

Praise for *The Lost Lieutenant*
Serendipity & Secrets Book 1

“Love Regency? How about a swoon-worthy hero and a plot that twists and turns yet ties up in a neat bow at the end? Then get thee to a bookstore! *The Lost Lieutenant* is all that and more, from the battlefield of Salamanca to the gowns and suits at Almack’s. This is my favorite Erica Vetsch title to date and earns a place on my keeper shelf.”

MICHELLE GRIEP, Christy Award–winning author of the
Once Upon a Dickens Christmas series

“An enchanting tale, *The Lost Lieutenant* was quick to capture my heart and engage my hopes. A wounded hero meeting a heroine on the run is always a perfect recipe for romance; throw in a spy for good measure, and you’ve got a winner from Erica Vetsch! This is a Regency novel that will have fans begging for more.”

JAIME JO WRIGHT, Christy Award winner of *The House on Foster Hill*

“A riveting Regency read, with captivating characters, that will tug at your heartstrings.”

CAROLYN MILLER, best-selling author of the Regency Brides series

“Erica Vetsch brings such a fresh, true voice to Regency romance. She catches all that’s best about the genre while weaving together a fast-paced, intriguing story full of characters I cared about so much. I can’t wait for book two!”

MARY CONNEALY, author of the best-selling High Sierra Sweethearts and Wild at Heart series

“With this stunning novel, Vetsch has seamlessly created a story and characters firmly set in Regency England. From the court of Queen Charlotte to the renovated English manor known as White Haven, we’re taken on a breathless journey of intrigue, romance, and historical depth. This is a must-read for those who love Sarah Ladd and Mimi Matthews.”

GABRIELLE MEYER, author of *A Mother’s Secret*

“Original, engaging, and oh so romantic, *The Lost Lieutenant* is a delightful tale sure to satisfy Regency fans and inspirational readers alike. Evan, a battle-scarred war hero, earns his place alongside the leading men of Austen and Heyer, and Diana is a heroine you’ll relate to and root for as she falls in love with her unintended earl. Rich historical details, authentic faith elements, and a dash of intrigue combine in this winning first installment of the Serendipity & Secrets series, certain to gain a permanent place on your shelf . . . and in your heart.”

AMANDA BARRATT, author of *My Dearest Dietrich*

“Two brilliantly developed characters forge a future together at the intersection of love and war in this compelling and immersive historical romance. Well matched in spirit, courage, and intelligence, together they graft a world through secrets, espionage, and unexpected acts of chivalry. My romantic’s heart will continue to skip a beat every time I think of them. With Vetsch’s deeply compassionate look at the mental scars of war, readers of Carla Kelly, Mary Balogh, and Julie Klassen will find their next favorite read in *The Lost Lieutenant*. I fully intend to revisit this world time and again for years to come.”

RACHEL MCMILLAN, author of *The London Restoration*

SERENDIPITY & SECRETS

The
GENTLEMAN SPY



ERICA VETSCH



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The Gentleman Spy

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CHAPTER 1

Haverly Manor
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HE SUPPOSED THAT someday he would have to forgive the child for being a girl.

Marcus Haverly took one look at the squirming pink bundle in the nurse's arms and sighed, the weight of the world threatening to push him into the ornate rug beneath his Hessians. He set down the book he'd been reading, his appetite for the written word evaporating as reality set in.

His mother dragged into the study, her shoulders slumped, her hands lax.

Who was more disappointed? He would hate to have to live on the difference. He rose, put his hands into the pockets of his breeches, and went to stand before the window, staring out into the night. Frost rimed the edges of the panes, and in the distance, black trees lifted skeletal arms toward the moon.

"How is Cilla?" he asked.

"The *accoucheur* has just gone. He says everything went well but that she needs rest." Mother's voice sounded as if she spoke from the bottom of a pit. "I can't bear it. A girl."

Marcus glanced over his shoulder in time to see her sink into a chair, the very picture of despair. The poor woman. All her hopes dashed in a split second.

The child squeaked and snuffled, drawing his attention. He should at least go and look at his niece. After all, he'd been anticipating the birth for months.

The birth that was supposed to set him free.

She had a tuft of dark hair atop her round head. An impossibly tiny hand lay next to her full cheek, the nails minute and faintly blue. Sparse lines of color indicated where her eyebrows would be someday.

He didn't know if he'd ever met a baby as fresh as this one. Though he searched her features, he could find no resemblance to either of her parents. Overall, she looked a bit like an old man. Though he would never say so to Cilla. She was much too frail a flower to accept even the mildest of teasing.

Looking at the baby's helpless little face, as innocent as a person could be, he felt a stirring somewhere in his heart. He would do his duty by her. He owed that much to Neville.

"Take her to the nursery. See that she has everything she needs." He nodded to the nurse, a woman nearly twice his age, thoroughly interviewed and scrutinized by his mother a month ago and passed as acceptable.

When she had departed, Marcus went to the desk . . . his desk now, he supposed. It was all his. The desk, the study, the house, the grounds . . . and the responsibilities. What a way to start the new year.

"What are we going to do now?" Mother eyed him from under the black lace trim on her black cap, her iron-gray curls clustered about her face. Lines of strain showed around her eyes and mouth. "This is an unmitigated disaster."

Marcus jammed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes at the bridge of his nose and breathed in. Why was there no air in this place? A cannonball lodged in his chest, cold and heavy. First his father and brother, and now this? Every event bound him to his burdens with more chains and hawsers than a frigate to the dock.

Mother sniffed, and he lowered his hand, digging for his handkerchief. He needn't have bothered. She had one and dabbed her eyes with the black scrap of linen.

I'm surprised there's a dry square of cloth left in the house. The amount of weeping that has gone on this last six months would fill the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

He chided himself for being unfeeling. She had suffered both great loss and now a great calamity. He should make allowances.

Though it seemed he'd been making allowances for the woman for most of his life.

