



Chapter 1

June 5, 1816
London, England

“ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU KNOW what you are about with this venture?” Mr. Asbury tapped the head of his walking stick into his palm, slanting a glance at Philippa Cashel, all his reservations in his expression. “It is quite unorthodox for a woman to take on such an endeavor without a male representative. I expected the duke to be here to negotiate terms.”

Philippa clenched her laced fingers, certain her gloves would be a creased mess by the time she finished dealing with this pious, pompous man.

I do not need a male representative to speak for me. Men have burned every bridge they've ever tried to cross as far as I am concerned. The only man I trust is Marcus, and I will not lower my guard to any other man, ever.

She kept her voice level. “I can appreciate your caution”—Lord, forgive her that lie, for she had no appreciation for it whatsoever—“which is why, upon my brother-in-law, the duke’s advice, we sent you a complete prospectus. Our plans, our means, our schedule, and more. We *are* ambitious with our goals, but the need is great. We hope to set about another fundraising campaign as soon as the location for the school is secured.”

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Soliciting funds. The worst aspect of charity work. Philippa loathed it. She would rather scrub every pot in the scullery than ask for money from people who thought they were her better merely because they were well funded. But without money, there would be no school. With no school, the women now forced to sell their bodies to survive would have no recourse and no way to reform and change their lives.

They stood before a rather seedy-looking manor, vacant for the last decade but owned by the Asbury family. The property had been for lease for some time, probably because of its proximity to the Horse-monger Lane Gaol. She had been certain they could secure the tenancy but had not considered the owner's reservations about their occupancy.

It was as if, from her birth, God had decided her path would be obstructed and she would have to fight for every inch in this life. She would spend the rest of her natural existence striving to atone for her past, overcoming hurdle after barrier—yet it was a past He had a part in subjecting her to.

She had long ago given up expecting life to be fair.

Philippa considered Mr. Asbury, what she knew about him, his fussy mannerisms, his foppish dress, the way he looked at her as if not quite able to forget what she had been.

Time to lay on some charm.

“Your generosity toward charitable causes is approaching legendary status, and we are honored that you would consider our humble project. When you said you might allow us to rent your property with the option to purchase, why, my heart just soared. It is a most magnanimous gesture and will surely aid those who are in such great distress.” Just enough flattery to appeal to him, but not enough that he might suspect her of being disingenuous.

Mr. Asbury adjusted his cravat, touching the mother-of-pearl tie pin, then smoothed his lapels and adjusted his cuffs. His prissy movements irritated. He was the one skittering about, but it was Philippa who felt uncomfortable.

Pedantic and peculiar.

But he, like most men, could be flattered and cajoled around to her

way of thinking, and often in the end, the men thought the entire enterprise their own idea.

He ran his hand along his watch chain, as if counting the links, rocking on his toes. He tucked his walking stick into the crook of his elbow and his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets. "I was not aware when I responded to your inquiry that you had . . . well, such a checkered past, Miss Cashel. I merely believed you to be the sister of the Duchess of Haverly." His face reddened. "Can you assure me that your efforts with these fallen women will be successful? That your behavior and those of the women you help will be above reproach? I am not interested in having my name or my property attached to a failure. Or anything salacious. If you can avow that the vast majority of those you bring here will leave with changed hearts and with enough skills to make their way in the world without giving in to their lascivious or baser natures . . ."

Philippa clenched her teeth, railing inwardly against this prevalent notion that women involved in prostitution did so willingly because they could not control themselves, rather than the truth, which was that most women were forced into the life through sheer desperation because they lacked any other means of support. They were victims of men who could not control *their* desires, not the other way around.

As to his learning of her history as a former courtesan, she had never sought to hide it. She had earned a living by working in a disorderly house, but that was in the past. Thanks to the efforts of her sister and brother-in-law, and Aunt Dolly, she now had an honorable occupation, a purpose that added to society and would help many others . . . if this annoyingly fastidious man would only give them the chance.

She calmed her voice and features. "We have shown excellent results in our efforts thus far. With the help of the Dowager Duchess of Haverly, Mrs. Stokes and I have been able to rehabilitate and educate nearly a score of young women who are now gainfully employed as domestic servants, shopworkers, and seamstresses. We've even placed a pair of young women into service at Carlton House with the prince. We hope to continue the work we've begun while adding more to our

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curriculum in the way of education, vocation, and spiritual nourishment.” All this was laid out in the prospectus. Had the man even read it?

