



Sophie Jordan

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WICKED NIGHTS
With A
LOVER

*Sophie
Jordan*

**WICKEDNIGHTS
WITH A
LOVER**

 HarperCollins e-books

For Lindsay with love for hours of laughter

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By Sophie Jordan

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Chapter 1

Marguerite Laurent was not given to emotional histrionics as so many females she had come across in the course of her five and twenty years. It was this, her lack of excitability, her utter constancy, that perfectly suited her for her particular vocation. Only now, on this particular occasion, did she find herself tested beyond custom.

“But I simply don’t understand,” Mrs. Danbury whined in shrill, petulant tones. “Why must you leave now? I am going to live! I should think you would be happy about that.” The widow affected a great sniffle as she set about her morning regimen of toast and honey—at least her morning regimen when she had not been prostrate at death’s door. She brandished the dripping spoon in the air, waving it like a weapon to be plied. “One would almost think you wished I had died.”

“Don’t be silly,” Marguerite gently chided. “You are well. A fact, I promise you, that fills me with only the greatest relief.”

Mrs. Danbury sniffed yet again, and repositioned her considerable girth in her chair as she took a crunchy bite.

Against all odds and the dire predictions of physicians, the widow Danbury had taken her turn for the *better*. Such the case, Marguerite counted herself unneeded and had already begun preparations to move on to her next assignment. Moistening her lips, she yet again wavered about the difficult task of explaining to her patroness that she only attended to the infirm and the dying.

“You’re going to live, Mrs. Danbury. While I couldn’t be more pleased, I am a sick nurse. *I’m better with the dying*. Biting back that morbid thought, Marguerite stepped forward and cupped a linen beneath the dripping spoon before a dollop of honey landed on Mrs. Danbury’s dressing robe.

The widow pursed her lips. “Well, you could be my *well* nurse.”

Marguerite smiled, but could not help her niggle of discomfort. This was a wholly unique situation for her. By the time the agency referred her, her patients were quite beyond recovery. No one had ever recuperated before. She’d never had to beg an exit. Usually, the family was happy to be rid of the sight of her for all that she reminded them of their loved one’s final days.

“I have another assignment waiting.” Marguerite had received the note this very morning from Mrs. Driscoll at the agency that a position was available.

“You cannot go yet,” Mrs. Danbury insisted with an unappealing pout of her honey-moist lips. “Not until we’re sure I’m well and mended.”

Marguerite blinked. “Why, you’re a vision of health, Mrs. Danbury. You’ve been free of your bed well over a fortnight. Your physician vows you are cured. Yesterday you rode in the park and ate so many scones that I lost count.”

“Posh! Meaningless all. I can’t be certain until I’ve seen *her*. Only then can I know for

certain. She'll be here any moment. Now excuse me while I dress." With a flick of her hand, the two maids lurking in the corner rushed forward, hurrying after the widow as she fairly skipped into the dressing room.

Her? Marguerite remained where she was, contemplating the bags she'd already packed and asked the butler to see collected from her room. She was so close to escaping. The need roared hot and thick inside her, climbing up her throat. Mrs. Danbury was a capricious creature given to fits of laughing and weeping interchangeably. She drained the energy out of Marguerite. As mad as it sounded, Marguerite craved the predictability and calm of the dying.

Mrs. Danbury's voice drifted from the dressing room as she berated one of the maids serving to confirm all of Marguerite's dread.

"I've just risen from my deathbed! I no longer need look a corpse, you daft girl. Put that horrid thing down and fetch me my blue silk tea gown."

Marguerite squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, hoping to block out the sound of her shrill, excitable voice.

A knock sounded at the suite's doors. The housekeeper stuck her head inside the room. Marguerite nodded toward the dressing room. The portly woman walked with a briskness that defied her girth for the dressing room door. With a knock, she announced, "Mrs. Danbury, Madame Foster has arrived."

"Excellent! Tell her that Miss Laurent and I shall be right down." *Madame Foster?*

Moments later, Mrs. Danbury swept into the room in a flurry of blue silk. "Come, Marguerite, dear. We shall find out if I am truly on the mend and whether you can take your leave or not."

A knot in her throat, Marguerite followed. Uncharitable or not, she somehow suspected she would not care for this Madame Foster.

"Tell me, Madame Foster," Mrs. Danbury encouraged between bites of frosted biscuits. Marguerite watched as crumbs fell from her lips to her silk skirts. The widow didn't flicker an eye over the mess tumbling from her mouth, her attention trained on the garishly attired woman across from her. "What do you see?"

Madame Foster clucked her tongue and rotated the teacup in her heavily be-ringed fingers, even as she glanced furtively at the room's appointments, assessing with the rapacity of a predator.

Marguerite frowned from where she sat near the window, fairly certain the female was looking for anything she might pocket before leaving.

"Ahhh," the woman murmured, refocusing her attention on the cup.

"Yes? Yes?" Mrs. Danbury leaned forward eagerly.

Madame frowned slightly and turned the cup around, her movements suddenly quick. She glanced from the cup to Mrs. Danbury's animated face and released a heavy sigh. When she returned her attention to the dregs at the bottom of the teacup, her frown deepened into a scowl.

“What?” Mrs. Danbury asked shrilly. “Dear woman, tell me what you see!”

The woman set the cup down with a decided click on its saucer and motioned impatiently for Mrs. Danbury’s hand. The widow quickly stretched her arm across the table, losing her lily-white fingers in the diviner’s grasping ones.

Madame Foster bowed her turban-swathed head and closed her eyes as though in prayer. For moments, she said nothing. Only the ticking clock on the mantel could be heard in the hush.

Marguerite leaned forward in her chair, duly impressed with the intense expression on the woman’s face. It was like she wasn’t even in the room anymore but transported elsewhere. A truly affecting performance. To her credit, she was quite the convincing charlatan.

With a sharp breath, Madame Foster dropped Mrs. Danbury’s hand. Shaking, she rose quickly to her feet, her many bracelets clanging together on her arms in her haste. “That is all for today,” she said in clearly affected accents.

