



Affair

Amanda Quick

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Midnight: London

Charlotte never knew what it was that awakened her in the early hours before dawn. Perhaps her sleeping brain had registered the squeak of a floor tread or a man's muffled voice. Whatever the cause, she opened her eyes abruptly and sat straight up in bed. She was consumed with a sense of overwhelming urgency. A cold foreboding permeated her entire body.

It was the housekeeper's night off. Her stepfather, Winterbourne, never came home before dawn these days. Charlotte knew that she and her sister, Ariel, should have been alone in the house.

But someone had just climbed the staircase and walked down the hall.

She tossed aside the covers and stood, shivering, on the cold floor. For a moment she had not the least notion of what to do next.

Another floorboard groaned.

She went to the door, opened it a few inches, and gazed out into the darkened corridor. Two figures shrouded in voluminous greatcoats hovered in the dense shadows at the end of the hall. They stood in front of Ariel's door.

One of the men held a candle. The light revealed Winterbourne's thick, dissipated features.

"Be quick about it," Winterbourne said in a slurred growl. "And then be on your way. It's almost dawn."

"But I wish to enjoy this rare pleasure. It is so seldom that one has the opportunity to save a genuine virgin descended from such excellent bloodlines. Fourteen, did you say? A good age. I intend to take my time, Winterbourne."

Charlotte bit back a scream of rage and fear. The second man's voice was a darkly played musical instrument, a thing of grace and power even when pitched at a whisper. It was a voice that could have soothed wild animals or sung hymns but it was the most terrifying sound she had ever heard.

"Are you insane?" Winterbourne hissed. "Hurry and be done with it."

"You do owe me a great deal of money, Winterbourne. Surely you do not expect to settle the debt by allowing me only a few minutes with my very expensive little innocent. I want an hour at the very least."

"Impossible," Winterbourne muttered. "The older girl's just down the hall. She's a bit of a nightmare. Absolutely ungovernable. If you wake her, there's no telling what she'll do."

"That is your problem, not mine. You are the master in this household, are you not? I shall leave it to you to deal with her."

"What the devil do you expect me to do if she awakens?"

"Lock her in her room. Bind her. Put a gag in her mouth. Beat her senseless. I care not how you manage the matter, just see to it that she does not interfere with my pleasures."

Charlotte eased her bedroom door closed and whirled around to gaze wildly about her moonlit bedchamber. She took a deep breath, collected her panic-stricken senses, and hurried across the carpet to a chest that stood near the window.

She fumbled with the lock of the chest, got it open, and yanked aside the two blankets on top. The case that contained her father's pistol lay at the bottom of the chest.

Charlotte grabbed the case, opened it with trembling fingers, and removed the heavy weapon. It was unloaded. There was nothing she could do about that. She lacked the necessary powder and ball as well as the time to figure out how it all went into the pistol.

She went to the door, flung it open, and stepped out into the hall. She knew intuitively that the stranger who intended to rape Ariel was the more dangerous of the two men. She sensed that he would be emboldened by any show of anxiousness or uncertainty, let alone a glimpse of the raw panic that was coursing through her.

"Stop at once or I will shoot," Charlotte said quietly.

Winterbourne lurched about in surprise. The flame of his candle revealed his gaping mouth. "Hell's teeth. Charlotte."

The second man turned more slowly. His greatcoat swirled around him with a soft, rustling sound. The weak flame of Winterbourne's candle did not cast any light on his features. He had not removed his hat. The wide brim, together with the high collar of his coat, obscured his face in deep shadows.

"Ah," he murmured. "The older sister, I presume?"

Charlotte realized that she was standing in a stream of moonlight that poured from her window through the open door. The stranger could likely see the outline of her body silhouetted through her white linen nightgown.

She wished with all her heart that the pistol she held was filled with a ball and a strong charge. She had never hated anyone as much as she hated this creature. Nor had she ever been so frightened.

In that moment her imagination threatened to run roughshod over her intelligence. Some elemental part of her was convinced that it was not a mere man she faced, but a monster.

Guided only by instinct, Charlotte said nothing. She wrapped both hands around the pistol, raised it with deliberate precision, just as though it were fully loaded, and cocked it. The unmistakable sound was very loud in the quiet hall.

"Damnation, girl, are you mad?" Winterbourne surged forward and then came to a shambling halt a few feet away. "Put down the pistol."

"Get out." Charlotte did not allow the weapon to waver. She kept her whole attention focused on the monster in the black greatcoat. "Both of you. Get out now."

"I do believe she means to pull the trigger, Winterbourne." The monster's mellifluous voice oozed honey and venom and a terrifying degree of amusement.

"She would not dare." But Winterbourne took a pace back. "Charlotte, listen to me. You cannot be so foolish as to think that you can simply shoot a man in cold blood. You will hang."

"So be it." Charlotte held the pistol steady.

"Come, Winterbourne," the monster said softly. "Let us be off. The chit means to lodge a bullet in one of us and I rather think she intends to make me her victim. No virgin is worth this much trouble."

“But what about my vouchers?” Winterbourne asked in a quivering voice. “You promise you would give them back to me if I let you have the younger girl.”

“It would appear that you must find some other way to pay your debts.”

“But I have no other resource, sir.” Winterbourne sounded desperate. “There is nothing left to sell that will fetch enough to cover my losses to you. My wife’s jewelry is gone. Only a bit of the silver remains. And I do not own this house. I am merely renting it.”

“I’m sure you will come up with some means of repaying me.” The monster walked slowly toward the staircase. He did not take his attention off Charlotte. “But make certain that whatever it is, it does not require me to get past an avenging angel armed with a pistol in order to secure my payment.”

