chest. Lower down, she had pulled the fabric taut to show off his narrow waist and hips. The additional effects there were unintended, but altogether delightful to behold, even for a girl who lacked firsthand knowledge of the ways of desire.

She chuckled again, wondering whether Benn had any idea of quite how irresistible he looked. Just then, the light changed. Perhaps the clouds had parted? Whatever the cause, Suzanne would have been ready to swear that there was white lightning forking around Benn's erection, rather than common silver threads.

She took a step towards him and brushed the back of her index finger along that straining ridge. His sharp intake of breath urged her on. She smoothed both her hands slowly around his middle, from his navel to the small of his back, and then down over the swell of his buttocks. It seemed he could not move. He groaned out her name.

The sound shivered all the way down to her toes. If she continued now, there could be no going back.

She did not hesitate. She leaned in to him and pressed her body along the length of his. She could feel the sparks jumping between them; the lightning was piercing her, too. Deep in her belly, there was now a hot, melting ache.

"Oh, God, Suzanne. I cannot—"

"Hush." She stopped his protest with a long, drugging kiss. She could not tell him that she loved him. Not in words. Her kisses would have to speak for her.

It seemed they had. Benn's fingers were already at the back of her gown, seeking to undo it. A bubble of laughter began welling up inside her. Had he been too busy spying to notice that modern gowns fastened at the front?

"Ouch!" He had caught his finger on a pin. Automatically, he pulled away from her and put his finger to his mouth.

Suzanne gave her laughter free rein for a second, but Benn did not join in. Did he think she was laughing at him? She reached for his hand. Yes, there was a tiny drop of scarlet on the tip of his ring finger. "We cannot risk this on the silk," she murmured, carrying it to her lips. His blood tasted sweet on her tongue. She sucked again, then nipped his skin with her teeth.

"You are entrancing."

Suzanne placed his hands on the front of her

bodice. Then she closed her eyes. She wanted to glory in the touch of his fingers as he undressed her. She wanted to picture it in her mind's eye, as if she were watching his every move through a mirror. He was slow and deliberate, carefully removing every pin and smoothing out every tie. She swayed a little when her petticoats joined her gown in a heap of froth around her feet.

He took both her hands in his. "Will it please you to step out of your muslins, lady?"

Suzanne smiled dreamily. She had no need to see, for she trusted the hands that supported her. She took two steps forward. Apart from her stockings, she was now wearing only her stays over a fine lawn chemise. If she opened her eyes now, if she saw how he was looking at her, she would probably blush to the roots of her hair. Better, much better, to remain in comforting darkness.

He stumbled backwards against a shelf of fabrics. Bolts of cloth began to roll on to the floor. Startled, Suzanne opened her eyes. Hampered by the tight silk around his body, Benn was trying, and failing, to catch the precious materials before they landed. He was muttering under his breath. English curses, she supposed, glad that she could not make out the words.

She crouched down quickly and began to gather up her fallen treasures. There was little harm done. The floor was clean.

"Forgive me, Suzanne. My confounded clumsiness. It always catches me out, just when I most want to

appear in control."

She lifted her head just enough to gaze up at him through her lashes. She hoped she looked as seductive as she intended. "You wish to be in control now?"

"Yes."

"Of yourself?" She waited for a beat. "Or of me?" His only response was a groan.

Suzanne rose. It took only seconds to restore the fabrics to their places. She picked up the cutting shears from the end of the lowest shelf and offered them to Benn. Her stay-laces could only be loosened by nimble fingers, which Benn clearly did not have. And, in any case, it would take much too long. The ache in her belly was urgent.

He was staring at the scissors in his hand as if he had never held such an implement before.

Suzanne put her fingers over his. She leaned forward so that the bare skin of her throat and upper bosom was touching his chest. "I need you to see all of me, Benn," she whispered, offering him her lips once again.

