

*The Case of the Black
Diamond*

A SOHO CLUB MYSTERY

CLYVE ROSE

*Praise for The Case of the Black
Diamond*

An intriguing, sexy mystery. I loved the plot; it was engaging and fun ... This story stood out, being a different, refreshing take on a spy romance.

JENNA

A step back in time, steep with vivid imagery to draw you into the story, giving you a glimpse of the past and a love story with just the right amount of tension and sensuality to have you believing in love again, rooting for its success.

CHARITY RUE

It has been quite a while since I've read a regency historical romance, but I have to say this author writes beautifully.

K.C. FORD

Note to the Reader

This story is written in British English. It is a complete story and does not end on a cliffhanger, but these Regency spies have more work to do. Their next adventure follows on from this one in *Christmas Secrets of The Soho Club*.

Available now at:
Christmas Secrets of the Soho Club

For Beautiful Bella, who belongs to herself.

For @aetherlev, the real Claire Ryan, who developed the plagiarism algorithm that earned her the name 'Shieldmaiden of Romancelandia'. These blades belong to you, my friend.

For Julie, because not all sisters are born by blood.

*Whether we fall by ambition, blood or lust, like diamonds we
are cut with our own dust.*

The Duchess of Malfi

CHAPTER 1

St Germain Parfumerie

1 January, 1820

St Germain Parfumerie, Mayfair

“Happy New Year.” Miss Claire Ryan sighed inwardly as she studied the slight, pretty girl seated opposite her father’s desk.

Miss Sally Kemble turned eighteen years old this Michaelmas past. Her youth and beauty made Claire feel old. They took tea in the rear office of her father’s parfumerie because it was the safest place to meet. Claire’s assignment for Miss Kemble was highly confidential. Not even their respective fathers knew of this young actress’s involvement.

“I must emphasise again how important your discretion is in this matter, Sally dear. The client for whom I engage you cannot be connected with this enterprise in any way.”

Sally nodded, speaking in her genteel, whispery voice. The reason, perhaps, Miss Kemble was less lauded on stage than her understudies. “I understand, Claire. This work is important, and I suppose – erm, the compensation reflects this?”

Claire handed over a little pouch of sovereigns. "Indeed. You're engaged as a lady's maid under the name Alice Croft. The monies you receive from your employer are yours' to keep. You'll receive a stipend from our client as well. There are rumours of intrigue at this residence. You're to keep your eyes and ears open. You are not to undertake unnecessary risk, at all."

Claire hesitated. Her father had not been forthcoming with Her Highness's suspicions. Presumably he'd have mentioned any true danger. She smiled at Sally. "You'll begin tomorrow. Do you understand, dear?"

"Eyes and ears, no risk, immediate start, two sets of wages. I have it, just as you wish." Sally sat up straighter in her seat, taking up the pouch. She seemed to smile at the weight of it. Claire knew of the girl's desire to fund her own education and she approved. She palmed a small vial from her pocket.

"I've this for you as well."

The younger girl gasped, clapping her hands together. "Oh, Claire, you know I cannot afford St Germaine parfum."

"Which is why I make this my gift to you," Claire replied. "If I must toil all day in the service of dukes' mistresses, I can assuredly find time to create gifts for those I truly esteem." She watched with pleasure as Sally unstopped her parfum and took an experimental sniff. "Oh, how divine. Is it jessamine?"

Claire clapped her hands. "Excellently deduced! Heart notes of jessamine indeed, Sally. I had excess from another commission. It suits you as well as the duchess, though I've added other ingredients. The receipt is uniquely your own, as it should be." She beamed at the glow of pleasure on Sally's face. "Do you approve?"

"Approve? Of a St Germaine scent all my own?" Sally stood and held out her arms. "How could I not? Thank you." As Claire rose, Sally raced round the desk to embrace her.

"Urf!" Claire clasped the younger girl a moment, missing

such interactions in her own family. Perhaps spaces between connections grow larger as one grows older. *Stop it.* At twenty-seven, she was hardly a crone. Claire stepped back as though warding off evil spirits.

“I am so glad you like it,” she said, holding out her hand. “I must close up now. It’s Ada’s birthday this week, you know. I’ve much to prepare.”

Sally blushed and took Claire’s hand. “Yes, Ada’s mentioned it at rehearsals every morning for a week.” Sally’s teasing demeanour made Claire laugh. “I shall enter into service as the new maid this evening. Will you look in on my Papa?”

“Both Ada and I will do so, as often as possible.”

“I thank you both. He grows melancholy since Mama’s passing. I do not like to leave him alone.”

Claire knew from Ada of Mr Kemble’s tendency to wander his theatre at night, drunk and weeping. This sad state of affairs had worsened with Mrs Kemble’s death. She walked Sally to the door.

“I’ll ensure Mr Kemble is not neglected. Good evening, Sally.”

Sally Kemble wrapped her cloak tight against the evening chill and left, the jingle of the service bell announcing her departure. Claire flipped the door sign to ‘closed,’ and stepped outside to lock the front entrance. The door required a firm tug and an odd twist of the key. If not performed correctly, the latch did not catch.

A tap on her shoulder sent her a foot in the air. Claire whirled round, palm already curving into a fist.

“Claire! It’s only me.” Her sister’s shocked face gave way to a smoothly familiar smile. “I have news.” Ada squinted into the fading light. “What was Sally Kemble doing here?”

Claire shrugged apologetically. “Nothing I’m able to discuss with you, Ada dear. I must beg your pardon.”

“You, Papa, and your secret work.” Her sister let out a harrumph and pouted.

Even Ada’s pout was beautiful. Her gilded hair, smooth complexion, and large blue eyes met every conventional beauty requirement of London society. No wonder she was such a success at Drury Lane. *That’s not fair*. If Claire Ryan was more than a mere parfumerie proprietress, her sister was more than simply pretty. Ada Ryan was truly talented, ambitious, and dedicated to her craft. Sally’s success in theatrical productions stemmed largely from her family’s reputation as impresarios, but Ada’s rising star was entirely her own doing. The actress’s earnings exceeded Claire’s own, more often than not.

“Your work’s no secret, anyhow,” Claire responded. “Performing in *The Duchess of Malfi* alongside Edward Kean brings your name to the notice of many.”

“True.” Ada brightened. “Though I’m merely Sally’s understudy when I do not play her nurse. I shall only earn really well if I’m afforded my chance to perform in the lead.”

Her pretty pout returned and Claire bit her tongue. “You’re just eighteen, Ada. Patience is a virtue, remember?”

Ada’s laugh trilled in the frosty air. “A virtuous actress never sees an opening night,” she offered sagely, shivering. “Do let’s step inside a moment, Claire. It’s colder than the north pole.”

Claire twisted the key the opposite way and gave it a jiggle. “Do you mean to say you’ve time for supper before you’re due at Drury Lane?”

Her sister smiled winningly. “I’ve time for tea, at least. I’m not needed until the third scene and Mr Davidson’s returned from Cornwall. I’ve asked him to let me in the back way. He’s so besotted, he’ll do anything I say. He’s had a word with Mr Kemble about giving Sally a night off, so I might be seen as the Duchess.” Ada’s eyes gleamed as she imparted this bit of news. “He’s good enough to recommend me to some of the regulars

as well." Ada's voice took on a wariness which saddened Claire. "I've received several propositions."

"What do you say to such arrangements?" Claire found a taper among the coals and led the way to the little office at the back of the darkened shop, lighting several lamps as she went.

"To own the truth, I do not know what to say. Is it so ridiculous to desire love over economy?" Her sister released a sigh, sounding genuinely weary.

"I am glad to hear you speak so, Ada," Claire replied. "I repeat, you *are* just eighteen. Are you certain your share of the parfumerie will not negate such measures?"

"Perhaps when Papa re-establishes St Germaine in Paris. In the meantime, we've not survived so well as this by being impractical," her sister declared. "Patrons like the lonely lord are easily satisfied."

"He still attends every show, then?" Claire carried a lit lamp across to the desk before stirring up the embers in the grate.

"I believe so." Ada appeared faintly puzzled. "He sends flowers to my dressing room every time, though he's only seen me perform as an old hag."

"Perhaps he recognises talent when he sees it." Claire watched her sister's smile light up her lovely face.

A small blaze soon warmed them both and Ada shed her cloak over her armchair. Claire placed the kettle near the flames and lowered herself into the other seat, watching Ada note the changes she'd made to the room in their father's absence.

"You've done away with that heavy armoire, I see. Excellent idea. It took up far too much carpet, and seemed to draw all the light from this room."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Oh, I do," Ada added. "Where is the apparatus Papa used to keep on the shop floor? I feel it likewise took up more floor

space than was useful. Patrons must have room to move about.”

Claire nodded. “Business has been better since I’ve had it moved to The Soho Club. It was not sound to have our receipts distilling under the noses of every competitor who wandered in off the street.”

“Just so,” Ada agreed. “Mrs Skarsgard is most generous with our lease at the club.”

“Very generous indeed, though as she receives an excellent return on the scented wares she sells through her membership, I’m certain sure she makes it up somewhere. Mrs Skarsgard is an excellent manager of her interests.”

“Speaking on which,” Ada murmured, opening her reticule. “I wanted to bring you this.” She laid a mid-sized bundle of sovereigns on the desk before Claire. “It’s what I’ve earned this week. Winter is setting in and the parfumerie needs funds for coal.”

Claire sat back with a sigh of gratitude. “Thank you, Ada dear, but you shouldn’t be giving anything away, today of all days. That’s not how birthdays work.”

“What about the birthdays you didn’t celebrate because I was finessed and refined into a young lady, with funds you scraped together from this place? I’ve not forgotten the tutors you engaged on my behalf, Claire, nor the artist you hired to paint my portraits. The jessamine scents you create for my patronesses are now the fashion.” Ada gazed at her fondly. “It’s expected for an actress to be selfish, dear sister, and I am. At least, I am more selfish than you, or Sally come to that. However, if you believe I’m ungrateful for all you’ve invested in my dream to take the stage by storm, then I am a better actress than any critic has yet made claim.”

“I am speechless,” Claire managed to interrupt, but her sister’s raised hand silenced her again. Ada played ‘imperious’ like no one else.

“With what I earn, and my – my gifts and stipends, I’m in a position to contribute a little more.” Ada paused, gazing thoughtfully at the portrait of their late mama. “I know you, Claire Ryan. I know your pride is as great as my own, so I’m not asking that you allow your younger sister to assist you.” She stood, walked round to Claire’s seat and folded her palm over Claire’s.

“I am telling you this is how it will be.” She squeezed Claire’s fingers. “At least until Papa returns from France.” Staring down with glistening eyes, Ada’s mouth was set and her gaze steady. “I will not be gainsaid, sister.”

“Then I will not refuse.” Claire’s eyes were damp as she patted Ada’s hand. “Use that commanding tone when you play the duchess on stage, and they’ll never want another woman in the role, sister.” She stood to busy herself with the tea.

When Ada was seated again, her palms cupped round her warm drink, Claire reached into a drawer for a deep blue, finely turned flask.

“This is for you.” Stooping, she kissed her sister’s cheek. “Happy birthday, dearest Ada.” She handed her the vial. “My business partner, now you’re of age.”

“Business partner *and* favourite sister.” Ada removed the stopper to inhale the distilled creation.

“You’re my only sister,” Claire replied drily and they both laughed.

Ada turned the delicate bottle over in her hands. “Venetian glass with gold. Why Claire, this flask is divine.”

Claire held her breath. “And the scent?”

“Hmmm...heart notes of roses, wait, no *primroses*, heads of clover and – oh, is it mint?”

“Spearmint.” Claire grinned. “With a hint of spirits of wine as your fixative. You still remember the work?”

Ada shrugged. "I'm not a *nez* like you but you never know when I might play a shopgirl."

Shopgirl? Claire bristled inwardly. *Stop it.* Exhaling slowly through her nose, she let go of her ire. "How do you like your scent, Ada?"

"Very well indeed." Her younger sister sipped her tea before dabbing the fragrance on her wrists. "It seems a part of me."

Ada smiled beneficently and Claire wondered, not for the first time, how any director in London refused her exquisite sister any role at all.

CHAPTER 2

The Lonely Lord

15 January, 1820

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

“I am Duchess of Malfi, still.”

The words hung in the air, prescient and powerful. Lord Xander Lindsey could not recall when he'd been so moved. He leaned forward in the box, determined to catch the expression on the girl's face. A tear shimmered at the corner of her eye, as though she were undecided whether to weep or not. Her bow-lips quivered as they had last night and the night before that, and in the extra matinee on Mondays. Xander shook his head at such a feat replicated so precisely night after night. It was no mean accomplishment to outshine Mr Kean's Ferdinand, yet the divine Miss Ryan managed it.

He applauded as the curtain fell on Act IV, wishing he might stand to whoop and holler with those in the pits. Such behaviour would not do. Lord Lindsey occupied his half-brother's box this night, and he must not forget it. Sighing, he rose to stretch his long legs. A movement by the velvet curtain

startled him. He reached instinctively for the hidden twister pistol in his jacket. The intruder cleared his throat.

“My lord?” Xander’s look-alike valet bowed, holding out a single card.

Xander released his weapon. “Good evening, Felix. He insists we miss the fifth act?”

“Good evening, Lord Lindsey, and yes, I’m afraid so,” his man replied with a sigh. “He awaits you in the alley.”

“My brother, standing about the doorways to actresses’ dressing rooms with the rest of the dandies? Mr Felix, this is a theatre I’ve long wished to witness.” Xander held out his hand for the card, glancing at the embossed print:

*Lord Liverpool,
3 St Margaret Street,
Westminster Palace*

“Hmm, I see he wishes to remind me of his station.”

It was like Robert to do so. One did not become a successful Prime Minister by neglecting to keep all the pieces in their place, and Xander’s half-brother was certainly shrewd. The applause began as the curtain rose. Lord Lindsey sighed regretfully as he left the box. Felix ducked behind the curtain for him, returning with a large bouquet of dyed blue roses.

“Your bouquet, sir.” He followed Xander down the hall.

“Thank you.” Xander tucked the card into his waistcoat before making his way down the stairs. He glanced behind him – an old habit, from spying in the king’s service for many years. Felix stood in place of his master, the resemblance between the two men uncanny. Though Felix was noticeably younger, a double was useful. Xander ignored the affront to his vanity, but the man’s stillness gave him pause.

“Is this not urgent, Felix?”

His man nodded. “Urgent enough. I’ve not seen him like this before, my lord.”

Xander dropped a step behind Felix, as a good valet

should. He nodded towards the flowers. "Then you'd best take those to Miss Ryan. A summons from the Prime Minister is not to be taken lightly."

A young man at the back entrance adjusted his stance at Felix's approach.

"Evenin', Lord Lindsey." The swarthy fellow ducked his head. "Miss Ryan's not left 'er rooms yet," he added.

"Ensure our fair friend arrives safely home," Xander whispered to Felix. "Find out if she knows the whereabouts of her predecessor."

His man nodded, flicking a coin to the doorman. "You've not seen us, Davidson."

"Right you are, sir." The young man caught his blunt with skill that spoke of experience.

The two men walked out into the night, stepping around the rakes and chancers awaiting the newly-feted Miss Ryan by the Theatre Royal's stage door. At the head of the alley stood a hack. While it looked like every other hack on a London street in Winter, Xander knew by the way the driver stood to attention that this one contained Lord Robert Liverpool, the Prime Minister. Given the state of the King's health and the Regent's purse, Robert was currently the most powerful man in England. *Arguably.*

Xander turned to Felix. "Ensure Miss Ryan is not troubled by...this." His gesture encompassed the bucks and bulls gathered about her doorway like dogs before a den. "I'll make my own way home."

"And if Miss Ryan wishes to *be with* his lordship, sir?" His man was loyal to a fault.

Xander shot his double a stern look. Like himself, Felix was broad, blond, and handsome. "If rumour serves, Miss Ryan is a woman of no mean appetites. Should she attempt a demonstration I expect you to do your duty, acquit yourself accordingly, and maintain my reputation at all costs. The

carriage is at your disposal, *Lord Lindsey*.” He winked, offering a cheery wave as he opened the hack door and peered in, his hand automatically creeping towards his gun.

“Good evening, Robert. Is it you alone?”

“Just me, Alexander. I appreciate your promptness.” His brother stared at him over the top of his monocle, watching his hand move away from the revolver.

Lord Robert was one of the few men who knew Xander always went about armed. A moment later the Prime Minister banged upward with his silver-topped cane and the hack lurched to life. A regretful twinge wound through Xander as he thought of the entertaining evening he’d originally planned...ah well. King and country, and all that. *Fortunate Felix*.

“You look particularly dashing this evening, Alexander. I hope I’ve not disturbed your plans.”

Xander sighed. “Must we play this game every time, brother?”

“*Half*!” Lord Robert barked out.

Xander bit back a smile. “There’s no shame in it,” he went on. “Why, the offspring of Hanover are mostly bast—”

Lord Robert raised his hand to forestall Xander’s words, one brow rising comically above the frame of his monocle. “Really, Alexander, must you?”

“Really, brother, you owe me this amusement, at least.”

“If I’m correctly informed, you’ve seen this performance before.” His sibling pointed out. “Every night, since Miss Ryan was promoted from understudy to lead.”

“Kean is the lead,” Xander replied tightly. “Miss Kemble left the company suddenly. No one’s seen her in a fortnight. In any case, she’s not exhibited half the talent of Miss Ryan. Are you having me tailed?”

His brother made a strangled sort of scratched-throat sound. It took Xander a moment to recognise Robert’s laugh.

“You are a spy in the service of the King. Of course I have you followed.” Robert sputtered and sat up. “The last thing the Crown needs is an agent in the power of undesirable acquaintance.”

Xander grit his teeth and glared. “No sane man could accuse Miss Ryan of undesirability. In any case, Westminster has greater concerns than following me – or rather Felix – about. Reformers to oppress, mastheads to decimate, and whatnot.” He let go of his ire, shrugging. “Never mind. To where are we headed?”

“Carlton House.”

Xander leaned forward. “Yes?”

His brother shook his head, placing one finger over his lips like a child with deep secrets.

Xander scowled. “If you do that again, I’ll run you through,” he muttered. “Has the Regent outrun Westminster’s patience at last?”

“It’s treason to speak so,” Lord Robert returned, but he didn’t look as if he disagreed.

“If it’s Carlton House, it’s the Regent. I warn you, Robert, I’ll not stand in for any of Prinny’s nuptial charades. If he’s begat further offspring that’s a matter for Westminster, not me. Neither his pocketbook, nor his politics, compel me.”

