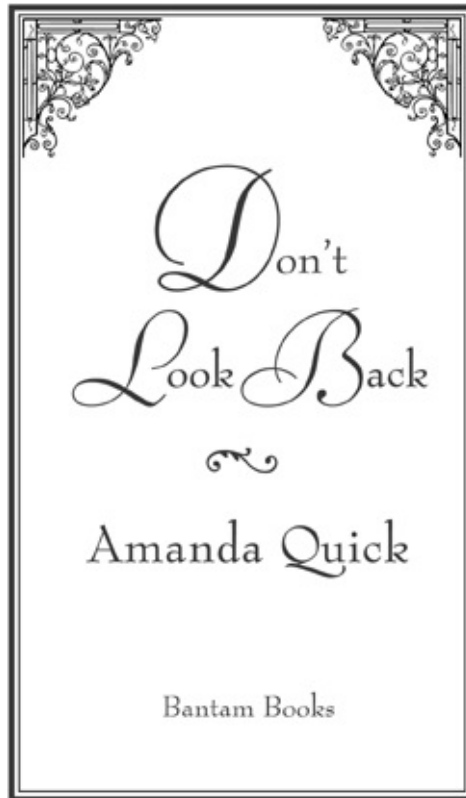




Don't Look Back

Amanda Quick



Don't
Look Back



Amanda Quick

Bantam Books

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For Catherine Johns:

What a joy is friendship.



And to Riley and Ferd—both gone
but not forgotten—and all of the
other creatures, large and small,
who add an extra dimension to our
lives while they are with us.

Acknowledgments

MY MOST SINCERE THANKS TO CATHERINE Johns, Curator, Romano-British Collections at The British Museum, for the insights and background on Roman Britain and ancient jewelry. Her personal and professional guidance, together with the wealth of information provided in her many publications, including *The Jewellery of Roman Britain, Celtic and Classical Traditions*, were invaluable. I am even more grateful for the friendship that we forged during the time it took me to write this book.

I also want to thank her for introducing me to Mr. Samuel Lysons, one of the founders of modern archaeology in Britain. The standards he set in his excavations and the beautifully illustrated reports he created in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are still admired today by professional archaeologists in the field.

I am, of course, solely responsible for any errors.

And, as always, my thanks to Frank, whose support and understanding are matched only by his uncanny ability to rescue me from computer disasters and rolling blackouts. I love you, sweetheart.

Prologue



THE KEEPER SET ASIDE THE CANDLE AND OPENED the old, leather-bound volume. He turned the aged pages carefully until he found the passage he sought.

. . . It is said they meet in secret in the dead of night to conduct their strange ceremonies. There are rumors that the initiates worship the snake-haired Gorgon. Others claim that they gather in obedience to their master, who commands Medusa's power to turn men to stone.

The master's talent is said to be a strange and terrible sort of magic. After inducing a deep trance in his victims, he issues orders to them. When he releases them from their thrall, they execute those commands without question.

The great mystery is that those upon whom the art is practiced have no memory of the instructions they were given while they were entranced.

It is believed that the master's power is greatly enhanced by the forces of the strange gem he wears.

The stone is carved with the fearsome image of Medusa. A wand is cut into the gem below the creature's severed neck. This device is said to be a representation of the magical rod used by the cult's master to effect a trance.

The carved gem is similar to an onyx, save that its alternating bands of colors are rare and exceedingly strange shades of blue, instead of black and white. The dark outer layer is so deep in hue as to be almost black. It frames the image of Medusa, which is cut into the light-colored layer of the stone. This second layer is a shade of blue reminiscent of fine, pale sapphires.

The gold bracelet in which the stone is set is worked with many small piercings to create a pattern of entwined snakes.

The master is greatly dreaded in these parts. His identity is always concealed by a hooded cloak during the cult's ceremonies. None knows his name, but the gem carved with the Gorgon's head and the wand is his emblem and seal. It is also believed to be the source of his power.

I am told that the stone is known as the Blue Medusa.

One



TOBIAS WATCHED LAVINIA WALK UP THE STEPS OF Number 7 Claremont Lane and knew at once that something was very wrong. Beneath the deep brim of her stylish bonnet, her face, always a source of intense fascination for him, showed signs of an odd, brooding tension.

In his admittedly limited experience, Lavinia rarely brooded over a problem or a setback. She was more inclined to take immediate action. *Much* too inclined to do so, in his considered opinion. *Reckless* and *rash* were words that came to mind.