“What? No! No!” Mrs. Danbury lurched to her feet. “What did you see? You cannot leave! I’ll pay you anything ... you must tell me!”

With an unladylike mutter, Marguerite stood, unable to witness another moment of the farce, certain the female was only working at some ploy to extort more money from the pathetic and far too gullible widow.

Then something happened.

The diviner turned—looked away from the widow. Only Marguerite still saw her face. And she could not help wondering why she should feign such distress at that moment, free from the widow’s view. Madame Foster’s eyes, glassy and panicked, darted to the door, eager for escape. She skirted the table, avoided Mrs. Danbury’s stretching hands. “I cannot—” she mumbled.

“Please, whatever you saw ... whatever it was ... wouldn’t you want to be told? Tell me, I know?”

Halfway to the door, Madame Foster froze.

Feeling invisible, and not unhappy for that fact, Marguerite looked back and forth between the two women, wondering how she had ever come to be trapped in such a mad scene.

Slowly, Madame Foster turned, her gaze narrow and thoughtful. “That depends.” She advanced slowly, moistening her lips. “Do you wish to know the hour of your death? Should anyone wish for such knowledge?”

Marguerite sucked in a breath, a shiver chasing down her spine. *Oh, no.* She wouldn’t be so wicked, so irresponsible as to pretend ...

Mrs. Danbury nodded doggedly. “I’ve lived half a century.” She drew a deep, ragged breath. Marguerite read the fear in the lines of her face, heard it in the quaver of her voice, however much she presented an image of bravado. “However much time I’ve left, I would want to know.”

Madame Foster nodded, pursing her lips. “Very well.”

Marguerite strode forward, intent on putting an end to this madness and stop the swindler.

from placing an expiration on Mrs. Danbury's life. Except she didn't move swiftly enough.

"The truth, as I saw with my own eyes, is that you'll not live out the week."

Mrs. Danbury screamed, clutching a hand to her great bosom as she fell, plummeting like a sinking ship to the Persian rug.

With an inelegant snort, Marguerite wondered if the lady's death had not arrived upon the very moment. Prostrate on the rug, she greatly resembled a corpse.

Helping Mrs. Danbury to the settee, Marguerite glanced around to find the cause for all the trouble gone. Vanished like a wisp of smoke.

Determined to stop the culprit and bring her back, force her to confess that she was a liar and a charlatan, Marguerite patted her patient on the arm and raced from the room after her.

"Wait! Stop!"

Madame Foster shot a frightened look over her shoulder and pushed her considerable girth harder toward the front doors.

Younger and significantly lighter of foot, Marguerite caught up with her and snatched her by the end of her bright blue shawl. "Oh, no you don't! You're not going anywhere until you march back up there and tell Mrs. Danbury she's not going to die *this* week!"

Madame Foster tugged on her colorful shawl, twisting it around her arm. "I won't do any such thing."

"You miserable wretch. This is not a game. Have you any idea what you've done to the woman?" Marguerite stabbed a finger toward the stairs.

"You think I enjoy this? You think I like letting people know their less than promised destinies? Usually, I lie. But not about something like this." She jerked her turbaned head toward the stairs. "Mark my words, that woman will be dead before the week is out, and she deserves to know she has so little time left. I'd wish to know."

"You mean to explain to me that *you* believe this rot?" Shaking her head, Marguerite hissed, "Never mind. I don't care. March up those stairs and take back everything you said before I call the Guard. Tell Mrs. Danbury it was a mistake." Marguerite waved a hand wildly. "Tell her you had another look into your crystal ball and you were wrong ... you said her eighty years old in a rocking chair—"

"Try to consider if it were you. Wouldn't you want to know?"

Marguerite shook her head, furious. "Spare me the ethical obligations of a seer," she scoffed. Snatching hold of the woman's arm, she tugged her toward the stairs, not about to give up. "You're going to tell that woman—"

Marguerite stopped, turning cold at the sudden look on Madame Foster's face. She'd seen the rapt, frightened expression before. Only moments before when she'd clutched Mrs. Danbury's hands.

A sick, wilting sensation twisted in her belly. Marguerite loosened her grip, eager to sever the contact, but then Madame Foster tightened her hold, keeping her hostage, her eyes eerily bright, glassy and faraway.

"Let me go," she hissed, tugging at her hand and marveling at the older woman's strength.

Desperate, Marguerite stomped down on her foot, finally freeing herself. Rubbing her hand, she wondered if she shouldn't simply wash her hands of this madhouse and move on to her next assignment.

"You," Madame Foster whispered, her gaze focused again, eyes darting avidly over Marguerite's face in a way that reminded her of a wild animal. "I've seen your death."

Marguerite resisted the small chill the words elicited, reminding herself that this woman was a charlatan. Propping her hands on her hips, she asked, "Indeed? Mine, as well? This is an inauspicious day, is it not? Do I have but a week to live, too?"

"No." The woman readjusted her shawl around herself. "You have more time than that. Before the year is out, you'll meet your end. I have seen it with my own eyes. This Christmas shall be your last."

Marguerite could not stop her shiver. "I think you should leave."

Madame Foster nodded as though she couldn't agree more. "Aye, I've had enough of this house. I'm sorry for both of you. But you especially." Her gaze roamed her face, eyes brimming with pity. "So young. And such a terrible accident." She clucked her tongue. "Tragic."

Vexed beyond her limit, Marguerite pulled the front door open herself, with no care that she was effectively kicking one of Mrs. Danbury's guests from the house. Her further presence could bring no good. "Leave."

"Happily." Madame Foster departed. It took every effort not to slam the door behind her. Even from where she stood, the wails of her employer could be heard above stairs. She would not be easy to soothe. With a sigh, Marguerite started up the stairs, unable to credit the heaviness settling in her chest.

She didn't believe the swindler's claims for one moment. She didn't believe in spells or magic or people who predicted fate. Rubbish. If she could see it, touch it, taste it, then it would be real.

At week's end, she would have her proof. Mrs. Danbury would be fine. Hale and her were sane and sane, if not again, then perhaps for the first time in her life, with the evidence of her foolishness staring her in the face.