Lord Robert made his rusty choking sound again. “You have your mama’s sense of humour, Alexander.”

“And you have our father’s,” he replied, watching Lord Robert’s smirk of satisfaction vanish.

“You are not a true peer, brother.” Lord Robert reminded him. “Merely an operative in the service of His Majesty.”

“The Regent is not the King,” Xander retorted, exhaling as the hack rolled to a stop. “My title is useful enough when it suits the Home Office.” He glanced into the street. “We’re approaching from the mews?”

His brother nodded, passing his palms over his face.

Xander glimpsed the greyish cast to his skin. An absurd twinge of something less bladed hit him. He took the Prime Minister's arm.

"Robert, are you well?"

His brother stared wearily back at him as the cabby jumped down. "I don't have all the details regarding our summons this evening but I believe it bodes ill. Very ill, indeed. I am rather pressed, just now." He glanced down at Xander's hand, his gaze warming a touch. "I thank you."

Xander withdrew his hand and followed his brother's exit. He turned up his coat collar and drew down his top hat, noting that Robert did the same. It was clear they ought not to be seen. Another man awaited them at the tradesman's entrance. On closer inspection Xander recognised him as Lovedale, Robert's long-suffering secretary and the man his brother trusted more than any other, save himself. No outside parties meant secrecy was paramount. His curiosity sharpened along with his interest.

They followed Lovedale through a complex warren of passages and sconce-lit stairs until they arrived at a drawing room. The secretary's knock was greeted with a discreet cough.

"Good evening, Prime Minister. Lord Lindsey," the butler bowed. "I'll leave you now, Mr Lovedale, and await instructions."

"Is the Prince of Wales in his rooms?" The Prime Minister inquired.

"The Regent has indeed retired." The butler coughed again. "It's getting on for a late evening." He bowed himself out, staring meaningfully at Lord Robert. "The Prince is very grateful to you, my lord, and to Lord Lindsey." Nevertheless he barely glanced at Alexander as he shut the door firmly between them.

Xander shook his head. "You'd think no one in Prinny's

household encountered a bastard before,” he said drily, winking at Lovedale. “We all know that’s not true.”

“Alexander!” His brother admonished, but Mr Lovedale grinned.

“This way, Prime Minister, Lord Lindsey.” He led them to the far side of the room, pausing before the fireplace. The hairs on Xander’s neck prickled as he gazed at the empty grate, and the Hanoverian portraits either side of the chimneypiece. The collection of iron pokers seemed a display of deadly weapons, the air of menace intensifying when his gaze fell to the body. *Oh, dear God.*

On the richly patterned rug lay a russet-haired girl in a maid’s gown, right down to her coarse linen cap. A dagger protruded from her abdomen, fastening a thick card to the front of her partially-opened gown.

“She’s dead,” Lovedale intoned, though Xander could see such for himself. He looked at the other two men. His brother paled and shook as though he’d a fever. Alarm stirred again. He dared not ask too much of his sibling who was, after all, some ten years older than himself.

“Here.” Xander assisted Robert to a chair, before pouring out three large brandies and turning to Lovedale. “Have you a paper?”

The secretary produced some foolscap and a nub of a pencil. Xander dashed off a note, scribbling his direction across the top.

“Ask for me at this address,” he ordered the secretary, flicking him a sovereign. “It’s not far, but take a hack. Bring the man they send out to you directly here. He won’t be me, obviously, but you’re to refer to him as Lord Lindsey until your return. Is this understood?”

Lovedale nodded, hurrying out as the Prime Minister’s wheezing laugh came again. “Your discretion is admirable, Alexander.”

Xander smiled faintly. "It is sometimes useful to preserve the appearance of a rakehell, Robert. Sit quietly a moment while I take a look at her."

He walked around the corpse. "She's rather ruddy in the face. I wonder if they summoned any physician," he mused.

"I doubt it," his brother replied darkly. "There is a protocol in these matters."

"Which is to keep the circle of knowledge as tight as possible," Xander finished with a sigh. "I am aware." *Why do you insist on treating me like a cub, brother?* He'd been in the King's service since Eton. *Over a decade, and these games do not change.*

He lifted the girl's auburn curls. "Dyed," he murmured. She was young, and not at all the Regent's type. Her feet were bare. He inhaled a scent, one he thought he knew. White jessamine, and some kind of fruit...*why is this scent so familiar?*

The answer revealed itself a short time later when the secretary returned, Felix by his side. A similar aroma rolled from the valet in waves so powerful, Lovedale pretended to mop his forehead with a kerchief. Felix's flush nearly had Xander grinning. The boy really was young.

"I beg your pardon, Felix. Or rather, the Regent does. It seems we're both needed this evening." Stepping aside, he heard the sharp intake of breath as his valet gazed upon the girl.

"Who is she?"

"Croft," Lovedale spoke up. "Miss Alice Croft, the housekeeper says. A search of her rooms told us nothing more."

Xander stared at the girl. *Alice.*

"I beg your pardon, Miss Croft," he murmured, before realising he addressed a corpse. He glanced at his valet. "I've not ascertained much more than the vellumed card protruding from her bosom. What else do you see?" He issued this as a challenge. Felix wished to learn, after all.

His protégé walked around the maid, retracing the steps Xander had taken earlier. “There’s very little blood, my lord.”

Xander nodded. “That’s because she wasn’t stabbed. Help me with the dagger, will you? Carefully.” Stepping closer, Xander held his breath as he inched the blade from the woman’s chest, handing it to Felix for a moment while he removed the vellum. Xander brought both items close to his face. No doubt about it, their sweet scent was pervasive, and definitely familiar. Jessamine, a fruit – *is it apricots?* – and a hint of something else. He furrowed his brow, the scrap of knowledge irritatingly out of reach. Not a flower...*what, then?*

He looked askance at his valet. “That scent.”

Felix nodded, his eyes round with surprise. “Indeed, sir, but I assure you Miss Ryan did not leave her apartments at all.”

“She was on stage when we were summoned, and Davidson saw her to her dressing room.” Xander agreed.

Lord Robert cleared his throat. “What’s that note? It’s not to be hoped the intruder left his card?” His brother’s attempt at another chuckle became a gasp as Xander brushed the girl’s hair from her face, tilting her head gently on her neck. *No choke marks.*

“She wasn’t strangled.” He saw her face fully then, heard Felix’s shocked exclamation. He reached up, gripping his man’s arm, hard. Taking up the vellum card he stood, turning to the others.

“Her name’s not Croft. This is Miss Kemble. Her father manages the theatre at Drury Lane.” He felt a powerful need for more brandy.

“Miss Ryan was her understudy.” Felix said.

“Until Miss Kemble disappeared.” Lord Robert’s tone firmed. “I’ll dispatch—,”

“Robert, you cannot arrest a prominent public figure for

such a crime,” Xander interjected. “A lady, at that.” He opened his mouth to expound further, but was stopped by Lovedale.

“If I may, Prime Minister? We must not lose sight of the Regent’s concern.” The secretary stared meaningfully at Lord Liverpool.

Hmmm...clearly, Prinny is not interested in our maid.
Alexander waited.

“The *jewel* is still missing, my lord.”

“Jewel?” Xander straightened his stance, shooting a look at Felix before fixing a stony glare on his brother. “What the blazes is going on, Robert?”

“What I’m about to tell you cannot leave this room.” His brother spoke in a hush, as though spies occupied each alcove of the Regent’s residence. “Carlton House suffered a robbery tonight.” Lord Robert passed his hand over his face again. “I was summoned as soon as the burglary was discovered. There was no mention of this.” He waved his hand distractedly in the direction of the deceased.

A muscle jumped in Xander’s jaw. “They left out the girl —,” *Of course they did.*

Beside him, Felix’s fist clenched.

“Go on, Robert.” Xander flattened his tone as best he could.

“Mrs Fitzherbert’s jewel chamber is rifled and the lady’s jewel case destroyed.” His brother paused. “The only item taken was a black diamond, gifted—”

“To Mrs Fitzherbert, on the occasion of her unlawful marriage to the Regent,” Xander finished for him, sinking into a seat and taking another gulp of brandy. He shut his mouth to avoid speaking further treason. *God.*

“How did you hear of the diamond?” Lord Robert demanded.

Xander shot his brother an impatient glance. “Anyone who’s ever placed a wager at White’s knows Prinny pinched

the stone from the Queen's jewel case on a dare. It was years ago, but all wagers are recorded." He rubbed his palms over his face, thinking. "Who knew The Regent's mist—"

"Alexander!"

"Who knows *Mrs Fitzherbert* is resident here?"

"No one," his brother replied.

Xander raised his brows and snorted.

"No one who might seek to humiliate the Prince of Wales in this way." The Prime Minister amended.

Xander stared down at the dagger and the vellum card. It was a well-drawn suite card: the queen of diamonds. He flipped the card to face the other men. The hand-drawn diamond design was common enough, except this drawing had been altered. The diamond motif, coloured black.

"Someone knew." The hairs at the back of Xander's neck prickled upright. "Someone *knows*."

CHAPTER 3

The Black Diamond

“**T**his mess has palace politics written all over it.” Xander studied the card in detail, bringing the mysterious aroma closer to his nose. *That scent... Miss Ryan...* he clenched his jaw, glancing at his brother. “Your instincts are correct, Robert. This bodes rather ill for the Crown.”

“The Regent claims to know nothing about this,” Lord Robert said faintly, turning his back on the unfortunate victim. “I hope to God we can keep it out of the papers.”

“Miss Kemble’s father is thick with half the Whigs in the country,” Xander said tightly, his eyes on the lifeless body of a girl he’d seen more than once at Drury Lane. He cleared his throat. “Someone ought to cover her corpse.”

His brother seemed to shake himself. “Of course.” Lord Robert took up his cane and walked to the door. “See to it, Lovedale. I must meet with the Regent.”

“Lovedale, attend the Prime Minister.” Xander tried not to notice his brother’s slowing steps. “I don’t want you left alone,” he said to Robert’s retreating back. Lord Robert didn’t

argue, which was more alarming than the recently deceased Miss Kemble.

As soon as the two men left Xander turned to Felix. “Quick man, hand me that dagger.”

Sitting at a large desk he held a steel rule along the length of the playing card, slicing at the thick parchment with the honed blade. The valet’s sharp breaths sounded loud in the silence.

“This card is home made, Felix. It’s a message.” Xander separated the thickened stock down one side, shaking the handmade compartment. A small card slipped out:

The Soho Club,
Soho Square,
London

A black diamond was sketched neatly below the printed text. Felix started. Xander turned, studying his man minutely.

“Is there something you wish to say, Felix?”

“Only that The Soho Club is not part of any treason, my lord.”

“You know it?”

The young man flushed more than usual. “I – I do, sir. My membership is useful. There is much spoken of in such places,” he admitted.

Xander wasn’t about to indicate his approbation one way or another. “Is it Whig?”

“No, sir.”

“Tory, then?”

“The Soho Club is neither, my lord.”

“Neither?” Xander’s curiosity was truly piqued. The hall clock chimed twice, reminding him of the hour.

“You’re to take me there. Tomorrow,” he ordered. “We’ll see if they know anything about Miss Kemble or Prinny’s precious black diamond.”

He stepped to the door. “Find a sheet to cover poor Miss

Kemble, then fetch the carriage for home. I'd best have a word with the housekeeper and our butler friend."

After Felix departed, Xander ordered the chamber locked and the room kept closed.

"I'll return tomorrow," he told the senior staffers. "It's as well it's a cold night. No one is to enter or leave that room until you hear from the Prime Minister, or myself," he repeated. "This includes *all* members of the royal household, and your staff. Entrée into that room can only compromise those who attempt it, and those who allow it. Do I make myself clear?"

The housekeeper sobbed her assent, but only when the butler nodded solemnly did Xander finally feel he'd done all he could do this night. He met his carriage at the front door. A known rake leaving Carlton House in the small hours did not excite comment. *Rake?* He nearly grinned at the aches in his muscles as he entered his own abode in Mayfair. There was one more matter to put to bed.

"How did you leave Miss Ryan?" He asked his valet.

Felix's flush could rival the dawn. "Mr Lovedale arrived at a propitious moment, my lord."

"The lady felt slighted?"

"I'm afraid so." The valet appeared shame-faced.

"Well, well, it couldn't be helped." Xander sighed heavily. "Get some rest, Felix. It looks like we'll both need it." He took the stairs two at a time, his mind fretting over Lord Robert, Miss Kemble, and a bloody black diamond. A gem so rare, and so inextricably linked to scandal, the crown summoned their premier spy in London.

As he drifted off to sleep, Xander recalled the scent of jessamine and perhaps fruits? Sweet fruits, tangling images of the delectable Miss Ryan alongside the rotund Mrs Fitzherbert, who was supposed to be in Cornwall but wasn't. She was here, in London, to claim her black diamond, perhaps at this

Soho Club which was neither Tory nor Whig. *How could a club be neither...black diamond, soho club, black diamond, soho club.* The words moved through his mind like tides over sand. The image of poor Sally Kemble came to him in sleep, and this final thought: no jewel is worth killing for.



THE NEXT MORNING, Xander stood beside his valet at a small, unassuming doorway in a mews off Soho Square. For reasons he could not fathom, Felix seemed nervous.

“It’s this way, sir.” His man paused, his hand on the door. “Lord Lindsey,” he said with a heartfelt sigh.

Xander watched the man’s gaze shift from the door, to his boots, until he finally looked his mentor in the eye.

“I do not believe The Soho Club is involved in anything Machiavellian. Or political.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Xander studied him narrowly. “How long have you held your membership?”

“Nearly three years, sir.”

“Anything else before we go in, Felix?”

His valet opened his mouth, licked his lips, then seemed to release a shrug that loosened his whole body. His man shot out his next words as though he was glad to be rid of them. “It’s best if you follow my lead, my lord.”

“All right.” Xander’s curiosity was a honed blade as he followed close behind his protégée.

“Good morning, Fortescue.” Felix nodded to the man behind the desk, who rose to bow.

“Good morning, Lord Lindsey.”

Xander choked, drawing the doorman’s focus.

“Guests are not permitted without the permission of our hostess.” Fortescue remained standing, as if to emphasise his size and strength. The concierge could flatten both of them, if

he'd a mind to do it. He may be senior in years but he possessed the build of a retired prizefighter, despite a heaviness round the middle that comes to all men eventually. Xander pushed this depressing thought aside.

Felix spoke smoothly. "Forgive me, Fortescue. My acquaintance wishes a conference with our hostess before joining the club. He cannot be seen in the grand hall at present."

Fortescue barely raised a brow. "Wait here," he ordered, pressing a small panel behind him. A low doorway opened in the masonry beyond the desk. The doorman winked at them, ducked his head, and disappeared. Xander found Felix staring at him, with obvious trepidation.

"I used your name, sir." He pointed out unnecessarily.

"I noticed." Xander felt a smile coming on. "Is this membership exclusive to bastard sons of the peerage?"

Felix seemed about to relax before he caught himself. "Hardly, sir. The Soho Club is a place where one comes to be oneself."

"Or one's employer," Xander said drily.

A door opened behind them. "We do not use our own names here." The strong, feminine voice was firm without a hint of hostility. "Fortescue tells me you've brought a guest, Lord Lindsey?"

The bronzed woman smiled formally at Felix, before extending her gloved hand to Xander. She did not offer a curtsy. Her gown was exquisitely created of the softest pink shade. It set off her complexion perfectly, as did the black pearls at her neck. Xander stared at her pendant a moment. *Black gems abound today.*

"I am Mrs Skarsgard." His hostess smiled again, her tone becoming richer as her gaze examined him minutely. "You are?"

"Mr Felix," Xander supplied with a bow. He lifted Mrs Skarsgard's fingers to his lips and kissed the air above her

knuckles, glancing up. The lady hardly blushed. "Is there somewhere we may speak privately, Mrs Skarsgard?"

His hostess straightened and her hand fell to her side. "Only members are permitted in our rooms."

Felix stepped forward. "I desire to sponsor my friend's membership." He opened Lindsey's coin purse. "Mr Felix shall join us for one year." So saying, he handed over ten guineas, avoiding Xander's eye entirely.

Mrs Skarsgard stared at the coins, then looked into Xander's face. "What is it you wish to find here, Mr Felix?"

Xander shrugged. "I seek answers, Mrs Skarsgard, and—" he stiffened. Leaning closer to the lovely woman before him, he inhaled. Mrs Skarsgard stood her ground. She did not simper nor was she flattered, if he was any judge of women.

"Mr Felix?"

"Your - er - scent, madam. I should like to know more about it," he stammered, wondering at himself.

Mrs Skarsgard smiled again, her eyes warming. "Why did you not say so at once? Follow me, gentlemen."

She led them up two flights of marble stairs to a chamber filled with natural light from several large windows, opening on to the terrace in a manner reminiscent of Venetian piazzas. The room was fitted up as a botanical laboratory. A variety of chairs and sofas had been pushed against the walls to foreground an apparatus Xander had only read about. The flasks and funnels were mostly glass, with some few taps and variously-tinted liquids he recognised as plant matter in oils. Petals, leaves, grasses, and some tree bark. The room was positively heaving with scent: white jessamine, apricots, and a hint of that unknowable ingredient. *Damn, what is that aroma?*

Xander stood a moment in the doorway, inhaling deeply before turning to Mrs Skarsgard. He ran a hand over his face, his neck hairs prickling. He was close to something here. *So close.*

“Are you the black diamond?” He blurted.

“I beg your pardon, Mr Felix?”

Xander blinked, glancing at the expression on his valet’s face. “It occurs to me the diamond may be a person and not a jewel.” He swallowed, then remembered to add “my lord” into the charged, scented silence.

Mrs Skarsgard’s gaze flickered thoughtfully between the two men. “This is serious.” She addressed them both, but Xander nodded.

“Are you the diamond?” He pressed.

His hostess didn’t blink. “I am not.” She checked a small watch face on a gold chain around her wrist. “There is someone who may assist you. She’ll be finishing her tea.” Mrs Skarsgard smiled at Felix. “I’ll have her sent up to you, my lord.”

Have her sent up?

Xander blinked and once their hostess had made her elegant exit, he rounded on Felix.

“What sort of establishment is this?”

“It’s unique, my lo—”

“Mr Felix,” he reminded the younger man. “We may as well maintain our ruse.” A moment later, the door swung wide to admit a woman who stole Xander’s breath in one glance. Well-shaped, she stood proudly like a dancer. She was petite, but well-busted. A beam of morning light created a glow about her fiery curls, making her face seem peerless and dominated by a pair of the largest, greenest eyes he’d seen...*Miss Ryan*. He shook his head, because she obviously was not Miss Ryan.