He seized her and began to kiss her even more passionately than before. He sucked at her lower lip, then bit it gently before sucking again. Slowly, he brushed the tip of his tongue along the full length of her lips. He pushed into her mouth, tentatively at first, and then with thrusts of increasing desire. He was pulling her body so tight against his own that the cold steel of the scissors was crushed into her flesh. Suzanne did not care. She was being held, being

kissed, by the man who had captured her heart. Very soon, he would take her body and make her fully his. She wanted only that.

The scissors must have stabbed him, for he pulled away abruptly. Suzanne's gaze was drawn to his eyes, so wide and dark with passion that there was almost no trace of blue. His lips were parted, and swollen, as hers must also be. They desired each other equally. It was perfect.

Chapter Six

She had placed the scissors in his hands. She wanted him to use them. She wanted him to free her of the remainder of her clothing, to feast his eyes on her body and to use his clumsy fingers to touch the essence of the amazing woman she was.

Ben's whole being was awash with desire. This beautiful, passionate girl was offering herself to him. It seemed she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He slid the scissors under the lowest loop of her stays and closed the blades. They glanced off the heavy lacing. The corset remained intact. He tried again, snapping the blades together with greater force. The result was the same. He growled in frustration.

Suzanne gave a low chuckle. "Poor Benn." She took the scissors from his hands. 'I had forgotten you are left-handed. Unfortunately, my scissors are not." With a deft movement, she severed the laces and dropped the scissors back on to the shelf. She was breathing fast now. The corset had been pushed apart by the rise of her bosom and was hanging loosely by its straps.

Ben swallowed. Then, very slowly, he put his hands

to her shoulders and pushed her stays aside. They fell to the floor, landing with a soft thump on the pile of muslin behind her. That left only her chemise. It was so thin that he could see every contour of her body, her erect nipples, her dark navel, the shadow at the junction of her thighs.

He needed more than shadows. In a single swift movement, he seized the hem of her chemise and lifted it. He did not need to ask her to raise her arms. She was before him.

"You are beautiful."

She smiled up into his face, accepting the words that were no more than her due. Then she allowed her gaze to travel slowly over his bare shoulders, over the red silk, still tight around his chest, and down, and down. She lingered over the evidence of his desire. "You are beautiful, too." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and glanced up at him through her lashes. Her eyes were dancing now. She reached for the edge of the silk.

He caught her hand and held it still. "Ah, no, my dear. Not yet. First, it is my turn." He scanned the shelves, pulling down and discarding silks and velvets. "Yes. This one, I think." A length of delicate pale gold silk shimmered as he lifted it down. "You shall be wrapped in gold tissue, as befits a princess."

When she opened her mouth to protest, he silenced her with a short, hard kiss. "Indulge me, I beg of you." He glanced down at the red silk he wore like a badge of honor. "As I have indulged you."

The blush began between her breasts and rose to cover her throat and then her cheeks. For the first time since they had entered the silk store, she seemed shy. But then she raised her chin and nodded.

Ben felt her response, deep in his gut. She would be his! But not yet.

He shook out the fine silk and flung it over Suzanne's shoulders, just as she had done earlier with the blue velvet. It must not be a cloak, however, for that would hide her beauty. He had something much more revealing in mind. "Raise your arms, if you please, lady." A frown flitted across her forehead at his use of her own words, but she did not hesitate. With fingers that seemed to have forgotten their earlier clumsiness, Ben stroked the silk over her shoulders and arms and crossed it behind her back. Her arms were pinioned. Her eyes were sparkling.

He brought the free ends round to the front of her body and crossed them again, over her thighs. There was just enough material left to tuck round behind her calves and under her heels. He stood up to admire what he had done. From the front, her arms and legs were all swathed in gold. A diamond of flesh remained open to his gaze—the narrow base of her throat, her breasts, her swelling hips, the V of her belly narrowing down to the shadow that had tempted him through her chemise. He let his gaze rest there for a moment longer, but desire was overwhelming him. He bent to take one pouting nipple into his mouth, sucking lustily. Suzanne moaned and leaned into him. Ben transferred

his mouth to the other, neglected breast. This time she did not moan. She shivered instead.