And Marguerite would be free to move on to her next assignment.

Chapter 2

A week later, Marguerite was free to move to her next assignment. Mrs. Danbury was dead. Standing over the still warm body of her employer, she stared hard at the lifeless form until her eyes ached. She stared. And she stared. As if she could *will* the woman to rise and not be *dead*.

She'd witnessed countless deaths, stood alongside the families and friends as they mourned and shared stoically in their sorrow. And yet never had she felt like this. This was different.

This couldn't be happening.

Her chest constricted, air impossible to draw. Guilt, she realized, although she couldn't credit such an emotion. She had afforded her patient every care ... even as she had never believed, up until the very end, that Mrs. Danbury was actually relapsing, actually *dying*. She had performed every measure to try and save her life. All for naught. Madame Foster had been right.

She blinked her dry, aching eyes. When Mrs. Danbury took a turn for the worse, declining swiftly over the course of three days, Marguerite had refused to believe that the *seer* could possibly have been correct. It was insupportable. For if she were correct ...

Marguerite shook her head fiercely and swallowed against the terrible thickness in her throat. She directed her attention back to Mrs. Danbury's grieving daughter. An unfortunate creature with a too-large nose and a regrettable moustache. She had never wed. Before Marguerite's arrival, she had been her mother's constant companion. To say Marguerite's presence was a point of resentment would be an underestimation.

"Why? Why? She was so much better ... on the mend, you said so!" Miss Danbury beat the bed beside her mother, very much like a child in a tantrum. "You said so, Marguerite, you said so!"

Marguerite flinched. She couldn't say a word, couldn't offer an explanation. Madame Foster's face materialized in her mind. *You'll not live out the week.* Her prophetic words had come to pass.

Shaking her head, Marguerite placed her hand on the young woman's shoulders, only to be shaken off.

She wet her lips to summon her customary words of sympathy. "I'm sorry. Your mother lived a good life. A full life ... and a life lived is nothing to grieve."

She uttered the words every single time ... had heard them once, when she'd first begun as a sick nurse. A friend of the bereaved family had offered the words of solace within her hearing and she thought them terribly wise. Now she thought them tragic. Tragic for someone like herself ... because she hadn't lived a particularly *good* life. Thus far, she could not characterize her life as *full* either. Her life simply ... *was*. A series of days passing, one after the other.

This realization had eluded her ... perhaps because she had assumed she had so much time

left. Time enough to live a *good* life. A *full* life. She folded her suddenly cold hands before her, looking away from the recently departed Mrs. Danbury enshrined in her bed and cursing Madame Foster for making her suddenly examine the state of her life.

All at once, the sight of death chilled her, affected her as never before, tangible as an iron hand that might reach out and seize hold of her.

“You’re a liar!” Miss Danbury choked. “A liar! I hope you die, you dreadful creature!”

With a cold, humorless smile curving her lips, Marguerite turned and left the room wondering in the darkest corner of her heart if Miss Danbury’s wish might not soon come to fruition.

It was much later before Marguerite escaped to her room. The undertaker had come and gone, left. The arrangements had been made. Miss Danbury had not been fit to cope, so the task fell to Marguerite. She knew the undertaker well and had been able to expedite matters with her usual efficiency, pretending there was nothing extraordinary about Widow Danbury’s passing.

With a weary sigh, she fell back in the chair beside the window that overlooked the small courtyard situated behind the townhouse. Over the past few months, she’d enjoyed this room, particularly the view. Even in the grip of early winter, the trees looked lovely, the branches swimming in the breeze, their few remaining leaves clinging with laudable tenacity.

Her eyes drifted shut and she began to doze, the toll of the last days catching up with her. A knock sounded, and she rose with a start, smoothing her skirts before opening the door to the housekeeper.

“Mrs. Hannigan,” she greeted. “Did you need something?”

“No, no, dear. Sorry to disturb you. I know it’s been a long day, a right trial, and you’ve taken the brunt of Miss Danbury’s pain, don’t we all know it. But this letter arrived this morning.” She pulled an envelope from her apron. “I thought you might like it now. Perhaps it’s from one of those friends of yours.” She shrugged one thick shoulder. “Thought you could tolerate a bit of cheer.”

Marguerite’s heart immediately lightened as she grasped the crisp envelope. A letter from either Fallon or Evie would certainly lift her spirits. Her friends were both happily wed and leading full lives. Despite their less than orthodox courtships, they had found love and happiness in their marriages.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hannigan.”

“Good night, dear. See you in the morning.”

She nodded and this time her smile felt less forced, less tight on her face. “Good night.”

Alone again, she sank to the bed, tearing open the letter with hands that shook in her excitement. Perhaps Fallon was back in London. She could stay with her for a few days before she took a new assignment and put this last week behind her, like a strange nightmare that would grow foggy and foggier until completely forgotten.

Her heart sank as her gaze settled on the page. She didn’t recognize the handwriting. In fact, the scrawl was nearly illegible. Marguerite squinted to read:

This letter likely comes as a shock to you. You may, in fact, believe I've quite neglected you over these many years. Let me assure you that is not the case. I funded you through Penwich, minding my responsibility to you as any dutiful father. It is not until this time that I have deemed a meeting beneficial. I hazard to presume you may not agree, but hope you may reconsider. Even if you have no wish to acquaint yourself with me, think of your sisters. They long to meet you ...

The letter fluttered from Marguerite's limp fingers like a falling moth, the rest of the words detailing how she should contact her father insignificant, lost as her thoughts reeled.

Her father wanted to meet her? She snorted. Not likely. He had not deigned to see her a those years ago when her mother scraped by a humble existence in their small village.

Several times a year Marguerite's mother left her in the neighbor's care so that she might venture to London and the bed of her lover. She never recalled her mother sitting her down and explaining the purpose behind these trips, but she had somehow always understood. Her father was in London. That was never a secret. The carriage that arrived to collect her mother belonged to him. Her mother always returned with smiles, a new wardrobe, and a doll for Marguerite. The price of her dignity.

Following her mother's death, the same carriage that had always collected her mother arrived to convey Marguerite to the Penwich School for Virtuous Girls.