He knew he was staring. Her resemblance to the young actress was remarkable, though this woman appeared to be naturally auburn-haired. She was a vision in white muslin, with some sort of dark design marking her spencer. A moment later he realised it was the embroidery over her bodice –

triplets of black diamonds danced irregularly over her décolletage – at which Xander was not staring. Not at all. She wore similarly designed white gloves, though the finger ends appeared soiled.

“Good morning, Lord Lindsey, Mr Felix.” The woman’s soft, contralto voice carried across the chamber. “Mrs Skarsgard suggested I assist you.” Her intelligent gaze flickered over the two men before she curtsied. Rising, she stared Felix in the eye. “I’ve seen you here before, sir.” Her gaze shifted to Xander. “Though it’s you who is Lord Lindsey, are you not?”

Xander bowed. “Indeed, Miss?”

“Ryan, my lord. I believe you know my sister, Ada?”

“Indeed,” murmured both gentlemen.

Xander noted that Claire Ryan did not blush, managing to appear both in control and alluringly attractive at once. *Stop it, man*. Those startling green eyes remained fixed on his face.

“I’m told you seek a certain scent, gentlemen.”

“The request is mine,” Xander said. “I am in quest of a black diamond, and – well, is the white jessamine with apricots your receipt?”

“Why does my lord wish to know?” Their new acquaintance parried.

Silence fell, the air fairly heaving with jasmine, and intrigue.

“Do you know a Miss Croft?”

The lady started, her gaze shifting to the apparatus behind him. She gave a little gasp, hurrying to adjust a metallic beaker and peer into a flask. “I don’t believe so, sir.”

Was that a catch in her voice?

“Perhaps you know her better as Miss Kemble.” He persisted.

“The actress,” Felix added.

Their fair companion did not answer immediately.

Instead, she made further adjustments to her equipment, fingering her dress collar before turning around.

“I am the black diamond,” she announced. “It is my identity here, and – and in the work I do.”

Another spy? Xander’s neck prickled again.

“Miss Kemble works for me,” the woman said.

“You’ll be sorry to learn she is dead, then.” He watched her carefully.

“You’d best explain yourself, sir.” The lady stood, her cheeks in high colour, fingertips clenching and unclenching at her sides. She reminded Xander of an angry cat – and of a certain actress.

“This scent was pervasive at the scene.”

“Take me there,” she demanded. “At once.”

Xander cleared his throat, but Miss Claire Ryan was already directing his staff.

“I require a moment to change my gloves. Mr Felix, have Fortescue fetch my pelisse, and find us a hack. We’d best get this investigation underway.”

Xander glanced at his already-flushing valet and nodded. The Ryan sisters clearly warranted further investigation.

CHAPTER 4

Scent of a Woman

Lord Lindsey's carriage rendered a hack unnecessary, though Claire Ryan was all too aware of the man's chocolate brown gaze trained on her face. He appeared to regard her with calculated curiosity, reminding Claire of a cat. *Does he blink at all?* She forced herself to stare right back, doing her best to appear calm. Sally Kemble, dead – how could this happen?

"You know who I am." Lord Lindsey began without preamble.

She nodded, barely muttering. "The lonely lord."

Chocolate eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?"

"I must beg yours, Lord Lindsey." Claire shivered in momentary horror. "Ada and I have pet names for all her regular admirers." She attempted a reassuring smile. "It's a silly sisters' game, nothing more. Your attachment needn't embarrass anyone, my lord. My sister is beautiful, and talented."

"She is also a suspect," he replied, without smiling.

"A susp—" Claire's brain shocked to stillness. Breathing hard, she recovered, glaring at his lordship. "My sister has nothing to do with this."

“Miss Kemble’s death has availed your sister of an opportunity to advance on the stage.” The man sighed, as though he didn’t believe it either. “Why don’t we start at the beginning? Miss Kemble left her theatre company quite suddenly at the turn of the year. Her father is most distressed on her account, and he is well-connected.”

“I am sorry Mr Kemble’s rehearsals were interrupted.” Claire tried to look contrite, though everything was superseded by Sally’s death. Smoothing the fringes of her pelisse, she took a moment to compose herself. “I engaged his daughter for work at short notice.” Claire explained the rumours necessitating Sally’s assignment. “The theft of the diamond is a grave matter for the Crown,” she said.

“I beg your pardon,” her companion interrupted. “To whom do you report?”

“Some years ago Her Majesty’s recommendation secured my employment with the Princess of Wales, or rather, Mr Brougham. Her Royal Highness takes security far more seriously than the Regent and his – set,” she finished, swallowing further words. She thought his lordship’s eyes warmed.

So, this is Ada’s lover. Her sister had excellent taste. She shot a glance at the other gentleman (valet? footman?), noting his resemblance to Lord Lindsey. Ada was quite capable of charming several gentlemen at once. Claire’s gaze returned to the lonely lord...*hmmm*. Instinct told her this man is not easily used. She wondered which of these two men spent every night watching Ada’s plays.

“Pray, continue your most interesting narrative.” Lord Lindsey prompted, likely unaware of her focus on the firm line of his jaw.

“St Germaine Parfumerie supplies all scented wares for the court at St James’s. My father is considered an intimate friend of the Crown. I assist in perfecting our receipts. My sister, as you know, is on the stage.”

“Mr Felix knows this rather better than I,” Lord Lindsey spoke out more firmly than she’d expected. “I attended your sister at Mr Kemble’s direction.”

Unsure why this pleased her, Claire continued with a little glow. “When word reached Her Royal Highness that some sort of plot centred on Carlton House, she appealed to my father. He in turn, suggested me. I’ve assisted in similar matters in the past, though none quite so alarming.”

“Do you mean to tell me your father is also employed as a covert operative?”

Claire responded to his incredulous tone with a glare. “Do not imagine you’re the only spy in London, my lord. The Ryans may not have attended Eton, but as purveyors of the premiere parfumerie on both sides of the channel, we have the entrée of the French court as well as St James’s. My father’s war service is doubtless as little known as your own.”

Lord Lindsey shrugged without apologising, offering his chagrined smile instead.

“Oh!” She sighed at the appearance of his dimple, immediately wishing she’d kept her mouth shut.

He started, hand to his coat. “What is it?”

A weakness for dimples, my lord. Claire shook her head, smiling in response. “I make it a point to know all the pieces on my board, my lord.”

“Tell me, are you acquainted with Lord Liverpool?”

Now it was Claire’s turn to startle. “I’ve not had the pleasure of meeting your brother,” she replied. “The Prime Minister appears to have little need of scent.”

His laugh surprised her. Warm, rich and genuine, it was enough to send heat to her face, if she were that sort of girl. *I’m not.* Claire shook her head, pretending not to notice the deep timbre of his voice. *I’m not like Ada.* She was grateful Lindsey’s man remained with them. *Silent, handsome, and no*

doubt deeply in love with my sister. This lucky thought kept her focus on the case.

“As I was saying, in my capacity as operative to the Crown Princess, I employed Miss Kemble as Alice Croft.” Claire’s heart hammered a horrified rhythm against her ribs. “It was not my intent to place her in danger.”

“I’m certain it wasn’t.” His tone conveyed such conviction that Claire calmed immediately, barely questioning how he might know this or whether it was simply a kind thing to say. She’d heard of this man’s charm, and it was hardly understated. No doubt it served him well as the rake about town. Remembering he was known for this helped cool her cheeks, although...Claire glanced at the other man and cleared her throat.

“Which one of you is the rakehell?”

Both men coughed.

Claire cocked an auburn brow at Lindsey. “There’s no need to concern yourselves with my sensibilities. I’ve been coming and going from Carlton House and Drury Lane since I was thirteen, not to mention what I’ve learned in French bawdy houses. We’ve a job to do here, gentlemen, so it’s best we all understand one another.”

“I am,” said the man who was not Lord Lindsey.

Claire narrowed her eyes. *Hmmm...* She’d not take this declaration at face value just yet. In any case, she had more pressing questions.

“Tell me about Sally.”

“Sally?” Lord Lindsey leaned back in his seat, studying her as narrowly as she watched him.

“Miss Kemble,” she amended softly, tears prickling her eyes. “Or do you refer to her as ‘the dead maid?’”

“I refer to her as the victim, in all this,” Lord Lindsey responded softly. It was steely, his softness.

Claire blinked at him. “She was employed to gather infor-

mation, not risk herself at all. You do not approve of my engaging her?”

His lordship’s brows drew together and he frowned quite beautifully. “I do not approve of her engagement in this matter, nor yours, Miss Ryan. Miss Kemble is a proficient actress, but she is not experienced in espionage. It clearly *was* a risk to place her at Carlton House.” He replied as the carriage rolled to a stop. “It is also a risk to involve you.”

Claire felt a glare coming on, but she restrained herself. “I am quite capable, I assure you.”

“This remains to be seen.” Lord Lindsey nodded at his man, who exited and awaited them at the trades’ entrance to Carlton House. The spy sat opposite Claire a moment, studying her acutely before he spoke again. “Miss Kemble was found in the front drawing room, lifeless, a dagger pinned to her breast. It tore her maid’s uniform and her flesh, to secure this card to her person.” He drew the vellum card from his waistcoat.

Taking up the card, Claire noticed the black diamond design immediately. “This has been cut.” She fingered the surgically sharp edge.

“I did that. This paper was gummed to another as a backing. The Soho Club’s card was concealed within, which my man recognised.”

“I don’t quite understand, my lord.” Claire stared into his astute brown gaze. “Is this a reference to the missing jewel, or to me?”

“This also remains to be seen, Miss Ryan.”

Claire glared. Lord Lindsey shrugged as he exited the carriage, offering her his hand. Now that he stood closer, Claire took advantage of his assistance to better make out his lines. She’d not served for years as her sister’s seamstress to miss the details of a handsome man, nor did she fail to notice the line of his shoulders or his trim waist. Straightening, she also

observed the outline of a weapon, and wondered whether she ought to mention he was not the only one who went about armed. He'd doubtless disapprove of this too.

A knock at the door granted them admittance. Lord Lindsey barely acknowledged the butler as he swept by. Claire did her best to follow in his wake. There were some advantages to being in the company of a lord. Many, if Ada's giggling anecdotes held true.

"Has the door remained locked?" He seemed to be addressing nobody but a small, portly man attached himself from behind a pillar.

"No one has entered the room all night, my lord," said the older man, nodding to Felix. He bowed to Claire.

"Mr Lovedale, Miss, at your service. Private—"

"Secretary to Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister. I am aware, sir. Good morning, I am Miss Ryan." Claire dropped a short curtsy, admiring the shock of surprise on the fellow's face.

"Miss Ryan likes to know all the pieces on the chess board," Lindsey added, his eyes warming with sudden amusement. "Remind you of anyone, Lovedale?"

Claire bristled inwardly as the secretary turned hurriedly away, presumably to hide a laugh. She stiffened, her finger ends tapping at each other as she turned towards the drawing room door.

"This is no laughing matter, gentlemen." She managed to convey enough dignity to settle Lindsey down. She thought his manservant nodded so she had one ally, at least. Turning away from them all she closed her eyes a moment, inhaled deeply, and released it in the same movement that turned the door handle. Miss Claire Ryan didn't blush and she didn't swoon, but she'd not seen a girl she knew dead on the floor before. She prayed to Heaven there'd not be much blood.

The moment the door swung open, there was a scramble

and a shout. Two masked men with kerchiefs looked up from the body on the floor. Lindsey shoved her hard to one side, and Claire hit the wall behind the door. Regaining her balance, she flicked her wrists. With expert aim, her blades flipped across the room, narrowly missing one intruder, but managing to pin the other by his collar.

“Down!” came Lindsey’s order, as his man ducked.

Claire ducked as well, though she was well out of the line of fire. The shot exploded across the drawing room of Carlton House, but it was too late. The pinned thief pulled his coat free just in time. French doors swung wide over the lawn, and the criminals were gone.

Lord Lindsey appeared to have lost his stoic demeanour, and his charm. A shame, really. Claire rather enjoyed his charm. She mentally shook herself. *No doubt Ada enjoys it too.*

“What the devil was that?” His lordship panted.

“That was a robbery,” Claire responded irritably. “Or an attempt, at least. Those men were looking for something. Are we certain the jewel is missing?” She inhaled deeply. “I see what you mean about the scent.” Glancing at Mr Felix, she jerked her head toward the French doors. “Close those, please, or we’ll lose it.”

The man hesitated, eyeing Lord Lindsey.

“Better do as she says, Felix. Then have Lovedale locate my brother. And find that butler. He has some explaining to do.” Lindsey spoke stiffly and was clearly angry. Turning to her at last, he took her hand.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Ryan. I’ve not asked if you’re all right.” He bowed, his manner distracted.

Claire straightened, forcing herself to focus on unbuttoning her right glove in order to replace her knives in their seamed holders. She’d created the cloth scabbards specifically for her assignments with the Crown and they worked, but they were darned difficult to reposition. The silence in the

room seemed suddenly close. Glancing up, she saw Lindsey gazing at her bare arm as she struggled with her cuffs.

“Allow me?” He offered softly.

“I thank you, my lord.” Claire held out her arm. He took up one blade, staring at it.

“It’s a letter opener,” he commented.

“Yes,” she replied. “Honed to a finer point, and with the ivory hilt removed.”

“Interesting choice of weapon.” He kept his tone light as he fitted the blade through the loops on the glove, assisting her in wiggling first her fingers, then her palm and forearm, into her right glove. The finger ends were cut open on the underside, allowing her to grip the blades enough to aim and flip them. The open finger ends were barely noticeable, unless one held her hand in their larger, more manicured palm – as Lord Lindsey was doing.

“Your own work, Miss Ryan?” Lord Lindsey had not released her hand yet.

Claire stifled a nervous giggle. Since when did she giggle? *I’m becoming more like Ada every day.*

“It’s no pistol, I grant you.” She studied Lindsey from beneath her lashes. His proximity was unsettling. His fingers on her arm...surely he didn’t need to touch her like this? Ada once told her that conversation diffuses tension.

“It is not easy for a lady to keep arms about her person. Letter openers, however, may be flat-stitched to the outside of my gloves easily enough. Besides, I have no intention of killing anyone. These are simply a defense against surprise,” she stammered, her cheeks warming despite the empty grate. Her skin heating, despite the seriousness of this case. Her defences active, despite Lord Lindsey’s dimples. *Stop it.* Apparently defences are useless against surprise dimples. Ada must have left that part out.

“Your aim is admirable,” her companion replied, finishing

her gloves. "If I'd held my fire, we may have nabbed at least one of them to shed light on this intrigue." He stared down at her, his chocolate gaze warmly appreciative. "I stand corrected, Miss Ryan. You are more than capable in this business." Slowly, he lifted her gloved hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles, his face creasing into a smile.

"Thank you, my lord."

Claire waited until he released her hand. When this didn't happen she withdrew it, taking up the scrap of fabric secured from one of the intruders. She handed it to Lindsey.

"Velvet, richly worked, and expensive unless I miss my guess." She said, approaching the sheet on the rug with a heaviness weighing in every part of her. Lifting her skirts slightly, she knelt over Sally's body and gently turned back the sheet, exposing the girl's face. Claire bit her lip, struggling to remain professional. All she wanted to do was cry. *No, all I want to do is hurt whomever did this.* Sally was the same age as Ada. She was – *had been* – quiet, clever, and discreet. Claire swallowed a sob.

"Oh Sally," she murmured. "I'll find who did this to you." Pulling the sheet lower, Claire ran her hands over the girl's stiff limbs. Then she leaned in, inhaling deeply. The scent was fading, but she recognised it. "The scent is jessamine, with apricots and almonds, distilled with spirits of rum. It's one of mine, created for a particular order. Proprietary, and not easily replicated." She studied Sally again, before looking up at Lindsey. "She wasn't stabbed."

"No," he agreed.

"Poisoned," Claire continued. "I smell bitter almonds on her lips."

"You're able to detect the scent?"

"I am a trained *nez*, my lord. I assure you—"

"Oh, I believe you," he replied, with enough vehemence to put Claire in a glow again, but he was still speaking.

“Almonds. I did not think of that, though it makes sense with the apricots. Miss Kemble would not likely notice the strangeness of bitter kernels among the sweet. Such treats are dear enough.” He rubbed one long finger over the scrap of velvet in his hand.

“Everything comes dear to those without means,” Claire muttered, half-hoping his lordship heard her.

“This case has a distinct appearance, Miss Ryan. Do you not agree?”

Claire stood, facing the peer’s son. “If you’re implying my family are responsible—”

“I am implying nothing of the kind.” Lord Lindsey’s chocolate eyes stared earnestly into her own. “This case is not about the Kembles of Drury Lane, or the Ryans of St Germaine. It is not about the people seated in the pits at all.”

“It is about the people in the boxes above,” Claire finished his thought, nodding. “I see what you mean.” She glanced around the room. “Would it offend the Crown if I partook of their brandy?”

Lindsey snorted. “It’s barely breakfast time, Miss Ryan.”

Claire shrugged. “Indeed, my lord, and already I’ve met an attack, snagged a thief, and examined my friend’s remains at Carlton House.” *Not to mention meeting your dimple.* Best left unmentioned, really. Now if only she were able to un-feel this attraction. *Not likely.*

Lindsey stepped to the bell and pulled it. “Tea, then, Miss Ryan, and if you add something to your cup I promise not to reveal it to a soul.”

“You’ll tell no one?”

“I am a gentleman.”

“And here I thought you were a bastard,” she shot back, grinning as he threw his head back and laughed. His laugh was the only bright thing in her day so far. Apart from his dimple,

his eyes, the line of his shoulders...*stop it*. Claire could hear Ada's teasing giggle in the back of her mind.

When the door opened and the butler entered, his lordship's demeanour altered entirely. "I told you to bar access to this room," he said flatly, before the man had taken three steps over the threshold.

"No one has entered this room, sir." The butler was clearly mystified.

Lord Lindsey appeared to swell visibly.

Claire lifted her hand. "If I may, my lord?" She turned to the frightened servant. "Andrews, did anyone request that you lock the French doors to the grounds?"

The butler gazed at her with the sort of adoration she'd seen on the faces of Ada's many admirers. "No indeed, Miss Ryan." He glanced at his lordship. "That would necessitate re-entering the room," he added. "However, I do beg your pardon, Lord Lindsey." He stared at his boots.

Claire faced her companion with raised brows.