Ben raised his head and took a step back. "A diamond," he said throatily, drawing the shape in the air. He reached out to brush each glistening nipple with the tip of a finger. "A diamond set with two gleaming rubies." He touched his lips, very lightly, to one nipple and then the other. "A glorious picture in a gilded frame." He bent and bestowed a final kiss on her navel. He would come to the essence of her, and soon, but not until she was ready. He straightened once more and gazed into her eyes. "Would you have me remove these golden trappings? Or should I see whether there are better foils for your beauty here?"

"No," she said softly. "No more." She lifted her heels to free her bonds and shrugged her shoulders. The golden silk whispered across her bare skin and sank reluctantly to the floor. Her arms were free. Her body was naked, proud and ready.

Ben reached for the end of his own red silk.

"No. Let me." Slowly she unwound it from his body, feathering tiny caresses on to his skin as she turned him beneath her hands. When the folded sheet was all that remained, she allowed herself to smile. "I do not think this belongs here." With a jerk, she pulled it away from his body and flung it out of the silk store. She sank to her knees and blew a long hot breath over him. "Only the most precious materials have a place here," she said softly. "Only the most beautiful. Which we now have."

Ben did not dare to move. His blood was pounding in his ears. It had to be soon. Without the glorious release of making love, they would both shatter.

It was Suzanne who made the first move. She reached up to pull the pins out of her hair, so that it tumbled down over her shoulders and on to her breast. Very deliberately, she rose from her knees, tossing her head just enough to ensure that her golden curls tickled and teased at his flesh. His reaction was somewhere between a laugh and a groan.

Very satisfying, she decided. There would be no going back now. She put her right hand on his chest, directly over his heart. She could feel its rapid beat. She smiled her message into his eyes. She was willing.

He understood. A deep breath hissed between his teeth as he knelt to spread the silks on the floor and to make a pillow of her petticoats.

"No!" she cried.

He sprang to his feet. In an instant, his eyes had changed from black to piercing blue. He raised his chin and stared down at her through narrowed eyes. "No? Of course it is no. I promised to protect you, yet I am on the point of robbing you of your honor." His cheeks were slashed with scarlet. His mouth was a hard, uncompromising line. But he had made no attempt to cover his proud nakedness.

Suzanne had desired him before. Now her longing was overpowering. This man, the man she loved beyond reason, had allowed her to take him to the brink of fulfillment, yet he was ready to stop at a word.

He was doing her honor, not robbing her of it. She gestured towards the silks strewn on the floor. They were her family's future. They must not be damaged.

"Not here." She held out her hand to him, watching as realization dawned and his gaze mellowed. When he put his fingers into hers, she threw open the door and led him towards the welcoming light of her own bedchamber.

Ben tried to lift her into his arms, to carry her across to her bed and lay her down between cool sheets. He needed to show her how much he valued her gift.

She shook her head and pushed away his arm. "You are not strong enough yet. You will reopen your wound." She closed the connecting door and turned the key. Then, with graceful strides, she crossed to the main door and locked it also. She was smiling serenely when she turned back to him. For a moment, she leaned her shoulders against the wood, stretching her spine so that her breasts rose invitingly. "No one will disturb us." She crossed to the bed and threw back the covers. The gauzy nightgown slid to the floor, unheeded.

Ben's mouth was dry. He could hardly believe that his wonderful girl, his amazing Suzanne, was offering herself to him. But she was. She was stretched across the bed and beckoning him to join her.

He lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms for a long, passionate kiss. Desire was driving him. He felt no pain at all. His injured shoulder flexed as well as it had ever done. He swept his right hand down her back and cupped her bottom. Then he trailed his fingers delicately up the back of her thigh. She shivered deliciously. He deepened the kiss yet more, glorying in her uninhibited response. She was ready for him. She must be.