Charlotte kept the pistol trained on the stranger as he went down the stairs. By avoiding Winterbourne’s candle, he managed to keep himself cloaked in shadow the entire time. She leaned over the banister and watched as he opened the front door.

To her horror, he paused and looked up at her. “Do you believe in destiny, Miss Arkendale?” His voice floated up to her from out of the night.

“I do not concern myself with such matters.”

“Pity. Given that you have just demonstrated that you are one of those rare persons with the power to shape it, you really ought to pay more attention to the subject.”

“Leave this house.”

“Farewell, Miss Arkendale. It has been amusing, to say the least.” With a last swirl of his greatcoat, the monster was gone.

Charlotte was able to breathe again. She turned back to Winterbourne.

“You, too, sir. Begone, or I shall pull this trigger.”

His heavy features worked furiously. “Do you know what you have done, you stupid bitch? I owe him a bloody fortune.”

“I do not care how much you have lost to him. He is a monster. And you are a man who would feed an innocent child to a beast. That makes you a monster, too. Get out of here.”

“You cannot throw me out of my own house.”

“That is just what I intend to do. Leave, or I shall pull this trigger. Do not doubt me, Winterbourne.”

“I’m your stepfather, by God.”

“You are a wretched, contemptible liar. You are also a thief. You stole the inheritance that my father left for Ariel and me and you have squandered it in the gaming hells. Do you think I feel any loyalty to you after what you have done? If so, you are quite mad.”

Winterbourne was incensed. “That money became mine when I married your mother.”

“*Leave this house.*”

“Charlotte, wait, you do not comprehend the situation. That man who just left is not to be trifled with. He has demanded that I repay my gaming debt tonight. I must settle my affairs with him. I do not know what he will do to me if I fail.”

“Leave.”

Winterbourne opened his mouth and then closed it abruptly. He stared helplessly at the pistol and then, with an anguished groan, he hastened toward the staircase. Clutching the banister rail for support, he went down the steps, then crossed the hall and let himself out.

Charlotte stood very still in the shadows at the top of the stairs until the door closed.

behind Winterbourne. She took several deep breaths and slowly lowered the pistol.

For a moment the world seemed to waver and shift around her. The sound of carriage rattling past in the street was distant and unreal. The familiar shape of the hall and the staircase took on the quality of an eerie illusion.

Ariel's door opened at the end of the corridor. "Charlotte? I heard voices. Are you all right?"

"Yes." Charlotte held the empty pistol against her thigh so that her sister would not see it. She turned slowly and summoned a shaky smile. "Yes, I am fine, Ariel. Winterbourne came home drunk, as usual. We argued a bit. But he has left the house now. He will not be back tonight."

Ariel was very quiet for a moment. "I wish Mama was still here. Sometimes I am very frightened in this house."

Charlotte felt tears sting her eyes. "Sometimes I am frightened, too, Ariel. But we shall soon be free. In fact, we shall take the stage to Yorkshire tomorrow."

She hurried toward her sister and put one arm around her. She pushed the pistol deep into the folds of her nightgown. The cold iron burned against her thigh.

"You have finished selling the silver and what was left of Mama's jewels?" Ariel asked.

"Yes. I pawned the tea tray yesterday. There is nothing left."

In the year since their mother's untimely death in a riding accident, Winterbourne had sold off the best pieces of the Arkendale jewels and most of the larger silver items in order to pay his mounting gaming debts.

But when she had realized what was happening, Charlotte had stealthily hidden a number of small rings, brooches, and a pendant. She had also tucked away bits of the silver to service. During the past few months she had surreptitiously pawned them.

Winterbourne spent so much of the time in an inebriated state that he did not even realize how many of the household valuables had disappeared. When he did, on occasion, notice that something had gone missing, Charlotte informed him that he, himself, had pawned it while drunk.

Ariel looked up. "Do you think that we shall enjoy Yorkshire?"

"It will be lovely. We shall find a little cottage to rent."

"But how will we live?" Even at the tender age of fourteen, Ariel displayed an amazing practical streak. "The money you got for Mama's things will not last long."

Charlotte hugged her. "Do not fret. I shall think of a way to make a living for us."

Ariel frowned. "You will not be obliged to become a governess, will you? You know how terrible things are for ladies in that career. No one pays them very much and they are often treated very shabbily. And I shall likely not be able to stay with you if you go into service at someone else's house."

"You may be certain that I shall find some other way to support us," Charlotte vowed.

Everyone knew that a governess's lot was not a pleasant one. In addition to the low wages and the humiliating treatment, there were risks from the men of the household who considered the governess fair game.

There had to be another way to support herself and Ariel, Charlotte thought.

But in the morning, everything changed.

Lord Winterbourne was found floating facedown in the Thames, his throat slit. It was

assumed that he had been the victim of a footpad.

There was no longer any reason to escape to Yorkshire but there was still a need for Charlotte to invent a career for herself.

She received the news of Winterbourne's death with vast relief. But she knew that she would never forget the monster with the compellingly beautiful voice that she had encountered in the hall.

Midnight: The coast of Italy, two years later

"So, in the end you chose to betray me." Morgan Judd spoke from the doorway of the ancient stone chamber that served as his laboratory. "A pity. You and I have much in common, St. Ives. Together we could have forged an alliance that would have brought us both undreamed of wealth and power. A great waste of a grand destiny. But, then, you don't believe in destiny, do you?"

Baxter St. Ives clenched his fingers fiercely around the damning notebook that he had just discovered. He turned to face Morgan.

Women considered Judd to be endowed with the countenance of a fallen angel. His black hair curled naturally in the carelessly stylish manner of the Romantic poets. It framed a high, intelligent brow and eyes the impossible blue of glacial ice.

