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DESIRE
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A JADED GENTLEMAN
NOVEL

Raves for the Jaded Gentleman Novels

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Continued—

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Desire
Wears
Diamonds

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R E N E E B E R N A R D

Desire Wears Diamonds
By Renee Bernard
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*This book is dedicated to Anne Elizabeth. She knows a warrior's heart and I am confident that Michael would find a welcome respite at her table.
He is a quiet soldier, Anne, and like you, a gentle soul.
I love you, Sister-Friend.
And to Geoff and the girls. You are my life. Thank you for making it an adventure.*

And finally, to my Beloved Readers.

This one is literally written for you. Every note from you, every kind review and post fueled my desire to write a better book. And you inspired me to keep going.

This book is Yours.

Acknowledgments

If there's been a theme to these last few months, I'm going to say it was about friends. I gained so many new incredible friends and was blessed to keep the great ones I already had, to the point that I've even overheard myself boasting that I'd achieved a Mark-Twainian (I made that up but I hope it comes across...) level of success. I have an inner circle of trusted souls that have given me new confidence—as if life were still a high school cafeteria and I finally found my peeps. (Did I say that right? Can you tell I'm thrilled to be at the nerd and geek table? Is it okay that at my age I just used the word peeps for the first time?) In any case, to the Universe, I want to say thank you for my friends. (But of course to the Universe, if you want to throw in a lottery win for good measure, I would never complain.)

Every once in a while, you get lucky and your agent, who is brilliant and supportive, also turns out to be a great friend and the brother you never knew you were missing. I want to thank Eric Ruben for his patience, his kindness, his humor and of course, for the most glamorous client/agent dinner I've ever experienced. I am spoiled forever.

I want to thank Lindsey Ross, for being my muse and sister-friend. More than a reader, I have to say that without her amazing support and personal encouragement, there's no telling where I would be today. Lindsey made me feel like a rock star, which if you'll refer back to the first paragraph of these acknowledgements, is an incredible accomplishment. If nothing else ever came, I'd count myself a lucky woman for the friendship we share.

I have to thank Ian Parton for his guidance on British military history and the details that can make or break a historical romance (which means if anything in this fictional work related to British military history is broken, it's my fault—not his!) And special thanks are given to Juanita Decur, for being my historical period costuming muse and at the end of the day, my friend. And to Megan Bamford, for making the world seem cozier and more wonderful by just being herself. Not only is she assisting me in my quest for unofficial Aussiehood, she bought me an English Title and made me a Lady (a feat my mother is still amazed at and that the DMV will have to contend with when I renew my driver's license and insist it goes on there!) A trip to Brisbane is on my list of life goals and I'm determined to get there!

I want to also thank Lisa Watson. She is my lost twin sister and my only regret is that I somehow didn't find her until just recently. Lisa, if I didn't believe in serendipity and the amazing blessings that can come from turning right instead of left, you're the living example that it's all true and that all things are possible. I love you.

And of course, I have to thank my mom. Because despite the craziness, she still takes all my calls and laughs with me until we cry. You were my first best friend and you are the gold standard by which all others will forever be measured.

*I used to be respectable and chaste and stable,
but who can stand in this strong wind
and remember those things?
Love has taken away my practices
And filled me with poetry.*

—RUMI

Bengal, India

1857

There were some things in the articles of war and codes of military honor that never translate in battle. Michael Rutherford had tried hard not to think about it too much. He wanted to believe in the officers and gentlemen and the almost religious requirements of the British military to establish order amidst chaos. As if the way a man packed his kit or laced his shoes could alter the course of a battle or change the world...

But that was the tall lanky boy who had joined the army so many years before. That was the naïve son of a gameskeeper who had thought to head out into the world to make his fortunes and find his way. He'd longed for the dark green jacket of the light infantry where his skills with a rifle would win him fame.

And he might have achieved it, if...

If he hadn't been pulled from the line after a bit of exhibition shooting arranged by the unit leaders where he'd astonished them all and struck a glass marble from atop a rose at over a hundred and fifty yards without damaging a single petal. If a British general hadn't decided to take him on as his personal attendant and guard. If he hadn't saved the man's life twice and guaranteed that the man's continued desire to stay alive hinged on Michael's presence, transforming him into the world's biggest rabbit's foot.