He had to be sure. He touched a finger to her inner thigh and let it drift upwards to the core of her. She moaned in response and opened sweetly to his touch. She was more than ready. But, driven though he was, he knew he must go slowly. She was his more than willing partner in this seduction, but it was still her first time. It had to be perfect.

He pushed her gently on to her back and nuzzled his way down from her mouth to her breasts, and then to her belly and the tender skin of her inner thighs. The first touch of his tongue at the core of her made her gasp and buck with shock. "Hush, my sweet Suzanne," he crooned, without lifting his head. "Lie still and let me give you pleasure. Feel the waves."

The waves soon became so strong that Suzanne thought she would drown in the wonder of it. Her whole being was focused on that single point, where Benn's tongue was creating such unimagined, piercing pleasure. All at once, it became too much. Her whole body spasmed. She heard herself crying out his name.

A moment later he entered her body, in one long, sustained thrust. She thought she felt a hesitation, but then it was over and he was inside her, fully sheathed. She had wanted this. And it was everything she had

desired.

Then he kissed her lips, slowly and sweetly, and began to move. She moaned into his mouth. It felt...she could not describe how it felt. The waves were coming again, washing over her and carrying her even higher than before, as she matched her rhythm to his and strained towards fulfillment. When the climax came, it robbed her of her senses. She saw the bright colors of the rainbow. And then darkness.

When she opened her eyes, the light was almost gone. She must have fainted. *No wonder*, she thought, remembering the unbelievable pleasure Benn had given her.

But where was he?

She raised her head from the pillow. He was no longer in her bed. Nor was he anywhere in the room. She sat up with a jerk. It was only then that she saw what he had done. He had dressed her in her own nightgown. And then he had left her alone.

What kind of man would do such a thing?

She flung herself out of bed and crossed to the landing door. It was still locked, with the key on the inside. He must have left by the door to the silk store. She would go after him and—

The connecting door was locked and the key was gone. On the floor, in a small neat pile, lay her gown and underthings, folded carefully over the mutilated halves of her corset.

Ben could not stop his frenzied pacing. If he stopped moving, his anger would consume him. What had possessed him to do such a terrible thing?

He had taken Suzanne's innocence. It did not matter that she had encouraged him to seduce her. The responsibility was his alone. It was hardly surprising if, over the weeks when she had been nursing him, she had come to feel more for him than she ought, for she was a passionate woman. He should have seen the dangers and dealt with them. But he had failed to do so. In the end, the fault was his. He was experienced; she was not. She could not have known what would happen.

He would have to leave soon. What would happen to her then? If anyone discovered what they had done, she would be disgraced, perhaps even cast out of her home. And what if there were to be a child?

He raked his fingers through his hair. It pulled on the barely healed scar of his head wound, but he ignored it. It would be a judgment on him if it began to bleed again. Suzanne's virgin blood was staining her sheets. What was a little of his own tainted blood by comparison?

He would leave her all the money he had. Yes, that was the answer. It would at least ensure her comfort. She—

No, it was impossible. She would probably throw his money back in his face. With reason. She had given herself to him in all sweetness. If he offered money, he would be treating her like a whore. She did not deserve that. She deserved to be cherished, by a man who loved and honored her, a man who would take her to wife. Could Ben find an honest tradesman who would marry her and give her back her standing in bourgeois society?

He began to plan. He would need money to buy such a man—ready money now, and the promise of more to follow, once Ben was back in England. But how was Ben to seek out a bridegroom, here in a country that was probably on the brink of war? Ben could not pass for a Frenchman. He could not move around the taverns and coffee houses, bribing the local soaks with drink in hopes of gleaning the information he needed.

Suzanne's husband could not be just anyone. He must be honest and trustworthy. He must be willing to honor Suzanne as his wife, even if she proved to be with child by another man.

A chilling thought shivered through him. What if this Frenchman were cruel? What if he were to beat her?