Morgan's voice could have belonged to Lucifer himself. It was the voice of a man who had sung in the choir at Oxford, read poetry aloud to enthralled listeners, and charmed high-ranking ladies into bed. It was a rich, dark, compelling voice, a voice shaded with subtle meanings and unspoken promises. It was a voice of power and passion and Morgan used it, as he did everything and everyone, to achieve his own ends.

His bloodlines were as blue as the ice in his eyes. They flowed from one of England's most noble families. But his elegant, aristocratic mien belied the true circumstances of his birth.

Morgan Judd was a bastard. It was one of the two things that Baxter could say they truly had in common. The other was a fascination with chemistry. It was the latter that had brought about this midnight confrontation.

"Destiny is for romantic poets and writers of novels." Baxter pushed his gold wire spectacles more firmly in place on his nose. "I'm a man of science. I have no interest in such metaphysical nonsense. But I do know that it is possible for a man to sell his soul to the devil. Why did you do it, Morgan?"

"You speak of the compact that I have made with Napoleon, I presume." Morgan's sensual mouth curved faintly in cold amusement.

He took two steps into the shadowy chamber and halted. The folds of his black cloak swirled around the tops of his gleaming boots in a manner that reminded Baxter of the wings of a large bird of prey.

"Yes," Baxter said. "I refer to your bargain."

"There is no great mystery about my decision. I do what must be done to fulfill my destiny."

"You would betray your country to fulfill this mad notion of a grand destiny?"

"I owe nothing to England and neither do you. It is a land governed by laws and unwritten social rules that combine to prohibit superior men such as you and I from taking our rightful place in the natural order." Morgan's eyes glittered in the candlelight. His voice crackled with

bitter rage. "It is not too late, Baxter. Join me in this endeavor."

Baxter held up the notebook. "You want me to help you finish formulating these terrible chemical concoctions so that Napoleon can use them as weapons against your own countrymen? You truly are crazed."

"I'm not mad, but you are most definitely a fool." Morgan produced a pistol from the enveloping folds of the black cloak. "And blind in spite of your eyeglasses, if you cannot see that Napoleon is the future."

Baxter shook his head. "He has tried to grab too much power. It will destroy him."

"He is a man who comprehends that great destinies are crafted by those who have the will and the intellect to fashion them. What is more, he is a man who believes in progress. He is the only ruler in all of Europe who truly comprehends the potential value of science."

"I'm aware that he has given large sums of money to those who conduct experiments in chemistry and physics and the like." Baxter watched the pistol in Morgan's hand. "But he will not use what you are creating here in this laboratory to help him win the war. Englishmen will die cruel deaths if you are successful in producing quantities of lethal vapors. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Morgan laughed. The sound had the low, deep resonance of a great bell rung very softly. "Nothing at all."

"Have you consigned your own honor as well as your native land to hell?"

"St. Ives, you amaze me. When will you learn that honor is a sport designed to amuse men who are born on the right side of the blanket?"

"I disagree." Tucking the notebook under one arm, Baxter removed his spectacles and began to polish the lenses with his handkerchief. "Honor is a quality that any man can acquire and shape for himself." He smiled slightly. "Not unlike your own notion of destiny when you consider it closely."

Morgan's eyes hardened with scorn and a chilling fury. "Honor is for men who inherit power and wealth in the cradle simply because their mothers had the good sense to secure a marriage license before they spread their thighs. It is for men such as our noble fathers who bequeath titles and estates to their legitimate sons and leave their bastards with nothing. It is not for the likes of us."

"Do you know what your greatest flaw is, Morgan?" Baxter carefully replaced his spectacles. "You allow yourself to become much too impassioned about certain subjects. Strong emotion is not a sound trait in a chemist."

"Damn you, St. Ives." Morgan's hand tightened around the grip of the pistol. "I've had enough of your exceedingly dull, excessively boring lectures. *Your* greatest flaw is that you lack the fortitude and the daring nature to alter the course of your own fate."

Baxter shrugged. "If there is such a thing as destiny, then I expect mine is to be a crashing bore until the day I expire."

"I fear that day has arrived. You may not believe this, but I regret the necessity of killing you. You are one of the few men in all of Europe who could have appreciated the brilliance of my accomplishments. It is a pity that you will not be alive to watch my destiny unfold."

"Destiny, indeed. What utter rubbish. I must tell you, this obsession with the metaphysical and the occult is another poor characteristic in a man of science. It was once merely an amusing pastime for you. When did you start to actually put credence into such nonsense?"

“Fool.” Morgan aimed carefully and cocked the pistol.

Time had run out. There was nothing left to lose. In desperation, Baxter seized the heavy candle stand. He hurled it, together with the flaring taper, toward the nearest cluttered workbench.

The iron stand and its candle crashed into a glass flask, shattering it instantly. The pale green fluid inside splashed out across the workbench and lapped at the still-burning flame.

The spilled liquid ignited with a deadly rush.

“No,” Morgan screamed. “Damn you, St. Ives.”

He pulled the trigger but his attention was on the spreading fire, not his aim. The bullet slammed into the window behind Baxter. One of the small panes exploded.

Baxter ran toward the door, the notebook in his hand.

“How dare you attempt to interfere with my plans?” Morgan scooped a green glass bottle off a nearby shelf and spun around to block Baxter’s path. “You bloody fool. You cannot stop me.”

“The fire is spreading quickly. Run, for God’s sake.”

But Morgan ignored the warning. Features twisted in rage, he dashed the contents of the green bottle straight at Baxter.

Acting on instinct, Baxter covered his eyes with his arm and turned away.