He watched her from the window of the cozy little parlor, every muscle in his body tightening with a battle-ready tension. He had no patience with premonitions and other such metaphysical nonsense, but he trusted his own hunches, especially when it came to matters concerning his new partner and lover. Lavinia looked nothing short of shaken. He knew better than most that it took a great deal to rattle her composure.

“Mrs. Lake is home,” he said, glancing at the housekeeper over his shoulder.

“About time.” Mrs. Chilton set down the tea tray with an air of enormous relief and bustled toward the door. “Thought she’d never get here. I’ll just go and help her with her coat and gloves. She’ll be wanting to pour the tea for her guests, I’m sure. Likely be looking forward to a cup herself.”

From what he could see of her face in the shadow of the bonnet, Tobias had a feeling that Lavinia was more in need of a healthy dose of some of the sherry she kept in her study. But the medicinal dose of spirits would have to wait.

The guests waiting for her here in the parlor had to be dealt with first.

Lavinia paused at the front door, searching through her large reticule for her key. He could read the signs of strain around her fine eyes quite clearly now.

What the devil had happened?

During the affair of the waxwork murders a few weeks ago, he thought that he had come to know Lavinia rather well. She was not easily flustered, upset, or frightened. Indeed, in the course of his own occasionally dangerous career as an investigator, he had met very few people of either sex who

were as cool in threatening circumstances as Lavinia Lake.

It would require something quite dramatic to put that grim expression in her eyes. The prickle of unease that drifted through him had a chilling effect on both his patience and his temper, neither of which was in especially good condition at the moment. He would look into this new situation just as soon as he could get Lavinia alone.

Unfortunately, that would not be for some time. Her guests appeared prepared to converse at some length. Tobias did not care for either of them. The tall, elegantly lean, fashionably attired gentleman Dr. Howard Hudson, had introduced himself as an old friend of the family.

His wife, Celeste, was one of those extraordinarily attractive females who are only too well aware of their effect on the male of the species and not the least hesitant to use their gifts to manipulate men. Her shining blond hair was piled high on her head, and her eyes were the color of a summer sky. She wore a gossamer-thin muslin gown patterned with tiny pink roses and trimmed with pink and green ribbons. There was a small fan attached to her reticule. Tobias considered that the dress was cut quite low for such a brisk day in early spring, but he was almost certain that the deep neckline was a carefully calculated decision on Celeste's part.

In the twenty minutes he had spent with the pair, he had reached two unshakable conclusions. The first was that Dr. Howard Hudson was a charlatan. The second was that Celeste was an out-and-out adventuress. But he suspected he would do well to keep his opinions to himself. He doubted that Lavinia would welcome them.

"I am so looking forward to seeing Lavinia again," Hudson said from the chair where he reclined with languid ease. "It has been several years since we last met. I am eager to introduce her to my dear Celeste."

Hudson possessed the rich, resonant voice of a trained actor. It had a deep, vibrant quality that one associated with well-tuned instruments. The sound grated on Tobias's nerve endings, but he had to admit that it commanded attention in an almost uncanny fashion.

Hudson cut a decidedly fashionable figure in an excellently tailored dark blue coat, striped waistcoat, and pleated trousers. His neckcloth was tied in an elaborate and unusual manner that Tobias thought his brother-in-law, Anthony, would have admired. At one-and-twenty, Anthony was at the age when young men paid acute attention to such things. He would no doubt also approve of the unusual gold seals that decorated Hudson's watch.

Tobias mentally calculated that the doctor was somewhere in the middle of his forties. Hudson was endowed with the distinguished, well-modeled features of a man who would no doubt always turn ladies' heads, regardless of his age. His wealth of dark brown hair was silvered in a striking manner, and he wore his clothes with an authority and aplomb that would have done credit to Brummage himself in the heyday of his social reign.

"Howard." The strain evaporated from Lavinia's green eyes as she swept into the parlor. She held out both hands in unmistakable and enthusiastic welcome. "Forgive me for being late. I went shopping

in Pall Mall and misjudged the time and the traffic.”

Tobias was fascinated by the change that had come over her in the past few minutes. If he had not caught that brief glimpse of her expression when she came up the steps, he would never have guessed now that she had been troubled.

It annoyed him that the mere sight of Dr. Howard Hudson had had such an uplifting effect on her mood.

“Lavinia, my dear.” Howard rose and took both her hands in his long, well-groomed fingers, squeezing gently. “Words cannot express how wonderful it is to see you again after all this time.”