Lindsey subsided with a sigh. "All right, Andrews. My instructions were unclear. I see that now. Send in tea for Miss Ryan. Afterwards you will please have the chief coroner fetched here, and if my brother arrives before I return, request he meet me at my rooms."

"Very good, sir." Andrews left at speed.

Lindsey turned to Claire. "That was unnecessary, Miss Ryan."

"Not to me, my lord. Andrews's work here is neither easy, nor pleasant. There's no need to make it insufferable." Handsome he might be, but he was as arrogant as any other aristocrat. "I shall call on Mr Kemble after tea."

"We both ought to see him." Lindsey paced the room like a palace guard. "I have questions I need to put."

"I sincerely hope you will remember your—"

“Place?” He appeared to be glaring. His dimple was so distracting it was hard to tell.

“Manner, my lord.” Claire met his glare with her own. “Mr Kemble is an elderly man and his only daughter has just passed.”

Lindsey dropped his gaze, nodded, shrugged, and resumed his pacing, allowing her to return to the matter at hand.

“What is your thinking, Lord Lindsey?”

His lordship paced a few more moments, giving Claire a lovely view of his chiselled profile. “These are deep waters, Miss Ryan. I wish to ensure neither the Ryans, nor the Kembles, are hurt by their connection to this case. There is danger here, especially while the thief’s motives remain obscure.”

CHAPTER 5

In Their Cups

“O bscurer? Do you truly believe so?” Claire fell silent as tea was brought in by the housekeeper. Darting a red-rimmed glance towards the shrouded shape on the floor, the older woman sniffed in evident distress. After setting the tray on an end table, she addressed Lindsey in a shaking voice.

“Shall I pour, my lord?”

Claire reached out and took the woman’s hand. “I’ll take care of it, Mrs Campbell. The coroner’s on his way. It’s all right. I knew Miss Croft a little. I shall meet with her family shortly.”

The housekeeper’s stance drew taller. “Thank you, Miss Ryan. I’m aware of your acquaintance. Do let me know of her arrangements. This household will pay their respects.” She glanced up, a determined line to her lips. Claire guessed she’d been told to avoid the maid’s family. The Crown had their priorities, and Mrs Campbell clearly had hers. Claire felt a rush of gratitude as she released the older woman’s hand. She poured out two steaming cups of tea, wondering if his lord-

ship found the Carlton House housekeeper as impressive as she did.

“I shall ensure you’re kept informed, Mrs Campbell.”

“Did Miss Croft work here long?” Lord Lindsey’s query came from across the room, gently pressing.

“We took her on to fill the place of a girl who took ill in Cornwall,” Mrs Campbell replied. “It’s not easy to engage a lady’s maid at short notice. I didn’t know her well but she was a good girl. Read overly much for my tastes. Not novels. *Plays*.” Her tone hinted at her disapproval but she commanded herself. “I’ve no complaints about her work however. She don’t deserve to go like this. No one does.” The woman shuddered. “I’ve served here since His Highness was in britches, my lord. I’ve seen all sorts, and no girl ever died in my service before.” She stared at Lord Lindsey as though daring him to contradict her.

“Noted, Mrs Campbell. You may go.” Lord Lindsey seemed to eye the woman’s retreat with suspicion.

Claire refrained from rolling her eyes, carrying the tea to the drinks table. She added a dash of brandy to one cup, hovering the decanter over the other.

“Lord Lindsey, can I tempt you?”

“Yes.”

The look he shot across the room was a heated blade to her skin. An inexplicable thrill shot through Claire. She held herself stock-still a moment, before doctoring the tea. If she were another kind of woman, his manner may seem suggestive. *Or if I were Ada.*

“I take it black,” he added as he sat.

Claire nibbled a scone and dashed milk into one cup. *Perhaps brandy on an empty stomach is unwise.*

“You were speaking of motives, Miss Ryan.” His lordship moved closer, took up his tea and sipped with a sigh, clearly revelling in its potency.

Claire's confidence rose a notch. "No thief could hope to fence such a well-known stone. The jewel has been taken to embarrass the Regent and by extension, the Crown. There can be no other motive."

"Perhaps." Lindsey's tone spoke caution. "Anything else?"

"You speak of 'the thief' in the singular. Is it not clear by now that this is not the business of a single individual? We surprised two men less than an hour ago, in this room." She waved a hand at the now-sealed French doors. "Have you any idea how difficult it is to access these grounds? Not to mention yet another person who's clearly harmed poor Sally. That's three, perhaps four conspirators at least."

He straightened in his seat. "What are you saying?"

"That this robbery – and the murder of Miss Kemble – can not be the singular acts of a singular person. Are they not, rather, indicative of an organisation? A – a society?"

"Like the Soho Club?" Lindsey said, very quietly.

Claire finished her tea, reminding herself not to plunk such delicate china down too firmly. "No, *not* like the Soho Club." She paused, thinking. "In a way, I suppose you're right. This does feel like a group of some kind is behind it all, including at least one member of this establishment."

"Or those paid to act," Lindsey pointed out. "The peerage rarely sully their own nests."

"Perhaps." Claire wasn't willing to let the Regent's household off so lightly. Not with Sally lying under a sheet four feet away. "We cannot rule out the Regent's family, my lord."

"Nor the staff," he responded wearily.

"Agreed," Claire replied as she stood. "Ought we to await the coroner?"

Lindsey placed his half-empty cup on the table beside hers. "Lovedale will see to it. Is there a matinee today?"

Claire gazed absently at the paired tea cups. White china painted with jasmine and fruit vines. They sat artistically side-

by-side. Some pairings are meant to be...*stop it*. She shook her head, walking rapidly to the door. "No matinee, but Mr Kemble will be at his theatre, regardless. Ada says he spends more time there than anywhere else."

"Has he no wife?"

"I suppose such news rarely crosses social strata," Claire replied, drawing on her pelisse. "Mrs Kemble died last Christmas after a long illness. Sally's death will go hard with him."

"How very sad," her companion spoke with such sincerity that Claire paused to look back at him. For a moment he appeared utterly downcast, the title 'lonely lord' fitting him exactly. She followed the line of his shoulders with her eyes as they moved into the hall. A man this handsome, clever, and charming ought not to be lonely.

Lindsey stood by the stairs to the mews, his brows raised. "Miss Ryan? It's this way, isn't it?"

"This is the exit I always use," she reminded his lordship, and herself.

"Of course." He motioned for Claire to precede him, his palm guiding her lower back without touching her.

Claire decided it was rather nice having someone backing her up. His skin gave off a decided heat. She nearly sighed before remembering that his brother was a peer, his father an earl, and his mother... Claire wondered about his mother. Breathing in his proximity, she described aromas in her head. Liquor, of course, one or two herbs, and a citrus. *With grapey overtones*. She laughed inwardly.

"Is something amusing?" He helped her into the carriage.

"I am mentally composing a scent for you," Claire blurted, her eyes widening.

Lord Lindsey laughed his baritone rumble again. "Do tell." He smiled winningly and Claire shrugged.

"Very well, but it is difficult to describe a scent for an

acquaintance I do not know well. One's scent is an intimate thing." She wondered at the wisdom of uttering the word 'intimate' in a closed carriage, with a charming lord who smiled like the devil himself. *If the devil sported a dimple.*

"From the little time we've spent, I have an idea of strong tea, brandy, amber, and oranges. I cannot be more specific at this time," she concluded primly, because he was gazing at her as though she'd just uttered a formula for alchemical alteration.

"I had no idea perfumery was so complex," he replied. "Nor so individual."

"It is," she went on. "It must be so. Every scent alters with the natural bodily aromas of the wearer. Then there are the concentrations."

"Concentrations?"

"For the various applications. I have a client, for example, who suits a primrose scent, but the scent contains more than just the petals from the primrose. There are herbs, and oils, and the alcohol fixers. Then the various strengths for the fabric perfume, the powder for her hair and face, and some ladies like to add scent bags to their corsetry. Each preparation must be done precisely, or the aroma will be either too strong or too weak. That will never do."

"Never," he echoed, staring at her with an expression she did not understand. "I'm impressed, Miss Ryan," he said after a moment. "You have so many skills."

This time it was Claire's turn to release a laugh that relaxed her whole body. "I am hardly versed in the feminine accomplishments of your world," she replied. "While I can sew as well as anyone, I do not paint or draw. My singing is, well, I am not my sister."

"Indeed, you are not." Her companion responded with a note of appreciation that made Claire want to hear him say it again – foolishly, for it was foolish to be lauded simply for

being herself. Wasn't it? Her charming lord was still speaking. Her? *Stop it.*

"You embroider weaponry, manage a range of disguises, organise and run secret operations, identify dozens of scents with a quick inhalation, not to mention your handy knowledge of poisons, and I'd wager you could pin an attacker to any suitable surface by tossing a blade at his lapel." He smiled at her. "False modesty is the most boring characteristic on earth. I refuse to indulge you."

"Or yourself, it seems." Her words slipped out before she could forestall them. Claire was rewarded with more robust laughter and the dimple in his cheek when her lord smiled. She turned away from that dimple. She had to.

"We've arrived," her companion said, restoring her focus.

Claire sobered immediately. This wasn't going to be easy. As they descended to the street a woman rushed headlong out of the mews, cannoning straight into Claire and knocking her flat.

"Oh, I beg your pardon." The woman's breathless brogue matched Claire's precisely, because of course it did.

"Ada," she managed, as Lord Lindsey knelt to help her up.

"Thank you, my lord."

"Why Claire, what do you do here?"

Her sister's startled manner had Claire's instincts on point. Ada bore a package in both hands, clutched protectively to her breast.

"You're in a hurry," Claire observed.

"I was coming to see you." Ada spoke breathlessly. "I *must* see you. It's *vital*."

"We're here to speak with Mr Kemble," Claire explained. "Ada, this is Lord Lindsey."

Ada looked up at him finally, squinting a moment with the barest glimmer of recognition. "Oh yes, the lonely lord."

Lindsey grimaced, sketching a bow. “Hardly my favourite title. Your duchess is superb, Miss Ryan.”

Claire congratulated herself on not rolling her eyes as her sister giggled then curtsied, before turning to face her. “Sally isn’t in, Claire. Her father grows more anxious by the day.” Ada swallowed, staring up at Claire with fear in her eyes. “Then *this* arrived.” She proffered her package. Claire studied the direction.

“It’s addressed to Sally,” she commented.

“Yes, but Claire the direction *is* Sally’s.” Ada’s gaze held hers. “I’d know her hand anywhere. I’ve been reading her understudy notes for weeks.” Her sister’s lower lip trembled.

Claire took Ada’s hand in hers. “I’m afraid Sally’s dead, sister.” She pulled the younger girl to her breasts and held her tight. “I am sorry, Ada.” Her voice wavered and she drew back. Instinct told her not to let go of her younger sibling, to keep her close. At least until they gleaned more information about this dangerous conspiracy.

“You’d best come with us.” She glanced at Lindsey, who nodded.

Slipping her arm firmly round Ada’s narrow shoulders, Claire led them all inside. They met no one in the hall behind the stage until Claire raised her hand to knock once, softly, on the door to a ramshackle office.

“Allow me,” murmured Lord Lindsey as he opened the door, guiding both ladies before him with his palm again, like a maestro. *Or a gentleman*. Claire resisted the urge to lean back against his broad chest. Lean away from the heaviness of the moment in front of her. She took a breath, raised her head, and met the worried eyes of Sally’s Papa.

“Mr Kemble, good afternoon.” She curtsied.

Beside her, Ada did the same but the theatre manager’s gaze found Lindsey’s. The elderly man rose to his feet, palms clasped together as if in prayer.

“Have you found her, my lord?”

Lindsey stepped forward. “Perhaps you’d best sit down, Mr Kemble.”

Something in the heaviness of his tone must have registered because Mr Kemble fell back into an armchair, his hand to his chest. “She’s – she’s gone, isn’t she?”

Ada moved swiftly to the desk, extracting a bottle and a sticky glass from a drawer. Pouring out a generous measure of liquor, she handed it to her manager. “Mr Kemble, I am so very sorry,” she whispered, her gay, blithe manner replaced with sombre gravitas. She sank into the opposite seat, buried her face in her palms and sobbed heartily.

Claire leaned down beside Sally’s father, taking his free hand between both of hers.

“H-how?” He stammered, staring up at her with brimming eyes.

“An accident,” Lord Lindsey spoke quickly. “She appears to have fallen ill at a friend’s home, sickening too rapidly to send for any one. She was gone before she ever came round.” Moisture glistened in his eyes and the firm voice shook. “I regret I cannot bear you better tidings, sir. I shall ensure your daughter is farewelled with dignity. You’re not to concern yourself over any arrangements.”

“Th-thank you, my lord,” stammered the stunned father. “You are very kind.”

Claire stared at Lord Lindsey. Never had she heard a man lie with such ease – or such obvious compassion. Lindsey’s generosity seemed to encourage Ada’s vehement sobbing. Mr Kemble mopped at his eyes with a soiled kerchief.

“May we call anyone for you, sir?” Claire asked.

Mr Kemble shook his head, gulping his drink. “Sally was my family, Miss Ryan. We only had each other, and now—” He stifled a sob. Leaning forward, he tugged at Ada’s hand.

“We must have a memorial,” he said thickly. “Will you perform in her memory, Miss Ryan? Please, you must.”

“O-of course,” Ada sputtered. “Anything for dear Sally.”

“Dear S-sally,” Mr Kemble moaned, his face crumpling as he wept before them all.

Claire’s tears brinked the backs of her eyes. She desperately wished to depart, but could not think of leaving this man to bear his daughter’s death alone. How awful to end up so utterly, completely alone. Where was Davidson? She looked wildly around, as though the doorman might be lurking behind a cupboard or sprawled over the stained sofa, but no one was expected for hours. She glanced around again, her gaze finding Lindsey’s. He seemed to read her thoughts.

“Wait here a moment,” he said in a low voice, as he slipped out. He returned a few moments later.

“I’ve sent a boy for Felix,” he told her. “I don’t like to leave them, but we’ve much to do.”

Claire nodded, glancing at Ada. “My sister ought not to be here,” she said in an undertone.

“Agreed. Is there somewhere she may stay in safety? A relative?”

Claire shook her head. Ordinary people did not have ‘places to go’. Such incredible ideas may occur to his lordship in time. A tap at the door was followed by Felix. Claire saw her sister’s posture alter dramatically, and the best attempt she’d yet seen in a woman passing off the puffy flush of sobbing as rouge. Ada truly was a wonderful actress.

Lindsey explained their requirements. “It’s a rotten time of year to journey so far, but Miss Ada cannot stay safely in town.”

Ada appeared to tune in of a sudden. “I have shows to do,” she objected.

“No, no shows,” Mr Kemble declared. “We must close for several days at least. Until the revue is written, a revue of dear

Sally's favourite roles. I'll write it." He seemed to speak to himself, staring round at them every now and then. "We shall close the theatre until Sally's revue."

Claire exhaled, feeling suddenly dizzy. She may have staggered against a bureau, because the next thing she knew she was out on the landing, sandwiched between Lord Lindsey and Mr Felix.

"Miss Ryan?" Lindsey stared at her with concern, the dimple in his cheek entirely absent.

"That's a shame," Claire stared up at her lord, or was it Felix? Could there be two Lindseys? *Why not? All actors have understudies.*

"Whosh my unnershtudy?" She found herself saying inanely, the steps blurring before her eyes. She fought to remain on her feet, but it was no use. For all she knew, she might have pitched headfirst down the marble staircase. The last thing she heard was Lindsey's voice.

"Get that girl out of here."

CHAPTER 6

Pariahs & Poisons

Xander and Felix half-walked, half-carried the unconscious Miss Ryan down the main stairs. Felix fetched the carriage while Xander supported the lady. He waited, the woman's heavily slumping form as nothing against the weight of his fear. Glancing up at the new portico he had the strangest feeling it may collapse inward, and was grateful enough at the appearance of his carriage to shake the coachman's hand.

"Right you are, my lord." His coachman bowed, his face full of questions.

"Not now, Dawkins," Felix answered for them both as he passed Miss Ryan in to Lindsey. Xander laid her as gently as possible in the corner of his carriage, fetching a blanket from the floor box. The carriage wasn't cold but he had to do something, go somewhere. Seeing her in this state was like needles beneath his skin. He slipped his hands around one of hers, gripping her clever fingers tight, his gaze fixed on the lady's chest. *She breathes, she is alive, and she will remain so.*

Dawkins stuck his head in after Felix returned to the sister. "Are we for Mayfair?"

Xander nodded absently, his attention on the shallow shifting of the woman's breaths. "No," he called out. "Soho Square mews. Quick, man!"

A moment later his vehicle lurched forward. Xander slid both arms round his passenger, pulling her closer, blankets and all. He watched her face, heart racing in his breast. The image of Sally Kemble crossed his mind. He shook it away, leaning back to feel Claire's breath against his cheek. *She breathes...* but was she redder in the face now? He touched his knuckles to her smooth cheek, noting the warmth.

Leaning in, he whispered. "We've a case to solve, Miss Ryan, and you'll not leave me alone in it."

A short time later he banged on the unassuming door, shouting with relief when Fortescue answered. The porter's unhurried manner disappeared at the sight of the unconscious 'Black Diamond'.

"Mr Felix?"

"No time," Xander said tightly. "Can you help us? I think it's poison."

Fortescue stepped back inside, presumably to summon his mistress, before returning to assist the lady. Xander knew a moment's chagrin when the prize fighter lifted Miss Ryan without assistance, and bore her inside.

"Return to Drury Lane, Dawkins. You're to await Felix and the younger Miss Ryan," Xander ordered his coachman, aware he spoke too quickly and felt too ill. Was it the sight of that vital woman, so shockingly still and silent? He met the impenetrable gaze of Mrs Skarsgard a moment later and bowed, feeling he'd somehow miscalculated. He did not recall the marble floor raised this high. That's when he realised he'd fallen over, like a swooning miss.

Scowling up at Mrs Skarsgard, he tried to speak. 'I beg your pardon', he thought he said but her expression indicated his words were unintelligible.

“Upstairs with both of them, Fortescue. Immediately.”

Xander felt himself bumped none-too-gently for several moments, and caught a glimpse of the glass apparatus he’d encountered previously. A connecting door was opened by his hostess and his prone form deposited on a richly brocaded chaise. Miss Ryan was laid far more elegantly on the large four poster occupying the chief of the space in the bed chamber.

He blinked as someone thrust a metal spoon against his teeth. Xander unclenched his jaw, opened his lips, and gulped the horrid stuff down. A moment later, his guts heaved and he rolled to one side, vomiting up his stomach contents.