Her dress seemed to swallow the light from the fireplace and wall sconces. Still wearing black bombazine from head to foot, though the time of deepest mourning had passed months ago. He continued to wear a black coat out of deference to her feelings, but much to his mother's dislike, he'd taken to wearing his buff deerskin breeches and a gray waistcoat. Every time she noticed he'd had his tailor remove the black cloth-covered buttons on his jackets and return the brass originals, she would pucker her lips and let a pair of tears form on her lower lashes.

"I suppose I have no choice but to accept it, but it seems God has been most cruel to me. I feel as if I am Naomi from the Bible. You might as well call me Mara." More sniffs and eye wiping. "That's what she said, wasn't it? When everything had been taken from her . . . that her name now meant 'bitter'? I'm just empty. How can this be happening? I didn't plan for any of this." Her voice vacillated, as if she didn't know whether to feel angry or just victimized.

"A son with higher expectations than mine of his relationship with his mother might take offense. You lost your husband and your eldest, but I still remain, and your daughter, and your widowed daughter-in-law. Not to mention a new grandchild." Marcus kept his voice bland, as he always strove to do in her presence. He was who he was, no more, no less, born in the order God had chosen. As a second son, he no longer resented the affection lavished on his elder brother. Though his parents had three children, only one had mattered when it came to the succession. Sophie, his younger sister, had been attended and sponsored and chaperoned, but his father had purchased a major's commission for Marcus the moment he'd earned his sheepskin from Oxford. He was the spare, not the heir.

He had ceased to let it rankle years ago.

For the most part.

"I have a grandchild, yes, but not a *grandson*." Mother sat up. "I wanted a *grandson*."

"And I wanted you to have one, but God had other plans."

And God's plans had put paid to Marcus's own. Life would be so much easier if God would stay confined to Sunday worship and evening prayers instead of encroaching on Marcus's carefully laid arrangements.

"God has abandoned our family. Or He's punishing me for something. Why else would He treat me this way?" She put her hand to her throat, the tears thickening her voice. "Oh, it's all such a mess. Still, I suppose we'll have to move forward. We have no choice. Tomorrow we'll begin packing for London."

"London?"

"Of course. Now that your circumstances have changed, we must begin the search." A fortifying breath lifted her shoulders.

"The search?" He sounded like a parrot. "For what?"

"Well, for a suitable bride for you. I made inquiries last Season, but I wasn't aiming high enough, I suppose. I was looking for a baronet's daughter, or a squire's, but now I'll have to start over."

The hawsers tightened around his chest. "I'm in no rush. After all, it's only been a few months since our bereavement and barely an hour since it all became official." A wife was the farthest thing from his mind right now. His life up to this point had been carefully ordered, everything divided, kept separate, and tidy. Work, society, family, God. Adding the responsibilities of a dukedom left little room for a wife.

"You might not be in a rush. In fact, I've never known a time when you were, but I am. We've learned, much to our regret, how quickly circumstances can change. You must marry soon and set up your nursery. It's your duty to this family and to the memory of those we've lost." Her backbone stiffened, and for the first time in months, a gleam entered her eyes. "I shall make a list and begin my inquiries . . . or . . ."

"Or?" He was doing it again, mimicking her.

"Or you could marry Cilla."

She said the words slowly, as if only now thinking of them, but he wondered. Had this been her plan for months now, should the infant be a female?

"That would solve a multitude of issues. She's in need of a husband. She's of noble birth. And she's obviously fertile."

A shudder racked down Marcus's spine.

Cilla was a nice woman, but she was also timid, sensitive, and if he was honest, boring. She had suited his staid, proper, and dutiful brother right down to the ground, but Marcus couldn't imagine himself married to her. Of course, he couldn't imagine himself married to anyone. At least not yet.

"It's too soon to make a decision like that. And it's too late at night. Go to bed, madam. We'll no doubt talk about it in the morning."

She rose, gathering her dignity around her like a coronation robe. If there was a silver lining to the dark clouds hanging over his life, it was that at least a hunt for a suitable bride would give her something else to think about than her bereavement. Of course he would have the final say, but her quest would keep her occupied and out of his hair for a while. For the first time in recent memory, she swept from the room with an echo of her former imperious manner.

The fire popped and the mantel clock ticked, the only sounds in the room. What was he supposed to do now? He needed to send word to London, ask for direction. Partridge would take the message.

He would have to wait for a return missive to come from Sir Noel. His superior would know what to do. Though if his mother was serious about leaving for the city right away, he might wait and speak with Sir Noel in person.

Sir Noel would answer the question foremost in Marcus's mind, the question he'd wrestled with ever since he'd received word that his father, the duke, and his brother, the heir, had been killed in a carriage accident almost seven months ago.

If Marcus was now forced to become the Duke of Haverly, could he still continue his work for the Crown?



London, England

February 1, 1814

"This is your last chance, Charlotte. If you don't find a husband this Season, you're finished. Your father won't impoverish himself further, and

I can't say I blame him. Three Seasons on the Marriage Mart really is the outside limit."

Lady Charlotte Tiptree looked up, one tendril of hair twined around her index finger. Her concentration broken, she tucked a slip of paper into her book on Roman history to mark her place and forced herself to return to the nineteenth century. "I'm sorry, Mother. Were you speaking to me?"

"You're the only other person in the drawing room, are you not? Please put that down and pay attention. Why must I always drag your nose out of some tome or other? If your father catches you reading again, I don't know what he'll do." Mother shook her head, her hands fluttering. Mother's hands always fluttered, especially when she was agitated. "And sit up like a proper lady. I don't know what your posture will become if you continue to lounge like a sultan. It's as if we didn't go to great expense to see you become a lady. What did they teach you at that finishing school?"

Refraining from rolling her eyes—another gesture that would get her a scolding—Charlotte pulled her legs off the arm of the deep chair and put her feet on the floor. It had taken an age to get into a comfortable reading position, and now all that effort was wasted. She smoothed her plain gray skirt. The dress was serviceable and chaste, covering her from neck to ankles, but nothing about it was pretty. None of her clothes were really pretty, her father feeling such fripperies an unnecessary expense. He could pinch a shilling until the King's profile cried. And as for the finishing school, it was more of a prison on a barren wasteland in Dartmoor. Run by an impoverished gentlewoman with no sense of humor, the Hitchin's School for Young Ladies was an academy so obscure, Charlotte had been one of only a handful of students, and none of those with social aspirations or titled family.