Ben saw a vision of Suzanne cowering in the dark in a corner of the silk store, her beautiful face bruised and her limbs trembling in anticipation of beatings still to come. He would not let it happen. He would kill the man first!

Fool! There could be no such man. Suzanne should not be allowed to suffer for Ben's misdeed. If he loved her, he should be prepared to make sacrifices in order to protect her.

He stopped in his tracks. The truth, when it dawned, was so very simple. Suzanne had to have a husband who loved her. And Ben would be that husband. In spite of all his toplofty lectures to himself, in spite of Jack's warning about falling into parson's mousetrap with a woman who would never be received by Ben's grandfather, Ben had done precisely what he had told himself to avoid. He had fallen in love with his brave and beautiful bourgeoise.

He loved her. And he gloried in it.

If she would have him, he would marry her tomorrow. His starchy old grandfather would learn to accept her, or lose his grandson altogether. As for the rest of the ton, Ben would put a bullet in any man who dared to insult Lord Dexter's wife!

Chapter Seven

It was well after supper time when Ben made his way through the silk store to Suzanne's bedchamber. He had taken great care to put everything to rights. The bolts of silk and velvet had been rewound and restored to the shelves. He could not be absolutely sure that they were all in their assigned places, but he had done his best. This was Suzanne's domain. If anything was amiss, she would put it to rights before anyone else was allowed to set foot inside.

But first he had to restore the keys he had stolen when he left her to wake alone. He had used her own keys to lock her precious silk store against her. He must go to her and beg her pardon. Until that confession was made, he could never offer her his love or his name.

At least this time he was decently clad, in shirt and breeches. Someone—Suzanne?—had washed the blood out of his shirt and carefully mended the torn cloth.

He took one last look round the silk store and put his hand to the door leading to her bedchamber. Earlier, he had turned the key in the lock and left it there. Even if she had a spare, she would not have been able to use it. The door to the landing was fastened in the same way. As was the outer door to his own bedchamber. His little fortress was impregnable, until he chose to open the gate.

He tapped gently on the communicating door. There was no answer and no sound from Suzanne's chamber. She was probably still downstairs, seeing to her interminable chores. He would open the door and leave her keys on the dressing table where she was bound to notice them.

He unlocked the door and pushed it open.

She was there! She was sitting demurely on the end of the bed, fully dressed in a gown made high to the neck, and carefully weaving new laces through the eyelets of her damaged corset.

Ben's heart sank to his boots, but he could not turn back. "Suzanne," he said softly. When she did not look up, he said her name again. "Suzanne, I have come to return the keys I took, and to ask your pardon."

She turned to him then. She looked very pale, and quite implacable. "My pardon? For what, may I ask?"

"For everything. I wish to make amends, if you will permit. I took advantage of—"

"You took advantage of my good nature to play a silly practical joke in my silk store. I hope you have restored it to order, sir?"

This was going to be even more difficult than Ben had feared. "Suzanne, I need to—"

She glared at him with the pride of a duchess. 'I am

Mademoiselle Grolier to you, sir."

Difficulties, Ben decided on the spot, were invented in order to be overcome. "Mademoiselle Grolier, I have put the store to rights as best I can. Will it please you to come and inspect it?" He stood back, holding the door for her.

She sighed. "Very well." She put the corset aside and rose. "We need to resolve matters quickly, I agree. Now that you are so much recovered, you will wish to be on your way back to England. At first light." She stalked into the store and began to rearrange the fabrics, tutting crossly as she worked.

Ben stood back, trying not to laugh. She was like a bad-tempered hen, fluffing out its feathers over its brood, turning round and round, but never quite satisfied that everything was exactly as it was meant to be.

She came to the end of the last shelf of fabrics, close by the main door. As she reached out to unlock it, Ben caught her wrist and spun her round to face him. "Your precious silks are safe, my love. But can you forgive me for everything else?"