“Into the basin, Mr Felix, if you please,” came the soft, controlled voice.

He wiped his mouth on his shirt cuff and sat up. “What-what was that?” He croaked.

“Salted mustard water,” his hostess replied, handing the basin to a maid.

Blinking the room into focus he saw Mrs Skarsgard bending over Miss Ryan, one sure hand on her wrist. “It appears she’s ingested more poison than you, sir.” The hostess glanced at him. “You did right to come here, Mr Felix. We’re able to counter this.”

“Poison?” His voice sounded strange, as though his words originated deep within his throat. He couldn’t speak above a fractured whisper. Xander stared at the too-still form of Miss Ryan. A strangled sound escaped him. *Not her.*

Mrs Skarsgard eyed him with a raised brow, indicating to a maid with a jerk of her head. Xander nodded his thanks as a glass of warm water appeared at his elbow. He took it up, sipping slowly, watching his hostess support Miss Ryan as the maid attempted to administer a spoonful of emetic.

“What kind of poison?” He asked after a moment.

Mrs Skarsgard kept her focus on Miss Ryan, one palm held protectively over the girl’s forehead. “The person most

qualified to answer this, is the Black Diamond herself,” she responded. “I am no expert.”

“You have my thanks,” Xander muttered, watching Miss Ryan for any flicker of movement. He glanced at Mrs Skarsgard. “She must not die, Madam.” He intended to sound commanding, but his words fell out as a plea.

“No one dies under my care, sir.” Mrs Skarsgard clenched her fist, glaring steadily at Xander until the roiling sensation in his gut eased and his glass was empty. “You will both remain here this morning.”

Xander cleared his throat a few times, twisting his head from side to side. His neck muscles ached and he felt about as old as Robert.

“Where is ‘here?’” He looked around properly for the first time, gratified to hear himself sound closer to normal. The canopied bed demonstrated several shades of lavender lace. The chaise on which he sat complemented the bed with a lilac and green brocade. The entire effect was soothingly sumptuous. Mrs Skarsgard’s room, obviously. Xander wished he could relax into the ambience, but he dared not. He focused his gaze on Miss Ryan’s face.

“Why hasn’t she woken?”

Mrs Skarsgard shook her head. “The emetic may take longer to act if the poison is already working.” She lifted the girl’s head again, holding a cup of warmed water to her lips.

Xander rose, moving unsteadily to the bedside. “Allow me,” he murmured, easing the cup rim between Claire’s teeth.

Mrs Skarsgard nodded, withdrawing to the chaise.

Xander stroked Claire’s russet curls back from her forehead, staring at her bow-shaped mouth, willing her breath to flow, her green eyes spearing him with a glare and a wit-laced riposte that skewered him to his pride.

“Wake up,” he murmured. “Dear Miss Ryan, you will wake now.”

Hardly had the words left his mouth than her eyelids flickered, a great moaning cough passing her lips.

“Turn her. *Now*,” Mrs Skarsgard commanded, and Xander turned Claire on her side as the least fairytale-like awakening he’d witnessed in any woman’s bed manifested before his eyes. Never in his life had he been so relieved to see a lady lose her innards over his shoes. He could have laughed for joy. Leaning in, he wiped her lips, planting a kiss right there, not caring at all that she tasted sour and sickly bitter. Only that she pursed her mouth beneath his, her breath detectable. Warm, lively, scented, and present.

“That is the stupidest thing you’ve done yet,” Claire croaked, shifting in his arms until she propped herself against the profusion of lavender-covered cushions. “Good morning, Mrs Skarsgard. I beg your pardon for the intrusion.”

“You’re welcome here as you need, my dear Diamond, though I must return to my other members. I’ll send someone to – er – clean this up.” She eyed the mess, sighed diplomatically and left them alone.

Xander gazed into Miss Ryan’s overbright eyes. He reached out, tracing the curve of her cheek, focus straying to her mouth again. He handed her the cup of water and sat, remaining close.

“Stupid?”

“If the poison on my lips relapsed you, how would I face your brother?” She spoke in a whispery voice, her Irish brogue more pronounced than ever. Green eyes softened with her smile, warming as she reached out, tracing the shape of his shoulders through his waistcoat.

“Are you all right, my lord?”



“XANDER,” he said softly, dipping his finger into her cup of water. “Or Alexander, if you prefer.” He ran his moistened finger over her lips slowly, taking the kind of personalised care Claire used in creating scents for her clients. He bathed her top lip several times, moving his fingertip back and forth, back and forth, back and forth... mesmerising and erotic, sensual and seductive. Claire stilled entirely, her lips parted, speechless, witless, damn near senseless again.

He paused his delicate touching and she uttered a small ‘meou’. His dimple reappeared.

“Shush,” he whispered, repeating his caresses over her lower lip, stroking his thumb over the fullness this time, dipping it into the water after each back and forth motion until he appeared satisfied.

“There,” he murmured, looking down at her mouth. “Will this save me from further stupidity, Miss Ryan?”

“Claire,” she replied stupidly. “That rather depends on what you do next, Xander.” She slipped her tongue over her lower lip, drawing the taste of his touch into her, watching his inward breath as he leaned closer still, his lips tasting hers, his tongue teasing his way between them until Claire leaned back, her palms sliding across his shoulders, pressing him closer, pulling him tightly against her breasts in an embrace she needed him to understand.

“Claire,” he said, his mouth still on hers. “Claire, I have never been so frightened in my life.” He leaned back, but not far. “Are you feeling better?”

Claire blinked at him a moment, smiling. “I am,” she replied quietly. “Thanks to you. Which do you think it was?” She squinted into the middle distance. “The brandy, or the tea?”

Xander shook his head, letting out a relieved laugh. “Your faculties are intact, then. It took me all this time waiting for you to come round, to deduce it must have been one of the

two.” He looked down at her, his gaze tender and warm. “Then again, I was desperately worried.”

“Were you?” Claire wondered whether Ada’s admirers looked at her sister like Xander gazed at her now.

“Desperately,” he repeated.

It seemed he was no longer speaking of her brush with death, but something else entirely. His gaze turned heated, palms slipping from her shoulders down to her waist, skimming the lines of her body in a four poster bed of some luxuriousness. *I do not swoon. I do not blush...* but she’d not been kissed by a man like this before. *A man like this...*no man had looked at her like this.

A part of her knew she ought to rise, get up and get on. There was much to do, not least of which was to work up their antidote. Another part of her had no wish to leave the security of The Soho Club, Mrs Skarsgard’s excellent protections, this chamber, this wonderfully decadent bed, and the safety of this man’s presence, of Xander’s arms.

Some matters, however, were pressing.

“What of Ada?”

“Felix has taken her out of town for a time.” He paused. “I didn’t consider the propriety.”

Claire snorted. “Neither will Ada, I’ll wager. Your man is in for quite a time. She likes him very much.”

“I’d noticed,” came his mild reply.

“You’ve not sent them to Cornwall?” She glanced up, failing to hide her urgency.

“They’re en route to Robert’s Scottish estate at Dunleigh. Why not Cornwall?”

“I’m not sure. It’s...a feeling I have. Sally was taken on to replace a maid who fell ill in Cornwall.” Claire was silent a moment.

“I’ll trust that intuition of yours.” Xander fetched more water. “We ought to inquire after the maid who took ill.”

She nodded. "Cornwall does not seem safe to me." *Safe...* Claire sighed as she spoke the word aloud. Safe was a sensation she'd craved since her father left for Paris, since her mother died, since Ada took to the stage. Safe was a place few women thrust into the world attained. Women like her sister and herself. *Like Sally.* Xander's deep drawl interrupted her.

"Don't you go blaming yourself for Miss Kemble," he said fiercely. "There's only one person responsible for that girl's death, and that is the man who killed her."

"Man?" Claire sat up straighter. "Are you certain?"

Xander sat beside her on the bed. "What do you mean?"

"Poison is a subtle weapon," she replied, folding her arms over her breasts. "Men are more – bombastic." Her gaze rippled over the barely-visible outline of his lordship's revolver. She looked into Xander's face, waiting for an argument.

"Hmmm." He tapped a finger against his lips. "You have a point. It's unwise to draw conclusions without data." He fell silent, flexing his neck muscles irritably.

Claire threw off her blanket, drawing up her legs.

Xander appeared to gear up for a scolding. "Mrs Skarsgard advised us to remain here."

"We shall," she replied, eyeing his muscular neck. "Your neck pains are a side effect of the toxin. I believe I know which poison we've ingested and I have the ingredients to create our antidote. So, I'd best get to it." She rose as she spoke, accepting Xander's arm.

"Oh dear." She stood still, hand to her head. "I feel dreadful."

"Then may this wait?"

Claire shook her head, rolling her shoulders and wincing. "My neck and shoulders are stiffening as well. It will ease over time," she said in response to his look of alarm. "The antidotes take time to steep and the sooner we administer the remedies,

the faster these symptoms will pass. Then we shall need to lie down.”

Xander tucked her arm through his, grinning. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“And sleep,” Claire admonished.

“Sleep? Lying beside you in that bordello of a bed? I won’t even promise to try.” He winked at her, then winced and put his hand to his neck.

“A gentleman would remain on the chaise,” she said drily.

“We’ve established that I’m a bastard, Claire,” he said without rancour. Indeed, his words held so much heat, Claire flushed. A sensation of warmth and rightness flooded her – and, yes, desire. She wasn’t an actress like Ada. She could not conceal her feelings, or pretend emotions where none existed. All she could do, all she could offer, all she could be, was herself. Smiling softly, she reached up and touched Xander’s cheek. Drawing his head down, she met his lips with hers, stroking his jaw with all the gentleness she possessed, teasing his tongue with hers. *A taste, no more.* Claire drew back.

“Let’s make your antidote, Xander.” She entered her laboratory on her lord’s arm, absolutely certain Ada had never experienced anything like this. Either that, or she and her sister could not be at all alike. Nothing on earth would induce her to entertain another man while Xander Lindsey stood before her, smiling like this.

“What do you need me to do?” He asked at once.

“I believe we were dosed with a similar poison to that which killed Sally. Prussic acid occurs in diabolical quantities in bitter almonds. The kernel is extracted from the seed of stone fruits.”

“Apricots?”

“Precisely.” As Claire talked, she measured several spoonfuls of dark powder into a small iron pot, which she placed over the fireplace. Taking Xander’s hand, she positioned him

beside the pot with a sigh, because touching him was a pleasure. "Keep an eye on that," she instructed.

"For what?" He stared into the pot.

"Alert me when it boils." She glanced up with a smile. "And don't say it, Xander."

"Say what?"

"That a watched pot...oh, never mind." She shook her head, unable to avoid grinning.

"You said it. I didn't." He grinned back, bowing.

Claire extracted a small flask from a neatly kept wooden box marked with the seal of St Germaine. "This'll wipe that smug expression from your face," she told him, measuring out a precise spoonful and holding it before him.

"I'm not a child." He took the spoon from her carefully, and nearly dropped it. "Dear God, the smell!"

"Spirits of hartshorn," she replied. "The same as you'll find in smelling salts. I realise it's overpowering, but it can't be helped."

"I think I'd rather have the poison," Xander complained as he gulped it down and shook his head, fetching them both more water. "That is the vilest stuff I've ever taken, and I've been to sea with pirates."

Claire looked at him with interest. "I understand successful pirates sup rather well. No doubt our sovereign sent you after the easy game," she teased, sobering as she considered how close they'd both come to serious loss. "And be grateful we were slipped only seed kernels, not the poison itself. Prussic acid in its purer form is absolutely deadly. We'd not have survived long enough to arrive here."

So saying, she dosed herself and nearly threw up her guts again, failing utterly at ignoring the I-told-you-so smile on Xander's handsome face. His expression sharpened suddenly.

"Has it boiled?" She asked.

"No." He glanced down. "Yes, actually, but I'm consid-

ering what you have said. We were poisoned, but not killed. Why is that, do you think?"

"There wasn't enough of the poison to kill us," Claire answered, catching up. "You're thinking no one truly intends us harm? I do not believe this is a safe assumption."

Xander barely noticed as she set him to stirring the little pot. "I believe this incident is to warn us off."

"That makes more sense," Claire agreed, taking over at the fireside. "Though they clearly do not know the Ryans." She set her jaw and tipped the mixture into two cups, adding a sprinkle of brown crystals to one.

"That smells heavenly." Xander stood beside her, his palm warming the small of her back. "Like coffee."

"It is coffee," Claire replied. "Dark as pitch and undiluted, which is why I did not send down for it. It's a known antidote, and less foul than any other I've come across. I'm afraid we'd best not add too much to it. Milk and sugar are all right and actually beneficial, but no honey, cinnamon, or anything else. We'll need to alternate cups of this with warmed water for the rest of the day."

"While we're lying down," Xander reminded her, with a wicked grin.

Not that she was likely to forget. She admired his dimple, passing him her packet of crystals. "Sugar, if you require it," she explained, watching as he took a cautious sip of her mixture.

"Piping hot and black as pitch, just as you promised." He sipped again, inhaling the powerful aroma deeply and sighing, just as deeply. "I like mine this way."

"Which is?" Claire added a heaping dose of sugar to her cup, looking up to find Xander's chocolate gaze fixed on her face.

"Strong," he said.

CHAPTER 7

Deep Waters

Outside, dark clouds gathered in the afternoon sky. The air thickened, closely heavy in the prelude to a drenching. Claire shivered at the change in temperature, the tensing of mood. She sipped her coffee, watching Xander Lindsey, watching her. His gaze seemed focused rather closely on the rim of her cup, specifically where the fine china met her lips.

She sipped her brew again. “If you’re intent on seduction, you should know I am not my sister.”

His gaze lifted to her face, steady, focused, powerfully intent. “I have never seduced Ada. I am no rake, Claire.”

“Neither is Felix,” Claire deduced.

“I’d hardly have sent him to escort your sister if he were.” His voice remained sure, strong, and deeply tempting.

“A ruse?” She guessed. “Some kind of disguise?”

He inclined his head, his “mmmm” resonating low in his throat, like a throb.

“We can’t all mask our clandestine activities with scent.” His tone turned husky, intensity sharpening like a honed blade.

“I am not in the habit of short term liaisons,” Claire spoke carefully. “I am not in the habit of being seduced, either.”

“There’s a remedy for that,” he said quietly, suggestively. Did his voice deepen further? As though he’d heard her, Xander set down his cup. He walked slowly towards her, the way one might approach a rare and dangerous object.

“Tell me, Claire Ryan, are you armed?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I should like to kiss you properly this time. If I halt here, you may blade my heart open instead.” He stopped halfway across the chequered floor, arms by his sides like a supplicant. A supplicant with warm brown eyes, and that devastating dimple.

Claire affected a study of the distance between them, lifted her head, locking her gaze to his.

“Three steps back gives you a sporting chance, Xander Lindsey.”

“Indeed?” The resonance from his baritone rippled through her. Nevertheless, he held his ground and Claire lifted a brow, gaze travelling brazenly over his planed face. He stared right back, smiling, offering that dimple where she lingered before studying the cleft in his chin, his corded neck muscles, those powerful shoulders of defined shape. Her gaze dropped lower, taking in his broad torso, narrow waist, and the shapely front of his trousers. She smiled then, wide and joyous, walking slowly towards him, slower than ever, as though she may never reach him, never touch him. Time stretched out, thinning, heating, bringing her closer to the heft of breath beneath flesh, her pulse beating faster with each step until her skin throbbed with the thought of his lips beneath hers, his surrender within her body.

“Something to savour,” she murmured, watching his answering smile. His tongue darted out, licking his lips and she let out a small laugh, not blinking at all. Not missing a

moment of Xander Lindsey standing before her, arms at his sides, gaze locked on hers with an impulse she felt in every nerve and muscle. Claire touched his cheek, stroking him gently before leaning forward, lips positioned inches from his. Reaching up, she slipped her other hand beneath his jacket, sliding her palm over his shirt, feeling his breath shorten, his weight shift...until she located his hidden jacket seam. Keeping her gaze on his, she extracted his pistol as smoothly as possible, stroking the barrel along firm muscle as she withdrew. She kept his barrel there, smoothing it lightly back and forth against his shirt, teasing him with danger, with steel, with her unbroken gaze.

“Is it cocked?”

“Always.” Xander shot her a look so full of heat, she feared for her newly-regained senses. He did not move, did not smile, and Claire wondered if he’d reached his limit.

“How long did our hostess say we need to rest here?” The low register of his voice matched the throb within her.

“Only this morning,” Claire whispered, tracing his ribs with his weapon, revelling in his shortening breaths.

“You’re the expert,” Xander whispered back. “Do you concur?” That voice again. Deep, warm, and powerful.

“It’s best if we remain for the afternoon as well,” Claire replied slowly, sliding the gun barrel lower. He sighed as she drew it out, dragging her gaze from his face to hazard a glance at his weapon. “You’ll not want to be idle.” Carefully, she uncocked the ball, placing it on her work table. “Shall I fetch you a book?”

He shook his head, his gaze dropping lower, lingering again on her lips, her chin, pausing for some time over the swells of her breasts, before exploring the rest of her body with a look so smouldering, she gasped at the hot bloom between her thighs.

“Xander,” she whispered, drawing his mouth towards

hers, tentatively at first and then powerfully, her tongue stroking his and then his arms stole around her waist, slipping down until he cradled her buttocks, caressing her through her skirts, her petticoat, and her soft linen chemise. She drew him closer, pressing him against her, wanting to know him, feel his desire, deciding for herself to become a part of it.

Placing both palms on his chest, Claire backed him against the wall beside a sofa. She broke their kiss to trace the line of his jaw with her lips, teasing the flesh beneath his earlobe with her tongue, her lips, and a delicate nip that made him gasp. His low laughter encouraged her to taste him again, pressing her lips into his skin, inhaling the Scent of Xander, *musk, coffee, whisky, and man*.

Opening his waistcoat buttons with an urgency she did not hide, she ran her fingers over his chest, learning the shape of him through linen, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't what she wanted.

"Claire," he rasped, reaching for her chin, drawing her face to his, taking her lips beneath his own while her fingers fumbled with his trouser buttons, teasing, rubbing, exploring the shape of him beneath the fine cloth. The urgency was his as he divested himself of waistcoat, and linen. She took up a vial, tipping lavender oil into her palms.

"God, Claire, yes." Her oiled palms on his bare chest let her enjoy the feel of him, his hairs smoothing under her fingertips as her lips teased the corner of his mouth, his chin, his neck; tonguing the hollow beneath his collarbone, kissing her way down his sternum, hearing each breath move through him, harsher and harder, until his buttons were opened, and her palm found his cock, hard and heavy and ready for her.