It had been less expensive than sending her to Switzerland with other girls of her rank.

Plastering a pleasant, slightly vacant expression on her face—the aspect Mother thought all young ladies should wear—Charlotte put her feet primly together and straightened her shoulders. "What is it you'd like to speak about?" Though she knew. It had been the topic of many a tedious conversation throughout the summer, the fall, and over the interminable holidays.

Mother exhaled, her features relaxing into kinder lines. "I don't mean

to nag, but you must face the truth. If you don't change your ways, you're going to wind up a spinster. You're nearly there now. Your father has spent all the money he intends to in order to see you prepared to take your place in society. What kind of a thank-you will it be if you squander your last opportunity? You're not getting any younger, and there will be many fresh faces in the *ton* again this year. If you don't put yourself out to be agreeable, to be the sort of woman a peer is looking for in a wife . . ." She gripped her fingers in her lap.

Something hovered on her lips, and Charlotte tensed. Mother rarely hesitated when Father wasn't present, so whatever it was must be momentous.

Mother took a deep breath, as if fortifying herself. "Your father has instructed me to inform you that if you are not engaged to be married before Easter Sunday, he will have no choice but to send you to live at Aunt Philomena's in Yorkshire." Tugging her handkerchief from her sleeve, she waved it as she talked, the scent of her lavender sachets filling the air. "Philomena broached the subject herself, and he's latched on to the idea. I tried to talk him out of it, but he's adamant. He says your lack of a husband is your own fault and that becoming Aunt Philomena's companion would be fitting punishment for your behavior over the last two years."

Charlotte's mind went blank. This was a new twist. Father had occasionally made vague statements as to her future, but nothing this definite . . . or dire.

Aunt Philomena. She winced.

To be accurate, she was Charlotte's great-aunt on her father's side. Having just endured the Christmas holidays with her at the Tiptree estate in Essex, the thought of a life sentence as her companion drained the blood from Charlotte's head.

Surely this was an idle threat? Her father couldn't be so unfeeling, could he?

Aunt Philomena complained about everything. Nothing suited or satisfied her, and her voice could crack glass. She must go through a half dozen paid companions every year because none of them could abide her for more than a few weeks—either that or she fired them for any of a hundred petty reasons.

But as a relative, Charlotte would not be allowed to quit, and Aunt Philomena would be delighted to have a servant who couldn't give her notice no matter how poorly she treated her. No wonder she'd planted the seeds of the notion for Father to consider. And Father would surely jump at the chance to fob Charlotte and the expense of keeping her off on someone else.

But Aunt Philomena?

Philomena smelled perpetually of naphtha soap, vegetable tonic, and ceaseless discontent.

But . . . Charlotte's only escape would be to find a husband?

Was there no other answer? No way to avoid either fate?

It wasn't that she was averse to having a husband and a family, but the men of the *ton* were all so boring or boorish, or both. Self-absorbed, idle, lightweights . . . None of them seemed to *do* anything constructive or important with their lives.

Mother put on a brave, encouraging face. "You're not unpleasant to look at, you are the daughter of an earl, and you have a proper education and training in deportment. You would be an acceptable bride if you'd only try. All it requires is that you exert yourself, perhaps use a bit of flattery, a bit of coquettishness. Make a man feel good about himself. Show an interest in something other than your books, and perhaps flirt a little."

Flirt. Act like an empty-headed miss who couldn't cross a ballroom unless a man gave her directions and lent his arm for her to lean upon.

"Don't make that face at me, young lady. It's not wrong to be smart, but it is wrong to assume that everyone else is stupid compared to you. If you continue to make potential suitors look foolish with your sharp tongue, you're destined for Yorkshire and the life of a lady's companion, and you might as well forgo this Season and head to Aunt Philomena's now." Her mother's voice had sharpened, and her shaft hit true.

Charlotte nodded, letting her chin drop, knowing she had been guilty of handing out setdowns when she lost her patience with the shallowness of conversations at balls and dinners. But how could she possibly marry a man who bored her to sawdust? If only she could meet someone who actually *did* something with his life, who could claim to have read *any* book in the last year, who did more than talk about his haberdashery or his driving skill with a coach-and-four. Someone who wasn't looking for a bit of

fluff to admire him and remind him how wonderful he was. Someone who might actually be capable of fidelity and genuine love and soul-nurturing conversation.

Perhaps someone who could see behind the plain dresses and severe hairstyle, prescribed by her parents, to the person she was inside.

“Now,” her mother said, brisk and businesslike as she rose from her chair. “Put that book away and get your cloak. We’re going to start as we mean to go on. I’ve received an invitation to meet some friends at the Frost Festival. It opens today, and there will be lots of people there with whom to mingle. All the most fashionable persons will turn out for the occasion. I expect you to be polite to those we meet. In fact, say as little as possible, and you’ll be fine. Dress warmly. I can’t remember a winter this cold, and it’s bound to be worse on the river.”

Charlotte had about as much experience holding her tongue as she did flirting. She set her jaw mutinously, but she obeyed, taking the book along with her to her room, lest her father come across it and confiscate it.

An hour later when Charlotte stepped out of the carriage at the top of the steps leading down to the Thames, her mother’s claims of cold seemed an understatement. Icy wind scudded over the cobbles and whipped at her bonnet ties. For the first time in years, the weather had been so bitterly cold that the river had frozen completely. Enterprising souls had used this phenomenon to revive the Frost Festival, and crowds had gathered for the entertainment.

“Come. I’ve arranged to meet someone on the quay.” Her mother gathered her woolen cloak about her, her cheeks already pink with cold but her eyes bright and eager. Mother, like the rest of the *ton*, loved any reason to socialize, and the temperature wouldn’t daunt her if it meant a chance to gather with friends.

Charlotte burrowed her hands into her knitted muff and followed Mother down the steps, careful where she placed her feet on the uneven stone. All around her, people laughed and called, vendors hawked their wares, and children wove and dove between the revelers.