Her father had never bothered to make her acquaintance in person before. She saw no reason to make his acquaintance now.

He was correct. She had no wish to meet him. But ... *sisters?*

For so long she had counted herself alone. She moistened her lips and bent to collect the message. Could it be true and not some fabrication? A ploy to bring her to her father's door? And why should he want to see her now? He'd had ample opportunity when her mother was alive. The opportunity had even been there when she was at Penwich's. Instead, she suffered there until her eighteenth year. Not even at Christmas had he sent for her. An orphan, for all intents and purposes.

Sisters. Her heart warmed at the possibility. Dropping back on the bed, she rolled to her side and curled her legs to her chest, feeling perhaps a little less alone, a little less chilled knowing that somewhere out there she had a family. Sisters who might wish to know her.

The echo of the diviner's words whispered through her head like a sifting wind. *You shall not live out the year.*

She shivered. Rubbish, of course. Utter rot. Mrs. Danbury's passing was a mere coincidence. She had been ill, after all, clearly not recovered from her initial affliction.

Marguerite was not ill. She was not going to die. At least not at any time soon, and she wouldn't let some scheming swindler wreak havoc with her head. She would put Madame Foster firmly from her mind and get about her life. A life that looked suddenly brighter than it had moments before.

Chapter 3

Marguerite lifted her hand for a second round of knocking, ignoring the sting in her knuckles. *Blast!* She had to be home. Marguerite refused to believe she had made the trip to St. Giles for nothing.

Hawkers called loudly from the street behind her, selling their wares with hard, desperate voices. Carriages rattled past with noisy clatter. Despite the unseasonable cold, the streets were crowded. The only concession to weather appeared to be that passersby moved with haste, no doubt eager to reach the waiting fires and grates of their destinations. She, too, longed to return to Mrs. Dobbs's cozy boardinghouse. It was a familiar enough place. She frequently stayed there between assignments, if she was not visiting either Fallon or Evie.

At last the door swung open. A woman strolled out, nearly knocking Marguerite aside where she stood on the stoop. Tucking her cloak more tightly around herself, the woman called back into the house, "See you next week, Madame."

Madame herself stepped within the threshold. "Aye, and mind what I told you, Francie. Stay away from that Tom fellow."

Francie fluttered her hand in the air as she descended the steps onto the cracked sidewalk.

Marguerite fixed her attention on the woman she had come to confront, despite all her attempts to put her from her head. Firming her lips, she gave a brisk nod. "Madame Foster, I've come to speak with you."

The woman settled a lingering gaze on Marguerite. "You," she said flatly. "I thought you would be here sooner."

Before Marguerite could respond, she shrugged and waved for her to follow. "This way. I expect you'll pay for my time. Just because you got the first reading for free—"

"I didn't solicit your service that day," Marguerite cut in sharply as she stepped into the dim shop that also served as the woman's residence.

"*You touched me,*" she reminded Marguerite as they passed through a set of swinging parlor doors. "Grabbed me most rudely, if I recall." Apparently she judged that tantamount to soliciting a reading.

Marguerite nodded her head doggedly. "Because you just informed my employer she would die—"

"That's correct." Madame Foster spun around with a militant gleam in her eye. "And was I or wasn't I correct on that matter?"

Marguerite pulled back her shoulders, loath to admit that Madame Foster had been correct no matter that she had been. For if she had been correct once, it stood to reason she could be correct a second time.

The woman snorted, doubtlessly taking Marguerite's silence as affirmation. "Precisely what I thought. Well, whatever the case, you're here now. If you want more information, you'll have to pay like everyone else." With a huff, she seated herself behind a small table covered

in a rich green velvet cloth.

Marguerite remained standing. “How did you know Mrs. Danbury would ...” She swallowed, still unable to say *it*. She settled for, “How did you know she would become ... again?”

Eerily green eyes gazed up at her. “How did I know she would die? The same way I know you *will*. I saw it.”

For several moments, Marguerite couldn't respond. She simply gazed at the woman she felt certain to be a fraud. Only why was she here then? Why had she come at all?

“Have a seat.” Madame Foster motioned smoothly to the chair opposite her. “It's why you came. To listen. And I'm getting a pinch in my neck looking up at you.”

Without a word, Marguerite sank down on the chair. Yes. She had come to listen. To find an explanation, something, anything. Perhaps Madame Foster possessed a better understanding of Mrs. Danbury's health condition.

Or perhaps it was merely coincidence. An educated guess. Anything except that this female with her cat eyes actually saw the future.

“What?” Marguerite motioned between them, desperate to ease the tension, to remind the other woman that she knew she was a fraud and would not be so easily duped simply because she sat across from her as a willing party. “No crystal ball?”

Madame Foster smirked. “Your hand should be sufficient to start with.”

With great reluctance, Marguerite offered up her hand.

“Remove your glove, please.”

“Of course.” She slid each finger free, calling herself ten kinds of fool for even sitting in this woman's parlor. She forced herself to not fidget as her hand was held between the old woman's hands. She looked away, unable to watch her. Instead, she studied the contents of the cluttered room, noting that Madame Foster had a fondness for figurines of pug dogs. They covered every available surface.

After some moments, she sighed heavily, drawing Marguerite's attention back to her. “It's as I said. You'll not live out the year. I cannot see the precise time, but before this time next year, you'll be gone. Lost in a tragic accident. Sorry, love. This Christmas shall be your last.”

These words, stated so matter-of-factly, chilled her to the core.

“Why?” she demanded. Only she wasn't sure what she was asking. *Why are you telling me such lies? Why do I almost believe you?*

The worst of it was perhaps that the woman did look sorry, wearied all of a sudden. “I'm sorry. It never gets easier. I can't tell you how many times I've seen tragic fates in my mirror ... but you. You're so young, and you've lived so little yet—”

“Enough,” Marguerite snapped, the words rooting with something raw and deep inside her. She'd heard enough. Rising to her feet, she fished a coin from her reticule. Dropping it to the table, she spun on her heels.