Aunt Dolly—Mrs. Stokes to the pupils—Philippa’s friend and partner in the charity, rounded the corner of the manor house, an eager expression smoothing some of the hard-worn lines of her face. Her lace cap fluttered in the early summer breeze. “It’s perfect, I tell you. Though there are some much-needed repairs, they should not take long. The house could hold as many as fifty pupils easily. And the cow byre will allow us to both train those with a desire to become dairy-maids and to provide for the needs of the kitchen. There is an excellent fowl house for chickens and geese too. And a walled kitchen garden that could use a bit of attention.” Her voice held enthusiasm, something Philippa hadn’t heard from her mentor in some time. “When do you think we might take possession of the property?”

Mr. Asbury removed a snuffbox from his pocket, seemed to remember how vulgar it would be to indulge in front of ladies, and returned it to its hiding place. “There is much to be decided yet. It has been on my conscience to somehow use this property for the good of my fellow man, or in this case, women, I suppose, but still, my mind hesitates. Is this the correct charity to which the land and buildings should be devoted?”

Why on earth would he hesitate now? The property had been to let for months. If he didn’t lease it to them, then what would he do with it?

“I actually have another party interested, who wishes to use the manor and grounds as a reform school for children at risk of becoming delinquents. The gentleman hoping to start the school has a fine prospectus and grand plans, and he has a prestigious board of directors already in place. He also has funds in the bank to begin right away.”

Philippa pressed her tongue hard against her front teeth. She had thought the conclusion to the matter so near, and here he was, bobbing about in purpose like a cork in the ocean. Another interested party? Was Mr. Asbury telling the truth, or was he hoping they would

increase their offer of monthly rent? What would it take to convince him to show them favor? She and Aunt Dolly and the girls must find a place soon and remove themselves from the Haverlys' house. They had been a burden for long enough. She could not impose herself on her sister's family any longer, especially given that she and the Duchess of Haverly were only half sisters, and she was baseborn.

Charlotte had been kindness itself, never looking down on Philippa's illegitimacy. From the moment Charlotte had learned of her existence, she had welcomed Philippa into her home, rescuing her from her life as a high-fashion courtesan and treating her as if they were equals, though Charlotte was a duchess of the realm.

There was nothing Philippa wouldn't do for her sister, and that included removing her charity from Charlotte's house at the earliest opportunity.

Carriage wheels on gravel drew her attention. Glossy black paint, gleaming brightwork, the family crest on the door, pulled by two magnificent bays . . . Philippa's heart sank. The dowager had arrived. She had hoped to have procured the property before that particular wind gusted in.

Mr. Asbury blinked. "I thought you said Her Grace could not attend today."

"We were not certain if she could fit the appointment into her schedule. She has a very full social calendar. We are blessed to have her as one of our patrons." Philippa spoke the truth, though the dowager's involvement could be challenging at times. At least Philippa wasn't related to the woman like her sister Charlotte. Imagine having the dowager as one's mother-in-law. It took every bit of tact and patience Philippa possessed not to give the dowager a scold for her interfering, outspoken ways. Yet there was no doubt having such a high-ranking aristocrat as a partner in the charity was a boon.

Charlotte assured her often that though the dowager was dictatorial, she meant well. She harped because she cared.

The dowager must care a considerable amount.

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Asbury hastened to beat the coachman to the carriage door and helped the dowager alight.

Her Grace took one look at the manor house and shuddered. “A bit of a hovel, isn’t it? Though what else I expected, being so close to the prison, I don’t know.” She tugged at her gloves, appraising the gray stone of the front elevation. “Still, it will do, I suppose, if the inside is even remotely functional. One cannot hope for too much when one is getting a bargain.”

Bite your tongue, Philippa Mary Cashel. Momentary satisfaction at confronting the dowager will not blot out the backlash. There must be no hint of discord between us, else the opportunity will slip away.