The acid struck his shoulder and back. For a second he felt nothing except a curiously cool sensation. It was as if he had been doused with water. But in the next instant, the chemicals finished eating through his linen shirt and seared his bare skin.

Pain lanced through him, a scorching agony that threatened to destroy his concentration. He forced himself to focus only on the need to escape.

Fire blossomed quickly in the stone chamber. A thick, foul smoke was beginning to form as more flasks shattered and released their contents to the flames.

Morgan lunged for a drawer, opened it, and produced a second pistol. He whirled toward Baxter, squinting to aim the weapon through the growing pall of vapors.

Baxter felt as if his skin were being peeled off in strips. Through a growing haze of smoke and pain he saw that the path to the door was already blocked by towering flames. There would be no escape in that direction.

He lashed out with one booted foot and kicked over the heavy air pump. It toppled against Morgan’s left leg.

“God damn you.” Morgan staggered to the side as the device struck him. He fell to his knees. The pistol clattered on the stones.

Baxter ran for the window. The pieces of his ruined shirt flapped wildly. He gained the wide, stone sill and glanced down.

Below lay a roiling, churning sea. In the thin, silver moonlight he could see the foaming surf as it crashed against the rocks that formed the foundation of the ancient castle.

The pistol thundered.

Baxter flung himself toward the dark waters. A series of fiery explosions echoed in the night as he plummeted downward.

He managed to miss the rocks but the impact tore Morgan Judd’s notebook from his grasp. It vanished forever into the depths.

When he surfaced a moment later amid the pounding waves, Baxter realized that he

eyeglasses were also gone. But he did not need them to see that the laboratory in the cast tower had turned into an inferno. Terrible smoke billowed forth into the night.

No one could live through such a conflagration. Morgan Judd was dead.

Baxter considered the fact that he had brought about the death of the man who had once been his closest friend and colleague.

It was almost enough to make a man believe in the notion of destiny.

London, three years later

“You leave me no option but to be blunt, Mr. St. Ives. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that you are not quite what I had in mind in the way of a man-of-affairs.” Charlotte Arkendale clasped her hands together on top of the wide mahogany desk and regarded Baxter with a critical eye. “I am sorry for the waste of your time.”

The interview was not going well. Baxter adjusted the gold-framed eyeglasses on the bridge of his nose and silently vowed that he would not give in to the impulse to grind his back teeth.

“Forgive me, Miss Arkendale, but I was under the impression that you wished to employ a person who appeared completely innocuous and uninteresting.”

“Quite true.”

“I believe your exact description of the ideal candidate for the position was, and I quote, *person who is as bland as a potato pudding.*”

Charlotte blinked wide, disconcertingly intelligent, green eyes. “You do not comprehend me properly, sir.”

“I rarely make mistakes, Miss Arkendale. I am nothing if not precise, methodical, and deliberate in my ways. Mistakes are made by those who are impulsive or inclined toward excessive passions. I assure you, I am not of that temperament.”

“I could not agree with you more on the risks of a passionate nature,” she said quickly. “Indeed, that is one of the problems—”

“Allow me to read to you precisely what you wrote in your letter to your recently retired man-of-affairs.”

“There is no need. I am perfectly aware of what I wrote to Mr. Marcle.”

Baxter ignored her. He reached into the inside pocket of his slightly ruffled coat and removed the letter he had stored there. He had read the damn thing so many times that he almost had it memorized, but he made a show of glancing down at the flamboyant handwriting.

“As you know, Mr. Marcle, I require a man-of-affairs to take your place. He must be a person who presents an ordinary, unassuming appearance. I want a man who can go about his business unnoticed; a gentleman with whom I can meet frequently without attracting undue attention or comment.

“In addition to the customary duties of a man-of-affairs, duties which you have fulfilled so very admirably during the past five years, sir, I must ask that the gentleman whom you recommend possess certain other skills.

“I shall not trouble you with the details of the situation in which I find myself. Suffice it to say that due to recent events I am in need of a stout, keenly alert individual

who can be depended upon to protect my person. In short, I wish to employ a bodyguard as well as a man-of-affairs.

“ ‘Expense, as always, must be a consideration. Therefore, rather than undertake the cost of engaging two men to fill two posts, I have concluded that it will prove more economical to employ one man who can carry out the responsibilities of both positions —’ ”

“Yes, yes, I recall my own words quite clearly,” Charlotte interrupted testily. “But that not the point.”

Baxter doggedly continued:

“ ‘I therefore request that you send me a respectable gentleman who meets the above requirements and who presents an appearance that is as bland as a potato pudding.’ ”

“I fail to see why you must repeat aloud everything on the page, Mr. St. Ives.”

Baxter pressed on:

“ ‘He must be endowed with a high degree of intelligence as I shall require him to make the usual delicate inquiries for me. But in his capacity as a bodyguard, he must also be skilled in the use of a pistol in case events take a nasty turn. Above all, Mr. Marcle, as you well know, he must be discreet.’ ”

“Enough, Mr. St. Ives.” Charlotte picked up a small volume bound in red leather and slapped it smartly against the desktop to get his attention.

Baxter glanced up from the letter. “I believe I meet most of your requirements, Miss Arkendale.”

“I am certain that you do meet a few of them.” She favored him with a frosty smile. “Mr. Marcle would never have recommended you to me if that were not the case. Unfortunately, there is one very important qualification that you lack.”

Baxter deliberately refolded the letter and slipped it back inside his coat. “Time is of the essence, according to Marcle.”

“Quite correct.” An anxious expression came and went in her brilliant eyes. “I need someone to fill the post immediately.”

“Then perhaps you should not be too choosy, Miss Arkendale.”