Smoke from braziers and campfires whipped around, propelled by the stiff breeze, and the aromas of cooking meat and yeasty ale enticed investigation.

A small city had sprung up on the solid surface of the river—booths, tents, shacks. Straw had been strewn in paths to make impromptu “streets.” Standing as they were above the icy surface on the pier, Charlotte observed a juggler entertaining a crescent of onlookers, and she spied a thin urchin dipping into the pocket of one jovial man while he was distracted.

She checked that her reticule was secured around her wrist and nestled deep into her muff. All summer long she had been saving to purchase a subscription to a lending library for the time she would be in London. Her father rarely turned any money over to her, and she’d had to hoard and scrape to purchase each of the treasured books in her collection. She couldn’t afford to be robbed if she was to have new reading material this Season. A library subscription would allow her to read as much as she wanted of books she could never afford to purchase.

“There they are.” Mother took Charlotte’s elbow and tugged her toward the end of the pier. “And they’ve brought Dudley.”

A groan worked its way up Charlotte’s throat, and her shoulders sagged. They were meeting the Bosworths? Dudley Bosworth? Mother hurried toward her friends while speaking in a low tone. “If you won’t take care of the matter of finding a husband yourself, I’m going to have to intervene. Now, be nice.”

All too soon Dudley was bowing over her hand, his rounded face parting in a reluctant smile. “H . . . hello, Lady Charlotte.”

Was his face red from cold, or was he blushing?

Remembering her mother’s admonition to keep her mouth shut, Charlotte said nothing, only nodding to him. He’d paid some court to her last Season, probably pushed into it by his mother, for he suffered greatly from awkwardness around girls. Charlotte hadn’t been interested then. She wasn’t interested now. Dudley was nice enough, she supposed, but he was about as exciting as blancmange.

“Charlotte was just telling me how eager she was to see you again. She couldn’t wait to come to the festival, knowing you’d be here,” Mother said, sending a warning glance Charlotte’s way, forbidding any contradiction to this bald-faced lie.

“We were delighted to know you were coming, my dear.” Mrs. Bosworth looked fondly from her son to Charlotte. “Dudley was most anx-

ious to see you too.” She inclined her head a little, as if encouraging Dudley to say something. He shot a startled glance at his mother and then covered it up by nodding vigorously.

So that was the direction in which the land lay. Ambushed by their parents. Charlotte turned away under the guise of dealing with the wind whipping her plain woolen cloak around her, and a bookseller’s stall caught her eye below. If only she could escape to that little oasis in the crowd.

“Let’s take in some of the festivities, shall we?” Mr. Bosworth clapped his gloved hands together and then rubbed his palms against one another, as if anticipating all he would see and do.

Dudley stood between Charlotte and her mother, shifting his weight. He half offered his arm to Charlotte and the other to her mother, then stilled.

His father solved the dilemma. “You escort Charlotte, my boy.” He held out both elbows to his wife and Mother, and they strolled back along the length of the pier, leaving Dudley and Charlotte to come along behind.

Taking his arm meant removing her hand from her muff, a proposition she didn’t relish. She was more than capable of walking without support, and her hand would freeze through her glove. Still, proprieties. Reluctantly, she placed her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“It . . . it’s good to see you again,” Dudley said. “I hope you had a pleasant Christmas.”

“Yes, thank you,” she lied, remembering the strident irritation of Aunt Philomena’s petulance. She would be good. She wouldn’t say or do anything to embarrass her mother or Dudley. She would hold her tongue. She would not be packed off to Yorkshire like a naughty child.

She hoped she was up to the task.

People jostled and pushed in around them, and Charlotte felt her muscles tightening. She didn’t like crowds. Her eyes darted, looking for avenues of escape amongst the throng.

The descent from the pier to river level brought a new perspective. She now looked up the embankment at the street, a view she’d never had before. Dudley proved useful, guiding her through the shoppers and revellers to one of the straw-strewn paths. Her mother and the Bosworths had stopped at a cart to admire a display of silk shawls, but Charlotte

pulled gently on Dudley's arm in the direction of the bookseller she'd spied from above. If she had to be here, she was going to see something she liked.

The man minding the bookstall doffed his cap and blew on his hands. His gloves had no fingertips, possibly to make him more adept at picking up and leafing through his merchandise, and as a consequence, his fingers were red as cherries.

"Sir, you look like a scholar. Are you hoping to stock your library? I've several impressive volumes that would look magnificent on your shelves." He spoke to Dudley, ignoring Charlotte.

Dudley shook his head, sputtering. "No, no, sir. I'm not looking for books."

A pity.

Charlotte touched the spines of a tray of books set at an angle to display their titles. She loved everything about books—the beautiful bindings, the mesmeric endpapers, the heft, the smell. And that was not even counting the words and worlds they held. Her own small library of getting on for a dozen volumes was her most precious possession, each book carefully saved for, pored over, and treasured.

"Ma'am, the novels are over here. I've a nice selection." He directed her to a shelf to the right of the booth.

Charlotte enjoyed a good novel, but at the moment she was interested in something more scholarly to sink her teeth into. "Do you have anything on Greek history?" She'd love to read a few pages, snatch a few moments, a few words and paragraphs to savor later.

The bookseller put on a patronizing grin. "Are you buying for a gentleman friend? Surely a mere woman wouldn't be interested in something as taxing as Greek history?" He shook his head, winking at Dudley. "I have some manuals on home management and a few recipe books here somewhere that might suit a lady like you."

Frustration burned its way up her chest.

"What utter twaddle. I may be a 'mere woman,' but I am certainly capable of comprehending a history book for my own education and enjoyment. Women aren't relegated to only perusing recipes and fiction, you know." The words flew out in a torrent, and her voice rose. "Of all the

idiotic—” Charlotte broke off when she became aware she was drawing attention.

The merchant held out his hands as if to plead innocence, glancing at the audience that had stopped to see what the fuss was about, and Dudley hunched his shoulders under his many-caped cloak, as if he wanted to disappear.