“Your Grace.” Philippa smiled through tight lips. “May I present Mr. Asbury? He owns Reeding Manor and has not yet decided whether to allow us to rent the property.” If the dowager tumbled in now and extirpated this offer with her high-in-the-instep ways, Philippa really would give in to temper, consequences notwithstanding.

“Well, are we going to wait in the sun until I’m faint from heat? Show me the property.” The dowager leaned on her cane. “We cannot know if the place is suitable until I see it.”

Those words epitomized the dowager’s view on life. Nothing worth noting could happen unless she were a part of it and approved.

And yet, she *had* been helpful with the women they had brought into her house for training. Well, perhaps it was a stretch to call Haverly House or the country estate the *dowager’s* property—they belonged to her son, the duke. She lived in the dower house on his estate and in his London house when they were in town for the Season. Still, it was her home, and she had opened it to the first students.

Her instruction to the ladies could be exacting and abrasive, but she held the students to the same high standard as would their future employers. They would not be accepted as rehabilitated and ready for the workforce unless they were willing to maintain the level of excellence required by the aristocracy. Trial by fire might describe the dowager’s instructive methods.

Mr. Asbury sidled toward the manor, ushering the dowager. “I be-

lieve, though there are some repairs necessary, the house should suit your needs. Mrs. Stokes and Miss Cashel have been through the place, of course. I let them explore, not knowing you would be coming, else I would have waited and allowed you to be first.”

Philippa caught Aunt Dolly’s eye behind the dowager’s head. This appointment would now take more than twice as long. Yet if Asbury was flattered by the dowager’s attention and it resulted in him choosing them to occupy the property, Philippa would grab firm hold of her patience and go along.

The heavy, iron latch stuck, and Asbury put his shoulder against the front door to get it opened. The gouge in the floor showed how lax the hinges had become.

Their footsteps echoed in the entry hall, and Philippa looked to the gallery above, admiring how the dust motes floated in the shafts of sunlight coming through the oval windows high on the front facade.

“Humph. This dark woodwork is so out of fashion. I’d paint every bit of it white, and these plaster walls . . .” The dowager grimaced. “Perhaps some pale green or even yellow coloring would brighten this space.”

Again, Philippa and Aunt Dolly locked eyes. Where did Her Grace think they would secure money to decorate? Essential repairs only would be the order of the day, as their budget was paper thin.

“I believe we should concentrate on beds, tables, and kitchenware to begin. Aesthetics will have to wait.” Mrs. Stokes spoke gently but firmly. “There are some broken windows upstairs, and one or two places where the roof is leaking. Those areas must take priority over paint and wall coverings, I’m afraid.”

“How long has the manor been empty?” The dowager ignored Aunt Dolly and spoke to Asbury. Another tactic of which she was fond—changing the subject when she heard something she didn’t like.

“Coming on ten years. My father purchased it just before his death, with an eye to bringing it back to its former glory. After he passed, the house and grounds went unoccupied and uncared for.”

“And how old is the original manor?”

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“It was built around 1480. Though it’s been added to and renovated several times through the centuries. This room was the first baronial hall. There are some stunning Tudor-era murals in the royal chamber, the oratory, and the book room. Of course, when the manor was built, the owners were Catholic, but the oratory was kept as a sort of store-room when the Church of England was founded.”

“The oratory would make a fine classroom,” Philippa offered. “With desks in place of the benches.”

“And you do not need to bother about a place to worship, as there is a church building on the property.” Asbury patted his lapels as if he alone were the one who had thought to provide such a luxury. “When I first perused your prospectus, I did some investigating as to whether London truly needed more than one establishment for the reclamation of the fallen. After all, there is the Magdalen Hospital which has been in existence for half a century.” Again, that speculating glance knifed Philippa’s way. Judging eyes, remembering her history.

He could find nothing to cavil at in her current appearance. She never dressed to remind people of her past. For this encounter, she wore a fichu the dowager would be proud of, a long-sleeved navy spencer, and had her hair covered by a sensible straw bonnet, as chaste as any maiden walking with her chaperone in Hyde Park.

“That is true, and they are doing a fine work. Some of our policies and procedures will be based upon what has worked so well at the Magdalen.” Though she wanted the freedom to structure the school in her own way, patterned after her own experiences rather than the strictures of a bunch of well-meaning but obtuse men who had no notion what it was like to live as she had and little clue how to help a woman such as she had been.