She flushed. “But the thing is, Mr. St. Ives, I wish to employ a man who meets *all* of my requirements, not just some of them.”

“I must insist that I do meet all of them, Miss Arkendale.” He paused. “Or very nearly all. I am intelligent, alert, and amazingly discreet. I confess that I have little interest in pistols. I find them to be generally inaccurate and unreliable.”

“Ah-ha.” She brightened at that news. “There you are. Another requirement that you do not meet, sir.”

“But I have some skill in chemistry.”

“Chemistry?” She frowned. “What good will that do?”

“One never knows, Miss Arkendale. Occasionally I find it quite useful.”

“I see. Well, that is all very interesting, of course. Unfortunately, I have no need of

chemist.”

“You insisted upon a man who would draw little attention. A staid, unremarkable man-of-affairs.”

“Yes, but—”

“Allow me to tell you that I am often described in those very terms. Bland as a potato pudding in every way.”

Irritation began to simmer in Charlotte’s eyes. She leaped to her feet and stalked around the corner of her desk. “I find that extremely difficult to believe, sir.”

“I cannot imagine why.” Baxter removed his spectacles as she began to pace the small study. “Even my own aunt informs me that I am capable of inducing a state of acute boredom in anyone within a radius of twenty paces in less than ten minutes. Miss Arkendale, I can assure you that I not only look dull, I am dull.”

“Perhaps weak eyesight runs in your family, sir. I recommend that your aunt obtain a pair of eyeglasses such as those that you wear.”

“My aunt would not be seen dead in a pair of spectacles.” Baxter reflected briefly on the outrageously stylish Rosalind, Lady Trengloss, as he polished the lenses of his eyeglasses. “She wears hers only when she knows herself to be entirely alone. I doubt that her own maid has seen her in them.”

“Which only confirms my suspicion that she has not taken a close look at you in some time, sir. Perhaps not since you were a babe in arms.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Charlotte spun around to face him. “Mr. St. Ives, the matter of eyesight bears very much on the point I am attempting to make here.”

Baxter replaced his spectacles with cautious deliberation.

He was definitely losing the thread of the conversation. Not a good sign. He forced himself to study Charlotte with his customary analytical detachment.

She bore little resemblance to most of the ladies of his acquaintance. In truth, the longer he was in her presence, the more Baxter was convinced that she was entirely unique.

To his amazement, he found himself reluctantly fascinated in spite of what he knew about her. She was somewhat older than he had expected. Five-and-twenty, he had learned on passing.

Expressions came and went across her face with the rapidity of a chemical reaction in a flask positioned over an intense flame. Strong brows and long lashes framed her eyes. An assertive nose, high cheekbones, and an eloquent mouth conveyed spirited determination and an indomitable will.

In other words, Baxter thought, this is one bloody-minded female.

Her glossy auburn hair was parted in the center above a high, intelligent forehead. The tresses were drawn up in a neat knot and arranged so that a few corkscrew curls bounced around her temples.

In the midst of a Season that featured a plethora of low-cut bodices and gossamer fabrics designed to reveal a maximum amount of the female form, Charlotte wore a surprisingly modest gown. It was fashioned of yellow muslin, high-waisted and trimmed with long sleeves and a white ruff. A pair of yellow kid slippers peeked out from beneath the severe, restrained flounce that decorated the hem. He could not help but notice that she had ver-

pretty feet. Nicely shaped with dainty ankles.

Appalled at the direction of his thoughts, Baxter looked away. "Forgive me, Miss Arkendale, but I seem to have missed your point."

"You will simply not do as my man-of-affairs."

"Because I wear spectacles?" He frowned. "I would have thought that they rather enhanced the impression of potato-pudding blandness."

"Your spectacles are not the problem." She sounded thoroughly exasperated now.

"I thought you just said they were the problem."

"Haven't you been listening? I begin to believe that you are deliberately misunderstanding me, sir. I repeat, you are not qualified for this post."

"I am perfectly suited to it. May I remind you that your own man-of-affairs has recommended me for this position?"

Charlotte dismissed that with a wave of her hand. "Mr. Marcle is no longer my man-of-affairs. He is even now on his way to a cottage in Devon."

"I believe he did say something to the effect that he felt he had earned a long and peaceful retirement. I gained the impression that you were a somewhat demanding employer, Miss Arkendale."

She stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. Marcle's retirement is not the issue. What is of importance here is that you called upon him one last time and gave him instructions to find his replacement. He has selected me to take over his responsibilities."

"I make the final decision in this matter and I say that you will not do, sir."

"I assure you that Marcle thought me eminently qualified for the post. He was pleased to write the letter of recommendation that I showed to you."

The silver-haired, dapper John Marcle had been in the midst of packing up his household when he had received his last instructions from his soon-to-be former employer. Baxter's timing had been perfect. Or so he had thought until he tried to persuade the dubious Marcle that he wished to apply for the position.

Rather than relief at the prospect of solving his last "Arkendale problem," as he termed it, the conscientious Marcle had felt compelled to discourage Baxter from the outset.

"Miss Arkendale is, ah, somewhat unusual," Marcle said as he toyed with his pen. "Are you quite certain you wish to apply for the post?"

"Quite certain," Baxter said.

Marcle peered at him from beneath a solid line of thick, white brows. "Forgive me, sir, but I do not comprehend precisely why you wish to engage yourself to Miss Arkendale in this capacity."

"The usual reasons. I'm in need of employment."

"Yes, yes, I understand. But there must be other positions available."

Baxter decided to embroider his story a bit. He assumed what he hoped was a confidential air. "We both know how mundane most such posts are. Instructions to solicitors and various agents. Arrangements for the buying and selling of properties. Banking matters. All very uninspiring."