"There *is* nothing else," she retorted. "Why would I need—?" She broke off and stared at him, her eyes wide. Her body began to sag against the door. Ben had to catch her in his arms to stop her from falling. "What did you call me?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"I called you 'my love' which is, to my mind, a great deal preferable to 'Mademoiselle Grolier.' You do agree, I hope?" He gave her no chance to answer.

He pulled her hard against his body and began to kiss her as if both their lives depended on it. By the time he was satisfied with her response, they were both gasping for breath and Suzanne's carefully pinned hair had tumbled down on to her shoulders. He lifted one of her curls and began to wind it round his finger. "I take it that is a 'yes,' love?"

"I...well, I cannot exactly object to your using such a term of endearment, I suppose. I—"

"You misunderstand me. And willfully, I do believe." He laughed down into her eyes. "What I need from you, Mademoiselle Grolier, my sweet love, is your agreement to marry me. As soon as it can be arranged."

"Marry you?" Her voice cracked. "How can I marry you? I don't even know your name!"

His name, it appeared, really was Ben. He had told her that, but nothing else. It was too dangerous for her to learn more, he said, while the house was being watched. He might be arrested at any time. What she did not know, she could not betray. Besides, ignorance would help to keep her safe. She could swear, on the family bible if need be, that his true identity was a mystery to her.

His attitude irked her. Marriage, she responded crisply, was out of the question. She was not about to abandon her home and her family for a nameless English spy, no matter how much he pleaded. Spies, she maintained, were men of the lowest class, even if some of them could *almost* pass for gentlemen.

That comment made Ben laugh a great deal, but he refused to explain why. He simply took her in his arms and kissed her until her head was spinning and her bones were beginning to melt. Then he led her back into her bedchamber, sat her down on her bed and left.

She listened with the greatest care. There was no scrape of a key turning in the lock. Even without trying the connecting door, she understood that the way to his bed was open to her, if she chose to take it.

She could not decide. She hesitated, standing by the door. What if—?

The noise was loud enough to penetrate the outside walls plus two communicating doors. What on earth could be happening? Suzanne flung open her door to the silk store at the same time as Ben opened his own.

"Quick! Come and see!" He pulled her across to the window, though she noted he did not to allow himself to be seen. There was a great deal of commotion below. The watcher was back, but now he seemed to be issuing orders to a party of soldiers, some carrying flambeaux. They had dragged another silk merchant from his house, just three doors away. The merchant's wife stood in the street, wringing her hands and begging for mercy for her man. Her pleas made no difference. In a matter of minutes, he was manacled and led away. The watcher, looking very pleased with himself, followed in the wake of the soldiers.

"Do we dare to hope that the danger is over?" Suzanne asked.

A strong arm stole round her waist. "I think, my love, that we may indeed dare to hope. For many things."

Guillaume was so delighted with the latest developments that he was unusually talkative the following morning when Suzanne sent him upstairs with Ben's hot water. "That old fool was bound to be arrested. Half of Lyons knew where his sympathies lay."

"Really? When we first saw that spy out there, you all thought he was watching *this* house. All of a sudden, you're remarkably well informed."

The old man grinned. "The way to be well informed, sir, is to frequent certain taverns in this town. Normally I have too many chores to see to in this house, but the mistress said it was vital to the cause. She even gave me silver so that I could buy a drink here and there, where it might help to loosen tongues. It worked, too, though it took hours that I could not really spare."

She said we would not be disturbed Ben marvelled at Suzanne's resourcefulness. A spying mission for Guillaume and a quiet house for Suzanne's tryst. Extremely neat. His love was worthy of a place in the Aikenhead Honours.

Ben decided to voice the question that was preying on his mind. "Mademoiselle Suzanne normally brings up our morning coffee long before this. I hope last night's disturbance has not upset her?" Guillaume shook his head. "She's sitting in her office, as right as ninepence. I have no doubt she'll be here as soon as she's read her letter."

"What letter?" Ben thundered.

Guillaume did not know the identity of the sender. All he could say was that the handwriting was not Marguerite's.