Another wave of disturbing, albeit inexplicable, unease washed through Tobias. Hudson’s most arresting features, aside from his riveting voice, were his eyes. An unusual combination of brown and gold in color, they had a compelling effect.

Both voice and gaze were no doubt extremely useful in his profession, Tobias thought. Dr. Howard Hudson was a practitioner of the so-called science of mesmerism.

“I was so very pleased to receive your note yesterday,” Lavinia said. “I had no notion that you were in London.”

Hudson smiled. “I was the one who was delighted to discover that you were in Town. Imagine my surprise, my dear. The last I heard, you and your niece had gone off to Italy as companions to a lady named Mrs. Underwood.”

“Our plans changed quite unexpectedly,” Lavinia said smoothly. “Emeline and I were obliged by circumstances to return to England sooner than we had anticipated.”

Tobias raised his brows at that understatement, but he wisely kept silent.

“Well, that is certainly fortunate as far as I am concerned.” Howard gave her hands another little familiar squeeze and released her. “Allow me to introduce my wife, Celeste.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Lake,” Celeste murmured in dulcet tones. “Howard has told me so much about you.”

Tobias was briefly amused by her manner. The almost theatrically gracious inclination of Celeste’s head did not conceal the cold assessment in her pretty eyes. He could see her measuring, weighing, and passing judgment. It was obvious that she immediately dismissed Lavinia as no threat and of no consequence.

He was amused for the first time that afternoon. Dismissing Lavinia was always a mistake.

“This is, indeed, a pleasure.” Lavinia sat down on the sofa, arranged the skirts of her plum-colored gown, and picked up the teapot. “I had no notion that Howard had married, but I am delighted to hear it. He has been alone much too long.”

“I had no choice in the matter,” Howard assured her. “One look at my beautiful Celeste a year ago and my fate was sealed. In addition to making me a lovely wife and companion, she has proven herself quite adept at handling my business accounts and appointment book. Indeed, I do not know how I would get by without her now.”

“You flatter me, sir.” Celeste lowered her lashes and smiled at Lavinia. “Howard has attempted to teach me some of his skills with mesmerism, but I fear that I have no great talent for the science.” She accepted the cup and saucer. “I understand my husband was a dear friend of your parents?”

“He was, indeed.” A wistful expression crossed Lavinia’s face. “He was a frequent visitor in our home in the old days. My parents were not only exceedingly fond of him, they counted themselves among his greatest admirers. My father told me on several occasions that he considered Howard to be the most accomplished practitioner of mesmerism he had ever met.”

“I take that as a very great compliment,” Howard said modestly. “Your parents were both extremely skilled in the art themselves. I found it fascinating to watch them work. Each had a unique style, but each achieved amazing results.”

“My husband tells me that your parents were lost at sea nearly a decade ago,” Celeste murmured. “And that you lost your husband that same year. It must have been an extremely trying time for you.”

“Yes.” Lavinia poured tea into two more cups. “But my niece, Emeline, came to live with me some six years ago and we do very nicely together. I am sorry that she is not here to meet you this afternoon. She is with friends attending a lecture on the monuments and fountains of Rome.”

Celeste managed an expression of polite sympathy. “You and your niece are alone in the world?”

“I do not think of it as being alone,” Lavinia said crisply. “We have each other, you see.”

“Nevertheless, there are only the two of you. Two women alone in the world.” Celeste gave Tobias a veiled glance. “In my experience, being on one’s own without the advice and strength of a man to lean upon is always a difficult and unhappy situation for a woman.”

Tobias nearly fumbled the cup and saucer that Lavinia had just thrust into his fingers. It was not Celeste’s completely inaccurate assessment of Lavinia’s and Emeline’s personal resources and abilities that jolted him. It was the fact that, for a few seconds there, he could have sworn that the woman was deliberately flirting with him.

“Emeline and I manage very well, thank you,” Lavinia said, an unexpected edge on her words. “Pray, have a care, Tobias, or you will spill your tea.”

He caught her eye and realized that beneath her drawing-room manners, she was irritated. He wondered what he’d done this time. Their relationship seemed to lurch from the prickly to the passionate with jolting force and very little middle ground, as far as he could determine. Neither of them was entirely comfortable yet with the fiery affair that had blossomed between them. But he could certainly say one thing about their liaison: It was never dull.

That was unfortunate, to his way of thinking. There were times when he would have given a great deal for a few dull moments with Lavinia. The time might provide him with an opportunity to catch his breath.