"After five years as Miss Arkendale's man-of-affairs, I can assure you that there is much to be said for the routine and the uninspiring."

"I am eager for something a bit different," Baxter said earnestly. "This post sounds as if it will be somewhat out of the ordinary. Indeed, I sense that it will offer me a certain challenge."

"Challenge?" Marcle closed his eyes. "I doubt that you know the meaning of the word yet, sir."

"I have been told that I am in a rut. It has been suggested that I add an element of excitement to my life, sir. I am hoping that this post will afford me the opportunity to do that."

Marcle's eyes snapped open in alarm. "You say you seek excitement?"

"Indeed, sir. A man of my nature gets very little of that commodity in the normal course of events." Baxter hoped he was not overdoing it. "I have always lived a quiet life."

And what was more, he much preferred his peaceful existence, he thought glumly. The damnable mission that his aunt had begged him to undertake was an unwelcome interruption in his placid routine.

The only reason he had allowed himself to be talked into it was because he knew Rosalind well. She had a flair for the dramatic—her greatest regret was that she had never gone on the stage—but she was not given to foolish fancies and feverish imaginings.

Rosalind was genuinely concerned about the circumstances surrounding the murder of her friend, Drusilla Heskett. The authorities had declared that the woman had been shot by a housebreaker. Rosalind suspected that the killer was none other than Charlotte Arkendale.

Baxter had agreed to look into the situation on his aunt's behalf.

A discreet inquiry had turned up the information that the mysterious Miss Arkendale happened to be in need of a new man-of-affairs. Baxter had seized the opportunity to apply for the post.

He reasoned that if he could talk his way into the position he would be ideally situated to conduct his investigation. With any luck he would resolve the matter in short order and be able to return to the calm refuge of his laboratory.

Marcle exhaled heavily. "It's true that working for Miss Arkendale can sometimes produce an element of excitement, but I am not altogether certain it is the type of adventure you would enjoy, Mr. St. Ives."

"I shall be the judge of that."

"Believe me, sir, if it's excitement you crave, you would do better to take yourself off to gaming hell."

"I don't enjoy games of chance."

Marcle grimaced. "I assure you, a lively hell would be infinitely less maddening than embroiling yourself in Miss Arkendale's affairs."

Baxter had not considered the possibility that Charlotte Arkendale was a candidate for Bedlam. "You believe her to be mad?"

"How many ladies of your acquaintance require a man-of-affairs who can also undertake the duties of a bodyguard, sir?"

An excellent question, Baxter thought ruefully. The entire matter sounded more bizarre than at the moment. "Nevertheless, I wish to apply for the post. It is obvious why she needs a new man-of-affairs. You are retiring, after all, and she must replace you. But perhaps you would be good enough to explain why Miss Arkendale is in need of a bodyguard?"

“How the devil should I know the answer to that?” Marcle tossed aside his pen. “Miss Arkendale is a most peculiar female. I have served as her man-of-affairs since the death of her stepfather, Lord Winterbourne. I can assure you, these past five years have been the longest years of my life.”

Baxter eyed him curiously. “If you disliked your post, why did you continue in it?”

Marcle sighed. “She pays extraordinarily well.”

“I see.”

“But I must confess that whenever I received a letter of instruction from her, I trembled in my shoes. I never knew what strange demand she would make next. And that was before she took a notion to add the duties of a bodyguard to the post.”

“What sort of demands does she make in the normal course of affairs?”

Marcle groaned. “She has sent me to make inquiries of the oddest people. I have gone haring off to the North in order to obtain information on a certain gentleman. I have interviewed the managers of the most appalling hells and brothels on her behalf. I have inquired into the financial affairs of any number of men who would be shocked to learn of her interest.”

“Odd, indeed.”

“And most unladylike. Upon my oath, sir, if she did not pay so handsomely, I would have quit my position after the first month of service. But at least I was never required to act as a bodyguard. I am grateful for that much.”

“You have no notion of why she feels herself to be in danger?”

“None whatsoever.” Marcle’s chair squeaked as he leaned back in it. “Miss Arkendale has not seen fit to confide in me on that score. In truth, there is a great deal Miss Arkendale has never seen fit to confide in me. I am extremely vague about the actual source of her income, for example.”

Baxter was very good at controlling his expressions. A bastard, even one who was the biological son of a wealthy earl, learned the skill early on in life. The talent served him well at that moment. He managed to convey only casual interest in Marcle’s last statement.

“I was under the impression that Miss Arkendale’s mother, Lady Winterbourne, had a substantial income from her first marriage,” Baxter said carefully. “I assumed the inheritance was passed on to Miss Arkendale and her sister.”

Marcle’s brows rose. “That is what Miss Charlotte would have you believe. But I can tell you that Winterbourne squandered nearly every penny of the Arkendale inheritance before he had the grace to get himself murdered by a footpad five years ago.”

Baxter removed his spectacles and began to polish them with his handkerchief. “Just what do you suspect is the real source of Miss Arkendale’s money?”

Marcle examined his nails. “I will be truthful, sir. Although I have assisted in the investment and management of her income for five years, to this day I have no notion of where the money originates. I recommend that if you take this post, you follow my example. Sometimes it’s best not to know all of the facts.”

Baxter slowly replaced his eyeglasses. “Fascinating. I expect some distant relative died and left an inheritance that has made up for the one that Winterbourne frittered away.”

“I do not believe that to be the case,” Marcle said slowly. “I succumbed to curiosity a couple of years ago and made some discreet inquiries. There was no such wealthy Arkendale

relative. I fear the source of her funds is simply one more peculiar mystery surrounding Miss Arkendale.”