She pressed her lips together. *So much for holding your tongue. When are you going to learn?* She should apologize, but righteous indignation clamped her throat tight. It wasn't the bookseller's fault, not really. It was society . . . and the women who played along and perpetuated the notion that no female could have a thought deeper than a finger bowl. The vendor had merely voiced what most people assumed, and by doing so, carried the trope further.

“Charlotte Tiptree.” Her mother's low voice cut across the ice. “Come with me, please. There's something I wish to show you.” Her hand came up and clamped on Charlotte's arm, drawing her away from the books. “Excuse us for a moment, Dudley.”

When they were a few yards away, in a blind alley between two vendors, Mother gripped Charlotte by the shoulders and gave her a little shake. “You haven't heard a word I said today, have you? I leave you for one minute, and you start spouting like a broken vessel. You're embarrassing yourself. I've a mind to send you home so you can do no more damage to the Tiptree reputation. We have generations of prestige and good standing in London society, and I'll be blessed if I'll let you and your unblunted tongue ruin it for us.”

If she weren't so cold, Charlotte would've been able to feel the blood rush to her cheeks. She'd done it again. Let her feelings get the better of her and take the restraint off her tongue.

She saw a long future with Aunt Philomena stretching ahead of her.

“Now, you'll stay close to me, and if I hear you say more than ‘yes, ma'am’ or ‘no, sir’ the rest of the afternoon, I'll put you on the first coach to Yorkshire myself. I intend to enjoy myself today, and you will do nothing more to prevent that. Do you hear me?” She gave Charlotte one more shake, her voice never rising above a harsh whisper, all the more piercing for it.

“Yes, ma'am,” Charlotte muttered past her clenched teeth.

She followed her mother over to the Bosworths, keeping her head bent, determined to walk small. Before they moved on, she stopped before the bookseller. He stiffened, as if bracing for her next onslaught.

“My apologies, sir.” She kept her voice low, but she met his eyes. “I spoke out of turn. You have beautiful books here. I hope the festival brings you great success.”

He nodded sharply but said nothing, no doubt fearful of incurring her wrath once again.

With a weight in her chest, she hurried to catch up to her mother before her absence was noted.

Booth after booth, stall after stall, they moved up and down, watching the entertainers, listening to music, admiring the wares. Dudley bought Charlotte a cup of hot chocolate and a Scotch egg served in heavy paper to catch the grease. The chocolate warmed her temporarily, but her toes were numb, and her cheeks stung in the stiff breeze. If only her clothing allowance would stretch to a fur-lined cloak like those other women in society wore . . . How long must they stay?

At last Mother declared they would have to depart, and Charlotte barely stifled an exclamation of relief. She’d adhered strictly to her mother’s mandate and said nothing most of the afternoon. Being so vigilant exhausted her.

At the base of the embankment stairs, Mrs. Bosworth embraced Mother, kissing her cheek. “Verona, it was a pleasure, as always.” She looked over Mother’s shoulder at Charlotte, her eyes clouded with indecision. Perhaps she was rethinking trying to matchmake for her son, at least where Charlotte was concerned.

Dudley shook Charlotte’s hand, formal and stiff, and Mr. Bosworth did the same. “Very nice to see you, Lady Charlotte. Lady Tiptree.”

“Lady Tiptree?” A woman in several layers of shabby clothing nearly stumbled to a halt on the ice near them. “Are you the countess?”

She must’ve been a handsome woman in her prime, but now she looked gaunt and thin. A streak of dirt decorated her cheek, and she clutched her cloak about her, no gloves on her hands. Her head was bare, her raven hair streaked with silver and clutched into a knot, drawing attention to her sharp cheekbones and her dark-brown eyes.

Mother frowned. “Yes, I am the countess. My husband is the Earl of Tiptree. Who are you?”

The woman reared up, her eyes sparking. “Who am I? Who am I?” Her voice ricocheted off the stone steps leading up to street level, and it seemed everyone in a wide radius stopped to hear. “I’m the woman who kept your husband satisfied and happy for twenty years before he abandoned me. I’m the woman who bore Joseph Tiptree, the earl himself, a daughter only to see him turn his back on us and put us out on the street—that’s who I am.” Her hands came up, bare fingers curled like claws, and fisted at her temples, as if her outrage consumed her.

Charlotte inhaled icy air that froze her lungs. The woman swayed, and people drew back, as if getting too close might contaminate them. Mother stood rooted to the spot, the color draining from her face.

A whirl of questions roared through Charlotte’s mind. Was this woman telling the truth? Her father had kept a mistress? Or was she a lunatic, raving nonsense? But the woman had known her father’s name. His name and his title. Of course she could’ve learned them from anywhere. Was she only looking to force money from the Tiptrees? Or was she being honest?

“Aye, that’s right.” The woman spun around to glare, spitting the words to the onlookers. “Back away. Act like I’m not good enough to wipe your shoes.”

“Madam, this is neither the time nor the place.” Mr. Bosworth frowned at her, his side-whiskers bristling.

“When is the time then? Joe dumped me in the street, after I was loyal to him for years. Turned me out of the house he kept me in. He won’t see me. He won’t return my letters. And now Pippa, our daughter, is forced to make her own way.” Her body quivered as a gasp went up from the onlookers and many heads bent to whisper behind their gloves. “After he promised me he’d take care of us forever. That he’d see Pippa had a good life. I’m trapped in St. Giles trying to keep body and soul together, and my daughter is . . . has become . . .” She covered her face for a moment, but then her chin rose. “I just wanted you to know what kind of man you are married to. You have everything you need, and your daughter here will never have to worry about having food or warmth or a roof over her head,

thanks to her father. But my girl, his second daughter, is forced to sell herself, something I vowed she would never have to do—” A sob cut off her voice.

“Verona, let’s go.” Mrs. Bosworth grabbed Mother’s arm. She looked the woman over, her eyes sharp enough to draw blood. “Whoever you are, get away from us. You’re no better than you should be and have no one to blame for your circumstances but yourself. Accosting your betters in public like this. Go back to the rookery, where you belong.”