“Forgive me, Lavinia,” Howard said with the air of a man who is about to broach a delicate subject. “I cannot help but notice that you are not practicing your profession. Did you abandon the science of mesmerism because you found the market weak here in London? I know that it is difficult to attract the proper sort of clientele when one lacks social connections.”

To Tobias’s surprise, the question seemed to catch Lavinia off guard. She gave a tiny start that caused the teacup in her hand to tremble. But she recovered swiftly.

“I have embarked upon another career for a number of reasons,” she said crisply. “While the demand for mesmeric therapies appears to be as strong as ever, the competition is extremely fierce on that line and, as you noted, it is not easy to attract an exclusive sort of clientele unless one has connections and references in Society.”

“I understand.” Howard nodded somberly. “Celeste and I will have our work cut out for us, in that case. It will not be a simple matter for me to establish a new practice here.”

“Where have you been practicing until now?” Tobias asked.

“I spent several years in America, traveling and lecturing on the science of mesmerism. A little over a year ago, however, I grew homesick and returned to England.”

Celeste sparkled at him. “I met Howard in Bath last year. He had established a flourishing practice there, but he felt it was time to come to London.”

“I hope to discover a greater variety of interesting and unusual cases here in Town,” Howard explained very seriously. “The vast majority of my clients in Bath, as in America, sought treatment for rather ordinary afflictions. Rheumatism, female hysteria, difficulty with sleeping, that sort of thing. All worrisome enough for the patients, of course, but rather boring for me.”

“Howard intends to conduct research and perform experiments in the field of mesmerism.” Celeste gave her husband an adoring look. “Indeed, he is dedicated to discovering all of the uses and applications of the science. He hopes to write a book on the subject.”

“And to do that successfully, I must be able to examine clients with more exotic nervous disorders than one generally encounters in the country,” Howard concluded.

Lavinia’s eyes lit with enthusiasm. “That is a very exciting and admirable goal. It is high time that the science of mesmerism was accorded its proper due.” She shot a speaking glance in Tobias’s direction. “I vow, a great many ill-informed people still persist in believing that mesmerists are a quacks and charlatans of the worst order.”

Tobias ignored the barb and swallowed some tea.

Hudson exhaled heavily and shook his head with a grave air. "Unfortunately, I must admit that there are far too many fraudulent practitioners in our profession."

"Only advancements in the science will discourage that sort," Lavinia declared. "Research and experiments are precisely what is needed."

Celeste gave her an inquiring look. "I am curious to know the nature of your new career, Mrs. Lakeland. There are so few professions open to a lady."

"I am in the business of taking commissions from persons who wish to employ me to make private inquiries." She put her cup down on the saucer. "I believe I have some of my cards around here somewhere." She leaned across the arm of the sofa and opened a small drawer in a table. "Ah, yes, here we are."

She removed two small white cards from the drawer and handed one each to Howard and Celeste.

Tobias knew exactly what was engraved on the little white rectangles.

PRIVATE INQUIRIES

DISCRETION ASSURED

"Most unusual," Celeste said, looking rather baffled.

"Fascinating." Howard pocketed the card and frowned in evident concern. "But I must tell you that I am sorry to learn that you have given up your practice. You had a great gift for mesmerism, my dear. Your decision to change careers is a loss to the profession."

Celeste eyed Lavinia with a considering expression. "Was it only the fear of competition that made you abandon the science?"

If he had not been watching Lavinia, Tobias thought, he would have missed the shuttered expression that came and went very quickly in her eyes. Nor would he have noticed the tightening of the little muscles in her throat. He could have sworn she swallowed before she answered the question.

"There was an . . . unpleasant incident involving a client," Lavinia said neutrally. "And the income was not what one might wish. It is difficult to charge high fees in the country, as I'm sure you know. In addition, I had Emeline's future to consider. She was out of the schoolroom and I thought it timely that she acquired a polish. There is nothing like travel abroad to give one some elegance and refinement, I always say. So, what with one thing and another, when Mrs. Underwood's offer of a Season in Rome arrived, I thought it best to accept."

"I see." Howard did not take his eyes off her slightly averted face. "I must admit that I did hear rumors of the unpleasantness in that little village in the North. I trust you did not let it affect you unduly?"

"No, no, of course not," Lavinia said a bit too quickly. "It is just that by the time Emeline and

returned from Italy, I was inspired to try my hand at this new venture and I have found it very much to my taste.”

“It is certainly an odd occupation for a lady.” Celeste gave Tobias a speculative look. “I assume that you do not disapprove of Mrs. Lake’s new profession, sir?”

“I assure you I have moments of extreme doubt and deep uncertainties about it,” Tobias said dryly. “Not to mention any number of sleepless nights.”