“Hmm, yes, but what I was saying is that a steady source of income for the Magdalen Hospital is their ticketed Sunday morning services. By charging admission, funds are raised to keep the place open. I would suggest you follow that example, and once the chapel is repaired and you are holding services, you charge admittance.”

Philippa’s stomach tightened. Charging people to attend church?

Was that even proper? One aspect of the Magdalen Hospital that Philippa wasn't keen on was that the "Magdalens," as they were called, sang in a choir on Sunday mornings as part of the church experience. Put on display to the public. Objects rather than people.

And Philippa had cause to know that women who made their way in the world as prostitutes had been objectified enough for a lifetime.

Asbury wasn't finished. "I have just the man in mind for the chapel services. I shall have to insist, as part of the rental agreement, that you use the services of my friend, Mr. Simon Todd. He's garnered quite a following recently as an ardent preacher, and in fact, was just appointed as one of the Prince Regent's personal chaplains. He will bring in crowds, which will bring in money. I owe him a great deal of gratitude. He helped counsel my son when he was struggling with some private matters and helped him see sense. I will do anything I can to advance the career of Mr. Todd. Having him associated with the school will help ensure you can cover the cost of your rent each month."

A celebrated preacher, and one favored by the Prince Regent? No, thank you. She would not be dictated to by this man, nor his lackey of a parson. But before Philippa could say anything, the dowager exclaimed, "How wonderful. I agree to those terms. Once we finish with the house tour, we can visit this chapel where Mr. Todd will speak."

Barging in where angels feared to tiptoe. Her *modus operandi*.

"Let us not be too hasty. The charity board for the school has yet to be formally assembled. Should not the board be the one to make such a decision?" Philippa tried to head the dowager off tactfully.

"If this Mr. Todd is good enough to advise the Prince Regent on spiritual matters, surely he's good enough for this new school." The dowager leaned on her cane, head tilted as if she doubted Philippa's ability to reason. There was a glint in her eye, however, that told Philippa she would not be dissuaded from her course.

Aunt Dolly put her hand on Philippa's arm, gently drawing her to the side. She whispered, "Let us not fight this battle here, in the territory of strangers. There will be time enough to go over everything

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we've learned today and make a sound assessment. If this is the location God has for us, He will make the way plain."

Philippa nodded, her lips pressed together to hold back the tide of frustration. Did God even take a personal interest in their lives? In her experience, God was remote at best. If He cared so much about people, why was there so much suffering in the world?



Was this how the leopards in the Tower Menagerie felt, crammed into a cage, itching to pace? Sir Bertrand Thorndike surveyed the tiny, cramped, dark room. Why did Haverly insist upon keeping this little bolt-hole, barely bigger than a closet, with no ventilation beyond a few patterned openings in the brick high in the wall? The duke owned one of the most beautiful houses in London, with a private meeting room on one of the upper floors. Yet he kept this box of an office, his secret meeting place as an agent for the Crown, hidden upstairs in a bookshop in St. James.

This room smelled of smoke, ink, paper, leather, and dust. The only illumination came from oil lamps and candles. The walls seemed to close in on Bertie every time he visited.

"Not three years ago, I sat in that very chair, getting yet another new assignment from my supervisor, but one that changed my entire life. It led me to Charlotte, to capturing a spy, and to the attention of the Prince Regent. You knew the former director, Sir Noel St. Claire?" Marcus, Duke of Haverly, leaned to the side in his desk chair, propping his elbow on the armrest and dropping his chin to his fist.

"I did know him, though I did not work with him myself. I was never high enough up the chain of command to receive orders personally from the director. I did not even know of this room until a few years ago." Bertie resisted the urge to lounge in the soft chair. Somehow, in this place, where so many crucial things were planned, where so much important information changed hands, and in the presence of his superior officer, he could not bring himself to relax. Though he

and Haverly were friends, he was accustomed to the hierarchal nature of their relationship, both in society and in their work.

“It has its uses, though I could wish it was a bit less like a cell in the Tower of London.” Marcus studied the aesthetic with a shrug. “Still, I could not bear to part with it, because it reminds me so strongly of Sir Noel and my early days as an agent.”