He'd existed in a twilight of rank, more servant than soldier, and all bodyguard for a man he genuinely despised for his icy manners and arrogance. But loyal Englishmen didn't think of a commander's character when they accepted his orders or pulled the trigger. Obedience and loyalty were tied inextricably together and by the time the man he'd become had looked up, Michael Rutherford was convinced that he was as far from honor as a man looking up at the moon.

He'd experienced the worst that war could offer and realized that fear was a weapon all its own. He'd noted how the Englishmen claimed civility and demeaned the natives but then acted with savagery that belied their humanity.

Even to the last...

It was a remote province and a small village but because the general's position had been threatened, Michael had obediently taken the rifle he was handed, accepted his orders and made his way to high ground. Under the cover of the skirmish and chaos of the fighting, he'd shot the targets he was directed to shoot, protected his fellow soldiers, and then fired at will until there was nothing left to aim at. By the time the dust had cleared and reason had returned, there wasn't a part of his soul that wasn't broken.

We've lost India. We cannot hold it. Not like this. They'll drive us to the sea, just you wait. And I'll drink the waves in with relief, God help me.

The battle was won and the local puppet raj and authorities were pleased to see peace restored. Michael was alone in his convictions. That night, the officers drank to victory and Michael watched their shadows on the walls—elongated and grotesque. He stared at the tricks of the light until the other men forgot that he was there on the verandah.

And then he overheard the general, drunkenly whispering to one of the lieutenants. “I should pin him down for a medal but Rutherford’s a villain. He has the conscience of a tiger but there’s no better man for the work...”

“What work?” the man had asked.

The general’s smile was as warm as a crocodile’s. “Did you know that Rutherford can shoot the flame off of a candle at five hundred paces?”

The lieutenant nodded, his expression uncertain. “An asset in the field.”

“I’ve given him use of my new rifle and the benefits have been extraordinary. An American Sharps rifle in the hands of a skilled marksman is a thing of beauty, sir. But in the hands of a common thug,” the general leaned in dramatically lowering his voice, “it is savage perfection.”

Lieutenant Hall frowned. “Or murder...”

The British did not hold to ungentlemanly tactics in the field. Long range silent and stealthy warfare did not suit their ideals. Long range shooting from cover was for hobbyists and hunters and even the dark green coated light infantry deployed in units for all to see, their rifles gleaming in the sun. The general alluded to something unheard of and something that Michael instinctively knew the other officers would not believe.

The British Army did not use assassins.

But Michael knew better.

Rutherford’s a villain.

He’d waited until the drunken festivities had finally broken up and then dutifully appeared as if he was conveniently arriving at the right moment to escort the general back to his quarters.

“Damn it, Rutherford,” the man complained. “How can anyone as big as you are be that bleeding quiet?”

Michael shrugged, but held his tongue. He knew better than to actually answer the man. General Timsworth wasn’t interested in any stories of how Michael had acquired his skills and Michael wasn’t keen on revealing anything so personal to a man he genuinely hated.

Once they reached the house the general had commandeered, Michael wasted no time. He made sure the servants were seeing to the general’s personal comforts while he headed directly into the office and began drafting what he needed. As soon as he was finished, he tucked the man’s field despatch under his arm and headed up the stairs to find the general alone.

“What the devil!” General Timsworth growled. “I didn’t summon you, man! See to the ground and be sure to tell the guard that if they so much as let a mouse in here to disturb my sleep, I’ll hang them up by their thumbs! You’re dismissed for the night!”

“Sign these and I’ll go.” Michael held out the orders he’d drafted.

“What the hell?” Timsworth took the sheet from him begrudgingly and then stared at the page. “Release from service? Are you mad?”

“Sign it and I’ll be on my way.” Michael set the small portable writing desk next to him. “Your official seal and stamps are there as well.”

“I’ll call for the guards and you’ll be on your way to a hanging you insubordinate animal!”

Michael didn’t blink. “Good riddance to a common thug then. I shall naturally have to confess all before I am executed. Which would have been discounted as lies if you hadn’t bragged *in detail* to your men about my abilities and how pleased you are with the results.”

“I didn’t—“ Timsworth’s protest died fast as the cloud of alcohol lifted slightly and made him wonder just what he had boasted at tonight’s party. Timsworth groaned and readjusted his nightshirt. “War stories over brandies. They’ll think it bluster and have forgotten it before dawn.”

“Let me go and I’ll say nothing. I’ll take it all to my grave. But if I stay, you’ll have to kill me because the next time I get a weapon in my hands, I can’t say for certain which direction I’ll be pointing it in.”