Had she hoped to feel better from this visit? Had she hoped for an apology? A retraction of the ridiculous prediction?

“Wait! If it’s any solace, I saw some happiness in your future.”

She shouldn’t, but she hesitated, looking over her shoulder, hope blossoming in her chest, eager to hear something good, anything to give her hope ...

“You’ll be reunited with your family.”

She jerked, just a small movement, which she quickly masked, stiffening, unwilling to give any sign to Madame Foster that she might have hit upon a possible truth. “I have no family.”

Madame Foster shook her head. “I saw sisters. There were two.” She grazed her temple with her fingers, concentrating. “Perhaps three. No, two.”

No. It couldn’t be. Marguerite felt as if the earth had been pulled out from under her. She grasped the back of a chair to stop from falling. She couldn’t endure it, couldn’t bear to ask for more, to hear another tidbit that would make her suspect the woman was not a fraud, but a genuine seer—one who had seen her death.

With her heart pounding in her ears, she turned to flee the room.

“There’s something more ...”

She stalled, glancing over her shoulder yet again and feeling the eeriest sensation at the quirk to Madame’s lips. “I’ve seen a man. A fine specimen, to be sure. He’ll be mad for you.”

Her foolish heart tripped. Why should she want this to be true? If this was true, then so was all the rest—specifically her death. No, best that it all be inaccurate.

She pressed her fingertips to the center of her forehead and dragged her head side to side.

“Aye, you’ll have a time of it with him.” Madame waggled her brows. “Gor, the two of you! It’s enough to make me blush, and I’ve seen everything. From the moment you bowed, you shall—”

Marguerite’s head snapped up, her hand dropping away. “Wed? I’ll marry him?” Her heart beat like a hammer against the wall of her chest.

“Busy year, eh?” Madame winked. “Yes, you’ll have a grand time. Romance, adventure, and marriage.”

“I cannot marry. It’s impossible. I haven’t any prospects. You’re wrong,” she said flatly, suddenly feeling a bit better, stronger again. As if she could once again breathe.

Madame Foster pulled back her shoulders, thrusting out her chest. “I am never wrong, but ...”

“Yes?” Marguerite prompted. “But what?”

“I don’t want to raise your hopes up, but no one’s fate is etched in stone. A momentary decision can alter the course of fate.”

She stared. “That’s it?” *That would make her feel better?*

The woman shrugged. “It’s something. All I can tell you.”

This time Marguerite didn’t hesitate. She fled the room. She didn’t stop until she left the tiny shop and breathed air that smelled decidedly unclean. She stood there on the stoop, blinking in the feeble afternoon sunlight, grappling with the knowledge that Madame Foster knew about her sisters ... knew even that Marguerite would meet with them, the very thing

she had determined to do.

Feeling like a wounded animal, she felt the need to escape, hasten to her rented room across Town where she could reflect and reduce all that had just transpired into logical facts.

She needed to overcome her fears. Her next post would begin shortly, and she need not be dwelling on the distant and unlikely prospect of her own demise.

For the first time, sitting beside a dying woman and assisting her through *her* departure from this world turned Marguerite's stomach, leaving a foul taste in her mouth. She wanted nothing to do with death. She had no wish to be around it ... she'd had her fill of it.

But what then?

She weighed this question as she worked her gloves back on her hands. What would she do? She'd tucked enough money away to live independently for some time, but that nest egg was intended for the future. So that she could acquire a home of her own some day. Just a small cottage. Perhaps by the sea. If she spent that money now, her distant goal was all the more distant. *You'll not live out the year.*

Madame Foster's unwanted voice rolled across her mind. Would it not be the height of irony to have saved her money so fastidiously only to die at a ripe young age? She felt the absurd urge to laugh, but bit back the impulse.

What would it hurt? Should not everyone live each day as though it was the last? In theory, it seemed a most excellent ambition. *Carpe diem* and all that rot. One could never look back with regret if she lived by that standard.

Indeed, what could it hurt?

A sudden determination swept over her. It was a rash scheme. Mad, but wonderful. The clinging fear she felt evaporated.

She would take a year off. A sabbatical of sorts.

This time next year, she would look back and see that Madame Foster had indeed been the grand swindler she believed, but Marguerite would have lived a splendid year at any rate. No harm.

She would have the year of all years.

As to Madame's absurd prediction that she would take a husband? Not likely. Marguerite knew she was moderately attractive, but she was little more than a servant, lacking all prospects. A husband? Unlikely. A lover ...

Well. Now that was an interesting notion.

Since Fallon and Evie had married, she had begun to wonder, to speculate at the origins of the heated looks that passed between her friends and their husbands. Perhaps it was time to discover passion for herself. That should definitely be something experienced before one died.

Standing on the stoop, she gave a decided nod and earned herself a strange look from a woman pushing a pram.

A lover. Yes. A brilliant notion.

And she already had one candidate in mind.

Chapter 4

Lost in thought, Marguerite lingered on the stoop of Madame Foster's shop and burrowed deeper into her cloak. She told herself it was merely the cold and not Madame Foster's prophetic words that shot ice through her veins ... nor the rash decision she had just reached.

Shivering, she lifted her face to the air, determining that it had dropped several degrees since she first entered the shop. Unusually inclement weather this early in the season. It brought to mind her many cold winters in Yorkshire. The biting cold, the dwindling winter rations ... the meager blankets that never quite warmed her.

A slow, freezing drizzle began to fall. Her hood failed to sufficiently cover her face and ice water dripped off the tip of her nose. She eyed the street, hoping to hail a hack quickly and escape the dismal weather. She longed for the cozy fire in her rooms back at the boardinghouse. Perhaps a decadent novel. She started down the steps.

Loud shouts attracted her notice. A small, harried-looking man raced past the front of the stoop where she stood, darting through bystanders like a scurrying street rat.

A moment later another man followed, his long strides easily overcoming the scrawny man's lead. He caught him by the scruff of the neck. The little man whirled around, swinging his arm wide in an attempt to defend himself, but the blow bounced off the bigger man's shoulder.

She gasped, freezing on her step as the younger, stronger man pulled back his arm and smashed it with brutal force into his victim's face.