Bertie would not have associated the duke with sentiment, but he supposed every man had his weakness. Bertie had long ago learned to steer clear of sentimentality. If one let one’s heart become involved, one made poor decisions.

“Tristan and Melisande are in Brighton for a few more days, are they not? Have they sent word when they expect to return to town?”

“Within the week, though I do not have a specific day for their arrival.”

“You’ve been a good mentor to Lady Juliette, but for the foreseeable future, I believe your niece and her parents will be better served if I do not send them on any missions. Your brother and his wife can concentrate on their daughter’s nuptials, and Lady Juliette can focus on her newly betrothed and newly minted earl.”

Bertie nodded, receiving the compliment on his mentorship. And he agreed with Marcus. His brother and sister-in-law had been away from their daughter far too much since Lady Juliette had returned from finishing school. She deserved their attention as she prepared for her wedding.

“So the Thorndikes will be heading to Worcestershire almost immediately, then?”

“Yes, the house will be in an uproar with packing and planning. They will be on the road within a fortnight.” Bertie had long ago ceased to be surprised by the depth and breadth of Marcus’s information network. The man seemed to collect and collate facts like a miser collected and counted coins.

“And you are not traveling with them?” Marcus asked. Though he posed the question as if he already knew the answer. Which he probably did.

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“I am not. As you said, they need time to be together as a family, and honestly, I find the wedding talk tedious. They’ll be detouring to Swann’s new property to assess what they will need to make the house habitable. I’ve heard they’re sending to Whitehaven for some of the earl’s workforce to make improvements to the place. Whitelock’s idea of training veterans as builders was brilliant, and Tristan wishes to make the renovations of Aylswood Manor a wedding present to his daughter and her soon-to-be husband.”

“And as Juliette’s uncle, do you have a wedding gift in mind?”

Bertie shook his head. “I told Melisande to take care of it, find something they either need or want, and let me know so I can reimburse her. As I said, I find all this wedding hubbub exhausting. For some unaccountable reason, before she left for Brighton, Juliette consulted me on place settings, stemware, linens, even items for her trousseau. And honestly, every charger and champagne glass looks identical to me, forks look like forks, and why on earth would I care which soup tureen she selects?” He threw his hands up. “Does she not understand I am a confirmed bachelor with neither the enthusiasm nor the expertise for which she’s looking? I am a dilettante, and in the eyes of the *ton*, a sot. I cannot be bothered with wedding planning.”

Marcus smiled, giving an understanding nod, and yet, a calculated, pensive look in his eye set off a tiny warning bell in Bertie’s brain.

“You’ve been a good asset these past few years, especially as a member of your brother’s team. Due to recent circumstances and your not inconsiderable abilities and talents, I believe it is time to give you more responsibility in the agency.”

Bertie lifted his chin. Suddenly the room didn’t seem quite as confining. More responsibility? He liked the sound of that. Bertie had often felt underutilized, but perhaps that would change now. He had been a cog in everyone else’s wheels for a long time. Playing roles in other agents’ missions, hiding behind his facade as a drunken cad. He felt as if he were a caterpillar kept too long in the cocoon, aching to break out. Was this perhaps his chance, at last?

“There are a few things I think we should change about your cover,

however. With Tristan and Melisande out of action for the foreseeable future, I would like you to form and head your own team. I have a new mission in mind for you, which will require you to leave a different impression than half-sotted dilettante. But the new mission, which will wear a public front, cannot be the reason you leave your drinking habits behind. You will need an obvious motivation for such reform before we embark upon this mission.”

Bertie’s mind whirled like one of those new kaleidoscopes being sold in Vauxhall Gardens. What new mission? What public front would he assume with a hidden motive of spy work going on behind?

Marcus studied him, then said, “I can think of no better reason for cleaning up your bacchanalian ways than that you’ve found a love interest. Nothing like the love of a good woman to reform a man. People will believe that easily.”

Bertie gaped, even as he shook his head. “With all due respect, Your Grace, no, thank you. I am heart-whole and free, and I intend to stay that way. Do not attempt to disrupt my contentment.”

Haverly steepled his fingers, pressing them against his lips. Eyes sharp, he considered Bertie. “Are you? Heart-whole? Content? Or are you just wary? You’ve nursed a broken heart from a boyhood infatuation long enough.”