"Claire, oh, Claire," he murmured as she touched him, fisting his shaft again and again with practised deliberation until he groaned.

She seated him on the sofa, slipping down beside him,

leaning over, licking her lips and nipping delicately at his dripping head. He swore again when she bent her head, groaning with pleasure when she slid him between her lips. She uttered a guttural sound of appreciation when the weight of him hit the back of her throat. The taste of him, the heat, the potency... Claire closed her eyes, sliding her tongue over his shaft as she moved her head, feeling the delicious in every masculine muscle beneath her hands.

“Claire,” he groaned again, stroking her hair. “Don’t stop, Claire, please. *Don’t stop.*”

His words inflamed her, hot desire wet beneath her skirts. Squeezing her thighs together, enjoying their moist heat, wishing she’d another hand or instrument with which to pleasure herself, Claire wriggled over his lap. Oh, she wanted this so much.

Her fingers stroked his chest, his hips, his buttocks, squeezing his balls gently while she sucked, pushing him from the side as she tasted him from the front and he called her name, running his hands over her head, her shoulders, every part of her he could reach, until Claire felt herself shifting, lifted across his lap, and Xander’s hands sliding beneath her skirts, her petticoat, her thin chemise. He caressed her backside cheeks while she tasted him, his fingers sliding beneath her, finding wetness and softness and pressing closer, closer to her urgent heat. His fingertips found her, teasing, tormenting, pressing into her until she pressed back, her pleasure beneath and behind her, his heat between her lips in front of her... Claire moaned deeply in her throat, rocking her hips to his rhythm while he strained into hers, feeling her warmth become heat, her tingling wetness on his fingers spurring her to more. *Oh God, more.*

He lengthened against her throat, harder, larger, his taste salty and powerful.

“Claire!” He cried out, cried for her, filling her as she

gasped her own pleasure against him. She licked her lips, savouring all of him, running her palm over his chest before releasing him.

“Xander,” she said, breathing hard. “Oh, Xander.”

“Claire.” Panting, he clutched her convulsively to his chest. “I’ll not lose you.” A determination she’d not heard from any man before.

Claire opened her eyes, looking up to find his brown gaze fixed on hers. “Xander?”

“I mean it,” his expression serious, tender, and beautiful. “I’ll not lose you.”

Claire sat up properly, puzzled. “I’m right here.”

“I don’t indulge in short term liaisons, either,” he said, when he’d caught his breath. “I am not about to begin now.”

Claire stood and shook out her skirts. “What is this, then?”

Xander rose beside her, buttoning his trousers. “I don’t yet know,” he replied, taking her hand. “I do know it doesn’t end here.” He paused. “Does it?”



CLAIRE REACHED for his other hand. “It was I who seduced you, remember?”

Relief flooded Xander’s chest, his cheeks warming with his smile. “Will you spare my pride enough to declare we seduced each other?”

Laughing, Claire leaned up and kissed him. “As you wish.”

He squeezed her hand. *Something to savour, indeed.*

Claire smoothed her skirts. “We ought to drink more coffee. I must alert Mr Brougham, as well. Her Highness requires her report.”

Xander settled his dress, kissing her once, softly. “It’s likely Lord Robert awaits me at my rooms.”

“At Cavendish Place?”

He refrained from rolling his eyes. “Is there anything at all you do not know about the Carlton House set?”

She grinned. “Not a lot, though I’m aware you’re not considered one of them unless they need you for something.” Her face sobered as she took up her writing desk. “It’s useful to maintain a network of informants that garner little notice from the aristocracy.”

“Meaning servants cannot be trusted?” Xander mentally calculated the number of staff employed in his apartments.

“My informants assist in seeking out traitors and threats, not tattle.” Claire replied mildly. “We’d best send in our reports. Mrs Skarsgard would not appreciate either of our employers attending here.”

“Certainly not.” Xander shuddered, though imagining Robert’s face made him chuckle. “My brother would be scandalised to learn of The Soho Club’s existence.” He watched Claire bend over a trunk, taking the opportunity to admire her fine derriere. Glancing across at the bed, his mind filled with wicked thoughts. *Not now.*

“Ah,” she turned around in time to save him from himself, handing him a quill and a paper.

They both sat, composing their respective reports. After a moment, Claire broke the silence.

“Will you tell Lord Liverpool about The Soho Club?”

“Not if I can avoid it. He prefers I report to his rooms, in any case.” Xander studied her. “How did you learn of it?”

“Ada discovered it before I did. One of her first directors brought her here to rehearse.” Claire shrugged. “I didn’t approve of course – what sister would? – but she was so determined to become an actress, and she has talent. The show ended but Ada fell in love with this place. She finds the club wonderfully liberating.” She paused, pursing her lips. “I don’t suppose it’s easy to imagine it, but my sister spends so many

days and nights being other people. When she's here, when we're here – we used to attend together – she's able to relax. She becomes the girl I remember.”

“You raised her?” He guessed.

Claire caught his look and nodded, smiling at some inner memory. “Ada is near a decade younger than I. Mama died when she was a child. She wasn't any easier to manage then, I assure you. A true Irish lass.” She offered a self-conscious smile.

“I know the type,” he replied, hoping his stare went unnoticed. *Unlikely... Claire notices everything.* It didn't matter, not now. Not in the way he thought it might. “Is this why you placed Sally at Carlton House, instead of your sister?” Xander bit his lip: he hadn't intended to sound cruel.

Tears glimmered in Claire's eyes but she sniffed, wiped her palms over her cheeks, sat up and faced him. “I cannot honestly pretend my decision was disinterested. I didn't want Ada at Carlton House because any assignment has a chance to become dangerous.” She sighed as though she wanted to excise something heavy.

“I knew Ada would get her chance on stage, too. While I do not like to believe this affected my choice, I can't be certain. Besides, Ada's never kept a secret in her life, and Sally's worked as a maid before.”

Xander winced at her wretched expression. “I truly did not believe this assignment would place Sally at risk. If I had, I'd never – I'd never—” a sort of wail escaped her and he moved swiftly to her side.

“It's not your fault,” he said, stroking her hair. “You could not have known.” He tightened his arms around her, circling his palms across her back. She stiffened a moment, then leaned into him, clutching, as grief took her. Claire shook against him. “We'll find the people responsible,” Xander vowed.

Claire straightened in his arms and leaned back, her eyes

wet with gratitude. “Yes. Thank you.” She cleared her throat and stood. “I beg your pardon, Xander.”

“Don’t do that. Not with me. That’s not how this works, Claire.” Xander drew her against him, gently this time, holding her lightly. “I told you, we’re finishing this together.” He released her and reached for the bell pull. “With our notes duly despatched, we’d best continue our recuperation.” He gestured towards the bedroom with his arm.

“Shall we?”

Claire sniffed and nodded, turning her back. “Would you be so good as to unhook my gown?”

“I’d like nothing better.” He didn’t bother attempting disinterest. Fooling this woman was clearly a waste of time. In any case, he’d never been more interested in a woman in his life. He’d told Claire the truth – he wasn’t any sort of rake. He wasn’t a saint, either.

Placing his hands on her shoulders he stared at the neat little row of buttons. Belatedly, he realised he was frowning and stopped, releasing the top three buttons, taking a breath. “Tell me more about your bawdy house experiences,” he said because he was curious, because he needed to know, because he wanted her again.

Claire gave an unsteady laugh. “I may have exaggerated somewhat,” she said. “That is, I have been in such places a half dozen times or so. When Ada began performing I attended as a sort of chaperon. We were even attached to a circus, for a time, where I learned to throw knives. I return to several low establishments in order to glean information for Her Royal Highness. She keeps a closer eye on the Regent than he’s likely aware.”

“Has your father always served the Crown Princess?”

“Goodness, no. Papa served the Crown in a clandestine capacity during the wars. My Mama was French, you know. The St Germaine Paris Parfumerie belonged to her family. It

was lost of course, under Bonaparte. When my parents re-established themselves in London and their scents became the fashion, it afforded opportunities to assist their new homeland. When Mama passed, Papa threw himself into his business, his service.”

“Not his daughters?” Xander asked, transfixed by the shiver of her spine beneath her chemise.

“Thank you for your assistance.” Claire stepped back. “Our work for the Crown assists with Ada’s expenses. The parfumeries do not always turn a profit, you know. It rather depends on the prices of my ingredients. St Germaine became an excellent way to ensure Mama was acceptable to London. Not all French émigrés...” her words trailed off, but Xander understood.

Many of those displaced during the wars made their way to London, and not all met with goodwill. The French wives of English officers suffered from this particular sort of prejudice. An Irish father and a French mother, a young sister dependent on her for many years, not to mention a family enterprise lost to the chaos that engulfed the French a dozen years ago...Claire Ryan was far more than she seemed. Xander watched her exit into the adjoining room, returning with water and more cups. She set out two glasses of warm water and two cups of coffee, doctoring her own. He wondered if anyone looked after her the way she took care of her father and sister, of the Crown and her country. Of him. After what they’d shared it seemed indelicate to inquire if she had a lover, but he needed to know. *Desperately*.

“So, in these bawdy houses...,” he paused.

“Yes?”

“I mean,” he faltered again. “You’re not a—”.

“Chaste young maiden?” Claire stifled a snort. “I am neither young, nor a maiden, so why am I required to remain chaste?” She spoke primly, which he found oddly arousing.

“Apart from the obvious, of course, and I’m unable to bear children. I am aware it’s not common.”

“Nothing about you is common,” he murmured, watching her flush in his sudden silence. His next question came quietly, because her answer meant something. “You toss caution to the winds and indulge yourself?”

“I choose not to forsake my pleasure merely because I am not marriage material.” She spoke in a hush. “The work I do sets one apart. Perhaps you cannot imagine what it is, to be always a sort of outsider.”

Xander’s raised brows spoke for him.

Claire studied him, her green eyes widening. “I beg your pardon, of course you can. I suppose I’m not used to speaking to anyone who comprehends it all. Even Ada does not truly understand.” She looked away for a moment, seemingly to draw in an extra large breath before meeting his gaze again.

“You’re asking a great many questions.” She stared up at him. “Am I being interrogated?”

“No,” Xander responded quickly, vehemently, as though she’d tossed a gauntlet before him. He glanced at the seat where he’d felt her, so silken, so hotly wet and ready. He wanted more. He wanted her. *I’m doing this properly* – because any man with half a brain could see Claire Ryan was worth more than mere dalliance. He’d known it the moment she flicked her blades across the drawing room of Carlton House.

CHAPTER 8

Of Knives and Petticoats

At that moment Claire shook herself, loosening her gown until it fell to her waist, caught on the swells of her hips. Xander forgot everything he'd been about to say. He stood closer, his voice a tentative whisper. "Do you wish me not to know you, Claire?"

She didn't answer immediately. Xander felt her clever brain working, weighing, considering, deciding... Claire folded her garment and laid it neatly aside, untied her petticoats and turned down the bed covers. She lowered herself on to the plump bed, jouncing experimentally. "Oh, this bed is lovely."

Cradling her coffee cup she looked up at him, into him, her unflinching gaze as precise as a knife. "As long as you are prepared to satisfy my curiosity, I am equally willing to withstand yours, Xander."

He moved to the foot of the bed, waving one arm expansively. "Ask whatever you like."

"Did you grow up with your mother's family?"

Except that. Xander repressed a scowl. "I do not speak of her often."

“You said I could ask whatever I liked.” Her pointed gaze sharpened.

“I did.” He shrugged. “I am not ashamed of her.” He met her gaze with his own brand of defiance.

“I am not the ton, Xander.” Claire reminded him, her expression disarmingly curious. “I’ll not judge any woman for making her own way.” She appeared to study him a moment, then smiled with sudden mirth. “I’m able to blade you at this distance,” she added. “Dead-on.”

“I’ve no doubt.” He responded with a nod. “I lived with my mother until I went away to school. She didn’t like London. Our home was in Surrey, though I’m sure she’d have preferred to return to Ireland. Lord Liverpool Senior would not have stood that. He took excellent care of us both.”

“You knew your father, then?” She eyed him quizzically over the rim of her cup.

Xander shrugged again. “After a fashion. He and Mama seemed very much in love, at least from the little I knew of such things. He could never have married her, but he took a town house for us each Season.”

“For his convenience, or yours?”

Xander’s brow flicked upward. “I’m sure it suited him very well, though as I grew older I saw it as an act of kindness towards myself.”

“How so?” Claire’s curiosity was relentless.

Ab well, my turn. “My attendance in town gained the acquaintance of my brother. He is all the family I have, now.”

“Is he very different to you?”

“I’m surprised you know my rooms, but not the Prime Minister.”

Claire laughed. “Of course I know who your brother *is*. I’ve little information regarding what manner of man he may be. I’ve heard he’s a decent fellow. Rather austere and a bit stiff, by all reports.

Xander bristled. "Reports are one thing. Robert is quite another."

"Oh? Is he like you, then?"

Hmmm...I dare you.

He crossed his arms and grinned at her. "What am I like?"

Claire wriggled against the numerous pillows at her back as though cementing her position, took a determined sip of coffee, set her cup aside, and studied the man before her.

"A man who is rarely seen as himself, and prefers it this way." She took up her water, possibly eyeing him through the crystal. "Handsome, charming, and well aware of it. Not at all seductive to a clever woman."

"Not at all?" Xander attempted a frown, but he was so obviously being teased that he could not hold it. "You describe me as society likely sees me. I asked for your perspective, not theirs," he pressed, aware her response meant something to him. Or possibly everything.

"Why should my opinion matter, at all?"

She reads minds as well? *God, I hope not.*

"We've established that false modesty does not suit either of us." He dropped his waistcoat to the floor, approaching closer.

Claire's only response was a quirked brow. *Hmmm...*

"I see you as a risk taker, but not a fool. Danger attracts you," she said finally. "Does this satisfy you?"

"Only if you prefer I remain on the chaise." He held his position, not moving, not asking, awaiting her decision. *Her choice.*

Claire slid her palm slowly over her chemise-clad lap. Xander held his breath, following every deft movement of her hand, cock tightening as she raised one shapely leg, her palm slipping beneath her chemise, pausing a moment – he nearly groaned – before reappearing with a blade from her garter ribbon. She held it up for his examination, like a magician. He

smiled, transfixed, as she repeated her action on her other thigh. This time, her hand lingered on her skin, moving higher, touching herself. She let out a little gasp. Xander's gaze snapped to her face... those pink lips parted, a small moan falling between them. She met his look with one of sheer carnality.

No deduction required: *I want you*. Claire's green gaze locked on his face as though she intended to knife him between the eyes. Her voice came quietly, soft and low.

"Xander," she said clearly, reaching for his hand. Bringing it to her lips, she tongued him. "I want you here."

He spread his palm over her face, tracing the shape of her eyes, her lips, the bones of her skull, while her mouth teased him, her tongue tracing his fingers, licking in and out between his knuckles while his other hand struggled to shed his remaining clothes.

Standing naked before her, he pulled her up on her knees, removing the chemise. He looked down into her eyes, his palms stroking her breasts gently, thumbing her nipples until she breathed his name. Only then did he bend to kiss the sound from her lips as she palmed him.

Xander groaned, exerting every ounce of control he possessed. "My turn," he whispered against her mouth. "My way." His mouth moved from her lips to her throat. One hand slid over her belly, finding wetness between her thighs, tugging her curls with his fingers, delving into her heat with a rhythm of pull, stroke, pull, stroke, kissing her neck while she fisted him, her other hand at his hip as her breaths came harder, faster and she moved him against her.

"Xander," she said again, as he turned her, lifting his hips against her backside, fitting himself behind her, and she fell forward with another gasp as his dripping cock stroked, slick against her wet folds. He leaned forward, climbing onto the bed, bruising his knees against hard wood because he couldn't

stop, not now he was inside her, hot flesh surrounding him, her hips shifting in time with her hard, panting breaths while his fingers teased her tight nipples and he thrust forward, pressing into her, increasing his pressure each time, waiting, waiting for her command.

“Do you want more, Claire?” He whispered, catching her earlobe in his teeth.

“Yes,” barely a word, hardly a sound. A gasp of assent that unleashed his own. He let their rhythm take him, thrusting heavily, powerfully against her, his thighs slapping against her buttocks until she screamed, and he shouted, collapsing against her, his lips kissing her neck in time to her whispers, her whimpers, her profound pleas. She said something else, then.

He missed it, murmuring. “Claire?”

“Hold me, Xander. Please.”

He moved to accommodate her, looked down, realising he’d already climbed beside her, curling his body around hers protectively, possessively, profoundly. He’d done it without thinking because he felt right, curled around her, against her, holding her.

“Claire,” he whispered. “Claire, I’m holding you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured drowsily, placing her palms over his hands as she relaxed entirely.

“Thank you,” Xander echoed, because she’d asked him to hold her, because she let him hold her, and because holding this woman against him might be the truest sensation he’d experienced. His lover was asleep: asleep in his arms. *I love you, Claire Ryan.*



CLAIRE WOKE to the comforting weight of her lover’s skin warm against her own. She smiled, touching her lips to his

shoulder before sliding out from beneath the covers. She loved the way he held her. Not tight, or clinging, or beneath his body, but beside him...warm, protected, safe. *Safe?* She stepped into her petticoat and tied it on before attempting her stays. If she reached behind, she could lace them well enough to work. Taking her clothes and consciousness into the adjoining room, she rang for hot water and turned to her work.

She refilled the coffee pot and placed it beside the fire again, sipping her water as she distilled oils and measured out fixers. By the time Xander entered, Claire was working on her second scent.

“Good afternoon,” she said, nodding towards the coffee and a small vial of spirits of hartshorn. “There’s hot water by the fireplace. How are you feeling?”

Xander rubbed his face. “A great deal better, though I am lightheaded still.”

“Drink your water. We’ll need to eat something soon. Broth, perhaps.”

“Like an old man.” Her lover made a face before coming up behind her. “What are you working on?”

Claire handed him a beaker, arcing one brow. “Is this precisely the scent that greeted you on entering the drawing room of Carlton House?”

Xander lifted the jar to his nose and sniffed. “Remarkable,” he stated with a nod. “It is the same scent.” He looked towards a newly set up glass press. “What’s this? Another antidote?”

“I hope not, Xander. That’s you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Xander inched closer to the press.

“It is a scent inspired by you, by...being with you.” Claire stared at the floor. *I do not swoon. I do not blush...* bollocks to that, because she was blushing like a beacon, and as lightheaded as an invalid. She raised her head, inhaled deeply, and

helped herself to more coffee. *I'll not swoon, at least.* A lucky recollection saved her as Xander's dimple reappeared, and he bent to kiss her. Claire leaned away.