Ben hastily wiped off the last of the shaving soap. The letter might bring vital intelligence. He must risk going downstairs, even though he might be seen.

Just as he reached the hallway, Suzanne came flying out into the hall. "Oh, Ben, I have such wonderful news. Marguerite and Jacques are married!" She waved her letter. "I don't understand it all, but that part is beyond doubt. Jacques has taken Marguerite to his family in England."

Ben twitched the letter out of her fingers and began to read. It was from the curé in Normandy, who wrote in a cryptic style much like Marguerite's. Marguerite had married her betrothed, he said. Did that mean Jack? Ben supposed it must do. There was a paragraph of pious advice to Suzanne about never allowing her heart to rule her head. That was wise, but a little late now.

The final paragraph was very puzzling. Ben scanned it again. "What on earth does it mean? How can your mama's assessment of Marguerite's betrothed have been exactly right? And why should that make him a most suitable husband?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't understand that,

either. Perhaps I should ask Mama? She will have to be told about Marguerite's marriage, in any case. She will be cross, I dare say, that Jacques did not ask her permission."

"From Normandy?"

"It is the way things have always been done in our family. Mama thinks she is still entitled to the privileges of rank, even though we—" She stopped short and let out a long, shuddering breath. Her eyes grew round. "I remember now. What Mama said. But surely—? No, it must have been. It was the only time she saw them together."

Ben took her by the shoulders, as if he were about to shake her. "Suzanne, what on *earth* are you talking about? You make no sense at all."

She smiled beatifically. "Tell me, Ben," she began innocently, "is it true that your Jack is the son of a duke?"

Ben continued stroking the tender skin at the side of his wife's breast. He seemed intent on rousing her passion yet again. He had cause, she decided. It was, after all, their wedding night.

The new Lady Dexter was not about to succumb without a fight. She tiptoed her fingers lazily across the tops of Ben's thighs, venturing occasionally on to the lower part of his belly. Never any lower. That would come later, but a little more wifely torture—in the shape of the things she would *not* do—was a necessary preliminary. He was beginning to writhe

against the sheets. It was most gratifying.

"You deceived me." His voice began normally, but ended in a gasp when Suzanne ran the edge of her fingernail down his hard length.

"I did not, sir! You simply assumed I was a merchant's daughter. If you had asked me outright, I would have told you my mama is the Marquise de Jerbeaux." She paused, reflecting on that. "Probably. Besides, my deception is no worse than yours." This time, she circled his flesh with her fingers and squeezed gently, provoking another gasp of pleasure. "I am an aristocrat's daughter. You are a viscount's heir. We love each other to distraction. So I think we are equal, do not you?"

He caught up her hands and rolled her under him so that he could settle into the cradle of her hips. "We are certainly equal, Lady Dexter. In everything, I would say, including—" he raised his hips and pushed deep into her welcoming warmth "—in our ability to satisfy each other."

The urge was very strong now. He began to move, timing his thrusts to the rhythm of his words. "To satisfy each other, in every—possible—way!"

Dear Reader

If you are new to the Aikenhead Honors, I hope that reading *His Silken Seduction* has left you eager to discover what went before. At the start of this story, poor Ben was lying hidden in a silk-weaver's house in Lyons, recovering from a nasty bullet wound. But how did he come to be shot? And why had his comrades left him alone in such a place at such a dangerous time?

The answers are to be found in the Aikenhead Honors_trilogy, three intertwined stories following the exploits of Ben and the other members of the spying ring—Dominic, the Duke of Calder, and his brothers, Lord Leo and Lord Jack Aikenhead.