Bertie’s jaw hardened, and the muscles in his neck tensed. Yet he could not overreact, for that in and of itself would be telling. How did Marcus know any of this, something so far in the past? Bertie had locked away that part of his heart long before he had ever heard of Marcus Haverly or been introduced to the world of spies and agents. There were some things a man had the right to keep private, even from Haverly.

“If there ever was such a woman, it is, as you have said, so far in my youth as to no longer matter. It is only that I like being free.” He trotted out all the reasons he had given Tristan and Melisande in the past when they tried matchmaking. “The work for the agency is both perilous and time consuming. I, more than most, am available for dangerous assignments, with only myself to consider. I cannot imagine

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the distraction having a wife and children to care for would be in the situations in which I have found myself. I would not like the burden of knowing at any moment my wife could become a widow, my children orphans.”

“I appreciate your candor, though many men in your position manage both a family and the job. Give it some thought. As Sir Noel told me not so long ago, a wife gives a man a certain stability and can provide great cover for his more clandestine work. I, too, was skeptical at the time and resisted his suggestion to marry, but I have to say, he was right. My wife is an asset to my work, not a hindrance. Look at your own brother. Tristan is a much better agent because he has Melisande at his side. And they’re passing their knowledge and abilities down to Juliette who will marry soon. You, yourself, have played more than a casual role in her training. She’s the closest thing you have to a daughter, and yet, caring for her well-being has not compromised your ability to do your work.”

“Juliette is an exceptional prospect, and now that Triss is going to remain in England for a spell, he can take over his daughter’s training. I only stepped in because he was absent. And of course I am fond of her, but should I perish in the line of duty, her life would go on much the same because she has her parents and soon a husband to look after her.”

“You think yourself so dispensable to them? I believe Lady Juliette would care very much should you disappear from her life.” Marcus shrugged and flipped open a folder on his desk. “Give the search for a bride some thought. The mission I have in mind for you—a wife would be an excellent backdrop. ‘Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord.’ You’d be quite a catch on the Marriage Mart if you let it be known you were looking to set up your nursery. Knighted, from an aristocratic family, and wealthy enough in your own right. Yes, quite a coup for some matchmaking mama.”

“What is this new mission?” A change of subject was called for here, and Bertie was frankly curious. What could Haverly possibly have for him to do that would require being sober and married? Surely not entering the clergy?

Marcus shook his head, his eyes tensing a bit, as if ordering his thoughts. “There are still plans and preparations to be made before I can reveal the nature of the assignment to you. Suffice it to say, a new team, headed by yourself, needs to be in place before you can begin this particular task. I would not ask you to change your life so radically if it were not important and if I did not think you would be the better for it.”

Bertie frowned, but he knew not to press. Marcus would share the information when he felt the time was right, and pushing would only earn his displeasure.

“Now, about your new team. I had intended to put Daniel Swann under your tutelage, but his new role as supervisor of investigators at Bow Street means he will not be in a position to do much spying. He will still be a great asset, but I would prefer him to focus on the informational and criminal side than the espionage or diplomatic fronts. That and his new title and lands and bride will keep him occupied for some time.”

Bertie cast about for who he would like to work with. He’d never had the luxury of choosing his colleagues. Would he have the opportunity now, or would Haverly already have them assembled? His contact with other agents had been limited to only a handful of men for the safety of all concerned. If one did not know the extent of the spy network, one could not be forced to or inadvertently divulge their identities.

“Of course,” Marcus continued, “Juliette has been thrown into deep water right from the outset, and she deserves leave from spying responsibilities. In any case, she will, for the foreseeable future, be considered a member of her parents’ team.” He picked up a quill, dipped the nib in an inkwell, and wrote something on the bottom of one of the pages. “Therefore, I am going to make Mr. Partridge, my own right-hand man, your lieutenant. He’s been a valuable part of my team, but with my increased administrative duties, I feel his considerable talents are being wasted. He’s got a wealth of experience, great contacts, and he is absolutely fearless.”

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Bertie nodded. He had long admired the taciturn yet very effective Mr. Partridge. They would do well together.

“As to a third member, I do not wish you to make any snap judgments, but rather to *consider* this person. Do not reject out of hand.”