“Mr. March is teasing you.” Lavinia gave Tobias a repressive glare. “He is in no position to disapprove. In fact, upon occasion, he undertakes to act as my assistant.”

“Your *assistant*?” Celeste’s eyes widened in genuine shock. “Do you mean to tell me that you employ him?”

“Not quite,” Tobias said mildly. “I’m more in the way of being her partner.”

Neither Celeste nor Howard appeared to hear his small correction. They were both staring at him, astonished.

Howard blinked his eyes. “Assistant, you say?”

“*Partner*,” Tobias repeated very deliberately.

“I engage Tobias’s services on the odd case now and again.” Lavinia moved one hand in an airy gesture. “Whenever I have need of his particular expertise.” She smiled very sweetly at him. “I believe he is only too pleased to have the additional income. Is that not so, sir?”

He was growing impatient with this conversation. It was time to remind her that she was not the only one with teeth.

“It is not just the money that attracts me to our *partnership*,” he assured her. “I must admit that I have discovered several additional, extremely pleasant benefits on the side.”

She had the grace to blush, but predictably enough, she refused to give ground. She turned back to her guests with a benign smile.

“Our arrangement affords Mr. March the opportunity to exercise his powers of logic and deductive reasoning. He finds the business of being my assistant quite stimulating. Is that not correct, sir?”

“Indeed,” Tobias said. “In fact, I think it is safe to say that our association has afforded me some of the most stimulating exercise I’ve had in years, Mrs. Lake.”

Lavinia slitted her eyes in silent warning. He smiled, satisfied, and ate one of the tiny currant-jam pastries Mrs. Chilton had placed on the tea tray. Mrs. Chilton did wonders with currants, he reflected.

“This is all quite fascinating.” Celeste examined Tobias over the rim of her teacup. “And just what is the nature of your particular expertise, Mr. March?”

~~“Mr. March is very good at ferreting out information from certain sources that are not readily available to me,”~~ Lavinia said before Tobias could respond. “A gentleman is free to make inquiries in certain places where a lady would not be welcomed, if you see what I mean.”

Understanding lit Howard’s expression. “What an extraordinary arrangement. I take it this new line has proven more lucrative than your old one, Lavinia?”

“It can be quite profitable.” Lavinia paused delicately. “On occasion. But I must admit that in terms of financial remuneration it is a trifle unpredictable.”

“I see.” Howard looked concerned again.

“But enough about my new career,” she said briskly. “Tell me, when do you expect to begin giving therapeutic treatments at your new address, Howard?”

“It will take at least a month or more to make all the final arrangements regarding the furnishings,” he said. “Then, too, I must put the word out in the proper quarters to the effect that I will be accepting clients and that I am interested only in the more unusual afflictions of the nerves. If one is not careful one can find oneself overwhelmed with ladies seeking therapy for female hysteria, and as I mentioned I do not want to spend my time treating such a mundane disorder.”

“I see.” Lavinia fixed him with an expression of surprisingly keen interest. “Will you be placing advertisements in the newspapers? I have been considering doing that myself.”

Tobias paused in mid-munch and lowered the remains of the currant pastry. “What the devil? You never mentioned any such scheme to me.”

“Never mind.” She waved away his inquiry with a small sweep of her hand. “I will explain the details later. It is just a notion that I have been toying with lately.”

“Toy with something else,” he advised. He popped the last bit of pastry into his mouth.

Lavinia shot him a repressive glare.

He pretended not to notice.

Howard cleared his throat. “In truth, I probably will not put notices in the papers because I fear they will only attract the usual assortment of ordinary clients with ordinary nervous problems.”

“Yes, I suppose there is some risk of that.” Lavinia looked pensive. “Nevertheless, business is business.”

The conversation veered off into the arcane and the highly technical aspects of mesmerism. Tobias wandered back to the window and listened to the lively discourse, but he took no part in it.

He had serious misgivings about the entire business of mesmerism. The truth was, until he encountered Lavinia, he had been convinced that the results of the French inquiries into the subject

were correct. The investigations had been led by such esteemed scientists as Dr. Franklin and Lavoisier. The conclusions were simple and straightforward: There was no such thing as animal magnetism and therefore mesmerism had no scientific basis. The practice was nothing short of fraud.

He had readily accepted the proposition that the ability to induce a deep trance was a charlatan's art suited only for entertaining the gullible. At most he would have conceded that a skilled mesmerist might possibly be able to exert influence over certain weak-minded individuals, but that only made the business all the more suspect in his opinion.