“That’s mutiny! You dare to threaten me? A renegade who thinks to dictate terms and stroll away from his duties? You have the stones to deal with your commanding officer like this?”

Michael marveled that he couldn’t feel his own heart beating. “My commanding officer? Technically, I’m not officially in the army, thanks to your machinations. Remember? You removed me from the ranks and have listed me as a valet on every pay voucher. So much for my chance at a pension, eh?”

Already dead. I’m already gone.

“You’re paid well enough and...” Timsworth’s color drained from his face. “I spared you from the dangers of the common rank and file. You’ve enjoyed a privileged stay abroad as my personal attaché, have you not?”

A stay abroad? Why does the man feel compelled to make it sound like he’s taken me on some exotic tour for which I should be grateful? Stupid git.

“As your privileged attaché, I’ve seen enough to make a report of my own to end your illustrious military career. Let me go. A drum head trial will only draw attention to the matter and make your statements at the dinner seem all too true. But you can tell them you dismissed me for insubordination, or gave me leave to return to England, or—I don’t care what you tell them. But I’ll take that signed paper stating I served you well and without fault for all these years and that I’m no longer in your employ.”

“This.” Timsworth held up the paper with a sneer. “This is not an official document by any stretch of the imagination, Rutherford. Who do you think will be fooled by some handwritten scrawl you force me to sign under duress? And who exactly will care enough to ask for it before they mistook you for a deserter and put a bullet into your head?”

“I doubt that anyone will have the time to search for one man...not in the months ahead.”

“Why? What can possibly lie ahead to spare your pathetic life?”

He can't see it. The Sepoys are increasingly angry and we've marginalized them into a corner. We're outnumbered and spread thin with a civilian population of our own that we cannot protect. And he's got us shooting children without a thought to the ramifications. These new rumors of the pig grease are simply an excuse for it all to go wrong.

“Sign it, general, and we shall call it an even trade. My life or death doesn't matter, right?” Michael took one step closer, allowing his commanding officer to truly appreciate the physical differences between them. At a breath short of seven feet, he towered over the average height and weight of the older man, a force to be reckoned with. “You see, I don't expect to survive long on my own in India; which means I have nothing to lose.”

“One does not simply walk away from the British Army and the East India Company because they wish to. I'll forget this conversation and put in a word for you to see that you attain a position with the—“

“This isn't a request for a transfer. If you have to, put my name in the casualty lists and be done with it.” Michael didn't move a muscle, and waited for the inevitable.

He didn't have to wait long.

Timsworth's arrogant ice broke and his hands began to shake, marring his signature but it was still legible. “Useless. Dishonorable waste of a man! Scribble does not change the facts. You're a demon, Rutherford.”

“No.” Michael gifted him with a crocodile smile of his own.

But I'll be damned if I'll linger in Hell and play soldier for the devil.

London

May 1860

Michael Rutherford leaned his head against the carved molding that framed one of the windows in Dr. Rowan West's study. The eclectic clutter and cozy colors behind him soothed his spirits. Dr. West's haven worked its subtle magic on all the men of the Jaded whenever they came. It was a casual sanctuary that had kept them close and provided a place for them to talk, plan or relax and kept the brotherly bonds between them tight.

At the moment though it was allowing Michael to hide from the festivities of all his friends below. Darius Thorne had finally wed the lovely Miss Isabel Penleigh in a quiet ceremony that was sure to set off a firestorm of scandal. It had been weeks since the ink had dried on Miss Penleigh's first marriage's annulment, but the plan for a quick wedding to Darius had been thwarted by her parents. In a cruel move, Lord and Lady Penleigh had sued Netherton and claimed that Isabel was not in her right mind when she left her "dear husband" and that if Lord Netherton intended to keep her dowry, he would have to keep his wife as well.

They'd have been in the court for months or years if the villain Netherton hadn't finally broken his silence privately to her parents about the illegitimacy of the marriage, his bigamy and his disinterest in regaining Isabel's hand. They'd agreed not to expose him to the law in exchange for her dowry, or whatever was left of it after he'd paid off a few debts.

It was an uglier end than Thorne had hoped and a terrible betrayal of her parents to coldly collect their daughter's dowry and then promptly to disown her outright for her "unsightly" condition and her wretched choice of a man with a profession and not a drop of blue blood.

From what Michael could see, neither the bride nor the groom's happiness had dimmed in the slightest despite the storm of disapproval around them.

Apparently love made even the cleverest men refuse to see the dangers.

Another wedding...