Mrs. Bosworth hustled Mother up the steps to the street, but Charlotte didn’t follow. Instead she yanked off her muff, tucking it under her arm, and peeled off her gloves. Dudley hovered nearby, shifting his weight, too much of a gentleman to leave without Charlotte but clearly uneasy.

“Here, take these.” Charlotte held the gloves out to the woman. “What’s your name?”

The woman studied her skeptically. Her cold-reddened hand trembled as she took the woolen gloves from Charlotte’s fingers. “You look like your father. Same coloring.” She stuck her hands into the gloves. Did she think Charlotte would snatch them back? “My name is Amelia Cashel. Former mistress of the Earl of Tiptree.” She almost sneered, her words bitter and hurt.

“Charlotte, come here at once.” Mother’s voice shot down the steps.

“Please, you say you have a daughter? How old is she?” Charlotte dug in her reticule and pulled out her entire savings, meager as it was, forcing down any remorse for the library subscription she had hoped to purchase.

“Her name’s Pippa, and she’s nineteen.”

Pressing the coins into the woman’s hand, Charlotte nodded. Her mind raced but felt stunned into immobility at the same time as she hurried up the steps, Dudley coming along behind like a faithful hound.

She had a sister.



“Charlotte Tiptree, this might be the most foolish thing you’ve done in your entire life,” she whispered to herself as she hurried down the street, head bent, lugging a basket that bumped against her thigh with every step.

Ice coated the gutters and glazed the cobbles, and she had to watch her step lest she fall. The darkness didn't help. She'd left behind the lighted braziers and streetlamps a few blocks ago. "At least you can be thankful that the moon is nearly full." Though the moonlight seemed to do little good. The stars were mere pinpricks, and the buildings created shadows deep enough for a horde of miscreants to shelter in.

Having given every cent in her purse to that woman, Charlotte had none for hiring a coach, and her father had taken the carriage out tonight. She was forced to walk. It might be less than two miles from Mayfair to St. Giles in distance, but it was leagues in social standing and safety. Block by block along the Tottenham Court Road, the houses dwindled in size, the side streets narrowed, and her tension increased.

Her hands ached with cold. She hoped her gloves were even now warming Amelia Cashel's hands . . . or Pippa's. Charlotte had no second pair, and she couldn't carry the basket and use her muff, so cold hands it was.

She'd never been to one of London's rookeries, much less one as extensive as St. Giles. If she wasn't wont to snaffle her father's newspapers and read them in secret, she wouldn't even know what a rookery was, much less where to find one. According to the broadsheets, the rookeries teemed with villains and ne'er-do-wells, women of low morals and men of evil intent.

Which made tonight's gambit seem foolish indeed as she bumped along, head bent, trying to keep a grip on both her imagination and her courage lest the one get out of control and the other flee entirely.

As Charlotte saw it, she had two major obstacles: finding Amelia Cashel's residence in a warren of tenements and squatters' flats, and getting back to Mayfair safely. All without her parents any the wiser.

If her mother knew where her daughter was and what she was doing, she'd grab Charlotte by the cloak and drag her to Aunt Philomena's on foot, bouncing her every step of the way.

Dinner tonight had been a nightmare. Her mother had sat as still as a Roman statue. Father presided over the meal as if nothing untoward had occurred. Had Mother even told him? He'd surely find out soon enough, London gossip being what it was. Charlotte toyed with her food, her mind

consumed with the knowledge that her father was a philanderer and liar and that she had a sister. Well, a half sister, but a sibling nonetheless.

Pippa.

Pippa Cashel. Nineteen years old. Which made her two years or so younger than Charlotte. All her life she'd wished for, prayed for, longed for a sibling, a sister, someone to share things with, to talk with, to laugh with. She knew her parents were disappointed that they had been unable to produce more children, in particular a son, but Charlotte shared that disappointment.

She had grown up lonely, and a sister would have banished loneliness.

Charlotte glanced at her father. He looked the same as always, perfectly barbered, impeccably if plainly clothed, his features sharp, his coloring, as Amelia Cashel had said, fairish like her own. She glanced around the dining room, taking in the papered walls, high ceiling, single candelabra on the table, but high overhead a chandelier that could be lit when company came over and her father wanted to impress. A fire in the coal stove had warmed the room, and the food, while plain, had been plentiful.

But no one had spoken a word during dinner.

Now, as Charlotte hurried farther from her home in Mayfair, cold, scared, on a mission of mercy that might not even be wanted, guilt smote her. Her sister had none of what Charlotte took for granted every day. Pippa's mother hadn't even owned a pair of gloves.

If Amelia Cashel was to be believed, her daughter, Pippa, was now a doxy? As proper and sheltered as Charlotte had been, she knew what a prostitute was, what happened during the transaction. She had science and medical books to thank for her knowledge, since her mother would never speak of such an intimate subject as relations between a man and woman. If either of her parents knew she read about anatomy and physiology, they would be horrified.

But the idea of any woman being forced to be employed as a prostitute . . . Most women of society seemed to believe that a woman who sold her favors did so because she wanted to, because some fatal flaw in her character that she couldn't overcome made her behave so poorly.

Was that true?

Were the Cashels merely subject to their sinful natures?

If so, what did that make her father, who had kept a mistress for two decades? Who had turned them out without any means of support when he tired of them?

Shame writhed through her middle, and she gripped the handle of the basket until the wood bit into her hands.

The air stank. Trash gusted along the street, and the buildings loomed overhead, the upper stories cantilevering out over the ground floors, cutting off the faint moonlight. Lamplight showed around tattered curtains or crooked shutters, and a rat scurried across her path. She stifled a yelp, jumping as it skittered into a pile of old rags crammed into the corner of a stairwell.

She'd arrived in the rookery.

A sign hung over one establishment halfway down the block, where light poured from every window. With such frigid temperatures gripping the city, no one lingered on the street. A man hurried from the opposite direction, head bent. He glanced up but wasted no time ducking into the tavern.

As Charlotte slowly approached, she could make out the sign swinging in the wind from two icy chains. Each swing squeaked, emphasizing the quiet everywhere else.

The Hog's Head.

The sign was in the shape of a barrel—a hogshead—but also bore the carved likeness of a pig's head.