Nevertheless, there was no denying that the public interest in mesmerism was strong and showed no signs of abating, in spite of the views of many medical doctors and serious scientists. He sometimes found it disquieting that Lavinia was trained in the art.

The Hudsons took their leave half an hour later. Lavinia went to the front door to see them off. Tobias remained at his post at the window and watched Howard hand his wife up into a hackney.

Lavinia waited until the coach had set off before closing the front door. When she walked back into the parlor a moment later, she appeared far more at ease than she had when she had arrived home. The visit with her old family friend had evidently eased some of the tension. Tobias was not certain how he felt about Hudson's power to elevate her mood.

"Would you care for another cup of tea, Tobias?" Lavinia reseated herself on the sofa and picked up the pot. "I am going to have some more."

"No, thank you." He clasped his hands behind his back and looked at her. "What the bloody hell happened while you were out this afternoon?"

She flinched at the question. Tea splashed on the table.

"Good heavens, see what you made me do." She seized a small napkin and went to work blotting up the drops. "What on earth makes you think that something happened to me?"

"You knew that you had guests waiting for you. You had invited them yourself."

She concentrated fiercely on wiping up the small spill. "I told you, I lost track of time and the traffic was terrible."

"Lavinia, I am not a complete idiot, you know."

"Enough, sir." She tossed the napkin aside and fixed him with a dark look. "I am in no mood to be put through one of your inquiries. Indeed, you have no right to press me about my private affairs. I swear, lately you have begun to sound altogether too much like a husband."

An acute silence fell. The word *husband* hung in the air between them, written in letters of fire.

"When, in fact," Tobias said eventually and very evenly, "I am merely your occasional partner and sometimes lover. Your point, madam?"

A rosy flush colored her cheeks. “Forgive me, sir, I do not know what came over me. That was uncalled for. My only excuse is that I am somewhat vexed at the moment.”

“I can see that. Speaking as your concerned, occasional partner, may I ask why?”

Her mouth tightened. “She was flirting with you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Celeste. She flirted with you. Do not deny it. I saw her. She was not particularly subtle about it, was she?”

He was so astonished that it took him a few seconds to comprehend what she was talking about.

“Celeste Hudson?” he repeated. The implications of the accusation reverberated in his head. “Well, yes, I did notice that she made a few dilatory efforts in that direction, but—”

She sat very straight, her spine rigid. “It was disgusting.”

Was Lavinia actually jealous? The dazzling possibility sent a pleasant euphoria through his veins.

He risked a small smile. “It was rather practiced and therefore not particularly flattering, but I would not call it disgusting.”

“I would. She is a married woman. She had no business batting those lashes at you the way she did.”

“It has been my experience that women who are inclined to flirt do so whether or not they happen to be married. Some sort of inborn compulsion, I suspect.”

“How awkward for poor, dear Howard. If she carries on like that with every man in sight, he must be humiliated and unhappy a great deal of the time.”

“I doubt that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a hunch that poor, dear Howard finds his wife’s gift for flirtation extremely useful.” Tobias crossed to the tea tray and helped himself to another pastry. “In fact, it would not surprise me to learn that he married her precisely for her talents in that line.”

“Really, Tobias.”

“I am serious. I have no doubt but that she attracted any number of gentlemen clients to his practice in Bath.”

Lavinia appeared quite struck by that observation. “I had not thought of that possibility. Do you suppose she was merely attempting to interest you in a series of therapeutic treatments?”

“I think it’s safe to say that Mrs. Hudson’s eyelash-batting amounted to nothing more than a form of advertisement for Hudson’s mesmeric therapy.”

“Hmm.”

“Now that we have settled that matter,” he continued, “let us return to my small inquisition. What the devil happened today while you were out shopping?”

She hesitated and then gave a small sigh. “Nothing significant. I thought I saw someone in the street I once knew.” She paused to take a sip of tea. “Someone I did not expect to see here in London.”

“Who?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I vow, I have never met anyone who can manage to return so repeatedly to a subject that a person has made very clear that she does not wish to discuss.”

“One of my many talents. And no doubt one of the reasons why you continue to employ me as your assistant now and again on the odd case.”

She said nothing. Not mutinous or stubborn, he thought. She was deeply uneasy and perhaps not certain where to start her story.

He got to his feet. “Come, my sweet. Let us collect our coats and gloves and take a walk in the park.”

Two



“WELL, HOWARD?” CELESTE LOOKED AT HIM across the small space that separated them in the hackneyed parlour. “You said that you were driven by curiosity to see how your old family friend had done in the world. Are you satisfied?”