A crowd gathered, vultures scenting their prey. Shouts drew more people to the fray, blocking her view several steps above the streets. Afraid the brute was killing the unfortunate man, she lifted her skirts and rushed down into the street.

"Stop! Stop it at once! What are you doing?" She charged through the crowd of gawking onlookers, elbowing past men jeering their support. Even a few ladies milled about. Although she could scarcely call them ladies. They shouted encouragement as crudely as any of the men, watching with glee as the large brute of a man beat the slighter one.

Even as she pushed her way through, she could hear the smack of fists. It was a horrible sound, like cracking wood. Each one jarred her to the core, shuddering along her bones.

Through the press of bodies, she glimpsed flashes of the assailant's white shirt. No vest. No jacket. The man was a primitive. Uncivilized. After several blows, the small man could no longer rise. The scoundrel wasn't done, however. He held him up by his crumpled cravat and delivered blow after blow to his lolling head.

With a grunt, she gave another push and broke through the circle of onlookers with a stumble, earning herself an unfettered view, much better than what she'd witnessed from Madame Foster's stoop. Or *worse*, depending on one's perspective.

She cringed. The beaten man's face was a mangled mess, his nose swollen and misshapen. Dark blood gushed from his nostrils. Her stomach heaved at the dreadful sight.

Reminding herself that she was no squeamish miss—she'd seen worse from her patients—she charged forward and caught the Goliath's arm as he hauled it back for another punch. The moment her fingers locked on the heavily muscled limb, she sensed she might be in trouble.

Through the thin lawn of his shirt, his arm felt hard and tight with raw strength. He was like no man she'd ever encountered ... thankfully.

A warning bell clanged in her head that she duly ignored. It failed to matter anymore. As risky as her behavior was, she wasn't to die here ... at least she didn't think so. According to Madame Foster she must meet her sisters first ... and *marry*. Not that she planned on the latter happening. A simple-enough matter to control.

No. This wouldn't be the hour of her death. The realization emboldened her, made her hang on harder to the arm of rippling muscle.

The man tugged, practically lifting her off her feet. Still, she clung. Using her most ferocious tone, the one she used when dealing with an insensible patient, she barked, "You shall not harm this man, you brute! Do you hear me?"

The crowd guffawed, chortling and whistling.

A female's voice called out, "Looks like she could use the tap of your fist, too, Courtland!"

Courtland. His Christian name or surname, she knew not. She only knew that he was a popular fellow among this riffraff, and that couldn't bode well.

"Aye, maybe a tap of something else," a man crudely suggested.

"Well, Courtland there can certainly deliver 'er that, just ask Sally over there!"

"Aye, and if he won't, maybe I will!"

Marguerite's cheeks burned, perfectly mortified at the rough remarks.

The brute twisted so that she was no longer grasping his arm anymore. Instead *he* was holding onto *her*.

She squeaked. "How did you—"

Her words were lost as he hauled her close, their bodies flush, his face—handsome, in a rough-hewn, carved-from-stone sort of way—only inches from her own.

She swallowed, fighting the sudden thickness in her throat at the abrupt change in position. Shaken to find the tables so easily turned ... shaken that he would press himself so intimately against her.

Everything seemed to slow, the air crackling as the moment stretched out and she found herself in the grip of such a virile, dangerous man. *Courtland*. Ironic, she supposed, as there was nothing *courtly* about him. Certainly not in his chilling black eyes.

She glared down her nose at the hand on her arm, gulping at the sight of his bloody fist—the cut, raw knuckles flexing over her. Her stomach dipped and twisted.

Her gaze flicked back to his face. His eyes flashed dark obsidian down at her, the demonic eyes a startling contrast to his golden hair. The sight undid her, robbed the last of her composure. It was this, everything, those last moments with Madame Foster when Marguerite accepted that the woman might not be a complete fraud after all. All of it sought to unravel her, take her apart bit by bit until she was naught but tiny motes of dust on the

air.

She addressed the scoundrel with a hiss. "Unhand me, you wretch!" She swung her free arm around, her palm cracking solidly with his cheek. The blow carried more force than she suspected herself capable.

Her handprint stood stark white on his swarthy cheek. For a moment, the crowd stilled, a laughter and jeers dying. Then a whispering murmur broke out over the crowd.

She caught a snatch of words, a fractured phrase. *Dead woman.*

Irrational laughter bubbled up from her chest. She swallowed it back lest everyone deem her well and truly mad. She had no wish to be carted off to Bedlam. That's not where she'd imagined spending her final days.

"Wretch," he sneered, a questioning ring to his voice. His lips curled back to display a flash of shockingly white teeth. She blinked. Superb teeth for one of Society's dregs to possess. Even his speech did not mark him an uneducated lout given to thrashing helpless souls in the streets.

His fingers tightened around her wrist until she feared the bones would snap. She winced. From the corner of her eye, she watched as the hapless creature he'd beaten scampered away, disappearing into the crowd. At least there was that.

His gaze flicked to the retreating figure, then back to her. "You let him get away."

"You've already beaten him to an inch of his life ... or was it your goal to kill him?" she blurted out.

His angry gaze slid over her, insolent and furious.

"What concern is it of a fine lady like you? Strayed a bit far from Bond Street, haven't you, sweetheart?"

"I've no wish to see an innocent man murdered before my eyes."

He thrust his face so close she thought their noses would bump. Startled, she pulled back as far as she could, craning her neck at an awkward angle.

"Innocent?" His mouth twisted cruelly and he laughed, the sound rough and deep, raising the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck. Even with that laughter, he looked furious, dangerous. Whipping his head about, he glared at their audience. "What are you all looking at? Show us over!"

Then she was moving, hauled after him by the wrist. A wrist she was certain would be bruised later.

She dug in her heels, but it did no good. She moved, tripping after him. "Where are you taking me?"

He ignored her, his long strides taking them past Madame Foster's shop to the corner of the street. He waved a hand. His whistle pierced the air. Almost immediately, a hack swung to stop beside them.