"Not so fast." She stepped back, reminding herself to beware of his dimple. "I understood we're working this case together."

"We are," Xander said in surprise. "Claire, if this is a change of heart —"

"This is not about me. I mean," she swallowed and sipped her coffee. "This is about the case. I woke with a thought."

"Which is?" His eyes remained uncertain, but this was too important.

"Since the Princess of Wales's visit to the continent, Carlton House is run as a gentlemen's establishment." Claire paused deliberately, cocking one incredulous brow. "Is it not?"

"You are too clever for your own good," Xander groaned.

"I shall pretend I didn't hear that." Claire raised her palm. "At least, I shall pretend you did not patronise me so. I may forgive you, Xander, *if* you explain why a gentleman's residence requires a lady's maid." She placed her hands on her hips, attempting her best glare. "You're aware a lady resides with the Regent?"

Xander nodded, moving to the wash basin to complete his dress.

"Yet you kept it to yourself," Claire prodded mercilessly, doing her best not to think the worst...what *is* the worst in this situation? That Xander is somehow in league with conspirators? No dimple could skew her intuition so badly. She watched him bathe his face and hair, smoothing the silk brocade of his waistcoat. *That he used my bed to further his investigation at the expense of mine.* Claire shuddered. Nothing could be worse than this...because she wanted to trust him. *Did* trust him, and she did not want to give him up. She tensed when he addressed her.

“If you’re well enough to leave, may I suggest a carriage ride?”

“To where?” Claire asked in consternation.

“To breakfast,” he replied, offering his arm. When she stared him down, Xander shrugged. “I’m hungry and light-headed, and it’s past time we put this mess together.”

“With breakfast?” Did the man have no argument etiquette at all?

“Yes.” He looked at her. “We’ll miss it if we’re late.”

“All right.” Claire eyed him warily.

CHAPTER 9

Lost & Found

In a shorter time than Claire imagined possible, they were seated in a hack. She supposed they were en route to Cavendish Place, so she looked out with surprise when the vehicle rolled to a stop at St Margaret Street. Claire smoothed one nervous palm over her skirts.

“I am not certain I wish to meet the Prime Minister,” she stammered.

“Nevertheless, you must.” That firm tone again, though Xander did not explain further.

Leaning across her, he opened the door and preceded her out, then offered his assistance and paid off their driver. The butler bowed them in, bidding them wait in the large parlour.

“Your intuition is not infallible,” Xander spoke into the silence. “I did not keep back information out of misguided chivalry.”

“He withheld it because he had to,” said a voice from the doorway, and Claire looked into the heavy-lidded gaze of Lord Liverpool. “I ordered it so.”

“Good morning, Alexander.” He took his brother’s hand in one palm, brandishing a paper in his other. “Next time you

endeavour to update a fellow, do begin with something less alarming than ‘Dear Brother, I’ve been poisoned and need to rest...,’ he growled.

“It was not my intent to distress you, Prime Minister.” Xander bowed.

Lord Liverpool waved the paper at him like a battle flag. “Be that as it may, brother, this is quite the most idly-composed missive I’ve received in my life to date, and I’ve corresponded with French politicians.” He winked at Claire, who looked away hurriedly to check her laugh. This was no time for idle banter. Xander cleared his throat and Claire saw a muscle jump in his jaw.

“I’m touched by your concern, Robert. May I present Miss Ryan? She suffered from the poison attack in tandem.”

“Miss Ryan, you are most welcome.” The Prime Minister bowed to her curtsey, kissing the air above her wrist. “I trust you’ve both recovered.”

His inquiry sounded more like an order to resume their case. Claire withdrew her hand and remained standing, assessing Lord Liverpool carefully. The man was a practised politician, after all. He smiled tightly at her, his lack of dimple a relief.

Claire took a breath. “I understand there’s a great secret afoot.” She turned back to Xander. “Is this why you’ve brought me here?”

“My brother wishes me to identify the lady resident at Carlton House. He is not permitted to reveal such information himself,” said the politician.

Claire felt only anger as she stood opposite the most powerful man in England. “Mrs Fitzherbert is not in Cornwall. Is she, Prime Minister?”

Lord Liverpool had the grace to appear shame-faced.

“She resides with the Regent while the Princess travels.” Claire nodded to herself, raising a hand to forestall Lord

Robert's protests. "Is her great friend, Lady Graves, a guest of the royal household as well?" She tossed her head, glaring at both men's confusion. "As if I should not know the scents I've prepared for these ladies for years. Is there other information you've not shared?"

Lord Liverpool looked to his brother. "She's as astute as you say, Alexander. Are you staying to breakfast?"

Claire made a sound in the back of her throat. "*She* is also immediately before you, Prime Minister, or do they not teach manners at Eton?"

"She has you there, Robert." The look in Xander's eye when he sought hers was warm enough to make Claire flush. Before anyone spoke however, she recognised Ada's 'Duchess of Malfi' accents outside the door. A glance at her companions told her their astonishment matched her own. A moment later, Felix and her sister preceded his lordship's butler into the room, all but shutting the door in the man's face.

"I beg your pardon, Miss?" Lord Robert began, falling silent as Ada held aloft a gem they all recognised.

"Miss Ada Ryan," Felix announced with a bow, before taking his place beside Xander, "and—"

"The black diamond," Ada declared. "Mr Felix believes its return a matter of urgency." She curtsied before them all, glancing up at the Prime Minister with barely a simper. "Good morning, Prime Minister."

Their host stepped to the door, opened it, and issued his instruction. "Find Lovedale. We're five for breakfast this morning, Davis. We're not to be disturbed til then." Closing out the rest of his household, Lord Liverpool made his way determinedly to his drinks cabinet and poured out several large Scotches. Turning back into the room, he gestured to the others. Claire and Ada took up his invitation, clinking their crystal.

"I'm awfully glad you're all right, dear," Ada linked her

arm through Claire's. Claire smiled, patting her sister's forearm reassuringly. She stood beside Ada, gaze travelling repeatedly between Xander and Felix, studying the two operatives anew. Their resemblance was astonishing. Apart from the small smile lines at the corners of Xander's eyes and the lighter shade of brown in Felix's irises, the men could have been twins. Catching Xander's eye, Claire lifted one questioning brow. Her lord shook his head, placing a finger to his lips.

So, this man had more secrets. Claire shrugged inwardly, mildly surprised that she found this enticing rather than suspicious. Either she was falling for his charm, or she trusted him. *Hmmm...*

"Why are you two not in Scotland?" Xander turned to Felix. "Miss Ada Ryan is in imminent danger here."

"Yes," Claire agreed, though she could guess what had occurred. Addressing her sister, she shook her head. "Did you convince Mr Felix to remain with you in London?"

Ada did her best to appear shocked. "I did no such thing, sister. We *were* en route to Dunleigh. Travelling expeditiously still requires several nights on the road." She glanced at Felix, who blushed as he took over their report.

"We broke our journey at The Bells post house. Miss Ada opened the package addressed to Miss Kemble." He paused to take a sip of Scotch.

"And?" Claire and Xander spoke together, leaning forward, his palm hovering over the small of her back. Claire only straightened when she saw the glare Lord Robert levelled at her. Ada stirred on her other side. The actress may have hissed.

"Sally's parcel contained a sort of book," Ada continued. "The kind we use as stage props. False writing on thickened pages, and a cavity akin to the space Papa uses to hide his flasks in the library." She glanced at Claire, shrugging lightly.

Claire sighed, shaking her head.

“The cavity was used to conceal the jewel?” Lord Robert asked.

“Obviously,” Claire muttered, before meeting Xander’s sharp glance. She cleared her throat. “Where is Sally’s book prop now?”

“Safely locked up at Cavendish Place,” Felix replied.

Ada added, “We returned directly, to find Lord Lindsey not at home. We then called at the— at Lord Lindsey’s club and learned you’d been ill.” Ada took her sister’s hand, before staring at the Prime Minister’s brother. “Mr Felix believed you might attend on Lord Liverpool and, you see, he is right.” She nodded at them beneficently, saving her brightest smile for Mr Felix.

Claire took another sip of Scotch. Surely she’d not drunk enough to witness Ada Ryan forming a genuine attachment? A quiet knock announced a harassed-looking Mr Lovedale. Lord Liverpool indicated the gem.

“Ah, Lovedale, it’s been returned, you see? Advise the Regent at once.”

Claire did not miss the look the peer aimed at herself, or Ada. She flexed her fingertips, inhaling sharply. “My sister did not take this jewel, sir. We all witnessed the parcel addressed to Miss Kemble at Drury Lane, including your brother.”

“Quite correct,” affirmed Xander, proffering his palm to Ada.

At a glance from Claire, her sister yielded up the jewel. The suspicion in the Prime Minister’s eyes did not lessen. Both women straightened their stance. Claire spoke up.

“The Ryans are Irish Catholics, my lord. We are not thieves, nor are we insurrectionists. My father’s service record speaks for itself.” She hardened her tone. “A jewel of great value is restored to you today. I suppose gratitude is too much to ask, but you will refrain from further insult.”

“I remind you the Ryans have the trust of Her Royal Highness,” Ada added, in her best aristocratic tones.

“Although clearly not that of my brother,” Xander’s voice turned steely, one arm firmly round Claire’s waist. “Take care, Robert. Miss Ryan is not the only Catholic in the service of the Crown. Do you seek to arrest me as well?”

The Prime Minister stared at Xander’s hold on Claire’s waist. “Her Highness has a great deal weighing on her at present.”

“As do we all,” Claire replied evenly, holding the politician’s gaze with her own, her palm closing over Xander’s knuckles, his strength held in hers. “I take it the return of the diamond relieves you of at least one burden, Prime Minister?”

Lord Robert’s neck appeared to stiffen so much, his nod was barely perceptible. Beside her, Xander shot the peer a dark look.

“As my brother appears incapable, I beg your pardon on behalf of Westminster. You have our gratitude, Miss Ryan.” He turned from Claire to Ada, with a smile for each. “Both the Misses Ryan.”

“And Mr Felix,” Ada added, gazing up at the handsome valet.

“Yes, of course.” Xander added in surprise, his attention flicking over the young couple.

The Prime Minister found his voice at last – hoarse, clipped, and unimpressed. “This is unnecessary, Alexander.”

“Not to me.” Xander returned his brother’s glare with interest, before addressing Claire. “You ought to examine the dagger before we breakfast, Miss Ryan.”

“Of course, my lord.” Claire bit back a smile at Lord Liverpool’s sour expression.

Xander glanced at the others. “I’ll not keep her long.”

“Mr Felix may breakfast below stairs.” Lord Robert pursed his lips, holding out his arm to Ada.

Claire inwardly applauded as her sister shook her lovely head. "I beg your pardon, Prime Minister, but I'm overdue at Drury Lane. If Mr Felix will indulge me one more time, Mr Kemble awaits our attendance." Presenting her back to the peer, she smiled warmly at the valet, tilting her head prettily.

Claire did smile this time. So did Xander, but Felix's smile was widest of all.

"A lady's request cannot be gainsaid, Robert." Xander eyed his brother again.

The statesman bowed so awkwardly, Claire was tempted to offer him an antidote. She settled for exhaling with relief as he followed the others out of the room.

Once they were alone, Xander made no move to produce further weaponry. Instead, he paced the considerable length of his brother's parlour. "I do not like keeping secrets from you, Claire. I'd have told you all, if I could, my love."

"My love?" Hearing herself repeat his words irritated her.

"A single point of contention isn't enough to undercut my affections. Neither will I allow the work we do to excuse you. Or myself," Xander spoke in a tone that precluded jest. He sounded, if anything, frighteningly final. Uttering a profound sigh, her lord stood unmoving, the look on his face nearly stilling her heart – right before it began pounding wildly. *Damn.*

"I am declaring myself, Claire."

She took another gulp of Scotch. "As a poisoner, or as a spy?"

"As a suitor," he ground out. "Have you never been wooed before?"

Claire flushed. "Oh! Oh, well, never afterward," she blurted, before recollecting herself.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," her suitor said wryly.

"I beg your pardon, Xander," she whispered. "You need not— that is, I do not require you to preserve my honour."

“This is not about ‘requirement’,” he said clearly.

“I’ve no need for a husband.” Claire winced at the hurt in his eyes. She stammered it out at last. “Mr Brougham will not allow it, you know. It is not that I do not wish—”

“Thank you,” he replied, staring into her face with fierce tenderness. His chest heaved and both his fists clenched. “I understand you, I think. Perhaps, you are not the only one to fear a royal sanction?”

“Perhaps not.” Claire blinked in shock at herself, at her lover – because she believed him. “I am not with child, and I am not marr—”

“Marriage material, yes, so you’ve said,” he spoke quickly, impatiently, as though this conversation caused a similar pain to drawing a tooth and he wished it over at once. He continued to hold her gaze with formidable determination.

“I am not asking for marriage. Love is a choice only you can make,” he said quietly, dark eyes brightening, melting, his palms flexing in unison. “I’ve chosen to love *you*, Claire.” His voice deepened with a familiarity that sent her nerves quivering. His courage helped Claire remember her own.

She smiled softly, walking slowly towards his determined stillness. His patient questing. His waiting heart.

“I’ll give you up, if you ask it.” He watched her approach. “What is your wish, dear Claire?”

“This. I wish this.” She halted before him, reaching up, curving her palm against his jaw, fingering the roughness of a day’s whiskers. “I wish *you*,” she whispered, drawing his face down, watching his eyes narrow to slits, closing entirely as her lips opened beneath his, her tongue teasing his mouth. Sliding her other arm across his shoulders, she pressed him to her, savouring the heat of his response.

Embracing him with both arms this time, Claire leaned against his chest, squeezing hard before looking up into his chocolate-coloured eyes. “You’ve no need to give me up,

Xander," she murmured. "I'm right here." He smiled then, and she nearly closed her eyes at the sight of his dimple, his jaw, his shockingly handsome face radiating such joy. "Is it enough, my love?"

"It's enough if you love me as I love you," he murmured, pressing his lips to her brow. "Do you, dear Claire?"

"I do." She grinned.

Xander shook his head, laughing. "Oh, that's discreet."

Claire smiled, slipping her fingers through his. "Do you mind it?"

"Not at all." Xander gazed down at her. "I rather like it." He kissed her briefly. "Now, would you be kind enough to examine my dagger, dearest? I'm able to offer warmed-over coffee and one scandalised Prime Minister."

"Then how can I refuse?" Claire breathed, sliding her arms about his waist and drawing him close. She sighed as his lips possessed hers, pressing closer until his arms tightened, palms stroking her buttocks through her skirts.

"I choose to love you, Xander," she mouthed against his lips, kissing him softly.

"And I, you, my love." He kissed her back.

Epilogue

Xander seized the frame of a portrait of the previous Lord Liverpool, swinging it back to reveal a sort of strongbox. Taking a key from his watch chain he opened the box, placing the jewel within and removing the dagger at the same time. Claire took charge of it at once, weighing the weapon in her hand.

“Excellently balanced,” she mused, aiming at a portrait of the current Prime Minister. “The horse of Hanover,” she said, examining the hilt. “Did you observe it, Xander?”

He stood behind her, watching the way her fingers caressed the blade. “No,” he responded, nuzzling her neck. “I confess it quite escaped my notice.”

Claire turned, meeting his mouth with hers. “I adore your mouth,” she said, breaking their kiss. “And I have a shocking theory.”

Xander released her, leaned back against the wall, and crossed his arms. “Pray, expound.”

“Given their access to Carlton House, the persons behind this are connected to the Crown,” Claire whispered. Even in a

closed room before Xander, her words sounded dangerous. She studied his face. "Are you well, my love?"

"Quite well, dearest. Why do you ask?"

"You're not arguing my point," she said seriously.

Xander's troubled gaze remained fixed on her face. "I've not raised any objection because I have none. I agree with you, so far as the data goes. I am merely considering how to go about protecting the woman I love from charges of treason."

"I've said nothing against the King or Queen, and I'll say nothing further without Mr Brougham's counsel. I am not the Prime Minister's brother." Claire said. "Sally knew she'd been murdered when she fell ill like the lady's maid in Cornwall. In an attempt to safeguard the Regent, she extracted the gem and mailed it to a place no one would trace. She herself secured the card to her person with this." She waved the dagger. "Sally Kemble directed this investigation to me. Our evidence admits of no other conclusion."

"Miss Kemble knew you'd assist," Xander affirmed. "Which means she trusted you."

Claire nodded. "Thank you, that's understood. This weapon however..." She described small circles in the air with the tip. "It points in a very specific direction, my love." She stared gamely back at him.

"The dagger implicates the Duke of Cumberland." Xander responded grimly. "I'd best address this with Robert. He will not like it."

"Neither will the Crown Princess," Claire replied. "She's unlikely to be surprised, however. There's little love lost between the Regent and his brothers. Whose audience shall we seek in the first instance?"

Before Lindsey could respond the door opened and Mr Lovedale sidled in, bowing low. "Lord Liverpool wishes to breakfast."

Xander sighed, handing him the dagger. “Very well, Lovedale. You’d best have this back, then.”

The private secretary replaced the weapon in the strongbox and secured the painting. He looked round, bowing again at Xander. “The Prime Minister is delighted at the successful conclusion of your case, Lord Lindsey.”

“Is he, indeed?” Claire murmured, grabbing Xander’s arm as she marched in to the breakfast room. “*Our* case is not complete, Prime Minister,” she said as soon as she’d sat down to table.

Lord Robert arrested his bow and stared back at Claire, plainly unamused. “The jewel is returned, Miss Ryan. The Regent’s propriety is preserved. What else is there to resolve?”

Claire clamped her mouth closed and swallowed a dozen epithets, shifting her gloved fingers against her blades. “I do not report to the Regent.”

“This case is closed, my dear.” Lord Robert insisted.

“The murderer remains at large.” Xander’s fist clenched on the table top. “A Catholic maid’s murdered body found at Carlton House...” He glared at his brother across a platter of eggs. “Such news spells trouble for Westminster, brother.”

“Such news will not get out.” Lord Robert raised his voice a notch. “Or you must needs explain yourself, *brother*.”

“Half,” Xander muttered. Claire heard him take a long breath.

“Until we’ve identified the threat your interests remain vulnerable.” Xander stared at the statesman, unblinking. “Are you guarded from physical attack?” Lord Robert flinched. “The danger here is not merely political,” Xander said quietly. “And you *are* my brother, Robert. You’re an astute politician, but we’ve little apprehension of how deep this goes.”