It was no mystery at all if Rosalind was correct in her conclusions, Baxter thought. The lady was a blackmailer.

A distinct tapping sound brought his thoughts back to the present. He glanced at Charlotte who had come to a halt near the fireplace. She was drumming her fingers on the marble mantel.

“I do not see how Marcle could possibly have imagined you to be qualified for this post,” she said.

Baxter had had enough of arguing the point. “It is not as if there are a great many men about who can meet your absurd requirements, Miss Arkendale.”

She glowered. “But surely Mr. Marcle can find me a gentleman who is more suited to the position than yourself.”

“Have you forgotten? Marcle is halfway to Devon. Would you mind telling me precisely what it is about me that is so unsuitable?”

“Other than your lack of skill with a pistol?” she asked much too sweetly.

“Yes, other than that failing.”

“You force me to be rude, sir. The problem is your appearance.”

“What the devil is wrong with my appearance? No one could be more unprepossessing than myself.”

Charlotte scowled. “Do not feed me that Banbury tale. You most certainly are not a potato pudding. Just the opposite, in fact.”

He stared at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“You must know very well, sir, that your spectacles are a poor disguise.”

“Disguise?” He wondered if he had got the wrong address and the wrong Charlotte Arkendale. Perhaps he had got the wrong town. “What in the name of the devil do you believe me to be concealing?”

“Surely you are not suffering from the illusion that those spectacles mask your true nature.”

“My true nature?” Baxter lost his grip on his patience. “Bloody hell, just what am I, if not innocuous and unprepossessing?”

She spread her hands wide. “You have the look of a man of strong passions who has mastered his temperament with even stronger powers of self-control.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Her eyes narrowed with grim determination. “Such a man cannot hope to go about unnoticed. You are bound to attract attention when you conduct business on my behalf. I cannot have that in my man-of-affairs. I require someone who can disappear into a crowd. Someone whose face no one recalls very clearly. Don’t you understand, sir? You give the appearance of being rather, well, to be quite blunt, *dangerous*.”

Baxter was bereft of words.

Charlotte clasped her hands behind her back and resumed her pacing. “It is quite obvious you will never be able to pass for a dull, ordinary man-of-affairs. Therefore, you must see that you would not do at all for my purposes.”

Baxter realized his mouth was hanging open. He managed to get it closed. He had been

called many things, bastard, ill-mannered, and a great bore being among the more common epithets. But no one had ever labeled him a man of strong passions. No one had ever claimed that he looked dangerous.

He was a man of science. He prided himself on his detached, unemotional approach to problems, people, and situations. It was a trait he had honed to perfection years ago when he discovered that, as the bastard son of the Earl of Esherton and the notorious Emma, Lady Sultenham, he would be forever excluded from his rightful heritage.

He had been a subject of speculation and gossip since the day he was born. He had learned early to seek refuge amid his books and scientific apparatus.

Although some women initially found the notion of an affair with the bastard son of an earl somewhat exciting, especially when they learned that he was a very wealthy bastard son, the sentiment did not last long. The weak flames generated in the course of his infrequent liaisons burned for only a very short time before sputtering out.

His affairs had become even shorter in duration since his return from Italy three years ago. The acid burns on his back and shoulders had healed but he was marked for life.

Women reacted to the raw, ugly scars with shock and disgust. Baxter did not entirely blame them. He had never been handsome and the acid lacerations had done nothing to improve his looks. Fortunately, his face had been spared. He was, however, fed up with the inconvenience of having to make certain that the candles were snuffed and the fire banked before he got undressed and climbed into bed with a lady.

On the last such occasion, some six months ago, he had nearly brained himself on the bedpost when he had tripped over his own boot in the inky darkness of the widow's unlit bedchamber. The incident had put a distinct damper on the remainder of the evening.

For the most part, he sought his satisfactions and pleasures in his laboratory. There, surrounded by his gleaming beakers, flasks, retorts, and blowpipes, he could avoid the empty conversations and frivolous pursuits of the Polite World. It was a world he had never enjoyed. A world that did not begin to comprehend him. A world that he found excruciatingly superficial and insipid. A world in which he had never felt at home.

Baxter schooled his thoughts and forced himself to reason swiftly. Charlotte had plainly dismissed him as a possible man-of-affairs. A new approach was required if he was to convince her to employ him.

“Miss Arkendale, there seems to be some discrepancy between your view of my nature and the views of virtually everyone else in the world. May I suggest we resolve the matter by conducting an experiment?”

She went very still. “What sort of experiment?”

“I recommend that you summon the members of your household and ask them for their opinions. If the consensus is that I can successfully go about my duties unnoticed and unremarked, you will employ me. If they concur with your views, I shall take my leave and look elsewhere for a post.”

She hesitated, clearly dubious. Then she gave a quick, decisive nod. “Very well, sir. That seems quite logical. We shall conduct the experiment at once. I shall summon my sister and housekeeper. They are both extremely observant.”

She reached for the velvet bell pull that hung beside the fireplace and gave it a strong tug. “You agree to abide by the results of this test?” he asked warily.

“You have my word on it, sir.” She smiled with ill-concealed triumph. “We shall settle the matter at once.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Baxter adjusted his eyeglasses and sat back in his chair to await the outcome of the experiment.

He was certain that he could safely predict the results. He knew his strong points better than anyone else. No one could top him when it came to appearing as bland and uninteresting as a potato pudding.

• • •

Twenty minutes later, Baxter went down the steps of the Arkendale town house with a sense of quiet exultation. He noted that the crisp March breeze, which had been decidedly chilly an hour earlier, now felt fresh and invigorating.