He contemplated the view of the street, his handsome profile at an oblique angle. “I suppose so. But I confess I find it absolutely extraordinary that Lavinia would abandon a career in mesmerism for such an odd business.”

“Perhaps Mr. March is the lure that drew her into this other career. It is obvious that they are lovers.”

“Perhaps.” Howard paused. “But it is difficult to credit that she would give up the practice for any reason, including a lover. She truly did have a talent for the art. I suspected for some time that she would make a more accomplished practitioner than either of her parents. And they were both very skilled, indeed.”

“Passion is a very powerful force.” She gave him a knowing smile. “It can cause a woman to alter the course of her life. Only consider our own connection and how my life has changed because of it.”

Howard’s expression softened. He reached out to pat her gloved hand with his long, elegant fingers. His brilliant eyes darkened.

“It is you who changed my life, my dear,” he said in his rich, velvety voice. “I shall be forever grateful that you chose to join your fate with mine.”

They were both lying through their teeth, she thought. But they each did it very well.

Howard returned to his study of the busy street. “What do you think of Lavinia’s associate, Mr. March?”

She gave herself a moment to ponder the subject of Tobias March. She considered herself something of an authority on the male of the species. For most of her life her fortunes had depended on the accuracy with which she could assess men and the skill she could bring to the task of manipulating them.

She had always possessed an aptitude for the business, but she considered that her serious study of the subject had begun with her first husband. She had been sixteen years old. He had been a widower, a shopkeeper in his seventies who had conveniently expired in the middle of an unsuccessful attempt to fulfill his marital duties. She had inherited the shop, but having no intention of spending her life behind a counter, she had immediately sold it for a rather nice sum.

The money from the sale of the small business had enabled her to purchase the gowns and frippery required to move up a couple of rungs on the social ladder. Her next conquest was a dull-witted son of a member of the local gentry, who had paid her rent for four months before his family discovered the affair and cut off his allowance. There had been others after that, including a man of the cloth who had insisted that she wear the garments of his calling while he made love to her on top of the altar.

The affair had ended when they were discovered by an elderly member of the congregation. The woman had promptly succumbed to a fit of the vapors at the sight of what was happening on the altar. All had not been lost, Celeste reflected. While her lover waved a vinaigrette under the nose of the stricken member of his flock, Celeste had slipped away through a side door, taking with her a very fine pair of candlesticks that she was certain would never be missed from the church's large collection of silver.

The candlesticks had sustained her financially until she met Howard. He had proved to be her greatest triumph to date. She had known the moment she met him that he had unique possibilities. The fact that he was not only personally attracted to her but also appreciated her clever nature had simplified matters. When all was said and done, she was in his debt. He had taught her a great deal.

She sorted through her impressions of Tobias March. Her first observation was that, although he was endowed with excellent shoulders and a very fine physique, he appeared to have little interest in fashion. His coat and trousers had been cut for comfort and ease of movement, not style. The knot of his cravat had been simple and severe, not fashionably intricate.

But she considered herself an astute student of men, one who was accustomed to looking past superficial elements. She had known immediately that March was very different from the other gentlemen she had encountered in her life. It was obvious to her that he possessed a steel core at the center of his being that had nothing to do with physical prowess. She had seen it in the veiled depths of his cool, enigmatic gaze.

"In spite of Mrs. Lake's comments to the contrary, I do not think that he is merely her assistant," she said finally. "I very much doubt that Mr. March would take orders from anyone, man or woman, unless it suited him to do so."

"I am inclined to agree," Howard said. "When he maintained that he was Lavinia's occasional partner, he did so with the easy air of a man who is merely sparring with his opponent for his own entertainment."

"Yes. He was certainly not enraged or humiliated by Mrs. Lake's claim that he was in her employ. In fact, I gained the distinct impression that the subject of which of them is in command is something of a private joke between them."

Which, in turn, suggested a very intimate connection indeed between Lavinia and Tobias, she thought. She had tried to test that relationship with a bit of flirting, but the results had been inconclusive. March had regarded her with those cold, unreadable eyes and given nothing away.

All in all, Tobias March was a very interesting and no doubt rather dangerous gentleman. He might well prove useful in the new future that she was planning. She would first have to lure him away from Lavinia Lake, of course, but surely that would present little challenge to her unique talents. Mrs. Lake offered little in the way of serious competition, as far as she could see.