Darius's face had shone with triumph as he recited his vows and Michael begrudged him none of it. He was glad for all his friends to have made their way back to their lives. It wasn't resentment that drove him away from the revelries.

It was an uneasy sense that there was a dark force in motion that would rather see the Jaded have funerals than flowery celebrations of tender future joys. The Jackal was still out there. The fire at the Thistle was solid proof that he'd underestimated the danger and it had shaken his confidence in his ability to keep his friends safe. Then Darius had told them that he'd uncovered the presence of a third party who believed that whatever mystic item they'd spirited out of India must remain in their hands.

Their fate was now supposedly controlled by an ancient prophecy and keeping the sacred treasure out of the Jackal's hands was more than a game of fortune—losing to the Jackal would be the end of all of them and all that they loved.

Nothing but enemies of the worst kind—the kind I can't see.

Came close to seeing the bastard in that fire though. Hell, he was close enough to touch in the smoky stairwell.

Michael shoved away the memory. He'd lost a lot of sleep wondering how differently it would have turned out if he'd been at the head of their group when they'd met the Jackal face to face. His fingers clenched around empty air in his frustration.

"You're not up here moping, are you?" Rowan's voice interrupted.

"I'm not a child to pout in corners." Michael's back stiffened and his face grew hot with the realization that he'd protested a little too loudly. He looked exactly like a toddler hiding in the drapery, and he knew it. "I have a headache."

"I'll get you something for it then."

Michael turned and waved him off. "There's no need. It will pass."

Rowan crossed his arms as he sat on the edge of his desk. "Your absence was noted. Couldn't you at least *pretend* to be happy for them?"

"I *am* happy for them. I am happy for all of you. I am brimming with joy."

"I can tell. You look like a man on the edge of a giddy collapse," Rowan said dryly. "Perhaps if you smiled, it would come across better. But then, it is *your* turn next even if you do try to hide from it."

Michael crossed his arms. "If you're implying that I'm somehow slated to get married next, you're daft."

"Careful, Rutherford. Every bachelor who ever makes a proclamation of his determination to do it alone invariably brings down the wrath of Aphrodite herself and lives to take it back." Rowan crossed his arms to mirror his friend's stance. "Ask any of us, if you don't believe me."

"Leave me be. I can't help but feel as if we're making a mistake, sitting back on our heels and pretending that nothing is wrong. And this public show of—" Michael sighed. "By all means, go enjoy the party, Rowan, but I...I can't."

"It was months between incidents last time—"

"Why?" Michael cut him off. "Why so long between every attempt? Is he baiting us? It takes veins of ice to demonstrate that kind of patience, wouldn't you say?"

"I wouldn't know. I may have many faults but excessive patience is one I may have skipped, Rutherford." Rowan dropped his arms, yielding the fight. "Which is what brings me in here to find you, friend. The wedding party? Remember? Darius has been desperate to marry his Isabel for weeks now and if not for the legal tangle, this happy day would have occurred over two months ago."

“Damn it, Rowan. Why hasn’t the Jackal snapped at our heels yet?”

“You yourself agreed that after that fire, Darius probably wasn’t the only one requiring time to recover. Perhaps we were lucky and the man has succumbed to pneumonia.” Rowan stood to head over to the side table and pour himself a drink. “And we’re not sitting back on our heels. Galen, Ashe and I are having all our stones discreetly evaluated by different London jewelers and in small lots to avoid raising too many questions. Even Darius has suggested that Josiah’s pearls be weighed to see if any of them are false and have something hidden at their center. We’ll find the “diamond in disguise”.”

Michael closed his eyes against the pounding at his temples. Ever since he and his friends had escaped from a dungeon in India, a prophecy involving the gems they had tucked into their pockets from their insane host’s treasury had haunted their every step. Over time, they’d learned that the gems were actually the guardians of a mystic ‘diamond in disguise’ but in order to keep it safe, first they needed to identify it. Each man of the Jaded held a different stash of stones after a casual ceremony where they’d divided the gems they’d taken by color. Galen had taken the rubies; Rowan, the emeralds; Ashe, sapphires; Josiah had taken the pearls; Darius, opals, and Michael had ended up with the diamonds. As a result, it was Michael’s cache that was exempt from scrutiny. They’d all agreed that a diamond disguised as a diamond was a bit redundant.

Michael shook his head, opening his eyes. “And then what? You see? Even when we figure out which of your gemstones is the ever elusive sacred treasure, we still have the Jackal at our heels and I don’t like running.”