“Do you believe it so, Alexander?” Lord Liverpool glowered. “This business goes deeper than you know, and I’ll not lose you in the morass. Not over a maid.”

Claire rose abruptly, fingertips tapping as her voice shook. “Her name was Sally Kemble, my lord. She was my friend and colleague. Someone must answer for what’s been done to her.”

“Someone will.” Xander stood beside Claire, his hand on her shoulder.

The Prime Minister plunked both palms face up on either side of his plate. “All right, you two, I surrender.” Sighing heavily, he rubbed his hands over his face and dropped them to his sides, staring from Xander to Claire. “You’ve formed a considerable alliance, Alexander. Your brand of stubbornness I’ve long withstood, but the both of you?” He glanced at Claire again, shaking his head. “I am not equal to it.”

He tasted his eggs. “These are cold,” he complained, as a footman stepped forward. “Bring me hot.” He looked up at Claire and Xander. “Being glared at twice over ruins my digestion. Do sit down, both of you.”

Xander sat, pouring coffee for them all. Claire stared down at the most powerful man in England. With a jerk of her head, she resumed her seat.

“This isn’t over, my lords.”



No, this isn’t over.

Read the BONUS CHAPTER *Carriages and Kisses* at the end of this novella and find out how Ada Ryan discovers the missing black diamond. This begins Ada and Felix’s story, and follows on from Chapter 5: *In Their Cups*.

Claire, Xander, Felix and Ada return in *The Case of The*

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Carriages and Kisses

BONUS CHAPTER

About Carriages and Kisses

The BONUS CHAPTER *Carriages and Kisses* begins Ada and Felix's story, and follows on from Chapter 5: *In Their Cups*.

Their adventure is available in:
Christmas Secrets of the Soho Club



Chapter One

16 January, 1820

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

Having seen to Mr Kemble as best she could, Ada found herself accosted at the doorway by the handsome gentleman who'd hurried her sister from the room. He glanced between the near-prostrate Mr Kemble and the doorway.

"My friend's taken your sister for some air." The man looked as worried as Ada felt. "We'll need to leave here shortly."

Hot whips of fear rose in Ada's chest. She gripped his arm, not caring in the least how this appeared. "With my father away Claire is everything to me." *More than everything.*

The man gentled his tone. "Your sister will be well, I assure you. Is Mr Kemble all alone in here?"

"Mr Davidson is around somewhere." Ada cocked her head, listening for sounds of movement elsewhere in the building. Baritone murmurs echoed from the lower floors. "I hear him working with the men behind the stage."

The man nodded, taking up Ada's parcel addressed in Sally Kemble's hand. "Do you have...things?"

Ada's brows rose. "I beg your pardon?"

An impatient smile barely showed. "A wrap? Shawl? We are leaving London and you'll need something warmer." His gaze drifted over her daringly-cut green gown trimmed with feathers. A gift from an earl who doubtless intended her to wear it for him, and not this man. *What if I prefer this man?* Something inside Ada tensed. She blinked, staring at the perfectly angular line of this fellow's jaw. "I keep no wardrobe here, sir. I have my own apartments, you know." Of course he knew – he'd escorted her home from *Amalfi* the previous evening. Ada forced her thoughts away from how close they'd been to each other. She cleared her throat, indicating her cloak over one chair.

"I have my wrap and my reticule here, but I'll not accompany you anywhere until I've word regarding my sister." She set her jaw.

"These are not my orders."

Ada shrugged, adopting her 'duchess' pose. "Those are my terms, sir."

This time his brows rose. He glanced again at the doorway. "Then I'll carry you out of here, Miss Ryan."

Ada stepped back. "I'll scream."

"So will I," he retorted, proceeding to lean back and take a breath.

Ada watched his lips alter shape as he let out a high-pitched, too-realistic feminine screech, just as his coachman approached the door.

"Bloody hell!" The exclamation came from Mr Kemble who stared accusingly at Ada. "What was that for?"

Only the thought of Claire preserved Ada's focus. Pleased at the old man's alertness, she curtsied.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Kemble." She rose, chagrined.

“The gentleman challenged me to a demonstration. I meant no disrespect, sir.”

“Very well, girl.” The theatre manager nodded, waving his hands at all of them. “Get out now, all of you. Get out!”

They were barely all three over the threshold when Ada heard the splash of more liquor, followed by the pungent aroma of rum. Mr Kemble may never work sober again. She sighed, turning to her escort. “Mr Davidson will make sure he’s all right.”

The gentleman wasn’t listening. He was giving orders instead.

“Report, Dawkins?”

“The lady is in good hands.”

“This is excellent news.” He turned to Ada. “I believe your terms are met, Miss Ryan?” The man tucked her parcel under one arm and reached for her wrap with the other. “May I?”

Ada adjusted her bonnet and nodded, turning as he settled the warm cloth over her shoulders. She tried not to think of his powerful presence at her back, and his clear line of sight to her French-cut bodice. Schooling her face to avoid a blush, she accepted his arm with a tight smile, remembering something her sister mentioned about shocking information out of people. The coachman flicked a coin to the boy holding the horses, then set down the steps and opened the carriage door.

“Thank you.” Ada accepted the servant’s assistance, offering her most bewitching smile as she turned suddenly, surprising both men.

“Where did you leave them, Mr Dawkins?”

“Soho mews.” Dawkins blurted promptly, receiving a scowl from his employer.

At least, Ada assumed the coachman was employed by the gentleman presently arranging Sally’s parcel on the seat between them.

“That was startlingly astute, Miss Ryan.” Her companion

appeared equal parts vexed and impressed. “Dawkins needs reminding of the meaning for the terms ‘covert’ and ‘discreet’.”

Ada clasped her hands in her lap as the vehicle lurched into motion at quite a clip. “Oh dear.” She gasped, doing her best to speak coherently while glancing wildly about for a handhold. “I’d no intention of causing trouble for Mr Dawkins.”

Her companion’s expression lightened. “Have no fear, Miss Ryan. Mr Dawkins’s employment is quite safe.”

“Thank goodness.” She took his hand impulsively, partly in gratitude and partly to steady herself. “It’s a technique Claire mentioned once in passing, before she became quite so adept at being covert.” *And closed*, she wanted to add. *Before my sister became so caught up in important secrets that she feels quite lost to me.*

Her sadness must have shown in her face because her escort did not release her hand. Indeed, his palm curved over her fingers with the warmest sensation. Ada swallowed, not daring a glance into his face. What if his dimple was showing? There was something intimidating about knowing a man’s features so well. *I do not like to be intimidated.* Since when had she become so tentative? Tossing her head, Ada determined to learn more regarding this gentleman who could not be Lord Lindsey. She’d not felt this way before his lordship at all.

“Where did you learn to scream like a woman?” She was rewarded with a loud laugh, and that devastating dimple.

“I knew an actress at one time. Long ago.” Her companion shrugged lightly.

“Do you make it a habit to know actresses?” She asked before she could stop herself.

The man’s brows rose again. “I wouldn’t say so, no.”

“Hardly definitive,” she murmured, fingering the plush upholstery. “This appears to be Lord Lindsey’s carriage.” Ada

studied her companion from beneath her lashes. He might be handsome, but she wasn't a fool. She levelled him her best glare. "You are not Lord Lindsey, are you, sir?"

His reddened cheeks surprised her. His face appeared younger, the difference between this man and the older Lindsey suddenly obvious. "Are you an acquaintance of his?"

Her companion blinked in surprise, then shook his head. "I beg your pardon, Miss Ryan. In all the confusion of Miss Kemble's passing, I've been remiss. I am Mr Felix, occasional double for Lord Lindsey. I work with his lordship."

"With?" Ada had some recollection that this doppelganger had arrived at Lindsey's command.

"I'm employed as his household valet."

"Oh," Ada's reply was as bland as she could manage it. A gentleman's 'man' was commonplace with the Carlton House set, but two men who resembled each other so well spoke of a closer connection. The matter was clearly a private one and Ada had more material concerns.

"Where are we headed, Mr Felix?"

"An estate in Scotland. You'll be safe there, though we've a few days on the road yet." He smiled sympathetically as the carriage lurched round a bend.

Ada clutched at his hands convulsively, releasing a small gasp. "I beg your pardon, Mr Felix. I am not used to such rapid travel. Oh!" She moved her half-boots aside just in time as Sally Kemble's parcel tumbled to the carriage floor.

Mr Felix released her hands and knelt to retrieve it, only to be thrown down and against Ada's skirts. He looked up in horror.

"I beg your pardon."

Ada laughed. She couldn't help it, he looked so uncomfortable and she hoped for the return of his dimple. It appeared when he laughed back and Ada leaned down,

offering her hand and glad to find he took his seat beside her with a sigh.

“I thank you.” He rubbed his face, leaning back into his seat. “The rapid travel is necessary, I assure you. We’ll stop at The Bells to change horses and take some refreshment. I shall see about their rooms as well.”

His gaze flickered over Ada then. She wondered if this was deliberate, because if she was any judge of faces it was he who escorted her home yesternight, he whom she nearly kissed in the darkness of the doorway below her apartments...and still wanted to kiss. *Damn it.*



Felix wished he hadn’t mentioned their rooms at the post house, though he enjoyed Miss Ryan’s laugh. It loosened her shoulders and softened her face. There was an edge of nervous tension in her pitch which he thought he understood. Her friend dead, and her sister taken ill. The lady is frightened. *Then her safety is paramount.* Felix hadn’t missed the way Dawkins gazed with rapt eyes at Miss Ada Ryan. *Another theatre-lover, presumably.* He could hardly blame the man. Even harried and afraid, Miss Ryan’s wide green eyes and soft red-gold curls were the stuff of artists’ dreams. A portrait of her famous face now adorned her playbill, and still did not do her justice.

There was a resolve about her jawline that the artist did not capture, as though the painter saw only Ada’s loveliness and nothing beyond. *He’s missed the best part of her.* Felix wondered how many gentlemen made this mistake. When he helped the lady don her cloak, he found his thoughts turning likewise. It was too easy to be distracted by Miss Ryan’s looks. He sat beside her to avoid the full force of those finely-shaped eyes. This only added proximity and heat. He shifted his seat

to maintain a proper distance. Did his best to avoid glancing sideways, reining in his wild thoughts...and ending up holding her finely-gloved hands and falling into her skirts anyway. Her laughter was a relief.

Now here he was, seated more closely beside her than ever, her arm linked in beneath his as though he were her...*what?* Felix stiffened as Miss Ryan's bonneted head dropt slowly against his shoulder. Gazing down in surprise, he adjusted his arm to afford her more comfort, sighing deeply.

If Sally Kemble hadn't died, Ada Ryan would still think him Lord Lindsey. They'd not be racing northward in a carriage bound for Dunleigh. He shifted in his seat as his body hardened. He didn't want to be like the other men vying for this woman but he couldn't deny the truth: He wanted her.

Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes a moment, calculating the miles between London and the post house. They'd several hours travel ahead of them at least. He glanced at the face of the woman beside him. Her lips formed the most perfect bow shape, appearing a shade of seashell pink. Felix turned his focus to the window in a hurry, but as the carriage was shuttered there was nothing to distract him from Miss Ryan. In any case, it'd take more than the sights of London in Spring time. *Much more.*

He looked down at the parcel, noting its regular shape. It was oblong, though bulky and he wondered what it might contain. A box of some kind? Given the direction this case tended, he ought to open it on Miss Ryan's behalf.

As though divining his thought, the lady stirred and sat up.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Felix."

"That's quite all right," he assured her. "Late nights make for long days, Miss Ryan."

She laughed and nodded, cocking an inquiring brow. "Is it

much further to the post house? I've a request as to how we pass the time." Miss Ryan curved her lips in a coy smile.

She can't mean... Felix cleared his throat. "We've some time yet." He managed to speak, despite the spike of desire shooting through his bloodstream.

The lady opened her reticule, drawing out a set of pages. "Would you assist me with my lines, Mr Felix? I've a new idea regarding Act Two."

He relaxed with a grin. "I should be honoured, though you clearly know the part cold."

Much to his delight, Ada laughed again. "I thank you. I'm trying out other emphases." She glanced at her script. "We'll begin from the maid's revelation. If you'd be so kind as to read for Antonio?"

"And may our sweet affections, like the spheres, be still in motion." Felix intoned, stumbling over such florid translation.

"Quickening, and make the like soft music!" Miss Ryan breathed.

The look of longing on her face was either craft, or cruel desire. Felix forced his attention back to the page.

"That we may imitate the loving palms, best emblem of a peaceful marriage, that never bore fruit, divided!"

"What can the church force more?"

Felix's duchess gazed into his eyes with such expression that he could not look away. "That fortune may not know an accident, either of joy or sorrow, to divide our fixed wishes!" He read.

"We now are man and wife. Let me shrowd my blushes in your bosom, since 'tis the treasury of all my secrets!" At these words Miss Ryan leaned up, laying her cheek against his, clutching his hand as though he were, indeed, Antonio.

"Miss Ryan," he murmured as she turned her face to his, licking her pink mouth, lips parting on a sigh to welcome his,

as per her playbill, her profession, her clear, intended direction.

Felix kissed her back with a passion he'd been nursing for hours, days, weeks, longing to taste her desire. *Is this real?*

He didn't know, couldn't tell, and then he didn't care... His tongue swept hers, savouring the warm wetness of her mouth, the flavour of her desire, her disarming scent of primroses and mint... This charged, bold power burning between them had nothing to do with Webster's pages slipping, unheeded to the carriage floor. The parcel fell again with a thump, but Felix didn't stop for that either.

Neither did Miss Ryan, uttering small, soft whimpers of encouragement as Felix lifted her tightly against him. She pressed her lips to his again and again as though she couldn't get enough. Felix drew her into his lap as his hands moved over her skirts, teasing her and himself, until it seemed sparks crackled within the close space – then the carriage halted with such force that this time it was the lady deposited inelegantly on the floor.

Felix was beside her in an instant, assisting her back to her seat – the opposite one this time – just in time for Dawkins to open the door and assist Miss Ryan with the steps. The coachman's eyes skimmed over the papers scattered everywhere.

“A new play, Miss Ryan?” He asked, despite a sharp look from Felix.

Miss Ryan favoured him with a gracious smile as she descended the steps and adjusted her curls. “The same play, Mr Dawkins, but I like to keep it fresh.”

Felix thought her voice a trifle breathless. *Or is this wishful thinking?* He cleared his throat, taking up the bulky oblonged parcel.

“I'll see to the arrangements.”

He needed more than the parcel to distract his racing pulse and subdue his desire. He needed a good twenty minutes to

get his brain back in order. *Or a good ten to spend kissing this woman again.* He shot a surreptitious glance at Miss Ryan, whose cheeks were a satisfying – and becoming – shade of pink. Her careful study of the ale board in the window of The Bells was heartening. A momentary pang shot through him at what Lindsey might say about his protégée’s behaviour. Felix’s orders were to ‘see to the girl’s safety’. They said nothing about kissing her. Still, the way his lordship looked at Ada’s sister inclined Felix to believe he might be forgiven.

He found Miss Ryan beside him as he explained their requirements to the landlord. The man’s wife showed them both to their small sitting room while they prepared refreshments. The door remained open, which Felix as discreetly closed.

“Mr Felix,” Miss Ryan began. “You cannot just—.”

He held up one hand, indicating the wrapped parcel with a jerk of his head. “I beg your pardon, Miss Ryan, but I must open your parcel.”

“It’s addressed to Sally, sir.” Her hauteur matched her duchess and those cheeks still bore a faint flush, firming his resolve.

“I am concerned the contents are unsound.”

Her eyes widened in alarm and she relented. “Oh, I see. All right, then.”

Drawing out a small knife from his waistcoat, he cut the string and the thickly-glued paper to reveal a thickish, bulky book. Felix stared.

“A book? That’s not at all what I expected from Miss Kemble.”

Miss Ryan took it up. “It’s a prop,” she stated. “At least, it looks like one. Like the kind we use on stage. Unless—.”

“Unless what?” Felix watched her hold the item between both hands, shaking it beside her ear. He wondered if one kiss might send a woman mad.

“I heard a rattle,” she said, pulling the pages open.

The thick-gummed papers did not part easily, except at the back. A cavity had been cut into the chunk of back pages. At Miss Ryan’s shake, a sparkling thing tumbled out. Felix caught it reflexively with a shout. *It can’t be.*

At that moment their meal arrived, amid carefully-averted glances from the landlady. When she saw they were both decently attired and examining a book she seemed almost offended, but Felix had no thoughts to spare for her. As soon as she left, he bolted the door again and Ada could barely contain herself.

“What is it, Mr Felix? A jewel?”

Felix opened his fist. “It’s *the* jewel, Miss Ryan.”

His guest uttered a gratifying gasp. “A black diamond? This is what they call Claire at The Soho Club, you know.”

“I’m aware.” Felix replied, pulling out his fob. “I suggest you make the most of your meal, Miss Ryan.”

The lady glanced at her food, which looked better than average.

“Why so? Is this black diamond important?”

“I should say so,” Felix replied. “We must return London directly. I’m afraid you’re in for an all night ride.”

“With you, Mr Felix?”

“With me, Miss Ryan.”

“Well.” Miss Ryan seated herself at the table and took up her knife. “Needs must, Mr Felix.” Her bow-lips curved upwards in a delectable smile.



Find out if our sleuths unmask the murderer in ***The Case of the Black Diamond Part II***, appearing in ***Christmas Secrets of the Soho Club***.

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About Clyve Rose

Clyve Rose is an award-winning, Amazon-bestselling author of historical fiction in Australia and the US. She has been writing historical romance for the best part of two decades. The first piece she published was a fictional biography of an erotica writer who made a living crafting explicit dating profiles for online chat sites.

Clyve believes that love is the highest and strongest force known in the world, and that it only manifests when we are our best and truest selves. She'll continue writing about love in all its various, glorious forms, and one day her epitaph will read *Just one more read-through*.

When she isn't writing fiction she can be found pounding the sand at any of the beautiful beaches near her Australian home. She's addicted to blogging and researching quirky historical fashion trends.

Her debut novel *Always a Princess* was a finalist in 2020's ARRA Awards, and a Bookfest gold medal recipient. Her novella *The Christmas Salon* won an Irwin Award for Best Romantic Novella in 2021. She is also the recipient of a Passionate Ink award for *The One Below*. The Soho Club stories were also finalists in the ARRA awards, as was her sweet romance novella *Love's Sweet Arrow*.

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A SOHO CLUB MYSTERY:
THE CASE OF THE BLACK DIAMOND
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