Just the head. Severed and sitting atop the barrel.

She swallowed. A most uncouth advertisement for a public house.

Still, she'd come this far, and a public house open at this hour might be the best place to inquire as to the Cashel residence.

Girding herself with what remained of her courage, she put her hand on the door and pushed it open.

Inside, a room crowded with tables, chairs, men, and talk greeted her. Only a few heads looked up at her entrance, but one by one, conversations ceased and eyes fastened on her. Her heart thudded painfully, and her lungs felt tiny and crammed into the top of her rib cage.

The odor of stale beer and unwashed male hit her, and she winced. A fire roared in a massive fireplace, and to the side, an unkempt large man

came up a set of stairs from below with a barrel on his shoulder. At the sight of her, he lowered it to the floor with a *thunk*.

“Sharkey, me eyes is going wonky. I b’lieve I better be done for the night,” a man to her left said, setting down his glass. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say a girl had just walked in here.”

“It is a girl, you buffoon,” the large man with the barrel called out.

“Cor, get a look at her.” The loud whisper came from the back of the room. “She ain’t from around here, that’s certain.”

“Here, lovey, come sit wif us.” A pockmarked man jumped up and grabbed an empty chair.

“No, come sit with me.” A rotund man with a florid face scooted his chair back and patted his thigh. His eyebrows waggled, and his lips shone wetly in the light from the fireplace.

Charlotte’s mouth went dry as she searched from one face to the next for any sign of . . . well, perhaps for someone who didn’t look either disreputable or lascivious . . . or both.

Several chairs scooted back, and their occupants rose, fanning out and approaching her slowly.

Her knees felt quite mushy, and her heart threatened to batter its way out of her chest. Which made her angry. Why should she cower? These men had no right to frighten her so.

“Gentlemen, I will ask you to mind your manners. I’m in need of some information, not attention.” She kept her chin up and tried to make her eyes fierce, but the crack in her voice didn’t fool even her.

They continued to advance, crowding her back toward the door. She held the basket in front of her, and with one hand strove to find the door latch behind her without taking her eyes off the men.

“What information are ye lookin’ for, me dove?” A hulking fellow with a beard that seemed desperate to hide his entire face grinned, showing off a few gaps where his teeth should reside.

For a moment, Charlotte couldn’t remember why she was there. She blinked. “I need to find the home of Amelia Cashel and her daughter, Pippa.”

The men stopped moving. The biggest man scratched his cheek, his fingers rasping in his beard. “Whatcha lookin’ for Pippa Cashel round ’ere

for? She ain't 'ere. She's too good for St. Giles by a long stretch. She's up in King's Place. Is that where you come from? If ya do, I'm going to have to save my pennies and visit you up there." His eyes flared, and he licked his lips.

Charlotte shook her head, unable to look away. This must be how a mouse felt when facing a snake. "No, I was told she lived in St. Giles. Her mother told me just today."

"Her mum lives round 'ere, but not her."

Disappointment seeped in, and for a moment Charlotte forgot her precarious situation. She wasn't going to meet her sister tonight.

"What you want with her anyway? We'll keep you company tonight."

Her fingers found the latch behind her, but before she could open the door, the large man planted his palm on the wood over her head and leaned close. His hot, nasty breath puffed against her cheek, and she pressed away from him only to find that another man had come up on her left. His eyes were gimlet sharp.

"Been a while since we saw a fresh face around here. You do look like you could be a King's Place dolly-mop yourself, though yer dressed more like a nun. But still, there might be somethin' interesting under all that fabric." His hand, nails crusted and filthy, reached for her hood, yanking it back. The abrupt motion and Charlotte's endeavor to evade him tugged pins from her hair. Her yellow curls tumbled about her shoulders, and several men sucked in quick breaths.

"Blimey," one man breathed. "Look how clean her hair is."

Charlotte tried to stuff her curls out of sight and tug her hood back up, but with only one hand, she made the situation worse, feeling pins slide and tangle in her hair.

"I'm sayin' it now. I get her first." The big man shoved the smaller man aside. As his giant hand reached for Charlotte's arm, she squirmed around, icy fingers scrabbling for the latch.

A whistling sound followed by a thud froze everyone in the room. Glancing up, Charlotte spied a bone-handled knife vibrating softly, embedded in the door. Was it possible for blood to truly run cold? Her vessels felt as if the Thames ran through them.

She feared if her eyes widened more, they might come right out of

her head. A knife? What had she been thinking, venturing alone into the rookery at night? She was an idiot. She should be committed to Bedlam.

“Stand down, gentlemen.” A deep voice, all the more frightening because it was so calm and controlled, filtered around the bar patrons from the back of the room. “I’ll be taking the lady.”

Some of the men on the fringes resumed their seats, but the few right around Charlotte scowled and remained where they were.

A cloaked and hooded figure advanced, weaving between the tables. As he came, he tugged his muffler up to cover the lower part of his face. Digging into an inner pocket, he flicked a gold coin toward the bar. “Drown your disappointment, boys. I’ll shout a round for the house.”

This moved several more away, but Big Beard stayed planted in front of Charlotte.

The hooded man reached around him and plucked the knife from the door. It disappeared under the cloak. “Barney, didn’t the last time you crossed me teach you anything?” His voice dropped to a whisper that feathered across Charlotte’s skin.

She looked from one to the other. Were they going to brawl right here and now? And could she escape while they were thus engaged?

But the giant’s shoulders went slack, and he bobbed his head like an ox. “Sorry, Hawk.”

With a small flick of his fingers, the cloaked man motioned Barney aside, took Charlotte’s arm, and opened the door. Behind him, men crowded the bar, clamoring for their complimentary drink.

The man called Hawk—what kind of name was that?—steered her out into the cold darkness, his grip on her elbow firm.

“What on earth were you thinking? Are you lost, or have you merely misplaced your reason?” His voice remained muffled behind his scarf, but his breath puffed in clouds through the wool.

“Neither, sir. Unhand me.” She jerked her arm in his grasp, but he held on. “Let me go, or I shall be forced to scream.” Terror built in her throat.