"Go home," he snapped as he yanked open the door and practically threw her inside. "Where you can delude yourself about the innocence of others."

Delude herself? Sprawled on the floor of the hack, her legs tangled awkwardly in her

twisted skirts and petticoats, she blinked up at the stranger's fierce countenance and even fiercer words ... and had the strangest feeling she was caught in the midst of a dream. Or rather a nightmare.

First Madame Foster, and now this dark angel glowering down at her and speaking to her with such rancor and condemnation. Would this horrid day never end?

"The next time you visit St. Giles, don't interfere in matters in which you know nothing. Not if you hope to return home as lily-white as when you arrived."

She snorted inelegantly. "The scene I just witnessed required little explanation."

Dark heat flashed in his gaze. He leaned inside the hack, angling his imposing body over hers like a finely stretched bow, taut with barely checked energy.

His fingers curled around the modest neckline of her bodice, pulling her up by his grip on the fabric. She gasped, certain he meant to rip her gown from her body and ravish her.

"That *innocent* man," he hissed, "very nearly beat a woman to death. A working woman like the likes you would cross the street to avoid." He scoured her with a contemptuous glare. "A woman with no family to protect her, no husband, and a small child to feed. An *innocent* child."

She absorbed his words, an awful heaviness settling into her chest. Her eyes stung and she blinked them fiercely.

Still, a part of her couldn't back down from him. Perhaps it was his manner, the rough way he handled her and spoke to her—his utter arrogance. "And beating him to death would improve matters? How will that help this woman and her innocent child?"

"Stubborn fool," he ground out, his grip tightening on the front of her dress. "You know nothing of how things work down here."

Heat scored her where the backs of his fingers slid down between the valley of her breasts. *The first time any man had touched her so intimately ...*

Her heart hammered, beating like a drum in her too-tight chest. She didn't resist him, didn't blink, her eyes wide and aching in her face as he pulled her closer and closer ... until no more than an inch separated their faces.

An arrested look came over him then.

She didn't move. Didn't breathe.

He stared at her, truly stared at her for the first time, it seemed. Everything else melted away. It felt like they were alone in the hack, even with half of him still standing in the street.

Street sounds faded, lost to the roaring in her head.

He lifted one hand between them, large and masculine. Not the hand of a gentleman. He brushed her lips with his fingers. "Such a beautiful mouth to spout such drivel," he mused.

She drew a ragged breath, her belly quivering with a twisting heat.

He eased her back down then. She propped her elbows on the carriage floor to stop herself from descending completely onto her back.

The back of his hand delved lower inside her bodice, knuckles grazing the swell of a breast.

She gasped at the foreign sensation, at the sudden tightness of her chest. Her breasts grew heavier, the tips tightening, hardening. Embarrassing heat washed over her face, traveling all the way to the tips of her ears.

He watched her closely, moving his hand again, testing her, it seemed, with each graze of his knuckles against her goose-puckered skin.

“You like that.” It was more a statement of fact than a question, but a denial rose swift and fiery to her lips just the same.

“I do *not*.”

The look in his eyes told her he didn't believe her, which only increased her mortification. Mortification she would perhaps not feel so deeply if she did not suspect it to hold a grain of truth. She did like his touch, reveled in the way her belly twisted and clenched, enjoying the way her heart thundered inside her chest, reminding her that she was alive.

She needed this—had to find this magic with another man. A lover of her own. The idea had burrowed and rooted its way inside her already, but now it intensified its hold.

The notion would not go away, and she didn't want it to. It filled her with purpose. Led her to action she would otherwise have thought brazen and insane under ordinary circumstances. Only her circumstances were no longer ordinary.

“Yes,” he rasped, dipping a single finger deep inside her bodice, beneath her shift, the tip daring to stroke a nipple. Her teeth clenched against the spike of sensation arcing through her. *Magic*.

A strangled sob escaped her.

His eyes flashed, darkly smug.

He continued, his voice a low rumble, physical, as tangible as that finger against her breasts. “You like it,” he declared. “What's your name?”

“Marguerite,” she breathed before she could consider the wisdom of giving him her name.

His lips turned up slowly, flashing teeth too white for belief. That grin was all-knowing. It galled her, pulled her from whatever feelings and sensations had addled her head. She wanted this, true. Only not with him, a voice whispered, small and unconvincingly inside her head.

“Perhaps, Marguerite, you've no wish to return lily-white. Perhaps you came to the room for a taste of what you can't get in your clean little world across the river.” He cocked his head, studying her as if he had never seen anything quite of the like. “Is that it?” He brought a hand back to her face and stroked the soft flesh of her jaw.

Then she smelled it—blood. Coppery rich on his knuckles. An inch from her mouth. Her stomach rolled, heaved.

It was all the reminder she needed. He was a savage. Seductive or not. Dark-angel mischief and all. She was a fool to let such a scoundrel lull her with his mesmerizing gaze.

Without thinking, she turned her face and bit down on his finger.

He hissed and pulled his hand back, shaking it. She held her breath, waiting, certain he would strike her. Certain he would turn the savagery she had witnessed in him on her.

Instead, he merely glared at her, his glittering gaze furious. And something else. Something

that made her belly fill with dancing butterflies.

She thrust out her chin. "Remove yourself from me!"

The driver shouted down. "Eh, we going anywhere or you just going to shag the wench there, gov'nor? Whatever yer business, I need coin for time in my hack!"

"If you know what's good for you, you won't come back to St. Giles. A pretty bit of muscle like you, with that saucy mouth ..." He shook his head, frowning. "You'll only meet with trouble. Run into the sort of man you so gallantly saved from my fists this day."

"How considerate," she sneered, certain she would never come face-to-face with a greater threat to her person than he. "I thank you kindly for the advice."

He rose up, hovering, looming within the narrow carriage door, overflowing it, blocking out all light. His eyes gleamed from within his shadowed features. She loathed that she could not make herself move, that she lay on the floor of the carriage like a quivering mouse.

"Just do as I say. If you know what's good for you, stay out of St. Giles."