Rowan took a small sip of his brandy before answering. “We could bury all the remaining treasure somewhere impossible for the Jackal to ever find and…”

“And spend the rest of our lives fending him off,” Michael supplied. “It’s a nightmare I’m not willing to entertain. We’ll need to face him and end this.”

“True. But the answer on how to make that happen won’t come any easier while we hide in closets or with you forbidding any of us to leave our homes without bodyguards.” Rowan poured another drink for his friend. “We’re taking every precaution we can, Rutherford.”

“I don’t see you hiring those extra footmen I asked you to,” Michael said with a growl.

“I’m a lowly physician, Michael. I’m not expected to have a large household and it’s not as if the house isn’t open to anyone seeking medical attention which means it’s open for anyone to do the worst if—“ Rowan caught himself and stopped. “I’ll get another man on staff if you get on Rutherford.”

Michael smiled. It was a ridiculous notion and an easy point to forfeit. Michael was a giant of a man, a few inches shy of seven feet in height, muscular and well-balanced in his athletic form. He lacked the thick neck of a brawler but there was no mistaking his power. And as the Jaded all knew for all his massive size, Michael Rutherford possessed the grace of a cat, forever startling them with his talent for entering rooms unnoticed or appearing where he was least expected.

Michael Rutherford was the last man on earth who appeared to need a bodyguard.

“I don’t think footmen are the answer,” Michael conceded. “You’re easy to rattle, old friend.”

Rowan’s eyes widened in surprise. “Is this a sense of humor I detect? Were you having a go at me, Michael?”

Michael shrugged, his expression sobering out of habit. “I have always had a sense of humor. I’m just more selective in my jollier moments. And today, I’m afraid, isn’t one of them.”

“When is a better moment? Hell, it occurred to me that I’ve never really seen you laugh, Michael Rutherford.”

Michael folded his arms and gave Rowan his most intimidating look. “I laugh.”

Rowan took a seat behind the desk. “All right. I’ll take your word for it. You laugh. What next then for the Jackal? Besides finding the treasure...”

“The Jackal sees us as the aggressor and blames us for the fire at the Thistle. Unless he’s had an epiphany in the intervening weeks since it happens, it means he knows nothing of the third party that Darius uncovered.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“So we must put ourselves in the Jackal’s shoes. He is in a two party fight and his opponent has demonstrated a willingness to use deadly force.” Michael’s voice took on a low measured cadence, and his imagination took hold. “He is outnumbered and every blow he strikes is either deflected or ineffective. If he weren’t frustrated and furious before, he is now. The gunshot at the Thistle proved it.” Michael unconsciously reached up to touch the faint scar on his cheekbone from the Jackal’s missed shot.

“Yes,” Rowan echoed again, this time more softly as he respectfully took in the strategic turn of a soldier’s mind.

“He may regret firing his pistol because he’ll never again be able to show the white flag to draw us out. Even if—even if we were stupid enough to start that fire, he might worry that he gave away too much in his rage. Subtle attacks didn’t drive us to ground, and his one and only attempt to meet us in the open nearly ended in his demise...”

“And some of us with him,” Rowan added.

“It just reinforces his impression that we are an unpredictable enemy,” Michael said and took the large chair across from Rowan as he began to relax into the conversation.

“Very well,” Rowan took another sip from his drink before he continued, “the Jackal thinks we are arsonists as well as jewel thieves. Lovely!”

“If I were the Jackal, I wouldn’t be accepting anymore of your invitations. It could never be so public enough to suit.”

“So we’re back to waiting for him to make his next move.”

Michael closed his eyes. “If I were the Jackal...”

“Go on.”

“My best weapon is my anonymity.”

Rowan grimaced. “If you know you still have it. It was close quarters in that stairwell according to your accounts. What if he fears you got a good look?”

Michael shook his head, his eyes still closed in concentration. “No. That fear has long been dispelled. If we’d identified him, we’d have already been on his doorstep. It’s been a few weeks and no one has come calling. He’s decided we were all as blind as he was in that smoky hellhole.”

Michael opened his eyes.

Rowan became very still. “I can see it in your face. Finish your thought.”

“If I were the Jackal, it’s no more games. When I’d gotten the soot out of my system, I’d come after you one by one until I had what I wanted or until every one of the Jaded were dead.”

“Does he have our membership in hand then?”