Celeste toyed with the little fan that dangled from her reticule and smiled slightly. In her entire life she had never met a man she could not handle.

“What is it that intrigues you so about Mrs. Lake, Howard?” she asked. “I vow, if you continue to carry on like this I shall start to wonder if I ought to be jealous.”

“Never that, my dear.” He turned his head and transfixed her with the full power of his amazing eyes for a few seconds. His voice deepened. “I promise you, you command all of my passions.”

Her breath caught in her throat. This was not a rush of longing or excitement, she knew. It was fear that made her suddenly breathless. But she managed to cover the reaction with another smile and lowered lashes.

“I am relieved to hear that,” she said lightly.

She was certain that her voice sounded normal, but her pulse was still beating too heavily. With an effort of will she contrived not to clench her gloved hands.

Howard pinned her with his fascinating gaze for a moment longer. Then he smiled and looked away. “Enough of Lavinia and Mr. March. They are, indeed, an unusual pair, but their odd business is none of our concern.”

When his attention shifted back to the street scene, she drew a deep breath. It was as if she had been released from an invisible snare. She collected her scattered thoughts and steadied herself.

In spite of Howard’s seemingly casual attitude, she did not entirely trust his careless dismissal of the curiosity that had led him to inform Lavinia of his presence here in Town.

Howard was most definitely intrigued by Mrs. Lake. She told herself that she should welcome the distraction. If nothing else, his interest in his old acquaintance would serve to divert his attention from this critical juncture in her plans. Nevertheless, she had the uneasy feeling that she was missing something.

She watched him closely, studying the distant, contemplative expression on his face. It worried her. These strange periods of withdrawal and silence were becoming more frequent of late. They had begun when he had been seized with the compulsion to go beyond the mere practice of mesmerism and had plunged into extensive research of the subject.

And quite suddenly her well-honed intuitive understanding of the male sex stumbled upon the truth. She saw it all with dazzling clarity.

“You accepted Mrs. Lake’s invitation to tea because you wished to discover whether or not she had become as skilled in the practice of mesmerism as yourself,” she said quietly. “That is what this is all about, is it not? You had to know if, after all these years, she presented a challenge to your own great talents or if she had somehow learned more than you have discovered.”

Howard stiffened ever so slightly. The slight physical reaction confirmed her conclusions. He turned toward her with startling speed and she found herself plunging into the fathomless depths of his eyes.

He said nothing. But she felt as if she were frozen in her seat. She did not think she could have moved even if the carriage had burst into flames. Panic swept through her. He could not possibly know about her plans, she thought frantically. There was no way he could have uncovered her scheme. She had been very, very careful.

Howard smiled, breaking the small spell. The mesmerizing intensity of his gaze faded.

“I congratulate you, my dear,” he said. “You are, as always, most insightful. Do you know, I had not fully comprehended my own curiosity about Lavinia until I saw her today for the first time after all these years. It was only then that I realized I had, indeed, been driven to discover whether or not she had fulfilled her potential as a mesmerist. She had such an incredible natural gift for the art, you see, I recognized it years ago when she was but a young girl. I was certain that all she required was time and practice to perfect her skills.”

Celeste breathed deeply and recovered her nerve. “Did you perhaps wonder if she had surpassed even your skills, Howard?”

He hesitated. “Perhaps.”

“That would be an impossibility.” She spoke with absolute, unfeigned conviction. “There is no one more adept. Even the great Mesmer himself must be in awe of your talents.”

Howard chuckled. “I thank you for the sentiments, my dear, but under the circumstances, I fear that we are highly unlikely to discover the truth of Mr. Mesmer’s degree of admiration for my skills.”

“It is unfortunate that he died a few years ago and was never able to see you work. But I assure you that he would have been impressed. No, more likely extremely envious of you, sir. And as for Mrs. Lake, you need not concern yourself with her. She presents absolutely no challenge to you whatsoever. She has obviously chosen to ignore whatever natural aptitude she may have had in favor of another career.”

“So it would seem.” He patted her gloved hand. “You never fail to lift my spirits, my dear. I vow, I do not know what I would do without you.”

She smiled and allowed herself to relax slightly. But she dared not let down her guard entirely. The

business that lay ahead of her was too important to be handled carelessly. She had taken risks before but this affair was far and away the most dangerous scheme upon which she had ever embarked.

It would be worth it, she assured herself. If all went as planned, the profits from the venture would enable her to alter her destiny yet again. She would be in a position to move into Society and at last obtain everything that she had craved so long.

The only obstacle in her path was Howard. She must not underestimate him, she thought.

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