All her wrath bubbled to the surface at his terse command. How dare he speak to her like she was his to command? Words she'd never spoken before, dared not think—except perhaps when she was enduring one of Master Brocklehurst's unjustified beatings—rose on her lips. "Go to hell."

For a moment he did not move. Did not speak. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "Perhaps the *lady* isn't such a lady, after all." She felt his gaze then, raking her, traveling over her with familiar insolence. "But then I don't find that such a surprise."

Sputtering, she clambered to the carriage seat.

"You beast!"

His laughter scraped the air, dragged across her stinging nerves. "Never fear. I'm certain I shall find my way to those fiery pits someday. Just do me a favor, sweetheart, and don't wish me there before my time. And in case you didn't notice"—he waved a hand about them and her gaze drifted to an ugly lodging house with broken, gaping windows. Stained rags were stuffed into the cracks in a weak attempt to ward off the cold—"this is fairly close to hell."

He vanished from the hack then, his laughter receding, a drifting curl of sound, strange and provocative, winding itself around her where she shivered on the stiff squabs.

A sound, she would later learn, that would follow her to bed that night and haunt her dreams.

Chapter 5

Ash Courtland strode down the streets that stank of rot and acrid smoke from the nearby factory. The odor was as familiar to him as his own shape and form, and yet he smelled only the chit he left behind. The whiff of honey lingered in his nostrils.

Stepping over a gutter, he cursed low beneath his breath. He shouldn't have let her go, he realized with an uncustomary pang of regret. He shook his head at the irrational thought. She was not a puppy one discovered on the streets, to be kept and coddled.

Still, he could not shake the feeling that he left something behind as he strode along the uneven sidewalk. Rarely had he met a female to stand toe to toe to him. She brought out the primitive in him—perhaps the chief reason he let her go. His primitive, savage nature was a thing of the past. He was a man of property now. Wealth. A respected businessman.

He and his partner owned two of London's most popular gaming hells. Not to mention a mine in Wales and a factory in the north, the latter two only acquired at his insistence. Jack would just as soon have kept their business to gaming. His partner did little these days aside from letting Ash run affairs and increase their wealth, something at which he was proving vastly superior. Jack's lack of involvement didn't trouble him. Without the older man taking him under his wing, Ash would never have gotten off the streets.

After all he had accomplished, Ash didn't need a female hanging about who looked at him as if he were still the lowest of street vermin—who, in fact made him behave that way.

He'd come far from the boy that skulked in the shadows committing all manner of vice and crime in order to survive. He possessed wealth and power that most men never knew. The only thing lacking was gentility, breeding. He vowed to have that, too. With a grimace, he acknowledged that snatching a female off the streets and mauling her in a hack like a caveman of old did not serve to that end. And yet those whiskey-hued eyes burned an impression on his mind.

He sent a lingering glance over his shoulder, as if he would still find the hack sitting there. Feeling a stab of regret yet again, he cursed himself. So she was a pretty piece, with her black hair and flashing eyes. Pretty women were no rarity, he reminded himself. Beautiful women were common enough within the walls of his gaming hells. One interfering, hot-tempered virago didn't bear notice.

Go to hell.

He laughed. Again. Those ugly words had sounded absurd in her soft, cultured voice. He bet that she'd never uttered them before.

But the sound of that voice, whispering a much different variety of words, words that enticed with naughty, wicked suggestions, filled his imagination.

A sound, he would later learn, that would follow him to bed that night and haunt his dreams.

The grand façade of Hellfire appeared ahead, a porticoed palace amid the squalor.

dwelling. A steady stream of people passed through the grand double doors even at this time of day. Vowing to think of her no more and put his mind to more important matters of business, he entered the hall. The whirring of roulette wheels filled his ears as he stepped within the marble-floored interior. This, he mused, was all he needed. All he had left in the world.

“Miss Laurent! What a lovely surprise. Dear me, how long has it been?”

Lord Sommers swept inside the salon with a grace borne from years of aristocratic upbringing. His grandmother—may she rest in peace—had been a dowager marchioness and the most exalted patient Marguerite had ever served.

“Lord Sommers,” she greeted.

He proved every inch of his breeding as he politely bowed before her. Not even in the deep brown of his gaze did he betray the awkwardness of their last meeting, that uncomfortable encounter when he dropped to bended knee and begged her to become his paramour. Indeed not. To stare into his eyes, one would never recognize what must be his undoubted surprise at finding the woman who so coolly rebuffed his advances and declined his proposition calling upon him in his drawing room.

Marguerite assessed him, trying to judge whether he could be the fine specimen Madame Foster described. His jacket required no padding. He was fit and fair of face, but possessed somewhat weak chin and thinning hair.

The seer’s affected accents rolled through her head. *A fine specimen, to be sure, mad over you. Yes, you’ll have a grand time. Romance, adventure, and marriage. You will definitely wed.*

A frisson of alarm coursed through her, which she quickly dismissed. Certainly *that* fellow could not be Lord Roger Sommers. The nobleman would never offer marriage to the likes of her—even if he did once upon a time harbor a *tendre* for her. She was safe on that score. He could not be the one. She drew a deep, relieved breath, filling her lungs. Already she was averting the fate that would lead to her death ... according to Madame Foster, at any rate.

As she surveyed him, an image of the brute from St. Giles rose in her mind. *Now he had been a fine specimen.* She gave herself a swift mental kick. Roger scarcely—thankfully—did not look the sort capable of beating a man senseless in the streets, deservedly or not. No would he manhandle a woman and accuse her of enjoying it, *wanting* it. He wasn’t that coarse, that brutish ... that raw.

She pressed her fingers to her throat, noting the jumpy thread to her pulse there. Her body betrayed her, tightening at the core with the memory of being in the close confines of the hack with that scoundrel.

Shaking all thoughts of the stranger free of her thoughts, she answered Roger’s original question with more bluntness than intended. “We’ve not seen each other since you visited my room in the dead of night a week after your grandmother’s passing and requested that I become your mistress ...” She paused to lick her lips, adding a courtesy: “My lord.”

The young man’s face burned brightly at her candid speech. He tugged at his cravat. “Ah yes. I recall now ...”

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