Michael nodded. “Half of us, at best. Blackwell is known to him; and you. Not Darius, I suspect though with he and Isabel temporarily taking up residence with Ashe and Caroline, it wouldn’t take genius to make the connection. Josiah might also be on his list of possible suspects but his impairment may have saved him the Jackal’s surety and slowed his hand.”

“How? Is it possible that he is morally sound enough not to attack a blind man?” Rowan asked in astonishment.

Michael sighed. “No. I don’t think the man has a single moral restraint. But Josiah’s attendance at our informal meetings has been sporadic at best and his public appearances recently were even more rare. Hastings is an elusive ghost and I’ve sent Eleanor a letter to privately ask her to see if anything changes on that front.”

“He’d be furious if he knew you’d asked his new bride to keep a tight hold on his leash.” Rowan’s tone was raw with disapproval. “You overstep, Rutherford.”

“Hastings is the most vulnerable man in our circle, Rowan. You want me to see things through the Jackal’s eyes?” Michael leaned forward, the intensity of his gaze frightening to behold. “I want to teach the Jaded a lesson about fear. I want you to give me what I want. And I want you to be sorry that you didn’t give it to me the first time I asked. So I’m going to slit the throat of the weakest among you and make sure each and every one of you watches so that the next time I ask, you’re on your knees.”

“You...are a very scary man sometimes, Rutherford.”

Michael tried not to wince. “Not fit for parties then?” Michael said, a shadow of mirth flitting across his features. “Should I just go?”

“There’s no escape for you, friend. Even if the devil is at the door, life must go on.”

Life must go on. Even if I’m the devil in that metaphor?

Already their lives had changed so much since they’d returned to England. Michael conceded that Rowan was probably right. He took the glass he was offered from his friend’s hand. “I’ll toast th

happy couple from here.”

“Michael, may I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Of all of us, I’d say you’ve said the least. About India.”

“What is there to say? It was a slender slice of hell.” Michael’s throat closed before he added quickly. “In that dungeon.”

“I’m still amazed we survived all of it,” Rowan said.

“We were lucky to only lose one man,” Michael said with a sigh.

“Two.”

“Pardon?”

“Two men. John died just after we’d escaped but there was another man at the beginning. Do you remember?”

“My god, I’d forgotten him completely!” Michael stiffened in embarrassment and stood in a rush. “Damn it!”

“We’d exchanged names in the pitch dark and barely sat down before they dragged him out! It was not as if we had any time to bond with the fellow...”

“That’s no excuse!” Michael kicked the desk and grimaced at the pain.

Rowan held up a hand as if to stop him, but didn’t approach his friend. “Hell, it happened so quickly. They took him out never to return. Darius said the guard muttered something about a bird for execution and we knew—”

“They were going to kill him. Some kind of example probably to entertain the locals.” Michael ran a hand through his thick hair. “Sterling.”

“Sterling,” Rowan repeated. “Sterling...what was his last name again?”

“Porter, wasn’t it? Yes, it was Sterling Porter.” Michael’s hands fisted at his sides. “Damn it. How could I have blocked the man from reckoning?”

He walked back over to the windows to stare down at the street below.

How was that possible?

Hell, I’ve been so caught up in everything. In survival and then in escaping, in getting back to England and keeping them all safe from Jackals and prophecies, knife wielding assassins, poisoners and burning buildings...

But to have forgotten one of our own? Even if we only knew him for an hour, it doesn’t seem right. It’s as if I’ve allowed him to be die twice...

“You’re wallowing in guilt over there, Rutherford.”

“Are you a mind reader now, Doctor West?”

“Michael, please. We couldn’t see our fingers in front of our faces for the first stretch. We never saw his face and there wasn’t a lot of conversation to be had. He was gone before we’d even had time

to accept what was happening and we all pushed him from our minds to avoid thinking of the worst.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Probably?” Rowan shook his head. “Hell, *I’d* forgotten him, too! It was Darius who corrected me when I said something of it a few days ago; about how lucky we were all six of us to overcome so much. So you’re not alone in this, Michael.”

“Sterling Porter.” Michael set his drink down and rebuttoned his coat. “No, I am not alone, but I do have something to do.”

“What do you intend?”

“To track down his family and offer my condolences.” Michael squared his shoulders. “It won’t be much but at least they’ll know where he fell.”

“Not today, Michael. It’s Darius’s wedding day,” Rowan said quietly.

Michael held his breath, wanting to argue, wanting to tell his friend that he ached to escape the confines of the house and not sit by in awkward isolation at the celebration. But Rowan was right.