The acknowledged leader of the Honors is Dominic, the eldest of the three Aikenhead brothers. In the first story, His Cavalry Lady, Dominic is spying on the Russian Emperor during the royal visit to London in the summer of 1814. He strikes up a friendship with Captain Alexei Alexandrov, a decorated Hussar, even though they are on opposing sides. But Dominic is troubled, both by the enigmatic Russian captain and by the memory of a mysterious lady he held in his arms just a few weeks before. She disappeared like smoke, but she haunts him, first as a Frenchwoman and then as a passionate little lady from Scotland. Even with the help of Leo and Jack, Dominic cannot fully resolve the puzzles that beset him. When he is sent to Russia in the wake of the Tsar and his entourage, Dominic has to operate alone. Can he find the answers he is seeking in that alien land?

In Dominic's absence in Russia, Leo becomes the leader when the Honors are sent to Austria, in His Reluctant Mistress. Their mission takes them to the Congress of Vienna where most of the crowned heads of Europe are assembling to carve up the continent. Leo uses his reputation as a notorious rake as cover for his spying activities, aided by Jack and Ben. For once, his success with the ladies is not assured—he encounters a woman who is more than a match for him. But there is increasing unrest in France and the Duke of Wellington wants his own spies on the ground there. The Duke orders the Honors' forces to be split — Jack and Ben to France, Leo to remain alone in Austria to defend England's interests. Discover how Leo deals with the intrigue, and how much a rake has to risk to rescue the woman he loves, in this second story.

Jack and Ben are the most junior members of the Aikenhead Honors. Until their arrival in France, at the start of His Forbidden Liaison, they have never operated alone. They reach Lyons together, but their mission becomes urgent following Napoleon's escape from exile in Elba. Jack, the incorrigible playboy, must assume more responsibility than he's ever done before and go on, without Ben, to Paris and beyond. Jack knows that traveling alone would jeopardise his mission, but his only possible companion is a woman who is forbidden. If they brave the dangers of enemy territory together, will he be able to resist the temptation she presents? And will she consent to keep her distance, even if he does? Find out how their dilemma is resolved in the final story of the trilogy.

Find out what came before *His Silken Seduction* with three tales of espionage and daring Regency romance in Joanna Maitland's trilogy The Aikenhead Honors!

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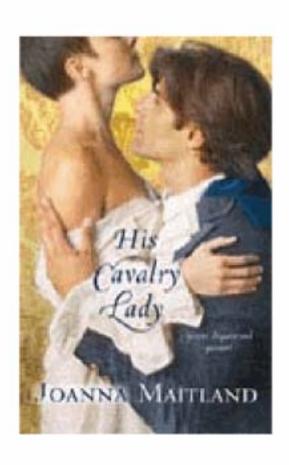
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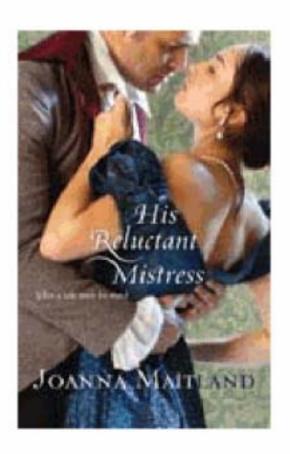
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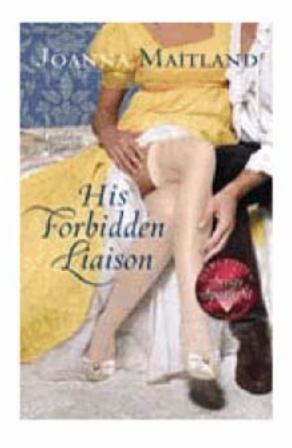


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Joanna Maitland was born and educated in Scotland, though she has spent most of her adult life in England or abroad. She has been a systems analyst, an accountant, a civil servant, and director of a charity. Now that her two children have left home, she and her husband have moved from Hampshire to the Welsh Marches, where she is reveling in the more rugged country and the wealth of medieval locations. When she is not writing, or climbing through ruined castles, she devotes her time to trying to tame her house and garden, both of which are determined to resist any suggestion of order. Readers are invited to visit Joanna's Web site at www.joannamaitland.com

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His Silken Seduction

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