“Then I should be forced to silence you.” He leaned close, and his breath brushed her cheek. “I’ve no intention of harming you, but keep quiet. You’ve drawn enough attention to yourself—and me.”

He sounded at least a bit educated, and . . . kind? Though impatient

too. He set off the way Charlotte had come, his strides long and Charlotte trotting to keep up. The basket thumped against her leg with every step.

“Where do you live? From the look of you, it can’t be St. Giles. No St. Giles girl would be so foolish as to beard a public house full of strange men at night.” His tone said he thought she had pillow ticking for brains.

If he hadn’t just rescued her from such a ridiculous situation, she would’ve had more of an argument for him.

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried toward the Tottenham Court Road. For a few minutes she trotted at his side, but finally, out of breath and out of temper, Charlotte jerked hard to free herself from his grasp and stopped. The cold air seared her lungs, and her breath hung in silvery mist as she gasped.

“Sir, I am not a barrow to be shoved along the street.” She set the basket down and righted her cloak and hood, her hair still tumbling over her shoulders. “I thank you for your assistance back there, but I am quite capable of seeing myself home.”

“I doubt that. Any woman who would stroll into the rookery at night, when she’s clearly well out of her element, shouldn’t be trusted to find her way home again.” His voice came from deep within his hood, and his features, other than the glitter of his eyes, were obscured.

Charlotte bristled, a hundred hot words leaping to her tongue, but she remembered in time that he had rescued her and that her mouth had already gotten her in trouble more than once today. With an effort, she said, “Sir, I assure you, I am fine now.” She stooped to pick up the basket, realizing she hadn’t accomplished her mission at all. “Oh, slipslops and malaprops, I didn’t find Amelia Cashel’s house. Now I have to go back.” She jerked the basket off the cobbles, but the man halted her with his hand on her wrist.

“You’re not going back in there, not now, not ever. You have no idea how close you came to disappearing forever tonight. Now, come with me.” He took the basket from her and laced his fingers through hers, tugging her along, but more gently this time. Her hand warmed, nestled in his, even through his gloves. When they reached the main road, as if by a conjuring trick, a carriage appeared.

“Where to, sir?” the cabbie asked.

The man looked at Charlotte. "Well?"

"Portman Square," she muttered.

She felt rather than saw the surprise in her rescuer's expression. Because of her plain cloak, he probably thought she looked more like a housemaid than the daughter of one of the owners of a house at that prestigious address. Let him assume. He handed her up into the carriage, and before she could tell him that she had no money for the fare, he swung up beside her.

"Really, sir, there's no need. I'm safe enough now."

"I might as well finish the job." He settled back against the hard wooden seat. No frills or plush squabs in this carriage. Tall as he was, he seemed to swallow up all the space inside.

When the carriage lurched into motion, he asked, "Why on earth were you looking for someone in the rookery at night?" He kept his face turned away from her, the muffler still covering the lower half, and the deep hood concealing the rest. He might be a common villain or the prime minister himself. Who could tell in the darkness like this?

She pressed her lips together. Disappointment and despair settled into her chest. She'd set out with such great hopes of meeting her sister. Of perhaps beginning a relationship . . . a friendship. She said nothing, knowing that it was foolish.

"Perhaps you're just now realizing what a dangerous stunt you attempted? Good." He tugged off his gloves, finger by finger, and bunched them in his hand, laying his fist along his thigh. The quality of his clothes was fine, the cloak thick, his gloves without a single hole, that she could see.

Odd that his fingernails were so clean, not at all like the other men in the public house. And his diction was better.

And he smelled better.

"If you must know, I was hoping to deliver a few things. I met—" Charlotte stopped, wondering. She supposed Amelia Cashel was a miss, since she'd never married, but she was old enough to be Charlotte's mother. "Madam Cashel this afternoon, and I could see she was in need. I only sought to help her." A blanket, some food, some candles, a shawl. Hopefully, none of the staff would notice these few items missing and report them to her parsimonious father.

The man actually grunted, as if barely comprehending her actions. “A noble thought, I suppose, though badly executed. If you leave the basket with me, I will see that it is properly delivered.”

“You would do that?” Suspicion laced her words. “You aren’t just trying to get your hands on the contents, are you?”

His silent offense was as cold as the February air. Finally, he asked, “What is your name?”

“Tell me who you are first.” She didn’t want to reveal her name, lest word get back to her father, so she stalled.

“Young woman, I have no need for such an exchange of information. If I put my mind to it, I will know your identity in less than twenty-four hours.”

Indeed? Arrogant man. She pressed her lips together, determined to give him no clues.

“Let’s see. Though you are plainly attired at the moment, you speak with an educated tone. Therefore you are probably genteelly born. Also, you haven’t the sense God gave a chicken, though come to think of it, that doesn’t narrow things down much. I’ve heard society ladies are a bit addlepatated.”

She stiffened as if poked with a stick, but she bit hard on the inside of her cheek in order not to rise to his baiting.

“However, I do know you live on Portman Square. There cannot be that many beautiful young ladies who call that prestigious address home. An empty-headed society miss shouldn’t be that difficult to identify. Though, you might be a governess, or a ladies’ maid? Perhaps a paid companion? Still, the list of occupants in Portman Square isn’t that large, so who you are won’t be difficult to diagnose.”

She fumed that he would think she had no sense, though she’d certainly behaved that way tonight. But she took satisfaction in the knowledge that he only thought he knew where she lived. She’d given a false address so he wouldn’t be able to find her later and so she wouldn’t bring any shame to her family.

No more shame than she’d already discovered that her father had brought on them today.

The carriage rolled to a stop on the south side of Portman Square, and

before he could stop her, she slipped out, leaving the basket behind, and hurried away.

As she ducked around the corner, she realized she hadn't given him proper thanks, though after his insult to her intelligence, he didn't deserve it.

Too bad she would never see him again. At least he'd been interesting to talk to. A rookery ruffian perhaps, but intelligent and capable of rescuing her from her own folly.

A unique man to be sure.

He also had one other uncommon opinion that predisposed her to favor him.

He had called her beautiful.