Wariness crinkled Bertie’s scalp.

“I’d like you to consider Pippa Cashel. Well, Philippa, as she now wishes to be known.”

Bertie blinked. Pippa Cashel? Not long ago, she had been the most desired courtesan in London. How could she possibly be an effective team member when she was as recognizable as Sarah Siddons? Was Marcus tossing out her name because she was his wife’s half sister and needed something with which to occupy her time now that she was no longer a lady of the night?

Marcus cleared his throat. “I know what you’re thinking, but she provided valuable information for me on many an occasion. She was privy to the secrets of powerful men.”

Uneasiness hitched up his windpipe. “But—” How did he put this delicately? She was Haverly’s family after all. “That was in her former capacity, was it not? She has left that life, and therefore the access to those same powerful men. Isn’t she fundraising for a charity hospital or reform school for women who are seeking to leave her former line of work?”

“She is, and yes, she no longer practices the particular profession that brought her those same sources. However, she is the best I have ever seen at detecting when someone is lying. She can read people better than anyone else, without exception. Anyone who can judge people as well as she can would be a valuable team member. And she’s adept at disguise. She had the ability to become whatever her client wished, and she is remarkably skilled in hiding her own feelings. With a bit of training, she could be an excellent agent.”

Bertie had encountered Miss Cashel a few times at various social events. She was stunningly beautiful, with a touch-me-not expression and watchful eyes. She reminded him, in her self-possession, of his sister-in-law, Melisande. Melisande was never discomposed and

had mastered the art of putting people in their place with grace and ease.

Unlike Melisande, however, Miss Cashel's situation in society was tenuous. As a former courtesan, she had attended the opera, the theater, the symphony . . . but always in the capacity of a paid paramour. It was widely known she was the illegitimate daughter of the Earl of Tiptree, though unacknowledged by him. She had no entrance into society except that her half sister, the Duchess of Haverly, Charlotte, both acknowledged and invited Miss Cashel into her life. Miss Cashel currently resided at the Haverly mansion, attended various functions with her sister, and as a result, society, which would not dream of insulting the duchess, perforce had to accept her.

The duke waited for Bertie to respond. What could he say? Haverly was his supervisor and had the final say in the composition of Bertie's team. But if Bertie wasn't confident in his team members . . .

"I shall consider the matter as you have asked. Have you approached her about the possibility? Is she aware of what you do, or did you obtain your information from her in the past without her knowing the uses to which you might put it?"

"She only knew me as Hawk at first, my cover persona when I was in the field, but now, of course, she knows both identities. I once was a frequent visitor to King's Place where she worked, though never as a customer, only in my role as a spy." His mouth twisted wryly. "You can imagine the stramash when, early in our marriage, Charlotte found out I visited there, though she did accept my explanations eventually. I urge you to give the matter serious consideration. Once Miss Cashel gets this school up and running, she will have access to women who were like she once was, and the information they may be holding."

Marcus butted the papers on his desk together and stood, signaling Bertie that the meeting was over.

"There is a gathering at my home tonight, and I would appreciate your attendance. Nine o'clock. If there is time and opportunity, you may confer with Partridge. And possibly Miss Cashel, who will be there as well. Think over what I've said. I believe she would be an asset

A THIEVING AT CARLTON HOUSE

to your team. And cast about for some likely candidates for marriage. Seeking a bride would make an excellent, plausible reason for you to slow down on the drinking and start the transition to the role I am considering for you.”

Bertie nodded, groped for the doorknob in the gloom, and slipped down the stairs into Hatchard’s bookstore. The door to the sanctum was in a small cul-de-sac, and no one lingered nearby. Bertie moved the Wollstonecraft book from the top shelf to a lower one, to indicate to other agents who might come calling that there was no meeting in progress in the stuffy sanctum upstairs. Stepping out onto Piccadilly, he inhaled the light summer air, grateful for its freshness and warmth.

His own team. No longer in the shadow of his elder brother.

A new mission. Something that sounded quite ambitious and challenging, just what he had been longing for. But to give up the persona he had so carefully curated? What mission could possibly require that drastic a change?

The ludicrous notion of finding someone to marry aside, he looked forward to the challenge.