“Of course. Time enough afterward.” Michael let out a long sigh. “We should get back downstairs. I don’t want to miss the wedding toasts and the send off.”

But I’ll be on it before nightfall no matter what and begin the search for his family.

There’s been enough waiting.

It’s time to take action.



“It’s a lovely menu, Mrs. Dorsett,” Grace said quietly as she handed the paper back to the cook. “Thank you.”

“As you wish.” Mrs. Dorsett’s expression remained stony and Grace did her best to ignore it. She’d been running her brother’s household for nearly seven years but her gentle nature didn’t lend itself to authority. In the first year, she’d once begged her older brother to release Mrs. Dorsett but he’d laughed at her childish request and merely pointed out that he liked the woman’s cooking. And then he’d added that until she had proven to be as invaluable as the cook, she would need to accept the charitable nature of her position.

She’d learned her lesson and never complained again.

She’d acquired a steadier hand and uncovered the real reason for Mrs. Dorsett’s foothold. It was her brother’s need to keep up social appearances by employing a cook—even if that servant had the education and bearing of a badger. Appearances were everything.

Our father’s lesson to my brother, I fear. Though I wonder what lesson I took from all those years of invisibility...

Her brother had brought her to London at seventeen years of age after their father had remarried and indicated that he had no place for another woman in the house. His new wife was the widow of

country squire and had no desire to share her position with another woman—even the quiet and obedient daughter of her new lord and master. The flimsy excuse that Grace could find a rich husband in Town had been accepted without argument. No one really believed that Grace was going to take London by storm without a title, dowry or any chance at a debut but no one had spoken up when they'd packed her off to the city with her meager belongings.

Of course, if any of them had bothered to ask, she'd have assured them that she had no desire to marry. Grace hated nearly every aspect of the confined and careful life of an English woman; but she knew better than to reveal it. As Mrs. Dorsett retreated, she began to write all the weekly expenses into the house's journal in her neat careful hand. She knew to the half-penny where the budgets were allocated. Over time, she had added a woman's touch and turned a dreary dark house into a light cheerful and elegant home.

Once the ledger was up to date, she set the accounts aside and took a deep breath of relief. She fingered the buttons of her blouse's high collar at her throat and leaned back in her chair. The house was in order, the chores in hand, the menu set and she had the afternoon to herself and a few precious hours to do exactly as she wished.

A few precious hours to escape...

A new story she'd been working on with savage pirates and an underwater kingdom beckoned her back to the pages she'd hidden away. She'd been up until two in the morning wrestling with krakens and trying to decide if her heroine's prayers for rescue should be answered in this installment or the next chapter.

Grace eagerly unlocked the large hidden drawer underneath the rose painted surface of her lady's desk and pulled out the well worn leather bound notebook that was her one secret source of solace in the world.

Respectable ladies did not write nonsensical stories and outrageous tales for the working class. Respectable women did not entertain naked tribes of cannibals and leagues of wizards in their heads. Respectable women had no notions of murders and mysteries and would turn their noses up at the very suggestion that there was entertainment to be had with harrowing encounters with dashing highwaymen or in the discovery of secret societies of vampyres.

Yet Grace did not write tame poetry or weak prose. Her soul's fabric was not suited to dainty fairy tales. And no one who knew her had any idea...

Her older brother simply thought her a strange creature with no gift for social situations and Grace had allowed it. After all, it meant that her interior landscape was her very own to manage and allowed her to plot her path out of the stifling cage she occupied. So long as her brother believed she was only scribbling away in some kind of girlish journal, Grace was free to do as she wished.

She pulled out the linen wrist covers she'd made to protect her sleeves from getting ink stained and settled in with a sigh of blissful surrender, dipping her favorite pen into a heavy glass inkwell

the ready.

Their tridents gleamed in the silvery depths as they cut off Captain Martin's escape. "Poseidon will have your bones to atone for this trespass!" cried the—

Grace's hand froze when the jarring sound of the front door's bell rang out.

She had to bite her lip to keep from crying out in disappointment at the interruption but there was nothing to be done for it. It was a small house and the crisp click of Mrs. Dorsett's heels on the wooden floors downstairs as she moved to answer the door was unmistakable.

Grace held her breath for a moment, hoping that whoever it was, might have business that the ever-efficient Mrs. Dorsett could manage without spoiling the—

"Right this way, sir." Mrs. Dorsett's sharp voice carried up the stairs through the floors and Grace's head tipped back with a sigh as she relinquished the breath she'd been holding. But her disappointment at the interruption was almost immediately replaced by a stronger emotion.