There was nothing quite like a properly conducted scientific experiment to settle things, he thought as he hailed a passing hackney. It had not been easy but he had finally secured his new post. As he had anticipated, Charlotte Arkendale was the only person in the smart household, indeed, very likely the only person in the whole of London, who would even notice him in a crowd.

He was not sure what her peculiar notions concerning his nature said about her except that they definitely verified John Marcle’s opinion. Charlotte was a very unique sort of female.

Not at all what one would expect in the way of a blackmailer and murderess, Baxter thought.

“I do not know why you are fretting so, Charlotte.” Ariel paused to examine a tray of eggs arranged on the sideboard. “Mr. St. Ives appears to be just what you wanted. A man-of-affairs who will not draw attention to himself when he goes about his duties. He also seems to be in excellent physical condition. Not so tall as one might wish, but quite broad and solid looking about the shoulders. I think that he will serve nicely as a bodyguard should such a necessity arise.”

“I thought him sufficiently tall.” Charlotte wondered morosely why she felt compelled to defend Baxter’s stature. Why did she care if her sister thought him less than perfect in height? “I had to look up to meet his eyes.”

Ariel grinned. “That is because you are a trifle short. In a most attractive fashion, of course.”

Charlotte grimaced. “Of course.”

“In truth, Mr. St. Ives is not more than an inch above my own height.”

“You are very tall for a woman.” *And graceful and willowy and very, very lovely*, Charlotte thought with a rush of sisterly pride. Perhaps it was more in the nature of maternal pride. After all, she reminded herself, she had been responsible for Ariel since the death of their mother.

And Ariel had turned out wonderfully well, Charlotte decided. She was a beautiful young lady of nineteen. Fair haired, blue eyed, and blessed with classical features and, yes, striking stature, she was the living image of their mother.

Charlotte had had many regrets and doubts in the course of the past few years. She had been all too well aware that she could never make up for what had been lost. Ariel had been only eleven when their tall, handsome, affectionate father had died. She had been barely thirteen when they had lost their beautiful, vivacious mother. Then Winterbourne had destroyed the inheritance that would have allowed Ariel freedom of choice in so many things including marriage.

One of Charlotte’s greatest regrets was that she had been unable to give her sister a Season. With her looks and poise and the education she had received first from their beautiful bluestocking mother and that Charlotte had continued, Ariel would have been a smashing success. What’s more, she thought, her sister would have thoroughly enjoyed the opera and the theater and the excitement of the balls and soirees. She had inherited their parents’ love of art and entertainment. She should have had a chance to meet the people who should have been her social equals. She should have had an opportunity to dance the waltz with a handsome young man.

So many things that should have been Ariel’s had been lost.

Charlotte pulled herself back to the problem at hand. She forced herself to do what she always did when thoughts of the past threatened to lower her spirits. She concentrated on the future. And right now that future included Baxter St. Ives.

"I wish I could feel as certain about Mr. St. Ives as you do." Charlotte propped her elbow on the morning room table and rested her chin on the heel of one hand.

"He is a perfect man-of-affairs," Ariel declared.

Charlotte sighed. It was now quite clear that she was the only one in the household who sensed that there was a great deal more to Baxter St. Ives than met the eye. Yesterday Ariel and Mrs. Witty, the housekeeper, had both pronounced themselves well satisfied with Marcle's replacement. The two were so convinced of their impressions that Charlotte had almost begun to doubt her own instinctive wariness.

Almost, but not quite. She had had a great deal of experience assessing gentlemen, after all, and her intuition in such matters rarely failed her. She could not dismiss it out of hand.

But she was baffled by the fact that the others could not see past the lenses of Baxter's spectacles to the truth that blazed there.

He claimed to have an interest in chemistry but in her opinion, he was no modern man of science. The man had the eyes of an alchemist, one of those legendary seekers obsessed with the search for the mystical secrets of the Philosopher's Stone. She could easily envision him hunched over a fiery crucible, concocting experiments that would enable him to transmute lead into gold.

Intense intelligence, unrelenting determination, and a will of iron burned in the ambient depths of his eyes. The same qualities were etched into his blunt, strong face. She had sensed something else in him, too, something that she could not quite define. A hint of melancholy, perhaps. Which, now that she considered it, was not unexpected.

There was a long artistic tradition of depicting that dark, wistful emotion with the emblem of alchemy. Those who engaged in an endless quest for nature's arcane secrets were no doubt doomed to experience episodes of despair and disappointment.

Baxter St. Ives was far and away the most interesting man she had ever met, Charlotte admitted to herself. But the same qualities that made him intriguing could also make a man dangerous. At the very least, they made him less than pliable.

She required a man-of-affairs who would take instructions without argument, not one who would demand constant explanations and justifications. She did not think that Baxter would be easily ordered about. At best, he was likely to prove difficult.

"Perhaps now that Mr. St. Ives has a new post, he will be able to afford a new tailor." Ariel chuckled as she carried her plate back to the table. "His coat certainly did not fit him very well and his waistcoat was quite plain. Did you notice that he was wearing breeches instead of trousers?"

"I noticed."

She would have been blind had she failed to observe the manner in which the snug breeches had revealed the sleekly muscled outline of his thighs, she thought. She summoned up the memory of Baxter as he sat across from her attired in a rumpled blue coat, unpleated linen shirt, and the conservative breeches and unpolished boots. She frowned slightly. "His clothes were of excellent quality."

"Yes, but sadly unfashionable, even for a gentleman in his position." Ariel took a bite of sausage. "And his neckcloth was tied in a very mundane manner. I fear our Mr. St. Ives has no sense of style at all."

"One does not look for style in a man-of-affairs."

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