Shock.

A male caller? Did she say 'sir'?

The low rumble of a man's voice in reply to Mrs. Dorsett made her sit up a little straighter, her curiosity completely piqued. Grace put away her tools and her writing as quick as a cat, locking her things away and made a rushed inventory of the sitting room to make sure that it was presentable.

She stood, her nerves jangling, and smoothed out her skirts just in time as Mrs. Dorsett rapped on the door and then opened it before Grace could answer her.

"A man to see you," Mrs. Dorsett stated flatly and then turned before she'd even shown the gentleman in, as if the intrusion of a visitor was her least concern, much less the rituals it might require or the impropriety of leaving her mistress alone with a strange man.

Grace bit her lip to keep from groaning aloud at the bungled social niceties but the sight of the tallest man she had ever seen *ducking under* the doorframe to enter her sitting room ended her ability to protest.

Indeed the sight of a very handsome and very large man in a simple dark suit with his hands gripping his hat in front of him shyly dwarfing her ended every intelligent impulse or thought she had hoped to have to make up for Mrs. Dorsett's failings.

Dear God. He's so...impossible!

"I was not expecting any callers, sir." She swallowed and prayed as hard as she ever had in her life that the heat she felt in her cheeks was miraculously invisible. For here was not only an unexpected male caller but one that not even her own overworked imagination could have conjured. Thick black curls streaked with white in a salt and pepper effect offset the beauty of rugged masculine features, a square jaw and the gentle light of his eyes. Despite the white touches in his dark hair, he was not old but a man in his prime. He was broad and lean and appeared as solid and unyielding as a bronze statue in a park—except this chiseled wonder was standing in her sitting room. She curtsied

slightly, at a loss for how one proceeded when demigods came to call. "I am Grace Porter."

"You're..." His voice trailed off, his expression reflecting genuine misery as his hat suffered from his white-knuckled hold in its brim. Pale grey blue eyes the color of a winter sky darted from hers as he took in the room. "I should have thought this through past the front door," he said softly.

Grace blinked. "Is it a visit or a tactical siege?"

It was his turn to look at her in surprise. "A visit, I hope." He replied as if asking if such a thing were acceptable.

Her next impression was that the man was undoubtedly the shyest human in the British Isles with the set of his shoulders and tentative stance. *Why he looks like he's getting ready to run from a fire breathing dragon!* Grace warmed to the knowledge, courage flooding through her. "Then I should tell you that you are welcome. Would you care to take a seat?"

He shook his head. "I don't think I should."

"It is the first step of a social visit," she offered. "Sitting. Or so I'm led to believe..."

He shook his head again, openly eyeing the delicate legs of the chairs, all carved to resemble bamboo and birds. "It may be but I don't think your furniture will survive the attempt."

Grace tried to see the room from his vantage point. It did look a bit dainty. "Perhaps it's a wicked custom to give a woman's dull life a bit of humor to see gentlemen attempting to navigate through our gauntlets of glass trinkets and silk pillows."

"That sounds like a frighteningly real possibility," he replied. "Please pardon my manners," he said, his cheeks reddening. "I am...ill-suited to...drawing rooms on my best days but this visit is particularly challenging. It's a lovely room but I won't linger long."

Grace's stomach fluttered with butterflies at the effect of his presence. *This is ridiculous and if I don't stop staring at him, he'll declare me an idiot and there's an end to it.* "I'll accept the compliment and the brevity of your intended stay, if only to try to save your hat." She bit her lower lip. "I'm sure it's stopped breathing by now if you care to release it."

He smiled shyly and relaxed his grip slightly on his cap. "There. A life spared."

"Well, that's one thing set right. But I'm probably the one to apologize for a lack of manners." She straightened her back, doing her best to compose herself and channel a more serene countenance. "I have the habit myself of speaking first without thinking although I don't recommend it to anyone for its consequences. But let's ignore the rules and stand, shall we? Even so, you'll need to provide your name if we're to make another start. Don't you think so?"

He nodded, becoming instantly more somber. "I am Michael Rutherford. I...I met your brother Sterling, in India."

Grace nodded, pleased that he was in the right house after all but mortified anew at her candor with an associate of her brother. Sterling hated wit in a woman and had complained more than once that she had the decorum of a dairymaid. Then again, she didn't expect her brother to allow him to call

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